

AMANDA MERRITT

WAITING ROOM

Standing in the middle of the waiting room I'm looking for a sign someone will intervene and help this woman who's bleeding out on the floor by the magazine rack. The exit light flickers. A fly rams itself into the ground-level window pane growing irritable, desperate. Baby sneezes, mother sighs, and the woman by the entrance holds her breasts in her arms like a bouncer. I take the seat beside you.

In the waiting room, Anything gnaws at the steel bars of happening, thrilled by the sound of a clipboard, the first syllable of its name in the mouth of a stranger who will die in the next great story blossoming in your mind, like the heat of embarrassment where your knee touches mine. Let's regress, things have gotten far too serious, and just this once pretend the imagination is less sport than game—you'll materialize from the ether of your fictional lives and take me back to the cabin, show me the fence line, promise what you cannot claim. We'll play Frisbee in the bay and lose it on the tide because you dread swimming far or deep; instead, we undress under waves of searing sun, so I'll keep believing you could be mine, I can be yours, and you won't have to learn how to float on water, that it means surrender. That ending was never meant for another story

because in this alternate reality no one is dying except the life inside me. Hands are folded in their own laps, the exit light withers, reddens the curve of your eye. Already the mind rapt, bloody with the next beat of that woman's story, as we wait for the ultrasound of our unwanted child: the only image I'll ever have, which I do not ask to see. A knee touches mine. There is a fly, a fat lady, a mother, and a child. They know why I'm here.