

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE HOPE AND GRACE MISSION

Erin Maureen Baggett
Master of Fine Arts, 2004

Thesis directed by: Professor Howard Norman
Department of English

The characters in the stories of *The Hope and Grace Mission* are all attempting to escape, whether it be a small town girl eager to get out of a small town life, or a civil war re-enactor unwilling to continue her re-enactment life. Often a more figurative escape is sought, with characters attempting to escape time, family and death. The voice and internal and external structures of form in each story are used to get characters and prose to push against these boundaries and limitations. Often, they find the escape they search for, though it may come in an unexpected form, through imagination, frustration or resignation. Just as often they find themselves in the center of their dark worlds, groping for the light switch. This struggle is at the heart of this collection.

THE HOPE AND GRACE MISSION

by

Erin Maureen Baggett

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master's of Fine Arts
2004

Advisory Committee:

Howard Norman, Chair

Maud Casey

David Wyatt

Family, Friends, Teachers, Students:
Thank You

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I Hate Michigan.....	1
As the Battle Raged On	13
Form and Theory.....	30
Jellyfishing.....	64
Bootstrapping.....	77
Heartsick.....	110
The Hope and Grace Mission.....	127

I HATE MICHIGAN

Grandpa looks exactly like Buddha, just exactly like him, when he falls asleep in his chair and forgets he's not wearing anything except for his long johns. You can see every little fold in his belly rolling out, and the wrinkles in his face all sag down into a many-layered frown. That's wrong, because of course Buddha smiles in all the pictures, but grandpa, even a divine grandpa, would not find anything that amusing.

Laugh now, repent later, he says in a voice that's meant to be booming whenever he sees me watching a talk show or joking with mom.

And another thing, if Buddha sent me out for bread and I came back with a loaf of wonder bread, instead of that gritty whole wheat crap Grandpa claims his doctor told him to eat, Buddha would not whack me upside the head with the handle of his butter knife and yell "The whiter the bread the quicker you're dead!" and then eat the whole loaf without ever offering any to me, even though I mentioned I was hungry twice. So I keep the change and go right down to Bowen's and buy myself a coke out of the cooler in the back, where they still have glass bottles, right next to the Styrofoam containers of blood worms and night crawlers.

I look on the bottom of the bottle, because Charlie and me used to play a game where the person who got the bottle from the farthest away won. Once I got California, and neither of us has ever beat it yet. I like to imagine someone in California walking out to the store to get a coke, walking down a long smooth white road with palm trees leaning down over them, big frond branches praying a blessing for them and their California life. This person has red red lips and a light blue dress on made out of stretchy soft material,

with long dangly earrings that have toucans on them and would purse her lips and drink the coke the same way I do, so when I drink it, it's like I'm connected to that person from far away, like for a little while we're the same. I told Charlie about it once, but he just laughed and said he hoped they washed the bottles better than that. Most of them are from Michigan anyway. So I get some candy cigarettes too, because I'm trying to quit the real deal, and I go back and hear Grandpa snoring inside so I sit on the front steps and start to fake smoke every one of those chalky sticks, right out on the front steps so anyone passing by would think I was really smoking, ha ha.

The reason I know what Buddha looks like, me being a Methodist, is because Charlie, my older brother, he's got this crazy book with pictures of all these men from other countries who other people think are god, even if I know, and Pastor Smith knows, and Grandpa knows, that there is only one true god, and he is the one Pastor Smith preaches about in the United Methodist Church behind the 7-11 on Rt. 4, because no way would God be fat like Grandpa and the Buddha, because to get to heaven you have to go through grievous trials, and they're bound to make you lose weight.

I know because mom lost twenty pounds after my daddy left, and to this day can't eat anything chocolate without crying, on account of daddy used to bring her the Whitman sampler boxes to make up with her after they had a fight. So pretty much every Sunday we had a new box to dig into, grandpa's fingers like warty pickles touching the tops of each one trying to sense which ones had nuts. When one of mom's boyfriends gives her a sampler box now, she just gives it right over to grandpa and me and says I'll always have you Angela, you will never leave me will you, and I nod even though she doesn't really expect me to answer one way or the other. It's just our understanding. I

always try to give grandpa the ones with the cherry goop in the middle, because they remind me of blood and feel like what I imagine it would be to chew on a bloodworm, the way the chocolate cracks out suddenly and your mouth is filled with runny sticky mess. But whenever grandpa bites into one he spits it out and claims his doctor won't allow it, though I doubt his doctor would think it was a good idea to eat every single other one in the box either. Like I care anyway, dumb chocolates each in their own little brown ruffled bed.

So I'm sitting out on the front steps of the house thinking about all this when my boyfriend Wesley drives up in his truck with the tarp in the back that smells like salt and old fish and crinkles with a thick heavy sigh whenever we lay back on it. Wesley is really sweet. He knows I like going to look at the water at this time of night, when the mosquitoes are just starting to come out and everything gets sort of dim and gloomy. Wesley usually swings by after he gets off work so we can go for a drive together, and he usually buys me dinner at the Tastee Freez before we go and park somewhere. I walk over to the truck and slide into the front seat. The plastic is still hot from the sun and burns the backs of my legs a little, but I am still glad I'm wearing my cut off jean shorts with the pockets that hang lower than the shorts. I put my hands under my legs so they won't make any gross sucking sounds and look at him. It is hot out and he has beads of sweat on his upper lip like a mustache and I can almost imagine how he will look in a couple years when he's older and married with kids. And he's handsome in a way that is unexpected, with his hair hanging just to his shoulders and sorta greasy, like Jesus' hair in the picture mom has in the hallway against royal blue velvet.

He offers me a smoke, but I say no, because I'm trying to quit for very good

reasons and he just shakes his head and laughs a little when I put another candy cigarette in my mouth. I have to stop imagining him against blue velvet. He doesn't like it when I say things like that, he says it makes me sound like a little kid. When I first met him he was hanging out with my brother Charlie and said he thought I was about thirteen years old. I'm fourteen but I follow the formula my best friend Jessie and I made up, which is always lie about your age by at least three years, your weight by twenty and for the cigarettes you've smoked, always subtract ten. When we first started going out he said no, we'll wait until you're sixteen if it kills me. I'm seventeen, I told him, real serious. Then we both laughed.

He drives us to the Tastee Freez and pinches the top of my stomach where it comes over my shorts when I order a double cheeseburger and a large chocolate milkshake. It isn't my fault; my jeans don't fit anymore and mom lies every time when she says she'll take me to the mall to get new ones and I don't want any crappy ones from K-mart. This little kid is in line in front of us staring at us over his mom's shoulder and blowing these huge spit bubbles. His little arms are wrapped really tight around her neck and he's got a fistful of her hair in his hand and he looks like he's never ever letting her go. I smile at the kid and say Wesley isn't this baby one of the cutest things you've ever seen, and Wesley just shakes his head and pinches my ass, even though there are people standing in line behind us.

We eat and then walk down to the end of the pier and lean against the railings, even though they're coated in dried up fish guts and seagull poop, and across the way I can see the other side of the Bay, the white glitter of sails and masts against the sun, and all the water in between the two sides. When I was little I used to think it was just a

reflection of our side, like in a mirror and that everything was exactly the same over there as over here. Then I realized I was being dumb and that there are people over there leading whole different lives who have no idea I'm even looking at them. I like that idea. Still it seems so far away, too far away to ever reach even though I can put my hand out and seem to touch it. I hate to see the little white flecks of seagulls sitting all alone out on buoys in the middle, even though I know they can fly away if they want to. It just looks so lonely sitting out there in the middle of so much gray water.

What are you pointing to? Wesley asks me.

Nothing, I say and squeeze my hands into my pockets. Wesley shrugs and leans back against the railing, watching the shore rather than the water. The man closest to me is crabbing and I watch him lower a chicken neck slowly into the water. When it hits the surface a circle of a grease rainbow ripples out from the line.

Hey, can I tell you something, I ask Wesley, watching the rainbow shimmer on the surface of the water. I smile at him with my mouth closed, because of my bad teeth and wait for him to look up at me. He's watching a guy at the other end of the pier reel in his line, stopping every few minutes to tug and readjust his grip on the rod. Finally he turns back to me and looks at me. I know I'm not one of those girls from school who sits at tables in front of the cafeteria asking for money for yearbook or wearing the right jeans with the right hair, but I'm not a total dog either. I mean, I'm at least sixty-three percent not ugly and a lot of that thirty-seven is because of my teeth, which I fully intend to get straightened.

What? He asks, suspicious all of a sudden and when I turn back to look at the water I see the rainbow has disappeared and the lead weight must have fallen off the line

because the chicken neck is floating there, the pale skin fluttering around it like it's trying to swim away or fly away or something, but instead just floats there on the surface.

Nevermind, I say, nevermind, I'll tell you later. Whatever, Wesley says and starts to walk back to the truck, so I follow him. When we're back in the truck my mind is buzzing trying to think of something to say to him, like will you pick me up tomorrow, or will you come in and meet my mom, but instead I don't say anything and just think in my mind dumb dumb dumb and wish my teeth were straighter.

An ambulance screams by us and Wesley pulls over to the side of the road, and I pray like I always do when an ambulance passes by. I pray for whoever is in the back, whether they are old and nasty like grandpa, or a little kid like my best friend Jessie's baby Trey who hasn't done anything wrong ever yet. I pray every time no matter who I think is in the back, please god, help them, please just help them. Then I make a big mark in my mind on my side, where I mark up all my prayers and good deeds so when I go to make a prayer that I really need, god will know I'm not just the kind of girl who prays when she's in trouble or wants something, but am generous and good-hearted, and have been praying for strangers my whole life.

When we park in the empty parking lot of the high school, he leans over to me, and his breath on my cheek reminds me of when Jessie gets her baby Trey to kiss me. It's the sweetest thing, because all he really does is inhale really quickly on your cheek, like the opposite of a kiss. I giggle thinking about it, even though I know it annoys Wesley, but I can't help it, especially when he has such a tough time getting the zipper of my jean shorts down.

What, he says, looking at me finally.

Nothing, I say and try to keep a straight face, even though that makes me want to laugh even more. Then he starts to move again, his mouth on my neck and he's got my shirt up and all of a sudden I feel the button of the truck door digging into my back and I go to move and accidentally sort've knee him in the crotch, maybe a little hard because that button was really digging into my back. He sucks in his breath and says goddamit, and then I do the wrong thing and start giggling again. This is really the wrong thing to do.

That's it, he says and pulls himself back over to the driver's seat.

I'm sorry, I say, come back over here, I'll be serious now. But he's already backing out of the space, without even putting his shirt back on. I scoot over a little on the seat, like to get right next to him, but he shakes his head and pushes me back over so I hit the button again, with my arm this time. Don't be such a baby, he says when he hears me sniffle a little. Everything is quiet on the drive back to my house and my stomach feels really full from the cheeseburger and shake and from having him mad at me.

When he pulls up in our driveway I go to kiss him goodbye but he just sits looking straight ahead like there's something really interesting in the woods.

See you tomorrow, I say, and try to sound cheerful.

Maybe, he says, still looking straight ahead.

Sure, I say, because it's not good to be too clingy. Whatever, I say when I shut the door, like I don't care.

I go back into the house and watch his truck pull out from the window. It kicks up gravel and drives off fast with the gravel still rolling around in the wheel cover. Inside my head I can still hear that rolling hollow clatter even after he's gone. Grandpa is sitting

in his chair like always, asleep. He startles awake when I slam the screen door shut behind me. Where's my change! he says, then looks at me again and says What have you been up to? like he can see something on my face. Nothing, I say, none of your business grandpa. Deb? he says, which is my mom's name. No, she's working the late shift, I say and walk back to my room at the end of the hallway. I go over to my mirror and look in it, looking into my face but I don't see any change, just me and my crooked teeth. I go into my mom's room and lie on her bed to wait for her to get home from work because she likes to have someone to talk to when she gets in, and because it's so lonely in my room by myself.

You're so lucky, Jessie says to me the next day when we're sitting on her bed hanging out, Wesley is really sweet.

I know, I say, he really is.

Jessie picks up Trey and puts him on the floor where he can crawl around in some laundry down there. I watch his pudgy little arms wiggle while he tries to escape the pile we stack around him.

He stinks, I say, because he really does, I mean seriously stinks, worse than when red tide hits and all the dead fish wash up on shore.

I can't even smell it anymore, Jessie says. It's like my nose is so used to smelling it I don't even notice it. Her eyes well up and I realize I shouldn't have even mentioned it. I don't know what it is, she says, there's nothing I can do about it. I look down at Trey and his cute little baby nostrils and hope he can't smell himself. You know? she says, it's like when something is so bad and you don't even notice it after awhile and you think this

is just *normal*. That's what I can't stand, she says. Is this normal? She looks down at Trey crawling around on the floor and kicks a pile of old t-shirts in front of him so he won't crawl out the door. One falls on his head and he sits for a minute trying to get it off before I lean over and throw it in the corner. He smiles at me and starts crawling again. He has two little teeth in his gums, straight and perfect and I want to kiss him even though he stinks, but I don't because Jessie is snurfling and wants attention.

Well, it could be worse, right? I say. I mean, your mom is really great.

Yeah, Jessie says, real great, and snurfles again.

And you don't even have to worry about school anymore, I say.

Thank god for that at least, she says, and even smiles a little, because we both hate school so much, everything about it, but especially the other girls with their straight shiny hair and Guess jeans. You can either be that kind of girl, or us, and even though they never asked me to be one of them, I know I would choose Jessie and me every time.

So what do you want to do? I say. But she just shrugs and sits there watching Trey crawl around and around in circles in the laundry on the floor.

Do you want to walk to Bowen's? I ask. We used to walk there all the time in Middle School, so we could buy cigarettes and sit out front looking mysterious and sexy.

Yeah, I guess, Jessie says, but I can tell she just doesn't want me to leave her alone with Trey.

So we strap Trey into his little stroller with the cute blue cushion in it and start to walk along route 4 to get to Bowen's. Jessie is still in a weird mood, even though I went ahead and changed Trey's diaper for her before we left so he wouldn't stink so bad anymore. He is a really good baby, and smiled up at me all sweet even when I

accidentally pinched his leg a little with the tape.

We are walking along, and I am pushing Trey so Jessie can relax a little and all of a sudden she is all Do you think it's possible to change?

I don't know what she is asking me, so I say, I don't know, what are you talking about?

So she says Oh never mind I don't know why I'm asking you this.

So we both are quiet for a little bit and I am enjoying the warm rush of air that pushes my hair up every time a car passes, and pretending like the people in the cars are looking at me and wondering who I am and where I'm going. I wonder if they think Trey is mine and what a cute baby and mother we are together and I sorta stand up a little straighter and flip my hair over my shoulder as if to say Excuse Me, I have places to be.

We are walking down the road and I'm happy and I can hear Trey gurgling a little and all happy like babies can be, even when they've got snot running into their mouths and a really ugly too small shirt on. Then I hear a car coming and turn around to look. It's Wesley's truck, and there are two other guys sitting in the front seat with him. I guess they're on their lunch break, I tell Jessie. She just stands over to the side of the road and nods, squinting at the truck. I stand still and wave really hard and I can see Wesley sees me, he has to, I'm standing on the side of Route 4 with a baby stroller and my too tight jean shorts. But he just drives right by and I can hear a deep rumble of men laughing. The warm air lifts my hair, then there is nothing but silence and us standing on the road. Jessie picks up a piece of gravel and throws it after them, but it's already gone and I just laugh and tell Jessie Wesley didn't see me is all. But Jessie gets all mad the way she does sometimes and says you know what, you know what we should do and just

starts spluttering like that, her hand in a fist, because honestly neither of us has a clue of what we should do, even if we wanted to.

At least you didn't do it with him, she says.

Yeah, I say.

You didn't, did you? she asks and gets up close to my face like she does when she's serious.

Not really, I say.

Oh god, she says. Then she just looks at me and laughs a weird sort of laugh like she's trying to get something out of her throat that's caught there, then looks at Trey, who is getting splotchy in the sun. I start pushing him again.

Should we put a hat on him or something? I ask.

What hat? Jessie says and laughs that laugh again.

When we get there Jessie gets a coke and comes back outside to where I'm waiting with Trey.

What should we do now? She says, taking a swig out of her coke and I can see it's MI just like they always are the same time I realize I have to go to the bathroom.

I go inside and ask Mr. Bowen for the key, which is chained to a hubcap. Sure, honey he says and watches me as I walk out with the big metal hubcap in my arms. Jessie is sitting on the ice cooler out front and I can tell she's trying to look sexy like we used to because she's got her eyes only half open and is letting her hair fall into her face. Trey is fussing in his stroller by her feet but she's ignoring him. The sun shines down and hits the hubcap I'm carrying in both hands. I can feel the light glimmering off my face and the warmth there too, like I'm being kissed all over and like nothing before

anything else matters at all and I want to stand there forever, but then the sun goes behind a cloud and I can hear Jessie banging her heels against the cooler. I move the hubcap, which isn't actually that shiny, and use the key to open the door.

In the bathroom everything is dank and cool and I put my head against the mirror before I do anything, to cool down for a minute and I look myself in the eyes right there and pray to myself and god and whoever else *please please please*.

What's wrong with you, Jessie says when I come out. Trey is screaming and I can see his arms are turning bright red in the sun, but Jessie just nudges the stroller with her foot and leans against the ice-cooler drinking her coke. Nothing, I say and put my hands into my empty pockets. Jessie leans down right in Trey's face and says SHUT UP really loud, then stands back up and looks over her shoulder, like she's wishing she hadn't done that, or wishing she could do it again, or both. I don't even feel like getting a coke or anything. All the bottles say Michigan and you never heard of Michigan being any better than any other place in the world, even here. I hate Michigan. Trey starts screaming even louder and higher, like he's really putting energy into it now, and is even sort of shaking his little red fists, his head back and all scrunched up. His eyes are closed and he's just screaming his head off he's so angry and sad and Jessie is telling him to shut up over and over again and I can't hear anything but that for the rest of the day.

AS THE BATTLE RAGED ON

“As the battle raged on,” Mary Alice tells the group huddled close around her, “On and on through the streets of Gettysburg, Jennie Wade left her house on the other side of town and came here to her sister’s house.” Here Mary Alice hesitates and pulls the lantern closer to her side, knowing the group will also come closer, closer to the light and Mary Alice and the small stone house behind her.

“This was to be a fatal error;” Mary Alice steps aside to reveal the bullet holes in the wall behind her. She holds her arm out, as she has seen Vanna White do numerous times on Wheel of Fortune. “As Jennie Wade took a pan of biscuits from the oven, a bullet tore through the outer wall directly into her chest. She died instantly.”

Mary Alice puts her finger to the bullet hole and touches the rough edges, worn away by years of tours and curious fingers. The stone wall feels warm under her fingers and she almost expects it to slowly rise and fall, as Tate’s body does under her hands at night. Since the latest scare last month, when Tate had suddenly grabbed at his chest at work and the boys from the mill had called Mary Alice to get over to Emmitsburg to meet them at the ER, Mary Alice couldn’t stop thinking about Tate, dead. It wasn’t even a heart attack, the doctors said, or a stroke, but something slightly less, nothing to worry too much about, they told Mary Alice. The language of all these phrases caught at Mary Alice and stayed in her mind, rewinding and playing back nonstop. Not *quite* a heart attack don’t worry *too* much. She tried placing the emphasis on different words to see if she could understand it any better that way. Not quite a *heart attack* don’t worry too *much*. Mary Alice didn’t understand any of that, except that it seemed to her that Tate had started to die; maybe not today, maybe not next week, but someday soon.

Mary Alice hears the tour shuffle nervously behind her and jerks her hand away from the wall and her mind from Tate's warm body next to hers at night in bed when she lies still and stares at the ceiling and tries to wait as long as possible before she reaches out to make sure he's breathing. She returns to the tour, and it is automatic, the lines moving through her head and out of her mouth, no need for her brain.

"This bullet most likely came from a Confederate sharpshooter vantage point in the old church across town. The bullet traveled three miles to end Jennie Wade's life, the only civilian life taken in the entire battle." The crowd glances over to the church as if they can see the bullet now, speeding its way toward them. Mary Alice pushes her body between them and the oncoming imaginary bullet to pull them back to her.

"But Jennie Wade was not over. Folks in town often see her, walking through the streets, all the way down Main Street, and just down Racehorse Alley, to the house she should have stayed in." Mary Alice points in the direction of the alley and is suddenly startled herself at the way her arm glows pale white in the light of the lantern. She quickly puts her arm down.

The tour exhales with delicate pleasure at the story, and several stop to finger the bullet hole, to touch that small part of Jennie Wade, to put a finger on that moment so long ago. Mary Alice starts to walk back to the Square, knowing they will follow the lantern. There are some hushed whispers behind her, a few giggles and a loud yelp, possibly from one of the teenagers in the back, the ones who have been hanging back to chatter amongst themselves and prove they aren't affected by the darkness or the ghosts. Mary Alice sees Lincoln's silhouette standing stiffly against the facade of Confeddy's drugstore. She turns to stand next to him. She likes to finish her tour here, with Lincoln

at her side. She thinks it lends a certain air of authority to the whole procedure.

She waits for the crowd to hush, and finally they do, gathering in a horseshoe around her. She swishes her hoop skirt nervously and bends her knees a bit to hide her shoes. She bought them at Wal-mart on a whim earlier that day, not realizing how obscenely white they would be in the night, against her muslin skirt. She always forgets how different things will look at night. She clears her throat.

“Some people say ghosts have unfinished business, others say they are just left over energy, emitted at the time of a tragic event, magnetically held in that place forever,” at this point an older man in the back shook his head and Mary Alice nods sympathetically to him. There was always someone in the crowd who scoffed at that part of her speech. “Still others say ghosts are simply a figment of our imaginations, or the product of our wish to communicate with those gone before us.” Mary Alice pauses again, “I leave it to each of you to consider what you’ve heard and seen tonight and make your own decisions. Thank you for coming and please be careful walking home tonight.” Here she pauses dramatically as her instruction book has suggested she do, though she winces at the melodrama of the lines as she says them, “You never know who you’ll run into...”

Some people clap as usual, while others simply turn and disappear into the night. Mary Alice waves goodbye to the last stragglers. Two college girls hang back.

“So have you actually ever seen a ghost?” one asks.

“Well, there’ve been quite a few unexplained things in my life, and I’m not so quick to discount them as other people I know,” she says, “I’ve seen some things, especially around over by Devil’s Den when I go on hikes.” Mary Alice doesn’t go on

hikes or to Devil's Den, but she figures if there were ghosts they would be there and that this is what the girls want to hear.

“So that's it? You saw a shadow over at Devil's Den?” the girl asks.

“Well,” Mary Alice looks around and sees the rest of the tour has left and wishes she could be gone too, “I haven't actually seen anything, but in a place like this, where so many people died so violently, I think what you *feel* is more important than what you see or hear.”

“Huh,” the girl says and turns to walk away, while the other follows.

Mary Alice watches them go and holds onto Abe's cold arm for balance and pulls the tongues up on her new shoes, wishing briefly that she'd just lied and told them Yes, of course she saw Jennie Wade all the time, all over town, in the twelve items or fewer check lane at the Giant, at pump #4 of the Exxon, waiting for cheesecake at Lincoln's diner. If she wanted, this might even be true, wasn't it possible she had seen the flutter of a gray skirt while she smelled an avocado for ripeness? What she'd said about the sense, that wasn't completely true, that feeling. It was more a smell. A smell hovered all around the town and especially in Mary Alice's house around battle time. Somewhere between the smell of old people and wet dog, somewhere between the smell of old take-out food and rusting blood. But you couldn't tell a tour group that.

She can hear the other teenagers trying to scare each other as they walk away; a “What's that!” echoes down the street. Mary Alice knows one of them will run ahead and jump out of Racehorse Alley to try to scare the rest. Every night Mary Alice and Abe watch this trick, every night the tricksters are delighted to have come up with it. Mary Alice's husband Tate often does this same thing to her. When she least expects it

he will jump out of the closet, suddenly appear on the other side of the fridge door as she closes it. “I got you that time,” he says every time, and Mary Alice puts her hand to her chest as if it is she who has heart problems, and exhales deeply to show him that yes, indeed, he did get her that time.

Mary Alice’s first husband drank. Her second husband just plain ignored her. So Tate with his quirks and huge grins doesn’t bother Mary Alice in the least. She wonders if, after he’s gone, she will still open closets and doors nervously, waiting for him to jump out at her, the way she still ducks her head down when she thinks someone’s mad at her because of Ralphie, or the way she mumbles because of John. She wonders if ghosts just stick around out of habit more than anything else.

She met Tate on the late shift at the paper mill in Hanover. She was working off her insomnia and divorce bills and he was getting extra cash for a new uniform. When he heard she lived in Gettysburg, he insisted on driving her home and telling her all about his plans for the new uniform, to be bought from a mail order catalogue based in Florida, authentic Union uniforms, the type of uniform that would ensure him a spot on the front lines at the Annual Battle of Gettysburg Reenactment. It had been this excitement, and the way Tate’s eyes looked off into the distance when he spoke about it, that had made Mary Alice ask him for a ride the next day, and the next.

He’d confided in her he secretly thought he’d been born into the wrong era, the wrong time. He wasn’t meant to heft the paper rolls onto and off the machine at all, that was all wrong, he told her. He was meant for a different time when things mattered more and people were more important. The way he’d said that to Mary Alice, revealed it to her like a secret when they were taking a picnic on the battlefields on a fall day right before

they got married, had gotten to her. It made her angry whenever she repeated this sentiment now though. How can you say that, she'd ask him, how could you choose that kind of life over this one, with the pop tarts you love and ESPN and ambulances that race you to the hospital just in time. Tate would just shrug and smile and hug her until she would have to smile back at him so he could continue to tell her more about the eighteen hundreds and why they were far superior. Then Tate would rub Mary Alice's back and she would listen to his breath in her ear and try to hear his heart pounding and forget about everything else, except when his hands would move lower, his breath get quicker in her ear. Then she would gently move beyond his reach and pull the covers up. No exertion, the doctor had said.

Mary Alice pats Abe's arm in goodbye and starts to walk home. The town is speeding up as it does every summer, hurrying forward toward the re-enactment that will start the next afternoon. Tents dot the fields around the old Pitzer place--the serious re-enactors will be eating only hardtack tonight and sitting around campfires telling stories about Antietam while the Peach Orchard in the middle of everything does its best to bloom, even as it did all those years ago. The old timers who have been making this trek for years will make fun of the soft wool on the newer men's uniforms, criticize the lack of must and mud, roll their eyes if anyone mentions ordering a pizza. They will discuss the types of cannon the Rebs used as if it is an incantation they must recite correctly lest all the men deep underground at the National Cemetery rise up to correct them.

Every year Tate begins to tense up around late May, worrying if he has the right buttons, the correct hat, whether he should apply for a different position on the field. These things are important, Mary Alice has come to understand, and, since she loves Tate

she tries hard to love each of these details. Now she wonders if these details are part of what wears Tate down, ticks away at his heart muscles, all this worry about death and war. All this work so that for three days in July Tate can leave Mary Alice to live out the death of a soldier out there on the hot fields, kicking up dust as he falls, shot by artillery, hit by a cannon. Mary Alice is allowed to watch with the other wives and townsfolk from the top of Cemetery Ridge. She wants to put her foot down as she has about other things, but finds her heart is what's lacking--she hasn't been able to ask him to sit it out, for his sake or for her sake. I want you around, she tried to explain to him in the hospital while he sat with the wires and suction cups all hooked up to him and that was as far as she got before he interrupted her. I'm not going anywhere, M.A. he'd told her and reached out for her hand with his clammy one. But she could hear the monitors pick up his lie and speed up with it, so she'd backed away and pulled the curtain to make him rest.

Mary Alice looks up to Little Round Top. In the dusk she can only make out silhouettes of the monuments, scraggly trees and boulders planted there. The monuments are mostly statues, standing stiff and proud against the night sky, surveying, always surveying, the fields and town below. Sometimes at night it seems to Mary Alice they lean imperceptibly forward, inching closer and closer to the town, as if waiting for the signal to wrench their feet from the concrete bases and charge down the hill, leaving behind the etched verses, names and nonsense, to finally finish the business at hand and forget all the ceremony and nostalgia. But of course, they never do.

Mary Alice shakes her head and hurries her new shoes along the cobblestone pavement. There is Tate's uniform to get together, his pills to watch him take, laundry to be done, TV to watch. She passes the National Cemetery and the white glow of row up

on row of graves, rising always like an ever-cresting wave that will never break. Now she passes the wax museum and turns into Lincoln Estates, marked by a stone sign with fancy scrolled writing and some awful geraniums. Here the old cobblestones end suddenly and are replaced by thick black asphalt.

Mary Alice pretends not to look into her neighbor's windows as she goes by, and in return she knows they will pretend not to watch her slow march through the dim street. The green glow of TVs flicker out into the street as characters and commercials bound across their screens in a quick succession of colors and images; even if a ghost did appear no one would notice it, Mary Alice figures. She should know, she is in the business of ghosts. Somewhere a phone rings and in response a dog barks. Mary Alice turns into her own driveway.

Tate is at the kitchen table polishing buttons, using one of her good guest bathroom towels, the ones with the monogrammed gold letters she got for her wedding to Ralphie. She shakes her head and takes it from him to run under cold water, like it will do any good. He is wearing his uniform, making sure he has everything just so, including the rip on his arm and the holes in the toes of his boots. He follows her into the bedroom and comes up behind her and wraps his arms around her waist, leaning forward to nestle his face into the high neck of Mary Alice's shirtwaist.

"Let me change, Hon," she moves to pull away but Tate holds her.

"Wait, wait," he breathes into her neck, sending a regiment of goose bumps marching down her arms. "Guess who got stationed in the front line of Pickett's Charge?" Mary Alice turns into his arms to hug him, wanting to be excited for him. She wants to tell him how much she loves him, how much she needs him, all that stuff, but

she never gets any closer than this, wanting to, trying to. She wants to tell him how much she hated waiting in the hospital room with him, hated every second of it, and by extension began to hate him a little that day too. The idea of it sickens her towards him, and she knows this isn't right, not what she reads about in romance novels or hears about on TV. She tries to get closer to what she's supposed to feel about all this, but can never quite manage it. Maybe everything was simply a matter of trying to get as close as you could, like a bull's eye, with those circles that could never meet, only continue to go round and round. She feels Tate tighten his arms around her and realizes he's waiting for a response.

“That’s great! All those years on Little Round Top finally paid off!” She gives him an extra squeeze to show she really means what she says. Behind him, Mary Alice can see the picture taken a few years ago. Tate and his buddies grinning into the camera, fake blood coating their uniforms, mud streaked artistically across their cheeks, rifles slung casually over their shoulders. Look at us, they seemed to be saying, look at us, warriors, all. She pictures them all older, grayer, someday using their rifles to hold themselves up rather than as a prop. She squeezes her arms tighter around Tate and wants to ask him to stop with this, take off that uniform, stay home with her tomorrow, keep breathing and breathing and breathing.

“Pumpkin, you’ve got to help me find my rifle,” Tate says, pulling away from her. “I’ve looked everywhere, I mean everywhere.” He pulls his eyebrows together to import the seriousness of the situation. His hair is thinning on top, so there are only a few delicate wisps near the front; it is dark black with only a few strands of gray.

“Did you check under the stairs?” Mary Alice unbuttons the top few buttons of her

dress. “You can’t go unless you find the rifle, right?”

“What the hell are you wearing on your feet?” Tate has spotted her new shoes and pauses with a hand on the doorknob to the basement.

Mary Alice wishes her skirt would go down further, but the iron hoop won’t allow the skirt to droop so her white tennies glow, and almost hum against the wood paneling and dim light from the lamp. “They’re new,” she says and tries to recapture the feeling she had when she put them on at the store, how it felt like she’d never worn shoes before she’d put these on, how good it felt to wiggle her toes in them.

“Well, they look horrible.” Tate shakes his head and steps into the basement, but not until he has repeated “Horrible!” one more time. Mary Alice hears his whistling fade away as he descends to look for his rifle, right where it is always kept. She wishes the shoes would stop being so white and so horrible, but it won’t do to show it.

“Randy and Chuck are coming over later to go over a few details,” Tate bellows from below. “I don’t see it anywhere.” The details are the best part for Tate, Mary Alice knows. He loves searching Internet sites and antique shops, poring through history books and old newspapers. The house is overrun by it; musty blue material poking out from Mary Alice’s linen closet, genuine bullets in a jar on the mantle, a canteen hanging from a hook on the wall beside the decorative plate set he ordered from TV depicting each Union general. Maps with blue and ray arrows sweeping across them are framed in every room. Mary Alice sometimes traces the arrows, letting her fingers brush over the land to stop at the points indicated. You are Here. She combats the smell of rust and decay with her African violets, for which she has won a blue ribbon at the Adam’s county fair for the last three years. When Tate goes on and on about his plans for obtaining a reb uniform

from a own and out descendent in South Carolina, Mary Alice strokes the leaves on her violets, thick and furry, tender and strong and thinks about trying to get some pink blossoms this year with cross-pollination.

“Keep looking,” Mary Alice says, as the phone rings. She picks it up after yelling KEEP LOOKING again in case he didn’t hear her.

“What’s another word for throbbing male member?” It is Diane. Every night this week she has called Mary Alice with the same question and Mary Alice is really starting to run out. Because Mary Alice has been married three times Diane thinks she is some kind of authority on sex, and all the euphemisms of sex.

“Don’t you have a thesaurus?” Mary Alice asks.

“One of the kids lost it, and besides I don’t think they would have this kind of term in it. Just think Mary Alice. I just need one more, I’m stuck in the middle of the scene where the Union Doctor has the debutante from Atlanta pushed down on his army cot and they’re just about to--” Diane pauses and coughs into the phone.

“What?” Mary Alice wants Diane to say it. Why can’t they just come out and say it? Once Mary Alice went through Raphie’s porn magazines, the ones he kept in the garage behind the old freezer that smelled like fish. John had been a high school teacher, so he pretended he didn’t have them; he’d kept them in a file labeled ‘Audit, 1988’ in the back of the filing cabinet. She wasn’t mad about it, not really, more interested and a bit shocked, she supposed, but she’d been younger then.

“What are they going to do?” Mary Alice asks again.

“I can’t say it, the kids are in the room,” Diane is exasperated. “By the way, I heard about Pickett’s charge, tell Tate congrats.”

“Oh, thanks,” Mary Alice says. She can hear Tate’s heavy footsteps lumbering up the stairs quickly. He won’t be able to find the rifle, Mary Alice knows.

“Look, Diane, I’ve got to go, why don’t you just use--” she utters the worst phrase she can think of and holds her breath, wanting to giggle.

“Please stop being so crude, Mary Alice. What’s got into you?”

“Nothing,” Mary Alice sighs heavily and wonders what has gotten into her.

“Is it something in the bedroom honey? I have a book I could loan you--”

“No, that’s not it.” Mary Alice says, though maybe that it is part of it. Since the scare at the hospital things had been different.

“I’ve got to go, M.A., Randy’s yelling because I washed his uniform. Dirt is authentic and I’ve committed the crime of the century, evidently. I’ve got laundry for five people, I’m supposed to check with everyone to see what they don’t want washed?” Diane pauses. “How about man-stick? Does that make any sense?”

“No,” Mary Alice laughs, “Just skip ahead and fill it in later.”

“Okay,” Diane says, “I’ll see you tomorrow for the big day. Are you bringing your pie?”

“I don’t know, I’m not sure I’ll have the time--”

“You say that every year. I’ll see you then.”

Tate is standing in the doorway when she hangs up. “I can’t find it. I remember putting it there last month after I cleaned it. Did you move it?”

The rifle has never killed anything, at least not to Mary Alice’s knowledge. It is possible that Tate may have shot a squirrel while out in the fields with the other boys, but this just isn’t Tate, not the one Mary Alice knows. She sometimes does wonder, even

after all the years together--especially after all these years together--if there is another Tate, one who surfaces around men and guns, outside. She imagines this other Tate, pushing the butt of his rifle into another man's straight white teeth, as crisp an action as when Tate carves the ham at Easter. Sometimes she thinks she catches a glimpse of this other Tate, lurking beneath the surface, snapping at her if she leaves the truck without getting gas in it, eyeing her suspiciously if she comes in too late. But these are only flashes that quickly disappear; if this other Tate does exist, he doesn't exist for Mary Alice.

"You know I don't touch your rifle," Mary Alice says, starting to pull off her skirt, then reaches for her robe so Tate won't see her and get any ideas. The last thing he needs before his big day is to get overexcited, worked up. You don't touch my kitchen and I don't touch your rifle." She pinches his love handle as he comes closer to her and swats his hand away.

Of course she touches the rifle all the time. It is old, an antique. It still works, sporadically. Tate has practiced in the backyard for hour upon hour, reloading it again and again to understand the panic the soldiers must have felt as they grappled with power, musket ball and packing, all while knowing somewhere through the thick smoke someone was coming to kill them. Mary Alice hates it when he goes into the backyard with the gun; he always comes back inside sweaty and haggard and looking older than when he went out.

Mary Alice goes into her closet with the robe to change, but Tate catches her arm. "No," he says, "stay."

She lets her fingers play across Tate's broad shoulders, catching on the thick wool

of the uniform coat, letting her body move forward toward his until she catches herself. “You look tired, do you feel tired?” she whispers into his ear, then pulls back into her closet to find her cotton pajamas. Tate smiles wearily after her, his arms still in the air, holding the outline of her there.

Later, Mary Alice lies in bed with her arms folded across her chest and Tate’s warm body next to her. She watches the arms of the oak tree outside the bedroom window wave back and forth, back and forth, goodbye and hello again and again until she can’t help herself and reaches out cold trembling fingers to flutter against Tate’s neck, checking for the ebbing throb of his pulse.

Tate is gone when Mary Alice wakes up the next morning. She’s slept horribly late, inexcusably late. If she doesn’t hurry she’ll be late. She can’t believe he left without saying good-bye, especially on battle morning. He usually makes a big show of heading off into battle and kissing her good-bye. She runs her fingers over the bread crumbs on the counter as if they are a Braille message and examines the angle of his chair, how he must have pushed it back in a hurry after checking the clock, stopping only to leave a note to remind her to look for his rifle and hurry with it over to the battlefields when she finds it.

The paper is on the table, unread, still creased neatly down the middle. The front page announces a foreign war someplace Mary Alice has never heard of and will never go. Below the national headlines is a story about the upcoming events. Tate has circled it, and underlined the part about Pickett’s charge. Mary Alice leaves it on the table untouched and goes to the front window.

She moves to the kitchen window and sees the little boy next door is playing in the backyard, scraping together piles of dust and planting stick flags on the top of them. She thinks if she had met Tate in time to have kids they might have been something like this boy, though Tate probably would have named them after Union generals or Confederate surrenders. She can picture calling them to dinner, “Appomattox! Meade! Pickett! Dinner!” And then they would come running inside, eyes in a battle fury, fists clenched to stare at her like the tourists did. Mary Alice lets the curtain fall back.

After putting her pie together and placing it in the oven, Mary Alice uses the brillo to herd Tate’s crumbs into the sink and watches them swirl away into the drain. She calls the Tour Office to see if she is needed that night. She is and what’s more Mr. Funkhouser saw her last night waltzing around in some kind of sneakers underneath her costume. Does she understand the regulations for the costumes are there for a reason to present an aura of authenticity and further suspend the tourist’s disbelief? Does she want to ruin the tours? Does she want to disrespect the memories of those dear ghosts who suffer through eternity. The answer is clearly No, of course not. She pictures Mr. Funkhouser peering out a window at her as she gave her tour and remembers how he always smells like bran flakes and ben-gay. Of course she doesn’t, she murmurs before hanging up.

She checks on her pie in the oven, then goes to the pantry. The broom, mop, and Tate’s rifle are leaning against the corner behind the potato bin behind the door. The rifle looks harmless next to the broom and mop, surrounded by cans of baked beans and peaches. Mary Alice picks it up and holds it to her shoulder like a baby, letting her cheek rest against the cold metal, thinking she can almost hear its breath in her ear, the tiniest of

exhales, thinking she can hear it whisper *I told you so, he went anyway, he'll go anyway*.

She carries it out to the table and lays it down next to the flour and sugar she has just used to make the pie. The gun glints in the morning sun and Mary Alice sits and stares at it. The timer on the oven dings suddenly. Before she leaves she changes into her tour guide uniform, thinking Tate will be pleased to see her watching him in it, watching always watching him, waiting for him.

She grabs the gun up before heading out the door with her pie in her other hands. On her way to Cemetery Ridge she hurries through Main Street and takes a short cut through Racehorse Alley. Some tourists gaze after her, but she doesn't stop, no time for stories. Maybe later they will tell their parents and grandkids they saw an authentic ghost.

When she reaches Diane on the sidelines she starts to explain about the gun and how she might as well give it back to Tate since he was already out there, how maybe she should borrow that book after all.

“Look!” Diane interrupted her, grabbing her arm, “There they are!” Diane points to Tate and Randy, who are kneeling at the edge of the trees, waiting for the command to charge. There is smoke hanging in the air from the artillery pounding that took place earlier, the pounding that was reported to have been heard all the way in Philadelphia, maybe even all the way to the ocean, a great blast when each bit of artillery and each gun was fired in a tremendous bash to confuse and disorient the enemy, though Mary Alice can't remember which side fired it. She coughs from the smoke and starts again to tell Diane about Tate's rifle but it is at this point the battle coordinator gives his signal, a great whoop, and all the men rush at each other.

They rush at each other with their unloaded rifles, barreling towards each other in their muddied uniforms and Mary Alice can only make out the vaguest outline of what must be Tate down there, with what must be a borrowed rifle. From the hill Mary Alice can see only some faces. The ones in the front look a little scared of themselves, of their own volition, and she can see they are running as fast as they can, like kids to win a race, but they don't know where the finish line is. The air is hot and muggy and Mary Alice has sweat rolling down her body and into the dark corners where her limbs intersect each other. She sways her legs a little to try to get a breeze going with the hoop skirt, but the sweat keeps rolling and she can feel her face getting red. The dust and smoke are thick and heavy and Mary Alice can feel it moving in her lungs, through her body, and she can't see Tate at all, knows he must be down there somewhere, but can't even see his outline or his stiff clean shaven jaw. Diane has turned to a woman on the other side of her and is discussing where the Cub Scout troop should go on their fieldtrip.

Mary Alice moves forward a little, and it is not completely her, she swears, but something pushing against her back, and then the momentum of the hill is pulling her down and she is rushing onto the battlefield, toward her husband and all the men and boys. Stop! She wants to yell, tries to yell, stop it all, just stop it, but instead a strangled cry comes out, raw and hard and cutting. As she rushes down the hill into battle and raises the rifle she cries out again, and this time it is louder, and rougher, like she has never used her throat before, never been so true and so right.

FORM AND THEORY

I. Hide and Seek

My new apartment is perfect and clean and tidy. It has cabinets above the stove and a hall closet where I will put my crisp Egyptian count sheets and the spare comforter. The floors are hardwood and have no scratches on them; before I moved in they waxed and clean them and now they shimmer like a ballroom. There is a security system on the door and a clean mechanical device that winks steadily into the bare hallway controlling temperature and other climates. My new apartment is perfect and clean and tidy.

Do you remember the old house as clearly as I do? The dog tripped us on the stairs and the cats lurked in the rafters of the unfinished basement. You punched a hole in the wall of your bedroom and when I arrived to take it over, after you moved to the new room in the basement, my whole arm could pass through the wall into Sister's room. You'd taken the closet door off too, or maybe it fell off. It was stuffed into the foyer closet with the table extensions, Christmas lights and poker chips. Every time we opened the door to hang up guest's coats they slowly slid out, a controlled avalanche, the poker chips ringing a jackpot.

There was flashlight tag and sardines in the backyard. On GO we would disperse and hide in the corners of our territory. The Serengeti of the overgrown garden, the teeming energy of the ants and mites and unspeakable bugs living in the unstacked wood pile, the shed with its dusty floors and snake skins in the corners. Once, we rolled an old tire up and down the driveway and you all put me at the bottom of the drive to catch it and there was no way my hands could stop that momentum. It rolled down the drive, over the washout pipes, across the street and all the way into the Causey's backyard.

When you sent me to get it I lifted my foot above a copperhead and froze. I waited and waited and it was probably hours, felt like hours, before you two finally came, the noise of your tumbling through the undergrowth scaring the copperhead away into the woods. The tire we never found; we'd wanted to make a swing out of it.

But inside hide and seek was best and worst. Always IT, rounding a corner, opening a door, looking up or behind me to hear your scream of fright, rage, surprise and echo it myself. You would be grinning and I would be angry, so angry at being scared, you all would have to promise me the remote control to calm me down, get me to be IT again so you all could hide again. I knew all of Sister's favorite spots, behind the bedroom door, lurking behind Mother's fancy dresses in the back of the master bedroom closet, feet disguised in mother's heels. You were harder, unpredictable. Sometimes you would just sit in the corner of the room, stock-still and wait for me to scream. Other times you would crawl completely into Mother's hope chest, cover yourself with mothballs, the Christmas stockings and Grandmother's old quilt and risk asphyxiation for the game. Sometimes I would hunt for long fearful minutes in the laundry and storage rooms, poking behind the drier, edging beneath the heater, checking inside bins of hand-me-downed clothes only to come back upstairs to find you both watching TV in the family room, game deserted long ago. I never knew where to look, where to start looking, when to stop looking.

Then you started to play without telling me first. I'd get home from school and call out "I'm home" but you wouldn't respond. Sitting down on the couch to watch TV, to find the blanket beneath me suddenly jolt upright, and you there, grinning at me, my heart pounding, my new braces cutting tightly into my lips.

You started playing harder. I'd look everywhere to find you, and finally deciding you weren't playing anymore after all, I'd turn on the light to find you sitting in the rafters, grinning widely as huge beads of sweat rolled to your ears from the effort of holding yourself up there.

I'd be eating a snack in the living room and find the pantry door suddenly swing open, all the food having been removed to another location, you standing there silent and cruel just inside the door, waiting for me to catch my breath to let out my shrill mouse like squeal of terror.

Another time inside Sister's hope chest.

Once, underneath the porch so that as I stepped into the house you grabbed my ankle.

Once you waited an hour after I got home and jumped out at me from behind the shower curtain as I entered the bathroom.

Stop torturing your sister, Mother would say, when you jumped out at me as I peeked from the fridge door, making me drop the tomatoes she'd just gathered from the garden, her prize tomatoes grown with pride and chemicals in one of the few cleared spots in the yard. Her hand would be on her chest in mock fright and her eyes would be glinting to see you up and about, oblivious to my fingers digging into the soft skin as my heart slowed down and I took in the sight of you there in the kitchen, the sun setting behind the Causey's house across the street, the moment before we turned the lights on for the night.

Then you stopped playing as Sister had stopped playing years before. I would enter the house wary and anxious, each step careful and planned, aware of the corners in

each room I entered. I would creep through the upstairs, past the chair heaped with Mother and Dad's clothes, past the laundry hamper where we kept old books and papers, beyond the pantry with its creaking door and the master bedroom bathroom with the hinky lock. Into the basement I would go, closer and closer to your room, past the study where we kept the old computer with its Frogger game and the stereo where you and Sister used to practice head banging in secret.

One these days the exposed rafters seemed fraught with danger, as did the smooth concrete floor, so cool and so dry against my bare feet. I would check underneath the pool table, poke my head into the still unfinished, and never finished, bathroom, eye the gaping holes where the appliances would one day be. The washer and dryer, too small to hold you, still seemed ominous, silent and wary as dead empty eyes. Closer and closer to your room I would creep, listening for any sign of you within, any sound or sense of you there, farther and farther away from the sliding glass door with Wolfrey Jack's scratch marks. Away from the windows opening out to the backyard and the tree house with no ladder, the weed garden, deeper and deeper into the house. Kneeling quietly at your door, I would put my ear against the thin plywood plastered with the life-size Larry Bird poster. My ear against Larry Bird's thigh, I would listen for you.

On my hunt one day I spotted the crawl space beneath the stairs, a space meant for hanging winter coats and old woolen sleeping bags from Dad's days in the Navy. Rowlky Ellen, the aging cat, was always trying to get in there, and, once in, making her Rowlky sounds in order to escape from. Do you remember the crawl space? How the door would rattle suddenly when Rowlky Ellen would force her way out? Not even you ever hid there, I didn't think, but couldn't know for sure.

Are you there? I asked the closed door. I found you, I said, opening the door all at once. For once I was going to find you. The closet smelled like mothballs, wool and something else. I pulled the hanging string and the exposed light bulb came on, swinging. It lit only the doorway where I stood. I felt rather than saw something move in the back of the closet. Rowlky? I asked. But she was on the pool table; I'd petted her as I walked by and she had bitten me gently in return.

I found you, I whispered again into the quiet basement. The rafters, where Rowlky Ellen prowled like a panther in her youth, and where you broke your leg while playing Tarzan many years before cast shadows across the concrete floor. I turned and asked the hallway that led back to your room if you were in there. I tried to see further into the closet, to no avail. I let myself lean into the hanging coats, my body swaying into them, the rough materials scratching my face. I lowered myself to the ground, my knees soaking in the coolness from the concrete floor. I saw a dark shadow at the back of the space, where the stairs met the floor, behind the red traveling cases, beyond the boxes of old records and un-albumed photos. My heart started to beat and I thought I should turn around, go watch TV, let you remain hidden. I wanted to wait for Mother and Dad to get home, but I couldn't.

Are you there? I asked the closet again. The darkness seemed to shimmer and deepen before me and I put my hands on the floor to crawl further into the darkness. I thought of black holes and other dimensions. I crawled further in, the tops of the coats brushing against my back, the taste of dust and mothballs in my mouth, the light from the swinging bulb useless in the deepening corners of the diminished space. I crawled further and further back, heart calming as I didn't touch anything soft, fleshy, nothing

human. I crawled further and still further back until I couldn't touch anything else, couldn't reach anything, curling myself into a tight contained ball. I lay on my side, my hot cheek soaking in the coolness from the floor.

Above me I could hear sounds: thick footsteps pounding down the stairs above me, Wolfrey Jack scampering to be let out, his nails dragging new marks down the glass door, Rowlky Ellen rowlking from her perch for more food. Hello? I heard Mother call. Is anyone there? From the space beneath the stairs she asked again if anyone was home. I stayed quiet, controlling my breathing, allowing my hand to flex and unflex against the floor.

She poked her head further into the space, moving the light bulb further back. I could feel the light reflect off my eyes and mother's sharp intake of breath. Who's there? She whispered. The house answered only with the click of the refrigerator turning on, the hum of the water heater, the plink of the leaky faucet in the upstairs bathroom and the usual creak of the floorboards settling in and out. I stayed tight and small as she began to slowly move forward, through the coats and blankets, through the dust and thick layers of the past, waiting, waiting for the right moment, breath ready at the mouth of my throat, hands digging into my skin in anticipation, alive and ready in the dark small space, as you must have been so many times waiting for me to find you.

When I get home to my new apartment every night I check every space I can find. There aren't that many spaces to check here, with the gleaming new cupboards, steel sink, shiny and silent appliances. Under the sink there are only cleaning products with strong warning labels, under the bed there is only the threat of asphyxiation by dust

bunny and in the closet all of my clothes are neatly hanged, shoes all lined up with toes pointing the correct way. There is nowhere to hide, no crevices or corners where a surprise might be lingering, which is one of the reasons I've picked the place, so perfect and modern and well-lit. But as I wait for sleep I can hear footsteps moving from place to place in the apartment, quickly and furtively, and I can picture you there, grinning to yourself as you fold your body into a new space, thinking I will never, ever, find you there. I think about these things as I grow older; how the spaces all seem to be getting larger and clearer, and how so much space can never seem as endless and dark as the house you grew up in.

II. In My Own Backyard

I came across the cat killing a mouse this morning.

The white fence stretched around, the hummingbird feeder swung gently in the breeze, and the mouse lay very still at my feet. My first thought was to dispose of the body, quickly, quietly. I didn't want it near my flowerbeds, or tomato plants, or the swing set. The children must not see this. Mother will take care of this. A secret between me and the cat, Rowlky Ellen, who had darted away under the deck while I stood above the mouse, angrily glaring at me for stealing her treasure.

The weight of its death had pulled the mouse's head down to its body, tucked away as if in sleep. If it had been a rat the cat killed, or one of the squirrels, it might have been different, more excusable. Or even if it had been the blue jay, who steals the dog's food while he watches trembling below the deck. But it was a mouse, and when I bent lower, I wasn't at all sure the cat was finished when I came upon her.

In the corner of the yard, where it dips into a deep ravine, we dump things. A sailboat that sunk on its first trip out. The old bunk beds. The remains of the fallen tree house. Years worth of Christmas tree skeletons, limp branches with the odd bit of tinsel hanging ridiculous from the last clinging brown needles. Once, I caught the children throwing the carcass of one of their dolls there, the one with the zippers and buttons and Velcro. Wolfrey Jack had mauled it and they had wrapped it in a cloth dinner napkin and hurled it into the ravine. Its arms and legs flew akimbo as they threw it and they let out little war cries I'd never heard them make before, little screeches and a high pitched keening children shouldn't make, the girls holding hands and leaping up into the air together, the boy simply kneeling and peering over the edge of the yard. They didn't

know I saw them.

When Wolfrey Jack pulled the head off the youngest's teddy bear I sewed it back on covered it with a bead necklace. When the oldest broke his arm in the jungle of the basement I made paper mache casts for the girls too, and myself, and we wore them all summer, the four of us together. When my little daughter drank the rat poison, I lined up shot glasses of milk and sang 35 bottles of beer on the wall while she laughed and drank each one down. I tore out the pages when Beth dies in Little Women and wrote a note to the school forbidding them to watch Charlotte's Web. I'm exhausted and then this; Rowly Ellen with her teeth digging into this small little body.

Did it squirm a little when I pushed it with the stick onto the thick oak leaf? I watched the sky as I crossed the yard with the little warm body; wisps of clouds wafting onward across the blue expanse, and the wind rustling the trees, making them tremble and whisper as I passed them. The cat stalked from bush to bush behind me.

When I got to the edge of the yard, I looked down at the thing in my hands. I could feel a bit of warmth seeping through the paper, into my hand, and before thinking I tossed the leaf, along with the little gray body into the air and closed my eyes as one dropped and the other fluttered into the upraised arms of the bed of dead evergreen. Where the cat went, I don't know.

Watching from the window now, I can see the children, the two girls and the slightly taller boy, circling closer and closer to the edge of the ravine, though I've warned them to stay away. I have oiled the swings, fertilized the tomatoes, watered the flowers and still there is something out there in the back yard, in my own back yard. And I remember when I came upon the cat killing the mouse, her mouth was open in a pant, and

she did not seem at all the same Rowky Ellen as yesterday who, dressed in a yellow tea dress, I kissed gently on the lips, her whiskers brushing my cheek, making me shiver.

III. Why We Shouldn't Entertain

I will be Mrs. White and you will be Professor Plum. You will roll the little purple piece between your fingers three times for good luck and I will roll my eyes at Mr. Green and Miss Scarlett. When I played as a child we had accents too--my little sister was a British Mrs. Peacock and older brother was a Germanic Colonel Mustard. I played Mrs. White the same way I play her now--a bit mid-western, an unassuming wife. There is always Miss Scarlett, I've noted through the years, but there is rarely a Mr. Green. Miss Scarlett will be shy and wear too much eye make-up like your secretary. She will keep careful track of her clues. Mr. Green will have never played the game before and we will both try to answer his questions at once. This is the first dinner party we will have in our new house; our new perfect house for our new perfect family. Mother will offer me furniture from the old house, legs chewed from mice in the shed, tablecloths stained from my childhood holidays and we will find the polite way to say No Thank You. We want things with a future, not a past, you say as we lie together in our new bed in the quiet house, with its carefully mowed lawn and fresh asphalt out front.

The game will be my idea, of course, an almost mistake that could turn into a great success for those hours after dinner but before polite leave taking. How charming, I can picture Miss Scarlett and Mr. Green saying as they climb into their car at the end of the evening., to play that old game after all these years, can't believe she had it to dig out! He sure got lucky with that one, they will say, what a charming couple, wonderful home! You and I will watch from the front window of our new house, waving from behind the curtains I vacuum every Friday, next to the table with the wedding picture, which I dutifully dust every other week.

You will insist on putting each little cast iron weapon into the rooms when people are accused of murder and I will get annoyed and hide the candlestick under my leg so that you will spend the rest of the game wondering where it could have gotten to and not who did it where and with what.

The phone rings, and we both get up quickly to answer it, huddling up in the kitchen around the phone. It was in the kitchen with the phone, I joke, before you pick up and for a second you laugh. Your mother, you mouth to me and I shake my head no because that is what you want me to do. Limits, you say, are good. We will share a quick kiss in the kitchen and I will keep the candlestick in my tight fist behind my back. Passive aggressive behavior, you have told me, typical for a middle child. Diagnosing your own wife, I have told you, typical for a newly minted therapist.

Who was Mrs. White married to? I will ask when we settle back around the board because I always do. Where is Mr. White? Is he the chauffer? Mr. Green and Miss Scarlett will laugh politely and ask whose turn it is.

It's just a game, you will say, looking in the box again for the candlestick. Whose turn is it? Is it your turn, you will repeat, giving me a firm look. I'll be laughing too much, or not enough, talking too fast, or too loud. The rules are simple, you keep telling me, have told me ever since we met, why I find you so charming and fresh, so awful and aggravating.

I will roll the dice and make my little white piece skip into the lounge and try to go to the conservatory to accuse Professor Plum of doing it with the secretary. Sorry, you will say, after a pause. It takes your whole turn to use the secret passage, so you can't make any accusations this turn, you'll have to wait. You will pick up my piece with two

dainty fingers and put it back in the lounge and hand the dice to Mr. Green who will shake them in his hand like a rattler's warning. Miss Scarlett will busy herself looking at her cards, one by one.

I want to go to the conservatory, I will say. Check the rulebook. I will feel the candlestick under my thigh.

Remember, we lost it, you will remind me.

Mr. Green will throw the dice and they will fly across the board, skimming the surface of so many rooms, his eyes lifting to glance at us, then out the window. Sometimes at night I picture burrowing like the smallest mite into the center of your brain, digging there and exploring those little crevices, sliding through the pockets and portals hidden away between the lobes, the hemispheres, all those dark lovely places you study with your thick books with pages like the bible. I try to read them but the pages slip through my fingers like the phillo dough when I tried to make baklava.

Miss Scarlett will titter something at Mr. Green will say and you will laugh too, your deep guffaw, almost an audible guffaw, so deliberate and unjolly it is. I can hear it echo against the walls, the white white walls with the growing shadows reaching up to paint them, as the phone rings again. Miss Scarlett and Mr. Green are quiet now. Whose turn is it? They will ask, and you will stare at me as I stare at the phone.

You will nudge me with your knee.

But they will be getting their coats and realizing how late it is and how they really do need to be getting home. You will walk them to the door, murmuring in your doctor's intonations, and the phone will suddenly stop ringing.

I will think of poor Mrs. White rushing in her super support pantyhose, rushing

through the secret passageway with a murderer on her heels. The candlestick in her hands is cool and heavy, the walls on either side of her brick and wet, clammy like a forehead, as she trails her hands along them to find the way out to the other side, out of the center.

I will sit and wait, feeling the thick damp walls press around me, hoping I am moving away, and not towards, some dark danger.

IV. Remembering Rowlky Ellen

I got back from Europe with a new chic, and very expensive, haircut. It was called a 'wedge' according to the hairdresser in Paris. It made my cheeks appear angular, especially when I sucked them in, and my neck long, made me toss my head and feel taller and older. We sat around the living room and I answered questions about my trip, yes it had been fabulous, yes I would almost certainly find a way to move there after graduation, the food was delicious and not gross at all, you simply had to know how to order it. I didn't say anything about eating at McDonalds, or how bums grabbed my ass and tits on the metros, or about running low on money in Prague and eating bread with nutella for a week so I could buy them all the cheap nesting dolls for souvenirs.

One for you, I told my sister and her snooty big-shot husband, one for you, I told my brother in the corner, and one for you, I told my parents. I pictured myself kissing them all on both cheeks when I would go out later to meet up with home-friends and hoped I'd remember.

Well, look at this! they said. What craftsmanship! Quite nice. My sister unpacked the dolls one by one and put them into her lap. Her husband sat on the edge of the couch next to her and picked a piece of dog hair from his pants. I noticed my new black turtleneck was covered with the stuff too and let one drift back down to the floor.

Each one is littler than the last! Mother said, giddy with the excitement of the occasion. My brother turned his over and over in his hands again and again, not opening them; he cast his eyes towards the basement, where he had resumed occupancy of his old bedroom. He scratched Louey, the dog who came after Wolfrey Jack, absentmindedly. I

ran my fingers through my hair again and gave it another toss. If I'd had the money I would have colored it something exotic like butternut or mahogany. I tried to imitate the French accent of the hairdresser for Mother, but it came out Pirate, like all of my accents.

While they admired their nesting dolls and continued to comment on just how neatly they fit within each other, I took my bag downstairs to the laundry room, hefting it down the stairs in front of me, watching it tumble down hitting the sides of the already scuffed steps. Pictures of us kids in various stages of growing up lined the wall, all out of order, sister's wedding pictures here next to the one of my brother with the puppy Wolfrey Jack, next to another of me holding the cat in the back yard, squinting into the sun, the ravine visible behind us, the old sailboat we were painting off to the side. Rowlky Ellen was dressed in the yellow tea dress I used to put on her for occasions: strolls through the yard, playing board games with me and Wolfrey Jack when the older siblings refused to join us. In the picture I was so small Rowlky Ellen seemed to flow from my arms, and I could barely see around the backyard bowl cut, smiling so largely into the sun. I thought I could remember that day, the smell of the paint, the feel of the sun against my bare arms, the brush of the cat's fur as she struggled to get down, the cut of my bangs across my forehead, but maybe I was just remembering the picture.

I left my duffle in the laundry room and went to the boarded up pool table to find Rowlky Ellen. There had been a five-foot bumblebee won for my sister from one of the old boyfriends, which Ellen would perch on, small black bundle of fur against the cheery yellow stripes. Sometimes she would rub her chin against the sharp corners of the large plastic eyes that stared always up at the ceiling, where the lamp hung from the exposed rafters.

The bumblebee had been removed. In its place was the paper mache swiss cheese my brother made the summer he broke his leg, a box of old Boy Scout badges, a basket of baby clothes, a canoe paddle and a set of encyclopedias.

Dad had followed me down. She got hit by a car, he said, we didn't have the heart, just didn't have the heart to tell you. It was a beautiful fall day and she'd just been watching the birds at the birdbath. She saw a squirrel and darted across the street. Sudden, very sudden, no pain at all. He shook his head and put his arm around my shoulders, rough and tender.

I went back upstairs where they were all sitting around. Mother had arranged her nesting dolls on a corner of one of the shelves next to the piece of lava rock Dad had brought from Hawaii, in front of the bowl they got for their anniversary. No one said anything when I raised my eyebrows, flipped my hair and pet the dog, still frantic with joy at my return.

When I went to the kitchen to get water my sister followed me in. They gave her away, she said, twisting her diamond ring around and around her finger. It was while you were away and they didn't want to bother you with the details. There was an old lady up in Riverdale, one of Grandmother's friends and she needed the company of an older cat, you know how they are. She reaching out and touched me on the arm, her feathery almost not there touch. I went up to see them one Sunday, me and Rick went together. We drove down a long drive with maple trees on either side and when we pulled up the woman was sitting on the front porch with Rowky in her arms. It was so nice there, such a nice scene, like something from a magazine. I'll give you the address, I have it somewhere, not on me, but somewhere. She reached out and ran her hand up and down

my arm again, smiling her thin lipped smile.

Oh! Mother put her hand to her chest in mock surprise when she came in to get coffee for the intruder-husband. Well now, I think she just wandered off one day, into the woods, you know how animals do when their time is near. She just wandered off. Remember how she was always trying to get into the crawl space beneath the stairs? I was scared to death she'd die in there and we wouldn't find her. Even before you left she would never move from that old pool table, except to try to get under the stairs. She would just sleep on that old stuffed bird all day and rowlk when she woke up, all night and day. Well, I let her out one morning and she walked a figure eight several times around my legs, then strolled off into the woods behind the house. The sun was falling on her fur and as she got near the edge, she ran right into the trees and just seemed to blend right into them. It was quite nice the way she did it, Mother said, I wouldn't mind that myself. Here, Mother put her hand arm around my shoulder and pulled me into her, gesturing in the air so I could see the cat and the lovely scene with her. Her arm tightened around my shoulders until I nodded.

My brother just shook his head. I put my hand down to scratch Looney's the black spot on Louey's back, but he shrugged away and sulked behind my brother's legs. They went down the stairs and left me in the living room alone. I stood at the upstairs window and watched the rest of the family proceed across the yard to examine Mother's new garden. I watched them from the dim insides of the house as they tromped around mole holes, past the sunken in badminton net, towards the back of the yard, where the tomatoes grew so well. I remembered the hammock that used to be there, and the string we used to pull it to and fro as we all lay in it, the three of us kids, sometimes the dogs and cats too,

their paws falling between the ropes, our sticky hands gripping them too tightly. I pushed my forehead against the window and felt the sharp cut of my hair fall across my jaw.

I could remember what it had felt like to stand atop all those important European landmarks, feeling tall and taller than them, breathless from the endless stairs. The endless stairs with the endless graffiti. Everywhere I looked in Europe I saw the little scrawlings: *I was here*. *I was here* etched in magic marker, in chalk, *I was here*, in ink, in pencil, *I was here*, lipstick and eyeliner *I was here*, in German, French, Italian, Russian, more languages than I could name, many more than I would ever learn to speak. I tried again to picture those views and remember that feeling. I was there, I told myself, I was. Downstairs I heard the sudden clatter of pool balls being released.

V. Happily Ever After

The dragon has been quiet for a few hours now so she escapes to go get more meat. She feeds it meat from the butcher's shop down on Rt. 4, the one with the huge plastic cow anchored to the top. She goes in directly past the standing freezer of bait and cokes and hurries to the back counter where she stops suddenly. There is a new butcher. All morning she's been removing the remains of an entire set of singed wicker furniture from the house and now this.

The butcher is helping a mother whose little boy has ahold of her belt loop. They appear to be buying a ham and several sausages. "Yes, made locally," the butcher is saying. He has a goatee and a rosy complexion, and she can't help dividing him up into the sections of the meat diagram behind him: flanks: firm; rump: tight; drumsticks: defined. She shakes her head and is frowning when he finally turns to her. She buries her blackened sooty hands deep into her jeans pockets. She's a vegetarian.

"What can I help you with?" he asks, and gestures toward the case in front of him. Piles of sliced lunchmeat, sides of roast beef and slabs of bacon glisten under the lights.

"Well," she says, "what do you have in this size." She removes her hands to hold a shape the size of TV or toddler. Her hands get caught coming out of her pockets. The jeans are too tight which means, according to her sister's Theory of the Universe, that someone else somewhere else has lost weight. Her sister posited that unwanted weight, like energy, was never created or destroyed, but instead kept shifting around from person to person. Whoever suddenly gained five unsightly pounds did so in sacrifice for a delighted bride somewhere else who suddenly fit into her dream dress. If I work out, her sister went on to explain, I will do so at the expense of one, if not more than one, other

people. Can I take that responsibility? She would ask, and Ruth would be able to hear her crunching into a potato chip over the phone.

“Depends on what you want?” he asks again, smiling and for a minute she suspects he is flirting, with her, here at the meat counter in Bowens on Rt. 4.

Flanks of beef, rump roasts, whole chickens, dozens of smaller parts no one else wants. She takes whatever she can get in big chunks, cheap. How can she explain this to him? Tell him she hosts a pack of wild dogs?

“Making stew?” He asks when she tries to explain what it is she wants. He wraps a chunk of red meat into the thick white paper, folding it over twice and then taping it. One corner of the paper turns pink. “I just moved to town, myself. I didn’t know people still made stew. I love stew.”

She nods and waits for him to hand her the meat.

“Cooking for a large family?” he tries again. She almost nods, then remembers it is just her now, and the dragon. And the house, of course. She shakes her head instead, then nods it, the sort of ambiguous reply that should have been enough of a deterrent, the sort of gesture her ex-boyfriend told her was maddening and her brother-in-law called passive aggressive.

“Look, I don’t have enough on hand right now, what if I delivered the rest to you tomorrow? We’re expanding our delivery service and trying to get steady customers, like yourself, to buy bulk meat ahead of time.” He leans forward on the counter. His cheeks are round and just a bit shiny above the goatee. He smiles with his whole face in a way that takes her aback, and things don’t usually take her aback. He hands the white package over the counter to her and raises his eyebrows.

She hefts the meat onto her hip like a baby and thinks. She needs the meat and it is a big hassle to drive all the way down here so often. Delivery would be ideal, really. She nods and he smiles again. Another customer comes in and starts asking questions about lamb, and she quietly writes her address on the card he gives her and leaves while he is discussing veal.

“How is every little thing?” her father had asked her over the phone the night before.

“Oh fine, fine,” she’d said. In the background she could hear her mother murmuring.

“She says everything is fine,” she’d heard her father say, then “This is long distance, let’s not do this now.”

“So, um, the back upstairs bedroom is--in good shape?” he’d asked

“Yes, it’s fine,” she’d answered. “I’m taking care of everything, you guys have fun,” she smiles, as if they could see it through the phone line, over the ocean.

“Yes, we saw the Basilica today,” her father’d said, “It was so tall and so grand.”

“And shiny,” she heard her mother say in the background. Ruth knows what the Basilica looks like, went there once on a trip she took to Europe, thinking to explore the world, conquer it somehow by taking many pictures and buying pointless souvenirs.

“Look, take your time,” she’d said, “everything is fine here. The dog is still a very good boy and everything else I can manage just fine, don’t you worry.”

“We’re so lucky to have such a good daughter!” Ruth’d heard her father say in the distance before he hung up, exclaiming to her mother about something she should put

down or pick up.

On the way back down Rt. 4, past the Power Plant, beyond the old high school, a right onto Mayberry Lane, the new road out where the Levitt place used to be, she listens to the pre-tuned stations in the car. Her mother has programmed in an opera station. An old boyfriend, the one before her cohabitation project, as she calls it now, tried to make her enjoy Tosca once, and she is surprised to find herself agreeing with him now, too late. It is beautiful and she wishes she knew how to sing along, as she turns onto the final street. Instead, she can only hit the steering wheel in enthusiasm and wave her arms at the windshield to show her support, opening her mouth silently for the foreign words to enter in, since she hasn't the know how to let them out.

The new house, the retirement house of her parents, looks oddly transplanted, like one of those houses she sees on the back of trucks out on the freeway, like it could have dropped anywhere. It doesn't appear to have grown out of the ground, as their old house did.

There are two stone markers at the entry to the new neighborhood and the other older couples who live there wave little royal waves from the wrist at her as she drives past. They bend up slowly from their wheelbarrows of mulch and buckets of extracted weeds to watch her wind her way through the smooth white streets, and she can almost hear their collective arthritic fingers crack, the bum knees and replaced hips click as they turn to watch her. Sue and Ted's girl staying at their house, she pictures them telling each other, the phones ringing up and down the street.

This neighborhood has certain rules. Her mother wanted to bury the old dog

Looey out in the backyard, but the Neighborhood Association had sent a letter back to her telling her that, after careful consideration, they had to regretfully refuse her request, as that sort of marker was not on the list of approved objects. They hadn't even bothered to ask about the wrought iron frog sunbathing in a bikini that Ruth and her brother had gotten their mother for the birdbath. They'd quietly returned it for a bread-making machine instead.

“You don't want to leave that garage door open, do you?” the elderly bachelor across the street yells to her as she opens the trunk of the car to unload the meat. He is watering his forsythia bushes and her father has told her that he suspects this bachelor of having the hots for her mother, or perhaps just her tomato plants. Ruth nods and smiles at him, waving as she hits the button that lowers the door automatically. Even the garage smells clean and new--raw, like the vacated apartment had. She can see her father has been shining his riding lawn mower, that her mother has neatly hung spare folding chairs up on hooks. Where are the nails for the rusty old gardening implements they had in the old shed? In what corner would the old dollhouse reside here, each room in it filled with old lifejackets, coffee cans of nails and bolts, baskets of yarn and twine and fishing line?

She lifts the lid of the freezer and throws one hunk of meat in, keeping the rest out. The dragon has been sleeping for hours now, and will be hungry if it awakens. There is plenty of room in the freezer for the delivery the next day.

She slams the freezer and carries the meat into the house. The aged dog lifts his head briefly, then puts it back down. She taps his stomach with her foot and his tail thumps thrice against the floor in gratitude. Her parents are supposed to call again tonight, with their return trip information. It has been nice, this hiatus, but she should get

back, she knows. She shouldn't be lulled by this routine of care taking, the importance of feeding and cleaning coming above everything else.

Largely the dragon is happy to sleep the days away, the snores echoing through the house like a steady breeze. The incident with the wicker furniture was mainly a result of her own carelessness. The dragon quieted right down afterwards, the dust from the extinguisher settled after a few hours and everything is now back the way it was before, minus the furniture. She can hear deep comforting snores from the end of the hallway. The curtain ruffle above the sink inhales and exhales calmly while she does the dishes every night and she finds it soothing.

In her apartment, the one in the building downtown with all the amenities, wonderful view, lovely appliances, perfect boyfriend who worked on the Hill, she had never found anything soothing. At first, maybe. It was fun, like staying in a hotel room. But she began to hate the neatly made bed, hate his dry-cleaned shirts hanging next to her dry-cleaned business suits. She hated the smell of the lobby of the building, the bright lights there, the bright lights everywhere. Even with curtains and thick drapes she couldn't sleep in the apartment. The sun glinting off the buildings in the morning, the windows of other buildings winking back car lights, street lights. Every light cut through her eyeballs like a knife. Her boyfriend bought her a silk sleeping mask and told her she was being a bit whiny about the whole thing, and thought what she was really saying was that she didn't want to move in with him after all. No, no, she'd assured him. It was the only thing she wanted. Eating cereal with him in the morning, watching TV with her feet in his lap, his morning beard rough on her face. He just looked at her suspiciously.

So after he fell asleep each night she began to creep into the closet and lie down

for stolen catnaps. First one leg and then the other, she would edge off the bed. Then her body, finally her head from the pillow. He never stirred. It was perfect! She could easily creep on all fours into the spacious walk-in (sleep-in) closet, shut the door after her and stuff his old tweed coat, the one he wore when he wanted to look smart, into the crack at the bottom of the door. Blissful blissful sleep, her eyes finally allowed to soak in the darkness, able to reach out and touch walls on either side of her.

His face when he caught her there, tangled up in his fallen ties, legs wrapped in an old knit sweater, was hurt and confused. Again she tried to explain, again he just looked at her in that way she couldn't stand. A week of sleepless nights, lying still beside him in the bed with the light ricocheting around her, dragging herself wretched to work after kissing him good-bye. The supply room had been so inviting. So small and dark, like the closet, with the cool floor. It had only been for a minute, and she had the plan to explain that she'd slipped on a sheet of loose paper there if anyone came in. But the second time it was so so delicious and the third even better still, so she could keep her boyfriend busy all night to distract herself from the light bouncing off of everywhere, every clean surface in the apartment, and get sleep the next day. What were you thinking? her sister had asked her when it all came out. Really, what was she thinking she could hear her brother-in-law say in the background.

They let her resign instead of being fired, and her boyfriend let her move out instead of being kicked out, so she supposed things could have been worse. Her parents came to collect her and she left most of the stuff behind. When she is sleeping in the guest room in this new house the wheels of the stationary bike constantly spin forwards and backwards, ghost peddled all night so she wakes up exhausted sometimes, having

dreamt of biking untold miles. But at least she can sleep there. For some reason the light does not bother her in this house, or maybe it is just that her days are too exhausting, caring for the dragon, driving to and fro, answering calls from her sister and parents, dodging calls from the boyfriend. She'd always pictured herself with an archeologist anyway, someone capable of digging beneath the surface of things. She liked a guy with a little dirt under his nails. The boyfriend had been a meticulous groomer.

She is starting to sleep longer and longer, and she tells herself she's catching up on lost time. She started getting used to the sound and feel of the house breathing around her only a few days after her father and mother left and now feels its absence if she goes out. When her sister and brother call from their distant homes to check on her she tries to remind them of the old house, tell them stories about that place, explain about this new place, update them on the dragon's health. "Why don't you guys come over," she told them both, pressing her cheek into the plastic phone, "I'll make us dinner. Like old times," she said.

"Sorry, baby," her sister said, and for a minute Ruth thought she was being called the old nickname Baby, then realized her sister meant her own baby, "but why don't we talk again next week?" Her brother just sighed deeply into the phone so she could picture him shaking his head. "Ruthie, you should find a new place," he said, "mom and dad can take care of themselves, and the house isn't going anywhere." When she tried to explain all the other things she did around the house, all the very necessary jobs she was needed for, the operator cut in and demanded more dimes from her brother, so he sighed again and told her good luck.

The meat is on the counter, where a pool of pink blood has begun to collect and

move slowly towards the floor. She should get a paper towel to soak it up, but sits exhausted in one of the kitchen chairs instead. The dog sighs in his sleep and she listens to the grumbling stomach down the hall, now audible beneath the layer of snoring.

The phone rings and the snoring abruptly stops. She darts a look down the dim hallway. There is no sound of stirring, only the absence of the heavy sleep breathing.

The machine picks up. She begins to unwrap the meat, using both hands to turn it out of its paper on the counter while the message starts.

“Hello darling...” it is her mother, “hello it’s us. We’re still here in Italy, the weather is here, wish you were beautiful! That’s a joke honey, of course you are.” She has the meat unwrapped, which is good, as a deep bellow has started from the end of the hallway, the high whine that erupts when hunger sets in. “Hope all is well there and just wondering if you’d mind just maybe staying a few more days,” she lifts the meat, moving closer to the machine with it; she can hear the background sounds of her father saying *a week? ask if a week will be okay* and she is nodding even before she has thought it through. “We’ll try later, okay? Take care,” and then they are gone and the machine’s angry eye is blinking steadily.

A week more, she thinks as she shuffles down the hallway towards the rising noise. She will just have to cancel a few more important interviews, move back a few things. Already those details seem distant. Nothing important. She kneels at the door and edges it open, caught by the full blast of hot air. She pushes the meat into the room and peeks in, moving one hand to touch the tail, run her fingers over the thick scales. She leaves the door open a crack and leans there, a hand on the dragon’s tail. She hums a little, an old tune, she can’t remember the name. She feels the rumble through her chest,

until the deep breathing begins again, the force gently pulling her hair back from her face, then letting it fall again, in and out, the house itself breathing, her own chest rising and falling now, the force of her own lungs pushing the hot heavy air out, pulling the cool air in; the whole house breathing with her now.

She showers and gets dressed in real clothes the next day and tells herself it is not for any special reason, but just because she wants to. She waits in the kitchen with a cup of coffee and the newspaper open in front of her so it appears she has a morning routine. The truck pulls up a little before lunch. It is big and white with a refrigerated section on the back, a picture of a smiling cow decaled on the side. When the butcher gets down from the truck he is smiling again and for some reason her heart leaps with trust and hope at the sight of his toothy grin. He hops down and she goes out the garage to meet him, despite the suspicious glance from the bachelor neighbor, who was kneeling in his mulch weeding.

“Hello again,” he says, “and good morning.” She moves forward to shake his extended hand, noticing the blood beneath his fingernails. She risks a smile and gets one back. They stood smiling at each other on the smooth white pavement for long minutes until the slam of the neighbor’s mailbox being opened and shut brought her out of her thoughts. “Yes, anyway,” she says, “the freezer is right in here.”

He nods and runs his hand through his thick hair. Men weren’t supposed to have hair that thick, she thinks. Before he leaves he asks to take her out for a steak dinner and she says yes.

He picks her up in the refrigerated truck, which she admits to herself, makes her happy. It feels good to be riding up above everyone else and turn the gaze of the melancholy cow upon them. They joke about the cow on their way to the restaurant; it is smiling, but its eyes are sad as if it is aware of just what it is advertising. She's surprised the butcher can afford to be so whimsical about the cow; after all he must see a lot in his line of work, she says. He raises his eyebrows at her and smiles again.

"Really I love animals," he tells her over their salads, "of course I think they're cute and adorable and all that when they're alive, but I don't even connect that to what I do really." He pauses to stab a bite of his salad onto his fork; a bit of the lettuce falls from his fork to his lap. Without hesitating he picks it up and places it back on the fork. Ruth is delighted. "It's more like a puzzle, seeing how all the pieces fit together, finding the right place to cut. After all, the only difference between really top of the line filet and an old t-bone is where and how the butcher cuts it." He put the bite into his mouth and chewed enthusiastically. She follows suit. They both order the eggplant parmesana for their entree. She raises her eyebrows at him and he laughs and holds up his arms. "Guilty," he says, "I'm a vegetarian."

"Me too!" she says without thinking of the freezer of meat he has just delivered her, the pounds of meat she had him carry into the garage for her. He wrinkles his brow but doesn't ask. She tells him she is house sitting for her parents and then somehow the story of going to Europe to find the cat missing when she got back comes out followed by an admission that she would love to someday go back to Prague. She didn't realize it herself until she says it out loud. He stares dreamily into the corner of the restaurant and admits he too would like to get to Europe, where they really appreciate a good cut of

meat, where butchers are more than meat cutters. “What about your parents, your family,” she asks him, “what was your childhood like?” This is really more a second date question, but she feels the same way she did when they stood together on the driveway that morning, just happy to see each other, and wants to know all of these little details. His hands move delicately as they cut his eggplant into neat squares.

“Uneventful,” he answers, “and boring.” He smiles again. He is smiling too much, but so is she and the food is delicious, he is delightful. She checks her watch and realizes she really should be going. Her parents will be calling from Europe and she should feed the dragon once again, should really before too much time passes; she forgot all about him this afternoon. She puts her napkin on her plate and waits for him to finish and get her signal. He looks disappointed, but signals for the check.

She tells her parents she can stay a week and a half more, at least, when they call that night. The phone crackles and she hears everything they say five seconds after they say it. She walks around the rooms of the house as she talks, letting her free hand skim along the new knick knacks her mother has procured since the move. They are smooth and insignificant. “Fine, fine,” she says to her father as she opens and closes the fridge. She walks to the back of the house where a glass door opens out to a patio. She puts her hand to the window and watches a fat bunny hop across the neighbor’s back yard. The only thing these bunnies have to fear is overeating, she thinks to herself, watching another hop into their yard. The old dog is lying in the grass back there but doesn’t notice, or doesn’t care, about the bunny.

The butcher calls and they go out again, and again. He picks her up in the

refrigerated truck and they drive around the county. He sees things in pieces, like slabs of meat waiting to be cut: Here, this is where the road changes into the highway, he tells her when they merge, this area is the city, here this is where the rich people shop, here this is where we go to get coffee, and this is where I kiss you under the umbrella. Each day was divided into these chunks, each with their own marbled veins of fat, thick texture. She went to the butcher shop in the morning to watch him find the right place, here just below the bone, there just above it, to cut into the meat, to divide it up for consumption. This is how they do it, she thinks, this is how it is done. At night he fixes her vegetarian lasagna and okra casseroles at his place, where they watched law and order together. She falls asleep under the glow of the TV and doesn't wake up until morning. When she gets home the house is silent and she wanders from room to room, thinking of the butcher's chart and how the house would be divided up, this is the kitchen, this is the roof, and how easy it was to think of it in these disposable parts, putting in the dotted lines along the creases. The house is too silent. There is no snoring, no rumbling coming from the back room. When she opens the door, the smell is as strong as ever, but different, mustier and moldier. She thinks to clean it out, but the dragon won't budge, it is sound asleep.

The dragon won't eat. It sleeps so much she hates to wake it up, and when she does it is sluggish and only nudges the meat with its nose, which is a shame, she thinks, since the meat is so well cut. Please, just a little, she whispers to it, pulling one of its long whiskers. The butcher calls again and again but she lets the machine pick up.

She purees lamb in the food processor and tries to pour it into the dragon's mouth, but it just spills out onto the floor at her feet. The same happens when she tries to cut it

into very small chunks and slip them between the brown jagged teeth onto the limpid tongue. The old dog eagerly catches the pieces she throws to it then runs outside to the bachelor neighbor, who lets the dog drink out of his birdbath while he scratches his ears. She goes across the street to drag the dog back and the bachelor reluctantly turns the collar over to her. "Didn't know you were still here," he said. "I don't mind bringing in the mail and taking the dog if you go out of town again," he says, reaching down to pet the dog again. She realizes it is not her mother this bachelor has the hots for, but her dog. The dog pants up at her and she caves and lets it stay, but only until nightfall, she tells them both. They go back to sitting in the sun on the porch together and she gets back to the house just in time to catch the call from her brother.

"What should I do?" she asks, and she can hear him shake his head again. "Don't do anything," he says. But what does it all mean? What did I do? she asks. Don't be like that, he says. Sometimes a dragon is just a dragon. A voice calls laughing to him in the distance and he hangs up. Her sister's line is busy.

As she hangs up, the phone rings again. She lets the machine pick it up.

"Hello? Hello?" the line crackles, "are having a fabulous time in Berlin. We met a great couple--from Canada!-- who play bridge!" the line crackles more "and a week or two at the most--" the machine cuts them off; the tape is full. She turns around and stands in the house, the new house with its clean floors and blank walls. The curtains at the windowsill hang limp. She catches her breath and runs to her room. The bike is still, the air hangs lifeless and dead in the hallway. She doesn't know what to do, though she has been waiting for this for a long time. She picks up the phone and dials the butcher.

They stand in the doorway of the room together. The dragon is very still, and smaller than she remembered. The other objects in the room, the old singed navy blankets, the skeleton of an old chair are tattered and about to fall apart. She presses against the dragon's chest and feels nothing, then leans her whole body forward into it, again and again, nothing, nothing. She feels the butcher's hands on her elbows, pulling her towards the door. Her brother and sister have left long ago. The house is growing dusty. She takes hold of the butcher's hand. He is looking at the dragon in pieces, as he sees everything, she realizes, and tries to do the same, this is the heart, this is the eye, this is the leg. "This will be your greatest work," she tells him, and he turns to her with a look of wonder on his face, nodding.

JELLYFISHING

“If you pick them up right they won’t sting you.” Jamie slips her finger under her flowered bikini strap to examine the pale skin underneath as she speaks. In front of the aluminum canoe Susan peers hesitantly into the gray water. There were specters of translucent goo hovering near the surface. She could see each tentacle sluggishly treading water, and in her mind she could see them frantically slapping her face with clinging, stinging slaps.

“Don’t be so scared, I’ve done it a million times,” Jamie says. The canoe sways erratically as the older girl squats in the seat, smoothing her gym shorts to avoid contact with the searing metal. The sun beat viciously into the canoe and winked off the water. There is no breeze, and the inlet sits quietly, except for the movement of a black lab pacing the nearest pier. Large houses rest uneasily on the banks, with sparse outlines of trees separating them from piers that reach into the water. In one direction the water tapers into thick mud and at the other moves into the river, that further along would flow into the Bay, then the ocean. The cousins sit in the middle.

Susan squirms. A trickle of sweat had started in the small of her neck, and it was sliding in the groove of her spine. It rolls slowly downward.

The Speedo was intrusively cutting into her flat body, and lacking shorts, she balances slightly against the seat with her knees resting forward on a faded orange life jacket. She shifts uncomfortably and glances into the water over the side. There is a smaller one, hovering, and she can make out a dark burgundy spot in its body. She is suddenly conscious of the peanut butter and jelly in her stomach.

Lunch is always eaten in bathing suits at Aunt Joanie’s house. Aunt Joanie likes

to lean down and tell Susan, “You just don’t worry about anything. Your cousin Jamie and your Uncle Bob and I are gonna make you right at home here!” But Susan doesn’t feel at home. At her house lunch is on plates with glasses of milk or a fruit sip-up. Here Jamie always splits a diet coke with Susan, and gives her the half in the can. Susan doesn’t like the way it hisses at her.

“It’s easy, see?”

Susan twists her body to watch behind her. Jamie reaches with fingers like spider legs, grasps the jelly body and slowly raises it. The strands droop down, stretching toward the water.

“There,” Jamie drops it into the bailer, a milk jug with the top cut off, but with the handle still remaining. It sloshes languidly, then settles. The older girl looks forward to smile at Susan, gesturing slightly with her head towards the outside of the boat. “Go ahead, you can do it.”

Susan looks into the murky water again. Her hand moves to the outer frame of the craft, where it quickly jumps back from the sharp heat. Now she carefully curves her arm around the metal and reaches toward the water. The hand creeps towards the surface and the looming parachute creature floating there. The fingers pause just above it, then with one more glance back, close around the formless body. They briefly sink then the mass resists. Susan hoists it, dragging its limp limbs over the side, leaving a slimy trail, and dumps it into the bailer. Her fingers tingle with surprise and fear, but with no physical pain.

“It didn’t hurt, did it?” Jamie asks, looking again at the skin on her shoulders, twisting her neck at a painful angle.

“No, it didn’t at all.” Susan gazes over the water scanning the inlet, eyes resting on the dark shadows beneath the pier of Aunt Joanie’s house. A longer shadow creeps out from the underbelly of the structure. Susan quickly looks up from the water to see Aunt Joanie standing at the edge of the pier.

“Girls, girls!” she waves both arms above her head to get their attention.

“What?” Jamie’s cry echoes throughout the inlet.

“Don’t you what me! You get in here!” The dog, Bubba, barks sharply and emphasizes Aunt Joanie’s yell.

“Oh crap,” Jamie shakes her head at Susan and rolls her eyes. “We’re gonna get it now. I think it’s time for Destiny’s Wheel anyway.”

Everyday Jamie watches Destiny’s Wheel at three o’clock, and lets Susan watch with her. Maybe today Todd will come out of his coma. Susan likes the love stories, but doesn’t follow them too well. It’s hard to see the whole picture, they mostly show an arm here, a leg there, a shirt falling to the ground and then music and a fade out. It’s hard to put the whole picture together from these pieces. She would like to see Todd in a love scene, but he just lies there in his hospital bed while other people talk over him. She doesn’t tell Jamie this, though. Jamie cried when Victoria professed her love for Richard and pretended like she was just pulling her hair back from her eyes so Susan wouldn’t notice. When a real smoochy scene comes on, Jamie sends Susan to get a diet coke for them to split, or asks her to make microwave popcorn for them. Susan likes to open the bag and feel the steam surround her face and feel the heat all over her skin, prickling. She imagines this is what it would feel like if Todd kissed her.

The canoe wobbles a bit and Susan’s wooden paddle clangs against the side.

Jamie is steering the canoe straight for the pier and Susan can see it coming quickly towards her face, which is level with the boards.

“You better duck!” Jamie says, as she reclines back in her seat, putting her paddle into the canoe. Susan hates it when Jamie does this, but still every time they come back in she does it, directs the canoe from the rear steering seat she always mans.

“Please, can you let me out first?” Susan asks, but the canoe is already moving forward. She can see hundreds of bone-white barnacle sockets starting from the pilings, and below the water she knows they are malignantly green and furry.

“Better duck,” Jamie says, in that tone of voice she uses when she asks Susan to please leave the phone she has to have a private phone conversation, or please go read elsewhere, the turning pages are bugging her.

Susan can see the floor of the pier evenly line up with her forehead and lays back quickly, gripping her paddle to her. She feels the hot metal bite into the uncovered skin on her back. The immediate coolness of the shadows is surprisingly soothing.

Horizontal strips of sunlight seep between the boards above and scan her body as the canoe skims along, and already she feels the direct sunlight hit her knees, then torso, and finally shoot into her eyes. Bubba skitters over and shifts excitedly, teetering on the edge, licking the hand she lifts to block her eyes.

Susan eyes the bailer as Jamie maneuvers the canoe against the pier. “What are we going to do with them?”

“Do with what?” Aunt Joanie, with Bubba crowding beside her, reaches down to take Susan’s paddle and pulls her up. Susan stands and reaches behind to snap her bathing suit back into place. She winces as it presses into her sun burnt skin. The night

before, stepping out of the bathtub, she'd caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. She wore a bathing suit of bleached skin surrounded by scarlet limbs and face. Her body seemed separate from her, and she wanted to step out of her skin and take another bath.

"The jellyfish," Jamie sets the jug on the pier. "I was showing Susan how to go jellyfish hunting. I guess we just throw them back. Or dump them on the shore to dry out."

Susan pokes a finger into her thigh to watch the white hole slowly flame back to red. She tries to picture a line shriveled orbs on the dark sand, but can only see them dragging themselves back towards the water.

"It's so nice to see you girls spending time together, that's one good thing out of all of this. I always felt badly about not giving Jamie a sister," Aunt Joanie gets a little misty, as she always does when discussing her ovaries. "Anyway, Susan, your dad just called from the hospital and it looks like we can go down for a visit today. You'd better run up to the house to change."

Susan watches Jamie pour the bailer back into the water, can still hear the glunk of the release when she pulls on her clothes back in the house.

In the car on the way there Aunt Joanie tries to make conversation.

"So, any boyfriends?" she asks.

Last year Susan probably would have answered right away, and chattered on about the different boys in her class who teased her, or sat next to her on the bus. But she feels weird now, and uncomfortable. She stands against the wall at recess, with the other skinny flat girls, and watches the boys run and storm around the playground. Sometimes

huddles of the other girls, in their groups of chatter will float by, but they never glance in her direction. Next year, she's told, there will be no recess, and she's glad.

"None, I guess," Susan glances down to scrape some dried mud from her leg. The sunlight makes the golden hairs on her legs shimmer. Outside the window the dull greens of summer fly by. When she drove by in the spring with her mother chattering in the driver's seat she remembers thinking the greens were too bright, too clean. They didn't save anything back for summer.

"None! A girl like you? I guess those boys just don't know what they're missing." Aunt Joanie glances over towards her. "I wouldn't worry about it. Jamie never had a boyfriend until she was fourteen and if I had my way she still wouldn't. So you've got a couple more years." The car slows down and Aunt Joanie leans out the window to hand change to the tollbooth attendant.

"There you go. Busy day, huh? Everyone's going to the beach, I guess."

The attendant was an old man with a firm belly that brushed against the sides of the booth as he moved. He nodded jovially and smiled, though already in the direction of the next car.

"Yes, the women in our family have always been slow bloomers. Your mom didn't even--" Susan closes her eyes and pictures the blurs of green from Spring again. Her skin is tight and hot and seems too small for her body. She stays very still and tries not to shift against the vinyl seat while Aunt Joanie tries to tell her about her mother.

The hospital lobby's air-conditioning seems rude and heavy after the gentle

breeze of the car ride. Susan always has a sense of easily becoming lost there, the potential for wandering down one of the many hallways into another world. And suddenly she could be in the maternity ward expectant for a sibling or in the emergency room waiting for a cast. But Aunt Joanie leads her right to the elevator, which they ride to the fifth floor.

It is quiet, with the usual hustle and squeak of nurses here and there, and the occasional rumble of the soda machine. The nurse at the station is sipping from a Styrofoam cup. Her eyes squeeze cheerfully above the rim. She gulps audibly before setting the cup down and waves them on.

“How are you all today? You can go on it. They just did some tests so she’ll be awake for visitors.”

Susan’s hand twitches toward her aunt’s for a second then retreats behind her back. They walk to the door. Aunt Joanie hesitates. In the room, a woman reclines stiffly with clenched jaw and body. She looks straight ahead, while the man sitting next to her loosely covers her fist with his hand.

“I don’t want any visitors, nobody.” She flinches and pushes her head into the pillow, away from his wrinkled shirt. Even from the doorway, Susan can see the deep creases.

“I’m here!” Aunt Joanie creaks the door open and proclaims too loudly. “And look who I brought!”

Susan walks over to hug her father. At his nod, she kisses her mother gently on the flushed cheek. The hospital bed cuts into Susan’s stomach and catches her breath. She tightens her muscles painfully to avoid falling against the warm body underneath the

thin knit coverlet. Out of the corner of her eye she can see white edges creeping out of the neckline of the hospital gown.

“Hello darling, I’m so glad to see you. You look so tan,” sharp white corners develop on either side of the smile. Her blue eyes meet with Susan’s, then shift and water.

Susan’s father puts his hand on her shoulder. It is heavy and underneath her cotton shirt, Susan itches. “We’ve had another visit from the doctor and a bit of rough news.” as he spoke he tightened his grip on Susan’s shoulder. “But it’s nothing we can’t handle, right?” He looks down at the pinched face on the pillow. The puffy eyes rolled towards Aunt Joanie.

“Why don’t you and Jim go get some coffee. I’m just going to close my eyes for a minute. Susan will sit with me.”

Susan saw and felt her father’s shoulders slacken. “Yeah, I could use the caffeine, I suppose.”

“Alright then,” Susan saw Aunt Joanie squint into the blue eyes, then nod. “Alright, you rest, and we’ll talk everything over later.”

“Thanks.” The eyes were already closed, and the breathing calmer. Susan’s father looks down and shakes his head.

“Come on Jim. Susan, we’ll be back soon. You’ll be okay?”

“Yes,” Susan eases into the chair. The murmuring moves down the hall in a steady decrescendo. In the quiet she watches the coverlet rise and fall. She follows the chained knitting until her eyes stop at her Mother’s skin.

“Susan,” the eyes ask, “how is Joanie’s house?”

“It’s okay,” There is a pause and Susan fills it. “I got a splinter on the pier.” She fumbles with her shoe and pulls her sock off.

“Just set it up here,” her mother says, shifting to sit up in the bed. The grip on Susan’s foot was firm, and she didn’t think of squirming. “Look at these little brown tootsies!” Susan smiles quickly, looking down at her foot. There is an ugly yellow callous developing on the bottom of her big toe, and she can feel her mother scrape it curiously. “Where is it?”

“It’s further down...do you see it?”

“Mmm, there it is. A big one. Where did you get it.”

“I don’t know. I just noticed yesterday. It’s killing me.” Susan’s dirty foot is only inches below her mother’s face. Fingernails probe slowly into the rough skin, edging closer to the brown shard imbedded there.

“Ouch!” the nail has poked the tenderness and Susan’s foot involuntarily jerks against her mother. She clutches her chest and sinks onto the bed. Susan’s shin bangs against the metal bed frame and she finds herself clutching her chest too.

“Mom?” Susan asks. The eyes are squinched shut but the head nods quickly. Air gasps through clamped teeth.

“I’m all right honey. It’s okay.” The eyes are glistening again. “Why don’t you watch my TV? Okay? I’m going to just lie here awhile.” On the TV Susan catches the last scenes from *Destiny’s Wheel*. It looks like Todd is still in the coma. She sneaks out to the hall to put her shoe back on so she won’t wake her mother up.

The next morning Susan goes out on the water while Jamie lies tanning on the

pier. The canoe is hard to paddle with just one person, so she mostly just lets it drift. She's borrowed a pair of Jamie's shorts so she can sit fully on the bench.

She hears the clatter of claws and looks over to see Bubba following Jamie's boyfriend onto the pier. Jamie had confided to Susan that she thought he looked very much like Todd. Susan squints to see better. Maybe his hair was the same color, but that was all she could see. He crouches down next to Jamie, and Susan can hear the echo of Jamie's shrill surprise bounce against the inlet.

She turns back around and trails her fingers through the lukewarm water. The sun hurts and she thinks her skin might be blistering. The splinter in her foot throbs and she presses it firmly down on the hot metal floor. A stream of dirty water ebbs from the front to the back of the canoe and hits her foot, calming the hot skin.

On the pier, Jamie is leaning back on her arms, legs in an upside down V. The boyfriend kneels next to her and Susan can hear bits of their conversation, which seems to mostly involve his speculation as to which strings are vital in the construction of her bikini. Jamie is giggling and Susan hears her loudly whisper for him to quit it, her cousin is right there.

Around the canoe Susan can see six or seven of the opaque globs, shimmering just under the surface. She reaches out and grabs the first, almost throwing it into the bailer. One of the gelatinous fibers hits her leg, and she rubs fiercely where it stings before paddling clumsily over to the others. Another plops into the bailer. Jamie's high pitched giggles hits the water again and out of the corner of her eye Susan can see the boyfriend kneeling over her.

Susan can't steer the boat close enough, so she whacks one with the paddle. It

makes a flat smack and water sprinkles against the boat. The wooden paddle looks like it has been wrapped loosely with saran wrap, like the kind Susan's mom used for leftovers. She drags it closer, and grasps the main body to dump it with the others. Some of the legs stay behind on the paddle, and she whips it around in the water to get rid of them.

Just one kiss, then lay off, Susan hears Jamie say, *My mom is around here somewhere.*

The next is very small, and Susan wonders if it is a baby. Were they born? Or did they just divide, splitting themselves off, a kind of oozing self-sacrificing birth and death. She could pick this one up with only three fingers, but it started to slip on the way. Her hand is almost to the boat when it slips from her fingers. IT sinks into the darkness, and she follows the contrast of the gleaming cloudy white against the dusky water for as long as she can. There is another within reach and she, more carefully, elevates it out of the water and into the innovated milk jug.

Susan can hear the boyfriend whisper. *She's not even looking. How old is she anyway? She won't care.*

The back of her hand stings a little; one of the tentacles must have brushed her. Susan lets it soak over the side for a minute before scooping another of the congealed clumps out of the water. The bailer is getting full, with the look and texture of curdled milk. The contents shift with each sway of the canoe, and Susan becomes aware of her movements in order to avoid overflowing the jug.

Near the front of the canoe, Susan can see one, the biggest one so far. It is difficult to tell whether it is the sun reflecting against the aluminum of the canoe, or one of the unwieldy masses. Susan wonders if that is an imperceptible flutter she sees, or just

a ripple in the water. Placing a hand on either side of the canoe, she slowly raises herself, and begins to hunch her way towards the front. The dirty rivulet of water in the bottom of the boat runs frantically to and fro as she travels.

“Jamie!” Aunt Joanie’s voice breaks into the still air. Susan hears Jamie’s shriek before she feels the canoe begin to roll. It frantically trembles for several seconds then seems to steady. Susan stands completely and holds her arms out on either side, eyes wide and legs splayed. It is then that Susan sees the bailer has fallen and that the collected blob has joined the water on the bottom, and is scooting towards her. Her body jerks with a deep shudder and she can not stop her leg from twitching out of the path. The canoe shifts in the direction of her leg. She feels a slow scraping along her leg and then the sharp slap of her body hitting water.

Beneath the surface, the water is surprisingly cold, and Susan’s eyes pull open. Rushes of particles and streams of water swirl into them, stinging them and forcing them to remain open. She thinks she sees something like a shimmering pearl in the corner of her eye and opens her mouth to scream. Grit hits her teeth and scratches her throat, and she can’t taste anything beyond the movement of the water forcing its way into her. Her foot kicks into something soft and grainy, and is immediately sucked in up to the ankle. Clammy swaying whips strike her arms and legs, and she recoils, jerking her limbs around herself, knotting into a tight, sinking, whirling ball.

She can feel the outline of a hand against the spandex that spreads over her chest. It pushes into her body and forces the water to heave out of her mouth. She turns her face to the side and coughs out the taste of dirt, salt, and mucus, feeling the rough boards of

the pier against her cheek. She turns to look up. His face is directly above her. Legs trap her on either side. Drops of water splatter on her nose from the sharpened wet tips of hair that hang around his face.

Aunt Joanie pushes him aside, her eyes dark with concern. Are you okay are you okay? she keeps asking Are you okay?

Susan gulps in the muggy air and lets out dry sobs that cut in her lungs and burn in her chest, sobs for Todd asleep in that coma, for pale wet blue eyes, and for her skin, already starting to peel.

BOOTSTRAPPING

It is a tricky thing to wear a cake on your head while you're trying to tie your shoes. No one will ever tell you anything about that! I had tea spoons dangling from my ears and while they looked quite right I can tell you my ears hurt quite a bit from the tugging at them. The newspaper boy was yelling about the League of Nations and I had to walk very straight because of the cake with the candles--did I tell you there were candles on the top of the cake? Of course there were! I'm not an amateur. They can call me kraut and bitch and she-devil and many other things, but they do not call me an amateur. I walked right up to the concierge at the door with my cake on my head (icing was beginning to drip down my neck and I was thinking in the back of my head the whole time, now what was mother's recipe for cream cheese icing) and said Hello, Good Day, May I please see the German ambassador? Then I made a slight curtsey, very slight because of the cake. He just stood there staring at me. What? he asked finally. What? He must have pressed some buzzer because then another man came out in the same uniform and stopped short before yelling Fire! Fire! then he ran back inside.

Some people from the street had stopped and were keeping their distance from me. What's the matter, haven't you ever seen someone dressed up before? I wanted to say, but just stood there, waiting to be let in. Waiting--waiting-- waiting, I can't stand it, always waiting to be let in or out. Waiting forever to get out of my father's grasp, waiting longer for husband to get it up, waiting still longer for lover to get me the hell out of Germany. Waiting for the place called Kentucky to make sense, for the English to come to my tongue, for lover to come back to me. Too much waiting. I am done waiting! I

will get what I want now and these people will help me the same way I made the people along the way from Kentucky to New York help me. They appreciated my art and it got me this far. It will be enough to get me back across that ocean again, I assure you, if only the right people will take notice, if just for this one time the right people will take notice.

They were all wearing their practical two piece skirts and blouses, each one the same as the other in only slightly different hues. Wear your baby as a hat! I wanted to call out to one woman with a sweating red child in her arms. Those nylons do not belong on your legs like a snakeskin--shed them and wear them as a belt! Wrap them around your throat three times like a string of pearls and let your legs go free while your brain addles. I didn't say any of these things, only looked at the American strangers with pity. To them, pantyhose would always be for encasing their legs, skirts would always be pulled strictly down as a guard and not a curtain to their naked bodies. They see it as something to hide and cover, not as something to reveal and decorate. Pity, pity.

The second man came out with another man and they formed a barricade with the first who kept saying 'what' every few seconds as if it was him and not me who did not speak English too well. I could see they would not let me through to see the Ambassador and that I wouldn't be able to get what I needed that day, wouldn't be able to explain to him about the visa and the passport and that whole long story. They wouldn't know art if they were eating it for dessert. They wouldn't know art if it trounced up to them on a summer day wearing a cake for a hat. I know what art is! I am the Baroness Elsa Von Freitag-Loringhoven. I am art.

*

Listen to this: my dad hit me with a hairbrush when I was seven because I said the

f-word and my mom wouldn't let me eat sugar until I was ten years old and my little sister slept with every boy in my senior class and my two older brothers used to beat the crap out of me for no reason. Nathan, my professional opinion is that you are fucked up, my girlfriend Birdie liked to tell me. She is not a professional anything and neither am I. I work on my thesis at night and during the day I wait for Birdie to get home from work.

Before there was screaming and yelling and blaming there was only the sound of Birdie and me loving each other, and for that space of time it was like we were in a boat in the middle of the ocean and nothing could reach us. Now it is like we are stranded on some dry and unforgiving place and when I try to swallow it is like my mouth is full of sand and I can't even remember what water tastes like, or if it tastes like anything and all I ever remember is Birdie looking at me like she hates me.

Birdie gets home from work as usual and throws her bag into the corner by the door where we keep umbrellas and dust balls. She throws everything now: looks, objects, feelings, all being pitched around the apartment by Birdie.

"Where's the mail?" she asks from the bedroom, which is really just a piece of the living room with a curtain nailed across it. Her shoes drop one then the other to the floor and I hear her lie back on the bed.

"Why, expecting a love letter?" I yell into the apartment. I am sitting at my desk. I am always sitting at my desk. I have a stack of books by my arm and notes on the chair next to me. They are never in the right order. I've been trying to sort them out all day. If I get them into the right order, the rest will do itself. I did go out to get the mail earlier. In the mail was a rejection letter for a new student loan, a rejection letter for the job at the museum I applied for and a postcard saying Birdie was overdue for a dentist

appointment. I put the bills into the freezer as I always do. When Birdie and I first moved in together this was a cute gesture. Now the frozen bits of paper have started to mildew and mold and Birdie says we should keep them in the desk instead.

Birdie emerges from behind the curtain in jeans and an old t-shirt. She goes to the freezer and slams it after taking out the bills and a bag of frozen peas. I know the only other things in the freezer are two empty ice cube trays and a frozen burrito. She takes the peas and the bills and locks herself into the bathroom. I hear the bath start to run and see steam start to billow out from the door. The couch and curtains are damp and mildewy enough from our morning showers. Tonight our bed will be damp for Birdie too. The bed is hers at night and mine during the day, the sort of deal that seems like it will work when you are trying to make a bad situation livable. We're just trying to make a bad situation livable, she said, shaking her head at me, until you can afford to move out. Once you finish that thing, she pointed to the stacks of papers and the folders I had color coded at one point according to subject matter. Once you finish that thing, your first priority will be to get a job and get out. She is always shaking her head at me now. No, she says when I reach out for her, with a sad shake of her head. That won't fix anything. Then she goes back to shaking her head at her paycheck and the taxes and the credit card bills we have stacked up from our happy times.

The names of the credit cards are like talismans to me. Visa! Mastercard! Discover! They kept us warm and safe after the student loans somehow dwindled and the savings account starting taking money out of itself as punishment for no minimum balance. We owe the savings account more and more money every month as a penalty for not saving enough, something Birdie would have laughed at at some other time. Now

she takes the bank statements in with the bills and runs the bath. I go back to the computer and click away on my keys too, but nothing ever comes out but birdie birdie birdie and sometimes the quick brown fox ran over the lazy dog. The lazy dog quickly ran over the brown fox. My notes are all out of order; the outline I made weeks ago is senseless. I make an outline of Birdie and me instead:

LOVING BIRDIE

I. We Meet--First Date

A. Clever anecdotes

1. Self-deprecating humor

a. Shows I don't take myself too seriously

b. Ego

c. Example: *I told Birdie the story about when I repeatedly used the term slippery soap in philosophy class when explaining a complicated slippery slope argument. This one worked perfectly because it allows an opportunity to brag about my philosophy minor.*

2. Puns and wordplay

a. Shows I should be taken seriously

b. Brain

c. Example: *Noting that the man at the table next to us loudly bragging to his wife while his neck hair visibly crawls up to his face demonstrates he is both hirsute and wearing a hair suit. Worked perfectly as it highlights my vocabulary while showing I am comfortable talking about other men's bodies, and myself do not have a hair suit.*

3. Corny jokes

a. Shows I have a soft side

b. Heart

c. Example: *Exchanging worst pick-up lines we've ever used/had used on us. This gave me a chance to use these on her without appearing to use them on her. Are your feet tired? You've been running through my mind all day! It also brought up the jerks who had attempted these with her and favorably compared me to them.*

B. Swapping childhood stories and traumas

1. Parental Trauma

2. Past Relationships

a. First kisses

1. Summer camp, both of us. What if we'd been at summer camp together? What if we could go back and I could convince my parents to send me to horseback riding camp?

b. First sex

1. Me, 18; her, 16 (Birdie, just tell me his name and I will track him down and put his head on a stick for you)

c. First break-up

1. Me, broken heart, broken fist after I punched a wall in misery; Birdie, broken romanticism and one STD (easily cured, no worries)

II. Falling in Love

A. Giddiness

1. Sleeplessness

2. Nauseous

a. Good nausea

b. Bad nausea

3. Can't concentrate

a. Stop attending classes

b. Stop taking notes

c. Stop researching thesis

B. Fear

1. Suspicion,

a. Where is she when I'm not with her?

2. Insecurity

a. If she's as fantastic as I think she is, why does she like me?

3. Jealousy

a. What other guys have left their filthy fingerprints on her inner thigh, shoulder bone, earlobe? What other guys plan to?

C. Elation

1. I leave my filthy fingerprints on her inner thigh, shoulder bone, earlobe, every inch of her covered in my swirled fingerprints until her body is marked by the swirling vortex of my love

2. She is an amazing person. I am an amazing person. The world itself is amazing.

III. Being in Love

A. Comfortable Silences

1. (Silence as she karate chops the newspaper fold over breakfast)

2. (Silence as I turn pages and pretend to read a book on the history of modern art while she paints her nails siren red)

3. (Silence. we both look up at each other at the same time and smile. silence.)

B. Finishing each other's sentences

1. "Do you want to go" "to bed now" (laughing)

2. Jinx! "Now you owe me dinner"

3. Double jinx. Jinx again. Jinx! Jinx infinity.

C. Hours in Bed

1. Class can wait
2. Call in sick to work
3. Food can wait
4. That wasn't the door
5. Mail isn't important

IV. Living Together in Love

A. Buying Groceries Together

1. Putting things she likes on the list
 - a. Soy milk
 - b. Frozen peas
 - c. Asparagus, zucchinis, leeks, many mysterious vegetables
2. Food budgeting together
 - a. Buying paper towels, toothpaste, detergent instead of going out for Thai food as I originally proposed

B. Brushing teeth at the same time

1. I switch to Crest and start brushing the back teeth so we'll finish at the same time. My dental hygiene has never been better.
2. Synchronizing spitting
3. She actually flosses. No one flosses! But Birdie does.

C. Routines

1. Sex falls in frequency, less spontaneous. Nah, the counter is pretty uncomfortable. What's on TV? No more hours in bed. No, she doesn't want to call in sick.
2. Hi Honey I'm home.
3. I love you. I love you too.

V. Falling Out

A. Why are you always in my space?

1. One-room apartment. Only the couch has space. Everything else works around it.

B. What do you *do* all day?

C. Exhaustion with once-cute personal details

1. You've told me the story of your horse camp five times.
2. Your mom was insensitive. I get it. Move on.
3. Your ex isn't really too interesting for me to hear about
4. When I asked you that I didn't really want an answer.

D. I love you. Me too.

E. I'm going out. Where? Out. Where out? Away from you out.

F. I love you. I know.

G. I love you.

>silence<

Outlines have never been my strength. They impose an organization that may not be natural onto an otherwise free flowing form. It's like trying to create a piece of dada art using the rules of oil painting. Those layers don't work here. Starting at the

beginning should involve starting at the beginning:

When Birdie was a little girl she would ride horses everyday. She had one in particular that was her favorite, and it was named something like Pepper or Paprika. It was named after a spice and it was her favorite horse and it had to be shot because it was lame. Birdie still feels bad about it, even though it had nothing to do with her. If you could go back and save Paprika or Pepper, would you? I asked Birdie once. If you could choose not to ride her and instead let her live for five more years, would you? Birdie just shook her head and said there was no use talking about it because she would never get that choice, and it wouldn't make sense anyway because if she hadn't ridden Pepper or Paprika, someone else would have.

But what about William Carlos Williams? What is the truth in our things? There is my computer, my stacks of books and notes, waiting to be sorted into something complete and real. There is Birdie eating frozen peas one by one as she sits on the toilet seat with steam surrounding her, folding damp bill pages over and over, reading our expenditures like a novel. There is her bag in the corner, the broken foil on the back of her birth control pills, the stack of stamps in the top drawer of my desk. But these can't tell the story either. Birdie could tell it but she won't. She won't come out of the bathroom.

Other than this accumulation of objects around us, and the sand in my mouth, everything is the same. I write my thesis and Birdie goes to work. I get up to make the burrito and finally Birdie emerges from the bathroom. Her hair is limp and her t-shirt is sticking to her body.

“Remember the time,” I ask Birdie as I punch in the numbers on the microwave,

“we went to the falls and lay on the rocks listening to the sound of falling water?

Remember the time we went to that party and they wouldn't let us in because we didn't have the right costumes on? Remember? So we went out for sushi instead?”

“Aren't you supposed to be done with that?” Birdie asks me. She goes into the bedroom and comes back out with a laundry basket. It is midnight, but she is getting ready to go out and do laundry. “Wasn't it due, like, yesterday?”

I go back to the computer with my burrito and type out an answer for her. The quick brown fox ran over the lazy dog. The brown dog and the lazy fox were run quickly over. Birdie is standing behind the couch, balancing the basket. Birdie, I love you. I want the world to write Birdie's name, to see her the way I see her, the way her body filters light through it, the way her fingers glance against objects without meaning to, the way her legs sometimes jump out to touch mine unwillingly under the table. Sorry, she will say, and cross them through the legs of the chair.

“Why don't you just finish it?” She says as she collects socks from the floor near my desk. I pull them off when I work. I like to rub my feet together like a grasshopper when I'm working, the swish of my skin and the scratch of my pen making their own music together. Birdie Birdie Birdie I want to make my body an instrument only to play this one tune. I take a bite from the burrito and feel the cheese burn the top of my mouth. “Please, Nathan, just finish it, okay? You've got to get on with things. *We've* got to get on with things.”

She throws the socks into the hamper and goes into the kitchenette. The coffee jar slams down, the pot clicks into place. The slow hiss and gurgle of the coffee steaming fills the apartment. She comes back out into the living room and adjusts one of her thrift

store landscapes hanging on the wall. I can see the shadow of Pepper or Paprika cavorting just beyond the next hill in these landscapes she loves.

“I will finish it,” I say. I have been saying this for months. I say this to myself before I go to bed; I say it to the administrators at school and to the student loan officers who have to wait for me to get my degree before they can start charging interest. “I will finish it soon, very soon. I have an appointment with the German translator tomorrow.”

Birdie rolls her eyes and goes back into the kitchen. She pours the coffee into the old metal thermos I gave her two Christmases ago, and puts it into the basket with the dirty clothes and the jug of detergent. “I don’t understand you,” she says as she gets her keys from the floor near the door. “It’s like you’re doing this on purpose to us.” She shakes her head and picks up the basket, “I can’t stand it much longer.”

“When will you be back?” I ask. “Why do you have to do the laundry now?” I watch her turn her head to look at me before she heads out the door. I close my eyes and burned there is the vision of the back of her head leaving. I think of the old phrenologists and the way they examined the shape of the head to figure out someone’s mental state and think if only I could be allowed to massage her scalp all day I might be able to somehow better understand her, better soothe her. There are moments when I want to crawl inside her skull, and curl up there to rest between the two thick commas of her eyebrows and the parenthesis of her small curled ears.

Birdie would say to stop that and that no one knows what a phrenologist is, or cares. She will not let me massage her scalp all day; if I reach out to hold her hand she will pull it away and say she has work to do.

She got a job in a bridal shop. Before, when she got home from work she would

tell me about how heavy the dresses were, how much weight the brides had to carry on their backs as they walk down the aisle. The beadwork, the train, the petticoats, all of these add up to as much as twenty pounds, sometimes thirty, Birdie told me. I'll never be strong enough to get married! She used to joke with me when she first started there, when she would get home and put her feet on my lap while we ate dinner. Sometimes she brought home wedding cake left over from exhibitions they had at the store. We would always eat every crumb of it; none left for under the pillow or in the freezer. You can't have your cake and eat it too, Birdie would say, licking the frosting from her lips in a bewitching way.

*

For a little thing like an umbrella they will throw you into the slammer. The slammer is a word I picked up from Djuna after they nabbed me and told me to call someone to come get me out. Djuna always gets me out of these messes; she is the only one who really understands me and what I'm trying to do. An umbrella? Djuna asks, slowly, like she wants to hear what I have to say, and also doesn't want to hear it. You've got to stop taking things that aren't yours, Djuna says like I'm a child. It simply has to stop, she says again in a final tone, or we will never be able to get you that passport, you will never be able to go back home. You are jeopardizing your art, she says, then softens and tells me she'll be there as soon as she can.

Oh Djuna so like my mother in some ways, though I will not tell her this. No one wants to hear that, no one wants to remember the old folks who hide away behind our ears and eyes, waiting to crawl out from our wrinkles when we get older; our ancestors are our constant accessories. Djuna wouldn't like my reason for being put in the slammer

anyway just as my mother wouldn't have.

HA! I wanted the umbrella; it was there, so I took it. I could feel a buzzing all through my body as soon as I went into the store and knew there was something there I needed to liberate and recreate. I walked through the aisles and let my fingers feel several things along the shelves. I had no money in my pockets. I never have any money in my pockets so I didn't even have to check. Then I saw it there, standing straight and tall in a bin in the corner with several other compatriots. What a fabulous cape I could make with it, I thought, how marvelous those ribs will be against my back like butterfly wings. The handle I thought might look nice attached to my new hat, which I found quite by accident in the street holding some coals. When I took hold of the umbrella it was like shaking a hand. Nice to meet you, I thought as I pulled it to me and settled it against my leg. Likewise, it seemed to say as it moved in syncopated rhythm with my leg. I assure you it wanted to leave with me as badly as I wanted to take it with me. I assured the policeman about this too, but he didn't care, didn't even care when I told him about all of the fabulous outfits he could make with the tools on his belt, lovely lovely bracelets.

My umbrella and I were separated at the police department and now I will never have my lovely umbrella cape and have to sit alone and quiet in this jail cell like a common criminal, which is another world my mother would have used; do you want to be a common slut like your father's women? she would ask me while we waited at the window watching the rain come down and father not coming home. Stay away from men, they will kill you but first they will torture you, she would say, holding her stomach, rubbing it raw as the pains went through her small birdlike body. During those days I just wanted to run out to the forest that backed up our house, run out to gaze at the lights from

the city where my father was wasting time on cheap women, where my destiny and future awaited me. I was more interested in these cheap women than in my mother or father.

Who were they? How did they get to the city? When my father came home I would sniff around him, check his pockets after he hung up his coat for clues of these women, these free and amazing women. I hadn't met any of my husbands yet and didn't dream of their existence, didn't know to dream of such things, didn't know to dream of this city with its empire buildings and dirty charm and virile policemen who grab you by the wrist just for a little thing like an umbrella. I will write a poem about all of this one day.

Sometimes the policeman walks by to look in at me so I change position every few minutes. I don't want to be a still life. Above all things, I don't want to be a still life.

*

"Good Morning, Nathan." Birdie says when she comes in around six. People Magazine lies on top of the worn wicker hamper, on top of my worn paisley boxers. She refuses to put the underwear on the bottom of the hamper like other people. "Everyone knows we're wearing them," she says, "they might as well know we're washing them too." From where I sit at the desk she looks washed of all color in the rising morning light.

"Sleep any?" she asks, and puts the hamper down on the couch. "Did you move at all?"

I turn back to my computer, type in some brown fox and quick dog to answer her with the clatter of the keys. I want to be able to picture her in the laundromat as she used to be, as she was when I first met her, the spinning of the machines, the hot musty smell

of the dryers, her legs crossed beneath her in an orange bucket chair leaning forward into a book. I can only picture her as she is now, tired, faded like a black sweater washed too often, gray.

She walks into the bedroom behind me without waiting for an answer. She stands on the bed in order to open the dresser drawers, standing on a layer of carefully tiered cinder blocks in order to be made accessible in the small room. The rest of our clothes are in the closet by the door, a jumble of worn out t-shirts and Birdie's few work outfits.

She comes back out with her hand up under her shirt to put on deodorant since she doesn't have time to shower. "I'll be late tonight, I've got a bridezilla appointment that will run into the night, I think." She rolls her eyes to the ceiling and laughs, so I laugh too. This is her apology for being out all night, this moment of shared laughter she has offered from across the room and I take it, snatch it up in case she changes her mind. But I laugh too long and I am left with it bouncing across the room back at me, all my words bound up in a tight inescapable scroll in my mind, all hers a mystery of ellipses and parenthesis hidden behind the memory of her face.

"I'm going then," she says, and her eyes glisten gray in the dim lights. "Isn't that due today?" she asks. "If you weren't fucking around with me, I would almost feel sorry for you."

"I'm almost done," I say. "Do you remember that time we went to the party? And it was raining? And we didn't have an umbrella?" I ask.

"I don't have time for your memory games," Birdie says and is out the door.

Listen to this: once Birdie loved me.

*

Jane Heap and everyone around her is a heap of dung of the worst kind, I told Djuna. We were at one of her social functions, people milling around, eyeing each other asking each other have you heard this have you heard that what is the latest from Europe, who is in Paris, who is in New York, who is who. I painted myself quite vermilion for this party, and the smell of the paint was starting to make me lightheaded, my neck sticky from the rivulets that ran down my back from the tips of my sharpened hair. Oh, Elsa, Djuna said when she picked me up, I told you to tone it down a bit, just a bit. Her eyes were sad and gray like my mother's.

Why can't you just once leave the art at home, and come as yourself, she said, adjusting her skirt and smoothing her shiny hair.

Leave the art at home? Sometimes Djuna and I don't speak the same language, not because my English is poor, because I've gone to great lengths to learn it well, but because she simply does not live full time in the world I do. Her husband's money buys her breaks all the time and this is when she goes out to these parties, like that imposter Jane Heap and every other small time editor that refused one of my poems. That's when the time comes to paint yourself another color and step out on the town with a loyal, if dim, friend.

By the punch bowl, which would have looked marvelous as a skirt, though heavy, various persons came up to me while Djuna was mingling with traitor Heap and that cowardly crowd.

"You must be this poet we've been hearing about," a man with a mustache dyed black commented to me. "Is this part of your performance art we've been hearing so much about?"

“I’ve just come from Paris and evidently it’s all the rage over there,” another man said. He was wearing his wife as a briefcase and his pedigree was tattooed in the clever lines around his mouth and the angle of his chin.

Djuna, Djuna, how was I supposed to behave myself?

“You’ve come from Paris,” I asked, as nice as could be, “Do you know anyone there then? Have you heard from Marcel or any of his crowd? I’ve just sent some poems over there but not heard back.” I watched the woman-briefcase sip from a crystal champagne flute and remembered the days back home when I snuck sips from Father’s flask. I tried to smile brightly as I had back then, at the reflection of myself in that tarnished silver flask, and patted my hair into place. The vermilion was on my neck now, of course, and gradually would work its way down my back. I’d decided if the man recently come from Paris was friendly I would let him see how far down it went.

“I’ve often thought,” I told them, “especially recently that New York is really not the place for me, for my art. There are many enemies of art here,” I gestured towards Jane and her heap. She was smugly ignoring me in a horrid concoction of brown and gray with no stockings at all.

“We wouldn’t know,” the woman-briefcase said, and I could see she was sensing her companion’s interest in me, in the curves I was curving and the poetry I was creating. “We are really more into the realist art, art that means something. You know,” she said, and tittered.

Djuna, how, how? Everywhere I turn I find these enemies, these flaccid vapid tepid holes. They would suck me in if I didn’t struggle so; you know they would Djuna.

I reached up and smoothed my hair again, getting a thick layer of my lovely

vermilion onto my fingertips. Ever so gently, as a mother would an erring child, as a lover would a beloved, I drew two thick lines on her cheekbones, and another across her collarbone.

Dyed mustache and good-breeding stood stock still. Woman-briefcase gave a horrid little bird squeak and raised her hands up inches from her face. “What, what,” she said, “why, why?”

I reached over again and just as gently colored her eyelids before she reached up to slap my hands away, slapped my instruments away. “You’re asking the wrong questions darling,” I told her, “but I’ll give you the answers anyway. Baroness Elsa Von Frietag-Loringhoven at your service. I am interested in getting back to Germany, perhaps by way of Paris. Any assistance you offer would be an assistance to art itself. I thank you.” I waited patiently for the black and whites to catch up, to laugh with me, to embrace me. Finally briefcase woman turned around and ran towards the powder room while dyed mustache stared at me. My ticket to Paris hesitated a moment and looked at me with a promise in his eyes before he broke it, gaze stopping on my breasts, neatly encased in a shirt I’d painted myself. His broken promise eyes turned and followed his unfortunate woman.

“Horrid, horrid,” I heard dyed mustache mutter before Djuna was there, taking my arm and leading me like a pet away from the table.

In the taxi on the way back to my place, Djuna looked out the window and shook her head. You exhaust me, she said, I am working to get you the funding to get you out of here, but you are exhausting me. Don’t ask for favors anymore, I am just too exhausted to deal with it. Then she wouldn’t say another word. I had no idea what she

meant.

The rain fell onto the windows of the automobile, each one like a small work of art, never so pretty as the dark street they hit. My hair, my lovely hair was running all over and made a puddle at my feet when I struggled with the key. Behind the door I could hear my lovelies skittering on their doggie feet waiting to be let out. How would I ever be able to take all of them with me? Their little furry bodies wriggled against my bare legs and I knew I would find a way for that too, all of us would be leaving together, and maybe Djuna if I could convince her, if we could only get the damned details out of the way.

*

Leaving the apartment is a big deal for me lately. But I have this appointment with the translator and Birdie can tell if I don't leave the apartment all day. She would blame me again and think I wasn't doing my best. The thing is, I am doing my best. She just doesn't care to notice anymore. I bundle up the pages of the poetess's manuscript and wrap them in an old tea towel, but this seems wrong so I wrap them in several layers of saran wrap instead, like a burrito. This also seems wrong, but time is running out again, as it seems to do everyday from the time I wake up to the time Birdie leaves and I get my shift in the bed. Never enough time to do a thing, but so much time to do nothing at all.

I find Birdie's tote bag by the door, the one she got for free from a tux company at an exhibition awhile ago. She might need it, I think, which is why I pick it up and look inside. I look inside in order to see if she needs it and for no other reason. Purely altruistic. Inside, nestled in the bottom beneath a wedding magazine, a half-eaten granola

bar and a plastic sample tiara is her silk robe, the one I got her for our third anniversary last year. It is a deep color of green, the color a word I don't even know, except that it is beautiful and deep and unforgiving, like Birdie herself which is why I bought it for her though it was way too expensive. There is a bird of paradise spanning the back of the robe, and Birdie used to turn and spread out the material like a wingspan so I could see it, and not see what was on the other side until the crucial moment. Birdie, Birdie, why did you take this robe to work? Why did it leave the apartment? What were you doing in your bird of paradise robe without me? What other person has seen the silk material fall from your shoulders? Why, why?

But I'm asking the wrong questions again.

I should take it to her and pretend like I don't know what's in the bag so she will have to admit it to me.

I should hide it and then ask where she has put the robe since I want it back when things finally do come to an end (and surely they will soon, I will finish my thesis, Birdie will find a new place, and this end will come--).

I put the poem burrito into the bag with the robe and leave the apartment and for once I'm glad to do it. The apartment stinks of Birdie and I can't stand it. But the street smells like her too, rain hitting the pavement, reminding me of Birdie sitting in the bathroom crying over bills. The rustle of the wind in the trees is the sound of my empty thesis, Birdie flipping through the pages in grim stillness when she thinks I am sleeping on the couch.

I meet the translator in a coffee shop down the street from Birdie's bridal shoppe; it's close to home and the translator will like their specialty lattes. He is coming from the

University, but just walking onto campus gives me anxiety attacks so I told him it would be nicer to meet off-campus, over coffee. They sprinkle chocolate on top, Birdie has mentioned. He is already there and his top lip is darkened by the chocolate.

“Nice to meet you,” he says, shaking my hand. “It’s so nice to get away from campus for awhile.”

“Yes, I know what you mean, “ I say. I put the bag on the chair between us and pulled the poem burrito from it. He raises his eyebrows but doesn’t say anything, taking another sip of his latte instead. I pull layers from the pages and put the poems one by one on the table.

“I’m afraid to admit I’d never heard of the Baroness when you contacted me,” he says, taking another sip, darkening his mustache. “But I looked her up in a few books and found some outrageous stories about her. Seems she ran around harassing and scaring people quite a bit. Something about wearing a cake on her head to an embassy?”

“A lot of that is exaggeration, I think,” I tell him, though I can picture my poetess doing just that, see it clearly in my head as clearly as I can see Birdie in her paradise robe. “I think she intimidated a lot of people with her--boldness. She was quite a character, a piece of art herself, really.”

“Just what is the nature of your work, then, if you don’t mind my asking.”

“Well,” I say, “I’m mainly focusing on early Dadaism. Mainly focusing on the poetess’s work. Mainly focusing on the Baroness’s life as a vehicle for this time period’s art. My main focus is still a bit foggy, to tell you the truth.”

“Huh,” he says, licking his lip finally, tapping the table while looking at me intently.

“Yeah,” I say. “Anyway, was wondering if you might translate a few words for me--her notes are mostly in English, but her native tongue was German and I admit it’s beyond my rudimentary knowledge--”.

“Yes,” he says, looking down at the pages, “This shouldn’t be a big problem. The handwriting is a bit of a challenge, though. That might take a bit longer. When did you need these by?”

I watch a couple cross the street in the rain. They both leap off the curb, but he is a little behind her and her arm gets yanked a bit before they hit the pavement. They laugh and run awkwardly, zigzagging around puddles. A car stops for them and honks calmly, wonk wonk.

“Well,” I say, still watching the window. The couple reaches the other side of the street and, still laughing, walk down the sidewalk, perhaps towards their marriage, Birdie’s store, a heavy dress. They leave my vision and I turn back. “It’s a bit of a rush, really. As soon as possible, of course as your busy schedule permits. I’d like to read what her side notes say here, when she isn’t trying to be poetic.”

“Of course.” He says and tips his cup back. A thick ring is on the table beneath his mug and another will develop as soon as he puts it back down. He has a ring on his wedding finger too. “Anything else?”

“No--” the cappuccino machine is screaming into the cafe and the bell above the door is tinkering as people come and go. He is filing the poems neatly away into his briefcase, leaving the clear ball of saran wrap on the table. “How long have you been married?” I ask. If he leaves I will be left with the bag and the paradise silk robe and Birdie down the street.

He hesitates and leaves his briefcase in his lap while he looks at the ceiling, counting off the time in his head. “Only seven months,” he says, “I know I look too old to be a newlywed--”

“No, no not at all,” I say quickly, though I was just thinking that.

“And you?” he asks, “what are your plans post-thesis?”

I’m thinking about going on a trip, I tell him, maybe to Berlin or Paris to do more research, take a little break from my busy schedule of sitting inside all year. He laughs at the right places and tells me certain cafes and streets that must be seen in both cities. It is very different now though, he tells me, perhaps the places he knows and loves are gone now, as charm and grace seem to be washed out under the feet of tourists and booming economies and the eurodollar. He is very cynical and very modern, which I try to appreciate. The bell tinkles above the door as he leaves, promising to get back to me with the translations as soon as possible. Thanks, I say, after he has left, to the empty table.

*

Do you have your birth certificate? the man asks me at the embassy. We will need proof of birth and proof of nationality. His eyes wander to my chest. I describe to him the way the woods would drip green in the spring showers, how the darker shadows would collect in the winter until finally everything was overtaken with them, I described to him my mother’s thick sauces and thicker bitterness, my father’s straight back and quick hand. These are my proofs of nationality, along with my poems and my accent. I show him the scar I got when I fell off my horse behind the house at eight years old. I show the way my ribs are poking out from my side, I am so hungry for my homeland and

also because I cannot work here, cannot get anything done so I cannot eat here.

Things are not so good there either, you know, he tells me staring at my chest. I throw my shoulders back further. My brother writes to tell me things are not so good there and I am only telling you this because you don't have anyone else to tell you. Now his eyes are on my eyes and I can see he will not give me the papers, those infernal papers that mean nothing, less than nothing, that mean less and lesser than anything ever written, even my poems which they say are pathetic ramblings of a washed up woman, those people who would once have wept at the genius of my art.

Your mother was a whore and your brother is a mother fucker, I tell him, reaching up to feel my cheek to see if my stamps are still there. Why don't they see that I am a national treasure? Why don't they want the greatest artist to ever come out of that demonland to return to it, to claim a part of my art, a part of history? I can sail back and get back to the place where I should have started, if things had gone as I had planned, if one thing after another hadn't betrayed me.

Excuse me? He asks, his cheeks turning red. What do you want? I say. I pull up my skirt. Here, take it, take what you want and gladly I will give it, only just let me please go back, I want to go back. My earrings are clanging against the thick necklace and still I lean forward, pulling my skirt up higher and higher until there is nothing left to his feeble imagination. I reach out to his face to touch it, but he pulls back and won't look at me, that mother-fucking bastard of a bastard.

Please, let me go back, I say as he pulls my skirt down and shows me to the door.

*

When Birdie comes out from her shoppe it is only five o'clock. She squints as

she exits, then turns back to wave to someone inside, before starting off down the street. I follow her, thinking with every step she will turn toward home. She walks at her usual pace, if a little quickened, and occasionally glances up at the sky. It looks like it might rain again. Gray clouds are seeping into white and eventually the skyscrapers will poke through and the sky will melt into the earth and everything will be gray gray gray. I stop to buy a paper while Birdie stops a little ahead of me to look in the window of a bakery, leaning forward to examine the sugary elephant ears, though from a distance it looks as if she is leaning forward to gaze into her own face. “We don’t barter here, buddy,” the newsstand guy says, “That’ll be thirty-seven cents.” I’ve pulled out stamps from my pocket instead of change and they just lie there like little useless flecks of skin in the palm of my hand. I find the change in my other pocket and walk on, putting the stamps into my inner pocket so if it rains they won’t get sticky.

She quickens her pace still more and it is more difficult to keep up with her now. Birdie! I want to yell, come back! Instead I move to a slow jog and stay five paces behind her. She moves her head a little, as if she senses someone following her, and begins to run, her hands stiff at her sides like she is a toy soldier, flat against her thighs to keep her skirt against her legs. She doesn’t look either way as she crosses the street, and neither do I. Now she is flat out running, and her arms are pumping as the rain starts to come down. Her white blouse is sticking to her skin and I can see the lines of her bra against her back, and her shoulder blades through it, sticking out like two unused wings. Still I say nothing, just make my legs go faster and faster until I am closer to her, with a last real surge of energy I could catch her, grab her arm, or her hair and pull her back to me. We are that close now. Drops of rain from her hair are spinning back to hit me in

the face and I am reaching out my fingers to touch her, grab her, hold her when she suddenly moves forward and away, as if she knew all the time I had only that one last push in me. Birdie! I yell, and her head jerks to the side as if she hears me. Birdie! I yell again, but she hasn't even stopped. She is still running. I stand and breathe roughly in the middle of the deserted rainy street as she runs away, further and further away until I can reach my fingers up and hold her retreating figure between them.

She has turned a corner near the University and I follow a block behind with my paper under my arm like all the real fake detectives, my breath coming fast and heavy. Birdie's silk paradise bird robe, neatly folded in her bag, is in my other hand. The computer is humming quietly to itself back at the apartment, the gaping maw of its blank screen there, always there. She is not working late. She is turning into one of the buildings now, me only a block behind her, and she doesn't even have shame enough to turn around and glance to see if anyone sees her, Birdie, my past love, entering into this other man's building before she is absorbed into it.

When I check the numbers outside I don't see anyone familiar. Why would I? Is it one of her grooms, one of her old flames? The one who took her to the orchestra? The one who played intramural soccer and tried to get her to join? A new one? An artist? There are studios here, I know from the old days of clove cigarettes and long conversations about outsider art.

Two kids come up behind me. The one who reaches around me to ring a bell has a nose ring and the hint of a silver tongue stud. His jeans are coated with magic marked drawings and signatures. His hair looks like my grandmother's old wig crumpled into a ball then glued on the very top like a hat. The girl with him has painted

her eyelids a dark blue that edges out into darkness, a midnight sky illuminated by a porch light. Her cheekbones seem to be smeared with glitter, as are her arms; glitter seems to float around her like an aura. A chain connects her earring to her naval ring. I follow them into the building and up the stairs. When they walk up the steps she tinkles like the cafe door and he scuffs like the garbage truck on Thursday mornings. They glance back at me, annoyed and I follow a little further back, reaching into the bag to feel for Birdie's robe, to get the touch and scent of her faithlessness again.

The room the kids go into is set up like the standard studio; chairs in a semi circle, a mini-stage with a podium at the front. As they scuffle and tinkle into the back row, I scootch into the door and lean against the back wall behind a dusty arrangement of plastic oranges and bananas. Someone has arranged them lewdly and I think of how I might tell Birdie about this later if this were months ago, before she sifted through my fingers like the sand I can still taste in my mouth. The other people in the room are chattering quietly, reaching into bags poked with pins of band names and artist colonies to get charcoal tins and pencil sharpeners. Hands clap at the front and Birdie walks out onto the stage. I have her bird of paradise robe, so she is wearing only a towel. Her hair is flat and limp on her neck, still wet from the rain, and her arms are still at her sides. She turns, carefully, deliberately, and faces the back wall while she takes off her the towel and drops it by the feet of the stool. The person who clapped adjusts lights and dictates shadows and Birdie stands there, absorbing the air and light and shadows from the room. Everyone else in the room sweats and starts to shed jackets, roll up sleeves, put pencil to paper to capture the lines and curves that make up the shape of Birdie. They are drawing her all wrong, they are asking the wrong questions as usual. They are all drawing a still

life, even those who attempt to capture muscle definition only get down on paper the idea of movement, the theory of it all. How could anyone tell the real story of Birdie, on paper or anywhere else? When Birdie's eyes rise to meet mine, I am the only person in the room with goosebumps.

*

When the Baroness comes out of her apartment building the dark is gathering around her and she is glad she chose to wear her skirt made of coke bottle lids, each one glinting dully in the streetlight, like tired eyelids. The man came to her that morning when everything else was quiet and she could almost feel the dust settling around her. No one ever came to see her in the mornings, not even Djuna. Everyone she knows is either asleep then, or working at a job they wouldn't admit to having.

He'd knocked on the door several times before she'd answered, wearing only an old shirt Marcel had left behind. The dogs had skittered around her feet and she'd nudged them aside with her foot. I'm busy, she'd said and tried to shut the door on him. That morning she had run out of paper and so she'd had to tear up an old portrait someone, she couldn't remember who, had drawn of her. She was carefully writing out her poems in tiny script on paper. She could barely discern the comments she'd made in the margins; ideas that had seemed so important, now illegible. She couldn't afford to make any mistakes; she'd spent her last money on more stamps and she wore these on her face and along her collarbone.

"I'm sorry," he'd said, "so sorry." He was an average man, maybe a little on the short side. His hair was unfashionably long and fell into his eyes.

"Sorry for what?" She'd said. He'd gestured to the torn up portrait and the

peeling walls.

“Ha,” she’d said, “I don’t care about any of that, and you didn’t put me here, anyway.”

“Let me help you,” he’d said, reaching into his pocket, “let me help you get out of here.”

“What makes you think I need help?” she’d asked, turning around, not caring that the shirt didn’t cover her. He’d noticed that she was slightly chubby and that her breasts were starting to sag. He’d noticed that her fingers and teeth were yellow from smoking and not eating well. She saw him looking at her and shrugged. She didn’t care about any of that anymore, didn’t care if they arrested her again for public exposure or stealing or any of it. She was tired, so tired; more tired than she’d ever been before. One place was as good as any other and one man was as good as any other as far as she was concerned. They all got what they wanted from you, hadn’t her mother told her that at the beginning? Someone had told her that at the beginning. And hadn’t she learned it a million ways since then, from a million different men? hadn’t it been worth it to see the way she reflected back at herself through their eyes? She needed it, she needed to see herself in someone else’s eyes; it was like she wasn’t there without it; it was like she’d never been there.

Then she’d felt his hand on her shoulder and then his mouth on her neck. His tongue had licked around the edges of the stamps along her shoulder and she’d gasped when he found the ones she’d placed underneath her shirt. “I’ll help you,” he’d said as she turned around in his arms.

Now she walks down the street and feels the stamps along her body, still sticky,

and she can still taste the glue on her own tongue. There will be money to buy the proper papers and money to buy passage on a boat. There will be a large gray ocean and her home at the end of it and money to get settled. There would be the memory of his body against hers, and his promise that he would remember her, and keep the small pieces of herself she has given him, and she chose, for the moment, to believe him.

*

“Good, you’re still awake,” Birdie says when she opens the door. I’m waiting for her at the desk where I’ve been writing. The quick brown fox and the lazy red dog lie strewn about my feet.

“What is that on your neck?” she asks, and comes closer to me, her hand out and almost touching the stamp on my jugular before she pulls back.

“We can go back Birdie, I figured it out,” I say. “We can go back to before and forget about all this. I can help you.” She backs away into the kitchenette and leans against the counter. She stands straighter than I remembered.

Listen to this, I want to tell you something: My father was a hard man and used to run around on us, and my brothers used to beat the crap out of me for no reason and my sister, little sweet sister, was asthmatic and would gasp for air while I watched taking deep selfish breaths. No, listen to this: I fell off the horse at riding camp and my mother wouldn’t let me eat any cake until I promised to love her always and she leaned forward to kiss me and I ran away. No, that is not what happened. None of that happened. What happened before and after these things is important. We met, we fell in love, we lived in love, we fell. The rest is conjecture leading to and away from what’s important.

“Stop it!” Birdie yells, “Stop it! I don’t want to hear another word. Stop writing

and turn around, for once I'm asking you to stop writing and talk to me." Her face is close to mine, her hair is longer than I remembered and her eyes are not the color I remember. The glare from the screen casts strange shadows on her, and they bounce back at me.

"Birdie, please," I say. But she turns her back to me, her face and now her body a mystery of motion. If I could catch her in my arms, if I could just grab a hold of her for a moment I could explain it all, I could find a way for us to go back together, I could write I'm sorry between her toes, in the corner of her ankle, all the way up to her hipbone, then continue across her stomach, etching deeper and harder there, letting the ink soak into her skin, into each pore, letting it surround each goose bump that would rise up against me. I would circle each breast with a thousand apologies and write the thousand ways I loved her up and down her arms, around and around her neck like a necklace and then with the gentlest pressure I would write each of our names on her closed eyelids. My pen is in my hand and I know if I could just reach her, just get to stay still for a moment she would have to understand, I could make her understand, spell it out for her. But Birdie is already slipping between my fingers, has already slipped away when I was watching behind her. She shakes her head sadly, "No Nathan," she says, and walks to the door and repeats herself, "No, just leave me out of it." Then she shuts the door.

Listen to this Birdie: the past can unbend itself into the future and I can't figure out if I realized this yesterday or last year or will find it out tomorrow. I can see myself on a boat, on a large gray ocean, and I'm waving, but I can't tell whether I'm saying hello or good-bye. The ocean is slapping against the side of the boat and a seagull in the distance is screaming. Listen, just listen.

HEARTSICK

I'm lying in the darkened upstairs guest room, my room. The curtains are drawn and the bed is made so I lie on the quilt grandmother made for me with her new electric sewing machine. My feet are sticking up with Aunt Lena's hand-me-down boots; even though I'm only fifteen, they fit me perfectly. Downstairs Aunt Lena is trying to be quiet and clanging pots around the kitchen. Outside I can hear the dogs bark over by the barn where Uncle Brud is fixing the tractor. I close my eyes and try to hear the sounds from further away, longer away but instead the dull thud thud thump thud thud of my heart echoes louder. My hand is anxious, moving against my leg where the skirt meets the knee, leg bone connecting to the thigh bone, as my little cousins sing, or femur to patella to knee to tibia to fibula. I make my heart slow down and hit the beat with each stress of the words, force it to work with me this time. Slow slow slow down, I tell it, thinking of the bones arcing beneath the surface of my skin, the thick tenderness there. Each bone moves into the other like a line of poetry, hard and breakable, soft and bendable. I open my eyes.

The sun outside illuminates the heavy curtains and I can see the photographs standing up at attention on the dresser with the doily Aunt Milly had me crochet when I was staying with her. She was always making me crochet, saying it would soothe me and make me live longer if I kept my hands busy. I'd rather die than crochet another stitch, I told her and she got all pale and the next day I got sent to live with Aunt Lena and Uncle Brud instead. Fine by me.

All the photographs are of stern looking men with smooth faces and smooth looking women with stern faces, all the lost and gone relatives. My mother sits in a chair

in one of the front portraits with my father behind her in uniform with his hand on her shoulder as if he is holding her down in the chair, or as she is keeping him from sinking. Don't let go, I whisper to them and my heart is speeding up again so I turn and look at the door with the light filtering underneath it. A shadow passes by and then again.

"I brought you your book," my cousin Adam is whispering through the door. "Are you awake?" The floorboards creak and his shadow slips into the room under the door again. I lie very still on the bed and close my eyes, making my hand stay still. I can hear my heart, feel it in my ears and fingertips like I do when I get this way, but no one else can hear it, I don't think. I hear Adam softly turn the doorknob and creak the door open.

"Muriel?" he whispers softly into the room. I hear him take another step. "I've got your book, are you awake?"

"Muriel?" he says it louder and quickly is right next to me. I stay still and hope he can't hear the thump thump thud of my heart giving me away. I make the corners of my mouth stay still instead of curving up like they want to. The dogs are barking out back still but it is dead quiet in the room. He reaches a hand out and I can feel it pass quickly in front of my face, then move to my arm. His fingers grab me and he shakes. "Muriel! Muriel!" his voice is squeaky and almost not there. He gives me another shake, a little too rough. I open my eyes suddenly and sit up, grinning. He jumps back into the dresser and drops my book onto the floor. His eyes are wide and he's holding onto the knobs of the dresser behind him real tight.

I scoot out of the bed and pick up my book and I'm not smiling anymore. Several pages have been folded over. I never should have left it where he could touch it. It is my

most valuable possession.

“That wasn’t funny!” Adam yells and runs out of the room, probably to go sit in the chicken coop with all the discarded furniture and the few remaining chickens. He goes there to cry, I’ve found him there about a million times and every time he keeps saying he’s allergic to chickens. Then how come you came in here? I asked him once and he just turned his back on me and stormed off to the horse stall to cry some more. He won’t go up in the hayloft, where I go to think, because he fell and broke his arm from there once. Chicken. Uncle Brud took him to the doctor and he had to sit in a plaster of paris cast for only a few weeks before it was good as new, the broken lines knitting themselves back together and forming a new bone, a new arm for Adam, not that he appreciates it. He just lugs it around with him like he does with everything else, not realizing he is moving around in a complex system of beauty and grace.

The skeleton is poetry but the organ called the heart is pure magic. My book tells me it is a hollow muscular organ between the lungs enclosed carefully within the pericardium. The book has pictures, showing me the different parts, the different valves, arteries, cavas. There are pockets, crevices, orderly hallways and highways running into and out of and through the heart. My book tells me the facts and my heart echoes them back to me, through me, one and two and one and two again and again. I can tell you the name of what is wrong, irregular, with my heart. I can spell it for you if you like. But it’s better to simply tell you that at night while I sleep I can hear my heart murmuring to me, in the truck on the way to the store with Aunt Lena it beats time, and during church it pushes against my ears, moving me onward and onward and if I didn’t call it back it would simply push onward without me. That is the nature of the organ, the nature of the

muscles I have layered within me.

I go down to the kitchen and sit at the table. Aunt Lena pours me a big glass of milk and puts it in front of me. It's not like the milk I used to drink at grandmothers, or at Aunt Milly's, or at Aunt Charlotte's. It's farm milk and is more tan than white. Sometimes I find little bits of hay or dirt floating in it. At Aunt Charlotte's place there was store-bought milk, juice from concentrate, stashes of Hershey chocolate bars in each cousin's underwear drawer left over from Easter. At grandmother's there was hot bitter tea with no sugar in it and hard cookies. Still, I'd rather be here with Aunt Lena with her bright red lipstick and Uncle Brud and his loud booming voice. Even Adam with his chicken coop smell and twisty smile is better than Aunt Charlotte's daughter my age, Elizabeth, who is straight and pretty with a perfect spine and complexion. When I lived with them Aunt Charlotte was always pinching my cheeks and pulling my shoulders back. I'd rather be crooked and pale than live there.

Aunt Lena sits across from me with a bowl of green beans and starts snapping them, snap snap, and into the pot with a ping. I drink the milk quickly without looking at it too closely so I won't see anything in it. The calcium is good for my bones, all 206 of them. "Where's Adam gotten to?" Aunt Lena asks and I shrug as I reach for a handful of beans to snap. She sighs and slouches down in her chair. Her hair is pulled back in a tight bun with wisps around her face but she is wearing lipstick and has a clean shirt on, just like everyday. Just because we live on a farm doesn't mean we're pigs! I heard her say once to Adam. Aunt Lena has spirit, I've heard my grandmother say. She's not blood related to us, so it's not as if it's grandmother's fault Aunt Lena has spirit, but she still seems to take it as a failure on her part.

“Tell me about the hospital where you worked,” I ask Aunt Lena, and her lips purse and she straightens in her chair a bit. “while you were waiting to go to war.” Aunt Lena had signed up to be a field nurse but come along a few months too late so that she spent most of her time as a nurses’ aide at a hospital in New Jersey delivering babies to the war wives. Uncle Brud won’t talk about where he was in the war. He showed me his scar once, a long jagged purple thing on his chest, but he wouldn’t say anything else, not how he got it or where or anything. I asked him if he fought with my father once, but he just put his hand on his chest and shook his head. “If something’s gone, what’s the point talking about it,” he said. But Aunt Lena tells stories all the time.

“If that place wasn’t war, I don’t know what was,” Aunt Lena says. “They came out backwards, forwards, upwards and downwards. I felt like yelling INCOMING whenever I saw another lady being wheeled in, poking their bellies like one wrong step could set the whole damn ward off, and they’d have babies flying up to the ceiling. ” she pauses, looking at the icebox as if it is one of the pregnant women. Her eyes narrow as she pictures it. “Third World War,” she says, “they aren’t calling it the baby boom for nothing. “Boom boom boom,” this is my favorite part, as she claps her hand on each boom, “baby after baby flowing through my hands. I’d wash em, throw them in a cradle and then run on to the next screaming woman and catch hers. Boom boom boom.”

She slaps her hands again but she’s simmering down and easing back down into her chair. She looks away from the icebox. Her cheeks are flushed with the memory of her old days and she shakes her head again. “So much broken water I had to hike up my skirt just to wade through the hallways,” she says, “like a swamp in the Pacifics, I bet.”

“And so many babies!” she says shaking her head as if she can picture them all

laid out before her. All those mothers, I think.

“I’m going to be a doctor,” I say, pushing the bowl of snapped beans at Aunt Lena. I have the heart for it, I know and I can train the rest of myself for it. The hands can memorize what to do, the body can learn how to position itself, how to work into the bodies, fixing them, tinkering with them.

“Good,” Aunt Lena says. “We need more smart doctors.” She gets up from the table and puts the bowl on the counter. “You just keep reading that book and studying and you’ll do it, I bet. I bet you will.” She smiles at me, her lipstick smeared but sincere then goes into the pantry to get the rest of dinner started. When I told grandmother this she just said I was getting excited and needed to go sit myself down to calm down. I sat down next to the pictures of her daughter and folded my hands in my lap just as she does in the picture. But what grandmother didn’t know was that while I sat there I was reciting the major arteries of the body, tracing them through myself, until I believed I could see them when I looked down, thick blue snakes winding their way up and out of my skin like the lines on the old maps Grandfather has hung on the wall to chart where his sons fought and died. The absent sons are kept in the basement; the lost daughters are kept in the front parlor with the calm granddaughters.

I pick up my book and go outside to find Adam. Aunt Lena is his mother so I won’t let him cry all day, even if he deserves it. I cross the yard and wave to Uncle Brud’s rear, which is sticking out of the hood of the old Ford. This is most of what I see of Uncle Brud until dinnertime; he’s always got his head in something trying to fix it. At dinner he asks me questions and tries to make me laugh like I’m a ford and have a bad valve or faulty spark plug.

The chicken coop is behind the barn and smells awful. They store old furniture in there that won't fit in the house or barn, mostly stuff from my other Uncle's houses, or other relatives who went overseas and never came back to get their stuff. Adam is sitting on the corner of a piece of an old pool table, hunched over. A chicken sits near him and another scurries out of my way, flapping its wings at me.

"I thought you were allergic to chickens," I tell Adam, and he just hunches lower and keeps away from me. I hold my book tight. It's damp and dark in here and I see why Adam comes here, so no one will follow him. I hold my nose with my other hand and my voice comes out funny when I ask Adam if he wants to go out and look for some Indian arrowheads along the old field out back. He shrugs then nods so I wait by the door for him to wipe his face off. I look down and out of the corner of my eye see something white.

It is an egg in an empty nest; it must not have hatched with the others. I touch it with my finger; it is cool. The shell is off white and flecked with crud from the nest. I pick it up and hold it in my hand, let my skin surround it gently. "What are you doing with that?" Adam snurfles, leaning over me so I feel his breath on my neck.

"Hand me your pocket knife," I say and he gives it to me from his pocket.

I tap the shell, ever so gently and pull the pieces away from the center. Inside is a perfectly formed chick, perfect except for the one thing that mattered: the machinery of the heart had somehow failed to activate, somehow missed its signal to start and instead left the perfect bit of meat and feathers inside its perfect case: perfect and useless. The mother hen knew to leave it behind. Adam shrugged behind me and went to wait outside. I put the chick back in its nest and placed the pieces of its shell around it. I didn't know

what else to do.

On Sundays we all go to church and then the other cousins come back to the farm so the family can all visit together. Adam and Aunt Lena and I pile into the truck and Aunt Lena lets Adam drive since she has a stomachache. Uncle Brud never comes to church because he goes out to the VFW on Saturday nights to play poker and is too busy worshipping his porcelain god on Sunday morning, Aunt Lena says, which makes me laugh and grandmother suck in her breath. We sit all together in a pew and stand and sit when the priest tells us to all together with everyone. Adam sits by me so we can write notes to each other on each other's legs. CHICKEN I spell out on his leg, carving the letters into his thigh. PRETTY I think he spells out on my leg, but I can't catch the next word. His fingernail pushes through the material of my skirt and draws on my skin again but I still don't get it, though the sensation sends goose bumps down my arms, same as when I have a spell, but I ignore it. He goes too fast so I can't decipher it and finally give up, shoving his hand away quickly so that grandfather leans down from his seat at the end of the pew and frowns at us.

The worst part about church is the walk to confession, but once I get in the booth sometimes I sort of start to enjoy it and sometimes make up a few extras to stay there longer, in that dark quiet booth with the priest listening only to me, Father I have sinned. My heart is heavy. Have I sinned Father. Heavy is my heart. Sinned have I father. Heart-heavy am I. That's a sin too.

In the parking lot I see a flattened frog lying on the pavement and lean down to examine it. I wish I still had Adam's knife in my hand so I could peel back the layers of

skin and look inside, as I did the other day with a toad I found floating in the pond. Aunt Lena found me and I thought I'd be in real trouble, but instead she just got out a book from her room and showed me pictures of animals with suits of muscle, artery and bones and told me to label all the parts on the toad by dinner. "Curiosity never killed anyone," she said as she headed back to the kitchen. "except a few cats, and we've got plenty in the barn."

"Yuck," my cousin Elizabeth says, passing me. Adam scuffs up next to me and makes dust go up my nose so I start coughing. Then grandmother is there next to me, Aunt Milly and Charlotte just behind her. "Hit her on the back," I hear grandmother say. "Don't, don't, be gentle," Aunt Milly is saying while Aunt Charlotte reaches out to pet my shoulder.

"She's just got something in her throat," Aunt Lena says, and grabs my elbow to direct me to the car where Adam is already waiting. The rest of the women in the parking lot are watching our cluster of family, their children grabbing their hands as they watch my aunts flutter around me while I try to stop coughing. Feeling their eyes on me makes it start thud thud thud thump thud thud. Grandfather and the priest and Mr. Harris with the flat feet are gathered by the door and they look up as if they can hear it too.

"Okay?" Aunt Lena says, sitting straight, and I nod and try to laugh. Adam shifts the truck out of the parking lot. I think of the flat frog on the road and of the frogs and toads that burp and burble at night outside my guest room window. Their deep tenors betray their overdeveloped vocal chords and small nervous systems, their long legged movements simple physics after looking inside to the leg muscles and ligaments. Frogs and toads had nothing else to tell me. I shift in the seat and allow my shoulder to lean a

bit against Aunt Lena. Adam shifts onto the main road and the truck makes a growling unhappy noise as he turns onto the highway that I can feel echo all through my body.

While the other cousins play outside Aunt Charlotte and grandmother sit me at the table and hand me the old poetry primer and a cup of hot tea with no sugar. Aunt Lena is in the kitchen fixing Sunday supper and Adam is out with the other cousins, probably showing them the chicken coop and tractor and pond. There were only a few lines I like out of the whole thing: The carriage held but just ourselves and immortality. I read them over and over again until grandmother looks up and takes it away from me and tells me again not to get overexcited.

I sit in the chair quietly with the tea in my lap and picture myself wearing a white surgical outfit, hair tied back behind a mask, bending over a patient, whispering, the carriage held but just ourselves and immortality. Probably no one even knows what that means, but it sounds nice, which is what people want when they're sick, supposedly. Of course, I picture myself saying other things too: Your son is going to make it! I will say, ripping my surgical mask off, we lost him for a minute there, but he was able to pull through. The families will fall onto me, weeping thankfully. I will keep my shoulders straight and firm, hands behind me to protect them for future surgeries, for future grateful mothers and fathers, their hearts blood flowing through my fingers until I stop it up.

"Muriel," my grandmother whispers suddenly, "I've got a little something for you," and hands me a little faded blue velvet box. I put my tea saucer and cup onto the table next to me and take the box from her hand. She is smiling at me. The box opens with a click and inside is a hatpin with a swirled silver head. It is slightly tarnished. I take it out and tap my finger against the bottom; it is dull. "It was your mother's,"

grandmother whispers, "Happy Birth-day." I smile back at her and click the box shut.

"Thank you grandmother," I say, "thank you very much." She gets up and leans over me, white powder rising from her chest as she pushes into me. Her cheek presses mine and feels like soft paper. When she kisses me I feel the flutter of her eyelashes against my forehead and in my insides.

After everyone leaves, Uncle Brud gets in the truck and goes out to the VFW and Adam goes out to the barn to feed the animals. I help Aunt Lena with the dishes. I'm just starting to go upstairs when she calls me back. "Happy Birthday, Muriel!" she says, like she means it. There is a big lump on the kitchen table covered with an old towel.

"Go on, open it," she says, "uncover it!" I want to just stand there for awhile, but instead I go over and swish the cover away. For my sixteenth birthday Aunt Lena has gotten me just what I want: a pig's head. The frogs have been good for muscles and the salamanders for organs, but this, a pig's head, who knows what I will uncover there. I run to get my book and Aunt Lena doesn't tell me to slow down, just sits down at the table with me and reviews the parts of the skull with me, mandibular fossa and all the others, lovely lovely bones and bits. And eyes! We are laughing and turning the pages of the book. The pig, procured from the butcher in town, sits in front of us and his eyes seem to twinkle with ours at the wonder and mystery that he contains. I go to sleep in my guest room and listen to the frogs outside, the rush of wind in trees, the slam of Uncle Brud returning home and am glad to be sixteen, glad to be a future doctor, glad.

When I go downstairs in the morning my pig's head is gone and Uncle Brud has

his head down on the table. Aunt Lena is standing with a coffee mug in the corner.

“Her *birthday* present, Brud. How could you.”

He shakes his head from where it lies on the table and his voice sounds dim from the tent of his arms. “How was I supposed to know that pig’s head was hers?”

I step into the room and Uncle Brud looks up and then puts his head back on the table. “I’m so sorry honey, you just go right on and take my head instead, you just go right on.” I smile and sit down next to him and he sits up, putting his hand to his head as he does so.

“I really didn’t know, sweetheart, but I will get you whatever you want instead, and that’s a promise. A dress, shoes, jewelry, you got it.”

Aunt Lena puts her mug down and starts slamming around the kitchen, looking in the food bins and the high cupboards and slamming them shut. With each slam Uncle Brud hangs his head lower. “Her *birthday* present.”

“I swear it winked at me too!” he says, and I laugh a little to help him out. “I come in and see a big plate on the table covered with a towel and what am I supposed to think? I think my lovely wife and beautiful niece have left me out a snack. I get a fork and knife and sit down to uncover it. And a pig is looking right at me.” He gets up and stands next to Aunt Lena, who won’t face him. “And the pig looks at me, and I look back. *And the pig winks!* I swear, darlin’.”

“Uh huh,” Aunt Lena says and checks the level of the whiskey Uncle Brud keeps in the potato bin. She holds it up in the morning light and shakes the amber liquid around. She doesn’t know about the ones he keeps in his winter coat in the closet, or the ones in the loft of the barn. I scoot out the door and go up there while Aunt Lena and

Uncle Brud keep talking in the kitchen.

Up in the loft you can lie for hours watching particles fly through the air chaotically until you get dizzier and dizzier and have to count off the bones of the skeleton just to calm down in the middle of all that. I lie there and picture Uncle Brud throwing my pig's head out the door, the dishtowel flapping in the wind. I found it on my way out, following the marks in the dirt where it rolled; it was gnawed by farm dogs, skin and muscle all gone, only some bits of flesh sticking to the skull bones, along with countless bugs, too small to dissect, too small to matter. I can hear Adam in the horse stall nosing around, waiting for me to come down. I wait a few minutes and take a deep breath before climbing down, before I get my idea to grant my birthday wish myself.

“Adam,” I say as I hit the ground, “get the truck.”

We haven't even gone a half-hour before we spot one. Adam is driving and every so often he reaches down to shift and the car groans and squeals in protest. From a distance it looks like the smallest bump on the road, then as we get closer we see it as a small black and white bump, closer still, a small black and white furry bump. Closer still, a small black and white furry bump. Perfect.

“Slow down,” I say, to Adam, to my bumping thumping thud thudding heart. Adam checks the rearview for cars behind us. The road is deserted, no traffic to speak of, the usual for these country roads out by the farm. There are only two lanes (so simple compared to the highways in our chests), one for coming and one for going and no one has much of a concern for either in these parts.

“Why are you doing this?” Adam asks. “Why don't you just be a nurse or a

teacher instead? Or a mother,” he adds, “Like my mom, and yours.” I shake my head and wait for the truck to completely stop. “There’s nothing wrong with that, Muriel.” He stinks like the chicken coop and I wonder if he’s been out there again this morning, sitting hunched on the fraying pool table surrounded by dead furniture and idle chickens.

“It looks about right,” I say and lean forward as Adam slowly moves the truck closer. The body is a cat and is still and seems intact; it could almost be mistaken for a sleeping animal. Only the odd tilt to the head and slumped hindquarters betray it.

“Ready?” I ask Adam, who is fiddling with the keys and looking in the rearview mirror again.

“Why do you have to know everything?” he says, “why can’t you ever just be still?”

“Ready?” I ask again, opening my door. He stays where he is for a minute, then finally opens his door and jumps out. I slam my door and start to walk toward the cat, with Adam just behind me. I get closer and closer and I’m looking down at my shoes now, seeing my socks are falling down as usual and the shoes are scuffed and dusty. I shuffle even nearer to the cat, mammal animal like me with all the organs and skin and muscle I need, fit into this wonderful package left here for me to find. There aren’t many flies, which makes it somewhat better. I think of my poor devoured pig’s head lying in the dirt back at the farm.

“Hand me the sack,” I say to Adam and he reaches forward, stretching to hand it to me. I look around and pick up a stick from the side of the road. I use it to roll the body over. It is reluctant to move and when it finally does for a minute I think it will jump up and run away. Instead it awkwardly rolls, revealing the face and belly. The tone

is sticking out and I think I can even see the rough bumps there. I reach my hand out and touch the fur, hot from the sun, but cool underneath, I suspect. Adam presses the burlap sack into my hand from behind me. His back is to me, as if he is keeping a look out, though it seems to me more likely he is looking away.

I move the body into the sack, lifting with both hands as if it was a baby or a puppy until it is inside, then quickly lift the bag up so that the body shimmies quickly down to the bottom. There is no blood on the pavement, just empty road where the body once lay, just pavement where the animal was. I shift the sack and cradle it in my arms.

“Let’s go,” Adam says and I nod, carrying the bag with me back to the truck.

I put the cat in the bed of the truck and lift my book from the floor of my seat. Adam puts the key in the ignition and wiggles the stick shift. After a few indelicate spurts the truck sputters to life, the flow of oil and gas moving through the hoses and tanks, moving the grinds and gears while we trundle our way up the road. If I blur my eyes the body on the front cover of my book becomes more celestial than human. I begin to recite the necessary intonations, until I can close the book and recite by heart the arteries leading away and to the organ, as nearly as Adam can recite the roads leading to and away from his home. He leans forward to drive and I lean back to look out the window.

He shakes his head. “Are you happy now?” I’m trying to recite in my head again so I just nod. “Elizabeth would never do something like that. She would never look at it or touch it.”

I shrug.

“I know something you don’t know, anyway,” he continues, and I roll my eyes.

“In some states, cousins can get married.” He stops fiddling with the gear shift and turns towards me. “I looked it up. You already live with us, this way you can stay. I don’t mind about that other stuff, you can even be a nurse if you want.” His breath is coming quick like it does before he cries and I keep my eyes on the road.

“Adam,” I say, slowly so he’ll listen and so I can get it right. “Adam, I’m not getting married. You know that. And anyway--I want to be a doctor.”

He sighs, big and heavy like Uncle Brud. “Sure,” he says. “I guess I knew that.”

I look into the rearview to see his eyes, to judge what he’s thinking now; he’s not going to cry, after all. He is just leaning forward and driving again, driving down the road like he always has done and always will do. I keep looking at his face, thinking of him drawing the words on my legs in church and how he likes the quiet dark places on the farm and helped me carry my bag up to the guest room when I first arrived there. Then I catch a glimpse of my own face in the mirror. It looks pale; under the eyes there are black marks and the mouth is pulled down, the lips the same color as the face. I feel tears start to well and I want to think they are in part for Adam and not all for me but before I can figure it out I see an opaque glimmer from the corner of my eye.

My heart bursts forward with a chorus of thuds and thumps that are new to me and behind my eyes I can actually see the thumps and thuds, each one a tiny white explosion that makes my ears and toes and arms go clammy before it moves to my innards. The car thumps over something, the wheels definitely running it down into the road, and then the truck is curving towards the trees off the pavement. The driver’s side hits a branch and then the mirror hits the window and my body is thrown forward into the front window. Adam’s foot hits the brake again and again and then something hits the

undercarriage of the truck and the glass next to me spiderwebs outward immediately, slow cracks tiptoeing up the window. The truck shudders and stops as Adam continues to kick the brake.

“Muriel, Muriel,” Adam is asking me, his right arm clawing for my stomach, leg, elbow. The names for the muscles and bones are lost to me as my heart knocks against my chest again and again; the names for the chambers, the ventricles should be leaping forward, but instead the actual chambers and ventricles seem to be leaping, bounding away across the road, away and away and away. I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out, not even the smallest thud or thump. I try to reach my arm up to feel my chest, to feel for a hole or tear there but it is heavy and feels damp like the rest of my limbs.

“Muriel?” Adam is asking, as I try to block out the sound of something solid scraping beneath the car. The scraping stops and the stars push out behind my eyelids; the grasses at the edge of the road rustle and wave as if something small was dragging away, something small and warm and necessary and I wonder if this is how my mother felt at the last, this tingling and trembling, this incredibly heavy hollowness, this escape and release.

The heart of a grown man weighs ten to twelve ounces; the heart of a woman weighs eight to ten ounces; the heart of my mother, growing heavier and heavier each day behind her rib cage, had to be lifted from her chest with two hands and if the scale hadn't been broken would have weighed in at eight pounds nine ounces, the weight of a full-grown healthy baby.

THE HOPE AND GRACE MISSION

She woke up confused again, disoriented. The branches outside her window were arthritic fingers cracking and rapping. And there shouldn't have been branches outside her window. Her bed shouldn't have been faced this way, not at all. The sun should have been slanting into her room and the old dog should have been clicking around in the kitchen, click clicking on the linoleum, waiting to be fed and let out into the yard. No, that old dog had died several years ago, she remembered now. She sat up and scooted her feet into her slippers; they, at least, were in the right spot. The phone was ringing, this was what had woken her up. It sounded like a baby crying, a dog whelping, a child screaming. She counts to ten to give things time to collect, to give the reality of things times to float up to the surface of her mind. Increasingly she sees her mind as the old pond from childhood, thick with mud and yuck at the bottom, clear at the top, the surprise fish lurking to kiss your toe. If you kicked it up too much, tried to touch down to the bottom, even the top would get murky, then you just had to wait for things to settle. One. Two. Three. In the end it just sounded like a phone.

“For Pete’s sake,” she says out loud, “For the love of Pete!” She picks up the phone.

“It’s Marjorie here, how are you Helen?”

“Fine, fine,” Helen plays for time. Marjorie? She looks around--the small kitchen, the emergency numbers on the fridge, the battalion of photographs hunkered down on the surfaces with neatly printed name cards near them.

“And are you adjusting all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” Helen says, moving closer to the pictures. The cards are in her own writing. *John III* one reads--*grandson*. The pond is settling again, the yuck sifting down to the bottom. These children, these faces, are all hers, in some way. She should make a map of them and trace them back so she knows exactly how each occurred, someday.

“Do you want to go for our walk?” Marjorie is still talking, “The other gals are all meeting us down at the community center. I could come by and pick you up?”

“Oh that’s so sweet of you all,” Helen says, because though she has forgotten, for the moment, who exactly Marjorie is, she will never forget her manners, “But I have a few errands to run today.”

“Well you did say last week you wanted to get started with us and start to get out a bit more--”

“Yes, I absolutely do,” Helen says, “I absolutely do, but I just can’t today. I have a million things on my plate.” On the calendar, she notes it says OPEN HOUSE in her own spidery script.

“Well, you keep your spirits up,” Marjorie is saying, “We just want to give you a real welcome to the community and let you know we all know what you’re going through. It’s a hard adjustment. But I think you’ll find there are certain perks to living here--”

“Yes, yes it sure is,” Helen says, “And thanks.”

“Well, I’ll call you tonight for bridge--” Helen hangs up the phone. She can see the surface of the pond now, all the way down to her waist and soon her knees. The house is gone, she has sold it, she remembers now. She lives here, in this small

apartment in something her daughters told her was assisted living, *don't you mean resisting living*, she'd asked them and instead of laughing they'd all put on their old hang dog faces. Her kids could never take even the smallest joke.

The apartment is small and she moves around it checking her small notes and letting the pond settle at its own speed. What was it she dreamt last night? Her dreams are getting more vivid as she gets older, she's noticing, and when they are good she wakes up exhilarated. When they're bad, like the one last night, she feels so out of sorts, so wrong for the rest of the day. She looks out one of her small windows and tries to shake off whatever dream world she was in last night. A drive, she'll go for a drive to clear her head.

"I will give you to the count of three," she tells the girls in the backseat, pointing a sharp finger in the air to emphasize her point. "And I mean it, you better settle down."

The girls are near hysterics in the back seat. As usual it is nothing specific and everything in particular that has them nervously, hilariously laughing. They are like two little malformed twins, she thinks, then feels guilty, because she is their mother and should think them perfect in everyway, according to everybody everywhere. Even when they are making those noises in the backseat, already snotty and dirty, when she begged them to please, just be good for this day.

"You are to sit quietly while I do my business, okay?" They erupt into another round of hysterics and she realizes she has used the wrong words--do your business is what her mother, their babysitter, has chosen to call poop. Her mother doesn't approve of these words, thinks them uncouth.

The manual says it is the little things that set one agent apart from the others--the little things that can get you in to the million dollar club, which she absolutely is determined to reach, starting with this commission. The manual also said a good realtor is selling not only a house, but the life the potential buyers will have in their house. She'd thought long and hard on this one, thinking about how she could pitch this to her potential clients. The house itself was nothing to brag too much about, one of those challenges they always gave the new kids on the block like herself. She shouldn't have hung her new license on the wall, she'd realized too late, seeing the others in the office only had pictures of family up, their smiling brace-faced kids and beaming bearded wives. Too late, she'd propped up a picture of the girls, but it was out of date and one of the girls was looking crossed-eyed and the other had milk all down her front.

You aren't selling a box of rooms, you are selling homes, the manual says. You want people to walk in and say I'm Home. After that, they are playdough in your hands, Alicia figures. She also figures two screaming girl-demons will be too much a taste of home, but there's nothing she can do. Mother cancelled because she had plans. What plans could she have? Alicia had plans too, but two kids and a divorce later that didn't pan out so well either.

Her mother with her little talk about birds and bees and the flower of love had not helped Alicia out too much, who was already about three months gone by that time with the first little demon, Maysie. A critical lack of information, she calls Maysie in her mind sometimes. The second little horror was also due to a critical lack of information and arrived only ten months after her older sister, her future ex-husband telling her so earnestly that she couldn't get pregnant if she was breastfeeding. Maysie was mumbling

baby nonsense in the crib next to her at the time and now it seemed that mumble had been a chant, a spell, ending in this unlikely second girl.

She got out of the car and walked on unsteady high heels through the mud at the side of the road. She'd been planting signs all morning, because, as the manual said, you can't sell a house nobody knows about! She'd added balloons to the whole thing, which looked great from the road, but was a little difficult, logistically, with heels, two screaming kids waiting in the car and nothing to hammer the signs into the ground with. She'd assumed the mud would be soft enough. Like everything else in her life up to this miserable point, she had thought wrong. She used one of the children's books to pound the sign in, the wind whipping the balloons into her face. She tried to use her other hand to keep her skirt down, but in the end just let it fly and pushed the stake into the ground. Cars flew by, their honks of approval streaking through her. She surveyed the sign in victory. The balloons snapped in the air, the sign slanted at a friendly angle. Her children screamed hysterically from the car.

It took her a minute to interpret their cries as panic and not joviality, this time. She turned and ran back, slipping in her heels and skinning her knee on the way. It was the youngest one, she could hear that cry louder and more insistent than the other, and could see her little arm flailing out of the car window, which had been rolled up almost to the top, with the arm in it. Both girls inside the car thrash about and in their panic can't find the automatic unlock button they have hit, while hitting every other button in the car for their game. She pounds on the window, screaming for them to hit it, pointing at it through the window, trying to keep the arm still that is outside the car. Her pantyhose are torn up, her knee is bleeding, the balloons behind her are still clipping against each other.

The name of the game was one two three GO. On the GO, you stuck your arm out the window as your sister moved the window tab up and down.

Mommy is at the window saying okay okay, it's okay over and over, but she always says this and it wasn't okay when she took them both to the dentist or put them in different preschools until they screamed and pretended to forget potty training for a week straight. Then she had to let them be together again, but only because they made her. It wasn't okay when she left them with pinching, slapping grandmother and it isn't okay now, that is a big fat lie, the kind she is always trying to run by them when she wants something from them. Both girls scream like animals in a trap, high and injured and keening, and the older girl is even a little louder than the younger. No no no, the little girl is screaming. Her mother is pounding on the window and finally the door is open and she is pulling her arm back in the car. Now she can howl like she means it. Really the arm doesn't hurt as bad as she thought, and think more about crying. Her sister, who pushed the button not on GO but on THREE is crying just as loud and younger sister has to match that because this is *her* arm, *her* turn.

Babies, babies, Mommy is saying, my babies, shh shh shh. She climbs into the back seat with them, pulling both into her lap. She keeps making the sound like short bursts of animal wings and without meaning to, the girls are soothed. Babies babies babies, Mommy is saying, rocking them in the car, holding both on her lap. Shh shh shh, as the cars on the road whiz by and the car shudders around them.

The world can be divided into two categories: those who rent and those who own.

Owners can paint their rooms in lovely shades of raspberry and cream. Owners can plant chrysanthemums and not have them torn up by the apartment building's lawnmowers.

Owners put their children onto a school bus. Owners go year by year; Renters go month by month.

They pull up into the drive and he doesn't know it but she's already got the colors picked out and in her purse, already sees him in the sunny front yard painting shutters while she watches, a hand on her expectant belly. She will tell him soon, after more time has passed. Last time, she told everyone too early and when *it* happened, that which they never speak of, they had to un-tell everyone. Even months later a haphazard acquaintance who they'd forgotten to update would ask them unfortunate questions and she would see his face crack like an egg. This house was to be their conciliation prize, but now, she suspects, she has a much better prize for him.

Kids are playing basketball outside the house next door, and there is a front porch and everything is wonderful. She wants it immediately. He looks over and sees it in her face.

"Okay," he says, "I like it too, but we can't let *them* know that. Try to find things to pick out that aren't right so we can drive the price down a bit more." She nods, but she's already seeing him putting up a hoop of their own in the yard. "It's out of our price range, don't forget," He tells her. They did the number crunching last night, called the bank this morning. It would be hard, especially for the first few years. If he knew about what she thinks she knows about, he wouldn't agree at all. But she believes these things will work out.

The kids bounce the basketball and occasionally shout out at each other "I'm

open!” one yells. The ball bounces like a steady heartbeat and she runs her hand, quickly, over her stomach.

She hears the car pull up in the drive and comes out on the front porch to greet them, careful not to seem too eager, as the manual suggests. The welcome mat is out, the cookies are laid out on the borrowed platter. Her pantyhose are in a bloody knot in the glove compartment and her knee is barely noticeable; the girls are under strict orders to be quiet. They are playing one of their games, the games that lock everyone else out, which is fine, because it is a quiet game this time, the little one still keeping her arm carefully against her body, the older one careful not to bump it. Maybe they’ve learned a lesson for once.

The couple sits out in the car and seem deep in discussion. She runs over all the advantages of the house, all the disadvantages she will skim over as challenges for a young couple starting out. Two other couples have already been by to look at the place, but left too quickly, after eating the cookies and poking around the house with skeptical glances. She’d delivered her best speech, all according to the manual, but hadn’t felt anything from them, not even a tug. She needed to land someone, soon. She could feel the commission slipping from her hands. But this couple out in the drive, they were clearly the right sort of people for this house. They looked hungry for it, sitting together in their little compact car. When they got out, she noticed that the man went around and opened the door for the wife. The right sort of people and they’d better have the right sort of checkbook. She could see to the rest.

“Hello!” She called, as if she’d just seen them. “I was just about to head back to

the office, but I'm so glad you made it before I did." She saw the couple exchange a nervous glance. They walked up the front stone path. The stones were almost completely covered by crawling vines and she wished she'd thought to do some weeding before the buyers started showing up. The man walked through the vines, but the woman tiptoed from stone to stone with a sort of ballerina pirouette. When they got to the front porch, the woman smiled up at the house and Alicia, and for the first time that day Alicia felt a small tug of hope on the line. The man kicked one of the front steps.

"Woodrot," he said, half-questioning and half-accusatory.

"Well, the charm of an older house is the challenge of fixing it up!" Alicia wouldn't be nailed that easily into any kind of statement on the rot, or the potential for termites, old pipes, electric. Best to keep those details abstract, fanciful; charming, picturesque, homey, quaint, stately, never run-down, old, cluttered, musty or damp. All in the twist of words, the twist of the eyes, the manual had explained carefully. Of course, she would never out right lie to anyone. But this, like anything, was simply a matter of showing people what they wanted to see. She'd learned that much from her dating life, anyway. Each guy was a gorgeous potential father and husband until the end when his stomach would turn from cute and squishy to a beer belly and his face from rugged to ugly. All a matter of inspiration and presentation.

"The family who used to live here really let this porch fall into disrepair, but it would be easy enough to fix up," she went on, "they mainly used the side door, though with the beautiful view of the front yard I don't see why!"

The couple walked carefully up the steps. Alicia stepped quickly to the side, waiting for them to note the welcome mat, waiting for them to feel that magic pull as they

entered into the house, their future house, her future. They paused, but only so the man could run his finger along the chipping paint on the door jam.

“Welcome, come on in,” Alicia ushered them in, even using her hands to move them forward. Sell the home, not the house, she could hear it from the training video.

1. Highlight the positive 2. It’s all positive.

She put a new smile on her face, “Let me show you this kitchen. You won’t believe the counter space,” The woman nodded and followed. The man trailed behind after them, eyes flowing from the scuffs along the floorboards to the scratched hardwood floors. “Do you like to cook?”

While his wife followed that real estate lady into the kitchen he started nosing about. He didn’t really know anything about this sort of thing, nothing at all about the woodrot, nothing about home repair. He was hopeless with that stuff; he’d almost failed shop in High School. The toolbox he kept in the trunk of his car was just for show. In the apartment buildings they’d lived in he’d made a show of getting under the sink, looking behind the toilet, tapping the porcelain, making disapproving noises as his father had. But in the end he’d always call the Super to take care of that stuff. The inner workings of plumbing, electrics, and all those things were a mystery to him, and in the end a big waste of time. But then she turned back to look at him with those big brown eyes and he thought maybe he could be capable of it, maybe it would work out.

He pictured himself hanging a swing on the front porch, nailing in some boards there, installing a pipe somewhere in the ceiling. A fixer-upper, she’d called it, and the real estate lady was beaming and explaining about the value of hardwood floors and the

exposed brick in the living room. The women were in the kitchen still, and the agent was getting his wife to run her hands over the molding, lean over to glance out the window over the sink. Sun slanted in and shone on them, center stage there.

He felt the dark coolness of the dining room where he stood. They'd forgotten him, the two women chatting there in the kitchen, discussing the fixer-upper, and for a moment he felt maybe he was the one they were talking about. Wasn't that always the way they looked at him? First his mother, then the fling or two he'd had in college, finally the wife, who said she loved him just as he was while buying him new shoes and tucking in his shirt? He kicked the molding a little too roughly and they looked up from the sunny chatter. His wife smiled at him and the agent looked at him measuredly, estimating how much work she'd have to do on him to get him on board with them. He hurried to catch up with them as they started to move into the other rooms.

She always did that to him, made him want to catch up. He'd married her on that look, kept the other parts of himself back from her on that look. He'd gotten a job, a pretty good one, and paid the bills and then they'd bought the car together. The next inevitable step, he knew, was the house, then the family, then the years and years of upkeep on both that would be required. It was all understood, it was all the natural progression of things.

But the thing was, he liked the apartment. He liked the balcony, the layers of people around them, insulating and comforting. He could hear the neighbors argue, smell them cook dinner, hear their kids scream, and it made him know he was part of this big teeming mass, that he wasn't alone. That time when they'd camped together in the mountains it had been just them and the sound of her quiet breathing almost drove him

crazy.

The stairs creaked under the three of them and ahead he could hear a small girl giggle, which struck the heat of fear into his body before he could even know why.

The two girls are making carpet angels on the newly vacuumed floor. They have spread their bodies completely out and are moving their arms and legs in tandem. Their arms and the backs of their legs are warm from the friction when they suddenly stop. One carpet angel has only one wing. The other arm she cradles close to her body, the red welt still rising against her skin from where it was stuck. It hurts big, and whenever she thinks of it she whimpers a little, making big sister work all the harder to distract her. Big sister and little sister sit up inside their angel bodies and have to balance carefully to rise from them so as not to leave earthly footprints too close to the angels. They leap from their imprints to the doorframe and big sister tries to forgive her one-armed little one for the stumble that drags a foot through both figures on the carpet.

The next game will have to be a good one to distract from the rising pain in the littler one's arm and the rising upset in the big one's stomach. When they were finally let into the house and were made to sit silently under the kitchen counter big sister was able to smuggle many handfuls of cookies for them both. Little sister was still too distracted with her arm to eat any, so the elder was forced to eat both shares, stuffing them into her mouth all at once and then chewing the enormous soggy mass, swallowing all at once. She can still feel the mass of them in her stomach.

The rules of the next game are simple: the entire upstairs is a gigantic swimming pool. Both girls know how to doggy paddle and the older even knows how to float on her

back. Everything on the carpet is water, the walls are the sides of the pool. They must hold their breath while they swim, and have to get to the windowsill to take in any oxygen. Sharks, alligators and whales are trolling around so the girls will have to be careful as they swim through these dangerous waters. When things seem clearest, often danger is closest, they've both already learned.

The girls start to spin and twirl through the water, careening through the thickness, one girl flapping her arms in wide flying motions, the other pushing her way through with only one.

He wakes up in the dark. He doesn't know where he is. This isn't new, this happens a lot to him. Dark fingers feeling their way over his body, into his mouth, nose, eyes, ears. Poking into him, while awake, while asleep. It is the same in the dark as it is in the light, he can feel the ghostly fingers always close to him, close to pushing into him, sliding through. He is supposed to count when these things happen, count to settle himself and ground himself, the doctor used to tell him. One Two Three. He knows these fingers pushing into him, pushing him along aren't real, the doctors have told him so many times, and other people he trusted too, but even as he trusted them he could feel the fingers pushing him, poking him always, goading him on. It felt very real.

He is always moving, always going on, away from the fingers, and away from those he trusts. He is tired, very tired, of this struggle. He is hungry and tired and wants to lie down in a clean bed after a hot shower and sleep, sleep, sleep with no dreams and nothing waking him up but something normal, an alarm clock, a mother's hand, a sunny window, any of those vestiges from that other world. He feels he could get back into that

world if he could find the right entry point, find the right place to knock and be welcomed back to. So he keeps moving and keeps an eye out, and when he saw this empty house, with its old ramshackle porch and the weeping willow in the backyard, the old stones sinking into the front yard, he thought to try to door. The door was locked, but everyone knows if you find one door closed, a window will open for you. And it did; a window in the back laundry room was already cracked. It took only the slightest tap to crumble the glass like a cookie and he was in, skinny enough from his road diet to fit through a window he would have laughed at years ago.

The house was empty and lovely in its emptiness. If he had a house this would be just the way he would want it. At last, room to move around. Smooth walls, clean floors. he climbed up the stairs and looked into each bedroom. In the master bedroom he found the closet, dark and small and cozy and quiet. He put his pack on the floor and slid down the wall to a sitting position so he wouldn't bother his old knee injury. The wall of the closet fell cool against his cheek and the faint scent of new paint was comforting. The shelves above him seemed like protective arms guarding him from above, and when he closed his eyes for just a minute more he hoped, for once, to wake up exactly where he was.

The car has disappeared, but she tries not to let it bother her, that she can't remember where she put it, or if she still has it. A taxi then, the yellow and black creepy crawlies that took you where you wanted to go when your husband took the car and you had to get somewhere. He is always taking the car and not telling her where he's going or when he'll be back. She is stuck at home with the screaming babies, his screaming

babies. But not anymore, the babies are old and he didn't come back. She counts again to clear it all out. She calls information and gets them to arrange the taxi and is waiting outside when it comes. She is still, after all these years, a woman who can get things done.

"Where to," the driver asks. She gives him the address; she hadn't realized where she wanted to go until she said it out loud. This new part of her life is like that, she has to trust herself before she knows even what she is doing, as she must trust herself before she falls asleep, trust she will know what to dream for herself, trust she will know the same things in the morning as she knows at night.

She watches the city go by as they drive. She thinks of it as a city, though her daughters would laugh and say it hardly qualified.

The cab pulls up and she gives him the bills she has in her wallet, the numbers blurry to her. "Too much," he says, "Do you want me to wait?"

"No, no that is all right," she says, "I'm meeting someone here." He shrugs, and waits for her to carefully unfold from the car, this careful quiet old lady. That must be how he sees her, she knows. She straightens her pants and pulls her blouse down. She walks across the street and can see a glimpse of the waving arms of the weeping willow tree in the backyard. The stones seem to sink even further into the ivy strewn ground and the daisies and chrysanthemums are all needing some attention--water, weeding, a bit of time. Who has let things fall into such a mess? She sits on the top step of the porch and leans over to snap off the buds from the flowers there. They spend too much energy on their flowers and not enough on new buds or new leaves if you didn't snap some off. She remembers all of her flowers, the names of each. Her mind is still sharp, she tells herself

and repeats the names to herself, each one springing forth magically. She holds the snapped flowers in the palm of her other hand and takes them with her then she stands and goes back down the steps toward the side door. The front door is only for company.

The dream from last night is close, she can feel it hovering as she opens the side door, and when she hears the little girl sounds from inside the house it comes back, washing through her. She had dreamed herself back in time again, and remembered the panic she'd felt last night in that dream world. With only one baby, waiting for John to come home, thinking this was the last time, the absolute last time and believing in the dream that she would leave him, take the baby and go, once and for all. The dream was potent, maybe she'd forgotten it on purpose. Because she never had left him, not after that baby, not after any of the others, she had gone on repeating the same mistakes and putting up with his repetitive mistakes too, loving him wrongly and allowing herself to be wrongly loved back. She'd been so young last night. She wanted to call that younger self on the phone and tell her everything, though it would mean the erasure of the children who came after, the years after, the erasure even of this house. Getting the kids up for school every morning, sending them off every day, waiting for them to return everyday until they would no longer be obligated to, as John had one day deemed himself no longer obligated. Why that day? she wondered. Was it the dinner the night before, that the kids squabbled that night and she couldn't make them stop, the pile of dishes she let wait until the next day, the way she always had dirt under her fingernails?

She puts the flower heads in the kitchen sink and glances up at the clock to check the time, to see if the kids are running late for the bus again. She should be waking them up, should have some sort of breakfast on the table, she realizes in a panic. What will

they eat? No kids of hers will go to school hungry. The clock isn't there, one of the boys has moved it again. But when she opens the cupboards to get the bisquit down, it isn't there either. Panic flutters again in her chest. Where are the children? What has she done? The clutter is starting up again and she closes and opens her eyes several times trying to clear it out. She sees a plate of cookies on the counter, only several left, and some crumbs. She takes the plate and starts up the stairs.

“So, what do you think!” She has shown them the bedrooms and is moving them towards the master bedroom, which, she feels, will certainly clinch the deal. She has been over eager, a bit too desperate, she knows, but she also knows that they want this house. She can feel it, and she can see it in the woman's eyes. The man is more deliberate, but this is probably just his hard sell technique. When she showed them the children's rooms, both of them walked around a bit and gathered around the windows together to examine the views. The trees weren't too close, she pointed out to them, so no Romeos would be getting to any future daughters! Her voice went a little too high on the last bit, maybe a bit too much, but she could already taste that commission; it tasted like cheesecake and steak and strawberry milkshakes.

They are standing inside the master bedroom when the girls careen through, laughing and snorting, pushing aside the couple to get inside, where they run to the windowsill and grab it with three grimy hands, gasping in like they can't breathe. The couple smiles.

“Please excuse them, my daughters are a little bit high spirited,” she says, and attempts a chuckle. She snaps her fingers behind her back, one-two-three, the warning

signal. *Or else.* The girls continue to grab the windowsill, but their gasps for air are less pronounced, in and out slower and slower until finally they are breathing regularly again as the closet door opens and something dark and terrible emerges towards them.

They are sure they are safe, holding onto the sill, when the shark suddenly wakes up and comes out of the closet. His eyes are sleeping and he is slow, but everyone knows a shark will appear harmless until he attacks. Big sister grabs little sister with one arm and the sill with the other. Her mother, she would like to have another arm for her, but there are only two, and one must be used to hold on. The shark's mouth is open in an O like he can't breathe either, but she is pretty sure they have gills. The cookies roil and complain in her stomach. The water is rising and her breath is catching. The woman near the doorway is starting to cry, grabbing her man's arm, the wail cutting through the room like a siren. The hair on her arm stands up and she can feel goose bumps rise below her firm grip on her sister. He is moving towards them now, coming closer and closer and she can see his teeth cutting into his own lip, his hand moving inside his jacket and his shark skin begins to fall away into the vision of a man, a large and dirty man.

A knife, a gun, mace, acid, candlestick, club, her mind instantly reels through the possibilities, through what the man might bring out into the room with all of them, how horribly any one of these things might change their lives forever. At each possibility she feels her body loosen and become more limp and there is a loud sound in the room, very loud in her ears and she wishes it was quiet, until she realizes the sound, that awful keening sound is coming from her, and then she lets it go even louder, pushing it all out

of her, wishing only to be back in their tight safe apartment, away from this baby killer, husband-killer, life-destroyer. She can see each part of her dreams in this man's hands, knows that this is what he is grabbing for: the fabric of her life to rip apart. It is so delicate, so easy to rip, she knows this now. She feels her body loosen still more and uses the rest of her consciousness to stay upright, stay somehow alive in spite of it all.

She is in charge here, this is her responsibility, and she moves in front of the girls, her two little demon-angels to block them from him. He is watching them carefully, his profile to the doorway where the young couple stand. The sale is gone now, sand running through her fingers, and she still cares, a lot, and that, combined with her feeling that if the girls hadn't been here this wouldn't have happened makes her face scrunch up with unspent tears and frustration. Not even one single thing was right for her, there was always something else to deal with. Then the man moves forward toward them and she tries to pull the girls closer in behind her; they won't move, both hold onto the sill with their tight claws. She can see their carpet angels on the floor below the man's feet, he is standing on them.

"I-I'm so sorry, but you will have to leave," she says, cringing back already, "You will have to go now, please, and we won't cause you any trouble." He is still moving slowly towards her, hands still in his jacket, and she thinks oh god what if he is moving them lower and is a sex maniac and here they all are locked in this old crumbling house.

"Please, please," she is saying, and now she is moving forward, trying to pull his gaze from her little ones, trying to move him off their little carpet shadows, it is not right that he is standing on them like that, not right at all. She moves again, letting her

shoulders sway a little. Is this it? All of everything up to this moment building to this: her and a sex maniac, her little girls watching? “Please,” she says again, into the room.

When he woke up he thought he was still dreaming. He heard a woman’s voice, and then some little feet scampering. Heavier than rats, lighter than a grown person. Children, he thought. It was dark and cloying where he was, the air suddenly gone, all sucked up while he slept. It came back to him suddenly, like it always did, like a poke in the ribs, the house, the window, the small space so perfect for him, the hopeful emptiness. He stood up and listened at the door. They were in his house, his house, walking around like they owned it. He had searched and walked for years to find this perfect place and they had simply walked in and taken it for themselves, just as they always did. He opened the door and came out, showing them his claim, himself, nothing more. He had slept there, dreamed there, it was more his than any of theirs. A house like this could not be given away, or bought, it was found and he had found it.

When he came out they didn’t say a word, and he wondered if he’d already said aloud what he’d been thinking. His heart was beating fast and he could begin to feel the fingers poking at him, moving closer to his soft spots, the vital areas. He put his hand into his jacket, feeling his heart beating quickly and erratically. Steady steady he thought. The people he trusted would tell him to count it down, count down this panic and these people here, let them leave him in peace at the count of three, all of them, for always.

The window is his best chance for an escape, he can see, but there are two little ones blocking his way, and another lady nearby who is talking at him, asking him

questions he can't quite hear over the hum of his heart. He glances over at the two other people, the one with her mouth open, yelling, the other slightly hunkered, hands itching legs, leaning forward.

Local Hero Rescues Women from Madman, he can see the headline in the news and it is this thought that finally moves him to lean down a bit, to begin to picture himself tackling the man, wrestling the weapon from his hands, tying him up with string that will magically appear, no, rope, would be better, wait with the weapon trained on him until the police would arrive. He has gone through the scenario several times before he begins to realize that he will actually have to do it, physically, for this chain of events to start. His wife is near him screaming, but he can't focus on that, he must focus now on what he must do, he is the protector. His reflexes tell him to run, run down the stairs, out the door, take off in the car, down the street, away away away, and this is just an echo of what he knows now has been in his heart all along, since they pulled up, since before even this man came out of this dark closet in this horrible bedroom in the middle of this old house. He wants to start screaming too, picturing himself, so much shorter than this madman, unarmed, and he knows he has no chance, but no choice either.

The pond is murky and swirling all around her and she can barely see for the clouds of yuck and grime, and for a moment more she fights it, like fighting sleep, until her body is too tense and she has to let it come, a great wave of pond scum coming to carry her off completely. The fear is there, the fear that has been lurking below her feet forever, and she can't help but flinch, hold her head with her two unfamiliar hands, hope

to steady that one thing. But it is not what it seemed; it is not unlovely. The swirling eddies of muck and yuck are brilliant in their minutia and she can see in each particle bits of things she loves. She can feel the nibbling on her toes and the backs of her knees, a brush against her elbow, small remainders of the past and future: little hands holding hers, large body pressed up against her, tearing the lip off an envelope for good news, a call in the middle of the night, sunshine warming the dog's fur, so many many lovely things wrapped around her, unattached and loved for their smallness and insignificance. The plate of cookies in her hands, she walks into the bedroom, thinking of all the children, their faces mixing in with grandchildren, thinking of John, who is standing there in the middle of the room, come home to her at last. A woman is screaming, a man is starting to move, a mother is saying please please and two little girls, twins maybe, hold onto the window sill. "John, John," she says, walking towards him with the cookies, and it is then that he takes his hand from his jacket, empty, lips moving, counting towards her. "John, you're home at last," she says, and he nods, slowly, surely.

