

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THINGS I DID TODAY THAT COULD HAVE  
CAUSED AN ACCIDENT

Karen M Keen, Master of Fine Arts, Fiction, 2004

Thesis Directed By: Professor Howard Norman, English Department

This thesis comprises six stories focusing on an art student, Georgia, coming to grips with her childhood friend's untimely death and the effects it had on molding her character and future. The introductory story, *Warhorses*, takes place years before the others and establishes the theme of the tragic consequences of familial love without communication or understanding which are particularly picked up again in *Conversation Across County Lines*. *Pigments* and *Interlude With Melo* deconstruct the modern metanarrative of friend-groups as an all-nurturing alternative to biological family while emphasizing their perhaps paradoxical importance nonetheless. *Vinegar* and *Glance* privilege fractured internal constructions of reality over a unified narrative to simultaneously explore the difficulties of memories carried imperfectly into the present and the seemingly impossible goal of true connection between human beings.

THINGS I DID TODAY THAT COULD HAVE CAUSED AN ACCIDENT

By

Karen M Keen

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Advisory Committee:  
Professor Howard Norman, Chair  
Adjunct Assistant Professor Maud Casey  
Associate Professor Brian Richardson

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## Warhorses

The man and the boy circled each other, hunchbacked and shuffling. They moved on packed dirt, the bald end of a back yard. The brittle stems of dead perennials lined the wire fence that ran to the second-story back porch, underneath which weeds thrived in last year's pile of pine mulch. A purebred Siberian husky with red markings was chained to the far end of the fence, where she pranced up on two legs and yipped at the combatants.

"Be quiet, Scarlet! You'll set off the whole dang neighborhood!" Ron hissed, turning his attention to the dog. His son rushed him, elbows flailing out from his sides. He grabbed Ron around the waist, butting him with his small, hard skull. They both went down, Ron first, his heavy sheepskin coat picking up dirt all down the back.

"Bobby!" Ron snapped, but immediately regretted it. He quickly forced a laugh, but Bobby looked away, scrambling to his feet. The dog snapped alternately at them both, her jaws clicking together a foot from their bodies. Ron reached back and clamped one hand around her snout.

"Scarlet! Now you stop that!" The dog glared at him, showing her teeth between his fingers.

"Stupid dog."

"She's not stupid, she just needs a little more training," Ron replied. He shook the dog's head once, firmly, and let her go. She barked and went for his hand.

"Told ya."

Ron shook his head and chuckled. "Can it, punk. She's young. Lotsa bad influences, too. Her momma wasn't treated good by the man had her before Mel, and the

pups picked up her skittish nature. If I can't train her out of it, might not breed her after all. No sense having a bunch of crazy-ass pups I can't sell, you know?"

He turned back to his son. Bobby avoided his eyes, gazing around the yard, the trees, the neighbor's houses. Pale yellow leaves fell around him from the big elm that dominated Ron's three acres of woods.

"Mel said that you can train it out, but I'm getting my doubts..." Ron fell silent, watching his son's shoulders twitch through three layers of flannel. Bobby was four inches taller than when Ron had seen him last. Maybe even six inches. They really grew once they hit high school. Ron had sent the boy a gift certificate for a skate shop in Bangor three weeks after his fourteenth birthday, just after school started up. It'd been complicated, first sending a thirty-dollar check up north written out to Celia, who chose the least offensive store of the ones Bobby pointed out, purchased a twenty-dollar certificate, and mailed it to Ron, who had signed it and a Bill'n'Opus card. He'd mailed them together back up to Bangor the next week, when he found them on the kitchen table under a stack of bills and auto-parts receipts.

Ron's chest tightened as he remembered again what his son looked like: small bones, skinny legs, dirty blond hair, and a round, open face. This boy in front of him would be tall. His shoulders had no meat on them but were broad, the arms like thin beams lifting up the long span of a bridge. He would grow up and out like Celia's family of Valkyries rather than taking after Ron's wiry frame. His features had rearranged themselves, changing just enough so that his nose was that of Ron's father-in-law, a broad apparatus with flared nostrils between flattened cheekbones. Ron couldn't check to see if the eyes were still his, a light, iced-over blue. The boy never looked up, hiding

under overgrown, dyed-black bangs. His face was red in a dozen places and already showing the first pitted acne scars along the jaw.

Ron wondered if there was any way he could offer to take the boy to one of those skin doctors, get him fixed up. It wasn't his place, but his mother obviously hadn't done anything about it. Bobby was on Celia's insurance. Ron's latest stint in the Quarryville Qwik-Lube didn't even cover himself; he had another four months before he could bust a thumb in peace.

"The leaves are already all down at home," the boy offered, snuffling noisily. Ron tried not to be encouraged. He stood carefully, gently stretching some overwrought muscles in his back, ignoring the fact that his boy now topped him by a hair or two.

"Oh yeah?" The first day of this latest weekend visit had already taught Ron that he was a hopeless dork and left him repeating the few words he knew that were acceptable in Bobby's new language. *Maybe, yeah, I don't really know, what d'you think, might be.* Left him contrary, wanting to poke with words like *okey dokey, right on, man, be-yoo-tee-ful.*

"Yeah. Been down since, like, beginning of October. You guys are really far behind." Bobby leaned down to re-tie his shoe, a black orthopedic shoe with a design of England's flag on the tongue. The other shoe had the same thick sole and yellow stitching but was green, with hand-inked anarchy symbols on both sides. There were squiggles drawn into the boy's jeans as well, in the areas not already torn and held together with safety pins.

Ron rubbed at his chin. It itched underneath a week's stubble. "This tree's a last hold out. The rest all fell in the storm last week, but this one's always been stubborn.

Wants to make sure I'm raking leaves all dang month."

Bobby replied with a non-committal "Hhmp" and switched feet. Ron tapped the his shoulder, lightly.

"Hey, now, c'mon. Back at it."

He crouched again, hands spread and tense. Bobby rolled his eyes, but leaned over as well. They shuffled again, clockwise. Bobby shifted his feet and stared at the bare dirt. Ron heaved a sigh, briefly lifting his gaze to the last yellow leaves rattling on the top branches. They caught the last rays of late-afternoon sun peeking over the hills beyond Ron's property, and glowed.

He rushed the boy, two long steps covering the distance between them. They grappled, Bobby's arms circling Ron's torso, rough soles digging uselessly for leverage. Ron twisted sharply, and used his son's downward momentum to push him to the ground.

"One...two...three! You're done!" Ron sat back on his heels. "C'mon, you're not even trying."

Bobby pushed himself up into a sitting position. He jabbed a finger at a clump of grass by his knee and breathed heavily. The air whistled in and out of his mouth. "Try what?"

"You can't let the big guys roll right over you. Got to know how to use leverage against them, like I always did. I could put anyone down on his butt, even if he was twice my size."

He paused, wondered if Bobby maybe didn't remember. But he had to remember. No other reason he'd have brought up the wrestling team, the next round of cuts. Still—"I trained with Maryland Championship Wrestling, back—"

“I know, I know.” Bobby rolled his eyes, his hair falling again so Ron still couldn’t see them. “You coulda been a contenda.”

“No. Couldn’t have. That’s why I quit, and because I like cars more. Knew I could be a great mechanic, if maybe just an okay wrestler. Never had the bulk. But I could still train a contender.”

He waited for Bobby to say something, but the boy only stared at the ground. He’d press his lips together until they were white, breathing heavily into his nose, then open his mouth to explosive gasps, one, two, three whistles in and out. Then the lips would clamp again.

“You have your inhaler?”

Bobby shook his head. “I’m fine.”

“Was asking if you had it, not how you are.”

“It’s in my bag, I’m fine. Christ.”

“No need for profanity, Bobby,” Ron said. He could hear the whistling even over the shushing of a thousand dry leaves around them. “Go in and get it.”

Bobby scrambled to his feet with a delicate snort of disgust. The dog snapped at his foot.

“Scarlet!” Ron snarled, patience gone. “Get in your house!”

The dog whined and pranced at the end of her lead.

“Get! Go!”

Bobby leaned over and stared. “That mullet’s not hiding the bald spot at all, you know. And it’s not, like, 1987 any more. Get with the decade.”

Ron stood and stabbed a finger toward the house. “You! Inside! And bring it

out, I wanna see you take it.”

Bobby rolled his eyes and kicked at the dog. She snapped again, got her teeth in his pant leg and pulled. Bobby yelled, more in surprise than fear, and hopped back on his free leg. “Leggo, stupid dog!”

Ron grabbed the dog around the neck and yanked her back. Safety pins popped and fabric tore before she released it.

“Bad girl, Scarlet, bad girl!” Ron threw her against the doghouse in the back corner of the yard. He’d built it himself, solid pine planks instead of plywood. She pulled herself upright, shivering, and slunk into the small arched door, disappearing into the gloom inside. “Bad dog!”

“Whoa,” gasped Bobby, now standing several yards closer to the house. One pant leg, the safety pins yanked out of place, sagged over his foot. His chest heaved with the effort of breathing. He didn’t seem to notice the whistling in his own throat, staring fixedly into the doghouse.

“I’m not tellin’ you again.” Ron spoke carefully, turning back to stare at the doghouse. His hands shook. He heard quick footsteps up the long wooden stairs to the back deck, recognizing the particular creak of every step. A couple squeaks lasted too long, sang of rot rather than settled wood. They’d need replaced before winter set in. Ron touched the gelled spikes at the crown of his head and yanked two handfuls of his thin ponytail in opposite directions to tighten the rubber band closer to his skull. His hands steadied with the old familiar gesture.

What the hell had happened to Celia? The spitfire he’d married had dropped the tv remote into the garbage disposal when he’d ignored her for the Raiders and tossed

more than one beer on the bar floor when she decided he'd had enough. Ron saw none of that woman here in his son. The boy was not growing up right. All back-talk and ripping up good clothes as soon as they were bought. And orthopedic shoes! Back in high school, Ron would've beat up any fool who showed up in those ugly things, and he knew kids didn't change. Why didn't Celia just paint a target on his back every morning? Maybe she was too busy with the new guy to keep her son on track. There wasn't a damn thing he could do about it, though, not in a couple court-ordered visitations a year.

Hard enough keeping on speaking terms with the boy.

Ron turned. Bobby stared down at him from the kitchen window. He must have been hiked up on the sink to have his face that close to the window, just above the last green tomatoes of the season set on the sill to ripen. His black hair faded into the interior, leaving a pale oval and indistinct features framed by Celia's old sunflower-patterned curtains. Ron frowned and pointed to the ground next to him. The face jolted up and away from the window.

Bobby let the screen door slam behind him and jumped down the steps three at a time, making the whole porch shudder. Ron winced, looking away. Bobby landed with a flourish. "You know, you know, if we're gonna do this, I don't think we're supposed to be doing this. Like this. Coach says..."

"Where's your inhaler?"

Bobby scrunched up his face. "Took it already. Coach says..."

"Told you to bring it out here, so I could see you. Make sure you took two puffs, like the doctor says."

"I took it, I took it. Christ. I know how to use an inhaler, better than you ever

could.”

“I told you to bring it out here,” Ron said, careful to touch every letter in every word. “I know you know how to take your medicine, but when I tell you to do something, you do it, because I said. And watch the goddam language.”

“Jesus. Where’s the sense in me bringing it out here and, like, taking it and bringing it back in and coming out again? When I can’t breathe, you want me running up and down those shat steps a hundred times? I could, like, drop dead.”

The whistle was mostly gone from the boy’s breathing, barely heard at all between *like* and *drop dead*. “Next time,” Ron said, “You do as I say.”

“Fine, fine fine.” Bobby turned to go back in.

“Hey now, we aren’t done here.”

“You said next, next time!” Bobby yelled, turning on heel. His skinny shoulders were hunched up almost to his ears.

Ron grinned and leaned over, touching the ground. “We’ve still got an hour or so of light left. No sense wasting it.”

Bobby shook his head. “I don’t wanna do this any more.”

“Look, you wanna make that last cut or not? I’m just trying to help here.” Ron stood and dug the heel of one hand into his back. “You said you were worried.”

“Shit, I just had to say something, you wouldn’t stop asking. ‘How’s school, what you learning, you like school, what’s wrong at school, what’s wrong, what’s wrong, what’s wrong.’” Bobby jerked his head side to side with each phrase like a pigeon worrying at a piece of soft pretzel.

“Stop that. And I’m just—just asking. I want to know how you’re doing.”

“It’s fine. I’m fine.” Bobby coughed and wiped saliva from his bottom lip.

There was something off, something that was making his guts pucker up, but Ron couldn’t pin it down. He dug through memories of brief phone conversations with Celia. *How’re you doing, how’s the boy, how’s the job, get those termites nipped in the bug, can you hold off a few months on trying to up the support cause my cash isn’t flowin right now except for out if ya know what I mean, I’d appreciate, I’ll make it up come Christmas...*

There was something, though. Celia said it was handled, she had the boy grounded and cleaning closets until he learned better, but, well... “So...your mother said she caught you smoking couple weeks ago.”

“I wasn’t–”

Ron held up a hand, like he wanted to cross the street in heavy traffic. “You know that’s no good for your lungs. You want to end up back in the hospital? Getting all those shots again?”

“I know! No–”

“Worst night of my life, watching that little body of yours fight and fight just to fu–just to breathe. Wondering if I’d have a son in the morning.”

He was yelling. Hadn’t meant to yell.

“Just–I know!”

He stepped closer to his son, near enough to feel the heat from his flushed neck, leaned down and looked up, hoping to catch his eye. “So why’ve you been smoking? You ended up in the hospital just from playing forts in Roy Stumpf’s hayloft all afternoon, but you think smoking’s nothing?”

“I know! I don’t smoke! It was gross anyway, like my mouth was all dead after. I was just—” Bobby looked back over his shoulder, squinting as though he were trying to pick out just one sapling far away.

“You was just what?”

“I was just holding them for Amy, and figured since I had them...” Bobby stopped abruptly and leaned his elbows back on the railing, arms spread and stiff.

“What, you figured? You’d just give it a chance and see if you like getting cancer?”

Bobby shook his head, silent.

“Huh.” Ron squinted, remembered his little boy for a moment, Bobby and his little posse from the neighborhood, Kyle and Jakey and the redhead kid, watching his Terminator video in the living room. *Gross!* they always chorused, *Blegh! Kissing!* And fast-forwarded to the part with the homemade bombs. Celia hated Ron letting them see that part, said she had to chase junior terrorists out of her kitchen, where they would scavenge for cans and heat them in the microwave in hopes they’d explode. She told Ron to fast-forward through the bombs instead of the kissy parts.

“Amy. She your girlfriend?”

Bobby shook his head again.

“No?”

“She’s a friend.”

“She pretty?”

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“But is she pretty?”

“She’s okay, I guess. She’s just my friend.”

“You got any other cute girlfriends at school?”

”No! Girls don’t–” Bobby huffed a sigh, his whole body heaving with its force.

Ron grinned. “If she’s a smoker, you probably don’t wanna be seeing her anyway. Ages a woman quick–get that turkey neck.” He demonstrated, pushing the bearded skin under his chin together with both hands.

“God! Just, just…” Bobby waved his hands, face screwed up like he’d smelled a terrible fart.

Ron bopped him on the shoulder. “I’m just saying. There’s things you need to know before you start all that up, and–”

“I’m good. Really.” Bobby shrugged the hand off.

“Oh really?” Ron grinned again, raised his eyebrows, trying to ignore the tremors underneath his stomach that were only getting stronger. The boy was a bit older than Ron’d been when his uncle had sat him down, but he was sure all the news was the same. This, he had prepared for. He’d given his reflection the speech while shaving every day in the week since Celia had called to let him know when Bobby’s bus would arrive. It was a good speech.

“Yeah. Really.”

“Cuz your little friends filled you in? At recess? They told you about Spanish Fly, I bet. And someone had an old titty magazine?” Ron chuckled. “Son, there’s nothing true in that. You need to know what actually goes on with men and women, how not to fuck it all up, pardon my french, but it’s the truth.”

“I know all that.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah. Darrell told me.”

Ron paused. “Darrell.”

“Yeah.”

He swallowed against a bad taste in his mouth. “You know it’s disrespectful to call an adult their first name. You should call him Mr. Selby.”

“He said I should call him Darrell. Mom said it was okay.”

“Hmm.” Ron cleared his throat. “So. When did you two have this talk?”

“Few days ago.” Bobby scrunched his nose. “Haven’t forgotten any of it yet. Not that stupid.”

“I know you’re not stupid, boy. Got too smart a mouth to be stupid.”

“Whatever. Yeah, okay, sorry. For whatever.”

Ron covered his mouth and coughed. *Darrell* Guess he had to know how it worked. “So...huh. How’s old Darrell doing anyway? He still working in the bindery?”

Bobby nodded.

“Get that promotion, or whatever?”

“Dunno. Wait, yeah. He’s the super over in the gluing machines instead of the bindery lines now. Got a new F-150. The old one was crap, anyway.”

“Oh. Was it? Huh. Well, how’s your mom? She looking to get married, you think?”

Bobby shrugged. “Dunno. Nah. Don’t think so. She hasn’t said, anyway.”

“Right. ‘Course.” Ron turned on heel and stepped to the middle of the yard.

“Wouldn’t want to lose that big child support bump she put in for this year. Darrell’d

have to pay for his own shiny new toy, then.”

“Hey! He’s not...it’s not like that!”

“I know, I...I,” Ron sighed. He tried to remember the man but the mental picture was old and out of focus, Darrell carefully setting suitcases in a taxi’s trunk, catching the brim of his Orioles cap on the edge as he shut it. He remembered thin wrists and worried eyes, made him think of a rabbit in hunting season. He thought of a voice, a clearing throat, *Sure*, harumph, *one sec*, harumph, *Honey*, *your*, *Ron is on the telephone for you*.

His lips pulled together like a cinch before he spoke. “Darrell seems like a good guy.”

“He’s, you know, okay, you should stop.” The boy rubbed at his face, sniffing mucus back into his throat. Ron fished a crumpled paper towel out of his back pocket and offered it wordlessly. Bobby waved him off, sniffing harder.

“I know, I’d just think...before he tells you things, he’d ask.”

“He doesn’t, really. Bobby shrugged. “He doesn’t, he tries, sometimes, but he doesn’t feel like...” He wiped his nose on his sleeve, rubbed at the line of mucus left in the flannel.

Ron wrinkled his own stuffy nose in disgust.

“I mean, he said, you know, to start with that I should, like, talk to someone. But maybe not him, but I could, but might not want to, so that why I ended up...you know.”

Ron blinked and ran the sentence back through in his mind. “What?”

“Nothing. Nevermind.”

“He said you should what?”

“Nothing. Just, you know, talk. About stuff.”

“You mean...talk, like coming down here this week, instead of after Thanksgiving like usual? He said you should talk to me?” *You want to talk to me?* He could feel the heat in his face that meant he was red as a fire truck.

Bobby shook his head. “Yeah. Okay.”

“Huh.” Ron thought for a few heartbeats. “So...what d’you want to talk about?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh. Um...okay.”

“I’m fine.”

“Okay.”

Both of them developed a sudden interest in the surrounding trees. Scarlet whined into the silence, and Ron shushed her in a whisper. He snuck a sideways look and saw a pimple on Bobby’s cheek rising off the skin like a blister.

“Hey Bobby,” he began.

“Huh?”

“Don’t wanna offend you or anything, know that, but I was just thinking, here, just now...to make you feel better, cause God I remember high school... If you want, I can’t pay for it all but if you ask Celia tell her I’m happy to kick in, to maybe go see a doctor—”

Bobby’s head snapped up. “I’m not talking to a doctor!” he snarled.

“Hey now, I was just...” Ron spoke softly, the tone he used on Scarlet when she got snappish during a thunderstorm or when a big 18-wheeler shook the road out front. Bobby’s eyes were still his, he saw now, and felt like an idiot for expecting anything else. They were set in new wrinkles as the boy glared.

“I’m not! I’m fine!”

“Of course, I know, I just—when I was in school, I got called...Zitface and...Popper, and...I hear they’ve got better medicine for that now, so no reason you should have to go through that.”

“What? Oh.” Bobby blinked, then scowled. “Wait, so you’re calling me ugly now?”

“No, no, I just...forget it. I never said anything.”

His stomach grumbled audibly, churning acid. Bobby was seeing a doctor? One of those talking doctors, a shrink? *What did he say?*

He watched his son’s chest rise and fall, unencumbered, for a full minute.

“How’re the lungs?”

Bobby shrugged again and looked to the house. “Can I just go watch some tv?”

“Look, we set your show to tape. It’ll be there when we’re done.” *What do you talk about?* “What do you say...”

“Can we just give this up?”

“When you go back up north, anyone there to help? Does Darrell watch WWF or WCW or anything?”

“He likes baseball. And Mom gets the tv the rest of the year.”

Ron snickered, coughed to cover it. He dropped into a crouch. *What do you tell him about me?* Bobby snorted and shoved his shoulder with both hands. Ron set one knee in the dirt and pushed back.

“You don’t know what you’re doing. Coach Gatley says--”

“What?” Ron snapped. “What’s he say? It’s not like your coach has taught you

enough to knock over your old man.”

“He says we shouldn’t do it like this. We, you know, we start from a fighting position, not, like, boxers in, like, corners.” He looked over his shoulder at a squirrel running along a low branch. The dog whined from the back corner of her box.

“What, no piledrivers?”

“No!”

Ron laughed quietly, standing and slinging his arm around his son’s shoulders. Bobby squirmed away. “No powerbombs, no body slams? No turnbuckle smash? No frankensteiner? No Katahajimi? For the love a God, no Katahajimi? What kinda wrestling he have you doing, boy?”

“Christ. I come the whole, whole way down here and all you do is make, make fun of me.” Bobby backed out of his father’s reach, bumping into the wire fence, and shot forward. Ron caught him with both arms.

“Hey, relax, I was just joking with ya.”

Bobby wrenched back out of contact.

“Look, what does the coach say?”

Bobby glared directly into his eyes, lips quivering—a babyish expression Ron recognized, even set in the alien face.

“Tell me what he says?”

He only looked away. Ron thought there might be tears in Bobby’s eyes. “I just want to help. I mean, it’s been a long time since I wrestled. Maybe the rules have changed a bit.”

Bobby shook his head, still staring at the dirt. His droopy pants leg had taken on

a dark copper tint where it covered his shoe.

Ron fell silent, sat down on the next-to-lowest step. He rubbed the small of his back, which twanged in a familiar way. He was going to be digging out the Motrin tonight. Bobby swayed but didn't lift his feet. He leaned at the waist and examined the new hole below the one at the knee, started pulling safety pins from other spots to shore it up.

Ron watched, wondering if he had any extra pins in the house. Celia's odds and ends were still everywhere. She hadn't taken enough when she went, and he wasn't one to redecorate except for the massive clean-up needed after a couple-three bad nights. Sewing things were likely in the closet with shelves in it, in the hall next to the living room. The same room where he and the boy watched the Saturday morning bouts and learned the best routines. Same old couch and same television, same rug with the worn tracts worn a little deeper, except the one left by two bodies grappling in the same spot week after week.

Sometimes they weren't acting out any fight. Ron would just sweep the little boy up in his arms and toss him to the ceiling, or spin with the boy flying out from a double grip around Ron's neck.

"You remember when you were little," Ron began. "Some Christmas. We heard all this noise, like logs rolling down the street and cars honking like crazy, and we looked out the window, and damned if there wasn't the Budweiser wagon and the Budweiser horses booming up the hill. Remember? Those big horses? Couldn't have been later than 6 am, still dark even, and those giant Clydesdales just like in a commercial. Going down to the Buck for the big Christmas tractor pull. Remember those big horses? You

were crazy for them after, had to be convinced to open your presents. Didn't even want that Rowdy Rowdy Piper doll you'd bugged for all month, just those Budweiser horses."

"Yeah," Bobby muttered to his knee, almost inaudibly.

"I've got those old pictures somewhere still, the ones we found in Columbia in some junk sale? Of those old farm horses dragging telephone poles out here, people setting them in place with just harnesses and know-how, and probably some huge post-holders. Farm horses like those Clydesdales, since your mother said you couldn't hang the Budweiser poster in your room. You'd have to look at those pictures every night before going to bed, couldn't sleep unless you were sure you'd have horse dreams."

Ron stood, put one foot on the bottom step. "I've still got them in the hall closet, you left 'em a couple years ago, I got them if you want to see."

Bobby turned and walked to the end of the yard, peering into the dog house. He lightly kicked the side with one heavy shoe. Scarlet poked her nose out and accepted a brief pat before half-heartedly gnawing on his finger. "Brat," he murmured, brushing her muzzle with the back of his hand.

"One more throw before dark? Then we'll pull together dinner, or hell, call in some Chinese from Tommy Yin's. Get that sweet n' sour stuff you like."

Bobby sighed like his lungs stretched to the soles of his feet. "Fine. Sure. Just, can we do it right this time?"

"Okay, sure. Sure. How's it supposed to start, then? Show me."

"Here," Bobby knelt in the dirt, "Just lean over me, with your arm under my chest. I'm gonna, gonna grab your shoulder and, like, twist, and you fall on your back."

"Oh, you think so?" Ron positioned himself, wincing as his back muscles

stretched. “Ow.”

“Hurting, old man? Tell me if this is too much for you.” Bobby shifted so their bodies weren’t touching.

“Oh, we’ll see how old I am,” Ron growled. He could feel the hummingbird beating of his son’s heart.

“Sh-Shut up and throw. One...two...three!”

Bobby tensed and grabbed his father’s arm with the hand not planted. Ron threw his weight on his son’s off-balance side, nearly upsetting them both. Bobby rallied, pushing himself back upright, but losing his grip. He put both hands flat against the dirt for a moment and tensed.

Ron grabbed both wrists and yanked Bobby’s arms to his chest, folded together like an Egyptian mummy.

“Dammit!” Bobby snarled, struggling.

Ron laughed. There was an edge to it, almost a sneer in the lips it passed. “Oh, throw me off! I’m the old man, remember?”

“Shut up!”

“Here, try again.”

Ron released the hands. Bobby immediately reached back, grabbed his father’s shoulder, and twisted his hips. Ron slid off the side and landed painfully on his tailbone. Bobby planted a knee in Ron’s exposed stomach.

“Hey! That wasn’t proper position! What would Coach Gator say?”

Ron surged to his knees, then feet, knocking the boy off. He grabbed Bobby around the waist, trapping his arms and yanking him up off the ground.

“Dammit! Put me—”

“What? Thought we gave up doing it right. We’re doing this the real way now!”

Ron balanced the twisting body on his hip, dredging up memories of holding a squirmy toddler. Slowly, he brought his left foot in line with his right, shifted their combined weight, stepped out with his right foot, and began to twirl.

His son screamed, “Put me down,” twisting to try and get his arms free.

“You used to like this. All around the living room, around, around...” He began to pick up speed.

This was easier outdoors. No furniture to bark his shins against. No Celia to yell, in fear for her lamps and framed photographs. They had only once broken anything, and the cracked corner of their old family portrait was easily fixed with a little glue and duct tape. They’d planned to get a new one taken anyway.

“Dad! You’re such a ‘tard!” Bobby started to giggle, helplessly. “I’m gonna puke!” He kicked his legs, heavy shoes only skimming the ground behind Ron’s feet. “Dad! You...!”

Ron shifted his grip and slowly began to raise Bobby up, up, up, almost to shoulder level, arms shuddering. “This was always the show stopper. Pay attention to what I’m doin’ here! This’ll get a crowd to their feet, guaranteed.”

“Dad!” Bobby howled, hiccupping now. He got one arm loose and yanked his father’s pony tail. “You ‘tard! Put, put me down, put me...”

Ron widened his stance and twirled one last time, lifting Bobby further and balancing the squirming teenager on his shoulder. He slowly brought one foot off the ground and got ready to jump, mentally already aiming his rear toward the soft mulch

pile.

“Look out!” he announced to the trees and the back of the house, “You’re going down, going—!”

His abused back finally seized. “Fuck!” Ron gasped, falling to his knees, barely feeling the kick to the side of his head as Bobby flipped upside-down and fell out of his grasp. “Fuck, mother fucking fucker goddam...”

Loose branches, probably the ones that Scarlet liked best for chewing, snapped underneath him. At least three of them popped, sounds like wet wood burning. He felt a vague warmth dribbling along his bones, down toward hips and ankles. The only suffering in the world ripped through his back, right up the spine and shot out his sides like wings. Ron moved his head a fraction of an inch and whimpered as his neck muscles spasmed. White flashed behind his closed eyelids.

Ron realized at the number forty-seven that he was counting along with the pounding of his head. He blinked, feeling grass brush eyelashes. Couldn’t have been down for more than a minute or two.

“Bob—ow.” Maybe more than a minute. Long enough to get his throat full of sand. He swallowed, heard the last dregs of saliva squishing under his tongue.

“Bobby?” he croaked. He cleared his throat, coughed, and continued in a whisper, “Sorry, kid. Threw out my goddam back.”

His neck still throbbed, but he thought the pain might be sliding back down into his shoulders, back where it belonged. If he could keep still for a few minutes... But the ground was cold, now that his belly was pressed against it without the jacket in between.

“Bobby?”

Ron lifted his head, let it fall back to the dirt. The last tough clumps of grass were no cushion. He may as well've head-butted concrete.

He tried again, louder. "Bobby!"

How had he been holding the boy, legs higher or head higher? Ron couldn't remember. "You inside, boy? Don't got to call an ambulance or anything, just been a damn fool and, and hurt my back. It got a trick to it. Likes to seize up. Bobby?"

Christ. Maybe he was inside, maybe calling for help...would the boy do that now? A child would, run for the neighbors or dial the phone right away, but maybe this boy would leave his old man seized up like the tin man in the mud. Ron winced. "Just get me a blanket, 'kay? I'll be able to get up in a minute, but right now I'm pretty damn chilly. Bobby?"

Somewhere overhead, a squirrel jumped between branches, shaking down leaves.

"Bobby? You alright?" He had to be alright. If he'd banged his noggin, even landed bad and twisted his wrist or knee, he'd still be sitting right there, rubbing his hurt and glaring at nothing. "Y'aren't calling your mother, are you?"

Ron carefully moved his arms, bracing himself. "So far, so good..." he muttered.

He pushed himself up on his elbows, bracing himself there. His back muscles crumpled painfully, refusing to support his weight. He grunted into the grass, spreading his feet further apart for another try. His foot touched something solid.

Ron moved the foot more forcefully, as much as his mushy muscles would allow. The thing by his foot gave a little under the pressure but didn't shift. He tried to remember where he'd been standing, if his foot could be stuck in the mulch pile. The pain in his back let up a little more, just enough that he could feel bruises forming where

snapped branches dug into his stomach and chest.

The dog whined and turned restlessly inside her box. “No barking now, ya bitch?” he muttered. “Now ya care ‘bout the neighbors? Should’ve gotten a collie.

“You bringing me that blanket?” he yelled, lifting his head as much as possible. The woods were rapidly disappearing into the brief November twilight. Ron blinked hard, willing his eyes to focus through it. Bobby was probably fine. Just a bump or two. Ron shifted again, testing the pain. It flared in response, but he thought it was less this time. The boy couldn’t be hurt, or else, punk kid that he still was, Ron would have heard him crying even from inside the house. Likely sulking, waiting to be found. He wished the boy would think to turn on the porch light, or even the overhead in the kitchen, so he could see out here. Why kids always wanted to stumble around in the dark, he’d never understand. Ron carefully straightened his arms and reached up and past his head, remembering both snow angels and the smell of chlorine on a hot day, and on his second try managed to lift his head a few more inches.

“Bobby?”

The faint sound of canned laughter from a neighbor’s television drifted to him, in between the unsteady hiss of leaves brushing through the three acres of branches. Ron could hear his dog pushing restlessly against the close walls, the scrape of fur rubbed against its lay. Beyond the yard, there was only the unsteady drone of traffic tearing along the bypass, and, when he strained, he plucked out the sound of an 18-wheeler shifting down to make a slow ascent up the hill.

## Pigments

She always left the water running in the bath. The rubber plug leaked, making a sound in the pipes that could be heard across the hall and downstairs. Georgia liked the aggressive splash of water better, like curling up, mouth and eyes closed tight, the underwater pounding like an impossibly fast heartbeat. The tub was old-fashioned, huge and up on claw feet. Mice ran underneath sometimes, even when she kicked water over the side and sang to herself.

It was getting dark in the bathroom. The only window opened up into the fire escape, which ran like a large chimney inside the building to the roof. She kept forgetting that it was autumn now, that the sun didn't stay up very long any more, and hadn't trained herself to close windows and turn on lights. It was the first autumn she was on her own with closing windows and turning on lights, and the shapes the fading light made across her floors were strange and hostile. They had been friendlier in May, when all the walls were new planes and angles to learn. There was a cold draft from the open window, blowing steam into her face through a crack in the shower curtain.

She closed her eyes, adamantly forcing her thoughts toward the significance of the color red in French Renaissance painting. The professor, a foreigner from North Carolina, hadn't gotten the joke, but Allen laughed. *Pembleton said that, right? or Meldrick?*

Georgia shrugged against the porcelain, making two wakes with her shoulder. *Maybe Mikey?* she'd replied, *or maybe it was someone else? I think it was putting down Bayliss. Wait, was it red, or blue?* They frowned, they stared; the dialogue dissipated

from the communal memory like smoke under interrogation, and it was too late, topic chosen and assigned.

Mind drifting. Red. Rich red brocades, red and gold wallpaper, wealth. Blood dripping from Marat, placid as his bathwater. Iron oxide pigments, natural red earth; Ancient Egyptians scribing it on their gabby walls, Etruscans mixing it with lime so quickly dashed on wet plaster, Medieval painters dabbing in the blood of Christ, and those Johnny-come-lately Renaissancers infatuated with their saturated streaks like they were the first to touch out light and shadow. Legal now to use it in foods that need to be extra extra red.

Georgia wanted another run, already. She couldn't soak away the ache in her knees before the endorphins were gone, lately.

Knock at the window. "Hey George—you drowned?"

"What?" She turned off the water, gripping the handle with her toes. Monkey toes, her mother always said, hairy monkey toes.

"Asked if you drowned."

"Not yet. Hey."

"Hey."

She couldn't see through the shower curtain but knew the voice: Allen, from across the fire escape. His bedroom was four feet across from her bathroom, big windows meant to be crawled through. Neither of their apartments had air conditioning; the old wiring couldn't take a window unit. They shared cigarettes on their fire escape landing—Allen added a potted palm until the weather began to turn—and pretended they didn't know each other's bodily noises in excruciating detail.

“Saw you out jogging.” Almost yelling to be heard over the gurgling in the pipes.  
“Thought you gave that up, since the incident.”

The Incident. Georgia running out of the building on an exuberantly misty night, her mind already halfway up the block, feet immediately slipping on wet marble steps. Falling extravagantly, legs flying over her head and hitting herself in the face with one hand, landing hard on the edge of the bottom step. Allen and Melo standing one stoop down, trying to light damp cigarettes, *huh huh huh huh! are you huh huh okay? huh huh!* A week gone, and they were still doing dramatic reenactments.

“How’s the ass, by the way?” She thought he might be laughing. His voice sounded funny, the words mushy at the edges.

“Fine.” She had a blue-black line of solid bruise across both cheeks, finally beginning to yellow at the edges. “Damn fine, if Lamont isn’t bullshitting me.”

“He’s bullshitting. No one likes your ass, George.”

She hated being called George. *George George George*. Or Gorge, as Allen sometimes smirked. Georgia wasn’t much better, but at least it didn’t bring up squirmy memories of little voices chanting. *George is a boy’s name, are you a boy? George is a boy’s name, are you a boy? George George George!* She lobbed a bottle of shampoo over the curtain, heard it bounce off thick glass. This windowsill creaked, and the bottle sailed back over the curtain, hitting her shoulder.

“Bitch,” she said, without heat, barely louder than the pipes. “Right, so, nice chatting with you, don’t let the window bonk your head on the way out.”

“Just wanted to see if you’re busy. Will made little egg rolls again. We’re all outside if you want to come and get some.”

“You got any cigarettes?”

“Just cloves.”

Something hit her shower curtain and fell to the floor. She slid forward, water sloshing, and looked: a book of matches from *The Monk’s Tunic*, now soggy. “That’ll do. I’ll be down in a few.”

“Alright. hey, my lighter’s dead. Can I borrow yours?”

“No.”

“I already got it.”

“Alright then. Hey, close the window after you, will you? There’s a draft.”

“No. See you.”

The window slammed down hard enough to make the tub ring with the vibrations. The last listless steam drifted straight up and sweat formed above her lips. Mostly she’d wanted the dubious privacy of the frosted glass between them before she heaved herself up and out, slopping water indifferently. Her legs were stiff despite the hot soak, and she didn’t want him to see her slip, or the bruise on her butt. Would it be worse if he laughed and ran for the camera, or if he climbed in to help her up?

Back when they were kids, teens only technically, her best friend told her she was shaped like the tube from a roll of paper towels. He pinched her butt when he said it, grinning, *I’m sorry, thought that was your shoulder*. She pinched him back, hard, and still thought of it every time she picked out clothes. She still thought of good comebacks.

Clothes still in a pile by the toilet, streaked with colors from her afternoon's efforts but still smelling okay. She pulled on outerwear—carpenter-cut jeans and the too tight unicorn sweater an aunt gave her in junior high—leaving underwear and bra on the

checkerboard linoleum. Her hair was gross, spiky-sweaty with tiny globs of smelly acrylic paint, but good enough for the stoop. She'd wash it properly tomorrow morning, after another run, rather than duck her head back into the cooling water. She ran wet hands through it and shook her head; in the mirror, it looked like an unmown lawn, thick and black. Shoes were too much effort as well, when she could so easily toe on her summer flipflops one last time.

She left the door unlocked and padded down three flights on the spiral staircase. The flipflops clacked against her soles with every step, the noise echoing irregularly off the cracked plaster walls. Street noise hit her when she pushed open the heavy outer door, engines and horns and people across the traffic fighting or maybe laughing. She didn't know the people who sat across the street. Only one of them, a sculptor named Moe who always smelled of kerosene, ever crossed to the east side to sit with them at number 918. Melo and Lamont were already out, like one octopus body sprawled across three marble steps and passing a psychedelic mushroom-shaped bowl. Georgia wrinkled her nose.

"The counterculture can not be mass-produced," she said to no one.

Allen sat on his bike next to them and handed her a clove when she settled on the bottom step by his foot. His gaze slid down and away from hers, rolling along her chest and stomach, that she knew came from a deep smug place. Georgia sighed internally.

"Light?" she asked.

He lit one for himself with her lighter and held it out to her, still without comment. Resigned, she look-looked at him through her smoke, checking: matted gelatin dreds, same color; vain pretty grey eyes thickly lined—*keeps the sun glare out of my*

*eyes*—with black; lips, usual cluster of pimples and two rings like glinting fangs, a stud in the skin underneath his bottom lip; clothes, faded, unclean, and familiar. She shrugged at him.

He grinned and stuck out his tongue. A shiny new stud poked from the middle in a cone of swollen flesh.

"Hey! New pretty!" She reached out to touch it with her free hand.

Allen quickly closed his mouth. "It tastes like blood," he supplied, the words thick from his swollen tongue.

"You finally did it! You get it done at Read?"

He nodded, pleased, and wiggled his tongue back out at her, rolling it so the sides touched with a wince.

"I took him," Lamont interrupted. The sallow whites of his eyes were nearly orange today with tiny hurting blood vessels. His teeth were in worse shape, the back molars mostly gone though he was just past thirty. "Stupid pussy just 'bout hit the floor. Had to put him on the couch."

"Oh ou mullthiter," Allen mumbled around his outstretched tongue, and Georgia reached again for the shiny ball while he was distracted.

The tongue disappeared. "Behave!" he told her. And "Later, if you're good," he winked.

"Telling you, had to carry Al out of there. Should have brought my damn smelling salts, if I knew he was such a girl."

She rolled her eyes, at Allen. "No," she said firmly, "not enough good in the world," and "Thought you were done with that for a while, saving up for real groceries."

"How you doing?" Melo interrupted and scrunched his nose. He put down the bowl and took her hand, the one wilting back from Allen's mouth, and held it to his chest. The chapped skin around his fingernails tickled her palm.

"Em owed me some rent money from way back, so she offered to do this gratis. Even throw in the good silver instead of the shit that turned you green—" Georgia shuddering, remembering the color and pus weeping from her navel, "—"and I figured it's the closest I'd come to getting mine back."

"You let your ex punch holes in you? Brave man." Allen shrugged, too casually, and she grinned. "That messy-haired girl's gonna be thrilled though. What's her name, Shara?"

"How you doing?" Melo asked again, tugging at her hand. She met his eyes, helplessly locked into their usual staring contest. Melo slowly increased pressure on her knuckles, rolling them back and forth between his fingers.

"Nothing to do with her." Grumpy Allen, glaring now down the street. Shifting again, over her head to Lamont, asking after another friend she didn't know. Moody men, so hard to keep track of. No point to it. Her contacts were already itching. Allen and Lamont now trading bike messenger gossip, Lamont really too old and broken in the lungs to be on the streets more than part-time but it paid more rent than his lackadaisical dealing. Georgia only knew these two out of the elite, those scabby fantasies of downtown secretaries. She didn't like them, thought their messenger friends looked her over and drifted away, too high for conversational niceties with a girl they didn't want to fuck. Allen was maybe like that too with other girls, probably only ensnared by the novelty of her conversations from the toilet. Because she was always a mess when they

met, frayed panties and pimples and yesterday's mascara smeared down her cheekbones, the ways you only ever saw lovers, girls who were yours. Baggy flannel pants and a wifebeater in the mornings, leaning out the window and across the metal with gooey bed-wrinkled cleavage and a hot cup for him, since his Mr. Coffee had died. Indistinct indifferent stripper in the night, naked ghost behind a half-shut window smoking in the bath, mouth still running on Warhol and Winterson and whatever else came up in class that day. Exactly what she saw in him, probably, that fragment of a person's most private ugly space where they met, remembered when it was completely submerged in the comparatively genteel society of the others. They never once sat together on Georgia's bed to watch television or cooked a meal in Allen's kitchen.

Melo's eyes were narrow, knowing she'd cheated. Lifting up and away from drying eyes and his frown-wrinkled face. One eye was a lighter brown than the other. She could have picked that one warm-toned iris out of a thousand, but the rest of his features were a blur when he wasn't in front of her. She remembered him instead as Lamont, just fewer lines and lighter skin and more bad choices ahead than behind. She squeezed his hand back, surprised when he startled.

The door opened behind him and ejected two new girls, Noreen and Stacey. Neither Georgia nor Melo broke away to watch. She smiled to herself, thinking it wasn't worth looking. Two young things, girls, pretty with straight hair and ugly clothes on thin bodies, thick-framed boxy glasses that Noreen needed and Stacey didn't. They came off an assembly line from junior year to cultural-district apartment and didn't pay their own rent. Noreen held a jelly jar of red wine. Stacey smacked Melo on the shoulder.

"You two cut that out. It's creepy." She snapped her fingers in his face until he blinked.

Melo was creepy. Everyone agreed, including Melo and Stacey, his sometimes-girlfriend. (Definitely on this week, Georgia thought, assessing the girl's little pecking glances in her direction.) Melo must have worked at it, quietly, alone in his apartment. Something in his stare was practiced. It was a ritual, now. She'd first met Melo her second night out on the stoop, talking with Allen and Noreen about professors in the photo department to avoid. Melo walked up from the end of the block, ignoring the others' hellos. *Who's this* he interrupted and she paused to offer her hand. *Georgia* she said and Allen replied too, *George and watch out he bites*, clashing with Melo, *I'm Melo*. He repeated himself, *Melo*, and she echoed *Melo, fine*, and back to Allen, *Have you had Rutledge, I'm taking him first session, but I'm hearing bad things*, and Melo took her hand. She curled her fingers into his palm, not looking. *I'm Melo*. He held her hand, not pumping it into a handshake, *Melo*, touching one chipped plum-lacquered nail. Allen replying, *Oh he's a bastard, no kidding, but he can be like boot camp, get you shooting prints out like a Xerox, anyway I've heard*, and Melo's fingertips slid into her damp palm, unerringly following the three main lines, and she looked down at their joined hands and back up. *But I don't care about learning to print, I just want an A* she said, and Melo's other hand crawled up to cup her wrist, keep her flaccid hand in his, tracing a spiral on the paper-skin over a dozen rolypoly veins, and Allen said *Wait and see*. Carlos stared into her face, into the sliver of one eye in profile and still insisted *Melo*. She asked *wait and see? who pays your tuition?* and she asked, finally, *I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name, Pedro, was it?* and Noreen hissed in air and exhaust, her lips pulled into a thrilled

"o." Melo slid the hand up her forearm, rubbing the sweaty fragile skin-hairs all in one direction, and took a firm grip, picking at her rough elbow skin with one nail. *Melo*. She stared into his eyes, thinking they looked like nutmeg and little bloody veins in sweet cream, and carefully enunciated, *Georgia*, two and a half syllables. And Melo blinked.

"I win!" Georgia announced and punched him in the arm, hard enough to bruise a little. She imagined the look of it, paling to sickly yellow rising off his warm-toned skin, thought again of natural red earth, luck of the draw mixing it into the blush on a roman slave's buttocks or slapped onto someone's aluminum siding on the Eastern Shore.

"Technicality. Interference. Next time." Melo nodded like a priest. Stacey settled on the step above his and pulled off his knit cap. He settled against her, resting his cheek on the curve of her stomach. Half his dreds were tightly twisted and clipped down to his scalp. Stacey dropped a baggy of clips by his rear, pushed his head forward, and began twisting hair that had an inch of raw fuzz at the roots.

"You want help?" Georgia asked. Melo still held her hand. He stared at it thoughtfully, touching the little scars on her knuckles as he always did, as if they were a brand new pair of hands.

"Nah, thanks." Stacey held one lock between the tips of one finger and the palm of the other, the briskly rolled it up in one stroke. She held the tight thick strand close to the skull and clipped it to the finished dreds in one practiced motion. "Been doing this all damn afternoon...he won't let anyone else touch him. Can I have a drag?"

Georgia held it to Stacey's lips with two fingers, feeling her pulse in the thin skin underneath. Stacey snuck another peck-look at her boyfriend. It made Georgia want to

snatch her hand back. The delicate tip glowed, closer to the filter than she expected. Cloves burned quickly.

"You're the only one who doesn't yank. You make them perfectly," Melo said, looking into Georgia again. She blinked twice, rejecting the challenge, pulling her fingers away slowly with a graceful arch of her wrist and bringing the clove to her own mouth. Her lips tasted of sugar from the damp filter.

Noreen set her jelly jar carefully on the marble, near the scorch mark left days ago when Allen's nearly empty lighter, impulsively thrown at Georgia, hit the step and exploded. They were still finding pieces. She reached for Georgia's stub end but was denied. Melo frowned at the jostling and tucked her hand into his armpit. Allen reached for one of them, or the cigarette, making a bad-taste face as he swallowed.

A tall, muscular figure in a chartreuse dress passed with a postgender sashay. She paused, one hip shot far out past her shoulder, and pointed at Allen, then waved two fingers in front of her face. "Hey, can I have one of them?" Her voice was deep and smooth.

"Sure." Allen plucked one from his shirt pocket and lit it for her. When she leaned over, Georgia could see the stubble on her shoulders, the shadow that led into her cleavage.

"Thanks—oh, this tastes good! What is it?" Allen handed over the pack for inspection. "Mmm...I'ma have to keep my eye out for these. Sure beats my usuals, beats them by a mile and then some. Mmm, mmm. Hey, do you know what day it is?"

"Monday, I think."

Georgia let her flipflop dangle from one toe and envied the woman's leopard-print suede platforms as she swayed up the street. She wondered if there were special stores trannies knew, if they all went together and planned what they would borrow from each other. She thought that one might call herself Nina, might have charmingly cadged beers from her pitcher one long night a month gone in the Royal. She might have told the story about the little Korean man in his SUV with the blue stuffed monkey.

Georgia was hungry. "Where's Will?"

"He went back in," Lamont replied. "Some shit about a midterm paper."

"Damn. Now I'm all hungry for chinese."

"You know them?" Stacey asked, jerking her chin toward two men down the block who had crawled up out of a basement apartment. They looked up and down and shook their heads at each other, yes no no yes no.

"The tall one's Anthony," Melo supplied. "He's got a little recording space down there. Dunno the bitty guy."

"I've never seen either of them."

Stacey didn't like anyone she hadn't seen before. Georgia'd assumed the girl had taken some instant irrational dislike to her that first few times they sat out together, until the next week when she settled next to Georgia, rested her head on her arm, dug into her shirt pocket after cigarettes, and rattled on for a good hour about her newest weaving project. Georgia took one last drag, getting nothing but the taste of wet hot filter, and leaned over to toss the butt between two parked cars.

Melo tugged irritably at her hand. "Sit still!"

Allen made his tasting-blood face again and slapped at their joined hands until hers slipped out. "Stop fingering Georgie in public. It ain't right."

"They keep staring at us." Noreen sipped and frowned, tapping the glass with one chewed fingernail. "Cre-e-e-py. Creepy boys, on our block. Better than the crackheads from the halfway house at the end, I guess."

"Fingering?" Georgia asked, with an edge. She went to take Melo's hand back, but he'd tucked them both under Stacey's thighs, glaring at her. Allen twisted his lips and mimicked *Fingering?* back at her, whispery and falsetto.

Lamont waved. "Anthony!"

The short man shrugged, still shaking his head. They walked together to the stoop. Georgia saw that the little guy was wearing a leather jacket and crisp jeans carefully fatigued in bright wrinkle lines at the hips.

"Evening all," Anthony nodded to the group. "Where's Will?"

"Inside tonight. Might be out later."

"You see him, you tell him I got a cd for him. New group, may be getting signed this month, he'll want to hear them before that. Style like Herbie Hancock but heavy industrial sound, it's beautiful. Oh, this is Todd."

Todd nodded, eyes flitting from Noreen to settle on Stacey. "Hey."

Melo bared his teeth at Georgia, who giggled, covering her mouth. "He's after your woman!" she hissed. "Look out!"

"Who were you again?" Todd offered his hand.

She shook it, firmly pulling away when he tried to squeeze. "Nobody."

Allen touched her shoulder. She turned her head and the fresh clove in his head nearly went into her eye. Her eyes narrowed, playfully, at his unusual generosity as she took it, accepted the flame from her own lighter. His face was still, almost stiff, weird for Allen who couldn't pass a mirror without pulling a face. Everyone was mirrors, to him.

"This is George," Allen said, and she was fighting to place the tickle that frozen face left in her. She thought immediately of that one moment she could never suppress entirely, that *early-on* memory they shared, his face gone still and eyes wide with surprise, circles in a face that rose, a tethered balloon, from the gloom of his bedroom. So hot, for June, the bright heat already falling on you, out of the air conditioning, like a wool blanket soaked in syrup. Peeling herself from the covers, from the broad and pleasantly jiggling flesh of a friend, Jer, a good enough friend to let stay the night without protest, halfheartedly putting on a bra and oil-stained linen pants before padding into the bathroom, followed. Sweat-clammy hands running over her ribs and the full bladder is forgotten, her nose in the joint of his neck and shoulder and smelling both of them on his skin, bra off, enthusiastically, out the window, snagged on metal and trembling in an updraft, all of her skin snap-spilling over the lintel after it, and Allen across the way jolting up from a fitful nap, his bed shoved to the window to catch any little breeze. Herself, all sprawled naked movement and himself, gaping like he's too surprised to think but actually—she knows—churning through the math of days they have known each other, long enough but not too long, and his eyes are round and mouth turning up not because he will make fun of her for weeks—which he will—but because *naked girl* is crawling *in his window*. Only a second, perfectly silent, and then Jer, his arm snaking around her waist and pulling her back in, triumphant snarling laughter and the noise of

bedsprings as Allen rolls over and away. Later, not long, she re-enters alone and looks first out the window, knowing his face will pop up again but surprised by the locked set of his cheekbones over the mocking smile. Dropping back and down on the toilet, breasts too low now for him to see and the moment's passing into something more familiar, declaratory splash of urine and a casual wave, *Morning Al*, and *Good for you George, everyone needs a hobby* in return.

"George?"

"George." Allen nodded and patted her head. "We let her come hang out with the cool kids if she behaves."

He made a fist and rubbed his knuckles in her hair. She remembered that hand, poking holes with his fork into the single-serving creamer, tipping it up over his coffee and squeezing, half-and-half shooting out in little wild streams, Allen mumbling *moo. moo.* with an anxious halfward tilt of his face to hers.

Georgia pushed his hand away and kicked at his bike, trying to knock it over, force him to stand up and away as it tilted.

Todd offered his hand. "Nice to meet you...George?"

"That is not behaving!" Allen said. "Don't make me discipline you."

"Be kind to me," Georgia replied, smiling up at him. Her teeth felt sharp where she ran her tongue behind them. "My mind is on the iron oxide pigments. I'm so worried they'll rust suddenly, before I can finish writing about them."

Noreen spoke over her, to Todd, "That's a hell of a joisey accent you've got there, bub," and Stacey spoke past her, "No chance, got to be a n'yawker," and Melo shook his head.

"Close your lips, George," Allen said, his expression meant to be fond but still off, still too tight. His jaw worked as he carefully rolled his sore tongue, compulsively playing with the metal stud. She wanted again to touch it, shiny smoothness nestled in heated irregular flesh. His hand was back on her shoulder, empty this time and tense with nonchalance. She shrugged against it.

*My little idiot*, he called her at least once. Often. Like she called him *dummy* and *donkey*. His little idiot who always takes the long drive out of town, thin excuses that the lights aren't timed right on Martin Luther, that the tourists clog up Pratt to Light to Conway past Camden Yards, always in the far lane, looping along Key Highway around the bulk of Federal Hill, through intersections of blinking-yellow stoplights almost to the main port of the city, under and around pylons holding up the lofty interstate and sneaking up an unknown ramp to merge two exits above the main drag out. His bike in the trunk and backseat, pedals clacking to the rhythm of potholes, her pointing out as they pass: *look, the water, look, the big neon sugar sign, look, the good Cuban place, look, I grew up there, look, the big ships*. Impatient Al, boots up and kicking the square marked AIR BAG, *Today George today get there before the sun's entirely down*, punching in cd after cd, all of them home-burned and unmarked, looking for some Cure, always his damned Cure.

(Todd grabbed at her hand, missing, "Excuse me...George?" "Yes?" "Hi!" He tilted his head away so it faced Anthony, but held her gaze, frighteningly perfect teeth like sweet corn and no wrinkles around his smiling lips)

Allen smiling even so. They're going to the park he likes best, the paths where she runs and he pedals, impatient loops around her when she slows, and she doesn't know

he's already planning how to lure her through the scary tilting railroad tunnel. Her own mood sinking, peeking looks through the new condos for familiar shapes of water and hill and piers

("He's from Jersey, like me. We knew each other back in the day—" "Oh, only for a few years! We moved pretty early. I went to high school in Pikesville." "Dude, we went to Edison, don't even start that shit." Petulance dimpled his weak chin. "Not all four years—")

annoyed she was looking, more annoyed she couldn't see what she knew, and Allen asking

("New Jersey's actually pretty cool. Well, nothing that kept me from moving away. But, nice lawns.")

why and what and *So, what, you're gonna leave Baltimore after school?* Herself not answering, telling instead of her stepfather buying a falling-down rowhouse hoping for the gentrification that took another twenty years to show, and not answering *this city, it sits in memories for me like old bathwater*, his truncated persistence, *We've just, but, fine*. Stiff hard face, looking at her then out the window, and she wanted to pet it away as much as she wanted to open the door and somersault cleanly out onto the highway.

Georgia's stomach hurt. Still hungry.

"Yeah, all that shit." Todd stuffed his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket, bunching the material in front of his crotch. "There's a whole magazine on that, true stories just in New Jersey. People write in, like, there we were, driving down Creepy Shit Lane, and suddenly we saw this big glowy thing near where that guy killed that girl fifty years ago tonight."

He heaved a sigh, pulled the jacket tighter around his body, looking at Georgia before turning to his friend. "Look man, I'm going back. I'm not up for this shit."

Georgia wondered what she'd missed, shrugging harder until Allen's hand slid off. It settled again immediately, closer to her neck. Melo watched, ignoring the stream of chatter from the girls over his head, still teasing the stranger just past the edge of politeness.

"Jeez, girl, you got ants in the pants tonight. Be still." The fingers twitched, a hard friendly rub.

"Don't go, man, let's go on out," Anthony said, rubbing his eyes.

"Just, fuck it. All that shit with the funeral today, and my mother, Christ, and it's just the...you're supposed to be cheering me up, man, good fucking job."

Georgia's stomach sank. "Funeral? Who died?"

Todd came closer, rested a foot on the step between her legs. "My grandfather. Had a stroke." He opened his mouth and then shrugged, like he'd forgotten his punch line.

She looked away, at the rest of her friends. No one else was paying him any attention, carefully not looking. Stacey concentrated suddenly on the hair in her fingers, Melo picked at a scab on his elbow. Lamont unwound himself from the railing and went inside, letting the door slam behind him. Noreen stared up into the orange light of the streetlamp. The insulated silence was nauseating.

"Hey," she said, stuttering on the *h*, "Sorry. They were just playing."

He shrugged again, "S'okay. Whatever."

Allen's fingers squeezed just above her collarbone. "Wanna go in and see what Will's up to?"

She ignored him. His palms were sweaty where they touched skin instead of nubbly sweater. "So, yeah. What was he like?"

Todd blinked. "Who?"

"Your grandfather." The one who just croaked, she thought, and nearly heaved.

"Oh." He grimaced, maybe thinking it was a smile. "He was pretty cool. For an old guy."

Anthony checked his cell phone. "Look, Todd, we've got to get going. Julie's gonna beat us there."

"Yeah, fine. Wait, Monk's Tunic, right? It was pretty dead last time I was in town, you know? We should bring our own crowd." He smiled, charming and fixed, and turned to the remainder of the group like a ringmaster. "What do you say? Little night out? Cheer a guy up?"

No one answered, except Allen, who settled back into his seat and tugged at Georgia's collar. "Nah, we're heading out."

Todd turned to Georgia, ignoring the rest. "C'mon, you'll come out with us, right? You're the only one here with a kind face."

Georgia noticed his earring, a big green stone cut like the diamond from an engagement ring. She wondered if he'd worn it to the funeral, if his family was the kind to take offense and whisper harshly during the quiet moments to take it out, tuck it back in a pocket. She remembered dressing for the funeral so long ago, putting silver hoops into a dozen pierces along her ears, taking them all back out. Her make-up applied on

autopilot, and half of it rubbed back off, then washed away entirely, and finally just foundation gently patted across her dry, swollen face. She'd had no shortage of black clothes, heavy velvet dresses and gauzy layered skirts, blocky pants with straps and zippers, shirts with ruffles or mesh—and finally borrowed a navy blue suit from her mother and a pair of mom-sensible pumps. She remembered standing, off to the side and away from the family, uncomfortable, not herself, still feeling like she'd failed the ones who loved him best. Hadn't shown herself to him now with respect.

"Is that a real emerald?" she asked.

"What? Oh, that, of course. No doubt. So you're coming, right?"

She looked down at herself, at her bare toes and bare stomach under the overstretched knit hem. "I'm not dressed for the Tunic. Or anywhere, actually."

"You look great," Todd insisted.

Anthony snorted. "Yeah, great. Just great."

"You don't want Georgie," Allen insisted. He moved his hand, now patting the back of her head. "I've seen what she's got. Nobody wants a ride on the town bike, yknow what I'm saying?"

Noreen smacked him on the shoulder, slopping her wine. "You gonna let him say that?" she demanded.

Georgia put a restraining hand on her knee and turned to Allen, sweet curve to her mouth. "Just his little fantasies. But, seriously, dear...I hear you at it every night just after bedtime—don't you think that's a little compulsive? And why's Tuesday so special, that you break out...well, you know."

Noreen burst out laughing and dropped her glass, spilling across her stylish clogs. The jelly jar chipped along the rim when it hit the marble and bounced. "Damn, girl..."

"What?" Stacey asked. The dred in her fingers twisted and slipped. Melo covered his eyes, wincing. "What'd you say? I missed it!"

"Nothing," she said quickly, glad she hadn't spoken too loudly. And cursed inwardly, wishing she'd saved that blackmail for something better than returning a casual insult.

"Nothing," Allen echoed, pale and glaring at them all. He avoided Georgia's eyes and pulled his hand away, wondering, what? Surprised she'd overheard, or wondering if she knew he knew she could hear? Or maybe thinking of everyone but her, laughing over the sounds of traffic. She suddenly, inanely, wanted to tell him about the natural red earth pigments, how some could have been painted into masterpieces but ended up instead coloring candy around waxy chocolate and it was all chance.

"Nothing, she said nothing," Melo agreed, "Just a stupid joke."

Todd's gaze jerked from face to face as he tried to follow the conversation. He blinked, finally. "So...you're coming?"

Georgia broke out in nervous giggles, holding her stomach. It felt ready to burst. "No," she managed, carefully not looking at Allen, "I said no."

"Come on! You make me laugh. I need to laugh. You don't want me crying into my beer, do you? I'll buy you a beer, how's that? Tell you some stories about Grandpa. He gave me this watch."

"I'm going," Anthony huffed. He turned but didn't leave. "Todd's a good guy. I'll vouch for him."

Allen tapped her shoulder. "You're an idiot if you go," he said, with an air of great self-sacrifice. His voice fell to a whisper. "I'm just looking out for you. Still."

She stood, twisting away from the arm that nearly settled over her shoulders. "One beer."

"Great! Great. Let's go."

Allen snorted, making his blood-tasting face again. "I'm not coming after you."

She couldn't help herself. "Is it Tuesday already? I wouldn't dream of interrupting—"

"See you guys." He pushed off without waiting for a response.

"Wait," she said, "I'm sorry," thought, *come back, come upstairs, let's call for pizza and sit on my couch and do nothing together*, but he was already bouncing over the high curb at the corner, pedaling into traffic, his narrow bike-messenger butt out of sight in heartbeats. She was cold all through, and her bruised rear hurt, throbbing from her hips down to her knees.

She followed the two men through an alley. Todd huddled close to Anthony, glancing back at her as he whispered. Her flipflops farted with every step. Georgia preferred cutting through alleys at night, no matter that it was in defiance of every safety guideline for the single gal. Her own apartment looked over the alley between St Paul and Calvert, and she heard every noise that disturbed the tomb-silence outside her windows. She looked up into the dark and lit windows in the buildings lining the alley, and thought that those people hadn't developed the indifference to noise, to talking or yelling, that those in front apartments needed. They'd hear her.

Todd hung back as they reached the end of the block and ran across against the light. Bold, he slung an arm across her shoulders, and she walked out from under it.

"Tell me about your grandfather."

"Is your name really George?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Just a nickname."

"What's your real name, then?"

She shrugged, impulsively told him "Marie." She'd always liked that one, usually stuck as the middle name, like Ann or Louise, too plain or too old-fashioned to get top billing, to be spoken except when a mother was angry.

"Murray," he said.

"No, Marie," she corrected, emphasizing the second syllable.

"That's what I said. Murray."

Georgia thought that her classmates were right. She was born a boy, and the names always knew. Always twisted, reflected her maleness.

"It's a pretty name. French? I like it."

"Glad to be pleasing." She thought Anthony might be laughing, up ahead. His shoulders shook. She wondered if he and Todd were actually friends, or if he was just tolerant. She suspected Todd might only have friends on nights a he'd just buried a grandfather. "So, Anthony, what's your deal?"

"Me? Little bit of everything. Mostly nothing."

"Heard you've got a studio on the block."

"Yeah, that's one thing." He pulled out his cell and dialed.

"Huh. Right. So, anyway..." She turned her attention back to Todd. "You said—"

"I'm an actor," he volunteered. "And I'm almost done with my first screenplay."

"Oh. That's...um...nice." She walked faster.

"Yeah. I was in a national spot for Pizza Hut not too long ago, with Danny Strong. You probably saw it. It was on a ton of channels. Danny's a good guy."

"Who's Danny Strong?"

"He stars on Buffy."

Georgia vaguely remembered *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as a show she'd felt herself too good for in high school. The annoying girls at the club had worshipped it.

"Oh. I don't really watch tv."

"You'd know him if you saw him, I'm sure. Danny's really good. Danny and I went out for beers back in LA a few times. He's gonna set me up with his agent when I get the screenplay polished. He's a good guy, that Danny. Gonna be big."

"Uh huh."

Passing under a particularly strong streetlamp, she noticed how much scalp was visible under his curly hair. She crossed the street in the middle of the block, easily dodging traffic. Todd followed her, almost walking into a northbound SUV. He ran in front of her and held open the door of the Tunic. "Here we are!"

Anthony paused on the sidewalk, nodding to the phone and covering his other ear.

"You coming?" she asked.

He shook his head and raised one finger.

She shrugged. "I'm going in the other door," she told Todd, pointing to the basement steps. "Upstairs is for the fancy people."

He pushed in front of her down the stairs and opened that door. She rubbed the ribs he'd stuck his elbow into as he shoved past. "Uh, thanks."

Georgia wished she had her cell so she could fake an emergency call. Maybe her stomachache was the ticket, or a sudden migraine from all the smoke. After she got her beer, for the trouble of walking five blocks. And she needed a cigarette. She nodded to the bouncer. He nodded back but held a hand up to Todd's chest.

"ID?"

Todd patted down his pockets. "Oh, sorry, I left it in my car. It's blocks away—can't you just let me in?"

Behind Todd's back, Georgia shook her head at the bouncer.

He sighed, "Whatever," and went back to his book. Georgia ducked to look at the cover—he was still working on *Don Quixote*.

"Well, here we are!" Todd announced, steering her to the bar. He spread his arms in a gesture that took in the entire room and nearly took out a ratty old man at the end of the bar.. "Ah, the good old Monk. Haven't been here in a dog's age. But here we are! What'll you have?"

She wished for better lighting, to check his pupils. "Beer."

"Two Blue Moons, my good man. I love Belgian beer, don't you?"

She made a face. "Got any Boh? In the can?" she asked the bartender. He shook his head. "The other thing then, I guess. I prefer Scandinavian, myself," she told Todd. "Only Nordic hops are worth the trouble."

"What? Oh, me too of course, but, y'know, Baltimore, best it can manage. Here, sit, sit."

She sat at the bar, ignoring his attempt to steer her to the little table in a dark corner. "Tell me about your grandfather. You wanted someone to listen, right? Get to it."

She didn't see anyone she knew well at the bar. It made her nervous; she was used to being jammed into one of the booths, surrounded like one pearl in a necklace, not up on display at the bar. As she scanned past him, a young black man with immaculately braided hair and creased pants paused and outright stared, from her bare toes to her sticky forehead and back down. His face scrunched in confusion.

"How old are you?" Todd asked.

"A hundred and five. How old are you?" She made a face at the trendy young man, who shook his head and sat facing away from her. Across the room, she saw a girl, someone she knew from her job in the college music lab, point her out to the rest of her table. She sighed and turned her back, wrapping one arm low around her exposed belly roll.

"Huh, you were right. You really do stand out in here, with everyone else spiffed up a bit. This joint has gotten kind of boughie since I was in last," Todd said, his voice too loud. He took a long swallow of his beer. "And by the way, it's rude to ask, but I'll tell you anyway. I'm thirty-one. I'm telling the truth, because I like you, but I could easily have said I'm your age instead. I still look it."

"Thirty? That's really old." Georgia picked at the soggy label on her bottle.

"What? No it's not, and it's thirty-one, which isn't old. This isn't the Victorian age, for god's sake, thirty's just life starting out now."

She smiled. "I'm kidding."

"Good." He sipped and scanned the crowd.

"Although, really, in nature, you'd be dead by now."

"What?"

"In nature. You'd be very very old now, or more likely eaten by something. Something toothy." She sipped at her own beer, keeping her expression serious. The beer was sour, probably cooled and left to warm back up many times. She never would have ordered a beer named after an oldies tune.

"Old, huh? Well, in nature, you'd have six kids by now and no teeth, tits down to your knees—you ever think of that?" He snaked his arm back around his shoulder and grinned, pleased with his repartee.

She pushed it off. "Do you smoke?"

He plucked a soft pack of menthols out of his jacket and made it dance along the bar.

"Can I have one?"

"What are you going to do for it?"

She took the pack from his hands and tapped out a cigarette. The bartender immediately offered a light. "Thanks."

"Oh, so that's how you're going to be," Todd's grin widened. "I like spirited girls."

She sat up straight. "I would so kick your ass."

He shrugged. "Of course."

Georgia blinked. "What? Oh. Just so we're clear, right."

She thought how, in the alternate universe, she'd saved her best blackmail material and sat right now with Allen on her couch, greasy pizza smashing into her sorely empty stomach. There, her imagination stalled. She inhaled deeply and flicked ashes on the floor. "I'm supposed to be helping here. If you don't want to talk, I've got work to do."

"You're cheering me up. Forget about it. Hey, I bet you're a jazz fan, right? I've got tons of cds in the car you need to hear."

"I like R&B," Georgia told Alternate-Allen. "And blues. Jazz is too intellectualized, too cold." Alternate-Allen secretly agreed but would argue for the fun of it. *Jazz is potential, a loose framework of mathematically precise formations that allows for spontaneous fractals. Music that needs no body to dance for it.*

Except Allen didn't dance or analyze music. He listened to generic alternabands who had this year's tattoos and occasionally forayed into canon punk, Clash and Sex Pistols and Pixies.

"Anybody who intellectualizes jazz is an asshole," Todd began.

Anthony finally entered, flashing ID at the bouncer, who didn't look up from the book balanced on his knees. "I can't get hold of Julie. You want to run us up to her place so we can check on her?"

Georgia hopped off her stool, happily abandoning her beer. "Ah well, it's been a lovely evening, bye now."

"No," Todd said. "Stay. Anthony, let's just wait. I'm sure she's on her way."

Anthony shook his head. "I don't like her out walking alone."

Georgia waved. "Bye then."

Todd grabbed her elbow. "No, come with us. You have to meet Julie, she's great. Very spiritual, very smart. You'll love her. You'll hate yourself if you don't meet this girl."

"No," she said, "I've got...stuff."

"Why don't you come with?" Anthon said. "It's just up to 24th and back. I haven't even had a chance to talk to you."

Alternate-Allen said, *I haven't even had a chance to talk to you.* She was suggesting they go out for a beer, or head back down to the stoop. See who was out tonight. He pointed to the couch next to him, patted the cushion. She wanted to want to sit there, but swayed toward the door.

"You paint, right?" Anthony continued. "Yeah, I've heard stories about you from Will and Melo."

"You know anything about the significance of the color red in Renaissance painting?" she asked both of them. "'Cause if not, you're useless to me."

"I know everything about painting," Anthony replied. His scruffy red beard and fluffy hair made it somehow easy to see him in front of an easel. She told herself not to be fooled by facial hair.

*You're on your own there, babe,* Allen replied. *You had to run your mouth, be the smart one, you suffer alone*

"I want to know about your painting," Anthony continued. "Jill paints sometimes, or she wants to. I want to know what makes you do it, what you think about. She'll want to compare notes."

Allen insisted, *Sit! I want to tell you about why anyone who doesn't use the zone system in black-and-white shooting is a pussy, and this great old Mamiya I got at some dead guy's auction, and maybe then chant the chemical compounds of various developers while I fellate myself!*

Georgia covered her mouth and closed her eyes, choking back painful laughter.

"What's so funny?" Todd asked.

"You want to hear what I think? About my work?" she asked Anthony.

He nodded.

"Fine," she said, her mind already crowding over with jumbled thoughts, *fracturing and juxtaposition of paint textures and pretty!* and wordless images conflating machinery and ductwork with organic movement. The way she always felt before starting a final defense paper, until halfway through when it all shattered against itself and fell into brittle splinters. Allen sulked as she piled the raw jumbled ideas overtop him on the couch.

Georgia pushed cd cases off the front seat and settled in. The seat belt wouldn't latch. "I think this thing's having problems."

"Oh, yeah, that's never worked," Todd answered, settling in.

Anthony kicked the back of Todd's seat from his crunched position in the back.

"You know that's illegal in this state, right?"

Todd ignored him and touched the gas, hitting the car in front of them so hard it bumped the next car in line. Georgia grabbed the handle at the top of her door, suddenly understanding why Allen kept reaching for the nothing in that place on her car. Todd reversed and then shifted into first, peeled out of the space and shifted right up into third, gunning it through the red light.

"Um, Todd, could you not..." She winced as the car drifted to the middle of the street, "...not, drive like, some mafia car chase?"

He looked over and veered back into the right lane. "What? Don't nag. I know where I'm going."

"Hooker! Hooker!" she yelled, flinging her finger into the windshield. Todd blew his horn as the tall figure, crossing with the light, dove back to the curb, falling out of her leopard-print platforms. They landed, together, one upright and one tumbling on its side.

"Should look where she's going," Todd muttered, blowing through the intersection.

"The hooker had the right of way!" Georgia yelled, now clinging to the door with both hands, one foot braced on the dashboard.

"They always do," Anthony offered, Buddha-placid in the back seat.

"I meant the red light, wait, one-way, one-way other way! Don't turn!"

"Don't scream at me," Todd looked over and swerved again. "You're wrecking my concentration."

"Your concen...you're so fuck—that's another one-way. That's another one-way!" She tried to close her eyes, but they popped right back open. The red brake lights of the car in front left swoops of color on her retinas.

"It can't be," he replied, already turning. "The last one was, so this one has to go the right way."

"Could you," she swallowed, "you know, stop. Stop now. Stop!"

"This asshole's in my lane...why are all the cars parked the wrong fucking way? That's so confusing...oh. Oh, fuuuuck," he whispered, finally seeing the red and blue lights flickering behind him, and then in front of him as well.

"Maybe you should pull over now," Georgia said, prying her fingers from the handle. Todd yanked the car to the side and braked, leaving them diagonally blocking both lanes.

She sat up straight and twisted to look first at the patrol car in front of them, just pulling out of an alley to block their path, and the one that had been following for almost two blocks. It was all fascinating, now that the car was stopped; she'd never been pulled over before, and was startled out of her terror by how very much it looked like the ones on tv. The wavery bits of red and blue light on her hands reflected from the windshield were lovely.

"Get my license," Todd said.

"What?" She shifted her hand, trying to catch blue light on a fingertip.

"My license, it's in the glove box." He pawed at his hair, leaving it half flat and half wild, fastened his seat belt and leaned over to yank hers down. "Here, hold this at the side so it looks like it's on."

"Move!" her fingers scrabbled blindly against the plastic until he moved back out of her way and she found the latch and flipped the compartment open. Georgia saw the license and four prescription medicine bottles. The only name she could make out was *Ritalin*. She slammed it shut and handed over the license.

A policeman tapped gently on the window with one finger. To Georgia, his head looked huge, easily the size of her entire torso. Not Starsky, to her disappointment. He was black and bald had no neck. "License and registration."

Just like on tv! Georgia thought again, willing to overlook his jarring appearance.

Todd rolled down the window and offered his license. "I haven't been drinking," he said.

Georgia watched with detached fascination. She felt like she never needed to move again, or blink. Her body was positioned exactly right, even the hand awkwardly looped around the seat belt at her hip, all of it faintly vibrating and ready to dissolve if she so much as had a vigorous thought.

"Sir, do you know why we've pulled you over?"

"I haven't been drinking," he repeated.

"Please step out of the car, sir."

Todd sighed and dropped his head until his chin rested on his chest. He opened the door and tried to stand without unbuckling his seat belt. The officer stepped back and motioned over his head.

Georgia coughed, hard, the involuntary motion freeing her body. She let the seat belt slide back and covered her face with both shaking hands. Three more policemen, three more large black men, got out of the two cars and the four gingerly surrounded the

tiny actor with his hands already up and his emerald sparkling jauntily in the headlights. She smiled behind her fingers. A different officer ducked and looking into the windows from the passenger side, first at Anthony and then Georgia. She gave him a little wave and squeaked. He didn't smile.

Anthony shifted until he was lying across both seats. "Get comfy, Marie. This could take a while."

Outside, one officer demanded, "Sir, get up against the car. Turn around and put your hands on the car where we can see them."

"I was just distracted, Officer, I'm new in town, and I could have sworn—"

"Sir, turn around. Sir—"

"I was sure this was a two-way, this damn confusing town, could have happened to anyone. It's not like I've been drinking—"

"Turn around, Sir! I'm not telling you again!"

Todd threw himself, spread-eagle, on the car. His eyes were just level with the top of the window and tightly closed. Georgia wondered if he was going to cry. She hated me who cried, especially in public. She'd make a run for it if there were tears, leave her flipflops behind and leg it home.

Two of the officers patted Todd down and turned him back around. He lay boneless against the curve of the car door. "We're just going home, it's only a few blocks from here, just up 24th..."

A crowd of maybe a half-dozen had gathered to watch and was already drifting away. They could afford to wait for a better show, she thought, trying hard not to recognize the corner more from the late news shows than from driving past it on a near-

daily basis. Driving, though, that was the thing. Georgia propped her feet up on the dashboard—her bare feet, practically, and wrapped her arms around her knees. Hard to really walk in flipflops, farther than from the door to the car. Impossible to strut, shoulders back, smooth heel-to-toe, eyes up and seeing everything because your feet were contained and safe, not bare and open to all things corrupt on the sidewalk. Easy to get through nearly any place, even at night, when you walked like you had nothing to fear, and could run when the bluff was called. Not here, though, not when there was a solid four blocks between here and a merely sketchy area, and not all but barefoot. Girl has some sense, she thought miserably.

"Sir, we tracked you for three blocks driving erratically—"

"I know, I was distracted, those two horsing around. I told them to stop. I'm usually a very good driver."

Georgia thought again of Allen on her couch. *You wouldn't have believed it, she told him, this crazy little guy. Man. Nearly killed us all and got himself beat up by a bunch of cops. Easily the worst date ever.*

Allen rolled his eyes. *Only you, George.*

She flopped onto the seat next to him, hip-to-hip and knee-to-knee. *Good to be back here, she said, reaching across him for the remote trapped between cushions. Time to kill some brain cells the old-fashioned way—what you think, game show network or cartoon network? Or we can just flip until we find a Law & Order rerun.*

Allen shook his head. *How'd you get home, Georgie?*

*Shut up, she said, that's the boring part of the story. Not worth telling, it was so easy. Hey, look, M\*A\*S\*H!*

Allen took the remote and turned the television off. *How'd you get home?* he persisted.

Anthony tapped her on the shoulder. "How do you know Melo?"

"What, Melo?" she answered, confused. "Just around. He lives next door."

"So you weren't one of his girls?"

Georgia snorted and thought of his rough, restless hands. "Nah."

"Oh," he said, "funny. I'd thought...well, you kids are interchangeable. You do paint though, right?"

"Yeah. A few of us do, though, on the block, including Noreen. Maybe I wasn't the one you wanted?"

"You've never gone to one of Melo's drum circles? I feel like I've met you sometime. Ah well...no, I do want to hear from you. Want to know what goes on in your head that you, like, got to paint it out." But he settled back into his seat again, out of range.

"Go straight home," the officer was saying. "You hear me? Straight home, no detours, no errands, you don't even stop for cigarettes."

"Yes sir, thank you sir. I will. Thank you again."

"Lots of people say that," Georgia cast over her shoulder. "That they know me from somewhere. One of those faces, maybe, or just Smalltimore. Can't swing a dead cat here without hitting someone your best friend slept with."

"Huh. Not my best friend."

The police officer shook a long knuckly finger in Todd's face. She looked back out her window. The street was entirely deserted now, almost appealing. She wondered what the alleys were like, and shivered.

Todd settled himself into his seat and slammed the door, gunning the car back to life.

Anthony flicked the back of his ear. "That was fucking stupid."

"Shut up. Just shut up," Todd replied, carefully backing up and going back up the street the right way. He drove around the next block to end up heading north, police cars closely following. "Just shut the fuck up," he snarled at his silent passengers. Three blocks later, the police finally turned off. Georgia leaned back and waved good-bye out the window, shivering again from the chilled night air.

"God, what assholes," Todd said. "Pussies. They knew I could take them."

Georgia chortled, involuntarily, and began to hiccup. "Oh hell...Look...what that...did."

"Fucking cops are such goddam bitches in this town," he continued. "Not like in LA."

"Here," Tony interrupted. "Just pull up here at the bus stop. Put your hazards on."

Georgia hiccupped loudly. "Hazards. Yeah. You should...have them on all...the time. You...should have them installed in...every shirt you own."

"Open the door," Tony said and shoved her seat forward, heaving himself out to the sidewalk. "Thanks. I'll be right back."

"You're strange, you know?" Todd told her. "I mean, hazards? What's that about?"

"You should probably turn them on," she replied, breathing deeply, carefully. "Since you're parked illegally and all." She reached over and hit the toggle herself.

He flipped the sun visor down with a shaking hand. Three badly rolled joints fell, one landing on end in his hair. He plucked it out and lit it, dropping the lighter in his lap, and offered it to her.

"Nah, thanks." It was sour, like days-old sweat, rather than the musty-incense smell of Lamont or Noreen. Hadn't been dried well before shipping, and the damp had turned to mold. According to Lamont, anyway, who swore he could tell the country of origin as well as whether it had grown in shade or sun, with one sniff. Silly trick to impress the arty girls.

Todd seemed content to puff in silence, filling the car with foul smoke. Georgia cracked a window and assessed the neighborhood: four blocks made a difference, but not enough. She snuck a look at his watch. Little past ten, and the street was silent except for the clicking of the hazard blinkers and someone's television leaking canned laughter.

He pushed back his sleeve, catching her glance, and reached up to turn on the interior light. The watch was tarnished silver, and old. "Did I ever tell you about this?"

She shrugged, interest long dissipated. "Not once, in all our lengthy association. I've always felt you held something back."

"My grandfather gave it to me years ago, and I always wear it. I had to risk my life to keep it." He tapped at the glass face with one fingernail.

Georgia's eyes narrowed, watching how the nail reflected the light. She told Allen, *For the love of God, he's wearing clear polish. He's manicured.*

Allen shrugged. *How did you get home?*

She told him, *I wish the police had followed us all the way home. I'd leap out screaming "Sanctuary!"*

"I got picked up for possession once, thrown into the nastiest holding cell you could believe. This was in Santa Cruz, and man, I'm sure you've heard about that. They packed us in like salmon. I mean sardines." Todd giggled. "Or anchovies."

"Hungry, Todd?"

A taxi cut around them, honking. She watched it go, longingly, and absently wondered if she'd left her wallet on her bed or by the door. Maybe the kitchen counter, again.

"You wouldn'ta believed this place. Bunch of...you know. People that get in jail. Half of them couldn't even speak real English I bet. All of them looking at me, like, you know. And then one of them sees my watch, and he grabs my fingers when he says I should give it to him, like, hard." He rolled down his window and tossed the glowing stub to the street.

"Uh huh. Is this gonna end up involving your ass, like that movie?" She was thinking about the police again, suddenly sure they were waiting just around the block to catch Todd running an errand, catch him double-parking and high. Allen loved that stupid movie, quoted the watch-up-my-ass-monologue until she bought her own watch rather than ask him for the time. She turned and stared down the block, hoping to see red lights rolling to life. Instead, she saw a door across the street open and three young men

stumble out. One was pulling a shirt down over his skinny chest, which was bisected by barbed-wire tattoos.

"No! Of course n—who do you think you're talking to here? I looked his eye, right in the eye, and said 'hey man,'" here he looked up and pointed a finger toward the roof of the car, "'hey man, you just fucking try, I fucking dare ya.'"

"Who are those guys?" she asked as they passed. "I think they came out the way Anthony went in."

"What guys?" Genuine offense spread over his face at her distraction.

"Those guys." She pointed. "Getting in that car." She ducked when one of them glanced at their car.

"Oh. Nobody probably." Todd shrugged. "Julie likes to have these sort of orgies sometimes."

"Oh." She considered that, and told Allen, *I guess that would make you late meeting up. You'd know better than me.*

"Don't you want to hear how it ended?"

"I can guess how it ended. I mean, well, orgy. Not too many different ways for it to end, I'd think. Eventually, everybody goes home. Unless you're the host. Hosts." She squinted, trying to see through the curtains in every window.

"No! Of my watch!" Allen laughed at her, now holding his elbows, curling over his arms. "It's a gripping story, girlie, and I've put it in my screenplay. You're lucky to get a sneak taste. Danny liked it best, of all the vignettes I wrote."

"Oh. Sure." Just shut up, she thought.

The door opened again, but only Tony came out. He motioned for them to come in.

"Ah, shit," Todd moaned. "Not another hang-up. C'mon, let's go on in. Just a second, I swear."

She shook her head and got out of the car, looking back down the street. Her toes curled toward the balls of her feet against the chill.

Allen asked again, sighing, patience dribbling, *How'd you get home, Georgie?*

*It doesn't matter, she replied. I always do. Talk about something else. Or I'll have to tell you what I'm thinking.*

*You've got to think about this now, George.* He kicked his feet up on the couch and stretched, so there was no room for her now to sit.

*Maybe I asked Todd to take me home.*

*Huh. When he's already at the door. Maybe you could steal the car.*

She looked back up at the townhouse, where Todd stood impatiently holding the door, and back into the car. Probably too many wires. You were supposed to touch two of them together to start the car. Assuming she could get the panel off. *Fine, next time I go on a date, I'll bring a screwdriver.*

*Try again.*

*Maybe I called you.*

*If so, I didn't come.* Allen closed his eyes. *Got better things to do.*

She followed Todd inside.

On the landing outside and below Anthony's door was a cane, lying crosswise on two steps. Todd bounded over it, but Georgia picked it up without thinking.

She heard Anthony's voice ahead. "C'mon, c'mon," and thought about knocking on the doors they passed, but the doors were all plain and unclean. No stickers or graffiti or stolen street signs, nothing to encourage the outside world to come in. She left them be, thinking, *I'll just make the call from in their apartment. Don't even really have to ask.*

"Sorry, Todd, I had a fall," she heard as she crossed the threshold, a reedy voice with a whine that assumed forgiveness. Propped in a chair at the other end of the hall was a very small figure with a bush of frizzy blonde hair. One cane dangled from the crook of her elbow. She stood, pushing herself upright with her hands, and began to walk toward Georgia, swinging her legs from the hips and keeping her knees locked.

"I know you," she said, taking the cane from Georgia's numb fingers and moving back to her chair. With both canes, the awkward strides looked almost graceful, like some esoteric gymnastics. "I know you," she repeated, looking at Georgia expectantly.

"Are you from Baltimore? Maybe we went to high school together." Georgia stayed where she was, half in the doorway. She remembered very few people from high school, actually, and didn't think the girl had been much for clubbing, to even recognize Georgia now without the make-up and piercings.

Anthony appeared, coming out of the bathroom. "Oh, hey. Julie, meet Marie. Marie, this is my Julia."

Georgia nodded, her lips twitching. She was trying not to sniff, to automatically scan the air for sweat and nakedness, but realized with some relief that the background smell of the apartment, garbage and heavy incense, deep delicate stench of ammonia,

would overpower anything more delicate. She turned toward Todd, wanting to ask if he'd been kidding. Surely someone like Julie wouldn't...

She was still staring at Georgia. "Long before that."

"From, what, the old neighborhood? I don't know anyone else who says they're from Riverside, or even Locust Point. Were you..." *...paralyzed, then? Better? Worse?* She closed her mouth.

"Way, way before Locust Point, darling. Before the children and the locusts, we were sisters together. You have the eyes of a sister, Marie."

Julie took her hand, kissed a finger, and smiled beatifically. Georgia snatched her hand back and blinked, wondering when she'd stepped in so far and let the door close behind her. "Oh. Okay. You'd know better than me.. I guess. Hey, can I use your phone?"

"Relax," Todd said. "Don't be in such a rush all the time."

"You're going?" A thin hand patted her hair. "Sweetie, you can't go home so soon. We've only just met, again. You need to keep me company for a little while."

"You have a phone, right?" They had to have a phone.

Anthony flipped on a light and herded her into the living room, where she drastically revised that assumption. There were many things an apartment needed to have—furniture, doors between rooms, an intact floor—that this one was missing. It had a cat, though, a wild orange thing that Julie scooped up and kissed on the nose, almost tumbling in the process.

"You do have a phone. Right?" she asked, begged really, looking at the large hole in one corner, the floorboards ragged and splintered around it.

"Here, give Walter Cronkite a smooch," Julie said, and deposited the cat on Georgia's chest. Walter Cronkite hissed and dug his claws through the sweater into her skin, unerringly catching one of her nipples.

"Bastard!" she hissed back and batted at it with both hands. The cat howled and leapt off, fleeing through the hallway into the bathroom.

"Silly Walter Cronkite," Julie sighed, a fond smile pushing through her gloomy expression. "He does that to everybody."

Georgia yanked her collar out and examined her chest. Little beads of blood already dotted her skin, rising out of new pink welts. It itched more than hurt. She thought of Allen, how she could tell him that, next date, she was bringing a screwdriver, antibacterial ointment, and Benedryl. A tool belt and a whole first aid kit, in fact.

"You should probably not do that, then," she managed, "Some people are allergic to cats." She gently patted at her sweater over the welts to absorb the blood. "And, you know, ow. Ow."

She sighed and gave up on first aid. "Don't you have a phone?"

Julie blinked, baffled. "Why would we?"

"Oh, damned if I know." Georgia looked around again, trying not to see all the dirt the cat walked in before sinking it under her skin. "I need to call my roommate."

"Relax, babe. I'll take you home. Just chill." Todd flipped aside the bed sheet that hung between the living room and—she assumed—the bedroom. She wondered if it had a bed, or blankets, or if they just took their door down at night to lie under.

"You never did tell me about your painting," Anthony said.

"You paint? That's so cool! I want to paint." Jill brushed hair out of her face with both hands, pulling stray strands from her tongue.

Georgia told Allen, "Give me money for a cab and I'll give you every paintbrush I own. And a kidney. I promise." The couch was empty, though, except for jumbled images and a bit of the word *fragmentation*.

Jill laughed. "My kidneys are fine, thanks. You're so funny. What's your name?"

"George," she said absently, concerned over her imaginary friend's defection.

"George?" Julie asked, wrinkling her nose.

"George is a nickname," Anthony supplied. "Her real name is Marie."

Close enough, she thought.

"Ew. George is a boy's name. Why do you let them call you that?"

Anthony ducked behind the bed sheet, holding a cardboard box. "What do you paint?" he called back into the living room.

"Stuff," she said.

There was the sound of glass set on a hollow floor, and something liquid. "What, stuff? That's a bullshit answer."

Georgia leaned, then clung to the doorjamb between the hall and living room.

She could easily get downstairs and outside, but what then? "Accurate, though."

"Are you representational, or abstract? Maybe you're into photorealism?"

Something small fell and broke. "Shit."

"I like paintings that look like things," Julie interjected. "I know that makes me sound stupid, but that's what I like. Those big red squares and things, they don't do much for me. But I really like Impressionist paintings, because you've only got to squint and

they fall together. And those old goth William Blake paintings, God and man and all. And lately I found a book by this guy named Dave McKean that I really liked."

"Dave McKean, seriously? The guy who did *Sandman*, you mean?"

Julie wilted a little. "Maybe. I don't know what you're asking."

Georgia felt herself smiling and moved into the room. "No, it's probably the same guy—surreal transmedia work, like, um..."

"He's got one of a cat like Walter Cronkite," Julie said.

Georgia knew exactly the piece she was referring to, and since that cat-figurine-thing had no teeth, couldn't agree. But... "Yeah, that's a good one, like, the way his use of color seems so casual, but the more you look at it you see how it's supposed to have a top texture like some reclaimed artifact, you know, except it's uniform across the figure and background, and, like, a lot of the elements have to have been computer-generated, like the eyes, to get that sharp unfocused effect, and there's etching on top of both of that in the lower half, it's like—"

"It's just a painting. Like I wanna do. It's all painted, right?"

"Well, no, I mean, you can tell it's not. It's supposed to make you feel like—"

"It could be paintings," Anthony shouted over her. "She just said she didn't know. You're probably right, Jules."

"Oh," Julie sighed. "I don't know."

Something else broke in the other room, and Anthony growled, "Shit, Todd, just stop touching things!"

Georgia edged closer.

"Alright, alright! Christ."

"Just, move! Over there! If you want to do this, just...stay out of it."

Julie tugged at her sleeve. Georgia flinched and stepped away, until she saw what the other girl offered: an oversized deck of cards. She took it and turned it upside down: the Empress, woman in a flowing dress in a field. Fecundity, or waste.

"Hold these for a minute and concentrate. I need to sort this thing out. Who you are exactly. You can sit over there." Julie jerked her chin toward a corner piled with ratty cushions.

Perversely, for the moment Georgia only wanted to peek into the dark bedroom and sip at whatever composition had fallen out in there. She wanted her sketchbook, to scribble out the fragile girl balancing on two canes over the abyss in her floorboards.

"What happened there?"

"Tony's putting in a spiral staircase. Or he was, except we're only renting this floor, so the landlord made him stop. That's why we sit over there. On the other side of the room." She spoke carefully, as if to a young child trying to grab a stove's flame.

Georgia moved back to the wall and listened: cardboard sliding across grit, metal tapping against glass—thin sound, so the glass was in a firm grip, not free-standing—papers sliding, chuckling in a high tenor pitch. "You fucking idiot...spill one more drop and you're running out to buy more...it's fine, just put it down..." "Where's the vodka I left here?" "Freezer...dammit, I said put that down!"

"You wait here," Julie said again, dropping both canes to pull at Georgia's hands. Alarmed, she followed, grabbing the girl's wrists, and settled herself gingerly on the cushion with the least visible mildew. Her old-bruised rear throbbed in time with the scratches on her chest. She handed the canes back up to Julie, wincing preemptively, but

the girl took them easily and swung out of the room. Todd poked his head around the bed sheet.

"You alright?" he asked. His voice reminded her of Allen's suddenly, mushy like his tongue had swollen.

She held up the deck. "I have cards. Are we going now?"

"Not just yet, baby, not just yet." He scrunched his face and pointed at her. It was a surprisingly good Mr. Magoo impression. She thought he might be trying for something a little more James Bond, though.

Julie reentered with a bottle under her arm. Todd took it and clucked his tongue at her, pointing again.

"Oh, you," she said, "go play."

She settled herself next to Georgia by dropping both canes and falling on her butt.

"Oh!" Georgia held her arms out, helplessly after the fact. Using her hands, Julie repositioned her wayward legs into the lotus position, tapping them with satisfaction when they were placed.

"You're likely a pentacle," she said, taking her cards from Georgia's limp fingers. "Let me see your eyes. Oh, no, you're a sword. That's rare, you know, such dark hair with such light eyes. It's like you're my opposite." She opened her eyes wide so Georgia could see they were dark brown.

"Everyone in my family looks like me," Georgia argued. "My stepfather used to say it's common, just everyday black Irish."

"I've almost never seen it," she insisted. She picked through the deck, pulling out the Queen of Swords and setting it in front of Georgia. Another woman in a field, this one casually holding a long broadsword. The faces carved into her throne looked pissed.

"Do you feel this?" Julie asked. "Does it speak to you?"

"I could go for a sword right now." She glared at Allen's empty couch, cleaved it in half.

Julie nodded, an expression of satisfaction pushing through her pout. "You're a natural warrior. You are my opposite, you know. I'm such a thinker. We're like a perfect yin and yang." She beamed. "I was right."

"Huh." The couch remained, whole. Maybe Imaginary-Allen had been right. She needed some paper immediately under her fingers, more almost than a phone. Julie was pitched forward, almost balancing on the tips of her knees, the wild bush of her hair just touching the floor. Georgia traced out the lines on her thigh, breaking Julie into cleaner lines and textures. She'd paint the outlines of the girl's jeans and fill it in with crayon scribbles, maybe, using the texture of the canvas...

"This is the inside of your head," Julie continued. "This is your bubble." She took a card from the top of the deck and placed it over the queen: the Magician, it said, a man in a red robe holding up...it looked exactly like the white two-headed dildo currently in the front window display of the local porn store.

"Huh," she grunted again. "Is that a, um, wand?"

Georgia knew enough about the cards to know Julie knew less. Melo always made her shuffle three times and settle her mind, allow a question to rise naturally. She was irked at Julie's unprofessionalism, much as she didn't want a real reading from the

crazy girl. *Tarot poseur*, she thought, but couldn't keep herself from noting: *magician, knowledge, of course this is my mind; I'm in school*. Gathering and testing.

Julie shook her head and tsked. "You've got men on the brain, sis. You're not encouraging your real feminine self, trying instead to be the boy you aren't. George." She made a face and grinned again. "It's got you off balance and wanting. You've got a hole to fill, and honey, another dick's not gonna do it."

She tilted her head amiably and picked another card, placing it horizontally across the other two: the Wheel of Fortune, surrounded by angels, a devil and a snake along the rim. "These are your obstacles."

That was an odd one, she thought, to be an obstacle. Usually meant unconditional good luck, or at least a surplus of good choices. Georgia thoughtfully chewed on a cuticle. Maybe luck was an obstacle if you depended on it. Turned off your brain.

"You've gotten lazy. Things have gone well lately and you expect it to always be like that." Julie's eyes narrowed.

Georgia avoided looking at her, disturbed to find herself in sync with the crazy girl. *I haven't been lazy*, she thought, *I've been working my ass off*. She closed her eyes and concentrated, forcing a hazy outline of Allen to appear on the couch. It looked like a store manikin, vapidly smiling. She opened her eyes quickly.

Julie pulled another card, this one from the middle of the deck: the Lovers, naked and blessed, except someone had attacked this card, burning holes into faces and groins. "Here's where you're coming from," she said, and set it to the left of the others.

*That can't be a good omen*, Georgia thought, stomach sinking. Love but not love. Joining impossible. She reached in and turned it over.

Julie chuckled. "Maybe I was wrong about the dick. Alright, what's a little dick between sisters, hey? I can ignore that. Everything in balance. Here's where you're heading."

Another card, this one to the right: the Hermit, with his long staff and lamp. *Betrayal, retreat, licking wounds*, she thought. *Heavy*. All of the cards had been heavy, actually. It was odd to get more than one or two of the major arcane in one reading.

"Ah, see, I wasn't wrong! Too many boys, too much testosterone—you'll be poisoned by it. You'll flee it, and be all alone." She sighed, cheerless again. "Sad. To run from yourself, your own femininity, and be all alone instead."

"I thought I was running from boys," Georgia broke in.

Sharp Julie. "You can run from more than one thing at once. You can run from your whole life."

"Look, I like men—they're good company, better than than the little idiots girls turn into in groups, and if I'm one of the boys that's fine and and if I take home any I want to fuck that's fine too," Georgia spat. "What's, what's this testosterone poisoning you're pushing?"

Julie ignored her, putting another card down: the Wheel of Fortune. Again.

"Now wait a fucking minute!" Georgia grabbed at the deck, coming away with a handful of cards, all major arcane. "You've got a loaded deck!"

"I only use the ones with real meaning," Julie sniffed. "Not the ugly ones."

Glass broke in the bedroom. "Shit!"

"Sorry Tones, slipped my fingers. Grrrs. Grr...but, hey, there's a few left!"

"Out—Out!"

Todd stumbled out of the bedroom, carrying a metal folding chair, and set it on the floor next to Georgia. Her knelt on the chair and leaned over her, resting his chin on the top of her head. She froze.

"Todd?"

"Mmmm...you've got nice hair. Smells funny, though."

She scuttled to the side, off her cushion entirely. He flopped back in the chair, prodding her with one toe. He heaved a big sigh and mumbled, "So! What've you gals been up ta? Goss'ping up a storm? Don't ev'n try ta lie. You've been telling stories, haven' ya?"

His tongue seemed to be stuck to his bottom jaw, and his eyes rolled at the end of every sentence. Georgia shifted closer, fascinated and seeing it already on paper, body in charcoal and the manic head and eyes in chalk, repeating shapes making the movement.

"Oh, shush you," Julie replied brightly. "It's girl talk. You've got no rights to it."

She winked at Georgia, who looked from one to the other like they would pounce when her attention shifted. She needed, physically ached, for any pulp, to scribble down the raw lines of the crippled girl's predatory position, thin limbs like broken spider legs, cards scattered and useless underneath.

Todd hopped his chair across the floor and leaned over to hook one arm around Georgia's neck. "I like you," he said. "I really, really like you."

"That's nice," she said, working her fingers under his arm. "Leggo."

He tightened his grip and turned to Julie. "You should go cheer up Tony. He's being a bitch."

"My Anthony," she sighed, struggling to her feet and heaving herself into the other room. The bed sheet caught on her belt and followed her inside.

"Can you let go?" Georgia gasped out. "I can't fucking breathe!"

She felt his warm, sour breath on her temple and closed her eyes. It seemed to leave a slime trail on her skin, in her hair.

"What will you give me for it? A kiss?" Sticky lips touched her cheek.

She let go of his arm, found his soft belly where his shirt had ridden up, and dug in with her fingernails. He dropped her with a yelp.

"What the fuck?"

Georgia coughed, trying to breathe too deeply, too quickly, blinking against little sparklies in her eyes. She shoved the arm that reached again for her. "You were choking me," she spit.

He petted her hair. "Sorry, sorry. Jus' don't know my own strength, baby."

"Todd," Julie called. "Come in here!"

One final pat. "Be right back, baby. Don't get into trouble."

He knocked over the chair as he stood, leaving it sideways on the floor. The other three whispered in the bedroom. Georgia rubbed her neck.

"I love her. Where did you find her?"

Deep voice, lazy now and calm. "Just on the stoop, man. We picked her up off the street."

"Well, I love her. You need to keep this one so the four of us can go out."

Shy. "I really like her."

"Can't let her go back to the street, guys. That would be wrong."

She saw Todd's jacket lying on the floor by the chair. She stared at it, knowing there was something she should want with it...something she should see other than Todd's disgusting second skin, the smell of Old Spice cutting through the reek of cat urine. Something other than a warm coat, if she could bear to let it touch her, to feel Todd with his bony girl wrists wrapped around her body like...

Phone! She snatched it off the floor and pawed through the pockets.

Phone! Left inner pocket, ripped at the bottom, the small mobile almost lost in the jacket's polyester lining! She let the lining tear, groping after it.

"Murray?"

"Marie? You alright in there?"

"What was that noise?"

Georgia froze, moist leather bunched in her hands. I'm fine, she thought. Her throat squeaked instead of forcing out the lie.

"Marie?" A warning note.

"I'm fine," she managed, this time.

She already saw herself, phone in hand, calling for backup, the police, the national guard, that security guy in Lexington Market she knew from high school. She saw herself outside her own door, already feeling the sickly dry warmth before she stepped through, saw Lamont and Melo laughing this night into a good story. Georgia closed her eyes tightly for one second, willing, until her calves threatened to cramp, for Allen to reappear. She needed to tell him to make it real: *I know how I got home.*

Instead, Georgia stepped closer to the bedroom.

"Marie?"

"I'm fine," she repeated, feeling a tight rigor-mortis grin stretch her lips. She couldn't see Allen; instead, every time she blinked, she saw her old best friend's basement, years before he pinched her cardboard-roll body. His punishment, when they two were caught starting little fires by the railroad tracks (*marshmallows, Jays, I'm dying for some s'mores, like my cousins have in their back yard*), to clean out the detritus of their family and the last owners down in the basement, which had recently started to smell something terrible. His mother's stern, fixed face, telling Jays, and George too who'd chosen to stand punished as well. *Stay away from the mold patch when you find it, let me clean it.* Let her attack that with clean harsh bleach that hurt her best friend's lungs so much, made him gasp and wheeze. The stink of ammonia and garbage and mildew all around him and she went deepest first, dedicated, pulling aside box after box that wilted in on themselves as they slid, to find the rotted remains of some feral cat in a corner. Crawled in the broken little back window to die in warmth and peace; skin rotted back from angry bare-razor teeth and eyes sunk in and stickydry, more savage now in static death.

With one hand, she grabbed the bed sheet and tore it down.

The three froze, staring back with wild eyes, burning the tableau into a squishy lobe of her brain. I will paint this, Georgia was already thinking as her eyes zipped: propane tank, batteries, glass shards and jelly jars and even a few proper beakers. Black-painted window with no curtain. Antifreeze and rolls of duct tape, messy rubber piping. Reek of ammonia like another wall, suddenly burning her eyes. Anthony and Julie, flanking their makeshift lab, Todd on his knees before it, arms half raised as if in hosanna. Circles and triangles and the large outer rhombus defining them...she could see

it, broken and rebuilt, in layers and layers of toxic pigments. Her hands stilled their shaking, and she realized, in one shining second of perfect serenity, that this would stay fixed in her mind. She needed nothing, no paper, no thick soft pencils, not even a Polaroid, to hold it safe.

Georgia ran.

Down the stairs, shrugging the jacket she still held over her shoulders, dialing as soon as both hands popped out of the sleeves. Realized she'd dialed the home instead of mobile as she punches the last digit and hits *send* anyway. By the second ring, she shoved open the front door and jumped over the three marble steps outside.

She landed badly, feet sliding off their flimsy plastic bottoms, and fell, taking the impact with her elbow. The phone clattered to the sidewalk ahead of her, coming to a stop in two pieces.

She cursed, chant-hissing under her breath, and scrambled after it. Her first grab retrieved the hard plastic backing. The third ring was just barely audible. She gently turned the larger fragment over. The thick battery just barely hung in its bay on the back. She held it down with her thumb, tossed the useless backing to the sidewalk, scrambled to her feet and ran.

The fourth ring began, just long enough to think of her empty couch, fading back into the wall, to think that she would keep running, toed tensed hard to keep the sandals on her feet and nearly flying out of them, and he picked up.

"Hello?" Coughed out between breaths, and she knew he'd heard the first ring as he came in the front door and bolted up the stairs as she had so many times, diving onto the couch toward the receiver.

"Allen!" It came out easily, riding a clean exhale. The stink of exhaust and decomposing leaves like ambrosia slipping inside her. "Jesus Christ...Al...you won't...believe—"

"Oh, hell." Jolts, something slamming into the phone. Or the receiver being slammed, into a wall, into the floor. "Girl, you...I don't care. If you got laid with that creepy thing."

"Allen—"

"No. Whatever story you've got, it can wait until morning. Just rode the whole way in from Canton, and you're making me run up these goddam—"

"Allen..." she moaned. "Allen, Allen..."

Georgia turned, almost tripping off her flipflops again, turned once more, up into the alley behind Julie and Anthony's block. It was quiet enough to hear a heavy door slam, the faint, plaintive call, "Murray? Muuuurrrray!"

She ducked behind the corner of a cinderblock wall and briefly held her breath.

"I'm hanging up now, goodnight George..."

"No, wait, Al! I'm not at home, I'm still out on Mr. Toad's fucking Wild Ride. You've got to come get me."

"No car, George, sorry...why don't you call someone you haven't offended in the last 12 hours? Do you even have any other friends?"

"You've still got my spare car key," she insisted, ignoring the rest. "I'm parked over on Calvert."

"I'm not. I told you I wouldn't." A pause. "I'll come get you in the morning."

"Christ...fucking...crap! These people are crazy," she hissed the last word, "and they're looking for me. Right now! I'm going to head toward the gas station you hate, remember it, they wouldn't sell you cigarettes?"

"No, George, I'm not—"

"Come get me there, baby, please?"

"No. No. I told you—"

"Muuuurrray!" Closer now.

She disconnected and chucked the phone over the wall.

"Murray! Why'd you break my phone, man? Murrraaaaay!"

It sounded closer still, but not yet in the alley.

"Murray! Get out here, and we can all go inside and have a nice evening! God damn it Murray!"

She dropped and huddled against the wall, pulling the jacket closer around her shoulders, trying not to breathe.

"Murray, just—dammit!"

In the alley, she thought, but not moving any further in. Her eyes adjusted to the gloom, and she saw cars parked opposite, ivy growing up the chain-link fence behind them, trash cans beside her. She could hide until he moved on.

Movement under her knees, and something large and matted ran over her bare feet, pausing with one tiny clawed foot on her big toe.

Georgia screamed, high and piercing as a whistle, and jumped away from the wall, kicking her foot. The rat's furry butt and flesh tail swung wide before it scampered across the alley, obscenely slow and clumsy.

"There—Murray!"

Right behind her. She inhaled, exhaled, squeezed her eyes shut without turning. Her skin rippled away from her flesh.

"Murry, why'd you, I mean... You're cool, right? You're gonna be cool? And we'll just go on with our evening, and then I'll give you a ride back. We're cool?"

A hand clamped around her arm just above the elbow and tugged. She flinched away, weakly trying to pull herself free, eyes screwed up tight.

"C'mon." His voice turned hard, and his fingers dug into the soft flesh of her underarm.

Her skin still crawled with the memory of on tiny dirty rat toes on her own and she remembered now the poor dead basement cat as though it had leapt up on her and rubbed its dryweeping flesh on her own, left behind brittle dead hairs in her skin. Really, she had backed up slowly, box almost her own size clutched to her chest and bumping her knees, mouth wide and soundless. Until she backed right into her best friend, who looked, who screamed himself, and only then could she run, following him.

Todd's fingers were small, almost delicate but too rounded at the tips. Fat, for their size. They would break like matchsticks.

She whirled and screamed again, pushing it to his closer ear, and watched through slitted eyes as his expression melted into a wince, into foggy shock. The jacket fell away

from her in his hand. Her toes curled fiercely, already lifting away from the pavement, and Georgia ran through him like smoke.

Every car that passed the gas station, Georgia half-illuminated in its fluorescent overheads, had to honk. Every single car. Most had something to say as well, almost-coherent words yelled through closed windows. She huddled in on herself, shivering under her thin sweater, trying to be visible and hiding all at once. She closed her eyes and thought about how loud they'd yell if she walked to the curb and just let herself...fall...forward...

Georgia preferred the darkness behind her eyelids to the half-seen street, made dense in comparison to the bright gas station. She wanted to be walking. Anywhere. Just in motion.

He wasn't coming.

He said he wasn't, but he really wasn't.

She thought about talking to the attendant again, begging now to use the phone. Call someone. Figure out who when she got there.

Instead, she stepped forward, eyes still closed, knowing by the subtle shift of texture in the darkness when she'd passed out from under the lights, knowing by the feel of air on her skin when she was nearly touching a parked car. She shuffled to the side, until she was sure she was clear, and stepped forward, neatly in between two parked cars. Just at the edge, just by the left lane, she stopped and opened her eyes—

—in time to see her battered black Honda fly past without making a sound.

She stepped instead of falling, out into the street without a glance back, and raised her arms.

Of course he looked back, just at that moment, and the red brake lights flashed. They were always like that, always passing their mutual windows at the same second. Always turning together, like dance partners. Like a mirror image.

The car whipped around in a tight U-turn and accelerated back to her, driving against the nonexistent traffic.

He pulled up beside her and stared through the window. She wondered what she looked like and flipped off a little wave.

"Al? You came."

He rubbed his eyes, unsmiling. Hard-faced again. "Get in, if you're coming."

The glass in between rubbed all the hard edges from the words, made them rounded and almost soft. Almost.

She stepped back on the curb.

"Get in! Get off of the goddam street."

Georgia walked around the back of the car and let herself in the passenger side. Allen hit the gas before she closed her door, whipping through another U-turn and heading back up the street.

Allen cleared his throat and played with the radio, punching through a half-dozen stations, getting only commercials, before snapping it off. "George."

She shook her head, focusing out the window.

"Man, George. I don't know what to say. Always knew you weren't all that bright, but this is the first time I thought you were this stupid. Man."

She shrugged and closed her eyes. She thought she could easily fall asleep in her own passenger seat. As long as she didn't open her eyes, the entire night could slip away unnoticed. When Allen took the turn onto St Paul too quickly through a yellow light, her body shifted into it, her head falling onto his shoulder. The clammy leather of his jacket smelled like an animal, unclean matted fur, but she took three more blocks to pull herself upright. He sucked his tongue and stared straight ahead.

He parked in a crosswalk in their block, muttering, "You'll have to get up early to move it so you don't get towed again."

She slipped off her flipflops and left them in the car, walked on the wet concrete, gritty and somehow sharp. The marble steps were soft in comparison. Up the big spiral staircase, the bare wood a pillow texture against her soles. Allen followed, staring down at the steps. Only his footsteps echoed up the stairwell, as if he'd come home alone.

She didn't turn to face him at her door. "Well, thanks, and all, see you...wait."

The doorknob wouldn't budge.

"I checked when I stopped in earlier," Allen said in passing. "Locked it up after you."

"Oh. Oh, damn. I don't have my keys." She knocked softly on the cracked wood. "Stupid keys."

"Just shut up," he sighed, holding his own door open. "You can crawl through."

She'd never seen Allen's apartment, not through the door. It looked nothing like hers, no sloping ceiling or big useless pantry and big wasted hallway. Allen left it dark, but she could see in the light from outside. She looked: bedroom directly to the left, kitchen and bathroom clustered to the left. Dishes piled up to the faucet in the sink,

folded clothes tumbled on a futon in front of her. Mismatched bookcases all along the walls. A little tv with bent bunny ears propped up on the wide front windowsill, next to a dead plant.

"Goodnight then. No need to make yourself a home," he continued as she stared, unmoving.

He put his hand in the small of her back, only to herd her into the bedroom, yanking it back as soon as she crossed the threshold. He pulled his shirt over his head without unbuttoning it. She backed away, looking over her shoulder. The window let in no light, and the room was grey.

"You got anything to drink? I'm dead dry."

"Just beer," he replied, absently scratching his stomach. "Want one for the road?"

She made a face, hating the feel of her sticky tongue and the stale smell of the bar still filming her skin. "Nah, thanks."

He unbuckled his belt and let his jeans, his usual boxy loose cut, fall from his skinny boy hips. The sound the buckle made hitting the floor made her shiver. "I'm all out of cigs, too."

Georgia edged around him, trying to look at his face but failing, her gaze falling back to the floor. She stepped up onto his bed and walked backward to the window sill. She walked on her toes, her feet sinking into the spaces between springs. The scraped skin on her chest burned, down to her elbow and the whole way up into her face.

"Aren't you ever afraid something could walk right in here, right onto your head? Like a rat. They can climb to any floor. Middle of the night."

"Night," he echoed, and flopped back on top of the sheets, next to her feet and nearly off the bed. His boxer shorts gaped open at the crotch.

She knelt on the windowsill and reached out, quick and blind. Shivered at the touch of cold, slimy metal. The grate was different on his side from what she knew. She couldn't remember where the hole to the landing below was set. She added a second hand, tentative, pushing on the grid underneath her fingers to see if it would hold, or tilt and throw her off.

"Night," she finally replied, and pushed off into the gloom. She didn't want to stand, to crack her skull on something unseen and fall like an unwily coyote to the basement, impaled on something jutting and rusty under the slick paint. Instead, on hands and knees, she crawled across the void, desperate to see what held her up.

## **Interlude with Melo**

*You meander, out the door, up the block. The stoop's empty, though the sun's just setting. But then though the sun's just setting, it's barely past the afternoon, not the time yet that people are drifting home from square jobs and dropping to the outside steps in their dry-clean-onlies.*

*George's home early, walking in little brisk steps, barely waving as she passes you and pushes herself in the door. Your words barely gathered they fall back into nothing. You can hear her thick soles pounding the stairs, going up, up, and around so quickly.*

*You pace, waiting. Up to Eager Street, into the little liquor store, crumpled balls of washingtons on the counter in trade for the cheaper cigarettes, the ones in a soft pack that get half-crushed before you've had them all. Back down your street, slowing your feet while you pass the odd numbers with potential, turning the corner and walking up the alley in the middle of the block. A quick glance up third floor to the left and you see a light in George's windows but look away quickly. George watches, you know. She's caught you before.*

*She's thin, you think. Thinner than usual, even. Hips poked up out of her boy pants, raw corner bones like the edges of envelopes.*

*Back on Eager, sight of the liquor store reminding you to light a cigarette, and you walk ahead through white fluffy breaths. You can see your air even without smoke in it, and the cold seeps through the secondhand camouflage jacket you'll wear all winter.*

*On the street again, you run up to each door you know, pushing the buzzer marked "Edgerton" at one and "Stephens" at the next, finger hovering over the one labeled "Nietzsche" (even though her last name is Stoltzfus) but you're too wise to push your luck. She thinks everyone is stalking her. She watches them.*

*No one comes down You sit on the stoop, alone.*

*You throw away one butt and light another.*

*Someone, a stranger passing, asks if you've got one to spare and you glare, you frown your face into lines, but when he stands his ground you tap one out without a word and hand it over. He asks then for a light and you wave him away, but he touches his raw end to your lit one and inhales quickly, so you both glow bright. He scampers when you surge up from the marble, leading with your chest arms hanging back in fists. Doesn't run, doesn't stand his ground, but fastfast dances away, checking over his shoulder like he isn't looking back.*

*You relight your own cigarette, having lost the orange coal in the shuffle, and bounce on your feet. Impatient, looking up the street and down. Anything to not go back inside into the quiet of your apartment with unopened envelopes scattered all over the floor and the clank of water forced anew through claw-foot heaters. Any company to feel human with, before you walk on to pull beers and indifferently mix martinis for fools who really only wanted the experience of ordering one.*

*You think about ringing up Nietzsche.*

*You light another cigarette. This pack will be halfcrushed gone before the night is half done.*

*Finally, a door opens, two down. Someone you know well enough. You wave him over but he only stands in front of you, looking up and down the block.*

How've you been man?

*No preliminaries. No long searching look while he fidgets. You stupid, lonely bitch.*

Good enough, good enough.

Dead here lately.

*A shrug, and you're annoyed. You've waited too long to beg for attention.*

Where is everyone?

*Another shrug, a step back like he'll go.*

Where's Will?

Gone, man, they dumped his shit out last week. I got a Sir MixA- Lot cd. You believe he had that? The whole cd, not the single.

I missed it.

He was two months behind. I told him the rental agency doesn't fool around, but Will, he just don't listen.

*You think about the tri-folded notices, that extra-thin paper that is under the page written on like they can't even give you an original fuck-off, neatly taped up on the front doors around the seventh of every month.*

He don't look much, either.

*Waspish. You can't help yourself. Can't stop yourself from pushing, want to hold a list under his nose and make him check off every one, thought there's no reason he should know. You're the one who doesn't talk much.*

Where's Noreen?

Around. Probably wherever Stacey is.

*Your turn to shrug, give the street your inscrutable look. Tough, but slick, nothing to catch your nails on.*

No idea where that'd be.

Uh huh.

*Bastard's smiling. At least knows enough to look at something else, like it's not over you and your girl who's not your girl.*

Even your man Allen's not around any more.

Spending all nights in the dark room, from what he says. Some big project he's on. That and messaging and classes all day, sleeping any time he's got left.

*You snort.*

You believe that?

Sure.

He's sulking.

It's just the way. Nobody's gonna be out again until it's warm. You find other things, hardly know anybody when you see them.

*He's sighing like a train now and swaying, rude and eager to be off. Wants you to stop poking at him. You know it's desperation when he asks*

I'm going by O'Shea's to see some people, you want to come with?

*It's desperation when you reply*

Yeah, for a little. Sure.

*The sun has set and it's rapidly getting too dark, too cold to stand in front of the stoop. Too late for anything else. As you turn together and start south, you look up at the windows on the third floor. No light, but then it's Allen's place in the front, George's in the back.*

Saw George earlier. Didn't say nothing.

*Flipping the collar of his nice slick wool coat up around his neck. Rubbing his hair in the back the wrong way so it'll settle down over the collar.*

Georgie doesn't come out any more.

George is always out.

*Not really, you know. She's actually rarely out, but always crossing the stoop, always coming or going, and pausing long enough to pass the time. Your hair itches where it's newtwisted and raw, and you think about how badly she bungled up your locks the last time she took them in hand, how she pulled at your scalp until you knew it was bruised black on the bloody side of the skin. She don't mean no harm, just got hard hands.*

It's the way things go.

## Conversation Across County Lines

Her mother had done everything too late in life, and now she's retired far too early. She was young yet, had a few years before sixty (at least Georgia thought so; her mother's exact age had always been a slippery concept that lagged further behind expectations every year; how was her mother not over sixty yet, with her gigantic floral handbag stuffed with packets of artificial sweetener?), and she could program her own VCR and defrag the hard drive when her computer acted up. Good God was she at one with computer technology, Mom with her zippy little iMac in tangerine that could easily zap out a chatty email twice a day. Zapping thrice if she'd had a particular concept she was working over in her mind and wanted to get it across exactly as she thought of it.

*If you've turned out to be a lesbian, that's just fine, but if you aren't then why do you insist on shaving your head in the beginning of every summer since you moved out?*

Later: *Is it a fad?*

Still later: *Some artist thing your dull old Mum just doesn't get?*

Her mother didn't watch much television, and as such was easily confused. Correction; her mother hadn't before watched much television, back when she was a one-woman department, practically, and ran her keister off even when it wasn't tax season, mostly fixing personnel issues that the men created and the men allowed to fester and the men expected would magically slough off, although of course her mother would never describe it in such unilateral terms except when she met with her old colleagues for breakfast at the Sip'N'Bite for french toast and bacon. Even then it wasn't men who caused the problems, it was "boys," eye roll, dollop of syrup on the bacon and

absentminded handful of artificial sweetener packets into the purse, “boys with their *human resource skills*,” longer sweep of heavenward eyes and sometimes an outburst of raucous cackling followed by demure taps of napkins to crinkly mouths stained with calcium-lake.

As a woman gets older, her lipstick shades should deepen, bolder saturated colors than the bubble-gum shades she would paint across her younger, pliant mouth. Colors to deny her thinning blood, ashy skin; bright but camouflaging like the stripes on a tiger. She almost sent her mother an email about Janine Antoni, her book of mascara eyelash-whispers and a floor mopped with dye-soaked hair. Art of applied beauty, applied everywhere but skin, disgusting when separated from the person. Meredith's reply would be typed with tightly pursed fingers, though; her mother only discussed age and beauty when she brought it up herself.

Her mother had been young once. No one was born middle-aged; life didn't begin at forty no matter what the greeting card industry insisted. She'd felt its passing, maybe, or else was tired of mothering only business formal babies in cubicles, grown in a year and moving out, past her, to the offices with real doors that closed, and carried herself down to the artificial insemination farm to snag the real thing. Only she got Georgia, who was not the real thing she'd expected. Georgia was a nocturnal creature instead, mostly made of lung and the eczema creeping across features that might have been cute once the birth squishing settled. The baby pictures were unfortunate and well hidden. Strangers, if they saw little Georgia at all, only gave her mother pitying looks. Maybe a younger mother would have been all the more infatuated with her spawn because of this, that face only a mother could love, but her mother was an older mum.

Already someone. Georgia was supposed to be an accessory, not a fundamental paradigm shift.

Not that her mother said this, in so many words. Told the stories with a wry twist and a wrinkled nose, and unfelt crinklelines appeared between her eyebrows. And it wasn't something to hold against her. No one liked change, even those big lotto winners who bought their tickets in hope and usually ended up broke again in a couple years. A windfall's likely to leave you worse off than before.

*I'm forwarding together all of the birthday cards that came to the house from the family and you should keep an eye out for a big package in your mailbox at work. Do things sent there still reach you? There should be at least one nice gift certificate for the big art supply store here in Carroll County that you'll find handy, from my cousin Ron. You remember Ron, don't you, who visited not long before you went off to school? He's doing well, his parole officer helped him find a good construction job up in York. Everyone sent their apologies for sending things to the wrong home, but no one seems to have your latest address. You should go ahead and make sure you include it in your thank-you cards.*

Georgia replied that night. *I saw Jimmy at Dougherty's last night trying to pick up little art girls. He said to pass on his greetings and not tell you about the art girls. He kinda creeped out this girl Noreen. His hair's getting grey and halfway to his ass, which peeks out of jeans I remembered you buying at Walmart lo these many years gone. They're grey too; why'd you never teach him the purpose of Clorox?*

Her mother replied quickly. *I'm thinking about trying a yoga class at the Y with some of the girls. We could get a group discount together. What kind of clothes does one*

*wear to yoga?*

*Something loose, like you'd dance in.*

Cheap shot. Her mother had never danced. She knocked over lamps and sofas just crossing the living room, but it wasn't fear of killing a partner that kept her at home. She'd just had no time to look for 25-year-old boys to play with at that age, to go where they might be. Too busy becoming Super-Meredith the Super-CPA then, but she jumped at the chance seventeen years later. Cute Jimmy, the construction worker she walked past every morning at his site by the Mother's Love Day Care Centre, little Georgia on her hip keeping his conversation relatively free of obscenity. They must have dated, had long talks, or just gotten really drunk, because her mother married him and moved into his dream house. That was a skinny wreck of a rowhouse in a neighborhood he thought was Federal Hill, just getting fashionable. He missed the gentrification by a few blocks and twenty years. Her mother became someone else for a while, half of a young couple and one-third of a young family, but she was no longer young. After he'd put in new floors and a new roof and updated the interior with shiny steel fixtures and black leather furniture, Jimmy left the house and the wife in it. Both had gotten three years older and no more valuable, souring his hopes.

Her mother took it in stride, like everything. From young family matroness to elder of the community in a few months, she joined the neighborhood watch and the PTA, chaired the local fundraising committee and convinced several of her supervisors that Punt & Schneider needed several thousand dollars worth of additional charitable tax deductions on the corporate return. Everyone knew her, Super-Meredith the Super-CPA, homeowner, mentor, and daughter in tow.

*I was in the old neighborhood yesterday—the new people, guess what, after all that trouble yanking out the flower boxes you had up, have put out new crappy ones. They're kinda sad-looking, all marigolds and one weird iris. You seen it yet?*

*Sorry dear, I don't get in town much, and my errands never take me back there. Are the new people still new? Or else, it's been three years, maybe it's a whole different set of new people by now. People are so transient anymore.*

Her daughter was obsessed with the old neighborhood. Always sending her updates, like she expected her to burst into violent grief. As for Meredith, less than fifteen years of that community responsibility shit and she'd been done. Enough was enough. She was tired of being surrounded by fools in discount power suits or ancient dirty tee-shirts all her waking hours, all of them expecting magic. Her daughter sketched them all into her notebooks with equal fascination, always keeping an invisible studio space between them and herself. She could squat anywhere forever, sharp eyes and sharp fingers flying in unison, sure that she had total invisibility and invulnerability. Meredith, who had a little more sense, took the early retirement package, unloaded that damn cramped rowhouse and the idiots surrounding it, and bought a condo out in the sticks just south of the state line. It was 45 minutes away from the city, forty years' worth of driving away. Now she had time and peace to watch television to her heart's content. It gave her heartburn, but she still watched it while she ate dinner, when she flipped through travel brochures without really looking, wearing a visible butt groove into the old green couch. When the attractive supporting actress in a popular sitcom cropped her hair down to the scalp and started kissing girls, Meredith didn't think about ratings and sweeps months. Instead she wondered if in fact young women all across the country had begun sporting

aggressive pixie cuts and kissing girls, just not here in Carroll County, and if this meant her (to be charitable) not very attractive daughter who had shaved her head, again, was off kissing girls (who were possibly also bald, like a race of smoochily affectionate aliens had invaded the Baltimore singles scene), and just once she wanted to know these things while they were happening.

She tried to put this in an email in supportive “I feel”-based language, but it didn’t seem to come out right. *I just don’t understand. I want to understand, really, what’s going on in your life. This world was confusing enough when I was your age, way off here in Carroll County (which I know you think is the dump of the world), but here you are in this crazy new world in this crazy city, trying to figure yourself out and make the best decisions for your adult life. I don’t know that being around all those rich kids playing at being starving artists is really helpful with these decisions. I trust you to make the right ones, but you’ve got to let me in on it. No one’s alone in this world unless they insist upon it.*

Georgia ignored it, anyway, and eventually wrote back a long email about her friend Melo’s drum circle and an article she’d read about rebels in Nigeria, not that the two were related.

*Melo sounds like a very nice boy. Is he Mexican? Does he have a crush on you? I’m always so impressed at how my daughter could keep up with so much news every day.*

Georgia didn’t reply for a week. *Sorry it’s been forever, I’ve been so busy with painting and reading up on Butler and Lordes for a midterm paper. I’m really liking this feminist art- theory course. Probably nothing you’d enjoy, though. It’s really not hard to*

*keep up with the news, just got to have an interest. Melo is in fact a very nice boy, with a very nice girlfriend named Stacey. This week, anyway—he's sort of a manwhore.*

As the summer went on, her daughter allowed her hair to grow back in, bleached it nearly white, then dyed it back to the natural black. She saw it once during each stage, when her daughter made the drive out for Sunday afternoons, bearing exotic produce from the farmers market: tomatillos, serrano and jalapeño peppers, whole lotus roots, sweet asian pears. Her daughter seemed not to notice that her room had been cleared out, keepsakes she'd halfheartedly set out in the room Meredith declared "Georgia's" now boxed again and relegated to the storage space under the stairs. Georgia never stayed to sleep. The girl on tv let her hair grow out again too and got married in the series finale that year to the doofy neighbor-boy across the hall. Her daughter was right; she needed an interest past getting fat in front of the boob tube, so she started buying ethnic cookbooks and doing something with those odd veggies.

Lately, all her mother made was mutant Thai food. She sent Georgia recipes: *Putting ketchup in the coconut curry base really adds to the flavor! But adding pureed tomatillos was a bad idea: I've learned, keep red with red and green with green!*

This idea made Georgia breathe so fast she wondered if it was a panic attack, until the gasps turned to whooping laughter and tears rolled down her cheeks. She read the recipe to her neighbor across the fire escape that night, still hiccupping. He didn't understand. Stupid boy. He didn't see her in the kitchen that night, frozen, ketchup bottle tipped over the wok full of steaming veggies in lava-bubbling sauce and a dollop of red quivering with indecision.

It was always that way. Maybe with all mothers and daughters. Georgia always

came to the end of this thought and trailed off, considering whether it was worth getting some girl friends, finally, just to compare notes. If her mother declared something, she was screwed. It was like the mummy's curse. If she ignored the proclamation, even something silly like *why is this painting so crowded, you should paint things with a little more air to them so people can breathe*, Georgia was wrong, and quickly, like in the next critique where her professor declared she had no grasp of negative space and needed to begin the composition again from scratch. Or, worse, she could take the advice. Like how flared pants were flattering to her figure, and just when she invested in two more pairs her bones made one last jump in inches, leaving her stubbornly highwaterwalking it all year. Her mother spoke and Georgia ducked, more doomed than any poor tomb robber; her mother spoke, and the fabric of reality warped to fit the words.

*Did you try it yet?*

*I skipped the ketchup, but it was pretty good anyway.*

Her daughter had always been tightly wound. Meredith picked her up from the babysitters' on her lunch break for the first day of kindergarten, frowning over her little girl's tight monkey face, her white knuckles around the straps of the backpack she held to her chest. She left work early and was home when her daughter walked in the door shaking and red-faced, threw herself on the new green couch and soaked it black with tears. It took an hour of cold milk, Oreo cookies and back-rubbing for Meredith to hear there'd been no fights, no humiliation, just three hours of constant and building terror that she'd do the wrong thing. Meredith regretted all that night registering her daughter for afternoon kindergarten. Her daughter's little neighborhood friend was signed up for the morning and Meredith had thought she could stand to make some new friends. Some girl

friends. That next evening, though, she got a call from Shawna, who was none too happy her son had waved goodbye at the school and then hid under the merry-go-round all morning, presenting himself with a stubbornly outthrust chin as part of the afternoon class. Shawna was switching him, since the teacher recommended leaving the two together, and Meredith looked at her daughter who'd come home smiling. She couldn't quite have regret for the boy now forever labeled a problem child.

That boy was a good little protector, all through their growing-up years. It took a lot of worry off Meredith's shoulders, knowing her independent little daughter had someone looking out for her when she zoned out with a pad of paper in her lap, when a mother couldn't be there. Shame how he ended up. There was no crying on the couch then. There should have been. What young girl wouldn't, whether she and he been *together* or *just friends* or...well, or god knows what by that point. A mother didn't always need to know. Still, whatever the circumstances...her daughter might have cried outside, maybe in the dilapidated park she seemed to like, maybe in the clubs the two of them used to sneak off to, but the latter seemed unlikely. Georgia'd stopped wearing all that make-up on her eyes, maybe because it ran too easily in the wet or maybe not. She started wearing a lot of pink and light blue, sometimes even lavender. She bought a couple pairs of blue jeans, faded and cut for a boy with a loop on the side for an absent hammer. Her long black skirts and pounds of silver jewelry went into old suitcases in the back of the closet, and her long long hair was cropped up to her neck, at home, using a box cutter.

Meredith felt strange all that summer. She'd always given the girl a long leash, letting her make her own mistakes, and held to a desperate faith she'd come around to the

right conclusions. And Georgia had. Her daughter had finally stripped off everything that had made it hard to look at her, all the black, all the kohl covering her face, all the silver rings running up to the top of her ears, and she didn't look like Meredith's daughter any more.

Georgia shrugged it off, *no point in wearing complicated stuff, just get it all painty*. Meredith didn't ask again, all through that long summer before her daughter finally went off to college. Her daughter felt there was nothing a mother needed to know. Once in those three months, they'd silently shared a dinner of take-out pizza.

*Now, I'm not trying to be a nudgenik, but I just want to be sure you're eating okay. I don't know how much money you make with your little job at school, and any time you talk about going out, it's to a bar. Are you skimping on groceries for beer money? My finances can stretch enough to send a little help if you need it.*

*Sorry I haven't written in a few days—they're scheduling me heavy at work and I haven't had time to breathe. Got a paper to write now, speak soon!*

Not like her mother really wanted to know. She just pawed for reassurance, mindlessly, like Harlow's baby monkey crawling on its terrycloth mother. If Georgia ever told her the truth on anything, her mother would just clap her hands over her ears and sing, la la la! But she wouldn't stop askingasking, always pattering like raindrops, expecting the right answers to pop back at her. Whatever those answers were.

*Sounds interesting—what's this paper on? You sure write a lot—do you still have enough time to paint?*

*Art history. We're on the photography chapter. The early daguerreotypers rarely stayed in the business longer than a year or two because the mercury that made the*

*image quickly drove them insane. That was typical, though, since the lead that painters absorbed, sucking on the hairs of their brushes to make it pointy, drove them insane too. It wasn't genius at all, and o by the way I've decided after all too I don't really want to teach.*

Never a straight answer from that girl. Never a question, either. Every time she spoke, it was around corners, a wide berth given to any possible obstacles. Meredith had always known that she'd eventually have to come clean, had prepared speeches that shifted by bits and pieces as her daughter grew older, but they all depended on being caught. On her fragile lies falling apart under the slightest nudging. It wouldn't take much, just a bit of genuine interest in her own past, in her own family, but the girl just accepted that it made no sense. Just nodded and walked away, deeper into the city Meredith never quite took to, but her daughter called home.

*Here's a different recipe for green curry. Ignore the part about whole peanuts and just use peanut butter instead—Jif or Shurfine, not sugary Skippy or Peter Pan! It saves a load of time. And are you planning to support yourself in the art world? People in Baltimore really only like free art, in places they can wash down any stray edification with beer.*

Georgia didn't reply, so Meredith wrote again, about breakfast with the girls and how her old boss had finally retired too and how after eating they took a drive up through Georgia's neighborhood since it was such a crisp day.

*Which of the pretty townhouses do you live in, surrounded by Bartlett pears? They must be so lovely in the spring.*

Georgia didn't reply.

Her mother looked back and saw only sharp lines filled in with tiny primary-colored dots, like an old funny page. All of it clear, and if you looked close you could see every little molecule that made the picture. Lately when she looked back, it was like she'd gotten too close to someone else's pointillism, unable to make out the figures and furniture from the little jolts of color that comprised them. Her own mirrorface, even, had turned strange, like Van Gogh took over the project and gave her a blue face, green smudges for cheekbones and red-lightning eyes. She looked for that reflection in other people's faces, see if they saw the same extremity in her, but no one was looking. It was like she'd gotten divorced from Allen, instead of drifting away when he refused to respond to her presence, and he'd gotten all the friends. They all seemed to know when she'd be looking for company, because the stoop was always empty when she went out.

*Jimmy called a couple days ago and said to pass on his hellos. (He didn't mention any art girls but you.) I think he still sees you a little bit as a daughter and can't get used to the sight of you all grown up and sipping a beer in "his" bars. Maybe it makes him feel old, or god forbid, think that he'll have to be a grown-up too one of these days! Remember this dear, some men will be 25 or 40 or 65 "going on 12" their whole lives. God love them. Just don't marry them :)*

Once, they were two peas in a pod—or, as Jimmy would chortle, two crabs in a bushel. He still called once in a while, to shoot the bull, usually after he'd come across Georgia in some Mount Vernon bar and got to thinking on younger days. Meredith thought that he was right in a shallow sense, that she and her daughter shared the same long hipless body, the same washed-out blue eyes and sharp chin, the same stubby, graceful fingers. Those genes were strong in her mother's family, obvious in the many

family pictures where the husbands stuck out like polar bears among penguins. Her daughter's innards, however, were purely her father's. Her expressions were his, the way she squinted when she felt threatened, which had already worn lines around her eyes, and the absent sharp gestures out of synch with her words like she was shaking off sparks. Meredith had taken his quiet nature, his reflexive secrets, as mystery. As depth. As artism, his word mumbled through a little smile. Not as teeth ground together hard against the words that didn't make sense, the thoughts he knew ran together wrong.

She remembered him better as pieces of Georgia than as himself. Such a brief time she'd had him, really! A few years out of nearly sixty—acquaintances on the same floor as her cubicle had more space in her memory. Meredith remembered what she thought when they first started dating, how bright and lively she found him and how he would only reveal more and more lovely sides. She remembered quietly leaving their apartment and sneaking into his hotel room the night before they married, trying to be silent for his parents in the next room. Then the Simon & Garfunkle record he played until the voices were all but lost in static. Nights he didn't come home, said he'd left work and just kept driving until it was dawn and he realized he needed to go back to work. The smell of him then, like sour aluminum, the deep wrinkles in those suits he hated so much. One time he rubbed his face, said he was going crazy, and she kissed the nascent bald spot at the top of his head and said, what? *Fatherhood frightens every man? or I feel like that sometimes too? I want to run away from it all sometimes too, but I'm not going anywhere?*

She remembered best the first night she knew he was gone. It was less than a year into their marriage, her washed up in their stainless steel kitchen with a big belly and a

pile of dirty dishes and her hands shaking. So hard she was sure she couldn't hold them, but she stood in front of the sink until exhaustion forced her hands to settle. Meredith washed all the dishes, then scrubbed the kitchen floor. The spot around her feet where dish suds slopped had made the rest of the laminated pressed wood look dirty. Her daughter wiggled against her bladder, delighted with the back-and-forth rhythm of Meredith pushing the big scrubber with both hands. She remembered thinking that God had a second set of books somewhere with an extra column where he recorded everything he siphoned away.

*Have you ever tried yoga? I'm finding I quite enjoy it, surprise surprise. Turns out you can buy pants officially named "yoga pants," but they're just silly-looking sweats. Are you still jogging so much?*

She couldn't be her mother. Forward, always moving forward, slicing cleanly through her life. Unencumbered and bored, taking on whatever Meredith-face was picked out for the new year, tossing the old one into the garbage. Was like having David Bowie for a mother, or maybe a frumpy Grandma Madonna sending a million emails a day. She wasn't herself anymore, either. Sometimes Georgia knew she now liked spicy food and cheap flipflops in the winter, liked old silent films seen in the theatre and hated everything on television; sometimes she painted quickly, mixing pigments impatiently with her fingers and brushing them quickly across canvas, scraping bits off and refilling faster than she could think. More often she stopped short on every decision. Her latest series, a surreal set of paintings based on some weirdoes she met the night she lost Allen, cranks with a crystal meth lab in their bedroom, had started out so well but quickly stalled. She fought the impulse to ask someone what to do, or better yet ask who she

was, what she would choose if she wasn't filled with this terrifying blankness. Some months ago Georgia had a good sit-down stare at some numbers. *1980 dash 1998*, which no matter how long she looked read as *three* years, three years that she'd been off the path and gone through some strange places, three years since she made sense to anyone, three years and if the only person who ever mattered sat up and looked at her short platinum hair and ironic unicorn sweater and right on into her indifferent brain-guts, he wouldn't know her. That stone marked off her time as solid as it did his. Georgia's three years late to any chance of being herself ever again and, worse, now she knows, like she's feeling every individual cell as it dies and is replaced by a new interloper. There's some comfort in knowing at least she'll be new and different again soon, unable to really remember what her face looked like in those bad years.

Georgia hopes her mother never makes a prediction either way on that.

*When are you thinking of coming by for a visit? I've got a recipe I want to try out, but it doesn't freeze well and it'll make too much without an extra person to feed. Let me know—and what are your feelings on pistachios?*

She'll tell her daughter soon. Now Meredith knows, she has to adapt her speech around the listener, make it open with something pointy to break the ice. She married Giovanni because she loved him, and because she wanted to get married and it was getting late to do that for the first time. She married Jimmy because you couldn't let the past keep you from taking new chances. She's taken in Magdalena, Giovanni's senile old bat of a mother, because there's no one else left to love her. Magdalena shuffles carefully between living room and bathroom all day and half the night, normal step with her left foot and mincing step with her right to favor her bad knee and hip. This gait makes her

walk in big arcs, and she will nearly bump into a wall, pause for a long moment to orient herself, shift her feet until she's facing outward, and push off again. Some days, Magdalena remembers she has a granddaughter and demands to meet her. She mostly forgets she hates her remarried daughter-in-law, has shrugged off a twenty-year grudge like it was Georgia's old backpack, now forgotten under the stairs. Meredith wants to remind her of it, to start it up again and soak in the familiar old scowl, but knows this urge is insane. One doesn't taunt the senile. Meredith has given Georgia's room, the room her daughter's spent less than a week's worth of nights in, to Magdalena. When Georgia returns, she can't help but see the old woman. So she can't believe the lies any more, so she pushes through them to the best truth Meredith can give her, finally, even if Meredith can't do it herself. Georgia deserves to know, needs to know... The baby who asked why Dad Jimmy said she's got no father, she didn't deserve the blow.

*Hello dear, are you still alive there in Baltimore?*

She is the one left with a big mess of slashed canvas and a printer all over dust, a laptop keyboard full of coagulated paint and fat zeros in grade books where there's always been high numbers and low letters. She's the one telling herself that's what artists do. She didn't pause a second then; her hands moved with divine purpose while she wordlessly witnessed their energetic scrambling. A different, instinctual creation, raw and destructive. She's also the one who knows that's beneath her, that only artists on television pull that crap, that real artists produce and make professors happy or angry or anything but sighingdisappointed. She knows her partial scholarship is gone, her work-study job in the music lab flown with it, when the fat round grades go into the computer. Soon, not now, but soon. For now, she's suspended while the camera in her head goes

round and picks up every detail she's going to lose.

Georgia pokes one key on her laptop experimentally, wondering if it would boot up. She hasn't tried in days.

Meredith shut down the iMac, sighing as she listened to the crackling of static in the cooling hard drive.

*This would be so much easier if you'd drop the props and talk to me like a human being.*

## Vinegar

This wine has turned.

It was once a perfectly fine seven-dollar bottle of Chardonnay, but it had the misfortune to be opened near the end of an evening as the lower sky peeking around corners of mid-rise apartment buildings and snug rat-riddled townhouses lightened toward dawn. Two glasses were poured and mostly spilled, sticky spots that darkened to the color of dust on her bare hardwood floor. The rest of the bottle was slung, mostly upright, into the back of the fridge behind three empty quarts of chocolate soy milk, where it sagged unstopped for, must be, two months now. Three?

It has turned.

It'll do anyway.

At the end of the evening, when most of the party finally decamped together, and the conversation drifted back up the stairwell through the open door: "Oh! I have a chicken fucking story!" The story itself was lost to the outside world, which no doubt appreciated it.

Those friends may just have kept going. Down the street, literally down because the gentle slope carried them across the big violent cross streets, into the harbor, out to sea. There weren't any memories of them after that night. Who were they? Two painters, one cellist, someone who was maybe a sculptor or something in computer art. He talked about graphic novels all night. Probably a loose photographer who mostly painted anyway, who always seemed to show up. Assorted girlfriends, and me, the host. Allen briefly, shaking his head as he passed the door. I saw him through the peephole,

attenuated limbs and huge skull rolling by. No one else from the stoop came. Even though everyone was still speaking then, none of them came.

It probably should taste sour. My stomach's all acid and crawling up my throat. It's wrapped around my backbone for leverage. My body doesn't want to lie on its back, diagonal across the middle dip, digestive juices oozing up into the mouth, aspirated into the lungs. It probably doesn't want the sips of sour wine sucked from a sweaty bottle.

Can old wine even get someone drunk? It should be mixed with the dry-to-cracking black oil paint, to make the turpentine stretch a bit further. The particulate matter might even shift the shade to something interesting.

The sculptor told the story of meeting Andy Kauffman when he was a toddler. The comedian had asked to hold him, with a gentle smile, and threw him high into the air while his father screamed and his mother laughed. Kauffman caught him with one hand. They neglected to get a picture. One of the girlfriends had met Vincent Schiavelli in a Fells Point coffee shop. He was just like he was on tv, speaking so slow and clear with a self-amused eccentricity. The barista took their picture together, but it never made the corkboard behind the counter. Another girlfriend had ignored a few actors who play cops, with some friends in Nacho Mamas. Then everyone else had ignored them too, in the good Egyptian pizza place, at the harbor bookstore, anywhere there was coffee.

Why's the brain keep such useless fictions? It's starving cells that remember the right way to stretch a canvas in favor of those that serve up empty boasts. Crowding out nonfictional memories that can't be refreshed, leaving precise, brief clips of memory like teases the front pages of porn sites. When I try to remember his face I first see photographs, push those down like beach balls at the pool, and then, always, one silly

conversation. In his basement, his mother upstairs making a racket with silverware and pans, videos flashing with the sound low. His profile, snub nose and high pinprick cheekbone picked out in shifting colors from the screen, thin lips stretched in a grin. *He don't stop moving much, ever. Listen, you notice there's not much even of a musical bit in the middle? He's singing and jumping the whole time.* Laughing, turning his face to me, when the clip ends. Cuts off like the celluloid's been chopped.

Outside, there's the too intimate noise of jingling keys, the very specific sounds made when a man walking in snug jeans pulls the ring of them out of his pocket. The tired little noise travels from the quiet alley, up four stories and in my wide-open back window, dropping some guy's hand brushing his genitals in my ear. It's inside my eyelids, supplanting my solid body.

I was dreaming, something silly. Walking along tree limbs up in the sky, through the thick trunks. In each trunk there was a different play, which I strolled through the middle of and out the other side. Running, naughty feeling I was trespassing in other people's dreams. Ran right into my own, that old one, with the white walls and the blind man in the white lab coat handing me the little circular saw. *You have to do it* he says, blinking lashless lids over eyes like old marbles, *there's no one else.* Behind him, the slab, and the stainless steel instruments mounted on all the walls come into focus. In front of them, the slab. Under a white sheet with crisp blossoming red stains, the slab. *You have to do it* he says again but I've already taken the saw and the apron, already stepped forward, because between the blind man and the decorated wall and between the sheet and the slab, it's Jays. I know his ashy profile, all I can see of his face, but more than that I know the ginger roots pushing out from the crown of his head, clashing with

the purple dye we put in just last month, and I fumble with more than ten fingers for the switch on the saw without looking because if I blink—

—the head turns away from me; the sheet slides to the floor. The saw, whining to life, lands by my foot before I shuck the white apron off my shoulders and leap forward, through the slab, through the wall, back out into the leaves and mindlessly swaying branches.

Woke up after I ran into the wall separating bedroom from bathroom. Still feeling bark under my feet as I tripped over shoes, brushing against leaves instead of cobwebs.

This body loves to run. We ran down an alley back behind Ferguson's grocery, startling a half-dozen rats. Breath flying into lungs, rattling air sacs hanging like hard apples, blowing back out in gusts. Long muscles singing along my legs, settling thick-heeled feet down among debris in the broken concrete with contemptuous ease. Wanting to run further and faster until my heart gives out in one joyful last pump. Pulled back, though, pulled down by a little sound that cut through the blood in my eardrums, *hyuh, hyuh, hyuh!* That old siren, loud as a scream: *Jays can't breathe!* There's Jays falling on the brick wall right into the graffiti tag that announces *Krisp!* and though the noises I know like my own heartbeat are coming from his mouth it's just some anonymous body more than it is my Jays and I'm struck by how damn tiny that body is, how I could tuck it up and carry it like a backpack. Some wayward gravity still tugs my body forward and for one bad second I think I will just keep going. But his face is turned to the brick and I can't leave him without his own face in that little broomstick of a body like a tree ripped out and propped against the building that grew over it.

That was the last night I ever got stoned, the night I came back for Jays, grabbing a lid off the trash can stickered with B' LIEVE HON, holding it over my head with both hands and ready to face off a horde of thug dealers, though there'd only been three to start with, as young as Jays and already bored with the chase, back to their prime real estate in front of the closed-up corner bar. After running back through long seconds like hours each, finding the clear plastic inhaler teetering on a gutter grate, and much later settling Jays in a calm corner of the club, I knew I was done with that fooling around. With that in our lungs, smoke worse than the cigarettes that were much harder to buy at fifteen, Jays couldn't breathe. I couldn't breathe.

There wasn't a thought I had alone, not for years. He told me first that he was in love with Renée Quick, even before he told her and she ran away making a terrible face, and I told him right back *I* was in love with Andy Patterson and that Andy loved me because he confessed *to me* his middle name was Howard. I never tested it by telling Andy himself, though. Even at 6 I knew better. Information like that only belonged to your best friend.

We realized together religion was stupid, and so were wars. We read Ayn Rand; we read Anne Rice. We stopped buying clothes that weren't black. We learned the right way to put on eyeshadow and to fill in your whole lips with the liner. *We* did. *We* thought.

It was a long time before I knew I was thinking alone, believing my own echoes were that other harmony. Even those hang-up messages on the answering machine that night, when Mom picked me up from a babysitting job after a late night in the office, an

even dozen click-dial tones recorded, didn't tell me. Mom gave me a look half worried half exasperated and asked in a snarky tone if I'd been checking up on her all night. I didn't know yet when Jays' mom called early the next morning to make sure I wasn't stopping by before noon. They were just finally back from the hospital after getting his stomach pumped late last night and her little boy needed his rest more than he needed little friends bothering him. His little *friends*.

When I want to remember his face, all I see are still frames of captured motion, from photographs worn thin from looking, images gone abstract so now I can only see a nose, a chin with a nearly healed pimple, a widow's-peak hairline. One moss-green eye and then the other. They don't form his face. They could be loose bits of anyone. I see sometimes too his gray profile in the autopsy room before it tilts away from me, and when I squeeze my eyes so tightly it makes fireworks behind my eyelids against that I can only see the thin body revealed, sunken belly button, big bony knees, limp translucent worm curled in sparse darker pubic hair. Pushing on the squishy occipitals with the heels of my hand can't rub it away.

Seen plenty of naked boy bodies in my life. Plenty. More than I'd want my mother to know, though less than I claim. All sorts of boy bodies, tall, tiny, thin, solid, wide and rippling—I don't have a type. They merge together easily, one amorphous shape with legs and arms and a cock hanging in there somewhere, and oh, always a nice little belly. Soft to rest my head on. I do have a type, then: no six-packs, no sit-ups. Soft chewy center instead.

We didn't have bodies, not like that. We had arms and legs and torsos, and he'd kneel to lace up my boots when I was already corseted tight into an imitation of bosom, or I'd tuck a silk shirt into his plaid pants the right way so it wouldn't bulge funny and wrinkle. They were bodies, but bodies like the family station wagon. Only there to carry us around.

Mulder and Scully. The same old argument. Funny how the girl was the noromo, the boy the shipper. She turned away, faced the wall as he insisted Mulder clearly needed her, couldn't live without Scully in his life, and what more could any woman ever ask? She pulled her shirt—heavy velvet, belled sleeves, far too hot for the sweaty gritty work of collecting loose railroad spikes by the abandoned granary—over her head, tossed it to the carpet. Replied the Mulder was clearly unstable, had ruined her life, and Scully could do much, much better. Ideally with Skinner. But some nice stable guy. Threading her hands into the sleeves of the teeshirt—one of his, black washed to grey and slick-soft as new leaves—and lifting it. *You know, just because they're together all the time for work doesn't make him not a stalker. Just lazy, picking the target that's right there anyway.*

So quiet, like he wasn't even breathing. She yanked the shirt down over her breasts—acutely aware all at once of their stunted size, mid-cycle sensitivity, and the fact she'd worn no bra—and turned. He was naked and motionless, something carved from soapstone or rough granite. She wouldn't remember his expression, just the way his eyes bored into hers, the fine skin at the corners twitching. Her own eyes fell like they'd been dropped, in seconds taking in the thin chest, concave stomach and outie belly button, the flaccid cock that moved just as her gaze touched it.

She turned back, quickly and crossing her arms over her covered chest. *Skinner*, she finished. *Sane, sane man, not getting drugged up and accusing her of...of...all the time. Just, not Mulder.* She leaned on the doorjamb with her eyes closed, listening to the rustle of clothing. *Not Mulder is the point.* She wouldn't remember what came next, if they made the long walk to Locust Point, the longer ramble along the old railroad tracks, what they said, if they spoke. She'll remember many conversations that came later, just never the very next one. The one that brought them back too normal. They never again spoke of Mulder and Scully.

The face is almost clear. It's too slippery, though, quickly takes on a broad nose, sensual lips squishing in between it and a big round chin. Wrong parts—the nose was thin and long, the lips just one inked line drawn into skin, the chin a distant southern point that, to be honest, receded more than was really attractive. The only thing right on these features—Mulder's, of course—is the expression, just as he breaks to give away the joke. Lips tight and beginning to turn up, the crinkled nose. Eyes dancing, looking into my own left then right then left then right and on, searching for amusement.

He moved when he was happy, when he teased and talked spontaneously. The old photographs are bothersome, because he was only that still in unhappy moods. Smiles forced to hold still become forced smiles, a casual arm thrown across my shoulder becomes tense. Crossed knees clench, toes roll into unhappy pillbugs.

Was my boy always unhappy?

He was happy when he danced. Sure of that. Even in big platform boots, a heavy black jacket with buckles and hooks that jingled when he walked, he moved like a

kerosene fire. Always leaping up, never touching foot to floor. Other less skilled dancers jostled him, drunks linked their arms around his waist for balance, friends leaned over to speak and bonked foreheads, but he took up no space they could share. A big-winged insect with legs like penciled lines, body less substantial than its movement.

He grabbed me, though, and his hands were real. Fingers with hard bones in them catching my wrist as I passed, winding familiar paths around my hips. Curling me into his motion, forcing a dainty grace into my limbs to match his. Big gristly tendons of his shoulders grinding against my back. Clammy lips brushing my ear as he laughed, friendly press of his head into my neck—cold sweat-slimy hair leaving its slick behind—tugging an answering giggle from me as he swung me out and back, ducking under his arm and turning. Taking his opposite hand in mine and leading, twirling him away then close, under the arch of my arm and around my back. Swing dancing to a slower beat next to the apathetic moshers more properly flailing to the monotonous industrial noise, until, from behind, he wrapped both arms around my middle and lifted me up, kicking, still laughing. When the smoke got to him, the tiny space with no ventilation but the front and back doors, we drooped wordlessly together in some corner, hands loosely clasped.

Once, drunk on spit-frothy dregs from unattended glasses, we found ourselves in the middle, hands joined and twirling fast, him running forward and me skipping back, while the other dancers formed a circle around us and clapped. Fingers entwined and gripping so hard they throbbed, bodies pulling away harder and harder as we accelerated. The other dancers flattening into the firmament of the wall, nothing but streaks of shiny silver, deep red velvet, bright lilac and satin. Nothing but his face was clear, bright flash

of teeth in his gaping mouth as he looked at me, down at his feet, at me, at a girl we nearly took down, at me. The sight of his laughter.

When the sun was out and we two sat by it in the shade, he made names for his dances. Catching the Butterfly (he held his hands up and gracefully fluttered, staring between them with an enraptured look), Squishing the Cockroaches (crouching, hard stomps and glares between his feet), Night at the Pier (full-body spasms, arms flinging wildly along his skin as if it crawled with bay mosquitoes and gnats). He kept his face still and serious, mimicking my expression when I told him how I would turn my sketches into paintings, until it cracked and he grinned. Teasing agreement in giggles, even though he made fun of me more than his dancing. My thoughts on composition and texture bored him to death unless it was describing his eyeshadow technique. At night, when I watched him, thoughts of invisible insects passed only briefly through my mind before it moved on to capturing him. How a simple video recording would only ground him in a clumsy body moving inside space, that the movement needed to be made static. Caught and pinned, the dying flutters hovering forever for contemplation.

A series of sketches made over time, trying to remake his face on paper—they evolved and merged together into a rough portrait of a smile in seven chronological stages, moving across a stylized face that could have been his or Mulder's or mine. My advisor found these flipping through my sketchbook one awful self-portrait critique in front of the entire class—*Why don't you work in this direction instead*—I demurred—*just an exercise, working after Duchamp's naked fella on the staircase*—he insisted—*Consider it your semester assignment from this midpoint on*—and I failed the class. He didn't understand that it was simply not me.

Wine's gone, evil stuff, like it never was. The bottle was made to lie sticky and dusty under a bed. Stomach heaves now, forces an acidic belch between sodden lips. Body rolls, nerveless and overbalancing, onto its side at the edge of the bed.

A mouse walks slowly, arrogantly, across the wood floor, passing between shoes and plates and taking sophistic note of it all. Fat body rolling along, undulating with the dainty steps. It disappears into the hallway, probably making for the kitchen.

I can see him, still.

Unmoving in the middle of the club, early in the night when everyone was running back and forth as friends paid their cover and shed jackets slick with rain. Reaching out to grab him as he passed, and he turns to stand at parade rest, features set in rejection. The words, some happy greeting, dried in my mouth. My lips moved and I wondered if he'd think he just couldn't hear me over the music, and wondered with increasing urgency when we'd last spoken, where I'd given offense. His face was still while freaks passed and sidestepped behind him, not quite glaring, while my fumbling mental fingers found puzzle pieces everywhere they touched, threw them away, and they fell naturally into a clear picture. It had been at least a week since we'd talked, and that briefly. Some argument about a shirt of his I'd borrowed and ruined with bleach, though I hadn't borrowed anything recently. A month before that, at least, since we'd gotten together. Both of us busy with senior year, college decisions, graduation invites, all new things disrupting the routine and taking our time away. Of course. But even before that, he'd lapsed into silence more and more, responding to my old conversational gambits

with an impatient grimace and a glance over his shoulder, always leaving early. Some girl's name he'd mentioned once, then conspicuously never. I couldn't remember the last time we'd fallen asleep on the couch together, watching the old silent movies that ran on cable at 2 am, heads tilted together like tulip blossoms.

His face, that tight unhappy expression, I can see. Lips so tight and white they disappear. Nostrils of that fine thin nose flaring irregularly, bright spots of color high on his cheekbones. Eyes wide and fixed on mine like they wanted to be looking at anything else. That smooth James Dean forehead, the spikes of black hair with light orange roots obvious even under the red lighting from the bar. Shaved on the sides. I thought that hairstyle was a mistake, looked more like early-90s white rapper than freak. He did it himself, or had someone new mess up all my hard work with this dull chop. Some dull girl who was too boring to say her name more than once, some unprimed canvas with an undry underpainting his hand itched to fill in with better colors.

*I don't want to be friends anymore. I can't be friends with you.*

Never saw his lips move. So different from the usual club conversations, yelling and lip reading; instead, the words meshed into the music—a slower song, heavy on synthetic percussion in three-quarter time that he'd undoubtedly find appropriate for *Catching the Butterfly*—pure undistorted tones dipping into my eardrum.

The rest of the conversation is lost—I fought, I'm sure. Demanded an explanation, argued for our long friendship. Wouldn't have asked the honest question: *How do we not be friends? How do I be me without you?* He shrugged, looked at his feet and right back at me, shrugged again. We could speak now and still knit ourselves up, but the flow of people behind him grew thicker and insistent. Passing hands patted

his shoulder, other mouths said hellos and false eyelashes blinked fetchingly. Snagging him, pulling him into the moving mass and away from the space his voice made. They caught and held, lifted him from his feet; he was a waterbug balancing by the shore. He floated, stiff body cresting their waves, finally tugged loose and carried away. His hard, angry face floated away from me and out the door, into another life I had no place in.

Stomach rolls and rolls and rolls. Back of my mouth itching, edges of my jawbones tingling up under my ears. Awful foamy taste with every exhale. Bad stuff in my stomach leaching through the lining and it won't stay.

All of me rolling, off the bed, my feet touching the floor first and holding, letting inertia pull the rest of me upright. Kicking shoes left and right, the noise like firecrackers when they hit the wall. Shoulder bouncing, hard, off the first doorjamb, forehead bumping open the bathroom door.

Sitting in front of the toilet in the dark. Resting my soggy forehead on the cool comforting porcelain. Waiting now, patient now, for my stomach to upend its contents. Sleep afterward.

The weeks were busy. It was surprisingly easy to give him space to fight this out with himself. The so-visible freak clique dissipated as graduation approached, some putting away their costumes and others approached by suddenly open-minded classmates who wanted to know who was under the scary make-up and chains now that everyone was moving on. A crew of B-string football players, suddenly noticing my four-year habit of running the track around their practice field, hijacked my social life. Amusing

and new to be their conversation piece, the exotic at the lunch table. Then there was graduation, and then I met a whole mess of new people on a post-acceptance tour of campus, guys who couldn't shut up about composition and texture and the importance of transmedia over multimedia work, and spent the week after graduation in a haze of emailing, meeting up, and painting.

He came to mind. I pushed him into a corner, for now, keeping him away from my new friends, my new work. My new life. *Yeah, you just sit there and look at all the cool shit you're missing. You just glare at that and feel left out.*

My mother made plans to move, bought a condo in the sticks, way out of the city. She bought a new car and put the old one's title in my name. I drove north, around the big harbor to the middle of the city, meeting new friends and their friends. Ages didn't matter like they had in high school; a junior living near school invited me to a graduation party for his roommate. Again, I was the exotic, the costume (my best short velvet dress, a heavy studded belt, thick silver hoops dangling from a half-dozen holes in each ear, plum lipstick eyeshadow and nails) giving my conversation unexpected weight. Guys pulled me from conversation to conversation like cutting in on a dance, and other girls fell silent until I moved past.

I thought all night how unlike these guys he was, how he'd never have projects to babble excitedly about, how he'd moved from brush to molding globs of paint into shapes with his fingers or melted crayons to liquid and used it for a figure outline. He had no projects to speak of, nothing to make him stand out except when he danced in some drab little club on an unfashionable peninsula. Nothing made him special like these guys, except to me.

When they weren't talking, these boys were a disappointment. The seniors in my high school had expanded into adults, people I could see interviewing for real jobs, real lives. The freshmen around me were children again, skinny unformed babies who needed more years to flesh them into people. The older students were my high school friends, just left in the oven a bit longer. The graduate himself, a slight young man who looked barely older than me except for the wrinkles around his mouth, kept fresh beer in my hand until he convinced me to stay and sleep it off. We watched an old silent movie until his roommate went to bed, and then he began shucking his clothes like a weary old day laborer ready for sleep, and kissed me.

I didn't feel the sensations so much as catalogue them. Wet warm lips, a limp tongue moving at mine, aggressive and lazy. Dissipating taste of old beer. His hands slid down my body, finding my nipples with his thumbs through the synthetic velvet. I arched against him, surprised at his sure movements—*Jays chuckling, hands on my nonexistent hips, you're like the tube in a roll of paper towels, you know that, no bumps anywhere*—at the pleasure of blood rushing to meet him. He ducked to kiss underneath my jaw and moved both hands lower. I was cataloguing a checklist as he ran through it, lingering nowhere. I squirmed away, quickly aroused but not enough, shaking in frustration and a little fear. He leaned back, spreading his arms along the top of the couch, tilting his head at me.

*You're a kid* he mumbled, his voice warm and bemused. *Just a kid*, almost tender, and yawned. His head fell back into the cushion. Even with the windows open it was humid and breathless, late Baltimore Spring, and his skin had pushed out little beads

of moisture. His curly blond hair, already thinning, had gone matted into the dips of his temples. He crossed his legs, showing me knobby knees.

I touched a lumpy joint, running my finger along the line of light and shade under the kneecap, obliterating it with my hand's shadow. Wiry hairs tried to push me off course. Traced the division of muscles down his calf, remembering their shapes from Gray's Anatomy but not their names, down to the foot. All hard skin, flaking between toes, bones and hair and utility. He chortled, tiredly, and pulled it away. I took the other one and traced my way back up, along the sharp shinbone, underneath the knee, all tendons and depressions. Tugging at his boxer shorts when they got in my way, and he obligingly lifted up, slid them off. Sketching along his hip, up to his stomach where the skin was loose and vulnerable. Thin chest, concave stomach. Softened penis resting upward, touching his belly, solidifying again as I traced the space around it, dipped my finger into his navel.

He watched me, fixed and still. Another statue of soapstone, this one reclining, but where I touched he was yielding and warm. Pulse of blood underneath his immobile pose, veins jumping in rhythm to the joyously pounding heart. He moved suddenly, pulling at the hem of my dress, and I pulled it up over my head.

We were back on the checklist. Fumbling in his discarded pants, and absent swipe of tongue that made me tense and gasp. Condom. Awkwardly leaning back over me, knees bumping, positioning, a hard thrust forward, our bodies touching nowhere else.

*Look at what you're missing. Just sit there and glare. I can see you, that bastard look on your face, staring and staring, missing it all.*

I'd forgive him, of course. Just not right now, not in absentia. I'd stay mad for a while.

Another call, another call. Shawna, her voice an exact angry xerox, *his little friends*, only mad at me a little. Still lost in an early two-dimensional stage of emotion, defaulting into the familiar, waiting without knowing it for the punctures from new subtleties of grief. Mad at me, for not going, but I wasn't invited. It wasn't my choice to abandon. Beating me with unfiltered facts with the indifference of a hard rain.

She hung up, another mostly silent call to make, and another after that, until some fool shook it off quickly enough to take the job from her. I set the phone on the counter, fist the blank dial tone and then the off-the-hook alarm swallowed by a quarter inch of linoleum. Put my own head down next to it and laid out the puzzle pieces, looking for those with solid edges to start the border.

Dry eyes like veiny grapes. A last-minute senior week. Who are those people? Shannon. Her friends. Jays. Hotel pool, chlorine and summers-old urine. Senior week. Senior week? Who goes on those things? Shannon, that was the name. Always hated that name. Hotel pool, dead water a hundred yards away from the dangerous, lively undertow and collapsing sand cliffs.

A.m. 3 a.m., 4 a.m., only an estimate anyway. Closing time. Red swollen eyes with sticky plastic membranes. Chlorine always hurt him. Why'd he go swimming? Shannon. Shannon and some guy. Some other guy, on senior week. Wrinkled all over like you feared as a child, lingering in a cooling bath.

He went swimming? He hated swimming. The chlorine hurt him, made the veins in his eyes swell and the passages in his lungs shrink. Hated being pulled by the ocean, losing breathe and unsafe and panicking. He hated the sun beating up from the sand.

Senior week, everyone high. Some girl sneaking in at dawn, creeping close to the sweetish smell of a forgotten bong on the patio. No one saw. No note, no indications. Bowels released underwater, the mess, the smell disgusting the girl, who turns away soon enough, tells her friends not to go where some drunk took a dump, nothing known, the important hours absconded unseen, and no note, no one knows anything, nothing that needs to be known.

Police and questions and substances fouling the blood, bawling in a blanket, everyone home early, every answer unfound, every call still to make. No logic, and no note.

Just his face, floating, bobbing really with no tide to carry him away, still and angry. Furious. At her, at his now-ex-girlfriend up in their rented bed with some guy, or worse at me, drifting off on a strange couch with an indifferent wad of toilet paper between my legs.

Or, no. Worse, far worse, for that angry face to be looking past me sleeping and already no longer bleeding, not even seeing me. Furious at Shannon, some careless girl who'd broken his heart, disappointed with the world, with himself, with whatever he smoked that did nothing to take the edge off, and nothing in that face for me at all.

Someone is pounding on my door.

## Glance

*thud thud thud.*

The ceiling stretches over her like rough beige firmament. One crack runs from the left back corner to nearly the middle, where it breaks into two unambitious fractures that peter out within inches.

*thud thud. slap!*

The left front corner, the edge that meets up with the ceiling of her sunroom—the only wall of the apartment with outside windows, and it has five as big as doors—that has a bigger fault, a solid leaf of paint nearly a foot long pulling away. Probably a persistent leaking pipe somewhere under the tarpaper roof, up where rodents scamper all year long.

*slap! slap!*

Muffled noise, minute vibrations where ceiling and wall and floor meet.

“Allen! Wake up, ya useless bastard!”

*thud.*

Georgia has been inside too long. Even her mother's emails have switched from worrying she spent more money on beer than groceries to asking hopefully, is she going out tonight? Perhaps on Saturday? Her computer no longer works reliably, even after she took it apart and scraped out the dried clumps of oil paint (Georgia isn't entirely clear on how it had gotten there, but she assumed it happened the same night she decided slashing up three of her last paintings and tossing them to the alley below was necessary for her artistic progress). It's easy to ignore emails and until the stridently cheerful

messages cease.

She'd had friends. Mostly people from school, other baby artists and their girlfriends and groupies. They were easy to forget, but after intervals of varying length there would be a tug from one end of a relationship or the other, and meetings resulted. A gang pulled together to drink and bowl or drink and watch movies or just talk, and she often found herself holding hands across a beer-sticky booth in one-digit hours, speaking urgently and listening with solemnity. It was embarrassing, afterward. She'd ducked it all for some time now, desiccating instead.

Her apartment is one large room divided into sleeping and working areas by slowly flowing piles of books and paper, a few forgotten meals lost in the layers. There's a small kitchen and a huge bathroom where she stores most of her clothes and nonperishable food. She's paced every inch of it until the map is indelible in her brain matter, stooped and explored under fixtures where forty years worth of grime was stored. The mice and she no longer fear each other.

*thud thud thud. thud thud.*

It's much closer now. She sits up, reluctantly, and swing her legs off the bed. Her bare toe touches the thick sole on one of her best pair of club shoes.

Two unsteady shadows break up the line of light underneath her door.

*thud thud thud thud.*

A ball of flesh smacking against her wood.

"Geooooorge! Georgie! Geooooorge! GeorgeGeorgeGeorge!"

She and the mice scurry for the safety of the far wall.

"Georgie! I know you're in there!"

The neighbor downstairs, the creepy one who sometimes sits outside her window on the fire escape, smoking and muttering, begins to yell. "Shut your fucking faggoty mouth!" drifting pleasantly through the floorboards.

Georgia dashes to the door and pulled it open. "Shut up!" she hisses, leaning out to peer down the stairwell.

"Babe! Can I use your can? Thanks."

"No," Georgia answered out of habit, but Jerry's already pushed by, unzipping his fly. She closes the door behind him, hears a door downstairs slam as well. He looks a little heavier than when she'd seen him last, but he carries weight easily on his barrel-shaped body. Nothing essential will have changed, the soft curves of his back and dimpled buttocks, strong legs and big firm belly, the undersized penis from which he now unselfconsciously shakes the last drops of urine.

"What happened?" he nods toward the window. Due to a quirk of the architecture, her bathroom window is only feet away from her neighbor's bedroom window. She used to be able to look out and usually see his body, a shifting mound under blue star-and-sun patterned blankets, but now the window was black. Probably spray paint, something quick and dirty. One spot near the bottom right corner was thin, almost transparent. "Allen have a breakdown? Finally?"

Georgia shrugs. "What brings you here, Jer?"

Jerry blinks and pulls an elaborate double-take, the matted mess of his hair flying over his shoulders and back. "What, no welcome back, Jer, how was Mexico, Jer, missed your effulgent present like I'd miss a limb, Jer?"

"You've been gone?"

"Yeah, for the last month and a half! Mexico! Where've you been, stoned?"

Georgia adds up the weeks, surprised to realize two months have passed. "No, just, not out. I picked up some freelance work with Burton that's kept me busy."

"Who's Burton?"

"Film guy. Mostly bald, pony nub in the back? Works in modern noir, mostly?"

"Oh yeah. The razor in the eye, first day of class."

"Yeah."

"God, that's classic. Makes the little girls howl. Look, I have to go, but come tonight. I'm having a Welcome-Me-Back party, and I walked the whole way here to invite you personally. You know your phone's off?"

"Yeah, they do that when you don't pay them, turns out."

"Oh, okay then. See you and Al tonight, okay? If he's in a presentable stage of crazy. Bitch won't even have the decency to be home for me any more. Bring me a present, everyone's bringing presents."

He busses her on the cheek and leaps down the stairs two at a time. Georgia's door rattles in time with his jumps. She glares across the stairwell at Allen's door. *We're not together, we're not even friends*, but she can't tell Jerry that, not without the building echoing her business. She didn't need downstairs crazy guy popping in her window for a caring conversation, didn't need the old wood storing up her words and vibrating them back out as soon as Allen stepped under the lintel.

The token outsider, tossing two conversations from hand to hand. "Yes, I've done

the bartending bit...made these for the servers after hours...that's why there's english, you've got to be careful with how much spin you put on it...no, back in Jersey, in a sort of biker bar, actually...well, your hands are all wrong to start with; try it more like this, just let it slide between two knuckles, that's how I...no fights, no; I was underage, anyway, so none of the ladies threatened anything other than to get a good meal in me..."

An acquaintance of a friend of Jerry's, a photographer who picked up some extra money working as a filing clerk most mornings in his office on the second floor. She'd been amazed someone so young would be in middle management—he explained he'd graduated from college in three years, gotten a masters in business management in two, and was promoted twice in his first year of his first job. His expression shifted as he got to the end. She'd told him he looked like a monkey trying to work a turntable and invited him to her friend's party on Saturday to see if it would precipitate some hidden bohemianism. She didn't show, herself, leaving him self-conscious of his pressed pants and cleanly shaved cheeks. Everyone else has wrinkles and extra holes in their skin.

Jerry finds him in the foyer, pretending to be fascinated by everyone's hanging coats. He establishes his credentials (*I work with Lori, she was supposed to meet me here*) and hands over his bottle of pinot grigio, learning that it's in fact a welcome-back present for this large black fellow with dreadlocks like seaweed hanging from his head (*I love gringo wine! Thanks!*). He sees ancient dandruff twisted into the locks down to the tips and it makes his own scalp itch. Jerry pulls him into the living room, introducing him as "our dear Mr. Walsh, who has graced us with his company for the first time tonight," and leaves him to sink. He seeks refuge behind the makeshift bar, a door set

across cement bricks lined with bottles and fingerprinted glasses, and begins mixing.

"I never actually worked in a biker bar. I made that up."

"Ooh." His gaggle of new admirers slumped together in disappointment. No men in this crowd, a relief. All the piercings have him worried.

"Actually," he rallied, "it was an S&M bar."

"No it wasn't!" one shrieks back while the others giggle or roll their eyes or smile. She's a cutie, he's thinking, long red hair, much redder lips, and the lingering gawkiness of adolescence charming up a curvy body. She bops his arm with a small fist, mock-frowning. He's wondering after that touch if she goes home with guys she just met and, after weighing the variants, decides it's probable.

It's Saturday, and this fact featured primarily in his thoughts, the likes of which would be quite uncomfortable and saddening to explore in any depth. This is a late night, just past midnight already, his usual departure time on weekends. He fights the impulses of his body, the dry eyes and just slightly stiff and aching joints, that send subtle but insistent messages to his brain: *time for bed, say your goodnights, time for bed...*

There's one...person? Someone keeps getting his attention, his eyes drifting over the heads of his sudden bartender-groupies three times before he realizes he's staring. He's mostly sure it's a girl. Her thin legs are nice instead of froggy, and even if a guy had legs like that he wouldn't wear jeans that tight, so tight she couldn't sit upright and breathe at the same time. She lounges back into the overstuffed velour of the couch instead, head tilted at an acute angle that makes the skin of her neck into a loose double chin. Her nylon, zigzag pattern shirt that screamed triumphantly of Goodwill is only

buttoned at the top, sliding away from the naked and bulbous belly poking over her waistband. No bra, clearly. She looks like a bored, fleshy ghost trapped in the press of bodies on and around the couch listening to one bald fool plucking out “American Pie” on a mandolin.

They met once before on some random Wednesday morning at the Eager Street Laundromat. She'd been there when it opened at 7, sleepwalking. This was during her worst run of sleepless days, and she was actually rewashing clean clothes from yesterday's trip to the laundromat, but she would never realize this. The nights were running together. An hour later she was tumbling steamy cotton onto the lone folding table in the front. He walked past, slightly late for work already, and snagged his gaze on the droopy-eyed girl folding her polka-dot underwear in the wide front window like a pizza maker teasingly flipping dough. She tossed that pair in her basket and fished another out of the pile: pink and blue stars. Then a Hello Kitty thong. One with a tiny hula girl in the front, wearing a grass skirt of loose green threads. How many folds she made in such tiny scraps of fabric! His nose touched the window, picking up a smear of grime no one would tell him was there until lunchtime. She frowned with her whole face when she noticed him and bumped the glass with her fist, one finger stiffly raised. He jumped back, almost into the street, and fled south, stalking like one of the demented power walkers she'd seen in her youth. The majority of his features were gone from her mind well before she swung the basket on her hip and started home, while he blushed and cringed through a long morning of budget committee meetings.

She holds out her glass, mostly full of something clear and bubbly, and lets go. Eyebrows raised, she leans forward to assess the change, spreading her knees to make room for her head, then settles back with a sigh and throws a casual arm around the guy next to her. No one seems to notice, even the girl sitting on the floor who scoots out of the way of the spreading puddle.

They met months before that in a pricey martini bar. She allowed Melo and some writer wannabe he was dating to drag her along because she was still nursing last night's hangover and only wanted cola. The chick bartender put an umbrella in it and charged her six dollars. He sat to her right on the tail end of his office's happy hour, not drinking something green and black called a Sexy Alligator and wondering what he was even doing out on a Tuesday night. They bumped elbows until she made a face and moved to sit by herself at a table. Minutes later he noticed her there, a lone female with a thousand-yard stare, and briefly considered making a move, but it was, after all, a Tuesday. She saw the appraising look, knew the moment he decided against the effort, and giggled so hard she choked rime of lime into her sinuses, setting off another nosebleed.

Something in her face make him think of his first girlfriend, his freshman year of high school, granny panties and a matted bush of hair turning him away from her pussy, the grey space behind his eyelids as a sticky-dry tongue worked in grim rhythm. Memory goes to his stomach worse than his flagrant mixing of vodka and National Bohemian.

She leans forward again and snatches up her glass, briefly catching his eye before

she presses it into a random pair of hands. They pass it on to another and another, like bucket brigade, until it reaches him. He adds small squares of ice and a whole lime, then fills the rest with gin. The result he thinks looks like some sort of abstract art, something from the Wall Street years, white squares and one green circle and sparkles all around. He hands it off and follows it back across the room.

"Hi, I'm—"

"Sit! Right here!"

"Um...okay. Except there's already—"

"I don't want him here. Make him leave."

...

"Excuse me, um...would you mind, so I can...thanks. Really."

"Thank God. Boy had no idea how close he came to sitting on that thing for the rest of his life."

...

"Rally, young man. You can do it."

"Young man?"

"Sorry, are you a reverse trannie? Good job, if so."

"No...no...my insides are male as well. I'm not so sure about you, though. Not at the moment."

...

"Got you."

"Stop smirking. It's not becoming on such rat-like features."

"Rat-li—uh huh. Still, I got you. Are you going to enlighten me, or what?"

"Better to keep you guessing."

"Might keep my interest longer."

"You don't want to be interested. My last date went very badly."

"I hate dating. Can I tell you that? I hate dating. We won't be dating."

"Probably best."

"Do you like the drink?"

"So, what do you do, young man? You look like someone who does something and expects to be asked about it."

"Young man? ...nothing exciting. I have a cubical and a computer that won't let me download porn. Well, not good porn."

"But what do you do in that cubical? Without porn. The good porn."

"Well, partly I manage different client accounts and partly I help control the entire company's numbers as well. Keeping it all on track and adding up right."

"All your ducks in a row."

"Yeah, just like that."

"My mother's an accountant too. Always saying that. Or she was. Are you trying to make yourself look plain?"

The suit, wearing only part of his armor, at least pushed Lionel and his closed-eye warbling out of her lap, and for that she has to be grateful. Has to be upright. Has to wet herself down. Has to get rid of this thing.

She fishes the lime out of her drink and drops it in his lap.

He smiles. Says thanks.

Shrugs. Says in my way, and drank. Winces. Says thanks for waving some ginger ale over this one, really cuts the bite.

He smiles. Says you looked tough. He smiles.

He smiles.

Georgia turns her back on him and catches someone else's eye, someone who just tripped and lays a hand on her shoulder. To them says I'm not even supposed to be here tonight.

Jer, passing behind, touches her hair like a benediction, burying his fingers in the hard gelled clumps and digging fingertips into her skull to turn her gaze back to the suit.

Waves him away like a fat buzzing fly. Says stop looking at me like that.

He smiles.

Says I said stop it.

He blinks, features relaxing into confusion. Those false brittle lines softened.

Says how should I look at you. He smiles. He smiles, and the lines creak into firmness.

She says not like that.

He smiles. Says what do you do?

She says nothing.

He smiles. Says are you an artist? I bet you are. You look like one.

She shakes her head. He smiles. Indulging. Across the room Lionel has resettled, smoothed his feathers, and begun again with a song about a queen and a soldier and their seventeen verses of deeply meaningful conversation.

He says this is so bohemian. Like you.

She covers her face with both hands and a drink.

He stares into his own eyes in the bathroom mirror. They're fuzzy eyes, owing to the fact she'd taken the glasses off his nose and left them in the couch. He's pretty sure someone sat on them right after. She stands behind him, tapping the blade of Xacto knife on her pursed lips, looking contemplatively at her own reflection.

“Duck,” she says finally and pushes his head down nearly into the drain. She turns on the hot water faucet and cups chlorine-smelling water in one hand, rubbing it into his scalp. He flushes, that too sudden rush of blood that feels like it must have pushed the skin entirely off its bones.

Immediately the knife's scraping, a mostly painless sensation, cleaving away the tiny dark hairs that sprouted far down his neck. He automatically reaches back, touching a neat line cropped across the seam joining neck and skull, but his hand is slapped away.

“Stoppit.”

She spreads her hand over his skull like a beanie and pulls it slightly up. Hanks of hair she tugs outward and then slices through. The noise of it, tiny individual popping tears building together into a noise impossibly loud for its decibels, dribbles down his spine. Tug and tear. Tug and tear. She's moving quickly, too quickly for thought.

*You've got all this...this...stuff on your head. It's not really brown or red or blond or anything, just flopping everywhere with no definition. No shape. Like a big split-end amoeba eating your face.*

The back of his head is mown. She runs possessive fingers through the bristles left before tilting his head even higher. He presses himself into the edge of the sink,

letting the cold porcelain nearly cut off his air.

More tugs at the top of his scalp, and she changes her stroke. Now she cuts upward into the strands. He tries to picture how her wrist must be moving. Flourishing like a magician after a particularly good trick, flashy twirls to hide the balls rolling back down his sleeve. Arching efficiently as an assassin.

*I can't think of why you'd do this to yourself unless it was on purpose.*

She moves restlessly around his head, grabbing a piece from the front, then another from just over his right ear, then from the crown. Long curls of hair fall into the sink, catch in his eyelashes.

“You’re going thin back here, you know that?”

“What?” he gasps and tried to twist back, to the side, but she firmly pushes his head into place. He tenses against it, somehow expecting to feel an erection against his leg.

“Calm yourself. It’s no tragedy. I’ve got gray hairs and you don’t see me freaking out.”

*Are you trying to make yourself look plain?*

Lips close, foreheads suddenly touching. Challenge. *Then. Fix. Me.*

He stares at himself and smiles. Such pretty lips to perform only one trick. She forces him from the reflection. Leaves only herself and his submissive crown.

Blinking hard, making her features blur and reform. They refuse to settle right. Refuse to form the face she expects. But it's her, there. Familiar. Known. What'd she expect?

Freckles. She blinks, hard. There were never freckles. Or skin so pale it looked blue, like icicles. She's pale, but red underneath. Blotches easily, blushes and breaks out. Patchy red skin, hard blue eyes, stiff black hair. Herself.

Her hands move. They could make these decisions. Relieved, she thanks them. She looks at her independent hands and the light flickering on the blade as it dips again and again, thinks, *one more added to the list of things I did today that could have caused an accident*. Thinks of her mother, moving the mail off the heater by the door where she dropped it every day on the way in after school.

The boy underneath her mumbles.

She says not you. Says punk, adding it with fondness. Her punk.

They'd only ever cut each other's hair, except when they were little and taken against their will to their mothers' hair stylists.

*How do you want it?*

*Surprise me.*

Hers always had to grow. He trimmed the hairs to nothing in the back, from her ears down, because it was cooler, because they grew out scraggly and weighed her down. He trimmed the tips. He liked to touch her hair when it was long, when it mellowed with length into softness and let the wind carry it around.. He liked to braid it, his graceful hands plaiting her skull into pretty swirls with long, long thin ropes brushing her back. Sitting on his mother's stoop to catch the breeze, his hands working and working behind her. He liked to touch the short hairs in the back, scratching there like she was a cat.

She didn't purr.

His hair needed change, demanded her creativity. Needed rubber gloves and

chemistry that gave her rashes to bring out blue, purple, orange, then black. Demanded convoluted patterns shaved, some carefully left to grow, new designs incorporating and building upon the old. Something to make him gasp, satisfied, amazed even, when she let him pull his head up out of the sink and see.

Sometimes she sketched ideas out ahead of time.

She made a sketch of herself, too, some silly thing her professor loved, her smile in stages moving across her face in fractals. Years later.

Only, no. It wasn't her. But it was the face she expected to see, there in the mirror. The one that always looking at her, tight and unsmiling.

Her hands are still on the move, working over his ears. This cut is a simple one, very short in the back, crisp asymmetrical spikes on top. He'd hate it. Not flashy enough, far too short.

The blade purrs when she slices quickly, and make a noise more like a growl when she hesitates mid-cut.

She runs her fingers through the uncut section—hairs feeling delicate yet adamant, uncurling off her finger. Stubbornly limp, curvy instead of curly. No, not the right hair. It doesn't expect complications, just encouragement to stand on end.

Reassured, she cuts again. Tug and cut.

She let her hands do their job, staring back into the mirror. When did she get so *old*? There's strands of grey already—unsurprising, since her mother's had grey hair since her teens. Her face has thinned and the skin is rough and clear. There's fine lines around her mouth, marking the triangular borders between her nostrils and the edges of her lips, deep ones in the corners of her eyes. She looks like a wizened twenty-two, not a

dewy goth child who thinks she's learned about the whole world on one tiny peninsula where no one else in the city bothers to go.

She's gotten old and a bit dull. Still a freak, but a different kind. One dipped in lacquer and hardened, not a magpie in soft textures and binding corsets. No matter how hard she blinks, the same old Georgia winks back.

He meekly leaves his head hanging in the sink after the pressure of her hand on his neck lifts away. She has to reach for his forehead and pull him out of the bowl.

"Wow," he says, and his reflection smiles. It isn't quite him, this man with high cheekbones and lively grey eyes. He hollows his cheeks. This man is a few years older, but looked younger. A sensitive mind hiding with ease, wearing a tougher man's haircut, thoughtful and protected, maybe a poet. The hair—it's...nice. Flattering.

He looks above his head, at her. She watches him with a shaky smile. Her eyes drift back to the mirror, and she blinks, hard.

"You don't have grey hair," he says, then of course he sees one bright strand, over her ear. He reaches without thinking and plucks it out, blows it off his finger. "Gone now."

She takes his finger and gently kisses the tip, examining it closely like she would remove a splinter. He stares past it, feeling her pulse through the contact.

"You know," he ventures, "I live near here."

Outside it's raining and desperate. Droplets swirl together underneath the street lamp and the entire road reflects spotty light from windows and headlights. She staggers

into the cold, trying to walk sideways with the wind.

“Where...?”

“There,” he answered, gesturing vaguely westward. “Are you cold?”

“Yes.”

He begins to put an arm around her, drops it when he finally notices how much taller she is. “It’s not far,” he replies brusquely and pulls ahead.

She follows him across the street, through the tiny park, stepping through the empty fountain when he goes around. Touches the frozen dancer in the middle as she passes, cupping its clammy bronze knee. He walks ahead of her for two blocks, shoulders hunched and tripping on slick cobblestones. He’s the very image of Chaplin’s Tramp in his boxy coat, except for the constant mumble of curses instead of manic orchestral music. She steps around cars, on and off the high marble curb, slipping once down a wheelchair dip in the corner, growing lighter despite her shivering. She could stay out here all night, among the water hanging in the air and the lights smeared down wet streets.

He turns into a dark alley.

“Here?” She leans into the gloom doubtfully, feet firmly planted back under a streetlamp’s circle. Something rustles in the stack of plastic recycling bins at the corner.

“There,” he says again and takes her elbow. She allows herself to be led. In the middle of the block, surrounded by high fences and parked or junked cars is a small free-standing house. It’s brick and painted orange, or maybe lemon or white. The one light is at the other end of the alley. Up on the second story a wrought iron winch, painted and shellacked solid, hangs out over the alley. “Here. Home.”

Inside, he gestures around without turning on a light. “The grand tour, here. Kitchen...living room...”

She can see vague lumps of furniture, walls within feet of where she stands. Possibly a fish tank bubbling in one corner. He walks them up the stairs, a narrow steep column that her big feet don't come close to fitting on. The upstairs is even smaller, divided into a bedroom and bathroom. “And here's, um, where I sleep.”

She sees little of it in the orange glow of the alley's sole street light.

“You know, you'd make a good redhead,” she says. “Should try henna sometime.”

“I'd look like Ronald McDonald.” He sways, almost stepping to the bed, almost back to the door. She sees his cover, the same stylized sun-moon pattern she used to see on Allen's bed. It annoys her; does every mother buy these for her college-bound son?

She shakes her head. “No, you'd look like...better. You'd look better.”

He stares at her from a foot away, leaning closer. His face has taken on that look of concentrating idiot child she hates seeing on men. The look of someone who's blood has tried to drain south several times already but, confused, has pooled stubbornly in the stomach. The look of a man determined to push it on down or throw up trying.

Actually...she tries to remember how much he had to drink. And where he pointed at as the bathroom. She steps back through the doorjamb and looks around.

“Do you, would you like something, to drink?”

She realizes gratefully that she is parched, already feeling the dry-sticky throat of the morning after. Her floating head had settled back onto her neck as she concentrated, his naked neck under her hands, and the cold rain had scoured through her like a pot of

coffee. An old memory hits her then, the compression of hundreds of young nights when she cadged vodka drinks from older friends until the music got good and then sweated it all out on the dance floor. She knows this exact moment, wet and wrung out like skin soaked in peroxide, throat and toxin-choked bladder crying for liquid but too solidly in motion to ever stop, can feel careless hands and elbows brushing her sides as she spins, turning on heel every other beat—

“Hey, uh, you—you thirsty?”

“Water,” she coughs. Can still feel hours old smoke settling into her skin, coating her nostrils.

They troop back down the stairs, her following and feet sliding off the edge of every step. Her body sloshes forward when she reaches the floor, expecting to still be moving down and down. She reaches for a wall but her hand goes through that space, grabs his shoulder instead.

“I’m falling,” she states, enunciating like a newscaster. His arms come up around her but before she’s steady, he thrusts his face into hers, leading with his chin.

Faces collide. She falls back onto the stairs, feeling the afterburn of stubble on her chin more than the jolts to her shoulder and lower back. “What? Wait,” she says, feeling for the wall, and bumps down another step. Another memory, much fainter: *bonk, bonk, bonk, giggles and corduroy overalls with those hard buckles, bonk, bonk, bonk, all the way to the basement!*

“You’re drunk.” The arms returned, steadier this time. He pulled her to her feet and held her, staggering himself and tender, tucking his chin over her shoulder.

Navigating around the empty television, four feet stepping in four direction, they fall

together toward an unseen couch.

She remembers...crawling over sun and moon sheets, overshooting the warmth of the bed and falling into the outdoors, cold metal high above the ground. She remembers being carried, but not then. Then she was pushed, untouched, by the spreading impenetrability of his nudity. Jays pulling off his shirt, his pants, looking through her. Thumbs hooked inside the elastic of his boxers and pulling when she gave up, fled, and she remembers running, then always running back, to slide an arm under his shoulders and carry him. She remembers him gasping, breath gone and too stubborn to return easily. She remembers being picked up and swung, loose feet striking someone and someone else, deposited and forgotten. She remembers—he was naked. He didn't get naked. He presented himself—whole. The other one shed his clothes like flaying off skin, threatening her with the unthinkable peek.

Push & pull, both of them. Go away and touch me, together and apart, under my arm and around my back—find my rhythm, follow my lead. Tag after me like the seas shifting to the remote moon.

*Get out.* She tells them both. *Into the street, into the cold. Find your own damn home. This is mine.*

He's kissing her again, tentatively. A pillow plunges to the unseen carpet by her feet. She blinks hard, frozen, already surprised she's not alone. Her hands touch: fabric, a leg, a shoulder, a collarbone, another hand that interlaces fingers with hers. Grounding her, and she's briefly grateful until limp lips glance across her nose and cheekbone,

searching for her matching set.

She could shake him off like a needle-toothed puppy, despite the fatigue now curving her body into the saggy cushions. He couldn't keep her, couldn't know where to grab the fingers and twist, how to kneel on delicate wrists with all his weight, how to make a fight of it. She's less disgusted by his clammy child's lips than she should be. She feels instead pity, and some small gratitude, that his inept seduction should be the thing to wedge apart her worst stickiness, leaving her trembling, scared, and aware. Detoxified.

She lays her fingers along his jaw, guides the head to tilt, makes a puckered cupid's bow and touches it to his neck. He pulls back immediately and dives in, bouncing off her chin. She tries again to shift him, move the hard edge of his face to the side, but he resists, returning to his stiff opposing angle. Foreheads bump. Wire-thick stubble scrapes across her cheek, torture to drought-sensitive nerves.

"Wait, wait," she commands, softly, and forces herself to sit up. Her height gives her an advantage here; he sits back reluctantly and she leans forward to his face, touching her lips again to his. She holds them, herself and him, trying to focus. Presses soft kisses to the upper and lower lips. Runs her thumb gently across the line of his cheekbone, his eyebrow, down the soft skin by his ear and the sensitive new-cut hairline of his neck. Traces her tongue just under his mouth, returning again to kiss deeply, slowly.

It's no good. He pulls away after a moment and just bobs upwards, pecking at her face with lips now pulled tight across his teeth. More force behind it now, smashing at her mouth with a skin-covered brick.

And so it continues for several painful, limping minutes. She slumps back against the couch in degrees, as the effort of pursing her lips begins to feel reminiscent of trying to dislodge an uncomfortable particle of food from between back molars. His lunges slow by degrees as she grows still, lets her arms fall impassively to cup her knees.

Finally, he abandons the effort as well, and pulls her against him, shifting until he is comfortably on his side. She settles against him, suddenly painfully awake, weaving her arms between his and around his back. They settle there, in the inappropriate cuddling of failure.

They drift together, briefly, before diverging. He falls into himself, mouth gaping open in that suddenly heavy skull. She can feel exhaustion like sand drifting into her joints, but her nerves jump with the need to fidget. Her feet and hands burn as though frostbitten, demanding to be stomped vigorously.

Soon, his breathing solidifies, deep and even, limbs twitching their way into unconsciousness. She's startled by how much she wants to listen to this, like she once stayed up to watch a lover's face shift in sleep. Just let the inexorable respiration, the sound of life callously going on and on through it all, settle into her bones.

Before he sleeps, she's gone.

She sees him again at the supermarket, which strikes her as strange. No one else she knows drives the entire way to Canton, because the trip fills up more of her long unemployed hours. And, really, because she likes to gawk at the upscale yuppie men with crisp little beards and baskets with seven -dollar natural peanut butter.

He doesn't see her, not at first. He lingers over the cantaloupe. She wants to tell

him it's too early in the season. These melons will taste like wet cardboard. Instead she ducks around the aisle, abandoning the contemplation of rock-hard avocados.

She thinks about his little pecking lips, hard granules of teeth rolling underneath and fights back a smile. Like a child kissing his favorite auntie, a little boy who has learned wet kisses aren't appreciated.

She peeks around aisles before stepping into them, not knowing he is still looking at cantaloupes, still thumping their brain-textured rinds. A young man bumps into her once when she stops suddenly.

"Excuse me!" she whispers, but places her hands on his waist (over the braided leather belt he bought at the Saks Fifth Avenue outlet) and sneaks a look back around him.

He stiffens and goes to pull away, holding his basket out of her reach. She smiles then and gives him a conspirator's wink, which he finds himself returning.

"The coast is clear!" she tells him, her voice low and strange to her own ears.

She ducks around him and makes for the check-out line with the highest display, humming to herself. *Duh...duh...duh...de duh duh!* She sees herself all in black, moving with catlike grace, but notices that, even stylized-idealized and purely imaginary, there's a white sliver of belly poking out between ninja pants and ninja turtleneck.

She bursts into laughter as she hands over the money, making the cashier flinch, and bolts for the door.

He hears the laughter, turns, and raises an eyebrow at the old man next to him unconsciously. The hard cantaloupe in his hand thumped back among its fellows. He

can just make out the wild thatch of hair over thin shoulders through the thick wavy glass of the exit, and touches his own hairline at the top of his neck. It's still crisp, the hair below it just growing from stubble into down.

Without thinking very hard on it, he shifts his walk to work the next day so he passes a laundromat, and isn't surprised, somehow, to see her in the window. She looks familiar there. He thinks that he must have dreamed it the night before and stops to watch for a moment as she shakes the wrinkles from a bright red shirt.

She shares the laundry with an old man, little and bent with a face like a walnut. He speaks to her, pointing to her dryer as she pulls clothes from it, *¿le acaban con esto?*, and she tries to reply with what little she knows from Melo, *no hablo español*, but it sounds wrong, so she says *yo no hablo ingles*, and the old man grins, *¿cuál es él, niña?*, so she goes for broke, *noyo hablo yo solo*, until he wheezes with laughter and clutches at her arm. Her hot face feels as though it may burst but she gives him an embarrassed smile, shrugs with one shoulder.

He remembers the end of the night, how they just didn't fit together and then suddenly did, melting into one space when they stopped trying so hard to make it happen. He likes her smile now, doesn't think he's seen it before. It makes her look younger, and permeable. She keeps looking back over her shoulder, her grin widening and her shoulders hunching higher up toward her ears.

He wishes suddenly that they'd connected and is glad they didn't. He thinks, wistful, that they should have met much sooner, that they should have been children together and friends. Something simple, before they had to grow up and have all these complications between themselves and other people. Something real, that could last.

But that's just the way things go, he tells himself, and waves to her, unseen, as he passes by.