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## Three Thingness: A Critical Introduction to the Collection

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THREE THINGNESS: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE COLLECTION

by

Kasey Peters

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Chigozie Obioma

Lincoln, Nebraska

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# THREE THINGNESS: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE COLLECTION

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University of Nebraska, 2023

Advisor: Chigozie Obioma

The following project, “Three Thingness,” consists of a critical introduction and craft essay on short story writing, and a sample of the collection *Very Light in the End*. The critical essay “Three Thingness” introduces a framework for evaluating short stories, and then evaluates a few key components undergirding the collection: gender, plot, and comic relief. Part postmodern realism and part absurdist-lite™ fiction, the collected stories depict characters as they navigate prescriptive narratives about bodies, gender, queerness, and illness.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Critical Introduction.....	1
Collection: VERY LIGHT IN THE END	
Very Light in the End .....	12
Creep.....	29
Lesbian Janitor Polar Vortex Whack-a-Mole .....	43
Hole in the Wall.....	61
Deborah Forever .....	75
Protective Instinct .....	90
Clara.....	99

## Three Thingness: A Critical Introduction to the Collection **VERY LIGHT IN THE END**

A story should have three things.

What are the three things?

The story decides.

*-apocryphal*

I heard the above writing advice third-hand: in an author interview, somebody mentioned having heard this anecdotal exchange. The visiting writer, giving a craft talk, said, “A story should have three things.” An audience member asked, “What are the three things?” The visiting writer—a twinkle in their eye, neatly closing the exchange with a preposterous opening—said, “The story decides.”

I don’t know why it is that three of something seems right to us—both harmoniously whole and sufficiently complex—but I acknowledge simply that it *does* seem right to us, and has for centuries, if not millennia. We take it for granted: aha, yes, three. More beguiling in this mysterious writing advice is the nature of the word ‘things,’ as it is revealed to mean not a prescriptive list of components, but more broadly, any thing. Importantly, the three things do not even belong to the same category—or, at least, they do not manifest in the story as the same type of thing. They are not simply three different plot points, or three different characters. They are more like energies. As such, and per the above exchange, they are agents from within the story, interacting with the writer and reader in a reciprocal becoming.

In Adam Johnson’s 2015 story “Interesting Facts,” the three things are: 1) a child who used to proclaim interesting facts, but has recently “turned herself into a horse”; 2) a breast

cancer diagnosis; and 3) the narrator's husband's betrayal. The first thing is really a few things: it is a mute "horse-child" galloping through scenes, and it is a strongly affecting vein of motherhood and detachment in the face of loss, and it is a narrative device of propulsive, associative interjection—the declarative phrase "interesting fact" opens, and perforates, the whole story—through which Johnson builds recurring motif into revelation. The second thing, the breast cancer diagnosis, manifests as a macabre fixation on other women's breasts, a double mastectomy, and the gradual transformation of the narrator into a ghost. The third thing, the husband's betrayal, is a looming self-fulfilling prophecy/inevitability with which the narrator grapples by imagining him sleeping with other women, and which ultimately comes to fruition not as marital infidelity but as a totally killer inversion of narrative control: near the end of the story, the husband (who is pretty much tagged as Adam Johnson) starts writing the story "Interesting Facts" from the beginning, stealing her story from her.

For a critical introduction to my own work, I'm talking a lot about an Adam Johnson story instead of one of my own, both because he won the Pulitzer and this story appeared in Harper's—his work is therefore beyond the kind of reproach that mine is not—and because his work has been so formative for my self-perception and affirmation as a writer. I chose the story "Interesting Facts" to point out an important qualification of the 'three-thing' prescription, which is that it's kinda bullshit. Per this Adam Johnson story, if the three things are really well developed, then there might be three things inside each of those three things, and maybe more things inside *those* things. Aside from making very clear that you have to be a hell of a writer to get a story to open up like a fractal, "Interesting Facts" also suggests that in my analysis, I might have interpreted the story into three different categorical 'things,' that the very division into 'things' is somewhat arbitrary, and that even the number three is an externally applied organizing

principle that feels instinctively right, but becomes so fluid that it can hardly function as a metric for rightness.

As a prescriptive measure, then, the almost mystical, intrinsic ‘three-thingness’ of a story is just what it seems like on first impression: a gut feeling. Maybe that’s why the advice seems so profound. It gives mathematical articulation to a mysterious sensation of writing a story as *solving* something, as working with the figures and energies of the story until it unlocks. The three-thing quantification of rightness, then, is both impossible and sort of pointless, but also useful and appealing, insofar as it provides a scaffolding for *thinking through*.

Therefore, in lieu of organizing a critical introduction around influences that have informed my writing and thoughtwork in this collection, I’ve decided to consider three energies, three any-things that manifest in various and connected ways, and inside of which theory and writers will be evident. Those three things are 1) gender; 2) an aversion to heavily plotted structure in favor of line-level and associative propulsion; and 3) comedy as it channels absurdity.

#### Gender:

I became curious about my own tendency to write stories without naming characters. In early drafts, I often refer to characters either through metonymy or synecdoche—and some of those ‘names’ persist into the drafts I have now; there is ex-girlfriend and Little Debbie, there is the handyman—or I refer to them simply as ‘the woman.’ In part, I do this because it can be funny, and because this reduction of person to attribute, inside the world of a story, normalizes an absurdist plane of reality that feels very real to me.

But there is, I think, a popularly held assumption that the practice of no-naming lends relatability to a character, such that a story whose main character is simply ‘the man’ is easily related to by all readers, because he is undifferentiated, he is a stand-in for every man. I suspect this assumption about relatability is an extension, per Sylvia Wynter, of the historical overrepresentation of a white man as that which is described by the word ‘person,’ by ‘personhood.’ When I write different stories about different women, and refer to them as ‘the woman,’ I don’t intend to write a highly relatable, nonspecific every-woman. I might even be doing the inverse: writing grotesque, somewhat unpalatable versions of ‘woman,’ such that I can put some pressure on the supposed relatability of the gender construct.

Mary South does this gorgeously in the story “You Will Never Be Forgotten”: the woman who does not “follow” her rapist online but follows him around in real life (and does stalk him online) is both crushingly relatable, and utterly repellent. The crude cleverness of South’s prose works to produce a simultaneous revulsion and enchantment, much like the horrific videos it is the woman’s job, as a content moderator, to remove from social media platforms. Characterizing her protagonist only as ‘the woman,’ and the man who raped her only as ‘the rapist,’ Mary South draws close scrutiny to the ways categorical naming defines people, limits them, and predetermines them.

Of course, gender is always at play with other identity categories, other material conditions and specific experiences. In “Clara,” I try to tease out the unnamed narrator’s racial ambiguity through her inability to name her race, and I try to trace the way her specific immersion in a rural white family as a mixed-race person has a hollowing effect on her sense of personhood. (I also gesture, with the title, toward naming, though I don’t make it clear who the name belongs to.) In “Very Light in the End,” I try to explore white womanhood as a certain



consumptive emptiness—and I use consumptive here as a kind of pun, as in a consumer, and one consumed, and one dying of a disappearing illness—and get ‘the woman’ to become the animal of herself.

The question I want to continue asking is: What does self-actualization mean inside of gender narratives? What does it mean for individuals? What does it mean for us, collectively? I think we can tell stories like pry-bars, stories that open things up and shear things apart, stories that at the very least speak to possibility. Emma Copley Eisenberg’s story “Fat Swim” did that for me in 2018: I cried about the possibility, even the complicated and tentative possibility, of love and joy inside of fat girl bodies. I cried about the possibility of good, loving fathers! I simply want to contribute to a vibrant canon of stories in which gender exists in all kinds of ways, in which openings are punched through the invisible walls of it. I don’t know if that’s the ‘point’ of short fiction, or if there is one, but it feels like a strong argument for the kind of world building that fictions offer.

Work that I need to do in the future (and some work that I’m doing in my novel project) is to give a little bit more protagonist stage-time to the gender narratives for people self-actualizing as men. Manhood, masculinity, and manliness are so often disregarded as patriarchal; ‘gender’ as it is used in academic discourse is so often taken to mean femininity or queerness. The elision is a disservice.

Plot:

Number two kinda speaks for itself, so I’m gonna move onto number three.

Kidding. I make this bad joke somewhat symbolically, here in the critical introduction, as it represents my impulse, whenever I encounter myself inside the trajectory of a scripted form, to break the pattern. I also make the joke to suggest my failure, perhaps, to provide the kind of immersion that a well-done form can offer. Propulsion, magnetism, vitality—for me, all of these things exist at the line level and within the little turns of insight that crisp observation can produce. My impulse is also toward a plot that arises out of character, instead of as some inexorable engine that plows the reader through a narrative. Maybe ‘arises out of’ comes up short; maybe what I mean is that my tendency is toward a plot *confined to* character. I have to work hard at events.

When I am barreling along within a narrative trajectory that feels too comfortably like a plot, my impulse is to find an escape hatch, to work toward inversion, to unrelentingly double down on metanarrative reflexivity. I’m sure it’s annoying. In workshops and as feedback, I have often received resistance to what one reader called an intrusive omniscience, and to what others have called a break in the narrative continuity. Readers are sometimes frustrated in their attempts to locate the narrative voice in my fictions. That a narrative voice ought to be cohesive seems almost baffling to me, seems almost like a denial of the performance of narrative persona. This is related, too, to my impulse toward what I’m calling a disturbance in the subject position.

The very late-in-the-game perspective shift in “Hole in the Wall,” the time jump in “Creep,” and most overtly, the disembodied narrative voice that has been resituated into a new body in “Clara”: all of these discomfiting moves enact an unsettling of the stable narrative ‘self’ that speaks a story. Even in stories that are not overtly about queerness, moves like this do some work toward perforating finite identity boundaries.

Listen, I fear what I am about to do is a lot of self-defense, a lot of groping around for substantial justification for what I perceive to be a pretty glaring flaw in my capacity for storytelling. What follows will inevitably be my invocation of ‘good’ writers in order to say, ‘But see, they get away with it!’ So maybe, instead, I ought to be thinking about the nature of this thingness, this line-level, associative propulsion that I think defines my engagement with writing. Part of it is simply that I gravitate toward interiority. But part of it is reflective of my fundamental beliefs about what stories do. Humans narrativize: it is the mechanism of our understanding of cause and effect, which is likely how we evolved into what we are. Our essence and our existence depend on the meanings we ascribe to our symbols. Meanwhile, we have so much agency over how we ascribe meaning! (Undoubtedly, this is related to my fixation on identity category constructs.) Stories are, in some broad sense, maps of our world constructed of playful association between meanings; that a story can reproduce that mapping at the micro level (the paragraph, the sentence, the phrase, the well-structured joke) feels necessary to me. It’s as if the text of a story is demonstrating what it’s made of at all times, such that we might *see* the craft of meaning. The editorial omniscience says: Here are the ways words build our lives; here we are, symbol-producing animals, and here is how symbols shape our reality.

In “You Will Never Be Forgotten,” Mary South uses “the woman” and “the rapist” and “the rapist’s girlfriend” not only to put pressure on those ‘names’ and the limits of those identities, but also to move through the story with playful (and brutal) associative comedy. The woman is a content moderator, and the prose is appropriately crude and casually violent. Names, in the story’s plot, act as levers propelling the narrative from moment to moment through turns of phrase, and the order of events in this story depends almost entirely on wordplay, as the following excerpt suggests:

In the employee handbook, the woman's position is listed as "digital-media curator," as if she were an assistant at an art gallery or a graphic designer for a winery. Indeed, she has become a veritable sommelier of beheadings. Unofficially, the woman and her cohorts have been dubbed "ninjas" because they kill content without being heard or seen.

South's story meanders—entertainingly, excruciatingly, riffing with the dissonance between symbol and meaning—toward an odd and enigmatic ending: the woman puts a bunch of food on her patio for a mountain lion, and the creature doesn't show up.

It's a sign. No one will save her. Nothing is going to magically make it better. The woman has to figure out her life.

Like many of my favorite stories, "You Will Never Be Forgotten" comes to an ending that only suggests a narrative arc symbolically. It is like a sigh. It is an internal reorientation.

South's prose overtly calls attention to its own self-reflexivity, and in this particular story, it flirts with another implication of no-naming, which is the collapse of author and character—a kind of finger-pointing, an overt examination of the man behind the curtain, as the saying goes. No-naming can function, to this end, as a kind of evasive (and simultaneously transparent) autofictional technique that weaves a layer of aboutness into a story. I say that it's an evasive technique because it is definitively *not* the use of the first-person in mock-autofiction, like that of Lauren Oyler (*Fake Accounts*) or Ben Lerner (*10:04*, etc), but instead employs a pretense of otherness in the protagonist that autofiction often wants to reject. I say that it's transparent because authors so often deliberately clue readers into similarities between themselves and their no-named protagonists.

Jenny Offill's novel *Dept. of Speculation* deploys a shifting narrative perspective that flits between the third person and the first person, referring to the protagonist either as "the woman," "the wife," and eventually "I"—parading the fine and maybe flimsy distinctions directly before the reader. The protagonist's life mirrors Jenny Offill's own life in many ways; many of the emotionally resonant observations seem ripped from a diary. *Dept. of Speculation* is about being a wife and mother and writer, and about writing as one. For Offill, this means prose that swims through short associative scenes, and a plot that almost resists cohesion.

Lorrie Moore's story "People Like That are the Only People Here: Canonical Babbling in Peed Onk" opens with a metanarrative paragraph that grapples with strong-arming the following events into the shape of a story: a couple's baby is diagnosed with a severe and likely terminal illness, and undergoes a long series of harrowing surgeries that destroy their marriage and bankrupt them. "A beginning, an end: there seems to be neither," the paragraph begins, and then it fumbles around for a thread of sense-making ("What is the story? Who put this here?"), and eventually it situates this grappling and fumbling within the psyche of the Mother. The Mother teaches writing and sounds a lot like Lorrie Moore. Which is to say, wacky, funny, highly digressive, brutally ironic and brutally vulnerable. The story ends much like it begins: resisting narrative form.

Maybe because I am *bad* at plot, because it is almost incidental to my reading experience, I am making the case that wordplay and associative structure are a way of writing stories that are also always about storytelling.

(And see how well Mary Smith, Jenny Offill, Lorrie Moore get away with it!)

Comic relief: *Funny or Die*.

Aside from the somewhat abstract practices of parsing the identity constructs and symbols that structure social life, all I am really doing is messing around with language, with expectation, with humor and sorrow and the inarticulable. All I am really doing is telling my little stories to an audience, every time, of one. Humor provides a feeling of connection like practically nothing else. When I read stories that make me laugh, I can believe that Sam Lipsite and Kevin Barry and Saïd Sayrafiezadeh and Paul Beatty and Andrew Sean Greer are my actual friends. *Getting* somebody's little jokes across time and space is practically physical: I receive their jokes into my body. It's like flirting, or catching somebody when they stumble.

Writing something funny requires that same intermingling of agentic energy and puzzle solving that writing a story does, but it feels amplified. Trying to be funny is a kind of confession: you show the reader a vulnerable version of yourself, and it requires an ego resilience that is very familiar with self-loathing. You make your little flirtatious eyes, and you stumble: they catch you or don't.

I am generally not one for inspirational workspace quotes, but I do have a single note-card over my desk to remind me what I value in fiction: "Funny or Die." It's a lot to live up to, and it's practically nonsense, neither practical nor sense-making, a pseudo-reference to my own nostalgia for encountering, in the early 2000s, reflexive self-awareness in narrative. The phrase suggests the precarity of trying to be funny, and it suggests nothing, too. And yet, I come back to it all the time, to engage with the inseparable polarity of humor and gravity, with my own impulse for comic relief. That word "relief" means the emotional catharsis, the relenting of intensity, but it also invokes the sculptural connotations of the Latin *relevo*, to raise. That levity

results in the stark disparity between planes. Comic relief has the potential to sharpen a story's emotional intensity.

There is something sharper, maybe heavier, too, about comic relief in fiction, beyond its capacity to give the reader a sense of connection and investment, and beyond its sharpening emotional strength. Comic relief is a coping mechanism for so many people, a sort of rationalization of suffering (not unlike the human impulse to understand the world through narrative), and occasionally a stand-in for logic. There is unfathomable cruelty in the world, and while love is the flipside of that coin, *laughter* is a bizarre intermediary, a transgressional, inexplicable expression that can exist on either side. It can express joy, pleasure, discomfort, relief. It can be *hateful*, for chrissake. Laughter is about absurdity and about that which doesn't conform, or that which cannot be confined. It is a kind of eruption of energy unmoored from meaning, and somewhere in that space, it resonates with the entire situation of human existence: beyond the scope and scale of our narrative capacity for sense-making is an energy that we can't quite fathom, and will never understand.

## The Collection of Short Stories [excerpt]

### Protective Instinct

Slow down, Big Shirley, your father says while you eat, always has. No matter how hungry, how justified you are in pursuing sustenance, not to mention joy. Shame!, he says, shame.

It's late at night and the brick of butter on the counter is warming. Just room temperature it is warming perfectly, sweat beads glossing the foil wrapper. She can see it from her bed, the soft night light over the kitchen sink flowing out into the green yard, the blank black windows and the mirror they could make for her, the stage it sets, and the butter just waiting to receive her thumbprint, yield to her. She doesn't ripple the calm waters of her bed-partner's dreamsea; let him sleep, let her steal away. She leans into it with her elbows, maybe a deer is watching and the stand mixer shines, it's one of those throwback colors, pistachio, that evokes the appliances of her mother's long domestic incarceration, and she works it with her hands, cold chocolate chips and the rough chopped walnuts, she can hear them crunching and taste their dust as she chops, as the weight of her falls through the knife and they split apart, the knobs of texture in the silk fat dough she has made, and she pats it just like that, the rump of a little baby, and she lets it stick and pull away from her fingers, and she nestles it into to the bowl. She wouldn't think of it that way, incarceration, her mother.



She is sleepless, perennially. Sometimes it is justified and sometimes it is a dream in which she is chaperoning many groups of small children to the top of a fire lookout tower, for no reason, at night, and it is swaying and they shriek with glee and one of them could accidentally push another one over or through, they are so small, for no reason, maybe because they've seen their comedian father make this joke before and they want power, they don't want to be frightened, they want to know the boundaries well enough to fake murder and have a laugh. So she likes to work the butter into cookies and feel it dissolve in the glimmer of her flour dusted kitchen, she likes to sip the steaming tea and look into nothing outside, look into her half-formed reflection in the inbetween of dark windows, where her face won't appear inside her form, where maybe a deer is doing the same, existing and not. Only your father gets to make that joke, and don't forget it.

If you watch it the whole time, if your mind is right, you will succeed in seeing the transformation, but it takes concentration and a simultaneous distance, an abstraction of self, like meditation. The softening of small peaks and the muted glare of melting—it's the fat, at last—glazing the lump as it puddles slowly, a limp flattening and an almost insignificant rising, a little puff of hope before it is deflated, toffee coloring and the occasional oozing of chocolate and the arrival at the perfect—and yes, there is a perfect, and no, you cannot time it—chewiness, a knowledge passed down from generation to generation. At least, passed down from your mother to you.

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Slow down, Big Shirley. This is a joke your father has made to you since time immemorial, the joke of your fatness that preceded its existence, maybe yours. This is a joke you have spent too much of your life, your one and only life on the planet in the world of the living and the night lights and the deer, plumbing, and it has been for so long the pea under your mattress, such a small thing, the smallest thing. Can you not just rest and rise into the world with the dignity of a man, can you not just learn with your full brain the calculus, the literature, the history of your monstrous country, can you not just turn off the compartment that calls to you at all hours, any time, *Big Shirley, slow down?* What choices you have made, what moral failings you have manifested, what shame, all evident in your fatness, real or imagined, and now certainly real. You see it subsurface boiling in the girls in your classroom, the two minds, one present and hopeful and alive, you can be anything you want, you're pretty, a smart cookie—the other a racket of echoes, names called, fatass, bitch, you are a piece of gum that's already been chewed, who would want you, ugly, worthless. The two minds, more if they're not white, saddled with so many minds the black girls the gay girls the hyphenate-American girls, nesting dolls down to their fetal cores. The butter melts again—how many ways it can soften—and coats your mouth. It sweetens the sweet, it saturates the crumb and the chew and the succulence, it is the stuff of love. This you have learned about fat and about milk and about those small burdens, those blisters we nurse through our lives and wake up in the night to, this you have come to understand, it is the stuff of love. If it isn't one thing, it'd be something else, your mother said to you at thirteen when you couldn't get out of the car to start middle school, and your mother believed it, you have to get out, your mother pushed you for real.

The yard is trimmed but not too close, the glowing paper discs of the lunaria money plant bristle at the moon's attention, some kinship chord struck, and the deer browse. One doe, two fawns, spots rippling with tail flicks and gentle steps through the settling dew, moist muzzles, liquid eyes low and alert. The gurgling of a neighbor's automatic swimming pool vacuum obliges them to raise their heads and turn, momentarily, routinely, familiar with this tax bracket and its nonthreatening peculiarities, and they chew.

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His jail cell is small, *cell* still being the word she thinks of, though he says bunk, though the guards say cell. He had never been able to think of himself in any other circumstances aside from his own; his imagination hadn't been able to stretch that far, or he couldn't bear to look. He thought only of himself as he was, given his circumstances (white but with *heritage*, with third-generation parents, athletic, charismatic, tireless), and how he performed under them (exceptionally well; look at the house he'd purchased, the resorts he'd cavorted drunkenly through, the car he bought his parents for Christmas, his business cards). He says bunk, though surely it is called cell. Denial, protection, she's not sure. What does he deny, who does he think he's protecting, who did he think didn't suspect, fifty-odd years old driving his bulging, glaring, monster F-ten-thousand around slamming Miller Lites in his reflective sunglasses and his shaded eyes, working ten and twelve hour days, seventy hour weeks like thirty years ago when he was building a life with his own two hands, kicking the twenty-something kid out of the cab of his skidsteer to get the damn thing done right, coming and going all hours of the night, sleeping three days straight, working twenty-hour weeks, losing contracts, busting the glass out of the cab

when he forgot to lower the bucket arms, the 2am phone calls from her mother, the fighting, her mother's black eye, her mother's gone molar, their laundry all over the front yard, in her father's words, like poor people.

Justice and injustice, both, this turn of events. That he should find himself susceptible, righteous though he believed himself to be, to the harrowing suction of painkillers, then to the corrective that was amphetamines. That his right and wrong should be rent apart, his identity thrown back and forth between mirrors until it disappeared in infinite iterations. That he should glimpse self-compassion, at last, but not have the capacity to extrapolate his compassion to other users of drugs, to other people in other circumstances, the poor, the black, the brown, the gay, the fat, the ill, his daughter, you.

He was the kind of man he'd always been. Remember watching him shatter the metacarpals in his right hand? Remember the sudden shift of sunlit oil-slick on the driveway when the crunch came? Hop, the machine went, right off the blocks, and the quick vomit-sound of her father's deflation, the stop-drop-and-roll of him out and away, the other hand flown to protect its broken partner, to guard it, to comfort it, to hold on. While he drove himself to the hospital, all vein throb and cradled broken wing, all spittle growl and white-red, white-red—while her mother paced wringing her own, weighing the consequences, and finally called a cab—the soon-fat girl sat on the swing and looked at her own hands, interlocked them, tried to feel what they felt. What did they know of each other's pain?

She once assumed that she would never find love, that she could not be loved, that she could not bear to love. We can bear too much, she thought. We can get used to anything, we can survive anything, and so we have, and so we have come to live in a world that will do anything to us. The question was not how her mother had paired his socks for forty years, how her mother had scraped burnt cheese from the casserole dishes and painted the fingernails still dish-soft and sponge-dank, how her mother hefted silence like pregnancy weight when he needled her at late night gatherings of neighbors on the driveway—but how the groove worn into her mother kept its concavity, even after, how it kept her mother cupped around his flame like a hand in the wind. How her mother burned at the edges but was cold in the middle.

But the big sleepless woman has found love in the form of an amiable and scrawny man, a sincere and doofy man—now, adrift in their boat of a bed and the whirl of the fans, his nasal breathing that will approach snoring, some decades down the road, should they be lucky enough to make it into the future—and she has expanded him to fit her, even as she grows, even as she ages, even as she is chewed up, even if it is a constant struggle for sanity, because there is only one long day in a life, and it needs a midnight snack, it demands it, life is one long day for woman and one short fraction of meaninglessness for time. Up against the crashing wave of time, she tells herself, there is no delineation between woman and man, their difference is insignificant the way two grains of sand are invisible in a motivational poster of a beach sunset on a fifth grade teacher's closet door, preaching ATTITUDE, for some reason. She didn't hang that poster; it was in the room when she arrived, and if you peel back the tape you will see somebody's attempt to scrub off a penis and its hairy scrotum drawn in black sharpie. She'd meant to replace it.

Always preaching attitude, her father, as if he'd earned his—as if it hadn't been as inherent to him as the length of his dick, some God-given measure of him, some proof of his own well-making. Self made, man's man, people person, God Bless America. He drove his truck through the wall of the house and he chased her mother down and broke her collar-bone and poured gasoline on her, that was his attitude, in the end, some performative mockery of the limits, an accident, that was all, a joke of a push, a long plummet off the grate of the fire tower into the void. That was the moment life tipped over, turned back on itself, that was the moment life was retroactively relieved of its vague uneasiness, developed like a black Polaroid.

Sleep deprivation affects your metabolism of fat and glucose, predisposing you to diabetes and cardiovascular disease, she knows this. It is one of the things that keeps her up at night. She drinks chamomile hibiscus tea, not because of its blood-glucose correcting powers, or not *only*, but because its tart edge and vanilla honey finish pull the butter off her tongue like the tide going out, like a bath the perfect degree of hot, like the reflection-friend in the sliding glass door of only her dimmest being, like imagining moonlit deer in the yard and then, of course, seeing them, because you're right, they are often there, they live among you. You can create a perfect thing, still, a lovely gentle thing, a place achieved through a divine combination of presence and distance, sweetness and fat and a bright pink cleanse, a part of yourself that is full of warmth, and empty.

Should I visit him?, your mother asked, on the phone, and you don't know what to tell her. If she wants to make him look at her, rub his face in it like a dog in its piss—then yes, yes, go—but you

suspect the urge is just habit, muscle memory, a hand's protective instinct toward its bone-snapped partner. Not yet, you tell her, though you don't know when, why, at all—you wish your mother could split like you had, growing and growing until she cracked open and spilled out, jiggling and bouncing, enraged, floating on the cloud of herself and spewing little streams of hot steam. You wish your mother could hear the chorus of voices that you can hear, an echo chamber for the voices of women, a song of rage and sorrow and resilience and fury. You wish she'd tried to kill him back.

—

Forgiveness is maybe a melting, it is maybe a spreading of softness—and it is maybe sublimation, a question not of forgiving a father, but of finding love for a mother, finding understanding for a human made in the shape of a woman that could, and did, separate the part of him she loved from the part of him that was culpable, until she could find forgiveness for that part, too, and merge them back together. It is maybe the mercurial shapeshifting of identity, of finally becoming who she had always been: a human capable of enduring her own compassion.

Through the sliding glass door, out into the yard, an eerie pressurization spewing into the air, preamble to some third or fourth neighbor's sprinklers coming on (it must be close to morning), she seeks the edges of the sky for the inkling, any sign of the clockwork yielding. But she knows it to be imperceptible in real time, if a person is looking for it. It can only be found in the middle distance, the sidelong awareness, cool air permeating to her scalp, the oven-good browned-butter smell rising up off of her skin, impossibly sweet in the chill swoop of pre-dawn.

The dream-fog, late-night memory of a rare camping trip, eight or ten years old, being shaken gently awake in her tent, her father's whispered call, *Hey, Sweetie, wake up, hurry, wake up*. The groggy fumbling to get out of the tent, the why-groan shushed, plodding in wet socks, herded a little too fast for her numb legs to coordinate, the surrender to her father's sure arms when he hoisted her up, his beer sour breath, stealth-running, the grey moonlight rinsing over spring grass mounds, her own hand held up bouncing in the moonlit wonder, like a ghost's, the sudden stop, the crouch, the thrill of a silent army crawl through the damp, her breath held, the point: and there it was. A shadowed shape that moved and huffed, taking on molecules of moonlight in her eyes until it became the outline of a doe pawing the dirt, circling, straining, until the glistening slop of new life heaved forth, slid onto the ground and steamed, kicked free with its toothpick legs and was licked clean, until her dad whispered in a voice that she will always remember as pious, as awestruck, as hallowed: *She had a baby*. It was a secret between them, a secret she carried in her palm for years, a secret that wobbled itself to standing, clumsy, precarious and new—and she felt, years later, that she had seen into him, some intimation of who he must have been at her own birth, full of gratitude and splendor and selflessness, some fraction of him undeniably reverent.

The sky has taken on its clear edge. She has the sensation, when she notices it, of having forgotten to breathe. How different things might have been, had he been lucid enough to light the match, and what dumb luck.