

“Growth”

An unpublished short story which was awarded the Senior Quinn Award for achievement and potential in Creative Writing at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign – 2018.

Clenching handfuls was like holding an infant’s hair; I hadn’t expected it to be so soft. I ripped it out, brought it close to my nose and smelled what could be considered your standard, pedestrian, run of the mill, grass—except that it grew, stubbornly, from the steel of my garage. A wave that curled down the door like a half-pipe, a surge of muddy-water against a redwood canoe, it echoed with the effect of some weird art installation, a horrid home deco show where AstroTurf is glued immorally to bedroom headboards.

Letting the blades flutter along my shorts, letting them garnish my tennis shoes, the grass was real enough to stain my palms in whisper-thin smears. It also evoked that lovely fresh cut smell. You know the one, the *green* one—of baseball fields and barbeques—that leafy nostalgia of childhood idealism, of grandparents and aunts, Easter and purity. Learning later in adulthood that that *green* smell is just the scent of physical trauma—the resulting rush of chemical defenses into an area of plant injury, a bleeding of organic green leaf volatiles to act against fungal growth and prevent bacterial infection—does nothing to reduce one’s pleasantness from sniffing it. How people can take pleasure from something so painful is beyond me.

Joe, like the needle of a metronome, wandered behind the window above the garage. He was likely unpacking stacks of his socks, alt-rock records and those obnoxious post-modern paperbacks into a bedroom, which I had concluded was predestined, always, as Eli’s vigil. That’s where I’d landed—that this was all in the cards from the beginning: the boys, the room, both leaving, the camping, one returning, the suffering, etc.

At the spot I’d torn out, there was dirt, or soil, or loam, I don’t know—but not the heavy steel the garage door was constructed of. The dark continent had the shape of a hole in cheese,

and suddenly my hand was against it, smearing the dirt like coffee grounds, even sucking the rich-bitterness off my thumb like some tricycle-striding toddler. I couldn't say if it was instinctual or even primordial, but with those minerals gritting my teeth and the remaining blades breeze-taunting me with finger wagging movements—I craved leaving, screaming; it burned across my body in an instant.

I needed to keep the grass from Jen and Joe, no question. If they discovered it, started asking or recommending how I should get rid of it—things could spiral, really slip out of my control. With dirt-smearred hands, I hunched and slid my fingers between the concrete and rubber lining of the door. I lifted. If the average human body is a collection of both redundancy and significance: wisdom teeth, auricular muscles, appendix, kidney, liver and lungs—then the average garage functions much the same. Bicycles, a cat carrier, a dusted car seat, a hockey net, a water heater, plastic shelving, plastic bins, a silver sedan with a scrape of blue paint—some are necessary, some extraneous. But what's meaningful about the garage is how its contents can flip to exchange importance suddenly. How in the snap of a finger, or let's say during the duration of a park ranger's phone call—an astronomy poster, baseball cards, a deflated soccer ball, a pair of crutches, and a Ping-Pong table, all become uncharacteristically vital.

“Are you coming?” Jen said. She stood beside me with her purse tucked under her arm, her hair pulled tightly back.

I hadn't heard keys locking the front door, or seen her and Joseph saunter around the corner of the house—hadn't heard the releasing again and again of the car lock as she repeatedly mashed the button on her keys. I hadn't forgotten about the group counseling session.

Jen turned to Joseph and said, “Can you get the car started?” She held the keys for him, watched until he was in the car.

With the sedan backed in under the garage's proscenium arch, it was like Joe was watching an afternoon performance of *Jen and I*. Chewing his tongue in the driver's seat, obviously trying not to look, I knew he had popcorn in the cup holders. He might as well flick on the high beams, run the wiper fluid, to set the scene.

"Are you coming?" Jen said, again, shifting her purse to the opposite shoulder.

"I want to get the yard taken care of," I said, and made to haul the edger from behind the trashcans.

"Christ, Ben," she said, arms crossed. "Look . . . I'm—it's hard enough just getting him to go. Can't you at least give me a little help?"

We'd done this dance before; I was fairly certain I could skip it. Bereavement was natural, was fairly modeled. The good folks at Higgins Stephen and Associates had everything figured out. You put on your cozy little sweater while your guide, Michael Schaffer—an airtight shirt with too many pens and a cleft chin so pronounced he could store a grape—hikes you through the structural Kubler-Ross model of grief. You come out fine. You come out completely healed. Oh it's natural that you want to scream *Mr. and Mrs. Parent of a deceased child*, and no, of course not, crying or yelling certainly won't offend this counselor—there is no set itinerary for grief.

If the good folks at Higgins had it all figured out, then why do we have a day for those dead in war but nothing to fully identify survivors' loss?

"Jen," I said. "We've been over this. Plus work's been hell lately. I just want to relax a little."

"And what about Joseph?" she said, chewing the corner of her mouth. She knew the firm was fine.

“What about him?” I said.

Her eyes narrowed. “He’s obsessed, Ben. With some ex-cop’s conspiracy stories.”

I pocketed my hands in silence, wondering if the car window was cracked, if the fourth wall was broken. Joseph didn’t so much as beg for someone to come and smash the window to save him, but rather sat like he expected it—like he was simply preparing for his cue.

While I might have agreed with Jen about the conspiracy thing, I didn’t know if I cared.

A scent drifted from the garage as if rolling down a hill.

“I’ll try to go to the next one,” I said.

She hurried toward the car.

The garage door remained open after that. I plucked the keypad off the side of the house and slung a sign on the door from the kitchen that said, GARAGE DOOR BROKEN! DO NOT CLOSE! Jen drew a little picture on it—a house with sad cartoon eyes and a frowning garage mouth, a thermometer sticking from it.

The sound of distant rain was Jen showering in the bathroom downstairs. Why? Because the upstairs bathroom still had his scent circling the tub drain, his Proactive bottle still entombed in the medicine cabinet, and when you looked at the scale properly, in a certain fragile ray of sunlight, then the suggestion of footprints exposed his outer two toes. If mass and energy distort space-time, then the distortion of our fabric effected small bathroom items first: toothbrush chargers, toothbrushes, mud facemasks, razors; and magazines from behind the toilet: Popular Science, Yoga Journal, People, and Oprah. Before you can take measure, those ripples have you too. First, the downstairs bathroom becomes where you wash your hands and then it’s where you

relieve yourself. You start shaving and showering there until eventually, it's where you imagine yourself having sex—if you still had sex.

Normally, I would hold my bladder until it hurt to avoid using the upstairs bathroom, but exhaustion strikes a different cord with every moment and recently apathy rang loudest. Besides, Jen locked me out.

Sitting there, the terracotta tiles—those multicolored lozenges shimmering like trout scales—made me nauseous. They were the result my forced attempt at re-doing the bathroom after Eli. A guaranteed massacre by any measure, it was a busted wet-vent that put everything on permanent hiatus and kept the room snared in this horrible, Cape-costal/Santa Fe, transition. There was a starfish ceiling light, a nautical brass porthole mirror, prints of ribbed shells and swordfish along the wall behind the tub, a faux-turquoise coyote cutout, the terracotta tile, a flowered talavera sink with matching soap holder, and an embroidered Chimayo shower curtain. The stagnant flux of the bathroom served as a reminder at how my current mentality often saved me from meandering unbearably toward some draining destination.

After washing my hands, I snagged my foot on the bathmat and lurched against a towel cabinet with muffled clomps and less-than-muffled cursing.

“Oh, I’m fine,” I told the swordfish.

Angry-snatching the bathmat off the floor, my arm, cramped at the elbow from catching myself, shot jitters up my shoulder. The mat was damp and eyeing it closely, a stringy-orange fungus hung from the bottom like a tattered 1970s textile. Touching it was like griping iron-wool, like squeezing a moist pinecone, and when checking its resting spot on the newly exposed tile, there was this obscene T.V. screen black—a chunky static of dirt with moisture peppered throughout. I splayed my palms on the chilled tile surrounding it and whiffed the earth right there

in our bathroom. Little green sprouts, tiny and insignificant, perched like music notes along the smoky grout.

As the bathroom gained weight and swelled, a shadow of footsteps lingered over the strip of carpet before the door. My body alighted with the physical sensation of an awareness watching—that feeling of someone over your shoulder, a face almost touching your cheek which vaporizes when you turn your head. I leapt up, clenched the weight of my stomach.

“Jen?” I said.

The porthole mirror swayed as a fragment of an actual ship; the starfish ceiling-light writhed, the faux-turquoise coyote viciously blinked. With my heart beating panic, I swabbed my sleeve along the sprouted floor, rotating my back to the toilet. The mess flaked easily, bunched into a stain along my arm. I wrapped the bathmat, the fungus, the music sprouts, into a clamped ball at my chest. Opening the bathroom door quietly, softly, forcing myself not to look toward Eli’s bedroom—toward a room where Joe, for some reason, was listening to the muffled groaning of an audiobook—I caught Jen floating in a towel toward our room.

Swirls of thin mist trailed her. Still holding the bathmat like a melon, I followed her and leaned against our doorway—a toddler waiting to have his height measured. The damp bathmat seeped through my shirt and left darkened, Rorschach, watermarks across my chest. First adjusting the edges of the comforter, Jen then shuffled to the dresser to sift for clothes. She uncurled from her towel, let it plunge, and for a moment the room filled with the freckles of her back, the bend of her small shoulders. Then she was dressed, rooted in front of me.

“Listen,” she said, in fierce whispers. “You need to talk to Joseph. I’m—I’m exhausted. I can’t do it anymore.”

I was doing something wrong, slouching there, the bathmat a bowling ball in my arms. I pictured her lamenting about struggling forward without a husband to a group of sentimental coffee-cups.

“Talk to him,” she said, nerves willowing her words. “He was upset during counseling and opened up about some things that . . . I won’t go in to it. Just to talk to him.”

“Now?” I said.

“Whenever,” she said. “He’s at Jason’s for the day.”

A sick-churning yawned at my chest. It floated from the bathroom after me and was swaddled in my arms, cooing sweetly.

“Did he leave his stereo on,” I said.

“I don’t hear anything,” she said.

A day later, on the stairs toward their once shared room, I practiced my lines. I’d ask Joe about UCSB, about what his classes were like—if he was playing sports or anything. Maybe if he’d met a girl, we could talk about that. Even if he had, he wouldn’t tell her about his brother. There were far more important things, like making it to biology lab, or eating hot-pockets, or the off chance of hooking up. In the unlikelihood he did tell his imaginary girlfriend about his brother, I bet he omitted the part where he slunk away from Eli—where he abandoned him down the trail to smoke a cigarette with ol’ Jason.

It didn’t matter; all I had to do was dig about the conspiracy to get Jen off my back. I’d ask, he’d tell. Simple. I lingered on the last stair of the staircase, absorbing the carpet through my toes.

No one ever tells you about the way the self diminishes.

About how much you'll hate.

So many children laugh like Eli and walk like him. I can't go to baseball fields anymore or ice cream parlors. I can't stand the smell of bike tires in the rain. I once followed a kid at the mall who I knew clearly wasn't him, he was skinnier—wore high-top tennis-shoes—but I pretended anyway . . .

A crash downstairs split the back of my head.

Jen was hunched and already picking up a photo off the hardwood, brushing away the shattered glass. She stacked the bones on the bookshelf and disappeared into the kitchen for what I figured was a broom.

There, sweating with moisture and life—clear as day where the photo had been—was a patch of glazed grass. It covered the shelf like carpet inside a shoebox, and when Jen trudged back, broom in hand, she seemed to gawk at it. I expected her to race towards me, nostrils flaring, to pull me from the stairs and point at the shelf like it was a rat swollen with the unseen spaces of our house. I wanted her to yell at me, to demand an explanation, but she didn't move.

It was as if she didn't see it.

Considering the room a little, she looked for me or Joseph before she scooped the ruins into the dustpan and left. I wanted to follow her, but bees thundered through my ears.

"I was thinking we could talk," I said, quietly shuffling past the bathroom towards their bedroom. The hallway seemed to stretch. My voice was squirrely, weak.

If a parent ever tells you they love their children equally, they're lying.

In the room, only an eggshell-frail light seeped through the closed blinds, dying along on the carpet.

Joe wasn't even there. What a surprise.

He was always too busy for meaningful conversation, too busy with friends to keep hold of his responsibilities. But maybe I'd get lucky and he'd stay out all evening. Maybe I could enjoy a warm meal for once, in my own home, without the weight of everything always lurching over my shoulders.

His desk, covered in maps and graph paper, a small flashlight atop a few grainy photos of dark woods, looked like it belonged to an ecology lecturer. I lifted a paperback whose cover was a man silhouetted by a dark forest. Finding a section titled: BIGFOOT—The Deception Mascot, I tossed it back.

When both boys shared the room, they fought over the bed closest to the closet. I never knew why until I came home late once and found Eli inside with a small TV, playing his Nintendo 64. Much later, when Joe left for college, Eli had the chance to really make the room his own. He hung posters of Sammy Sosa near the windows, Griffey Junior above his bed. He took his baseball card collection and displayed it on the bookshelf originally used for showcasing Joe's marching awards. He kept the small TV in the closet though. Some nights, I still see him in there, light shining under the door.

I didn't sit on the bed.

Instead, I pulled out the desk chair and squatted. The closet door was cracked slightly, and Joseph's shit was everywhere: backpacks, an opened suitcase, books, comics, socks, socks, and socks. It was like he didn't—

The closet door opened slightly.

Heat spread through my ears. My pulse rollercoasted.

I realized that only the AC had kicked on.

There was a box in the closet, and Eli's baseball cards were scattered haphazardly around it.

Suddenly cards materialized around the room like Joe had flung them from the closet like confetti. Under the desk, between the end table and bed, cast as bookmarks—Joe didn't care about anything, didn't have respect for anything. I got on my hands, hurrying, scraping my knees along the carpet. He must have taken the box from the garage while I worked and he pulled them deliberately from their penny sleeves—knowing what they were, what they meant to me.

His excuses floated in my head. "I just wanted to look . . . I just wanted to . . ."

One of the binders was splayed near the bed, and two full card-sheets had been yanked out. If I knew Joe, and I was damn sure I did, I could bet a hundred large there were at least three baseball cards cavered somewhere beneath the bed. I crawled over—was magically correct in my assumption—and stretched to nab the nearest one. The card was curled, creased with water damage, and while I was about to explode, about to hop in the car and wring Joseph from whatever pixilated pizza-arcade he was hiding in, I realized that my arm too was wet. An earthworm looped off my wrist.

With the flashlight from Joe's desk, I ran the beam along the carpet underneath the bed.

The soft light glimmered over crystalized, swaying blades of grass. Earthworms created biblical creases through the little steppe, and the light-beam weakened, distorted, where the bedframe met the wall. A sound, like the twisting of a petulant stomach, reached out to me.

I writhed, dropped the flashlight to be swallowed.

Taking the cards nearest me, snatching the box from the closet, I hiked from a room I would never return to. I'd made the damn effort. Struggled in coming here, in trying to talk to Joseph like an adult, to actually treat him like an equal. Look how he repaid me. I tried to make

Jen happy, but all the while Joe was going into the garage—digging through my things—and treating them with the same disregard he had for everything. It was my fault. I should have expected it.

After that, I began finding strips of grass along our bedroom windowsills. Jen kept the figurine of a windmill on the sill nearest the bed, which gained a rolling, miniature, prairie to complete the scene. A few blades peeked from behind the portrait above the stairs—the four of us in Barbados when the boys were still young, and a small cutlet lurched from behind the shoe rack. A baby tulip grew sweetly from one of Jen’s high heels, sitting idly in a beam of direct sunlight. I threw them both out while she was at the library, just to be safe.

I perfected keeping the grass from Jen and Joe. I lugged around plastic Wal-Mart bags, kept them shoved into my pockets like Russell’s pistol in Tombstone. I ripped away all the greenery I found, immediately, without any lingering, and the opaque-plastic sacks—those bloated with roots and grass—stayed securely in the trunk of the car, bolted down into a dusty, concrete-colored, cat carrier.

One night, sitting at the dining room table, our three plates crowding one end of it, the boiled steam of green beans and carrots lofted through the looped napkin holder, wilting the paper-thin napkins. Steam drizzled over the tablecloth like the train of a wedding-dress.

While Joseph gabbed on, he cut into his chicken aggressively—his knife scraping the plate. Normally, I’d make myself busy in the garage to avoid him, but lately Jen insisted on us eating together while he was at home.

“I know it sounds strange,” he said, popping pieces of triangle-cut chicken into his mouth, stopping rarely to chew. “It’s like Santa, the Easter Bunny. I’m not saying I actually believe any of it.”

The shape of his mouth, his teeth—the way he talked between bites—clawed at the back of my eyes. Letting my mind float the sedan, I was standing proudly in the purple sunset, before an opened garage, a bathmat suffocating in an old trash bag and the beautiful steel door of a cat carrier grating lines into plump bags of dying grass. I’d go to the dumpster again tonight.

“This ex-cop who spent years gathering—” Joe said.

The chunks of chicken in his mouth were shifting, separating, tucking against his cheek as he talked. “He only focuses on mysterious things. Rules out animal attacks, runaways and accidents.”

I shoved my own chicken around, spooned my potatoes a little. The garage door was still open, and though I continued telling them it was broken, someone had ripped my sign off the kitchen door.

“He’s even got maps of the national parks where people disappeared under strange circumstances.”

I remembered the paperback on his desk.

“Well, if he has maps,” I said, and Jen shot me a look before I’d even realized what I’d said. Joseph glared at his plate.

“Does he explain what causes it?” Jen asked, trying to encourage him. I could only think how she sounded more like Higgins Stephen and Associates every day.

Joseph forked his carrots. “It’s not ridiculous,” he said, almost loudly. He eyed me and his face had that flat determination as if he knew this was a tough sell. “No one believes it’s the

Sasquatch or anything,” he said. “But there are a lot of suspicions, some scientific, some religious. This guy helps a lot of people.”

“What do you mean, religious?” Jen said.

I waited, as Jen put her fork down and leaned on her elbow, feigning interest. My cheeks tightened, my foot jiggled under the table.

“Yeah, mostly in a negative sense,” Joe continued. “People go missing in places with semi-demonic names—Devil’s Peak, Hell’s Valley—things like that. Some theorize it’s a demon who steals children.”

I almost laughed, almost spit my food on the table. Instead I covered my mouth and faked a cough. Jen peered at me.

“Isn’t that—don’t you think he’s taking advantage?” she said. “Don’t you think he’s benefiting selling books on uncertainty?” She leaned my direction. There was exhaustion in her eyes.

I pucked a green bean to the side of my plate.

“It’s not though,” Joe said. “You’ll just need to read it. It will make sense if you give it a chance.”

“Well, I’m not reading anything,” I said, and when Jen looked up at me, I saw a flashbulb of tension in her face.

I thought about holding back, about trying to be sensitive or whatever, but I felt like he’d been getting enough of that from Jen and her therapy strangers.

Joe needed something real, something direct.

“I think this is all bullshit, Joseph. Just your way of not taking accountability for anything.”

“Ben,” Jen started, but stopped when I shoved my plate into the clutter of side dishes.

The bowl of carrots turned and orange discs careened along the flowered tablecloth.

Joseph, with wide eyes and chewed chicken still lumped in his cheek, sat dumbfounded. I stared him in the face so he knew I was being straight with him.

“There was no demon, no scientific reasoning or whatever. It was you, Joseph. Just you.”

The air in the room went thin.

“What’s wrong with you?” Jen said, and with the side of her hand she corralled the carrots to their bowl.

“You said yourself this wasn’t healthy,” I told her. “Why not call it what it is? He’s a grown man, let him take responsibility.”

“And you?” Jen said, now standing, pulling dishes away from the table. “Like you’re in any position to criticize him.” Her voice grew as she plunged plates into the sink. “Shouldn’t you *take responsibility?*”

“For what?” I said.

Joseph shifted like he was sitting on nails. He shoved his hand under his mouth and rubbed his jaw, gazed from Jen to his plate and back again. I took a second, as he worked not to look my direction. I wasn’t going to feel bad for this, wasn’t going to take the blame because Jen was too afraid to place it where it belonged.

“Don’t turn this onto me,” I said. “Was I there?”

Jen’s eyes went hard. She stood holding a half-bowl of potatoes.

Joseph looked as if he wanted to throw his plate.

“Don’t pretend this was ever about anyone else,” Jen said. “You know this has nothing to do with him. Get a hold of yourself, Ben.” She turned to the counter. “I’m tired of doing the parenting for both of us.”

My stomach knotted. I was at the edge of something. I didn’t know what I was saying, why I wanted to say it. “If you think running to therapy or playing counselor is parenting then you’re deluded. If you want me to be the bad guy for saying what’s going on, I’ll do it.”

Jen pushed herself against the edge of the counter, leaning her weight against it. I knew she hurt from what I said. Joseph, straighter in his chair now, eyed me with determination.

“At least she’s trying to do something,” he said.

Joe stood to clear the table. Jen and I both let him do it. He covered the potatoes with foil, returned the bread to the breadbasket. Occasionally he gazed at Jen, and my chair was like an island away from them.

It was Joseph. Eli relied on him.

This wasn’t on me.

The way Jen went upstairs after dinner, how she slammed the bedroom door, told me I’d be sleeping in the living room. It didn’t bother me much; some nights, in front of the TV was the only way I could sleep anymore. Showering, I let blistering water, sting my face. Jen had refused to see Eli when the authorities said they’d found him—refused that last opportunity, those final fleeting moments—threw them away like nothing.

I didn’t believe they’d found him.

After I had resigned myself to the ending of the search, all I wanted was to find his body, to be the physical person who, by the order of creation, could remove his son from those surroundings that broke him, to take him somewhere safe. I couldn’t even claim that.

It was some couple sneaking off a nearby trail to do whatever, and I wouldn't be surprised if they'd tripped over him or put off telling the authorities what they'd found until they'd finished. After my shower, I curled up on the living room couch, tucked a pillow under my knees. The ceiling was the goose flesh of his skin.

The next morning the air was like someone jammed open a window. I pushed myself up, walked half-blinded to the entrance of the kitchen. If I hadn't seen it, if my eyes hadn't cleared and I hadn't known I was awake and alive, my colon spasming like a trout, I wouldn't have believed it. If you told me, if the president told me, I would have called you both fools.

Vibrant reds, sky blues, and rich purples, all swirled in flora across a wind-gusted floor. Dense ivy climbed the cabinets, the woodworking of our Lazy Susan, dug its claws into the corners of the room. The jade arm of a colossus—its superficial flexor muscles exposed—threw down the side door from the garage and grew along the floor, the countertops, into the sink and the refrigerator. Green was everywhere, on everything, and objects once separate: table, kitchen chairs, coffee mugs, stove and spice holder—they all seemed fused, melted down, still retaining a semblance of shape but adorned with a continuous spread of emerald-green carpeting. My legs staggered, and I buckled along the kitchen wall to the floor. Leaves crunched underneath me, as little green blades still unfolded between the tiles.

A section of tulips, like a rainbow speckled black with ants, popped along a stretch of the countertop, their bulbs leaning together.

“How...” I started, pulling at my knees, and something crept up inside me, both of fear and wonder. It moved through my body as a current. The faucet poured water into an overflowing sink, over the grassy countertop onto a forested floor.

I bit down hard, my teeth aching, fought to keep my breathing under control. I told myself I was fine.

But I wasn't—I was at the edge of myself, of insanity. The urge to cut away the growth drew me from where I was sitting. I went to the sink, afraid of the rough foliage under my feet, and twisted the tap off. The increasing pitch of my breath caused ripples over the chilled water as I slid my arm first to the forearm, then to the shoulder, the neck, and the ear. The sink-space deepened until I caught a long clump of snaking earth. I yanked it out, held it like a catfish—its white roots curling like arteries—and then flung it to the floor. In breathless gushes, the sink drained.

Jen coughed behind me, tightened her robe as she lazed against the kitchen entryway. Her eyes were tired, beautiful, and her vision drifted over the kitchen like she couldn't see anything that was happening. Sleepily she studied my face, and I felt as if she could taste the panic from my body.

She didn't speak—I needed her to speak. I tore handfuls of tulips from the countertop.

“Are you crazy?” I yelled, but she just walked away. She was gone, already floating somewhere else in the house, as tulip soil-water slunk over my hands and wrists like blood.

On the floor, hovering over the wild grass, I gripped as much as I could hold. I tore it out harshly, carelessly. I wanted to hurt it, wound from where it rose. It flexed in my hands, challenged me. I yanked ivy until it splintered at joints, until thick soil-water spilled over all the wooden cabinets and pantry doors. We could reseal them; maybe even pick out something better, something cleaner. It was fine. We would get it all out. The sedan had plenty of space—rear seats that folded inward to accommodate dozen of grass-brimmed trash bags. We . . . I could do it. Just a few more trips to the dumpster, that's all.

Half atop the table, wrenching sinews of sprigs from a layer of molting leaves, I heard Joseph meandering down the stairs. Lingered at the front door entryway, grass-covered tennis shoes in his hands, he flipped each upside down and emptied handfuls of dirt from inside. It was like he wasn't aware what he was doing, what I was doing, and before I could appeal to him, before I could shriek out in desperation, he slid on his shoes and was out the front door without looking back.

I propped myself against the swaying table.

Dogwood flowers seeping from my fists.

The fresh feeling was from the open garage. It gave the space airiness as if nothing, no walls or ceilings, surrounded me. Most nights, I was out here, even though the walls had leafed, bloomed in healthy, fibrous, greens, which blanked my workbench and barstools. I'd tried to cut the growth away—used sheers, the edger and mower—but every time, it just reimbursed itself, grew denser. My image of hell had changed because of it; no dead-fire or demons, but instead olive leaves and vibrancy. I began to notice, after hours and hours, how the blades swayed to some silent music, some clockwork or design.

It was almost nice, once you accepted things.

Jen floated down the steps and lighted atop a grass-covered barstool. She kept her nightgown pulled around her waist, her elbow propped on a patch of daisy-weed budding from the workbench.

“Tell me about when you went to see him,” she said. She had a look in her eyes like she'd just woken up.

I waited, hesitated. “Remember being unimpressed by the Grand Canyon?” I said.

“Really?” she said, and her eyes were like a lifted weight.

“The place was clean, sterile,” I said, and shifted. “This woman with a clipboard took me into a room with bare walls.”

“Every time I shut my eyes, Ben,” she said.

“She sat me down,” I continued. “Told me there were pictures on the other side of the clipboard, that the body had been cleaned, but that still the images were unsettling. Exposure—she’d said.”

Jen leaned, rubbed her mouth with her fingers.

“Like a saint, she gave me the clipboard overturned—told me to take time, as much as I needed. I sat for what felt like days; an upside-down clipboard balanced on my knees.”

“That’s why I couldn’t go,” Jen said. She lifted her elbow, trying to sit straighter on her stool. “Did you . . .” she said.

I didn’t answer.

Jen had refused that last opportunity, those last few moments. Now she wanted mine?

She adjusted on her stool. “During counseling,” she said. “The group asked what our idea of perfect happiness was. Perfect happiness—I mean, what does that even mean? I had to think a long time, and though nothing came at first, eventually I kept getting this image, this picture of . . . He was so young, Ben. And Joe—” She stopped, and dried her eyes with her sleeve. “Joe would be carefree again, and he’d be able to let go and have fun. It’d be me in the car with both the boys, and we’re driving to see Penny in Omaha. Eli—he’s up front because he called it. Joe—he’s in the back reading something interesting. I’m driving, Ben. I’m driving, and it’s warm out; it’s really nice. The air is crisp, and there’s music on the radio. There’s Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, and they’re performing for the three of us.”

Picturing them—I knew I wasn't going to tell her. "I didn't look," I said.

That was all.

I could feel she knew, because she brushed her nightgown above the knees like she didn't believe me, like she knew why I was lying. She didn't push any further.

Nothing would separate us—that moment, him and I lying there, blue-cold together. It was something I deserved, was all that shored me up anymore. I washed, cuddled, and carried.

Jen walked past me towards the door. I wanted her to put her hand on my shoulder, not for long—only a moment or two, but she didn't.

Like an insect under a magnifying glass, I woke with sweat beading down my eyebrows, tickling the inside of my ears. The sun cut thickly through the windshield, making the space a bayou. There was a sound of bone-stiff gravel when I moved my neck, and from the blurred mailboxes lining the sidewalk, I figured I was only a couple blocks from the house. Crushed cans and bottles littered the floorboard at my feet. Jen had called a few times but didn't bother leaving a voicemail.

Driving back to the house, slowly—my head splitting like an atom—a part of me wanted to keep going, keep driving until I was somewhere I didn't know the name of. Could I trade the boys for each other? If the devil, cloven hooves propped on the dash, were with me, could I exchange?

When I turned down our street, saw our home, I knew didn't matter anymore.

The top of a fir tore through the roof. Shingles hung like ornaments from branches etched with moss. The peek, strong and grey like an arrowhead, seemed to pierce the sun itself, as

around the chimney exterior, a dark layer of dense-green grass, conveyed constellations of flowers.

I parked along the curb, noticed curiosity under my fear, and let car door hang wide.

The dining room windows, so covered in ivy I couldn't see inside, cracked along the frames that held them. The garage door, which someone had closed, was bent and pregnant—a wave of viridescent foliage spilling from its veins.

The seatbelt was my line, my rope to reality. I wrapped it around my hands.

If I went inside—when—I went inside, there would be no coming back. Only the car could save me. If I could pretend I hadn't seen it, could deny the green image veiling the sanity of my eyes, maybe I could escape, maybe everything would be fine. A light in the bedroom window—flickered faintly through curling, uncurling, leaves.

It beckoned like a lighthouse.

My seatbelt was off, and before I was aware, a country separated me from it. I placed my feet in the front yard, and the car door shut itself, as the fissure, the waves, the circling free-fall, cradled me. I was weightless, and then rooted at the front door—the house, a mountain before me. I took the handle of the front door, felt the cold brass on my palm.

The growth from the kitchen had multiplied on itself and became a small forest that covered both the kitchen and the living room. There were young pines just taller than me, with fallen needles that covered the sparsely seen carpet, and I was having trouble telling where one room began and the other ended; they seemed to stretch together in length. The space smelled sweet, alive with a sticky freshness, and a breeze moved naturally between the small trees. The largest of them, the one that put a hole through the second story and roof, consumed the entirety of the kitchen, while on the living room floor, under a mist of light fog, there were layers of

leaves decomposing on top of one another. A fat moss swallowed the set of stone angels that Jen's mom had given us for Christmas last year, and they became part of the porous mass that connected the entertainment center and coffee table together. I stood in the doorway, disbelieving the size of everything.

"Jen!" I called, from the doorway, looking upstairs towards the second floor. Mushrooms grew along the dark backs of the staircase steps, and vines snaked along the mossy banister.

I walked in, shut the door behind me. The house, shaded by thick wild grass and ivy-covered windows, was dim except for the slips of sunlight that broke through the pine-filled hole in the kitchen ceiling.

"If you can hear me, come downstairs!" I yelled, and the ivy covered walls seemed to quiet my pleas. I tried to slow my breathing for an answer, as the sound of water running in the kitchen made me think Jen was there. I pushed further in, listening to the leaves shifting under me. At the large pine inside the kitchen, the trunk and branches blocking my view, I pushed my face against the bark, smelled the bitterness of it, and I leaned in enough to see a small waterfall pouring from the sink onto the thick, green, covered floor. The cherry-wood mug-stand I'd carved for our ten-year anniversary was splintered; a fat, bulbous hash colored plant, had taken root in it. Specks of dust shifted through rays of sunlight. A splash of ants marched along our plastic cereal containers atop the fridge. Birds sung from inside the pantry.

Back through the living room, coming around the stairs again, I saw the filing cabinet in the corner turned over, its drawers splayed under a young pignut hickory. Our tax files were covered in nutshells and the Cavern Club magnets from Liverpool, Jen's sister's save the date, were buried under spade shaped leaves. I put my hand on the mossy banister, the sensation of it

was like holding a sponge, and this horrible feeling that something I'd been ahead of had finally caught up with me, ran down my neck.

"Jen!" I called, as I climbed and the name hurt my throat. My mouth felt full of chalk. The air was colder at the top of the stairs and I could see my breath. I turned down the hall towards our bedroom, followed the flowering vines that shot across the walls like lightning. Sinking clumps of moss hung like drapes from the ceiling, and they kept me from seeing too far ahead.

"Jen," I said, more quietly, as I came to our bedroom door. It was cracked, and a sliver of lamplight shone into the darkness of the hallway. I pushed it open. The bottom of the door dragged and tore away a clump of thick grass and leaves.

My fear kept me from calling out again.

Inside, wildflowers, violets, flowers I didn't know the names of—hundreds of them—all seemed to converse with one another leaning the weights of their blooms towards the bed at the center of the room. They grew on almost every flat surface, on the dressers, the windowsills, the TV stand, even along the back of the toilet. The tub in the bathroom was running.

On the bed, the blankets had become hills of rolling grass that gave the impression of a person sleeping under them. Flowers grew around the knolls outlining the silhouette of a head, chest and feet.

I knew it was Jen.

I could picture her smiling as she'd lifted the grass covering, the way the tension in her face released as she scrambled under to rest. As small inlets of water shimmered along the floor between the flowers, I felt almost envious of her.

I wanted to call out to her, to see if she could hear me, to apologize for something I knew I didn't have words for, but as I walked closer to the bed, wanting to lay my hand on her forehead, I shook overwhelmingly. If I decided to leave her, to look for Joseph, I knew she would wait for me—she would want me to try and find him—and when I did, she would wake beautifully. But I couldn't move. I stood frozen until a flare of heat caught the inside of my face, and the urge to rip her up, to rip each flower from where it was, caught stiff like love-fire in my stomach.

I moved then, quickly, turning off the lamp on the end table, stepping hastily onto the flowers blooming beside the bed. I tore the final clump of moss that kept the bedroom door from closing completely and forced it shut behind me.

The wildness of the hallway stretched towards Joseph's room—the room he and Eli shared—and the door, small and uncovered, was further than I remembered it being. The vines, moss and the thick vegetation all grew on top of one another in a spiral, covering the floors, the walls and ceiling, blending together in front of me. I stepped forward, parted the hanging moss like heavy curtains, and kicked my legs through the wild grass that stretched above my waist. It felt as if it was catching hold of my ankles, pulling at my shoulders. When I reached out to put the flat of my hand on the only uncovered place I'd seen since I first stepped inside the house, I heard Joseph's breathing slip out from behind the door.

“Dad?” Joseph cried, his words seeping between the door and frame. “Are you there? Is that you?”

“It's me,” I said. “I'm here.” I stopped my hand before I touched the door, and pictured his ear, his cheek, pressed against the other side of it.

“Please,” he said. “Please. I can’t get out. I can’t stay here.” His words got wilder, pitched upwards in panic.

“Listen,” I said. “Listen.” And I wanted to tell him I was sorry, that I was . . . that things would be ok.

“There’s something in here with me,” he said.

I didn’t speak. I didn’t say anything. But I wanted him to know I was trying, that I wished things could have been different. I lurched at the door I wanted to open, the door I felt I deserved to open, into the space my sons still shared. Coldness wrapped my arm, my shoulder, slipped into my ear. I pleaded. Taking the door handle, a glazier of brass groaned against my hand.

No room, no walls, no Joseph or Jen. An expanse of wild earth stretched into a range of dusky-green mountains, which rose to skim the backdrop of a sky. The sun, a sinking point on the horizon behind, was smeared in drapes of yellows, of feathered pinks and oranges, while a visible mist, one you could put into a bowl or wrap your hands around, tumbled ungainly through a curved ravine. At moments, the mist turned, took form, and peered in my direction like a deer, before dipping through a grating of trees to draw itself apart.

A whisper curled across the landscape.