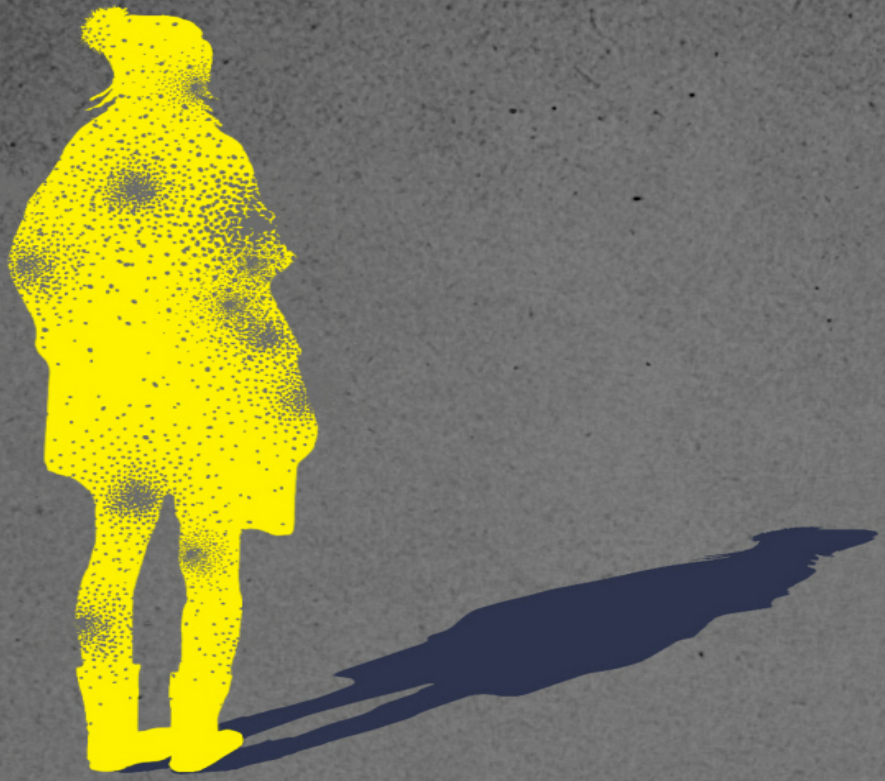

find me

LAURA VAN DEN BERG

‘the best young writer in America’
SALON

‘elegiac debut…lingers and aches in the memory’
GUARDIAN

‘impressively original’
NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

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Things I will never forget: my name, my made-up birthday... The dark of the Hospital at night. My mother's face, when she was young.

Things other people will forget: where they come from, how old they are, the faces of the people they love. The right words for bowl and sunshine... What is a beginning and what is an end.

Joy spends her days working the graveyard shift at a store outside Boston and nursing an addiction to cough syrup, an attempt to suppress her troubled past. But when a sickness that begins with silver blisters and memory loss and ends with death sweeps the country, Joy, for the first time in her life, seems to have an advantage: she is immune.

At once a hauntingly beautiful portrayal of a dystopian future and a powerful exploration of loneliness, Laura Van Den Berg's debut has been compared to Kazuo Ishiguro and Margaret Atwood.

About the Author

Laura van den Berg was raised in Florida. Her first collection of short stories, *What the World Will Look Like When All the Water Leaves Us*, was a Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers selection and a finalist for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. Her second collection of stories, *The Isle of Youth*, received the Rosenthal Family Foundation Award for Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. *Find Me* is her first novel. She lives in the Boston area.

ALSO BY LAURA VAN DEN BERG

What the World Will Look Like When All the Water Leaves Us

The Isle of Youth

FIND ME

Laura van den Berg

TO P.,

for never being afraid of the search

Things I will never forget: my name, my made-up birthday, the rattle of a train in a tunnel. The sweet grit of toothpaste. The bitterness of coffee and blood. The dark of the Hospital at night. My mother’s face, when she was young.

• • •

Things other people will forget: where they come from, how old they are, the faces of the people they love. The right words for bowl and sunshine and sidewalk. What is a beginning and what is an end.

BOOK 1

In a place far away from anyone or anywhere, I drifted off for a moment.

—Haruki Murakami, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*

1.

On our third month in the Hospital, the pilgrims begin to appear. They gather outside the doors, faces tipped to the sky, while our Floor Group watches at the end of the fifth-floor hallway. The windows have bars on the outside and we have to tilt our heads to get a good view. Sometimes the pilgrims wave and we wave back. Or they hold hands and sing and we hear their voices through the glass. Some stand outside for hours, others for days. We don't understand what they could want from us.

• • •

Early November and already the cold is descending across the plains. We can't go outside, but we hear about it on the Weather Channel and feel it on the windowpanes. We can tell from the pilgrims' clothing too, the way they come bundled in overcoats and scarves. The twins, Sam and Christopher, named the visitors, since the first one to turn up wore a black hat with a wide brim, like the pilgrims they learned about in school. I can remember the way the twins grinned as they offered this fact, pleased by the strength of their memories.

For hours I stand by the fifth-floor window and watch the pilgrims pace in front of the Hospital or use sticks to draw circles in the dirt. It's like observing wildlife.

When the sky darkens and rain falls for three days straight, I go to Dr. Bek and make a case for letting the pilgrims inside. His office is on the sixth floor, a windowless room at the end of the hallway, furnished with two high-backed rolling chairs—Venn chairs, he says they're called—

and a desk shaped like a half moon. We all choose our dungeons: this is a saying I've heard somewhere before, though I can't remember the source, a nibble of worry. The one personal touch is a poster of massive gray cliffs, fog-dusted peaks, ridges veined with snow, on the wall behind Dr. Bek's desk. It's the Troll Wall in Norway, where he was born.

In Norway, there are half a million lakes. In Norway, the cheese is brown. In Norway, the paper clip was invented. These are the things Dr. Bek has told us.

Me, I know nothing of Norway. I used to live in Somerville, Massachusetts, on a narrow street with no trees.

Dr. Bek types at his desk. Manila files are stacked next to his computer. I look at the folders and try to imagine what's inside: our case histories, the results of our blood work, all the ways he is trying to find a cure. Dr. Bek is fair and tall, his posture stooped inside his silver hazmat suit, as though he's forever ducking under a low doorway. Behind the shield, his eyes are a cool blue, his cheekbones high and sharp. When he's angry, his face looks like it has been chiseled from a fine grade of stone.

The Hospital staff guards against the sickness with Level A hazmat suits, chemical-resistant boots and gloves, and decontamination showers before entering their quarters on the second floor. They need these precautions because they aren't special, like the patients are thought to be. When we came to the Hospital, our possessions were locked away in basement storage. "Why does our stuff have to stay in the basement?" some patients demanded to know, and Dr. Bek explained it was all part of releasing the outside world for a time, of releasing a life that no longer belonged to us.

Each patient was given a pair of white slippers and four sets of scrubs, two white and two mint green. Louis, my roommate, and I avoid wearing the white ones as much as possible, agreeing they make us look like ghosts.

All the patients have been assigned weekly appointments with Dr. Bek, to make sure our feelings don't stay in hiding. When our feelings stay in hiding, bad things can happen, or so we've been told.

I have no talent for following rules. I ignore my appointed times. I only go to his office when I have questions.

I sit across from Dr. Bek and tell him two pilgrims have been standing in the rain for days. They're shivering and sleeping on the ground.

"They could get pneumonia and die," I say. "Why can't we let them inside?"

"Joy, I take no pleasure in their struggle." Dr. Bek keeps typing. Every breath is a long rasp. The sound is worse than nails on a chalkboard or a person running out of air. "But we can't let them in. After all, how can we know where these people came from? What they want? What they might be carrying inside them?"

Disease is as old as life itself, Dr. Bek is fond of pointing out. An adversary that cannot be underestimated. For example, when cacao farming peaked in Brazil, mounds of pods amassed in the countryside, gathering just enough rainwater to create a breeding ground for the biting midge. From this slight ecological shift came an outbreak of Oropouche, or Brazilian hemorrhagic fever. According to Dr. Bek, it only takes the smallest change to turn our lives inside out.

"It's my job to see danger where you, a patient, cannot." He stops typing and opens the folder at the top of the stack. I watch his eyes collect the information inside. "To protect you from the flaws in your judgment."

Dr. Bek is a widower, but not because of the sickness. His wife died many years ago, or at least that's what I've overheard from the nurses, who sometimes talk about him when they think they're alone. Dr. Bek tells us little about his life beyond the Hospital walls.

As for the pilgrims, I have no argument—there is plenty of evidence to suggest flaws in my judgment—so I leave his office. Already our group of one hundred and fifty has dwindled to seventy-five. During the first month alone, a dozen patients became symptomatic and were sent to the tenth floor. We didn't see them again.

Still, I feel a pain in my chest when I look out the window and find a pilgrim balled on the ground, his body pulsing from the cold. Before the rain, this man was pacing, and then, out of nowhere, he did one perfect cartwheel. I wish I had a way to talk to him, to ask why he came, to tell him no one is going to help him here. I don't think it's right to watch these people suffer, even if it's a suffering they have chosen.

Finally the rain lightens and the man scrambles to his feet. He stares up at the Hospital for a long time, and I wonder if he can see me watching. What kind of person he thinks I am. He turns from the window and staggers away. Another pilgrim calls after him, but he doesn't look back. It's still drizzling. The sky is charcoal and goes on forever. I watch his silhouette grow smaller, until he is just a speck on the edges of the land. We the patients are always dreaming about being released from the Hospital. Sometimes it's all I can think about, the outdoor air rushing into my lungs, the light on my face, but I don't envy that man then.

• • •

The Hospital is ten stories high, plus the basement. The patients live on floors two through six. Each of us is assigned a Floor Group; each Group is staffed by two nurses. Louis and I belong to Group five. All floors amass for Community Meetings and activities and meals, but otherwise the Groups have a way of sticking together.

I call the basement the zero floor. On the zero floor, there is a door with a triangle of glass in the center, a small window to the outside, and beneath it the faint green glow of a security keypad. Floors seven through nine sit empty. All elevator service has been suspended. You can punch the round buttons, but nothing will happen. Dr. Bek believes in the importance of exercise, so the patients have free passage to the other floors by going through the stairwells, except the first floor, where the staff lives, and the tenth floor, where the sick patients go—both are forbidden to us, also guarded by keypads.

The Dining Hall has a keypad too, but the staff allows those doors to stay open. Whenever possible, they like to create the illusion of freedom.

In the beginning, there were thirty patients on each floor. Now, after three months, no floor has more than fifteen. But the staffing has not changed. There are still ten nurses and Dr. Bek. “Way to lighten your workload!” Louis and I sometimes joke, because laughter makes us feel brave. In the end, the patients might be outnumbered.

An incomplete list of the rules: each Floor Group has a job within the Hospital. The Common Room is located on floor five and it is the job of our Floor Group to keep that space neat and clean. Floor Group three is in charge of the library. Every other week, Group two rounds up patient laundry in canvas rolling carts. After meals, Groups four and six collect trash, stack the red plastic trays, and wipe the warm insides of the microwaves and the stainless steel buffet tables. The surfaces of the tables are dull, but sometimes I catch a smudged reflection as I move through the food line and think, Who is that face? Each floor is responsible for keeping their own hallway in order. “A busy mind is a healthy mind,” Dr. Bek likes to say.

In the Hospital, there are no razors in the showers, just miniature bars of white soap that melt between fingertips, slip down drains. In the Hospital, there is nothing to drink

but water. The plastic chairs in the Dining Hall are the color of tangerines. In the Hospital, we celebrate every patient birthday, knowing full well that it might be their last. In the Hospital, our meals come frozen in black trays, the plastic coverings fringed with ice, and we wait in line to heat them in the large humming microwaves. In the Hospital, there is no such thing as mail.

• • •

Before long the other patients lose interest in pilgrim spotting and go back to rummaging through the books in the Hospital library or watching TV in the Common Room or trying to sneak into the Computer Room on the fourth floor, yet another keypadded space, to check WeAreSorryForYourLoss.com, a government-maintained list of people reported dead from the sickness. We have supervised Internet Sessions every Wednesday and Friday, though of course we always want more.

When breakfast ends each morning, I stand on an orange chair and look out the Dining Hall windows. I turn my back on the maze of long tables, the clatter of the Groups stacking trays. The Dining Hall is on the fifth floor; the bars on the windows are thick as arms. I peer between them, searching for pilgrims. Sometimes it's the same people. Or a new one has arrived. Or there are no pilgrims at all, just a scattering of footprints in the brown soil.

I spend a lot of time thinking about why the pilgrims started coming here, how they even found us. The easy answer is that they think this is a safe place, that we might have a cure, but that reasoning has never satisfied me. I do much of this thinking in the library, sitting between the squat bookcases filled with dictionaries and encyclopedias, plus books on space travel and the Mayan empire and dinosaurs. Dr. Bek believes that even though our bodies are

confined to the Hospital, there is no reason to limit our minds.

I think about how devoted the pilgrims seem, the way they stand out there in all kinds of weather, staring up at the windows. They don't bang on the doors and shout to be let inside; they don't demand to be included in our secrets. They just wait. Dr. Bek is always reminding us of our specialness. Do the pilgrims know we're special too?

For a while, the library is the space I like best. All the patient quarters are white-walled rooms with white twin beds and white rolling medicine cabinets—other things in the Hospital that are white: the sheets, the pillows, the hazmat suits of the nurses, the flimsy shower curtains, the towels that scratch our skin—and so the walnut bookcases and the round olive-colored rug make the library feel special, a portal to a place that is separate from the rest of the Hospital.

When I start reading about the dinosaurs and the Mayans, however, the things I learn disturb me. For example, the book on the dinosaurs is not about how big and magnificent they were, but about why they all died. There is no agreement on what happened. An asteroid, continental drift, an epidemic. In the book about the Mayans, the author says they were wiped out by a plague, that every so often "incurables" appear and civilizations are reset. When I discuss my findings with Dr. Bek, he says the sickness is not the result of some cosmic reordering. Rather it's the simple truth that the smallest alteration can create the perfect atmosphere for a new disease to emerge. "The world is a very fragile place," he tells me, another favorite line of his.

I've grown up knowing the world is fragile. No one needs to tell me that.

• • •

I stretch out in a hallway. I've been walking the Hospital for so many hours, I've forgotten what floor I'm on. I only know that I can't keep moving. I lie on my back, my arms pressed against my sides, and feel the cool on my spine. On the patient floors, the hallways are identical: long and white and fluorescent-lit, with an arched, barred window at one end. I think of the different Floor Groups standing at their window and watching the pilgrims at the same time, all of us mirrors of each other.

I gaze up at the lights and feel the burn in my corneas. I wonder how long I would have to look into them before I went blind. I feel the brightness in my cheekbones and inside my mouth. I feel it sinking into my skull. The floor stays empty. I begin to think no one will ever find me here. That I can lie like this forever, still and filled with light.

The voice brings me out. None of the patients have ever seen the Pathologist, but every day his voice crackles over the wall speakers. I sit up and rub my eyes, imagining a man alone in a room on the tenth floor, whispering into a machine. Sometimes he has practical things to say, like an announcement about meals, and sometimes he just talks to us.

Today he tells us what good patients we are. Meditations, these are called, even though I've always been under the impression that meditating is something you're supposed to do in silence. REPEAT AFTER ME: YOU ARE WELL, YOU HAVE ALWAYS BEEN WELL, YOU WILL ALWAYS BE WELL. He says we're doing everything right. All we need to do now is keep breathing.

2.

Three things brought me to the Hospital. In my first month, in the library, I wrote it all out on sheets of paper and pretended I was telling someone a story.

Number one: the sickness itself. The first case was reported in June, in Bakersfield, California, when a fifty-year-old woman named Clara Sue Borden stumbled into the ER with a constellation of silver blisters on her face. She couldn't walk a straight line. She pressed a hand over her right eye, claiming everything she saw out of that eye had a funny look. She couldn't tell anyone her name or date of birth or where she lived or how she got to the ER. If there were relatives to call. She remembered nothing. "I am me," she kept saying.

For as long as I could remember, the weather had felt apocalyptic. Y2K fever and the War on Drugs and the War on Terror. The death of bees and the death of bats and radioactivity in the oceans and ravenous hurricanes. I thought the country was like a fire that would rage and rage until the embers lost their heat, but instead the sickness appeared and within two weeks it had burned through the borders of every state in America. It was everywhere and it was so fast. At first, the Centers for Disease Control thought it was a highly contagious strain of Creutzfeldt-Jakob. Autopsies showed prions eating through brain tissue, leading to sudden neurological collapse, but once they got everything under the microscopes, they realized it was something different, something new. We were awash in theories—biological attack, apocalypse, environmental meltdown—and no solutions. Our brains, our

greatest human asset, were disintegrating. The president was moved to a secret location and the World Health Organization announced a Phase 5 alert. Our borders with Mexico and Canada were closed. For once, no one wanted to come in. And they definitely didn't want us coming out. By August, one hundred thousand people had died. By September, that number had doubled. Experts now say the toll could be worse than the 1918 influenza, which left half a million Americans dead.

• • •

When I was a child, I lived for a time with a boy I grew to love. One morning we were walking to school when we felt the ground shake. "Earthquake," the boy said, even though we'd never heard of an earthquake happening in Charlestown, which was where we were living, just north of downtown Boston. We saw smoke spiraling up in the distance and moved toward it. We forgot all about school.

On a city block, a building had exploded. Already the police had put up barricades and were rushing around in blue surgical masks, to shield their lungs from debris. The smoke was so dark and dense that if they moved too far down the street, they vanished into it. We stood behind the barricades and watched a woman rush out of the smoke in a beautiful gold dress, the scalloped hem falling just below her knees, and blue bedroom slippers. On the corner, she fell to her knees and released a scream that was shattering in its loudness. She kneaded her fists against her stomach. Her entire body quaked.

In the Hospital, on the news, I have watched people in emergency rooms beat their stomachs as they wail, have seen faces covered by those same blue surgical masks, and the memory of the masked police and the smoking emptiness in the middle of the block and the woman screaming in her fine dress seemed not like the result of a

freak gas leak—the cause of the explosion, we would later learn—but like a premonition, a chance to witness the kind of world that was to come.

• • •

Raul used to be a hairdresser in Chicago. He's in our Floor Group and when he gets permission to give the patients haircuts, we line up outside the Common Room. I'm happy to have something to do besides pilgrim watching.

Louis and I have determined that there are two secrets to life in the Hospital:

1. Don't get sick.
2. Don't get driven insane by empty time.

The linoleum floors glow white under the fluorescent overheads. Sometimes it feels like we're standing inside a flashlight. I wait next to Louis. He's thirty, which to me seems young and old at the same time. He has the blondest hair and the greenest eyes and a dimple right in the center of his chin. He is a college graduate, handsome and solid, someone I never would have talked to out in the real world. I would have rung up his groceries, bagged his tomatoes and his eggs, handed him the coupons that printed with his receipt. We met on the bus that carried us to the Hospital and were assigned to the same Floor Group, the same room. We are the only coed room on our floor. There were odd numbers of women and men, so Louis and I got stuck with each other, and Dr. Bek said the Hospital was placing extra trust in us, in our ability to handle being an exception to the rules.

On our first night, I did not sleep. I lay on my side, facing Louis, and watched the gentle rise and fall of his body under the sheets. I was used to aloneness, and it would

take me days before I could drift off with another person in the room.

The Hospital looked like a fortress from the outside, so far from everything that went wrong, a towering structure rising from the absolute flatness of the plains. From the bus window, I thought at first that it was a mirage.

A brief history of the Hospital: It started out as a public psychiatric hospital, but state budget cuts shut it down in 2009. The building sat empty until Dr. Bek and his staff took it over during the sickness and made it into something useful again. I'm betting the people who built this Hospital, the people who lived and worked here, could never have imagined what it would one day be used for.

A red exit sign hangs over the stairwell entrance. The light inside has burned out. There are no working clocks, but my guess is Louis and I have been waiting for close to an hour.

"I only want a little off the ends." My hair falls past my shoulders in dark waves, lush and healthy-looking. It shines under the lights. No bangs, center part, showing off a high, smooth forehead. It's one of the few things I have found consistently admirable about myself, my hair. "Nothing dramatic."

"I don't want a haircut," Louis says. "Not from Raul, anyway."

"So what's your excuse?"

He's leaning against the wall, one leg bent, arms crossed. The hair on his forearms is as light and soft as corn silk. I want him to say that he is here, that he is standing in this line, because he would do anything to be close to me.

"I'm looking for Paige. Seen her?"

Louis has recently taken a special interest in Paige, a patient from our Floor Group and a former marathon runner from Seattle. I've seen him watching her in the Dining Hall as she props her heel on a chair for stretches

or offering to time her when she practices sprints in the hallway.

I shrug. “Maybe she doesn’t care about hair.”

The twins emerge from the Common Room. Their hair has been trimmed at the crown, but left shaggy around the ears and napes. They look like a pair of elves. I avoid eye contact with Louis, but I can feel him smirking at me, at the flaws in my judgment, as the boys pass.

“Next!” Raul calls.

It’s easy to picture psychiatric patients lolling around the Common Room, the air swelling with their cigarette smoke. A sour smell has gotten trapped in the dark blue carpeting. There are little holes all over the walls, rings of chipped white paint, evidence of what used to be there. The couch is long and the color of rust, the seat cushions indented with the impressions of bodies. The TV is an ancient black box resting on an equally ancient VCR. In Community Meetings, Dr. Bek has told us that he is suspicious of technology, of an overreliance on machines.

One morning a week, the nurses play a yoga video in the Common Room and patients from different floors bend and twist, form bridges with their bodies. On Saturday nights, the nurses select a movie to show. So far we have seen: *Sleepless in Seattle*, *Meatballs*, *Night of the Living Dead*, which gave half the patients nightmares, *The Maltese Falcon*, three installments of *Mission: Impossible*.

In *Mission: Impossible*, the masks made me think of the boy I used to live with, the boy I grew to love. That night, I lay in bed and mouthed his name. My private meditation.

When I first came to the Hospital, I wanted to know everyone. At Community Meetings and in the Dining Hall, I would go up to patients and ask them who they were and where they were from and what they missed. After the nineteenth person went to the tenth floor, a death for every year of my life, I stopped remembering names.

An orange Dining Hall chair stands in the corner, the metal legs encircled with mounds of hair. Raul waves me over with his scissors. A nurse from our Floor Group is sitting on the couch, supervising. We identify the nurses by the ID patches on the breasts of their hazmats. Hers is N5. She's reading a magazine, an old issue of *Newsweek*, from the library. A soldier in a mud-crusted combat helmet stares out from the cover, his eyes wide and vacant.

After the sickness broke out, people stopped talking about wars.

"This way." Raul's stomach is a small dome under his green scrubs.

I sit down, facing the wall. Despite the cleaning efforts of our group, there are scuffs on the floorboards. My slippers rest on a pile of hair. "Just a trim," I say to Raul, who has already started.

I watch dark clumps fall to the ground. Scissors graze the back of my neck. I tell him that I hope he's not getting carried away.

"You look like an old customer of mine." He digs his fingers into my hair, his hands warm and rough. His nails pierce my scalp. "You have the same kind of face."

I ask Raul what kind of face that would be, to describe this woman to me, but he doesn't answer and I wonder if this same-faced person has lost their memory, if they are dead. When he finishes, I pat my forehead and feel bangs.

"Do you have a mirror?" I ask.

"No, he does not," the nurse answers for him. She turns a magazine page.

Hair bits are stuck to my thighs. I brush them away. I stand and look at my hair spread all over the floor and try not to panic. In my head, I start a new list, because lists are what I lean on when I get upset.

In the Hospital, I have seen women with bangs that hang like curtains over their eyes and ends so split it looks like they've been electrocuted. I have seen a pixie cut that

never seems to grow. In the Hospital, I have seen men with sideburns, men who only have swirls of hair at their temples, men with small bald spots on top of their heads, round and shiny as coins. There are all kinds of people in here.

Raul gives my bangs one last snip and calls for the next patient.

Louis is still hanging around the hallway. A few patients from other Floor Groups have wandered over and fallen into line. I rush past, sweeping hair from my scrubs.

“Sheepdog!” he shouts as I walk by. “Sheepdog, sheepdog!”

I hurry into our bathroom. In the mirror, my hair is short and thick, so it puffs out like a helmet, and heavy bangs blanket half my forehead. I lean closer and notice a black hair on the tip of my nose. I flick it into the sink and turn on the faucet.

“Fuck you, Raul,” I say to no one.

• • •

One morning, near the end of November, I look out a Dining Hall window and there’s just this one pilgrim, a woman. She isn’t someone I’ve seen before. She wears a saggy black coat and her pale hair, which I envy immediately, falls past her waist. “Hello,” I whisper. My breath makes a fog circle on the glass.

It takes me a minute to realize the pilgrim is barefoot. Her feet are white and delicate. The bare skin glints in the daylight, so it looks like her feet are made of crystal, like that part of her body is not quite real. I gaze through the bars and try to imagine what it would feel like to stand barefoot on that frozen ground.

Breakfast is over. Floor Groups four and six have finished cleaning the microwave trays with the smelly green sponges. I turn to call to Louis, to show him this barefoot

woman, who must have some kind of death wish, forgetting that he's long gone, lured away by Paige, who needed a timer. After all, what is the point of running if there's no finish line? No audience? No one to tell you that you've won?

Louis and I used to have rituals. We sat across from each other at breakfast each morning. We kissed in the dark of the stairwells, his hands disappearing under my scrubs. I can still remember the wet, electric feeling of his tongue pressing into the hollow spot at the bottom of my throat. Now we are just roommates. Nothing more.

In Kansas, when it is not the dead of winter, there are lots of sunflowers. In Kansas, in the year 1897, in a city called Atchison, Amelia Earhart was born. Kansas is not the flattest state in America. In Dodge City, spitting on the sidewalk is illegal. The state insect is the honeybee. The people who live here are called Kansans.

I repeat my list about Kansas and keep watching the pilgrim, who—like everything else in the world—is unreachable through the distance and the glass.

• • •

Lights Out is at ten o'clock and to our room it brings the darkest night I've ever seen. It's not like city darkness, softened by streetlights and headlights, but thick and black as tar. Louis isn't in bed for Lights Out—typical ever since he took up with Paige; her roommate was among the first to go to the tenth floor, so she can be counted on for privacy—but he returns not long after, in the mood to talk.

If your roommate dies, you remain in your room. There is no switching, no matter how lonely you get.

Tonight he's complaining about the food. In the Hospital, we have eaten lumps of breaded chicken drenched in a mysterious red sauce and partially defrosted peas and hard, stale dinner rolls, which Louis thinks taste like ash.

At dinner, we pick up these rolls and make like we're going to clunk each other in the head.

"At least we're alive," I say. "When you're dead, you don't get to eat at all."

"Like *ash*," says Louis.

I stretch my legs underneath the sheets, into the cool space at the bottom of the bed. Our room smells like rubbing alcohol and Vaseline. Louis can talk about whatever he likes. I just want to keep hearing his voice.

In the beginning, I would climb into his bed and feel his hands move down my waist. The whole time, I told myself we just needed something that felt familiar, needed to prove that a part of ourselves still belonged to the outside world. But during our second month the routine changed. After Lights Out, I burrowed next to him, started kissing his chest. He sat up and shrugged me away. At first, I thought this was a symptom: the prions were attacking his brain, he was losing his memory, he no longer knew who I was. *Quick*, I remember saying to myself, as though there was something for me to do.

In the dark, he started talking about his wife. He told me about the tangles of hair he would find in the bathroom, like tumbleweeds, or the way she used to unroll maps on the floor of their travel bookstore and trace the blue lines of rivers with her pinkie finger. He was remembering perfectly well.

His wife died in the third week of July, at five in the morning, at the Penn Presbyterian Medical Center in Philadelphia.

They lived in Philadelphia, Louis and his wife, in an apartment above their travel bookstore. I lived in a basement apartment on a dead-end street, on the eastern edge of Somerville. I want to believe I can have a fresh start here, in the Hospital.

That night, after Louis stops talking, I concentrate on where I am, in a safe place, in the care of medical experts,