1. Autumn 3

A memory washes over Zareen as if it's flowing down from the waterfall.

It's summer, and she's seven. Behind their house is a seasonal creek. Stone steps, bordered by tangled plants, lead down to a rocky beach where the water's stagnant and green.

One morning, she sees a small snake sunning himself on the steps. He's dark with two bright stripes running down his back, and when he senses her presence, he whips back under the shrubs. But he's there the next day and then the next.

On the fourth day, she gets there when it's still cool. On the step she places crayfish meat that she and her mom caught and froze. The snake sticks his nose out from the brush and seems to sniff the air like a dog. Then he crawls out, snaps up the meat, and races away. She goes back for days, and he doesn't slither away as fast as he did before. She names him Racer, and she wants to catch him and keep him for her own. She takes an old aquarium from their shed and fixes it up, rinsing it until the glass loses most of its filmy glaze. She adds gravel, a jar lid for his water, and braces a stick against the side of the tank that he can curl around.

One morning, she gives Racer a bigger piece of crayfish than

normal, so it takes longer for him to wolf it down. This is her chance. She strikes out swiftly and pins him against the rock, getting a grip just behind his head. As he twists, his tail curling up to make a beautiful bracelet around her wrist, she starts to cry. She imagines him in the aquarium, nosing the streaked glass, looking for a way out, the gravel and artificial light a sad substitute for his sunny stone step, and everything feels wrong. She wants him though. He's hers now. She gave him a name.

It's like being torn in two. It feels like this is the most momentous decision she'll have to make in her entire life. She watches her hand, as if it's else's, open up and let him go.

