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Limited Resources

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

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Christine D. Cote, 1991



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ABSTRACT

Limited Resources

Christine Cote

Limited Resources is a novella about two women's struggle to sustain a sense of private identity within imposed roles that deny all recognition of their individuality. Set in Mrs. Thames' boarding house for elderly ladies, the story is told in separate first-person narratives by two of the residents, a young woman who has been reared in the house and an old woman, a retired servant who is one of the roomers. In the narratives, the characters relate the circumstances that have shaped their lives, their stories converging on the events leading up to the old woman's death, events in which the characters enact the central problem in their lives, how to formulate and preserve a distinct self-hood.

The separate identities assumed in the narratives are, in fact, precarious; the boundaries defining self and other are inherently fragile. Their experiences and perceptions have been formed by the same conventions, their places in the insular domestic societies they live in are similarly disenfranchised and subservient while their histories share a mythopoeic structure that reflects the collective consciousness embodied by Mrs. Thames' household.

Divested of personal autonomy, their past a history of the usurption of their lives by prescribed roles and lacking both possessions and a place of their own, they inhabit a reality in which even memory may be appropriated. In response to this, the young woman attempts to fabricate both a private self and an imaginary landscape in which to situate it by claiming whatever she is able to secret away, whether it be worn-out objects or the fragments of overheard reminiscences. But her creation is an impoverished refuge which becomes increasingly tainted by feelings of guilt and self-condemnation. This is followed by the old woman's story in which she records the disappearance of those few possessions which have served to substantiate her memory and identity. At the same time, the old woman's account of events appears to unravel the borders of that self created within the young woman's text for the objects and memories which form the elements of both their stories are, in essence, the same things. In the end, it is through the individual act of imaginative synthesis of these elements that a sense of self-hood is found.

To Margaret Broad

We get what we deserve. It is very precise this reckoning and not something to be tampered with no matter what the heart might desire. The world has been sorted through and neatly parcelled out and it is up to us to figure out how to live within our allotted means. This I learned from Mrs. Thames. To be frank, these are not her very words. She was far too shrewd to pass on such a lesson within a neat phrase that I might accept or reject as I pleased, especially as I was wilful a good deal of the time, a clear indication of the intractable bent of my character, as she observed. Then she fell silent, considering how best to proceed, while I sat quiet on the edge of the bed, clasping those wicked fingers which had been caught, once again, burrowing through the bureau drawers, intent on uncovering hidden treasure. Very well, she said, one must work with the material at hand.

Her method was to drop clues, odds and endbits of hints and thin parings of half-truths, which I gathered when her back was turned and puzzled over, fitting them together so that I might learn all that she knew of things. As soon as I had done so I knew that I'd made a mistake for those pieced out secrets, by which I'd thought to discover the loopholes concealed within the patterns fixing our lives, revealed instead only my own experience, endlessly replicated, without a stray thread left over. In this way she taught me to see that the world would offer me nothing but what I already had. I would like to hand this insight back to her, as I would the gift of another's soiled garment,

cleaned and folded on a tray. But this is not possible now. I cannot rid myself of it, just as she'd planned.

Furthermore, I now know how few of my secrets escape her appraising gaze and when she looks at me I am made aware of how evident and simple I am. She would say that this humiliation is kindly intended, meant for my own good I'm sure.

Fortunately I've managed to retain some critical faculties. I can spot her guile, I can catch her foolishness, especially when they present themselves at the same time. I can tell you, for instance, that Mrs. Thames puts great value in the notion that what a child needs is stability. She speaks of firm foundations and a solid background as the basis for building character. It is a choice of words that reveals a delusion. Inevitably I note that the window she would have me polish is cracked and the sill beneath rotted out. As well, everyday I must sweep up more dust from the ceiling's crumbling plaster and empty the cans set out to catch all the leaks. These things I examine when she is out of the room and I am able to collect the evidence of her fallibility. I pause, chin and hand poised on the end of my broom, absorbed by the countless, minute disintegrations of a structure in decay. Free of her presence I find myself thinking that in fact the house is Mrs. Thames' concern while I am simply passing through, gradually making my way from the front entrance, along the hall towards the back door, like a mote drifting through the stagnant air. When she is with me, this certainty evaporates. What's this? she asks,

clapping her hands for my attention and there follows the reminder: First things first. These being my obligations to the house. This is an important point for she wouldn't want it thought that she asks me these things simply to please herself. Mute, inert, the house requires someone to speak on its behalf. Quick, says Mrs. Thames, fetch the pail for it, brush aside that film of lace hanging there by the window, make the stairs thrum with the beat of your feet, open rooms that need airing and close doors on the draft. From one bidding to the next, I become enveloped by the needs of the house and I lose sight of a world where things stand separate and distinct. Contours blur, walls fall into floors and against these flat surfaces my arm appears as the extrusion of their inner substance, while my will yields to the shape of what Mrs. Thames says must be done, until even her sheets, which I wash and hang to dry everyday, seem to be my own.

I believe that Mrs. Thames must have noticed the signs that her house was falling apart but did not recognize what they really meant. She hid the worst of the damage with high-backed chairs or shawl-draped tables, which she rearranged at night to serve as props for the old ladies' teacups. It is also possible that she made the choice to ignore all signals of the growing disintegration. I have noted that although she complained that her eyesight was poor, it was very acute for those things she wished to focus on. She didn't miss a day's neglected dusting or the faint black streak left by the tip of a boarder's cane. So do I say that she could choose in this matter, preferring to

remain oblivious to the real state of the house, or that she was incapable of doing otherwise? It is a question that I can't answer, even to satisfy myself. What I know is that under Mrs. Thames' supervision, we kept a clean and ordered home, but this effort represented the limit of our permissible activities, and so the plaster slowly slipped from the lathes year by year and the linens wore out until I didn't dare to scrub them against the washboard any more for fear they might tear. One must make do she often said, and I tried.

She told me that she had a generous heart. Hadn't she brought me into her world when I lay on her doorstep, crying that no one else would have me? She might just as well have left me there. I wasn't really her concern. Instead, she had taken my welfare to heart. She thought it evident, given the circumstances in which we'd met, that I had been born to a frugal share in life and it seemed to her that I'd best thank my good fortune for sending me her way since she couldn't think of another person better suited to teach me how to live within my means. It was regrettable, but not enough would have to be good enough for me.

We were the same, she and I. She would tell me this after savoring all the ways and means she used to accommodate the narrowness of her life. Oh yes, she would tell me, such scrimping and saving, such endless ploys to forestall what might seem inevitable and so stay afloat. Difficult, she conceded, you think it will break your heart. But she didn't pity my position,

rather she seemed to derive some satisfaction from it. I can understand that. It would have hurt her deeply to discover that my life was intended for more bountiful circumstances and that all her teachings had been squandered on one who had no need or desire for them. To waste something was more than she could bear. She had taken a great risk with me, she said, a risk which few others would have chanced. But I know that it would have been an even greater risk not to have brought me in that day. Without me, she would be lost. She would disappear in time as we all do with nothing to show for it. Through me, everything may be saved. What she has managed to make out of life will be waiting every morning beside the kitchen door with a hand outstretched for the day's list of chores. And she believes that when she's gone, by force of habit I will see things her way and continue on just the same. This certainty is very precious to her. Even now she must be looking for me, up and down the halls, in every room, in the closet and under beds. She must be asking for me, but calmly, as if I've merely been temporarily misplaced, hiding her worries from the boarders who must never wonder if something's gone amiss. It wouldn't do for their hearts, their poor, impotent hearts.

I don't think about this very much since it seems to do no good, but I don't want to be here. Not anymore. There was a time when I couldn't wait to get here, to be here but then, how could I have known where such thoughts would really lead? I was searching for a place I'd never been to. Away was

how I thought of it, I'll go somewhere away. So you see, it was ignorance that led me here and now I am bound by the consequences, no chance to reconsider. Sometimes I ask myself, what's so bad? Things could be worse, not much mind you, but generally I can imagine potential causes for more concern. I have concluded that, really, there is no such thing as the absolute worst of any situation. This reassurance is what keeps me alive. It's not food, that's for sure. I'm starving here. My teeth have loosened; I'd say it's just a matter of time before they fall out. And in my bones I feel a new frailty, an expanding lacework of hairline cracks. There's no telling how I'll turn out in the end. Yes, I'm weakened in all ways but just when it seems that finally, this is it, it's not possible to continue, something comes along. A crust of bread falls into my hand, a piece of cookie appears in the dust beside my heel. More often I find flakes of paper or bits of thread knotted between the rocks. Perhaps that is the very worst of it here, getting just enough to keep me going for another day.

To explain how this could happen: I came to this island with nothing but what I could hold in my arms. I wanted no part of a past, where there was so little to call my own except for some keepsakes that had slipped through someone's fingers and needed a home. I picked them up and asked, will these be missed? When no one spoke up for them, I packed them into the laundry basket. Everything else I left behind. That is why I am now forced to endure life with my eyes burnt dry from seeing only this place, my mouth forever open

except for those times when something flies in for me to chew on. It's really too bad that I never had the luck to come across a more hospitable place. A green scented valley would do the trick, with a painted wooden house, wrapped all round in clear, blue-tinged glass that I might hold cupped in my hands and press my cheek to. As it is, I'll count my riches. I'll review the little hoard: my sheets, some string, rocks big and small, the black tar covering the ground, a hot blue sky, the tree. Delete the tree. Its branches are long gone, cut down and although I do the best that I can, it's now nothing more than a pole. It casts a thin line of shade, half the width of my leg, which never stays still. I think that would bother me if I allowed it but I don't. I make do.

What really bothers me is the heat. I can think about that, which is just as well, there's no avoiding it. I am the object of some desire between the sun and the melting tar sand. I sit, stand, crouch and, no matter what position I assume, I can watch blisters form on my arms and feel the sting as they rise on my face. I close my eyes against the glare and the heat beats in. The sun is not gold, it's black; its halo coils of dark smoke. I open my eyes and watch it float in the blue glass sky, the cool white moon scudding towards it like a cloud on the wind, faster, nearer, then flames reach out, crisping the ice white edges, burning deeper. The sky turns night and I look away. The gulls are silent. The ocean pauses, looks over its shoulder. I can hear the moon's claws, her silver nails scrambling against the sky and now she's free, tumbling along, looking for the horizon. It happens every night. What could she be thinking

of? Never mind, she's alright, a little flustered perhaps but I don't see more than scratches on her. And she's gone again. She's found her hole.

A new day and I'm under the sun, against the black tar. Just like yesterday. I examine my splintered nails. A breeze wafts the sheets back and forth. They split apart and I see the sky, then they fall together and I see nothing. Beneath them it's almost cool but they won't stay put and I scurry after their shadows, back and forth, hour after hour, tired of running, chasing sheets on a line.

But you see, I've only forgotten how to do what I do best. Solutions flap in my face and all this time I haven't noticed them, my mind caught in the monotony of old patterns of thought. But there they are, the ways and means to gain some shelter, so simple and all the necessary elements at hand. I don't have to make anything up, just rearrange things a bit. This inventiveness of mine startles even me but that's no wonder. I've kept it wadded tight in my pocket, a small talent with glue and pins, a knack for getting by as best I could so that, until now, I never saw the full extent of my ability, shaken out, snapping in the air while the creases slowly fade away.

When I am here, where I can look down on my usual self half submerged in the haze from the daily sweepings and dustings of Mrs. Thames' house, it is quite clear to me that all I must do is lift my head and brush the dirt from my eyes. How can I pity a creature as stupid as that? Alright, enough. Leave

that poor muddle-headed me be. Leave it behind to chase its shadows and weep into chimney pots. Well, I say that but, in truth, I'm attached to it. I'll probably miss it. I'm sentimental that way. Maybe while I work I'll catch it staring with amazement, then creeping closer, reaching out to touch this sleight of hand that I'm creating and quick, pulling back. It will duck its head humbly and mutter a request. What? I'll say, Speak up!, irritated by its tiresome posture of humility. Stand up straight and talk as if you're there girl, I'll say. This is all form of course. I know what it wants; it's the same thing every time. May I come in, it will ask? Maybe, I'll answer, if there's enough room. I'll see. But there won't be enough room, not for both that me and this me. There has never been. One of us will have to go and that one is already past, small, smaller and if I snap my fingers, gone.

I take down the sheets. There are three of them, along with the line on which they were hung and the clothespins that held them fast. Also, if I remember correctly, there are other items lying about, useful things. I take one of the sheets and fold it in half over the line, then anchor it with three of the clothespins, one on each end, the third in the center. The sheet doesn't nearly reach to the ground but I knew that would be the case. That is why I provided myself with two more. I take another sheet and tie it to one side of the first, then do the same with the last one. Now both sides trail on the ground, just as I planned. Everything is going without a hitch.

I find rocks, good-sized rocks that lie scattered about and use these to secure the sides which I've stretched out taut. As soon as I let go and stand back, the breeze comes nosing through, bellying out the fabric with its passage. The rocks drag along the ground until each finds a niche. And settles in. There we have it, my tent, and it didn't blow away. I admit, I was worried for a moment. The sheets swell and subside, absorbing the breeze and I leave them be. There's no need for reinforcement. Even in a stronger wind, I think that they will hold.

I'm really very pleased. Between the sheets there's enough space, quite enough for one. Inside I can almost stand straight. I can sit down, I can crawl out and back in again. A piece of pale shade. Given unlimited choice there are other shades I would have preferred, for instance the cool damp green beneath a tree or the shock of black at the bottom of stone steps, through a door, below ground. However I must be realistic. This shade is hot and dry, still it's something between me and the sun, a diminishment of my discomfort. My tent will make all the difference. It will make my stay here bearable.

If I think of how it was before, when I lived in Mrs. Thames' house, my island begins to slip away, its substance deliquescing, fragile sand towers melting into raindrops. The black sands, the hot blue sky, the frothy rim of breakers dissolve like widow's lace and I stand once more on the roof, shoes sticking to the melting asphalt, among a row of white sheets strung along the

length of clothesline, edges fluttering and waving to the antimacassars pegged on either end. I swing the laundry basket with one hand, drying the wicker before I take it in and return downstairs. There are pigeons up here, sooty grey birds whose breasts gleam like oil slicks when they turn to the sun. A few are patched with white, a bit shabby I think, like young gulls in molt. They perch at the far edge of the roof, waiting for me to disappear. As far as they're concerned, we don't know one another. I must go in. I'd rather stay and frustrate the pigeons, but Mrs. Thames will be looking for me and she won't be pleased if she has to trudge up all those stairs only to bring me back down them again.

Goodness knows but I've tried to close the door on her and lock myself out but the wood is rotted under the hinges and around the latch. So the door won't swing square and jams ajar against the header. Each time I walk through it to go inside, there is a moment when I look back and see that translucent sky, the crisp white sheets tugged by the morning breeze, the pigeons preening or standing atilt, peering to see if I'm really leaving. Then I turn and my eyes are caught up in thick grey light, my hands and feet feel their way down the stairs into the smell of damp rot and closed windows. I have asked Mrs. Thames if we might put a light in here but she says that I have young eyes, better to learn right off that what you can't see won't hurt you. Yes and better to have me grope through the hallways as all the others do, blinking through their cataracts. Less chance that I'll notice what's going

on, less chance that I'll find a way out. She would have me no different from the rest except for my youth which she uses to wash up the dishes, turn the mattresses once a month, scrape up the bits of squashed tea cake, the flecks of dried saliva from the floor. Our boarders spring leaks faster than I can wipe them up. Old women, they piss themselves each time they uncross their legs, they steam up the windows with every breath, they dribble and slop their tea, and when I've wiped and dried as best I can I have to carry them one by one to the bathroom and place them in a tub so I can scrub at the green mold under their arms and the mildew nestled in the creases of their necks. Then it's back to the parlour with them. Sit them straight on chairs, propped with cushions so they don't fall off and tell them to wait. Now that they've been cleaned and dried and powdered, they want a cup of tea so that the whole procedure can be started all over again.

I am not quick about it. Even if I were willing, I could not match the haste with which these old ladies want me to fetch for them. It's been so long since they've done such things for themselves that they've lost the knack of tallying task with time. When they were younger, in the days when their opinions about reality were, at least on certain points, still tied into the world rather than to the loose ends of some fragmentary memories, they would say to one another: Now she's put the kettle on, now she's spooning in the tea, and they wouldn't be far from the truth. But these days they want me to run one step ahead of time. They want the tray laid out before I've set foot into the

kitchen. They want me to blow on the burner to hasten the flame, while there I am, still hunting for a match. They would have it all hot and ready for them in an instant, but without a step missed. No shortcuts. They judge it intolerable if I neglect to warm the pot first, or fail to set the tray with a fresh doily and the good china and they'll complain most bitterly if the creamer isn't properly chilled before I pour in the milk. In short, they have nothing better with which to occupy their minds.

I don't know how they discern these details, what mysterious sense they possess that lets them measure the crispness of the linen or the precise degree of warm and cold, for their regular senses have been eroded by decades of examining an unchanging world. Their numbed fingers grope at an indistinct reality, unable to feel the difference between human skin or old linen. I watch them bent over embroidery they cannot see, their hands rising and dropping in obedience to a mind that is fashioning oriental gardens from cross-stitch and all the while the needle lies unnoticed on the floor, slipped from the thread on the first stitch. Or they sew their fingers to the fabric and then are frightened when they cannot put it down, calling for me in anguished little girl voices and weeping into hands shrouded and trapped by the folds of guest towels and pillow cases. But they demand and know that the hot be scalding, the cold rise to form a thin glaze of ice on the surface and that the cups be smooth and finely fragile in their clumsy grasp. These are the rules they have set me for their tea.

The kitchen where I make these preparations is very old. I believe that it was built long before the rest of the house and, indeed, that it was the foundation around which the house was established. It slants, both the roof and floor, towards a point where the underpinnings have sunk deeply below the earth's surface. I walk uphill to the stove and downhill to the counter. The cupboards above reach to the ceiling. Up there is where Mrs. Thames keeps the good china, on the top shelf, for safety. On the call for tea, I must climb up onto the counter and stretch on tiptoes to reach the cups. I place a damp towel on the counter in order to anchor the tray, otherwise it slides dangerously on the glazed tiles, edging towards a downfall.

When the ladies have finished, I must wash each cup without delay to avoid stains and climb up once more to put them away, shoes off, Mrs. Thames says. A rule of the house. She says that another of these rules is that I must not turn up the stove so high as that will wear out the burner. Neither am I permitted to keep the creamer in the fridge between times as it is part of the good set and all the pieces belong in their place on the top shelf. A set is a set only as long as it's kept together. She won't have it scattered about. Also, if the doily isn't too badly stained it should be reused, just give it a shake and put it back on the tray. The ladies are all half-blind and there's no sense wasting effort. Most important, I must not disturb anything. Everything must remain exactly in its place.

Another rule of the house is that I am to please the old ladies, no matter what.

In the kitchen I listen to their indignation; an impatient little finger fitfully tapping on the arm of a chair, on a forearm, on a forehead. I catch the rustle of a dress and whispers as one leans over to another and wonders, whatever is keeping that dratted girl so long, whatever is she doing, dragging it out like that? Primping in front of the glass no doubt with never a thought for others, never a thought for us parched with thirst and no time to spare.

I don't hurry. Slowly I arrange the tray, carefully counting out napkins, placing a spoon on the right side of each saucer, stealing more of their precious time. They can whisper their complaints, tap out their frustrations. With each exhalation the old women wither a little more. It's good for the ferns which flourish on old words and sighs of impatience and self-pity.

This is the pattern of our clandestine economy. The old women consume my youth while I squander their dying days by dreaming over the teapot. And the ferns fatten and scatter their infants past the confines of their pots. Moist and tenderly green, they unfurl in quiet corners, on the edges of the rug, nested within the folds of drapes, in the crevices between cushions, sprouting from the heads and handles of porcelain tigers and Toby jugs. For the moment, all things are equal.

But I intend to tip the balance, to weaken them you see, a bit more each day. I will begin to withhold their tea a few moments longer each time I serve

and watch them shrink ever smaller into their chairs. I will introduce this change judiciously; it wouldn't do if they took alarm. If they even suspected what it is that I mean to do, they wouldn't suffer it. They would struggle from their chairs and totter down the hall, leaning on each other for support, hunched, shuffling figures in faded print dresses smelling of dead flowers, muffling the thump of their canes just so they might catch me at it, moony while the kettle boils dry. Then they'll call for Mrs. Thames, Mrs. Thames see what this girl's been up to. They'll press close to the walls and simper as Mrs. Thames appears behind them, silent and inevitable, wiping her hands on her apron then squeezing past them through the door saying, What's this, what's all this? While I scurry to hide myself within the disguise that works the best. It will soften her towards me to see her face reflected small and trembling before her eyes. But in the end, she'll admit no excuse.

The old women, who must have been nasty children, clutch each other's sleeves, faces alert to whether Mrs. Thames will frown and tighten her mouth, whether she will raise her hand or not. They crave justice and believe that she will grant it for she is their protector, they agree between themselves — after all, aren't we what keeps the dress on her back. They adore her to her face and hate her when she turns away, although they never whisper a word of that. They don't dare. Mrs. Thames is a fat woman in grey poplin with square hard hands that I have felt more than once for my own good. She invents diets to starve their ailments and potions for those feebly agitated hearts. She

humours them and coddles them, subjecting them to an everlasting sameness, willing them to wake every morning without fail and begin their demands, the toilet, my hair just so, a pillow in the small of my back, all so Mrs. Thames may eke out another month's rent long after her boarders should have crumbled and fallen into the cracks in the floor.

For me she concocts purges. I am prone to bad humours that must be expunged. She thinks that is why I am not to be trusted. These humours gather with the moon but she no longer waits for them to gain ground in my system as she once did. She has resigned herself to the fact that she will never effect a complete cure, only remissions, so now she doses them regularly. Once a week she enters my bedroom with a tray. It is a small white enamelled tray that holds a brown glass bottle with a crusted black cap, a steel spoon, two white tea towels. Over the years she has identified the exact articles needed for the task. She places this tray on the table beside my bed and picks up the bottle. Now, she asks, are we going to be a good girl tonight? I cannot say. I don't have the courage. Instead, I turn my face to the wall and know what she is doing. She is opening the bottle.

She props the spoon handle on the tray's lip so the bowl will be level, the potion will not dribble over the sides and be wasted on the tray. Then she sighs. I am causing her pain. She unfolds a towel and shakes it out. Holding this in one hand, she reaches out with the other and grabs a fistful of my hair. Deftly she wrenches my head to face her, crams the towel under my chin then

slaps my cheek hard. My mouth drops open, every time, and before I can close it again the spoon is hitting my teeth and I am filled and choking with the acridity of her resentment. If only I would choose, I wouldn't force her to be this way. It is hard for her to forgive this. She scrubs at my lips with the second towel and puts everything back on the tray. I am very disappointed she tells me, I was hoping not to have to repeat this scene. She stands up. Well, she says, I expect that this will give you something to think about. She bends over and kisses my cheek. We won't speak of this anymore, will we, my dear.

There are long lists of things that we do not speak about. I once thought of writing them down, to keep track of them. That was when I was younger and just starting to feel my way through the narrow apertures and indistinct paths of what could be said and what had best be forgotten. I chose an evening and a time when Mrs. Thames and the boarders were seated in front of the television and I went to my room. I had found a piece of paper and a short stub of pencil and with these I began to write, but then my hands started to tremble for, with each letter I pressed into the paper, it seemed as if I was erasing a frail layer of obscurity, embossing the outlines of a form that lay beneath, blunt fingertips pressed against the thin sheath of paper entrapping it. So I stopped and scribbled over the few lines that had been written. A necessary gesture. There was no place in Mrs. Thames' house for yet another boarder and I certainly wasn't going to keep even a partial one hidden in my room. I was cramped enough as it was. And as things turned out, there

wasn't really a need for a list such as I'd thought should be made. Despite all the density and complexity of the directives there was really only one rule: to make myself agreeable. Over time I memorized this, the topography of our daily conversations and stayed silent when the path came too close to what must be left unsaid, so as to make our lives pleasant and cheery in every way.

I can never quite pull it off, this business of being cheery. Mrs. Thames told me, think cheerful thoughts and your life will be cheerful, but if you can't manage that have the decency to act the part so that the rest of us don't have to look at a sulky face. I formed my mouth into the semblance of Mrs. Thames' smile; it didn't fit properly and kept slipping uncomfortably towards my chin. Good, good, Mrs. Thames approved, that's what we like to see. As soon as she left, the smile fell clear off my face and I'm still waiting to feel the shape of a smile that would be my own. I think that being cheerful is rather like wishing on stars, easy to do as long as you're given the opportunity to practice. Mrs. Thames was always quick to catch me on that one, closing the drapes against the rectangle of sky and reminding me not to waste my few thoughts.

As I'm doing now, thinking of events I meant to put behind me, and I wonder at this need to remember the past over and over again, from beginning to now and back again. It's a daily routine whose purpose quite escapes me. Why, for example, do I linger over the sound of closing drapes, of brass rings scraping and clinking along an iron pole? It makes me think of averted hopes,

of shapeless longings ground and polished in the struggle to see into them until they are as clear as crystal and easily said — I wish that these memories would come to a stop. Mrs. Thames frowns. She taps her foot. How many times must I tell you to shush! Yes, well, I knew she would say that.

To think of something better: on the day of my arrival I was determined to make up for lost time, although a little confused as to where I should start. Actually, it couldn't have been on the first day since I was too exhausted from the exertion of saving myself from the wreck, but the moment that I felt well enough I began to take stock of what I'd salvaged and what I'd lost. That's when I found a small translucent shell coiled neatly behind the antitragus of my left ear, a memento of my old collecting habits. It contained all the wishes that had congealed on the tip of my tongue, then tucked away out of Mrs. Thames' reach. I took a pin and poked about in the shell's mouth. Then I turned it upside down and shook some out. In my impatience I was careless; the first few wishes to tumble out were caught by the wind and blown out of reach before I had the chance to hear them. So I made a protected place within the folds of my dress and coaxed out the remainder, one by one. Some of them, worn out by their own improbability, expired at the shock of day. Lifeless was the wish that Mrs. Thames might be different. So was the one formed while peering through a rain-streaked window, searching among the passers-by for the face that might turn to me, then break into a rapturous smile at having finally found me. These wishes I put aside to grieve over later.

There were more however that still spoke to me on feeling the warmth of my hand and my throat caught at the yearning they contained. I found one that implored to be given a proper pair of feet in exchange for my own which always insisted on pointing one way and another. And the wish that I might grow to such a tremendous size that on each clap of my hands yet one more old lady would be lifted by the burst of air and sent sailing past me, down the length of the hall. Then might I not see how one after the other they form into a line of diminishing figures, shrinking down to mere cinder points before vanishing out of sight. Maybe one day I shall try out my luck. I'll put a wish back into my mouth and taste it melting into a tart sweetness before I lick my lips and, finally, say it. But for now I've decided that they should be woven tightly into my hair to make a plait, thick and gleaming as if beaded with the moonsheen of mother-of-pearl. It's for the best, I say, without knowing why.

If one measure progress by minuscule increments then I suppose that I am a bit more cheerful than I was yesterday. My tent does help, in its way. I could almost say that my situation was significantly improved if it were not for the lack of water. That's what really bothers me. It seems impossible that I should land in a place without a drop of water when I can hear it so well, rain dripping from leaves, pouring down gutters, running out to sea then returning to foam uselessly on the beach. I remember now. All rivers run to the sea. Well, I'm off. Time to go. Time to pull myself together and stagger

forth, skin, bone, desiccated muscle, before my blood dries to sand. I can feel it, a flow of little grits scratching inside. When I stand it drains from my face, a stream of rust-stained sand sliding down through my body. I watch it pile about my feet. I feel faint, so I'm down on my knees in the swimming air. This is where I'd stay, head bowed but undefeated, looking heroic while my time runs out, except that I prefer to scabble as far as I can. There is always the chance that I might yet find the mystery by which my life can be changed. I start to my feet once more, then walk unsteadily, with my hand stretched out towards the east. How many paces until the brink? I've counted thirty-two.

The wind blows stronger and I pull my robe close about me as I stare over the edge to where the sky joins the sea. Is that land over there? Maybe, far away, too far to swim. I wish that I could fly. It doesn't work. No sails on the horizon either. I turn away, northward, following the edge, falling between boulders, slipping into crevices, picking myself up each time, always forward but stopping once to watch the sea lions frolic on a crescent reef, backs glistening, black heads bobbing on the waves. My foot touches something strange that yields, rolls away. Fearful because I am careless, a betrayer and murderer of the weak, the unwary, I look down thinking, now you've done it. You've trampled some poor creature, I expect, a fledgling that was cowering humbly and silently in the corner of its nest. But no, it's not that. It's nothing much really, just a small black rubber ball.

I don't remember having a ball. It's not mine. I don't think that it's mine although it nestles comfortably in the palm of my hand. I throw it up in the air and watch — it returns. It might be mine after all. I'll have to think on it. In the meantime, do I have pockets? I must have one around here. There's so much material in this dress that I'm always searching for its form, always losing then finding the sleeves, the belt around the waist, the neckline with its two buttons. I pull the dress out, away from my body and feel along its seams. There, I knew that I had a pocket. It's already full, stuffed with seashells and pebbles. Also a clothespin. I add the ball, start to go then hesitate. Have I been here before? I can hardly believe it but then, there's this ball.

I look back towards the sea. Standing here, on this high point, I see the patterns of the whitecaps moving in on the reef, broken lines of white, wind blown froth breaking loose on the rocks then swallowed once more by the next roll of the sea. Away from me, further along the headland, the gulls nest, screaming at each other: mind your step, stop walking on that egg, get that child out of here, stop thief, stop thief, while on a rock, black against the sea, the cormorants huddle like old charred sticks, their backs to me. I will not look around. Behind me is the island, dead and dry — unless someone else is in there, or maybe, just ahead of me. Someone who's already searched these cliffs, not ten minutes ago, always just before me, looking over his shoulder when I lag behind, waiting on the other side of a rock when I pause, around

and around the island, I dogging his steps. Other times he sniffs my trail. Neither of us knows who started out first, who leads the way, staggering, feet bloodied by the rocks, burnt by the lava-black sands.

In the beginning I didn't know that he was there. He didn't know that I was here. We were in the same boat. But then, I found his toy, the one he kept safely inside his pocket but dropped as he stood on the cliff gazing at the sea lions. And he found something of mine. I can't think what. Something tenuous — he found my handkerchief fluttering along the beach, probably at the very same instant that I picked up the ball. We both found out about the other and nothing was ever the same. I knew that he stood on the opposite side of the island where the breakers roll in strewing the beach with shells and weed. He picked up a handkerchief knotted at each corner, stiff with salt, and wondered, is this mine? It must be mine, then put it in his pocket. That's when I noticed that my hanky was gone, the white lawn hanky with the tatted edge, one initial embroidered on the corner. Sometimes I used it for a sunhat. I tied knots in the corners and draped it on the top of my head. With our backs to the island, we stared out to sea, unknown to each other but feeling that, at last, we were no longer alone. And yet, we both feared to take a peek inland lest we find that the distant figure on the other side wasn't really the one for whom we'd so hoped.

Finally, I decide to get on with it. Carefully I follow the coast northwards, always keeping to the inner edge of the precipice. One stumble

and I risk falling down, head over heels to shatter on the rocks at the bottom. The sea watches for this, smacking against the base of the cliff.

I've thought it over. If I fall, I will not go down flailing and screaming. I will curve my plunge into a pure arc, toes pointed, arms raised, palms together over my head and I will be quiet about it. The gulls can scream for me. Not far behind he will be searching along the coast, frantic now for he has decided that, come what may, we must meet. So he runs and trips and scrambles to the last place where I stood, here, and almost passes it by, so great is his haste until he realizes that my tracks have stopped. Gone. But where? Did she go inland, he wonders. No, that's impossible. All the crumbs of her passing have vanished. She might as well have flown off into thin air. He can't help himself. He looks up and thinks, for a moment, that he can see her flapping heavily to the west, towards the sun, shoelaces trailing. He looks again, into the bare sky, then around. The gulls hover but an arm's length from the cliff and he notices their golden eyes. They are all looking down. If gulls could purse their lips, if they had fingers, they would be whistling and pointing — Hey mister, down there. Are you blind? He looks and, after a momentary vertigo, he will see only my robe floating small on the water's surface, while tangled in the kelp, indistinct but possible, what looks to be hair, a single strand with pearly glints that catch the sun. He will see his ball hurled playfully by each wave, towards the rocks, then caught again.

Or he will never catch up. He'll fall at the same time, the very same instant, tripping and diving headfirst into death. Then again, he just might manage to save me, catching hold of my ankle as I go over and then, holding it firmly in the crook of his arm, he'll sit down and decide what next to do. I'll have to think on this. I'll have to remember first whether or not the ball is indeed mine.

I'm at the northern point now and starting inland. The island is shaped like a basin, rimmed by cliffs. There's a pouring spout on the western side where the land slopes down to a beach. I have my camp at the lowest point, in the center, below sea level at the hour when the tide is at its lowest ebb. If the tide would turn and come surging up the beach, it would overflow onto all that low ground. Then I could describe the terrain to you as a marsh. But that's impossible. It's not a marsh, it's bone dry and covered with salt and dune grass that cuts when I brush by. I would like it to be a marsh, even if it did have mosquitoes. There would be birds, crabs, oysters blowing bubbles in the mud. When the tide is high, the starfish would float in and dig out the oysters. They would hook three legs on the rim of a shell and, bracing themselves with their other two, begin the slow discreet process of prying open dinner. I could learn from them. But you see what happens in a place like this. There's nothing to watch, to do and the mind begins to fill the empty spaces with what it will. Shaking my head I send clouds of mosquitoes off in panic and I shake it again, for good measure, then slap away the marsh which

has made me forget what I'm supposed to be doing. I was falling and looking for a hand to stop my plunge. But wasn't that tentative? It could so easily happen that he would hold out his hand and demand — first, the ball. I would comply because I would be quite desperate with falling and falling, my skirts flapping about my ears. I would throw it to him and then he could snatch it from the air, pocket it and shrug his shoulders.

This leads me to think that I've been examining the subject in all the wrong ways, overlooking someone because she is both shy and small, so small that only rarely does her head bob into view above the line of the rocks. At this moment she might be standing very still at the edge of the surf, arms crossed over her soft round belly while the wind tousles her salt-stiffened hair. I expect that her legs must feel tired by now, so long is the wait for the return of her ball and she might wish to sit down, although I am concerned that she'll get wet by the shallow froth of water. Later, I'll find her lying further up the beach, hands closed over a bunch of dry black weed, sand powdering the curve of her sunburnt cheek, a white handkerchief shielding the top of her head. I rest awhile and idle over this possibility. Who?, I want to ask and move to touch her, just to brush away a hair blown across her eye. And then, as if she had taken form in the brief space between two breaths, she suddenly crumbles away and all that's left are granules of grey ash. I waited too long —

No, I decide. The ball is mine. It fits in my hand and even if asked I won't give it back. The rest was only a daydream I had while on my way some place.

Yes, that is how it was. I was walking the circumference of the island, re-examining it rock by rock in case I had missed something, a peninsula, a strait that narrows to a trickle at low tide, a line of rocks that I could tiptoe across. I was trying to find a way out of here, something to leap over, if I had the nerve. But I don't. Instead, I worry about what I risk to lose, as if this place was both necessary and dear to me. I can't think why. Clearly though, there's nothing holding me here, except myself, and of late I've gained the impression that so little is left of me, I must cling to the rocks at the slightest breeze or blow away. But there you have it, I still cling.

None of this is true. I put myself here to stay. It was the place to go and not meant to be temporary like the other two or three places where I have spent my entire life. I thought of this island and of how I intended to reach it scudding in with the flotsam of a storm-wrecked ship so that no one could follow me, then drawing a great moat around me of endless sea. I made no provisions for a change of heart. Now I'm here, watching the years sail past. I could sit and weep. I notice that I often do just that. Then, when the fit is over I wipe my eyes and tenderly blow my nose and, incredibly, I start to weep again, drenching the sheets as I bury my face in them. Later I wring them out

over my open mouth. That's what I do. Old habits are impossible to eradicate. Between times, when I've lost interest in that, I am perturbed by the feeling that there is something I had meant to do, some task that keeps slipping off the edges of my memory and I set off to tramp the coastline once more.

Need I say that this routine doesn't quite meet up with my expectations. I blame the sheets. The problems they've posed! They've taken up every bit of my spare time. How to arrange them, how to hold them in place and now I see, thanks to all the clear light that comes along with sunny days, that they're far from clean, they're all smirched with grey as if somebody's been wiping their dirty hands on them. When I come back from my walk it is a sight that stops me in my tracks. No, I cry, that can't be right! And turn on my heel before it comes back to me that no matter what my direction the island will always bend my steps towards the same spot. So — the sheets. Oh, I'll just wash them, was my first thought, when next it rains. Then I remembered that it doesn't rain. Even if it did, I have nothing to collect the water in. I haven't a bowl to spare, let alone something big enough for a full set of sheets. But, supposing that it does come to rain, some morning or afternoon or even some night, wouldn't it be a comfort to me to know that I was prepared?

My first idea was to try to form a sort of trough in one of the large rocks that stand hunched like exhausted figures forming a straggling line over the shoulder of the cliffs. It took time to judge each one of them and more time

still to find a stone of the right size and weight to be fashioned into a tool. As for the time devoted to the actual shaping of the container itself, I've lost track. The cliffs around here are composed of exceptionally hard rock and, despite all my vigorous pounding and grinding, I only managed to create a faint scribbling of shallow marks. Not to be discouraged, I moved on to another site but that was no better. Neither was the next one, nor the one after that. All together there must be years of this project scattered from end to end of the island, like a trail of frustrated toothmarks.

Still, the sheets must be dealt with, washed and hung to dry as I remembered them, when I first arrived and found them wafting white against the blue sky and black sand. It came to the point where I could not sleep for this, waking four, five times in the night haunted by the thought that my sheets weren't clean, that I had no way to get them clean and so might never get them clean, until I could no longer even lie down without immediately beginning on this train of thought. Instead, I spent the nights going down to the beach and then coming back to the tent in the hope that, one way or another, the situation might have changed. Either the sea had turned sweeter since I'd last tried its taste or — and here I swung about and started to trudge inland again — my sheets were not really in such a bad state after all.

Of course every time I looked at them, which I couldn't bear to do except from the corner of my eye, I immediately knew better. In this way my optimism began to wind down. And when it had wound down completely, one

morning on the beach, it left me with nothing to do but to notice that the sun moved so slowly, one might well say that it didn't really move at all and how each wave was so like the other that it seemed that the surf had stuck fast, poised on the curl before rolling back in towards the sand. And the sun poured down on me until I lay gasping and fainting under its weight. I turned over on my stomach and hid my face in the sand. I thought, I always come back to this, and then, are there yet some options that I might have missed? Carefully I allowed my attention to slip from everything that served to remind me of who and where I was. The island sounds began to fade away, gulls' cries ebbed into silence, the pounding of the sea died down to muffled throbs, indistinguishable from the blood's beat heard when I cup my ears, a sound more felt than heard. Was this as far as things went? I thought, my misgivings growing when nothing came along to fill the space. I clicked my tongue, I tapped my nails, anything but that small throb in a silence that threatened to swallow up the world. So I began to fill my mouth with the things from my pockets, pebbles, shells, bits of thread, chewing up feathers and gobbets of paper then waited in vain for the sound they would make once they struck bottom. Silence, and not even a thought to while away the time, just a painful bewilderment but I couldn't make out what questions it contained. Without the means to occupy myself, I was clearly at a loss. Adrift, I thought, and at the mercy of any sudden winds. I crouched down and wrapped my arms tightly about my knees.

It was later, much later, towards the afternoon of that day, before I recovered myself, in small bits at first, swatting at a fly that wandered over the bridge of my nose, scratching the mole on the back of my neck, then sitting cross-legged to examine the bottoms of my feet. Small knobs of softened tar had stuck fast to the skin. And stained my hands which tasted bitter when I tried to lick them clean. But I must finish what I've started, I thought. Apparently I had no other acceptable options. The sheets, the tar, one must work with what came to hand. The thing to do, I knew now, was to dispense with the notion that I must save them all. One would have to go. I would smear it with tar and tie it to form a large basin — so then I must choose which sheet to lose and which to keep? But it is best to deal with one problem at a time.

I go about my business, collecting necessary things. Are they mine to keep? No, quick, drop that thought. Let it roll away. Bring your eyes and hands back to the sand. I'm sifting through it and I can tell in a moment if it holds what I want to find. Though in truth the take is better further up the beach. There the tar lies in thick lumps, dark and glistening like clots of a rain-soaked night. Each piece that I pick up is a little larger than the last. Moreover it frequently happens that, when my fingers sink into that dense warm black, I find the most curious objects, shards of pottery, white glass beads, the curved silver tail of a baby's spoon. They surprise me, coming to light like unexpected glimpses of another life. Here, on my island. They must

have washed ashore. When my lap is full I carry them off in a fold of my skirt and hide them safely in a corner of the tent. Then I hurry back, anxious for more. I think that if I can collect them all, they might be pieced together, back into the shape which once ordered them. Failing that, I'll have to come up with a shape of my own, turn the pieces this way and that in the hope that something might come out.

But first things first as Mrs. Thames would say. I have a wash-basin to make, of a size to fill all the space between my outstretched arms. One day it might rain and while I sink under the basin's weight, still I'll manage to totter out with it. I'll prop it upright against the side of the cliff and when it's full, well then I'll have to find a staircase to spiral up its sides so that I might reach the rim and peer over it into the dark wet depths. I'll carry the sheets in the laundry basket — but they're tissue thin. How do I know that they'll hold up in the wash?

I can't say where my parents were during all those years that I lived with Mrs. Thames. They must have been taken from me suddenly, the parting hidden while I was deep in play. When I looked up, they were no longer in my life. They might have died in an accident or been killed in one of the revolutions, they left no word to explain. Or it might be that they were cast up on islands of their own.

More often, I believe that Mrs. Thames stole me; that my parents were careless one night and left the nursery window open. I believe that Mrs. Thames came through the rain, returning from some errand. She passed our house, then turned about, lured by the scent of milk and sleeping baby, so she climbed in, took me from the crib and then fled away through the dark, muffling my wails in her heavy cloak. But Mrs. Thames claims that I was left on her doorstep at the age of seven. She clearly remembers opening the door to bring in the milk and finding instead a cardboard box collapsing under the beating rain. When she opened the lid — there I lay, curled like a snail with my thumb in my mouth, a habit she had me break immediately. Little did she know what a can of worms she'd opened that day she says, but although I was never her own daughter, she's quite sure that I was treated as such, just the same.

I often dream another story but I don't know where it comes from. It's not a really story, it has no beginning nor end and it appears in my mind like the fragment of another's memory, precise and saturated. It is raining and my boots are wet and someone asks me if I would like some tea. I walk up stone steps that are too high for me, holding onto a flap of heavy brown wool, then pass through a door. Inside there's a carpet which I try not to muddy and a brass container with umbrella handles poking out.

Given these circumstances, I have no way of saying who I really was. I can't find a flicker of a former life that I might run to; not for me the

consolation of recalling happier times. Instead, I've made do with hand-me-downs, the worn memories overheard from the boarders when they think they can bring them safely to mind, there in the privacy of their rooms. In happier times, that's how they begin and then I'll hear of strips of lace bought with pennies earned from hemming endless lengths of cloth or of the husband with the soot-grey jowls who, regrettably, didn't last. I think, what to make from such meager lives? But then a voice floated clear of the halting murmurs and I caught — That summer we stopped by the edge of the sea. I moved a step closer. But it was a wasted trip, filled with rain and bad colds and inside-out umbrellas whose spokes would never bend back again. I kept just the beginning, playing with it long after the others had gone to their beds. After that, a long period of days by the window and not a cloud in the sky and the bowl, do you remember? into which I broke an egg. Which I've kept and strung together, although I thought I'd never hear an ending that could make everything fit but patience, patience, it has to come and now, out from a dark corner I hear a flake of a voice, so frail and light that I've almost missed it as it wafts past — I saw the curve of the world, it says and pauses, but it was too much for me to grasp. So, I think, clenching my hand, what am I to make of that?

There did come a time when, despite all Mrs. Thames' care and attention, one of the old ladies suddenly took a turn for the worse. The old

woman became more and more reluctant to be taken from the bed each morning. She wrapped herself in the sheets, knotting them around her neck so I couldn't get her up until I got them all untangled. Where before she had always been impatient with how I washed and dressed her, now she wouldn't stand for it at all. She hid the soap under her night gown. She kicked me when I tried to put her stockings on. Each morning it became worse and she began to refuse to allow me into her room. She said that I wasn't her real mother and demanded to see Mrs. Thames, weeping for Mrs. Thames who didn't want to have anything to do with it. She's broken the contract, was all that Mrs. Thames would say. And I couldn't stand the sight of it, all old and bent, the wisps of yellowed grey hair matted in clumps on the pillow, the bony hands wrapped with thick lavender veins, the crying that wouldn't cease until I hit her, on the shoulders and on the hips, so hard that my hand became swollen. I dragged her to the edge of the bed and forced every last piece of clothing on her, stockings, shirts, skirts, boots and a jacket, all her things plus a hat which I grabbed and jammed over her head. Then I pulled her out of the room and into the parlour where she would sit, sit with everyone looking at her. I told the others what a terrible thing this old woman was. I told them that with everything she'd done, she'd caused the delay in the serving of tea, and while I spoke her breathing became louder. Yes, and what's she up to now, I thought? So it continued until it rasped in her throat and the rhythm broke and fractured and what emerged were words never before heard among

the ladies residing in Mrs. Thames' house. Crooks, she cried, crooks, sneaks, cheats the lot of you! Pay no mind, I ordered the others and pushed the old woman back down in her chair. Furthermore, I ordered them not to speak with her for the rest of the week. She was to sit there and they were not to look at her at her nor pay any notice to her until she'd learned what a disgusting thing she really was.

But they didn't listen to me for they informed me later, when I came back, that while they had spoken with her, very nicely, about the temperature of the tea or the general humidity, or the way Mrs. Thames did seem to be putting on fat, they'd been answered with the mutterings of a madwoman, so they said. She's a madwoman they told me, it's unspeakable what she says.

They'd drawn away their chairs, leaving the madwoman be, alone by the parlour window, snorting and spitting out ravings, oblivious to us all. But she was acutely alert to the sound of Mrs. Thames' footsteps coming down the hall and her entrance through the door, for this made her shout even louder and it seemed to me that the tone of her voice had now changed, no longer unforgiving but yearning, although the others said it was all one and the same to them. So the madwoman raved, on and on, despite the fact that Mrs. Thames had turned her back on her and was even then wiping her hands on a dust rag while the other boarders crouched, eyes squeezed tight and ears tightly corked with the tips of their crooked little fingers.

Mrs. Thames has a cousin, distant on the uncle's side. She always said how fortunate she was to have this cousin, as family could be trusted. They didn't question how things stood. This cousin was a specialist of many diseases which, she said turning on her fancy, goes to prove how the healing arts ran through her bloodline like little gems, she said, fairy lights and crystal, that's what the seeds of healing powers are. Many of her boarders were referred to her by this man for a small commission on the monthly fee. She had agreements too for emergencies, that he would visit after hours when the others were in bed, white faces carefully folded in sleep.

I heard when he came in that night. I was sitting, clutching my handkerchief. Heavy footsteps entered the front hall bringing in rain that dripped to puddles on the tile floor. Mrs. Thames exclaimed. Ah, finally, I thought, she's called in the doctor. It had been too much for me the whole long week, trying to keep the house in order while the old woman threw clothes and pillows about and made me ill with her accusations. I had taken things, she said. This couldn't be true. When I came in after her, it was only to pick up. It made me nervous, her acting up like that. If I got too close she would lunge out her hands, as if she might very well turn me on end and shake me until the last penny fell out. It made my hands itch and my hair stand on end, so bewildered was I as to what I should do. Or so I told myself, avoiding the thought that those reaching arms might mean something else entirely, but for sure, whatever she asked for would be the very thing that I couldn't possibly

give back. But now, I had her peaceably in bed. It was easier in the evening for she didn't protest at being put to bed as she did when I took her out of it in the mornings. I tucked the sheets snug around her, pinning the corners to the mattress so she wouldn't throw them off and go wandering about as she had the night before. I left her dozing with the lamp on too. Mrs. Thames said that I was spoiling her terribly and that I shouldn't let her think that she could have her own way. If that woman goes from bad to worse, she said, then you've only yourself to blame. But I needed my rest so I left the light on anyway.

No, I can't recall if Mrs. Thames told me about any plans, any special plans she might have laid, perhaps while listening to the madwoman howl. And yet, you might say, I must have known that she wouldn't brook such continual disorder upsetting what she liked to term, the equilibrium of the house. Moreover, might it not also be true that I had given her ideas, in carelessness perhaps, thinking that if there wasn't a cure for the old woman's condition then there must be some prescription to make her settle down. Could this be the reason why I wake up every night and pace back and forth? No. Best look for a simpler cause, the one that I've been hiding behind my back. To be frank, and for the moment I will put the excuses aside, what I did was to let things slide, pretending that my thoughts were everywhere else but knowing that, as the old woman fell to pieces, I could gather them up and keep them for myself. But was this really a choice I made? How do I know?

And now it comes. Mrs. Thames led the doctor in through the house, towards the room where I sat. I was peering through the doorway to catch a glimpse of him. I hadn't seen him before. I couldn't have or I would never have raised my eyes from my lap, I would have had no desire to discover that he was much larger than imagined, like a piece of a dream that overtakes you, rearing up without reason or warning. His head reached to the top of the door and his shoulders filled the width of the frame so when he paused and looked in, looked in at me, I could see no way past him, not even if I tried to duck a glance beneath his arm. I had to stare at him. There was nothing else to do. So I watched as his gaze sharpened and made its way through my deceptions to that which I'd turned my back on, an old woman who covers her rotten bones with ridiculous pretensions of youth, thin grey hair hanging in a braid beside a face full and smooth, dimpled with a smile, eyes glossed with naivete, while she sits with her rheumatic legs fixed straight, shoe heels propped on the floor, the round toes pointing left and right. He had found me.

Evidently, I'd been confused. I'd thought that I knew who he had come for, and yet it seemed that I was indeed coming on sick, my fingers stiffening with fatigue and aches cramping my neck and back. Wasn't it true that I was a bit under the weather, taking a turn for the worse, perhaps from the exhaustion of the last long week, but wasn't it true that I was often ill, always ill in fact, and wouldn't it be best if I would let him have a look at me? Just a short look. To my alarm, he made as if to enter the room and I thought, I

must tell him it's no more than tiredness. I've never been sick a day in my life. Mrs. Thames shook her head and hushed me. She pulled gently on his arm and he frowned at the interruption. She repeated the gesture and the frown disappeared. He'd been mistaken. The light plays tricks with the eyes at times. He shrugged. And he was gone. Really, it seemed to me that he'd forgotten me entirely the minute he was distracted. I felt better and yet — what if I was ill? What if the old woman had brought in something contagious and now I too was sick, so weak that I could no longer judge what was or was not in my own interests? And if I was ill, really ill as his grave regard so clearly suggested, shouldn't there be someone to take care of me?

As she led him on down the hall, I couldn't shake the thought that Mrs. Thames was, as always, simply inconsiderate of my well-being. Anything might happen if I didn't try to put myself where he would stop to look at me again. That was why I rose and crept after them. So I heard Mrs. Thames talk of contracts, her usual concern, along with vacant rooms and putting things to right. Very true I thought, and pressed up closer to the wall. Already they'd turned the knob and entered the old woman's room. I flitted behind them and crouched by the closed door. From the other side came the peevish voice, What's this? What's this? And I imagined him looking at her when he should be looking at me. Who had suffered the most in the past week? It was easy for her, she just had to lie there and be impossible but I was the one who must feed her and dress her or turn her about when she lay

in the bed then find the time to wash her sheets twice a day. So I listened for the words of comfort the doctor would give her because, really, they belonged to me. I would snatch them up before they could reach her — why waste any kindness on a pair of deaf ears? I was so clever to work all this out, arranging my thoughts so that what I did would seem right and proper. A tissue of lies, such a fragile thing to hold between myself and the glare of unbearable truths. And then to say: so busy was I with my own deceptions that I didn't question why the doctor, who was now walking back and forth, said nothing, not even in the slight pause he made before each turn. Nor did I start with sudden concern and get to my feet when finally he stopped over the bed, although plainly I heard the intake of a frightened woman's breath. I remember — the draft stirred beneath the door and I turned my face against the smell of old urine. She'd become a real bitch about that, too lazy even to bother ringing the bell. I heard the window close and the shirr when the curtains were pulled to, and then the old woman's voice was still. The voice was still but I heard hands shuddering on the mattress, although I don't know how she broke them free, I'd pinned down the sheets securely, Mrs. Thames, a clothespin on each corner so she wouldn't be a bother, but my hands aren't what they used to be. Nor my eyes either for I saw, from under the door, the draft blow a flurry of tiny moths, pale and tattered like feathers from an old pillow. And I remember how I swooped silently about, catching everyone of them, and how

I felt the dying pulse in each small body as I put them, one by one, into the terrible hunger of my mouth.

Evenings now I sit in a spot on the inner rim of the cliffs, high enough to see the contents of my island but not so high that I can see past to all the things I have no say over. Lately I have come to realize that from this vantage point my island can be nothing more than the burnt out bowl left by a fallen star, its trail of dust calcified like salt around the badly chipped rim. Most of the time I keep my eyes closed and listen to the gulls. They have been moving inland for the last few years and would have possessed the entire island if I hadn't laid claim to a portion. When the migration first started I was pleased to have the company. I watched them tear apart the old nests and carry the best bits to spots they'd chosen amongst the rocks by my tent. They brought favorite pebbles and shards of bone, mementos of an especially fine catch. Then they discovered the thread unravelling from the hems of my sheets and pulled them off to tie down their new homes. There's nothing more that I can do. It's only a matter of time before I am declared officially homeless and driven to an outer ledge overlooking the sea.

The cormorants have disappeared. They flew over the island one day and away to the west while I watched them pass above me in the same way that I used to watch the banks of winter clouds break and run before the spring winds. I followed them as long as I could, feeling myself diminish from

view until I passed out of sight entirely. I turned from the window and resumed my seat.

I live in the last room of an old house which is rented out to me by a woman I know as Mrs. Thames. I have heard others calling her by different names but Thames is the one she told me to use the day I came and she showed me my room. "We keep a quiet home here", she said. I nodded. I knew no other kind of place.

She has three other boarders who I never see but know of by the black coats hung in the hall, the three pairs of overshoes lined up safe and dry by the door, the stiffened umbrellas that will no longer unfurl. At night I've often waked to the sound of footsteps passing towards the toilet then back to one of the bedrooms. I believe these must belong to the girl. The other tenants aren't much for getting up and about. Sometimes, as I pass by one of the closed doors, I'll hear breathing but it always stops the instant I pause to listen. Oh, you're in there alright, I say to myself and keep on my way. I expect that they're the sorts who don't merit more than a passing glance. Not like the one who lives behind the last door, at the end of the hall, and always leaves a shadow to blacken the thin space beneath. But I shouldn't be talking like this for I've been told that we tenants are not to go out. Mrs. Thames says it's because of the character of the house, cranky with twists and hidden nooks, the kind of place that could swallow us up. She wouldn't want us to waste our last days rattling doorhandles, bones trapped in a closet. At first I believed

her, even the furnishings seemed untrustworthy, cropping up in the most unexpected places so that I stumbled each time I tried to pass by.

The window of the room, in which I'm supposed to stay put, faces north. It looks out to a brick wall belonging to the house next door, positioned so close to our own that there isn't the space for an adult to squeeze through. I often worry for the children who will be tempted to play in there, that they'll forget time and find, when they wish to go home, that they're no longer small enough to make their way back. That is how close the next house stands to my room. Nevertheless, light manages to seep in although it loses much in the struggle. And I did agree to accept it. Mrs. Thames pointed out a bed, a bureau, a chair. These were on the house, she said, while I was to provide the rest. She turned abruptly and pressed her palms together in order to add, whatever you have? Some remnants of linens, odds and ends, rags really that I'd yet to discard and then memory fails; I do not know what wreck I retrieved them from and find only thick patches of utter darkness where every candle gutters in a rising wind.

She offered me tea and sent the girl off to the kitchen for it. During the wait, Mrs. Thames leaned back her head and watched me with half-closed eyes. I did nothing, wanting to set a good impression that I wouldn't be a bother and, indeed, I believed that I'd succeeded until the girl, who'd finally come back, handed me a cup. And I of course, having at some point lost the knack for this sort of thing, felt it slipping from my grasp. You nearly dropped

it, the girl's eyes reproached. But Mrs. Thames was quite kind and motioned her to steady my hand. I explained that over the years the delicacy of my senses had quite worn away. I have washed such a quantity of sheets and faces, I said, that I can no longer tell them apart. Mrs. Thames said that I wasn't to fret, she quite forgave the incident and could assure me that no harm was done. It relieved me to know that she wouldn't hold my clumsiness against me. Only later, when she left the room to fetch her papers, did I notice that the handle of that cup had long been missing.

On that day, when we met and discussed the conditions of my fate, while we sat that way, face to face, I couldn't help but see that her lower lip was much wider than the upper, as if it had been overstretched and lost its shape, I presume from smiling. It was the mouth of a face slipping from the prime of life but which could still be picked up at the corners without too much effort. Apart from that, and the shortness of her arms — they only reach to the hip — I noted the hold of her head, a little askew and downwards, as if speaking in passing to someone on the street.

Her terms appeared quite generous, more so even than I'd been led to expect. The agreement was, that in return for an indefinite period of care, I was to will to her all my remaining assets. The transfer of property would only take effect on my departure, not a minute sooner, so I could be assured of not wanting for anything during my stay. I reminded her that I owned very little. Neither could I make up any short-fall with offers to help with the daily

chores. Those skills had been entirely used up in the care of others. I was very forthright about this because I didn't want it said that I had entered under false pretences. Mrs. Thames answered that she had a certain talent for making do and not to worry as long as I didn't live beyond my means. This last point being emphasized I nodded agreement, a simple matter for me as I've always lived frugally, managing on rather limited resources. "Good," she said, "We'll make out just fine." Then she rose and led me to my room.

Now that she walked in front of me, I discovered that there was a large rip in the back of her grey dress, held together by an assortment of hooks and eyes. Behind my own back, the girl followed. I didn't turn to see her but I heard as she scuttled from doorway to doorway. I have no doubt that if I'd turned, I would have found her frozen into some pose of domestic respectability. As for Mrs. Thames, despite her fat she soon outdistanced me, hurrying along the hall until so diminished, the only guide I had as to my direction was a glimpse of grey skirt hem as she veered around yet another corner.

So I started my life over again as I have time after time in the past, leaving one position to search for the next and the relief of finding the next since it is never certain that another will come my way. But the sense of reprieve was followed by yet more dread for it always happened that my new employers, who had expressed complete satisfaction with my ways on hiring me, soon developed an antipathy to everything about me. Reviewing the

quality of my presence, they began to discover previously unsuspected traits. I was not what they had been led to expect, they said, although I did as I was supposed to, exactly as I had done from the beginning. Under close scrutiny it seems that I couldn't hold up. Sometimes, as their eyes ground closer to me, I would feel my features acquire a disquieting instability. My eyes would narrow and draw in slyly closer to my nose, my mouth fill with secrets they feared it might reveal. No matter what I did next, the outcome was inevitable. I would have to leave. Consequently, my arrangement with Mrs. Thames left me both curious and anxious. What had I brought with me that might lead her to imagine that I possessed some worth?

That night I catalogued every one of my assets and found nothing unexpected. I tried to give them substance by cleaning and rearranging them but they remained scraps, even when I squinted at them to gauge how they might look through another's eye. I considered the idea that covetousness demands an object, any object, and will fondle and believe desirable whatever happens by. But I thought of Mrs. Thames as a woman with some standards — after all the teacup had been good china — so I didn't see how we would make out. I expected that any day, she would take a closer look and discover that what I promised to her was nothing but rubbish. Then she would turn around and tell me, time to be off, time to go. Then where would I be?

Another time I woke with a start in the dead of night thinking: there's always room for improvement. Just like that I heard it, a thought from

another set of circumstances entirely, so clear that at first I looked behind my pillows to see who could have hidden there. I thought, room to improve? While still making do? I wrote this down on the back of the contract I had signed for Mrs. Thames. On second thought, I blacked out the question marks. New ventures should be undertaken with an air of confidence. On the right side of the page, under the heading, Still Making Do, I wrote down an inventory of all the things that could be found in my room. Then I drew a line down the center of the page and on the left side, Room to Improve, I made another list in which I itemized what I saw as worn out or otherwise damaged, intending to note suggestions as to how I might refurbish them. How? Why, by borrowing a thread here and stitching up a tear there, or by chipping off a piece from there to glue over a small gap here. At first my hopes were buoyed up with the optimism of the activity but all too soon they began to sink. The two lists were turning out to be identical. Everything needed repair so there wasn't a single object that could escape appropriation for the restoration of another which, once mended, would have to be disassembled again to make up the deficiency in yet another. Neither could I resolve the problem by sacrificing some objects entirely to the restoration of the remainder since the wears and tears were linked in a consecutive chain of defect and compensation. It would have been better, I thought, not to have come to this realization. It would have been better if I'd left the question marks in place and gone back to sleep, lulled by the twinkling of a distant possibility.

In the morning, while I sat in the chair which I'd pushed over to the window, Mrs. Thames paid me a visit. "And how are we this morning?" she said, sitting on the bed. She began to fluff the pillows. I would have preferred to keep the bed all for myself but it wasn't my place to say. What I said was that I had settled in nicely, thank-you, but didn't she think that was really an awful lot of rain? Yes, the house did suffer from damp she agreed, preoccupied with examining my sheets. For wear, I thought. She looked up. "Now, about this business of settling in — " She paused, looking intently at the floor. I looked too and saw four long scuff marks. The tracks led straight to my chair. "I see. You've moved the chair", she said. Did I think that was wise? What with the drafts: one of her ladies had only recently been taken away by a draft. Here Mrs. Thames got to her feet and came over to me. She smiled. Not that she wanted to alarm me but you never knew. And here she lifted me up, along with the chair. My face flopped into her bosom. It was difficult to breathe. But, she continued, we wouldn't want it said that we were careless about my health. Chair and I were gently lowered back to the floor, right in the spot where the chair had been before all my work, well away from the window. And now she wished to continue with this business of settling in. Business? I said. She stood blocking my view of the now dim and faraway window. She had her hands on her hips. She would say it again, slower this time. No, please, I stopped her, I quite understood. She was happy to hear that, not being one to waste words, she said. To go on — it seemed that I had

been up for the better part of the night? True, I said, perhaps as a result of the new surroundings. Yes, she conceded, they might be new but she expected that by now they would be quite, quite familiar. Of course, I agreed, wanting to be pleasant. In any case, to date I had seen nothing that I could call unfamiliar. Well, all this was neither here nor there, she decided. Speaking of which, had I by chance come upon that piece of paper? I raised my eyebrows, in the way that I'd seen others do. Actually, she was speaking of the contract. Ah, the contract. Where was the contract? No, I lied. "No?" she repeated. No, I lied again, not since the day I came and if she remembered I had read it very closely so as to be sure to know it if ever I saw it again. But if she would like me to help with the search? No, it seemed that wouldn't be necessary. She'd just remembered that the girl had been around, picking up. It was really very irritating the way things kept being moved about. And by the way, she would send the girl in to give the floor a bit of spit and polish.

Heavens but I am getting old. Mrs. Thames was at the end of the hall before I finally caught my breath. So old, I had to prop myself with the bureau, with the chair, before I made it to the bed and pulled the covers over my old, old thoughts of saving myself.

I thought that I might want to make a third list. If I wrote very small I could probably fit it into that space still open at the bottom of the page. As it was to be a listing of those things that, in fact, I lacked and as I felt most uncomfortable if I was caught in an outright lie, I thought it would be best to

use a heading such as: Gratuities received in fond, or was it grateful? — in grateful remembrance of services past, or better yet: Family Heirlooms. This for the sake of Mrs. Thames, a reassurance if she ever happened on it and yes, a dodge on my part. However, although I had the heading down pat, composing the list itself turned out to be more than I'd bargained for. Since I didn't want to be seen leaving my room — there was always the chance of someone else moving in on my absence — there was no way I might go mumbling and poking about in order to compare what I owned with what was wanting. Still, you would think that I could simply make something up. But no, search as I would, all I could discover in my imagination were the bed, the bureau, the chair, my little odds and ends, and finally, some memories: at twelve, a visit to an uncle's house with white stones lining a drive and a glimpse of myself caught and erased by someone's hand as I stood on tiptoe before a gilt-framed pierglass that hung in the hall. Then earlier, when I lay ill on a makeshift cot amid the trunks and boxes in an attic. It was something contagious and a woman brought me meals on a tray lined with a tea towel while complaining how she didn't like the look of those stars always peering in through the gaps in the curtains, the ones I had memorized, hanging pale across the window then teased apart by the faint hot breeze. And the cotton quilt I clung to as a means to pass the time. Before that there was infancy, a conch shell that whispered to itself while lying on a shawl-draped table, the

shadow of lace on a wall, a yellow ball daubed with black moons, a human presence that was always just behind me.

At the window, countless times during the course of the day, I'd stand and peer through the glass, watching for another feather to fall my way. There was life up there, on top of the roof. Squabbling sparrows, I thought, or pigeons tidying up their nests. The feathers fell and time was slowed while they floated down the narrow shaft of damp grey light. When my legs gave out, I'd lurch back to the chair. In the chair, now that was another matter. There I could only think that, as always, there was no way to build on the little that I had. And eventually, even those fragments began to slip away but I didn't detect each absence at the time it occurred. I'm not one who can hold onto things as others do. Housekeeper used to reproach me for having been born with holes in my pockets. Quite evident, as I'd managed to lose both mother and father by the age of three. Everywhere I went I left droppings behind, a haphazard trail of foil twists, fabric snips, biscuit crumbs. She followed me with reprimands, for which she seemed to have an inexhaustible vocation, interrupted only as she paused to gather up the traces of me, even my footprints. And when I stopped, as I did sometimes to retrieve an object dropped in error, she would be there first to scoop it up and hide it in her apron. No, you'll not get it back, she would say when I asked for its return, it's high time you learned that you're not in your own home. She had a drawer

full of articles that I'd considered to be my own. It was in the kitchen, to the right of the sink. Get away from there, she said when she saw me edging towards it. I didn't persist. Instead, I learned to stifle the impulse to reclaim what had once been mine.

You see, it's always been my situation to be an occupant in someone else's home, to have no place of my own, no claims to the floor I walk upon, the chair in which I sit, the bed I curl into every night. So if I leave so much as a handkerchief on one of their tables, then it's no longer mine, even if my name is embroidered on it. They'll just say, you're quite mistaken, that's not your name, it's mine, my middle name if you must know, and snatching up the object they'll run with it to their rooms. In the early days, when Housekeeper puffed behind me ready to point the finger at any negligence on my part, I tried to retain my hold on things by securing them to my person. I put my cup on a string and knotted it around my wrist. I filled my pockets until they could hold no more, then tied two pillowcases together and slung them about my neck. When these too were full, I tucked more items under each arm. The weight made me stagger about and each gesture I made during the day would shake something loose and my hands were not free to pick it back up. In this way I learned what I must do without. That's why my eyes follow those who shuffle by, pushing their dusty prams filled with contents safely hidden beneath white sheets. How were they permitted to keep all that? And why I can barely contain my loathing of those others who parade up and down the

hallways leading a train of exhausted porters panting against creaking baggage carts piled high with a booty of bags and steamer trunks corded tight on ribbon-bound letters, souvenirs and what-nots, while I, who may not retain one item more than my own strength can support, am pushed to a corner of the floor where I press my forehead against the wall, gaining comfort in the thought that I have found an inconspicuous spot that few would think it worthwhile to claim.

So it was that in the dim light of my room, all I noticed was a change in the substance of the space around me, wider somehow and thinner too, while the things in my room grew very light and insubstantial, making them harder and harder to find. I thought this was what it was like to finally be left alone. It was not the sensation I'd expected but then neither had I, in my heart, expected Mrs. Thames to stand by her agreement to leave me be, safe with my belongings for the duration of my stay. If I felt vague and uncomfortable it must indicate a period of adjustment. Besides, I'm not one to complain over little nothings. I would have sat quietly in the chair, worrying what Mrs. Thames would think of me if she found out my plight, when all the while conniving and thievery continued until I didn't have a leg to stand on. If it hadn't been for the lists. Because I found them you see, right where I'd lost them, under the chair pad. It goes to show what a slovenly creature that girl is, never thinking to turn the pad over now and then to save wear on the fabric.

There is no question but that the lists are mine. The handwriting is unmistakable even if the details are blurred. Some moisture has crept into the paper, rippling the edges of the sheet and leaving behind a series of impressions, like thumbprints. My own thumb fits into every one of these prints. If someone had been about to witness my discovery, they'd have seen my face catch hold of recognition. They'd have watched as my features shifted from uncertainty to understanding so that, when I next looked up, it would be apparent that I saw right through their nasty little plot. Luckily, I was quite alone. In my long career I'd been accused often enough of theft to know the lay of the land as it were, or, at least, the essential elements of its design: quite simply, that once they'd had their fill of me they wanted to sweep clean the scene and would concoct excuses, moving things out of place then pointing at the empty space with cries that their trifles were no longer there. Following which I would be asked to leave, without notice, pay or references, with no choice but to oblige. So I knew what was afoot although I wasn't yet certain just whose hand explored the corners of my room at night nor which pocket stretched wide to swallow the morsel. I had suspicions that pointed to the girl but it seemed obvious to me that the one who stood to gain the most was really Mrs. Thames, since our agreement was so balanced that the longer my residence in her house the ever diminishing would be her returns.

I can't tell you the state I was in when I realized my situation. At first I was in such horror that I couldn't say what specifically was gone and what

remained, only that the numbers didn't tally. I was, in fact, astonished at the length of the list. It was enormous and the writing was very small, while my room was wiped clean, except for the chair and the bed I lay on, as well as my pillows and a small thin square of pieced fabric that served as a blanket. How long had I been without sheets? I cannot answer. I wasn't aware that they'd been pulled out from under me until I had the proof in hand. Also missing, and this might seem a tiresome list of complaints from an old woman but it is the truth, the absolute truth — also missing were those items I had managed to carry for years from one end of the house to another, seeking to support myself. Gone was my washboard. Utterly vanished. If I hadn't noted down its description, I wouldn't begin to know what I looked for. I might go so far as to entertain the illusion that it was a fine board, with a glass scrub surface instead of old tin pitted from my knuckles and lye soap until it rasped like pumice and was deemed, as I have it written here, unfit for use. Furthermore, they stole my mixing bowl. This I can almost remember, although not how it looked. It was ironstone, I know that but I have no colours for it, no patterns that might or might not have been imbedded in the glaze. I must have cradled it against my breast time after time while stirring its contents, cookie batters I imagine, until my arm absorbed the curve of its body so that when I hold myself just so, one hand clenched around a wooden spoon, the other occupied with the bowl, holding it safe and still while my head bends over it, I recall the absent shape, its dimensions both around and within. The solidity of this

memory in itself should be sufficient proof for anyone that it is indeed my own. But if not, I have it here on my list: bowl with pouring lip, some chipping about the rim, and when I find the culprit sitting on it, there in the corner of her room, just see if she can disprove my claim.

Meanwhile, I look for the evidence against who is to blame. I think, to catch her fingers in the act! I must confess, that is as far as my thoughts can go. I've no idea what I would do in the event of success. But where was I? Yes, first I will consider the case of the girl as it is she who wakes me up every morning, her grim little mouth hardly saying a word, certainly never a kind word. So it's obvious that she feels no great solicitude for me. And then, although I never summon her with the bell, she finds all sorts of pretences to flit in and out whenever she pleases. She says that Mrs. Thames has ordered her to tidy up. She also says that if I didn't upend the room that way then most likely I'd get to see less of her unwelcome face. An unpleasant sulky face, I put in while intently observing her version of tidying up. I find it very suspicious the way her fingers linger over things, or rather, over parts of things, hems, edgings, rims, as if her hand is too small to close in a good solid grasp. Pinching one corner of a towel, she manages to hoist it into the laundry basket. Yes, I saw that, however it's not my towel so I must deem it insufficient evidence. After a pause, to catch her breath I suppose, she takes hold of a sweater by its one remaining button, drags it over to the bureau and

reluctantly begins to push it into the bottom drawer. I wonder, could this feeble performance be just a ploy to put me off guard? I've noticed that her legs look sturdy enough. Meanwhile, she has shrouded her fingers in a dirty old rag and begun to dust, the bureau, the bed rails, more dirt left behind than wiped off and finally to the window where she hunches, her eye close to the lower pane, ostensibly rubbing a spot from the glass. And now the incident occurs. As I watch her blow a bloom of mist upon the window then polish it away, I begin not only to see her but, in an odd way, to feel her — the lowered chin, the bent back, the motion of the hand cleaning the glass then slowing as the fingers find and trace the vague outline of the mirrored face. And how she brushes back some straying hairs while examining the reflection of her half-turned head. All this sensed so clearly that it might be myself standing there, except that she has come and taken my place. And what I want to know is, would this be considered to constitute a theft?

After she's gone, I go back to searching for those articles that should be in my room. But then along comes Mrs. Thames, who finds me lying sweetly peaceful in the center of the unmade bed. I'd kept an eye on the door, expecting her arrival. She visits once a day at unscheduled hours with no thought for how this might inconvenience me. She's here to see that the girl's keeping up — or so she says — followed by, "Crumbcake will be served in the parlour at three". She smiles, proof of her kindly intentions. I almost say, well in that case, please reserve a seat for me but then I hear, I'm sure that

I hear — "It's time that you get your just desserts". Sotto voice, the words crawling out from the flaccid corners of her mouth. Does she really believe that I'm so deaf that I couldn't make them out? Or am I dreaming up words just to suit myself? I find that indeed, I've left my mouth agape. Sit up straight you old fool and hope you've let nothing slip. But although Mrs. Thames is still turned my way, her eyes are looking everywhere else. They see that somehow I've used up the curtains. How that could have happened in such a short time, I don't know. And now she's noted that, so soon? I've worn a hole in the rug. But I weigh almost nothing, I want to protest. No time, she's already moved on to something else. She says, "I see that you've not found the use for this bit of thread". She reaches out and plucks up a spool of white, as if it's been sitting there all this time, right on the top of the bureau. Which isn't so. She must have pulled it out of her sleeve. Of course, I know that this is all a feint, to throw me off-balance, to see what might fall out. I give her no satisfaction, although she waits and waits. Finally she explains, "We're short on such things. It can be used in another part of the house." Her voice is so matter-of-fact, the request so simply put that suddenly I am no longer sure if all the previous complications have done justice to what just occurred. But I can only speak of the things that I remember and if the thread was there, on the bureau, well then, I forgot. I must give her the benefit of the doubt. Now she raises her hand in farewell and I see, between her thumb and forefinger what looks to be a fluttering blur but my eyes are too

slow to pin it down. It is all happening too fast for me, there are things that I've missed. Indeed, Mrs. Thames is already at the door. What is that thing that she's caught in her hand, the blur so like a pair of frail struggling wings. And now she's on her way. To which part of the house? I think, listening as she walks down the hall. To which room, into which closet, on which shelf? Good god woman, get a grip on yourself. The way I go on, you'd think that she'd carried off more than a bit of thread that's not even mine.

If we are very good, then we will get our reward. So said Housekeeper, smiling as she folded the sheets. Yesterday I thought this one of the rules that ordered life. Today I've changed my mind. But why should I remember this when what I started to recall had something to do with Housekeeper's teeth? One of the things that I mean to think about, now that Mrs. Thames and the girl are gone. Housekeeper's teeth: they fell out. I can tell you that much as well as the fact that this occurred while she lay innocently asleep in her own bed. Well. Imagine her upset when she woke the next morning and found those poor teeth scattered about, all tea-stained and yellow, on her clean sheets and pillow. After that she went about with one hand held against the surprise of her suddenly shapeless mouth. And the way that she spoke! All those slurrings and lispings, people were obliged to avert their faces, to ward off her confidences with upraised hands. Also, there were frequent slips of the tongue, leaking out like the spittle that ran down the two furrows at the

corners of her mouth. Not that Housekeeper had any idea that she meant to offend. "The way she goes on," Cook whispered to me, "you'd think that those teeth were all that's been holding that woman's mouth in check."

And here I am, with my own teeth so loose that gaps have appeared, wide enough to let the most thoughtless comments blurt out. Just when I can least afford it, I fear I've become rather indiscreet. Though it was hard to sit on my suspicions while showing the world that I was harmlessly addled. Then the girl dragged me to the parlour and put me on display — yes, that's what I said, *on display* in front of a trio of withered old nannies stiffly propped this way and that, well it was harder still and I so worried at having to leave my room. But then the little liar blamed me for the delay in the tea, when in fact she had deliberately dawdled over dressing me up. Of course, I thought, that's how it goes, now she's taking away my good name. And before I knew it, the words were pouring out. All those creakings as the nannies leaned forwards to catch their earful of what I had to say. Then Mrs. Thames came and they all leaned away, acting as if they'd rather I be put safely under glass. Mrs. Thames, I cried, forgetting that I might be having a spot of trouble with her as well. Mrs. Thames, I repeated, because her gaze was still moving from one to the other as if she had yet to decide who she was going to save. But my chance was cut off by the girl who moved between us. And then threw a teatowel over my head. So down the hall, folded in half over somebody's arm like an old doll, to my room, where Mrs. Thames had been conducting a

thorough search. What else could have delayed her arrival in the parlour? Then I was dumped down in the chair and my hands let free to struggle as they might with the cloth. When I had managed to pull it off, Mrs. Thames and the girl had both left the room and were now standing outside the hall. Through the half-opened door, I could see two shadows wavering against the wall, first apart with the arms gesticulating about and then together like an immense and shapeless creature. Such a scene, I thought it likely to end with them on the floor, rolling about like a huge dustball. I was flabbergasted to think that this went on in Mrs. Thames' house. And then, the smaller shadow, the girl's, pulled and pulled until it snapped free and the girl ran off, except that the angle of her shoulder made it appear that a piece of Mrs. Thames had stuck fast to her, bulging out just below her ear. I settled back in the chair and sought for the darkening blur of the window.

Now I remember something else about Housekeeper's teeth. She'd got another set which she showed to me for the first time that day. And were they very dear, I asked, wondering how could she ever afford such a golden smile? "Just hear the child!" she said to Cook, who was bent over a bowl of batter while muttering something about the fine thing of expecting rewards for doing one's duty. "In this case," Housekeeper interrupted, "what with nursing that poor soul so long that I felt as close to her as a daughter, why I was obliged to accept if only to please her memory for you know what they say, the old woman was most frugal and she wouldn't want them to waste a good set of

teeth." As she spoke, Housekeeper's mouth closed on each word with little clicking sounds, like that of tiny gold keys turning in tiny locks. And I feel that if my memory held everything so orderly and tight, I would be able to make out the sense of it all. But I can only finger the gaps through which my words fell through and despair that I have no way to take them back.

They've locked the door. I thought as much. They did this while I slept but even there I heard the snicker as they slid the bolt so I woke with the premonition that I would find a change had occurred. In fact, I can now stretch my foot to nudge the chair whereas before I had to cross a patch of empty floor to reach it. Another of the improvements is the placement of the bureau which has been moved conveniently to hand, pressed against the side of the bed so that I can no longer open the drawers. I feel certain that these things signify the start of a new phase and don't wish to look further. I don't care to examine the present position of the walls, thank-you.

I'm the one who gave Mrs. Thames the excuse to do this. It was a risk I failed to calculate although I foresaw plenty of others that led me to think that using bedrest as a strategy to keep myself safe was a delusion. As if one delusion was any less trustworthy than another. The truth is, Mrs. Thames has a certain talent of making do. Even if I'd stayed quite still under the blanket, she would have found some reason for locking the door, a justifiable reason fabricated from the set of my face or my unnatural immobility but

whatever she chose to say, it would be a reason utterly detached from the real cause of event: she will do whatever she sees fit for the proper running of her household. Now, if she had let me be, the whole incident would have gone without notice, but no, she had to have her way. It's not my fault if the house is in an uproar.

It was night and in the darkness of my room I was able to find the courage to get up and about. Throughout the house, bodies were rolled into beds and, as I discovered once I was out, there were others without beds who wrapped themselves in litter and lay curled knee to chin, legs straight in the way, like question marks scattered about the floor. To my weak eyes, the hallways were a confusion of drifting shadows and drizzling moonlight. I started down its length, not knowing where to go. Doorways retreated before my outstretched hands, walls turned on a whim and rushed me, slapping me about the head. But I thought, no, I'm beyond all that, childhood is past, and then I closed my eyes so that I might feel my way through the bones of the house. Bones hold true I believe. Indeed, one might almost come to love them. I myself grew fond of a small pile perched on the ledge outside my window, fledgling bones not completely hatched from the shell. Between the shattered edges of eggshell I've glimpsed the pale empty trceries of a tiny breast, the jointed snippets of an ivory claw, a thumbnail skull. Then I sigh and it fades behind a bloom of vapour forming on the glass.

Mrs. Thames taps her nail on the glass. The girl averts her head as Mrs. Thames talks of calmatives and cough syrups then adds, "Unlike you, who have nothing better to do than go stirring up dust from one end to the other, we have business in hand". That very same hand is raised and wipes out the sight of me, first the feet and legs, then the body and the better part of the face. But in her haste she leaves intact one eye and half the mouth. My secret. So, we're not done yet, not by a long shot. In order not to divulge this oversight I refrain from protesting to the girl that she's unnecessarily unkind. Hunkered down by the side of my bed, she's tying me into my own coverlet, knots at each corner, clothespins pinching intervals along the hems. She does this with a dexterity that can only come of practice. On whom, I ask, or did she capture stray pillows and learn the motions with me in mind?

It seems to me that all these precautions represent a great deal of effort for one failing busybody. That's what Mrs. Thames called me, an old busybody. This in the same breath in which she accused me of shiftlessness. It was because of her closets you see. She didn't want me mucking about with the linens when in fact I had no interest whatsoever in her blessed linens, particularly as they're far from clean. They've been left too long on the line gathering soot and bird droppings. A better housekeeper than her would have locked that closet, then I wouldn't have been tempted to pry. I would have kept to my own affairs, looked out for my own interests and I'd have found them too. Even in the dark, with my eyes shut tight I would have found them

since in truth they're bitter objects, drawing blood at the slightest touch. I show you my hands, see how they're tracked with thin white crescent scars from clutching the chipped rim of an empty belly — such pain that I thought I would gladly let go. Let someone else try their hand at my life. Yet now, when the traces of my past have been snatched from me so that I have nothing to remember it by, I see that I cannot reconcile myself to the loss. It seems grief has its habits and I am left with bewildering gestures disjointed from their rightful place and time, my hands busy cleaning, mending, folding, holding things for which I have no particular thought in mind. Not that I'm fool enough to think I could ever put everything back to right. It's that my things belong with me, botched and hurtful as they are. There's no arguing it, I have far more need for them than does Mrs. Thames' house.

So what happened last night, at such a late hour, was that I set out to get my things back. And once I'd done that I planned to return to my room and there I'd wrap everything into that little scrap of a coverlet they'd seen fit to leave me. All this very quietly, without saying a word. Then I meant to put on my hat, tie my shoes to my belt and go my way, creeping down the hall until I reached the front door — how long since I had a breath of fresh air? Mrs. Thames was grudging even with that. I'd need a coat, yes, there was one on the peg, also that old cardboard box by the corner, something to sit on when I rested my feet and a pair of those rubbers against the pouring rain and then what? Then what?

Leave? I don't know what I've been thinking of. "Come to your senses woman", Mrs. Thames said and she's quite right, although it seems to me that some have gone missing. Fingers and toes have flown off in small flocks to the world's four corners and I make do with sturaps, too blunted to detect a new loophole now. Yes, sometimes I agree with her and sometimes I don't. That's the confusion, back and forth as if turning slowly like a weight on a string. First she says, "And just what did you intend to do with yourself? In the dark? In the rain?" I have to say that I hadn't really thought much past leaving the house for some spot where I could sit with my things, put my legs in the sun. "Well, you'll not get far", she says, "with those legs, in this weather". How kind of her to point this out, the little weakness in my plans. But then she adds, "Is this any way to repay me for all I've done? Put that in your hat to think on once we've got you in bed, where you belong." For a moment there I'd begun to think that Mrs. Thames was really kindness itself. But I return to my room without further struggle. What else to do when in the end you can't think up another place to go?

She didn't come upon me by chance last night. Nor was she drawn out by nervous curiosity over strange bumps in the dark. It's not likely that my poor feet could have kicked up enough noise to jog anyone's sleep. What Mrs. Thames won't say is that already her eyes were wide open, taking stock of her ghost, waiting to see how far I would go and next, there she was, blocking the doorway. I didn't recognize her at first. Groping, my fingers found a surface

that gave slightly under pressure, then without warning it ruptured and they were enveloped in what I thought to be the sticky pulp of damp rot. Until the teeth clamped down, almost severing two smaller knuckles and I knew that I'd made a mistake. Such a fuss and, in the end, all for nothing because I'd already found out what she kept so carefully hidden. In the dark, with my eyes closed I discovered that despite the trifles and tricks of draperies and cunning little four-legged tables that sprang in the air at the touch of a button, everything was quite lifeless and fixed into place, as if whatever passed through her large square hands was drained of all substance and meaning, except for the way that it fit into the arrangement — another bleached shell in the row on the wall. Moreover, Mrs. Thames' house was much like another, if perhaps smaller than most. The kitchen was where any kitchen should be; the hallways never deviated into unknown routes. I know it so well, I can draw out the plan in my sleep.

A few surprises remain. In the twilight dimness of my room I raise my hand before me and see that the flesh has lost its place to shadows. Events set in motion so long ago continue unabated; I have no way of stopping them. Even when I form a fist, condensing all my gestures into one mute motion, I gain only a faint increase in density. Moonbeams can dance their way through without a shiver. I daresay that Housekeeper, who was never far behind, has

grown plump off my leavings. But there is more of me gone than may be explained by what I've seen happen.

Which brings to mind a memory that I chanced to smell off the girl's fingers as she washed my face this morning. I was pushing her away when the scent rubbed loose and began unfolding in the air. The girl exclaimed, then started to beat about with the washcloth as if to shred its traces but I had already caught its cue. I kicked free of the cover and elbowed past her, which I would never have managed if she hadn't been so frantic with trying to salvage her secret. I wonder that I had no pity for her. No, I can find no hint of it; I am only troubled in hindsight. So, once I'd shoved her from my way I grasped at tatters that led me up a flight of stairs to a door which was rent and split by shards of azure sky. One push and I blundered out, ducking as an explosion of wings burst around me, huge white wings I thought, their tumult almost knocking me down, turning me about, this way and that. Then I was clear, blinking under a hot sun with gusts of wind tugging my hair, slapping my skirts, and I saw that I stood on a rooftop. To one side, hiding the door I'd come through, were lines of fluttering, flapping linens, sheets, tablecloths, pillowcases, crisply white and snapping to an onshore breeze. So close to the sea I marvelled, I'd never come as near and I peered for it past the roof's rim which was broken in places by irregular crenelations cut into a masonry parapet. Yet there was no sign of the sea, only the expanse of sky and, in segments, an intimation of green. Past my eye rolled a small shadow,

gone as soon seen to hide in a crack of stone, and it seemed that a cry blew past me. So there are others I thought and stepped over, to where I could lean my arms on a ledge and gaze far out at a smooth sweeping ring of skyline which met an ocean of salt grass rippling toward me with the breeze so that the green blades continuously shifted, revealing their silvered bellies, which I could see one by one, if I so chose, or as a mingling of patterns folding over themselves in a flux of ebb and flow. Have you seen? I turned to shout, then hand to mouth, tight and frightened, for across the rooftop to the parapets furthest away I'd seen the girl, poised on the ledge, a motion suspended, the head before it turned, arms, hands surrendering a completed movement, the body balancing on its toes as the wind twined about it the folds of her black dress. You will fail, I cried as I saw her hand begin the reach for all the empty space before her and I covered my face. Then the hand was gone and I looked on eyes, the girl's eyes, fixed on me and the fierce set of her mouth but I'd seen enough to recognize snatches of my own lost dreams and now I'm not afraid anymore. It's not possible but the fear had died before I have and I can say what I think aloud. I say: "Mine".

Who is that girl? She comes into the room when my head is turned. She sidles around with her back to the wall, circling about as if searching for a side of me that will permit her to fulfill some intention. Time and again she creeps through that stealthy dance and I watch every move she makes. Not

that there's a mystery. I wouldn't go so far as to claim that. I no longer doubt but that she hopes to snatch some precious scrap from me if I once look away. They haven't got it all, not yet. That's why I've kept a close eye on her, perhaps too much because a curiosity is awakening in me, for no good reason except that I have studied her so intently that familiarity has dulled and I catch myself asking, whatever is she about?

From the corner of my eye I see the doorway is blocked by a large brittle flake of slate. Mrs. Thames' shadow. Of course, the girl comes on all bustling efficiency, pretending she's only just bathed me and is propping the pillows so she can dress my hair, a mere excuse because she's spotted them you see, the lists. Yes you do, it's easy to pick out the words now that I've shown you, like finding wings within an embroidery of leaves. Poor Mrs. Thames, unable to think of anything better but to keep on searching under the mattress or to feel along the folds of my raggedy old dress hems. And all the while I've been nursing such cunning where she wouldn't catch wind of it, a simple act of misrepresentation that took ages to complete, hampered as I was with no fingers to hand. First, I tore the lists into long thin strips that I pinned into my hair. Then I braided it all together. Sadly, some strips did tear, as paper will, but not to worry, I've gathered the bits and hidden them close to my bosom, which set me to laughing for well over a day. I haven't done such a thing since the time I buried Miss Cynthia's doll in the laundry basket and stowed it under my bed. What an uproar that stirred up. The entire

household, running over itself from attic to basement calling for the little thing, as if she could possibly answer.

Don't touch my hair I say to the girl and pull my head out of her reach. And yet, at the same time, I would like nothing better than to feel her fingers combing out the words I've knotted so tightly about my head or to let her close my eyes and smooth the wrinkles from my face. But where would she put them? I start back up in fright.

The losses, how shall I bear them? And more every day. The chair, gone, stolen while Mrs. Thames goes on about rent overdue. I think, that's a hard woman; she never lets go. There'll be no easy way to settle our account. Even the feathers that stuff my pillows are plundered, handful by handful so that my head sinks lower each night and has further to rise in the morning. That's when Mrs. Thames sends in the girl with her spoonfuls of tonics. Very nice, and what does she use to mix them in, I ask? The girl plays a cretin, round blank eyes and a sly smile that I recognize only too well. Don't fool yourself girl, sneaking around holding another's face in front of yours. My little black crow, fluttering about, hindered by an oversized hand-me-down, caught in the folds of another's mourning dress. And here I find that I've started to cry. Where's my hanky, I ask, what have you done with it? Now what am I to do with all these tears? She couldn't even leave me that. No, I suppose not. The young feed off the old just as the world turns round, then round again and I, left to count my losses. From the outset I've found it so.

You take one step, swaying, clutching at air, at a chair leg or the hem of a skirt, then brave another and already the first is forfeit and before you know it, they've hustled you out the door with empty arms.

Empty and yet I seem to feel the weighted arm, curved just so, from the soft inner crook of the elbow to the hand, where tiny toes curl warm and blind between fingertips. My arm, I know, but what's it about?

The girl sits at the foot of the bed while I can be found at the head, an eye, some broken words that never finish a thought, a heart that still flutters about in my throat. Between us stretches the rest of me, covered with a worn blanket so grey it seems that I look across a drift of ash. She sews, the hem of a sheet, the pocket for an apron, I can't tell. The needle flashes in her fingers but with no tail of thread. She'll make you rip it out, I try to warn, she'll have you do it over and over again. The girl doesn't answer. I sigh and shrug my shoulders. What more can I do?

I've come to think we're much alike, she and I, bits of something from nothing, trying to make more from the same. Bad luck I whisper and shake my head. She lifts hers and looks to me. But for what? She refuses all advice, she ignores the best of intentions. Still, from what I see, she appears to dream that I might give her what she's never had. If so, she's pinned her hopes on the wrong person. All this has become clearer to me, now that the doorway has emptied. The bell rang out from the front of the house, drawing

Mrs. Thames away like a splinter from my eye, so great was the relief. She was always in the way, no matter how I turned, behind, in front, there she was with her purse-strings, standing in the narrow doorway of her narrow house. And in her pocket, along with her scissors and thread, the contract I'd signed in a childish hand where it says that for one like me, my life is not my own.

But didn't the doorbell just ring? The girl holds still while I listen. Then I think, we should be the other way around, what can I hear but my tired blood thud. Is it the new tenant, I ask? That Thames woman isn't one to waste any time. The girl shrugs. No matter. It's agreed and settled that my term has run short, but why she hangs about I don't know. I have no patience for problems bent on outlasting me.

Busy, always busy, her fingers stray towards my cover, seeking loose ends. I feel the tug when she finds one and know the weave is loosening, beginning to unravel as she rolls the thread into the first inchoate bead. Go ahead, I tell her, I won't stop you. It's no matter to me. She can make fistfuls if she pleases, and when she's done why not string a necklace and hang it, looped twice, about her neck. I'll lie here naked and I'll not say a word. Or she can break the string and scatter them from here to there and back again. I very much doubt the effort will lead to something. Such is the truth so there's no reason for her looking disappointed. She should understand as well as I that liberality is limited by the circumstances of birth. For my part, I

came out too soon and it appears that I'm to go before I'm ready. In between, I've suffered for my imprudence. There's nothing left to say. It's not as if I'm a wealthy woman who has a smile and a free hand to pat the bed, signaling her to come here, by me, so that I can think on her as a daughter and afford to be generous. Now, wouldn't that be a picture. Such a woman would bring her lips close to the girl's ear and whisper what I've never heard. She would tell of the curve of a drive, lined with white stones gleaming in the sunlight like new ivory that encircled an island of soft green grass. And in the center, a pool of still water reflecting the sky above and the huge white clouds drifting serenely past. I saw it once. That was in the summer. I went down some steps, then took off my shoes and stood my bare feet on the drive's hot gravelled surface. I felt at once that it must lead to some dear heart's desire, only my feet were too tender and I couldn't take another step.

Would she want that, I wonder? But I don't like to promise what I never had. I found it one day and put it by for safe-keeping, expecting that the owner would come to me and wish it back. I find this hard to say but it's been a foolish wait. I think now that the owner is dead and, with her, pieces gone missing. Still, I might recall an outline, a slender light tracing that will not break even my brittle hand. I wouldn't want it all to go for want. It's a little thing I'll give the girl, a gift that she has no obligation to return, just an echo to be heard if she leans her head close to the crook of my arm. Because, I'll tell her, I never learned the words. Shoulder, arm and hand, stiffened with

disuse, I despair they'll ever do it. How did it go? Like the bowl I coax and feel the fingers flex. Better yet, the elbow creaks and I think I have it. Yes, I have it — until I look down and see an arm, greedy as a hook, a hand clawed in incurable yearning. Alarmed, I protest — not right. And stop, for it's evident that this is the best that I can do. Dare I show her? I look to consider her face. But the room is now empty. She's not there to ask.

If I was a wealthy woman, others would wait in rows of chairs pulled in close to the bed. But I'm not. Alone, which is for the best, as what I have is better kept to myself. I heard heavy footsteps far down the hall, then they stopped awhile. I remember a hand gently brushing my tired head. There's no one here so I think it is now time to reclaim a past. There was a drive, lined with white stones. I repeat myself, a circular shape that emerged from a distant patch of trees. There, and see how it curves up, towards the house through a plain of blowing grass, then past in a slow sweep and away down, back towards the trees, quite as if the house was incidental to its purpose. Not so, Housekeeper said, any fool can tell, the house stands as sole reason for the drive's existence. I stood corrected and stopped lingering by the door, puzzling over what might be there, in the distance where clouds and trees grow from the same space, scattering birds like seeds that wheel across the sky towards the sea, the sea which I have never seen. But I heard it. Deep inside the shell that lies on the hall table. They'd concealed it there. I couldn't believe it, this

life heard only as heartbeats within a human ear. Before they return, I've put it by safe. I've hidden this foundling love in the empty circle of my arms.