Tree. Mailbox. Trashcan. Tree, mailbox, trashcan. Tree mailbox trashcan. Street. 8th Ave? It does not matter. Tree. Mailbox. Trashcan. It helps to keep track of how many things I pass, so that when I have to come back and pick up the new box from under the old slide, I will know where to find it. When I finish, I write it on my arm – 37 trees, 18 mailboxes, 48 trashcans. I wonder why there are so many trashcans when everyone just throws their trash on the ground anyway. My arm is covered with these numbers, but it is easy to remember where I wrote the last one because I am moving up my arm. I am almost to my armpit.

Most of the time the boxes are heavy, but sometimes they are so light I wonder how the wind did not pick them up and carry them away before I did. They are always brown though, which is kind of sad because brown is such a sad color. Sad color for a sad box. Maybe it is not a sad box. Maybe it is a box that did not get to choose its color so now everyone just thinks it is sad. Maybe it feels like a Christmas present box on the inside but no one knows. I do not know what kind of box it is on the inside because I have never opened one. I wonder all the time, but I never open.

As I walk home, all I think about is birds. Birds do not cause trouble – at least not the big kind of trouble that gets in the news, and what other kind of trouble is there? Their mamas do not yell at them in the supermarket, and their daddies do not give them the kind of sandwiches on the fire escape that make people look at them funny when they go to school. Birds just fly, make a home, leave, and make a new home. No trouble. They just watch all the trouble from way up in the sky. I bet trouble looks less troubling when everyone is as tiny as ants.

“Hey there, whatcha got in that box?”

I shrug, and Caroline goes back to her cigarette. She asks me that question every time I bring back a brown Christmas present box, and I always shrug because that is the truth. But she always asks. Even though I always shrug.

Caroline is the kind that gets into trouble on accident. She has two kids, but I do not really know if she likes them. I like them. Sometimes, when Caroline forgets to come home, Allie and Marcus come over and knock on my red door and we make macaroni and cheese with extra cheese. Macaroni and cheese cheese. We also sit on the floor and watch Judge Judy. There are 5,425 of them and I think we have seen them all. Caroline forgets to come home a lot. Trouble is her thing. Like these boxes have become my thing.

My mama did this too, this box thing. She would come home and set them on the high shelf, next to our bottles, and then a few days later, it would be gone, and there would be groceries in the fridge. My mama was very nice. She combed my hair before school and helped with math when I got home, and when I laid in bed crying because so many things did not make sense to me, she would lay next to me and rub my back. Sometimes she would cry with me. Mama told me to stay out of trouble, like it was door that locked behind you and that was it. No going back. So I did.

When Mama died, or left, or flew away, I went to get the boxes. It took me a while to find the first one, but now that I know they are under that slide, I just have to keep track of the trees and I will find it. I do not keep it on a shelf because the shelf is too high and it is easier to just keep it on the floor beside my red door. In a few days, I will wake up, the box will be gone and there will be money on the counter, or sometimes, in the exact same spot as the box was. Once, there was a letter, but not anymore. Whoever takes the boxes do not want me to write back, so I stopped. The only letter I got from them told me where to find the first box and not to tell anyone, so I got the box and I did not tell anyone. I wrote back, but when they took the box they took the letter they had left and box and left my letter that I had wrote and the money. I am not stupid, I know when I am not wanted, so I stopped writing.

The box is sitting by my front door and I’m sitting at my kitchen table. When Allie and Marcus are not here the house is quiet and I can hear things squeak all by themselves, without footsteps making them squeak. My tv is in the other room but I do not know if I want to stand up and walk over to my cushion on the floor and watch it. Maybe I will just stay in this chair until my box leaves. Maybe I will fall asleep at this table and when I wake up I will have another letter – a letter from someone who wants me to write back.

I jolt awake and the dream I was dreaming tiptoed into the back of my head, and it sits back there and I feel like when I sit outside and I can feel the sun on me, but I can not see it, except you can always see the sun, which is the best part about the sun. But I can not see this dream. Why do we even have dreams if we can not remember them most of the time? Why do dreams want to leave so fast? I am stumbling down the stairs because it feels like my brain and body do not quite know I am awake already. I think about last night and the kitchen table and the squeaks and I can not think about think anything else because that is all I remember.

There is money on the counter and a Snickers, which is definitely better than the three hundred dollars sitting beside it. I can smell outside from here and it smells nice. Nice enough to sit on the front porch and not care when I stand up with stuff sticking to my pants. There is a white square on my red door, with the flap taped down and my name on it. The writing inside is scrunched, like whoever wrote this wrote it while their feet were walking out the door and they had to stretch across the room to finish the last sentence. But it’s nice. It looks like a nice person wrote it like a nurse or a gardener.

“Hey somebody wrote you a letter! Gonna write ‘em back?”

Caroline is sitting on her steps too, smoking, and her eyes look at a spot slightly to the right of my head. I shrug, but she is no longer looking paying attention to me at all. She is talking about how no one writes letters anymore and we should start again. I think that would be a good idea. Letters seem like something I would look forward too. Maybe I should see if Caroline wants to be my pen pal, but I am not sure that counts since she is my neighbor.

Outside is nice. I smell Caroline’s smoke and oranges and the smell of someone’s air conditioner and I do not smell deodorant. I can hear the birds’ wings hitting the tree branches above me and I can hear horns honking and sirens yelling at everyone on the streets. It is a quiet day, at least compared to other days. It is the kind of day that urges you to think about things – about birds and trees and that cab driver who ignored you all the way across town even though you were sitting directly behind him. It is also the kind of day that people make noise – they yell or watch TV or mow their lawns and then they do not have think about those things. It seems like some of the most important things to think about are the things people do not think about. Or they decide to make unimportant things seem important – like whether or not their TVs get the right channels.

As I leave I wave to Caroline but I look over and realize she is already gone. She had gotten up and gone back inside while I was in my head. My footsteps sound like the loudest things on the block as a count trees to the old slide and my special destination. I find the sad brown box but instead of turning around and going home, I keep going straight and I keep counting the things I pass. 59 trees, 24 mailboxes, and 76 trashcans. The more things I count and the farther away from that slide I get, the quieter the neighborhoods around me get. The trees here are not as green and do not have as many leaves. That is what it looks like at least. I wish I could climb up to the top of the tree and count every leaf on every branch, but that would be very hard with the sad brown box in my arms. The only thing on the block is a big cement box with one door and one window. The echo seems to go on and on and on when I knock on the door. I am not sure if that is what I am supposed to do, but that seems like the most polite thing to do. It seems very empty in this large cement box. This cement box seems even sadder than the brown box.

Caroline opens the door and comes out, shutting the door before I get a chance to see what is behind her that is not making noise, but is something she things she should hide. She is the only person I did not expect to see here. She tells me that my job is to stand very still and to look mad. I am the scary person in the room, I make sure no one comes in and no one comes out. I tell her I do not want to hurt anyone and she tells me that that is okay because I will not have to.

I stand by the door and I can tell Caroline is nervous.

“What is in this box?”

It is her turn to shrug, but I do not believe her. Her shrug is not real, but I am not going to point that out or ask again, so I just stand quietly and watch the door and think about how if I was a bird, I would not have this job and I could just watch Caroline get into trouble all by herself.

Without warning, there is a bang and Caroline’s teeth and chin are just red spots on her face and I watch as her face hit the floor. I am standing in a corner and if I was a bird I would fly away but instead I throw the box at the ceiling and run.

I run out the door and away from the big cement box and I try to keep track of the things I am passing but they are moving too fast and when I close my eyes all I can see is red teeth and a blurry face, and I know my mama was right.