To Wound, to Tear, to Pull to Pieces

Greg Schutz

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GREG SCHUTZ

TO WOUND, TO TEAR, TO PULL TO PIECES

This begins years ago, when I was young and recovering from a case of heartbreak. I met a friend for lunch in the small Wisconsin town where we both were living at the time. We talked for a while, and when we parted, I felt better. I can't say exactly why.

This is a ghost story.

A case of heartbreak. That's what I call it now. As if the only thing to do anymore is laugh—a little jaundiced, a little prideful. I abandoned graduate school to live for six months with an older man, a professor of linguistics named Jeremy Kite, and when, one might say, my shine wore off, he asked me to leave, and I left. I fled homeward, to my parents' house in the town where I'd grown up, to submit to their tender, suffocating attentions and ready my return to the life I'd been leading before.

Which I eventually did. That's all Jeremy Kite turned out to be: a bump in the road.

Some clichés save us more than time.

It's also too simple to say Joanna and I were friends. We'd known each another in high school—I played volleyball and field hockey; Joanna cheered. We knew many of the same lazy, athletic, breezily handsome, utterly thoughtless boys—but I don't believe we ever had a conversation. I remember admiring her, in a way. Joanna was tiny and plump, redheaded and pretty, her freckled knees flashing below the hem of her cheer skirt on game days. *Plucky* was a word I may have used to describe her. An overachiever.

Of course I believed I was more the type of girl the boys we knew were really interested in. But it was Joanna who ended up marrying one of them.

Away at college in Madison, I found myself endowed with new freedoms, new powers. I'm not just referring to sex, though I'm referring to that as well. I didn't burn any bras, but I did replace a few of the full, pearlescent, matronly designs my mother

favored with bright, filmy things that crumpled as easily as afterthoughts. I did see draft cards burned, and I sang songs for racial equality and an end to the war, and I conducted a series of what I called liaisons with young men whose gauzy ideals masqueraded—sometimes charmingly—as real ideas.

I had a job shelving books at the university library, where I spent a long autumn leaning on my cart in the stacks, living through *War and Peace*. (Years later, reading Adrienne Rich, I would suffer a pang of recognition: "you watched Natasha grow into a neutered thing." In Natasha, I thought I saw my mother, who still existed as a mischievous girl, dark and grinning as a wood sprite, in old photographs.) In a Russian literature class, I read Turgenev's "Bezhin Lea," with its ring of firelight, its haunting cries echoing over the river. I appreciated these things, I decided, in a way my classmates did not. I developed a vertiginous sense of my own possibilities.

Meanwhile there was Joanna, back in my old hometown, living my shadow life.

At eighteen she'd married Kyle Bohannon, a lanky, sweet-faced varsity hurdler who'd kissed me once, suddenly, at a party after a football game. Like that kiss, the wedding arrived without warning, seemingly without prelude or courtship, without even a period of engagement. When I heard about it, I remembered the glow from his flushed face and the sour whiff of his breath, his lips pressed together as if to hum into my mouth. Their first child, a boy, arrived that winter—a scandalously brief interval.

"There's a story there, you know," my mother said.

She called every Sunday, the dormitory pay phone ringing, one girl or another knocking on my door to let me know. This mortified me, as though having a mother were my unique disfigurement. She would be standing in the kitchen, I knew, looped in the cord. I hated her swooping, loaded tone. She was afraid I wouldn't catch her implication.

She said, "It could have been you, Carol."

My mother meant this one way—I had *applied myself,* she'd say; I'd been a *good girl*—but I took it differently. After Kyle had kissed me, I laughed and shook his hands from my elbows. Telling my friends the story, I'd made a joke of it. Joanna had done something else. She'd done the thing that separated us.

Two more children followed, one after another. "You wouldn't even recognize her," said my mother, who attended

YWCA reducing classes every Thursday. "Some women—they simply surrender themselves to motherhood."

My mother believed in a feminine duty to appear pleasant. This didn't strike her as submissive, merely proper. There existed a slatternly sort of motherhood that belonged, in her eyes, to the undesirable classes, however defined. Yet I sensed a new note creeping into her voice, a peculiar emphasis on the word *surrender.* It must have seemed somehow romantic to her: the heroic acceptance of duty, the glorious laying down of one's most intimate possession, the body itself.

What my mother valued, I was determined to pity and hate. Poor Joanna; she had surrendered. She'd even been saddled with a ridiculous, cumbersome name: Joanna Bohannon.

I valued the hush and crackle of old pages turning, the way paper slipped across paper like skin. I valued skin. I wrote my honors thesis on romantic dominance and submission in *Eugene Onegin,* won entry to the University of Chicago, and used the phrase *taking a lover* with far less irony than it deserved. For years, I never actually saw Joanna. She was a presence in my life, but not a real person—just a shadow on a wall against which I measured myself.

It must have seemed somehow romantic to her: the heroic acceptance of duty, the glorious laying down of one's most intimate possession, the body itself.

Now I was home again, waking each morning in my starched little childhood bed. I recalled the skimmed cream of Jeremy Kite's pillowcases and convinced myself, finally, that I'd feel better once I owned a set that felt the same. Which was how, in the parking lot of the Ben Franklin store, I encountered a small woman carrying a grocery sack, round yet spritely, tiny-footed yet wide at the hips, with a quick, mobile, somehow childlike face. Nothing at all like my mother's depictions. But I knew right away who it was.

As for Joanna, she might have seen me only yesterday.

"Oh, Carol," she said. "Hello there. I heard you were back."

There was more to Joanna's story, a reason running into her felt like more than luck.

While I'd busied myself with my studies in Chicago, Joanna

had met a man named Travis Snell. My mother knew his name; the story had achieved a brief notoriety. He was a park ranger who worked in the marsh outside of town, a wildlife refuge. How had it begun? My mother didn't know. In any case, things became public. In one version of the story, Kyle threw her out of the house; in another, she packed and left to live with Travis Snell in his bungalow at the edge of town. After just a few weeks, though, she came back—or was taken back, my mother said—for the children's sake.

"It just goes to show" was her assessment.

"Cheaters never prosper?" I suggested, determined to resist any lesson. My mother was a housewife (she refused the term *homemaker:* "It sounds like a construction worker"), and my father was a salesman for the local dairy cooperative. He traveled the state, peddling cheese. He'd done his duty—my mother's phrase—in the Second World War, and now he tied his tie each morning with big, clumsy swipes. I remembered Jeremy Kite's perfect Windsors, silken gems. My parents seemed bound by unwavering, passionless devotion. Jeremy and I were different. I lay awake at night, remembering our selfish tearing at each another.

"It could have been worse," my mother said.

Meaning I hadn't risked a family, as Joanna had. I had not abrogated my duties to anyone but myself, had sacrificed nothing but a semester of school. My spectacle was smaller, less sordid, less shameful. I agreed. I found myself respecting Joanna in a way I hadn't before.

My heart, those days, was waterlogged. The slightest prod could set it leaking. In the parking lot, I must have looked bleary and amazed, blinking in the sun.

"I can't get away today," Joanna said. "Maybe this weekend. I'll call."

I heard you were back. So the word was out about me, too.

Arriving early to the restaurant we'd chosen, I sat outside, pulling root beer through a straw. It was the edge of July. Light lay sheeted across hoods and windshields. Down the street, workers draped the courthouse with bunting. At last Joanna appeared, pushing a stroller—a pram, I suppose, the old-fashioned kind where the child faces the mother, leaving the two to stare helplessly, fixedly, at one another.

"My daughter, Gail."

"She looks like her father."

It was true. Gail had what I remembered of Kyle Bohannon's plump bow of a mouth and embarrassed, nearly aggrieved expression. So this was what Joanna had done to seal her return. She'd fashioned a gift in her husband's image.

Joanna may have sensed this thought; she may have raised her defenses. That would explain how our lunch began, a tightrope-walk of empty pleasantries and tinny, intensified cheer. We were both doing so well, we agreed; it was such a treat to have run into each other. I praised the unhappy infant; Joanna praised my color, my hair.

"You were in school," she said.

I registered the past tense.

"I'm going back."

Immediately I recoiled at my own bristling tone. At the same time, I meant what I'd said. Or, more precisely, I understood that I would have to mean it, or else own the statement for a lie and own every pitiful thing that lie said about me.

My face must have betrayed me. Joanna leaned forward, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear and then—she seemed to hesitate for a moment, considering; beneath the hood of the carriage, the baby stared out at us from its little cave—lowered her hand to mine atop the table.

This was it, the slip that sent us tumbling.

"God," I said, "it's been terrible."

"Tell me everything," she said.

I told her everything.

The April before last, Joanna and Kyle and their two sons, four-year-old Todd and infant Collie, had taken a walking tour of the marsh. ("A walking tour," Joanna repeated, making a face that said she knew how pretentious this sounded. I was glad to see her face. It impressed and relieved me, confirming my trust.) This was one of their first outings since Collie's birth, the four of them going somewhere other than church or to visit parents. The outing was Joanna's idea; the marsh was Kyle's. Migrating north, Canada geese were descending into the marsh in long lines, crowding the waters. Kyle wanted the boys to see this. The idea had fixed itself in his mind, Joanna said. He wanted his sons to be—his word—*outdoorsmen*.

There was another family on the tour, parents with a trio of

hulking teenage boys, as well as an older couple in matching flannel who photographed everything. Their guide, a wiry man in his thirties with a neat brown beard, discussed the migratory patterns of geese and the various native plants along the trail. He often had to wait while the older couple attempted the perfect picture: "Oh, look, he was beating his wings and you missed it! Wait, wait, he'll do it again!" Or else he had to speak over the three boys, who jostled and swore and pelted one another with fistfuls of mud. They seemed identically sullen and hairy, differing only in size; they could have nested one inside the other like dolls. The parents made no attempt to impose order. Marching shoulder to shoulder, they wore the expressionless masks of prisoners of war.

At one point, as the guide described a species of native wildflower, his eyes met Joanna's, and his face changed. It was hard to describe. He hadn't noticed her before; now he did.

"He looked unhappy, almost. Apprehensive."

The tour looped several miles through the marsh. Cattails and bulrushes sprouted in thick clumps. Red-winged blackbirds rode the wavering stalks. Poplars and spindly willows closed over the trail, casting scents of mildew and mud. And then the view opened up. The trees gave out, there was a break in the rushes, and Joanna stood before a silver expanse of water—dark clusters of geese drifting this way and that, and in the distance low hummocks of land, islands untouched by paths. The marsh covered several thousand acres, the guide explained. Much of it had been left undeveloped, a migratory waypoint for ducks, geese, and cranes.

It was fascinating, in a way. The sudden shifts in scale, from the intimate flecking of moss on bark to the miles of cold, shallow water. The ceaseless braying of geese wove itself over the world like a roof. But the path had only begun curling back toward the parking lot when Todd started to complain. Earlier, one of the teens had jostled him, knocking him down and muddying his jeans; now his legs were cold and his feet hurt. "I'm *tired*," he said, investing the word with a four-year-old's keen sense of cosmic suffering.

Be a big boy, his father chided. Couldn't Todd walk on his own like a big boy?

Perhaps it was his choice of words that stirred Joanna. How ugly those *big boys* were—beyond love, invulnerable to hate.

She handed Collie to her husband and held out her arms for Todd, though she knew Kyle would have something to say about this later, in private.

Joanna carried Todd the rest of the way, shifting him from one hip to the other, her shoulders and elbows turning warm and watery and beginning to ache. Todd hung limp, doing nothing to help, like a wet piece of herself that threatened to tear loose in a clump. Kyle, peeved, barely looked her way.

He must have felt bad, though. After they'd returned to the parking lot, he offered to change Collie's diaper—a rare kindness—and to accompany Todd to the chemical toilet. Alone for a moment, she wandered down to the split-rail fence that divided the lot from the marsh. Her body tingled with exhaustion, as though it were giving off a flickering aura, smoking at the edges.

"A night heron."

It was the guide, who'd approached without her noticing. He pointed to a tree that had collapsed into the reeds across a strip of shining mud. Joanna, squinting, saw nothing.

"Your eyes must be better than mine," she said.

True. He looked at her, and she saw that his irises were two shades brighter than his beard—tawny, owlish. His sharp, narrow face could have been carved from wood. He studied her in the same hard way as before, like a man reaching an unhappy decision. He offered his hand, and she took it.

"Joanna."

"Travis."

I know this moment. Not the beginning of anything, you think at the time. You don't invest it with special significance until later, at which point you hardly remember it anymore. Not the way you want to, at least, marking the weight of the light, the scent of the wind, and the breath before words are spoken, etching the words themselves in stone. You re-create what you've lost: owlish eyes, shining mud. Your particulars take on the too-bright tint of invention.

It's hopeless. Here you are, years later, trying to crack your life open with *words*.

I might say, for example, that from across the fronded expanse of a hotel bar—this was my first foray into professional life, an academic conference on languages and literature in a gray

inland city at the nadir of winter: three days of cocktails, panel discussions, and delicate internecine stabbings—I watched Jeremy Kite approach in the back-bar mirror, boiling up like a storm cloud that settled over the stool beside mine. Dark hair, dark eyes, dark woolen coat: these details, at least, are certain. And his black scarf was, I want to say, banded with green, minutely fuzzy, and faintly iridescent, like a bird's throat.

In truth, though, it's never the initial meeting I want to remember as much as the moment that soon follows—that sweeping apperception of opportunity and risk, and then the choice made so suddenly and completely that it seems, every time, like it can never be unchosen.

My mother went to Milwaukee to learn nursing at the outset of the war. She met my father there, a few years older, an Enlisted Reserve corpsman stationed at the port facilities. Later, he spent a year in Bristol, England, guarding American freight at a switchyard against rumors of German saboteurs and the very real depredations of black marketers. But these were not details my mother chose to dwell upon; instead, he "shipped out to Europe."

Telling the tale, she remembered things she couldn't possibly remember: the pattern on the plates at a hotel restaurant, the names of freighters at anchor. Sometimes she grew fanciful. My father strode forth to meet her in polished boots, his garrison cap folded beneath his arm and brassy stitching gleaming down his sleeves. Once, she described barrage balloons tethered over the city. "The spring of 1942," she'd say, her voice riding the syllables. I learned to roll my eyes.

You re-create what you've lost: owlish eyes, shining mud. Your particulars take on the too-bright tint of invention.

When she was very old, my mother believed my father sometimes visited. He'd died years before, following several strokes and an era of sad decline. My mother conjured him young and vital. "Your father put a fence around the garden today," she might call to tell me. "He had that big hammer, the sledge. All afternoon, I heard him driving stakes."

After she entered the assisted living facility, he became a constant presence; it was almost a joke among the staff. "Never lonely," the nurses said when I asked how she was doing.

Her window overlooked the parking lot, a strip of grass, the highway. "Wonderful!" she cried from her bed, blankly cheerful at my arrival, as if I were a neighbor dropping in. "My husband's in the kitchen." She tossed a gesture over my shoulder. "Have him put on some tea."

No one was there, of course. There wasn't a kitchen. Our family never drank tea. Still, the words had power. In spite of everything, I turned to look.

"I knew you before I knew you," Travis Snell said.

He and Joanna were in bed. It was the one happy interval of their affair, a few weeks between consummation and public discovery, when it seemed to Joanna a delicate balance had been struck. She could have her family; she could have Travis. She could arrange things just so, sacrificing nothing. It was midday. Kyle was at work, and Todd was being watched by the neighbors. Collie slept in Travis's front room. The baby had a doctor's appointment, Joanna had told the wife next door. Travis had called in sick.

"Tell me," she said.

He had light brown hair all over his body, coppery freckles beneath. His bones were solid and thick. Atop her, he was heavier than he looked. He drove her into the mattress. Now, afterward, she lay with her head on his chest. Under the hair, he was warm and hard as a heel of bread. She heard his words through his ribs.

One summer, years ago, when Travis had first arrived at the marsh, there had been a series of sightings. That was the word he used, the one Joanna passed to me. It slides down the thread of the story, clicking up against the next, inevitable question. Sightings of what?

"A person," he said. "Someone in the marsh."

Of course, the marsh drew trespassers of all stripes. Amorous couples and mushroom hunters, poachers with frog gigs and fishing rods. But this one was different. She made no attempt to avoid detection. In fact, she took no notice of anyone at all. Caught by a flashlight, she simply kept moving, picking her way across uneven ground. Pursued, she vanished.

She was barefoot, people said. She left no prints.

She?

A woman. One of Travis's coworkers claimed to have seen her. He was driving a service road when she parted the cattails a hundred yards ahead and crossed in front of him, a white shape in the headlights. By the time he reached the place she'd been, she was gone. The frogs belched as normal. The cattails didn't stir.

She had red hair, the friend insisted.

Did Travis ever see her?

"Just the once."

Kids had been sneaking into the park that summer, scattering cigarette butts and bottles at one of the scenic overlooks, so Travis returned a few hours after the gates were locked to walk the tour trail. Just a hunch: it was a warm, starry night, the sort he thought might lure the kids out. He kept his flashlight off, trusting his feet to remember the trail, stepping softly, in ambush. But the overlook was deserted.

Travis stood beside the bench, trying to decide whether he was disappointed or relieved. He was twenty-two, hardly older than the kids he was hunting. The night prickled like droplets in the hair of his forearms. The overlook occupied a low knoll of heaped manna grass and sedge, offering a view of a broad expanse of marsh, the water divided into pools and channels, tangles of box elders and dogwoods, the black domes of swamp oaks and birch. Something sluiced through the rushes below, a big pike or a carp. A night heron croaked from a nearby thicket.

Travis became aware that he wasn't alone.

What changed? It was impossible to say; the feeling stole over him like sleep. Not a dramatic transition, electricity at the back of his neck, but a certainty that grew in stealth until it had simply arrived. Someone stood behind him.

He turned around. There she was, her feet white as wax in the dirt.

When he turned on his flashlight, she disappeared, flung backward into shadow. He paced the overlook, calling a few times, sifting the tall grass with the flashlight. Again, though, he was certain: he was alone. Walking back to the gate, he felt unsettled, but not afraid. There had been no threat in the encounter, only a sense of focused attention, a keen yet neutral interest. In nighttime hikes since, he'd often felt something similar—an owl peering at him from a branch, a coyote padding unhurriedly away through the brush.

And he had, for just an instant, glimpsed her in the light.

"What did she look like?" Joanna asked.

Travis rolled onto his side, displacing her. He slid down her body, trim and intent, to cup her foot in his hands. He ran his tongue over the branched bones of her instep, pressed her toes to the fur of his cheek. He did not smile.

"It was you."

I laughed. "No!"

"Well, that's what he told me."

By now, the table was a mess: braided napkins, ketchupped plates, sandwich crusts. Joanna glanced over her shoulder. Up the street, across from the courthouse, a cannon topped a pedestal inscribed with the names of the county's war dead. Had we climbed the monument steps, we would have seen, over the barrel of the cannon and the roof of the public library, a gleaming corner of the marsh.

I return sometimes to Travis Snell's story, turning it over in my mind. Surely he didn't expect Joanna's belief. Why tell the story at all, then, something so outrageously false?

Jeremy Kite could speak and read German, Frisian, and Scots, a historian of that clade of languages that rose from the Elbe and spread throughout the north and west of pagan Europe. Had I asked, he surely could have told me that *ghost* comes from the Old English *gast,* meaning "soul, spirit, breath, life," a word itself derived from the proto-Indo-European *ghois:* "to be excited, frightened." The etymology is revealing, embracing as it does both our dread and our desire for the things that quicken us. (*Quicken,* he might have said, his fingers at my thighs as if to twist me open as easily as separating a mussel at its gummy hinge.)

The etymology is revealing, embracing as it does both our dread and our desire for the things that quicken us.

This was the usual West Germanic word for "supernatural being," the dictionary tells me, *and the primary sense seems to have been connected to the idea of "to wound, to tear, to pull to pieces."*

At the beginning of the third and final year of my second marriage, I took a maternity leave to care for my younger daughter, Cat. It was early afternoon, winter. David was working, and I had gotten it in my mind that I would cook a shoulder roast.

Rubbing the Dutch oven with trimmings, browning the beef, chopping vegetables—I must have been delusional, courting that extra labor. Cat had been difficult all week, blasting me awake every ninety minutes, night after night. I'd begun sleeping in the nursery so that I could calm her quickly: David was teaching an eight o'clock class and had grown prickly about his sleep schedule. Cat was not hungry, it seemed; she didn't need to be changed; she simply demanded a witness. To what? Her life, I suppose. "Here I am," I'd say, lifting her from the crib. "Yes, yes." And she would hush herself against my body—craving, it seemed, these little affirmations and reinforcements.

This day, too, she'd been cranky and irrepressible, shaking with rage if I set her down even a moment. She was on my hip as I covered the roast at last and left it to simmer.

I'd never envisioned this for myself. Not motherhood at all, at first—and then, after my first marriage, after Natalie, not motherhood again. Yet here I was, reliving everything. The aches and exhaustion, the tenderness laid like a lid over frustration, the savage little tug of a mouth at my nipple. Some days with an infant are lived underground, down in the biological basement of your life. It's a type of soured passion, the face you look into an echo of his face, asking always more and more. What you thought you were about—a university career, the classes and meetings and delicious, petty dramas; the busy comings and goings of students and colleagues, books and ideas; the endless pleasant stoking of your various indignations—seems very far away.

Dinner was cooking. The bus bearing Natalie home from school would not lumber up the block for another half-hour, and for the moment, at least, Cat was quiet. I didn't dare put her down, but I could, by resting my elbows on the countertop, take some of her weight off my shoulders. I stood like that, letting sweat track down my back and between my breasts, fantasizing of a shower before David and Natalie came home. If I could just get Cat to sleep, even for a few minutes, it would be possible. I closed my eyes.

Someone walked into the kitchen.

Just like that. Not that I heard anything, of course. I simply knew.

"Mom?" I said.

But when I opened my eyes, the air around me stilled and she was gone.

A few years earlier, between my two marriages, my mother had died like a tree—at the edges first, her leaves curling. Her fingernails turned blue as her heart gave out; her toes softened and purpled like fruits. Her hand swelled in mine, knuckles sinking in a tide of cool flesh. The nurse receded into the wallpaper. I was alone with my mother.

I could tell you the exact moment. A shadow passing over the sun, the swift winging of a diaphanous form upward and outward, trailing stillness behind. An interval passed. Then the nurse stepped forward and stillness gave way to brisk, logical bustle.

She'd been lucid, more or less, until very near the end, when the morphine took her under. We talked about my father. She knew he'd died; she remembered that much. She wanted to know how long it had been.

"Eleven years."

"My," she said. So simple and mild, so unlike her. She fell quiet for a minute. Then she said, "Was I alone all that time?"

Meaning, *Where were you?* This was more familiar: the little barb, the quick pluck at my skin. I was grateful and pained, as I would have been at any small recovery.

I'd once thought it impossible to reconcile myself to my parents' bloodless marriage. How could I, after my mornings spent before the mirror in Jeremy Kite's bathroom, dreamily touching the toothmarks that darkened my thighs? Over lunch, this was what I'd complained about to Joanna. Yet it seems to me now that I hadn't been sincere. What had really bothered me was the impenetrable intimacy of the home I'd returned to. Little touches: his hand at the small of her back, asking her to precede him through a door. Her fingers at the soft, crumpled lining of his hat, inspecting the stitches of a previous repair. These details were irreducible. They betrayed my romance for the airy, porous thing it was. "Tying the knot," we say. My parents lived in a tangle whose loops I'll never be able to follow to their ends.

"Eleven years," my mother said. "I never thought it would take so long."

After my mother died, Joanna was the first person I called.

We've kept in touch. For months, we'll hear nothing. Then a letter will arrive in a familiar hand, the phone will ring an hour after dinner on a quiet evening. We open with apologies. *Dear Joanna*, I will have written, *Where does the time go?* "Oh," Joanna's voice on the line will say, "I've been meaning to call forever!" But in truth, I suspect we choose these silences, this distance. Our lives are too different to bear a daily bond. After all the early drama, she remains Joanna Bohannon. Meanwhile, I continue to have my adventures, my setbacks: always that initial astonishment, the whole world electric with assent, and always, afterward, that same sad shriveling, the return of your life as it otherwise must be lived. Daylight seeps through the curtains.

"I felt it. I felt *her*. I felt her leave the room."

"I know you did, honey. I know."

Not a lie, exactly. Something gentler if just as false, a construction absorbed into the landscape. The fence the tree has grown through, pulling the wire into its trunk.

My mother was a big, boisterous woman, with a creased face that had been round and beautiful in girlhood and that spread and softened with age. A remarkable storyteller, a casual fabulist, too fiercely opinionated to remain beholden to facts. I hated this about her. I mistook it for faith, for desiccated Puritanism. I told myself this was what I was escaping when I left for Madison and then Chicago. I did not think that, along with her height and vigor, her hair that frizzed without mercy and had to be pulled and pinned or else surrendered to, I'd also inherited my mother's habits of mind. We were idealists, given to the same leaps and justifications, the same slips and excuses. My mother strung barrage balloons over Milwaukee. I loved Jeremy Kite.

I recognized this eventually, but not in time.

Out of regret, then, I sensed her presence leaving. Years later, exhausted and alone, I called her back.

As for Travis Snell, there are swamp gases and fogs, and all the little scientific tricks played by starlight. It was dark. Expecting to see a person, you might think you saw a person. Remembering what you'd seen, you might grant the memory a face

you loved. You might shape certain details to fit your fetish. Does that make you a liar? You've found the ghost you need.

"Maybe my heart's broken," Joanna said as we rose from the table together. "Maybe that's how the story ends. I'm supposed to drown myself in the marsh."

Stepping to the carriage, though, she gave a small, pliant shrug—an unburdening, a dismissal. When Gail began to fuss, Joanna leaned forward, dangling her hand as a plaything. Her daughter latched onto a finger. She had her mother's red hair.

It's Natalie and Cat I think of now, who call mostly for practical advice: bank loans, dental work, wedding registries, insurance policies, and how to grow ever more pregnant with grace. This is Natalie's first time. She was late to marry. Graduate school came first, and then the establishment of a career. Tonight, she calls to say her ankles are swollen. Her hips ache. Sleep with a rolled towel under the small of your back, I tell her. Sit down to pull on your pants.

Expecting to see a person, you might think you saw a person. Remembering what you'd seen, you might grant the memory a face you loved.

Hausfrau, Jeremy Kite might say. His smile would not be kind. ("She gave up," Tolstoy writes; "she let go." Natasha becomes, in the end, a happy plowhorse, useful, utterly domestic. *Motherly.*) But on my kitchen table sit my manuscript pages for a book-length translation of Elizaveta Polonskaya's poems. A bottle of Barolo breathes atop the butcher block by my hip, beside a ripe tomato and a salty hunk of Grana Padano. I offer my daughter what comfort I can, but a part of me is elsewhere. I sink a knife into the purple fruit, flaying it open with swift, immaculate strokes. At some point, I must have been taught this—how to cut without pressure through skin and flesh, not to damage but to transform, to make of things what I want. The little blade in my fist turns wet, glazed with golden seeds.