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LOOKING FOR LINDA

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

LITERATURE

by

Courtney Kersten

June 2022

The Dissertation of Courtney Kersten is
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Abstract

Looking for Linda

Courtney Kersten

Linda Goodman was America's first New Age celebrity. She was the author of the first book about astrology, *Sun Signs*, to make it onto the *New York Times* Best Sellers list in 1968, and her second book, *Love Signs*, set a record for the largest advance of \$2.3 million. While Goodman was teaching the world how to search the skies for clarity, she was involved in her own mysterious pursuit. In 1973, Goodman's daughter Sally was found dead at the age of 21. Police declared the death a suicide, but Goodman believed the body found on the scene was a double and that the CIA had kidnapped her daughter. For the next two decades, Goodman depleted her sizeable fortune, hiring investigators and traveling the country chasing down leads. She may have had a column in *McCall's Magazine* and Steve McQueen's number in her Rolodex, but she was lambasted by the press, who regularly depicted her search as the product of irrational denial. Despite her literary success, she was branded a madwoman.

This dissertation chronicles my search to understand an eccentric American icon. It combines memoir, biography, and literary analysis to meditate on what it means to care for someone and how to know when to walk away.

Jeanne McCulloch interviews Leon Edel in *The Paris Reviews'* Art of Biography Series, Issue 98, Winter 1985:

MCCULLOCH

What moves one to write a biography, to spend that much time in somebody else's life?

EDEL

It's a little like falling in love; at any rate that's the way it usually begins. You never know how long the affair or the infatuation will last... In the writing of the life changes occur, discoveries are made. Realities emerge... Isn't that the way all love affairs run—from dream and cloud-journey to earth-firmness?

1.

I never think of Linda Goodman as my other lover, but it's what my husband implies when I go to the library to research her. I see it on his face: a certain kind of betrayal wafting over him. I think of it as a selfish betrayal. Because he knows he only wants me to stay so that he's not alone with himself. He watches me put my coat on, his mouth slack, and I want to tell him there's no reason to feel envious. My history with Linda is long, and my love for her is something complicated.

But, as always, I walk out the door and say nothing.

Do I say nothing because I am already thinking about her? Or is it because I cannot yet be so honest?

Both, perhaps.

My love for Linda looks like me at the library all evening. It's me gazing at footage that lives on the internet. Footage that has been posted about in internet forums and shared as a link in private messages where fans of astrologer Linda Goodman whisper its existence across cyberspace, *You can see her here*.

That's how someone passed it along to me. A stranger. Known to me only by their handle "M00NBABY957." The link leads to rare footage. In the clip's comments on YouTube, viewers write about how "this is like the only clip of Linda." About how Linda is "the goddess of astrology!!" About how she is their "childhood love."

The clip shows a 1990 interview from a now-defunct New Age television network called “Oasis TV.” In it, actress Alley Mills, host Paul Ryan, and Linda sit in upholstered gold satin chairs around a table of crystal water glasses. They’re outside somewhere on a rooftop or garden patio. Something feels make-shift about the scene. None of them touch the glasses. They sit in the chairs as though they’ll collapse if they lean back or shift suddenly. The table sits off-center. The microphone picks up gusts of wind. Some mysterious foliage waffles in the background. Did their original set burn? Was there an infestation? Was Mills unhappy with it? Regardless of what happened or didn’t happen, Linda rides the wind. She’s a field sparrow. Her hands flit, her thumbs twiddle. Her hair is feathered, even her bangs jetting outward as if gust-caught. Earrings dangle to her shoulders. Her attire all taupe, black, and girlish as though her mother had dressed her. She wears an ankle-length skirt the color of mushrooms and a short-sleeve black sweater with a beaded cream heart on the chest. How old is she? I can’t tell. The footage is too grainy; her smile is too quick. Somewhere between forty-five and seventy. Mills must’ve thought she was going to a different talk show, the likes of Oprah or Phil Donahue, something that would merit a make-up artist applying her foundation and someone blow-drying her platinum blonde hair. Ryan knew what this was, a low-budget affair where their Plan B was filming on a patio, so he’s wearing the same outfit from when he was a chain buffet maître d: a suit and tie he doesn’t care about getting ketchup on.

The foliage trembles, and they chat about astrology. About Nancy Reagan and Raisa Gorbacheva’s astrological configurations. About Barbara and George Bush’s

sun signs. About some trip up to Wellesley. Linda's thumbs revolve as she speaks. She makes a joke about George Bush shooting quail, "but not the right Quayle."

They laugh polite laughs.

Ryan turns to Goodman. The camera cuts to his pale face.

"Have you been doing this for a long time, Linda?" he asks.

"Astrology?" Goodman replies.

"Yes."

She replies without hesitancy. "For a couple of million, maybe four-billion years before Atlantis, yes."

The camera pans wide. The statement wafts in the air. There is a pivot towards something unsaid.

Do they wonder if she's making a joke? Do they think they've misunderstood her?

Should they

laugh?

Ryan continues.

"... Do you believe in previous lives, that whole philosophy?" he asks.

The camera pans back to Linda. She replies, "Well, it doesn't really matter if you believe in it or not; it's true."

She smiles, and the clip fades to black. It is two minutes and thirty-seven seconds long.

I repeat the clip until I can speak Linda's final words along with her. I want to memorize her words. I pause the clip, trying to catch Linda's final smile and excavate

it. I want to translate the subtext of a grin. I need to see if it's the satisfaction of a joke or the contentment of stubbornly defending a philosophy. I need to know what the difference is between belief and truth.

I want to tell my husband that Linda and I are caught here together, trapped between these words. I want to ask him, *Now, do you think that's love? Ensnared together?* I'd ask the question to reassure him that this, indeed, is not love. But I fear he would reply, *Yes, my dear, that's what love is.*

Because what I need to know now is how to get out.

I was eighteen when my mother pulled me aside. I was about to leave to go to college in Indiana, a ten-hour drive from our rural Wisconsin hometown. She told me that she knew I wouldn't get involved in drinking or drugs. I'd spent a childhood around such things—the bars on every corner where they never check your ID, my stepfather's weed stuck in kitty litter for safekeeping in the garage, the meth labs tucked into Wisconsin's rolling hills. It was all there, and I hadn't touched it. "This," she said, "makes me feel better about you leaving."

I grinned.

"But" she hissed, grabbing my elbow, "if anybody down there in Indiana tries to get you to go to a Bible study or something like that—you know, kids getting together to talk about God or a messiah—you say, 'No,' Courtney . . . Do you understand?"

"... I say, 'No?'"

“You say, ‘No’ to Bible studies.”

I didn’t get it. I remember telling her that I knew some of those kids from school, kids that did youth group and things like that. There was nothing wrong with them.

“I’m not saying that... I’m saying you can go to church or read your astrology things. But do it alone. Not in groups.”

I looked at her tan face, her peeling nose. She’d spent all May in the driveway trying to catch the iterant sun. She’d never been to Indiana. I didn’t know what she thought happened in its flat humidity.

I took her advice.

In the years that followed, I often wondered if it was a joke, a prank my mother had played on me. I wondered if it gave her a giggle to think of me avoiding Bible studies, my body growing tense at the sight of their photocopied advertisements on campus corkboards. Sometimes I’d speculate on the nefarious activities my mother thought Bible study groups took part in. Polluting altar wine with Everclear. Preying on elderly churchgoers through phone scams promising luxury heaven condos somewhere in the clouds in exchange for bank routing information and social security numbers. Covert Satanic rituals wherein wandering housecats would be sacrificed to churning industrial dryers on the New Moon.

Sometimes I considered that my mother had an experience when she was a young woman that caused her to caution me against such groups. I knew she had a baby she gave up for adoption when she was seventeen. I knew she had an abortion

when she was nineteen. I wondered if the babies had something to do with Bible studies. She once told me about drinking a tea of psychoactive mushrooms, stumbling into a wood-paneled bar, hanging her coat on a whitetail antler plaque, and giggling on the sticky bar top before being kicked out into the cold. She told me of having to walk the two miles home, her coat forgotten on the antler rack. The sky an aurora borealis visible only to her. She told me about how she feared she would die, her skin blue in the ditch, her eyelashes crusted in ice. I wondered if the mushrooms were given to her by someone at some church group. I didn't know. But there was a lot about her that I didn't know, and I knew enough to know the tumbling depths of my naiveté. I never asked her about any of it, and she died before I ever could.

I now realize what she was warning me against. She thought I was ripe for joining a cult.

But I'd already pledged my devotion to someone years before. Her name was Linda Goodman.

It happened in the public library when I was thirteen. I was wandering the stacks when I saw her name: *Linda Goodman*. What drew me to her? Why did I pick up *Sun Signs*' blue paperback-self and read it in its entirety sitting between the shelves one afternoon? Why did I grab all 914 pages of *Love Signs*' red spine and proceed to read love connections for couples unknown to me? I can't tell you what it was about those books that made me pick them up. But for years after, I thought of that moment of finding her as something divinely guided.

That afternoon, I began by turning to *Sun Signs*' chapter on my astrological sign, Aries, and read about how an "Aries girl" like me would "open her own doors... put on her own coat, fight her own battles, pull out her own chair, hail her own taxi, and light her cigarette without any masculine help." I read about how, according to Linda, the Aries woman could get along just fine by herself, but "this is not the same thing as getting along without romance." For, "she'll always need that hero of her dreams to yearn for in her heart." Linda described Scarlett O'Hara as "the very epitome of the Mars-ruled Aries female." Linda explains:

Never was Scarlett more Mars-like than when she was starving, alone and friendless, and without waiting for a man to come to the rescue, she clenched her fist toward heaven and shouted, 'I'll survive this . . . and when I do, I'll never be hungry again . . . If I have to lie, cheat, and steal, or kill—as God as my witness, I'll never be hungry again!

I had no cigarettes to smoke or taxis to hail. I had no lovers to woo or husbands to tend. I had no idea who Scarlett O'Hara was. Did I feel the tug of yearning that Linda had described within my heart? I wasn't sure, but Linda's words still strummed the truth of my being. *This is who I am* . . . For, if I had any battles to fight or coats to put on, even at thirteen, I most certainly would've done it myself.

How did she know?

Twenty years later, as a doctoral student in California, I watch the Oasis Television clip repeatedly, but it doesn't matter. There's nothing I can tell by Linda's expedient

smile. Only seeming assuredness. Confidence. Sometimes, as I watch, I drift. I imagine the extended conversation. I fantasize about what would happen if Paul Ryan were to lean in and inquire further, to ask, *What do you mean, Linda, when you say, "It doesn't matter if you believe in it or not; it's true?"* I want to hear Alley Mills whisper, *Could you say more?* I want to see Linda stumble or watch the definitions tumble from her mouth. I want to see how she reacts. If she engages their questions or deflects. I want Linda to elaborate on what she meant.

But what I really want is to have been there. To have been hired by the Oasis Television studio as a craft services attendant or a wardrobe aide. To run from my post before the cheese and crackers or the steel clothing rack and onto set. To take Alley Mills' chair while she's up to adjust her lipstick. To drag her chair closer to Linda, to feel the wooden feet caught against the patchwork rug and see surprise roll across Linda's face. To not even introduce myself, to only demand information, *I gotta know the difference between these two things—belief and truth.*

I'd wait for her to reply. Watch her eyes dart back and forth, searching for the words. But maybe my next question would rise further than her answer would. Maybe I wouldn't be able to hold back. *Linda, I'd say, how do you know when belief has asphyxiated you? Where you can no longer see what is true? When you've crossed the boundary between the two things? When you've hopped the fence?* Maybe I'd even be able to tell her, *I'm trapped here with you, where what I believe about you is so different than what I've found; and now, I don—*

Would she slap me then? Was Linda someone that would slap another woman? I don't know. But maybe Paul Ryan would be pulling me up. Maybe a producer would've taken me away minutes earlier. Maybe I'd never even get this far. But, even in my fantasy, when I imagine accosting Linda there, she never answers me. She stammers. She glares. Her face a locked gate. So, I hold the question and keep returning to the clip, to those few seconds before fading to black. Waiting for her smile to reveal an answer it never claimed to have.

I understand why my mother saw cult potential within me.

She had been raised Catholic and gone to parochial school for kindergarten, elementary, and high school, where nuns taught her. Once, when I was eleven, she told me about the nuns slapping her knuckles and whacking her wrist with a ruler if she was perceived to have misbehaved. Somehow unconcerned with knuckles rapped and wrists spanked, I inquired about the nuns. Who were they? What did they do? My mother explained that nuns chose to serve God and not marry. Sometimes they taught or did charity work. Sometimes they lived in convents with other nuns. The nuns at Holy Ghost, where she went to school, were very mean. They had to wear hoods and veils and couldn't—

“I'd love to be a nun,” I interrupted.

“... You don't want to be a nun, Courtney,” she said.

“I think I'd really like it.”

I envisioned being married to God. Living with other nuns. Putting on my habit each day. Praying for my sisters and the world. What attracted me was how a nun's life seemed to be laced with the divine. What was mundane was imbued with holiness. The clothing they wore. The place they lived. The profession they chose. Their symbolic marriage to a holy being.

My mother must've known I was an obsessive prayer. My bedtime appeals stretching on for tens of minutes as I sat under my covers with a hunting headlamp, whispering goodwill upon each of my classmates by name and the neighborhood cats. She must've noticed that I stole her childhood rosary and kept it beneath my pillow, despite my being raised Lutheran by my father and having no idea what to do with a rosary. Maybe she knew that I liked the ritual of church, the wafers pressed into everyone's palms at communion, the unison inhaled of the choir. I liked the feeling of sacredness when the sanctuary would be vacant before the Sunday morning service.

Perhaps my mother saw that I grew to be indiscriminate, heretical even, in my spiritual inclinations. I'd learned in Sunday School what the Bible said about astrology. I'd read Leviticus 19:26, "Do not practice divination or sorcery." The image of astrologers burning "like stubble" in Isaiah 47:13. That Deuteronomy 18:9, 12 & 14 declares that anyone "who does these things is detestable to the Lord."

I must not have cared about burning like stubble or being detestable to the Lord. I kept a photograph of Him, long-haired and white-robed, his Sacred Heart radiating, next to *Love Signs* and *Sun Signs* on my bedside table. If I had been pressed on my spiritual beliefs, what would I have said? That I believed Jesus Christ and

Linda Goodman worked together? That I think Jesus would've liked to have known his sun sign? That Linda was convinced Jesus was a Leo?

I never meditated on the logic of my beliefs. All I knew was that I wanted to keep them all, and I especially wanted astrology, and I especially wanted Linda. There was a higher consciousness, I felt, proven by the fact that someone like Linda could know so much about me. She was my evidence of a larger order, something intelligent that guided us and was channeled through her writing. I didn't have to be a nun to have my everyday be mystical. Through astrology, everything already was.

Perhaps it was this spiritual greed, this haphazard embrace of anything I happened to find, that made my mother pull me aside and tell me to never go to a Bible study. Did she worry about finding me, head shaven, clothed in sweatpants, somewhere in the Nevada desert professing my devotion to the Lord? Did she envision seeing me on the news, one of the victims in a mass suicide, cyanide on my breath? Did she think about what it would be like to have her daughter disappear into someone's charisma?

I wonder if my mother would pull me aside now as I walk from the library to the studio I share with my husband. What would she say? What snare would she see me walking towards? With what force would she try to yank me away? Or am I already too far gone?

I am not the only one she wooed.

Linda was astrology's first superstar. Her 1968 guide to the zodiac, *Sun Signs*, became the first book about astrology to make it onto the *New York Times* Best Seller List. In 1978, *Love Signs* broke a publishing industry record with an advance of 2.3 million dollars. Her books, according to her 1995 *New York Times* obituary, "have sold more than 30 million copies in 15 languages and continue to sell some 200,000 copies a year." Before Linda, astrology was something obtuse and, arguably, unknown to mainstream American consumers. Occult expert and author Mitch Horowitz claims that before the 1960s, and arguably Linda Goodman, "the occult could appear to be little more than an amalgam of eccentrics and loners who sat," quoting philosopher Jacob Needleman, "vain, nervous, inept, neurotic, and fearful in their chintz-curtained apartments." Astrology manuals were also complex. Astrologers, such as Alan Leo, wrote books detailing mathematical equations to calculate astronomical relationships between planets, complete with charts and diagrams alongside obscure astrological concepts like planetary triads, "The Seven Tones and Colors," "The Interlaced Triangles of the Individuals," and "The Chain of Globes."

Linda knew all that, I assume. That astrology was an obscure topic. That it had to do with planetary triads, and maybe she could even explain what that was. At the very least, she knew how to calculate planetary relationships and had her own language to describe it steeped in ancient philosophy. But she wrote it for someone new: mainstream Americans. In a 1969 *New York Times* article, author Marcia Seligson describes Linda's work as "deliciously anecdotal, funny, irresistible."

Seligson claims that she is a "non-believer," but since she "paid a call on Linda Goodman," she has found it "impossible to remain unseduced by astrology." Seligson describes Linda as having "an empathetic quality that makes you want to tell her everything that's unsettling you and let her fix it up. Which I did. And she did." To her, Linda was "a friendly, lively, pretty lady (she was once a contestant in the Miss America pageant) with a fabulous old West End Avenue apartment, four cute children, and three less-than-cute bulldogs." Likewise, in a 1979 review of *Love Signs*, Robert Kirsch describes Goodman as an "amazing student of character in its permutations and combinations . . . I'm not saying whether I believe in astrology. That isn't important. I believe in Linda Goodman." Linda had columns in *Ladies Home Journal* and *McCall's*. She was read around the world, her books in Swedish and Russian, her work revered in India.

A 1971 *Los Angeles Times* article about throwing parties cites Linda's astrological work and describes her as a charming, "pretty blonde" who can help you throw better soirées depending on your sun sign. Linda advises that perhaps because she "spends most of the year in New York City" where she writes and "summers in Cripple Creek," Colorado, "where she meditates . . . the best time of the year for parties are spring and fall." Her thoughts on women's lib? Linda claims, "I'm an Aries, and I was born liberated. I'm not about to give up feminine privileges to gain equality when I know I'm already superior." A photograph of Linda, her hair shoulder-length and parted down the middle, bangs feathered, accompanies the article. In the photograph, Linda's hands are raised as though in mid-gesture, showing

fat silver rings on her fingers and bangles around her wrists. She wears a turtleneck with multiple necklaces and a thick leather belt. She is a 1970s reverie. When I first read the article when I was seventeen, I knew that I disagreed with Linda's thoughts on women's liberation. I found them arrogant, even dismissive, but I still wanted to know her. I was still enthralled.

Why? Why did I and do I feel such affection, such love for her? Is it because she was practiced in the art of seduction? In fostering adoration? She began her career in broadcasting with a radio program where she would read letters written by soldiers abroad to their loved ones back home. When I picture her sitting behind a microphone, reading the letters, I imagine that the attraction of the show, of the letters, is that in reading them, Linda spoke into the void of those who the draft had separated. She breathed hope into their connections. She was a guardian of fantasy. The letters, I imagine, were from Clarence or Stanley. Maybe they wrote to Juanita or Lorraine. Maybe they all sounded the same. *I love you. I miss you. Please be there for me when I come home.* But I imagine that she read them, nonetheless. Did the songs all sound the same? *All my love. Nevertheless, you belong to me.* Probably. But I imagine she played them even so. Linda breathed possibility into absence.

Was it this ability, this background, in recuperating distant lovers that drew me to her? Or is it because, with Linda, everything is already intimate? Read her words and feel as though she knows you. Read her words and see yourself spelled out with the precision it would take a lover years to discover about you. Read her words and forget that you don't know anything about this woman who has seduced you.

No one ever asked me to study the Bible with them during my four years in Indiana, though, occasionally, a stranger would ask me to read their tarot cards. They would corner me at the drinking fountain in the dorm and whisper, "Are you the girl who...?" and make some gesture with their hands, vaguely alluding to cards shuffling.

I'd nod, and we'd proceed to sit on the floor of their dorm room, where I would lay the cards out. I loved the cards for the same reason I loved Linda. They were something sacred, something that could speak to us from the beige cable carpeting and guide us.

Once, I asked one of my professors her thoughts on pursuing a doctorate. "Should I?" I murmured in the darkness of her office.

The professor's offices were cement blocks with tubular fluorescent lights that none of them used. They all hauled floor lamps and tattered armchairs into their offices and rolled rugs onto the floor. The offices reminded me of hotel bar lounges. Dark and stale, gum pressed into the carpeting. Somehow, too dim, too casual. I always wanted to grope for the light switch, turn the overhead lights on. I only clasped my hands in front of me and watched their pale faces speak from the shadows.

"Why would you want to do that?" she asked.

I think I said something about the library—that I liked to get lost there. Looking in the books. Peeling through the stacks. I liked the quietness of it. It felt hallowed to me. Like academic church. “I guess,” I said, “I like research.”

I remember her telling me that wasn't a very good reason to get a Ph.D. She'd told me I'd have to take classes in theory, read dense scholarship, and write a dissertation.

“It's a lot of work... *intense* study. I'm not sure if I can really see you doing that,” she said.

I must've asked why. Or my silence begged a further explanation.

“You seem kind of... dreamy to me. Scattered.”

I don't remember what I said. Or if I said anything. I don't recall hurt rolling through me. I remember a blankness, as though I expected her response, as though I could've told you myself. *Me? I'm dreamy and scattered.*

Because I had been dreaming. Dreaming of a biographical project that would redeem Linda, that would cast her as the person I knew her to be: not a madwoman but a literary and spiritual visionary to be celebrated. Dreaming that the best way to do this would be to enter a doctoral program and wrestle my adoration of Linda into a dissertation.

After I graduated from college and throughout my twenties, I carried Linda with me to each place I lived. A Minneapolis suburb. Eastern Europe. Rural Idaho. Everywhere I went, I'd loan my copies of *Sun Signs* and *Love Signs* to anyone who

inquired about astrology. "Read Linda," I'd gush, telling them about how accurate she was. What a wonderful writer she was. They would take the books and nod, returning them to me weeks later wrapped in a plastic bag from their previous night's take-out or left on my doorstep, as though they were as banal as a sweatshirt I'd forgotten in their car. I'd scoop them up, hold them close, and return them to their place of exaltation on my bookshelf.

"What did you think of Linda?" I'd say the next time I saw them.

They would turn away. Look at their shoes. Stick their tongue in their cheek. Mumble "umm" and "ahh." If I pressed them, they'd say, "She's so... dated." A friend once referenced how she evaluates each woman's sign in relationship to how she'd be as a homemaker in *Sun Signs*. For instance, "Sagittarius girls are acutely bored by the confinement of dusting and mopping." Men who marry Gemini women will have "several wives" all different, among them, one who will be "bored and depressed with housekeeping." Another who will "be a gay and laughing mother." And another who will "be a beautiful hostess, an expert at the whole candlelight, flowers, and sterling silver routine."

Many of my friends referenced her conformist stance on gender. How men are noted for their manliness (or lack thereof), and women are counseled on how to capitalize on their feminine attributes. The Scorpio man is "invincible," a man who "behind his frosty reserve is a huge pot of boiling steam that bubbles and seethes continually." Whereas the Aquarian man is described as not being "the best breadwinner around." Likewise, Linda advises women who want a marriage proposal

from a Cancer man to "Cut out baby pictures from magazines, leave your sewing machine out in full view" and to "take up the hems of your skirts an extra inch." They would mention how Linda describes the Pisces woman as "all-girl . . . one hundred percent."

Other times, they'd say, "She's a little... odd." They'd tell me that after a cursory internet search they found some article that discussed how Linda believed the penis of Osiris, the Egyptian god, was buried underneath the Hollywood Cross in Los Angeles, California. Or they'd tell me about how they read the back pages of *Love Signs* where Linda outlines a birth control method called "astrobiology" wherein couples are to either avoid or embrace, "during a certain approximately two-hour period of each Lunar month, when the sun and the moon are exactly the same number of degrees apart as they were at the moment of the women's . . . birth." Linda cites Ecclesiastes 3:1-5 to support her claim, "To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under the heaven . . . a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing." Linda interprets this as a reference to the "synchronizing of events on Earth to planetary movements and configurations—and the need for women and men to learn the expediency of timing their important actions ... with the flow of cosmic currents. . . ." Furthermore, Linda also claims that "there were many references to astrology and reincarnation" in the Bible before they were removed. The Ecclesiastes verse was forgotten in the purge of the occult from the Bible. Of astrobiology, Linda concludes, "You see? All this fussing and fighting over the subjects of abortion and

birth control, when astrology could solve it all, and keep everyone . . . happy—even the immovable Vatican—and not to mention the infants themselves . . .”

My friends were confused.

“Why is she giving advice about birth control?” they’d ask.

“This just sounds like a bad version of the rhythm method,” someone said.

“This isn’t what *you* do, right?” my cousin asked, horrified.

Always, I’d defend Linda. “Okay, yeah,” I’d say, “birth control by astrology isn’t what I’d do, but did you even read the rest of the book?” I’d tell them that she was writing in the 60s and 70s. She was writing in a moment. *A particular* moment. We can’t blame her for that! I’d say that, of course, if Linda was writing today, her views on gender would be much more progressive. She wouldn’t assume her readers were all heterosexual. She wouldn’t think that women all wanted to be homemakers and that all men relished their masculinity.

I’d reference *Sun Signs*’ introduction, “Listen to what she’s saying... ‘Isn’t that life’s major problem? Understanding? . . . understanding the twelve sun signs will literally change your life . . . You’ll soon feel closer to strangers, as well as to friends, and isn’t that really rather wonderful?’” I’d look up to see their blank faces. “Right?” I’d say, slapping the book shut. “Isn’t that really rather wonderful?”

We would never talk about Linda again. Spiritual matters or other astrologers, perhaps, but never Linda. Perhaps I liked it this way. Perhaps I wanted to be able to love her with abandon.

Even at the height of her popularity, many dismissed Linda; found her cracked even.

In a 1979 review of *Love Signs* in *Maclean's Magazine*, the reviewer calls it a "silly book," citing, specifically, the prologue wherein Linda outlines the details surrounding her daughter's disappearance in 1973 and Goodman's thoughts on numerology. With these statements, the reviewer claims Linda's "credibility" is "substantially blown." In an accompanying article, author Rita Christopher writes that Linda, despite her success, "remains a cryptic figure: holed up in a New York hotel [and has] refused all interviews after the paperback auction" of *Love Signs*. According to her agent Morton L. Janklow, "There are just some things she wants to get straightened out." *Love Signs'* prologue alludes to such "things." Christopher writes:

The foreword [to *Love Signs*] contains a letter to her daughter, Sally, in her mid-20s when she disappeared five years ago. Goodman's husband, Sam, identified a decaying body in Sally's apartment as that of the young woman, but Goodman herself has never believed Sally is dead.

The article includes a quote from a resident in Cripple Creek, Colorado, who describes Linda as "a little bit eccentric, runs around in long dresses, gypsy style, beads, and all that baloney." He adds, "She's not as young as she looks. I bet she's had a face-lift or two."

For many, speculation surrounding the mystery of Sally's disappearance and Linda's sanity overwhelmed her literary success. A 1979 *People* article opens with a scene of Linda in her Cripple Creek home. The article describes Linda shoveling logs into a fire and setting "about a bizarre daily ritual" where "to the low recorded music

of a Gregorian chant, she lights candles on a handmade altar and recites a mystical litany . . . created six years ago as a message to her departed loved ones.”

Authors Sarah Moore Hall and Richard K. Rein outline the controversy surrounding Sally. According to the New York medical examiner, Sarah Snyder, who went by Sally, committed suicide “just before Christmas 1973.” Despite this, Goodman believes Sally “is not dead.” Goodman is quoted as saying, “I’ve done her chart over and over again. An astrologist can’t predict death, but I can foresee non-death. I don’t know exactly why she was taken, but I feel the time is right for her to reappear.” Hall and Rein claim that “cause for hope seems slim” because “Sally had a period of depression and was hospitalized after a suicide attempt at the age of 18” and “her body was identified in the New York morgue by Linda’s second husband, Sam Goodman.”

Hall and Rein continue, "Linda Goodman's case is not helped, it is true, by her profession and lifestyle..." and describe Linda writing her first book by "staying in a nightgown studying astrology 20 hours a day for a year." Additionally, the article claims that Linda's "current literary projects tend to cast further doubt on her credibility—an autobiographical account of reincarnation and a book . . . about Howard Hughes, who she claims is alive and living in Alaska.” They add, “Her dark theories on [Sally's] case seem equally strange." Linda admits, “to be an astrologer, you live a great deal in the imagination... but about Sally, I'm like any distraught mother. I just want my daughter back."

I'd found the *People* article when I was fourteen using the public library's database. I cannot remember what I thought about it. I only remember that I was undeterred. I did not put her books on the curb, nor did it make me pause in my idolization of her. Despite my inexperience with disappeared lovers and children, I sympathized with wanting to find someone who had disappeared. How could you not search? When my mother would die years later, my loss would only intensify my admiration for Linda and belief in her theories of Sally's disappearance.

I was twenty-four when my mother died from lymphoma, the first nodules sprouting in her frontal lobe. She passed four months after her diagnosis, and in those months, I had a recurring dream, the meaning so obvious I'd wake myself up, moaning in protestation.

In the dream, my mother and I were on the shore of a body of water. Sometimes the water was choppy, maybe an ocean or a Great Lake. Other times it was calm and pond-like. Sometimes, it looked like a cartoon, baby blue or indigo. There was always one canoe and one lifejacket, and she took them both. She'd get in and paddle away, and I'd watch her orange lifejacket and little blonde head disappear into the distance while I stood on the shore and screamed at her. Threw sand. Kicked the water. I'd yell at her to come back. To turn around. Abandon ship.

She never would. I'd wonder if she was ignoring me. I'd wonder if she couldn't hear. The fact that she took a life preserver never comforted me.

Sometimes, there would be others around in the dream—people we mutually knew or random tourists and beachgoers, all oblivious. They ate hot dogs, threw a foam football back, or passed out frosted cupcakes from a plastic tub. *What are they doing?* I'd think. *Don't they know what's happening? Can't they see her leaving?*

Why didn't I swim after her? Why didn't I find a lasso in the sand and wrangle her to shore? Did I know I couldn't follow her? Did I know that it was a scene my subconscious had coughed up for the reality I could not alter? I never ran through the water or lassoed her. I stood on the shore, watching her leave, my heels descending into cool sand.

The day my mother died, I threw myself on her corpse and recoiled in the corner of her room until the coroner and sheriff knocked on the front door. I watched them take her away. I saw her emaciated form beneath the black bag. I washed the sheets of the vacant bed where she passed. I knew she was dead. I did not think that she had disappeared or absconded as she had in my dreams. I didn't run to the lake and look for her in the surf. I did not check to see if there was one lifejacket missing from the shed.

But I understood wanting to have it be that way. I knew why Linda would've or could've wanted to believe her daughter disappeared. How that would be easier. I saw how, for Linda, the cultural zeitgeist might've aided in her speculations. When Sally disappeared in 1973, it was post-Watergate. Post-gaslighting Martha Mitchell. Two years later, CIA operations like Heart Attack Gun and MK Ultra would be made

public. Linda promoted seemingly far-out theories, but hadn't Mitchell promoted the same things? Wouldn't something like MK Ultra sound absurd in theory? Yet, all that was true: Watergate, covert CIA operations involving experiments on humans, and a gun that would induce a heart attack.

I had compassion for Linda's theories, for the acuteness of what I imagined her grief to be. I often thought of the *People* article's final sentence. After I would dream that dream about my mother in the canoe in the months after she died, I'd whisper it to myself while still lying in bed, "I'm like any distraught daughter... dreaming of my mother." Linda's grief made me have more compassion for my own.

Perhaps, after that, I wanted someone else to love fiercely.

I once lusted after an astrologer who lived in a cabin with no running water three miles from Lake Coeur d'Alene in Idaho. He was fourteen years older than me, tall and earthy as a rotting birch. He came over to my rented room one evening, and we perused my bookshelf together, gazing up at the stacks while we lay on the carpeted floor. He laughed when he saw Linda's psychedelic book spines. "You like this stuff?" he said, standing up to pull *Sun Signs* down from the shelf.

I nodded, breathless, as though he were touching my spine rather than Linda's. He flipped through the book and said that I needed to read some different stuff—more academic astrologers. Noel Tyl. Liz Greene. Stephen Arroyo.

"This is fluff—commercial stuff," he said, shoving her back on the shelf. We spent the rest of the evening on the floor. I asked him questions, feigned rapture for

his answers. Said, "Tell me more about Liz Greene." Asked, "Can you say his name again? Something Arroyo?" Grabbed a notebook and wrote their names down. I'm sure I didn't want to offend.

I never invited him over again.

After my evening with the birch man, Linda became my litmus test with potential lovers. I would tell them of my devotion to her and show them my books, her books. I'd ask them what they think of it all—astrology and the beyond. My subtext: *will you still love me even though I believe in the planets and stars?*

Was my husband the first who did?

No, but he was the first one I loved back.

I met him during the spring I turned twenty-eight. I was living in Idaho. He was thirty and tall, from rural North Dakota, a Capricorn with a face like a split walnut: angular and withered. He smelled like my childhood: Camel's cigarettes, Wild Turkey, and arid radiator air. His name was Ronald Green, and he'd hated it since he was a kid. He hated it first because it was associated with Ronald McDonald, and everything about McDonald's disappointed him as a child: finding wilted French fries in the ball pit, crawling through the greasy tube tunnels, and, once, seeing some kid whip his shorts down and poop on the slide. He hated the name as a teenager because it was the same name as Ronald Reagan. When he was eight, everybody started calling him "Buck." It was a joke that stuck; his father was always telling him to "Buck up."

We were graduate students together, both getting our master's. We had the same classes, and I saw him around town. He could be crusty. I'd see him belligerent at the bar, arguing with his friends about Deleuze and Guattari or which Black Flag album is best, their fights spilling onto the sidewalk, shoving one another until someone more sober broke it up, telling them it was stupid to punch one another over *A Thousand Plateaus*. He could be sweet. He would write me notes of adoration in pencil, tape a sage sprig to the paper, and leave the note outside my front door where I was renting a room in a house full of Ukrainian exchange students. Sometimes he left a wildflower alongside a photocopy of a poem he found that he thought I would like: Lorna Dee Cervantes. June Jordan. Sharon Olds. He was right; I loved the words he left. From my bedroom window, I'd watch him leave the note and walk home, him and his dirty jeans. His steel-toe boots and plaid shirts thin at the elbows. His lit cigarette like a firefly. Was I afraid of his brashness? I must not have been. I must've felt I could cultivate what was beneath it. Maybe I felt like his sweetness was a secret only I held.

I gave him the test. Invited him over to the house and into my bedroom. My furniture all secondhand. My bed from an ex-boyfriend that left Idaho to go to law school in Montana, rogue springs contained by duct tape. My dresser from an old housemate that had moved to India, a sticker of Shiva pasted to the side. My walls a shrine to my mother with pictures of her younger self taped to the plaster with packing tape. We sat on my bed, the springs quaking, and I introduced him to Linda. I

told him that I believed in the planets. I believed in her. Loved her. I said that I believed in it all—God, the universe, love. That, maybe, Jesus was a Leo.

“What do you think about that?” I asked.

He told me he didn’t believe any of it. He was a staunch atheist. He read Christopher Hitchens. Marx. Salman Rushdie. But he was attracted to my belief in something beyond. He took *Love Signs*’ thick spine and ran his hand along the pages. It made him feel softer, he said.

One night, we drove into the rolling farmland and turned the engine off. We lay outside the car in a pile of leaves and looked at the moon. It was May. The Flower Moon. I told him I was leaving soon. I was moving to the California coast to start a Ph.D. program in literature. I was going to write about Linda.

I asked him, “Do you still want me even though I’m leaving?”

He did.

The biography outlined in her *New York Times* obituary and a 1995 *People Weekly* profile presented the facts. Linda Goodman was born Mary Alice Kemery on April 9th, 1925, in Morgantown, West Virginia. She began her career as a radio announcer, radio writer, and newspaper reporter. She adopted the name "Linda" after hosting a radio show called "Letters from Linda." Her first husband was Bill Snyder; her second husband was Sam Goodman. Linda outlived both. She published astrological texts, books of poetry, an autobiography, and a New Age handbook. Her lover, Robert Brewer, disappeared in 1972 to Mexico. Her daughter, Sally, disappeared in

1973. Linda looked for Sally and, likewise, waited for Robert for decades. Neither returned. Linda died in Colorado Springs, Colorado, on October 21st, 1995, from diabetic complications.

I thought it would be easy.

What could be more effortless than writing a dissertation about someone you love? I imagined that each fact verified and inscribed would be delicious. Every citation a delight. My stack of research notes like an altar. I envisioned that it would feel like romance budding, each disclosure your beloved shared like a gift whispered through darkness—an offering of intimacy. My redemption of her narrative the ultimate love letter. Linda knew me so well. Now, I'd know her so well, too.

Soon after I met Buck, a ninety-three-year-old man who lived in Baker, Nevada, just outside of the Great Basin National Park, hired me for the summer to edit a manuscript about his life as a park ranger. The job entailed editing the manuscript in exchange for a small hourly salary and the chance to live in his mother-in-law suite for the summer before I would move to California. His name was Shaughnessy, but he instructed me to call him “The Old Man.”

The Old Man told me it would be an opportunity to earn money and see the bristlecone pines and bawl-faced cattle in the field behind his house. He told me there were rattlesnakes and cougars in the area. Little scorpions everywhere. I would have to travel two hours to Utah for groceries. There was a gas station in town, but even a box of mac n' cheese there cost about six dollars. He told me I'd need to monitor my

water consumption when I went hiking. People died in National Parks all the time.

“They don’t advertise that, but it’s true,” he said. The Old Man asked me if I thought I could handle that. You know, if I still wanted the job, knowing about the rattlesnakes and things.

“Yes, Old Man,” I said. “Yes, I do.”

I told Buck about the job that night as he taught me to tie men’s neckties. He had a cardboard box of them he’d collected from thrift stores in Palouse and Pullman. We tied necktie after necktie and made a pile on his bed. We flopped in the mound and remarked on the ties’ resemblance to tadpoles, psychedelic tadpoles, strange little primordial beings.

“Come with me,” I said. “Let’s go to the desert together.”

“Yes,” he replied. “Let’s do that.”

It was a time of yes. Buck and I said it to one another over and over. Yes, I love you. Yes, we commit. Yes, let’s do this forever. Yes, I will come with you to California. Yes, I will take your problems as my problems. Yes, I will take care of you. Yes, I see your sadness. Let me take it from you. Yes, I hear you. Yes, I will always listen. Our bodies were yes. Yes, you can do that. Yes, again. Yes, I agree. Yes, yes, yes.

All the signs I saw were yes. Buck’s birthday was on January eleventh: one eleven. “Magical numbers,” my friends said. “Fated relationships,” my hairdresser said. One one one. “Angel Numbers,” the internet said. I saw 1:11 pm on the clock at the mall. \$11.10 on my receipts. “111” scribbled on the sidewalk in my dreams. *Yes*, I

thought. *He is right. This is right.* I looked no further. I did not consult Linda. I did not crack another book to investigate our connection. I was convinced.

Yes was liberating, enthralling, sexy. Yes was what I wanted to see, the wave I wanted forever to ride. Yes, to everything: petting stray kittens in the alley, jumping in the river, turning on that dirt road, and seeing where it took us.

Yes was lived on the surface. Yes was fleeting, superficial. Yes was how fleas jumped on my sweater, how kittens left bleeding scratches. Yes was how we ended up somewhere on State Route 21 trying to befriend cattle who fled into the arid field. Yes was how I never wondered what would've happened if they'd charged the other direction. Yes was how I felt the river's current lift my feet. Yes was how I paddled upstream, screaming as I felt the river's bottom slip slimy and shifting beneath me.

Yes was how I overlooked the game he played with me, where he would throw himself on the bed or the floor and pretend to "die," stick his tongue out, let his body go limp and hollow, with his eyes rolled back and unfocused. Yes is how I played my part, where I had to make him come back to life, beg him to live, tell him how sad I'd be if he died, shake his shoulders, and watch his head flop back and forth, tickle him, kiss him, scream.

Yes was how I never connected the game to the real thing. Yes was how I never considered what would happen if, one day, I shook his shoulders, and he never awakened. I slapped his face, and he never woke. I screamed, and he couldn't hear. Yes was never considering how close that moment might be.

Yes was how I threw liquor bottles and beer cans away, counting them with each clunk into the recycling and rationalizing away the number. Yes was how I ignored his self-loathing. About his body. His mind. His capabilities. Yes was how I ignored meltdowns and manipulation. Yes was how I listened to his fantasies of killing himself, about the time he tried to dive into the Missouri River, how the feeling of wanting to die had never escaped him. Yes, I thought. *I can take this. I can love this.*

Yes was how I only looked for signs that confirmed what I thought I wanted.

It's how I found myself months later—only months after lying on a bed with all those neckties, not like tadpoles but nooses, only months after he and I slept in a pile of near nooses—at Año Nuevo beach in California, saying, *Yes, yes, I will marry you*, as he slips my mother's wedding ring on my finger.

Once I began my doctoral program, I made a list of every possible source and divided them into categories. The factual and the fantastical. The verified and the unverified. The rumors and gossip from internet forums and blog posts from fellow fans clearly insubstantial; I focus on other sources. I plan to dig through databases for every article, review, or interview ever written with or about Linda. I see if she has papers or letters in a library or institution. I make a list of her manuscripts and publications. I make a list of every person mentioned in the front matter of her books. I look them up, find their addresses, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses and write to them: her children, former business associates, friends, editors, and agents. I draw trees of who

could know who and people who may know Linda or once worked alongside someone that knew her. I write to them too. I write to a company that makes sound healing products in the Netherlands whose founder knew Linda during the 1980s. I plead my case. I tell them it's for my dissertation. I explain the whole thing. *A biography that shows Linda Goodman in a new light—not as a madwoman but as a woman who spearheaded the American New Age movement.*

I cite Phyllis Chesler's *Women and Madness*, wherein she charts how accusations of madness have silenced women: namely, artists and intellectuals. And how such accusations have cast doubt upon what they say and write. I say that Linda is a part of this because she endured such criticism over her reaction to her daughter's disappearance and her participation in occult studies. I cite Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* that explores the madwoman trope in literature and how such a term was a way to discount female characters. I put Linda in this legacy. I say she's part of this. We've ignored her. Cast her aside, and now, we should look at her. Grant her legitimacy.

I cite Adrienne Rich's "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" and her call to "revision" old texts "from a new critical direction." I cite how she calls this "an act of survival" and link it to telling a new narrative about Linda and her work. I cite Tania Modleski's *Old Wives & Other Women's Stories*, wherein she discusses how women "cannot afford to participate in the endless deferral of women's stories" and her call for women to instead become "confidantes" for one another "engaging in

[our] own confirmation process and granting legitimacy to each other's stories." I say that this is what I'm doing. I cite other recuperative biographies of women. I claim desperation. I slip a business card into the envelopes, handwrite their addresses, and send them away.

I wait.

Did I love Buck for the same reason I loved Linda?

They both seduced me with knowledge. With their ability to translate the unknown and spoon-feed it to me. We never played *Trivial Pursuit*, but sometimes I'd fantasize about it: being on a team with him and the way he would be able to answer every question. I'd tell him about the beauty of his mind, but he told me he wasn't smart—he just remembered most of the things he'd read. And he did. I didn't read anything I was assigned my first year as a Ph.D. student: Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida. I'd come home from school and toss photocopied pages of Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* or Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* at him, shrieking, "What does this mean?! I don't understand any of it." He would pick my papers up, skim through the first pages, and tell me the gloss. He'd already read all of it. Years ago. I'd listen, rapt, taking notes, and then collapse onto him, kiss his face, and whisper, "Thank you for saving me."

"Saving you from what?"

My answer would change each time. Sometimes I said, "Frustration." Sometimes, it was "From spending days with this book." Sometimes, I'd just laugh

and say, "From school!" I never said that he saved me from grappling with all that I did not know, could not understand. That his intelligence was the rung I clung to, his most seductive feature, that hearing him explain Foucault reminded me that there was potential for him to become something he wasn't yet, that through such a recitation, I could ignore the reality of what was unfolding around us.

We married in the backyard of my stepfather's house on a lake in rural Wisconsin, where I grew up.

The Time of Yes had ended months earlier with the news that several of Buck's job applications in California had gone unanswered or been formally rejected. He took this as a portent of doom for our future life in California and a confirmation of his inadequacy. For him, these rejections were shattering.

For me, his response was baffling.

"It's just a few applications," I assured him. "They don't mean anything. You can get a job. I get rejected from things all the time . . . It's just life."

He receded. He went somewhere I could not understand. I asked him about it, "What do you need? Are you sure this is just about these applications? How can this one thing be the only thing that's making you sad? Is there something else?"

"No," he said. "No."

I clung to Yes. Yes, this will still work. Yes, we will be fine. Yes, I still want to be with you. Yes, I still want to marry you. Yes, get that baby blue suit. Yes, I'll get that pink dress. Yes, we are going to look like infants. Yes, let's do this on July

1st. Yes, I'll send the invitations. Yes, there's no money to fly, so we'll drive from California to Wisconsin.

My body knew it before I did.

The day we married, I woke up in my childhood bedroom and looked out the egress window at the sun shining on the lake. The sky was blue. No rain. No wind. Picturesque wisps of white clouds. *A perfect day to marry*, I thought, throwing myself back into bed and sobbing into the comforter. I went upstairs to find that my aunt had made me a bouquet of wildflowers to walk down the aisle with, and I bawled. My father made cupcakes for the reception, and I wept. My friends from out of town came, all the way from Pennsylvania and Idaho and Minnesota, and I yowled into their shoulders.

"Why are you crying?" they asked.

I told everyone I was crying because my mother wasn't there—she'd been dead for four years by then—and wasn't it sad that my mother wasn't there to see me get married? I told everyone that I *felt* her with me on this day, and that's why I was crying, why I couldn't stop crying even though you just gave me this beautiful bouquet, made these cupcakes, came here all the way from Philadelphia, and I should be so happy.

"Oh, honey," they said. "Yes, this makes sense."

I told myself, *Yes, yes, this does make sense. I am devastated and sad because, on this day, a happy day, a very glorious day, I am stunned by the absence*

of my mother. This is why I'm crying. This is precisely why I'm upset. I said it to myself as I painted my nails, sobbing. I said it to myself as I blew up balloons and put them on the mailbox. As I moved chairs on the lawn. It was my mantra: *she's not here, and that's why I'm sad. She's not here, and that's why I'm sad.*

Twenty minutes before the ceremony, my cousin found me, weeping and filthy, dirt up to my knees, sprawled across my bed. I told her, "It's awful; my mother isn't here . . . I can't do this. It's just too sad."

She handed me a shot of something tan and said, "Yes, it's awful, but it's time to get married now. So, put your dress on, and let's do the damn thing."

I took the shot. I put on the dress. I did the damn thing.

It didn't occur to me that the reason I couldn't stop crying was that I didn't want to do the damn thing. I didn't realize that the reason Buck and I fought while standing in his parents' driveway a week before we drove the rest of the way to Wisconsin was that, maybe, he didn't want to do this either.

We argued outside the car with the passenger and driver's side doors flung open. I asked him to make sure he had his birth certificate. I had looked up the instructions. We'd need it to get married in Wisconsin.

He disagreed. His friend from high school who had just gotten married in Washington state didn't need his birth certificate. He didn't need anything besides his driver's license.

I said, "Sure. But each state has different rules. I looked it up."

He didn't believe me.

"That doesn't sound right," he said. "Why would they need to have our birth certificates?"

"I don't know... But that's what the instructions on the government website say, so that's why you should probably go get it now if we want to get married in Wisconsin, where we're having our actual ceremony."

"I don't need to get my birth certificate," he said, throwing his coat into the car. "That doesn't make any sense."

We got in the car and drove to Wisconsin.

When we showed up at my stepfather's house, Buck looked up the instructions and saw, oh yes, he did need his birth certificate. We didn't get legally married until we drove back through North Dakota, where there was no waiting period and no need for a birth certificate.

Then, we drove from Bismarck to the California coast. We crossed the state line on Interstate 80 outside of Reno, and the border guard asked us if we were bringing anything unusual into California. The words flooded me. *Yes, this whole thing: me, him, the marriage certificate, the crockpot in the backseat, etc.*

I stammered. I knew what the guard meant. He meant plants, produce, and seeds. But I couldn't say it. Buck sat next to me, watching a Pomeranian sticking his head out the driver's side window in the next lane over. He was tapping his foot against the dash and blowing smoke rings towards its plush face.

The guard asked again, “Are you bringing any agricultural products into the State of California?”

“No, we’ve got nothing that can grow,” I said.

He waved us through.

Two people respond to my dozens of queries.

The first one is Duncan.

In California, we first live in a 100 square foot illegal shed in someone's backyard in the Santa Cruz mountains, where it’s so humid mold grows on our shoes overnight. We store our clothing, cooking supplies, and books in the trunks of our cars and hold our hands under an outdoor faucet’s pathetic trickle to catch a drink. We have no reception, so I plan to drive fourteen miles and call Duncan from a grocery store parking lot in town. Duncan Brooks, now retired, worked with Linda as an editor during the 70s and 80s.

I scrape the mold out of my penny loafers and dig out one of my mother’s old coats, a green tweed blazer cinched at the waist, from the trunk of my car, and put lipstick on in the rearview mirror as though I were meeting this man in person. I drive to the grocery store in a near-carnal haze. The mugginess no longer oppressive but erotic as I anticipate the secrets about Linda he will offer. Awaiting the chuckles we will share as he prattles on, telling me tales about Linda. I lust for the feeling of notebook pages wilted with writing in my hands.

I dial his number, my breath held in anticipation.

He picks up. Wherever he is, it's busy. Something beeps, and conversation floats. It could be an office. I wonder if it's a hospital room.

I tell him who I am and thank him for speaking with me today.

"Say that again?"

I try to inhale. I can't.

"I'm Courtney—the doctoral student. Who e-mailed you?"

He'd forgotten about our phone call. But he can still talk—for a short time.

People laugh in the background, and I'm so warm it feels like my lipstick is dripping down to my chin. The beeping sounds like the timer on a microwave. I think to ask him if he'd prefer to arrange another time to speak, but I don't. I stammer questions—how he knew Linda. What she was like. I forget everything specific I wanted to know—about Sally, about her legacy, about Robert, about her grief. I try to crank the window, but the hand crank is stuck. I jerk it back and forth.

He tells me she was a "very high energy person... wildly creative and gifted." It made sense to him that she started her career on a radio show, "she had a great voice." But by the time Duncan met her, she didn't want to do anything in public. I manage to ask him about the article—that one from *People*.

"That's one of the only things I can find about her," I say, letting the handle go.

"That embarrassed her," Duncan said. "It broke her heart . . . she thought they were making fun of her."

“I thought the same thing,” I say as I hear someone’s voice mumbling to Duncan, the stifled clap of a palm over the receiver, and his muffled reply—I can almost hear his words. Something about salmon. Maybe he’s at brunch. I twist in the seat and hit the handle until it budgets. I roll the window down, hot air escaping.

He apologizes. The truck next to me starts playing the radio loudly, so I roll the window back up. I know there are other things I could ask, things that I’ve written. But all I can think about is whether or not it was a coincidence this man started playing music or if he was watching me sweat and struggle. So, the only thing I can say to Duncan is to talk about all that I haven’t found and the only things I have found—the article about parties and her obituaries. The article Marcia Seligson wrote that mentioned Linda’s three bulldogs and four children.

“Do you know of other publications? Any books or archives I could look into?”

“Hmm...”

“Or anyone that might be useful to talk to, anyone who might be willing to speak with me?”

“She was reclusive... it would be very hard to find something about her. I doubt you’d find letters or papers.”

"I'm writing a biography," I say as if declaring my intention will change this fact.

The bass from the truck next to me throbs.

He wishes me the best of luck with my project, and I thank him like I assume Linda thanked him during her life: ebulliently.

We hang up.

I crank the window down, smear my lipstick on my jacket sleeve, shove my notebook in the glove compartment, look in the rearview mirror to see the lipstick is now lopsided on my mouth, so I smear it the other way and drive back to the shed where I find Buck cleaning out the waterless toilet. It's an outhouse autopsy. The toilet disassembled and scattered. Wrenches and stained handkerchiefs discarded. I ask him how it's going. He's got peat moss and feces up to his elbows, his face all sheen and speckle.

"You know how it goes... Nothin' but shit," he says, wiping his hands on his jeans and leaning against the wooden outhouse to light a cigarette.

He asks me how the phone call went.

I stare at him, my skin writhing under the jacket's swelter, cigarette smoke crawling towards me.

"Kind of the same."

2.

The second person to reply was Jerry.

Jerry Southers runs a New Age website that once housed copies of Linda Goodman's *Star Notes*, a newsletter she wrote and sent to fans during the 1980s. I'd found copies online when I was fourteen, but when I went back to look at them again, the newsletters were gone. The links broken. I couldn't recall what they said. I only remember Linda's loopy handwriting signing off each one. I e-mailed someone named Jerry, listed as the webmaster, about the *Star Notes* and asked if he could share copies with me. I assumed there were electronic copies because, once, there were scans online.

"I remember them being there years ago," I wrote, the sentence ringing foolish as I typed it: *years ago*. As in *sixteen* years ago, I remember coming to this site and reading Linda's newsletters. Sixteen years ago, I went to this GeoCities website, scrolled through some PDFs, and now I'm back wondering where they are.

Jerry replied, "I can't send these to you through the internet." If I wanted them, I'd have to come to Midland, Texas, where he lived.

I asked him why. I assured him of my intentions, “I’m a fan,” I wrote. “I have no malicious intent.”

“I just can’t send these to you through the internet,” he reiterated.

Midland was 1400 miles away and a \$500 plane ticket.

I kept looking.

I contacted a woman who ran a Linda Goodman fan site who said she had copies of *Star Notes*. I messaged her and asked if she would share them with me for my dissertation. I wrote her and said I didn’t have a lot, but I could try to pay her for her time.

“NEVER,” she replied. “Linda sent these to ME. Not YOU. You had to be CHOSEN, and she chose ME. I don’t even know who YOU are!”

I wrote back to Jerry and asked him when he was free.

My friend from Arlington tells me I can stay with her folks and use their car for the day if I fly into adjacent Dallas. Midland is five hours from Arlington, but I can't afford a hotel or a car, and a flight into Dallas is hundreds of dollars cheaper than a flight to Midland. So, I do it. I take a 6 am flight from San Jose and, with the time change, I'm in Dallas by 10:30.

It's July, and my friend's parents meet me at the airport in their burgundy minivan. I'm paranoid about the whole thing. Being late. This random man, Jerry, I'm supposed to meet. This random van with the backseats ripped out. I want to ask why. *Why rip the backseats out?* But I don’t. Because the parents are friendly and even

brought me a powdered donut and are letting me use their car, so I get in and wave goodbye. I drive away from Dallas International, and the car feels light, like I'm driving a Kleenex box. For five hours, I sweat across Texas, hot wind licking me across the flat road, an AM radio station host defending the "Pizzagate" conspiracy theory and claiming that Bill and Hilary Clinton have assassinated more than fifty people blaring the whole way there because I'm too nervous to reach my hand to the dials to figure out how to change it, too nervous to even pull over to stretch until I pull into Midland at 3:58 pm.

We meet at a Church's Chicken on South Midkiff Road next to an expanse of bulldozed strip malls, and I spot him across the parking lot. He's wearing jeans with sawdust up to the crotch and a t-shirt full of holes memorializing an Odessa music festival from 1993. He told me he was a carpenter, so I assume it's him. He's holding a folder and looks to be about sixty, and I know it's him when he walks up to me, grabs my hand, and shakes it. How did he know it was me? I have no idea, but his hand, solid and rough, envelops mine, and he reminds me of the men I'd see in the rural Wisconsin bars who would get in bar fights and kept pistols in their truck's glove compartment. Box-like men, all muscle and edge.

I can't see his eyes behind his polarized sunglasses. He's still shaking my hand. I start to feel nauseous.

"I need a soda," I say.

We sit in a booth. A child is screaming across the restaurant. Everything smells like fried chicken, and we stare at one another, and I don't know what to do. I

wait for him to open the folder, assuming that's where the notes are. Or, maybe, he's waiting for me to ask him for the notes.

"Thanks for meeting me," I say.

"Sure thing."

We stare. The child sounds like a pterodactyl cawing. I take a sip of my soda and forget to swallow before asking him if he wants anything.

"I should've asked," I say, coughing.

He says he's fine.

I move the Styrofoam cup in a circle on the table. I wait for him to move, to shuffle through his folder, to shift in his seat, to reach for it. He doesn't. His hands are folded in front of him. I can see a smear of ketchup dried on the table. Bright red. Like blood.

"So... do you have the notes?" I ask.

He tosses the folder on the table, and it slides towards me.

"All of 'em. There's an old ad for *Gooberz* in there too."

"Can I... look?"

He nods.

I open the folder, peel through one by one, taking photos, trying to ignore the child and the ketchup-blood smear and the soda sweating just as much as me.

"How'd you come to be a fan?" He asks, drumming his fingers on the table.

"You're too young.... Everybody I know who read Linda read her in the 70s. I bet you weren't even born then."

“I wasn’t,” I say, turning a page, reading the phrase, *A Funny Tale for Purple Plate Leprechauns*.

“Why—why couldn’t you share these with me electronically?” I ask.

“I don’t know how to use a scanner.”

The phrase: *meditate upon these several mysteries of Christmas*.

He tells me that his wife was the "website guru," and he doesn't know how to do any of it since she died.

The phrase: *TREES AND ALCHEMY A Love Letter To The Trees*

I look up. I tell him I’m so sorry to hear about his wife.

He tells me how she died. A sudden stroke. How everything has been different since then. The website—he just didn’t know how to do it. So, it’s fallen apart. He doesn’t even know how to cancel the thing.

“The domain?” I ask.

“... I don’t even know.”

I tell him I can’t imagine and finish photographing the papers in silence before sliding them back across the table to him.

I thank him again, wondering if this will be the end of our conversation, perhaps, hoping it will be, but he doesn’t move to leave and, maybe it’s because I’m tired or nervous, but we just stare at one another. His eyes are brown, and there’s sawdust in his beard. I sip my soda, the straw sucking at the ice. I shift against the plastic seat to get more comfortable, and the pterodactyl child is gone, but the seat is unyielding, and I came all the way here, and shouldn’t I ask him more if I came all

this way? But I don't know what to say—why didn't I write possible questions down? Instead, I start to babble. About how hot it is today. About how I got up at 4 am. About what I could order if I got something here. About how often he comes here. Jerry stares, saying nothing. But his eyes do not dart towards the door. He does not shift in his seat. He's listening. "Jerry," I say, "how old do you think Linda would be if she were alive today?"

His face hardens.

"Linda's not dead . . . she had a time twin that died."

I thought he was going to say, "Ninety-three."

I wait for him to smile. To laugh. But he doesn't. He just keeps talking.

"Oh," I say, pulling my notebook towards me and writing *NOT DEAD?!*

"She always said that she was four-hundred years old... so by now, she's probably still somewhere around there. Between four-hundred and five-hundred."

"I see..." I say, writing *400 YEARS OLD?? WHAT IS A TIME TWIN?*

He continues, "Linda didn't believe in time. That's why she never revealed her date of birth—not like it's real anyway."

I read the articles—they said 1925. She was born in 1925. And she died. She died in 1995. Because of diabetes.

I put the pen down, suck on my straw, and laugh. As though I agree, as though I'm in on the secret, as though I, too, believe I've just had my three-hundredth birthday and write postcards to my time twin living her own life somewhere on the Algerian coast. I set the soda cup down, and now the questions come to me—

specifics about Linda that he might know, names and phone numbers he could know. What people thought about her when her books were popular. What he thinks her influence has been upon the New Age movement and spiritual literature. But it doesn't matter because I can't ask. I can't say the words. Because I can't believe the answers.

Jerry smiles at me as though we were sharing the secret of time not being real together. As if I believed it too.

I smile back.

"Well, I should turn around to Arlington," I say, "So nice to meet you!"

I thank him and watch him get into his truck and drive into the endless asphalt horizon, and I wonder if it's he who has been deceived or me.

On the plane ride home, I read Linda's *Star Notes*.

The letters are effusive in their gratitude. She repeatedly thanks her fans who write letters to her in Cripple Creek, many of which make her weep, "because I need them to soothe my weary spirit far more than you can guess." She signs the letters with wholehearted wishes of "Love, Rainbows, and Elves" and "Pax et Bonum . . . and a promise for tomorrow." She writes to those of "you who have written about" her autobiography "*Gooberz* . . . I want to send you a huge bear hug and millions of bunny hugs of gratitude! Your requests are so unique, so genuine . . . they make my heart sing!"

The letters are also just effusive. In their hatred of the publishing industry, so-called "bean counters," who have kept her autobiography *Gooberz* out of her fans' hands for years, who refuse to send her on book tours for her 1987 guide to health, healing, and universal mysteries, *Star Signs*, and clearly don't understand her artistic vision. Effusive in her confidence that many will love *Gooberz* (because look at all the letters her fans have written asking about it!). There will be so much love for the book that it should only be presented in the form that Linda intended at over 1,000 pages despite most major publishers' caution at publishing such a monstrosity. Effusive in her insistence upon a Paul McCartney conspiracy theory that, indeed, Paul did die in November 1966, and the "Paul McCartney" of today is an imposter. In her critique of grammar. In her hatred of eating meat, hunters, the National Rifle Association, and George Bush Senior, "Could President George Bush please clarify his pretzeled polarities of speech and actions? It's *so* confusing! You see, George is a hunter . . . of deer and quail, among our endangered brothers and sisters in the deeper woods." In their post-scripts upon post-scripts. In her insistence upon Sally's return and the beauty of it, "I know I will literally levitate with joy, won't you?" In her promise that a "later Star Note will briefly explain the *cause* of her disappearance, which is not what you may think it to be." In her insistence that time doesn't exist, that it is "the Great Pretender." In the intimate disclosures of what Linda will do after writing the letter, like making herself a root beer float just like her "mother elf" used to do.

I scramble and skim to see if I have the “later Star Note” about Sally’s disappearance, but I don’t have it. Jerry didn’t have it. I read them all again and am caught between intoxication and disillusionment. I recognize the voice, the woman behind the words, but Linda has shifted. I know she’s an astrologer, someone who believes in wisdom from the planets, but I didn’t realize that she would be someone who would reveal herself to disregard the scientific realities of birth, death, and the normative human lifespan. I can’t shake Jerry’s voice from my head, *between four-hundred and five hundred*, I can’t shake the phrase “the Great Pretender,” I can’t shake the question, *Who has been deceived?*

Because I think it’s me.

In California, we arrange our newly married life through lack. You lack dignity. *Let me give that to you.* You lack touch. *Let me do that.* You lack someone to sing your sorrows to. *Let me listen.*

We knew we were broke, so we spend our days at the central coast thrift stores: the one in the mountains shaped like a barn with a crotchety cat that sleeps on secondhand ottomans, the one downtown that stinks like weed and antiseptic, the one further east where we find designer brand khakis and scratched polka records.

The thrill of possibility drives us through the door. Maybe we’ll find a pot that isn’t beat to shit. Maybe I’ll find lingerie that isn’t full of holes. Maybe this couch would work just great if we put a board under the cushions. Maybe one day, our coats won’t stink like someone else’s sweat.

Possibility is our ventilator, the only thing that keeps us going.

I stuff my basket with coffee cups and vintage matchbook covers, the delirium of fresh oxygen drifting through me. *Dear husband, you are my broken microwave. You are this mini dress with the bulging zipper. You are this waterlogged atlas. I will unscrew you and rewire your circuitry. Seam rip your zipper and sew it back in. I will put bricks on top of your curled pages to make them smooth.* I ride the feeling for as long as I can, my breath shallow and quick as I march through the aisles, telling every object I meet, *I know I can fix you.*

He loves buying coats. He tries them all on. Women's fur coats, men's trench coats, green and red raincoats. He purchases sci-fi pulp paperbacks by the collection. Once, he opened a cover, and a moth flew to the light. He once bought me a porcelain Valentine trinket from 1982.

The thrill bleeds into our trips home, our treasures shivering in the backseat. We talk about the future: when we'd leave California, when we'd get a new place, when he'd get a better job, when I'd get a freelance gig. This will make a difference, we say. This would make everything better, we agree. After living here, everywhere else would seem great. We do not talk about the drinking, about what we really want and how it's not each other, about the stalemate we've come to over his suicidality, about the couples therapy books stacked in my office on campus.

I blame my unhappiness on California: the traffic and the expense and the drivers who flip me the bird as I crossed the street. He, too, blames it all on California: the job market where the only position he could get was as a butcher and

the isolation of suburban sprawl and Silicon Valley wealth next to hypodermic needles nestled in a ditch. I ask him—beg him—to admit that he resented me for being the one to bring him to this state he despised. But he never says it.

What comes after the thrift stores, a frozen pizza, and a six-pack all for himself is us sitting in the lawn chairs in our rented room, our upgrade from the shed. It is a monologue about how his misery has nothing to do with California but with something else, the something else that propelled him to try to plunge into the Missouri River when he was sixteen, the something else that drags him into self-loathing, into being unable to write his name on job applications, into being unable to see himself ever experiencing joy, into him fantasizing about suicide, about what it would be like to die, about what it would be like to be brave enough to walk through the unknown that teased him.

Come with me, he seems to say. Have this conversation with me. Let's talk about the circumstances under which it's appropriate to slit your wrists, to slide a noose around your neck, to down a bottle of those pills under the sink. Is this that situation? Are we living it? I hover above myself. I watch Buck and I have the conversation. The “signs of suicidal checklist” scrolling before me: *method of harm, date, time, stated intention . . .*

In the beginning, I would tell him I was sorry that he was experiencing this. Tell him I'm so glad that the guardrail stopped him before he went into the Missouri all those years ago. Tell him it must be so hard to feel these things. Later, I would try

to convince him of his worth. Argue with him. I'd remind him of how everything is always changing. Of how emotions are mercurial. You feel this way now, but not forever. I would ask what he needed. What he wanted. What we could do differently. I was his campaign manager for staying alive.

Sometimes I would try to be philosophical. We would talk about Durkheim. We would play scenarios out. What if you were kidnapped and trapped in someone's basement? What if you were ninety-five and had terminal cancer? Then, would it be okay to hang yourself? To watch the bathtub water run red? Often, I only listened in silence. I was so scared, so pained to see him in such agony, that I would weep wordlessly into the sleeve of my sweater as I listened. Upon which, his hatred for himself would swivel to me. Why was I reacting this way? Why was I making this moment that was supposed to be about him all about me?

I never knew how to reply. So, I didn't.

Eventually, I stop suggesting therapists. I stop suggesting gratitude lists, medication, and mindfulness. I stop telling him that he is worthy. I focus on how to protect myself from his sorrow. I listen to him and think of the ducks I watched in the lagoon shimmy water off their backs. *Be the ducks*. How sea otters tossed by a wave would float. *Be the otter*. My mother waving her hand at the situation and laughing. *Be like Vicky*. When there is a row of good days, I wonder if it is coming. I track it in my diary, trying to find meaning, a cycle, a revolution. But there is no grand pattern.

Once, he started the monologue while driving on a dirt road through the mountains, and I threw my foot on the break. Our bodies lurched forward and whipped back against the seats.

“Stop!” I yelled. “Stop this—please!”

I put the gear in park, the car running, stalled in the middle of the road as we each wept into our hands.

I go to her poetry: 1970’s *Venus Trines at Midnight* and 1980’s *Linda Goodman’s Love Poems: Levels of Love Awareness*. I read and look for clues to confirm the established facts. That she is not 400 years old. That she died in 1925. That what I know to be true is true, but the speaker in Linda’s poems traffics in ambiguity, delighting in evading confrontations with reality. In “Throw a Little Neptune in with the Image,” the speaker fantasizes about what advertising agency she would use if “I ever try to make it / as the first woman President / running on the astrology ticket.” The speaker considers hiring a public relations agency with direct communication but then decides they would “hire that other outfit / that makes you wonder / ‘Does She or doesn’t she?’” Likewise, in “The Aquarian Age of What,” the speaker details having lunch and eavesdropping on another conversation where they discuss how, based on a recent *New York Times* article, the world will be uninhabitable in ten years due to current pollution levels. The speaker panics, wondering why and how it is that no one seems to care about such a dire prediction. The poem concludes with the speaker walking past a sign that reads “SLEEP WITH A STRANGER TONIGHT.” Upon

reading this, the speaker slips into a fantasy of falling in love with a stranger “or with someone / or with *something*—like life,” perhaps to evade their dread of only having ten years left to live or, maybe, to live recklessly given the future’s brevity. Likewise, the speaker engages with Goodman’s common evasion of her age in “Capricorn Calendar” stating that they’ve “aged at least 500 years \ since I stumbled into you,” and “You’ll never know how old I am / but I’ll tell you anyway / I was born the hour we met / and died today.” In Goodman’s work, the truth is a prize the speaker keeps hidden, the gem she taunts her readers with, a reality never revealed.

Paradoxically, while the speaker hides certain, seemingly irrelevant, details, they are forthcoming about their emotional heartbreak. In “Cancerian Cry,” the speaker proposes having a “National Emptiness Week” for those who “sit around in all-night coffee shops / blinking in the purple-white neon light / dropping dimes into a slot / to dial a number that never answers.” They propose that such a week will “rescue the lonely.” In “Venus in Virgo or Venus in Aries,” the speaker claims that their “heart learned grief by diving naked / into anguish / long ago.”

Yet, even more illogically, the speaker undercuts their moments of vulnerability with superficial lines that often veer into child-like fantasy. In “If My Calculations Are Right . . .” the speaker imagines running into an old lover in the future: October 25th, 1993, in Central Park. The speaker envisions how their eyes will both have “a few / more crinkles” and that the lover she runs into will be eating “blueberry pie.” Upon seeing one another, birds will “swim backwards / and fish will fly high.” The lover will tell the speaker, “Remember? I told you we’d find a purple

leprechaun / to wish on someday.” Perhaps, such images could evoke the wonder of reuniting with a lover, yet with poem after poem of fantastical creatures appearing at a moment of reunion, the images begin to seem facile, the speaker’s stakes remain a mystery. So mysterious, they become inconsequential.

The poetry is ever glib, gliding into images of lovers on white horses and poems that end with vindictive one-liners, such as “*That* would teach him a karmic lesson or two!” The speaker even calls into question their own sadness stating, “Why should I grieve? / My dreams are made of sterner stuff / and Spring will be here soon enough . . .” Linda’s speaker continually daydreams of the future, ever unreflective on the present moment, the reason for their loneliness, the fantasies they cast themselves towards, and the impossibility of such fantasies.

The speaker’s conception of reality is also dubious. Do they inhabit an invented world, or are their flights of fantasy rooted in our quotidian here and now? Or is the boundary between the imaginary and the real more porous, even overlapping? In Goodman’s poem “Abracadabra,” the speaker describes someone who stands 6’2” and tries to stop the rain. They “squeeze [their] eyes tightly” and “concentrated tightly too” and “waited . . . and waited/” and “believed . . . and believed.” The speaker describes watching the person feel anguish at not being able to stop the rain and replies, “do you know how it made me ache inside/ and how deeply I understood?/ . . . /when you tried so hard to stop the rain/ and believed so hard you could.” Linda’s work could be set within a magical world where the rain can be stopped by concentration alone. Yet, the speaker’s understanding that, of course, this

figure couldn't stop the rain indicates otherwise. Likewise, such an attempt would be understandable for a child, yet most children aren't 6'2". The speaker glorifies their fruitless attempt to stop the rain through concentration, "you failed/ but you tried, you tried, you tried, that's what was so perfectly marvelous.../ You tried."

I turn away from the book and look at my notes. I've written nothing—just twelve question marks, a line of ears waiting for answers. I slap the book shut.

You tried.

My car dies soon after we move to our rented room. My only way into town is to take the city buses that curl through the hillside four times per day. I take it into town at six am and back at eight pm each day.

On the bus, people tell me this is the year it's raining. "It hasn't been for a while, but this year it is," they say. When I ask how long it hasn't rained for, they tell me, "Maybe five years." One man tells me, "it feels like a decade since I've seen rain like this." I wear a raincoat and wrap myself in a trash bag before I get to the bus stop, but by the time the bus rolls up, I am sodden and shivering for the forty-minute ride.

I know where all the liquor stores are in Santa Cruz. That's how I orient myself to the bus stops. There's U Save Liquors next to the Safeway and across the street from a bus stop where I can catch the number forty-one into the mountains. There's Bonesio Liquor Store downtown that will take me to the U Save Liquor store

stop. There's the stop by Lloyd's liquors on the other side of town that will take me to the other bus stop by the Liquor A Lot should I ever find myself there.

I meet Richard on the bus. He is impressed by my liquor store knowledge. I never tell him how I know. How I've driven Buck's car for cigarettes or booze for Buck before they close at two because he's too drunk to drive. How sometimes I think I should take beer home so that I don't have to worry about Buck's mood should he not have alcohol. Richard tells me he's fifty-something and was in Hurricane Katrina and drove back out here after that. One day, he tells me he's trying not to drink, but he's drinking now. He tells me another day he's thinking of going to Mexico when he gets paid next Thursday, but when I see him next Thursday, we both board the bus headed north. He lives on the beach in Davenport. I meet Alberto, who wears a cowboy hat and wishes everyone a Happy New Year until March. While we wait at the bus stop, I meet Keith, who tells me about his hometown in Kentucky, his friends who live on the beach in Pescadero, and the touring musical he was in after high school. Keith tells me that their cousin in Half Moon Bay thought Keith might be able to find a place to stay if he can get up there. Most nights, I'm the only woman on the bus. I never start the conversations, so like everybody else, Jorge was the one who started talking to me.

I was grading papers in a hailstorm with my father's old hunting headlamp, the bus sticky as a greenhouse. Richard and Keith were talking about smoking halibut over a fire earlier this afternoon, and we can all smell it. Jorge stuck his arm over the seat, asking, "How can you write on a bus?"

I turned around.

“I dunno.”

He asked me what I was doing, if I was a teacher, if I taught at the university. He asked me if I liked what I did. If I liked the bus. I am terse. I don't know if he's bored or friendly, but he tells me he hopes I have a good night as the bus lights illuminate, and he steps off the bus into the night. He waves, his face beaming, a grin like a crushed soda can. He looks older than me. Maybe the same age as Buck, in his early thirties.

The next day I see him, he asks more. Why do I ride the bus? Where's my car? I tell him I'm married, and my husband takes our car to work. I show him my ring, tell him it was my mother's. I tell him I just got married this past summer.

“How is it?” he says. “You should be so happy.”

I gape at him. I want to tell him everything. That each day I trace my steps towards getting married, my hands caressing the walls and sliding into corners to see if there was an escape hatch I missed. That my husband wants to kill himself. That I do not distrust his pain. His ideation. But that I do not know how to retract the porous boundary I had offered my husband as his emotional confidant. That my husband never said, *Look at how sad I am now... What would happen if you were to leave me?* That I never see my husband lay the trap or place the bait on tin foil. But I walk into it every time. That I am his emotional hostage. That I keep wondering if this is how he knew he could keep me from leaving.

That before California, my husband lived in a cement cave of an apartment on the south side of town off Highway 95 in Idaho's undulating hills. The cave's entrance, a set of descending wooden steps, would grow thick with ice during the winter. That I would slide down them, my hands clutching the steel railing, thinking, *You could kill yourself just walking down these things*. That I now wonder if that's why he loved that apartment so much.

That I watch couples in the grocery store or the library, holding hands and sliding their fingers into back pockets. That I want to peer into their lives. To sit them down and ask if they felt trapped by their spouse. If they were afraid of their future yoked to their beloved. If they were scared of what would happen if they left.

That I go for walks and whisper to my friends through the telephone, "I'm so unhappy. I hate this. Why did I do this? Why did I get married?" That they tell me that this is what the first year of marriage was supposed to be like. I was on the right track.

Jorge waits for my answer.

"It's great," I whisper.

Jorge nods and sits back in his seat.

I go back to *Gooberz*. It's 1081 pages, my copy found in the used book section at an occult shop when I was fifteen. Did I read it with immediacy and delight in every word? Was I ravenous to know more about my idol? No. I only remember putting the book on my shelf with the cover face out, my prized souvenir that grew dust with

each passing year. Did I cheapen the book in this way? Was it nothing more than *Tiger Beat* or *Teen Scene* to me? An artifact whose purpose is to feed an uncomplicated adoration? I suppose that's how I wanted it to be. Maybe I never read the book because I didn't want to know what it said. Perhaps I didn't want to grapple with the intricacies of the woman I loved. Maybe I didn't even know that love could be so complicated. Perhaps I thought to love was to love without reservation.

Linda describes *Gooberz* as “telepathically channeled during the months of April, May, and June in the Year of our Lord 1972.” Typically, channeled texts are not autobiographies. Instead, they are regarded as stories from a higher power or divine being that uses an earthly author to pen their thoughts or narrative. To me, this contradicts any notion of an autobiography: a text written by someone about their life. Why would a spiritual being know how to tell someone else's story? Why would an autobiographer attribute the telling of their life to a disembodied entity?

I begin to read *Gooberz*, and I don't want to dwell on it. I just want the word *autobiography*. An *autobiography* in the most traditional sense. Channeled? I wave the word away. I want to read the book and ignore the cover with what appears to be a little boy and a little girl walking on a curved stone path that turns into a rainbow. I want to forget about the little leprechauns that seem to be lurking and watching them. I want to forget about the diagrams of body swapping and channeling of your higher self in the back pages. I don't want to unpack it.

Everything falls apart anyway.

In *Gooberz*'s opening, Linda dedicates the book to "the Lion, Robert A. Brewer," her disappeared lover, and claims that he is the "co-author" of the book "who transmitted it to me through the wakefulness of his sleep, on a higher level of awareness, spanning Time and Distance." Does this mean that Robert is the entity "channeling" her autobiography to her? Has she given him the authority to tell her story? That she's actually telling his story? I am uncertain, but Linda anticipated such questions.

In her prologue, Linda writes, "for those curious reviewers and readers/ who will inevitably question/ whether or not this work is autobiographical/ the answer is: partly yes, and partly no." She claims that "the events themselves did actually occur/ and are as real as the paper of the page you now hold in your hands/ but... to *whom* did they occur?" For, "it shouldn't matter about *whom* the truth is written/ as long as what is written is truth . . . this book may—or may not—have been written about me/ but it very well may have been written/ about you." In this way, Linda invites readers to integrate themselves into the text, share experiences that happened to her, and see themselves in such situations. An uncredited and undated *Gooberz* advertisement Jerry shared with me reflects this enmeshment between book, author, and reader. The advertisement reads, "And what is *Gooberz*?" It is a book that "has a mysterious chameleon essence which causes it to become, as you read it, your own personal biography," though neither the advertisement nor *Gooberz* indicates how such integration occurs or to whom the "events themselves" happened.

Yet, the prologue also obscures this invitation as Linda complicates the boundary between truth and fiction. In turn, she obliterates the idea of a unified reality upon which readers and Linda could claim to share. She writes that everything we experience is a “fiction” for the “dictionary defines fiction as. . . / *an invention of the imagination*” and “isn’t everything on Earth, in reality/ an invention of the imagination?” In this, Linda could be suggesting that her book is fictional because her conception of reality, our earthly life, is, to her, a fiction. As in, the world that we live in is only an illusion within another reality. Does this also mean that, even if what we see is cosmically speaking, a fantasy, readers could still regard Linda’s narrative as events that happened to her?

I don’t know. But I read it as if it were Linda’s autobiography, as if it were written within the spirit of truth, as if it were non-fictional. Because that’s what I want it to be. I want it to confirm what I believe to be true about her life: the facts of her obituaries. With each section I read, I line up the scenes Linda writes with the biography I know of her life.

For a while, it works.

I read about growing up in West Virginia and her grandparents. About going to a Catholic church. About meeting her first husband, Bill Snyder. About her nervousness around sex and losing her virginity, about not having a nightgown to wear and, instead, slipping on Bill’s wrinkled “army regulation” khaki shirt. About remaining in the bathroom, “for what must have seemed to him, hours,” and trying to

cut her hair to make it even with his “razor blade.” About nicking her earlobe and, eventually, melting “like coca butter” with her lover.

I keep reading and wait for the rest of her life to unfurl. For the pages to keep corresponding to the established biography. For her to start talking about her radio show. For her to talk about her children. But she doesn’t. There is no description of the radio station or the birth of her four children. There is nothing about Sally’s disappearance, writing her books, or how she learned about astrology. Instead, she writes about a character named “Goober,” who, given the context, I assume to be a pseudonym for Robert. About loving and lusting for him. About how Goober is the reincarnation of her first husband, Bill. About how Goober is her Twin Soul. About theories of Twin Souls—lovers destined to be together through time and space. About the inevitability of them. About how, despite the certainty of their union, the fights Linda and Goober get into. About her loneliness when he leaves. About the joyousness of her potential reunion with Goober, “you are me / and/ I am you/ we are eternally One . . . and also eternally Two/ which encircles us within the magic Three/ of the Holy Trinity/ of Miracles.” About her obsession with the legend of Isis and Osiris.

The whole book is in verse, Goober’s dialogue rhymes, there are diagrams of how to switch “body temples,” or, as far as I can tell, corporeal bodies during reincarnation, and there’s an astrally projected conversation with Linda’s sheepdog, Heathcliff. I don’t know what this book is. I don’t know what this means about Linda’s life or how she conceived of her life. I cycle through conclusions: *she’s*

evading the truth. She's projecting what she wants to happen. She's written her autobiography in terms of how she conceives reality. It's taken me forty hours over ten days to get to page 740, and I quit, frustrated. I flip to the back page and stare at her author photo and biography. In which, Linda describes her "favorite perfume" as vanilla extract and "sweet peas in the rain," being "5'4" or 5'5" depending on whether she is wearing shoes or is barefoot, so most of the time she is 5'4". Her biography also mentions her two dogs, "Benjamin and Bear," who are twelve and nine years old, respectively, "so they are still puppies."

I look at Linda's face. Her eyes rimmed in liner. Her hair still feathered. She stares directly at the camera with her hand curled against her cheek, the slightest of a smile upon her lips, and I slap the book shut. Am I irritated at the flippant nature of Linda's biography? Its playfulness in the aftermath of my confusion? Or am I angry at myself—for being so naïve to think that it would be easy to know her? To do this project? For keeping the book on my shelf for nearly fifteen years oblivious to its contents but adoring the author?

I don't know, but it's all I think about as I pick up our rented room. As I crush empty Kleenex boxes between my hands. As I collect Buck's boots with rotting meat festering in the treads and put them outside. As I collect and line up Buck's beer bottles against the wall. As I lie on the floor, stare at *Gooberz* across the room, and consider, *Why do I care?*

Buck and I go to the ocean when it's too hot to be in our rented room, and we're too broke to do something else—like sit in an air-conditioned movie theater or eat churros in the taqueria with cool linoleum floors downtown. “Maybe next summer,” we say. When you have a job. When gas is cheaper. When our rent is cheaper. When you stop smoking, and we have extra cash. When I graduate. “Before we leave California, we'll do those things,” we say. For now, we skitter down the cliffs and wander the reeky beach where bull kelp lies in a tangle, and I feel envious of the couples holding hands, wading to their ankles in the surf.

We play games in the sand. Find the creepiest piece of trash. Spot the egret standing serenely against the surf. Stand in the sand, let your heels sink, and see how long you can stay upright. Slap your bare feet against the kelp blades to make the loudest noise.

We wade knee-high into the surf. He was always ahead of me, ever braver against the waves, always more tolerant against water's cold. I am content to my ankles, the waves rising and falling, the ocean's undertow far away. Then, he runs back to me, his legs wet, and wraps his arms around my torso, and drags me deeper into the water with him. Up to my knees, my crotch, my waist, while I squeal, begging him not to take me in. Not to take me in any further.

He holds me there until my chest heaves, until I am out of breath, until he feels the energy go out of my limbs, until I am spent. Then, he lets his arms go slack, and I stagger back onshore, pushing the fact that he was strong enough to keep me there forever, strong enough to drown me, away. I push it away until it comes back

hours later when we crawl into bed, the smell of brine and salt still on our skin, his arms wrapped around me again, and I wonder about the possibility of him taking me down with him.

On the bus, Jorge and I talk. One day, he tells me about being an electrician with a company near Pasatiempo. Another day, he tells me about how he lives with this brother in Felton. Once, he tells me about growing up in Tucson and his mother's enmolada. One day, as his stop nears, he tells me I'm beautiful. He apologizes for saying it. He tells me he couldn't help it. "Maybe it's the lighting," he says, referencing the dim LED step lighting running down the bus aisle.

I tell him that my husband says that to me too and turn away to yank the window down.

He changes the subject.

He walks off the bus two stops later, and I wonder if it's wrong to talk to him. For him to tell me I'm beautiful. For me to listen.

We keep talking. Do I look forward to seeing him? I don't think about it. I inevitably will. Does he look forward to seeing me? He never says it. Do we think of each other as friends? We never say it. But we must. Sometimes I think to start up conversations with other passengers. Sometimes I think to put my face in a book. Sometimes I think I should tell Buck I have a friend I talk to on the bus. But I don't. I say, "Hi" to Jorge, and he says, "Hi" to me. We tell one another about our days. I tell him about our mold problem. He tells me how to use bleach and ammonia.

One day, Jorge calls me *lovely*, as in, *hello my lovely*, as in “Hola, mi encantadora” as he sits down in the seat behind me, and I think to tell him to stop. Stop all of this. Stop telling me the LED lights make me look stunning. Stop telling me my husband is lucky. Stop telling me you’d meet me at the taqueria downtown and order for me. Stop talking to me. But I don’t. Because maybe I want him to say it. Maybe that’s why I let this go on each day. Maybe I want him to sit next to me one day. To lean into my hair and whisper into my ear. *Mi encantadora*... To ask me to get off the bus with him, to go home with him. Maybe I see that he is my way to detonate this. To abscond. To manipulate Jorge just as Buck manipulates me. To use him as my exit.

I turn around, and I can’t even say the words. Can’t even tell him to stop. Because I don’t know if I want him to. Maybe he sees what I’m thinking, sees it all over my face. Maybe he knows I cannot talk to him anymore.

He stares at me, his mouth drooping.

I stare out the window the rest of the bus ride.

Jorge never tells me I’m beautiful again. He never asks me about going to the taqueria or about my husband. He never compliments my ring or tells me about the pranks he and his brother play on their little sister in San Jose again. And one day, I never see Jorge again. I keep riding the bus each day, caught somewhere between relief and loneliness at the empty seat behind me.

On my thirtieth birthday, Buck takes me out to dinner. He wears a tie I haven't seen since we first met, and he taught me the loops to tie them. At the restaurant, they seat us at a narrow table where the lights are low, and there are yellow roses in a glass vase, and all I am thinking about is renewal and romance: the flower's open petals. The warm paisley of his tie. The seclusion of the table and how its restriction makes us lean in towards one another, but by the time there is water in our glasses, he is not whispering about love or celebrations or new decades. He recites the monologue, this time with an emphasis on forecasting the misery of our future: "I hate living here. Being here. I hate myself. I don't see, after this, how things are ever going to get better. For me... or the world. Sometimes, I just think the only way to make it better is to get out, you know? Because, ultimately, nothing has any meaning. It makes me want—"

I stare at the little face of one of the roses on the table between us and count the petals to distract myself.

"—to just end it."

Four, five...

"The world would be a better place without me in it—and, really, all humans."

Nine, ten.

"But, especially, me."

Eleven.

"The world vilifies suicide, but it shouldn't," he says, and I cannot manage to count anymore, and I look up at Buck's bearded face talking about how he's never

felt well. Has he said it so often that his words no longer shock me? Their repetition akin to a public service announcement or a radio jingle? Rather than an earnest expression of pain? Or is that how I see it now? A message I must endure?

A bowl of pasta arrives with two plates, and he keeps going as my face grows wet. He tells me, “You always get so upset when I talk about this. You’re making this about you... I’m trying to tell you how I feel.”

He spoons ravioli onto his plate, and he’s still talking, but I don’t even know what he’s saying anymore. Tears gather at my chin and drip onto my skirt. I grab my cloth napkin, collapse my face into it, and mumble, “It’s my birthday.”

He puts his fork down with a plunk.

I pull the napkin away. He’s staring at me, and I hiss at him, “It’s my birthday... I just want—a day . . .” I’m so humiliated I can’t finish the sentence.

We crawl into bed that night. I perch on the edge and whisper into the darkness that I wish we could do that dinner over. “It didn’t feel very celebratory,” I say.

His voice replies, “We can do that. But you’re paying for it.”

While fantasy marks *Gooberz*, so does Linda’s suffering. The losses of her life serve as the foundation for the fantastical telling of her life. It begins with the death of her grandmother. Then, Linda’s friend Peggy dies when they are young girls. Peggy’s mother told Linda Peggy had “new -monya,” and “just *three days later*/ Peggy died.”

Linda expresses disbelief at the conception of death itself, praying to God, “well, if You are so good, and always right/ then why do You let birds — and people — die ? oh, You can’t deny / that You do let things die. . .” Such disbelief continues with the death of her cat, Pat, and what she calls her “dreadful dilemma” of her “struggle to make Life and Death rhyme,” asking if Jesus was resurrected from the dead, then why couldn’t Pat be as well? Such a dilemma continues with the death of an infant daughter, multiple miscarriages, and her first husband, Bill. Linda describes forcing her “shaking legs to carry me / down an endless grassy hill / to watch a tiny, withered wreath of violets / placed gently on the ground/ three times/ three times / three times.” She claims, “it was a kindness—kind of doctor / to write pneumonia in the blank space, when the cause of” Bill’s “death / was really—drowning / drowning in an alcoholic sea.” She attributes Bill’s alcoholism to, possibly, “grief / for the three [lost children]” or, perhaps, herself. In this, does she blame herself for her miscarriages and the death of her daughter? Or does she imply that Bill blamed her? It is uncertain.

Yet, the longevity and severity of her grief is certain. She asks, “is it wrong to mourn this long ? / there must be some way I can snap myself / back into the world of the living . . . or at least existing?” She chastises herself for her perceived inability to accept death, asking, “why do I still hope — why? / when people die, they die / why, oh, why can’t I realize that? / I believe it — I know it/ but why can’t I . . . *realize* it?” It repeats throughout the book, a chorus she returns to, “Oh! Grief affects the judgement / of the mind . . . and makes one blind to reality / damn it all, damn it!”

What is the reality, I wonder, that Linda feels blind to?

That night after the birthday dinner, after he falls asleep, I shut myself in the bathroom and lock the door. I sprinkle powdered bleach into the tub and scrub. Scrub the tub and the tiles. The sink and the toilet. The fixtures and the doorknob. I spray water and vinegar everywhere, even the walls, and smear a towel over everything. I bat at the cobwebs in the corners with an old hairbrush. I take a toothbrush and scrub the dark parts of the grout. I turn the shower as hot as it can go, step in, and make myself foam. Turn my hair slick. Turn my skin red. Turn myself languid and get out.

Fog obscures the mirror. I smear a spot to see my face and tilt my head to the exact angle at which I look most like my mother and think of the age when she was diagnosed with the disease that would kill her months later: 56.

Twenty-six years left.

If I only had twenty-six, maybe twenty-seven more years to be alive, I wonder if I want to spend them like this. I stare in the mirror and think about the sea lions I see on the pier. I think about them bellowing. Their lungs expanding and contracting. Their bodies a funnel for sound. I think about their unabashed rage, and, though I do not emit any noise, I grasp the countertop, throw my head back, and listen to air expel from my lungs.

Two days later, my brother calls to ask how my birthday went. To ask how Buck is doing. What he's doing. If he got a job. If we're okay.

I start by lying. I say everything is fine. Yes, he has a job. Yes, we have a place to stay. But then I say maybe not. I mean, he has a job, but he hates it. He hates our life. I hate my life. Our life. Why did I move here? I'm always so broke. I should've moved to Texas or Ohio, where I wouldn't pay everything I make in rent. We're always so broke. I have nightmares about hypothetical medical bills, being evicted, him sleeping in his car, and me sleeping on campus in the library or an empty classroom. I tell my brother I'm always soaking wet—I take the bus in the morning, and it's pouring. I come home at night, and it's pouring, and I bring extra clothes with me, but it doesn't help because then I'm carrying all these wet clothes around with me. I'm an idiot for coming here. For doing this. I'm so stupid for thinking I could do this.

He tells me I'm not stupid. "How is it possible to spend your life in a library and be stupid?" he asks.

I assure him it's possible.

I go back to the databases. I type her name so often I swear the feeling stays with me for days in my fingertips. *L-i-n-d-a—G-o-o-d-m-a-n*. I look at the same articles. I look through microfilm. I write to everyone again. I feign oblivion to their indifference. *Just checking in to see if you received my last letter?* I pretend that my project is moving along. I pretend that I have so many facts that I'm now at a stage where *all I'll need is just verification of what I've found*.

I start looking up stained glass companies in the Colorado Springs area to see if they might've worked with Linda while she was building her house there in the 1970s. I write to a woodcarver in Skagit Valley, Washington, who gifted Linda a woodcarving in the 1980s.

The woodcarver replies to me while I'm still at the library:

HELLO KERSTEN.... I AM A WOODCARVER.... LINDA WAS
SUCH A BEAUTIFUL 'SOUL' BEING....VERY
INSPIRATIONAL.... SORRY TO NOT HAVE ANY 'GREAT'
MEMORIES' TO SHARE W/ YA FOR YOUR
DISSERTATION....HOPE ANY OF THIS WILL HELP.... VERY
GLAD YOU ARE CARRYING ON !!!! THANK YOU
..... *****LOVE & LIGHT *** ANDRE

I consider pressing him. Asking if we can talk on the phone. Asking him for details. If he met her. How he became interested in her. "You have no great memories, but you must have some memories," I type. "Any details would be helpful." But I never send the message.

I find an August 6th, 1991, classified ad from the Springfield News-Leader in Missouri that mentions *Gooberz*. A post from a "single, white, female" reads: "Would like to meet male who has read 'Gooberz' and understands what it means. Anyone who hasn't read it, I urge you to and delight in it's [sic] meaning to you. Age unimportant if wise beyond years. Love is forever!"

I imagine writing back to her. My message: *Please—help me.*

My brother calls me a week later. I'm waiting for the bus in the pouring rain.

"What are you doing?" he asks me.

"Wha?" I say.

"What are you doing?" he yells.

"I'm standing at the bus stop, and it's raining. It's so loud."

"I didn't know you didn't have a car."

"What?"

"I didn't know you didn't have a car?"

"Oh yeah?" I yell.

"Do you want mom's old car?"

I can't tell if he's serious. I assume he's not.

"You're an asshole," I say, running across the street to stand underneath the awning of a donut shop.

"What?"

"You're an asshole. Asking me if I want a car while I'm standing here in the pitch-black pouring rain waiting for the bus."

"It's a real question! Do you want mom's car? She *gave* it to me. It's not like I paid for it. Now, I'll give it to you." My brother had inherited my mother's car when she died. It was a 2002 black Toyota Camry that hit a doe and a buck the same winter my brother first started driving it. The alignment was off from where their furry bodies collided with the hood, always doglegging to the right no matter how many

times he took it in. It has cigarette burns in the seat from my sister-in-law, broken sun visors that hang like laundry on a clothesline, 275,000 miles, and I am wild.

Throbbing. Lusting for that car.

“... really?” I whisper.

“Yeah, it’s a piece of shit, but it’s better than not having a piece of shit.”

His friend, who’s paying \$300 to attend an ayahuasca ceremony in San Francisco, drives it out to me three weeks later, and I take him to Oakland. We get in the car and drive north on Highway One. The ride is cliffs, crashing waves, and pampas grass waving. I tell him that my mother sent me this car.

He pauses.

“No... your brother did,” replies.

“No, I know that,” I say, rounding a curve. “But I think it’s *from* my mother. Like... you know, cosmically, she sent it to me.”

I can feel him and his military flattop gaping at me from the passenger’s seat. He’s a realtor in Kansas City and is wearing a suit and tie with cufflinks to this ceremony. He told me the shaman’s name is Kyle. When I asked my brother why this guy was driving all the way to California to go to an ayahuasca ceremony, my brother replied, “He’s got some friend he’s gonna do it with. I don’t think he totally gets what it is.”

In the car, I can hear the friend exhale.

“No... he *gave* it to you. I *drove* it to you.”

It starts to sprinkle.

I flip the wipers on and tell him we need to stop at the K-Mart in Half Moon Bay and get him some new clothes if he's really going to an ayahuasca ceremony.

"I don't want you to barf all over your suit."

Our new place: a 350 square foot illegal unit in someone's backyard four blocks from the ocean. As we pack our boxes, we speak of how things will be different in this place. Soon, we will have more time together. Soon, things will be different.

But the Time of Now has already spoken to me. In the restaurant. In the library, the grocery store, each time I look at him. *Now*. Go *now*. Get gone *now*. Tell him *now*. It speaks to me as I load bedding and dishes into my car to take to our new place. I feel it from the polyester and the chipped porcelain. They speak it, *See how easy it is to put us in your car and drive away? Think of this as practice. We'll come with you!* Every time I hear the car engine turn over, I think of it saying, *I have arrived—now you can leave.*

The new studio doesn't change a thing. Now, we're just closer together. Now, there's no screen on the window when he smokes. Now, we see it was never about the shed or the rented room or California. It's about us.

I write grant and fellowship applications for the project. I say that I need funds—to travel to visit key locations, meet potential sources, and investigate possible archives. I am vague about what these "archives" are. What these "sources" are. I make grand proclamations to hide my uncertainty. I supply an abstract: *By utilizing the*

biographical genre, I tell the story of astrological superstar Linda Goodman and argue for her centrality in the history and literature of the American New Age movement. My dissertation draws upon feminist theories of narrative, madness, and representation to widen the possibilities for how we interpret Goodman's life, literary legacy, and cultural impact.

Within weeks or months, I learn that my proposals are universally rejected. Reviewers write, *I don't understand why I should care about this woman. She seems interesting, eccentric. But how does she advance academic discourse surrounding the genre of biography? The history of the New Age? Feminist biographies? This proposal doesn't convince me...*

I try again, and with each application, I make my proposal more specific. More argumentative. I change my verbs. Make them more affirmative. I send the applications off and get the rejections again, the reviewer's comments all the same: *Why does this woman matter? Why should we care about this project?* Another reviewer tells me, *This sounds great if it were a movie, but that's not what a dissertation is... isn't this really a project about pop culture? You don't mention that at all... why do you not write from that disciplinary perspective?*

I write the abstract over and over as if just by writing it repeatedly, the answers will fall from my fingertips as if it could be something spelled out on a Ouija board. As if it could require no thought on my behalf. But the more I write, the more unwieldy it all becomes, the more I am ensnared. The more I recognize my captivity.

ABSTRACT (what I would whisper to you if found me in the computer lab, staring at a vacant screen)

I want to quit. I think about it all the time. Sometimes I go onto library databases and look at the names of literature dissertations, write them down, scramble the names, see if a title strikes me, and wonder if that could be my project instead of this one. *Post-Trauma in 21st Century American Printed Landscapes. Economics, Gender, and Post-Soviet Baltic Poetics. Reading the Enchanted in Contemporary Russian Erotic Fiction*. Sometimes, I fantasize about picking my dissertation off a tree, rubbing its shiny skin on my jeans, setting the fruit on some administrator's desk, whispering the words, *There it is*, and walking away. Sometimes, after Buck goes to work, I lie in bed and write a list of other things I could do. Two hundred pages of asemic writing. Automatic writing. A manuscript that utilizes the subconscious. An epistolary project. Write letters to random addresses in the phone book and see who replies. An ekphrastic project. Return home to Wisconsin, set up hunting cameras in the woods, see what it collects, and write about the images. I look at all the other writing I've done and wonder if I put it all in one document if it would meet the page count. Sometimes, I even try the ideas. I find trail cameras at the thrift shop. I buy a calligraphy pen and begin to scribble my asemic language. I read about the surrealists and automatic writing. I begin to write, to fix my attention elsewhere like the surrealists advise—focus on the feeling of my pulse through my arms, the ambient noise of a police siren

down the street—but Linda tugs at me. Her name falls from my fingertips as I write. Her face is what I draw with my calligraphy pen. I think about the trail cameras and fantasize I'd catch her ghost. Why do I keep returning to her? Why can't I let her go? What do I want her to tell me?

ABSTRACT (subtext)

This project is one-part intellectual posturing, seven-parts panic. I tell Buck I'm going to work on my dissertation at the library where I wander the stacks, letting my fingers skim books I never open, and fantasize about interviewing Linda. In my fantasy, we meet at a diner for coffee. I don't know why we're meeting at a diner; she's the one that picked the spot. I show up early, and there's a list of questions I've written on notebook paper. The subject of inquiry is obvious; they're all questions about her. But then the fantasy hemorrhages, and I am the one chattering. I am the one asking for another pot of coffee, taking a drag off her cigarette, promising it will be the last one. My hands extend across the table as I explain why I want to talk to her. *Because you wrote the book on love... but your life is about heartache.* I am the one whose eyes search her face, whose fingers twist my wedding ring around my finger, the only query I can manage: *What do I do now?*

ABSTRACT (what I would tell you if you were my therapist)

We don't talk about Linda. Have I ever even uttered the words *dissertation* or *biography* while sitting on your floral couch? The words I use are *divorce*, *why*, *did*, *I*. The words I whisper are *drinking*, *borderline*, *maybe*, *me*, *codependent*, *of*, *course*. I leave your office and walk home, gripping your advice like a talisman: *Be careful—he is fragile*.

Buck returns home from the closing shift and walks into the studio with two pounds of raw fish. The ends of salmon tails and shavings of halibut harvested throughout his eight-hour shift. They bathe in oil on the stove and twitch, drenching the whole studio in their musk. He twists his beard with his long fingers and cracks a beer. It's sometime after midnight. I'm playing dead in bed, thinking about the solitude of roadkill. Whitetail does supine in winter. A raccoon nestled into a ditch. Mice thrown curbside.

I listen to him eat, to cans opening and bottles cracked, to cigarillos slid out of their cellophane casings, to his bare feet going out the door to smoke, and wonder how long I can breathe so shallow, wonder if he knows I am pretending. That I'm lying. I wonder how long I can fool him. I smell the cigarillo through the window, the smell somewhere between antique shops and wet earth. I linger there—in the dirt, the scent of plastic-covered couches and nightcrawlers reaching for the light, and I paddle off.

I dream of my mother.

She and I. A hotel room. Together. Both of us wearing white robes. The wallpaper a rococo floral of reds and yellows. Somehow, I know it's a party. A celebration. Of what? I've no clue. But she's there, and I'm there, and we're shoulder to shoulder on the bed.

She grabs my left hand and pulls it between us.

She points at my wedding ring, which was her wedding ring, and says, "Courtney, there's a chip in your ring." My hand in her hand is as I remember it, her touch protective, her skin like wax paper.

I look at the ring. There is a chip—maybe even more than a chip: a dark cavity in the diamond. I look at her face. She is translucent. Sea glass.

The hotel room warps around us. The wallpaper is gone. All I can see is her face. She says it again, "There's a chip in your ring." I think to reach for her, to inquire further, to say, *What?* But when I extend my hand, she's already gone.

The dream fades into some other time, some other place. Something I cannot remember.

I awake the following day, the words running through me, *There's a chip in your ring.*

I pull my left hand out from under the covers.

The diamond, her diamond, whole. Untouched.

I call friends. I call my cousin. I corner an acquaintance at a juice bar. I tell them about the dream. No one seems to feel it means anything. One friend asked me how

many carats the diamond was and said, “Maybe it’s a sign you should upgrade your ring!”

Another laughed, “How funny! Your mom would say something like that.”

No. I thought. Not funny.

I said to them, “Don’t you think this is a message? About Buck and me?”

“It’s just a dream, honey,” someone says.

“Don’t you dream of her all the time?” another asks.

“I do,” I say, remembering how I’ve told friends about the notebook I keep chronicling the dreams I’ve had of my mother since her death—dozens of dreams. I’ve always wanted to understand them. Yet, this is the first time where the message has been anything other than obtuse.

Did I want them to tell me that I should end it? That the chip in the ring was a metaphor? To say the truth I could not utter? Is that why I kept asking the question?

My mother’s words stalked me. While Buck and I set the electric trap for the rat living under the sink. While sweeping up cellophane wrappers. While he tells me I’m the only thing he has in the world. While I look at strangers’ naked ring fingers and long for my own ring finger to be naked. While I wait for the relief of the door shutting with him behind it. While I contemplate how to utter the dream’s meaning myself.

Merriam-Webster defines *belief* as “a habit of mind in which trust or confidence placed in some person or thing. Examples include “her *belief* in God,” “a *belief* in

democracy,” or “I bought the table in the *belief* that it was antique.” Whereas truth is defined as “the body of real things, events, and facts” or “a judgment, proposition, or idea that is true or accepted as true.” Only one example is given: the “*truths* of thermodynamics.” To be an astrologer is to sew a thread between the words, to make them friendly. Astrology asks you to *believe* what someone says is *true* not because there is verifiable evidence but because they, and many others, find it to be true in their lives. It is, in this way, an audacious act to be an astrologer. For many, astrology lives within the unverifiable, the unscientific, and, in turn, the untrue.

Linda elaborates upon the relationship in *Sun Signs* claiming that “Alone among the sciences, astrology has spanned the centuries and made the journey intact. We shouldn’t be surprised that it remains with us, unchanged by time—because astrology is truth—and truth is eternal.” Accordingly, Arleen Abrahams, in a 1969 *Chicago Tribune* article, claims that Linda has “been waging a campaign to make astrology a university-taught subject.” Linda’s theories, no matter their basis, *were*, at least to her, the truth, and this truth seemingly overrode any contradictory conceptions of reality.

She addresses the topic of truth versus belief again in *Love Signs*’ opening pages. She shares that her book contains “a number of controversial concepts” that may “be deeply disturbing” for some readers. Despite this, Linda shares them “as truth.” “However,” Linda does “not ask” or “expect” “any of you to regard [her] concepts [as] *your* truth” for “*real* Truth . . . can only be found in one place only—in every man and woman’s communion with an eternal Source of hidden Knowledge

within.” She concludes, “each must walk along that path alone . . . and all of us have finally reached the light of full-born Wisdom at the end of the Way . . . where we began, a long-forgotten Time ago.” Despite Linda’s insistence that her truth need not be a universal truth, this idea suggests that her truth overrides a reader’s perceived truth. Rather, she implies an essential truth that she believes her readers are ignorant of until they discover it. When I read Linda’s words, I want to replace the words *truth* with *belief*. As in, “I do not expect your beliefs to be my beliefs, but if you keep reading, I hope that you will see that what I believe has, actually, been around for a long time and, because of its ancient origin, is true.” I do not know if she is earnest— if she truly believes there can be multiple ways to experience the truth of human existence or if she is merely attempting to be diplomatic in presenting her ideas as just one truth among many.

But the line between truth and belief becomes further tangled in my hands. For biography, as biographer and scholar Leon Edel claims, is “concerned with the truth of life and the truth of experience” wherein the biographer “can only lay bare the facts as he has understood them.”

But are there any facts I can understand about Linda? Have I ever known Linda? Or did I only think I knew her? Maybe the only Linda I have ever had or known is the Linda I’ve never had or known. Phantom Linda, a figure I made up, projected onto, and idolized. A woman whose image I have constructed from gossip on internet forums, a few articles, and the vacant expression of posed author

headshots. A woman I'm making up and, really, have been making up since I found her books in the public library when I was thirteen.

So, that's the woman I decide to write: the imagined life of Linda Goodman.

I think of all the ways to avoid it.

All the ways that I never have to say what I know to be true. All the ways that I could evade being the person to break Buck's heart. All the ways he could break mine so that I could be free by proxy. I walk to get a gallon of milk at the market and fantasize about us, maybe two years later, in a new city, in new jobs. I imagine that Buck would meet someone else. Maybe they'd be co-workers. She'd be a woman who loved what he loved: cigarettes and whiskey in succession until 3 am, science fiction sagas from the 1970s, and playing digital battles on the computer late into the night. Above all—I fantasized she'd be a woman who could love his sorrow. She could accept it in the way that I could not.

I would imagine their courtship. What would begin as conversations about Frank Herbert's *Dune* would turn into confessions about his unhappiness would turn into her consoling him would turn into an affair would turn into me finding out. I'd feign outrage. I'd probably cry real tears. He would pack his bags, and I would pack my own. They would run off into their sunset, and I would run off into mine.

Or I walk to watch the sea lions and imagine all the other ways he could leave by his own volition. Falling in love with a woman in Japan that he meets in a Manga fan club online. Getting a job in Bismarck with pet insurance and three weeks of

vacation a year and deciding that following his wife to the California coast had been an idiotic idea. Applying for a Ph.D. in Philosophy somewhere in upstate New York and deciding he must leave me to study Derrida or Camus. Developing a sudden interest in sailing and concluding that he cannot be tied down to a wife or her career, so he has decided to file for divorce and explore the New Zealand coast.

Yet, when I return home, these fictions still ripe in my mind, he pulls me close as I put the milk in the refrigerator and whispers to me, beer on his breath, “You were gone so long; I missed you.”

I never consulted Linda when I met Buck.

Shouldn't that have been my first step? *See Linda for advice about a possible romance between an Aries Woman and a Capricorn Man.* Why hadn't I? Had I somehow known all along what she would say? Had I remembered it somewhere in my subconscious from years prior? Maybe I didn't consult her because I didn't want the truth. I just wanted to believe he was right. I'd never be able to wave away what Linda told me. Maybe because I trusted her so much that I didn't want her to sour my infatuation. To look before I leapt. To tell me the ending of my story before it had even begun.

But that night, I could see the ending, so I pulled her down from the shelf. Did I want validation that we were wrong for each other? That we were foolish and impulsive to have married one another? Or did I do it as a performance—for him to

watch me pull *Love Signs* down from our bookshelf, for him to see me reading it, for him to wonder if I was evaluating our love?

No matter, I did it that night because when I returned home from campus, I found him out in the street trying to start his '99 rusted Chevy Cavalier. Sixty hours earlier, police had tagged it telling him that this vehicle has been deemed abandoned — the last time this car had moved was six weeks earlier — and they're going to tow it in seventy-two hours. Because when I walked in the door, he asked me if I'd jump it, and I said yes, but the jump didn't work. Because we end up driving to auto shop after auto shop looking for one that is open. When we finally find one and buy a battery charger, Buck tells me he doesn't have any money. So, I purchase it with the last of my teaching stipend. Because on the way home, he asks me if we can stop at the liquor store so he can buy beer.

“Didn't you just tell me you don't have any money?”

“I got enough for beer.”

He comes back with a six-pack and an ice cream bar for me as a “thank you” gift for the charger.

When we get back to the studio, he settles in before his video game and six-pack. I throw the ice cream bar in the freezer, grab *Love Signs* off the shelf, and toss myself into a folding chair.

I begin with the introduction that claims, “love is man and woman's deepest need.” That “it's not the threat of illness or poverty that crushes the human spirit, but the fear that there is no one who truly cares — no one who truly understands.” That we

do not seek “to give it.” Nor do we seek to “receive it.” But we seek “to *share* it. To love and be loved in return.” Linda then outlines what each sun sign must learn in their quest to share love, what she calls each sign’s “Love Mystery.” I read the Love Mystery for the sign of Aries, my sign, the same sign as Linda.

Linda describes Aries as the “infant” of the zodiac. Aries must, “like the real infant, time and time again, undergo the sharp disappointment of misplaced trust. As the victim of unkindness . . . or abandonment, the newborn babe feels shocked, frightened, alone—and then yells even louder for attention.” For the “Aries soul, Love is a necessity of life . . . love is synonymous with existence itself” in the way that a mother’s love propels the care of her infant. For, without a mother or caretaker, a baby would die. Of Aries’ love mystery, she claims that “the positive qualities of Aries are a heart-tugging innocence and wonder, blind faith and raw courage. Expressed in the negative forms, they can become selfish egotism, thoughtlessness, aggressiveness and impulsive action with no regard for the consequences.”

I set the book in my lap and felt the words prickle. *Blind faith. Impulsive action.*

I read the *Aries Woman—Capricorn Man* section:

It can hurt to lose someone you love because you’re unable to communicate your feelings, and this is too often the case between the quiet boy Goat and the aggressive girl Ram . . . the Goat and the Ram will either lock horns in constant battle or become so bored with each other that they wander off someday and forget to return . . .

I look at him across the room: Buck, tapping his foot and chewing on his beard, fingers darting across the video game controller. He's playing a game where he's a character in a ship, careening through space. Was it that simple? That I had *blind faith* his promises as a husband would be fulfilled? That my *impulsive action* made me fasten myself to someone who professed to love me? I replay the scene at the auto parts store. The liquor store. The decisions: *to buy the battery, to drive him to the liquor store, to accept the ice cream...* I could've said no. I could've refused to buy him the battery. I could've said everything. That he was disappointing. That I was depleted. That I didn't believe this was going to work. Was I so far deep in this that I didn't know how to say the password to get out? Did I love him so much that I couldn't handle breaking him? Or, somewhere, somehow, did I know that for him to leave I had to be the person to buy that car battery? That in order for him to take off, he needed a vehicle? Did I know that I was setting myself up for the expediency of his departure?

I don't know.

But, two days later, he left.

3.

Untangle.

Go outside. Take a butter knife and pry the dried meat from the Doc Martens he used to wear to work at the butcher shop. Watch it flake onto the sidewalk. Watch the neighborhood cat come up and sniff it. Tell her not to eat it. Leave the shoes on the curb and trust that in less than an hour, some high schooler walking home from band practice with a trumpet case will pick them up and take them home. Trust that they will find these shoes fashionable. Stare at the sidewalk and remember the tentative steps of deer in the woods. Think of my father and me in the tree stand. Think of my father shooting at those hesitant creatures. Think of them fleeing. Think of their hearts beating like mine now. Why is it still beating? Go back inside. Take his records off the shelf and sneeze. Roy Orbison and the Misfits. Beastie Boys and Nick Drake. Sniffle at them and the books I stack on top of them. Make an urban skyline of his media. Watch it box me in. Feel the city grow metaphorical. Disassemble the metropolis. Put it all into boxes. The paperback pulp novels and the 1960s psychedelic tchotchkes harvested from the thrift stores. Think of the words in my

mouth, my astonishment at saying them. *My heart has receded*. Think of his response. *What the hell does that mean?* Think of the absurdity of not being able to say, *I'm done*. Consider how I thought it would hurt less if I only said it indirectly. Think of how he had to pry it out of me. That I didn't want to be married to him anymore. Think of his response. *I know I've slipped—I'm not who I was when we met*. Write his parent's address on the boxes and think of everything else I could do with the stuff inside them—sell it on eBay, take it to the thrift store, put it on the street for the neighbors to pick through. Feel righteous as I write my return address. What is my return address? Feel uncertain. Write my brother's address in Oklahoma. Remember how Buck told me to throw it all away. Remember him smashing the porcelain bowl on the kitchen tile. Remember me shrieking and running into the bathroom like a fool—how was I going to get away by running into the bathroom? Remember staring at him from across the studio, his hands in fists. Remember sinking to the floor and folding myself small. Remember watching him stalk out to the street to smoke a cigarette.

Move the boxes to the car and feel my obliques ache. Wonder just how submissive I can be. Wonder if the postage is worth feeling righteous. Wonder about his rage if I said, *I put it all on the street just like you said to do*. Think of his hands in fists. Think of him breaking dishes.

Conclude I am making the correct decision.

Take the broom and fish under the fridge for porcelain fragments and watch them skitter like toboggans shoved across a field. Leave one shard under the fridge

for someone to find one day. Pray that they will construct a story better than what occurred to account for its presence.

Sell the enamel dishes, the camping lantern, one of the moth-balled sleeping bags. Sell the Crock-Pot, the baking tins, the whisk. Sell that old sewing machine, those hiking boots from the Goodwill, and the beach blanket we got as a wedding gift. Give the relics of my failed domesticity to strangers. The meals I thought I would make. The mornings I thought I would spend. The furniture we thought we would take to our future.

Some of the strangers ask what I'm doing.

You must be moving, they say, standing on the sidewalk with me.

I stare at them, and the words fall from my mouth, *Yes, I am moving*.

However, I haven't yet thought of this yet. I suppose I must be moving—where else is there to go? Buck even said it to me as he left, *Good luck paying for this place all by yourself*.

Though I feel it would be more accurate to say, *Why, yes, I am surrendering*.

They wish me good luck with my move, and I watch them walk away; my marriage heaved into the back of their Subaru. Flood with possibilities of where I could go. My brother's couch. My cousin's garage. My stepfather's basement. Consider how long I could sleep in my car. Consider when I need to be back here. Consider that I will take a leave. Consider never coming back. Wonder where Buck is.

Donate the framed watercolor of a shipwreck from 1942 he found at a garage sale. Take the heaping pile of coats he left and dump them on the street. Take the Peruvian rug we found at a garage sale in Boise and shake it out. Take his wishes for us to go to Peru together and put it all next to that pile. Take the lamps and the rest of his cigars and put them there too. Watch the college kids and tourists on electric bikes pick through the pile and take items with them. Chortle at their excitement. Giggle at their obliviousness. Feel relief at all the coats walking away. Feel relief at all the things I will not have to carry to the Goodwill. Feel relief at the cigars and their stink leaving the studio. Think of Buck driving back to North Dakota. Think of him weeping. Chain-smoking. Smearing his hand across his face. Drinking a Diet Coke in the Nevada desert. His hands on my thigh. His face so shrunken and sallow. My eyes on his eyes. His eyes on mine. Sit down on the curb. Sob into my palms. Listen to the high school's marching band practice two blocks over. Neil Diamond. Sweet Caroline. Good times never seemed so good.

Go back into the studio.

Throw the other sleeping bag on the floor next to the heater. Lie there for two days with a notebook. Scribble my eight-word abstract: *I. Will. Forget. Him. I. Will. Find. Her.* Decide to visit the American New Age capital: Sedona, Arizona. Wonder if it is foolish—she never lived there. She never wrote about it. Did she have any affinity for Arizona? No idea. Rationalize it. Tell myself it makes sense to visit. If Linda spearheaded the American New Age movement and Sedona is the modern-day locus of the movement, why not visit? Wonder if this whole thing is irrational from

the start. *You're looking to a woman whose life you can't even know to tell you about a topic she never seemed to accept: loss.* Tell myself that maybe there's another narrative, another way to look at her that I might discover.

Plot an itinerary. Draw a map. Count my cash from selling my marriage relics.

Calculate my expenses.

Fantasize about what I will find.

Emerge.

Walk to the ocean. Smell the rotting kelp. See the couples holding hands. The trash stuck in the sand, wrappers wiggling in the wind. The surfers talking about some asshole over at Steamers. Hear the bike bells and that guy who rides around on a tricycle playing Top 40 Country on his mini-radio. See the ocean. Rip off my boots. Run. Into the surf. In my jeans. Feel the cold. Smell the rotting kelp. Look up to see the seagulls waft. See them caw and swoop. Somehow, now, see them as majestic and free away from the Chowder Shack and the wharf's garbage pails. Drop to my knees to watch, water swirling. Let the thought beat through me. *I am like you now. I am like you now!* Hop up and run. Away from the surf and up the stairs. Jeans sopping, leaving a trail down the concrete path along the beach. Taste iron in my mouth like biting a medallion. Think of it around my neck, bouncing against me as I flee. Get in the car and drive. Feel it bouncing all the way from Santa Cruz until Yavapai County. Until I hit the winding canyon outside of Sedona.

In Sedona, I bring a notebook to record my findings and look for Linda in the jewelry shops where tourists ask if the “Finest Authentic Native American Jewelry” has magic powers. Where the shopkeeper sweats through his linen shirt and the sightseers in polyester football jerseys laugh. Where sage, sweetgrass, and amethyst sticks are sold as “healing bundles.” Where I wonder what the Kachina dolls watching from the shelves think about all this.

I look for her in the bookstores where she is an afterthought to spiritual thinkers more palatable than her: Marianne Williamson, Deepak Chopra, and Chani Nicholas. A single copy of *Love Signs* often sits in the astrology section, overwhelmed by the work of other astrologers. Vedic astrologers. Karmic astrologers. Horary astrologers. Astrology guides with blurbs claiming miracles of self-understanding upon reading chapter four. *Love Signs*’ psychedelic cover illustration of a lion and lamb brand it a relic. Linda is the wrinkled gran among the glitz of contemporary self-help gurus.

I look for her in Boynton Canyon, where the red rock cliffs tower indifferently over the tourists doing warrior pose variations in neon hotpants, and a man hands me a heart carving made from stone as I pass by him on the trail. He holds his hand out to me, the heart in his palm, and I don’t want to take it. *Isn’t this illegal? To take a rock from this canyon? And even worse to carve it?* I even say to him, “I don’t think I can take this.” I look around, feeling caught, but the only watchers are the Arizona Cypress shading the trail.

He tells me he wants me to have it because the earth loves us. He suggests I can take it home with me to remind me of “universal love” and mother earth’s heart beating for all of us. I’m not entirely sure what that means. But somehow, I find myself extending my open hand to him and holding the heart to my sternum as he walks away. I grip it in my hand for the rest of the day, red clay staining my palm.

I look for Linda when I take a tour of a “Salt Room” that’s nothing more than lawn chairs in a basement surrounded by pillars of pink Himalayan salt. I look for her when I crawl underneath a gong to receive a complimentary sound bath, the practitioner having to hit the gong several times to produce a reverberation, each hit scattering the mallet’s flaking rubber in my face. I look for her when I let the psychic I meet at the Goodwill handing out flyers advertising her services touch my hand and tell me that it seems like I need a friend right now.

I feel my jaw go slack. “No—no,” I say. “I’m fine.” She nods and walks away. I continue down an aisle of sundresses, letting my hand slip over their pillowed cotton, not even looking at their patterns, and watch her walk up to other patrons. She’s not saying anything to anyone else she approaches. Only handing them her flyer. Only walking away. I watch her so long that I don’t even see I’m at the end of the aisle. I don’t even see that I wander into the open store, my hand still held open, waiting for something to graze.

I think I might find Linda’s commercial endeavors of the 1980s in New Age shops—the Linda Goodman lotion I’d heard about, purple plates to work “mini miracles,” “ruby red” water glasses to help you lose weight, and her divination deck:

Star Cards. But the New Age industry has blossomed past all that. There are new lotions and dozens of tarot decks and all kinds of apparatuses to cleanse your soul. So many that I get distracted with smearing quartz crystal-infused lotion on my wrists and breathing in essential oils from a pen that I forget what I'm here to do. I spend hours sitting on the store's acrylic carpeting, reading about my past lives and the planetary transits that may bring love into my life, my hands careful not to bend the book's solid spines. I listen to Gregorian chant compilations through headphones and read about the healing properties of alkaline water and why an abundance of acidic foods, such as the innocent tomato, can irritate my throat chakra. It's only when the salesclerk comes up and tells me they're closing that I realize I haven't thought about Linda at all. I haven't seen her.

I look and look, and in her absence, the only narrative that emerges is a history of taking.

That's how Linda describes what happened to Sally in Hall and Rein's 1979 *People* article, "I know Sally is not dead... I don't know exactly why she was taken, but I feel the time is right for her to reappear." Yet, reports of what police found at the scene contradict any sense of *taking* as in a *disappearance* as in a *kidnapping*. And by "reports," I mean information I found on the Linda Land internet forum from someone who claims to be Linda's former friend Bibi DeAngelo on October 27th, 2007. Bibi is someone I'd written to months ago. Someone who never received or replied to my queries. Someone who, possibly, isn't even alive or real. But if she

were to write back to me, if she were to tell me about Sally's disappearance, this is what I envision she would've told me.

I imagine she would've said this idea of "taking" split at the root from the beginning. As in, *taking* your life versus *being taken* by someone. Because the reason police went to Sally's apartment in the first place was because, according to Bibi, "friends of Sally who had stopped by to visit" her "noticed a peculiar and unpleasant smell emanating from Apartment 6 B." Because when police opened the door, they found the "decomposed body of a young female." So, the question that rang throughout the apartment wasn't *Where did she go?* It was, *How did this happen?* Because the original police report read, "no blood, phone perfectly clean, bed in vertical position."

I can't tell you what they found first, nor can I describe the apartment's layout. But I imagine, given this account, the cops examined the walls and saw nothing but flaking paint and oily handprints. I would think they looked in the bathroom and didn't see a crimson streak across the tile floor. They didn't see the footprints of struggle. They didn't smell a lover's cologne left on the sofa or see heavy footprints in the carpeting. There wasn't a gun or a knife or a rope, not that a weapon would have been left behind. The apartment told them it had never been there in the first place. The apartment said, *She's been alone for days*. The cabinets said, *There's nothing in here*. Because stocking the pantry, I imagine, wasn't what persecuted Sally. Something else haunted the woman who lived here. Was there worn carpeting near the window that looked out onto the Alexander Hamilton Bridge? Did she

contemplate what it would feel like to jump off the steel beams? Or was she looking at the traffic on the street below? Bibi writes of a police report describing “the remains of a decomposed body of a young female.” I imagine police saw what Bibi describes as an “8-page handwritten note . . . describing great depression.” They saw the hollow pill bottle, “barbiturates.” Then, I imagine, they saw their verdict unfurl before them: *suicide*.

Call the coroner. Call her stepfather, Sam. Call the crematorium. The case is closed.

I'm sorry, but Sally is dead.

Is this what Sam, Linda’s second husband—then estranged though still legally married—told Linda when he called to tell her that her daughter died? Did he say he was the one who had identified Sally? He must have, right? That’s what Bibi says. Because Linda wasn’t in New York when Sally died. She was in Cripple Creek existing as a spiritual guru and doing the things that spiritual gurus of the 1970s did, like start their own religions, wear prayer beads, and write one-thousand-page astrological guides to love and romance.

Bibi doesn’t speak of this in her account, but I imagine there was some argument when Linda insisted, whether in that conversation or later, that Sally had *disappeared*. Because, in one sense, she had. The old Sally—the girl who wouldn’t think to down a bottle of Demerol, chase it with bottom-shelf liquor, and write a suicide note—was gone. The girl they had sent to school years ago at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, the girl who had hopes of becoming an actress, was no

longer. Maybe Sam conceded that, *Yes, abstractly, the old Sally has “disappeared,” Linda*. But, I imagine Linda insisted, *No, disappeared! As in, alive but just stepped out for a moment . . .*

Maybe Sam had to say it again, *No, Linda, she’s dead. I saw the body*. But it doesn’t matter what Sam said because for Linda this situation was a quintessential disappearance: body or no body. The body wasn’t the problem. The problem was the phone calls she’d been receiving, the threats against her children’s lives, and the other books she’d been working on. The problem was the dreams she’d been having.

It didn’t matter for Linda that the police had found a pill bottle and an eight-page suicide note. All that mattered was Linda had people in spades who wanted to shut her up. Because when you think someone has disappeared, the questions drop and run like marbles across a kitchen floor, and the thing that Linda needed to figure out first was, *How can I prove it?*

In Linda’s history of taking, she’s not the taker. She’s a victim. But, in another history of taking, Linda’s the one who takes. Look at her self-created religion Manitou: a blend of Franciscan and Algonquin traditions. Look at her theories of numerology based on Jewish mysticism. Look at her books, and scraps of other belief systems abound.

Because in the New Age, nothing is sacred enough not to be for sale.

The movement takes. From the Navajo and Cherokee. From Hindu Ayurveda and yoga. From Chinese Feng Shui and Qi Gong. In the jewelry store, it’s the Diné

jewelry and so-called “Southwest” styled crucifixes. It’s the peace flags strung over the men’s bathroom in the health food store. In the art gallery, it’s a sand painting of the Last Supper. In the tourist shop, it’s a t-shirt printed with a naked American Indian woman wearing a red, white, and blue headdress. In the garden at a condo complex, it’s the Chinese symbol for peace waving on a polyester flag.

According to the woman I meet in the crystal store, she’s taking these quartz points and shoving them underneath her pillow at night because she has lymphoma, has been through two rounds of radiation, and is willing to try just about anything. According to the couple carrying three copper Buddha statues I chat with in the parking lot, they’re creating a sanctuary in their backyard. This past year has been full of loss, both their mothers, a sister, and a pet, and they need to intentionally create respite in their lives. They tell me they’ll buy some lilies when they get home to Michigan. In the back of a bookstore, I see a young man, clothing torn and face sunburnt, sitting before a supposed healer. Behind a translucent Mayan curtain, the young man whispers about not knowing where to go next, of billowing uncertainty. The healer draws her hands to his temples as the young man closes his eyes, hands clenched in his lap.

I turn away and pretend I never saw it, never heard a thing.

Maybe we take because we don’t know. The availability and stylish packaging of appropriation make our participation appear harmless. Maybe we do know that we are taking something that isn’t ours. Maybe we ignore how we are a player in a wider web of misuse and do it anyway. Because we are sick or sad. Because we are

desperate and groundless. Maybe in these moments, taking does not seem so selfish. Maybe it seems like the only logical step towards survival. Perhaps what is seen as “other” can be more easily imbued with mystery and magic than what is known.

I imagine Linda never thought of herself as complicit in her work as an astrologer and spiritual guide. I imagine that even if she was to think of herself this way, to see herself as appropriative, she’d see it in service of something greater: helping Sagittarius men understand their Cancer wives, spreading the news of astrological birth control, and helping mankind to achieve everlasting harmony through compassion and understanding.

I feel the urge to condemn Linda. To highlight her collusion. To note how she profited from her appropriation, but the only complicity I can attest to is my own. Because I’m here in this New Age wonderland. Because I’m seizing her narrative for my own purposes. I’m a taker, just like she is.

As I wander Sedona, Buck texts me. Every hour, he messages me about how we are destined to be together. About how things can get better. About how he knew he was drinking too often, working too little, whining too much. About how he should really see a counselor, as I’d always suggested. How he sees a future for us. How he wants me to come back. How we could start over.

I stop and read the messages in the shops and on the sidewalks. I let them accumulate. I remember this voice from our courtship: something optimistic and dreamy. Something that held hope.

You're my soulmate, he writes, and I am too guilty about my responsibility in our marriage ending, too enchanted by his sadness to tell him that I am resolute in my decision. So, I keep talking to him. I avoid confrontation. I avoid having to break his heart again. I avoid what I imagine would be his subsequent wrath. I engage at what I think is a distance. I stick patchouli incense in my face and tell him I need some time to think. *Maybe we could talk later?* I listen to tuning fork's twang and tell him he should take some space for himself. *That might help you.* I ask the salesclerk what an aura photo is and suggest that Buck put his phone down and go for a walk. *I'm sure the weather is nice.* I look at books about soul mates and hope they will tell me they are fake. That there is no such thing. That they are not destined; they are propaganda from wedding companies and divorce lawyers. But the pages I skim tell me otherwise. *You won't believe in them until you meet yours—and then you will never go back.*

I shove the books back on the shelves, his messages gathering, and drive to my rented room on the other side of town, nothing written in the notebook I brought with me but a pros and cons list of whether or not to tell him we can no longer communicate.

Bibi never speaks of the exact conversation between Linda and Sam. But the way I see it, Sam was never going to tell Linda what she wanted to hear.

So, standing next to the corded phone in the kitchen, I imagine Linda hung up on Sam. Maybe she had to. Because what else could you do with an estranged

husband that wouldn't say the words you wanted him to say? You'd stop talking and find the people who would say them to you.

In New York, the police had already collected the evidence used to determine Sally's cause of death. In Cripple Creek, I imagine Linda had begun to collect her own:

1. *Feelings*

In her guts. In her fingertips. Twanging through her. The feeling wasn't surprise, denial, or anger. I imagine that Linda *knew* that Sally couldn't be dead. She didn't throw herself onto the couch to weep or fall into a heap on the floor. Maybe her body knew this wasn't a moment for such histrionics. This wasn't like the time when she just wanted Pat the Cat to be alive, but she knew within herself that Pat was really dead. Maybe this moment felt like sitting in that Catholic cathedral back in Morgantown as a little girl and recognizing that the priest's words found no resonance within her. Maybe it was like watching Bill drink and trying to believe he was just fine. Did she feel the same discord drifting through her? Maybe she knew that no police officer or coroner or judge would care, but it mattered, nonetheless. Linda must've felt it and known it, and that was enough.

2. *Sally's astrological natal chart*

She says it in the 1979 *People* article, “I’ve done her chart over and over again.” I imagine that Linda casts the chart on butcher paper spread on the living room floor. She saw her daughter, her Scorpio child: mysterious, intense, and ambitious. The daughter who snuck off with her boyfriend Marc during that picnic last summer and sang along to Top 40 hits on the radio. The daughter with whom she had “conversations” that were nothing but silence between two stubborn women. Linda examined how death wove its way into her daughter’s chart, and she saw nothing like what the police had told her: no suicides or overdoses or youthful indulgence in melancholy. What Linda saw was a strange emphasis on the twelfth house: the house of kidnappings, convents, and things stowed away.

Was it then that she threw herself into the couch and wept? When she saw so clearly what might have occurred?

3. *She knew too much*

But why? Why would someone threaten Linda’s children? Wasn’t she thought of as just some harmless New Age nitwit who spoke about love, light, and natural birth control? She did write about love, light, and natural birth control, but Linda knew she wasn’t some New Age idiot. She had manuscripts sitting on her desk that spoke of other things: corruption and Richard Nixon, clandestine activities and hush money, governmental tinkering outside the boundaries of the law. According to Bibi, Linda had been writing a book

about a boat called the “Star Quest” “that was connected to Watergate” and was an alleged “ floating brothel onto which to lure political opponents, then tape and photograph them in compromising positions.”

Maybe years ago, when she was reciting love letters from soldiers on the radio, no one would've cared what she had to say about the US government. But now, they would. Maybe they would care so much that they'd go to great lengths to silence her. Perhaps they'd even take down someone innocent in their pursuit. And, to Linda, I imagine there was no one more innocent than her Sally.

4. *The threats*

Perhaps Linda didn't know the threats would become evidence. And because she didn't realize they would one day become evidence, she didn't write them down or think to mark when they happened on the calendar. But she remembered them with precision. According to Bibi, the threats came while Linda was investigating Star Quest, and “the most recent threats” had “been made only a couple of weeks before the news that Sally ‘was dead.’”

Maybe they came in the early morning, two am or three am. The phone would ring, and Linda would patter to the phone in her stockinged feet to answer it.

Hello?

Sometimes there was just breath. Other times, only an unnerving silence.

Then there would be a click.

Maybe the first time she thought it was those high school kids who poked fun at her house and its stained glass murals of Egyptian gods. Or maybe she thought it was some drunk. Once, she fell back into bed full of longing, believing it was a secret admirer. But I imagine that, in the beginning, she didn't think much of it. Until one evening when the breath began to speak, and it uttered threats against the lives of her four children.

Or did the threats come differently? Notes typed and sealed with wax? A letter slipped inside a pizza delivery order? Or were they more an abstract feeling that stayed with Linda, a notion that she couldn't shake, an omen that stirred within her and raised its head in the moments when she could listen—on a plane to Los Angeles or in between changing records on the stereo? Was it then that she felt it, when she knew something beyond her was looming and would threaten those she loved the most?

Maybe the warning was there. Maybe it was only in retrospect that she could see the signs. Perhaps it was only then that she wondered whether this would've happened if she had acted earlier.

For Linda, the evidence could only mean one thing. But, if she was going to prove it, she would have to go to New York. If she wasn't weeping before, then she would be

when she realized that she'd have to buy a plane ticket. According to Hall and Rein, "her royalties from *Sun Signs* had been withheld when she failed to deliver a second book to her publisher as promised." Furthermore, they describe her as, at the time, "penniless" and living on "welfare."

I imagine that she knew the numbers in her bank account. Well, if you could *call* them numbers. Do negative numbers still count as numbers, or are they something else? Place markers for numbers? Maybe it doesn't matter. There wasn't any money to be gotten by going to the bank. Maybe that had been made doubly clear to her by all those statements sitting on her desk.

She would have to pick up the phone and dial numbers she normally liked to dial. However, this time, she would have to say things she didn't want to have to say. Maybe it made her woozy just to think about it, so much so that she collapsed onto her unmade bed and moaned. Maybe she thrashed around for a bit, hoping that if she threw a big enough fit, a different solution might appear to her. Maybe she kneeled before her stained glass mural of St. Francis of Assisi and asked for help. *Send money quickly!*

No matter, that night, I imagine that she shuffled to the kitchen—make-up still smeared from rubbing her eyes—tied her bathrobe belt around her waist, and sat in front of the telephone, knowing what she had to do.

In Sedona, I rent a room in someone's house on the outskirts of town. To get there, I listen to the radio spit static for eight miles and remember the story of those who

suffered in this desert. I remember hearing about the people who paid motivational speaker James Arthur Ray \$10,000 for a five-day “Spiritual Warrior” retreat in Yavapai County in October 2009. I think about all of them coming together, intent on inciting change in their lives, garnering strength to endure whatever ailed them. I think about how they were asked to shave their heads and live for thirty-six hours without food in this desert, a so-called “Vision Quest.” How they had to pay \$250 if they wanted a hat during the Quest and enter what Ray called a “sweat lodge:” a dome of sticks and plastic tarps. I think about what it would’ve been like in that dome: rocks steaming, hearts throbbing, participants vomiting and frothing at the mouth. I think about what it would’ve been like to try to escape, only to be told that you must stay if you are serious about your spiritual intentions. To wonder if you should call 911. To pass out. To be dragged out of the dome. For organs to fail. For nineteen to be taken to the hospital. For Ray to escape, getting on a flight out of Arizona and later be charged with three counts of manslaughter. I think about how the promises of healing, miracles, and manifestation can lead you astray. Past all logic. I drive past a ditch of rotting Prickly Pear—the carcasses blue and withered—and think about how love can do the same.

Linda was going to have to beg. Or, as Hall and Rein say, “friends” would “help” her.

Yes, she had a book on the *New York Times* Bestsellers List and was hailed as the woman that introduced astrology into mainstream America. Yes, her next astrological book would eventually get an advance of a then-record-setting 2.25

million dollars. Yes, she was known to buy new cars and jewelry for her friends in Colorado Springs. Yes, I imagine she bought dinner for everybody at the Palace Hotel & Casino every other weekend. When you walked into her house in Cripple Creek, there was a hot tub out back, a pool in the basement, a giant golden statue of Osiris in the living room, and a brand-new washer-dryer unit humming somewhere on the first floor. An outsider probably wouldn't guess that she'd been thinking about how many pennies were in the jar on her dresser.

I get that it's surprising. But it was the rumor and, by all accounts, the truth. She was a spender and a gifter. Her accountant Joel Cohen knew it. He's quoted in Cynthia Sanz's 1995 remembrance of Linda Goodman in *People Weekly* as saying, "I've seen her empty her pockets to anyone who asks. She's incredibly naïve." She'd also promised money to this person or that person and had eventually frittered away all the cash she earned before it was even in her pocket. It's what former agent Arthur Klebanoff describes in his book *The Agent*, "Like Zero Mostel in *The Producers*, Linda Goodman had . . . given others percentages of her revenue in the book totaling well over 100 percent. Some of the recipients loaned her money, provided lodging, or were helping on one of her many other projects."

So, when Linda got the news that Sally had killed herself and knew it just couldn't be true, how else was she going to get to New York but beg for the plane fare? I imagine she called her friend Ruth in Colorado Springs. She called Steve McQueen and Ali MacGraw, who, according to Hall and Rein, were friends. There were probably others in Los Angeles and New York—this producer she met at that

Halloween party back in October and that actress from the garden party last spring. She must've had a list or peeled through a Rolodex. Or maybe her manager, Aaron Goldblatt, had their contact information.

Sam had told Linda that Sally had killed herself, but what did Linda tell her friends and far-flung acquaintances when she spoke with them? How developed were her theories at that point? Did she say that she wanted to double-check the police reports and see the "body" in the morgue because she was convinced that something else was going on? Did she talk about the phone calls? The natal chart that said it couldn't be true? Or did she say, *Sam told me Sally's dead, and I have to get there to see it for myself.*

Whatever she said, it worked.

The family I stay with love Jesus. The welcome mat says it. It's on the coffee cup they let me use and on the throw pillow of my bed. The phrase *Hallelujah! Jesus is in Our Hearts!* painted in red on the walls of my rented room. Shouldn't I feel comfort at such familiar phrases? The phrases of Sunday School and my youth? Instead, I feel caught, guilty. I wish the wall said, *My child, I forgive you for your sins.* I lie in bed, letting my eyes trace the cursive arcs of the word *Hallelujah!* on the opposite wall, and I imagine Linda and myself at the Spiritual Warrior event together. Would she have even come with me? Pioneer of the New Age? Stubborn little Linda? I'm not sure, but in my fantasy, she's there. I imagine we would've both been excited—we would've come with intentions, aspects of our lives we wanted to heal, ways that we

wanted to change. But, once we crawled inside the plastic dome, maybe even once we saw it, I wonder what we would've done. If she would've assured me of the "sweat lodge's" transformative powers, and if I would've tried to tell her about heat exhaustion. If I would've told her this is what my mother warned me about all those years ago: *cults*. That it makes no sense to do this in Arizona. That I thought this was a different tradition—Plains Indians do sweat lodges because the weather is cooler. I wonder if I would grow panicky at our clammy skin and whisper to her about our organs ceasing function and point to the vomit on the dirt floor. I wonder if I would try to drag her out with me. If she would try to keep me in. If I would eventually leave her.

I assume the pose in bed, the posture of staying in there with her: hopeless, fetal; and I wonder why I take solace in a woman who would, perhaps, find herself in a sweat lodge and stay there, why it is that I would get in there with her, and why it is that I continue talking to a man well trained in the art of smothering.

I imagine that once Linda made her way to New York, she charged right into the forty-seventh precinct, looked the officers straight in the teeth, waived the autopsy reports away with her fragile hand, and demanded that they investigate her claims of kidnapping. I imagine she ran up to Sam and demanded he tell her why the hell he identified the body before she got there when it was *clear* from the photographs that it wasn't their Sally? Did she use the words "you" and "dolt" in reference to Sam? Probably. I imagine that once they showed Linda the photographs they'd taken of

Sally, she enumerated why this “body” wasn’t her daughter—the bleached hair, the bloated fingers, the rubbery-looking skin. Or, what Bibi says, a body that appeared more like “a young black woman” with “dyed blonde hair.” Never mind that the body they’d found had been sitting in a warm apartment for days, the skin turning necrotic. Never mind that a body left for days will bloat. Never mind the realities of decomposition. To Linda, it didn’t matter. Rein and Hall report that Linda “faulted the police work from the beginning. The suicide note, she swears, was not in Sally’s handwriting. There was no empty pill bottle in the apartment. Police reported no signs of violence, but Goodman says she [later] found bloodstains and bleached hair though her daughter was a natural blonde.”

Regardless, the first time she visits the precinct, I imagine the police have to be somewhat sympathetic. Maybe they even say to her, *Tell me why you think your daughter is still alive, Mrs. Goodman*. By now, maybe Linda’s sitting down in somebody’s office in the precinct, and she’s got piles of tissue in her lap. I don’t know if she’s really crying or if she thinks it’s helpful to her case to appear as though she’s weeping, but, regardless, she’s got a snotty mound. Maybe she’s got a cold. It is December. Maybe someone has gotten her a cup of coffee that they handed to her as they ushered her into the room. Maybe, then, sipping it, she sputtered that this is the worst cup of coffee she’s ever had—*Shouldn’t the forty-seventh precinct of New York City have better coffee than this for its clientele?* At this point, if Sam is there, he’s shushing her. Telling her to calm down. *You’re too hyped up*. So, sure, she’s a pain in

the ass, but they're supplicant to her demands because, understandably, her daughter is gone. How else would you expect someone to act in this situation?

By now, I imagine they ask her, *Now, Mrs. Goodman, do you have any information that can help us understand why you think your daughter was kidnapped?*

She says everything we already know—the creepy phone calls, Linda's intuition, and the natal chart. And, sure, that's all a little kooky to a bunch of police officers, but they're nodding along, trying to appear sympathetic, because, again, her daughter is dead. She's distraught.

Then, Linda pauses and delivers her bombshell evidence:

Officers, I dreamt of my Sally. I saw her in my dreams—I know she's alive. I saw her. Felt her.

How did they react? Did they write down the words “dreams?” Did they say, *Tell me more, Linda. What exactly did you dream of?* Did they grab her hands and say, *Oh sweetheart...* I don't know. But when I imagine Linda saying those words, all I can see are their faces crinkling, their jaws parsing, and their diaphragms jiggling. I only hear laughter. Or as retired detective Al Desmond put it to Hall and Rein, “The father identified her. Then ten days later, the mother comes to town saying—hold your hat—she dreamed her daughter was still alive.”

The next morning, I wake up to love letters. I lie in bed and read them.

I am unmoved by his words.

Is it because I am still dreamy? Still too languid from sleep to consider the ramifications of what I want to tell him? Or am I weary? Exhausted from fending off his desperate affection? Apprehensive at the thought of another day of his proclamations? I am uncertain, but, nonetheless, I write back. I tell Buck that I filed the paperwork. I tell him I am resolute. I tell him we should take a break from communicating—for at least a few weeks.

He replies immediately. A litany. About how I need professional help. About how he didn't know I could be so cruel. About how he didn't know I could hurt him this badly, how he never believed I could. Wasn't capable of it, but now he knows differently. Now he knows who I really am.

Finally truthful? I think and shove the phone deep into the covers. I fall back asleep to the vibration of my phone's notifications pulsing throughout the bed, his indignant messages coming one after the other.

Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo describes the impulse to “take” via appropriation and commodification as one that directly relates to “yearning” for what no longer exists. Rather, “agents of colonialism long for the very forms of life they intentionally altered or destroyed.” This kind of nostalgia “revolves around a paradox: a person kills somebody and then mourns his or her victim.” This nostalgia can also manifest as “Someone deliberately [altering] a form of life and then [regretting] that things have not remained as they were prior to his or her intervention.” Yet, for Rosaldo, this nostalgia is dangerous precisely because it appears innocuous. Our “attempt to use a

seemingly harmless mood [nostalgia] as a mask of innocence” covers our “involvement with the process of domination.”

Sedona’s proliferation of American Indian novelties and paraphernalia proves Rosaldo’s theory. Yet what undergirds Rosaldo’s idea is control. That through nostalgic commerce, we buy into and control a specific narrative. Taking obscures the realities and existences of those you’ve taken from. The sand painting of the Last Supper could imply a harmonious balance between American Indians and their Colonizers rather than one of genocide and racism. Australian Aboriginal dream workshops make no mention of racism, a history of segregation, or stolen land. Buddha head planters and chakra candles are disembodied from their traditions. For spiritual transcendence, you buy nostalgic fictions.

When I think of Rosaldo’s theories and Linda, the questions that arise within me feel like betrayal, but they ascend, regardless. What blame does Linda eschew by saying someone *took* Sally rather than Sally *took* her own life? What questions of Linda’s complicity does she sidestep when insisting upon Sally’s disappearance rather than her death? Or does the question of Linda’s complicity, her impact, upon her daughter’s life remain regardless? Disappearance or otherwise? Would Linda have always asked, *What could I have done to change this?*

I asked Buck about it once. The “taking” involved in suicide, that phrase we use: *to take one’s life*.

He told me it was a paradox and asked, “How is my life not my own to take?”

I remember offering that the “taking” comes from the person who commits suicide *taking* their life, their presence, from everyone else.

He told me it was selfish of everyone else to think that someone should live so that others don’t suffer.

I said nothing else. I only remember thinking, *But don’t we all need one another?*

I go into town and am as hollow as the dry air pushing through the city and find myself staring through the window of a shop advertising Aura Readings and Photography. I walk inside the shop, doorbell chiming, the linoleum floor so clean my boots squeak with each step. Everything is lilac, as though I’d crawled inside petals. Lilac walls, carpeting, and light switches. There’s a woman behind the counter wearing a white jumpsuit with a silver dolphin pendant around her neck and a nametag that says “Mystic.”

She looks up at me and asks what she can do for me today.

I pause and stare at her and her purple expanse of a shop.

Everything. You can do everything.

I want to tell her that my suicidal husband is god knows where, and I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with him now, and I’m supposed to be writing this biographical dissertation, but I’ve got absolutely nothing beyond my own speculations which means that I’m not really writing a biography, and I drove to

Sedona, for some erroneous reason thinking I'd find something. And, of course, there's nothing to find here, and I think I might be homeless.

"I guess I don't know," I whisper.

Mystic hands me a laminated list of services.

I point to the cheapest aura photography package and follow Mystic into a backroom where the lilac expanse continues. Lilac pleather where I sit. Lilac curtains where the wind blows. Lilac crystals in the window. Mystic calls me sweetheart and tells me to place my hands on a silver orb hooked up to a computer and to look into the camera for one minute.

I stare into the glossy lens, my arms outstretched, the smell of a Swisher Sweet wafting from the alley below.

She tells me it's about to start, "Be still. Think calm, happy thoughts."

I try to think of the hot air balloons I saw gliding over the red rocks this morning, but all I can think about are those cigarillos. The smell of them on Buck's beard. His fingertips. His mouth. On his shirts. I think of spreading the divorce paperwork, *FL 100*, *FL 115*, *FL 140*, on the floor of my friend's apartment and writing our names and dates of birth. I think of him weeping. His body limp on our bed. His face red and streaked. The bowl smashed and skittered. His words: *You're my soulmate. I know it.*

Mystic's thighs peel away from the pleather chair as she stands to turn the camera off, and I open my eyes.

"Did you think of happy things?" she asks.

I look at her, her face soft and open.

“No.”

Bibi says nothing about what Linda dreamt. Neither do Hall or Rein. Neither does anything I can find. But I imagine that the first night the dreams occurred, Linda woke in a rage after seeing her daughter’s image. She huffed into the covers of her floral-patterned bed, blue and white, Delftware-like, and hissed, *Why are you doing this to your poor mother?! Torturing me while I sleep!* But by the third night, I wonder if Linda came to anticipate Sally’s nocturnal appearances, to long for them during her waking hours, to promise herself before she drifted to sleep that, this time, she would summon the consciousness to reach out and grab Sally in her dream. To tie a scarf to Sally’s wrist and attach the other end to her own so that Sally couldn’t run. To tackle Sally and whisper to her pale face that she was never ever going to get away again.

In the days after Sally’s death, when not scrounging for money to get to New York, I imagine that Linda woke before the sun rose and walked the streets of Cripple Creek in her galoshes. Sometimes going three miles. Once, four. Perhaps she eschewed coffee, knowing that her headaches would make her sleep even more tranced-out later. Maybe she did sit-ups in the afternoons and walked up and down the stairs to tire herself out or drank a Brandy Alexander before bed and a cup of water with magnesium powder so that unconsciousness would come quickly. I

imagine she crawled into bed and spoke her intentions aloud to Sally, *Show me where you are. You cannot do this to me... you cannot leave me like this.*

Of course, the Brandy Alexander would usually keep her restless until one, and that magnesium water would just make her have to pee twice before three, so by the time she drifts to sleep, it is a hard, deep sleep. A sleep so hard she dreams of nothing. So, when Linda wakes up and makes a pot of coffee and smokes cigarette after cigarette while perched against the kitchen countertop, her daughter's name sits raw in her mouth as though Sally had snubbed Linda As though dreams were something you could control, a story you could write.

The printer moans.

I ask Mystic how she ended up in Sedona, and she tells me she came here for a retreat in the late '80s and never left. "You know," she says, "this place is all about meditation and self-reflection. Meeting with like-minded folks. Feeding off that communal energy... Once you get into it, it's hard to leave. New Jersey didn't feel like home anymore." She says, "It wasn't always like this though, you know . . . this place has really blown up in the past ten years."

"... What do you mean?" I ask.

"So many tourists. Come here thinking it's all a joke, you know?"

I shift in my chair and nod, watching her staple the papers together. I nod to indicate I hear what she's saying, but she interprets it differently.

"I know you know. I can tell by your energy," she says.

“... Oh.”

“You’re pure. You’ve got a light.”

I laugh, “Well, that’s nice of you to say, but... everybody does, right?”

“No,” she says, turning to a page that shows my body with a glowing green light around it. “They don’t.”

She takes me on a PDF tour of my aura. The way green encapsulates my body and turns orange towards the outer edges. The swirling blue above my head. She shows me the way certain chakras shoot through my torso. She tells me my aura is tall but not wide. It could be wider. I could work on that. My aura and chakras are broken down into percentages based on their size and strength. 60%. 45%. 20%.

She points to a diagram of my chest with a dim green light emanating.

“Your heart,” she says. “That’s a problem.”

I look. Her fingers trace a dim moat around my xiphoid.

“It is,” I say.

The session ends.

I imagine friends offered explanations to Linda about her initial dreams.

Interpretations of what Sally picking strawberries in a field could mean about her whereabouts. *Maybe she’s being forced to do manual labor?!* Ideas about what a centerpiece on the dinner table could indicate or the significance of a room with no ceiling. Maybe Linda described specific details—clothing, house pets, or tchotchkes—that stuck with her from her dreams of Sally, and they brainstormed

possibilities about the detail's connotations. I imagine, because Linda is a New Age celebrity and already has a bookshelf full of spiritual titles, that her friends probably have their own metaphysical guides to share. So, when one of her friends shows up at her house one day with a fistful of cash to help her get to New York, she also brings a few dreaming dictionaries along: Isobelle Woolever's *The Dream Dictionary*. Tom Chetwynd's *How to Interpret Your Dreams*. The anonymous *Dream Dictionary* from 1919.

If I had been there with Linda in the wake of Sally's disappearance, I imagine we would've sat at her kitchen table, both of us chain-smoking. Even if I didn't smoke in 1973, I'd do it to be there with Linda in her time of need and cough my way through it. I'd eat all the things she would be eating: noodle and beef gravy Mug-O-Lunch from the gas station outside of town. Strawberry Danish Rings warm from the toaster. Pizza Spins chips and Hunt's chocolate pudding. I imagine we wouldn't be cooking—even if I offered. Maybe Linda would say, *There's too much to do...* Of course, even if I was sick of Danish Rings and found those Pizza Spins chips to be foul, I'd go along with it. When I'm enamored, I'll go along with lots of things. So, I do whatever she wants—make her coffee, run down the street to buy wine or cigarettes, answer her calls. I'd like to think that, despite my ardor, I wouldn't pretend to believe her theories just to humor her. That I'd be truthful about my doubts. That I would raise the potential for Sally to have killed herself. Maybe even try to convince Linda of it. That I would tell Linda it's not her fault. To be gentle on herself as she grapples with this news.

But look at all those nights of me winding through the mountains to the liquor store to buy cigarettes and Jim Beam. Look at me scrubbing the bathroom in a rage. Look at me staring at Jorge on the bus: everything I want to say sealed within me. I've already proven myself to be withholding. Indulgent. Untrustworthy.

So, really, I'd say nothing. I'd tell myself that I'm sparing her, that she's too tender for the truth. Maybe I'd say that she needs to believe this right now, and later, she'll come to realize the truth on her own. I'd tell myself everything I ever said about Buck. Maybe I'd even say that Sally could be out there somewhere—who am I to say differently? What do I know? So, once fortified with snacks and cigarettes, I imagine I'd sit down with her and read from the dreaming dictionaries while she takes notes.

Dreaming of a "Farm," I'd say, can mean there's "contentment in your inner self and, perhaps, a deep-seated wish for peace."

Not helpful, Linda replies.

Did you say you dreamt she was picking "radishes?" I'd ask. Because that's a scary entry... It foretells of a "violent quarrel."

No radishes, Linda corrects. Strawberries.

I'd return to the book, take a drag, and cough.

Okay, well, there's no entry for "strawberry," but there is an entry for fruit. According to this, it could have something to do with work—as in, something "bearing fruit." It can also have to do with... genitalia? As in, you know, bananas and phalluses and, like... and rounded fruit being like breasts.

I can feel her stare.

Are you serious? She'd ask.

I'm just reading what it says!

That's not what this is about, she says. My dreams are not about sex, especially about my daughter. This is about life and death—don't you get that? That's what we're looking for! Matters of life and death!

Okay, well, then let's look at something else... I say, flipping to another page.
Here's the entry for "daughter."—

No—no. We're not reading that aloud...

What? I'd say. Why? It's an interpretation...for Sally. She's your daughter.

Sally is Sally, Linda says, taking a drag on her cigarette and exhaling. She's not representative of something. She isn't a symbol.

I stare at her, my eyes growing watery from the smoke. She glares back.

Even in my fantasy, I miss the point entirely.

Later that day, I attend a "Dreaming Group" in Sedona.

I go to ask about Linda's dreams.

We meet in the back room of a café that stinks like weed and disinfectant.

There's a circle of metal folding chairs and a wooden statue of Shiva surrounded by bite-sized candy bars in the center. I don't ask about Shiva or the candy, but I want to know why she's here and if we can eat the candy, but no one says anything about Shiva or reaches out their hand to grab a Snickers the entire two-hour gathering.

There seems to be some kind of understanding about Shiva and her candies I don't understand. Instead, everyone brings something to share: fruit juice and crackers, mandarin oranges and tiny chocolates in tin foil, a half-eaten burrito sacrificed from someone's dinner that we heap on a dented folding table in the corner. We sit in the metal chairs and go around the room, introducing ourselves by our first names and our "dream names:" our alter-ego when we're dreaming. During the session, we were supposed to call one another by these personas. One person's dream name is "Lord Star Raptor." Another is "Third Eye Blind." The Jungian psychoanalyst from Flagstaff with white hair and pearl earrings tells us her name is "Dr. Luanne Swoon." I say that my name is Courtney, and I don't know what my dream name is because I always feel very rooted in myself when I dream.

After that, we sit on the wooden floor and do a meditation. Crows squawk outside the café. The man next to me, Steve, who has skin like white sand and told me twice he's eighty, keeps sighing heavily, and all I can think about is if he's keeping time through his sighing with the crows.

I don't even know the meditation is over until Steve taps my knee, whispering, "You can come back now, honey."

I open my eyes.

The room is open for discussion, and I fling my hand up.

"I need some help... you know, some insights into a situation," I say. "So, pretend someone close to you died under mysterious circumstances, and you suspect they aren't really dead. You wonder if they've been kidnapped. Then, you dream of

them repeatedly. In this situation, what do you think is happening? As in, what do the dreams mean? Who is the person in your dream? Is it... that person's soul, visiting you to assure you of their safe passage? Or a message that they're still alive? Or—"

The leader of the group, Lord Star Raptor, with dreads to his hips and wide brown eyes, interrupts me, "Girl... so, this is one'a your dreams!?"

"No—no. It's just research."

"Oh," he says, "Well, that's good—I'd hate for that to have happened to anyone.... What were the dreams about? Do you know?" He peels a mandarin, the rind unfurling into a ribbon.

"I don't—I just know that this person was dreaming about her daughter, who the police thought was dead, but she, the woman dreaming, thought was alive . . ."

José, who said he went mountain biking today and that's why he's all sunburnt, says that if it were him, he would try not to dwell on the meaning, but, he "you know, would try to be present with the experience... because, maybe, it would be my opportunity to heal and let her go." I scribble in my notebook, *Heal. Let go.*

Third Eye Blind, whose real name is Dave, chimes in and says that it "all depends on what you *believe*... it could be a visit from the daughter's spirit, or it could be a visit from a part of you."

I write, *Part of you??*

Steve, still sitting cross-legged on the floor, starts rocking back and forth and says, "Let's be real here, honey—I'm eighty years old. So, I seen a lotta people *die* in my life, and there is a difference if somebody dies, and you can see the body versus

you not seeing the body . . . You know, I'm from a Mexican family, and family is important. Our feelings, you know, our emotional world... it's crucial in our lives... and if you hadn't seen that body, well, then, I'd think it was that is a spirit coming to you to give you closure..."

Needed closure.

"The gift of closure," Third Eye Blind reiterates.

"Yes," Steve says, drawing his knees to his chest and shaking his finger, "The gift of closure."

Dr. Luanne Swoon crosses her legs and says that if someone were to come into her practice and tell her that they had repeated dreams of a daughter that they didn't know was alive or dead, she would characterize that as the ego wanting to believe that the daughter was alive.

Linda wants Sally to be alive. Ego.

Others chime in agreeing, reminding us of the theories that say that dreams are mirrors of our subconscious mind, that dreams are just reflections of our soul and our inner worlds, and that dreams are just projections we must interpret. I'm trying to write it all—*mirrors, reflections, inner-world*—but I cannot make my pen move any longer. All I can think of is my mother in my dreams. Her little pink face and her terry-cloth robe in the hotel room. Her hand grabbing my hand and looking at my ring finger. The comfort of having her next to me. Her waxy hands. The pages of notebook paper detailing the times she has appeared to me in my dreams. Someone is saying something about psychoanalysis, something about egos and spirits, but I want

them to tell me that when someone who is dead comes to visit you in your dreams, it's really that—a visitation. I want them to tell me that my dreams of my mother aren't projections of my ego or my desire to have my mother in my life. I want to hear that the dreams mean that she wants to be with me, even if it's on a different plane. They're not some delusion shielding me from the reality that she's dead and gone.

Maria, who's been sitting slumped up against the wall, staring at the carpeting since our meditation, leans forward and says, "Why does it matter if it's real? Why does it matter if it's really the daughter or the daughter's spirit or our ego? Can't it just be good just to dream of those we've lost?"

Everyone is quiet. We all stare at Shiva.

I nod and tell everyone thanks so much as they move on to the next topic: personal experiences of taking galantamine to enable lucid dreaming. I keep scribbling.

Linda dreaming about Sally:

-if it's Sally's soul/spirit = probably dead

-if it's a projection of Linda's ego = maybe dead but could be alive

-if it's Sally's soul temporarily leaving Sally's body = possibly alive

Me dreaming about my mother:

-...

I cannot bear the ambiguity. The possibilities. I cross it out.

~~*Me dreaming about my mother:*~~

I spend the rest of the meeting tracing a line over *Me dreaming about my mother* again and again so that by the time the meeting is over, I can believe I never asked the question.

Dave taps me on the shoulder at the end of the meeting.

He introduces himself again.

“Third Eye Blind... you know, *Dave*,” he says, hushed. His beard is silver and wired. Like a scouring pad.

“Oh, yes,” I say. “Third Eye Blind! Hi.”

“I need to tell you about a dream I had,” he says. He tells me about this woman he dated; he doesn’t know, “maybe fifteen years ago? And a few years ago, I had a dream about her son . . .” He rubs his hand across his beard, “Now, this was the son that was the, you know, love child of the man she cheated on me with. So, when I’m dreaming about him at first, I’m like, well, what the fucks he doing here?”

With each sentence, he inches closer, and he’s close enough now that I can smell him. Cigarettes and Gatorade and sweat, and he just keeps talking, so I just keep listening.

“In the dream, the son comes to me—and, granted, I haven’t seen this guy or his mother in years, so who knows how I knew it was him in the dream.... Anyway, in the dream, the son is all beat to shit—he’s gotta black eye, and his arm is all busted up, and he starts handing me all sorts of things... a phone receiver, a walkie-talkie, a

flip phone, a telephone book... and I'm like, 'What the hell am I supposed to do with all this shit?' And the kid is like, 'Just do it! Do it!' We argue with one another, and then the son stalks off. And I'm left with this pile of phone receivers and cords, like a *mountain*, and that was the dream. So, I wake up the next morning, and I'm like, 'What the fuck was *that* about?'"

"Yeah, right?" I say.

"So, anyway, I gave my old-ex-lady a call, and it turns out the son is dead."

I nod.

"So, you know, I think that *the son* was him coming to me to tell me to get in contact with his momma because she needed somebody. So, to answer the question of 'What was that girl doing?' when she *came* to visit her ma, I think it was her spirit or soul or whatever coming to visit her ma because that girl was dead, and she had a message for her ma."

He stops talking and wipes his mouth.

"Thanks, Dave..." I say. "That's really helpful."

"You bet, girl," he says, bounding off towards the door.

Dave's story = Sally's dead.

I envision that if some lady comes into the forty-seventh precinct, calls herself a "client," and proceeds to insult the secretary's coffee, the police would refrain from *laughing* at her—especially if her daughter just killed herself. Even if they didn't know who Linda Goodman was, I wouldn't exasperate this woman any further than

she'd already been exasperated. I wouldn't be surprised if Linda fantasized about tossing her coffee at the officers as she watched them chuckle when she mentioned her dreams.

But maybe they'd had it with her. Maybe they thought they could be patient until a point. But how were they ever going to put "dreams" in the blank line of evidence on a police report? Maybe they made jokes. About the voluptuous women with tiny waists they dreamt of that never showed up in their life. About body parts they dreamt were larger or smaller that were certainly not larger or smaller when they woke up. About dead pets they'd dreamt of that, miraculously, never rose from their backyard graves after their midnight visions.

I'd imagine that, despite Linda's bravado, shame had to have washed through her. She'd even brought her notebook documenting the dreams with her, thinking they'd want evidence. Thinking that it could help them. She'd come prepared and had been so vulnerable and *helpful* with these officers to offer her theory to them, and she even groveled for money just so that she could come all the way here, and now they were *laughing* at her.

But shame can quickly turn to anger when Linda's already pissed about shitty coffee, and her dumbass husband cremated her daughter's body without even asking her, and now she's got an office full of police officers getting their jollies off her despair.

So, I imagine Linda stands up and stomps out of the office. Down the hallway. Into the lobby. Out the precinct's steel doors and onto Laconia Avenue. Does Sam

chase her? I imagine so. He does it for blocks, watching her cobalt coat flit through the crowd, catching up to her as she turns right on 233rd street to go sit in Seton Falls Park because where else is she supposed to go now to figure this out? I imagine he catches her there, telling her, *Linda, I know it's hard, but you need to accept this. I saw the body. I saw Sally. It was her. You can't just pretend this is something else.*

I see her stopping. Hung on the word *pretend*.

She whips around, hissing at him, *I am not playing "pretend." I have evidence.* She holds up her notebook. *I dreamt of her. I saw her. You just saw a double.*

I imagine her taking off again, and Sam, who would later recant his body identification, following her, beseeching her, *Linda, what is going on? What am I supposed to do?*

But it didn't matter what Sam offered or what he could do.

Because it wasn't Sam that Linda wanted help from. He'd already broken her trust the minute he looked at the corpse and said it was Sally. He was on Linda's naughty list from now until forever. It was everyone else she wanted help from. It was everyone else to whom she'd ask, *Tell me—how can you help me get Sally back? What can you offer?*

But her friends had a different question for her.

In Sedona, I get back in my car and drive to the Goodwill on Coffee Pot Drive. I buy every single dreaming dictionary on the shelf, a copy of Anton Chekhov's *The*

Seagull, throw the books in the passenger's seat, and plot my route back to the Midwest. Because there's nowhere else to go. Because I don't have to be back in school for months. Because I already said, "I'm doing research." Because my stepfather told me I could sleep in his basement.

Maybe it's because Buck hasn't contacted me or because Mystic told me I have good energy. Or maybe it's because, according to Third Eye Blind, my mother could be visiting me, but as I turn the key and take off, I imagine each passing mile as freshwater running through me. Through my hair and lungs. Winding through me and down to my feet. I see myself running clear. I imagine I'll be pure as the snow that will be falling by the time I arrive east of the Mississippi.

I make it two hundred miles before the runoff comes.

4.

Shouldn't I say where this happened? That I was on Highway 40 East towards Albuquerque, and I pulled over when the phone rang. Or I was outside of Flagstaff eating a donut at the gas station. Or I was driving behind a tractor somewhere in Texas. But I don't remember where this conversation took place. I can't recall. I have looked at the date in my diary, traced my steps over those hours, but the surroundings of this conversation have evaporated. What I remember is Buck's voice. Steady. Precise. I remember him telling me that he found something he shouldn't have.

All I remember saying was, "Okay."

He tells me he has something to share.

I must've said, "What?" Or maybe my silence was his invitation.

He tells me he got a hold of a rifle. He's got two suicide notes written; one is for me. He's gonna kill himself in seventy-two hours, and I don't know where he is. His parent's house in North Dakota? His friend's place in Seattle?

I remember spitting in protestation, the words like flies in my mouth. I must've told him not to do it. I had to have said it would be so horrible if he were to die. I had to have said his name in repetition, to have said, *No, no. Please—don't.*

Did I keep stammering? Or did he speak? He must've. I remember the recitation of his chorus of pity: *You have ruined my life. Your omissions were lies.* But the only rhythm that mattered was that checklist within me, a prize wheel clicking: *date, intent, method.* But there was no reward. No winner. Just the steady thrum of building possibility. Never before was there a date. Never before was there a weapon or means. Never before with notes written. Never before had he said, *Seventy-two hours with a rifle. I've got goodbye notes.*

"I just wanted you to know," he said and hung up.

I'm back-tracking now. Back to Cripple Creek. Back to Linda getting the phone call about Sally's suicide from Sam. Back to Linda wondering how the hell she would get to New York with nothing more than the nickel she found in an old winter coat. Because if I was one of the people Linda called, I'd do the same thing, jump from the past to an even further past and back again. Because the first thing I'd say if I was Linda's friend was, *Yes, of course, how can I help you?* I'm ignorant, of course, to the saga that's just about to learn to crawl and will soon speak its first words. Instead, I'm attentive to the needs of the present moment. Sympathetic. Unsuspecting.

Who knows what Linda precisely said about Sally when she solicited friends for the capital to get to New York. Regardless, I imagine that Linda was frantic. At the

very least, urgent. Urgent to tell her friend what was going on. Urgent to get money. Urgent to explain the dire situation. If I was one of the friends she called, I'd be awaiting the prologue of what was happening *before* Sally disappeared: the last time Linda spoke to Sally. The final words. To see if Linda had any inkling of what was about to happen. I assume this is important information. I assume it's information that you would want to share if someone is suspected of killing themselves. If Buck took his own life, I would begin the story with: *He spoke about it all the time.*

But, when I imagine the scenario, Linda calling me, she never gets around to this. She's just rambling on about her theory—*The police called it a "suicide," but when I looked at Sally's natal chart again, I remember that her sun is in the 12th house ... which could indicate a kidnapping or potentially being hidden in a convent*—and, maybe, how she had a dream about Watergate before it happened, just like Martha Mitchell. Maybe she's talking about the funds she'd need for an investigator and if that shearling coat she's got is going to work this time of year in New York. Maybe she chatters about what she's going to do with her little son, Michael, while she's in New York. Take him with? *It might be the only way...*

I would've stopped listening by then. I'd be stuck on this information: *The police called it a "suicide"* and the way her voice mocked the word *suicide*.

In this fantasy, Linda is my friend. A real friend. Not a projection. Maybe I've even gone to her dinner parties, and I love the new Walkie Talkie set she got me, so I want to believe her. I'd want to think that, yes, Sally *is* alive, but any rational person is going to want to know what was happening before Sally died because if she did

overdose, I'd want to know if there were any warnings. Clues left that say, *This is how we could've known and intervened.*

So, once she takes a breath, I'd blurt it, *Linda, wait, wait—tell me, what was going on with Sally? Was she depressed? Had she recently gone through some kind of turmoil? Was she doing okay?*

But I only hear the line humming. I only hear Linda's sharp inhale. I only hear a woman stalling, mulling over how to respond. Because, possibly, the most honest thing Linda could've said was, *I don't know.*

Maybe I got in my car and drove, or maybe I didn't. Maybe I screamed, or maybe not. Maybe I considered driving to his parent's house in North Dakota and pounding on the door. As if I could've done something if I accosted them on their doorstep. As if me tracking him down and slapping him or shaking him or sinking to my knees and weeping would've convinced him otherwise. I don't know if it was then or later, but here my memory comes back to me: I'm in my car. Knees folded to my chest in the driver's seat. I'm outside of Gallup, New Mexico, on 40 West, the land sage and frost. Had I driven further after the call from Buck? I don't know. All I know is that I dial my father's number.

He picks up, and I bleat into the phone. I tell him what Buck said to me about the rifle and the suicide notes and killing himself on his birthday.

My father chuckles.

"Cork, you gotta stop talking to him," he says.

“I tried.”

“He’s just manipulating you.”

“Dad,” I sputter. “You don’t know him. He tried once before. He’s sad. I can’t—I can’t just not believe—”

“He’s *manipulating* you.”

“Okay, well, yeah, maybe, but, Dad, I just need to know—can you kill yourself with a rifle? Can you do it? Is it possible, or is a rifle too long? I... I just can’t see it. I can’t see how someone would—”

“Well... funny you should ask. I actually *knew* a guy in high school who tried to kill himself with a rifle. But, you know, he was a short little guy—didn’t have long arms or nothing. So, he missed—I don’t know if the gun slipped or whatever—and he didn’t die and, instead, just ended up blowing half his face off.”

A truck rushes past. My car seems to shiver in its quake, and I must’ve said nothing because my father just kept talking.

“Bad fucking luck . . . Did I ever tell you about Bob Donovan? He was gonna kill himself, so he goes out to this field with a bottle of Wild Turkey and a pack of cigarettes and a pistol but then the fucker—”

“Dad—you’ve told me this story.”

“Well, yeah, but it’s a good—”

“Dad, I need to know what would’ve happened if the guy you knew in high school had been taller or a better shot or something. Would it have happened? Would he have died?”

He pauses.

“I mean, probably—yeah! It’s probably harder than, say, with a pistol or something. You might have to use your toe to pull the trigger, but it’s not impossible.”

Buck is 6’3’. Bare branch toes. Bare branch limbs. He probably could shoot himself with a rifle. Or smart enough to figure out how.

I tell my father that I’ll talk to him later and hang up the phone.

Cars spit past, and I sit twisted for I don’t remember how long, questions churning. *Who to tell. My fault. Not my fault. Of course, my fault. If I don’t tell. If I do. Am I responsible. Complicit. Aren’t I already.* It couldn’t have been that long because soon I’d open up the car door to vomit.

I can’t tell you anything about Sally either.

I’ve seen the photograph Bibi DeAngelo posted online of Sally. Based on that, I know Sally was thin and blonde. I knew that she once wore a beret and that, maybe, people might’ve told her she looked like a young Goldie Hawn. All of this is to say, I know nothing of substance from the picture. I can’t even confirm that the photograph is Sally. The only other information I have is far more suspect: a Post-It note I wrote when I was eighteen that I stuck inside the back cover of my copy of *Love Signs*. Curiously, I dated the note: 8/23/2006. Perhaps I was pretending to be a researcher; maybe I thought that’s what they did: date Post-It notes. The note reads, “Sally played

Nina in Chekhov's *The Seagull*. Won Best Actress. AADA." "AADA" being the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, where Sally studied acting.

I try to verify the note, but I cannot find anything. I e-mail Duncan. I e-mail Jerry. Neither have any idea about Sally being in *The Seagull*. I peel through my notes. I peel through databases. I e-mail the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. I leave messages on their answering machine. I never hear back. I don't know where or how I got this information that Sally was in a production of *The Seagull*.

But I imagine that if she really was in the play, when she saw her name on the cast list next to the character "Nina," she felt chosen. Special. Because the role of Nina in *The Seagull* is an actress' reverie. It is a challenging role, one of great depth. Some characters in *The Seagull* want success. Others want artistic acclaim. Others desire love. The play begins with everyone in various states of gloom, and the play ends with almost everyone in various states of gloom. Yet, despite the play's melancholy and Nina's subsequent spiral, she is a character of hope.

Set at a bohemian estate in the late nineteenth-century Russian Countryside, the play begins with Nina showing up at the estate buoyant, dreaming of fame and fortune as an actress. She marvels at being among the writers and actors who have gathered at the property. Later in the play, Konstantin, a playwright whose romantic advances she has rejected, goes into the woods and shoots a seagull that he lays at her feet. He tells her that he shot this bird, and he's going to kill himself too. Meanwhile, Nina is enamored with another writer, Trigorin, and later runs away to Moscow with him to pursue an acting career.

We learn that Nina and Trigorin's affair curdles. They have a baby that dies. Nina is an actress but an unsuccessful one. When she returns to the estate years later, she finds Konstantin working and tells him:

Why do you say that you have kissed the ground I walked on? You should kill me rather. I

am a sea-gull—no—no, I am an actress I know now, I understand at last, Konstantin, that for us, whether we write or act, it is not the honor and glory of which I have dreamt

that is important, it is the strength to endure. One must know how to bear one's cross, and one must

have faith.

Nina is a study in endurance. About how to sustain. How to continue on. Her character's message is simple: *Do not give up*. Whereas, seeing how Nina has endured without him, Konstantin kills himself.

I wish I could ask Sally how she felt about playing Nina. How it felt to say the words, *One must know how to bear one's cross, and one must have faith*. Did the words feel sour in her mouth? A betrayal of how she felt? Or did they inspire her? Did she wish that she, too, one day, could say such a thing to herself? I can never know. But I imagine Linda must've believed that Sally was like Nina: a woman who endured.

When I lived on the California coast, there was a juvenile seagull that lived on the pier who had a fishing line wrapped around one of his knees. The webbed foot below appeared raisin-like: withered and dark. He couldn't stand on it. He was usually in the same spot each day, hopping along a wooden railing, hunting for stray french fries and discarded bread bowls from the chowder shack. I would watch him and fantasize that he might let me grab him and snip the line around his foot. I contemplated legal tranquilizers and diseases birds might carry. I wondered about protective gear and if he would struggle. One day, I slipped a pair of cosmetic scissors inside my purse before going to the pier. I would sometimes inch closer to see how quickly he would move, to see if he would sit still long enough for someone to nestle him under their arm.

He always darted from my advances, and I always stopped inching closer, not wanting to make him hop on one foot.

I called my father, an amateur avian expert, to ask about the bird. Was there anything I could do? Would the bird be okay? Do you think he's in pain? I felt terrible leaving him.

He told me there are lots and lots of seagulls, and lots of them lose one of their feet. "That's why they've got two. There's nothing you can do."

"I can't just grab him?"

"No. He's never gonna let you grab him."

"Do you think there's someone that would rehabilitate him?"

"Nobody rehabilitates seagulls. They're not that important."

“Well, I think he’s important.”

He sighed.

“You can’t save all the birds, Cork.”

We hung up.

I kept the cosmetic scissors in my purse for months.

Maybe six hours later. I must’ve gotten back on the road. I must’ve kept going. I must’ve checked into a hotel in Dalhart, Texas.

I sit on the bed.

I dial his father, Ray, from my cell phone, and he doesn’t pick up, so I dial him a second time from the rotary phone in the room. I think of Ray’s face, all wither and stubble just like Buck’s. I remember how Ray would text me about his son. How he would check in to see if he was okay. If he was filling out job applications. If we were happy. I think of Ray commenting on how much his son was drinking when we would visit North Dakota. *Too much*. I remember the tears in Ray’s eyes at our wedding and how he told me that he loved me like his own daughter. *So much*.

Someone picks up.

“Ray?” I choked.

“Yeah?”

“It’s Courtney.”

“Yeah?”

“Please listen.”

I tell him everything Buck has told me. About the rifle. The notes. The seventy-two hours. That I'm worried. That I didn't know who else to call—because who else could do something? “But, maybe,” I say, “you could.” I tell him that I don't know if this is real—but I didn't want to not say anything in case it's real, rig—

“It'll get fixed,” he says and hangs up.

I pull the phone down from my ear and stare at the receiver in my hand.

I thought Ray would thank me for letting him know.

In the opening pages of *Love Signs*, Linda includes two sections about Sally. The first is titled “a carousel message to Sally,” written on Christmas Eve 1977.

The letter explains how Linda hopes that finishing *Love Signs* will lead to the “miracle” of Linda finding Sally. Linda does not speak of suicide, police investigations, or conspiracy theories. Instead, she is cryptic. So much so that the letter is rendered meaningless to anyone unaware of Sally's disappearance. So enigmatic that, even knowing about Sally's disappearance, the letter contains larger mysteries I can only gesture towards. The letter's intended audience remains uncertain.

In the letter, Linda positions herself as an outcast, the only one who believed that “what [she] was told on that terrible December day in 1973 was a lie.” For her, “it was a very lonely faith.” Everyone believed she had been “prejudiced by grief,” even though Linda would prove “it” “medically and scientifically.” Despite this, Linda now finds herself at an impasse. Even with such evidence, it “didn't help me to

find you.” She doesn’t mention what the evidence is but writes that none of the “official ‘records’ seemed real,” perhaps referring to police reports, an autopsy, or a death certificate and that the records themselves “*seemed* like the dream, not *you*.”

The letter grows increasingly puzzling as she recounts how the last time Linda saw Sally, she was with someone named “Marc.” Linda does not elaborate on who Marc is but claims that this occasion was “the symbol of an unexpected twin-joy ending to temporary shadows and confusion.” While imprecise, I take this to mean that Linda believed Sally had found her true love in Marc and, in turn, any previous “shadows and confusion” would soon ameliorate. Rather, Linda implies that, for Sally, life appeared optimistic the last time she was with her daughter. She writes, as though reminding herself, “Faith bestows awesome miracles upon the faithful. This I know.”

There is also a “coded message” to Marc, albeit on another page, that speaks of “the power of the magic roses he and I carried to St. Patrick’s through the rain one April morning in New York,” followed by a quote from the 1972 film *Brother Sun Sister Moon*, about the life of St. Francis of Assisi, which reads, “words Bernardo . . . words. There was a time when I believed in words . . .”

She ends the letter with “one more thing I wanted to tell you,” and says that she keeps “dreaming the same dream... since you disappeared.” It is a dream about when Linda ran away to St. Raphael’s Convent on Thirteenth Street in Parkersburg, West Virginia, as “a little girl.” She writes, “The music . . . the incense . . . the whispering sirens . . . the scent of pine and the manger scene . . . the flickering

candles . . . all seem so *real* in my dream. Isn't that strange?" She signs the letter with "all my love, all my heart, *Mom*."

I curl up on the stiff bedspread and read from *The Seagull*: the scene where Konstantin lays the slaughtered bird at Nina's feet. I read his words to Nina, "You have failed me; your look is cold; you do not like to have me near you." Her response, "You have grown so irritable lately, and you talk so darkly and symbolically that you must forgive me if I fail to follow you. I am too simple to understand you." He tells her, "Oh, if you could only fathom my unhappiness! Your estrangement is to me terrible . . . You say you are too simple to understand me; but, oh, what is there to understand?"

I can hear a television through the wall. Someone's winning on a game show. The audience claps.

Perhaps I did feel too simple to understand Buck, but I do not know what else there was to understand. To me, there was nothing simpler than his nihilism. *Nothing has meaning*. What else was there to comprehend? I do not know what else I could've done. What response he wanted. If Buck had been like Konstantin, seeking my love through the prostration of his sorrow, a dead bird laid at my feet, he already had it. No bird needed. Were his disclosures a gift of intimacy I rejected? A bid to deepen our love that I dashed? I never saw it as such; I recoiled like Nina.

I lie in bed listening to the game show throughout the wall and think about how all I wanted was for Buck to ask for those cosmetic scissors he knew were in my purse, snip the line from his foot, and stand on his own.

I cannot determine the singular intent of the “Carousel Message.” In one way, the letter, in its intimacy, its singularly, is directed towards Sally. A love letter for a lost daughter. But I also see the letter functioning as a kind of tease to the public wherein Linda only tells enough information about the case to provoke interest and, perhaps, invoke support for Linda’s cause. She tells enough to entice. Yet, Linda’s ambiguity surrounding the specific evidence to support her theories surrounding Sally’s disappearance can be read in multiple ways. Maybe Linda’s lack of disclosure surrounding the evidence points to Linda’s ignorance of what happened to Sally. She cannot speak of details she doesn’t know. Or, perhaps, Linda’s ambiguity comes from wanting to protect herself from any naysayers. She wants to evade pointing to specific evidence that can be disproven. Or, possibly, the gestural information is given as a jest to any doubters, a boast that she has knowledge and through its concealment, she retains its power.

The final paragraph detailing Linda’s dream points to her conception of the relationship, or complication of the boundaries, between waking and dreaming life as she challenges the notion of believing in facts and evidence when something like a dream felt so “real” to her. Perhaps Linda suggests that, despite her proof not being

an “official” record or document, it still has validity. In this, does she point to the dreams she had of Sally? She doesn’t say.

Yet, the next section about Sally is far less ambiguous in its meaning.

How long do I lie there? I don’t know, but all I can think about are Buck’s long fingers sliding around that gentle curve of a trigger and the subsequent jolt. So I go out to my car, grab all the dreaming dictionaries, and toss them on the bed. I look up guns. Husbands. Handwritten notes. I bought them for Linda to look up “daughter” and “blonde woman,” but I instead look up everything I worry I will dream about to assure myself that it won’t matter even if I do dream of them.

This isn’t what I find.

According to Lady Stearn Robinson and Tom Corbett’s *The Dreamer’s Dictionary*, guns forecast injustice. In Briceida Ryan’s *The Ultimate Dictionary of Dream Language*, to dream of my husband means that I must act quickly. I have seven days to avoid an unfortunate event. I keep looking in each dictionary for more—*husbands, guns, notes, suicide*—until I fall asleep, dictionaries bent at the spines next to me, turkey vultures coasting.

That night, I do not dream of Buck.

I dream of my mother.

We sit in a dark, wood-paneled bar. I want to reach for the familiar: *We are home. In Wisconsin. At that bar off Country Highway K.* But nothing in the dream

confirms this. There's a middle-aged, white man across from us, grey-haired with a polyester PGA tour shirt. My mother touches his hairy hand across the green Formica table. She asks him if he has ever seen Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*. She laughs.

Is he a golfer? Or is he just wearing the shirt? I cannot tell. My mother would hate *A Clockwork Orange*. I doubt she's ever seen it. I look at the table in front of us. We each have a pint of beer. I pour salt in mine and watch the crystals dive bomb. My mother slaps my elbow and hisses at me, "Pay attention!"

I look up. The man went to the bar to get another beer. I ask my mother, "What are you doing? You're married. You can't be flirting with this man."

"This is just pretend," she says, laughing.

I want to search her face for her age, but she has turned away from me and digs through her purse. I think about her withered body. Clumps of hair in the bathtub. Chemotherapy dry heaves into the toilet. Her ashes in my hands. I hold my suspicion within me, yet every move she makes within the dream defies it. I am caught believing, if only for a moment before waking, that she has returned.

In the proceeding section, Linda is more explicit as to who the next section is for, addressing it, "For Sally . . . who, as Sarah Stratton, won the Best Actress award from the American Academy of Dramatic Arts... in the spring of 1973—and who disappeared on December 10th, 1973."

The story begins with returning to "that desolate home from which she took flight, so long ago." The narrator states that "one thing I would like to do immensely,

and that is to tell Sally's mother, in the way authors have, that her child is coming back." But "that would spoil completely the surprise to which the angels and druids and Sally herself are so looking forward" for "they've all been planning . . . her mother's rapture, her Dad's shout of joy, Bill's and Jill's and Michael's leap through the air to embrace her first."

The section apologizes for "taking some liberties with the great classic of James M. Barrie," author of *Peter Pan*, "for a special and love cause." The narrator describes the state of the family's house: "Sally's dad is now living in Heathcliff's old doghouse." I know Heathcliff was Linda's pet sheepdog, but I do not know if "Sally's dad" refers to Bill or Sam. Either way, "When his daughter flew away, he felt in his bones that all the blame was his" and "each night, when he returns from work, he crawls back into his kennel." They then describe "Sally's mother, a very sad-eyed woman." The narrator claims that as they look at her closely, they "remember the gaiety of the old days, all gone now, just because she has lost her babe." They continue, "Look at her in her chair . . . asleep. The corner of her mouth, where one looks first, the corner Sally always kissed, is almost withered up. Her hand moves restlessly on her breast, as if she had a pain there."

The narrator describes Linda awakening and saying to Heathcliff, "Oh, Heathcliff, I dreamt my Sally had come back!"

Such a dream will soon be realized.

The narrator describes the family finding Sally sleeping in her bed "like a princess in a faerie tale." But they do not shriek in excitement at first, for "they had

seen her there so often, in their dreams, that they all thought this was just the old dream, hanging around them still.” Once they realize it is, indeed, Sally, “every single person in the room levitated . . . that is, they all found they could fly.”

Despite the happy ending, the section shows Linda as broken and lonely. Perhaps it is an appeal to Sally, *See how you have tortured me?* Or could it be a confession, *See what a wreck I truly am?* Or maybe a plea to those who doubt Linda, *How could you disbelieve a woman in such pain?* It is a dead seagull laid at the reader’s feet.

Such confusion often happens when I dream of my mother. It runs a predictable course.

I watch her move in the dream and convince myself she went away for a while, but now she’s back. I gape at her and panic thinking about her reentering our lives. I think about the rats nesting in our car engines. The steps leading down to the lake have split and rotted. Her landscaping has overgrown and been forgotten. The Christmas wreath on the door is the same Christmas wreath from the December she was diagnosed. In the dream, I wonder what it would be like to have a living mother again. About what she would think of me. About my brother. Our stepfather. I see that, despite missing her, we have expanded past the space she once inhabited. I don’t know what to tell her in the dream. The words that come to me are too painful to speak, *There’s no room for you...*

Sometimes in the dream, I conclude that I don't understand death. Maybe it's more like a timeshare or a vacation rental. Maybe you can die and come back. Other times, I am wary. I point to the trembling coffee cup in her frail hand, the lipstick she glides across her mouth, the way the bed sags when she lies on it as though it were evidence. I ask myself, *When was the last time you really saw her do that?* But I am caught in the dream's eerie logic where she is alive to me: breathing, laughing, and lipstick wearing. I battle with myself, trapped between evidence of her existence and evidence of her death.

When I wake, the spaces she inhabited remain collapsed. The crisis of her reappearance resolved. The pain of her absence steady but dull. After the dream, I tell my friends that my mother visited me last night. I laugh. I try to make a joke of it. But the joke has gone on for years. Why do I keep telling it? Sometimes I long for the dreams. I worry I'll never dream of her again.

Once, I dreamt of my mother on Mother's Day eve. The next morning, I walked to a bookstore to browse and found a used encyclopedia of birds to purchase. When I went to pay the cashier for the book, he asked me if I would be spending time with my mother today.

I looked at him, the words rising within me. *Yes, in fact, I just saw her...*

I paused.

"No..." I replied. "My mother is . . . dead."

I knew the words were true, but they felt false. A line from a play I was once cast in.

I left the bookstore.

I sat in the park for the rest of the morning and read the Latin names of starlings aloud. *Sturnus vulgaris*. *Grús americana*. *Dendroica kirtlandii*. I repeated them until the syllables felt familiar in my mouth. As though I understood their new sounds. As though I could translate the untranslatable within me. As though I could understand my want, somehow, to reside there.

Is this why I find myself drawn to Linda? Why I continue to pursue her? Because I understand the confusion? That porous boundary between waking and dreaming? Because I realize what it's like to be enchanted, convinced even, by what you see there? Or, maybe, the reason I am drawn to her, cannot let her go, is that I understand the heartbreak of the chasm between what you believe, what you want to be true, and what is real.

The next morning in Dalhart, I toss the dictionaries and *The Seagull* in the trunk, get a coffee from a gas station, and keep driving. I sing along to every song on the radio and listen to the news at the top of the hour, trying to remember what it was an hour ago. I say every billboard slogan aloud and narrate the drive to myself. *Here we are outside of Ames, Iowa, on I-35 North. On our right and, I guess, our left, we have some naked cornfields with a few leftover stalks... We've got plenty of semi-trucks on the road today. And here we've got one full of cattle... you can see their little faces through the slatted doors... looks like some Jersey cattle...* I try to distract myself, but the questions push at me. About him. About his threat. About whether I have done

enough. About my responsibility. About whether I should've just kept talking to him, listening to him talk about soulmates, and said nothing. About whether he's purposefully not talking to me to further scare me.

If he is, it's working.

Why do I imagine Linda not knowing anything about Sally in the year before her disappearance?

Sure, according to Bibi DeAngelo, Sally had sent Linda and Sam letters from the Hackmatack Playhouse in Maine where Sally performed in the months before she disappeared that "were filled with news, overflowing with optimism of five plays that would begin in late June and end before Labor Day." Maybe the letters spoke of specifics that Linda would've known about how Sally would be living at the farmhouse adjacent to the theater, tending to the chickens, or staying up until two with her friends, memorizing lines for the summer stock shows. Maybe Linda knew that Sally had played the leading role in *The Cactus Flower* and Annie Sullivan in *The Miracle Worker*, and she danced in a few musicals. Maybe she remembers holding the letters in her hand and watching Sally's loopy handwriting dash across the page and feeling momentary contentment reading her daughter's words.

But, even if she knew these things, if she had known what Sally's last semester at AADA was like, I see Linda as inattentive. Maybe even oblivious to Sally's final months. I imagine that once she put Sally's letters back down on her desk, next to the bank statements and contracts she was supposed to notarize for her

lawyer, and the drafts for those books she wished would just go ahead and write themselves, she'd let her mind wander back to him: Robert. Her lover. The twenty-two-year-old marine biologist. Linda was waiting for his return.

It was her obsession. Occupying her thoughts from the early morning to her final waking moment. Perhaps, at this time, before Sally's disappearance, it felt good to fixate upon him and his reappearance. I imagine she was convinced that with each passing day, with winter coming again and the days growing shorter, even in places like Baja and Mazatlán, it would flush him up and out like a grouse hiding in sodden oak leaves.

Maybe Linda was calling up and asking her favorite intuitive over in Venice Beach to inquire about the month he would appear. Maybe they would say the words Linda yearned for, *This fall... I feel November is fortuitous*. Maybe Linda visualized Robert snoring beside her each night and pretended that the dark hairs in the shower drain were not hers but his so often that she really did convince herself that he had just stepped out for a moment. To run to the store to grab a loaf of sourdough. To take those letters to the bank for her. To see the full moon rise over the hill. Maybe she thought these domestic fantasies were entirely probable. Likely even. *The man still has a key to my place! His footprints are still on the bedroom carpeting!* Maybe she luxuriated in these fantasies so often that she carried on as though nothing had happened, down to setting a place for him at the dinner table every day as Hall and Rein claim she did. Because I envision that Linda clings to her fantasies. That they

give her balance. Hope. Control. That the dust she feathers off his table setting is a reminder of how far she's come and how close she is to being in his arms again.

Or do I only imagine Linda's not thinking about much else besides the man who has left because that's where I am? Where I find myself pulling over in a hailstorm to call my cousin from the side of the road in Wabasha, dairy cows in the distance running for the cover of a tin-roofed hut.

She picks up.

I tell her about Buck and the suicide notes. About killing himself in seventy-two hours. I tell her that, "I don't know what to do—I shared the information with his father, but that doesn't mean he won't kill himself. That doesn't mean that if he doesn't kill himself now, he won't kill himself in the future." I tell her that, "I'm worried—I feel like I did this to him. I've been trying to drive all day and not think about it, but I can't not think about it because I told him I didn't want to be married. I did this. If he's gonna kill himself, then it's my fault. And I can't handle that—I can't handle that. I don't want him to di—"

"Courtney," my cousin snaps. Her voice, somehow, even louder than the hail.

"What?"

"You know it's not your fault if *he* kills himself."

". . . it doesn't feel that way."

"Listen—it's not your fault if he kills himself."

“ . . . But if he actually kills himself, then it’s really gonna feel that way—maybe I shouldn’t have just ended it in this way. Maybe I should’ve had us go to therapy and told him during therapy. My friend told me that I could write letters. Maybe I should’ve written a letter . . . that would’ve been gentler. I shouldn’t have just told him. I should’ve scaffolded it like a lesson plan an— ”

“No—no. *No*. People break up and get divorced all the time, and not everyone kills themselves.”

“But I married him—I mean, I know him. He is really sad.”

“He’s *working* you. If he’s depressed and wants to die, then that’s his bullshit—you can’t fix that. . . okay? That’s why you left in the first place.”

The wind hurls a crushed Slurpee cup across the road. I watch it crash into the ditch.

“Plus, he’s too much of a coward to kill himself anyway,” she says, hanging up the phone.

I wait until the storm fades into mist and pull back onto the road, baffled by the notion of dying by suicide having anything to do with cowardice or bravery, by the notion of suicide being anything other than an expression of suffering.

Or do I imagine Linda consumed by this lover because I know this to be how grief operates? That it can flood you to the point where all you can do is tread water? Where you become overwhelmed by not only fantasies but rituals?

I see it like this: Linda crawling out of bed, lighting a candle before the St. Francis of Assisi statue on her dresser, and praying before him each morning. Then, lighting a fire and checking Robert's astrological transits for potential clues as to his comeback. Then, adding more logs and studying books in astral projection, an intentional out-of-body experience, and practicing it on her living room floor. I see her supine on the shag carpet, following the book's instructions to breathe in and out, gradually increasing speed. To feel your body grow lighter and lighter. To let yourself drift into another realm. To enter the space between heaven and earth. But, of course, you can only do that so long before you become lightheaded. And anytime Linda became lightheaded, she needed a cigarette, so the astral projection attempts never amount to much beyond Linda sitting on her wrap-around porch, watching smoke drift into the distance. Even so, Linda thinks of this like a prayer: her smoke beseeching the gods.

After her cigarette, I imagine her afternoon rituals involved calling up the Monterey Bay Aquarium to ask if they'd seen Robert recently—maybe he used to work with the animals there. She knows it's not a habit of the metaphysical sort, but it's something she does almost every day. So, in that sense, it's at least procedural. *Nearly* a ritual. She does it so often so that the secretary knows her by voice alone. Does the secretary know the whole story? That Linda met this younger man and had some seemingly passionate love affair for an unspecified amount of time before he disappeared? I don't know. I, myself, can't even find the details, and, in turn, I

imagine the secretary merely annoyed by this woman calling for a man who never seems to be around and, maybe, hasn't been for years.

There are probably other rituals she does. Making mini-altars. Chanting. Humming. Kissing a specific tree on her property. Of course, Linda hasn't brought Robert back through any one of these methods, but she knows she eventually will. So, in the meantime, she keeps it up. The fantasies. Setting the dinner plate for him. Astral projection's frenetic breathing. The phone calls to Monterey Bay.

The thing is—doesn't Linda get tired of treading so much water? Is she going anywhere? Progressing towards anything? Is she also thinking about how foolish she was to get here in the first place: falling in love with some man who disappears just like everybody else in her life? And, of course, the longer she contemplates that, the more she folds in on herself, the more inward she turns. So, to me, if Linda didn't know what was going on with Sally in the months before her death, it doesn't surprise me.

Because, for Linda, Sally was never the first disappearance.

I show up at my stepfather's house in rural Wisconsin at midnight.

I go into the basement, fall into bed, and dream of Buck. The dream is sharp. Vivid. We are on the California coast together. He sits on an ocean cliff bench. I go up to him. The wind blows, and he stares at the crumbling concrete surrounding the bench. I sit next to him, trying to console him. My words are muted. I can't hear myself. He gets up and walks away. I watch him walk down the sidewalk. There's a

parade happening in the street. Children in costumes and face paint. Balloons. Dog tails wagging. I run after him, and I can't catch him. He's wearing the plaid pants he found at Goodwill.

Flash elsewhere. We're at a restaurant together. There's no food. No silverware. It's just him and me at a table. I see the ring on my finger. I remember: *We're married*. I look up at him. He's smiling. His teeth a nicotine yellow. I look at his ring finger. He's got one too. I look back at my ring finger. *How do I get out of this? How did I get back here?* Suddenly, there's a salad before Buck. A wilted mound of iceberg lettuce with a pile of grape tomatoes falling off the plate. He spears a grape tomato and holds it out to me to eat. I don't want it. I don't want this. I bend forward. I eat it. I don't want it. This isn't real. *You aren't married*. Well, you are married, but you're not together. But if you're dreaming of him, then maybe, maybe—

I wake up on an inhale.

He's dead.

It's 4:32 am. I crawl out of bed and call him.

The phone goes to voicemail.

I call him again. And again.

I go to his social media. Last post at 9:43 pm. Something about radical socialism. Another post about a new brand of vegetarian hamburgers.

I crawl under the covers, propel myself to the bottom of the bed, and curl up, hands clasped to my chest. I pray he isn't dead. I pray that if he did try to kill himself, he couldn't go through with it, that he coughed up the pills or accidentally took

melatonin. I pray that the knives were too dull, and he didn't have any bullets. I pray that the song he wanted to die to wouldn't play or that his parents woke up and asked what the hell he was doing in their bathroom with a paring knife. I pray that the family heeler, Sparky, came up to Buck, and staring into Sparky's cataract-ridden brown eyes touched his heart, and he couldn't handle killing himself while Sparky watched. I pray that this isn't like my mother. I tell myself the story my father told me about Bob Donovan. The story I wouldn't let him tell. Bob went to a cornfield somewhere near the Kinnickinnic River with a pistol, a pack of cigarettes, and a fifth of Wild Turkey. His plan: drink the bourbon, chain-smoke the cigarettes, and shoot himself. But the fifth was too boozy, and the Wisconsin summer sun was too warm, and the breeze was just right. So, right when he lit what was to be his last cigarette, he fell asleep, lit ember twinkling in his hand, and the cornfield went up in flames. He woke up, fire lapping at his feet, and ran, leaving the pistol behind, and I pass out, blazing stalks wild in my mind.

5.

ABSTRACT (what I would tell you if you were the neighbor)

You're burning garbage in a barrel, and I'm walking out to the road to get the mail when you call me

over to update me on all the shit that hasn't been done on my stepfather's property. The rusted '97 Chevy Monte Carlo in the lawn and the gutters sprouting oak saplings. That dead carp stinking down by the lakeside last spring and dog shit for days. You tell me about seeing my stepfather passed out on the riding lawnmower this past summer as if I'd never heard him stumbling and riding the kitchen floor's stagnant wave. As if I haven't watched his inebriation become quotidian. You tell me it's a good thing this neighborhood isn't in an HOA. I want to tell you it's a good thing your wife never died, but I don't. I don't tell you how you don't seem to understand how I've tried. How he's tried. How the things she once took care of turned in her absence, her handiwork made plain in the spaces we'd never thought about. So, now, when I return, I rip the saplings out of the gutters and add water to the Maker's Mark and scrub the floors. I take the Christmas lights down in

July and spray the mold in the basement with bleach, but it doesn't help. The leaves come back, and the snow comes back, and the mold grows, and it's all a mess again, and now the shingles are falling off the roof, and I can't fix it. I can't put it back together.

I wish I could tell you not to worry about it. Encourage you not to give a shit about anything west of your property line. I wish I could tell you to say it to me. For me. *Don't worry. Leave him on the lawnmower. He'll be fine.* But I don't know how to walk away. I don't know how to get out of this. So, all I can do in response is to keep walking to the mailbox, your smoke stinking past the property line all afternoon, your words hovering over us the whole damn winter.

ABSTRACT (what I'd tell you if you were my friend from middle school)

We used to pretend we were sick to get out of swimming together during high school gym class, and now you're married with a gummy-looking newborn sleeping in your lap and breast milk stains like a crime scene on your t-shirt. When my mother warned me about Bible studies when I was eighteen, and I told her that the kids I knew who went to those were okay, you were one of the kids I was talking about. I've always loved you—found you kind and wise. I'm on the crumb-ridden floor of your apartment helping your one-year-old with one of those plastic box toys where you stick shapes into the corresponding holes. You ask me about my marriage, and I give you the gloss.

Too much drinking. Wanting to die too often. Letting it go too much. The newborn in your arms squawks. You probe further, asking me how I feel, asking me if I want to try to get back together with him, and I crack, start to weep, not even realizing I'm trying to shove a triangle into a square hole. I keep spinning the plastic shape around and around, jabbing in the points. I tell you, I'm embarrassed. So embarrassed that I didn't see how wrong this was. That I, essentially, lied to someone through my silence. That I feel deceived. I thought I knew him. I didn't think this was how things were going to pan out. I feel so foolish for trusting him. That I don't know why I can't let this go. Your one-year-old starts whacking my thigh. His little pink hand a metronome. I let the triangle drop.

You tell me that God doesn't like divorce. That, in the Bible, marriage is a public and sacred commitment. "Divorce is something hard to forgive," you tell me, your eyes gazing at your baby, "But your husband sounds really difficult... So, I think God will forgive you."

You stick your baby under her shirt and tell me about hyperlactation.

Sometime later, you ask me about my dissertation, and I paraphrase what I think it should be. What I write in fellowship applications and tell other Ph.D. candidates it is. What I wish the project really was. *A recuperation of a stereotyped figure. A feminist biography. A story that reveals how Linda Goodman's legacy is not one of madness but one where she spearheaded the American New Age movement.* But I know I'm lying. Not because she can't be

those things, but because I know what the project is and, I've already said it to you. *This is about how I feel deceived. How I thought I knew her. That I feel so foolish for trusting her. How I don't know why I can't let this go.*

ABSTRACT (subtext)

We're still in the diner. Me and Linda. My fantasy interview gone rogue; my hands extended across the orange Formica table, grasping for hers. Our coffee went cold hours ago. The waitress gave us lunch menus that sit unexamined on the end of our table. There's a plume in the air from burnt bacon in the kitchen. *Tell me please*, I say, coughing. *Tell me how I'm supposed to do this. Tell me how I'm supposed to carry on. Because, Linda, your life is a life of disappearances. Of vanishments. Think about your infant daughter that died and your first husband, Bill. Then, Robert Brewer... and, of course, Sally. You talk about it in Gooberz. About treading that path to the cemetery to say goodbye continually. That's the narrative. That's the story I'm writing—maybe the story I'm in, even—and I have to know what you did. How you did it. How I can do this...*

Linda looks at me and places her hands in front of her, fingers woven.

My life is not a series of disappearances, Courtney, she says. *My life is a series of miracles.*

My hands go limp on the table, *What?*

I wake up and recheck everything. My phone. His social media accounts. All the same as it was seven hours ago.

I throw myself back into the bed frame, stare at the strip of snow visible through the egress window, and hear the words revolve within me. *Two. Suicide. Notes. One. For. You.* I think of the dream. Buck's unsuspecting face staring at me. My question at the Dreaming Group: *What does it mean? This dream about someone that might be dead?* I remember Dave's face, all unshaven and pocked. Steve babbling and José's sunburnt nose, and I remember walking back to my rented Jesus room, no answers within me. I try to remember that Buck never believed in the afterlife or God or dreams having meaning. He believed nothing had meaning. I try to remember that maybe it's just me talking to myself—my subconscious working out what I fear. That the dream wasn't about him dead, it was about being married. About being trapped there. I watch an errant leaf, never raked from the fall, skitter past the window and wonder if you can be simultaneously trapped and free.

I get up and grab Linda's autobiography *Gooberz* off the floor and take it with me. Thinking I'll read it during the day. Take notes. Distract myself. Thinking that, maybe, if I just carry it with me, I'll know what to do. Thinking that knowledge is something osmotic, as though the messages Linda could tell me about loving and losing could move from her to me without effort, water pruning fingers in a bathtub.

Because before Sally, Linda lost Robert. Hall and Rein mention him as one of the two people who vanished, as in "her lover . . . who fled to Mexico without

explanation in the spring of 1972 and has not been seen since.” *Gooberz* tells of their relationship. I take the book with me to the gas station where truckers from Sioux City with thick necks and rough hands gather beside the rotisserie taquitos to talk about some woman named Brenda from Osseo. I take it to the diner where I eat a plate of fries at 11 am, and thirteen-year-olds bat icicles outside along the diner’s railing and watch them shatter on the blacktop. I take it to the bank where I deposit a check, the snap of fingers on keyboards and the crescendo of cars through snow puddles on the street the only things audible. I take it with me to the laundromat and the IGA, where some guy in a Viking’s jersey and sweatpants asks me in the parking lot why the hell if I got California plates, I’d come to this godforsaken state this time of year.

I stop and turn around to look at him and his wind-whipped face. Him and our backdrop of tawny muck and snowbanks of dog piss. Him and everybody else walking into the IGA all wearing sweatshirts and baseball caps. Him and our invisible exhales.

“This isn’t that bad,” I say, turning back to the automatic doors.

I take *Gooberz* with me to knock on the door of my father’s room at the hotel off Highway 53: 34B. A kitchenette and half-bath on the hotel’s south wing. Thirty percent off for staying for more than six weeks. He’s been here twelve.

He throws the door open.

“Remember that guy you told me about who tried to kill himself and set the field on fire instead?” I ask, hands shoved inside the pockets of my winter bomber, *Gooberz* cradled in my elbow.

“Yeah?” he replies.

“Whatever happened to him?”

“Fuck if I know,” he says as I edge my way through the door.

The only thing on the room’s cracked walls is a painting of pheasants in a cornfield gazing at one another as though they were lovers. I imagine this painting irks my father; he’s a man who loves love, and the only reason he’s in this room is because he doesn’t have it. He sprawls on the bed and opens a can of Coke, the tan line from his wedding band still visible on his left hand, the palm all puffed pink and gristle from a pistol explosion when he was twenty-two.

“What do you mean you don’t know? Didn’t you work with him?” I ask, sitting down on the sunken couch.

“I mean, yeah, but I worked with him decades ago—I dunno whatever happened to him.”

“Well, do you know if he’s alive?”

“I never seen his picture in the obits.”

“Oh . . . Well, that’s good—”

“That don’t mean he’s alive neither.”

I cross my legs, and we stare at the television. FOX news correspondent Jesse Watters is talking about why the Mueller investigation is an FBI coup. My father’s

Labrador retriever creeps out from the bathroom and waddles over to stick her face in my lap. She has a bit of toilet paper sticking out of the side of her mouth. I pull it out.

“Dad, I’m freaking out abo—”

“Oh, oh! You gotta look at this,” my father says, standing up to stick his cell phone in my face. “Lookit this. Tell me what you think.” He goes outside to fiddle with the miniature grill he stuck in a snowbank.

The cell phone shows a series of messages between my father and his third wife, Virginia, who he is currently divorcing.

The conversation begins with a message from her reading, *Maybe we could go fishing up in Ontario again this summer*, alongside a photograph of the two other Labrador retrievers they had together.

My father replies with a picture of the other lab holding an orange training dummy in her mouth and writes, *Yes, Id love to have fun again with u. Thunder bay is v pretty.*

Remember the good times? I miss those, Virginia writes.

Yes, I remember them, my father replies.

The messages end with my father asking Virginia to have a glass of wine with him at their “old spot.”

I sigh and listen to my father curse at the grill outside.

What do I think?

I think I remember my father telling me that they almost didn’t get married. They had booked some elaborate wedding vacation package on St. John’s Island ten

years ago and were spitting in one another's faces right up to the ceremony, but they'd already paid for the trip, her dress, and the photographer, so they went ahead with the whole thing. I think Virginia once forbid my father from seeing my brother and me: vestiges of his former marriage, both of us the mirror image of our mother, his first wife. I think they almost divorced five years ago because my father didn't want to landscape the front lawn. He told Virginia he wasn't a landscaper; he was a fisherman. He said, *Have you ever seen me pick up pruning shears in the six years you've known me? Who do you think you married?* That time, she kicked him out in the middle of June.

My father was broke. He pawned his wedding ring for thirty bucks and the watch Virginia gave him for Christmas for twenty and lived for two months in his cousin's cabin until they rekindled. He found another wedding ring on eBay and bought it. Virginia would later ask him, *What happened to your ring? Wasn't the band thicker?*

No, no... It's always looked this way. A nice thin band—remember?

I think that Virginia has abandoned him in restaurants and movie theaters. Virginia has gone for days on end without speaking to him, epic silent punishment. She has refused meals, refused water, to avoid talking to him. They have screamed at one another in department stores and on a ferry in the middle of Lake Michigan, and my brother told me that she once left him in a parking garage in Minneapolis and drove back over the Wisconsin border, leaving him to find his own way home.

I think it was fated last October when my father scooped the ashes from a previous night's fire into a plastic bag, neglected to douse the contents in water, and, instead, put the plastic bag into a plastic garbage bin in the garage. He and Virginia left to go fishing three hours away in Superior while the embers spawned. Later that evening, they would return to find their house in flames. Their insurance company put them up in a hotel room, but she booted him from there within twenty-four hours. Homeless, my father went to stay in his cousin's cabin in Buffalo City without running water. I think it was after that he stayed with my stepfather in my childhood bedroom for six months. Now, he's in room 34B.

My father barges back into the room.

"Well?" he asks, zipping his parka up.

I think he should pitch his cell phone into a snowbank, pawn his wedding ring, and never look back.

"I'll tell you in the car," I say, handing him his phone, picking up my copy of *Gooberz*, and walking towards the door.

"What the hell is that?" he asks, pointing to the book.

"It's for my dissertation," I say, stepping outside.

"You're always doing weird shit."

Linda believed in miracles. She had a slogan of sorts: *Expect a miracle!* She writes it in her books, says it in her letters, and I imagine she said it to friends and as a retort to anyone who doubted her: *Expect a miracle!* She describes her belief in *Love Signs*:

Miracles *are* possible. Miracles *do* happen . . . Science is presently concerned only with the material

forces, failing to recognize the Spiritual Forces. Yet, what is material force, but the visible

manifestation of the Spiritual Force behind it? . . . You . . . control your miracles. All that's needed to

produce them is the marriage of Truth and Faith.

For Linda, the *expectation* of a miracle, the thinking of it, belief in its manifestation, would inevitably provoke its material appearance in her life. *Belief* in a miracle occurring would result in the *truth* of its existence.

In *Star Signs*, Linda describes the miniature altar she keeps with her when she travels “to evoke minor magic and ordain baby miracles—for myself and others.” She calls it her “portable cathedral” consisting of “an alabaster statue of St. Francis of Assisi . . . a bowl of fresh daisies... and several votive candles burning in ruby-red glass holders, like the ones in St. Patrick’s Cathedral on Fifth Avenue in New York City.” Yet, Linda claims that “one doesn’t really need such an accouterment to manifest magic or miracles.” Instead, “all you need is a direct line of communication” to your “Higher Self” or whatever one’s conception of “God” may be.

She is not the only New Age figure to espouse such principles. She recommends several books in *Love Signs*’ “Recommended Reading” list that echo the connection between the visions of your inner world manifesting in your outer world. She suggests “any book about Edgar Cayce.” Cayce states in *Edgar Cayce on*

Atlantis, his son Edgar Evans Cayce's 1968 book, as saying, "Mind is indeed the Builder . . . which is held in the act of mental vision becomes a reality in the material experience. We are gradually builded to that image created in our own mental being." She likewise recommends alternative readings of Jesus Christ's life and his miracles, such as Levi H. Dowling's 1964 book *The Aquarian Gospel* and Reverend William Phipps' 1979 text *The Sexuality of Jesus* that claim to unearth the metaphysical teachings in the Bible that have been hidden for centuries.

There is no anti-thesis. There is no "if your miracle doesn't manifest" clause or instructions as to what to do. Nor does Linda provide any criteria for determining what a miracle looks like or could be. She does not cite the miracles of Jesus changing water into wine, raising Lazarus from the dead, or the miracles described in the Hebrew Bible. Nor does she mention the miracles of Gautama Buddha: healings, teleportation, and creating duplicates of himself.

Nor does she mention what a miracle would look like to her, what she envisions a miracle could be. Are miracles the things of changing water to wine, or are they as quotidian as finding a lost sock? Likewise, are miracles wholly beneficial for humanity? Can one person's miracle come at someone else's expense? Perhaps, Linda does not provide an example of what, precisely, a miracle would be for her because it's so obvious what it would be: *Sally coming home. Robert, too*. I wonder if Linda hesitates, also, to give precise examples of what a "miracle" would be for her because, in one sense, to proclaim that you are hunting for miracles is to claim that you are courting the inexplicable. Rather, in calling Sally or Robert's reappearances

“miraculous” is Linda admitting that their resurgences would be something statistically unlikely?

I want to say that Linda does not give a definition of a miracle because she believes that a miracle can be what is most unexpected. Something that she, herself, doesn’t define. Something that she leaves up to the will of something beyond her. But her definition of miracle presents the concept as something she can control, a wild bull she can lasso through her insistence upon “truth” and “faith.” Yet, other conceptions of the miraculous present the idea as something beyond scientific or natural law. Something, in essence, that does not yield to the laws or wills of the earth. Something Linda could not control no matter how much she tried. Rather, is “expecting” a miracle to contradict the very thing a miracle is?

“How was the drive?” My father asks, sticking his hands between his knees.

I am quiet.

We crawl down Highway 53. It’s snowing dandruff, all flakey and light against the darkness.

“I think he’s dead, Dad,” I say, rubbing my right hand on my leg.

“Nah—he’s not dead,” my father says. “He’s just being a jackass.”

“Dad—I don’t think he’s being a jackass. I’m really worried. I keep trying to call him, and he won’t return my calls.”

“He’s not returning your calls to fuck with you. So, you get all worried like you are now. Meanwhile, he’s just fine... He’s probably eating fuckin’ bacon and eggs and reading the paper.”

“I wish I could call his folks and see... see if he’s—”

“Don’t call his folks.”

I fidget with the heating vents, my teeth chattering.

“They’d never talk to me anyway. I think they hate me.”

“Well, who cares—it’s not like you *cheated* on him or anything like that. You just didn’t want to be married to the fucker anymore!”

“Yeah, but they’re still never gonna want to talk to me... even if it’s just asking to see if he’s okay.” I pull into a spot at Perkins and kill the engine. My toes feel wet in my boots. “I just don’t know what to do.”

“There’s not much you can do, Cork.”

We stomp inside and slide into a green vinyl booth that grips our legs as we slip into it. I order chicken strips and coffee. My father gets turkey with a side of mashed potatoes.

“Well,” my father says, playing with the paper wrapping from his straw.

“Wha’do ya think about those texts?”

Throw your phone.

“Well, what do you think?” I ask.

“Wah—well, I think she maybe wants to get back together! You know, she’s talking about fishing in Canada... wanting to do that again! I think we could be turning a corner here...”

Into the snowbank.

“I’d just wait and see, Dad... see what she says. See how you feel . . . Do you even want to be with her?”

Pawn your.

“Well, yeah! I mean, then we wouldn’t have to do this whole divorce thing.”

Wedding ring.

“Yeah, but then you’d still be married to her.”

“Yeah! That’s the point! We’d still be together. I could get outta that fucking hotel and live in the house I paid the mortgage off on.”

I dump a creamer into my coffee and watch it bloom.

“But do you *want* that? To be with her? Again?”

My father tosses the paper wrapper from his straw to the side and looks past me.

I continue, “I just think that she hasn’t treated you all that kindly, Dad. She sounds really difficult . . . I mean, she kicked you out for no reason. She’s... not a nice person. I think you deserve someone... who’s, you know, *kind* to you.”

I sip my coffee and watch him. He ignores me. Stirs the plastic straw in his water. Picks out a piece of ice with his fork and cracks it between his teeth. Smears a hand across his face.

“I’m sixty-five... I just... I don’t wanna be alone.”

Our food shows up, and we talk about the weather.

There are no records I can find of a man named “Robert Brewer” or “Bob Brewer” who were marine biologists in the 1970s. I come across a drawing of, according to the poster, Robert on the Linda Land internet forum. The drawing is an amateur line drawing with the title “Goober.” Jill Goodman, Linda’s other daughter, is listed as the artist alongside the date “1972.” The drawing shows a man with a long square face, thick mustache, and beard. Hair shaggy. His eyes crinkle in a slight smile. But the scan is faded and gestural, so much so that had I not been looking for Robert Brewer, I would’ve guessed that the image was a cartoon rendition of a white Jesus Christ. I would’ve missed Robert altogether. As with the photograph of Sally, the drawing of Robert only tells me superficial information—maybe he had long hair, maybe he was sympathetic. But, really, it only inspires more questions. Did Jill really draw this? Is this really Robert or a religious portrait? Did Robert know Linda’s children? The drawing only points to the mystery, the lack of information, I already knew I had.

The snow still piling, we step into the parking lot, and my father asks me what I’m gonna do the rest of the evening. I slide the snow off the windshield with my arm. We climb in the car and shiver, sticking our gloved hands to our faces and blowing hot breath into them.

“I should read more of this book,” I say, turning the engine over, “and I’m going to try not to think about whether or not Buck is dead.”

My father rubs his hands together.

“What are you gonna do?” I ask.

“Fuck if I know. Watch the tube.”

We drive in silence as the snowplows churning alongside us leave clean road in their wake. We pull into the hotel’s vacant parking lot.

My father hops out of the car and stomps up to his hotel door. I watch him fumble with his wallet for the keycard. I roll the window down and stick my face into the cold, my chest throbbing. I yell to him, “Dad—I . . .”

He opens the door and wheels around, his face blank.

“I’m—scared.”

My father stares at me.

“What if—wh... I don’t know what—” I whisper.

“If he’s dead, he’s dead. If he’s not, he’s not. There’s nothing you can do about it at this point, Cork,” he yells, turning around. I watch him stick the key card in the reader and walk inside 34B. Snow accumulates on my windshield, and I fantasize about falling asleep here. I imagine the snow piling all night so that I am trapped in this car, unable to move, and I must live in this car until spring and emerge when everything is solved.

I stay up all night and through the next morning reading.

Much like *Love Signs*' fantasy of Sally returning home through the window á la *Peter Pan*, *Gooberz* ends with a scene of Linda depressed and walking New York City, stopping at St. Patrick's Cathedral to light a candle before St. Francis of Assisi for, "as always" she feels "closer to you/ when I'm near St. Francis." She describes herself as a pitiful figure: "giving popcorn and *Expect A Miracle* cards away/ to some hungry pigeons . . . and lonely, separated lovers/ Earthlings, reaching for a star/ who needed a miracle..." She writes herself collapsing into bed, the weight of time, of waiting, too overwhelming to stand, and muses on the notion that St. Francis of Assisi knew that "Faith is the bird that feels the light/ and sings, when the dawn is dark." Has she just heard him sing? Maybe. But, even so, "doesn't he know that Spring/ might be planning never to return."

Despite her pessimism, the "bird" she thinks she hears is actually the telephone with her lover's voice on the other line. The scene jumps—now, she's in a phonebooth. She looks through the window to see Goober, the character modeled after Robert, "I ran out to the street/ on flying feet . . . like the mad woman of Chaillot . . . to your dusty blue Bug/ with the *Expect a Miracle* card still tucked into the windshield." Once inside, Goober "reached under the seat/ and pulled out a double surprise/ a map of Alaska, with the word *lonely* written across it/ and a Mexican calendar, with the July crossed out/where you had printed the world *Spring* in blue." Why? Goober says he crossed it out because "I held back the season . . . till I came home to you." They discuss metaphysics. How to rhyme gladness with sadness. They atone for their faults and fights. At some point, while they are talking, it starts to rain.

And “then . . . *miracle ! miracle ! miracle !* The drenching downpour, incredibly, stopped.” Then, Linda cries, echoing a scene from her earlier poems where a character tries to stop the rain but cannot, “LOOK ! YOU’VE FINALLY STOPPED THE RAIN!” She proclaims after the rain stops that “grief is good, for it helps you grow to know/ unless it becomes too flooding and painful to bear.” It is as if by stopping the rain, a cycle has broken for Linda. In this way, *Gooberz*, like *Love Signs*’ forward about Sally returning, is an act of recuperation: it is a recovery, a reconstruction of what has previously been dismantled.

Meanwhile, for the past 300 pages, while Goober has been gone, Linda has, in her loneliness, continued her conversation with her sheepdog about astral projection, discussed the importance of resolving the Isis and Osiris legend, considered why she and Goober could not connect on the astral or telepathic planes while they were apart, extolled the role of evil and Satan in the world, and recounted a conversation she and Goober had about the three miracles of Our Lady of Fátima. But now that the rain has stopped, “you are me/ and / I am you/ we are eternally One . . . and eternally also Two/ which encircles us within the magic Three/ of the Holy Trinity/ of Miracles.” The lovers touch noses and whisper “magic!” to one another. Linda then describes how “all the seasons blended” until “snow mixed with rain” and “JOY ! replaced pain.” While Linda’s book ends with what appears to be a happy ending, she also writes herself into a space where, seemingly, the only way for her life to be complete and for her to maintain faith in God and the universe is by having Goober return to her. She writes herself into being saved not by herself but by another.

While the book's ending, a reunion, is expected, the couple's parting surprises me. The relationship's demise begins with a lost pregnancy. Linda describes the miscarriage as a baby that falls "off the Carousel" and tumbles "in the grass, in her dreams/ reaching for a clover . . . or a violet/ before she even had a chance/ to ride the painted pony she had chosen." While Linda "stayed on" the metaphorical carousel "still spinning/ my tears splashing/ on the empty, riderless pony/ she had been holding out her tiny hand to grasp." Linda describes it happening "so suddenly/ when I returned from a long day of shopping/ and unexpectedly . . . felt the familiar iron band of pain." Linda does not speak of her miscarriage as a mutual loss between her and her lover, but something she grappled with alone. There is no mention of Goober on the carousel with her; she is the only one that watches her baby fall.

Her isolation continues as she describes Goober vacationing in Vail while leaving her, irate, in Cripple Creek. She cries, "I am not going to stay in this trap of a house/ playing the role of a chastised mouse . . . while you are out skiing down snowy slopes . . . without me!" Goober is further absent, leaving her alone on Thanksgiving Day after kissing a woman he met at a pharmacy. He is also described as someone who entertains the prospect of meeting up with another woman that he said is merely a family friend. In turn, Linda compares him to Judas Iscariot.

She also compares herself to a thunderstorm: a lover delirious with rage. She throws herself vulnerable before the reader, explaining that her wrath, really, comes from her insecurity, that she wasn't hip enough, that she "feared the mores of this strange New Age." That this old family friend "was so . . . *different* from me/ so

tolerant, so permissive, so . . . bra-less . . . /so self-possessed, yet so un-possessive like and sure/ so unlike me.” She claims it was this insecurity that caused her “with alternating Fire and Ice/ that I did not choose to throw the dice—and gamble/ on winning the chance to be your mate.” She admits that she “gave such sharp-edged exaggerated reasons/ which wounded you” and that she is impatient. Whereas her lover is patient. She also concedes that, perhaps, she’s emotionally immature. Despite her awareness of such things, Linda eventually kicks Goober out, telling him, “oh ! you REEK of arrogance/ and unforgiveness/ you’ve packed all your rags/ in your traveling bags — so GO!”

So, Goober gets in his blue Volkswagen beetle and drives away.

I am incredulous. I read the scene again—*Goober gets in his car and drives away...*

I slap the book shut.

Why did I always believe that he had disappeared?

Meanwhile, Buck consumes me. The seventy-two hours has come and gone. He’s either dead or he’s not, and the question of whether or not he did it runs through me like a news ticker. I let its steady stream of speculation devour me. Let myself lie in bed until noon and check his social media to see if he’s posted something and feel my stomach fold when there’s nothing. Check his friend’s social media to see if there’s something—a memorial or a poem or some indication—and feel relief at seeing nothing. Wonder if it’s too early for such memorialization. Look at local newspapers

for obituaries in North Dakota. Consult the tarot and the iChing. Overanalyze the results. Grow nauseous, stand in the bathroom, grab the sink, and wonder if I'm getting an ulcer. Wonder if Buck's conniving enough to not post anything on social media because he knows I'm probably looking. Wonder if I'm self-absorbed to think such a thing. Convince myself I'm getting an ulcer and drink half a bottle of Pepto Bismol from my stepfather's medicine cabinet.

I force myself into clothing. Into going to the library. Into typing *R-o-b-e-r-t B-r-e-w-e-r* into databases. Into not thinking about Buck. But it doesn't matter. Every time my phone rings, I both long for and pray that it's not a North Dakota area code. Everything I see in the world becomes a symbol of his possible demise. The black plastic bag caught in a snowbank. The doe carcass, all bones and tuft, in the ditch. The gun show my father calls to invite me to at the civic center. I let myself stare at the bag or the doe and think that I drove down this specific road just to see this thing so that I would know he's dead. I screech at my father on the phone and ask him if he's trying to torture me. Asking me if I want to go to a gun show with him.

"Haven't heard from him?" he says, laughing.

I crawl into bed at six pm and replay the conversation with Buck. Wonder if I heard him incorrectly. Wonder if he was joking, and I just didn't get the joke. Consider how I would find out if he was dead. Wonder if he mailed me his suicide note. Wonder, again, if he's doing this on purpose. Warping my reality. Consider that it's me doing it to myself—wonder about Linda. Is this what Robert did to her? Did

he tell her something that made her think he had disappeared? Think about manipulation. Complicity. Madness.

Check everything again. Drink the rest of the Pepto Bismol. Pass out.

I'd always believed Robert had disappeared because it was reported by Hall and Rein in their 1979 *People* article:

[Goodman] has become a recluse, hidden away in Cripple Creek, Colo., haunted by the disappearance of the two most important people in her life within the space of 20 months. One was her lover, Robert Brewer, a marine biologist of 22 who fled to Mexico without explanation in the spring of 1972 and has not been seen since.

When I read the words “disappearance” and “has not been seen since” as a teenager, I imagined sheer cliff faces in Chihuahua or El Potrero Chico. I thought of fingers grasping and bodies falling. I contemplated foolish dares and amateur expeditions. Food poisonings and extortion. I fantasized about a man hiding out at a citrus farm and the smell of lemons on his fingertips for weeks. I researched all the ways you could die scuba diving. Rapid ascension. Turbulent water. Sharks. The word “disappearance” is used, but had I misunderstood? The information presented in *Gooberz* about the character “Goober” matched the little I know of Robert: a young marine biologist who went to Mexico.

I consider that the definition of “disappearance” is more complex than I had ever known. I look up the definitions for “to disappear” versus “to leave.” They are similar, but not the same. A disappearance can often mean that someone leaves as in “to be lost” or “become impossible to find.” There is a seeming lack of agency on behalf of the disappeared to be found, whereas if someone simply leaves, there is no wanting to be found. If Robert *left*, as he does in *Gooberz*, there is no outside force taking him away. No grant plot against Linda. No mysterious circumstances to overwhelm her life. Should I have discarded the word “disappearance” and focused more on the words “fled without explanation?” But why use the word disappearance at all if someone left of their own agency?

The next morning, I can’t stand it anymore. I wake up and call my friend in San Diego who went to graduate school with Buck and me. I already told her about the two suicide notes and the gun and telling Buck’s father. It’s seven am in California.

I pace around my bedroom. She picks up, and I bleat into the phone.

“I’m sorry—I’m sorry I’m calling you so early. But you would tell me if Buck was dead, right?”

“What—what do you mean? Is everything okay?!”

“I don’t know. I still haven’t heard anything. I just wanna know, if you knew it—if you saw it somewhere or heard it from someone that he’d killed himself—you’d tell me, right?”

“Did something happen?”

“No, no... nothing’s happened. I don’t know anything. I just—I just wanna know. If you knew that Buck was dead, you’d tell me, right?”

“Well, okay, sure, but why would *I* know before you?”

“... I’m not saying you would, but I’m just saying if you did hear about it, you’d tell me?”

“Courtney, why would I be the one telling you? If Buck was dead, I assume that *you’d* call to tell *me*.”

“Well... wh—why would I know before anybody else?”

“I mean, you’re still married to the guy. You’re, like, a ground-zero person in this scenario.”

“But who would tell me? How would I know?”

“Girl, I don’t know about this stuff. But you’d probably find out from someone eventually and probably before other people, especially me. I’m just a random acquaintance to the guy.”

“Okay... I know. I guess that makes sense.” I unbuckle my belt and rip it off. I fell asleep in yesterday’s clothing. “I know. I feel... insane. Paranoid. Not knowing. I keep trying to do other things to stop thinking about it, but I can’t not think about it.”

“How many days has it been?”

“It’s been, like, maybe two days since he said he was going to do it.”

“Well.... I don’t know what to tell you.”

I say nothing. Sit on my bed. Fasten my eyes on the egress window. Think about how cold it is out there. Wonder if it would feel nice. Feel certain it would. Wish I had a bigger window.

“But, I guess, if this is what you’re wanting, then... I guess I’ll tell you if you don’t tell me first?”

“...Okay.”

“But, hopefully, that doesn’t happen! And you tell me in a few days when you hear from him?”

“Okay...” I say.

“You should go back to sleep. Or go do something else. Try to stop thinking about this.”

We hang up.

I sit in bed until it’s 10 am in Midland, and I call Jerry. He doesn’t answer. I leave a message telling him I need to figure out what’s going on with Robert. Is it illogical to call Jerry? A man who thinks Linda is four-hundred years old and has a Time Twin? Maybe, but I don’t care. I need to know if I’m the only one who thought this. If I’ve been deluded all these years. Meanwhile, I send a message to Duncan, asking him if he ever met or knew Robert during his time with Linda.

Then, I scrub mold off the basement drywall from where the septic flooded last summer. I scrub so hard I see the gypsum core making it look like there’s still mold on it, only taupe instead of black. I decide to paint over where the mold lived. I wander the house and make a list of every busted doorknob and every broken screen.

Jerry calls back three hours later while I'm looking for a staple gun.

"Whad'ya mean what's going on with him? I dunno the guy," he says.

"I mean, I need to know, you know, what happened. If he disappeared or what. I went back and looked in *Gooberz*, and none of that is there, and now I'm really confused because I read in this article, like, when I was a teenager, that he vanished. Like, I always thought in a scary, strange way, and that's not what's in this book."

He pauses.

"Robert Brewer didn't 'disappear.'"

I sputter. I make him repeat it. *Robert Brewer didn't disappear.*

"No... Not sure where you got that . . . I met some guy once that talked on the phone with him about, oh, I dunno, eight years ago?"

"You met someone who talked with him on the phone?"

"Yeah. I think he and Linda talked all the time during the 80s."

"Jerry!" I shriek. "My whole adolescent and adult life, I've thought that he *disappeared*. Like was *kidnapped* or *fell off a cliff* or something. I read it in *People* magazine!"

"No..." he says.

"But, okay, then, what happened?"

"Well, you read *Gooberz*. It's all there. They broke up the way couples do."

"...Then, why did I think he'd disappeared all these years? Why did some national publication write

this? Do you think..."

The line hums.

"Linda... lied? Just flat-out lied?" I ask.

Jerry is silent.

"I dunno what to tell you, honey. But the man is alive, for sure," he says, the whirring of a machine kicking on in the background.

I thank him, I thank him so much, and hang up.

Duncan replies later the next morning. I assume he'll tell me "no," but instead, he writes, "I never met the guy. To be honest, I never really thought he was a real person."

I don't understand. I write back, pressing him for more details, perhaps in denial about the simplicity of the statement. "Not real as in she made him up?" I ask.

"Yes," he replies. As in, "she made him up." He reminds me, "Linda was an eccentric woman—if you saw her walking around, you'd probably think she was homeless. She lived in a different reality."

I want to ask more. Why "homeless?" What does that mean? Why would Duncan think Linda had made Robert up? But I don't ask any further questions. I am distraught. How do I make sense of Linda if Robert isn't real? How am I supposed to write about her and her life? Is Linda real? Is my husband's suicide threat real? Is any of this real, or am I making it all up? Have I always been making all of it up?

I don't know what to do, so I go back through my notes. Every name I find in her books. Every person in the front matter and acknowledgments. I dig through the Linda Land internet forum and find archived screenshots of another, now defunct, forum and find two names I never contacted before.

Blaine Wineman and Casey Felton.

I start looking, again, for Robert. I don't know where else to go because everywhere I've already tried has yielded nothing, so I go to Facebook and look at the top ten search results for "Robert Brewer."

1. Bob Brewer in Nova Scotia with a beard and baseball cap
2. Robert Brewer who works construction in Tracy, California.
3. Robert "Bob" Brewer who works for a healthcare company in Lewiston, Idaho.
4. Bob Brewer holding a chihuahua.
5. Robert Brewer with a child on his lap.
6. Robert Brewer in Boeuf, Arkansas.
7. Robert Brewer with no profile picture.
8. Bob Brewer with no profile picture.
9. Robert L. Brewer, an American TESOL teacher, in Budapest, Hungary.
10. Robert Brewer, who's a Kansas and Missouri Injury Attorney.

I stare at the screen, the questions pressing at me. *Why contact more people? Am I only hoping that someone will tell me something different than what I know to be true? Am I avoiding the reality that this woman I've pledged my love and doctoral*

work to is nothing but a fiction? Am I contacting more people to distract myself from thinking about Buck? It all might be true, and I know it, but I write to Blaine, Casey, all ten Robert Brewers, and decide to snowshoe the three miles to the other side of the lake where something is on fire because I can't stand to sit in a room with only an egress window any longer. I saw the spiral start while I was writing. I put on my mother's old camouflage winter coat and follow the smoke. Snow heaves. I squint as I walk and can't tell where the lake meets the land meets the sky, the bare Sugar Maples along the highway the only thing visible, the only thing to mark my path. For three miles, I luxuriate in the blankness. I take comfort in my toes growing numb. I think about feeling this way forever.

Then, I see it down the road, flames roaming the bottom floor of the tiki bar, peeking through the top-story windows. I watch a cop car glide through the snow, sirens quiet. I arrive, and there's another man who also came out to watch the scene: a neighbor, I assume. By now, it's snowing so hard I can't tell what's smoke and what's precipitation. All I can make out is the neighbor's round-balaclava-clad face, a babbling ghost. He doesn't say hi or introduce himself. Maybe he thinks he knows me, but I don't bother to ask.

"The plow guy is the one that called it in," he says.

"Oh yeah," I say.

Firemen douse the flames. Another police car arrives. I stomp snow off my shoes. I find it unsettling how hushed the whole scene is—the police cars arriving without lights. The stillness of frozen earth. Falling snow muting the fire's crackle.

“There’s gotta be ten fire trucks here,” he says.

“Yep, it sure looks that way,” I say, smearing my glove across my face.

I start to shiver, wondering if we should even be here with all the smoke. The firefighters have masks on. I look around to see if anyone else has stopped by to watch, but it’s just us.

“This sure is a bummer,” he says. “They had the best pizza.”

“Sure did,” I say.

“You know, I even came here when I was in high school. I went to Chi-hi.

This place was a *historic* location.”

“Oh, sure,” I say, thinking about turning around. Wondering how long it took me to get here. Wondering how long it will take me to get back. I think to look at my watch. I think that to look at my watch I’d have to take my gloves off and decide I don’t need to know the time.

The man is talking about some bartender they had once, and my cell phone rings in my pocket. I pull it out and look at the screen.

701-577-0027.

701.

“North Dakota,” I whisper.

Not Buck’s number. But someone. Could be his parents. A friend. The police.

“Huh?” the neighbor says, but I’m not listening. I fumble to take my gloves off and drop the phone in the snow. I crouch down and dig it out, but the call has already stopped. I couldn’t answer it.

I stand up, take my gloves off, and call back immediately, but the number is busy. I call again. Still busy. I can hear the man asking me something, but I tell him I have to go. I rip off my snowshoes and run through the snow, somehow thinking this will be faster. Why do I run? Why not stand there in the snow and keep calling? I don't know—maybe I only move because I can't bear to stand and wait for the phone to ring. Maybe that's why I went to the burning bar in the first place. Maybe I know that if this is it—if this is the moment I learn that he's dead—I cannot hear it standing before another kind of destruction unfolding.

I fall. I spit. I stand up and call. I run and heave the three miles home, believing that this is the moment I will know. The moment I can get through to this number is when I will know what has happened to Buck.

I wave and scream at every passing truck, hoping they'll pick me up to take me further down the highway. Even a mile would help, but none do, and each time they pass by, it feels like a betrayal. I swear that they must hear me screaming. That they must know I'm weeping beneath my balaclava. That my lungs burn. That I've lost feeling in my fingertips. I tell their tread marks to go to hell. I tell their taillights they're motherfuckers. I rip my gloves off, dial the number, and howl at the busy signal.

I make it to the driveway and call again. The pines lining the driveway indifferent and snowcapped against my panic.

It rings. I pant, waiting.

Someone answers. Karrie. At Walsh Steel.

“Who?”

“This is Karrie. At Walsh Steel?”

“Oh... what?” I say.

“Ma’m, do you have the wrong number? This is Walsh Steel in Fargo.”

I inhale. The air piercing. My chest tight.

“No, no... Sorry. I just got a call from this number. A while ago . . . I’m just calling back.”

“Oh, I see. Well, we’ve been real busy this morning. What’s your name?”

“Courtney.”

I wait and feel as though I might shatter. I think of every friend of Buck’s that I ever met. I think of everything they ever did for a career. None of them worked in steel. None of them worked in Fargo. I can think of no reason that Buck or anyone associated with Buck would have anything to do with this place.

She asks me for my full name and number, and I give them to her.

“Did we leave a message?” she asks.

“No, no message,” I say.

“Are you a client of ours? We could look up your account— ”

“No. I’m not a client.”

“Well, Courtney. I’m so sorry—we do lots of business with companies up in Wisconsin, especially around Eau Claire. You know, all those 715 numbers. We must’ve dialed you by accident.”

“Oh,” I say.

She apologizes for the inconvenience and hangs up.

I shove my phone in my pocket and stare up the driveway towards the house. Everything smells like smoke. A dead branch has fallen overnight and rests diagonally twenty feet away. I charge to it and try to move it, but I can't—the wood is frozen to the asphalt. Picking up the free end, I tug the stick loose and beat against the ground until it cracks. I take the half in my hands and heave it into the woods, its soft thud audible only to me, fall to my knees, and bawl.

Later I see that Casey has replied, saying, yes, he'd be happy to talk to me, but he'd prefer to speak about Linda in the present tense. I'd told him that I got his name from an article where he said he "had been friends with Linda." Whoever Blaine is never replies.

I write back Casey back and say, of course, present tense for sure. Whole conversation. We arrange a date and time to speak the next day, but I am weary at the thought of a conversation and only speaking about Linda in the present tense. I grow uneasy. *If he wants to talk about Linda in the present tense, does that mean he thinks she's still alive, like Jerry? And if that's what he thinks, then what am I supposed to do with our conversation?* I pick out my splinters with tweezers and rehearse how I'll cancel until that evening. I write the e-mail in my mind again and again. *I've decided that I need to change course... I appreciate your willingness to speak with me, but the more I work on this project, the more I realize it's an impossibility to write about Linda's life. Maybe if I decide to pick up this project again, we can speak one day...*

I never write the message. I don't know why. I don't know why I'm still doing this. I don't know why I'm doing any of this. I pull *Gooberz* into bed with me, thinking I'll read it again, thinking it could convince me either way, and I fall asleep with it in my arms, its pages pressed into my cheek like a lover's stubble.

The next morning, I get up and dial Casey's number, and I wonder if it doesn't matter. Maybe to know Linda is to engage in the ambiguity. To live in-between the real and the unreal. That there is a certain incongruency between truth and belief. Maybe the best way to write a biography of her is to live there too. Isn't that what I'm already doing? Imagining her? So, who cares if Casey's conception of reality lies within the outer reaches of human consciousness. Most of my sources already live there. I'm living there too. Somewhere between delusion and actuality.

Or, maybe, I just don't care anymore.

When he picks up, I ask him about it, "Why the present tense?" I say, and he explains that it's a spiritual belief—that those who are dead are with us in spirit. Their soul hasn't died.

It's one of the only things I ask because Casey just talks, and I just scribble, folded against my headboard. He tells me he's in Florida with his partner, Jason, right now, and I can hear it—wind and something chirping and chimes tinkling.

He begins and tells me Linda came into his life around 1987. Casey was living in Detroit. He was long-haired and yoga-going, putting chia seeds in everything and

thinking about buying a juicer. So, of course, a buddy gave him a copy of Linda's *Star Signs*. He read it and "became obsessed" with the handbook. So obsessed that he and Jason moved to Cripple Creek, Colorado, from Detroit. He knew that Linda needed to be his spiritual teacher. Or, as he said, "I basically stalked her."

Casey and Jason got jobs as singing waiters at a restaurant in Cripple Creek and, somehow, rented the house right next to hers on Hayden Street. Linda always had some assistant she was cycling through, and one day, Linda's assistant stopped to talk to them. Casey must've asked them how to meet Linda and told the assistant they were fans. The assistant shared with them that Linda was a recluse. Casey says, "You weren't going to just pop in and meet her. She wasn't friendly." But Casey didn't care. Every day he said mantra to bring Linda closer to them, *You will meet us. You will love us. You can't live without us.*

"And that's what happened."

Casey doesn't tell me exactly how the meeting happened or about the first moment they went into her home in Cripple Creek. But he and Jason eventually met her, became her new assistants, and helped her edit *Gooberz*. Casey describes letters, hundreds of letters, that poured in for her. He and Jason would read the letters, answer the phone for her, and screen her calls. He tells me that people would "just show up" at her door in Cripple Creek. Two or three a month would arrive there to find her. He said, "At that time before the casinos, the town was like a little stamp; everyone knew everyone." She wasn't hard to find. Especially because her home in Cripple Creek had distinctive stained glass murals of St. Francis of Assisi and Clare and a nativity

scene, among other vignettes. Casey tells me that, once, a mother and a daughter came from England to meet Linda. They showed up at her door. Casey asked Linda if she'd be willing to meet them. But Linda couldn't do it. She just didn't feel up to it. Casey had to turn the women away.

Casey describes seeing Linda do astrological charts for clients in Hollywood. Despite people saying she was a hack, he claims that she had to be more than just a superficial astrologer. "She had to know the intricacies" to do those charts. Casey tells me that Linda felt she had a special mission on earth, "She said to us, multiple times, my path became clear once I started learning astrology. I am here to get interested in the basics. I am here to make people say, 'What's your sign?' I'm not here to take them further. This is to get everyone talking about their sun sign to get them progressing" on a spiritual path. "That's what she wanted to do."

Casey and Jason went on a book tour with her. She would lecture about "metaphysical topics," but that she couldn't talk to people afterward. Casey and Jason did that. He says, "She was insecure. She was a human being, and she was extremely insecure and very lonely. And I think that happens to some of us when we have a special mission, and I believe she carried that out... She was a little stunted in her personal development."

He tells me that, once, on a book tour, there was this young woman, the manager of the hotel they were staying in, came up and said that she was "looking for the woman on the back cover of this book," holding up one of Linda's books. But said that, "it can't be you... you're so old-looking."

Linda replied, “Let me guess your birthday.”

“And she did, Linda said, ‘You must be born around May 10th or 11th, around this or that time.’”

According to Casey, the woman was in total awe and asked Linda how she could know this.

Linda told the woman it was because her face was so fat, “You’re a double Taurus.”

The woman never took the insult. She just thought it was incredible this woman was able to guess her birth date and time.

Linda was upset that the woman didn’t understand the slight.

I adjust my back against the headboard. Linda sounded cruel. I’d never thought of her that way. I thought of her as someone who believed in love and, by extension, kindness.

“Age was a big, weird monster for her,” he says. If you were to have been around her, “Her hair would be in pigtails. She would be wearing pink, trying to look very youthful . . . Aries is the first sign of the zodiac, and she wanted to stay youthful. She was obsessed with that.... She was just a little girl all the time.” He continues, “if you met her, you’d probably think she was this eccentric wacko.”

But, Casey reiterates, “She didn’t care. She could be so insecure about” her appearance and youth, but “she didn’t care that she was a kook. She was very secure in her spirituality. She did really firmly believe in it, in karma, in her journey. *Star Signs* came from a deep place inside of her . . .”

He pauses. I can hear Jason talking to him in the background, saying something about the pigtails.

“Casey,” I say. “I grew up with Linda—I mean I didn’t ‘grow up’ with her, but I read her and just, always, in my mind, thought of her as, I don’t know, kind of warm and fuzzy and motherly? Like, I thought of her as my mentor. Like a spiritual guide. Like, even now, when I read her words, I feel like she *loves* me.”

I can hear him sigh.

“She wasn’t warm and fuzzy. And didn’t come across that way and she knew it . . . Her early career was the radio show, and that was known for warmth . . . love letters between people in the service. She did project that love and compassion, and that’s what came out through the books.”

He pauses.

“When I finally met her, her energy was completely different. It took me a while to resolve that. She would say, ‘You want me to be the person that wrote *Star Signs*, and I am, but...’” he trails off.

According to Casey, she wasn’t motherly. Her children “didn’t get her.” He says, “Aries is not the most nurturing parent. Her nurturing was a completely different type. Not the Cancerian, not the deep mothering... It wasn’t a close relationship with any of them.” I think to bring Sally up, and he does before I even ask. He continues, “And then, the whole crazy stuff with Sally... I think that was a wedge between them.”

I am quiet.

“When Sally committed suicide, that was a real guilt piece. The same thing with Robert Brewer... She thought he was a step-in because he had left her . . .” A “step-in” is what she describes in *Gooberz*: Robert being the reincarnation of her first husband, Bill. Casey describes it as a moment of “Not accepting reality, very little girl-like.”

I press him further about Robert. Did he, while he was her assistant, ever have any communication with Robert? Is he alive? He tells me that, yes, “They had set up times where they would talk. She had this theory that he had been abducted... She thought they were Francis and Clare reincarnated... She had to rationalize it somehow.”

I don’t ask what the “it” is. I assume it’s that they parted ways—that’s *Gooberz*’s entire narrative crisis.

Eventually, Casey and Jason left Cripple Creek. Or, as he says, “I had to get away from her.”

“Why?” I ask.

“There wasn’t a lot of money; she didn’t have a lot of resources. . . All that money you hear about—the highest advance—that money was all gone. Her home was a little *Grey Gardens* by that time. Things were falling apart. We were doing her gardening. We were doing what she couldn’t do...”

He tells me he’ll send pictures once he’s back in Michigan, and I thank him.

I hang up and realize I should’ve asked him if he thought I could resolve it—this incongruence between the woman I thought she was and who I’ve found her to

be. Maybe I should've asked him how he did it. How and if he came around to loving her again. If he even wanted to. I think to write to him again to ask, but I don't. Do I not ask the question because I cannot bear the answer?

The phone calls start the next day.

The first voicemail begins with Buck gasping, spitting into the receiver, and I assume it's him calling me as he's dying, recording his final breaths, and I am hysterical.

Then, he speaks. Asking why. Why did I tell his father? Why would I do that? How could I betray his trust? Didn't I know that he wasn't going to kill himself? I knew that he wasn't going to kill himself. I've always known that. He just wants to know why I did it. Why I called his father and told him. He doesn't know who I am anymore. How could he have ever thought that I would be a person worth spending my life with. Why wo—

The voicemail cuts off.

There's another. And another. My body thrums with memory. I am in our old studio. I am running into the bathroom. I realize there is no way to get out. I am cursing myself for being so stupid as to run into this bathroom, thinking I could get out. I am wondering if I could cram myself through the window. I am wondering if I should scream. I am pressing myself into a corner.

I put my cellphone in the pantry upstairs next to a can of corn and vow not to look at it. I go for a walk through the pine woods and watch the turkeys try to scratch

through the snow. Throw the ball for my stepfather's gray-mouthed dog and watch her go up and down a crusty snowbank, tail wagging, looking for it. Watch my breath billow before me in the cold. Study the dissipation. Pretend I am a scientist. Pretend I am someone else.

When I return, my stepfather tells me I left my phone in the pantry.

I shove it deeper into the cabinet, behind a box of Panko crumbs and canned tomatoes, and let it go dead.

Perhaps I'd always believed that Robert had disappeared because why make up such a thing about someone unless it was true?

I imagine it's a question that followed Linda.

Maybe it's what they talked about at Ralf's Break Room on Bennett Avenue in Cripple Creek. Perhaps Linda was the gossip at the Pint and Platter. I imagine they chattered about how she's an oddball, some recluse lady living up there on the mountain. That she's one of those New Agey folks who will babble bullshit to anybody that will listen. Then, maybe, in hushed tones, someone would talk about how she's straight-up *delusional*. How they heard from someone at the post office that Linda's running around claiming her lover *involuntarily fled*. To which someone might ask, *What the hell's that mean—"involuntarily fled?"* To which everyone shrugs. To which someone says, *That's the point—sounds like he dumped her, and she can't get over it*. Of course, the gossip is frivolous. Maybe even harmless. Linda can't hear their chatter. But if you were a friend of Linda, the chatter ends up riding

the line between gossip and genuine concern. Because if the conversation about Robert was between Linda's friends, if I was there, I'd ask the question, *Why does she keep looking if he left of his own accord?*

In response, you'd pose ideas. *Maybe she's bored? Maybe she has too much money to burn? Maybe she's lonely?*

Mind you, this was before Sally. We're backtracking even further to her long wait for Robert, her attempt to reel him back into her life, where someone had to have said to her at one point, *Linda, what's going on with you and Robert? There's nothing wrong with it not working out... if that's what happened.*

But, if you were ever to criticize her, tell her to let go, to accept that he's left, probe her intentions at all, I imagine she'd just throw it back at you, *What do you mean 'What's going on?'* *It's clear what's going on!* She'd cite John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant Woman*. She'd cite *Gone with the Wind* and say, *Did you expect Scarlett to just give up! No! She said, "Tomorrow is another day." And tomorrow is just the day when he might return!*

I want to say that she saw other options. That she considered herself better off alone. That she envisioned herself meeting someone new and falling in love again. But she did not write a book about a woman alone, carrying on despite her grief. She wrote a book where the end to her misery is to be reunited with her lover. What else was she to do but wait?

The e-mails start two hours later. One message, two messages, seven, twelve . . . *Do you know what kind of a mess you started and left me to deal with for the past week?* he asks. His father told his mother and called a therapist, and now they both know what he told me, and they've both been hysterical for days, and he's been having to deal with it. They wanted to throw him in the psych ward. They want him to go to therapy. Take pills. Make a gratitude list. He just wants to know why. Why I did this. How is it possible that I've made his life even worse?

I sit underneath a quilt in bed and watch as the messages accumulate over the evening. There are twenty, twenty-five, twenty-seven. He begs. *Tell me why you did this.* I tell myself to stop looking, go do something else, but I can't pull myself away. Do I enjoy watching it? Is there some thrill in this? Or am I still caught? Somehow believing that he could see me move away from the computer, that he knows I'm ignoring him.

An hour later, I wrap the quilt around myself, drag it up to the kitchen, call him from a landline, and tell him. *You're harassing me.* I tell him I did it because I care about him, and what he told me checked all the boxes for having a plan and the means to kill yourself. I had to tell someone.

"You knew I was never going to kill myself. You knew that," he says.

"I didn't know that. You told me you were going to kill yourself on a specific date with a rifle you found in the attic. What else was I supposed to do but tell someone that could help you?"

My response is unsatisfactory.

He tells me I've ruined his life. He's never gonna speak to me again. He's blocking my number. His parents and sisters hate me too.

I tell him we're gonna have to talk again because we have to do our taxes in March.

"Then I guess I'll e-mail you," he says and hangs up.

I hold the phone in my hand and listen to the dial tone reverberate. I want to call him back and hiss at him. Tell him that he's scheming and mean. That I should've just taken all his shit to the dump—the Tom Petty records and mildewed books and tweed coats. That I feel no remorse about leaving him. That this could be worse. That I could've dragged this out. That he's lucky.

But I don't. I listen until the dial tone turns to its insistent beep.

I hang up the phone, strap a headlamp to my head, and walk into the winter night. The moon is nothing, and so the snow is nothing, and everything is black felt. I don't even know where I am in the yard, where the lake is, where the road is. Where is the spot that Buck and I married in this yard? I don't know. I don't care. I inhale. Buck is alive. *Great.* I let myself fall to the ground and stick my arms and legs out. He never wants to talk to me again. *Perfect.* I flap. He's blocking my number. *I love it.* His family hates me too. *I'm an angel.* A snow angel. I flap my arms and legs until they are numb, until my teeth chatter, until my stepfather yells to me from the deck, asking me what the hell I'm doing out there, until I know that my wings are deep enough in the snow to be visible tomorrow morning, until I know that I am free.

For certain this time.

Days later, Casey sends me copies of his snapshots of Linda. In one photograph, Casey, Jason, and Linda all sit together at the Palace Hotel in Cripple Creek. Linda sits in-between them with one of her hands draped across Jason's back, and he holds her bony hand in his, and Linda props her other hand on Casey's back. Her hair is a mess tied in pigtails with multi-colored polka-dot ribbons, her clothing non-descript—a brown turtleneck and cream-colored button-down and gold necklace. Her expression is dreamy, maybe even absent. Casey grins.

In the other photograph, Linda is in the center of a group of friends at a party to celebrate the publication of *Gooberz*. Her hair is curled and shoulder-length. She smiles, holds a glass of something red, maybe wine, and wears a sheer white gown with cream stitching in a floral pattern. She is glamorous. Present. I am ravenous looking at the photographs—images of her I'd never seen. Images so candid. But I am also further estranged. I cannot square the two women: one dazed, the other glamorous. Perhaps, it shouldn't be so difficult to see them as the same. Maybe take two photographs of any person, and they'd look just as varied as these do. But perhaps it is because I find myself in the chasm between them. Between two mythical Lindas: Linda looking child-like, disheveled—maybe the Linda of slander and stereotype: a madwoman. And the Linda akin to her author photos: combed and bedazzled, a beloved expert on metaphysical topics. Perhaps I hadn't realized that to go beyond the stereotype of Linda as the in-denial grief-stricken madwoman of an

astrologer, I would have to contend with all of her—the aspects that inspired the stereotypes and everything that contradicts it.

One of the Robert Brewers asks if we're cousins.

Another tells me he's not the Robert Brewer I'm looking for, but best of luck with my project.

The rest never write back.

For a month, I believe I will never hear from Buck again.

For one month, I don't.

I do not think of him scheming. I do not imagine he's strategic. I don't want to believe he's manipulative. But I imagine he remembers my caution. That there are certain things I would never send via e-mail. Social security numbers and the like. He also must remember how impatient I am. That if he asks me enough questions via e-mail, I'll get frustrated enough to tell him to just call me, so I can explain it over the phone. Because when he e-mails me to ask for the information he needs, it always leads to him and me on the phone.

The first time, I remind him that he said he was never gonna talk to me again.

"I'm doing my taxes. I need your social."

So I give it to him, and we hang up on one another.

The next time it's my address. Then my mother's maiden name. Then our old California studio address, and it's then that I ask him if he's lying. If he really needs

this or if he's just calling me. Because when he calls, he asks me the information, *What was the address of that place we lived at in Felton? Was it 221 Buckeye?*, and the conversation softens. He asks me how I am.

I tell him I'm fine. "Just working on the Linda project."

Then, he'll say something helpful. Insightful. Something I hadn't thought of before. *You should look at Adrian Ivakhiv's work about the New Age. Did she have any connection to the Victorian mystics?*

I remember his intelligence. His sudden gentleness. The flowers on my doorstep. His hands on my waist. How can I waver so easily? I don't know, but I engage him. I ask him how he's doing, and he says he's fine. He tells me about his days working as a substitute teacher at an elementary school. He tells me he meets up with another friend who is getting divorced, and they smoke weed together on Tuesday nights. He takes his parent's dog for walks around the block and listens to an art history podcast about the Bronze age.

For the five minutes we talk, I enjoy it. I fantasize that, maybe, we could be friends. Perhaps, the worst has passed. I imagine a reunion dinner ten years from now with our new spouses where we laugh about the time I called a steel company in Fargo, thinking it was someone telling me Buck was dead.

Then, he dangles something. Because, actually, besides the job and the friend and the dog, he's really not doing well. He's still thinking about suicide every day. Because of how hard our break-up has been on him. It's made him feel even more

worthless than he already felt. He gets nervous going to thrift stores, thinking he'll find something to hang himself with and want to buy it.

He says goodbye and hangs up.

My chest collapses, the phone still held to my ear, and I am bewildered by my continual captivity.

Maybe Linda spinning a tale that Robert may or may not have left of his own volition wasn't as conniving as it might sound. Maybe it was something spur of the moment. Something Linda hadn't entirely thought about. Something she wasn't ready to face: the reality of her own complicity in the reason Robert had left. So, when her friends ask her about how things are going with Robert, days or weeks after they split, maybe she paused as the possibilities unfolded before her about what she could say. She could tell the truth—about her temper and insecurities and the way they screamed at one another. Or she could abscond from further questions. Further responsibility. She could take a breath and say, *Robert? Well, he disappeared!*

I imagine that her friends would pause. *He disappeared?*

Yes, disappeared. Linda would say.

Maybe, then, she came up with ideas about what that meant. *He was supposed to be studying algae somewhere in the Gulf of Mexico, but I haven't heard from him in weeks...*

Maybe she only thinks of it as a half-lie. She does say in *Gooberz* that he went to Mexico. She just doesn't precisely say what happens to him once he's there.

Disappeared? It's within the realm of possibility. Did Linda think of these moments telling friends about what happened to Robert and letting the word *disappearance* settle within her as a dress rehearsal? Did she feel relief at how their questions would turn not to her about *how* and *why* their relationship ended, but instead to the possibilities of where he might be and when he might return? Did she delight in the fact that by making Robert disappear rather than *leave her* there was still the possibility of their reunion?

Was it this pliability surrounding the truth that made it so easy for Linda to look the police officers in the face and wave their file folders away when Sally disappeared? Or was it because she had grieved so often—all the miscarriages and her first husband's death—that when it came to Robert and Sally, Linda said, *I refuse*.

Regardless of whether or not Linda made up the story that Robert *disappeared*, given the fact that she waited for him, longed for him, wrote a thousand-page romance about his reappearance, it should surprise no one that, eighteen months later, Linda wasn't going to *trust* the police when they tell her about Sally's death. She's never going to say, "too bad" and go to Bloomingdales to buy a new black dress for the funeral. Remember? Linda's prepared for this type of situation. For the leavings. The absences. She's studied and rehearsed. Everything before this was just a test. She knows what to do. And what not to do is to let anybody tell her different from what she wants to happen.

So, back in New York, just as in Cripple Creek, I imagine she's willing to wait.

I know it's a ploy.

But it works.

Maybe Buck knows that my fear is natural to me now. He taught me. Maybe he knows that it can be activated with the slightest suggestion. Maybe he knew me better than I ever thought. After we talk, the news ticker of whether he's dead or not revolves within me again for days. I want to check on him. To monitor him. To know that he is alive. To call every thrift store in Bismarck and tell them to get rid of their Paracord ropes and diamond braid spools. To say a prayer for him each morning. I find myself wondering about old college classmates that told me they moved to Bismarck a decade ago and consider if they would get along with Buck. Maybe they could be friends, and that would help Buck feel better. I find myself in the bookstore looking at self-help books, picking books out for him, wondering about media mail postage. I find myself wondering if his mother would befriend me again. I find myself checking his social media, making sure he's posting. Making sure he's alive.

Then, a letter arrives for me.

I assume it's one of the Robert Brewers. I'd given them all my address in case they wanted to write. Really, I hadn't expected anyone to write. I had even chastised myself for giving out my address in such earnestness, thinking someone would respond. But someone did. I stare at the envelope and beam. I flip the envelope over and read the return address, anticipating his name.

Instead, I read:

Superior Court of California, County of Santa Cruz

1 2nd Street

Watsonville, CA 95076

I read it again. *Superior Court of California, County of...*

It's not Robert. Unless he works for the Superior Court of California, Santa Cruz, where I also happened to file for divorce.

I rip the envelope open and see them: FL 100, FL 115. My divorce papers. Returned to me. My mistakes highlighted. Sections left blank. Boxes unchecked. *Do you require spousal support?* Unanswered.

I throw myself down at the kitchen table, feel like an absolute fool, and look through the papers.

A fluorescent yellow piece of paper with a message in all caps tells me I've been summoned. I have to appear in court in Watsonville, and all the conviction I ever had in writing these forms evaporates. Somehow, I thought filing the paperwork was the hardest part. I thought the rest would just fall into place. There wasn't any property to divide. Now, according to the forms, I'm stalled. I have to take further action if the divorce is to go through. I find myself wondering if I should spare Buck. Stop the divorce. Stay separated longer. Wait for him to gain stability. Because what would happen if I were to go through with this? For him to receive a divorce decree?

Somehow, I still implicate myself in his stability. Somehow, I think I can control it. Somehow, I waver holding these forms in my hand as to whether or not to

drive to California or to let this petition expire, to let the whole thing fade, to keep myself entangled. Somehow, I think the best thing to do at that moment is to call him.

In New York City, Linda is willing to hang around. For the investigators to get the documents she wants: the photographs of the actual “crime scene,” copies of that “suicide note,” and so on. For the coroner to return her calls. For the toxicology report. To make a call at the phone booths on 42nd street where somebody’s been on the horn with their mother-in-law for some ungodly amount of time. For her advance on *Love Signs* to come through.

But, while she waits, she has nowhere to stay. Perhaps Duncan told me Linda appeared “homeless” because, at one point, she was. She had enough money to get to New York City but not enough for anything else. So, when the snow turns her boots sodden, and her socks grow holes, I imagine she just takes the entire works off and curses Sam and Taplinger Press and whoever the hell was calling her, threatening her, back in Cripple Creek. She curses Robert for leaving. He would’ve *done* something about those phone calls. *Done* something so Sally wouldn’t have been a pawn. But a woman cannot live on cursing alone. So, eventually, she must dig for food. Maybe in the bodega garbage bins. Maybe waiting outside the Westchester House for leftovers from banquets. Maybe begging Duncan or another editor to buy her a meal. I see her slapping her little hands together inside every Catholic church she can find and praying to God to tell her what the hell she’s supposed to do next. Curling up outside St. Patrick’s Cathedral and shivering. Did she rage with regret at never having gone to

see Sally the previous summer when she was performing in Maine? Did she feel guilty that she was never able to say goodbye? Did she reprimand herself for not bringing an extra pair of socks with her to New York and fantasize about her bed back in Cripple Creek and a crackling fire? Does she tell the other people curled up outside of St. Patrick's Cathedral about her life as a famous astrologer and her home that included elaborate Biblically themed stained glass murals? Did they say in response, "Lady, if you're famous, then I'm the fucking Queen of England." Did she gasp at them, her anger turning to tears as she walked away and cried into her jacket sleeve?

Never.

Because how is Linda going to make a miraculous comeback if she doesn't roll around rock bottom for a while? She revels in rock bottom. She likes the smell, comments on the weather. She laughs at the man who doesn't believe she's Linda Goodman. She cackles at the wind when it whips by so fast it stings. She delights in throwing back dumpster lids, listening to them thwack, and peering over their edges. Yeah, if you were to ask her, she'd tell you she thinks it's kind of disgusting to scrounge in the garbage, but sometimes when folks see you scrounging, they just *give* you food. What's better than that? She sees the gashes in her shearling coat like Girl Scout badges for bravery that she can take back to Colorado and show off. She doesn't even know about the callouses on her feet until she's peeing inside the Grand Central Station bathroom and can examine them under the light. She feels affection for her hardened feet; they make her feel wolf-like. Fierce. She growls at the man

sleeping next to her outside St. Patrick's, who tries to take the sweater she's been using as a pillow. She begins to fantasize about how long she can do this for. She begins to tell herself that she can do this *forever*. Because it's only going to get easier once spring hits. More tourists. More food in the dumpsters. Fountains with treated water will start to churn. She'll grow fat from pizza. Her skin will smell like chlorine. She'll rub dandelions on her wrists for fragrance. She'll find a new pillow sweater. *Life can only get sweeter from this point forward.*

Because, within the logic of manifestation and miracles, she reasons that the longer she waits, the closer she gets to her reunion with Sally.

I dial Buck's number and listen to the line ring.

Am I looking for his reaction? If he's unphased at the notion of our divorce, I'll be able to go through with this? And if he's angry, I'll have to deal with it? To decide what to do? I cannot think about it. I watch my stepfather in his robe on the patio holding a grape cigarillo to his lips. His portable radio next to him. The Rush Limbaugh show playing. The sliding glass door flung open. Winter air streaming in. Smoke winding. I should close the door. I should tell him to turn the radio down. I shouldn't even call Buck.

Buck answers giggling. He never giggles.

"Hello?" I say.

The giggle crescendos.

"... Why are you laughing?" I ask.

He tells me it's funny I'd call him today. Must be a coincidence.

"Oh... why's that?" I say. I start to shiver. *Close the door.* But I don't. I listen, divorce forms in my hand, waiting to reference them. Buck tells me about how he put the mementos of our love—notes written on receipt backs, Valentine's Day cards, and photographs of us in one another's arms—into one of those paper sacks they give you at the liquor store. Then, he says that he went to a bonfire at his friend's house last night and brought the bag with him. He tells me about how the fire felt on his legs—somehow so comforting. About the way the smoke rose to the sky and disappeared. How beautiful it was. About how he'd never thought of fire that way before. He tells me about how he tossed the bag's contents one by one into the bonfire. He tells me how he watched our faces disintegrate. How everything I ever wrote or gave to him writhed in flames.

"Oh," I say.

"It felt so good, you know, to burn all that. I feel so much better," he tells me, chuckling.

I don't know what to say, so I say nothing, and he keeps laughing. I go to the door and slam it shut. I am a compass spinning, from concern to rage to inexplicable sorrow over him burning the remnants of a relationship already disintegrated, and I hang up the phone. I clench the divorce forms in my hand, feel my breath run staccato through me, astonished at how I could've loved someone who would treat me with such callousness. I unfurl the papers and smooth out the creases to confirm when I need to be at the courthouse: 8:20 am. A Thursday.

My stepfather sees it on my face as he comes inside, Limbaugh's little voice coming from the speakers. "What's wrong?" he asks, turning the radio down.

I take my cell phone and find his name. *Ronald Green*. I block his number. I can't talk to him and figure this out. I can't sit here and figure this out. I have to go to the court hearing—even if I decide not to go through with the divorce when I get there.

I look up at my stepfather, waiting for my answer.

"I have to go back to California."

Did Linda really sleep outside of St. Patrick's Cathedral and wander around New York City barefoot for months? It's reported as fact in several sources. It's one of the only things about Linda's life, besides her date of death, that's reported in multiple sources. But there's no explanation of how Linda went from digging in the garbage to landing a 2.25-million-dollar advance for *Love Signs* or vice-versa. Maybe there's no explanation because, maybe, Linda didn't understand how it was that her agent was able to dig her out of her deal with her original publisher Taplinger and that bad habit of promising all her money away before she earned it. But, really, did she *need* to know? That wasn't *her* job. Her task was to interpret the planets and give advice so that all of humanity could live in harmony from now until eternity. But, beyond the financials, how did Linda get off the street and, somehow, get that 2.25-million-dollar check in her hand? Where were her other kids during this time? Didn't she have a little son to take care of?

I don't know. I don't know who was taking care of her kids or how old they were at this point or where they were. I don't know the time difference between being on the streets and getting that 2.25-million-dollar check. I don't know if her agent had to find her on the street or if her cousin from Morgantown came to check-in, or if her fixer, Aaron Goldblatt, eventually found her and dragged her into his apartment to get her cleaned up. I don't know why she wouldn't have stayed with him in the first place. But, given the circumstances, I imagine that someone had to take her by the hand and usher her into a taxi because I imagine she damn well didn't have the pocket change or humility to do it herself.

Maybe it was then, nestled inside the taxi, weaving their way to a shower and fresh clothes, the heat blasting, the radio playing Aretha Franklin, her voice maybe singing, *Until you come back to me*, that Linda turned to whoever was sitting next to her and whispered, *What... What was I doing?*

I imagine it was then that she began to envision what she could do with that 2.25 million.

6.

I don't tell my brother that I'm stopping in Cripple Creek on my way to California. I don't tell my stepfather or my father or my cousin who calls asking about Buck. I don't tell anyone that I'm also stopping at the Hollywood Cross to see the spot where Linda believed Isis' penis was buried. I don't want questions. About the divorce. About my confliction. About why I'm doing this research project where there's nothing to research. About why I'm still chasing this woman. Wanting to know her. Wanting to chronicle her. So, I say nothing. I find a cooler and a hot plate at the thrift store, find a room to rent in Cripple Creek for fifty-nine dollars a night, and when my stepfather asks why it's going to take me a week and a half to get to California, "It's a long drive, but it's not that long," he says, I tell him I'm sightseeing along the way.

"Like Route 66?" he says. "Maybe the Grand Canyon?"

"Sort of," I say, "I'm thinking, like, more north of all that." Maybe I will do such things, touristic things, the things you do when you go to Cripple Creek—whatever that might be. But what I really want is to see where Linda lived. To know her beyond my readings and fantasies. I want to walk the same sidewalks she walked.

To see the same mountains she saw. To see the house where she lived. I want to know the certainty of her existence, no matter how otherworldly that existence may have been. I don't think Casey has lied to me; I believe that there is a Cripple Creek and a house on Hayden Street that was hers. I believe he and Jason were there with her. I think, too, that Robert was real. But I have lived so long with her in the intangible; I need something else. Something I can run my hands over.

I leave the next day. I leave the biographies of women I've studied, the dreaming dictionaries, and my snowshoes, but I take everything else with me—my mother's old tweed blazer to wear to the courthouse, my pain at Buck's laughter, the divorce forms in a manilla folder, my astonishment at my willingness to keep engaging with him, all of Linda's books, my inclination to indulge his malice, a bag of trail mix, my worry that he'll keep calling, three gallon water jugs, and my unknowingness at what to do. I take it all and pack my car, somehow still stuffed, somehow still carrying it all. I put on my mother's camouflage coat that I'd sloughed off in the laundry room weeks ago and forgotten about. I take I-94 West. I take the exit towards St. Paul and wonder what's burning through Minnesota. *A bonfire? A diary farmer's burn barrel?* Wondering why all I smell is smoke, and all I can think of is Buck burning our keepsakes and my unfathomable sadness around it.

Around Twin Lakes, I realize it's me that smells. It's the coat. Still fragrant from the bar fire. I roll the window down through rural Iowa, unable to shake the image of our faces dissolving to ash, the fear of him drowning both of us, the reality that, maybe, he already is.

There were many things to do with 2.25 million dollars in the 1970s.

Buy 3,400 hot tubs or 22,500 *Steve Miller Band* Vinyl Box Sets. Purchase 3,500 sectional sofas and 1,600 electric typewriters. Buy too many German Coocoo Clocks and enough *Hot Wheels*-themed mechanical watches to fill a bathtub. Get Pyrex sets for all your friends and their friends and their children's friends. Then buy them all "Talking Busy" Barbie dolls. Donate to the Red Cross or UNICEF. Put indigo shag in your living room. Retile your bathroom pink and orange. Have a fondue party every Thursday. Invite the neighbors over for Black Forest gâteau and decaf every Friday. Stockpile Hamburger Helper to last for decades and eat that on Sundays with sirloin. I imagine Linda did do some of that once she had that check in her hands. You know, buy some Pyrex sets as gifts and get a new sectional and, sure, maybe even put that purple shag in the living room. But once she did all that, or maybe even before she did all that, I imagine she got her Rolodex out and contacted every single astrologer buddy she knew. Once she had them on the line, she pled, *Look at Sally's chart, and tell me what you see*. She offered cash and whatever else they wanted—a dishwasher or one of those *Hot Wheel* watches for their little boy, but most refused. Maybe they even said, *Never, Linda. I will never accept payment from you. This is a moment of crisis! Consider my help a karmic gift*.

Even though she had 2.25 million in her fist, I imagine Linda said, *If you say so!*

She hung up the phone and waited for the results.

They all called back to tell her the same thing. *Look at the twelfth house. Look at her transits. Look at Mars and Saturn. I see it... I see it! Sally is alive!*

Yes, Linda cried. You see it too!

I imagine they ranted together about those *horrid*, corrupt cops. The meat-eaters who abused their power and extorted what they wanted for their liking. The grass-eaters who accepted bribes and payoffs as innocently as a candy cane left in their Christmas stocking. *Remember what Serpico said? Remember the Knapp Commission? Who's to say it's not still happening? Who's to say Sally didn't get wrapped up in some of that?*

They festered. They screeched. They repeated the names: *Meat-eaters! Grass-eaters!* They said it together, *We will find her!* Linda hung up the phone even more confident that God delivered her this 2.25-million-dollar check at the precise moment where she needed it most.

I envision it's then that she pulled out her Rolodex, went to the letter "S," and looked for the husband of one of her astrologer friends who did something or another with the Army. Something with *investigations*, she remembered.

She dialed the number, believing that this, too, must be divinely guided.

I pull over at the Royal Inn outside of Ankeny, Iowa. The logo has a palm tree, and it's the only reason I pull over. I think I've found paradise among the cornfields. The whole structure looks like three single-story prefabricated homes stuck together, and once I get inside the room, I wonder if it is. The room is a trapezoid, funhouse-like,

and I think to go elsewhere, somewhere the cheery logo with tropical flora would match the interior, but I don't. I stand on the sidewalk outside my hotel room door and hold my coat out like a matador taunting the wind and remember this same smell on my father's hunting gear and the taxidermy he saved from the first time he torched a house.

It was a structural flaw. He had a fireplace in the basement of his split-level house, where he would burn a fire each night during the fall, winter, and spring. The smoke would escape through a flue that turned sixty degrees and met with another flue that led to the chimney. Over time, the area between the two flues had rusted and began to disintegrate, exposing the foundation. Each time he would build a fire, a small section of the foundation would char, unbeknownst to him. The basement was always smokey. He thought nothing of it until the night when the smoke climbed from the basement to the rest of the house. Until the night when his second wife told him to go figure out what the hell was wrong with that fireplace, and he put his hands on the walls of the house and felt that they were warm.

He knew what was wrong.

Instead of calling the fire department, my father put on his parka, went out into the December cold, snaked a garden hose through the basement window, and sprayed water up into the chimney. After ten minutes of spraying, the smoke had cleared. He left the hearth wet, shed his damp coat in the hallway, told himself he would clean up the mess in the morning, and went back to bed.

Meanwhile, the flames grew, smoke spiraled, and the fire alarms blared. My father and his wife grabbed what they could and stumbled into the snowy front lawn. Standing in his underwear and the coyote fur coat he grabbed from the rack, Labrador panting at his side, my father watched the greatest bonfire he had ever seen until the volunteer fire department showed up two hours later.

My father took my brother and me to see the house a few weeks later on Christmas Eve. When we arrived, we jumped out of our father's truck and wandered down the driveway. Somehow, I thought the wreckage would reflect the panic of seeing a home go up in flames. I imagined I would smell terror. Taste it. It would be titillating.

As we approached, my father mumbled behind his balaclava, "There it is."

The house was nothing but sticks and ash, a blemish among miles of soybean fields blanketed in winter's pitch white. I was not thrilled, only shocked by how still the site of the fire now stood. How the debris became mundane. My brother, eight years old, cheeks fat and flushed, said to my father, "Are we gonna live here again?"

"Uh, nah . . . no, I think we're done."

Years later, my father would tell me that if my house ever caught on fire, I should let it burn to the ground before calling the fire department. That way, he said, everything will be gone. There will be nothing the insurance company could salvage. That way, he said, I could truly start over.

In Iowa, I walk back inside the hotel room, crawl under the flat charmeuse bedspread, the ten o'clock news on mute, and wonder why I refuse to let my

relationship with Buck burn, why I keep stirring the embers, letting them spark. I watch the news anchor's silent mouths moving on the mute television screen as though they could tell me, uncertainty flickering within me.

I imagine Linda called David Sikes.

David used to work for the CIA. I imagine David wore navy blue suits and was always one step away from lighting up a Winston. He was in his fifties, but his face was pasty and pocked like a fifteen-year-old's. Maybe Linda liked this about him. It gave him an innocent, upright flair. David didn't want to talk about the Army. *Really shouldn't be talking about it at all*, he'd say. I imagine that David was a Virgo: gentle and shy, but stern when necessary. Linda also liked this about him, this man with his sun in Virgo. It meant she could get him to do what she wanted.

David, assumedly, picked the team of investigators, but I imagine Linda was the one that demanded her friends be able to sit in on any meetings and that there be a gofer to get snacks and things. So, he assembled some folks who could do that for her too.

I imagine that they would all meet to brainstorm at David's office down the street from The Playpen sex emporium in Times Square. Each day, the minute Linda got into the conference room, she would march up to David and remind him that the sex emporium was vile. Maybe she'd say something about how Satan is doing his work in Times Square, and David makes Linda come here day after day. *Why do we have to meet here?* she'd sputter.

Think of it like a cover, he'd say. Nobody's gonna think we're here. It's easier this way.

The rent was also cheap. David also liked how he could stop into the Army-Navy Surplus store after they were done. Anyway, once Linda had ranted about being down the street from a sex shop, and everybody had gotten a coffee or a slice of chocolate babka or the green tea with lemon they wanted, David continued to construct his narrative of the past few years of Sally's life: 1971-1973.

I imagine Linda had gotten a hold of Sally's planner, and the investigators used it to storyboard Sally's life. Or maybe they didn't even have her date diary; maybe they had to rummage even more. Call up the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and see if they could get ahold of the former semesters' classes and student lists. Call Sally's friends in and demand that they look at *their* planners to see when and where they had met with Sally. Maybe they'd take photocopies. Maybe they'd call all her friends back in. Maybe they'd ask questions so loaded with suspicion it would make her friends weep into their coat collars on the subway ride home. Maybe they'd call in her former professors until the teachers told the investigators they weren't going to take any more of this shit, *You're not cops. You can't just make me tell you all this personal stuff.* Maybe they went to that pizza place down the block Sally liked or the Drama Book Shop on West 39th and held a picture of Sally up to the store clerks' noses and asked about the last time they saw this woman. Maybe they explored the possibilities of what young actors do to pay their rent. Waitressing. Sweeping up hair at a salon. Voiceover gigs. Maybe they traced all the people and

places Sally could've gotten mixed up with. Through their research, whatever it was, they perceived a gaping hole: that summer she was in Berwick, Maine, before she disappeared. When she performed with the Hackmatack Playhouse.

Linda found a member of the staff and called him up.

Meanwhile, someone writes to me. Someone I'd written to long ago. Saying they finally checked their e-mail. Saying, sorry it's been so long, but they don't have any reason to check it that often. Someone saying, *Yes, I can help you*. It was someone from the Hackmatack Playhouse.

I read the message the next morning.

The response is signed "Michael."

I sit up in bed and reply. I feign excitement.

Yes! Thank you so much for your response. I'd love to talk with you!

I do not let myself run giddy with anticipation at what this man will tell me. I expect nothing. I slap my laptop shut and throw myself out of bed and out the door. My jacket still smells like a bonfire, so I shove it in the trunk, put two sweaters on, crank the heat up, and get on 35 South.

I drive for hours, and every prescribed burn I see in Nebraska feels like a joke. I watch the smoke spiral heavenward, and I think about Linda talking about Twin Flames in *Gooberz*. About how she believed your Twin Flame was someone you were meant to be with—no matter what. How she felt she and Robert were one another's Twin Flames. I watch firemen walk alongside the undulating lines of fire as

I drive further south and think about how the concept makes no sense to me. I understand flames' association with passion and lust, with heat—perhaps with the desire you would feel for your Twin Flame. Yet, when I think of fire, I do not think of destiny. I think of destruction. Endings. The sulfur funk of my coat. The roof caving in of the tiki bar. That blemish among the soybean fields.

As I drive, I watch every cigarette butt, glowing and hot, tossed out every window, fall to the ground and turn cold. When I pull over, I notice every person smoking in every parking lot at every gas station, and I think of Buck and I talking about visiting Cripple Creek this upcoming summer, me to see Linda's house, him to thrift in the mountain towns: Victor, Manitou Springs, Colorado Springs' suburbs. He fantasized about the country records he would find and spoke of his lust for a pair of black leather cowboy boots. When I get back in the car and drive again, I think of his voice, *It felt so good, you know, to burn all that*. Over and over. *It felt so good...* I rip my coat off and turn the radio on to drown it out. But hours later, when the clerk at the gas station in Sterling tells me I need a coat, "It's still winter, young lady," I can only whisper, "I just couldn't take it anymore" as he nods, his eyes fixed on mine, his face regretting that it ever uttered the statement.

Fog smears Teller County, covering highway 67 all the way to the dark hillside. The only things visible are the median lines and the mileage signs glimmering against my headlights. I crawl the switchbacks and stop at the gas station outside of town where

the trucks rust and the clerk slides my change across the table like it's something elicit, and I grab a copy of every tourist brochure sitting in the rack by the glass door.

The fog rolls so thick, I cannot drive more than a mile until I pull onto a dirt road. I reason that the longer I wait, the clearer things will become, so I kill the engine and pull the brochures into my lap when I see something move down the road a quarter-mile ahead of me. It skitters. I squint and watch the little flicker among the fog. I think it's a gallon garbage bag. I think to go grab it. Toss it in the trunk to throw away later. Then, I think it's a crow picking at a carcass. At an opossum or grey squirrel. Then I see a wing. Another wing. I get out of the car. I set the car door against the frame. Crouch. Watch. I see that same skitter, and whatever it is walks towards my direction from the haze. It gets larger. Clearer.

It's Merriam turkey. A hen. She hops on one foot, the other shriveled. With immediacy, the solutions arise within me: *Grab her. Take her to a veterinarian in Denver. See if there's a wildlife rehabilitation center in Colorado Springs.* I know it's illogical as I see them rise, but they come to me, nonetheless.

I watch her move as the mist turns to rain. My jacket growing damp, her steps steady. Steady towards me and steady as I anticipate her walking into my grasp and then steady towards the meadow away from me. Meanwhile, the solutions keep surfacing about what I would do once I had her. I think of scattering seed in a bathtub and keeping her there. I envision titanium prosthetic limbs. I think that she might be easy to grab. But the land grows dark, and the longer I wait, the more obscure she becomes, and the further she walks away from me. Somehow, I remain there, now

cross-legged on the dirt road, until my clothing is heavy on my body, and it grows dark enough that I am watching nothing, looking for nothing. Until I crawl back into my car. Until I get from Cripple Creek to my rented room, my father's voice like a pinch, *You can't save all the birds*. Until I think, *Or all the husbands*.

Michael replies that evening, and he wants to know how I even know about Sally. He wants to know how I would know about the Hackmatack summer stock theater company. Why I'm doing some dissertation about Linda Goodman. Why I would care about her. He tells me that what he has to share is not something "I wish to relive without knowing more about your purpose."

I wasn't expecting him to respond. But I also wasn't expecting him to be so suspicious. I don't know what to say. I think about lying. About telling him that I was looking in a newspaper archive and found an article about Sally performing with the theater company. I consider saying I did an interview where the interviewee offhandedly mentioned Hackmatack. I don't want to tell him that I found the theater's name on a Linda Goodman forum where posters discuss the vibratory energies of purple plates, the merits of Pizza Gate, and how to live on air. I don't want him to know that I don't know what I'm doing—that I have no abstract. No research plan beyond my own interests. Now that he has responded, now that he may tell me a story, I am ravenous. I want him to trust me. To write to me and tell me everything. I want him to think I'm a legitimate researcher, not some woman living between fantasy and reality. That I'm writing my own *Gooberz*. Living it.

I stare at the message and remind myself that Michael wrote back. Why would he write back if he wasn't interested or willing to tell me his story? He could just ignore me. So I reply and tell him the truth: I found the name of his theater company on a Linda Goodman forum where posters were discussing Sally and her life. I tell him that I'm a fan of Linda Goodman, and I want to research her life and write a biography of her for my dissertation.

I send the message.

It's fog the entire four days I'm in Cripple Creek. So, to me, the city is celestial: casinos in the clouds, sidewalks winding through the mist, single-story pastel houses with porch pots and lawn decorations twirling in the wind like hallucinations. I fall asleep in mist and dream of the artificial snow of my childhood: all whisp and itch. I wake up, and it's no different. I wonder if the turkey was a mirage.

In Cripple Creek, I ask everyone I meet about Linda. The bartender at the Boiler Room. The janitor vacuuming the floor at the Midnight Rose Hotel and Casino. The hostess at the Wildwood Casino. The tourists from Denver in the restaurant sitting at the table across from me. The woman I rent a room from and to whom I also ask if something is wrong. "I feel like I can't breathe; is this normal?" I say, and she assures me that's what everybody says when they get to town.

"We're two miles high!" she says, handing me a key.

I ask the man smoking a cigar outside Bronco Billy's Casino. The woman looking for

towels at the Family Dollar. I ask the man who gives me directions to a gas station. I ask, and they say, “Who?”

“No—never heard of any Linda. Goodman.”

“... no? Should I?”

“Mark Twain was here once.”

“Are you from Canada? You sound Canadian.”

They tell me they’re thinking about self-publishing a book of their own. They tell me Marshall Sprague lived in Colorado Springs. The nineteen-year-old hostess at the Wildwood tells me they went to high school with a girl named Linda.

“Maybe that’s her?” she says, wiping off laminated menus.

“No, I don’t think that’s her,” I say. “But thanks.”

Michael must not care. He must not perceive that I’m the fraudulent biographer I am. Or maybe he does, and he’s taking pity. Maybe he sees me as something else. Or, maybe, he just doesn’t know who I am yet.

Because Michael starts to tell me his story, beginning with the history of his family: the Dukes.

He tells me that he lives on “the same ground, the same house, that the Duke family has occupied since the 1600s” in Maine. They farmed the land and, at one time, had cows. But, when the cows were sold, Michael’s father turned the barn into a summer stock theater. After Michael’s father passed away, Michael “kept up the summer theater tradition.”

One of the actors who was working with the summer stock company was also going to school with Sally in New York. He recommended the theater to her. Michael writes, “She came for casting, and my family fell in love with her. She was very talented, but also friendly, loveable, happy—a joy to be around.” They loved her so much that they invited her to stay in the “big farmhouse on the grounds,” which was “usually only reserved for family only.” For that summer, she became “family” and “was just as happy acting as she was working in the fields with us or doing chores assigned to her.” Michael recounts Sally “singing and dancing and laughing to the Paul McCartney song—‘Live and Let Die.’” After that summer, the Duke family was “sad to put her on the bus to NYC.” Then, in December of 1973, the friend that had introduced Sally to the playhouse “told us the horrible, sad news that Sally had taken her own life.” He ends the e-mail telling me that he misses her; “Over 30 years ago and our family and friends still talk about her.”

He signs off, “That is my Sally part of the story.”

I read the message and am relieved to know anything concrete about Sally, even if it’s vague: that she was friendly and lived in a farmhouse the summer before her death. That she sang and danced to Paul McCartney. But, of course, what I want is Linda. To know about her. How he knows her. If he knows her. I am also curious about his assertion that this is a story “he does not want to relive,” but I do not know how to ask him to share such a thing. Instead, I ask if he will share his “Linda” part of the story.

Hours later, he replies, “I will.”

In *Star Signs*, Linda claims that Cripple Creek is filled with more ghosts than people. That there is a spirit who lives in her house on Carr Avenue named Maggie. That sometimes she, and others, have heard a baby cry in that house. That this town is “fairly quivering . . . with intense vibrations.” That an astral spirit visited her once to tell her metaphysical secrets and prophecies. That clairvoyance is a real phenomenon to those who vibrate at higher frequencies. That Nikola Tesla’s ghost inhabited her room. That this town is a magical point. That being two miles high is the ideal altitude for miracles to occur. Just look at the Gold Rush of the 1890s. Just look at all the ghost sightings. And in turn, if this town is a magical point, then the men who explored it below ground are, by proxy, intuitively blessed. “Miners,” Linda claims, “are unexpectedly psychic. Miners *know* things.”

I am perplexed as to why Linda would claim that miners *know* things. I imagine they know the feeling of a shovel in their grasp and the heave of earth behind them. They know their comrades in the mine. They know fluorite’s sheen and the gold lurking beneath. They know how to coax the earth, I imagine. Yet with the environmental impact of mining and Linda’s seeming concern for the earth—she even promoted waterless toilets in *Love Signs*’ back pages—why would she valorize such a profession? Was her concern for the environment fickle? Or is there something about miners that Linda admired? Do they, indeed, have psychic abilities? Even more so, I am intrigued by her emphasis on something earth firm, something physical. Even when describing her love of Cripple Creek’s thunderstorms in *Star Signs*, an earthly

event, her fixation is not on smelling ozone's sweetness or watching the sky darken and crack with lightning. She loves them because thunderstorms "seem to evoke some deep and long-buried sense of power in me" for thunderstorms harken back to "an invisible energy force everyone long ago possessed, then lost." Given this, why the fascination with miners, with those who work within the earth, from a woman obsessed with the stars and "invisible energy forces?"

I walk the two miles to the Mollie Kathleen Gold Mine and take the tour to study their ways.

Michael writes that he received a phone call in September 1980.

He answered.

"Is this Michael Duke?" the caller said.

"Yes," he replied.

The caller said that she was Linda Goodman.

"Do you know who I am?" she asked.

"Yes," Michael said. "You're Sally's mom."

Linda told Michael she had good news—"Sally is alive."

Michael was speechless. Linda kept talking, telling Michael that she didn't know how to find Sally, but she wanted to know if Michael and his family would help her. Michael writes, "I was in complete shock. My mind was racing. How should I answer? Sally was my sister that summer she lived with us. She was very real to me, and I still missed her. Of course, I answered 'Yes!'"

They arranged to meet a few weeks later.

Michael gathered his older sister, his brother, and two younger sisters to meet with Linda in South Portland, Maine. He explains that “Over the years since Sally lived in the farmhouse, the three of us older siblings had all married, and our spouses came along to this meeting as well.” Apparently, “Linda had rented the top floor of the Sheridan towers at the Maine Mall in South Portland. In Maine at the time, there was not a fancier place to be. My rural family was quite impressed.” When the Duke family arrived, they saw that “Linda had brought with her quite a crew—a couple of attorneys, a couple of accountants, at least one other astrologer friend, a gopher whose job seemed to be ordering from room service—and a team of investigators led by a guy named David . . . Linda introduced us all and told us that David had recently left the CIA.” Michael writes, “As true Yankees, sensing a free meal, we ordered room service.”

As I read about Michael’s family, I feel a kinship; they’re similar to the people I grew up around in rural Wisconsin who work the land. Folks accustomed to waking up at four am to birth a calf. Who like the way sweet corn looks when it gets its tassels in August and getting to the strawberries in the summer before the birds do. I feel I understand the family’s amazement at the hustle of Linda’s team and being at the Sheridan with its crisp restaurant menus and glass chandeliers. Of being drawn into helping someone with such resources. Of being wooed by wealth. Or maybe it

has nothing to do with that—with the opulence of it all. Maybe they're just trusting. Just as trusting as I would be. Unsuspecting.

Michael writes that once they'd ordered, David began to explain.

Nobody talks about being a seeker or searching at the Mollie Kathleen Gold Mine Tour, even though gold mining is just that: an exploration. Instead, we gather outside the mine on barren earth and talk about dirt. About danger. About the allure of glitter and the Gold Rush. I shiver in the mist. A couple from Toronto hand me an extra black-and-white Gaban poncho from their backpack. The guide keeps talking about the Gold Rush, and I stick the poncho over my head. It feels like a stranger swaddling me: stiff, tentative. The guide hands out hard hats that we all have to wear.

We go into a steel elevator and face its mesh walls. "Get in real close," the guide says, and I do, steel's tang in my face. The guide tells us we "gotta keep our feet planted." We must prepare for the lurch. The start of movement. It begins, and I stumble towards the mesh walls. I want to hold something, place my hands around a railing or a bar, but there's nothing to grab. I mash my hands against the mesh as though it could grab me if only I pressed hard enough, and we fall through darkness. My poncho flutters, pulse throbbing against my hard hat's plastic headband. The guide is talking, and other people seem to be nodding, but I'm not listening. I close my eyes, and Buck comes to me. I think of how his body would feel against mine in this elevator, how he would steady me, how he would let me hold him. I open my eyes to search for signs of where we are in the elevator shaft as it rushes past. As if I

could know, as if I could keep a tally of the dozens of yards we fall. As if his presence would've changed the reality of me plummeting through darkness.

Somehow, I yearn for him at this moment. It feels foolish to me, aberrant. Hasn't this man proven himself to be cruel? Maybe I yearn out of comfort—because if he were here, we would be together, and I would know he is alive. Maybe I long because if he were here, that would mean we were still together and, by proxy, I had some hope about us, about the future. Maybe I ache out of nostalgia—this is the trip we talked about. He'd be wearing cowboy boots. I'd have *Star Signs* stuck in my waistband, and his hands would be around that waistband. We'd be eating french fries and ripping pull tabs at the bar later. Maybe I yearn for him because I want the rush of fantasy, of what might have been.

We hit granite illuminated by light, the elevator rattles to a stop, and I shove through the opening onto the mine floor.

I said before that miners *coax* the earth, but the word unsettles me as I see the mine's enclosure expand before me. The granite is chiseled, still. There are posed, life-sized models. Arms raised in mid-heave. Necks thick from work. Their bodies show no sweat, but I understand the intensity of their labor, nonetheless. I see that miners do not coax the land. They blast it. How else could we stand here and wander beneath the earth?

Before I arrived, I researched. I read the 115 pages that list mining fatalities prior to 1963 in the Denver Public Library Special collections online. The men suffocate. They drop between cars and moving trains. Rocks fall. Shafts cave in.

Some columns list the cause of death as “foul air.” One line for a man that died in Cripple Creek reads, “Frozen crust fell & crushed him.” In other counties, they are struck by empty cars. They are killed by the “fall of roof” or the “fall of rock.” As though the mining company did not want to place blame on the roof or the rock, but on the fall, as though the rocks and roofs are inherently benevolent. Defective lamps cause gas explosions. Air pipes strike heads, and noxious gases are inhaled. According to miners, the earth will tell you when she’s about to cave. It is a knock. A creak. Sometimes a banging. A groaning before giving way. *Get out.*

We shuffle through the mine. I know my body is moving with the mass of tourists and their Sturgis Black Hills Harley Davidson t-shirts, and I know I shake my head “no” at the couple from Toronto when they ask me if I’m still cold, but I’m not aware of it. I know that I came here to understand why miners could be psychic, but I am only thinking about leaving. About how to get out. About how long this tour is going to last. About ripping this poncho off, tossing my hard hat on the dirt floor, and fleeing down the tunnel and digging for land. I think about the miners. About how long they had to contend with working in a place of such danger. Did they know? Did they care? Perhaps they knew how long to stay because of fluorite glimmering in stone. Because of the boom and prospectors. Because, sometimes, the further they dug, the more precious the earth became. Perhaps the rewards of the search outweighed the risks. But, more than this, they knew when their search ended: *When we reach the gold.* And they knew the conditions under which it can continue: *If there’s more gold.*

But, if there is no gold glimmering, if there is no prospector to guide your journey, how do you know when to bail? When what you seek will not materialize? When the walls are knocking, and it's time to give up? Did Linda valorize miners not because of their supposedly psychic abilities but because they knew how to wrangle the unyielding earth into submission? To get what they want at all costs despite the risks? Because they were expendable bodies? Pawns in a prospector's game?

I stop as the rest of the tour moves forward and spin around, looking for an EXIT sign, and see nothing but the cavernous tunnels sprawling into darkness.

According to Michael, David explained that New York City cops were corrupt and gave "several examples," including the true story behind the 1971 film *The French Connection* with Gene Hackman. David claimed that when he showed up at the precinct after Sally's "suicide" and tried to pull the file on Sally's death, the clerk told him there was "no file." Michael doesn't explain how it was that David got ahold of the file—maybe he reached out to his network, consulted friends of friends—but, somehow, he got the file. Inside the file were photographs of Sally's apartment. David showed the photographs to the Duke family. Michael writes that the "photos were horrible; bloody, an obvious scene of a struggle. One particularly brutal photo was of a phone receiver that was used as a club. This certainly did not look like a scene from a suicide. Perhaps someone had died, but it wasn't Sally."

David explained that "his investigation uncovered that Sally had become mixed up with some guys that make snuff films." Did the Dukes know what snuff

films were? Did their faces scowl in disgust when David said the word *snuff*? No. They didn't get it. I imagine that David probably didn't want to explain it. Maybe he'd already had to explain it to Linda, and he didn't want to do it again. Maybe he hoped that the Dukes would know what the word meant. But according to Michael, "I and my innocent farm family had no idea... we had to have David explain them." Which he did. He also had examples, but the Dukes "declined" to view them.

At this point, Michael says they've been there for hours. They've seen all sorts of carnage and heard about pornography where someone dies. Maybe they're traumatized. Maybe they're disgusted. Maybe they're regretting driving the two hours to South Portland to meet this astrologer woman and her team. They certainly don't understand what this has to do with them. Michael says he was the one to ask it, "This is all horrible, but what does this have to do with us?"

"We are not sure," David replied. "But I have spent many months researching the last couple years of Sally's life before the alleged death, and there seems to be a blank space in her life the months she was supposed to have been living with your family. Something happened to her when she was up in Maine. We don't know what... maybe she went somewhere else; maybe she met someone. We really don't know. That's why we have asked you here." David and Linda wanted the Duke family to help them relive the summer of 1973 when Sally stayed with them.

According to Michael, after hearing about corrupt cops and telephone receivers used as weapons, the two youngest sisters wanted nothing to do with David or Linda. But the older siblings said they'd do anything to help.

We climb back into the elevator, and I shove myself into a corner, close my eyes, and wait for fresh air's waft. I remember the smell of beer on casino carpeting and the rough cotton of my rented room's bed and the feeling of my boots against a sidewalk and lust for it all.

I count to two hundred and will myself to think of only the numbers.

Dim light breaks. The elevator opens. The mist has turned to rain. I stomp out, take the helmet off, rip off the poncho, shove it in the hands of the woman from Toronto, tell her thanks, and run the two miles through the rain to my rented room. Past the smokers crowded under an awning on Bennet. Past the stray cat darting into a hedge. Past the high schoolers peddling past, screeching about the rain. My boots grow heavy, my clothing clinging to me. The sky heaves. I heave. Thunder cracks. I remember Linda's words, her love for thunderstorms. About how they thrill her. About how they *evoke some deep and long-buried sense of power . . . they are an invisible energy force everyone long ago possessed, then lost... a memory bell I hear chiming in the back of my mind...*

The only energy I feel is that of nostalgia. A desperate ache. A longing that robs me of all power.

I make it to the door. Stab my key into the lock. Throw myself inside. Rip the weight of my clothes off. Stagger into the shower. Turn the porcelain faucet handle hot. Let the heat wash over me, cold skin stinging against the warmth, and wrap my arms around myself. I squeeze. I let myself rest there. Let my skin grow red. Let my

ribs rise and fall against their grasp. Let my feet drag on the carpeted floor to pass out, arms still grasping me, their grip persuading me of their strength, of their ability to do what I doubt I can do alone.

Michael writes that each weekend, “One or two or all of us made a trek to South Portland as David and the team took apart the summer of 1973.” Once, a neighbor even came with them so they, too, could be questioned. The investigators traced the summer Sally spent with them. In return, “Linda was a gracious hostess—becoming somewhat of a friend. She showered us with gifts and visited our homes. My brother and his wife had recently bought a small house.” For their new home, “Linda gave them a gift of living room furniture!”

As I read Michael’s story, I imagine that the family had to be thinking they were doing something honorable. A kind of community service. That they were helping a shattered family come back together. But, even more than this, I imagine they had to have been, of course, thinking about Sally more than ever. They had to wonder if this investigation would yield Sally’s discovery. Did they fantasize about, one day, seeing Sally walk through the doors of the Sheridan? Did they wonder if, maybe, Sally could perform again at the theater? Did they believe that this investigation would work? I imagine they had to. I envision that, even if not, there was something enjoyable about the experience, even more than the gifts. Maybe it had to do with reliving the summer they spent with Sally and seeing Sally’s face in Linda’s face. Perhaps Linda showed them a picture of Sally’s late father, Bill, and

they marveled at their matching almond eyes. Maybe it was because, for a while, they could live on the same hope Linda had.

And there's nothing better than resting there: where every possibility still floats.

I'm living there too.

The next morning, I walk to Linda's house and let my longing pacify me. Lull me away from thinking of Buck's arms around my body. Away from wondering whether those arms suffocate or soothe. Away from the weight of boots sodden from yesterday's rain. Away from the weight of my uncertainty about what to do once I arrive at the courthouse. I let myself luxuriate in hope over what I will find on Hayden Street: where one of Linda's former houses sits.

I long for a certain kind of story. A story told through a home with tulips blooming before it; the flowers planted there by someone last autumn, someone anticipating spring. A story told through delicate cursive reading *137 Hayden Street* painted in acrylic years before on a mailbox. A story told through crisp shingles and the hollowness of clean gutters and weeds ripped from sidewalk cracks. I long for a story where the home Linda built on Hayden street has been cared for. That the *Grey Gardens*-like ruin Casey told me about was hyperbole. That, despite her losses, something that was once hers has been salvaged.

The story begins as I reach Hayden Street and walk its skyward slope. The epigraph: St. Peter's Catholic Church a block from Linda's home with a limestone

Our Lady of Assumption statue depicting Mary before her bodily ascension to heaven in the courtyard. Mary holds her limestone hands up towards the sky. Her gaze towards heaven is tranquil, a tiny smile on her face as she waits for ascent. There is no fear of her transition to the other side, the unknown that waits for her. Her subtext: *I'm ready for what's next.*

I stand, breath clipped, my body on the verge of a shiver, and think, *Me too.*

But such hope didn't last for long.

Michael explains that as the months went on, he realized that “the questions were becoming more pointed.” There became “more pressure that we were not giving the full answers or the right answers.” Linda and David were working together in their own kind of manipulation, what Michael calls a “good cop, bad cop thing,” to force the family into revealing information. Meanwhile, Michael’s “older sister and husband were becoming friendlier with David and his wife,” and Michael’s sister “was also starting to accuse [him] of not giving full answers.” Michael also realized through talking privately with his brother about “the things that David told me my brother said to him” that his brother had never said such things. Michael realized that “one of them,” David or his brother, “were not being truthful.”

Spending so much time in South Portland had strained Michael’s relationship with his wife; she “had become pretty fed up with our search for Sally, a girl my wife didn't even know.” They only had a few weekends off from going to the Sheridan. Even then, during the week, the siblings would be calling one another to confirm

certain details and double-check what information they had told David. Michael says that they felt obligated to provide information, even more so as they were being challenged on what they were sharing and, each weekend, feeling pressured to provide more information. Michael says the investigation “was tearing my family apart.”

Meanwhile, the local media was stirring, asking questions, requesting interviews, “Several local papers and TV stations now were interested in the investigation underway in South Portland by one of the country's most famous women and the family and theater mixed up in the middle of it.” Michael tells me that, at some point during the investigation, he had an interview for a job “and when the potential employer found out who I was—he wanted to know all about Linda and the investigation . . . it had been on the news the previous night.” The investigation was taking over all aspects of the Duke’s life.

After Mary’s ascension, I find Linda’s house.

The story the house tells is this: nights of high schoolers gathered on its wrap-around porch where they smoke Camel Lights snuffed on the rotting wood railing, ashy dabs dotting the wood like bullet holes, shell casings discarded over the railing. Evenings where steel-toed boots crush the Natural Ice beers they drink. Where the cans are thrown into the lawn below, all falling into a pile so abundant if you squint, it looks like heaped Christmas tinsel, all glitter and buckle. Weekends where the kids who gather here do it, of course, because this is the house up on the hill that’s

abandoned—an obvious place for debauchery. But they also do it here, instead of some basement or alley, because this is the house that lets their teenage arrogance blossom. They stare at the stained glass murals of Egyptian gods and baby Jesus in the manger and snicker. They gape at the image of St. Francis of Assisi and Clare running into one another's arms and ask what kind of freak lived here. They feel all-knowing in their dismissal.

Sometimes, they bring burgers and fries from Maggie's downtown and sit on the carport roof where they squirt the leftover ketchup packets on the window near the *Expect a Miracle* stained glass inlet and let the ketchup drip and crust. Sometimes, they leave their homework here—pages from notebooks of Mrs. Arndt's math class underneath the carport. A note their mother wrote them about picking Sonny up from school on the sidewalk. Shouldn't they know that if they're going to party here, not to leave evidence? I imagine they also gather here because they can let any urge to destroy run wild. Toss their take-out bags and Styrofoam containers on the front lawn. Pull their zippers down and pee on the front door. Take a rock from the backyard and toss it through a window, listen to the glass fragment, watch the stone bounce inside. Let themselves feel shocked at what it's like to destroy something with your own hands. Not just to fantasize about destruction but do it themselves. Maybe then they run away, garbage and cigarettes and math homework left behind—maybe worry that the neighbors heard. Maybe worry about what mom would say. Maybe tell their friend that *we better get the hell outta here now*. Maybe not—maybe laugh. Maybe find delight in destroying someone's house. Maybe throw another rock. And

another. Maybe throw rocks until they can slide their skinny torsos through the broken glass. Walk around the living room. The bedrooms. The miniature chapel. Kick a wall. Jump to touch the ceiling with their hand. Look in all the cabinets. Leave some open. Open and close the wood-burning stove. Stick their fingers in the ash. Smear it on their jeans. Wander until they realize there's nothing here. Until they get bored with a home of nothing but stained shag carpeting and silence. Wander until they run out of beer and toss their empty cans on the living room floor. Find the rock that let them into the house and throw it through another window to let themselves out.

The house tells me that there's a lot of that—the throwing of rocks through windows. It tells me, too, that someone, at some time, has tried to fix it all. They first tried during the late 90s when it started—when, I imagine, the teenagers or whoever discovered they could come to this abandoned place and hang, they could destroy this property and never get caught. Maybe the kid across the street started it—he kept watching, waiting to see if somebody ever came by or seemed to be living at that place with all the weird stained glass. Maybe when he realized nobody was, that's when he told his friend. *Let's check out that place across the street...* So they did. And, eventually, that's when the rocks started. When the glass splintered. When whoever was looking after this place started having to go to Home Depot in Colorado Springs to buy sanded plywood and get a new set of drill bits. When they realized that it wasn't just once they were going to have to do this—but again and again. Over the windows and the front door. Over the living room and the pool room and that one

bedroom that faces west. When they saw that they could use the plywood and its weather to mark time. From the first break-in to the most recent. From all the ways different intruders at different points in time have circumnavigated the plywood.

At some point, they tried harder. Maybe they thought *I can fix all of this!* So, they picked up the trash. They peeled away the carport's molding wood and threw it in a pile. They bought a rake, shovel, and a blue tarp at the Home Depot. They began assembling trash in a five-gallon plastic bucket. But at some point, they gave up. They decided the more wood they pulled, the worse it got. So, they quit. There was no point in moving that blue tarp to cover anything—it's not like anything would save this place from the weather of a Colorado winter at this point—so they left it to flap underneath a rock by the driveway. Maybe the bucket of trash was too tragic to take all the way to the dumpster. It felt too sad to walk past all the ways the house has been degraded. So, they left it in the middle of the driveway to accumulate rainwater and mosquito larva.

Maybe it was then they put the padlock on the door. When they knew that they didn't have the energy to do anything else. Maybe they knew it was futile to do it. Even more futile than trying to clean up the litter that just kept accumulating. Look at all the rocks around—all the hammers that live in jockey boxes. All the teenagers in cowboy boots who don't care about using their heel to shove in a storm window. Look at all the nothingness around—the meadow, just that one house across the street. There's so much opportunity to break into this place. Nobody's watching. What's a padlock gonna do? But maybe they put it there as a statement. A message.

Someone is watching. Or: This is someone's property. Or: Quit it! I can't spend all my time hammering plywood over these windows and picking up your take-out containers.

Not that the padlock did anything. The destruction kept unfolding around it.

The story of the house is also told through gossip. Yes, because of the high school boys who come here to drink and smoke and bust through windows, but the house stirs larger myths. Of Cripple Creek residents murmuring about the resident that once lived in that house up on the hill. Maybe some people know: *Linda Goodman—that astrologer woman*. Maybe some people think they know who she was, and in this semi-knowingness, they embellish or prevaricate. *She was a witch. A woman who could move walls with her mind*. The gossip is endless. Relentless. Innumerable.

The house also tells of visitors coming here thinking it has some kind of spiritual energy. People coming for the thrill. Maybe they think there are ghosts. Twenty-something girls who drive from Colorado Springs to sit on the carport roof with a Ouija board and press their sweaty fingers to the planchette, thrilled at the thought of it moving. Retirees from Manitou Springs with turning forks and tarot cards to channel the spirits of this home. Paranormal hunters from Denver who crawl through the broken doors with voice recorders to pick up ambient background noise: voices. Whines. Shudders. Maybe Linda Goodman fans like myself come here to pay their respects. To place a bouquet of daisies that will rot and wither on the doorstep. To press their palms together and pray to Linda for her guidance. To place their hands

on the grassy meadow behind the house and wonder if Linda knows they've come for her.

Or, maybe, the fans are just as reckless as the high school boys are. Maybe they're the ones breaking the pool's sliding glass door. Snaking their hands through the opening and groping for the lock to turn. Trying to flip a lock that will not budge. Resigning themselves to pressing their noses against the windows of Linda's home. Telling themselves it's okay to break a window. To being more intrusive than they'd planned to be. Maybe they're the ones leaving their footprints on the carpeting inside. Snapping photographs. Exhilarated at being inside Linda's home.

The house tells a story of indifferent wilderness. Of raccoons picking through trash and climbing the pines. Of deer nibbling on the Kentucky Bluegrass verdant on the property. Of an opossum nesting inside the chimney and raising her young. Of three young opossums too frightened to leave the property. Of mounds of opossum feces lining the wrap-around porch. Of the rabbit who took shelter inside the outdoor hot tub's vinyl shell and died there: a lonely mausoleum.

What story will the house tell of me being here? Maybe the house would tell of a woman's muddy footprints leading up to the house and around to every window and door. The house will show a gait short from fatigue. Steps tentative from disbelief. From wondering if this was the feeling she wanted when she saw her father's burned house as a child. To feel sorrow so deep it stung. To see something truly destroyed. The house will tell you that, for the woman, the house is less a story than it is a series of questions: *Why did someone care enough to board up the house*

but not to preserve it beyond that? Who owns the house? Why would Linda's familiars, her friends or family, not care to maintain it? Had she upset them? Did they hold grudges? Did they simply not care?

The house will tell you that the woman wonders if, maybe, it's just a house. Maybe it's no relationship to her family or familiar's concern for her. Look at her own mother's house—it's not out of lack of concern, but lack of time. Of control. Of knowing how to fix screens with just a staple gun. Of the ruin becoming bigger than anyone can fix. Of fixing the decay becoming a kind of joke, a farce, a woman scrambling to perverse a home that can never replicate the care her mother took. The house would tell you that a woman came here once, but she was too lost in thought to see that though she came looking for another woman, she only saw herself reflected back.

The house will tell you that the woman turns her questions over in her mind as she walks down Hayden Street towards the church. She asks them, looking at Mary again. Yet, Mary's arms raised towards heaven no longer appear to have the confidence of knowing heaven waits beyond but only the indifference of a shrug, as if to say, *Who knows?*

Michael sends me newspaper articles about his family, detailing what Linda and David believed had happened to Sally. An undated article from the *York County Coast Star* written by Richard Hamilton, the headline reading, "Hackmatack Playhouse Actress—missing or dead?" focuses on Michael's older brother, Stephen,

and his belief in Linda's theories. Stephen doesn't talk about snuff films or murder. He doesn't talk about the presents Linda buys him and his wife or his older sister and her husband. The story in the article is far different from what Michael told me the investigators laid out for him. Instead, he says that "he believes Goodman's theory that the woman he thought was Snyder for more than half the [theater] season was, in fact, a look-a-like planted in the theater's company to replace the real Sally Snyder."

Linda claims that "within the past year she discovered a 'double' had been switched for her daughter during a run of 'The Cactus Flower' at the Duke's theater, the Hackmatack Playhouse, in July of 1973." According to Linda, "My daughter never left Maine for New York at the end of that season, and the letters allegedly written by her to friends from New York were blatant forgeries." The scheme David and Linda proposed was complex. According to them, "the body found in a Manhattan apartment on Dec. 9, 1973, was the victim of a homicide, as were several other bodies they believe were moved from the apartment, none of them Sally Snyder's." David claims that Sam Goodman, Sally's stepfather who reportedly identified Sally's body after it was found, was "really identifying" the blanket wrapped around the body "that belonged to his daughter, not the body itself." Rather, because the blanket was presumably Sally's, Sam assumed it must be Sally beneath it. Linda also claims that "someone was 'brutally murdered' in the same apartment by being beaten with a telephone receiver."

While Stephen remains convinced, Stephen's wife, Charlene, is less certain, stating that she "doesn't like what Goodman is doing." Charlene says, "There's no

way a double could have been switched for Sally in the middle of a show. I can understand her (Goodman) wanting to find out what happened to her daughter, but I think the way she is going about this is very strange.” Charlene describes Sally as “a high-strung girl, talented but unstable and apt to fly into rages or get hysterical over nothing. We had even considered inviting her to stay with us beyond the end of the season because we thought it might help her become more stable.”

The doubles theory is different from what Michael shared with me about the snuff films. Despite this, I envision that the theory of doubles could compliment the snuff theory. Perhaps, it was too crass, maybe too embarrassing for Linda, to publicly admit her daughter had fallen in with filmmakers who produced snuff films. Or maybe it was just a temporary theory, or there were multiple theories.

According to Hamilton’s article, while the Dukes themselves have not seen the evidence that supports the theory that the real Sally was switched with a double. Yet, another article by Hamilton, from March 7th, 1980, claims that Linda was working with “a physiognomist from the Smithsonian institute, J. Lawren Angel, curator of physical anthropology” who “has stated that” photographs taken from the apartment where Sally supposedly commit suicide “show ‘four or more girls’ similar in appearance to Snyder” to support the doubles theory.

In Hamilton’s undated article, David Sikes claims “as to why no one at the theater ever noted the obvious differences” between the double and the real Sally, “The human mind makes adjustments to accept what it can’t believe. If your own son

were to come to the table one night looking slightly different than before, you wouldn't question it because your mind would tell you he had to be the same child."

Furthermore, Linda claims that "Everyone we've talked to who was around the theater then has a great deal of difficulty remembering anything about that season," and there are "sharp" discrepancies between accounts. She credits such misremembering to the possibility of "memory-erasing drugs and techniques of hypnosis which can alter memory."

Despite Stephen's belief in Linda's theory that the real Sally had been switched for a double, he couldn't remember an incident that, according to Linda, four other people had recounted wherein "the real Sally Snyder... was still at the theater" and "she became hysterical one night and kept repeating phrases like 'People who look like people' and 'I promise not to tell.'" Linda claims that these accounts "support the notion that Sally may have been intimidated into believing she had to disappear and let herself be replaced by a double."

Again, Charlene is skeptical because "this new girl would have been walking into the middle of a production" and into a community where relationships had already been made. For instance, Charlene claims that "Sally and the man she was playing opposite in 'Cactus Flower' hated each other, and that relationship continued uninterrupted throughout the season."

A missing advertisement from 1980 Michael shares with me reflects this theory. The advertisement has a headshot of Sally with the name "SARAH ELIZABETH SNYDER, a/k/a SALLY SNYDER, stage name: SARAH

STRATTON.” The advertisement states that fifty thousand dollars cash “will be paid for factual information which results in the discovery of the present location of my daughter... who performed for approximately one week in the role of ‘Stephanie’ in the Hackmatack Playhouse production of CACTUS FLOWER in the summer of 1973, in Berwick, Maine, and then disappeared.” She continues, “A separate and additional one-thousand-dollar cash reward will be paid immediately to anyone who provides substantiated information which, in the opinion of my attorneys, is directly connected with the circumstances related to Sally’s disappearance from Maine in the summer of 1973.” The advertisement’s header reads: “EXPECT A MIRACLE.”

In another article from *Fosters Daily Democrat* on March 11th, 1980, author Dorothee Kock cites Linda’s work on a book about Howard Hughes and a book about “a twin investigation-research project which involved a large boat that figured in the Watergate hearings” as the reason for Sally’s disappearance. Kock’s article implies that, perhaps, Goodman saw Sally’s disappearance within a larger scheme of personal tragedies, “including the disappearance of ... Robert Brewer.” Instead of four doubles, Kock’s article claims that there may have been up to nine doubles involved in Sally’s disappearance.

In support of the "doubles" theory, Kock's article includes two photographs of blonde women that are both, supposedly, pictures of Sally. The only difference is that in one, a more candid photograph, with a darker exposure, one of the blonde woman’s front teeth is darker and slightly crooked. Whereas the other photograph, a professional headshot, shows a straight, white smile. I examine the teeth: the incisor’s

curve, the enamel's vibrancy, and I see that they are different. But the photographs are no more different than two photographs of the same woman who has had dental work done. Some tooth whitening and bonding. Different lighting and a professional photographer. I look at their noses and their nostrils' unique ovals. I compare the curve of their eyes, the expansiveness of their chins. Yet, the more I stare, the more I oscillate. If I look at the pictures wanting to believe that the woman is the same, I can see the similarities. If I look at the photographs wanting to believe the woman is not the same, I can see the subtle differences.

I cannot tell you if they are the same woman or not.

Michael decided that something needed to be done. There needed to be an intervention. So, he called the family and the investigators together and said they needed to have a meeting. At that point, Michael's wife "had decided to take no more gifts from Linda," and when Michael drove past his brother's house, he saw "all of the new furniture Linda had bought for them on the lawn with a 'For Sale' sign." Something within them, too, had shifted.

When they all met, once again in South Portland, Michael asked the question to David, Linda, and the rest of the team, "We have spent the last six months with you. Are we getting anywhere?"

They said, "Yes."

David explained, "He had discovered something that we might not be able to believe." He explained to the Dukes that "There is another family just like ours in

Eastern maritime Canada . . . another big family with a farm and a theater. Another family named the Dukes. They were our doubles. He wasn't sure if we were the 'real' Dukes - or if we were the doubles." Michael continues, saying that David likewise "wasn't sure if Sally stayed with us that summer, or if it was her double that stayed with us."

Michael assured David that they were the real Dukes. As I envision Michael telling David that they were the "real" Dukes, I wonder if Michael laughed as he said it. Or was the whole assertion that there was some Duke double family in Canada so preposterous he was simply stunned?

No matter, David replied, "Perhaps, but I don't know for certain."

David then asked the Dukes "to prove that they were the 'real' Dukes" and to "supply him with the contacts of not only all of the other actors and staff of that summer a few years ago—but also all of the theater patron contacts."

Michael doesn't tell me how the rest of the conversation went, only that he decided that "that this whole thing was ridiculous to continue any further. I told David that I would not provide that information, and my family left."

I imagine that as the Dukes drove back to their home that day, maybe they laughed about the Duke "doubles." But even if they did laugh, I wonder if they felt taken. Scammed. If they felt embarrassed to have been drawn into such a complicated and outlandish plot. Did they feel angry that they had invested so much time into something that never materialized into anything? Did they think about Sally? That this whole time they thought they were helping a family reunite when, in actuality, all

this time had brought them no closer to the truth of what happened to her? Or, rather, had only distracted from the reality of her suicide?

Michael doesn't allude to any of this. He only tells me that his story with Linda wasn't over.

Hamilton's March 7th article titled "Goodman presses search for daughter despite skeptics" includes what he calls "the strangest part of the saga," which concerns a made-for-television movie that Sally appeared in "shot in early 1973." Linda obtained footage of Sally and "one or more of the look-a-likes who later showed up at Hackmatack and who are in the photographs found in the apartment." Apparently, still photographs from the movie were part of how J. Lawren Angel at the Smithsonian made his determination that Sally had several doubles.

Furthermore, for Linda, "the movie is fraught with symbolism hinting at the kind of activity she fears her daughter fell victim to, things like the CIA's drug and mind control experiments and the government's witness relocation program." Furthermore, "the title of the film, shown in 1977, is 'The Guardian' (which Goodman takes as a possible reference to witness protection schemes) and its theme, according to a cable TV program guide, concerns governmental-related 'psych-biological experimentation.'" Additionally, the film also opens with the shot of a Richard Nixon doppelgänger "and contains many other scenes which Goodman says carry special meaning for her in light of what she believes may have happened to her daughter."

I look in database after database to find the movie, but I cannot. I e-mail film scholars about made-for-television movies from 1977, and they reply later, saying they've never heard of it. But, perhaps, it doesn't matter. Somehow, I cannot believe that a film would've communicated such information to Linda beyond coincidence. How is it possible that a movie independently produced before Sally's disappearance that happened to feature Sally as an actress would've contained such information unless someone in the film themselves was involved in her disappearance? Yet, this does not seem to be what Linda suggests about the film's significance. If so, wouldn't she and David interrogate them instead of the Dukes about what happened to Sally that summer? While it may have proven oddly coincidental, I do not understand the connection.

I wonder, as well, if this is the project where Sally was involved with snuff filmmakers that Michael told me about. But it cannot be: snuff films aren't shown on network television. Perhaps, this filmmaker was connected to the snuff films. Or, maybe, the snuff films were a dead-end theory. Something they initially shared with the Dukes and then abandoned in favor of the doubles theory.

Chicago private detective, Anthony Pellicano, quoted in Kock's article, agrees that such a connection between Sally's disappearance and this film is "all the product of a mother's 'fertile imagination' who 'just cannot accept what she doesn't want to hear' about her daughter." Goodman hired Pellicano for several days in 1979 "before the theory of the look-a-likes had surfaced . . . checking police and morgue records of Snyder's reported death." Pellicano "disputes many of Goodman's allegations of

irregularities and inconsistencies in police and morgue handling of the death, including her theory that it was a homicide.”

Pellicano found “nothing unusual” about how Sally’s suicide was handled. Kock reports that Pellicano “agrees with a police laboratory finding that the suicide note found in the apartment was genuine.” While Linda was concerned that no tests were performed to verify Sally’s identity, according to Pellicano, this was common practice because the body had been identified by her stepfather Sam Goodman.

Likewise, while Goodman claimed, “the apartment contained large amounts of blood, hair, and skin, particularly on the bed and on a telephone receiver, which indicate it was the scene of a murder,” Pellicano asserts that ““there’s no way hair would stick to a telephone receiver being used to beat someone” and that “the hair and blood were shed by a bloated, decomposing body” which was “found several days after the time of death.”

Kock claims that neither party, those who think Sally disappeared and those who believe Sally killed herself, including Deputy Chief Examiner Dr. Michael Badeon of New York City, can “conclusively prove their case.” According to Pellicano, “There’s no way you can ever prove that body was Sally Snyder or not . . . Simply because [the body] was cremated before any dispute about its identity had arisen.” In Hamilton’s March 7th article, Pellicano is quoted as saying that based on all the “data I could gather on it, I’m convinced the death was correctly reported.” Pellicano claims that he “could have made a stack of money by telling her (Goodman) I could find her daughter, but I felt an obligation to tell the truth.” Implicitly, the

truth, for Pellicano, was that he could no longer help Linda find her disappeared daughter because her daughter had never disappeared.

Sam Goodman disagrees with Pellicano and claims that he identified the body “under great pressure and adverse circumstances” and that “The body was so badly decomposed when I saw it that there was no way I could have positively identified it.” He claims he “was under the misapprehension at the time that [the body’s] features had been distorted by an autopsy which I later found out had not yet been performed.” Sam claims that Pellicano “had a negative attitude toward the case from the very start,” and he did “not trust” Pellicano’s assessment of Sally’s situation.

Despite the differing opinions, the article reports that Linda remains steady in her determination. Hamilton describes Linda as “waiting for the break that some say will never come” as she “continues each day lighting a candle to St. Francis and praying for her daughter’s return.”

I want to tell you that there’s something in the cultural zeitgeist of the 1970s that makes such a theory about doubles convincing, maybe even obvious, to those alive at the time. I want to say that it was in the air, that it stuck to mysteries, solved problems, and answered questions—that people were obsessed with doppelgängers. That Linda and her team were swept along by some cultural fetish like everyone else in America was. Or, I wish I could tell you that there were real instances of doubles in the world that would’ve made Linda’s theory plausible.

While the conception of doubles and doppelgängers have existed within storytelling and psychology for centuries or as scholar Helene Moglen puts it, “shared by psychologists and mythmakers as separated in time as Plato and Freud,” the conception of doubles is, perhaps, most particular to the Gothic fixation with supernatural shadows and evil opposites, such as in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* wherein the young scientist Victor Frankenstein creates a doomed monster or in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* that details the divergent personalities of Dr. Henry Jekyll and the malevolent Edward Hyde. Within the Romantic period, the double became more closely associated with aspects of our psychology. As in, a character would confront, through their double, aspects of themselves that were consciously or unconsciously repressed. One example is Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, where numerous doubles highlight psychological differences between characters. Whether supernatural or psychological, the double often functions in a binary: there is a positive version, seemingly untainted by the unconscious or the immoral, and a monstrous or negative version that expresses what has been repressed. Yet, even this observation is betrayed by several examples wherein doubling becomes further complicated or less dualistic, such as in Ingmar Bergman’s 1966 film *Persona*, where two women, throughout the film, become more similar in appearance, almost merging into one. Another example is Frida Kahlo’s 1939 painting *The Two Fridas*, where the two Fridas are neither inherently positive nor negative but different representations, facets perhaps, of the same person.

Despite the abundance of psychological and fictional allusions to doubling throughout history, I cannot say that there was something specific to America in the 1970s that makes such a theory more palpable. I am uncertain about the nature of Sally's doubles, if Linda and the investigative team conceived of them as malevolent duplicates or if they were mere pawns in a larger scheme to kidnap Sally. What makes Linda's theory understandable, palpable to me, is the desire for Linda to assign Sally's suicide to someone other than her daughter. To deny that her daughter would have ever taken her own life. I see the doubles theory as a way to abscond from the truth. As I consider doubles and its often binary nature, I find myself thinking about astrology and how Linda believed that by embracing and understanding all of a person and their sign, both in the positive and the negative, we could love one another more fully. Or, as Linda says in *Love Signs*, "We are incarnated in these flesh bodies on Earth to learn love's deeper, more difficult lesson of loving the *unlovable*." Yet, does her own life betray what she taught? Does Linda ever see her daughter as a woman of both darkness and light? Does she ever accept that Sally suffered? If she does, how does she arrive there?

As I wander Cripple Creek, I consider the questions I imagine Linda must have eventually considered herself. I must believe there is something more to the story. Yet, despite continuing to search, all I can think of are Mary's hands raised to heaven and her response: *Who knows?* It stays with me until I return to my rented room; it's refrain like an owl's hoot with two beats, *Hoo knows? Hoo knows?*, cast through the darkness, a question I can never answer reverberating around me.

That night, I dream of Buck.

We are at the courthouse in Watsonville, California. We're on a balcony. I don't know if there is a balcony at the courthouse, but I know we're there. Somehow, I'm aware it's humid. Somehow, we're divorced. Somehow, we're together, my hands on his chest. Then, he's walking away from me. I've got the divorce papers in my hand, his staccato signature all over the documents. I see him walk down the marble hallway, and my hands reach for him. *Come back*, I think. *Come back*, I scream at him. He vanishes. I turn around, and there's another man like him. Someone tall. Someone with a rounder face. Someone who extends my mother's wedding ring in his palm towards me. Someone who grabs my hand and slides it on my finger, and I am all astonishment. Somehow, I did it again. I'm married again. I'm still longing for Buck again. My old husband. I look at the man's eyes. Another man with brown ey—

I wake and don't know where I am. I sit up and look at the pink walls. Hear the dripping sink. Feel the dampness on my pillow from the open window. See my clothes in a pile on the floor. *Cripple Creek*. I think of Buck's face. Of him walking down the marble hallway. I think of the dreaming dictionaries I left in a heap in Wisconsin and push the question of life or death and dreaming away. I don't want to ask it. I don't want to dwell in such ambiguity anymore. I don't want to consider the meanings of dreams and his appearance, but I whisper it to myself nonetheless, "I just talked to him." I move to the other side of the bed and lay back down, feeling my

body relax into the mattress. I try to stay there. Stay with its soft embrace, but I sit up again and grab my phone to see the precise date, the precise time, to track how long it's been since we spoke. To reassure me that it was only days ago. Instead, I look and find the voicemails. Voicemails Buck has left—voicemails stored in a special folder for messages from blocked numbers. A folder I didn't know existed. I thought such messages evaporated into the ether. Maybe I hoped they would.

I listen to them all. All within the past few days. His voice pleading. His intention the same. The story a repeat. His number comes to me. *701-663-9013*. The familiar tautness in my thumb of dialing the last 3 comes to me. I imagine the phone ringing and ringing. I envision myself dialing, see myself shrieking, *Are you okay?* I see myself weeping. Getting in my car. Driving to North Dakota.

I feel bound, caught in the habitual response of it all. How it comes so easy to me. The lace curtains waffle in the wet breeze, their reach so expansive it brushes my shoulder. I roll over to slam the window shut, lie back, and stare at the popcorn ceiling, my cell phone in my hand. Warm. Waiting.

I sit up, toss it across the room into my suitcase, and let myself fall into the mattress with a thud.

I don't want to know if he's alive or dead.

7.

The next day, I wake to a message from Michael.

All night, I've been thinking of Buck. Thinking that I do not want to know if he is dead because I cannot bear to grieve him. Because I still love him. Wondering about the absurdity of it. Knowing the absurdity of it. Of loving him. Of still loving him. Of still remaining tethered, unwilling to sever our tie, reluctant to know if it's already been cut by his own hand, loath to face the reality of what it would feel like to reach out for that rope and see that it's gone. Wondering how long I can sit in the postponement of not knowing. Wondering how long I can remain on this tether. He runs through my mind, dictates it, really. I feel possessed by him. Under his spell. So, when I pull my laptop into bed the next morning and read Michael's message, I assume I misunderstand his message because of me—not because of Michael's words. I assume it's my state. The lack of sleep and anxiety. The dinners of chicken strips at casinos and walking in the rain. The days of sitting in a car, taunted by my coat, my husband, my questions surrounding complicity.

I read the greeting again, *hi Courtney*, to confirm that the message is really for me. That Michael didn't mistakenly send me a letter meant for someone else. I read

the closing again, *That is the Linda part of my story*. I read his message repeatedly, looking for words like *wasn't, not, would've never*, but they're not there. The only words I see are the words I cannot bear to read. The content roiling through me, I sweat under the sheets. Hotboxed in by my shock at Michael's story. I rip the covers off. I stand up and pace the rented room, the air thick. I wish I didn't believe Michael. I wish that almost the entirety of the story he's told me wasn't corroborated by newspaper articles. I wish I didn't trust him, that I didn't see his family as my family, that I hadn't projected such trust onto him, that he hadn't earned it. That he hadn't sent me the newspaper clippings with such urgency, with his note saying that he wanted me to get my Ph.D., with the understanding that he knew I would need evidence—real evidence, like articles. My feet stick to the wooden floor, each step gummy, caught, and I hear Linda's voice. I see her smile, her feathered hair. I see the clip fading to black. *It doesn't matter whether or not you believe it; it's true.*

I can't think about it. I can't think about any of it. I have to drive to Watsonville. I'm supposed to go look at the Hollywood Cross. I was never supposed to know these things. I never thought I'd know these things.

So, I pretend I never did.

I throw my clothes and laptop and copies of Linda's books in my suitcase and tell myself I never read the message. I pull myself into yesterday's clothing and convince myself I never learned the final chapter. I throw water on my face and say that I never exchanged e-mails with Michael. *Michael Duke? That doesn't sound familiar.* I walk out the door and think I never imagined him eating Pineapple

Chicken at The Sheridan or his sisters' faces squirming at the idea of snuff films. I step into the fog and never thought of his family's wonder at a man with a tweed coat from Santa Barbara trained in hypnosis. I never envisioned them lying in chairs, listening to the hypnotist telling them to think back to the summer of 1973. To think about Sally and who her friends were and let my phone go dead. None of this happened.

I drive west, the word *never* a mantra on my lips. I say it to the Bristlecone Pine flanking the highway, *never*. To the sprawling interstate, *never*. To the sage clustered, *never*. I say it to my botched divorce papers jiggling in the passenger's seat as though giddy for their special day: my divorce hearing in 48 hours. *Never* to the jackrabbit who tried to cross the road rotting in a ditch, as foolhardy as my dissertation plans.

Did Linda think of searching as a kind of hobby? Or did it become the only way she knew how to exist? Or were some searches, smaller searches, a way to prove that her larger searches, for Sally, for Robert, had teeth? In an article titled, "Linda Goodman & the Secret of the Hollywood Cross," from the January 1st, 2011, edition of *Atlantis Rising Magazine*, author Philip Coppens details Linda's quest to prove that Osiris penis, as in the mythical Egyptian god's member, was buried underneath the Hollywood Cross on a small hill next to interstate 101 in Los Angeles.

There are variations on the myth, but the general narrative details that Osiris was murdered by his jealous brother, Set, and dismembered into fourteen pieces and

scattered in the Nile. Isis, Osiris' wife, looks for the pieces hoping that this will save Osiris' soul so they can have a proper funeral. Yet, she cannot find all fourteen parts. The phallus is missing. Some say a fish ate it. Others say it was lost. No matter, Isis conceives a divine child by fashioning a wooden phallus. This child, Horus, would later go on to avenge his father's death. Isis also briefly brings Osiris back to life. During his brief revival, he thanks her and tells her that he can no longer stay in the world of the living. Instead, he must remain in the world of the dead and become the King of the Afterlife.

Coppens claims that from "the early 1970s" until Linda's death, it was her "firm conviction" that "there was a subterranean structure underneath the [Hollywood Cross] hill" that held Osiris' phallus. She "laid out a considerable sum to have many tests performed using the latest available technology—short of physical digging—to map the hill's interior." While she knew that "no one" would "believe her or allow her to excavate without virtually concrete proof that something manmade was indeed underneath that hill... she, nevertheless, persisted for the rest of her life," trying to prove there was something beneath the hill. Those who "knew" Linda "and saw the scientific material she compiled" assert that there "was indeed something underneath that hill." Coppens suggests it could be a buried pyramid or a chamber and cites a passage in *Star Signs* wherein Linda describes a "stranger" who knocked on her hotel room door in the early 1970s who told her about the phallus (though the specific information about the phallus was "left out" of Linda's retelling).

Accordingly, there's nothing about the phallus in *Star Signs*. Instead, Linda describes a visitor knocking on her door at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel during *Sun Signs*' promotional tour on January 1st, 1970. She opened the door to what she describes as "a plump man . . . wearing... a proper business suit, suede loafers—and a snow-white turban fastened in the center with a pearl stickpin." She is taken with him, and according to Linda, this man was an "'initiated' Hatha Yoga and a Zen Buddhist who had spent thirty years in a monastery in India, under a vow of silence." His name was Nahtan.

Despite him offering "no explanation of how he had managed to locate" her, Linda let him into her hotel room. Linda didn't ask how or why he found her, fearing "that such a direct question was forbidden by some esoteric rule of conduct." She didn't "*know* this but *sensed* it."

The whole thing seems bizarre to me—I would've asked the direct question. I wouldn't have let a stranger into my hotel room. I would've let skepticism take hold of me and kept the door open only to a crack. Maybe I would've suggested we meet in the lobby or hotel bar. But Linda didn't.

She describes that over "the next several hours," they "chatted like old friends." During this time, according to Coppens, Nahtan told Linda that she had a special spiritual mission—she was to find the phallus of Osiris. Nahtan believed it was buried beneath the Hollywood Cross near Cahuenga Boulevard and Pilgrimage Bridge in Los Angeles. Had I been there with Linda, and she had been the one to let him in the door, I would've had questions. Namely, how did you find her? But also,

why would the penis of a mythic character be in Los Angeles? Isn't that strange and appropriate to think an Egyptian Deity's penis would be in the West? Why does Linda need to be the person to find it? Because you think she has money and is gullible enough to try to find this for you?

I imagine Linda would've shushed me. Did she like being chosen for a spiritual mission? To be special? Of course. Who wouldn't? But wouldn't the obvious tension between the mythical nature of the story versus the belief a deity having incarnate genitalia compel Linda to shoo this man out of the hotel room? Why am I even asking the question at this point? We've already gone so far—why am I still demanding that Linda prescribe to my perception of reality? She's clearly not here, no matter what I would tell her.

So, she accepted Nahtan's mission to recover the deity's penis.

While Coppens claims Linda believed Isis and Osiris were the "perfect archetypes for twin souls," the precise link between Isis and Osiris and her need to find the phallus underneath the Hollywood Cross remains unclear. In *Gooberz*, she seems to foretell the end of "all lonely and separated Twin Souls" when "the pieces of Life's jigsaw puzzle" are complete. She claims that:

Legend whispers that it shall be during the dawning of the Age of Aquarius when the fourteen pieces

of the soul of Osiris . . . will come together in one man . . . One man, who will be reunited with his

own Twin Soul, Isis, after millions of weary years of searching, and countless uncomprehending

incarnations spent together in the past.

Perhaps Linda believed that uniting Osiris with his penis would ultimately lead to him being reunited with Isis.

Linda's conception of Isis and Osiris lies contrary to the most common conceptions of the myth. The myth's emphasis is not on reunion but on Isis and Osiris remaining in two worlds. Likewise, the penis becomes irrelevant in the story as Osiris can still conceive a child who will avenge his father's death. Narratively speaking, the penis' journey is so ambiguous, so trivial all that matters is that it's gone. In some stories, there's a wooden proxy phallus, and sometimes there's not. Sometimes fish eat it, and sometimes they don't. The phallus isn't essential to Osiris and Isis reuniting because they're never going to. Osiris even says it; *I cannot live among you. I am going away*. Of course, to have the phallus would mean that Osiris reunites, in a sense, with himself as he is made whole. But even this does not seem to be necessary for him to stay in the world of the dead and become King of the Afterlife.

Linda's interest in the Isis and Osiris myth sits contrary to her seeming fixation on reunion. Perhaps her focus on the pair was because she saw them, like herself, as lovers torn apart that she wanted to put back together—even if the lovers themselves never speak of such a desire. Perhaps she wanted to rewrite their narrative: two people that were never supposed to be together again but, through her intervention, were able to be reunited.

I don't understand any of it, but I decide to drive to Los Angeles anyway.

En route, I arrive in Las Vegas at six pm and get a room at the Binion's for forty-five dollars. Las Vegas festers on itself, the air complete stench and heat. I can't bear to wander the streets, so I stick a twenty-dollar bill into a Wheel of Fortune slot machine in Binion's casino and bet five cents a spin, letting the reels twirl, the icons flash and boogie, my money vanish and rebound, vanish again, and all I can think about is Michael. Michael's words. Michael's story.

I'm not sure what I was expecting his final installment to say, but I know what I wanted it to be. I wanted him to tell me about a prayer circle he and his family did on their farm the next summer when the corn got its tassels. I wanted him to tell me that they held hands and prayed for Sally's soul. That, while the ordeal with Linda was traumatic, that they had found peace. I wanted him to tell me that the whole thing with Linda and David inspired the theater company to put on another production of *Cactus Flower* in honor of Sally's life. That a few of the original actors who performed with Sally even came back to watch and remember her. I wanted Michael to uncomplicate my story. To tell me that he understood and loved Linda in her persistence to find her daughter. To keep Linda pure. To let her simply be a woman who grieved. A figure to empathize with. That's what I've wanted the whole time: make a double of Linda to counter the madwoman stereotype I'd read. My own Hyde to her Jekyll. I want her to be the woman brave enough to write her unique vision of

the universe but not for that same courage to make her bold enough to do what Michael shared with me.

Now, I don't know what to do with her.

Because all I can think about is barging into Linda's house on Hayden Street back when the shag carpeting was still soft, and there was coffee brewing, and Nag Champa was swirling from cones on the stove. Back when the morning light hit the St. Francis of Assisi mural just right, and the roof tiles weren't all fringe and mold. All I want is to find her in the kitchen, a Newport smoldering between her fingers, as she reads the morning paper in a peach terry-cloth robe, her hair tangled, all unsuspecting of my arrival. All I want to do is walk up to her, bat the newspaper away, look her square in the teeth and say, *What the hell are you doing?* To see disbelief roll across her face, to see her place her cigarette down and gape. I want to restrain the urge to slap her. To bolt to the junk drawer and fumble around for some twine.

I want to hear her ask, her body all languid and leaning against the kitchen table, *What the hell are you doing?*

Now, I'm looking for a pair of scissors. I want to cut the twine. I want to bind her to the chair.

In my fantasy, I do it. Somehow, it comes so easy to me. To wrap the rope around her wrists, to pull the twine tight, loop it around her ankles. Pull it around her waist and tie it like an apron at the back. She doesn't even struggle—did she expect

me to do this? Does she realize what I'm doing? Probably not. I've always been so nice. So supplicant to her. *Would Courtney bind me to a chair? Never!*

I pull a stool in front of her. *You need to listen to me*, I say.

I see her look at herself. The ropes binding her. Her body rigid in the chair. She tries to stand, so I sit on her lap and wrap my arm around her. She is floral and funk. Yesterday's perfume still fragrant against her terry cloth robe, unwashed for weeks. I want to recoil, but I whisper, trying to be tender, *Linda, the walls are knocking. The search is over.*

You're heavy. She says and spits in my face. Her breath acidic. I stand up, wiping the wetness against my sleeve. I sit back on the stool.

I know everything, Linda. Michael told me. He told me what you and David did.

Would she look surprised then? Would she wonder how I found out? Would she believe me? I don't know. What I imagine, first, is denial.

Did what? she'd hiss, her elbows flapping, struggling to loosen the ties.

Could I even say the words? Would I be brave enough to tell the truth? To say everything that I am so loathe to say with her, with Buck, with everything? That I think I know their secrets? That all of their secrets make me wonder why I'd ever loved either of them? That I was foolish enough not to see that what I think is "secret" was there the whole time? That I saw Buck fighting outside of bars? That it was silly to ever think that a woman who writes about astrological birth control and the healing power of purple plates wouldn't have some fantastical life that runs

beyond the boundaries of truth and biography? That I was delusional to ever think all of this would be so simple?

I'd like to think I'd say it. Even if I had to whisper it. Even if I stuttered. Spoke in fragments. Took my time. I imagine she'd say it again, *Tell me what Michael told you. Tell me the lies.*

So I do. I recount it. *He told me about how you showed up that day to his farmhouse... You and David and some of your people... and David told him that he was the number one suspect in Sally's disappearance and that if he didn't give you the name of every person that worked at the theater company that summer you were gonna...*

I can't say it. I don't want it to be true.

Say it. Linda taunts. Say it. Say what you think I did.

Michael said David threatened him...

With what?

I can't do it.

Say it. How did we threaten him?

...I don't know specifically—Michael just said, "Legal action. Bodily harm." You know, like suing him. Maybe... like... bashing in his knees. Dislocating his shoulder. Kicking the shit out of him outside his apartment. He told me he slept that night with a knife...

Her mouth parts. Her body slack in the twine. Did she not believe me? Did she think that I didn't know the whole story?

She must not have.

She is silent.

Linda, I say. What the hell am I supposed to do with that now? I didn't know you did that!

We—we didn't do anything you wouldn't do, Courtney. You'd do the same thing if your daughter went missing. You wouldn't spare any expense, any resource you have to get what you want. Plus, I wasn't the one that said any of that—David did! Linda says, hopping, trying to propel the chair towards the living room, the chair legs creaking on linoleum.

No, Linda, I wouldn't do that—it's one thing to believe that Osiris' penis is under the Hollywood Cross and that Jesus was a Leo. That's all, relatively harmless, but your team threatened a man with his life! This is the stuff of conspiracy theories and extremism. It didn't matter that David said it—you hired him. You endorsed this. I don't know what she's doing. I watch her inching across the kitchen. I wait for her answer. I don't know where she's going or why. She's approaching the living room. I keep talking. I can't tell if she's listening.

Eventually, Linda, you have to stop. You have to let go. You can't just keep looking and looking, thinking that the harder you push, the closer you'll come... do you ever stop? Does this story ever end?

Isn't that what you're doing? She asks, letting herself fall onto the living room floor's soft carpeting.

What do you mean? I ask, running to her.

Look at yourself—you're looking for me this whole time. She's breaking free. The knots growing loose. I was so stupid as to use twine. Her wrists are so small. Her ankles so strong. Why did I think that would contain her? *And you still haven't found me... You don't know shit. You've got nothing.*

I feel myself grow flush. My hands tremble.

She's right. I don't know shit.

I have the urge to be cruel. To tell her, *You're no different—you still haven't found Sally, and you're not going to*—but as I watch this woman struggle, all I see is myself. The truest doppelgänger I've made is not some version of Linda Goodman I've found—the redeemed Linda—but myself as Linda's double. She and I as the same person. She's everything I think I'm not and everything I really am. A woman looking, unwilling to believe the story unfurling before her, still clinging to the story she wants. A woman who returns to a person expecting them to be different, then disappointed when they're the same as they always were. A woman high on some delusion of things turning out differently than they already have. A woman who denies the truth. I think I'm the pure version, the good one: a woman looking for another woman who calls her out on her appropriation, her meddling, her threats of violence, but I've done all the same things. I've taken her story for my own. I've projected my life onto hers. I've meddled in her story—made it up. I've fantasized about tying her up and forcing her to listen to my opinion.

Her ankles blister red. She's stopped struggling. I can see sweat collect at her brow. I rush to her in the living room and kneel next to her, trying to explain, *Linda*,

I—I started this whole thing, yes, because I wanted to redeem you. Because I love you. But I also wanted to know how you got through all of this. How you dealt with Robert’s disappearance—which, now, I guess, was never really a disappearance. How you grappled with Sally’s death—which you never seemed to accept. How you dealt with your other losses—your infant daughter and your husbands. I thought you would help me like you helped me with Sun Signs and Love Signs. How you helped everyone understand everyone better... I just thought that—

Help you? she says, her chest heaving. *Why don’t you first think about helping me get up off the floor?*

But I can’t—the casino presses at me. I feel my finger pressing the button. Betting and betting. My heel lifting from the linoleum floor, sticky from a spilled drink. I don’t know what else to say to her. I don’t know how to let her go. How to free her. I see the reels spinning. I don’t know what doubles do to rid themselves of one another. I don’t know how we get away from one another. She dissolves. The reels spin my last twenty-five cents.

I watch the screen flash, asking me to play again.

I reach my hands into my pockets, searching for change, for just a dollar, but I have nothing. I have nothing left.

Perhaps Linda and I have been primed to be led into situations such as this. Would my mother have told her, too, not to go to church groups for fear of her joining a cult? Would my mother have worried she’d see Linda on the evening news one day? A

lemming purged off a cliff? Perhaps. Because, perhaps, there's something about engaging in the study of astrology that encourages openness. And this openness can lead you towards the infinite mysteries of the universes and towards being hoodwinked.

For, to believe in astrology, you must place your faith in something mysterious, something that claims both specific information and a certain sense of mutability. Carl Jung described it this way, "We are born at a given moment, in a given place . . . like the vintage years of wine, we have the qualities of the year and the season in which we are born. Astrology does not lay claim to anything more." Even in the introduction to *Sun Signs*, Linda claims that looking at someone's sun sign alone "will be approximately eighty percent accurate, sometimes up to ninety percent." Yet, "isn't that far better than zero knowledge?" While she concludes that only a complete natal chart will be "completely dependable," such uncertainty in astrology—both in its accuracy and its origins—is a hallmark of the study. In his introduction to his 1962 book *The Coffee Table Book of Astrology*, rumored to be Linda's central astrological text, John Lynch even admits that "Astrology has been used, abused, exploited by charlatans for personal profit, condemned as utter nonsense, hailed as a science, accepted as religion. The truth about it probably lies somewhere between the extremes." Perhaps, this is what remains seductive about astrology: its mutable accuracy. There is always a certain sense of mystery around it and a certain sense of discernment students must apply. Linda puts it this way in *Star Signs*, "the stars incline, they do not compel."

Yet, astrology is also complicated by its consumption in mass culture. In Theodor Adorno's *The Stars Down to Earth: And Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, Adorno views astrological magazines and horoscope clippings as a method wherein the status quo is reinforced. They are "irrational" and a "metaphysic of the dopes." Scholars Cary J. Nederman and James Wray Goulding explain it as such:

One would not expect to read in the morning paper's astrology column such imperatives as "If you

are being treated badly by a boss, tell him off" or "Don't bother with going to work today' spend the

day doing something you would enjoy." The "advice" of such columns is geared to the rigidly structured everyday life of the consumer.

Nederman and Goulding claim that "the popular astrologer who dared to break with that rigidity would soon find himself out of a job." Further, they claim that "Popular occultism has forgotten the magical irrationality with which the occult was originally imbued." They continue that "in this process of forgetting, the occult has lost its oppositional character, it's capacity to negate the given material conditions of existence."

Linda, herself, agrees that "studying your Sun sign shouldn't be confused with studying the predictions based on your Sun sign alone in magazines and newspapers" for "they may hit you with impressive accuracy more often than they miss, but they're far from being infallible." Yet, studying newspaper clippings of astrological predictions is far different than even a cursory study of someone's Sun sign—even in

a mass-market book such as *Sun Signs*. While some may say that astrology may lead believers towards blind faith in the planets and a prediction or suggestion that only reinforces contemporary social conditions, as Niederman and Goulding suggest, astrology can also be seen as a practice that encourages devotees to use their own experience and intuition as the barometer of their belief or disbelief in an astrological portrait or forecast. Ultimately, astrology turns the task of believing what is *true* back to the astrological inquirer. Because it is not seen as legitimate science, what feels untrue in a reading can, arguably, be easily waved away, not taken as fact.

Yet, what is the line between someone looking to something beyond themselves for guidance and looking, instead, to themselves? Does studying astrology encourage individuals to believe too much in the thoughts, opinions, and predictions of someone they have imbued with trust? Or is it simply human nature, a certain kind of humbleness even, to look to what is considered to be more “expert” for advice?

What I mean to say is that I believe Michael’s story. I believe, even, that Linda and her team threatened him with violence. But what also shocks me about the story is that Linda’s team threatening violence and her, assumedly, condoning it is contrary to everything she writes about. In *Star Signs*, Linda devotes nearly an entire chapter to the evils of eating our “animal brothers and sisters,” “the intense harm done to your body through eating traumatized flesh of all kinds,” and promoting vegetarianism (and, ultimately, living on air). While she states that it is fine to learn karate and self-defense, “if you must,” but “you must not remove any person’s or creature’s Free Will choice to live or to die.” Of course, it is too simple to say that

simply because someone promotes vegetarianism and loves animals, they wouldn't threaten violence. Perhaps, also, Linda might say that she didn't threaten Michael with his life—only bodily harm. She may also say, as I fantasized, that *she* didn't say it—David did. But, perhaps, what I am really trying to say is that there are other people involved in the story of Linda that I cannot account for. Whose motives are unclear to me.

Maybe I am only trying to protect her, to continue making an affirmative biographical portrait, trying to present her as something I cannot confirm. But I also see her, possibly, as prey. As someone so hell-bent on reunion and finding her daughter that she was prime to be taken advantage of. As someone so trusting and open to the infinite possibilities of the universe that she let some stranger come into her hotel room and convince her to try to find a mythic figure's genitalia. A person so credulous that she'd traipse around the United States on a whim if only someone said they'd seen some blonde woman at a McDonald's the same height and weight as Sally. I don't know if David Sikes was a con artist. I don't know what Linda's team thought. I don't know whether she overlooked violence. But I know she was, once, wildly rich. I know she wanted to find her daughter. I know she believed in miracles.

I can find no mention of the Maine travels on the message board, but Bibi DeAngelo, Linda's friend, claims in a message board post that Linda went to Arizona on a "tip" about Sally. After a cursory search, I find the missing advertisement only weeks after the newspaper articles about Linda being in Maine were published.

That night, I watch Freemont street from my window and start to make a tally. Five Chippendale dancers. Three bachelorette parties. One birthday party. Numerous couples collapsed into one another's arms, and I remember how Buck and I stayed five hours north of here in the Great Basin Desert the year before we married.

I remember sitting on a picnic table at night in the desert, listening to the rattlesnakes stir, and giggling about what it would be like to drive south to Las Vegas and proclaim our love before an Elvis impersonator. I remember Buck's brown eyes on mine as I whispered about how I'd find a dress at the Desert Industries thrift store in Cedar City, Utah, and he could find a suit. Not even a full suit, maybe just a linen shirt and tie. We talked about the flowers we could find in the desert, and I fantasized about bouquets of sage and wild rye. About the way my hands would smell after we married. *Spiced earth*. We talked about the drive to Las Vegas—the songs we would listen to. The snacks we would have. Where we could stop along the way. We talked about the thrill of a secret wedding, a sporadic proclamation. We never lingered on the vows. What it would feel like to whisper the words *'till death do us part*.

Sometimes, we discussed the aftermath of our hypothetical marriage. How his mother would spit on us all the way from North Dakota and spend hours praying to Jesus Christ about our hastily declared love. How his father would call him and ask if I was pregnant. How my father would tell me I'm crazed and stupid. How my stepfather would tell me that, *There are ways you can undo this, Courtney*, and ask me if I'd thought about annulment. How my mother would've found it foolish and exciting and toasted us with champagne.

The picnic bench solid beneath us, we would snicker together at their hypothetical reactions, smug at how they just couldn't have understood what we had. Because we thought we knew more. Because we thought we knew one another. Because maybe, we thought we could see the future. Isn't that the subtext of a vow? *I cannot see the future, but I promise it to you.*

Why did we never linger on the vows? Why did we always fast-forward to the end? To the reactions? To the rings already being on our fingers and my dress already cleaned and in the closet?

Maybe because we would've never had to consider if our hands would've shaken at the altar. We would've never had to ask what the words "I do" would feel like on our lips. We would've never had to think about the surrealness of getting married in the desert, where nothing grows, where an impersonator is marrying us before an empty chapel. We would've never had to face the possibility that one of us would fling ourselves into a taxi without the other and tell the driver to take them away. We never discussed the vows, what we would say, what it really meant, but maybe it didn't matter. Maybe all we thought we needed to know was that we loved one another. Maybe all I need to know now is that I still do.

I charge my phone and stay awake until the early morning hours, listening to his voicemails, his pleading, his declarations of our destiny as soul mates, his proclamations of his impending death, and let myself waffle between belief and disbelief at the sincerity of his words, let myself grow panicked at how long it has

been since the last message. *Only hours*, I reason. *Only minutes to do away with yourself*, I reason.

In the Tuesday, April 8th, 1980, edition, an advertisement reads “\$50,000 REWARD” with two photographs of Sally. The first photograph is the same headshot from the Maine missing advertisement. The second photograph is a headshot of Sally outdoors, looking past the camera, her face gazing at something in the distance. The phrase “EXPECT A MIRACLE” separates the photographs. There is a short profile of her physical characteristics. 5’5”. Ash blonde hair that may be worn longer. A mole under her left eye. Another above the right side of her upper lip. “Porcelain cap on upper right lateral tooth.”

A message from Linda accompanies the photograph and physical description. Linda states that \$50,000 will be “paid at the time of recovery” to the person or persons who can provide information about Sally’s whereabouts. Linda says that her daughter “involuntarily disappeared from a summer stock theater company in Maine in June of 1973. For several reasons, one of these may be amnesia, she may not remember her actual birthdate and may be unaware of her own identity. Therefore, she may presently be known by a different name. Due to the circumstances which caused her involuntary disappearance, she may have been forced to submit to plastic surgery, which could have changed the shape of her nose. However, this is not a certainty.”

Linda claims that there have been reports of Sally living at three different locations in Tucson during the past twenty-four months and that there have been reports of Sally working for the University of Arizona “possibly” at a greenhouse. Additionally, she may have been a patient at a Tucson hospital about eighteen months ago, “as well as sometime during the past four months—perhaps also at present.”

Smaller sums, \$5,000, \$10,000, or \$20,000, “will be paid to any person and/or persons providing verifiable information which in the opinion of [Linda’s] attorneys, directly concerns the situation related to Sally’s 1973 involuntary disappearance from Maine.” Such sums will also be paid to anyone who can provide “provable facts related to her situation in Arizona during recent weeks or months, even if such information fails to lead directly to her exact current address.” Linda closes by expressing her gratitude “for your compassion in helping me find my daughter.”

How did Linda switch the locus of her investigation from Maine to Arizona within a matter of weeks? How is it that the theories of Sally’s disappearance—from doubles to plastic surgery and so on—continually evolved?

Because someone told her so, I imagine.

Just as Linda put her faith in the planets and cosmos, forces beyond her, I imagine she was willing to do the same with her investigation into Sally’s disappearance. It’s how she ended up in Maine—perhaps because David suggested it. And it’s how she ends up in Arizona—because the investigators told her they’d found compelling evidence.

Is David there with her? Is he one of the investigators that tells Linda she needs to go to Arizona next? I'm not sure. I want to say he's not. I want to say he's off in Maritime Canada harassing the Duke doubles or trying to track down one of the nine Sally doppelgängers in Queens, or he's trying to interrogate Sally's classmates from some Feldenkrais Method class she was in before she disappeared. I want to put him somewhere else. But why? Why do I want to put him somewhere else? Especially if he was willing to threaten violence? Maybe I'm trying to shelter Linda. Maybe I want to believe that she did have someone looking out for her. Maybe I want someone, at some point in her search, to really believe her.

Because I imagine that whoever she with next doesn't.

Who are they? I don't know. I imagine there are two of them. Let's call them Frank and Felix. Let's pretend they're swindlers who've done this to Linda before. Before Maine. Before snuff films and made-for-television prophecies with Richard Nixon look-alikes. Let's pretend they've known her for a while. Let's pretend they genuinely *like* Linda, but they also know she's rich as a pig in shit, and they're thinking about putting in a new carport. Let's pretend they just found a blonde thirty-something in Tucson who looks a whole hell of a lot like Sally.

So, they plot the story. They make sure it's different enough from the last time not to be suspicious but within the realm of possibility for Sally. They make sure they have the actors and fixers in place. They make sure they cover their asses, and the next day they dial her number. It's eight am in Los Angeles, where they are, so it's

nine in Cripple Creek, Colorado. I assume, by this time, Linda has returned to Cripple Creek from Maine.

I imagine that outside Linda's home on Hayden Street, the snow is turning to mush. It's April. Linda's favorite time, her birthday month, and she's kneeling before her fireplace where the ashes are nothing but a twinkle. Incense swarms. She has a bottle of maple syrup from Maine on the countertop. She did like that about that place—all the kitschy-wooden roadside stands selling maple syrup and chainsaw carvings. Coffee's gone cold. She's still in her robe, hands clasped in prayer to Jesus, Krishna, and anybody who might be listening. She's praying for what she's always praying for. Sally, Robert—the drill is the same each morning. She prays for God to hear her prayers and grant her what she wants. She's been asking for so long. *Why haven't*, she asks aloud, *my prayers been—*

The phone rings.

She patters to the phone in her bare feet and holds the receiver to her face.

Hello?

It's Frank and Felix. They tell her not to get too excited, but they gotta tip outta the University of Arizona's greenhouses.

There's a lady who works there who looks just like Sally, they say.

... You think she's in a greenhouse?

Working in a greenhouse, Linda. In Tucson.

My Sally?

Yes, Sally.

A greenhouse?

That's what our informant said—a greenhouse.

Once before, maybe, they told her they'd gotten a tip that she's milking cows
on a ranch in East

Helena, Montana, and before that, it was in a convent sipping grape juice in
Milwaukee, Wisconsin. And there was that time where they didn't precisely know
where she was living, but somebody said they saw her wandering a mall in
Columbus, Georgia. And then, of course, there were the months they camped out in
Maine, looking for leads.

They continue.

*Doesn't that sound like her? Such a gentle, carefree soul it takes to work with
plants. The desert heat would be healing for a soul such as hers... it makes sense that
she would end up there...*

Linda holds the phone in her hand. She can feel herself sweat through her
robe, and she flaps the collar open and shut. What does she think? Does she say, *No,
no, that makes no sense. Nothing grows in Arizona; it's a desert. Full of cactuses and
lizards that eat up heat from the sun. Why would that be healing? Sally never liked
the sun.*

Or does she think that this is the moment where her prayers have been
answered? Where she is on the upswing of a miracle, and it's just a short drive to
Tucson that will make it crest into a levitation-inspiring divine moment of
intervention? Or does she think, *Screw these investigators, jerking me around. You*

say you've found her again? I think you're full 'a shit. Or is she somewhere else, caught between knowing better, knowing that she is being scammed, but aching with desire to see her child again, to believe and know that Sally *is* alive?

I imagine she leans against the kitchen counter or twirls the phone cord in her hand. Maybe she asks, *Where exactly outside of Tucson? Did she have the cap on her tooth?*

But, in this story, it doesn't matter what Linda thinks at that moment. Because the story unfolds regardless of what she thinks or feels. The only thing that matters in this story is what Linda says and does. And what she says is, *Yes*, and what they do is go to Arizona.

What do you do with a double? Is it something to be escaped? A problem to be resolved? Or, merely, a mirror to either be examined or turned away from?

Perhaps the nature of the double is of essence to answer the question. In Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, the double figures of Heathcliff and Catherine, double because they claim that in their love, according to Catherine, their "souls are . . . the same," are the fixation of the book's first section. Catherine also claims Heathcliff "is much more myself than I am." Scholar Helene Moglen describes it as such, "Each feels himself not so much to *possess* the other as to *be* the other.'" Linda, perhaps, found some kind of attraction to this love affair as it mirrors her conception of Twin Flames: lovers than cannot be whole without one another; she did have a sheepdog named "Heathcliff." Yet, the doubling of *Wuthering Heights* does not end with

Catherine and Heathcliff. After Catherine's death, the mirroring continues in the second section with Catherine's daughter, Cathy, who, according to Moglen, invokes how the "second section of *Wuthering Heights* is not a parody of the first . . . it is rather a further, sophisticated development of the author's consideration of the maturation of the self." Rather, Cathy goes on to "explore the meaning of love that develops beyond narcissism." What Moglen calls something "sad and mournful, but very beautiful" as we leave behind the "passionate, irrational aspiration of childhood" and transition into our second sections. Rather, in *Wuthering Heights*, the resolution to doubleness is, simply, to move on.

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the nature of a double is far more problematic for Victor Frankenstein and his creation, the monster, that Victor makes out of old body parts and chemicals but is ultimately horrified by. In initially describing his hopes for his experiment, Victor sees himself as a parental figure in bringing the monster to life, "A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me." While Victor sees himself being respected by his creation, he does not reflect any sense of responsibility towards the being. When the monster escapes and Victor's brother is murdered, Victor flees to the mountains. There, he encounters the monster who admits to killing Victor's brother to spurn him. Despite the severity of the monster's actions, the monster reminds Victor of his responsibility and that that are forever linked, "you, my creator, detest and spurn me, thy monster, to whom thou art bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us." After a saga involving more murder, an

aborted attempt to make a female companion for the monster, and a dogsled chase, the only way the monster and Victor, ultimately, escape one another is through death. *Frankenstein's* double, the creator and his monster, point to, perhaps, the most common, relatable type of double: that of the bond between parent and child. There is no solution to the doubles. For *Frankenstein's* doubleness, the bond between creator and created, as the monster emphasizes, cannot be denied no matter how tenuous the bond.

Frida Kahlo's 1939 painting *The Two Fridas* points to another kind of doubling. The painting is a double self-portrait of Kahlo. One Frida wears a white Victorian dress, and the other wears a traditional Tehuana dress. The Frida in a white dress holds forceps and the Frida in a Tehuana dress holds a portrait of Diego Rivera, whom she divorced the same year as painting *The Two Fridas*. Both Frida's hearts are exposed on their chests, blood pooling on Frida in the white dress' skirt from a broken blood vessel. This Frida's heart is also cut open. A blood vessel connects the two Fridas, snaking from their hands through their hearts. Their gazes neutral, the two Fridas hold hands. Kahlo's friend, Fernando Gamboa, claims that Kahlo was inspired by Théodore Chassériau's *The Two Sisters* and the anonymous *Gabrielle d'Estrées and One of Her Sisters*, both of which she had seen earlier in the year. Both paintings show two women, also doubled.

Rather than a portrait of doubles in friction with one another, such as in *Frankenstein*, or enmeshed with one another, as with Catherine and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, the nature of doubles in Kahlo's work is different: something

separate but connected. Where there is both pain—the broken blood vessel, the exposed hearts—but also comfort, the two Frida’s hands in one another’s. There are multiple interpretations of *The Two Fridas*. Some say that the two Fridas represent her dual heritage: the Frida in the Victorian dress represents her father’s German heritage, whereas the Frida in the Tehuana dress represents her mother’s Mexican heritage. Others claim that the two women represent Rivera’s adoration of Frida’s Mexican heritage and his rejection of her European ancestry. Others claim that the divergent clothing represents the colonial impact on racial demographics in Mexico or a cultural symbol of Mexico. Kahlo herself claimed it was a memory of a childhood friend.

What sort of double are Linda and I? Enmeshed with one another? It would be easy to do; we’re both practiced in such enmeshment. She with Robert; I with Buck. Yet, our doubling is something else. Not a creator and a created inseparably linked or two women holding one another’s hands, our hearts beating together. No. Linda never asked to be linked with me. It’s only me gazing at her; she is something static, unable to escape my stare. It’s only me who has the choice of what to do with the reflection I see in her: to turn away, to enact that change from “passionate, irrational aspiration of childhood” or stay there. Why do I feel such a pull, such an obstinacy, at turning away from the reflection? Why do I refuse to break away? Perhaps I am afraid of what it would mean to be untethered. Do I find comfort in my containment?

I don't know if Linda and the investigators drive or fly. I imagine they drive because, that way, if Sally is there, they can take her back with them. That way, if she has clothing or tchotchkes or books, she can take all that with her. I imagine they drive because, that way, if Sally doesn't want to come with them or there's a scuffle about who is coming back with who, they can argue as long as they want because there's no flight to catch. I imagine they drive because driving from Cripple Creek to Tucson takes way longer than flying, and maybe the investigators are paid by the hour. They drive because they probably flew to Milwaukee before, because who wants to drive all the way to damn near Canada, and that whole trip was a bust. From Linda getting sick on the plane to Sally not being at the convent to Ray dropping his wallet in the toilet at that steakhouse on Fifth Avenue. Maybe Linda declared the trip and the entire state of Wisconsin cursed. Maybe Linda never wanted to fly after that.

The investigators pick Linda up in Cripple Creek. The drive is cigarettes and pork rinds. It's anxiety fuming off Linda like steam from the Super Pretzels they microwave at a gas station near Los Lunas. It's a tiff between Linda and Felix over whether or not to stop at the rest stop outside of Dos Cabezas Peaks. It's Linda swinging like a pendulum. Between desire and despair. Between hope and hopelessness. Between anger and gratitude. She gets diarrhea what feels like every seventy miles, and when they land in the Catalina Foothills, Linda marches out of the car and walks straight up to the door of the apartment complex on East Fort Lowell Road, where Sally might be.

In Las Vegas, I leave late. Too late. So late that the maid is knocking on the hotel door. So late that the slot machines' chittering in the hotel lobby feels like a reprimand. So late that I forget all about the slowdown of rush hour traffic outside of Los Angeles and that by the time I arrive, I'll be right in the middle of it. So late that I repeat the miles between Las Vegas and Los Angeles as I fumble for my keys in the parking garage as if to convince myself that I will make it before sunset to be able to see the Hollywood Cross. *Only 271 miles. Only 271 miles.* So late that even though I speed through Manix, Yermo, and Barstow, the traffic hovers the moment I merge onto Interstate 15. So late that I am not thinking about all the possibilities a highway presents: turn signals flicked too late, bumpers strewn in the shoulder, stretcher wheels trembling on asphalt. So late that by the time I'm within five miles of the Hollywood Cross, I hear the sirens and shut my engine off along with every other car. So late that we turn our engines over and crawl onto side streets, through suburbs, and four-way stops, and by the time I figure out where I am, the Hollywood Cross is thirty miles away in the darkness. So late that I'm supposed to be at the courthouse at 8:20 AM tomorrow. So late that I miss it entirely.

I pull over into a strip mall parking lot somewhere outside of Santa Clarita, where red and yellow umbrellas outside of a deli threaten to take flight against the gusts, and a skeletal, orange tomcat darts from undercarriage to undercarriage. I call my friend who lives in San Diego and tell her there was an accident, and I just spent three hours sitting in traffic in Los Angeles, and I blew off the whole reason I came here, and he left me these voicemails. About dying. He left me these voicemails about

dying, and I can't take this anymore. And now, there haven't been any voicemails.

There's nothing, and I don't know what that means.

"You're in Los Angeles?" her voice soft.

"Not anymore. I'm somewhere outside of it."

"Why didn't you tell me you were going to be here?"

"... I dunno. I'm sorry—I didn't have time to come see you."

She asks me about the voicemails. About whether there are specifics. The suicidal checklist of intent, and I tell her no—no. None of that. Just the proclamation.

I want to die.

"Hasn't he been saying that to you for, like, four years?"

"... Yeah."

"Well . . . there's your answer."

"I mean, okay, yes, he has been saying this forever. But I don't think he's lying. I think he really feels this way. I think the want is real. I think the urge to do it is real for him... I think he really thinks about it... and I don't know what to do with that."

We are silent. I hear something grumble in the background on her line. Maybe a garbage disposal.

I watch the orange tom dart around the corner of a taco stand, his tail straight to the sky as teenagers shove one another with sodas in their hands outside the counter. I can hear them laugh. They're saying something about toilet paper.

"... why do I still believe this? Why do I listen to him and trust him?"

“Because you loved him.”

I think to correct her—*love him*—but I stop myself.

“Hey, aren’t you supposed to be in Wisconsin?” she asks.

“Well, I’m supposed to go to court tomorrow in Watsonville, but I felt like I needed to go to Cripple Creek for my dissertation, so I stopped there on the way, and now I was or tried to be in Los Angeles to see the Hollywood Cross, you know, for the dissertation. This woman I’m writing about, she thought...”

I pause.

“She thought that Osiris, you know, the Egyptian god—she thought his *thing* was buried in the hill the Hollywood Cross was buried on.”

“His thing?”

“His penis. She thought his penis was buried there.”

She inhales.

“Did you... think you were going to find it?”

“No, I mean, of course, not. I guess I just needed to see the Cross. Not that I couldn’t know whether anything was there just by looking. Not that anything about it makes sense. It was, maybe, sort of a dumb idea to, you know, try to go—”

“It’s buried?”

“Yeah, that’s what she thought.”

“Like... buried in the ground.”

“Yeah, buried.”

“Isn’t Osiris... like... a myth?”

“... Yeah. He’s not a ‘real’ guy. Like a ‘real’ guy that would have a dismembered penis you could find.... I know it’s weird—”

“Did I ever tell you about Barbara and her son?”

“No...?”

She tells me. Barbara isn’t a psychic, per se, but that she “sees” things underground, things buried.

“Like... remote viewing?”

“No... not like that. It’s just something she does. She has a talent for it.”

“Like a hobby?”

“Yeah, I guess. Sort of a hobby. She’s done it in Mexico and Norway... she ‘sees’ things, and then she and her son dig up what they find.”

“Oh.”

The boys leave their soda cups on top of a trash can, and they walk away. The wind blows the cups off and into the parking lot. Fledglings falling, then crawling.

“Maybe she’d know what’s buried there.”

“... does she charge money for this? Is this, like, a high-demand thing?”

“I dunno—she just tries to dig stuff up. It’s like a hobby.”

My friend says she’ll call her son to see if she’d be interested in talking to me.

The cups skitter towards me.

I thank her for talking with me about the penis and Buck and everything.

“Tell me if you find the penis. I’d like to see it—and don’t worry about the voicemails and shit. That is not your problem.”

“Okay,” I say, too numb to even consider what it would mean to believe it’s not my problem.

We hang up.

I watch the cups slide past me and stick the key in the ignition. I keep driving until I pull into the Walmart in Gilroy, crawl into the backseat, throw a sweater over my face, and dream of nothing.

In Arizona, Linda stands at the door of some burnt-colored duplex where the concrete sidewalk leading up to the front door almost recoils in the sunlight it’s so damn hot. A dog barks behind a fence somewhere down the block, and Linda knocks so hard it feels like it reverberates through the investigator’s guts as they climb out and watch her. They’re worried. They wonder if they’ve gone too far. Montana and Maine and all the rest were one thing, but now, this is the fifth time they’ve taken her on some cross-country saga. And this is the fourth time they’re going to show her some blonde thirty-something and hope she doesn’t call their bluff. This could be the last time they pull this off before they must think of a new angle to try to “find” Sally. But maybe they’re also thinking about the feeling of a Pontiac Firebird steering wheel in their hands. They’re thinking of the sun on their hairy arms in Haleakalā. Or maybe their worries are unconscious, something they reason away as indigestion from the donuts at the gas station outside of Los Lunas.

The reveal goes as it always does. There’s a woman behind a door. There’s a girl in the park. There’s a young lady they meet at an ice cream parlor. They go there,

and the investigators argue for the validity of this woman. *Look at her blonde hair, just like Sally's. Look at that mole beneath her left eye. Look at her crooked pinky from when she slammed it in the car door as a child.* Certainly, Linda, too, wants to believe this woman behind the door is Sally. But the only thing that floods through her is the ambivalent nuisance of a stranger bumping into you on the street. She doesn't need convincing that this is her daughter. Each time, she *knows* this woman isn't Sally, and, each time, Linda turns to the men and gapes at them like they're insane. They stare back, oblivious and confident she's as gullible as they hope.

But, this time, I imagine, she's not.

Because the Arizona sun is so hot, Linda feels like she might snap underneath it, and that dog is still barking like a maniac, so Linda doesn't wait for anybody to come to the door. She turns the door handle and walks into the living room, throws herself on the couch, dust particles flying, and waits like she's been instructed to do for the girl who's supposed to be Sally to get back from work at, yes, a greenhouse on the other side of town. She doesn't care who else lives here or if she's even at the right place. She sticks her elbow on the armrest and props her head in her vacant hand, closing her eyes. That drive was so long, and she thought she might've been able to nap, but she hasn't been able to close her eyes since they took off before the sun rose this morning. Does she know then that this is all a rouse? I can't tell, but when I envision Linda sitting there, I remember the scene from Anatole Litvak's 1956 film *Anastasia* where the amnesiac Anna, played by Ingrid Bergman, must convince the Dowager Empress Marie Feodorovna of Demark, played by Helen Hayes, that *she*

is the Grand Duchess Anastasia. Does Linda know the film too? I bet she does. Maybe she even thinks of the film at this moment, just as I am thinking of it. I want Linda to remember the banter between Anna and the Dowager, the pleading, the stonewalling. I hope she remembers the Dowager's line, *You are making vulgar and sentimental use of an episode which is for me a great personal sorrow.*

Does the line roil within Linda? A snake roving through switchgrass? I want her to think of it as she cranes her head around to see Frank and Felix smoking cigarettes outside the front door underneath the measly shade of a blooming Catclaw Acacia.

I want Linda to march out to them and say, *I know she's not here—I knew it the whole stinkin' time we drove here.* I want her to slap their sweaty faces and take the money out of their wallets and light it on fire with her lighter, only to stomp it out, realizing it's *her* money. I want her to scream at them, *I'm just a lady who's distraught and lonely, and you are both absolute pigs!* I want her to feel the car keys in her pocket. To consider that she could drive away and leave them. To think of something better. To tell them she needs a moment and goes out onto the back patio.

I want her to walk to the nearest gas station, call a cab, and when it arrives, jiggle the keys in her pocket and tell the driver to take her to the closest airport. I want her to quit. To stop letting herself be duped. I want the line to reverberate within her, *You are making vulgar and sentimental use . . .* as she sits at the gate waiting for her flight back to Colorado Springs. I want to find the moment where Linda walks

away. I want Linda to feel rage at being deceived, to feel exhausted, to, somehow, save her from herself.

Because, maybe, that's where I am.

The next morning, I crawl into the front seat and drive twenty miles to the Watsonville Courthouse.

I go where I'm told. Courtroom C. There's a collection of us. Everyone has papers in portable filing folders and stuck in manilla envelopes. Papers crinkled from being held and papers with food stains on them. Papers we shuffle through and rearrange. A couple argues in Portuguese, and their two-year-old slaps a rattle against their stroller. Two women sit on a bench, and I stand next to them. One has long flat ironed blonde hair and wears black stilettos. The other is ruddy and wet looking with auburn hair. She's moaning, a mess of papers and tissues in her lap. There's something hesitant about the blonde woman; her body held taught as she rubs the other woman's shoulder.

I must be staring because the blonde woman asks me if I'd like a place to sit.

I nod, and the blonde woman shuffles to make room, pulling the wet-looking woman towards the center, and I sit next to the woman with auburn hair as she breathes booze and menthols in our faces. She looks at me, her eyes all bloodshot, and explains her situation in a shrieking crescendo, "I'm getting a divorcssssshhhhh—I'm getting a DIVORCE!"

Her voice echoes through the lobby. The blonde woman shushes her, and the ruddy woman throws her hand to her face and laughs. Then she sobs. I look at the blonde woman. She looks at me. The couple speaking Portuguese has stopped talking to look at us. The child stops whacking its rattle. I dig in my backpack for a tissue, and the blonde woman tells her to breathe.

I hand a tissue to the woman, and she cups it between her hands as though she's never seen one before.

The blonde woman coaches her, "Wipe your eyes," and the woman does it, sniffing.

Someone clunks down the hallway approaching, heels clattering; they're coming for us. It's an aunt or a sister with the same square face, the same auburn hair, and she has a wad of toilet paper from the bathroom that she hands to the woman between us. The aunt or the sister gets the woman to her feet, sticks her purse around her shoulders, laces her arm around her arm, and leads her down the hallway.

I watch as they shuffle away. The woman still moaning. Her papers shoved under her armpit.

The blonde woman says nothing to me. She shuffles through her papers.

We wait.

Someone with a badge opens the door, and we all swarm into the room.

I don't know how any of this works, and I'm looking around at everyone to see if they're doing something I should be doing. But no one is doing anything except

sitting here in the wooden pews just as I am until the judge enters the room, and we all stand, and then we all sit.

Somehow, I'm the first case on the docket. They say my name, and I stand up. I approach the bench, and I don't know what to do; they must see it on my face because the guy who opened the door in the first place instructs me through the whole thing. I can't register what anyone looks like or how many flags are in the room or if there are windows. Everything is just burnished wood and air conditioning. I raise my hand and swear to tell the truth, and the judge notes my husband isn't here today.

I agree.

She tells me I missed a checkmark in my original petition. Spousal support. I never indicated whether we were supporting one another.

Isn't that obvious? I think.

She tells me I'm going to have to come back in a few months, and now I need to go to the Self-Help Center for instructions about how to re-file my paperwork, so I turn around and walk down the lobby to the glass partition in the lobby. The Self-Help Center is a tan room with tables, a secretary's desk, and a waiting area of folding chairs against a wall. Babies and toddlers are not allowed, so every person that comes in with one is asked to leave or keep their kids outside. I stand inside the door and watch the gaggle of children staring at their parents from the other side of the glass, their pressed noses like tiny macaroons against the glass. The woman next to me is filing an elder abuse case. Her ankles are puffy, and she has a briefcase full of papers. She tells me she's been at this for so long; she just wants it to be over.

There's a guy in the corner talking to someone on a flip phone about filing a restraining order against his girlfriend. There is no talk radio playing. There is no easy listening station. All I can hear is the man talking about all the reasons he needs this real bad, "Bitch is cray-zay!" The woman filing the elder case abuse case glowers at me, her eyes darting to the man talking about the restraining order.

I turn away and stare at the places where the carpeting has gone threadbare. A little girl with black braids runs in to hug her mother's knees, and they're both asked to wait outside.

Someone calls my name, and I walk towards the table with the clerk gesturing at me to come towards her.

I sit down and hand her the papers.

She asks me questions.

"Do you understand why your papers have been rejected?"

"Did the judge give you another court date?"

"Did you visit the Self-Help Center when you first did your papers?"

"Why didn't you visit the Self-Help Center when you first did your papers?"

"Are you amicable with your husband?"

"Is he hostile?"

"Reasonable?"

"Responsive? "

"Do you have children?"

"Step-children?"

“Pets?”

“What property do you own together?”

“...Furniture?”

“... Electronics? Lots of people have electronics and things around here.”

“Did you own sports equipment together?”

“Surfboards?”

“Collectors’ items?”

“Do you own transportation together?”

“A car? RV?”

“Is his name on your lease?”

“Are you supporting one another?”

“How do you communicate?”

“How often do you *talk*?”

“Does he have a job?”

“Do you have a job?”

“Is he in the state?”

“Where is he?”

...

“Do you know where he is?”

...

“Mrs. Green?”

I tell her that I understand why my papers have been rejected. Because I thought I could do all of this myself. The paperwork for getting married was so easy; why would divorce be that much more difficult? Yes, the judge gave me another date, and I didn't really know what the Self-Help Center was. I thought the name was sort of goofy. I don't know what I am with my husband. The last time we spoke, he told me I ruined his life, and he burned all our photographs and cards and things, so I think that means we're hostile? I don't feel hostile, but he might. We don't have children. We own nothing together, and we have and had nothing. We bought our furniture at thrift stores, and our mattress was something cheap we bought on discount, and I stuck it all on the curb and sold some of it. We aren't supporting one another. I don't know if he has a job. Do I have a job? Yes. Yes, I do. Is he in the state?

The phrase darts: *Or is he dead?*

I don't even know if I believe the phrase. If I'm really asking the question. If it's muscle memory.

She stares at me.

"Where is he?" she asks.

I stutter and stare at her mouth. Her lipstick matches her shirt. Rotten cherry red.

She repeats the question, "Do you know where he is?"

I want to say somewhere in North Dakota. He's living in his parent's basement or crashing at a friend's place, or he got a job in Bismarck. But I cannot tell

her that because I do not know. I do not know where he is. The only thing I've heard are the voicemails telling me he wants to die. All I know is that he's either alive or dead, and if he's alive, he's contemplating being dead. All I know is that the voicemails have stopped.

I see the woman with the eldercare case staring at me from the next table. She sees the words stuck in my mouth. She calls me sweetheart and tells me it's gonna be okay. "People get upset in here all the time," she says across the room to me.

Now, I am the ruddy, wet-faced woman.

The woman urges me to answer. She calls me Buck's surname name: *Mrs. Green*. The name I never took. The name I am, somehow, still called.

I stare at her.

"I don't know—I don't know where he is."

8.

She prints the paperwork and tells me what to do.

In-between each command, she pokes her head up as though her gaze were punctuation.

"With the FL-100."

"Then go to FL-115."

"Read them. Don't check something or leave it unchecked if you don't understand."

"Call us if you have questions."

"Don't try to do this by yourself. You'll just end up back here."

I leave. I wave goodbye to the woman with the elder abuse case. I wave goodbye to all the little kids standing outside the center, and they wave back their puffy hands back at me like a garden of pinwheels. The man who's trying to get a restraining order stands outside in the hallway between the center and the courtrooms asking someone on his cell phone if he can get fifty bucks.

Outside, the California sky is its usual oblivious blue. A farmer sells raspberries in the back of a rusted F-150 outside the courthouse. I sit on the metal chairs outside the café across from the courthouse where they play mariachi music over the sidewalk speakers, dandelions sprout from the sidewalk cracks, and coffee is a dollar fifty.

I look at the paperwork in my hands. The choice is now made tangible in the forms: file them or don't. File them and divorce the man. Or toss them in that garbage bin next to the glass door and remain wedded. I cannot just let the divorce play out as I had hoped, an autopilot separation, the wheels in motion. Now, if I want out, I have to do this all again. Get him to sign this paperwork. Get him to write a statement about how I don't support him, and he doesn't support me. Get him to cooperate in what he claims he doesn't want. Somehow, I do not even think of whether or not he is dead. I feel defeated. I felt I had been so brave, so strong in divorcing him, in doing the paperwork, and now, I'm back at the beginning.

I call my father.

On the Linda Land internet forum, Bibi says that after Linda returned from Arizona, she gave Bibi a photograph of Sally and asked her to take it to a "Radionics specialist to see if Sally's energy was still on the planet." According to an American Cancer Society's assessment of electromagnetic therapies compiled by Jill Russell and Amy Rovere, radionics was pioneered in the late 1800s by Albert Abrams, who created devices that he claims could "detect the frequencies of diseased tissue and heal the

underlying imbalances." Yet, "Dr. Abrams and his colleagues were never able to prove his devices were effective, and investigators from Scientific American magazine reported as early as 1924 that the device did not correctly diagnose any of six specimens." The American Medical Association called him "the dean of gadget quacks." Contemporary uses of radionics claim that such devices target and heal disease in the body energetically. Some practitioners assert they can assess and cure a patient's ailment at a distance if patients provide the practitioner with a patient's photograph. I assume Linda believed that if a radionics specialist could distantly detect disease in the body from a picture, they could, by extension, know if the body was present in the first place. The only reason I can think of that Linda would ask a radionics specialist to see if Sally's energy was on the planet was to entertain the possibility of her death.

Bibi reports that "When the expert put Sally's photo on the machine, Sally's energy imprint wasn't on the planet." She also mentions that "Linda told me her daughter Jill had mentioned to her she had a recent dream of Sally. Linda said Jill didn't talk about Sally much, and therefore Linda put special meaning to Jill's dream." Bibi does not say what "special meaning" she applied to the dream.

Did Linda grieve then? Or had she been mourning all along? Was this the moment where she fully accepted Sally's death? Where she felt the sweet peace of accepting the reality of the human lifespan? Where she knew that there was something liberating in knowing and accepting the truth?

Perhaps. But the topic of her final book, *Star Signs*, suggests otherwise.

ABSTRACT (What I tell you if you're my father)

I press my back against the café window and tell you how it went. About the drunk woman and the guy who wanted a restraining order. About how I didn't know that I couldn't get divorced if I didn't know where Buck was. If he was.

You tell me I damn well know that man isn't dead, and I can still get divorced because he's sure as shit alive, and he's sure as shit a piece of shit husband. I'll just have to place an ad in the newspaper. See if he responds. Your voice is chirpy; you just went fishing, you tell me. You're pleased with your three sunfish.

I tell you that I'm going to have to wait to figure this out because now I think I have to go to West Virginia.

"... West Virginia?"

"Yeah. West Virginia. Over near... Virginia. It's where Linda Goodman's buried."

"Why the hell do you need to visit that?"

"Because—it's Linda's final resting spot. I have to see it. It's research."

The line is silent.

You ask me if this is what Ph.D. people do, "just traipse around the country looking for weirdos."

"No, Dad."

"Well, that's a real long trip... you sure you wanna do that after you just drove all the way the hell out to California?"

"I'll be fine."

"Well, call me if you get lost, Cork," you say.

I listen to the line murmur and look at FL-100, its edges rolled before me as though it were cowering. What I want to tell you is that I think I already am. Isn't that how I got here?

I think to say it, but you hang up before I do.

ABSTRACT (what I'd tell you if you were my mother)

Maybe you saw all this from the beginning. From the moment desire blossomed within me as I watched Buck walk down the street from my rented room. From the hollow beer bottles to the cigarettes stubbed in mum planters outside our apartment to my panic at Buck's recitations of how he's longed to die. Maybe you knew this was always about you.

I don't know how you remember those evenings. I imagine you'd see it as though it were multiple projections upon one another. The images of the evening whirling, colliding. Us trapped together in your inebriation. Two women colliding. I remember it in flashes. Horrible little Polaroids. I see you and I at some function together—Christmas Eve dinner at your sister's, your friend's house, Jackie and Tammy's bar on County Highway K. I see myself

wedged, a vice of inevitability as I am watching you, counting the drinks, hoping you'll stop, fully aware you won't. Do you see me watching you? I don't know; I can't imagine you do.

There's the car: me getting you into it, your arms lead, your mouth foul, the learner's permit in my pocket brand new. There's the detritus of our journey. The coat shed from your shoulders to be forgotten in the driveway, frozen the blacktop by morning. The glass pie dish shattered on the kitchen floor. Overturned chairs and bruises on our ankles from our crashes into the wall as I guide you from the car to the house. There's me weeping. Helpless. Heartbroken. Wishing it was some other way. Thinking of mothers and daughters I see on afternoon television specials. Women wearing pastel and drinking lemonade together on some four seasons patio in Connecticut. Fantasizing about being them—boring and sober. Wanting to expedite the next fragment. Because it's now that you see my tears. This upsets you. You refuse to go any further. You collapse to the floor. You tell me that you're so upset I'm upset that you want to kill yourself. You tell me how you'll do it. You know where all the guns are in the house. You know the right way to press a knife to flesh. You know about how to fill a bathtub with water and let yourself sink into it, let yourself bleed out.

If someone else were watching, if the neighbor overheard, maybe they would whisper to me, *She's drunk—you just go on to bed now*. Maybe they'd tell me, *Honey, those guns probably aren't even loaded, and she's too wasted*

to find the bullets. But no one is watching. It's just you and me, and I am too young to know any better. So, I believe you. I stand and listen to you, watch you. I believe every word you say, and I am paralyzed. Unmoving. Unspeaking. Only weeping, caught in the crosshairs of your volatile sadness. This bothers you. These *tears* are too much for you to take, you say. You tell me to go the hell away. Get out of here. I think that I cannot leave—I shouldn't, look at what you just told me, but you tell me to go the hell away until I patter down the steps to the basement.

I sit on my knees at the bottom of the steps and wait. For the sound of your tiny hand dragging the Glock 19 across the top of the hutch and to your temple. The slithering of a knife from the drawer. Your hand sliding the Ruger Rifle from behind the bookshelf. I wait until I hear your feet stumbling towards your bedroom. Until I swear I can hear you snore. Until I fall asleep on the linoleum floor and awake hours later, where I will sneak to your bedroom to be sure you are asleep, until I check every gun and every knife, my own hands touching their cold metal. Until I pass out on the couch.

Until the next morning when I will pry your winter coat up from the driveway or clean up the broken pie glass. Until I pretend it never happened and speak nothing of it to my stepfather, your husband, when he returns home from wherever he was—a business trip or ice fishing weekend.

You never kill yourself, but the threat was always looming for me.

Somehow, I've never blamed you. I always saw the behavior as part of a larger constellation. Something inevitable with all that was given to you: your small town, your family's impoverishment, your mother kicking you out when you were seventeen. I knew you loved me. I knew your shame. I knew you didn't mean it. Even though I knew it all, I never knew that I wasn't supposed to save you.

ABSTRACT (what I would tell you if you were Buck)

I don't call you, but I should. I should do it now because I've got these forms and need your help if we're ever going to finish this thing. But why don't I do it? Why don't I just pick up the phone to call you? Why can't I just tell you I screwed up—wouldn't you love that? Your wife wants a divorce but then can't even correctly fill out the forms? Maybe you'd laugh. Maybe you'd tell me I deserve this—to have to go back and forth to court. To spend more money filing things. Maybe you'd say this is what you wanted when you burned our photographs: to invoke some kind of black magic. Put a hex on me. Stop me in my path.

Or, maybe, you wouldn't say that. Because I would probably call you weeping, and perhaps you'd soften at the sound of my gasping voice. Maybe you'd remember me bawling into your lap time and time again about trivial things—rude drivers or the housecat I saw splattered in the street. Perhaps I'd

remember how tender you could be. How what you knew best, more than Derrida or Kant, was how to suffer. And so, when I was suffering, no matter how insignificant the crisis, you were a refuge. Maybe this was why I've always thought my love would save you. That if I could only convince you of your worth, how you could uniquely see the depths of the human experience, your potential for sensitivity, and your intelligence, you would see it too. Your ideations would dissolve, and you would be free. Do I not call you because to call you would be to confront the fact that this whole time all I've ever wanted to do is save you? And I was so naïve as to think that by loving you I could?

I suppose that's what this whole thing is about. I fashioned it in academic tongue, called it a *recuperation*. I liked writing it. Liked saying it: *recuperative biography*. *Restoration of a maligned figure. A feminist retelling*. But I can't even define the words. What does it mean to recuperate you, Buck? To recuperate Linda? What would a feminist recuperation be? I've already been doing it for years—trying to save her. In the face of questions from friends about Linda's sexism, her retrograde politics, and appropriation. Despite my doubts, I just held the books to my chest. Walked away. Kept her for myself. Talked to Casey and Michael. Went to Cripple Creek. Refused to question what it means to recuperate a woman who never asked to be fixed, never wanted to be. Refused to ask what it means to write a biography of someone, to know someone, when you are so entangled with how you want them to appear to the world,

when you are so invested in the character you want them to become. Refused to admit that through my retelling of her life, I can save her no more than I could have saved you, Buck. Maybe the only recuperation I could write would be the story of me saving myself. The story of me walking away.

ABSTRACT (what I'd tell you if you were Linda)

We're in the diner. I don't know where those interview questions went. Under the table? Did

the waitress take it with the coffee pot? I haven't thought about them in hours.

This isn't an interview

anymore. Was it ever? You haven't told me anything, Linda. I still don't know what to do about my husband or what I'm supposed to be doing now that he's gone, and maybe dead and gone, or perhaps just gone. But, somehow, that doesn't feel important anymore.

I look at you, Linda. You and your feathered hair, you and your part down the middle. You and your blue eyes and mint sweater, and somehow, you're still sitting here with me, and I'm still enamored with you. *Linda*, I say, sliding into the booth next to you, so close now that I can smell your perfume, *Immortality*, I want to tell you, *is a paradox. Yes, it is a way to wait for those you wish to return to you. But immortality*, I say, *is a path where everyone you have ever loved will surely leave you. Which one*, I want to ask, *is the bigger risk for you?*

My father calls me back.

He tells me to come home first. Before I take off again. He tells me he'll check the tires. The oil. "That car you got's a piece 'a shit, and you better make sure it's not gonna fall apart on you if you're going all the way the hell out to Virginia."

I tell him it's not Virginia. It's West Virginia.

"Well, wherever the hell you're goin'."

I say, "Okay," and we hang up.

Immortality, Linda claimed, was as natural to humans as life itself.

Linda's final book, 1987's *Star Signs*, is billed as "an enlightening and remarkably accurate guide to help you discover all the powers possessed by the you-of-you." It's a lifestyle guide to help readers achieve financial abundance, understand and practice holistic healing, find meanings in numbers, codes, words, déjà vu, and achieve everlasting harmony through colors, music, and crystals. Organized by thematic chapters, *Star Signs* culminates with Linda's guide to achieving immortality through cellular regeneration.

She explains that all deaths are the choice of one's soul. If someone dies, it is not an act of divine force or inevitability. Instead, "Physical immortality is natural—and death is unnatural. Therefore, people need to exert so much (subconscious) effort

to die that it causes illness and pain." Death is a choice for Linda, just as immortality is also a choice. She claims:

All deaths are suicides; do you realize that? Every single one. The only distinction is that,

with some people, suicide is a subconscious choice—and with others, it's a conscious choice.

Otherwise, those who commit suicide and those who succumb to accident, illness, or

'old age' die for exactly the same reason: belief in the inevitability of death. *Star Signs* outlines how readers can choose immortality. She details eleven steps towards eternal life with more directives within the larger steps.

First, to achieve immortality, you must believe it, know it to be true, and know you will achieve it. You must "imagine the spirals of your cells turning in the opposite direction and repeat aloud, *I am immortal, and I now ordain my body to demonstrate this.*" You should also take supplements—Vitamins C and E and para-amino-benzoic acid. Vitamins B12 and B-Complex if you feel like it. Moisturize your entire body. Walk. Get fresh air. Ingest "at least two full eight-ounce glasses of unsweetened grape juice each day of your immortal life." Why? She doesn't say, but you should drink up to four glasses a day. Do not feel shame about your enlightenment—in fact, gab about it. To your neighbors and friends. To the grocery store clerk and the postman. Let it be known that you are immortal. That you are 300, 400, or 700 years old. Feel no embarrassment when they look at you quizzically or

laugh. Remember, *you have received precious knowledge*. If you are pregnant, have your baby in water to minimize trauma. Avoid alcohol entirely except for the teeniest-tiniest bit of wine now and then. Quit smoking and snorting cocaine and avoid all kinds of drugs. Do not be sexually promiscuous; it ruins your soul. Forgive your enemies. Reject all fears. Become a vegetarian. Then, work your way towards living on air. Do not kill anything. Learn karate instead. What about your teeth? How could your teeth last an eternity? Don't worry—you'll grow a new set. Drink solarized water according to your body type. Maybe you will need red solarized water. Maybe blue. You need to look at Chapter 3 to find out. Fast one day a week. Step eleven gives no directives. Step eleven is only there for the numerological power of eleven versus ten. Ten being weaker than eleven.

Also, do not retire.

Despite Linda's instructions about achieving immortal life, she was pronounced dead on October 21st, 1995, in Colorado Springs, Colorado, due to diabetic complications.

Linda's story could end here.

But I imagine that if Linda had spent decades believing that she and Robert were St. Francis of Assisi and Clare reincarnated and that Osiris' phallus was somewhere in Los Angeles, then she was willing to cook up all sorts of far-out ways to fake her death. Maybe she did spend the last decade of her life imagining her cells spinning backward, drinking four glasses of grape juice, and attempting to live on air. Does this all defy reality? Of course. So much grape juice would surely make her

sick, and she'd already had part of her leg amputated. But I imagine that Linda liked the sugar buzz. She could probably still move one leg. Maybe she even believed there was a possibility for regeneration. Haven't you ever seen a King's skink lizard?

All Linda would need was a body double.

Four days later, I show up as Wisconsin's summer hits its swelter. Next to my stepfather's house, cows in a pasture crowd under the shade of a single oak tree, and down the street, a white-haired man strips his Winnebago fifth-wheel panel by panel and throws it into a bonfire. The grass is so frail all through the countryside all I think about as I drive by is that bonfire licking the open field and swallowing it whole.

The car is still rusting in the driveway, and the mold is still crawling, but I'm too tired to care. All I fantasize about is the tickle of the ragged wooden dock's planks against my body and the lake's cool waters undulating around me. So, I take a steak knife to the cardboard boxes full of my mother's old clothing that live in my closet, and I dig through them, hoping I can find a bathing suit. But it's all angora wool sweaters that smell of her, and so I hold one up to my face and breathe in, and when I pull the fuzz away, my face prickling, I see the photo album sitting on my closet floor—the wedding album given to me by my father's third wife.

I hug the sweater to me, wool itching, and stare at the album's black pleather face, wondering if I should look. Wonder if shame would crawl through me. Regret. Wonder if I'd want to pitch it into the lake. Wonder long enough that I rip the sweater away from me and decide to look.

The photographs are us. Us baby blue and pink standing beside the lake. Us holding one another, dancing in the driveway. Us standing on the dock kissing. Us holding one another's hands at the end of the lawn. My family sitting around card tables. His family sitting around card tables. That one plastic chair buckling under the weight of my uncle. The dog in a plastic lei. Blank pages of unfilled slots with a cursive note from her: *Fill them with joy!*

I stare at the blank pages, having forgotten that she wrote this message. Having forgotten that when I first read this, days after being married, I did hope we would fill these pages with something blissful. Snapshots of a life together worth remembering. What is this album now? An invitation to try again? To fill the pages? Or a metaphor for what is: a life together started and ended abruptly?

I think about it for hours until I'm sitting on the patio when I get my first call from Barbara.

Barbara tells me she's not a psychic. She doesn't like that word. Instead, she sees things, visions when she sleeps, or sometimes she "knows" things. I suggest "intuitively," but she doesn't seem to like that word either. I offer to pay her, but she tells me she doesn't want it; she does this for free. She keeps on and tells me she often knows where buried objects hide. She and her son, Jamal, dig holes guided by the images.

"Perfect," I say, the air so muggy around me that the porch's broken screens seem to sag in exhaustion. A forgotten beer bottle and mini-decorative palm tree also recline against the screen as though weary in a corner.

Barbara tells me that people think she's crazy, but then she tells them something only they would know, and they don't know what to think anymore. She tells me about a time with her son's professors at Chico State and a party where she read the Ouija board that turned awkward. But she gets information and "says it." She can't help what she has to say.

She trails off.

"Tell me, again," she says. "What do you want to know?"

What do I do? With Buck. With Linda. With everything.

I pause, and the questions bob again, a buoy at sea. *What do I—*

"So, I think I told you when we were texting; I'm working on this project about Linda Goodman, the astrologer. She had this kind of fixation with the Hollywood Cross and something buried there. I'm just wondering, you know, if you think anything is actually buried there."

She pauses.

She tells me she dreamt of this. It came to her last night. The numbers: 12-8. 12-8. "What does that mean?" she asks.

"I mean... I don't know. But, if it's a date. Then that's... December 8th. It was a holiday for Linda. She declared it to be Osiris' day. She would go to the Cross every December 8th."

Barbara pauses.

She tells me that a man came to talk to her. He was a mason or something of that sort. Some person that believed in good and evil. He thought that there was something special about that Cross, and he went to Linda because he knew she would believe him, "She was that kind of a lady." And he convinced her that something was there. He wanted her to start searching.

"Oh," I say.

She continues, "But this guy that came to see her, he put a box there thinking that the gods would then fill it with the penis."

I pause and draw a box in my notebook and write *ONLY A BOX?!*

"She wanted so badly to go digging... she was obsessed." She gasps. "She would've been so disappointed to know that there was nothing there. That it was just a box."

"So, there was something there, but just a box?"

"Just a box."

I circle the box and draw a sad face: eyes and a mouth. I draw one sad face and then another and another. I keep drawing them until they're all over the page like a flock.

"Barbara," I say. "Can I ask you about Sally, her daughter? Does anything come up for you?"

She hums.

"Who is Sally?" she asks.

I tell her everything.

Barbara tells me she dreamt something the other night, "Right after we texted one another." She dreamt about a mother and a daughter. It was a daughter who was so depressed and a mother who wasn't there for her.

I am quiet.

"Her mom had too many problems," Barbara says. "Too many problems."

I pause, my pen poised on the page, ink bleeding into an orb.

Barbara tells me that Linda had troubles, mental things. She repeats it, "She just couldn't be there."

My eyes trace the gap between the screen and the frame. I don't have any reason to believe Barbara. Any proof. But I trust her, nonetheless.

"I'll text you if I dream of anything else."

I leave for West Virginia the next day.

Is it unbelievable that Linda would fake her death? Of course. But she was also a woman who believed that you could live on air, so how is this out of the realm of possibility? She did write about all that, immortality, and whatnot, but she sure as shit wasn't going to follow her own rules and tell anybody that they had to keep the same *identity* if you decide to become immortal. She also wasn't gonna follow her own rules on that dietary regimen she prescribed of flaxseed and high vibrating fruits. If she's gonna live until eternity, then she was gonna make sure she could keep smoking and eating Little Debbie's at noon with a glass of chilled grape juice while

wearing a velvet coat tied at the waist. I imagine she would think to herself in her immortal life, *Why live if you cannot live in splendor?*

Anyway, she knew how to do this. Linda was smart. Resourceful. Creative. Plus, she had all these friends in LA that would get the kind of things you would need to fake your death: dummies to slip in your hospital bed. Lace wigs and plastic gloves you can throw in the compost. I imagine that if Linda were to fake her death with three living children, grandchildren, and, despite her decline in popularity, a fan base of small but enthusiastic devotees, she wasn't going to want to deal with all of them. That wasn't the point of faking her death. She faked her death to get away from all that. To start over. To go far away. To live a life of solitude. Invent a new persona with a new wardrobe. Get her a passport and new friends. I imagine her stories about the past would be something that she would only tell when she's cornered at a hotel bar with a couple of Scotch and sodas. Maybe then, after you've talked for twenty, maybe thirty minutes, she whispers, *Can I tell you who I really am? The truth?*

Yeah, tell me, you say.

Of course, she tells you everything. That she's 500 years old and in her previous life she was a world-famous astrologer who has sold millions of books. That she has a lover in Mexico. That she believes in reincarnation and the ability of prayer to produce miracles. That she's been drinking grape juice this whole time, bottles of it, and that's what's kept her skin so taught. That she's reached immortality. She'll even say it, *I'm immortal*. Then, she'll sit back and pick out an ice cube from her

drink. She'll crack it between her new set of teeth, staring at you, waiting for your reaction.

Maybe you laugh. Maybe you smile. Maybe you don't even know what to say, but when you say eventually, *Lady, listen, I just can't believe that you were that woman, a famous astrologer. None of that makes any sense...* She'll just shake her head, laughing. She'll stand up, place her fragile hand on your shoulder, and say, *Nobody ever believed a thing I said in the first place about anything important to me. So, you're no different.*

Even if Linda is immortal, does anything change?

As I drive, I try to think of the images I could put in that photograph—images of a life Buck and I could've had together, maybe could have together—but I can't. All I can do is turn up the radio, roll the window down, and stick my arm out, a wing testing the breeze.

Parkersburg is spit and heat when I show up 26 hours later and pull into the Piggly Wiggly parking lot. I don't know why I'm in a hurry—I don't know why I feel such urgency to get to the cemetery, but I do. So much so that I dash across the parking lot, carts crackling on the jagged asphalt as they roll, and I run to the customer service desk and ask the sixteen-year-old cashier if she could tell me if they have flowers.

"I gotta ask my manager. I dunno if we sell flowers," she says, disappearing into a back room.

I wait.

She emerges from the back room and tells me they don't have any, "You gotta go to Kroger's for that."

I ask her about the cemetery, if it's near here.

"What cemetery?"

"Mount Olivet."

"What?"

"Mount Olivet?"

"Oh, I dunno—I never heard of that."

My chest falls. *Maybe it's not here...*

I ask her about Kroger's, if it's near here.

"Oh yeah, just down the way," she says, throwing her hand westward.

I tell her thanks and run back to my car.

Where does Linda go after telling someone in a bar that she was an immortal world-famous astrologer? Sure, she's tipsy, but the night is young, so she must go somewhere. Maybe to a bookstore with late hours. Maybe inside the dark interior of a tram stop. Maybe into a tuc tuc. I can't imagine where she goes when she's living her immortal life. As I imagine her walking away from that hotel bar in that unknown city whose billboards and street signs speak an unknown language, the picture becomes blurry. The edges begin to fade. I don't know into what unknown she walks. I can't see her anymore, even in my imagination. Maybe I don't want to see her as immortal

in the ways she described in *Start Signs*. Because to be immortal means that, maybe, she was just waiting for Sally to come back. For Robert to come back. Because maybe it means that what I really want for Linda, what I really want for myself, is peace. And, maybe, to get there, we must stop imagining what might've been or could be.

I dash across the parking lot at Kroger's, where all of Parkersburg has come ground beef special. I weave through carts and kids and buy two bouquets of roses, one for Sally and one for Linda, because it's the only thing they're selling. I crawl along Seventh to Park Avenue in traffic, so by the time I get to the cemetery, the sun's sliding towards the horizon. The cicadas are buzzing so loud I swear it's a security system I tripped by parking inside the gate until I step on a pile of dead carcasses as I walk towards the first row of graves.

I don't know where Linda's grave is; there isn't a directory, so I jog, searching, roses' plastic wrapping crinkling in my arms, and skim each headstone: *Cunningham. Alex C. 1858-1936. Emma 1878-1965. Oakey Leon Fouse. June 11, 1940-June 30, 1993*. The cemetery must've been mowed before the rain because sodden clippings cover half of the stones. I paw away headstone after headstone until sheared grass covers me. *Mother Myrtle Izora November 07 1919. Mary Louise Taylor. 1892-1986. Eugene B. Laird 1877-1936*.

I paw away at limestone to read *Lydia Gooding 1873-1960* and nearly scream. I have to say it aloud, "Lydia Gooding. Not Linda."

I keep going, pawing at dozens of stones and reading the names, my legs and arms covered in wet grass.

There is a stone with no date that reads "Little Kate."

There are singular blocks of letters. "K." "C." "O."

There's a headstone where I can make out the name *G—ld Green*. I drop the flowers, drop to my knees, and claw at the headstone. It's covered in clippings, but I see it: *Green*.

Buck's surname.

Gerald Green 1920-1969.

I look to the right and the left. There's a whole row of them.

Green. Green. Green.

Shouldn't the sign of Buck's surname on a headstone incite panic within me? Yet all I feel is my boots on the sodden earth. The cicadas hum rising and falling. I have lived in the land of Linda—where fantasy and reality collide, where I lived the threat of something illusionary as though it were real—and I'm not there. The headstones are a coincidence.

I walk up to the top of the hill and pause. I thought it was just one hill. I thought I could do this in an evening. I thought this would be easy, and instead, the cemetery sprawls on the opposite side of the hill, what looks like five acres. It could take hours, days, to peel through each row to find her.

I keep going for one row, looking through the top row of the hill, thinking I'll get lucky. But there is no Linda. No Goodman or Snyder. There is no Sally or Bill.

There's nothing but darkness slinking and a truck pulling up to the gate a quarter-mile away below me and locking it. There's nothing but me running down the hill, barefoot now, sandals loose in my hands. My body dusted in grass clippings. Flower petals breaking free and streaming, me screaming, "Wait for me!"

Barbara does dream more, and she tells me that night. She dreamt of someone named "Mike."

"Who is Mike?" she texts.

I tell her, "Linda has a son named Mike? He's her youngest child."

Barbara says that she "dreamt of Linda, and Linda said she is so sorry she couldn't be there for him."

She asks me if I know anything about him, "Was he ever seriously ill?"

"I don't know anything about him. I just know he was her youngest."

She just wants him to know how sorry she is. She had too many things going on—too many problems. She feels that way for all her children, so sorry she couldn't be there more.

She asks me if I know anything about any of them.

I tell Barbara, "No, I tried to initiate contact and see what I could find. But I don't know anything about any of them."

She texts it again, "Linda is just so sorry."

I pause, watching the phone in my hand as Barbara's final message appears.

"That's all I dreamt."

The next day, I take the flowers with me and walk up to the top of the cemetery and despair at its expanse again.

I walk down the asphalt path, wondering if, maybe, I should just leave the flowers at the gate or on some other grave. Maybe it doesn't matter if I find the graves. Maybe it just matters that I tried. Pebbles fall down the hill, kicked up from my steps, and I watch them gallop down the hill where I see a name in granite.

KEMERY.

The name is familiar, but I don't know why. I think of high school classmates. The family names of appliance repair companies in Wisconsin. Former Packer linemen. I think, *Mary Alice*.

Linda Goodman was born Mary Alice Kemery.

I rip my sandals off, fling them down the hill, and run to the headstone. I reread it, *KEMERY*. I stalk around the headstone and find them all. Sally. Linda's parents. Linda herself. Linda's baby that died in infancy: Melissa Anne.

Sally's grave is a flat granite headstone with flowers in the bottom corners and a border. The script reads "SARAH E. SNYDER, LOVE, 1951-1973." Melissa Anne's grave is also a rectangular granite flat stone that reads "Melissa Anne, 1950-1951, Daughter of William H. and Mary Alice Snyder." I linger on the name: *Mary Alice Snyder*. The name both familiar and unfamiliar. Both Melissa Anne and Sally's headstones have a lighter border than frames with a darker granite insert.

Linda's grave has no decoration or border. It reads: "LINDA GOODMAN AKA MARY ALICE KEMERY." No date of birth. No date of death. In comparison to Melissa Anne and Sally's grave, Linda's is clinical. Almost comically impersonal.

I divide the flowers and put them on all the Kemery graves. Linda's. Sally's. Melissa Anne's and Linda's parents. I sit in the grass and say the intentions that I wish for Linda, but, of course, the intentions I speak for her turn into the prayers I speak for myself.

For a moment, I sit before Linda's grave and stare at its glossy granite as if waiting for a response.

A woman drives by in a gold Astro van and stops. She gets out of her car, walks around to the side, and stares at me. I poke my head up and stare back. She's got hair like a tumbleweed and a University of West Virginia sweatshirt. She scratches her head and shouts at me, "Are you broke down?"

I prop myself up on my elbows. I look around to confirm it's only me she could be talking to.

"No?" I said. "I'm jus'sitting."

"Oh, okay . . . jus' had to make sure," she says.

"Thanks for checking," I say as she gets back in her van.

I watch as she turns the engine over and grumbles away, weaving through the graveyard's expanse.

Am I broken down? Is this it?

I slide into a booth at Mary B's diner and wonder why the hell I didn't just call a psychic in the first place. I could've asked them everything. I could've even just inquired if this was a project worth pursuing, and they would've been able to tell me, *Girl, you've got nothing that can grow*, and that would've been that.

But would I have listened?

It's 10:45 am, and the breakfast crowd is shuffling out, empty coffee cups and greasy plates left behind, and it's just me in here watching the handkerchiefs stuck in the back pockets of their jeans walk away.

The waitress asks me what I'd like, and I ask her for a plate of hash browns, and as she walks away, I see it: Linda and me. My fantasy happening in real time. She and I at this diner. Right now. I imagine her moving, reapplying her lipstick, and looking up at me. Her mouth is a heart, lips pursed. The table is restaurant carnage: used napkins and five coffee cups and torn-up paper menus and sugar sprinkled across the table like a galaxy.

Now you know, Courtney, Linda says, tossing the lipstick inside her purse and buttoning up her jacket.

Now I know what? I say back to her.

You know everything, she says again.

No... I don't—I don't know anything, Linda, I say.

Linda slides out of the booth, tosses a five on the table, and walks towards the door.

Linda? I say, wheeling around in the booth. *Please, don't leave.* A breakfast straggler at the counter is looking at me, I can feel their gaze, but I don't care. I repeat it, louder, *Please, don't leave, Linda.* I get up and follow her to the coatroom. I catch her sticking a quarter into a gumball machine and turning the lever. She turns around to look at me, the pink gumball running to the opening.

There's nothing else I can tell you, Courtney, she says, sticking the gumball in her mouth.

But, Linda, you haven't told me anything, I say. *We've just been sitting here, and I've been ranting about Buck, and then you got mad when I asked you about miracles and immortality. And we're still here, and I still don't feel like I really know you at all. I mean, this whole thing, it's just been me, imagining you. Why did I ever think you were ever gonna tell me what I could do about Buck? Or that you'd show me anything? Why did I ever think that through imagining you I could get to some kind of solution?*

Linda puts her hands on my shoulders and says, *Calm down,* all swollen-like with the gumball in her mouth. She's shorter than me, about my mother's height, just below my chin.

Okay, I say. She leans into me, gum cracking beneath her teeth.

This, she says, sticking the gym in her cheek and pointing to the tiled floor, *this right here, is the closest you could've ever come to knowing me. You got it. You know it.*

... *What do you mean?* I ask, and she shakes her head at me like I'm an idiot.

Now you know what's it's like to search and search and only be left with yourself, Co—

The waitress sets the plate down before me, and I snap my head up to her.

"Do you want some Heinz?" she says, setting down a bundle of silverware.

"What?" I say.

"Ketchup. Do you want some ketchup?"

I stare at the vacant seat opposite me.

"No, thanks."

The hash browns steam, and I open my backpack and start stacking it all on the table. The notebooks I've carried. The manilla envelope of notes I'd written to myself. My map of Teller County. My map of West Virginia. Notes from my conversations with Duncan, Jerry, and Casey. My subsequent conversation with Jerry. The list of everyone I contacted who never replied. The second list of everyone I contacted who never replied. The notes from my first conversation with Barbara. My divorce papers. That picture of Robert where he looks like Jesus. Printouts from the Linda Land internet forum. List after list. Some note about why Linda thought she was related to Abraham Lincoln that I never pursued. I spread it all before me, and I have the urge to continue to rifle. To open the notebooks and see if there's something I missed. To return to Linda Land and peel through the forum again. To open that manilla envelope and pour its contents onto the table and dig through it for a story. To text Barbara and ask her what I should do. Where I could go for the thing that will bring everything together, and I cannot make myself do any of it because I know

there is no place, no thing that will make any of this coherent, let it fit into an abstract or five-chapter monograph.

I shove everything to the side and eat my hash browns. I drink the coffee. I pay the bill.

I leave the diner and go outside to sit on the crumbling sidewalk stoop and call Buck.

In the Linda Land thread "Why did Linda die?," Linda-Goodman.com user "need to believe" writes on May 31st, 2003, at 05:53 pm:

I still have not been able to come to terms with the fact that Linda could die. Somehow, it made me lose faith in myself . . . in physical immortality, in everything that I believed in after I read Star Signs . . . and I cannot get rid of this cynicism with which I see life now. I look at everything with doubt. I keep thinking everything is too good to be true. I'm lonelier . . . sadder . . . I miss Linda. I wish I could have a sign from her . . . any sign that would restore my faith back in life . . . and love . .

"Kelly" replies on June 14th, 2003, at 6:18 pm:

I know her soul has lived since the beginning. I feel she has been my spiritual teacher for a few

Lifetimes, but I did not accept that she was gone. I felt at that moment that all the advanced Star Signs of wisdom and light she taught me were for not.

Buck picks up, and I bleat into the phone. I tell him I'm sorry. I'm sorry I screwed up the forms. I have to write something declaring that we're not supporting one another financially, and I'm going to need you to notarize it and mail it to my stepfather's house in Wisconsin because I don't have anywhere I really live in California, but you need to write it as though I actually have a place there. And I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I screwed everything up.

I peer around to see if anyone can overhear and see one of the waitresses smoking behind the dumpster twenty yards away.

"I'm just sorry. About everything," I say.

I stare across the parking lot and squint to see a pile of dead cicadas clustered by the sewer. He is quiet. I am quiet.

".. Buck?" I ask.

He whispers, "I'm sorry too."

He is all soft and tender. He recounts his cruelties and apologies for them one by one. The suicide threats and the names he called me. Breaking the watermelon bowl and telling me good luck paying for the apartment. For "slipping" after we married. He tells me what he wants more than anything is to be with me. He thinks that, maybe, just maybe, one day, I will come back to him. He loves me now and forever.

"Buck, you know—you know I don't feel that way," I say. "I've told you that. I can't do this anymore. I have to be done."

He is quiet.

“Buck... I don’t love you like that anymore.”

“I know,” he whispers. “I just didn’t want it to be true.”

On October 23rd, 2007, at 09:09 pm, Bibi writes:

The last time Linda gave me a bear hug, in her bear [sic] feet, we talked about her transits/cycles for the upcoming Christmas. I reminded her to be careful throughout the holidays. Linda knew she had difficult and challenging transits ahead; how could she not! However, all of us here in Los Angeles believed her to have been in "Diabetic denial." Linda's eating patterns of sweets all day, endless coffee, and cigarettes she put out on her purple plates might have assisted her transition to the other side. However, anyone who knew Linda would know the incredible joy Linda's soul must have felt to finally be with Sally!

Here's a picture:

A woman walks in Parkersburg. Captured on a Polaroid. She's at the sloping intersection of 7th and Juliana, where the city's winding streets, for a moment, look towering. Where if you catch it on a rainy day, like today, you'll have to tiptoe to avoid the puddles. Where the only visible sky is building dark in the distance. The

woman's face obscured, we see her silhouette. A raincoat synched at the waist. A hood to protect her from the drizzle. Hands in pockets. The photo is underexposed. So dim that when you ask, *Who is she? Where is she going?* Nobody could tell you. It could be 1956 or 2006. So blurred that you can't tell whether it's a group of crows or seagulls gathering in the sky. So hazy that the trash mid-skitter in a gutter could be a feral cat. But the light from the bakery next to the woman reveals something. Something to linger upon. To zoom in to. Look closer, and you'll see the woman's gait. The space between her toes and the sidewalk: daylight. We've caught her in mid-movement. Does she skip? Does she levitate? I cannot tell you. But I know that as I zoom out and see her there in flight, she is free.

END