

If the country were an envelope, you come from Return Address. Find it on the sticky placemat—your far-right home in the far-left corner (*look for the isthmus!*), there where green gives way to blue. Your family never traveled outside the Pacific Northwest, & even when you do, even when you live away a long time, you'll never actually *be* from anywhere else. It's a truth that takes shape slowly: how this place marks you like fern-prints on pavement—the way you say certain words (“roof,” like a dog barking; “root,” like a hole in the road), the way you speak of “sun breaks” & “galoshes,” assume a jacket is always needed after dark. Beaches are rocky where you come from. Tomatoes grow in cages, & roses endear themselves to fence-posts. Everything clings there, not just your parents & the damp air. Houses are often red brick with peach trim, their square, low-ceilinged rooms made to retain the heat. Daylight basement. Carport adjacent. Window wells. Tool shed. No air-conditioning, though sometimes for a week in summer, a fan clipped to the footboard of your bed. Sprinklers to run through on those few hot days, though the grass is lush enough on its own. Windows open half the year, mosquitoes gnashing at the screens. Always a medicine cabinet stocked with calamine, though it prevents nothing, barely soothes. Nettles, blackberry bushes, & poison ivy, too, which is different from poison oak—though you don't know how & never learn. Salt water in the swimming pool. Salt water in the water park. Recycle bins & compost heaps years before anyone mentions “climate change.” Butterflies white as notebook paper, so bright they must glow in the dark. Come to think of it: *where did they go in the dark?* Hydrangeas round & weighty as crystal balls. And the azaleas! Grown dense as a thicket, then sheared into hedges to mark property lines. And the pinecones! How they lavished every lawn & decorative bowl, every Christmas wreath threaded through with tinsel. Chimneys puffing in that storybook way, practical & romantic both at once. You recall the time your aunt lit a fire before she opened the flue. Soot everywhere! She died before they ever repainted her walls. Fog that “burns off” by midday. More fog that “rolls in” by dusk. You liked how it swirled under the streetlights, haunted the headlights of your father's car. Expect a mountain is always watching. *Is that a cloud or a peak? Is that a peak shrouded in clouds?* Expect the water to be frigid as you wade in up to your elbows or capsize your kayak in the bay. You will never learn to skip the smooth stones you find along the shoreline, but you will learn to cast them with a loud *kerplunk!*, then watch as they sink to the limpid bottom. You will wear your share of “clamdiggers” & “windbreakers” over the years. Your mother will yell that *for the umpteenth time!* you've forgotten to remove the agates from your pockets. How does the washing machine survive you? How does anything? The snarls in your hair, the dirt under your nails, the chapped white skin at the corners of your mouth where sometimes it even hurts to smile. Your lips pull apart, bleeding. Mentholatum in abundance. Also Vaseline. A heating pad or a cold compress or an Ace bandage with silver clips. No one is ever sick or injured for long in your family. *It's time to mulch! It's time to weed! It's time to dead-head those fuchsias!* Every night you press your face to line-dried pillowcases—*Inhale peat! Inhale rose! Inhale salt!* How they trap the scents of everything you love. When you leave, you take only a few shells & the kerchiefs your mother wore in the yard as a young wife planting her first garden. Sometimes you wonder why she didn't name you after a flower, though most times you think the answer is obvious. When you leave, you have no forwarding address, so you send them a postcard instead. It could come from anywhere, that little cardstock square—but *you* couldn't. Don't kid yourself about that. There's an umbrella hooked over your wrist right now, the fabric beneath it rustling like feathers. And earlier today, you mentioned how the sky was “overcast.” You went searching for socks, prerequisite for shoes. You're still always waiting for rain.

**“What is Washington?”** [States of Being, \$200]

If the country were a body—I shade the state with Sharpie, then stand with my back to the map to be sure—this is the place the palm would cover as “The Star-Spangled Banner” plays. Maybe it’s a palm that’s never been read, or a palm clutching a ball cap just lifted from the body’s head. But that palm doesn’t require an anthem, or even a pledge, to alight there, slightly off-center, to draw its slanted line from clavicle to sternum. (Finger-tips touching Canada, wrist landing somewhere south of Mason, perhaps as deep as Tennessee.) This placement of the hand is meant to convey, with a pat or two, a subtle nod of the head, *I feel for you*, *We’ve all been there*, or maybe *This moment has moved me beyond words*. Mine was only a brief spell in that stoic place, though long enough for a new driver’s license & a new pair of plates, long enough to cast a vote for president of these Disjunctive States. What can I offer that’s under-stated, that echoes the ethos of this land? It wasn’t all buckeye bliss? Not quite my cob of corn, my slice of cobbler? Silent meetings are an oxymoron, though I’ll confess I sometimes miss them now. In the after-years, I won’t say I’ve never held an anguished stranger in the light, or felt a little lighter, doing so. But when I lived there, I felt like—no, I *was*—the single, stormy consonant in a tepid sea of vowels. I taught my students how to pass a state exam as I was failing every kind of community standard. My mouth kept expletive-deleting, which kept my heart expletive-rebeating: a dangerous feedback loop. I had to place my hand across my chest just to press that vocal organ back in place. *Ba-dum. Ba-dum.* No, this wasn’t our brightest move. My beloved served as school librarian. We tried to hide ourselves in books, but the heat unglued their spines & sent the pages flying. (So many deckled geese!) For months, students only wanted to check out the *Twilight* series, which wasn’t on their list for AP Lit. How they sought to involve me in the saga: “It’s set out there in that place you’re from. Have you ever been to Forks?” A few snickered when I said: “No—but I always had a terrific time in Spoons.” The truth is, there’s no landscape I’ve traversed more often now, no chamber of the state we’ve left unseen. Let’s not call it *fleeing*. Let’s call it *passing through with verve*. Let’s remember how twilight in such a place is best described as *gloaming*. Highways open as the sounds that form them: every mouth a cathedral after all. Summer evenings where the sun didn’t set so much as melt away: thick, gold syrup glazing cornfields & farmhouse roofs, billboards bellowing *Hell is Real!*, & the silver-capped silos that made me imagine, just for a moment, I was living in my childhood Fisher Price world, the one I played with every night before bed. It may surprise you that *silo* was the third word I learned—right after *mama* & *more*. I won’t forget the cow whose lavender tongue anointed my face each time I returned, sweat-stained & panting, from my runs through the orchard. (I won’t forget the orchard either.) And no, I won’t fault the snow for its persistence, or the wind for enthusiasm gone awry. I feel a grudging kinship with these things & with the four, stout seasons that announced themselves, coming & going, ventral & aortic as any...well, you know about the heart. These days, almost everyone I meet has spent time there—“or *done* time,” a colleague kids. I’m not quite willing to say that. It was *fraught* time we spent, but not *wasted*. Perhaps the way a heart is sometimes taxed to exhaustion—a series of great exertions preceding an even greater reprieve. Later, recollected in tranquility, the muscle preens itself like a stubborn goose, flexing its hard-won heft, becoming... well, almost a poem. (And what place was ever better at being, not meaning, than there in the Heart of It All?) I might get a whiff of apple cider somewhere, swizzled with a cinnamon stick, or I might glimpse a lone maple aglow in a field, blazing orange on behalf of all Octobers everywhere. That’s when the riddle returns, & I can’t help but chime: *this place that’s round on both sides & high in the middle—*

“What is Ohio?” [States of Being, \$600]

If the country were a family, this place would be the ne'er-do-well cousin everybody talks about but no one ever sees. Is he even a ne'er-do-well, or is that just part of the odd bird story—which is also the land crab story & the cane toad story—this family likes to tell? My god, he's nearly mythic by now, as alluring as he is dangerous, all hybridity & hyperbole. While his given name is something rather plain—Frank or Jim—this cousin goes by *Bufo*, *Muscovy*, *El Flamboyán*, his orange hair wild & derelict atop his matchstick body. Does he wear a ratty tie-dyed hoodie year-round despite the humidity? You betcha! Does he drive a 1993 Jeep Wrangler without a top that has to be tarped the whole rainy season? Abso-fucking-lutely! And does that Jeep (*don't you dare call it a car!*) sport a bumper sticker that shouts *SWAMP LIFE!* & another that forms a peace sign from two spindly palm trees joined at the root? Why, naturally. At least that's what you've always heard about this man who resembles a flaming tree—or that quintessential odd bird, the flamingo. And how did you never catch that before? *Flamingo* is just *flaming* with an O, like the bird startled by its own reflection in the water: *Why are my legs so thin? Why do my tail feathers suggest an arson at Barbie's Dream House?* And just like the actual flamingo, kitschy versions of this cousin far exceed anyone's encounters with the bona fide, living-breathing man. Right now, for instance, he's donning a green apron to start his shift at Publix. He works a second job at Winn Dixie & picks up seasonal work at some of the local casinos. He can fix anything & always shows up 10 minutes early for a job. No, he never found a strongbox full of cocaine while metal-detecting naked on a beach at dawn. Which also means, *Aunt Helen*, he never did time for selling it to kids in Daytona either. And no, he never got so drunk on Islamorada Ale that the police had to pry him loose from a median on Interstate 95. This cousin checks out books from the library—James Patterson mostly, though he read Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* to see what all the fuss was about. He kept it past the due date, & then he paid the fine. This cousin rents a studio on the Intracoastal side of Sunny Isles. When he can nab a little free time, he takes a cold brew in a Dolphins cozy & kayaks through the mangroves at Oleta State Park. Contrary to popular lore, this cousin doesn't have any unpaid parking tickets, & his Jeep isn't booted on a treacherous street. He grows oregano on his windowsill & cat-sits for his neighbor. He's been seeing the same woman for a year & a half. An uncle said that Cuz shot himself in the foot—*how original!*—while fleeing a bar fight with a stolen gun. “Poor son of a bitch can barely walk now, & on top of that, he's wanted by the law.” Fact is, Frank does have a gun, but it's registered, he stores the bullets separately, & he's never had cause to fire. A sister-in-law swears she saw Cuz's picture on *America's Most Wanted*. “You know, that's down there where the show started, & this guy who looks exactly like him is on the lam for exotic animal smuggling, not to mention—” She doesn't finish her sentence, & her daughter brings her a cup of herbal tea. Meanwhile, Frank takes his girlfriend to dinner at Margaritaville. They get their pictures made in front of the giant flip-flop in the lobby. She wants to know, *Should they have copies printed up as Christmas cards this year?* He says, “Baby, you can do that if it floats your boat, but I don't have anyone I'm dying to drop a line to.” She squeezes his freckled hand. “Yeah, I forgot. They don't really get you back home, do they?” Frank sighs. “Nah. Pretty sure all they'd see is the little stud in my ear, & somehow it would look huge as a sinkhole.” There's a free concert at the amphitheater, so they sit out in the balmy night air swaying in time with the music. Lauren works as a bank teller & sells her jewelry on Etsy. Frank thinks she's the smartest, most talented woman he's ever met, & he knows he should tell her more often. He kisses her cheek, whispers, “You're golden as a panther to me.” When Christmas comes, they skip the cards & take a day trip to the Keys.

**“What is Florida?”** [States of Being, \$1000]