



*He prepares the bristles beneath a spout of scalding water,
then the paste, then him in her mouth adjusting the lay
of her lips with his fingertips.*

BEFORE THIS THAT THEN

Lloyd finds Poppy in the hospital at last. He's flown in from overseas, a country now in night while here is day, Poppy's alteration announced to him while he should've been dreaming but was instead out with a man and a woman and all their spines curled over a bar in a row, them shitty enough that to speak or remain silent felt largely the same. In his beer's puddled sweat his phone began to throb and he pictured quite clearly some beetle boring wood.

Lloyd, he'd answered, articulating his syllable. Then, as an afterthought: Erickson?

The man and the woman, one small-mouthed and the other -eyed, squinted to listen.

Do y—have—you, Mis—on? he was asked amid extra noise in the receiver like the person were an ocean, too, its steady roar and, intermittently, something more. Lloyd saw weedy legs and arms and a whale torso, no neck but everywhere hair rippling in waves. An accident, he heard himself told, and at some point he must have, thought Lloyd, been offered a name, the title required to announce Poppy hit with a stroke, recovering, experiencing loss.

Poppy? he asked.

—an—one—you?

Speaking, Lloyd said, and then, though knowing he shouldn't, he began uncontrollably to laugh.

They three had eaten Japanese the day before, late then instead of now being early. They'd finished workshops and presentations and notes or doodles and had changed from finely crafted suits to jeans, t-shirts, the woman as stickish as Poppy, both naturals on a beach. Lloyd had thought this when the night was yet to start, they emerg-

ing one by one by one from the elevator cars and pushing their damp hair around or tucking it, the woman's behind her ear in a way his wife's hadn't been in years, Poppy's shorn so that from behind she was just another man.

In the lobby, seeing his narrow colleague, Lloyd recalled clearly Poppy in a ruffle-edged bikini that had surprised and disturbed him, as if he were her father and not someone to arouse which Poppy's figure in that outfit had not, and if she'd tried Lloyd couldn't now remember, so focused he'd been then on wishing her coverage. She'd for once in their life together burned, so when she'd stripped of the suit he found she wore still its evidence, having blistered thickly.

You should've been more careful, he'd said. Worn more, he'd chided, and Poppy, nodding, said: Thanks, from which he couldn't decide the meaning of her tone. She handed him a tube to use to cover her in cream, then facing a mirror and her head drooped down so as he performed his gentlest application he couldn't tell if she winced.

When Lloyd met the man and woman in the hotel's golden lobby he saw the slim woman's billowy t-shirt printed with Poppy's favored Lloyd, not whom she'd married, Poppy had been known to say, her lower incisors looking especially long in her smile, but he who in the movie held aloft a love-belted boombox like an Olympic dead-lift champion.

It was all I had, said the woman to Lloyd, shrugging and blushing and he didn't believe her. Earlier that day they'd pressed shoulders close when there'd been no need, and she'd told a joke that was funny but not to the extent that it called for his grabbing her around the waist to pull her toward him, their bodies clanking and bouncing apart, then jostling again. Lloyd had sweated thinking they might return to a single room that evening. He might be undressed by her teeth. She might find his tongue in her folds.

In the lobby, perhaps because they'd both considered these outcomes, they remained on either side of the man who'd come along, too,

someone uninterested in their imagined infidelities, possibly oblivious, but curious, he said, about what fish they'd eat. One earthquake is all it takes and we're in the ocean, he'd declared earlier at lunch. The fish is nearly in our laps, he'd said, spitting passion, and when I eat it, it should taste like I'm its sea.

Lloyd had waggled his eyebrows at the woman and made a face, helpless in his features which acted like they owned him. He'd not been prone before to such gestures, had never been good around children, was always the one others called cold. The woman giggled and Lloyd felt briefly weightless and dizzy in his skin.

The restaurant was made in high cool light and dark exposed wood and anything said was absorbed by the surrounding blasting mouths unless they tipped forward across their small table, seated as they were on knees on mats, their leaning that much more imbalanced. They ate rolls of shredded crab in spicy, creamy sauce, and snapping, briny eggs over sweet, shiny rice. Then ruby and white and peach slabs of fish, the suction cups of an octopus and clams looking like claws, their sake tab soaring, by the meal's end each having fed the other two with his or her chopsticks very carefully, licking their sticks' tips after. The woman's shirt was hand-cut deeply around the neck, its edge jagged, and when she bent for either of them a tunnel showed between her lemon breasts. Behind her on the wall hung a painting of a fat horse rolling with legs in the air and pinned ears and angry nostrils. Lloyd's intestines had begun to gurgle and he growled at the animal, You're makin me sick, but the place was much louder around them so he sounded like only more sound to which his dinner-mates, who didn't ask that he repeat himself, shook heads, shrugged, and grinned.

If she'd been here, Lloyd thought. Had the doctor finished speaking? The chain of events had been said? He'd already slipped the phone inside his pocket. He should call Poppy to be sure this wasn't a joke — she'd answer, wouldn't she? Or should he call her mother and father

who'd be calling him soon, he sensed this, and began again, though this time like it was some kind of sigh, to laugh. He hiccupped and what bile rose tasted of sea, its weeds, the salmon that should've been cold butter to crush in his molars but had been, he was suddenly sure, unpleasantly aged. There'd been an off scent and he'd steamrolled past, caught up in their odd intimacy, eating without pause. He'd been a glutton and would reap the consequences.

The woman grabbed his wrist and Lloyd wondered without Poppy as a pin in his map where his road might have curved or backtracked or bolted without bend.

You look awful, she said and didn't ask was everything alright. It was obvious, Lloyd thought. Things were not as they'd been, for him or for her, now, locked on his joint.

Time for bed, she said smartly. She stood. For all of us. Let's go. It's beyond late.

Lloyd didn't resist but slipped from his stool and his knees didn't catch but his elbow did on the rail so he hung briefly cliffed, his trunk and disobedient limbs slowly firming. His stomach rolled, a high spinning ride, a spawning trout. I'll be sick, he thought, then said, in sounds he couldn't believe were his: Watch out. And then he was. And then was gathered. And then settled in his room and the body in his bed didn't belong to him.

Lloyd's small hand flutters above Poppy's face, her prairie bones wide and flat and in the light and her poorness everything greened. He breathes You and thinks What and recalls her bare spine's pearly line, a coarse white neck whisker he'd bit and of her teeth within her familiar mouth: broad, boxy, unforgiving.

Through the doorway comes Poppy's mother and then her father, too, in from the hospital's hall with brown bags heavy in hand and skins damp with daylong mist. To see Lloyd so abruptly causes in Poppy's father a gargle and he chokes, Oh! and in two steps Lloyd's crushed to his chest as if to stuff him inside to use him for food, to

glean his young fats for fuel.

We didn't know, Poppy's father says in Lloyd's hair, when to expect you, and his wife looks at Poppy's husband, then Poppy, then at Lloyd again and then at her own husband who wears eager, pooling eyes above the slope of his nose, his torso tilted forward in the pits of his hips.

You haven't missed much, Poppy's mother says. It's really your luck, she says, to get here just now.

She thought if she could just hold Lloyd's knee in her hand that would fit like a mitt. That you're here, she begins again, then grasps her mouth, then mumbles, Jesus, and Lloyd says, I was late. I'm sorry. I'm here.

He'd woken and been sick on himself and found the woman still clothed as a line along the bed's edge. He'd felt sure she was awake but didn't ask, only sat himself up and began to make calls: the company, the airline, the car service, the hotel. He should've heard her leave but didn't and was hopeful such an oversight could be a result of his shock, his concern over Poppy with whom he'd not been in touch since arriving there so far away, several days before. He'd sent her a short message over the computer—*here*—and she'd sent him one back—*here*—and they'd both been either satisfied or busy or at a loss for what more they should say.

Having made his return arrangements he'd sent another message, as if Poppy might find her old self and receive it. Almost, he wrote. Wait.

Poppy had stood as a tall tower amid carpet-squared children, their thick syrup scents and tendencies to tattle, her within their soft swarm a queen among workers before the punch in her temple, sharp with a snap, so down toppled her tower that trapped kids beneath, their loose-toothed bays drawing more towers to pull snivels free and smack awake Poppy's cheeks and to punch and hear her heart and put an ear near her mouth for breath, Poppy ultimately coming-to but knowing

then only to crawl, believing and seeing herself long on a quartet of unending legs whose stride, even so, couldn't thwart being caught.

For a week, another, in close quarters Lloyd fogs Poppy with his lungs, clots her eyes with snapshots of large speckled stones they'd visited and camped between, their snappy blue tent, and once fenced orange field made neon beneath a violet gray sky for which they'd pulled off the road, unsure of the light's meaning, and another time Poppy hugging the joint of an oversized brown plastic bison fiercely, choking it, her neck's tendons bulging and her mouth a bright white.

She keeps watch of Lloyd's throat's bobbing apple. He says *mayonnaise kale zeitgeist July carrier fuchsia Notre Dame bronc opal thirty-three Sunday better spur*. His language in its persistence mimics silence and no matter their proximity — a chair between, two lengths on her bed, several steps apart, the skin of their lips — the space they feed fats deep.

The season is hot and the fires begin and the valley is a yellowed, hazy globe.

Lloyd touches Poppy's dry knuckle and pictures them up above lights, fields, cars, people in shoulders pinked and spotted, throats packed with grease. The sun's set had made a lilac frosting across the mountains' tops. They'd knotted elbows. Let's always be this, he'd said to her, and she'd turned and laughed to him, her head dipped back and her mouth agape, her tongue curling until its root showed. You'll get bored, Poppy warned, and Lloyd shrugged and said: Not yet.

Alone in her hospital room Poppy's intent on the high windows stained with sky. She recalls a dappled place, a different view, a tree's outstretched arm which no language now matches but she knows it's right, what was there and so was she and all before. Before this that then. Before, when.

Poppy's mother sits with Lloyd while her husband is out, while Poppy feigns sleep.

We don't expect, she begins and thinks of seeing him first, his

narrowness in jeans like Poppy wore, them twins and both curveless in matchsticks she'd not've fit as a girl. Always she'd been balloon hipped, slacks requiring oversized waists she'd cinch down to compensate, Poppy's shape like her features her father's—narrow and bony and prone to disappearing. And now there'd be another: Lloyd. The light's strike and shadow, her mother had thought to see him with her daughter and had felt pleased with her poetics, mouthing the words. Poppy, beside him, could've been a son, androgynous in hair clipped to a black shining cap where Lloyd's same style flamed red.

In the hospital room Poppy's mother finds Lloyd's face, his weak beard, cheeks caving in on his mouth. She puts his hand in hers. Let me say, she begins again.

I'm not, he thinks, then is unable to finish. He's *not* often, he thinks, in all different versions, but in this instance, which?

Poppy's mother doesn't grip him but holds his palm's weight as if her own were a mattress, his a wearied traveler. I, she says carefully, don't care.

No one sounds to Poppy's mother like anyone she knows. All frequencies are too high or thin or crackling or, worst, obscured. It's as if her ears have turned against her, her brain their hostage. She seeks bed where everything sleeps, limbs stripped of feeling and foreign to move, while Poppy in the daylight, once returned to her homes, visits streets with her father, Lloyd quickly back to papers, pens, a desk, suit and tie. He closes sales feeling sharkish with no thought towards his prey, only that he must feed, then begin to hunt again.

The show must go on, Poppy's mother thinks the first time Lloyd drops Poppy off as if she is his daughter, so Poppy's, too, to be watched for the day by doting grandparents. As if Poppy is again as small as when their hopes first began.

Poppy's father engraves an identifying tag. Names. Numbers. Colors. Measurements. Zip. Her mother holds and bounces it in test as if its

weight matters. If you're ever unsure, she says at last and presses the metal into Poppy's softened chest. Remember this, her mother says. The air is dry and the woman's flannel nightgown holds her skin and sparks and snaps in shifts.

Her father keeps seeing Poppy as a girl and her mother then so hard yet to keep off of, the world nothing but where they were, which was up a mountain in a trailer, road disappearing in the rock around it, the sage and bunchgrass, cedar they'd burn in the pit. Mornings they set out sprayed and slathered against sun, Poppy's head kerchiefed flashy pink amid pine needles and puzzle trunks and the boulders, the snags, the lichen. They climbed, dropped down ravines to climb far sides and then down again, all the while ascending, shale taken by zag, steps slow over stumps for rattlers, woods navigated as if no legged creature could be there but them. They reached cliffs that overlooked treetops, stream threads, rocks slid in piles, and Poppy threw more rocks from the edges, whole handfuls released, so they looked to her father like a swooping dove or pigeon flock, a net tossed to catch.

Poppy's father once visited the same city called to find Lloyd, the father's visit when Poppy and her husband were only Poppy and her boyfriend but already the young man traveled the world, spoke very carefully new languages with his patient tongue and attention to teeth, paid exorbitant prices to be outfitted well enough to mute his remaining inabilities because he appeared so tailored, professional, aloof.

Lloyd had been in that city then, too, and they'd met, each having attended and been dismissed from meetings — Poppy's father's on the study of cancerous cells and Lloyd's for whatever it was he sold, her father didn't understand it then and still doesn't now, knows only it's a thing very small and particular and imperative to the workings of another thing very small and particular and imperative, the combination of the two so particularly, imperatively small as to be required in countless peoples' lives. Poppy's father had time to change to look even more a tourist while Lloyd arrived still immaculate in a three-

piece number, height accentuated by his light fabric's grab, its charcoal brightening the pink of his cheeks and his olive eyes.

Her father thought then without thinking: I'll kill you, and as they ordered beers, then coffees, and the boyfriend loosened his tie, then unbuttoned his collar and coat, Poppy's father's heart flapped erratically and he grabbed his thighs, his elbows, locked his bare ankles until Poppy's boyfriend at last breached their tiny table to touch the father's arm. Something's wrong, said Lloyd lamely.

They'd so far only ever shaken hands and the boyfriend's grasp nearer Poppy's father's chest wasn't a cure but did reroute what beat itself wildly: his valves, his brain, the well of his throat. Her father's gasping had aim.

I just hope you'll take care, the older man said, but did he speak to Poppy or of her or to this young man bent towards his, Poppy's father's, face, Lloyd's concern a strange look of desire, like he might begin some ritual, and the father began to see his skin peeled by tweezers as if it were wallpaper, a job for delicacy, him treasure beneath.

Lloyd's smile appeared simultaneously with his jaw's glandular ache. He couldn't translate his brain. Everything I do, he said and paused. His throat had quilted quickly in mucous which he tried clearing but like a trick candle it flared back. Instinctively he said again: I do.

Poppy's father stared at Lloyd and his head shook the type of shake he couldn't stop. Everyone, he thought and felt moved by his clarity, is ultimately unstoppable. His eyes began to sting and he bulled his choke and said, harshly: For *her*.

They'd looked away from each other, one blushing but chilled and the other shaking, each disappearing somewhere in the day's final brilliant light.

Lloyd in Poppy's parents' drive pulls a thumb below Poppy's eye, across its ridge. There, he says.

Poppy leans her face to him which he knows now to meet. The first time she'd positioned herself so he'd sat motionless, unsure.

The woman from the conference had made no move to contact him while he'd sent a message to her phone from his, a single word found in his and Poppy's home, him thinking not of hospitalized Poppy, nor of him alone in the kitchen sitting the counter couched by cabinet corners, but of a magazine's photos of a foreign country, its garden-choked cottages and the sun setting the sky pinkly beyond a pond and broad single tree, in the water a set of white-shirted girls among wide-backed horses, some waist and chest deep and soaked already, horses submerged to their armpits, their bellies, all hair and clothes pasted to edges and one girl's vertebrae bumping shadows on her as she was caught midair leaping from her animal's back, an upwards arc beginning in the moment to trail down. Everything was so exquisitely lit that Lloyd's body arranged a sob whose swell he couldn't swallow. His thumbs shook in their sockets and he steadied them against buttons choosing: Anything? As if the conference woman had been searching, as if he'd been her pair.

When he'd looked again at those girls and their horses he'd passed through their impact, they no longer stirred him. He flicked himself hard in the throat and yes, there he was, still.

Lloyd thought of the woman and her Lloyd shirt that evening which had worn a small red heart. He reminded himself how Poppy wore a small red mark right on her chest. It was raised and smooth and she'd once returned home with a penlight for its examination. This was months before the accident, between Lloyd travelling, and beneath their covers with all the lights off she'd pulled her collar down and pressed the beam to her bump.

It's like I'm trying to grow another organ outside myself, she said, and Lloyd peered closely, unaffected by her exposed nipple, its dark nest. The growth held tiny thread veins and glowed orangely inside.

What other organ could you need? Lloyd asked.

She combed his neck's nape and they felt, Lloyd abruptly thought, he and Poppy, like an unattractive chair. It wasn't all looks, he knew; more important was the feel. But then this was precisely what he no

longer grasped: one day they were soft and obvious and the next a tiger's trap, an idea of ground with nothing to ground it: shocking impact to heels, all breath swiftly lost.

An extra sieve, Poppy said of her spot and when Lloyd asked her, Why, she clicked them to darkness and turned on her side. It would know, she said, I'm just the host. Lloyd found her for days after standing and holding herself by the tips of her fingers, twisting that small globe like a knob.

Poppy, the first time she leaned near to him in the car after her incident, pressed her skin to his in explanation. She'd had a flash of his throat pushing whiskers, had thought effort and sweating, remembered nothing on her but an armpit's mark like a rabbit's little shit, and her husband's teeth there, their space between, and how he'd held her tongue with his and overrun her mouth with his own.

Inside the house is Poppy's mother at the stove, flipping ham slices and dropping eggs in old tuna tins to contain their whites, her hair spiked in yesterday's spray. She hands Poppy bread to slip in toaster holes. Bread, says the woman slowly, her finger on the bag. Toast, she says, placing that same finger on the metal getting hot. Her hair inside is powder soft.

Poppy dumps her bag in a seat, Lloyd's hoodie and its breaking cuffs hanging off the stool's edge to fall when she'd long been a neat adult, intent on corners and stiff creases and clutterless space.

Says Poppy, bread airborne still: Toast.

Her mother's chin lifts and her thinned nostrils flare and Poppy thinks cobra while her mouth forms a tunnel and with the steadiness of a master says: Co. Bra.

Poppy's nearby father's eyes clot. He and his wife should be dying in peace, he thinks. In a sunset and in love a way they've never before been and never could've been because it's meant this long to make it, which they have but are now engaged too in some cowboys

and Indians, horses and headdresses, them not stretched or warmed but Poppy strapped to their backs or slung from their skulls, their unprepared bodies riddled with pain.

Poppy, Lloyd discovers, is perfect on a bike. They spend a weekend together, alone.

We won't see you until Monday, he tells Poppy's mother who looks at Poppy's father gazing out the window at flickers pitching chaotically through trees.

You've got her tags, says her father, still looking nowhere but at those birds.

Lloyd flexes his teeth. Her tags, he nods.

Be good, says her mother and Poppy all the time in the room is on her husband's eyes, what lines dig his cheeks, his forehead, all around his lips. His hair, Poppy thinks, and recalls a den of foxless kits: their unbridled gymnastics and sunset fur.

We'll be great, Lloyd says, and holds Poppy's arm to steer her from the kitchen, down the hall and out the door. As they pull from the driveway there stand her parents at the picture window, the day's setting light dissolving their faces so just bodies show, hands grasped between hips. Poppy's husband lifts his own in a last wave, shifts smoothly into gear, and drives them away.

Her father coughs. Poppy's mother nods. She doesn't say a word of her head's spinning or her shoulders caught in rotation, the ways in which her organs seem a funnel inside her, everything on an axis other than the earth's. She grasps the nearest curtain or chair in a fist and puts her other hand flat against the window as she's not before, the prints she'll leave.

Sweetheart? her husband breathes.

Darling, says Poppy's mother, knowing her voice but not its distance which seems placed beyond a hillside, beneath a rock, behind a wall. He doesn't grip her but should and then she's wheeling from the glass and feeling her way out to the yard, acting blind, stum-

bling into furniture pieces, knocking a shoulder frail enough to chip against a cupboard's corner. Is she wailing? He can't decide. There's a deep sound coming from somewhere but it holds several layers, the topmost could be a cry. She's bent over her center, folding more and more clearly in half. How she continues, her husband marvels. She grabs hold of a blueberry bush's delicate, fruit-laden branches, her nose neatly to her knees.

I'm coming, her husband thinks, now crashing his own path through their house. He throws the screen-door off its track and the boom to the deck doesn't move her or cease her moan. She's a corn-stalk in a breeze, core steady while periphery flaps. This is a moment, her husband thinks, and will pass. They'll forget or pretend to. This is nothing, he thinks.

At home they build dinner slowly, Poppy the best with knives she's ever been, mincing onion to a fluff. Hey, Lloyd says. They're in the counter's corner, both bodies fitting, and he offers his hand and Poppy takes it and smiles. Poppy, she says.

In the overhead light she's her richest color, her husband his purest. They finish preparations and place things in baking degrees, then eat until their tiny tummies push like they've both been made pregnant, are beginning to show.

Lloyd brushes Poppy's teeth out of habit, a task begun when she couldn't and continued now as she can. As she will in the mornings but at night their ritual is this: her before him and the slightest bit taller, him peering up to her enamel, her gum line, her teeth's textured edges. The light is always at her back. He prepares bristles beneath a spout of scalding water, then the paste, then him in her mouth rearranging her lips. Considering, when their rhythm's established, that he could've been a doctor, a surgeon, someone whose touch renders skill, his pressures and approaches. Last of all he cleans her tongue and then she bends for the water cranked cold, swishes, and spits.

Out of another new habit they fall asleep naked, Lloyd feeling not

like a husband or a brother, nor a lover or a father, but like Poppy's as he's not before understood. An extension of her frame and hide and also a cave for it to fill or a crest across which she'll stretch, their skins bare so she gives him color and he filters hers. In the morning they wake as Poppy their lid and all their limbs woven.

The afternoon brings the bike. They've weeded what will be garden, turned the soil to work compost through choking clay, and while Poppy's placed each seed carefully in its well and covered it gently and made a mark of each crop at each intersection – beets, then kale, next broccoli, sprouted potatoes last – Lloyd has pricked himself pruning dead roses, sucked his wounds and continued on after browned lilac bunches and the desiccated heads of spent daisies, new growth at their bases beginning brightly to poke. Poppy allows a hornet to cruise her arms and neck, her eyes.

Careful, her husband warns but she alters nothing, elbow and cheek fuzz afloat by its wings.

The bike is in the shed and Lloyd moves it for a shovel, a bucket, something needed, and behind him Poppy eyes the machine. She takes it from where he's leaned it and out into the day.

I don't know, Lloyd says.

It's an old rusted cruiser whose peeling seat he holds while holding also his chest as if pledging allegiance, thinking pump, pertinent lobes willed to engage.

Poppy palpates the tires and gets in the shed and makes scrapes and reemerges with the air-pump which she sets beside the back cap, squatting. Lloyd, as he's often, is impressed with her remembrance of mechanics, what's going where and when to fiddle and when it works.

I think, he says, but Poppy has filled and moved frontwards, finished there and grabbed handles.

Poppy, he says.

Lloyd, says Poppy.

His name in her voice is quick to disorient.

I think, he re-begins while her leg swings over the seat he continues to hold, all her weight taken in his fingers' ends so when they're retrieved they've bled to white by her weight. She eases away, helmetless and exposed, and begins smoothly to pedal.

Watch it! he shouts and dashes after to be her catch. He remembers learning horsebacks from his mother's lap or father's but no memory of their bodies behind, just the arch and sway of each animal's hope to shake loose his panicked heels dug close.

Lloyd is trim but not fit. He stops and clutches his thighs in the street, Poppy already too much the lead to hear him but still he wheezes her name, over and again, stooped. She follows a straight line and when something—a rock? a crushed tail? a branch?—cuts her path, she curves sweetly, elegantly, faultlessly steering.

Lloyd pictures a car and her struck so she sails through air, his inability to reach her arc's end, her father's face approaching his to destroy it, her mother's face looking even less hers than now. He blinks and straightens to run again and begins, head down, new steps in the beat of Poppy's name and the pulse of hearts, while Poppy traces an unshaking, unseen loop of return, simultaneously recalling muscle, valves and chambers dissected, incisions made well along cleavage so portions parted as if prior positions were forced. Something inside her shifts leftward in a move painless but tweaking her lung. Poppy, charting Lloyd's head-down run towards her, notes this is the space in which she'll catch and hold him in her tight. Here is shade, here light, there the arch of a branch above street like a long burly arm. She is blinded but hears clearly his chanting, him charming them near. They're on a crash course. Neither breaks stride. ■