

**SWINE: THE ANIMAL INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX, RESISTANCE THROUGH STORYTELLING,
AND THE QUESTION OF THE ANIMAL IN NOVEL FORM**

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Abstract

In this thesis, I work at the intersections of Creative Writing, Critical Animal Studies (CAS), and ecofeminism in order to explore North American carnist culture and human exceptionalist discourse through fiction. Ultimately, I contend that the animal industrial complex relies on exploitative ideologies, and that fiction can be a radical act of resistance to such oppression, and, thus, contribute to a social justice that sees the liberation of other animals as a focal point. As part of this argument, I argue that gothic fiction has the ability to reflect upon a cultural, socio-political moment by exploring an imagined future, alternate reality, or hyperbolized temporal fear to problematize, destabilize, and resist restrictive understandings of social norms such as arbitrary speciesist notions and the porous ontological divide between “human” and nonhuman animals. Rooted in a historical tradition of radical writers and thinkers, the gothic aesthetic speaks to sociopolitical and ethical anxieties; as such, I suggest that gothic fiction might be the best place in which to visit moral quandaries that effect all life on earth. Methodologically, I rely in part on Anne William’s understanding of the Female Gothic plot in my creation of *Swine*, but take this further, suggesting that an *ecofeminist* Gothic is the best way to resist the animal industrial complex by telling a different story about our relationship to “farm” animals. My novel *Swine* is the culmination of my argument against the animal industrial complex, “rational” modes of knowing, and carnism itself. Rather than treating the critical and the creative as binary approaches to the animal industrial complex, I see them as existing on a spectrum or continuum, all the while insisting that fiction can be an ethical response to violence.

Lay Summary

My thesis combines the fields of Creative Writing, Critical Animal Studies (CAS), and ecofeminism to argue for an interdisciplinary approach to combatting speciesism and carnism. In the scholarly portion, I unpack what the animal industrial complex looks like, how it functions, and ways in which we can resist it. I analyze gothic literature as a tool for social justice towards animals and situate my novel, *Swine*, within this tradition. My thesis culminates in a gothic novel that follows Lou Lowe and her family after her father takes a position on the kill floor of a slaughterhouse. Lou navigates both human and animal abuse, as well as mysterious events related to the pigs at Jackson's Own farms and meat-packing facilities. My thesis argues that our current relationship with animals is violent, unnecessary, and cruel, and that fiction can allow for innovative ways of thinking about our fellow earthlings and our relationships to them.

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Section 1: Introduction

For thinking concerning the animal, if there is such a thing, derives from poetry. There you have a thesis: it is what philosophy has, essentially, had to deprive itself of. It is the difference between philosophical knowledge and poetic thinking.¹

On June 22, 2015, a truck carrying pigs to a slaughterhouse stopped at the intersection of Appleby Line and Harvester Road in Burlington, Ontario. These pigs were headed for slaughter and like most pigs, were likely transported without food or water for up to thirty-six hours (Millward). Through the portholes of the truck, activist Anita Krajnc used water bottles to give much-needed water to the thirsty pigs. Krajnc was subsequently arrested and charged with mischief. The Crown argued that Krajnc had tampered with property. Hog farmer Eric Van Boekel, owner of the pigs, claimed that he was worried there could be contaminants in the water Krajnc had given them. He expressed concern that, if found sick, the pigs would be turned away from the slaughterhouse. Krajnc's case received widespread media attention. Multiple online petitions were created supporting Krajnc's compassionate decision to give those pigs water on a sweltering summer day in Ontario, where temperatures often reach nearly thirty-degrees Celsius—and, ostensibly, create much hotter conditions within transport trucks where pigs are forced to stand side by side, unable to turn around, almost on top of one another. In fact, a petition on Care2 had over 125,500 signatories, while another on Change.org had nearly 25,000. On Twitter and other social media platforms, two hashtags circulated

¹Shandell Houlden, "Ruptures in Thinking," 38

in support of freeing Krajnc: #compassionisnotacrime and #StandbyAnitaK. Ultimately, Krajnc was acquitted of her charge. The pigs, of course, still went to slaughter.

Some might argue that Van Boekel was protecting his property and, thus, his livelihood; he had no way of knowing that Krajnc had only given the pigs in his truck water and not a more dangerous or insidious liquid. However, this weak argument would ignore the broader, cultural, systemic, and structural problem: Why do Canadian laws allow for sentient, intelligent, emotional creatures like pigs to be property in the first place? How does the more salient question in this case become about the sale and profit of the pigs rather than their suffering and violent deaths within the animal industrial complex? As Paula Young Lee asks: how do we make animals “count” in a system that so overwhelmingly exploits them? (201)

This question, among other questions of animal cruelty, ownership, and slaughter, was the starting point of this thesis. To properly consider how to “make animals count,” it is important to understand the history of thinking around *discounting* animals. Enlightenment philosopher René Descartes’ well-known view of nonhuman animals as mere “automata” has troublingly persisted into the twenty-first century. He famously asserted that nonhuman animals act “mechanically like a clock,” and that any semblance of pain or other such response is robotic, not genuine (qtd in Waldau 144). Indeed, Descartes claimed that nonhumans have “no mind” and are “devoid of reason” (144), a view which has become the basis for withholding ethical consideration from animals not only in factory farming but also in scientific research and various forms of “entertainment.” Put more simply, Descartes denied that nonhuman animals are “sentient, possessed of feelings and emotions, and subject to pain and suffering”

(Waldau 147). This paradigm prevails and is rooted in Cartesian attitudes of the divide between human and animal, a dualism which philosopher Paola Cavalieri notes is “supported by more than twenty centuries of philosophical tradition aiming at excluding from the ethical domain members of species other than our own” (3). The consequences of this exclusion are ubiquitous: animals are not only brutally killed for human consumption, but tortured in the name of scientific research, used for entertainment in a myriad of ways (including but not limited to zoos, circuses, and various forms of media “entertainment”)—in a word, as means to our ends. These examples of exploitation, among others, constitute what Barbara Noske has called the “animal-industrial complex” (Sorenson xiii). As Cavalieri asserts, humans use animals relentlessly and unthinkingly, without “pause to ask ourselves whether our behavior is morally justified” (3). Two main modes of thinking support our willful ignorance and other cognitive defense mechanisms in relation to the animal; predominantly, *speciesism* and what psychologist Melanie Joy has coined the ideology of *carnism*. I will discuss speciesism and carnism and their relationship to the animal industrial complex in more detail shortly.

But first, what is the animal-industrial complex and of what relevance is it to my work of fiction? In 1997 Barbara Noske coined the term “the global animal industrial complex” and by this she meant an “interlinked structure of government, scientific institutions, and various corporate interests in the fields of agriculture, biotechnology, entertainment, medicine, pet industries, pharmaceuticals, retail food industries, vivisection, the wildlife trade, and other business based on the exploitation of animals” (Sorenson xiii). As Richard Twine notes, Noske’s concept contextualizes animal use

and exploitation within broader frameworks of Western, capitalist societies (Twine 15). Through advertising and marketing grounded in anthropocentric hegemony, the widespread exploitation of animals is normalized, encouraged, and rewarded. For example, a significant part of the animal industrial complex is the myth of “humane meat,”² a heavily subsidized propaganda effort that normalizes carnism by “mak[ing] our compassionate feelings about non-human animals seem trivial, misguided, and foolish” (xiii). In short, the animal industrial complex refers to the ways by which largely capitalist societies mistreat, kill, and exploit animals in myriad ways vis-à-vis underlying human exceptionalist and Cartesian attitudes. Although the primary focus of this thesis is to vigorously and creatively investigate the status of the “farm animal” it is vital to also explore the ways in which human workers are subject to exploitation in factory farms and the slaughterhouse where the work is racialized and hierarchized in regards people of color and women, and how this system, in turn, upholds violent speciesism.

From an early age, I was drawn to animal stories like the one involving Krajnc giving water to the pigs. In fact, I would not have conceptualized it this way at the time, but stories were the reason I gave up eating animals when I was ten years old. I cheered for zoo animals who managed to escape or resist captivity. I was attracted to animal films like *Babe*, *101 Dalmatians*, and *Homeward Bound*. I re-read a tattered paperback my mother had brought home about companion animals who had saved their people’s lives, had travelled miles to come back home, and who had changed someone’s life forever. I fell in love with the red-bone hound dogs Billy adopts in Wilson

² For an extensive study on the myth of humane meat and its relation to the animal industrial complex, please see environmental studies scholar Katarina Trapara’s 2017 thesis: “An ecofeminist critique of in/humane biopower: bad faith, speciesism and carnism in ‘happy meat’ marketing.”

Rawles's *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Like many of us, I intuited that the lives of animals are deeply and inevitably interconnected with ours, and that stories can be an effective and affective way to access these lives, even when imagined.

In this way I follow E.B. White, author of beloved children's novel *Charlotte's Web*, who once remarked in a letter to his editor Ursula Nordstrom, that farms are "peculiar problems for a man [*sic*] who likes animals, because the fate of most livestock is that they are murdered by their benefactors" (Popova). White's "peculiar problem" has, to say the least, persisted, with the plight of the farm animal, and all non-human animals, becoming graver since his time. However, with knowledge of the horrors of factory farming, the world has seen in response, the rise of animal activism, vegetarianism and veganism, and Critical Animal Studies as a field of academic study. John Sorenson notes that "in the context of global capitalism and the ideology of neoliberalism...our already taken-for-granted exploitation of other animals reaches unprecedented levels and develops new forms of mutilation and genetic manipulation that seem to have been created at some bizarre intersection of the genres of science fiction and horror" (xv). As Sorenson notes, the ways we treat animals *are* horrific. Sorenson's linking of animal exploitation and literature is relevant here as Sorenson's remarks can be seen to address part of the reason why I have chosen to use the gothic as the specific genre by which to write about animals. Traditionally, gothic literature shows us that which is considered monstrous, horrible, terrible—this can come in the form of literal monsters or psychological fears. The system in which we systematically and routinely exploit, torture, and kill animals for food production *is itself* horrific but, and this is important, we do not see this as horrific. In many ways, theory and criticism

accomplish the social justice goals of CAS as a field but I contend that fiction, story, and narrative can also combat speciesism, human exceptionalism, and anthropocentrism. *Swine* uses gothic conventions but subtly shows the audience that, while they might think the villains of the story are Jackson's Own's aggressive pigs, the real horror lies in the ethical blindness that allow for our participation in the system of animal agriculture and, more broadly, the ideology of carnism. In Jacques Derrida's formative book *The Animal That Therefore I am*, he speaks to this horror, and the ways in which art can reflect such horror. He says that:

Everybody knows what terrifying and intolerable pictures a realist painting could give to the industrial, mechanical, chemical, hormonal, and genetic violence to which man has been submitting animal life for the past two centuries. Everybody knows what the production, breeding, transport, and slaughter of these animals has become. (26)

Although we, as Derrida points out, "know" this to be true, carnism allows and encourages us to forget this knowledge. Derrida goes on to say that if these images "evoke sympathy" it is because they "open the immense question of pathos and the pathological...that is, of suffering, pity and compassion." He also tells us that, from these immense questions, we must consider the "sharing of this suffering among the living, to the law, ethics, and politics that must be brought to bear upon this experience of compassion" (26) My thesis, working within CAS, argues that, through cultural and personal stories, the animal industrial complex can be resisted, challenged, and abated, with the goal of seeking freedom for other sentient creatures on our planet. Indeed, ecofeminist philosopher Lori Gruen, in her radical book *Entangled Empathy*, contends

that fiction can be useful in crossing trans-species boundaries. She writes that “the existence of storied empathy—the ability that we find in children to empathize with fictional beings—suggests that we have the capacity to engage with very different others through narrative, literature, art, and storytelling, and that this capacity, if honed, might help us to engage empathetically” (72) with nonhuman animals with whom we share the planet. As such, I see fiction, but specifically gothic fiction, as an invaluable tool to talk about the violence we inflict upon other animals. By using an often-violent genre such as the gothic, I wish to draw our attention not so much to animals as “monsters” but, rather, to the cruelties we inflict on animals. Although empathy and gothic fiction are not generally discussed together, I wish to demonstrate that by using gothic conventions, we can tell new stories about animals and our relationships to them in which we must re-think the troubled and often disingenuous relationships we already have with animals.

In this thesis, I work at the intersections of Creative Writing, Critical Animal Studies (CAS), and ecofeminism in order to challenge carnist culture as it exists in North America as well as the discourse of human exceptionalism, specifically at the site of the slaughterhouse. My thesis, which consists largely of a gothic novel, argues for the validity of stories to provide guidance in the face of moral dilemmas, to respond compassionately to cruelty and violence, to resist privileging anthropocentric rationalism, and to work in tandem with theory to dismantle the animal industrial complex. Opening social justice literature to experiences we might never have imagined could be a stepping stone to justice for all beings. Andreea Ritivoi writes that “being open to another’s experience, *especially one that we can’t even imagine*, leads to a

disclosure of the limits of our epistemic horizons” (65, emphasis mine). By using not only the gothic genre but also Marc Bekoff and Jodey Castricano’s notion of radical anthropomorphism (which I will explore in greater detail later), I investigate the interior lives of nonhuman animals forced to endure horrible lives and untimely, cruel deaths within the animal industrial complex.

The time to tell new stories is now. Why a gothic story? In many ways, the reason is simple: gothic literature is concerned with boundaries and borders and the fear that arises when we transgress these constructed binaries or, of course, when these binaries are shown to be arbitrary, such as the human/animal divide. The gothic allows us to examine fears—fears of the individual, fears of entire cultures. As Stephen King has famously noted, horror films “often serve as an extraordinarily accurate barometer of those things which trouble the night-thoughts of a whole society” (*Danse Macabre* 139). Although King is speaking here of horror *films* specifically, he is correct in noting that gothic tales more generally have historically reflected fears of the time and place in which they are written. Similarly, gothic scholar Corinna Wagner tells us that gothic literature “evolved in response to current events” (li) and that, due to its malleability, “gothic characters, tropes, and themes...have evolved in response to many of the social, scientific, political, and cultural changes of the last 250 years” (xxiii). Tracing the history of gothic stories, she notes fears of political anxieties of the 1790s, responses to the Enlightenment emphasis on reason and rationality, and an “outpouring” of thrillers and medical horror stories in the 1830s as a reaction to medical experimentation (xxiii). Other anxieties that Wagner pinpoints are mid-nineteenth century tales that countered the Victorian emphasis on domesticity and family, and

twentieth-century responses to imperialist fears of racial contamination (xxiii-xxiv). In the twenty-first century, my aim is to utilize gothic characters, tropes, and themes to respond to the well-documented horrors of the animal industrial complex. We should fear what we have done to our fellow animals, how we have destroyed the environment, and how we are damaging our own health.

Industrial animal agribusiness has detrimental effects on the environment, involves unsustainable use of water and food resources, results in deforestation and ocean dead zones yet animal agribusiness is disproportionately fostered by demand for animal products in the U.S. and Canada. Globally, animal agriculture is responsible for 18% of greenhouse gas emissions (Steinfeld n.p.). In terms of water, rearing billions of animals for food annually involves water consumption in ranges from 34-76 trillion gallons (Steinfeld n.p). To put this water usage in more concrete terms, 2500 gallons of water are needed to produce 1 pound of beef (Pimentel 909). Indeed, approximately 29% of all freshwater is consumed by animals reared for food (Gerbens-Leenes 26). Not only does animal agriculture contribute to climate change, but it is also the leading cause of ocean dead zones and species extinction (*The Guardian* n.p). NASA Earth Science points out that up to 137 plant, animal, and insect species are lost every day due to rainforest destruction ("Tropical Deforestation" 3). Clearly, the rate at which we are producing animal products for human consumption is not sustainable for the land, the oceans, or other species of animals. I see the exploitation of human bodies, animal bodies, and the planet as intrinsically linked and wish to demonstrate this link through creative stories to talk about that which is considered the unspeakable, namely that the animals that are raised and consumed for food are sentient creatures with needs and

desires of their own, in a carnist society. Rather than sustain the human/animal divide, my project aims to explore radical relationships of ontological entanglement between humans and other animals that encourage thinking through such dire and cruel phenomenon as factory farms and what these mean for the animals within them and, ultimately, life on the planet itself. On a micro and personal level, I explore how these phenomena affect the ways we express attachment, loss, and violence, and how those expressions differ when directed towards humans or non-human animals. I also seek to provide multiple ways for readers to glean new connections between humans and other animals that they may not have considered before.

Rather than treating the critical and the creative as binary approaches to challenging the animal industrial complex, I see them as existing on a spectrum or continuum, all the while suggesting that fiction can provide an ethical response to violence. Although creative writing itself is an excellent means of imagining the perceived Other, I believe gothic literature is one of the best tools at our disposal to approach our modern relationship to animals because the ways in which we *already* interact with them are horrific, violent, bloody, and nightmarish. I do not see this changing unless we highlight these instances of violence and consider the arbitrary borders and divides we place between living beings. As such, gothic fiction is not only a way to bear witness to the cruelty currently facing fifty-six billion nonhuman animals annually but also an effective fictional genre with which to investigate the fear and anxiety around the collapse of these ontological borders. Throughout this portion of the thesis, I will be talking about social justice in fiction and the relationship between fiction and empathy, specifically for those considered “other.” I will then move on to the central

question: why is the gothic the best genre to tell this story? From here, I will situate *Swine* within this storytelling tradition and analyze how gothic conventions inform my novel. My thesis concludes in *Swine*, a gothic novel that acts as the culmination of my argument against the animal industrial complex, “rational” modes of knowing, and carnism itself.

Section 2: Critical Contexts: Speciesism, Carnism, and Ecofeminism

2.1 Speciesism

Recognizing our vulnerability—bearing witness to our vulnerability—in these shifting systems is key to the necessary material and theoretical transformations required for the necessary challenge. Being open to vulnerability. Stories, with their affective power, are one way into that opening³.

The animal industrial complex is based upon speciesism and carnism. Speciesism, a term coined by Richard D. Ryder and popularized by Peter Singer in *Animal Liberation* (1975), describes discrimination based on the arbitrary marker of species membership. Speciesism insists on the superiority of humans, excluding nonhumans from moral and ethical concern and even the right to life; in fact, speciesism normalizes this exploitative power dynamic. Sorenson writes that “speciesism, with its absolute convictions of human superiority, presents our destruction of other animals as unavoidable, acceptable, and even admirable” (xii). Indeed, speciesism encourages animals to be perceived, as Melanie Joy puts it, “not only as objects, but as commodities, as units of production” (Joy 10). Speciesism considers membership in a species to be an important, “quintessential” moral marker (Joy 11-12). Speciesism describes the belief that we, as humans, are entitled to treat members of other species in violent, painful, exploitative, and oppressive ways that we would consider unthinkably cruel if directed at members of our own species.

³Shandell Houlden, “Ruptures in Thinking,” 45-6

2.2 Carnism

Another view, related to speciesism, is carnism, a term created by psychologist Melanie Joy to describe the violent but invisible ideology that upholds inconsistent Western attitudes towards animals and encourages meat eating as being “normal, natural and necessary.” For example, Joy points out that carnist societies love some animals and eat/harm others (such as seeing dogs as companion animals but cows as a potential meat product). Socialization, as Joy says, allows us to compartmentalize our views of different species, resulting in conflicting attitudes depending on the animal. Carnism works to obfuscate and confuse, allowing, as Sorenson points out, “people...[to] hold contradictory ideas about our relations with other animals” (xvi). Within Western hegemonic norms and human exceptionalist discourse, meat eating is, as previously mentioned, considered “natural, necessary, and normal” (Joy). According to Joy, carnism is the “belief in the moral justification of meat eating [that] rests upon the anthropocentric assumption that the killing of other animals *for the human palate* is ethical and legitimate” (8, emphasis mine). As part of carnist culture, we value our taste buds over the entire life of another living, sentient being. In fact, within carnism, the distinction between what is considered “edible” and “inedible” becomes arbitrary—that is, many cultures would never eat a dog but would consider cow part of a wholesome family meal. Our disgust at animal foods is formed by socialization. We find what our family and culture grew up eating (generally, cows, pigs, chickens, ducks, and various sea animals) to be normal and appetizing, and animals that we consider pets to be off-limits. However, this disgust response varies by culture, location, and even individual. Joy notes that the disgust response is implicated in psychic numbing in relation to meat consumption. She tells us that “virtually all ‘disgusting’ substances are of animal origin”

(4) and that “meat that bears less resemblance to its original, animal form has been found to elicit less disgust, if any, than meat that has not been mentally associated with its living source” (4). Joy argues that while “many ethical vegetarians [and vegans] find all meat disgusting...meat eaters experience as disgusting only the flesh of animals whom they have not been socialized to consume” (5). Because animal meat is disguised through dismembering the animal and packaging her body in strategic ways, Joy says that “people who [otherwise] share an underlying belief that killing animals is an act of violence nonetheless include meat in their diet without apparent discomfort” (6); the reason being, perhaps, one cannot make the connection. As such, carnism creates what Joy calls schizophrenic behavior, by which Joy means we believe cruelty towards animals is wrong while simultaneously eating flesh foods from abused and terrified animals routinely. The ways in which disgust is wrapped up in carnism is why gothic, which often deals in what a given society considers “disgusting” is vital for this project. I will analyze the specific ways *Swine* discusses this conflicting disgust in the next section.

Critical Animal Studies (CAS) is a relatively nascent interdisciplinary scientific and theoretical field that critiques, challenges, and queries the systemic, structural, institutional and discursive power formations that shape our understandings of animals, humans, and the planet. Sorenson sees CAS as maintaining the view that “concern and compassion for animals are not marginal or ridiculous sentiments, but are logical responses to serious problems” (xix-xx) and that CAS is “based on the conviction that our ideas of social justice should be applied to other animals, not just to members of our

own species” (xx). CAS is also based on theory-to-action and abolition. Sorensen tells us:

Rather than accepting the false binary that suggests that one must be concerned either about humans or about animals, critical animal studies sees the intersectionality of oppression and suggests that speciesism—the oppression of animals—constitutes a basic form of oppression that provides a structure for the oppression of other humans. (xv)

2.3 Ecofeminism

Sharing the concern for animal exploitation and the interests of critical animal studies, ecofeminism is an intersectional social justice perspective that critiques anthropocentrism, speciesism and the domination of nature. As Sorensen has noted, the oppression of animals constitutes a basic form of oppression that has provided a structure for the oppression of humans deemed less than human or “animal” as well, particularly, but certainly not limited to, the ways women are treated within a patriarchal society. Thus, ecofeminists call for the moral and ethical inclusion of the nonhuman, arguing that speciesism is a feminist issue, and that rigorous ecofeminist thought must consider the plight of the nonhuman animal as being a feminist issue, particularly within Western patriarchal norms.

Indeed, in *Ecofeminism*, Greta Gaard contends that “ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature” (1). She furthers this by stating that ecofeminism describes the

“framework that authorizes these forms of oppression as patriarchy, an ideology whose fundamental self/other distinction is based on a sense of self that is separate, atomistic” (2). Ecofeminism also critically examines the ways in which feminism has ignored the plight of the nonhuman animal as such, ecofeminism seeks to include the animal in its social justice perspective. Gruen writes that “ecofeminists call for a major shift in values” (61) and that we must “[re-examine]...our relationship to nonhuman animals” (61). As ecofeminists Carol J. Adams and Gruen put it, ecofeminism serves to analyze “mutually reinforcing logics of domination and [draw] connections between practical implications of power relations” (2), including consideration of species hierarchies, and thus seeks to challenge anthropocentrism and extend moral concern towards other animals and the earth. Rethinking our relationship with nonhuman animals—and, by extension, different subjugated Others or those considered similarly less-than-human—can also help us rethink our relationship with the planet. As Gaard writes, ecofeminism describes a number of salient connections “between the oppressions of women and of nature” (4), including “the way in which women and nature have been conceptualized historically in the Western intellectual tradition [that] has resulted in devaluing whatever is associated with women, including emotion, animals, nature, and the body, while simultaneously elevating in value those things associated with men, reason, humans, culture, and the mind” (5). Gruen notes that “the categories ‘woman’ and ‘animal’ serve the same symbolic function in a patriarchal society” (61) and that the Western world relies on hierarchical dualisms that place women and animals near the bottom of an

ontological hierarchy. Gruen and Adams argue that “ecofeminists identify dualistic thinking (that create inferior others and upholds certain forms of privilege as in the human/animal, man/woman, culture/nature, mind/body dualism) as one of the factors that undergirds oppression and distorts our relationships with the earth and other animals” (2-3). Lou, the protagonist in *Swine*, resists these dualisms, insisting through her veganism that the slaughterhouse relies on such dualisms all the while providing a site for extreme cruelty, exploitation, torture, and slaughter.

Recently, ecofeminist philosophies have been studied in psychological settings. In 2018, Lucius Caviola, Jim A. C. Everett, and Nadira S. Faber conducted a study called “The Moral Standing of Animals: Towards a Psychology of Speciesism.” They note that:

[Ecofeminist] philosophers were right when they drew an analogy between speciesism and other forms of prejudice. Speciesism correlates positively with racism, sexism, and homophobia, and seems to be underpinned by the same socio-ideological beliefs. Similar to racism and sexism, speciesism appears to be an expression of Social Dominance Orientation: the ideological belief that inequality can be justified and that weaker groups should be dominated by stronger groups. In addition, speciesism correlates negatively with both empathy and actively open-minded thinking. (n.p.)

A major portion of my thesis aims at exploring alternate and, therefore, radical ways of responding to the animal industrial complex; following ecofeminism’s lead, I seek an intersectional guide to action that emphasizes that humans are, as Lori Gruen argues,

already in relationships with nonhumans and the planet. Although ecofeminists, vegetarian/vegan activists, and CAS scholars have provided exemplary scholarly research, including many of the articles, books, and interviews I work with, the aim of this thesis is not only to propose gothic fiction to engage the emotions of the reader but also to posit carnism and the exploitation of animals as the true horror of contemporary Western society. While gothic fiction is already effective at engaging affectively, as I will demonstrate later with examples, the question arises, Why storytelling? The narratives we tell and internalize allow for the exploitation and slaughter of the fifty-six billion animals we raise annually for the unnecessary consumption of their flesh, deflect our attention from the role animal agriculture has in the destruction of the environment, and these narratives, in turn, lead to us damaging our own health. Instead, we could turn to the creation and perpetuation of new, transformative stories, and use them as motivation to do better, be better, and think differently.

Section 3: Fictional Methodologies: Empathy, Narrative, and the Gothic

The word “empathy” has emerged in the Western world relatively recently; derived from a translation of Theodor Lipps’ term *Einfühlung*, translated by experimental psychologist E.B. Titchener (Gruen 43; Keen 209), empathy means “feeling one’s way into” an art object or another person. Colloquially, *empathy* is often confused with *sympathy*; however, there is an important distinction to be made between the two terms. Empathy generally means to feel what another feels (“I feel your pain”), whereas sympathy suggests a supportive emotion (“I feel pity for your pain”) (Keen 209). Empathy, then, is when we feel what we perceive to be the others’ emotion, while sympathy denotes feelings *for* another. As Keen informs us, empathy is a “sharing of affect” experienced as a “feeling [of] what we believe to be the emotions of others” (208). Empathy is considered, by both philosophers and psychologists, to be both affective *and* cognitive (Keen 208). In the last two decades, ethics has seen an increase in interest around empathy, and, in the last few years, “been discussed in greater detail in animal ethics” (Gruen 43). Recently, some prominent psychologists and philosophers, including Paul Bloom and Jesse Prinz have argued against empathy; indeed, both Bloom and Prinz, and other empathy skeptics, argue that empathy can be misleading, in that it encourages us to empathize only with those most like us or “selectively elicited for those who are close by” geographically and emotionally, and that this can, in turn, distort the “proper ethical response” (Gruen 54-55). This criticism is not to say that we should entirely disregard empathy as a productive tool in ethics. As Gruen notes, we must instead cultivate or explore empathy thoughtfully, carefully, and self-reflexively. When we see through the conditioning of carnism, we might be able to feel empathy for other

animals. An ethical response will necessarily involve mindful, engaged, compassionate relationships with other animals with whom we share the planet. I agree with Gruen and other ecofeminists who insist that we are always already in relationships with other animals and that it “makes sense to work to make [these relationships] more meaningful and more mutually satisfying” (64) by making them conscious. We should be consistently, frequently, and kindly questioning our current relationships with others, “working to understand and improve these relationships” (64), while being mindful that we should seek to change, whenever possible, “relationships of exploitation or complete instrumentalization [*sic*]” (64). Entangled empathy requires not only self-awareness of one’s positionality but is also a “way for oneself to perceive and connect with a specific other in their particular circumstance” (67) and to recognize one’s place in relation to the other. Entangled empathy, as Gruen writes, is a process in flux, and involves a sharing of experiences and perspectives. All of this is to say that storytelling can be a powerful way to re-write and re-think our relationship to animals and to share a range of experiences and perspectives. And, of course, gothic conventions are useful in not only responding to current events but exploring the collapse of ontological divides, notably between human and animal. A vital component in psychology, philosophy, and (animal) ethics, empathy has also been explored alongside narrative understandings nearly from its Western conception. As Keen argues in “A Theory of Narrative Empathy,” we are storytelling and story-sharing creatures (209). While it may be true that we are initially emotionally drawn to those considered “like us” (family, small social groups, ethnicity, species), research suggests that this inclination is a cultural notion and that empathy can indeed be extended to groups outside our empathetic circles. Keen tells us that

education through storytelling modes “does not *create* our feelings, but renders emotional states [towards others] *legible*” (209, emphasis mine). Stories offer unique platforms for engaging with those considered Other, bridging temporal and geographical spaces. Gruen asks difficult questions about empathy for others: is empathy, she asks, “all it’s cracked up to be” (81), if there can be so much pain, suffering, trauma, and despair in the world? Gruen notes that our busy lives are partially to blame. “We are busy and most of us are absorbed in our own problems, projects, and plans. Many of us also have the luxury of not thinking about the problems that most people around the globe and most other animals are confronted with...almost every day” (81). Keen tells us that “narratives in prose and film infamously manipulate our feelings and call upon our built-in capacity to feel with others” (209). Although I agree with this perspective, I am hesitant to limit this experience merely to “manipulation” given its negative connotations and instead want to assert that this conscious decision of writers is a powerful, positive rhetorical tool and strategy of stories. Using plots and characters that engage readers emotionally, *Swine* questions anthropocentric norms that insist that “farm animals” are inferior to companion pets and humans. While future work, possibly in affect theory, is needed to empirically study the effects of animal narratives on empathy levels⁴, the goal of this thesis is to both assert that narratives provide and help foster empathic understandings and to create and present a fictional narrative as an empathetic response to those considered other. In fact, my thesis resists the Eurocentric notion that Western, “rational” modes of knowing are the only or best ways of receiving information. Indeed, although gothic is not typically considered an empathic

⁴Indeed, my later PhD work aims to address this gap.

genre, Wagner tells us that gothic confronts convention (xxxix) and that the gothic is radical in questioning and resisting the status quo (xxxviii). She notes that “gothic literature must keep moving and evolving to avoid becoming fixed and conformist [and] at its best, gothic haunts the practice of simply accepting things as they are or of deferring to nature, tradition, or received opinion” (xxxix). Wagner says that gothic can also be used to suggest alternative ways of living and thinking (xxxix). For these reasons, and others stated above, I see gothic stories as a powerful tool in re-thinking the way we treat and interact with animals because these stories allow us to explore not only the hidden horrors of actual animal agriculture but also to do so by challenging the “natural,” traditional or status quo. Ritivoi’s work is on Syrian refugees and the power of narrative to build empathy between groups. She notes that: To approach empathy as the result of hermeneutical application through narrative understanding is also to acknowledge that empathy is not so much characteristic of an immediate response to a concrete situation so much as the mark of an expanded consciousness that goes beyond a concrete event to a historical set of circumstances and can comprehend both their particular meaning and a larger moral, social, or political significance. (71) Ritivoi tells us that the act of empathically interpreting another’s experience by relating it to our own “assumes the ability to situate oneself and the other in a historical perspective and to be aware of the present moment in relation to the past and the future” (71). Indeed, empathetically understanding one’s relation historically and presently to nonhuman animals, vis-à-vis the animal industrial complex, is the first step to dismantling harmful dualisms, disrupting speciesist status quos, and encouraging compassionate responses to cruelty. Ritivoi furthers her claim by asserting that narrative understanding is “thus a

form of *historical* knowledge, of being able to project into the future while also remembering the past” (71), which, when applied to animals and literature, encourages a critique not only of present day factory farm conditions but of the anthropocentric attitudes that fuel them. I write later on in this thesis that one way in which the animal industrial complex is fueled is through forgetting: the careful, systematic, socialized forgetting and thus denial of the suffering of other animals. I suggest that we must remember instead, and that one avenue to social justice is through narrative remembering. “One *must* always begin by remembering. And the way not to forget, says [Helene] Cixous, is to write” (qtd in Castricano 3). I argue that the one of the best ways to produce an emotional response to such real-life cruelty is through fiction, specifically gothic writing. I situate my work as a response to the all too real horrors of the animal industrial complex, via a novel that is at once informed by the intersection of ecofeminism and critical animal studies and, idiosyncratically for this thesis, where these meet the conventions of the gothic, while revolutionizing what the gothic plot can look like—what I am calling an ecofeminist gothic plot. Gothic scholar Emily Carr also uses the term ecofeminist gothic to describe a certain type of literature. She says: Ecofeminist literacy, as I understand and practice it, intervenes in the rhetorical construction of the politics, history, and memory that is commonly known as humanity. It teaches us strategies for dislocating our anthropocentric assumptions about, for example, who speaks and for whom; what it means to suffer; the logical fallacies and cultural blind spots that lead to the supremacy of the ‘sentient’; the linguistic sleight of hand that turns bodies into commodities; and the deep-rooted (however we might try to deny it) assumption that our obligations to our home, the Earth, and the creatures that

inhabit it are economic rather than ecological. (3715) *Swine*, then, draws upon an ecofeminist ethos in combination with gothic convention to, as Carr puts it, dislocate our anthropocentric assumptions and to challenge the linguistic and narrative strategies that “turn bodies into commodities.” Carr writes that, within an ecofeminist gothic, “the everyday is collapsed with the nightmarish; distortion, dislocation and disruption become the norm” (3805-6). It is this disruption that is my primary tool, as I wish to highlight, query, and resist the animal industrial complex by painting a more vivid picture of it than human exceptionalist discourse typically allows. The main argument of Carr’s work on the ecofeminist gothic is that “the moral of ecofeminism is quite simply this: the world quite literally suffers from a lack of imagination” (3741). As such, by utilizing a creative, nightmarish, and gothic imagination, I have written *Swine* in order to better understand what horrific atrocities we in the Western world are imposing upon nonhuman animals every day. It is not my intention to ignore other gothic texts that have not discussed animals in some ways—yet I do contend that, by and large, these texts are interested in using the animal figuratively, as metaphor for the human condition⁵. My thesis suggests that an ecofeminist gothic will, in comparison to other gothic texts, more accurately depict not only the *current* state of animal agriculture taken to its speculative extreme but also directly query the state of the modern day abattoir for not only humans, but also especially and explicitly the animals caught within them. Within a capitalist, neoliberal, industrial North American context, I situate my own novel, *Swine*, suggesting that the atrocities we commit against nonhuman animals haunt us.

⁵ For a few examples among many, see ape imagery in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*; horror movies such as *Midnight Meat Train* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, in which slaughterhouse imagery is used to build atmosphere; the use of pig’s blood in Stephen King’s iconic 1973 novel *Carrie*

More to the point, gothic texts are often sites of anxiety, highlighting temporal and cultural fears, such as fear of degeneration at the turn of the nineteenth century⁶, and also exploring the collapse of boundaries and binaries between men and women⁷, human and animal⁸, class divisions⁹, technology and nature¹⁰, “good” and “evil,”¹¹ sanity and insanity¹², and boundaries between nations¹³ to name but a few. Jodey Castricano writes that the gothic is home to “radical rethinking,” because it is an “an aesthetically disavowed and morally repudiated genre that *nevertheless* deals in the epistemological and ontological aporias apparent in the totalizing gestures in Enlightenment value and thought” (801). If, within Eurocentric, patriarchal notions, women and animals have been considered morally unworthy, disgusting, irrational, instinctual, emotional, and closer-to-nature, the gothic is home to them even as it is paradoxically a genre that often presents both women and animal as monstrous. Yet, many women gothic writers¹⁴ have long used the genre as a mode by which to create radical, agentic heroines who resist the norms of their day. From this landing point, the Gothic can be reformulated to understand what is often truly monstrous: the imbrication of Western rationality, and human exceptionalism that enables the exploitation of all those considered less-than-

⁶ See Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

⁷ See Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle*; Ira Levin’s *The Stepford Wives*.

⁸ See H.G. Wells’ *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and *The War of The Worlds*; Octavia Butler’s *Fledgling*; Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*; Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach*.

⁹ See H.G. Wells’ *The Time Machine*.

¹⁰ See Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

¹¹ See Ira Levin’s *Rosemary’s Baby*; Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend*; William Faulkner’s *A Rose for Emily*.

¹² See Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*.

¹³ See Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*.

¹⁴ See many radical women gothic writers: Charlotte Smith (“Sonnet XII”), Joanna Baillie (“The Ghost of Faddon”), Kate Chopin (“The Story of an Hour”), Mary Shelley (*Frankenstein*) Charlotte Perkins Gilman (“The Yellow Wallpaper”), Charlotte Brontë (*Jane Eyre*), Emily Brontë (*Wuthering Heights*), Angela Carter (*The Bloody Chamber*), among many others.

human. This mode of storytelling is effective in exploring the porous ontological divide between human and animal, querying the speciesist status quo, and offering imaginative, speculative solutions to real-life problems. Anne Williams tells us that not only gothic fiction, but gothic fiction women *writers*, “[have] the power to change the ways we think and feel” (103). Through the use of the fantastic and horrific, gothic fiction provides a space in which we can not only critique dominant ideologies and dichotomies, but question social political, and cultural notions of self and other, or human and animal. Indeed, gothic fiction is instrumental to deconstructing dominant narratives and contending with oppressive practices. Even more specifically, gothic fiction is concerned with the disavowal of “nature”. As Alana F. Bondar tells us “Canadian texts of an EcoGothic nature, like the Gothic mode itself, make discoveries about cultural fears, anxieties and ancestral/colonial hauntings that expose Canada, and its culturally defined relations with ‘wilderness’ as a site of Gothic anxiety, as an uncanny space” (73). More than this, EcoGothic can expose human exceptionalism as fraught and bound up with other axes of oppressions, as ecofeminists suggest. In *EcoGothic*, Smith and Hughes write that “The Gothic seems to be the form which is well placed to capture these [environmental] anxieties and provides a culturally significant point of contact between literary criticism, ecocritical theory and political process” and that, through the Gothic, “the political urgency of ecological issues is often...elaborated.” In short, the EcoGothic “explores the Gothic through theories of ecocriticism.” *Pace* Smith and Hughes, I suggest that since the Gothic speaks to ecological and environmental anxieties it also affords a space in which to discuss human-animal relations and anxieties surrounding the collapse of anthropocentric arbitrary binaries.

Although realist texts can also afford fictional space by which to consider our relationship to nonhuman animals, Wagner asserts that gothic fiction's "extreme scenes...jolt us from our complacency, passivity, and security" and that "powerful images...counter complacency" (xxxix) and argues that, in turn, "an active mind is one that is more likely to identify new and more positive ways of living" (xxxix). It is in these ways that I see gothic as having, at the very least, *potential* to build empathy towards those considered a monstrous Other. Bondar specifically includes the nonhuman in her analysis of gothic texts. She writes that "EcoGothic texts attempt...to expose how...manifestations of the uncanny have been unfairly propagated within the culturally defined labyrinths of racism, sexism, speciesism and fear of the marked and/or sexualized body" (74). She contends that the gothic is entangled with ecocriticism and, importantly, ecofeminism (73). She notes that in the 1990s, prominence of ecocritical and ecofeminist philosophies within gothic scholarship helped "[breathe] new life into discussion concerning Canadian cultural identity and its connection to human-nature relations" (73). At the core of the Canadian ecoGothic is, as Bondar outlines, "[to unfix] the fixed metanarratives that remain at the core of a nation transfixed by unhealthy and outdated beliefs concerning otherness, multiculturalism and nature." If, as we have established, speciesism is but one of multiple axes of oppression upholding anthropocentric, Eurocentric, colonial, patriarchal logics, then "EcoGothic (or ecofeminist Gothic) novels seek to decentre [*sic*] impulses...of cultural identification and unity that serve to reinforce social controls and networks largely based on European, colonial, American, and maintained logics of binary opposition." I see the gothic text as a site of possibilities and, beyond that, *responsibility*, particularly when written or read

with an ecofeminist philosophy. Bondar writes that: It is within the unique cultural and artistic milieu of literature that emerging cultural fears, anxieties and concerns may be heard, mended and re-membered so as not to continue to be silenced or garrisoned unnecessarily against the evolution of a more just and sustainable biotic community. (74) Indeed, *Swine* focuses on acts of hearing, mending, and *re*-membering so as to dismantle oppressive hierarchies and systems that enable the systematic oppression of our nonhuman counterparts. Bondar suggests that EcoGothic strategies are twofold: first, while traditional gothic practices may reflect what she calls an imported or inherited “garrison mentality” that continues to haunt Canadians, ecofeminist gothic writers will “employ the Gothic mode as a way of decentering...fears and unlocking new ways of collapsing the logic of binaries by recognizing ‘otherness’ as a ‘notherness’ [sic].” Following Bondar’s lead, the creation of my gothic novel insists upon the entangled nature of our relationship with nonhuman animals and the planet, encouraging an ecofeminist perspective when dismantling the fragile ontological binary between human and animal. As established, the gothic has been characterized by its concern with temporal fears and the horror around the collapse of constructed binaries, specifically the arbitrary divide between human and animal. This is evident in Mary Shelley’s iconic *Frankenstein* (1818), in which the creature is chimerically comprised of makeshift “parts”—some human, some animal. In 1886, Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* highlighted tension around Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* and Social Darwinist fears of degeneration (that is, humans reverting to their “animal selves”). In the late nineteenth century, H.G. Wells’ wrote *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, a novel about vivisection, sentience, morality, and what happens when a scientist

literally erases the divide between those considered human and those considered animal to create the Beast Folk. Richard Marsh's 1897 novel *The Beetle* explores similar themes and fears of the fluid natures of gender and ontological notions of species. Ira Levin's novels *The Stepford Wives* and *Rosemary's Baby* highlight fears about the "new woman," feminism, and female empowerment. Shirley Jackson's iconic *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) uses the gothic genre to explore female sexuality, ideals of womanhood, confinement, and freedom. Today, the Gothic narrative is used to highlight twenty-first century anxieties. Jac Jemc's radical 2017 horror novel *The Grip of It* uses gothic conventions to discuss first-time home ownership and marriage within Western hegemonic norms and capitalism. Thus, I am employing the gothic genre to tell this story because the urgency to interrogate our exploitative and oppressive relationship to other animals has never been greater due to the frequency and ubiquity with which we rear and kill animals for food production. *Swine* tells a different story—not of the white, male worker troubled by existential ennui and morality of his positionality within a slaughterhouse, but the story of his daughter, who sees this work as the violent, problematic, and speciesist industry it is. I am of the conviction that stories change minds and hearts and can do so in relation to the animal industrial complex. *Swine* could be used as a starting point for future scholarship that might seek to analyze representations of women and animals in Gothic genres and, more specifically, the relationship *between* women and animals in this context.

Section 4: *Swine* and subverting gothic tradition

4.1 Gothic tropes

Now that I have discussed the rationale for choosing the gothic genre as a tool for resisting the animal industrial complex, I turn to a reading of *Swine* as implicated within the modern-day slaughterhouse. At times, I will weave between scholarly understandings of the slaughterhouse and my fictional representation of the modern state of animal agriculture. In this section, I address the ways in which the traditional Gothic plot functions, predominantly utilizing Anne Williams' conception of such a plot, and the ways I apply this in *Swine* in order to address the problem of animal agriculture. As Corinna Wagner puts it, gothic is a notoriously "slippery" (xxiii) term and, as a genre, difficult to define. However, although difficult at times to categorize texts within this genre, Wagner notes that gothic writing "has responded to an impressive range of cultural phenomena," from imperialism to advances in psychology, medicine, criminology (xxiv). Few would deny that gothic is known to induce horror and terror or that it evokes the uncanny—that is, as Sigmund Freud has conceptualized it, that which ought to have remained hidden coming to light.¹⁵ Many might raise their eyebrows at the connection between storied empathy and the gothic. My argument here is subtle but important: The real horror explored in my thesis, particularly in *Swine*, lies in the exposure of the real-life violence of anthropocentrism, which is usually normalized and thus not seen as horror. The real horror lies in the reader recognizing the system that

¹⁵ For more on Freud's concept of the uncanny, please see "The Uncanny," found in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works, pages 217-256.

puts the pigs in Jackson's Own in the first place; indeed, empathy comes about when this anthropocentrism and speciesism is finally seen for what it is: a violent and inconsistent ideology. My project subverts conventional Gothic novels, transforming a traditional, monstrous animal-human hybrid creature (the pigs in *Swine*) from the gothic Other to the agentic rebels. Similar to Richard Matheson's sleight of hand in his iconic gothic novel *I Am Legend*, the empathy that I am seeking comes when we realize the real horror is the violence we perpetuate on sentient beings every day through animal agriculture.

Although in the preceding section I began with a more general explication of what constitutes the gothic, and, more specifically, a Canadian ecoGothic, I now trace what Anne Williams outlines as the female gothic plot in her essential *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*. Williams writes that the female gothic plot is both constructive and empowering for female readers, affirming the possibilities of feminine strength (1827). She tells us that the female gothic narrative is "genuinely and profoundly novel" (1827) and even revolutionary. Williams says that the female gothic narrative does "not merely protest the conditions and assumptions of patriarchal culture, it unconsciously and spontaneously rewrites them" (1827). For Williams, the key aspects of the female gothic narrative include: a heroine, a home of initiation, a happily ever after, a responsibility, a suitor, a male antagonist, a female antagonist, and a confidante (256). Holly Hirst maps Williams' schematic to multiple Gothic narratives in her article "Gothic fairy-tales and Deleuzian desire." I have used this table to begin analyzing *Swine*.

Table 1. Holly Hirst's Gothic Framework

Tropes	<i>Swine</i>
Heroine	Lou
Home of initiation	Jackson
Happy ever after... in...	Sharing a home with her adopted pig on the East Coast of Canada
Responsibility	Stand up for convictions
Suitor	Dylan
Male antagonist	Her father
Female antagonist	Her mother
Confidante	Alexis and Harpreet
Imprisonment in a tower/castle	Figuratively in Jackson
Loss of parents	Abusive father, disconnect from mother
Vicissitudes of hero	Anxiety
'Salvation' of hero	Releasing Jackson's Own pigs

The goal of *Swine* then, is to present a novel in the *ecofeminist* gothic tradition: the ecofeminist plot does not merely present and protest the conditions and assumptions of speciesist culture, it rewrites them. Lou, an unlikely protagonist, encourages the rethinking of our relationship to animals by first eschewing animal

products altogether, as well as by questioning the carnist culture of Jackson, British Columbia, the setting for the novel. *Swine* begins with a young family having just moved to a nearby town so the father can take a position on the kill floor of a local slaughterhouse. Lou, our thirteen-year old vegan protagonist and her parents, Ian and Gail (who gave birth to Lou at sixteen) move to Jackson¹⁶, where Lou quickly realizes people are consumed by their obsession with their local pork from Jackson's Own. She meets two friends at an October fall festival, Alexis Caceres and Harpreet Dhillon. Although Lou appreciates her new friendships, she is riddled with anxiety: one, because she has been uprooted from the only home she has only ever known and misses her closest friend, Julia; and, two, because she was the sole witness of her father's murder of her pet dog, Caroline.

Swine also engages with ideologies of speciesism and carnism. While there are vegan and vegetarian characters seen more often in novels in the last decade or so¹⁷ (and vegetarian characters much longer than that), the frequency with which vegan characters (those who eschew all animal products, not just flesh foods) is rare and vegan protagonists currently still rarer.¹⁸ As we have seen, carnism is the invisible ideology that encourages inconsistent views towards animals. The setting of Jackson is designed to highlight the ways in which we normalize meat consumption. Joy writes that, in order to keep the awareness that our meat consumption involves excessive

¹⁶ This town name was chosen as an homage to gothic writer Shirley Jackson.

¹⁷ Lauren Groff's 2015 book *Fates and Furies* features a pescatarian couple; Jonathan Safran Foer's character, based and named off himself, is vegetarian in his 2009 book *Everything is Illuminated*; J.M. Coetzee's 2003 *Elizabeth Costello* (the titular character is also the protagonist in *The Lives of Animals*); John Green's 2012 young adult novel *The Fault in Our Stars* has a vegetarian main character.

¹⁸ Han Kang's 2007 novel *The Vegetarian* features a vegan protagonist.

cruelty, “the meat industry locates factory farms and slaughterhouses far from public scrutiny,” (8) a notion that anthropologist Amy Fitzgerald and journalist Timothy Pachirat support in their own research, namely, that

marketing strategists often aim to assuage any internal conflict the carnist may experience by depicting nonhuman animals as willingly offering their bodies for food (i.e., pigs holding carving knives and dancing over the fire pit in which they are to be cooked), as living enviable lives (e.g., “Oh, I wish I were an Oscar Mayer wiener” or California’s Happy Cow campaign), and even as being “happily” harvested rather than slaughtered (e.g., McDonald’s Happy patch). (Joy 8-9)

Through the novel, Lou encounters similar attitudinal representations of such marketing. She witnesses what seems to be the town’s obsession with local pork when she rides her bike to the gas station, which is the same scene Lou endears herself to her friend, Alexis. The teenaged clerk asks if Alexis would like “Jackson pepperoni stick[s]” or slices of Jackson ham (29). Lou’s new cafeteria sells mostly pork meals (13-14) and claims to “proudly” sell Jackson’s Own meat products (13). Several times, Lou sees bumper stickers or slogans that read DON’T BE A DORK EAT JACKSON PORK (12, 119); she witnesses a billboard at the fall festival that depicts a woman with large breasts holding a “rack” of meat, which is modelled after a similar billboard at a rib fest in Kelowna, British Columbia; when Lou’s school is taken on a tour of Jackson’s Own Farms and Meatpacking Industries, the tour guide assures the students that the pigs are “happy” and not stressed, and this is why the pork is “supple,” “succulent,” and “tender” (25). Later, at Alexis’s funeral, her father Max strangely boasts about Jackson’s Own’s

pork during deep grief at the loss of his child (157). This over-the-top obsession with the meat is shown to demonstrate the eerie nature of those who eat the pork in Jackson, but also to demonstrate the incommensurability of loss of life; that of a human child and that of a pig are treated entirely differently in that one is mourned and the latter celebrated. The comparison is meant to shock the reader because it aims at illustrating discrepancy in the value placed upon a life. I do not mean to suggest in this scene that they must be mourned in the same way (because, of course, Max would have a deeper emotional connection to his own daughter rather than a pig he did not personally meet) but rather, aim to illuminate the the great disparity between the death of the lost human loved one, remembered and mourned indefinitely, and the animal on our collective plate, not considered at all. Billboards, television commercials, images in text books, and myriad other forms of media all celebrate the consumption of animal products and encourage buying and consuming more while concealing the realities of meat production. Carnism works to make these ubiquitous images and ideas seem natural, normal, and necessary, thereby trivializing resistance to carnism.

The novel challenges speciesism both tacitly and overtly. Juxtaposed with scenes of pig abuse and slaughter, Lou often remembers abuse of other animals. For instance, during the Win Your Dinner event at the winter festival in Jackson, “unsellable” and “unraisable” piglets are used as entertainment (what the farmhands call the unpigs). Competitors are invited to “catch the pig,” which is seen as harmless fun—however, the event quickly turns violent as competitors realize the quicker and more reliable method of “catching” is to kill the piglets. Before this event begins, Lou’s friend Harpreet asks Lou if she has ever gone fishing, to which Lou replies that she has (123). Here, Lou

recalls striking the fish with a PVC pipe in order to ensure the fish's death (123-4), raising the point that although the Win Your Dinner event seems cruel and unnecessary, the similarly unnecessary deaths of fish during fishing outings are normalized and accepted, effectively not seen as violent. Win Your Dinner is also contrasted with Caroline's death (130-134). Caroline's death scene features Lou witnesses Ian, who has arrived home drunk and rejected after not receiving a job he wanted, escalate in his frustration and kills Caroline. Although the Win Your Dinner event is brutal, it is intended to show how different the responses are to the slaughter of these animals when out in the open and for anyone to see rather than concealed both ideologically and physically in slaughterhouses. More to the point, the narrative contrasts Caroline's death with the pig's death to demonstrate that while many would feel horror and revulsion at the killing of a companion animal such as a family dog few in a carnist society would feel equally moved over the death of a pig (particularly pigs used in food production), which demonstrates the arbitrary and inconsistent way we view different animal species. Pigs, as a group, are commonly seen as a homogenous group who are bred solely to become food products, whereas dogs are seen as individuals. In these ways, the novel does emotional work that encourages reevaluations of our daily practices with animals; we are able, through narrative, to compare cruelties to animals and humans in ways that reach us affectively by ask us to follow along as the protagonist experiences each instance of abuse. The novel brings awareness to interconnected violence of pork production, fishing, and dog abuse and queries our relationship to animals and the ways we normalize inflicting violence on animals. If the reader cringes at overt depictions of violence they are encouraged to reflect upon hidden and naturalized violence involved

in fishing or eating pork at a barbeque. Throughout the novel, Lou attempts to have her father see pigs the way that she does. She relies on their intelligence and their sentience as reasoning points (62), as well as insisting on the atrocity of killing pigs (129). However, her appeals fall on deaf ears as Lou's father says that he "hates" pigs and that he must see them as objects, rather than subjects, to engage in the business of killing them (174). Ian and other slaughterhouse workers consistently brag about Jackson's Own's "revolutionary" pig killing systems and their efficacy. Of course, this is a commentary on the seduction of industrialization and the ways in which efficiency trumps compassion where speciesism is involved.

As an ecofeminist, I am mindful of the ways that people of color have been historically "animalized," seen as less-than and inferior-to the Eurocentric white, male, subject. Wagner, in her overview of the gothic genre within Western contexts, tells us that many Victorian texts deal with anxiety around colonized peoples. She writes "In many Victorian [texts], colonizers often fear the vengeful spectres of colonized people—in whatever forms they may take" (xxviii). Notably, Wagner acknowledges that nineteenth-century gothic writers tend to represent racial "others" as having diabolical, monstrous or otherwise powerful qualities (xxviii). Indeed, she notes the tension and juxtaposition between pride of the colonizers regarding their "progression" and "fears about social and cultural regression, about changes in international power structures, and, indeed, about a future decline in the economic status of the nation" (xxx). I raise this brief but powerful point to demonstrate the ways in which the gothic is useful in both cataloguing racist fears of the racialized Other and in highlighting anxiety about social and cultural "regression"—that is, the destabilization of the Eurocentric, white, male

rationalist figure. Animal figures within the gothic have been written similarly—that is to say, they have been written as both pitied and feared symbols in opposition of what is considered normal, civil, and moral. Wagner says that gothic fears of animals, but particularly animal-human hybrids, center around atavistic, animalistic creatures that she says are “abject, uncanny beings whom we may fear or we may have sympathy for, but who always prompt us to consider the traits that make us human and the qualities that make us civilized. Invariably, they also remind us of how fragile our ordered world is” (xxxvii). It is from this historical notion of cultural, ontological fear that *Swine* emerges. Although many of these gothic texts show fear of the racialized and/or animalized Other, they rarely talk about the plight of these individuals, nor do these stories tend to evoke empathy in the way I have written about it. Rather, *Swine* encourages something of a subversion in this gothic tradition: on one hand, *Swine* keeps with convention by striving to “remind us of how fragile our ordered world is,” and how arbitrary the ontological human-animal divide is. On the other, *Swine* reminds us that we should *not* fear the pigs from Jackson’s Own—or, we can fear them, as long as we also realize that it is the humans in the story, and us in real life, who continue to perpetuate the real-life horror of animal agriculture and anthropocentrism. We are the monstrous. As Gruen has said, ecofeminists call for a drastic shift in values (61), insisting that we vigorously re-examine our relationship to nonhuman animals.

Although *Swine* critiques certain violent and cruel behaviors humans depict towards animals, the novel also celebrates the connectios between humans and animals, specifically Lou and her dog, Caroline, and a pig she meets at Jackson’s Own whom Lou calls Olivia. Throughout the novel, Lou repeatedly refers to Caroline as her

“best friend,” (27, 146) someone in whom she confides, plays with, protects, and shares a deep bond with. On the farm tour, Lou first feels a connection with Olivia (25-6) and on Halloween night, they interact again (90-2) when Olivia and Lou bond in the British Columbian woods. Lou, unafraid of the genetically modified pigs, feels a connection with them, but particularly Olivia. Later, when Lou frees the pigs, she runs with them through the woods. When Lou trips, Olivia catches up to her and waits to see if Lou is all right. Lou assures her that “this [injury] is nothing” (184), which she repeats, trying to convey her deep sadness for what has happened to Olivia and the other pigs in Jackson’s Own. As the night of the pig’s release progresses, Olivia stays protectively with Lou, not allowing the other pigs to harm her (181-91). That same night, with Lou’s consent, Olivia enters the Lowes home, attacking and eventually killing Lou’s abusive father (189).

4.2 The slaughterhouse

For gothic texts, setting is paramount. Many narratives, and specifically horror texts, not only use slaughterhouses as motif, atmosphere, and backdrop. Before exploring the way that setting is established in *Swine*, it is necessary to look at the real-life history of slaughterhouses in North America. I have suggested that carnism, speciesism, and the animal industrial complex function in such a way that we no longer see animals as living individual beings: rather, we see them as potential food products, as commodities, and as objects to be consumed and exploited at will rather than subjects of a life. In contrast, people often view cows in a field or pigs in a truck as either wholesome, in the case of the former, or potentially tragic, in the case of the latter, but we rarely interact with farm animals in such ways and, when we do, these

encounters are fleeting. Of course, these ideologies rely on human exceptionalism. The systematic abuse of animals continues to happen, in part, due to its physical concealment. Much of the reason why such widespread cruelty to animals continues to occur is because abattoirs are not only difficult to find geographically but are “physically, linguistically, and socially isolated” (Pachirat 236). Although from an early age we are abstractly aware that animals are raised for food, most of us are disconnected from the fact that death is implicated in this process and, more concretely, the violent realities of slaughter. This act of separating the animal product from the animal it once was happens through the language we use—calling animal products “beef” or “poultry” or “pork”—as well as the physical compartmentalizing of the animal body—“lamb chop” or “chicken breast” or “rump roast”—makes it easier for the average consumer to ignore the fact that their meal was once a living, sentient creature. This is what Carol J. Adams calls the “absent referent.” Although we understand that the food on our plate comes from an animal, the twenty and twenty-first century modern factory farm and slaughterhouse, implemented in the animal industrial complex and working in tandem with carnism, ensures that we forget. Indeed, we not only are not aware of the geographical locations of slaughterhouses, but forget the connection between what is on our plates and the animals whose bodies provided the product no longer recognizable as coming from a living being. Norbert Elias notes that “the animal form is so concealed and changed by the art of its preparation and carving that, while eating, one is scarcely reminded of its origin” (qtd in Pachirat 9-10). This forgetting, as it were, is neither innocuous or accidental. Nancy Williams “argues that there is actually an

unwillingness among the public to think about how their meat is produced,” (qtd in Fitzgerald 59), which is carnism at work.

A spatial divide between humans and non-human animals within new industrialized settings has helped facilitate this separation. As Andrew Robichaud and Erik Steiner say, “[the] new spatial separation between humans and certain animals [has] transformed human-animal relationships” (1). Anthropologist Amy J. Fitzgerald acknowledges that this separation, which encourages us *not* to think of the slaughtering of animals, is not an oversight and is indeed intentional (58). As recently as the nineteenth century, some animals now considered farm animals roamed the streets of New York City and San Francisco (1). Robichaud and Steiner write that in the nineteenth century, people who lived in cities used animals for work purposes, which meant animals and humans often shared the same streets, “even if [the animal’s] physical presence was at times offensive and unpleasant” (1). Fitzgerald agrees with this description of nineteenth century relationships between humans and animals, noting that during this domestic era, “the social and economic structures normalize daily contact with animals (including non-pets)” (59). Charles Dickens, when visiting New York, documented seeing pigs mingling with humans and dogs on city streets. As late as 1892 “pigs...maintained a conspicuous presence in the city” (Robichaud and Steiner 1). Although San Francisco was not home to many pigs, many other animal species roamed the city. French Journalist Etienne Derbec wrote that “horses, mules, sows, pigs, chickens live in freedom in other unusual sections [of town],” lamenting that “the spaces separating [San Francisco] houses are filled with domestic animals” (qtd in Robichaud and Steiner 1). One living in the twenty first century would find this difficult to

imagine. Pets in cities are limited to cats, dogs, and other small animals such as guinea pigs, fish, ferrets, and lizards that are confined to such spaces as cages, aquariums, and kennels. Rarely are horses and cows seen, and almost never, save for infrequent events or the exception of animal sanctuaries, do we ever interact with animals raised for slaughter.

Current practices of meat slaughter and consumption are borne out of societal concerns with civility. *Swine* seeks to acknowledge that the concealment of the way we slaughter animals is anything but civil. Fitzgerald, in tracing the construction of the concealed abattoir, notes that the slaughterhouse as we understand it today emerged in the early nineteenth century “as part of a larger transition from an agrarian to industrial system, accompanied by increased urbanization, technological developments, and concern about public hygiene” (59). In Europe, efforts were made to make animal slaughter less visible. At the same time, similar motions were being made in the US and other parts of North America.¹⁹ As meat production and slaughter were mechanized, the public was further distanced from the process. The infamous Union Stock Yard in Chicago, opened in 1865 was the site of Upton Sinclair’s expository novel, *The Jungle*. This highly mechanized slaughterhouse, which employed many immigrants, marked the beginning of modern abattoirs in North America. By the 1880s, animal slaughtering had become an industrialized, mass-production industry keen on developing efficient ways to increase profit margins. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, concentration of animal slaughter in few urban areas was “driven by the idea that it was more efficient

¹⁹ For a more thorough genealogy of the emergence of slaughterhouses in the Western world, see Amy J. Fitzgerald’s “A Social History of the Slaughterhouse: From Inception to Contemporary Implications,” notably pages 59-63.

for animals to be slaughtered in central locations and to transport carcasses to markets than to transport live animals” (62). Because of these new policies and regulations, slaughterhouses and the process of animal slaughter helped to drive a further wedge between “human” and “animal.” The human/animal divide is so entrenched that animals were always already objects of consumption, making this transition shockingly seamless. As Robichaud and Steiner tell us:

The diversity of people’s physical relationships with animals narrowed to mostly horses and dogs as transportation and pets—relationships qualitatively different from animal husbandry. Perhaps no coincidence, the first generation to grow up with disembodied meat and invisible slaughterhouses was the first generation to have their stomachs turned at Upton Sinclair’s descriptions of slaughterhouses on Chicago’s South Side decades later. (6-7)

Indeed, Norbert Elias, in his work, *The Civilizing Process*, identifies the “process” as the segregation, removing out of sight and concealment of certain phenomenon, including the slaughtering of animals. Pachirat explains as follows:

Drawing on Western etiquette manuals to document changes in public standards for bodily functions, nakedness, sexual relations, table manners, attitudes toward children, and the treatment of animals from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century, Elias convincingly reveals the following pattern: what once occurred in the open without provoking reactions of either moral or physical disgust has been increasingly segregated, confined, and hidden from sight. Manners surrounding the

eating of meat are identified as particular historical evidence: table portions grow smaller, making meat less identifiably animal...In many of our meat dishes the animal form is so concealed and changed by the art of its preparation and carving that, while eating, one is scarcely reminded of its origin. (10)

The gothic allows us to question both the literal and figurative human/animal divide that allows for the industrialized slaughter of animals every day. *Swine* suggests that this divide, this transition from the living being before you to the absent referent upon your plate, created by the industrialization of animal agriculture, can not only be troubled, but can also be seen. This psychological transformation occurs not just by opening up the slaughterhouse and peering inside, but within our seemingly average day-to-day interactions, between our companion animals, our food, and even between one another. As mentioned above, many gothic narratives utilize animal agriculture as backdrop or as allegory for the human condition. Yet when animals *are* involved in such stories, they are often intertwined with classic anthropomorphism, which is arguably modelled on anthropocentrism.²⁰ Much of this literature, although at times fantastical, uses the representation of animals as a parallel of the human condition by serving as allegory or metaphor for human behavior. Gruen grants that we might tell stories about animals, rivers, wetlands “but it is always *us* telling the story; we create the narratives. In this way, I don’t know that we can be non-anthropomorphic” (73). However, Gruen

²⁰ For example, although Stephen King’s 1973 novel *Carrie* features pig’s blood, the role of this symbol is not to talk about the plight of pigs but rather to demonstrate that the schoolchildren found Carrie herself to be piglike. On a practical level, pig’s blood is cheap and accessible. There becomes potential for many interesting analyses of the character of Carrie but does little to imagine the actual lives and deaths of pigs.

also tells us that not all anthropomorphizing is problematic (66). I agree with both of her sentiments, suggesting that when written carefully, thoughtfully, and radically, anthropomorphism can be helpful in understanding animals *as animals* and not merely as allegorical or metaphorical figures for the human condition. I follow the lead of Marc Bekoff and employ what he has called “careful anthropomorphism.” Likewise, Jodey Castricano contends that this move from a classic anthropomorphism to *radical* anthropomorphism, “acknowledges the significance of empathy and compassion, love and friendship” between and beyond species (256). Danielle Sands writes that while anthropomorphism has frequently been applied within an anthropocentric understanding of other animals, “[anthropomorphism’s] association with anthropocentrism, sentimentality and intellectual sloppiness are now being challenged” (92) by people like Marc Bekoff, Frans de Waal, and Castricano. Sands suggests that anthropomorphism can be a “clumsy but useful tool for understanding kinship and difference” (92). Author Alice Walker uses careful or radical anthropocentrism in her short story “Am I Blue?”, a narrative that not only ruminates on animal emotion through the tale of a grieving horse but also ties such grieving to the experience of African-American slaves who, like Blue, were used merely as means to other being’s ends (139-140). In this way, “Am I Blue?” offers a fictional reflection on loss, attachment, and abuse, and the ways in which speciesism and racism are similar. Bekoff insists that anthropomorphism, when used carefully, is “alive and well, as it should be” (qtd in Castricano 256). It is my contention that radical anthropomorphism *can* be used to further understanding of animals’ lives in a way that encourages empathy, consideration, and care and that this “odd mixture of distance and kinship which characterizes human relationships with nonhumans” (Sands

93) can be best understood using this understanding of relationship or kinship. The aim of *Swine* is not necessarily to demonstrate the “kindness” or “altruism” of other species, specifically pigs within factory farm/slaughterhouse contexts; rather, I wish to demonstrate the complex range of emotions felt by other animals. Within the novel’s plot, the pigs of *Swine* are, at times, sorrowful, nervous, terrified, angry, spiteful, and perplexed. As discussed, oftentimes the setting of a slaughterhouse is utilized within novels not to talk about animals but to talk about humans (or otherwise marginalized peoples). In a similar vein, animals in texts that encourage a closer examination of our relationship to other animals often depict animals as endlessly altruistic, kind, and selfless²¹. While this may be true in many cases and worthy of representation, *Swine* seeks to trouble this notion and demonstrate that nonhuman animals have *complex* emotions that, like humans, are context-specific and dependent on the individual animal.

In creating *Swine*, I was hesitant to write fully from the pig’s perspectives, as I fear this would deny the pigs their “pigness”—that is, what makes them nonhuman animals, individual pigs, rather than humans trying to conceive of what their interior life could be. Instead, I preferred to take the route of humans attempting to understand and bond with animals, while letting their actions both speak for themselves and be free to be interpreted by the reader. Walker’s “Am I Blue?” takes a similar position, in which the narrator observes the titular horse’s grief and mourning, but the prose remains from the human’s perspective rather than the horse’s. One could argue that Walker employs classical anthropomorphism in describing Blue’s behavior, but I would insist that this is

²¹ See such narratives as:

careful or radical anthropomorphism, one that challenges rather than reinforces conventional understandings of animal emotion, cognition and behavior.

Section 5: Conclusions: Towards an Ecofeminist Fiction

5.1 Ecofeminist writers and stories

I have no illusions that philosophical arguments alone will suffice to transform our thinking about what we call animal. Poetry reminds me to challenge the dominant discourses.²²

Encouraging empathy through narrative is important not only for readers of fiction, but for deep political thought, social justice movements, and significant governmental regulation change. The novel portion of this thesis aims to build empathy towards nonhuman animals to generate political and personal change. I am not alone in my mission: animal activists who see fiction, poetry, and storytelling as a response to human exceptionalism and the violence this ideology brings have long resisted animal exploitation and encouraged a re-examination of our relationships with animals. Indeed, one can see such disruptive thinking in such nineteenth century texts as H.G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau*; twentieth-century texts like J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* and Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*; and twenty-first century texts including Don LePan's *Animals*, Robin Lamont's investigative *The Kinship Series*, Ondine Sherman's young adult book *Sky*, Julia Ducournau's *Raw*, and Han Kang's thought-provoking and artful *The Vegetarian*. Other texts, like Bong Joon-Ho's 2017 film *Okja*, bring concern for the state of the animal in modern factory farming conditions to the big screen, considering the plight of individual animals in relation to the homogenizing of

²² Shandell Houlden, "Ruptures in Thinking", 62.

animals within industrialization and their use as food. I remain unconvinced that *Okja*'s message is entirely coherent and successful, but I do contend that the film challenges the viewer to think on the state of their food and the millions of real animals raised in factory farms. In fact, Google trends suggest a powerful connection between Joon-Ho's film and those who wish to make the switch to vegan eating. *Okja* was released between May and June 2017; by late June, Google searches for the phrases "going vegan" and "how to go vegan" increased by an impressive sixty-five percent (Starostinetskaya). Narrative might be the best route for building empathy across species and procuring long-lasting change.

Many of these stories are told by women who see deep connections between the plight of animals and those of marginalized, racialized others, and the ways these logics of oppression also damage the planet. These narratives, though employing differing storytelling techniques, seek to question the human/animal divide. Shandell Houlden writes that:

There is a long tradition, be it oral, textual or otherwise, of animal rights activists and theorists telling their stories as part of their practice and effort to both come to terms with and to change the world. These stories usually involve struggles with personal relationships to the nonhuman world, and in particular to the consumption of, and relation to animals. In part, they are attempts at evoking some of the passion that motivates these struggles, but they are also a cataloguing of the narratives all of us bear, our moments of realization that our pasts are haunted by spectral suffering. These stories are where many of us begin to think about the

world because in fact, they are us thinking *in* the world, and indeed, *thinking the world*. (6-7)

I join these activists and theorists in telling a story to change the world. *Swine* creates a new story and narrative, and contributes to a growing tradition of storytellers that aims to consider not just the human but the *animals*, and the ways in which, in spite of denials, we are already in relationships with one another. That being said, two scholars and activists who have come before me who deserve recognition are Shandell Houlden and Coral Hull. In his book *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*, Paul Dawson describes Hull as follows:

Hull completed a doctorate in Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong, and part of her thesis was published by Five Islands Press as *Broken Land: 5 Days in Bre*, 1995. Hull is an animal rights activist, and in this work, which won the Victorian Premier's Award, she employs an autobiographical narrative sequence of poems in which the narrator travels to an outback town, Brewarrina, in order to spend time with her father and to visit various abattoirs and slaughterhouses. The narrator in this book is referred to as Coral, forcing us to identify her with the author and to read the poems as a direct representation of experience. (211)

Dawson notes that Hull's writing in *Broken Land* "is both poetry as therapy and poetry as politics" (212) and he insists that "[her writing] is the political made personal" (212). If this is true—if such poetry is the political made personal—and if Houlden's assertion is correct—that stories *think the world*—then it seems that we, in the twenty-first century, should indeed turn to stories and storytelling for new, radical, entangled

ways of understanding our planet and the animals with whom we share it. In a world so scarred by factory farming and slaughterhouses, and billions of animal deaths per year, it makes sense that we might (re)create ourselves and our world through the narratives we tell one another. In fact, the planet and the animals demand it. A humanist, anthropocentric discourse cannot hold.

Houlden's work is a challenge to anthropocentrism, suggesting it limits ethical thinking and that the "nonhuman life remains marginalized and unaccounted for" (iii). Houlden writes that, in order to resist performing normative, humanist theory, "[she] turns to alternate modes of knowledge production, including textual collage, poetry and auto-ethnography, in an effort to challenge the terms of what is given as *good thinking*" (iii, emphasis mine). If the horrors of the contemporary abattoir are, as journalists such as Pachirat, anthropologists like Fitzgerald, as well as other CAS scholars, say, so prevalent, so ubiquitous, and so unbearable, perhaps the best way to encourage "good thinking" around these issues includes the affective turn in fiction as well as scholarly writing and analysis. I turn to the writing of a gothic novel for these reasons as well as to demonstrate that fiction can be employed to build empathy *towards our fellow earthlings* and to serve as an intervention within the a reparative response to the animal industrial complex, notably factory farming and the slaughterhouse; and contribute affective knowledges to existing ecofeminist and CAS scholarship. CAS encourages theory-to-practice; through the creation of this gothic novel, I suggest that fiction *is* practice and action, and that it need not be read as counter to or in opposition with theory, but as its own form of knowledge-making that functions *alongside* theoretical and scholarly approaches to the animal industrial complex. As patrice jones suggests, "empathy with

nonhuman animals requires more research and imagination and, therefore, more circumspection before leaping to conclusions” (102). It is this imagination that I think can help save us, and the animals with whom we share the planet, from the anthropocentrism and carnism that currently propagates the death of fifty-six billion animals annually. Fiction gives the reader space to foster such empathy by pointing out, like Gruen, that we are *already* in relationships with animals. And it is the gothic specifically that occupies the liminal space between binaries, encouraging us to sit with our horror; what are we so afraid of? From here, the question becomes, what will we do about it? My hopes are that, in creating *Swine*, I can suggest a radical kind of empathy that encourages us to consider our own positionality within anthropocentric discourses and that we will begin to question not only the individual killing practices within the slaughterhouse, but the slaughterhouse itself. I contend that fiction helps us see animals for the subjects they are, rather than objects. Fiction, specifically Gothic fiction, is one of the ways that we can make animals matter again.

Pachirat writes in intense detail about the inner workings of a slaughterhouse. He says the following: “The detailed accounts [in his book, *Every Twelve Seconds*] are not merely incidental to or illustrative of a more important theoretical argument about how distance and concealment operate as mechanisms of power in contemporary society. They *are* the argument” (19). Following Pachirat’s lead, I suggest that epistemological and theoretical work can be utilized to resist, interrogate, and dismantle the animal industrial complex, but that fiction and narrative, specifically gothic narrative, is also essential for this work; not only essential, but vital as an affective way to consider our

relationship to animals, our planet, and to challenge human exceptionalism. In this way, *Swine* is not incidental or adjunct to these claims. *Swine* is the argument.

5.2 Conclusion

As I mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, my compassion towards my fellow earthlings was compounded through story. Books, movies, televisions, word-of-mouth tales, narrative is the way I understood not just myself but where I stood in relation to others. Narrative continues to help me understand those perceived Other, to foster empathy, and to imagine better futures by exploring injustice.

Halfway through writing my master's thesis, Jordan Peele released his 2017 film *Get Out*. He uses gothic conventions to think through and critique the systemic racism that African Americans still experience to this day, while simultaneously crafting an engaging and entertaining story worthy of sitting in the canon of horror. I aim to do the same with *Swine*, but I extend the commentary to the nonhuman animals with whom we share the planet. In this way, *Swine* is intended to be a part of CAS's social justice project, demonstrating both the efficacy of the gothic genre to talk about the animal industrial complex, and the power of story to change our minds. Stories touch on the emotion that so seldom is legitimized in academic circles. Although I wholeheartedly agree with the philosophical, scientific, and ethical arguments and reasons for not harming animals, for not killing animals, and for not eating animals, I believe stories let us look inward. Simply, they reach our hearts. Lou is only thirteen years old and is still very much a child. In Walker's story "Am I Blue?" the story that, in many ways, inspired this project and launched me on a journey of talking about animals through fiction, she writes that children think more with their hearts than adults do and that we *forget* the

deep levels of communication we share with those who are unlike us by the time we grow older. Walker insists that it is not that we do not rationally know the pain we inflict on animals, but that we are encouraged, through socialization and ideology, to push our emotional connections and knowledges and memories aside. To forget the connection that we share with all life. This, then, is why I write: Stories ask us to remember.

Section 6: *Swine*

All men are created equal.

– Thomas Jefferson

All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.

– George Orwell, *Animal Farm*

Kill the pig! Cut her throat! Spill her blood!

– William Golding, *The Lord of the Flies*

PART I: September 2017

Ad from Kijiji.ca, July 17, 2017:

Meat Cutter/Production Personnel – Jackson – 2017

Department: Production

Location: Jackson, BC

Job Type: Full Time (including nights)

Professional Area: Industrial Meat Cutters/Butchers

Salary Range: 21.00 to 25.60

Jackson's Own is engaged in the dressing and processing of hogs for both domestic and world markets. To reach and sustain its position as a premier supplier of quality food products, it strives to employ talented, motivated, and passionate people who are capable of reaching the cutting edge of their discipline, open to an experimental and fast-paced environment, and eager to contribute to their community. Due to rapid growth, we are looking for Meat Cutters/Production Personnel. This position is based at the operations in the close-knit community of Jackson, BC, which has a nationwide reputation for its beauty, mild climate, and high quality of life.

Responsibilities/Duties include:

- slaughter, eviscerate and mark hogs for further processing
- cut pork carcasses into primal cuts intended for commercial, industrial, institutional or wholesale use

Full description of responsibilities/duties available through contacting Jackson's Own.

Please contact us at xxx-555-2627 for information about how to apply.

Jackson's Own looks forward to meeting you!

I.

Lou Lowe woke to Beastie standing on his hind hooves, beady black eyes glistening in the rosy dusk light. Caroline licked Lou's palm and whined fearfully.

Even before her mind caught up with the rest of her body, Lou knew she'd been dreaming. It wasn't possible to feel a warm scratchy tongue on her palm. Caroline had been dead almost eight months now. And as for Beastie, he was a pale pink stuffed pig her father had bought her at IKEA some years back who did not possess the ability to prop itself up on its hind legs. She knew she'd been sleeping and her subconscious had rolled her thoughts together in a slippery and unpleasant package, and yet when she awoke she still thought for a delirious hopeful moment she was back in Kettering. She didn't recognize her new room. The sounds she woke up to, or, rather, the lack of sounds, did not sound like home either. In Kettering, she and her parents had lived on a busy blistering street and it was not unusual to hear a train grumbling as it passed through from one destination to the next. Waking up to silence was, for Lou, unsettling.

She grabbed Beastie and tucked him into her armpit. She had not unpacked her pajamas last night, had fallen into sleep after yanking off her T-shirt. She pulled it back on, a teal tee with orange petals and ALABAMA SHAKES written across it. From her window, she could see her neighbor's house. She could not know yet but the room opposing hers was Alexis Caceres's. On Alexis' windowsill sat a fat black cat, a furry lump like moss on stone. Although the crisp September air was void of train whistles or

cars backfiring, it carried with it the uneven morning sound of a pair of black-capped chickadees. One of the birds chirped happily; the other joined her, a three-note whistle. The effect pleased Lou the rest of the way out of her heavy slumber. It was the third day of September. A Sunday. In the morning, the air was cool, but by afternoon the sun was out and temperatures reached sixteen, seventeen, eighteen.

Some tangible home things were here with her already. (The others were, of course, *intangible* or impossible to recreate, like her best friend Julia.) Her uncle's passed-down Fender Sonoran with its new nylon strings, her Brittany Howard poster rolled into a tube in the corner. On her bedside was her plastic retainer, her pack of Restoril, one gone from last night, and Caroline's collar. She would have to join her parents soon but for now, she held this quiet moment. She thought about how Caroline would have loved it here, all that wide-open yard behind their new house. Her heart ached. She squeezed Beastie one more before nestling him back into her pillows.

Her parents, Ian and Gail, were already up and in the kitchen. Lou smelled the familiar odour of scrambled eggs and bacon. Her father liked to ladle the bacon grease back into the eggs, season the scramble generously with salt, pepper, thyme, and dill. Those smells were home. Ian hummed as he cooked. When Lou was younger, even last year, she had enjoyed this sound. Now it jarred her, sent prickles of annoyance down her spine. Ian often said just because someone shopped at Wal-Mart didn't mean their food had to taste second-rate. This, despite the lack of proper furniture, was ritual. Ian made breakfast in the morning while Gail woke up, needing one or sometimes two cups of coffee two sugars, a drop of milk, before she could face the day. She'd finger a

Dean Koontz novel as she did so but re-read the same pages in an hour when she looked more like a human and less like a zombie. At least, that's how Ian described the process. Lou would have been lying only to herself if she said the smell of grease and fat didn't entice her. Ian dished up three plates and, before Lou had a chance to realize what was happening, presented Gail and Lou with three slices of warm bacon resting on their pile of eggs.

"Good morning, new citizens of Jackson," her father said, wiping grease-stained fingers on the back of his pants.

Gail noticed before Lou could say anything. "Ian—"

"Dad," Lou said. She felt awake now. She glanced at the plate. "No meat, remember?"

Her father's grin slipped off his face. He looked at the plate. Crisp wind blew through the open blind-free window. But Lou felt hot suddenly, even though she was only wearing cropped jeans and a loose T-shirt. The kitchen was a mess, of course. They'd gotten in around dinner last night and been too exhausted to do much in the way of unpacking. Ian only had his cast-iron pan out, some basic spices, a fold-out table that would be replaced later by a cheap find off Kijiji.

"No meat," Ian said, nodding to himself. His smile reappeared. "Right-o, little Lulu."

Lou, who once held great reverence for her father, toyed with the idea of eating what had been made for her. But Lou was a girl of convictions and didn't see how she could say one thing and do another and claim consistency. "Sorry, Dad."

"I forgot," he said, rubbing the top of her head. "Don't be sorry." Ian and Gail shared a conspiratorial glance. *She'll be over this soon*, Lou imagined Ian saying to Gail who, with her eyes, responded. *Thank you for indulging her*.

"You know," Gail said, dog-earring the page in her book and setting it aside. "Jackson might not have your fancy soy milk and fake meats. And your father and I aren't up for cooking two sets of meals all day every day. Any suggestions on that front, Lou?"

"No problem," Lou said, sensing the tension in the room. After that night months ago, Ian constantly worked to do what Lou could only describe as apologizing: In his gestures, his phrasing, his cadence. Lou wanted to use this as evidence. She *wasn't* crazy or experiencing a night terror; it really did happen, see, otherwise he wouldn't be acting like this. Most days Lou could ignore Ian, pretend he was someone else, pretend he hadn't done what he had done. Some days this was impossible. The first times Lou visited her therapist, Dr. Potter, a small woman with a wide gummy smile, Lou's father had held back, uncertain. But Ian, broad shouldered, sandy haired, wide grin with the slightly crooked teeth, had introduced himself that dreary Thursday afternoon when Gail had a six-day cold. When Lou told the story to Dr. Potter for the third or fourth time, she saw the flicker of doubt in Dr. Potter's eyes.

Lou preferred it when the tension was between Ian and Gail, not her and her father. They'd stopped at the twenty-four seven pharmacy after dropping off their main luggage last night and bought basics: Wonderbread, Kraft peanut butter (crunchy), milk, frozen fruit. Lou popped bread in the toaster. "Peanut butter and jam toast. Easy peasy. Anyone want a slice?"

Gail scooped half of Lou's helping onto Ian's plate and half onto her own. "I'll stick with what your father's made us." Wasted food offended Gail, who would rather eat more than she could than see it go to waste. Lou understood why because Gail often said: When she was little, she had to wear her older sister's hand-me-down winter boots for three seasons before her parents could afford new ones. This, she insisted, was the reason for the bunions on her pinky toes. If Lou (who had never said this) thought they were poor, she should have seen how Gail grew up. Sometimes when she told Lou this story it was two seasons, or four. The point, Lou knew, was the adage *waste not want not*.

Later, Lou could hear her father speaking in hushed tones to Gail. "She looks *sick*, have you seen the dark spots beneath her eyes?"

"She's tired, Ian," she said and Lou felt an unfamiliar surge of appreciation for her mother. "It's been a stressful few weeks. Can you blame her for not sleeping well?"

"She has her Restorils. That's what they're for."

"She doesn't need those sleeping pills, she needs exercise and sunshine. Which is partly why we came here, isn't it?"

"Part of why we came here was to make something of ourselves. I don't want to start on the wrong foot," he said. Lou imagined him grabbing Gail around the waist now, wiggling her hips in a pseudo-dance. "What if she goes to school and all the big bad bullies make fun of her? It's hard enough to be a *normal* kid, never mind—"

"Never mind *what*?" Lou pictured Gail stepping back, or feigning a step back, and Ian walking forward to meet her. An equipoising dance. Lou was struck by the fact that it was Gail who defended Lou and Lou's boycott of animal products. Ian, for his part, tried

to win Gail over to his side, whatever that was. Lou's surprise stemmed, perhaps, for the fondness she felt for her father and the aloofness Gail typically embodied. Gail was not a bad mother, but intrepid and at times unaffected.

"She's a picky eater," Ian said. (Lou almost laughed.) "The other kids will show up with cheese strings and pepperoni sticks. Eat hamburgers at the cafeteria. Heaps of poutine shared between three of them. You know. *Normal*."

"I don't know about you but I ate plenty of peanut butter sandwiches for lunch and I turned out all right, don't you think?"

"I just," Ian repeated. "Don't want her to be made fun of."

"Kids make fun of our Lou? Have you met her? She's a girl with a sense of self, if nothing else. And there's plenty else."

"Maybe you're right," Ian said. Here, Lou felt a sense of relief. Her parents believed in her. Even now. Even after potentially offending them with her rebuke of breakfast.

"I know I'm right."

"I'm just saying she looks skinny," Ian said in way of concession, voice gentler. "She's not a little girl anymore but she looks like she is. I wish she'd eat a little more. I wish she'd eat normally."

"She will."

"It's borderline disordered eating," Ian said and immediately backpedaled.

"Before you say it, I know, I know: Kids go through phases. I didn't eat carrots for six years because the thought of them made me gag. I'm worried is all. I want to take her to

the movies and share some nachos and a tub of that gooey cheese like I used to do with *my* pop.”

“There’s always popcorn.”

“Butter.”

Here Gail sighed and agreed: “Butter.”

Lou had been skinny her entire life and hadn’t, as far as she knew, lost a pound since giving up animal products. She was thirteen and hadn’t begun to fill out, hadn’t yet gotten her period (Thank God for that, Lou thought). Her arms and legs were long and thin. *Rakish*, her mother had said once, and when Gail’s cheeks reddened after she’d said it Lou knew this was an unflattering description. Lou’s face was similarly narrow, her nose and chin ending in points. She had both her father’s yellow-blond hair and his green eyes. But Ian was handsome, if not weary-looking, and Lou didn’t feel altogether pretty. None of Lou’s mother had made itself present in Lou. Gail was tall and dark-haired, with wide hips and a round face. Perhaps, Lou sometimes thought, that was why they did not connect. Something about their DNA didn’t match up.

Lou took a few steps back so that her parents’ voices reverted to rising and falling background noises. “I’m going out!” she said. Her helmet, surely, was tucked away in one of the bins. She thought she’d tossed it in the one that read LOU - STUFF on it, which was not a particularly apt name for the bin that contained their shoddy porch gear and their flimsy tent which they had never used. She found it, and threw it around the handlebars of her Devinci. Popped in the earbuds for her iPod. Unpacking could wait.

Even leaving the house made for an adjustment. Lou fumbled. Like walking down stairs that had been walked down a million times but somehow, your feet think there is one more and you hit the ground too hard, rolling your ankle a touch. That was how Lou felt walking into the September air, muscle memory expecting Kettering spread out in front of her, a twin duplex beside her. Their new house—her *home*, Lou tried out, her new home—had once been a beautiful ranch house with speckled brick and crisp white accents and stone pillars. Now, although its skeleton remained the same, the house looked shrunken and disappointed. Before, in what now seemed a different and partitioned time in her life, Lou had visited and even slept in the wide and squat ranch house the Lowes now owned. Once, it had belonged to Lou's Aunt Ida, who upkept it handsomely up until 2015 when she had passed away. Although the Lowes only lived three hours west of Jackson, they had not visited Ida much. Ian cited busyness. Gail money. When Ida fell sick, they came more often but, even then, only for short bursts of time and the three of them drove home, slumped, as though heavy with heat exhaustion—spent but duty complete. Ida surprised Lou with the care in which she tended her garden. Lou found the juxtaposition of her aunt's brawny frame and wide hands and the gentleness with which she preened and watered and planted curious but soothing.

A lone halfdead tree sagged in the browning lawn. With some love, Ian promised, this place would look as good as new. They'd restore her to her former glory. The Lowes had tried to sell the place initially, which Gail found more or less appalling ("you can't just sell something your sister owns," Gail had said and Ian had said "she doesn't own it anymore—we do"). Ida had lived with her co-worker Heather for two years, whom

Lou had regarded as distant but kind. She laughed hard whenever Ida cracked an unfunny joke. Afterwards, Ida shared her home with a man named Rod who swore with obnoxious frequency and always stank like beer and dirt. Ida didn't call him her boyfriend but Gail did, behind her back. He left when Ida got sick. Three months after her passing, Ian put the house on the market. No one bit. That's how Ian explained it, as though selling a home functioned the same way fishing did.

Gail told Lou that they'd had an offer one week in the spring of twenty sixteen. But the elderly couple who came to have a look backed out after their second meeting with the real estate agent. One half of the couple, Gail thought it was the woman, had a bad bladder and excused herself to the washroom. By the time she sat back down at the table, her mind was made up. We won't take the house, she'd told her husband, because someone's still living here. It's haunted.

"She'd seen a ghost?" Lou asked, already skeptical, already disappointed at the story's climax. She was eleven at the time and had thoroughly debunked an afterlife. She couldn't buy it.

"I guess so," Gail said, and she did not look nearly as calm as Lou felt.

They kept the house with the intention of flipping it, something Ian said would make them a lot of money if done well, but then the job in Jackson came up. Serendipitous. That's what Gail called it. Ian said that was a positive way of looking at it. He thought he was being beckoned. By who? Gail said. Ida, maybe, Ian offered. Jackson's Own was hiring workers for the kill floor. Ian, who enjoyed manual labor, who did not tire of repetitious tasks, who enjoyed becoming efficient and handy, applied. He got the job. The house was theirs to keep.

The British Columbia wild fires were worse that summer of 2017 than they had been in over six decades. Lou woke up in Kettering that summer, cranky, eyes swollen shut and throat raspy. She'd take her Benadryl but it did little to ease her symptoms. Although the smoke had largely dissipated two weeks ago it still clung in stubborn lumps on the Southwest horizon. Washington fires caused the worst smoke which made no geological sense to Lou.

Mostly everywhere in Jackson was flat. Lou knew theoretically what she was getting herself in for: New job for Dad meant saying goodbye to Julia and to the only home she'd ever known. But Jackson, her mother told her, was a great little city. A small town like the one she had grown up in. Well, Lou didn't want what her mother had. She wanted something more, something different. What she got was hills the townsfolk called mountains, air so dry it sucked the moisture out of her cheeks, and one dinky high school. Gone was the romanticism of moving cross-country, of snaking through mountains and passing lakes, journeying from province to province and somehow, inevitably, being a different Lou Lowe on the other side of it all.

Although perhaps that wasn't exactly true—the lack of romanticism. Jackson was, in climate if not geographical location, entirely separate from Kettering: While the latter had been gloomy grey and dismal for two-thirds of the year, Jackson, in contrast, looks dehydrated and painfully barren. Her parents had told her that Jackson is a desert and Lou had imagined the aesthetic to be somewhat more vibrant, something out of a TV show. Jackson did not match this vision. She passed a car with the bumper sticker DON'T BE A DORK, EAT JACKSON PORK. By the time she'd reached downtown, she

saw a utilitarian SUV and a burgundy truck with the same sticker. Good God, thought Lou, don't let Dad want one of those.

Lou biked for nearly two hours. She enjoyed the burn of her calves, her quads, the fresh September wind nipping at her ears and neck. She hadn't known what she was looking for until she reached it. Passed the *Welcome to Jackson! Population: 9,437* (now four hundred forty; even-steven). She passed the farm first. She only knew it was, in fact, a pig farm because of the signs indicating as such. MEET YOUR JACKSON MEAT! Of course, this was impossible because there were no animals to see, let alone interact with. The farmland was consumed largely by large hatched barns. But Lou knew the animals were there because she could *smell* it. An effluvium of industrial animal smells hit her hard and fast: Waste, body odour, garbage. Lou wrinkled her nose against it, tried to breathe through her mouth. This did little to help. She would have sworn she could taste it. It took her three and a half songs to bike alongside the farm. She searched, in vain, for sight of a living breathing animal but none emerged from their housing for the entirety of her bike ride. She only saw long stretches of green grass, not yet browning, spotted with fire red maples. Her legs screamed. The farm was along the base of a hill and now Lou biked, climbing higher, sweating more profusely, to the coveted plateau.

She could see it now. Just at the bottom. The fence was yards away from the actual building but she got as close as possible. Lou was disappointed. The building was not red, angry passionate brick, but a sleek white building. Or perhaps, Lou thought, squinting her eyes in the wind, a pale faded blue. Modern. Nondescript. Nothing obviously tragic looked to occur there. Against the flat white sky of the Valley,

the abattoir shrunk, its edges shrinking into the landscape. Her mouth set in a rictus of disillusionment. In fact, she might have ridden right past it if she hadn't noticed, on the Eastern facing wall, a six-foot stencil. JACKSON: Meatpacking & Processing. That's where Ian would be starting tomorrow. No. Tuesday. He was training tomorrow, and starting Tuesday.

What stood out to Lou was the graffiti on the side of the building. She watched as two men reversed a Ford 1-50 below it. Unfolded a ladder. The words swirled in rusty red and a brighter orange the color of a ripe tangerine. EAT OR GET EATEN. Inscribed carefully, the words were the work of a person who took pride in their artistry. The phrase was kind of, Lou granted, rock and roll. Eat or get eaten.

A marmot started at her feet. Its tiny paw rested on her sneaker before jerking back, realizing what it had done. It glanced up, once, big fanged yellow teeth enormous in its tiny mouth. Its eyes rested on Lou's, curious, and then out down the hill and towards the abattoir. It stood, watching, frozen, before retreating the way it came, pushing rocks out of its way.

The men, high on their ladders, wore white overalls like painters in children's books. They looked unamused and uninterested in their job, as far as Lou could spy from her position on the hill. One of the men stayed on the ground to set up the pressure washer. The other climbed the ladder, hoisting the hose with him. Lou sat and watched for close to twenty minutes as the words disappeared. EAT OR. Eat or what?

"Is there anything else?" Lou said.

The lunch man offered Lou a tiny shrug of his shoulders. "Tacos," he said. "The tacos are good." He thrust his chin towards the corn tortilla tacos, overstuffed with pulled pork, slaw and radishes, lightly garnished with cilantro and a streak of green hot sauce. "No? Not a fan of tacos? What about the parmesan pork? Pork burger?"

Dishes at Lou's new school cafeteria were astonishingly elaborate. Back home, her school sold the usual fare: BLTs, veggie burgers, turkey wraps. Chocolate milk, juice, veggies and ranch-dressing for dip. Here, despite the small student population, students practically fine dined. Milk pork bathed in warm gravy, skewers, sloppy joes, A white sticker on the glass announced that the cafeteria was PROUDLY SERVING JACKSON'S OWN. Surely, this announcement was unnecessary, even borderline parodic. The evidence that Jackson High sold Jackson meat sat overwhelmingly behind the glass in shades of brown and pink. Glazed Brussel's sprouts, carrots and broccolini all hid like unwashed prisoners behind the hunks of meat. Lou could have but chose not to pick them out of the dishes. The baked beans, tempting at first glance, had flecks of pork floating in them.

"No pork burger for me. There must be something *e/se* to eat," Lou said. A kid behind her said *move it or lose it* under his breath.

"Look, kid, I'll level with you." The lunch man leaned forward. Lou smelled his hot pepperoni breath and closed her mouth sharply. "I don't give a *shit* if you eat or not. But if you are going to eat, you're going to eat what I've cooked you. Understood? I don't give anyone special treatment around here. You want fruit? We got fruit. Move along so someone else can order before the entire break's over."

Lou snagged a half-rotten banana and a hard pear for a dollar seventy. She fished a toonie out of her pocket. She ate them moodily, daydreaming of a can of refried beans with a generous helping of habanero sauce. Lou longed for Julia and her other friends back home. The principal had been nice, if not a little brash; she'd told Lou that she could talk to her at any point if she was having difficulties adjusting but Lou knew right away this would never come to fruition. It was a line, anyways. Nobody bonded with their principals. That was teen movie stuff. Mr. Rudkus, her homeroom teacher, was all right but had made her introduce herself in front of the class. Lou sunk lower in her seat, put her earbuds in, and decided she'd ride her bike at lunch hour from here on out.

Lou's father came home most evenings the same way he'd left in the morning: Optimistic. Generally, he was a good-spirited man. This is why, Lou reflected, he was that much more terrifying in anger. Her therapist had asked Lou about this: what makes your father so scary sometimes? It was the contrast, Lou had said. Like day suddenly becoming night. But those first weeks in Jackson, Ian was, if not quieter, just as even keel as he tended to be.

"What's it like?" Lou said one afternoon after school. "Work. Do you like it?" Lou hoped in some part of her heart that work was just as miserable for him as school was for her.

"The shift flies by," Ian said. He'd showered after work and put on an old tee shirt from when he'd worked at the casino. He rummaged in the cupboard for chickpeas. He never smelled bad after work, like Lou thought he might.

Lou paused a moment. She chose her words carefully. “What do you do all day?”

“A few different things,” Ian said. “Do you like cayenne in your hummus? I can’t remember. Mom says it gives her the shits—oops, *loose bowels*.”

Lou ignored Ian’s deflection. “Like, a few different things *how*?”

“It’s a technical process. Takes a lot of training. I’m not sure you’d understand it.”

“Try me.”

Ian groaned. “It’s been a long day, all right? Can we have this discussion some other time?”

“I was just curious,” Lou said.

Ian started the food processor. He’d bought it in a garage sale a couple years back. He shook it to get the blade to cut evenly through the chickpeas. The food processor hummed. Lou wrinkled her nose: the garlic’s stink was palpable. Once, when Lou was only eight, she’d tried to make her parents a treat: homemade Nutella. (The treat, in hindsight, was mostly Lou’s.) Her father had said not to use the processor when he wasn’t home, but he *was* home, just sleeping. Grandma had helped Lou buy the hazelnuts and the cocoa powder. Lou threw the ingredients in the processor. She’d forgotten to put the lid on as tightly as she should have. *Rookie mistake!* Julia said later when Lou recanted the story. Ian woke up when Lou screamed. She’d instinctively placed her palms over the food processor when it had begun to spurt dusty bits of nut and cocoa and the blade, cheap as it was, bounced up and sliced her palm. She needed five stitches. Lou shed only a few tears and those were mostly from the shock of seeing blood when she wasn’t expecting it.

Lou loved that day. Ian had kissed her stitched palm; he'd brought home Beastie that same afternoon. They had sat on Lou's bed, watching TV together, eating heaps of caramel chunk chocolate ice cream (Lou's all-time favorite). Lou ate so much that her belly remained round and taut to the touch. She giggled, poking at it. Lou said her stitches were itchy. Ian distracted her from the trauma of the morning. He asked her to say the alphabet, backwards. She watched him play Super Mario on their old Nintendo console; she could only effectively use the controller with one hand, so she opted out. He asked her to name all the planets. He told her when he was young, there was a planet called Pluto. (Lou did not believe him.) He asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up.

"I don't know," Lou said. "A scientist. Or a vet. Or maybe a full-time high jumper." She had won second place in her track meet high jump that spring. Her new puppy Caroline, curled up in Lou's lap, had soft curls and the cozy feeling of home. Smelly puppy breath, the farts of a sleeping animal. But also the wet warm smell of Caroline damp, her slobbery tongue on Lou's palm. "What did you want to be when you were older?"

"Well, I still haven't decided," Ian said.

"But you're old *now*," Lou said. "You have to decide."

"I'm not sure," he said. "Are me and Mom old to you?"

"*You* are," Lou said. "Mom is half-old."

"Wow," Ian said. "That one hurts, little Lulu."

"You're almost as old as Santa Claus."

"And how old is Santa?"

“Like four hundred years old.”

Ian laughed again. “*Wow*. No wonder I have so many headaches.” He poked her belly. “I’m not sure what I want to be. Am I allowed to be not sure?”

“No,” said Lou.

“I’m not sure exactly where I want to work or what I want to do. Something, probably, with my hands. But I think like anyone,” Ian said. “I want to leave behind a legacy. I’m sure of that.”

The food processor hummed to a stop. “No cayenne,” Lou said now.

When the sun began to tuck itself behind the Rocky Mountains, the earth became Mars. In the fall of 2017, the forest fires thick and remorseless, Western Canada saw otherworldly sunsets. Each foot of sun lost to the horizon rendered the sky a bloodshot burst of red. It began to rain. It turns out, Lou thought, that it could rain on Mars. Lou took photos on her phone. Vehicles exhaled red exhaust. A golden retriever ran with its owner in the distance, its white kerchief turned orange, its own coat auburn. The owner, his own red hair turned a brilliant shade, threw a stick; the dog chased after it, tongue flopped out of its mouth. The sun crept down. This was a desert. This was not a land where life grew. It was a land where life came to die. The dog barked. She imagined showing the iPhone photos to her grandchildren, if she had them, and telling them that she had never felt more like she was sleepwalking than that September.

Ian had Tuesday the 19th off from Jackson’s Own. After school let out, Gail and Ian picked Lou up for grocery shopping. Gail said she thought they could have a night in, with card games and chips. After a lonely day at school, Lou felt suddenly loved. In

math class, she'd felt desperately and strangely behind her classmates; the math itself was not so different, pre-algebra, but perhaps it was the weight of friendlessness that rendered the problems that much trickier. Lou was not used to being disliked, or it's more covert but not less insidious form: Ignored.

Gail asked Lou to pick out breakfast food. Lou did as asked, grabbing a box of the expensive, no-sugar-added almond vanilla granola. Lou didn't care for its claim of organic, but it certainly tasted better than the Quaker brand. At least the grocery store was like home. Her parents stood in front of the deli, choosing sandwich meat and bacon. Lou's parents were younger than most parents Lou had met. Gail stood with her shoulders pulled back. She hunted through the freezer section, weighing in her mind, Lou knew, if they could afford it that week. Meat was simultaneously a luxury but a necessity in their household; it was treated with reverence at mealtimes. Eventually, she settled for a small piece of pork.

Lou lingered at the end of the aisle, watching. Gail walked up behind Ian, who was waiting for slices of deli meat. When the young clerk walked back to wrap the meat up, Gail mumbled something Lou could not make out.

"I'm so proud of you," Ian said, hugging Gail's shoulder and pulling her in close. "You know that?"

"Really?" Gail said, shy. "It's not—pathetic?"

Ian answered firmly: "Nothing about you is pathetic. We're in a transition phase. There is nothing to be ashamed about."

"I'm—God, I'm ten years older than the oldest worker here, I think," Gail said. "I'm getting bossed around by a sixteen-year-old."

"Where you work is not your worth," Ian said. Lou had a flash of her father from before the incident. She had that familiar pang of doubt in herself but pushed it down deep into her gut. A tall, burly man with a large but well-kept black beard pushed his cart along the frozen meat and seafood aisle. His eyes flitted over Lou. He lit up when he saw Ian. He spoke with a baritone tenor, offset by an easy laugh. They spoke of work. Lou could tell from where she stood. Ian glanced around and, finding her, beckoned Lou over. She stuck out her hand for the man to shake. He introduced himself as Parth Dhillon. He worked with Lou's father; they both worked the kill floor. Lou watched Mr. Dhillon's hands. They were large and smooth, not the calloused hands of someone who used them to earn a living. There were multiple ways, Lou supposed, to use one's hands. On closer inspection, the skin between his forefinger and thumb had been presumably cut but scabbed over.

"Remarkable," Lou's father said, gesturing towards the small wound. "You really do heal quickly. Parth, this is my better half, Gail. Gail, this is the man I was telling you about." Gail said pleased to meet you. Mr. Dhillon was warm and bubbly; Lou could see why Ian enjoyed working with him. When he found out how old Lou was, he thundered that Lou *must* know his niece, Harpreet. Lou did not get a chance to say that she did not, in fact, know Harpreet, although she'd seen her from afar and heard her interrupt Mr. Rudkus many times in homeroom. Harpreet proved difficult to miss. Dhillon explained that he worked with his sister at Jackson's Own, although she didn't do what he and Ian did, no sir-ee, she was more of an organizational woman herself.

"If you need a position, Mrs. Lowe," Dhillon said kindly, "You can always apply to work with us two. Promise we don't bite."

Gail thanked him for the offer but assured him she already had an interview lined up.

“Thanksgiving around here,” Dhillon said, gesturing at his cart. It was the third week of September. “It gets a little crazy. Just wait until Christmas. Jackson really goes all out. The Valley is famous for its dark, grey winters. Maybe in other towns. Here, we have a month-long celebration. You’re going to love it.”

“He’s terrific, isn’t he?” Ian said, eyes bright. Lou hung off the back of the grocery cart; Gail asked her to help pack away the groceries but Lou watched the setting sun, pretending she couldn’t hear her. They loaded the canned beans, dairy milk, almond milk, Wonder Bread, and canned vegetables into the back of their car. “Really nice guy. You’re friends with his daughter? Lou? Earth to Lou.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It’s not as easy as just saying ‘Hey, we’re friends now’, you know?”

Gail laughed.

“I see her at school,” Lou said. Begrudgingly, she added, “She seems nice.”

On their way back towards their house the Lowes stopped at Home Depot to get chairs for their kitchen table. *Proper* chairs. They had been using the fold-up kind Lou knew people used for camping (they never had gotten around to camping as a family). Lou and Ian grabbed the tortilla chips and salsa; Mom dug through a box in the garage for the pack of cards. She came back with a Curious George Uno pack, Bicycle playing cards and a wooden cribbage board carved in the shape of a toboggan. They played Uno first. Lou did not know if it was the sequence of that day’s events—biking alone to

school, eating lunch alone, seeing the golden retriever, or the way the smoke and sunset bled into one another—but she found herself unexpectedly maundering. She knew they had been in Jackson for only three weeks, and that money was tight right now and would be for a little while, but just how soon did her parents think they would be able to get back home? For a visit. A short one.

“Julia can’t come here?” Gail said.

“I guess she *could*.”

Gail’s shoulders stiffened. “This place is *bigger* than the one we could afford back home.” She corrected herself. “Back in *Kettering*.”

“I know,” Lou granted. “But Mom—it’s *Jackson*.”

“Julia’s parents can certainly afford the drive.”

“It’s three hours, Gail,” Ian said. “*We* can afford the drive, too. Did you want to make a trip back home, Lulu?”

“I think you and I have different understandings of what it means to afford something,” Gail said. She held the stem of her wine glass. Lou worried it might break. “You’re supposed to still have something left in your bank account to afford something. Raising the limit on a credit card isn’t affluence, it’s stupidity.”

Julia’s family was well-off. This was true. But Julia was no snob, and neither was her older brother, and neither were her father or stepmother. Lou was not so sure what Gail was afraid of. To be fair, Gail had never been anything but courteous and respectful to Julia, but she sometimes said things like this that insinuated something perplexing Lou could not quite grasp. Gail held a simultaneous veneration and repulsion for the wealthy. Lou wanted no part of her mixed emotions. Julia was Julia; yes, Lou

would have preferred her North Face jacket to her own thrifted coat, but Julia was the kind of friend to give you the coat and act like it didn't fit her right. Or she used to be. She didn't answer Lou's texts very much anymore.

Gail sometimes grew frustrated at television and ads for movies that featured the wealthy. She would twist in her seat, look up from her sudoku puzzle, cross and uncross her legs. Gail was not one for nonspecific complaints, she considered that whining and beneath her, but launching criticism at something exact was acceptable. *I just don't get what they're always crying about*, she would say. *Why are they playing sad music? They have a pool for Christ's sake. Do you get to cry if you have a pool?* She would laugh after, like she was joking, but Lou knew otherwise. It was Ian who was the eternal optimist. At least, that was the way he presented himself to Lou and Gail. He would see the same movie trailer and turn to Lou and said he'd like to take her to that; for him, spending thirty-five dollars at the theatre to watch the beautiful and the wealthy was a grand way to spend the afternoon, not a waste of time, like Gail might imply. Did they mean he had more empathy or less?

"Uno sucks," Ian said. He scooped up their cards and dealt for crib. The cribbage board had been made by Gail's grandfather. Artistry had been passed down the maternal line and stopped at Gail. Lou, however, was a quick study at mathematics. She beat her parents the first two times before Gail won. In their fourth game, it was Lou's crib, and there was no contest: she'd won again. Gail high-fived her across the table.

"Come on," Ian said. "You looked at my cards."

Lou did not understand the implication at first. "Sorry?"

"You knew what I had and banked on me throwing a three in my crib."

Gail and Lou looked to one another. Gail rolled her eyes. "Ian. You're being a sore loser. Lou won fair and square."

"I out-pegged you every turn," Ian said. He smiled. "Unless you're lying. Unless you *did* look at my cards."

"How would I have lied?" Lou said. "You just hate losing."

"Ian. Lou. Really?" Gail said. She shook her head slightly. "It's just a stupid card game. Look. I have four measly points. Who cares? I just wanted to spend some time with the two of you." She smiled. "Can't tonight be a fun night in?"

Maybe a family was just people bound together by blood, destined to travel through life loosely entangled with one another when the going got tough. Pods of resentment and bitterness. Lou did not have the maturity to acknowledge this thought for what it was: Deeply unhealthy.

"Crib sucks, too," Lou said. She didn't realize until Gail pointed it out: She'd been holding the card so tightly it bent in two.

Two afternoons later, Lou and the rest of her homeroom boarded the bus for the ten-minute drive to Jackson Farms. The smoke had, for the most part, dissipated. For the first morning in a long time, Lou woke to a clear head. She liked to sleep with the window slightly open. Ian went into work early. Gail said she'd drive Lou but Lou wanted to ride her Devinci. Today was the eighth-grade students' turn for their tour at Jackson Farm. The seventh graders had gone last week, the ninth graders next. Strangely, Lou

looked forward to this. She rode her bike around school during lunch, eating her sandwich with one hand. Soon it would be too cold to do so.

Lou sat at the front of the bus listening to music on her iPhone. Friendless, Lou was forced to sit in the front seat alone, opposite Mr. Rudkus. He chatted to the bus driver, a woman with long red hair tucked beneath a baseball cap. Rudkus recounted one of President Trump's latest Tweets; the bus driver snorted in laughter. She then said something about the spineless prime minister. "Handsome as a movie star," she said, "with the wits of one, too." Rudkus said he'd take Trudeau over Trump any day. Lou turned her music up.

There was a part of Lou that she kept hidden, that she inspected in only the briefest moments with an uncritical eye; she was lonely, yes, and that loneliness sat inside of her next to something that looked like fear. She tucked those parts beneath a thing more stalwart, a trait she nurtured proudly. She was not used to being alone at school. She had always had Julia. Not only that. The other kids liked Lou back home. If Julia stayed home sick, Lou had plenty of friends to hang out with. Not here.

Lou could see three industrial barns as they pulled up; the same she'd seen before. In the afternoon warmth, the sun high in the sky, the kids walked into the middle barn. The ginormous barns with aluminum roofs sat amid green farmland dotted with sprinklers.

In class, Mr. Rudkus had told them to be on their best behavior—polite, courteous, and treat the head farm hand, Mr. Roberts, with the utmost respect. Only important questions. Like her initial glimpse of the town's abattoir, the farmer's appearance disappointed Lou. No coveralls. No straw hat. He wore a black shirt and

dark denim; broad shoulders and the beginnings of a beer belly; a shaved head and a beard. He smelled like cedarwood. Lou guessed the man to be in his fifties from the color of his beard.

“Before we start,” Mr. Roberts said, “We all have to rinse off! Have you ever gone swimming at the pool downtown? It’s a similar process.”

Mercifully, the showers were individual. The kids with long hair were provided ponytail holders; Lou secured hers in a knot at the crown of her head. She rinsed and shrugged on the heavy black top and pants. The outfit reminded her of a thick Karate gi or nurse’s smock. Her classmates wore identical garments.

“The pigs mostly stay in the barns,” their guide said. “The barns, and the main architecture of the farm, really—it’s all based on an innovative new hog farm down in Illinois. A couple decades ago, it wouldn’t have been like this. We used to raise them mostly outside. But we found the pigs really like the barns. We like to keep ‘em cool in the summer, warm in the winter. It also saves them from predators.”

A short boy with a curly top knot raised his hand. “Like what? What kind of predators?”

Their guide paused for effect. Then he leaned forward. “Like the big bad wolf.”

The eighth-graders followed him first outside and then to the doors of the middle barn. Mr. Roberts instructed them to keep their voices low so as not to disturb the pigs. They were used to loud noises, but not groups of excited kids. As he stood there, friendly but lecturing, a man in a ballcap came through the doors behind him. His face, although young, was thin and gaunt. He looked tired.

“Which barn are you taking them through?” the man asked.

“Sow and nursery.”

The man wrung his hands. “That was today?”

“Yes, we’ve—we went over this.”

“Only through this one and the finishing barn, right? Nowhere near the UPs?” He said it *you-pee’s*. Lou wondered what this meant.

“No,” the farmer said firmly. “Of course not. Why? Are there any in there right now?”

“Fuck if I know. This is why I told them not to keep these stupid fucking things anymore,” the man said.

A few of the kids up front, closer to the man, shared a conspiratorial glance with one another. Some laughed. Their guide, Mr. Gagnon, apologized for the outburst. *Someone*, he said jovially, had a bad morning! The next few minutes of the tour passed awkwardly. They walked through the gilt nursery, with the three-week old piglets. Feed was provided to them twenty-four seven through a futuristic-looking metallic bowl that strongly resembled a urinal. It made sounds. It stimulated their mother. Efficient, efficient, efficient. Maybe it sounded outlandish, even to Lou, that she could like a place like this. She did not like it, though. But she could see the appeal. Contrary to what she had inferred from animal books, the place did not smell altogether bad. Up close, the animal pens had a far-away odour of cleaned-up shit, but otherwise, the barn let off a downright medical smell. Useful. That was how Lou imagined the farmers felt.

“The nursery barn,” their guide said, “is kept really warm to keep those little piglets safe and comfy. Piglets can eat as much as they want in here.”

“What do they eat?” someone asked.

“Excellent question. Corn and soybean meal, mostly. But we supplement with micronutrients as well, because we want these little guys as healthy as possible. And you see those?” He pointed to a fan currently misting water over the piglet’s small backs. “Because it’s warm outside today, we have misters to keep them cool. We have heaters as well, in another room.”

“You mean like... sun and rain?” A girl in the middle of the group whispered this to her taller friend.

Mr. Roberts continued as though he hadn’t heard them. (Perhaps he had not, although Lou thought she’d seen his eyes flicker over them.) “And they grow so fast, we have to move them to a new barn once they’re six months old. You see those ones in the corner?” Lou followed his gestures. Indeed, there were bigger pigs grunting and nudging one another in the straw-colored pen. “At six months, or once they reach their goal weight, they head on over to the finishing barn to get ready for market.” Although all of the piglets in the barn were born and raised at Jackson, not all of the grown pigs in the finishing barn were from Jackson. With the growth of their facilities, they were shipped pigs from other provinces as well. “Can anyone guess the goal weight for a pig about to be sent to market?”

Lou eyed the bigger pigs. She thought of that old nursery rhyme her parents used to do before bed. They’d tickle her feet and say: *this little piggy went to market, this little piggy stayed home, this little piggy had roast beef, this little piggy had none.* Her father would pretend to munch down on her pinky toe: *and this little piggy cried wee, wee, wee all the way home.* She raised her hand. “Three hundred pounds?”

“Close! Very good guess. Two hundred and eighty pounds, give or take.”

“Has anyone tasted a tough piece of pork?”

A few tentative hands rose.

“That’s right,” he said. “That’s because the animal lived a stressful life. That’s why Jackson pork doesn’t taste like that. It’s supple, tender. Succulent. That’s because we keep our pigs happy.”

Next on their tour was the area Lou was most excited for: the sows. Their guide told them that the scientific name—Lou perked up—for the state of being in heat was *estrus*. Pigs at Jackson’s Farm were artificially inseminated. The kids visited the pregnant sows. Lou was amazed at how massive they were up close. Enormous, soft-looking noses pushed up against the slats of their pens; small eyes hidden by folds of hairy flesh. The stalls were small enough, their guide explained, so that they could not harm themselves or the little piglet they were growing inside of them. Here at Jackson, the main goal was to limit all unnecessary stressors. The sows had what looked like IV bags attached to their pens. Lou imagined this to be an upgraded feeding station, similar to the piglets’ own urinal-like troughs. Lou trailed back as they walked through. She made eye contact with the pigs and nodded and smiled. Their thoughtful eyes darted between black-clothed students. Lou stopped at one sow’s stall. She was the idyllic pig: soft, pale pink in color, kindly eyes, large floppy ears. She looked just like the titular character from the children’s book series *Olivia*. Lou reached a finger in, slowly, and traced it along the side of Olivia’s warm face. When she did so, a flurry rose up from the pigs near her. Some stomped in their pens; others grunted in quick succession. Lou yanked her hand back.

Mr. Rudkus said her name. “*Lou*. Get away from there. Come on. What did we talk about in class?”

“Absolutely no touching the pigs,” Lou repeated. “In any circumstances. Or you’ll get sent back to the bus.” Mr. Rudkus did not, in fact, send her back to the bus, but he did walk beside her the rest of the day. Lou looked back once. She was sure Olivia stared after her, grunting.

Gail welcomed Lou home that afternoon. Her damp hair smelled like rose shampoo.

“Would you want to go for a walk with me? I’d like to take advantage of this nice September weather.”

Gail asked this with the shyness and brusqueness of a high schooler asking her crush to dance, not sure if he would say yes or no, if he’d even respond. They walked the back road behind their house. Due to that summer’s smoke and dry heat, the lawn had never recovered; it had been browning the day they’d moved in. Now it struggled to cling to autumnal life. It crunched beneath their sneakers. After minutes of walking in silence, Gail asked Lou about her day. Lou told her partially about the farm tour. Gail asked if she’d learned anything. Lou said she learned a lot about biosecurity. She held out her palms and showed Gail how rough they’d become from continuously washing her hands between stations. In response, Gail told Lou that her grandfather, Lou’s great grandfather, had owned a farm. Gail grew up eating homemade bread and fresh-churned sweet butter. Gail said she’d sneak the cows leftover double fudge brownies. She laughed. Could cows eat brownies? *Hers* did, and they didn’t keel over and die. She, an only child like Lou, had climbed the haystacks in their barn. Once, she’d fallen

and broken her wrist. She showed Lou the faint white scar from surgery. She said surgery and scars did not scare her; she'd a C-section with Lou and, while taxing, frightened her less than vaginal birth. Lou stayed silent. Lou did not like hearing about her birth, indirectly or not. Presumably sensing this, Gail redirected the conversation back to Lou's great grandfather's farm.

"Nothing like the farms and slaughterhouses nowadays," Gail said. "But then again, there weren't seven billion mouths to feed."

The mother and daughter walked along the pebbled road. A friendly man in a pickup truck did 20km/hr past them, saying hello through his open window. They reached the end of the road and walked another ten minutes for cups of warm tea. Lou asked for steamed soy milk with two pumps of vanilla. Lou felt cozy in the cool air.

"Lou," Gail said. "I know moving here has been difficult for you. For me, too. I miss being close to my father. A three hours' drive is significant for a man his age. Impossible, I'd guess. His eyes are shot. Growing older," she said, "is heart wrenching."

Lou did not know what to say. "I'm sorry about granddad."

Gail waved her hand. "That's not for you to bear. I know you miss Julia, and—and other things about home. I was wondering: would you like a new companion? A dog?"

"No," Lou said resolutely.

Gail raised her eyebrows. "You don't?"

"Absolutely not," Lou said. "Caroline's dead. I don't want another dog." Lou could not fathom taking another dog into her care. Not only because she felt it unfair to

Caroline's memory (she was more romantic than she would have admitted out loud) but because the dog would not be safe. That was the worst of it.

Gail pondered this. "If you change your mind—"

"I won't."

"Okay," Gail said. "*Okay*. Sorry for breathing. It was just a suggestion."

They resumed silence. Lou, who resembled her father in a myriad of ways, both physical and mental, found walking with her mother unexpectedly calming. She thought maybe there could be parts of her mother that Lou would find familiar if she got to know them. Maybe. Certain traits that had to be shared between them, even though neither could admit it. But Lou wasn't scared of scarring, either.

Lou locked her Devinci up outside the Esso gas station. She told the clerk that she'd already bought the graphic novel at the book store down the street. He shrugged, uninterested. Dad was at work and Mom in a job interview at Superstore. She had nothing but Saturday's long afternoon hours ahead of her and she planned on sitting in the October sun with her book and a fizzy drink.

She liked comics. Not her father's comics: old, tattered superhero comics. Lou didn't understand the appeal of Batman and Superman and Spider-Man. It was all too easy. She also didn't like her mother's horror stories, because that was too easy in its own way, too. No, Lou liked Brian K. Vaughn and Marjorie Liu. She liked stories about things that could happen, *maybe*, stories where the stretch was a little less. She did not mind young adult fiction, either, depending on what it was. Her main issue with it was that the teenagers were either too stupid or too clever, and both sides of that binary left

her unsatisfied. If she had to choose she'd take the books with the smart teens, not because she thought she was one necessarily, but she hoped that she might transform just a little bit into the type of teenager the adult writer thought she should be. This practice proved ineffective. English was Lou's worst subject, Math her best. Her father had told her one evening when she struggled to write a report on Alexander Mackenzie that the art of deduction was a strategy that bridged the two disciplines and to think of English like a mathematical formula. But none of the stories they read mapped on the same way that pre-algebra did. Well-intentioned but, Lou feared, ultimately useless. In any case, she was not a big reader, much to Ian and Gail's disappointment, and that was likely why: she never saw herself in the pages and when she did, she was either offended or embarrassed.

The gas station door opened and closed. A tall girl with curly hair walked in. Lou had seen her in homeroom but could not remember her name. Embarrassed to be seen alone, Lou stayed in the back of the store with the paperbacks. Lou trailed her fingers along the cool glass of the refrigerator. She grabbed a pack of sour bears. Next to the candy were the rows of pepperoni sticks, JACKSON'S OWN and the silhouette of a plump pig stamped on the plastic wrap.

In her AP Geoscience course the year before, Lou had read about crown shyness. This is a curious phenomenon observed in some trees by which the crowns do not touch. Rather than creating a thick brush of overlapping branches and leaves, the trees do not graze one another resulting in holes in their appearance. These gaps created an ornate labyrinth. So much so that when Lou first saw the photo of it in her science text she thought it had to be Photoshopped.

Researchers had a few working theories as to why this phenomenon occurred. Lou's favorite hypothesis suggested that the trees knew one another, that maybe they could detect which nearby trees were kin and which were strangers. Some leaves could not grow in too much shade. In crown shyness, trees appeared to move closer together to dissimilar neighboring trees and avoiding their kin. Malicious. And altruistic. Was it possible to be both? When Lou described this process to her mother, Gail laughed and said *sounds like an R.L. Stine book*.

Lou thought in links. Crown shyness, she had thought at the time, was like her best friends Julia's hair part. It swirled in a cowlick, never quite touching. A gap in the machine. Crown shyness. Now, Lou could see, she was observing in it again: the indecisive girl from school seemed to float as she walked, never completely touching anything. Her fingers grazed the bagged goods. A dog yelped from outside.

"Jackson pepperoni stick?" the clerk asked the girl when she'd made her way up to pay.

"Sure," said the girl.

"Jackson ham slices?"

"Well—"

"You're in high school, aren't you?"

"Eighth grade."

"But you have, like, a lunch break."

The girl remained silent. Crown shyness.

"Sure you do," the clerk said. He sniffled loudly, the wet sound of mucus.

"Jackson ham makes for a good club sandwich."

“Okay,” the girl said uneasily. The dog barked outside.

“That yours?”

“The dog?”

“Yeah.”

“She’s mine.”

“Can you tell her to shut up or something? She’s scaring off the customers.”

What customers? Lou thought as she grabbed a Doctor Pepper.

“What’s your name?”

The girl squeaked something in a voice so high Lou could not make out what she had said.

Lou walked up to the counter. In moments like this, her adrenaline piqued, she could observe the world in a cool, alert detachment. In moments like this, she supposed, she reminded herself just a fraction of her mother. Lou waited in line behind the girl. The clerk, a skinny man with tangled greasy hair that curled behind his ears, nodded at Lou. He couldn’t have been more than twenty-five.

“That one’s pretty good,” the clerk said while the girl dug out the remaining change from her cross-body bag. He pointed to the comic Lou held.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

The girl paid.

“Look, I was wondering if I could take you out some time.”

Lou almost laughed.

The man leaned forward. "Let me take you out. Just once." He held her hand where it had landed taking out the loonies and toonies to pay for her licorice and bottle of pop. From where Lou stood, his grip on the girl's hand did not look physically forceful, but firm. The girl stared at her hand under his, as though it was an unretractable limb she was not familiar with.

The girl looked up. "I'm in *eighth grade*. I'm thirteen."

The man smiled mordantly. "You know what they say right?"

Lou stepped forward "Did you hear what she said? She's thirteen and, more importantly, not interested." Lou dug her fingernails into his hand. "Go fuck yourself," Lou said, and snatched the girl's change back. Oh, Gail would have been furious if she knew what she'd said but the satisfaction of this—of swearing, of stealing back the money—filled her stomach with a pleasant floating sensation. She and the girl hurried outside. The puppy yapped and twirled excitedly.

"Thank you for that," the girl said. She bent and unknotted the leash for her curly-haired pup. Lou unlocked her bike. "That guy gave me the creeps.

"Because he *was* a creep," Lou said and they laughed, an inconsistently morose sound in the cool October air. The puppy looped between their legs, entangling the girl and Lou in her plum leash. Lou's gut wrenched at the non-partisan affection of the young dog. She was smitten.

"What's your dog's name?" Lou said. The dog was young, a puppy, dark curly hair like Caroline's.

"Ginny," she said.

“That’s nice,” Lou said. The puppy yelped and turned around. She’d peed in excitement. The sidewalk below her paws was dark and stinky.

“Like Virginia Woolf. She’s Mom’s favorite. She calls her Virginia, the full name, but I...” The girl looked like she’d said too much. “I just call her Ginny. You just moved in, right?” The girl went red in the cheeks, along her jawline. “I saw you. Last night.” Everything she said sounded like an apology. *Sorry for asking. Sorry for seeing.* “With your family.”

“That’s right,” Lou said and extended her hand. “Lou Lowe.”

“Alexis Caceres,” the girl said.

Alexis smelled nice. Lou recognized the scents: Eucalyptus and lavender. She was familiar with them because one of the coping mechanisms her old therapist in Kettering recommended was essential oils. Lou liked them. She was not confident that these oils did anything significant or not but she liked them nonetheless. She figured some things did not have to be useful to be good and that good was enough.

Alexis shared with Lou one of her stolen licorice sticks. Ginny squirmed at their feet. She barked once. She was hungry. Alexis excused herself. Turned back, held up her hand, said *thanks again*.

When Lou was eight, her father killed a wasp.

This was not an altogether strange occurrence. Wasps are uniquely bothersome and tend to warrant ire. Lou came home from school, mouth full of sticky fudge from Julia’s mom who knew she adored her baking, and her father sat in front of the front window. She would find out later from her mother that daddy did not have a job

anymore. He was home early because he'd been laid off that afternoon. The planter Gail propped outside the window had been eaten by verdigris but the plants themselves bloomed beautifully. This meant that, especially on cool September evenings, wasps hung by the front door. Ian was propped in front of it, favorite worn chair pulled up so he could prop his feet up on the air conditioner and watch the wasp buzz. It was trapped between the blinds and the screen.

"Get me some sugar Lulu," he said. "And a water bottle. Take out a pan and heat about, oh—about two cups of water. You hear me?" Lou said she did. "Boil the water."

"What are we making, Dad? Kraft Dinner?"

"A trap."

She paused. "For the bee?"

Ian hollered that it was a wasp. If it as a *bee*, he wouldn't give a shit. Wasps were nasty little fuckers. "Don't tell your mother I said fucker." Later, Lou would remember with a kind of lambent joy the taste of fudge and the cozy feeling of being alone with her father, who trusted her enough to boil water on the stove and didn't tell her to be careful once.

Congenially, he instructed her how to finish the trap. After the sugar water boiled she let it cool for ten minutes. He told her how to pour it in an old Dasani water bottle but Lou spilled on the counter. Wasps are attracted to the sugar, Ian explained, and once it sniffs it, it'll be consumed by the lust of its hunger. Then, the wasp's own greed will fatally enervate it.

Lou brought the trap to the window.

Ian watched the buzzing wasp navigate the screen's lattice. He was a handsome man and, later, when she was older and she remembered this afternoon, Lou imagined what someone could do with that power, with a gaze like that. The wasp climbed up. Dropped down. Up. Down. It floated towards the sugar water trap and wiggled through the hole. Down into its sweet death. Lou and Ian watched the wasp struggle for longer than Lou thought necessary. Before it was dead, Ian dumped the water bottle and methodologically plucked off first its wings, and then its spindly legs.

"Just to show it who's boss," Ian said, staring down at the mess of sugar and water and dismembered bug parts. "So his friends don't come around."

"Dad?" said Lou.

"Little Lulu?"

"There's no wasps around," she said. "How will any of them see what you've done?"

"It's the principle, Lou," Ian said and, satisfied with the wasp's massacre, scooped up the trap and took it out back.

From *The Jackson Gazette*, 30 September 2017:

Animal rights activists, armed with homemade signs, cans of red spray-paint, and military-style chants, rallied outside of Jackson's annual Jackson Fall Fair last Saturday

evening. Approximately twelve picketers gathered outside the event. Some of their signs read: BE ONE LESS PERSON HARMING ANIMALS and JOIN THE MOVEMENT! Most marchers were not from Jackson but the surrounding Valley. The main problem, says Jackson's Own's CEO Morris Montgomery, was one of safety, not moral disagreements.

"These people don't eat meat, okay," says Montgomery. He holds his hands up, palms out, as if to indicate yielding. "They're missing out, but okay. No problem. The issue here is that we have safety precautions in place for a reason—for humans and animals alike."

The precautions Montgomery references are tight security on the fair premises, including an electric fence, and no video surveillance. These are in place to ensure frightened animals do not run into traffic and so that teenagers don't bring in noisy electronics or other items that might harm the animals. Protests like this, Montgomery says, are a waste of time and offensive. "Look, eat or don't eat whatever you want in your own home. You're not going to get anyone to stop eating our delicious pork with a sign that says MEAT IS MURDER. It's just not going to happen. Besides, these are honest, hard-working people. Who are you to tell them their job isn't good enough?"

Montgomery refused to answer any further questions on the welfare regulations on the kill floor. Yet, local activists contend that their protests are not about the people working there, but that nonhuman animals have a right to life as well.

"Of course I object to animal abuse," says Jackson resident Elisabeth Nguyen. "Animal agriculture is a far cry from animal abuse. My husband has worked at Jackson's

Own for nineteen years and he's also best friends with our cat. These facts are not mutually exclusive."

Jackson Fall Fair is scheduled to run until October 7.

I.

The Jackson fair looked idyllic in the early October evening. Dad wore his beat-up Sherpa-lined denim jacket. Her mother was in a mustard yellow coat she'd snagged on a boring Value Village pilgrimage. Lou bundled in a toque pulled low on her forehead, hair trailing down her back in a braid. She'd thrown on her yolk-colored rain boots to slosh through the mud. The rain was mild, more of a mist than a downfall, but persistent. Back home, teenagers and young adults flocked to Kettering in the summer for the music festivals and the rock climbing. There had been nothing like this.

Red. Lou squinted: All she could see was rust, maroon, currant. The unseasonal beating sun, the dead leaves from the nearby hanging maples and birch, the overplump pumpkins stacked three-high, the apple cider, the ribs, the floating balloons. The Land of the Red. The fair's grounds were cayenne powder, dusty soil mixed with the glow of the setting sun.

Ian stopped first at the rib trucks. Lou had only seen this many street meat vendors in Vancouver. Lou counted nine. At least one person was lined up at each of them. Lou sat on a straw-stuffed burlap sack while her father bought two orders of ribs.

Lou half-listened, half-watched. Red helium balloons in the shape of pigs floated high, rooted in dusty soil. The woman on the twelve-foot billboard wore a leather miniskirt and a plunging blue sleeveless shirt. Her breasts were pushed up, high and round. (Lou, who had seen her mother naked multiple times, wondered briefly how breasts could achieve such rotundness.) In the advertisement, the woman held a gooey rack of ribs to her parted lips. DO YOU THINK YOU CAN HANDLE A FULL RACK? the billboard screamed at Lou. She frowned.

“Two more, sir? You and your wife won’t be satisfied after just a taste of Jackson’s Own,” the teenager said from the truck’s window. She did not sound entirely convinced herself. Ian and Gail stood in line at one of the rib trucks. Lou sat beside them on a haystack. The teenager smiled at Ian, who hesitated when he opened his wallet but acquiesced and bought two more racks.

“Are you sure you don’t want a bite, Lulu?” Ian said. Chunks of meat sat in between his front teeth, visible when he spoke. Lou shook her head. “If you cheat, I won’t tell.”

“I’d only be cheating myself,” she said.

“Honey,” Gail said to Ian. “These ribs are incredible.” Lou detected a note of admiration in her voice. However statistically unlikely that Ian himself had helped in the processing of those specific ribs, Gail leaned into him as if to thank him.

“Heavenly,” Ian said and Lou saw his lower cheeks turn the faintest shade of pink, as though he’d been flattered. Lou could not decipher this exact exchange between her parents. Was her fastidious mother impressed with Ian’s productivity, at his usefulness? Was she cautiously optimistic about their financial future? Perhaps Lou had imagined the whole thing. Perhaps the ribs had been marinade in barbeque sauce and jalapeno peppers.

Ian wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, wiped his hand on his dark jeans. “How about cotton candy?”

The Lowes passed through two barns. Lou ate her foam pink cotton candy until her stomach hurt. The first had dog races and they sat, hip to hip, on the benches and watched. A woman in the center called out droll directions: Walk. Trot. Canter. One

horse grew antsy with each tedious circle and reared up, causing a collective gasp from the audience. After that, a few families with young children left to avoid watching what one weary father called a coup waiting to happen. Next on their journey was the chicken coop which lead directly to the goat pens. The smell of animal shit prickled Lou's nose, faded, re-emerged. Faded, rose up again. Stuffed in their cages, the chickens rustled with a certain sad forbearance. Look at this one, Gail said cheerily, pointing at a tawny goat. He whinnied, knocking his dusty hooves against the back of his pen. Goats climbed. The pen didn't look high enough to contain him, Lou thought and told her mother so.

"They check for those kinds of things," Gail said. "Safety measures, animal caretakers. Don't worry, Lou, he's not getting out." Although Lou was not sure if that's what she was worried about at all.

Lou stopped outside the baby goat pen. Much younger children than her cooed and fretted over them and Lou couldn't help but want to hold one herself. She giggled as one's furry head rubbed against her chin and it bleated excitedly. "Take our picture," Lou said, and Gail did, raising her phone.

Ian was most excited about the big boar competition. He lamented finding out that they had missed the actual weigh-in. You should see the big bastards they raise around here, he told Gail, feed three families off those suckers. He called Lou over to look. King of the Big Boar Competition, Gallant weighed in at a staggering seven hundred fifty-three pounds. A piebald pig who looked too large to stand on its knobbly legs. His blood-shot eyes darted around the arena. and mucus dripping from its mouth.

It paced in its pen with a nervous energy that made Lou's stomach turn. His Queen was juicy herself: seven hundred thirty-eight pounds.

"Hogzilla," Gail murmured.

Lou asked what she meant.

"Oh, you know," she said. She loved *Ripley's Believe it Or Not!* Just another monster show, according to Ian, but Lou soaked in the oddities, the trivia, the wild and the weird. If it was real, how could it be a monster show? "Hogzilla. That's what they called that wild hog down in Georgia. The one they shot. Biggest on record, I think. There's this picture—you can look it up when we get home—and the hog's tied, hanging and dead, next to the boy who killed him. It's awful. But it's breathtaking, too. The townsfolk said he weighed a thousand pounds."

"A *thousand*?"

"Well, that's what they *said*." Gail squeezed Lou's shoulder and Lou leaned into her. "You know how these things tend to be exaggerated. When they dug up its body, I guess it was about—oh, eight hundred pounds. Eight feet long."

"Gallant's catching up to Hogzilla then, huh?" Lou said.

Gail frowned. "He's enormous."

"Check this fat sack out," said a nearby voice, followed by laughter. The voice was high and delicate, so much so that Lou was reminded of sucking in the air of a helium balloon.

Alexis stood with a friend Lou recognized from their shared class. The friend was a round-faced girl with thick black hair and cat-eyed frames. The glasses would have looked pretty if they were not a few sizes too big. The girl used the palm of her hand to

push her glasses up every minute or so. The voice belonged to this one; Lou deduced as much because of the way she puffed out her cheeks and waddled in place, mimicking the pig whose stall she stood in front of. She wore a toque as well. Hers was embroidered with red letters: JACKSON'S OWN. Her burgundy T-shirt was tucked into a denim skirt that hit above the knees but her spandex leggings reached almost to her ankles. She held a half-eaten hot dog in one hand, smeared with ketchup and mustard.

"I know them," Lou said to her parents, gesturing towards the two girls. "Kind of. They go to my new school. Mind if I say hello?"

"Please do," Gail said eagerly.

Lou approached them, trying to register the exact amount of aloofness she should carry in her shoulders and face. But Alexis didn't seem to notice the way Lou was walking at all, only that she was walking towards them. Her face lit up. "New girl!" she said. "This is—Lou, right? Lou Lowe. She's in our homeroom. Harpreet, Lou. Lou, Harpreet."

"Nice to officially meet you," The girl in the floral dress extended her hand and Lou shook it, feeling pleasurably adult.

"Alexis told me you saved her butt from some whack-o yesterday," Harpreet said. She pushed up her glasses. "I think his name's Jimmy or Justin or something. He's Anna Tompkins's asshole second cousin but she always pretends like he's not because he's such a creeper."

Lou shrugged and said it was nothing.

"Where'd you come from again?" Harpreet said. She stuffed the remainder of the hotdog in her mouth and chewed noisily.

"Kettering," Lou said. "Back east."

"I've been there," Harpreet said and swallowed. She burped. "Scuze me. I climbed The Concord with my sister last year." Lou was familiar but hadn't journeyed up The Concord herself. She had spent most of her free time at Julia's instead of the thick verdant forest escapes of Kettering.

"No way," Alexis said. "No way." She laughed hard, a deep belly laugh. "You wheeze just going up the steps at school, and you're trying to tell me you climbed The Concord?"

"If you don't believe me, come with me next summer," Harpreet said. "I wheeze because I have *asthma*, you buffoon. Not because I'm *out of shape*."

Lou pointed at Harpreet's toque. "Where'd you get that hat?"

"This? Oh." Harpreet pulled it off her head, twirled it around in her hands to read what was written on it. "My mom works at the slaughterhouse. Gets me some freebies sometimes. I have a zip-up, too."

"My dad, too," Lou said. "Works at the slaughterhouse, I mean. That's why we moved here."

Alexis raised her hand like she was being sworn in, Scout's Honour. Lou was reminded of church back home, when she had went on long Sunday mornings with Julia. The Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost. Or cross-my-heart-hope-to-die. "Papa, too. Sort of. I mean, he does PR or something. Before you ask, Harpreet, I don't *remember* what it stands for. Marketing, or something. A lot of us kids around here have folks who work at the slaughterhouse. Or relatives. Or know someone who does. You see the pigs

around here?" She looked suddenly like she'd spoken too much and too fast. "These are our parents' livelihoods: Pigs."

How could Lou not see? She had never seen bigger pigs in her lifetime. Not in the movies, not on YouTube. The pigs she was used to were the gentle pigs of kid movies. One time, a classmate had brought in her teacup pig, Tulip, for show and tell. She'd been a cute little thing, rosy pink and snorty. Turned out teacup pigs weren't real and when Tulip got too big and fat she'd been shipped off to a farm. Or maybe, Lou reflected, somewhere like this.

"Is your dad the blond one in the jean jacket?" Harpreet asked. She squeezed her fingers in front of her eyes, squishing Ian between her thumb and forefinger. "He looks like you."

Lou followed Harpreet's gaze: Ian and Gail stood with a gap between their shoulders, watching a mother sow and her piglets, no more conspicuous than other fairgoers. Lou's heart sank. "Does he?" Lou said.

"Yes," Harpreet granted. "You're both good looking."

"Harpreet," Alexis said. Her cheeks glowed red. "Don't be such a *creep*."

"I meant it as a compliment," Harpreet said, gesturing between the two of them. "That's how you took it, right, Lou?"

"Sure," Lou said, laughing.

"He looks nice is all I meant," Harpreet said. "Not like that pedo Rudkus."

"Our *homeroom* teacher?" Lou said.

"She thinks every man she meets is a pedophile," Alexis said. She sighed.

“Mr. Rudkus is almost certainly a pedophile,” Harpreet said. “I have a sixth sense for this kind of thing.” Alexis laughed behind her hands.

Lou’s mother called her back over. Almost time to go, Ian said. School day tomorrow. The sky was dark outside; it was nearing nine. Gallant, a stall over from where Gail, Ian, and Lou stood, rattled against his pen. He paced.

“There’s something wrong with that pig,” Lou said. She perfunctorily balled her hands into fists in the bottom of her pockets.

Gallant snorted and leaned into the fencing again, pushing his thick side against the slats. A small boy stopped to stare. He tugged on his older sibling’s sweater, but he either did not notice or did not care and kept walking, dragging the little one behind him. Lou watched the pig uneasily. The boy, successfully escaping his brother’s grip, doubled back, stuck his face against the pen.

“There’s something wrong with that pig,” Lou repeated, firmer.

Ian grabbed her shoulder half-heartedly but did not look down at her. “Sorry?”

“Grab the kid,” Lou said, realizing what was about to happen. Alexis looked at her from across the crowd. They made eye contact. Under the gaudy yellow lights in the barn, everyone looked sick.

Gallant panted as he thrust his body against the pen. One of the farmers Lou had seen bragging about the pigs hurried down the pathway but dinnertime at the fair was peak time and the crowd difficult to parse through. Gallant pushed his shoulders into the pen a final time and it gave. The boy stared, small and wide-eyed in his black gumboots.

“Piggy,” he breathed.

The hog had looked massive within the pen—all seven hundred fifty pounds of thick muscle buried beneath the black and ecru hide. Massive was perhaps the wrong word: *Grandiose*, Lou thought, might have been a better one. Without standing directly beside Gallant, though, it was impossible to fully appreciate the pig's sheer girth. Gallant's snout glistened with snot and saliva, his eyes wild and fearful. Lou saw that Gallant was not angry but panicked, although later reports of the incident would describe him otherwise. His pen gave way with a final forceful push of his body.

The crowd collectively noticed that Gallant was not, in fact, where he was supposed to be.

Gallant put his head down and charged. In full gallop, the pig was mythological: Giant, curved back, upturned snout, heavy brow, thirsty eyes. There was a single tense second between Gallant's hoofbeats and the grinning boy's outreached hands ("Piggy!") and the collision of human and animal bodies. The boy hit the ground with such rapidity that he made no sound, only the dense *thud* of his back on straw-covered floor. Gallant fell sideways on top of him, followed by a dull *pop*. He bit once, desperately, at the boy, ripping flesh from his wrist with sickening ease. Yellow lights from the barn's roof did nothing to dull the stark white bone beneath it.

The farmer from Lou's school tour was there, shovel in hand. He used it to *whack* Gallant across the head but Gallant only stumbled back and lowered his head again. The man, a big man with wide shoulders, raised the shovel above his shoulders like a seasoned baseball player and brought it sideways into Gallant's face again. Another man showed up, wiry but tall. He carried a tire iron.

"Look away," Lou's father said. She could not.

The tire iron did the trick, ripping into Gallant's flesh. Gallant whinnied and turned, confused but not beaten, stumbling and sliding in his own blood. The first farm hand continued to beat him over his side, great, walloping strokes, until someone in the crowd said *Jesus Christ it's over stop hitting it*.

The brutality of the scene silenced Lou, made her sick to her stomach. Made her remember. Made her anxious. Gallant, prize-winning pig of Jackson Fall Fair, King of the Big Boar Competition of October 2017, collapsed into the straw and the animal shit, all seven hundred fifty-three pounds of him. Horrified, people took exaggerated steps back from the pig. Gallant lay on his right side, staring at Lou—no, past Lou, towards the open barn door to the red fairgrounds and beyond.

The boy's face was dazed, insensate. His leg bent at an unnatural angle, his calf incongruous with the rest of his leg. Oh, hell. Lou waited for him to start screaming. Instead, he moaned a low, guttural sound. A bleat. It was his mother who started screaming. "For God's sake call an ambulance!" she shouted to the audience—crowd, Lou meant crowd—and it was Ian who fumbled for his phone and told the dispatcher to come quick, there was a little boy in shock. Yes, a pig attacked. Yes, he was sure. Yes, it was bad.

The Lowes did not—could not—speak of what had transpired. Driving home, Lou understood the sanctified weight of the silence. It was a too-large balloon in the hands of a child, ready to burst at any moment. Her boots were muddy and she wanted to jump in the shower and wash the afternoon off her. The Lowes pulled up to their new

home. Lou stuck her face to the window, looked up. She wondered how many evenings of driving back here it would take for her to feel that familiar rush of reprieve.

“Do we need a debrief?” Gail asked Lou quietly once they’d walked inside.

“The television is crooked,” Ian said. He moved towards it. He hadn’t removed his coat. It stunk like goats, and chickens, and pigs, and urine, and the dreamy sweet smell of cotton candy. Lou could still feel it stuck to her molars but the actual event of eating it was faraway.

“This is an odd moment to be so fastidious,” Gail said.

Ian half-turned, his coat lifting at the bottom to expose his abdomen. “What do you mean, an odd moment? Right-before-I-watch-TV is an odd moment to notice the television is crooked?” He laughed. “Could you just give me a hand, please? I want to sit down and watch some TV but if I do it now I’ll drive myself crazy. Is anyone else seeing this? Lulu?”

“Sure,” Lou said, squinting. “Yeah, it’s a little crooked, Dad. Move it a bit to the left—up a bit, I mean, and it should be good.”

Disconsolate, Gail stood in front of the television and directed Ian how to move it so that it was even with the television stand.

“Are we going to talk about what happened?” Gail said, after Ian had grabbed himself a glass of milk (in lieu of beer, Lou thought, a good replacement) and settled himself in front of the television. It hung evenly now, above Gail’s succulents and a framed photo of herself, Lou, and Grandma. Lou had intended on placing her framed photo of Caroline on the other side, for balance. Gail had told her, quietly so Ian would not hear, that maybe that one was better off in Lou’s room, no?

Ian glanced towards Lou. "Right now?"

"I just want to go to bed," Lou said.

"Especially right now. Lou—what do you think?"

"Just give her some space. Right, Lulu? We could all use it, I think."

"I'm exhausted," Lou said, louder.

"It would help," Gail said evenly. "To *talk* to the child and ask her what it is she needs instead of pretending to know." Lou was amused. Gail was talking around her just as obviously as Ian was, but at least Ian could detect what it was Lou wanted.

"My sincere apologies," Ian said. "I didn't know we were discussing something so consequential. Lou, dear, my loving daughter—"

"You don't have to make a show of it," Gail said.

"Okay, no show: What is it, exactly, that you want?"

"I just thought," Gail repeated, "we could have a quick familial debrief."

"Do you need to say *debrief*? Can't you just say talk? Or speak? What are we to you? Patients?"

"You know what I meant, Ian. Is it a big deal what *word* I chose? I did a crossword this morning. Sue me."

"It's just a bit obnoxious, isn't it? Pompous? That's a New York Times word, right?"

"Ian—"

"Ian *what*? I can't sit here and enjoy a drink in front of my own television after a long day's work? Which one of us was up at four am, Abigail? Me or you?"

Gail fell silent, rolled her lips together.

“Sweetheart,” Ian sighed. “I’m sorry. Lulu. Sorry. I’m not angry at you two. Look, I’m shaking.” He held out his hands. “I’m a little spooked. I can’t imagine how you both are feeling. Come on. Sit down.”

They huddled on the couch, thigh to thigh. Ian said it had been pretty freaky, seeing the pig so aggressive like that. Gail agreed and squeezed Lou’s leg. *If you’re worried something like that’s going to happen to me*, Ian said, *you don’t have to, Lulu. It isn’t like that where I work. Okay?* Gail’s shoulders relaxed. Lou sunk into her. This wasn’t what Lou had wanted—what words were there to describe the boy’s white bone, Gallant sitting in his own blood?—but Gail was pleased and Lou was too tired to want more than that.

Lou gets out of bed. Beastie turns and watches her from the bedside table. Lou’s toes are cold on the hardwood floor. The Lowes had carpet in their apartment back home. Back in Kettering. Home is Jackson, now. Silly Lou. She walks to the kitchen and opens the fridge. Her father’s leftovers are piled in two Tupperware containers, a mess of runny red pork. Lou takes these out, hands shaking. She is desperate for the taste of meat. How long has it been? Oh, how her mouth has missed this. She is drooling in such substantial quantities that some of her saliva lands on the pork. She constructs a sloppy joe with the meat and slaw and a thick layer of eggy mayonnaise. She eats it in seven starved bites. She reaches for another bun but foregoes this superfluous step and begins eating the pork by the forkful. Forks, though, do not wield the same volume as hands and, inspired, Lou hauls palmfuls of pork into her mouth. First with her right and then left hand and then both. Oh, how her mouth has missed this. How it has

needed this. She eats until she is full; she eats beyond satiation until her stomach is taut against the waistband of her pajamas; she eats until she thinks she will vomit; she eats until both containers are empty and she washes her stained hands, soaked in red juices, in the warm sink water and wishes she has more.

“No way. You like *Paper Girls*?”

The comic sagged in quasi lassitude in Lou’s grip. She had not been reading the comic but giving her eyes something to flit over while she gnawed her pear. Dehydrated and sleep-deprived, Lou was not in the mood for reading. “I do,” Lou said, happier to see the two girls from the fair than she let on.

“I’m way into comics,” Harpreet said, sitting down beside Lou. Of course, Harpreet did not have to announce her comic book adoration. Her backpack was adorned with characters from the Marvel Universe: a grinning Iron Man, Black Widow crouching menacingly, a handsome Thor and Odinsword. The cafeteria was small, cramped, and loud; although quotidian, this bothered Lou more than it would have on any given day. Today she was weary. Alexis and Harpreet sat opposite Lou. Alexis held up her hand as way of hello. Evidently the lunch man had sold Alexis on the tacos. Harpreet had gone with the burger herself.

“Which others do you like?” Harpreet said.

“Sorry?”

“Superheroes, I mean. Jessica Jones? Superman?”

“No.”

“Batman?”

“No.”

“The Hulk? Everyone likes the Hulk.”

“Nope.”

Harpreet paused. “Wonder Woman. You have to like Wonder Woman.”

“Why do I have to like her?”

“Cause she’s a woman and she kicks ass.”

“So?”

“Well,” Harpreet said. “That was really my only argument. My thesis, if you will.”

“I don’t think it’s enough,” Lou said.

“Hold on,” Harpreet said. “She’s also made of clay.”

Lou waited.

“And, like, if I was made of clay I’d just be a big useless blob. But Wonder Woman chooses to spend her time avenging people. For justice. She resists her nature. Like, the psychological argument of nature verse nurture, right? In her *nature*, she’d just be sitting around getting browned by the sun. But her *nurture*, from her mother I guess, she—“

“Harpreet,” Alexis said. “You’re mortifying me. Sorry, Lou.”

“I’m just saying, I like the book, and I think she’d like some other ones, too.

What’s wrong with that?”

“Maybe I’ll check it out. Wonder Woman. Maybe you could lend it to me sometime.” Lou extended a smile to Harpreet. She felt the soft warm feeling of an easy friendship forming. She was grateful.

The conversation was interrupted by an influx of kids. A lithe boy of fifteen or sixteen sat down at a table, which quickly gathered a small crowd. Lou saw instantly that he was beautiful, dark hair and dark eyes. He held his shoulders gracefully if not melancholically. She recognized him. It was this boy's kid brother who had been thrown to the ground by Gallant, King of the Big Boar Competition, wrist flesh ripped clean to the bone, leg fixed at an angle fit for horror movies. Lou, who had never so much as sprained a ligament, had found the sight simultaneously fascinating and horrific. Lou, Alexis, and Harpreet watched with similar intrigue as children swarmed him and interrogated him. Either the boy was greedily bathing in the awed attention of his classmates or forced to endure their questions. *How big was the pig? Was it really seven hundred and fifty pounds? I heard it was nine hundred. Well, I heard it was a tonne! You know a tonne is two thousand pounds, Brett, you moron.*

That pig, Harpreet breathed. *That pig.* As though those two words could encompass what they had witnessed that day on October 13 2017. That pig: Synecdoche for the entire event. The ambulance, loping sirens cut off methodologically by the keening wind, backed itself to the open mouth of the barn. The boy, still silent, consumed in shock, had been lifted onto a stretcher. One of the paramedics smoothed the hair on his sweaty forehead down and told him *we're here now, you're going to be a-okay little buddy.* No one attended to the pig. Not until everyone had cleared out. Lou looked back over her shoulder as the Lowes left, one of the remaining few groups to do so. The pig sat in his own blood.

Alexis told Lou the boy's name was Dylan.

"You okay, Lou?" Harpreet said.

Lou paused. “Well,” Lou said, not wanting to give it up, not ready to tell them about her pills and why she took them. She could say the dream part, though, if she had to. Alexis had no reason to judge her. It was Harpreet who Lou feared just a little bit, if she feared anyone at all. But vulnerability was one of the building blocks to friendship, right? If you couldn’t be honest with friends, what could you be? Lou, who lionised science and mathematics, had to put aside her theoretical musings and trust her gut.

“I’m not sleeping well,” she admitted.

Alexis and Harpreet fell silent for a moment.

“Nightmares?” Alexis asked.

Lou nodded.

Harpreet shrugged. “We all get them around here.”

“What do you mean? Both of you?” Lou felt relief. Maybe it hadn’t been such a bad idea to open up.

“Not just us three, I don’t think,” Alexis said. “A lot of us.”

“It’s because of that place,” Harpreet said, using her plastic fork to play with the remnants of her pork burger. “Where your daddy works. Where they all work.”

“The slaughterhouse?”

“I think we hear them dying,” Alexis said. “But it’s like a dog whistle. Our ears don’t register it. It’s somewhere in our subconscious. And then it comes out—screaming, sort of, *kicking*—when we fall asleep.”

“I’ve had the same dream twice now,” Lou said finally. “I dream that I’m eating more meat than I can fit in my mouth.” Lou hadn’t told her new friends yet that she did not eat meat, had not for eight months, and would not for the foreseeable future. No

way, Jose. “I’m scooping it up with my hands and it’s seeping through my fingers and shovelling it into my mouth. I want to puke in the dream, but not from the taste. See, in my dreams, I love the taste of it. Salty, and thick, and gooey—just the right amount of gooey. My belly’s all big and round. But I can’t stop reaching for more and I’m just... well...” Lou had realized she’d said too much. The three of them watched her with wide eyes, no longer interested in Dylan and the pig incident.

“You’re just sort of grabbing for it, right?” Harpreet said.

“Yeah,” said Lou. “Yeah. That’s right.”

“Yes,” Alexis said, nodding. She and Harpreet shared a somber look. “Yes, we’ve all had that one.”

II.

Thanksgiving weekend was so cold that Lou declined Harpreet and Alexis's invitation to go for a walk Friday afternoon. Typically, the cold would not have bothered Lou, but her sleeps had worsened in the past few days. The Restorils helped but left her sluggish come morning. The headache she nursed most mornings alarmed her but she hesitated to take more pills. She'd heard somewhere that Tylenol could make your stomach bleed. In any case, her pounding head did not make her want to take a brisk walk in the cold snap that had hit Jackson that weekend.

That year's Thanksgiving marked the first family holiday since Lou stopped eating meat.

They cooked dairy-free and egg-free dinner rolls, mashed potatoes with almond milk. Ian didn't do a turkey that year but a ham. *Work perk*, he said, grinning sideways at Gail. Lou helped by prepping a salad of slightly wilted spinach, arugula and avocado and sweet bell peppers. She tossed the salad with olive oil, sea salt, garlic and lemon juice the way her father had showed her. She tried her hand at a protein—a lumpy lentil

and chickpea loaf that her cookbook *Plant-Based for All Ages* had instructed her would only take an hour. (It took closer to two and Lou lied through her teeth that it tasted like meatloaf.) Her dad cooked the ham in brown sugar and pineapple.

“This is better than the birds you usually make,” Gail said. “It’s not dry and crumbly. This is—well. Damn, Ian, this is the best ham I’ve ever had.”

Ian could not come home after work without smelling putrid. He could not wash it off his body in the shower. His hands were scaly imitations of healthy flesh. Lou watched him scrub his hands with harsh dish soap; nothing helped.

Thanksgiving was fine. Typically, the Lowes invited Julia. Lou missed Julia fiercely; that she might have a new best friend made Lou’s heart ache. Julia had been the sole believer of Lou’s recollection of events about Caroline. She’d kept her sane. Now, their relationship was characterized by the strain of a two hundred kilometers distance between two thirteen year olds. Instagram and Facebook, however ubiquitous, were cheap knock-offs in comparison to being with one another. She snapped a picture of herself with her iPhone. In the photo, Lou held up a peace sign in front of her Thanksgiving meal. Lou, do you need to take a photo of everything? Gail asked, but when Lou told her she was sending it to Julia, she squeezed Lou’s shoulder and brushed back a stray piece of Lou’s blonde hair.

Alexis and Lou had begun to ride to school together in the mornings. When Alexis showed up at Lou’s door with her scooter and Ginny Sunday midafternoon, Lou eagerly set out to explore with her. They cruised passed the school, up a small hill, coasted

down. Her handlebars shook with speed. Lou complained that her long hair kept getting caught in her lip gloss. She scooped it back to secure it with a ponytail, but Alexis asked, with painful bashfulness, if she could do it. She loved to French braid people's hair; she learned to do it on her mother but couldn't angle her arms back the correct way to do it on herself. Alexis looped Lou's hair into an intricate looking braid. There, she said, looks perfect, and won't get in your mouth anymore. They rode on. Alexis asked Lou what her favorite subject was. Hers was English. And math.

"You can't have two favorite subjects," Lou said. "Then it's not a *favorite*."

"History, then," Alexis decided. "Because it's fact *and* fiction."

Lou told Alexis about a study she'd read about in one of her textbooks. A psychologist named J. J. Gibson experimented with special glasses that inverted what someone usually saw. The entire world looked upside down, Lou explained.

"How did they walk around and stuff?" Alexis asked. "I'd trip."

"That's the thing," Lou said, eyes bright, "Within *days*, sometimes hours, the brain would adapt to the visual flip. And then they'd see the world *right-side up*."

"Whoa," Alexis said.

Lou said that Gibson's special glasses demonstrated how strongly the mind could adapt to visual changes, but not perceptual ones. Understanding and common sense were essentially powerless in the face of perceptual distortions. She didn't quite understand it, but she wanted to. And that was why, Lou said, she loved science. They stopped at a small creek. Alexis let her scooter fall to its side. Lou did the same with her bike. They drank from their water bottles. Ginny danced at their feet, lapping at the water they extended to her in their palms.

The creek trickled. Lou took off her sneaker and then her sock. Alexis asked her if she was crazy. That's how you get pneumonia, you know, Alexis said. That's a myth, Lou answered, although she couldn't remember if it was or wasn't. She dipped her toe in the freezing water. She splashed Alexis, who screamed. Lou like being out in the woods here. Reminded her of back home. Of before the incident. They fumbled through topics, from *Game of Thrones* (Alexis loved it, Lou thought it okay) to maternal relationships. Here, they were similar. Both girls could not describe their mothers as anything but kind but felt they did not know them. Lou tried to describe Ian and paused, looking out at the pebble colored water. She skipped a rock across it. It bounced once, twice. Sunk. Plop. "Have you ever been scared of your father?" Lou said.

"No," Alexis said. She squatted at the edge of the creekbank. She trailed her fingertips in the cold clear water. "I mean. He gets mad sometimes. But I'm not *scared* of him. But my aunt left her husband a few backs because she said she's a psychic. A medium. Like that show. She moved to Europe and wears a lot of long dresses now. My mom says we're not allowed to speak about her."

They were on their way towards city limits. They'd ride up the hill to the abattoir and head back downtown for a snack afterwards. Lou rode slightly ahead; her bike had better traction in the grass. She saw it as a lump in the distance at first (at stump or a large rock, maybe) but as she rode closer, she recognized the lump as an animal's body.

What was left of the wolf's intestines snaked out of its shredded abdomen, bloated pink guts flopped against blood-stained silver fur. The worst part was not the intestines. No, the worst part was the wolf's missing face. The skin from its mandible up

had been crudely removed, the raw ragged flesh beneath it exposed. Lou's heart thudded. The October sun beat down against her neck. Alexis was behind her, slower on a scooter. For one dithering moment, Lou considered grabbing the wolf by its broken hind legs and dragging it behind a honey-colored birch before Alexis caught up. Around her, the field's grass was tinged caramel, the maple and birches autumnal shades of red and orange, the ground littered with ruddy roots and muddy footprints. Here, the wolf blended in: bruised body and violent red guts. Flies swarmed the wolf's gaping wounds. Lou had never seen a wolf up close before. She'd thought for a moment that it was a coyote but it was much too large for that. She had heard wolves before, sometimes, at night. Back home. Once, while driving with Gail, seven-year old Lou had seen the backside of one disappearing into the woods. She'd pressed her nose to the glass: *bye-bye, Wolfy*. Bye.

Alexis rolled up behind Lou. Ginny, her leash wrapped around Alexis's wrist, yelped and pulled back. "Oh," Alexis said, her voice snagging in her throat. She pulled Ginny closer to her by tugging firmly on her leash. "That's—*nasty*."

Lou turned and said over her shoulder, "What do we do with it?"

"Do with it? Nothing." Alexis made a gagging sound. "I think I'm going to puke, Lou. Let's get out of here."

Lou felt queasy herself. The sight of the torn-apart wolf was surreal and breathtaking; she also felt a visceral gut-punch of nausea. She turned Alexis around and sat with her on a nearby stump, swollen with the recent rainfall. White yarrow crept up beside their feet. Lou positioned her shoulders so Alexis could not accidentally see the wolf.

“That’s number four,” Alexis said.

“Number four?”

“That’s right,” Alexis said. Ginny paced in one spot. She whined low in her throat.

“I watch the news every morning with Mom. Over the past two—or maybe three—months, three wolves have been found dead around Jackson. Two were around here. One was all the way by our school. You’d think they’d learn after the first time, wouldn’t you? To stay in the woods?”

Lou frowned. “But who’s killing them?”

“Other wolves? A bear? I don’t know, Lou.” Alexis tucked her hair nervously behind her ears. Untucked it. “It looks awful, doesn’t it?”

Lou agreed. However, the October wind did not carry any foul odour. How long did it take a corpse to begin stinking? Lou’s stomach turned. The wolf’s disembowelment, she guessed, was relatively fresh.

Alexis held her nose. She stayed where she was and wrapped her cardigan around her chest. The weather had been warm enough that afternoon that neither Lou nor Alexis had tugged on their coats and instead opted for sweaters. “I guess we should call someone, shouldn’t we?”

Lou could not stop watching the wolf. Alexis tugged her arm. “Yes,” Lou said. Her shoulders shook. “Yes, we should call someone.”

“Hey,” Alexis said. Her scooter clattered to the ground. “Are you okay? This is gross. Let’s head back.”

Lou’s therapist had told her, when she felt this way, to engage in box breaths. She was to breathe in deeply for four seconds, hold her breath for four seconds, exhale

and repeat. Four by four. This, Lou had been told, was supposed to help regulate her nervous system. Calm her racing heart. Re-set her negative thoughts. Alexis watched Lou for close to three minutes as she did so.

Ginny whined again. She stood alert, front legs stiff and poised, her gaze unwavering. She watched through the trees. Lou followed her black eyes. To the left of them, past the highway, was the pig farm. Beyond here, where Ginny looked, was the sloping hill leading to the slaughterhouse. She thought of what Alexis had said when Lou revealed her nightmare: *It's like a dog whistle. We can hear them dying.* Most dogs, Lou knew, lunged at bodies. Alive and dead—perhaps especially the latter. Caroline had been fascinated with dead birds, squirrels, even a gutted and flattened deer they'd accidentally stumbled upon. Not Ginny. Her body tensed with adrenaline.

"Lou, let's get out of here," Alexis said. The two girls took one last look at the wolf. She and Alexis rode back to their houses, quiet and introspective. Alexis asked if Lou was all right to go home alone. Lou said she was and Alexis said she'd call later to make sure she was okay, and Lou said not to worry about it. "Well," Alexis said. "I will anyways. And I'm going to tell my mom. You should tell your dad, too."

"Orange juice, little Lulu?"

"No thanks, Dad," Lou said. Her father had been off work for half an hour now. His eyes were a wild shade of red. She'd asked him if he'd burst a blood vessel and, absentmindedly, his fingers drifted towards his eyes. *Sure did*, he said. *Work can be a real boxing match, you know?* Lou did not know. Gail, who had scored the job in the

meat department at Superstore, worked until eleven that night. Now, it was just Lou and her father in the dimly lit kitchen. The moonlight was high in the full dark sky. The Lowes had hung festive Hallowe'en curtains. Gail had picked them up. *They were already on sale and with my discount, I only paid \$3.50*, she'd said proudly.

"What's troubling you?"

Lou watched her dad's face with the interrogation of someone on the cusp of seeing him not as her father but as a fallible person who just so happened to be raising a daughter. Jackson's Own offered a significant pay raise for Ian. The top end of the wage scale was 25.60 plus 1.00 per hour for perfect attendance. After reading that aloud to both Gail and Lou from an online posting, Ian laughed and said he could manage perfect attendance for almost twenty-six dollars an hour. "Would you still be proud of your old dad if he worked at a place like that?" he had asked. Lou felt the agonizing blow of heartache. She didn't know exactly what he meant: because no other fathers she knew worked at meat packing plants? Because she had recently stopped eating animals? Ian had worked first at Arby's when he dropped out of school at sixteen, second as a casino dealer but after being accused of short-changing the till too many times he'd had his third job as a mover. He'd done this for years before suffering a substantial concussion. He'd been unwieldy and lethargic in those first weeks after the accident. Lou had hated that. Her mother had been pregnant at fifteen and given birth three weeks after turning sixteen. She had missed out on attending college but planned to do so once they'd saved up a little more money. (Lou had heard the phrase *a little more money* more times than she could count.) Jackson's Own would help with that. Ian wanted Gail to return to school. He used to, Lou could remember, tell her how intelligent

she was. Besides, the position at the meat packing plant would be temporary until Ian could maybe move up north to work in the oil fields.

"Those fields," Gail had said. She'd worn down the corner of the novel she'd been reading as Ian spoke about finding jobs. "They're dangerous. It's *cold*. You'd be away for a long time." She frowned. "I don't know."

They had fought, too, over Jackson's Own.

Ian had glanced at Lou. "I grew up on summers at my cousin's farm," he'd said. "You think I haven't slit an animal's neck when I've had to? It wasn't *fun*. I didn't wake up hoping I could end Daisy or Gilbert or whatever's life that morning. But you do what you have to do to help your family."

"Lulu?" Ian said now. "What's up with you?" He offered her a slice of ham from the cutting board, paused mid-reach and put it in his own mouth. He handed her the Tupperware of salted almonds, instead. "You have that—you have a look."

"Alexis and I went for a bike ride. A bike and scooter ride," she said. In the dim kitchen light, Ian's eyes looked less red. He had lit a candle, buried in a pale green clay holder. It filled the entire kitchen with the smell of cinnamon apple crumble. "And we found—" Her voice caught for a moment. She saw Caroline. Broken spine, limp brown body underneath the grim glow of the streetlight. Him bending over her. The shock on his face apparent even in silhouette. "We found this wolf. It was *mangled*, Dad."

There was a beat. "A wolf? Where did you find it?"

"I don't know," Lou said, shaking her head. "We'd just left Jackson city limits. Alexis wanted to wear Ginny out. She'd been ripping up her mom's couch. We were at the bottom of the hill. By the farm. We were pretty close. We could smell it."

“What did the wolf look like?”

“Grey. Big.”

“No, I mean, what was *wrong* with it?”

Lou grimaced. “Its stomach was torn wide open. Like a dissection in science class. And its face... it didn’t—it didn’t have one anymore.”

“It was torn away?” When Lou looked up from her hands in her lap she saw that her father was bent over the sink, gripping the faucet so hard that the knuckles on his left hand were white. Lou was startled out of the memory of the wolf by her father’s face. It was not what she could read on it that bothered her. It was that his expression was too shrewd, too masked in opacity to construct anything meaningful out of it.

“It was just *disgusting*,” Lou said. Her shoulders shook. She began to cry. “I don’t know what kind of monster plays with its own food like that. How can you—how can you rip something’s face off like that?”

“Animals don’t think like me and you,” her father said. He rubbed a hand up and down her back. Lou inched her back away from him. “They’re primal, Lou. Driven by instinct. Desire is a ruthless monster. They see something tasty, they lunge. If they win, it’s food. If they don’t, well: Survival of the fittest. Do you need your pills?” He said this often now.

Lou sniffed back snot. “Yeah. I think so.”

He disappeared into the bathroom and gave them to her with a glass of ice water. She swallowed the two blue pills and drank the rest of the water. This act calmed her.

"What did it *look* like had killed the wolf, Lulu?" Ian's hands enveloped hers, clammy. Blue lightning forked outside the window.

"I don't know," Lou said. "I don't have the faintest idea. What kills wolves?"

"Well, I'll have to report it," Ian said.

"To the police?"

Ian laughed. A sour sound. "The police? What have they got to do with it?"

"What do you mean?"

Ian didn't answer. He made her a snack of celery and peanut butter with raisins on top. She used to eat that when she was little, maybe seven or eight, and, as much as she didn't want it to, it touched her to see him make it now. After she ate, Lou fiddled with her Fender until the sleeping pills crept in and worked their magic. When Gail came in, Lou pretended to be sleep. She didn't want to recount the story. The rain let up and eased into a gentle pat-pat-pat against her window. Lou counted the beats. She snored before she reached thirty. She did not hear Gail showering before bed. She did not hear Ian on the phone with his boss. When she slept, she did not dream.

From *The Jackson Gazette*, October 11, 2017

Jackson wolves turned prey: Citywide curfew imposed

Recent wolf deaths concern locals who live close to Jackson's Own

JACKSON—The city of Jackson has announced a curfew for certain areas that will be firmly implemented beginning Saturday evening, following reports of a fourth wolf corpse.

Mayor Mary Lyons and other city officials announced the curfew along with possible answers to this crisis at a small conference Friday afternoon.

Lyons has imposed a citywide curfew from eleven p.m. until five a.m. until the cause of death can be confirmed.

Thursday evening Jackson police received a disturbing call confirming the fourth wolf body found in under eight weeks. The corpse was discovered twenty minutes south of Jackson's Own Farm and Meatpacking Industries. "The likely culprit," says Captain Johnston, "is an aggressive bear, but until this can be confirmed we do not want to be taking any chances."

At the end of August, the first gruesome wolf body was discovered by a Jackson mother hiking with her two children. Three more have since been found by concerned Jackson citizens.

The curfew applies to:

- West of Acorn St.
- East of City Park

- North of 10th Avenue
- South of 12th Avenue

Lyons urges residents to not leave garbage in their driveway and to not let children under the age of twelve walk to or from school unassisted.

A detailed map and copy of Mayor Lyon's curfew order can be found at WelcometoJackson.ca.

Alexis invited Lou for her own family's Thanksgiving celebrations Monday evening. Because the invitation was sent, via Facebook, the evening before, Lou wondered how much of the invitation was Alexis's idea and how much was Alexis's parent's idea. She toyed with the concept of not attending but what could she say? That she was busy with other friends? She smiled to herself over the absurdity. She was, however, wracked with a different kind of guilt. She thanked Alexis for the invite and mentioned that, while she didn't eat animal products, she would love to come by. This was the first time she'd had to tell her new friend this. Alexis didn't make it a big deal. Lou made sure to include in her message the fact that she did not expect Alexis's family to accommodate her diet: she would bring something for herself.

Ian, however, found this not just rude but offensive. He was initially receptive to the invitation—he said Alexis's father, Max, was a good man, would probably be a good friend. Ian smelled like Herbal Essences passionfruit, at least in his hair, but underneath was the rank odour of efficiency. The combination unsettled Lou. After a moment of humming to himself, Ian paused. He told Lou that he expected she would not embarrass him in front of Max and his family.

"What do you mean?" Lou said. She looked up from her cracked iPhone. "I'm polite, aren't I?" She grinned at Ian.

Ian ran a hand from his damp hair down the side of his stubbled cheek. The darkness under his eyes screamed for sleep. He looked at Lou and smiled—somehow, Lou thought, somehow it was patronizing. "You're going to eat what they offer you, right?"

"Within reason," Lou said.

“Reason?”

“I’m not going to eat what I don’t eat,” she said.

“You’re a *guest*. In someone’s home. You understand what that means, right?”

“It means I’m a guest,” Lou repeated dryly. “In someone’s home.”

Ian laughed. “Funny, Lou. Very tautological. You know that’s not what I meant.”

Lou reached for her phone to keep scrolling. Before she could pick it up, Ian plucked it from the kitchen counter. “Don’t look at your phone when I’m speaking to you,” he said. “I’m not saying you have to gorge yourself on meat. But if someone offers you something, you accept.”

Lou sat with this for a moment. She was hurt, but more than that, she was angry. “I don’t think that’s fair,” she said. “If I had an *allergy*, you wouldn’t tell me I had to eat something. I’ll pretend I have one, if it makes you happier.”

“You’re right, Lou. It wouldn’t be fair if you had an allergy—an allergy is abnormal. And something that you *don’t* have. Eating a few bites of meat is natural.”

“Natural?”

“You’re not stupid, Lou. Why do you think humans have eaten meat for thousands of years? Because it *works*. Things that don’t work get stamped out. Evolution. Darwin said it: Natural selection. If pigs weren’t meant to be turned into bacon, they’d fight back.”

Lou sat silent for a moment, forming her argument. “Pigs are smart, you know. Smart as a four-year-old.”

Ian laughed. “Which one of us works with pigs? Which one of us knows how smart or fucking stupid pigs are? Do you know what happens when a pig’s about to die,

little Lulu? Do you think its life flashes before its eyes or it looks behind it to say goodbye to mommy and daddy? Or do you think it shits itself in the lineup?"

Lou went quiet again.

Ian softened. "I'm not trying to be mean," he said. "Just think about it, okay? These are new friends of yours. New co-workers of mine. You don't want to—alienate yourself. Do you? You don't want this transition to be more difficult than it has to be."

"Pigs can tell whose nice to them and who isn't," Lou said, for lack of a better rebuttal. "They recognize people. Like I said: They're like dogs. Smarter."

This was what broke Ian and Lou realized, moments too late, why. Lou knew because his shoulders dropped, his jaw slackened. He only ever looked that calm when he thought he'd won or that the conversation was over. "Do you know what naïve means, Lou?"

"Yes," Lou said, although she couldn't have offered up an exact definition.

"I think," Ian said, with a poetic measure to his voice, "I think you're just about the most fucking naïve person I've met in my life."

Lou froze. Lou was many things—many good things she thought—but she hadn't thought of herself as naïve. She didn't know what was worse. That he had called her that, or that someone had sworn at her. That stung. And for her own father to say it? She gritted her teeth and left for her room. She leaned back and hollered, with all the gusto she could manage: "*Fuck you!*" and slammed her door. Oh, it felt good. It felt delicious. She waited, tense, adrenaline pumping, for Ian to storm down the hallway and berate her—or worse. She waited. She heard something smash. She tensed. He didn't

come. He didn't come. Five minutes passed. Seven. She told herself she wasn't going to cry and she didn't. She opened *Paper Girls* for the third time and read it start to finish.

Hours later, after Gail had come home and she and Ian had spoke in hushed tones, Ian knocked on Lou's door. His face was drawn into a pained countenance. He apologized for what he'd said. "You're not naïve. And even if you're a bit naïve—so what? You're thirteen. You're *supposed* to be. Forget what I said, okay?"

At the last minute—in the couple of hours she had between school and dinner—Lou scrambled to put together a couple of sides to bring to the table. Her mother told her it would have been rude otherwise and she was right. Lou wished she hadn't said she would go to Alexis's for Thanksgiving dinner at all. Traitorously, though, despite last night, despite too many things, she was still very much her father's daughter. Gail, who likely sensed this, would have been hurt to hear her say it out loud and Lou was not stupid enough (or cruel enough) to ever put a feeling like that into words. Secretly, Lou harboured a theory: that Gail not only knew Lou preferred Ian, but that she liked this fact. That way, Lou thought sometimes, with a tight chest, that way any effort she made to connect with Lou was above and beyond what was expected of her because Lou was already so far gone, emotionally, from Gail. Perhaps Lou sensed resentment that she had no language for. If asked, Lou could not have articulated why she thought this true, but it was something she was quietly positive about. That there was a gulf between all family members and in that space, there were narratives that remained unspoken familial folklore. Gail showed Lou how to bake balsamic Dijon Brussel's sprouts and

baked yam with dusted cinnamon. She kissed her daughter on the forehead when it was finished and told her she was proud of her. Lou smiled.

Alexis's parents, Sofia and Max, owned a small colonial on the other side of town. When Gail dropped her off, she squeezed Lou's hand and told her not to worry. Lou squeezed back and said no way, Jose, because she knew her mother liked it when she said that. Harpreet and Alexis were already inside, Alexis's hair pleasantly disheveled as Lou had come to expect. Alexis took her dishes and set them on the elaborately decorated table: Tiny metallic pumpkins, glittering gold tablecloth, red and white and yellow flowers as accents. Lou took it in, impressed. Her family did not do those things for holidays, not even Christmas, and she wondered in a self-conscious way if her sprouts and yams were enough. Sofia and Max looked extraordinarily like one another, round bodies and dimpled chins, full lips—but, despite the dark hair and fair skin, not much at all like willowy Alexis herself.

Max and Sofia moved with jovial ease in the kitchen. Taken aback by their comradery, Lou wondered if part of their banter was a façade because they had guests. Yet by the time they'd sat down for dinner, Lou's worries about the dinner had, for the most part, evaporated. For the main dish, Sofia and Max had labored over a gorgeous cranberry apple stuffed pork loin. Perfectly crisp was an understatement; the loin positively glistened in all the right spots. They'd laid out other dishes, too, and a dark green spinach and cranberry salad which Lou filled half her plate with.

Max cut into the pork loin and Sofia moaned appreciatively and nudged Alexis. Max cut off a fat slice and the loin's guts spilled out: walnuts, onions, apple, stuffing. Steam rose and fogged Max's glasses. He grabbed Lou's plate.

“I don’t eat meat,” Lou said firmly but politely. In almost nine months, she’d perfected the tone. “I’m sure it’s delicious, but I’ll just take the salad and the beets, please.”

“No meat—at all?” Sofia smiled sunnily at Max, who mirrored her befuddlement.

“I thought I told you,” Alexis said. “Don’t make it weird for her.”

“I thought you meant her stomach was upset or something,” Sofia said to Alexis. She’d pretended to whisper. Lou gave her credit for the effort of the charade, at least.

“Well. No hard feelings, Lou.” Max looked dumbstruck. “We did take a few hours to make this. Would you like to try a bite? I promise it’s delicious. Sofia’s mom’s recipe. Pair that with Jackson pork?” He smacked his lips.

“Oh,” Lou said. “I think I’ll pass.”

Alexis and Lou shared a look and Alexis, grinning in what Lou interpreted as embarrassment for her, shoved a spoonful of Brussel’s sprouts in her mouth.

“Are you fitting in to Jackson all right?” Sofia said tightly.

“Sure,” Lou said. She did not mention the pang in her chest every time she thought of Julia’s Instagram account; Lou had private messaged her three times now. Julia had read them all, the incriminating slanted *seen* beneath each of Lou’s messages. “Jackson’s not so bad.”

“Jackson’s a fantastic little community, once you get to know everyone,” Max said. “We hope you’ll stick around.”

“That’s the plan,” Lou said. “At least for a couple of years. And then—who knows.”

“That’s why a lot of the kids are kind of distant at school,” Alexis said. She looked embarrassed to have to be the person to explain this to Lou. “It’s not personal, exactly. It’s just they leave so quickly. Parents come, one of them has a job here. And they can’t take it. It’s too much for them. And then they’re gone, just like that.”

“They tend to be people down on their luck. Not everyone. Max has a passion for efficiency. For hands-on work,” Sofia said. “But some of them come from some pretty harsh conditions, so they try and tough it out. Send some money back home. But a lot of them don’t last.”

“Your dad, though,” Max said. “He’s different. He’s good.”

“Yeah?”

“There is a big turnover rate,” he admitted. He nodded once. Twice. “At Jackson’s Own. At any meat packing place, I’d guess. Most folks can’t handle the pressure. It’s difficult and thankless work. You should give your daddy a hug and let him know you appreciate him, you know even if—even if you’re not eating the meat yet. You will. Jackson’s Own is irresistible.” He smiled, an unkind turn of his lips. “You know Jackson is revolutionary?”

Lou looked to Harpreet and Alexis, who kept her head down. “Revolutionary?”

Alexis’s mother looked to Max. “Right now? Max? Do we have to?”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“It just doesn’t seem like dinner table talk.” But she kept silent after that.

“You ever wonder why Jackson pigs are so big?” Max said, turning to Lou.

“Of course,” Lou said. She sat up straighter and put down her fork.

“It’s all in the feed,” Max said.

“Mom said it’s not in the feed at all, Mom says it’s genetic *engineering*, like in a Batman comic only not evil,” Harpreet said.

Max laughed. “*What?* No, it’s what they feed them. It’s a special blend, with ingredients from Sweden. Made on the East Coast of Canada.”

“Maybe it’s a combo,” Harpreet said. “Feed *and* genetic tinkering. Like more Superman than Batman. Not all techno—some space stuff, too.”

Alexis groaned and blushed. “Harpreet,” she said. Lou couldn’t tell if Alexis wanted to laugh or cry.

Max furrowed his brow. “Your mom told you that?”

“About *Superman*? She hates Superman, Mr. Caceres, says you can’t trust a man with a jaw that square.”

“I mean,” Max said, cutting into his roast. “She said they genetically engineered them?”

“Look, Mr. Caceres, I don’t know, I barely pay attention when she talks which is why I’m grounded all the time. I’m grounded right now but my mom said if I come here for dinner then she doesn’t have to feed me. So, don’t count on me for accuracy of information.”

Lou looked to Alexis, who gave nothing away with her expression. She frowned. Her father hadn’t say anything about special feed or genetic tinkering or space stuff or anything like that. Not that he had talked about his work at all yet, not really, which she supposed was to be expected. Lou had not asked and Ian had not told.

“All I know is there are no pigs like Jackson pigs,” Max said, but Lou had the feeling that due to Harpreet’s outburst, he was trying to steer the conversation

elsewhere. She did not have much basis for this, however, except that Sofia and Max would no longer look at one another. She had seen her own mother and father at this stand-still before so, for the most part, Lou let it go.

“You thank your daddy when you get home, you hear?” Max said. This time he feigned a smile, a brief flicker of his teeth. “God knows he could use a little bit of reassurance after spending his days like that. Surrounded by those hybrids. Now pass the salt, would you? Only thing we can’t do is raise those pigs already salted.”

Lou did not know if the reason Sofia coughed was because she was choking, like she’d said, or because Max had said the word *hybrid*. Lou did not know for sure, but she knew that Sofia did not have any food on her fork when she claimed to choke.

Harpreet and Alexis showed up at Lou’s home the following Wednesday. *This*, Lou thought, opening the door to her new friends, *maybe it’s this that makes a home*. Alexis needed to go to the pet store for Ginny’s puppy food. Lou rode her Devinci, Alexis her scooter. Harpreet walked beside them, leading Ginny. (“I’ve just never gotten *into* bikes,” she said. “What’s the appeal?”) The girls walked to Jackson’s only sushi joint, tucked beside the Esso. Lou, who had never tried sushi, ate a veggie roll drenched in soy sauce and promptly ordered another. Harpreet tried the special: a BBQ pulled pork roll that was so large she couldn’t finish it. Harpreet bothered Lou by continuously asking details about what the wolf looked like. Harpreet spent too much time, Lou thought, complaining about not getting to see the wolf body. She and Alexis made eye contact across the table. Alexis said to shut up, they didn’t want to see something like

that. Harpreet said she didn't want to see it but she wanted to be around the scene of the crime. It was, after all, Alexis and Lou who were responsible for the new curfew. Lou balked at that. Afterwards, they got frozen cappuccinos from the neighboring gas station. The weather and the threat of rain in the distance made this a bad idea and the girls giggled through their brain freeze.

"You haf to hol' your 'ongue again' a 'op of your *mou*!" Lou explained, laughing. The cappuccinos made them shake.

Dylan was just leaving with his mother as the girls showed up to the pet store. He held an oversized bag of guinea pig feed in his arms. His mother, who wore a colorful kerchief around her short black hair, stopped at the doorway to button her grey wool coat up to her chin. She wore heavy shades despite the overcast weather. She looked not as if her son had been bitten by a pig but as though she'd lost him. Lou locked up her bike; Alexis her scooter.

"How's your little brother?" Harpreet said.

Dylan glanced at his mother, whose cheeks lost their color. "He's not feeling well."

"You mean a little bit more than a broken leg?" Harpreet said.

"Something like that," he said. He readjusted the lumpy bag in his arms.

"Let's go home, Dylan," his mother said.

Dylan glanced at his mother, whose cheeks lost their color. "He's fine," he said. He wouldn't make eye contact with any of them. "He's back at the hospital for a—a check-up. He just hurt himself a little bit. No big deal. See you at school."

Harpreet fanned herself as Dylan and his mother opened the trunk of her car. "He wants to see me at school," she said. "Dylan knows a woman when he sees one."

Alexis instructed Lou to tune her out, which Lou replied that she had never entertained the preposterous notion of listening to her in the first place. (She had been busy analyzing the odd confluence of her group and Dylan. What had he said again?) Alexis picked out a bag of dog food. "And maybe a few treats," Alexis said, grabbing a package that said *Every bite infused with Jackson pork!* Harpreet would not let the girls leave the store just yet; no, she had sacraments to attend to.

"Harpreet thinks it's a game to watch the piranha get fed," Alexis said.

"I don't think it's a game," she said cheerily. "I just like to see it. What's wrong with that? A fish has got to eat and I'm just a witness."

"It's kind of weird," said Alexis.

"You think everything's weird," Harpreet said. "They chase some fish food around for thirty seconds. If you don't want to watch, buy your stinky puppy food and get out."

She asked the clerk, who seemed to know her, if she could watch the piranha get fed. At first, he declined, saying they'd already eaten, but the other teenaged worker reminded him that piranha could eat more than once a day and not to be such a dick to customers. The clerk held a translucent bag up in front of their eyes; inside the bag, two plump goldfish spun in circles, dragging their golden tails behind them as they swished round and round.

"Is that what you usually feed piranha?" Lou asked. By the looks of her face, Harpreet had not been expecting this either.

“They’ll eat just about anything,” he said. “They like a variety of food, but these guys haven’t been selling. And piranha might like fish food but they *love* fish.” He opened the top of the piranha cage; the goldfish plopped in, one after the other. They swam fast but were no match for the piranha. Lou nudged Alexis, who looked to her, lips downturned. Harpreet looked, not delighted, but cautiously curious. The piranha ripped the first fish apart. First, its tail disappeared, and then bits of its body, tiny goldfish flesh floating in the tank. Not satiated, the piranha darted after the second and gnawed a bite out of its tail. If it were not so dire, Lou could have seen the humor: the goldfish’s tail was missing a perfect crescent moon shaped chunk, a cartoon bite. The goldfish swam from one end of the tank to the other. Up. Down. Left. Right. The piranha pursued. Lou regretted being there; she regretted Harpreet asking to see the piranha. A rush of heat rippled through her body. She felt sick. She knew the goldfish thought it could get away and it was only moments—minutes at best—before it’d be snatched back in by the sharp teeth of the piranha and inhaled.

Alexis looked away. The clerk stared. Lou grabbed Harpreet’s arm. “Is this what you wanted?” she said fiercely.

“No,” Harpreet said. Her voice was not like hers at all. It was unusually timid. “They usually just feed them fish flakes.”

Lou kept her arm on Harpreet’s as they left the store. This was for her sake more than Harpreet’s, although she didn’t tell her that.

In the second-last week of October 2017, Lou had what she would consider, later, to be the Last Good Day before everything else happened. Afterwards, there were still, of

course, moments of happiness and ease, but the problems would soon become such that Lou could no longer ignore them. Could no longer chalk them up to a bad feeling or a paranoid intuition. But that Friday afternoon was a good one. Lou did all right on their English pop quiz. The clock ticked closer to three ten. She could not recall the name of Prospero's spirits in *The Tempest* and of the life of her did not remember who Caliban had mistaken for one of said spirits. (Sensing Lou's distress, Alexis had turned her sheet towards Lou but Lou couldn't see if she had circled A or B.) In any case, the rest of the quiz she could answer with a bit of certainty. It was Friday, though, and Lou had other things on her mind. She, Harpreet, and Alexis were off to the pumpkin patch.

She wore a gingham summer dress over thick leggings and her coat. Her mother had worn that dress when she was a teenager and smiled tightly whenever Lou threw it on. Lou did not know what that expression meant. She tucked her new beanie down low over her eyebrows. Like Harpreet's, it read JACKSON'S OWN Farms and Meatpacking in red embroidery. She did not particularly enjoy wearing it. Not necessarily for some anti-capitalistic notion, or that it promoted the actual slaughtering of animals but because it represented her father; he'd brought it home the day after her breakdown about finding the wolf with Alexis. Harpreet's mother bought them warm apple cider that was so hot it burnt Lou's tongue when she first sipped it.

There was a small line-up. Alexis had brought Ginny, who snaked in between kid's legs and barked happily. The pumpkin patch, Lou saw, was home to food (mostly hotdogs), face painting, and pumpkin carving. Plus, if you paid an extra three dollars you were allowed to hold a piglet and take a photo with it. A group of kids who could not be older than seven or eight stood near the entrance. They all wore identical costumes:

Pink onesies or pink t-shirts tucked into pink trousers of some sort. Curly pig tails attached to string or a pink belt. Over their faces were plastic pig masks. One would not take his eyes off Lou. Or so she thought. The masks did not have traditional holes for the child's eyes; instead, the masks had black, mesh eyes. He waved. Lou waved back. Truthfully, she was a bit unnerved—how could he see behind those creepy lifeless black eyes? The kid pushed the plastic pig nose; it beeped out a robotic *oink oink*.

One of the fathers spoke about the curfew. "That's a result of people not taking proper care of their products." He said this to another man who nodded.

"Jesus," he said, in way of agreement. He sipped from a mug that had J.O. wrapped around it. "Je-sus. Build a bigger fence. Hell, *I* // build it."

"Daddy," one of the girls with a pig mask said. Lou watched her push the mask up to her forehead. "How are we going to go trick or treating?" the little girl asked. Her hair fell in a dark tangle, nearly to the back of her knees. "*How?*"

Once inside, Harpreet and Alexis pooled their money to buy fat frankfurters piled high with grilled onions, cheese, and jalapeno relish. Alexis ripped off a chunk of greasy ketchup-coated hotdog and held it out to Ginny. ("That's cannibalism!" Harpreet said, but Alexis pushed her arm and told her not to be an idiot.) Ginny sniffed it once and, ears flattened, turned her head away. Lou took a picture of the three of them and Ginny. Afterwards, they had Harpreet's mother take a photo of them all. Lou loved it. She decided she would frame it. The girls had their faces painted shortly after; since there were four of them, they go the group rate and only had to shell out a precious ten-dollar bill. The woman working the booth only knew how to do three animals or claimed to: a

pig, a cow, or a sheep. Harpreet said they should all get a pig face, naturally, but Lou wanted cow-spotted cheeks.

“Do we have any money left for an actual pumpkin?” Harpreet said afterwards, cheeks rosy pink and nose colored kohl.

“Mom only gave me a fiver,” Alexis said. “I’m all out.”

“My mom gave me a five, I think,” Lou said, digging the crumpled bill out of her jeans pocket. “That help?”

The girls took their pumpkins, newspapers, and carving supplies and sat just outside the carving tent. Alexis carved a classic Jack-o’-lantern grin with crooked teeth. Harpreet designed a Spider-man pumpkin: Triangular eyes amidst a cobweb. Her artistry impressed Lou. Ginny, heavier than she knew, climbed into Lou’s lap and promptly fell asleep. Ginny snored restlessly. Could you ever know another creature? She guessed not, not really. But the relaxed beat of her heart against Lou’s thigh felt a lot like knowing something about her. Lou focused. She was no artist. But she could do silhouettes all right.

“Lou, yours isn’t scary at all,” Harpreet said.

“Neither is yours,” Lou said. “Since when is Spider-man scary?”

“Is that Ginny?” Alexis asked, pointing her scooper at Lou’s pumpkin. Ginny kicked her hind legs. Lou smiled and rubbed Ginny’s head; she’d heard dogs do that when they had nightmares.

Lou turned the pumpkin towards her friends. “No, it’s my dog. My old dog. Caroline. She looked a lot like Ginny, though.”

“You weren’t allowed to bring her with you to Jackson?”

"No, it wasn't that," Lou said.

Harpreet frowned. "Then what happened?"

"Well, she died," Lou said flatly.

"Died how?" Harpreet said. She pushed up her cat-eye frames; their tortoiseshell pattern glistened in the naked October sunshine.

Lou felt the twinge of her protective instinct. Stalwart. She was not supposed to tell this part of the story. But she also had also learned something else: Grief grows stronger when embowered.

"Someone killed her," she said. She looked up, briefly, from her pumpkin guts. She wanted to see how shocked they would be.

"*Killed* her?" Alexis asked. "Your *dog*?"

"I've heard of that happening," Harpreet said sagely. She scooped the last of her gooey pumpkin seeds out. "Some sick bastards set up traps. Anti-freeze for cats. Who-knows-what for the dogs. It's gross."

"Yeah," Lou said. "Yeah, it was something like that."

"I'm sorry, Lou," Alexis said. "I'm really sorry."

Harpreet pointed at Ginny. "But look. Gin loves you."

Lou bent forward and kissed Ginny's soft nose. When she and Alexis were dropped off home that afternoon, Lou stopped Alexis. She needed to ask her something. It was entirely possible that Lou was turning her pumpkin into a tyrannizing force it needn't be. All the same, Lou was not about to risk the day turning sour on behalf of an oversight.

"Do you think we could swap pumpkins?"

Lou admired Alexis's derivative handiwork: clean, simple, emotionless. Lou had to bank, now, on Alexis's crown shyness, on her pliant, eager nature.

"You don't want yours?" Alexis asked.

"I just think," Lou lied, "that mine suits you more. Because of the dog. You have one." Lou looked down to Ginny, who, tired from the sun, sat slack-jawed and heavy-eyed on the sidewalk. "It's kind of misleading for me to take it, don't you think?"

Alexis smiled and took the pumpkin. "I can pretend it's Ginny."

Lou thanked her graciously. She and Alexis swapped pumpkins. And Lou, heart full, waved goodbye to Alexis with her free hand. Ian loved the pumpkin, said it would look delightfully spooky lit up in the darkness, tucked slightly askew beside the front steps. He was right. Gail, Ian, and Lou sat on their front steps that evening, sipping hot chocolate and laughing about the episode of television they'd just watched. From where she sat, Lou could see her Caroline-silhouette pumpkin on Alexis's front lawn. Despite this, Lou had a grateful heart. She leaned back against her father's knees and breathed in the cool damp October air. She could have cried, she was so content.

Monday afternoon, Lou found out she'd received a nine out of fifteen on her *The Tempest* quiz. Alexis scored a perfect one hundred, and Harpreet managed to pull off a B.

Lou heard the ambulance's sirens from down the block. An SUV and a green car honked at a white Ford Ranger that wouldn't pull to the side to let the ambulance through; eventually, the Ranger did, haphazardly pulled against the curb. She and the boy ahead of her in her row looked out the window to see the commotion. From her

vantage point, Lou could see the drivers miming their frustration at the truck. The entire block's maple trees had exploded into a line of beautiful marmalade leaves. Those golden leaves littered the sidewalk as well. The ambulance sped by. Lou would find out before the end of school that afternoon that the ambulance was speeding to the abattoir, to the kill floor, to pick up her father.

"The pig could have bit his arm clean off," Gail said. "Those pigs—I know you don't want to hear it Lou, but they have destructive teeth. Jesus. And they're *big*. You saw how big they were, didn't you? The doctors have to keep him in the hospital for the next few days. Make sure there's no infection. Lulu?" The name sounded sodden coming from Gail's mouth. Not right at all.

They sat in the driveway of their home. Gail had come from the hospital to pick Lou up at school. Only five minutes remained of the school day; most of the kids had already zipped up their binders and slammed their text books shut, restless, shaking like horses in a holding pen. That was why, when Lou's name crackled over the loudspeaker to *please come to the office*, Lou thought, initially, it was a misunderstanding or, outlandishly, a joke. But Rudkus ushered her towards the door and Lou, in her confusion, had left her coat on the back of her chair. Gail stood in front of the office. Her hair was still covered by a Superstore hairnet; she wore only a holed grey cardigan over her khaki pants and avocado green shirt. Gail asked irritably if Lou had all her things. Lou, not thinking of her coat, said she did. Refusing to answer any of Lou's questions, Gail threw open the door to their Neon. Finally, once they were inside, Gail slammed her hand down on the wheel and honked three long honks in frustration. She told Lou that Ian was in the hospital. He'd been hurt on the job.

“Fuck,” Gail said. “*Fuck*. Sorry, Lou. Penny in the jar, right? Maybe about five bucks by now. I just—how is he going to work now?”

Lou sat quiet and stiff in the passenger seat. Students had begun to stream out. Lou sank lower in her seat; she did not want to be seen with her mother this way. “They can move him to a different position, can’t they?”

“Oh, fuck, Lou. What position? You need an *arm* to work at a slaughterhouse.”

“He has an arm,” Lou said. “Right?”

They drove home. Lou tentatively rested her backpack on the couch. Gail walked to the fridge, opened it, slammed it shut. Lou watched the slope of her back from where she sat on the couch. Gail’s cardigan—flimsy, cheap, worn—was soaked through in the back from sweat. Her dark hair had come out of her turtle clip. She was not yet thirty. Lou did not know how that was possible. She looked too old, too angry, to be twenty-nine. Lou waited.

“Why do we never have any food? I’m always buying food,” she said. “I just spent a hundred and fifty dollars at Superstore. On what? Nothing.” She finally grabbed a carrot and chopped it roughly.

“Can we go see him?”

“Dad? He’s sleeping now. They knocked him right out.”

Lou waited another moment to let her mom calm down. The TV played *Keeping up with the Kardashians* quietly in the background. Mostly, Lou listened to the harsh crunching as Gail cracked into each carrot. “His arm’s going to be all right, right, Mom?”

Gail began to cry. “Yes, Lou.”

Lou got up and wrapped her arms around her mother's waist. She could not remember the last time she did that.

"He said he didn't even feel it," Gail said. "He said it happened so fast that he didn't feel its teeth sink into him or anything like that. God knows how. Must be shock." Lou remembered the look on the little boy's face when Gallant had escaped from his pen and struck him down: dazed. Lou's stomach hurt when she thought of this something similar happening to her father. She didn't want to cry in front of her mom, didn't want to—but, before she could help herself, she cried, too, and Gail, perhaps surprised, held her tightly.

Lou didn't go to school Tuesday. Her father's surgery was Tuesday—just to reset the bone, Gail said. She crafted Lou and herself breakfast, cooking a crude imitation of Ian's bacon and eggs. Gail had to be coaxed out of her mental fog and even when Lou pointed out that Gail had made bacon and eggs for *both* of them, not just Gail, Gail did not seem to register. If it really was just a bite, Lou thought, what was this mood all about? Lou was not uncaring and she despaired to see her mother in the throes of such anxiety, but Lou did not know how to cope with it. She did not know what she needed to do and when she felt useless, Lou grew angry. (Another trait, she supposed, of her father's.)

Alexis showed up mid-afternoon, Harpreet in tow. They had her coat and wanted to return it.

“My mom said it might snow tomorrow,” Alexis said, by way of explanation, holding out her coat. “We thought that kind of weather called for a jacket.” Lou took them up on their offer of a walk.

At first, the girls danced around the topic; they walked and talked about Dylan and what he had meant by his little brother being back in the hospital. Lou, who admittedly loved a good enigma, threw herself into the conversation with a gusto that surprised even her. Eventually, though, the topic could not be avoided. They hankered down on a bench in City Park. Alexis’s mother was right, Lou thought: the wind was turning frigid, less October and more November. Her breath floated in front of her face in icy translucent clouds.

“My uncle told me what happened,” Harpreet said.

“Was he there?” Lou asked.

“Saw pretty much the whole thing,” she said.

Lou replayed the story in her mind that night. Harpreet had told it convincingly enough, although she didn’t have all the facts.

Ian worked the kill floor. Dhillon worked alongside him. All the workers called it this: the kill floor. It was not a colloquialism but a proper name. Ian and Dhillon, typically worked the chute lines together, making sure the pigs got in smoothly, without any disturbances. It was literally, as Dhillon said, shit work, as the pigs would almost always shit themselves in fear. The holding pens would reek to high heaven. Harpreet didn’t know why (or Dhillon hadn’t told her) but one of the pigs in the lineup had charged at Ian.

Dhillon said he had worked there for almost three years and never seen anything move with such *motivation*. It's like it wanted revenge. That's the way Dhillon recounted the story and that's the way Harpreet told it to Lou. Lou, Alexis, and Harpreet were quiet by the end. Alexis looked to Lou. Lou could not look back. When Lou heard this, she excused herself, walked twenty feet and puked beneath a half-golden half-dead maple. Her vomit, mostly bile, made an autumnal abstraction in the leaves.

IV.

Halloween had been a Very Big Deal to Lou back home. She and Julia had, for the past five years, dressed in matching costumes. During third grade, they'd saved their babysitting money and splurged on a matching chips and salsa costume from an overpriced costume store in the mall. From there, the costumes had only improved, becoming more intricate and detailed. This year, Lou watched miserably online as Julia designed a costume from one of their favorite television shows without her. Not for the first time, Lou felt as though Jackson had sucked her into a black hole: why wasn't Julia responding to any of her Facebook messages? Lou felt hurt, yes, but she also a surge of anger. At who, or what, she couldn't say.

After word of Ian's bite had reached them, Gail ordered in, finally remembering that Lou needed to eat around nine. Gail couldn't stomach food but told the person taking their order at Pizza Hut hold the cheese, hold the pepperoni. *So you want bread and sauce?* Lou heard the teenager on the other line say. When the pizza arrived with the teenage delivery girl, snapping and popping her gum, Lou and Gail opened the box

to realize they had held neither the cheese nor the pepperoni. Gail cried. "I'm just on edge, Lou," she said. "It's not you or the fucking pizza." Lou called back, explaining what had happened, and the assistant manager apologized profusely, said they'd send out a new pizza, free of charge, and keep the old one too, okay? The pizza never came. Lou ate dry cereal out of the box, chopped up an unripe adolfo mango. Finally, Gail told Lou to put her shoes on. They would wait at the hospital. When they arrived, Ian slept. They stood at the door. Lou stared warily at Ian's bandaged and casted arm. Not missing, just damaged. "Should we wake him?" Gail said.

"No," Lou said fiercely, although she did not know why she reacted with such fervor. "He needs to rest, isn't that what the doctor said?"

Gail watched Ian another moment more. Even Lou could see the serenity on his face in his drug-induced sleep. The bite behind him and the surgery in front but for now, he slept.

The next morning, Gail offered to take Lou costume shopping. Lou, unused to this, said she'd go alone. But after Gail, defeated-looking, slumped on the couch and grabbed a book Lou knew she'd read just months ago, Lou acquiesced. First, they bought much-needed groceries. There was only one costume shop in Jackson's mall and when they looked, all that was left in Lou's size was a Wonder Woman outfit and a hippie. Gail insisted Lou would make a perfect Wonder Woman but Lou shook her head.

Gail sighed. "Let's just get some lunch," she said, "and get out of here. Maybe Wal-Mart will have something. Or the second-hand shop."

On their way towards the food court, they were stopped by a woman who Lou recognized without having met her before. The woman, who later introduced herself as

Yamini, strongly resembled Harpreet. Back home, boys in Lou's grade had begun to find Gail attractive, joking that they wanted to come over for math lessons with Mrs. Lowe. (Eventually, Lou had kicked one boy in the shin with such ferocity that she'd been sent to the office.) If they thought Gail was attractive, they would have lost their mind at Harpreet's mother. She, too, wore glasses with wide rims (perhaps, Lou thought, Harpreet's frames were an older abandoned model of her mother's) and had a round, pretty face. She was more fashionable than Harpreet, Lou noticed, wearing a long forest-colored wool coat and dark heeled boots. She smiled at Lou's mother. Although she had never met her before, Lou could see that instantly that this smile was fake, nothing more than an exhausting display at collegial politeness. Harpreet's mother was not who Lou had come to expect as a meat-packing worker; rather, Lou anticipated someone with broad shoulders and big hands. Sturdy. Someone like her father. This woman's frame would be better suited to a catwalk than an abattoir: tall, willowy, narrow. Her makeup did little to cover the dark bags beneath her puffy eyes. More plainly, she looked exhausted.

"Mrs. Lowe, correct? Good morning," Harpreet's mother said, extending a hand. She smelled vaguely, Lou thought, like lavender hand sanitizer. She smelled like someone had tried to clean up a smell and not done a thorough job, but instead sprayed Febreze to mask the offending odour. Not an altogether pleasant smell; it stung Lou's nose. The woman introduced herself as Yamini Dhillon. "Halloween shopping? Me too." She held up a Dollar Tree plastic bag. Halloween decorations spilled out of it. An orange banner that read something Lou couldn't quite make out; a witch that likely lit up or cackled or both; a stack of plastic bowls, cut to resemble half pumpkins.

“Trying,” Gail said. “There isn’t much here.”

“Harpreet is having a tough time finding one as well,” Yamini said. When she looked at Lou, she felt small and unimportant. “I’ve heard about your husband. I’m so sorry. How are you holding up?”

Lou watched Gail’s shoulders sink. Her mother had not showered but instead pulled her greasy hair, away from her face. Smudged and caking mascara sat beneath her eyes. She deflected the question. “Thank you. I still can’t believe it happened.”

“It never should have happened, that’s why. Those animals are bred a certain way for a reason—to stamp out the more primitive instincts. Still. Some people are not cut out to be around them. Even if they’re dumb, they’re large and fast.”

Gail shook her head. “Ian’s wonderful around animals, that’s the thing. Comes from a long line of farmers. From what I’ve heard, the accident was just that: an accident.”

“He’s new,” Yamini said, pushing up her glasses with the palm of her hand (something else, Lou thought, that Harpreet inherited). She grimaced, as though taking out a particularly foul-smelling bag of trash from beneath the sink. “I’ve been pushing for better training since, oh, twenty twelve. Anyways. Ida’s shoes were always going to be difficult to fill. I’m not surprised the transition has been a little bumpy.”

Lou watched Yamini’s face closely. She gave little away: her face was set in a neutral expression, eyes large and unblinking, lips slightly upturned to appear kind. Lou did not buy this.

“His surgery went better than expected,” Gail said, as way of an answer. “I’m sure he’ll be back in no time.” She excused herself and Lou, saying they needed a bite

to eat. “Bit passive aggressive, isn’t she?” Gail said to Lou once they were out of earshot. They stood in front of one of three food kiosks. Gail asked Lou if she wanted anything to eat. When Lou said she’d take an order of fries, Gail grimaced and asked when the last time she’d had a vegetable. Not waiting for an answer, Gail ordered a loaded hotdog.

“Not exactly food for a cold October day,” Gail said as they sat down. “But I’m starving.”

Lou heavily salted her fries and dipped them in a swirly goop of ketchup and mustard; she and Julia contended this the best and only way to eat them. Lou had been about to ask Gail why Harpreet’s mother seemed annoyed with Ian and, by extension, Gail. Before she could finish chewing she realized: Harpreet said they had moved to Jackson, oh, five years ago? six? That’s how long she and Alexis had been friends, so it could not have been much longer than that. Lou’s aunt had worked in the abattoir for close to five years herself, Lou knew, before she’d gotten sick and passed away. Her cancer had been swift and unrelenting—four months from diagnosis to untimely death. Lou remembered her as a woman built like a bull, even close to death. They moved at the end of August and Ian had started work at the abattoir immediately; even then, he had no previous experience. Sure, he was a dedicated worker and often pushed himself too hard. As Gail pointed out, working with animals was practically in his blood. But. Lou chewed. She saw the connection between Yamini’s misplaced anger and Ian’s new job. For whatever reason, Yamini wanted that position and had, for perhaps five years, been overlooked for it.

"I don't usually like hotdogs," Gail confessed. She grabbed a chunk of fallen hotdog and stuck it back in her mouth. "But these are *incredible*. And affordable. Two-fifty for this, can you believe it?"

"I'm glad," Lou said.

"Oh, Lou," Gail said. "Do you have to say everything like that?"

"Like what?"

"Flat. Lifeless. Like a robot."

"Sorry."

"There is again." Gail chewed. "Honestly, I don't know what it is, but there are just *layers* of taste to this."

Lou swirled her straw around in her drink. "Did you notice everyone here is obsessed with meat? Pork?"

Gail nodded. "I think it's because most of their livelihoods depend on it. And—"

"It's delicious, I know." Lou tried to change her tone: "I just mean, they seem to like the pork more than that. More than it just being their jobs."

Gail paused and looked back at the kiosk where she'd bought her hotdog.

"See?" Lou said, pointing. "They only sell hotdogs."

"Well, that's not a particularly apt example. It's a *hotdog* stand, Lou."

"I'm just *saying*. You should see what they serve at school, mom."

"I've heard they serve you quite the fancy meals. Nothing like what I had growing up. Is there nothing you can eat there?"

"You're not listening to what I'm saying," Lou said. "Basically all they sell is pork. It's disgusting."

“Do kids *like* the food they’re selling?”

“Sure, I guess—”

“Then what’s the big deal?”

Lou pushed the last of her fries into her mouth. “Nothing, I guess.”

But Gail paused, chewing her hotdog. She looked around the miniature food market and nodded once to herself. She looked at Lou, who, for the first time that day, felt seen. “I suppose I know what you mean,” Gail said softly. She placed the last bite of her hotdog down on the tray in front of her. “It is a lot of pork.”

The words hung in the air, heavy, charged, for a moment and Lou thought Gail might say something more. She did not. Lou had the feeling, not for the first time, that she was born to the wrong mother. Gail and Lou did not understand each other the way Lou and Ian used to; even with the help of her therapist, who walked her through scripts, Lou felt uncertain about what to say to Gail. She sensed that Gail had a similar unease. Lou knew Gail loved her, but she also knew that Gail did not particularly like her. Lou did not know what kind of daughter Gail would have liked and she had a difficult time imagining Gail forming more than a distant authoritative bond with any child. All she knew was that it was not, as far as she could tell, *her*. Lou was not unfair; she knew Gail was, by most standards, a good and loving mother. Lou did not feel altogether lacking in her maternal relationship with Gail, but as people, not as family, sitting together in a mall in Jackson, Lou thought herself alone.

Of course, Lou could not see herself the way others in the mall could; she did not recognize the similarities in the way she and Gail held themselves in the world. She was not privy to the conversation between Ian and Gail when Lou had begged for her puppy

Caroline. She had not heard the way Gail convinced Ian to get the dog (nor did she know how strongly Gail rued spending that four hundred fifty dollars on Caroline—oh, the price they paid for Caroline). Still, Lou was not wrong in her basic observation that their bond was tenuous.

But Lou was a good sport. At least, she tried to be. “Thanks for the fries, mom.” She licked her fingers to prove her point.

Gail laughed. “Oh, gross, Lou. Like father, like daughter.”

They first checked Value Village, one of Gail’s favorite stops, but what meagre selection there might have been had been picked through by last-minute shoppers. In Wal-Mart, Lou passed by a damsel with a long blond wig, akin to Lou’s own hair, paused at a decrepit witch with a hooked and warty nose, and hesitated before a knight costume. She held it up in front of her. A generic looking knight indeed, but it would do. The package sold a shiny bronze helmet, black tunic, matching black boots, leggings, and a flimsy pointy shield. On the back, Lou read: KNIGHT’S SWORD ACCESSORY SOLD SEPARATELY.

“What about this?” Lou said.

Gail turned around. She held an Elsa costume. “A knight, Lou? Look at this. You already look like her.”

Lou wrinkled her nose. “Mom, I’m not five.” She held the knight costume out to her mom. “I think it’s cool. I just have to find a sword. Or we could make one.”

Gail grabbed the costume and flipped it over. She shook her head. She told Lou it was too expensive. She sighed. “All of these are too expensive.”

“Mom,” Lou whined. “It’s only forty-five dollars.”

“Forty-six,” Gail said. “You can’t round down from forty-five ninety-nine.”

“Forty-six, okay,” Lou said. “What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is these are complete junk,” Gail said.

“It was *your* idea to go shopping,” Lou said. “If you didn’t want to spend forty bucks, why did we even come?” Lou snatched the costume out of Gail’s hands and hung it back up. She did this with such gusto that the plastic rack shook. Tears stung her eyes. If she was back home, she and Julia would have made something together like they always did, and Julia wouldn’t be doing *Game of Thrones* with stupid Katherine Owens. What did Katherine Owens know about Halloween?

“I thought they would have reasonable prices—a sale, *something*—being this close to Halloween,” Gail said.

“Should I grab a sheet, then, and be a ghost? Or would you prefer we ransack the dumpster behind the mall? Maybe someone left a costume there, since, you know, it’s cheap junk.”

Gail’s jaw set. “Lou, do not speak to me that way.”

Lou recognized the tone. Her cheeks heated up. “Whatever,” she mumbled and turned away so her mother wouldn’t see the tears in her eyes.

Back home, Lou gave Gail the silent treatment. She plucked her Fender but mostly sat on the edge of her bed, hugging Beastie to her chest. Lou could hear Gail pacing the house. Lou thought: *if she comes in here and tries to act friendly, I will snap. I will tell her exactly what I think about Jackson and her and dad for that matter.* When Gail inevitably knocked at Lou’s door, Lou sat up straight and stiffened her shoulders. Lou had read on a canine blog when they’d first brought Caroline home that this was

one of the ways dogs showed dominance: stiff, tense bodies. Gail had her hair coiled in a knot at her neck, the way she had when they'd schlepped their boxes inside on moving day. She carried two cardboard boxes in front of her, one stacked precariously on the other.

"What," Lou said. It was not a question.

"I know you're mad me," Gail said. "You'll understand when you're older, okay? Fifty bucks—"

"Forty—"

"Forty-six dollars is a lot on something you wear for two hours, okay?. Moving isn't cheap, even a couple hours move and a cheap house." Gail hesitated at the door. She walked in. "I know Halloween this year isn't the same." She placed the box down at her feet. She sat on the bed next to Lou, who scooted away. "I know *nothing* is the same right now."

Lou looked away.

"I knew your aunt had something in the attic," Gail said. She wiped her brow with a freckled forearm. "When we were putting things away, I kicked this into the corner. I thought it was costumes—*theatre* costumes. But there are no theatres around here, are there?"

Lou glanced. "So what is it?"

"A few old costumes your aunt and father wore, I think," Gail said. "Your grandma must have sewn them. What do you think, Lou? Will you take a peek with me?"

Lou held Beastie for a moment longer. She placed him down beside her on the bed. She looked at her mother and shrugged. Lou could be impossibly taciturn. She considered it a strength. In one box, Lou spotted the kerchiefs Ida wore around her head in the last days of her life. Lou remembered her as cold in the desert heat, wide but bony shoulders protruding from her white muscle tank. She spat a lot. She cracked open pistachios. Sucked them. Swallowed them. (Lou could not eat pistachios after this; they reminded her of a too-hot summer and a too-thin aunt.) Lou looked away from the colorful prints.

Gail removed swathes of fabric from the next box. Polka dots, frills—things Lou was not particularly fond of. The two of them placed these in a pile on Lou's bed.

"Ooh," Gail breathed. "Here we go." She held up a silvery grey jumpsuit. "What do you think?" She handed it to Lou.

Lou held up the wolf costume. It was impeccably detailed. Lou ran her hand down the smooth fur. "What's it made of, do you think?"

"I'm not sure," Gail said, fingering the bottom of the wolf's foot. "Polyester, most likely."

A strip of red poked out from the box; Lou tugged on it. She held it in front of her by its shoulders. A thick, crimson cloak.

"Little red riding hood," Gail said. "Put it on."

Lou rarely felt beautiful. Vanity was not a trait she consciously cultivated, not because she thought vanity inane or weak-minded, but because she didn't think she had any business with it. She simply wasn't someone, like Julia, who had been a cute kid and a pretty teenager. Besides, Lou figured, this left her with more free time for other

activities: bike riding, learning guitar, playing basketball after school. However, when Lou placed the red cloak around her shoulders and pulled it up over her head, she felt beautiful. The red rendered her blue eyes cerulean. Her lean face filled out beneath the frame of the hood. Lou smiled.

“It’s perfect,” Gail said. She pushed the hood back and kissed Lou’s forehead.

Lou went on Facebook to let Harpreet and Alexis know. Yes, her stomach sank when she saw the photos Julia had uploaded on her timeline. She pressed *hide content like this* and washed her hands of it. *Out of sight, out of mind*, she told herself. In her group chat with Alexis and Harpreet, Lou wrote that she had found a costume and that, if Alexis still needed one, she was welcome to Lou’s newfound costume loot. Alexis agreed. What had been a light rain that afternoon picked up. Soon, the howling wind shook their windows. Gail tugged on her cardigan. She cracked open the kitchen window. Both she and Lou loved the smell of a rainstorm. She lit a soy-wax candle that bore the woodsy scent of pine, the only kind she would buy (every time she used their barbeque lighter, she told Lou soy candles lasted longer), and pulled Lou onto the couch with her. Gail took Lou’s hand in her own. “Are you okay, Lou?” Gail said. “Really okay?” Thunder flashed outside. Lou studied her mother’s fingers squeezing her own, where she’d nicked herself between her index finger and thumb, the cuticle on her ring finger, how she’d bitten most of her nails down.

In October 2017, Halloween fell on a Sunday. Gail said she and Lou had to see Ian the next day. It would break his heart, Gail said, to think his daughter did not want to see him. Lou took her phone into the bathroom while she showered. She blared Brittany

Howard until her mother told her to please play it a little quieter—what if she *drowned* in there? Lou thought: how the hell am I going to drown in here? but reached over and did as her mother asked. She tossed her hair upside down and used Gail's blow-dryer until her hair was mostly dry. Delicately, Lou braided her hair into two damp pigtailed that trailed down to the middle of her rib cage. Around each elastic band, she tied silky red ribbon that she'd snagged from a box in her closet. After pulling on the blue gingham dress, complete with puffy sleeves, she wrapped the shawl around her shoulders and over her hair.

Alexis arrived shortly after dinner. "You look fierce," she said, looking Lou up and down approvingly. She smiled shyly afterwards, as though she'd said too much. "I hope I look as great as you do."

Lou assured her she would. She took Alexis to her room, showed her the wolf costume. "Look how detailed it is," Lou said, holding the soft paw up to Alexis's face. "There are five holes for your fingers, so you can hold your bag."

Alexis secured her curls in an elastic. She stepped into the jumpsuit. Lou zipped her up. "We make a good pair," Alexis said, pulling the wolf muzzle down over her face. Only her mouth remained. Without Alexis's kind eyes showing, the effect was as spooky as Lou hoped it might be. "What a terribly big mouth I have." She turned to Lou. "All the better to eat you with." They laughed.

Although chilly, the weather network promised no rain. The girls forfeited coats for the sake of their costumes. Downtown, Alexis and Lou met Harpreet. The town of Jackson had gone all out, Lou thought approvingly: pumpkin-colored lights strung on awnings, costumed store owners with fanged teeth and green skin stood at corners with

bags of treats, atmospheric music played from a loudspeaker near city hall. Kids and teenagers ran screaming through the streets. A disproportionate amount of pig costumes, Lou saw, ranging from Wal-Mart quality to beautifully hand-created furry jumpers, similar in eminence to Alexis's wolf. Harpreet's costume, less intricate than Alexis and Lou's, held promise. She donned green leggings, a brown tunic and a matching brown hat. Dangling from her hands was a flimsy bow and arrow, a clearly reinvented coat hanger.

"I didn't know we were matching," Harpreet said. They were still half a block away, but Harpreet's clear high voice rang out amidst the hubbub of Jackson festivities. "What the hell? Where was the memo? Or a text? My mom came home from Value Village with this mess. Can you believe it? Didn't even sell a plastic bow and arrow with it. This is made from a coat hanger—a coat hanger!"

"You look awesome," Lou said.

"I didn't know we'd be matching," Alexis admitted. "I just liked this one when I showed up. Lou had a whole trunk. You should have seen the costumes."

"I like yours, though," Lou said, gesturing at Harpreet. "It's badass."

Lou could not shake the feeling that Jackson resisted her. Not the townsfolk but the town itself. This sense of unease went deeper than insecurity. Lou missed home and she missed Julia, surely, but the sight of Jackson lit up in a Halloween spectacle, gorgeously and carefully and lovingly decorated, left Lou not feeling intimately connected to the town but hollow. Nervous. Vulnerable. Lou could only compare the sensation to being alone at home when her parents were at work and hearing a sound in the kitchen she was *almost* positive was just the house groaning and creaking. She

felt a certain precarity walking down its streets, like she might fall into a sinkhole. Lou knew this was illogical and that, despite movie magic, this occurred with no regularity. (Although, another voice in her head reminded her, what about those limestone sinkholes down in Florida? What exactly was limestone, anyways? Lou pushed this noisy thought from her mind.) Still, Lou found herself better adjusted draped in her costume as though whatever resistance she felt could not break through this blood red barrier.

Various shops, including the butcher shop, on the main stretch gave out candy if you waited in line. Alexis, Harpreet, and Lou stood for fifteen minutes, only to receive pork pops. Lou held hers up to a streetlamp. They were exactly what they sounded like: sugary lollypops, not with jelly in the middle, but pork.

"Gross," Lou said. She held it up in the moonlight. "This is horrific. Who gives this to children? I want sour cherry blasters and rockets. Not pork pops. Who eats these things?"

Alexis glanced at the group next to theirs. "Don't say that too loudly, Lou."

"Say what?"

"That it's, you know, gross and stuff. Some of these people they—"

"It's how they make money, you know," Harpreet said. "They get kind of offended if you mock it. A lot of demanding work goes into pork production. It's not for the faint of heart." Lou could tell from the way Harpreet spoke, as though recalling from memory, that she was citing her mother.

"But it's not like *this* package came from the pigs in the farms around here."

“Some of it does,” Alexis said. She shrugged. “I mean, I don’t care. But some of these people do. It means a lot to them. They feed their families with those pigs.”

Lou wrapped her cloak tighter around her shoulders. The moonlight hit her cheek. She looked milky smooth and pale. “Just because they make their living doing it doesn’t mean it’s not gross. Besides, you can eat these pork pops any day of the year—I want pumpkin flavored licorice.”

“Okay,” Alexis said evenly. “I’m just saying, don’t say it so loudly.”

After blocks and blocks of trick or treating, the cool, fresh, late October air on Lou’s cheeks, the dull ache in her calves from walking up and down hills, the excitement of seeing a whole town dressed in festive gear, the screams as people scared one another, the weight of their bags gorging with candy and treats and chips and pop, they stood in the middle of a busy cul-de-sac, deciding which route to take next. “I think we’re too old for this,” Harpreet said. She pulled at her brown shorts. “I have camel toe. And my feet are sore. And they *stink*.”

“How do you know that they stink? They’re in your boots.”

“Believe me,” Harpreet said. “They stink. You do not want to be around when I take these off. Mom says I could kill all the pigs in Jackson with one whiff of these babies.”

Lou laughed. “I’m going to buy you foot deodorant for Christmas.”

“Does that exist?” Alexis asked. “Because I’ll get it to you for Hanukkah, Harpreet. It comes first.”

“But we’re not Jewish,” Harpreet said. “Isn’t that sacrilegious?”

“But my dad’s side of the family is,” Alexis said. “Does that count for something?”

“Look,” breathed Lou, pointing in front of them. “Whose house is *that*?”

The house stood alive in the darkness. The yard was framed by cemetery décor, frothy cobwebs, a coffin that shot out a skeleton if you walked near enough to it. They watched a little girl walk in front of it, screech at the sight of the skeleton, and break into tears. “*Mommy!*” she wailed, hurling herself into her mother’s parka. Lou had memories of driving with her parents down wealthy streets in Kettering, oohing and aweing over the sprawling homes that they would never afford.

“Montgomery. Dad’s boss at Jackson’s Own. That’s his *second* house,” Alexis said. “Or first. Whichever way you want to count it. He definitely doesn’t live here most of the year, though.”

“I wouldn’t think so,” Harpreet said dryly, “with a perpetual tan like that.”

The home was old but gorgeously upkept, with an enviable vaulted ceiling, stone detailing, and an abundance of curves and arches. Although the yard was lit up, all but one of the front windows was dark. Out back, Lou made out a black wrought-iron gate, leading to half an acre of backyard. Past that, a tree here and there and, finally, the forest. Lou reminded herself to bring her parents to this neighborhood. She wanted to see their reactions at this home they could never afford. Her father’s jaw would drop.

“Back to the main point: we’re not too old for this,” Lou said. “Fifteen is the cut off, everyone knows that.”

“I think once you have your period, you’re cut off,” Harpreet said.

“I’m safe then,” Lou said.

“Me, too,” Alexis said.

“God damnit,” Harpreet said. “Okay, that can’t be the rule, or I’ll be the only one not trick or treating.”

The girls carried on for three more neighborhoods until their bags stretched full. Groups began to thin out. Less lights remained lit for straggling trick or treaters. Alexis paused at the treeline. Lou thought, briefly, of the wolf carcass they had seen together. Alexis’s shoulders tensed, too close to her ears. A group of four kids, younger than them, waltzed into the forest together, laughing.

“It’s quicker this way,” Alexis said. Harpreet turned to Lou and said *after you*.

Moonlight slanted through the thick evergreen branches, intermittently illuminating their faces. Lou’s boots crunched over brittle dark dead leaves, olive green and burgundy. A small animal, a squirrel maybe, darted out from the underbrush, jittery brown body against the muddy ground. Between the trees, shoulder to shoulder, the girls looked up at the giant trees. Enormous trunks beside them, crunchy redcedar below their feet. Behind them, they left their footprints and candy wrappers, the ground loose and muddy. Squish-squish-squish. Another squirrel, this time up a tree trunk. It paused. In the darkness, Lou could see the glint of its eyes. A cold wind had picked up, stinging Lou’s cheeks and teeth. Around them, rhododendron drooped and curled ghostly.

They came to a creekbank. The water lay low and trickled, unrushed, by their feet. The moon had risen to its full height, casting a yellow glow atop the water. Alexis’s wolf muzzle transformed from grey to silver, grey to silver, depending which way she looked. Harpreet skipped a rock across the water. It jumped once, twice, sunk. She

announced the creek was shallow: they could walk across, no problem. On the other side, Harpreet paused.

"Go on," Alexis said. "I'm getting spooked out here." They could no longer hear the other kids before them. Their laughter had stopped echoing among the trees.

Adrenaline coursed through Lou. She glanced at the trees beside them. She had seen something and Harpreet must have as well from the way she hesitated. This was no squirrel. Something bigger. Lou thought of the wolf's intestines trailing out of its gutted stomach and the awful rigid way its head had rolled onto its shoulder bone. Another rustle in the trees and a light grunting. A wolf?

Alexis turned to Lou. Her eyes shone through the holes in the wolf mask. Lou could see she was terrified. She gripped Lou's arm. "What is it?"

Lou's heart quickened.

"There's something there," Harpreet whispered.

"It's nothing," Lou said sharply. She did not believe this was true (she had heard muffled steps as well) but needed silence to hear better. "Be quiet."

Lou, Alexis, and Harpreet stood frozen in the bushy British Columbian trees. The creek tinkled by their feet. Alexis pulled her wolf paw mitts over her hands but did not say a word. A rustle came again. Lou peered through the trees, palms sweaty, mouth dry. She had seen the squirrel's eyes minutes before; the eyes she saw now were higher, chest-level, bigger. This was not a squirrel.

The pig looked straight at Lou. She was transfixed. No, *awestruck* was the better word. She was beautiful. With a lurch in her belly, Lou recognized her almost instantly. How could she forget? This was Olivia, the mother sow in the pen from the day of their

school tour. She had stood, fluffy pink fur matted and dirty, eyes showing their whites, stuffed inside that tiny pen. Her enormous shoulders had ached for room, her muzzle pushed up against the metal slats. Yes, Lou would have recognized her anywhere.

Lou wished desperately that Alexis and Harpreet were somewhere, anywhere, else. Lou removed the hood of her cloak and stepped closer to the surrounding trees. Harpreet hissed at Lou to stay closer to them, did she want to be eaten? But Lou knew, a perspicuous surety, that she did not need to fear Olivia. She could not articulate why this was true but she knew somewhere deep inside her that this animal did not want to harm her. Closer, Lou could see the pig was not alone: there were others behind her, piebald, black, white. The one in front of her was big, bigger than Lou could have appreciated trapped in her pen. If this was the same pig, though, how had she gotten out? Lou reached out a hand, fingers loose, knuckles forward. A trick Lou had learned when Caroline first arrived home. It was a nonthreatening gesture. Olivia did not move. Lou stood, frozen, hand outreached, shawl pooled around her neck. Her ribbons had loosened, mingling in her blond hair, crimson red in the night's glow. Olivia's face tilted sideways, the fur around her snout dirty and matted. The sides of her belly heaved in and out as she breathed.

The two locked eyes. Even in the full dark of nighttime, Lou noticed the blue of the pig's eyes, almost grey, like the sea off Vancouver Island in the springtime. The pig breathed steadily. She raised her front leg gently, gracefully, and lowered it. She inched forward. Lou could feel her warm breath on her hand now. Lou straightened her fingers and held her hand, palm up, towards the pig. The pig pressed her snout, gently, so gently, into Lou's palm.

Lou smiled. "Hi," she said softly. Lou felt as though the town of Jackson had evaporated. What was left was only herself, standing amidst the trees, and these pigs. If Lou had been more self aware in the moment, she would have been surprised to realize she had no anxiety. In fact, her nervous system was quiet. Steady. Calm. She thought this pig, Olivia, had to be the leader for she was not only the largest but she stood several feet in front of the others. Bold. In the relative open.

The pig pushed her snout into Lou's palm again and then pulled away. She turned back to the others behind her, four pigs who were obscured so that Lou could not make sense of their size and shape. Olivia grunted once. Twice. She turned back to Lou. She raised her great head, eyes still locked with Lou's and bowed her snout without breaking eye contact before raising it level once more. Lou followed suit, nodding deeply. Beneath the moonlight, each breathing frosty even breaths, they held one another's gaze. Olivia backed up and turned, walking away with the others, haunches swaying, breaking branches, crunching over trees. Surprisingly graceful, Lou thought, watching the enormous animals tread a careful path through the woods. Their hooves left sticky imprints in the mud.

"What the fuck Lou?" Harpreet hollered. Her high voice echoed in the trees, loud and clear and reverberating. "You could have died!"

Lou jumped. She had not realized how transfixed she'd been until Harpreet's voice shook her out of her trance. She looked at the back of her right hand. She turned it over. No, it had not been an illusion or a day dream: her palm was damp with saliva. Lou gently pulled off a pink-white hair and dropped it to the ground.

"He could have eaten you!" Harpreet said. She stood beside Lou now, tugging at her arm. "He could have trampled you or—"

"She."

"What?"

"That pig's a girl, not a boy."

"How the hell do you know, Lou?" Harpreet said. "And who the hell cares?"

"She was nice," Lou said. She readjusted her red hood, pulling it back around her hair. She gripped her candy bag tighter around her shoulder. "I'm fine."

Alexis pulled the wolf mask up from her face. She rested it in the mess of her curls. "You're sure you're not hurt? I'm sorry. I couldn't move. I kept picturing the wolf, Lou. The way its eyes looked. Its guts. The blood. I couldn't move," she repeated.

Lou grabbed Alexis's hand. "I'm *fine*, I promise." She put her other hand on Harpreet's shoulder. "I think you just about burst my eardrums with all your shouting."

"Well, I needed to do *something*. I was hoping to scare those little buggers away! *Big* buggers. God, those pigs are ginormous, Lou! We need to call them in." Harpreet laughed. "Like they're criminals. How did they get out? I'm telling my mom. She's going to lose her mind."

Alexis, Lou, and Harpreet hurried the rest of the way through the woods. It was a short trek. Another five minutes and the trees thinned. Two more minutes and they were once again beneath the starlit night's sky. Alexis said she was done for the evening. She had enough candy, plus she couldn't shake the chill in her bones. Harpreet said it wasn't *that* cold and she could do for another few neighborhoods. Lou said she thought she was done for the night, too. She offered to walk Harpreet home. Before they went

east for Harpreet's house, Lou looked back over her shoulder at the trees. Other than the wind rocking the leaves and the rhododendron to and fro, nothing stirred.

PART III: November 2017

The Jackson Gazette

(Online posting)

Jackson, British Columbia

1 NOVEMBER 2017 * 8:58AM

Jackson's Own pigs were sighted on a midnight stroll last night, October 31st, according to several eyewitnesses.

Jackson RCMP detachment has confirmed that there were several reports of large, seemingly docile pigs between midnight and one-thirty am last this morning. “I received three calls: one at 12:07, one at 12:49 and one at 1:20. All three reported a similar account,” says local 9/11 dispatcher. “They saw pigs walking quickly north of 10th Avenue. They were not acting aggressively but two of the callers feared they might attack children or teenagers out for Halloween.”

The pigs, all described as larger than average, were spotted trotting quickly through the woods. One caller reported seeing four pigs, while two other callers saw five. All confirmed they moved like a pack.

“I wasn’t scared,” says Annie Shriver, fifteen-year-old Jackson resident. “They looked friendly. I just thought, you know, they’re really big and they could trample someone smaller than me.”

However, when Jackson’s Own was reached this morning, supervisor Gabriel Scott confirmed that all numbers remained the same. “We do a head count every morning of the adults,” says Scott. “We could possibly miscount one or two pigs, although unlikely. I am confident we could not miscount five grown pigs.”

Despite this assurance, Scott says that the public does not know how to properly handle such big animals. “If you see a pig in an urban area, back away. Do not run. Walk

slowly, with your eyes focused on the animal,” says Scott. “I cannot stress this enough: Do not approach the pig.”

If there are any more pig sightings, call 9/11 immediately to report.

I.

The hospital ensorcelled Lou. Something fascinated her about the way it could make a person so small, so statistical. Through the window, she saw her father lay back against his clean cotton white pillow, dark blond hair tucked behind his ears. With the soft periwinkle blanket pulled to his chest and his arm bandaged, Ian looked the part of the

victim. *He is a victim*, Lou had to remind herself. She took a breath before they went inside the hospital room.

“Lulu!” he said. Ian grinned. He looked categorically unwell, the lines around his mouth deep and dehydrated. His smile showed his gums a dull pink. He smelled, not of the staleness of a hospital room, but a damp sticky cellar smell, the smell of food sitting out in the sun or moulding in a dank dark place. Lou took a seat beneath the window, folding her legs beneath her like she used to when she was a small child. She tucked her hair behind her ears and untucked it. When Ian thundered like that, he re-inflated to his old size and demeanor. “How are you?”

“Good,” Lou said, and before she could help it, she told her father about Halloween. She chatted eagerly about finding Aunt Ida’s hand sewn costumes.

“Not Ida’s,” Ian said. “Our father’s. He learned to sew in the war. Talented, wasn’t he?”

“I knew it,” Lou said, turning to Gail. “We *said* it couldn’t have been Aunt Ida.”

Ian smiled. “Go on. How much candy did you get?”

Lou started to retell the evening. She planned on telling Ian about the pig, too. But two things happened simultaneously. She realized that her interaction with Olivia might instill skepticism or censoriousness, or worse, a sense of danger. At the same time, Lou registered the look Gail gave her to stop talking about herself. “Dad,” Lou said instead. Inexplicably, tears leapt to her eyes. “How are you feeling? Are you okay?” She remembered Gail’s comment. Lou looked, horrified, at Ian’s wrapped arm. “Does your arm still work?”

Ian laughed. His face, lightly lined, still holding onto the summer's tan, was tired but he sounded healthy, strong. He held up his hand. Lou watched. He wiggled his fingers, albeit weakly, and only his pinky finger moved with any real gusto. The pig's enormous teeth had gnashed through his skin, through his soft tissue, down to the bone. The mix of pig saliva and blood and perhaps the airborne chemicals had resulted in an infection, in deep soft tissue injury, in a fractured bone. He would heal but it might take some time and the arm would likely need years to be back to its full pre-bite strength, if ever. Ian joked that, in old age, he'd be able to sense when storms were coming through semi-psycho arthritic pain in his once-damaged radius. "See that, Lou?" She nodded. "I'll be good as new in no time."

"Promise?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die."

Lou's father was good with his hands. This was evident in his calloused fingertips, coriaceous and prickly red, good for plucking heavy guitar strings and kneading bread. Ian insisted that one did not need soft, delicate hands for the creation of sourdough or ciabatta, that it took a man's labour for the best results. (Gail, Lou noted, had scoffed at this, but perhaps enjoyed the bread too much to repudiate Ian's claims.) The Lowes tended to watch television with their dinner in their laps; Lou would sit back against the couch, shoulders slumped, plate balancing precariously on her bony knees. After they'd eaten, Lou would shower and soak her hair in conditioner. Then, when her hair was still dripping wet, she'd sit again in front of Ian, leaned back against his legs. He liked braiding her hair. A regular braid at the nape of her neck produced waves but for bouncy blond curls, Ian parted her hair down the middle and pulled her

hair back into two Dutch braids. To do so, he'd had to watch several YouTube videos. At the time, Lou was not as moved by this as she was later: she knew Daddy liked to work with his hands and he knew she wanted her stick straight hair to be bouncy like Julia's. So he made it happen. That's what fathers did.

Gail lowered herself to the edge of Ian's hospital bed. She rubbed at the tears on her cheeks with the palm of her hands. The tears made faint indents in her foundation and blush. The three of them talked easily until the nurse came in and said Ian had to rest, that the infection wouldn't beat itself. Sleep is when the body heals itself, she said, it's when you reconstruct. On some level, Lou wanted to tell her father what had transpired Halloween night. The warm soft touch of the pig's nose against her palm, the glint of the pig's steely blue eyes beneath the moonlight. Before the incident, Lou and Ian told each other everything. Now he sat, eating Jell-O with his good hand, and she knew she would carry that moment with herself and herself alone. Yes. She would nurture this perfidy.

Lou was in the hospital for her third begrudging visit when Dylan approached her at the vending machine. Unequivocally, Lou had been relieved to see her father fully armed, two shoulders leading to two biceps to two forearms—of which one was, of course, thoroughly bandaged. Yet that familiar desperation to not be around her father had returned that same evening after leaving the hospital, swift and unassuming, as though it had never left. Now, Lou grabbed a bag of dried apple chips and a sparkling water. When she stood up from grabbing them from the bottom of the machine, Dylan stood behind her. She jumped.

“Holy,” Lou said. “Way to scare the crap out of me.”

Dylan grinned. He had an endearing smile and bright white teeth covered in colorful braces. He looked like his mother. They both had pensive features, heavy brows and downturned mouths. He wore an olive-green button up shirt. Most boys in ninth grade wore a hoodie, jeans, and Nikes. His shirt was not only ironed but tucked into his jeans. Lou had never seen a boy their age wear a shirt like that, except perhaps on television shows set in the 60s and 70s. “Sorry.” He pointed at her hands. “What you got there?”

Lou held up her bounty. “Nothing for me in the cafeteria,” she said.

“Right,” Dylan said. “I’ve heard about you.”

Lou stood up straighter. “Yeah?”

He laughed. “Nothing bad. Promise. I just heard you don’t meat.”

“Who told you?” Lou said. She tried to hold herself loose. Aloof. As though she could not be bothered to care about who told her but that it was her duty to find out anyways.

“I don’t think it was any one person,” Dylan said. “These things just float around. So it makes sense that the cafeteria would be off limits for you. I think they have about six full pigs in there.”

Lou wrinkled her nose. “I suppose they do.”

“I didn’t come over to talk about meat,” Dylan said. “How come you’re here? I saw you yesterday, too. Can I ask that? Is everything all right?”

“Everything’s all right with me,” Lou said. She paused. A private person by nature, Lou was not prone to sharing details with relative strangers. There was a

kindness in Dylan's eyes that she responded to. She recalled why he was there in the first place. His kid brother had been bitten by a pig, his leg broken. And now he was back in the hospital for what—complications? "It's my father. He works at the slaughterhouse."

"So does my dad. Which floor?"

"He works with the live ones. On the kill floor."

Dylan exhaled. "My dad did that for a while. Before he couldn't take it anymore. Now he sorts the body parts. He says it's easier that way."

Lou nodded. She opened her bag of chips and bit into one. "My dad got bit. I guess it's really rare but it happened. He'll be okay, though." She extended the bag of apple chips to Dylan, who took two and popped them in his mouth. "Why are you here? Is your brother okay? Did he get an infection or something?"

Dylan stayed silent while he chewed. "Robin isn't doing so well," he said. "I don't know if it's his leg or the medication. He feels funny all the time." He smiled that melancholic smile again. "Headaches. Stomach problems. Trouble sleeping. That kind of thing. Typical flu stuff, I guess—"

"If it's typical flu stuff," Lou said, "why can't he just stay home and eat chicken noodle soup? Oops. *Pork* noodle soup." Lou lowered her voice. "Don't you get sick of eating that stuff? It's everywhere here."

Dylan smiled thinly. He did not answer her directly. "I think he's sick because of the bite—not the broken leg. I've been toying with the idea of rabies. Did you ever read that book about the rabid dog that infects people when he bites them? Made him go all insane? Froth at the mouth?"

"*Cujo*," Lou said. "My mom loves that book."

"*Cujo*, right," Dylan said. "But what do I know about rabies? I guess pigs don't have rabies, do they? They put the pig down. I guess if it had rabies, they'd know by now."

"They put it down?" Lou repeated.

"That same night," Dylan said. "Jackson's Own called Mom's cellphone. They said it was her decision. She was pretty hysterical at that point. She said yes."

"I thought they get three strikes," Lou said. "Can't dogs bite three people before they're put down?" Lou remembered when Caroline was a puppy, barely eight months old. They'd been walking around the neighborhood and she'd clamped down on another dog. It had been light and not unfriendly; Lou figured she was more excited than anything. But the owner of the dog, a small bichon frise who had not been harmed (no blood had been drawn, the dog had barely yelped), had called animal control and the Lowes were issued a warning. Lou didn't walk Caroline for a month because she'd been terrified of Caroline accidentally biting another animal or person. She didn't want to risk it.

"Dogs are a lot smaller than those pigs," Dylan pointed out. "Anyways, they're running some extra tests on Robin to make sure nothing's in his system. Keep him here one more night or two and he should be back home."

"You make it sound like he's in prison," Lou joked.

"No," Dylan said seriously. "I think it's better if he stays here."

"You don't want him home?" Lou said.

"I do," Dylan said. "But I want the *old* Robin home. If they can fix him up here before he comes back..." He chewed.

"Then it's best for everyone," Lou said.

Dylan smiled again. "I hope your dad can come home soon," he said.

"Me, too," she lied.

Because Gail was exhausted after opening at the deli and visiting Ian at the hospital that evening, she did something she didn't normally support: she took Lou through the Arby's drive-thru. Lou got a baked potato, hold the bacon bits, hold the sour cream, hold the butter. Over the intercom, the woman waited a beat and said *so you just want a hot potato?* Gail and Lou shared a smile. Gail ordered the Jr. Ham n' Cheese with a chocolate milkshake. She slurped it on the drive home.

When they pulled up to the house, Gail looked to Lou in the near-darkness. "Dad's going to be all right, Lou," she said.

"Will he be the same?" Lou said.

"The same but better," Gail said. "Don't you worry."

But Lou didn't think Gail knew what she meant and she didn't press the issue. Instead, she curled up in bed with her Mom's old Dell and her baked potato. She sliced up an avocado and poured siracha all over it. She typed: can pigs have rabies? Google said: *Rabies is a viral disease that attacks the central nervous system of warm-blooded animals, including pigs.* Lou frowned. The few times they had visited him in his hospital room, Ian was more or less the same he'd always been. Besides, he was hopped up on

drugs, as Gail put it, and Lou knew that would make anyone a little loopy. When she'd broken her ankle in second grade the morphine had made her feel all sorts of funny.

Lou then typed: Jackson's Own pigs rabies. If there had been an outbreak, Lou reasoned, surely that would be mentioned somewhere on the internet. No Google results emerged that directly spoke to this inquiry but an article from 2002 came up. Lou scanned it. Something about a Swedish swine-genetics company acquiring a new partner. Lou, of course, recognized the name Morris Montgomery as the current owner. The article explained (*bragged*, in Lou's opinion) he came from a background of scientists who emigrated from England at the turn of the century. Montgomery held previous work as a mammologist and developmental biologist before starting work at Jackson's Own. Lou read the next paragraph carefully:

Jackson's Own new farm and meat packing facility will become home to approximately 5, 000 hogs at a time, both boars and sows. Periodically, the farm animals will be tested for fat, muscle, bone structure, as well as feed conversion and growth. Eventually, once the boars test at the predicted levels, top boars and sows will be sold. By 2020, Jackson's Own's goal is to ship top boars and sows for breeding, as well as boar semen, to more than sixty countries.

At the bottom of the article was a link to another article a year later, a few months after the opening of Jackson's Own. MEET YOUR MEAT: WHY JACKSON'S OWN IS SET TO BE YOUR NEW FAVORITE PORK. The article opened with more information about Montgomery, his familial legacy as a scientist, and his passion for working with animals.

“You see, previous doses of pGH have been deemed effective when increasing average daily gain by 10 to 20%. In the last few years, protein deposition has been increased by 50%. This was seen as remarkable,” says Montgomery. “I’ve developed a new strain, one that has a much higher efficacy rate. My pigs will be able to develop at a much higher rate than 20%—I’ve almost doubled that. As for protein deposits, my strain of pGH is nearing the 75% mark. Prep your barbeques, folks: this pork is going to be mind-blowing.”

Lou clicked another article which took her to an academic journal co-written by Montgomery, but this one she understood even less: something about trans-genetics in mammals and a harrowing history of failed tests in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She stumbled upon an article about a human-dog hybrid. The photo was horrifying: a dog-woman, mostly hairless, with a long doglike snout, nursed its hybrid babies. Snopes clarified this was, indeed, a hoax but the photoshop had almost convinced Lou. After that macabre discovery, Lou decided she needed to clear her mind. She watched two episodes of *Home Renovations* with Gail, who complained Arby’s had made her gassy, and eventually, the two of them fell into a restless sleep on the couch.

Lou and Gail arrived at the library so early on a Saturday morning they had to wait ten minutes for it to open at eight-thirty. At thirteen, Lou was beginning to understand the

appeal of sleep. The Restorils afforded her quick-acting but shallow sleeps. Some mornings, it felt impossible to open her eyes and get started on the day. The Jackson Public Library was an ill-kept red brick building with high, windowed ceilings. At just after opening time, a bleary-eyed teenager opened the front doors. She said sorry she was late. She had a pounding headache.

“Hungover,” Gail whispered to Lou as they walked in behind the clerk. Lou nodded sagely as though she understood. She felt a certain unfamiliar comradery with her mother when she told her things like this. Gail didn’t act like Lou was too young to understand what a hangover was, even though she had never experienced one herself. (Lou wanted to change that. She thought this was the year to try a beer or two.)

Gail’s mom dragged Lou through the new releases, the science fiction, and finally the horror aisle (this section was not altogether an aisle, more like six shelves). She picked up a Joe Hill book and studied the back. Lou moved straight for the comics. The library had all the first two *Paper Girls* but no others. She grabbed a comic called *Saga*.

“Would you pick something out for your father?” Gail said absently. “See if there’s a new Clive Cussler. Or—” Gail paused here, looking at Lou as though seeing her for the first time that day. “Or pick something out you think he’d like.”

Lou hunted through the Clive Cussler books for one with the longest page count. She figured her father would want a fat book to keep him preoccupied. She chose another Cussler book and a thin Louis L’Amour paperback because the cowboy on the cover bore an uncanny resemblance to Ian. Lou plunked down in the bean bag chair. “Why do you like that junk?” she asked, nodding at the book Gail held. She flipped absently through the comic. “Isn’t it kind of—trashy?”

Gail laughed easily. She did not seem offended. “Trashy? I thought Harlequin Romances were considered trashy. Or am I showing my age? Does your generation read those things?”

“No way,” Lou said. “If kids my age want to read erotica, they read fan fiction. Wait. Do they even have sex in Harlequin Romances?”

Lou appreciated that Gail did not blush. “Sort of. It’s implied. It’s not very hot, I admit. Or we’d read Anne Rice. That got pretty steamy. But still: None of the scandal of *Fifty Shades of Grey*.”

“Mom, no one reads that,” Lou said.

“So no Harlequin but no *Fifty Shades*? Your generation is so picky.” Gail sat down next to Lou. She flipped the book over, a collection of four novellas. “Why is this trashy?”

“It’s all blood and guts,” Lou said. “Isn’t that kind of—I don’t know the term for it. It’s just gory for the sake of being gory.”

“I don’t know about that,” Gail said. “I mean sure, I like them because they’re entertaining. They get my mind off things. Is that so bad?” She didn’t wait for Lou to answer. “Who are you—the book police?” (Lou giggled.) “No, I like these books because they ask questions about fear, I guess. About what we do in situations that demand us to be... alert. About the choices we make in dire situations. Is that a fair enough answer, miss *I-only-read-comics*?”

Lou rolled her eyes. “Sure.”

“What are you afraid of Lou?”

The question hit Lou harder than she expected. What was she afraid of? Not the dark. She prided herself of getting rid of her nightlight at the ripe age of four. She didn't fear death in the way children did not—she could not comprehend it, so what was there to be scared of? Death was not just unknowable but unimaginable, so Lou did not waste her time fretting over it. No, Lou was frightened of something less tangible than darkness and death. She feared not being able to live up to her own convictions. She feared letting herself down.

“Nothing, right?” Gail said. She smiled. “My fearless Lou.”

“Sorry,” the teenager said when they brought up their stack of books and comics. She shook her head slightly and took another chomp out of her Jackson jerky. “Did you hear about it?” (Lou and Gail shared a look: hear about what?) She swallowed. “Another wolf. Dead. Intestines falling all over the place. Yuck. I’m a little freaked out.” She turned the screen towards Lou and Gail. “Take a look.” Lou and Gail craned their necks to see. Gail immediately turned her head away and held Lou’s shoulder.

“My brother works there,” she said. “Couldn’t get a job anywhere else because of his record. Non-violent crimes. Theft. Stuff like that.” She shrugged. “Most places don’t care: a record’s a record. But Jackson’s Own hired him, no problem.”

Gail offered a noncommittal sound. The teenager got the hint and signed them up with their library card. Lou took the tote (it said JACKSON READS and sported a cartoon hog with reading glasses peering over a book) and slung it over her shoulder. Gail and Lou walked into the warm October sun.

His first week back home, Lou moped around the house. His arm still required bandaging morning and evening and, Lou thought, he certainly enjoyed milking it. Although his right arm worked as it always had, Gail bandaged and re-banded his arm. He asked her to kiss it better. She obliged him, red faced, while Ian put on a show of thanking her.

Lou sat with her father on the couch. With his good arm, Ian flipped through the TV channels until he landed on a movie. One of the sci-fi space ones with George Clooney. Lou had made both she and her father peanut butter sandwiches with pickles on the side. Gail found them bizarre for this combination but Lou and Ian had eaten it since Lou was a little girl. That evening, however, Lou worried the peanut butter had gone rancid. She brought the plate up to her face. She sniffed. No, not the peanut butter. Something smelled like sour milk or worse. Lou avoided the pickles just in case.

"A couple more weeks and I'll be back at work," Ian said. "Then you won't have to put up with me twenty-four seven."

Lou sat on the opposite end of the couch, texting Alexis and Harpreet in their group chat. "Your arm will be okay by then?"

"I don't know if I'll go back to the same position," Ian said. "Not at first. I can't work in the chutes with a weak arm. There's just no way. I might be using a clipboard for the first little bit; checking numbers, supervising the lines. No cut in pay, thank god. And I'll be working the night shift. What do you think about that, Lou? Used to work the nightshift back home when you were, oh, six or seven."

Lou nodded. "Are you scared to go back?"

Ian paused. "I don't feel scared. I'm angry."

“Angry?” Lou said. “Angry at who?”

“At *what*,” Ian corrected. “What do you think, Lou? Getting bit isn’t a walk in the park. It fucking—woops, sorry, Lulu—*really* hurt.” Lou’s shoulder tensed up at this. “It’s unexpected. I was just standing there doing my job and suddenly, out of nowhere, I heard this horrific sound.”

Lou finally pulled her eyes away from her phone. “What kind of sound?”

“Hoofbeats,” Ian said. “Doesn’t sound spooky, right? It is when you think all those things are supposed to be in a single-file line. I still don’t know who messed *that* one up, Lou. If they had just shut the chutes correctly, none of this would have happened. No bite, no hospital, no recovery time. The pig bit me before I had a chance to even react. Good thing I had my stun gun with me. Christ, Lulu, your old man could have been crushed by one of those.”

“Why?” Lou said.

“Why what?”

“Why did the pig attack you?”

“I don’t think even the pig knew. It’s just instinct. They see me as a predator. They don’t want to go out without a fight. Normally, of course, they don’t know what’s happening. This one must have been more jittery than the rest. You see?” Ian said, holding his arm up. “When we first moved here and I went in for training, there was graffiti on the slaughterhouse. It said something like eat or get eaten.” (Lou remembered this somewhat differently, of course: she recalled the *eat or—*) “They’d eat us in a heartbeat.”

“Or maybe,” Lou said. “The pig was frightened.” *Maybe*, Lou thought, *the pig saw you as the prey, not the other way around.*

Ian looked at her. The pale light of the TV washed over his face, faded, rose up again. Lou saw the fine lines beneath Ian’s eyes, skin stretched skin, tinted purple from the screen or lack of sleep or both. Finally, he nodded, looking down at his arm.

“Maybe.”

II.

Late October bled into November, bringing with it stinging temperatures and snow.

Gone were the flaming red trees on Lou’s bike ride to school. Soon, she would trudge through the rain and mud and, eventually, thick fluffy snow. Although colder, the fresh air was a welcome change: smoke no longer hung, uninvited, in the air or clung to their lungs. All at once, a person could walk outside, inhale deeply, and be rewarded with clean oxygen. Lou only realized she’d been coughing so frequently and with such intensity when her coughing abruptly ended. No more sore and aching throat. Teachers took down the faux cobwebs and construction-paper pumpkins hanging in the windows. Lou struggled to stay abreast in English class but increasingly proved herself to her science teacher, who suggested Lou prepare a project for the science fair in the new year. This prompted Lou to ask Alexis if she’d like to be her partner in such an endeavor; Alexis shyly said she’d love to be. Lou busied herself brainstorming potential experiments. Back in Kettering, one of the Lowes’ Christmas traditions was to decorate their duplex with lights on the first snowfall. This typically occurred on the third or fourth

week in November, or sometimes as late as mid-December. One year, the front lawn of their duplex hadn't seen snow until December 24, but Ian held steadfast in his decision to wait. He said a tradition wasn't a tradition if you changed it. That was the whole point.

Snow fell, lightly, on the ninth of November. Harpreet lamented to Lou at school that it wouldn't stick. Alexis said *thank goodness*. Ian's arm ached but he assured Gail and Lou that he would be happy to string their lights along their new home. Brighten up the place.

"Do you think you're up for it?" Gail asked. "You don't want to slow the healing time. And you're not sleeping well."

"I'm sleeping fine," Ian said.

Gail gestured at his eyes, puffy, purple-blue bags beneath them like a bruise, and absently touched beneath her own. "Are you sure?"

While Ian hunted through the garage for their ladder, Gail and Lou prepared snacks. Another tradition. Lou found the rusted cookie tin, still buried in a cardboard box beneath a broken set of plastic measuring spoons, began preparing gingerbread cookies. This year, she used a flax egg. Gail watched, perplexed. "That will hold it together?" she said and Lou said to have more faith. Gail laughed. She asked Lou about the contents of her Christmas list that year and Lou said, without pause, guitar lessons. She'd had them in Kettering for a few months and she wanted to get better. In the spring, Jackson Middle School hosted a talent show. Lou had been toying with the idea of playing in the show for the past few weeks. Gail re-heated Ian's homemade sausage rolls in the oven; the battery, buttery aroma intoxicated them, filling the kitchen. When Gail pulled them out of the oven she held the pan beneath Lou's nose. "I know

you don't eat it," she said. "But at least breathe in that *scent*. They're delicious, Lou. If you ever need to cheat—"

"I don't cheat," Lou said.

"Oh, Lou," Gail said. "Everyone cheats."

Ian called Lou outside. He'd strung red and green lights along the sides of the house, Lou's window, the garage, across the front bay windows. Lou and Ian waved at Gail from outside. Ian needed Lou to hold the ladder for him while he hung lights along the roofline. Lou looked at Alexis's house and complained to her father that everyone had clear lights this year, why couldn't they have clear lights? "You want to pay for them?" Ian said. Lou remained silent. She noticed her father's hands shaking as he tried to get the lights to stay in position. "Fuck," he said. Lou held it steady for the next twenty minutes until their house was finished: festive and jovial. Ian studied his handiwork, smiling. He squeezed Lou's shoulder. "Just like home, huh?"

"Just like home," Lou said, but the words sounded tinny, even to her own ear.

When Ian came back inside from putting the ladder away, he carried a strange odour with him.

"Yuck," Lou said. "You stink. Better wash up, Dad."

Lou is not sure what has awoken her. She waits, inhaling and exhaling, tense. She is listening for the sound that has brought her out of sleep. Her head is heavy and sore. She has taken too many Restoril lately. She cannot catch her breath properly. She holds it, listening, trying to do box breaths but she cannot. Not right now. She is listening

for the sound of her parents. It is two fifty-eight in the morning. Ian and Gail would not be up right now. No. They're fast asleep.

Something strikes the window. Lou looks over, startled. She half-expects to see Alexis standing outside her window but she can only see two small red orbs amidst the darkness. They look like eyes. They are eyes.

"Go on," Beastie says from the night table. "Go for a walk, Lulu."

Lou pulls back her covers. She is only wearing a thin long-sleeved shirt that hangs to mid-thigh. Her hair hangs behind her, turned yellow in the moon's glow. The red eyes watch her from the window. They look away and back at her. They lower. They disappear. Lou understands: She is to follow.

She cannot go out into the hallway. Ian is a deep sleeper but Gail is not. Lou opens her window. The night is calm and cool. There is no wind. She swings one leg over. Hesitates. "What are you waiting for?" Beastie asks. "The night does not last forever. Not for you." Lou thinks this is madness, this is madness. But what is madness if not all the senses bursting into life? Besides, what does she have to fear?

Lou swings her other leg over the windowsill and slips out, landing noiselessly into the grass beneath her window. She pulls the window down until only an inch remains and places a stick between the pane and the glass.

The eyes are twenty, thirty feet away. Lou looks back, once, and follows. She passes Alexis's window. Alexis is awake. She stares out the window but does not seem to notice Lou; Lou cannot wait to try and get her attention. She has somewhere to be. She knows this with a violent sagacity. She walks down the sidewalk. Occasionally, the red eyes look back. She knows what this means, too: Keep up. Keep up.

The figure fades in and out of focus with the streetlights and the flaxen moonglow. At times, she can see its hunched and hairy back, its enormous hind legs. It is flatly colorless in this lighting. Grey or coral or dark peach or soil brown. At times, she is not so sure she knows what she is seeing. It is at once too horrific and too magnificent to comprehend. Her t shirt floats softly across her skin. The beast walks on. She walks on.

They pass Lou's school and Harpreet's house. They pass the sushi joint and the Esso. The gas station's light is off—no neon glowing blue. When they reach the city limits she hears the wolves begin to cry. They start low and soft and whimpering and grow louder louder louder/louderlouder into a cacophony crash of howls. The figure, undisturbed, walks on and so does Lou. The strange duo pass the site of the gutted wolf. Out of the darkness, yellow eyes watch them pass. The howling has faded into snarls and whines. They reach the farm. It smells pleasant and earthy.

Lou pauses.

She thinks she hears steps behind her but when she turns there are no feet. No people. Just darkness, and kilometers of empty space. When she looks back, she sees them. Hundreds of beasts like the one she has followed. Their eyes glow red in the night.

What are you willing to risk? The thing asks.

Lou climbs atop the fence. Carefully, carefully, so as not to rip her t-shirt or her flesh. The clouds have parted enough so that she can see them better. They are strange and delirious creatures with pig-like snouts and ears and tails. The darkness shrouds enough of them that Lou cannot be sure of what she is seeing. Beyond them,

the abattoir glows—no, it throbs, it pulses. From its windows it leaks a dull red light. When Lou places her feet on the ground she feels a throb. It is low and rhythmic. It matches the beat of her own heart.

The pig-thing opens the door. Screams seep out, screeching, haunted sounds and low, desperate moans. It beckons her inside. Lou reminds herself that she has nothing to be afraid of. After all, this cannot be real, just like witches and zombies and werewolves are not real. Lou follows the creature towards the abattoir. The throb deepens and intensifies—thudthudTHUD THUD—as she gets closer. Inside, the walls are grotesquely red. The bodies of dismembered pigs hang from their ankles, their intestines falling out, their stomachs, their oozing organs; the standing pigs slip and slide in their own blood.

The creature rises up, shaky, on its two back legs. It is impossibly large, larger than Lou thought possible. She looks up at it. It is three heads taller than Lou. She closes her eyes and says *I want to wake up I want to wake up I want to wake up* to herself, like Dorothy. *Take me back to home, not Jackson-home, Julia-home, with Caroline and the sea and the mountains.*

Can you see us? The pig thing asks. It has not spoken. Lou does not know how she can hear her.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Lou says. She is cold. She is tired. She has walked far.

The others, on unstable joints and angular ankles, rise, slowly, gently to their two feet. They cannot walk well. They take gentle steps. Foals. Some cannot stand at all.

Would you see us, if you looked?

Lou feels a scream working its way up from deep down in her diaphragm and to her throat. When it reaches her mouth, the scream is cut short. The world falls silent.

Lou spent the last weeks of November avoiding her father. The cooling weather made it impossible for her to linger outside for too long, but she did her best. She invited herself over to Alexis's and Harpreet's as often as etiquette would allow. She scarfed down her dinner, eager to get away from the table as soon as possible. She overheard Ian complaining to Gail that Lou did not want to spend time with them anymore. He worried about her adjustment. All teenagers do this, Gail said. Give her some space. On the twenty-first, he went back to work, and Lou breathed a mental sigh of relief.

At night, she wandered their house that was not her house like a spectre, languishing in the dark shadows of early sunsets, hiding in her bedroom or the kitchen, shifting rooms depending on where she heard her father's shuffling footsteps. She wondered how long it would take her to feel at ease in this house, to familiarize herself with its architecture, its night sounds, the way it smelled. In the grey November dawn, she remembered she had dreams that left her sweaty and uncomfortable, but she could never pinpoint what they were about. The one thing she remembered was the fragrant smell: the muddy earth and the metallic odour of something. Loose change, perhaps, or blood.

PART IV: December 2017

l.

Ian bent down so that he was eye level with Lou. He wrapped a thick wool scarf around Lou's neck. The material made her skin itch. When he pulled back, Lou saw the long surgery scar across his forearm. Yellow-green pus had oozed and dried, plastered in a small clump to the end closest to his palm. Lou looked away from the scar and into Ian's blue eyes. "Bundle up, Lulu," he said. "It's going to be a cold one today. Have fun."

"I will," Lou said.

"I'm going to sleep all morning and set my alarm for early afternoon, just before nightfall. I'll text you when I'm up and if you're still there, I'll come find you, okay?"

"Okay," Lou said stonily. When her father straightened, she hung the scarf back on the coat rack.

Lou met Alexis on the sidewalk. Ginny was wrapped in a blue plaid coat with faux black fur. Alexis held up her hand in greeting. Lou bent down to say hello to Ginny, who promptly released her bladder, turning the slushy sidewalk yellow.

"Did you get any on you? She'll learn," Alexis said. "I hope. Mom says she might have a bladder problem. A dog UTI. I have to take her out at all hours to go pee and Mom says she's my dog so I have to be the one to do it."

Lou remembered similar conversations about Caroline. "She'll get better," she reassured Alexis. "She's still a puppy."

Ian left for work, waving goodbye to Alexis and Lou. He told Alexis to say hi to Max, which Alexis, blushing, said she would. Harpreet rounded the corner shortly after and the three friends took Ginny back inside. They bounded upstairs for a pre-event snack of popcorn and soda. Lou's family had always struggled with money in a way that Lou understood as universal: you did not get new pans just because yours were burnt at

the bottom or the handle sometimes came off. Three squares of toilet paper was reserved for the greedy or the sick (although Lou snuck more, she was only human). The Lowes bought conditioner in bulk and it was not the pretty, scented kind Julia used in her hair but a cheap no name brand. The Ceceres home, on the other hand, while not the home of the exorbitantly rich, was certainly luxurious in comparison to what Lou knew. When Ian had driven away in their old Neon, Lou felt a twinge of shame in her stomach. Structurally, Alexis's house was similar to Lou's, but the interior had been redone to look sleekly modern.

Before they left, Lou excused herself to the washroom. She was heading back upstairs to return to Alexis's when Lou paused at the bottom of the stairs. In the kitchen, Sofia and Max cooked. Whatever it was they were making, the smell intoxicated Lou. From where she stood, behind the wall, Lou could see Sofia and Max standing at the kitchen counter, backs to her.

"She was kind of loopy," Max said. "Not all there. Spacey eyes. You know the type."

For a brief, humiliating moment, Lou imagined Sofia and Max were discussing her. She held her breath.

"And they're sure it was her?"

"Last on there at night—who else would it be?"

"Someone with a—vested interest?"

"Interest in what?" Max glanced over his shoulder and, for a terrifying moment, Lou thought he had seen her. He must not have, for he turned back, voice lower: "Why

on God's green earth would anyone want those—*things*—outside? They're too valuable, for one. Too dangerous, for another."

"I don't know," Sofia said. "I read an article about this student down in the states. An animal rights activist. He pretended he needed a job so he could expose a big slaughterhouse. All kinds of policies violated. The line was going too fast, people were getting hurt. Sometimes the animals were still alive. Hideous things like that. I know *our* facility isn't like that. But maybe the recent—*activity*, has something to do with that kind of thinking."

"A conspiracy you mean?" (Lou found Max's condescending tone all too familiar.) "Someone letting them out on purpose?"

"Something like that."

"No, I don't think so. I think it was an accident. Like I said, she was old and not all there. Couple screws loose, you know what they say. Anyways, there hasn't been another incident since she's been fired."

"And you're sure it was her? Not a problem with the door?"

"We checked. The lock works just fine. It's automatic. Can't fail. She must not have shut it hard enough."

There was a pause. Lou's heart raced. Had they seen her? "It creeps me out to think the only thing separating us and them are *doors*," Sofia said finally.

"Just remember," Max said. "We breed them for docility. A walk in the woods at night? Sure, they scared a few kids. That's about it. They don't move fast. They don't get far."

Lou took five steps backwards. She shut the bathroom door behind her loudly. She walked with heavy steps.

Max poked his head around the corner as Lou walked up to the kitchen. “Hi, Lou,” Max said cheerily. “Are you three excited for today? The winter fair is one of Jackson’s best events.”

“Sure am,” Lou said. Sofia smiled at her from the kitchen. “What’s your favorite part about it?”

Max put his fist beneath his chin in an exaggerated display of thoughtfulness. Lou gave in and smiled. “The food,” he said and then, as though just remembering, “Oh but you’re—well, you can’t eat it, can you? Next to that, I suppose it’s the Win Your Dinner contest. This is our third year running it. Have you heard of it?” Lou shook her head. “No? Alexis can explain. Or better yet: don’t ask. Just wait and see.”

The grey skies made Lou’s chest hurt. Weeks ago, when she and her family had run into Parth, he’d cautioned them of the grey valley in winter. Under the September sun, his warning struck Lou as misplaced and faraway. Now, she was finding that she tired easily of no sunshine. Gail brought home Valupaks of Vitamin D from Superstore. She told Lou to take one a day. It was cheaper than her therapist and, Gail had read, more effective. Lou did not feel a change in her anxiety when she took them but she did so diligently. Truth be told, she missed Dr. Potter. Now, the girls traipsed through the sludge and snow on their way downtown. The colors had changed since Halloween. No longer festooned with floating pumpkins and grey cottony cobwebs, the streetlights had green and red garland wrapped around them, striped like giant candy canes. Trees

glowed with white lights. A giant, artificial tree had been constructed at the corner of Main and 9th Street. On top sat a plump—

“Is that a pig?” Lou asked incredulously. “In a Santa hat?”

“Where?” Harpreet squinted. “On top of the tree? It sure is. Ho-ho-ho. Oink-oink-oink.”

The girls made sure to arrive in time for the parade. They filled their cheeks with soft sugary pink cotton candy. Lou preferred to let hers melt in her mouth. (She would be chastised the next week at the dentist when she had her third cavity in two years.) They pooled their allowance money on fat plastic bags of Christmas candy wrapped in red and green ribbon. Peanut brittle, candy canes, chocolate, peppermint bark. Alexis and Harpreet bought warm sausage rolls. A sizable crowd gathered along the streets, some in chairs, little girls and boys perched atop a parents’ shoulder. Despite the grey day, the barren tree branches, the slush and snow and cold, people were in good spirits. The girls shoved themselves to the front of the crowd, touching both out of necessity and for warmth. The hot chocolate warmed their hands as they watched.

“This is beautiful,” Lou said. “Kettering doesn’t have anything like this and it’s double the size.”

“It’s okay,” Harpreet said. “I always wish something would *happen* though. Like in a Christmas movie. There are never any *antics*. What’s a parade without mischief?”

Alexis sighed. “Why can’t anything just be what it is?”

The girls watched the parade. Loud, cheerful music played; a float went by with high school girls dressed in red flared mini skirts, high striped socks, hair tied up in ribbons, completing a complex gymnastics routine; enormous balloons in the shape of

different pigs, black, pink, piebald, spotted, piglets, grown boars and sows; on one float, small children dressed as elves threw candy canes into the crowd; a group of teenagers, dressed in warm clothes and heavy boots, marched down the street, playing instruments. Dylan spotted them from the other side of the parade. He held up his hand. The girls waved back. He stood with his little brother, who looked like he had not slept in three weeks. The skin beneath his eyes was so dark it looked sunken. Lou watched him bounce from one leg to the other. Dylan whispered something in his ear and he was gone. A few minutes later, Dylan had squeezed in beside the girls, holding beautifully decorated gingerbread men cookies, asking them what their favorite part was. Another float came along. Everyone on it wore pig costumes of some type, head-to-toe onesies complete with floppy pig ears, a stick-on nose, and a curly tail. They held a banner that said DON'T BE A DORK EAT JACKSON PORK. As they drove by, they threw out black bags that said *pork clouds*. Dylan handed his to Alexis, whose face turned two different shades of pink.

“How’s Robin?” Lou said.

Dylan sucked in his cheeks. “He’s okay. How’s your dad?”

“He’s okay,” she said.

Dylan looked at Lou for long enough that she felt uncomfortable. She noticed his eyes were the color of the caramel candies her grandmother left on the coffee table.

“Yeah?”

Lou almost buckled. But not here, not in front of Harpreet and Alexis. She was not sure she was ready to tell them. “Yeah,” she said.

Dylan nodded. “Can you do me a favor?”

“Depends on what the favor is.”

“Sometimes, when people have—what’s it called? When people have PTSD, their personality changes. They like things they didn’t used to like before. They dislike things they used to love. They act sullen or rude or quiet or—*whatever*. You get my point. Their personality... shifts. I think that’s what happened with Robin after he was bitten. But I don’t know if that’s *all* that happened. Tell me if your dad stops being okay.”

Lou could have told him right then that she’d noticed similar things with her father. Ian’s grouchiness, his short fuse, his anger. That he slept less and ate more. Yet these differences seemed at once profound and inane: what was the point of discussing them? It must be, like Dylan suggested, PTSD or some variant of the condition. Ian was likely sore, tired, eager to get back into what he called the real work. He liked the kill floor. (He said it’s where all the non-whites were and he preferred their company. Gail said what do you mean, where all the non-whites are? And he said, do you think I’d be a supervisor if I didn’t look like this?) But there was something more than this. Lou was frightened. She did not want to make these changes tangible and real. Another voice asked her: what the hell are you saving him from?

“He is a little strange,” Lou admitted.

“Keep an eye on him,” Dylan said. He was serious now. No touch of levity to his words, like there had been before. “If it gets worse, will you let me know?”

Lou said she would.

Dylan held up the gingerbread cookies. “See you around,” he said.

Harpreet smacked Alexis on the arm. “Blush more, would you? I don’t think he has any idea how much you want to make out with him.”

Alexis squeaked. “I don’t! God, Harpreet. You can be so annoying. Can you stop talking for thirty seconds?”

Lou let them bicker. She thought about what Dylan had said: *your dad got bitten by one of the pigs, right?* Maybe the articles she had read online lead her in the wrong direction. Or perhaps not the wrong direction, but the wrong conclusion. Lou realized what she needed to investigate: not just how Jackson’s Own was growing their pigs so large and what the potential consequences were of those experiments. (Lou had seen one particularly grotesque image of a pig, terrified, being impregnated by a horrifyingly futuristic machine.) And what, Lou wondered, did that mean for humans? She watched Dylan’s back until he could no longer see him in the crowd.

“Look,” Alexis said. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

The parade’s finale made its way through Jackson’s snowy streets. Superfluously adorned in brilliant red velvet, the sleigh was simultaneously tacky and breathtaking. Golden wreathes weaved with real flowers—burgundy, green, baby’s breath—slunk around the circumference of the sleigh. Atop it, perched on his throne, sat Montgomery. He looked the part of Santa: he already had the beard, but he had fluffed it up with a tape-on imitation. A red Santa hat completed his look. But Lou did not stare at the sleigh but rather, what pulled the sleigh.

Alexis smiled. “Have you ever seen anything like it?”

Lou could not say she had.

Pulling the sleigh were two enormous hogs, both snow white, with enormous reindeer-style antlers tucked behind their ears and bridles attached to reins. The pigs were stunning in their size. Like Clydesdale horses, their white fur hung in long elegant

layers. Awed, the crowd's noise fell almost silent as the pigs pulled Montgomery through the snow. Dressed in festive gear, the pigs looked something out of a strange nineteenth century children's story. Lou remembered what Alexis said when she confessed the dreams she was having, of inhaling pork, of gorging herself on it. *It's like we can hear them dying*, she'd said. Lou agreed. Jackson pulsed with the screams of the nearby abattoir but, Lou thought, with parades like this, with noise, and lights, and candy and treats, the sounds of death were buried. As the sleigh passed Lou, the pig closest to her turned its head as much as it could without disturbing its bridle. She saw its gums were red and bleeding slightly. She saw the panicked look in the pig's bright blue eye. Montgomery pulled the reign and the pig's head snapped back into place. No, she had never seen anything like it.

When the parade finished, Harpreet, Alexis, and Lou pushed through the crowds to the candy store, Candy Cane Lane, at the end of 9th. Lou asked her friends if all of Jackson was out today. Alexis said that it seemed like it. She lamented the grey skies. The candy storefront had been pushed to the side to allow for six tables. Families filled all but two. The three of them plunked down, paid the five-dollar fee ("I'm running out of allowance money," Harpreet complained) and were served gingerbread pieces, icing, gumdrops, sprinkles, bright chewy candy. Harpreet's eyes lit up. They spent the next forty-five minutes creating a gingerbread house, complete with three gingerbread replicas of themselves in the snowy front yard. Alexis's feet wouldn't stick. She pushed, collapsing the gingerbread's neck. She laughed. "Guess it wasn't meant to be," she said. At five, families began once again drifting down the street.

“It’s time for Win Your Dinner,” Harpreet said. She asked the clerk if they could store their gingerbread house in the fridge and the clerk said for an extra two dollars. Harpreet bargained with him until he said okay, okay, you can put it in the fridge—just stop talking. The girls followed the crowd to a barn, similar to the fall festival. Small cages littered the area. An announcer, like the horse trot, stood in the center, smiling broadly. She directed people to get their tickets.

“Tickets?” Lou said.

Harpreet and Alexis explained that you only needed tickets if you intended to participate. They just wanted to watch. They picked the side opposite of Montgomery. He sat with what looked to be his two children, a stern-looking boy and girl. The three of them squeezed along the bleachers next to a woman in an ankle-length wool dress, long bushy hair. She smiled at them. She told them her son entered this year. We’re going to make a ham, she said, when we win. With maple glaze. Brown sugar. Mustard. She giggled. She said she knew the pigs were small, but they were free. She asked if Lou knew anyone involved this year. Lou, who did not know what she was about to watch, said truthfully that she did not. Alexis and Harpreet reassured her the event was thrilling. Lou said it sounded like someone tortured a pig until, terrified, they grabbed it and took it home to eat. Was that right? Alexis and Harpreet shifted.

“It’s not so bad,” Harpreet said. “Have you ever been to a rodeo?”

“No.”

“Well, it’s similar I guess,” Harpreet said. “Mom says Jackson Own needs to get rid of some of their less—what’s the term, Alexis? Undesirable pigs. Some of them just

don't grow to full size the way they're 'sposed to. I mean, you know what that's like, right, Lou?" She nudged her. "Some of us are a little less developed than others and—"

"And we don't eat our undesirables, do we?" Lou said.

Harpreet rolled her eyes. "Ha-ha. Point is—" Harpreet paused here, leaned her head back, and belched. "Oops. These fizzy drinks always make me burp. Point is, if they're not going to grow to regular size, what's the point in keeping them? They're doing the community a service, that's what mom says."

"I still don't get it," Lou said.

Harpreet took another slurp. "So, if you catch the piglet, you get to eat it. It's yours. For free. 'Win your dinner'—you get it now?"

"Sure," Lou said.

"Look, have you ever gone fishing?"

Lou had gone fishing with Ian and Aunt Ida when she was in fourth grade. They'd brought Caroline to Squamish with them and, despite being only a wiggly one year old, Caroline climbed into the rental boat obediently. Lou had insisted her father shell out the extra ten bucks to get Caroline a doggy lifejacket. Ian had tried to explain that dogs knew how to swim. *It's in their blood*, he said. But Lou shook her head. *No way, Jose*, she said. *What if she drowns, daddy? I haven't taught her to swim yet.* Ian handed the clerk a crumpled ten. Lou clipped the neon orange dog vest across Caroline's chocolate chest and kissed her nose. No drowning today.

Lou had been a natural at fishing. That's what her aunt and father told her. Lou balked at this; it had taken her two hours to get a tiny bite. But they insisted two hours on a fishing day was no time at all. The sun beat down along the Squamish River, had

burnt Lou's nose so bad that it peeled for two weeks. She'd picked her dried white skin off her face, rolled it up into balls, shot it into the garbage can in the corner of her room. *Look at us*, Aunt Ida said, gesturing at their blond hair, *a real Brady Bunch type, aren't we?* An hour later, when Lou got what Ida called a real bite, her father stood behind her and wrapped his hands around hers. Later, Lou recalled that it was he who had reeled the fish in, although he told Gail proudly that it was all Lou. The fish flew momentarily in the air, caught in the sunshine, blue-green scales glinting. Smack. Onto the bottom of the boat.

Aunt Ida handed Lou a seafoam colored PVC pipe. *You have to knock it unconscious, Lou*, but really what she meant was kill. You have to kill it. Lou looked at Caroline, who was whining fitfully, to her father, handsome in the sunshine. He smiled. *Grab the fish first*, Aunt Ida said. *By the neck*. Lou could not see a neck per se but pinched below its pulsing gasping gills. She held the pipe firmly in her other hand. She lightly tapped the fish. It writhed and bucked. *Harder*, Ian said. *Make it count*. She closed her eyes. Lou did not witness the pipe hitting the fish but she heard the wet meaty smacking, felt the cartilage bend to her will. Not so bad. Lou kept her eyes shut until Aunt Ida gently touched her shoulder. *All done, Lulu*, Ian said. *Now hold it up for the camera*. Caroline had stopped whining.

"I have," Lou said.

"It's kind of like that," Harpreet said. She paused. "If you want to leave, we can."

The woman who entered the arena had long straight black hair. She looked barely older than Gail; perhaps early thirties. She'd rolled her plaid shirt up at the elbows. She chased the pig around the arena with what Lou recognized only as a

butterfly net. She recalled running through Julia's yard in the springtime, when they'd been quite young, perhaps four or five. They'd used similar contraptions. Lou caught a gorgeous purple emperor. He'd crawled up her finger onto the back of her hand. His tiny feet tickled Lou. When she laughed, he flew off, violet wings glistening in the April sunshine.

Panting, the woman chased the pig. Polite claps perforated the silence. The announcer told her she had three more minutes and if she didn't catch the pig, she'd go home empty handed. Spurred on by the threat, the woman ran faster. She caught the pig between the confines of the metal sphere. It squealed loudly. It kicked its back legs, squealing a high-pitched falsetto, and bucked the net off. The pig ran, huddling, hiding, shaking in the corner. Lou could see from where she sat that the pig's eyes, so wide she could mostly see the whites, darted back and forth. It stood in its own urine and feces.

"So sorry," the announcer said. "Better luck next time!"

The woman sulked back out the entrance. The pig remained in the pen, visibly anxious.

"Our next contestant is—" The announcer reached down into the glass bowl by his feet. He rummaged among the folded pieces of paper. "Six! Number six, your time is now!"

"Six is mine," a woman said. Her voice shook. When Lou looked, sweat dripped from her temples, out from under her toque and pooling at her jawline, along her scarf. She grasped a small piece of paper between her thumb and her forefinger. "My son's

going to try. He lost last year but he was only fourteen last year. He's fifteen now. Built like his daddy. Look!"

Lou followed her outstretched finger. A teenager was standing up where he'd been sitting with what looked to be his friends. He made his way down towards the pen.

"No shit he's going to catch the pig," Harpreet whispered to Lou. "He's built like a brick shithouse." The boy was, indeed, both burly and brawny. He resembled the woman next to Lou: ruddy cheeks, dark red hair, a wide mouth.

The alarm rang—a sharp chime, unlike a boxing ring announcement and closer to a church bell—and another pig darted out. *Pig* was perhaps a misnomer. The animal was small, not yet half grown. Whereas the first one, which had been scooped away, kicking and squealing, had been a sturdy, plump pig, younger than usual but not tiny, this one was heartbreakingly small. Lou could not have said how old but she would have pegged it for two months. Remembering what she had seen at Jackson's farm, the pig was larger than the week-old piglets but significantly slither than the six-month-old pigs.

Lou, Harpreet, and Alexis sat close to the arena, only four rows up. From where she sat, Lou could make out some of the pig's features. She noticed something peculiar about the pig. "What's up with its leg?"

Harpreet palmed her glasses up her face, closer to her eyes. "The front one? Yeah. It's weird."

"It's shorter than the rest," Alexis said. "By, like, five inches."

Lou sat up straighter. "It can't run right with its leg like that."

Harpreet laughed. "Oh boy, I can't wait to see what kind of gimpy roast they'll make out of that dud."

"They were like this last year, too," Alexis said.

"What do you mean?" Lou said.

Alexis gestured at her own body. "A little messed up. Dad says that's why they do this dinner. Give away the ones who won't grow all the way. They're totally fine to eat," she clarified. She pulled a curl straight, let it go. "They're just better to eat *short-term*. Dad says they're not a long-term investment."

The announcer counted down from ten. The boy chased the pig. He was fast. The boy's friends cheered him on, yelling at him to *catch the pig, do her in! catch the pig, do her in!* Buried beneath the roar of the crowd, Lou could have sworn the boys switched *catch* to *kill*. But perhaps it was a trick of acoustics. Lou thought this chant sounded familiar but she could not pinpoint why she recognized it. (The reason for this being the fact that Lou had put down *The Lord of the Flies* only twenty-three pages in and read the Spark Notes summary online. She'd passed grade eight English but failed the reading quiz and, as such, would never have understood the reference.) Harpreet told Alexis that the crowd this year was surprisingly literate. Alexis whispered back that it was just coincidence.

"Faster!" the woman beside Lou shouted. Her body trembled with excitement or nerves, Lou was not sure. "Run *faster*, Noah!"

The boy was quick. He grabbed the piglet around its tender belly, holding it up high so the crowd could see. The piglet squealed and wriggled in his grasp. It leaned

forward and clamped down on the boy's shoulder. Almost immediately, dark red blood pooled beneath his denim shirt. He threw the pig down.

The crowd gasped. Beside Lou, the boy's mother's shoulders shook. "Oh," she moaned. She clutched the piece of paper stamped six between her sweaty fingers. "My boy. He's hurt."

The boy grabbed at his arm and pulled his arm back. "You fucking piece of shit," he said. "He bit me!" Lou did not know who the boy was shouting at. The announcer held her hand to her cheek. Lou thought she did not look upset, but feigned it well. The teenager chased the squealing pig again. His jaw set. He grabbed the piglet by its hind legs and held it in the air.

"Get it," the mother squealed. She stood up. "*Get it!*"

"That's it, folks," the announcer said cheerily. "He – has – won – his – *dinner!*"

The boy kept his fist tight around the piglet's ankles. Instead of retreating the way he'd come, like he was supposed to, like the first person had, he held on tight. The piglet squealed a high-pitched singular note. The yellow lights of the barn lit up his ruddy cheeks and orange hair. Like the one that came before it, the piglet's eyes, mostly white, darted back and forth; its tongue lolled helplessly about its mouth; blood licked its teeth; it, too, in fear and stress and panic, had pissed itself, yellow urine dripping down its hind legs. The blood on the boy's shoulder, although small in circumference, shone against his chambray shirt. The pigs' urine dripped onto his shoes.

He held the piglet back behind his shoulder and swung it, like a baseball bat, into the side of the arena. *Thwack.*

The mother clapped her hands in front of her. "That's what you get!" she said.
"That's what you get, you nasty little vermin!"

The crowd erupted in cheers.

Where the pig's head had collided with the concrete side of the pen, closest to the back wall, Lou saw a bright smear of blood. She looked away. Noah swung the pig again. The woman beside Lou bounced up and down in her spot on the bleacher. Lou looked around. Most people stared at the pen, rapt. She felt a cold sweat forming at the back of her neck. The crowd combined with Dylan's annoyingly cryptic talk, as Harpreet as said, gave Lou the sense that the narrative had flipped. For the most part, she'd understood the parent-child dynamic to be as follows: parents have ultimate authority because they have ultimate knowledge and, even if they could be infuriating in their despotism, Lou held a deep underlying trust that Mom and Dad Knew Best. How else could parents be in complete and total control at all times? Surely, they had access to information that Lou and other children did not have one but, if they were well-behaved and studious, would one day earn. But Lou could not believe this that cold December day: the grownups wore silly, placated smiles. What did they know that Lou did not?

The next man approached the pen's entrance. He smiled approvingly at Noah as he walked by with his prize pig, dangling and squirming by the legs.

"How does it work?" Lou said. "Where do they kill it?"

Harpreet said she guessed just in the back. "Bolt right to the head," she said, but her voice didn't carry its usual jocularity. Harpreet looked pale beneath the barn lighting.

This time, the man used the butt end of the net to stop the piglet in its tracks. He pushed the metal rod into the piglet's chest. The piglet made a sound like a balloon

deflating. The theme had changed. The tone was set. The next contestant did not pretend. He chased a one-eyed pig, saying *here piggy, piggy, piggy*, and snapped its back leg when he slammed it into the ground. The pig died on impact.

Some families got up to leave at this point. Lou's palms were sweaty. She felt frozen in her seat. She wished someone would grab her by the hand and lead her out. This was too much, too sick, too directly in front of her gaze. She looked down at her feet, stuffed into black Keens from three winters ago. Her pinky toes ached when she wore them. On some level, the way many small children do, Lou understood that violence was wrong but that parents were, in small, specific instances, allowed to be violent. This is what enabled her mother to spank her when she was four. This rule allowed Ian to work at the abattoir. Sometimes violence was given the a-OK.

"I'm leaving," Lou said to Harpreet. She did not wait for her to respond. She stood, brushing by Alexis's and Harpreet's knees. She pushed through the door. The announcer's cheery voice echoed after her. Fresh air. The air felt better outside, less contaminated with—whatever that was. She'd forgotten her jacket again but would only realize later.

Lou walked fast but Harpreet and Alexis kept pace with her. She walked deliberately to feel the muscles in her legs, to forget about the tightness in her chest. Box breaths did no good. She walked. Harpreet and Alexis said something to her but she did not hear them. The way the first pig's head had—God, the way it had *burst* on impact. And the second piglet squeals of terror as it was chased around and around and eventually thwacked in the chest.

“Stop,” Alexis said. She grabbed Lou’s upper arm. She squeezed gently. Lou thought of those same fingers gently French-braiding her hair. “Lou—are you okay? Lou?”

Lou grabbed the soft drink out of Harpreet’s hands and took a swallow. Another gulp. She wished it was water, not the sticky syrupy taste of Dr. Pepper, but it would do. She took a deep breath and used the back of her hand to wipe the tears and mucus from her upper lip. Alexis and Harpreet watched her carefully. The setting sun lit up Alexis’s and Harpreet’s dark hair, drawing out the purples and burgundies. For once, Harpreet did not say anything.

“What was that?” Lou said. She sucked again on Harpreet’s straw. “What the hell was that?”

“What was *what*?” Harpreet said. “You’re freaking me out, Lou. You’re pale. Do you want to sit down?”

There was hard packed snow on the edge of the road, cleared from the streets. The three friends sat atop it. Alexis wrapped an arm around Lou’s shaking shoulders.

“That event was disgusting,” Lou said. “I’ve never seen anything like that. Why did we go? Why was everyone sitting there applauding? What is wrong with them?”

“It’s not usually that vicious,” Alexis said. She gnawed at the corner of her thumb. She ripped away a hangnail, leaving a small bloody prick near her nailbed. “Last year people just rounded them up—easy peasy, lemon squeezy.” Alexis snaked her arm off Lou’s shoulder and brought her hand to rest in Lou’s. She tightened her grip.

“Everything happened so fast. Not like stumbling across that wolf. I didn’t realize what was happening until you stood up. I swear. It’s like everything clicked as soon as I saw

you walking out. That woman beside us. She was screaming. Cheering. Like at a sporting event. I guess I got swept up in it.” Alexis hung her head as though confessing her sins at an altar. Lou squeezed her hand back. She wanted somehow to convey that she understood; that she, too, had sat there mesmerized by the sheer emotion of the crowd.

In the dying light of that cold December afternoon, Lou felt on the precipice of something: she did not know what exactly, but she conceptualized herself walking along the raised cement curb she used to jaunt across on her way to school back home. When she was younger she fell frequently. Her balance had been terrible. As she got older, she found she could walk an entire block without toppling over. Here she felt that she was about to reveal something forbidden—one step, two step, three step, fall. Lou took a deep breath.

“My dad did something awful last year,” Lou said. “This—this *competition*, whatever you want to call it—reminded me of it.”

“What did he do?” Alexis said. Her voice quivered. She sounded as though she did not want Lou to answer her at all.

“Do you remember how I said my dog was killed?”

“Yes,” Harpreet said. “By some sick-o on your block, right?”

Lou could have laughed. She supposed, in its own way, that was an accurate description. “Caroline died scared and alone,” she said, her voice catching. “And I didn’t stop him. I didn’t save her.” Lou pulled her hair back, securing it with a black tie. “My dad killed her.” The cool wind tousled her hair, stung her teeth, scraped against her neck, made her eyes water. She remembered his knuckles, how bright the blood was

on the dishtowel. She remembered the rain that night. She remembered the sounds of Caroline dying. Lou told her friends what happened.

Lou had walked home in the pouring rain. Her sneakers made squeaky fart noises as she walked, purposely squelching through the muddy puddles. Her backpack caught on the shoulder buttons of her rainslicker, as it always did. It was two sizes too big for her and hung to her knees. She'd been at Julia's, whose mother had provided the ingredients for a build-your-own-pizza night. Lou liked eating at Julia's for dinner. Her parents were divorced which meant no fighting at the dinner table. Julia's mom made Lou laugh by impersonating actors on TV. She told Lou to call her Samantha. Lou never could—it felt foreign and strange, a bit awkward—but in her head and away from Julia's house, she did. Like Samantha was a friend, not her friend's mother. Samantha let Julia and Lou have extra cheese and pepperoni on their pizza and didn't tell them they had to save leftovers for school lunches. If they didn't finish their helpings, Samantha grabbed a knife and slid the food into the garbage. Samantha even let them split a soda, something Lou's mother never allowed because she said she didn't want to be the one paying to have Lou's cavities filled.

Lou rounded the corner for her house when she remembered that her father had a job interview that afternoon. He'd worn the blazer he always wore to job interviews: silvery grey that was a bit loose in his shoulders, dwarfing him slightly. Lou hung by the open bathroom door while he shaved. His cologne smelled warm and cozy to Lou. He squeezed out goop from the almost-empty tube of clay pomade that Gail bought him

every year for his birthday. He ran it through his hair, temporarily dampening it, turning it from sandy blond to almost brown.

“You look handsome,” Lou said shyly.

Ian looked at her in the mirror. He smiled wide, his eyes crinkling in the corners. “Thanks, little Lulu,” he said. He stood back, examining his reflection. He turned to her. “Do you think I have a shot?”

Lou gave him a double thumbs-up.

She could see the mess half a block away beneath the streetlamps. Identical duplexes lined Lou’s street, but she always knew which was hers because of the crooked bushes in front of her building. Along the roofline they still had their Christmas lights up; Ian said what was the point of taking them down in February if they were just going to put them back up in November? She might have seen it before that but she walked with her head bowed slightly, avoiding the rain. In the semi darkness, the garbage debris looked like clumps of damp fall leaves. As she went closer, stepping in and out of puddles, she saw that the garbage can had been knocked over. Littered across their small lawn was the week’s contents: Chinese takeout boxes, balled up paper towel, plastic, expired food, shredded black plastic bags. Lou pulled down her hood to see the mess better. Rain struck her face.

Caroline sniffed happily beneath the front window, pausing to pee. Lou whistled softly. Caroline’s ears shot up and when she saw Lou she froze. Her ears flattened and she tucked her short brown tail beneath her hind legs. She whined low in her throat and backed into the darkness of the bushes. Lou sighed. She’d go inside first, lay a towel down for Caroline so she didn’t get wet dog smell on the carpet and couch (Gail would

be furious) and grab plastic gloves to pick up the lawn before Gail and Ian arrived home. Caroline tentatively followed Lou up the front steps but Lou shook her head. "You can't come in yet, Caroline," she said, but she didn't have the heart to tell her she was a bad dog. She let herself in with the key and flicked on the kitchen light.

She grabbed three towels and placed one of them in front of the door and the other beside it, in case Caroline was wiggly. She'd use the third to dry her off. Lou knew how Caroline had gotten out but looked out the back kitchen window to double-check. The latch between the shared back yard and the front yard hung open. Gail had asked Ian to fix it a thousand times or to call someone to fix it if he didn't know how, but Ian always waved her off. The worst that could happen is the dog takes an unplanned stroll through the neighborhood. The worst that could happen, Gail would snap back, is the dog gets hit by a truck. Lou always felt a brick in her stomach when they discussed this. Lou sided with her mother. She told her father firmly that the gate had to be closed. He looked at Lou and nodded: *I'll fix it*, he promised. Now, Lou sighed. She rummaged beneath the sink for gloves.

She saw the lights hit the backsplash in the kitchen before she heard Ian's car grind to a stop against the curb. Later, she would find out that his interview had not gone well. That he had received a call later that afternoon because they'd offered the job to someone on the spot. He had spent the evening at Hideaway downtown, drinking Budweiser. She stood up quickly, hitting her head on the bottom of the sink. She yelped and grabbed the sharpening spot above her temple. Shootshootshoot. She'd meant to have this finished before they got home. She slammed the cupboard door shut but, she could see from the window, Ian had already noticed. He stumbled out, leaving the car

door hanging open and the lights on. At the time, Lou figured he'd done this out of surprise and anger, but realized as the months and years passed that he was likely drunker than she realized.

Ian hollered for Caroline. His hair had fallen out of its style, hanging in front of his eyes. He had taken off his blazer and wore only a black t shirt that cold and rainy evening. Caroline had not disliked Ian but did not warm up to him the way she had to Gail and Lou. She did not rub up against him when he came home or clamber into his lap or yelp excitedly; she would wag her tail from the corner, looking up from her food dish or raising her head from her paws. She rarely offered more than this. Now, presumably hearing the tone in his voice, she cowered in one corner of the yard. Ian chased after her. She bared her teeth and bolted to the other side of the yard. Ian picked up the lid to the garbage can and held it in front of him, as though a matador holding a cape in front of a charging bull.

Lou had been sent home with a letter from her teacher about talking too much in class. Twice. Gail and Ian laughed at this. Lou defended herself, saying she was speaking her mind and she'd been taught by her parents that she was supposed to do that. Julia had been bullied once for a tacky sweater she wore and Lou had put an abrupt end to that. Yet standing there in her living room, holding pink plastic gloves in one hand and a towel in the other, listening to the rain pelt against the windows, hearing Caroline snarl and yip and Ian bellow, she did not feel persuasive. She did not feel capable.

She hoped the neighbors next door would hear the commotion. That they'd come outside. That they'd put an end to it.

Ian caught up to Caroline. With the way his body was positioned, Lou could not see his face. She could, however, see the bulging veins in his forearms outlined by the streetlamps. Ian grabbed her collar. He held her neck down. Lou saw Caroline's panic. She bared her teeth as Ian told her she was a bad dog, she was a *bad fucking dog*, and she wiggled from his grasp and clamped down on his thigh.

Lou squeezed her eyes shut. She could not look. But she heard: she heard the *thump* of fist on flesh, the yelping of the dog, of *her* dog, of Caroline. Lou told herself what she'd had to tell herself when she was six and scared of the bogeyman. *If you don't open your eyes he can't see you and if he can't see you he can't hurt you.*

"Lulu?" Ian banged on the door. "Lou? I see you in there. I—I think something's wrong with Caroline. We should take her to the vet. Lou? You hear me?"

Lou felt a rising dread.

"Lou? I know you can hear me." He slammed his fist against the door again.

Lou did not want to open the door. But she knew, too, that she must open the door, that she *would* open the door. She dropped the towels.

"Listen, Lou," Ian said. His voice shook. "Something bad happened out here. Okay? Are you listening to me? We need to get help. Can you open the door for me, Lulu? Sweetie? You don't want Caroline to be hurt, do you?"

Lou imagined Ian standing on the stoop, hunched over, weary. Exhausted and drunk. His knuckles bloody. Pleading. Nonsensically, she pictured him holding Caroline's severed hand in the hand not rapping on the door. Looking back, Lou understood this to be ridiculous, but in the moment she was convicted. Her heart thudded painfully. She could not remember a time she'd been more frightened in her

life. Her nerves felt twitchy and jumpy. She held her breath. *Just open it, Lou*, she thought. *It's just your dad. He won't hurt you.*

"Come on, Lou," her father said. He was not pleading anymore. He sounded mad. "Open the goddamn door, okay? I'm getting soaked out here. It's pouring. Let me in."

She knew he had left his keys in the ignition. Why did he not remember? Lou gave the door one last lingering look. She could not stall anymore. She swung it open.

He was her father. Just her father. Yet at the same time, Lou could not look at his face. Nor could she look in the west corner of the yard. She stood in the doorway. Small. She could feel Ian's eyes on her. He said: "Don't look, Lou. I found her like that. You hear me? When I pulled up she was—she was like that. Don't look." He walked to the kitchen sink, pumped the hand soap, and washed his hands. "Shut the door, Lou."

They buried Caroline in their back yard, complete with a homemade wooden cross that Lou scratched her dog's name into. *I think she haunted me*, Lou said to her friends. Her cheeks colored. She had never said the words out loud. Rather than cheap or hokey, confessing this in the cold December air made Lou feel powerful and honest. Some nights Lou woke up to the sounds of scratching at her bedroom door. She'd sit up straight, holding Beastie to her chest, and tip-toe to her door, holding the collar she kept on her bedside table. She waited a moment every time—counted to three, one Mississippi two Mississippi three Mississippi—and creaked the door open, always as laboriously slow as she could manage. She'd peer into the hallway, eye level with her parents' door first to delay the inevitable and finally down by her feet. Nothing. Caroline

was never there. But every time Lou heard it, she'd have the same hopeful plea: that maybe what she had seen had been a mistake. That Lou's eyes had failed her. That Caroline had gotten up and ran away, sprinting down the road, finding refuge somewhere warm and dry, only to find her way back home to Lou. Or, darker perhaps, Lou fostered a thought she vowed never to articulate. Some small, hidden part of her hoped they'd buried Caroline alive, that she'd dug herself out, crawled through the soil and stones, and that she'd limped, dirty and sore but breathing, to Lou's room.

It felt cathartic to tell this to someone who wasn't Dr. Potter. Days after Caroline's death, Lou sat at the table with her parents. Her father had added ground beef and peas to their potato casserole. Lou sat sullenly in her chair, chin in hand, picking at her food. Gail remarked that Ian had undercooked the beef a little. Ian, in an exaggerated display, leaned down to his own bowl, cupped his hands around his mouth and let out a low *moooo*. Maybe you're right, Ian said, laughing, and then reassured them that a little pink wouldn't kill them. This act used to make Lou laugh but now Lou froze. She hadn't thought of beef as coming from a body before. Not consciously. Not even when Ian brought it to her attention by mooing. She *knew* of course—meat came from somewhere, didn't it? But it clicked. She thought of Caroline's pink tongue, bloody body, matted brown curls, damp from the rain. She felt nauseated, too hot, anxious. She told her parents she couldn't eat it. She *wouldn't*. They indulged her. Ian whipped her up pancakes with whipped cream on top but this made Lou cry, too. Finally, he made her a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. *That okay?* He'd said gently while Gail watched with fearful eyes. Lou nodded. They'd likely thought it would last a day or two, a week maybe. Lou never went back to eating meat.

Her panic attacks came after Caroline's death, too. She didn't recognize them for what they were at first but felt the telltale signs creeping through her nervous system. They started the same way. She'd see something that reminded her of the incident, smell the cheap beer Ian had been drinking, and her heart would race and thud and pound, her palms grew clammy, her stomach painfully restricting, sending her to the washroom every twenty minutes. After Lou had to be pulled out of gym class (the sounds of bodies hitting the big blue wrestling mats sounded eerily similar to the *thwack* of flesh on Caroline's side), Lou heard her parents talking in hushed tones about seeing a doctor. Lou bristled. She resisted. *I'm not sick*, she would say, *I'm not sick*. But she was twelve. She had to go. She heard Ian say to Gail that they didn't have the money for therapy. Gail said she knew they didn't, but she also knew that Lou needed help. They ate Kraft Dinner and broccoli for many months. Dr. Potter proved to be Lou's best asset. She looked forward to Wednesday afternoons. She told Dr. Potter what had happened. She believed Lou first time, no ifs, ands or buts. When she told Dr. Potter that her mom had doubted Lou (*now Lou*, her mother had said evenly, *be careful about accusations like that. They can destroy a person*), Dr. Potter paused. She did not say how do you feel about that, Lou? like Lou had seen shrinks do in the movies. Instead, she explained victim-blaming and denial.

Harpreet and Alexis hugged Lou again. Alexis used the back of her hand to scoop up a tear on Lou's chin. Alexis held Lou's hand. "I believe you," she said. "I believe you one hundred and fifty percent." Harpreet nodded. She took Lou's other hand. She said she didn't doubt Lou for a second.

“There’s something else I have to tell you,” Lou said. The sun set behind the snow-capped mountains, casting an ominous glow like a presage over the snow, painting everything a foreboding mahogany: the barn burned, Lou’s hair turned strawberry blond, the nearby empty tree branches chestnut brown. Back on Mars, Lou thought. Back to the Land of the Red. “Maybe it’s better if I show you. It’s hard to explain.”

“Do you want to meet at lunch tomorrow?” Harpreet said.

Lou said that sounded perfect.

The three friends walked along the side of the highway, beneath the darkening sky. Lou felt peculiar and undefeatable that afternoon, both vulnerable and exposed and strong. The sounds of the December festival echoed behind them, children laughing and screaming, pigs grunting and squealing. Soon, they could no longer see the festive lights. It took blocks before the smell of popcorn and candy faded entirely. And if you hadn’t been there, it was like the piglets hadn’t died at all.

The next day at lunchbreak, the three girls forewent their usual fare: a peanut butter sandwich for Lou, cafeteria pulled pork for Harpreet and Alexis. Instead they went to the library. The librarian looked up from his desk, perhaps surprised to see eighth-graders at the library so early on a lunchbreak (or at all). His eyes were a pale shade of green, wide and kind. On his desk sat a half-eaten bowl of ham and split pea soup. If sitting in a toilet, Lou would have wholeheartedly believed it to be vomit.

“Need help with anything, girls? Class project? Book report?” He waved half-heartedly at the stack of books on his desk. “Animals? Space? What is it?”

“We just want the computers,” Lou said. “In the back. Can you give us the log-in password?”

The librarian opened a drawer at his hip. He paused. “What’s this for?”

“We’re doing a biology project,” Harpreet said. “We’re covering the menstrual cycle. How often you bleed, how long it lasts, if you should use tampons or pads. Have you heard of menstrual cups? I hear that’s the best, but you have to fold it up like a little plastic flower, just crunch it right up, and, well, my mom says you have to shove it right up your own snatch, isn’t that something? Just fill the little cup up with blood and—”

The librarian blushed. “No problem, girls. Good to know—good to know about your own bodies.”

The three of them chose a computer as far away from the door as possible. Lou had been spending her time locked in her bedroom, effectively hiding from her father. She perused articles online, typing in bizarre combinations of search words. Lou held her breath when her father came into her room at night, saying hello, good morning, I’m heading out the door. She held her breath not out of tension, but from the smell. He stank. He stank not of what she might have thought he’d stink of: blood, guts, fear. He smelled of garbage. When he showered, he smelled of wet dog. In those weeks, Gail would also poke her head in Lou’s daughter, worried of her lack of a social life, of her potentially mentally stultifying herself. Gail would not have said this because Lou had a hunch that Gail found the idea of properly chastising Lou terrifying. But, if Lou was not riding her bike, taking long meandering detours from Harpreet’s, she liked sitting with her laptop warm on her thighs, sleuthing around the internet.

“Have you heard about Mad Cow Disease?”

“Of course,” Alexis said.

“Do you know what it is?” Lou said.

“Like, isn’t it that you eat beef,” Harpreet said, “and then you go crazy, right? You turn into a cow or something?”

Alexis rolled her eyes. “That can’t be a *genuine* answer, Harpreet, you know you don’t eat beef and *turn into a cow*.”

Harpreet’s eyes lit up. “Like a werewolf. But a werecow. And instead of a full moon, you transform every time you drive by MacDonald’s. So it’s way more of a problem than being a werewolf because there are way more MacDonald joints than there are full moons. And maybe your superpower is, like, incredibly raunchy farts. ‘Cause cows have bad gas, you get it?”

The girls laughed. Lou sat back in her chair and grabbed her belly. The librarian looked over. “Girls? Is something funny? Please remember this is a study space.”

“Just talking about period stuff! You know what they say, if you can’t cry, you have to laugh! And let me tell you, I want to cry—this is horrific. Good news though. Turns out the brown blood has just been hanging out in your uterus for a while, nothing to worry about!” Harpreet turned back to Alexis and Lou. “Cow farts. They’re singlehandedly causing the entire planet to melt or something—”

“Oh my god, Harpreet, do you mean *climate change*?”

The girls laughed hard again but this time the librarian did not say anything. When Lou looked, he held himself uncomfortably stiff, pretending to read a book. Lou knew he was pretending because the book sat in his lap, upside down: she could not

make out the text from where she sat, but she knew the words were not facing the correct way. Red bloomed in his cheeks.

“Honestly,” Lou said. She used her palm to wipe away the tears from her beneath her eyes. “It’s an illness that cows can get, right? I think there was an outbreak in the UK a few years ago. I don’t fully understand it but it effects the cow’s nervous system—so it does sort of make them go crazy. They can’t always walk right. They get more aggressive because they’re confused. Stuff like that.”

“Right,” Alexis said. “I kind of remember that.”

“And,” Lou said. “If you eat the beef that comes from the cow, a *person* can kind of go mad too.”

“See?” Harpreet said. “Werecow.”

“No, not like that,” Lou said. “The illness gets into your brain. It can change your personality, make you forget words, make you angry. Stuff like that.”

“Freaky,” Alexis said. “Is there another outbreak?”

“I don’t think so,” Lou said. “From what I read, it only ever got to a few people in the states. But they acted really weird and then... died.” Lou could see from their faces that they were not following her train of thought. “The pigs. Here in Jackson. I think something’s wrong with them. I think they have mad cow disease—or mad *pig* disease.”

Harpreet burst out laughing. “No way,” she said. “Mom’s always going on and on about these pigs.” Harpreet lowered her voice to mimic her mother’s. She lowered her shoulders and pursed her lips. Lou considered this a spot-on impersonation of Yamini. “They’re in perfect condition, Harpreet. Beautiful beasts. Majestic. Prize pigs. They sell

them all across Canada, did you know? And they pay a pretty penny at that. So eat up, Harpreet, your mother works hard for that food. And that food works hard for you.”

“Not all the pigs are in perfect condition,” Lou said stonily.

“What do you—? Oh.” Alexis furrowed her brows. “*Oh.*”

“The pigs from yesterday, you mean?” Harpreet said.

Lou nodded.

Alexis grabbed a curl and tugged it straight. She let go. Light slanted through the window and hit her cheekbone, her lips. “I don’t know, Lou,” she said. “That’s bound to happen when we breed animals, right? There will always be mistakes.”

Lou shook her head. “Sure, maybe.” Lou did not want to lose them now. Alexis frowned. Lou need something else. “But the pigs that escaped on Halloween? How do you explain that?”

Alexis again tugged on a curl. She sighed. “Pigs escape. Animals escape. I heard about this group of cows that got out of their pasture and stood in the middle of the highway. They just stood there, like the pigs in the woods. Cars had to swerve around them. None of them got hit. But you see my point?” Alexis looked up. She could hear the tone in her voice. She paused and, Lou thought, regrouped herself. Crown shyness. “I just think these things happen sometimes, that’s all.”

“That pig said hello to me,” Lou said.

“*What?*” Harpreet leaned closer.

“Not verbally, but she—I don’t know. She pressed her nose into my hand. She did it on purpose, I could tell.” Her stomach felt uneasy. Not the way it had last night, nothing so severe, but Alexis watched her carefully. Lou imagined herself under a

microscope, insignificant. Something to be studied. Lou could not have her new friends conceptualize herself like this. Lou knew she held herself with a confidence that implied she was not easily ruffled. But this look of Alexis's (pity, Lou thought, that was the only way to describe it) unravelled her. She needed the facts. "Look, have you noticed how Robin has been acting?"

"I guess kind of rude," Harpreet said. "You know what I heard? That he told Rudkus to fuck off. Like the actual words *fuck off*."

The librarian faux whispered from his desk. "Girls, please. Do I need to ask you to leave?"

"Can he hear us?" Lou said. She felt exposed and unnerved, both by Alexis's doubt and the librarian's eavesdropping.

Harpreet lowered her voice. "Are you thinking Robin has mad pig disease?"

"It's just a theory," Lou said. "I see it in my dad, too." Again, Lou, who felt a curious need for a barrier around her heart, hesitated. "He's been—pretty mean to my mom."

"Like how?" Harpreet said.

Lou's tongue felt dry and sluggish in her mouth. Her heart rate picked up. She told herself: *box breaths, Lou, box breaths*. "He's been saying nasty things to her. And how about the people at the festival? What about them? They were acting totally nuts. Sure, a few people walked out because it was such a horror show but the others? Did you see the looks in their eyes? They loved it. They *wanted* him to hurt the pig. They didn't know they did at first, I don't think, but once he slammed the pig into the wall—

everyone cheered. They were electrified.” Lou paused, remembering. She added: “Even I was electrified.”

“I mean,” Alexis said. “The pig *bit* him. What was he supposed to do?”

“The pig bit him,” Lou repeated. “You’re right. He *bit* him. Do you know who that was?”

“The boy—the boy who caught the pig?” Alexis looked pained.

Harpreet pushed her cat eye glasses up. “I don’t remember his name but he looks familiar. I think he’s in grade eleven or twelve.”

“I think people are infected here,” Lou said. “I think they’re infected, but I don’t know exactly how. I can’t tell if it’s from *eating* the meat or by being bitten by a pig. Or maybe—”

“Maybe consuming it does something to your brain,” Harpreet said. “But being bitten speeds up the process.” She leaned forward, palms on her thighs. Her dark hair fell over her face. “This sounds like a plot to a TV show.”

“But it’s not,” Lou said. “I think there’s something wrong with those pigs. Or the people running Jackson’s Own. Or some combination of the two. I don’t know for sure. But something’s up.” Lou glanced at the computer screen. “Transgenic hormones. It doesn’t sound—what did Montgomery call it?—*enterprising*. It sounds spooky. I’m serious.”

When Alexis was in the washroom, Harpreet pulled Lou aside. Beneath the school lights, Harpreet’s skin looked sallow and unhealthy. She took off her glasses. She

curled up the hem of her polka dot dress and wiped them clean. For the first time that day, Lou noticed that Harpreet had deep purple circles below her eyes.

“How did you tell your parents you wanted to stop eating meat?”

Lou was surprised.

“Seeing the pigs yesterday,” Harpreet said. “I felt my skin crawl. But not at first. Not in the moment. That’s the creepy part. In the moment, I felt like everything was okay—I was revved up. Weren’t you? I could see it in your eyes, too, at first. It was kind of exciting, all the music, and the smell of popcorn and hotdogs, and the cheering. I wanted him to win. I don’t even know why, I just *did*. And then after we talked about what your dad did, I felt nauseated.” Here, Harpreet pushed her glasses back on her face. She did not break eye contact with Lou. “But it wasn’t even that really. Mom was at work so I was sitting at home, alone, most of the night. I told her I didn’t need a babysitter anymore—I’m almost fourteen, I can *have* a babysitter’s license if I want one, which I never will in a million years because have you seen me around children? No thank you. They flock to me like I’m their queen. Couldn’t tell you why. Anyways, my point was, sitting alone in my room, listening to music, I just got to thinking: *why* did we all cheer him on? Why did I feel excitement, not anger or fear? Why did I want to see more blood? It was pretty fucked up.”

“Yeah,” Lou said.

“And when I sat down to dinner my mom had made a pork lasagna which is—was? I don’t know—my favorite. She slow roasts the pork first and pulls it into shreds, like for pulled pork sandwiches, only she layers it in between rows of soft pasta and gooey cheese. It’s been my favorite since I was a little kid. I’ve had it for my birthday

meal for five years in a row. Five! And I sat down at dinner and I grabbed my fork and—I think I vomited a little bit in my mouth. Mom must have heard me. She put her hand to my forehead and said I wasn't getting a fever, so what was the matter? I didn't know what to say. What *could* I say?" Harpreet looked at Lou and Lou understood this question had not been intended to be rhetorical, but she didn't know how to answer her friend. "I tried. I put a bite in my mouth and I couldn't get the—the sound of its pathetic little *squeal* out of my head. I went to bed, feigning sick. I don't know how to get out of the rest of that damn lasagna. She's going to know something's up. I guess I just have to tell her point blank: I can't eat it anymore. I can't."

"You just have to tell her," Lou said. "Rip the Band-Aid off. What's the worst she can say? No? Tell her you refuse."

Harpreet looked pained. Lou could tell she was somewhere else, either remembering or imagining an incident.

Alexis came out of the washroom. Lou turned to her two friends. "After dinner tonight, can we visit Dylan?" she said.

Alexis's eyes widened. "Visit Dylan? Why? Were you—invited? To his house?"

Lou shook her head. "No. I want to tell him what we know. Even if it turns out to be nothing."

"It's that one, I think," Harpreet said. Alexis asked her how she knew and she shook her head, saying everyone knew where they lived. Alexis and Lou shared a glance but followed her down the rest of the block towards the townhomes. The day was overcast and lightly snowing. Harpreet wore her uncle's toque, the words JACKSON'S OWN

pulled low over her eyebrows. Alexis's ear muffs sat over her ears, buried in her curls. They'd brought Ginny with them because, as Alexis put it, if she peed one more time on the carpet she was going to the farm. *That means death*, Alexis said. *I wouldn't let her, of course. Oh, c'mon, Ginny, really?* (She'd peed on Alexis's boots.) Lou's mother hadn't let her go out with Alexis and Harpreet the night before. Gail had shaken her head, pursed her lips, sighed. *Not with those things out there*, Gail said. Frantically, Lou had texted her friends to let them know they had to move their excursion to the following morning. She understood that they had a momentum going—she and Harpreet perhaps less so than Alexis, although she knew, on some level, Alexis trusted her—and she feared the momentum would turn inert without rigorous fostering.

"I think it's number eight," Harpreet said. They knocked on the door. A man in his thirties answered and looked perplex to see three young teenagers on his doorstep. He held a half-eaten hotdog in one hand. His eyes were red rimmed.

"We're looking for Dylan Carter," Harpreet said.

"Next door," the man said, gesturing to his left.

This time, when Harpreet knocked, a woman who Lou recognized as Dylan's mother answered the door. She wore a similar colorful kerchief, vermillion and papaya, around her hair, knotted in the front over her hairline. Dylan's mother had tears in her eyes. Lou heard a crash from behind her. Dylan's mother jumped. "Jesus Christ," she said, half turning behind her. "Girls? Yes? Can I help you?"

"We're here for Dylan," Lou said.

His mother held up a finger, closed the door slightly, and hollered. He shouted something back and came downstairs. He had earphones from the early aughts around

his neck, the ones that didn't slip into your ears but around them. He somehow made them look cool.

He was older than them by two grades, taller, broader. Lou was again struck by his beauty. (One day Ian, who had been complimented by Gail, told her men could not be *beautiful*. Handsome, perhaps, or good-looking but not beautiful. Lou wanted to show him Dylan and say *I've proved you wrong*.) He seemed wiser than most people in their grade but Lou was not intimidated by him. She had read somewhere that boys matured slower than girls and she felt it in her bones. Her mother was fond of saying this; she reminded Lou not to date until she was at least eighteen. When she said this, she often subconsciously pulled away from Ian. Lou didn't think she meant to but she saw it happen. Lou could do the math. She knew Gail had still been a teenager when she'd given birth to Lou although, to Gail's credit, she never said, not even in anger, to Lou that she'd been a mistake or an inconvenience.

"How's it going, girls?" Dylan said. He seemed surprised to see them standing at his doorstep and for that, Lou could not blame him. From behind him, another smash.

"Robin, for Chrissake," she said. "If you don't want a sandwich for lunch, use your words, don't break plates."

"We want to talk," Lou said. She tried to widen her eyes in such a way that he would understand: *this isn't something we can say in front of your mom. Got it?*

"Come out back," he said. "It's freezing but we should have privacy."

The townhome's hallway led directly from the front door to the back door; to the immediate left was the kitchen and beyond that, the living room. A staircase leading to the second floor was on the right. Alexis closed the door behind them. On their way

towards the backyard, Lou shot a glance into the kitchen. Dylan's mother squatted on the floor, wiping up a smear of peanut butter and what looked like banana chunks. Dylan's brother, Robin, stood against the counter, watching. He looked up when Lou walked in and for a moment they made eye contact. He did not look particularly ominous or maleficent but he did not look like a eight-year-old. His face was set, stony, emotionless. He did not look like the same child Lou had watched childishly say *piggy!* and reach out to touch the animal. His leg was no longer in a cast but he wore heavy bandages around his lower leg. When he smiled, close-lipped, at Lou, she felt a shiver run up her spine.

Dylan's backyard looked even smaller than it was due to the tattered wooden playground. Two swings, a see-saw, a dumpy and chipped red slide. It was the opposite of cheery or inviting. Snow crept up four inches on the poles of the swing set. Dylan sat in one of the swings, Harpreet in the other. Alexis and Lou sat on the see-saw until they were level with one another. Alexis let Ginny off her leash. She pranced around in the snow.

Dylan asked if they had been at this year's Win Your Dinner. When Harpreet said, grimly, that they were. "I heard it was a disaster," Dylan said.

"That's putting it mildly," Harpreet said. She kicked off from her toes. "What does a girl need to do to get an underduck around here?"

Dylan stood up from his swing and stood behind her. Wide-eyed, Harpreet beamed at Lou and Alexis. He pushed Harpreet until she was above his head, ducked beneath her and let go; she swung high and *yip-ee'd*. "Wow, Dylan," she said. "I really

need to come over here more often. Killer underduck skills. Absolute A-plus.” Lou shot her a look.

Dylan laughed good-naturedly. “What brings you here, anyways?”

Alexis looked at her mitted hands, which were gripping the handles of the see-saw.

“I haven’t been completely honest with you,” Lou admitted. “My dad *is* acting different.”

Dylan sat back down in the swing. He inhaled, held it, exhaled. “I thought he might be. Different how?”

Lou lowered her voice. “Exactly how you said Robin’s acting. Aggressive. Hostile. Just plain mean. But not all the time, of course.”

“No,” Dylan said. “If it was all the time, it would make more sense. It would be easier to point to. I think that’s why my mom doesn’t believe me.”

“Exactly,” Lou said. “*Exactly*. If I told my mom, what would she say? She’ll think he’s just cranky because his arm’s sore or something but that’s the thing. I swear he *likes* having the scar. He doesn’t care at all. I don’t think he’s in pain. Not anymore. I think it just gives him more reason to go to work and do what he does. He feels like he’s—what’s the word?—vindicated.”

“And you think there’s a connection between them, right?” Dylan said. “Between your dad and my brother—and the fact that they’ve both been bitten by one of the pigs?” He glanced at his closed back door. Snowflakes had stuck to his eyelashes. “You think there’s something in their saliva that causes it?”

Lou asked Dylan the same thing she'd asked Harpreet and Alexis: did he know about mad cow disease? He said that sure he did, he'd written co-written a report on it last year for science class. Got a B+ on it. Lou told him what she knew, the articles she'd found, the revolutionary trans-genetic testing being done on the pigs. How she thought something had gone wrong along the way, although she didn't know what. "And I don't know all the implications," she said. "I haven't figured it all out. I'm just relieved you don't think I'm crazy."

Alexis sat quiet on her side of the see-saw. Ginny had jumped into her lap, panting and content. She looked across it to Lou. "I don't know," she said quietly. Her cheeks had turned a faint pink. "It's not that I don't believe you two. I do. But"—here she raised her left hand and began ticking off fingers—"You already told us that your father is—well. He's not the greatest guy, is he? And Dylan, Robin's what? Nine? Ten? Him being moody doesn't correlate to the fact that meat from Jackson's Own is making him mad."

Harpreet dragged her feet along the ground so that her swing came to a stop.

"I wasn't sure if there was a connection either," Dylan said. "I see why you'd be skeptical. But, here's the thing: I haven't been eating it for a week. And I feel weird. I feel like I'm having withdrawals."

"You stopped eating pork?" Lou said.

"All meat," Dylan said. "I told my mom I was considering vegetarianism. You should have seen her lose her mind. That was not a pretty conversation." He smiled, that sad, teeth-covered-in-braces smile he had. He raised his voice slightly to imitate his mother's voice. "*You think I'm cooking two dinners? Where are you going to get your*

protein? You want to grow up to be a man, don't you? Stuff like that. I told her I was trying it for a school project, just to get her to lay off. I mean, it sort of is for a project."

"Let's think about who is effected by this," Harpreet said. "We have to think methodologically—"

"Nice word," Dylan said approvingly.

"Thanks," Harpreet said, unfazed. "Who's changed? Lou, your dad; Dylan, your brother. That's two, okay, not a huge sample size. But we can all agree that the carnival this year was—intense." She paused. "I mean, my mom's freaking nuts, pure whack job, but I don't think that's anything spooky, I think that's just my mom."

"My dad," Alexis said quietly. She shifted on the see-saw seat. Everyone turned to her. "He's been freaking me out a little lately. Being aggressive. He grabbed me the other day. Not *hard*. He just wanted my attention and I—I wasn't looking at him." He held her wrist up and wrapped her other hand around it, seemingly unknowingly. Her eyes were far away in memory. "He gripped me. And it ached afterwards. It wasn't that it hurt so much. But I had a sense of the power he has. Does that make sense?"

"Oh my god," Harpreet. "It's only the men. Women are immune. We're in *The Stepford Wives*. Have you seen it? Like, all the women are robots or something but the men—they're the one's behind it. They want all the women to bake and clean all day and have huge tits."

"No," Lou said firmly. For one, she did not believe her findings had anything to do with gender but, for another, she did not want Harpreet to make light of the situation. Lou couldn't read how seriously the rest of them were taking it (except perhaps Alexis,

who was skeptical at best) but she needed them to believe her. “It’s not like that. It’s something to do with saliva, or their flesh, but I don’t think it’s just the men.”

They were interrupted by Dylan’s mother. She held a hand over her forehead to shield her eyes. She squinted. “Did you four want hot chocolate? I have marshmallows in the cupboard from Halloween. Don’t imagine they’d be stale yet.” Robin peeked around her waist, made eye contact with Lou, and, skittish, retreated into the house. They all said sure, that they’d love some, and she brought out steaming mugs of cocoa loaded with marshmallows. Lou scooped hers onto Alexis’s pile.

“Robin’s little,” Dylan said. “But your dads aren’t.” Dylan sipped his drink. He looked at Lou. “Are you scared? Of your dad?”

Lou had a flash of her therapist’s office. Dr. Potter had asked her the same question. Perhaps feeling out the situation—should she believe Lou or not? Had her father killed Caroline or had he really found her, crumpled and bloodied in the lawn? Had Lou imagined the bloody dishrag?—to see if she should call CPS or if Lou’s anxiety was manifesting itself as a fear of her father. Lou had said no, she was not afraid. Of course, she was terrified, but at the time, the terror did not extend to her own safety. She did not believe her father could hurt her, even if he had done something unthinkable. Incredibly, she did not believe him to be a heartless monster.

Was she scared of her dad?

“I don’t like him very much,” Lou said simply. She wanted to say *I hate him*, but something stopped her from doing so. She couldn’t take that back. “Is that the same thing as fear?”

After their discussion, Alexis, Harpreet, and Lou said goodbye to Dylan and went downtown. There, they shared a heaping plate of seasoned fries with extra vinegar, discussing everything but Jackson's Own. Afterwards, they combined what money they had in their pockets, and the three of them rented skates and goofed around on the ice rink for over an hour. None of them, it seemed, had the desire to go to their respective homes because when they were finished at the rink, calves sore and happy, one of them suggested they see a matinee. They only had enough money left for two tickets but Harpreet complained loud enough that the father behind them offered to cover the remaining five dollars. The three girls immersed themselves in the new *Star Wars* movie, wishing they had salty popcorn to dig into, but happy to be laughing together. Finally, languidly, they walked home with the setting sun. Alexis and Lou walked Harpreet to her door. They all hugged before Harpreet went inside. They didn't usually do this when they parted ways but later, Lou would be glad they had. Later, taters, Harpreet said, and Alexis said, in a while, crocodile. The contrast between what had happened at Dylan's and the rest of their day was at once humorous and necessary. Lou felt alive again. The girls stopped at Alexis's doorstep.

"I'm really glad you moved here, Lou," Alexis said. Without warning, she threw her arms around Lou's neck and hugged her tightly. "I'm so glad I met you."

Lou hugged her back. When Lou arrived back home, however, she called her mother into the living room. She opened her laptop.

Gail sat down across from her at the kitchen counter. She'd just woken from a nap. Ian was still sleeping, a fact Lou was grateful for. Gail poured herself a glass of water. "What is it, Lou?"

Lou realized when she was sitting and talking with her friends that she didn't know what all of the words from the articles had meant. Trans-genic did not mean much to her, although it certainly sounded ominous. "I want to show you some articles," Lou said. "I don't understand everything in them." Like Dylan, Lou searched back through her history for the articles.

When Lou clicked the link from her history bar, she was met not with the article but simple blue font on the white background: 404 – Article Not Found. No matter. The article she'd clicked was simply the NEW HOG FARM FACILITY TO OPEN IN JACKSON, which, all things considered, was the least important. She searched for the interview with Morris Montgomery. 404 – Article Not Found. She refreshed the page. The same message appeared.

"Your hands are shaking," Gail said. "Everything all right?"

"I can't find them," Lou said. "They're not here anymore."

"These articles?" Gail shrugged and shook her head. "I'm not following."

Lou searched *The Jackson Gazette* for another ten minutes. She knew she had, at one point, read the articles because they showed up in her computer history. This was not a case of having confused herself. She knew.

"How old were the articles?" Gail said. "They likely take down the older ones. Make room for the new ones. Something like that."

But what Lou knew was this: the articles had been removed, sure. Not because they were old or outdated or the information was incorrect. Somehow they had been alerted to recent activity of old articles by Jackson residents. Where wolves were being attacked; where pigs were escaping. Someone did not want Lou to read those articles.

“What’s the big deal, Lou? What did you want to show me?”

“Nothing,” Lou said softly. “I guess they were just old.”

Lou wakes and cannot see.

Slowly, her eyes blink into focus and she sees a wiggling mass of pigs around her. She walks, unsteady, and almost falls. Her legs are not her own. Her body is wider and shorter than she went to bed with. She is breastless and covered in soft, insulating fur. Her legs are strong but wobbly. She cannot turn her head at the right angle to inspect but when she walks forward she notices: her legs are grey and short and end in sharp dirty hooves.

She is ushered forward.

Lou remembers things she cannot possibly remember: long, sprawling afternoons in the sunshine; cool mud on her back, kissing the itchy spot on her right flank she can never scratch; a game of pass in the long grass, pumping her legs fast after the tumbleweed. She recalls a stormy afternoon, the fresh smell of rain, running towards a black pig whom she feels great affection for. She remembers, suddenly, the constricting tug of fear and a pen and feeding from a metal trough.

She turns her head as much as she can and sees a black pig (Lou rushes with warmth—this is her friend) who looks much older than the rest of them. Logically, he cannot be, but his massive face has been lacerated repeatedly. Long red or white scars remain raised on his face and shoulders. She remembers they have a plan but he doesn’t know the details. The plan is to repeat the plan is to pass on the plan is to instill the plan but—Lou is ushered forward—what is the plan? She knows she is supposed to

know it and this, combined with the rushing bodies beside her, makes her panic. She bleats uncomfortably. What is the plan? The black pig looks at her and she remembers—*The plan is to end all suffering*—she remembers what she needs to pass on to the others but now she has no time, does she? Because in that que there is a looming sense of dread and death and she can smell it; she can smell the sick sticky shit smell of death and its coming.

She cannot see on either side of her. The metal sides are too high. But she can hear: she can hear the human voices speaking, grunting, shouting. Some of the words' meanings are clearer to her (*come*), some are muddled (*surprisingly*).

She sees him up ahead: a man with sandy blond hair tucked back behind his ears. Blue eyes. They make eye contact for a fleeting moment and Lou is overwhelmed with fear—both at the knowledge, the surety, of death, and at the sight of her father.

Her bowels and bladder empty simultaneously. Others have done the same. This explains the smell. She slips in someone's excrement, either hers or someone else's. She falls on her shoulder, hard, and is prodded with a metal rod. She stands on wobbly legs and is shuttled forward. She is riddled with apprehension and revulsion for she knows at once that the man inside that white suit is her father and that her father will kill her.

The black pig in front of her walks up slatted stairs into a box. She hears the mechanical *whirr* as his head is locked into place. The airy buzz and slam of the bolt gun. The silence. Her turn. She cannot see anything but the wall in front of her but, in her peripherals, she can see his movements. Another *whirr* as the lock slides around her neck. Her head is secured. He looks at her, looks at her face, and either does not

make eye contact or cannot. She wants to scream that she is his child that it's *Lou* inside here, little Lulu dad, *little Lulu*, and she wants to escape her skin but she is stuck she is claustrophobic she is anxious her father knows this, dad, *it's little Lulu* but she has no voice she cannot scream—

Her father raises the bolt gun.

Lou woke to screaming.

At first, she thought she was in the middle of her nightmare. She did not remember all of it but she still had the sight of her father holding a futuristic-looking contraption, the bolt gun; she remembered, impossibly, staring at it and the sound of something rushing towards her. Lou's shirt stuck uncomfortably to her chest, her ribs, her belly, coated in sweat. Beastie sat, motionless, on the bedside table, where he'd been when she closed her eyes for the night. The scream came again. This time, Lou could tell it was not coming from inside her house. No, Gail and Ian had not produced that sound. It came from outside.

Lou's alarm clock read twenty minutes after midnight. She held Beastie to her chest and walked towards her window. She had reasoned with herself about nightmares before: the only thing worse than getting out of bed to investigate was lying beneath the covers, waiting to die. Outside the window, she saw Alexis's room lit up from her bedside lamp. Her sheer pink curtains were drawn.

The scream came again. A voice. Lou recognized it.

That's when Lou saw: Sofia, hunched over a figure, in the front lawn. Or what would have been the front lawn, if not for the thick layer of snow covering the grass.

Beneath the moon and the streetlights Lou could make out gently falling snow swirling like dust motes. Sofia was partially obscured by the mailbox and the low row of bushes between their driveway and their lawn. Lou could make out her back, covered in a thick yarn sweater but no jacket. Ginny barked and danced around Sofia's feet, raising her legs high with each snowy step she took. Her purple leash trailed behind her.

"My baby," Sofia wailed. Lou watched her rock back and forth.

Lou's lights flicked on.

"Are you all right?" Ian said. Gail stood behind him, bleary-eyed, hair in a frizzy bun at the nape of her neck. Ian clomped towards the window. During his off days, Ian kept his schedule; he was awake, alert even. His system was prepared for this. He stood behind Lou, one hand firmly on her shoulder. His grip hurt but Lou could not look away. Only half drug out of her Restoril-induced sleep, Lou did not know what exactly she was seeing. Max walked out of the front door, shoulder pressed to his ear. Lou guessed he had a cell phone there.

"What is it?" Gail said, tugging her robe tighter across her breasts.

"I'm going across," Ian said. "Lou, go back to bed. Gail, I don't think either of you should see this."

Instead, both Gail and Lou watched Ian walk across the snowy lawn to Sofia's form. Lou saw what her father must have noticed right away: Alexis's dark curls in Sofia's arms.

"Mom," Lou whispered. "It's Alexis. She's hurt. I have to go see her."

Gail grabbed Lou's arm firmly. "No, Lou," she said. "There's nothing you can do."

The ambulance pulled up, red blue red blue red blue. The splashes against the Caceres house and lit up Lou's room, turning Beastie an organ red. Gail wrapped Lou in her arms. Peering from beneath the armpit of her mother's robe, Lou observed Max hunched on the front stoop. He wore only a thin t-shirt. He stared straight ahead, not at Sofia and Alexis, not at the paramedics. At the ground.

"My girl," Sofia said. "*Don't touch my girl.*"

"Mom—"

"No, Lou."

"Max, stop them," Sofia said. "They're trying to take our girl away from us, Max, *please*. Not Alexis. Jesus, please, not Alexis."

Ian sat next to Max, pulled his co-worker into his shoulder. Lou didn't understand. She held Beastie tighter to her chest. Had Alexis taken Ginny out for a walk and fallen? At night in December, Jackson temperatures dropped to minus fifteen, minus twenty. Ice was abundant. This was certainly possible. Yet Lou, perhaps still shaken by her nightmare, had the unsettling feeling in her stomach that what she was watching was more than this.

Gail gasped. She covered Lou's eyes with her hand and drew the blinds. Gail was quick but Lou had seen a glimpse of Alexis. She saw her bloody, sunken face, blood where her mouth should have been. She saw her hair matted at the right temple, the grotesque, twisted shape of her right cheekbone. Except her cheekbone did not exist in the way it should have but was, instead, concave. That was when Lou realized what she was looking at: Alexis's face did not resemble her face because it wasn't there. Her face was gone.

Not gone entirely, but the skin had been removed, a wretched surgeon's poor job at deskinning. Lou's whole body jolted alive in the night. A wolf had not done this. No. Because Alexis's face looked like the wolf they had seen in the woods all those weeks back, or rather, resembled the absence of that wolf's face. Someone. A person, possibly. Her face—just a blank, ruby red, glistening wetly in the darkness. Her friend.

Lou clutched her mother's hands around her face. *Don't let go*, she thought, *don't let go*.

A few hours later, Ian sat Lou down on the couch in the den. "Lou, sometimes accidents happen." Lou still wore Alabama Shakes shirt and her sleep shorts. Beastie was under her arm.

Lou looked her in the face. He would not make eye contact with her. He stared at his big, rough hands, folded in front of him. "What happened to Alexis?"

Gail stood at the doorway. "Ian. Why can't we go to bed? It's late. It's past six in the morning. We're all exhausted. Let's talk tomorrow."

"Is that how you'd prefer to run this family? Through denial?"

A shadow crossed Gail's face. "I'd prefer to run this family the best way I know how," she said evenly. "And keeping our thirteen-year-old daughter awake so you can tell her traumatic news is not truth, it's torture."

Ian laughed. "Torture? Isn't Lou supposed to be the dramatic one? Grow up. Lou—what do you say? Now or later?"

"Now," Lou said immediately.

"Ian—"

"Gail, what use is it to deny her the truth? Who am I protecting? You or her?"

"Say whatever you want. Clearly I'm not apart of the decision-making process anymore." The frown lines between her brows were more prominent in the pale December dawn. She rubbed her fingers beneath her eyes. Lou thought for a panicked moment that she was crying but Gail's fingertips came back dry. "If you need me," Gail said, looking at Lou, "I'll be in my room."

When Gail had closed her door, Ian looked out the living room window towards Alexis's house. "I know these past few months have been so difficult for you."

"She's dead, isn't she?" Lou said. She had no need for frills now. She did not need her father to provide a monologue or ease into it. She had seen what she had seen. That was no nightmare. (Or if it was, not one provided by her subconscious.)

"She passed away on the way to the hospital," he said.

"From what? What happened?"

When he spoke, his cadence was even. He did not look at Lou. "It's icy out there, Lou. Max admitted he hadn't properly salted the driveway yet. He's so mad at himself. So mad. It was late. Dark. She couldn't see. She fell and hit her head."

Lou saw Alexis's bloody, skinless face again in her mind. "Are you lying?" she said softly.

Ian looked up from his hands. "Of course not, Lou. What a thing to say. What *timing*. Jesus. Lying? Christ." He rubbed his palms down his stubbly face. "I'm sorry, Lulu. These things happen sometimes. They're tragic and unexpected and just plain *awful*. Don't make it worse, okay? Can you sleep? We can talk about it tomorrow. I'm sorry, Lou. Really."

But Lou shook her head and said she couldn't sleep. No way. Ian came back with her Restorils. She took them from him greedily, sipped them down with water. He reached out to embrace her.

"Don't touch me," she whispered. Ian stood by her bed for a moment, hands working uselessly in and out of fists.

Sometime later, before the pills knocked her out, Gail crawled into bed beside her. Lou sunk into her mother's arms. Her mother hummed. She stroked Lou's hair until she fell asleep.

The funeral was held six days later. Lou's mother had her wear a long black dress she forgot she owned. It did not fit her correctly, stretching where her small breasts were. She had her mother plait her hair in a French braid. When Lou looked in the mirror, she saw that it was lopsided. Hair stuck out from the middle of her neck on. Gail had never been as good at doing Lou's hair as Ian. Lou recognized many of her classmates in the church pews. Dylan sat a few rows ahead of her, head bowed. They gave one another a cordial nod when they noticed the other.

Harpreet and her mother both looked wan. Yamini did not wear her signature makeup, but a simple black outfit with her hair around her face. Harpreet, Lou could immediately see, had lost weight. She was a small but sturdy girl and the five or so pounds she'd dropped in the last week made her usually durable shoulders look bony. But Max and Sofia looked the worst. Sofia could not stand up straight. She kept moaning that Alexis was her only child, her only daughter, and what would she do without her baby? The handkerchief she clutched had clearly not been washed in some

time. Max steered her from person to person. His touch—a hand on her neck—looked less consoling and more pragmatic. Lou watched his face carefully. At one point, hand still on Sofia's neck, he made eye contact with Lou. She held his gaze. He was the first to look away. His eyes were dry. *People grieve differently*, Gail had told Lou when Aunt Ida passed away. *You can't judge someone's grief*. Lou thought maybe she could.

"When it's closed casket," Harpreet said. Her voice, still high and light, was clipped. She cleared her throat. Tried again. "When it's closed casket, that means they couldn't—they couldn't fix her up." She took off her glasses to wipe the tears away from the bridge of her nose.

Lou did not respond but watched the mulberry-colored casket for the duration of the funeral. Lou scrutinised it warily from where she sat, half-expecting it to snap open at any moment. After the priest recounted the prayer of absolution (what sin did Alexis commit? Lou thought) Sofia and Max spoke about their daughter. Rather, Max pulled Sofia beside him, where she continued to pule and take deep quaking breaths, dabbing beneath her nose. Max kept repeating the word *accident*. He broke down the last time he said it, tears and snot sinking into his beard. His face went red. He wailed that it wasn't fair. Someone who looked like she might be Alexis's grandmother hugged him until his sobbing subsided; Sofia's did not stop. When they were finished, the priest asked for Harpreet Dhillon to approach the front.

Harpreet held her head high, her chin proud and defiant. She stood in front of the podium. Behind her, someone had changed the overhead projector to show photos of Harpreet and Alexis. The two girls, barely eight, flashing gap-toothed smiles in front of the camera; Alexis, on her scooter, Harpreet walking beside her, both of their hair

blowing in the wind; a picture of Alexis on her thirteenth birthday, tall and pretty, a wiggly, tiny Ginny at her feet and Harpreet eating cake in the background; the three of them—Harpreet, Lou, and Alexis—at Halloween. This last image was a selfie that Harpreet had taken.

“Alexis was my first friend,” Harpreet said. She paused, inhaled deeply, and pushed her hair back from her face. “I met her in grade two. I hadn’t learned to use the bathroom properly like other kids—I know. Like four hundred years late. And one day I couldn’t hold it anymore and I peed on the playground. Alexis saw and snuck me around the back of the school to the bathroom, so the other kids wouldn’t see the piss all down my track pants, and she gave me her gymnastics shorts to wear. It was the end of October so I looked like a freak. Who wears shorts in October? That’s a real friend. She always laughed at my jokes. And she was always there when I needed her. She would never say something to hurt anyone’s feelings. She was my first friend,” Harpreet repeated. “And my best friend.”

As Harpreet spoke, Lou finally felt the immense loneliness of death pressing on her chest. Lou openly sobbed, shoulders shaking, face red. Her mother and father both put their arms around her. Lou felt certain she committed a dark malfeasance because, although she deeply mourned the brutal and strange death of Alexis, she also cried for the loss of Julia. She felt, maybe, that she and Alexis would have that same closeness, felt with a certain pure clarity that they would reach many milestones together. She missed Julia. And Alexis. And Caroline. She cried while Mr. Rudkus spoke and she cried when they carried her casket and when they lowered it. Finally, eyes sore and

heavy, she felt empty. She didn't think she could attend Max and Sofia's afterwards but her father wouldn't allow her to skip. "Max would be heartbroken," he said.

Max did not seem heartbroken to Lou. He brought food trays to mourners: fresh fruit, sliced vegetables, a potato and bacon casserole.

"Meatball?" Max said to Lou. He held out the tray. Ten lumpy meatballs sat atop the plate, "It's pork."

Of course it's pork, Lou thought. She shook her head.

Max laughed. "We'll get you yet, Lou," he said.

Your daughter's dead, Lou thought. But she said: "No. I don't think you will." Max's smile wavered. He offered a meatball to the next guest, who took two.

When she found her, Lou grabbed Harpreet's hands and held them tightly between her own. "That was brave of you to speak at the funeral," she said. "I'm proud of you."

But Harpreet took her hands back and did not answer Lou. She sat on the couch, slumped, morose. Lou could not shake the feeling that somehow Harpreet blamed this on her—on her presence in Jackson. On *something*. Perhaps it was misplaced guilt on Lou's part. When she thought Max and Sofia were not watching, Lou crept upstairs. Alexis's door was ajar. She sat on the bed and almost sat on Ginny, who was curled in Alexis's soft striped sweater, the one she usually wore over her comfiest Jackson's Own tee. Ginny's loss manifested itself in her ears, which, usually perky, remained pressed closely to her head. Lou pet her. Ginny raised her head languidly and lowered it again into her paws. Did she know Alexis wasn't coming back? Or did she think she'd just left town for a few days, a few weeks, and was coming home to her? Did she know the

finality of the situation? Lou wished she knew how to tell her she was sorry. She sat, on Alexis's bed, and Ginny crept onto Lou's chest, where they lay, shivering together, for some time.

"I wanted to talk to you right away, obviously," Dylan said. "But I wanted to be respectful to Alexis, too. And you." He leaned against Lou's locker. The first bell had rung, signalling the end of lunch break. They had four minutes before the next bell. "I'm so sorry, Lou."

Lou reached out and hugged him. He squeezed her hard. "Thanks," she said.

"Can I ask you a question?" he said.

Lou said of course he could.

"You lived right next door to her, right? You didn't see anything that night, did you?"

"No. I was sleeping."

"I was looking online," Dylan said. "The same morning that she—she passed away. I didn't know what had happened yet. I read an article from *The Jackson Gazette* that said a girl had been attacked by wolves and killed. That her dog hadn't been touched. That's why I remember it so clearly. I thought that was an odd detail to include. And then my mom told me what happened and I connected the dots. So I went back to the article, just to re-read it for information because the context was changed now, you know? But the details weren't the same. It didn't say she was attacked by wolves. It didn't mention her dog. It just said a girl had passed away in the middle of the night, no foul play suspected. I think it hinted that she'd slipped and fell and hit her head."

Lou felt her stomach sink. “You’re sure? Maybe you’re misremembering. Maybe the first article is still online and it’s about—about...” What was the point of finishing the sentence? She knew the truth.

Dylan offered a smile. “I hoped for the same thing. But I went through my search history and the only news article even resembling a girl’s death was Alexis’s. They changed it. And I think I know why.”

The bell rang again. Rudkus, carrying marked essays from the week before Alexis’s death, rushed past them. Dylan watched him and frowned. “There’s something else I have to discuss, but let’s do it somewhere else. Tell Harpreet.”

Although Lou forced herself to go to school every morning, Harpreet’s presence remained unpredictable. Some mornings she rushed over to Lou’s locker, gushing about this or that; other mornings, she ignored Lou entirely. And still others, Harpreet stayed home. Lou stood in line in the cafeteria, getting her usual side of overpriced and soggy fruit to complement her similarly disappointing peanut butter sandwich. Harpreet sat at their table alone with a full tray of food in front of her. She ate another spoonful of soup.

“There’s meat in that,” Lou said, placing her tray in front of Harpreet and swinging off her backpack. “It’s the *ham* and split pea soup, Harp, didn’t you remember?”

“They killed my best friend, Lou,” Harpreet said softly. She wore an expression of forbearance. She slurped another spoonful of soup.

“What do you—? Oh.” Lou nodded. “I get it. You’re pissed.” Harpreet sat, slumped. She had not gained the weight back yet. Lou missed her fiercely. But she

couldn't lose Harpreet to this thing, either. The school had been rocked by scandal the last half of 2017. First, the attack on Robin in September; next, Lou's father's bite. The winter festival. Alexis. From a distance, without peering too closely at it, without being too *involved*, these things were flimsy and benign. But in the midst of it, Lou felt mad. She understood Harpreet's anger, but she considered it misplaced. Harpreet, without companionship, had made the connection Lou feared to voice out loud. That the pigs were vengeful creatures, strange Frankenstein creations, ruining their painful existence. That humans, their captors, limped along like stupid, greedy narcissists. They had killed Alexis. Yet when Lou looked around, kids ate meals, laughed, threw food, studied for exams. Normal. No one else found the pork obsession strange. And if they didn't find that strange, why would they not blame the pigs? Lou thought, selfishly perhaps, that Harpreet had to think beyond her grief. "Remember what we did to them at that stupid Christmas fest? Remember what we do to them every day?"

"We?" Harpreet said. She popped a crunchy pork bite into her mouth. "Whose we? What did Alexis do?"

"Not Alexis herself," Lou said. "But us—all of us. How do they know which of us hurts them and which of us don't?"

Harpreet shrugged. "Lay off, Lou." She pulled a piece of grilled pork off its skewer. Lou stared. Harpreet had bought every item offered that day and had it on her tray. Her cheeks were ruddy. She looked bloated. "I don't need you to constantly be preaching at me."

"If you don't do it for them," Lou said, "I get it. You're upset. And I don't blame you for that. But do it for yourself. Do you want to risk it? What if what happened to Robin happens to you?" Lou looked around the cafeteria.

"Sorry. Guess we can't all be as perfect as you."

"It's not about that," Lou said. She tightened her grip on her tray. "What about our discussions?" She glanced around and lowered her voice. She had the paranoid feeling that people were listening, specifically the cafeteria worker doling out the food.

"I said drop it," Harpreet said. She bit into her sloppy joe. The red, stringy pork slid down her chin, leaving a greasy red streak. The pork covered her fingers. Harpreet licked them. She grabbed the fallen meat and pushed it hastily into her mouth. Before she swallowed the bite in her mouth, she took another one. Lou stood up from the table and ate elsewhere.

December defied Lou's expectations. Typically, Christmas festivities cheered the otherwise tense Lowes. Atop the fireplace, Gail carefully set up Lou's grandpa's hand-me-down nativity scene. "I don't know why," she confessed to Lou, "I'm not religious and haven't been since eighth grade. For my father, I guess." Lou took comfort in it, nonetheless; she traced her finger along Mary's concerned face.

Lou's mother packed her sweet gingerbread cookies for lunch. Lou could not stomach the brown sugar and maple syrup but still, she took them dutifully. Something happened on a cold Wednesday morning in December that rattled Lou out of her grief. Or, she would think later, perhaps deeper into it. Lou had mastered not looking at the Caceres home despite walking past it on her way to school on chilly Jackson mornings.

She kept her gaze locked forward or found sudden, intense interest in the homes across the street and the neighborhood kids walking the same route as her.

In the days preceding that Wednesday, Lou had not seen Ginny. Although Lou knew the dog had bladder issues, neither Max nor Sofia appeared to take her outside to urinate or to enjoy a wintery walk. When Lou saw Ginny up ahead, she was not altogether surprised to see a redhaired woman holding the other end of Ginny's leash. She wore a wool toque pulled low, over her eyebrows, and a censorious expression that seemed, in Lou's mind, to counter to the act of dog walking. When Lou saw Alexis's dog, who looked as though she'd grown in the time between Alexis's death and now, fur denser and curlier, legs longer, Lou could not move. This did not feel like panic she had experienced before. Her body felt like it had simply stopped functioning. One knee fell to the sidewalk and Lou, obedient, fell beside it. Her shoulders shook violently. Her left backpack strap slipped from her coat.

Ginny, whining incessantly, tugged against the tightness of her harness; she pulled, bounding towards Lou and pressed her paws to Lou's thighs. Ginny licked Lou's damp chin. Lou noticed, with the tiniest humorous satisfaction, that Ginny had yellowed the sidewalk with urine. Lou buried her face into Ginny's soft neck, chest heaving for her friend. Timorously, the woman asked if Lou needed help.

Ian, who had been asleep when Lou left, she was sure of it, appeared as though Lou had called for her help. Eyes half-closed, wearing only stained sweatpants and his denim jacket, he knelt down beside Lou. "Lulu?" he said. His voice still thick with sleep. "What's going on? Let go of Ginny, all right? We'll go back inside. No school today."

“Don’t,” she said, when her father tried to put his hand on her shoulder. She yanked away from him. Back inside, she let him start a hot shower for her, which she stood in until her skin felt parched and pruned. Stonily, she accepted the tea he made for her. He asked her to talk to him. Let him know how she was feeling—did she need a therapist again? They could afford one, no matter *what* Gail said. Lou couldn’t speak. Frustrated, Ian said if she was not going to talk to him at all, he was going back to bed. When she thought he had fallen asleep, she packed a light lunch and headed for school. She could make it for math class. The thought of being alone in that home with him made her skin crawl. Lou stepped outside. Snow had picked up. She crossed the empty street and walked to school the long way.

“There’s something I know that I don’t think the papers are reporting,” Lou said. A week after Alexis’s funeral, Harpreet approached Lou and acted like nothing had happened, as though she hadn’t ignored Lou for the better part of two weeks. Lou, in her own way, understood. Perhaps she was too lonely not to. The forgiveness was swift and seamless. They did not bring up their conversation at lunchtime, except to discuss what they both thought to be the case: that Alexis had not fallen, not slipped, not knocked herself unconscious. She had been attacked. She, Harpreet, and Dylan huddled in the back corner of the school library. Earlier that day, before school began, they had tried to access the articles Lou wanted to show her mother: Montgomery’s interviews, the news about transgenes, the opening of Jackson’s Own. 404 – Article Not Found flashed on the screen.

Harpreet perked up. “What do you know?”

“The faces,” Lou said. “I think whoever is attacking the wolves—and it must be the pigs, right? It’s the pigs—is ripping off their faces.” She saw the skeptical look on Dylan’s face. “I know. You’d think that detail would be mentioned, right? It’s a pretty horrific detail. A really gruesome thing to do to a body. When we found the dead wolf, I didn’t know what I was seeing at first. But the face was ripped off. But no—not *ripped*. The edges were jagged. Bitten off.” Lou sat up straight. She pushed back her shoulders. “I saw Alexis’s face that night. It wasn’t—ah.” A lump formed in her throat. She forced herself to swallow. “It wasn’t *there*. Her face wasn’t all there.”

Harpreet exhaled sharply. “Some accident, huh? Tripped and ripped her face right off.” She grimaced.

“Exactly,” Lou said.

The three of them sat silently in the coffee shop booth, all imagining it and none of them wanting to. Lou, of course, was the only one who could see it, who held it in her memory, and the image was much more terrible than she let on. “The faces. The bitten off skin. If it’s the pigs, why would they do it?” Dylan leaned back in his chair. He scanned the coffee shop. It was nine-thirty on a snowy December evening. They sipped their tea. The shop was mostly empty, save for the elderly woman in the corner who watched them from a distance and occasionally smiled, and the barista, lazily wiping the counters for close in thirty minutes. Finally, Dylan’s lips parted and he snapped his fingers. “It’s political.”

“Like a statement?” Lou said.

“Yes,” he said. “If we’re granting that they have emotions—”

“—and that they’re smart,” Lou said.

“And that they’re smart. Then I think we have to acknowledge that, like humans, they’re capable of understanding symbols and abstract thought. They’re telling us something. Warning us? Threatening us? Telling us a story? I don’t know. I can’t quite read it.”

Harpreet sighed. “I can’t crack it, either. It could just be a fucked-up MO. You know? Like some serial killers keep memorabilia of their victims in their houses, and their wives never know, and then like forty years later they realize their husband was the killer plastered on the news? And everyone’s like oh my god, she should have known, what a stupid broad, and somehow, she should have predicted that the guy she married was busy ripping people’s heads off. Maybe,” she finished, “they’re serial killers.”

“Or maybe we’re the serial killers,” Lou said. She recalled Alexis and Harpreet retelling the story of Ian’s bite. How fast the pig moved. *Like it wanted revenge.*

Lou needed Julia.

She opened their last text conversation. For their conversation icon, Lou still had a photo of herself and Julia grinning for the camera, arms wrapped around each others’ shoulders. Lou scrolled through their conversation; she had sent several text messages. It was not that Julia did not respond. She didn’t, not always, but she sent something in response most of the time. It was that her responses were strangely short. Curt. Annoyed. If the change had been subtler, more gradual, Lou could have gotten used to it. She still would not have liked it, of course, but the adjustment wouldn’t have been so gut-wrenchingly difficult.

She curled up in her bed. A snowstorm raged outside her window. Snow fell in great swirling gusts. Lou's mother had put up dark blinds on Lou's window when she was in school one day, a small act of mercy, but Lou could see through the gaps into the yard. The wind fiercely flung itself against her window, rattling the window panes. Caroline hated storms of any kind and would huddle beside Lou, quaking and whining. Lou pulled the covers up to her chin. She realized she was crying when the blue linen, damp, deepened in color. The weight of what had transpired—Alexis's death, her father's increasingly agitated demeanor, her nightmares—weighed on her, pressing on her chest, her heart, her lungs.

Lou called Julia.

When she picked up, Lou's stomach dropped and her heart quickened.

"Hi," Lou said back.

"Lou?" Julia said. If Lou wasn't mistaken, Julia sounded as excited as she felt. "I haven't heard from you in forever! How are you? What's new?"

Lou sniffled. How could she explain? How to phrase it? "Julia," she said. Her voice cracked. "I miss you."

"Sorry—Lou?"

Lou cleared her throat. Tried again. "I miss you," she said. Louder. Firmer. "It's so nice to hear your voice."

"Lou, where did you go?"

"I'm here," Lou said. "I'm right here. I can hear you fine. Can you—"

"I think it's the storm," Julia said. "Lou, I can barely hear you. You sound so far away."

"I'm not," Lou said. "Only three hours. I can hear you. Should I speak louder?"

"I—I can't hear what you're saying," Julia said. Now the phone did seem to crackle. Julia's voice sounded quiet. Distant. "I—"

The phone beeped. Lou saw her own reflection in the black screen of her phone. The wind shook her window. Lou held her phone to her chest, hoping Julia would call back. Five minutes passed. Fifteen. Lou held Beastie.

The evening Gail went to the hospital began like any other day. In fact, the day started off better and more magically than the days had that December: the Lowes were going to cut down their annual Christmas tree. Lou was grateful for the outing and for likely the same reason Gail and Ian were—to help ease some of the tension in the house as of late. The last fortnight had been difficult in more ways than one. Ian and Gail sniped at one another whenever their shifts allowed. Some mornings Lou would walk, bleary eyed, into the kitchen for granola and find one of them sleeping on the couch curled beneath the throw blanket and the stained green blanket they typically used for camping. Sometimes Gail. Sometimes Ian. Maybe they had a rotating schedule. The kids at school had been morose and quiet the first week after Alexis's death. Many girls wore black: black sweaters, black jeans, black ribbons in their hair. By early second week, the air of Christmas spirit had flooded the school again and on Thursday, they decorated their lockers, discussed gifts, talked about what they would do with two whole weeks off. Most discussed snowball fights and igloo-building; others, from wealthier families, talked about ski trips to Whistler and Washington. Harpreet didn't try to joke as much. After their period of not speaking, she and Lou ate lunch together, closer than

before, shoulders touching shoulders, thighs touching thighs. Yet they could barely hold a conversation.

Lately, her nightmares had been awful. She did not always remember them—generally, she did not, just remembered the feeling and the fear—and she blamed that on the Restorils. They put her to sleep with efficacy but the quality of the sleep left something to be desired. The night before their excursion But Lou was happy that mid-December morning. Lou had slept well and with no dreams. She was rested and calm. The snowstorm from two days earlier had transformed Jackson into a beautiful wonderland, coating the trees and weighing down their branches.

Despite being on night shift the last week, even Ian seemed chipper. He confessed he did not sleep much the night before (“And I don’t think I wanted to,” he said, “I need to keep my body in rhythm, you know? Don’t want to have to retrain it”) but he woke up early to pack them a lunch. Three thermoses of warm hot cocoa, veggies and crackers and hummus, a package of thick hot dogs from the local butcher, thick and smelly egg salad sandwiches for himself and Gail, a chickpea salad (made to recreate a tuna salad) sandwich for Lou with dill pickle, red bell pepper, celery and an extra helping of Dijon mustard. He even cut Lou’s sandwich into fours, the way she used to like it in grade one and two. Gail had bought ingredients for s’mores.

Ian snapped once at Gail when she put the cooler in sideways to fit it in between the equipment. He’d packed their tarp, gloves, straps, and the bow saw borrowed from Max. *One day at a time*, Lou told herself, *one day at a time*. The sun shone in the car windows; the warmth on Lou’s cheek sent palpable thrills of contentment down her body. *He’s adjusting too*, she thought charitably. The Lowes drove slowly through

Jackson; the roads were plowed but not well. They passed Alexis's house. Lou could not look at it. They drove past the acres of farm land. In the distance, Lou thought she could make out a sow or two in the fields. Ian reminded her it was too cold for them at this time of year. "All tucked safely inside," he said. "Nice and warm."

As they drove, the houses and lights of Jackson dimmed and faded and ultimately disappeared. The trees on either side of the highway grew thicker and denser. Felt more like home. Gail had a map open on her lap, reading glasses on her nose. Lou remembered last year when Gail got them and Ian had smiled broadly when she walked in. Gail had been nervous. She felt old she said, like this was the end of her twenties and the end of her youth. Ian shook his head. *You look like a sexy librarian*, he had told her, and Lou had blushed and so had Gail. But they'd kissed a deep kiss afterwards and Lou forgave them.

The tree farm was forty-five minutes away. They listened to classic rock and sang along to their favorites; Lou loved Bruce Springsteen and Tom Petty the most. Gail let Lou plug in her iPod and play Alabama Shakes. Lou caught her father bouncing his fingers along to the beat on the steering wheel and she teased him for it. "Am I too old to like your hip music, Lulu?" Ian teased back, looking at her in the rear-view mirror.

Lou grabbed the three thermoses and their old camping chairs that Lou figured they must have bought back in the 90s. Gail hauled the picnic blanket and the heavy wool blanket. Ian said he would meet them after he cut down the tree. The least exciting part, he joked, was the actual chopping down. You women, he said, you get all the fun parts. You have no idea, Gail said dryly. She and Lou hiked for five minutes, looking for the top of a hill.

“Can storms affect cell phone reception?” Lou said.

“What?” Gail turned back. Trees grew thicker around them. They could no longer see the parking lot, nor Ian.

“Snowstorms,” Lou repeated. “Can they block cell phone reception? Make it difficult to hear the other person?”

Gail stopped walking. She frowned. “Good question, Lou,” she said, “but I don’t think so. The weight of heavy rain, sure. But snow? Perhaps the wind could cause a slight disturbance.” She looked around. “Why?”

“Just wondering,” Lou said.

“We won’t get lost up here, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Gail said.

Other families with children had evidently had similar ideas. Three small fire pits sat in a large semi circle, two of which were occupied. Gail and Lou snagged the last one. They set up the camping chairs, laid out the blanket, set up the picnic but kept everything wrapped and covered with dishtowels so as not to get soggy or too cold while they waited for Ian.

“How are you holding up lately, Lou?” Gail said at one point. They watched a pair of sisters in twin plaid snow pants squish themselves onto an intricately carved wooden toboggan. They slid down the hill, screeching and bouncing. “How have you been feeling?”

Lou swallowed. “It seems sort of surreal.”

“I can understand that,” Gail said.

“I hear her mom a lot,” she said. “I mean, the *memory* of her—I hear that. I hear her saying *my baby, my baby* over again.”

“And that makes you feel anxious?”

Lou nodded. “A bit.”

“Dr. Potter is only a phone call away,” Gail said. “Remember when we left? She said she’d be happy to Skype with you, remember? Or call you on your cell phone. Would that sound like something you’d like to do?”

Lou said sure, maybe, she’d think about it. But really, as she watched the snow begin falling down in slow swirls, she had a worrisome thought: what if her call to Dr. Potter went the same way that it had with Julia? Except this time, there would be no storm. This time, she would have to accept that she was simply crazy or disappearing or slipping away into a black hole. The thought made her nauseated. She would not be calling Dr. Potter.

Gail said Ian would be coming back soon. They began creating the s’mores because, as Gail put it, sometimes you had to eat dessert first. She smiled at Lou beneath the December sunshine. Her cheeks were plump and rosy when she smiled. Ian walked towards their site. Unknowingly, he still wore his thick red gloves. When he eased himself into the camp chair, it slid slightly in the snow. “Fuck, Gail,” he said. “Trying to kill me?” He laughed. Gail did not. Lou watched Ian peel off his red gloves, stack them beside his chair, lean forward and warm his hands over the fire. “Got the tree,” he said. “You two are going to love it.”

“Thanks, dad,” Lou said, because no one was speaking. It was like trying to collect water in a sieve, Lou reflected. You could patch up one hole but there were simply too many holes. You would never catch up. Lou had the sense, since she was young, that she existed to patch those holes. That she was expected to somehow take

care of Gail and Ian. She had resented this from the time she had realized. The Lowes could try to carry on their Christmas tradition in Jackson, try to smile and be polite to one another, try to eat a simple December picnic the way they used to but something was irrevocably changed. Jackson, only three hours away from Lou's hometown, felt on another planet. And here, the Lowes were irreparably holed. Jackson. Mars. The Land of the Red. Wherever she was, whatever Jackson was, this was an unwelcome space for Lou, she felt it in her bones; she wanted to go home.

Ian ignored the s'mores that Lou and Gail were eating and opened the cooler. He ripped open the hot dog package, grabbed a stick by his feet and began cooking. He and Gail talked about what a gorgeous day it was. Gail agreed that it was but that she missed the East Coast a little bit. Ian said she'd moved out west when she was ten, what was there to miss?

"I guess I miss the ocean sometimes," Gail said.

Ian tucked his hotdog into a bun. He smeared homemade relish over it. He bit into it. Chewed. "Can't we just enjoy the day we have here? Look at the trees. Aren't they something? Why do you need the ocean when you have the trees?"

Lou agreed with her father, in a way: the trees, thick, verdant, snow-coated. The air fresh and cool. Lou opened the cooler and reached in for her own sandwich. She thought she wouldn't mind seeing Eastern Canada one day, dip her toes into the Atlantic. She leaned back in her chair and dug into her sandwich.

'How did you make this?' Lou said, chewing messily. "This is delicious. I'm goan'a," she took a long slurp of hot cocoa, "I'm goan'a make this for Harpreet. She'd love it."

Ian rattled off the ingredients: dill, chickpeas, Vegemise to bind it all together. "And," he added, "for flavor: a few bacon bits."

Lou laughed. "Funny, Dad." She shoved the remaining bite in her mouth and wiped her fingers on her jeans.

His lips didn't twitch. "Just a few, Lulu," he said breezily. "For protein. You didn't even taste them, see? I want to make sure you grow up big and strong, like your father."

Lou felt like her body was on fire. "Are you kidding or not?" she said. She felt the panic rising in her chest. She hadn't eaten meat since a few days after the incident; she was coming up on a year and a half.

Ian took a bit of his second hot dog. "Why would I be joking? It was a handful of bacon bits. Am I on trial now? What's the big deal?"

"I don't eat meat," Lou said icily. "You *know* I don't eat meat. You didn't even tell me."

"If I told you," he said simply. "You wouldn't have eaten it. And where's the fun in that?"

"Ian," Gail said. She sounded as cold as Lou did. "How could you?"

"Whoa. Okay—wow." Ian held up his hands; a chunk of his hotdog fell off and plopped into the snow. "I'm sorry, okay? They're Jackson bacon bits. The pigs were raised right here. I probably helped with its production. Just trying to get everyone on board with the family business."

"It's not the family business," Lou said. "Only *you* work there."

"Ida worked there, too," Ian said. "And your mother works in the deli. What's so different about that? See? Family business."

Lou remembered her Aunt Ida, who looked so much like Ian. The same blond hair, the same wide, open face, and powerful—so powerful. Broad shoulders, big hands, a fierce wit to her speech. Her last memories of Ida, however, were not of her aunt as powerful or big or fierce. Ida had died of cancer, after being laid off with an injury that helped the doctors detect the disease spreading inside of her, and she had died shriveled and hairless and angry. And—Lou thought with a sickening bolt of surety—she had died infected. How could she not have? She was bitten, too. She didn't recall her parents telling her what type of cancer Ida had. Yes. The family business.

Lou was not sure if she should vomit. Her pride told her yes: make her father watch her puke, discolor the snow. The other families would stare, maybe ask her if she was all right. But she felt more numb than angry. She should have known. She should have expected. In a perverse sense, she was upset with herself. Had her father not already betrayed her? Had he not already shown who he really was?

"I'm sorry," Gail said finally. The kids were back at the top of the hill. The siblings clambered onto the wooden sleigh. The older one adjusted her toque (Lou could see that it was the same one Harpreet owned). She whooped and they were off, back down the hill. Gail spoke again: "I'm sorry that your father doesn't respect your wishes."

"Christ," Ian said. He bit into his hot dog. "For fuck's sake, Gail. Are you trying to pit my own daughter against me?"

Gail remained quiet for a moment. Lou was careful to stare straight ahead, into the pitiful flames of the fire. "I think you're doing that on your own," Gail said.

"Christ," Ian said again. "Sorry, Lou. Okay? Sorry. Please accept my sincere apologies for caring about your health. Have you noticed how skinny she is? Gail? You

need meat to fucking survive. I don't want to watch my daughter waste away in front of my own eyes without at least trying to intervene. Jesus. I know we were never the goddamn Brady Brunch but—

"There are kids *everywhere*," Gail said quietly. "Does every second word have to be a curse? Maybe we could try for every third. Balance it out a bit."

"You know where I'd rather be right now?" Ian said. He sat back in their camping chair, the one they'd bought from Wal-Mart a few years back. The blue polyester was worn in, faded, threadbare on the armrests. "I'd rather be at work. With those *things*. How's that for a family outing?"

"Then go," Lou said.

"What?"

"Go," she said again. "Why are you still here?" Lou began to pack their things.

The ride home was tense. Lou excused herself to the outhouse before they got their car. She stuck three fingers down her throat and heaved. As they walked towards the car, with alarming clarity Lou knew she must vomit—not even for her pride or her commitment, but for her health. If what she, Dylan, Harpreet, and Alexis had discussed was accurate, she could never risk it, no matter how small the chance.

When they got home, Ian hauled the tree into the living room and said he needed a nap. Lou helped Gail unwrap the tree from the tarp, prop it in the stand, and sweep up the errant branches. Gail turned on the holiday music channel and she and Lou made sweets. This, too, was tradition. Ian was the better cook, but Gail the better baker. Lou, now hungry, having emptied her lunch into the outhouse, ate heaping scoops of dough

as they went along. She wanted to ask her mother about it—she had the not entirely irrational fear that her father had put meat in her dish more than once—but she didn't know how to broach the topic. The closeness that she and Gail were now fostering and Lou thought of it like a wild deer: get too close to it, look at it head on, and it would bound back into the woods where it came. When she was older, Lou and Gail would discuss that day in detail and Gail would tell her she, too, wanted to talk about the lunch but not only what Ian had done. She wanted to discuss the incident with Caroline. As it turned out, they wouldn't properly have that conversation for years. In hindsight, when Lou was older, she would chastise herself for not connecting the dots earlier. The dots of Jackson's Own, yes, but those intertwining her family as well. *You were only thirteen*, her numerous therapists would tell her, but this wasn't what Lou wanted to hear. She wanted someone to be angry with her, to be disappointed in her, like she was with herself. That way, the both of them could carry it. But, as Lou would later begrudgingly forgive herself, Lou's time in Jackson felt like a fog, characterized by too many sleeping pills and not enough happiness.

When the two of them heard Ian washing up in the kitchen, Gail prepared two rum and egg-nogs. Lou fetched the decorations from the garage. From where she stood, hunched over the box, she accidentally looked out the garage window towards Max and Sofia's house (she did not notice the slip, the gentle shift from *Alexis's house* to her parents' house). Lou saw Max reaching into the back seat of his car. She thought, at first, that he was bringing in a tree—the type that came in a box and lasted forever. But she realized as he gave the box another push that he was *placing* it in the back of the seat. Not taking it inside with him. Lou had seen their Christmas tree when she walked

home with Alexis after school, bright and blue and festive. She brought the decorations inside.

Ian and Gail nursed their rum and eggnogs. "Turn up the TV," Ian said to Lou, who did so. Ian and Gail swayed, each clutching their drink, in the kitchen. Lou saw the distance between their hips but delighted in the way they held each others' shoulders. Like before they'd moved to Jackson, when they were younger and more in love.

Ian broke apart from their hug to refill his drink.

"Yes," Gail said.

"Come on," Ian said. "I know you're holding back. What is it? Not big enough? It fills the whole corner. I was scared a bigger one wouldn't even fit in the door."

"It's great," she said, shaking her head. "You picked a nice one."

Ian leaned into her shoulder. "What is it? I know you too well. You forget that."

Gail wouldn't say, though. She smiled coyly.

"Where's the star?" Lou said, rummaging through the box.

Gail told Lou to check the garage. It probably fell out, she said. Lou searched under the car, beneath half-empty moving boxes. She stacked her old Easy Bake Oven box on top of another box to reach the top shelf. Nowhere. It was gone.

"No star," Lou reported.

"It's just a little bit of a Charlie Brown tree," Gail was saying. She downed the rest of her eggnog. Her face looked relaxed, her eyes watery.

"Charlie Brown? What are you getting at? What does that even mean?" Ian laughed sourly. "Jesus, Gail, can't you see the upside to anything? It's a tree. It's a *free*

fucking tree. I thought you'd be happy about that. I'm sorry it doesn't fit your aesthetic standards."

"Look at the top half—it looks like it was eaten by squirrels," Gail said.

"Okay," Ian said. "What's the plan?" Gail looked to him. "You want to go buy another tree?"

"No," Gail said. "Maybe we could cover that portion with garland."

"Garland," Ian said. He held the drink in his hand, studied the tree. "Nah, I think you're right. It's pathetic, isn't it? Shouldn't have wasted my time cutting it down."

"It wasn't a waste of time," Gail said.

"We should just go buy another one," Ian said. "Wal-Mart should have a few stragglers left. Can't be sure they'll be better than this one, but—"

"It's not in the budget," Gail said.

"They're less than fifty dollars," Ian said.

"You cut this one down," Gail granted. "It's great. I didn't mean it as an insult, okay? God, Ian, you're so testy lately."

"We have fifty bucks—"

"No," Gail said firmly. "No, we do *not* have fifty bucks. We still owe on the Visa, you know that, and we still haven't bought half the presents we need to buy and Christmas is in two weeks. One of us has to be responsible for once, Ian. This was supposed to be a fresh beginning for us. A clean start. You work evenings now and we never see you. I barely know you any more. I wish we'd never come to Jackson."

"Your problem is with us moving now? I needed a job, Gail. Or did you not notice that either?"

“Oh, give me a fucking break,” Gail said. “Of all the positions to take, why *this* one? Your sister *hated* this job, Ian. I heard her crying with you on the phone! About the mental toll it took on her, killing those animals day in and day out. She wanted *out* of the job, she didn’t want you coming here. You should have sold this house. We never should have taken it. And when Ida told you this town was strange, you didn’t listen to that either. What do they do to those animals, Ian?”

“You never liked Ida. You always thought you were too good for her. She thought the opposite, did you know? She thought *I* was too good for *you*.”

“It’s just a power trip,” Gail said. “It’s always been a power trip with you. You like being in control of things, don’t you?”

“Who *doesn’t*? Who wants to feel out of control?”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it. I mean you want to *dominate* things, or people, or animals, or whatever. It’s the only time you feel fucking secure. Even Ida said it, said you’d been like that since you were kids. Did *you* know *that*?”

Lou looked between her parents, at her mother, bags beneath her eyes, the waves in her brown hair stringy and frizzy both, the new weight in her midsection. Her father, tall, broad, angry. His jaw muscles working. He took another gulp of his drink and slammed the glass down. Lou remembered this Ian: this was the Ian who had come home, drunk and rejected, ego bruised, pissing the day away. He’s the one who took out his anger on a dog, who convinced Lou she didn’t see what she had seen, who made Lou feel utterly batshit crazy. She wondered how she could have ever sided with him.

“Can both of you calm down?” Lou said. “Look—the tree is a bit sparse on the top. So what, okay? Can we just get back to decorating?”

Ian turned around. “Hey, Lou? Did I ask for your opinion? No? Then shut the fuck up.”

Lou’s jaw clacked shut.

“Don’t speak to your daughter that way. Ever.”

Lou would always remember the feel of the wooden toy soldier, grainy and warm, in her hand. She hated that decoration because it was missing an arm but Gail said they should still put it up (another of her *waste not, want not* habits). The smell of eggnog made her stomach turn. “Grandma Got Ran Over by a Reindeer” played on the TV. Outside, in the distance, maybe a few doors down, Lou could hear the cheerful trill of carollers.

“I provide for you both, don’t I?” Ian said. “I give you what you want. Don’t I? Lou—oh, little Lulu, I’m sorry, okay? Forgive me, but you’re kind of fucked up. What thirteen year old needs sleeping pills to get to sleep? You need a therapist because you see things in the night? Do you know how much money that is? If you think we don’t have room in our budget for a fucking Christmas tree, take a look at your daughter over there. That’s where it went. That’s why we live here. That’s why I’m working where I work. Do *you* want to go in for me instead, huh? Blow their brains out? Knock them unconscious? You don’t know what it feels like, to take a life. You accuse me of liking it but you *have* to like it or you’ll go insane, you have to see it as a game, you have to want them to die, you have to hate them. Got it, you miserable cunt?”

Gail reached out—for what? Lou thought, for who?—and when Ian turned around he was someone else or he was the same person he had always been but Lou saw him clearly. He raised his hand. Lou closed her eyes. When he brought it down Lou heard a sickening smack. Gail clutched her jaw. The worst part was not that Ian had fractured her jaw bone, it was that he didn't stop. He grabbed Gail by the shoulders, hard, and when he pushed her Gail tumbled backwards into the tree. *Don't look*, she remembered Ian saying last year, booze on his breath. Lou heard the thwacking sounds of Ian's fist on Caroline's sides.

Lou ran forward and grabbed Ian's arm. She was amazed at how sweaty he was, how big, how fierce. She pulled his arm back. "Stop," she screamed. "Stop!"

Ian wrenched his arm from Lou's grip. His arm slid out of her fingers. She was startled by his strength.

A knock on their door. Outside, choir members began singing "Baby It's Cold Outside."

"Oh, Gail," Ian said. "Oh, Jesus, Gail. I'm sorry. Are you all right? Fuck, Lou, why didn't you sweep all the nettles away?" Ian extended his hand to Gail.

A small, clean fracture in her jaw. The doctor said no surgery required but to be more careful heading into the basement without flicking the lights on. She was prescribed pain medications, ibuprofen and heat for the swelling, and told to eat soft foods. Lots of mashed potatoes and soup. Was a shame it had happened so close to Christmas—no pork roast for you. Lou was outraged at this terrible lie but Gail made her promise not to breathe a word about what had happened to anyone. The town's too small; she didn't

want to be known as a battered wife. Ian, pale, white-knuckled, cried on the way to the hospital. He was not drunk but likely should not have been driving (something Lou realized only months later, which seemed a small crime in comparison to his others). Having rushed out the door, the Lowes were dramatically underdressed in thin shirts, jeans, and boots. Ian sobbed in the hospital waiting room. Lou stared at him. He asked for a Kleenex. Lou didn't move. Eventually, he was offered tissue by a nurse, who distractedly patted Ian's shoulder.

When Ian killed Caroline, Lou suffered. She wept, she screamed, she cried; she became anxious and vulnerable in a way she hadn't felt before. Lou considered herself a natural leader but, after Caroline's death, felt unstable and unsure. Her sense of self had been shaken. Now, she did not feel anxious. A quiet resentment began brewing with Caroline's death; now it swirled angrily in her stomach. Part of this resentment was directed inwards. She hadn't helped Caroline. She hadn't helped the piglets. She hadn't helped her mother. No, her answer had been to cower. To close her eyes.

Ian tried to talk to Lou in the waiting room. He whispered that this Christmas was going to be the best Christmas yet. "Just you wait," he said. "Just you wait to see what I've gotten you."

"What is it," Lou said. She sat, arms crossed over her chest, slumped in the plastic waiting room chair.

Ian repeated himself. "Just you wait," he said. "Just you wait."

Go fuck yourself, Lou wanted to say.

When Lou thought of this time when she was older, when she dissected it with future therapists and a close friend over many glasses of wine, Lou realized the seeds

of her plan had been planted during the December festival in downtown Jackson. The fact that her father had put bacon bits in her sandwich had certainly helped it grow. Her mother's jaw solidified it. Yes, Lou was weary. She'd exhausted herself by letting those she cared about down. But somehow, it was her father, saying *just wait, just wait* that made her decide to do it. She could not wait. She would not.

Ian fluttered and fretted. Despite working night shifts, he barely slept during the day. Instead, he pureed Gail food (squash, peas, potatoes; at one point, Gail told Ian to stop force feeding her baby food or she would vomit), he constructed smoothies loaded with hemp hearts, chia seeds, maca powder. He refilled her water before she was finished with it. He went out and bought a Christmas tree from Wal-Mart, the flimsy plastic kind. The smell of pine evaporated with the Charlie Brown tree. Ian decorated the fake one, extra garland. He put the wooden ornaments on himself. On the sixth day of this, after Ian had slipped out the door for work around nine at night, Lou sat down with her mother on the couch.

"Mom," Lou said quietly. "What are we going to do?"

Her mother, who Lou had wildly underestimated, did not appear acrimonious or particularly mawkish; she did not grovel or shuffle. More or less, she was the same as she'd always been, save for her swollen jaw, her murmuring voice, the meals she ate. She ate a spoonful of refried beans. Chewed barely, carefully.

"He was a charming boy when we were younger," she said finally. "Him nineteen, me barely sixteen. With a little distance now, at my age, I can see why my mother balked. Those years don't seem like a big gap now and they're not, but when you're a

teenager, every year is monumental. Every year shapes who you are. It's one of those things you never believe your parents about. That you'll understand when you're older. But you do."

Lou understood. Her father, good-looking, bright smile, quick to laugh, good with his hands. He had charmed her, too.

"I'm sorry I made him your father," she said. "It's too big of an ask right now, I know." She held her jaw, breathing in and out for a moment. "But I hope one day you'll forgive me for that. I don't deserve it, but I hope."

Lou picked up her mother's bowl. She took it to the sink, let it soak. Lou boiled water for ginger tea. She refilled her mother's water glass, grabbed her evening pain medications, and brought them back to the couch. She lay a warm blanket over both of their thighs.

"My mother always said I could take just about anything and that was my strength and my downfall. Stalwart, like a tree, she'd say, but unable to move, too. Let me heal, Lou. We'll find a place. We'll find our home. Away from him. You hear me?"

Lou felt silly for thinking she'd ever been her father's daughter. She looked like him, the same mess of blonde hair and blue eyes, narrow face, but DNA could only predict so much. She sipped her tea. She asked her mother for a timeline. After Christmas, Gail promised. Just hold tight for a little while longer, Lou. Just wait.

DECEMBER 21 2017

Lou walked.

In her hand, she held her father's work SALTO card. She flipped up her red hood to protect her ears from the cold. He left it dangling in the closet, as he always did on his nights off, hanging from the green lanyard. Lou waited until her alarm clock said three and snuck into her parent's room. Gail, long asleep on the pullout in the living room, was not a worry. Her sleeps, thanks to her pain pills, were deep and difficult to disturb. Lou waited at the doorway until she heard her father's breaths heave in and out in and out in and out. She tiptoed to the closet and unhooked the card and held it tightly. What had her father called her back in October, when she and Alexis had found the wolf? Naïve.

Naïve. Well, Lou thought, looking at the card in her hand, you had to be a little naïve to be brave, didn't you?

She knew this route. She had walked it before. She'd woken up at quarter two three in the morning. Although she did not feel as though she'd consciously planned it, when she began dressing, she realized her motions were calculated, measured. The sky was black, almost starless. A waxing crescent moon hung in the sky; she could make out craters, crevasses, wrinkles, rough surfaces. In the darkness, the landscape disappeared and reassembled itself before her eyes each time she passed a house alit

with holiday lights. She passed through trees. Strangely, she felt calm. She walked on. Her breath came in soft icy tufts. She pushed her hands into her parka. Nothing made a sound in the woods. No shuffling, no howling, no swaying trees in the nighttime wind. Only her boots, her breath, the crunch of snow beneath her boots. In the distance, she saw it. The abattoir's lights were dull but still glowed in the darkness. Close.

She climbed over the fence like she had done in her dreams those past few months. She landed softly. As her father had mentioned, new electric fencing had not been erected around the farm grounds. Her father had told Lou that this was not Jackson's Own's aesthetic; they were a family-owned farm, a family *friendly* farm, traditional roots, progressive prospects. No, Montgomery ensured that the doors themselves were impossible to open. Unless you worked there, of course. Unless you had an employee card.

When Lou turned around, she stood frozen: bright eyes twinkled in the field. She felt her heart thumping in her neck. She had driven by cattle fields countless times in her life, to the point of mindless ubiquity. A cow here, a cow there; a horse, a llama, a pig. Rarely did she see a herd of them, but if she did there were perhaps fifteen, twenty, thirty. But Lou had never seen anything like the site before her. Hundreds—no, thousands—of pigs standing silent in the field, facing her. Still. Patient. A chill shot down her spine.

Lou inhaled deeply. She held her breath (*face the bogeyman*, she thought, *don't wait under your covers, shivering—face him head on*), weaving in and out of the pig bodies. They did not harm her. They hardly acknowledged her. Lou's foot felt the body at the entrance of the barn before she saw it. She glanced down, once, to see if she

could help. She could not. She discovered another worker's body at the mouth of the breeding area. Her intestines were pink and dewy beneath the barn lights.

Lou walked the mostly empty pens. Pigs had climbed, jumped, and maneuvered the gates open. Some remained, terrified, shaking, grunting, squealing, and groaning in their pens. Lou used her father's card. The mechanical whirr of the gates raising. Lou repeated this. Again and again. The pigs walked around her, again, with that measured uncanny patience in their steps. She went into the piglet pen. Many of the them greeted her, silently, walking up to her feet. She led them out the door. They followed. Stopped. Walked to the older, bigger pigs. Lou headed for the slaughterhouse.

She had longed to do this for some time. Her hands shook. She used her father's card. She half expected it not to work, to not watch the red light turn green. Instead, it did what it was designed to do. When Lou walked in, she was greeted with the smell of sanitation and, beneath it, blood. She walked down a hallway. She turned right. She unlocked another door. Dismembered pig torsos hung from great racks, their stark white ribs alive in the dull lighting. Lou heard crying. She walked. A man, dressed in white garb, one side a bright red, sat, crying into his elbow. A pig faced him. She did not know where the pig had escaped from but it stared patiently at the man, great chest heaving. The man's arm had been bitten off at the shoulder. Lou saw that he was dying. She walked. She opened a door.

Pigs in metal chutes stared, wide-eyed, at her. Great, furry, grey and pink and black and beige and pink shapes of animal. She unlocked them from their pen. They lead the way this time. She followed them back outside. A thought crossed her mind: they were waiting for her. She had come this night for a reason. If she hadn't come, the

ones in the farm facilities might have escaped, but what of these ones? She remembered being here before—but no, that was a dream. A flurry had risen up; pigs walked, squealed, grunted. They moved towards the fence. Lou followed. They picked up speed. Lou held tightly to the fence. The cold night's wind blew her hair around her face. She tucked it back into her cloak, beneath her parka. At first, she watched. Great masses rushed past her. She heard crunching snow all around her. *Stampede*, Lou thought desperately, but they did not harm her. Large pigs rumbled past her, rushing, some running, others lumbering. The full dark made it difficult to see the pigs in their entirety but Lou's eyes had adjusted somewhat.

Lou looked over her shoulder. They were heading south, not north.

South. Not north.

Towards the town.

Lou's pulse quickened. She stood up tall, waving her arms. "*That way!*" she screamed. She pointed. "*That way!*" She pointed beyond the farm, beyond the abattoir, to the hills. They'd have to trawl through the forest. They might have to pass freeways. And another town. And—and maybe they wouldn't make it. Maybe they couldn't. But they had to try. It was better than this. Anything was better than this. Yet the pigs did not pause.

Lou screamed again. "No, no! Listen to me! Turn around! You're going to die!"

The pigs thundered by.

Lou stood there, red cloak billowing in the December wind, her father's employee pass dangling around her neck. Oh, Christ. She looked around her, at the bodies galloping by. Around her, the ground shook. Despite the moon's obfuscation by cottony

clouds, Lou could see something her brain had no explanation for. Pigs walked on four legs. This she knew. Yet, a coal colored pig near her walked slowly, uncertainty, like a foal learning to walk—not on four legs. On his hind legs. Lou's jaw dropped.

She understood.

The pigs were headed for Jackson on purpose.

Lou threw her head back and, from the bottom of her diaphragm, from the deepest recess of her chest, screamed.

The ground rumbled with the weight of thousands of hooves, thousands of swine hybrids, barreling towards a reckoning. A tidal wave of wriggling, vengeful, angry bodies. They carried the scent of piss, shit, blood. They demanded to be understood as alive. First, they ran along the highway, great hooves against icy roads. Some fell, slid, caused a brief domino of fallen hogs, but stood back up, shaken but not injured. Onward. Headlights. Some, Lou noticed, had turned back when she'd shouted. A small group of them, now northbound, ran back towards the slaughterhouse, headed past the fields, the manure pools, towards the forests and then God knew where. Lou could not watch them. She had to keep up with the others. Trees swayed and shook as though an earthquake swept through them, and in a way, an earthquake did, or at least—a force of nature. Some pigs yelped as they collided with one another but mostly they ran in a uniform group, southward, eager, planned, a united front.

Lou sprinted after them.

In the harsh December night, calf-deep in snow, this was an arduous task. She lifted her boots high. Her lungs burned in the freezing night air. She gasped for air. Her cloak slid off her head. Her coat buttons gave way and flapped in the wind. Still she ran.

She could not keep up with the pigs in front; they easily sped past her, great muscular legs traversing the snow with relative ease. They kicked up tufts of snow that hit Lou's nose and mouth. She ran on.

They hit the treeline. Lou leapt over fallen and dead redwood branches and rocks, ducked beneath the heavy winter trees. Chatter filled the forest. Lou could not make sense of what she heard. The pigs did not sound entirely pig-like anymore; from far away, Lou might have believed she was listening to the conversation of a foreign family, visiting from overseas to ski in Canada. Massive pigs rushed past her, most on all fours, some, grotesquely, horrifically, on their hind legs, propelled forward by their colossal haunches. The image so intensely shocked Lou that she rationalized she must be in a dream but the sounds, the wind, the shaking of the earth beneath her boots reminded her that she was regrettably, dangerously, impossibly awake. Above them, in the hills, wolves howled: high, desperate, lonely, frightened pitches. Warnings. SOS's. Pleas. Lou understood: the forest no longer teemed with carnivorous, stalking, ruthless wolves. No, the pigs had remythologized the danger in the woods. Swine, in ferocious groups of quivering muscle, bounded through the trees. Lou, small for her age, skinny, narrow-hipped, nearly disappeared among them.

She looked over her shoulder once and—

Lou collided with the ground. Hard. Thank God for the snow. Her nose ran. No, not mucus. Blood. She wiped the warmth from her upper lip with the back of her wrist, the strap of material hanging over her hand: scarlet blood on scarlet cloak. She wiped her face dry as best she could. Pigs continued to run, to chatter, to squeal, to grunt. A pig stopped by Lou, panting in deep and uneven bursts. Lou looked up from where she

sat in the soft white snow on her knees. The same snow that came up to midcalf on Lou merely covered the pig's hooves. Lou raised her gaze.

A set of piercing blue eyes met her own; the blue ones both pitied and sympathized with Lou, as though Lou, a poor wounded creature, bowed to the power of the world around her. She stood to her feet. She held out her palm. Olivia pushed her nose into Lou's hand, her warm breath reenergizing Lou. She stroked the side of Olivia's face. Olivia sniffed Lou's bloody face and crooned. Lou shook her head: she would be all right. "This is nothing," Lou said, as though apologizing. "This is nothing."

Olivia ran softly, Lou sprinting beside her. The two, a peculiar pair, traversed the frozen creek with the other pigs, climbed the creekbank, zig-zagged through the thinning trees. Lights ahead. Homes. Quiet. Jackson laid out before them. The pigs did not stop or slow but instead reinvigorated their pace. Behind them, through the trees, the wind carried the shrill blaring siren sound of the abattoir's alarm system. Lou, exhausted, spent, picked up her feet and traipsed after Olivia, through the beating cold and the heavy snow.

Behind an enormous, dark house, blinds shut, a shadowy figure slipped out the back door. Lou noticed before she realized who she was seeing: a man, slender, with broad shoulders, dressed in a heavy winter coat. His mittened hands held a cell phone in the crook of his ear. He closed the door quietly. Lou could see his age by the way he hunched as he jogged from the back door into the snow. The house. Lou recognized it as the one Alexis (oh, Alexis) and Harpreet had sneered at. *That's his first home*, Harpreet had said, *or maybe his second*. Morris Montgomery.

A flurry rose up, much like when Lou had first met Olivia—as though the pigs were rejoicing, celebrating, or chanting. Lou could not determine which. Snow fell in fat, swirling multitudes. Wind whipped Lou’s hair around her face. Despite this, the figure running was a dark blot in the snowy landscape, easily seen. Later, Lou would question: how did he know? Few people that night heard the rumble of swine, most found out before it was too late, but Montgomery knew. He’d been connected to the sirens, that much was obvious, but his knowledge dug deeper than that. Desire, her father had said, was a ruthless monster. Only the guilty run when no one has accused them of wrongdoing.

Three black pigs and a tawny pig that stood on its immense hind legs rushed the man. They ran twenty yards with jaw-dropping ease; Lou was reminded of guard dogs sprinting towards an intruder. For their size, the pigs ran remarkably agile. The man moaned. The four pigs stood beside one another, furry muzzles damp. Clouds parted, casting moonlight down upon Montgomery’s backyard. Lou could see his age, his weary, beaten face. She recalled him atop the sleigh. She saw his face in the stands that afternoon, the way he inhaled the body parts of his fast-growing, prize-winning creations. She held no sympathy for him. The pigs made a low rumbling sound deep in their throat, not unlike the chatter of birds but in a much lower octave. Lou understood they communicated with one another but this confused her, this—oh. *Oh*. Lou felt goosebumps along her arms.

Montgomery lowered himself onto his knees. He held his hands together as if in prayer. “Listen to me,” he said again. (Another thought dawned on Lou: he knew, he *expected*, them to understand him.)

The pig closest to him clamped down on his forearm. The old man did not scream in fear. Perhaps he was in shock. Silence. And the sound of clothing tearing. Another pig had circled around to his other side and tugged on his other arm. Lou had read about a similar treatment in history class: in England, traitors had been hanged, drawn, and quartered. The traitor would be kept alive after hanging, barely conscious, but still able to feel pain, and violently disembowelled to public cheer. Afterwards, their four limbs would be attached to horses, who would run in opposing directions. If the limbs did not rip off cleanly, volunteers hacked hatchet wounds into the traitor's joints. The pigs did not need the help of a hatchet. Their large, sharp teeth dug into his flesh; their powerful bodies pulled backwards. Lou felt dizzy. She could not watch. She leaned into Olivia and vomited into the snow. Lou had realized when the pigs ran south rather than north that they'd hatched a plan, but it took until that moment for this plan to exist as something tangible. In his death, Montgomery did not holler, but he did pule and whimper. He was still conscious as they ripped and tore at his facial skin.

The pigs ran. Lou followed at a light jog. A home with its lights on caught their attention. They swarmed the door. Two of them heaved against it. One two three four. It down, crashing into the hallway. Lou could see inside. A woman, awake, a midnight snack perhaps on her plate, stared slack-jawed and wide-eyed at the panting squealing pigs.

"Kevin," she heard the woman say. A dark spot had emerged on the front of her blue nightgown, turning it a deep navy. She'd pissed herself. "Get down here. Now. Kevin! *Kevin—something's at the door.*"

Not someone. That might have made sense to Kevin. An intruder. A burglar. A drunk, wandering home from the pub. No, she'd said *something*. Lou stood, transfixed, as a man in a robe clipped down the stairs, holding a baseball bat. He looked at the enormous pigs, made larger by their relationship to the architecture of the house. The pigs looked at him. The man—Kevin—swung the bat, colliding with the pig's abdomen. The pigs looked to one another.

Lou ran. Olivia did not follow. Lou turned right, past Cedar Road, jaunted up the incline, saw her house in the distance. She had to get home before the pigs did. She allowed herself a minute on the lawn to catch her breath. She inhaled shaky, icy breaths. Gail slept on the couch, beneath the blankets, half tucked between her bare thighs. The sight of her mother, unsuspecting, unknowing, peaceful, made Lou's stomach lurch. Lou crept in slowly, so as not to wake Ian. She knelt by the couch. She took her mother's hand.

"Mom," she whispered. "Mom."

Gail's eyes opened a slit. Her eyes shone in the darkness. Her cheek, still achingly swollen, bunched up as Gail offered a smile. "Lou? What time is it? What's going on? You're drenched in sweat."

"They're coming," Lou said. "The pigs. They're on their way. They—broke out of the slaughterhouse, Mom. Please. Get up. You have to come with me. We can't stay here. Okay? We have to go. I know it sounds insane. But you have to believe me. No matter how crazy it sounds. Okay?"

"Lou," she said, resting a hand on her daughter's shoulder and looking her in the eyes. She could only smile a small smile. Then she said what Lou had longed for her to

say for so long, for at least a year now, but maybe longer than that. She said: "Stop. I believe you."

Gail pulled on thick tights and a wool sweater. She walked on her toes. Lou crept to her bedroom. She needed only one object from her room. In the darkness, Lou observed the room she'd called her own for only three months. It had never been her home; it had always belonged to Ida. She would miss her Fender fiercely. She looked at Beastie. What she needed was beside him. She grabbed it, tucked it into her parka. She met Gail at the entrance. "Let's go," Lou whispered.

Lou took her mother's hand and squeezed. She told her not to be scared. She said: if you think of this all as a long fever-dream, you will cope much better. Keep up.

Lou ran for Harpreet's house. With everything in her, she needed to get there before they did. The snow furiously swept down, circling, coating the already snow-covered roads; the wind whipped her face; the storm grew around them. Lou's lungs pleaded for rest. Lou carried on. As they ran from block to block, glittering with red green lights, the flashing neon blue, white icicle lights, yellow snowflakes twinkling, Santa Clause and his reindeer, LED gifts, half-finished snowmen, MERRY CHRISTMAS flashing from one family's bay window, Lou knew Olivia kept pace with her. She saw her in flashes: behind a home, in an alley, down the street from her. Gail had not seen yet. She did not know. Lou feared the inevitable collision of dream and reality, of Gail's world collapsing. And still Lou ran. She saw Harpreet's yellow colonial, mercifully untouched. Lou shook the door handle. Locked.

“Lou?” Gail’s mother said. She had thrown on her own parka, a toque, a scarf, boots, and a pair of black work pants that had been crumpled by the couch. She still hugged herself tightly. “Where are we?”

Lou held a finger to her mouth. She led her mother around to the side of the house. Lou dug through the snow, which made her fingers ache, and rummaged for a rock. She hurled it at Harpreet’s window. It smacked, a dull, nonthreatening slap. Lou threw another rock. Gail, who could have had no inkling of why she and her daughter stood in a snowstorm at nearly four on a cold December morning, reached into the snow and picked one up, handing it to Lou. (Lou loved her purely and stalwartly in that moment.) No time. Lou ran back around to the front of Harpreet’s door and banged until her the side of her fist smarted. Yamini creaked opened the door. “What—?”

Lou shook her head. “Where’s Harpreet?”

Yamini, deep bags under her eyes, opened her mouth and closed it. She pointed up the stairs. Lou ran up them. She shook Harpreet until she awakened. Lou held her hand. She told her to think of what was happening as a dream, as another world, and not to be scared. When she saw them, Lou said, don’t pinch yourself. You don’t want to know. Harpreet pulled on her parka, her snowpants, her boots. Her mother tried to keep her inside. Lou ripped her hand off of Harpreet. She told Yamini to come with them, to not ask questions, just *come*. When Yamini refused, Lou did not have time to convince her. Lou saw the pigs four blocks down. Not all of them. Twenty, thirty perhaps. Great rushing masses. The sick heavy sound of wood collapsing. Glass smashing. Screaming. Grunting. Sweat. The storm picked up.

The only place Lou could think of to take cover was her garage. She led Harpreet and her mother in a wide circle around Jackson, trying to avoid the pigs where possible. She grew tired. Sounds of agony rose up. Someone shouted *help me* repeatedly. More glass shattered. Harpreet, wide-eyed, followed Lou silently. Back on Lou's street, pigs walked towards homes. One, on its hind legs, stood in Alexis's front lawn. Harpreet wept. Lou squeezed her hand. Olivia, taking slow, deliberate steps, walked up to Lou. Her front door had a cheap wreath. At one time, it had said MERRY CHRISMTAS. Now it just said MERRY. Lou looked at her home that was not a home. They lived there for less than four months.

Olivia looked to Lou. She did not have to imagine the destruction a pig like Olivia could cause. She knew. A scream sounded in the distance. Close now. A few houses down. Lou's skin pricked. Her heart raced. Yes, a regular pig's teeth were dangerously destructive, their hooves heavy and unforgiving, their sheer mass goliath. But these pigs—these pigs. Lou had never seen anything like them before. Humans, Lou thought, didn't stand a chance. Not at three in the morning. Not when they were most docile, least suspecting, buried deep in slumber, trapped inside their homes. And Ian had always been good with his hands, hadn't he? He braided Lou's long damp hair. He cooked Lou and Gail intricate meals, kneaded bread, built their furniture. He worked the kill floor.

Lou hesitated. Was this something she could be absolved for? Was she redeeming herself for this night or the nights before it? Was inaction as bad as action? Was *not* stopping the pigs just as bad as leading them to her father? Was she asking the wrong question entirely? Maybe the question was: why *shouldn't* she stop them? Or

better yet: could she, even if she wanted to? Lou recalled—*Gail's jaw hanging skewed her teeth uneven the frenzied primal look on her face the bloodshot eyes Ian's red knuckles Caroline's body the rain coming down Ian bent over the dog Lou's dog his grunt her yelp the limp lifeless arch in her back the broken spine the dread Lou felt knowing she could be alive she could be alive how she had to pretend she didn't see how she watched him wash his hands in the sink but he smelled like wet dog he smelled like Caroline he stunk he reeked he—*

Yes, Ian was good with his hands.

"Good luck," Lou said to the house. "You'll need it."

She turned to Olivia. Like their meeting weeks ago in the forest, Lou held her gaze. She nodded deeply. Two pigs broke down Lou's front door. A swarm of them entered.

Lou, Harpreet, and Gail sat in their Neon, gas running. They sat there in the red dawn of the new solstice, shivering, listening to the screams and the pleas and the chaos and destruction and Lou thought *I knew this would happen, we all knew this would happen, they told us this would happen* and she didn't know at any given moment in those crimson tinted hours if she was laughing or crying. Her body shook and her face remained wet with tears and mucus, but she did not know their cause. Lou could make out ambulances and police cars in the distance; first, the blaring of their sirens, second, the wet screeching sound of tires stuck in snow; third, the desperate and confused men and women who crawled out of their police cars, disorientated. Next came the gunshots. Periodically, they heard squeals and screams and, already, it was impossible to say which belonged to whom.

The Globe and Mail

December 24 2017

DISASTER IN JACKSON, BC

What we know so far:

- RCMP are investigating cause of pig release the evening of December 20/morning of December 21. Various unnamed employees have been linked through the electronic sign-in system
- Thousands of pigs culled at the disaster site
- JCPD issue warning: some pigs sighted outside city limits
- Death toll has risen to 324, at least 30 still missing

A bizarre disaster has shaken an entire community.

Jackson is known for its pork production, leading innovation in trans-genetic porcine growth hormone. Although once considered controversial, alternative hormone and antibiotic treatment became commonplace in the twentieth century. Biologist Albert Montgomery tested exclusively on sheep, attempting to create a close organ match for potential future human recipients. Although Montgomery made significant advances in animal science it was ultimately his son, Morris, also a biologist, who furthered his father's research in transgenic science. As of 2002, Montgomery had partnered with a little known Swedish company to increase pork slaughter efficiency by speeding up pig

growth, muscle mass, and fat deposits. Montgomery has won several awards for his work in this field, including the prestigious Darwin Medal.

Residents of Jackson, BC awoke on the early morning of December 22 to cries of help from people they had grown up with, broken bread with, and shared a community with.

Jackson was under attack.

Over the course of a few hours, an event which is estimated as having occurred between three am and six-thirty am, pigs reared for pork production in a nearby farm and slaughtering facility terrorized the small town of Jackson. Many homes were broken into, through unlocked doors and windows, but also through forcible entrance. Bodies have been found in lawns, hidden under beds, and huddled together in basements. Investigators have said that the crimes are particularly brutal and akin to other wild animal attacks, such as grizzly bears. Dental records have been used to identify several victims who had tried to escape through backyards.

When police arrived, they immediately opened fire on the animals. They were highly successful, although one police officer, Addie Hokoda, tragically lost her life. Witnesses did report several pigs escaping back into the woods. Police are unsure at this time how many avoided capture, but estimate less than twenty.

No motivations for opening the farm and slaughterhouse are known at this time.

RCMP will release more information as it becomes available. If you have leads, you are encouraged to reach out.

In case of pig sighting, please call xxx-xxx-xxxx. Do not approach.

CBC News

January 7 2018

FORMER JACKSON'S OWN EMPLOYEE IMPLICATED IN JACKSON DISASTER

A former employee of Jackson's Own Farm & Meat-packing Industry has been officially named as the primary suspect.

Ian Lowe, thirty-two, had moved from Kettering, BC, to Jackson, BC in August 2017 with his wife and young daughter. He worked at Jackson's Own for three and a half months, first as a meat dresser, then as a kill floor worker, and finally as a night shift supervisor. During his time there, he was bitten by a startled pig, which resulted in a minor arm injury.

Lowe was killed during the Jackson Disaster but his card has been linked to the time of the slaughterhouse's door release, 3:23am on December 21. RCMP have since spoken to his wife, Gail, and thirteen-year old daughter, but have ruled them out as possible suspects. Gail was still recovering from a jaw injury and confirmed that the daughter was asleep in bed. However, law enforcement has not entirely ruled out the possibility that Lowe's card had been stolen, as it has not been located yet.

RCMP are actively encouraging and pursuing leads at this time.

CBC News

April 12 2018

ANOTHER CASE OF MAD PIG DISEASE: PARENTS GRIEVE TWO CHILDREN

CPHA has confirmed another outbreak of what is being colloquially referred to as mad pig disease. This brings the toll to a staggering 427.

Similar to bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), porcine spongiform encephalopathy (PSE) effects the brains and nervous systems of infected pigs. PSE's human offshoot, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, is rare but often fatal. Those familiar will know the symptoms. Self-reported "sticky" skin, a "rotting" or "sour" odour emanating from the skin, heart palpitations, confusion, delusions, occasional seizure, and, frequently, limping in one or both legs. Eventually, most motor skills are reduced or lost altogether. Some lose control of their legs entirely. Children, the elderly, and those with compromised immune systems are more susceptible.

Although the government of Canada has encouraged reduced meat intake, specifically pork, the government is contemplating a ban of pork sales entirely.

Kennedy Rhodes, eighteen, of Winnipeg, Manitoba, has fallen into a coma. Her brother, Kyle, passed away on April 6 due to complications related to PSE.

Ellen and Paul Rhodes say they bought meat from a local farmer, who refused to be interviewed. “We don’t buy from the big places,” Paul says, “As we understood it, we only had to be careful about meat found in traditional grocery stores. We buy from our neighbor’s uncle and cook the meat medium-rare. No pink. The news didn’t say this. They need to alert the average Canadian. We can’t process this right now. It’s too much pain.”

The Rhodes are unsure if the farmer had bought semen from Jackson’s Own to impregnate previously owned sows or if offspring are related to pigs bred at Jackson facilities. RCMP have been alerted and are currently investigating.

PSE has been widely recognized and named for almost seven months now, although symptoms of an unknown disease had been occurring since the advent of the twenty-first century. Doctors had previously associated certain vague symptoms with influenza or as complications in epilepsy sufferers and stroke victims. In 2003, a single BSE-infected cow was traced back to Northern Alberta; this spurred a worldwide ban on Canadian beef exports. Liberal MLA Mark Bowen called on Canadian government to implement firmer policies to restrict movement of pigs and other animals raised for slaughter. He cautioned that PSE needs to be contained before irreparably harming the environment, agriculture, and human health.

For more information on how to distinguish between symptoms and to keep yourself and loved ones safe, please see MAD PIG DISEASE: SIGNS, SYMPTOMS, & CAUSES (WebMD).

National Post

April 24 2018

JACKSON'S OWN UNDER CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION FOR MISUSE OF GENETIC MODIFICATION IN PORK PRODUCTION

Jackson's former marquee employer is back in the news once again, and this time it is for the illegal use of genetic modification that has been found to have been used in the production of their pork products. While genetically modifying livestock and other agricultural products is nothing new, the use human genetic material in animals in Canada is illegal. Following the farm's closure over a year ago, The Canadian Food Inspection Agency has been investigating the company's premises and practices extensively and now, upon the conclusion of their investigation, has advised Canada's Attorney General to bring charges against the disgraced meat producer for the use of a human genome found in "concerning" quantities within those samples tested. The genome, described by sources as "what provides humans with most of their bacterial and viral resistance," is speculated to have been used by Jackson's Own to prevent their pigs from falling ill prior to processing. No word has been given as to whether the use of this hormone is connected to or caused last year's incident in the small BC town.

Lead study author Todd Wiber says that mythical chimeras were never seen as a negative thing, and the outcry from both public and private sects is not only uncalled for, but misplaced and, as he says, "ridiculous." "Chimeric forms were thought to guard humans in ancient civilizations," he says. "Chimeras were associated with God."

Others disagree. “There are ethical concerns of course,” says litigation lawyer Melanie Bischoff. “The most pressing being issues surrounding the human cells. If these cells start to form neurons they could potentially spark human consciousness in the animal’s brain. It’s complicated. Too complicated. Never should have happened.”

Wiber cited research conducted at the University of Maryland School of Medicine as inspiration. In 2016, scientists who hoped to address a shortage of donor organs launched a project to grow custom organs inside an animal. Specifically, pigs. “Jackson’s Own’s ethics are sound,” says Wiber, “and for those who say otherwise. Wait until you need an organ. Or you go hungry. You’ll be thanking them for their contribution.”

Wiber had no comment on the spread of PSE.

CBC News

April 28 2018

SURVIVORS OF JACKSON DISASTER FILE CIVIL LAWSUIT AGAINST TRANSGENETIC PROGRAM THAT LEAD TO HUNDREDS OF DEATHS, DEADLY DISEASE ACROSS CANADA

A group of Jackson, BC residents are filing a civil lawsuit against the firm accused of carrying out the genetic experiments that allegedly lead to last year's tragedy in the small BC town. Their claim, represented by the firm of Turner Alamond LLC, purports that not only did the firm's work lead to the deaths of over 300 Jackson residents, but may also be linked to degenerative diseases in those who have consumed Jackson's Own products in the past four years.

Turner Alamond LLC was not available for comment.

The Globe and Mail

September 3 2018

PORK BAN IN BC, ALBERTA, AND MANITOBA NOW SPREAD NATIONWIDE

Pork lovers across Canada will be disappointed to hear that a pork ban that had previously affected only British Columbia, Alberta, and Manitoba has now been extended to the entire nation.

Jackson's Own, at this point a well-known farm and meat-processing facility based in British Columbia, frequently sold pigs and pork to other cities and facilities. They also sold prized semen for sows at other facilities, carrying on the genetically modified line of pigs.

As of August 31st, The Canadian Food Inspection Agency has declared that, due to the inability to accurately destroy descendants of Jackson's Own, and with an increase in PSE across Canada, the only responsible and ethical thing to do is to place severe regulations on pork production for the next half a decade.

"Pork will return," spokeswoman Theresa Ball says, "we just don't know when yet."

Nova Scotia, Canada: 2040

Lou had been home in Halifax for a week and back at work the last three days. Using most of her vacation days, she'd done her best to clean her mother's home while she was away in Bali with her boyfriend. Gail, twice divorced, deserved someone who made her happy. This boyfriend was not amazing and Lou did not think they were the best match, but he was not abusive. He did not hurt her. Boring was not a crime. Lou's mother decided her passion was not in teaching, but in learning. She worked part-time at the library's downtown branch. Her teeth clacked sometimes when she stuttered through certain t-words, but most people did not detect her old jaw injury.

Pork production still banned nationwide some two decades after its implementation, some folks adhered to the black market. Pig meat smuggled up from America. Most of this was not pig, of course, but dog, cat, sometimes smaller mammals like guinea pig. If people noticed the difference in taste, they did not say. Many born with restrictions in place would not have the memory for pork. Phone calls were still reported on the evening news: sights of pigs, larger than normal, cleverer, with too-blue eyes. These reports came less frequently over the years and Lou did not know if that was because there were less living pigs or simply better hiding spots. The evil of slaughter would flex and wane over the years, as, Lou supposed, it did, until the hierarchy was temporarily displaced again. Lou, in her secret heart, the one she kept carefully guarded, hoped this reckoning was sooner rather than later.

In her late thirties, Lou found a combination of Zoloft and marijuana worked best for her anxiety. Years of therapy had remedied most of her PTSD symptoms. Her therapist assured her PTSD was one of the most treatable conditions.

Lou stopped at IGA on her way home. She picked up fresh baked buns from the bakery, a yam for Beastie, and a small bouquet of spring flowers. The daffodils sagged but Lou would liven them up. Lou got to her car, remembered that Harpreet's wife had expressly asked for a bottle of red because flights ruined her nerves, and went back in to purchase two bottles. It had been three years since they'd seen each other. Hopefully two bottles would be enough.

When Lou was seventeen, she bought a pig. He came from one of the last pig farms in Canada, a secluded family-run operation in eastern Ontario. Jackson's Own sold pigs to that farm. Lou recalled hearing about it in school, or her father mentioning it, or perhaps it had been Max. But it did not matter who had told her when she was thirteen for seeing the pig eliminated all doubt: the pig was large for his age, muscular, a shorter snout than usual. He had no right eye. His left eye darted nervously, large and uncannily blue. *He's got a wonky leg, too*, the farmer said. *You can have him. Take his sister, too.*

She couldn't keep his sister, though. She took the one-eyed pig and he squealed against her in the vehicle. She felt his heart thudding in his chest and she stroked his breastbone, humming softly, rocking. She'd read somewhere that animals' muscles shook when they were fearful or anxious as a way to get it out of their system. Eventually, he stopped vibrating, settling into her lap, looking out the window. When Lou rolled down the window, he stuck his head tentatively out and the warm breeze ruffled

his soft pink facial fur. Lou held him firmly around the middle. He closed his one remaining eye, content. They were friends.

Lou watched Dylan in the media for some months after Jackson. He'd told his story: that pigs had entered his house that December evening. That one had looked him in the eyes. Left him alone. Some accused him of sensationalism, of humanizing a monster, of attempting to create a connection between species for a better story. Dylan, only a teenager, who had seen his brother and his mother killed that night, told the news reporter to fuck off on live television. He wasn't in the media after that. She ran into him, by chance, in the Vancouver airport when they were in their late twenties. They spent the night together. Had too many drinks and tried too hard to avoid talking about Jackson. When Lou deleted her Facebook and Instagram accounts, they lost contact. Sometimes, on her lonelier days, she missed him or missed the idea of him and their teenaged friendship. Mostly, she did not. She did not like to think of her time in Jackson, in that rancher.

Lou hardly thought of her father these days. The nightmares had stopped coming some five years ago. She pulled up to her home, turned off the car, grabbed her last-minute groceries. Lou looked at Beastie. He wagged his tail. He oinked and she smiled at him. When she opened the gate, Beastie circled her calves, grunting happily. His body shook with excitement. Yes, redemption felt something like coming home. Lou and Beastie stood beneath the powder blue spring sky that reminded her of Olivia's eyes and of a soft nuzzle against her palm; sometimes Olivia's, sometimes Caroline's. Lou would lie in bed that night as she frequently did, well past midnight, unable to sleep, tracing her thumb along the bumpy red nylon of Caroline's collar, the smooth-scraped

metal with her etched name, listening to the animals alive in the darkness. Sometimes she heard her neighbors, newlyweds, talking in soft voices or making love. Lou hoped fiercely that, somehow, impossibly, Caroline knew that if she had a chance to go back to that rainy night in Kettering all those years ago, standing small behind her front door, she wouldn't leave her behind this time. She would not close her eyes.

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