The curtains, delicate and faded, hang limply from the hooks. I look through wood-framed panes, the flawed glass, distorting slightly the view from inside. The frames and the window sill are painted a dark color. The paint chips in some spots to reveal layers of old paint beneath. I lean over the bed and look through. I am among the trees. They are eye-level and above me, and the sunlight flutters through the leaves, and beyond the branches, I glimpse the blue sky.

I reach across the bed, place my left hand on the wide windowsill, and grasp the handle at the center of the window. I pull up to release the latch, the old metal presses sharply against the insides of my fingers. I pull both windows open. They fold inward, pressing the curtains away and off to the side. First, I hear the breeze shushing through the branches of the trees, the chirping birds, the chatter of squirrels among the leaves. Then beneath it and around it, I hear the river. I see it too now, as I look over the roof of the porch beneath my window. I hear it trickle around the bend in the river and babble over the pile of rocks that lie just beyond. The sunlight sparkles among its ripples, whorls, and still, silent pools. I hear the springy screech, slam, rattle of the old screen door and my dad’s heavy footsteps on the wooden floor of the porch below me as he brings in bags from the car. I can’t see them, but I hear my sisters’ voices as their feet scuffle down the path and clap down the metal steps of the bridge. I hear my grandmother sharply remind them, “Stay away from the water! Don’t go in the woods! Watch out for poison ivy!”

I lean out and breathe. First, pine needles. Then woods and green leaves. Beneath it, around it, I smell the damp, black earth near the dock that surrounds the river. The damp, black earth speckled with blue forget-me-nots. I can barely make them out from here; I can barely see the dock through the leaves.

I take another breath and drink it in. I am here. I am present. I stand and look out for a few more moments before I step back and walk away to leave the room and go downstairs and join my family.

I want to ride a wave of time and space and be there again. I want to step away from that bright window and walk down that long, creaky hallway, the walls covered in old, grainy black and white pictures hanging crookedly from old wires, pictures of people, many of them dead and unknown to me, posing in front of this old lodge with the day’s catch. Children sitting cross-legged on the ground in front of them. Women in modest bikinis or pedal pushers playing cards. Men wearing waders and pinching cigarettes in their lips. I want to walk down the solid wooden stairs that switch back at the landing and continue down. I want to walk to the other window at the base of the staircase.

This window is just like the one upstairs, but there is no screen because it looks out onto the screened porch. I push it open. There is a table right under the window where men, and less frequently, women have assembled their rods and reels, considered the hatch and selected their flies, and set down their hats as they climbed into rubber waders. My dad is there now. He is unpacking his gear. His hair, dark, thick, peppered with a few gray strands, is so familiar to me. He whistles as his thick fingers fumble with the flies he just purchased at the Orvis store, attaching them to the new fishing vest. He glances up as I open the window. “Hey, sweetie,” he smiles. As I see him here, I know that he is in his perfect place. He is leaving behind the work back home, the responsibilities, the long car ride. He is coming into this moment.

Later, after dinner, and after he comes back in from the river, he will have a cocktail and sit on the porch, looking through screened in window frames and out over the river, waiting for the deer to arrive in the woods below us. I will sit there too, reading. Gradually, all of us will gather in the chairs and couches that line the porch, we’ll talk, laugh, and relax. My dad is at the center, listening, grinning, and watching the darkness settle over the river.

It had been four years since I had looked out these windows. I just couldn’t go back, none of us could, after my dad died.