

BARTON COLLEGE

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*Crucible*

Fall 2010

## DAYBED

This is what they never had before. In all the possessive, unspoken worship, the panicked sex that caused sparks—literally caused sparks—to flicker between their bodies, the love that was so burly neither could even admit it. But they're old now. Well, older. And yet this feels like their salad days. Or at least a salad day. Anyway, this time together, this unexpected intimacy bought in a few hours of downtime on her book tour, away from husband and children, will probably never happen again. At least neither can think of a way that it will and when this comes to pass, each will be petulant, broken, without appetite for days, quick to blame the other. And yet, its happening again (and again and again) will fill their imaginations to capacity.

It started 13 years ago, in 1995, and ended about a year later. He's 33 now—and looks it—except on the sun-pocked parts of his neck and throat, where he looks much older. Ali's a few years younger, though not as many as it used to seem. When they'd met everyone called him Ollie, but "Ollie and Ali" was too cutesy to stomach, and she'd insisted on calling him by his initials, O.D.—a not funny joke—or O for short. But these days, all grown up, he goes by Oliver.

Back then he never had a place of his own, but now they're in his tidy apartment in Bakersfield, her hometown, an easy stop on her book tour because she draws a crowd and can stay with her parents. Oliver did not come to her reading but she came to him afterwards, and now his right hand—the one that he'd laid on her once and only once in fury—holds her calf. Holds her calf. Towards the bottom, under her loose black pants, between his thumb and middle finger, stroking the silken sandpaper of her leg. They're jammed up against each other, sitting side by side on his daybed—the only real place to sit in the room—and he realizes that her neck is crooked against the brick wall.

"Why don't you make yourself comfortable?" he says, and means it, and moves so she can adjust, recline with a pillow, allow him to lay his head in her lap. She traces circles into the cropped part of his still-black hair, near the nape, the juggle of their breath and a flicker of candlelight the only movement in the little room.

"Tell me about your day," he says, and she does. And then he tells her about his.

And that's all that happens. All they never had before.

Sometimes when she's in the bathroom too long at night and the light under the door begins to bother her husband, Fern, who's grown sick of waiting up, he will rap on the door, annoyance in the guise of concern.

"You all right in there?"

She always asks Fern about his day. Sometimes his answer is what she wants to hear, usually not. She wants to know how he passed the lonely, vacant hours, the sunlight curdling through the industrial glass, the dust motes swarming in the shaft of it, the phone ringing and then not ringing. The way the hills looked at 9 a.m. and then at 4 p.m. and if it was the same way they looked yesterday at 4 p.m. and if they imparted in him a quiet desperation—perceptible but nameless—that would be all but forgotten by dinnertime. He tells her the problems with his boss, the deal that almost wasn't, the mutual friends encountered at lunch. And these things matter. She listens. And then, sometimes, he asks her about her day and she feels it's too late to talk about light and dust and mountains. So she says "fine."

If one of the children is sitting on the couch, he'll arrange the pillows, bring a blanket, a snack, juice. "What do you need?" He's wonderful like this. With them. With their home. With their life. Other than his temper, a difficult man to complain about. But then, she couldn't think the last time he asked her to make herself comfortable. Or where and when she purchased the dress she wore for the first time. Or if she ate lunch on any given day. These complaints were clichéd—throw away lines in a battle-of-the-sexes sitcom—but valid in their ordinariness.

In her quiet moments, she would often run a mantra through her head: You don't want a divorce, you don't want a divorce, you don't want a divorce. Those had to be the words. You love your husband wouldn't have worked because she did love Fern, more than when she married him, more than she loved anyone. That wasn't the point. The point was...

No, she wasn't comfortable.

It's not like they ran into each other in the frozen foods section of a grocery or anything horrid like that, though that whimsy had come to both at least once over the years even though they lived hundreds of miles apart. No, they went looking for each other. Probably they'd been looking for each other since not long after they last said goodbye. She was easy to find, to admire, to love from afar. Google was rich with references, pictures, things she had written. He would sit at the library, looking at the same sites over and over again, having to stop himself from sticking his thumb out to stroke the fuzzy black-and-white



contour of her cheek on Wikipedia. He would start e-mails and never send them, too afraid of what she'd become, what she'd think, if she'd remember.

One of his favorite things was to imagine she was with him, accompanying him to his repetitive job as an EMT, on mundane errands, to pick up a sparse bag of food at the market (tuna, off-brand instant oatmeal, coffee, sparkling water if he splurged, maybe an apple or two just to show her that yes, he ate fruit).

He'd be driving somewhere—anywhere—and a song would come on the radio, something that jogged his memory, something that was just right. He'd turn to his passenger side, exchange an imagined look with her. Those lyrics are rough, baby. Rough but true.

He conjured her at the hospital, showed her around, let her see what he'd become. When he was a hero to an old drunk who came in wanting to kill himself, she was next to him. He'd say the roller coaster's rough today, huh dude? and the old guy would smile through his boozy fog and check himself in. Ali'd be impressed but Oliver would just roll his eyes, not the last we'll see of him, but we do what we can.

Sometimes he brought her on his daily run and they'd watch the sunrise together, sometimes to a movie theatre if the seat next to him was empty. He even brought her to the library, sat her next to him, while he looked at pictures of her on the screen. Look at you now, baby.

For her part, she'd convinced herself he wouldn't even remember her last name. She was as sure of this as she was that she would love him forever. As sure as she was that she could never—would never—want to be with him, not for long anyway, despite this love.

She'd never believed in the whim of love at first sight, it was for simps, but love at first sound—at first words, at first listen, as it were—that was different. She remembered how fast they fell into the wrath of love, how his bass voice lapped like well water in her ears.

“One day you'll laugh at how you underestimate yourself,” he'd said, not long after they'd met in line at a café. He had a way of looking at her when he talked; not just at her eyes, in the uncomfortable way where the game is to figure out when it would be polite to look away, but into her eyes, way down into the conical root of them.

“You like me too much, that's all,” she'd said. “You'll get over it.”

“Doubt it.”

They sought each other out not with tenderness but with fury—sometimes induced by synthetic drugs and sometimes by their own flowing dopamine—each the other's remedy for angst and pity and the redundant glare of the earth spinning back towards the sun to start another lonesome day. But through that dripping wrath, that pounding



body-on-body fury, they found in each other succulent charity, the balm of affection. And once found, she couldn't put it out of her mind to seek it out once more. At least to seek out his voice, like a liquid echo of what was once good, or in the least what once was, between them. But he wasn't easy to find. She could find no online reference to him—none at all—which bothered her, a woman of technology and fast-pace and the world, so much that she concocted a sad fable about his death, and many ridiculous ways in which it might have happened. He'd enlisted in the Marines and died an unidentified soldier in Iraq, strung out on standard-issue crank. Driven himself and some girl off an icy bridge on the way home from a bender in the Sierra Nevadas and their bodies were still buried in the ravenous snow. Finally and actually OD'd—maybe in that abandoned house he used to squat, maybe in the fallow fields at the outer borders of the Tejon Ranch where they used to go snort junk and smoke primos—just a line item at the county morgue, not even a blip on the radar of local news.

And then one day, when she wasn't looking for him, there he was, live, on the same time-wasting social site at the same time and against all probability. Simultaneously, windows popped up on the other's screen, bringing the sputter of their heartbeats, the swift, sweet rush of adrenaline, the hazy hope, the transitory vision of what would transpire months later in his apartment, of them having that moment, that quiet, that thing they'd never had:

It's you. Is it really?

Yes. Here I am.

Thirteen years ago, on a dusty afternoon out in a tinderbox of a between-plantings almond field in Tejon, he hadn't so much laid a hand on her as thrown an upper-cut at her jaw.

It had been hours since they'd sucked up the last of their supply. Though neither had a watch and the smog-cloaked sun gave few clues, they could mark the passing of time in the progression of their high followed by the intricate sequence of coming down.

There was no calm, even in quiet, and Ali, for one, found it easier to talk.

"Let's do something different tomorrow," she'd said.

They were lying in the weedy amber stubble, a few feet from each other.

"We've only been here once before."

"I mean really different. Like, real."

He sat up and put his arms around his legs.

"What do you want, a goddamned trip to Disneyland?" he said.

She jumped up, went to stand over him.

“Why is everything a fight with you?”

“Why do you always ruin a decent afternoon?”

“I don’t know what a decent afternoon might look like, but this isn’t it.”

“What do you want from me?” he said.

“Oh, please.”

Oliver stood up and opened his arms wide.

“You have my time, my money, a fucking leash around my fidelity.”

“Money? What money? Maybe that’s what you ought to do tomorrow afternoon. Go get a job.”

That’s when he punched her, though probably not as hard as he could have. It didn’t dislocate anything or loose a tooth. It was the shock she felt more than his hand, and she felt it not in her left jaw but with a zing in her wide eyes and a quickening thump in her chest.

Instead of that being the end, as it should have been, it wasn’t even the beginning of the end. It was just another episode of tedium, aggression bred of ennui. They had nothing to do so they did in each other.

Now her days were thick with responsibility. Wake in time to exercise before the rest woke, fail to do so four days out of five, spend 30 minutes in bed feeling like a fat pig, potty the children, dress the children, make the beds, start the laundry, feed the children, pack the lunches, braid the hair, get in the car. Always in the car. In the car to the appointments, in the car to the doctors, in the car to the library, the swim lessons, the market. After three children, she still couldn’t believe her life was so formulaic.

Then back home—before the afternoon routine began—to salvage a few hours in front of the computer, never meeting her writing quota, thinking instead about the law student from India who was always at Starbucks with his computer, always glancing at her sideways. Or planning the week’s worth of dinners she wouldn’t get around to making, serving scrambled eggs or fish sticks and edamame nightly instead, tuning out Fern’s complaints when she called to tell him to pick up his own food on the way home from work. Or thinking about eating a pie—a whole pie, banana cream—fuck the ten pounds she wanted to lose. Or thinking about Oliver.

One of the things she never considered was that his days were more regulated, his life more weighted with exhausting responsibility than hers.

That he woke at 5 a.m., meditated, thought hard about not getting high, ran ten miles, drank a disgusting raw-egg health shake on his way to work, worked 12 hours straight ostensibly saving people’s lives but really sitting behind a desk and trying to elicit information from bums



for insurance purposes, went to a meeting—preferably NA and not AA, and preferably one where he wouldn't run into his own patients—came home, cooked himself plain salmon and cauliflower together in the same pan, his only pan, recorded his interactions with god in his perfect, loopy handwriting in one of his many journals (probably more than she wrote in a week) and went to sleep in a tiny bed alone. Always alone.

She was never alone, never able to tolerate even one night by herself. And she'd fixed it for herself so that she wouldn't have to. This is where her mantra came in. She didn't want a divorce because she couldn't stand the possibility of abandonment. In her dating days she'd always felt like a runt at feeding time, worried about when her next nourishment would come, and she couldn't go back to that, no matter how much freedom it would buy. If Fern was unexpectedly late coming home she would, in almost the same moment, hyperventilate with worry and dream him dead.

Now the most she ever had to herself was maybe three feet in the middle of the bed between her and Fern, and that was often wedged with a child, filling the bed with the smell of sour milk, piss and baking bread. She wore a sleeping mask and ear plugs and still she would lie awake at night—staring at the pilled cotton of her mask and the tips of her own eyelashes—delighting in the muffled breath of those she loved, who slept close without knowing that she was restless, dimly panicked in her cotton cocoon.

Her marriage was not sexless or loveless. At least the clichés of her life didn't extend that far. On the other hand, that, at least, would have been an answer. An explanation. With a solution.

About a month before her trip she had what her husband called an "incident," though he'd all but forgotten it by the time she left for Bakersfield, and she was still replaying in her head. It was evening, the children already in bed, at the end of a week that had seemed at once longer and faster than the previous one. She was heating up a late dinner and spilled a bowl of leftover pasta over the kitchen floor.

"Goddamn it," she said.

"What happened?" Fern said, eyes still on a magazine.

"It just slipped."

She knelt down to begin wiping it up and started to cry, knees in the red sauce, rocking herself against the soothing vibrations of the refrigerator. She flashed back to the time when a friend said to her, over a spaghetti lunch, that she woke every day wishing she was somebody else, anybody else, and how Ali had thought that futile agony. Being someone else—somewhere else—wouldn't fix what was broken in her.

“Jesus, you’re crying.” His voice was sharp, he closed the magazine.  
“Leave it. I’ll clean it up if it’s such a big deal.”  
“That’s not the big deal,” she said.  
He got up and stood over her in the kitchen.  
“It’s just a bowl of pasta,” he said. “Let’s not make it a pity party.”  
This should be the end, she thought. The last time. Say something.  
Say something goddamn it.  
But what she said, she said only to herself. You don’t want a  
divorce. You don’t want a divorce. You don’t want a divorce.

Oliver can’t remember how it ended 12 years ago, except that it  
was protracted—it ended over and over again—and that the never-  
always-endingness was a particular kind of blissful misery.

He can remember how it started, though, and where, and this is  
where she suggested they meet again, after thirteen years.

He saw her get out of the car—all pulled together, naturally, when  
he was still in grimy scrubs—and knew right away that every choice  
he’d made in his life had been all wrong, every choice that hadn’t  
allowed him to hang on to her.

She slid into a chair across from him and knew that every choice  
she’d made had been right—just the way she was supposed to make  
them, how lucky, how lucky!—and in the same moment knew, for the  
first time explicitly, she would never be happy. Not with her husband,  
not with Oliver—Christ, he was handsome—not with anyone.

Then came the dance. Catching-up, reminiscing, apologizing,  
bedroom eyes, lip-chewing, getting drunk on those old pheromones.  
She drank her tea, scalded her tongue, pretended it hadn’t happened.  
He noticed her hips had flared, her body softened, and fidgeted with  
the stethoscope in his pocket. It was a 1950s relic the old clinic  
doctor gave him his first week on the job, when he could barely afford  
groceries much less a steth. Take a deep breath. This lasted for hours,  
many hours longer than it should have, and many fewer than they  
wished it had.

“Bye,” he said, when they were forced to leave by the coffee shop’s  
weary clerk. “Be well.”

“I love you,” she said into his shirt—while still enveloped in a  
massive farewell hug—confident he hadn’t heard.

He pulled back and looked at her—there was that look, slicing  
right down the center of her—reached out his hand as if to touch her  
face, then changed his mind.

“I love you, too,” he said, for the first time ever.



He did love her, and saying it had lightened him somehow, but he was aggravated she'd forced his hand. He couldn't see either of them being better off for having said it out loud. She'd manipulated him into a corner from which she had an easy out—husband, kids, book tour, gotta go—but he'd be stuck, flung backwards on an emotional timeline, with no one to pull him out of the muck. And he had a feeling she knew exactly what she was doing.

He couldn't sleep. In his agitated tossing, all he could think was, she has one more night in town, please, god, don't let her call. I won't be able to say no.

Her children were the reason he held out. He could feel them on her, see them in her eyes.

"We're in the same boat," she'd said to him at one point, just hours ago, over their third cup of tea.

"No. You're in a boat with three other people."

And this brought on in her the worst feeling she'd ever known, a feeling she hoped would never return. She resented her children. Not with a dull ache in her chest or background throb of her head, but with rage. Seething, selfish rage borne from the repression of prurience, the decade-long logjam of sentiment, the suppression of all the things that one wasn't supposed to feel in a good marriage and therefore tried to forget.

The resentment was new. Usually when she felt boxed in she spent a couple hours looking at vacation rental Web sites, sometimes even booking a gloomy bungalow in Big Sur or Cambria, only to cancel it hours later, losing the deposit. Or she'd hit "play all episodes" on the children's favorite DVD, then bury herself in a tent under the covers to fantasize about blowing rails and writing sonnets (easier by far than actually writing the sonnets), free from anyone who cared what she was doing or when she'd be back. Sometimes she'd even throw herself into overcorrecting—make an elaborate meal, dust the baseboards, buy ridiculous lingerie, skip the \$40-an-hour swim lessons and spend the afternoon throwing packing peanuts back-and-forth with the children—to try and forget the suffocating reality of being a wife and mother.

And all this worked in the way of coffee breaks, coin-operated massage chairs and corporate retreats. Temporary relief.

It staved off resentment and allowed her to not be the mother who dispatches her kids quickly at night to attend to herself. It allowed her to be the mother who always has time for one more book.

Books had been one of their things. Oliver would read to Ali, often in the morning, when they were fresher, usually in the aisles of Bookman's Used Book Emporium because they had nowhere else to be. She'd pick the section—religion or gay erotica, military history or pulp fiction, poetry or westerns—and he'd grab a book off the shelf and start at the beginning. Sometimes he'd read her the whole book, sometimes they'd stop in the middle, hide the book on a high shelf and return to it a different day, and sometimes he'd only get a few lines out before she snatched it away.

"Boring," she'd said about *Knitting for Fun and Profit*.

"There's no such thing as a boring book."

"Yes, there is. This one. And that paperback from last week with the ugly cover."

"*Love in a Hot Summer Climate?* That was sexy."

"No, it had sex in it. Not sexy."

"You're sexy."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Pick another book. Political philosophy. I'm in the mood for a dialogue. Make it obscure."

He liked to read the dry stuff in what he called poet voice. Monotone, with down-emphasis on the middle and end syllables, long, drawn-out vowels and dramatic pauses in all the wrong places.

"It makes anything sound important," he said, but really he did it because it made her laugh.

Now she only had a matter of hours left in town before she did the Borders circuit in Los Angeles, and she wanted to give him something. A gift. Books. Old favorites from their days at Bookman's. New favorites she'd discovered since and wanted to add to their shared awareness. A first edition of *Watership Down*, which he once told her was the book that uncovered his love of books. Buying him books was such a bad idea that the pen she used to sign the credit card receipt at the bookstore practically scalded her fingers.

"I can't see you tonight, baby. I'd love to, but I can't," he said when she called.

"I'll just drop them off then. Tell me where you live. I want you to have them."

He hesitated for a moment before giving her the address.

"Where should I leave them?"

"Behind the screen door. Isn't that a movie? *Behind the Screen Door?*"

"Is it?" she said.

Another pause.

"Why are you so good to me?"

"I'll leave them there, then."



She waited until 8:30. Most meetings in Bakersfield would be over by 8:30. Instead of a locked door she found him behind the screen, without a shirt, the tattoos they got together and plenty of new ones unfolding across his back. Without asking she went in, took in the ascetic room, drank in the smell of his soap, his sweat, his trash, his cum dried on the sheets under the taut bedspread.

"You're home," she said.

"Funny how that happened."

It was a wind-tunnel of an apartment. A studio with a door at the front and back, exposed brick walls, post-and-beam, Spanish tile, no pantry. There was a candle, a small table with a computer, a closet full of journals, a clean bathroom, the daybed.

He pulled on a shirt.

"Have you eaten?" he said. She hadn't, and they had steamed broccoli and Luzianne tea. She washed the dishes and picked bits of food out of the drain because there was no disposal.

"If things were different," he said. "If you were married to me..."

"Don't."

"If you were married to me I wouldn't like this. Wouldn't want you with someone else. Wouldn't allow it."

She turned to him with a sponge in her hand.

"Allow it?" she said, and then they were quiet for a while. She rubbed a scorched spot on the pan but couldn't undo the damage.

"Let me read something you've written," he said.

"You really haven't?"

"Say I haven't. What should I read?"

"The articles are boring, the poetry is crap and the stories are too close to home."

"And how do you suppose that makes someone like me feel?"

"You suppose I have everything," she said.

"I suppose you have what matters."

"And that should be enough."

"More than," he said.

"I'm glad faith can buy your way out of happiness."

"You're a good writer and it's bullshit to say otherwise. I'm not good at anything and I'm not nearly as mopey."

"You're good at plenty," she said, and allowed her half smile to explain the rest.

"Now you don't. Just don't. I printed a bunch of stuff off the internet. What should I read?"

He went to the closet and took a grayish stack off a shelf; flimsy, standard-library-issue, 30% recycled paper with a staple in the top left corner.

“Clearly you’ve already read it all, so why are we going through this?”

“Fine, I’ll pick,” he said.

He read aloud. Two of her poems, but not in poet voice. They sounded better than she remembered them, his voice a salve for her angst, her lust, her clumsiness with words in a confined space. She began to relax and see how brave he was. How he was the same—the exact same person she’d loved—but so much sadder.

He watched her while he read—he almost knew the words by heart—but she wasn’t the same at all. There was no more self-consciousness, no more girlish giddiness. She leaned back on her pelvis in his bed, legs splayed against the desk, without the slightest trace of sex, which made it intolerably sexy. She didn’t blush or roll her eyes or investigate her finger nails. She looked at a spot on the wall and listened. Her lips—stained purple, just like the night before—pouted, and she didn’t bother to tuck stray hairs back behind her ears like she used to. Her slow breathing and the droop of her perfect eyes—still with flecks of gold in the green, it hadn’t been his imagination—betrayed how tired she was, but also, in her eyes, longing. For him, but not just for him. She was further away than that. She was trying to turn back, grasping at anything that would take her, exhausted in the knowledge that it would be a mistake. He would not be the mistake. Everything he’d done back then had left her the worse, and he would not betray her again. No matter how much he wanted to.

“And believe me, I want to,” he said out loud.

“I didn’t write that.”

“No. I’m telling you. I’m not going to let you.”

“Of course not,” she said, the edge gone from her voice now, and that’s when he sat down next to her on the bed. She put her palm against his neck. “Of course you’re not.”

Not long after they met Oliver wrote something for her. A love letter of sorts.

Take a long look in my eyes...maybe lost in dreams or shrouds I might be able to show...

It was the closest he got to saying he loved Ali back then, but that didn’t bother her much because she felt it. In all their self-destructiveness (coke if they had it, meth if they didn’t; crack rocks in the bong bowls; puking into the trash can; fucking in places where cops had to come and tell them not to fuck), he was tender with her. He would bring her a toothbrush and a cup of water in bed at night so she wouldn’t have to get up to brush her teeth. Run baths for her if



they happened to be crashing at a house with a bathtub. Sit and watch her write for hours—sometimes she would use his back for a desk, balancing her notebook on top of his tattoo of a bear—lulled by the way the words burst from her, her hand stumbling along the pages. He never let her put a needle in her arm, never compromised her for a fix, never let her stop going to school.

“Because, baby,” he said one sober afternoon, about six months into it, “I think we both know you’re not going to end up with me and I’d like to leave you in one piece for the next guy.”

“Fuck you,” she said. “I don’t want the next guy.”

He grabbed her at her wrist. “You think I want him to come along? He’s my only fear, the next guy. And your only hope. You’d better hope he comes along sooner than later. And that, baby, is my reality.”

She twisted away. “So dramatic,” she said. “Why don’t you just become the next guy?”

“It’d be easy if it worked that way, huh?”

“You could try.”

“It would kill me.”

Fern came along not so long after Oliver, when she was at the beginning of her long mend. And they had their salad days. Glorious days that went by quickly. Huge shopping trips to Target. Buying their first water filter. Eating red beans and rice from box mixes. Naming the cat they would get if only he wasn’t allergic. She stitched a slipcover for their \$40 futon to make it look more homey, which didn’t work. They fucked on that futon, and on the table, the chairs, the bed, the stairs, the Jacuzzi in their apartment complex and the kitchen counter. They were still fucking like crazy when they moved to the Bay Area, bought their first king-sized bed. It didn’t even occur to her to invite Oliver to the wedding, or what he would think of such a wedding—a spectacle of normalcy—or what Fern would say if she asked.

At first they would joke about Oliver. About all of it. Her dark times. The lowlands. All behind her, she was rescued now. And she knew it had been dark. And low. And she had been too young. She knew all this, didn’t doubt it, was grateful to her husband for helping to show her the way out. She thought of Oliver with spite. Angry flashes about all the things he’d failed to do, the ways he’d failed to be.

Then there were days—whole weeks—when she didn’t think of him at all. It was years before he would become a reliable fantasy, more years still before he was the only fantasy.

Oliver's head is in Ali's lap and he can smell the salined waves flowing out of her, feel the hot surges. It's her second night, her last night, in town and they've finally grown silent because there's still too much to say. He's holding her calf—a part of her body he'd never thought to seek out before—and her head has drooped, it's not more than a few inches from his. Her fingers still in his hair feel better than anything has in two-and-half-years, since he forced himself to stop feeling good things.

He notices that the light over his desk is shining in her eyes and in the moment he gets up to turn it off she tumbles off the bed—she looks like a marionette, at war with herself, struggling to jerk her body towards the door—and he's relieved that his own fading will-power won't have to keep holding out.

She can't figure out what part of her body is calling the shots. It seems like every part wants to stay, needs to stay—if only because there will never be another shot—but there she is standing dumbly in front of the bed, her back turned to him.

He comes up behind her, puts his arms around her arms. They are stronger than she remembers them.

“Look at me,” he says.

“I can't.” She expects her voice to be strained with tears, but none come.

“Look at me. We're fine.”

“I just can't.”

He turns her around and before she can look at his face, even for a moment, she collapses her head into his chest, into the warm, soft place where it yields to his arm. He stinks, and she burrows in deeper, eating into the salty thickness of him, inhaling enough of him to last.

“Oh how those flowers grow,” he says, almost with a laugh.

“It's going to be awful tomorrow,” she says.

“But here's what I've learned, baby. Here's what I've learned to ask. Here's what you're forgetting. How is it now?”

His body is hot, soft, firm, cool. She nuzzles around as if he were a pillow, a mattress, an expansive bed of down. Toes curled, she seeks out the cool spots under the sheets, delighting in the undiscovered corners. She floats between the layers, the parts of his body tucking into her like sheets. She holds onto the dream of them, captures the feel as if it has not been more than a decade. She is as a cat—without malice, without shame, without anything more important to do than seek the warmth through the window, the suppleness of her own limbs against his, a safe place to bury her head.

They stand that way, in fleeting comfort. And stand. And stand.