Sent to visit one summer, Charlie and me, eight or nine years old, our mother putting us on a train in Providence, our father waiting on a platform in Detroit, pigeon murmur of loudspeakers in the station, man carrying our bags out into late afternoon light, click of boot heels across the concrete of parking garage, three of us riding out of the city in that old Impala of his, car floating big and loose as a motorboat in the dusk, radial drone of road and traffic under everything, burgers and fries in Flint, gas station in Saginaw, another hour to Grayling, Portage Lake, and the fishing cabin with our father at last.

A lifetime ago, yet still on that big bench seat of his car together, windows open with that loud pour of air, drowsy smell of heater at our feet, man driving with his arm straight, wrist flexed over the wheel, cigarette after cigarette in the dark as we go. And this little kid—me—I’m picking the plastic tubing of the armrest, my father’s face glowing from the light of the dash, my brother leaning toward the man like a plant toward the sun, three of us riding shoulder to shoulder. Even here we must know so much more than we know that we know. Even riding like this we must realize how deep we miss our father, how loyal we need to stay to our mother, two of us caught between this man more present when he’s gone, and this woman more absent when she’s home.

And home, whenever the phone catches us off-balance at night, whenever a car idles past the yard at dinner, we go all tiptoes with hope and fear to the window, Charlie looking as if to ask, Is it him?

Never who we want it to be, of course, and in the middle of the night we sometimes find ourselves awake suddenly, a kind of presence standing in the dark between us, faint creak of weight on the floor, branch scratching quietly at the window, house tight and tense and unable to get enough air.

You can imagine this kind of house. Can see the doilies, the photos, all the little efforts she makes, your mother with her porcelain collies on the shelf, all the bric-a-brac of hope. Can listen to the rooms as you would to the sound in a seashell—that constant press of quiet like a hand over your mouth—not hard, not heavy, but the weight not exactly lifting either. Can feel her voice in the

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Fidelity
empty rooms below. Hope she’s on the phone—please let her be talking with someone—not just alone in the kitchen again, woman conjuring your father home at night, your mother’s voice spooky as she talks to the light fixture on the ceiling, her tone going angry to sad to angry as she starts in on the coats hanging by the door. Can go downstairs with Charlie to the kitchen to break the spell. Can cling to Charlie as you clear your throat, Charlie clinging to you as you say you need a glass of water.

Hi, Mom, says Charlie.

What’re you two doing up? she asks, all sweet and surprised, like you’re two little birds at the door, her face scoured-looking, red and swollen around eyes and mouth. C’mon, she says, look what time it is.

She walks you down the hall, your brother holding your arm as you make your way together in the dark. Puts you into your beds, tucks the covers around you, says to go to sleep now please, woman kissing the hairline of your forehead, her breath sweet and humid as bread, hand cool and papery.

Should be able to put it together in some way—you and your brother—should see it clear by now, understand that she will never once explain any of this. None of it will ever lie still for her. Maybe that’s the point in the end. Our father, our mother, our sad little family, nothing will ever make sense for us. Maybe that’s what will break our hearts—and keep breaking our hearts—these two kids awake in their room all hours of the night, their mother’s voice like water pouring through walls, her voice like mice running under the floor, a thrumming like she’s crying, or laughing, or crying again, woman back and forth beneath you, back and forth with some awful secret she’s holding for you and Charlie, your mother keeping some object safe until you’re old enough to take it from her.

At least this is what we say to each other.
Charlie asking, So when d’you think we’ll be big enough?
Me saying, Seventh grade maybe. Or high school maybe.
He takes a deep breath, my brother, boy in his bed across the room from me.

Go to sleep, I tell him.
I can’t.
Try.
No, he says.

Makes us laugh, way he says it—way we always refuse whatever’s good for us—had to learn this from somewhere. Two of us lying there the entire night like this, each sigh, each huff of blankets, moon crossing the whole bowl of sky, Charlie turning every so often in the darkness, me still and quiet as possible,
trying to will my brother asleep with my mind.

And there are silences so loud we still hear them even now. All these years later, back in that old gone room of ours, that submarine tick of the house as it sinks deeper and deeper into night, everything holding its breath as we float down, clouds broken with moonlight like the surface of the sea far above, and glimpses of our father appearing pale and transparent outside the dark window, man as fragile as ash as he holds this shipwreck of a house going down, ghost forever there on the other side of the glass.