

Escapees · *Albert Goldbarth*

1

Her older sister died of it at eight. She remembers her mother pulling cords of phlegm from the girl's open mouth. An older brother lived weeks. (By then they knew more than the doctors, predicted their own son's death: you only need to kiss a cystic fibrosis infant once. The bitter thick salt skin.) Morgan escaped it. She calls, around midnight—her younger sister in the hospital again, a whole lung needs gutting out and then what? Her younger sister my age, 31, and the house around me deepens.

2

My sister, Livia, was eight when Grandma/ . . .Daddy Irv said, "She's with Grandpa Albert now." He stood alone in the late day's dark bay window, the little light left made the lace drapes mottle his skin. I'd never seen him cry before, I was thirteen or so. And Livia must have understood less, even. —Though she registered grief, she shivered in the limousine. Before he entered the house, Daddy Irv washed his hands from a mason jar of water: Jewish tradition: washing the funeral off, like a pair of gloves, a pair of death gloves, left outside. Then he joined us. Jewish tradition: the relatives all brought sweets.

3

Livia calls, around midnight. "I got me a raise!" I tell her: a root-a-toot brunette with a peekaboo blouse in my class, a new poem, Morgan's sister's sick, the summer dog days finally wagging their tail end, and how's Boogie. Livia's 26-year-old's voice goes simpler: "Boogie's so cuute." I hear his buzzsaw snore. "He's sleeping just like a faiwybook fwog." And Mommy and Daddy are fine, and back from vacation on Mackinac Island. We both got t-shirts, mine's in the mail. Goldbarths are happy, basically happy, creatures.

4

But I can wear gloves, so touch it. Morgan in bed with me, it's dark but we see with our hands. It's dark and I can make love to the darkness, I can fuck death with a rubber, I can put Morgan on. It's there, in back, the bent gene and the seeds, and then we're done and just kissing, all the sweat you'd expect and saying: salt, so light, so faintly, salt, such a normal night's taste, we've escaped it. Kiss so sweet, we've come through again.

120