that Gram had said a prayer for her every night before bed. She did not know
that it was Ma’s cigarettes that made the mucus in her lungs that made those
first breaths so hard, that the beating inside her chest was called her heart and
that this small bit of body was working harder than it should have been. Prob-
bly Margie knew pain and warm and cold. Air and water and the sound of Ma’s
voice, the screaming sound of Ma’s voice. Her heart, beating, lungs, breathing,
hands, grabbing, feet, kicking. The freedom and the loneliness.

She must have known.

We held Margie, rocked Margie, weighed Margie. We warmed Margie with
our bodies while her ma watched the television. We ate our orange jello and
wished for it to all go away.

We said, Quiet, quiet, calm down now.

We said, Is she normal?

We said, Yes, yes.

Everything’s fine.

Fuck, we said.

We cried.

We prayed.

We screamed until our voice left and all that came out was air.

5. MARJORIE

Marjorie is making the smell of Ma go away. The shape, the sunk of Ma into
the soft mattress is a thing that Marjorie cannot change. But the smell of Ma,
the breathing-in of Ma, Marjorie is taking care of.

She has her yellow sponges and big brown bucket and her bottles of spray
cleaners. Marjorie puts on her long yellow rubber gloves and her hands feel far
away and different from her self. Ma’s soft sheets Marjorie pulls off the bed and
cuts into rags and with those rags Marjorie sprays and wipes away the gray coat
of dirt and dust and Ma that cover all the things. She picks up dried balls of
tissues that missed the wastebasket and candy wrappers that shine in the light
and Marjorie throws away emptied-out bottles and bottles of pills. Little plas-
tic round brown-red bottles of pills around the bed and under the bed. Round
white caps on the floor look like stones like mints like mouths. Marjorie cleans
quietly, uses Ma’s sheets to wipe up all the Ma she can see, thick gray swirls of
dust from a half-ripped-out Bible found far under the bed, dust from the top of
the soundless television and dust on the top of the dresser.

The Bible, found, wiped, the pages torn, taken, Marjorie throws away.
Marjorie breathes her wind slow to help her knees bend through the pains. She puts her eyes close to the dust, to see what it is, really, what makes this gray that holds Ma’s smell. Hair, small black Ma hairs, and cigarette ashes, and dirt, something like dirt, little bits of black and brown, and what else? Marjorie sneezes and the dust floats up and around her and she covers her nose, says, Excuse me, and tries not to breathe too much of this Ma dust inside.

Head hair, arm hair, nose hair, the secret hairs of the body, and skin, Ma’s gray dry skin and her chapped lips and all the fingernails she must have clipped in this room. The cigarettes she smoked and the tissues she blew into and the crumbs she dropped from her potato chips. What happened before. This must be the dust of Ma. Marjorie coughs and covers her mouth and nose and moves her wind slow and small as she can through her self to stay clean and separate. Trying to keep Ma out.

Ma does not have many things. Things need money and time and care and want and all Ma wanted was television and cigarettes and bed. Marjorie puts her hands into every one of Ma’s pockets and then pushes Ma’s clothes to one side of the closet. She opens up all of Ma’s drawers and feels her way slowly through the few things Ma has, the old soft t-shirts, the small white bottles of rum that Gram must have missed, the sweat pants and old packs of gum.

Marjorie is cleaning. Marjorie is looking for Him. Marjorie is wiping the Ma smell away and throwing Ma out of this room and Marjorie is looking for Him, for the clumps of chewed-up paper and the blue shirts and any other sign of Him in all this Ma. Marjorie is using her sponges and spray cleaners and paper towels to scrub away the last of the Ma dust and in all the pockets and under the bed far as she can reach and in all the drawers, Marjorie reaches and touches and looks, makes sure Ma kept none of Him.

The Bible, the torn-to-bits-to-chew Bible, is in the trash.

In one drawer, in the small drawer of the small table next to Ma’s bed, Marjorie finds one picture. One faded photo of Ma, just Ma, alone, standing, unsmiling, wearing her black work pants and white cafeteria shirt, in front of the dark blue falling-down front steps of Apartment #2. Just that one picture of Ma, and across the front of the photo, on the bottom, the dark orange shadow of finger in front of lens. Every picture He ever took taken over by shadows of fingers got in the way. Took, taking, taken. But still, the photo is mostly of Ma, and Ma is not smiling but her hair is long and brown and her body is round and upright, how Marjorie remembers her, and the grass in front of the steps is green and long, how Marjorie remembers it, and Marjorie puts the picture back in the drawer and keeps cleaning.
Marjorie wipes all that she can wipe and throws the paper towels into the trash on top of the rags and the bottles and the dust. She cleans the headboard carefully, wipes the gray coat of dust away and moves her weight against it in waves to hear what sound it makes, to know if this is the wood-and-wall heartbeat she knew from before.

It is. Might be. Marjorie blows her wind hard through her and tries not to touch too hard to hear the sound. Is doing her best to make this place as clean as it can be.

Marjorie vacuums the thin gray carpet and waits for the sound to wake Gram but Gram’s room is door-shut quiet. A down-day, probably. She ties up the garbage bag with all that Ma inside. Marjorie puts clean sheets on the bed and sits down for a rest.

Good. The room smells good. Marjorie sits and smells, closes her eyes to help feel her wind moving through. Ma is gone, almost gone, the air of her taken over by the sting of lemon, the sweet of Windex, the burn of bleach underneath it all.

Marjorie takes the rubber gloves off and shakes and squeezes her hands until they feel like hers again, until she can feel her whole body whole and together and warm and beating.

At first Marjorie does not know the dong-dong sound as the sound of the doorbell. The dong-dong sound makes Marjorie jump, makes Marjorie suck her breath in and hold it there. Marjorie waits maybe a minute for her body to settle, for her self to understand the sound, to understand that People are here, that someone is outside, waiting. She understands this and Marjorie squeezes her hands into fists and uses her fists to push out of and off the bed and Marjorie catches her wind best as she can. Quick as she can, Marjorie walks to the dong-dong of the door. Because Marjorie does not like to leave People waiting.

The People. The white-gloved People with Ma. Steve. The Store. Her vacation day. Marjorie, smelling of bleach, of lemon, of Ma, cleaned, remembers. Too late, Marjorie remembers how good she is at forgetting.

The man is short and thin and he wears a hat over a head that looks hairless and he says, Good Morning, and then he stands, quiet. Marjorie in the small doorway of the small apartment feels big and wide beside this small man. He uses his two hands to hold a cardboard box about as big as a shoebox and for a full minute, maybe more, he stands unspeaking, head down, waiting or thinking or praying. And when he does speak, when he looks up at her and smiles at her, his voice is so soft and far away that Marjorie cannot understand what he is
saying. Words and words and a nod and then the man hands Marjorie the box so that he can reach into his coat for what is hidden there.

Marjorie’s hands do not feel ready to hold the hard edges of this box that is not as heavy and also much heavier than it looks. The man feels around inside his coat and finds a paper and a pen and he places the paper and pen on top of the box and then opens his arms out toward Marjorie. In her mind Marjorie sees the ghost of her self hold her arms out to him. She can feel that unseen part of her, that other Marjorie that sits inside her skin, hold his small body close beside her. Her other Marjorie, the bright white lit-up shape of her self, wants to reach out and feel what his skin feels like and see how he moves with his wind and see if her wind and his wind could become the same.

Marjorie stares at his reaching arms and his small white hands and she breathes, brings the bright shape of her self back inside her skin, holds the box close to her chest. Blinks, blinks. The man nods and reaches and she understands that he wants to take the weight of the box back from her and Marjorie passes it back to the man. He nods his head again toward the paper and the pen on top of the box and in his low voice says words that Marjorie cannot hear over the inside sounds of her breath, her blood, beating.

But Marjorie can do it. Marjorie is not sure of the words the kind man is saying but Marjorie can see the pen there and paper there and Marjorie can understand what he wants from her. Ma in her room with her television had decided to go away from People. But Marjorie stayed her self. Marjorie is staying here in the world with the People and Marjorie understands how the world works. She understands that People hold special packages with two hands, with chins to chests, eyes down, and that to make a thing real you must sign your name. Marjorie is ready for what People will ask her to do. She has spent hours and hours of her life holding pens to paper, practicing exactly how to make her name into a name, into a shape that can be seen and read and known.

Marjorie picks up the man’s pen and presses it into the paper on top of the cardboard box where Ma is. Maybe all that time spent practicing, all those afternoon hours, all those pieces of paper covered in the shapes of her, were for this. For this time, when Marjorie will sign her name perfect for this man, for Ma to come back home. Marjorie smiles, thinking this thought, feels good, feels right, as she makes her big round M and her smaller a-r-j-o-r-i-e. Marjorie, just this, just Marjorie, because the rest of her name is not hers, is theirs, is His, is nothing that People need to know.

Marjorie, signed.

The small man again holds his arms out to Marjorie and carefully, with her
two big, soft hands she takes the box. He says words Marjorie does not hear and
nods and takes the pen and paper and puts them back inside his coat. The man
lowers his head one last time, touches his finger to the front of his hat, turns and
walks away, closing the door quietly behind him.

Marjorie stands in the living room and holds the box. She watches the man
out the window hold his coat close for warmth. Watches him light a cigarette
and pull his short body up into the inside of a big blue pickup truck. Watches
him drive away into the gray winter morning. A good man, small, kind, quiet,
clean, gone.

Marjorie holds the cardboard box close to her body. It is heavy and light, light
and heavy, thick and wide and so much smaller than she ever thought Ma could
be.

What to do with this?

This box. A box of Ma. The cardboard shape of what is left of Ma.

Marjorie would like to talk to Dr. Goodwin. To see what People do with
boxes of what People leave behind. But Marjorie has missed her chance for this
month. She will have to wait for the days to go by.

Marjorie holds Ma in the middle of the small living room. She looks down
at the brown sofa with the bed inside, looks up at the green clock passing the
time. Today, still today, still the quiet of the early parts of today.

Marjorie puts the box on the floor beside the sofa. She has cleaned Ma up and
signed her name and she cannot think of what else there is for her to do here in
the apartment. Gram is quiet today, must be deep down in a down-day, must
be sitting in her bed waiting for her Stories to start. Marjorie is here, awake,
alive, and Marjorie has People who need her. Marjorie has her job to do, the
Store out there, waiting for her. Today is a day like all the days, and like all the
days the People need someone there to say Hello. And there are days and days
to wait for her time with Dr. Goodwin.

Marjorie does not mind. She has things to do. Friends to see and People to
help. Marjorie goes into the kitchen to begin the making of her toast with but-
ter and grape jelly, the pouring of her milk over cereal.

Because there is nothing more to do here. No need, right now, and so, for
now, Marjorie is going to forget about taking her vacation day.

6. MARGIE

Margie learned about lines. She did not know the word, line. But Margie saw
lines all around her. Straight lines like walls, like pretzel sticks, like candy bars.