

Exponential

The wall stood on the morning. Through the window I could not see. A huge flat black on the horizon. I'd slept until my belly woke me. *I'd learn to call it Brother.* I got out of bed and made my way through the webbing I'd hung to keep the nits off. Not that I slept. Not that I ever, or even wanted, as when I did I held visions: not of what was coming, but what had already been. The screaming of my father as they dragged him down the stairs. *Who wants to hear their father bawling? My mom had gone in hush.* I slunk into the hallway where water'd warped the walls, the paisley paper run to mush. Mold spread over our family portrait. The overhead lamp lay flush with eggs that hid the light. I'd wrapped my head in gauze. I'd used the same strip for several months now, until the cloth turned brown over my mouth from the steady stream of gunk and rheum. *It was inside us now. Tickling my dreamhead. A bit more of me each day.* Outside the porch sat rotten, lapped by the lake swoll to an ocean. So many days I'd sat on the sand and watched my little brothers splash and Dad had flushed our dinner from that small bog until the fish grew so large he couldn't reel them. And then the rain; and then the swelling—the pond's circumference tripled, quaded. Soon you couldn't see one end from the other, there where we'd once been baptized, Marco Polo'd. It grew to lap the house. *One night a cod blipped at my window, his scummy eyes unblinking, a mnemonic whisper through the glass: What will one day come will come and find us, you and I and I and you goodnight.*

Now near the middle of the dead tide the wall divided wrecked sky—a monolith, blue and edgeless, stretching forever out at both ends and

upwards into heaven. The sun still sat on our side, blinking in and out under crudded clouds, but the other half of everything—where the mall'd been, where my grandmother drowned with her reams of hair, where so many nights, alone now, I'd watched the moon try still to gleam—gone. Even from my distance I saw splotches where birds had flown into the flat surface. Below, their bodies floated. *Such things I'd fished up since the stilling: copper bottles, bits of head, even once a violin—some nights I sat and tried to play the songs I could remember.* The wall absorbed all sound. Even in mid-afternoon, when on most days you could hear the buzzing from far off—the men shouting, the creak of machines—the silence hurt my head. The water was colder than I remembered. Its new grip blipped my blood. I'd come to wash my face just yesterday, to clean away the dust that wore the air. Heat had mowed the fields dry; had withered my first brother. *His pale pink skin grown tight like old tobacco.* The second brother starved. As of now I weighed eighty pounds, at least by my best guess in the mirror; its silvered surface cracked down the middle. I was good at not eating. I'd stayed thin even when each night we all ate together. *In want of ending up one day on glossy paper, my skin forever memorized.* The wall seemed to watch me now with one enormous lidless eye. I went inside and shut the door and turned around and turned the lock—*I hadn't in forever; what to hide from? Who would come?* Down the hall then, to my bedroom, that door closed also, that lock keyed, through the webbing with my back turned, back to bed among the wet to weep.

The wall was still there in the evening and the next morning into noon. I felt it even with the windows covered, with my head hid beneath the bed. It seemed projected in my pelvis—another disruption in my flesh. So long without eating had made me rickety, my organs on display through sickly skin. I could hear it whisper to me, mostly nonsense, ingrained in brain like lines of Braille: SLIBBITZ NOESSDUM VIKUD KLIMMER, OHST IFTS BEED BOD YAKCLISSO OYT VU EIEE. It refused to quiet during sleeping; often even louder, as if aimed. Its words vibrated my vertebrae. My stomach curled and bubbled. Sometimes I'd get stuck on the ground. I spent several days dizzy like that, my insides runny, upside-down. I tried to remember the way my father focused during those weeks of losing hair. How despite the fact his teeth went loose and his eyes stung and he lost his nails and strips of skin, he still sat up and tried to listen and kissed

our faces for goodnight. I clung to live in every inch of him. Of what we'd had. Of where I'd been. *No one would say where he'd been taken. When I gave his name aloud they said Who?* The wall's words got louder. I could taste them. I could read them in my teeth. They overran all other. They wanted my attention. In slow increments I learned the rhythm. I held the syllables in my cerebrum until with study they formed sense: COME TO ME. COME TO ME SOON. COME IN HERE. COME. COME. I punched my head, refused to listen. I tied myself down to the bed. I tried to speak over the interruption but my words became another echo: COME NOW. BRING THE GIFT. I touched the window. I could see it. It was waiting. I could see.

After they'd taken my mom and father I'd tried to be a mother to those boys. I'd tried to establish something, to brush all thoughts of hell out from their minds. In the evenings, when the skies fell, when the water beat the brick, it was hard for me not to shiver. I coached them with unsure words. I tried to move the way our mom had. I tried to speak in her sweet voice. I couldn't do it. I knew beforehand. I saw it in my sleep. *If they hadn't crumbled on their own I would have left them another way.* On the porch I'd lashed a tin tub with ribbon to girder in case in need of quick escape—IE: crumbling, IE: disease, IE: some unclean presence like this wall. I stepped in with both feet, buoyant, bumbling, my small frame barely making the basin bob. I took the soup spoon—the same my mother had turned our broth with, spanked our butts—and dipped it into the liquid, birthing a short ripple on the lip. A breed of mosquitoes zipped and clustered. One burrowed in my ear. *Where they got their blood these days I couldn't figure. I'd once cut myself and felt no drip.* I pulled my mother's dress over my muzzle and stirred the basin outward. Over my shoulder my porch grew smaller. The trees hung waterlogged and bending, hugging round me in bouquet. I floated through them with each grunting stroke until I felt a current and slid in. The water hadn't moved in months. I'd seen faces in the film. Now I seemed to spur on towards the high wall as if sucked in by magic, magnet. The lake had spread more wide than I'd imagined. The tip of the capitol building's gold dome, several miles off, glinted in recognition, drowning. Hardly half of the high cathedral sat above the water. I thought of Grandma, of her hovel. Her brittle body sandwiched underwater, nipped and bloated six times her size. *Perhaps I should be so lucky.* Farther out the air sunk

cooler. My breath began to plume. The metal basin stuck to my feet and fingers, frost etched on my face. It was getting dark. Hard to tell if temporary or the beginning of the night—the sun would lose itself so often, light might shine five minutes and be gone for weeks. My stomach somersaulted. I bumped through a layer of dead geese. I felt a panic rumbling; my stomach itched like full of mice. Coming closer I could see the wall was less blue than black and made of perfect polished stone. It had symbols of some strange language embedded. The more I looked they became numbers. The more I looked they became names—ones I knew I knew by syllable but couldn't connect to any eyes. *So many gone. Had I forgotten? Already lost inside me deep?* As I thought each word it appeared before me, somehow transcribed on the surface, slightly off: SO MANY GONE. YOU'LL HAVE FORGOTTEN. LOST INSIDE YOU. DEEP. Overhead the face of the wall stretched forever. It cut the cold, a clean protection. I spread both hands flat against it. My fingers tingled in the heat. Felt something open in me, ringing—a wound wide as the sky.

Back at home, locked in my bedroom, my stomach began to swell. At first a pooching, as if by water, then bobbing outward, more rotund. The grinding turned to stretching. My abdomen ballooned. I wiggled with the heft of it, learning to negotiate the rooms. *What rooms were left now, anyhow—the kitchen was ceiling-high with crap; the den buried in some kind of fluid; the basement full of worms.* Soon I couldn't stand. My gut weighed twice as much as me. I spread-eagled on the floor. I stuck sewing needles in my belly button. I begged God to make it end. In the mirror my face was licked with burns and incisions that formed another face, one the wall had drawn. Three hours later my baby brother came out, screaming in a flood of sludge. My father's spitting image—full red hair, mustache and teeth. For days after I could feel the bleeding, the scumming over, the slow seal. So long the house had sat dead silent and now it swam with squeal. The baby babbled at all hours. He had the same voice as the wall, all gob. He got tangled in my webbing and refused to let me help him loose. When I tried to touch him, he'd cringe and wriggle. He came to the foot of the bed and bit my feet. We spent several days like that, at odd ends, learning where and who and how. He did not need me to teach him. On his second day he was toddling around the room. On his third he spoke the language of the wall. He

said: EICHJUN LIBBVUT PEM. PIZZIT SVIMMY-NARGER IEH UNT SNAH. He collected nits and sucked their fluid. I couldn't stop him. His small eyes seemed to want to puncture. If I played dead, he'd pet my face and kiss my ears—when I opened my eyes he went away. Still I couldn't help but feel some great swelling for him, in a place I'd once felt something else. Outside the wall was growing. Its size displaced the water. It lapped the window higher every hour. I prayed aloud for the cod, but it did not come. Sediment ground our house's frame. I thought of my grandmother elsewhere, already finished. Grandmother—I could not recall her name. I could not recall the lines of her face on those days when she'd held me—days when she'd—when she'd—what? On the bed my backbone tensed trying to remember. I stretched into my mind and felt nothing. No small indenture of where I'd come from. Suddenly in my memory where even moments earlier my father's face had sat I felt nothing but flat black blank. *Just the wall.* It was growing. I could hear it. It was forcing water through the window seams. Divots had opened in the ceiling. The pressure shook the walls. I grabbed the child and moved into the hall. It was raining there. The carpet sloshed thick at my feet. I climbed the stairs up to the attic where for years we'd stored our photo albums, birthday letters, Christmas ornaments, baby blankets. The worms had eaten through them. I put the remnants to my face and sniffed, looking for something clean inside. I dragged the moth-holed blanket, now a napkin, across my brother's head to keep it dry. I could feel the wall expanding in my chest now. I could feel it want me at the window. At the small pane I rubbed the glass till I could see. The wall had reached the front yard, still moving, becoming huge, becoming all. This wall of nothing. This smudge of black. *My strum, my love, my humble.* My brother squeamed in my lap beneath me. He screamed for recognition. He didn't have a name yet. I would give him mine, so I could remember. My name. My name. The wall was buzzing. My name I hadn't heard aloud in years. *Was it even mine now? Would I want it if it was?* My brother spoke: YOU HAVE A NEW NAME. YOU WILL WANT IT. YOUR NAME IS AKVUNDTBLASSEN. YOUR NAME IS XICTYHIAY BLODDUM YAHE. YOU ARE HERE. THE NAME IS MINE. As he spoke, the wall spoke with him, becoming one voice, pronged together. I found myself echoed aloud, repeating, spreading my new name into my head. I drooled. My head was bright warm. I couldn't feel my legs. I covered my lips with one hand, humming. I

