

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Transitions

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2fn533k9>

Author

Ryther, Sarah Elizabeth

Publication Date

2020

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Transformation

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS
in English

by

Sarah Elizabeth Ryther

Thesis Committee:
Professor Michelle Latiolais, Chair
Professor Sarah Shun-lien Bynum
Professor Ketu Katrak

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS	iv
The Day After The Incident On The Bus	1
Begone For It Is Written	21
The River	46
War Stories	63

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my teachers at the University of California, Irvine: Michelle Latiolais, Sarah Shun-lien Bynum and Ketu Katrak, for their kindness, patience and overwhelming support. I would also like to thank my cohort: Mason Boyles, Katherine Damm, Miles Parnegg and Dillon Seffic for being absolute angels every step of the way. I am also grateful for the TAs provided to me by the Department of English in the School of Humanities at UC Irvine, a form of financial support that was instructive as well as crucial to my growth here.

Thank you to my family: Pop, Peter, Andy, Nate, Molly and Kelsey for your constant and buoying love. And finally, a shout of eternal thanks across the void to Mom.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

By

Sarah Elizabeth Ryther

Master of Fine Arts in English

University of California, Irvine, 2020

Michelle Latiolais, Chair

With the following stories, I seek to explore the effects of the imagination on the construction of individual and collective identity. Each character uses fantasy as a coping mechanism — to draw closer to others or to shield themselves, to insulate against the penetrative qualities of loss, failure and fear. Thematically, these stories probe the state of perpetual curiosity, loss, and the difficulties of growing into a world vastly different from the one you expected.

The Day After the Incident on the Bus

In the lobby of the apartment complex where Cynthia waited for her mother, tiny circles of mold wheeled from a crack in the wall down to the soaked gray carpet. It had been raining for weeks now. The last time Cynthia had seen her mother, at Christmas, she'd handed Cynthia a copy of the alumni magazine that still came to the house and asked her if she kept in touch with anyone.

"Maybe Lily?" she added when Cynthia didn't say anything. Lily was Cynthia's first college roommate, a tall, needy blip in an otherwise good year. Cynthia rolled the magazine and put it into her purse where it would sit for months, stained by leaking pens and melted chocolate by the time she finally threw it away. Four years of college, and five after, and still her mother was preoccupied with Lily, a girl she had met only once. Cynthia decided on move-in day that her roommate would be the last person in her life that her mother would ever know, and had not gone back on this resolution.

Even then, Cynthia knew Lily was odd. They had first met at the freshman orientation brunch. Cynthia sat on an uncomfortable folding chair at a table with nine other freshmen. The boys wore wrinkled Oxfords, hair stiff with gel, the girls in dresses that showed too much cleavage. A chubby blond boy in a mohawk and dirty Chicago Bulls t-shirt made a show of pulling out the empty chair next to her. He sat down and sighed.

"Did you go to any crazy parties in high school?" he asked Cynthia.

"Not really."

“I was at a party once where everybody got arrested except for me. I snuck into the pantry as soon as I heard the sirens and ate an entire bag of Doritos while everyone else got breathalyzed. They all got suspended from school. Everybody except for me.”

“That was lucky.”

“Yeah, it turns out some kid’s mother called the cops.” He waited for Cynthia to say something.

A girl with a conical bun on the top of her head stared at Cynthia from across the table, a bronze line marking the place on her jawline where her makeup stopped and her natural skin color began. “I think you’re beautiful.”

The conversations around them halted, and nine heads turned to the girl. Cynthia noticed that her name tag had slipped from its plastic house. She looked down and poked it back into place.

“Thank you.”

Cynthia wondered later whether Lily had known they were going to be roommates, her flattery just a strange attempt to ingratiate herself. Nobody had ever paid her much attention before.

Within days, the boy in the Chicago Bulls t-shirt, Robbie, became her boyfriend, and Lily her best friend. They traveled everywhere together, two members of the group waiting outside the classroom for the third to finish Introduction to Biology or World History Seminar. After nights of indulgence, they all slept shirt to shirt in Cynthia’s bed. Sex was the only thing that separated one side of the triangle from the other two.

On the odd night when they were alone together in their room, Lily sobbed to Cynthia about everything wrong with her life. These confidences were a strong glue, the release of tears and hormones equal, Cynthia felt, to the connection she had with Robbie during sex. Cynthia needed to protect Lily, that much was obvious from her wispy hair and frail body, the way she berated herself for the tiniest mistake. So Cynthia left her notes on the mirror when she was having a bad day, quotes from Oprah and snippets of their favorite Beyoncé anthems, syrupy bits of encouragement that told her she had it all, that she too was beautiful and wanted. The day before their midterm exams, Cynthia even dragged pillows and blankets up to the third floor of the library so Lily could nap through the night.

As October rolled into November, objects started to disappear from Cynthia's side of the room and reappear on Lily's. Lipstick in an orangey-red shade that she spread across her lips before telling Cynthia she was going for a run. A cashmere sweater two sizes too small for her, the fabric straining so much against her large breasts that Cynthia was afraid it would rip. One morning, she woke and stumbled into the bathroom to find her toothbrush lying on the countertop, a trail of water droplets leading to a smear of white in the sink. Then it was Lily who began to disappear at odd hours. Later, Cynthia would realize that her disappearances coincided with Robbie's trips to the gym, the times he said he needed a walk to clear his head.

One Thursday, Cynthia arrived late to Biology to find a note on the door explaining that Professor Watkins had the flu. They should enjoy the great outdoors or take a nap. The day was cold and the grounds withered, so Cynthia went back to her room. But when she opened the door, her bed was already occupied by a mass covered with her quilt, a body huge and amorphous and grunting.

“I didn’t realize we were exclusive,” Robbie said. He looked past her to the bathroom. Moans stuttered out from underneath the door, and Cynthia wanted to go to Lily, to comfort her, but she could not tear her eyes from the condom wrapper that shone against the white tile floor. “I’m going to go now,” Robbie said.

Lily’s exit was more dramatic. She stalked the library and communal kitchens in the dorms like a town crier spreading a tale of woe, casting Robbie and herself as the villains, and Cynthia as the poor, besotted victim. The University Police had to chase her through the quad in the early hours of the morning, wild-eyed and cackling, and when she finally left, she didn’t bother to say goodbye. Everything she owned still occupied one side of the room, and for months afterward, their phone rang several times a day. Cynthia never answered it because Lily was the only one who knew the number.

By February, there was still a body shaped hollow in the mess of blankets on Lily’s bed. Dishes covered every surface, and the curdled remains of milk and sports drinks released a thick stench into the room. Cynthia started sleeping in the lounge at night, arranging her books around her so it looked like she had just fallen asleep studying. She entered the room only to shower and change her clothes

Then her mother emailed to say that she was coming to visit. Cynthia could already see her scrutinizing the campus, as thorough as any health inspector. She would pull the coverlet back to make sure Cynthia’s sheets were clean, and raise her eyebrows at the undercooked pizza in the cafeteria. Robbie would pass with his friends and look her right in the eye and her mother would stare and ask why the boys these days pierced their ears.

“Unbecoming,” she would say.

In anticipation, Cynthia bought Clorox wipes and a box of garbage bags. She tied a bandanna around her mouth and began to strip Lily's bed. Underneath the sheets, the rubber mattress cover was like something from a hospital, shiny white except for a brown spot in the center. It wouldn't come off, although she rubbed at it for a full minute. The phone began to ring at five-minute intervals. After an hour, she picked it up and set on the nightstand, receiver up, as if it were a radio.

Knots of dust floated around her as she wiped the top of the dresser with a damp cloth. Dust was fallen skin, she thought, cells shed and united, pieces of the three of them collecting in corners and drifting through the air when she opened or closed the door. Her face and back were damp with sweat. Each time she pulled a drawer open, she was sure something unpleasant would spring out, some seedy vestige of Lily and Robbie's relationship. The thought of her mother in this room terrified her. She was sure to find a sex toy or dirty pictures left in a drawer, a clump of black hair nestled in a forgotten corner of the medicine cabinet.

Her mother would have picked up the phone on the first ring.

Cynthia walked to the desk and unplugged it from the wall and put it into the garbage bag. And then, although the bag was only half-full, she walked down to the dumpsters behind the dorms and threw it in.

It was a physical feeling, the paranoia she had felt that day, a sense of being damp, as if fluid had penetrated her skin and was leaking back out from her pores, not sweat but something foreign, radiator coolant or the juice of standing garbage. She wondered why she felt the same way now, why the thought of her mother's car stopping in front of her apartment complex, the

honk of the horn and then the twenty minutes they would be alone in the steamy cabin, a sequence of events predictable and unpleasant, filled her with a vague sense of dread.

Perhaps it was like an old war wound, aggravated by precipitation. Her mother was fifteen minutes late and Cynthia had nothing to do but look out of the window. The leaves on the trees, shiny with water, seemed on the verge of falling, although they were still the green of full summer. A flyer drooped from the telephone pole, sodden ink blurring the picture of a lost cat. She thought back to the first time she had experienced this paranoia, in the bleak beginnings of adolescence, a few weeks before her fourteenth birthday.

That day she woke with a desire to see her brother's room, a sudden nostalgia for the place where she had spent her toddler days, curiosity about the only place in the house where the door was always shut. The light behind the door was white and strong, an outpouring of the windows that climbed from floor to ceiling, stretching across three of the walls. With the sun, the room was blinding. And when the snow fell and water dripped from the eaves and froze at night, icicles formed and flashed through the glass.

Inside, nothing had changed. The bed still faced the closet and little piles of clothes grew from the rug, the bookcases filled with the books of their childhood, *Goodnight Moon* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and a turtle care manual for Shelton, who was motionless in five inches of green water. Then she saw the magazine that sat open in the middle of the bed, its pages resting like flesh-colored petals against the plaid comforter.

Their bodies were different than hers. And yet she felt as if she was looking at one of the motivational posters that hung on the walls of her classroom, the kind that showed enormous

butterflies or jagged mountains, that urged her to rise above and challenge herself, to face adversity, to seize the day.

In her imagination she stood at the bottom of one of these mountains, cocooned in a parka with pickax in hand, the treads on the bottom of her boots ready to shred the obstinate ice. Into the unknown she would go, carrying her flabby stomach and tiny puffs of breast with her like survival gear. Ten years from now her body would be smooth and plasticized, her eyelashes soaked in black and her skin soaked in sun and in her eyes and on her lips the same expression that she saw on the faces of the women in the magazine. She pulled her shirt up over her head and her pants down around her ankles and kicked them away with a flick of her foot. Then she walked to the mirror that hung on the back of the closet wall.

Her mother came into the room and stood and stared through the windows with a familiar look on her face, a watery rapture amplified by the light that stretched and smoothed her, the glare erasing the lines that whiskered from the corners of her eyes, turning her red hair molten. She looked like this when they drove over the river in the springtime when it was high and laced with foam. In this light she was young, and Cynthia felt a sudden pinch of guilt for ruining the moment.

“Nice girls don’t look at that kind of thing,” her mother said after she squinted at the Cynthia and the magazine for a moment. Then she snatched it from Cynthia’s fingers and walked out of the room, leaving the door open.

After that day, her mother developed a strange habit. Sometimes if Cynthia was in her bedroom painting her nails, or in the laundry room ironing a dress, she felt a presence and turned to find her mother watching from the doorway.

“Do you need something?”

“No,” her mother would answer. “I was just checking to make sure you were okay.”

But Cynthia could sense her mother’s excitement, could feel her heart from across the room as it beat with the possibility of finding her daughter in the middle of some unspeakable act, some new transgression.

These visits continued until Cynthia went away to college. They were the reason she shredded every birthday card that came in the mail and deleted every text as soon as she received it. If she only had the courage to move to another state or even another city, she was sure her anxiety would lessen, perhaps even disappear altogether. But the ghost of an umbilical cord tethered her here, inflexible as it was invisible, and like a dog tied to a tree, she was unable to do anything but circle. College was the farthest she had ever gotten, and even then, the campus was only forty-five minutes outside of the city, close enough to return by shuttle bus on weekends, although she never had. Every place she had lived since then had been closer to her childhood home than the place before it.

Her current apartment was just a few blocks from her mother’s house. When she first signed the lease, Cynthia told herself that she had chosen the location for safety, in case anything bad ever happened. In reality, her mother was the last person she would go to in an emergency. Sometimes her black Honda Civic, the bumper patched by peeling duct tape, would pass the bus stop where Cynthia waited to go to work. Her reaction was automatic – she hunched her shoulders and stared at the ground, as if hiding from her mother was some kind of reflex.

Yesterday it had been too dark for anyone to notice her from the street as she walked to the bus stop. The air smelled of rain and the clouds sagged with it, and in the flat light of early

morning, the waiting people all looked like mannequins. They stood in a loose, tired line until the bus came and then they entered it one by one, their movements still stiff, their plastic bodies animated by the growing light.

The last person to enter was an obese man who wore sweatpants and shoes with Velcro straps. His feet were so wide that the straps only made it halfway across the top of each foot. Cynthia smiled at him to let him know they were in this together. He stared at her. Fingerprints daubed the lenses of his glasses, the rims disappearing into his cheeks. She couldn't make out the color of his eyes.

He sat behind her and the bus pulled out from the stop. Something tugged at her hair. Maybe the man had lost his balance when they changed lanes. She shifted forward to the edge of her seat. It was pouring now. They crossed one of the busiest intersections in the city where a cop in a voluminous slicker was directing traffic, water spraying from his waving fingers. The man behind her began to whisper.

The only reason anyone ever talks to you is because they want to fuck you.

Maybe he was singing along to his music. She turned her head a tiny bit to see his reflection in the window in front of her; he wasn't wearing headphones. A shiny spot on his bald head caught the light and reflected back at her from the window, and she had an image of him shaving it while the rolls beneath his chin rippled down his chest like a flight of stairs.

You think everyone loves you, but they don't.

Your father wanted your mother to abort you.

Girls like you deserve to be raped, but I wouldn't even hate-fuck you.

Cynthia saw him on a stage, performing for a crowd while eight synthetic suns pulsed above, piercing through waving arms like noon light through branches, this light blinding him and all the people blinded by him, by words nestled in other words, words that stuck to the ear and came out of the mouth when you were sitting in your car at a stoplight or on the porch on a summer night for the benefit of a boy with a video camera. He seemed to reach the limits of his creativity.

You're the most worthless slut I've ever seen.

She wondered if he was mentally ill. Then she wondered if he was aroused. She did not turn to look at him.

The bus passed a strip mall, and then they were on the highway. Water had collected in the median, and birds gathered on the new pond. The cars up ahead slowed to a crawl and from the window she watched a bird peck at an empty French fry box. She thought about french fries and tried very hard to focus on the emptiness of her stomach. The birds seemed unconcerned with the rain. If she watched them and pretended she couldn't hear him, maybe he would stop. They waddled around the edges of the pond, beaks to the ground. Every so often, they lifted their heads and jerked them from side to side as if they all had cricks in their necks.

The man stopped talking and the silence around them felt like a sigh after a long day's work. Then the bus reached her stop and she got off, pausing to thank the bus driver, to smile the same smile she had given the man.

Today was Saturday, so she didn't have to ride the bus at all. She woke to a heavy, hot sense of shame that made her want to stay curled in bed for as long as it took for the feeling to subside. That she felt anything was bewildering. This kind of thing was normal; every woman

she knew had experienced some type of harassment, public or private, and they all seemed able to laugh it off. Maybe it only felt bad the first time, a deflowering that stung and made you cry, but prepared you for the next time around.

She stayed in bed all day. At five o'clock she changed out of her pajamas, and did her makeup. Her brother William was in town with his new girlfriend, and they were going to eat together as a family at one of the casual chain restaurants her mother loved. Cynthia had been dreading this day for weeks now. Her mother always dressed up when they went to these restaurants, as if the restaurants themselves were worthy of some honor. Instead of her uniform of a plain gray T-shirt and jeans, her mother pinned a tiny Santa face to a knit dress, or donned a sweater embroidered with fall leaves in shades of burgundy and mustard.

The sky was beginning to darken by the time her mother arrived, thirty minutes late, the swollen clouds blending with the coming dusk.

"Are you seeing anyone?" her mother asked before Cynthia had even shut the car door. And then, "How is your job going? Who have you been spending time with lately?" Cynthia looked at her. The years had settled on her hips and thighs, and her hair was rusty now, thinning even, so Cynthia could just make out pink patches of scalp beneath the frizz.

The gray light outside shaded sodden dark buildings and empty playgrounds behind iron fences, mulch leaking through the bars onto the sidewalk. The awnings that hung over delis and pawnshops dripped as if with sweat, and beside them, a woman in pink spandex and a racing helmet struggled against the water that swept across the bike lane. A paper bag caught in her front wheel and when she put her foot down, water lapped against the strip of ankle between the top of her shoe and the bottom of her jeans.

As if from a great distance, Cynthia heard her mother's voice and then her own voice as she answered each question with single words. The birds she had watched yesterday were like the woman on the bike, reference points to a reality outside of this moving vehicle. She stared at them and found that overnight, as a muscle fiber torn then strengthened, these objects rendered her mother's words meaningless. They reached the restaurant and the questions stopped.

The waitress seemed nervous as she led them to their booth, past a tank of lobsters who bumped against the glass, their claws bound by pink and blue strips like many squirming newborns. The woman sitting next to William looked normal. Her blank eyes stared at them from a delicate face, so placid in its expression that even news of a dying family member, of a car crash or a terrorist attack would wash right over it, leaving it unchanged. Brenda was an accountant, William told them, and they had met while playing Ultimate Frisbee. He laughed, out of nervousness, Cynthia thought, or maybe relief. Her mother was smiling at Brenda.

"It's been a long day," the waitress told them as she fumbled with her notepad. The ceiling lamps swung with the gentle flow of air from the fan beside them, an imitation of a breeze that was somehow unsettling in this artificial space. It was difficult for Cynthia to pay attention to the conversation. Her mother leaned toward Brenda as if they were on a date and there was nobody else at the table. With each question she seemed to gain energy, her smile more and more indulgent. Brenda, unused to this much attention, this precise focus, answered her with a flush. Cynthia felt sorry for her. William stared at his water glass, his palm pressed against the side of the table as if to steady himself.

The waitress reappeared with their food. As she lowered her arms, the tray slipped and one of the dishes skittered across the table. Pearly drops of cream sauce spread over the

tablecloth and fell into Brenda's lap. When she stood, chunks of oyster clung to her dress, the sauce painted in wide, mottled strokes over the floral fabric.

A man emerged beside them. He was ruddy-cheeked, tall, the beginnings of a belly stretching his black polo shirt. A tiny golden rectangle pinned to his chest said, "Manager," and underneath, "Robert," as if to proclaim to her family, to the entire restaurant, that he still existed. Cynthia looked down at her lap. She hoped he didn't recognize her. He looked straight at her, but spoke to Brenda.

"We're so sorry about that. We can give you a discount on your meal, and please be sure to send us your dry cleaning bill."

As they were leaving, he called out to her.

"Have a nice night, Thia." Cynthia looked straight ahead and swung the door open so fast it hit William in the shoulder.

The inside of the car was thick with heat. "Do you know that man?"

"It's muggy out there. I'm sweating a little bit," Cynthia said, and looked out of the window as her mother turned the key in the ignition.

"Do you know that man?" The car was running, but her mother had not shifted the gear.

"Yes, I knew him. We dated my freshman year of college until I caught him having sex with Lily in my bed."

It was as if a blister had burst and its fluid drenched them, the pocket of skin once live and throbbing now sagged, deflated. The relief of it did not fade, and with it came the elation of ownership, like she stood in the doorway of a house she had bought and realized it belonged to her. There were only the sounds of the car now, the engine and the heating vents and the tires

parting the water on the road, the water rising up and falling onto the windshield of the car behind them.

“I have dreams sometimes where I walk into my dorm room and it’s filled with condom wrappers in all colors, so many that I have to wade through them like they’re water. Lily is there on my bed with Robbie, the guy at the restaurant, and they’re having loud, obnoxious sex and they look over and smile at me. I ask them to stop, actually I beg them to stop.”

Until twenty minutes ago, these dreams were buried deep in the months after Lily left. She relished the act of unearthing them.

“I am so, so tired in the dream and all I want to do is sleep, but they won’t stop. I get into Lily’s bed, and even though I don’t want to, I’m turned on by the sounds of their fucking. Then I come, and it’s harder than any orgasm I have when I’m awake, so hard that it wakes me up.”

They reached Cynthia’s apartment complex and her mother stopped the car. She didn’t look at Cynthia.

“Thanks for the ride.” Holding the bag of leftovers above her head against the rain, she ran from the car.

She set the bag in the kitchen and took off her rain jacket and boots. After standing for a moment, she peeled her shirt off, dropped it, and took a few steps toward the bedroom. Her bra came down over her ribs, unclasped, tight around her hips as she wiggled it away, then her panties, her sweat-moistened socks and the pink band that held her hair in place, all shed and left where they fell until naked in front of the mirror she stared at the place where her hip bones pushed against skin, where belly fat pushed away from a mesh of muscle. Strands of hair floated

above her head. Her face was close enough to the mirror that she could make out the vertical line between her eyebrows that the melting foundation couldn't hide.

She turned on the faucet and cupped her hands to hold the water. At first she sipped, then she pushed up so it ran over her face, snorting in a long, forceful rush to stop it from entering her nose. She dried her face on a towel then retraced her steps, collecting each garment, thinking to herself how like a lover's entrance it had been.

Begone For It Is Written

MRS. JONES

I am naked on the carpet in the 5th grade Sunday School classroom, breathing the children in. Fibers from thick sweaters and yippy dogs, skin scratched from the scalp and left to be collected in the vacuum's rotten belly. Sometimes I feel this dust on me. Coming up, out. Parts of me peeling, falling away. The only products in my bathroom vanity are a bar of soap and a jar of lotion, the cheapest kind you can buy at Costco. My husband doesn't know what I hide. Retinol, niacinamide, lactic acid, Vitamin C. The sing-song list of anti-aging. Before bed, I drink a full glass of water. By 4:00 AM, it presses on my bladder, an imperfect alarm. I sneak away to the bathroom to anoint myself.

It is not just my skin. There are imperfections everywhere, specks of dirt on countertops and floors, greasy fingerprints on doorknobs, clots of dust lurking in every crack and corner. I must clean, fix, destroy. After I am satisfied with the kitchen, I move on to Jacqueline. First child, only child. She came out of me screaming, a milky-skinned little rabbit. I knew she was mine by the way she wriggled, the motion a perfect match to the way she had rolled around in my belly. She is ten now. Her hair, once an impossibly bright banana peel color, has darkened to mouse-brown. Still delicate out of her head though, soft like the plant they call Lamb's Ears, so long it grazes her hips. I make her gather it into a single braid, fat at the beginning, weaving weakly down to a sparse paintbrush head. One day I wake angry with it. It teases me, swishing back and forth as Jacqueline does her chores, as she sits at the kitchen table, lips moving to sound out the hard words in her study Bible.

“Come here, baby,” I say, sweetly. These are the first words I’ve said to her in days. She is beginning to grow afraid of me. I hug her, draw her so close I swear I can feel how it was when she was still a part of me.

The black plastic garbage bag wrapped around her shoulders makes her look wan, sickly. She doesn’t say anything, even when I accidentally pinch her throat with an alligator clip. I croon to her as I chop. *Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.* I give my sweet shorn lamb an elegant Page Boy. Well, maybe not so elegant seeing as I’ve never cut hair before. A little uneven in the back, really uneven in the front where her cowlick is, where the hair springs up despite my every attempt to smooth it down with gels and pomades.

She runs to the mirror when I’m done, and I can tell what she thinks by the way her eyes widen. But she doesn’t say anything except, “Thank you, Mommy.” Polite. Always polite. *Look adults in the eye, Jacqueline. Extend your hand.* They will shake it and be delighted that a child makes eye contact, has a firm grasp despite her tiny twig fingers.

I cut it twice more. Next is a bob. Asymmetrical, as rough as I can make it, so it looks like she cut it herself.

“Children experiment in the strangest ways,” I tell the women at church. “It may be the beginnings of a rebellious adolescence, or it may be nothing.” They nod and cluck softly. We pray for Jacqueline, asking God to keep her heart soft.

Last week before church I shaved her head so close to the scalp I accidentally nicked her with the razor. She cried out.

“Bear your pain,” I say sternly. Something my mother said to me, through period weeks and on the day I pushed Jacqueline out. A virtue not to make ugly sounds, to hide your suffering.

I thumb the blood spot and lick it away. My husband comes in from heating up the car, looks at her and bursts into tears. I try to console him, wrap my arms around his neck and rest my head because lately it has been so tired, so heavy with my Testimony. I don't tell him why I did it. It is to protect her. Now she won't be a temptation to men, to boys who will want to damage her. To Old Curdle Eye. She was getting too beautiful.

"I think you should stay home from church today and rest," he tells me.

ELISABETH

It was because of Emerald Washington that I snuck back to the Sunday School room in the first place. To slip a note in her cubby that says in my best handwriting how I love her like a wife loves a husband and I always will. It's an anonymous note because I am too scared to tell her the whole truth, right to her face. But I want her to know there's a person out there who loves every single braid on her head, from the top where her scalp is pulled tight down to the fringe that sticks out from the beads that click together whenever she moves.

Emerald isn't homeschooled like I am, like most of the children in the church are. She goes to Sojourner Truth Prep, an all-girls school. She wears a red and black plaid skirt and a polo shirt with a logo over the heart and can't make the tiniest peep in the hallway or she will be punished. I long to go to school. I imagine what it would be like for a teacher to ask me a question. I would answer it with authority, loudly and carefully. I imagine the girls in front of me. They would wear shirts with cartoon frogs and lions on them, plastic chokers and skinny jeans. I don't imagine the boys because they exist in another world, a strange, smelly place that doesn't interest me.

I think about the time Emerald came over to my house every night before I go to sleep. We went straight up to the attic, my favorite place in the world. The wallpaper has big yellow and orange flowers all over it, daisy-shaped and almost neon when the sun shines through the window. My Barbie houses are on the far side of the room, as far away from the stairs as possible. For privacy, even though nobody ever comes up here.

“This is all yours? This whole room?” Emerald asks, her voice low, hushed, as if we’re in the sanctuary at church. Our mothers are downstairs trying to memorize the fourth chapter of Matthew. Mrs. Washington can only come to church every other Sunday because some Sundays she has to work at the Metro Petro over on Lake Street. She sells people candy and formula for their babies and air fresheners that are shaped like trees but smell like strong, chemically perfume. She tells my mother about it in a low voice, and I know it’s because she’s embarrassed. Women are not supposed to work outside the home, and especially not on Sundays. I’m ten now, old enough to go and minister to people every Saturday. We knock on doors all over Minneapolis, sometimes even St. Paul, and ask people if they want to go to church. Most of them say “no” and slam the doors. Some of them say “yes,” and we give the adults rides on Sunday mornings. The children come to service in old school buses painted a deep cobalt blue. On the Sundays that Mrs. Washington works, Emerald comes to church on the bus.

“Nobody else likes this room, so my mom let me have it,” I tell her, trying to be casual. I am proud that I have a room to myself, even if it is just the attic.

“Just for your dolls. A room just for your dolls. Wow,” Emerald breathes. I set up the Barbie houses on squares of cloth - old napkins and quilting squares. They are arranged just like a real room would be, except with dollhouse furniture. We start playing right away.

“Let’s pretend Vanessa was separated from her family at birth and was raised on the prairie by a pack of wild horses. She doesn’t know any humans so she never learned to wear any clothes, and she lives behind the waterfall.” Emerald gestures to the stairs, an obvious yellow waterfall.

Vanessa is the prettiest Barbie and I love looking at her. A couple times a week, I take Vanessa into the bath with me and wash and condition her hair to keep it smooth. I even painted a flick of glitter nailpolish on Vanessa’s eyes so they sparkle, greener than they were when she came out of the box.

“And then one day Kevin gets pushed down the waterfall by his evil little brother who hates him because Kevin is nice and won the lottery three years ago when he was twelve,” I add.

“I don’t really think that’s realistic. Winning the lottery when you’re twelve. You can’t even buy a lottery ticket by yourself. It’s illegal. So maybe he should just fall down the waterfall on accident.”

“OK, fine. So then Kevin falls down the waterfall and of course he almost drowns. Swallows so much water he starts sinking.”

“But he bobs up and down,” Emerald interrupts, quick and excited. “And Vanessa sees him. She’s is in the middle of taking a bath under the waterfall, and she’s scrubbing herself all over with seaweed because it’s good for your skin.”

I can’t explain it, but all of a sudden I have goosebumps. Maybe it’s the way Emerald jumps in, bosses me around, knows better than I do the way you should play. From one second to the next, I’m in love. The feeling spreads from my chest through my whole body, and I want to lean over and kiss her. Softly, like you kiss a stuffed animal to sleep but with a different kind of

love behind my lips. Once at the park I saw two girls on a bench, tongues flicking in and out of each other's mouths, bodies all wrapped up. I watched them for awhile, trying to figure it out. Then they saw me and giggled and offered me some Takis. This is what I want with Emerald.

"Why are you smiling like that?" Emerald asks, and I laugh to cover myself, pretend, as I start to sweat, that I wasn't thinking about kissing her.

"Vanessa is as naked as the day she was born," I say.

"Her bosoms are showing but her nipples are nowhere to be found." Emerald pokes at the place where the nipples go on us.

"Ahhhhhhh, I'm a naked lady, look at me, look at me!" I make Vanessa do a naked lady dance, and now Emerald is laughing, her mouth open so wide that I can see all the way back to her fillings. Her gums are different than mine, purply-brown where mine are pinky-red, her front teeth big and gappy.

"Help, I've been raped, I've been raped," I say in a high, breathy lady voice, for no reason at all except that it's what comes out. Emerald stops jumping.

"What did you say?" she asks, the laughter draining from her voice.

"Nevermind."

"You shouldn't ever say that word."

"I'm sorry." And I am truly sorry, so sorry that Emerald is no longer smiling at me. She's taken Vanessa's dress and is putting it on, carefully buttoning each tiny button. She won't look at me.

"What does it mean?" she asks finally in a whisper, so low I can barely hear her. "Rape."

“I don’t really know all the way,” I tell her, which is true. “I think it means when a man takes a lady’s clothes off when she wants to have them on.”

“Oh,” Emerald sighs, relieved. “That’s not as bad as I thought. Sometimes when it’s really, really hot outside, women wear bikinis. I mean, immodest women do. But that’s pretty much like being naked anyways.”

“You’re right,” I say, even though I don’t think it’s the same at all.

MRS. JONES

A little girl comes into the room and I draw myself up from the carpet to look at her. She stares at me, cow-eyed and awkward, her white tights grimy at the ankles where she stepped in slush. Her parents are in my small group. Weedy people, poor like my family but always well-groomed. Goodwill dresses from the 80’s and suit bottoms modified to fit fleshy bodies. We all grew up in the church, grew together, and when puberty hit, noticed and longed for one another. Seventh of twelve, firstborn of nine, third of eleven. Or the most precious of all, the caboose reversal baby, born five-to-ten years after their closest sibling. Men with tears running down their cheeks give Testimony to the congregation about their snipped scrotums, vasectomies procured in moments of weakness. And then reversed. Procreation as an act of repentance. We the arrows.

“Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate.” - Psalm 127:5

We were warriors, my brothers and I. Eleven hungry warriors, greedy for attention, for social contact, for real food because there were never enough microwaved hot dogs, jiggling inside their burnt orange skins, to go around. We ate mushy food mostly - oatmeal and chili and rice. Poured vats of it into our stomachs in the mornings so we were primed to attack enemies with our embossed King James bibles. With our righteousness.

My family is wed to rock. Taconite saved us, saved the whole mining industry in Minnesota. It was once just waste, a homely gray layer cake of quartz and carbonate with iron fragments at its core. Then they discovered how to extract the iron, melt it down and form it into white hot pellets, precursors of steel. Taconite bought my grandparent's framehouse in Northeast Minneapolis. In the summers the backyard is hazy with sawdust blown in from the shipping yards next to the river, lightly scented with the yeasty odor of the breweries that fill the neighborhood, that churn out keg after keg of beer for humble Swedish and Norwegian laborers. Not for us. Not a drop of liquor passed through my grandfather's lips, and my father followed his example.

Although he is graying now, his body made frail by hard work and years of chastising children, my father still wakes in the navy blue of early morning to make the three-hour drive up to the Mesabi Iron Range. He stays there from Monday to Saturday, pulling striated slices of cherty iron ore from the ground with his bare hands. Or that's how I imagined it until I learned about jaw crushers and cone crushers and hammer crushers that smash the heart right out of the stone until it is reduced to powder.

While taconite sheltered our bodies, pipestone saved our souls. They made the church from it in 1871, sent blocks from Southern Minnesota up on the heavy-laden boxcars of the

Minneapolis and St. Louis Railroad. The church stands on the corner of Franklin and Park in the Phillips neighborhood of central Minneapolis, a dull pink behemoth that can't quite decide whether it's Gothic or Romanesque. Its congregation was Lutheran at first, calm and steady, traveling home after church on the streetcar to feast on Sunday lunches of walleye and pickled herring. In the 1980's, when the last of the Bjorklands and Amundsons died off, the church was put up for sale. Pastor Knutson, fresh from divinity school, bought it and started his own pilgrim church. Unashamed of the gospel of Christ, firm in the conviction that the Bible is the verbally inspired word of God. A church that swore to send its parishioners to the gates of Heaven with nary a black mark on their constricted souls. We are governed by the doctrine of separation.

This means that we reject worldliness in all its forms. But still we covet. The world finds ways to intrude, shoves itself unbidden into our dreams. In our hours of sleep we wear blue jeans and low-cut tops, retire to the cool dark of theaters where we bask in forbidden, thrilling universes. We slip tongues into each other's private places and ride on shiny reptilian roller coasters.

I lusted after a Cabbage Patch Doll once, wanted to brush her wormy yarn hair, to mother her, to kiss her cherubic and puckered plastic cheeks and rock her to sleep. After my bedtime confession of this lust, my father explained to me that the problem with Noreen Marietta and Cherry Cathlyn and all the other dolls in the Patch family was the adoption certificate tucked so innocently inside each of their boxes. By signing a document wherein you swore to love an object with all your heart, you were entering into a contractual agreement to worship an idol. A clear violation of the First Commandment.

It must have been difficult for the boys with their daily urges, dicks itching to be touched. And we girls, demure to the point of absurdity. Hair snaking to our waists in praise of the Father. Hair covered by white triangles and old-fashioned felt bowler hats during prayer or prophesy, or all the time if you were like my family and took First Corinthians 11:6 literally. When I was fifteen I wanted to cut my headcovering into pieces and scatter them in the garden where they would surely grow, sprout into a towering cotton tree.

I remember the excitement of going to places we could not avoid - the post office, the shoe store, the bank - places where there were people who didn't go to our church. I watched them closely, wondered what sins they hid in their hearts. In the grocery store, my mother turns the magazines at the checkout around so my brothers won't see women gaze at them with black-rimmed sex eyes, their bronzy oiled skin and coiffed hair completing the trinity of temptation. My brothers are too young. They clamor for Matchbox cars and Archie comics. I am the one who is interested in these women. I want to feast on them, swallow them and absorb their beauty for myself and reflect it back out to the world.

Growing up, my mother didn't like most of the church women. She never said it outright, but I know it was because most of them never went to college. "You'll go," she always told me when I asked about it. Pastor Knutson doesn't believe that girls need college. I never did go. In high school, if I finished my schoolwork for the day, I was allowed to walk to the library by myself. Before I go, my mother hands me a list of acceptable books to check out and instructs me not to stray. She knows me, can sense the vanity I try my best to conceal. At fourteen, men have already approached my father to ask if their sons can court me. I slip copies of *Vogue* and *Glamour* into the stacks of church-approved reading material - biographies of Corrie ten Boom

and Albert Schweitzer, the chalk-dry lay theology of C.S. Lewis. I am seventeen and have memorized whole chunks of *Mere Christianity* before I gather enough courage to open the magazines behind the closed blinds of the teen study room. It is then that I begin to collect and memorize the world's secrets. It is then too that the Father begins to whisper His secrets to me. At first I am startled, think that I have mistaken the ceiling fan's gentle whirl for a heavenly whisper. But it happens again and again, and then so often that I get confused, distracted from conversations by God's flickering voice inside my head.

In truth, I am one of the blessed ones. I do not find my husband repellant. He is good and kind, and although I had to learn to love him, I am content.

ELISABETH

"Sit," Mrs. Jones hisses at me. Her dress is blue with tiny white flowers, and it's puddled on the carpet. A bra is next to it, white cotton with two small black stains on the front, near where the nipple would be. I wonder where the stains came from. Black ants crushed into the fabric. A Sharpie's pointed mark, leftover from when she was measuring the fabric for a new dress. All the church women sew.

"I need you to sit," she says to me, more urgently. Her voice is raspy, as if she spent all last night screaming. She's kneeling in front of the folding chairs we sit in during Sunday School, yellow plastic gloves on her hands. Scrubbing the seat so hard I think the paint will dissolve. The smell of cleanser burns my nostrils. I inch over to the chair next to the one she's scrubbing and sit down. I am still scared to look straight at her so I look up at the halogen light that shines its hospital glow on us, and at the blank cream walls, scuffed near the bottom from

bored shoes. I rest my eyes on our cubbies. They hold spare pairs of winter boots and artwork we've forgotten to take home. I find Emerald's name, three cubbies down from mine. She decorated her nametag with green plastic jewels, the capital "E" curled and swirled in her fanciest handwriting. My fingers itch to unzip the calico case on my bible and pull out the love note. I look very quickly at Mrs. Jones. She starts to sing to herself, and I stand up, slow and quiet. *Rock of Ages, cleft for me. Let me hide myself in thee.*

She reaches out and pinches my elbow gently with her gloved hand. Pulls me toward her. I want to be anywhere else. It's December, and already there have been stories of babies dying in car seats after being left alone in the cold. I would rather be a baby in a cold car seat than here with her.

"Just keep me company," she says. There is another odor in the room, I can smell it through the solvent. Sweat, maybe. Or the smell after you puke and leave your teeth unbrushed. What if the smell is blood? I worry then that Mrs. Jones is a murderer and she's trapped me here so she can slit my throat and pour me full of some chemical. Mummify my remains with her cleaning supplies.

"Talk to me, please," she says. You're a Miller, right? I know your parents. I've known them since before your father courted your mother. Your mother used to be beautiful, but having babies makes us old and fat."

I want to run upstairs as fast as I can, straight to my mother and hug her so, so hard and tell her that she is the most beautiful woman in the world. We are only allowed to hate Satan and his legions, but I feel hatred now for Mrs. Jones. My mother does have a roll of fat around her waist, but her eyes are clear brown, and the lines around them crinkle up when she smiles.

“Tell me I’m beautiful,” Mrs. Jones says.

I have never thought one thing or another about the way Mrs. Jones looks. She blends in with the fifty-or-so church mothers who come to service in their floor-length dresses, who bring casserole to Bible Study on Saturday mornings. They all smell and act like mothers are supposed to. Mrs. Jones grips my thigh so hard I’m sure there will be a bruise there tomorrow.

“Tell me I’m beautiful,” she says again.

“You’re beautiful.”

“There’s a device inside me. Stuck way up in my pussy. My husband doesn’t know about it, and he keeps pressuring me to go on fertility drugs because he wants more babies. I only wanted one, and I have her. Sweet Jacqueline. The doctor put a plastic thing in me and now I can’t have another baby. Funny thing is, God talks to me through the plastic thing. He tells me secrets.”

“Begone Satan, begone for it is written that you shall worship the Lord your God!” I say this loudly and look straight into her eyes. They squint back at me. I was sure there would be red squiggles running across the white. But they are clear. Blue flecked with yellowy-brown. Normal eyes.

“It is not Satan in me,” Mrs. Jones says, talking to herself in a low voice. “I am a prophetess and I must give my Testimony. Pass the true and gilded word of the Lord on to all the afflicted women.”

A drop of sweat escapes from my armpit and crawls down my stomach. I screw my eyes shut, so hard that the sockets behind them ache.

“My brother is giving his Testimony next week,” I say, because I want to say something. “He practices it in front of the mirror. He came back to Jesus after he strayed for three-and-a-half years. He got pulled over for speeding.” Mrs. Jones is not listening.

“Pastor Knutson never stops looking at me. His wife has given birth to eight babies, so they must be fucking all the time, but he still fixes me with those horrible white eyes. Undresses me.”

“Pastor Knutson has cataracts,” I say, snooty as I dare. She is my elder, but it’s probably safer to defend Pastor Knutson’s honor. I only know about the cataracts because I used to be too scared to shake his hand after service. Then my mom explained to me about how cataracts invade your eyes until you go blind.

MRS. JONES

“Mrs. Jones?” the little girl says in a tired voice. “I think service is about to start and I’d really like to be there on time. Do you mind if I leave?”

“Do you know why we have to wear dresses that cover our knees and arms?” I ask her.

“Because women should be modest in front of men in case the men get tempted.”

“Yes, men have natural urges they can’t suppress. And those urges involve us and our bodies. They want to be close to us, and sometimes they can’t resist.”

Little girls don’t understand men. Last week, as I was pouring coffee after service, I watched two girls sitting on folding chairs next to the water fountain, thoroughly absorbed in each other. They could have been twins. Long hair pulled back in a single braid, blouses covered by cardigans in pastel colors. Neat, orderly. One of the girls wears an ankle-length jean skirt. The copper buttons have snapped open to her knee. She is oblivious. One whole knee is exposed. It is

light bulb bright against the denim, covered with fine brown hairs. A young man, up-and-coming in the church, walks over to her purposefully. No discernable expression on his face. He stops in front of her and reaches for the skirt, pinches the fabric between his thumb and forefinger, drawing it in a quick motion over the offending knee. She reddens, ashamed, as he walks away.

“But we are not responsible for their urges, for their desires,” I say to this little girl because it’s something she needs to hear. “My body belongs to the Bridegroom Christ, and through Him I know it must be exposed. That’s why I’ve taken my clothes off and I don’t plan to put them back on. Ever.”

“Won’t you get in trouble?”

“I am covered by the blood of Christ. It is by grace I have been saved through faith.”

“You should go into the sanctuary,” the little girl says, looking at me finally with those cow eyes. “There are lots of people in there to see you. They’re just assembling.”

“Yes, yes,” I say to her, but mostly to myself. It’s a stroke of brilliance. This little girl is lighting the way for me, illuminating the path ahead as if she’s been sent by Jesus to do so.

“So I can give my Testimony?”

“Yes, that’s right,” she says. “I can open the door for you if you want.”

“That’s the right thing to do,” I tell her. “I expect many more people will be opening the door for me as time goes on.” I give her my most queenly smile. “I am God’s mouthpiece, you see. I have been sent to pass on a message.”

“Wait,” the little girl says. “Are you sure you don’t want to put your clothes on before you go out there? It’s cold.”

I suspect she's examined the gooseflesh on my arms, my royal purple nipples. But she does not fool me.

"Little girl, you just said I should go out there as I am. So all the people can hear the word of the Lord."

"But some of the people are little kids. They might not like it. They might think you're gross."

"I am a mother," I say to her as I rise and walk to the door. My tone if not the words shuts her up.

ELISABETH

I am relieved for a minute after she leaves, but then a thick feeling of guilt weighs me down. I'm scared that she will actually do what I told her to do and wander up into the sanctuary. So I open the door and look down the hallway and into the big Sunday School room. It is filled with chairs and empty now of people. We sit in these chairs to pray and sing and poke each other and watch the teenagers act out skits about how we should honor our fathers and mothers. Pastor Knutson makes them do this because when you are thirteen or fifteen, or even twelve, it is easy to fall into rebellious ways. Trees in pots stand on either side of the blackboard that still has today's lesson written on it. The trees are supposed to make the room cheerful, but it doesn't work because we are in a gloomy basement. The only light comes from two rectangular windows way up high on the ceiling. Cold cloud light, slush light, light that says winter will never end. It lands on Mrs. Jones and turns her gray. I am not afraid of her body when she is all the way across the room. I pretend I am in a museum and she is a painting. She kneels in the middle of the front row. The ends of her honey hair catch bits of cleanser, and white foam bubbles over the

seat and drips to the floor. The muscles on her arms go up and back down again as she scrubs. Like how a fish tries to breathe when you take it off the hook.

I turn around and walk down the back hallway and up the stairs that lead to the kitchen. I walk tiptoe across the tile, even though service has started and the Doxology screams in and bounces off the cabinets, so loud I feel like I'm drowning in it. I plug my ears just a little bit so I can still hear enough to mouth the words. The smell of burnt coffee comes from three tall silver canisters on the counter, and hundreds of doughnuts are set out on napkin squares. I get up really close to a doughnut, so I can see where the lacy crust bleeds grease onto the napkin. It smells sweet, and I want to stuff it into my mouth, so fast that I will barely be able to taste it. But I have already sinned today and I need to talk to God.

I start to open the cabinets that line the far wall. They are filled with enormous Crockpots and plastic tubes of Styrofoam cups, blue and white china serving platters so big I could use them for a bed if I wanted to. The very last cabinet I check is empty. I curl up, tiny as can be, and stuff myself in. The door seals the light away, and I pretend I'm in my bedroom at home in the kind of total dark that makes me feel like God can really hear me. I can never find this feeling in the daytime. During service and prayer meeting, I look at all the people's faces twitching with the things they feel. I watch the beginnings of tears coming out from the sides of my mother's eyes and try, and try and try. But it never works. He is only with me in the dark.

"Dear Lord," I pray. "I'm sorry for doing wrong in Your sight, for tempting Mrs. Jones to go into the sanctuary without her clothes on. Please help me repent, please take away my sinner's heart and give me the heart of a child."

This is what my parents ask for when they pray together in the mornings before my father goes to work. Now I understand why. I think about when I was six and pure and didn't know all of the bad things you could do, didn't understand them like I do now. And then I know that I have to go into the sanctuary and walk up to the third row and tap my mother on the shoulder and whisper in her ear all about Mrs. Jones alone in the basement without her clothes on.

But I don't want to. I struggle with myself, and Pastor Knutson starts to speak. I've worked for months to fill the floral journal my parents bought me for my birthday with sermon notes. When I was first learning to write, it took me most of service to write just a few lines. Now I've learned that even though I don't understand most of what he says, I can catch phrases in my head that seem important and copy them down. I cannot write in pitch dark, so I listen hard to his scratchy old-man voice and whisper his words to myself. Try to memorize them.

MRS. JONES

Wooden accordion dividers polished to a dark, glossy sheen, separate the abandoned atrium from the sanctuary. It is warmer up here, even though all the bodies are on the other side, their voices leaking out in collective praise. Worship buoys them, makes them fill their lungs to spit note after lopsided note out in praise of the Creator. The Christmas Decoration Committee has been reading the book of Revelation, and the atrium drips bloody prophecies. Clusters of plastic grapes hang from garlands, and a tree in the corner is heavy with lions and lambs in ceramic, spun glass and paper. I am heavy with my Testimony. It pushes me to my knees again, and I am forced to crawl across the room to the door that leads up to the choir loft. The choir does not sing today, and I rejoice at my luck. I creak up the spiral staircase, bare knee, bare palm

on dusty wood. I reach up softly and push the door open, slide myself in and wait for the soft kiss of metal as the door clicks shut. Twist the lock a half-turn so they can't get to me. I must belly crawl to avoid detection. A row of slats march fence-like across the edge of the loft. The guard rail is waist height and protects the choristers from a fall. I draw up in a crouch behind the slats and watch the assembly.

Underneath me, Old Curdle Eye croaks out his sermon, and the sound bounces from the beveled arches and echoes against Mary's glass form in the window at the back of the sanctuary. Blue-robed and flaxen-haired, she absorbs his words silently. Her head is covered like ours are, covered and bent in adoration of a man. Bent in submission to those who know better than we do. Our fathers, our husbands. God. Covered in white cloth triangles or old-fashioned felt bowler hats.

From my peeking perch, I can make out the cracks under the red carpet where the baptismal fount is hidden. Sleep is in the air. Heads nod, and fingers that so furiously transcribed sermon notes just ten minutes ago, are idle. It takes all the strength I have to draw myself up onto the chair in the middle of the row that faces the guard rail. The rail rises up to my shins, but the rest of me is exposed. My molten belly and wheaty hair, the connect-a-dot moles sprinkled across my neck and arms. Here in this sacred space, I wait for the people's gaze.

One of the Yoder brood, age seven or so, twiddles his thumbs in the second row. He unfolds them and his hands creep into the air, climbing an invisible ladder to his brother's neck. Just as he is about to make contact, he raises his head and looks up to me. His hands drop to his lap and his mouth follows. One frozen child. I wait for the rest of them, these lambs in dresses that surge past their knees and end right above their ankles. Perhaps church girls twenty years

from now will remember this moment as the one in which they realized that they too must unbutton their dresses and present themselves to the wide world as they are.

“And she, casting away her garment, rose and came to Jesus,” I begin, my voice rising over Old Curdle Eye up to the highest beams and through the squares of stacked stone, up and up and up.

ELISABETH

Suddenly, another voice floats out and mixes with Pastor Knutson’s voice. He pauses, but the voice does not stop, and now I know Mrs. Jones is somewhere in the sanctuary. Somewhere far away from the pulpit, because I cannot hear what she is saying. Her voice is like music. It echoes, moves up and down and around and into me until I am surrounded. At first I want to burst out of the cupboard and run away again, to another secret place. But the sound won’t let me. It is like a hymn without the words, flowing, floating on high. My spirit lifts with it. I believe her now, believe that Jesus speaks through her.

I wonder why it takes them so long to get to her. But then there is a crash, a sick, hollow sound, like what it must be to hear a bone breaking. I want her to scream, to kick them and whip her honey hair in their eyes. I want her voice to speak-sing forever, although I am afraid of what she is actually saying. There is a moment of silence. Then, “Let us pray,” Pastor Knutson says. As if he has preached a full sermon.

And now I have to get out of the kitchen, fast, before I am caught. I open the cupboard and head back to the door where I wait for a few people to filter out of the sanctuary after shaking Pastor Knutson’s hand. Then I make for the water fountain, quick as can be, where I pretend to take a drink for a couple of minutes. My Sunday School class sits in the very last pew,

so we are always some of the first ones out. Mrs. Ramnarine, my Sunday School teacher, leads my classmates over to the back door where most of them wait to get on the buses. Her face is serious, sad maybe. The lace doily pinned to her hair is slipping off, but she hasn't yet noticed. She leads a crying Jacqueline by the shoulder. I get an awful urge to laugh, even though I don't think it's funny at all. Jacqueline looks like a prisoner in her dark gray dress, her face pale and eyes purply-red, with hair so short it's not even spiky yet. Mrs. Ramnarine goes off somewhere, and I come up behind Jacqueline.

"Are you OK?"

"This is none of your business," she says, not even looking around to see who's talking to her.

"Your Mom was in the Sunday School classroom with me. That's where she took her clothes off," I tell her. I'm not sure why I want her to know this. "I told her to go into the sanctuary," I say fast, telling myself in my head the whole time to stop talking. But I can't stop myself. I want to be forgiven.

"What is wrong with you? They're going to take her away. Because of you. You don't know what that feels like." Nobody has ever looked at me the way she looks at me right now. Spite drips from her eyes. Hatred.

"Go to hell, bitch," she whispers, slow as you please. Mrs. Ramnarine comes back holding a doughnut and a Styrofoam cup.

"Come on, honey," she says, and shepherds Jacqueline away. I don't have time to think about what she said to me because out of the corner of my eye, I see the last of the bus kids move

out of the front door and down the steps toward the parking lot. I hear Mrs. Jones' wordless voice again in my head. She gives me courage.

I walk as quickly as I can through the crowd of adults who talk to each other in chirpy, polite voices, dodge the forest of little children just released from the nursery. The carpet in the entryway squelches with my every step. Hundreds of boots have come over it in the last three hours, melting snow into dirty water that drips out the door to meet the sidewalk. My Mary Janes are immediately soaked, and I know my mom will make me stuff them with socks and dry them on the heater so they keep their shape. The first snow fell in the last week of October and never melted. Layer by layer it grows. There is a huge pile of it in the parking lot, lining the chainlink fence next to the bus garage. The snow plough comes through after every storm to add to the mountain. We want to climb it, to reach into its gray slope and scoop out gritty chunks to throw at each other. But it is too dangerous.

"You'd be in trouble alright if it ever collapsed on you," my father says.

"There are foul things buried in those piles," my mother tells my brother, tugging his arm down as he hops onto it. My mother is scared of dirty needles and guns, and we are told over and over that we are not allowed to leave the church's perimeter. To stay with an adult at all times. This is a bad neighborhood.

They are almost done loading the buses, and I start to run. My shoes don't have treads on the bottom, so I skid across the ice and palm the side of a parked car to stop myself from falling.

"Hold up, Ms. Elisabeth," the bus leader Mr. Ben says when I finally make it. "You're not a bus kid."

“I’m going home with Emerald today,” I tell him. My heart pinches with the lie. I love Mr. Ben. On Saturday mornings after we knock on doors, he hands me an extra cookie behind his back, just dangles it there for a second and waits for me to see it.

Emerald is sitting by herself at the very back of the bus. Today her dress is pink, and tiny white ruffles slide out from under the hem and spread over the seat. The beads at the end of her braids click together as she lifts her head to look at me. She scoots over without saying anything. The kids around us are too loud anyways.

I duck until we are out of the parking lot, hope that my parents are in the middle of some long conversation that will distract them until I get back. From the window, I watch the wind sneak under the hood of a city bus stop and indent all the waiting people’s coats, and then we are on the highway. We backtrack over to Cedar-Riverside, to the building where Gerald and Waaran and Agar and Tina and Mikey R. live. I am jealous that they get to live in such a big building, a building crammed with families, with happy noises, warm with so many bodies living next to each other. The bottom of the building is an ugly gray color, but up top it’s magic. A grid of red and blue and green squares walk up the side, colors so bright you can see them from the other side of the Mississippi. Waaran’s mother is waiting for him under the canopy at the entrance of the building. A little smiley face peeks at the the bus from behind her floaty striped robe. Its body belongs to Waaran’s little brother, who runs out quick as a flash to meet Waaran. He is barefoot, wearing only a diaper, and he makes Waaran’s legs buckle as he wraps his arms tight around them. I look at the little tic-tac teeth behind his smile and pray again for God to make me like a little child so I can enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Then we are back on the highway and everything is gray. The Viking's stadium rises like a big ship on the skyline, and I am sad, sad about Mrs. Jones and Jacqueline, about the trouble I'll be in.

"Elisabeth," Emerald says, finally looking at me. "You can't come home with me today. I didn't ask my mom. And my dad's on a business trip and I think you should go back with Mr. Ben when he turns around."

"I know," I say, a lump spreading in my throat. "Emerald, I just wanted to tell you that I like you." I say it in a funny, choky way, and I'm kicking myself for not saying "love."

"I like you too," she says.

I tell myself to be brave, but it is already too late. We come up on Powderhorn Park where Emerald lives, in a white house with green shutters that opens to the playground. There's a bald spot on the sledding hill, slimy green grass slicked down by flying saucers and old-fashioned toboggans. A few kids are out today, and I want to be with them in a snow suit and sweater instead of shivering under my special Sunday coat that is made of wool and lets everything in. There are men out too, a big group of them surrounding the basketball court, and it's hard to tell their mouth vapor from their cigarette smoke. They look bored, and I think they are wishing for hoops of past and future summers. I know the feeling. Wanting the summer so bad you pretend cold is hot and believe it for a minute.

The bus sighs to a stop. I want so badly to follow Emerald. To school, especially to school where we can learn all the same things, and into her bedroom where we can go to sleep at the same time. God will be sure to set his angels over us and watch over our dreams. Emerald retrieves her backpack from underneath the seat. It is purple, dotted with little white hash marks,

and I think about slipping the envelope still hidden in my bible into the front pocket. But she stands and looks down at me, her eyelashes flicking up and down fast against the piece of white sunlight that has come from nowhere to shine in her eyes.

“Bye Elisabeth,” she says quietly.

“Bye Emerald,” I say because that’s all I can say. The wind gets her too as she lifts the latch of the gate that leads to her backyard. I see her shake against it, her hands clumsy in shiny red mittens. Mr. Ben turns the bus around and the men look up from their cigarettes to watch us go.

THE RIVER

Suffer me a gambit. You be You and I’ll be me.

*

You are a blackjack dealer at Harrah’s in the Central Business district. Breaks you walk down the Riverwalk to watch me as you have almost every day of your life. Childhood you watched me from the strip of grass behind the low water channel on the Chalmette Loop levee. Your meemaw would send you out of the house with a sandwich and a book, tell you not to return until suppertime. Quiet I was then, blue or brown and never vicious. You missed me with all of your body those two hazy years after the flood, when they sent you to Houston with two kids and a neighbor’s cat. You wore your bathrobe and slippers to the ghoulish slumberparty at

the Superdome. Hair still in curlers. The homesick feeling started right about then and still lasts, although you've been back in New Orleans for ten years. Ten years on and ten feet up, my stain still lives on the side of your meemaw's fossilized house on Evangeline Avenue. Brown as Co-Cola and just as poisonous. Once a week you drive there just to visit. You look in through cobwebbed glass at the carcass of the big brown couch, the yellowed picture of a pine tree that hangs lopsided on the wall next to the stairs. You stay on the sidewalk. You have never ventured in, not even in the beginning.

You need me today. Instead of grabbing the kids from school right after work, you loosen your bowtie and put your vest and slacks in your locker, change into jeans and a sweatshirt and sit with the tourists on the rocks. You watch me lap, watch the barges chug in slow, listen to the chatter and the cameras, breathe this last day in and out. You take your socks and shoes off and dangle your swollen feet in my waters. Tomorrow they will raze the house. A group of volunteers, college kids on spring break who still swarm the city in their matching t-shirts, will attack the rotted frame with indefatigable joy. Masks and sledgehammers. At the thought, you rise up with sudden decision.

The kids are confused. You're an hour late, giddy to see them. *We're going to celebrate*, you say as soon as they're buckled in. You drive to Party City to pick up funny hats and as many balloons as they can blow up in fifteen minutes, buy the most colorful sheetcake in the bakery section at the supermarket. You send your children out to the strip of grass behind the low water channel and tell them to come back with as many weedy wildflowers as they can carry. You go in, all of you, the children hesitant, the party juice behind you in a pile on the lawn. They don't remember so you guide them.

That chair was across from the window.

It doesn't feel like it with all these crusties, but this rug was perfect for napping. You pick up one end, I'll get the other.

That was me when I was your age. Put me back on the mantel.

You set every object in that house right. Gently. As if placing flowers on a grave. The crippled credenza, the clock with a face bruised yellow and green, the swollen mass of papers that cannot be separated, accustomed as they are to being together these ten years. When you try to fold the blanket your meemaw's mama crocheted, the knobs of fringe on the end fall off in unison. You rubbed your cheek against them as a child, the whisper-tickle of yarn thrilling your whole body, giving you the precursor of sex shivers. You take this as the signal to go, let the arrow of spent song in your chest point you out the door. On the lawn, you crumple.

*

You are my child. I watch from below as you stand on the Greenville Bridge, your left foot in Shives, Arkansas, your right foot in Refuge, Mississippi. No cars this late at night. Just a navy sky smoky with stars you can't see because you've taken your glasses off and put them in your backpack. You look at my cold calm, the latespring waters frothing my banks, but you do not see me. Your skateboard is propped on the bridge's railing. *Steel Jesus* in yellow spray paint on the underside of its maple deck. You're not Jesus Christ, baby. But you're mine. *White male, age 17, 6'2', 200 pounds, with brown hair and blue eyes. Was last seen wearing a white choir robe and a crown of thorns.* Next week, your Missing Persons flyer will wrap around every street lamp and telephone pole in Chicot County.

Last month, on a Tuesday thick with thunderstorm, you tried to convince the twelfth grade American History class at Dermott High School that you were the Son of God using a deck of tarot cards and the Gideon Bible you lifted from the drawer of a motel room. You spoke for fifteen minutes and they listened silently, sitting on their laughter because they thought you were joking. The most delightful senior prank in school history. Better than when some kid led a cow up to the roof and left it there. The sky grew dark and thunder roared and Mr. Pearson was alarmed when you pulled two water bottles out of your backpack and promised to turn them into wine. You just wanted to be believed. You reddened at their eventual snot-snorts of laughter, their glee at the absurdity of you. That night you stayed up all night making a crucifix from planks you found in your family's garage, Gregorian chants humming through your ear buds. Your mama works nights at the Hormel plant, your daddy lurks in the hot gut of a missile cruiser somewhere in the Persian Gulf. They were deaf to your hammering. You pounded nails through your palms as a final touch.

You had a single disciple, a boy so tweaked out he couldn't remember his middle name. The next day you paid him to whip you up and down Buford Avenue. It was the week after Easter. Cars stopped and people gawked and crossed themselves as if you were really Him and not just an escapee from your own personal Passion Play.

And so you came to me to prove to an invisible audience of disciples that you could walk on water. The rails were humid, slimed green. You clambered up and raised your arms. Your fingers were stubby branches on a night wild with a wind that swirled the petals from a cluster of dogwood trees on my banks around, their fishy baby powder smell rotting the last breath you took. Step off, fall down, snapneck on impact.

I held you for the very first time, rolled you over and around to check your chubbed boy body for birthmarks. A red welt across your forehead. Your left leg riding funny off your hip where it smacked a log. No matter. Hosanna in the highest, you are perfect.

Over the next three months, I watch you grow. You sink to my bottom and I swaddle you in loess, rich and smooth. *Like dark chocolate*, I croon to you. Obediently, you take bites with your opened mouth, ears, nose, eyes. On my banks, the dogwoods replace their stinking flowers with hard green bullets. Mayflies cough and teem and devour the ankles of volunteers who come out to search for you. The parishioners of Nativity Catholic Church. The owner of Breaux Mart, who giggled himself shitless at the sight of your back bent under that cross. Every last one of your classmates. Your mama.

I am proud of your progress. You green. Crawdads worm under your robe, massage your calves, your thighs, the delicious bud of skin between your thumb and forefinger. You swell larger and larger, my portly gray messiah. Water in your lungs, a stewy mix of hydrogen and carbon dioxide and methane bloaty as the day is long. I prune you. You are more beautiful without your left foot. Your right hand upsets the stomach of a venerable blue catfish. Out there, rumors abound. A psychic tells your mama that you're still alive, just biding your time. Your tweaker friend passes out cold in Calculus, goes to rehab and tells his therapist that some scum a town over is hiding you in his basement. The police raid the house, scream your name. Your daddy demobilizes. Fall comes. The psychic calls your mama in the middle of the night, straight out of a purple dream, wild and chattering nonsense. Finally she calms down. *The river, the river, the river, the river. Go to the river*, she says before hanging up. So your mama comes near, walks through the woods and lets the dry leaves swallow her feet, lets the wind bite at her

permanently swollen eyes. She sits at the base of the Greenville Bridge. I can feel her numb heart as she stares at me, the tiny living orange spot in the very center that beats with the belief that you will rise from the water in front of her eyes. But I do not give my children up easy.

She knows. Goes.

I am unsettled and I toss you around to vent my discomfort. Shush you a few miles down, send more fishes to guard your body. Her wanting irritates me, a grain of poison that sickens me on you. Pure as an egg, a royal yellow force. She comes every day and stares me down hard. I am about to cough you up when she stops her pilgrimage. I wait through winter. Then through another cloudy rotten spring. She returns in high summer. When she returns, she carries a black bear on her back and I am defeated. I laugh.

You know this story my blowsy bloated boy, could tell it even in your dead slumber. As a crawler you gnawed on the bear's dusty cream-colored claws as it stood guard over your foyer. On your grandfather's knee you learned how as a very young man he came upon the unsuspecting bear in my waters. She was bathing. Your grandfather crept up slow and quiet and shot her once in each lung. Now your mama is stooped and sweating. She sets the bear down to rest and brushes her hair out of her eyes. The bear watches over, her eyes glassy with longing. Your mama hoists the bear once again and walks into my waters, deeper, deeper until she can no longer stand. Your mama clambers on top of the bear, and for a moment it looks as if they are maybe wrestling, maybe copulating. The bear sinks

The world outside my womb does not become you. I turn away.

*

You are a car mechanic at Memphis Auto Repair Service Incorporated. Sometimes you're so exhausted you have to call your wife to come pick you up at the end of your shift. Nights you dream of gasoline, and despite sixteen hour days, you tell yourself you love the feeling of grease on your fingers, the bone ache of a healthy day's work. Truthfully, you love your wife and your little girl and twin boys. On weekends, while their mother tightens braces and paints young teeth with sealant, your kids sit in the office next to the garage with Dum-Dums and homework and coloring books. The only thing missing is your wife sitting on the hood of your pickup the way she used to sit in high school. There to watch you do your best thing. A holy shine in her eyes. It's still there whenever she looks at you. When you come into living room at two in the morning to find her hum-yawning as she's folding laundry and listening to those audio books she likes, any Pulitzer Prize winning history. You sit next to her and press your thumb to her forehead. Turn her back on.

Every Saturday you get up real early and go to Bosa's Donuts, buy a dozen for the guys at the shop. Yesterday you and the kids gathered around a gasoline spill as large as a basketball. Four crouching velociraptors on one of the first see-your-breath mornings of fall. *Dragonfly wing*, Twin One says. *Unicorn horn*, Twin Two sighs. *Sunset after a storm*. You smile. Your little girl is a poet. Often, you pretend your kids are dignitaries and give them a tour of the place as if they are seeing it for the first time.

There's no shortage of pumps at this establishment. Over here, sir, we have the bike pump, handy if you find yourself in need of a little air. To your left is Pump 1. Underneath our feet, madam, an enormous tank holds many a swimming pool worth of gas.

They're too little to find the bit annoying, and you dread the moment when they shy away from you, tell you to stop in still-reedy voices. You feel tender when you think about the death drums underneath your feet, grateful. I shudder at the way this misguided gratefulness bubbles and bursts in your chest.

Today your little girl is at second grade and your sister is watching the twins. You ghost them up as you finish changing someone's tires, all in a line, peering at you through the office window, their breath on the glass your own breath. You steal glances at the basketball stain all day, watch how it changes with the light. In the morning it is flat and black under the clouds. You eat your sandwich, fix a carburetor. You find yourself getting cranky when a customer tries to haggle. The stain is brilliant in the late afternoon sun, a coat of many colors rivery as me. It calms you. Your wife calls to check in and as you're shooting the shit, leaning against the open garage door, a trucker comes to fill up. Spits a mound of phlegm in the stain's heart, then whistles away over to the restroom. For a moment you want to get into the cab and pull down all the stuffed animals that hang in a noosed row from the windshield, smack them against the ground as punishment. Slit their furry bellies and pull the stuffing out of them. Throw a tantrum, mild man that you are. You ghost your kids up again to calm you down. They look at you cartoon-eyed. Your little ghost girl picks up one of the gutted animals and stuffs it into her shirt, runs into the office to perform an emergency surgery. Now, as the trucker hops in and growls away and the sunset bulges up, a flexed arm of pink and red, you stand very still by Pump 1. You pretend like you're fixing the nozzle, but really you're just aiming a squirt at a pothole. A surge of wiper fluid makes it shimmer. *Aurora borealis*.

*

You are the trucker and you ride I-55 North out of Memphis, following my lead in a ziggy parallel. The same route all week long, lugging corn, coal and gravel through Kentucky, Missouri and on into Illinois where you turn the fat butt of your tractor trailer around and do it over again. Your semi. One in an infinite flock of big-rigs that dribbles toxic piss across my floodplain. A great gray rhinoceros with a shiny chrome cabin and eighteen thick black toenails that rub smooth against midwest asphalt, even in storm, when water or snow threaten to boat her. You love riding high, ever-thirsty for a view of the prairie. Tableaus you can paint later in the studio you have in your basement. A scattering of wrens, the silly golden arches against a field of soybeans. The little boy who squats in a puddle in his family's backyard just outside of Saint Louis. In spring you roll the windows down and fast brittle air scurries in and blows your road dog's ears around and around as if Bingo was a lady who forgot to wear a scarf on a convertible ride. In winter, you think in gray and white. Partial snow blindness maybe, only you see white behind your eyelids back home on the couch as you nestle your head into the moving place between your boyfriend's throat and neck. You're on your way to trusting him. He's tinier than you are, wrists thin, waist slim. So very gentle. Before you met him, the only thing you hated about yourself was that you were attracted to men. Baby kill pill with your coffee every day, scared shitless that you could possibly be defined by your uterus like you have been by your heavy breasts and the booty that Will. Not. Give. Up.

You're skittish, you. Always packing. A Ruger Super Redhawk Alaskan Special in the breast pocket of the down jacket you've lined with rabbit fur, a taser bound to your leg under the Carhart overalls you're forced to buy in the children's section. The thick canvas makes you feel swaddled, the metal appendages vital in case you find yourself in the middle of the apocalypse or

confronted by a lion or a zombie or the man who lumbers toward you in the wee hours of today as you sit at a picnic table outside of B.J.'s Travel Plaza in New Madrid, Missouri. You're eating a biscuit sandwich you made this morning, a sliver of Country Ham wagging out like a tongue from the back end. Bingo is asleep in the truck, the heat on soft to pad his dreams.

You chew extra loud to deter the man, think about getting up and heading on. But then a shimmering clot of mist rolls up from my banks and across the freeway, collides with the diesel fog. The image is the most interesting thing you've seen all day: a Santa Claus suspended in the steamy Jack-O-Lantern floodlights, orange curdling a braided white beard. Big nasty, his leather vest stinking from where he stands, too close already, lifting one leg onto the picnic table seat and leaning his elbow on his raised knee in a conqueror stance.

Hi, you coo.

Hey there sweetheart

He reaches out and puts his hand on your knee. Strokes up. You move aside. Pat the bench next to you. *Do you want to watch a video with me?* you ask, sweet and silky, moving your voice up a register so you sound like the little girl you resemble. He sits, chuckles. The sound is rich and low and wakes Bingo who raises his head to look at you both, then goes back to sleep. You pull up Youtube. Show him the last interview Aileen Wuornos gave before her execution. You let her speak her truth. You watch the way her eyes bulge as she sits in prison orange behind a wall of smudged glass. Eyes brown, flat and crazy enough to kill seven men in one year.

The cops knew who I was after Richard Mallory died, I left prints everywhere and they covered it up. And, let me kill the rest of those guys to turn me into a serial killer. I know they did because I

was no professional serial killer or anything or murderer, or whatever you want to call it, you know. I wasn't special at what I was doing. Did some sloppy work. You know, left prints.

You watch his face. It's serious now, grim. None of that horny grandfather jocularity. *What the hell*, he mutters under his breath. You're losing him so you shove your phone into your pocket and stand suddenly on the bench, bend your face kiss-close to his and recite your favorite part of the interview:

You sabotaged my ass, society. And the cops, and the system, a raped woman got executed. It was used for books and movies and shit. Ladder climbs – re-elections and everything else; I'm putting the finger on all your faces. Thanks a lot. You are inhumane. You're an inhumane bunch of fucking livingbastards and bitches and you're gonna get your asses nuked in the end, and pretty soon it's coming. 2019 a rock's supposed to hit you anyhow, you're all gonna get nuked.

He is too shocked to move. The slenderman shadow you cast engulfs him, looms black against the concrete. *Don't fuck with me*, you say, making sure some spare biscuit crumbs shoot onto his craggy cheek. Then you rear back, flick your coat open, force the metal to gleam at him, a sullen black diamond in the hoary light of new dawn.

You jump off the picnic table, you exit the playground.

*

You are Turtle Girl but you live in a human house. From your bedroom window in Trempealeau, Wisconsin, you imagine you can see the bale of Painted Turtles who nest on the bent elbow of shore a hop downstream from the house. Early each summer morning, you steal out of the back door and through the copse of trees that separates your house from me. They come to sun by ten and don't leave until you or the rays do. You squat on a fallen tree that juts

out into my shallows. My current braids and unbraid around you as you watch them flick their bobbleheads back and forth. You mimic their habitual yawns. Admire the kittentongue pink of their exposed papillae and the invisible shark teeth that mutilate rosy red minnows and crickets gold as wheat. They slide slow off the rocks.

You see the whole world through turtle-eyed glasses. To school where nobody is a turtle, you wear one of nine different shirts you own with a turtle body on the front. On the days your parents don't catch you first, you color your ears red with a marker after your favorite turtle, Red-eared Slider.

On your bed is a bedspread with a cartoon-faced loggerhead. Hatshepsut looks jealously down at the loggerhead from her tank on your dresser, lusting after his freedom, the way he leaves the room in a lump of laundry, sometimes not returning for a week. Hatshepsut, a black pond turtle, was kidnapped from India, but your foolish four-year-old self had no way of knowing this. You saw her through the window at La Crosse Reptiles and wanted her. On very lucky nights her memories collide with your dreams: she swims in a child's plastic pool with a gaggle of siblings, a UV bulb scorching her scales, she stares at a waterlily painted on the ceiling in a concrete room that smells of unwashed men, snaps at it, wanting to swallow its pure yellow heart. She plays king of the mountain, shoving brothers one, two, seven, and five aside to clamber onto the highest concrete shard.

Throughout your whole childhood, from when you first learn to speak, you beg me to help you understand them. In deepest January, you come simply to mourn their absence, to shatter the translucent frills of ice that edge my shoreline with your winter boots. You whisper pleasantly, fiercely, desperately. Once you pick one up and lick its shell. Taste its scat. Despite

this odd behavior, they are never wary of you. When you are too old for this kind of behavior, thirteen going on fourteen, I finally oblige you. You are running your fingers through my water, hanging your head over the log, nose close to the surface. I rub myself this way and that around a Painted Turtle, pushing him toward your fallen tree. He is dead. You scoop him up, nearly falling in, then walk the plank back to shore. You trace your fingers across his roughened carapace, the keratinous scutes that look to you like hangnails. You put your hands on him as if you are a healer. You see his last thoughts through your palms. Through your body and in your coiled organs you feel the choking pinch of a clogged esophagus, a digestive system knotted with ache. Last night, Turtle Girl, with your turtle-shaped toothbrush and your toothpaste the new green of a turtle shell, you brushed and spat, brushed and spat. Today your lifelines cross deathlines and into your brain jumps the image of the clot in the turtle's belly. Dollhouse confetti, the bon-bon bombs soaked in polyaromatic hydrocarbons you spat in the sink. You gutshot my fishes. Your spit exterminates my Red-eared Slider, my Razorback Musk, my Eastern Mud, my Three-toed Box, my Gulf Coast Shiny Softail, my Alligator Snapping, my Eastern Snapping, my Stinkpot, my False Map, my Ouachita Map, my Northern Map, my Midland Painted, my Western Painted, my Midland Smooth Softshell, my River Cooter.

Later, you disappear and it was as if you never existed at all. Your parents wake to a tinny feeling of longing that they can't pinpoint. They look into the bedroom where you once were, and all they see is hotel. They believe themselves childless. Their child is a new freak species, population 1. With the beak of a loggerhead and the crimson ears of a red eared slider and the wholeness of a turtle.

*

You are an aquatic ecologist. At dawn you kiss your husband's sleeping fingers goodbye one by one. You go downstairs to the kitchen and put a pot of coffee on, leave a Post-it note on the refrigerator with a single star on it, your signal to each other that you'll be shining towards each other through walls, over roads bumpy and smooth. The corniness of this ritual makes you blush, makes your heart hum. Like a country song your son listens to in the car that you pretend to suffer through. You wade through your lawn decorations to water the roses before you go, homemade signs you've brought back from various protests, the enormous wooden body counters you update each week. One erected after Bush declared war on Afghanistan. One erected after Bush declared war on Iraq. A dove carrying an olive branch flies above them. A timeline of earth's average temperature over time hangs from the porch's eaves, festooned with Christmas lights. *There is no Planet B. Land is life! Water is life! Keep Earth clean, it's not Uranus.* The one the neighborhood association forced you to take down peeks out from your garage as you open it: *Let's fuck each other instead of our planet.* You spent hours at your kitchen table drawing that one, fashioning the earth into a bursting green heart crusty with glitter.

You drive slow because the boat is attached to your pickup, taking your time as you leave Winona and wind up through the suburbs of the Twin Cities, stopping for lunch at a diner in Duluth. You go up north at least one weekend a month, always alone. Your husband thinks you're doing research, collecting water samples to bring back to the lab. But really you go because you need a place to keep your rage. It's two-pronged, all-consuming. War and the environment competing constantly for space in your brain. You were drafted in '72 and stayed until the fall of Saigon. Every night before sleep you silently curse Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon. Clinton. *As a responsible government you don't just go around hollering*

'genocide'. One day about five years ago you looked in the mirror and saw Dick Cheney's pale, devilish face. The ruff of white hair set way back on the skull. Those puffy cheeks and dead blue eyes. The wire rimmed glasses you'd worn for fifteen years didn't help. You ditched your suits and started wearing a bucket hat and Chakos to teach at the university, let your husband take you to the Spectacle Shoppe on Grand Avenue in St. Paul to pick out a new pair of glasses. Tortoise shell frames, round and smooth as blown glass.

You get to Lake Itasca by noon. Here you plunge into my headwaters, here you swim with your mouth open because you want to know me as I really am. The way you still eat first snow even though it and I taste downtrodden, brackish, suffused with a taintedness that makes you feel dead and alive at the same time. Your polarities and mine immediately present themselves in the rush of delicious tingly cold that quenches your thirst, then the aftertaste of algae, maybe sewage, the grit that lodges in your throat. To everyone you love and those you don't, your anger is righteous, cheerful, a force steady as it is gentle. Undergraduates flock to you for mentorship. You teach elementary school students about water conservation, you are Man One of a two-man band that writes folksy songs about me, you go to Friends meeting once a week, write forceful, kind op-eds. Salt of the earth, pillar of the community. A good man.

Inside, your anger jumps and shakes, glass shattered and sprinkled and scraped over the inside of your chest cavity. It is two-pronged, all-consuming and entirely directed at yourself. You know you will never feel purer joy than the moment after you pulled the trigger all those years ago in a stolen jungle. Three moments when you felt completely whole.

The other part, the lesser part to you and the greater to me, I who have swallowed so many, is the sparkle of lust that enters you when you think of my mythology. When as a young

man you canoed from here to the Gulf of Mexico, just for the hell of it, you marveled at all twenty nine lock-and-dams that cinch my watery guts. You are a disciple of Mark Twain's steamboats, and even though you know better, you identify with Henry Schoolcraft who, with the genocidal sparkle of manifest destiny in his eyes claimed to discover my source, smeared away Omashkoozo-zaaga'igan and replaced it with a word of his own invention. You try and fail, try and fail to lift the enchantment, this desire to conquer, to control, this need to be awed by the majesty of power.

So you come to me to beg forgiveness. I refuse to absolve you, refuse to acknowledge your living epiphany. Instead I take your rage and reflect it back to you over and over as you gaze at yourself in my surface. Foolish, fragile man. Your self-clogged mind restless, your self-hatred feral. You have reduced yourself.

The last tiny irony in this construction: this morning your milky eyes neglected to see the cluster of zebra mussels who clung to the hull of your boat. They let loose a collective sigh of triumph as at long last they penetrated the most virginly part of my waters. And yet, you still want to know my secrets, what makes me live and be.

"Tell me everything," you whisper. *"Start at the beginning and don't leave anything out."*

Are you sure that's what you want? You the you of now and all the yous you have and will become. I will grant your arrogant wish, that you deserve to know everything. You cannot separate yourself from the pain you knowingly and unknowingly inflict on me, and I on you. My woes are your woes. But you knew this before we began. You and me. We. In a world stretched beyond capacity, we both occasionally relish human sacrifice, a fact you will deny. We are afraid of each other. Oh, I am afraid of you. Your poisons, machines and laws. The recklessness that

has crippled me in my very youth. I in turn hold the power of flood, of rendering your ill-built structures useless. I have my own poisons. The friendly brown recluse, the rattler you step on deep in the middle of a drunken night. But now that your eyes have traveled my length from end to beginning, looked me straight up, I must ask:

Can you inhabit me and I you? What permissions do we need, what boundaries will we ignore?

War Stories

The masks had been in Olive's family for three generations, passed down from father to son and handled with such care that the brittle rubber held only those marks said to be blemishes from the battlefield. There were three of them, each equipped with a hose that led to the black box of a filter, meant to be tucked into a sack hung around the neck. Almost a hundred years old. The streetlamp shone down on them now, turning them gray, and Dustin held them in front of his body like they were something he had caught and killed, trophies from the hunt.

"Olive, we're not supposed to touch those," said Jed in a low voice, as if he didn't want Dustin to hear. He had always been the cautious one, hiding behind Olive at shopping malls and ball games, the first to shy away from a dog or a stranger. A wand of copper light from the streetlamp split his worried face in two. His socks billowed over his ankles, a strip of white shin leading up to bruised knees, the pockets of his cargo shorts sagging with the granola bars and juice boxes he had stuffed into them in case they got hungry along the way.

"Why were you in my parent's room? That's really weird, Dustin." Dustin's ratty red hair was slicked into a ponytail, the greasy tip of his widow's peak pointing to his equally sharp nose. He was looking down at the masks, running his fingers over them.

"I was exploring the territory. You've never wondered what people hide in their houses?"

“My parents aren’t hiding them, they just don’t want anyone to touch them because they’re old.” Jed nodded. Dustin stretched a mask over his head. It puckered around his cheeks.

“Take it off,” Jed said.

“Why?”

“I just don’t like it. It’s creepy.”

They were creepy. It had been a long time since she had thought about the masks, not since the days when her mother worked at the hospital on Friday nights and her father was left in charge. He was lord of the living room then, surrounded by his friends and his whiskey, telling stories that had been passed from father to son like water through gills.

Olive practiced being still, cinching her knees to her chest with folded arms, while Jed, who was always restless, plucked strings from the carpet and wound them around his fingers so they looked like bundles of trussed meat. Olive watched Jed’s pupils dilate and shrink as he listened, his torso stiffening when something in one of the stories scared him.

Men were buried alive in collapsed trenches. Girls appeared from farmhouses, carrying loaves of bread and cans of milk, offering themselves up gratefully. Inhuman noises were harvested from the throats of dying men, mingling and stretching across the battlefield. Apparitions crept from abandoned buildings and were washed to reveal small, scared children. There were too many escapades, too many places and dramas that ran together. Olive couldn’t keep track of them all.

All of the years that her great-grandfather and grandfather had lived seemed to flow through her father then, and his hands were green-veined and leopard-spotted and moved with the arthritic torpor of an old man who sat at a retirement home, but he spoke with the voice of another man, younger, browner, with goggle glasses and a toupee, regaling men at the country club or women at parties whose bouffants wobbled as they laughed, and the words that marched out of his mouth came one after another in unflinching order, as they had for fifty years.

When he began to slur his words and the laughter of his friends turned harsh and unrestrained, Olive and Jed ran to their parent's room, a forbidden place in the light of any day. They paused on the threshold, Jed standing a little behind Olive, then entered with reverence for the secret, serious things that happened here, the rituals they knew only from afar, from noises and dancing silhouettes behind a door that swung open in the night. The smell was of their parents distilled, the incense of dirty clothes cut with sweat and the florid, chemical odor of their mother's wrinkle cream, a box of takeout rotting in the wastebasket and on top of it all, the moist, heavy scent neither of them could identify.

The room was a cathedral, with walls climbing up and up, then curving into a domed skylight. Even at night, light seeped in through the glass, casting shadows of bars and circles that blackened sections of the wall. But it was the glass case that stood in the middle of the room, so tall it grazed the ceiling, that Olive and Jed held sacred. On one shelf stood the twin urns that held the ashes of their grandparents, circles of light reflecting from the black marble like a pair of headlights. Below them, carvings of African animals flanked photographs in bargain basement frames.

The masks were in the middle of a shelf that stood eye-level for an adult. Olive had to tilt her head to look at them. They were stretched over Styrofoam molds, their hoses resting on the glass. Jed refused to touch them, so Olive lifted them from their cage. They walked back down the stairs instead of running, handing the masks to their father and sitting back down on the rug.

“My grandfather came wandering home with stories in his head and nothing else for anyone,” her father said. “They don’t teach you about ghosts in history class, do they Olive?” She was in the fourth grade then. In history, they’d made Ticonderoga wagons out of orange crates and read about when George Washington crossed the Delaware.

“No,” Olive said. “Nothing like that.”

It wasn’t hard for Olive to imagine the way World War I had been for her great-grandfather, with her father’s red face and blustering breath, smoke seeping from the end of his cigarette and filling the room. This was how she saw the battlefield, red faces under armadillo helmets, vapors curling out from artillery shells and settling in the lungs, clinging to mucous membranes.

With the mask on, her father reminded Olive of an insect with reflective eyes, a ribbed proboscis snaking down to the canister that lay in his lap. His voice, already smeared with alcohol, was muffled, his breath heavy. And the gasses seemed to swirl around them, the mask the only thing between him and metamorphosis, between him and death, and Olive could smell them in the air, each distinct scent like tiny hooked barbs in her throat and nose until she barely dared to breathe.

The smell of hay that's been sitting in the barn all winter long. Phosgene.

Geraniums, like you'd put in the window box. Lewisite.

A hint of garlic from your mother's spaghetti sauce. Sulfur Mustard.

Some said pepper, some said pineapple. Chlorine.

But sometimes, you couldn't smell it at all. This is what frightened Olive most.

Sometimes it had sunk into the mud, lying in wait for the soldiers who stumbled into a low place after marching all day, feet soggy and faces hung with sweat and fatigue. Hours later, days even, their lungs began to disintegrate. The skin on their faces and necks blistered and stretched like latex over pockets of yellow fluid, their eyes poured from sockets in gelatinous showers.

Jed shut his own eyes at this part. Olive knew he wanted to clap his hands over his ears too.

"Don't do that. This is important for you to hear, Jed," her father had said the one time Jed actually did. Olive thought about what her mother would say, knew the look that would appear on her face. They were too young. Her mother would whisk them both away and kick her father's friends out. But no matter how much Olive knew she shouldn't be there, she couldn't bring herself to leave.

Later, when Olive was safe in her loft bed, she touched her hand to her face to check for blisters and breathed in quickly, testing the air, making sure the vapors hadn't floated up from some hidden recess. About ten minutes after they had been tucked in, she would hear the door creak, and the shuffling sound of Jed climbing up the bed's ladder. He always pretended that his

room was too cold or the sounds of a neighbor's party too loud, but Olive knew better. She felt a heavy, proud swell in her chest when she thought about how she was the only person in the house, in the world even, who could protect him.

There was a game she played as she waited for sleep, where she and Jed were soldiers sent on all sorts of missions by their commanding officer. In all of the scenarios, Olive would save Jed. Pull him up when he tripped on a branch. Lead him away from the enemy. United in fear, but ultimately triumphant.

Jed and Olive never talked about the stories, and their mother never found out because Olive didn't tell her. It was as if Friday nights were erased with sleep, nightmares blurred from recollection by daylight and the faultiness of memory.

Then they grew, and to Olive the stories became like elevator music, a faint but constant hum. The masks remained on the shelf in her parent's room, which was no longer mysterious or off-limits, just another part of the house. When she was bored and her parents were away, at the mall or out in the garden, Olive snuck into their room to stretch a mask over her head for the thrill of it. The rubber clung to her cheeks like a second skin, and even in daylight, the goggles made everything a dark, filmy gray. Eight years later, and there was barely a prickle in the pit of her stomach when she saw them.

"You had no right to go into my parent's room, Dustin. But it's fine, Jed," she said.
"They won't miss them. We can put them back tomorrow morning before breakfast."

It was strange, creepy really, that Dustin had gone into her parent's room without anyone noticing, and was now holding these heirlooms with a smirk on his face. This same smirk

infuriated their teachers and made their peers shake their heads in awe as he dressed the chicken patties in the lunchroom with various bodily fluids or pretended that he had menstrual cramps so insistently that their hare-lipped gym teacher coughed away his discomfort and gave him a pass to the nurse's office.

Olive had seen Dustin's charisma envelop entire classes of students, like smoke settling on a beehive, tired necks bent towards him, eyes revolving to follow his swaying body, lulled by the rhythms of his conspiracy theories about the secret lives of robber barons during the Great Depression. But then he got too excited and his voice sharpened and his waving arms chased the smoke away, leaving the class bored with the spectacle. Because everyone realized sooner or later that Dustin was stupid. Olive tolerated him because of Jed.

She had been excited when Jed started ninth grade at her high school. At first he followed her around, but after a few weeks he started to avoid Olive and her friends in the cafeteria, preferring instead to sit with a group of freshman boys who played paintball and watched bad horror movies on the weekends. She wanted him to love and hate the same teachers she did, to notice the same inconsistencies in the rules, to scoff with her at the banality of it all. Instead he rejected her in his calm, passive way. He joined the debate team and went to every football game with streaks of red and black painted across his cheeks.

"Where are you going?" she asked him one day that fall when the leaves blew in circles around the yard.

“You don’t need to know that,” he said before walking out the back door. It was the first time he’d spoken to her like that, the first time he’d refused to tell her something.

Eventually, Olive was forced to tag along. Jed’s friends were just more interesting than her friends, always skirting some rule, coming up with new games that pitted them against any and all authority. Jed was the conscience of the group and Dustin and the others had to coax him into things.

“It’s just easier for me to stay outside as the lookout,” he said when they snuck into the gym at their old elementary school in the middle of the night. His friends didn’t realize that Jed’s protests were a form of manipulation, a whiny act that ensured he could reap the benefit of the story without the consequences that befell the others – underage alcohol charges, broken legs. But Olive knew, and lately, his aloofness enraged her.

They walked away from the house, shoulder to shoulder in the tunnel made by the light of the streetlamps. Around them murmured the white noise of summer, faraway coughs and the creak of insects, the laugh track of a late-night sitcom. A car turned onto the block.

“Put your masks on,” Dustin said.

“I don’t want to. I’ll feel like I’m suffocating. It’s hard to breathe with it on.” Jed was holding his mask as far away from his body as he could.

“It’s not hard to breathe at all. It’s filtering the air for you. When you have it on, the air that you breathe in is cleaner than the air outside. It makes you healthier. Your lungs aren’t used to the air being that clean.”

“He doesn’t want to wear it.”

“Shut up.” He never used to mind when she spoke for him. It was a reflex for her, honed through years of being the one who had to order the pizza because Jed didn’t like to talk to strangers.

“I’ll wear it. Give it to me.”

“Where are we going?” Olive asked Dustin.

“Somewhere.” Dustin was preoccupied with the mask in his hand.

“No, really, where are we going?” She grabbed his wrist but he jerked it away from her.

“Olive, you have no sense of adventure.” Jed laughed.

“This from the boy who was too afraid to touch the mask two seconds ago.” Olive’s chest expanded in anticipation, as if it was filled with sand, each breath making granules rub against her lungs and push up into her throat. Her mouth was dry.

Dustin was distracted by a car turning onto the block. “This is it guys,” he whispered. “Just stand still. Don’t let them intimidate you.” He pivoted, and they followed, creating a barrier in the center of the street. A man on the passenger side of the car rolled down the window, cocking his head and sticking his torso out over the sideview mirror to face them.

“Who are you?” The whites of the man’s eyes bulged out from the rest of his face. “Y’all are a bunch of assholes for walking around dressed like that. Move along.” He laughed. They stood still. Behind the mask, Dustin began to breathe heavily.

“I said, move along!” He slapped his hand against the car door and disappeared from sight. There was a moan as the car accelerated, curving around them and bumping the curb. An object soared backwards from the window and liquid unfurled over Jed’s head, a white fast food cup bouncing to the ground. They watched the car drive away.

“I’m soaking wet,” said Jed.

“It’s all part of the game, my friend. Suck it up.”

“I hate being wet.”

“The faster you walk, the faster you’ll dry off. Come on, we’re wasting time.”

They walked another block until they saw a woman in her bathrobe standing with leash in hand as her dog urinated. She peered at them as if they were a grotesque painting at a museum, a tableau behind a protective sheet of glass. The dog sniffed at Dustin’s shoe and then turned his head to the bark of another dog. Jed stepped forward and tilted his head down until the hose of the mask was almost touching the woman’s forehead. For a second, Olive thought that someone else was behind Jed’s mask. She had never seen his body bend like that, tight with aggression. He took one ragged breath, and then the woman seemed to realize that they were real and backed away, dragging the dog with her and running into the house.

As soon as the door slammed, Dustin ripped the mask from his head and started to run. They followed him, flip-flops thudding against the concrete, the strap between Olive’s toes chafing her skin. Beside her, Jed’s elbows jabbed the air, and fifty feet ahead of them, Dustin’s ponytail swung with the urgency of his gait. They passed the new grocery store that swallowed

an entire block. The sign that glowed fluorescent orange during the day was dulled, the welcome streamers drooping to the ground. Then there was the synagogue with its bald dome, and the free clinic, naked in the night with its empty parking lot.

On the left was their old elementary school. The tire swing on the playground hung limp like a noose, and Olive saw herself as an eight-year-old, standing on the bar from where the swing hung, and Jed down below, legs crossed and hands over eyes, refusing to watch as her toes tapped her heels one after another and her fingers created the smallest flutter of a breeze.

They reached the bridge, an oasis of light that made the stuttering blue orbs of the streetlights behind them seem like a false trail, leading not back to where they came from, but to somewhere sinister.

“The look on that woman’s face...” Dustin’s laugh turned into a wheeze and he started to choke. He spat, and it landed hissing, an inch from Olive’s flip-flop.

“Dustin! Gross. I feel bad. That woman was really scared. She’s probably going to call the police.”

Dustin was still laughing. Jed didn’t say anything, didn’t look at Olive. She knew he was ashamed. Way out across the water, hidden now in the dark, was the dam that pushed against the parallel riverbanks like outstretched hands. In the daylight she could see the line that marked where the water fell over the side of the dam. Now, all in the distance was dark.

The path down to the riverbank from the end of the bridge was smooth and slippery from many feet, and when they got to the bottom they saw the water that swelled up to the tree line in

the spring had receded, leaving a strip of sand just wide enough for them to walk one behind another. Beside them, the double-jointed finger of the river lay flat and black, a void poised to swallow the orange sky. Dustin's voice babbled on, easy to ignore because it seemed to blow past her, as if he was aiming to fill the whole space behind them with it, back to the woman with the dog, to the man in the car, all the way back to the house.

But Jed's voice was a whisper, sliding back on an invisible line from his mouth to her ear. She had already found the answers to the questions he asked, long ago, it seemed, although not long enough that she had forgotten the feeling that came with the wondering, a tangle of knotted strings draped over her brain. And each day of the two years she had on him was the pinch of a finger on a firm knot, the coaxing of thread away from thread to join the other unraveled filaments that lined up like furrows across the surface of her consciousness.

When they were younger, he didn't question that she knew more than him about everything. Her vocabulary was more advanced and her fingers more dexterous, better at tying shoes and opening frozen juice containers. When he asked her a question, he was always satisfied with the answer.

The sand was patched with froth and wet in spots, a vacuum that half-swallowed their feet with each step. In front of her, Dustin and Jed looked like they were marching.

The bluffs grew from the sand, hovering as if they had shouldered their way onto the riverbank, and she felt as if she had entered a room where all of the furniture had been rearranged. Then she blinked, and the bluffs seemed to pivot in her vision, and she saw that the shore on the other side of the river was their shore, and she stood in the place where they saw

yellow bulbs of bonfire and bodies shuffling into the water in the early drunken mornings of days like this one, when they had never gone to sleep.

Her seventh grade class had come here for a field trip, a tour of an old Speakeasy carved out of the bluffs, the largest of the hundreds of caves that lined the riverbank. The tunnels once used to smuggle liquor couldn't distract from the modern sconces ringing the sandstone walls, the exit signs blocking Olive's ability to imagine the place as a rollicking den of sin. Their guide had worn a flapper dress clotted with spangles, and the stories she told about Prohibition were so rehearsed that Olive's classmates mocked her by pretending to be robots. But there was a certain romance to all of these caves, these secret places that had housed bootleggers and generations of teenage miscreants like them who had come to drink and hide in these rocks.

Olive could tell that Dustin had chosen this cave beforehand from the caution tape that bandaged the entrance. The mouth folded into an emaciated stomach of shadow, and if Olive squinted she could make out a knob of white light that hung like a navel in the center of the darkness. She wondered where it came from. Dustin turned on his flashlight and Olive looked at the mask in her hand. Thin cracks were visible where the rubber had been smooth earlier. It was almost a hundred years old, too old to be worn, too old even to touch. She could hear her father's voice saying that a mask was the only thing that could save a man during battle, an apparatus as necessary to survival as a gun.

"We're not supposed to go in there. I'm staying out here." Jed looked down at the sand, rubbing his foot around in circles. He was afraid. She could tell by how stiff he was, by the sweat on his upper lip. Perhaps his fear of the masks had never diminished as Olive's had.

“I think we should go home. I have to get up really early tomorrow,” Jed said.

“You’re a pussy.” Dustin reached out and tore the caution tape away.

“We’re obviously not supposed to go into these caves.” Olive gave Jed a reassuring look.

“That’s why we have masks, Olive. These caves are poisonous.” Dustin played the same game her father had, trying to fashion intrigue from nothing, to sew a feeling to a place.

“You are so full of shit.”

“Jed, put your mask on. We’re going in.” Dustin stared at the mouth of the cave as if it were a television screen.

“We have to wake up early tomorrow morning.” She was stalling, for Jed.

"You're just scared. Why are you even here, Olive? I didn't invite you." Jed looked at Dustin for approval, and Olive looked down to hide her hurt.

Blooms of light from their phones jumped from swath to swath of blonde rock as they walked into the cave. Old images appeared to Olive, unbidden. The mask muffled her hearing; Dustin was saying something, but she couldn't understand him. She distracted herself by giving way to the images. Their commanding officer had sent them to explore the caves. At any time, the enemy could burst out from somewhere and capture them. But she was unprepared - her boots were untied, she was tired, her rations had run out.

“I have to tie my shoe.” She was wearing flip-flops but knew they wouldn't remember and couldn't see that well with the masks on. Stooping, she pretended to grab at an errant lace.

They fumbled along the passage without her, and she waited for them to turn a corner. Each step back to the entrance was urgent, as if some inexorable force, the bristles of an enormous broom, swept her from the cave.

When they had run from the woman, she had felt a sort of glee. Now it was terror, like a haze that numbed her to pain and fatigue so she barely noticed when she tripped and hurt her knee on a log. When she could no longer run, she crawled up the embankment to the sidewalk where she stood to catch her breath.

She was miles and miles from where they had started. She walked along the sidewalk until she came to a gas station.

Underneath the concrete canopy, she could see bodies zig-zag from their cars, as intoxicated by the promise of light as she was, by the nicotine and caffeine inside this place that never closed, an oasis that seemed to exist only for the night dwellers who swarmed and then abandoned it. She needed a cup of coffee or a Red Bull. Her face reflected back at her from the window of a parked car, blanched from lack of sleep, the light exposing a necklace of acne that spread across her chest and down her cleavage.

A man leaned against the wall and watched her. His beard was matted, thick and pubic, but underneath it he was young. Pots and pans hung from a hiking backpack at his feet. She didn't know why she walked toward him instead of through the sliding doors in front of her, but she did. She turned and leaned against the wall, then realized she had been thinking she would

take out a cigarette and smoke it because he was smoking a cigarette. But she had never smoked, and now she had nothing to do, nothing to hold. He laughed.

“You shouldn’t be out right now. You should be sleeping.”

She felt defensive, embarrassed that her youth was so obvious. Her camisole and shorts gave her away. She bent down as if to stretch and wiped at the blood on her knee.

"You should be sleeping," he said. "And you shouldn't be out alone this late." He sounded stern, but she thought he might be smiling behind his beard.

“Why are you awake?” She acted like this with the boys at school, challenging them, flirting. Mostly it worked.

“I don’t sleep very often.”

“Where do you sleep?” she asked although she already knew the answer.

“Everywhere.” He laughed again. “Where are you supposed to be right now?”

“Are you a teacher?”

“I’m just protective. I have a little sister.”

“I was with my brother and his friend down in the caves.”

“You’re not supposed to go into those caves.” Here it was, the paternal, patronizing tone. She was too tired for the lecture she knew would come, so she pushed herself away from the wall

and walked back out towards the street. He called after her, and his voice was urgent, although the edge of it still mocked her, made her feel ashamed for her youth, for her brashness.

“There’s carbon monoxide in those caves. People have died in there. A couple of dumbass kids went in there a couple of years ago and ended up in body bags. Be careful - you can’t even smell it.”

Dustin had known the whole time, had told her as much. They had all known. She pressed the mask to her nostrils and smelled the rubber, sweet and burnt, examined the holes, thin as paper cuts. New holes. The whole thing was coming apart.

She sat on the sidewalk and thought about how they all dangled like beads on a chain worn by a nervous woman. A tug too forceful and they would fall and shatter. She didn’t know how to get back to the cave again, had run blind without knowing where she was going. So she waited as the many-colored dawn came and hung like carnival lights.

Behind and below her, something was happening. She conjured the image of Jed and Dustin walking ahead of her into the cave, how its throat had seemed to loosen to let them in, how the light whispered into the shadows. Jed hadn’t wanted her there.

She thought of a life without him, like the river charging over the edge of the dam and disappearing. But it was just the illusion of disappearance. Jed would still be there in her head and he would follow her, a constant, never changing presence. The ghost Jed, stuck where she had wanted him in the first place.

It wouldn't burn like mustard gas, wouldn't stick to the eyeballs. It would pool in the lungs.

The knob of light was nothing at all. Jed followed Dustin, grazing swaths of sandstone with his fingers, his knees buckling as he sat down hard, bumping against the wall of the cave, a triangular bruise forming on his back.

Like any breath of air you'd take at any other time in any other place. Odorless. Carbon Monoxide.

There would be news stories with helicopter shots of the river, the bluffs and the entrance to the cave with fresh caution tape fluttering and the newscaster frowning into his microphone. Jed hadn't wanted her there anyways.

She remembered the calm, practiced swoop of her father's hand separating the air into quadrants so they could better see the sterile ceiling of winter sky, the waterlogged boots attached to shins that bumped along in rows and scattered with the belches of the enemy.

He had prepared her for this. She was meant to carry these stories and add her own to them. They would possess her until the expression on Jed's face appeared on her own face as if pasted there, his worry wrinkle resting between her eyebrows, the crooked hunch of his shoulders contorting her shoulders. One day he would spill from her.

Her hands would move softly. They would curve as if following the edges of a piece of lace and the splaying of her fingers through the gaps would be the pop of gunfire and the snap of her meeting hands would startle the listeners because they would not expect it.

Then when they all got sleepy and bored, she would pull from this day, take everything out of it and spread it around the room, her voice growing then cracking. Even her child, who sat in front of her with legs crossed would be listening. She could see his eyes grow big when he was scared and small when his attention wandered and wound around to other places, to the cat sleeping on the couch, to the spines of the lopsided books on the coffee table, and finally back to her.