

What I Know

Mostly I have to believe in my knees. They tell the story. They know about dampness that collects from kneeling, pitiful or otherwise. They know about cuts and bruises I never felt, about aches I will carry forever, about tiny hairs I can't shave away, a roughness impossible to hide. And what they've done for me all these years, bending with power, in surrender, in lust, in salivating worship of him or her or you. Tightening in stride over ragged winter creeks, across those crusty shelves of translucent ice that pulsed and glowed like living things. (And weren't they? Living out their opposite lives, gone when life was allowed back in.) Knees off the roof of the red pool shed and knees down in the garden with the little potatoes and the basil and deep in the tall grass, pulling my dress to the side to pee while I looked for the Summer Triangle, the only one I could always find. That shape, too, what it meant to us, dragging us back together, August

after August. The names I wanted to call my mother for throwing us outside by our pajama sleeves: come lie in the cold wet grass, come sit on the sagging trampoline after the rain and stare into the stars. The guilt of resentment, the guilt of my desire for comfort, to be dry and warm.

And I believe in candlelit kitchens and rooms thick with wood smoke and the smell of roast chicken cooked in olives and salads hefty with burnt walnuts, sliced apples and vinegar; fresh bread folded with pesto and seeds; dark wine staining the painted juice glasses she collected out of nostalgia, out of love for her mother, a drunk, whose tin bangles shook when she stirred her guests "martoonis."

She taught me ritual, my mother says.

Ritual is legacy, is habit. The histories we carry in our wrists, our kneecaps.

I listen to my mother reading from behind a closed door.

There's no privacy in this house, we complain, you can hear everything. But she

never builds ceilings beneath the beams.

I shut my eyes and hold my breath to feel her, all of them, through the walls, through the floor. And in the melancholy cheer of twilight at the end of summer—crickets already going at it by the afternoon and you know what that means; those copper leaves cracking across the valley—when there is smoke coming off the barbecue and someone is fiddling with the radio and someone laughs at someone else’s story, I listen to them all living. Somehow it’s easier than being among them. It’s almost better just knowing they are there, that it could go on and on and on.

It was always just the four of us, even when it was three and three split up in different homes. Especially when it was three and three. So other people’s houses mattered—big, full nights at other people’s houses. Wool sports coats and velvet dresses and spicy lipstick and boughs across the mantels; windows that looked out over snowy woods. How our mothers spun us around beneath the speakers, knees rubbing raw on carpet, knees burning, knees sliding across waxed wood floors, until our hair stuck to our pink faces and I could taste the salt and the walk to the car in the cold was sweet, somebody balancing the remains of the pie beneath a big glass bell jar.

And then being carried half-asleep—pretending to be heavy and asleep, and listening, like at the top of the stairs, through the floor, through a door—from that car

into the house that was mine, to the room that was lavender and that I still shared with my brother because I didn’t know then about the different things my knees would do, the beautiful messes they would show me, the things they would need, the imprints they would leave behind. I believe in the time before all that, when my knees knew only ladders and blue eggshells, knew how to hold me up to things that made me stronger or bring me closer to the small, real things.