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Mantis

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Mantis

Olivia Lipkin

I can feel my bag slipping from my shoulder as I half-walk, half-run down the street. I know I'm not going to make the 427. I never do. I hoist my bag back up. Rounding the corner, I repeat my daily routine of watching the 427 pull away from the sidewalk, puffing exhaust as its doors shut closed. It's an uninviting sight, to say the least. I slow my pace. Shit. I don't know what else I expected.

The air is dry and biting. My scarf feels thin. I walk to the bench under the bus stop sign and collapse. Despite having this little mock-pursuit every day, I'm still out of breath. The winter air is just harder to breathe in, I reason with myself. Every big breath ends up feeling so small. I drop my bag next to me and pull out my phone. I reluctantly pull my gloves off so I can text. My hands are cracked at the knuckles, small notes of red shining through the thin, fragile skin. A few days ago, I had painted my nails a dark blue. It felt like a good winter color. But now, against the white of my skin, the blue looks too loud. I have to remind myself to take it off once I get home. I text Caitlyn, my roommate, for a ride. We both pretend like it's unusual, as if I don't do this every single day. It seems like forced politeness. I can't assume that she'll always give me a ride home from work, and she can't say no to my face— or my phone— that I need to get my act together and make my goddamn bus. But her office is only a few blocks away from mine, and we should carpool in the first place. It'd be stupid for her to say no to me. I bounce my legs to keep warm. Caitlyn responds. She'll be here in five.

I look at the city around me. It isn't quite a city, it's one of those pseudo city-towns. It used to be a mill town. The smokestacks loom over Main Street. There's a downtown, in the sense that there's a main street with a few antique shops and a coffee shop or two. I've never really seen anyone go into them. The town feels like it's struggling for commotion. It's begging for a higher crime rate. The freeway hogs most of the headlines — wrong-way crashes, traffic,

bad road conditions. Every once in a while the town is blessed with a break-in, or a car window or two smashed at the train station. Or the town gets to gossip about some rowdy kids taking a bat to a row of mailboxes. The town news actively works to stave off the rurality that surrounds the area. The city-town is just big enough for public transportation, but not big enough to have it be reliable. Well, the 427 is reliable, but I'm not.

I've only been in this franken-city-town for a year. I don't yet know how it changes from season to season. But I know that right now it's dead and cold and empty. The color feels like it's being sucked out of the air. The only thing that lasts is the red brick of the old mill buildings. Everything here was built in the same year. It's a weird phenomenon, but no one really acknowledges it. Every building is at the same point of decay, each rotting parallel to another. The old pipes never last the winters. One business will announce a burst pipe and then the reports come flooding in. It's a good town for trades. If a building reports a problem, everyone in the town calls in to get that utility checked out the next day.

I scroll through my phone, pretending like I have someone to text. Post-graduate social life is a hellscape. I don't know anyone here except Caitlyn. I watch the small birds pick at the trash cans lining the sidewalks.

A few minutes later, Caitlyn picks me up in her dorky old car. It shudders every time she tries to make a turn. I crank the heat dial and listen to her car sigh in protest. I did it too soon, so I'm returned with a burst of cold air tossed into my face. I bounce my legs to warm up.

"You have to wait for the car to warm up more!" Caitlyn says, glancing at me. "Can you pass me a cigarette?"

I frown and open the glove compartment, digging around until I feel the flimsy cardboard pack. I slide a cigarette out and hand it to her.

“Light it for me?”

I roll my eyes and search the glove compartment for her Bic lighter.

She rolls the window down so the smoke can escape.

“It is too fucking cold for the window to be open,” I complain.

Caitlyn scoffs at me. “Get over it,” she laughs.

I wrap my jacket tightly around my body and watch the smoke get sucked out into the graying air.

We park on the street in front of our apartment. In the good old days, it was a single-family home, a decomposing townhouse with aggressively green window shutters and a flat roof. I don't know who ever approved for that roof to be built. The landlord is always up there in the winters with a shovel. Often, I wake up to loud bangs and peek out the window to see clumps of snow falling and splatting on the concrete as the landlord clears the roof. A safety hazard, really. Now the old house is vivisected, cut up and divided into three apartments. Each apartment has the whole creaky floor to itself. We lay claim to the second floor.

Caitlyn and I stomp up the stairwell and unlock our door. I follow Caitlyn inside.

I walk down the hall and into my room, dumping my bag on the floor.

My room doesn't look very lived in. I have a few posters taped up, but the white walls still overpower the room. It feels empty. I had tried to fill the space with fake flowers, plastic ferns and roses shoved into a couple of vases. Mostly, my room is filled with clothes and dirty plates. I sigh and collect some of the dishes, carrying them haphazardly to the kitchen sink.

Caitlyn is standing on the couch, trying to hang purple string lights on the wall. She turns when she hears me approach.

“How do they look?”

“Great!” I assure her.

“I’m so excited for tonight.”

I nod. I still don’t know how Caitlyn managed to organize our post-graduate diaspora of a friend group together for a party. It’s hard enough to get everyone in the same place, and Caitlyn had somehow figured out a time that worked for everyone too. Looking at the mess we’ve left in the kitchen and living room, I waste time cleaning up after myself.

Later, I sit on Caitlyn’s bed as she digs through her dresser with purpose.

“I *promise* I have something cute for you to wear,” she mumbles, tossing a few shirts onto the floor. “What time is it?”

I check my phone. “9:20. I’m going to go put makeup on.”

A few minutes later, Caitlyn knocks on the bathroom door and sticks her head in. “I just made your night.”

I bend over the bathroom counter, trying to get my eyeliner right. “Oh?”

“Look!” Caitlyn holds up a lace white top. “It’s *perfect*, right?”

I smile back. I wish I could match her enthusiasm.

“Alright, people are showing up soon. Hurry up!” With that, Caitlyn tosses the shirt to me with a smirk.

I sit on the arm of the couch, watching the apartment fill with friends and strangers alike. People cram into the tiny kitchen. Bodies pour into the living room. Liquor bottles and cups are

tossed about. I can tell how sticky the kitchen counter is just from looking. The apartment is drowning in purple light. I spot Caitlyn in a corner, whispering to our friend Nick. Their arms are wrapped around each other — I can't tell where one ends and the other begins. I wander to the kitchen and search for a clean cup. My judgment on the sticky counter checks out. I fill my cup with whatever bottle of cheap wine is closest. These parties don't happen often enough to not get fucked up.

The purple lights dance on the wall. I lift the cup but overestimate my own drunk strength. The wine spills down the front of my shirt. Shit. I leave the kitchen, stumbling down the hall towards the bathroom. Thank god it wasn't red wine. Caitlyn would kill me. I fumble opening the bathroom door, my hands slippery from intoxication. Just as I manage to get the door open, a hand grips my bare shoulder and turns me around.

He is a friend of a friend. An acquaintance. We've met before, at other parties and get-togethers, but we never really spoke. I've felt his eyes on me before. I make a confused noise, but he must not be able to hear me. The hallway light swirls above me. I suddenly realize just how drunk I am. I fight the urge to vomit. The noise and sweat that fills the air is suffocating. His fingers play with the lace of my shirt. I feel myself shrinking away. I twist my body from him, but it doesn't matter. He slips the shirt from my shoulders and drops it on the ground. He pushes me into my room. I try to protest, but my mouth won't catch up with my head. He shoves me down onto the bed. I try to say no, to yell, make any noise, but all I can do is look at the water stains on the ceiling.

The headboard always squeaks. The frame is cheap, made of a flimsy black metal that shakes if you so much as sit on the bed. He notices it too. The creaking fights against the low

bass that seeps through the walls. The party is raging on. I can hear muffled voices, music and soft laughter, squeaking and grunting. I lose myself in the sound of it all.

I'm still trying to make sense of the shapes of the water stains. He shoves me to the floor. All I can feel is the carpet rubbing against me, skin ripping from my shoulders and back as his body pushes against mine. The most I can do is turn my head. I refuse to look at him as he does these things to me. I watch his hand gripping my arm, his fingers curling around me as he holds me down and concentrates.

I wake up in an empty bed. The fitted sheet is ripped from the corners of the mattress, folding over my toes. The window shade is peeled open. Bright stripes of light cut up my bare legs. I turn my head lazily to the side and shiver. The window is open. I can hear the slow Sunday traffic outside.

It's too cold for the window to be open. I never leave it unclosed. There's a wasp nest right outside, and in the warmer months, a wasp will flick against the glass and try to force itself inside the apartment. My eyes closed, I think of the insects swarming beyond the glass. I imagine one fluttering in through the window and landing on my knee. I can practically feel it crawling up my leg, its touch lifting goose pimples to the surface. Every touch somehow intensifies the headache at my temples. I shake my leg, shooing the nonexistent wasp from my mind.

Liquor swirls in the pockets of my brain that are trying to think. I lift myself from the bed and move toward the window, closing it with a soft bang. The sounds of the road are sucked out

of the space. The room is silent now. I look around. My jeans and underwear are crumpled in a heap by the floor next to the bed. I wonder when he left.

I shuffle through my dresser and pull a t-shirt over my head, slip on a pair of itchy sweatpants. My head is pounding. The morning light casts a spotlight on the floor, guiding my eyes to Caitlyn's shirt. It was dropped by the door.

I push out of my room, my feet carrying me to the bathroom. There's a pain between my legs, a soreness throbbing from within. I try to ignore it. Makeup is scattered across the pale counter. I don't even know his name. I doubt he knows mine, either. The bathroom lightbulb ticks. I lift my eyes to the mirror. My hair is atrocious, large and knotted. I dig my hairbrush into the mess. Raking through my hair, I notice a bruise sprouting on my upper arm. Lowering the brush, I examine the purple spot. I lift my t-shirt up, exposing my back. The skin is red and raw, small blotches of blood freckling the skin. My shirt falls back down over me.

My makeup from the night before leaves deep circles around my eyes, drifting up the bridge of my nose. I think of the difference between a rug and a carpet, the difference between sex and —

I place a washcloth under the sink faucet and let the cold water slowly soak into the cloth, then pour over my hands. The water runs as I bring the cloth to my face, scrubbing away the dark black lines of eyeliner and mascara. I twist the faucet and the water stops. It's quiet now.

My t-shirt feels too close to my skin. I can feel the fabric against my shoulders. I take the t-shirt off and drop it on the floor. Leaning into the mirror, I study myself. My lip is a swollen, deep red. My face is pink and puffy. I look at myself, red and raw and churning. My body aches. I am a mixture of white and red, skin and blood.

I stare at my stomach, at the soft folds and pink lines left there. My belly button looks darker, deeper than usual. But then again, everything feels off and looks strange. I finger my belly button and feel an aching pressure.

A small patter of knocks hit the bathroom door.

I back away from the mirror.

More knocks. I slip my shirt back on.

“I have to pee!” Caitlyn whines through the door.

I open the door and, before I can think, Caitlyn pushes past me. I turn to leave.

“Close the door behind you!” she calls after me.

I step out into the hall and listen to the door click shut.

Caitlyn’s bedroom door is open. I can hear someone shuffling around inside her room. Probably Nick.

I go back into my bedroom and find myself in front of the window. It’s winter. I never had to worry about keeping the window open. All the wasps are dead.

The bathroom door opens and I hear Caitlyn’s feet smack against the cold floor as she approaches my open door. She leans on the door frame.

“Ayla!” she sings. “How was your night?”

I’m sure I look frenzied, my hair half-brushed and my face still puffy. But Caitlyn is conveniently tapping away on her phone, oblivious.

Then it’s been too long for me to not have said anything, and she looks up.

She studies me for a minute and frowns.

“What’s up? You hungover too?”

I don't know how to explain. I think of different things to say, but can't get my voice past my throat.

"Ayla?" Her voice sounds muffled, far away.

"Yeah," I say. I straighten my back, wincing as the torn skin tries to stretch. "Super hungover. How was your night?" I force my mouth into a smile, but I'm sure it looks more like a grimace.

"It was good!" She smiles with a gleam in her eye and leans closer to me. I feel myself pull away. "Nick and I hooked up again," she says quietly. She turns quickly to see if he's conveniently right behind her, but we can both hear him moving about in her room, trying to find his clothes.

"Awesome," I hear myself say. "That's cool."

She nods, her eyes drifting back to her phone.

"Well, I'm going to shower," I blurt out.

Caitlyn nods again and heads back to her room, eyes still stuck to her phone.

I take a deep breath. Hollow. My stomach feels heavy and twisted. I go back into the bathroom and lock the door.

I avoid the mirror. Caitlyn hadn't noticed anything. Maybe I made it up. Maybe I'm still drunk from last night. I turn the shower on and watch the water smack the floor of the tan tub. As of yesterday, the headlines warn of no hot water. Everyone in the city is complaining. It was a full scandal at this point. I stick my hand in. The icy stream confirms my suspicions. I don't mind the cold. I just need to be clean.

I lather the soap in my hands and scrub the dirt from my skin. Rubbing my thumb against my fingers, I watch the grime collect. My hair is tangled, and now it's just wet too. I look down at my stomach. The streams of water run down my breasts, my torso.

I pull a towel around my body without thinking and wince from the resulting pain. I walk back to my bedroom and close the door, falling back into my bed. I don't know how long I'll stay here, but for now it's all I can think to do. I fiddle with the floral patterned sheets. It's like he was never even here. My body aches. I try to let it be.

The 427 pulls away from the curb. I swear the bus driver saw me running this time. She watched through her rearview window. As I got closer, she got this strange look on her face, all twisted up. Then the bus drove off. I wait on the bench. I already texted Caitlyn.

My hand drifts under my shirt, finds my gut, and presses. This morning, I had stared into the mirror for too long. I swear my navel has gotten bigger somehow. There is an ever present yet dull ache that radiates from it. I pull my hand away and check my palm for blood. Nothing. Just my hand, blotched from the cold. Caitlyn is later than usual. She hasn't texted me right back like she usually does.

I focus on the city around me. It's trash day today. All the businesses and apartments have piled up bags and bins along the roadside, taking up all the space of the curb with their plastic. It's late for the garbage truck to not have come yet. I hear low rumbling from down the street as someone rolls their trash can into position. How many garbage trucks do you even need in a city-town like this? Maybe the truck had already come, but people are producing waste too

fast, and it will just always be like this now. The streets will stay brimming with trash and offensive smells. The sidewalks are practically useless with this amount of trash piled up. There is so much waste. There aren't enough people around to clean it all up.

My phone buzzes. I take my gloves off and check it. Caitlyn has to stay late at work tonight. She can't pick me up. I rub the bridge of my nose, thinking. I could walk back. It wouldn't be terrible — if I walk fast, I could make it in thirty. It'll be cold, though. I grab my bag and make my way to the crosswalk. Between collections of bins and mountains of trash bags, the walk signal blinks red.

The city is cold. Every time the weather seems to be hinting towards spring, another storm moves across the town and dumps a fresh pound or two of snow onto the roads. There's somehow even less color in the town. The brownstones downtown wash away into the cheap vinyl fronts of the city's newest renovated houses. I swear the bricks have already faded from red to soft pinks just this season.

I listen to my shoes crunch against the ice and snow glued to the pavement. There's still trash on the sidewalks, but less now as the streets get more private and quiet. Most of the bags lie on top of snow banks that have turned brown and gray from the dirt the traffic kicked up. There's a small park that rests just south of downtown. Cornered by rows of houses and cul-de-sacs, it marks the beginning of the residential area of the city. On the pond in the park, a few teenage boys have set up a makeshift game of hockey. I hear their blades scrape against the ice as they brake and shortstop, spraying the coldness into the air.

“Jake, I'm open!” one of them shouts.

The puck slides silently across the ice as it's passed from stick to stick, boy to boy.

I listen to them yell at one another, a cooperative type of aggression.

I wonder how often they play here. I try to guess which one of the boys is the one to test the ice, steps out first as the others watch safely on the snow-covered grass.

Maybe the boys have parties to go to. In the basements of their huge empty houses, they have their friends come over. Their parents are away. Maybe they have girls to hold down and have their way with.

I turn down a side street.

I quicken my pace and walk further away from the impromptu hockey game. After a few more silent side streets, the street lights flicker on as the sky darkens. Ahead of me, I see the bakery illuminated, its pink walls broadcasting into the greyness of the coming night. It's a tiny family-run shop. They make mediocre pastries at best, but it's the only bakery in the entire city-town. A worker is outside, pulling the trash bags away from the curb in resignation. I slow my pace to walk around them. I peer in as I pass. The busboy mops the floors inside. I hear the shop door ring as the worker opens it, dragging the trash bags back inside.

I only have a few more blocks now. I'm almost home.

I finally see those hideous green shutters, that stupid flat roof, and I know I've made it. My thighs and toes are frozen through. I can feel the redness of my cheeks and ears. But I linger outside for a moment and stare at the trash bin planted at the end of the driveway. The cold can only go so deep.

The apartment is quiet. Caitlyn came home about an hour ago, but I didn't say anything to her. It would take too much out of me. I hear her music softly through the walls. She's singing

along. I open the window and fill my room with the sounds of the garbage trucks finally driving around. I guess someone had reported it.

I climb into bed. I want to wash the sheets again. Somehow, they still smell like sex. The cold air floating in through the window cools my skin. I lift my shirt. My stomach rises and falls with my breath. The air catches in my throat when I see it. Where my navel should be, there is a small vortex, the size of a quarter. I try not to panic. I spend some time watching it. It's definitely larger than before. It's like a black hole, twisting the skin around its edges until my flesh surrenders into a black pit of nothing.

I need to know what's inside. I want to see it. To feel it.

I undress myself.

My cold hands lift and pry. I dig my fingers into the hole and stretch it open wider. I pull and pull. The crater widens. I try to lean forward and peer inside: only blackness and empty space. Nothing. It's a hole at the center of everything, and it's empty inside.

Again, I try to touch it, to reach in, but when my fingers get close they fill with a static that's overwhelming. I watch the sickly motion of the pit, the edges of the void moving clockwise. My body is open, empty. My fingers start to go numb, and my chest fills with static. I pull my fingers away, lying on my bed, panting.

I don't see the 427 leave today, I'm too late for even that. The sky is dark. The winter days are so short. I sit on the cold bench. Caitlyn's on her way. I place my palm on my stomach. The hole had stayed these past few days, a small softball-sized cavity swirling in my gut. I'm not

entirely sure that it isn't just inside my head. Mostly, I try to ignore it. I can feel the whirring beneath my shirt. And then all I can think of is the rug, the carpet, his body and mine, I can feel his rhythm and my stillness. The hole throbs. I try to find some distraction.

I look up to see the birds on the telephone wires across the street. There's a line of them perched there together. I watch as one particularly plump bird stretches and spreads its wings out. I know what's going to happen before it does. The bird's wing hits another wire, and suddenly the bird is falling to the ground, fast. It hits the concrete with a soft sound. As it falls, the streetlight closest to the birds flickers out. Two of the birds fly away, but the others stay on the wire, unaware. I look at the dead bird on the sidewalk.

Caitlyn's car pulls up the curb.

"What were you staring at?" she asks as I open the car door.

"A bird just hit the wires," I explain.

She follows my gaze and spots the carcass. "Oh! Oh my gosh! That's so sad."

I nod.

We drive home in silence.

"Nick's coming over in a few, by the way," Caitlyn tells me as we walk into the apartment.

"Oh, yeah, okay." I drop my bag on the floor and try my best to settle on the couch. I begin to suspect that the arm of the couch is comfier than the actual cushions. Despite this, I stay where I am.

Caitlyn goes to her room to change out of her work clothes.

I hear a couple of knocks at the apartment door and walk over to let Nick in.

I open the door.

“Hey, Ayla!” Nick says when he catches sight of me. His head almost touches the top of the door frame. I can’t tell if he’s tall or if the old buildings’ ceilings are low, and I’m just now noticing it. “I didn’t know you’d be around.” He draws me into a hug.

“Hi! How have you been?” I ask him as we pull apart.

“Oh, pretty good. Thanks again for hosting last weekend.” He grins at me.

I mumble something back about it not being a big deal.

“Nick!” Caitlyn exclaims, walking out of her room.

The three of us chat for a bit in the living room, about our respective jobs and lackluster hobbies. I watch as Caitlyn lightly touches his arm when he cracks a joke, and I start to get the hint that I’m superfluous. I make my way to my room. Eventually, I hear the two of them walk into Caitlyn’s room, and the door closes. They speak in hushed tones, softly to each other.

I fall asleep listening to their voices rise and fall through the walls.

I wake up in the early afternoon. It’s a Saturday. I feel the static in my gut crackling, waking with me. There’s no reason to get out of bed. But I still do — I have to. In the hallway, the hole inside of me begins a vertiginous ache. I stop and press my hand against my stomach. Nick steps out of Caitlyn’s room.

“Morning,” he calls after me.

I whip around to face him. “Good morning,” I try.

“Where’d you disappear to last night?” He smiles at me.

“Oh, I just went to bed early. I wasn’t feeling great,” I offer. I don’t know where the words are coming from. I feel too naked in front of him, like he can see right through me.

“Caitlyn got called into work,” he says as I glance around the apartment for her. “Is it okay if I hang out here for a bit?” He holds eye contact and I have to look away.

“Oh! Yeah,” I feel flustered. “Do you want some breakfast?”

He grins back knowingly.

I make my way to the tiny kitchen.

“Is cereal okay?”

“Cereal’s perfect.” He sits at the small table Caitlyn and I had jammed into the space.

As I pull the cereal boxes down from the cupboards, I place my hand on the counter—it’s still sticky and syrupy from the party. My hand instinctively goes to the gap in space where my stomach should be. Scratching at the void, my fingers go numb. I can feel the pressure he left on me, his hand on my shoulder, my arm. I can hear the headboard squeaking, my body twitching. I think of the horrible mess of our bodies, together.

“You thinking hard about which cereal to choose?” Nick jokes, pulling me out of it.

I muster a laugh and grab a box and place it between us. I sit down across from him.

The power goes out.

I gasp in surprise.

“Whoa,” Nick exclaims.

It shouldn't be that big of a deal. It's the early afternoon. But the living room only has one window, and it faces the alleyway. Caitlyn's purple string lights illuminate the room.

Battery-powered.

Nick and I seem to come to the same conclusion at the same time and laugh.

"I'll find a flashlight," I say, starting to stand up.

Nick shoots his hand out and grabs my wrist. I flinch. "No, don't."

I give him a confused look.

"It really sets the mood, don't you think?" I can see his teeth smiling at me through the dark. I think of the purple light of the party, how different the apartment looked when filled up with people.

"Did you know everyone that came to the party?" I ask Nick, suddenly.

He shifts back in his chair, away from me. "What? Why?"

I try to come up with an excuse. I sit there, thinking in the dark.

"I mean, I know Dan invited some of his friends from home," he offers.

My eyes strain in the dark as I trace the coffee cup stains on the table.

He stands and heads toward the window. "Looks like the whole neighborhood is out," he reports back.

I think of the birds on the wires.

I push my chair back and stand. "I'm just going to use the bathroom," I announce. It sounds strangely formal.

He laughs at me. "Don't fall in."

I make my way to the bathroom and shut the door. I lift my shirt like it's routine. There is a gaping hole in my body. Its edges stir. I can practically hear the static that fills it, a low hum. I

grasp for other sounds, but there's only buzzing. I want to fill the hole that's inside me. I don't want it to hurt. I push out of the bathroom.

Nick is sitting on the couch.

I go to him. I sit on the edge of the cushion next to him.

"Everything okay?" he asks, turning to me.

I push my lips against his mouth.

His eyes fill with surprise. "Ayla."

"Is that okay?" I ask softly.

He responds by leaning forward and kissing me back. He falls into me.

We stay like this, embraced, on the couch. He smiles at me, says something to me, but I can't hear him. His hand cups the side of my face as he kisses me. His hands move to my back, sliding under my shirt. We move with each other, mirroring each other's movements in a strange harmony. He takes my shirt off. I pull his off.

Nick looks down and struggles with his belt. Immediately, my eyes flick down to my stomach. The hole is churning. It's doubled in size since the morning. Hollow. And then, as if in protest, the hole grows before my eyes. It stretches itself across my stomach, creeping up towards my breasts. It crawls down past my hips. It spreads.

Nick tosses his pants and belt to the floor. He returns to me, touching me gently. And then he's inside me, and my body is screaming and burning, but I fall into the pain. It's a good kind of hurt. I can feel the hole in my stomach meeting with his body, but he doesn't seem to notice. He doesn't seem to see it at all. His lips brush my neck and return to my lips and I feel nothing.

I kiss him with my eyes open. I look at him, watch him focus. I can see these strings, these waves coming out of his face. His face looks muddled, as if it's being stirred. His eyes are mixing together, his nose is twisting clockwise. His eyes fill with panic. He opens his mouth but it twists shut. All of his features are fused, and then I see the same waves coming from his chest, his throat, all of him.

I am nothing more than a black hole. I suck him in.

I jolt up from the couch. The apartment is empty. I stare at my stomach. The hole inside of me whirs. I know that it won't stop. I don't know where he went.

I grab my clothes from the floor and put them back on. Next to my shirt are his pants and belt. They lie in a small heap by the couch. I stare at them in confusion. He could be anywhere. Without thinking, I grab his clothes in a bundle. I rush to the dresser in my room and shove his clothes into the back of it. My stomach growls.

I decide to make eggs and toast for breakfast. I place the carton on the counter and pluck out two eggs, cracking them on the side of the bowl. The shells break like a skull, syrupy liquid oozing out of the fractures. Inside and outside at once.

I stick a fork into the yolks and stir, whisking away the edges. The gooey center breaks and melds with the thinner liquid. I pour the whole mess into a pan and listen to the sickly sound of the eggs popping and burning, darkening and thickening. I flip the eggs onto a plate and use my fork to pull the eggy tendrils apart.

I can't do it. I leave my plate and head to the bathroom.

I stand in the shower. The water is hot. All of the city's problems are so short-term. Sure, they're pervasive, but they never lasted long enough for anyone to really complain. I feel the pinpricks of water hit my back. I know that my skin will be red from the heat. Lathering soap in my hands, I scrub my neck clean of him. I look at the hole in my gut. The water goes right through me.

Caitlyn comes back from work around 3 pm. I hear her put her things down on the kitchen counter before she goes into her room. I hear the sounds of her pulling her dresser open as she changes out of her work clothes.

I feel caught, even though she can't see me. I feel the urge to be as quiet as possible in the hopes that she'll forget I exist.

Instead, I see her shadow under my door. She knocks.

"Yeah?" I call from the security of my bed. I want to hide under the sheets.

"Can I come in?"

"Door's unlocked," I say, clamping my eyes shut as the words come out of my mouth. I can't say no to her.

The door creaks open as she slips inside. "Why are you in bed? It's the middle of the day," she says. "What, are you sick?"

I shrug.

She sits on the end of my bed. The headboard creaks. "Well, do you know when Nick left?"

“He was gone when I got up,” I lie through my teeth. My stomach aches.

She frowns and looks down.

“Why? Is something wrong?”

“He just didn’t text me or anything. Normally he does.”

I nod, even though she’s still looking at her feet. Even though she’s not watching me.

“I’m sure he’s just busy,” I say.

“Yeah,” she sighs. “Right.” She stands from the bed. “Well, I didn’t get to eat lunch at work, so I’m going to go make something,”

“Alright.”

She closes the door behind her.

I think it’s finally getting warmer outside. I’ve been living strictly in routine. I take the bus to work, waste my time there, come back home. I don’t leave my apartment otherwise. I don’t want to be seen by anyone.

I sit on the couch in my apartment with the lights off. I think of the water stains on my bedroom ceiling, his hand holding me down.

He could be anyone.

I hear Caitlyn on the phone in her room.

I feel the hole inside of me crawl higher up on my chest. In this moment, I can’t even remember what he looks like. I try to think of his eyes, or if his hair was curly or straight, brown or blond. The hole thrums. I don’t even know what he looks like in the daylight. I don’t even

know his name. I try out different possibilities. Chris, Harry, James — maybe Jimmy when he was younger — Cameron, Charlie (but Charles on his business cards). Nothing sticks. Maybe he works at a small gas station in town. He flirts with the girls who roll down their windows and park at the full service pump. He smiles at them as he helps them. Or he makes his money in the kitchen at a local restaurant. All his coworkers know that he always takes extra long breaks so he can enjoy his cigarette. Maybe he's a beekeeper.

The hole in my body stirs.

Caitlyn bursts out of her room with a yell of exasperation. She storms into the living room. She stops and looks at me on the couch. "It's so fucking dark in here, Ayla," she declares, flicking the light switch.

My hands fly to my face as I try to block out the searing white light.

"Sorry, I didn't realize it got dark," I mumble. I watch her angrily pace around the room.

"What's wrong?"

"He won't text me back!"

"Who?"

"Nick!" She practically yells. She throws herself theatrically onto the couch. "He's ghosting me."

I squirm on the couch in an attempt to sit up straighter. "No, I bet he's busy or something."

"I've texted him every single day this week and gotten nothing back! He fucking hates me! I hate him!" Her face crumples into a frown. "I don't understand how he could do this to me."

"You guys only hooked up twice," I say.

She glares at me. “Thanks, Ayla.”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that—”

“I always liked him in college. We used to talk every day, too, you know.”

I look down. I didn’t know that.

“Not that it was anything serious, but, like, I thought it was enough to not be ghosted.”

“Caitlyn, I’m sure he just has other stuff going on.”

“Bullshit.” She takes a minute. “It’s fine, I just need to get over it.”

“I’m sure he’ll text you soon.”

A few days pass. I skip work. I walk around the city instead. Caitlyn thinks I’m sick at home. It’s slightly warmer today, which isn’t saying much. The air is still cutting into me. The roads are stained white from the salt dumped onto the pavement. Despite this, there’s still a brittle layer of ice sitting on the streets. I pass the iced-over pond, the bakery, the bus stop — there’s no novelty left in this town.

Across the street, there’s a mini mart with yellow awnings. The windows are plastered with pictures of cheap beer and cigarettes. A few posters for local events are tacked up by the door. The neon signs in the window blink at me: LOTTERY, ATM, OPEN. Green, red, and blue. I pull the door open. A bell dings in response. The mart is really a glorified hallway, a narrow space filled with shelves jutting out at me. The space makes me feel like I should suck in my stomach.

There's a man standing silently at the counter. He watches me as I move carefully through the store. Behind him are more wobbly shelves packed with cigarettes and ibuprofen and lottery tickets. They all look seconds away from tipping over. I don't actually need anything in here. I try to think of something normal to grab. I open the fridge and reach for a bottle of soda as a burst of chilled air strikes me. I walk to the register. The man doesn't say anything to me. He just sticks his hand out, palm up and open, and waits. I place a few dollars in his hand and his fingers close over them. He nods at me.

I squeeze out of the store. As I uncap my soda, I scan the posters and signs on the glass of the mart one more time. Nick's "missing" poster blends in with the rest. It isn't hard to peel the tape from the glass. The man at the counter watches me as I take it. He doesn't move. He doesn't stop me. I hold the poster in my hand and tighten my fist around the paper. It crumples.

Man-eater.

_____ It hits forty degrees today. My timing is off, but it works to my benefit. Of course, now that it's warm enough to walk home without the looming threat of frostbite, I make my bus. I sit on the 427 as it rumbles through the city-town. I text Caitlyn that I don't need a ride. I imagine her heart rate rising at the notification, her face falling when she realizes it isn't news about Nick. For the past two weeks, that's how she has been looking at her phone. The roofs of the city are dripping. The snow slides off in sheets of wet.

I walk up the stairs to the apartment. Although the bus is cheaper, it isn't faster. Caitlyn's already inside. Her door is closed. She's on the phone in her room. I go into my own room and

close the door. Before I know what I'm doing, I shuffle through the drawer of my nightstand and pull out the crumpled up missing poster. I smooth it out on my desk.

Nick's face is blurry and pixelated on the paper. They used his college graduation photo.

Knocks on my door. I shove the paper back into my nightstand.

I clear my throat. "You can come in,"

The doorknob turns. It doesn't make a sound. I think about keeping it locked.

Caitlyn pads into my room and sits at the foot of my bed.

"What's up?" I ask her.

She looks at me with full, wavering eyes.

I feel myself tense.

"Ayla." Her voice breaks and bends. "They found Nick."

"What?"

My body moves instinctively to her side. I go to her. I wrap my arms around her and hold her. We sit like this for a moment, together.

She curls into herself and tears pour out of her. I listen to the sounds.

"What happened?" I finally muster.

"I don't know," she whimpers, "I don't know." She shakes her head as she says it.

I wait for her to breathe and think.

"They found him in the pond." She turns to face me. "He was under the ice, and — oh, god!" Her sobs return.

"Under the ice?" my voice echoes.

"Ayla," she says again, but stops herself. I know she can't say it out loud.

"He's dead?" I confirm. My voice is too loud.

Caitlyn presses her hands over her eyes and nods. She keeps nodding and nodding, like it's some sort of compulsion. Her neck is snapping back and forth. She won't stop.

I place my hands on her shoulders. "Caitlyn, breathe."

I think of him, floating underneath the hockey players. The puck sliding across the smooth frost. His hands pressed up against the bottom of the ice. His eyes wide and open. His skin is blue.

"I can't believe this." Caitlyn raises her head and looks at me. "This can't be real."

I meet her gaze and watch her eyes widen. I don't know why.

The sadness in them converts to utter terror, this rendering of panic. The white of her eyes are red from crying. Her irises are so blue. I watch in fascination as the waves start again, blending her features into a smear of herself.

I want it to stop.

I want to control it.

I feel so far away.

My head lolls down, and I can see inky tendrils extending from my stomach. Finally, something is forming inside that hole at the center of everything.

From what I can tell, Caitlyn is still crying as she tries to back away from me. There's no sound. I see her hand lurch out, trying to grab me, to stop me, but the moment she comes into contact, her hand jolts back as if it's been electrocuted.

I have no control. She's gone.

I wake up in an empty apartment. There's a car alarm going off somewhere down the street. I lie in bed. I listen to the alarm cycle through different pitches of whines. I can hear neighborhood dogs barking along. I try to block out the noise. Just as I cup my ears, the alarm is shut off, and a car door slams. I push the sheets off of me.

An eerie silence greets me when I open my bedroom door. I step into the hall and listen to the resounding creaks of the wooden floor. There's been no sight of Caitlyn since that night. I feel the panic start to rise in me, creeping from the pit in my stomach and stretching towards my fingernails. What have I done?

I push the feeling down. She's fine, wherever she is. I don't even know her that well. We're just roommates. I sit at the kitchen table. My movements around the apartment are thunderous. Every step is deafening. I feel colossal. I can practically see Nick sitting across from me, the lights blinking out. But I know he's not really there.

My head falls into my hands. I feel nauseous. I didn't mean to hurt anyone. The apartment is silent. The fridge hums. I stand and drift toward the window. The wasps should be coming back soon.

I go to work as usual. I keep quiet, keep to myself. The town flickers with gossip about Nick. A body in the pond. The headlines boast multiple plotlines. No one really knows how he ended up there. It's the biggest scandal the town's gotten in years. I start to notice the police station more and more as it passes by the bus' windows each morning and every night. I never go further than that. I refuse to step through those doors. I know the police would start asking

questions, looking for answers I can't provide. I don't want to be this person. There's nothing to hide. No one has to know. It's not real until somebody finds out.

The day passes quickly. Before I know it, I'm back in bed, staring at the pattern printed across my pillowcase. If I squint my eyes, the flowers look like mold. Or strange cells with sticks poking out. The pattern creeps towards itself, caves in and reproduces. The flowers barely meet. Untouching. I think of the whirring inside of me. I think of willingness and restraint. I try to remember his eyes. Is he all that I am?

I reach over and turn my bedside light on. I lift my shirt and stare at my stomach, facing the all-too-familiar sinking blackness. Its boundaries are liquid, shifting before my eyes. As I watch, I'm met with a sharp pain stabbing in my torso, like my organs have decided to collapse in on themselves. The void warps and dilates. The hole swallows itself.

My stomach rises and falls rapidly as I try to breathe. Quickly, the skin of my stomach creeps over the blackness, stitching itself back together and keeping the darkness within. I stare incredulously as my navel returns. I don't see the hole anymore. My stomach looks like it should.

The hole is gone.

I run to the bathroom and look into the mirror. I feel tears pooling in my eyes as the reflection reassures me, as I touch my stomach, and move the skin around. It's over.

It's finally over.

I have control again.

I sit on the bathroom floor and cry in relief. Now I can move forward. Now I can forget.

I go back to my bedroom and climb into the sheets. I try to feel whole, like all the parts are in the right place. I close my eyes.

In my dreams, I see her. Her blond hair is splayed out around her head in a ring. Her eyes are closed. She doesn't tell me anything. She doesn't speak a word. Her body is forced into an unnatural position, her limbs bend at points they shouldn't. In my dreams, I try to cry. I scrunch up my face like I see others do, but nothing works. It's Caitlyn who cries. The water pours out of her eyes, then her mouth. She weeps by herself. Her body is unmoving.

I leave her when I wake up.

In the morning, I get the call from Caitlyn's parents. She's in urgent care. She's comatose. Some poor soul found her half-alive in a dumpster a few towns over, they tell me.

Half-dressed and without breakfast, I rush to the bus stop and take the next bus to the hospital. I have to see her in person. Eventually the hospital spreads out before me, a brick block with a few bland columns at the front. The bus circles and stops in front of the entrance. I step out onto the pavement. The trees lining the parking lot are starting to green.

"Caitlyn's parents are out for lunch," a nurse tells me when I finally make it to the ICU. It feels strange to hear her name in a stranger's mouth, talking like he knows her. He leads me to her before attending to the other patients and visitors.

She's lying in the hospital bed, blond hair glued to her forehead. A mask wraps around her face. There are tubes shoved down her throat. Bruises scatter across her arms and creep up her neck. One eye is swollen shut.

I watch her breathing, listen to the beeping and muffled voices that bounce around the room. Her eyes are closed.

I wait for the guilt to fill me, for the tears to sting my cheeks and my knees to collapse. Instead I stand there, pressed against the plastic bars that line her bed, staring at her in this unreciprocated way and all I can think is, what the fuck are you doing here?

The soft morning light from the window casts itself on Caitlyn's face, illuminating one half of her face in some lopsided way. I can't believe any of this. I thought everything was over.

I place my hand into hers.

The second I touch her, her eyes rip open. She tears her hand from mine and screams. Her screeches fill my ears, swarm my head. The noises force themselves through all the tubes and plastic choking her. She's desperate to get me far, far away from her.

I blink. She's silent and still in the bed. Her eyes were never open. The nurses mill around the room as usual. Nothing happened. Caitlyn is safe here. Safe away from me.

No one can think of a reason she ended up in that dumpster. The bakery worker who found her thought she was dead.

I think of her in the trash, surrounded by stale pastries and curdled milk, empty cartons and collapsed cardboard. Caitlyn, eyes open in the dark.

I think of the rotting, and the sweets.

It must be three in the morning when a pain in my gut wakes me. It feels like my insides have been torn out, like someone stuck their hand inside of me and shuffled everything around, and now my spleen is where my intestines should be.

My bedroom door creaks as I push it open. In the hallway, I can see that Caitlyn's door is still closed. She's not here. My stomach lurches. I turn to the bathroom. Collapsing in front of the toilet, my chest heaves as a strange saliva gathers in my mouth. I give in to the pain, my mouth open over the bowl. A thick, black sludge rolls off my tongue and pours out of my mouth. I stare at the black vomit swirling like a galaxy in the toilet, but my eyes are watering too much to make any sense of it. My cheeks burn, but my stomach feels calmer. I flush the toilet and move to the sink. I wash my hands, then my face.

I swear the floorboards are creaking outside. But I know Caitlyn isn't here. The apartment is empty. In the mirror, I can see the black between my teeth. I move toward the kitchen and find a clean cup to fill with water. I lift the cup and let the icy water soothe my throat.

I feel my stomach turn to knots again, and before I can move, I lean over the sink, mouth open, and I let it all go. Lurching, the sticky blackness drips from my teeth into the dirty water.

I wipe my mouth and consider the black as it stains my hand.

I thought all of this was over.

I grab Caitlyn's car keys from the kitchen table and head for the door.

Despite the hour, the emergency room buzzes. There's a collection of people scattered throughout the waiting area. The white walls are broken up by columns of black — large windows peeking out into the night. I don't know how long I've been here. The receptionist taps away on the desktop in front of her when she's not chatting with the passing nurses.

A middle-aged woman paces up and down the rows of chairs as she speaks hurriedly into her phone. She switches between languages, leaving me with snippets of conversation to hang onto. A small boy coughs into his mother's chest every few minutes as he clutches her. An old couple sits in a corner, the wife holding her wrist tentatively. A few families collect together, sleeping in shifts as they wait.

The exhaustion of the hour only seems to hit one woman, who sits in the center of the waiting room. Her head nods up and down as she tries to keep herself awake. Slowly, her hand loosens its grip on the celebrity magazine she had been reading. From the cover of her magazine, a tan, muscular man smiles at me. I feel something rise inside my throat, crawling up with acidity. The woman's hand opens as her head lolls down again, and the magazine falls to the floor.

One of the nurses calls out my name.

I swallow the bitterness down and stand up.

The nurse leads me down squeaky, bright hallways and into one of the rooms.

"Dr. Neumann will be with you shortly." She closes the door with a click.

I sit on the examination table and listen to the protective paper shift. There's a small rectangular window in the room. Outside, a street light illuminating the hospital parking lot flickers, catching raindrops in its beam.

Dr. Neumann steps in. His face is pocked and pale, the skin seeming to pull itself downward. His eyes are small and black, like little pools of my vomit. A shiver runs through my frame.

I don't hear what he says. He looks at me expectantly, waiting for an answer. I feel the nausea returning.

“How long has this been happening?” he repeats.

I clear my throat. “Few hours ago.”

“How long have you had stomach problems?”

I think of the rug burn, the soreness inside of me. “About a month ago.”

He unwinds the stethoscope from around his neck and moves to take my pulse. His large, hairy fingers creeping under my shirt as he places the cool metal against my already goose-pimpled skin.

“Lie down.”

Listening to the paper crinkle as I adjust, again I comply. Lying on my back, I stare at the popcorn ceiling as his hands run over my body. I flinch as he lifts my shirt again and prods at my stomach.

He presses down, and a wave of nausea and static overcomes me. His eyes are fixed on my stomach. My gut pushes and pulls deep inside. I try to see what he’s seeing, try to make sure nothing has changed. There’s no hole. He watches my stomach rise and fall under the harsh fluorescent light.

He retracts his hands and leaves the room without saying a word. Alone, I sit up on the examination table and press my palm against my stomach. It’s strange to feel. I’d grown accustomed to the emptiness.

The door opens. Dr. Neumann carries a small portable machine into the room.

“Sonogram,” he states.

I lie back down on the table and he squirts a cold jelly onto my stomach. Then he takes out the transducer, the thick white cord coiled around his forearm, and presses the alien thing against my stomach. He scans my stomach, casting beams and soundwaves inside of me.

The pain inside my stomach ripples. Moves within me like waves.

Dr. Neumann clicks his tongue. “I see the problem now.”

I search his face. “See what?”

“Something.”

He lifts the transducer off my stomach and looks at my body, then my face.

I can feel my stomach flipping and turning.

Dr. Neumann’s mouth opens slowly, the corners of his lips crunching together and exposing his yellowed teeth. He looks down at me, his eyes shrinking, his loose skin pulling taut against his skull.

Dr. Neumann turns the screen toward me, and I see the sonogram — a semi-circle of roiling darks and whites, swimming shapes and dizzying movements that mean nothing. The cold of the gel seems to seep into me, chilling me from the inside out.

The heartbeat sounds like a drunk person stumbling down the stairs in the middle of the night. Hollow, like a sound you’d wake up to and wonder if it’s the train or the wind rattling the windows. The steady thumping of a bed frame against a wall. Except it’s not steady. The heartbeat skips and jumps.

The panic hits me on the ride home. I drive carefully as the rain thunders down on the streets.

The streetlights pass in a rhythm of space, the distance between them perfectly calculated. I struggle to take a deep breath. All I can think about are the parasites that eat you from the inside out.

I just don’t know what to do.

The sun is slowly rising as I drive through the brick city, finding my way back home. I think of the Caitlyn I saw in my dreams and want to cry. My eyes feel too hard and dry. The windshield wipers squeak as they fall back and forth, beating against the rain.

The rain doesn't stop. Storm after storm rolls over the city-town. I sit on the 427, checking to make sure I get off at the right stop. The bus is full today, offering the townsfolk solace from the rain that spills over the streets. All the buildings in town are flooding. But, for some reason, none of the plumbers in town are around, so there's no one to fix it. The city is filled with standing water. The neighbor's cat drowned trying to walk down the basement stairs.

The wheels of the bus spray the parked cars and sidewalks a dirty kind of clean. The other bus passengers range from slightly damp to completely soaked. The cement sprawled around the bus is dark and I wonder if Nick's been buried yet. I hit the STOP wire and make my way to the door as the bus slows to a stop in front of the apartment. I try to leap from the bus to the building in as few bounds as possible. Despite my effort, I end up with dripping hair and a rain jacket that clings to my frame.

The visits to the hospital never change. There's always the same eerie cleanliness, the hurried footsteps and lost visitors roaming the halls, a balloon trailing behind them as they clutch the string. Caitlyn doesn't change either. She stays in that same hospital bed, her mouth propped open with snaking tubes.

I try not to think about it. Inside the apartment, I twist the shower knob. I'm met with a defeated trickle before the tap runs dry. The landlord's solution to the flooding was shut the water off in the apartment.

I walk to my room. I stand in the doorway and scan my room. Nothing looks right. I pull the dresser and push it against a different wall. Then I push my bed into a new corner, the nightstand following suit. The wood furniture drags against the floor, screeching in protest. I plop down on the bed and close my eyes. I listen to the rain slapping the building. I wonder if the landlord has to shovel the rain off the roof, too.

Cold water hits my face. Confused, I open my eyes. Above me, the water stains in the ceiling slowly stretch themselves, dull browns dyeing the white expanse. My bed is now perfectly positioned below the largest stain. The water dripping from the ceiling is cacophonous, but mostly because everything else has gone quiet. The noises bounce off the walls differently now. Another water drop drools from the ceiling and I'm not quick enough to dodge it. It drips into my eye.

It's only been a few days since the water's been off, and I can feel the grime on my skin. Black filth gathers on my fingertips. I take the 508 to the indoor public pool on the outskirts of town. Half of the building is in another town, technically. Split straight down the middle. The high school swim practice is ending as I pull open the doors, the humid air inside pushing itself down my lungs. I head to the women's locker room.

The shower water takes a moment to run hot. There's something odd about being in a building dedicated to holding water when the town's in the middle of a flood. I step into the shower stall as the girls team enters the locker room. Underneath the sputtering shower head, I stand and let the hot water pour over me. The high schoolers chat loudly, happily, their voices ringing in the heavy air. Locker doors creak open then slam shut as the girls change. I can hear them pulling the zippers of their bags. The final locker door slams shut as the girls filter out, leaving the locker room abruptly devoid of noise. The only sound left is the sound of water hitting the tiled floor of the shower. I turn the shower off and change into fresh clothes.

I don't feel clean, after all these weeks. I can still feel him on my skin. I think of the pattern of water hitting the shower walls, the irregular beats of the sonogram, the headboard creaking, and I know the problem is me. I suck air in between my teeth.

I shove the locker room door open and find the pool empty. My breathing is amplified, the only sound in the massive room. The still water of the pool stretches out before me. The muggy air presses down on my lungs and I can't seem to get enough breath no matter how hard I suck the air in. I stare at the water as it stays unmoving. I think of water births. Drowning.

The water pulls me in.

I can feel water in my lungs, and a fiery pain kicks in my chest. My body sinks to the bottom of the swimming pool. I can't remember how to breathe, or how to hold my breath. I can't remember how I used to do it, how I swam with ease when I was younger. I can't remember how I used to be.

My chest burns with chlorine. I look up to the water's surface, as if seeing it can will my body toward it. Floating above me, I see a body. The fluorescent lights above the pool illuminate

the form from behind. It moves slowly in the water, ripples emanating as it glides. And then it moves in front of the light, and I can see the face.

Nick.

His face is bloated and purple, his eyes glossed over and bulging out of his skull. His body skims along the surface of the water, those sickly eyes stare down at me. Small bubbles escape from between his lips. His hair sways back and forth calmly.

I've run out of air. I have to swim up.

I kick my leg against the pool floor. My body rises, moving closer and closer to him, until we're almost face to face. His eyes are dead but follow me nonetheless. I shut mine as I breach the surface right next to him.

I raise my head out of the water. My eyes level with the ground, people stomp around the pool's edge, their feet heavy and dragging. The air is thick, but in a new way — the space is filled with voices and smoke.

Where am I? The ceiling to the community pool is gone. Instead, the night sky opens up above me. The pool has shrunk. It feels warmer, and the water sloshes around as people dip in and out of it. What's happening? A bottle falls and shatters on the ground, beer cascading over people's shoes and dripping into the pool. I hear bass and laughter. How did I get here?

The metal of the pool ladder is cool. Something catches my eye. A praying mantis stands on the flagstone in front of me. Its green head tweaks and it rubs its legs together, cleaning. Its eyes are large and black. Its jaw opens and shuts and its leafy back quivers.

I pull my body out of the water, my clothes dragging me down.

Standing on the cool flagstone, a house party spills out before me. The patio is dotted with metal chairs and potted plants, overrun by smokers. The party is overflowing, and people are scattered around. Beyond the patio stands a small white one-story home.

From the windows of the house, pink light beams into the night.

I approach the sliding glass door and pull it open, stepping inside. The first thing I notice is how low the ceilings are, pushing down on the people that mill about. People sit on the couches, roam around the kitchen, huddle in different circles and talk. A light in the corner flashes different colors into the room. It fills the space with overpowering colors, switching on a timed cycle. A speaker blasts radio hits, repetitive and cyclical. My stomach turns.

I see him.

He's talking to a small girl, leaning over the kitchen island to get closer to her. She laughs as he whispers to her. The house shifts to purple.

From across the room, I study his hands, his back, anything to try to match the memory to the person. What a strange thing, to look at a pair of hands and wonder if they've held you down. The girl walks out of the room in search of a drink. He straightens himself at the counter and scans the room. I watch his face change under the light, his eyes flooding with red as the room switches to crimson. Then he catches me staring at him. His eyes shrink. His teeth are shining in the lights. He smiles.

He steps toward me. The apartment turns green, red, blue.

I push myself against the glass door, pinned against the city.

"Have we met?" his voice is smooth. His eyes are black.

He doesn't even recognize me.

I stare at him, dumbfounded, and he laughs. "I guess not."

He starts to turn away, but my hand reaches out and grips his arm.

“Wait,” I tell him.

He smirks at me and looks down at my hand. I let him go.

“Did you forget a swimsuit?” He gestures to the puddle forming at my feet, the wet clothes sticking to my body.

“I was about to change.” I think of the girl in the kitchen. I know what I have to do. “Do you want to come or not?”

He raises his eyebrows. I grab his hand and pull him down the hallway. We push into one of the empty bedrooms. The door closes. I know I won't last.

I walk toward him, my skin still dripping.

I summon the static.

I feel it rise.

My stomach lurches and I know the hole is back.

The hole gurgles and shifts.

It creeps across my abdomen, the returned whirring like a comforting purr. Something familiar.

He stands in front of me. His eyes are wide and open and they can see everything.

Everything.

The void gyrates violently, the tendrils lurch out of the hole and reach for him, feel for his touch. His face warps, his shoulders shake, and his eyes are white.

The birds are dead and falling, the electricity is flickering out. Nick is under me, under the ice. The sounds I hear through the walls. The void, swirling and sucking. My body is still. Caitlyn's voice rising and falling, her body stiff, her stomach bulging with child. Nick is dying

on the wires. Caitlyn's mouth is flooding, trash floating in the lapping water. The doctor puts his hand on me and holds me down. The eyes of the hockey boys flicker out like lights. Soundwaves and swimming pools. The rotting, the sweets. Rugburn. The wasps are back. Red and raw and churning. Static seeps into my eyes. The hole stretches to my fingertips, runs down my ankles and fills my spine. There's nothing left.

It's just the two of us, in the end.