

ALYSON FOSTER

*The Theory of Clouds*

In September, scientists come to town to study the clouds. No one is sure how many researchers there are exactly—some undetermined number of men and a single woman who walks with quick and competent strides—and no one wants them there. The cashier at the gas station on Route 27 rings up the interlopers' purchases sourly, taking their proffered bills with two pinched fingers and grudgingly doling out their change, shorting them a quarter or dime whenever she can. The waitresses who serve them at the diner downtown leave their plates on the cook's counter until the mashed potatoes congeal, and shun the tips they leave behind.

Little surprise then, Julia thinks, that the small group rarely ventures away from their site, the white cluster of tents at the southern perimeter of town just downwind of the Smithson plant. Every day, when she drives the school bus past the field where they work, she sees two or three of the scientists wading through the wet cresting grass, legs sheathed to the knee in bright galoshes, to where the spires of their instruments glitter. Or conferring over wide scrolls of graph paper that wave their hieroglyphics loosely in the wind. Or draped across the dented hoods of their Volvos, eating sandwiches with one hand and gesticulating skyward with the other. Their gestures are so earnest, so fraught with exclusive meaning, that Julia looks up too, leaning forward in her seat to peer through the expansive windshield in front of her, as if something brief but majestic might appear.

She sees nothing. Her neck hurts though. The hours of sitting, guiding the bus through the same rotation, twice in the morning, once at noon, twice at night—always right on Deerfield, left on Bluegrass, then left on Meridian, and then the whole pattern reversed—are tightening her joints like the cogs in a clock, everything forever grinding in the same direction. The fleshy undersides of her palms, that constant point of contact with the wheel, began to lose feeling several years ago and now the skin there has a slightly deadened cast to it. She can see it in good light, faint smudges that never disappear, a bruising from wrist to pinky finger.

She has never mentioned this to Danae; it simply doesn't occur to her. When Julia was a little girl, her mother used to call her *stoic* in an admiring tone. Now that her mother is gone, Julia likes remembering the word; the chime of it both melodic and steely in her ear. Another thing she keeps to herself. Danae has always thought Julia a touch sentimental. Danae, who works forty hours a week on the line at the same plant sorting out the hardware that comes rolling off the belt. Her hands are as attuned to nuance as a blind woman's. Plow bolts from flanges, truss screws from pans, half-inch washers from three-quarters—Danae knows these distinctions by touch. Her fingers assess quicker than thought—all day long they sift out what they need and leave behind the rest. A metallic odor lingers on Danae's skin no matter how long she dallies in the shower. When Julia presses her lips to it the cold scent makes her think of snow.

Julia is out in the garden planting bulbs when Danae comes home late from the plant again. Three times this month, Smithson employees have been held after work for informational meetings. Julia isn't sure what information is being disseminated exactly. Danae can never quite seem to specify. But from what Julia can piece together these assemblies have an interesting tone—discussions that are strident and yet vague in their objectives. She patiently whittles out hollows in the dirt with her finger while Danae relates the most recent highlights. The summer flush of flowers has peaked and wilted away, and now only a few hardy chrysanthemums remain, a spattering of stolid yellow and orange that glow in the gathering dusk.

"Are you listening?" Danae says, and when Julia looks up Danae repeats herself. "Joe Flynn was talking about how we have to be careful," she concludes. "You know how these environmentalists are."

"Not really." Julia smooths the soil with both hands and sits back on her haunches. The irises are tucked away now, ready for the cold and the waiting. She likes to sing a little song to her flowers while she lays them to rest for the winter, something to fortify them while the earth chills and hardens around them, but she would never let Danae catch her at it. "I mean I know how Joe Flynn thinks they are. But just because rabidity happens to be his natural state doesn't mean he should assume everyone else—"

“Rabidity.” Danae shoves her hands in her pockets and tilts her head. “Is that even really a word?” She sees Julia opening her mouth and hastily continues. “I know it’s a *word* word. But something people actually say? It isn’t.”

“Not Joe Flynn, anyway.”

“Or anyone else.” Danae reaches down and ruffles Julia’s hair, traces the switchback of her part. “I get out in the world, Julia. I see things. I hear what people say. One of us has to pay attention, even if you don’t think it’s important.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re up to the task.” Julia stiffly hazards a standing position; dirt drizzles around her fraying tennis shoes. “I’m certainly not.” Without thinking, she glances up. Too dark to see anything now—all she can make out is the pines’ vertiginous pitch and sway against a shadowy expanse. Beyond that, everything is lost to the eye. Maybe the bats setting out above them or the birds returning to rest in their arboreal posts can still make something out, a glimmer of the clouds’ churning passage, but how would anyone know?

“Hey.” Danae gently scuffs Julia’s foot with her own. “What are you looking at?”

Julia sees plenty. If you were to draw a map of her routes they would spread out for miles in a series of intricate loops, widening like a net unfurling and coming back into itself. She drives the bus along gravel roads nearly hidden in the undergrowth. Three, maybe four times a year the county sends men through in giant threshing machines—they beat the weeds into shimmering clouds of pollen. Two weeks and the foliage has crept back up the shoulders and covered them over again. In some places oaks soldier up so close to the dirt tracks that the bus scrapes along their branches. The trees release their acorn burden like revenge. Hundreds of the dense seeds drum down upon the roof in deafening peals of aluminum thunder before they scatter to the ground, each one to become a tree or nothing at all.

Julia no longer remembers many particulars from her high school education. But there is a vague concept from science class—or maybe it came from a book—about time, the way it’s a dimension, like space. A dimension that can’t be seen, only moved through. She thinks about this sometimes and wishes she understood it better.

Through the seasons, Julia passes along her convoluted orbit and watches the world change hourly, daily. Stones rising and sinking in the river beneath the bridge. Wildflowers blooming incrementally. A mailbox succumbing to rot and ditches emptying and filling with earth. An abandoned house accruing stars in its dark windowpanes, each one shattering into brittle light. Every year the kids coming back taller and more reluctant. While always in the distance the plant's three smokestacks jut like rust-tinged peninsulas into the sky. The smoke rising from them twists like musculature—a dense bunching at the bottom that thins into wisps as it gains altitude.

In her mind's eye, Julia tries to merge this vast collection of seconds, as if she could hold them all simultaneously. She can almost picture it: the fields layered with every color there is; a frozen streak of train along the horizon; Julia herself coming and gone; and the scientists suspended like ghosts watching the clouds hurtle through the sky, luminous mountains moving at the speed of light.

And then she snaps to again. Coming back into town, the bus passes the field where the scientists are working. The woman striding through the grass on the far end of it loses her grip on a sheaf of papers and the wind takes them. Julia sees it all, makes a mental note. *So there, Danae.* In her rearview mirror, the inverted figure stoops and chases the sheets as if she is trying to call back a startled flock of birds. While the kids in the back turn to jeer.

Most days she's back at the garage by a quarter to four. The day is then her own. She usually drives from there to the town's library. It's a small one-room brick building with green carpeting, its ivy pattern nearly scuffed away by years of passing feet. Julia walks along the quiet rows as lightly as possible, like a person without footsteps, imagining that she can draw up the creaking of the floorboards inside herself and leave behind nothing but silence. She closes her eyes, trails her fingers along the softening spines of the hardcover volumes, the brittle cracking paperbacks. And then she stops. If the book beneath her hand isn't one she has read, she pulls it. If it is, she closes her eyes and moves on. Simple as that.

She rarely takes a seat at the scarred table next to the sighing radiator in the corner. There's something vaguely depressing about watching the late afternoon sun sink in the window that's covered in faded construction-paper stars made by children during story

hours long ago forgotten. She checks out her books from the wordless librarian and heads back out into the evening with the small stack of them clutched to her chest.

When she arrives home the paper is waiting, nestled in the top branches of the enormous jade plant on the porch next to the front door, placed there for her by Danae. It's a shabby little local publication, never more than fifteen pages long, and the photographs are poorly set, the red and yellow ink misaligned so that every figure in them trails behind a forlorn blue ghost of himself.

The reporting isn't so bad though. Tim Kelley, the *Herald's* editor, has a reputation for being eccentric. The property where the scientists are now at work belongs to him; he's letting them camp out there for free. But Kelley also has family that goes back generations in the town; he's related by blood or marriage to school board members, plant foremen, and town councilmen, and is therefore a known element. His loyalties cannot be called into question, and his readers also know that there is nothing else for them to read.

Julia reads the paper every day from first to final page. She's not especially interested in the particulars of any one story—the conflagration of a granary out on North 46 or the deranged high-school band director fired at last with great fanfare. It's more habit than anything else, following the dramatic arcs of business and personal tensions like plots in a mediocre sitcom, which are predictable but still moderately diverting.

And then even the humdrum offers up a revelation from time to time. When Julia opens the paper one fall afternoon she finds a letter to the editor on page two of the *Herald* written by one Christopher Tenley, leader of the enemy conclave. There are his credentials, the authoritative addendum to his surname: PhD, Atmospheric Science, Cornell University. Who around here can compete with that? She puts the water on to boil, shakes out the paper, and sits down at the kitchen table to read.

That's where she's sitting when Danae comes home. The water has boiled away and evaporated into nothingness, and not until the thump and shuffle of heavy shoes on the linoleum does Julia smell the empty pot, a metallic scorching in the air. Danae appears before her in the haze, jacket in one hand, her face wrinkled up wryly. "Smells great," she says. "Hope you saved some for me." With her free hand she gestures toward the paper. "What do they have their

panties in a twist about now?" she says. She herself never reads a word of it.

"The usual, lately." Julia sits up and rubs her elbow, which has gone numb. "They think the EPA is going to come in here and close us down and we'll all be jobless and starve and the children will turn feral and run naked through the streets."

"Oh yeah?" says Danae. The second syllable bows a little under some kind of extra thought she's not saying, but Julia has jumped up to rescue the pot, to keep the bottom of it from adhering permanently to the burner, and so she doesn't notice.

"You should read it, Danae," she calls into the living room. It's too late—the burner has singed a scar of concentric rings into the pan's copper underside, and the entire kitchen is rife with a poisonous stench. "Kelley printed this whole long piece by the guy that's heading up the study. Tenley is his name. A long and very explicit letter to the editor about what it is they're looking at. He says there have been some studies about certain airborne industrial emissions—that there might be something in them affecting atmospheric patterns. They think the plant is actually making new clouds. How crazy is that?"

The window above the kitchen sink won't open—it has been carelessly painted into its sill. Julia's handiwork. Danae would never have done something so shoddy. Julia leverages all the power of her pitiful biceps for one last push and finally it gives in a burst of white flakes.

"They just want to know, that's all, Tenley says," she continues when she catches her breath. "I mean, it could have important environmental consequences. But Kelley put this guy's letter, which is very dispassionate and well-written, next to these accusations that people like Flynn wrote in. And he didn't edit out any of their typos—he just put *sic* in brackets next to all their mistakes. Then over the top he put a big headline that says *Whom Do You Believe?*"

No answer. Still waving her hands at the vanquished smoke, Julia steps through the doorway to see Danae standing by the table, frowning down at the paper. Finally, she looks up. She's been rubbing her short brown hair against the grain and now it bristles up like an animal pelt. She says, "Kelley better be careful."

“Oh, come on.” Julia starts to laugh and then she sees Danae’s scuffed knuckles tighten against the seams of her corduroy pant legs.

“No, you *come on*, Julia.” Danae picks up the paper and begins twisting it into a funnel, wringing it tighter and tighter until her fingertips bruise and blur the newsprint and come away dark. “I know you think bad grammar is funny, but this isn’t a joke. These are people’s jobs—it’s *my* job.”

“Don’t you think it’s possible you’re getting just a tad ahead of yourself?” Julia puts her hand on the back of a chair to steady herself. The room sways, just slightly, around her ears, but she’s startled at how ready she feels for a fight, pitched forward on her toes in a battle stance. “No one’s talking about shutting anything down, Danae. It’s called *science*. The disinterested pursuit of knowledge for knowledge’s sake. Widening the scope and depth of human understanding so we can better our situation. So they find out it’s true. It doesn’t mean they’re going to *do* anything about it. But the thought of facing a few unpleasant facts—”

“Blah, blah, blah.” Danae folds her hand, fingers to thumb and snaps them open and closed in Julia’s face. “Facts, my ass. Do you not know how things are? You’re the one who reads the paper. They went up to that electric plant in Grayling just to do a study. They sent people out on that forest property owned by the Hyatt mill just to do a study. They went out and took samples of phosphate or whatever the hell it is up in the Titabawassee *just to do a study*. And what happened afterward in those places? Not nothing. Kelley may think he’s being smart, and you might get a kick out of it, but he’s not doing anyone around here any favors. And neither are you.”

And with that pronouncement she whirls, a single tight and enraged pirouette, and marches out of the house. A moment later the truck engine throbs to life but Julia can’t hear it. She’s still rocked back on her heels, dumbfounded, ears ringing.

Overnight the wind swings around to the north. It scrapes across the woods and fields, an abrasive husk, the benign pulp of summer suddenly sucked out and gone in the night. Danae appeared in bed next to Julia some time early in the morning, and she doesn’t stir when Julia cautiously loosens the blankets from around her hips and leans over her. Danae’s boyish face with its square jaw is still

fierce even in sleep, her fists tucked under her chin. Neither one of them is old exactly, but in bad light like this, the embalming gray tints before dawn, Julia sees the future. Her own flesh has already begun to separate out: tendons, muscles, and veins all coming slowly toward the surface. It is now apparent that Danae will be one of those old women chiseled down into sinews by the passing years while Julia will simply go soft.

In cold weather the bus drivers arrive at the lot a few minutes early to warm the buses before they start their routes. They wave at one another, beat their gloved hands together, and lean their backs against the bright yellow hulls, talking and drinking coffee out of plastic cups. Julia can't abide small talk, especially not early in the morning. She slips past them with as cursory a nod as she can manage. As soon as she pulls the bus door behind her, the conversation resumes. While she waits for the mammoth engine to warm, she paces up and down the center aisle. Cold air bristles around the bus's twenty-two windowpanes—she pinches the catches on several of them and slams them up, but they only settle back down in their frames again. *Well, we'll live*, she thinks. She pulls a broken pencil out of the fold of the front seat. Gold butterscotch wrappers gleam on dusty floor and, out of habit, she bends to pick them up. She watches them crinkle and spark in the palm of her gloved hand.

It takes a long time for the air in the bus to lose its edge even with the heaters on at full blast. Paisley and peacock-feather patterns of frost recede from the metal frames and then from around the messages that the kids etched across the panes during the last foggy day. Most of this childish cuneiform is cryptic to Julia's eyes, but there are the obvious tic-tac-toe games and the initials wedded together—VN + EW, AF + DE—in valentine hearts. The order, always the lover first and then the beloved, Julia does remember. She isn't sure how these inscriptions vanish and reemerge—and she's thinking about the physics of it, the memory of glass, while the sun at last clears the trees, and burns the elusive letters into silver decrees that make her eyes smart and sting.

They continue to run all morning, not tears exactly, just a steady filling and emptying. The bus's mirrors concentrate the immense pallor of the sky from all its angles and funnel them into a blinding pinpoint that slips into her pupils and inside of her. Clouds are

running like liquid through the afternoon sky, small rivulets flowing around denser deltas of gray, and only every now and then does she see a snatch of blue in the depth of their passing, an insinuation of something hidden and vast.

*How crazy is that?* Her own stupid question reverberates in her head, as she turns the bus north onto Bluegrass, west on Whiteville, south onto Meridian. *How crazy is that?* A crumpled doe lies just on the shoulder at Hiawatha and Lantern Hill, casualty of the blind left curve. For days Julia has watched the animal's disintegration; now its white ribs are slowly unfurling like stark pinions on the verge of flight. *How crazy is that?* Whatever word she should have said last night to Danae about Tenley's letter, it wasn't *crazy*, that trite adjective. Granted, every other word she might have chosen sounds childishly overstated when uttered out loud, but still.

She's wandered so far into the thicket of her own thoughts that the intermittent chatter of the other drivers over the radio and the sound of twenty-seven children rampaging in a rattling hothouse of breath and motion is utterly lost upon her, but when the wheel trembles under her fingers Julia starts straight in her seat, guilty, as if she'd spoken aloud without being aware. She jerks her eyes to the road in front of her and then glances up in the trembling mirror that hangs over her head. None of the kids seem to notice. Several factions in the back seats are kicking at each other from across the aisle, behavior Julia has forbidden. All her rules are unenforceable and ignored.

Still they continue to lose speed no matter how hard she depresses the sturdy gas pedal beneath her foot. The bus sways with increasing gentleness over every rut; the yellow lane dividers stretch out longer and longer with their deceleration.

"Why are we stopping?" calls a voice from behind her. "We're not at Blake's house yet." Julia doesn't turn around. She keeps her foot to the floor. For one insane moment she believes she has driven them all into a surreal inverted world where keeping going means slowing down.

Then she returns to her senses. They are at a dead standstill in the middle of the road, five miles from the elementary school, not far from where Tenley and Co. have set up camp. Behind her, the kids surge up in their seats, each one straining to see something amazing

before his neighbor does and thus gain an authority no one else can share. An ominous reek begins to filter in through the vents.

“If the bus is broken do we get to go home?” asks the voice.

“No, you do not.” She fumbles with the radio next to her. Normally she listens to the call-and-response banter of the other drivers with a secretive annoyance and no intention of ever joining in. She presses down the button on the mouthpiece with her thumb. “Hey,” she says and apologetically identifies herself. “This is 89-A here. We’re having some mechanical difficulties and I don’t think we’re going to be able to make it in.” A silence ensues; for a full minute she believes no one will answer her back.

Even though she’d told them to stay in their seats, the bus erupts into riot the moment she steps off and pushes the door carefully almost, but not quite, closed. Julia can feel the vehicle rocking slightly with the impact of footsteps pounding up and down the aisle while she struggles to lift the bus’s yellow hood. The garage’s last refresher training session on engine maintenance and emergency repair was years ago, and once Julia manages to release the cover over the engine—it opens backward, the hinge over the headlights—and locate the prop to hold it up—she has done everything she knows how to do. Black smoke pours off the massive engine block, which now gapes in the open air. Julia stands on her tiptoes and ventures to peer down into it, but the choking cloud drives her instantly back. She doubles over, coughing and heaving into the grass, sucking in the windy cold and waiting for her lungs to clear.

When she straightens again, she sees a figure moving toward her from the far end of the field. A few more seconds and it resolves itself into a man; he’s moving, head down, without haste, and from a distance she thinks he’s lost in some ponderous thought. But no, as he draws closer, it becomes clear that he’s kicking an aluminum can in front of him with each step, somehow driving it upward and clear of the weeds, without ever losing it or syncopating his stride. His hands are shoved in his pockets and he is, astonishingly, wearing nothing heavier than a sweatshirt.

He lets the can fall to rest when he comes within speaking distance of her but pauses before he says anything. His mild eyes survey the scene; his hands knuckle around in his pockets as if searching for an elusive piece of change. Julia waits, somehow struck by the

notion that he should speak first. It's still early yet—there's no sign of anyone else, only a single vehicle parked far on the other side of the field and so this, she believes, must be Christopher Tenley, the PhD in the flesh. The shrieking of the children vibrates in the space between them, high-pitched trills that burrow straight through the windowpanes as if they are as insubstantial as air.

"So the mutiny was successful," Tenley says at last. "Is this the island they've voted to leave you on?"

Julia turns and looks back. All of the faces have disappeared behind filmy curtains of condensation—the only things visible are pink segments of fingers that creep like earthworms over the glass. "They can't leave," she says. "I took the keys."

"Smart woman." He hitches the neck of his sweatshirt over his nose and steps up to look down into the engine.

"Don't bother," Julia says. Suddenly she's at loose ends; having two arms seems superfluous. She crosses them across her chest and rubs furiously at the coat covering her shoulders. "There's nothing to see."

He doesn't seem to hear her. "Really, it's OK," she says. "I already called it in. They're sending the mechanic. And another bus. We just have to wait."

"That could be it." He steps back and pulls the shirt from his face. The smoke has dissipated although the engine continues to bake the air, making the backdrop of fence posts and red-gold trees wobble like flames. "There's some sort of belt giving out—down near the back. Look, you can see it."

"Really," Julia says but he has her by the sleeve and guides her alongside of him. "I won't be able to—"

"Right there. Near the carburetor. Maybe it's not the carburetor. I actually have no idea. The construction of this engine is bizarre."

Julia follows the line of his finger, through the blackened assortment of greased shapes and then she sees it—the fraying of something silver, a cluster of painfully needle-fine spines.

"There it is. I see it." She means to pull back, but instead she wavers uncertainly, staring down at the glinting threadbare ends. The warmth of the engine wafts up across her cheeks. Hedged in by Tenley and the bus, she is now shielded from the cold teeth of the morning. The wind acts as a current streaming his heat into her and carrying it away again. He stretches out his hands, rubs

them together campfire-style over the engine block, and after a moment, she follows suit. They stand there together, propped on their elbows, staring down into the bewildering jumble of parts and wires, listening to the soft hissing sound of them fading gradually toward silence. She says, "I read your letter."

Tenley doesn't look up. "Ah, yes. The letter. Apparently, it wasn't such a hit." He reaches out and brushes the studded half-circle around the bus's wheel well. "Someone keyed my car."

"Oh." Julia does not know what else to say.

"Hostile locals. I don't remember them covering that in grad school." He's still tracing the raised trail of yellow rivets with his fingertips, already pursuing some other thought. "Are these Smithsons?"

She glances down and laughs, a single flat syllable. "Are you kidding?" she says. "Of course they're Smithsons. The county specifically ordered the buses from a factory that uses them. Most of the buildings around here are held together with Smithsons. My house included. The realtor made a point of mentioning it to my roommate. Did you not see the sign on the way into town?"

"I saw it," he says. A car is approaching; it must be the mechanic, Frank, coming grudgingly to the rescue at last.

"So you think it's true?"

"What? The theory about the clouds?" Tenley scratches the back of his neck and they both straighten up, take a step back into the cold. "I don't know. There are still a lot of other things to rule out. But you want my gut feeling? Based on the data we've seen so far, yes. It's true."

"So then what?"

Frank is bearing down on them now in his rattling hulk of a tow truck. Julia can see his face, the scowl of disapproval growing more distinct with each passing second.

"Then what nothing." Tenley gives a little wave toward Frank as the truck slows and settles heavily into the soft shoulder just in front of them, a gesture Frank clearly does not appreciate and does not return. "That's not my department. I just study clouds. Clouds are amazing. I want to keep learning everything I can about them until the day I die."

Julia means to tell Danae about the encounter, she really does. It's once she starts thinking about the logistics of the telling, how to begin, where to leave off—that she comprehends the difficulty of it. She keeps shifting around the pieces of the anecdote, and still something is just not right. When Danae comes through the door that night, she is whistling between her teeth, a thin and determinedly cheerful melody that marks the end of every workweek. It signals her intent to let bygones be bygones—*bygones be begonias* is what the two of them say—and as soon as she hears it, Julia knows she will not say a word. It is the sound of the moment passing her by.

Friday evening is their dinner out. They cycle through four of the town's five sit-down restaurants, passing up the fifth, a pseudo-Chinese establishment, because every dish there contains water chestnuts, which Danae will not tolerate. Tonight it's Stuckey's, a steel-and-glass-plated greasy spoon that serves only breakfast food. It is the only place open all night and therefore it draws the drunks and the lonely, but at this hour it is perfectly respectable. The diners pass by the tables saying hello to one another, inquiring after the health of one another's folks, spouses, and children. A couple of Smithsonian men sitting near the corners wave a hail-fellow-well-met to Danae as the waitress leads them to their booth.

When their food arrives Danae attacks her tangled nest of bacon. She always eats like this, as if each meal is a serious duty that must be dispatched without delay. Her small body burns through its fuel with a disconcerting inefficiency. It's as though the strain of never quite being sated has keyed it to a febrile pitch, giving her coloring an almost painterly quality—copper filaments in the ends of her hair, a flush touching her cheekbones and clavicle where the indigo collar of her stretched-out sweater hangs even beneath the muted glow of the chandelier between them. Julia picks at her food and watches the taut working of Danae's jaw. It's up to her to carry the conversations at the beginning of the meal; Danae will pick up the slack at the end while she waits for Julia to finish.

She scrapes at the purple sauce covering her pancakes, searching for an actual blueberry, just one, and talks on about the garden, which is being plundered by the deer. Every fall, they come through and lay waste to the chrysanthemums. Deer are supposed to be repelled by chrysanthemums, but these deer are not. They love mums; they bring their family and friends to the feast and they

devour her flowers down to nubs. The topic strikes Julia as safe. She does not want to break this truce, the normalcy still brittle around its edges. She can feel it, the way she is trying a little too hard.

“Oh, the mums,” Danae says between bites. “You know what you should do. They sell coyote urine over at the garden store. You sprinkle it on your garden and it keeps them away. I can get you some if you want.”

“No thanks.” Julia has discovered a berry at last, albeit a shriveled one, and she spears it triumphantly with her fork. “I don’t like this idea of buying pee and soaking my garden with it. If I’m going that route, why don’t I just save the money and piss on it myself?”

“That would probably work.” Oblivious Danae doesn’t look up from her plate and instantly Julia’s heart leaps out toward her, that unshakable and endearing practicality. She forgets herself and reaches out across the tabletop to squeeze Danae’s free hand. A momentary lapse. Julia has broken their cardinal rule—*never where other people can see*—and immediately she pulls back, but not before Danae’s fingers elude her grasp, withdrawing from the scalloped border of the paper placemat and into the depths of her lap. It is not the first time Danae has reminded her. The reproof never quite loses its sting, a sharp dwindling feeling that amplifies every sound around her—the clatter of the plates, the scraping of chairs—into painful twinges in her ears.

When Julia’s eyes clear, they are focused somewhere in the background and it’s then, for the first time, that she sees Tenley. He’s sitting across the aisle three rows behind Danae, and Julia can’t understand how she hasn’t noticed him before. Maybe because the hostess has seated him in the back, at a darkened table beneath a burned-out chandelier. Maybe because his head is bent over—Julia can just glimpse them around the curved red lip of the booth—an elaborate fan of papers. He has anchored them down to the table with flatware, but the edges ruffle up in the breeze of waitresses swinging in and out of the kitchen doors.

“Are you almost done?” Danae says. “I’m going to run to the bathroom.” The table tilts unsteadily as she pushes off and then disappears.

Julia is not sure where to look. She’s trapped beneath the chandelier’s swaying hoop of light and blushing conspicuously for no good

reason. Where is their check? She thinks she sees it in the waitress's hand, but the girl is dallying by the hostess stand, leaning over it and swinging her rump thoughtlessly from side to side as she talks. The sway of her skirt's pink folds against the back of her thighs has caused the table of Smithson men to put down their forks. All Julia needs to do is wait out the next few minutes, pay the bill, and get away. These are not difficult tasks. She turns and studies her reflection in the blackened window beside her. The sharp twisting this unnatural posture requires, the effort of narrowing herself into a mere sliver of a profile, hurts her shoulders. But she holds it with great determination, stares at the blanched moon of her face floating in the glass. Then something stirs and ripples the image.

"You made it off the island, I see."

Julia turns and glances up at Tenley. Then back over her shoulder. There is no sign of Danae. Perhaps she has been waylaid by a table of co-workers and has not yet found her way back. "I did," she says. "It was a hard swim."

"I'm glad." The restaurant is overheated to the point of suffocating, but he's still wearing that navy sweatshirt with the sleeves pushed up. Even in the bleached light his forearms look tan. It's not the thin veneer sported by vacationers—it's the weathered coppery cast of someone who works under the sun during even the harshest of days. The coarse hairs covering them shine. Julia can't bring herself to lift her eyes any higher.

"So look at what came out of my table." He opens his hand and drops a screw among the cutlery in front of her. Julia watches it revolve in two slow circles before it settles to a stop. "You know, I'm not sure about these things. They seem prone to stripping out. The radii of the turns might be too short. That's my theory."

Julia rocks in her seat and anxiously jiggles her legs up and down as if she's running in place. "I wouldn't know anything about that."

"Well, nothing to lose sleep over." Tenley squats and props his elbows on the tabletop and Julia lifts her head and looks him squarely in the face for the first time that day. He's smiling at her, but he stops abruptly when she meets his eyes. Their irises are richly detailed, a patchwork of blues embroidered with intricate white stitching. The sudden serious straightening of his mouth makes her stomach drop in a sickening way; she would get up and

walk away if her legs weren't suddenly so heavy. From somewhere across the restaurant, Julia hears Danae laugh, her stage laugh. It's half an octave high and a beat too long.

"All right, then. I'm on my way out of here," Tenley quickly straightens to his feet. "I just have to browbeat that waitress into taking my blood money. Given how little they're probably paid here, they should get a pass on principle, don't you think?" He lays his hand against her back, a brief pressure, there then gone. "Take care, Julia."

"Take care," she stammers. She can't for the life of her remember telling him her name.

Half a minute later, Danae is back, flushed and triumphant. "I just heard the greatest story," she says. "Wait until I tell you."

But Julia's distracted by the gaze of the burgundy-haired woman sitting in the booth behind them. Julia recognizes her—a teller who works at the bank across town. She is staring at Julia with the hawkish and satisfied expression of someone who has just had her least charitable suspicion confirmed. There's something so steely, so chilling in its import that Julia falters and stumbles mid-stride.

The Smithson men turn to watch them pass.

"Ah, home to bed." Back in the passenger seat of Julia's car, Danae flings out her arms—embracing the warmth streaming from the dashboard vents, the night, the happy lazy weekend ahead. She slithers out of her seatbelt and rests her head on Julia's shoulder. "You're beautiful, Julia. Have I told you you're beautiful?"

"Of course you have." Julia's tone is sharper than she intends. Beneath the thick layer of her jacket, the imprint of Tenley's fingers still lingers on her nerve endings, a five-point brand seared across the rise of her left shoulder blade.

"Well, I like to say it." Danae shifts dreamily. Her mouth finds the chink of space above Julia's collar and nestles gently against the bare skin there. For the rest of the ride home she stays like that, so still she might be sleeping. Julia can feel the carnal press of Danae's pulse beating though her dry lips, slowing only when she finally drops off. Clouds have covered the moon; the night is so black that the headlights cannot possibly keep up with their speed. Every turn, every curve holds the split-second possibility of peril.

On Sunday it befalls them. They have just pulled into the driveway, and Danae sees it first. Julia is doubled over the seat of the hatchback, wrestling a tangled bag of groceries, which is resisting her for all it is worth. When she hears the sharp intake of Danae's breath, she drops it and stumbles out ungracefully, ass-first back out into the bright day.

"Jesus Christ," Danae says.

There is the jade plant, scattered. There are the dismembered branches, the spread-eagle stems, each one twisted from its joint so savagely that pale green viscera gape from each severed end and gleam wetly in the shade of the porch. There are the pot's blue shards, still quivering separately like blades on the floorboards. There is the strewn dirt. There are the thick oval leaves, dozens of them, loosed and flattened. All of this Julia sees, but so startling is the effect that she cannot reach backward through it for a cause. Everything inside of her has hardened and become as brittle as glass and so she simply stands and listens to the wind seethe in the dry autumn grass.

Danae is racing up the steps, throwing back wild speculations about the wind, about deer and their ability to climb stairs—suggestions so ludicrous that Julia would laugh if her mouth weren't so dry.

"Julia."

Julia has regained the power of motion once again. She stumps up the walk like someone on peg legs, climbs the stairs, peers over Danae's head, and together they stare at their front door. Centered in the green paint a single word has been etched, *dykes*, all in capital letters. The lettering is rough and its lines are deep and deliberate. They have been carved by a heavy hand through the layers of the door's history—freshly exposed shades of red, blue, yellow, and gray curled out for all to see—and straight into the grain of the wood.

"Someone *did* this." Danae sounds amazed. She says it again.

Julia's first thought is to get inside as quickly as possible. The outdoors seems full of open space. The inky ellipses on the cluster of birches at the far end of the garden leer at them like eyes, and all she wants is to get her back against a corner, the thicker and more opaque the better. The lightning hit of adrenaline shot along her nerve endings has begun to fade, and although her knees still

tremble she manages to pull Danae through the door and slam it shut behind them.

Once inside, Julia jogs from window to window, lowering the blinds. Danae stands adrift in the foyer where Julia released her. She keeps scuffing her hair, dropping her arms, then reaching up and scuffing it again as if concentration alone will produce an answer to this new and perplexing question. *After all this time*, she says. *Why now?*

The blinds have cracks between them. Someone could conceivably still see in. Their curtains aren't much, just gauzy strips filmed over at the edges with dust, but Julia pulls them for good measure. Danae vaguely watches the flurry of activity, still adrift. *I just don't understand*, she says. That's what she keeps coming back to. *I just don't understand.*

By the time Julia goes out to the car to retrieve the groceries, the ice cream has melted. When she opens the hatchback, a marbled puddle spills over the bumper and drips across her shoes, and the entire car smells like overripe berries.

The day wears on. Julia can't sit still so she gets down on her knees and begins scrubbing the floors. The fierce repetition of her arm across the rippling linoleum soothes her—the moment it stops she feels the dread again, a swift renewal that stops her breath every time. Bucket after bucket of water muddies and turns black.

Danae keeps wandering by the window and peering between the blinds. "I just don't understand," she says. She stares out into the dusk. "I just want to know why, that's all, you know?" She lets the plastic slat snap back into place but she can't restrain herself; she peels it up and looks again. "After all these years. After all your loyalty. You keep your head down. You toe the line. You do your part. And this is how they felt all along. That's the worst part of it."

"For God's sake, Danae." Julia can't stand it any longer. She flings down the sponge. "Hasn't it occurred to you it might just be some kids? Don't you remember being in school? Kids just *do* things. Why do you have to attach all this significance to it? Maybe it doesn't *mean* anything. Maybe it's just stupid."

It would be a relief to see Danae rise to the provocation and put an end to this nerve-racking silence. But when Danae turns from the window, Julia can see her eyes shining. "I know," Danae says.

“That’s what I keep thinking.” She angrily brushes her face with her sleeve. “But something is off, Julia. It just doesn’t feel right. It’s like the sound of something turning on you. Can’t you hear it?”

Julia picks up her sponge and wrings it dry. Very formally she says, “Please put those blinds back down.”

Everything seems significant now. On Monday morning several children on her route are absent. Julia reminds herself that cold season is beginning. There are those weeks when some plague or other cuts a swath through the public school system. This could be one, although it seems early. Normally she makes it a rule not to wait at her stops, but today she idles at the end of empty driveways. A few of the teenagers glance up at her as they board the bus, maybe gauging her, maybe not. They are always a shifty-looking bunch, unwilling to let on how much they know.

All day long, the radio is quiet. Every quarter hour or so, Julia reaches over and changes the frequency, trying to catch someone somewhere else, but there is nothing but the empty rustle of static, quiet stirring air.

Lunchtime, back at the garage. When Julia pulls her brown bag out of the refrigerator, she catches sight of a red slash mark on the calendar over the day. Someone has written her name above it, first and last, in exaggerated scrawl instead of the usual initials used for notations. The high school cross-country meet in Chesaning at five o’clock tonight. Somehow, she’s now on the schedule for the extra shift. When she sees it, Julia feels her peripheral vision fading to black. So here it is. She rips the sheet from its tacks and marches into Henry’s office.

He’s sitting in his desk chair, feet propped on a dented filing cabinet, playing a game of solitaire on the garage’s ten-year-old computer and doesn’t look up when she shoves the door open. “What can I help you with, Julia?” he says. The hulking monitor is dying; he has to lean in to make out the faces on the cards.

“What”—she thrusts the paper toward him—“is this?”

He doesn’t turn his head. “That would be the overtime schedule.” He clicks twice on the mouse and leans in closer to peer at the dusky screen. “Is there a problem?”

“Why am I on here for tonight?”

“Marlene has a doctor’s appointment. She needs to leave early.”

“What about Rob? Or Erin? Or Carl?”

“You were up.”

Julia hands are shaking so hard she can hear the paper rustling. She drops her arm to her side and tries to speak as levelly as possible. “There are at least four people in the rotation ahead of me. There is no possible way it can be my turn.”

“I checked. It is.”

Another click. Stacks of cards flicker away. One of the arms on the chair is coming loose. Julia watches it tilt back and forth beneath his elbow. She says, “This is bullshit.”

“Excuse me?” At last he turns to look at her. Henry has been around for ages. He’s seventy-six weeks away from retirement and his pension. Every Monday morning he calls out the countdown to whoever happens to be in the garage. This might be the longest conversation the two of them have ever had. His wide face is impassive as a slab and he wheezes slowly in and out for a few seconds, waiting for her, before he continues. “I have a copy of your contract in a file right over there, Julia. Mandatory overtime requirements are spelled out on page three if you want to have a look.” He slides his feet off the cabinet and lets them fall heavily to the floor. “It also states that you’re an at-will employee. You’re clear on what that means, right?”

Through the window, the fleet of buses is parked in lines. It’s strange to see those identical bright shapes layered in rows, like a stuttering of the eye. Julia’s gaze wanders across them, the matching black letters and stripes, the emergency back doors, each one manufactured in precisely the same dimensions. Once a year the drivers are required to have a drill in which the children unlatch them and leap out over the rear bumper into the grass. Even for an adult, Julia thinks, it’s a long way to the ground.

Without saying another word, she turns and leaves the office. She slaps the crumpled paper back up to the bulletin board, stabs a single pin straight through the center of it, and goes to use the phone.

Danae eats lunch every day with a group of men from Smithson. They get half an hour between the bells—the one releasing them and the one calling them back—never quite enough time to come

home, so the employees who don't bring their lunches pile into cars together and race out for hamburgers and french fries wrapped in greasy paper sheaths. Danae is small enough to squeeze into someone's lap—that's what she told Julia, pleased with the image of herself—her head pressed up against the ceiling, someone else steadying her feet.

Julia intends to leave her a message, to tell her that she will not be home until eight o'clock at the earliest. She dials the number and tears furiously at a loosening seam on the cuff of her jacket while she waits through the rings, ripping out the loops of broken stitching. When someone picks up after the third one, she is so startled that she nearly drops the phone. The hello on the other end sounds like a stranger's—low and ragged—someone Julia has never spoken to in her life, and there's a lag before her ear registers the pitches. All the hair stands along the back of her neck. *Danae*, she says, *Danae, it's Julia*.

A long and tremulous pause follows. Julia listens to Danae breathing, the way each exhalation sounds like a struggle to keep something in or to hold it at bay. The scouring sound of each one against the receiver is deafening. Julia reaches out, places her hand against the cool cinder block wall beside her and closes her eyes. Something is coming back to her, a night, years ago, back in the days when she and Danae were still new to one another and every moment together seemed profound in some way. It had been spring and the smell of lilacs sifted in through the darkness of their open bedroom window. They had been talking—of what?—until Danae drifted off with her head on Julia's chest and Julia breathed in and out beneath the weight of it. At last, she couldn't bear it any more. *Danae*, she had whispered, shifting out from under as gently as she could. And Danae, not asleep at all, had lifted her head in the darkness. *It sounds like a storm in there*, she said. The husky catch in her voice had startled Julia into silence.

"Danae, listen to me." Julia can feel the tiny openings of the phone's mouthpiece like perforations in her own skin—she's holding it that hard against her face. She knows what she means to say: It isn't like that. It isn't what they told you.

But when she opens her mouth what comes out is: I'm sorry. The line goes quiet and Julia immediately calls again, but this time no one answers.

The afternoon stretches out, an infinitude of space and quiet. The sky above them a taut blue plain. Julia can't remember the last time she's seen it so clear. There's something aching about its emptiness. With nothing in it the expanse seems depthless—nothing can be discerned of all the distance it contains or the speed of those shifting currents of air passing soundlessly overhead. Julia feels weightless, disembodied, as if everything—the sounds of the children talking, the golden trees burning along the fringe of the horizon, the steady mechanical vibrations of the bus engine—must travel a long way to reach her. And by the time they have, they are simply faint impressions of what they once were. The wheel spins frictionless beneath her hands; the bus takes its corners in loose and fluid curves. Julia moves with great care—one thoughtless gesture, one emphatic twist of her shoulders and she could send them all hurtling down an incline, or straight through a guardrail into the river. It would be so easy to do. She sits straight and rigid in her seat, studies the edges of the road crumbling away, mile after mile, in glittering obsidian chunks.

When she finishes dropping off the last of the elementary school kids and pulls up in front of the high school, the cross-country team is waiting for her, a swarm of leggy kids in gold singlets and faded blue shorts. They storm the bus as soon as she opens the door carrying their cleats and coolers with them. There is a charge they carry with them of low-grade anticipation. The race is ahead, waiting to be run. The girls fidget with their hair, shake it loose, collect it again in bands, and every one of them talks too loud.

On the way out of town, they pass the field where the scientists are working. The boys in the middle seats are hurling bottles full of jewel-colored liquid—aquamarine, topaz, and sapphire—back and forth across the aisle, deaf to the coach's admonitions, while the girls discuss the difficulty of taking a piss discreetly in the woods. Julia wills herself not to look, but she sees Tenley anyway for the first time that day. He is standing alone in the field, a lean silhouette, staring skyward. Far above him a lone cirrus wisp hangs like a plume, something lovely he has single-handedly concocted from the blue. When he hears them coming he turns his face. He lifts his hand and salutes her as they pass while Julia stares straight ahead, eyes burning, and pretends not to see. One of the bottles goes flying

out the window, splits on the asphalt, and its bright drops scatter like ruby light receding in her rearview mirror.

It's a relief to finally reach their destination, to be able to stop and let the landscape, which has been rattling past, come to a rest at last. Julia opens the door and everyone flows out and away and then she shuts the door tightly behind them. The driver in the bus next to her, a balding man, has slumped against his driver's side window and covered his eyes with his hat.

But Julia can't doze. She can't read. She hasn't even thought to bring a book. She stares out the windshield at the sun slanting over the gutters of the empty school building, the shining empty troughs beneath the sky. *There are billions of water droplets in a single square foot of cloud.* That is what Tenley's letter had said. *The weight of them all added together numbers in the hundreds of tons.* Julia has no idea what keeps them in a holding pattern overhead. She drops her head to rest on the steering wheel in front of her and studies the patina of her fingerprints across the plastic, slick spots, still visible in the fading light. The days are getting shorter. From the parking lot, she hears the sound of the starter's gun, and when the runners come back to the bus, their limbs are like ghosts', glowing blue-white with the chill in the air. They smell like sweat and fallen leaves. She can't remember what happened to that letter now—if Danae took the paper out the door with her that night she left, or if Julia herself placed it in the stack to be put out at the curb, anxious to be rid of the painful reminder. She wishes she could recall more of it now, just a few more words, but they are gone, and no matter how long she thinks back, there is nothing else.

By the time they make it back to town, it is dark. The Smithsonian plant is always the first thing you see at night, a complicated web of interlocking lights, red and golden cells in ornately gridded backdrop. They infuse the sky with a dingy peach hue, reduce the low-lying buildings in the foreground into nothing more than two-dimensional outlines. Julia has studied the vista more times than she can count, driving this bus with load after load of students, year in and year out. There's something about the final stretch, when they have passed beneath the last of the monolithic bridges and left the last curve of the interstate behind them, when the highway

looms emptily like a straightaway before them—acute fatigue sets in, as if all the miles she has driven thus far are nothing compared to these unbearable few she must complete. This is what is referred to, Danae once told her, as losing your sense of proportion.

Right at this moment—as Julia grits her teeth and bears down on the accelerator, determined not to slow down, determined to return them all to where they came from without shirking or delay—she can't put aside the thought that it all looks terrible in a way she has never noticed before. *Inferno* is the word she keeps thinking—something about the way the horizon flickers, dark and lurid at the same time—and then she realizes it's the smell that's catching her. Something is burning.

It's been quiet in the bus, but behind her a stirring begins, a steady swelling of voices, and now everyone is sitting up, alert, straining to see the road ahead where they are bearing down on it now—to where the asphalt shines out an unearthly streak of light. The dark landscape ebbs around them, flickering shadows, straight lines warping into curves, but off to their right through the next stand of trees, they can see it at last. The field is ablaze. The dry grass roils with flames; the white tents are billowing and the wind has carried their sparks up into the oaks—their branches are alight, unfurling. Gusts of incandescent leaves whirl through the air, showering down upon the expanse of fragile wildflower skeletons, all their fragile carapaces ignited, each one black and vivid.

The coach has come up to the front of the bus. Julia does not know how he got there. He is speaking to her urgently, yelling perhaps—it's impossible to hear anything above the raging air outside her window and everyone around her pantomiming frantically—flashing hands and wild faces like signals in a language she is unable to comprehend. She hasn't so much stopped, as taken her foot off the accelerator. She depresses the parking brake; when she stands and pushes open the door, the metal is alive to the touch.

As loud as it was inside the bus, it's so much louder out here, as if the sky is shuddering. She drifts a few steps off the shoulder of the road, stops short where the ground drops into a dry drainage ditch. The heat is blistering, radiant, and painful across her throat and lips and fingers. Somewhere in the distance, glass instruments burst and shatter in ringing octaves.

Julia listens to the sound of them and watches a cluster of figures emerge from out of the smoke. They walk with quick and steady strides, their hooded heads unbowed, hands swinging gasoline tins, metal tinged black, their sway light and emptied as if what they once held has been spent and returned to them in triumph. Seven or eight or twenty of them, forms like apparitions, but Julia recognizes only one. The squared shoulders, the fierce strides matching the others' step for step. *Danae*, Julia yells out. *Danae*. And when Danae turns back, when she lifts her eyes defiantly to meet Julia's, they are so bright with the fire that Julia doesn't call out again. The sound of the conflagration has begun to dim around her until the world is simply rising and falling in the profoundest of silence, and everything it contains—the flames, the smoke, the lights and shadows, the unraveling fence, the lamenting birds taking flight—is simply acquiescing gracefully to some force she can just now perceive, some pattern of air or eddy of the sky. She can only raise her eyes and watch the dark billows surge up into the air, collecting over the burnished trees and disappearing into the night above them.