ABSTRACT

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The characters in “The Golden Key and Other Stories” find themselves wandering the border between the known world and the realm of the unreal, struggling to understand their desires and the way those desires shape the stories they have to tell. “The Golden Key” and “Lakeview” draw on folk tales, one about a chance discovery of an unlikely object, the other about a wife’s longing to leave her family. “The Garden” and “The Hollow” both find young girls struggling to reconstruct their pasts, while “Alfa Whiskey Echo” and “Lady with an Ermine” see adult women dealing with the ramifications of childhood events, some fantastical, others all too real. In “May Queen” and “Langwidere”, obsession with beauty takes on monstrous proportions, with disastrous results. The historical figures who populate “Charlotte” and “When I am laid in earth” slip into impossible situations, impelled to narrate their own stories from beyond the grave.

THE GOLDEN KEY AND OTHER STORIES

By

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Dedication

For my mother, always.

Acknowledgements

These stories owe many debts, as do I.

For my part, I am deeply grateful to the Maud Casey for her generous guidance as thesis advisor, and to the other members of my committee, Emily Mitchell and Gerard Passannante. I also owe thanks to the many people who have read and helped me revise drafts of these stories, both in workshop and beyond, especially LiAnn Yim and Michelle McAbee.

As for the stories, their sources are many and varied.

Several of these pieces are retellings: "The Golden Key" is based on the Brothers Grimm folk tale of the same name and "Lakeview" draws its premise from a variety of animal-bride tales. "Langwidere" is inspired by L. Frank Baum's *Ozma of Oz*.

Other pieces deal with historical figures: "Charlotte" was scaffolded on research into Charlotte Brontë's life, particularly Fannie Ratchford's *The Brontës' Web of Childhood,* as well as a visit to the Brontë Parsonage Museum in Haworth, Yorkshire. "When I am laid in earth" contains references to and direct quotations from a variety of sources both primary and secondary, including (though by no means limited to) the 1656 catalog of the Tradescants' collection, *Musaeum Tradescantianum*, Hester Tradescant's 'submission' to the chancery court in 1676, Georg Christophe Stirn's 1638 description of the Ark, and Elias Ashmole's diaries. Perhaps most invaluable of all was *Tradescant's rarities*, Arthur MacGregor's exhaustive 1983 catalogue of what remains of the Tradescants' collection in the present-day Ashmolean Museum, as well as C.H. Jostens' edition of Ashmole's

journals and two wonderful biographies of the Tradescants by Mea Allan and Prudence Leith-Ross.

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“The Golden Key”

It’s late winter when he finds the box, winter right on the cusp of spring, that time of year when everyone goes out of their houses and looks around expectantly, thinking, Well, what are you waiting for?

Of course, it isn’t the box he sees first. That’s still buried under a foot or more of snow.

What he sees, instead, is a crop of new crocuses. He isn’t looking for flowers, doesn’t care much for them. He isn’t sentimental; in fact, he’s about as unsentimental as they come. He once fought in a war and the only time he’s ever cried was long ago when he accidentally ran over a turtle, and even then it wasn’t so much the death of the poor creature as it was the fact that he’d seen it there in the road but couldn’t swerve in time to avoid it—that, and the explosive pop of its shell underneath his tires. In short, he’s not the type to notice flowers, and he wouldn’t have noticed these flowers at all if there wasn’t a foot of snow on the ground. He’s quite surprised to see them, these flowers—after all, even late winter isn’t quite spring. The buds haven’t quite opened yet, and they look to him like the bulbous nipples of tiny baby bottles.

He crouches down to look at the flowers more closely and wonders how they aren’t frozen. He’s pretty cold himself, even though he has on an expensive jacket designed for extreme weather conditions. The flowers don’t seem to feel the cold at all.

Something must be warming them from below, he reasons. He’s extremely logical, this man. He appreciates marching orders and ranks and maps with little pins

stuck in them. He keeps schedules, wears a watch set by a satellite, leaves no room for uncertainty or doubt. Faced with this improbable inflorescence, he thinks of hot springs and geothermal vents.

He brushes aside the snow that surrounds these little yellow nubs, and then brushes away some more. Not too deeply buried is a key, the kind that opens coin op lockers in bus stations and public swimming pools.

The flowers have grown up to mark the spot, he thinks, and his having had this thought surprises him even more than the flowers growing there. He feels queasy at the mere idea. He's not, as I've said, a man over given to fancy.

More likely, he reasons, this key fell from someone's pocket as they walked along the path. He feels better once he's explained this to himself in plain terms.

But the man's mind, now that it's started rationalizing, has no intention of stopping. If there is a key, the man finds himself thinking, quite against his will, there must also be a lock.

So he digs around a little more in the snow, looking for the lock that matches his key. The key's plastic cap is a garish canary yellow, with a black cord threaded through it to form a wrist strap. He feels sure, just for a second, that the color of the key is the seed of the crocuses, that they sprang forth from its ugly yellowness.

He feels suddenly, unaccountably sorry for the key, which has been separated from familiar things—the lock it opens and the wrist it wraps around—perhaps for a very long time. He wants badly to return it to where it belongs.

If he had to keep looking for much longer, he would soon begin to feel foolish, but as chance would have it, at this very moment, his searching fingers come across the flat top of a box.

This is no ornamental box, no mysterious chest. It's the kind of flame retardant case used to guard important papers in home offices. This makes the man feel somehow more at ease, despite the strangeness of stumbling across such a thing in the middle of the winter woods. Even though the circumstances are an affront to his stolid sense of reason, the box itself is familiar to him, and this familiarity reassures him. He has seen just this sort of safe box in office supply stores many times.

He's fairly certain that, despite its plainness, this box holds something of great import. He feels sure that it isn't just papers or cash or legal documents, though his limited imagination won't allow him to conceive of what else it might be.

Instead of sitting around in the freezing cold and wondering what's inside, he decides, he might as well go ahead and find out. So he fits the lock in the key and turns it.

“Lakeview”

Once upon a time, she tells them, there was a lake.

The boys raise a wail of complaint. They do not care for fairy tales.

She says, Do you want to go straight to bed with no story?

They do not want to.

Now, this lake, she says, was beautiful. It was set in amidst a wide marshy place by the sea, where soft-tipped grasses grew tall and the land and water traded back and forth. The lake lay flat and silver on the horizon, guarded by reeds and genuflecting willows.

This lake was home to a white swan. Though the swan left every autumn to migrate south, it was to the lake that she always returned in the spring, and it was her favorite place in the whole world. She dove in the murky water of the lake to dine on small insects and spent many long hours watching the light write changes on its surface. One moment it would be radiant, the next it would turn dark under the shadow of the clouds. She never tired of looking at it.

This story is boring, says the older boy. Did the swan ever do anything interesting?

Be patient, she tells him. I’m getting to that.

They shift their legs under their covers, restless.

The swan loved her home very much, but one day while she was bathing in the lake, a man snuck up and stole her feathered skin where she had left it hanging in the trees.

She could take off her skin? the little boy asks. His eyes are wide.

Oh, yes, she says. And when she took off her skin, do you know what happened?

Their golden hair quivers as they shake their heads.

She became a human. With her skin, she was a swan, but without it, she was only a woman.

How come the man took her skin? the little one asks.

He knew that if she didn't have her skin, she couldn't turn back into her true form and fly away. So the man hid her skin and the swan was forced to stay a human woman and become his wife. And because she was his, everything that had once belonged to her now belonged to him, including the marsh and the grasses and the lake.

The swan's husband brought in other men to drain the lake and fill in the dry lakebed with dirt. Over the place where the lake had been, they built a fine house, and after that they built many other houses, and roads between all the houses, and a playground and tennis courts and a community swimming pool. They called the place Lakeview.

That's where we live! shriek the boys in delight. Lakeview, Lakeview!

Yes it is, she tells them, but if you aren't quiet, you won't get to hear the rest of the story.

They close their gaping mouths.

The swan's husband took the first house for his own, because it was the finest of them all and that was only fitting. Soon other people came to live in the other houses and, before long, the quiet little stretch of marshland where the lake had been

was overrun with cars and children and men with screaming machines they used to trim their front lawns very loudly in the early mornings. Soon more houses were built, and more roads, and shopping centers with grocery stores and outlet malls and miles of flat, grey parking lot.

The swan wife grew despondent, but as long as her husband had her skin, she could not fly away.

What does despondent mean? the little one asks.

It means an ache in the very center of you that never goes away.

Like a bellyache? he asks.

Nothing at all like that, she says, and the little one falls silent.

This is stupid, the older one says. Why didn't she just find out where he hid the skin?

It wasn't for lack of trying, she replies. She looked everywhere she could think of, in every copse of reeds and muddy mire, in every cupboard and closet and dresser drawer. But he was a man and men have other hiding places a swan would never think of.

So she never found it? the little one asks.

That, she tells them, remains to be seen. Maybe, if you're very good tomorrow, you'll find out.

The boys, curious now despite their earlier protests, try to complain for more, but she silences them.

Now close your eyes, she says. Daddy will be in to say goodnight in a minute. She rises then and turns off the overhead light. The nightlight, a sailboat, shines dimly

on the wall between their twin beds, and she closes the door on the boys and their beds and the softly glowing light.

While the boys are at school, she does the laundry, folding white sheets for what feels like hours. She holds the sheets to her face, seeking some half-remembered touch. She likes the billow and snap of the supple cloth between her arms as she folds the sheets in half, and half, and half again.

From the window of the laundry room, she can see the perfectly ruled tennis courts fenced in with wire. A heron lingers in the fountain near the courts—until something startles it and it lifts, weightless, toward the sky.

Later, she writes her grocery list, her fingers extraneous and clumsy around the pen, and goes down the road to the supermarket. She puts applesauce and frozen peas and long wavy lasagna noodles in her cart. She stands in front of the butcher's counter for a long time, watching the men in their bloody white coats debone chickens and put the pieces on little Styrofoam trays and wrap them in plastic, but when the man behind the counter sees her there and asks if he can get her anything, there is nothing she wants.

As she walks through the store, searching for the right brand of bright blue mouthwash, the toilet paper with the best value, she thinks about all the food—chopped, diced, dismembered, pureed—trapped so carefully in plastic packaging and tin cans and tightly sealed jars. The aisles seem, suddenly, like the over-crowded display cases of some provincial museum, full of still-vivid specimens of dead things.

In the afternoon, the boys come home from school and she feeds them peanut butter on white bread so soft it collapses at their touch.

Mama, asks the younger one as he sucks the peanut butter from his molars, what ever happened to the swan lady? Did she ever find her skin?

I don't know, she says. What do you think?

They think she did.

She says, What if I told you she was still looking?

I bet I know lots of hiding places the swan lady never even thought of, the older boy says.

I'm sure you do, she replies.

I bet her husband buried it, like secret treasure, he says.

Do you know, she tells him, she never thought of that.

I bet I could even find her skin.

She smiles down at him. How will you know if you don't look?

After they have had their lunch, she takes them to the park to play.

She listens with half an ear as they whisper loudly to one another, fighting or making plans, it's hard to tell. Their voices always sound shrill and accusative to her, no matter what they're saying. Today, it seems, they are arguing about who will find the swan wife's skin first.

She watches the backs of their heads as they walk in front of her, their golden hair bobbing up and down. They have their father's looks, tawny and solid, the same tangled locks and brutal, capable hands. They are always building things, inventing

cities, designing ships out of wooden blocks. Then they tear their creations down with delight, so eager to build again that they spare no thought for what they have destroyed.

When they get to the park, she sits on a bench while the boys dig in the dirt with sticks. She doesn't speak to anyone at the playground. When she first started going, the other mothers would try to make conversation, but they stopped because they didn't like the way she looked at them, intent, never blinking. None of the women ever said as much, but she knew by the way they began to shift and touch their hair and glance away. Her eyes are very black, she knows. This unsettles some people. They are unaccustomed to being the sole focus of anyone's attention.

She doesn't mind sitting alone. She prefers it, in fact. Alone, she is free to observe the birds: gulls and hawks and kites, egrets and ducks now on their way south for the winter. She watches them wheel above her, small black shapes like cut paper against the flat plane of the sky. There are more vultures now than there used to be, so many carrion birds to feed on the dead: deer hit by cars on the highway, seabirds caught in fishing line.

When the sun begins to ease toward the treeline, she calls the boys back to her. They return with their hands caked in mud from digging holes. She walks down the street in the waning light, the boys trailing behind.

By the time they reach the house, it's nearly dark. The days are growing shorter and shorter. Soon it will be dark almost all day long: dark when she wakes and dark long before she goes to sleep at night. She hates the dark part of the year, dreads the thought that soon she will have weathered another winter here, and after

that another and another. She wishes she could go someplace warm, even if only for a few days, a week. She longs to be carried away on a languorous breeze.

While the boys play in the living room, she makes dinner: fish sticks for the boys, roast salmon with new potatoes for her husband. The smell of the food cooking turns her stomach.

When her husband comes home, a gust of cold air forces its way into the house, and he calls out to ask when dinner will be ready. The fish sticks smell like they are just about to burn, which means it is time to eat.

Once, when they were first married, she cooked the meat still in its plastic wrapping and the house filled with black smoke. Another time, she forgot to cook the food altogether and served up a raw tangle of meat. Sometimes she forgets her family needs cutlery, and she almost choked on a rubber band she'd neglected to cut from some vegetables just last week.

At the dinner table, she watches her husband's mouth move without listening to what he's saying and wonders whether he only needs his teeth to chew his meat, or if they serve an additional purpose. His teeth are very white and square, and she imagines that if she swallowed one it would sit heavy in her stomach like a lead fishing weight.

After supper, her husband and the boys watch television while she washes the dishes. She likes this time of night, when she is alone in the kitchen, the rush of the

faucet almost drowning out the boys' voices as they weave seamlessly with the begging voices on TV.

The boys are allowed an hour of television, but argue for half an hour more, and then it is time for bed. She drags off their T-shirts and jeans, compels them into the bathtub, and soaps their hair and scrubs their backs. They hate the water, tolerate it only long enough to be cleaned, and then she is drying them off and shoving their skinny limbs into their pajamas.

Sometimes it stuns her, how much they need her. When they were small, just born, she could understand it, but even now that they can walk and speak and feed themselves, still they beg her, lean on her, pull at her arms, demanding. Why does it take them so long to grow up? Hasn't she given them enough by now to survive on their own?

When they are in bed, the younger one asks, How come the swan lady wanted her skin back?

Well, she says, if you both lie very still and close your eyes, I'll tell you.

Their arms go rigid at their sides and their eyelids snap shut.

The swan had been living as a human woman for a very long time. She learned to button buttons with her human fingers and she learned that humans don't eat algae and grass. She learned how to cook and wash dishes and do laundry. In time, she even gave her husband two sons.

What were their names? the older boy asks.

Were they our names? the younger boy asks.

They were your names, she says.

They were? the boys ask in delight.

They were.

Were they swan people, too? the younger one wants to know.

No, they were only boys, she says.

But I bet they could fly and stuff, says the older one.

No, they could not, she tells him. Don't interrupt.

He presses his arms extra close to his sides in recompense.

The swan's husband believed she would be content now that she had a family and a home, but she was not. She could not fly south for the winter, and every year the cold wind cut away at her while she watched her sister swans sweep into the sky and disappear. She longed to follow them, to tear the sky, beautiful to behold in her white feathers. With every winter that passed, she grew less and less a swan, less and less herself. She knew that if she did not find her skin, she would sicken and die, for she was not a human woman and could never be one, no matter how she tried.

But she found it, didn't she? the little one asks. She didn't die?

Maybe she did, the older one says hopefully.

That, she tells them, remains to be seen.

It's still dark out when she wakes. Soon it will be time to get the boys up for school, to make breakfast, to iron her husband's shirt.

The boys never want to wake up. She has to lift their limp bodies from beneath their sheets, make them brush their teeth and dress. Yes, she says, they must eat their breakfast or else they won't go to the park in the afternoon, and they whine

at the threat but eat their oatmeal sullenly, picking at it with their fingers enough that she is satisfied.

Her husband, on the other hand, wakes before his alarm, showers, puts on his freshly ironed shirt, and eats the meal she puts in front of him with vigor. He kisses the boys, walks them to their school bus. Then he gets into his truck and drives away, and she is alone in the house again.

The bus drops the boys off at noon and she fixes them lunch. After lunch, she helps them into their warm coats and they walk to the playground again.

What did the swan lady do when she got her skin back, Mama? It is the younger boy who asks, slipping his hand into hers as they make their way to the park.

You can't guess?

He shakes his head.

Well, what would you do with it?

He screws up his lips very tight. I think I would take it flying, he decides.

Well, she says, you'd have to find it first.

The boys commence a shoving game on the sidewalk, warring to see who will find the swan's skin first.

At the playground, she lets the boys wander as far from her as they like, as long as they are still in sight. She watches them dig holes, one after the other, leaving heaps of dirt beside each hole. They do not fill the holes back in.

After the boys are asleep, her husband stops her in the hallway, slipping one hand under the collar of her blouse. He kisses her hair and strokes the curve of her face with the palm of his hand and then they go to bed. His broad fingers twist and slide inside her and her body shivers in rote response while she thinks about being high up in the clouds, coasting on long southerly currents of air.

Later she dreams she is miles above the surface of the earth, so high that the lakes are hand mirrors and the rivers are silver thread below. She alights on the bank of a small marshy lake and wades in to refresh herself in the cool waters. She savors the flex of her toes in the thick silt of the lakebed, the quiver of the current around her thighs. In the dream, the man who will be her husband, grey in the moonlight, steps into the water to meet her. How exhilarating it is, at first, to feel his muscles moving under his skin, so very close to the surface, his powerful arms supporting her weight, his fingers digging into her thighs. And then, how rough his grasp becomes, how terrible, as he peels the flesh from her bones. She screams and thrashes, trying to lift from the ground, but her limbs are weak and unstable and all she can do is beat her body till it bruises, and then he steps in and holds her close, to keep her from hurting herself, but still she writhes and screams in agony, separated from her true skin.

The boys spend the whole weekend digging holes in the back yard. Their father watches with a worried eye out one of the windows. He expresses concern about the landscaping.

Let them be, she tells him. They're only playing.

Late in the afternoon, as the sun is beginning to dissolve, there is a sound like an anxious flock of birds. Her husband is watching television and does not seem to hear the noise, so she slips out to back door to see what the commotion is.

In the middle of the lawn, the boys are pointing excitedly to something they've uncovered in the ground. One of them—she isn't sure which, the younger one, she thinks—comes running toward her, shouting proudly that he has found the swan's hidden skin.

She follows the boy back to the hole he and his brother have dug.

The boys are squawking back and forth, jittering, fairly jumping up and down, arguing over who will draw the burlap sack out of the ground.

Do you think that's really it, Mama?

I do, she says.

The older boy reaches down to pull the sack from the earth and she slaps his hand away. There is shock on his face. The younger boy is crying slightly.

Mama? he asks, licking at his tears. What did the swan lady do when she got her skin back? Did she take her sons with her when she flew south for the winter?

No, she says.

But then they grew wings of their own and flew after her, the older boy says.

No they did not, she corrects him. Her great, white wings were so strong that when she summoned the air to carry her, she conjured up a powerful storm. Harder and harder she beat her wings, until the wind was screaming and the house below shook and tore apart. It shivered and fell, crushing the boys and their father dead. And still the swan rose higher, until the ground below her was only a dark cloth seeded

with lights, while the storm she had raised tore all those houses and roads and shopping malls from their foundations, scattering debris and shards of bone for miles around. There will be no survivors.

“The Garden”

“Albie,” I said.

I called my brother “Albie” and “Percival”, his middle name, and “my turtledove”, and he called me “Evelyn”, because that was my name. Whenever I called him “my turtledove”, he would remind me that doves were really just stupid ugly old pigeons. In actual fact, he looked nothing like a turtledove, but rather like the kind of white doves that people keep as pets. He was very pale, his hair so pale it had an almost pinkish cast to it. Even his eyelashes were almost transparent. His eyes were the only part of him that wasn’t pale. They were black-black, so black it was hard to tell the iris apart from the pupil. I had a dream once that I was walking in a dark room, and the dark of the room was the dark of Albie’s eyes.

“Albie, it’s your turn.”

We were playing croquet in the garden. Smoke came crawling out of the fat, full faces of new blossoms and the tendrils of the rosebushes stung one another in the breeze. Peacocks screamed somewhere out beyond the trees. We never saw them, but we could hear their cries carrying through the heavy air.

"Look," Albie said, pointing up at the clouds. It was hot, very hot, and the clouds were creeping across the sky with elaborate languor. Never had clouds moved so slowly. We abandoned our croquet mallets and lay on our backs in the velvet grass, watching those clouds. The biggest and most beautiful of them moved less than a quarter of an inch all afternoon. When it was time for supper, Albie drove a small flag into the dirt underneath the cloud and decided we would measure to see how long it would take to go across the lawn.

I was fairly certain that we used to take supper in the dining room with the good china and that it had not been only us two at meals, but now we ate alone at the wooden table in the kitchen. We ate whatever we pleased whenever we wanted, anything we could find in the larder—roast chicken and sliced beef, bread and cheese. After supper, we lay out on the veranda and ate ice cream. There always seemed to be an endless supply of ice cream.

At bedtime, Albie lay down next to me in our little bed in the old nursery and pulled the humid sheet over our heads and told me about all the things we were going to do the next day. Albie rehearsed the entire day's events, deciding what we would eat for breakfast and the color of the sky. Once he'd said there would be fireworks, and, sure enough, there were fireworks the following night, just visible over the horizon, pure sparks of color flaring up over the trees.

"We'll have orange marmalade tomorrow," he told me, "and then we'll play hide and seek until luncheon. You'll hide well, but not as well as me. The clouds will all stay put and the hellebore will start to bloom. In the afternoon, we'll go swimming." When my eyelids started to fall in earnest, he kissed me, his small lips wrinkled against mine, and made the light go and we fell asleep.

We woke at the cusp of dawn. We breakfasted—tea and orange marmalade straight from the jar—and then Albie ran outside to check on his cloud. After that, we played hide and seek, just as Albie had predicted. And just as Albie had predicted, he found me every time.

Albie was always watching me. He was constantly scolding me, warning me back if I got too close to the edge of the woods, telling me to watch my step on the stairs. They were very steep, the stairs, and I did have a fear of falling down them, as I'd done once the winter I turned six. I broke my arm in three places, and my bone stuck out of my skin like a new tooth.

I was hoping that Albie had forgotten about going swimming. I didn't like the pool. It was too deep, too still for me to trust it completely. Albie loved swimming but hated to swim alone. I would much rather he pushed me on the swing on the old cherry tree instead. The cherries had already fallen on the ground beneath the tree, and though the birds had done their best to eat them up, the grass was still full of red pulp, the air thick with the smell of rotting fruit and buzzing with intoxicated wasps. But, sure enough, after luncheon Albie sprang to his feet and announced we were going swimming.

"Can't we do something else?" I said.

"If you really loved me, you wouldn't make me swim by myself." Albie's eyes narrowed at me. "What if I drowned? Then you'd be all alone and it would be your fault I was dead."

I sat on the slate edge of the pool and trailed my legs in the water while Albie swam laps. With his pale, pale hair and green bathing suit, he looked like a calla lily cutting the water. It made me nervous how long he could go without coming up for air, and also how the water made the edges of him indistinct.

"Why don't you come in?" he asked, leaning his thin, white arms next to my knees. His hair was slicked back against his scalp, smooth as a polished skull.

"I don't have to if I don't want to," I said.

"Yes, you do." He reached out and pulled on my leg, trying to drag me in, but I screamed and reared back, kicking my leg to break his grip. My foot hit his lip and his head snapped back.

"Albie!" I rocked forward, my arm outstretched, but he jerked away from my touch.

"Why, you little beast," he said. "Look what you've done." On his lip there was a thin line of blood. He was treading water a few feet away from the edge of the pool, watching me with a hateful look. "Maybe it'll be you who'll drown one day."

"Sorry, Albie," I whispered, but he ignored me, ducking back into the water to resume his laps. Each time he came up for air, I could see him touching the cut on his lip with his tongue, testing its sting.

When Albie was finished swimming, he climbed out of the pool and lay down on the grass to dry in the sun. I sat beside him, twisting clovers between my fingers and watching the slow rise and fall of Albie's chest. When he stood up, he was scattered with tiny blades of grass, which he made me brush from the white planes of his back.

At sunset, Albie ran down to check on the progress of the slow-moving cloud. "Look!" he called. I followed him down the lawn. The cloud was now pink and gold, but it had hardly moved across the sky.

"We'll keep it," Albie said, advancing his flag forward over the ground. "It'll be ours."

I felt a pang of pity for that poor cloud. I had often wished I could rise up and walk amongst those clouds, so soft and fine and stretching on forever beyond the horizon. I imagined it would be like going down an endless corridor and I almost cried once thinking about it. But this cloud would never get to go, held as it was in Albie's sway.

Albie predicted we would spend the next morning playing hide and seek again and then have a game of badminton in the afternoon.

When it was his turn to hide, Albie forced the lock to the attic and clambered up the narrow stairs. I checked every cupboard and closet in the house, and it wasn't until I ran out on the lawn that I realized he'd found the ladder that led to the old widow's walk. I begged him not to but he climbed out onto the roof, where the wind was wild and almost threw him to the ground. I could hear him daring the wind to try to take him. When I started crying, he just laughed at me.

Eventually, Albie got bored of scaring me, like he always did, and wandered downstairs for lunch.

Just as we were finishing our potted shrimps, it began to rain. Albie had not predicted this, and he went all still and wrathful when I pointed it out. Usually when this look was directed at me, it meant something bad was about to happen, but he couldn't very well punish the weather, and his mood only got worse. I tried to draw him out with a game of cards, but Albie just pretended I wasn't there.

Instead of playing outdoors, we retreated to the library. Albie read and I looked at the pictures in the encyclopedias. I tried to read, but I couldn't remember

how to make the letters into words. They lingered just out of reach, and it seemed that just looking at them might be enough to absorb their meaning, like reading in a dream. Because I could no longer read the words in any of the books, I lay under the big table and paged through the botanical texts, running my fingers over the heavy vellum, trying to feel the contours of the continents with my fingertips, to sense the color of the petals through my skin.

I liked flowers, and pictures of flowers even better. I liked animals, too, but did not prefer pictures of animals to the real thing. No drawing I had ever seen of an animal even remotely resembled the creature it was supposed to represent. They always seemed mangled and misshapen; drawings of birds always looked like their necks had been wrung. I hated even to think of dead animals. There was a taxidermied fox in the study, and I couldn't so much as to look at it.

Albie stayed cross at me all afternoon and all through supper, even though it wasn't my fault about the rain, not even a little bit.

On nights when Albie and I went to bed angry, I slept in a wicker armchair on the veranda. The rain let up after sundown and the night air spoke to me, suggesting all other places that the wind had passed through on its way to me. I tasted the air of those places and imagined what it would be like to live somewhere else. I cried, thinking of all those other cities, other rivers, other gardens I might never see.

When Albie wanted to hurt me, he would ignore me. This was one of his favorite weapons against me, because he knew I needed him. He was all I had, and

without him, the house began to seem too big, the shadows lingering out in the trees too deep.

Because Albie hadn't decided what I would do the following day, I could drift around as I pleased. It was frightening, a little, to be all alone in the house, but I was glad I didn't have to go swimming or be it in blind man's bluff. Albie delighted in tripping me when I was it, which I always was, and sometimes I thought he only suggested it to watch me fall.

Albie was not in evidence when I got up, so I breakfasted alone and spent some time in the front hall, looking at all the paintings. Most of them were portraits of people, but some were landscapes or pictures of horses. I wished I could remember all their names. I wondered if Albie knew. Even if he did, he wouldn't care. If Albie had been there, he would've said he hated them, all those people in the portraits, that they were callow, stupid boors. He probably would have driven them out of their pictures, the way he had done to the couple in the photographs in the big bedroom upstairs. Now, no matter how hard I looked at them, I couldn't see their faces.

I lay at the foot of the stairs for a long time, tracing the pattern in the carpet with my fingers until my neck got stiff. I wanted to lie down and sleep—but not in my chair on the veranda, and not in the little bed I shared with Albie in the nursery.

There were bedrooms on the second floor, and I went along the hall, peeping my head into each room until I found one I liked. There was the blue room with peacock feathers inscribed in gold on the wallpaper, and the grey room with its hard, squeaky mattress, and the sunny yellow room with a girl's doll on the bed. That was my favorite, or next to it. The best room of all was the big bedroom, with its green

silk wallpaper and curtains embroidered with flowers and fruit. A silver hairbrush and mirror stood on the vanity, and if I stretched onto my toes, I could see cufflinks in a little silver bowl on top of the dresser. The clothes in the wardrobe smelled familiar, a spicy, sweet tangle I could never clearly recall once I'd left the room.

Where had they gone, that they'd left behind their dresses and jackets and shoes? Albie had made them go as a punishment to me, that I remembered, though as punishment for what I no longer knew.

Their smell permeated the bedclothes, too, breathing up around me when I fell onto the big, soft mattress. I pressed my face into the pillows and breathed deep, trying to remember.

When I woke, I was too hot and my mouth tasted thick from my nap. It was gloamy and quiet in the big bedroom. All the shadows had expanded, reaching out for me.

The corridor was no better. The lights had not come on, so the house was in almost total darkness, save for the last touch of sunset through the windows.

I stood there, listening for Albie. I couldn't find the faint tap of his footsteps, the creaking of a door or the clatter of knife on plate. In the nursery wing, our bed was empty, and all his toys were just as he'd left them yesterday, the tin soldiers scattered where they'd fallen when his spinning top knocked through their ranks.

"Albie?" I whispered. I knew he'd be able to hear me if he wanted to.

I called his name again in the corridor, and again on the stairs. The paintings on the wall didn't answer, nor did he. In the kitchen, on the veranda, there was no

reply. I searched the dusky lawn for his figure—he might be out measuring the progress of his cloud, I thought, or causing the roses to grow ever thicker around the garden gate. Out by the trees there was a dark shape, and I ran down the lawn towards it.

It wasn't Albie, only a willow sapling bending in the wind. The woods looked so alive and shifting in the twilight. Once I'd wandered for hours in the cool shelter of those trees. I found bluebells growing there and liked to lie down amongst them and pretend I was drowning in that purple sea, until their short season passed and they disappeared.

What lay beyond them? I wondered. I couldn't remember. If I walked out into the woods, what would I find on the other side?

"There's nothing," Albie's voice said behind me, and I started at his closeness, his silent approach. Before I could turn, he had my arm wrenched behind my back and was holding me right up to the edge of the wood so that I could feel the cold touch of fog on my face. "Want to go and find out?" His breath hissed into my ear and I tried to twist free. "Go ahead. Just see how far you get."

He dropped me then and left me on the cold grass. I was crying swollen tears, not because he'd hurt me, though he had, but because he was right.

In the morning, I brought Albie a cup of tea. "I'm sorry, Albie, do you forgive me?"

He took the teacup from me. "You really are a wretched little thing." His gaze was cold and still and seemed to take in every single shift of my shoulders as I breathed. "But I suppose I can excuse you."

The unexpected rain had cleared and the sky was pink and yellow. Albie's cloud was still tethered, having drifted only a few feet in total since it first appeared. "When it finally leaves," Albie said, "we should have a tea in its honor," but I knew we never would, because it would never leave.

Albie was in good spirits again. "Just the two of us," he told me happily. To him, it was a promise, a charm. He whispered the words like they were what made it true. "All we have is each other."

Sometimes I felt I didn't even have Albie. Sometimes he seemed like a stranger, too, his eyes the black, impersonal eyes of an animal. Sometimes I thought he didn't trust me. Sometimes I thought he didn't even remember me.

Everything was slipping away, everything changing. Once the garden was rich with lavender and bee balm and chamomile, hydrangea and lilac, mint, sage, and basil, wild hedges of azalea and big gangly dogwoods good for climbing. Clover and buttercups were abundant in the lawn, and honeysuckle grew up the walls of the house like ivy, so sweet we could smell it from any open window. But now I was noticing that other things had begun to grow which had never grown in the garden before: foxglove and fumitory, delphinium and lily of the valley, sweetpea, oleander, blue flag iris, bleeding-heart and golden chain.

And then there was the smoke. I'd forgotten a time before it started pouring out of the cups of poppies and seeping up from the covered well in the mornings, but it would always dissipate by midday. Now it had stopped burning off, and lingered all day long, roiling just above the grass and clinging to the trunks of trees, obscuring the lawn with a thin grey film, like fog that smelled of ash. Before long, I couldn't even see the trees at all, their lines obscured entirely by the haze at the edges of the garden. Whatever lay in its path was in time corroded by its touch.

Albie didn't seem to mind, or even notice. His legs cut through the smoke when we played tag and he dipped and swooped, his arms out like a hawk's wings. Albie, my turtledove. He wasn't afraid because he knew the smoke wouldn't hurt him. He knew the smoke was just for me.

Then Albie discovered he could control the light.

When he called for me, I dropped the book I had been looking at and hurried out to the lawn. It was only a day or two after he'd forgiven me, his good graces still tenuous. He stood there in the middle of the grass, poised like a concert conductor, and as I watched he made the sun set and the night roll past and then it was dawn. He laughed in sheer delight, and as he made it day and night again, I thought of those kings who went mad with their own power and no longer recognized their loved ones for themselves.

I started sleeping in the library to keep clear of Albie, and after he willed the Northern Lights into the midday sky, I started drawing the shutters, too. We spent less and less time together in the garden, which most days smelled too much of smoke to

be pleasant anymore. We still saw one another at mealtimes, and I tried my hardest to stay civil. When he asked if there was anything wrong, I promised him there wasn't. Saying it, though, didn't make it true. He watched me more closely than ever after that, and I noticed that the smoke got even thicker amongst the trees.

One dim afternoon, I was lying under the library table, trying to remember the War of 1812. We'd had a lesson on it, I was quite sure, but I couldn't remember what it was about. I'd started forgetting things at an alarming pace, not just words but places and people and dates. It was Albie, I was sure, slowly eroding little pieces of the world beyond the garden. I kept mouthing the words to myself, trying to sense their import: the War of 1812, the War of 1812. Albie came in and said, "It's raining stones. They punched right through my umbrella." Scraps of black nylon rustled against one another as he shook the umbrella. The War of 1812.

"Come and see," he said. When I looked up, he was standing at the window. Sure enough, stones were falling from the sky—not white hailstones, but flat, smooth river rocks, grey and brown and heavy. For a moment, it seemed that Albie was only a dark shape against the murky window, but then he turned back to me, and said, "I'm hungry. Let's have luncheon," and he became distinct again.

There wasn't much left in the pantry. We ate stale crackers and finished off a tin of dried apricots. They were tough as leather and we chewed on them until our jaws ached. For desert, we had more ice cream. After lunch, Albie made the sun set three times and forced the stars to change their places in the sky. He named all the new constellations after himself.

I left him on the lawn and went into the library, closing the blinds and turning all the lights on so that it didn't matter what Albie was doing to the sky outside. I picked out books from the shelves to keep me company: field guides and atlases. I could only look at the pictures because all the words were gone from them, but they were a comfort. They told me, *Not everything is gone, we are still the same*. I had the wren and the waxwing and the tufted titmouse like a small drop of silver water; I still knew the Hudson Bay and the Straits of Gibraltar. These, at least, Albie hadn't taken from me yet.

I knew he would make those places go, too, eventually, just like he had made the sun and the stars and the light in the nursery disappear. I wondered what else he had made go—there might be things I didn't remember at all, like formal suppers, or the people who slept in the green bedroom. Someday all the world beyond the garden would simply wink out of existence at his behest. I would never see it again, not the peacocks or the sea of bluebells or anything beyond the trees and smoke. It would be just the two of us, forever and always, Albie and Evelyn, from then on.

“The Hollow”

We used to think we were the only two people ever to have found that cathedral of tangled branches and vines. It might even have been true. The woods were dense and old, every tree seeming to lean down to peer over your shoulders as you passed, and the hollow was deep in the woods, further than most of the vacationers ever dared to go on their picnics and nature hikes. To us, it was our place, only ours.

Our little bower, our home. The branches were so dense we could hardly feel the water drip through when it rained. We spent the entire summer there.

I don’t remember the Fourth of July beach party, or our trips to the lighthouse, although there are photos, I know: you and me in our bathing suits and shorts, blinking into the camera while behind us someone sets off fireworks that will not show up against the daytime sky. I find those pictures unbearable to look at, as if someone has doctored them, cropped us out and transplanted us. We both have the softly stunned expressions of the recently awake.

I know we must have gone home—for meals, to bathe and sleep—but all I remember is the hollow. That, and what it was like afterwards, once you were gone.

The woods are exactly as I remember them. Even in the dark, I can recognize old familiar landmarks—the snarl of blackberry bushes, the fallen tree across the stream.

The night is oppressively close. Even though the sun has been down for hours, it's still suffocatingly hot, the air a weight on my skin, the way someone's hand too tight on your shoulder is a warning.

I will not be afraid. We were never afraid of anything, you and I, the wild girls. We mapped every inch of this island, or near enough. We learned more of this forest than anyone else on the island, pushing right into its tangled heart, that empty cave of life. They didn't know its secrets, its hidden ways. No wonder they could never find you. But I will.

I know exactly where you'll be. I've thought about it long and hard over the years, and there's only one answer. I will find you at the hollow.

The night you disappeared, we'd made a plan to spend the night in the hollow. We'd seen it at almost every other time of day—at sunrise, at twilight, in the cool, dim light of midday—but never in the true dark.

I remember the anticipation, the sound of the nighttime woods outside, as eager for us as we were for it. Soon, I remember thinking, soon we will run. Soon we will crash through the underbrush, until it yields to us and gives way, and then there will be the hollow, opening to us under the starry sky.

Once the light under our parents' door had gone off, you whispered that it was time to go. Your teeth were pale in the dark.

Together we crept down the stairs and out the back door. At the edge of the yard, we switched on our flashlights and then we were off—running, running. You

were a year older and an inch-and-a-half taller, and your stride was long enough that no matter how fast I ran, I was always just a half-step behind you.

I remember the beam of my flashlight glancing off your washed-white shirt, your strong, thin neck, the delicate curl of your copper hair behind your ears. You ran ahead of me into the night, never doubting I would follow.

The underbrush is getting thicker now, and the trees here grow closer together. This, too, is familiar. The forest contracts in on itself the deeper you go, getting dense and treacherous, protecting its tender center.

I remember the way perfectly: along the creek, past the ruined chimney and the old well, until you reach the rise and the ravine below, then down into the low-lying tangle in the middle of which lies the hollow.

You will be waiting for me there, won't you?

We ran along the edge of the stream for a while, our shoes slipping in the wet dirt of the bank. Briars clung to our socks, and every step made a sucking sound.

We went single-file, you in front. I remember the collar of your shirt stretched out at the base of your neck, your hair like wind-tossed and wild copper wire.

We passed the chimney and the well in the dark, the stream whispering beside us.

Then the rise came into sight and you broke into a sprint.

"Come on!" you cried.

"Wait!" My shoes were sinking into the mud, and by the time I managed to free myself and scramble up the rise after you, you had already gone down into the ravine with a crashing of leaves.

I stood there at the top of the rise, catching my breath and scanning the dark woods for the beam of your flashlight.

I called out for you, but you didn't answer. I aimed my flashlight out into the dark little valley, but the light seemed to have been swallowed up. I couldn't see you anywhere.

I thought at first you'd twisted your ankle or slipped on some moss on the way down the side of the ravine.

In a minute, I told myself, I'll trip over her leg and we'll laugh in the soft deadfall and tomorrow we'll compare bruises.

In a minute, she'll sit up and shout, "Scared you!"

I called out to you again, so loud a sleeping bird started awake and fled into the air. The woods seemed all at once so very large and empty of anything alive.

It's very dark now. The trees are so dense that I can't see the sky. There are no stars anymore. There's no noise, either, not an owl crying or the cracking of a twig breaking underfoot. I can't even hear my own breathing, like the night has clapped its hands over my ears.

It was like this the night I lost you, too, this perfect darkness.

I waded blind into cutting banks of thorns, calling your name. You didn't answer, but I kept calling, my voice rising and rising until it scraped my throat.

I never knew the dark could be so absolute.

It can't be much further now.

The undergrowth claws at my bare legs, leaving marks, drawing blood. A twisted root catches my foot, brings me to the ground. The rush of the fall knocks my breath out of my chest and for a while all I can do is lie still while I try to remember how to work my lungs.

When the air finally rushes back into my body, I can smell my own blood, my palms having opened against the rough earth. I can't see them in the darkness, but I can feel the tender skin singing out in shock.

What would happen if I just didn't get up? What if I lay here forever, unmoving? Would the forest creep up and cover me? I've imagined you like that before, tender ivy cradling your skull, saplings pushing up between your ribs. In my worst dreams, your eyes are blue and staring beneath a blanket of damp leaves, just yards away from where I stood.

No, in my worst dreams, you lie there, yards away from me, and hold your breath so that I won't hear you. You hide from me, hating me, wishing I would go away. But you would never do that to me. I shouldn't even think it.

I'm the one who abandoned you: left you lying somewhere on the forest floor. If only I'd looked harder, if only I'd turned my head just a fraction of an inch to one side or the other, I might have found you.

The sun had just come up pale behind the early morning clouds when the sheriff's deputy found me wandering barefoot in the stream. He picked me up and carried me back to town, his arms lean and powerful around me, the spice of his aftershave mixing with the smell of mud and the clear, cold note of dawn. I never knew when or where I lost my shoes.

They sent out search parties after that. Dogs barking, the beams of flashlights scattering off the trunks of trees, everyone calling your name. I wasn't allowed to go with them, even though I tried to make them understand: I was the only one who could find you.

Eventually, they stopped looking, and our parents decided it would be best if we went home. They gave up, but I never did.

This time, I will find you. You've been waiting.

Pebbles and thorns bite into my palms and knees when I push myself onto my feet. The air is so thick before me that I have the feeling of being walled in and the urge seizes me to tear at my skin, as if it's what's constraining me.

My legs are shaking, and the night presses back against me, but I force myself forward. I put one foot in front of the other.

I can't see anything anymore, not the stars or the trees or even my hands in front of me. The dark is too complete. Shapes that might be bushes or slow-moving animals creep past me, black-on-black. My eyes ache from straining to see and my

pulse throbs in my palms, hot and stinging. There is blood on my legs. Every step seems to take longer than the last.

I've made it further than I did that night, at least.

Do you blame me, for leaving you all those years ago? I didn't mean to leave you out here all alone. I didn't mean to keep on living.

Can you forgive me?

I'm here now, that must count for something. I've come back.

The ground is unsteady beneath my feet, threatening to swallow me up.

The air gets darker and darker, and I think of the stars somewhere far away, listening in like eavesdroppers.

When at last the tangle of vines and branches becomes a thick curtain, then I know I've almost reached the hollow. I dip my hands into that veil and shove my way through, guiding myself by touch, by memory.

Inside the hollow, the quality of the air changes—the way the sound echoes under the curving ceiling, opening out and reduplicating, growing thin and distant. The air grows sweeter, though it's no less dark.

I hold my breath, turning into the empty cave of the hollow, straining my ears for some sign of you. My eardrums quiver and I reach out, blind, my eyes open wide.

I can sense you coming closer. Yes, it must be. A dark shape I can almost place against the darkness moves forward. That absence of light must be you.

I reach out my fingertips to touch the velvet-black night and, oh, you're here, you're here!

“Alfa Whiskey Echo”

We used to talk in code. You were Alfa, I was Whiskey. In homeroom, during study hall, we used Caesar and Atbash, simple ciphers. We taught ourselves Morse code and the NATO spelling alphabet, repeating the letters back and forth to one another until we’d learned them by heart, • —, — • • •, — • — •, like that. On the telephone we would communicate by tapping our fingertips against the receivers. Be careful, someone might be listening. Dit-dah, dit-dah-dah.

In my dream of you last night, I dreamed in code. After years of radio silence, you appeared to me, the very picture of a femme fatale, and said, *DLTBB, QXXRQSH*. There was a Wehrmacht Enigma in front of me, like a typewriter in a wooden box, its lettered lampboard ready to illuminate your meaning, but I just sat there. I didn’t move. *ZJTJHD*, you said. A good spy would have tried one rotor setting after another until she found the right starting position, but I never touched a single key. Why didn’t I? Was it that I didn’t know how to decipher your message, or that I didn’t want to?

Your parents got divorced the summer before we started high school and they sent you to sleep away camp while their lawyers negotiated.

You sent me letters every week and I spent hours decoding them, the only part of you I had. *Uryyb, Juvfxrl*, they all began. I traced my fingertips along the curves of your words while my other hand sketched out the translation, A for N, B for O. Your pencil dug deep grooves into the paper, an indelible mark.

Your letters were full of the kinds of adventures I imagined Nancy Drew might have had at camp, up until some valuable heirloom went missing—hiking, canoeing, making out with boys in the woods after curfew. You told me, using ROT13, about Evan, the boy from New York who'd unhooked your bra behind the boathouse and put his brusque hands on your breasts. *Ur'f phgr, ohg ur's fb obevat*, you complained, and I couldn't help laughing.

I had nothing to tell you, except what I invented.

When the divorce was final, your father spent a muggy afternoon loading his possessions into a big white U-Haul. I watched from our front windows as he carried box after box into the truck, his shirt dark with sweat as he strained under their weight. I wondered why he didn't have anyone to help him, why no one in the neighborhood had volunteered. Your brothers had also been sent away for the summer, though I never knew to where.

Your mother kept the house, and for the rest of July and August there was always a small crowd of trucks—carpenters, painters—parked in front of your house, always the sound of buzzing and hammering coming from inside. I peered through our curtains, speculating, making up stories to report back to you.

Plumber's van parked out front 3rd day in a row, I wrote. *Possibly CIA surveillance?* I felt this was preferable to the real news I could have given you from home. Otherwise, I would've had to tell you that I spent most of my time reading everything the public library had on code breaking, which wasn't much, and that watching reruns of *Get Smart* and *The Avengers* without you next to me on the couch wasn't nearly as much fun.

You didn't get back from camp until right before school started. As I counted down the last week of vacation, I imagined myself as an operative waiting for a connect. Every day I thought, *Surely now, surely today*. I watched for the light of the lamp in your bedroom window, our signal you were free to talk. It wasn't until I was waiting for the bus that first morning that you materialized behind me, closing your left hand around my right. I was so startled that I almost jerked out of your grip.

Hello, Whiskey, your fingers said against my palm, as if you'd never left.

You wore your skirt rolled up at the waistband, your legs long and powerful and very tan. It hadn't been that long ago that we'd played the game of convincing strangers we were sisters, but now I felt pale and round in comparison.

I missed you, I said.

You were smiling, though you were looking past me at the dense green trees that lined our street, never meeting my eye. *Of course you did.*

You told me I couldn't come over after school because your mother wasn't done decorating yet. I said I didn't care what the house looked like, but you said your mother did care, so it didn't matter what I thought.

You'd always preferred my house, anyway. At yours, you were on constant alert for your brothers, who I saw around the neighborhood but never really spoke to. I only knew them as the clatter of their book bags in your front hall, lean figures at the other end of the hall at school. You always made me leave as soon as they came home. I asked once if it was because you were embarrassed of me, and you laughed, a

harsh, crashing sort of sound, and said, *It's just that I want to keep you to myself*. I was flattered, almost, enough that I didn't ask again.

We spent the afternoons at my house instead. We did our homework at the kitchen table and then lay on the floor watching old spy movies. We practiced that Bond girl *sang-froid*, trying to master the art of stubbing out a cigarette and heartlessly tossing our hair. The cigarettes were your mother's menthols, filched from her purse in ones and twos. The beauty of this strategy, you told me, was that your mother smoked in secret, thought you didn't know, and so, you said, could never confront you about stealing them. You always offered me one, even though you knew I wouldn't accept. Someone else might have given me a hard time, but you never did, just shrugged and said, "Well, if you ever change your mind . . ." You smoked on our back patio, looking back at me through the sliding glass door. The door tended to stick from the outside and when you wanted to be let back in, you would tap little messages on the glass to get my attention, • • • — — — • • • and — — • — — • — — — • • • — • — — —. Sometimes I just stood on my side of the door and shook my head, pretending I wasn't going to let you in. As your tapping got more and more plaintive, it would become harder and harder for me to keep a straight face, until we both dissolved into laughter, leaning against the glass to keep from falling down.

"Do you ever hear from that boy from camp?" We were sitting on the patio, enjoying one of the last warm days of the season. Out of the corner of my eye, you were edged in gold light.

"What boy?" you said.

"You know, the one who—" I hesitated, as if I didn't remember his name. "Evan?"

You stretched out long in the chair, your dark hair spilling down over your shoulders. "Definitely not," you said.

"How come?" I twisted around in my chair so I could see you better.

"What about you?" You tipped your head to look at me, eyebrows high. "Any summer hookups *you're* waiting to hear from?"

"Just Alan Turing," I said, and you laughed. "Did you know that he died from eating a poisoned apple?"

For a long time, you didn't say anything. Then: "Evan was an idiot, anyway."

This was something that hadn't been in your letters. "Why do you say that?"

You dragged your arms up over your head and arched your back, like you'd just woken up from a long sleep. There were scratches on the underside of your arm, right where the sleeve of your t-shirt rode up, red lines. I watched as they were exposed, centimeter by centimeter, then turned my head before you could catch me staring. "Who poisoned him?" you asked after a while.

"Who?" I imagined Evan, his lips blue from cyanide.

"Alan Turing."

"Oh. Nobody. He poisoned himself."

You let out a long, slow breath from between your teeth and I felt, somehow, I had disappointed you.

While I was reading about Virginia Hall and Krystyna Skarbek, you'd discovered that Coach Geller was more likely to excuse you from gym if you flirted with him. You used hall passes from Mr. Alvarez to take forty-minute trips to the restroom and collected tardy excuse slips from the student office aid whose eyes, when he spoke to you, were never on your face. It became a sort of game to you, seeing how much you could get away with.

People started noticing. Boys you didn't even know would ask you out, and girls who used to invite us to their birthday parties in middle school started spreading rumors about you and calling you a slut behind your back. I was embarrassed, angry, wanted someone to tell them to stop, but you said not to listen to them. You were the one who cared less. For you, it was an art. You said you had made yourself immune to sentiment.

No one asked me out. I wouldn't have said yes, anyway. I didn't daydream about seducing someone for nuclear launch codes. You, on the other hand, wanted to sell state secrets, keep a cyanide capsule in your tooth. You wondered what it would be like to slit a man's throat.

I loved you for that. I loved your ruthlessness, your indifference. *Nobody else matters but us*, you told me once. You were sleeping over that night—we must have been in fifth or sixth grade—and we lay chest-to-chest in my little white bed because you said your sleeping bag was too hot. The lights were out and in the dark your eyes looked big and empty and bright.

Nobody else matters but us.

I asked you once if you remembered saying that. You said you didn't.

“I’m not doing my algebra homework anymore,” you announced one day on the way home from school.

“How come?”

It was raining, a cold rain, promising winter. You were hunched under the hood of your raincoat, scowling down at the water pouring into your shoes.

“I thought you liked Mr. Miller,” I prompted, when you didn’t answer.

“That class is such a joke,” you said with a sneer. “He doesn’t even look at our work, just grades the answers from the book. I checked.”

“What do you mean, you checked?”

“I did all the work, then put down the wrong answers, and he didn’t even notice. You can pass the class based on the midterm and final, anyway, so the homework doesn’t even count.”

Not long after that, you started ditching algebra altogether. I knew you spent the period smoking behind the science building because I could smell the menthol on you when you turned up at lunch. In the bathroom, you would touch up your eyeliner, examining every angle of your reflection through slitted eyelids.

I thought of you as Mata Hari. I imagined you facing the firing squad without fear.

I was wrong, though, to think you weren’t afraid of anything. It was just that the things that scared you were different than what frightened me.

When we were out together, at the diner, or getting coffee, you couldn’t bear to have your back to the window and would make me switch seats with you, even

switch tables sometimes. You watched the street more than you looked at me, your expression tense and guarded. I never knew what it was you were looking for, but you never seemed to find it.

You said the mothers at school were always watching you, judging you. You were convinced Mr. Miller's wife drove by your house sometimes in the middle of the night, her headlights dark. You got in a screaming match with the clerk at the drugstore once because she said something to you under her breath, but you wouldn't ever tell me what it was you heard her say.

Another time, we were walking home from school when your brothers went by on their bikes. One of them stood up on the pedals of his bike and shouted, "Hey, sluts!" while the other tossed a lit match at you.

The flame went out in the air but the matchstick burned your cheek, right below your eye.

"Are you gonna let us fuck your friend?" your oldest brother asked you.

"We'll even let you watch," said the younger one. "How about that?"

I waited for you to yell at them, to cut them down to size, but you just stood there, stock still on the pavement, tracking their movements without ever looking directly at them.

"Hey," your oldest brother said, turning to me, "let's see your pussy. I bet it's real sweet."

I tried to catch your eye, but you wouldn't look at me. You didn't even move until they'd rounded the corner, laughing, and disappeared from sight.

I put my hand on yours, wanting to send you some private message, but you wrenched your arm away from me. We walked all the way back to my house in silence.

Winter was mild, I remember, one big, long nothing. You spent most of the break at my house, eating every meal with me and my parents, sleeping crammed into my twin bed with me. My father accepted your presence without question, even sitting in on our film noir marathon for a little while, but my mother started to lose patience after the first week.

"This is supposed to be a time for family," she said one day while you were taking a shower. "She must have some other friends who want to spend time with her."

"Maybe she just likes me better than her other friends." My mother and I never argued, at least never outright, and I felt bold, reckless talking back to her. I felt this was something you would have said in my place—and from the sour look on her face, my mother clearly agreed.

"I hope she knows she's not coming with us to Grandma and Grandpa's for Christmas."

For a moment, I wished desperately that I could take you with me. I wished my parents could go to my grandparents' without me and leave us behind on our own. I wanted it to be the two of us only, no one else in the world. I remember thinking, *Maybe then—* But I could never get any further than that, just, *Maybe then—*

In the end, of course, you spent the holidays with your family. We exchanged gifts before I left: a switchblade comb and a tube of Siren Red lipstick for you, a biography of Alan Turing I'd already read for me.

That spring, we went to the mall to pick out bathing suits. My mother wanted to come with us. She didn't like you much in those days. She tried not to show it, but her mouth began to press a tight line whenever I brought up your name. "We'll be *fine*," I told her, rolling my eyes, and eventually she agreed to let me go.

You chose a black bikini with a low-slung belt. You looked like Ursula Andress just emerged from the sea. I imagined a small pistol or a knife strapped to your hip. You smiled at yourself in the fitting room mirror, your teeth very sharp and white, and then you turned to smile at me.

"Come on, try *something*," you said. You held out a cherry red one-piece with a padded bra.

I shrugged and said, "There's nothing to fill it out." I still didn't have any breasts to speak of and my stomach wasn't flat enough for a two-piece.

"Just *try it*," you said. I felt, for a moment, like your prisoner—like we might not leave the humid fitting room stall if I didn't comply. It was always easier to give in to you. I peeled off my shirt and slid my shorts down my legs. You unhooked the bathing suit from its hanger and stood there watching as I squirmed into it. In my flat triangle bra and panties, I looked like I was playing dress-up in some grown woman's clothes. I didn't want to look in the mirror, much less look you in the eye.

"See, it looks stupid." I started to drag the straps from my shoulders, but you stopped me. Your hands were tight on my shoulders as you turned me around to face the mirror. You raked your hand into my hair and shook it loose.

"There!" you said, as if you'd discovered me, as if, before that, I wasn't there. Your smile reflected sharp in the mirror. "You could kill in that."

I couldn't imagine myself the way you described me—as someone dangerous, someone mysterious. That was you, not me. I saw myself bent over a Typex at the GC&CS, not lounging around on sun-kissed beaches in lingerie. In the end, I decided I didn't really need a new swimsuit, since the one from the year before still fit OK.

On the last day of school, some senior dumped a gallon of water on me as a prank, and you gave him a black eye. I'd never seen you move like that. It was like watching something inside you uncoil—something that had been waiting a long time to strike. There was relief, delight, blind rage in the snap of your arm. When I saw you later, standing outside the principal's office, you smiled, a brilliant, fearless grin that frightened me.

You were grounded for two weeks, but you snuck out while your mom was at work. I was sure you'd get in even more trouble, but you told me not to worry.

We stayed in my room just in case. You braided my hair on my narrow bed. Your lean fingers carding through my hair made me want to close my eyes. "You didn't have to do that." I couldn't make my voice go above a whisper. "I don't want you to get in trouble because of me."

Your hands tightened in my hair, and it almost hurt. “I don’t give a fuck,” you said. The fierceness of your voice made me want to turn around and look at you, but you held me fast.

I don’t give a fuck. Tension gathered between my shoulders and I was scared for you, though I couldn’t have said why. *Nobody matters but us*.

After your grounding ended, we spent almost every day at the outdoor swimming pool. You lay out tanning, I read. Neither of us did much swimming, me because I got earaches, you because you didn’t want to get your hair wet.

But mostly you came to the pool to be on display—for the boys from our speech class, for the lifeguards, for the college kids home for the summer, sometimes even for the fathers of neighborhood children, men I would see mowing their lawns in sweat-stained shirts in the late afternoons. They loomed over us poolside, trying to coax you into conversation. I could feel their shadows as cool lines across my legs.

Sometimes you let them buy you sodas or snacks from the vending machine. You made a game out of who wanted you most, what they would do to have you, but none of them won in the end.

Later, you would tell me about it, recounting every fumbling gesture, every stuttered compliment. You laughed at them, how eager they were to make themselves ridiculous for you.

The day after Fourth of July, you came over to show off a rash of tiny puncture marks on your arms and legs. Your brothers, you told me, held you down

and stuck pins in you. You rolled down the waistband of your shorts to show me the bruises where their hands had pressed you to the floor.

I was horrified, nearly crying, but you were almost proud. “If I’m ever captured,” you said, “I’ll never break.”

For my birthday, my father had promised to take us to DC for an exhibit on women in espionage.

We picked you up early and drove into the city, along the slow curve of the Beltway, past the white and gold spires of the Mormon temple. As we crawled through morning gridlock, I watched the streets for Secret Service agents and unmarked vehicles with bulletproof glass. You leaned your head against the window and closed your eyes.

The museum had only just opened when we got there, and the marble corridors leading to the exhibit were all but empty. The space was so quiet I could hear our footsteps, each distinct—my father’s long, brisk gait, my slower step, your light, near-silent tread.

You stopped reading the explanatory plaques after the first five minutes, wandering instead from room to room, flirting lazily with the museum guards. One of them, the young one, had very white teeth. I worried you were mad at me.

In a glass display case, a dozen intercept sheets from Bletchley Park, marked by the delicate strokes of the analyst’s pencil. I started crying at the sight of them, thinking how precious that paper was, how tenderly it had been made to yield its secrets. I rubbed my fingers against my eyes, hoping nobody had seen.

That's when I noticed you were gone.

After a little while my father noticed, too, and when he asked me where you were, I could only shrug helplessly. "I think she went to the bathroom," I said.

A minute passed, and then another.

On the wall, a map of dead drops in East Berlin.

I forced myself not to check my watch.

Making a circuit of the room, circling like a nervous hawk, my father said, "Do you want to go and check on her?"

The restrooms were marble and chrome, still clean that early in the day. You were not in any of the stalls.

Next to the restrooms was a door marked 'Employees Only'. I thought about pushing it open, looking for you there. I thought about the straight line of the security guard's shoulders in his uniform jacket. I thought about your hands on his back, clenching that dark fabric. I thought about his hand over your mouth, crushing your lips against your teeth, pressing your nose closed. I thought about the pinpricks flecking the bruises on your thighs.

My stomach started to churn. I thought about faking an illness, a dizzy spell or nausea. I wished I knew how to fall down without hurting myself. I wished I wasn't afraid of hurting myself when I fell.

I lingered by the water fountains, taking tiny sips of ice-cold water that did not rinse the taste of bile from my mouth.

You turned up twenty minutes later carrying a bag from the gift shop. Your hair was mussed and I saw a red mark on the flesh of your shoulder before you pulled your shirt higher up around your neck.

"I was about to call your mother," my father said.

"Sorry, Mr. C," you said, smiling. "But I got you a present." A pen with invisible ink.

For me, a book safe, styled to look like the collected stories of Sherlock Holmes. "Happy birthday," you said, and for a moment I forgot how frightened I was, how sure I'd been that you hated me, that you had gone forever. "Are you done? Want to get ice cream after lunch?"

That wasn't the only time you went missing.

I knew there were nights you didn't sleep at home. Some of them, you spent with me. Other times, you'd tell your mother you were staying at my house and slip out once my parents had gone to bed. You would return before dawn, walking barefoot across our wet lawn, still wearing the same clothes you had on the day before. On those mornings, when you got into bed next to me, I could smell stale cigarettes, some stranger's cologne. "Just ten minutes, I don't want to go back yet," you would tell me, your hair slippery on my pillow.

Toward the end of that summer, you told your mother you were going to see your aunt in Bethesda and didn't come back for three days. Your aunt said she hadn't seen you, that you'd never even mentioned you were coming. Then one afternoon the police showed up and walked you back to your front door.

Your mother more or less stopped letting you leave the house after that. You would call me on the phone, tapping out messages like a telegraph operator. • • • — — — • • •, • — — • • • • • • • • • — • — • — • — —. I listened with my eyes pressed closed, trying not to hear the stuttered rhythm of your breath. • • • — — — • • •.

The last time you came over to my house, you looked dangerous, wild. Rain was shattering down in torrents and you were drenched just in the time it took you to run across the street.

"I'm not going back there," you told me. Your teeth were clenched with the cold, but when I tried to touch you, you flinched.

When I got up to turn the air conditioning down, you grabbed my wrist and held me there. "Don't make me go back." Your voice was so rough you sounded almost like somebody else. I was afraid you were about to cry, and suddenly I wanted very badly to put some distance between us.

I twisted my arm out of your grip. "I'm just going to get you a towel," I said.

In the hallway, I stood staring into the linen closet for a long time. I stood, listening to my breath catch in my chest and nothing else.

When I got back, your expression had gone flat, blank and still and determined. You didn't say anything else to me about leaving.

We lay down on the bed, just like we used to do, our foreheads almost touching, hands clasped. I wanted to say something to you, to promise you would be all right, because that seemed like the sort of thing I should say, but all I could think

of was our names, Alfa Whiskey Alfa Whiskey, over and over. Your hair was drying in fine curls around your face and you smelled like rainwater, like night air.

A few days later, you took fifty dollars from your mother's purse and packed a bag and disappeared.

So many times since then I've wondered why I didn't ask you, why I didn't say—something, anything at all.

Everyone had their theories about what had happened after you were gone. The police asked me if you'd been seeing anyone—Maybe an older man? Maybe a teacher? Had you gotten into some kind of trouble? What about your home life? How did you and your brothers get on? Didn't you ever confide in me? After all, weren't we best friends?

How could I tell them that I never asked? Not, at least, the questions that really mattered. A good spy would have investigated. A good spy would have pushed for answers, even if they were answers she didn't want to hear. But I never asked, and then it was too late.

For years after you left, I used to imagine breaking into your house. I could have used the spare key your mother kept by the back door. I knew where it was because you'd told me you used it to sneak back in on occasions when you'd stayed out past your curfew. I could have lifted up the loose tile along the rim of the flowerbed and let myself in. I could have crept up the stairs and into your bedroom, opened the jewelry boxes on your dresser, checked all your drawers for false bottoms.

But what would I have found there, in the end? What good would it have done? It wasn't proof I needed.

“Lady with an Ermine”

My job is photographing car accidents. A lot of people think it’s morbid, but I like the way you can tell the whole story of a collision if you just step back far enough to get it all in frame. Also, the insurance companies pay for my time from the moment I step out the door, plus gas and expenses. Sometimes I’m called away to scenes several hours away, sometimes in the middle of the night, but I’d trade the occasional late night for flexible schedule any day. I like the driving, too, the time alone in the car.

On the drive home tonight, my headlights only stretch so far. It’s late, there’s no one else on the road. Around each bend, there is absolute darkness, broken only by the lights of a jet in the sky, the blinking red flecks of a radio tower.

When I get home, the house is dark except for the light under my father’s door. I drop my bag on the kitchen table and drink a glass of water at the sink.

He’s left the light on in the shed again. It turns the back yard a sulfurous yellow, casting the shadow of the lemon tree against the fence. I let myself out the back door and cross the dew-wet grass to the shed.

Inside, on his workbench, a jar of nails anchors a stack of blueprints and sketches. The papers curl and shiver in the breeze coming in through the open window. Three half-empty cups of coffee perch, forgotten, on the shelves. I close the window and gather up the cups to wash tomorrow, turning off the light on my way out.

When I was growing up, my father kept nuts and bolts in jam jars, made stacks of his old mail that would slide down like an avalanche if anyone walked past

them too quickly. The mess always seemed to exist independently of him, but before my mother left, somehow he managed to rein it in. His control was virtuosic, like conducting the weather or the traffic on the roads. These days, it's closets full of old newspapers, abandoned cups of coffee. He forgets things. He lives in the past.

The light is still on in his room when I come in, so I knock gently, long-short-long like he used to do when I was a girl.

I hear the light buzz of his snoring falter and he says, "That you, kiddo?"

Shouldering open the door, I lean on the frame. He's sitting up under the covers, a book propped up on his chest, his reading glasses slipping down his face. "You didn't have to wait up," I say.

"I worry about you when you're out so late, is all."

"You left the light on in your shop again," I tell him.

He looks up at me, his eyes half-hidden behind the frames of his glasses. "Did I?"

"I turned it off, but just— Mrs. del Vecchio will never let us hear the end of it if she notices the light through her bedroom window, you know that."

"That woman." My father marks the place in his book, shaking his head. "It's my own yard, I should be able to do what I want in it."

"I know, I know, I'm just saying—try to remember to turn the light off, OK?"

He makes a grumbling noise of agreement.

I close the distance to his bedside and drop a kiss on his head. His neck is flecked with silver hairs and crisscrossed with deep lines. "Go to bed, old man."

I hear his light switch off a minute later, and by the time I'm done in the bathroom, the gentle sound of his sleeping breath struggling in and out of his nose is the only sound in the house.

I wake from confused sleep to find someone standing at the foot of my bed. Adrenaline shocks through me and for one breathless second, I think it's my mother, but it's not.

I try to sit but, but I can't move, can't even open my mouth to ask her what she's doing in my house. But what she's doing is nothing. She just stands there staring at me and I, paralyzed, lie there staring back.

She is small, plain, dark-eyed. Her face is soft, but she has a hollowed-out look, like someone who's survived a severe illness. She's wearing an ermine collar above her grayish dress and holding a black cat in her arms, or maybe it's a catskin collar and she's holding an ermine. Her hair is of no particular color and she wears it tied back, half-covering her delicate ears. When I try to speak again, she lifts her hand from the cat's dark flank and puts her index finger to her lips, silencing me. A green ring hangs on her finger, unusually bright.

She watches me for a little while longer and then she is gone—not out the window or through the door, just gone. As soon as she goes, the feeling comes back to my limbs and I struggle out of bed, landing hard on the floor.

I stagger through the rest of the house on shaking limbs, checking closets and corners for her. I test all the locks. She is nowhere to be found.

Back in my bedroom, there is no sign she was ever there, except a slightly ferrous tension in the air, like bringing a vibrating tuning fork close to your skin. I want nothing so much as to scrape all my skin raw, to run until I am far away from here.

The clock on my nightstand says I was barely asleep for two hours, but I won't sleep again tonight. Outside my window, the sky has taken on the blue shade of morning and in the trees the birds are making reckless noise.

I spend the morning editing photos on my laptop under the lemon tree because I can't quite bring myself to stay in my room. I kept having the feeling she was still in there, invisible but so close she was almost touching me, looking over my shoulder.

My father reads the paper in the chair next to me. He drops each section on the ground as he finishes it and snaps the next one open with a crisp shake.

Outside, in the clear grey daylight, it's easier to forget her, the girl in the fur collar, to shake off the lingering sensation of her stare.

What was it about her that reminded me of my mother? The resemblance was slight, whatever it was—a similarity in the sloping shoulders, maybe, or the way her mouth turned down at the corners. My confusion when she first appeared was only reflexive wishful thinking.

I haven't seen my mother in over twenty years. One day, we woke up and she was gone. She left all her things behind—her clothes, her records, her car. I was nine.

The girl in the fur collar returns the following night. It's just the same as last time: she appears right before dawn, pulling me abruptly out of sleep. I lie there transfixed while she stands at the foot of my bed, holding that indeterminate creature with the dark pelt. She watches me for a while with her finger pressed pensively to her lips before she leaves.

I try sleeping on the couch the next night, but she follows me, staring me out of sleep. This time I'm sure it's definitely not a dream, because the TV is on behind her, and my brain couldn't possibly be inventing the weather for the morning commute.

She watches me intently, her expression part curious, part expectant. I have the impression that she wants to ask me something, but that she wants me to guess what it is. *No*, I think at her, unable to say it aloud. She doesn't seem impressed. Just like before, she puts her index finger to her lips. Her ring is green light.

Once she's gone, the blood runs back to my extremities. All my muscles have that shivery, slightly sick feeling, like after you've run too far, and I can't shake the prickling feeling on my back that tells me someone's looking at me. I check all the doors and windows, all the closets and cupboards and behind the shower curtain, but I can't convince myself she's not still here.

The thought of staying in the house a minute longer makes my stomach turn, so I walk over to the twenty-four-hour diner. The muscles in my calves are trembling and I thrust my legs down hard with every step, making sure they make contact with the ground.

The diner is deserted except for a waitress and a man half-heartedly playing a small toy accordion in a corner booth. I worry my father will wake up in the silent house and wonder where I am if I'm gone too long, but what I want more than anything is to be away from that feeling that the girl in the fur collar has only just disappeared, so I order a cup of coffee and let the fluorescent lights work on me for a while.

If she were just a dream, a neurological phenomena, I could stand it, but she's not. She's visiting me on purpose, and there's something she wants. That's what frightens me—not the apparition herself, but the fact that she's reaching out to *me*.

Five or six months after my mother left, my father thought it would be a good idea for me to see a therapist. We sat on humid Naugahyde chairs in the waiting room, sweating and listening to a woman try to stop a baby crying. When we were finally escorted into the doctor's office, I seized up—dug my heels in, wouldn't go inside. Silence rose up in me. I couldn't bear the thought of talking to someone about her, so I chose to say nothing at all. I remember my father's hand too tight on my shoulder, urging me into the room, and I remember how much the grip of his fingers hurt when I twisted away.

What I want is to ignore her, to make her nothing, but she won't let me.

What am I supposed do to get her to leave me alone? If I knew what she wanted from me, I could at least try to answer her. What clue or signal is she giving me?

I keep thinking about that green ring, its green the almost-blue green of traffic lights, bright like it's lit from within, like she's focusing all her energy on making it shine. She keeps holding her finger up to her lips almost like she's showing it to me.

According to the Internet, gems can be identified by their hardness, the way they break, and the color mark they make when scraped across a ceramic tile. Color alone, it turns out, is not a reliable indicator. Emeralds are always green by definition (if they're another color, they're called something else—morganite or goshenite or aquamarine), but sapphires, garnets, and even rubies can be green, too. What people call jade can actually be one of two types of stone: jadeite or nephrite, neither of which is necessarily the opaque green most people expect.

There's no way of telling whether the girl in the fur collar's ring is a real gem or just a piece of glass. Even if I could move while she's there, I don't think I could break her ring or scrape it against a tile. Just the thought of touching her makes me vaguely queasy, like my body knows it's something I'm not supposed to do.

If I could only take a picture of her—but here, again, the problem of being immobilized. I can't even move my index finger when she's around, so how am I supposed to press the shutter on a camera?

After some trial and error, I work it out: my camera on a tripod near my nightstand, rigged to a light sensor, the kind storm chasers use to capture lightning. When the girl in the fur collar appears, the light levels in the room shift just enough to trip the sensor that tells the camera to take the shot. When she hears the snap of the camera's shutter sound effect, her expression is doubtful, maybe even little bit sad.

As soon as I can move again, I almost knock the camera off the tripod in my hurry to view the pictures. My heart knocks in my chest when I do: she shows up as nothing more than a vague smear, the ring, at best, a green point of light.

When I was twelve or thirteen, my father dated a woman named Maxine who was a jeweler. I always liked her, but even I knew it wasn't going to work out between them. He could never stop comparing other women to my mother and now Maxine and her wife are raising the wife's kids from a previous marriage. She always did like children. She was nice to me. I still have the little pendant she made me for my twelfth birthday, a moonstone oval on a silver chain.

Maxine's store is just as I remember it, a tiny dim corridor of glass-topped cases full of glinting jewelry, tucked between a stationer's and a hosiery store. She mostly does repairs and resizing—taking the work that pays the bills, like a lot of us.

Maxine's eyes widen behind her big beetle glasses when I walk through the door. "Kit," she says warmly. "It's so good to see you."

We embrace, exchange pleasantries. She asks after my father.

"He's the same," I tell her.

"Well," she says, "you tell him I said hello."

I promise I will.

"Are you here to shop?"

"Actually, I was hoping you might be able to help me with something."

She offers to do whatever she can, so I tell her I want to learn more about a ring I saw somewhere. I don't mention the silent, serious-eyed girl who keeps

appearing at the foot of my bed and watches me with such unswerving attention that it stands my hair on end. The thought even of saying anything about her closes up my throat. So instead I leave the circumstances vague.

"It's big," I tell her, "at least as big as a postage stamp. The setting's gold, not ornate, square, not round. It's a deep, clear green—almost a little blue?— and very intense. I assume it's an emerald, but I'm not really sure."

Maxine nods. "That sounds like a good guess. It would be easy to say for sure if I could look at the ring in person."

"I don't have it."

"A picture, maybe?"

I think of the pictures I took, how the girl in the fur collar came out all warped and see-through, but the words stick in my throat. I give a tight shrug instead. "Sorry."

"Oh, well," she says blithely, "what can you do?" She taps one of her fingers on her lips. Her fingers, I remember, are peppered with little burn scars from all the soldering she does.

"I'm not sure it'll be much help, but an emerald that big, somebody's bound to have heard of it. I can make a few calls, if you like."

"That would be—Yes. Thanks."

She assures me it's no trouble. "How'd you come across this thing, anyway? In a museum?"

I swallow against the constriction in my throat. "Not exactly."

She's laughing at me silently, just like she used to when I didn't want to tell her what I was reading or what I was up to at school. "What, did it appear to you in a dream?"

"There was a woman," I say, like something cracking open.

Her smile wavers. "A—?"

"In the house."

"Someone broke in?"

"She just—showed up in the middle of the night." I'm caught in the truth now, my heart hammering in my chest. "She was standing there, and then she was gone."

Maxine looks at me for a long time, her eyes narrowed behind her huge glasses, and I think: *This is it, this is it*, tensed like I'm waiting for the blow to fall. Finally, she says, "Well, in that case you don't need a jeweler."

I am abruptly aware that I have been sweating. I can feel it on my forehead, under my breasts. "I don't?"

"Hang on, I've got just the thing." She holds up her hand, commanding me to stay put, and pulls out a battered Rolodex from a shelf under the cash register. The space between my shoulder blades contracts as I wait. "Patti and I went to one of her seminars a few years ago, just kind of on a lark." Maxine bows low over the Rolodex to see it better, her dexterous fingers moving over the cards. "I don't know if I'd say I was convinced, but I kept her card all this time, so I guess something must've struck me. Ah, here it is."

She hands me a plain white business card with the name 'KATHLEEN KINLOW' printed on it in capital letters. On the other side is a phone number and a web address.

"I remember her saying she does workshops, if you wanted to check her out," Maxine says. She shrugs. "See what you think."

"I— Thanks, I will."

A customer comes in before we can say our goodbyes. I leave my card on the counter for her and she waves absently to me as she takes a look at the man's watch. As I slip out the front door, I catch a fragment of her chime-like laugh and for a moment I am vividly twelve again, listening from the hallway as my father walks her out to her car.

My father is asleep in front of the television when I get home. I'm working on a headache that starts behind my eyes and seems to extend all the way down to the roots of my back molars. Not enough sleep. Too many demanding apparitions waking me up.

I settle down on the sofa and kick off my shoes.

"I thought you weren't coming back," my father says, only half awake.

I close my eyes and turn my head so my forehead rests on the cool curve of his shoulder.

"When I got up from my nap, you weren't here."

"I left you a note," I tell him.

I can feel him shaking his head, the shifting of the tendon in his neck. "I didn't see it."

I breathe deep the smell of him. It's just the same as when I was a girl—sweat and cotton and shaving cream. "Of course I was coming back."

When I wake up, I'm in my own bed, though I have no memory of getting there. The girl in the fur collar is standing in her usual spot. She's stroking her black creature—a weasel? a stoat?—with her ringed hand and watching me. It's always her steady gaze that wakes me.

Why can't you just let me sleep? I wish I could shout at her. I am suddenly angry at her, and tired, so tired. *What more do you want?* But I'm held in place, and even if I could talk, she wouldn't answer anyway.

Kathleen Kinlow's website is the website of someone with only a rudimentary knowledge of HTML. It looks like something out of the past. But her schedule of upcoming workshops is up-to-date, and there are a number of glowing testimonials to her "supersensitive abilities," whatever that means.

It's only me and three other people in the library meeting room for her workshop on Saturday morning. One of them is a soft middle-aged woman in a flowered cardigan who tells us to call her Kathleen, not Mrs. Kinlow, we're all friends here. Another is an elderly man who I've seen sleeping in the silent reading room before and who keeps a running commentary under his breath. The third is a cagey housewife type in a zip-up fleece vest, her hair pulled into a sloppy ponytail.

The Disappeared, Kathleen says, her tone enforcing the capital letter, are not dead. The dead die and are gone, but they leave behind bodies, and the dead, she tells us, do not return. The Disappeared, on the other hand, vanish entirely. They go with no warning, often when nobody is looking, take nothing with them and leave no

corpses—but sometimes, they turn up again, specter-like. They're not back for good, Kathleen explains. What you see when you look at one of these apparitions is an impression only. From a distance, or seen only for a moment, they may seem real, but when you look closely enough, you'll realize there's nothing there. The human body is skin and hair over cartilage and bone, but the Disappeared are a trick of the light. She passes around a set of photographs that look like the blurry, over-exposed work of an amateur, their subjects a pale smear of color. These manifestations, she says, are usually brief, sometimes serial in nature, sometimes not, and when they stop, the Disappeared leave no trace at all that they were ever there, except for a slight disruption in the electro-magnetic field, which some people experience as the smell of iron or lightning.

Kathleen counsels us to temper our expectations. No one's sure if the Disappeared can control when they turn up, or to whom, or where. There are all sorts of theories about the forces that compel them—magnetic fields, ley lines, the phases of the moon—but no explanation is without exception. Nor is there any reliable method of conjuring the Disappeared. They cannot just be ordered up like a pizza, she says. In most cases, when someone suspects their loved one to be one of the Disappeared, that person is really just missing or dead. She says she does not want to give us false hope. This is a thing that happens, that's all she wants us to understand.

Kathleen talks to us about coming to terms with our grief for our missing loved ones, about making a home for that grief in our hearts and not trying to stamp it out or sweep it away. I want to tell her no, she's made a mistake, she doesn't understand. I want to tell her I'm not here to contact a missing loved one—that my

missing loved one has been gone so long she is no longer even loved. When Kathleen moves on from deep breathing exercises and tells us to visualize our loved ones and practice what we would say to them if we could see them again, I excuse myself to go to the bathroom.

I'm taking shallow panic breaths by the time I flip the lock on the bathroom door. I almost want to laugh. What I would say is— What I would say—

Air comes into my lungs in little sips and I'm getting lightheaded. In a rush, I imagine what would happen if I passed out in here, if one of the librarians had to break down the door to find me sitting on the sticky tiles, my head between my knees.

I stand there for a long time, leaning heavily on the sink, until my pulse slows and my chest relaxes enough to let air in again. When my hands stop shaking, I blot my back and armpits with paper towels and splash water on my face. In the tinny mirror above the sink, I look washed out, in danger of disappearing, myself.

When I get back to the meeting room, the class is breaking up. Kathleen presses each of our hands between her own in turn and tells us how well we did and wishes us luck. I expect her to scold me for skipping the participation segment, but she just puts her warm hand on my upper arm and says, "It was nice to meet you, Katherine." She reminds us that she also teaches an intermediate non-credit reiki class at the community college, and gives us all flyers.

As I'm leaving, someone flags me down in the library parking lot. "Kit!" he calls, jogging over. "Hey, Sullivan!"

"I heard you moved back home," Whitman says when he catches up to me. "What are you up to these days?" He gives me a big white-toothed smile and I am conspicuously aware of my empty hands, no books in sight.

"Just—doing some research." I hope he hasn't seen me leaving Kathleen's seminar. I hope he doesn't notice I look like my fever just broke.

"We were here for story time."

I notice then a woman and a small child, standing over on the sidewalk, watching us. I can't tell whether the child is a boy or a girl; from this distance, it just looks young.

"You're doing OK? How's your dad? You're living with him, right?"

I nod. Yes, my father. Yes, I'm fine.

"Well, look, I've got to run, but we should have lunch some time or something."

I tell him we should. For sure.

He smiles again, and then I watch him grow smaller and smaller as he crosses the parking lot and rejoins his family. I watch until they are all secure in their car. As they drive past me to the exit, Whitman half-raises his hand to wave.

When I get home, my father is halfway down the street and the front door is standing open. When I pull up, he stops walking and turns around to stare.

"Dad?" I say, climbing out of the car.

"Where have you been?" His voice is loud in the quiet street.

"I—" Glancing up and down the street, I close the distance between us. "What are you doing out here? You left the door open."

"Don't change the subject, Kit. I asked you a question."

"I'm serious, Dad!" I can hear my voice getting louder. "Were you just gonna go out without locking the door?"

"You don't speak to me like that, young lady," he cuts in, his lip curling. He starts to turn away, and I grab his wrist, pulling him back.

"Somebody could have—"

He slaps me full across the face, his hand flat and stinging. It shocks us both, and we stand there staring at one another in surprise.

"Kit," he says.

"It's fine, forget it. Let's just go inside."

My father starts being especially careful, mindful to close doors after himself, to do his dishes. He only makes it worse.

I turn down a couple of assignments because they're too far away. I refresh the local job listings page compulsively. I do it because it's the exact opposite of what I want to do. What I want to do is get in the car and drive as far and as fast as I can.

The girl in the fur collar does not want me to sleep. She appears every night, impatient and severe. I yell at her in my head. I will my limbs to move, but I cannot break her hold.

I want this to be over, I want to be let go, but she will not leave me alone.

Even after she vanishes, I lie there in bed, too tired to move.

Get up, I tell my body.

Get up.

"I spoke to a friend of mine," Maxine tells me over the phone. "He's an antiques dealer upstate. He says he thinks he knows the ring you described to me."

I write down the address and thank her for her help.

"Any time, Kitten." The old nickname opens up something in my chest and I have to close my eyes for a second. "You're all right, aren't you, you and your dad?"

"Sure," I tell her. "Just the same as always."

I find my father half-asleep under the lemon tree. Fallen fruit has already begun to dot the dead ground under the tree.

"Dad?"

He answers without opening his eyes, just a noise in the back of his throat to show he's listening.

"Do you ever wish you could talk to Mom again? I mean, if someone could find a way to, I don't know, reunite the two of you, I guess, would you even want to see her?"

He looks up from the paper, surprise large on his face. "Of course I would. What kind of question is that?"

What I would say is—

I pick one up one of the fallen lemons and press it close under my nose, inhaling the sharp sunshine smell of its rind. "I've got an errand I need to run upstate,

so I won't be around for dinner. There are leftovers in the fridge. You can heat them up in the microwave. Will you be all right here by yourself tonight?"

"Of course I will, kiddo." He pats my hand, his thin skin warm from the sun.

"I can call someone to stay with you." Even as I say it, I know there's no one I could ask.

He pulls me close and kisses my forehead. "I'll be fine."

I breathe deep of the smell of shaving cream and scalp oil. His hair is just as thick as it was when I was a girl, although it's shot through with wild grey now. "It might be late, but I'll be back tonight," I promise, and I leave him in the orchard, already drifting back to sleep.

It takes me three hours to get to the town where Maxine's antiques dealer friend lives, a little nowhere tourist town on a steep cliff overlooking the river. Even though it's well past midday, there's still fog clinging to the edges of the roads, twining in and out of the trees. The air has a faint violet cast.

The town is a cluster of antique shops, a diner, and a shabby motel. Nobody is out on the streets except for a couple of stray cats rubbing their flanks against the poles of parking meters.

In front of Maxine's friend's shop, a wreath of silk flowers is tacked to a staple-scarred telephone pole. At its center is a faded photograph of a little girl, maybe five or six years old—the victim of a car accident or kidnapping. I brush my fingers against the fraying white-pink petals of the garland as I pass, a brief gesture of greeting, and then a bell announces me as I step inside the shop.

A balding man in an argyle sweater appears at the door to the back room and says, “You must be Kit Sullivan. Winston Leavis.”

“How’d you know?”

“D’you see anyone else around?” he asks me cheerfully.

I smile without parting my lips. “Maxine said you might know something about this antique ring?”

Leavis spreads his hands equivocally. “I think so, I think so. Come on back and I’ll show you.”

I follow him into the back room through a too-warm maze of boxes and disused furniture, heaps of junk towering almost to the ceiling, threatening to collapse in on me at any moment and bury me alive. We switchback a couple of times before we finally reach his office, where he gestures me to sit down and starts hunting for something on the cluttered surface of his desk.

“I’m a little bit of a local history buff.” Leavis talks briskly but with only half his attention, focused on finding whatever it is he’s looking for. “Cecilia Chambers. Her family was very wealthy, old money.” He starts opening desk drawers and rifling through them. “Something of a mystery around here, back in the day—she ran away in the thirties, never heard from again.”

“Ah-ha!” He holds up a battered manila folder in triumph. After shuffling through the contents, he extends a single sheet of paper. The photocopy is faded, but I’d recognize the girl in the fur collar anywhere. She looks at the camera with the same somber, fixed expression I wake up to in the night. And on her index finger, the square ring. Even in black and white, the stone seems to glow.

"By all accounts, it was a gorgeous piece—emerald, you were right about that—and just a lovely setting. Big, too. It was worth an absolute fortune."

I focus on taking long, even breaths. "It's beautiful."

He rifles through the file folder some more. "She was wearing it when she ran off, apparently. The police figured she stole it, used the money to get away." He shrugs. "Cecilia's sister had a nervous breakdown of some kind, kept insisting her hadn't run off. Some people still think someone in the family killed her. That's a little bit conspiracy theory, if you ask me, but you can't deny it's a better story."

My arms feel like dead weights at my sides. "Is there any chance Cecilia Chambers' sister— Is she still alive?"

He shakes his head, one shoulder jerking up toward his ear. "I wouldn't know. But, you know, now that you mention it . . . I put my parents into care a few years, when the house got to be too much for them to keep up on their own—Brightview Park, very nice establishment—and I remember Mom saying the Chambers sister was there."

"Brightview Park?"

He nods. "It's not too far from here, about an hour's drive. I don't remember her first name. Jane or June or Joyce, something like that." Leavis furrows his pale brows and shakes his head. "I remember every piece of jewelry I've ever sold, but names—names always escape me."

Brightview Park is a massive white property on the edge of the river. The driveway cuts across a rolling lawn that slopes down to grey cliffs.

An officious nurse informs me that Ms. Chambers is, indeed, still a resident, and that, as it happens, I've come just at the tail end of visiting hours. We climb a curling staircase and she leads me down a hallway that is all white wood paneling and delicate upholstered chairs, more like a museum than a hospital, despite the antiseptic smell that pervades the air. She leaves me at Ms. Chambers' room and disappears down the hall, her white uniform fading away against the white of the walls.

The door to Ms. Chambers' room is open and I can see a silver-haired woman sitting in a chair by the window. Her back is to me, so I knock.

There's no doubt, when she turns around, that Ms. Chambers is the girl in the fur collar's sister. She has the same soft, hollowed-out features, the same dark eyes. I almost expect her to be holding some dark creature in her arms.

"Ms. Chambers . . ." The words don't come easily. In all this time I've spent looking, I haven't given any thought to what I would say to her if I found her—what message the girl in the fur collar would want me to deliver. What I would say is—Always silence rises up in me. My lips are dry. "Ms. Chambers, my name is Kit Sullivan. I'm here about your sister."

"Cecilia?" She looks at me, caught in some sweet, sad confusion. "Is she here?"

"No, Ms. Chambers." My tongue tastes like the iron of my dental fillings. "But I think she wanted me to find you. I just . . . thought I should tell you. I know that, if someone I'd lost ever turned up, I'd want to know."

Ms. Chambers looks at me for a long moment, considering, and although Cecilia isn't here, I feel her with us.

Finally, she lets out a slow sigh. “I was there, you know, when it happened. When she went disappeared. They didn’t believe me. But I was.” She shakes her head. “We were sitting in the music room. I was practicing the piano and Celia, she got this startled look in her eyes, like something cold had just touched her, and then it seemed that she was about to ask me a question.” The corners of her eyes are wet, I notice, a faint shine gathering on that delicate skin. “And then she was gone. Just like that.”

I glance around the room, at the adjustable bed, the mealy chintz wallpaper. I take long breaths against the constriction in my chest. “I’m sorry.”

She touches her fingertips to her face, patting her temples dry. “Is she all right?”

How can I begin to answer that? “She has a black cat with her.”

Ms. Chambers presses her fingers against the beginning of a smile. “That’s good.” She nods. “I’m glad of that.” She seems to remember herself then with a start, and says, “Can I offer you something to drink? Tea, coffee?”

I look away from her, out the window. Beyond where the lawn gives way, the river is slow and grey under a stony sky. “I’d like that.”

I imagine offering to sneak Ms. Chambers out of the nursing home to see Cecilia. I imagine the car ride back to my house, during which she would tell me the story of her life since Cecilia’s disappearance, and I imagine the heartfelt meeting between the two sisters after so many years. Mr. Chambers would reach out to touch Cecilia’s hand and I would have to turn away, an intruder on their private grief. I could do it. It wouldn’t be difficult.

Just then, a nurse—not the same one who showed me in, a man this time—shows up at the door and tells Mrs. Chambers that it's time for dinner, that her guest will have to leave. While he's talking, I feel my phone buzzing in my pocket and I step out of the room to answer it. It's not a number I recognize.

"Hello?" I keep my voice low, watching the empty hallway.

"Katherine Sullivan?" A man's voice, no one I know.

"Yes?"

"This is Officer Dunham with the Third Precinct. I'm calling to inform you that we've found your father."

The hallway is very white and very long. The stairs seem a mile away. "What?"

"He was wandering down by the wisteria trees in Green Park and appeared to be very disoriented," Officer Dunham informs me. "He asked us to call you. This is Katherine Sullivan?"

"Yes," I tell him, or at least I think I do.

"We can keep your father here at the station until you're able to pick him up, or we can have an officer drop him off at home."

"No, I'll—" I can't seem to hear my own voice. "I'll come get him. I'll—Where?"

He gives me the address of the police station.

"He's very lucky not to have come to any harm," says Officer Dunham, "but he really shouldn't be left alone."

"No," I agree over the ringing in my ears. The white hall seems to contract, to throb, like it's breathing around me. "I— Thank you. It's— Thank you. I'll be there as soon as I can."

By the time I get back on the road, the sun has set. The night gets darker and darker, the overcast sky blocking out even the stars. There's no one on the road but me and I push the car forward as fast as I can, leaning into the looping curves.

I remember driving home with my mother once—from where, I can't recall. It was late, and I remember thinking, with great excitement, that maybe we weren't going home at all, that maybe we would keep driving forever. "Look," I remember her saying, pointing to the rear view mirror. With the dark highway behind us, the sky was so black that it was impossible to tell the trees from the sky, and for a moment, the whole world disappeared.

“May Queen”

In the morning, our mothers kiss us and say their goodbyes. Those of us who are ugly, our mothers do not linger over. The lovelier among us are wept over, just in case.

It is better to be ugly. That is what our mothers have always told us. The plain, the pock-marked, the unsymmetrical have, at least, the hope of someday growing into our features or finally learning how to properly style our hair. The truly pitiable ones are those handsome girls who will live out the rest of their days knowing they weren’t quite beautiful enough. And yet, each of us cannot help but think—*It could be me, it could be me*.

Our mothers do not make us bring our lunches or our books today. We walk to school unencumbered, ascending the hills like larks climbing into the sky.

In town, the crowds have already begun to arrive. Tourists take guided walks along the cliffs to snap pictures of the spiritual people who have gathered there to pray and weave flower garlands. Then they stop for lunch downtown and spend the afternoons wandering in packs along the sidewalks, eating ice cream and buying commemorative key chains. Some people book their hotel rooms months in advance, coming back year after year. In the past few days, stalls have cropped up on street corners selling candied violets and little slips of escarole filled with cheese and fruit. The smell of chicory coffee hangs in the air alongside the bite of spring. Already the town is waking up.

In class, we sit primly at our desks, backs straight, hands clasped, waiting for the announcement to come over the loudspeaker. When our names are called, we file

in an orderly fashion toward the exits. Our classmates watch in silence, looking hard. Now they know something about us they did not know before. Even the most invisible girl is recognized, if only for a moment.

We ride in a van with the windows blacked out. Every judder over every pothole is magnified. Time seems to stretch out, though the journey is not far. Nobody quite looks anybody in the eye. We are not competitors, quite, but neither are we exactly friends.

There are twelve of us this year. The oldest is seventeen, a senior. The youngest is eight or nine, and she is crying. We can all see she has nothing to worry about, but nobody has the heart to tell her. Let her cry. Let her hope, for now.

When we arrive, we are ushered out of the van and along a vaulted walkway. Inside, we are made to strip out of our school clothes and directed to a large, tiled room, where we wash ourselves in silver tubs of lavender and milk. Scrub hard, we are told. We use coarse brushes to scrape the old skin from our knuckles and the spaces between our fingers, our wrists and elbows and armpits. When we are clean, we are given robes made from rose-colored silk so fine it is almost breath itself.

From now until May Morning, we are told, our days will be devoted to quiet study and preparation. In the mornings, we will learn the histories of the girls who have come before us, memorizing each of their names and ages and lineages until we can recite them all in order without drawing a breath. The afternoons will be spent learning where to stand, how to walk—how to fall correctly, how to tie the knots. After the evening meal and an hour of silent prayer, we'll have two hours until lights out, which we may spend however we like.

By the end of our first night, the prettiest girls have already made their alliances and staked out the bench by the dormitory windows. One of them claims her boyfriend has promised to sneak in to see her, and all the beautiful girls hang out by the windows, gossiping and watching the woods for some sign of him. A couple of girls pray. The rest of us read or talk quietly or write letters to our parents that will not be delivered. At lights out, we scuttle into our beds and then the only sound is the slow undulating noise of all of us breathing together.

There is an art to falling well, we learn. A few years ago, one of the girls tripped. She went down hard on her knees right out there in front of everyone, projected fifty feet tall on the screens for the cheap seats. Your hands are behind your back by then and no one will come to help you. She wriggled around on the floor, trying to get her feet back under her, while the crowd held its breath. When she finally managed to get herself over the edge, you could hear a sigh of relief break across the crowd. No one wants a repeat of that disgrace, so we all study hard.

First we are tutored on the theory of falling. You must propel yourself correctly, pushing yourself away from the ledge, or else you will knock against the cliff face on the way down. But neither must you leap head-first like a diver. This isn't synchronized swimming, after all. There has to be some dignity.

We practice falling from a raised platform onto a stack of blue foam pads like they use in gymnastics class. Once, in our mothers' or their mothers' day, there was only a net to catch you at practice, but these days concessions have to be made out of concern for our safety. We stand in a line on the platform, just as we will on May

Morning, and one by one we clasp our hands tightly behind our backs and practice walking to the edge of the stage. The five-foot drop is nothing compared to the real thing, but some of us still tremble and shake. We're grateful for the practice, so we can learn to control our limbs before the day.

The rest of us are supposed to face forward when someone is practicing her jump, but it's hard to resist the temptation to turn around and look: to gauge the planes of someone's shoulders, to measure someone's stride. How does she bend her knees? Is she keeping her back straight?

The bindings are no easier. The knots are ornate and the silk cords slip in our fingers. We practice in pairs first, tying our partners' wrists, then letting them tie ours, so we can all learn how the pattern goes. Once we've all got a handle on doing the knots ourselves, we have to practice tying the knots together, the way we will on May Morning. Our hands cramp quickly and our skin grows tender from the constant slide of the cords. We have ointment to keep our skin from drying out, and some of the girls tear their pillowcases apart to wrap their hand overnight, so the ointment can soak in.

There have been many girls before us. This is what we learn. Many girls have stood where we will stand, and one has been chosen every year for as long as anyone can remember—longer, even, because no one any longer knows who the first girl was or how she came to be chosen. There has simply always been a May Queen. The river below the cliffs is littered with the bones of the girls who have jumped before.

We can see the floodlights of the stadium from the dormitory windows. They are lit at all hours while the risers and barriers and stage go up. They glow crystal white, irradiating the sky.

In town, people have started celebrating. Every table in the city is laden with all the good early spring foods: braised asparagus and salads of strawberry and spinach, gooseberries in cream. At home, our parents are getting drunk on elderflower cordial, only this year we're not at home to see it. We can hear the revelers singing in the streets. Their voices bend and dip, warped by distance and geography, an underwater sound.

What are we supposed to pray for during silent prayer hour? one of us asks during our morning lessons.

We are told it doesn't matter. We can bow our heads and sit in silence if we like, so that's what we do.

The girl whose boyfriend was supposed to sneak in never comes. The prettiest girls are growing tired of talking about themselves to one another. The food is not as good as you might expect and we grow homesick for our mothers' radish mousse and rhubarb custard, all the delicacies of the season we are missing. We have memorized the May Queens' names and can tie the bindings with our eyes closed. In the hours between supper and lights out, we lean our chins in our hands, swinging our legs in our chairs.

On the last night of April, someone keeps us all up with her crying. It's impossible to tell who, because any time one of us gets out of bed to investigate, the noise stops.

Crying will make your eyes puffy, someone reminds us in the dark.

Don't worry, someone else says, as if this weren't cruel enough. *Tomorrow you'll be home.*

We are woken early. It's practically still night. We bathe, and then our hair is combed and twisted and pinned into ornate plaits threaded with roses pink as sugar candy. We admire ourselves in the mirror, giddy with our beauty, our promise. Even the plainest of us look a little special today.

In the van on the way to the cliffs, we lean on each other, still sleepy despite our excitement. The crowds scream when they see us arrive.

Dawn breaks as we file onto the stage. We stand in our straight line like we've been taught, bare in the clear morning light, and try not to search for our mothers and brothers and friends in the crowd.

Silence falls over the crowd when the music starts, a hush that lets us know we are coming to the end of possibility—that we are about to lose forever even the smallest hope that we might be *her*, that we might be the May Queen. The moment is almost here when our little group will be cleaved in two: one who was beautiful enough, and eleven who remain.

Orations are made, praising our precious traditions and the impeccable beauty of May Queens past. Prayers are offered. We've heard these words every year, but

this year we cannot hear anything over the rush of blood in our ears. We are wrapped in anticipatory silence.

All we can think is:

We must not scratch the itches that arise under our skin, must not shift our weight, must hold our heads up high and our shoulders straight. We must be regal and pious and pure.

Perhaps if we perform well enough, it will make a difference.

And then, at last, she is chosen: the May Queen.

She is radiant. She is perfect. There is no denying she is the best of us. We were blind not to see it before. It's so obvious now: how much lovelier she is than the rest of us, how much more serene. How could any of us have hoped, even for a second, that it could be anyone but her?

We break formation to bind her, our eleven pairs of hands working together to twist the cords. Up close, we notice she has a hangnail on the index finger of her left hand, the cuticle a raw, red fringe. We feel her breathing as the slow expansion and contraction of her ribs between us. She is not the one shaking. Someone's hands slip on the cords, despite all our training. The tremor is contagious. By the time we resume our line, we are all trembling as if we've run laps.

By now she has appeared on the big screen and for a moment, we are all transfixed by her image, even her: the azure sky behind her, the air around her almost pink. Her eyes, narrowed against the bright sun, like colorless cuts across her face. Her neck, long and bowing under the weight of all the flowers in her hair. Round

shoulders giving way to plump upper arms. Her nipples are wide and dark, her breasts small. Thighs tensed, toes curled.

For one breathless moment, it almost seems she is about to run. Finally, she turns on the ball of her foot and walks with measured steps to the far edge of the platform. What perfect posture, what a graceful gait. The camera tracks her movements lovingly and the muscles of our necks ache to turn. We aren't supposed to look, but we can't resist. We have to see.

Her knees bend, her hamstrings standing out under her skin. She dips and rises and then is gone.

On the big screen, the camera transmits her descent. She turns head over feet, head over feet, until she disappears under the water. It shivers to accept her, enclosing her. We are too far away to hear the impact, but we listen anyway.

After the ceremony is over, we who remain climb down from the platform on shaky legs and wade into the crowd to find our families. Tourists and worshippers alike bow to us, clasp our hands, kiss our feet. Our parents, when we find them, pat us on the backs and kiss our cheeks, congratulating us the way they do after recitals and school plays. We have done well, they tell us. They do their best not to betray their disappointment that we have returned to them. They love us anyway. At home, there will be yellow roses waiting for us, and baskets of sweets.

When we first return to school, our friends and classmates will beg us to tell them all about the ceremony, all about the May Queen. Some of us with speak, breathless, of her beauty and peerless grace. Others will affect a callous attitude and

shrug and say, *She wasn't anything special, really*. A few of us will make up rumors about her—a sordid home life, a tragic love waiting for her return. We will delight in the attention, but after a few weeks, our classmates will tire of quizzing us about the ceremony and we'll be absorbed with catching up on the schoolwork we missed, with the end of the semester and the arrival of summer, and before long, we will forget there was ever a time, even if only a moment, when we dared to believe we could have been the May Queen.

“Langwidere”

Sometimes she wonders about the girls whose heads she wears. Sometimes, though not very often, she wonders where they came from, who they loved. She wonders who, if anyone, keeps their memory now.

Mostly, though, she doesn’t trouble herself. They share space, that’s all. Her breath moves through their vocal chords when she speaks, but it’s still her voice. She is the one who sees through their eyes. That, after all, is the nature of possession: they are hers.

Everything is hers, as far as the eye can see: the mirrored sitting room and the marble statues in the courtyard, the forests to the east, the endless farmland, now fallow, to the west—all hers. All this she takes as her right, the natural order of things. Of course they are hers. Of course they are.

“I think I’ll wear No. 5 today,” she tells her maid when the girl brings her breakfast.

The maid—unremarkable, impossible to remember her name—bobs a little curtsey and scurries out of the room to run her bath.

She loves to eat using No. 6, whose palate is especially sensitive. This morning, her tongue is awake to the sweet, woody strawberries, the thick cream. She could savor this all day. When the little maid summons her to her bath, she rises reluctantly and lets herself be ushered into the hot turquoise water. Steam rises, white.

The maid scrubs her back, moving the cloth in rough circles between her shoulder blades, her upper arms, her clavicles, her breasts. She avoids the long pink line across her throat, tries not even to look at it, because she is afraid.

When she is clean, the maid helps her into her white gossamer dressing gown and they go together into her sitting room, where her heads sit on velvet pedestals inside identical jewel-encrusted cabinets—thirty in all, one for every day of the month, every hour, a head for every whim. They watch her from behind the glass fronts of their cases. Their eyes seem to follow her around the room.

With the little ruby key she keeps around her wrist, she unlocks doors 6 and 5. Then she lifts her head from her shoulders and there is nothing—not silence, not even dark. The maid receives the head from her mistress' body. It blinks dully at her as she replaces it on its velvet perch and retrieves No. 5. She takes great care to put the head in her mistress' hands, so that she doesn't drop it. It happened once, a mistake the girl won't soon make again. The lady lowers the head onto her neck, feeling along the seam to make sure it's straight.

Once she is dressed, the high collar of her gown will hide the seam where the head is joined to her neck. She appears whole to any untrained eye, of a single unbroken piece. The little maid knows better.

She can hear them from her garret room, her lady's prisoners. The mistress keeps them for weeks, sometimes months, before she does for them. There is a room in the north tower where they stay, which bears the marks of those who've come before: scratches on the walls, fingernails caught in the mortar between the stones. At

first, she'll hear them screaming, crying for help, but that soon subsides to bitter tears once they realize no one's coming for them, and after a while even their sobbing quiets down. That is what her mistress wants, for them to give up hope, and what she wants, her mistress always gets. When they finally emerge, the grime of that cell has worked its way into every crease of their skin, and they've grown used to the smell of rot that rises from their bodies. By the time the little maid comes to collect them, they do not so much as raise their eyes to look around them. They are as ones already dead.

It is her job, the little maid, to make them ready. She soaks them and scrubs them, much as she does her mistress, prises the dirt from their knuckles, strips their hair of its accumulated grease. She dries and dresses them, combs their hair. By the time she's done with them, they appear fresh and new, pliant as saplings.

What happens to them after she delivers them to her mistress' sitting room, she doesn't know. It's enough to see their eyes gazing back at her from behind jeweled glass. Any more than that, she doesn't want to know.

She has enough to be getting on with, that's for certain.

Every morning, she rises at dawn. She must sweep the courtyard and scrub the marble stairs, polish the silver floors and mirrored walls of her mistress' sitting room. She must wash and press her lady's linens, air the rooms, fix breakfast, run the bath. She must help madam assemble herself and dress. She must make the bed. Before long, there is luncheon to prepare. Then, books to be placed back on shelves, the harp to restring. Its gut warps in the changeable atmosphere and must be changed frequently. To combat the draft, she stokes fires, fills braziers. She washes dishes,

lights lamps, serves dinner, helps her lady to bed. By the time she wakes the next day, all her hard work has been cancelled and must be done again.

She has no time for sympathy, and only a very little time for fear. She chooses to sleep instead of lying awake thinking of those girls' stranded heads.

Her mistress doesn't lose sleep, either.

But still, sometimes, the lady does grow curious. Not often. But when she's dispensed with more important matters, when there is no decent company, when all the books have been read, then, sometimes, she will notice some small imperfection—a pock-mark, a scar—that tells a story she will never know, and she begins to wonder. Since she cannot ask, she invents.

For instance, her habitual Tuesday afternoon: nineteen, with skin like buttermilk and hair the color of whey. Her eyes are a grey so light they seem almost clear.

This one did not weep or beg like most girls do. She watched silently, and even after her head was parted from her shoulders she watched still. She is a head for quiet contemplation.

She was a pragmatist, this one. She had no hope of escape, did not even entertain the thought. Even as she longed for home, she never forgot that suppers were meager and often burned, or that her mother could always be relied on to criticize the way she swept the hearth. No rosy retrospect for her. But, still, she did miss the apricot tree that grew beside the rubbish heap in the back garden and the kitchen table where in the evenings, after all the piecework had been set aside, she would read the paper by the light of a foul-smelling lamp. She knew the only people

who take recourse in nostalgia are those for whom the past will never return. She was one of those people now, she reasoned. She had earned the right. It was for her a kind of leave-taking.

There was not, after all, so very much to miss. She was young, had lived only a little. She'd never traveled outside the city, never planned to. She worked and read the paper and slept, and on Sundays, occasionally, would go to the museum to look at the statues of famous dead people carved from precious jade. They were polished to such a fine finish that when she leaned forward she could see her own reflection in their cheeks and she had the urge, sometimes, to brush her fingers along their soft green faces, as if her touch could bring them back to life. No one ever touched her. There was no lover to pine for her or stage a rescue. Her mother would find someone else to sweep the hearth and bear the brunt of her ill temper. Hers was a life neat, compact, easily dispatched.

She walked evenly toward her death, never stumbled, kept her back straight. When the little maid came to collect her, she did not tremble. She let herself be bathed and then laid out, fresh as a new cloud. Cirrus, maybe: something thin and skeptical, casting little shade.

Hers was the twenty-ninth head in the collection, almost a round number but not quite. She keeps nicely behind glass, wears well. The lady gets a lot of use out of her.

Others in the cabinet are not so versatile. For instance, girlish, dimpled No. 12 is ill suited to serious conversations, and No. 25 has weak eyes and is unfit for

reading. The redhead, No. 18, is inconvenient for days when there is wind or rain. The weather wreaks havoc on her spill of wiry curls.

The rain is a constant irritation. Water pours in through the roof when it storms. The wind plays the palace like a flute. On the wettest nights, the fires will not light and she is kept awake by the tap-tap of water dripping down the walls.

That stupid little maid is supposed to stopper all the leaks, but she's no use at all. If she weren't so hopelessly plain, the lady would have taken her head long ago, but alas, there is no promise in her at all, no mystery, no spark of light. There is not even any chance she might improve with time, as some girls do.

This the maid counts as a small mercy. She does not mind her ugliness—or, not ugliness even, only a lack of beauty. Beauty she can do without. Beauty would do her little good when she is up until all hours, bailing out the cellars or changing out buckets to catch the drips in the great hall. When she finally drifts off to sleep, it is to the noise of the birds that roost in the rafters and the little unseen creatures that make nests in the walls, shredding old books and draperies for their beds.

This palace was beautiful once. The entire kingdom, a lush green jewel. And now—

Some might see this once-great nation's decline as a tragedy. They might mourn the mildewed portraits in the great hall and the dead leaves that drift in through the broken windows of the ballroom. They might curse the last living heir for running the country into the ground, for abandoning her people. But not the little maid, not her.

It is not loyalty that stays her judgment, though. She harbors no love for her mistress, but, as the maid remembers them, her predecessors were not much better. Who wears the crown makes little difference to the maid. She will still be here, emptying chamber pots. She will do what she has to.

It is true that her lady is cruel at the best of times. Her temperament fluctuates depending on which head she wears. No. 8 is morose and sour, quick to criticize. Freckled No. 9 brings with her more joyful attitudes, sometimes even singing. The little maid is grateful for those borrowed moods. At least they break the monotony.

'Borrow,' though, is a funny word to use for what her mistress does. 'To borrow' implies she might someday return these heads. 'To borrow' implies they were not already hers to begin with.

Everything is hers, of course. Anything that does not yet belong to her is only waiting to be claimed. There is no boundary.

When she wears another's head, she is still herself. Her thoughts fire along another's synapses, her dreams twitch another's eyelids in the night.

Sometimes she thinks she can hear them whispering to one another when she's not around. Sometimes she wonders what they would say about her, if they could speak. But, of course, they can't.

Only she can speak for them.

Only she can say, on behalf of No. 23: *I was a schoolgirl in love with running down hills. When I got to the bottom, I would spread my arms, exhilarated, embracing the air. I ran and ran. But I could not run from you.*

Or of No. 13: *I was a dancer of some modest promise, but really I am glad you found me, because one of my legs was slightly shorter than the other, and I never would have amounted to much, in the end.*

Or of dark, doe-eyed No. 3: *I had a twin brother who bit people like a dog and when they sent him away I was so very much alone, but now I'm not. Now I have you*.

The little maid catches her looking suspiciously at them sometimes, talking to them, scolding them, imploring them. As much as she loves them, she is jealous of them, too—hates them, even.

Their lovely heads are divorced from life but not from history. They lived so long without her. Years and years she'll never know anything about. The past, the only part of them she can never have.

How did No. 11 get the scar above her left eyebrow? Who kissed the purple birthmark at the edge of No. 12's jaw?

The lady tells herself it doesn't matter. It shouldn't, not when each crease at the corner of their eyes is hers, each crooked tooth. Every freckle, every mole, every old acne scar is hers. Every eyelash, every strand of hair.

No. 8 has the loveliest wisps of hair in front of her ears, a soft, dark fog on her dusky cheeks. And her spine, her spine was a lovely white. She remembers how the girl's chest continued to heave for a moment after her death, drawing air into voiceless lungs. She lifted her head onto her neck while the body was still warm.

They are hers forever. They will never grow old. Long after their bodies have been dissolved in lye, their heads survive. She has kept them. They are hers.

And yet, still she wonders.

“Do you know any card games?” she asks the little maid while she’s dressing No. 4’s hair. This one’s scalp is sensitive, almost obscenely tender, and her thoughts are quick-moving and sharp—excellent for games of strategy.

“Me, my lady?” The maid’s eyes are wide.

“Even your company must be preferable to sitting in silence polishing one’s nails.” If there were anyone else, she would not have to ask, but it has been such a long time since anyone has come for an audience—not even a lost shepherd or a passing tradesman. Gone are the days of grand banquets and dancing into the early hours of the morning—gone are the days of conversing with anyone other than servants, apparently.

“The only games I know are ones to play alone, my lady,” says the maid.

Her mistress lets out a sharp sigh. Worthless, this girl, utterly worthless. Her fingers itch to tug at her neck and pull this useless head off, cast it away. It was the wrong choice for today, all wrong. “Get out,” she snaps at the maid.

“But, my lady, your hair—”

“I said get out!”

The maid barely pauses long enough to curtsey before she’s out the door.

As soon as the maid is gone, the lady stalks into her sitting room and throws open the glass cabinets that house her thirty heads. None of them are right today—No. 21 too insipid, No. 7’s lips too fat, No. 19’s overbite no longer quaint. Where is the perfect face, the one that will eclipse all the others, that will feel just right?

Then it comes to her: No. 17, of course. She goes to stand before case 17 and looks at her: the tangling pile of glossy black curls, the clever almond eyes, the pale constellation of freckles across the high cheekbones that on another might seem childish but in this combination give an impression of freshness and youth. Yes, she will do well.

She lifts No. 4 from her neck and tosses her carelessly in the direction of the divan. She feels around until she gets ahold of No. 17 and lowers her, blind, onto her neck. She blinks her eyelids and can see again, the elegant reflection looking back at her from every mirrored surface in the room.

She is reminded of how exhilarating it was to make that first cut, to feel the blade sink through dense muscle and even denser bone—what savage ecstasy, cascading over her—what perfect union when the seam of their flesh finally met.

To think, there was a time when she still concerned herself with petty affairs of state, when she still grieved over the betrayal of one lover or another. She was still imperfect then, still incomplete. She had not yet taken her first head, did not yet know the pleasure of lowering another's neck, still warm, onto her own.

She remembers next to nothing about her first. She was some parlor maid or other. What she remembers most is how men's eyes—stewards and visiting princes alike—would linger on the girl's rosy cheeks, try to meet her dark eyes. She has long since fallen out of rotation in favor of faces with more perfect symmetry, more exquisite beauty. There have been so many since her.

There will be so many more.

From the high window of the little maid's garret, she can see in all directions. At dawn, when she wakes, she can see the sun climbing out of the ocean and over the top of the forest there, and by she time the finally drops into bed at night, the sun has set over the endless farmland to the west. It used to be that she could see cows moving in their pastures and little white clouds of sheep, and on early autumn evenings those fields were dotted with the lantern lights of farmers, mowing hay well into the night. Now, even the steep mountains to the north, where goats would sometimes ramble, their bells rattling, are empty. The farmers and their livestock and their scythes are gone, she knows not where. To other cities, maybe, where the roads do not lie mired in dust and the roofs of grand palaces are not falling in.

This morning, when the little maid pulls back her curtains, she thinks she can make out a dark cluster of shapes making their way across the broken, yellowed road through the forest. She stands watching for a moment as the distant figures advance along the road. She reckons they're at least a day's journey away. With any luck, they will take a wrong turn and lose themselves in the woods. As she looks on, the little traveling party turns a corner and disappears under the cover of the trees. On the horizon, the sun dazzles against the blank, green-grey sea.

She's made herself late, gazing out the window—as if she has time to be staring at the scenery. She hurries downstairs to stoke the kitchen fires and draw the water from the well and scrub the tables and sharpen the knives. If she isn't quick about it, she'll be late with her mistress' breakfast. The lady was in such a dangerous mood yesterday, she doesn't dare put a toe out of line today.

When breakfast is ready, she balances the tray before her and climbs the stairs carefully, so as not to spill any precious milk or upset the delicate arrangement of the rolls.

She arrives to find her mistress still asleep in her crystal bed, the sitting room beyond in disarray. The maid sets down the tray and goes to tidy the room before her mistress wakes.

What a mess the lady's made—all the cabinet doors open, one of the poor heads lying on the floor. She picks her up gently and brushes her cheeks clean. There's not much to be done about her listing, unfinished coiffure, but the maid does her best to prop it back up with her fingers once she's set the head back on its stand.

The maid remembers this one well. She knew her from the village, the milliner's daughter. She was bright as well as skilled with a hatpin, kept all the accounts for her mother's business. She could have gone to school, if her father hadn't been set against it. Her brothers went, not her. She stayed at home and learned to measure hatbands and shape felt. She was bitter over it, though she tried not to be. And then she came to the palace to make a delivery one day and was lured into a high room where she was held prisoner until she lost her head. Now she blinks slowly at the maid as she closes the door to her cabinet once more.

The maid goes around the sitting room, closing all the other doors, too. Each of the heads is reflected in the mirrored planes of the room, the walls, the floors, the ceiling, everywhere. The little maid can see herself reflected too, sallow and drawn next to these captive beauties. The maid turns her head from one reflection only to catch the eye of another.

When the sitting room is tidy once again, she escapes back into her mistress' bedchamber. Her lady has changed into No. 17, she notices, and she prepares herself for a difficult day. No. 17 is exceedingly beautiful, even more so than all the others, but she has a temper. She is perhaps the worst of them all, and also the most lovely.

No. 17 also has the lady's favorite dreams. Sometimes she prefers to sleep headless, but with No. 17, her dreams are vivid and tumultuous, long as a lifetime, sometimes two. She always wakes regretful that the night is gone—so that no matter how gently her maid rouses her, she is bound to be cross to wake at all.

Did this girl dream so lavishly when she was alive? Did she lie abed all day, dipping in and out of sleep just to luxuriate in the pleasure of her own dreams? The lady is sure she did.

She was the imperious youngest daughter of a new-money nobleman, as the lady recalls, some merchant who lucked into an advantageous marriage—an insignificant title and just enough money to spoil his favorite child and throw his weight around in town. This girl grew up with every comfort imaginable, her every whim catered to without hesitation. Perhaps her mother's mouth sometimes pressed thin with disapproval at her husband's extravagance, but nothing was too good for his youngest girl.

She never needed to lift a finger, had servants who tended to her every need—good servants, the lady thinks resentfully, thinking of her useless little maid. She excelled at every art and virtue—her flower arrangements were the envy of every lady in the county, and when she played the glass armonica to her father's assembled dinner guests, there was not a single one who did not weep for the beauty of her

compositions. She had countless suitors, all of whom she refused. Several threw themselves to their deaths for want of her love, and when she would hear of one's demise, she would only laugh.

Her cruelty was bred of a desperate boredom. Each task she turned herself to was facile, disappointing. Only dreaming gave her any pleasure. No one was good enough for her—nothing enough to satisfy her.

Nothing, until the lady found her. She knew the moment she saw her, on a visit to the palace with her father, that she would have the girl. It was only too easy. It always is. Her expression, in the last, was one of gratitude. She was doing her a kindness, in the end.

Finally, the lady stretches and lets her maid help her from her bed. The days have dragged of late, but perhaps today will be different.

Or perhaps, she thinks looking at her breakfast tray, not. The milk is slopped up on the edge of its saucer and the rolls are tough—the maid must have rushed in preparing them, the idle sow. As if this were not enough, her bath is too hot and it scalds the delicate sole of her foot when she tries to get into the tub. She curses the maid and threatens her with the most grievous harm.

The little maid fears her lady's ire more than her violence. Her mistress will not kill her. Her head is not pretty enough to keep, and she is the only servant left. She will not kill her, but she can make her life a misery.

Out of instinct honed from long experience, she spends the rest of the day trying to avoid her lady's notice, keeping to the edges of the room, never lingering longer in her presence that need be. She brings her all the best things to eat for her

midday meal, in the hopes that her favorite foods will soften her ill humor. As she goes about her chores, she tries to make as little noise as possible, so as not even to remind her mistress she exists at all.

Late in the afternoon, there is a resonant clanging from across the house, and for a moment the maid is afraid her lady has gone into another fury and started throwing things—but it is only someone knocking at the front door. It has been so long since anyone came to call that she's forgotten the sound.

It must be the party she saw from her window this morning, the maid thinks. They made better time than she'd anticipated.

"What do you wish?" asks the maid, opening the door only enough to put her head out.

They are a motley party, this thin little girl and her two companions. When the girl asks to see her mistress, the maid knows they are in for trouble. If it were only refreshment they wanted, or directions, she could have sent them off before her lady took any notice of them and they might have gone safely on their way. Now, instead, she will have to let them in.

"I will tell her you are here, miss, and ask her to grant you an audience," the maid says, and bids them come inside to wait.

As she hurries down the winding passages and climbs the marble stairs, she hopes they will be gone when she returns. She hopes her mistress will not see them. If only she would decide not to see them.

It occurs to the little maid that she need not tell her mistress about her guests at all. She's never considered this before. She could go back to the girl and her friends

and tell them her lady will not see them, or is not at home to callers. Then the guests might survive their visit and things will be as they have been for so long, just the maid and her mistress alone in the palace. She hovers in front of the door to her lady's chamber, considering. She could do it. It could be done.

"Don't just dither outside the door," her mistress snaps from inside the room. "As if I haven't noticed you skulking about all day—sulking, no doubt. Come if in you're going to come in."

The little maid slips inside and delivers her news almost in a whisper. Perhaps she will not want to see them—but even as she thinks it, she knows there is no hope of that.

The word 'company' captures her lady's attention, just as the little maid knew it would. It has been so long since she's had visitors. "Who is it?" she asks.

"No one of consequence," the maid says, "just a little girl and her two friends."

Her lady considers her thoughtfully, her dark eyes narrowed. "And what are they like? This girl, is she pretty?"

The maid's heart sinks. "She might be called so, my lady," she says carefully.

With a great sigh, pretending a boredom the little maid does not believe for a minute, her lady waves a languid hand. "I suppose I may as well see them."

While she waits for her guests to arrive, the lady rises from her chair and examines the figure she cuts—yes, fine, very fine. No. 17 was an excellent choice for today, as it turns out. What an elegant profile, what perfectly formed ears, what a shapely chin. Yes, it really is her best.

As soon as her maid shows her guests in, the lady sees she was not exaggerating when she called them no one of consequence. The girl is shabbily attired, her companions no better off.

The girl sets to some outlandish tale of shipwreck—a perilous journey through a storm and a safe landing on the shore—of being set upon by ruffians in the forest and their brave rescue by the newest member of the party. She talks animatedly and with the self-importance of the very young.

This girl will be her next, the lady decides. No. 31, a prime number, indivisible. She's not much to look at now—not beautiful, of course, but she has promise, and they are all made more lovely by death. She will shake the girl's mousy hair loose and style it in curls. Maybe she will keep her for a while, let her grow up a little. If she's spared from the sun for a few years, her skin will go milk white.

It's not as if she will be missed, the lady reasons. From her homely hairstyle and her plain sack dress, it's obvious she's an orphan, perhaps the burdensome ward of some aged aunt or uncle. Just another pair of hands on the farm. Her palms are rough, calloused from outdoor work. She milks the cows and collects the eggs before she goes to school in the morning, then comes home and helps with the laundry and the cooking. Her people, if she has any, will find someone else to help out around the house once she is gone, another girl who doesn't drag her feet and lean against the fence daydreaming when she should be doing chores.

What does this girl dream of, the lady wonders, as she idles away the oppressive late-afternoon hours? Perhaps she stares out at the sky stretched endlessly over the horizon and thinks of the way it turns dark and greenish and dangerous, of

the way it lifts houses from their foundations and tosses them into the air. Perhaps she would like to be lifted, too, transported somewhere far away.

Perhaps, the lady thinks, she will get her wish. After all, she is very far from home.

While the girl rambles on about her companion's time in the service of the late king, the lady catches her maid's eye. For a long moment, the maid looks back at her, blank, and she is afraid the stupid thing hasn't understood, but at last she dips her head and the lady knows her order has been obeyed.

The maid offers the travelers shelter for the night, which the little group happily accepts. Under her mistress' watchful eye, she bids them follow her to their rooms. The two companions she deposits in the servants' apartments near the ruined wing, quietly bolting their doors behind them. The little girl she leads up to the north tower. She's grown skilled at turning keys in locks.

The maid is quick down the corridor, but not quick enough.

"Wait," calls the girl, before the little maid can slip away. "What will she do to me? Starve me? Torture me?"

The little maid swallows against the contraction of her throat. "It's much worse than that."

"Doesn't it bother you?" the girl asks from the other side of the door.

The maid stands there in the cold corridor, staring down at the stone beneath her feet. "I try not to think about it."

"That's all very well for you," says the girl, "when you're not the one who's going to be beheaded. Though I suppose soon enough I won't have to think about anything, either."

How many times has the little maid done this? How many more? She doesn't mind it so much when it's just the two of them, the maid and her mistress. The work is hard and thankless, true, but at least it's only her suffering, not anybody else's.

Some time in the night, the prisoner discovers the door to her cell has been left on its latch. The well-oiled hinges give way gently and she is able to slip silently to freedom and rescue her friends.

In the morning, the maid must tell her mistress the bad news: the girl and her companions are now long gone, having disappeared into the deep mountain valleys to the north.

The lady's rage is profound.

The maid swears up and down she does not know how it could have happened, begs her mistress' forgiveness. When it is not forthcoming, she bears her lady's punishment in silence, her gaze fixed on the floor. The lady's thirty heads look on from behind the glass fronts of their cases. Their eyes are trailing stars.

“Charlotte”

You carry an ember, Charlotte, a bright-burning star. It’s a light that will not fade. Even when you’re gone, it will glow still. This I know because my name is the name of that patient spark inside you.

I, your potential energy—

Not your daughter, not the flesh that is growing even now from your flesh by umbilical connection. The spermatozoon that sprang forth from Arthur Bell Nicholls’ tenderly guarded testes is no part of me. I will never bear your mitochondrial DNA. And yet I am no less part of you.

You yourself might call me a spirit, but I’m not the shade of a life extinguished. The fetus incubating in your womb will die when you expire, but I won’t. She, the beginnings of your earthly legacy, will cease to be, but I will remain in this form unchanged. I’ve always been inside you, always been waiting. But unlike you, who must travel in only one direction—your mortal body carrying you only forward toward a moral end—I move in all directions. I am and was and will be.

I am here with you now as you sit at the table, writing a letter to Ellen and listening to Arthur read aloud. Like you, I can hear your father coughing in the next room, the wind breathing against the windows. But I am also elsewhere even as I am here, remembering, potentiating.

At this moment, I am also with you as you arrive at Haworth Parsonage for the first time, the carriage rocking over the cobblestones through the thick, black night. You should have arrived hours ago, but the roads are bad this time of year, so the seven-mile journey from Thornton took twice as long as it ought. You know you

should be anxious; you can feel the nervous energy in the carriage—little Anne is crying in Maria's arms, and your mother's face is white with the strain of travel. Although you don't know it yet, she is already sick and will be dead by autumn, just the first of many losses you will concede to the tubercular air of this place. But now, as the carriage bumps up the steep high street, you have no presentiment of your future troubles. I watch with you as you peek out the window at the darkened village and catch your first glimpse of the cemetery and the rectangular parsonage beyond, its front lamps lit in attendance of your arrival. You are not frightened by the flat-topped graves or the gnarled trees or the loud, rattling wind. You are just this month turned five and you're caught in the excitement of staying up past your bedtime, of moving to a new place, of a mysterious journey under the cover of darkness.

I am there—

As you trace your initials in the frost that forms on the early morning windows of the cramped bedroom you share with your sisters; as you write the soft curves of those letters over and over again; as you lie there awake while Emily and Anne sleep, knowing that soon you'll have to get up and dress, go about your day, knowing that for just a moment you are alone with some secret promise you sense in your initials, as if they are a cipher of things to come; as your tiny fingertip squeaks across the wet glass and makes that looping pattern: *C.B., C.B., C.B.*

Beyond the stone wall of the parsonage, where the green farm hills give way to the stooping shoulders of the moors, barely visible through the lingering cold haze of dawn.

As you and Emily and Anne and Branwell walk the moors, naming the streams with private names and curling centuries-old stones in your small hands.

In Angria.

In Brussels, when you walk Messieur Heger's creaking hallways, holding your breath in unrequited sentiment.

When you are Currer Bell; when you crack your nervous joints and every few minutes think, *Maybe someone, somewhere, has just now bought a copy of my book*, even though, objectively, you realize there's no way to know.

In London, when you make your first appearance in society as a celebrated authoress; when you burn under the weight of so many eyes on you and then school your features into an invulnerable shape for fear of seeming too eager for all this attention; when you hold stilted audiences with great men of letters, during which you remind yourself that you will not be overwhelmed, and resolve to behave no differently before these exalted figures than you should if you were at home with your father; when you tell yourself, *This changes nothing*, and you're right: you have always carried this fire.

As you stand beside Branwell's grave with Emily, who insists on walking to the church barefoot despite the torrential rain, a challenge to the elements to subsume her, to break her down and make her part of the land forever; as you exhort her to see the doctor, knowing that before the year is out, she will be dead, too; as you curse her silently for being always so close and yet ever out of reach to you.

With Emily and Branwell amongst the slowly gathering crowd in the family vault at Michael and All Angels, which you will join soon enough yourself.

I am there when they lay you to rest, too.

I'm sorry there was nothing I could do to put a stop to your demise. She, the little uterine interloper, is to blame. The estrogen your body must produce to bear her body in your own is what causes you to twist again and again in sickness and disgorge your meals, the tepid tea and cool water you try to force down your throat—not me. But I cannot fault her for what will happen to you. She is weak, only flesh, like you. Though if I have a single regret, it is that I will never have the chance to see your face with my own eyes. I would very much like to be held by your hands and swaddled in your arms, to put my natal lips to your breast and touch your cheeks with my own corporeal parts.

But what I am is greater than your body or your desires or even the most lasting words you have consigned to paper. I've already lived for hundreds of years after your death. I am living now, in fact. I am, always, simultaneously. I am here and I am also later and before, when you are just a zygote yourself and when you are long dead. I am not just some resonant echo of your voice. I do not belong to you. You are mine.

You will never know me, but I breathed life into you, and without your ever realizing it, my voice is the voice that has always whispered to you when you fell quiet enough to listen. My voice, our voice, is the one you put down on the page, the one that was blocked out in leaded letters backwards and inked and bound.

I existed long before you came to be, and I made you what you are, and I have watched your flesh decay. When you are gone, I will survive, telegraphing your spirit forward through time, lingering in the corners of your home and the lonely dirt roads

leading to the moors, whispering in the ears of others in your voice well after your last breath has been breathed out. I am the one who will always remember you. I am the one who will carry you on.

“When I am laid in earth”

If Paradise is a garden, which I have been led to believe it is, I hope it’s one without any shallow ponds in which to drown.

To drown is an ache in the soft palate that eventually explodes the lungs. It is a kind of fire that builds and to breathe in water promises to extinguish that flame but does not.

It was dark in South Lambeth the night I drowned. Across the river, the clouds were violet in the city glow of London, but it was dark in the garden. A lamp in the high window next door was the only light. The house was disappearing behind me, and in the darkness, the trees and hedges all took on familiar shapes and the sighs of the roosting birds spoke in a single voice. I listened, longing, dreaming awake.

These days, I do not dream. I float, a silver breath of air.

There is nothing left of the garden now, today. A road named in my husband’s honor lies in its place. Once all you could see for miles were treetops; now it’s houses, houses, satellite dishes, sodium vapor lamps. It’s still dark at night, though not as dark as it once was, the air lit with the diamond glitter of southbound traffic on the A3.

I should have buried him in that dirt. It was his garden, after all, his life. I should have kept him with me. He should never have left.

It was alone that I came to mischief.

I was fully twenty-five when we were married and already long acquainted with the silences of empty rooms. In the passing of solitary hours I was well-versed.

Sometimes I think that's why he chose me. He imagined that, spinster that I was, I must have learned the trick of loneliness—its mystery, as the secrets of any trade are called. He thought I could be left and returned to with ease. That I would keep. I, the second wife, the stepmother, the sticking point. The sad-eyed lady of South Lambeth.

His children's mother was only three years buried when we were wed, and Frances and young John looked at me with coldness when I came. We did not represent, let us say, a united and contented group.

For his part, he cared little what his children thought, or what I thought, for that matter. He cared little for anything that wasn't his garden or the Ark.

But, oh, the Ark: all things in creation, a safeguard against the Deluge. A world of wonders in one closet shut. In that cramped room did all the wonders of life effloresce, miracles of the natural world and marvels of man alike proliferating.

Amongst that vast collection, all manner of dead things: the stuffed skins of birds, strange fishes, shell-creatures, dried worms, four-footed beasts. So, too, were there minerals, warlike instruments, outlandish fruit. Amulets and ornaments, jewels and rings. Shoes upon shoes, boots and clogs and slippers and mules. A penguin and a dodo, a vial of blood that rained down upon the Isle of Wight, bells fashioned from the seeds of poisonous plants in the West Indies. Christ carved into a peach pit, the robe of the king of Virginia.

There was more than we had room for. Objects lay stacked three and four deep on shelves, were heaped cheek by jowl in cupboards. And there were always more coming, too, deliveries arriving, trades he'd arranged, some bequest. Daily did he raise new and curious delights.

We charged people sixpence to see it. Anyone might come, if they had the coin, and come they did. They crossed the river and drove for miles to see those famous rarities. I always knew the sightseers by their knock—a moment's hesitation at the door, then an overloud clatter of knuckles, as if they were afraid they might not be heard. Once admitted, they stood in awe. From my sitting room, I listened to the pattern of their stunned breathing as they took the tour, and on hot summer afternoons I was sometimes lulled to sleep by the keeper's lilting patter, his auctioneering patois. I learned his whole routine by heart: *And this, ladies and gentlemen, a piece of the true cross given Mr. Tradescant the Elder by Henrietta Maria of France, to safeguard until she called for its return*. Or sometimes, depending on his mood, *This holy relic was bestowed upon good Mr. Tradescant by the hands of King Charles himself*. I could close my eyes and trace those strangers' progress through the house: now they are gaping up at the remora and the puffer fish hanging suspended from the ceiling, now they are dipping their fingers into drawer after drawer of glass beads.

Sometimes, after the tourists had gone for the day, I would slip into the room that housed the collection and imagine I was showing the visitors around myself. *Ladies and gentlemen*, I told them, silently mouthing the words. *See this fine mirror case, perfectly hewn from ivory, depicting two lovers meeting beside a tree. See how his hand grasps her wrist, how she holds her palm out to him, her fingers long.* Once as I was leading my invisible tour, I looked up to find my husband watching me from the doorway and was so startled I nearly dropped the ivory ornament I was holding. *Be careful, Mistress,* he said, his smile half-hidden behind his beard. *This one is very dear to me.* His calloused hands guided mine as he explained how the artisan had

carved each seamless concentric sphere within the one outside it, turning and turning a single block of ivory on his lathe. Its surface was lacework against my skin, and he was the smell of wool and sweat and sunshine beside me.

Then the war came, and he left us for the New World. *For how long?* I asked, feeling bold and righteous, but he wouldn't say. A civil war and he had to sail for America, how convenient. Less convenient, perhaps, for the Royalist's wife left on her own with two resentful children and a house full of precious artifacts. *Don't worry*, Frances told me one day right after he'd left. Y*ou'll get used to it. He leaves, that's what he does*. I wanted to slap her insolent, cow-eyed face for saying it at the time, but later I would laugh and laugh, because she was right.

He left me over and over for that new-found land and all its boundless undiscovered flora. I imagined Virginia as a country overshadowed with trees: oak and pine and cedar and cypress, mulberry and chestnut, laurel, sassafras, cherry, and plum. I invented those trees; long hours I spent thinking them up. I imagined him standing beneath them, small, a child by comparison, taking a cutting of some frail blue flower.

Did he think of me while he was away? Out there under the black New World sky, did his thoughts ever turn to my breasts, my thighs? Or was he dreaming only of that other kind of propagation?

I thought of him often. He had me painted, once, holding a sprig of myrtle: love and constancy in wedded bliss—accurate enough. Perhaps he thought I was too dull to stray, too unimaginative. But that was never my problem, I'm afraid.

I might have fallen into some other man's arms, I suppose. There were always enough curious strangers trailing through the house that I could have found someone if I'd wanted to. But I never did, because I never felt alone. The house was never truly empty.

The ivory spoons were always there to keep me company. They and the kerises with their crooked little blades were my best companions while John was away. The figures on their handles would observe me passing the open door of their cabinet with their tiny eyes. The Virgin Mary carved of alabaster from time to time looked up from adoring her child to watch me go. And then there were the little rams and roosters, serpents and winged beasts that never failed to mark my movements: medallions, coins, cameos of amber and onyx and shell. All these he left with me in the house—all these and more.

In his absence, they began to speak.

It started as a thin murmur, like a conversation between two maids in a corridor, not meant to be overheard. At first, I think, they were only talking to themselves. But when they noticed someone listening—the spurs and cannons and coral ornaments—they addressed themselves to me.

Oh, those eternal voices. They spoke and spoke to me. They speak still.

They say,

We we we are the eighty perfect faces carved in a fruit stone. We will sing to you, our tiny teeth moving, infinitesimally small.

They say,

We we we are geese grown in Scotland on a tree, the barnacle boys!

They say,

We we we are the reclining figures in deep blue oval dishes, made from the molds of Bernard de Palissy. Observe the shiny flesh of our bellies, come taste our small white breasts and the grass at our feet.

They sang with voices like cut crystal or Morris bells. They whispered down dark corridors and said,

Don't leave us. Keep us with you always. We are yours. We are yours yours yours.

Yes, I said to them. *I will*.

While my husband explored the primeval forests of Virginia, I was left to tend the wilds my husband and his father made to grow:

The garden, with its Balm of Gilead tree, which he alone could nurture here in this harsh climate and which after he died was laid low by winters and eaten by mice. The garden, teeming with plants he and his father brought back from Muscovy, Virginia, the Barbary Coast: spiderwort and elaborate rose daffodils. *Platanus acerifolia*, the plane tree, a lovely name, the offspring of which still grace London's street corners with their dappled shade.

The kitchen plot, fat with beans and legumes and root vegetables, shivering with long feathery stalks of wheat and oats and barley.

The orchard, where grew forty-eight types of apple tree, forty-five kinds of pear, thirty-three plum, fifteen cherry, six apricot, four nectarine, twelve peach.

Scrawled across the ground, the shaggy little strawberries his father tenderly rescued from the obscurity of some witch's garden in Plymouth.

Those gardens are gone now.

Since the days when his father first labored to foster this soft earth, the woods that edged Lambeth have dwindled away. It's all telephone wires now and bottlebrush antennae on the flat roofs of semi-detached houses, illuminated signs on the high street: Laundrette Premiere Food & Wine Ladbrokes Dragon Garden. Where did it go, the rippling velvet surface of the treetops, the cool green of the deer park to the east, the rolling countryside? Bridges rose up across the Thames—Vauxhall, Lambeth, Waterloo—and the ferryboats that once crisscrossed the river dwindled and died. The city swelled, expanded. The shouting stench of fishing boats and the wet slap of the washerwomen at work on the banks were replaced by car horns and the trill of pedestrian crossing signals. Now the sound of the radio, that bodiless voice, keeps me company in the air. *This is the BBC Home Service*. I feel its frequencies buzz through me, hissing and popping, almost a language but not quite.

When at last my husband returned from the Americas that first time, they hushed a little when he came home, those petrified trinkets and ocelot teeth. In his presence they held their tongues, like schoolchildren cowed in the presence of their master. I thought, *Now all will be well again.* And for a time, it was.

Frances was married by then herself and I no longer subject to her resentful looks. John was doing good business selling bulbs and saplings, and several of his learned friends had expressed an interest in publishing a catalogue of the collection, a

task which he cared little for doing himself but was too vain to resist if someone else would do the work.

While he helped Mr. Ashmole and Dr. Wharton make their inventory, I would stand in the doorway and listen to him describe each axe and rosary in such loving detail. Often I imagined it was my hands running over the hull of the model sailing ship, not John's or Dr. Wharton's. Sometimes, too, I imagined it was my body he was turning over and over in his hands, describing with such care: *here the slow curve of her nose, here her dark, thick eyebrows, here the mole at the base of her neck*.

During that time, dear Mary came to stay with us and for the first time I had a true ally in the house, someone other than the portraits and short swords to keep me company.

Mary and I spent our afternoons sewing in the parlor, and from there I could hear John singing as he worked in the garden. He had a fine voice, humble but strong: *Through bushes and through briars of late I took my way, all for to hear the small birds sing and the lambs to skip and play*.

And then young John died and my husband left again and the house was so terribly quiet.

In his absence, I would lock myself into the curio room and open all the cabinet doors, pull open all the drawers. I would run the buckskin shirts against my cheek and breathe deep the smell of tanned flesh. Every hawk's hood and comb I cherished. I lay my hands on his cradle and his lantern and his jasper heart.

We were a house in grief, but the human bones and crocodile eggs sang out, a joyful din. They delighted in partsongs especially: lissome glees and pious canons and bawdy little catches, such beautiful harmonies. Henry the Eighth's stirrups favored "Pastime with Good Company", of course, while the jewels from ancient treasure hordes preferred old heathen rounds about the coming of spring. Other songs were like nothing I'd ever heard—wordless, vibrating cries that seemed to lift straight to sky and raised gooseflesh on my skin. They talked, too, gossiping like old women and trading stories, telling lies. They laughed and scolded, teased one another, chided me.

Their noise was a welcome reprieve. *Et tant que je viv'ray aultr' n'aymeray que vous*, they keened, and, *Greensleeves was all my joy!* When they forgot the words, they hummed.

When at last John returned again, we resumed our life together and didn't speak of the times before he'd gone. Sometimes, though, I found him casting resentful glances at the painting of Old Parr, as though he faulted him for living so many years when his own son died hardly more than a boy.

Eventually, it became imperative that we discuss our plans. The Ark grew larger with every day, and John was without an heir. We talked about making a bequest to a university. *Someplace that could afford to take it off our hands*, he said. I said, *Someplace that could take care of them*.

And then he came home drunk one night—distempered, I would say later, to be polite—and signed our treasures all away. Four men, strangers to me, stood in the candlelight and watched him sign the deed of gift. One of them had an earring,

another a stain on his jacket that looked like the Outer Hebrides. At a flash of silver, my heart caught: not a knife, but a coin changing hands, a single shilling to signify all the wonders of the world—as if they could mean so little, as if any one thing could stand for them. I bade Elias let me keep the coin, and sweetly he agreed—sweetly, because he knew what good it would do. The damage was already done.

I sat up that night, thinking over and over: *They will be gone*. In every sense that mattered, they were already gone, promised away to Mr. Ashmole. I shook with it. They were no longer ours.

In the morning, when John had sobered up, I threw the deed at him, the words pouring out of me: *I thought you would not suffer yourself to be so much abused!* His face went whiter with every line he read. My husband—the world traveler, so gifted at making the earth split open at his will, at coaxing life from dead land—taken in by the superstitious son of a Litchfield saddler.

How could you! cried the matchlock muskets. John did not hear them, but I did. *How could you how could you!* called the manacles and powder flasks. I could not tell, still cannot say, whether they meant to reproach John for signing the deed or me for letting him.

For days and days, the jars and lacquered boxes would not speak to me. In silence, they reproached me. I had betrayed them. I had not kept them safe.

Even John, who did not love them as I did, felt that we had failed them. *He shall never have a groat of it,* he promised me, but how could he promise that? How could he, how could he?

We thought to burn the deed, to obliterate it into ash, but in the end it seemed wiser to keep it as proof of the wrong done against us. We tried scraping the ink from the page and defacing the seal in hopes of undoing what he'd done, but there was no way back. All our wonders gone.

Clever, covetous Elias. I should have known he would be trouble when he took my husband to see the witches tried at the Maidstone Assizes. Never trust a man who relishes the wringing of women's necks, I always say. I wonder if he ever contemplated wringing my mine. No doubt he did. Perhaps he even cast an horary question: "Are the signs propitious to the strangling of Mrs. Tradescant?" He was just waiting until the stars aligned.

Did the stars align the night I wound up lying face down in that pond in that garden in the dark?

What I know is that it was a Sunday.

What I know is that I was not yet sixty-five.

What I know it that it was very dark in South Lambeth that night. But I remember the light—Elias' lantern in the high window.

Ever since my husband's death, the voices of the Ark have not been silent for a single second.

While I watched my husband be interred, they screamed and squalled. They begged and cajoled, laughed until they had the hiccups. They sang and sang and sang. When they could not be consoled by any other means, I would take out my little magnifying glass and examine them close up, my hands moving over the carved

boxwood leaves of the runic almanac, the miniscule carven helms and gilded hauberks of the ivory chessmen, the cracking paint of the portraits. This attention seemed to soothe them. Perhaps they simply longed to be touched. But though their tantrums quieted, they were never entirely silent.

What they wanted most, it seemed, now that they had me alone, was to tell me their own stories. Perhaps they had listened long enough to my husband dictating their provenance to Mr. Ashmole's ready pen, to the keeper reciting their histories in his loud voice.

They all clamored to be heard, talking over one another, always *I, I, I, we, we, we*.

They said,

How many passing winters has it been since we were carried over the ocean from our home? Our home, where the maracock and chinquapin grow, where sturgeon are thick in the mouths of rivers. Our home, of juniper swamps and cypress swamps, of tidal pulses and meander scars, of the great salt bay. Long ago we saw the rise and the power and the lowering of the sun, we watched the coming of the stag moon. And you—you swans with fire, with smoke in your mouths. Are you punishment? Were you sent to injure us by the beautiful, cold-eyed man who scars all those who look upon him? Could we have circumvented you with offerings of copper beads?

They said,

Reverend Sirs, may the monastic community listen to me. Those present desire ordination. They are pure from the conditions that hinder monastic life. They have

their own alms bowls and robes. They request the monastic community for the higher ordination with their venerable preceptor. If the monastic community is prepared, it should ordain them with their venerable preceptor. This is the motion.

They said,

Don't you know anything? Don't you know? That I come from the edge of the White Sea, where the night evaporates in summer, where we forget the name of sunset? Don't you know?

Sometimes they wept from loneliness, homesickness, from recrimination, regret.

They jeered at Ashmole when he came to collect, sent up a joyous roar when I turned him out empty-handed. They disputed the terms of his bill of complaint against me as absurd, and cursed bitterly when the chancery court decided in his favor. I was comforted by them, at first.

They were the noise of flutes, of skin drums. They spoke in spike fiddle, that lilting, sinuous tongue. They were the marketplace chatter of souks, the whispered insinuations of imperial court. They were the drone of insects in wet equatorial forests.

In time, their noise came to press upon me. They grew louder and louder. That clamor of voices did not end.

In the quiet pre-dawn, the engraved clubs would say,

In the lingering hours of the night, we will come upon you and set your homes aflame, and when you run from the fire, from the smoke, we will fall upon you and your blood will run.

When their threats became too violent, the shields would promise to protect me.

On some nights, the trumpeting of fluted ivory horns.

On others, the creaking of cotton hammock ropes, like breathing out and breathing in.

I lay awake listening. I had to. I was the only one left who could hear them, who could understand. *I know*, I told them. *I know, I know*. Yet still they talked.

It did not end and did not end.

I sold some of them just to shut them up. It didn't hurt that I needed the money, that it meant Ashmole would never get his grubby hands on them, the creep, but most I just wanted some quiet. Even after I gave up, gave in, carried them all in boxes to Elias' house, they still spoke to me. He tried to dissuade me, told me to wait, but I threatened to throw them out in the street. It would have been worth it, then, for even a moment's peace.

But still they did not stop. I could hear them all the way from the attic room where he kept them. We were by then neighbors, after all. Together they rattled and wailed, constant cacophony. They asked endless questions like children and sang intentionally out of key.

Hester, Hester, they cried. *Where did you go?*

Why did you leave us so alone?

Who will polish our fittings and brush the dust from our dead feathers now? Who, who?

I couldn't sleep for their noise.

I'm sorry, I said to them, but it didn't help.

Oh, what will become of us? they cried. *Who will admire us, where will we go?*

We, the rhinoceros horn cups and sherbet spoons.

We, the shields.

In the end, I just needed some respite. Searching for silence, I stumbled out into the cool, dark air.

And Elias was next door. A light was on in his window that night.

He was a shrewd one, Elias was—well-educated, though not, I believe, very learned. He wormed his way into John's good graces, called himself a friend.

Even as he helped make the catalogue, he was already counting our belongings for his own. Each one he imagined placing on his own shelf, turning it this way and that so it might better catch the light. He leaned in to smell the dry salt tang that lingered on the seashells and the fish. The leather he touched with a desirous hand. I walked in on him once, you know, to find him with a glove between his teeth, tasting it. His incisors left marks like a line of code.

He wanted everything, all of it, every last cameo and cup and engraved gem. If he could have swallowed it all down, he would have, and even then he would not have been satisfied.

Elias, that miserable man. That engine of greed.

When the great fire threatened to engulf his library, he came to me in a panic, begging me to keep some of his books for him. Why did I agree? Did I imagine that my generosity would stay his hand, that it might engender generosity in kind?

How little I knew him, if I did.

He brought his friends into my home at all hours, tracking mud across the floors to count my coins and medallions, to make sure I hadn't kept any back from him. As if I could help it. As if I could bear to part with them.

And then, as if that wasn't enough, he moved in next door.

He cut a hole in my garden wall, did you know? So that he could sneak in to observe my things. One night as I was coming in from a walk I heard a scratching by the wall and stood there, holding my breath, listening to the scrape of mortar being prised loose. The stone, at last, fell free and there appeared a grasping white hand, reaching blindly through the hole. I leapt forward and shoved the stone back into place, then stood there in the dark to catch my breath, my legs trembling, weak.

I know he tried to steal from me. He said I was the one who stole from him—chickens, he claimed! a heap of earth so that my agents could scale his garden wall under the cover of darkness, he said! what diabolical vision I had, in his esteem! But it was he who was the thief, he who crept into my husband's confidences and insinuated himself, made himself indispensible, indebted us to him, so that he would never have to lose his hold.

Even in death he could not leave well enough alone. He just had to be buried at St. Mary's, right by my husband's tomb. Was it not enough that he moved in beside me, that our two homes shared a wall? Was it not enough that in the end he owned our whole collection, all the books and birds and wampum belts? Was it not enough for him to buy the gardens once I was gone? He had to plant himself in the

ground nearby, too. What bitter fruit would grow from him, I do not know. I believe he poisoned the earth. All around his grave, the grass grew brown.

It's the least that he deserves.

Because of him, our great collection now stands as a testament to his name, crying mute under glass. John's dear garden went to seed, our house razed to the ground.

I should have seen it coming. Those singing little voices should have warned me.

But even if they had, what could I have done? The law was on his side. I was only a woman, taken advantage of in my weakness. I tried to tell the neighbors how he'd wronged me, told anyone who came knocking at my door hoping to gawp at Mr. Tradescant's famous rarities. *They are gone*, I said to their bewildered faces. *Mr. Ashmole has stolen them out from under me*.

And for that, he wished me beg his forgiveness. He put the words of apology in my mouth and hoped that I would choke.

Well, here they are:

Be it known unto all persons that I, Hester Tradescant of South Lambeth in the county of Surrey, widow, do acknowledge and confess that I have very much wronged Elias Ashmole of the same place, esquire, by several false, scandalous and defamatory speeches, and reports.

I have reported to several persons that the said Elias Ashmole had made a door out of his garden into my orchard, by which he might come into my house as soon as the breath was out of my body.

I have reported to several persons as well strangers as others of my acquaintance, that the said Mr. Ashmole had forced me to deliver up to him my closet of rarities, and that if I had not done it, he would have cut my throat.

All which, and many other like false and scandalous reports and words, as I have unadvisedly and rashly spoken against him without any provocation of his in words or deeds, so I am really and heartily sorry that I have so greatly wronged him therein.

I am so sorry. Really and heartily, I am.

I'm sorry that my wretched life was ever twined with his. I'm sorry he clambered into my house under the pretense of friendship and I'm sorry that my husband trusted him and I'm sorry that he crept into the dark yearning garden that night and held me down until my lungs ached, until my legs stopped thrashing and I lay still.

Is that right?

Is that what I was supposed to say?

Perhaps I should thank him. In some ways, surely, drowning came as a relief.

I was old, a widow. I was alone.

Was I alone in the garden that night? I try and try to remember.

I remember the smell of some sweet flower, jasmine or evening primrose.

I remember the bees buzzing in their glass hive.

I remember the dark whispering of the birds, their rare phosphorescent glow.

I remember the stars so very high above in constant motion behind the clouds.

The stars are fire, did you know? The stars are fire and so am I.

The fire that destroyed Elias' own curio collection, that was me. I set it out of spite, willed it into being to make him suffer loss the way I had. I am wishful thinking.

But what good did it do? I could burn him, cast nightmares upon him—I watched him gather peony root to try and soothe his bad dreams, but to no avail, because those dreams were me—but he still had my writing tablets, my miniatures and crystal balls and carven crosses. Even after he sent the collection away to its final resting place under museum glass, he still kept a few odds and ends he couldn't bear to part with.

Ever avarice, Elias.

Desire is the shape of an absence. It is an ache that can never be assuaged. No matter how many toads encased in amber you have, there will never be enough.

To want is to hang suspended in the air. To want is to wait endlessly for a breath that will not come.

I am waiting. Waiting and remembering.

I remember John's tread on the stair, the dirt under his nails. I remember bats the size of pigeons, a mermaid's hand. I remember my airless lungs contracting and then the water filling them. I remember whale ribs at the garden gate.

I remember the garden.

I am in the garden still. It's gone now, but so am I.

In truth, I am tired of gardens. Gardens were my husband's work, not mine.

In truth, I would like Paradise to be something else. Perhaps Paradise is a fire that cannot be quenched. Perhaps Paradise is a lightning field. Perhaps Paradise is nothing at all.