

Indiscernible Ash

Holly Fisher

I find a cardboard sweater box at the bottom of Mom's closet filled with clothes from high school. Nineteen-seventies clothes, 1980s clothes, mostly t-shirts, thin and moth-eaten in places, all iron-on letters and baby blues and used-to-be-blacks that say Supertramp and Stevie Nicks and Heart and the J. Geils Band. In the dim light of her bedroom, in the stillness of another night she's not home, I pull the shirts over my head one by one. They smell like thrift store clothes and used books, the scent that comes from years of sitting. I wipe my hand across the mirror above her dresser. The dust is thick and collects on my hand, and after I've cleared away an oval, I stare at myself and imagine I'm her. The clothes fit right. Each time I take a shirt off and toss it on the floor, the dog takes a sniff at it. He leaves the room and comes back, leaves the room and comes back. In dog speak, I know it, he's asking, Where is she? and I don't have any answers for him. He's always loved my mom the most, for whatever reason, and there's nothing sadder than being around a dog that loves someone more than you. He looks up at me with dopey, expectant eyes and lets out a whine. Where is she? he begs.

"I don't know," I say out loud to myself, to him, to the mirror. "I don't know." I can't break it to the dog that somewhere, she's in an anonymous trailer holding a blowtorch and a piece of aluminum foil, that in the hip pocket of her jeans is enough meth to last her until morning. I can barely break it to myself.

The shirts are in a faded rainbow heap on the floor now, in a pile that seems to sigh. At the bottom of the box is a tan corduroy jacket, zipped and folded into a perfect square. I take it out and shake the folds from it. When I tug the zipper, there's audible resistance, like I've woken the teeth from years of rusty death. I slip it on. The collar's so tall and stiff it grazes my chin. I pretend I'm Mom, young with feathered bangs and glasses the size of coffee mugs that start at her eyebrows and end halfway down her cheeks. I can almost see her, but not what she's doing. Is she throwing her head back at a

party, drunk and cackling? Walking home from school? Years ago she showed me her yearbook pictures, but now they all elude me. I shove my hands deep into the jacket's thigh pockets and press against the seams so the fabric pulls down on my shoulders. All I can see is her at forty with bags like thin pouches of tar under her eyes, a Marlboro between her lips, and a face pocked with dime-sized, menacing boils, red and ready to pop. Teenage Mom is a stranger to me. I picture hazy snapshots of rust-colored couches and avocado tiled bathrooms and record players and bell-bottoms and laughing, long haired friends before I realize that these are all just stereotypical '70s images and I don't know her.

I pull my hands out of the pockets and the fingers on my right hand are covered in dry bits of dead leaves, probably an old maple leaf, or a clover, I think, one she forgot to press in a book. The only photo album in our house is dominated by leaves, like the pictures were an afterthought. The dog sniffs at my fingers and sneezes, and I put my hand back in the pocket and pinch up more of the stuff that's sleeping along the seam. I look again. It's not a crumbled keepsake leaf, I realize, but twenty-year-old pot, shake that crushes into indiscernible ash between the tips of my fingers.