

Across the Dark.

As little flowers, which the  
Chill of night has bent and huddled,  
When the white sun strikes,  
Grow straight and open fully on their stems,  
So did I,  
Too,  
With my exhausted force.

Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*.

Our house was white wooden walls and big glass doors.

In the winter, it would almost disappear among the snow, yellow light shining through the square windows into the dark. In the brief summer it looked oddly out of place against the dark green trees and the bright grey sky.

I remember playing by the lake in my red swimsuit, black pebbles so hot under my feet it made the water feel like ice when I stepped into it. I remember my mother's smile, and the sparkle of her eyes behind her sunglasses. I remember the sound of my father hitting his newspaper to keep its pages together against the wind and the lighter, softer sound the wind made as it tore them apart, over and over and over again.

I used to remember the smell of sunscreen and wet leaves and banana ice-cream. But now all my memories smell like fire.

The hospital was white and light green; an endless maze of long, wide, identical corridors that stretched on forever from one set of stairs to the other. When the nurses weren't around I used to escape out of my room and walk on and on until someone eventually found me and took me back. They never got mad at me. I didn't know where I was going.

When my eyes opened there were flowers on the nightstand. I laid looking at them until all of their colors turned to brown, and someone came in and took them away. There was a phone in the room, and sometimes it rang and rang, but I never picked up.

The last time I sneaked out of my room I managed to walk much longer than I usually did, and I found myself in a corridor that was not white and light green but yellow, colorful stickers filling the walls and windows, balloons resting on the floor. Something cold crawled through me from the back of my head and I knew, then, where I had been going all along. Still, it took me twenty more minutes to find his room. He was asleep, his tiny body almost drowning in the blinding white sheets. Someone had stuck needles in his arms and tubes in his nose, and I could hear the faint sound of the machine telling me his heart was still beating, but it could all have just been in my mind. I heard footsteps behind me and I knew it was time to leave. The nurse put a light hand on my shoulder and let me look at my brother one more time before she ushered me away.

My arms and legs are still covered in white bandages. The thought of what they cover is enough to make my insides churn. When I push my fingertips against them the skin underneath feels warm, as if some of the fire had stayed there, gnawing at my flesh and eating me alive. Holding things in my hands hurts. Slipping through my fingers, everything keeps slipping through my fingers.

Jude woke up after many cold days had come and gone, and many furious blizzards with them. The snow was white noise filling all the empty spaces in my mind. One icy speck after the other pulling me back together. One day, I'll tell him the story of the winter I spent waiting for him.

When he was four years old, my parents started taking Jude to doctors all around the country, and they would ask them the same questions they asked each other in whispers when they thought we couldn't hear. Two years later, and they still hadn't got an answer. Not one they could live with at least, but they won't have to now.

My grandmother lives in the south, where the people are nicer and the weather is kinder. A place where the ocean is as blue as the sky. Sometimes I sit by one of the big windows and look out into the busy street full of people walking and talking and shouting and driving, and I wonder what will become of us. Jude brought me a leaf from the garden once, green and soft and so different from the ones that made up the piles we used to jump into in autumn afternoons, pine needles biting at exposed hands and cheeks. Green leaves in March, that's how far we are from home.

He tries to talk to me like that sometimes.

Tonight is cold and restless. I sit on the floor with my back to the wall, the rhythmic passing of cars on the street below lulling me into nothingness. I stare at the shifting shadows on the ceiling. I have been sitting here for hours, I have been sitting here for a thousand years. Jude comes in and sits next to me, close enough that I can feel his warmth, but far enough away that no part of us can touch. We stay like that for a long time. He is not looking at me but at something he holds in his hands. I recognize what it is from the warm glow that suddenly tints his face red against the dark blue of four am. He flicks the lighter again and it's almost deafening in this still house, silent as ours had never been. In my dreams I can still hear how loud their screaming was that night, even before the fire came, the words they threw at each other like acid and his fists slamming against the walls so they wouldn't slam into her. Sometimes they did anyway. It was a flicker that put an end to hit, and then the heat had swallowed us all. "I will love you anyway." I whisper to him across the dark.