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The Whether and Nots (excerpt)

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Cover Page Footnote

This piece was brought into workshop in progress. Because we operate under a workshop model, we see value in an unfinished piece.

The Whether and Nots (excerpt)

I keep walking because that is the thing to do. I catch sight of a massive spire of rock that rises into the air just beyond the ridge like a lonesome guardian. I hear a bark and see a woman walking towards me. She wears black exercise pants and a form fitting purple tank top. A small beagle trots at her side and gives me an amenable woof as they pass.

Beagles always catch my attention. A beagle is the first dog I remember meeting. You always remember your first dog.

His name is Max, and his fur is a mixture of brown and white, ears floppy, legs short. He belongs to my next-door neighbors: a dysfunctional family composed of an insurance saleswoman, a male guitarist, and their two blonde daughters, Ilena and Annika. Eventually, this family will fracture: the guitarist and the saleswoman get divorced, Ilena moves across the country, Annika battles crippling depression for several years before being placed in a facility a few states over. You know how the story goes. But all of that is a long way off. Today, I am at the neighbors' house after a long day of elementary school, eating celery sticks and playing with Max and Ilena.

Annika and my younger sister are in the basement, relegated there because that is where younger siblings go. Ilena and I are in the backyard, throwing a stick for Max and then watching him prance happily across the dry grass, refusing to give it back. Suddenly, the back door flies open with a bang. Ilena's mother stomps onto the back porch, eyes tight with anger.

"How many goddamn times," she screams at Ilena, "will I have to tell you to clean your room before you actually do it?"

Ilena opens her mouth, perhaps to explain that she had informed me of the room-cleaning obligation, but I had suggested we avoid this activity in favor of the stick-throwing game with Max. Her mother cuts her off.

"I have had it up to here with you!" she shrieks, raising her hand quite high into the air. "I am DONE! No birthday parties this weekend—you're grounded."

And with that, she turns on her heel and stomps back into the house, letting the door bang shut with a note of finality.

Ilena bursts into furious tears. Muttering about unfairness and trampolines—(I believe the girl whose party she was planning on attending had a trampoline)—she runs to Max, snatches him bodily from the grass and flies into the house, letting the door crash shut just as loudly as her mother had.

Feeling rather bad about my role in the whole ordeal, I follow her into the house and make my way upstairs to her room, where I can hear the melodic tones of more yelling. I enter the room and see Ilena sitting in her closet, surrounded by dirty clothes. Her face is streaked with tears, and she holds Max tightly in her arms. Her chest curves around him. She shouts at her mother, who stands with her back to me but is yelling with just as much force. Max the beagle barks furiously at both of them.

I stumble slightly on the path. I was focusing too hard on the rock spire, didn't notice the pebble in front of me. I wish that I stopped to pet the beagle. Max was hit by a car when I was nine and died on the pavement in front of my childhood home. I miss the feel of his warm fur under my small fingers.