ABSTRACT

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My fascination with things left behind, things carried, and things unburied is revealed in this collection of short stories. There is borrowing and lending of objects and lives, though the characters who populate these stories are not always successful in inhabiting these new, often peculiar skins. Here are stories of people whose lives are unsettled by the presence and power of the uncanny moments they encounter.

BORROWED SKIN

By

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Original Skin

The architects of the whale room in the Museum of Natural History had built this hall at a funny angle. All cellular signal and radio waves flat-lined as soon one crossed the threshold, as if this hall was lost in some dimension of the building. Sometimes I wondered if I looked up the blueprints for this museum, if the Hall of Ocean Life would even be on it. I was in that room when my grandfather died, and my cousin Eliza tried to call me for over an hour, and left twenty-four phone calls that went straight to voicemail.

The first time I ever visited the museum was three months ago. I had come with two of my classmates for our History of the Universe class, a required class for freshmen. It was at the beginning of my first semester at college, the end of September, when the weather was still heavy and humid and walking just one block was like walking through a soup of sweat. I hated that time of year. My group and I had been given a worksheet with boxes to fill in. The answers, we were told, could be found by reading the placards of specific dioramas and exhibits. The three of us then embarked on a divide and conquer approach; we agreed to take responsibility for one section each and then copy the rest from each other.

I finished my portion of the assignment first, after winding my way up and then back down the Cosmic Pathway, writing down answers about the timeline of the universe. Significant events across 13 billion years, like elliptical galaxies and the first generation of stars. I figured out that one of my strides covered approximately 75 million years of planetary evolution. The pathway ended with the Age of Dinosaurs, and at the very end of the path, just before one stepped off, there was a small stroke,

almost like someone's accidental pencil mark, the thickness of a human hair, which represented the length of recorded human history.

I think I must have been homesick then, only I didn't want to admit it to anyone. The crowds bothered me. The ramp shook under me from people pounding up and down the Cosmic Pathway. They drove me into the Hall of Ocean Life, off to the side. The other halls opened into one another, but here there was only one entrance, easily missed because of how dark it was kept.

It was a large, straight room shadowed in blue light. It was quiet, but not oppressive, like sitting in the back of a movie theater, but without all the noise and buttery smells. I went around the room looking at the marine dioramas, and found them more agreeable than the mammals of the other halls. Here they were carefully rendered models, instead of stuffed dead skins: sea lions, a West Indian manatee, fat-lipped and long-toothed walruses, elephant seals, otters, dolphins and tuna, a giant squid dueling a sperm whale. The museum planners clearly meant for visitors to feel as though they were submerged in aquatic life, so everything inside the hall was preserved in a light that was pale and wavering.

I sat on the bench under the belly of the blue whale, 94-feet long, flecked with faded paint spots. I stretched my legs out in the direction of its snout. It was a nice spot because I could sit without being bothered too much. Not like out in the lobby, by the dinosaur fossils strung up in the atrium, where I could hear tourists demanding to see the miniatures, and listen to the museum staff say, in their brusque way, that was only in the movie, that stupid movie, and actually, this museum has no miniatures, sorry. I often thought to myself that the museum should have miniatures.

Maybe more people would come then. People liked to imagine themselves into other people's homes. That was the one thing I liked about living in the city. From my apartment building, I could see into the many windows of many lives, the intimacies my neighbors shared. I didn't discover any secrets. I wouldn't have known what to do with a secret if I spied one. I liked best the moments when people sat there, in front of the TV or at the dinner table. When I couldn't fall asleep, at least I could look across the street to the next apartment and feel less lonely because there was someone else there, at home and still awake, too.

The day my grandfather died, my skin had started to itch. Not because I had any of my grandparents' old country instincts. It was spring storm season in the city. The streets were a graveyard of umbrellas; wire spindles of blown-back inverted black umbrellas tumbled down the avenues, silver spikes cartwheeling through the air like deadly Catherine wheels. The little snow there was left mostly turned into slush, but here and there were patches of ice, and the city people navigated the sidewalks with their arms outstretched like tight-rope walkers.

I was from South Florida. The cold weather knotted my spine, made my limbs heavy and aching. In my heated apartment, my body was a swollen cocoon, unbreakable and humid. At night I curled around myself in bed, striving to contain the discomfort. I was as bewildered as a beached whale, all my body's parts flopping and at odds. Gravity dogged me.

In the cold, my skin itched, reddened as if I had a rash or was sleeping on an infestation of bedbugs. I could not bear it in stillness; I had to scratch. When my mother was alive, she told me it was because my skin was too dry. I slathered lotion

on my body. I bought the same brand she always did, made of crushed bees and vanilla, and I used up tins of it. I rubbed layers of it into my skin, and I still itched, though I was as slippery and slick as a seal and smelled like flowers. Any time the wind blew past and then doubled back on me, I thought I smelled my mother.

My grandfather came over from Eastern Europe, where he used to work in the market every day of the week, killing chickens. His job was to wring their necks and toss them onto the cutting board so that his first wife, a verifiable maestro with a cleaver, could strip the feathers and hack them into sellable pieces.

The last time I visited him was before I left for college. After dinner, we had sat outside on the porch talking. I had recently become a vegetarian, and this had upset everyone in the family, especially my grandparents. It would have been better if I had run away and eloped, or dropped out of college.

"We could only afford one good knife," my grandfather had said. "At first we had two. One was a wedding gift, but it was too new and it got stolen one day. After that, your Nonna slept with our one knife under her pillow."

I liked to listen to stories about my grandparents from the old country. They had brought with them a tradition of giving stories as gift. So whenever anyone in my family came at me empty-handed and said I had a gift coming my way, I knew I could expect a story.

He continued. "Everyone just chops the heads off. No one eats the heads. So, we had no use for them."

This was not one of my favorite stories. My favorite was the one about how he lost his first fiancé to a hag-witch who had stolen her heart and placed it into a pocket watch and tried to sell it. It was no use telling him I had heard this story before, so I said only, “That’s disgusting, Nonno.”

“That was life,” he scoffed. “I was very good at twisting their necks. It was the best way. Less blood for your Nonna to wash off my clothes at the end of the day. Blood is very hard to get out of clothes.” He patted his chest as if he were brushing stains off the soft chambray shirt.

“How old were you? How old was Nonna?” I asked.

“We were both eighteen. Your age, Nina,” he told me.

I wasn’t sure that was true. There were a lot of stories about all the amazing things my grandfather had done when he was, supposedly, my age.

He held up his left hand and showed me his familiar, frozen grip. “I would stretch their neck out very gently. Then I held their head with my hand like this, like I was holding a cookie. Not pinching it, just *holding* it. Then I did like this—” He whipped his other hand down in a swift motion and grinned at me, pleased with his pantomime. “One had to be very strong and very fast to do it that way. Every day I killed a hundred chickens.”

There were few pictures of my grandparents when they were young and back in the Old Country. In the wedding picture that was the focus of the living room, my grandfather had been a short man, but his arms displayed their whipcord strength, the muscles coiled like steel ropes under the dark skin. I had always wondered about his arthritic hands but had known it was bad form to ask. I used to think that it was rigor

mortis creeping over him, one piece at a time. The fingers were gnarled like a beak, as if they were still cramped around a hundred poultry necks.

He might've had bad hands that had done grotesque things, but they had been good, and done good things, too. The blunt fingers had fashioned dollhouses out of cardboard cereal boxes for me, with nothing more than an X-acto knife and Elmer's glue.

I didn't like playing with the houses themselves so much. Some girls I knew collected miniature furniture because building the house, decorating it, was supposed to be the fun part. But I liked to imagine the little toy figurines, bears and ducks and cats, moving around, living their lives. Their lives were very ordinary. They went to school and played or fought with one another at recess, then they went home and played outside until it was dinnertime. Every night the bears and ducks and cats feasted. Sometimes there was a neighborhood block party, where I placed them in front of their house, using new erasers for picnic tables, and all the animals ate together. Every night they would be tucked into their beds. Their slumber was good. They had no dreams.

"Why am I telling you this story about killing chickens?" my grandfather had said, that last time I saw him.

I wasn't sure. He had a repertoire of stories, and he retold many of them. His reasons for telling were always changing. One month the story about the goat that gave sour milk was used because I wanted to travel alone with friends in Canada. The next month the same story would be brought out to bear when I hadn't started looking for summer work yet.

"Not because I liked it. There was no liking or not liking to it. It was just something that had to be done, so I did it. You're a woman now. Sometimes you will have to do things you don't like. Maybe you will be working someplace you don't like. Sometimes you have to do things you don't love. You just have to do them. People might look down on you because your job isn't important, but you make like you wear a fur coat."

"Yes, Nonno."

He had started tiring then, his chin dipping onto his sunken barrel chest. "When you go away to college, you study hard. That's your job. To study."

My mother died when I was in second grade. My father and I never spoke about the death in the family. They were not physically or verbally demonstrative, and I couldn't remember if we had been, back when my mother was still with us.

I remembered that my mother was divine, and prim. A woman who was careful with her buttons and the lines of her skirts. My mother had a preference for A-line cut dresses with prints of nouns: bicycles and teacups, dessert dishes and flowers, rainbow-plumed birds. Pleated skirts, with all the pleats pressed even. Blouses with unique buttons that were works of art.

When my mother died, I was eight, and all those things had been packed away to my aunt, who told me it was because all those objects were grieving my father.

One of the few things I inherited from my mother was a turquoise ring. It was a souvenir from a small beach town my parents went to on their honeymoon. A cheap stone set in some metallic band.

When I was little, I used to imagine the ring cast a cloak of changeability around me, that when I slid it to my knuckle and twisted the turquoise stone, another image of myself was projected outwards. It was my mother who came up with the idea. One day I was being her little jackrabbit Nina, as she called me sometimes, which meant I had eaten too much sugar at school. I remember my mother sitting at her vanity looking at her reflection, asking, "When will the jackrabbit Nina go away so I can have my Nina back? When can I have my Nina back?" Then she rummaged inside her jewelry box and produced the turquoise ring. She said, "You remember Nonno's story about the first woman he wanted to marry?"

"Yes, yes," I chanted back at her. "Oh yes, yes, yes I do."

"Good girl. Of course you do. Do you remember the part of his journey where he had to fight off bull elephants and wrestle a caiman, swallow an entire lake, count seven hundred grains of salt, break mirrors, and sew a shirt of feathers before he could reach the hag witch?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" I fairly screamed.

"Very good, my little jackrabbit Nina." She stroked my hair, scratched her fingers through it. "Well, this ring is the ring that let him do all that."

"Ooooooooh," I said. "Why? How? He never mentioned it!"

"He never mentioned it because he gave the ring to me, and you know if he told you about the ring, all your cousins would want it. And he would have run into

so much trouble if he hadn’t had this ring, which he wore on his little finger. It’s an invisibility ring. If people had been able to see who was fighting the bull elephants and caiman, they might have stopped him, but when they saw such mean beasts being beaten and buffeted as if by the very wind itself, they grew frightened and ran away. When they saw the lake being drained, they thought it was an evil spirit, so they ran away and let him be. And just how do you think he snuck up on those birds he stole the feathers from?”

“Invisible,” I said, shivering with delight.

“Yes, Nina. If you put this ring on and you are very quiet, no one will notice you.”

So I put on the ring and sat against the wall of my mother’s vanity, watching her from behind my invisible veil. Occasionally that afternoon she would call out, “Where are you, Nina?” and I would tap a wall or kick my feet and make some noise so she would know I was there.

Later on, I imagined the ring cast a happier Nina, a projection that hovered over me. My classmates would see that I was composed and cheerful, and they would start talking to the happy Nina. One of my aunts let me know that my constant hysterical sobbing when someone tried to talk to me was upsetting my father; I stopped crying and let the projection of me flicker over me. Later on, when I was fifteen, the ring overlaid my shape with another figure, made me svelter, taller, golden-skinned instead of red and sallow.

I left the city without thinking to pack anything. I didn't have a black suit, or a black dress, and that was a problem. My cousin Eliza was about the same size, except for being taller, but I had heels with my at least. While the rest of the family held a private wake downstairs, Eliza went through her closet, passing things out from its depths.

My cousin snapped purple bubblegum between her jaws and stabbed the air with her nails when she spoke. She was a junior in high school, two years younger than me, and in all sorts of school clubs and events. The front part of her hair was slashed rakishly at an angle, and she signaled her moods by blowing the bangs out of her eyes with deliberately loud puffs.

Eliza's room was small, but she made the most of the space. Shoes stood at attention in rows two deep under the bed, and the bottom shelf of her bookshelf showcased different pumps and flats. A full-length mirror edged in a gold frame, broad enough for two people to stand side by side in, leaned against one wall. Perfume bottles were lined up on top of the dresser, pyramids and spheres and twists of glass. I stood by the dresser, taking the clothes Eliza passed out, and draping them over one arm. The drawers were all unaligned, and I would have pushed them shut if there hadn't been clothes spilling out of each tier. Tropical orange, cherry red, lime green underwear, all of it lacey and stringy. A purple bra was jammed against the dresser, the underwire bent and misshapen.

"Here, try this one," Eliza said, slinging a shapeless black garment at me. "There's a belt that goes with it, a sash or something I think…"

“What are you wearing?” I asked, wondering if a sash was appropriate for a funeral.

“This dress, and…this hat.” Eliza held her outfit up. “Want to see?”

“Sure.”

Eliza shed her clothes with ease, with a casualness that was not studied or affected. Unzipped her jeans, shimmied them down her thighs, stepped on the legs and hopped a little to extricate herself from them. The blouse, a shimmery gray, was similarly divested and dropped on the floor.

Eliza said, “Go ahead, try that one on.”

I turned my back on Eliza and tried to ignore the mirror that showed my profile as I removed my clothing. I took off my shirt first, careful to turn it back right side out so that I could slip it on again. Keeping my pants on, I picked up Eliza’s dress again.

This was the first time I had borrowed someone else’s clothing. I understood that everyone did it in college, that roommates threw open the doors to their closets as a gesture of welcome, but I had never felt comfortable asking my own roommate. It felt like an imposition and an obligation, an uncomfortable entanglement I wouldn’t know how to shed. So I had never known the shared solidarity of swapping clothes. Of seeing someone wear my things and thinking, I own you, you are wearing what I own, and today while you are wearing part of me, I own you. Or, conversely, the possessive thrill of being able to borrow someone’s clothing, of exerting ownership over another’s belongings. Perhaps because I never borrowed anyone’s jacket or shirt, no one ever asked to borrow mine. Nor had I ever worn an ex-boyfriend’s shirts.

When I put on Eliza's dress, I noticed that it smelled different. It wasn't just the detergent; it smelled like it had been hanging in a stranger's closet, had rubbed against someone else's belongings on either side of it. There was the absence of lavender, from the small lavender sachets that hung in my closet. I had never touched this dress before; it felt different in my hands, and when I put it on, I didn't know where the zipper was, couldn't find the hidden buttons. With my own clothes, I knew how to put them on swiftly and without thought. Eliza's dress needed to be eased into, lest I poke my head into an armhole, or break threads if I jerked it down too quickly.

I dragged the dress into place and looked at the shape of myself in the mirror. My bra straps stood out, straight black lines cutting into my shoulders. I was still wearing my pants and they distorted the line of my hip and thigh. I reached under the folds of fabric to unbutton, unzip. I watched my limbs emerge.

Eliza joined me at the mirror and ran a practiced glance over me in the dress. "It looks much better on you than me," she conceded generously.

My reflection touched the neckline. "The fit is a little big here."

"Here." Eliza moved to stand behind me. Her fingers alighted on my shoulder, moved busily.

There were buttons sewn discreetly under the collar, intended for the errant bra strap to be looped into and fastened so that it would move with the neckline, tucked out of sight. I hadn't known; I didn't own a single top or dress that had buttons to hide a woman's bra straps.

I wore Eliza’s dress to the funeral. My back was straight, my shoulders relaxed and not hunched in on myself. I had a habit of slouching, and jiggling my leg, and my mother and grandmother used to dig their fingernails to the inside of my thigh or my lower back when they caught me doing it.

We buried Nonno with his knife laid on top and a fresh loaf of almond bread. As I sat there in my cousin’s black dress, I thought of a story to give him. I gave a little piece of it, a sentence at a time, to accompany each flower people put on top. I was glad to see the flowers weren’t white; Nonno always said white was a color of bad luck and death. The story I made up was about a black raven queen who was cursed to live as a mortal woman until she could find her feathered cloak. She found it in the underworld.

After the blessings for safe travels and fortune were said over his grave, we got up to leave. An old woman touched me on the arm and told me how sorry she was, then someone else did, too. I didn’t know who she was. I didn’t realize Nonno had so many friends; whenever I visited, he made sure it was family time only. People drew near me, held my hands in theirs, told me how lovely I had grown up to be and that my grandfather was surely proud of me. I looked around and saw my cousins were near the car already. Only I had been waylaid.

It was not my imagination, it was true: More people spoke to me that day than ever before at family events. In Eliza’s dress, I retained a palpable poise. Though many of the funeral attendees didn’t recognize me, they thought I must be someone they ought to pay their respects to. One after another, they came up to me, held my

hands within theirs and offered up their condolences. Back at the family home, I stood in the corner of the room, and people gravitated towards me.

I received their words and casseroles with quiet thanks and a small, sober smile. This confirmed to the mourners that they had done the right thing, behaved properly. As more people came, the ones who were there pointed to my corner and said, "You'll want to speak to Nina. His favorite granddaughter, you know. The one he favored."

That wasn't true. There had been no favoritism from Nonno, for any of his brood. We never had any doubt that he loved us equally. But the way I held myself signaled some subtle authority to people, and they believed it.

It was, I knew, because of Eliza's dress.

My father had gone out onto the porch with all the uncles and their wives. They were smoking up a storm; those of us who were inside could smell the menthol coming in through the window. The cousins were watching TV, their feet propped up on fur-covered ottomans. Wolf fur, supposedly, and from one wolf that their grandfather had killed in the Old Country, after it had taken the life of his first wife. As kids, we had all believed that story. It was reenacted every Christmas.

I was still wearing Eliza's dress as I slotted the containers of food into the refrigerator.

Eliza walked into the kitchen. She had changed out of her mourning attire.

"Need help?" Eliza asked, but she was sitting down and blowing her bangs out of her eyes.

"That was the last of it."

"Well, thanks for doing it."

"Sure," I said. I sat down at the kitchen island next to her.

I was wearing black tights that made my legs look slimmer, and Eliza's leg was bare and pale next to mine.

"So when are you going back to the city?" she asked.

"My flight's tomorrow morning."

"I could drop you off, if you want."

"Thanks, but it's really early. Listen," I said, "Thanks for lending me this dress."

"No problem. I never wore that one anyway."

"Why'd you buy it?"

"I think I wanted to dress it up with some cool jewelry, like it'd be a great backdrop for a statement piece, but I never ended up finding any really good jewelry like what I wanted."

"Well, I love it. It's really terrific…really comfortable."

Eliza shrugged. "So keep it then. I'm probably not going to wear it again."

That was what I wanted. I thanked my cousin. I wore the dress upstairs and into the bathroom, where I brushed my teeth and couldn't bear to look away from my reflection. I turned from side to side, arching my neck, hauling my shoulders back to

see the thrust and curve of my chest against the fabric. Felt for the tiny buttons at my shoulder, fastening my bra straps in place.

Back in the guest room, I folded the dress very carefully, and kept it on the very top layer of my small carryon suitcase. Ironed it when I got back to the city. I hung it off my floor lamp by my desk. Before I went to sleep, I tried it on again.

The dress didn't feel like it was mine, and that was the point.

I was unimaginative when I bought clothes for myself. I thought that other girls went through a period of ritual, where their mothers helped choose their clothes, helped up mirrors to their daughters. My taste wasn't conservative, not exactly. I instinctively chose things to go with everything else. I owned nothing that required precise matching with a certain piece of cut or color. Everything could be paired up. I didn't have statement pieces like Eliza, and I didn't feel comfortable finding one on my own. I wouldn't know where to look. And if I was honest with myself, I didn't quite trust my own taste.

But I did have a roommate. Camille's family was in the hotel business, and Camille was taking hotel management courses at school, even though she didn't need to. She was not only well-off, she was well established.

From Camille's closet, I borrowed flimsy, sleeveless dresses, dresses that invited me to walk in a strut. Voluminous skirts that wrapped around my legs when I moved; those skirts made me flow like a bohemian baby. Sleek and thin blouses in buttercream and apricot. Velvet blazers to turn me into a luxurious peacock, savoring

life. I put on a lace camisole, white, clingy, and became a new person. Slouching from each hanger was a new body, new bones, new skin. The borrowed garments gave me that.

They had to be someone else's clothes, that was the secret, the secret charm. It was better than the turquoise stone ring that I had left in my own jewelry box at home before I moved away to college. I didn't need to keep the clothes. I had realized, after I returned with Eliza's dress, that it was better if they didn't belong to me. Owning them took some of the pleasure from it. Camille didn't mind, but then again, she probably didn't realize just how often I wore something of hers, which was nearly every day.

On Friday, one week after my grandfather's funeral, my body was subsumed by one of Camille's leather jackets, buttressed by the smooth softness. The two halves of the jacket flapped open as I walked. Flashing the column of my throat with every other step. Reveal. Conceal.

When I stepped up to the curb, the doorman of a hotel behind me rushed forward and whistled for a cab, but already there was a yellow car pulling up in front of me. I smiled and sidestepped the car. Kept walking east across the avenues, Third and Lexington and Park until I was on Fifth. People didn't brush up against me; I thought they didn't dare crowd me.

In the windows of Versace, there was the dress I craved. It was filmy and lacy. It was a bedroom dress, like lingerie, and it was peach, shaded like a woman's blush, becoming and coquettish.

Wrapped in my borrowed jacket, I kept moving, unhurriedly, to the museum. This time, I didn't stay long.

Archeology

When we took over the house, the caretaker warned us that we should be careful going out into the garden. The gardener had been fired years ago for stealing fruit, and no one had taken care of it since.

We found this to be true. The house had been maintained in a cursory sort of way—windows occasionally opened to let the rooms breathe was about the extent of it—but the garden had overrun the stone wall that bordered it. In one section, a tree had actually split the stone apart in its determined reach for the sun. Weeds were waist-high. This was not a quaint garden, blooming with sprays of mismatched wildflowers. There was nothing charming about it. We saw nothing we recognized. Later on, Del would find in the house a book on plants and flowers, and we identified some of them as narcissus, toad lilies, bleeding hearts, anise hyssops, wild cabbage, and rhododendrons. Boxwoods and other trees clawed the air for space, their trunks hugged by moss and lichen. Where trees grew close together, their limbs had cleaved together in a way that looked like a duel instead of a romantic embrace. There were places in the garden where sunlight only crouched for brief moments. It was not a hospitable place. This garden, far from charming, was mean.

Del and I were afraid to go into the garden. We were reminded of movies where the actors wandered into a tall field and one by one were dragged out of sight, right in plain view. The kitchen and bedroom had windows that faced the garden, and occasionally we saw the growth there rustling. We believed several animals made their homes there. Sometimes we talked idly about what might be hiding in the garden—hedgehogs, perhaps, and rabbits almost certainly.

As we had arrived late in summer, we watched the browning of the garden. I did my research and Del did her sculpting. She was making death masks then. On weekends we visited estate sales and in this way, slowly filled the house. At the end of November, the garden had mostly been denuded by the winds, but it was still an area of no easy trespass. Now that the leaves had been stripped away, we saw clearly just how hostile the garden was. Brambles and nettles and patches of poison oak, the stems of many thorned flowers and prickly plants that seemed to be in season all year round, were all exposed. I suggested that perhaps we ought to buy rubber boots and walk the garden for once, but shortly after we decided to do this, Del got pregnant and suffered through unending bouts of morning sickness.

We started talking about how we would modify the house for the baby. We didn't know the sex yet, but we got used to thinking of him as a boy. A backyard for him to play in would be nice, Del said, and I agreed. For Christmas, I bought heavy-duty boots, impervious to water, mud, and thorns, for the both of us. A second gift was red strips of adhesive tabs for bookmarking and a modern book of flowers and garden plants. It was very comprehensive. Tab the ones you want in your garden, I told her. My third gift to Del was the promise that we would make over the backyard.

Both our families came to visit us for a week each, and we confided in them our plans for the garden. A small pond for lotuses and lily pads, home for frogs and minnows, things a little boy would surely love. A gazebo we could read under, perhaps even sleep under when the summer was especially hot. Our relatives peered out the window at the garden and wished us luck. Del's mother gave us ten crates of clementines and pomelos—Del had a relentless craving for them; her breath of late

tasted ripe and semisweet. I drove a few boxes over to our neighbors on either side of us, each house a six minute drive away. When they heard about our plans, they donated a few working tools.

I put my own research work on hold and began consulting gardening books. Del started sculpting pots and vases, urns of all shapes. The oven was on nearly all day, glazing the paint, and that was nice because it kept the house even warmer. More and more red tabs edged the pages of the flower book.

Once the snow-swollen river had gone back down and the ice melt had puddled away, I put on the boots and took up a new ax I had purchased at the hardware store, the same place I had gotten the boots. I also had a pair of clippers stuck in my back pocket. I spent two days hacking, cutting, dismantling.

On the third day, Del and I built a bonfire that lasted almost seven days. Del found an old tin of kerosene in the garden shed, which I had unburied, and I dug a pit in the dirt, which Del ringed off with rocks. That was another thing we had discovered—there were a lot of rocks in the garden. Some people had rock gardens; it used to be fashionable, Del said. The rocks didn't look especially special to me, but what did I know? Del started moving the rocks to the side with a shovel so she didn't have to bend over as much. She divided them into two piles. One pile was for rocks we could keep outside, perhaps line a path or border the flowerbeds, and the other was for rocks she intended to wash and put in vases. This was something she had seen in a bridal magazine; wedding guests signed their names and wrote messages on rocks, which were then housed in transparent vases and used as centerpieces.

Del fed the bonfire with the dead growth I pulled from the garden. I dragged over rotting logs, fistfuls of nettles, brambles, even trees. Our clothes and the entire house smelled of woodsmoke. As we purged more of the garden, ripped up more of the unchecked growth, we excavated layers of dirt.

Things we found in the garden: An old iron gate, and the gap in the wall it was supposed to guard; a mound of broken porcelain and one nearly whole cup, as if someone once had a picnic out there and smashed all the plates and such; a rock that was almost a perfect pyramid, which we decided to use as a doorstop; plastic from a children's wading pool; six stone sculptures of tortoises and angels; two broken but mostly intact bottles of a fashionable and expensive men's cologne; some small animal burrow; feathers and fur; depressions in the earth that were killdeer nests, and an actual bird nest that had fallen from a tree; round coffee tins and cans of non-perishables, for, perhaps, some bad storm that might've passed through at one point. When I cut and pushed down a medium-sized tree, an old-fashioned hanging strop and straight razor fell out of a bird-drilled chamber in the trunk. Near Del's feet, where she sat on a stack of cinder blocks, she dipped her fingers in the dirt and plucked out two thimble-sized beads, one made of gold and the other of pearl. We bit these with our teeth, scored the surface of the gold bead and tasted the sandy grain of the other and knew these to be real. She kept searching for more beads, but those were the only two she unearthed.

We also found artifacts that revealed earlier undertakings to tame this garden: nine trowels, four spades without handles, three watering cans without spouts, five shears, a pruning saw, three types of weeders, sprinkler heads and tubes, an unending

length of rubber hose worn through with holes. We were told thirteen families had lived in this house before us, and we found evidence of it.

Ash from the bonfire grew in heavy drifts that blew out of the rock ring and carpeted the dirt. I unspooled an extension cord and set our fan to blowing the ash away from the house. I raked the smaller debris away and uncovered under the tan topsoil a rich, black clay earth, loamy and moist as a dark chocolate cake. Del said, Thank god! And I agreed because I had not been looking forward to buying the good soil we would need to properly foster the flowers we wanted to plant. Del walked through the backyard, eating clementines and dropping skins in the dirt. Just enriching the soil with nutrients, she said cheerfully. So to save even more money on fertilizer, we started tossing out fruit remains, pits and peels, eggshells brown and white, leftover vegetables, corn husks, coffee or tea that had grown cold. The animals had left because we had burned down their burrows, but now the birds came into the yard. Del loved the birds, especially the small, bright ones. She added more tabs to her flower compendium, hunting for flowers that would attract the kinds of birds she most liked.

When the wood had been completely burned out, it was gloaming on the seventh day. We hugged each other close, traded pomelo kisses and sticky clementine touches. I smothered the fire with dirt and sand, stirring the remnants of it with a stick, while Del threw buckets of water over it. We held a careful watch until the hissing stopped, the steam bitten away by the wind. Holding hands, we walked across the garden we had turned soft, boots toeing into the earth, and that’s how we found the bone.

The toe of my boot hit it, and I thought it was another rock. I uncovered one section of it, but it was buried too deeply for the two of us to pry up. It was gray, but Del rubbed her clementine-wet fingers on it and we saw very clearly that it was white. We squatted down and started brushing it off with our hands. I don't know why we didn't immediately call someone professional or even the police. We didn't think it was anything terrible; we were merely very curious. It seemed the garden held no more secrets for us, after all, and here was this object that refused to come out of the earth.

We scratched our fingers through the soil, scrabbled to pull it away. We moved heaps of dirt before we were able to loosen it from its resting place. It was calcified into rock that shone with minerals.

The bone was not human, I saw that very clearly. It was too blunt, too broad, to be any part of a human. Held against my calf and thigh, I saw it was much bigger than a femur. It looked like a breastplate, and it was the size of a shield. There was a break in it, and we saw that the inside had canals and a webbed structure. The texture of it was pitted and porous in places. So—neither plastic nor stone nor ivory. We sat back on our heels and considered it. Perhaps it was a deer, Del suggested. One of the neighbors used to operate a working farm, what if a cow or horse wandered in here and died, she said. But we couldn't figure out what piece of bone this might be.

I carried the bone inside the house and left it on the coffee table after I protected the surface with old newspapers. Even with the light, Del and I couldn't figure out what it was. We handled it much more carefully now. Del covered it with

plastic wrap before bed. In the dark, our hands found each other. We tossed ideas about what the bone could be, where it had come from, how it had ended up there.

In the morning, I went out back again. I saw the hole Del and I had dug. I scuffed the soil around some more with my shoe, then probed the area with my hands. I shouted to Del, Come quick, there might be another one!

The second piece was not quite as wide, but it was broader. I could barely wrap my hand around it. There was a curve to it, like the tusk of an ancient elephant. Del, I said, I think we should call some people to take a look at this. Del looked nervous and excited. She held her belly. She was about to enter the second trimester, and her stomach showed a gentle sloping. I put my hand there, too; the three of us were all sharing in the thrill of our discovery.

I looked up the number of the local museum while Del called her parents. I listened to her chattering away in the kitchen: Listen, Dad, you know how we've been cleaning the garden? You won't believe what we found last night. *Bone*. The size of that antique chest mom bought. Yes, at least. And we found another one. No, we don't know what it is. Haven't a clue. Steven's calling some people right now to come out and take a look.

After she hung up, she gave the phone to me. I dialed the museum and held the phone between us. We sat together on the couch, looking at the two slabs of bone on the coffee table, counting the telephone rings.

An automated voice answered and rattled off the new museum hours. For more information on ticket pricing, press 1. For information on booking tours for large groups, press 2. For other general inquiries, including the option to speak with a

museum staff member, press 3. I pressed 5 by accident and had to hang up and do it all again. Finally a woman answered.

Hello, thank you for calling the Museum of Natural History. How can I help you today?

Hello, I said politely, my wife and I found what appears to be bone in our backyard. We found one piece yesterday and another this morning. I was wondering if I could bring it in, or if someone could drive by our place.

The woman's voice soured a bit, took on the barest hint of lime. You can certainly bring it by the museum, but you should know, it's not uncommon for people to mistake sedimentary rocks for fossilized bone.

My hand closed over Del's. I said patiently, Yes, I understand. However, I don't believe there's any doubt as to what this is. Here's why.

I described the dimensions of the two pieces to her, as well as the texture of the bones.

The lime was gone from her voice now. She started asking other questions: Where exactly did we find it? Are there any other markings on it? Can you describe again what shape are these fossils? How large did you say they were?

Del squeezed my hand. I remained calm.

Are there any other tests we can conduct on our own to determine exactly what this is? I asked her.

No, the woman said, mildly alarmed. No, sir. We'll send someone out there today to take a look at it, if that's convenient for you. If these are real fossils, we don't want to degrade them further.

I understand. Today is fine, I told her, and gave her our address.

You were so wonderful, Del burst out. She nearly didn't believe us, but you were so professional and calm.

We laughed together because neither one of us felt calm. Delight was surging up as uncontrollable hiccups from deep within our chests.

Del wondered, What will happen? What do you think this means?

I thought about it and replied, well, honey, I'm sorry to tell you this but it sounds like we won't be able to build that garden back up just yet.

Of course, of course. Do you think we'll get money for this? Do we own it? Aren't there stories about people finding artifacts in foreign countries that they never get to keep and don't get compensated for? Is there some kind of finder's fee?

Slow down, Del. I'll do some research into this before the person from the museum comes over.

Good, good. We should know these things.

I went off to do some research while Del sat down at her old-fashioned wheel; I heard the mechanical whirring begin as she pressed her foot down on the pedal, but it worked only in short bursts. When Del got really involved in her work, the wheel spun without cease. I could always tell her mood from listening to her throw the clay and work the wheel.

I hadn't done much research before the visitors arrived. It couldn't have been more than an hour since our phone conversation. The museum had sent two people, a curator and a historian, a man and a woman.

I'm Steven, and this is my wife, Delphine.

Would you like something to drink? Del asked.

No, thank you. May we see the objects in question?

Del had taken out a white tablecloth and transferred the bones onto it. We watched anxiously as the two experts examined the bones.

The curator spoke to us as the woman put on gloves and gingerly picked up this morning's find.

Steven, Delphine, I can assure you right away from the shape of these objects that this is almost certainly prehistoric. I am the curator of natural history in our museum, and I can conclusively tell you that this does not belong to a modern mammal.

Oh, Del uttered.

You say you found this right out back?

Yes, in our garden, as you can see. How is this possible?

Are you from this area?

No, we are not.

Well, I've lived here all my life. This place used to be a swamp. My father used to tell me to put my ear to the earth and I could hear the mud of the swamp. The bones of the animals that could not find their way out of it. They drained it of its water and took over a million horsecart loads of earth from this place, but you can still hear it. It's very possible that this is a creature that got itself mired in the swamp.

The historian spoke to her colleague. I can't speak to whether this came from the same creature. It's impossible to accurately date these bones without taking them into a lab. We need to call a specialist.

So they are real then? I asked.

She spared me a brief glance and nodded. We should like to take these into our custody, where we can transfer them safely to a lab. We would also like to send over some more people to take a look around. The fact that these pieces are relatively undamaged leads me to believe that the rest of the remains may be in the same area. Until we can send someone over, I would ask that you and your wife refrain from disturbing the area.

Just a minute! I asked for a consultation. I didn't say you could just come in here and walk out with our property.

The man said quickly, Steven, no one is going to remove anything from your property without your permission. We're asking you to allow us to take these pieces for testing and preservation. These bones have been buried for god knows how many years. This exposure to the air, which is quite different from the air of millions of years ago, is causing irreparable harm to these artifacts. You risk diminishing their value and quality.

I hid my fear and thought fast. How about this, you take one, but leave the other. And you're welcome to take photographs of them now.

The curator attempted to convince me to relinquish both bones, but I held my ground. Finally, the sullen-faced woman went out to their car to retrieve their camera, and they took a huge number of pictures before departing with the tusk-shaped bone.

Del, I said when they departed, I think we need to speak with your brother.

Her brother was an in-house lawyer for an advertising company in Nashville. He mostly dealt with copyright and patent suits. Still, he was the only attorney we

knew, so Del rang him at his house. He said he would get back to us, which was understandable, as this wasn't his area of practice.

Del and I took a long time to fall asleep that night. I felt her, awake and very still, smelled her sweet warm scent mixed with the must of the clay she worked with. I wondered what she was thinking of. That night I turned my pillow over again and again, once every hour, pressing my hot cheeks to the cool side. I thought about what the curator had said. Millions of years ago. From my research I had learned that fossils needed at least ten thousand years to become fossilized. I tried to imagine what the garden looked like millions of years ago, and couldn't. Or perhaps it looked not too different from how we had found it when we first moved in. I let myself be lulled to sleep with dream-memories of my dog. I thought I wanted to find where my dog was buried. I hadn't thought about that dog in years. She was some sort of mixed collie with floppy ears, a loose tongue. She was not the only thing I had buried over the years. When I was a boy, I found a bird that had flown into our garage and killed itself by ramming its body into the window. My mother helped me place its body in a bed of tissue, cushioned inside a plastic chocolate box. I buried it beneath an old pine. Was it still there, and did worms press against the box to look inside, I wondered, and I fell asleep.

Past midnight, my body was convulsed with a fear that it had never happened—no bones found, the garden as it first was. It brought me out of bed. Del was sleeping, her body now a heavy weight. From the bedroom window I could see the freshly moved soil, a sea of black, dotted with the gleam of whale-gray and blue rocks. Still, I wasn't sure. I rushed past the bone, gleaming like the shard of a star, to

the kitchen, to the back door. I unlatched it with a finger and stepped into the beach sandals left there. I rushed outside. My weight bore me down; for a moment it was as though I was sinking into the earth. Wet soil covered my toes, seeped beneath my soles, filled the arches of my feet. It was like running in a snowdrift. Behind me I left footprints too large to be mine. I made my way to the widened hole. I could see the fine webbing of small roots that had escaped my cleansing. I stood there breathing, just breathing, but instead of a swamp, I smelled smoke and ash. I listened to purring crickets, the gurgling river, sagging into the soil. When I finally rejoined Del, I left tracks of dirt on the floor from door to bed.

Del and I were woken early by the telephone ringing.

Is this the residence of Steven and Delphine?

Yes, who is this?

Are you the couple who found the bones in your backyard?

Yes, but—I'm sorry, who are you?

It was a reporter from a local station, whose unexpected call startled Del into answering half the questions before she worked up the nerve to hang up. Even after the phone call ended, Del kept saying in bewilderment, but how did they get our number? Why did they call us? How did they know?

We ate cold cereal standing up. The first bone was still lying on the table, bound up in the plastic wrap, which the museum people reluctantly acknowledged was a good precaution, though not up to their standards. We stood around it, crushing almond and oat clusters with our back teeth.

The museum people were prompt again. This time they sent a team. Leonard, Margaret, Virginia, George, all with doctorates. Two of them hunkered down around the bone, while the other two unpacked tools that they carried to the edge of the garden and lined up against the house. Del and I huddled in the doorframes, observing them work knowledgably. Watching Leonard and Margaret canvas the garden, I was shamed by how cautiously they placed their feet, in a way that was both prudent and surefooted. Margaret, especially, seemed to float above the earth. Del and I watched them kneel down occasionally and brush the dirt aside to reveal the white insides of fruit rinds or tiny drumsticks and wishbones we had tossed out. Leonard took dirt samples into test tubes he carefully labeled and capped.

Around noon they struck pay dirt. Margaret had unearthed the corner of another bone, deeply embedded in rock. Using the tip of her pen, she pointed it out to Leonard. Her teammates brought out brushes, whisk brooms, small picks and trowels. Leonard asked us politely to stay back and watch from the house. Three hours later, it seemed they were no closer to pulling it up than when they first found it. They were going at it much more slowly than Del and I had.

They planted pegs at different spots, and before they left, the four of them unfurled a large yellow canvas by walking backwards in four directions before tying the corners to the tent pins they drove into the earth.

Leonard, the team leader, came to speak with us while his team tidied the equipment and secured the dig. The hardness of his face and hands were undermined by his soft voice. We both felt his hands when we shook in greeting. Leonard wanted to apprise us of the situation. I told him I appreciated that. The thing was, they wanted

written permission from us to continue their excavation. We would also like to you meet the museum director and talk about contributions, donations, you know. You would be doing a great service to the community, and of course we are ready to offer you recompense for any damage done to your land, Leonard said. I told him to wait. Hang on a minute. No one is telling us anything. What exactly have you found? What is it? What manner of species made its grave in our garden?

They didn't know. They were unwilling to air their theories, but neither could they hide their faces from us. From the kitchen window, we watched their marionette movements, as if they had to keep their limbs leashed on a string for their audience. Whatever we had found, it was authentic. It was big. Leonard said what we discovered held huge scientific and historical significance. Something about the age and size of these fossils could possibly skew the currently accepted timeline of evolutionary events.

I held firm again. They could come back, and of course we would like to meet the director, but we would have to discuss this further amongst ourselves.

Del's brother arrived in time for dinner. Bill had mouse-colored hair, thinned at the crown. He was perpetually sharp-eyed and ruddy-cheeked. We got along fine. He took third helpings of Del's cooking, smacking his lips with obvious pleasure. When he had eaten his fill, he dabbed his wet mouth with the napkin and looked at us, considering his words.

I've made a few discreet calls around, Bill said, and as I understand it, you two are potentially sitting on a goldmine.

Del clutched my arm with a hand. I nodded calmly at Bill to continue.

Here are the facts, Bill told us. Some poor saps found bits of pottery and arrowheads and stuff like that—important to museums and anthropologists, but not so desirable to the folks with real money. Private collectors. Now, what we had was something of interest to both the academic field, and the private sector. And this wasn't federal or state land, so no one could take it from us. Anything found on the property belonged to us. If we didn't give permission for archaeologists to excavate the site, they couldn't touch it. Else it would be trespassing and vandalism. And if they *did* do that and we caught them, Bill added, we could sue the pants off them. Point was: there was money to be made here, no matter what the museum said.

How much money? I asked.

Bill said, Don't think about it for now. Don't talk to the press or anyone else about this. Keep 'em all in the dark, you'll generate more interest that way. To his sister he said, You probably won't have to worry about paying for your kid's tuition. And this statement rocked us to the marrow.

As Del cleared the plates away, Bill admired the bone. Looks just like a piece of rock, said Bill. Just a dirty rock. Hey, you know my kid was playing soccer last week. A rock on the field tripped him up, and he busted his ankle. Even with health insurance, it's certainly making a dent. I should bring him by next time. He misses his Aunt Del and Uncle Steve.

In the morning we were woken by loud rapping on the front door. Our neighbors had heard, and they wanted to see it with their own eyes. Since they had given us gloves and shears, we invited them in and showed off the bone. Del had moved it to the dining table without telling me. The neighbors wanted to touch it,

stroke the dips and cracks in it, but we gently said no. I imagined that every touch would cause it to atrophy in some way, perhaps in ways not visible to the naked eye. I told Del we should stop moving it around.

Del started sculpting some sort of display stand. Don't turn on the oven, I warned her. It's too close, the heat can't be good for it.

Then someone, a complete stranger, showed up on our doorstep, jabbering at us in French, craning to see beyond us. I blocked the doorway with my body. Del studied abroad in France in college, and she still remembered a bit of French. The man was a well-known journalist of a documentary show in France, and he wanted to interview us. His camera crew was flying in tomorrow.

Three more reporters showed up—one local, one state, and one from a national syndicate. Their vans crowded our driveway, parked half up on the curb when there was no more room. We barred the door and drew the lace curtains we never got around to replacing. All afternoon their shadows played against the curtains.

The archaeologists returned again. This time they came with the board of trustees and the museum director. Our kitchen was very crowded now. There were not enough chairs, so no one sat. Del brought out sliced cantaloupe, garlic cheese, palm sugar cookies and crackers. Everyone nibbled on the cold food. Del and I stood with our backs to the oven. Around us, the museum people and between us, our bone on the table.

One of the trustees had been designated the speaker for the group. She was a nicely turned-out woman. She wore a gold museum pin on the lapel of her brown

blazer, and a necklace of chunky silver plates flat on her chest. She said they were a small local museum housing reputable collections. Our find would become the main exhibit. They planned to build several other exhibits around it. They had come up with a plan that would certainly appeal to both children and adults. Visitors would come from everywhere—out of state, out of country even. We would have our story of discovery emblazoned on a bronze plaque, prominently displayed. An entire hall would be built, as a matter of fact, and it would be named after us. We wouldn't have to make any financial contributions; on the contrary, the museum wanted to pay us.

I played along, and, encouraged, they declared they wanted to take us to the museum; we would be served a six-course luncheon there. We couldn't refuse, and we didn't want to. Del loved it. As the lunch wound down, the trustees and directors toasted us. Del and I raised our glasses, but I made sure not to commit to anything. A trustee said we were now considered one of the museum's charitable donors, and they presented us with a thick vellum envelope, our names in pristine gold lettering embossed upon it. Inside was a gift card for the town department store. A token of our appreciation, a little scroll of paper inside read, like a fortune. We shook hands until our palms stung with aching.

We went to the department store and registered the gift card. Amazing! Del and I went floor to floor. We bought up basketfuls of baby things. On the first floor in the jewelry department, I bought Del a necklace with a piece of amber shaped like a honeycomb, glowing as if from within. The sales assistant cut the tags off for us right in the store.

More journalists had arrived when we were out. A few of our neighbors stood in the middle of the road, talking to each other and with the reporters. We waved and hurried inside. The telephone rang and rang. Del and I took turns answering it. That night we received a call from someone in Prague. His sorghum accent was wildly exotic. He wanted any bones we might find in the backyard. I will fly out to see them in person, he informed us. Please do not sell them until I arrive. These objects are priceless to me. After his call, the telephone kept ringing. We would need an answering machine. People from different time zones kept calling us. We finally had to turn down the ringer so we could sleep.

The archaeologists came earlier and earlier each day. Today they were going to bring the other bone fossil they'd found to the surface. They were very happy about their progress, until it was interrupted by a journalist who had snuck around back and stood at the stone wall, shouting questions at them. Del went outside to pass around bottles of water, and he shouted at her, too. When Del came back, her face was the color of new milk, and I knew I had to take her out of there for a while. Just as we were leaving, the man in Prague called again. No, I told him firmly, I haven't given the bones away yet, so please remain calm, sir.

We visited several buildings in town. At the bank, the branch manager brought us to his desk and started talking about extending our line of credit. Shop assistants were attentive to Del. People in the street came up to us to make conversation. No one was crass enough to ask what was going on at our house, but it was clear they were angling for invitations. The trip to town tired Del, and we headed back earlier than expected. We stood in the kitchen, sharing the small space with the

bone on the table. Del made a move to cut up some apples for us—the clementines and pomelos were gone—but ended up emptying the bowl in the trash. A millipede had crawled onto the kitchen counter and made its home inside the soft flesh of an apple. Del felt sure the rest of it was just as contaminated. I listened to the thudding of each apple hitting the bin. The day ended.

That night was unseasonably warm. I thought about the gazebo we had wanted to build. We threw back the covers, lay under a thin sheet and shivered in our film of sweat. Del's hand was slick; our palms made a pocket that was hot and sweaty. It felt like we held a breathing ember trapped between our hands. I disentangled our fingers.

Past midnight, our sweat had cooled on our bodies and I woke, chilled. I saw a shadow move past our bedroom window. My fingers bit into Del's shoulder. I pushed the phone at her. Call the police, I mouthed.

Two figures were moving around our garden, their backs bent. They were stabbing long picks into the dirt, having peeled back the yellow canvas to expose the black soil. I was enraged by this trespass. I wished for a gun. I didn't have one. I found my hand reaching into Del's urn of rocks. I grabbed up a rock with one hand, cradled the urn under my other armpit, and kicked the back door open. They were trapped under the low moon, and I hurled the rock at one of the shadows. I threw them, rapid-fire, my arm a mechanical thing. I heard each thud so clearly, I almost felt it. They cried out and made for the low stone wall, throwing themselves over it. I had emptied almost half the urn of the good rocks.

The police came with flashing lights and sirens. They stormed into our backyard, batons at ready, hands on the butt of their guns. Instead of taking down our descriptions of the intruders, they seemed more concerned with what damage the intruders might have done. What might have been stolen. They looked closely at the holes, filling their eyes with stories they could go home and tell their wives and friends.

When the police left, Del and I tucked the garden back under the canvas. Our legs and arms were streaked with dirt. We were too tired to shower, so we sprayed our limbs under the hose until the earth around us moved like a black snake. We were too tired for sleep, so we sat on the couch, leaning against one another. In the darkness I felt for Del's stomach, a small round drum that I petted. We stayed that way, a still life portrait, until the archaeologists returned at seven.

In the rise of the pale sun, I saw thorny nettles poking through the overturned dirt, the deep furrows left by our trampling feet, the gouges of disturbed earth. The archaeologists were emptying out all the loam. Their carving left me sick. I wished intensely for the bone to be returned, to be gotten rid of. I went inside and told Del I was going to the hardware store again. I was going to buy up bags of salt. I was going to seed it in the soil, stamp out the last bit of that ancient swamp for good.

It Doesn't Mean Anything

Last month I found in the school library a book of ancient mythologies. It was mostly a picture book, with a lot of color pencil sketches of different gods and goddesses. It seemed like all one had to do was shout a god's name, and he would appear before the mortal in need. One tribe of people never spoke the name of a deceased person. To do so would pull the person back from the afterlife, and the dead would be unable to rest in peace. I remember thinking this was the awfulest thing I had ever read because until then, until a month ago, I had never even thought to ask about my mother's name. She was, after all, just my mother to me. And now that it occurred to me to find out, I couldn't even ask my father or Lily what it was. I endeavored to find out though, and I found it at last in an old card, made from expensive cardstock with grooves that fill my fingertips, the color of a new egg. It was a picture of a baby cradle surrounded by a forest of celebrating animals—the dancing bear with the red bandana around its neck, holding a tambourine in his paw, the moose with a "congratulations" banner strung from its antlers, three leaping rabbits throwing confetti. It read: Dear Nick and Evangeline, congratulations on your baby girl. My parents must not have shared any other information beyond my gender with this well-wisher yet though, or else they must not have been very close, because there was nothing else personalized about the card.

My name is Meg, and it has been my name since I was nineteen months old and my father married Lily and she renamed me. We don't talk about my first name. It's on my birth certificate, but I don't know where that is. I tried to look it up on the

Internet, but maybe I didn't look in the right places because I keep getting asked to join with my credit card, and I don't have a credit card.

I told Lily that I wouldn't want to be called by my true name. I just wanted to hold it close to me, like a worry stone or a charm. Lily said that Meg *was* my true name. She said if I couldn't remember having another name, then the other name didn't exist.

That can't be true. I have heard my name whispered in my ear at night, always in the early hours when it's night for some people and morning for others, when the line between two planes of life is lowered. In the morning when I wake, my name is a dream I've forgotten. I only know that I've had it. I have felt it as a tickle in my throat, like a sneeze almost, and I just need to cough or burp it out.

Lily said, Meg is short for Meaghan, my mother's name, that's your grandmother, and I always wanted to name a little girl after my mother in some way.

I looked up the meaning of Meg and I told Lily, Meg is not short for Meaghan, it's short for Margaret, and it doesn't even have a meaning. It's just the name of some saint.

Lily told me to leave the kitchen because we were having people over for dinner, and unless I was going to help cook, she didn't have time to talk about it with me right then.

So I left the kitchen and went to the blue room. That was last week.

When my father married Lily, we moved houses. Our old house had many straight corridors and many doors that all seemed to open into each room. Each room had a wall of glass windows, and the bathrooms had round cubbyhole windows, sunk

into the walls. There was an attic, and a basement. The old house was out in the country, and in the winter, my mother and father would take walks by the river until they found a tree they both agreed would make a fine Christmas tree. I was told this story. I have seen the photos of myself wearing a yellow romper and a flowered bib, stretching out all my limbs on a blanket in front of the Christmas tree. After we moved, my father never brought home real Christmas trees again; we have a plastic one that can be unscrewed and folded into parts. My father puts the tree together, extends the poles of its frame, the three of us dress it, and I unmake it in the New Year. My father, Lily and I take walks together, but only on Christmas Eve, when we walk upon well-lit streets and look at the strings of lights. That's the only time we take walks together, just once a year. Our breaths fogged from our mouths, my father's heirloom pipe clamped tightly between his teeth, and Lily clinging to my father's arm with both of her small hands. And me, always pulling up the wrists of my mittens. I have large hands and thin wrists. I have my father's hands.

Our new house is an apartment in a condominium in a neighborhood of actual houses. Lily chose the floors and the walls and the windows. Every room has its own color. I live in the peach room. My father and Lily live in the red room. The living room is the brown room, the kitchen is the yellow room. The big bathroom is white, mine is pink. The dining room is apricot orange. The study room is blue.

We still live near our old house. If I miss the school bus, I can walk right by the street. Last July, when two banks in town closed and the air-conditioning in the apartment broke, I walked to the old house. Sometimes I went for months without walking near it, and there was a For Sale post by the mailbox. There was a woman

standing in the front yard on a stepladder, pulling down plums and dropping them into a box. Two kids were picking through the plums on the grass. I knew this woman. I knew she didn't live there. She was always taking fruit from empty houses.

I asked Lily why she would do that. Lily got mad at me when she learned I was still going there. Then she told me the woman shouldn't be doing that because unless she bought the house, it was stealing. Then when my father came home, she told on me. I didn't get in trouble that time though because I was already sleeping when Father came back. This was when he had to work late a lot to keep his job. In the morning Lily said he was disappointed in me and that I should stop doing it, but I don't know if he really said that or not; he never brought it up.

My father reminds me that Lily is the only mother I have known. Lily dressed me and held me, shook me and burped me on her shoulder, cupped my head in her hand. It was only natural, he said, that Lily named me, because I belonged to Lily.

Today I was rereading the book of mythologies in the blue room. The inside cover has a card with due date stamps on it. No one else has borrowed this book, ever. I just keep renewing it. This string of stamped dates is mine.

Lily came in said we were having another guest over for dinner. We usually have someone eat with us at least once a week. My father and Lily like to have guests. They like to talk. On the right subject, they can talk until my bedtime, until I fall asleep, and even until I get up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom. My name is not the right subject. Neither is my mother, who killed herself. Usually Father and Lily don't repeat guests in a month, so at least once a week my father and Lily introduce me as their daughter, Meg, in sixth grade.

Lily told me to change my clothes. I had last period gym so I was wearing my uniform still. But I didn't sweat, because we were doing the archery unit. We stood behind the line, walked not ran to the straw targets to collect the arrows, and then waited for our next turn. I told Lily this. I said I didn't need to change because my clothes were clean. Because I didn't sweat.

"You don't wear your gym clothes to dinner, Meg," Lily said.

I suppose I got started thinking about this at the beginning of the new school year in Mr. Flagg's first period English class. Mr. Flagg got this idea to create a classroom weblog to replace our regular spiral-bound reading journals. First he asked if any of us had blogs or used blogs, which is a stupid question, if you ask me, because if any of us did—and I know for a fact that some of us do—no one was going to say anything about it. I was right; no one raised a hand. Mr. Flagg was always trying to communicate with us on our level, and the blog was just another one of his experiments to get us engaged. He gave us forms for our parents to look over, explaining the project and goals. Most of it was about how the blog needed to be open to the public and not just our class. Mr. Flagg said he understood if some of us might be uncomfortable "sharing ourselves" with the Internet, so he was not only giving us permission to make up pseudonyms, or "nom de plumes" he called it, he was making it mandatory.

Some people kept their blog handles private, but Harris Barker told everyone around him that his name would be Ben Dover. Ha, ha. I pretended to laugh. I pretend

to laugh a lot at school. Not because I don't get the jokes, because I do. I always get the jokes before anyone else does. I just don't find them amusing.

Sarah Horwath said her name would be Simone Sinead, and her best friend Maria chose Leandra Calliope. But I couldn't pick one. I sat there writing out a list of names. Mr. Flagg passed out a sign-up sheet with a column for our pen names and a column for our email addresses so he could email us our login information. I put my email down and wrote "undecided" in the other column. The list made its way back up to the front of the room, and Mr. Flagg scanned it. He looked up and smiled.

"Sarah, you chose a lovely alias. That's sounds like a journalist's name."

Simone Sinead. I turned the name over and over on my tongue, tasting it silently. What Mr. Flagg said locked into my brain and imprinted in my mind. I envisioned Sarah's pen name emblazoned in gold on the cover of a paperback book; I saw it stamped in blocky letters, in tiny typeface on a newspaper. I saw it spray-painted on a brick wall, carved into the wood of a desk, etched onto the base of a trophy, engraved on the side of a gold cup.

At lunch Dancy brainstormed names with me even though she didn't have Mr. Flagg for English. We thought of Meaghan, Morgan, Nora, Regine, Roanne, Veronica. None of them sat right with me.

True names have a coded power. A name is something to hold on to. The truest part of someone. My name is what I am defined by. I feel that I am living a lie under Meg.

That night for the first time I dreamed of a person who knew my name. I couldn't get close enough to see if this person was a man or woman, young or old. I

saw everything through the long lens of an old-fashioned brass telescope. The stranger stood on a small island, across a wide expanse of sea. An immense blue whale, frothing gray and white breakers, swallowed the island, and the stranger. The whale sank into the sea, and I was left clutching the telescope to my eye.

When Mr. Flagg asked me for my pseudonym, I told him Meg *was* my alias. I told him how my name had been officially changed when I was a baby. The conversation went like this:

Mr. Flagg: Meg, I am disappointed in you. Your homework assignment was to create a pen name.

Me: But like I said—

Mr. Flagg: Your classmates are already registered and logged into the blog, Meg.

Me: I know, but I told you—

Mr. Flagg: Do you know why I'm asking everyone to use a pen name?

Me: Sure. It's because we'll feel comfortable writing personally.

Mr. Flagg: That's part of it. The other part is that it's supposed to be *fun*. You can try on a different persona and write in the voice of that persona. For example, you could have chosen a name of the opposite gender, like Brendan did.

Me: So I write like I'm supposed to be a boy?

Mr. Flagg: You could, if you wanted to.

Me: I don't really want to, Mr. Flagg.

Mr. Flagg: I'm not finished with that example, Meg. Say you chose a male pen name, like Zach. You might try to imagine who this Zach person is like. When

you respond to the reading, 'Zach' might make comments that Meg normally wouldn't. You'll be experimenting, pushing the boundaries.

Me: But that's how I feel about using Meg; I'm not really a Meg.

Mr. Flagg: …

Me: …

Mr. Flagg: Meg, this project is twenty percent of your final grade. Not to mention it accounts for your participation in this class.

Me: …

Mr. Flagg: This is intended to be a fun exercise, but you need to take it seriously as an assignment and get in the spirit of things.

Me: I'm trying to. I am trying.

Mr. Flagg: You could choose the name of someone close to you—you don't have to completely make up something out of the blue. You can pick a name that holds some special meaning for you.

Me: It's just…Meg is not my real name. So it *is* a pen name for me.

Neither one of us would back down. Finally Mr. Flagg said, "Historically, there have been people who adopt just one letter as their signature. Why don't you choose a letter?"

So right now my name on the blog is M.

Another dream I had was about a boy about my age. He was bound in a knot of magic, and he was only able to unbind himself if someone on the outside spoke his true name. Then the knot would fall away. But he had forgotten his name a long ago. People walked by and gave him quarters if he guessed their names right.

The other thing I like to do is find swimming pools. I do this every fall. Our old house had a pool. There is something about an empty swimming pool that I have am unable to resist. Empty of water, sleek, pale white concrete with the gently curved slopes…rough and smooth limestone textures. Dry dead things cover the inside, leaves and dirt, windblown detritus. I like walking slowly into this white, man-made hole shaped like a bean, watching the world disappear from view. I could make the sun set and the trees shrink. I could bring the world to level with the edge of the pool until only the blue sky covered me. I could see, in the sky, in my mind's eye, my name in sky-writing, piped out by a cherry-red two-engine plane, in cursive.

As soon as the weather turns cold and people drain their pools, I walk through backyards, searching for empty pools that are full of quiet.

Maybe I took a permanent marker from the classroom art supplies at school. Maybe I wrote different names in different swimming pools. Really small, so the owners would never notice once the pools were filled in again.

Every fall, I visited the marked pools at least once. I kept trying to find new ones. I thought that next year, I might have to get a bicycle so I could go to other neighborhoods. I could look up satellite pictures on the Internet and look at the neighborhood from top-down, but that would be cheating. I liked to guess which houses might have pools. Even though I was good at guessing, it was still a surprise to find one waiting for me.

Lily cried when she came home from the parent-teacher conference. Mr. Flagg told her about our standoff over the pseudonym. He also told them about how I

don't answer when he calls on me by name. Father yelled at me, and I went to bed early. When I finally fell asleep, I dreamed a spider spun my name in the top corner of my room, and then dropped dead on my desk.

My father and I do not speak of my mother. Lily insists that the memory of my mother's death is too painful for my father to talk about. I know only the barest details: my father was away from home, my mother was alone with me. Her mother—the grandmother I have never seen—had already gone back to Denver. My father traveled a lot back then, flying around to help set up new offices of his law firm in big cities. He doesn't do that anymore, but he used to, when he was living with my mother and they had me. When my mother died, he was away on a trip. I don't know to which city. I don't know if he called home every night. I don't know what rituals he and my mother had. There are many things I do not know about our lives back then. My mother had run to grocery store late at night. For what, I don't know. Maybe she wanted yogurt. Maybe I needed diapers. Lily told me that I was a fussy baby, a picky eater, and my mother had to mix a special formula for me. Perhaps that night my mother had run out of formula. Maybe I was making a fuss.

Anyway, my mother took me to the neighbors, a couple who already had four children, asked them to look after me for half an hour while she drove to the store. My father never told Lily their names; I don't know who they were. If they were black or white or Asian. My mother hadn't left a number. My father was the only one who had a cellular phone then. After an hour, the husband went next door. Our car—what model, what color, how many seats? I don't know, will never know—was still

in the driveway. He thought my mother might have come back from the store and fallen down inside, so he went into our house. He found my mother in the bedroom, and he knew immediately that there was nothing to be done except to call the police.

This is all what Lily told me. But it's no secret: Everyone in our family knows that my mother killed herself.

Tonight's dinner guest had ruffled, uncombed hair. He was thin, skinnier and taller than my father, though not as attractive. He had hair on the pale backs of his fingers, and a beard that covered his chin and upper lip. He was left-handed, and he switched the knife and fork around. He was a friend of my father's, but he was also my mother's friend, and his name was Oscar. When Father went to help Lily with dessert in the kitchen, I told him he was the first Oscar I had ever met.

"I guess there aren't too many Oscars around," he said.

"Did you go to school with my mom?"

"No," he said. "I dated your mom, it was a long time ago."

"Really." I gave him my flat eyes, something I copied from Rebecca Mackey at school.

"Yeah," he said. "She and your dad were just friends then. She introduced us. Even when your mom and I ended things, I stayed friends with both of them. I'm still friends with your dad."

"Why did you break up with my mom?"

"I got a promotion, moved to Chicago to a new division in my company. The hours were bad. She got tired of waiting around for me. We knew each other pretty

good though. We did everything together, for a time. Your mom was a fun lady. She might've had a little too much pride, but there's not anything wrong with that."

"No," I agreed.

"I was going to ask her to marry me. We had always talked about buying a house, moving out to the coast. Not to California though. We used to argue a lot about the kind of dog we would get. She wanted a big one, with a lot of hair. I wanted something medium-sized, like a beagle or one of those bearded terriers."

His face got all distant, and he rubbed his lip, scratching his fingers over the dark beard. I looked at him and saw a stranger who had, for a time, touched my mother and was touched back.

"We even named the kids we would have."

"What did you call them?" My urgency tastes citrusy, like a lemon drop. I seal my lips closed so I don't talk over him or interrupt him.

"Oh, I don't know. I think it was Calvin, for a boy, so he could be called Cal for short. Rachel for a girl."

I'll tell you what I didn't feel: I didn't feel a bone-deep recognition like I thought I would. It came so suddenly out of his mouth, I was startled. If he had said my name, my true name, it would wrenched something in me, just levered me wide open. It would have been like a silver bell being struck at ten o'clock at night in winter. Rachel was misshapen, wrong, thinking to myself Hi-my-name-is-Rachel felt like someone poured tar over me from the top of my head.

I told him, "Want to visit my mother? I know where she is buried."

He said, “Ahh,” and looked around for Father and Lily. I could hear Lily in the kitchen, and I knew Father would be changing out of his work clothes. Else I wouldn’t have asked.

“You can pay your respects,” I said. “We have time. Lily doesn’t serve dinner for another half an hour, and it’s only ten minutes away by car.”

“Okay. Yeah, sure. Let me tell your parents.”

Father and Lily were not happy, but they didn’t show it. They also didn’t offer to come. I knew they wouldn’t.

In the car, I shared with him a quote I read in a book. “‘When I like people immensely I never tell their names to any one. It is like surrendering a part of them. I have grown to love secrecy.’”

“That’s nice, I can see that. Where’s that from?”

“Oscar Wilde.”

“You’re reading Oscar Wilde in school?”

“No. I found it in the library by myself.”

“You like to read a lot?”

“I guess.”

“Your mom did, too.”

I gave him directions to the Roselawn Cemetary. It was too far for me to go on my own, but I knew where it was because the school bus drives by it. Right beside the cemetery is the edge of a wilderness park, where people go hiking and camping. Oscar parked the car in the spot I chose—it was closest—and then we walked to my mother’s plot. He stood over her grave and read the headstone, but it only said the

same thing all the other headstones said. I knew the names of the people around her, too, so instead I looked at the park. Someone camping there because I could see smoke. The trees looked black from where we were standing.

I said, “Are you sure you remember right, about the names? Calvin and Rachel?”

“I guess. I don’t know. It was a long time ago.”

“It just doesn’t seem like Rachel was special.”

“It was just a name that we both liked and agreed on at the same time,” he said.

“There weren’t any other names? You didn’t have a list?”

“No, Meg.” He gave me a friendly smile. He reminded me of Mr. Flagg. They both had brown hair and eyes. “Why all the questions about names?”

“I just don’t think my mom would have called me Rachel. For no reason.”

“There might have been a reason, I just can’t remember it.”

He turned his feet in the direction of the car. The sun was almost gone now, and the cemetery felt wet even though there was no rain, no sprinklers turned on just yet. My feet followed Oscar.

“Can you try? Do you think you might have anything of my mom’s that like, maybe she wrote a list down on? Some people do that.”

“I don’t remember, but I do know that your mom wasn’t a list-making person. You should probably ask your dad, Meg.”

“My name’s not Meg. That’s why I’m asking. I’m trying to figure it out.”

We reached the car. Oscar unlocked the car door on my side. He made it look harder than it is. He opened the door for me and then walked over to his side. I stood outside the car.

“Did you hear me? I said my name isn’t Meg. Don’t call me that.”

“Okay, okay. I won’t. I’m sorry I can’t help you with the names. But we need to get back home to your dad.”

His beard reminded me of the bear on the congratulations baby card. He was even wearing a plaid red shirt. I wanted to grow a forest in a swimming pool. I would sit in it all day, root my feet into the forest floor and feel the limestone underneath. And all the seeds I planted to bloom my name. I slammed the car door shut very hard, very loud, I know it thundered through the entire car. Oscar shouted, “MEG!” I didn’t look back. I ran towards the forest of black trees, and I thought maybe the smoke curling at their piney tops curled in a way that spelled my name.

The Seaside Summer

Claudia's father broke the news as they were sitting down to dinner. Claudia was scratching her fork across the empty plate, waiting for her mother to finish bringing out the dinner so they could all begin to eat. They were having Claudia's favorite: breaded pork chops. There was also a side of snap peas and grape tomatoes from their backyard.

Her father had changed his clothes, and he was enjoying his after work cigarette. He was trying to quit, but he said the after work cigarette didn't count. That was Claudia's job: setting the table, which included bringing the ashtray. The ashtray was a bowl Claudia had made in art class when she was in fifth grade. Her mother used it as a sugar cube bowl when her friends used to come over for tea a lot. Then it was a dipping bowl for a while, until one year Claudia couldn't think of anything to give her father for Christmas and feeling guilty, she wrapped the bowl in some wrapping paper her mother had saved (from a gift from her cousins). Her father pronounced it the best gift she had given him, and joked that she ought to make him a second one to keep at work.

Once her mother finished dividing portions onto their plates, her father took a bite, wiped his thin lips with a napkin. "I have good news. I got the promotion at work."

Her mother dropped her fork on the table and reached over to cover his hand. "Paul, that's wonderful! And you thought they were going to give it to Greg."

"Well, that's what I thought." Claudia's father picked up his fork again, and her mother folded her hand back into her lap. "So I have a treat for the both of you. We'll be spending a month with Phil and his kids this summer."

"Oh, but—where?"

"They always go to the beach. We'll join them. I'll talk to Phil; we'll pick a place. You should talk to Elaine, see what we need to bring."

They had never stayed at the beach before. When Claudia had been much younger, supposedly they had gone as a family to the beach at least once a week in the hot months. But apparently there was a period when she grew fussy with the long drives, and her father finally said that there would be no more trips to the beach. She couldn't really remember any of those trips. She had been too young to do much except sit in the sand, so there were no souvenirs or evidence that they had ever gone.

"Is the water going to be hot or cold?" she asked, thinking out loud. "Can we swim in the ocean?"

Her father looked at her and sighed. "Don't play with your food like that, Claud."

"But I like eating it this way." She always nibbled off the breaded layer first, exposing the white meat before chewing it slowly. Sometimes she didn't even eat the meat part.

"Let her eat however she wants," her mother said. She gave Claudia another pork chop from her own plate, just the skin and breadcrumbs part.

“It shows that you were raised without any manners,” her father said. He stopped cutting up the meat and pointed his knife at Claudia. “No one will want to take you out to eat if you pick at your food like that.”

So this was her father’s treat, understood as such by both Claudia and her mother: summer at the beach. Otherwise, usually they stayed in town and Claudia went to Camp Cosmos, which was a science camp where they mucked around in the creek collecting specimens. Her mother would drive Claudia to and from Camp Cosmos and accept the mementos of beaded friendship bracelets and braided plastic lanyards for safekeeping. Every week her mother would drive to a nicer grocery store than the one they normally went to and select summer fruit: plums and peaches and watermelon. Always there was watermelon; it was a family favorite. On two separate occasions Claudia had been with her mother when she was choosing a watermelon. Her mother rapped her knuckles on each melon, slapped at it to hear the hollow thock. It took her mother a long time to select watermelon. She would let the store boy help carry the bags out to the car, but her mother always held the watermelon herself, bearing it into the backseat and instructing Claudia to hold it in place during the drive. Claudia thought that her mother drove slower when there was a watermelon in the backseat. At home, the watermelon soaked in a tub of cold water until evening. It was turned every hour, and ice water dribbled over it. They ate the crisp and sugary fruit to the rinds for dessert.

Claudia was used to this. She was used to the days when she came home early from camp and spent it with her mother, while her father was working. They had fun

together. She leaned against the broken dishwasher that night as her mother washed the dishes.

“Are you excited, Claudia?”

“I guess so.”

“You should be! Sea air is very healthy. And we’ll get to spend all this time together for once. Your father just needs a vacation.”

Their two families rented a small cottage in a seaside town for one month of the summer—half of the end of June, and the first two weeks of July. The salt-encrusted house had three bedrooms with scarred furniture and slightly mildewed carpet. Her uncle and aunt took up the master, and her parents took the other room closest to the bathroom. She had to stay in the children’s room with her cousins, who immediately claimed the top and bottom bunks, abandoning Claudia to the collapsible cot. The vacationing owners had put all the valuable and precious things away, so the house seemed noticeably stripped. There were empty spaces on the mantel, and the bookshelves showed gaps, like missing teeth. Still, there were odd flourishes here and there that the owners hadn’t stowed away. On the very first day, Claudia had seen something winking in the ceiling of their room. When Claudia was left alone, she climbed onto the top bunk. The ceiling plaster was embedded with marbles, blasted there like missiles, and she rubbed the dust off with her sleeves so they looked like little planets, her own galaxy. Then one of her cousins—who had claimed the top bunk—returned and drilled his fist into her leg, dangling off the bunk, so she had to get off the bed.

It took her three days to get used to the tides. The first night in the house, the ocean crashed roughly onto the rocks. By the end of the week, she thought the pockets of silence in the town shops felt too silent.

The town was a one-of-everything sort of town: it had one grocery store, one gas station, one ice cream parlor, one bookstore, one point on the pier where spotted seals lazed. The houses, too, looked much the same: the sun and ocean had bleached and stripped the houses of layers and layers of whitewash paint. Each house had a small patch of front yard, with scrub bush and peeling trees, the bark shredded from the weather. Claudia explored the entire town in one week, and she reported back her findings to her father.

"If you're bored, it's your fault," her father told her as he smoked and at the same time swatted at flies on the wraparound porch.

"I'm not bored," Claudia defended, "I was just telling you that it's different."

"Don't state the obvious," her father said. He blew out a funnel of smoke and pitched the cigarette into the sand. "You get that from your mother. When you're with your friends, I hope you don't go around saying the obvious things."

Claudia left him alone then. He was not on vacation from himself.

The best part about staying in someone else's home was eating out all the time. Mostly this was because her father had to pay the security deposit, and he didn't want them mucking up the kitchen. They ate out for practically every dinner, at restaurants where the waiters told them about the freshest catch of the day and where it had been caught and hauled in from.

Claudia's mother was allergic to shellfish, so she had to order greens and sandwiches made of crusty peasant bread and grilled pepper sausages. Her father ordered clam chowders, succulent oysters, deep fried crabcakes, and made Claudia try everything.

"It's polite. Otherwise you're disrespecting the chef, and your host, the man who's paying the bills," he told her. "Seafood is a delicacy. Not everyone can appreciate good food. If you order seafood off the menu, it shows people you're worldly. It shows them you're cultured."

Claudia tasted flounder filet, broiled lobster, jumbo shrimp, grouper, yellowfin tuna, Atlantic ocean perch, and of clams there were cherrystones and littlenecks. Fish was fried, broiled, baked, sautéed. It all tasted salty, had the tang of something metallic, and the texture was flaky. She didn't like it, but she could eat it.

The house they were renting came with bicycles, and Claudia spent a lot of time pedaling the streets by herself, riding through soft piles of sand. She didn't like to spend time with her cousins. They were twins, constantly speaking the longtime language of a secret shorthand. They were older than her, just by one year, but that one year made all the difference: they were in high school, and she was still in middle school. This divide was keenly felt by them all, so no matter how much her mother urged her to play with her cousins, Claudia didn't.

This town was located farther up north where property was cheaper, but that meant the beaches were too cold for swimming, even with a wetsuit on. Claudia was disappointed, and she felt cheated. When she told her class about what she did over

the summer, she would not tell everyone that she didn't even get to go swimming in the ocean. Anyway, Maria, who was usually her best and closest friend, would always top her. If Claudia said she went to Camp Cosmos and got to mix things in test tubes, Maria got to go to NASA camp and float around in an anti-gravity container. If Claudia said she spent her summer living by the ocean, Maria would've got to swim with dolphins at a marine biology program.

It was Saturday, exactly midway through their summer month, and close to the Fourth of July. A parade of RVs had begun driving in, backing up traffic for miles. The houses lining the oceanfront were all filled, and the nearby campground was completely filled up with trailers and rented RVs, the trailers lined in rows like zipper teeth.

The wind whipped in from the sea, slipping into the collar of her windbreaker jacket and touching her neck like cold fingers. Claudia ducked her head down and pedaled harder through the mist. The air was white and wet, and she imagined it was made up of the same substance as clouds.

Claudia was waiting at a red light on Main Street when she saw a sign with an address and the words GARAGE SALE in heavy marker pen, tacked to a telephone pole. The address was a shingled house lined with flower boxes. Furniture was scattered across the lawn. The heavy pieces sunk into the damp grass and listed at angles like so many shipwrecks. People were drifting up and down the driveway, digging through piles of junk.

Claudia wandered up the driveway. She was too tired to rummage through the stacks and boxes, and she decided to sit for a moment at a pale blond wood writing

desk. From her vantage point, she saw Christmas lights and ornaments trailing out of a cardboard box, collectible dinner plates from Disneyland on the table.

"Sorry," said a man. "But I just bought this chair."

She got up, wondering why he hadn't bought the desk, too. She walked over to rummage through the boxes. She found a comb made of whalebone, studded with pieces of seashells and pearls: $15. She found a handy pocketknife with a mermaid carved into the handle: $3. She wanted both pieces, but she knew she could never get money for them. As she straddled her bike and prepared to kick off the curb, a red truck reversed up the driveway, blocking up the sidewalk. Three people spilled out of the cab; the woman waved at the homeowner.

"I'm back, and I brought my strongmen like I said I would," she said, smiling and pointing to her husband and son.

They surrounded an old-fashioned lady's vanity table that could be turned into a letter writing desk. It was a heavy piece, with a large mirror attached.

Claudia sat on the bike and watched with lazy interest as the men braced their palms beneath the desk and lifted it up. They had to lift it quite high to get it into the truck bed. As they did so, they tilted the desk at a sharp angle, and the single drawer of the vanity shot open. A small box came flying out; it landed in the grass upside down, unnoticed by the movers.

"Hey!" Claudia called. She pointed at the grass. "Something just fell out."

"Keep it!" the man called back with a groan. With a final heave, they lifted the desk into the truck. In no time at all, they were off.

Claudia retrieved the box. It was dirty looking, the silver tarnished and brown, with an embossed design on it. It had a small wind-up key underneath it, and she gave it a couple quick turns. When she lifted the lid, it played a charming single-note version of Beethoven's Für Elise. It reminded her of ice cream trucks. She imagined it would look neat once the powder had been cleaned out and she got the chance to polish it up a bit.

The homeowner wandered over. "Oh, that must be some rogue," she remarked. "Go ahead and take that with you. If there's anything left, I'll just have to lug it all back inside."

When Claudia got home, it was time for dinner. Her mother had made potatoes. No gravy, but there was melted butter and grated cheese. A spoonful scoop of sour cream, too. There was a shrimp and tomato salad. It seemed like they had shrimp every day here. Claudia wasn't supposed to complain about it because shrimp was more expensive back home, and her father loved eating it. Her mother had to cover her nose and mouth with a mask and wear transparent gloves to prepare the shrimp, which she was cooking in some new form at least once a week. Claudia only liked it when it was cooked in crispy batter, that way it didn't feel so slippery.

After dinner, her father went out for a walk like he always did. Her mother, cleaning the kitchen, asked Claudia if she wanted to go for a walk as well, but she said no. She planned to clean up the music box instead. She carried it into the house and took it to the kitchen sink.

She thought about dumping out the powder, but decided she might be able to use it in someway. For an art project, maybe. She carefully wiped down the box with a dampened towel, rubbing away layers of dust until it wasn't exactly sparkling, but at least she could see the embossing, the inlaid gold filigree. It still had a bit of tension left from when she had wound it up earlier, and the one note song strained away into the living room to her mother, who came over.

"Oh, what a lovely box," she remarked. "Does it belong to the owners? You don't want to be touching their things or we'll lose the security deposit."

"No, I got it for free at a driveway sale today."

Her mother picked up the lid and sniffed at the powder.

"This must have been very expensive back in the day," her mother confided. "You can tell, it's still got some color to it. And it doesn't feel like chalk. They don't make cosmetics like this anymore now. Nothing lasts because they want you to keep buying more and more." She replaced the lid and said teasingly, "Don't go putting it on in front of your father now or he'll scold us both."

"I don't know how to put it on."

Her mother surveyed her through the mirror. "Well, there's no harm in showing you, is there? Here, let me get my own brush." She went into the bedroom and came back with a hard flat case. Inside, there were three squares of different colors: coral, rose, and a shimmery pale pink. Her mother took up a short brush and dusted Claudia's nose with the soft bristles.

"Now watch me," her mother instructed.

Claudia watched carefully as her mother dabbed the brush into the powder, blew lightly on it, and applied it to her cheeks in short strokes. Her mother's hands were thin and chapped, marred with red from handling so much seafood; there were small white bumps clustered around the fingertips from soaking her hands in dishwater. She pressed closer to the mirror, observed her mother's cheekbones were highlighted, sharply cut and hollowed, suffused with a rosy glow. Her cheeks were tinged the same pink color as when someone came in blooded from the cold. The soft bloom in her cheeks made her look fresh-faced and youthful. In the mirror, her mother's eyes, normally a flat, watery brown, shone dark.

"Can I try?" She begged when her mother took the brush away from her cheeks and smiled in the mirror at Claudia.

She ached to take it in hand, work the color into her own skin. She touched the powder with her finger. The granules of powder were like touching the middle thickness of cloud, she thought. She made a little fingerprint on the kitchen countertop and blew on it.

"Not until you're at least fifteen," her mother said, putting the brush away. She wiped it carefully first with a piece of tissue, until the brown bristles were clean of powder.

"Why can't I? I found it. It's mine."

Seeing the unhappiness on Claudia's face, her mother said, "You don't need it now, honey. It would be inappropriate. You don't want to look older than you are, trust me. Here. Girls used to pinch their cheeks if they didn't have time to put the blush on." Her mother's fingers plucked at Claudia's skin, twisted the skin deftly.

Claudia cried out, but she saw her mother was right: color bloomed on the round crests.

"And see?" Her mother showed Claudia her teeth, the line of them slightly crooked, and bit her upper and bottom lip before pursing them out. "That's what they would do for lipstick."

Her mother left the blush on. When her father came back from his evening walk, he stayed outside smoking for a while. He came inside and stopped when he saw Claudia's mother sitting curled up on the sofa, her hair very dark and gleaming. Her lips looked fleshy and tender. Claudia was also reading in the room.

"Where's Phil and Elaine?" he asked.

"They went to visit some friends who invited them to a barbecue on the Fourth," replied her mother. "The kids went with them."

Her father remained standing in the entranceway. "Dinner was almost too good. I might've had a little too much…I had to go and walk it off," he told her. His voice sounded like he had swallowed a spoonful of honey. He smoothed his hair back and kept looking at her.

Claudia's mother looked up with a smile. "Thank you."

He nodded and went into the bedroom. When he came back out, he had changed into his stay at home clothes, and he had washed his face. He sat next to Claudia's mother on the sofa, put his pack of cigarettes on the little table and picked up a magazine about real estate in the seaside town. When he sat down, her mother had begun to uncurl her legs to the floor, but he placed a hand on her knee, and she stopped moving. She folded her legs back.

Claudia watched them surreptitiously, checking on them every two pages in her book. When she reached the end of the chapter, she saw her parents were holding hands. They turned their pages with one hand, and linked loosely together with the other. Their fingers folded into each other, knuckles tucked down, palms forming an intimate sphere.

City Girls

We are all afraid of the man we have read about in the newspaper.

This city is a strange place, no two ways about it. Chainsaw attacks in the subway. Acid thrown outside apartments; fires set inside elevators. Cranes topple off half-built buildings. But this is different, this is worse. This is the most terrible story you will ever hear.

Here is what we have learned from the newspapers: The man goes into hair salons, takes hold of a woman's hair, usually after it's been washed and lies lankly like an oily seal pelt, and cuts off a great hank of it. He leaves. He takes the hair with him. What does he do with this hair, we wonder. We don't know. People have made guesses about it at dinner parties. Late night show comedians make jokes about it on TV. What is going on here? This guy's got some kind of hair fetish; he's a bald guy, he's angry at the hair. Bedbugs ate away his mattress so now he stuffs the bedding with human hair because a Chinese acupuncturist instructed him to do so, if he didn't want to have a crooked spine. Perhaps he has in his possession an egg, white, and speckled, that must be placed in a nest of fleece and hair before it can be borne.

A new city beat reporter stumbled across this story by accident. He was on a police ride along in Spanish Harlem, nearing the end of the cops' shift. When the cops went to answer a dispatch, he sat in the backseat and through the open window he heard two women, smoking on the sidewalk, talking about a crazy man. This was the first interesting thing the reporter had heard all night. He got out of the car, interviewed the women, and eventually found the all black hair salon where it happened.

The reporter pieced together his story from three angles: the unfortunate and overwrought woman, the owner of the salon, and the stylist who had washed the woman's hair. They remembered: The man sheared off a woman's knot of hair, a thick ropey coil she had nurtured since she was twelve and became a woman. The woman was reading a magazine and listening to her friend, the lucky woman beside her who did not have her hair cut off, and she hardly noticed the man behind her, but then there was a sawing, thumbs touching the secretive skin of her scalp, until a weight was gone from her head, so abruptly banished that her neck sagged for a moment, bowing forward and was released. The owner of the salon assumed he was a customer and had seated him in a chair to wait. He was wearing a somber blue suit "like he worked in a bank." He sat for a while, then got up and walked over to the woman sitting with her back to him, and he cut her hair off just under the ears. The woman's stylist had her hands full of rollers; she dropped all of them when she saw what had been done to her customer. The woman's hair had been taken in swift closures of his scissors, and there was a spray of thin hair sprinkled down into the collar of the woman's blouse, down her back, and the spiky ends of her hair prickled her neck.

The journalist's story ended up occupying only a square space that looked more like an advertisement than an article, published last month. Yesterday in the school computer lab, we crouched in the corner and looked up his new story, a follow-up to the original, published this week. Since the first reported incident, this man has severed and stolen the hair of twenty-one women. The journalist's second article is much longer and this time includes photos of all the women, before and after

photos that show what they have been left with: wisps and spare ends, hair that doesn't flatter their faces at all. We keen with grief at these photographs. Noses look bigger and hooked, brows protrude more, chins and necks are fleshier, a bottom lip is much thinner than the upper.

This man is clever. He only goes inside a hair salon when it is at its busiest. No one pays attention to him. Last week, this man snipped off the hair of two women in the same shop. It happened in Midtown this time. They were both sitting near the door, that's probably why. He was able to come in, scissors already out in his hand, thumb and forefinger hooked into its silver loops, turn from one girl to the next, and then take his leave like a ghost. Nobody mortal have seen when he appeared and where he disappeared. One was a girl with particularly lovely hair in skeins of white blond. The other was a dirtier blond girl. They both had very fine hair, sleek pools of silk; hair ties were always sliding right out of their hair; they were cousins. Sitting in adjacent chairs, they had been looking at pictures of hairstyles. The prettier cousin felt fingers penetrate the veil of her hair and then a sting—in the man's haste, his finger had scratched the hidden part of her neck, just under the hairline. They glimpsed the image of the man through their gilded mirrors, perhaps one or both of them made a rising movement out of her chair, certainly one of them screamed, and the man ran out of the room. Afterwards, the cousins, interviewed individually by the indifferent police, described two different strangers.

This is not uncommon. His victims have been unable to agree on what he looks like. Eyewitness testimonies are notoriously unreliable, and the reports of his appearance have differed greatly. We comb through the papers carefully for any

description of him—his height, his age, if his fingernails are dirty or uncut. We are constantly disappointed by the lack of sketches. And there's that he might have started disguising himself. We don't know. One woman said she felt he had rough hands, calluses like sand, but then another—no less credible a witness—said he had hands like a baby, with the slenderest fingers and cute knuckles, dimpled with little dents.

The third woman in this string of attacks said she thought he was a swarthy man "like he spent time at sea or worked as an olive grove picker." She had taken off her glasses while her hair was being vigorously shampooed and washed, and she placed them, folded, on a stack of magazines in front of her. She couldn't make out many of his features, but she was certain he had dark skin. But another woman said she saw his hand when he swept her hair from her forehead, and he gathered it in a hand that was pale and freckled. Someone ventured the opinion that maybe there is more than one man; maybe he has an accomplice. But we find this is too terrifying to contemplate, so we try to put it from our minds.

In math class we estimate that there are about two hundred and forty-five hair salons in the city. This number should reassure us, but then we realize he has visited salons in all five boroughs, four times in each borough.

We do not want to encounter this man. Fear of him curdles in our stomachs like an ocean of spilled oil. We laugh and joke but privately agree that he is a sick fellow. We say we will cut each other's hair. We prick our fingertips with a needle, taste each other's welling blood, and swear an oath that we will not deliberately sabotage each other. We will hold the scissors with careful hands.

This man frightens all of us, but surely it must be Jane he frightens the most, though she pretends bravery. Jane has hair like mink. She likes to pull her hair into a sloppy knot, lopsided at the top of her head, like a puffy cloud. She arranges it this way on purpose, so everyone can see how little effort she puts into looking beautiful. This knot of hair keeps slipping free, so she has to reach up with both of her slender white arms, pull the tangle apart and redo it. She arches her back, pushing her breasts against her shirt, bows her elegant neck, graceful and enticing. Her neck looks too delicate to support the wild thicket of her hair. When we swim in gym class, all the girls' heads look shriveled and small, their shoulders hulking in comparison, their necks like rhinoceroses, all except Jane, whose swaths of hair is obsidian rich, newly washed seaweed.

Jane is the kind of girl whom boys and other girls covet. We need her more than she needs us. It's always been this way, ever since we all met in first grade. At first we followed her around the yard because she had the best ideas, and she somehow managed to get everybody, even the boys, excited about them. One year, both third grade classes got a new pen of rubber kickballs to share between them, black and clay-red and orange colored ones. At the end of recess, we would return all the balls back into the two containers, and in this way, they got shuffled back and forth between the two rooms quite a bit. But there was one little yellow ball, the size of a grapefruit, that Jane took for her own. It had to be protected, it could never be kicked, and there were certain people Jane didn't ever want to ever touch it. They weren't allowed to play with it, though whether they were aware of it or not, we never knew. We suspected they did.

Soon everyone got involved in the game of protecting the yellow ball. We cantered around with it for a month, coddling it and passing it around carefully. One day, we were playing with it and somehow Marta gave it a funny sideways kick at the wrong angle and lobbed it over the fence into the fast-moving creek. We were all aghast, Marta most of all. Jane had rushed to the chain-link fence, but Marta stood where she was, her stout face splotched. The rest of us quickly fetched a teacher and other students to try and retrieve it. Rueven even climbed the fence. We never got the ball back, Rueven was Jane's first boyfriend, and Marta was kicked out of our group. Not right then, but over time we talked less when she was around. We still invited her for birthdays, but only because it was a class rule that no one could be excluded from birthday parties. Eventually Marta started making excuses for why she couldn't follow us out to our spot on the playground or eat lunch at our table. At first she would hide in the library and eat where the librarian couldn't see her, and later on she joined another group.

So Marta was out. Rueven and Jane got married at one lunch recess. We attended as bridesmaids, sweeping the ground behind us with creek bulrushes. Her ring was something from the vending machine, the silver tab off a soda can, threaded onto a plastic lanyard taken from Art. Eventually they had a "divorce," as we understood it, but Jane was allowed to keep the ring.

Jane is Lysistrata and Héloïse. Jane buys her prom dress first out of all of us and forbids anyone else to buy a dress like hers in any way: We cannot choose dresses spun from pools of midnight, nor dresses with folds like origami paper, or

dresses with little sprigs of pink flowers painted into the silk, it is all forbidden. We choose, instead, pale-colored dresses that make us look lovely, but not too much so.

Jane wants her hair cut and permed. She wants a sable spill of it down her trim back, the soft curves of it to call attention to her dress and its lines and sharp-angled creases.

In school we learn about the English Civil War. We read in our books about the followers of Oliver Cromwell, who cropped their hair in defiance of the curls and ringlets of the king's men. In English, we read a story by Fitzgerald, about a girl named Bernice who bobs her hair and is ruined because of it, and in our Drama elective we take turns reading aloud scenes from *The Rape of the Lock*.

At lunch we learn it has happened to a girl at our school. A sophomore, who used to have curly hair. Her sister was getting married and she was going to be in the wedding, even make a toast, so her mother took her to the hairdresser's. Now her hair has been fixed into a severe, chin-length cut. None of us girls want to make her feel worse than she does, so we avoid looking at her. When she walks into the lunchroom, we shift our eyes to the floor, even Jane, like we are all in mourning and this girl is a funeral procession alone. When she passes us in the halls, she cowers back as a nocturnal animal retreating from sunlight.

After school, we go to Jane's apartment because it's the weekend, and we're all sleeping over. We do this often, taking turns. Corrine's home is probably the best though. Her apartment building, with its deep gabled roof and balustrades and niches, occupies an entire block. Famous people lived there, though we hardly ever see them coming and going—Corrine says there is a private entrance, which she isn't allowed

to tell us about, owing to the fact that a resident was once gunned down at the entrance and died in the lobby.

We're supposed to stay at Jane's, but Corrine volunteers her apartment, which isn't fair, or right, since we have only just stayed at Corrine's. We don't mind—true, Corrine has the better apartment, although Jane has the superior housekeeper who makes desserts we like—but Jane insists on following the rules.

Jane is unbending. In the end, we have to abide by the rules. Corrine, whey-faced, comes with us. That night we dream the same dream, of not being able to leave a table until we finished an unending bowl of porridge. The porridge congeals in our mouths, clumps in our stomachs. Perhaps it is because we spent the afternoon on the roof, braised by the sun and city smoke. Or maybe it was the housekeeper; the chocolate cake we gorged ourselves on was too dark and raw, practically bloody with chocolate; it unsettled our bellies and made us sleep poorly.

In our dream, wolves interrupt us from finishing our meal. We flee through the city, and wolves hunt us in packs. They drive us up avenues, root us from subway stations. Occasionally we catch sight of one another, spy the banner of Jane's hair weaving through buildings ahead of us. Our lungs seize up with burning. One of us screams. One of our hands stretches out towards Jane, grazing her hair, which coils around our wrist like a lash. Our skin there starts smoking.

When all of us tunnel from under the covers, Corrine stays curled, snail-like, eyes closed. We pounce on her, thump her with heavy pillows. We grab her arms and wrists and wrest her up. Wake up, we say, wake up! What's wrong with you, we want

to know. Then we see the soiled sheets. No odor, just a copper red stain, a bloom shaped like a swan's egg.

Jane cannot forgive this trespass. She simply cannot. Jane recoils from Corrine as if she holds a translucent centipede out in her palm. We do not ease Corrine from our group like we did with Marta; this is a true divorce. The separation is immediate and absolute. So Corrine is out, and here our hearts are riven with sorrow because we liked her and her apartment so much.

Jane urges us to throw ourselves into the weekend as if nothing has happened, as if Corrine is not out there alone. We have all brought along our old dolls: Barbies and Cabbage Patch babies, even American Girls. We wet their hair with fine-tooth combs to make it orderly. We sit them on pillows in our laps. The scissors are gleaming, winking at us. Our fingertips sting where we pricked them.

This is for practice, Jane reminds us. So we are taking this seriously, as if we were doing this for one another.

We are a sober trio, a golden triangle of grim faces. Straight lines elude us. We try again. We try this time to cut a little bit of a curve, but the curve is uneven. We rush to fix this. Waist-length hair becomes shoulder-length hair becomes chin-length becomes a crew cut. Jane proclaims our efforts as terrible. We will try again tomorrow. Today we try on our dresses. Jane's housekeeper brings in the full-length mirror from her parents' bedroom. We strip and put on our dresses, helping each other zip and hook. We practice dancing because, of course, we will be asked. We will swallow all the light in the ballroom. Other girls will be desirous of us.

Jane rents a movie for us. It is a romance, one our parents surely would not allow. It takes place in Renaissance Italy, about a woman who wants to become an artist but can't because she was a woman. Instead, she is raped by her tutor. There is a scene where dark-faced magistrates discover the loss of her virginity and lop off her hair while she writhes on a bloodstained table. The movie disturbs us, especially Agnes, who has to leave the room at one point. We make fun of her for doing so.

There are three bathrooms in Jane's apartment, so we take our baths at the same time. We brush each other's hair and practice our French braiding. We fall asleep with our hair bound in crowns that wreath our heads. And the shower caps, to keep our heads humid and damp.

We awaken in the morning to take off the caps and unbind our hair. Ours is mostly flat or unevenly waved, but Jane's plume of hair, unbraided, is an inky glory. She strips off the cap and casts it aside like it offends her. Bareheaded, she looks as if she should be holding a sword in her hand and wearing a shift of silver armor, stamping her foot and calling for heads.

Over breakfast, we start to play a game. It has to do with a blindfold and several tall glasses filled with different liquids: fresh squeezed orange juice, papaya juice, soda, water, and one is left empty. One at a time a scarf binds our eyes, the glasses are shuffled, and we dip our fingers inside. Once we've wetted our fingers, someone takes our arms and moves our hands over the table where we've scattered sea salt, black peppercorn, and sweetener. We touch blindly; the grains stick to our fingers. Which glass we choose predicts who our first boyfriends will be—if he will be prosperous, handsome, impoverished, ugly—and the salt and pepper tell us if we'll

stay a virgin until after marriage or not, the sweetener if we'll die a spinster. The number of grains tell us at what age we'll get married.

Agnes says, "This game is stupid, it's for children."

We tell her, "Do it anyway."

Agnes almost knocks over the glasses before touching the papaya juice. She shudders as she brushes an ice cube and when she withdraws a finger, a little bit of pulp still clings to the tip. We turn her towards the spices. Her hand hovers and then jabs at the salt. Agnes wrenches off her blindfold with one hand and stares at her finger.

Fifteen spots of salt fleck her finger. We make woo-woo sounds. This means Agnes will sleep with a boy sometime this year. Agnes wipes her finger on the table, leaves behind a shiny smear. She tells us to shut up.

Jane's eyes narrow, become cat-like. She says in a threatening way, "Don't be sore, Agnes, it's just a game."

Poor Agnes is unhappy. She says again, "It's stupid. Who ever thought of such a stupid game?"

We are all quiet. Then Jane says, "If it's just a game, why are you getting so mad? It isn't as if this will come *true*. Right?"

"Right," Agnes says, her voice tight and wrathful. As if she is speaking through the end of a tin can and some string pulled taut.

"Anyway," Jane says, "Even if you did, there's nothing wrong with that."

"I wouldn't."

"Right, but if you did, it would be okay. If you really loved him."

“Can we please stop talking about this,” says Agnes.

“Tell us who you like, Agnes,” Jane says. “We shared ours.”

“I don’t like anyone right now.”

“You have to, everyone does. Why won’t you tell us?”

“Because I don’t want to.”

Jane’s eyes glitter, marbled and dark like a porcelain doll’s. Sometime during our game she has done her hair up again in a thick braid, so heavy it is immovable against her back. “You’re not being fair. If you don’t trust us, then we can’t trust you.”

Agnes’s tongue is still, her teeth firmly clicked together. We sit in the kitchen and listen to her walk upstairs and collect her things, and we listen to the front door open and close and we think we can even hear the ding of the elevator arriving and then carrying Agnes away.

And Agnes is out. Jane’s housekeeper comes in and looks at us. She asks if we would like some cake with our breakfast; it’ll be our secret, dessert at breakfast. Our stomachs roil and pitch as if we have just drunk an entire sea inside of us. I look at Jane. Jane looks at me and says, Good riddance, we don’t need prudes. The city is bad enough without prudes. The two of us aren’t safe in the city, Jane insists. Just look at what’s happening in barbershops. Stealing hair is half a step away from slashing throats; that’ll be the next step. Hm-hm, I say.

We go upstairs to her bedroom again to look at her gown, which is still covered under a soft sheet of plastic. It lies flat on the bed like a skinned mermaid, a slick, midnight blue shimmer, unworn and unshaped.

Jane brings out an array of silver instruments—a comb, a brush, clippers, three different types of scissors, one pair with gnawed teeth for an edge, one that is straight, and one which is curved. I feel as though I have swallowed a mouthful of pennies. They plink against one another down my throat, swirl into the sea in my stomach. Everything is salt and copper.

"I trust you, Annabel," Jane says to me.

But I am consumed with how I loved the swishing of the scissors opening and closing, the tension. I think about how all my dolls have hair cut so close to their scalps that the tan plastic is showing through, and all the holes in which the hair was rooted can be seen, and how their hair can never grow back.

I hear myself saying, "We should go. To a salon. Let's go where your mother goes, and I'll keep watch for you. That place is sure to be safe." My voice sounds like a frog's. I am prepared to stand guard for Jane, her solitary knight, the one handmaid who hasn't abandoned her. I will carry the train of her hair downstairs, all the way to the salon. And later, at the dance, Jane and I will whisper secrets to one another about everyone else, while everyone leans in closer to us.

"Don't be ridiculous, Annabel!"

Jane kneels on the floor, her spine straight, hair swinging down in a sheet. I take up position behind her. I card my fingers through the fine filaments of Jane's hair. This is what we had practiced on our old dolls. Just trim the ends, take off the split and crooked parts. There's an itch in my fingers. I twitch up the scissors. Standing above Jane, I can see the parting of her hair, which I never could before

because she is three inches taller, and it looks like a fracture of bone, a river of milk, unspooling.

A Natural History

One day the boy woke up and his body was tender as if he'd woken from a fever. He was cold but the blankets chafed as a wrinkled, sundried cocoon. He lay in bed and listened to his family moving around the house. He could tell where they were and what they were doing: his father sitting on the footstool by the door, putting his shoes on; his mother walking away from his sister's room; and his sister washing her face in the bathroom.

His mother was outside his room. She knocked, called his name. His limbs were heavy, but his voice was not. He tested it in a little cough and found he was able to call back to her. Satisfied, she walked to the kitchen. Now his sister was thumping around her room.

Usually this was the moment when he would get out of bed. There was much that he looked forward to at school—he was reading a small, square copy of *The Call of the Wild* inside the cubby of his desk. He had gotten very good at keeping the book open with one hand, while the other held his pencil poised above his notebook so that he was able to fool his teacher's passing glances. At lunch recess, he and his best friend, Manu, were helping their science teacher create geological dioramas. Then after lunch they would have science, where they were having a unit on evolutionary biology. It was also his month of looking after his classroom's fire salamander. Ordinarily everyone was only supposed to have two weeks, but not as many people signed up to care for the salamander as they did with other specimens, like the field mice or chinchilla, so he was able to have a longer turn, which suited him very well.

But this morning his body felt unlike his own. He was capable of only watching the slow revolutions of the family tree mobile. He had cut photographs of everyone into precise ovals, backed against different colored sheets of paper, and punched holes into them. It was made of two wire hangers and four paperclips. He always carried paperclips secreted about his person: in his left sock, hooked onto a shoelace, in his backpack, in his pockets. Manu's father was in prison, and he had taught Manu how to unlock doors with paperclips. Manu was a poor teacher, so he hadn't yet learned this skill, but he was always with Manu anyway and Manu never carried paperclips.

The boy's body felt as though he had been thrown down a flight of stairs. He was without an endoskeleton, without marrow. He could not bear the thought of pushing himself up with his arms, of standing up on the soles of his feet, or putting on clothes. This was strange, because nothing he had done the previous day would account for the limpness. A little further down the hallway his mother cracked an egg over the hot pan, and his sister scraped the chair away from the table. His father opened and shut the door. His footsteps marched across gravel, in the direction of the train station.

The boy's hand crept up and felt his neck where the jawbone met his throat. He had the expectation that he ought to be gilled, that there ought to be the presence of a thin flap, lucent discs of membrane, which would flutter as he breathed. He was mildly alarmed to feel smooth skin instead. He was able to turn his head a little to the side to read the clock. In the face of its reflection, he saw his eyes were pools of tar, sticky and sullen.

During this time, the sun moved a bit and came into his room at an angle. It was suddenly much warmer. Now he felt hot. He needed cooling. He was able to animate his limbs now, and gathered the parts of him together so he was able to, finally, get out of bed, though he felt ungainly on his feet.

Their current place of residence was a two-bedroom house. The boy and his sister's room had been divided by a hollow drywall, put up by their father. One time his sister had been angry with their parents and thrown a book at the wall, so there was a bit of a dent on her side; another time it was the boy who was angry (he couldn't recall why) and he kicked it, so then his dresser had to be moved so it covered the hole.

The house was all right. It had been whitewashed too many times. Also, there was a smell. A smell they could not get away from. It wasn't the stink of spoiled food, but it was a little sour. A staleness they noticed every time they returned from outside. The house was near a train station, which was good for his father, who commuted to work. Twice an hour trains, hammered the railroad. It was impossible to speak on the phone when a train bawled by. At least the house had hardwood floors, even though the boy's sister was always catching splinters when she practiced her handstands. Their mother said she was sick and tired of always bowing her head over her daughter's palm, easing slivers of wood out.

In the kitchen area, the boy gulped down mouthfuls of water. As he ate the soft, runny egg, he read his book of primordial amphibians for his school report. He said the names of extinct genera aloud to himself: *Adelospondylus, Brachydectes, Chelomophrynus, Chomatobatrachus…Labyrinthodontia…Temnospondyli…*legged

and lobe-finned fish that thrived in rivers and briny shallow basins, lived in coal forests and bogs. His father used to read the book with him until the boy realized his father was pronouncing the names all wrong, and the boy got mocked for it at school.

The boy languished at the table; it was cold in this part of the house. He complained of a skin irritation, an itchiness. His mother pulled his shirt up and examined his back and front, even peered into his hair. She was worried because he hadn't had the chicken pox yet. She quizzed him on the health of his classmates. In the end, she decided he would stay home. He was eleven; he knew how to heat up his own food, important numbers to call, to lock the door. When she left for work at the gift shop, he was lying on the sofa in a patch of sun, reading his book.

After a time he felt warmer. He went into his room and laid down inside the closet to examine the names of past occupants carved into the wooden floor. He could make out Gabriel, Carol, Ella, Wolfgang. He was carving his name in there next to the rest, but his name was long and he wasn't good with the kitchen knife. In the closet he could pretend he was in a cave. He heard water dripping from somewhere in the house and imagined he was in a forest of teeth, made from stalactite and stalagmites.

When his body warmed a little more, he realized he was just like a reptile, cool-blooded and nocturnal. An ancient one that needed to slither, that breathed in coal and tar. He went outside and was careful to lock the door behind him.

His mother returned early from the gift shop; her son was sick, after all. The boy was not home. They had a small yard; he was not there either. She did not panic.

As she stood outside in the yard between clothesline, she saw him through the thin tree.

The boy was walking along the steel rail. His fingers grasped the air for balance. He wobbled off it, and then she was upon him. She shook him hard, clutching him. He was dirty, he was fine. His pockets were weighed down with track stones; when she shook him, some of them fell out and clanked on the rail.

She yelled at him, shook him again in her paroxysm of fear, walked them back to the house. What did she always tell him, she demanded, and the boy replied dutifully, if it's dangerous, Don't Do It. Railroads were dangerous. He had known this since he was a child, hadn't he? He agreed that he had. But, he said, there hadn't been a train there. If there was a train, he would have walked to the side and watched it pass. If it's dangerous, don't do it, his mother repeated. That was that.

As she chopped chives for garnish, the mother could not stop thinking about the time they took the train to the city by the bay for a baseball game. They were delayed over an hour because a commuter had jumped onto the rails. Or the time the girl, the poor girl, was hit by an oncoming train at a crossing near the Mexican store she always bought their fruit because it was cheapest there. The girl was in high school, would have been about her daughter's age now, and had recently received a new bicycle for her birthday. The girl had been biking to school when one of the tires got jammed on the rails at the crossing. The girl would not let the bike go. For months afterward, there were wreaths of flowers and candles hung at the crossing. At this, the mother had to put down the cutting knife and catch her breath.

It kept happening. His sister reported to her mother later that week that she had seen her brother hurling stones over the railroad. Another time the boy picked the rocks clean from one section of the tracks. They yelled at him, took away TV privileges. They didn't let him go on his class field trip to the Academy of Sciences. The father even spanked him until both of them were red in the face, the boy crying. But the next day he was back there again, playing a game he had invented with the rocks that involved hopping back and forth across the rails.

Another time he built, with the rocks and dirt, some kind of fort, or perhaps a hut. The mother found it after she had sent him inside. She brushed the leaves off the mound, wanted to dig into what he had been hiding from her. Inside he had placed two tiny frogs, jewel-bright, which he had found at the park swimming pool and carried home in his cupped hands. They were still but alive inside their stony fortress, toes splayed on browning leaves.

She thought about buying one of those leashes other mothers had for their toddlers. There were different kinds of leashes. Harnesses, wrists, ankles, waist. She thought she would get him one to wear around his waist like a belt. Maybe she could even attach it to his old superhero costume belt.

The boy himself could not explain why that was where he disappeared to. His parents had a psychologist come and see the boy. The psychologist asked him many questions and at the end of the two hours was only able to recommend, very gravely, that they remove the boy from "this situation." The father was very annoyed and put out. "This situation" seemed to imply this was an unhealthy home. An abusive family. That was certainly not the case.

Then the father heard from a colleague at work—they worked for a light manufacturing company—of a new townhouse development that was closer to the city. The company was in the process of slowly parceling out homes. Each lot was reasonably priced, his co-worker said, anyway, it was a good investment.

The family went to tour the model homes at the end of the month. The development was built beside the wetlands. When they got out of their minivan, they could see the white plumes of sailboats passing through the bay. A flock of waterfowl scattered like so much confetti. The family smelled loam and salt marsh air, they bit down hard on it and tucked it beneath their tongues. It was good to be away from the smell.

They walked into the first home, which the realtors were using for an office. There was a wooden plaque affixed to the front of the door, in lieu of an address number, and the word OFFICE was engraved on it. It looked as if it had been there for years. This was the only indication that this house was an office and not a home.

The mother was holding the boy's hand by the wrist, but she let him go once they were inside to shake hands with the woman who greeted them at the door. The foyer was curved, with a high ceiling and a circular porthole window near the top. How lovely. Like they were standing inside a tower. The outside of it might have been sandstone wrapped in moss.

The woman introduced herself as Dora and led them to a room with a view of the street, saying their realtor would be right with them. In the meantime, what would they like to drink? Just water for everyone, thank you. She came back with the water in frosted glasses. While they waited, they looked at the materials that were stacked

on a table: contracts, disclosure statements, inspection reports, prominently on display. The mother and father browsed this literature.

Their realtor was a man named Peter who wore a gold band on his ring finger. He wore a silk blue shirt and gray slacks. A diver's watch braceleted his wrist. He showed them blueprints of each type of home—there were four of them, A, B, C, and D. They were currently in model A. Each home had three floors, a garage, and a small attic space. Other than that, they were quite different and would service different needs.

Peter showed them a model of the community under a glass casing. The father noted the houses that were positioned with the best view of the bay. The mother saw where the school was located and that there were no railroads nearby. Just to be sure, she asked Peter, because, you know, the noise was bad for her nerves.

"No, it's very quiet here," said Peter.

She asked about the town. Peter replied that the town was ten minutes away by car, and that it was a one-of-everything town: one Italian restaurant, one movie rental store, one frozen yogurt shop.

The boy and the girl peered at the tiny figurines of people that speckled the model. A girl pedaled a bicycle on a path by the war. A boy walked his dog in a square playground tucked between three lines of houses.

"The best thing I can do is to show you the homes," said Peter. "We have just enough time before lunch to look at one."

The family drained their glasses and left them on top of the glass case. Since they were already in model A, they went upstairs to take a look. Model A was the smallest unit, and it came outfitted with ramps.

"All our homes can be made wheelchair-accessible," Peter said. "You only have to ask. Please observe: even in this model, the ramps do not take up much space at all."

All of the models followed this structure: There were two smaller bedrooms and a master. Two bathrooms and a half bath. The living room, kitchen, and dining area were one open space. The dining furniture was wood, a heavy tablet mounted on two blocks made from the same material. The father asked what kind of wood it was. Peter said it was amboyna, with a natural semi-gloss finish. The husband remarked that he hadn't heard of this kind of timber. It was an import, Peter told him, the lumber was carried out of a Cambodian jungle on the backs of men and white elephants. They looked at it with fresh eyes, like it had been handcrafted and sanded down by Peter himself, after Peter had supervised its transport. Fat candles sat on a flat stone tray on the amboyna table. Travel magazines were left open on a coffee table.

Then it was time for lunch. Model A was nice, but much too small, the husband said. Just wait, said Peter. he was sure they would be very pleased with model C. He had a good feeling about model C. In fact, they were headed there right now because that was where lunch was being served.

The developers had hired a catering company for lunch. The hostess was a very pretty woman, but not unattainably pretty. Not pretty enough to intimidate

anyone. Her name was Sandra, and she welcomed them in and introduced the lunch menu to them. A handsome young man with crinkled eyes made vegetarian pizza, white, with the option of throwing on olives. The family each had two slices. The young man tossed together a salad in front of them. The girl hovered nearby and smiled shyly when he asked her if she wanted cheese or pepper. She wanted both. The boy skipped the salad but ate three cups of sorbet, and refilled his glass of ginger ale twice. When his parents didn't say anything, he got another glass. The husband praised the pizza and said to his family, "Now, it won't be like this every day if we move in." Everyone laughed. Peter laughed the loudest.

They ate at an onyx square table that could seat eight people. Other brokers came and left with other couples, other families. Everyone said hello to Peter and the family. They preened under the attention.

After they ate, they walked around the rest of the house. Model C was much larger than model A. The bedrooms were expanded and had cushioned bay windows, "reading nooks," Peter called them; the closets were wider and deeper. There was also a fireplace. This, too, could be added into any of the models, Peter informed them. If they wanted one, they only had to ask.

Model C was different from A also in that the kitchen and the dining area were elevated in a loft-style over the family room.

"How nice," the mother could not stop herself from exclaiming. "It will be so easy to call everyone to dinner." She was thinking about how their house was long and skinny, with the two bedrooms and the bathroom all spaced down the line of it,

and when she stood at one end of it, she could neither see nor hear any of her family in their separate rooms.

“We can watch TV while we eat,” said her daughter.

“We’ve skipped model B,” Peter reminded them. He stood alertly inside the master bedroom after having shown them the shower and the sunken bath. “The square footage is smaller, but there are some neat designs the architects have installed so you can really make the most out of all the space. But if you can’t imagine going down in size, we still have the last model. We still have five units of Model D available, and you will have few complaints about the space, I’m sure.”

Model D sat on the corner of the townhouse row, and it had more windows and a balcony on the second floor. Out on the balcony, there was a portable grill. The husband thought: catfish, crab, and corn could be made on it.

There was a cushioned bench seat lining the windows of the dining space, and Peter raised the seat to show them the built-in compartments underneath. While the rest of his family went to explore the other parts of the open loft area, the boy crept to the bench seat, lifted it, saw the space beneath was just large enough to conceal him. It would be like being tucked away inside a rock.

The pantry was its own room, and there was a larger room beside it, which could be turned into a study or even an extra guest bedroom. The kitchen had enough room for a granite island, one half of it being additional workspace for preparing food, and the other half being a cozy breakfast bar. A red earthenware butter dish sat on the island. The boy saw himself spooning blackberries into his ice cream at the counter while he read his book of amphibians.

The dining table was set. A cream tureen with the cast of a rabbit reclining on its lid sat in the center. The porcelain plates were painted with pearlescent watercolor poppies and had dainty, scalloped edges, unfurling in bloom like giant lotuses, the center of which would house some tasty, precious morsel. If eaten, it would be transcendent.

The living room was covered with a shaggy—hand-knotted by Indonesian maiden girls, Peter told them, he and his wife had one inside their very own home, that's how he knew and could say with certainly—white rug that looked like it was molded of snow. Two chairs framed the fireplace. On one side, a petite blue lady's chair with a whipstitch edge visible as a gold trim. On the other, the deep-set, glove leather, down-filled wingback chair smelled subtly of fireplace smoke and sweet pipe tobacco. The husband thought that he would read more books, not just the self-help books, but novels that he could talk about at the Fourth of July barbecue, which he might host at a place like this, or New Year Eve's parties. If only he had a chair like that.

Upstairs, the room for the boy's sister was lushly green. The girl peered inside a little bit and proclaimed she was taking it for her own. It was the boy who went all the way inside. Three door hooks were affixed to the inside of the closet, burnished brass heads of a stag, crowned with a heavy set of antlers that spread like the branches of a tree, the head and breast of an owl, and a flat circle, bearing the fossilized imprint of an ancient fungus. The sleigh bed was covered with a mint duvet, bearing white pillows with the black portrait silhouettes of dead writers: Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters. Standing inside the open door of the closet, the boy felt

he was in an overgrown wood, that it was damp and dark here, a place buried at the foot of a hill that grew weeds and wildflowers that were heavy and impenetrable. A window was open; he smelled soil and perpetual nighttime, could hear a red bird's song. He felt his way out of the closet, rejoined the family in the hallway. It seemed to him that everyone now was speaking a little too loudly.

The boy's bedroom, then, was done in cool earth tones. The walls were robin's egg blue, but the ceiling was painted midnight. Planet decals had been stuck to the ceiling, luminescent white orbs. The boy saw where he could set up a terrarium. He imagined himself traversing the surface of a planet or diving into a deep pool at night, a pool with no bottom, and once he had swum as deep as he could, he would no longer know which was lay the surface.

The master bedroom had a his and hers walk-in closet. The father opened one drawer and saw it was a place for him to put his cufflinks. He thought to himself that this was why a man had cufflinks, so that he could have a place for all of them and pick and choose the perfect pair for each new day. His wife slid open one drawer after another, counting them, realized she could have a drawer just for her socks, just for her panties, just for her bras. Right now, they were all thrown into a single drawer. To have all the delicate underthings laid out was unspeakably delightful.

"We are not done building all the homes," Peter told them as they traipsed downstairs to look at the two-car garage. "Not many people have moved in just yet, though we have sold nearly all the units. You'll really have to act fast."

"We like what we have seen," admitted the father. At his side, the mother added, "This looks like a wonderful community."

“We want our families to be happy here. In fact, we give higher consideration to people such as yourselves, people with families. We want you to grow into these homes,” said Peter.

The family felt good about what Peter was saying. People like them. They went back upstairs and stood around the living room. The daughter looked at the living room, with its white sofas shaped like an L. She saw herself curled on one end, talking on the phone. Stretching her legs out, painting her toes with purple nail polish, the kind with a clear shimmer. She saw her friends, new friends, people she hadn’t even met yet. They would watch foreign films on the flat screen TV. Italian films with sullen faced boys and sloe-eyed girls, motorcycle racing on the streets of Rome. Perhaps they would take turns reading from a book of translated Greek poems about young sons and daughters being sent into a labyrinth to flounder inside and die.

“We can also install a small stoop for the front door,” Peter said. “You look like you enjoy spending time outside, watching sunsets and geese.”

The family agreed they were those kind of people. It would be a small space, but they could all fit.

The mother was listening to her husband and Peter talk, but she was looking around her. She thought she would like to add a box of herbs to go with the miniature fern that sat on the kitchen windowsill. When she seasoned lamb chops, she could use her own herbs to spice the meat. Vintage seed packets for tulips, wildflowers, and marigolds were framed on the wall. That was such a good idea. The wife thought that she would start collecting seed packets. Above the framed seed packets was an

analogy clock—that felt right, to her, that it was old-fashioned. And so nicely placed. She would always know what time it was.

“Are there a lot of geese here?” her husband inquired.

“Nearly all year round. They’re beautiful to watch. A lot of birdwatchers come out here. Black-bellied plover, kingfisher, avocet. Some pelicans, too. It’s just amazing. They love it here. But you don’t have to worry about hunters. This is protected marshland.” Peter chuckled. “They drive the golfers crazy. They like to land on the green a lot. You must have driven by it on your way in. Many families sign up for a club membership hen they purchase a home here. You’ll get a resident’s rate, of course. Are you a golfer?”

“I play,” the father said modestly. He had gone out to a driving range six times. His wife had won a raffle ticket from their son’s elementary school fundraising event for six hours at the range. The driving range was over an hour’s drive away from their house, and it had been crowded with people who knew what they were doing. At least, it seemed to him that many times the back net whaled out because someone had managed to hit it. He had taken up a spot at the end, spend a long time adjusting his posture, the bend of his knees. He never ran through the single basket of golf balls they provided for him.

“Then you’ll love the course,” Peter was saying. “It’s a fifteen minute walk, but I have a golf cart here. Some of our residents have purchased their own carts. We can set up a charging station for you in your garage. Part of the community amenities; we like to encourage energy-saving efforts here. It doesn’t take up much room. You’ll still have your two-car garage.”

The family piled onto the electric golf cart. The boy and girl sat facing the back and watched the salt ponds and mud flats. Ducks speckled the brackish shoreline, their emerald heads gleaming.

Peter drove them right up the circular driveway to the lobby of the Clubhouse. Inside, pink-faced men smoked fat cigars and drank beer. The ladies curled their fingers around cups of iced tea and coffee, bobbing their heads, owl-like behind dark round frames. Plump, dripping slices of cold watermelon were served, the red wedges soaking in a pool of ice water.

From the Clubhouse they had a panoramic view of the golf course. Peter explained there were three courses, 9 holes each. Here and there the lawn dipped into white sand shaped like beans. The water hazards were still as tin plates. And the birds, clustered on the narrow strips of green, taking flight only when a golfer clobbered a shot out from the tee-off point, each connection resounding like a shot.

They were introduced to a woman named Jean, who told them about the other amenities the club had to offer: tennis courts (grass and clay), a spa, salon, a swimming pool (standard Olympic-sized), a gym with state of the art equipment, a dance/yoga studio. Jean looked at the family, uniformly pale, and said that private golfing lessons with an ex-pro could be arranged.

"We have an excellent chef in residence," Jean said to the mother. "Whenever you don't feel like cooking, you can bring your family here."

The husband and wife linked fingers as they walked back to the golf cart where Peter was waiting for them. Peter drove them back to where they had parked the minivan.

He shook hands with everyone, including the boy and girl. Made sure the family had the take home materials. Said to the father and mother, “It was great meeting all of you. I’ll touch base later tonight.”

They drove home. When they turned, at last, onto the road by their house, they raced a passing train to their doorstep. No one was hungry that night. The mother wanted to savor the white pizza, which had been so perfectly kneaded.

The boy went outside. The mother could see him from the window, so she did not worry. She sat at the kitchen table with her husband. They talked about the development, the models they had seen. They remarked four times on how much they liked Peter. They felt glad, and lucky, Peter was their realtor. The mother got up to collect her box of cards, cards for every occasion. Her boy was still outside. She did not worry. She sat back down at the table and ran through the box, looking for a thank you card.

Peter called. The mother sat forward in her chair, listening to the conversation.

“Hello,” said her husband. “Yes, Peter. Thanks for calling. Yes. We were just discussing it. Yes. Really wonderful...you answered everything, sure, really appreciate that. Yes...you know, exactly so. Yes. Well, thank you for calling. Good speaking with you.”

He hung up the phone, turned to his wife, told her, “He knows we are interested. He will have contracts ready for us to sign. Now we just have to pick one.” He looked at her expectantly. “Which one do you want?”

Pick one. Pick a house! Just like that. Like picking the right loaf of bread or stalk of asparagus that wouldn’t wilt as soon as she brought it home. The mother

looked outside. Of course, the boy was gone by then. They went out, retrieved him from the railroad. Made sure he went down the hall to his room. Made sure he was inside it. As the father locked the front door, a train clamored down the line. Their empty glasses shivered on the tabletop. Enough.

In the morning, they called Peter. They had decided to go with D. It was the balcony that did it for them. Model D was the only model that came with a balcony.

In one day they moved their things in. They had not visited the house after their purchase, and even though it was the same size and structure as the home they had toured, it seemed like they had never been inside it at all. It smelled like turpentine. They looked for the things Peter had talked about: the fireplace, yes, it was there, and so was the little room beside the pantry. The front stoop had been added. The concealed storage space—it was there, too.

The movers carried in the pieces of their furniture, and for a little extra pay, they assembled it. The boy crouched on the floor with his frogs in tin breath mint box, watching tables and bookshelves take shape out of the bones.

That night they were too tired to enjoy the house. They went to sleep in the same, familiar beds, between the same starched cotton sheets and covers, which had all been laundered in the same detergent and softener the mother had always used.

The mother had worked herself to the bone putting things into place. Her dreams were dark and unfathomable. She dreamed of an ocean of warm, sour milk. Smelled ozone on the breeze. Dreamed she washed up on the shore. She woke up in her dream, listening to the steady trickle of coffee. She was not in their new home, not even in the home they had just left, but the house she grew up in. She went to

pour herself some coffee, but her cup was heavy, filled to the brim. She turned it over on the floor, and the earth tumbled out of the cup. It bore a fruit. Star-shaped, yellow, the corners of the edges curled up. It looked like the fruit she had tasted in Malaysia so many years ago. The texture was slick, and there was an oily tang. She woke up. She and her husband were sleeping back to back, and his weight trapped all the covers beneath him. She got up and stood next to the bed, realized she was lost in the new dark. She climbed back into bed, tried to sleep, slept.

The next day, they continued unpacking their belongings, putting them away in the built-in compartments and shelves. They looked out the windows at the water and saw empty townhouses, models A, B, C and D, looking back. Their neighbors, who hadn't yet moved in, were much closer than they had realized. There were no boats on the water. Heavy drifts of fog brooded across the bay.

They walked over to the country club to sign up for a family membership. Jean's shift was just ending; they saw her walking out with her handbag tucked under her armpit, her other arm extended toward the parking lot, clicking the unlock button on her keys. Jean waved at them, keys jangling. Another young woman, Debra, took down their information.

The club restaurant served lunch buffet style. A Hispanic man stood at one end of a long table, wielding a foot-long knife, ready to prepare custom order sandwiches. The boy watched the man slice prosciutto so thin, he could see through it. It smelled sweet. When the man asked him if he wanted a sandwich, he said no. There were too many choices. In the end he let his mother fill his plate with roast beef

and pearl onions. His mother tried a salad with California abalone and shredded lobster. It slid slippery and too quickly down her throat.

The boy and his sister stuffed themselves on slabs of chocolate cake that was not crumbly or spongy, but cut as thick as butter. Their father told them this was the kind of cake they had in Europe, in the chocolate capitals of the world, and he himself had two large slices. The cake stuck thickly to their teeth, and when they smiled, it looked like there were broken gaps.

They were not the only members there for lunch. There was a group of women drinking beverages, choked at the neck by the skinny arms of colorful sweaters knotted about their slimly rounded shoulders. An older couple came over to introduce themselves as George and Dana Hendelman. They always ate lunch at the club; the distance from their home (one of the unseen model Bs) to the club was the perfect exercise for them. They exchanged phone numbers; mother invited the Hendelmans to dinner.

"Just call us anytime," she said.

After lunch, the boy went to the playground he had first seen on the model scale of the development. There was a gazebo on the lawn for babysitters to wait there and watch the children at play, and the field was broad enough for soccer or football. There were two play structures, one for older kids like himself, and one for the really small babies who needed to be carried and tucked into the swings. Also there was a basketball court, which no one had told him about. He jumped at the hoop a couple times, tried to slap the net with his palm, and then walked back home, getting lost only once. The streets were paved and weeded. There were no rocks, just

smooth pale sidewalks and roads, without any oil drips or zipper stripes of burned rubber. There was no coal or smoke in the air.

The floors of their new home were smooth, with only a few dust scuffs from the movers' and workmen's' shoes. The boy's sister did a handstand, bending her body, straightening out. Folding her body down again until she stood upright. No wounds this time.

Dinnertime. The Hendelmans did not call, or come over. Just as well—the mother thought about making lamb chops but realized she did not have any seasoning. All they had were packaged hot dogs, and no grill. The Weber grill, of course, did not come with the house, they should have realized. The mother laid the hot dogs out on a tray, covered it with a damp paper towel, and put it in the microwave. No one felt like sitting down at their old dining table, so they stood clustered around the kitchen island, holding themselves up by their elbows, which was usually not allowed at the mother's dinner table.

Even though it was only the end of summer, the father started a fire in the new fireplace. They sat beside it in the living room, sweating into the sofa. The boy poked a finger at the pea-soup stain he had left on it when he was five and had to come home early from school because he threw up in the classroom, when they were learning about Ancient Egypt and deserts. And his mother had made him the pea soup from a can, which he had placed upon his chest and tried to sip, but it was too hot so it spilled over his neck onto the sofa and his stomach heaved again.

After the fire died and the embers of it were crumbling, they went outside and sank onto the stoop. Far off in the distance, several rows away, they saw a light on in one of the houses. Maybe that was the Hendelman's home. They weren't sure.

It was now dark, but the birds were still alive in the trees. They had begun to sound human. The boy listened to their conversations. He got up, stroking a frog inside his pocket. Ribbit, ribbit, the frog protested. It did not like the way the boy's thumb prodded its throat, but it was too hot in the boy's pocket to do much about it.

His sister swore she could hear someone watching movies from the bathroom, but their neighbors hadn't moved in yet. But the low murmur persisted, invaded her bedroom like a low drone of a machine that had been accidentally left on.

They all thought the smell had followed them from their old home by the tracks. They had an exterminator come in to see if some pest was walled up and nesting, but the man found nothing. It wasn't a bug smell or a rodent smell, he said.

The mother worried about the attic—they hadn't put anything up there, in fact had not been shown the space that Peter had promised them was there. What was in the attic? She imagined a hive of wasps descending through the ceiling, swarming into her children's rooms, into their beds. She called a fumigator. He did not charge her for his time, even though it was a wasted trip because nothing was there. She began to fill it with empty suitcases and boxes of winter clothes. Every day she went upstairs to check that everything was undisturbed, that wasps had not built a hive there and were attempting to funnel through the floorboards through the ceiling below.

The father dreamed he turned into a bird, red-and-gold-plumed, and a man whose face he couldn't see broke his wing.

The boy's frogs got lost inside the house, and he was desolate. They went into the fireplace, jumped through the holes of the iron gate, so now the family couldn't use the fireplace, in case the frogs were still trapped in there somewhere.

A month later, they called the realtor and said they wanted their money back. Listen, they said, It's not the house. The house is all right. But it's everything else. Here's what you couldn't have known.

Fruits

The body was discovered in the morning, pre-dawn. It couldn't have been dead more than a few hours. The corpse was still sunk at the bottom of the reservoir, heavy as a stack of cinder blocks. They tried to drag him out using poles with loops at the end, but in the end Anton Hesse had to jump in and thrust the body up so everyone could gather him back. At last it lay flat, gelatinous, dripping, the stench scouring their nostrils.

This was the first drowning to happen in over fifty years—the first drowning in anyone's memory. There was a big group of them standing there: Anton Hesse, who had arrived to relieve the night guard, Mayor Stark, Dr. Gregory Herman, the water men, and Noah. Noah had only come because he had a flashlight ready and he lived a block away from the reservoir. He had seen the Mayor and Dr. Herman running up the street. The gate to the reservoir was gaping open and Anton Hesse had come out to lead them inside. Anton had shouted over his shoulder, "Get a light!" Even though he hadn't been talking to Noah, his sharp eyes had scanned the street and landed briefly on Noah standing in the driveway by the mailbox. Noah's father always kept a light hooked into the wall by the front door next to the snake stick. He had grabbed it, fingers wrapped tightly around the plastic casing, and joined the men hurrying into the reservoir, where the water men were there to meet them.

Inside, they flowed through three open gates to the reservoir. There was a line of men standing along the edge of the water who were strangers to Noah. Their faces were contorted, their chins tucked in, staring into the water. A couple of the water men started scissoring long aluminum poles in the water, like they were trying to

pluck something out with big chopsticks. There was a rapid exchange. No one looked happy about it, but no one stopped him either as Anton shed his shoes and pants and shirt and eased himself into the water.

The water couldn't have been cold, but it seemed a shudder gripped and then transformed his body. Someone hissed, "Take a breath!" Anton nodded, filled his lungs, and they all watched him flounder in the water for a while before he was able to move downwards.

Noah stood silently over the huddle of people kneeling around the body. He held the heavy flashlight and aimed it down over their heads.

"Did he pollute the water?" One of the men was good enough to ask the question on everyone's minds.

"The body would have voided itself at one point," said the doctor with a grimace.

"Anyone know him?" the Mayor asked.

"That's Nick. He just moved here to stay with his sister, Maureen Fair. He's been here about a week."

The doctor carefully peeled back each eyelid. Noah's light tracked the path that the doctor's hands traversed over the body, lingering at different areas along the way. The eyes were glistening, lifelike in the red face. Blood had crusted around the ear canals, and there was a film of pinkish, white foam sealing the nostrils and mouth. The thin, concave chest had become swollen and bloated like a bullfrog's. It looked voluminous and doughy, as if this were the body of an overfed, soft man. The skin

had become wispy at the hands and feet, sagging like too-large gloves and gray socks that had collapsed to the ankles.

"Drowned," was the doctor's pronouncement.

The crowd shuffled back and forth. They bumped into one another as they turned away. From deep within their ranks, someone muttered, "That selfish piece of shit. Goddamn. Goddamn it."

The Mayor looked sharply into the group.

The doctor was still perusing the body. "No abrasions or contusions around the shoulders and neck. He may have been unconscious when he entered the water, but so far there's no indication of a struggle."

"So?"

"It means I can't say for certain if this was homicide or suicide. All the textbooks say that when someone's drowning, they'll fight to survive. Try to push themselves up out of the water. It's instinct, just built into human nature. The shoulders should be black and blue. They aren't. He died in the water, but that's all I can swear to."

"We'll have to filter it."

"Sure enough we do."

"Water's only filtered once a week. The whole town's going to know something's up," one of the water men said.

"Can't be helped. Can't have it go bad."

"I'll get the pumps going. Damn. They'll all be out in the streets soon as they hear the pumps. Got anything in particular you want us to be saying, Mayor?"

"Why don't you redirect them to my office."

This was a joke; the men laughed.

Light was filtering over the walls. Their faces turned gray in the darkness. Except the body, which was pummeled blue in the torso, and blotchy, angrily red in the face. Noah switched off his flashlight.

"I'll walk you back to your house, Noah," Anton said.

Anton had put his uniform back on without drying off. Dirt and dust were already getting stuck to the damp material. The black shoes clopped loudly on the graveled road and left faint footprints that vanished almost as soon as the toes lifted off them. Anton had been three years ahead of Noah in school. After graduation, Anton entered the gates of the reservoir, where he only came out when it wasn't his shift. Noah stayed at home, taking care of the loquats and prickly pears and date palms, plants and trees that somehow thrive without water, without care, which left him with nothing to do a lot of the time.

"How did he get in?" asked Noah.

"Who knows? Thresh said he didn't hear a thing."

He could tell Anton felt shamed by the break-in, and he searched briefly for something to say that would remind them both that Anton helped in keeping the reservoir and was privy to knowledge Noah was not.

"Are the pipes going to run as usual?"

"Yes. I think so. They aren't going to want to scare people yet. You'll get water today."

"You think it's safe to drink after that guy was floating in it?"

"It won't kill you."

"I guess it'll taste weird. You know the forecast says they'll get rain in the east this week."

"Lucky."

"One tenth of an inch, in some little town where the population's under a hundred. Can you believe that?"

Anton couldn't. His face was pale and sharp in the morning light, haggard with a terrible yearning. Or maybe he was just tired.

They reached Noah's house.

"See you around," Anton said, to be polite, since they rarely saw each other anymore.

Inside, Noah's mother was awake, standing at the tap in the kitchen. Her head was cocked to the side, listening, Noah knew, for his father in the bathroom. They performed this ritual every morning. When Noah was much younger, it used to be a game: guessing which tap in the house the water would have been directed to. They always stood prepared at each tap so as not to let a single drop escape.

From upstairs, his father called, "Not here, Eleanor."

His mother turned the tap and water slapped the bottom of the tall basin. She stood by the sink and waited until there was enough water to fill three stainless steel water bottles. Noah stared at it the fall. He tried to see—what? Something. Dead particles, flakes of skin, cloudy layers of putrefaction settling to the bottom of the glass, maybe. The naked eye couldn't see a difference.

Noah's parents have lived in California all their lives. His father liked to talk a lot about the California-then: a place of the drying creek, the dying bush, and flowers that bloomed only after summers of drought. San Francisco used to be enshrouded with dense fog, mist that shimmered in light. Everything was dewy in the morning and evening. As a young boy, his father used to climb hills where the weeds grew rampant and wild, a bounty of gold broken only where firemen had shorn the earth in long furrows. In those trenches of upturned dirt, there were harmless snakes and collapsed mole tunnels and rocks for lobbing. Now there were only rocks, snakes foraging for food, and brown scars of useless dirt left all over the place.

When Noah was eight and studying Geography in school, he learned about Antarctica and didn't speak to his father for two weeks. He had been unable to forgive his father for not taking the family out of California, which sounded like it had been a desert back then anyway, to places that weren't as dry or hot. Places where they could melt snow every day for drinking. Places where the cold would suppress the hot ache, muffle the perpetual cough that worked to claw the inside of the throat.

Instead they were trapped in the California-now, the landscape a perpetual rainshadow no matter which way the wind blew: just burnt hills and windblown barrenness, stunted trees that twisted and hunched under a relentless sun, offering no shade, only lines of shadows on an already cracked earth. Chaparral. Black elm. Sequoia. Eternal summer land.

His mother asked Noah if he needed a ride. She was going into the city, to her research lab. No. Noah didn't have anyplace to go. Well, what was he going to do

today? Maybe see his friends. Maybe check over the date palms. They were peeling badly this month.

Upstairs, his father dropped something on the hardwood floor of the master bedroom; whatever it was rolled noisily across the floor. He came downstairs just as the water from the kitchen sink stopped. His mother turned off the faucet. It had run for twenty minutes exactly. 1.5 gallons per minute.

If a man had sufficient water, he could make bread, walk away from this town, drive to a place that was colder, or at least without the winds that stir up blazes and washes of heat. If he had enough water, he could maybe withstand the siege of heat. But there's no saving water here. Everything is rationed out carefully through the pipes that still work, only nothing comes out the faucets most of the time. Only in the mornings, and only for so long as you can pay to have something trickling out of it.

*

Noah biked down the road. The bike was his father's, a blue road bike he bought to navigate the university campus where he met Noah's mother. After their marriage, his father used to cycle around the neighborhood and sometimes to work. A lot of Californians were cyclists. For many reasons. California was a leisure cyclist's dream, with hills of varying steepness, flat paths, white bike lanes painted beside every major road. And everyone used to be scared of the rising price of oil so they biked when they could.

Noah alternately stood up on the pedals to climb hills and sat with his feet kicked off to the sides when coasting down the other side. The houses here were set back from the sidewalk, sometimes out of view. Private homes with winding driveways and three-car garages. This used to be the domain of Silicon Valley tycoons and engineers, software designers, green tech innovators, even a football player who spent two years ripping up a huge tract of land and planting imported palm trees from the Caribbean. Every other house had a pool and verdant landscaping. Now the pools were caked with leaves and dirt, nearly filled in so that the space inside was level with the concrete around it. Many of the landscaped estates had been diminished, and only the most affluent were able to maintain the upkeep of a watered lawn. Here and occasionally there, and Noah and everyone always knew whose homes they were, there were a couple artfully shaped patches of green.

He had to pause a couple times to take sips from his water bottle. Eventually, he dismounted and dragged his bike from out of view of the road. This was an old jogging trail. On one side was a dried up creek bed, and on the other side, dilapidated horse stables recessed into the hill. There used to be a donkey that would linger by the fence, waiting for people to feed him carrots and apples.

The earthquake in March had devastated the state: three reservoirs had cracked open, and one in the Saddleback Mountain range had been buried in a landslide. But in the South Bay, Noah's neighborhood, it had unearthed a natural spring. It had been buried under dirt and small rocks, and water seeped into the earth around it. The hard-packed soil was moist and black. Noah knelt beside it and lapped at the water, the seepage so small that he was unable to cup enough of it in his palms.

At last he sat back on his heels. The front of his pants were muddied; he would have to wait until it dried so he could brush the dirt off before he could return home. Noah ran his fingers through the bubble of water. He pried up loose rocks and pressed them into the damp earth in a circle around the welling of water. He attempted to measure the amount of water from the spring, but he couldn't tell if there was more or less than yesterday. He refilled his silver water bottle, and then he leaned against a tree and listened to the spring, gurgling softly, freely.

When he looked up, he saw the coyote there, unmoving in the dark brush. It was the same one from the week before. Noah found the spring when he was following the coyote, thinking maybe it knew where there was something to hunt. It looked well-fed. The coyote was a scavenger, and it had easily adapted to a suburb of scraps and survivors. Still, Noah left a parting gift for the coyote: a handful of blackberries washed in the spring.

*

At home that evening, his parents were talking about the body. They asked Noah questions about his involvement. Apparently, their neighborhood knew about the body by mid-morning, and the entire town was aware of it by noon. Many of them had congregated at the gates of the reservoir to watch the body being carried out, dragged by two of the guards on a piece of blue tarp, limp like a fresh kill hauled in from the sea.

*

There was a man waiting where the coyote usually was. He had either deep-set eyes or a protruding brow, Noah couldn't decide. A prominent hook nose drew attention from the lines in the face. He wore dirty jeans, shored up with a belt, and a shirt that blew around him in the wind. His hair was sheared short like Noah's, like everyone's, to stay cool. It was so short that Noah couldn't tell what color it was under the stained baseball cap. There were five plastic bottles fallen over in the dirt, filled with spring water. The sides of the bottles were muddy with dirt, but the water inside was clear.

The man looked up, saw him, and stood. He made his hands turn palms up at Noah as he said, "Hey. Hey. It's okay. I'm just passing through. I've seen you come here before. You just haven't noticed me," said the man.

He had a nice voice, like he had swallowed a spoonful of thick, dark honey. No rasp or rattle in that voice.

The stranger smiled at him. "You're not being a very good citizen. Keeping this to yourself."

Noah swallowed, wetted his lips. "You haven't reported it either."

"Well, that'd be because I'm not a resident of this town, and I don't plan to be one. Is there something wrong with your reservoir?"

"You know what happened at the reservoir? You know they found a body in it?" Noah's face was red; he could feel himself reddening.

“Yeah, I heard about that. We were traveling together. He hitched a ride with me.”

Noah saw again the body, ballooned as if from the inside so that the man looked as though he had the body of a well-fed, sated man.

“Your friend was selfish,” said Noah. “He was a thief. He almost spoiled the whole thing for us all.”

“He drowned himself,” said the man.

“Yeah, because he was trying to drink it all.”

“I think it’s because he’s been thirsty for so long, his body couldn’t tell when he’d drunk enough.”

The man’s eyes were sharp on his face, and Noah knew when he was being assessed, judged. He didn’t like it, and he looked away, back at the sprout of water between them. “Where’d you guys travel from?”

“Wichita.”

Noah had some idea of what Wichita must be like. Limpid rivers, so fouled that in some places the river was only the slimmest of veins, and the Midwestern states were choked on all sides by sweltering heat and dust storms. The Father of all Rivers had lost all its children. The coastal states limped by with aid from expensive saltwater treatment.

“So you came out here for a drink?” Noah asked.

“Well, I heard you’re trying to get orange trees up.”

Noah gave a bark of laughter. “Where’d you hear that?” He shook his head. “That’ll never happen. You know how much water oranges consume?”

"How do you know so much about it?" the man challenged.

"My parents are botanists." Noah brushed his hair back from his forehead. He felt surer now that he knew something the man didn't. "I know all about drought tolerant plants. We got figs, soybeans, olives, kumquats. Pomegranate. Maybe we can get apple trees back in production. I doubt it."

"You know a lot about it."

Noah shrugged, deliberately casual-like. "Where're you staying?"

"I'm camping close by. It's cooler." The man nodded at the spring. "That's what's called a filtration spring. Small flow rate, not a lot of resurgence." He grinned. "You know a lot about plants and trees, but I know a lot about water."

Noah asked skeptically, "Why aren't you working for one of the labs? California pays a lot of money to people working in the labs."

"Like your parents?" the man asked. "Well, because I couldn't tell you how to fix this problem. I just have good ideas on how to find untapped sources. I always find them, too."

"Why don't you tell people?"

"I'm still working on a couple theories." The man squatted down, drew another plastic bottle from the trash bag, and began filling it up.

"Do you need some help?" Noah asked, watching.

The man looked up. "Thanks, but this is the last one." He stood up and stretched, slapping his pants to brush the dirt off. He began bundling his plastic bottles back into the bag.

“I’m driving up to the Sacramento area. I haven’t been there since I went whitewater rafting on the American years ago. It was a nice place then.”

“I bet it isn’t now,” said Noah honestly.

“Probably not, but I have a good feeling about it.” The man gathered the opening of the garbage bag together in one fist. “Why don’t you come up with me? You can tell me about what’s drought tolerant and what’s not.”

“I can’t. I live here.”

“And that means you can’t travel? Why don’t you think about it,” the man offered. He twisted the end of the bag into a knot around his fist and slung the bag of water over his shoulder. “I’ll be here until the end of this week.”

*

Noah dreamed. Usually he was too dried out for dreams. In his dream, he was in the California-then, and he finally saw how his father loved it and saw it. The rapid flutter of birds’ wings beat the air. The drone and buzz of insects rose and fell on the breeze. It was hot, but the heat was balmy like a blanket of soup.

The coyote sat in the crotch of a persimmon tree, its boughs drooping from the weight of fruit, branches straining to reach the ground. Persimmons glowed like little pumpkin lanterns. As Noah walked up the path, several persimmons finally reached the ground with heavy plops on the earth. Upon this impact the bruised skins opened

up like a split lip and spilled sweet juices and seeds into the dirt, soft and plumply overripe.

The coyote sat amidst this bounty. As Noah approached, the coyote snapped up a persimmon whole in its skin and ate it in one gulp. The fruit's tender pulp clung to its snout and black gums. Noah could hear the falling fruit, felt it, could almost taste it, but the smell of it eluded him.

When he woke, for the first time, Noah wasn't thirsty. He was hungry for fruit, yellow-orange and with juicy flesh, fruit that bloomed only with more water than there was to spare. He reached for it and knocked over a glass of water his mother had left on the nightstand. The glass didn't break, but the water did, seeping into the grains of wood as if the house, too, was hungry for more. For a minute or two there was a stain the shape of a man's body and then it started to shrink, and shrink, and then it was gone.

Following Distance

Helga sat in the middle of the backseat, letting her body pull at the seatbelt so that both her hands could hold onto the headrests of the seats in front. Her mother had come early to take her out of her Wednesday afternoon piano class. Helga wasn't sure how she felt about that: she liked her piano teacher's home, with the shaggy dog and the air smelling of fried dough, but she also liked spending time with her mother. One of her favorite things was when they rearranged her mother's roll-top vanity together, making faces at each other in the mirror, trying on necklaces that Helga could borrow when she was older.

Helga's mother was wearing her work clothes: a ruffled peach blouse with pearl buttons, round gold earrings, and her high-heels that peeped out from the wide cuffs of her silky white pants. Her mother smelled nice and flowery, and her small mouth was painted pink with the Wild Rose lipstick from Estée Lauder. Wild Rose was Helga's favorite, not because of the color, but because of the name. Her mother would let Helga taste the Wild Rose lipstick a little bit, and she laughed at the way Helga smacked her lips loudly and made kiss prints on tissue paper. They would fill the entire wastebasket with fragrant tissue kisses. Helga never got to wear it for very long though, and definitely not to school; her mother always made her wipe it off before her father could see.

Helga played with the dog, combing her fingers through the dog's tangled hair, while her mother spoke to Mr. Ward, the piano teacher.

"Helga is doing great," Mr. Ward said. "She was just telling me that she's selected a piece for our recital."

"I'm sorry for the late notice," her mother said, "but could we reschedule today's class?"

"Of course not, but…Christine, is something wrong?" Mr. Ward was frowning. He laid one of his large, graceful hands on her mother's arm, patting her there like he would sometimes pat Helga's back, to get her to stop slouching. Mr. Ward's fingers were long and thin, with very short nails, the pads blunt and calloused. When he walked his fingers across the music sheet as Helga followed along on the keys, his hand moved like an overgrown spider, scuttling left to right. His hands were very different from her father's, who had thick fingers with hair on them, and smooth palms that were always a little dry, or a little oily from his hand lotion. Helga thought about how she liked when her father held hands with her, and they swung their arms back and forth. But not when he patted her on the head because sometimes his hands made her hair sweaty.

Helga's mother laughed, very high, and loudly. "Oh, no no no. This happens every now and then. You see, I like to take Helga with me to see her father at work, to surprise him."

"I'm sure he appreciates the surprise," said Mr. Ward. "Let me get my calendar, so we can schedule a make-up class for Helga this week."

"Oh, we can do that over the phone, can't we?" her mother said, and then she and Helga went away, into the car.

They drove to her father's office. Helga imagined his office was a fortress, keeping everyone out. It was made of shiny steel beams and glass that rose in tiers like the battlements of a castle. She used to go there all the time and played the mini

golf set in the corner of the office while her father sat behind his large desk and talked on the phone.

Her mother was on the phone now, talking to Lauren, one of the nice secretaries. Lauren's job was to guard her father from people who wanted to waste his time. She called herself the gatekeeper.

Helga's mother said, "Of course he's not at the office. It's only two-thirty in the afternoon in the middle of the week. And he's not in. No, no. No, thank you."

Her mother closed the cell phone and threw it onto the passenger seat, where it bounced against the door with a crack before falling onto the floor. She met Helga's eyes in the rearview mirror and smiled. "Lauren said we just missed him! Isn't that just our bad luck?"

"Are we going home now?"

"No, this is even better. We stop by his office all this time, so this way, it'll really be a good surprise. And it's such a nice day, I thought us girls could just drive around," her mother said. "Wouldn't you like that? Huh? How about it, Helga?"

Helga agreed that she would. "Can I listen to music?"

"Pick your station, but not too loud. I need to think."

Helga unbuckled her seatbelt and squeezed into the front so she could punch the pre-set button for one of her favorite stations. Her mother had rolled back the sunroof so that the sun seemed caught in the square hole of the roof. Helga whooped to feel the wind rushing in to blow her face, to feel the car rocking her body back and forth on the turns. She swung from her grip on the headrests, sliding across the

backseat again and again. She imagined that this was how her stuffed bear felt when Helga used drive the shopping cart at Long's Drugs up and down the aisles.

Their car sped by the public library and the organic grocery store where they shopped, then the fire station. They passed by the park so fast, Helga couldn't tell if anyone was playing on top of the jungle gym she thought of as hers. They passed by the police station.

At every red light, Helga flew forward until the seatbelt caught her safely back. She thought to herself that this was what riding a horse must be like. Cars around them honked, in short bursts and long blares. Her mother was shaking her fist out the window and striking the flat of her hand on the steering wheel, once, twice, and then alternating with both hands as if she were beating a drum. At the red light, a man, with a heavy beard covering his mouth but no hair on head, drove up next to them, rolled down the tinted windows and shook his fist at back them. Helga's mother stared straight ahead, looking neither left nor right.

"Why is he doing that?" A tightness banded across Helga's chest, squeezing and pinching like when she wrapped rubber bands around her wrist. She sat still in her seat.

"He's just telling me to drive faster, Helga."

Helga hung onto the two headrests in front when they parked outside a Chinese restaurant. Her mother took her cell phone out of her purse, the same purse that held everything for Helga, like tissues, green tic-tacs, a small tube of ointment for bug bites. Pens for drawing on paper placemats at restaurants when they ate outside on the weekends. Band-Aids in her wallet, hidden amongst the folds holding credit

cards. Her mother ground the phone into her ear. Her gold earring winked in and out of Helga's eyes.

"John," her mother said into the phone, between short, quick breaths, "John. I'm here. I'm waiting outside. I'm waiting outside for you right now, we both are, me and Helga."

Helga unbuckled her seatbelt so she could sit on the very edge of her seat. The leather stuck to the backs of her thighs. One of her ankle socks had slipped down into her shoe, and she bent over to hook it back up with a crooked finger. She was getting bored in the car, and her mother never told her what they were doing here. It was a restaurant they had eaten at before, with a red carpet rolled up three steps and towards the golden doors shaped like a large lantern. Two gold lions resided on either side of the doors. Whenever they came to eat here, Helga would climb over the lions while the adults kept talking and eating.

On the phone, her mother: "I want you to come outside. Yes, that's what I want. Come outside to talk. Let's talk right now, in front of your daughter. No, no," her mother moaned suddenly into the phone. And then, "Hello? Hello?"

Helga shrank back into the car. The sun had moved while they were sitting in the parking lot, and her head and shoulders were no longer so hot under the open roof. She hugged the back of the driver's seat. Helga's mother tucked the phone gently into her lap. The frail bumps of her mother's knuckles perched over the top of the steering wheel.

"Come, Helga," her mother said suddenly, decisively. "We'll go in to find your father."

They unbuckled their seatbelts and held hands as they walked into the restaurant. Helga had to blink sunspots out of her eyes. The restaurant was different, in a way Helga didn't like, than it was at night. There weren't as many people, and the entire middle section of the restaurant; it looked like they had only seated people by the large windows. Only about half the lights were turned on, and the large space was dim. In the darkness, the paper scrolls with Chinese calligraphy that hung on the walls looked brown instead of red. The wrongness of it rattled Helga's bones. Perhaps her mother felt it, too, because she squeezed Helga's hand.

She and her mother marched past the empty section of tables to the window.

"Ma," Helga tried to protest. Her legs were pumping to keep up. "You're going too fast."

They bumped into a waitress.

"Excuse me. I'm looking for my husband. I see him right over there," her mother said politely. They sidestepped the waitress.

Her father was seated with three men and a woman. A bus boy was clearing away the remnants of their meal.

Helga's father was wearing his blue suit, the one he wore to Helga's parent teacher conferences. His face turned red when he saw them, his lips thinning to a pale white line, and he stood up quickly. The white cloth napkin in his lap tumbled down his pant legs to the floor. His black shoes left a mark when he stepped on them.

"Say hello to your father," Helga's mother said. Her hand was clamped on Helga's shoulder, twisting the t-shirt at the collar.

"Hey, Dad," Helga said awkwardly, looking up at him.

“Hey, kid.” His familiar face was tightly compressed. To her mother, he said, “Are you satisfied? Does this satisfy you? I told you I was in a business meeting. I told Lauren to tell you. I know you called my office. She must’ve told then.”

Her mother tried to speak. “Darling, we just wanted to surprise you—”

“The hell you say! That isn’t what you wanted to do! You and I both know goddamn well what you’re doing when you show up all the time. I can’t believe you. I just can’t believe you. Why don’t you get the hell out of here before you embarrass us further.”

Her mother whispered furiously back. They kept their voices low and private, an angry drone of bees, but standing under them, Helga could hear every harshly breathed word. Her mother recoiled back a step every time her father moved.

The men at her father’s table were talking in hushed voices. One of them looked up, saw Helga looking back at him, and smiled in a friendly way. Helga turned her face away and stared instead at one of pockets of her father’s suit. She remembered that he used to hide notes to her in his pockets, and sometimes fortune cookies. She used to climb all over him like he was a pet wolf.

Her mother grabbed Helga’s wrist with cold fingers. Helga twisted, her fingers wriggling, but she subsided when she saw her mother’s face, expression tight, skin stretched taut over bone. “I can’t speak to you when you’re like this,” she said simply, and walked away. She did not let go of Helga.

Back in the parking lot, the sun was over-bright. People stopped and looked at them. Their eyes looked like beetles in their faces.

Her mother kept the engine running and just sat there, her head bowed a little, strands of hair hanging limply around her face. The radio was still playing. Helga hugged her mother from behind, felt her mother's hair tickling Helga's hands. The radio played two songs and then started playing advertisements. For a community college. For a furniture warehouse sale. For a travel agency, promising to book discounted tickets to Hawaii.

Her mother sat forward suddenly in her seat, breaking free of Helga's arms. Helga's father rushing out of the restaurant. Her mother wrenched the door open to meet him; the handle made a loud thumping sound as it snapped back into place. Her mother got out of the car and slammed her hand down on the car locks, but she didn't push the door shut all the way. It hung awkwardly open until Helga's father reached the car.

Helga exclaimed, "Dad!" but her father swung his arm in a wide circle like the pendulum of a grandfather clock. Her mother turned her face to the side, behind her uplifted arms. Her father's open hand slapped at the door and it crashed shut loudly. The car shook, Helga still inside it. The tinted windows muted Helga from their view, but she could still see them. Her father, blustering, arms swinging as he talked. Her mother, responding in cool tones.

"I have had enough," her father shouted. He jabbed his index finger at her mother's chest. "What, are you just going to wait here for me? Are you going to sit here all afternoon? I can see you from the window, everybody can see you just sitting here! Are you crazy?"

"Don't you tell me I'm crazy. You make me crazy."

“I’m telling you, Christine, if you want me to come back tonight, you’ll go home right now. I have had enough of this.”

When Helga’s father had gone back inside the restaurant, her mother cupped her hands around her eyes and pressed her face close to the dark window. Her forehead touched the dusty glass as she squinted her eyes in at Helga.

“Helga, honey, open the door, please. Your father’s gone now. He’s not angry anymore, you see, he’s just going to finish his lunch inside and then we’ll see him at home. Pull up the lock or open the door, Helga, so we can go home. We can drive to the store and get some ice cream if you want, you’ve been such a good girl today.”

Helga didn’t open the door. She was imagining what would happen if she didn’t unlock the door. Maybe they would have to call the fire department, so they could rescue her just like that had to rescue Anna Clemenson that time she got stuck in a dressing room at Macy’s, where the door wouldn’t open. Maybe she could just wait here until the firemen came and opened the door, and her father would come pick her up. By then it would be dinnertime, and they could all just go into the restaurant and order greasy and fried Chinese food. The restaurant would be well-lit. She could have the little pork dumplings that she always shared with her father. She always carefully bit the skins open first and let the soup spill out. She would separate the dumpling parts into two bowls, one for soup, the other for the pork. She would eat them one at a time that way. Her mother said she was ruining the dumpling like that because the whole point was to sip the soup through the transparent skin, that’s why the dough was so thin. Then Helga’s father would always tell her mother to leave Helga alone, that if that’s how she liked to eat it, then they should let her. They would

save some of the stringy noodles to take home because Helga liked to eat it for breakfast, right out of the box, cold.

Her mother cracked her palm loudly on the glass.

The elastic rubber band around her chest finally broke. It snapped and stung, like when her mother pinched the soft part of her palms after Helga talked back with a smart mouth. Now Helga was possessed by a vengeful spirit, coiled and elongated, thinly bearded. She sat forward and rolled down the window a little. She said through the crack, “You’re crazy.” She said it again, in case her mother couldn’t hear her over their hearts beating.

Her mouth was very dry. She wished for her mother’s lip conditioner in the gold tube. She wished the tube was a thousand times bigger, so it was the size of a gold elevator, which would take her to any floor she wanted to.