

Nesting

by Lindsay Oncken

He liked to toss her name around and feel its resistance on his tongue. It had legs, like a good wine; the Ls would linger, her name full-bodied and swimming beneath surface tension. “Lily,” he said. He thought maybe he loved her, the way her hair slashed across her face on windy days, the violent edge of her jaw. She slipped through crowds like a city carp; he could never quite reach out and touch. Sometimes he liked to imagine that she would catch his eye, wink and say, “Boy, Jake, the people here move much too fast. Let’s catch a train somewhere, just you and me, what do you say?” He always said yes and then she was off again, tail fin beating a beckon behind her.

He first saw her on the T, crumpled between two enormous men, her shoulder blades fanned out like plates of armor, swaying and slight in the heat.

That was the only time he ever spoke to her. He stood and gestured toward his own seat, and she nodded, her eyes lifting into a courteous smile. She said, “Thank you.” He nodded back, feeling a blush crawl up his neck to settle in his temples. “Of course.” He turned away, dodging the glare of one of the large men, feeling an uncomfortable heat beneath his arms. Two stops later she squeezed out the door, and he memorized the cross-streets and the way her sad eyes crinkled at the corners when she turned to wave.

The buildings breathed out the morning, most days. The Charles slipped through the city, sleepy and forgotten.

He was a tall boy, his parents used to tell him angular, with a thin mouth that rarely betrayed his thoughts. He used to spend hours reading in their bright sunroom, swimming through the text, the shimmering pools of ink. Often he imagined the way the words settled into the paper, the finality of it, and sometimes he held his books under running water to watch worlds swirl down the drain. He could have been a writer, had he the patience for it. Imaginative, cunning, his mind traveled and danced with a lethal sharpness.

It was the details, perhaps, that made it easier to love her. The things he picked up sank like hooks into his skin.

Once, Jake left her a dress just like one her mother used to wear. He had found a photograph of her and her mother on the sidewalk; it had

slipped out of her purse and fluttered to stick in a grate behind her. For the next few days he’d studied their frozen faces, their trapped smiles, the rough landscape in the window and the framed photograph of a fish skeleton behind their matching curly heads. She looked good in blue, he decided; it gentled her frame and held her in place, smoothed her outline with the softness of water. He wanted to give her something that reminded her of home.

When she found the dress on her stoop she didn’t hold it up to her body and twirl like he had hoped. She looked up at her door, then darted a glance over her shoulder to ask a nearby tree, “How in the hell?”

He was hurt. He shot her scathing looks over their morning coffee, the room full of strangers. Even in his mind, they didn’t speak for weeks.

It was the nature of their relationship, though, that he felt an apology was never needed. One morning he spotted her reading a novel in a small café, and he sat awhile adoring the wild way her eyelashes fell down across her cheeks: perfect, like a hundred tiny black tusks. “I forgive you,” he said quietly, and he could have sworn the corner of her mouth twitched up in a private way, a silent “Okay.”

He had been in one relationship before. It was college, and the girl was nondescript and angular, muscled and aggressive when she kissed him. They were a pair of wasps circling in a sharp, useless dance. To him it was a year of discomfort and shared meals, a sort of laziness passing over that held them in place. She was not surprised when he drove away from her. She had told him many times, “People pass over your face like shadows.” This was true, but he was fascinated with the change in light, the glimpses that added up to a nothing that was briefly brilliant. He lost focus. He just couldn’t find people. They were swaddled tight within themselves, and he wanted only a touch.

Lily gave his life color. She swam through the outlines, gave faces to the faceless. Hers was a shadow that lingered.

He started tailing her a few days after the bus encounter. He went to the same bus stop every morning, at roughly the same time, and watched the doors open, waiting for a brief glimpse of her lovely face. At first he wasn’t planning to follow her; he was just going to try and hear her speak again, maybe say hello. What he *really* wanted was to ask her inane, personal questions, like how often she washed her sheets or whether she liked her orange juice with pulp. It had occurred to him to introduce himself or simply invite her to dinner, but as the days went on, as the hours of waiting boiled through his body like a heatstroke, he started to feel a sort of pressure

on the back of his eyelids. An intense need to know, to see for himself. His knees shook while he watched the wheels do somersaults.

The fourth day, she stepped out of the bus and it felt as though his ribcage was a swinging door and she had fallen through.

She made a sharp left, hardly glanced in his direction, and walked with purpose away from him.

He got up to follow, working hard to envision tapping her shoulder, smiling at her, telling her his name. Block by block, turn by turn, those plans settled deep into his abdomen and burst into a cold resign. His pace loosened and he lingered, suspended between staying and going.

He knew, of course, that following her would make him seem insane. He knew it would only indulge a darker side of him, and he knew that he should just walk away. But he couldn't. He would try to explain this to himself for months, but that was the only thing he could ever think to say. There was something about her, or something about him. He just couldn't.

His feet fell heavy, tugged along; the sidewalk arched up to meet his strides.

There are things she finds hard to identify.

Why so many people insist on driving cars through the city, for example. Why she finds it so difficult to really see or hear anybody. Why she can't go on a run without feeling like there's a string tied between her and some other place, like the taut line of her childhood tin can telephones. The buildings have distinctive gazes, pupils illuminated with the morning's watery color. She feels watched all the time. The clerk at the supermarket looks at her strangely when she walks out.

It is distant, uncomfortable. She often wonders if the years are as capable of travel as they seem.

Lily grew up in a small house in Alabama, where lawns would tiptoe to the edge of the water and sip. She used to sit on her front porch and watch heat lightning that shattered the sky, brilliant lines framing the night's cracking grin. There, the humidity was a houseguest.

Her mother was a small woman with floral dresses and dusty rooms that Lily liked to explore. They would dart across the wood floors, slide on socks in the winter, stand with arms tied like ribbon and smile for her father's old camera. Her mother had often told her about the cobblestones and buildings tucked close like old friends, had shown her in old diaries how

Boston had given her handwriting a distinctive lean. "It will tire you," she told Lily, "in the most wonderful way." Growing up, Lily never trusted the complicated shapes of northeastern states. She liked the country's mid-section where land was spaced out and rectangular. As she got older, she learned to live with these things: the winding river borders, the way streets seemed to breathe her in and hold.

When her mom got sick, they picked the best hospital in Boston and left Alabama behind without hesitation. Almost immediately she found a small job at an insurance agency, answering phones and scheduling appointments. It was passionless and bleak, an empty slate her life could build on. She made cubicle friends and paper clip statues, and accepted quietly that this was her new home.

Her tiny kitchen is briefly caught in a brilliant haze, the sun extending handshakes toward her window. She watches the people far below, registers only a muddled watercolor of urban life, and turns to pour a glass of orange juice, no pulp.

This morning her mother called her. Her voice is weakening. The past few weeks have been rife with strained conversations, doctors rattling out words like *hippocampus* and *degeneration* that get caught in her teeth. It seems altogether likely that her mother will soon forget the old house, the water's edge, the elusive snakes; when she pulls out those memories, the light rests on her mother's skin like a thousand insects that would scatter if Lily reached out to touch.

She grabs her things and opens her door to the breaking day. The sun makes streamers through the buildings.

There is a small café around the corner where she goes for her morning coffee. She's found that her life is framed by routine, so similar in shape to the square blocks and buildings. Coffee, then work, then lunch in the same deli every weekday afternoon, an hour at the hospital, more work, and a long walk home. She generally avoids buses because of the heat and unwelcome closeness. Besides, the walks allow her small swells of time to let her mind wander, usually backward; she finds odd stoops, benches, trees to sit by and remember. Her days are strung with more days to revisit, bright and spaced out like paper lanterns.

She has become exhausted by the shape of memory.

Sitting at her favorite table, Lily opens a newspaper and orders a

Lily grew up in a small house in Alabama, where lawns would tiptoe to the edge of the water and sip.

large coffee. She is only dimly aware of the people around her. A man nearby moves and in her peripheral vision it looks almost like a beckon. A waiter sets down a large steaming mug and she glances up to observe the buzz of a society addicted to caffeine, the faces of sharpened city buzzards. It is a culture that does not draw her the way it had her mother. Looking up, she meets the intent gaze of a man a few tables over, and he lets his eyes glance down her shoulder and away. She sips her coffee, wonders how anybody really registers anybody else with so much distraction, such short time.

Briefly it occurs to her that her isolated life is unhealthy, and she dismisses this notion with a slight fluttering of her fingers, as though she is throwing up her loneliness like bits of confetti.

On the way to work, she kneels down to pick a small flower sprouting between buckled sidewalk. She tucks it into the pocket of her blouse, knowing it is probably just a weed, hoping her mother will not feel the need to say so.

She returns that evening with weight in her shoulders. On her porch sits a small stuffed bear. She picks it up without thinking and walks inside.

The city creeps and chatters like mice within the walls.

She felt okay walking into the hospital earlier that day. The dandelion's yellow petals drooped a little. When she walked into her mother's room, she saw her perched on the windowsill counting cars in the street. Turning briefly, her mother said, "Oh, hello Mama," and resumed her childish game.

It was almost automatic for Lily: in her body a clicking sensation, the feeling of years translated, a costume sliding over. She said, "How are you today, Ellie?" and set the flower on her bedside table. Lily's mother shrugged, murmured a quick string of numbers, and shrugged again. "I can't figure Billy out," she said. "I think he likes me, but I just don't know."

Billy was a nurse on their floor, young, handsome. He came in to check on Lily's mother from time to time. Lily made a sympathetic clucking sound, nodded, let out a vague, "Oh, boys."

"Have you checked on the casserole?"

"Yes, Ellie."

"Good. I'm starving."

For a long time Lily's mother sat with her face to the city, eyes childlike and intrigued by the world spread below. Her fingertip tapped the glass, her mouth shaped the things her brain chose to register. The walls

were white and to Lily's left was a picture of a sailboat fighting angry waves. Lily wasn't much for science, but at times like these she wanted to know the exact combination of time and genetics that had brought her mother to this—thirteen again, fitting the world into numbers and color.

After a while, Lily's mother turned and smiled. "I think I have some homework to do, maybe I—" She moved to stand, and Lily hurried to help her to the bed. As her weight settled into the mattress, Lily's mother looked around, briefly wild, and focused once more on Lily's face. "Lillian, darling," she said, and her face relaxed back into the same wizened form Lily was used to.

Lily exhaled. "Hi, Mama."

"Do me a favor. That jar of frogs? Get rid of it. They're starting to stink."

Another clicking sensation; Lily was herself again.

"Yes, of course, I will."

When she was young, Lily and her mother would sit very still on the lake's shore and count the number of times they saw snakes' heads bob over the surface of the water. She had been told many times that they were more afraid of humans than humans of them, and this thought gave her a strange thrill. Lily loved the game, relished the way evening air made the snakes more daring, the thrum of mosquitoes come thick as humidity. The land became hers, and she loved the pulsing wildness of the place. She would sit for hours watching minnows in shallow water slide through one another, then set off leaping through grass to watch waves of tiny frogs that would envelope her feet. She often caught the frogs in glass jars, gave them each family roles, kept them in her room until they died and she found another family to love. Her mother smiled, bristled her hair. Together they would eat breakfast under a weeping willow and admire its graceful grief.

How strange, the landscapes in people. How strange the way they never really leave us. She watched her mother act out scenes from another life.

"You've finished patching that hole in the attic?"

"Yes, Mama."

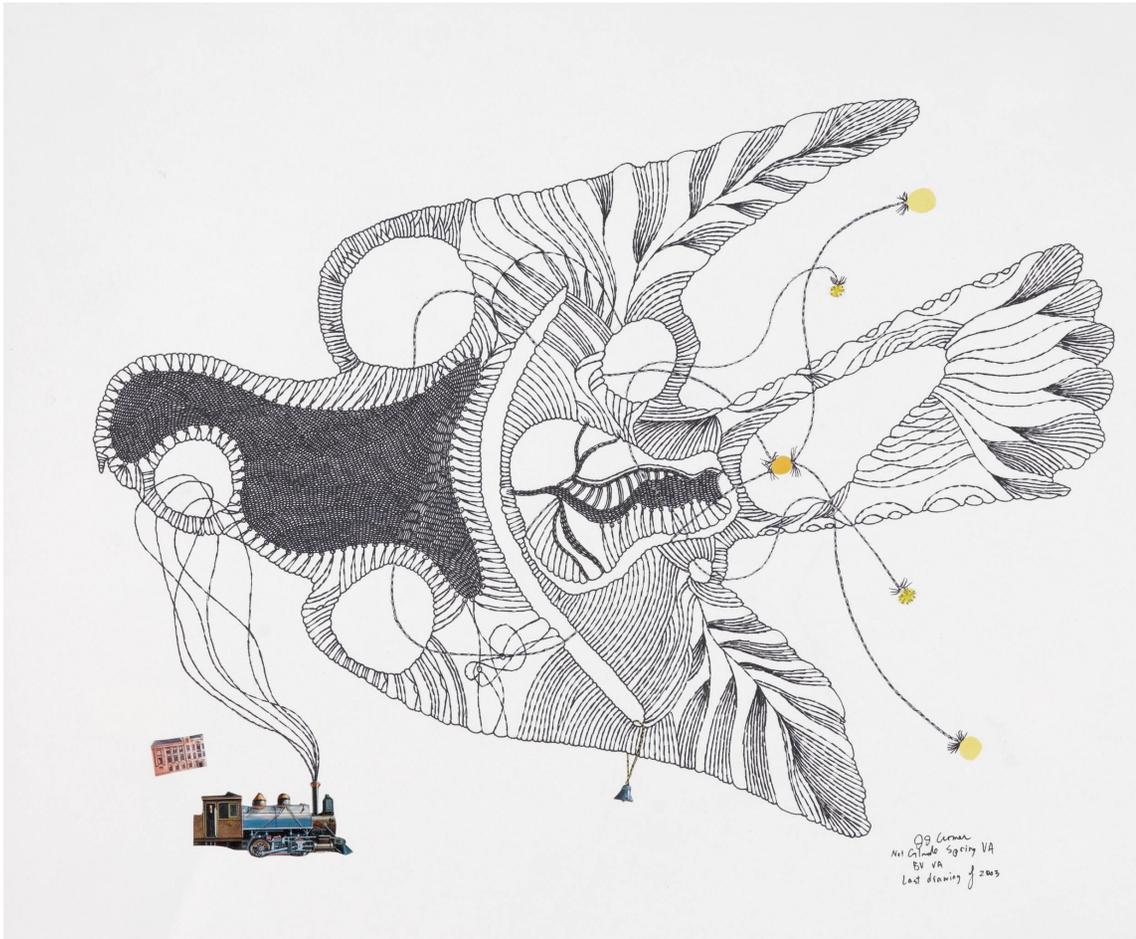
"Good, good. I'll be damned if I let those critters in the house again. Oh, and we must do something about that wasps' nest in the chimney; it's an absolute hazard."

"We'll take care of it, Mama."

There was a pregnant silence. Lily concentrated on the way the air made her ribs fan out, in, out again, like a pair of injured wings.

The nurses had told her that her mother kept old photographs in a box beneath her bed. At night she would take them out. Sometimes she remembered Lily's face, and sometimes she didn't. She told her daughter once, on a lucid day, how awful she felt that Lily wasn't a permanent fixture in her mouth, that her tongue hadn't memorized the patterns of calling her name. It killed her, she said, eyes welling.

This was Lily's understanding: long ago scientists discovered a fleshy seahorse in the brain, curled and sleeping around other unnamed structures. A horse, a sea monster, slippery with history. Doctors showed it to her in



sketches, pointed out the small bumps where memory and emotion entangle, the maps of experience.

But her mother couldn't think of memory as an isolated spot, something that can deteriorate or be lost; it needs to pull through blood vessels and be *felt*, she insisted, and on her worst days she sent the nurses away with loud cries that there was absolutely nothing wrong with her heart, so why was she here? "Fascists! Pigs! Empty goddamned white coats, the lot of you!" Those days, she remained framed in her window, unmoving, a shadow.

"Now, Lily," her mother said, and Lily glanced up at the change in tone. Her mother looked sternly at her. "Please tell me you have done something about that boy."

There was a pause. Lily's breath caught, gills in a fishing rod. "Which boy?"

Her mother sighed, rolled her eyes. "Oh, Lily, don't treat me like I'm an idiot. They keep me here like I'm crazy but I *know* what's going on, and he's dangerous, you know he is." She fixed her daughter with a pointed stare. "There are things that can be done, you know."

Another pause. "He isn't dangerous, Mom." She turned to the window, feeling uncomfortable.

"Then what would you call it?"

"I don't know. Infatuated." She ran her finger along the sill, stared at the tops of peoples' heads far below and wondered what it would be like to be caught in the air, sliding down toward so many hairdos. She turned back around. "If he were going to do something he would have done it by now, wouldn't he? Besides, he gives me nice things. Flowers. I don't know." Her mother tilted her head with disapproval, and Lily shrugged. "I just don't see why anything needs to be done about it right now, if he's posing no threat."

"You want to wait until he poses a threat?" Lily's mom raised her eyebrows. "You're smarter than that, honey. You keep these things around your house like they're from an old boyfriend or something, but they're not. It's sick."

Lily crossed her arms, felt her eyelashes brush her cheeks.

"It's probably just about sex," her mother said.

"Mom! It isn't."

For a long time they sat like that, the air between them compressed and twisted, feeling exactly like mother and daugh-

ter should for the first time in a while. There was a strange feeling in Lily's stomach, like a cellar door falling open, and after a while she looked up and said, quiet, "He's the closest thing I have to a friend here, though, Mama. I know it's crazy." She took a breath. "I miss the snakes. Do you remember the snakes?"

Her mother had been staring at the ceiling fan. When she looked at Lily, alarm crossed her face like headlights passing over a wall and her eyes darted away, back again, and then settled into a hesitant recognition.

"Julie?"

Color escaped Lily's cheeks. Julie was the primary nurse. Lily crossed the room and rested her hand on the doorknob.

"Julie, honey, before you go, would you get this weed off the table? It's not really a suitable decoration, wouldn't you agree?"

Now, stomach warm with an acute emptiness, Lily sets the teddy bear on the kitchen counter and lets her body sink into her bed. The air feels stale to her. She wonders how much time she actually spends in her own apartment. Through the wall, she hears a young couple fighting about flower arrangements for their upcoming wedding, and she allows her mind to slip into a familiar daydream: her body, arms spread, chest smacked with solid air, watching the sidewalk slip closer.

She stands. It's not so much a longing to die as an aversion to living.

She listens to her heart knock at her ribs.

The things he's left her have special places in her apartment. At first, she was unsure of what to do with the attention. It never scared her, exactly; to her he was just another snake testing its boundaries. She enjoyed watching him grow more and more bold, and for a while she felt a little like a charmer coaxing him out of a wicker basket to dance. It was almost amusing, the way he nosed his way into the details, the bold way he inserted himself in forms unexpected, yet his cowardly refusal to move past the fringes.

After a while, though, it was more about company. Being cared for. He seemed to know the things she needed. A few boxes of chocolates when her mom started mistaking her for her Nana. A nice pair of winter boots when the snow came in blankets and she realized Alabama hadn't prepared her for this much cold. A picture frame when she got homesick. A dress that inexplicably looked exactly like one her mother used to wear. Flowers on the occasional ordinary day. He seemed perched on the edge of her world, content to watch and provide, unwilling to participate. She allowed him to cozy into her structured life, and he never moved past his own

boundaries.

Often it occurred to her to search for his face in the crowds around her. She never did, though. She couldn't see the point. It didn't matter.

She turns to the teddy bear. "You don't think I'm crazy, do you?"

The teddy bear's black eyes reflect the dull glow of lamplight.

With a sigh, Lily moves to put on a cup of coffee. Her mother would shoot her a look for that—"Coffee before bed?"—but that, too, doesn't matter, and she watches the water trickle through the filter. The smell makes her think of a life years past, and she wants to call her mother and ask her, again and again, "Do you remember—?" Her hand grips the counter's edge. "Do you remember, Mama?" she says aloud. She tried to go looking for frogs, once, but the city had scared them off, even by the river. Her knuckles are turning white. In one fluid motion she throws a mug, hard, at the wall, and it leaves a sizable hole and shatters on the ground. "Fuck you, Mama!" she shouts, but she doesn't mean it.

The teddy bear looks skeptical. Lily breathes. The mug makes small clinking sounds, and is still.

She is rattled with the knowledge that nothing can ever be regained.

Quiet, Lily crosses to open her shades to the night. Evening air spreads like liquid amber and the people far below look like insects, trapped and twitching and golden.

Jake stands in the rain, hitting his heel against an abandoned apartment's fire escape. A few people walk by and glance in his direction, eyes suspicious under wet hoods. He gives them a nod. The rain pools in the collar of his jacket. He shifts his weight from one leg to the other, waiting, a dull ache squeezing in his temples. Through the sheets he can almost see himself at twelve years old, holding pages under running water. So many years ago. A few times he looks to his feet, half-expecting to see himself run off his skin, circling a drain.

It's been days since he's seen Lily, and his insides have started to tremble with the weight of not knowing.

He looks up at the peeling blue door, the empty porch. The rain, somehow, makes her apartment look smaller. He thinks for a moment that he would give everything he owned just to see a light in the window.

The last time he saw her was in a deli near her work. She was chewing her sandwich with measured movements, clenching and unclenching her

jaw in a strange sort of rhythm. When he saw her face he felt a hollowness in his chest. She had been visiting the hospital more and more frequently, he knew, often leaving long after the city had made its brilliant transition into night.

He would follow her home, those nights—not for the same reasons he used to, but because he was concerned by her slow steps, her movements controlled, the way her head was permanently bent toward the ground. She would stare at the pavement, the smears of city lights so much like wet paint.

When Lily left the deli, she did not take her usual route home. She walked, pace steady, through throngs of commuters. He hung back to give her space. It was not uncommon for her to disappear in a crowd, and when he lost sight of her he decided to double back and wait at her apartment. It was a bright day, and the streets felt more alive than usual. A woman selling jewelry under a small tarp reeled him in with a grin and asked, “When’s the last time you bought your wife something special?” Food vendors assaulted him with free samples, businessmen walked brisk in the sunlight and said, “Good afternoon.” When he turned the corner onto Lily’s street his chest felt buoyant. He picked a stair on the porch of an apartment across the street from hers and busied himself with a crossword puzzle, glancing up occasionally to see if she was home. Whoever she had been visiting in the hospital was probably not doing well, he reasoned. It would explain her behavior. He was proud of her commitment to others. He daydreamed—the two of them waking up in yellow morning light, the way he imagined her hair would make brown puddles on her pillow. He was relaxed. It would be okay.

He waited outside all night. She did not come home.

He went to his own apartment at the first crack of day and slept a few hours, uneasy with worry. It felt as though his insides had come unknotted. That morning when he went to the café she was nowhere to be found. He stood outside the hospital for hours. It was as though she had disappeared, a whisper escaping the city’s teeth.

The days passed on slow streams.

He moves, now, feeling the water in his ears. A woman on the third floor puts on an old jazz tune that sails down with the rain, buzzing, probably vinyl. He crosses to Lily’s apartment. In the window he sees darkness, and on it, an image of himself: eyes red-rimmed, dripping wet, locks of hair stuck to his forehead like fat leeches. He wraps his fist with his jacket and draws back. He checks that the street is empty and then thrusts forward;

with a sound almost like a wind chime, the window bursts around his arm. He ducks inside, dodging the shards. Water swings in and spreads on Lily’s hardwood floor. He doesn’t bother with a light. His steps are cautious, silent, and in the kitchen he finds pieces of a broken mug on the tile which he gathers gingerly and drops into a trashcan.

Jake straightens up and looks around. The shadows are long, lean, almost curious the way they reach for him. A stuffed bear stares. The rain is making tracks into the house. A bouquet of tulips he gave her is wilting on the counter, the heads dipped like horses kneeling for water.

By the river, the air is thick with moisture. Lily can feel the rain sliding through her clothes, pooling in her shoes and the hollows behind her collarbones. She sits on a park bench and watches the Charles crawl toward her. Her eyes are steady on the water’s ecstatic surface.

She spent the past two nights on a hospital couch, watching the nurses watch her. She could feel their pity, and she detested their soft eyes. Julie came over and gave her a pat. Her mother’s lucidity was fluid, rushing away in streams, and the workers were eager to let her know how brave she was for being there. To her the word meant nothing. Her bones felt tired. Many times her mother had been terrified of Lily’s presence, her eyes widening as she curled into herself, the color slowly draining from her mind, and Lily had begun to think of her as Eleanor. A woman in her own right, an embodied clean slate. They were something like strangers. Lily often imagined her love for her mother sticking to her insides like moss.

She became mildly attached to a soap opera they featured in the waiting room.

In the cafeteria she watched family members drained from holding tightly to lives that were pulling away. She envied them. At least they would be left with nothing, no tethers, no confused shell. The daydream morphed: her mother, sliding on air, the hem of her hospital gown winking up. Lily stabbed at her chicken nuggets.

At noon she left with the intention of going back to her apartment. The clouds were knitting together then, sky preparing to swing open. There was no lightning, and she decided to blame this on the city itself. People around her were bobbing along with their umbrellas. A man with a gold tooth tried to give her a flyer for a comedy show. Taxis made slick sliding sounds, sent puddles leaping like tiny waves of frogs. She stepped over

the shoes of an elderly man propped against dirty red brick, a cardboard sign at his feet. Gutters spit out dirty water and garbage bobbed along like steamboats. She found, after a while, that she was not going home. The city pulled her along, her shoulders leaning under its weight, and she smiled when the rain soaked through to cool her skin.

A strip of green and sidewalk lined the river, benches positioned along the grass so Bostonians from one side could sit and admire the concrete landscape of the other. It was an impressive spread, Lily thought. She sat as the first drops of rain licked down her arm.

Now the cars behind her seem too quiet, and a woman passes on a bicycle with a whimpering toddler strapped into a small seat behind her. Lily listens to the air dip near her ears, imagines the whole of Boston seeking shelter. On her thigh a raindrop sits upright, perfect and unviolated. She is proud of its fearlessness.

Somewhere far off, thunder tumbles through the clouds.

On the shore a garter snake slips in and out of the shallow water. It is casual, letting its tail drag through the grass before wriggling into the Charles again, and when Lily looks at it nothing registers for a few moments. It seems to bow to her, and she feels something warm in her chest. She thinks of the lake, tests the weight of the memory. Perhaps it is heavier now that it is hers alone, but she isn't sure; all she can feel is the whip of humidity, the veins of lightning cracking open the air, the thrill of seeing another head slip over the surface. She imagines her mother, the old blue dress, the way wind lifted her hair into a salute. Lily smiles and her shoulders loosen. Water pushes over the snake's head and it makes a curve toward her. She leans over and the snake looks at her, tongue flickering — playful, as though imitating the river itself.

Without warning she begins to laugh. It is a full-bellied sound, and the people walking nearby glance at her with irritation.

She slips out of her shoes and when the tears slide down her cheeks they mix with the raindrops and she keeps laughing.

She is running and when the lightning finally comes it is one bright flash that illuminates the whole sky—different from what she remembers, as though all the bright veins of her childhood have split open. The river sends a shock through her body and she runs, still, her limbs slowing as the current begins to carry her into the city, the tips of her hair grazing the surface like a thousand tiny heads.