

THIS FAMILY

For Hartmut Austen

1.

This family is relocated, fast. Their travel is long, nasty. Its end does not grant relief, but a thin, railroad apartment near a dangerous (warns the repositioning literature) park. No one is equipped for adjustment. The father, unused to irregular hours, skimpy pay, dull requirements, performs poorly vocationally. The mother, eaten up with worry, cannot write home, so writes to herself: “We are safe. We are also ugly, dirty, poor. He forgets how to talk or stand straight. Wide pores plaster his face. The girls suck their thumbs, their noses run constantly, they don’t eat, but smear food in their hair.” The mother stops cooking, washing, stops watching her children. Evenings, the father finds his toddlers alone on the stained carpet outside their apartment, his wife inside, bent over pictures from home. “Look,” she says to him, “Look”, tapping her finger on their wedding portrait. “Look what you made us leave. And, why couldn’t I bring my necklace?” She asks, moving her fingertips over the jewelry she wore on that day.

2.

The father wakes up one night to find his wife's side of the bed empty. Next night, same thing. And the next. This goes on for weeks. Each time there is an object in her place. Sometimes it is a thigh. Not bloody or severed, but a smooth appendage, knee to hip, pulsating, warm, inviting. Other times he finds a piece of clothing: a satin undershirt, an embroidered slipper. Another time he finds an earring. Another time it is a fence, enclosed, made of barbed wire. He cuts his cheek when accidentally leaning against it. In the morning the cut is gone, but his pillow is still stained with blood. "Where do you go?" He finally whispers, catching her return one morning. "Where do you go?" he repeats, thrown by her appearance: bright, soft, thrown by her clean, salty smell.

"Home" she answers, wrapping herself around him, "I go home."

3.

Husband and wife start sharing fantastic, early morning interludes. During them, each cannot stop smiling. They taste things from home in each other's mouth, on each other's body. But always, after, right after, everything changes back. He stops talking and is unable to control his posture. Her gray face, stale smell, sagging body, also return. Once, he asks her to describe her travels. She snaps, eyes flashing: "I have to protect my trips home. I just have to. Yapping puts things in danger. If anyone knows that, you know it." He plants a kiss on her forehead, lies back on his pillow. Secretly, he will get back her wedding necklace. Maybe also her flowered silk nightgown, and his daughters' dolls. Since relocating, the girls do not have a single toy. In this new city, his wife drapes herself in harsh, dark nylon. He, too, wears nylon. It is a nasty material that holds things in for a time, and then sucks them down deep, deeper.