

HISTORY

BY DDUM KIM

for you

I can only tell you what I remember. Of three stone slabs not built but found. That met at the top in a lean. Commiserating giants in a gravitational trinity. Smaller stones filling the gaps between except for where the door and two window frames were. Connected to the wooden frame lining the interior connected to four beams crossing the ceiling connected to four columns standing inconvenient in the already limited workspace, structural reinforcement appropriated as shelving stuffed and wedged with books, manuscripts, loose papers, unclear which supporting which, all the way to the top, accessible with a ladder I never saw used. The ladder leaning against the wall behind the historian's desk. His desk tall with an angled surface like an architect's, covered with inkpots, pens, pencils, brushes, papers, a lamp, three magnifying glasses of different sizes, binder clips, mugs of tea steaming or stale never slipping off, defying gravity or placed to be in perfect harmony with it. In front of his stool, also wooden, also tall, allowing him to hunch over documents with feet resting on one rung above the floor stone or concrete or clay, dusty and dirty despite daily sweepings, never mopped or scrubbed, covered with more books, manuscripts, loose papers placed in stacks only meaningful to the historian we knew as *doctor*. The piles bridging, blocking the space two strides wide between the historian's desk and the scribe's, also wooden. Apothecary drawers built in the base of the scribe's desk containing ink, paint, gold leaf, graphite, lead, nibs, pens, pencils, brushes, blotters, thinner, string, turpentine, seals, rags, rulers, knives, thread, needles, wax, matches obscured by the scribe's chair, also wooden. The surface of the desk one arm's length deep, one arm span wide, necessarily large. Level, thick like a butcher's block, cut, damaged, worn, painted with a precise black grid for second, third, and fifth copying, helpful for sevenths. With a red stain on the front right corner I suspected was blood. The hinged lamp dented, clamped on the right, to the right of copies placed on the desk in front of the scribe's chair, the right side of the desk farther from the door and potential drafts when opened by theoretical visitors. Originals placed left of copies on the left side of the desk in front of another chair, also wooden, that I only witnessed occupied by one individual a handful of times, under the window slightly open for ventilation. Below the window, built into the wall, a shelf laden with blank sheets bound, loose, and rolled, and in the bottom tier my school bag and thermos of tea hot when cold and iced when hot, never sweet enough. The archive only hot or cold, never moderate, jumping from one extreme to another in changeable weather. A veritable tinderbox. Of wood, paper, fumes,

dust. Collecting for uncountable years confined in a too hot stone shell. That burned down, that you saw burn down, in a heatwave like this heatwave, disappearing lakes and rivers, leaves, rodents. Its ruins rotting in weeds tall again after years, bulldozed and removed, the earth reshaped, sprinklers installed, and grass grown for the private golf course that outrages those who supported and voted for its development who now whine injustice when fined for trespassing on land they once could tread for free though they never did. I tell you this is what I remember.

Now go to the municipal building, go to room 203, ask the clerk for a file on *the old archive, the one that burned down*. She will give you a folder. In the folder you will find a photograph. The clerk will tell you this is all there is, that all other documents on the archive had been stored in the archive and disappeared with it.

The photograph will neither be dated nor signed, but you will recognize the image of the archive. You will know the yellow grass of late summer, early fall encircling it, the cast shadows of late afternoon, the dirt path leading up to the door. You will see the door closed, the lines in the dry wood, the small stones filling the gaps in the outer wall just as I described them, that make up the archive into something resembling a beehive, stacked so tight, flush together. Look for the three large stone slabs that form the lean. If you cannot see them immediately, make a copy of the photograph, take it with you, and in your room under a strong light with a magnifying glass look closer, carefully. Search until your eyes ache, the photograph pixelates, the image is lost, reduced to black vibrating on white. Find that you cannot see the three whispering giants. Find the small window at eye level, left of the door, small and missable, but still there, that I did not mention because I have forgotten it. The mat woven, large, bleached out, and rough in texture in front of the door that I did not mention because I cannot recall it. The wildflowers growing from between the stones that I did not mention because I do not remember them and still question if they ever were.

Looking at the photograph to which I have led you, that you might not have known existed had I not told you it did, consider whether I lie. Question my memories, dismiss them as you count the number of discrepancies I point out, acknowledge exist, describe because I have observed them myself. Have myself accused light, lens, and angle of trickery, declared the thing altered, and knowing these possibilities to be untrue, have dismissed my own memory as inaccurate, false, deficient. Have avoided and feared my own mind's fabrications not only of the archive's exterior but of the interior, of the work, of the paints and inks used, of the copying skills acquired, of the doctor, the professor, the walks to and from

the archive, the woods, the house, of you, of them, of ghosts, of sounds, of smells, textures, noise, of temperature, of the weight of the air, of my anxiety, my very thoughts, my very feelings. Have myself been pushed to only trusting facts—numbers, addresses, names—to only believing that substantiated by others and recorded, and even then only sometimes. The inaccuracy of remembrance reinforced by the persistent incongruities perceived between what is and my recollection of what was. Walking upon level expanses of grass carpets where I remember there stood an ancient stone structure on a yellow balding hill. Sitting on a black leather sectional too large for a room with gray cracked paint in a house too small to breathe in where I remember a green corduroy couch in a room with white walls in a house big enough to hide in. Eating dinner with a quiet man whose strength and anger I remember terrified, sitting across from a quiet woman whose scream I remember ruptured an eardrum. Doodling meaningless pencil lines with a hand that I remember replicated seven calligraphic styles with certainty, grace, ease. Seeing you again gaunt, gray, lined, exhausted, not opposite but so other from what I remember.

I searched for something remotely familiar in your posture, gesture, speech, not to disprove my paranoid amnesia but to reconcile the simultaneous and contradictory feelings of knowing you and meeting a stranger so that when the moment of seeming déjà vu came, when you spoke with the same inflection, the same cadence, the same voice, the same words, said *if we were one person, we would be perfect, then we would be okay*, though you preceded it with *Remember when we thought* and followed it with a laugh, it jarred remembrance into full consciousness and despite the photograph, I remembered as I had always remembered three commiserating giants in a gravitational trinity, a wooden door stained dark and dry, a handle painted black with a thumb latch smooth from wear, pens with bent nibs, the doctor's loud breathing, a leatherbound portfolio sticking out of the shelf to the left of the door, rust growing on the corners of the hotplate in the shape of rabbits, a perfect circle of light glowing on the historian's desk illuminating a yellow legal pad covered in graphite notes, the musk of the soap in the bathroom, picking up the phone after two rings, pausing after asking *Hello?* after you answered *Hello?* Asking *Who is this?* though I knew. You said *It's gone*. Said *I was in the woods*. Said *I smelled burning*. Not *I smelled something burning* but *I smelled burning*. Told me you walked towards the smell. Told me you walked into the smoke before you were aware it was there, that you choked, that the day was windless. Said *Firemen came and did nothing, said there was nothing to be done, just to watch, to be on standby, to be sure it was contained, that it would be safer to let the fire die out on its own, said it was lucky there was no wind*. Said *it was lucky*. Said *They smoked as they watched*. Said

There was so much smoke. You told me others appeared, that they stood, watching along the perimeter of the woods, refusing or unable to venture beyond, neighbors we never knew who must have emerged from the houses that never seemed inhabited. Said *Some were crying.* Told me they mouthed *Oh my god* into the smoke to no one, into phones to invisible someones. Said *But I could not hear them. For the smoke.* Said *The smoke. It took over.* Told me you could not see the fire for the smoke. Told me you could not see the archive for the smoke. Told me your eyes watered. Said *It was the smoke.* Told me it diffused twilight, blurred bodies, muted faces, muted sound but the roar of smokescreened blazes. Said *And then the doctor. He appeared. I don't know from which direction. He stood so close. I only knew it was him because he stood so close.* Told me he did not know you were there, that he was wordless. Told me the sun set. Said *Then I could no longer see anyone or anything, only feel the fire, its heat everywhere.* Said *I still smell like burning. Everything smells like burning.*

If this recollection does not match yours, if I have missed even the smallest detail, I know you have stopped reading. That this goes unread. But if it aligns with your memory in every way, I know you are still with me. And I know you are still with me. I know you are still with me. I know you are still with me. I know you are still with me. I know you are still with me. And I can ask you to look at the photograph again and consider what you remember of the archive. To note details you remember differently, do not remember, never knew were there, and know your memory to be as imperfect as mine. And now to put the thing away. And read what I have to tell you. Because if we are ever to be okay, it is not what was, but what I remember of what was that you must know.

There were eight scripts, eight historians in all. The doctor being the eighth. There, earliest and latest, the doctor there, when I arrived there, when I left. I thought he lived in the archive a hermit. The inkpots, pens, and brushes on his desk always dry. He used pencils. HBs, round, painted silver making notes, crossing out on blue-ruled yellow sheets stored in manila folders stacked on another stool, also wooden, to his right. Reading and turning pages with care, slowly, of volumes and records compiled by his predecessors, nodding or shaking his head as if in conversation. His large nostrils breathed loud, clouding one of three magnifying glasses left hand held over manuscript or book or sheet smoothed flat with crooked fingers with thick nails striated and yellowed connected to a bony right hand age-spotted, steady, and fingerless-gloved in winter. He was left-handed. I felt embarrassed for him his loud breathing, seeming a condition more profound than simply nasal for one silent unless posed yes or no questions—the least demanding to one so taciturn—or greeted with a *Hello* to which he replied *Hello have some tea*. With a reserve not cold or condescending, but concentrated. Making tea his rare break. Taking any two mugs and the kettle to the bathroom. He emptied and washed the mugs in the sink, filled the kettle, emerged, placed the kettle on the hotplate, turned it on, watched it. The kettle, aluminum with a black handle. The hotplate white with two burners. On a small brown oblong refrigerator that stood to the right of the bathroom door which was to the right of the archive door, closer to the historian's desk than the scribe's. The bathroom an afterthought, a toilet and shallow bowl of a sink wedged between stone and drywall that did not reach the ceiling, sounds in one room audible in the other. The tank of the toilet stacked with empty manila folders smelling of mold. A wooden ledge nailed into the wall above the sink slimed from bars of soap, holding a damp sponge and mugs, of which one held the doctor's toothbrush, toothpaste, and razor, and a small beige lamp its incandescent bulb buzzing orange. The doctor watching the kettle well after the steam began to emit, turned off the burner only when the water reached a rolling boil, took a tea bag from a box, also wooden, removed the lid from the kettle, emptied the tea bag string and all into the water, replaced the lid. Took hold of the handle, swung the kettle in slow generous circles, the water sizzling without spilling, poured the contents into the two clean mugs, returned the kettle to the hotplate, walked to my desk, placed one mug on the corner furthest from my work, on the lefthand corner closest to the door, returned to his desk to his historian's work, his nostrils breathing

loud while sipping tea. I drank the tea out of politeness, but always too bitter, never finished it. Drinking, always finishing, the tea father prepared in the thermos brought from home. Cold in summer, hot in winter, sweetened but never sweet enough because I never told him. Never bitter. Rationed. The thermos there, in one hand, mother's hand in the other, you on the other side of her, on that first visit to the archive, first meeting with the doctor, when I did not know I became a scribe and did not know what a scribe was. There in my bag thereafter when you walked me after school uphill through dry yellow grass that drew raised lines across my calves. Sweating through my shirt through the blue canvas of my backpack, grabbing onto the hem of your shirt crying *I'm so hot*. You quickened your pace out of reach and with vision blurred I followed the sound of your footfalls. Fast and wide, kicking up dust or dirt or mud or snow or nothing pounding frozen ground when you said *If we were one person, we would be perfect. If only we were perfect. Then we would be okay*. Reaching you waiting outside the archive entrance, you told me to go in, so I did. The door, also wooden, stained dark was never locked, though there was a lock in the handle painted black that gave with a thumb click of the latch and a too easy pull. Any exertion too much exertion. Light and flimsy in contrast to its appearance. Slight breezes flapping it almost open. Flap flap flapflap flap flapflap syncopated summer dust sneaking in through cracks, snow in the winter, rain in spring and fall the wind beating it against its frame almost unhinged. I wore gloves in winter. The pair you received as a gift from a friend of father's, bagged to donate, the kind that appear made for midget hands but stretch to fit any. They were green. I cut the fingers off like the doctor his. Drank tea like him. Layered gloves the way he wore two sweaters. Gloves made of felt that must have been white when new but which I only ever knew to be gray, I wore over the fingerless ones in winter and by themselves otherwise. Always worn when copying second style manuscripts with compressed charcoal that smudged too easily on smooth paper square and thin, soft to the touch. Sheets fit within the outlines of the desktop grid, the horizontal rule visible through the paper serving as guides ensuring straight lines required by the second historian, his glass face void of features but for two blazing eyes that stared through the woods you told me were haunted. I held my breath copying seconds, expelling air with a turned head. Accidental breath or breeze or bump of the desk scattering the charcoal, marking the sheet with spider thin lines, ruining hours of work. The small size of its pages, six inches square, a redeeming aspect of fragile seconds. Second characters reproduced with a series of controlled and measured strokes from left to right allowing for slight corrections if need be with charcoal sanded to a fine point. Requiring fewer strokes than firsts, less demanding than symmetrically precise

thirds, the second style in and of itself not a difficult script to master. The text fixed with a spray, the sheet made stiff with a short soak in a mixture of gum and water in a wooden box placed on the lowered toilet seat cover, the wet sheet transferred to a tall narrow rack, also wooden, with seven levels each made to dry one sheet overnight, set on the scribe's desk for this purpose but otherwise folded and stored behind the refrigerator. Minimal embellishments applied the following day with a rudimentary wooden tool burnished from use. Three dots in each corner, one in the center, dropping on thick, viscous, drying into hard smooth half beads of dark red lacquer serving as decorations, weights, and buffers between sheets to prevent blotting effects, only then stacking the copied sheets followed by the copying of the next seven pages followed by fixing and soaking followed by copying the next seven followed by the dropping of lacquer on the dried sheets followed by stacking followed by the fixing and soaking of the next seven followed by copying the next seven pages and so on until the copied pages made a copied manuscript followed by the copying of the next manuscript. Making mistakes, repeating mistakes, my hand going straight when it should curve, skipping lines, spilling ink, applying too much pressure, not enough, copying so slow the ink drying in the nib of the pen, backing into the chamber, flooding onto the sheet, onto my hands, wiped permanent on my clothes by accident, copying so slow the paint hardening in the brush, or sitting, just sitting, not sleeping, just sitting, incapable of doing anything more or anything else. The doctor never saying anything, never commenting on my inertia. Then slowly or abruptly, either on the same day or the next or several later copying again at a steady pace without difficulty, without pause, focused, selecting the proper materials, the proper instruments, selecting and treating the paper accordingly, practicing strokes, comparing copy with original for incongruities, placing originals to the left, copying on the right, lines, curves, dashes, forming letters, characters, words, sentences, into pages, into manuscripts, cleaning instruments, clearing spaces, opening the next manuscript, arranging and preparing for the next copy. Copying occupying time uninterrupted but for the one week and a day the professor dripping greetingless came letting in rain and wind that streaked ribbons of ink across my copy. Not knowing he was a professor until he said *I am a professor* then *You can call me professor*. I did not call him *professor*. I did not call him anything. I never spoke to him. I never called the doctor *doctor*. I said *Good morning* not *Good morning doctor*. *Thank you* not *Thank you doctor*. *See you tomorrow* not *See you tomorrow doctor*. When you called, I picked up the receiver, asked *Hello?* and you answered *Hello?*

I do not mean to confuse you. I did not know my memories would splinter on the page, lead to the transcription of spontaneous thoughts crashing into tangential dead ends. This is not how I meant for this transfer of information to happen. Before my conviction in the eventuality of this telling faded on finding the photograph of the archive in the folder for *the old archive, the one that burned down* in the file maintained by the clerk in room 203 in the municipal building, I constructed and reconstructed over and over and over and over in my mind what I would tell you, how I would tell you down to the very pauses I would take between phrases. I planned to tell you everything in person. In an organized manner, in script order. I planned to start with the first script. The *skeletal* or *insect script*. With its lead lines forming characters resembling primitive four-legged creatures revealed with slow gestures. Veins drawn with deliberately painstaking unhurried movements that caused the hand to shake and produce jittery lines that made the insects appear to vibrate. The foot of each leg punctuated with a near invisible pinhole. An appropriate script to start a child just having internalized name-writing, just learning to write sentences, good with instruction, mediocre and uninspired when asked simply to draw, always lacking ideas of my own. The doctor placing the manuscript in front of me, opening it to the first page, breaking the spine to lay it flat, placing a blank translucent sheet on top and a pencil on top of the sheet without instruction, wordless. The arrangement familiar from alphabet primers, I knew to trace. Tracings appearing perfect when laid over originals but upon separation, held up to the light on their own, missing lines, the thickness of lines inconsistent, uncorrectable due to the delicate nature of the paper, smudged, a mess. Wasting so many sheets before learning to keep my hand lifted so as not to smear the work or stain the sheet with sweat from the base of my palm. Wasting so many sheets to achieve a perfect tracing only to be discarded. Leaving dozens of meticulous tracings on my desk on the left side under originals to be found in the trash on each subsequent visit over the course of something like a year, turning into something close to a ritual. The disposal of that work not upsetting, having learned in school to view tracing as an act of pretend regardless of the time and effort invested. Not meant to be cherished or saved. Not serious. The paper's translucence announcing amused forgery. Especially in contrast to the rough, beige almost gray heavy handmade leaves of first manuscripts. Of which blank ones I found in the scaffolding turned shelf behind the scribe's chair. Thick layers of dust covering the stack suggesting it had been there all along.

Lead wrapped in paper like a crayon I found in the top left apothecary drawer in the scribe's desk. Initial attempts to copy not simply trace, eyeballing character size, spacing, alignment, resulted in creatures of various proportions resembling less a system of language and more an infestation of mutant vermin. Running out of space after copying too wide, too long, too far apart only then to trap characters too small, too close, too narrow within margins too cavernous. Until observing that the innocuous pinholes resting in the feet of each character, what I believed to be pure decoration, were regularly spaced and aligned both horizontally and vertically. I measured the spacing with the ruler, also wooden, that lay in the desk, in the fourth line of drawers, second to the right, and found that the distance between each hole alternated between being three centimeters apart and half a centimeter apart. I looked at the page again and for the first time saw the regular repetition of the holes containing in perfect squares each character made with care and deliberation that undermined the document's seeming primitive qualities. It took several days to find the needle. Rusted into the crevice of one of the drawers. In the process of searching for it, happening upon other implements I did not know before were there. I did not reorganize what was at the time still but a cabinet of curiosities, in part because I knew it was not mine, but more on account of a newfound awareness that what I perceived as haphazard storage might be the resultant order of centuries. And so I left it all undisturbed but for the needle, scraped out with my fingernails and cleaned in the bathroom with soap and water. I took out a blank sheet, from the left and top edges measured three centimeters in to where I placed the tip of the needle and pushed it through. The size of the hole perfectly matched those in the original. But the needle, still rusted, left a brown stain around the hole. I tried again three centimeters to the right with the hope that the first hole had removed the rust, but the needle left the same stain. Washed the needle again with soap and water, not knowing my efforts were counterproductive. Spent the rest of the day poking brown holes in the sheet at random, no longer concerned with measurement, only in eliminating rust and my failure to do so. The doctor absorbed in writing, crossing out, appeared unaware. But whenever the supply of blank sheets on the shelf ran low, I found it replenished on my next visit. Likewise the needle I found on the scribe's desk clean on my return to the archive the following week. I took out a new sheet, positioned the needle and punched a hole so clean I held it up to the light to make sure it was there. From there I measured and punched the rest of the sheet. From there I copied the characters with lead, used the ruler to measure the length of each stroke, used the protractor, also wooden, to measure the angle between each line. Measured and measured again, deliberately painstaking, copying the characters with unhurried

movements that caused the hand to shake and produce jittery lines that made the insects appear to vibrate. Characters that took seconds to trace taking unquantifiable time to copy. Months of familiarization through tracing completely abandoned, irrelevant. Thoughts of copying the entire manuscript also abandoned, seeming impossible. Focus refined to reproducing a perfect line. Until on copying the last line of the last character on the last page, suddenly finding nothing more to copy, recollections of finding the needle of making marks in nursery school primers of marking sheets with lead of us marking asphalt with chalk of us sleeping between mother and father after too many of your ghost stories laughing in between coats smelling of mothballs giving away my hiding place of hiding keys so they could not leave of hiding bottles so they could not drink of crying of crying *I'm so hot* grabbing for the hem of your shirt climbing up the hill leading to the archive running after you silent that silence the sound of the doctor's pencils scratching paper heavyweight paper attempting clean holes in paper attempting flight from beds flapping like wings the sleeves of matching pajamas several sizes too big from father just because attempting to avoid stepping on shattered glass of mother singing lullabies about children with our names of tracing of watching breath materialize into clouds swirl dissolve in darkness of waiting for you of measuring the second to last line of the last character on the last page rushing me undifferentiated, I did not know what to do. Could not bring myself to close the original, close the copy, return the needle to the crevice in the drawer. I left the lead on the copy, left copy and original open on the desk, left the lamp on, left. Returned to find the lamp off, next to it the lead and ruler placed side by side, the paper replenished in the shelf, the copy and the original nowhere to be found. In their place a manuscript I had not seen before, thicker than the one previous. I copied the new manuscript to completion over uncounted visits and unable to close it, left copy and original open on the desk to find another in its place to copy and leave open on the desk to find another in its place to copy and leave on the desk, unspoken swapping of copied and to be copied developing into a routine that led to the eventual learning that firsts were not the only scripts, to copying second style manuscripts wearing felt gloves with compressed charcoal that smudged too easily on smooth paper square and thin, soft to the touch, fitting within the outlines of the desktop grid, the horizontal rule visible through the paper serving as guides ensuring straight lines, making the pinpricking of firsts obsolete. I held my breath copying seconds, expelling air with a turned head. Accidental breath or breeze or bump against the desk scattering the charcoal, marking the sheet with spider thin lines, ruining hours of work. The small size of its pages, six inches square, a redeeming aspect of fragile seconds. Second characters reproduced with

a series of controlled and measured strokes from left to right allowing for slight corrections if need be with charcoal sanded to a fine point. Requiring fewer strokes than firsts, less demanding than symmetrically precise thirds, the second style in and of itself not a difficult script to master. The text fixed with a spray, the sheet made stiff with a short soak in a mixture of gum and water in a wooden box placed on the lowered toilet seat cover, the wet sheet transferred to a tall narrow rack, also wooden, with seven levels each made to dry one sheet overnight, set on the scribe's desk for this purpose but otherwise folded and stored behind the refrigerator. Minimal embellishments applied the following day with a rudimentary wooden tool burnished from use. Three dots in each corner, one in the center, dropping on thick, viscous, drying into hard smooth half beads of dark red lacquer serving as decorations, weights, and buffers between sheets to prevent blotting effects, only then stacking the copied sheets followed by the copying of the next seven pages followed by fixing and soaking followed by copying the next seven followed by the dropping of lacquer on the dried sheets followed by stacking followed by the fixing and soaking of the next seven followed by copying the next seven pages and so on until the second style copied pages made a second style copied manuscript followed by the copying of larger, cleaner, more austere versions of seconds that were third style manuscripts with an ink of graphite and stone ground by hand with a circular motion on a slab with drips of water from a ceramic contraption with two small holes in the top, one for filling through submersion, one for pouring, the novelty of which wore off within the first day of grinding, the smell of which mildly intoxicated. Third blanks came stacked flat with frayed edges requiring trimming into sheets of uniform dimension. Then aligned and centered on the grid, each corner weighted with a handful of gray and white porcelain minnows, grid lines still visible through paper refined in its translucence and tight weave of indiscernible rice fibers. Void of human imprecision, symmetrical third characters demanded nothing less than the application of one even coat of ink that could not be retouched. Thirds seeming an impossible script to copy but after months accomplishing the task, followed by the copying of another third, followed by the copying of a second, followed by the copying of a first, a third, a first, a second, a first through too much tea, copying bloated, copying into dusk, copying into waiting for you into beyond dusk into night, copying turning into waiting into hunger into errors into amassing wasted sheets riddled with deformed half insects into walking crying frightened through the woods running from clawing ghosts in between trees that disappeared the moon into the house to find them not there, you already asleep. Trying not to wake you. Hoping you might. Thinking you should. Crying into staring at your back

turned to me, the profile of your right side covered with a blanket that reached your neck, unconscious in the bed parallel to mine separated by the white nightstand, also wooden, with two drawers with metal pull handles, the top drawer yours, the bottom mine holding our pajamas, just a little wider than our combined arm lengths creating the aisle where mother sat her back against the nightstand reading aloud a story of our choosing then another and another still because we begged. Her voice calm, calming even when shaking.

Laying in bed, there I counted the number of years until I could leave, converted the number into months then weeks then days. The conversion into hours and minutes beyond my faculty of calculation. Staring at the dark grays of the night ceiling otherwise beige, holding my breath, unable to imagine what could come next. Always on my back not turning on my side so as not to disturb the sheets and blanket mother made neat, there on my back in pajamas you had long outgrown, staring at the ceiling thinking how strange that though I could not see or hear you, I knew you were almost within arm's reach. Unable to figure out how this could be, wanting to ask you, but knowing that rousing you from sleep would only make you angry.

Staring at the ceiling, their screaming reaching us through cracks around the door, wide awake before learning to sedate fear with sleep, I asked you what they were saying. You said *You do not need to know*. Asked you what they fought about, asked why they fought. You said *You do not need to know*. Asked why you would not tell me. You said *To protect you*.

Staring at the water stain on the ceiling thinking how strange that without turning to see, I knew you were not there. That if I reached out to where your bed would have been, I would touch the wall separating my apartment from my neighbors' whose incomprehensible screaming lulls me to sleep.

I asked you how we could make them stop. You said *Come here* and I did and you fell asleep holding me in your arms the way mother used to.

Staring at the ceiling wondering though I could not see or hear you, if you might be almost an arm's reach away. Turning my head to see your bed empty, made, neat. Years after not seeing you stretching into longer still. Not knowing you were gone until I returned. I did not ask them where you went or when you would return if you were to return or why they did not tell me. I never asked them anything. And you were not here for me to ask.

I asked you how we could make them stop. You said *If we were one person, we would be perfect, then we would be okay*. Asked you why. You said *Because we are so different*. Asked you why. You said *Because*.

HISTORY · DDUM KIM

Watching shadows crawl along the ceiling tracing with my eyes the outline of the stain, climbing out of bed, opening the door, seeing you sleeping on the green corduroy couch now mine now faded almost to yellow, your back turned to me under a thin blanket white with pale blue lines also once theirs now mine pulled to your neck despite the heat, I hear your inhale, exhale under the neighbors' high-pitched screams and still cannot believe you are here.

There were eight scripts, eight historians in all and you must know them if we are to be perfect. Imperfection a fear instilled by ghosts. Turning from menacing to violent, closing in as I ran through the woods, a telltale sign that a copy was subpar, must be amended or discarded altogether. The residue of dead historians maintaining distance when copying met their standards, but still there with eyes blinking presence and judgment. The first ghost's skin gouged with gaping pockmarks, two of which served as sockets for sunken eyes that followed my every step. The fifth historian with clothes as disheveled, hair as frazzled, angles and slitted gaze as severe as fifth style characters, watching alongside the seventh historian verging on translucence but for fallow eyes so dense they seemed to float on their own, watching with eyes that I did not know were there until you told me they were there. You said *There they are* and *There, there* as we cut through the woods from the archive towards home when you still came for me, when I was still a scribe, when you were still here, when you said *Even if you don't see them, they are there* and *There, they are watching, there* and *There* and *If we were one person, we would be perfect. If only we were perfect. Then we would be okay.* You pointed and I saw eyes piercing the clear early darkness of winter, the dust and haze of heatwaves like this heatwave disappearing lakes and rivers, leaves, rodents, everything but the second historian appearing of dust, his eyes red lacquer luminescing in between trees we once used to play tag and war, the fourth historian his eyes glowing indigo flooding, streaking his face like ribbons of ink pulled across three completed sheets and another in progress across the scribe's desk towards the right corner closest to me, drawn by wind let in with rain by the professor dripping greetingless. Wiping the wet from his coat, pushing it out of his hair onto the floor narrowly missing the piles of papers and books stacked there. The professor waiting, myself waiting then following the doctor's lead of resuming work, discarding the ruined sheets, preparing a new one, turning back the original manuscript two spreads until asked *May I sit here?* Seeing clear and not indigo stains on the floor, seeing the professor gesture towards the empty chair to my left. He added *Until the rain stops.* I shrugged and he interpreting this gesture as acquiescence, pulled out and sat in the otherwise empty chair. The professor sometimes watching me, sometimes the doctor, sometimes looking at the ceiling, but mostly out the window. He did not say anything more that day. He fell asleep. He had brown hair and a receding hairline and his face was thin. He wore glasses with thick black frames. He wore muddied black dress shoes.

He had a straight nose, a cleft chin. He smelled of mildew and rain. He wore a rumpled black suit too wide for his frame. He slept with his arms crossed, mouth closed, head resting on his chest. I forgot about him, completed two of the ruined sheets and felt accomplished for it. Then he awoke, stood up, the mud on his shoes dried to a light brown, breaking off onto the floor. He said *Thank you*, walked to the door, opened it onto a dry twilight, stepped out, closed the door behind him. He visited every day for the following seven days, coming at different times, each time sitting in the chair to my left. He said *You are a good listener*. Told me he was educated and worked in an office. Told me he lived somewhere far away but had returned because his mother had passed away. Said *I used to play in the marching band* and *My father yelled at me when I would lose my mittens. Like Tom Kitten*. He said *My mother passed away four years ago*. Told me his mother smoked, said *But that is not what killed her*. Said *I bet you wonder why I come here*. Said *It is so peaceful here. That is why I come*. Said *Always look both ways when you cross the street. My father always told me that. Now I look both ways even when a street is empty*. Said *You work so hard. When I was your age I did not work as hard as you*. Said *I do not know how old my mother was when she died*. Said *They lied to me. They said they didn't, but they did*. Said *They keep lying to me*. Said *My father says he remembers differently*. Said *I always wished I had a sibling*. Said *It is all different from what I remember*. Said *Everything looks strange. Not how I remembered it. I don't know who to believe*. Said *Beware of those who begin with 'I remember.'* *They lie. No one remembers anything. Memories are gathered emotions presented as fact. There is no such thing as 'I remember.'* *If you know this, you will never be conned by someone else's delusions*. Said *She was not very pretty, but she was beautiful*. Said *Don't worry*. Said *I go back on Tuesday* on the Wednesday they covered the kitchen with shattered fragments of what were bottles, what were glasses, what was a window, what was a chair leaving the blue flame of the left front burner burning the second to smallest stainless steel pot with the long curved black handle and illuminating your streaked face. You wedged squatting in the corner next to the stove shivering from wind blowing in through where there had been a windowpane. I asked what happened and you said *You do not need to know*. Asked why you would not tell me and you said *You do not need to know*. Asked why you would not tell me and you said *You weren't here* and I turned the knob on the stove to disappear the blue flame and you said *You weren't here. You're never here. You do not need to know* and I pulled out a chair from the kitchen table and sat with you there in the dark, waiting there for them to return long after you stood up wiped glass from your lap walked across the kitchen into the hallway and up the stairs, waiting into falling asleep waiting waking knowing no one had returned fearing

they never would, wondering what would happen if they never did, standing up, walking across the kitchen into the hallway and up the stairs into the room. Trying not to wake you. In the dark changing into pajamas outgrown twice over, climbing into bed, laying on my back sleepless in the silence watching the ceiling black turning gray to red to pink to beige, climbing out of bed, undressing, showering, toweling off, brushing teeth, putting on clothes, pulling on shoes, descending stairs, entering kitchen, stepping over shards but still feeling hearing granules underfoot, making tea, filling thermos, exiting the house, going to school, entering school, passing in hallways others with faces now forgotten mutually ignored sitting in classrooms in rows alphabetically by last name, exiting school through double doors, stepping around groups that dwindled as paths diverged into subsets of fours then threes then pairs to two whose birthday parties I attended years earlier, before I was a scribe, and myself staggered across and along the same stretch of road, silent eyes following the ground or fixed on an invisible line stretching towards a house or tree or lawn in the distance avoiding each other's gaze. Entering the house to find no one there, in the kitchen the glass gone, the windowpane replaced. Ascending the stairs, entering the room, leaving the door open, laying on the bed, staring at the ceiling thinking how strange that without turning to see, I knew you were not there. Sitting up, taking out the thermos, pouring the tea still hot in the cold of winter, neither sweet nor bitter, drinking, watching shadows pull across the walls and absorb themselves waiting. I sat there waiting, there listening, there in the room dark but for the hallway light casting through the open door listening for the key in the lock, the front door opening, knowing mother's footsteps from the weight of their sound followed by uncounted hours by father's return by the television turned to the news at the approximate time I would have returned from the archive with dinner almost ready, the table needing to be set, getting up, going downstairs, finding mother finishing preparations, father watching the news, and four place settings already laid out by you returned without my knowledge, sitting there with fingers absently stroking the corduroy of the green couch. Mother bringing the food to the kitchen table, we moved wordless to three matching chairs and a miscellaneous fourth too low for the table, silent as we ate, I watched and listened for warning signs, clearing the table, climbing the stairs, returning to the room, completing assignments for school, going to bed, laying there on my back waiting there watching lights and shadows flicker and move across the ceiling through waiting straining to hear angry whispers before they turned, waiting through unnerving silence until morning to leave to return in the afternoon to the empty house to sitting on my bed drinking tea, hearing mother followed by father and you somewhere in there

undetected, dinner, homework, bed, laying there counting the number of years until I could leave, converting the number into months then weeks then days then hours then minutes decreasing incrementally with the passing of days of the same, expecting the silence to be broken by their yelling, crashing, departure never to return, determined to be there awake when it happened, to know what happened, watching shadows waiting there laying in bed there fearing the punishment awaiting me for my truancy from the archive to be exacted by the ghosts the doctor the professor should I have misremembered misunderstood misheard him say *I go back on Tuesday* and not *I come back on Tuesday*, recalling him say *You are a good listener* and *It is so peaceful here* and *My father yelled at me when I would lose my mittens. Like Tom Kitten* into my spoon ladling clear beef broth through voices taking care not to drip on the tablecloth turning to shouting somewhere between soup ladled and its almost ingestion returning it there to the bowl there their screaming there pulling their pushing there and I was there, there not knowing what was happening begging without knowing what we were begging shielding them from each other there screaming not knowing there what why we scream there altogether screaming there him screaming there leaving her screaming leaving there the silence of overturned bowls spilled soup running forever off the table forever dripping onto your foot forever there absorbed by your sock there forever reaching your ankle and matching the green of the couch and turning a darker shade absorbing more soup there forever unnoticed by you on the mismatched chair there forever I turned and left you there. Climbing the stairs to the room climbing into bed facing the wall crying not knowing when you came into the room if you came into the room not knowing when I fell asleep to wake in the morning late for school going to school leaving school running between trees chased by ghosts slamming the door on them safe in the archive where the doctor sat hunched over a yellow legal pad, round silver-painted HB pencil in his left hand, making notes, crossing out on blue-ruled yellow sheets. Reading and turning pages with care, slowly, of volumes and records compiled by his predecessors, nodding or shaking his head as if in conversation. His large nostrils breathed loud, clouding one of three magnifying glasses left hand held over manuscript or book or sheet smoothed flat with crooked fingers with thick nails striated and yellowed of a bony right hand age-spotted, steady, and fingerless-gloved in winter. With a reserve not cold or condescending, but concentrated. I said *Hello* and he said *Hello have some tea* placing his pencil on his desk, taking up two mugs and the kettle to the bathroom. On the scribe's desk, a sheet penciled ready for inking made flat by thin rectangular metal rods set in the left and right margins as I had left them, only now the sheet no longer curling of its own accord. On the far side of

the desk two copied sheets set to dry as I had left them only the ink now matte, no longer glistening wet. Brushes, pencils, ink, rulers, and folded rags laid out in an organized fashion to the right of the copied sheets as I had left them only now the bristles dry. To the left of the copy, the original fourth style manuscript spread open four pages to the end with the aid of a wooden paperweight as I had left it but for a coat of dust, set in front of the wooden chair as it had been, only now empty, no longer occupied by the professor. I blew away the dust, twisted open the inkpot, and set down its lid. I took up the largest brush, dipped it into the ink and stroking the bristles along the inner rim to smooth and bring them to a point, let the excess drip back in. I examined the original script, the character about to be copied, then followed sketched graphite lines with steady curving sweeps of the brush with just enough pressure for the bristles to bow without separating, maintaining its shape. The ink thick, smooth, flowing with a texture reminiscent of black pearls revealed, held up to the light, then swathed in fabric and disappeared again into the secret place we were meant to remember with mother saying *Should something happen to me. Don't forget.* Fourths not easier than other scripts, but as with seconds, slight errors retouchable with a miniature brush used for this sole purpose. Heavyweight glossed sheets faintly scored stored in rolls, requiring metal rods to keep them flat when copying to prevent ink from running off-course. Each section of indigo characters ending in three circles painted with an opalescent suspension containing flecks of gold shimmering to imperceptible vibrations before solidifying. The paper barely absorbent, the ink sitting on the surface, each copy taking several hours to dry. Sheets larger than others, wider than long, too large for the rack used for seconds, were set to dry on the scribe's desk a maximum of five at any given time. Moving freshly inked copies the trickiest aspect of fourths, sheets ruined from transferring them not only too soon but too late, disrupting the rhythm and momentum of copying, but not on my return when copying the last pages of that manuscript with such skill and precision, with no ink wasted, no paper discarded, encountering for the first time perfection and its power over ghosts with eyes glowing in the darkness following my slow walk through the woods long past dinner time whom in spite of my delinquency, in spite of my expectations, to my disappointment, maintained their distance and did not tear me to pieces.

Fifth style scripts, the *frenetic type*, were easily the most challenging. Lacking uniformity or symmetry, with letters so different from those of fourths which were deluxe versions of thirds which were austere versions of seconds which were simplified versions of firsts. Lacking prescribed heights or widths, words slanting right, rushing ahead, sometimes expanding to an entire line or crammed into themselves, climbing or falling across the page, lines nearly crashing into lines, words nearly crashing into words, each successive word connected by fine rushed lines, appearing as one continuous run-on. Each fifth copied in one sitting, the pen never leaving the page, threads fast connecting ends of lines with beginnings of lines into a pattern of slashes, fluid and strong with verve toeing frenzy on paper light, like that of thirds, but uneven, rough, overtly handmade, scrolled vertically, one scroll for each fifth, so that one error ruined an entire manuscript. Errors uncorrectable unlike fourths, seconds, or sixths. And whereas the application of compressed charcoal for seconds, graphite pencils for sixths, and two millimeter felt tip pens for sevenths was readily apparent, fifths misled with text appearing to be the effect of a round medium brush with bristles soft and fine like cat fur coated in thick relatively dry ink that produced bold one-centimeter marks when pressed hard to the surface and almost immeasurable veins with light quick strokes. But its lines too refined, the brush did not render the needed effect, nor did others, dozens of them, every available brush, when applied to the page with the first then second of only two inks that matched the original fifth's luster, color, opacity, and texture. Weeks of trial and error at the archive every afternoon into evenings into weekends, returning to the house well after dinner, passing them in the living room watching television or behind a closed door or not there at all, a plate of food wrapped in plastic found in the refrigerator consumed alone at the kitchen table ruminating on the remaining limited possibilities of how to replicate the fifth script leading to the discovery that it necessitated not a brush, but a worn quarter-inch flat-nibbed pen with a chamber filled with the same hand ground ink used for thirds only ground finer still then heated in a small ceramic bowl held by the rim with oven mitts marked with burns and tears over the flame of a candle so as to melt any remaining granules that would otherwise prevent the ink from flowing. Holding the pen with loose fingers high on the handle cutting the page with rapid strokes powered by the entire right arm, the lower roller balanced on the lap with legs firmly planted on the floor to keep it from falling, left arm fully extended stretching across the top of the

desk, left hand holding the end of the upper roller turning it clockwise, rolling the copied portion around itself as the work progressed, copying fifths a whole body exercise. With this pen, this awkward posturing, I tried, I practiced, I failed more times than with any other manuscript to copy my initial fifth before synchronizing mental physical spiritual energy into choreographed sweeps of the right arm, rhythmic turns of the left, body channeling flow sustained from start to finish with the ink cartridge emptying in tandem with the last flourish, completing my first copy of a fifth without error. Entering the woods I whispered *Victory* to ghosts who allowed me to follow them in their silent approval. They tread the path ahead of me, the glow of their eyes faint but perceptible through the haze of their translucent forms, the angularity of the fifth historian's aura subdued into more of a gray than the familiar electric blue, razor-sharp edges dulled into a halo which I was close enough to see composed of tiny oscillating particles, the ink flowing and trailing off the fourth historian steady and smooth more like seductive rivulets than pooling blood, the seventh's sickly hue softened into a warm diffused yellow, the sixth's anemic skeletal form seeming rounder, gentler with a gait less severe, less mechanical, more human. Leaving them at the edge of the woods to be met again on my more frequent returns, longer hours copying at an unprecedented rate, finishing and starting one manuscript after another without pause with the doctor leaving not one but several originals to copy on the scribe's desk to match my prodigious output. Contents of the scribe's desk, once alien artifacts revered with disuse and avoidance of familiarization, taken out, tried, tested, stripped of their status as sacred relics, resurrected as functioning instruments, copying transformed from illustrating deficiencies into stroking harmonics, penning precise staccatos, pulling sonorous ink with possessed, fluid, deliberate motions free of the hesitance and anxiety of not knowing. Copying still painstakingly laborious, for every symphonic moment achieved innumerable mistakes made, perfection still elusive, but the experience of having once reached it opening up the possibility of doing so again, motivational fear of punishing consequences transformed into an obsessive desire to excel and belief in its absolute necessity. Observing, mimicking the doctor, wearing fingerless gloves in winter, drinking tea like him, layering gloves the way he wore two sweaters, copying as much and for as long as I could developing endurance and stamina, though never outlasting the doctor always there, earliest and latest, there when I arrived, there when I left, there on days and nights when I was expected, there on those when I was not. Walking through the woods, gauging the distances maintained and degrees of anger expressed by the ghosts to measure perfection attained or missed. In the solitude of leftovers pushed around a green dinner plate, reflecting

on techniques and strategies to improve precision, achieve accuracy keeping at bay the atmospheric tension of nothing happening in the wake of everything having happened again, climbing the stairs to the room, you already there your back turned to me with the blanket pulled to your neck there already asleep save the time you said still with your back to me *You know it means nothing. Your being a scribe means nothing* and watching your body rise with each inhalation and fall with each exhalation, I felt sorry for your not yet knowing the satisfaction of holding a first sheet to light shining through holes punched with utter exactitude, producing on the very first attempt a flawless third character, testing patience and frustration for so many weeks working through the most time-consuming of seconds but for this same reason tending bittersweetness when stacking the last pages of its manuscript copy, the exhilarating rush of copying a fifth sweating shivering focusing on not focusing too much or else suffering the loss of equalized rhythmic flow followed by the euphoric relief of finishing with the ink running out when it should, knowing perfection without needing to see it but still taking the time to compare, admire, savor a perfect replica achieved and thinking though never saying that it would be impossible to know copy from original, but more than the nervous feverish high of touching of attaining perfection which of course was intoxicating and exulting when realized and acknowledged by the historians, more than this, I felt sorry for your not yet knowing the steady assuredness of knowing what to do, how to copy each script, for your not yet knowing how each incremental angular adjustment of the lamp optimized or washed out manuscripts making copying more or less difficult, how each instrument worked down to the minutiae, down to the unique properties and idiosyncrasies of each pen, pencil, brush, down to the exact thickness of each line set in the surface of the scribe's desk, sorry for your not yet knowing precisely when to stop grinding graphite and stone to produce ink for thirds or fifths, and how impatient I was for the time to come when I would show you so that you could know.

Laying in bed, staring at the ceiling, I counted the years months weeks days minutes seconds until the end of my training, until my becoming the next historian, your becoming the next scribe, walking amongst the historians in mutual respect towards home, talking with mother and father about our days in the archive over warm dinners, the doctor visiting on occasion to make tea and share as equals stories of the archive and on a Tuesday the professor returning sitting in the chair to your left and saying *It is so peaceful here. That is why I come.*

You wouldn't know. You weren't there. You said this. Staring at the road. As you sat in the driver's seat. You said this. Driving. As I sat in the passenger seat. With windows closed, air conditioning set to high. Sweat still staining the right armpit of your shirt. With sweat beading on my upper lip, dripping down my face. Golf course passing on the left. Lawns, driveways, houses on the right. I said *I can't believe they did nothing.* And then nothing. You said nothing. You did nothing. So I said again louder clearer slower *I can't believe it. That the firemen did nothing.* But nothing. Again nothing from you nothing. Until, approaching the stop sign, slowing the car, you said, finally, you said *You wouldn't know. You weren't there.*

You said this. This is what you said.

And then I shrugged.

And then silence again. A left turn at the intersection.

Staring at the road. You said this. And then I shrugged.

You said this and I shrugged.

But the shrug. That shrug. It was not agreement not acquiescence. If you took it as either, then you were wrong to do so. That shrug. I shrugged yes, but that shrug. I shrugged because there was nothing else I could do. I could do nothing else but shrug. In response to your response, there was nothing else I could do but shrug. Because *You wouldn't know. You weren't there.* You made conversation pointless ridiculous. Because you're wrong. To say I wouldn't know. I wasn't there. You're wrong. Because you're wrong. Because I never left. I went away but I did not leave. Because I'm not you. Because I'm not like you. Because unlike you I went away with the intention always with the intention of returning, to make everything better, to make everything okay. So instead of lecture halls, classrooms, titles of courses and books and readers, topics of papers written and revised, dormitories, dining halls, people, I have memories of thinking *I must learn this, I have to know this* to complete my training, to become a historian, to make you a scribe, to make everything okay. Instead of conversations I should've but never had with classmates I should but don't remember, I remember the phone ringing twice asking *Hello?* you answering *Hello?* pausing asking *Who is this?* though I knew, you saying *It's gone* and *Everything smells like burning* and flames licking four columns, curling pages into red black nothing, melting bursting glass pots, torching brushes, swallowing lamps breaking crashing onto books shelves the ladder never used blazing beams crashing flaming chairs desks onto the floor engulfing manuscripts and

copies fueling flames red blue orange yellow clawing the stone walls, charging the vaulted ceiling, rushing the door, exploding the windows and smoke, so much smoke, bursting through the meeting point of three stone slabs leaning like three commiserating giants falling shattering onto into swelling blinding flames heat smoke roaring into the sky, chasing the doctor, the historians, shrouding its spectacular violence from those neighbors, from you, from everyone who was never really there, but not from me there every day, all the time, always there, even when away. Unlike you. You. You left without warning, without a note, address, anything, left without telling anyone you were leaving or when if ever you would return. You who left. You just left. You left.

And your being here now doesn't change that. Doesn't allow you to say *You wouldn't know*. Doesn't erase all the years you so easily dismiss when you say *You weren't there*. All the years I've spent here responding to their emergencies, assuring them I wouldn't leave too, sitting through dinners night after night after week month year decade with your seat empty and their screaming, always screaming on the verge of screaming. Shouting *Enough Enough Enough* at them not understanding anything. Trying to understand predict know when how why but failing always failing to pull them apart shouting *Enough Enough Enough*. You're the one who doesn't know, who wasn't here, who hasn't been here. It's me, not you, who's replaced plastered and painted and glued back together. I am the one who despite all their madness, has never left, has come back night after night. Came back believing that I could still make everything okay, could resurrect the archive, ventured out on sleepless nights trying to locate its footprint, trying to commune with lost ghosts and trace familiarity on fake inclines, transplanted grass, artificial sandpits all designed for the knocking of small balls into small holes, only to be chased by security guards and dogs employed to protect that pimpled monstrosity. It was me not you who held onto the pathetic notion that you would return and lay in bed repeating to myself what I would tell you, practiced what I would say down to the very pauses I would take between phrases to make your transition efficient, seamless. I'm the one who went in search of the doctor only to realize I could not find someone whose name I never knew. Went in search of, if not rooms, at least cabinets of files, documents, anything on the archive, went to the municipal building, was directed to room 203, spoke to the clerk who had no idea what I was talking about until finally, the other clerk, sitting at the desk, also wooden, said *I remember the old archive, the one that burned down*. She told me to sit in one of three empty wooden chairs and I waited in the one on the left anticipating, excited, only to be handed a folder with one photograph and told *This is all there is*, that all other documents on the archive had been stored in the

HISTORY · DDUM KIM

archive and disappeared with it. It is me, not you, who on seeing the photograph, did not see what I had so clearly remembered, who spent hours in that chair staring at the thing, who photocopied that image and stared at it day after day only to see more discrepancies and incongruities between it and my memory.

It is me, not you, who cannot remember anything after that, who has gone through a daily existence of work eat sleep too afraid to think or know or retain anything for certain, who has lived like this for so long, for longer than we shared a room in this house, than I had been a scribe, than I had spent dreaming of being a historian and perfection and making everything okay.

So fuck you. Fuck your saying I wasn't here. Fuck you and your fucking fucked-up response. Because I was here. I was always here. I have always been here. I am still fucking here. You're the one who left. You're the one who wasn't hasn't been here. You're the one who doesn't know anything so now you're the one who has to be told everything. Why? Because you don't know anything. Why? Because you haven't been here. Why? To protect you. Why? Because. Why? Because fuck you. Fuck you. Fuck you.

You are going to leave again. And this time for good. You have not said or done anything to indicate this, but I know it. I can feel it. I do not know why or how I know this, or why I should trust this feeling. But I know time is running out. But there are still things I need to tell you. Things you still need to know. So I must push through and finish, before it is too late and this unexpected only last chance lost. Concentrate, focus, and tell you. Tell you about sixths and sevenths. Sixths. Sixths a total departure from fifths, perhaps a reaction to them. So easy, copying sixths felt a trick, like cheating. With a number two pencil and the aid of a ruler on letter-sized paper already printed with a blue grid. Each character consisting of straight verticals and horizontals drawn along the pre-existing guides, with occasional diagonals drawn from one corner of a box to another, free from the complexities of curves or freehand. Blotter paper interleaved between sheets to prevent smudging. No fixatives, no baths, no sprays. The copying of two sixth style manuscripts, and once even three, from start to finish possible in a day. Seventh manuscripts not as straightforward as sixths, not challenging in the way of thirds or fifths, but strange. Original sevenths unbound manuscripts, each consisting of hundreds of sheets of tracing paper tied together with a red string and stored in a gray envelope. Aware that I could easily reproduce a seventh with tracing, still I initially attempted to copy sevenths as I had the others, with the copy placed over the grid of the scribe's desk, the original set to the left, employing all manner of observation and measurement to complete the task. But this approach failed, and though I knew the reason for it, that sevenths needed to be traced in order to be copied, it took my putting aside that first seventh manuscript, copying a waiting second and then a fourth, before my prejudice towards tracing as nothing more than tracing dissipated and though never abandoned at least suspended when copying sevenths. Seventh style characters a combination of sixths and firsts, consisting of verticals, horizontals, and diagonals but in the insect stylings of firsts, copied with two millimeter red felt tip pens. Each page punctuated at the bottom right corner with a black stamp made with a handcut wooden square seal and a thick black odorless paste with a tar-like texture. The stamp consisting of two large sans serif S's set back to back as in a reflection, with two lines cutting an X across the S's, two lines cutting a cross in the middle, and four lines each connecting two adjacent sides of the stamp forming an equilateral diamond framing the S's. I can see it so clearly in my mind, the depth of the carvings and even the shallow scratches in the stamp that never appeared on the final print,

and it is such a static image that it tempts to be drawn though I know not to because I know if I tried to reproduce the scripts from memory and show them to you, they would not be what I remembered, that even with the best of intentions and attempts they would be full of inaccuracies and imprecisions and what I see and remember is not inaccurate or imprecise but perfect memory. Even in the miraculous event that I produced exact replicas, without the originals to compare them to, there would be no way of knowing for sure that mine were not inventions, lies, misleads confusing what I can draw with what I remember. Perhaps you think this illogical, but recall a gray afternoon playing amongst trees before we knew them to be haunted, sweat dripping down the side of your face into your mouth shouting rules only to change them, your breath condensing into momentary white puffs with each utterance, my repeating them from behind a tree designated as homebase, running with sneakers waterlogged, heavy with mud, white leather dirtied to gray cracked from too much wear and repeated refusals to throw them away despite mother's pleas, her profile smooth in the glow from the lamp on the nightstand, lips soft whispering stories from books of our choosing following the stories with shadow puppets made with our hands and fingers that felt the contour of father's skull from the privileged perch on his shoulders watching the awesome world from dizzying heights through the frizz of his curls following their turns and spirals down to the follicles born from shiny sun-deprived skin that would eventually reveal itself as the hair thinned. And now try to draw some all any of it onto paper exactly as it was and find yourself unable to do so, and you will understand why I do not cannot reproduce the scripts and present them as what I remember though I copied them countless times with the exception of eighths which I cannot describe because I did not copy them. I saw them on the historian's desk, circle of light illuminating a yellow legal pad covered in graphite notes. The inkpots, pens, and brushes on the desk always dry. The doctor using pencils. HBs, round, painted silver making notes, crossing out on blue-ruled yellow sheets stored in manila folders stacked on another stool, also wooden, to his right. Reading and turning pages with care, slowly, of volumes and records compiled by his predecessors, nodding or shaking his head as if in conversation. His large nostrils breathing loud, clouding one of three magnifying glasses left hand held over manuscript or book or sheet smoothed flat with crooked fingers with thick nails striated and yellowed connected to a bony right hand age-spotted, steady, and fingerless-gloved in winter. He was left-handed. I felt embarrassed for him his loud breathing, seeming a condition more profound than simply nasal for one silent unless posed yes or no questions—the least demanding to one so taciturn—or greeted with a *Hello* to which he replied *Hello have some tea*. With a reserve

not cold or condescending, but concentrated. Making tea his rare break. This is what I remember. But I do not remember his scripts, the eighth scripts, so I cannot tell you about them, what they looked like, how to copy them, because I do not know these things, because I never saw them myself. I never copied an eighth script, because the doctor never gave me a manuscript of his to copy. I cannot tell you what his manuscripts or any of the manuscripts said. Because I was a scribe, not a historian. I did not read them because I did not know how to read them because I did not learn how to read them, only how to copy them. I did not know if they were stories or records. If they contained factual accounts or epic tales, anecdotes or oral histories, lists of lineages or groceries. If they meant anything to anyone. If they meant anything at all. I do not know if the order in which I organized the scripts in my mind, in which I have presented them to you, correspond to their actual chronological order. If the number of historians I formed in my mind, the way I have presented them to you, correspond to the actual number of historians that preceded the doctor. If I was meant to copy the doctor's manuscripts. If the doctor was in fact a doctor. If the professor was in fact a professor. What the doctor's name was. What the professor's name was. Where they lived. Where they grew up. If they were married. If they had children. I do not know what kind of trees made up the woods. Why I stayed late at the archive knowing I would have to walk through them in darkness. Why I started going to the archive every day. Why I continued going every day. Why I went to the archive on some days instead of to school. If anyone noticed. If it mattered to the doctor. If it mattered to them. If it mattered to you. If it mattered to anyone. If the copying I did mattered to anyone. If the doctor ever looked at my copies. If anyone ever looked at my copies. I do not know what happened to the historians. I do not know what happened to the doctor. I do not know what happened to the professor. I do not know what happened to you. I do not know what you did when I was at the archive. What you did not tell me. What they did when I was at the archive. What they did not tell me. What makes them start. What makes them stop. Why they start. Why they stop. Why you left. Why you returned. Why you are leaving again. Why I was a scribe. Why you were not. I do not know how it would have been different if it had been different. I did not know that perfection was still possible until you returned, until you said *Remember when we thought if we were one person, we would be perfect, then we would be okay*. I do not remember thinking this. I do not remember the small window at eye level left of the door. I do not remember the large woven bleached out mat rough in texture in front of the door. I do not remember wildflowers growing between stones. I do not know why I do not know what I do not know, why I cannot remember what I cannot

HISTORY · DDUM KIM

remember, why I can remember what I remember, why I cannot only remember but see the professor sitting in the chair to my left, hunched, his elbows on his knees, his left hand rubbing his forehead, saying *Beware of those who begin with 'I remember.' They lie. No one remembers anything. Memories are gathered emotions presented as fact. There is no such thing as 'I remember.'* If you know this, you will never be conned by someone else's delusions, and feeling wanting but unable to say *No, that is not true.* I do not know why this is all that I know and do not know why this is all that I can and cannot remember, but now at least, at last, you know everything.

My shirt smells of filing cabinets and office air conditioning, my pants are wrinkled from the day. My mouth is dry. I could get a glass of water from the kitchen where through the doorway I see mother pouring salt from a cardboard box into a stainless steel pot full of the ingredients that make a chicken soup over a medium blue flame and stirs with a large wooden spoon. Or I could pour the water from the green ceramic pitcher into one of the glasses on the table. There is a chip in the rim of the pitcher close to the spout, exposing a white rough surface. You sit in the corner of the black leather sectional, legs crossed, arms crossed. You wear a pair of brown linen pants and a long-sleeved beige cotton shirt stained with sweat and buttoned to the top despite the heat. Sweat beads on your nose and your upper lip and you wipe it away with the left sleeve of your shirt. You are sockless. Watching television. A one minute world news update compiled by the local station. A hurricane is being monitored off the coast of Cuba. The NASDAQ lost fifty-two points today at the close and the NIKKEI lost forty-seven. Recent studies suggest that derivation of perception is ninety percent memory, ten percent sensory. Scientists monitor the albino barn swallow population thriving in Chernobyl. The dinner table, also wooden, is set. I folded and set the napkins and cups, you the spoons, forks, and knives. The pitcher is full of water waiting to be poured that reflects the light fixture overhead too simple to be called a chandelier that hangs from the ceiling by a brass chain ending at a plastic circular shade of the same color housing three sixty watt teardrop bulbs with sockets gathered in the center and filaments directed outwards along the axes of an equilateral triangle. Father sits to your right. You both watch the weather report. He wears black socks with thin gray lines. He sits with his legs loosely crossed, back into the sofa, his right arm resting on the armrest to his right. The skin of his right arm lined and covered with white hair that once was black. His knuckles thick, his fingers thin exaggerating the size of the knuckles, a few sparse but long strands of white hair growing on the back of each finger in between the joints, his fingernails large and more square than round or oval, cut short. Father also wears brown pants, but they are not linen, and they are several darker shades of brown than yours. They are almost black. I do not know if they are cotton or if they are synthetic or if they are a blend. He wears a cotton knit polo shirt. It is light blue. The top two of three buttons are unbuttoned and the collar is turned down. The pores on his nose are large enough and the grooves on his neck, around his right ear, around his right eye deep enough for me to see from here, sitting

at the dining room table, copying what I see with a one millimeter black ballpoint pen onto white paper. The chamber of the pen is clear plastic and reveals that it is nearly out of ink. The paper is a twenty pound cotton with eighty percent brightness, eight and a half by eleven inches in width and length. The ink flows too freely, unintentionally webbing words. The table, also wooden, is oval-shaped and large enough to seat six, but I have only ever known it to sit four. The dining room rarely used but for special occasions, we have used every night since you arrived. Mother enters from the kitchen carrying four bowls of steaming chicken soup on a tray, also wooden. Her hair white, thin, pulled back with a red rubberband. She wears a beige sleeveless dress printed with small orange flowers made of a light material that reaches her calves. Her lips are dry and flaking. The skin around her mouth is lined. Her complexion is uneven, spotted. Her cheeks flushed, fold over deep creases that extend from either side of her nose to either side of her chin. I smell rosemary. Father moves his right hand from the right armrest and scratches the right side of his nose with his right index finger. He says *They're turning the golf course into a parking lot*. He does not address anyone in particular, though you sit to his left, I sit at this table a few feet away from him, and mother walks back and forth between the kitchen and the dining room. You are raising the remote control with your left hand, with your left thumb pressing a button to turn off the television, and now you are all coming towards me.

This is not how I meant for this transfer of information to happen. Before my conviction in the eventuality of this telling faded on finding the photograph of the archive in the folder for *the old archive, the one that burned down* in the file maintained by the clerk in room 203 in the municipal building, I constructed and reconstructed over and over and over and over in my mind what I would tell you, how I would tell you down to the very pauses I would take between phrases. I planned to tell you everything in person. Not like this, with you asleep on the couch back turned to me under a blanket pulled to the neck despite the heat, your body rising with each inhalation, falling with each exhalation as I leave without a word this for you to make everything okay before you too disappear.