

How Much of This Is Mine

I decide to start cataloging objects that belong to me because there is always a grave possibility in the middle of all things that you are closer to the end than the beginning. This does not make me sad; I am a thing among things. My hair has always regrown after being cut away by thin silver scissors in a half-dark bedroom. I will not trust a stranger with it.

To catalogue requires curation, so I take my body on a walk to the local craft supplies store to buy a new notebook. A store employee introduces himself and says that I should ask him if I need help finding anything. I ask him which notebook would be best for list-making. He says any of them, really, they all have lines and the potential for lists. I ask him if he feels the same way about himself. I can tell the question seems odd to him—and after a second, I admit it even feels odd to myself. I say nevermind and ask him where I can find pens.

I live in a tropical climate that calls for tank tops and sandals year-round. I walk home from the art supplies store, the sun friendly on my back. I pass a group of children struggling to stand up on roller skates. They wear multicolored shirts and shorts. I want to tell them that balance requires concentration; they are too distracted by each other's laughter to ever get upright on the skates. But when they fall down against pavement, they still seem happy.

The house I live in has a large front yard swarmed in native plants. A pink-bellied hummingbird hovers between azaleas and ferns. I live with two housemates: one who I love dearly and one who is unknowable. The one who I love dearly is sitting on a red plastic chair on the front porch smoking a cigarette and drinking a beer. He asks me how my day was, and I tell him it was wonderful because I finally found a purpose. He takes a drag of the cigarette and smiles.

I take a cold shower and think about a girl I used to have a crush on. She wore tiny gold hoops and jeans that blessed her body. She worked at a science fiction themed combination mini-golf go-kart complex. I liked to go there and play a round of putt-putt, sometimes on my own, sometimes with my cousin and her fiancé. They were boring but I liked that about them. They knew I had a crush on the girl who worked the cash register, but they never asked me about it or teased me. I liked that about them, too.

I think about the time that I bought an ice cream sandwich from the cooler next to the cash register. When the girl rang me up, she said that she could tell I was good at real golf from the way I did mini-golf. I was so taken aback by her compliment that I just stared and stared and forgot all about the ice cream sandwich until it started melting down my fingers in white streaks. She knew something about me. That has always been enough to sustain me: her knowing, and me knowing she knew.

The shower runs cold down my back but I feel my skin flush, flowers of red blooming along my body. I touch myself until something in the center of me crumbles.

I dry off from my shower and take my new notebook and pen to the backyard. It is nearly dusk and the world is alive with bug sound. Birds scream from the tops of trees, telling their families to fly home. I make myself laugh thinking of birds tucking each other into little bird beds.

In the notebook I use a steady hand to draw long straight lines. One of my strangest abilities is to draw perfectly straight lines without the assistance of an edge. I write at the top of the page, in my neatest writing: *Catalogue of Objects*. I do not have any experience organizing data, but I think with a clear mind and good intentions, I will be okay. I start with the backyard. There is endless yellow grass and lime green saw palms and orange and pink hydrangeas with beautiful antennae. There is a rectangular pool with chlorine water and a blue-tiled floor that feels nice to float in on a humid day. It is a peaceful scene, one I would photograph if I owned a camera.

In the yard next to mine, one of my neighbors is setting up his grill with charcoal and lighter fluid. He waves to me, and I ask after his wife and child. He says they are well, that they are walking home from the park. I hold up my notebook, as if to prove that I have important work to do as well, as important as coming home from the park when it gets dark outside, or grilling dinner. I have yet to write down anything on the list.

When the mosquitos find my skin, I go inside. The housemate who is unknowable has returned home from a long day of thankless work. She cracks a diet soda and asks me if I think it's strange that her boyfriend hasn't called her in several days. I ask her when she last saw him. She says she saw him just that morning, next to her in bed, naked. But he hasn't called, she tells me. It seems to be of the utmost importance that she be called. I say I'm sorry that I can't help more. She asks what I am doing. I tell her that I want to archive my belongings. She asks why. I tell her it can't hurt to be prepared. She asks for what. I tell her I do not know exactly what.

When she and her diet soda go upstairs to her bedroom, I sit in the living room and look around for things that belong to me.

Rattan chest-of-drawers

Various colored glassware (17)

Hand-painted floral tray

Matted black-and-white photo of outdoor market in Spain

Books lining the windowsill (Secondhand & new)

Folders full of papers (Bills & old writing & misc)

Tiny marble frog from museum gift shop

The housemate who I love dearly comes inside and starts making dinner. He wonders if I'll have a quesadilla and I say sure. He inquires about the notebook and the list. He does not ask me why or what for I am making the catalogue. This is what I love about him: his understanding of me.

He makes me a pomegranate juice and vodka and cracks another beer for himself. We sit in front of the TV with our dinners and watch an interior design competition show. One of the competitors is crying because she didn't give herself enough time to find the color palette

she wanted. She is crying a weird amount over a color palette, I think. When my housemate goes to bed I make myself just a vodka and head to my room.

I'm not sure if my desire to catalogue comes from my mom, but I do think the compulsion to organize does. When I was young, she would use her label maker to put my name on all of my personal belongings. Putting my name onto the physical object upset me and sometimes when she wasn't looking, I peeled off the labels slowly, so there wouldn't be sticky residue left over. No trace of ownership. My mom worked in an office that was full of loud angry men. She would come home very tired but always read to me from chapter books beyond my own reading capacity. She wore professional pencil skirts and blouses and a locket my father had given her.

On my bedside table now is a photo of my mom and me. In the background of the photo is the Golden Gate Bridge. We only traveled once to San Francisco, when I was nine or ten. My father was still alive then; he took the photo. My mother and I wear matching bright blue windbreakers. Our frizzy brown hair flies around in the wind. I add this to the list.

Favorite photo (Mom & I) in pretty spackled blue frame

In the bathroom next to my bedroom, I hear the shower turn on and run for a long time. I put my notebook aside and lay on my bed, listening to the water running through the pipes in the walls. My phone lights up with a phone call from someone I have been kissing intermittently for a few weeks. I let it go to voicemail. Does the experience of knowing her—half-knowing her—belong to me? I do not put it on the list.

I listen to her voicemail. She wonders if I've ever seen the stage version of her favorite play. She says the play is based on a book by one of her favorite authors. She thinks it's fantastic that the author was able to work so well with the playwright. She thinks the stage version is very different from the book, but in a way that makes her see the narrative in an entirely new way. That's the best thing about art, she says: It is enhanced each time you see it interpreted, even in different mediums, even on different days. It's also dependent on mood, on how you feel about yourself, she thinks. At the end of the voicemail she pauses for a long time, and just when I think she has hung up she says: *I'm glad we have known each other. However long, I'm glad.*

I fall asleep listening to the voicemail again.

The next few days I don't have time to catalogue because it's busy at work. I work as an administrator for a film production company in my tropical town. Mainly the company produces smalltime TV shows that need an ocean setting or a pretty downtown. Once they were involved in an Oscar-nominated film starring one of my favorite actors. Since that movie—which was years and years ago—that actor has invested lots of his money into the production company. Business has really thrived thanks to that. I have met him several times since. Sometimes he drops by to see how things are going with the company's independent films. He flirted with me once, which was a truly harrowing experience. I don't know what I expected.

There are a few things in my office at work that belong to me.

Green coffee mug

Healthy plant

Dying plant

Grey long-sleeved sweater

Bottle of whiskey (special occasions, gift from boss)

One of my coworkers flies in and says this and that, we need you here, can you call so-and-so, what are you writing, are you okay? I tell him that of course I'm okay and shouldn't we go to set. We walk down to the production warehouse together.

They're filming a show about family dynamics that recently became very popular. The actress who plays the teenage daughter was recently involved in a nude-photos-on-Internet scandal. I watch her from behind the cameras, acting in a scene with her on-screen mom and dad. The family stands in the kitchen. This seems like the place lots of family arguments take place on TV. The teenage daughter is screaming about how she is old enough to do what she wants, she doesn't need them hovering over every second of every day, she deserves room to breathe, to make her own mistakes. The writing on this show isn't the best, but the general public would rather the writing be subpar as long as the drama is high.

The dad in the scene is silently seething, and the mom is peeling the skin off an orange with a knife. I find this an odd choice. I wonder who had the idea for the gesture—the actress or the director. She peels and peels, the orange skin falling off of the fruit in spirals. The knife is out of place. She is looking at her on-screen daughter, not the knife or the orange. Did she just walk on set with the knife, think, oh this will be good for the peeling sequence? The on-screen daughter is crying now, and so is the on-screen dad. The on-screen mom has forgotten to cry, or else the script tells her not to. For some reason my coworker is crying next to me, too, which is strange because the scene wasn't *that* well-acted. Though maybe it was well-acted, because something inside of me changed while I watched the scene, too. I turn to my coworker, who is wiping away tears, and I ask him why that actress was peeling an orange with a knife, and he laughs and says he was wondering the same thing.

The cataloguing has seemed—up until now—utilitarian. But now the purpose feels clearer: I am leaving this place, and soon. For somewhere else. Before I go, I have to make sure there is proof that I lived here, that I existed in this place. The proof must be objects because they suggest permanence, some weight that can be measured. Look: I was here for this many objects.

When the scene wraps, my coworker and I shuffle back to the office to scroll through emails and return calls and have a disappointing lunch of platter sandwiches. After lunch I get called in to my boss's office. She tells me that she thinks I deserve a raise, that I've been working so hard lately. She has a look on her face that I am startled to find belongs to me. For all the time I've known my boss, she has always looked at me like this: like she believes in me, like she thinks I can accomplish things I have never even thought to accomplish.

It is so special to notice this. She is an older woman with long grey hair pulled into a ponytail high on her head. She has hard grey eyes, eyes that mean she won't be fucked with. She has always dressed so fashion-forward, even though all she does is sit in her office all day long.

I tell her I am grateful for her immense trust. She smiles and the look is gone, suddenly, which is okay because I have already catalogued it away.

On my drive home I stop at the grocery store to pick up

Onions

Cereal

Peanut butter

Milk

Parmesan cheese

Wine

It is busy at the store and I run into two people that I know. The first is my personal trainer, who recently took pregnancy leave from the gym. She is already back in great shape. I tell her she looks like she has been running marathons every day since giving birth. She tells me it really feels like that, it really does. She shows me a picture of her baby on her phone. When I see pictures of babies, I always feel a weird mixture of sadness and disgust. I do not tell her this; I say it is an adorable child, and that I can't wait to get back into personal training sessions. But as she walks away from me into the checkout line I call out after her, oddly, saying that actually, I might be leaving town. She looks back at me, oddly, as if she didn't hear what I said. We are not that far from each other.

When I make my own way to the checkout the person behind me in line is my unknowable housemate. She and I laugh. In her cart she has four boxes of macaroni and cheese and garlic salt. I do not ask, and she offers no explanation. Her job is thankless. I do not even know where she grew up.

At home the housemate who I love dearly is watching a Hitchcock film. The one with the stairs— well, one of the ones with stairs. He talks to me about camera angles and shadows and mirrors and duplicity. He is smart about cinematography. I perch at the small table between the kitchen and living room with my notebook and a glass of seltzer water. The sun sets through the sliding glass doors opposite from where I sit. Its colors spread themselves out on the table like a meal. Will these colors belong to me permanently? Or will they merge with the swatches of every other pretty sky I've ever seen and become a macro-memory?

My housemate puts in another Hitchcock film. I heat up a plate of frozen eggrolls and count which spoons, forks, and knives belong to me. The ones that are mine have flowers etched onto the handles.

Knives (3)

Forks (7)

Spoons (7)

I do not catalogue the fruit or vegetables or meat or yogurt or sodas in the fridge that may be mine; those will not last long enough to be written on the page.

My phone lights up. It is the girl from my voicemail. She wonders if she can come over. I say: You don't belong to me, do you? She says traffic is light and if she was going to come over, now would be the time. I ask her if she saw the sunset; if that was the same or different than other sunsets she'd seen, if it was better or worse. If she could remember one, forever, which one would it be?

She tells me I run the risk of overlooking any meaning at all if I think too long and hard about what any one thing means. I tell her to come over immediately.

I move to the couch in the living room and watch the film with my housemate. I think of DVDs I own to add to the list.

Pride and Prejudice

What's Up, Doc?

Steel Magnolias

On the TV, a woman dies in the shower. The man who owns the motel cleans up the bathroom of the crime methodically. There is not much blood, given all the stabbing. I mention this to my housemate, and he tells me they used chocolate sauce as blood in this scene. By the end of the film, we learn that the man who owned the motel was also the murderer. He had a complicated relationship with his mother, who somehow lived inside him, forcing him to kill. My housemate has fallen asleep on the couch.

When there is a knock at the door, I switch off the TV and let in the girl. We go to my room and I am all of a sudden bashful. She asks me what's wrong and I take a long time to answer. There is nothing wrong, after all. Just a shift. My boss is calling. She is whispering on the other line, and sounds upset. She is drunk, probably.

I sit back on my bed and let the girl from my voicemail undress me. She traces the curve of her nose along my whole arm, my leg. She closes her eyes against my ankle. My boss, on the phone, is crying gently. She does this occasionally. I know her second marriage is unstable, her children shuttled between her and her ex-husband. She is very lonely. I ask if everything's alright. Oh, of course, she says. Things are relative. I am only as sad as the things around me ask me to be.

The girl from my voicemail has retrieved a bottle of lotion from my bedside table. It is an expensive French brand; one of my only concessions to vanity. It smells like freshly washed linen. It seems odd she would be here with me, spreading lotion across the tops of my feet, the length of my shins. But she isn't, is she? She is still standing at the foot of my bed, watching me. I am fully clothed.

The girl looks strange to me now, like a girl I might see from the inside of a moving car in the rain, walking down the side of a street with a plum-colored umbrella; a girl who, when the car passed by her, she might look up, lock eyes with me, and seem immediately like the type of person whose heart was wholly available to anyone who offered to hold it.

Her dark hair is cut in a blunt short line across her chin. There is a birthmark on her cheek that looks like a rabbit. I reach out, as if touch it before it runs away.

On the phone, my boss blows her nose nosily. She apologizes. She laughs, as if she can't remember why she called me in the first place. I tell her things will get better and she won't feel like she is feeling right now forever. Pain often subsides.

My boss agrees. After a moment of quiet, she asks if I am going somewhere. I have a physical reaction to this: my lungs fill with air and I make a weird gasping noise. I am not surprised; I am relieved. I ask her what made her think that. She says it was in my eyes earlier.

The girl in my room has spotted the list in my notebook and points to it, quizzically. I stretch my legs out until they form a two-sided triangle for her to climb between. I mouth to her: It is a work in progress.

By the end of the week I have six pages of the notebook filled with things that belong to me.

High-backed armchair w/pink-and-green embroidered upholstery

Vintage editions of *The Hardy Boys* (6)

Bottles of nail polish (18)

Perfume bottles all half-empty-or-so (4)

Circular mirror

Sweatshirt w/HS logo

Winter boots (unused)

On Friday night, my housemate who I love dearly helps me clear out the hall closet and I find several jean jackets I forgot I owned. He asks if I'd like to go to a trivia night at a bar with him and his coworkers. I am thankful for the opportunity to take a break from archiving. Am I a hollow person who only cares about material?

I pick out jeans and a white linen top to wear to the bar. I look at myself in the circular mirror and lean in close to really look. I put on one thick coat of mascara, just enough to make sure my eyelashes are really there. I apply a clear lip-gloss, smacking my lips together like I'm in a makeup commercial. My housemate calls up the stairs to ask if I am ready.

We walk down to the bar; it's not far from our house. He works at a small private college in our town, and his colleagues range in age and background. I have met most of them, and they are funny and kind. There is one guy in particular that I love. He sports a huge bushy beard and handles it with good humor. His wife is with him tonight. They tell me about how they are renovating their master bedroom. They tell me all about what kind of shower they're putting in, what type of faucets. I find the discussion mundane and comforting. I ask them what brand of bath towels they chose.

The trivia is mostly pop culture questions. There's a woman in the group—an anthropologist—who complains loudly each round. She says it's unfair; she would be nailing the answers if they had to do with early human cultures. She has a tattoo of a wildflower on her forearm, and another of a mountain range on her shoulder. I watch her down two shots of vodka. My housemate leans in and says the anthropologist was put on academic probation last year for sleeping with a student.

I don't realize I'm drunk until we're walking home from the bar and my dad calls me. He says my younger sister has been in a horrible accident. I don't understand him right away; my vision is fuzzing at the edges. I stumble into a streetlamp and my housemate catches me at the elbow. I ask my dad to repeat himself. My housemate takes the phone from me and I am momentarily angry. I yell that my sister has been in an accident and my family needs me. I am distraught. I sit down on the sidewalk and look up at the ugly glare of the streetlamp, its lemon-lime buzz. Its lemon-lime buzz. My insides feel narrow, a sadness as thin as a needle

snaking down my throat into my chest cavity. I drag my fingers across my shirt, as if I could reach inside and pick the needle out, as if I might use the precision of an experienced surgeon to make sure I didn't scrape anything important on the way out.

My housemate sits down beside me. I say it is bizarre that I just imagined a call from my dead father about a sister I never had. He nods, which is a kind reaction. I talk about how there are certain drawers in the kitchen, in the bathroom, in my bedroom, that I have yet to look through. My list is incomplete. I ask him if he thinks I should include abstractions on the list. Like what, he asks.

Well, I say, I might own a story. It is not unlike an object, a narrative. It may take a physical form, and feel heavy. It may shift from owner to owner. It may be bought or sold; it almost certainly has sentimental value. He asks for another example. I point to a scab on my right leg. It is a healthy, hard scab, deep purple and brown. I own that only until it heals completely, and the scab is dissolved back into my body matter. But I owned it at one time. And it was mine. And I loved it.

A couple passes down the sidewalk on the opposite side of the street. They are laughing audibly. My phone is buzzing in my housemate's hands. I ask him if that notification is something I should write down on the list. Should I add my unopened emails? All of the passwords and logins for my various Internet accounts? Coupons I have used on transactions in stores? I can't catalogue feeling. I have tried.

My housemate lets me talk but I can tell he wants to go home. I am selfish, I know. But I want to sit beneath the ugly streetlight for a few minutes more, maybe a few hours, maybe a day or two. The impermanence is curing some kind of illness in me that I didn't notice before. A volcanic desire to name unnameable things, catch uncatchable things. I am flooded with a long-ago pain. I don't remember where it came from; I just know it belongs to me.

It is so embarrassing to have feelings. I tell my housemate we can go home. I hear him breathe out a long—almost endless—sigh of relief as we step out from beneath the light.

Maybe it is time to return objects that do not belong to me. When I go into work the next week, I bring a metallic travel coffee mug that belongs to my boss. She thanks me when I hand it to her, and pauses for just a moment, long enough to remember the drunken phone call. I look away from her, stare at the stacks of spending approval forms and unread scripts. Things that are hers temporarily. I tell her I am grateful for what she's given me. She shakes her head and smiles. She turns to her computer and begins typing as if I am already gone.

My coworker and I head to the warehouse to talk with set managers about scheduling concerns. The family sitcom is rehearsing. My coworker tells me he is going to get a latte before we find the set manager, and I say I'll wait. The scene is just the mom and dad sitting in what looks to be a study or someone's office. The wall behind them is rows and rows of bookshelves. I know they sourced those from a local secondhand bookstore; I was the one to make the call, take the drive, bring a crew to load in the books. I took out four books as we unloaded, to keep for myself.

The DaVinci Code
Alice in Wonderland
Brave New World
The Executioner's Song

I don't think of that as stealing—though I have no intention of returning the books. If anyone asks me, if I am somehow caught, I will simply say the books got lost in the mix.

The scene is halted temporarily so the mom can get a retouch. Her makeup artist is a stunning black man who I have never seen before. He and the actress seem to have a good rapport. They laugh as the makeup artist reapplies blush and eyeliner. I am amazed he can do that while the mom's face contorts and moves with emotion; he is good at his job. The scene director calls for another run, and the mom squeezes the makeup artist's forearm affectionately. Is this a "thank you" or a "I'll see you later?" Their familiarity might suggest intimacy. I wonder if they are sleeping together. The mom is wearing a wedding ring—but, of course, that might just be a prop.

My coworker comes back to stand by me with his coffee. I ask him to find the manager and say I'll meet him round the back for our meeting. I want to watch, just for a minute more.

In the scene, the mom and dad are arguing about finances. The dad has been working long, hard hours at the office and he thinks the mom is too credit-card happy. The mom is exasperated. She tries to explain that she puts in her own work: taking the kids to and from school, cooking and cleaning, keeping everyone's schedule in order. And on top of that her sister is in rehab, her parents are ailing, and she is planning their daughter's sixteenth birthday party. She asks her husband if he thinks her work is less important than his. The dad's voice gets quiet and he says of course he doesn't think that. Then he pulls out a legal pad from the drawer of a desk he leans on. He hands it to the mom. She looks like she is about to cry. The dad asks her why she has made the list. The mom admits she is just trying to keep track of what is hers in this life.

I feel a strange twisting sensation in my abdomen, like I ate something rancid. I quietly move closer to the set, so I am on the side of the cameras that capture the mom's profile, close enough to see what's on the legal pad. I can only read what is written at the top of the page: Inventory of Assets.

I wonder, momentarily, if I am dreaming. If I am sleepwalking. But my phone buzzes in my pocket; it's my coworker, wondering if I am on my way. He has found the set manager in charge of scheduling. I look back at the mom on the set, clutching the legal pad. I think the actress has somehow infiltrated the deepest part of me. Her acting is not acting at all. She is playing me, or at least some version of me I might become. I want to storm the set, call to cut, take the actress playing the mom gently by the shoulders. I want to see her, eye for eye. I would ask her: How much of this is mine?

I have neglected many appointments. I have skipped a visit to the gynecologist and my therapist, unwittingly. I call the gynecology office to reschedule, but wait on the therapy. I am not yet ready to be told how to deconstruct my actions.

The morning of my new appointment I get up early to make peanut-butter toast. I put little slices of bananas atop it. I wave goodbye to my unknowable housemate as she leaves for work. The housemate who I love dearly comes slovenly down the steps and makes himself coffee. I have the sudden urge to say a long and final goodbye to him, as if I will drive all the way to the other side of the country that day and never return. The sensation tickles in the back of my throat. It feels like the beginnings of strep.

Traffic is light on the way to the gynecology office. In the car I become unnaturally worried that my gynecologist is the only person who knows me, really knows me. This is not true. But the fear is overwhelming and heavy. It seems like something that belongs on my list. I will not write it down. I will not humor myself.

For some reason I turn into the parking lot of a small park next to an elementary school. I am only a block or so from the gynecology office. The playground is thronged with children. Adults sit on benches lining the park, talking with each other and distributing snacks and juice boxes to their kids. I turn off my car and stare at the swarms of stumbling children. The toddlers are especially clumsy. They look really stupid, unable to keep themselves upright. There is a cluster of them loitering in a sandbox, plopped down, picking up handfuls of sand only for it to fall straight through their fingers. They laugh like this is a magic trick only they can do. I do not know how to feel about that confidence.

My phone rings. It's the gynecology office, asking if I am still coming. I say, dumbly, that I am almost there.

Summer arrives unexpectedly one weekend. It rains all of Friday and Saturday, long, hard rains that shake our small house. It's as if the water will uproot the structure from beneath the foundation and we will float down the street in a river. I sit in my room and stare at my catalogue of things. I video chat with my mom and ask her where she thinks I should go. She wants me to return to my hometown, a place with seasons. She also wants to talk to me about an article she read on Monarch Butterfly migration. The rain runs dark blue against my bedroom window. I say sure, I'd love to hear about migration patterns.

When the heavy rain finally lifts back into the sky and humidity swarms, Sunday arrives. My housemates and I are hosting a barbecue in the backyard. We set up in the midday, filling coolers with ice and hard seltzers. The unknowable housemate goes to the store to pick up meats and chips and fruit. The housemate who I love dearly and I put up a cheap badminton set far enough away from the pool to be safe. He hooks up his phone to a speaker and puts on a synth pop album. His sunglasses are brand new, but look like they were made in the nineties.

Guests begin to arrive as the late afternoon sets in. We have invited an array of people; coworkers and mutual friends and neighbors. We even invited our postwoman, though we were fairly certain she wouldn't show up. I even invited my gynecologist—which I realize now was a strange and probably unprofessional thing to do. She is just so pretty. I can't really control what I say around her.

People mingle on the small backyard patio, picking at the food, taking drinks out of the

cooler. One of our mutual friends has just told us she is engaged, though she doesn't wear a ring. I ask her where her fiancé is and she says he had to go into work. I think he is a pediatric surgeon, or else a pediatric dentist. I am too nervous—and have known this friend too long—to ask again what her fiancé does for a living. I suppose it's okay just to know he was probably in school for many, many years before he obtained a degree.

We pass around bottles of bug spray as the sun slides down, slanted, in the sky. I click on the outdoor lights. My housemate who I love dearly is in the pool with our friends. The girl from my voicemail has just arrived and wonders if I want to swim. I say sure; let's swim.

The pool water is darkened black by night. I strip the weight of humidity; it glides off of me like a second self. When I open my eyes under the water, I see the shapes of other bodies. I think these are not my friends but aliens that have replaced them. Beautiful, underwater aliens. The girl from my voicemail tries to take my hand in hers, but underwater I am different. My hand is not mine; it does not belong to me.

I run out of air. As I break the surface of the water, the alien shapes around me rearrange into faces, bodies, people. The girl from my voicemail is wearing an orange swimsuit. It feels like my brain is spinning around inside of my skull. I swim to the edge of the pool and brace myself. For what, I'm not sure. It's like there is an earthquake waiting underneath the pool, deep in the ground, the faint pulse of potential destruction laying wait in stagnant dirt.

Above me, by the patio, I spot our mailwoman. She looks different out of uniform. She has such an interesting face; wide and oval-shaped, with long eyelashes that are asking for trouble. It seems like she has been put in charge of manning the grill. She calls out to guests if they'd like a burger or a brat. I am so happy she is enjoying herself.

At my ear, my housemate who I love dearly. He asks me if I might add this night to the list. I tell him yes without hesitation. I do not think of the party or the pool or the mailwoman at the grill as abstractions. They are solid-edged lines, and they all lead home.

I bend backward in the water until I am floating. My friends move out of the way to accommodate the length of my body. I think that no matter what year, month, or decade this party was taking place in, I would still be in this same space with the same people. There is at least one other timeline happening, I think, just a fraction of an inch from this one. In that timeline I am a girl with a name and a list of belongings. That girl is ready to leave.

That girl gets out of the pool and grabs a dry towel. She smiles at her friends and gives hugs to those she passes by. They are smiling, too. She thanks the mailwoman for all her hard work at the grill. The mailwoman laughs and laughs, says it is not hard work at all; try walking around and delivering mail all day.

That girl walks through the sliding doors into the air-conditioned home. The cold feels crisp, like a physical thing, not just a sensation. She walks into the kitchen, swimsuit dripping onto the tile below. She pours herself a glass of water and drinks the whole thing. Then she climbs the stairs and finds the notebook where she left it in the bathroom. She looks at the last written thing.

Tubes of toothpaste (3)

She hugs the notebook to her chest, wet swimsuit dampening the pages. The house is dark around her, empty. Outside, the party and its happy noise. She hopes she will make it out of this alive.

Or maybe that girl floats on her back in the water until all the guests have left the party. Maybe they think she is sleeping. Her housemates clean up the party mess and turn off the outdoor lights and go inside for the night.

That girl imagines that she is not in a pool but in a dark ocean. Floating beside her is someone she loves deeply and without selfishness. She turns her head to see that person's face—but it is hidden from her, shrouded by an unruly shadow. The only source of light is the shy pinprick stars. There is one that is brighter than all the rest; a planet. She opens her mouth to tell the person she loves, but the person is already swimming away.