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THE RED DEEPS:
A RETELLING OF GEORGE ELIOT'S *THE MILL ON THE FLOSS*

By

Emily Denton
B.A., University of Tennessee Chattanooga, 2003
M.Div., Vanderbilt University, 2012
MFA, West Virginia University, 2016

A Dissertation Submitted to the
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A Dissertation Approved on

April 20, 2023

By the following Dissertation Committee:

Professor Deborah Lutz

Professor Dawn Heinecken

Professor Amy Clukey

Professor Nicoletta Vallorani

ABSTRACT

THE RED DEEPS
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Emily Denton

April 20, 2023

The culminating project toward my Ph.D. in Humanities under the Public Arts and Letters track is a combination of creative and scholarly work composed of two parts: a retelling of George Eliot's novel *The Mill on the Floss* and a critical introduction outlining the creative concerns to the project. The novel, *The Red Deeps*, reimagines *The Mill on the Floss* in the recent past—during the late 1980s in the Copper Basin, the former copper mines in Eastern Tennessee. The critical preface draws broader categories of adaptation, ecocriticism, and climate fiction and incorporates theorists from new southern and Appalachian studies to explore how large-scale mining industries have transformed the U.S. South and the copper basin.

The Red Deeps is composed of short chapters which correspond loosely to the chapters of George Eliot's novel. Interwoven within the chapters are intertextual passages taken from primary and secondary sources, such as quotes from *Mill on the Floss*, extracts from critical commentary, and information taken from Eliot's biography. The critical afterword is divided into four subtitled sections. The first section discusses

the different relationships between retellings and their source materials, including theories on the impetus behind the act of retelling and what purpose or role retellings serve in the literary canon. Next, I discuss how my retelling, *The Red Deeps*, fits within broader genre of climate-fiction. The third section considers these issues in interaction with the American South and Appalachia, giving particular focus to the representations and descriptions of an objectified landscape. In the last section I provide an overview of my novel and explain some of the structural and stylistic choices of the text.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

I. Fifty Shades of Fanfiction: Retellings, Adaptation and, Literary Afterlives

Adaptation is nothing new in literary publishing. There seems to be a rampant trend to reincarnate classic texts for modern audiences from Harper Collins' Austen Project,¹ which published modern retellings of Jane Austen's novels to a recent science fiction reimagining of Jane Eyre in space. Such retellings invite writers and readers to experience a world-within-worlds and hunt for the intertextual allusions within the text. This section will trace patterns of re-narration of classic novels by women of the nineteenth century such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. These texts have launched a wide range of reinterpretations, impersonations, parodies, homages, and fanfics. The long arm of Bronte fandom has launched such works as *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which originated as fanfiction based on the *Twilight* series—which was originally inspired by Heathcliff and Cathy's doomed romance. Rewritten texts have been derided as appropriation, salvaging, or theft, and are too often written off

¹ A 2013 HarperCollins project that paired six contemporary bestselling authors with Austen's six classic novels. The Austen Project was eventually abandoned after publishing only four modern remakes: See Joanna Trollope's, *Sense and Sensibility* (2013), Val McDermid's *Northanger Abbey* (2014), Alexander McCall Smith's, *Emma* (2015) and Curtis Sittenfeld's, *Eligible* (2016).

as a derivative by product of postmodernist culture.

Unlike other canonical 19th-century women writers, George Eliot's novels have been largely ignored by the adaptation zeal that has produced the many reprisals of Austen's and Emily and Charlotte Brontës' work. This is not to say that Eliot has not been reapproached by contemporary authors completely. Rebecca Shoptaw's 2017 *Middlemarch* is a gender-bent, 70-episode vlog series that follows student filmmaker Dorothea—“Dot”—and her friends at the fictional Lowick College in the town of Middlemarch, Connecticut. Diana Souhami's novel *Gwendolyn* imagines a future for the central protagonist of, *Daniel Deronda*. Furthermore, Gabrielle Zevin's *The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry* could be considered a modernization of *Silas Marner*, though the book was not marketed as a contemporary retelling. Despite such examples, retellings of Eliot's novels are rare, if almost nonexistent. This could partly be due to a lack of familiarity with the canonical texts. Many may not be familiar with *Silas Marner* in the way that readers may be with the major plot points and central characters of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* or Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.

“But why never *Middlemarch*?” asks Rebecca Mead, perhaps the foremost advocate of Eliot's revivalism, in her bibliometric *My Life in Middlemarch*.² “Why has the novel proved largely resistant to such reimagining?” Mead suggests that it is the

² In her review of *My Life in Middlemarch*, Joyce Carol Oates locates Mead's writing within a small subset of memoirs, the bibliomemoir. According to Oates, the “rarely attempted, and still more rarely successful” bibliomemoir, “a subspecies of literature combining criticism and biography with the intimate, confessional tone of autobiography.” The bibliomemoir, more so than other adaptations, flaunts its textual influences, often adopting a reverential, worshipful stance toward the master narrative and its author.

“density” and “psychological complexity” that make Eliot’s novels too daunting for “‘Clueless’-like efforts at a wholesale relocation to a new context.”³ Eliot does not share the same popularity or even come close to fan-culture as Austen, or to a lesser extent the Brontës.

However, many of the same themes and plot points are shared among these 19th-century novelists. Eliot’s novels are filled with unrequited, scandalous, and doomed relationships ripe for retelling.

Rewriting criticism extends from a broader category of intertextual theory. Many scholars agree that Julia Kristeva first introduced the term “intertextuality” in her 1967 publication of “Word, Dialogue, and Novel.” In this essay, Kristeva focuses on the writings of Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin and his claim that the novel was a dialogic genre that brought together a wide range of opposing and divergent voices. Through her study of Bakhtin’s work, Kristeva examines the far-reaching implications of intertextuality in literary studies. She writes, “Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.”⁴ According to Kristeva, every text is an intersection of cultural and historical influences and depends on relationships with other artifacts and discourses.

The trend in these modern retellings is the adaptation of classic literary works, myths, or historical events. Linda Hutcheon claims that the process of adaptation is a process of creation that “involves both (re-) interpretation and then (re-) creation; this has

³ Mead, “Middlemarch Gets Winningly Adapted.”

⁴ Kristeva, “Word, Dialogue, and Novel,” 37.

been called both appropriation and salvaging.”⁵ In *A Theory of Adaption*, Hutcheon looks to legitimize adapted or rewritten texts by pushing against critics that view the proliferation of contemporary retellings as a derivative byproduct of postmodernist culture. A critical factor in any revisited text is the audience’s familiarity with the initial text. Hutcheon discusses the importance of audience considerations in her distinction between “knowing” and “unknowing” audiences. According to Hutcheon, “part of the pleasure” of adaptation lies in the audience’s recognition and remembrance of the primary text. Adaptation’s appeal, she claims, “comes simply from repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise.”⁶ Adaptation, unlike parody, or plagiarism, signals its influences overtly, often announcing openly that the work is “based on” a prior narrative. In such cases of “known adaption,” the audience’s experience with the adapted work is often reliant on a “horizon of expectations.”⁷ Hutcheon discusses the importance of audience considerations in her distinction between knowing and unknowing audiences, that is readers who have or have not read the original text. She claims that “knowing audiences have expectations—and demands.”⁸

While Hutcheon’s work attempts to develop necessary distinctions among adapted texts, she does not address literary rewriting per se but focuses on a larger swath of texts across multiple genres. Christian Moraru expands Hutcheon’s theories in *Rewriting* by systematically examining rewriting tendencies in late 20th-century

⁵ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 8.

⁶ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 4-5

⁷ Hutcheon, 121.

⁸ Hutcheon, 121-123

American fiction. Moraru acknowledges the elusiveness of rewriting as a literary category and, as such, attempts to trace patterns of re-narration to determine the cultural-ideological issues at stake in these updated texts. Rewriting, according to Moraru, is not a literary genre but an “*archigenre*,” a “hybrid practice,” or an “intertextual phenomenon” that can be consumed by other more canonical genres. Moraru defines rewriting as an intertextual form that closely resembles a prior work. His examination of rewritten texts focuses on fiction that projects and comments on the primary narrative. He distinguishes his study from the neoclassical philosophy of rewriting, which does not try to displace or replace their literary model, instead insisting that “rewriting is underwriting, support and reduplication of the already written.”⁹

Moraru maintains that “true” rewriting “does more than just lay bare its own techniques.” Instead, it is a “radical literary practice” that attempts to rewrite reality through “un-writing” and other revisionist techniques.¹⁰ Moraru describes this type of rewriting as “intertextuality with a conscience.”¹¹ Rewriting in this sense is no longer merely a response to, or support of, or reduplication of past texts. Postmodern rewritings, Moraru maintains, try to rupture, redo, or remake the literary past as opposed to the neoclassical philosophy of rewriting as “underwriting,” which supports and replicates the primary narratives. According to Moreau, “literature that rewrites previous literature is a political act.”¹²

While I have no illusions that a retelling of George Eliot’s novels will herald a

⁹ Moraru, *Rewriting*, 9.

¹⁰ Moraru, 20.

¹¹ He draws on examples such as Toni Morrison’s retelling of Uncle Remus’s “The Wonderful Tar Baby” in *Tar Baby*.

¹² Moraru, 156.

revitalization of her long-ago popularity, I think that in a literary market saturated with Austen and Brontë retellings, revisiting other authors, particularly women writers, can introduce new audiences to unfamiliar or daunting works that they may have otherwise overlooked.

II. Climate Fiction's Long History: Toward an Ecological Perspective

My retelling of *The Mill on the Floss* draws on the broad genre of Climate Fiction, or “Cli-Fi,” which expresses the growing anxieties around climate change and human relationships with the environment. While “Cli-Fi” is a relatively new term,¹³ the fiction of the climate crisis has roots that extend as far back as the early 19th century. Scientific discoveries and rising industrialization were instrumental in heralding an “apocalyptic imagination” as images of the collapse of civilization and the destruction of the earth saturated Victorian popular culture.¹⁴

In her examination of late Victorian fiction of natural catastrophes, Ailise Bulfin suggests that the phenomenon of ecological crisis fiction has a much longer history than many acknowledge. She argues that these “natural catastrophe texts” reveal Victorian concerns about human development and its adverse environmental effects.¹⁵ Descriptions of drowned cities, deadly fogs, volcanic eruptions, and catastrophic comet collisions fill

¹³ There is some disagreement among critics as to when, and who, coined the term “Cli-Fi.” In a 2013 *National Public Radio* interview, “Cli-Fi” was used to describe the recent outpouring of climate-related books. Journalist Dan Bloom has also been credited with coining the term as early as the mid-2000s.

¹⁴ In his examination of the flood in Victorian fiction, Darryl Jones suggests that this “apocalyptic anxiety” was in large part due to a “crisis of faith” brought on by the cataclysmic paradigm shift that was Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*.

¹⁵ Bulfin, “The Natural Catastrophe in Late Victorian Popular Fiction,” 84.

the pages of Victorian fiction and ecological catastrophe novels. For example, William Delisle Hay's *The Doom of the Great City* and Richard Jefferies' *After London* grapple with concerns about the sustainability of urban development and the growing dependence on industrial production.

Eliot seems to speak to the future of climate change in the description of a landscape transformed by modern industry, and her anxiety for the future of the natural world is apparent in her passages that describe St. Ogg and its inhabitants:

Even the floods had not been great in late years. The mind of St Ogg's did not look extensively before or after. It inherited a long past without thinking of it. . . the present time was like the level plain where men lose their belief in volcanoes and earthquakes, thinking tomorrow will be as yesterday, and the giant forces that used to shake the earth are forever laid to sleep.¹⁶

Throughout *Mill*, Eliot repeatedly reminds readers that humans cannot master or control nature without far-reaching consequences. In her eco-critical interpretation of the novel, Melanie Hacke suggests that Eliot is ultimately critiquing rising commercialism and industrialization that removes the individual from their connection to the natural world. Eliot's "ideal human dwelling," according to Hacke, is one "where inhabitants are careful not to overtax the earth's resources but live sustainably without harming the environment."¹⁷

This vision of the interconnectedness of nature and culture anticipates many contemporary climate concerns and speaks to overarching ecofeminist concerns. For example, In *The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology* King reveals the important connections between domination of nature and the domination of women. The

¹⁶ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 112.

¹⁷ Hacke, "Uprooted by Modernity," 127.

failure to recognize these connections results in insufficient environmental and feminist theory and practice. According to King understanding the link between domination of women and nature “opens the way to developing a set of ethics required for decisions making about technology.”¹⁸ Technology is defined as the tools humans use to interact with nature: “from the digging stick to nuclear bombs.”¹⁹ King’s view of technology, specifically military technology, cannot be separated from the dual oppression of women and nature. Ecofeminism recognizes the connection between misogyny and the domination and destruction of nature. King shows the connection between human hierarchy in culture and the destruction of the natural world. Feminist theory speaks to social ecology in showing that dominion over nature is rooted in the subjugation of women. Both nature and women are othered in patriarchal culture, social ecology requires feminist ideology because all domination extends from the original subjugation of women. According to King, Ecofeminism “asserts that the domination of woman was the original domination in human society, from which all other hierarchies—of rank, class, and political power—flow.”²⁰

In much the same way that George Eliot wrote with a specific didactic vision in her novels, Cli-Fi authors are writing for a sense of social purpose.²¹ *Mill* lends itself to such a retelling as many of the concerns that trouble contemporary Cli-Fi authors—the effects of rising industrialization on the environment, restrictive gender roles, and role of

¹⁸ King, “The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology,” in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, 473.

¹⁹ King, 473.

²⁰ King, 473.

²¹ For more on this see Eliot’s journal entry from December 6, 1857, “How I Came to Write Fiction.”

the individual in the community—can be found in Eliot’s novels.

III. Out of Place and Unnatural: Appalachian Studies and Tennessee’s Red Desert

The notion of a hidden place of autonomy in nature is a central feature of many women-authored development novels. The “The Red Deeps” descriptions in *Mill* first inspired my novel’s idea. Many of these novels depict natural sanctuaries that women carve out for themselves, such as Emily’s “Land of Uprightness,”²² Julie’s backyard retreat christened “The Rocks,”²³ and Francie’s tree-shaded fire escape.²⁴ Even Katniss Everdeen finds solace in the ruins of a woodland cabin beyond the border of District 12.²⁵ The recurrent descriptions of these private places in nature, and the heroines’ link to the natural world, have been explored by many feminist theorists, in particular Elaine Showalter’s well-known essay “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,” which articulates the concept of “wild zones” of women’s culture located outside the boundaries of culture and society.²⁶

George Eliot explores notions of gender and feminine “norms” through the protagonist Maggie Tulliver. Many readers have identified with Maggie Tulliver, the willful, unruly protagonist who chafes against the strict confines of family and community. Maggie’s struggle to remain demure and compliant is a common characteristic many female characters share in 19th- and early 20th-century literature. For

²² L.M. Montgomery, *Emily’s Quest*.

²³ Catherine Marshall, *Julie*.

²⁴ Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.

²⁵ Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games*.

²⁶ Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, 262.

example, Frances Hodgson Burnett's protagonist Mary Lennox, like Maggie Tulliver, is a misunderstood and often unlikable child who escapes to a hidden space within nature for solace.²⁷ For Mary, this refuge is a walled and locked garden on the grounds of Misselthwaite Manor. In *Mill*, Maggie retreats to "the Red Deeps," an "insignificant rise of ground crowned by trees," which is described as "her one indulgence."²⁸

In Eliot's novel, The Red Deeps are a secret refuge for Maggie, a place where she can explore her literary ambitions, read books, and talk with her friend Phillip. I did not want to replicate the Red Deeps as a literary oasis but as a larger metaphor for the outside world, its experiences, knowledge, and ideas. I also think that the act of reading as a reproachable habit for young women did not translate as well outside of the Victorian era. The essence of Maggie's yearning and curiosity resides in a desire for knowledge of the world beyond the small mining community where she's grown up. In my retelling, the protagonists' sanctuary is not a secluded natural spot but a scarred and abandoned wreckage in a mining town. The chapters that take place in "The Red Deeps" are set near the abandoned mining structures of the Burra Burra mine near Copperhill, Tennessee.

The mining towns mentioned in *The Red Deeps* (Dorlcote, Mudport, and St. Ogg) are based on the real mining towns Ducktown, Isabella, and Copperhill, Tennessee. The Copper Basin, an area of approximately fifty square miles, is surrounded by mountains and spans the borders of Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina. Industrialized copper mining began in southern Appalachians in 1873 and continued almost continuously until

²⁷ Burnett, *The Secret Garden*.

²⁸ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 276.

1988.²⁹

I stumbled upon the copper basin while researching mining communities for an earlier version of this project. I was shocked to discover that there was once a literal red dessert in the Appalachian Mountains. Growing up in Nashville, I had never heard of the copper basin, and even when I went to college in Chattanooga, a town only sixty miles from Copperhill, I still did not know that such a blight on the hills had once existed. Much of what I hope this novel achieves is more recognition of the environmental toll that mining had on the landscape.

In the same way Rebecca Mead melodramatically writes, “Why not *Middlemarch*?” I am also asking, why not the copper basin? Or, more accurately, why aren’t there more novels set against the backdrop of this red desert? Why wasn’t a landscape so visibly and violently eroded by acid rain, not more visibly remembered? And perhaps most relevant to this discussion, what narratives do we tell ourselves about these red hills? And how do these narratives fit within the broader conception of Appalachian history and culture.

Negative depictions of the Ducktown dessert were common to those visiting the region and descriptions of the “red desert” from those outside the basin often veered toward the oddity or grotesqueness of the landscape. However, among insiders, some appreciated the basin’s lack of mosquitos, snakes, rodents, and allergens.³⁰ Much of my information about the state of life, such as the inability to hang clothing on the line on

²⁹ Maysilles, *Ducktown Smoke: The Fight Over the South’s Greatest Environmental Diasters*.

³⁰ See Elizabeth Dulemba, *A Bird on Water Street*, or Duncan Maysilles, *Ducktown Smoke*

high smelting days, the stinging of the acid rain, and even the sulfur smoke that descended the mountain into the towns on foggy days, was taken from local research and the few fictional books based in the basin.³¹

A description from a 1936 soil conservation manifesto titled, *Rich Land, Poor Land*, illustrates the fascination and revulsion many outsiders felt toward the red landscape of the basin. In this account, author Stuart Chase describes the fascination and horror he felt on seeing the banks change from “good honest mud to this forbidding brown jelly.” In Chase’s observation, the Ocoee River that winds through the basin was “a river not of water but of boiling molasses. The whole stream bed, every rock, every log, every leaf of grass was coated in silt. . . mile up on mile had been blasted by fire.”³² Over and over, Chase emphasizes the peculiarity of the red desert, its out-of-placeness among the lush forests of the surrounding mountains. The Landscape was “strangely out of place in Tennessee, and unnatural. I cannot tell you what it means to see and feel the power of the earth cover gone. Anything might happen. Here was no place for life or for man.”³³ Summing up his visit through the copper basin and the Mining towns of Polk County he writes— “ugliness matches ugliness, and desolation suits desolation” and asks, “what happens when a continent is one red Ducktown?”³⁴

This objectification, or tokenism of the southern landscape, as part nostalgia, part wild west territory speaks of the misconception of who southerners and especially

³¹ Both Elizabeth Dulemba 2018 *A Bird on Water Street*, and Helen Reeder Cross’s, 1982 *Isabella Mine* are set in the Copper Basin. Both books are also written for children, or Middle-grade readers.

³² Stuart, *Rich Land, Poor Land*, 48.

³³ Stuart, *Rich Land, Poor Land*, 49.

³⁴ Stuart, *Rich Land, Poor Land*, 50.

Appalachians are. Appalachian is a term that has a long and problematic history of misconception about what and who the Appalachians are and what defines the region. Often defined in terms of romanticized pastoralism or hillbilly derision, Appalachia is a vast geographical region spanning 13 states and covering approximately 700,000 square miles.³⁵

In her 2018 book *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia*, Elizabeth Catte offers an analysis of the death-dealing cost of industrialized mining and coal production for the region. Central to her discussion is the way in which Appalachian stereotypes of the backwards hillbilly have legitimized paternalistic and unfettered exploration of the region's resources. The vision of Appalachia as a wild, untamed pocket of America grew in popularity during the 20th century. As Catte points out, these popular "narratives of Appalachian otherness often work too well. . . For industrialists, the natural perception of Appalachia as a blighted and unnatural place aided their economic expansion. The most degraded of all Appalachians were those who, by chance or intent, had not taken their rightful place in the region's mines and hills."³⁶

The Appalachian stereotype, of backwoods hillbilly is a convenient symbol, and one that was scapegoated after the 2016 election cycle. Catte offers a brisk summary of the astonishing number of news, magazine, and scholarly articles that blamed Trump's victory on voters from mining communities in Kentucky, West Virginia, and Eastern Tennessee who voted against the nation's wellbeing in order to preserve jobs in the coal industry. Missing from these narratives about the people and places of Appalachia are the

³⁵ Williams, *Appalachia: A History*.

³⁶ Catte, *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia*, 38.

human cost of industrialization. Catte cites Hilary Clinton's 2016 remarks to out-of-work coal miners in West Virginia when she was quoted as saying that coal miners did "the best they could" to "keep the lights on." According to Catte, this "ghastly but honest flub" is emblematic way current conversations about Appalachia are missing the point. She writes, "Appalachian communities and people are used as convenient symbols. The slogan "'coal keeps the lights on,' is often the rallying cry of those condemning. The 'war on coal,' but I suspect even the most progressive among us have been tempted to lob the phrase at someone clueless about the human cost of their energy. People didn't 'do their best' to keep the nation's lights on; they died."³⁷

While Catte's analysis and many other recent Appalachian criticism focuses on the coal mining communities of the Appalachian region—for good reason, as coal was for a long time the number industry in states like Kentucky, West Virginia, and Tennessee—the same concerning pattern of unfettered industrialization and paternalism is evident in the history of copper companies in basin. After all, the first words spoken aloud in *The Mill on the Floss* are "what I want." Spoken by Jeremy Tulliver, this statement signifies the relationship many industrializers had toward the land's resources.

IV. The Red Deeps: An Overview

Preparation and Evolution of Project

The central topics of retelling and climate fiction came together during the second term of my Ph.D. During the spring 2018 semester, I took two literature classes, *George Eliot: Victorian Rebel* with Professor Deborah Lutz and *The Literature of Lewis & Clark* with

³⁷ Catte, 28.

Professor Kiki Petrosino. In Professor Lutz's class, I read George Eliot's writing for the first time. Rebecca Mead, in charting her relationship with the work of George Eliot, describes her reaction to reading *Middlemarch* for the first time: "This book, which had been published . . . almost a hundred years before I was born, was not distant or dusty, but arresting in the acuteness of its psychological penetration and the snap of its sentences . . . I could not believe how good it was. Furthermore, I could not believe how relevant and urgent it felt."³⁸ On reading *The Mill on the Floss*, I too could not believe how good it was. As an avid reader of 19th-century women novelists, I could not believe I had never read one of George Eliot's novels.

Professor Petrosino's *The Literature of Lewis and Clark* not only introduced me to a part of American history with which I was unfamiliar—the Corps of Discovery and the opening of the American West—but it also offered a chance to explore how other artists and writers have responded to the American myth of the Lewis and Clark journey. In this course, we considered how contemporary authors have used their writing to reimagine ways into the silences of historical records. Examining the often-overlooked figures on the Corps of Discovery, course readings such as Campbell McGrath's *Shannon*, Diane Glancy's *Stone Heart*, and Frank X. Walker's *Buffalo Dance* considered the shifting point-of views and other power dynamics that emerged when these characters are allowed or not allowed, to tell their own stories. Such reimagining into historical events invites readers to look at familiar events or historical sources in a new way.

The rewritten texts I read in this course, such as *Stone Heart* and *Shannon*,

³⁸ Mead, *My Life in Middlemarch*, 4.

inspired alternative rewriting methods, particularly in these authors' experimentation with form and the fragmented narrative. While writing *The Red Deeps*, I used this fragmented style, particularly in Part III, "The Temptation," which is the most fragmented of the three sections.

We ended the semester by reading Benjamin Percy's *The Dead Lands*, a post-apocalyptic retelling of Lewis and Clark's expedition. This novel inspired much of my initial thinking for this project; I was delighted by Percy's quirky, action-packed narrative about a band of explorers journeying across a harsh and unforgiving landscape. Percy blends genres of horror, science-fiction, and Westerns to create a retelling of American history that is compulsively readable. Percy's description of a post-apocalyptic landscape, ruined and burned beyond recognition by nuclear war offered examples of how to describe an unfamiliar, even alien landscape of the basin's red desert with verisimilitude.

These readings broadened my understanding of rewriting as a literary practice. Each author stretched the boundaries of easy recognition as they experimented with reconfiguring and recasting other texts through unexpected juxtapositions.

Structure and Stylistic Choices

I did not wish to fall into the trap many retellings succumb to: That of an overly reverent stance to the source material; therefore, in many places, my retelling deviates from Eliot's text. For example, I shortened the overall timeline. Eliot's novel covers Maggie's life from the time she is a young child until her young adulthood. I have condensed much of *Mill*'s major plot points into a few years from 1985-1990. I used either flashback scenes or other allusions to the past to account for some of the necessary backstories from

Eliot's timeline.

Part I, "The Basin," takes place in the spring of 1986 during the final days of mining in the Copper Basin. Part II, "The Downfall" covers the time from Jeremy Tulliver's "Downfall" (i.e., the loss of the mine and eventual bankruptcy) to his death. Part III, "The Temptation," begins in the summer of 1989 and ends in the spring of 1990. Parts I and II are the longest sections of *The Red Deeps*. Part III, "The Temptation," is shorter and brisker in tone to reflect the writing style from *Mill*. This has been a common critique of the novel since its publication. I envision future revisions, and even the final version of the book will include a preface or afterward that discusses the long history of mining in the area.

Inspired by the structure of recent novels such as Jennifer Offill's *Weather* Tupelo Hassman's *Gods with a little g*, *The Red Deeps* is compiled of a series of short chapters ranging from a single paragraph to several pages. Offill's and Hassman's novels are structured around micro-moments, with chapters comprising paragraphs and sentence-length segments that build into an overarching story. *Weather's* fragmented structure and brief narrative bursts reflect the experience of grappling with the impossibility of a global catastrophe while still navigating the daily domestic duties of packing a child's lunch or walking the dog. In Leslie Jamison's review of *Weather*, she points out that Offill's fragmented structure matches the "unbearable emotional intensity" of the novel. According to Jamison, there's "something at the core of the story that cannot be narrated directly, by straight chronology, because to do so would be like looking at the sun."³⁹

The Red Deeps is intentionally fragmented, especially in the final book. This is

³⁹ Leslie Jamison, "Homesick for Another World," *The New York Times*. Feb 9, 2020.

inspired by trends in micro fiction or flash fiction.⁴⁰ For example, Lydia Davis’s short-short stories,⁴¹ or authors such as Lily Tuck,⁴² and Lucy Corin who have published novels made up of short, vignette-style chapters.

Many of the chapters that follow begin with epigraphs; italics indicate these portions of the text. Typically, these “intertextual” passages come at the beginning of the chapter, except in a few instances when these sections act as single chapters. This format reflects Eliot’s penchant for epigraphs in her fiction, most notably found at the beginning of chapters in *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*.⁴³ Eliot refers to these epigraphs repeatedly in her letters and journals as “mottos.”⁴⁴ I like this term for the intertextual passages, as they seem to suggest a summing up or condensation of the research and literary allusions that I’m drawing on in this retelling. Furthermore, the epigraphic structure contributes to the overall fragmented, or episodic nature of the individual chapters in *The Red Deeps*.

Next Steps—Plans for Revision

Major characters and relationships central to Eliot’s novel are explored in my retelling, specifically, Maggie’s’ relationship with other women, such as her cousin Lucy, her

⁴⁰ Mark, Athitakis. “How 2022 became the year of the fragmented-identity novel,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 20.2022.

⁴¹ See Goodyear, “Long Story Short: The Radial Fiction of Lydia Davis.” *The New Yorker*. Mar. 3. 2014.

⁴² See *Heathcliff Redux* and *Sisters*.

⁴³ See David Higdon, “George Eliot and the Art of the Epigraph,” and Amelia Hall “Epic-Graphic Proportions in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*

⁴⁴ See Eliot’s, letter to John Blackwood (1857-12-15): “I gave up the motto; because it struck you as having been used before. . . it is one of those obvious quotations which never appear fresh, though they may actually be made for the first time.” From Cross, JW. *George Eliot's Life*, 1885, 1:387.

domineering Dodson aunts, and her close bond with her aunt Gritty Moss.

In both the critical and creative portions of this project, material culture will be a central theme. Fundamental to discussions about climate change are the economic and material effects of human industry on the environment. In climate fiction objects from the past are often fetishized and removed from their original or intended use value.

In reimagining the Dodson sisters, I used the criticism that exists on the material culture of Victorian realist fiction to inform their relationship to objects and personal possessions. Critics have long acknowledged Eliot's careful portrayal of the impact of industrial capitalism on early 19th-century rural England. Central to an economic reading of *Mill* are the material concerns and individual property that are central to the Tullivers' downfall. Eliot explores the personal and social significance of material objects and takes seriously the relationship characters have with their possessions. The Dodson women's peculiar attachment to their possessions expresses the anxiety over the drastically changing society of the Industrial Revolution, and the shifting social roles and expectations that result from these advanced technologies. Eliot trains the reader to understand objects and personal possessions as reflections of internal truths through minute description of the items that inhabit the fictional space. Elaine Freedgood's seminal text on material culture *The Ideas in Things* concentrates her analysis on the objects that clutter the pages of Victorian novels. She suggests that Eliot "was among the first novelists to decide that the stuff, that is to say the things, of everyday life could have meanings for reader that narrators ought to restrict by way of interpretation."⁴⁵

Moving forward I would like to emphasize this relationship and include more of

⁴⁵ Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things*, 117.

the crucial Dodson scenes that were not as fleshed out in this version. I translated this materiality into Bessie's preoccupation with the memorabilia from her glory days as a country music star and Sophy's extensive clothing collection, including a large suite of closets.

While I included some scenes that illustrate Maggie's fraught, often volatile relationship with her brother Tom (i.e., "The Life Cycle of Frogs" from Part I and the fight at the end of Part II), there is room to explore this sibling dynamic further. This sibling relationship has troubled readers and critics of *Mill*, and I am reluctant to give Tom's character as much narrative space as Eliot offers him in *Mill*. I also do not want to end the novel with the double drowning of the brother and sister. Such an ending amplifies the importance of the sibling relationship which is not central in my retelling.

In future drafts, I would like to explore the disastrous outcome of Maggie's almost elopement with Stephen Guest and the aftermath. In *Mill*, Maggie is shunned by her community for trying to run away with her cousin's fiancée Stephen Guest. When Maggie reconsiders and returns to St. Ogg, she is the object of harsh criticism and relentless gossip. Stephen, however, is forgiven by the community: "Stephen Guest had certainly not behaved well; but then, young men were liable to those suddenly infatuated attachments . . . a young man of five-and-twenty is not to be too severely judged in these cases—he is really very much at the mercy of a designing bold girl." St. Ogg's judgment of Maggie and forgiveness of Stephen is, unfortunately, a scenario that easily translates into a contemporary setting. Despite the advances made by political and social movements such as #metoo, too often, we see examples of women being held to a vicious double standard in the wake of sexual scandals.

Absent from this draft is the final flood and drowning of Maggie and Tom Tulliver., I left the ending intentionally ambiguous to allow for a series of potential conclusions when revising. Like many readers and critics of *Mill*, I am dissatisfied with the novel's final scene and Maggie's death by drowning. One advantage of rewritten texts is that later audiences can revise and reimage dissatisfactory endings. For example, Patricia Park's adaptation of *Jane Eyre*, *Re-Jane* ends not with Jane returning to Rochester but rather with her family relations in Seoul. Alternatively, the ending of Lily Tuck's *Heathcliff Redux* imagines Cathy divorced, not dead.

PART I—THE BASIN

1985-1986

Apollo astronauts of the 1960s used the scar in the Appalachians as a navigational aid. The three man-made marks on the planet that were visible from space were said to be the Great Wall of China, the pyramids of Egypt, and the Copper Basin in Tennessee.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Tennessee Valley Authority. *The Global View*.

Outside Dorlcote Mill

*Our brown canal was endless to my thought;
And on its banks I sat in dreamy peace,
Unknowing how the good I loved was wrought,
Untroubled by the fear that it would cease.⁴⁷*

Maggie stood at the water's frothing edge. She stared out at the river, straining her gaze across the slapping hiss of the water that seemed to gallop toward her from the opposite bank. The sun hovered over the horizon, sinking fast behind the distant red hills. The thunder of the rapids cloaked the river bank in a kind of dreamy deafness, a lulling white noise that drowned out the mechanical whir from the mine.

She wanted to be the first to see Tom cross the bridge into town. He wasn't expected until late that night, but she stood still, rooted to the riverbank in case he decided to return early. She knew her mother hated when he drove in the dark, especially when he came home late at night and had to navigate the ridge's twisting switch-backed turns in the dark. This was Tom's first trip home since he returned to school after Christmas. In the months since Tom had been gone, she'd felt the town closing in on her and tightening its hold more than ever.

She felt the temperature drop, a sudden and apparent cooling that happened each evening, even in the summer, when the sun disappeared behind the mountain. The days always ended like this, a quick plunge to darkness like a light switching off. Tightening her coat around her, she turned to walk back into town, cutting through the untidy

⁴⁷ George Eliot, "Brother and Sister" from *The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems* (1874 UK edition), 214.

patchwork of scrap lumber and tarp-covered machinery spread out along the narrow bottomland by the river.

I Get the Blues When I Rains

Gold in their palms. They roasted the rude ore with green cordwood, cut from the virgin forest. Great heaps of burning wood and sulfur—like supernatural blasts—hot, smoking, acrid. The green cordwood smoked. The heat drove off volatile gases. Fumes settled over the land, bathing hills in vales alike in heavy, sulfurous clouds. Treed in poisonous fogs. Grasses withered until not a wisp of living vegetation remained. The land became a desert—red, raw, ragged, as far as the eye can see.⁴⁸

Jeremy Tulliver walked out of the wide glass doors of the Tennessee Copper Company's headquarters. Neon patches of dandelion dotted the asphalt, and a row of scraggly trees, just planted, lined the front door. He sprinted across the parking lot toward the far-off section of spaces appointed for visitors. He swiped at the rain, dotting his arms and the back of his neck, and winced at the brief sting that ebbed as the rain dried. Fat drops of rain pummeled the windshield, and a fine layer of red dust coated his truck. He started the ignition and cranked the wipers to full blast. Red rivulets smeared across the entire windshield, marring his vision in a tinge of red. The world through copper-colored glasses, he laughed humorlessly to himself, not precisely rose-colored. But then, that was life in the basin. Everything was seen through a layer of red dust. He thought he'd need to get new windshield wipers as the red streak remained even after cranking the wipers to full blast. He needed a new set of tires too. The acid was rough on cars in the basin, eating away the rubber and chrome at an alarming rate. He was replacing his tires more and more frequently than he'd used to. Or perhaps, he was just noticing the cost of a new set of tires every few months more now that production had slowed and he was swamped in EPA litigation.

⁴⁸ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service, *The Badlands of Tennessee, Fortunes Washed Away*, 4.

When Eddie Wakem had called him up last week to invite him over to see the new offices on their side of the basin, Jeremy had assumed he wanted to talk about the last smoke complaints from Gilmer County. He and Riley had shared the legal expenses a couple of years back when Cherokee county filed a similar smoke complaint with the courts. But Wakem hadn't planned on fighting the legislation at all. The TCC could comply with the EPA's new regulations. It's just a matter of updating some things around here. Wakem had said, giving a meaningful look to the framed map of the TCC's newest mine holdings. They wanted his mine. Fucking vultures.

His knuckles whitened from his grip on the steering wheel as he stared out at the bright industrial complex surrounded by a streamlined, manicured lot. Inside, the building was just as pristine. Bright, white, and unnatural. Nothing but crisp navy corners for the TCC. Wakem's office was all sharp edges, straight lines, and neat corners. Not a pencil shaving or a scrap of paper in sight. The man even kept a manual on mining behind a glass case.

Jeremy had stood looking down into a display case at the open pages of the book, not able to make out a single word. This book on the history of copper mining, as Wakem had explained in laborious detail, was the first English translation of a 15th-century treatise on copper mining. Translated into English in 1912 by none other than Herbert Hoover, future president and then copper miner. Hoover autographed it himself. See there. Wakem had pointed to the large scrawl on the thin onion-skinned front page, staring up at them under the display glass. Wakem went on—the history of copper and the invention of the printing press in the Dark Ages that allowed mining practices to spread to America. Jeremy knew that the first miners in America were straight off the

boat from Cornwall. He didn't need a 15th-century book that wasn't even in English to tell him about copper. He was more determined than ever not to sell up to the TCC. He unclenched his fingers from the steering wheel and put the truck in gear.

Jeremy pulled out of the lot onto Ocoee Street and headed south toward Route 68. Rain puddled in the dry-as-dust streets as he drove out of Copperhill and across the bridge into Georgia. The Tennessee Copper Company's massive industrial complex of smelters, smokestacks, and the largest copper furnace in the nation dominated his rearview mirror. The TCC was the tallest structure in the entire basin, more like a town than a company, and it wasn't until he had crossed the border into Georgia that the looming shadow of the plant faded into the distance.

He followed 68 along the river through downtown McCarville until he reached the brick steeple of New Hope Baptist Church. Turning left, he continued north on Mineral Bluff Parkway, past All Things Gas N Goods and McCaysville Drug & Gun. He headed north, following the river until he reached the nearly invisible turn-off that led past Greasy Creek and along the broad ridge that separated the Big and Little Frog mountains. The gullied hills of the badlands spread below him as he wound up hairpin turns toward Dorlcote.

The Copper Basin, ten miles wide and twenty miles long, sits 1,800 feet above sea level and a thousand feet above the Tennessee River Valley. Mountains rim the basin on all sides. To the west, the peaks of Little Frog and Big Frog Mountain are swallowed up by the fifteen-mile range of the Unaka Mountains. These outlying ranges are pierced by the Ocoee and Hiwassee Rivers and serve as the only entry points to the basin below.

The only way to get from one edge of the valley to the other was to drive out of

the basin and into Georgia's Ellijay Valley. This valley followed an ancient fault line from Atlanta to Marietta. It continued through the jumbled peaks of the Cohutta Mountains before descending into the basin. This route, known to locals as the old copper road, is still the only entry point to pierce the basin's western wall. What was once a footpath, then a wagon road, then a train track for the L & N's route between Atlanta and Knoxville, was finally paved over sometime in the 50's and renamed Georgia Highway Number 5.

The basin's land was dead, literally poisonous to life. Jeremy remembered listening to a radio program as a kid about soil conservation. He could still hear the canned laughter, the corny dialogue, and the sinister organ music that signaled doom and destruction. For a time, the whole town had been spooked. They'd even held a community meeting to discuss the ramifications of the radio broadcast. His father and old Mr. Barclay had written an official Cease and Desist notice to the producers of *Fortunes Washed Away*, but they never received a response. Still, they couldn't deny that the ground was red, the air stank of rotten eggs, and the rain stung like the dickens if you got caught in it. They couldn't ignore the yellow sulfur clouds that hovered beneath Two Top, Mule Top, and Big Frog peaks. The fog would sink down the mountainside on high-humidity days and slide into the valley. It crawled through the streets and alleys of the town, a sulfurous seeking cloud, like that horrible movie he saw as a kid, *Attack of the Killer Fog*, where a hovering poisonous fog killed victims instantly if they were sucked in. This was a fog of plans, an agenda, and a mind of its own.

Girl Friday

*But it's bad—it's bad, Mr. Tulliver added sadly, checking this blamable exultation. A woman's no business wi' being so clever; it'll turn to trouble, I doubt*⁴⁹

Tulliver sat at a narrow desk underneath the mine office window. Tulliver's father had deliberately moved the office to this top floor so he could keep an eye on the comings and goings of traffic between the mine and the town. From this position, he could see the feed store at the north end of Main Street all the way to the coaling tower at Burra-Burra Mine. He could see past the roofs of the train depot and out far beyond where the river bisected the bottomlands. He watched as his daughter Maggie scaled the low stone wall that bordered the mine's outer perimeter and cut across the parking lot. Her hair was wet, and even from this distance, he could make out damp splotches that plastered her shirt to her shoulder and back. Bessie would be furious. She'd forbidden Maggie to go near the river after the recent flood. Even two days after the rain had stopped, the river was still a churning, milky brown eddy that sucked up debris and carried it to the surging Columbia River.

Maggie spent every Friday afternoon at his office. This had been their routine since Maggie was old enough to add a column of figures in her head without pencil, paper, or carrying over. It was a feat that staggered Tulliver, who couldn't make sense of the long rows of digits that filled his account ledgers. And once Maggie had started learning script in school, she took over the signing of checks in Tulliver's name.

Bessie had disapproved of the arrangement from the beginning. She's too young and excitable to spend all that time in a mine office, she'd said. If you need help in the

⁴⁹ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 19.

office, why didn't you ask me to do the books? I should think I could balance a checkbook and add up a row of numbers like any eleven-year-old. But she'd said this without any real conviction; even Bessie could admit that Maggie had an uncanny ability for numbers. If we aren't careful, Bessie had warned, She'll get to thinking more of herself than she already does. She's already driving poor Tom to distraction whenever he's got homework. She's forever making sly hints and suggestions and pointing out all the errors he's made solving to x.

Well, let her help the boy with his homework. He needs it based on his last report card, Tulliver had said over dinner the night he proposed getting Maggie's help with the mine's accounts. Besides, she's cheaper than a calculator, and I can't afford to hire anyone to replace Gladys. Not after paying through the nose to upgrade the converters, and you know I've got the state inspectors riding my ass about air quality every dam day.

He heard the clattering of the metal staircase that led to his office, and when Maggie appeared in the doorway, he was shocked by how much more disheveled and wet she looked up close. What happened to you? Did you fall in the river?

Maggie glared at Tulliver, Yes, actually.

How'd you manage that? Tulliver stood and crossed to the dingy store cupboard that doubled as a closet, file storage, and makeshift pantry. I think I've got a sweatshirt or something in here. Tulliver pulled open the closet door and reached to turn on the light. Sparks leaped from the outlet and singed his fingers. Fuck, Fuckety, Fuck, he studied the brown spot burned into this thumb and forefinger, then stuck his fingers into his mouth.

Don't worry about it, Dad, Maggie said. I'll dry off before I get home. She sank down into his desk chair and pulled the ledger books toward her.

Tulliver looked at his daughter, now eleven, hunched over his desk, her hand moving rapidly through the long columns of figures, and was amazed, as he often was, at the sheer miraculous luck of genes, DNA, or whatever cell it was that had morphed and mutated into a girl who could do sums. She was like a living, breathing calculator.

T.G.I.F.

Maggie sat at her father's desk and surveyed the riverbank below the office's window. It is Friday, she recited under her breath, we have come to the paying of bills. It was the only part of the poem she could remember. When Ms. Britton read the poem aloud in class, Maggie's mind clung to those first lines, struck by the rhythm of words that described her Friday routine. She loved even the inverted syntax of that phrase, We have come to the paying of bills, like an obstacle won, or a mountain scaled. It sounded like a prayer, or a spell, and she would whisper these lines aloud every week before she sank into her father's desk chair and opened the book of accounts.

Tulliver liked to call Maggie his newest hire, My girl Friday, he'd said once to Mr. Riley. She handles all my accounts. Telling Mr. Riley had made it official. She was no longer playing office like she'd done when she was a kid and would color on the back of receipts and supply orders. She didn't even have to use the mohair cushion to reach the desk. And now that she had learned the script, which she knew was necessary for writing checks, she was even more essential to the mine.

She'd never admit that this was the best part of her week, especially not to her father, who hated paying bills, and not to Tom, who thought anything to do with math was a waste of time. She even liked licking the envelopes and would carefully run her tongue along the flap and hold the tangy bitterness of the glue in her mouth long afterward.

The best Fridays were the last of the month when she sent a check to Quincy's Disposal. Maggie liked writing the curly Q that looked like a two—a concept that Ms.

Britton had to explain again and again to the class, It's not a two, it's an uppercase Q. Numbers as letters, this seemed to Maggie like breaking the rules, and it gave her a small thrill, a tiny prick of excitement, every last Friday of the month. If only there were a Q in her name. If she were Maggie Quincy, or Quillie, or Quine, instead of Maggie Tulliver, she could have drawn a curly two every day, tracing the curved lines across her homework papers. She would have known before anyone else that a cursive Q wasn't the number two, and Ms. Britton would have smiled and been pleased, and she might have even let her stand up from her desk and explain it to the class.

There were no Qs to scrawl this Friday on the envelopes, only squinched up Rs and Ns for the light and power companies. Tulliver told her to put the power check into the light envelope and to make sure and seal it up tight. It's a game, he'd said. A prank we play on them. They'll get a big kick out of it.

Putting the power check in the light envelope had almost the same thrill that Qs gave her—numbers for letters and power for light.

Domestic Disturbances: Or the Origin of Bessie's Nerves

*I wasn't fond o' the noise of it, when first I was married, for there was no mills in our family, —not the Dodson's*⁵⁰

After they'd been married less than a month, Bessie woke one night to the floor shaking, the windows rattling, and the lamp jumping on the bedside table. She sat up in bed, terrified, thinking of earthquakes, hailstorms, and apocalypses. Tulliver snored beside her.

She shook him awake, How can you sleep through this?

Sleep through what? He raised up on one elbow and rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

The ground's shaking. The whole house is rattling. It's an earthquake or something.

It's just the blast from the mine. Happens all the time. He yawned and pulled the blanket back over his head. You'll get used to it.

After that night, she noticed a constant, low rumbling from the ground. The next week they blasted a new vein in the mines, and the explosion roared through hundreds of feet of earth to shake the house, the town, and the entire county. Dishes crashed in the cabinet, can food fell from pantry shelves, mirrors cracked, the glass exploded from picture frames, and the dining room table and four matching chairs were picked up and plopped back down, leaving small indentations in the floor. For a full minute, the ground shook. Tulliver held his wife against his chest. He patted her back and promised her it wasn't always like this. Even after the last reverberations stilled, she could still feel a

⁵⁰ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 231.

small quaking beneath her feet. She waited for it to quiet, but days, weeks, and months went by, and still, she felt the vibrations traveling up from the mine.

Some nights Bessie would wake with a strange sensation that the world had been flipped on its head. The sky beneath her, clouds pillowing her head, stars carpeting the ground, and the mine, its labyrinth of tunnels and deep passageways, pressed down on her, capping her vision. She would lie in bed trying to reacquaint herself with this inverted world until Tulliver's breathing or the mattress shifted as he turned over in his sleep, righted her vision, and turned the world right-side-up.

Big Wally Wall Washer Lifts Dirt Right off the Wall

No Running. No Streaking. No Bucket. No Mixing. No Rinsing. No Dulling Residue. New foam formula that penetrates through dirt and grease build-up on your walls and woodwork. Big Wally is the best investment you can make. Leaving your walls and woodworks to make them look brand new and save yourself the work and expense of repainting. The 24ounce size (net. wt.) goes a long, long way.⁵¹

The story of Maggie's birth was Tulliver's favorite. He brought it out on Christmas and St. Ogg Day and often told it in slurred syllables toasting his daughter's health. In his telling the event took on the quality of myth and was transformed into a fairy tale.

She was born six weeks early on the night of the Big Flood. The roads were closed, the bridge washed away, and the only way out of town was by boat or helicopter. The river rose to the front steps, then to the house's front door. Empty buckets and old galoshes bobbed incessantly against the back gate. The dining room and parlor still bore a faint brown line halfway up the wall. A stain that Bessie attacked with renewed energy every year on Maggie's birthday as if this annual observance somehow cleared Bessie's vision and allowed her to see anew the muddy line marring her walls.

They were expecting a boy. According to Aunt Glegg, Bessie had been carrying low, which meant a boy, and because she had gotten so big in such a short time, they'd assumed he would be a very large boy. Maggie was the surprise. The child no one had expected.

There is no history of early births in the Dodson family, Glegg had peered down at the small baby squirming in the bassinet. It must be a singularly Tulliver quality, she'd

⁵¹ Big Wally Wall Washer, S.C. Johnson and Son, Inc., Big Wally Washer, advertisement, *The Tennessean*, March 3, 1973, 132.

said this with the same piqued annoyance at finding an uninvited guest at a dinner party. No Dodson would ever appear anywhere, even into the world, early or unexpected.

Long before the birth, they had already decided to call the baby Thurgood in continuity with the Dodson tradition, which had used the name generation after generation for the second-born sons. They had no name for a girl. Tulliver suggested Margarite, an old family name given to his great-aunt and his sister, who'd shortened it to the more serviceable, if less attractive, Gritty. Maggie disliked the name Margarite, a flowery, flouncy thing that she only tolerated when shortened.

The family always feared Maggie was too much a Tulliver. Wild. Impatient. Angry. She acted too much like her father and looked too much like her Aunt Gritty. As a child, she'd bit her Aunt Sophie when she wouldn't give her another baked apple she'd served for dessert. After a group of girls pulled her hair and called her a dirty gypsy, she'd picked up a rock and slammed it into the biggest girl's jaw. She'd pushed her cousin Lucy into the River. She'd sneaked a snake into Aunt Glegg's pillowcase and drowned a bunch of beetles in her mother's soup. Not much has changed. More and more, when provoked, her temper snapped out, as sharp and menacing as a rabid animal.

How to Start a Prayer

Maggie woke to the guttural gasp of her dad's truck engine turning over and the crunch of gravel as he backed out of the driveway. Groggy and still half asleep, she sat up in bed to watch him drive across the bridge into town. She could watch him drive all the way to the mine from their house, high on Smelter Hill. As owner and supervisor of the mine, Jeremy had the highest house on the hill with the best views of the town.

The rain had stopped, and the sun shone weakly behind thick grey clouds. Maggie looked at the bridge that led to downtown with the high school at the west, Little Frog Mountain to the north, and the copper mine to the east. Beyond that lay fifty square miles of bare red ground. The light turned the hills beyond a brilliant red, and the rising sun cast the erosion ditches into deep shadows of blue and purple. Maggie reached under her pillow for her arrowhead and rubbed the smooth surface of it as she watched Tulliver's truck disappear behind the mine's front gates.

She rubbed the arrowhead, one of many that could still be found in the erosion gullies outside of town. She prayed, as she did every morning, Please keep him safe, please keep him safe, please bring him home. She knew it was silly, but this had been her morning routine since she was little. She was just superstitious enough to think if she missed even one day of watching and praying and rubbing her arrowhead, then her dad wouldn't return home from the mine.

A Little Less Talk and a lot more Action

In 1981 the Supreme Court case overturned a state law that allowed a husband to control a jointly-owned property without a wife's consent. In this case, Joan Feenstra's husband Harold mortgaged their house without her knowledge.⁵²

Bessie wanted to know *how* exactly he planned to repay the money without mortgaging the mine or the house, which he'd promised he'd never mortgage. Banks need assets nowadays, and they won't be keen on lending money to a failing mine.

Don't worry, Bess. I've got some assets and holdings I can lean on. Jeremy assured her.

What holdings? What do you own that's left to mortgage?

⁵² Kirchberg v. Feenstra, 450 U.S. 455 (1981)

Mr. Riley Gives His Advice

*this affair of the water-power had been a tangled business somehow, for all it seemed—look at it one way—as plain as water’s water; but, big a puzzle as it was, it hadn’t got the better of Riley.*⁵³

The St. Ogg Country Club was established in 1924. A three-story, twelve-columned, Neo-Victorian painted a blinding white; it was the spitting image of Tara, complete with sweeping staircases, French doors leading to a wide veranda, and a ballroom on the ground floor. It was the most exclusive country club in the city. The trustees—members of the first families of St. Ogg—guarded the membership roster with a discriminating judgment and had been known to double and triple-screen new applicants. It was a club you had to be born into. Not even marriage to a member could get you in.

Tulliver only ever had a residential, non-equity membership, so his position was precarious. His membership is in danger of being snatched back for the slightest infraction, which Bessie reminded him of every time he broke some unwritten code of behavior. He talked too loudly, drank too much, and wore his swim trunks in the lobby. Bessie was a natural; she sashayed through the front door in her tennis whites, asked for patio seating, ordered gin-and-tonics, and requested extra towels from the staff with an inborn confidence he’d thought only British lords and ladies possessed.

He was never more aware of his temporary status than at the Oak Bar. A windowless cavern of dark panels and plush leather meant to resemble an English hunting lodge. Booths, banquets, and cushioned alcoves provided privacy, and a tall backed sofa faced a wall of shelves filled with leather-bound tomes on hunting, fishing,

⁵³ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 14.

and the state's history.

Jeremy sat at a round table beneath a stuffed and mounted deer head. A couple of tawny, orange-red foxes stuffed and immortalized in mid-step stared out at him from a glass-fronted cabinet in the corner.

His friend Riley, an overweight man with a waxy complexion, sat across from him. Riley once owned the Isabella mine but had sold his holdings back in '72 to TCC. Now he oversaw the Isabella holding from behind his desk at the company and rarely ventured out of the vast industrial complex in Copperhill.

Riley ordered a whisky and Jeremy the same. When it arrived, he downed it in two gulping swallows. He'd prefer a beer, but he felt that the dark, old-world interior of the bar required something more expensive than a Coors. A trio of small bowls with the St. Ogg Country Club insignia held honey-roasted peanuts, pretzels, and cheese curls.

It was the legal fees that buried me. Riley took a large gulp of whiskey and reached into the bowl for another handful of peanuts.

Why can't you ask your wife's relations? What's em, The Dodson Sisters? Aren't they rich with all the royalties? Riley scrunched his face into concentration while absently rubbing his ample belly.

Jeremy knew this was the easiest answer to his problem, but he also knew that a loan from the Dodsons would come with a whole tangled knot of strings attached. His sister-in-law couldn't keep her nose out of his business if her life depended on it. He truly believed that the only pleasure Jane Glegg had was bossing her little sisters.

The Dodson sisters had a brief but highly successful career as gospel singers. He doesn't think Bessie's ever been able to move past the fame of her younger, pre-married

life. The money from their music career was held in trust by Glegg, and she controlled the funds with a tight fist.

I tell you, I made a pretty penny after I sold up. You could retire and move away from here.

Maggie, who'd skipped her tennis lesson in favor of the quiet cool interior of the Oak Bar, was curled up on a leather couch with a high back. This angle hid her from anyone seated at the bar or nearby tables.

She shot up from her hiding place behind the couch. Are we going to have to move?

Riley and Tulliver, both startled by the sudden appearance of Maggie's head and excited voice, stared agog at the pale face peering over the sofa's tall back.

Where'd she come from? Riley chuckled and grabbed a handful of cocktail napkins to sop up the sloshed whiskey he'd spilled at her sudden appearance.

Magsie, what are you doing over there? If your mama catches you in the bar, she'll whip you.

Maggie looked toward the bar, which was empty at this time of day. Mama's playing tennis with aunt Susan. I've got ages until she comes looking for me.

Dodson Sister Family Band

The historical information regarding the women who inspired the Dodson aunts is scanty at best. Like their fictional counterparts, the Pearson aunts inhabit a forgotten past, and little is known of their lives. Like the Dodsons, the Pearson sisters also married late in life and came to their marriages with some degree of financial independence. Like Mrs. Glegg's fictional counterpart, Eliot's aunt Mary Pearson Evarard was childless and left her property to her nieces and nephews in her will. According to Eliot's biographer, Mrs. Evarard's will, then, demonstrates all the qualities associated with a Dodson – absolute fairness, an abiding belief in the right of married women to manage their own money⁵⁴

The Dodson Sisters' fame was in constant flux, riverlike. Narrowing and deepening in some places but then expanding in shallow banks and reaches. The Dodson Sisters weren't a household name anymore, but since they'd sold the rights to Sugarland, their song was immortalized in the jingle for Bagel Dogs. A national brand, Bagel Dogs were in every grocery store thanks to the catchy jingle. Maggie would be on the bus or driving home from work when she'd hear the opening lines of the jingle come over the radio. She sometimes heard strangers sing it under their breath or hum the notes absently. It was designed to worm into your subconscious so you couldn't shake the tune. That's probably why Bagel Dogs sales took off. It was widely parodied on SNL, *The Simpsons*, and years later, *Family Guy*. But by then, the Dodson Sisters' origins of the song were long forgotten, dissolved, and evaporated.

Unfortunately, the Dodsons were only paid once for the song due to a single line in the original contract. A lump sum that Glegg had overlooked when she'd signed. And ever since then, she clenched her jaw whenever she heard the opening three notes to that song. If she were a woman who cursed, she would have used every filthy word she knew to damn Bagel Dogs straight to the pit of hell. That song was a reminder of her

⁵⁴ Hughes, Kathryn. *George Eliot: The Last Victorian*, 57.

carelessness, of not reading the fine print, of trusting someone outside the family to handle family business. It'd never happen again.

The Dodson Sisters had a buttery smooth harmony that was unparalleled. In fact, their vocalizations were so flawless that in the next century they would have a brief but intense renaissance when YouTube videos of their performances were used for instruction for any self-respecting collegiate *a cappella* group, resulting in numerous Reddit threads titled Whatever happened to Sister Jane? and The dark secret behind the Dodson sister's rise to fame.

Their first recorded song was The Way of Things, with lines like Daddy won't like, and mama will fuss, that's not the way of things. And their companion piece, that's not how we do it That's Not How We Do It But it was Solid Ambrosia Salad, which made them famous. A nonsensical song that was nothing more than a recipe set to music but always to great applause, especially when they mimed the chopping and peeling and the slicing and squeezing gestures involved in making the recipe. It was soft-core cooking porn before it was even a thing.

Habits of Reading and Ranting: Lessons in Historical Fiction

*I can tell you almost everything there is in my books, I've read them so many times, and that will amuse you. And I can tell you something about Geography too, —that's about the world we live in, —very useful and interesting. Did you ever hear about Columbus?*⁵⁵

Maggie propped a book between her cornflakes and the sugar bowl. She had checked the book out from the library the day before and was almost finished. She'd devoured the author's other book, *Captain Blood* about the Monmouth Rebels over the weekend and this one, *Columbus*, was even better with a sea voyage, mutinous sailors, and a forbidden romance.

You know I don't like you reading at the table, Bessie snapped.

Maggie was startled at her mother's harsh tone. She'd never minded Maggie reading at the table before, besides her objection seemed pointless since Tulliver spent more and more meals behind the wall of his newspaper. In fact, in the weeks since the union strike and the company from New York trying to buy out the Burra-Burra mine, her father's only mode of conversation was the ranting monologue. All his rants began and ended on the same line: Smoke was smoke. How'd those lawyers expect him to control where the wind blew. Every morning at breakfast and every evening a dinner, same song, same note. The smoke suits were Rome, the place all conversational roads led.

What are you reading anyway? Bessie reached across the table to move the sugar bowl blocking the book's cover.

A book about Columbus.

⁵⁵ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 117.

Is that for school? Bessie frowned at the embracing man and woman on the cover, the man wore a plumed hat and breeches, but the woman clutched at a billowing scrap of fabric that barely concealed her breasts. It looks like a romance novel.

It's a historical book, Mom Maggie laid the book flat on the table so her mother couldn't see the woman's heaving bosoms.

Uh, huh, the breasts on that cover look very historical.

Breasts can too be historical. Maggie started flipping through the pages, hunting for the page she'd have dog-eared if she weren't too afraid of the librarian noticing and revoking her library card. Apparently Columbus thought the earth was shaped like a giant boob.

He what?

Listen to this, Maggie found the page, cleared her throat, and began to read. I am therefore forced to conclude this about the world: I have found that its shape is not that of a true sphere, as scholars have told us, but more like that of a pear, it is like a round ball, with a protuberance on one side, like a woman's breast.

Maggie, I am not interested in discussing breasts during breakfast.

I'm not talking about breasts, Mom. All I'm saying is that Columbus didn't think the earth was round like we thought.

I wouldn't trust the accuracy of a book with bosoms on the cover.

Mom, please, this is historical, there's a footnote and everything. It came straight out of Columbus' diaries.

I've got diaries, too, you know. Bessie reached for the butter knife. Used to write in one every day before I got married, and they didn't mention anything about breasts.

Which is probably why no one wants to read them. Maggie mumbled through a mouth of cereal.

Some people might find them pretty interesting.

There's even mention of a few famous people.

Yeah, like who? Maggie returned to her book and scooped more cornflakes into her mouth.

Like Elvis, Bessie scraped a translucent slice of butter across her toast. Did I ever tell you that I dated Elvis?

Please, Mom. You did not date Elvis.

I did.

You did not.

I did so. Bessie said. Why are you so surprised, I was pretty famous once too, I knew all the Opry folks, Moon Mulligan, Kitty Wells, the Wilburn Brothers.

No one knows who those people are, Maggie dismissed these unfamiliar names with a wave and leaned forward. But Elvis. Everyone knows Elvis. You actually dated Elvis

Of course. It didn't go anywhere. Bessie gave a soft chuckle and glanced over to Tulliver, to make sure he was still engrossed in his newspaper.

I think he was you know, kind of funny. Bessie said in a lowered voice. Plus, he paid more attention to my feet than anything else.

What do you mean? Like a foot fetish?

What's that?

You know, like getting excited, down there about feet.

You're too young to know that word. Tulliver finally tuning into the conversation set down his newspaper.

What word? Maggie asked. Foot or fetish?

Neither. Sex. Tulliver grumbled. Why are you telling her these stories anyway Bessie? Wasn't Elvis a bit light in the loafers anyway?

Maggie snorted into her cornflakes. I know about sex, Dad. I'm fourteen. Besides, I didn't say sex.

Well, you thought it. And you shouldn't at your age. Tulliver grumbled and disappeared again behind the newspaper.

The Aunts and Uncles Are Coming

*there were particular ways of doing everything in that family: particular ways of bleaching the linen, of making the cowslip wine, curing the hams, and keeping the bottled gooseberries. . . In short, there was in this family a peculiar tradition as to what was the right thing in household management and social demeanor*⁵⁶

Tulliver entered the kitchen through the back door to find Bessie on the table wiping down the ceiling fan blades with a rag. Her hair was sweaty and stuck to her forehead in damp clumps. She wore a faded paisley dress she had bought when she was pregnant with Tom and now only put on when the house needed a good scouring, signaling to the rest of the family that they were in for a long day of sweaty, tiring chores.

What's all the fuss? It's just a Sunday dinner.

No, Jeremy, it is not just a Sunday dinner. It is Easter dinner. She went at the fan's blades with vicious swipes of the dripping dishtowel cinched in her fist. Her house shoes, a worn pair of Ked's, left muddy imprints across the kitchen table. Why you insisted on having them here is beyond me.

Tulliver watched as a constellation of footprints marched across the table's white Formica. He didn't want to be here when she came out of this frenzy and saw the mess she'd made of the kitchen table. She must have fought with Maggie. The little wench was the only person who got under her skin this way. He sometimes wondered if she did it deliberately. To see her mother rant and rage and throw such a fit that she forgot about everything, especially Maggie, who would flee to the neutral ground of her bedroom or the sanctuary of her attic hidey-hole.

Of course, it will give me a chance to use the good china. Glegg only ever uses

⁵⁶ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 41.

those tacky farmer plates, even though she has our grandmother's Wedgewood. Why I haven't even seen one piece of that set since we were kids not a gravy boat or butter dish. I wouldn't be surprised if it disappeared.

Jeremy turned to leave, wanting to dodge what was sure to be a long-winded tangent about some long-lost Dodson heirloom.

He never felt right inside the Dodson house, that hulking Victorian monstrosity where Jane Glegg lorded her family's lineage, money, and trinkets over everyone. If he was going to ask for a loan from his in-laws, he needed to do it here, on his turf. It wouldn't be like the last time they visited. That disastrous trip up Kennesaw when Sophie and Lucy had gotten sick in the back seat and they'd been stranded in a fog bank on the way back down the mountain.

When he had suggested they invite the Dodsons for Easter, Bessie had been more confused than unwilling. But we always go to Jane's on Easter.

I know, but this time, you could call your sister and say you want Easter at our house this year. I shouldn't have to tell you how to talk to your family.

You know my sisters hate driving over here. Besides, Deane won't want to drive his new car through all the dust and mud. Sophie said he had to pay to have it specially cleaned the last time they visited.

If not Easter, then the week before.

They won't agree to come all this way just for a normal Sunday dinner. They'll say it's too far of a drive for a Sunday dinner.

Well, then make it Easter. Tom will be home.

But we always have Easter at Jane's. Bessie continued to stare at him.

Tulliver tried to hold in his irritation as he flipped through the timeline in his head, a mental calendar ticking off days faster than he could hold on to them. Just make it soon, Bess.

Why, what's with the hurry? Bessie eyed him, suddenly suspicious, And why here?

Where are you going? I need your help getting the crystal glassware out of the garage.

I'm driving up to see Gritty. Maybe we should invite her to Easter.

No, don't invite Gritty, you know she always starts in with Glegg, and last Christmas, there was that fight with Deane over what was it?

Well, alright, Tulliver agreed, with a lingering twinge of guilt. What would Gritty do on Easter? She only had her no-account husband Moss and the passel of drunks that hung around the Feed Store for company. I'll go see her just the same. Their phone must be out again. I can't seem to get an answer.

More likely, they didn't pay their bill.

Tulliver ignored this final jab as he left the kitchen, letting the door slam behind him as he moved through the living room and stopped at the foot of the stairs. Magsie, let's go for a drive.

Maggie Tries to Run away from Her Shadow

Maggie sat in the truck while her dad pumped gas for the trip to aunt Gritty's. It was an odd time for a visit to Gritty's with all the insane cleaning Mom was doing to prepare for Easter. She wondered if this car ride was just an excuse for her dad to give her another of his sex talks. Lately, almost anything could trigger a sex talk from her dad. A song on the radio, like when they were driving to Blockbuster to return a video and Mama, He's Crazy, came on the radio. Jeremy had turned the music down.

Hey, I like that song. Maggie had protested.

Magsie, listen up. Men are pigs. All sex talks from her dad started the same way, men are scum, make sure you get treated right, and on and on until they were both too embarrassed to make eye contact for the rest of the car ride.

Jeremy, for his part, could never remember if he'd ever talked to Maggie about sex and men. Whenever he visited Gritty in Mudport or saw her husband sulking around the mine parking lot, he would be gripped with a sudden terror of Maggie ending up with a man like Moss.

In the last year, Maggie had started to resemble his sister Gritty more and more. It was uncanny, like staring at a version of Gritty, he thought, long gone. Her wild tangle of red-brown hair turned the exact shade of copper during the summer, and the wide-set eyes that seemed too big for her face. Even her expressions, how she twisted her mouth to one side when thinking or sucked on the end of her ponytail when she was really thinking—being somewhere else is what Bessie called it—lost in that big brain of hers. Ever since he'd seen the discarded maxi-pad in the bathroom trash—a memory he

shied away from with almost as much revulsion as when he'd seen the partially unrolled pad—a thick wad of blue plastic, white cotton, and dark red blood. He'd shut the trash can lid with a clattering bang and flipped the faucets to full blast for hot water. Maggie had her period. Maggie could get pregnant. Just like Gritty was his next thought. A nagging worry that, when paired with Maggie's uncanny resemblance to Gritty, made him approach the sex talk with all the awkwardness and sense of sacred duty as a new recruit at boot camp or a first-timer underground.

Old Man Mosey was slumped against the side of the gas station, knotting a rope between his fingers. Maggie flinched whenever she saw him on the road or outside the All Things shop. If she looked at him too long, a tight wad of anxiety would gather in her chest, and she'd feel like she couldn't air her lungs. Tom told her the story of the old man Mooney. The man who'd fallen down the old Burra Burra mine shaft. It was days before someone passed by and heard his screams. He was nearly dead from hunger and thirst when they brought him up. After that story, Maggie had nightmares about mines collapsing—trapped in the tight chambers underground—drowning, a dry as bone drowning, choking on dust and debris, sulfur fog. She'd wake at night clutching for the chain on the bedside lamp, brushing imaginary debris and dust from her hair, shoulders, and bed quilt.

A Little Money Thing

Mudport's level land was so narrow that only a few yards separated the railroad tracks from the town's buildings. The rest of the town climbed the hill behind the bottomland. The hulking Hyperion Hotel, the red brick mansion built by Captain Raht's son Julian in 1901, the long-abandoned summer cabins once frequented by the D.C. elite, and the dozens of clapboard houses and two-story tenements once overflowing with workers appeared to hover precariously above the narrow stretch of flat land. Mudport was a once-thriving boomtown where stores, saloons, hotels, and boarding houses overflowed with patrons. Where the L& N Railroad barreled through the depot and carried away shipments of copper from St. Ogg. At its peak, the Copper Basin, which included the bustling towns of Isabella, Burra Burra, and Dorlcote, shipped out more freight trains of copper than Ohio, Virginia and Cincinnati combined.

The miners and their families settled into a makeshift living around the mine's entrance. They built tiny, quick houses with the cheapest stuff available. At first, they socialized out of necessity, not wanting or needing to unpack their boxes or even move their curtains to see what their neighbors might be doing. All the men in the town worked for the mine and all of the buildings in the town existed because of the mine. The entire Tulliver familial history was set into motion because of the mine. Like a lit match, the small square mile encompassing Mudport took off in a brief flame. The town, at its height, was a hotbed of industry, new money, and quick fortunes.

After the mountain had been picked clean of every ounce of copper, Mudport was deserted as suddenly as it had sprung up. Machinery was left to rust, the commissary and

feed store left vacant, and the workers moved on, abandoning the clapboard houses with the same swiftness in which they moved in. Barely a decade later Mudport was practically a ghost town. It was a town that, at its fullest, could not even achieve a naming on the post office boards or a listing on the county maps. A town without a mayor, a church, or even the significance of a cemetery where the permanent attachment to a place is ensured by the dead and buried.

Gritty's husband Moss ran the Feed Store, a makeshift bar and pool hall in Mudport's old Company Store. The sign for the Feed Store still hung above the door. Bags of grain, seed, and oats were stacked in the corner, a dusty display in case the sheriff ever investigated. But he never would. In a dry county, the sheriff was one of their regular customers. Since Mudport and the rest of the basin were in a dry county, Moss would buy booze in North Carolina or Georgia and bring it across the state line to sell to miners off shift. Most nights, Moss was out tending to business or seeing to his customer, so Gritty was left alone to shoo the drunks away from the front stoop after closing.

In the half-hour Tulliver had sat with Gritty inside the Feed Store, the rain continued, turning the stinking sludge mud of Mudport streets into a squelching lake of forbidding brown jelly.

What's eating you?

Gritty asked as she perched on one of the old corn barrels that served as the only seating in the makeshift bar. Her typically frizzy hair was contained in a checked scarf and she wore a faded denim shirt that must belong to Moss as it was about three sizes too big and hung past her knees.

It's nothing, Jeremy said. Just a little money thing.

She pulled a crumpled pack of Marlboro Lights and a slim book of matches from her shirt pocket. There are no little money things. We know that better than most.

Tulliver pushed the ashtray across the bar toward her.

Thanks. She blew a skilled smoke circle into the space between them and held out the pack.

No, I'm quitting.

Again.

You should quit. Haven't you heard? Those will kill you.

What won't kill you nowadays?

He needed money. A lot of it. And fast. They'd be toast with just one collapsed shaft or a stalled-out piece of machinery. The Dorlcote was barely able to make payroll last month. Their longtime bookkeeper, Mrs. Standard, an efficient sparrow of a woman who'd been ancient in his father's time, had asked him just that morning if she'd missed any outstanding payments or order receipts. These numbers aren't matching up, she'd said, pointing out the accounting book's error.

That Nancy-assed fairy! Tulliver erupted, slamming his hand on the bar, and startling a wheezing cough from Gritty. He just sits behind a desk all day. Why he's no more a miner than Maggie is. Why he's probably never done an honest day of work in his life. He'd never worked below, that's for damn sure.

Gritty lived in a converted storage space above the old gun and pharmacy store. From here, she could watch the Feed Store across the street to see if anyone wanted to buy a bottle or pack of smokes.

Her kitchen walls were papered in glossy pages ripped from *Good Housekeeping* and *Southern Living*. Maggie loved visiting Gritty's house. It wasn't a house with a yard like they had, but it was closer to an apartment, and from here, she could see all of the main streets of Mudport stretched out below her, and in the distance, she saw the three rising smoke stacks of the Copper Company. Her dad said that the TCC had grown over the years, buying up smaller mines over the years until they owned every mine holding in the Basin.

Her apartment across from the Feed Store was a makeshift beauty parlor and a Psychic shop. Behind a beaded curtain, a barber chair sat in front of a lit vanity. A folding card table is set up in the apartment's main room, where she gave manicures and tarot card readings. Five bucks each. 8 for a polish and a psychic reading.

Let me read your cards before you go.

Ah, you know I don't believe in that witchy crap.

Just a quick one.

Women from town usually went into St. Ogg for a real cut and color, but the hill women who couldn't make it across the mountain and out of the basin went to Gritty. Sometimes just for a shampoo when the well was dry or a quick polish before a date.

There were whispers around Mudport. Rumors that reached Maggie's ears in

Copperhill and even the Dodson's in St. Ogg that Gritty was giving readings behind the beaded curtain and after hours. When Maggie did the books for Gritty, she noticed these items in the ledger were four times what she charges for a tarot reading.

Gritty's tarot deck was wrapped in a silky patterned scarf and sat ready for the next reading on a velvet-draped card table in the middle of the room.

Gritty pulled the tarot deck from its place and laid the cards between them.

The Hanged Man.

What's it mean?

Change. Upheaval. Redirection. Wrong path.

Maybe you should sell up. She said stacking the tarot cards back into a neat pile.

Stand Facing the Stove

When you are entertaining, try not to feel that something unusual is expected of you as a hostess. It isn't. just be yourself. Even eminent and distinguished persons are only human. Like the rest of us, they shrink from ostentation; and nothing is more disconcerting to a guest that the impression that his coming is causing a household commotion. Confine all noticeable efforts for his comfort and refreshment to the period that precedes his arrival. Satisfy yourself that you have anticipated every possible emergency—the howling child, the last-minute search for cuff links, your husband's exuberance, your helpers' ineptness, your own qualms. Then relax and enjoy your guests.⁵⁷

Maggie was worse than no help. She'd burned the pie crusts when par-baking them for the meringue pies; broken a crystal vase trying to fill it under the tap; forgotten to add salt and baking powder to the biscuits so they came out of the oven looking and tasting like beige hockey pucks; spilled a jar of apple juice when unpacking the groceries—even after mopping up the spill with a solution of vinegar and hot water Bessie could still feel a faint squelch when she walked past the refrigerator; added Worcestershire instead of molasses to the sweet potatoes; singed an iron-shaped burn into her best tablecloth so that no amount of creative table setting could hide the mark.

There was still the silver to be polished, the good china to be brought down from the attic, unboxed, washed, dried, and set on the table; the chafing dishes to set out and the tiny petroleum lighters to find—when was the last time she even used the chafing dish? And the TV had to be moved from the living room to the den unless she wanted an argument again with her sister about the mind-rotting dangers of television. And the napkins to iron, the iced-tea spoons to set out on the drinks trolley, she had to phone

⁵⁷ Rombauer, Irma S, Marion Rombauer Becker, and Marion Rombauer Becker. *Joy of Cooking*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975. 8.

Lorna Jenkins about borrowing her deviled egg platter. And where was Keziah? She was paying her an extra 50 cents an hour to work on Easter weekend, and she still couldn't show up when she was supposed to. And the dust that was everywhere. No matter how often she swept, vacuumed, mopped, and wiped down every flat surface in the house, the dust would resettle, the red film misting every surface of the house.

Maggie stood at the counter, chopping celery into uniform sticks. Behind her, Bessie buzzed around the kitchen, chopping, scraping, and stirring with pressured intensity, allowing Maggie the chance to sneak olives and pinches of cheese from the hors d'oeuvres platter.

Stop eating those, Bessie snapped. You're supposed to toothpick them.

Tom entered the kitchen in a rumpled McCallie t-shirt and boxers from the basement stairs. He stretched wide, lifting his arms high toward the ceiling to reveal a hairy chest. Is there any potato salad in here? Tom opened the refrigerator.

Yes, but it's for dinner, Bessie said, Get out of there. I've got everything wrapped up.

Tom took a bowl out of the refrigerator, pulled off the plastic wrap, and plopped a potato cube into his mouth. He sucked on his finger and thumb before reaching into the bowl again.

Needs more relish, he said, returning to the refrigerator.

I assume you washed your hands before you put your fingers in that potato salad?

Maggie asked.

Tom squeezed his face into a grimace. I assume you washed your hands before you stuck your finger in the olive jar?

Use a fork for those olives. Bessie snapped to Maggie. Really, what would your aunts say if they could see you eating with your fingers?

He's eating with his fingers, too, Maggie pointed incredulously at Tom. And why doesn't he have to help?

Because I'm a boy.

Stop it, both of you. Bessie pulled Tom away from the still-open refrigerator. Tom, stay out of the kitchen. And Maggie go get the clothes from the line. They've been out there too long already.

Maggie stomped from the house and out into the backyard. The clean shirts and nylons, ghostly pale in their translucence, twisted and flashed on the close line. The for-now clean sleeves of the dress shirts seemed to throw up their arms in frustration at the misting of red dust already marring their starched whiteness.

Maggie was tired of cleaning, cooking, and this stupid scheme to have the family over for Easter. They always went to aunt Glegg's on Easter and Garum Firs for Christmas. For three days straight, they'd been aunt-prepping the house. Hiding the ashtrays, moving the wine and whiskey bottles to the carport, dusting, and re-dusting every flat surface.

They scrubbed the house as if it had never been cleaned before. Maggie didn't see the point; it'd never been clean enough for Dodson's standards.

Whenever she went to Lucy's house, her aunt Deane would follow them with a manual dust buster and wipe down the plastic covers on the living room furniture after each visit. Sometimes she even pulled out the Lysol can and sponge before Maggie had left the house as if she were Pig Pen from *Peanuts* and walked through the world surrounded by a dirt cloud. No offense, dear, it's all that red dust you carry around, she'd say as she attacked the carpet's pile in furious strokes. I swear it must seep into your pores or something. I can't imagine why else you'd still track in so much copper dust since you know we don't wear shoes in the house. Once, after she'd put in new carpets, she'd made Maggie wear a makeshift parka from an industrial-size trash bag.

She hated Easter. Nothing was the same this year, even with Tom returning for the weekend. And her parents still wouldn't tell her what happened or what Tom did to get sent to a boys' school in Chattanooga.

When it happened, it seemed to be a family drama that only involved the Dodsons. Bessie had been on the phone with her sisters night and day. She'd pulled the phone into the pantry to muffle the sound of her crying, and for nearly a week, Maggie and Jeremy had to duck under the phone cord when they entered the kitchen.

Maggie was never allowed to talk on the phone outside the kitchen. Never mind that they had a phone with a 12-foot long cord, explicitly made to stretch from one room to the next, but according to Bessie, stretching out the phone cord would damage the connectivity. Something about fraying internal wires weakening the telephonic signal. If Maggie wanted to talk on the phone, she had to do it in the kitchen, right smack in the

middle of everyone. That was why she hadn't given Michael Sullivan her phone number.

No way was she talking to a boy where her parents could hear.

Enter the Aunts and Uncles

Easter was doomed from the start. The Dodsons, already going against their nature and their tradition, were holding Easter Lunch, not at Garum Furs, where it had been held for time immemorial, but at Bessie's home, all the way in Benton County. They had to cross Monteagle to get there. No one accidentally stumbled across the basin or stopped off on the way to another intended destination. Getting to the Tulliver's house in Dorlcote required intention. Before arriving at the archipelago of towns settled at the bottom of the mountain, you had to exit the freeway and drive across a city highway walled in by mini-malls, rent-a-storage, and Dollar stores.

Then a long, winding drive down the basin, you held your breath and gripped the steering wheel as you took the blind curves at a crawl.

Mr. Deane didn't want to go because he was afraid the transmission wouldn't make it over Mount Eagle. Last time he'd had a devil of a time with the breaks coming down and had thought for one terrifying second that he'd have to use the sand traps at the bottom of the mountain for drivers who barrel down the slope too fast and can't slow down. It was a tricky slope to navigate under the best conditions. But it was foggy today, and the breaks had been feeling sticky. If he got killed driving over Monteagle, he'd haunt the Tullivers for eternity.

Paulette was worried about the wear to the tires. We can't stay too long, she told Sophie. I just had the car washed. I'll have to do it all over again when we get back. I'll not be spending a fortune at the carwash again.

Sophie had worn plastic sacks from the Piggly Wiggly over her snakeskin ankle

boots. Something that Susan wished she had thought of doing, especially after she tried to rub the red dust from the tops of his loafers on the back of his khakis.

If Susan had been in Bessie's place and known that every pair of nylon stockings would disintegrate on the clothing line and get eaten up by this toxic air, she would never have agreed to marry Jeremy Tulliver even if his family had owned the largest copper mine in the state. But by the time Bessie got married, she was already pregnant with Tom, so it was too late to do anything but marry. At least she'd had the foresight to get knocked up by a man whose family owned the biggest copper mine this side of the Mississippi. At least she didn't have to deal with bugs, roaches, or spiders. Even mice stayed out of the basin. And she didn't have to pretend to like gardening. Bessie didn't have to join gardening clubs, put up window boxes, plant squash, or divide the damn lilies every spring.

Gordon Glegg checked his pockets for wallet and keys, a habit born from locking himself out in a snowstorm, and locked up the house he and his wife Jane had shared for nearly 27 years. He watched Jane try to haul the spare tire out of the car's trunk before joining her in the driveway.

What're you doing with the spare?

I'm trying to make room for this sleeping bag and snow boots.

Why?

Do you remember the last time we went up there to see Bessie? We were almost

caught in a fog bank and stranded up that mountain all night.

We weren't up there that long.

Trust me. I timed it.

Jane wrapped up casseroles and platters of food in a large basket because you never knew what kind of stuff they sell at the company store. I bet it's nothing more than tinned soup, fruit cocktail, and beans in a can.

You know, Bessie said not to bring anything. Do we really need to bring the big bowl?

We've served fruit salad from that bowl every Easter since before we were born. I don't see why we should stop just because Bessie insists on having dinner at her house.

Gordon tried to fit everything into the back trunk, which already held a spare tire. Jane said she'd hold the bowl on her lap. She feared it might get scratched with the rest of the stuff in the trunk.

I know he's going to ask for more money.

Now, hon, you don't know that.

Why else would they invite us for Easter?

You did say that it was such a hassle hosting everyone for Easter each year.

I've said no such thing.

He thought the Dodson family had far too many family functions. And there was the expectation that every holiday would be with the Dodsons. Every Easter, Christmas, Thanksgiving, Fourth of July, Memorial Day, hell, even every Mother's Day was spent with the Dodsons, even though they didn't have a child and Jane didn't have a mother. He'd visited his mother at the Meadows Nursing home in Huntsville the day before

Mother's Day each year. The nurses seemed to look at him pointedly every time he visited on the days before any major holiday. He pictured his mother sitting alone in the big sterile, too-bright cafeteria. He was just being maudlin. There must be plenty of other people at The Meadows who didn't get visits from family, especially getting to Huntsville and then to the actual retirement home was such a hassle.

Jane Glegg walked around the living room with a skein of yarn clutched under her arm. She was tall. Almost too tall. As if she'd taken more than her allotted inches as the oldest child. Each Dodson sister was a head shorter than the one before. When they were still performing, fans joked that the sisters looked like stepstools or those Russian stacking dolls. In every picture of the Dodson Sisters, especially the official ones required by their producer, Glegg is in the back, with her three shorter, prettier, and livelier sisters in front, a gaggle of feminine confection, all blond hair, and blue eyes.

Is there a place for me to sit down? she asked.

Pick a seat, Jane. Anywhere you like. Jeremy gestured to the number of empty seats around the living room.

Well, I wouldn't want to sit in anyone's favorite chair. Glegg eyed the corduroy recliner in the center of the room. This one must be yours, Jeremy. Her gaze seemed to trace the outline of every one of Jeremy's excess pounds in every crease and fold of the faded fabric. Jane's posture made no concession for comfort in every chair she sat in. Her spine could stay ramrod straight—like a needle pointing north—in any chair she found

herself seated upon. Be it the faded reupholstered velveteen settee that once sat in her father's study and now sat outside the closet door and served as the place where she pulled on her pantyhose each morning, a white wicker chair from her sister Sophie's modern patio furniture, or the hard metal folding chair of a church basement.

Such a shame, Aunt Glegg fretted aloud, her voice rising over the click of her knitting needles, that Maggie's hair is so frizzy.

Maggie should sleep in rollers to keep her hair from curling erratically and frizzing out so much. Maggie should wear more subdued colors. Red didn't go with her coloring and clashed terribly with her hair. Maggie should smile and stand up straight. Maggie should act more like her cousin Lucy. And most of all, Maggie should behave more like the rest of the Dodson clan.

Such observations, in her aunt's mind, were all well-meaning. Helpful advice that Maggie would do well to heed. But since such comments were usually announced loudly and in public—the Country Club's annual boating race, the church's coffee hour, the deli department at Kroger—and in such a clipped, impatient tone that Maggie was often reduced to tears and would run from the room, table, or even out into the Kroger parking lot just to get away from the sound of her aunt's voice.

Well, there's no need for hysterics, Glegg would say to Maggie's retreating back. Someone needs to tell her how to behave. She's got none of the Dodson spirit, at least none that I can see.

General Glegg

*If, at the last minute, something does happen to upset your well-laid plans, rise to the occasion. The mishap may be the making of your party. Capitalize on it, but not too heavily. Remember that way back in Roman times the poet Horace observed, 'A host is like a general: it takes a mishap to reveal his genius.'*⁵⁸

Since you'd planned on taking Mr. Glegg, Deane, and even Tom down the mine shaft; I don't see why I shouldn't go. Aunt Glegg peered at Tulliver from behind her Coke-bottle glasses.

Tulliver, having breached the subject of a loan for the mine over dinner, was now in the position of acting as a tour guide for his holdings.

Miners are a superstitious bunch, Tulliver said. It's bad luck to have a woman in a mine. Why no woman has even stepped foot on the freight elevator before, he added.

Don't you own this mine? Glegg raised her glass of tea to her lips and took a small sip. If you own it, you can say who can and cannot go down.

That's right, Tulliver stood and shoved his hands into his pants pockets. I am in charge of who goes in and out of the mine, and I say no. Not ever.

Well, I won't give a cent toward saving it unless I see it first.

Tulliver sputtered and stared wide-eyed at Glegg, I tell you, I won't be bullied in my own house. I said no woman's going down the mine, and that's final.

Please, do be reasonable, Bessie reached an arm across the coffee table to pat her sister's knee.

Why would you want to go down there anyway, Sophie asked. It's so loud and dark and filthy. You'll come out looking as dark as old Keziah.

⁵⁸ Rombauer, *Joy of Cooking*, 9.

I'd be scared; I'd imagine it'd be just like going to the underworld, Bessie said. It'd be just like those hell night skits the Methodist church put on when we were kids. Remember Soph? Bessie turned to Sophie pleadingly, hoping her sister picked up on the hint to change the subject.

And who knows what kind of stuff you'd get into your lungs, Sophie added. You could pick up any number of diseases breathing in the air down there.

Glegg brushed at a smear of red dust that had dotted her skirt. Really, Bessie, how do you stand all this red dirt? It's absolutely everywhere. I swear worse than sand at the beach. She continued to sip her tea and watched Tulliver's erratic pacing with an air of curious indifference as if he were an interesting display at a museum exhibit.

Tulliver stalked from the room, and they could hear him stomping all the way to the kitchen, followed by his muffled voice talking over the phone.

Maggie didn't know where to look.

Glegg glanced at the small gold watch on her wrist. Come now, Mr. Glegg, let's get ready; we have a mine to inspect before heading home.

Bessie was making small coughing noises in a vain attempt to clear the nervousness from her throat and voice. Sister, must you really see the mines? It'll only upset Luke, the mine foreman, and the workers are as superstitious as Jeremy said. He's not exaggerating when he says that some of them may quit. You wouldn't want them to walk off the job over this, would you?

That's not my fault. Glegg sniffed. If someone is foolish enough to jeopardize their livelihood over a silly superstition, it's their own doing. I wonder why Tulliver hired them. Doesn't sound very bright to me.

Really, sister, I think Jeremy knows best here.

If he knew what was best to do for his business, he wouldn't be in this mess now, would he? If you ask me, the mining failure and these lawsuits are proof positive of his mismanagement and poor instincts. He hasn't a head for business, and I've always said so, Bessie.

Tulliver had returned to the living room more quietly than he'd left, in fact, so stealthily that no one had noticed his arrival but Maggie. Who looked back and forth between her aunt Glegg and her father's grim angry face.

Enough! he bellowed. Everyone jumped; even Glegg was startled out of her speech. I talked to Luke. He said he'd find another pair of coveralls for you. Let's go.

Down the Mine

Can I go watch Aunt Glegg go down in the lift? Maggie asked after Tulliver had stalked out to the truck and pulled away. Maggie knew better than to ask if she could go down with them into the mine's shaft. Her father barely contained his rage, and she knew that Luke would be worried about the miners' reactions.

Bessie considered, I don't know. I don't think it's a good idea for a little girl to hang around a mine entrance.

Let her watch, sister, Glegg said. I don't see what harm it could do. She can watch us go down and wait in Luke's office until we return. It will be an educational experience.

When they arrived at the foreman's office, Luke had a pair of coveralls, boots, and a lantern helmet ready for Aunt Glegg.

It'll be really dark down there, but don't worry, there's no danger below; we aren't blasting this month, Luke said as he adjusted the strap under Glegg's helmet.

Blasting? Glegg asked before her face was hidden behind a pair of safety goggles.

Maggie knew about blasting; she'd been warned to avoid the mine on blasting days. When a new tunnel was opened, all of the basin shook. It was like an earthquake. Once, a crystal punch bowl vibrated right out of the cabinet during a blasting day and shattered into a million pieces.

As it turned out, when Aunt Glegg was trussed up in coveralls with a lighted helmet and protective goggles, you couldn't even tell she was a woman. They might be able to get away with not even mentioning it to the workers. They'd never have to know,

and it wasn't like Glegg could open her mouth and say anything to give herself away while she was down the shaft. It was too loud to hear anyone above a scream.

Aunt Glegg walked stiffly beside Tulliver and Luke toward the mine shaft. The lift was nothing more than wooden planks held together with cable, and there were no sides or rails to hold on to.

We'll be back up in a few minutes, Tulliver said before lowering into the shaft. Don't touch anything, he added before his head disappeared down the shaft.

Maggie Behaves Worse Than She Expected

They walked to the dried-up tailings pond by the Mary or Eureka mine. Here a valley of cars, a car graveyard, of all the rusted-out jalopies that had long stopped running, their engines corroded in the acidic air. Tom and Bob spent their afternoons hitting golf balls and shooting pellet guns at the abandoned cars in the ditch.

Lucy looked as dressed up and delicate as a china doll.

You'll get all dirty outside.

I don't care. Lucy was fascinated with Maggie's house. She wanted to explore. They never came over to Maggie's, and she wanted to see all the places Maggie talked about.

At the end of the trestle bridge, they saw Tom and Bob smoking and passing the paper-wrapped bottle between them.

Tom, Bob, and other high-school boys hung out at the end of the trestle bridge by the Old Number Two Tailings Pond.

Baby,' Tom sneered. You're too scared to cross the bridge, ain't ya?

Maggie rolled her eyes, Shut up.

Bob reached around Tom's shoulders and clapped his back with a meaty paw, nearly causing Tom to stagger forward. It's not a fair dare why even I wouldn't cross the bridge by Old Number 2 at their age.

Comm'n Maggie, let's do it. Lucy said.

Maggie stepped onto the first railroad tie and, balancing from beam to beam; she made it all the way across the bridge. When she reached the end, she jumped, turned, and

gave a flourishing bow.

Lucy grinned widely at Maggie as she stepped onto the bridge. Halfway across her wedged sandal caught on an upturned nail, she slipped, skidding heavily against the wooden railing. The railing held her weight briefly before the rotted-out wood collapsed under Lucy. She grabbed onto one of the splintered rails.

For a moment, Lucy flailed through the air as she kicked her feet. She pointed her toes, grasping for a foothold, reaching out to find purchase on something, anything. But she found only empty air.

Maggie was frozen and staring at the writhing figure of Lucy, who seemed to twist and flail in the wind like a dress caught on a clothesline.

Bob was the only person who could move. He streaked across the bridge, jumping over the missing or rotted-out boards. He tore down the bridge stirring up a cloud of dust. Lucy couldn't make out his form but could feel the thundering vibrations of his heavy feet.

When he reached Lucy, he crouched down and scooted on his belly until his arms and shoulders hung over the tailings edge.

Lucy, he called. Come on; I've gotcha. He reached, grabbing her under her armpits in a bruising grip, and hauled her up over the edge. Lucy grabbed one of the remaining rails lining the bridge and hoisted herself forward.

For a brief second, she'd thought she'd be safe, but her sweaty palms loosened her grip, and she fell, landing with a sickening squelch into the mud-caked bottom.

She returned home a stinking, mud-covered mess.

Easter Argument

Before the Easter Upset—which is how Bessie referred to the fight in hushed tones over the phone with Sophie—the longest the Dodson sisters had gone without speaking was 47 days, and that was when they were touring. During the last bout of silence, the sisters had erected borders and taken sides like they were negotiating the boundaries of some disputed territory. Paulette could usually coax them to a wary truce, but Jane would not be swayed this time. Jeremy had insulted her for the last time.

Down the Sinkhole of Oblivion

Maggie sat in class listening to Ms. Britton read aloud from the *Scarlet Letter*, when a sharp whirring sound cut her words off. The siren. Books dropped, papers flew, and chairs crashed to the floor. Everyone took off running out the school's front doors staring down the main street toward the mine. The company siren meant something bad happened, always an injury, but more and more often, a death.

Pounding down the street, Maggie soon broke free of the crowd of other students barreling toward the mine's front gate. When Maggie scaled the rise, the copper mine appeared like a hulking black monster on the horizon. The rusted pipes wove over and around each other like a tangle of wadded-up wire. The smokestacks rose high out of the center spewing clouds of dark smoke and ash overhead.

Maggie crashed into the chain-link fence surrounding the structure of small buildings and acid tanks that made up the mine's enclosure. She could make out the commotion in the yard as a crowd gathered around the elevator lift. The ambulance was already there, its back end facing the elevator lift. Maggie pressed her face into the chain fence, digging metal indentions into her forehead as she strained to see past the scattered miners and paramedics lining up outside the lift. Two paramedics, navigating a stretcher, squeezed into the elevator lift, and Maggie watched the tops of their heads disappear as they were lowered into the mine shaft.

They'd all been shocked stupid by the Challenger explosion. They all gathered together in the auditorium to watch agog as a shuttle imploded on a grainy screen. But for many of them, the feeling was familiar. They were used to sudden loss, used even to

sudden explosions. They were used to the gut-wrenching, heart-sinking, eye-rolling back in your head-feeling of sudden catastrophe. When machinery malfunctioned, someone didn't do their job, nodded off for just a second, and let a drill, ax handle, or screw bolt slip. That's all it took. Just a second. The kids in the basin knew like no other school children on January 28, 1986, what an explosion and the sudden explosion of life sounded like; it didn't matter whether it was a mile above ground or below; when a body exploded, it sounded the same.

PART II—THE DOWNFALL

1987-1988

In the Red Deeps

Maggie's melancholy romance with Philip Wakem plays out against the unforgettable environmental background of the Red Deeps, which, with their dark melancholy firs and mysteriously vivid rock formations, form one of the novel's most significant and memorable described locations, a location for which Maggie seems almost to have more affection than she does for Philip himself.⁵⁹

Maggie climbed the steps to the top of the old smelting tower—long-unused—now it stood a skeletal stele towering over the old buildings of the Burra-Burra mine. No one went here. The abandoned machinery and the open mine shafts' deep holes were cautionary tales to any child born in the basin. They climbed the rickety steps to the smelting tower; from here, they could see the distant smokestacks of the Company chugging out smoke and the deep grooves of craters and gullies dissecting the valley below.

Philip was already there. She could hear the faint electrical buzz of the radio dial as he searched through a sea of static to pick out the distant signal from beyond the basin to an outlying island of sound.

Tom used to dare her to touch the outside of the old smelting tower. She'd not only touched the building but also climbed the rickety, rusted-out ladder to the top, where she could see the entire town spread out below her.

Since then, she'd thought of this place as hers and was surprised to discover Philip there one day.

She'd paused on her way home from school. She'd been exploring the pockets of

⁵⁹ Jayne Hildebrand, Environmental Desire in *The Mill on the Floss*. *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 76, no. 2 (2021): 195.

town she'd been forbidden to visit by her mother. Bessie worried about the abandoned mining structures surrounding Dorlcote, anxious about buildings with long outdated wiring, crumbling foundations, and the probability of some wild dog or vagrant who had made a makeshift house inside. When Maggie had passed under the tower, she'd heard a faint sound—music—filtering down through the building above. She climbed the ladder to the smelting tower and pulled the music like metal to a magnet. When she got to the top of the narrow stairs, she found a dim circular room and Philip sprawled on the floor opposite, cradling a handheld radio. He held it protectively to his chest, almost cooing to the thing. When he finally noticed Maggie hovering at the top of the stairs he sprung to his feet as if pulled by strings and let the radio clatter to the cement floor. Maggie laughed. She couldn't help it. He'd looked so peaceful, serene, and transcendent, like the print of Raphael's Madonna that hung in Aunt Glegg's parlor. Watching from her perch at the stairs, Maggie recalled the serene features of the Madonna as she gazed reverently at the bundled Christ child in her arm.

Maggie knew who Philip was before meeting him that day in the tower. She'd seen him around school and town, and she knew his father was involved in some problem with the mine and the subject of most of her father's rants.

Philip had a jagged scar running across the left side of his face. Raised red and purple lines zigzagging from his temple to his cheekbone. He hid his face behind a wispy curtain of light brown hair. Rumor around the basin was that he'd been hit with a

stray ember from the slag heap on dumping day when he'd gotten too close. You'd think people growing up in the basin would sympathize with a kid who'd had his face burned off, most of the men in the basin had sacrificed at least a finger to the mine, and more and more were losing limbs and lungs, but Philip had the disadvantage of being a Wakem. He was a manager's kid from up north. And the consensus around the town was that a Copperhill kid would have known better than to get near the slag heap on dump day. They called him Phantom and hummed Frank Lloyd Weber tunes when he walked down the hall at school. If he had been a miner's son he would have been protected from the sneers and taunts about his scar. Miners kids were used to sacrificing more than their looks to the company. But since he was an owner's kid and a recent transplant from up north, he was treated with the same mistrust and side-eyed suspicion as any carpetbagger.

Philip was obsessed with technology. Computers, calculators, the newly forming internet, and even synthesized keyboards excited him. The age of computers could usher in entirely new sounds. Sounds no one's ever heard. He talked animatedly to Maggie about creating an as-of-yet undiscovered instrument.

It would be like finding a new continent or striking oil, he said.

Or copper, Maggie said.

Philip's Playlist

He introduced her to the Smiths, R.E.M. and The Replacements. He made her tapes with songs only about rivers and another with songs only about trees—including the Beach Boy's hauntingly beautiful and underrated Life of a Tree, which he added twice. He made her tapes of all women singers, Kate Bush, the Bangles, Carole King, and Joni Mitchell.

Maggie listened to I Feel the Earth Move on repeat. Rewinding it again and again so the world was masked through a fog of sound behind her headphones.

She would belt the chorus out at the top her lungs.

I just a-lose control

Down to my very soul

It made her feel sexy, powerful, graceful even. As if she, Maggie Tulliver, were just right. It was amazing what the right song could do for her confidence.

Borderline

Inside the Basin, they lost reception, the waves blocked by the mountain ranges towering on every side. But by the Burra-Burra mine, near the jagged gaping mouth where the mine blast killed nine people back in 47, they could pick up the loud metallic rock from WKRB that they listened to so loud the soles of Maggie's sneakers thrummed with the vibration.

On the south side of the basin, they could usually pick up the signal from WKRB in Atlanta, but even at this height, the connection was often staticky and flitted in and out depending on the cloud cover. But sometimes, when the air was exactly right, and the sky was clear, they could reach the radio waves from as far away as Jackson or Mobile. Once, Philip had even gotten Loveline from Charlotte.

Far away from the clang of the mines in the distance, they belted out the words to "London Calling." And when they got to the line, "I live by the river," they raised their voices to a scream. Thrashing their hands in an erratic wave that would have toppled Maggie from the tower if it weren't for the rusted guardrail.

A Love-Scene

*Maggie, moreover, had rather a tenderness for deformed things. . . and she was especially fond of petting objects that would think it very delightful to be petted by her.*⁶⁰

The sun shone out suddenly from a bullet-colored cloud. Philip looked down at Maggie, from this angle he could see every detail of her skin in pixelated perfection. She opened her eyes and blinked up at him. He stared back at her for a few bright moments before turning back to his book.

She stared back at him, her eyes running over his face and Philip realized that in this light she could see him as well. He turned to look toward the sky.

Maggie sat up, Why do you do that?

Do what?

She swiveled her head from side to side. Hide your scar from me.

I didn't realize I was doing it. Philip said.

Yes you did. Sometimes it's unconscious, but just now I saw you flinch away when you realized I could see your face.

He shrugged. I didn't want to make you feel uncomfortable.

How'd it happen? Maggie asked.

Car accident, Philip said. With my mom when she died. He'd been stuck in the car for hours before paramedics had come. He still woke up most nights thinking he was back in the wreckage, trapped underneath the crushing weight of metal and glass.

Up until the accident he'd spent most of the year in Ohio with his mom. His

⁶⁰ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 166.

parents had divorced when he was a baby and his dad had lived in this strange wasteland for as long as he could remember. Every summer when he was growing up, he came to the Basin. This place was weird like something out of Mad Max or Dune. As if a bit of Arizona had been plopped down in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Does it hurt?

No. It itches sometimes.

She reached up and ran her fingers through his hair, brushing the strands back behind his ears. I think you're beautiful.

Shut up. You don't know what you're saying.

Don't tell me what I don't know. She tilted her head up and pressed her lips to his in a hard, fierce kiss.

Their lips touched again this time briefly, hesitantly. Then they'd done it again. And again. So, *This is kissing*, Maggie thought. She liked it. She grew comfortable with Philip's lips. Then she grew bold and curious about the rest of his body.

The Young Idea

*He's a poor crooked creature, and takes after his dead mother. But don't you be getting too thick with him; he's got his father's blood in him too. Ay, ay, the gray colt may chance to kick like his black sire.*⁶¹

After that kiss, and each subsequent one, Philip felt the rising pressure of going back to their usual selves, their school selves, pretending they didn't see each other in the hall, or the grocery, or when they both ended up at opposite ends of the counter at Arp's diner.

Not when he'd felt Maggie's lips under his, not when he'd finally been able to explore all the soft curves she kept barely hidden behind the straining buttons of her tissue-thin blouses. Not when he knew the pulse and shudder of her long tanned legs capped in denim shorts wrapped around his waist.

See me again, Philip pleaded.

I shouldn't. Besides, You're going away to school. She added.

⁶¹ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 173

Teenagers from Mars

In high school, when Philip had enrolled at McCallie, an all-boys boarding school in Chattanooga, the distance still existed, but now Maggie felt safe to close this gap with letters. They sent handwritten letters to each other. Philip's on heavy cream stationary provided to all McCallie students and left in stacks on the library's long mahogany tables, and in the boys' individual dorm rooms, stuffed in each boys' desk along with a McCallie pen. Maggie's on sheets of lined paper ripped from her notebooks.

He'd written her three letters to her one, a fact that he pointed out to her when he called her house one night. Maggie thanked all the gods there were that her parents were out to dinner with the Riley's.

She said things were different now. It was hard to explain. Her father had gotten worse after the wreck and his stay in the hospital. Tom had dropped out of college and her mother was looking for a job and she was working at the theater after school and on weekends.

'I think we should stop meeting each other.' She said.

There's no harm in it Maggie. It's not like we're running a meth lab in the tower. Besides, I made a new mix for you. I think you'll really like this one, I added more new wave, less punk

I'm sorry, I just can't now.

Family Traits

Maggie banged open the door to Gritty's shop after school. She was winded and panting. Her hair had come loose from her ponytail and hung in tangles around her face. A large bruise darkened her left eye.

Gritty sat at the window smoking. Where'd you get the shiner?

Janice Tooley punched me.

Why'd she do that? Gritty asked.

No reason.

She just walked up and hit you for no reason?

I might've pushed her. Maggie vibrated with pent-up anger and paced circles around the room. I pushed her. I knocked her head all the way back until it hit the hook in the cloakroom. I bet she's got a hook-shaped hole in her head right now.

Why'd you do that? Gritty took a long draw on her cigarette and blew out two smoke rings.

Maggie stilled and watched the rings evaporate above her head.

She deserve it? This Janice girl? Gritty asked.

Yeah, she sure did. Maggie sat at her desk, jiggling her legs while her hands beat an erratic rhythm on her knees.

What she'd do? Gritty recognized Maggie's nervous energy. She saw the same erratic movements in her brother when he got angry or excited.

She was talking about Dad, and she said... Maggie dropped her gaze. She couldn't look at Gritty anymore.

Had to have been pretty bad for you to slug her

Maggie picked at a flaking chip of paint on the edge of the desk. She said the layoffs at the mine were Dad's fault. She looked up at Gritty.

Gritty lit another cigarette, her expression blank.

They said the mine was closing, and everyone was out of a job because of Dad. Maggie continued, But I know that isn't true. She looked back down and flicked more paint off the desk. Her vision blurred, she felt sick to her stomach and thought she might cry.

Well, pal, Gritty stood and stubbed out her cigarette. Let's make sure the next time you fight, you win. She picked up her suitcase from the end of the bed and pulled out a compact. But first, let's take care of that shiner.

Mom says I'm not old enough to wear makeup. Maggie said as Gritty bent over her to examine the black eye.

You're sixteen. That's plenty old.

I'm fourteen, Maggie said.

You sure?

Pretty sure.

Well then, let's pretend your sixteen.

Maggie Behaves Worse Than She Expected

Maggie was in trouble. And so, it seemed, was aunt Gritty, though Maggie wasn't sure why, except that her aunt always seemed to be in trouble with the family. She lay fully clothed and inert on her bed, stretched out to all four corners like a starfish. Sun streamed through the window blinds, and she watched the dust particles float through the air.

Downstairs she could hear the low murmuring of her parents' argument. At first, they'd been careful to keep their voices to a whisper, but she'd been able to catch snatches of words and phrases—bad influence, never done this before, can't be helped—enough to piece together the general idea. Even if they had been stone-cold silent or done their arguing in the basement or out in the driveway, Maggie would've known they were talking about her. Her teacher had called home. Maggie had been suspended for fighting.

Not even *The Smiths* could drown out her parent's fight. The low cacophonous rumble of their voices rose to a new intensity. Your fault. Should have sold up years ago. Give up on the mine already. They'd moved on from Maggie's suspension and fell back into their regular fight about money, the mine, moving away. Like a worn groove on a record, every conversation between her parents lately had gotten stuck on this subject. She raised the headphones to her ears and turned the volume up all the way up on her Walkman.

Maggie pressed her fingers to the purpling bruise at her temple until she felt a throbbing ache deep in her skull. She wanted to keep the pain sharp and present. She thought if she could hold on to the pain in her head, she'd be able to hold onto her anger instead of letting it slip into sadness.

What Had Happened at Home

*Mr. Tulliver, even between the fits of spasmodic rigidity which had recurred at intervals ever since he had been found fallen from his horse, was usually in so apathetic a condition that the exits and entrances into his room were not felt to be of great importance. He had lain so still, with his eyes closed, all this morning, that Maggie told her aunt Moss she must not expect her father to take any notice of them.*⁶²

Tulliver flitted in and out of consciousness in a room at Benton County Hospital. He had a concussion, two broken ribs, seven stitches across his forehead, and a broken jaw. His face was bandaged, his left eye swollen, and his jaw drilled shut with two eight-millimeter screws.

The nurse who fingered his wrist for a pulse avoided looking directly at him. The screws sticking out of his cheeks and the stitches on his forehead made him look like Frankenstein's monster. Tulliver tried to ask for water, but his mouth was full of gauze. All he could manage was a faint groan. The nurse gave him another dose of morphine, and he sank back into the warm glow of his high.

When he resurfaced, a starch-coated doctor stood at the end of the bed frowning at the file in his hand. He coughed, and the sound seemed to vibrate inside Tulliver's skull. He coughed again, a loud shuttering noise that shook his whole body. Tulliver tried to tell him to stop, but the effort of opening his eyes and parting his lips made his head throb and his vision blur.

The doctor gave one last phlegmatic cough and looked up. Oh, you're awake. Good.

The doctor's voice was too loud. Tulliver wanted to tell him to be quiet, but he

⁶² Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 232.

still had gauze in his mouth. Before he fell back into a morphine haze, he heard the doctor mumble something about a fracture, stitches, and swelling.

When Tulliver woke again, a candy-striped volunteer was trying to feed him ice chips from a plastic spoon. The gauze in his mouth was gone, and he parted his lips and croaked out a faint plea, Don't tell my family.

What's that? the volunteer asked. Your family? Don't worry. They're already here. Her voice sent shudders of pain through his body.

Your wife is in the waiting room if you want to see her.

Tulliver shut her eyes and willed himself back into unconsciousness.

Mrs. Tulliver's Teraphim, or Household Gods

*The Dodson pattern of perverse attachment to personal possessions allows Eliot to comment on the problematic status of women in relation to property. Women's sphere of power was the domestic space and typically a woman's personal property was restricted to household objects, or portable wealth. Exploring the role of portable property in *The Mill on the Floss* Deborah Spillman notes that women face the threat of material dispossession most profoundly, both because of their inability to own property. . . and because of the typically portable nature of their property⁶³*

Anything that could bear the Dodson name, or better yet, the grinning faces of the four sisters, did. They'd smacked their name on plates, cups, coffee mugs, calendars, tanning lotion, aprons, tea towels, miniature decorative spoons, giant commemorative frisbees, sewing kits, and thimbles.

Bessie Tulliver kept all her Dodson Sister memorabilia in a rented storage unit outside of St. Ogg. she didn't trust that the basin's acidic air wouldn't eat away at her treasures. She passed the storage facility off highway 411 whenever she ventured into St. Ogg and often wiled away huge chunks of the day rummaging among the boxes of photos, trying on old costumes and singing along to old Dodson records.

When Bessie visited the Barbra Mandrel Country Museum in Nashville she got ideas. She'd asked Jane about opening a Dodson Sister Museum.

I have all the costumes, memorabilia, and stuff just lying around in the storage space. You really should let me organize it.

No, Bessie, I think it's tacky in the extreme. What would mama say about us opening a museum to ourselves?

⁶³ Deborah Spillman *All That Is Solid Turns into Steam: Sublimation and Sympathy in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss**.

Job's Comforters

*When one of the family was in trouble or sickness, all the rest went to visit the unfortunate member, usually at the same time, and did not shrink from uttering the most disagreeable truths that correct family feeling dictated; if the illness or trouble was the sufferer's own fault, it was not in the practice of the Dodson family to shrink from saying so.*⁶⁴

The Dodsons descended. A hydra-monstrous mass of relatives, they took up every empty chair in the hospital waiting room.

Paulette sat down without taking her hand or head from her giant upholstered handbag as she hunted for tissues and cough drops. She offered both to Bessie, who took them with the rote obedience of a toddler.

Glegg took the chair facing the clock and the door and pulled a knotted clutch of yarn and two needles from her handbag. Maggie had always thought something was menacing in the many armed, tentacled appendages of her aunt's knitting, something in the protruding needles that stuck out from the bundle of wool, the clicking needles as she was able to switch from one hand to the next without breaking stride.

Susan slumped in the chair beside Sophie and riffled through the magazines stacked on the side table.

When the waiting room had lapsed into silence for too long Sophie brought up with astonishing clarity and attention to detail all the names, ages, and occupations of all the people she'd ever known who died in a hospital from the exact same thing.

Bessie baby, you want a tranq? Susan plucked her handbag from where it hung on the back of her chair and rummaged inside.

⁶⁴ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 41.

Give me two, Bessie held out her palm.

One, Glegg barked. What you've got in that handbag could outfit a pharmacy. Glegg watched as Bessie swallowed one of the pills in her hand and returned the other in her pocket.

A Vanishing Gleam

*Among the threads of the past which the stricken man had gathered up, he had omitted the bill of sale; the flash of memory had only lit up prominent ideas, and he sank into forgetfulness again with half his humiliation unlearned.*⁶⁵

Maggie helped Bessie get Tulliver into the car, each of them taking an arm to guide him through the hospital's front door and out into the parking lot.

The doctor gave me some painkillers, but they will wear off in a couple of hours, Tulliver winced as he tried to maneuver himself through the narrow car door. Then he leaned his head back against the vinyl seat and closed his eyes.

Bessie pulled out of the hospital parking lot, gripping the steering wheel at ten and two, her knuckles already whitening with strain. She was a nervous driver, prone to sudden starts and stops. She would tread on the accelerator and brake as if she were trying to force her foot through the floorboard to toe the pavement. At the first red light, Bessie slammed on the brakes.

Jesus Bes, you trying to kill me? Tulliver cursed and blinked back tears from his stinging eyes.

You're doing a good enough job of that without my help. Bessie snapped.

Maggie turned toward the window. She looked out at the passing storefronts that dissolved into two-story houses shaded behind elm, maple, and oak trees.

⁶⁵ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 208.

Take this Job and Shove it

*the mind that has the strongest affinity for fact cannot escape illusion and self-flattery, and Tom, in sketching his future had no other guide in arranging his facts than the suggestions of his own brave self-reliance.*⁶⁶

Tom pulled one of his father's beers from the carport fridge before getting in the car. Just a little liquid courage. He checked his pocket for the slim pack of Big Red before turning the ignition of Bessie's gold Lincoln. Before he pulled out of the garage, he adjusted his tie in the mirror one last time. He didn't know why he was so nervous. He was just asking his uncle for a job. Easy, not sweat. After all, they were family.

He looked at his reflection in the rearview mirror, hoping his face conveyed respectability, deference, and reliability. He needed this job. Otherwise, he'd have to take a cashier job at the Piggly Wiggly or keep working the late shift at Chester's Fried Chicken off 431. He never thought he'd ever have to wear a uniform, especially a scratchy brown polyester uniform, and matching hat, and he'd never thought he'd ever have to repeat do you want fries with that after every customer clogged up outside his window. It was particularly devastating when Renna James had stumbled in late one night on the arm of some beefy football player, and he'd had to ring up two value meals with a single chocolate shake to share, Renna added while squeezing the jack ass's bicep. Tom could have taken that guy if he hadn't been separated by a wide counter, cash register, and the knowledge that he needed this job no matter how paltry the pay or demoralizing the embarrassment.

⁶⁶ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 209.

When Tom exited the interstate, he passed subdivisions of identical 1 and 2-story ranch houses, each framed by a patch of gleaming green grass. Tom wants to laugh at the suckers pushing the lawnmowers over their front lawns. There wasn't a single weed whacker, hedge trimmer, or lawn mower in the basin. There had never been any grass to mow. He'd before wished for grass to cut or a yard to upkeep, but in the basin, he was missing out on an easy source of income.

Tom had been obsessed with uncle Deane's riding lawn mower when he was a kid. That thing was better than his BMX bike and faster. It even had a cup holder, which his bike could use. His uncle claimed that mowing lawns had been his first business. I was 14 years old and raked in the dough, cutting lawns every summer. People would pay anything not to cut their own grass. He'd even said some women tipped him extra when he'd taken his shirt off. It was like that scene at the beginning of *Can't Buy Me Love*. Tom didn't believe him. No one would be attracted to his uncle's shirtless chest. Tom could have pulled it off. He'd been lifting weights for over a year and could bench over 150. He had studied the slow-forming muscles that seemed to harden into a series of dips and gullies across his arms and chest. As if his body were a topographical map and set into its own version of the erosion gullies, his fat slowly dissolving into hardened muscles.

Tom Applies His Knife to the Oyster

*But I'll tell you what it is. Your poor father went the wrong way to work in giving you an education. Mr. Deane says to his nephew. It wasn't my business, and I didn't interfere; but it is as I thought it would be. You've had a sort of learning that's all very well for a young fellow like our Mr Stephen Guest, who'll have nothing to do but sign checks all his life, and may as well have Latin inside his head as any other sort of stuffing.*⁶⁷

Deane's Motors was the most successful car dealership in St. Ogg. The gas shortage of the late 70s and early 80s was over, and people were buying cars again. Expensive foreign and luxury models. His office inside the car dealership was wood paneled and dominated by a large desk and two plastic guest chairs. In the corner, a half-empty coffee pot burned on the range, and the acrid scent mixed with cigarette smoke and gasoline. Behind his desk hung framed glossy photographs of President Reagan and former President Ford. An American Flag waved behind their heads. Ford's dishwater blue eyes and Regan's squinty gunmetal stare were trained directly at Tom. Tom suspected his uncle positioned these portraits specifically to intimidate visitors to his office. When customers signed contracts, they didn't dispute the necessity of sealant wax, suede seat covers, or reinforced floor mats under the unblinking weight of the joint presidential gaze.

Deane watched Tom squirm in his seat. He could pick up on the faint scent of anxiety as he sweated through the suit and tie he'd worn. Leaning back in his chair, he let one more beat of silence pass before putting the boy out of his misery.

Tom, don't sweat the work. I told your mother I'd find a summer job for you at wash-up and maintenance. You can't pay for the on-the-job training you'll get watching

⁶⁷ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 214.

Stan and his crew.

I was hoping for something more permanent. Tom looked alarmed and scooted forward in his chair, the plastic upholstery giving a slight wheeze under his readjusted weight.

More permanent? Deane leveled his stare at the boy. He knew full well that he'd come here for more than he could earn in a few weeks on the lot. Don't tell me you're considering dropping out of college with only a year to go?

Just something I've been thinking about, Tom slumped back in the chair. With the mine, the union, and dad's medical bills. I need to start pulling my weight, you know. Help at home.

Deane didn't answer for several seconds, letting the boy stew in his own lies. He knew full well why Tom wasn't going back to college, and it had nothing to do with being the man of the house or a sudden interest in selling cars. He'd heard all about it from Riley the other week at the club. He knew Tom and the Pullet boy had been kicked out. Expelled for gross disregard for the school's honor code, and there was also that business with a girl who'd complained. Riley said the boys had to appear before a judge and plead their case. There was even talk of police involvement. It would have gotten out if the girls' parents hadn't intervened to keep the whole thing quiet. And here was Tom, cool as a cucumber, claiming family responsibility, when he'd been shoved out ass first with only a semester and some change left until graduation.

You'd drop out after all the money your daddy put into your education?

It's just something I'm thinking about. Tom backpedaled, recognizing the judgment buried beneath the benign question. Nothing's settled yet.

Deane sat up and ruffled in his right-hand drawer for a lighter. Yeah, I bet. If you want to throw your daddy's hard-earned money down the crapper, so be it. You can keep working the lot after the summer ends for all I care.

I was hoping for something more. . . Tom paused and rolled his eyes toward the ceiling as if searching for the right words that would make this excuse plausible. More permanent. I could join the sales team. Nate is getting up there, and you said yourself he was thinking of retiring.

Deane barked out a laugh. Sales. You can't start at the top, boy?

Why not. Isn't that what you did when you started working here?

Not at the top, I didn't, Deane said. Plus, I wasn't a college dropout with a few measly credits short of a degree when I started here. I was a grown-ass man with job experience. Hell, even sales experience.

Didn't you sell air conditioners?

I still sold them, didn't I? You've never sold anything, not even me, on this conversation. Don't try to fool me. I know why you're here and why you aren't going back to school. You can't go back, can you?

He watched in satisfaction as Tom's face drained of color. Didn't think anyone would find out, did you? But I know all about your troubles at college. If you think I'd trust someone like that to move product, interact with customers, and not cheat me on the commission, you've got another thing coming, son. Deane's voice grew louder with each accusation, and now the boy looked alarmed. He stared open-mouthed at his uncle, his mouth gaping like a black hole, empty and useless.

Don't worry, I won't go telling tales to your mamma or aunts, but I just want you

to know that I know what's what, Deane said. You can have a job as a lot boy, we've been needing someone to wash and gas the cars when they come back from test runs, and ever since Manny left for college, Deane couldn't hold back the knowing sneer that spread over this face, the salesmen have been doing their own wash and gas, and they're sick of it.

Deane reached toward his desk's intercom and pushed the reception button. Charlene, I've got a new lot boy for you. Be sure to get his payroll sorted, then send him down to Manny in Service Parts.

The Game of Who's More Miserable

*Tom went to and fro every morning and evening, and became more and more silent in the short intervals at home: what was there to say.*⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 256.

Gloom, Despair, and Agony on Me

*Poor Mrs. Tulliver, it seemed, would never recover her old self, her placid household activity; how could she? The objects among which her mind had moved complacently were all gone,—all the little hopes and schemes and speculations, all the pleasant little cares about her treasures which had made the world quite comprehensible to her for a quarter of a century, since she had made her first purchase of the sugar-tongs, had been suddenly snatched away from her, and she remained bewildered in this empty life.*⁶⁹

It was the dull, unending hours that did Bessie in, more than her sister's ever-tightening lips, more than the accusing stare of her brother-in-law who insisted that he understood, anything for the family. We'll stay as long as you need. Not even that drove her to the edge, the very brink of torture. It was the slow beat of each hour. The way Bessie—against all laws of time, space, and physics—knew, was quite certain, that she had existed for a lifetime, a thousand decades, between each tick of the clock's hand.

Bessie measured her days by the repetition of small household routines: the thwack of the newspaper against the front door at 5:17, sometimes as late as 5:25, her sister's soft pad down the hall in her faux velvet housecoat between 5:30 and 5:45, the click and swoosh of the door lock being turned and the door being opened, Half an hour later her brother-in-law would grunt, shift, scratch and rise from the creaking guest-room bed. Bessie would hear his feet hit the floor; he would groan and then reach for his robe draped across the bed. She could hear every creak of the floorboard in the next room, she could hear the soft flannel fabric leave the hook and travel through the air the short distance to his body. She imagined him slipping the red flannel robe about him like a matador, whip, swish, it had that sound, but she knew, if she could see him, grabbing the

⁶⁹ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 256.

robe from its hook and spreading it across his torso, she'd see a limp cloth stretched across his too wide shoulders and stomach.

How a Hen Takes to Stratagem

*Mrs. Tulliver, seeing that everything had gone wrong, had begun to think she had been too passive in life; and that, if she had applied her mind to business, and taken a strong resolution now and then, it would have been all the better for her and her family.*⁷⁰

The kitchen at Garum Furs hadn't been updated since their mother had been first married.

The cabinets, countertops, and ruffled curtain under the sink reflected a pre-War frumpiness that had aged only slightly better than the cracked linoleum and scarred butcher block table. Copper baking tins hung in a line on pegs above the cabinets.

Maggie sat at the kitchen counter tracing a crack in the linoleum with her finger.

Jane Glegg stood kneading a loaf of bread, as she did every other day, refusing to eat or even acknowledge the existence of store-bought bread.

Bessie settled heavily onto one of the kitchen chairs beside Sophie and pulled out a crumpled pack of Slims and a lighter from her bathrobe pocket. The robe, a yellow chenille, had developed a faint tinge of gray and was spotted with coffee stains and what looked like a dried-up, browned-over spot of blood on the left sleeve.

Maggie knew the robe bothered her Aunt Glegg. Only hookers and new mothers wear a bathrobe all day, every day, she'd said to Bessie the night before when she'd appeared at the dinner table in the offending garment. Why don't you change? Sophie had asked. You'll feel better. Bessie had ignored her sisters and sat dazed and vacant-eyed through the entire dinner while Sophie tried to cajole Bessie into eating and Glegg made repeated remarks about how people can't just lie down in the middle of the road and stop living when life gets tough.

⁷⁰ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 228.

You'll have to have a plan, Jane said, carrying the bowl of dough from the window ledge to the scarred butcher-block table. Bess, I mean it.

People go crazy without a plan. Sophie added from her seat at the kitchen table. They get bored, listless, and depressed. Then they end up throwing themselves off bridges and buildings.

Maggie watched as Glegg flipped the bowl over and the wad of dough flopped onto the kitchen counter. A white cloud rose and settled as she turned the dough, once, twice, and then reached her hand into the bag of flour to sprinkle another layer of white over the counter.

What do you plan to do when Jeremy is able to leave the hospital? Glegg pulled the dishcloth away from the bowl and punched the dough down with her fist.

Bessie gave a small shrug and squinted at Glegg through a cloud of smoke. She held her cigarette above her head with an elbow cupped in one hand, and when she exhaled, the top half of the kitchen swirled with smoke.

You could sell the house and move into Garum Firs for a while. Glegg continued, pushing, and pulling the bread across the floured counter.

Well, that's awfully generous of you, Jane, considering it's my house you're volunteering. Sophie said.

As if you'd notice another person. You could go weeks in that house without seeing anyone. Why your closet is bigger than most houses.

I got this at the library in town. I asked the librarian if she had anything on finding a job, and she gave me this. Paulette held up a battered paperback with *101 Jobs You Can Do from Home* in bright yellow bubble letters. What about selling cookies? Everyone

loves your snicker-doodles.

This is not a bake sale, you are not a girl scout, Glegg said. You need a real job, with a paycheck, a time sheet, and a place to be every day.

How about Junque boutique? Sophie added peering to read over Paulette's shoulder.

You could open a junk shop with all the stuff you've crammed in that storage space. Glegg muttered as she punched down the dough.

But it's all gone now, sister. Bessie dabbed her eyes with the tissue. There's nothing left.

Why are you worried about the shit in the storage locker? Glegg said. Good Lord, Bess, they could take your house. You should be worried about where your children will sleep.

You think I don't know that. Bessie erupted, finally angered into a response. I know better than anyone. It's me who's going to have to live like this. It's me who's lost all my things. It's me who's probably going to be homeless on the street. The well of tears she'd been subduing somewhat successfully burst free. Bessie put her head in her hands and let out a series of hiccupping sobs.

I guess I could talk to Gordon at the office. I bet someone's looking for a secretary. Glegg paused, her hands inside the dough, and looked up at Bessie, how long ago was it that you took that short-hand class at the junior college?

It was Susan who took short-hand. Bessie rose unsteadily from the chair and stubbed out her cigarette in the saucer of her coffee cup, leaving a dark brown singe that Glegg would find later and be unable to scrub clean. Besides, how would I even get to an

office with the car totaled and no hope of replacing it? Tightening the belt of her robe, she left the kitchen and wandered back upstairs.

Maggie remained seated at the kitchen table and watched Sophie knead the bread, liking the sound her wedding ring made when it clinked against the bowl. Maggie knew that her grandmother had taught Bessie and her aunts to bake bread when they were young. Bessie had tried to teach Maggie in the same way, showing her how to manipulate the dough between her palms, but her fingers were stubby and fat, so unlike her mother's long tapered fingers, and she'd grown bored with the repeated pattern of rest, rise, repeat involved in making a single loaf. You know that they sell Wonder Bread in stores, Maggie had said when the backs of her arms ached from what felt like hours and hours of kneading. But she liked the peculiar scent of the bread. The way the dough had smelled alive, like the earthiness of potting soil, like the ripe mulch the school spread on the playground every spring but so much milder and sweeter than these other smells. She'd told her mother that the bread smelled ``kind of like dirt, and was surprised when she seemed offended.

She had never known that anything could be so soft and simultaneously sticky before she had reached her hand into a bowl of dough and turned it over palm to palm, so like flesh. Maggie leaned her elbow on the table and forced her eye to focus on the chipped linoleum rather than watch the rhythmic give of her aunt's hands pushing into the dough. With two fingers, Sophie pressed the smooth surface of the dough, leaving behind two small dents, eyeholes, Maggie thought. She watched the shallow dents bound back, it's ready, her mother had taught her, when the dents bounce back.

Now in Technicolor

Maggie drove to St. Ogg each weekend and three nights a week after school for her shift at the Bohemian movie theater. Copperhill's part-time jobs had been snatched up by striking miners. She took the narrow roads that led from the high school down Water Road to Interstate 311 and watched the landscape green-up before her eyes. Outside the window the cragged gullies and wrinkled hills would transform into brush grass and straggly weeds until she drove out of the red desert completely and into a vibrant technicolor green.

As she drove out of Copperhill and the landscape faded from red to green Maggie thought of the sepia toned photographs that she'd gotten with Lucy when they'd taken a trip last summer to Dollywood. Lucy and Maggie posed woodenly and trussed up in old-timey costumes that smelled strongly of B.O. The brown tint of the photo, a technique Maggie assumed was meant to denote age and nostalgia, but to her it was only a reminder of how leached of color her home was. Like *the Wizard of Oz* before Munchkin Land. Instead of black and white, they had brown and red.

Those sepia photos always gave her the uneasy feeling that her town, her landscape, was stuck in time. The red dust that covered every square inch of the basin and gave everything from the tops of cars, the tops of houses, to the tops of heads a distinct sepia tint. All the town needed was a couple of old-timey props, a top hat or parasol and the vintage illusion would be complete. Each day driving home was like returning to the past, to an ancient sepia-toned wasteland. Like going from Oz to Kansas and back again each day.

Immovable Minutes

Maggie hated Saturdays. Worse than Mondays. Worse, even then the Sundays her mother made her go to the early service at Hopewell Baptist, followed by lunch at her Aunt Glegg's. On Saturdays, every single kid in town lined up outside the Bohemian Theater for the double feature. Each and every Saturday, at the stroke of noon, a yakking, kicking, screaming, bouncing tidal wave of little bodies poured through the wide double doors and into the lobby. They pulled on the velvet ropes, ran down the aisles, climbed the steps to the balcony, and filled up every single seat with their sticky, sweaty, sugar-filled bodies.

For the next four hours, leaning against the back wall of the auditorium as caged as a lion at the zoo, Maggie would shudder against the mayhem. Kids were everywhere, filled to their eyeballs with sugar and cola, and popcorn. Wild and stomping, hanging off the balcony like monkeys, throwing popcorn at the screen, spilling soda on the floor, choking on Milk Duds, ruining their braces and their suppers.

At four o'clock, the thousand-and-one kids groaned and sniffed and shrugged from their seats, filing back up the aisle and back outside, blinking dumbly in the bright sunlight under the marquee. Maggie would sweep up the crumpled popcorn bags and unstick the gum from the armrests to make the theater ready for the seven o'clock double feature.

Holiday Road

Maggie stood in the back of the theater and watched the Griswold's go on vacation every night. The opening credits with the postcards looked outdated and faded with manufactured nostalgia. Gator Hill, Florida; Covered Bridge, New Hampshire; Boots and Scoots Gas Station in Seattle.

Maggie walked down the aisle—invisible in her usher's uniform—and, reaching row five, she dropped her flashlight. When she crouched to pick it up, she slipped the bangle bracelet from Annalise's wrist. She pocketed the bracelet, palmed the flashlight, and continued up the aisle.

Maggie didn't keep the bracelet; instead, she dropped it into Henrietta Clay's handbag as she exited the theater. Henrietta found the bracelet on her way home as she reached into her purse for a stick of gum.

Monday morning in homeroom, Annalise snatched Henrietta's wrist and demanded to know why she had stolen her bracelet. Henrietta didn't know how to answer. From the back of the class, Maggie sat at her desk, watching.

It wasn't stealing. The things she took were not to keep but to redistribute. She moved objects with a keen sense of what went where. A talent learned from a movie palace morality, where crooks were always caught, paupers turned to princes, and guys got the girl. She imagined herself the Robin Hood of handheld objects, purse trinkets, and pocket change. Her aunt Paulette loved Robin Hood, and the one with Errol Flynn was her favorite. Maggie remembered sitting on the busy patterned Persian rug in the living room of Garum Firs, watching a late-night showing of *The Adventures of Robin Hood* on

the aunts' flickering black-and-white TV.

It's much better in color. Aunt Glegg had said.

How can you even tell which one is Robin Hood without the color? Maggie squinted at the small figures sword fighting on the screen.

I can tell which one is Erroll Flynn. How could you miss that mustache?

Your aunt loves outlaws, Uncle Gordon teased.

Suspect Device

Already that week, Maggie had lifted a brand-new tube of coral lipstick from Donna Wydell's purse and with a smooth sleight of hand, dropped it into Lorna Milner's handbag. Lorna, a washed-out frizzy-haired chemistry teacher, walked into class Monday morning, much improved by Donna's signature color. Maggie had also slipped a lavender cardigan from Janie Henderson's shoulders. Janie didn't notice. She was busy getting her hair ruffled and her neck nuzzled by Chet Avery. Scrunching the cardigan into a tight ball, Maggie crossed the auditorium and stuffed it deep inside Max Perry's trench coat without breaking stride. When Max found the sweater he was bewildered but pleased, realizing he could give it to his girlfriend for Christmas. Maggie was good. She could reach into a Letterman's jacket, pull out his wallet and remove the hopeful condom in seconds flat. She snatched fedoras from under seats and carried off umbrellas hanging from armrests, and nobody noticed. She was invisible.

Stiff Little Fingers

Maggie stood at the back of the theater as the seats filled for the matinee. It was the second showing of *Top Gun* and the theater shouldn't have been crowded. But it was raining and the movie had Tom Cruise. Maggie had it all planned out. Ideally the seat behind Eli Ledford would be empty and after the movie started she could dart into the row behind him without being seen. She'd wait for Maverick to fly through Iceman's jet wash, and then she'd pluck the flask from Eli's coat pocket and tuck it under her jacket.

But the seat behind Eli was taken at the last minute. A boy and his date slipped in as the opening credits rolled. Half an hour into the movie, Maggie made her move. The boy was inching his hand up his date's thigh and didn't notice Maggie walk up the aisle, stop at Eli's chair, and bend to tie her shoe. With one hand, she fiddled with her shoelace, and with the other, she reached into Eli's pocket and pulled out his flask. She stuck it in the belt of her pants, stood, and continued up the aisle.

Maggie climbed the stairs to the balcony where Tracy Latch sat with her five boys. The Latch boys were a walking cockfight. Wherever they went—school, church, the dentist's office—they engaged in wild, violent horseplay. They strangled, wrestled, pinned each other down, and couldn't walk within reach of each other without snatching and twisting whatever limb swung free in a bright red whelp. Everyone in town felt sorry for Tracy Latch. She tried to tame her five-boy litter of wolves as they yipped, snarled, and rolled around on the floor. When she jumped up to pull one boy off another and to shove them back into their chairs, Maggie dropped the flask into her purse.

An Item Added to the Family Register

Tulliver had taken to staying in bed most of the time, with the blinds closed, getting up only to use the bathroom or rummage in the fridge for a can of coke.

Aunt Gritty came to stay. She slept in the other twin bed in Maggie's bedroom and spent most days cleaning, ironing, and carrying things up to her brother on a tray: tomato soup, Saltine crackers, and Jell-O. Gritty was the only one who could coax Tulliver out of bed. She would cajole him into a pair of faded sweatpants and a clean T-Shift and shoo him downstairs, where he sat glassy-eyed and vacant at the kitchen table, drinking cans of beer, and poking at his food.

After school, when Maggie looked in, there was her father's back, still in the same position as when she'd left that morning. As if his body had settled in and crusted over, his shape fossilizing into the mattress. Somedays, Maggie stood in the doorway watching for movement, a shudder, a twitch, the shallow rise and fall of air to traveling to his lungs. When she finally crossed to the other side of the bed, he'd be staring, eyes wide open. It only took him a moment to recognize Maggie, and then he'd wink up at her. He'd shift and elevate his head until Maggie adjusted the pillow behind him.

Little Wench, how was school? A positive pleasure, I'm sure. He strained to sit up; the bed groaned and creaked with effort. His T-shirt hung loosely around his neck so that Maggie could see his waxy skin, as pale and translucent as the threadbare sheet covering his body.

Dad the Zombie

For Maggie, her father's depression was tightly bound to the mine. When the mine withered and stopped producing yield, so too did Jeremy Tulliver. In the weeks following the mine's closure, he scampered to salvage what was left of his leveraged holdings. He spoke with banks in Chattanooga and Knoxville in the same dull, ragged tone as when he'd made funeral arrangements for his mother. Maggie would come home from school and find him in the kitchen, sitting at the old Formica table, staring at the cork board beside the refrigerator as if the scraps of paper, church bulletins, and newspaper clippings held some coed message. Sometimes he'd tell her about his many failings—the heavily leveraged holdings and the multiple liens on everything. The house, the mine, the car, even the furniture—were about to vanish before their eyes.

He'd tried for several months to muddle through and get back to the grind. He now worked for the Company, which he'd sold, for less than its value, to cover his other debts. He dragged himself out of bed each morning, showered, shaved, and drove to a company that'd never be his again.

Daylight on the Wreck

Gritty couldn't smoke in the house. That's what Bessie had said as soon as she'd walked through the door, even before she'd set her purse down on what she called the occasional table in the front hall.

Maggie can set up an ashtray and folding chair out behind the carport if you need to smoke, Bessie said.

Beside her purse, Bessie dropped her keys in a blue ceramic bowl. The bowl was lopsided with an uneven lip. Gritty thought Maggie or Tom must have made it for a school art project. It would make a nice ashtray. The lip dipped down just enough to steady a cigarette. Later that night, after Bessie was asleep, Gritty took the blue bowl and returned to Maggie's room. She opened the window and used the bowl to balance her cigarette.

A Vanishing Gleam

Gritty sat at the window of Maggie's room, smoking, and looking out at the smelting pilings being dumped down the slag heap.

Nothing beats a slag night. Gritty said, drawing another pull on her cigarette without taking her eyes from the window.

I used to watch those when I was a kid, just like you. Slept right here and watched the burning glow run down Slag Hill.

This is probably the last Slag dump we'll ever see.

Don't say that. You don't know what'll happen.

Why not, were moving aren't we? Heard the company was shutting down soon anyway.

Maggie thought slag dumps looked like the jewels she'd seen at the Hyde Exhibit. Rubies, amethysts, and garnets all burst to blinding in the night sky. The hot molten lava seemed to puff up and expand like a bag of jiffy pop, bursting into a brilliant kaleidoscope of reds and oranges as it rushed down the hillside.

When Maggie read *Anne of Green Gables* for the first time, she understood the necessity of naming her own surroundings. The town founders had named these places without a speck or spark of imagination. Slag Heap. Big Creek, Rough Creek, Grassy Creek, Greasy Creek, Shallow Bottom. None of them did the landscape justice.

Maggie stayed up long enough to watch the slag embers fade from bright orange to dull red to black.

Before closing the window, she upended the folded newspaper she'd used as an

ashtray and crumbled the remains into the waste basket by the desk.

Will Your Lawyer Talk To God

*Nobody, it appeared, had thought of going to speak to Wakem on this business of the mill; and yet, Mrs. Tulliver reflected, it would have been quite the shortest method of securing the right end.*⁷¹

That had gone better than she'd expected.

Wakem hadn't said anything definite, but she thought he'd looked pleased when she'd left his office.

She had sweated through her dress guards and was glad the suit she'd borrowed from Sophie was dark enough to hide the dark spots under her arms.

⁷¹ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 220.

A Pike and a Roach

. . . and now Mrs Tulliver had put the notion into his head, it presented itself to him as a pleasure to do the very thing that would cause Mr Tulliver the most deadly mortification,—and a pleasure of a complex kind, not made up of crude malice, but mingling with it the relish of self-approbation. To see an enemy humiliated gives a certain contentment, but this is jejune compared with the highly blent satisfaction of seeing him humiliated by your benevolent action or concession on his behalf. That is a sort of revenge which falls into the scale of virtue, and Wakem was not without an intention of keeping that scale respectably filled.⁷²

⁷² Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 235.

Cat Among the Pigeons

Almost every resident had driven by a Klan 'roadblock' at one street intersection of another, where white-robed crusaders distributed propaganda while collecting money in buckets. Saturday afternoon parades through small town squares and nighttime cross burnings were also commonplace, particularly during the summer months. Dropping a dollar bill in a bucket or picking up a piece of racist propaganda did not mean that you had joined the Klan. But the constant presence of public activity tended to normalize these groups.⁷³

Leo Frank had been lynched less than 100 miles from this spot. Hell, less than 60 miles if you considered the location of the Forsyth courthouse. He drove farther each week for Temple. And this woman sat here asking for mercy? When she, or maybe just he, knew full well that her husband was prancing around the intersections of Polk county in a white sheet pan-handling with a plastic pail.

Jeremy Tulliver had a tattoo of the Cornish flag on his forearm—for the miners who first came to the area back before there was even a United States—which is how Wakem had recognized him underneath his klan robe.

The bottom half of the black-and-white flag of St. Perion peeked out from the white sleeve of his robe. Wakem stared back into Tulliver's snapping blue eyes and felt like a rabbit trapped in the sights of a fox. He reached with a sweaty palm for his wallet, pulled out two crisp dollar bills, and slid them into the plastic bucket's open slot.

Thank you, Tulliver said. Ya'll enjoy the rest of your Sunday. It's the Lord's day, you know. then added, We're here doing the Lord's work.

Wakem gave a brief nod before rolling up the window and turning back to the

⁷³ Leonard Zeskind, *Blood, and Politics: The History of the White Nationalist Movement From the Margins to the Mainstream*, 133-134.

steering wheel. As he continued down 114 and out of town, he kept his eyes steadily on the road ahead. He could feel the judgment washing off Philip, like heat from a furnace.

It felt almost thick in the car, a stench of judgment and disapproval.

How could you give money to the Klan, Dad?

How could you do that?

Do you think I need attention drawn to us? Look around you, son; there are white cloaks at every county line.

How can you give them a dollar, and then still go to the temple on Saturday?

I don't know what else to do, son.

The Torn Nest Is Pierced by the Thorns

No page in the phantom history of Ducktown reflects greater brilliance than that on which is inscribed the individual achievements of Captain Raht. No man ever worked harder to make of Ducktown a district of moral and industrial strength or assumed greater responsibility for its well-being.⁷⁴

Tulliver made his way toward the center of town. Swaying slightly, the brown-bagged bottle sloshed in his hand with each step. Tulliver swayed and stumbled into the town square. A cemented-over quadrangle dotted with metal benches between the post office, company store, and pharmacy. The flickering red glow from the town's only traffic light illuminated the town square. Smack dab in the middle of Main Street stood the statue of Captain Raht. A hulking copper beast. A blaring beacon of the town founder set in the very stuff he had pulled from the ground. For years Captain Raht's statue stood in front of the company store, his back to the mountains and the mine as he looked out over the town from beneath a tri-cornered hat.

The statue had long ago oxidized into a mossy green and stood out garishly against the red-tinged square. When Maggie was a little girl, she had once asked him if the statue was a tree. She'd been learning about trees in school, an always confusing and often frustrating attempt the elementary school teachers made to introduce botany and geology into the curriculum. All Maggie knew of trees were that they were green and tall. Captain Raht's mossy figure, long ago oxidized to a Kermit the frog green, fascinated the child. She'd asked if the roots of Captain Raht were grown underground. The little wench was always coming with the queerest questions.

⁷⁴ Robert E. Barclay, *Ducktown: Back in Raht's Time* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1946), 249

Tulliver stopped at the statue's base. Howdy, Capt'n

He took a long swallow from the bottle of Old Forester clutched in his hand. Your hat looks stupid. And this town you founded stinks. Tulliver gave a sharp cackle, Literally, He slurred, his tongue unable to breach the word's final syllable.

Ha, get it? He laughed again, the sound ringing in the silent street.

Tulliver slumped to the ground and leaned heavily against the statue's base where the Captain's legacy was engraved. But I'm sorry you died in a mine collapse and your wife was hit by a train.

He took another swallow from the bottle and ran his finger across one of the base's etched words. He'd memorized the statue's words long ago and had known the story of the captain who dug the first mine and built the first railroad.

The next morning when Bev Creevey opened the Pharmacy, she would find him curled up at the statue's feet. She tsked and nudged the snoring body with the tip of her pump.

Humph, just like his sister Gritty laying drunk in the street, she muttered before turning back to unlock the store, already planning who she would call after she phoned the sheriff's office.

A Voice from the Past

In a powerful demonstration of loyalty, Bob offers Mumps as a temporary companion to the distressed Maggie. He explains, He's rare company. . . You'd better let me leave him a bit; he'll get fond on you. Lots, it's a fine thing to have a dumb brute fond on you; it'll stick to you. And make no jaw.⁷⁵

Rain drummed the row of houses on Smelters Row and puddled on the sidewalks downtown. The creeks in Copperhill started to rise and water rushed through the gullies and erosion. Peanut-butter colored water rushed under the bridge and threatened to spill over the embankments.

Bob was gassing up his truck when he saw Maggie scabble up the steep embankment from to the river bed. She shouldn't be anywhere near the river when it was flooding. He raised his finger to his lips and gave a loud piercing whistle.

Maggie jerked toward the sound. And seeing Bob she grinned. Her whole face lit up for a moment, then returned to its resting dullness.

Bob motioned her over, Let me give you a ride home you look like a drowned rat.

From anyone else Maggie would have been offended, but from Bob she knew it was a sincere concern for her comfort.

Rain drizzled down the windshield.

Bob glanced at Maggie as she settled on the seat beside Mumps. The rain dripped off her as she pushed down her parka hood.

He hadn't expected her to accept the ride home. She and Tom both had been avoiding him ever since Mr. Tulliver had sold up and all the workers had been laid off.

⁷⁵ Robertson, Linda K. "Horses and Hounds: The Importance of Animals in *Mill on the Floss*."

They must think he was sore about the business at the mine. He knew what people were saying around town, knew that Maggie must be taking the brunt from kids at school. If he'd still been there, he'd made sure they kept their traps shut. He didn't envy them; even before all this trouble with the mine, he wouldn't switched places with the Tullivers for anything.

The truck rumbled over a pothole and Maggie lurched against Mumps. The snoring dog snapped to attention shaking his massive head from side to side.

Oops, sorry, boy, didn't mean to wake you. Maggie laid a small hand against Mumps heaving side and tried to settle him back to sleep with long stroking pets to his fur. Bob was jealous of his own damn dog.

He'd grasped her waist in two hands and hoisted her into the passenger seat. He felt a brief electric jolt when her body rested against his, a comforting weight of soft curves. If she felt the same jolt in her arm and thigh where they'd been pressed together, she didn't show it. Bracing herself against the front dash and straightened up, separating herself easily from him. A heavy lump formed in Bob's throat as he crossed to the driver's side and settled in beside the still sleeping bull terrier.

I got this for you he said, nudging the paper sack on the seat between them.

I know all your records got sold off with the rest of the stuff from the house, all your mom's memorabilia, and your dad's music equipment and records. So I thought maybe, you'd like this?

I know it's nothing like your dad's fancy turntable. Bob continued in a rush. But I saw this in the record store when I drove over to Chattanooga last, and thought of you.

You got this for me? Maggie was amazed.

Her dad's record collection must have been taken with the rest of the stuff, the stereo, and the turn tables. She hadn't thought about the albums in ages. She remembered her dad putting on old-timey ones like Ernie Ford, but he had Hendrix, and Dylan. Her Mom had Judy Collins, the Lennon Sisters, and the Supremes. They were stored in the den in milk crates and she'd take them out and arrange them on the carpet like a giant game of Memory. Sometimes she'd arrange them by color, or in varying shades of blues or greens, and sometimes she'd arrange them by the musicians' faces in an oversized family album.

Old Flame

*In the provinces, too, where music was so scarce in that remote time, how could the musical people avoid falling in love with each other*⁷⁶

In the purpling dusk Philip Wakem entered the large canvas tent erected on the wide clearing bordering the river. It was the first music night of the season and everybody in town gathered to play or to listen to music. Usually, music nights were held in the town square where people could set up folding chairs and blankets under the watchful gaze of the town's statute. But the recent flooding had covered main street and the town square in a thick coat of mustard-colored sulfurous-smelling mud.

Philip had just returned home from school and his father had suggested—or ordered—him to attend the music night. It sends a good message if there's someone from the Company at these town events, his father had said. Especially now with all the union talk. Philip wasn't sure what his father meant by union talk; he'd thought the miners already had a union.

As Philip pushed through the crowded seats to a bench at the back a low mummering wave spread across the crowd. He was tall and could easily see over the heads in front of him. The air was thick with the smell of sweat, dirt, and the faint metallic tang from the copper dust that coated every surface in the town. He watched the lazy drift of dust in the yellow glow of the spotlight while all around him the audience murmured to each other about the mine layoffs.

When the lights dimmed and a young woman with an erratic mane of dark curls stepped from behind the curtain the audience quieted and there was only the distant buzz

⁷⁶ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 384.

from the spotlight as she took her position at the front.

Philip shifted in his seat to get a better view. Then he recognized her, it was Maggie Tulliver. He hadn't seen her in years. Not since his father had sent him to McCallie prep after all that trouble with Tulliver's mine. She was much taller, as tall as Philip. She wore a paisley patterned dress that shone opalescent under the bright spotlight and highlighted every new curve she'd developed in the past six years. Philip watched as the girl extended her arms and started singing.

Later he would recall every detail of that moment, her hair flowing over her shoulders like hot slag down a hillside, the tips of her fingers pointed toward the audience, the rise of her chin, the arch of her neck. He was entranced. Agog. Bowled over and blown away. Philip believed that only in that instant had he begun to exist, born from some far-away magic. Something occurred inside of him then, something odd and mysterious that uprooted him, unhinged him from his own time and place, and transported him adrift through an uncharted region of his mind. When the song was over, she gave a brief bow and exited the stage.

While the tent emptied after the show, Philip stayed, sitting on the bench in the back absorbed by the now vacant stage. He stared at the place where the girl had stood, where he had last seen her and as he watched the stage, his eyes became wet, and he dried them with the sleeve of his coat. He thought himself in love.

Strange Magic

*There was not the slightest promise of love toward him in her manner; it was nothing more than the sweet girlish tenderness she had shown him when she was twelve.*⁷⁷

Philip took Maggie to the only restaurant in town, a small diner beside the commissary with only three booths and half a dozen stools at the counter. They ordered coffee and chocolate pie.

How do you do it, he asked.

Do what?

Sing like that.

Magic.

He nodded gravely, Of course.

She laughed, You believed that. She laughed again, Of course not magic. Just practice I guess.

He looked down at the half-eaten slice of pie on his plate. He searched for something to say. Across the table, Maggie was running her finger across her plate, catching the last crumbs and smears of chocolate left behind. He pushed his pie toward her. Here, have mine.

She pulled the plate toward her and took a small bite, Thanks. I love the pie here.

He watched her eat, following the arc the fork made as it traveled from the plate to her mouth. She ate slowly, taking small bites, and each time the fork slipped from her lips Phillip felt a small pang of zinging pleasure.

⁷⁷ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 285

Full Moon in My Pocket

*Philip's gaze after her remained immovable for minutes as if he saw her still.*⁷⁸

Philip held the door open for Maggie as they exited the diner. He watched as she walked ahead with her chin tilted up and her arms extended from her body. He wondered if she always walked like this as if suspended above the earth.

He led her away from the restaurant, down Main Street, and through the town square where they passed beneath the watchful gaze of Capt'n Raht's statue. When they reached Jenkin's All Things store, they took the narrow dirt path sloping downhill toward the abandoned warehouses and cooling slag heaps by River Road. Phillip kept his eyes on the ground. He did not want to risk looking directly at her, afraid if he studied this moment too closely, it would vanish. The road ahead appeared to waver, to wrinkle and fold and then straighten back out beneath his feet. He grasped her elbow to keep from stumbling.

Careful, don't fall.

Maggie turned to him and smiled, I won't. I've got excellent balance.

Right, of course, you do.

They wove through tall pillars of creaking machinery gray and quiet in the night until they reached the old tailings pond.

Look up, he took her chin in his hand and turned it to the sky. It was a clear night; a blizzard of stars coated the sky. That one, he took her hand and pointed it to the sky. See there, that line of five, six, eight stars all in a row? It's the Pegasus constellation.

⁷⁸ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 285

How can you tell? Any stars can make a line. See there. She took his hand and signaled to another string in the sky, Or there? She tugged him around to face a rope of a dozen more stars. Or there? she pointed to where the stars strung together in a web.

True, but they're not all named.

She laughed, Is that so? I didn't know you were a star expert.

It's true. I know the names of all the stars.

That's a lot of names to learn, how'd you manage that?

Practice.

Sleeping Single in a Double Bed

*Philip went home to do nothing but remember and hope.*⁷⁹

That night he tried to sleep but when he closed his eyes, he could still see Maggie, gliding across the underside of his eyelids. He watched her walk from one side of his eyelid to the other and back again, over, and over, all night long.

The next morning, he dressed quickly, skipped breakfast, and forgot to bring a lunch. He had no appetite. He ran out of the house, down the street, past the commissary and through the pounding machinery outside the mine's entrance until he reached the clearing where the tent stood. He stopped several feet from the tent's entrance to catch his breath. He crouched down, resting his hands on his knees trying to still the jagged rhythm of his heart, like a wing flapping against his ribcage.

He closed his eyes and waited for the fluttering in his chest to still. When he opened his eyes, he saw a bright sheet of paper among the dropped popcorn and smashed paper bags littering the ground. Looping font filled the page. It was the music night program. He picked it up and ran his finger across Maggie's name and then the title of the song she'd sung, *Troubled Water*. He'd hadn't noticed or recognized the song last night. The familiar song was made new, and unfamiliar in her voice. He traced his finger over curved lines of her name again, before folding the page and putting it in his wallet.

The mine whistle blew, signaling the end of the night owl shift. Even if he ran, he would still be late. The morning crew was already gathering outside the mine's entrance waiting for the overseer's instruction. He looked again at the tent's opening, and then

⁷⁹ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 286.

turned and walked back into town.

Another Love-Scene

Philip would meet her at the tailing pond or in the Red Deeps on weekends. During the week, he'd sneak out of his dorm and drive to St. Ogg to pick up Maggie at the movie theater after her shift. She'd climb into his Pontiac, and they'd drive around the winding roads of the Basin into Georgia and North Carolina.

Sometimes Philip snuck into the theater when Maggie was working. He'd buy a ticket for whatever was showing and slip into an aisle seat in the back of the darkened theater. When Maggie walked the aisles in her usher's uniform, he'd catch her hand and pull her down into the seat beside him. Sometimes, if the theater were empty, they'd make out. Sometimes they held hands. His fingers tracing patterns on the inside of her palm. Sometimes they'd actually watch the movie.

Maggie, who'd seen them all already, felt the movies were different when she sat beside Philip. The action was more thrilling, the flickering colors brighter, the sex scenes steamier, and the happily-ever-afters more believable.

Big Stripey Lies

The Lies that Maggie told:

I have to go to the store to pick up tampons, milk, eggs, and once because they were out of dishwasher detergent.

My car wouldn't start and Cheryl had to drive me home from work

My stupid boss made me stay an extra two hours when Cindy didn't show for their shift. Can you believe it. She tried to give a good show of frustrated outrage at the plight of the minimum wage worker.

I joined the Math Leagues and we have practice after school.

She got very good at lying.

The Channel of Fatality, the Pathway of Lightening

*To her father, Wakem was like a disfiguring disease, of which he was obliged to endure the consciousness, but was exasperated to have the existence recognised by others; and no amount of sensitiveness in her about her father could be surprising, Maggie thought.*⁸⁰

Maggie was terrified to getting caught near the Red Deeps with Philp. She would imagine elaborate scenarios where her father or Tom saw her with Philip. She'd worry the scene in her mind like a tongue to a sore tooth. In every scenario she'd imagined, she had never, not once pictured Aunt Sophie as the harbinger of her doom.

⁸⁰ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 316

Sophie's Charity

They're last season, but I figured you wouldn't mind. Sophie unloaded the clothes from shopping bags bearing the still-bright logos of McCall's and Nordstrom. Sophie and Paulette had arrived, unannounced and uninvited, that morning armed with dozens of glossy shopping bags.

I was going to give them to the church rummage sale, but I thought maybe you or Maggie might want some of it. I'd give them to Lucy or Susan since they're closer to my size. But they've got more than they can wear as it is. You'd appreciate my last season clothes and no one around here will notice if they're last season. Sophie said as she plopped on the sofa beside Bessie.

Sophie's fluttering chatter receded to a dull background hum as Maggie sorted through the pile of clothes. They looked more like a sequined, feathered Muppet than anything wearable. Maggie kneeled beside the coffee table; she pulled out a tasseled leather vest, stirrup leggings, and a long cashmere sweater with a wide buckled belt.

She returned to the conversation with a physical jolt when she heard Philip's name. She was shocked. How did her aunt even know Philip's name? If she hadn't already been dreading discovery and hadn't been spending weeks steering every conversation away from any topic remotely connected to Philip, or even boys in general, she wouldn't have started so obviously at the mention of his name.

Philip Wakem drives one of those new fuel-efficient cars. We saw him parked at the bottom of the smelting tower.

Maggie's hand shook as she added a clumsily folded sweater to the teetering pile.

The sweaters fell in a heap on the carpet.

Be careful, dear. That's cashmere. Sophie said from her spot on the sofa.

She remained unmoving and didn't offer to help as Sophie reached for the sweaters and began to re-fold.

Tom watched Maggie freeze up at Philip's name. *He knew it. He fucking knew it. The deceitful little wretch. The Bitch.*

Maggie glanced nervously toward Tom, not daring to meet his eye. She should feel guilty. He thought, seething. He clenched his fists once, then again, and again in quick succession. His nostrils flared as he felt the rage rise from his belly to plug his throat. He felt like this every time, the rage rising to choke him, block his throat, clog his voice, stop his words, and blur his vision.

He turned without a word, left the living room, and headed out of the house through the back door. Sophie and Bessie were shocked by his sudden departure. Sophie privately thought that he left the house so suddenly to pass wind. She was grateful that he had the forethought and to hold it until he was safely out of earshot and smell shot; she laughed to herself. Smell shot. She'd have to remember that and tell Paulette later.

Bessie, embarrassed, made a series of blustering apologies. I don't know where he's off to. I apologize for my ill-mannered children. I don't know where they get it.

Maggie, for her part, was familiar with Tom's frequent rages and even more familiar as the recipient or cause of his rage-filled passions and knew all too well what had set Tom off. She knew why he'd stood stock still, clenching his jaw and his fists before turning and storming out of the house. *He knew. He had to know. Oh Shit.*

The Hard-Won Triumph

But Tom was too keen-sighted to rest satisfied with such an interpretation; he had seen clearly enough that there was something distinct from anxiety about her father in Maggie's excessive confusion. In trying to recall all the details that could give shape to his suspicions, he remembered only lately hearing his mother scold Maggie for walking in the Red Deeps when the ground was wet, and bringing home shoes clogged with red soil.⁸¹

The fight had been terrible. He'd waited until everyone was out of the house to vent his rage. His screams were loud enough to rattle her ears. How could you and you don't understands, and you promised, and it's not what you think, were peppered in with a fair amount of sluts, traitor, and bitch. Maggie had finally fled to her room and sobbed into the old horsehair cushion.

⁸¹ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 315.

One Promise Too Late

*The very name of Wakem made her father angry, and she had once heard him say that if that crook-backed son lived to inherit his father's ill-gotten gains, there would be a curse upon him.*⁸²

Tom's face reddened and his jaw clenched like a rubber band.

Leave him alone, Tom. Maggie shoved herself between him and the door.

Get out of my way Maggie. Tom hissed.

No. Maggie raised her palms to Tom's chest and pushed him back. What's wrong with you. It's not his fault his dad is the Company manager.

It's not about that and you know it. Tom snarled at her.

Then what's it about? She shouted back. Say it.

How could you be so disloyal. Dad made us promise. He made us swear on a bible and everything.

Maggie rolled her eyes. Tom, for god's sake. That was years ago, and we shouldn't have done it. Dad wasn't himself toward the end.

⁸² Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 175.

The Cloven Tree

Maggie called Philip as soon as Tom left the house.

Tom knows.

Knows what?

That I've been meeting you. Maggie twisted the phone cord around and around her wrist.

So What.

So plenty. She knew that the seething control Tom had gained after their fight had been a temporary, hard-won reprieve that would only last long enough to sever ties with Philip. She'd been surprised he'd allowed her this long without telling Daddy.

Meet me at our place one last time.

I can't.

Meet me or I'm coming over to see you.

Baby's Gotten Good at Goodbye

*I have made up my mind—it is right that we should give each other up, in everything but memory.*⁸³

Maggie met him at the bottom of the smelting tower. Neither of them wanted to climb the rickety steps to the top. A cold front had moved in after the rain and the orange landscape seemed to stand out more sharply against the blinding blue sky.

We aren't going to see each other anymore? Just because your brother doesn't like me. Philip shrank like a deflating balloon.

It's got nothing to do with you. Maggie tried to reach over to run her fingers through his hair but he turned away.

It's got everything to do with me.

You know how my dad feels about the company and your dad's part of that.

You think your dad hates the other men at the company as much. Philip's face took on an ugly sneer now, his lips forming into a snarl Maggie hadn't seen before.

It's because we're Jewish. Maggie. Can't you see that?

No it isn't. Maggie rushed to assure him. But inside her head, she recalled all the sneers, jabs, and insults her Daddy had directed at Wakem. The way he'd exploded at Christmas when she asked what was wrong with being a Jew. All these moments spun out in her mind like a reel of tape flapping in a projector. Maggie shook her head vigorously as if to shake away the pictures forming in her mind.

It's got nothing to do with religion, it's the mine; it's always been about the mine.

⁸³ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 425.

Everything is. She added inside her head.

Yeah, right. Philip paused as if considering his next words, but suddenly a look of conviction stole over his features. You know my dad saw him at a klan roadblock the other week. Bet you Tom's joined up too. Why don't you ask him.

I don't have to ask him. I already know. Maggie gasped and felt winded.

Philip now looked at her sadly, pityingly. Sure, Maggie.

The Golden Gates are Passed

Maggie stood in the living room and looked out the wide picture window that filled the room with light. She had ripped the curtains down the night before and thrown the heavy, dust-filled brocade into the industrial dumpster rented for the move. They were leaving Dorlcote. By then the house had become leaky and frail. They could see daylight seeping from the ceiling eaves in the attic and even the mild winds rattled the screens in the windows.

It was taking longer, *so much longer*, than she'd anticipated to pack up the house. One day stretched to the next, only distinguished by the room they were packing up, until she began to mark the time by rooms instead of hours. She had packed dozens of boxes and filled hundreds of trash bags and still the house was crammed with stuff. The staff at the local Goodwill dreaded her visits. They winced and avoided her eye when she walked through the door. Maggie imagined they must draw straws every time she pulled up in her father's rusted pick-up truck.

Bessie sat on the worn green couch surrounded by stacks of books and sifted through a shoebox filled with photographs

Mom, you need to go through those books and decide which ones you want to keep.

Bessie did not look up from the box on her lap.

Maggie cleared off a place to sit on the sofa and reached for one of the books. Did you hear me? What books do you want to keep?

This is the first year we were on tour. Bessie handed her a crinkled photo of the

smiling sisters leaning against a convertible.

He was dating my sister Sophie when I first met him. He came to pick her up for a date wearing a black leather jacket and driving a motorcycle. He was the best thing I'd ever seen. And I thought if I can't beat that, I'll just stop trying.

This wasn't true. Sophie was married by the time her father started sniffing around as her Aunt Glegg had put it. And her father had never, not once, owned a motorcycle. They were impractical for Copperhill, they couldn't navigate the winding roads that spiraled up the basin's steep sides, and would more-than-likely stall, slide, or swerve right off the highway, if anyone had tried the climb.

You know Dad never had a motorcycle. Maggie yanked the photo box from Bessie's lap and placed on a teetering stack of paperbacks waiting to be sorted. Who is it you're remembering instead? It enraged Maggie, to the point of tears, the way her mother kept remaking the past, so that even the simplest events of their family history kept slipping away beneath her.

Bessie didn't look at Maggie as she tried to fit the top onto the shoebox. I don't need any of those books, I've read them all. She stood, placing the shoebox on top of the stack of books nearest her and left the room.

Hardbacked copies with the author's glossy smiling face stared up at Maggie from their teetering perch, their smile made reproachful and sneering after her outburst.

A Day of Reckoning

Funerals were always conducted with peculiar propriety in the Dodson family: the hatbands were never of a blue shade, the gloves never split at the thumb, everybody was a mourner who ought to be, and there were always scarfs for the bearers.⁸⁴

Jeremy Tulliver's funeral service ended with the hymn, "How Firm a Foundation." As the congregation stood to sing the final hymn, Tom, Uncle Deane, Uncle Moss, and Luke carried his body down the aisle of St. Ogg church. The sun was shining on that August day, the sky was blindingly blue, and the reflected colors of the stained glass windows shone down on the single-aisled church.

Tom, Uncle Deane, and Uncle Moss, along with two other pallbearers shouldered the coffin from the church and slid it into the waiting hearse.

Not since Wylan Jones had been killed 37 years before, shot two dozen times in the chest and buried as poked through as a pin cushion, had a death so fascinated St. Ogg.

It didn't matter that, technically, the death had happened in the next county. The details were so curious that they drove up the Mountain and down into the basin—braving the eye-stinging air and stink of sulfur just to see the house, maybe even the room, where it happened, where a man had fit bankruptcy and ruin so neatly in with a tightened rope.

Even if Jeremy Tulliver had only been a Dodson by marriage, his death was still a smudge on the family's good name.

He must have figured they'd be better off without him.

The sorry sod.

⁸⁴ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 41.

He Didn't think ahead.

He mustn't have realized suicides don't get an insurance payout.

There's nothing left.

She is leaving the basin and moving in with her sister in St. Ogg.

All that money put into life insurance each month was wasted and useless.

The aunts' responses—on a scale from Glegg's undisguised ridicule to Sophie's pitiful assurances, *of course, he didn't, dear*. Were too much for Maggie.

PART III—THE TEMPTATION

1989-1990

Tumbling Tumbleweeds

*What! is your cousin coming to stay with you? said Stephen, with a look of slight annoyance.*⁸⁵

On the Friday of Memorial Day weekend, Maggie Tulliver drove from Chattanooga to her aunt Glegg's house in St. Ogg. She was meeting Lucy and her new boyfriend, Stephen, and then the three of them were driving up to his family's cabin on Norris Lake for the long weekend.

As Maggie sped down the highway, the gray, early morning fog dissolved, and the day turned bright and yellow. The sun reflected off the car and shone in her eyes, causing black spots to hover across her vision. She reached into the glove compartment for her sunglasses while still holding the steering wheel steady. She'd only seen her mother and brother a handful of times in the last four years. Since starting college, she had loaded up on classes, work-study, and summer internships to avoid visits home.

Driving south, the silver mountains etched on the horizon stooped down and flattened out to rolling green hills. By mid-morning, Maggie turned off the main highway and drove down a long two-lane road scattered with crooked trees and bushy green vines. A pristine, sand-trapped golf course rose to the left, and a glint of silver reflected off a distant club as a golfer launched a ball into the air.

The fact that she had been home so rarely, skipping even the last two Christmases, claiming she had to work over the holiday, was a particularly sharp thorn in the side of the Dodsons. Aunt Glegg insisted on setting a plate for her at Christmas and Easter,

⁸⁵ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 337.

insisting that no Dodson would dream of skipping such an important family event. And every year, without fail, Maggie's plate went untouched, and her chair remained empty.

Tom was of the opinion that aunt Glegg set the plate for Maggie out of slow simmering spite for his mother. Bessie would begin the meal with a jolly attempt at small talk, but the longer she stared at Maggie's empty place, the weaker her attempts became to keep up under Glegg's pointed hints about Maggie's delay or surely she'll be here's until Bessie fled from the table in tears. Always just before dessert. Tom was pissed, he wished she'd return home and stop all this childish pouting. She was so selfish. He was the one who had to keep up their charade of happy family at holidays year after year.

Enter Stephen Guest

*lying on the young lady's feet is no other than Mr Stephen Guest, whose diamond ring, attar of roses, and air of nonchalant leisure, at twelve o'clock in the day, are the graceful and odoriferous result of the largest oil-mill and the most extensive wharf in St. Ogg's.*⁸⁶

Stephen Guest had been engaged to Lucy for almost eight weeks, and this was the first time he would meet her cousin Maggie. He had avoided meeting the family before by telling Lucy the mill couldn't spare him. She didn't question this and had traveled home for Thanksgiving and Christmas alone.

Stephen met Lucy two years before through a mutual friend at a dinner party. They sat next to each other, and he was entranced with her witty comebacks and the way she put him in his place. He asked her to lunch, then for a drink, and finally for dinner. Until months had passed, and his friends, and hers, too, considered them an item. This led to talk of marriage, which she wanted, and he agreed.

Lucy was pretty, more than pretty, a real knockout with blue eyes and blond hair that hung far below her waist. She was a nice enough girl, and while Stephen wasn't in love with her, he was fond of her. And besides, Stephen knew that certain things were expected after a year of dating: engagement, marriage, and children.

⁸⁶ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 335.

A Duet in Paradise

The Guests predated the Dodsons to the state by over 100 years. They were the oldest family in the state. They could trace their lineage back to William the Conqueror. Their ancestor signed the Declaration of Independence, and Governor Guest was the first territorial governor of Tennessee. Their ancestral home, Guest Mansion, was the oldest private home in the city and a national historic landmark. They were the first family listed in Zella Armstrong's *Notable Southern Families*, even though they preceded Armstrong herself alphabetically. The Guests were a big damn deal.

Lucy, Maggie, Tom, and every school child in St. Ogg and the neighboring counties visited the Guest Mansion on field trips each year. Lucy remembered the Victory jugs, the cane-back chairs, the handprinted mural, and the slave cabins dotting the single acre remaining of the once vast plantation.

The Guests objected to the family's history in show business.

They're not in show business, Stephen had said.

It's still performing for a living.

They had that tacky variety show, too, remember?

The youngest Dodson girl married a miner and moved to some ugly industrial town.

And Lucy's father is in trade.

They said this without a hint of irony, unaware they sounded like a character from a Victorian novel.

Listen to yourselves, Stephen railed. You're such snobs.

Who Can It Be Now?

For one instant Stephen could not conceal his astonishment at the sight of this tall, dark-eyed nymph with her jet-black coronet of hair; the next, Maggie felt herself, for the first time in her life, receiving the tribute of a very deep blush and a very deep bow from a person toward whom she herself was conscious of timidity.

This new experience was very agreeable to her, so agreeable that it almost effaced her previous emotion about Philip. There was a new brightness in her eyes, and a very becoming flush on her cheek, as she seated herself.⁸⁷

Lucy wasn't sure if she were more amused or irritated by the very visible, almost stumbling, double-take Stephen gave Maggie when she entered the room.

⁸⁷ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 347

Idle Hands

*And knew what it was to get up in the morning without any imperative reason for doing one thing more than another.*⁸⁸

The few weeks hidden away at the Deane's lake cabin had been idyllic. Maggie and Lucy slept late. They gorged on the stockpile of perishables kept in the pantry—making meals out of Pop Tarts, Chips Ahoy, and peanut butter slathered on saltines. They tethered their inner-tubes to the docks with long ropes and spent entire afternoons drifting across the lake. They found aunt Susan's collection of harlequin romance novels and spent one rainy morning reading the sex scenes aloud. They laughed until their sides ached.

⁸⁸ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 370.

Confidential Moments

*for the happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history.*⁸⁹

You know, Philip was my first kiss. Maggie was stretched out on one of the twin beds in Lucy's room.

No. Lucy shrieked. Why didn't you tell me. Lucy threw a pillow at Maggie's head.

I don't know. I didn't think you'd want to know. You'd had so many boyfriends by then. Maggie trailed off.

So what. Lucy looked genuinely perplexed.

It seemed pathetic to be sixteen and not have kissed anyone.

That doesn't matter. A first kiss is always noteworthy. No matter who it's with.

What was your first kiss with Stephen like? Maggie didn't know why she asked it. The question just flew from her mouth.

Lucy scrunched up her nose, trying to remember. You know I don't remember. I think it must have been after our first date.

Lucy's room at the lake house was exactly the same as she'd remembered. Two twin beds with matching pink chenille comforters and eyelet dust ruffles. A border around the ceiling was still there, the shepherdess and lambs frolicking together in a landscape of faded green hills. Their smiling faces, half-hidden by matching beribboned bonnets, peered down at Maggie.

The Deane's ranch house and its sleek suburban blandness always depressed

⁸⁹ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 355.

Maggie. The smooth lines of the kitchen countertops, the sunken living room, and the terracotta-style walls were all painted to resemble the sprawling haciendas in warmer, more exotic locales, but the lake house had a homey shabbiness that reminded her of home.

That night Lucy had begged her to play the ukulele for them. She'd picked it up at a garage sale in Nashville after they'd lost her father's guitar along with everything else. She loved the twangy notes that reminded her of her father's banjo. She sang renditions of Beach Boys hits and improvised silly songs to make Lucy laugh. Dried up Christmas trees. And an imitation of Dodson's Ambrosia Salad she called Spunk Salad that made Lucy laugh so hard she peed.

The whiskey she'd drunk had given the evening a slight haziness, like a rainy mist. She knew if it weren't for the dulling effects of the alcohol, her mood would plunge again into melancholy.

She was homesick and wanted to go home. But Dorlcote was gone, and so was her father. Whenever anyone said anything terrible about her father, she would remember those nights when he'd dropped everything to pick her up from Lucy's house. When she spent the night somewhere with Lucy or one of the aunts, Maggie would get homesick. Almost as soon as her parents drove out of the driveway, Maggie would be desperate to leave. Often, she'd concoct some elaborate reason why she needed to go home. Right then. That night.

No one ever believed her reason for wanting to leave. It was practically a family joke. Still, her father would pick her up—showing up at the front door in the middle of the night, his coat over his pajamas and his car keys jangling in his hand. Ready to go home,

Magsie baby.

The only thing that helped homesickness, Maggie knew, was a distraction. In the time it took her father to pick her up, Maggie would lay on the couch and watch cable—a luxury that didn't stretch far enough into the mountains, let alone the basins, of East Tennessee. Maggie gorged herself on reruns of *I Love Lucy*, drowning in the comfort of the black and white palate and the plot's predictability. After *Lucy*, there was *Dobie Gillis*, a show she had to stay up past midnight to watch. The characters in *Dobie Gillis* seemed grownup but still attainable. Nothing like the middle-aged actors who played Ethel, Fred, and Ricky. Even *Lucy* seemed plagued with the very issues that bothered her parents, and she had the same squabbles that erupted between *Lucy* and *Ethel* play out between her aunts. But *Dobie Gillis* was about teenagers, high schoolers, or college students with cars, curfews, and a local diner where they could order as many cheeseburgers and milkshakes as they wanted. At least once during every episode, the characters loitered around *The Thinker* statue. Maggie recognized the figure. She'd seen a picture of it in one of her aunt Gritty's art history books, and every time it appeared on screen, usually with one or more characters sprawled at its feet, she marveled that they could exist in the same space as a famous work of art. *The Thinker* was nothing like the statue of Capt'n Raht. Raht didn't invite retrospection.

Tossin' and Turnin'

Had anything remarkable happened?

*Nothing that you are not likely to consider in the highest degree unimportant.*⁹⁰

Maggie lay awake long after Lucy had drifted off. She couldn't sleep. She rearranged herself on the lumpy mattress, turning on her side, then her back. She pulled the sheet over her head and breathed in the faint scent of dust and laundry detergent. Gray light from the rising moon filtered through the window. From the other twin bed, Lucy—a loud and active sleeper—let out a series of low sighs. Lucy had a habit of groaning in her sleep, often letting out several long whines as if her dreams were disappointing and inconvenient.

Every evening since she'd arrived had stretched out the same. All night, every night, mosquitos buzzed, crawling insects clicked, owls hooted, frogs walloped and burped, and trees crunched and crinkled in a loud, unending cacophony outside the open window. How could anyone sleep? To Maggie, the night noises seemed both purposeful and aggressive. As if the chattering of crickets and the distant howling coyotes had it out for her and were making a racket to keep her awake. She imagined the sound carrying on all night, reaching into the dense, busy wilderness that stretched away on all sides. It was then that she could focus on the sharp homesickness that stuck like a craw in the pit of her stomach. The kind of homesickness that felt real, tangible.

There were no insects at home. The mine had killed them off or driven them underground long ago.

⁹⁰ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 355.

Showing that Tom had Opened the Oyster

Tom Tulliver stretched out inside the 12-foot yellow polyurethane raft and tried to count the number of groups they had scheduled for tomorrow. His hair had bleached from hours spent outside. He was dressed in one of the Rcc Center's standard t-shirts. A yellow shirt with the Ocoee Rec Center logo, a silhouette of a single rafter on the edge of a rolling wave, all encased in a circle with Dorlcote White Water Rafting and Recreation. On the back in block letters, Ride the back of the Ocee, see if you can take her on.

He would have to ask Bob about hiring another guide. These five-a-day trips were killing him. On the last one, he thought they would flip right as they were cresting the final rapid in the last 4-mile bend. Tom was good at amping up the reckless excitement in the passengers and could usually tease them with the danger of flipping. On the final bend of the course, he would let the raft teeter on the rapid's back before crashing through the final wave and drenching the passengers one last time before they had to call it quits. He would guide the raft along the rapid's back and let it teeter. The passengers thought they were done for. But at the last second, he would punch through the final wall of water, drenching them before oaring in. But today, he had miscalculated the rise of the final wave; instead of barreling through, he had led them to smack into a wall of water, and they had flipped.

That lawyer from Nashville had been spitting mad. He complained about the stinging water that had lodged up his nose and almost caused him to drown in his snot. He had asked to speak to a manager as he hurled his paddles and unclenched the helmet's buckle from under his chin. When Tom said he was the manager, he'd said he needed to

Speak to anyone who was not him. Tom had sighed, regretting that he let it slip that he was the co-owner. He could have just pretended he was another summer hire, one of the many college kids they would hire each summer when their numbers tripled.

They were the first commercially operating rafting company on the Ocoee. They were the very first to set up a permanent shop on the river. It had been a lot different that first year. There were no regulations then. Now, everything was regulated, from the size of the raft, the number of paddles, hell even the position of the buckles on the life vests was decided by the department of safety and the state tourism board. Back then, the water ran 24 hours, day, or night. You could get on the river without guidance, training, or a life vest. They'd been pioneers then. They'd even marketed a few night rides in the early months. Those were big sellers. But then the state started to control how many hours our guides had to be trained, what time we could launch our boats, and even which route to take down the river.

At first, it was just the rafting enthusiasts who came, but now they had a steady stream of vacationing families, church youth groups, and corporate team builders.

Rockin' Shopping Center

*I can't think what witchery it is in you, Maggie, that makes you look best in shabby clothes; though you really must have a new dress now.*⁹¹

Maggie was amazed at Lucy's complete lack of embarrassment. She strode up to the pinched-nose woman operating the dressing rooms and dumped the pile of blouses, skirts, and slacks into her suddenly sprung-to-life open arms.

Can you find us a dressing room, please? In a tone that Maggie had only heard from her aunt Glegg.

Luce, this isn't necessary.

Of course, it is, she snapped. I haven't seen you in years and got all this money from Mama's estate.

That's for you. Maggie hung her head, trying not to catch Lucy's expression in the full-length mirror in front of her.

It's family money, and it's for family use. She said, with a small stamp of her foot. Maggie's lip rose, and she grinned at Lucy through the dressing room mirror. God, she'd missed her, this sweet, sly sprite of a girl, fiercer in her devotion and loyalty than Christ himself.

Suddenly Maggie felt the missing years welling up behind her eyes like a dam about to burst. How long she'd wasted being mad, upset, and pissed off about her daddy when there was Lucy. Lucy, who'd been alone, and sad and upset with all the stuff with Aunt Deane. Jesus, Maggie thought, I'm the worst sort of friend and an even worse cousin.

⁹¹ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 344.

But Lucy wouldn't let her sulk. She kept up a steady stream of conversation about the aunts, the family, the girls she knew from church and the junior league, all people as unfamiliar, or seemingly so, as characters in a soap opera.

Try this one. Lucy shoved a royal blue shining blouse at her. The shirt was already unbuttoned and off the hanger, ready for Maggie to slip it on.

I think this and the other emerald would be perfect with your coloring. We'll wear it tonight when we go out with Stephen and Philip.

Tonight? Maggie whipped her head around. What's happening tonight?

She said tonight just at the last second when what she wanted to say was, Philip. As if his name alone conjured all the unspoken questions and pleadings that Maggie wished she could ask Lucy. She'd never dared ask her mother or aunts or more unthinkable Tom. What's happening tonight?

I thought we'd go out. Lucy gave a slight shimmy in the new miniskirt she'd tried on from Maggie's pile of discarded clothes. Oh, Maggie, please say yes. It's only Philip. I know Tom wouldn't mind, not after all these years.

He would. Maggie mumbled under her breath.

Would he? I'm not sure. Lucy's eyes widened in disbelief, and her mouth gaped when she said Tom's name as if she couldn't believe he would discredit or dislike anyone.

Maggie knew better. She knew that in Lucy's world, Philip was just a lonely, skinny boy who'd stumbled across Lucy's path again in St. Ogg. She didn't know the half of it, couldn't know.

Nope. Don't even think of refusing me, Maggie Tulliver. You are coming out tonight, and you are going to wear this. Lucy held up the emerald green blouse. With

these, she snatched a mini skirt from the floor and held it aloft in her hands waiving a flag.

Wakem in a New Light

Philip was spending the long weekend at Stephen's Lake house. He said that they hadn't used the cabin in years, and it would be just the four of them for the whole weekend. Stephen had told him that the Guest family had sold most of their land to a golf club years before and all that remained of the once vast estate was a three-acre lot where the lake house still stood.

Philip turned left past the golf course onto a narrow road. The pavement turned to gravel and dirt as he twisted through the tangled brush. The road ended at a battered mailbox with Guest printed in faded letters at the entrance to the driveway. The dirt track was edged by tall oak trees arching overhead, forming a thick green canopy, and submerging the car into shadow. At the end of the tree line, the car came out into bright sunlight and a rose before him. He parked the car in the circular drive and sat still, listening to the engine click to quiet.

He glanced at his reflection in the rearview mirror and arranged his features into an expression that he hoped conveyed bland indifference and not the eager excitement that he'd felt since waking that morning. If he were honest since Lucy told him Maggie would be there. He tried to memorize this expression. This was how she wanted to appear when he saw Maggie.

The large house once white had faded into dull gray, loose shingles hung from the roof and the front porch sagged. Philip stepped carefully onto the porch and pushed open the front door. Standing in the entryway Philip paused, blinded by the sudden change

from bright sunlight to the gloom inside. As his eyes adjusted to the dark Philip heard the faint hum of voices at the back of the house.

When Philip entered the room he schooled his features into an expression of cold indifference. He was bound not to betray his old acquaintance or what they'd once meant to each other. He'd been psyching himself up for their meeting all day, and all of last night. Really since he'd listened to the voicemail Lucy left on his machine.

But, Maggie's face expressed everything. Her eyes widened when she took in his taller height, the brown wavy hair held back in a low ponytail, his grey hooded eyes so like she'd remembered. She rose and moved toward him as if pulled by some invisible wire. Tears filled her eyes as he took her hand. He cradled her hand as he would a delicate lowering bud.

She vibrated as if pulled tight, her heart pinging like a plucked guitar strip.

He'd changed since she had last seen him. He was taller, and his skinniness had filled out to an attractive, lithe, leanness, like a bobcat ready to pounce. His hair was still long but tied back in a low ponytail.

They made labored small talk until Lucy claimed to have forgotten something upstairs and left the two of them alone in the room. She gave Maggie an exaggerated waggle of her eyebrows before shutting the living room door behind her.

Mainly to avoid looking at Maggie, he let his eyes roam around the large room which was as old fashioned and dimly lit. Spindly legged side tables were crowded with glass and porcelain figurines. In one corner a glass cabinet held shelves crammed with something that looked like a squat shallow gravy boat.

They're invalid feeders. Stephen's mother collected them. Maggie said following the direction of Philip's gaze. If you ask me, they're a bit morbid.

Rowing on the River

Let's go for a row on the river. Stephen said, glancing at his watch. The rapids will be raging on the Ocoee, and we can rent a raft from Tom. I've been meaning to go over and check out his white-water business down in the basin.

Lucy looked at Maggie's panicked expression and knew she was about to bow out, to make some excuse so she could put off the dreaded reunion with Tom.

That's too far to drive. I promised the aunts I'd have Maggie home before dinner. Why don't we use daddy's canoe? It's gathering dust in the garage.

Stephen didn't want a languid float down the river. He felt antsy and unsettled, especially under Maggie's intense stare. He wanted the rush of the breakneck rapids in the basin. He was about to cajole them into it when Lucy ran an appreciative hand over Stephen's bicep, which he flexed reflexively.

I'm sure you can have it down from the rafters and strapped to the truck lickety-split. She said.

Maggie marveled at Lucy's ability to control men with a well-placed caress and a lingering glance from under her fluttering eyelashes. Lucy could make any outcome happen with just the flip of her blond hair and the intentional watering of her blue eyes—a trick that Lucy had taught her when they were in high school.

Stephen secured the canoe in the truck's bed, and they drove out of St. Ogg suburban sprawl on highway 411; housing developments and strip malls gave way to Family Dollars, Circle Ks, and auto shops. When 411 turned into Waterlevel road, the stores thinned. The deforested landscape dotted with farm stands and churches, they

passed New Friendship Baptist, New Hope Nazerteth, and Little Flock Church of God.

Maggie sat beside Lucy and looked at the familiar landscape passing by. The exact route she'd taken to and from the Basin when she worked at the theater. The same highway she had driven with Philip when they were dating. Then, they didn't have any destination in mind. They just drove with the music blaring and the windows down until they reached a secluded shoulder or old wagon trail where they could pull over unseen from the highway.

They pulled off toward the Caney Creek embankment when they reached Reynolds Bridge Road.

As they floated down the river, Maggie was quiet, reacquainting herself again with the familiar banks of the river.

They drifted with the tide, gliding underneath the tree's steeped branches, basking in the emerald glow that seemed to shimmer and vibrate when caught between the sun's sharp glare and the muggy steam rising from the water. Underneath the canopy of trees the early morning fog lingered beneath the tree's canopy, trapped above the river's shimmering surface. The air shimmered with a vibrant phosphorous glow, and the reflected green from the trees seemed to be sucked into the humid fog's orbit, absorbing the light in a loose cloud of floating phosphorous-green haze.

Stephen had a chance to study Maggie from his seat in the canoe. Now that they're out in the sunlight with the wind brushing the hair off her face, he can make out the sprinkling of freckles across her nose, adding an innocent contrast to the slashing brows and sharp cheekbones. He'd never met anyone with such a fighting spirit. There was a firm set to her chin and stubborn sharpness in her gaze. He was unsettled by how

she looked at him when he spoke. As if every word was weighed, measured, and dissected for its worth. It was unnerving.

Illustrating the Laws of Attraction

Later, they lounged by the dock, cracking open the cooler that Lucy had packed with sandwiches, soda, and beers. Maggie sat at the edge of the dock, her feet dangling in the water in Lucy's sweater Maggie's breasts overfilled the top leaving a wide expanse of her cleavage and the twelve tiny freckles that dotted her collar bone. Stephen wanted to peel off that sweater and trace the freckles with his tongue.

He started, startled, and looked to Lucy. Had she noticed? Had she seen every carnal thought written above him in damning scarlet letters? Surely not. He took a long swallow of beer, then another, finishing off the can and reaching for another from the six-pack. He could always blame his lingering eyes and vacant stare on the beer.

New Fool at an old game

That night Maggie dreamt of Stephen and woke up needing a shower.

Eyes of a Stranger

Stephen came to the Deane's house most nights, usually unannounced after dinner.

They tried to ignore each other. They never made eye contact. It felt like a game. The game of who can hold out the longest. Maggie usually won. But just barely.

Tired of Toein' the Line

He is a reckless flirt, and I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him. Aunt Glegg said.

Besides, any man that good-looking can't be trusted, Sophie added.

Maggie disagreed. She was the one who could not be trusted. She had never met anyone so much resembling a Disney prince. He had dark hair and a square jaw, and he was taller than her when she had to look down on most men.

First Impressions

The Dodson guilt trip was a cyclonic force that sucked in every obstacle in its path. Buildings, lampposts, bridges, telephone poles, everything was pulled into their high-society singularity.

A debut had been used both as a temptation and a threat when she was young. Maggie assumed a debut like so much else, had dissolved with their fortunes. We're broke. Maggie stated baldly to her aunt Glegg when she'd phoned.

Maggie was used to getting clippings from her aunts, who used the well-placed newspaper column, comic strip, or magazine article as a way to communicate uncomfortable news or hint at behavior best changed for the comfort of all. Received articles clipped from the society section of the *Chattanooga Times Free Press* or the *Knoxville News Sentinel* detailing past debutant courts. She received glossy pages ripped from bridal magazines with a what do you think? Scrawled across in her mother's looping script.

Sophie dangled the monetary benefits of a debut, promising a new wardrobe and loans of her best jewelry.

Glegg insisted that Maggie debut. Just like she did and just like their mothers.

The aunts phoned and wrote Maggie with a singular regularity that was scary. She was of age, past the age, for her debut, and she'd do it. She would not be the first Dodson woman to forgo tradition and society and not be presented.

You think this is bullshit. Her aunt Glegg had said that it's all a silly show, a performance, and a stupid rite of passage and that it's all just a meaningless tradition.

Well, yeah, said Maggie, unable to find more words than that. She pictured her aunt on the other end, speaking into the ivory-handled, golden-mouthed antique phone she had positioned at a secretary table in the front hall.

Of course, it is. Everything is. You'll be hard-pressed to find any area that isn't stuffed to the gills with meaningless tradition. It doesn't matter if it's an empty ritual. It's a ritual, and rituals are what we do.

She ended this comment with the air of having delivered a final, devastating blow. But really, Maggie didn't see as she'd said anything more than because I said so, which had never satisfied her as a child, and definitely wasn't doing the trick now.

But when Lucy added her plea to the Dodson chorus, Maggie caved.

Fine, I'll do it.

Bessie, for her part, never believed for a moment that she wouldn't debut. So she'd gleefully planned her daughter's dress, pre-debut ball gown, and the number of dresses, skirts, pantyhose, and pumps she'd need for the pre-debut weekends that lasted from Halloween to Mardi Gras in the south.

If Maggie had gone to Mt. Holyoke or Vassar, where she'd applied and dreamed of going ever since she learned of the notion of a seven sisters' collegiate system, she could have pled the distance and bowed out of the debut nightmare altogether. But going to school in Chattanooga, she was a short drive from St. Ogg and could easily make the weekend trips in for the rehearsals, fittings, and etiquette lessons required of all debutantes in the South.

Rehearsal

On the second Saturday of August, Maggie appeared at the St. Ogg Country Club for her first debutante rehearsal. She'd been badgered into a pair of nylons, pumps, and a sweater set by Bessie and now arrived feeling breathless and wobbly. She'd been outfitted from the extensive collection of outcasts from Sophie's closet. And while the skirt and sweater fit without having to take in or let out any seams, the shoes, a pair of coral pumps in the same dyed-to-match shade as her borrowed purse, were a half size too big.

Maggie entered the large conference room where her aunt Glegg stood in front of twenty or more girls seated in folding chairs. Aunt Glegg was the chair of the ball. As members of the newest debutante cohort, Maggie and Lucy had to sit through weeks of pre-debut rehearsals that lasted from Halloween to Mardi Gras.

For the rest of the afternoon, they were all here twenty other girls were subjected to the backward lecture on manners, good breeding, a lady's place in society, and responsibilities incumbent of a lady from one of the Notable Southern Families.

But to Maggie's surprise, the other girls weren't rolling their eyes or looking around in shocked amazement at the old-fashioned, stodgy manners she'd always assumed died with the Eisenhower era. No, they were hanging on her aunt's every word. They were taking notes. Even Lucy, who knew this shit back-wards-and-forwards looked at Glegg as if she were Moses come down the mountain to reveal the ten commandments.

As she listened to Southern womanhood's rules, responsibilities, and expectations she let her aunt's voice thrum in her head, like a background beat, or the distant humming of bees, she gave into the inescapable gravity of her debut. On some level, she'd always

known she'd end up doing this, no matter how much she protested, hedged, and insisted that she wouldn't be caught dead parading around in a white dress and feathers. So, Maggie sat up, crossed her ankles, cinched her knees together, and let the weight of Southern womanhood, the Dodson matriarchy, and the debutantes past and present settle around her borrowed sweater-set shoulders.

A Family Party

The aunts buzzed and fussed around Maggie, hovering and circling her like sharp-beaked vultures. They'd brought curlers, straightening irons, spray moose, gel, and lipsticks in 47 shades of pink, from arctic blush to coral sunset. All while keeping up a constant commentary on Maggie's hair, height, cleavage, and waistline.

We thought you'd never lose that puppy fat. Aunt Sophie had said approvingly when she draped a measuring tape around Maggie's waist. I suppose poverty has some advantages. Look how skinny you've gotten. She said this as if Maggie had stumbled upon a new diet trick.

But this bust size is still indecent. Glegg had motioned Paulette toward the straining bodice that had traveled down to reveal extra inches of cleavage.

Charity in Full-Dress

*Thus Maggie was introduced for the first time to a young lady's life*⁹²

Before they walked out, Tom told Maggie she looked beautiful. Daddy would've been proud of his little wench, he whispered, squeezing her gloved hand. Maggie took the gesture for what she knew it was. Forgiveness, finally. She beamed at Tom, her face illuminated in the spotlight as she walked out onstage.

⁹² Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 370.

Tempted

Stephen didn't know how he'd survived the hours until he could see Maggie alone. He had to watch her across the auditorium, watch her laugh and dance and flirt with other boys while he pretended to listen to Lucy's excited chatter. Teddy Parks was talking Maggie, and then he was dancing with her. Stephen imagined pushing his way through the crowd to get to Teddy. Imagined the weight of his fist crunching into his delicate face.

He couldn't stand it any longer. As soon as Maggie was released from Teddy's Park's sweaty paws he crossed the room toward her. He caught her eye and inclined his head toward the side door.

Maggie in spite of the all the promises she'd made herself, felt her heart leap out toward him when he approached. She'd felt the devouring hunger of his gaze all night.

When a Tingle Becomes a Chill

They were on their way to the Round Pool,—that wonderful pool, which the floods had made a long while ago. No one knew how deep it was; and it was mysterious, too, that it should be almost a perfect round, framed in with willows and tall reeds, so that the water was only to be seen when you got close to the brink⁹³

Outside, in the August air, Maggie rustled in her bag for a cigarette. If her aunts caught her, she'd be toast, but she needed something with all the chattering and flapping and daughters and fathers locked in a choreographed dance.

Hunting through her sequined purse, she looked up to see headlights approaching and squinted into the light. Rolling to stop beside her was Stephen in his car with the top down.

Do you want to get out of here? He asked.

Maggie didn't hesitate. She jumped in his car, a zippy, soaring convertible, and they drove.

Maggie directed him to the basin and pointed out the silhouettes of houses atop Smelters' Row, where she used to live. They drove all the way past Dorlcote, past the ruins of the Burra-Burra mine to the oldest mining settlement in the basin, long abandoned the town of Isabella was where the mine baron lived back before the Civil War. Ancient smokestacks and discarded machinery were just visible in the half-moon's glow. Years earlier, an explosion caused a small lake that wasn't wide but deep, deep, deep. No one dared to swim it. The cratered-in hole was deeper than any pool, fathoms deep, leagues and miles to the earth's core.

⁹³ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 38.

At this time efforts had already begun to reforest the copper basin, but the planting of several years had produced very few trees. The landscape was still as red as ever.

Stephen parked at the edge of the mine's gaping mouth. He killed the ignition leaving behind a heavy silence.

When I was a kid, a little boy drowned in this pool. Maggie whispered, shattering the silence. They never found his body. She added. It was too deep.

Stephen shuddered. How did they know he drowned if they never found. .

. Stephen's question trailed off.

His bike was left on the cavern's edge.

What was his name? Stephen asked.

I don't know.

The Chase

You don't even like me, it's just the chase for you isn't it?

It's not the chase. He ran his hands through his hair.

Yeah, sure. She turned away to head back down the sidewalk.

Maggie, wait. It's not the chase. And you're right, I don't like you.

Her mouth formed a small o of surprise.

You're asking me to explain something that I can't even understand myself. I don't just like you, I need you. I'm addicted to you.

Me?

Yes you.

Why?

You're the funniest girl I've ever met. And the smartest. And everything you say is surprising. And. . .and before you start thinking my feelings are all evolved or noble, I'm also obsessed with the twelve freckles running cross your collar bone. I've been fantasizing about the other freckles I can't see.

Just Can't Get Enough

Maggie felt like a heroine in a Danielle Steele novel. She felt like Molly Ringwald in *Pretty in Pink*. She was in love with being loved.

Right Here Waiting

Stephen called every night after Maggie got home from work. They talked for hours. Sometimes she fell asleep with the phone pressed to her ear. She got good at performing household chores one handed with the phone tucked under her chin.

Maggie?

She didn't answer.

Are you still there?

Yeah. Just thinking. She rolled over onto her stomach and pressed her face into her pillow.

What about.

You. He was quiet. She thought he was holding his breath.

What about me.

I wish you were here. Or I was there. I wish there was a way to see each other, like really see each other, to be alone together. without hurting everyone.

Why can't there be.

She gave a strangled laugh. You know why. She sounded like she was crying.

Maggie. Sweetheart.

Don't call me that. It makes everything worse.

Careless Whisper

He said it hurt to look at her. He said he was exhausted by her beauty. He said he'd been looking for her, just her, his whole god dammed life. He said all sorts of things while he pressed kisses to her neck and breasts and belly. It was overwhelming.

The Sweetest Taboo

She had cried after their first time together. Stephen had also cried. After all, it had felt like his first time. Afterward, he'd held her in the backseat of his Pontiac as if only the apocalypse could separate them.

Wicked Game

They said *I love you, I love you, I love you*, and *forever*, and *always*, so many times it became a mantra. A prayer or a spell that Maggie believed, if she repeated enough, would come true. They believed they were the first to ever feel this way. They thought they'd invented love.

Every Time Two Fools Collide

Maggie was late.

From years of listening to *Loveline*, she knew the reliability of the pull-and-pray method of birth control.

She waited another two weeks for her period, but it never came.

When Gritty gave Maggie a reading, she drew the Ace of Wands, and then the Tower.

Shuffle them again. Maggie pushed the deck across the table to Gritty. Just one more time.

Blame It On the Rain

Stephen called. And called again. He kept calling until Gritty took the phone off the hook. A workable solution until Stephen knocked on the front door. Until Stephen showed up at the front door demanding to see Maggie.

--

The rain had stopped and the sun shone weakly behind thick grey clouds.

She walked out of Gritty's front door. Stephen was sat in his car parked across the street. When he saw her he jumped from the car and ran toward her. Maggie stopped, her heart juttering in her chest.

What are you doing here.

I don't know.

You don't know

I had to see you.

Why.

I missed you.

The Spell Seems Broken

Maggie stood in one of the gas station's four aisles, surrounded by brightly colored boxes of Reese's Pieces and bags of Planter's Peanuts. Mr. T's grinning face stared out at her from a box of Kix cereal. Mikey's chubby-cheeked dimples on the Life Cereal box were more menacing than cherubic in the harsh light from the gas station's blinking florescent light. Cans of Chef Boyardee shared the shelf with sharp-toothed mouse traps and tubs of Gorilla Glue in the next row. In the next aisle, she found what she was looking for. Underneath the tiny bottles of shampoo, red sticks of Old Spice, and cylinders of Pepsodent, the pregnancy tests were on the bottom shelf beside the condoms and the KY jelly.

Maggie made sure the girl up front was still flipping through her magazine before she bent down to adjust the strap of her espadrille. In a smooth movement long ago perfected when she worked at the movie theater, she tipped the pink box into the raffia tote bag Lucy had given just a few weeks earlier.

She dared not return to Lucy's house or her aunts with the test, but she didn't want to risk the cashier's suspicion if she remained too long in the store with the stolen test in her bag. She grabbed a bag of circus peanuts and a Georgia map on her way to the counter.

When she exited the gas station, having paid for the map and peanuts, she felt the weight of the test's small cardboard box in her purse.

I Don't Want to Talk About It

The test was positive. She'd peed on the stick while hovering above a Love's Gas station toilet. After five tense and sweaty minutes of pacing from sink to toilet she'd buried the test at the bottom of the trashcan. It didn't occur to her to save the stick as proof.

When she told Stephen, he said, marry me.

But what would she do all day as a society wife, as a *Mrs. Guest*?

What about Lucy? And Philip?

And what would the aunts say?

I Don't Wanna Play House!

They spent the night spent at a motel in Pigeon Forge. Stephen slipped out before Maggie was awake and asked the desk clerk for the nearest Cadillac dealership. He gestured vaguely to the corner where a brown dial phone sat on a table beside a plastic covered upholstered chair. He copied down the address of the first car lot listed in the phone book and hurried out.

Maggie woke to the slam of the motel room door. Stephen motioned to her and she threw on a robe over her nightgown and followed him outside to the glaring mid-morning sun. Parked, right outside the motel door was a dark red convertible.

Stephen stood beside the driver's door, flipping a set of keys around and around on his finger.

What's this? Maggie couldn't quite be sure what she was looking out in glaring sun. She raised her hand to shield the sun from her eyes and glanced around the parking lot to make sure no one could see her in her nightie and slippers.

I got it for you. Stephen looked sheepish, and the tip of his ears turned a brighter red.

You like it?

I love it, she laughed at him. But I can't accept that. How will I explain why I suddenly have a new car.

It's a wedding present.

But we aren't married.

Not yet.

Borne Along by the Tide

If they were hell bent on an abortion, Dr. Hicks would do it properly. I never heard of anyone dying there.⁹⁴

Rain drizzled down the windshield. Stephen made a few awkward attempts at conversation. Maggie had remained silent. He turned on the radio and tried to find something that wasn't incessantly cheerful or achingly sad.

⁹⁴ Doris Abernathy quoted on *Taken At Birth*.

Danger Zone

Nearly all the local people, those in McCaysville and folks in Copper Hill, Tennessee, the town just across the state line where Dr. Hicks lived, believe the women who had abortions or gave up their babies were from other, bigger cities.⁹⁵

Rumor was that Dr. Kenn was giving abortions. Other rumors were that he was selling babies, another that he was drowning them in the river.

Abortion may have been legalized in 73, but that didn't mean much in the basin. Prohibition had been overturned too, but the mountain stills were still running and you still had to drive to Murray North Carolina to buy a six pack.

Dr. Kenn had a reputation of discrete abortions since the early 50s. He's been arranging for babies to be adopted from the back door of his clinic since the late 60s. It wasn't until the late 90s investigative report Black Market Babies premiered on 60 Minutes that anyone dreamed that he was anything other than a well-meaning doctor trying to help girls in trouble.

⁹⁵ A Town's Secret, *The Atlanta Constitution*. May 1997.

Waking

Maggie dreamt she'd been stranded on the top of her residence hall Dormier Towers during a flood. In her dream Tom was rowing past in his Ocoee White Water t-shirt and yellow life vest. She screamed after him, but he wouldn't turn toward her.

Her recollection of the last few hours wavered in scattered fragments behind her closed eyes. Her mind eddied around the few hazy images she could recall. Dr. Kenn's office, the thin-lipped nurse, the sliver of light coming in through the shaded window.

St Ogg Passes Judgment

Rain drummed on the red roofs of St. Ogg stately Victorians and puddled on the sidewalks of town square and five points. The skinny smoke stacks of the hosiery factory and the pointed cupola of court house floated above a dense fog.

Jane Glegg paced back and forth on her screen-in porch. Where was she?

I think we know where she is and with who? Sophie raised her voice over the rush of rain battering the roof.

Glegg's mind eddied around this single fact. Maggie was gone. And so was Stephen Guest.

Sophie thought Maggie had been kidnapped, or murdered, and would pipe up periodically with another example of a girl who disappeared and ended up dead. After three days without word from Maggie, Glegg, to her shame, was beginning to agree with Sophie—something terrible had happened.

The Return to the Mill

Maggie's destiny, then, is at present hidden, and we must wait for it to reveal itself like the course of an unmapped river: we only know that the river is full and rapid, and that for all rivers there is the same final home.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 370.

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CURRICULUM VITA

Emily Denton

1231 S. 4th Street.
Louisville, KY 40203
615.419.4119
Emily.denton@louisville.edu

Comparative Humanities Department
Bingham Humanities 212
2216 S. 1st Street
University of Louisville
Louisville, KY 40292

EDUCATION

Ph.D., Comparative Humanities, The University of Louisville (May 2023)
Dissertation Title: “*The Red Deeps*: a creative retelling of *The Mill on the Floss*”
Committee: Dr. Deborah Lutz, director (English)
Dr. Amy Clukey (English)
Dr. Dawn Heinecken (Women & Gender Studies)
Dr. Nicoletta Vallorani, outside reader- University of Milan (English)
M.F.A., Creative Writing, West Virginia University (2016)
Thesis title: “Women Gone Bad”
M.Div., Vanderbilt University (2012)
Thesis title: “Give Them Something to Eat: Ritual Meals in Liturgical Practice.”
B.A., The University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, English, Magna Cum Laude (2008)

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Part-Time Lecturer, Liberal Studies Department, Spalding University
RS 217: World religions I: Eastern Religions, Online (Fall 2023)
RS 236: Women and Religion (Spring 2024)
Part-Time Lecturer, Department of Comparative Humanities, University of Louisville
HUM 340: Women and Religion (Fall 2023)
HUM 310: Religion and Culture (Spring 2024)
HUM 219: Introduction to Western World Religions (Fall, 2022)
HUM 216: Introduction to World Religions (Fall 2022, Fall 2023)
HUM 216: Introduction to World Religions, Online (Fall 2022, Spring 2024)
Instructor of Record, Department of Comparative Humanities, University of Louisville
HUM 216: Introduction to World Religions (Fall 2021-Spring 2022)
HUM 105: Introduction to Comparative Humanities (Spring 2020-Spring 2021)
Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of Comparative Humanities, University of Louisville
HUM 105: Introduction to Comparative Humanities (Fall 2019)

HUM 105: Introduction to Comparative Humanities, Online (Summer 2020)
Adjunct Instructor, Department of English, West Virginia University 2016-2017
ENGL 102: Intermediate Composition and Rhetoric (Fall 2016-Spring 2017)
ENGL 101: Composition and Rhetoric (Fall 2016-Spring 2017)
Instructor of Record, Department of English, West Virginia University
ENGL 111: Introduction to Creative Writing (Fall 2015)
ENGL 102: Intermediate Composition and Rhetoric (Spring 2015-Spring 2016)
ENGL 101: Composition and Rhetoric (Fall 2013-Spring 2015)

SELECT PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

- “Instructor misbehaviors as predictors of students’ writing apprehension,”
Communication Quarterly, 70:4, 429-447, DOI: [10.1080/01463373.2022.2077123](https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2022.2077123). Stephanie Kelly, Michelle Violanti, Emily Denton & Ian Berry (2022)
- “Fifty Shades of Fanfiction: The Literary Afterlives of Women Writers”
- The Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture, Louisville, Kentucky, 2021
- “Recipes for Resistance: Food and the Fight for Women’s Suffrage” (Invited Lecturer)
- Thirsty Thursday Lecture Series, Conrad-Caldwell House Museum (2020)
- “Unruly Women: Transgressing the Boundaries of Acceptable Feminine Behavior”
- (Panel Chair), The Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture (2020)
- “‘Crazy High Eleanor’: Moral Reform and Feminine Excess in *The Good Place*.”
- The Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture, Louisville, KY (2020)
- “A Wand to Wake the Dead: Writing as Resurrection in Dante, Walcott and O’Brien.”
- The Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture, Louisville (2019)
- “Food and Feasting: Symbolism Dutch Painting to Contemporary #foodpics”
- Guest Lecturer UofL colleague’s Creativity in the Arts (2020)

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Newberry Adult Education Seminar: “A Serial Reading of *The Mill on the Floss*” The Library, Chicago Illinois (2021)
- “Delphi U: Principles of Online Course Design.” Delphi Center for Teaching & Learning, The University of Louisville (2019)

ACADEMIC SERVICE

- President—Association of Humanities Academics, Graduate Department of Comparative Humanities, The University of Louisville (2019-2020)
- Peer Mentor—Graduate Department of Comparative Humanities, The University of Louisville (2018-2022)
- Representative—Graduate Network in Arts & Sciences, The University of Louisville (2019-2020)
- Committee Chair – Graduate Network in Arts & Sciences Research Fund, The University of Louisville (2019-2020)

- Conference Intern—The Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture since 1900, The University of Louisville, Commonwealth Center for Humanities and Society (2019)
- Reader—Waitman Barbe Creative Writing Contest, West Virginia University (2015)
- Reader—Jon Scott Nelson Creative Writing Contest, West Virginia University (2015)

COMMUNITY SERVICE

- Instructor—Young Authors Book Project—Young Authors Greenhouse, Louisville KY (2017)
- Instructor—Bolton Writers Workshop, Morgantown WV (2015)
- Volunteer—Appalachian Prison Book Project (2013-2017)

LANGUAGES

- French (reading, beginning speaking) completed translation exam proctored by Classical Modern Languages department (2019)
- Greek (reading) completed two graduate translation classes (Fall 2010-Spring 2011)

ACADEMIC AWARDS AND HONORS

- Dissertation Completion Award, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, The University of Louisville (Spring 2023)
- University Fellow, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, The University of Louisville (2017-2019)
- AWP Intro Award Nomination, Graduate Department of Creative Writing, West Virginia University (2015)
- Folkerth Scholarship, Divinity School, Vanderbilt University (2008-2012)
- William E. Brock Jr. Scholarship, Brock Scholars Program, The University of Tennessee, Chattanooga (2003-2008)
- Pau Koblenz Memorial Scholarship, College of Arts and Sciences, The University of Tennessee, Chattanooga (2003-2008)

EDITORIAL EXPERIENCE

- Nonfiction Editor- *Cheat River Review*, West Virginia University (2014-2016)

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- Director of Communications and Social Media—Horrell Company
- Nashville, TN, 2012-2013
- Delegate—Commission on the Status of Women for the United Nations, New York, New York, 2012
- Volunteer Organizer—Tennesseans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty
- Nashville, TN, 2011-2012
- Youth Director—Emmanuel Presbyterian Church
- Nashville, TN, 2009-2012

RESEARCH AND TEACHING INTERESTS

- Women, Gender, and Sexuality
- Environmental Studies, Landscape, and Climate-Fiction
- History of Religion in America
- Ritual and Religious art
- Popular Culture, Film and Television Studies