Eugenia Wire was falling apart. Lately her mind had started to leave her (she would forget to throw away the shopping list after fulfilling its demands and, upon waking up the next day, would find it sitting there, tacked on for the fifth time to the cork board in her bedroom, as if new, and go buy another addition to the heap of groceries that already spilled over the refrigerator and was left rotting in the kitchen), and she woke up more tired than she'd been when she went to bed (she had begun to think of sleep as an exertion best avoided and found the tiredness overwhelming her at the most inopportune moments: at dinners where she was the guest of honor, in mass on that fateful anniversary during which she was the sole subject of the day's prayers, at the local high school's graduation ceremony when it was her turn to speak, etc.).

What bothered her most, though, was not how bad she felt, but how bad she looked. Somewhere underneath the loose skin and the thinning hair she knew was hidden the young girl she had once been, but there was no amount of makeup and cosmetic experimentation that could fully undo the passage of time. She tried scraping off her wrinkles with pumice and lifting up her jowls with strips of tape pulling her skin taut just beneath her ears, but the chronological reversions, when effective, were always too abrupt to go unnoticed, the restoration of her beauty cannibalized by the desperation of her efforts.

She was not yet sixty, but the past fourteen years had aged her more than they should have naturally. They had required her to live so actively (not in the sense a dietician would recommend but in the sense that being, often confused with a preposition, became, unquestionably, a verb) that they'd felt two, three times longer than they really were, as though they contained within them reflections folded against each other like the inside of a croissant. For

all the good it had done her, fame had made her too visible to age, like the rest of us, in dignified silence.

The morning began with spectacle. Eugenia, half-awake, stood smiling as a reporter for the town's only newspaper, *The Broadsdale Watchman,* set off his flash just to spite the beating Georgia sun. Monstrous stacks of loudspeakers swayed like drunks trying to hide their condition, their movement barely noticeable against the cloudless blue sky. The baffling electro-pop perversion of the national anthem that had been playing on a loop since the ceremony began was cranked up in volume to hurry the mayor, who had been speaking for more than fifteen minutes and was making the audience restless. The music sprawled outward, hammering the crowd under the thumping of its beat.

"… I'm sure you all feel the same way. Now I'm afraid I'm being played out, and I wouldn't want to tire you, so I'll hand it over to our guest of honor, whom I appear to have bored to sleep." Laughter. "Please welcome to the stage: Madam Eugenia Wire."

In a town of a few thousand where no one's really done much for the past century, finding guests of honor to lend relevance to public functions was not easy. So when Eugenia rose to fame and that fame proved impervious to decay, she became guest of honor in perpetuity. Public officials came and went, none of them reaching the midpoint of their designated terms, and Eugenia became the only person that the townspeople could rely on to be there at the demolition, at the groundbreaking, at the grand opening, at the bicentennial, and, as now, at the ribbon cutting.

She read a short speech off the prompter. This was the sixth time Eugenia would be cutting the ribbon for a new church. One was opened every few years, where the previous church stood, to reignite the congregation's interest. It was the same with everything: museums,

libraries, and even hospitals (revamping a hospital's appearance had proven to be the only way doctors could get people to care about health). The town would scrub itself clean in long cycles, emerging anew brighter and more exciting, and people soon forgot what it looked like in the past, overlaying its current form upon their memories, so that everyone remembered being educated in the most recent version of the high-school and baptized in whatever church was built last. The new buildings were like newborn skin cells conforming to the texture of old scars.

When the ribbon was cut, mayor Jameson helped Eugenia off the stage. She took his hand and smiled, draping her lips over the splotches of decalcification that marbled her teeth, hiding her annoyance at being treated like an old woman in full view of the press. She walked unassisted all the way to the car, guided by the sound of the camera shutters going off as she navigated through the vague shapes (she refused to wear glasses) that littered the path to the parking lot.

Eugenia had not needed the full two planes to become famous. As the first one struck, Monsieur Hugh Wire, on it, was completing a call to Melinda (the stewardess he was flying to Los Angeles to live with, a fact the town never learned, believing instead that he was just making another stop in his yearly business pilgrimage) and saying his last goodbyes. Before the line went dead, Hugh informed her that he had successfully amended his will so that the title to the Wire family home would go to her and not to his son, as he had originally intended. He could not have known that his lawyer, always more loyal to his convictions than to his office, would choose to ignore this final wish.

The morning after the tragedy, all eyes were on Eugenia. On the front page of the *Watchman,* she sat looking through a window, face half-covered by the curtain, at the procession of photographers that had gathered around her house. Nowhere on the paper was there an image

of the towers set ablaze. Zachariah Pratt, lawyer and aspiring politician, used Eugenia's newfound notoriety as a springboard for mayoral election. Zachariah took her along to every press event, and her fame began to consolidate. Eventually, the small-town sense of fraternity that made some speak about themselves in the plural became a vessel for contagion, and Eugenia's suffering metastasized, becoming, as it did, everyone's suffering. The people of Broadsdale banded together against those that would try to take their purity from them. Zachariah won the election, naturally, but could not reach the depths of fervor he had taught the townspeople to demand. He left office quietly when a new candidate, promising prayer in every school and the banning of muslin cloth, threatened to depose him. Eugenia, without whom the town would have no justification for its steady radicalization, remained a political accessory.

Outside, a group of children knocked on her window, begging for a chance to meet her. She had always found it odd that she was popular with those who hadn't been alive long enough to feel her pain as theirs. But they loved her precisely because they hadn't had the chance to meet her as everyone else did (all of a sudden). They had, instead, reconstructed the past gradually and in the wrong order, with Eugenia as the only point of reference when they overheard their parents talking about the unmaking of the towers that September. Once they knew it as well as those who'd lived it, the event completed their understanding of Eugenia and not the other way around. It was this same illness of tangled remembrance that made them resent their grandparents for sharing their names and care about Marathon, the battle, only because of its relation to marathon, the race.

She lowered her window and clasped their hands, before rolling it back up and pressing her palm against the pane in farewell. The sunlight fell shattered on the streets, interrupted by leaves overhead, as Eugenia drove through streets she had memorized. Bands of shadow fell

rhythmically and swept past as she sped on, cast by the overpopulated clotheslines fixed on opposite balconies by cooperating neighbors. The streets widened, and the sidewalks turned to grass. The homes grew larger and the people richer, until Eugenia's house emerged, the oldest among them, slightly askew.

Once inside, Eugenia went through her mail. Birthday greetings, fan mail, a notice from the Board of Health (which she hid in a pile under her bed along with all the others where, invisible, they might forget to keep existing), and a letter from Melinda. Melinda wrote every once in a while, claiming that Hugh had promised her the house and threatening the indistinct shadow of a lawsuit that is the true patron saint of lost causes. In their correspondence, Eugenia and Melinda discovered a similarity in their hearts so intense that under different circumstances they might have become friends. Eugenia always treasured this resemblance, believing that Hugh, despite himself, had fallen in love with her twice.

The house had remained unchanged since Hugh left, except for the floor. Eugenia's son had started a business installing linoleum panels after graduating high school, but had found, to his dismay, that not even his mother's celebrity could tear the townspeople from the hardwood floors that had supported them for all these years. His mother was his only customer, and she would order a new layer of flooring every time the old one got scuffed, until the panels were stacked so high that she had to cock her head to keep from bumping against the roof, and her spine solidified into that misshapen angle. Francis Hartford, the mailman, when pressed by his friends, said Eugenia would "look at you all bent, making you think that the whole world was lopsided and that she was the only one who saw it as it really was."

Eugenia left her coat on the hook by the door and hobbled to the bathroom, where she changed into a plain white robe and wiped off her makeup with paper towels she'd left soaking

in baby shampoo and coconut oil. She had not had time to floss in the morning before leaving, and she made up for it now, playing the gaps between her teeth like violins, looking straight in the mirror at her own reflection, not stopping even when she felt the copper twang of blood snaking from her gums. She spat into the sink and rinsed off the rest of the blood with what little water dribbled from the faucets' mouths (the sink had two separate faucets, one for hot water and the other for cold, both covered in a film of brown accumulation left behind as they dripped in a coordinated carrousel). She squeezed a dollop of cream onto her hand from a rolled-up aluminum tube with a worn label that read, among other things, DO NOT MAKE CONTACT WITH THE EYES and rubbed both hands together, eyes clenched shut to keep from looking at it directly, in obedience to the warning.

The phone rang, but Eugenia ignored it. She had started stuffing her ears with cotton balls whenever she came home. It was the only way she could withstand the B.o.H.'s incessant calls. They'd been harassing her ever since Larry, who was still living with Eugenia at the time, had let an inspector in while his mother was out working. Eugenia refused to listen to the inspector's conclusions when she returned to find him, clipboard in hand, talking to her son anxiously, going on about a faulty drain leaking under the house and turning the ground below it into mush.

Eugenia gathered the bloody dental floss and the paper towels stained with makeup and tossed them into the toilet. When she flushed them down, she saw that the replenished water had brought a small handkerchief with it. Upon closer inspection, the handkerchief proved to be the goldfish that Eugenia had placed in the tank months before to eat the algae that had been clogging the valve. When Eugenia had resumed flushing undisturbed, she had steadily forgotten about the fish behind her that had been losing its color as it spent its days in darkness.

It looked up at Eugenia with its bulging black eyes out of place against the spectral pallor of its body. She ran to the kitchen and returned with an empty glass, holding her breath as she scooped up the fish, water dribbling down her arm. She rushed out of the house and hurried to the pond. She ran to its edge, bare feet covered in mud, and lobbed the glass into the air. The fish and water inside swirled so fast that it was difficult to ascertain, as they flew, whether or not there was any difference between them. The glass landed facing down but flipped over as it sank. The fish escaped and thrived in the pond, growing to the size of a forearm in later months, but it never regained its color.

Eugenia stood as the pond's waters calmed and smelled the peaches in the air. Many years ago, Broadsdale had been home to the largest peach orchard in the county. Then the chemical plant opened and its scientists engineered a way to recreate the peaches' flavor. When the men who worked there brought home batches of peach-flavored candy and bubblegum, their children became used to their saccharine sheen and lost all interest in the real thing. When the children went on to work in the factory as adults, they no longer engineered the flavor to imitate the fruit but to imitate itself, getting sweeter and sweeter with each iteration. In reality, the air did not smell of peaches but of SmartFragrance P-163.

Eugenia turned her back to the pond and began her walk home, finding, when she looked up, the entire neighborhood watching what must have appeared to be a psychotic episode. She was painfully conscious of her bare face and the stained robe she'd been using since before the birth of her son. Eugenia would live for another three decades, but she would never feel as old as she did at that moment. Caught like this, unguarded, she realized how badly she had lost her battle against a past that had decayed relentlessly, despite her every attempt to keep it still and

suspended. Whether or not she liked it, she was a slave, like everybody else, to what she would later call "nature's fundamental shortness of breath."

She went back inside and into her room where she lay down on her bed and on pillows still stained from Hugh's nosebleeds, grimly aware of how quiet her house was without a child laughing or a husband snoring. The only indication she had that time had not been frozen was the continuous purr of conversation from neighboring homes, no doubt about her. She only realized she had fallen asleep when she was awakened by the sound of the phone ringing through the cotton balls. Eugenia saw her son's name in the caller ID and picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi, mom. It's me."

"Hi, Larry. What a surprise! How come you're calling this late?"

"Mom, we both know why I'm calling. I keep getting emails from the Board of Health saying you're still living in that dump, and now David Moore calls me, worried that you're having a breakdown of some sort. You need to leave that house. I don't like what it's doing to your head."

"I don't know what you mean, Larry."

"Don't play dumb mo–"

"Play dumb? I'm not playing dumb."

"Mom, we've talked about this, and I know for a fact that the B.o.H. has been trying to get in touch with you. I don't want to have to do this, but that's technically my house, mother, and I can have you removed until the renovations are finished. One day it's going to collapse with you in it. I'd like to get it fixed before that happens."

"No…"

"Yes, mother. I'm not negotiating with you on this. It's not going to take forever. I'll come by tomorrow in the afternoon and you can stay with me until everything's finished. I'll make all the arrangements. Don't make this difficult for me, please."

She cried on the phone until Larry hung up and felt the house, with the full weight of everything that had once inhabited it, bearing down upon her chest. So immense was her sadness, so complete her despair. Eugenia tried to stay awake, but soon enough she found herself sinking into the numbness of sleep, bereft of hope.

When Eugenia woke up it was early enough to see the sky unmoving and dark, as it was before the dawn swallowed it. The house was sweating again, bubbling against the plaster. Long cracks like rivulets ran across the ceiling, and the light bulbs no longer shone bright enough. She knew she would not find them that way when she returned, and all trace of the house she had tried to keep, the house where she'd fallen more and more deeply in love, the house where she'd stayed in love even when love's depths started filling with water, the house where she'd raised her son, the house where she had been young, would be gone forever. She sat up on her bed and tested the springs with a bounce. They let out a muffled squeak, and under them the floor moaned, unsettled by the commotion. Then everything went quiet again. The bed was older and sadder than it had once been, but it was still good after all these years, and, like Eugenia herself, it would be staying around just a little while longer.