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SILENT INTERROGATIONS

Society must accept some things as real; but [the writer] must always know that the visible reality hides a deeper one, and that all our action and all our achievement rests on things unseen.

—James Baldwin

On Drowning

My mother: nine years old, standing on the shore of a New York beach. My grandmother: nowhere in sight. My grandfather: absent. Water laps at my mother's toes. She shuffles into the ocean. The waves are strong and my mother is, too. She doesn't know this yet, that she is strong.

The saltwater snatches her. She swims.

She doesn't think of me, doesn't wonder if she will have a daughter, but I will be a strong swimmer, too. She stops. Looks back. Still, she does not see her mother. The wind is picking up, the current dragging her. She heads back. Now it takes twice the time and strength. The sun hides. She swims and swims.

Air is scarce. She's not getting closer to shore. Waves rise. Water tumbles over her, slamming her to the ocean floor. She grabs the sand with her fingers and toes, tries to push off the bottom, but water presses down on her head again. Sand blinds her. She can't tell how long she's been under but she can feel the breath leaving her chest like helium being sucked out of a balloon. She lets the water take her.

Hiding

"Tell me," I said.

I sat on the corner of my bed, legs tucked into my chest, phone pressed against my ear.

"I don't want to get you involved in all this—in this world," Carlos said.

We'd been dating for two, maybe three, months, and I thought only

of my desire—my need—to prove my fortitude, to prove a fearlessness I might never have truly possessed.

My desk lamp glowed. My fan spun. I uncrossed my legs.

“I can handle it. Tell me.”

“I gave Josh two thousand dollars to pick up the pills, and now he won’t return my calls.” Carlos spoke slowly, softly, like if he uttered the words too quickly, too loudly—made too sudden a move—the phone and the room and the mirrors on my closet doors would shatter. “He’s probably hiding.”

Okay, I thought, *no big deal*. I’d met Josh—Carlos’s six-foot-tall, three-hundred-pound friend whom he’d worked with at an ice cream shop—before. I’d heard he’d spent time in jail, but Carlos said he was a good guy—deep down.

The phone slipped against my sweaty palm. I’d seen the pills he spoke of; I’d taken them. I knew he’d planned to sell them. And this was the way it worked. The pills we took at parties and music festivals had to come from someone, somewhere. But until now I’d never considered the *who* and the *where* that came before the flashing lights and ecstasy.

The TV yapped at my father in the living room. I pulled my pajama shirt over my knees.

“So what happened?” I asked.

“My brother knocked on Josh’s door, shoved a gun in his face, and told him to get on his knees and give him the money. Josh begged at my brother’s feet. Said he didn’t have the money or the pills anymore. So my brother got in his car and drove away.”

I scooted the shirt past my knees, down to my ankles.

When Carlos first mentioned his history of meth and coke and acid, I’d wanted to shed my apprehension. But this, this was happening now, a gun pressed to another man’s head—the head of a man I actually knew. These weren’t criminals on the news or characters in Carlos’s tales. I was a part of this. It had entered my life. I’d allowed it to. Perhaps I’d even wanted it to.

I was no longer safe tucked away in my home in suburban Miami, my parents couched in front of their televisions, my dogs snoring away, my sister chatting on the computer. Agreeing to date this man was entirely unlike holding hands with my middle-school boyfriend between classes, making out in the car, skipping school or sneaking out or smoking weed behind my best friend’s house. I was, whether I knew it then or not, entering a world so unlike the one I’d grown up in—a world I would soon

feel bound to, compelled to understand and outwit. I was sixteen, Carlos twenty-one. Only two years had passed since I met my first boyfriend at the canal behind my house and had my first kiss.

“But,” I said. “He’s eventually gonna give you the money back, right?”

“I doubt he still has the money. He’s got mouths to feed and debt to pay. He was probably telling my brother the truth. It’s probably long gone.”

The fan blades turned and the desk lamp glowed and I stared in the mirror at this girl crouched in the corner of my bed.

“Oh,” I whispered. “Oh.”

On Rip Currents

Rip currents form at breaks or low points in sandbars. Warning signs: churning, choppy water, or breaks in the wave pattern. Float, tread water, or swim in a direction that follows the shoreline. But do not fight them. Rip currents should not pull people under water, only away from shore. Drowning is a secondary result; the swimmer decides to fight the current, attempts to swim against it, and panics, allowing the water to drag her under.

Something Red

You help him wrap the back brace around his sagging belly, fasten the Velcro into place, and tell him he looks fine, tell him to stop worrying. He pulls a black polo over his head and even though it’s Christmas—your third together—you don’t ask him to wear a red or green shirt like your family always does. You know he thinks black hides his stomach. That’s why I’m wearing the brace, he’d say. You want to say he still looks fat in black but no, better not. He definitely won’t make it to your parents’ house if you say that. You text your father and tell him you’ll be home soon, gather the gifts that you bought and Carlos signed his name on, step into the sun, and tell yourself, *Hey, at least this time he’s coming. At least this time he’s not home, alone, while you open gifts with your family, eat quiche off your great-grandmother’s china, and tell your grandma how nice her new hair color looks.*

If only he didn’t have to smoke that bowl first.

He walks inside your house, cringes—afraid the camera will capture the reality he so longs to vanquish—as you ask him to take a picture with you beside the tree. *Doesn't he know this is better than all the other Christmases he's endured?* You know how different your families, your lives, your perspectives are. You've known for a long time. And sometimes you think that staying with him makes you a better person, even if people can't see it. *Especially* if people can't see it.

Your mother catches your eye, tries to hold your gaze—I know, she wants to say, *I understand; you need to get away*—but fails, as she often does, especially when she's holding a glass of Cabernet, eyelids fluttering. It's too early for a drink. She'll start when the sun disappears. You look away.

Sometimes she tries harder—I'm thankful I'm still here, she'll say, *after all I've put my body through*—but you always say you're glad too and then comment on the weather or the dog. She never persists.

Sometimes you think that you could live with being the only person who knows that being with Carlos heightens your intuition—your understanding of the world—that crossing these lines of culture and class and the whole goddamned world's expectations of what's right and what's wrong—what should and shouldn't be—makes you righteous, different. Sometimes this makes you feel powerful.

You never ask yourself why you want to feel courageous and intuitive though, why it matters that you feel so noble. Why it doesn't matter that maybe you're causing your mother more pain.

But sometimes you wish you could live in ignorance like you imagine your friends do. Sometimes you wish you didn't feel guilty for having a car and an education, that you didn't believe that Carlos's life is unfair, that you could correct him when he writes *there* instead of *their*, that his struggles didn't swallow all the space inside your skull.

Sometimes you wish it so hard you scream into your pillow until you can't breathe. Sometimes you think that things will get better.

Sometimes you don't want to lift the pillow from your face.

He's still just standing there, cringing beside the tree, and you imagine him when he was eight years old. He's tucked under his comforter, listening for hooves on the roof, dreaming of the next morning when he'll tear open the gifts that have been sparkling beneath the tree for days. You imagine that eight-year-old boy sneaking out of bed on Christmas morning and finding the floor beneath the tree empty. You wonder if he punched a wall like he does now when he's angry, if he screamed for his

mother instead, or if he wrapped his hands around her neck and blamed her for everything the way he does with you. You wonder what an eight-year-old could've said when he learned his brother's gang members stole his Christmas gifts. You've never questioned this story.

You look at him now, his eyes barely meeting yours as you pass the camera to your mother and ask for that picture again. Your parents say nothing about you, about him, but your mother's eyes are piercing. You don't let yourself wonder what she knows.

Instead you wonder if your parents notice he's wearing something beneath that black polo to hide his belly, if they wonder why the hell he couldn't wear something red.

Always

From our house at the top of the hill, we saw the town running toward us. My grandmother said it was erupting. Three nights earlier she had dreamt of all the people of the town coming toward her. I hadn't believed her. But she was right. The town was crumbling.

Carlos's mother spoke less English than I did Spanish. Between sentences about her grandmother and Venezuela, she paused and I asked questions.

"Vol-can-o?" I asked, touching the tips of my fingers together, attempting to make a triangle with my arms. "Vol-can-o?"

"Si. Occure un volcán."

Caramel skin hung around her eyes. Her lips concealed a missing tooth. Sometimes she'd forget and smile, then remember and drop her head. I'd laugh with her and look away. She never laughed with her eyes.

I didn't trust everything she and Carlos said about their family. Political refugees. Brother kidnapped. A sister pregnant at sixteen. Gangs. Drugs. No insurance. Cancer. Mother nearly swept away by Hurricane Andrew. Deposit for a house (finally their own) stolen by an uncle. More drugs. Holes in walls. Belts striking the children's soft, brown skin. I couldn't believe that so many bad things could happen to one family.

I was a little girl. It was the '60s. Maybe the '70s. The ground shook and the whole town was destroyed and I just kept running. Always, always, we were running away.

Siempre, siempre. Always.

Things Lost

There were things that needed to be in Carlos's sight at all times; things that, if lost, could ruin the day, make it end in shouts, fists, and broken glass. There were things so heavy you could feel their presence in the room. There were things that, when no longer in sight, ripped a hole in Carlos's chest so large you could see right through the skin and muscle and bone.

There were his keys, a blue bottle opener hanging between the gold house key and the key that was as tiny as my thumbnail—the key that opened his box of weed. There were keys that meant nothing, keys that we no longer used but still hung beside the others. And, of course, there was the silver heart I'd had engraved with our names when we'd been together just a year. I'm certain that's what he pictured when we arrived at his house after a long day at the beach and his keys were missing. When he tore through the car, yanked at his black curls and said, *Goddammit, Caitie, you lost my fucking keys.*

They weren't in the trunk or in my teal purse or wedged between the leather seats of my Mustang. Not hiding in the glove compartment or his pocket. No, the keys were gone—the blue bottle opener and silver heart, too. He kicked in the door to his rented room in the old, crumbling house that seemed as though it, too, was disappearing. He paid for a new door and had a new key made. Days later, I moved the driver's seat—the one Carlos had been sitting in the day the keys vanished—and found them stuck in the tracks. Sunlight shone off the silver heart.

There were also things that just *couldn't* be lost, no matter how hard we tried to make them get up and leave. The clear bag I found inside his dresser every few months, cocaine remnants coating the sides. The brother who called Carlos to catch up once a year, ending the conversation with, "And hey, brother, you got a couple thousand bucks I could borrow? I hear you're doing good. I'll pay you back in a month. No lie."

The white, puka-shell necklace Carlos was wearing when we met, the one that once belonged to his dead best friend. The necklace that, when Carlos moved it from his nightstand to his dresser, suddenly appeared on his nightstand again. That found its way from the garbage can back to Carlos's top dresser drawer. Refused to burn when we threw it in the trash bin and lit it on fire. That we placed in a tin can and burned and burned and burned.

The necklace that, when finally lost, finally burned to tiny, charred pieces, made Carlos's dead best friend stop speaking to him at night, in dreams.

The necklace that I told my mother about as we ate everything bagels at our favorite Jewish deli in Miami, that made her say she believed in these sorts of things, too.

But even when the necklace had been burned and the pieces trashed, I still couldn't lose that dead best friend. I still woke in the middle of the night to whispers telling me what I'd done wrong, what I needed to do to keep Carlos alive, how he'd die if I continued to think about leaving. In the mornings I still woke with that dead man's whispers tumbling through my mind, and at my stirring Carlos would rouse, oblivious, yanking me into him where I'd lie awake and rigid, trying to sneak out of his embrace.

Neil

A photograph of my uncle and me hangs above my childhood bed. We're both wearing pink—I'm in a jumper, Neil's in a polo shirt. We're cheek to cheek. I'm smiling, as I am in most of my baby pictures. He's smiling, too. Black stubble frames his wide jaw line. His dark, curly hair, brown eyes, and long, pointed nose match my mother's. They look like their father. When I stare at this picture Neil's smile remains for some time, but then his upturned lips begin to wilt, his arms collapse, dropping me, and there he is again, raising the gun to his head. I imagine that trembling hand, those eyes searching the parking lot for signs of anyone who might stop him, and I wonder how long he sat in that car before his finger latched onto the trigger. I wonder how many minutes it had been since he lost all the money in the casino—how long he'd known this was the plan.

I wonder how thoughts can get so stuck in your head, how no matter how hard you fight them you are still sucked under, everything rising over you, pushing you down, and you cannot see any escape aside from the gun that calls from inside the safe when you put the money away at Grandpa's bar at the end of your shift every day. I wonder how my mother managed to outswim her thoughts, to find strength when her brother didn't. And there he is again: gun to head, trembling hand, those

eyes. There I am in my pink jumper, crawling on the floor, wondering where that man who held me in his arms and smiled has gone.

So Good

Something about the image of my mother in a trailer park just doesn't sit right. Nearly twenty-five, living in a trailer in middle-of-nowhere Florida with a man who, after two months and a line of coke, says he wants to marry her. No, this cannot be my mother, but I suppose she would say the same about the image of me, eighteen years old, legs dangling over the side of a dock above the lake outside my boyfriend's house, taking a bump of white from the edge of a key and telling Carlos I was just scared when I tried to break up with him last year and now everything is good, so good, isn't it just so good?

My mother calls her trailer times "bad times" and I call mine "dark times" but of course I never tell her this, never tell her of the cocaine at all. Perhaps it's my obsession with language that makes me think that *dark* resonates better than *bad*, or perhaps I just can't bring myself to describe those times as *bad* because every time I did a line of coke all I could think was *so good, so good*.

Raw

The house was cold, my hands sweaty. I bit my bottom lip. Carlos and Josh—that friend who'd stolen Carlos's money, that friend who Carlos had eventually forgiven—played video games, their fingers jumping from button to button. They were still wired from the coke. I was coming down.

It was six in the morning and we'd been calling the guy who had the purest I'd ever seen—the cocaine still in rocks, not yet crushed into powder—since four. I twisted my tongue around inside my dry mouth, chewed the inside of my cheek until a piece of skin detached. My hands shook in my lap.

"Have you heard from him?" I asked again.

"No," Carlos said, gaze fixed on the screen.

I knew Carlos wanted more, knew I never had to ask if he wanted more, but Josh seemed quiet, annoyed. I wondered if he thought I was

hooked. He'd been doing it for years but this was still new to me. I was seventeen. I felt no shame in asking for more. I asked like I was asking my host for a glass of water—*Hey, how's that drink coming? Need a hand?* I asked like everything was normal—my smile impenetrable, the heart trembling erratically inside my chest mere excitement and not stress from the drugs, not my body telling me to stop.

The dealer finally answered and we raced to the car, the sun rising, my nose cold, dry, and achy.

Maybe it was that I could see my shaky hands clearer in the morning light, that now my high was fading faster and I was thinking about my parents at home in bed—about how swollen my lips would look from all the chewing; maybe it was the pain in my nose or the sweat on my neck or the fact that I could barely swallow; or maybe it was that I realized that for the past five or six or seven hours of cocaine I'd been able to fake happiness, pretend I was still in love with Carlos, and imagine that everything in my life was okay, but suddenly I wished I'd never asked for more.

I'd been telling myself that I was doing the right thing by sticking with this man, rejecting society's expectations, making life *mean* something. I'd been telling myself hey, there's this caramel man who's been dealt a rotten hand, and it'd be so honorable if this girl with the snowy skin and loving parents and car and house and everything she's ever wanted just walked away from all she'd been given; it'd be so honorable if she abandoned the easy—the ordinary—took the hard route, held her breath until she couldn't breathe anymore, until she couldn't stay awake. For months I'd been waking to whispers, and I'd stopped trying to determine whom they belonged to. I'd just been listening to what they said.

For months I'd stopped being able to convince myself that staying with Carlos was right, but for those five or six or seven hours, I'd been able to trick myself again.

And as we drove to pick up more, my high long gone, I became, again, no longer convinced. I needed to hold on to the realization that everything was *not* okay, and I knew in that moment that I shouldn't have asked for more—knew it was only helping me ignore the truth longer—but still I didn't tell Josh to turn the car around.

The sun was rising and my hands were shaking and the skin inside my mouth was raw, gnawed pomegranate-red.

What would I say to my parents about my chewed-up mouth, my empty bank account, my dodgy eyes? What would I say when they looked

deep inside my chest and saw what was really there? What would I say when they said nothing and everything all at once through the silence, when my lips were too swollen with lies to make words?

If I'd never asked for more, if I'd never let us drive back to that apartment and get high again, maybe I could have let this realization penetrate me—convince me that ordinary wasn't so bad. I could have found a way out right then and there, stopped obeying the whispers, and avoided being with Carlos for the next five years.

I could have realized that holding your breath until you can't breathe anymore—until you can't lift the pillow from your face, can't pull your head from the water, can't pry the gun from your head—isn't the smartest way out.

What about

those cars we see driving down the dirt road and onto the open field behind Carlos's house? We watch them from the other end of the street, just before the dirt begins, and we blink and blink when they disappear. We aren't on coke when we see this—at least not all the time, though this is around the time that we do lines on and off for months, just before my high school graduation—but we cannot figure out where these cars are going. We think of Harry Potter, platform 9 and $\frac{3}{4}$, disappearing into walls, and wonder for a time if we are crazy and then arrive at the conclusion that no, no, we are not. There they are, the cars escaping the dirt road and vanishing like the voice that whispers to me at night, vanishing behind an invisible curtain of palm trees and humid air.

We wander onto that dirt road where the cars disappear. We are on foot. We discover railroad tracks, abandoned beer bottles and cigarette butts, the smell of a freshly smoked joint sliding across rusted rails. We light a blunt and look up at the sky, and there I am dancing again, showing him the dance I choreographed for him, the one that's meant as a goodbye but I'll-love-you-when-I'm-gone sort of thing, and then I stop because this is supposed to be a surprise—my marijuana mind has forgotten—and he's only supposed to see this when I perform on stage three days before high school graduation, he in the audience, my parents beside him, me turning and turning before them like a piece of beach glass caught under water, its shiny surface eroding against the shoreline.

Better in Silence

Windows down, air conditioner on, Florida steam rolling out. One hand running through your hair, one hand on the wheel, sometimes just a knee on the wheel. Sometimes his hand on the wheel, trying to veer you off the road. Nearly four years have passed since high school graduation. College graduation nears. The scene is the same.

Always you nag him about the sweet, smoky scent of pot that won't subside. Always you remind him how much you hate it.

But, of course, never actually *say* you hate it.

Scan either side of the road for cops. Punch it to eighty-five until you spot one. One hundred miles per hour only on the worst days.

The worst days aren't the ones when he tries to veer you off the road.

Radio on. Off. Eye yourself in the mirror. Look away. Turn on the windshield wipers and wash away the dead lovebugs—those insects that infest the Gulf Coast; those black pests that fly coupled—still mating—and smash into front bumpers and headlights in swarms. Kill any still left alive. Look at him in the passenger seat. No, don't. Better to pretend he isn't there. Better in silence. Pretend the gas tank isn't empty. Pretend he has the money to fill it up if it *were* empty.

Pretend you don't know that moving to Boston with him is a mistake, that you haven't always known you're moving to Boston alone.

Pretend the odometer reads 10,000 instead of 110,000. Pretend your father doesn't ask how you rack up so many miles. Pretend your father doesn't know that in the five years you and Carlos have been together, Carlos has never had a car or a license. Pretend your father doesn't know everything.

Pretend the man beside you doesn't love you—it's easier that way.

Pretend, pretend, pretend that man just isn't there.

Perfectly Fine

I'd been lifeguarding at our community pool every summer since I was sixteen. Now I was twenty-two. The move to Boston, the first day of graduate school, was three weeks away. The sun seared my shoulders as I biked down the uneven sidewalks I'd walked since I was a child, turned right at the pool entrance without scanning for cars, and coasted all the way up to the pool's edge.

I lounged in my white tower all morning, eyelids fluttering against sleep. The gate beyond the empty pool opened. Carlos, wearing a black cap, sandals, his favorite sunglasses. Had he not understood my silence? My messages from Israel asking him not to contact me, that it was much too late? I rushed to the gate.

“I’m working,” I said. “What are you doing here?”

He glared at me with wet brown eyes.

“Can I come by later? Can we talk?”

I didn’t think that was a good idea.

He came the next morning, though—a weekday, it must have been, because my parents were at work. The house was empty. No one to watch as I opened the garage door and avoided letting him inside. No one to watch as I handed him the boxes labeled “Boston,” “Memorabilia,” and “Clothes,” that he’d stored in my garage all summer. No one to demand an explanation. Maybe Carlos had already realized that following me to Boston was never going to work, but I wondered why he wasn’t fighting me, trying harder to change my mind. Maybe he was hurting. Or maybe he knew we both needed this. Maybe he even wanted it, too. Josh waited in the driver’s seat as Carlos stacked his belongings in the van and I rushed in and out of the house with the last of it.

It’d been three months since my college graduation, and I’d been taking care of one of his two dogs—the two dogs that were supposed to come with us to Boston—all summer. I don’t know when we said it but it was decided I’d keep one, he the other. Financially, he’d barely be able to handle the one.

“Can we get them together,” he asked, chewing on his upper lip, “so they can play? One last time?”

I looked at my feet. I didn’t think that was a good idea.

He hugged me, his sweaty flesh too warm against mine, and then I pulled away and the van pulled away and I closed the garage door behind me.

The world was too vast, too wonderful, too much to miss.

With Carlos I had been losing the world. Losing myself.

Who was I anyway?

I walked to work that afternoon. The pool was empty again so I swam and I swam until the sun disappeared and the warmth left the water.

That night when my father walked into my room to say goodnight I said, “Hey, Dad, Carlos isn’t going to be coming with me—to Boston—

anymore. I hope that's okay."

Posters of The Goo Goo Dolls and Bob Marley and Sublime still hung on my walls.

"Of course. That's fine—that's perfect," he said.

I stared at my father's blue irises, the wrinkles on his forehead that lifted as he spoke.

"That's perfectly, perfectly fine."

Silent Interrogations

Are you happy, are you okay, do you need me, is what she's thinking. Silence between "Hello, how are you, how was your day?"

Mother, I wish to say, *please*.

I want to ask: *Have you taken your Lexapro? Did you sleep last night? Are you staring at your phone, waiting for me?*

Instead: Sammy the Yorkie, chasing lizards in our backyard in Miami.

Instead: Snow falling outside my Boston window.

Instead: I ask, "How's Grandma? Has she sounded drunk on the phone lately? Where are you going for lunch?"

It's been months since I moved to Boston without Carlos, weeks since I found someone new, but silent interrogations still disrupt our calls.

There she is, my mother: downward dog in yoga; bony fingers clutching her ailing back; clucking in Spanglish to her drowsy, gassy endoscopy patients; telling me between pauses on the phone, "I do just fine with my Spanish at work. I ask them, '¿Dónde dueles? ¿Necesito baño? ¿Qué quiere por toma?'"

I want to say: *Mom, I think you mean, "¿Necesitas usar el baño?" I think you mean, "¿Qué quieres para tomar?"*

Instead: I say, "Yes, Mom, you do just fine with your Spanish."

Me, clenching a beer in my fist.

My mother, in bed with low-fat, sugar-free vanilla yogurt, granola and chocolate chips sprinkled on top. No Cabernet Sauvignon on her nightstand anymore. Instead, she spends nights staring at my pictures, aching to ask if I get too drunk like she did. I hear it in our silence. I do not tell her that maybe I used to get too drunk and high like she did but now I'm twenty-two and I'm fine. I do not tell her that I know sometimes

our stories collide, two lives running on tracks that weave in and out of one another.

And when she soundlessly pleads through the silence, *are you okay, do you need me*, I want to ask again: *Have you taken your Lexapro? Did you sleep last night? Are you staring at your phone, waiting for me, still floating beneath the current?*

But

there is this dream I have six months after I leave Carlos for good.

First, I dream of my childhood home. My father, bald save the gray patch on his scalp, scrubbing and scrubbing our tile floors, and me, in bed, thinking how lazy I am and how guilty I feel, unable to bring myself to my feet and grab a mop.

Then.

My friends enter the dream. They party without me as I sit at home with Carlos, trying to save money, trying to buy him a car or an education or a way to obliterate his past. He smokes anyway.

But here comes the important part, I think. There I am in the most intensely painless state, calling for my father to come, quick, I think I need an ambulance, because, see here, there is a clean, deep slice in my chest and if I don't use both hands to hold the skin together a huge hole appears and you can see right into the cavernous depths beyond my sternum. There isn't any blood. I don't feel a thing. But look, see, if I let go of the skin and allow the hole to gape open, the slice gets longer and longer like the snagged seam on a pair of tights that keeps running and running. Look, Dad, you can see right into my chest, and I want to know why, why is it empty in this red hole.

Again this dream flips. I am running up an incline toward an unknown elevator in an agonizingly sunny place where light reflects off salmon-colored brick. Into the elevator with a chubby man.

A gun in his hand.

But I am calm and settled and tell him look, I've got this hole in my chest and I can't let go or else the slice will keep running and running like a thread but you see, you don't need the gun and you don't need whatever you're planning because balance comes not from physical action but from action within; balance is achieved in the mind. And then the elevator

ascends and I let go of the skin and the seam is running and maybe he drops the gun, I can't be sure.

It doesn't matter

if you think you are safe because sometimes the earth drops right out from under you.

Last week I was visiting my parents in Florida, lying on my mother's bed and watching the news, when I heard about the man four hours north of us who was asleep in his bed on February 28 when a sinkhole opened beneath him and swallowed him and his bedroom furniture. Less than a month later, the sinkhole was filled with gravel, deemed too dangerous to retrieve the man from.

Unofficial sinkhole season had just begun. And this notion of the earth falling out from under us infested the news.

I think that something like this might be easier, that if instead of dreaming of Carlos lifting a trembling gun to his head, instead of seeing Neil's and Carlos's faces interchanging in front of that gun, I could dream of the earth swallowing them up. If my mind is right—if my dreams aren't lying when they tell me that Carlos cannot escape death—then maybe it'd be better for death to just creep up on him, for the earth to simply consume him, for him to die not by suicide or murder or the relentless pull of the current, but by falling straight down into the earth. Maybe that'd beat dying any other way. Maybe, then, we could all stop dreaming of holes in our chests and guns at our heads and saltwater pressing us down. Maybe we could live in ignorance, surrender our intuition. Maybe we could forget about the cars that disappear into invisible curtains of air, the dead best friends who speak to us at night, the silence that splits us. Maybe we could let our seams run until we're wading in crimson bodies of water, until we're immersed in red.