Christening

They were surprised by how small the new house is. There’s no basement with shelves of chemicals for Sam to hold her breath around, no Piano Room with its sagging stairwell and lack of a piano—Sam's parents had sold it before she was born. There’s no Sun Room, the back wall cast in drippy glass and the floor sometimes so cold that it numbed her toes in winter. Instead: a small bedroom and a less-small bedroom, both with prickly stucco ceilings; a retro bathroom and, like an afterthought, a cobwebby toilet-room probably lousy with spiders; a living room with dark huddled bookshelves and blotchy not-quite-cream carpets. Heavy sliding-glass doors open on a back yard thick with dark, hairy grass in long leaning strands.

Sam learned fast that birds like the backyard—little chipping sparrows and juncos and heavier, bobbing brown things like robins. Best of all, there were hummingbirds; they buzzed past overhead like fighter jets, and sang like a child squeaking a straw through the lid of her Burger King cup. When they alighted on the wires in the back yard, Sam could catch the brilliant flash of scarlet on the throat, and her dad could be convinced to look up from his laptop. He even mentioned to Sam's mother that they should get a feeder, and later—after the last boxes had been ripped open with the squeal and stutter of tearing tape—Sam's father took her to the grocery store, which was little enough that cashiers didn’t wear uniforms, and they bought a bulb of red blown glass with a little base for hummingbirds to drink from.

They still had a month until school began, which Sam's parents had thought for the best—it had been argued in tense, low voices in the kitchen before they'd left, and whenever she'd seemed distracted in the back seat of the car, eyes gone hazy and fixed out the window.

"It'll be easier on her," Veronica had insisted, in that tight I'm-correct-and-you're-stubborn voice, "she can't handle being rushed."
"It would give her some structure—"

"And what if the schools here aren't at the same level?"

Henry had tightened his mouth and been sorry for his daughter either way.

But Sam had, as near as her parents could tell, taken it well. She had cried in the hotel room, the night before the airport, because they all had; Veronica with her whining, breathy sniffing and Henry stoically swiping at his eyes. She had cried on the plane. Henry's sisters had met them as they uncramped their legs from the six-hour flight, powdered and eyeshadowed among the flat off-white of airport tiles and artificial airport lights. Their greetings sounded pressed-flat under the monotone intercom-warnings and the hasty, distracted bustle of strangers, and Sam had tucked herself into her dad's side but her eyes were dry.

So they'd drifted around town, and looked at the big salty stretch of ocean, and men brought boxes of their lives from Maine and piled them up along the airy California breezeway and the tiny, expensive California courtyard.

It's been weeks, now. The boxes lie in heaps again in the breezeway, but they're empty, ignored.

Henry isn't around to hear the thwack of a small body against a pane of glass. When he comes into the living room there is Sam, crouching, with the slider pulled open and something small and dark on the wood planks of the patio. She rocks on her heels, feet on the clean carpet, leaning out to touch it.

When he comes closer, he finds that it's a hummingbird. The body is very small, fragile-looking, dark and drab now that it's lost all motion: the throat is a gash of dark feathers, not lit with sunlight, little body lost its iridescence in stillness. Its narrow wings are tucked at its sides;
its small round head lolls, the needle-thin beak protruding. Its tiny chest does not move; its tiny pebble-dark eyes are fixed and dim.

Sam turns up to him, face raised away from the little creature, and her brow is crinkled in concern. "Is it dead?" she asks him.

She is barely eight. He would have expected, can we help it? or even, is it okay? But she is not young enough for that, apparently.

"I think so," he says, and watches the shift in her expression—wide eyes turned down a little, the tension in her face crumpling. He crouches beside her, to examine the thing.

There is a small pinkish thread poking out of the narrow beak. It is the bird's protruding tongue, thin and light enough to look like the stamen of a flower.

"Can I touch it?" she says suddenly, and reaches out her fingers towards the small body. She's been taught that she shouldn't touch dead things, or wild animals, and certainly not dead wild animals; it is unsanitary.

"If you're very gentle," he finds himself saying, instead. The little creature didn't die of disease; it dashed itself to death against their windowpane. It lies there in a limp bundle, like a dead fairy, while Sam touches probing fingertips to its feathered back. There is no sign of movement.

Henry leaves her there, rocking on her heels over the little figure, while he goes to find a shoebox. He knows, in some deep tangle of tension below his stomach, that he can't put a dead hummingbird in the trash.

Sam scoots back to let him scoop it up, bare-handed and automatically, instinctively careful, like he's holding something made of eggshells: like he will do it some unforgivable harm
by touching it wrong. But the little body rolls neatly, bloodless, into the box. It’s a massive casket for a tiny bird. He closes the lid over it while Sam watches, silent.

"We're going to have a funeral," he tells her, and realizes as he says it that it's somewhat to himself. "Will you join me?"

She nods, and he examines her expression, waiting for the tears—but she looks more surprised, and more fascinated, than anything. She follows him when he takes the shoebox around to the courtyard, to the little garden along the fence, and lingers there while he finds the trowel. She crouches quietly while he digs, twirling her shoelaces in her fingers and looking at the box, very quiet. She leans over his shoulder when he lowers the box in, and her eyes track every little flurry of dirt he pitches back into the hole.

Finally Henry stands, patting the dirt off his hands, looking down at the small space of raised soil with the shoebox beneath it.

"We should say a few words." He says it in the low voice of bad news, and casts a glance at Sam out the corner of his eye; she stands straight-backed, biting the insides of her cheeks to keep from crying, ready for the funeral. She doesn't seem about to say anything. He accepts his responsibility as Dad; he begins the service.

"You were a very beautiful creature," he tells the dirt, and his voice swings a little between too light and too honesty-soft, "and we are very sorry that you had to meet your end at our window."

Beside him, Sam sniffs.

"We hope you're happier," he says, for good measure, "and freer wherever you are."

Somewhere with no glass doors. "Somewhere peaceful."
It ends a little too low, too actually sad: *somewhere peaceful*. Sam don’t notice or doesn’t mind. She drops her chin in a little half-nod, bangs hanging into her eyes.

Henry picks up the brick that will serve as a marker—to keep raccoons out, really, but maybe Sam will see a nice headstone in it—and sets it down firmly over the churned-up dirt. It stands out very red and rugged, clumsy, against the delicate green of their garden and the dark soil. He sees Sam nod again, with finality.

"Bye, hummingbird," she says, and makes a little choked kid noise. He puts a steadying arm around her, and she tucks herself into his side, small shoulders digging into his ribs. She's shaking, he realizes, shuddering against him for the first time since they hit the airport.

He doesn’t like omens or karma, but this feels like one of those. It feels like a sacrifice, or like breaking a bottle over a ship: they've broken a little life over their doorstep. This is where something actually starts. He doesn’t know whether it means good luck.