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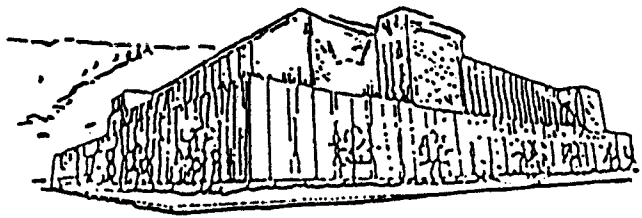
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FLATUS VOCIS

by

Tiffany A. Rayl

B.A., Coe College, 1997

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

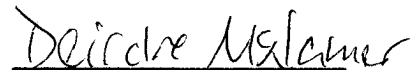
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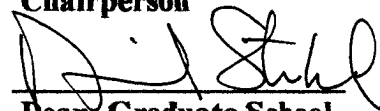
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***FLATUS VOCIS: a mere name, word, or sound
without a corresponding objective reality.***

~Webster's Third International Dictionary

*for tony,
who i lost along the way*

and

*for pj
who taught me the pain and strength of being found*

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**“i listen to the gunfire we cannot hear, and begin
this journey with the light of knowing
the root of my own furious love.”
~ joy harjo**

**“to match the silent eloquence of the created
world I have learned to speak...by my words
you will know me.”
~jeanette winterson**

the last act

Sterling Falls is the kind of town where nothing is allowed to be itself. The kind of town where three businesses flourish: greasy bars, all night diners, and meat processing plants. There's one grocery store where the produce is always bad, a single whitewashed church everyone ignores, and a dog pound that smells the whole damn block up like urine. By the time I moved there I was addicted to being alone and the place fit me like a glove. I think I hooked up with Dillon because he seemed a point of stasis in the midst of the falling apart. His dirty brown cowboy boots with silver plaqued toes, faded Levi 507s, and flannel button-downs were the epitome of the mythical west. He was pure cliché and pure what I wanted.

Dillon worked for Patrick Miller and his grown son Freddie. They owned the biggest ranch in town and had more money than Sterling Falls, sum and total, was worth. Dillon kept their stalls clean, guided touristy rides through the back landscape of their estate, and lived in a small cabin located behind the bigger house where Patrick and Freddie lived. Rumor had it Patrick picked Freddie up by the graveled road shoulder one night like an abandoned puppy, and since Pat never said a word for or against that story, the whole town takes it as gospel truth.

Dillon, he's the trusting type. Simplistic and touch naive. One of the first affectionate things he ever said to me was, "I love you more than oranges." I hadn't a clue what that meant.

Dillon didn't know, or even suspect, all the nights I wasn't with him, I was with someone else. People in Sterling Falls didn't operate like that.

I moved out west to escape the consequences of my own behavior. Start anew. I'd become a pro at running away, and after reading some book about a woman being struck by lightning, I'd been taken by the west. So there I went. To a place where a man in one of those sullied bars told me I was just the kind of pretty Sterling Falls needed.

I didn't know how to take words like beautiful, amazing, lovely, alluring, charming, and once even, in a New York city dance club, sublime. Words like those caused me to

itch and squirm like ill-fitted jeans. "I'm far too selfish to love anyone," I told Dillon the first week I knew him. He thought I was joking.

That's when I found Paul. We met one night a week to make love in the backseat of his wife's Blazer. That was Wednesdays, when Dillon taught dog obedience class in the front yard of the ranch. I liked to imagine the wet snouts of dog noses pressing into Dillon's palm, while Paul grunted and snorted above me. "Corrective jerk, corrective jerk," I could hear Dillon saying. "Gentle but firm, hand slips down the leash, and corrective jerk." Sometimes I'd want to say it out loud to Paul.

Dillon didn't know about Paul, or any of the other relationships strung out behind me like an overburdened clothesline, each affair synonymous with a new persona. Karl from Kentucky I followed with obsessive reading of Kafka, Billy by Mailer, and somehow bi-spectacled Timothy inspired me to pick up Gertrude Stein. After Philip I bought new glasses, until he, and the frames, were disposed of for Kenn (who always spelled his name when introducing himself -- "That's Kenn with two n's.") the hair stylist, contact lens, and a long braid. Which was shorn two days later when I met Kellie and she told me I looked like "a Shakespearean Puck with too much hair." She'd rub my head before we went to sleep at night. I gave up meat with Mark, dairy products with Jenn, and ate nothing but strawberry Hagan Das straight from the carton in bed with Perry. It was from Fruit Loops to whole grain wheat germ when I left Drake for Roberta. Terrie, the first, turned me onto meditative yoga, while Terry number two sent me spinning to Fred Astaire Studios ballroom dancing class. I changed my name from Mary to Silver after Natalie read me a line in a book where the character called herself "Just Silver": "*Just Silver, with a capital J and a capital S, the just is because I renounced my father's name.*" That was me, capital J, capital S. Nat agreed. It was after Peter I decided to give up monogamy as well as organic health foods.

Then came Sterling Falls, followed by Dillon, Paul, and finally, Aurora. That was her real name. She painted her lips velvet tinted, the same color of her favorite wine, and I

imagined they tasted, at the same time, caustic and candy-coated. She always had dirty toenails, her favorite jacket was brown suede with fringe and a furred collar, and she had a twenty pound pure white Persian she called Ebony. Aurora also had a faint, thin series of white scars twisting like delicate ivy up the insides of each of her wrists. She said they were about a person she could hardly remember. "A self I am no longer acquainted with," was how she explained it. It was something I understood. She had long hair circling her waist in a blonde belt which made her seem airy, like a peasant skirt, always barefoot. When she talked about cutting her hair, it made me want to cry. She smelled of fresh cut grass and brittle poppy seeds. Snappy. Sometimes sweet. A delicacy of vanilla perfume. She touched the spot on my back I knew best when we stood next to one another, and her eyes reminded me of the oak table in my Grandmother's breakfast nook. Flecked with cherry oak.

Aurora and Dillon could have been twins. They shared the same shock of blonde hair, dimples in their chins, soft voices, I always had to ask them both to repeat what they said, and mostly they shared a strange affinity to spend time with me. Sometimes, when I couldn't sleep at night, I imagined sacrificing them together, throwing their constellations up against the distant Sterling Falls night, and telling their sad stories to the next person I lay with in the damp grass. If possible, I loved them both.

Aurora and I never slept together, and kissed only once. On the lips. She was about something I'd never known. She made me nervous and I'd never felt uncertain with anyone before. I was the one who had it all planned. Did what I wanted, when I wanted. Nobody's girl. I didn't know what to make of the time I spent with Aurora. It felt like we were waiting, but I hadn't a clue for what.

And she could hurt me like no one ever had.

My daily trail rides with Dillon bore a tangible familiarity, rocking horses through pine needles trails, the kind of relationship I'd done a hundred times. One of us caring more than the other, but staying where we were. Never tipping the boat. Content. But

dusks spent at the only outdoor coffee house in Sterling Falls, when my knee would accidentally collide with Aurora's under the table, startled me. I could feel her heartbeat in my foot, slow and blue like an October sky. The most soothing thing about Sterling Falls was its sunsets, placated by stillness and unproclaimed auburn like a woman's hair -- like Aurora and ancient trees. I shared those moments only with her.

"I don't believe in jealousy," she told me one night we sat there, sipping cafe au laits and decaffeinated tea. "When you connect with one person what the rest of the world thinks doesn't matter so much anymore." She looked out over my head. Beyond me.

I didn't know what to say. I didn't believe in jealousy either, until I'd met her. Then I wanted to know where she was and who she was with, and why it wasn't me. If I called and she didn't answer, I'd call again. And again, and sometimes so many times she mention the crazy way her phone had begun to have a frantic ring. "I wish you'd just trust me," she said. "I'm never going anywhere on you." But I couldn't bite back that rising panic when she wasn't where I wanted her to be. Aurora turned me and all my favorite lines right on their head. I'd never wanted to be so close until I met a woman who wanted nothing but distance.

"You're amazing," I said to her instead, that night at the coffee house.

She smiled faintly, tilted her head, and reach out to tap a fingernail on the back of my hand. She never took my compliments.

The light had this way of hitting Aurora's body so she softened and looked like an out of focus photograph. A Midwestern transplant who told me she missed rolling green spaces that folded like nudes without interruption. "It makes you feel like you could believe in agoraphobia with all that room," she said. She missed the smell of the Great Lakes. "Like a woman," she told me.

"Like us," I said smiling.

"Like you," she said back, without an expression.

I wanted to touch her. I wanted to wind a piece of that rayed hair around my middle finger and tug. She shifted her chair away from me so our legs no longer entwined.

“Did you ever realize life is only one long series of good-byes?” she asked.

I bit my bottom lip. Tasted blood I bit so hard. “I’d be the one to know,” I said, looking away from her. I wanted to hide in cocky blasé comments. I wanted to not care. I wanted to call her on the phone right then and there, even though she was sitting next to me. I wanted her foot back against mine.

I jumped when she spoke again. “Would it kill you to make something count?”

She was like knowing death is coming, but still being surprised.

There was this time Dillon and I found an injured Shetland collie on the horse path near the barn. The paltry dark and matted body looked deflated, a wheezing balloon expelling its last puffs of air. Its white collar was camouflaged dusty, and if we had been riding the horses instead of walking them, we’d have missed it entirely.

“God damn hunters!” Dillon swore, placing his hand on the animal’s quickly concaving side. “Inexperienced goddamned tourists.” I could see tears glaze his eyes like black ice.

“How do you know it was hunters?” I asked, shooing a gnat from my ear, standing while he knelt over the dog.

He said my name like I was an idiot, looking at me the same way.

“Well, Jesus, Dillon, it could have been anything, a lot of people probably use this trail,” I said.

“It’s a *private* trail, Silver, for the ranch and hunters with permits *only*.”

“Freddie could’ve done it,” I said. The gnat was still buzzing around my ear, and I used my shoulder to brush it away.

“Freddie wouldn’t shoot a dog and leave it,” Dillon told me. “No matter what, he’s still a rancher, Silver. He knows you either kill an animal or take care of it. Oh, poor

Maddie,” he said softly. “Poor girl,” he crooned over the dog. Then looked at me. “She’s not in the class, you know. She’s too hyper, too much her own girl. We can’t get her to behave, but damnit if she isn’t smart as hell.” Dillon gave a tight smile and made a sort of strangled noise in his throat. “She had a good life, Silver, I can tell you that. She was free, not tied down to anything or anyone. Free as a ranch dog should be. Poor old Maddie girl.” He heaved the dog to his shoulder and I helped him lay the limp body across my horse’s back. I walked along side the horse, steadying the dog, while Dillon led us home. She stunk, but I kept petting her soft ears anyway, wanting to whisper to her, wanting to ask all her secrets, but I didn’t want Dillon to see.

About halfway back to the ranch, the dog exhaled its final breath. I could feel with my hand it had given up. I touched its nose, to check, and it was already warm from suffering. I don’t know why but I wanted to sob. I wanted to weep and weep right there and scream at the sky like something out of the movies, and just be angry. I also didn’t want to have to tell Dillon she was gone. So we just kept walking in a long silence until I could see the barn, the house peering at us from just beyond it. Then I wanted to say something before we got too close.

“Dil,” I had trouble getting my voice started. “She’s dead. She’s not breathing anymore.” I blinked like crazy.

Dillon stopped the horses and came back to us, placing his hand on the dog’s tangled fur chest. He didn’t say anything, but lifted her off the horse and walked away with her in his arms. I knew he probably understood the dog had been dead for a while, and I just hadn’t said anything. I don’t know where he went, or what he did. If he mourned, he did it alone. Like I did.

I led the horses back to the barn, unsaddled them, and brushed their coats in cozy circles with the curry comb until my right arm grew numb, then I switched to my left, unable to stop the mindless motion. The horses softly shone, and I hoped the other animals would forgive them for not looking like ranchers, but I needed the hours of

preoccupied brushing. The smell of manure and straw swirled in a hay feverish nightmare but were a comfort surrounding me. I pressed my forehead against Season, the horse I had come to call my own.

Freddie came into the barn, tilting his white Stetson back, unshielding his eyes, the only way he said hello. I moved to hang the tack on a rusty nail driven into the clean pine boards lining the barn, and Freddie asked if I was okay. He spoke to my back, and I answered to the wall. I don't remember much about that night, except I didn't know where Dillon was and the only person I really wanted was Aurora. I tried to call her seventeen times from the pay phone in the back of the bar, but she never answered.

Two days later she and I took a walk. I led her along the same trail Dillon and I rode together daily. The one where we'd found Maddie. It was a false bravado taking her someplace so close to home, so near Dillon, but I liked the pretense. I liked knowing I had them so close together. I imagined he and Freddie were out there somewhere with the cattle, not so far away, and Patrick was probably up at the house making dinner. I could have invited her to stay. I didn't ask her where she'd been two nights before, even though it gnawed away at my insides. I burned with her.

Aurora, as we walked, traced the veins of a leaf she'd pulled from a tree and talked about her parents' home on the lower peninsula of Michigan. It never ceased to amaze me how far our thoughts always were from one another. She talked about loving the lake that stretched from their home to where she'd once lived in Chicago, to her brother's place in Milwaukee. "All those places connected by water," she said, "makes me understand globes." She went on, "Do you think the world is really round?" She stopped walking and dropped the leaf. I watched it twirl to the ground in a slow waltz. I looked up to see her fanning her fingers in front of her face like a child at a scary movie. She peered through the spaces between her fingers at the mountains. "I like the idea that everybody touches everybody else," she said. "Endless sphere of shape." Then she reached out and stretched a hand in front of my face. Her skin sliced off mountain tops

and I could smell her hand lotion. I wanted to pull her against my face, pull her up against me. Feel us touching. Like everybody. I trembled. She dropped her hands and we continued walking in silence. The air had shifted.

When Aurora began talking again, she described a huge monster of a white whale house, beached and opulent with light on cold wintry nights. “The lake was too native to freeze,” she said. She called the moon a sodden star and her father Ishmal, lost on the sea looking for his white whale. As she talked her voice bloated with pride and longing, pregnant with homesickness, bringing me even closer to that frenzied water because I could hear it inside of her. “He died when I was very young, Silver,” she said. “That made him an irreplaceable hero.” “My father,” she said, as if I didn’t know.

I nodded. Her voice made me want to do something for her. I wanted to reach her, meet skin to skin, but she stole my bravery every time she spoke.

“It’s made me impossible to love,” she said softly. “Don’t fall in love with me, Silver, just don’t.”

I felt the distance crawl between us like darkness across the sky. I wanted to kiss her.

I found Dillon again a couple hours later smoking while leaning on the doorway of his place. He grinned at me. “Where ya been, sweetheart?” he asked.

“Walking,” I said. I looked past him, over to the hills. I wanted to fan my fingers over my eyes again and look at him.

“Pat says we’re to come up to the house for dinner.” He dropped his butt and twisted his dusty boot toe over top of it, kicking it from the stoop.

I shaded my eyes and nodded, following him as he headed toward the house. We helped Patrick clean the kitchen after we ate, washing dishes like a college clique of old friends, drinking and laughing. I was only sort of there. No one noticed.

Before Dillon and I returned to his cabin, I suggested we go for a drive. Dillon’s pickup smells like a horse -- saddle leather and woolly blankets. I thought about how

nice it would be to curl up in back, under a plaid sleeping bag while summer defended herself against the coming cold, the air ignited with surrender. I wanted to be able to talk to him, tell him things, ask him things, say Aurora's name. I thought maybe Dillon would understand about love. He wouldn't get Paul or Freddie, but maybe, if anyone could, Dillon just might get Aurora. How suddenly there wasn't anyone else I wanted to be with. But then I realized, that included him.

There was no doubt in my mind I loved Dillon. He was my best friend. We were comfortable together. Content. Certain. Sure. Clear. The kind of relationship that followed an invisible manual -- tab A fitting slot B, then corner C folding around flap D, a perfect box.

The problem was I wanted Aurora and her globe and her non-jealousy. Her way of not caring. Her foot against mine under tables and her fingers fanned over my face. And I couldn't tell her because she couldn't handle wanting me. Or she just plain didn't.

As Dillon started the truck, Travis Tritt came blasting out of the stereo speakers. I jumped, hitting my head on the low ceiling of the cab.

"Sorry," he grinned sheepishly, turning it down, popping out the plastic tape, and rummaging on the floor by my feet for another.

I watched the side of his face while he pulled the pickup out of its space and onto the late night road. The one thing about Dillon was he had this fabulous laugh. It took his entire body to carry out. He'd toss his head back, all teeth, sounding like one of those characters in a cheesy 80's teeny-bopper movie, like Matt Dillon -- like his name.

And the way he said my name. Like a warning. With an accent that never sounded Sterling Falls to me. He'd slide softly past the "l" and curled the final "r" like the delicate sharp edge of scissors curling gaudy birthday package ribbons.

As we drove I wanted to suggest we go someplace and make love. I wanted Dillon against me like that. I was tired of thinking. I wanted him like Freddie that day Maddie

died, or like Paul, on Wednesdays, when there's nothing there but two bodies. The way I couldn't bear it with Aurora.

"Hey Dillon?" I asked suddenly. "You know about Freddie, right?" I wasn't trying to be hurtful, it just kind of came out before I could stop it.

I watched his jaw clench and the muscles of his face jump. "That you slept with him, you mean?"

I nodded.

"Yeah, but I don't wanna talk about it," he said in a tense voice. "Sometimes I don't get you, Silver, sometimes I don't get you at all. I mean I love you and all, but I just don't get you, and I don't wanna talk about it." He reached out to turn the radio up.

"Dillon, I think maybe we should," I said, touching his hand to stop him from turning the dial.

"What, you're in love with Freddie now?" Dillon laughed a laugh so unlike the one I cherished. This was a sad, pathetic sound. Reminded me of Maddie.

"No, Dillon, that was just one night. Just sex."

"It's all semantics with you, right, Silver? Fucking or making love or sleeping around, you think it's all the same thing dressed up differently." His eyes never left the road.

I looked out my side of the window, watching the trees slip by in the dark. I wanted to pluck a joke out of thin air, fill the truck with it, and forget I had opened my mouth in the first place.

"Aren't you happy with me, Silver?" Dillon began to sound like a pleading child. I stayed silent, staring out the window. Dillon whipped the steering wheel to the left, jerking the truck to the gravel shoulder on the other side of the road, slamming on the brakes. We sat in silence for a single, very long minute before he said, "What's going on, Silver?" He turned to face me.

"I don't know," my voice broke and I kept looking out my window. Cars whizzed past us in Van Gogh flashes of light and color against the blackness.

“Silver, what the hell? Talk to me, okay? You know you can always talk to me, tell me what you’re saying so I can make sense of this.”

I sighed, looking up at the ceiling so I wouldn’t cry. “Did you ever order something in a restaurant you didn’t really like but just kept eating it anyway, and then later, you looked over and saw somebody had something else, so you got that too, and that didn’t fill you any better, and so you just kept trying to find stuff to make it better but in the end wondered why you just didn’t tell your server the food was shitty in the first place?”

“Silver,” Dillon looked away from me, starting straight out the windshield. “Please don’t do that, please don’t make a joke right now.”

“Relationships never seems like that to you?” I studied a torn patch in the red vinyl, I stuck my finger in it, wiggled it around. I wanted to keep his face from turning toward mine. I didn’t want to see the hurt I had put there. “There’s a lot of stuff you don’t know about me, Dillon. A lot of people I spend time with you don’t even know,” I said.

“Besides Freddie?” His voice was thick, like homemade syrup.

“Besides Freddie,” I said.

“Are you in love with someone else, Silver? Is that what this is about? I mean, cause if you are, I’ll fight for you. I will, it’s that simple.”

“No it isn’t that simple,” I said, a sob catching in my throat. “Don’t you get it, Dillon? It’s not that simple. You and Freddie and...and other people, it isn’t a nice neat clean pile of black and white, love or not love, to be or not to be.”

“Then what?” he asked, looking at me sideways.

“I don’t know,” I said, my tears dangerously close.

“You keep saying you don’t know, Silver, and that just isn’t helping me a whole hell of a lot.” He looked desperate for an explanation I didn’t have.

Why couldn’t I just want to love Dillon the way he loved me and raise babies with him and get a dog and play family? But I didn’t. I didn’t want those things. All I really knew anything about anyway was endings. Going away, breaking up, the end. The final

act of a relationship. I had that down, and didn't know about anything else. I didn't know how to start.

"What is it, Silver?" Dillon turned toward me. "What in God's name is it? You want to break up so you can screw every guy in the goddamned state till you make up your mind or what?"

"This isn't about a guy, Dillon."

His face contorted. I knew, right in that moment, the way you know things sometimes that after that night I'd never see Dillon again.

And I was right.

Dillon went back home without me, full of hurt I could never explain away. After some time we'd run into each other, not knowing how to say hello, not knowing how to talk after the end. He'd dive right back into himself, going over and over it all again, wondering what he did wrong, why I didn't love him the way he loved me, hating himself for not being able to make me happy, and I'd never know how to apologize for that.

And I'd leave Aurora too. Because I didn't know what else to do with us. Because that's what I'd always done. She really wasn't so different from everyone else. In fact, she was more the same than any of them. Detached. I was the one who had changed. I was the one who wanted things. It was my fingers that throbbed without her touch.

So, I walked away. I walked away from the one thing I'd ever wanted. I moved away from Sterling Falls. Hauled my cardboard boxes to someplace with more air, where I could breathe. No good-byes, no notes, no explanations or made up stories. Just up and gone. I changed my hair again, gave up my hiking boots for Nikes, and took up step aerobics. Gave up bars, and cowboys, and lovely blonde women who closed up that ache inside of me. Gave up the west. Because that distance, all that space out there, what we have to traverse to meet someplace in love, all that was just too too much.

perfect third

Isabelle appears quick and dark, charged with more energy than a tiny five foot frame should allow. I only pretend to understand our relationship. Past or present. Before I graduated, we talked easily in her office, discussed papers I'd written, chatted casually over coffee, even the occasional beer, but only once did attraction ever enter our conversation. Isabelle and I were lounged in her cramped office, me on the yellow overstuffed chair, her twisting to meet my eye in her revolving desk chair. She spun to face me and asked if I'd ever wanted to *be* with another woman. Stressing that word *be* like the insect buzzing in my ear. To have answered her honestly I would've had to tell her, not until you. Instead I just laughed her off without a word.

Isabelle was married. I mean, she still is, but back then, I tended to forget. Being around her made me feel like a child sick with the flu. My stomach plunged, danced, hell, probably sang when she walked in the room. She generated a full fledged body symphony.

At the ripe old age of six I'd decided if I didn't take care of myself, no one else would. That was the year Mom left and I learned to cook scrambled eggs, balanced on a metal kitchen stool, dripping shells running over the edge of the counter, my elbow knocking over the carefully measured cup of milk, wire whisk clattered to the floor. Dad still wasn't home by nine, and my stomach clenched with hunger.

I'd been the kind of kid who equated sickness with weakness, but when Mother forced me to succumb, pushing, "Annie, you've got a fever, go to bed," it was her lovely gentleness to which I relented, stomach knotted but certain.

That's how I fell for Isabelle.

Her house is a lovely, two story strong old beast in a quiet line of twins. It's the kind of neighborhood I used to drive through late at night during those haphazard college days. I'd peer into curtainless windows from my car, watch families sit down to dinner, or in front of the TV, bathed in electric blue scrambling shadows, and feel an intangible tug

deep in my chest for the way things wouldn't ever be again. The way cancer feels, pulling insistently in your right breast, an itch you can't quite reach.

The way my own chest felt before I knew.

Isabelle's husband, or as they call one another despite their eight year marriage, *partner*, seems to be just that. Her partner in everything. Trevor wears silver wire framed glasses pierced by eyes so blue they make the back of my teeth ache. Often his long slender feminine fingers fidget with the hair on his face as if he can't quite believe its sprouted there. I constantly expect him to pull out a pipe, or settle in front of the piano they don't own. He'd be such a grand cliché. Except neither he nor Isabelle claim to have any musical talent, and both refuse to touch tobacco. Although Isabelle once admitted to smoking a little pot. "Yeah, I had a pipe," she said, giggling like a wicked child, "but I'm not saying what *kind* of pipe." Trevor, on the other hand, is cleaner than a hospital cornered bed sheet. He has a direct coolness about him that gives to nothing.

I'm probably more like Trevor than anyone else. Maybe that's why the three of us get along so well. We balance out. Trevor and I agree there's not usually a whole lot of use in talking, although Isabelle fills the space between all of us with her constant chatter. She's full of ideas, proposals, points she wants to ponder, issues she wants Trevor or I to pick up and debate. She enjoys what she calls "discussions," but what Trevor and I label fights. Isabelle, Trevor, and I form a funny shaped triangle, the kind left unnamed by geometry classes.

Trevor can't, no matter what other closeness he finds with each of us, close the gap that sometimes widens between he and Isabelle so much it scares me. I become a child, brought back to the days my parents fought violently. Dad smashing his fist into the wall, Mom squealing away in her beat up Impala, me never certain if she'd return. One day, she didn't. That's when I realized no matter how much you say, it doesn't usually change anything.

When Isabelle introduced me to Trevor I felt something between them that shot heat glittering to the base of my spine. I knew I couldn't ever be with her the way Trevor is. They share an easy way two people do when they have been together most of their lives. They don't need one another to survive. They simply prefer it that way.

There were nights in our past when Isabelle would go one way, to a play with the English department, or out to dinner with my best friend Kate and I, and Trevor wouldn't come. Later they'd ease back together, like a wooden alphabet puzzle I had as a child, the letters easily slipping from one another and just as simply sliding back into place. As if never apart. I had one in the shape of my name, shiny sanded wood that smelled of a dresser drawer. I used to caress the pieces, my fingers learning the sharp tilt of the "A" and the sweet curve of matching "N's," melting to the edges of the final "E." Isabelle and Trevor have that lovely simplicity about them. The kind I can't quite touch.

I don't know how much I interrupted their lives with my return. They've chosen not to have children, and with Isabelle climbing past thirty-seven her next birthday, and Trevor only a couple years older, I figure they've laid that consideration to rest. I don't ask them about it. To me it seems bearing children is a personal affair of which I'm not a part, recalling a life before me. It's a painful reminder they share things like that between them, the way she easily takes a bite from his half eaten sandwich, or a swallow from his coffee mug on her way out the door. The absence of children from their comfortable marriage left untouched by voice. I don't want to know if it was a choice, or if there had been earlier storms, weeping, blaming, to an end of inevitable quiet acceptance. I don't want to know what else they share outside the boundaries of me. I don't want to find penciled notes signed "Isa," eliciting personal nicknames, suggesting a past exclusive of me. I don't want to speak of our relationship because I'm terrified that will change it. I don't want to scare them, and sometimes I think I don't want to stop being scared.

Mostly I don't want to talk of our bodies, because it doesn't seem right between the three of us. Still, I imagine them making love, discreetly, silently, not the way I would envision Isabelle's desire. Her body so full, her breasts round and sure, nodding under silk shirts and cabled sweaters. Her tiny hips curve like crescent moons, her lips stained like dyed sweet slices of watermelon. Her body keeps up with the passion in her person, but I've never heard them together. Sometimes I start from sleep, lift my head from the pillow, thinking a soft escaped moan, or muffled song of pleasure shook me awake, but I never hear more than what must be dreams.

Perhaps Isabelle, or maybe even Trevor, sense what discussions of their desire would do to me. Seep into that untouched part of myself that longs for Isabelle's thigh to stay a moment longer beside mine, or want Trevor's hand to linger a second longer, warm and strange on the back of my neck. Perhaps one of them noticed the way I watch the two of them, always a pair, always together, even when apart. Maybe they noticed the night of the college's inauguration ball, she gazing up at his face, he laughing toward the sky, and resting his fingertips lightly in her exposed shoulder blades. I about to finish senior year, on the verge of leaving them behind, together. My eyes followed the gold rings around the third finger of each of their left hands, mirrors, reflecting the spinning lights. All three of us encircled in wavy bands across the dance floor, and somehow the shadows included me their vows. I wanted to press myself between Trevor and Isabelle, not to separate them, but to become a part of them.

Telling Isabelle I was sick was unreal, like something I'd concocted for attention, the same way I'd embellish the truth about what I'd done last night, just to make it that much more interesting. I began to feel fictional, wondering if the phone call actually happened. Except if it hadn't, I wouldn't be here.

Isabelle and I hadn't talked for over six months, and I felt awkward dialing the phone, even hung it up before it rang, twice, until finally waiting it out.

Isabelle answered in her professor voice, polite, distant, warmly detached. I wanted to hang up against the familiarity, but instead got the words out, “Isabelle, it’s Anne.”

“I know,” she said, even though there was no way she could have.

“How are you?” I asked cautiously, unpracticed with the breaking of serious news.

“Well, I’ve missed your voice,” she said. I could hear her smile stretch over the long distance lines, I could feel it reach across the vastness of the Mississippi River, jumping endless Dakota sunflower fields and curling around western mountains to find me. “How are *you*, Anne?” she asked.

I swallowed. I knew telling Isabelle I was coming home wouldn’t be easy. We hadn’t planned on it, but what was harder was telling her the truth. I was coming home for good. “Not so great, actually,” I said, trying out a laugh, “at least that’s what they tell me.”

Isabelle’s voice immediately filled with concern, sounding like a mother, “What’s wrong, Annie?”

I wanted to tell her I was kidding, it was all a big joke, that I had just called to say hello, nice to talk to you and all, but now I gotta go. Instead I had to say, “They don’t think there’s much more they can do.” I don’t know why I felt I had to protect her from the very same thing destroying me, but I did. This was Isabelle. My Isabelle.

I heard her exhale in the shaky way grief has when it appears in a breath, and I listened it break across those far reaching wires connecting us.

I hate Isabelle for those tears sometimes. With them she stole my stoicism. Everything I’d built inside of me since I was six. If I didn’t grieve over losses, I could bear them, but her sorrow left me unprotected. She told me she wanted me with her. She told me to come home. Not to my parents, still estranged from one another, and growing further from me, but *home*-- to her and Trevor.

“We want you here,” she said, using the pronoun in a way I never have with another person. The easy “we” slipping out because you forget what it was to be alone. She said

“we” without speaking to Trevor first, because she knew he’d only want exactly the same. And she was right.

When I arrived in the tiny one room airport, the red pattern woven through the grey carpet, a dizzying display under foot, they folded me into a welcoming hug that somehow perfectly fit.

We fell to the business of living with one another as if it were the way things had always been. We shared meals, chores, difficult decisions, and lazy Sunday mornings with the Gazette spread around us. We learned what to order on pizzas without asking, when to knock on doors before opening, and who had the yellow toothbrush, not the green. We learned how to live as three.

With the knowledge one would soon leave.

Asymptomatic is an interesting term. It means your body has been invaded by deadly viruses, crawling pathogens that smell angry and creep unrelenting, but on the surface, everything appears fine. Until doctors, and tests, and more tests, and quiet concerned glances, and the avoidance of real terms fall to softened blows like, “possibly malignant” or “nothing is certain yet.” Then the absence of symptoms becomes unbearable. The word normal begins to change.

I’d search my face in the mirror for a sign something was wrong. I’d admire my slim waist, the one I thought long hours of hiking helped maintain. I was drawn to the way my dress fell in a gentle scoop at the neck line, my collar bones gracefully peering through, how Kate called it “pretty,” but we hadn’t known it was a sign. How I would, after gaining such knowledge, stare at my naked body for hours, longing for a spot, a mark, a symbol, a bruise, a pear shaped pink blotch, or a singular changed mole, but still only saw sweet skin smelling faintly of the peach scented bath soap I used.

“Cancer can be like that,” my heavy coated doctor said. “It’s inside of you Anne, you can’t see it, but eventually you’ll feel it.”

They wanted to operate right away. They wanted to see how far it had spread, if there was anything they could do. I bowed to their scientific knowledge, trusting them to do their jobs. They called it “exploratory surgery,” a preventative measure, not a cure. They spoke of rare cases, and one in a million chances. But who ever believes themselves to be the one on the slimmer end of statistics? Apparently lymphnodes are the oracles of women’s bodies.

I was laid on the table with my arm over my head the way I used to raise my hand in school. I could have smoked ten joints and not been as lost as I felt with those unrecognizable fingers prodding and tapping my inner arm. They seemed to dance to a drug induced rhythm. I wanted to jump up from the table and scream at them to stop touching me. “Get your fucking hands off of me!” I wanted to yell, but I couldn’t move, not my body, my voice, or my mind. The hands were cold, rough against my skin, and I began to weep because I dreamt surgeons’ hands would be warm and gentle, sure against the human body. These hands were callused and detached, void of anything but the science of perfection. My tears ran down the sides of my face collected in a wet nest where my jaw line ended.

I woke up full of the irrational fear I wasn’t all there. I wanted to run my palms up and down the plane of my body, explore its terrain and make sure they hadn’t wrongly removed my gallbladder or appendix, forgetting their “preventative” plan. I wanted to move my hands across my own territory, now foreign, searching for signs I existed the way I previously had, but I was exhausted. The IVs never stopped draining more liquid sleepiness into me. Two days passed before I learned I had indeed lost a part of myself. It was slipped off easily, wasn’t something I needed, a part I knew could’ve been lost in their search, but not something I’d ever expected to really be without.

“It couldn’t wait, Anne,” the hollow answer to my disbelief. “It was the kindest thing to do under the circumstances. We had no choice. You knew this was possibility.” I

shook my head. No matter how they'd tried to warn me, I hadn't realized how unprepared truly felt. I didn't understand what the loss would procure.

The scar runs from midway down my inner arm, curves around my armpit like the corner of a coin, stretching to a fault line across the plain where my right breast once lay. It stops short right before my chest cavity, which houses my heart. What devastated me was not so much the missing flesh, not that they'd taken something that wasn't theirs, but the feeling it was still there. They say that happens with legs and arms, but not once have I heard anyone refer to a phantom breast. My altered skin didn't long for its missing companion the way I thought it would. It was deceived. It still believed thick flesh hung in its correct place, right where it belonged. I kept picturing a room of women's loped off body parts where doctors disappeared to fondle discarded skin, thrilled by black and stinking decay. Masked men touch solitary blobs like dirty magazines and make up in their minds blonde full breasted women, BayWatch babes bouncing down beaches, while dead flesh nestles in their healing hands.

Trevor and Isabelle are the only people who have seen me without a shirt. No one else has. Or probably will. I gave up on coupledness with death. That day, when Trevor and Isabelle witnessed my skin was a late, deep Friday night in July, humid and wet, Iowa green outside. The kind of green found only in hard cover library books with annoying crinkly plastic covers, a palatable green, one you can smell like earthy vegetables, broccoli and potatoes. As rain dripped from the willows shading the sun porch, the three of us sat listless on the curving couch. Trevor behind the paper, Isabelle with a book on her lap she was ignoring, and me, eyes closed, resting like a nursing home patient.

"Don't you ever want to talk about, Anne?" Isabelle said, breaking the comfortable silence.

"About what?" I kept my eyes shut, shifting my crossed legs under the pink and blue checked blanket draped across me.

“Any of it,” she said, using the tone reserved for when I was playing the idiot.

“What would I say?” I opened my eyes, and looked her directly in the eye. “It’s a fact I live around, Isabelle.”

Isabelle looked at Trevor who’d lowered the paper to watch us. I still don’t know if I actually saw him shrug or not, but the following movement seemed, in all of its strangeness, planned.

Isabelle approached me as I eyed her warily, a cornered dog. She knelt before me, lifted my arms in the air, and gently pulled my damp T-shirt over my head, sliding it off of my lopsided body. The blanket had fallen uselessly to my waist. I didn’t move. I froze as if merely a voyeur. My body felt off balance, awkward, timid, too thin, terrified of exposure. I held my breath as Isabelle ran her fingernail, tipped in a murky maroon polish, over the scar, her eyes never leaving mine. She read the Braille of my body, the bumpy dividing line that spoke too much. Trevor forgot his paper and moved closer to us, curling his lanky body like a shelter housing us. We sat that way, Isabelle opening her hand on my empty space, Trevor enveloping us, for a long time. Minutes, hours, seconds, I don’t know. Time slid somewhere off to the side, unimportant. We were outside of it, beyond speech and space, filled only with the connection of human skin. Isabelle eventually let her head fall against my chest, and Trevor buried his face behind my ear, nose resting on my neck, lips on my shoulder. I folded into the center of them, and there they kept me from collapsing entirely. We never spoke of the afternoon again.

las cruces

Rosa

Grandmother Rosa died three months ago. Juan's her only son's only son, and he is my first love. There are no daughters in the Senalda family, none in my own, and I too, am the only son.

Rosa held Juan's family together like glue. What was left unsaid, was Rosa's. She knew how to sew together, and keep apart, all the pieces in that house. I never met her, but learned her through Juan.

Rosa grew up in a time and culture which didn't allow women to do what they wanted. It was required she listen to her father and brothers. She learned better what they wanted than what she did. She married a friend of her older brother's named Julio, because Tomas, her brother, told her to. This wouldn't have been so bad, Rosa told Juan, if it hadn't been her eldest brother. The oldest of ten. Rosa was the youngest. "Maybe we could have understood better," Rosa said, "if we had not been so distant all our lives."

Juan describes Rosa's long hair as moon colored to waist. He remembers tiny wrinkled hands and feet, mapped with heavy violet veins, gnarled with life, and the cotton slippers embroidered with tulip designs, flecked with stitches of ivy. The ones he'd bring her at night. Juan speaks of cherished night time eyes, vivid velvet midnight tinted, to match her hair and the husband she'd had, with fists like warm pudding. She told Juan, "They filled me with deep burning," but wouldn't explain what she meant.

Rosa had a crooked nose from when Julio had broken it, twice, and a faint scar at the cleft in her chin where a piece of kitchen plate caught her after shattering against a wall behind her head. "When I look in the mirror, I still see him," she'd once said. "He will always be with me. His hands always on my face."

Juan and I liked to talk of Rosa because she did what so many like her never do. She walked away. When Julio's fury became too much, Rosa packed up her son, and left. She walked from Bravos, Mexico, crossing Rio Grande borders at twilight, to find

answers in New Mexico. “*Bravos Mexico*,” she said to Juan. “I was full of it in the name,” she said. “*New Mexico*,” Rosa said. “And it was new.”

Oranges

There was a night when Juan couldn't sleep and when he padded, sock footed into the kitchen, Rosa sat wide awake, watching the dark hall as if she were expecting him to come. She got up and warmed him a pan of milk without a word, as Juan sat at the table. Rosa fanned an orange like a star before him, placing a golden pool of honey in its center. She would save the leftover peeling in a shoebox under her bed. They clicked like castanets when they dried and hardened. She wrote “Juan” on the outside of the box with a thick black magic marker, and spent afternoons on the front porch swing, swaying back and forth slowly, her feet not quite reaching the ground as she strung the withered rinds together in a long garland of musty fruit. She would hold them like rosary beads when that particular night grew to numerous midnights they stayed up talking, each decayed slice a memory, slid through thumb and forefinger as Rosa spoke. “My life, a crown of rotted oranges,” she told Juan one night, chuckling. He says he'd touched her then, feeling the pulse on the spine of her hand.

They swayed back and forth in light breeze that first night, and Juan says Rosa was addicting him to insomnia young. The heaviness of his midnight snack clung to the secret passageways of his insides and Rosa balanced his restless mind with her voice.

“I forgave him, Juan, that you must know,” she said. He was falling asleep against her shoulder. She smelled like red wine vinegar, he says. “It was not his fault he did not know how to love a woman,” Rosa said. “It was not his fault he believed beauty was enough. I was small, but not defenseless. When Nico was born, I knew there would be no more. I had a power, Juan. A power Julio understood less than he understood me. The power of a woman. It frightened him. He knew he would lose. That is when I left.

I used the two feet *Dios* gave me and walked my son to a new home. You see, Juan. You see?

“I told the stars my stories, Juan, before you came along. They know so many things,” she said. “Listen to them, *nieto*. Listen.”

Juan never forgot that night. Not even as he watched Rosa grow sicker and sicker. She faded, not suddenly, not overnight, but with time, day by day, strung like a chain of worn orange peels, until one day, she no longer stirred under the heavy goose feathered quilt. That last afternoon Juan says he played with the quilt’s tailored edges, ran his fingers along the box stitched patterns, knowing it was Rosa’s time to die. He whispered in her ear, “Please stay Rosa, *mi abuela*, please do not leave me here alone.” But away she went. Without him.

At the funeral, Juan reached into the open casket and slipped his finger down the scar dividing her chin. He says he wanted to sap her strength. To know the power she spoke of. Juan wanted his grandmother through fingertips, like touching the base of her wrist, feeling the pulse beating there, reassuring life, but it was too late.

Julio was Juan’s grandfather. The one he never knew. Julio stands in photographs, stern, rigid backed like a stake in the ground. Donned in light shirts, dark pants, huge black boots to the knee, scarf around neck, hat pulled over one eye. Even in yellowed ancient black and white, water stained, folded, and cracked, we see he looks just like Juan’s father.

Fathers

My father left and so Mom moved us from Chicago. “He is too much everywhere,” she said to me about that city. He remains to me as spicy aftershave without a name, army colored fatigues, long childhood nights with him somewhere missing in the house, and a stranger kissing me goodnight the times he did stay home. My father knows how to fire a gun. Wore faded green, but sparkled in dress uniforms the Sundays we

remembered to go to church. My father joined the army in college. Army Reserve. He never fought in any wars, but used it as a reason to never come home. He'd spend weekends playing army, he told Mom, pitching tents and reassembling those guns she wouldn't allow in the house. She'd pace the worn path on the carpet in front of our garden boxed window, in the apartment, number 176, sixteenth floor, Old Town, Chicago. I wanted to love my father more than anything, but it's hard to love someone you don't know. Once, I'd touch his razor in the bathroom, five a.m., he's just closed the thick apartment door. I hear my mother not sleeping through the wall, and I rinse the leftover facial hairs from the porcelain sink. I look in the mirror, see his color of eyes, his long dark lashes, the tilt of his nose, but the cup of still foamy shaving cream I sink my finger in, the old fashioned barber brushed bristle comb I press to my own naked cheek -- my father itemized, that is as close as I get.

He isn't cruel, my father. He knows about my boyfriends, the fights I'd have in school, the times I'd wept in my mother's arms, just a confused little kid with his heart breaking for all he didn't understand. I once heard him ask Mom if I was okay, suggest she take me on a trip. "Out of the city, maybe," he said.

"Will you come?" she asked, but he must have said no.

It isn't his fault he doesn't know how to have a son, everyone says there aren't any requirements. It isn't a part of the army regiment. It's not his fault anymore than it's mine that I love the way I do. I just wanted, the same way I didn't want to love boys, I wanted my father to stop. To stay home long enough to know me. To understand I hate the way tuna fish makes my hands smell and I love the way tangerines make my tongue sting. Things my mother knows without asking, things she's taught me. All the pride I have coming from her, the way I keep everything at bay, from him. I want him to be able to make assumptions about me and be right.

Instead he disappeared, walked out, and nothing changed but the city around me.

I wonder, when I look at Juan's face, what he fills for me that's been missing for so long.

Nico

Juan wasn't named after his father because Nico wanted him never never never to feel obligated as a son. That's what he said to Juan. Out loud. "You honor me by being my child," Nico said. "Nothing more, nothing else," he said. Imagine that.

I imagine Nico and Juan talking. That Nico used to place his hand on his wife's waist and whisper words Juan couldn't hear. Juan says Nico taught Rosa to waltz, and Juan to swing. *Toe heel toe heel, spin Juan, right back to your Papi.* And Juan crashed right into his rock hard barreled chest. Nico would help Juan's Mami make thick loaves of bread, kneading the dough with grizzly hands. Hands that shouldn't have been able to author airy mounds that melt in the mouth with butter, but they did. Nico told Juan he would never be like Julio. Never never never. Promised never to raise a fist on Juan. And not once did he.

I have to ask questions. The Nico Juan describes isn't the Nico I know. Not the man whose hands trembled me.

"That is what happens in grief," Juan says. He says, "Once my father loved me, but now beats boys for loving his son."

Truth

Juan told his parents about me five nights ago. He says he'd just returned home from another secret meeting held in Marina's basement. Emphatic Marina, who has a face like a clown and a body like a drunk garter snake -- thin, twisty, and never still. I can see her too short hair sticking up in razor sharp spikes, hear her firing off an artillery of reasons that all those brave enough to hide in her basement each week should go home and tell every person close to them every secret regarding their hearts that very moment. "Hiding yourself only forces others to hide beside you," she says. I see her flushed face as she marches in front of the paneled wall, plastic dart board bouncing behind her. I feel

Juan's passion, implanted by Marina's words. I imagine him rushing home, without further thought, to reveal his truth.

Juan tells me the house was warm after the dank meeting room. I want to imagine it filled with the smell of frying tortillas. Mr. Senalda reclined in a plaid Lazy Boy grumbling at the TV, while Mrs. Senalda stands at the stove, flipping dinner with natural ease. I want Juan's house to expand with corn edged smells, the rooms to glow spicy colored, and the lights to stay soft, bouncing off white countertops, while beads of steam condense on the window's chilly glass above the stove.

Instead the house stood tense, loss deep to its foundation. Young grief pressing the walls. Mr. Senalda's mouth tight at the corners, the TV too loud, three, six, twelve beer cans scattered around the chair, his chin unshaven for a week, dark and prickled like some of the plants that grow here. He a broken promise. Mrs. Senalda asleep, her forehead pressed to the laminated kitchen table top, her dark hair cut with her own scissors, elfish atop her ears tinged with crusted food. Juan touched her shoulder, and she jerked awake.

"Mami," he said to his mother's solid back, her round breasts visible from beneath her arms. "I have something I want tell you and Papi." Juan has always told his parents everything. This first secret racked him endlessly.

Mrs. Senalda, heavy with sleep, touched her son's cheek. "Not today, Juan, ok? Not today."

But Juan told them anyway, adding to their already overburdened shoulders stooped with age and fatality.

Myself

Juan thinks I don't know the boys at school call me *muchacha*. I know. I know it's because of the way I walk. They say I'd look better in a dress than our high school's unofficial blue jeaned uniform. They laugh at my funny body, its long arms, pointed

chin, and hopelessly flimsy wrists. They laugh at the way I say his name, Juan, Midwestern and nasal. It's so obvious I'm from some place else.

Juan says that's exactly what he likes. He sits on the fence and watches me lift bags of feed for Mr. Cisernos. I like to pretend Juan notices the way my muscles fix to thick mounds, and how the veins poke up like delicate floss. The way my body behaves for him. I don't know what he really sees.

Mr. Cisernos doesn't mind my walk, or lisp, or strange sense of style. He leaves me alone.

"You never ask much," Cisernos said to me once, in his broken English, nervously touching his slender silver black mustache. "Nice quiet boy. I like hard work." He gestures at the bales of hay I've stacked. I nod, and look at the ground, embarrassed. He pats me on the head, like a dog.

I'm drawn to barns because of their sweet hay. I'm drawn to them because of the way the empty stalls provide soft bedding after hours and how the horses' quiet whinnies and restless shifting melt into Juan's moans when I run my tongue across his dark strong stomach to the waist band of his jeans. He smells like tobacco and looks like the sun has tattooed him. I like how our skin looks together. I'm drawn to the barns because they are like Juan himself. Cool and clean.

Juan teases me because I don't know how to fight, and shadow-boxes playful punches against my thigh. I tickle him and wrestle him to the ground, making him plead "mercy" before I let him up. He feels so lean and certain between my thighs.

Love

Nico must have spoken to Cisernos. He found me pitching straw from an empty horse stall. Juan discovered me an hour later, huddled in the corner while my left eye swelled like a plum, and my ear lobe throbbed for its missing gold hoop, and a deep cut dripped from my forehead. I could feel the trail of red licorice rope scratches scrawled down my

left cheek from Nico's stubby nails and as Juan moved to touch them with those same hands I held out my own to keep him away.

"Leave," I told him softly, covering my face. The horse in the next stall tossed his head and rolled his eyes. He's got a crush on Juan, and never misses a moment to let us know. I wanted to tell him it wasn't the time.

Juan stood with his hands at his sides, unmoving.

"I said leave!" I exploded, launching myself at him. Juan let me beat him. Took my defenseless punches like a penance. My arms eventually tired and I gave up. I fell to the floor, panting, kneeling at Juan's feet, pressing my swollen face to his legs. Juan pressed his lips to my hair, holding my forehead against his denimed knees. The floor was grimy and manure covered because I hadn't had time to finish the sweeping before Nico came. I'd have to stay late. I began to cry and Juan wrapped his arms around my head.

"I am sorry," he whispered, "*Mi amor*, I am so very sorry."

Marina

Marina was Juan's best friend. Before me, that is. She took our meeting like she takes everything -- hard. When Rosa met her for the first time, Juan says, she took one look at Marni, in black combat boots and torn camouflage shorts, and said, "You have no laughter, *chica valentia*, no laughter inside of you."

Marina and Juan used to lie out on the grass behind Cisernos' barn at night. Where he now lays with his head on my thigh. That's where Juan tells me Marina's the first girl he ever kissed. The only girl he ever kissed. The reason Juan knew I'd have to come along.

Horses

The day was overcast. The weather ignored my building euphoria. Ignorant to the way my chest filled strangely whenever Juan was around. How I'd bite my lip to keep from grinning.

Juan was all about new beginnings. *New Mexico*. This city as dark as the clouds gathering in sky pocketed corners that day, tiptoeing closer to us. Eventually they broke and downpoured. Cisernos and I laughed and laughed out there in the rain. I straddled the giant spotted gelding while Cisernos stood holding the lead line, water running down his face in rivulets. Juan perched on the fence watching us like maniacs. Mud splattered as I rushed the horse back to the barn, Juan at our heels. Cisernos waved at us both before running for the house. I could still hear his laughter as I disappeared into the barn with Juan, high on the bursting atmosphere.

Juan and I climbed the hay loft, stretched out next to one another, cozied in scratchy nests of straw. We talked and talked, the rain dancing on the wooden hand laid planks roofed over us. If I rolled one way or another, the bedding snapped satisfyingly. I told Juan about my school before, the place I lived. I studied the deep stained tresses above us while I talked, imaging the place I'd called home my entire life, painted there on the ceiling like the Sistine Chapel.

"Chicago's pretty cool," I'd said casually. I didn't want Juan to know how much I wanted to go back there. How deeply it was carved to my insides, and how I missed the lake and the Ferris wheel on Navy Pier. How my Dad had taken me there. Juan had never been out of New Mexico.

I told him about the horse carriages on Michigan Avenue. The ones that a week before Christmas match the trees along the street, covered with lights, every single one of them white, twins to the white horses and white buggies, laced with red harnesses and silver bells. The drivers wear dark top hats and gloves. Sprigs of mistletoe rest behind the horses' ears.

"My father promised," I said. "He promised we'd ride in one drawn with a black horse. One with a horse named Johnny, but we never did."

"Like you Juan," I said, trying out a laugh. "A Johnny horse."

A Kiss

His lips were soft and wet, his tongue thick and warm. He let his fingers play with the curls on the back of my neck, running them down my spine and back up again where they tapped a gentle rhythm just above my shoulder blade. I could feel his chest rise against mine, and his breath came out in shaky pants, the way it does when you're so nervous you forget to breathe. My limbs trembled. I was embarrassed by my shakiness, and tried to steady myself by cupping his round hip bones in my palms. I pulled his torso against mine by the waistband of his jeans and our legs twisted in a vine of tangled cowboy boot and tennis shoe.

The Catholic Church

A place to disappear. A place that dissolves seventeen year old boys into quiet escapes from battles ensuing in the world beneath the cathedral on her hill. The church stands facing away from the downtown lights of Las Cruces. An outsider, a loner, a white cow balanced on a faded grassy slope. Its steeple rises into the air, against night's black cloak, reaching for the untold stars. For stories just out of its reach. A place full of peace required by religious buildings. Pews wave in the sea of burning candles, phosphorus crackling in deep blue. The benches line like soldiers on attention, thick flickering shadows slanted against the cement floor, too flat against my rubber shoe soles. In front of the room stands a tall figure of Christ, his hands upturned, unscathed. His face mild and devoted as he reaches for his invisible children. Our Father, who art in heaven. I want to touch his plaster cheek. Something so unchanged in decades of chaos comforts even me, who gave up on such mystical figures moments ago.

Distant planes pass over head, echoing buzzes like lawnmowers lost in the mountains. Dust smells of dryness creep in the door, remind how far this place is from home. I miss my city and downtown sun struck buildings, light cutting across traffic choked interchanges to the vast lake chained with yachts no one ever seems to use. I think of a

child, a boy, a son, running in the long grass, the kind they don't have in New Mexico. Gnats lift from thick stalks as he runs, the grass tickles the back of his hands stretched out behind him, spread eagle, like a bird. He looks over his shoulder to an image, a dark paper cutout behind him, the shape of a father, lifting a child in his arms, like the breeze whizzing past the boy's ears, like the gnats defying gravity, lifting the boy so he's higher than air, so he believes he can fly.

all the way

I was a swimmer. That's how it all started. In high school I was a swimmer.

The first meet of my senior year season, third year varsity letter winner by then, had me poised on the starter's platform, rotating my shoulder blades, awkward like a pelican's beak, knees bent slightly. But I was not awkward. I was graceful. A knobby kneed dancer who flew when I hit water. I can still feel the gritty sand papered texture of the dirty white platform against the arching valleys of my feet. Years later, I have memorized the tiny claw-like bones of my toes curling over cool sharp metal edges. I know my trade. With every inch of my body, my tissues, my blood, sinews and bone, I know this sport.

Click. The pistol locked into place and I flexed the muscles stretched like rubber bands across the canal of my back, the curving South American trail we call spine. I bounced, pulled my arms tightly behind me. I was ready. I'd done this a hundred times before. My fingers twitched. The air was still, thick with silent anticipation, not a titter, a cough, in the crowd. Everything remains frozen until swimmers break surface. Then the air explodes. In a preparatory silence I was ready to soar. Oxygen filtered nervously through my nose and my senses halted. I stopped seeing, feeling, thinking, hearing. I became instinctual. Moving only for the metallic burnt iron smell of the starter's gun. My lips wanted that still man-made aquamarine lapped against them, my hands ached to feel the tiled black "X" reassuring fingertips. My body would flip, turn, shoot from the wall and rocket ship to its destination. I was in control. I was in my body and driving it with ease. Any Indy car driver will tell you, fatal crashes didn't happen to experts. They know too much, have turned their sport into their art, their lives, their bodies.

But I didn't realize you could drive a body too hard. No matter your knowledge, an inattentive diver can take herself down. Way down. To a depth she never knew existed.

"Abra," Coach said one day, "You're too thin. You can't swim unless you eat enough to keep up."

I nodded, adjusting my navy Speedo, pulling it out of its crawl space in back.

“I mean it, Abby,” Coach said. “Your body is a machine, you have to give it fuel.”

I eat, I told Coach. I eat, I told everyone. I eat.

I didn't tell them how I liked to look at myself in the bathtub at night. Private moments kept private. I would run my hands up and down the slick surface of skin, my own natural wet suit. I imagined the father I never knew whispering in my child ear, “You are a lovely mer-baby.” He was the type to believe in those sorts of things. In my mind. My body appeared a corpse after his voice. A corpse I'd never touched. My father's body, thin, emaciated, left to starve and die, eaten away by disease. My own disintegrated skin transformed the clean bath water a murky grey. I'd read somewhere human beings shed like snakes, only microscopic layers at a time. The only place witness to this is the bathtub. I would balance palms on jutting hip bones, holding them like cool cue balls ready to cut across green felt. Make a triangle of thumb and fingertip, met at a point on my abdomen, taut at that time with well worked muscle. I would chant a mantra, words I'd learned young and clung to, “Fat, fat, fat.” I'd recite: “Baby fat, pot belly, beer basket, paunchy pouch, butter roll, tubby tum-tum, gut.” I said it out loud. Patted the tiny rounded mound of stomach. Slapped the skin till it stung pink. Pinched myself till tears filled my eyes. Traced the appendectomy scar running across my side. My small pointed breasts, B cup, protruded out above the water, and annoyed me. Reminded me of Cari Clark, captain of the swim team.

“They're *triangular!*” Cari squealed, pointing directly at my naked chest in the locker room after practice. Cari giggled so her long blond hair flounced in a violent dance. She always spoke in italics. “I'm more *gifted,*” she said, shoving her full breasted, over-mature, sport braed chest in my direction. I wanted to twist them right off.

Cari went on, after college, to write famous poetry about those breasts. Those mounds I'd dream about, that would smother me in a huge cleavage like the pocket trunk of a tree, "I love love *love* you!" she'd croon, smashing my nose between them. I couldn't breathe.

Her ease in her flesh, in her rolling hilled body terrified me. The way she filled out a swim suit and pranced around naked in the locker room. Still – I swam faster.

It was Cari who provided a reason to swim for an hour in the morning, three hours at afternoon practice, and stay an extra hour after that. Cari's chest, her wide hips and curling flesh that melted from the waist band of her jeans pushed me beyond the three years I'd already trained. I couldn't bear to be like her. I couldn't bury myself in that too too much flesh.

Perhaps it began with eavesdropping. I overheard Grandfather tell Mom he thought I looked more beautiful everyday. Was I losing weight? he wanted to know. She looks older, thinner in the face, more mature, he'd said. Cheekbones, he said, good old fashion cheekbones. I listened from the top stair, blushing. My grandfather, my father's father, thought I was perfect. I would have made my father proud. He told my mother this. There it was. Without any effort but a few extra laps, praise was sung. I prevailed. I wasn't Cari Clark.

I should have stopped there.

In my bottom desk drawer I began to keep candy bars. The greatest pleasure of my day was not eating them. I'd smell them, hold their tiny bodies of chocolate like rodents in my cupped hands, shiver with hidden thrill as I tossed them, uneaten, into the pink plastic garbage bin under the kitchen sink. Sometimes I'd just take them out, stroke their wrappers, turn them over to trace the nutritional information pasted on their backs: 12 grams of fat, 6 of those saturated, 17 grams of fat equals 290 calories, 150 of those

calories, fat. Fat, fat, fat. Add, subtract, multiply, divide, it expanded and disappeared effortlessly on paper. Numbers slid so simply under zero. I began to like negatives and my ease with them. I had found another expertise.

Then I started to stash plates of food under my bed. Dinners I didn't want. Didn't eat because I didn't have to. I was a swimmer, nourished on air. My mother believed in privacy. Especially for young women, she said. Mom would happily bring dinner to my room while I studied after swim practice. She'd stand in the doorway and smile at her only daughter. She knew I was a straight A student, running for class vice president, and co-captain of the swim team. She'd want to ruffle my hair, but wouldn't because I was getting too old for that. She loved me with all of her heart. She told me this. I'd squirm with embarrassment, "M-om!" I'd say. You'll never be too old for that, Mom would say. I'd look up from pre-calculus homework, the only light in the room a small circle from my desk lamp, smile, and thank her for dinner.

After she left, I threw aside the books and faced my meal. I began by cutting the pork chop (or hamburger, or chicken breast, or leg of lamb) into six sections, slicing each of those into three smaller divisions. Add, subtract, multiply, divide. I'd move the pieces around the plate like a choreographer. I'd cram mashed potatoes into perfect squares, dividing the cube into four sections, then trimming those segments into five small strips. Smothering each section with generous portions of gravy. After over an hour of arranging food, I would eat a single string bean, or maybe a swallow of milk, or one, just one, heavenly forkful of potatoes, and flushed the rest down the toilet in my private bathroom.

Some nights, after the carefully calculated dissections, I shoved the plates under the bed. I would keep them there until they began to smell. Then when Mom wasn't home, I'd take all the plates back to the kitchen, wash each one carefully with the yellow sponged soap wand, and put them away, stacking the multicolored Fiestaware yellow,

orange, yellow, orange, in perfect order. I arranged the matching plastic handled silverware in the drawer so all the small spoons were separate from the larger ones, and all the sharp knives kept handles closest to hands.

The next night I began again.

A time came when I noticed my period gone. It would be the third month this happened before I wondered. I'd counted the calendar days to the last red Crayola dot I'd made. 92 and a half days. Confirmed. Three months. I knew this wasn't about the same thing that forced Kimberly Peterson to leave school for nine months. Kimberly had returned pasty faced, worn, and older in some way I couldn't quite grasp back then. Before I knew the knowledge your body can bring you, Kim became another Cari. Her swelling stomach, her disappearance, and worst of all her return. Kim talked less when she got back and yet seemed to have more to say. She gained the observant quality I attributed to someone wise, some sage or guru on a mountain from a movie.

I was a good kid. A perfect kid. The kind people called responsible, mature, well adjusted for her age. Everyone knew that. By that point I had kissed Mark Learner, Sam Eleanor, Andy Stevens, Peter Tompson in the school play, so he didn't really count, and Mitch Taylor. Mitch had been my boyfriend for over two years. We hadn't had sex and he wasn't the kind of boy who'd push. I don't think he'd even have asked. I thought he might love me, but stayed with him because he was safe. There was nothing frightening about Mitch. Not in the least.

My friends and I mostly traveled in pairs, did things like home football games on Friday nights followed by late night rendezvous at the corner Pizza Hut, afternoon matinees on Sundays greasing each other's hands with movie buttered popcorn, and two hour phone conversations past midnight munching M&Ms, occasionally on school nights, but I'd only been drunk once and never even tried pot. I knew kids did that stuff. I knew they partied and had sex and broke curfews, but I didn't. I was an athlete, a model

student, a wonderful daughter. Anywhere I went, Mitch did too. We didn't seem to miss the rest of it.

Soon after my period disappeared, and I ascertained I couldn't be pregnant, I forgot it. Didn't concern myself with its absence. Then I began to notice it was uncomfortable to sit on hard, uncushioned chairs. I'd shift and wiggle, but nothing made the desks in English 12 bearable. Lectures on Shakespeare and proper grammatical sentences turned longer and longer. Ms. Smyth kept me after class one day, probably suspecting me of ADHD, as if I wasn't Abra Gold. Ethel Smyth was the type who corrected anyone who accidentally called her Miss, stretching out the pronunciation to, "Mizzzzzz," buzzing the poor z to death. She wore mismatched, too large pants suits, brown oxford shoes and mocha colored lipstick that strayed outside the lines of her mouth to her front triangularly crooked teeth. She had wild frizzy hair that stood straight out from her head, and wore glasses so attracted to gravity no matter what she tried, they never stayed on her face. She possessed a reputation of being the therapist teacher. The kind who nodded sympathetically, ummhmed, and said, "Yes, I understand." No matter what a student said to her.

"Abra, is everything ok?" she asked, holding her glasses to her nose with her thumb.

"I'm fine," I said with a warm smile. I was a senior, I'd learned how to handle Ms. Symth, and Mr. Johnson, the massive shop teacher who hated all female students, except of course, me. I had learned to work the school. Most kids had by graduation. I met Ms. Symth's eyes so she was sure.

It didn't seem to work. "You look sick," Ms. Smyth said softly, "tired, dark circles." She gestured under her own eyes which were an amazing brownish grey rimmed in crooked eyeliner. She could have been beautiful just for those eyes. "You've lost a lot of weight," she said, reaching out to touch my shoulder. I ducked from her hand, as if a sudden itch on my leg made me jerk away. I straightened up, nodding. "I swim and am

really busy," I explained. "I have lots to do. I miss meals sometimes." I picked another smiled for Ms. Smyth, so she'd get the picture.

Ms. Smyth studied me a minute, and said, "If you need to talk, I'm willing to listen."

"I'm fine," I said, grin number three as I walked away, giving a small wave. I was fine. I was absolutely fine. And Ms. Smyth would have been the last person to know otherwise.

I went to the girls' bathroom and studied my reflection in the full length mirror hastily stuck to the faded putrid non-color walls. Other than the usual emaciated way fluorescent lights made everyone look like lavender paste, I thought I looked good.

My unlit jack-o-lantern eyes, sunken and dark. Cheekbones exposed like a bird with its wings spread and pants clung to my slowly disappearing waist only because a belt with four extra holes punched with a Philip's head screwdriver wrapped around my waist. I was fine.

Later that day I went home with an aching stomach. Stress, I told myself. Ms. Smyth has stressed me out, and I didn't need that. I was busy. Things to do, meetings to run, practices to attend. Damn her, I thought to myself. I stalked into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. I wanted everything. I reached my hand down the front of my falling off jeans, feeling my stomach rise beneath fingertip. I read my scar like Braille. Slammed the door and grabbed a glass, filling it seven times with water. I was still hungry. Damn her, I swore again.

I reopened the refrigerator, handled the blue topped Tupperware dishes. Ran my fingernail around the pastel painted ring on the platter of last night's fried chicken. I smelled an onion. Held a plum. Touched pear. Grasped a block of brie, sniffed the Smuckers, wiped the trail of Hershey's syrup from the squeeze bottle's face, washing it off my finger before I could lick it. I wanted to devour the pickles, drink their juice, put them in the leftover half of a cherry chocolate cheesecake, and inhale the entire container

of cold, hardened two week old macaroni. I was overcome with the sensation I wanted to weep. I wanted to shovel the food into my mouth with my hands, both of my hands, like a man starved, barely able to swallow fast enough, like an infant, covered in mashed food. Tears mixed with saliva, and I gagged.

Frantic I wiped my nose and eyes with the back of my hand, I removed all the food from the refrigerator. I rearranged it. I Lysoled the inside of the ice box. I wiped the trays with a wet rag, I counted containers, sticks of celery, and leaves of lettuce. Add, subtract, multiply, divide. I washed the labels of each jar. Put everything back inside, took it out again, rearranged it once more, and finally, fled the kitchen. I didn't know if I could win, but I was determined.

I went to my bathroom and laid on the black shag rug in front of the toilet without moving. I clutched my knotted stomach, drew my knees to my chest, and squeezed my eyes shut. I cursed Ms. Symth one more time.

An hour later the sound of my mom's car, the headlights through the window, jerked me upright. I stood, steadying my dizzy self against the sink. "Get yourself together," I said to the face in the mirror. The eyes blood shot and exhausted. Lines running across my face. I splashed cold water on my face, ran a brush through my thinning hair, tossing out the clumps under wads of used Kleenex. "Get it together," one more time to my face, and I went downstairs to meet Mom at the door.

"I cleaned the refrigerator," I told her. Another practiced smile.

"Well thank you honey," Mom said, looking at me funny, "you're such a big help. It's so nice to come home to a clean house."

"I ate already," I said, rubbing my nose. I'd taken the container of macaroni and flushed it. Evidence.

Mom gazed at me. "Why don't you join me tonight anyway?" she asked. She shook her head, pushing her eyebrows down like an angry clown. "We should talk. We haven't for a while."

I shrugged, "I'm fine, Mom," I said, letting my voice sound annoyed. As if Mom were being too nosy. Overprotective.

"Are you?" Mom asked, reaching out to pull on the corner of my untucked shirt. "I'm worried about you," Mom said. "You don't look so good, sick," she touched my cheek.

I made a grunt. "Why is everyone so concerned with how I look," I muttered under my breath.

"What?" Mom asked.

Nothing, I said. I told her if it'd make her happy I'd sit with her while she ate, but I wasn't hungry.

Mom said, "You have an appointment with Dr. Gorden tomorrow."

Dr. Gorden had been my physician since I was born. She'd known my dad. She'd seen him through his cancer. She took special care of me because my dad was such a great guy. Dr. Gorden told me this every time we saw one another. She liked to remind me of all the diseases we'd fought together. Strep infections, earaches, chicken pox at fourteen, that damn about to explode appendix, and all the adolescent stuff too. I squirmed every time Dr. Gorden asked if I was sexually active yet. She'd known my dad for Christ's sake.

"Well let me know so at least we can do it safely," Dr. Gorden would say, smiling at me. Dr. Gorden trusted me to tell her the truth. I didn't understand the choice of the we pronoun. Was Dr. G. going to be there too?

Dr. Gorden liked me. She lit up every time she greeted me.

This visit she wasn't smiling. I sat uncomfortably on the stupid paper covered table, the kind that always reminded me of butcher paper, thick hunks of raw meat wrapped in neat squares of white. I was dressed in the regulation exposing faint gown and socks. Dr. Gorden shook her head over the manila folder I assumed held my entire medical history.

“Abra,” the doctor said, a line forming between her eyes, “you have lost a great deal of weight since last year. You weren’t overweight to begin with. Are you eating regularly?”

I shrugged one shoulder. “I dunno. I don’t keep track,” I said, “I’m really busy this year.”

Dr. Gorden pursed her lips, and studied my face.

“Abra, you need to level with me. This is concerning and I need to know if we should run some tests. Are you eating?”

I shrugged again. The other shoulder. “I eat,” I said, bored, looking at the ceiling.

Dr. Gorden continued to look at me. She didn’t say anything but clicked her pen.

“I *eat*,” I said, this time placing emphasis on the word eat. Cari Clark would have been impressed. I added another genuine smile on top of it.

Dr. Gorden nodded. “Then I think we need to make some appointments for you at the hospital. This kind of weight loss isn’t normal, Abra, and we need to figure out what’s going on.”

We. There she was using that we again. I shook my head. “For crying out loud,” I said, “I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine, Abby,” Dr. G. answered.

“Yes I am,” I said, knowing I was beginning to sound like a spoiled child. I was more mature than this, beyond that tone. I looked Dr. G. straight in the eye. “I’m not hungry is all.”

Dr. Gorden said nothing. She didn’t blink. She kept staring at me.

“I’m fine,” I said again. My smiles were getting tiring, even for me.

Dr. G. heaved a sigh, and said, like a symphony conductor with a ball-point, “Stand up.” I obeyed. See, I was good. I would do anything required of me. Well, anything that didn’t involve food.

Dr. G. made me hold my arms out, then over my head. Moved behind me and had me touch my toes. One two, a workout for the skinny girl, I thought to myself. I wanted to giggle. Then Dr. Gorden asked if it would be okay if she opened my gown a moment. I shrugged good naturedly and mumbled Mitch's favorite, "Whatever." Dr. G. untied the gown and studied me from behind, then switched to the front. I blushed hotly, despite how cold I was getting, and wanted to cover my non-Cari breasts. My triangles. I was glad I'd kept my underwear on. I shivered. Dr. Gorden pressed my scar, made me breathe in and out, then, finally, let me put the gown back on. Said abruptly, "Stay here." I considered barking.

I was left sitting on the crinkly paper and tried not to move because every time I did, it ripped. I studied my socks. Rayon, black with white and yellow daisies on them. I twisted my ankles so my heels touched. I swung my legs back and forth and wished I had one of those little rubber hammer things. I looked around for one, but even craning my neck caused the stupid paper to tear. I sighed and sat still. I started playing games with myself. How long can I go without blinking? How many grey design smudgies are on the white tile floor? How long can I sit perfectly still and not breathe? This reminded me of swimming. I smiled. Swimming. I daydreamed about how I'd break the record at the next meet, the one Cari held. How I'd go to state, and how that year was finally, as a senior, my year. My year to win. To go all the way.

Dr. Gorden broke my thoughts with a quick curt knock on the door, swinging in without waiting for an answer.

"Abra," she said, "we have a problem."

I blinked.

"Your mother says she thinks you're not eating. Or at least she hasn't seen you put anything in your mouth in a long time. We're both very concerned."

I blinked again. "I eat," I said, looking down at the floor. I'd lost count at 1,324.

“Abra, I’m in a situation here,” Dr. Gorden said, lifting my chin so I had to meet her eyes. “This is serious and you need to talk to me. You need to tell me what is going on.”

I held the gaze. Another useful trick. “I eat,” I said again, pulling my head from her hand.

“Abra, I don’t think your mother is making this up.”

I broke the gaze. No fair. Bringing in Moms is not fair. I studied my socks. I closed my eyes. “I eat,” I said one more time. I just wanted to go home. To the pool. Dive deep, glide with arms outstretched, watch the surface ripple from below. Be where I was someone, something, else. Away from Dr. Gorden, Mom, Mitch, Cari, and my stupid dead father. Away from all that stuff everyone made so important. I didn’t want to eat. I hated food. I hated food like I hated Cari Clark. I hated everyone there in Dr. Gorden’s sterile little bandage bearing, needle wielding room that smelled like antiseptic and had an icy breeze coming from the air vent overhead. My body, my choice, I thought angrily. Leave me alone.

Out loud, I said nothing. I continued to stare at the floor. I sucked in my cheeks.

“Are you cold?” Dr. Gorden’s voice was suddenly soft. Her hand touched my upper arm in a flinch of warmth. I wanted cold. I liked cold. I yanked away.

“I’m fine,” I said.

“No Abra, I don’t think you are,” Dr. Gorden said. I looked at Dr. G.’s face, middle aged and drawn in dark lines. I wanted to apologize. Tell Dr. G. I was sorry, even if I didn’t know for what or why. I didn’t want to upset anyone. I just wanted to be left alone. I’m good, I silently pleaded, please, everyone knows that, just leave me alone. I tried to get my eyes to communicate this and stared at the doctor.

“Abra,” Dr. Gorden began quietly, “I can’t put you in the hospital until you drop another ten or twenty pounds, but I’d rather we not get to that point. I think we should try and tackle this before we have to do anything too extreme.”

I looked at her. Tears gathered in my throat. Goddamnit. "I eat," I said softly, the tears glassing my eyes, embarrassing me.

"Oh, Abra," was all Dr. Gorden said. "You're too smart for this, kiddo. Let's take care of the problem before it becomes any worse."

I nodded. Then shook my head. There wasn't a problem. I closed my eyes. Whatever, I thought. Anything to get away from the moment. I wanted to hide. "Can I go home?" I finally asked in a voice that sounded too young to be mine.

"Ok," was all Dr. Gorden said. "Ok, Abra, get dressed. I'll be in my office with your mother. Come join us when you're done."

I would find out later that before I got to the office, Dr. Gorden gave the name of a therapist to Mom. I'd be told there wasn't a choice about going to see him. "He's special," Mom would say, "he works with girls like you Abra."

What, I wanted to ask, swimmers? What kind of girls does that mean?

There were six days until the shrink could see me. I couldn't have cared less. I refused to talk to my mother. Even when Mom told me she trusted me to keep the appointment, go right after school six days away all on my own. Like an adult, Abra, Mom said. "But it's a one time deal, young lady," she said. "You blow it, I take you." "Like a baby," she said. I didn't answer.

I wanted to talk to my father. More than anything I wanted to know him, and have him there and just talk. On day two, pre-shrink, I did. The only person I had turned out to be nonexistent. I told Dad what was going on. I closed my eyes and spoke to him in my head, where he lived most of the time, like a bedroom ceiling in the dark. I hoped the shrink wouldn't find out about this.

I told my father how no one would leave me alone, and that I ate. How Mom and Dr. G. had gone behind my back and bought me therapy time. Fifty dollars an hour to look at

ink blots, I said, I'll bet I'll have to look at big blobby pictures of kindergarten looking crap and tell him what I see. I hadn't ever seen a psychologist before. Just on TV. I'll tell him I see shit, I told Dad. That's what I'll say, I continued, I'll say, Mr. Big Old Therapy Man, with your pinstriped button down judging me, I see big plops of poo on your stupid cards, so what in the hell do you think of that?

That's when I got angry at my father too. I was tired. Of everyone and everything. I was worn out and angry at the world. I wanted to know where my Dad was, why he left before I was even born, why he had to go and get sick before Mom even knew I was swimming around inside of her. I needed my Dad to be there and tell Mom I wasn't a nut case. I wanted my Dad. I wondered if he even knew my name.

I noticed in that week I was cold constantly. I had to fight to cover my trembling. I could barely move my hands or feet sometimes. I shivered and couldn't sit in desks comfortably. Took to wearing two pairs of underwear and carrying a balled up sweater to sit on. Some days I'd wear two pairs of socks and knit gloves with the fingertips cut out. I was overwhelmed by daily exhaustion and repelled by the fine downy fuzz sprouting and matting over my arms and stomach.

On day four of the shrink countdown, Mitch offered to take me for fries after school, he thought something was on my mind. I screamed at him. Told him I was in training and he knew that and what in the hell was wrong with him anyway, to be offering greasy gross fast food during the season? I told him to leave me the fuck alone. Get out of my life if you can't understand it, I said to him. Then shoved him as roughly as I could against the bank of lockers. It felt strangely foreign and good to push someone so much bigger than myself. I wanted to hurt Mitch. To punch him, hit him with my balled up fists until he was raw and bleeding. I wanted someone else to feel what I did.

My desperate desire to hurt someone outside of myself, someone as kind as Mitch took me off guard, and as its implications lit into my consciousness, I backed away. I began to realize I was terrified of myself. I didn't know what was happening to me. I stood and stared at Mitch, wide eyed. Mitch stayed pressed up against the lockers, eyeing me warily through his girlish lashes.

He slouched awkwardly, slipping a hand into his jeans pocket, sliding his left untied hiking boot a little in front of his body. His long bangs fell over his twined eyebrows. He flipped them back. He was trying to look cool. I wanted to apologize, but seemed unable to tell anyone else I was sorry. I was sick of apologizing. I was sick of keeping everyone else happy. I wanted to collapse. I wanted Mitch to reach out to me, to pull me against his jacket and promise me it'd all be ok. I wanted to burrow into him like an animal, and make everything else disappear.

Which is why I fled. I couldn't bear needing anyone else so much. I ran. From Mitch, and his well deep eyes and nervously chewed lip. From my desire to beat the living out of him. From my Mom and my dead father, and Dr. Gorden, and Cari Clark and the nameless faceless therapist looming over it all. From every person I couldn't bear to see or hear or touch or talk to. From my slowly disintegrating self who was so lost and confused and terrified. Why was I made this way, I wept to myself as I fled.

Mitch called at 11:30 that night and told me he was sorry. I let out a gwaff. He was such a wuss.

He asked if I was sick.

"You don't look so good, Abby-Cat," he said, using a special name he had for me.

I didn't say anything. Just sighed into the phone. I hated that he called and yet needed him to. If he hadn't I'd hate him for that too. It was my fault. Mitch would forever take the blame for everything I did. I hated him for loving me that way. I

couldn't return that. Not ever. I could feel the rage from that afternoon rise like a soap bubble inside of me. We both sat breathing over the line, not speaking.

Then Mitch said he really, really liked me and hoped I wasn't mad at him, and if I was, could I tell him why, cause he didn't get it. I sighed again and said no Mitch. No, I'm not mad at you, I said. I couldn't get anything else out.

I heard Mitch smile. He said, "Well, good. Good then. I'll say goodnight Abby Cat, and we can make up tomorrow." And he hung up. I clutched the dial toned phone to my ear, wanted to plead, come back Mitch, come back. Don't take that soft kindness away. But I knew I'd never ask anyone to stay.

The next day I passed out while walking down the hall at school. I was alone. I'd started carrying my body strangely. It seemed everything ached and I finally had reached the culmination of my father's death. Thinning wispy hair, ancient creaking bones without enough flesh or fat to sustain life. I had succeeded in reaching where my father had left me.

I moved carefully down the noisy hall, lockers slamming shut around me, the din of voices melding together so I heard snippets of conversations:

"Yeah, Mr. McGregor's an ass, man."

"65%, my mother's gonna kill me!"

"Did you see Bradd Hoff last night, he's so cute," squeals, giggles.

"If the food doesn't get better in the cafeteria I'm gonna starve to death," followed by retching noises and laughter.

All of it spun inside of my head like a Monet mess, the red paint of the lockers swirled with the shiny white recently cleaned floor, the buzzing of the overhead lights blinding. The sound of tennis shoes squeaking along the shimmery polish, dress shoes clicking and clipping quickly past. I felt separated from my body, like an ABC movie character, floating above my own image. The next thing I knew, the walls slanted, the floor raised

like a skateboard ramp and I was lying on the floor with a circle of people staring at me. I had no idea how long I'd been there.

The first thing I heard was, "She looks like hell."

"No shit," came a response. I kept my eyes closed against them all. "She's looked pretty crappy for awhile," same voice.

"Is she sick?"

"Well duh! Look at her."

"Shouldn't we get her to the nurse?"

"Old lady Hubba Hubba?" Giggles. "Hubba Bubba," giggle giggle. The nurse was a mammoth monster of a woman who had hips accused of setting fires as they swished against her tight white dress when she lumbered down the hall. She had a giant mole on her left cheek that looked like a squashed Hershey's Kiss and tiny feet shoved into those silent nurse shoes so her fat ankles bunched up over the sides. I couldn't bear to think of her putting that slab of a hand on her forehead and asking in a hushed voice if "the monthly pal" had paid a visit. I wondered what old lady Hubba Bubba would say to the fact that I'd pulled that invitation months ago.

"I'm fine," I told everyone weakly. "I'm okay, just a touch of the flu."

Hands like caricatures of God reached for me, the way a cartoonist would draw The Lord, and I stood. Wobbly, I made my way to the school office to call Mom and get her to take me home. She sighed sadly and shook her head, never saying a word as I slept stretched in the back seat.

The final meet of the season. Day before the shrink. The day the champion swimmer, record breaking senior, three time varsity letter winner Abra Gold almost drown.

I balanced on that platform, trembling knees knocking together, almost calf-less. My shoulder blades barely able to maintain the weight of my arms outstretched behind me. I couldn't fly. I could hardly walk. I wouldn't soar when I hit that water, I'd sink. Like

stone. I wanted to swim, dear God I wanted to swim and swim and touch that wall and win. I wanted to show them all how good I was, how I could do it and then some. I waited for that gun, I twitched my nose, but my senses were a mess. I didn't know color or smell or sound. I collapsed. Tumbled off the starting block, crashed into the small jutted side of the pool, and let my body go. I let myself sink to the bottom of the pool where I wanted to lay down and rest. I have no idea what happened around me. All I know is I wanted the thick still peace waiting for me on the pool's floor. I was a swimmer. I was ready to die. To go all the way. Reach my father's arms, and finally, sleep within them.

This is not where the story ends. It isn't over, but my climb back up would be a lifetime to tell. How I learned to talk shrinks, to call them therapists and not lie. How I struggled to put food in my mouth, taste it against my tongue, the sweet swirl of August peaches and grainy sandy taste of breads, left sour if soaked in milk, sucked like an infant from my mother's fingers as I first recovered. How the rest of my life will be dedicated to attempting to recover. How I am no longer a swimmer. I can't be. How Mitch retired after my tumble, I was too much for a seventeen year old boy. How I don't hold it against him, I was too much for me. How Cari Clark won the meet that year, broke my records, went on to qualify Olympic style. How somewhere, inside my body lives a little girl I'll never know, who had a Daddy and wanted life more than death, and how she'll fail to become anything he would have dreamed. How every season is still swimming to her, and how it still aches to be alive. But how, finally, that's become her choice.

not what you'd expect

I.

*“Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone...”*

The sharp edged silver whisper of life that stole you lasted only an instant. Beyond that razor blade, nothing could have taken you faster.

“She was serious about it.” That’s what they said later. Standing uniformed, in a line, it seemed they spoke together, like a Greek chorus, even though only one of their mouths moved. Serious, I wanted to scoff at them, I could tell them you were never serious. The word didn’t belong in your vocabulary. Playful, I think I called you. “I love that you’re so playful,” I said that last day in Rusten Park. Or was it silly? Did I say, “I love that you’re so silly, K.C.”? Maybe I dug into my language banks, my mental GRE study list and called you asinine or fatuous. I don’t remember. I know the sky resembled the inside of an upside down cappuccino mug our last afternoon together, and I was full with it. High on non-existent caffeine. I know the sun was shining because you dragged me to Woolworth’s and made me buy those kiddy sunglasses. Mine putrid plastic red and yours a shade darker than the sky. The way it would look later that night when I found you, swimming alone in your tub.

You climbed a tree, shouted from the branches, beckoned me, crooking your finger like the bend that held you. “Come on!” you called down to me. You grinned from behind the too small frames, the glasses rising with the smile of your cheeks. You looked like a ridiculous Big Bird, tattered jeans and paint splattered work boots, tongues hanging out like beat dogs, untied, but still I followed. I obeyed your every command. I didn’t know what else to do. We sat in that tree for hours, you and I. You shot big chunks of spit exploding to the sidewalk, letting the wads drop just inches from bodies passing below. Grown-ups playing child games. The dark toe of your boot touched my Nikes, and we met foot to foot, above the rest of the world.

“K.C.,” I said your name, squishing together the initials of your name so you sounded like Casey, deifying you’d ever be a Kaithleen. “When are you going to start taking things more seriously?” My hand wrapped around a branch as thick as your arm, my back pressed to the trunk, leg against yours. Our inside ankle bones, the talus of human feet, met like parts of that tree.

You laughed, made a goofy crossed eyed face. “Who does at 26?” you asked. Then told me you were different from other people. “I’m Peter Pan, I can fly,” you said, reaching back to tighten the tip of your braid. I believed you.

“Guess that makes me Tinkerbell,” I said, wanting to stay there, joking, in that tree all night. I was certain we stood on the edge of everything, falling impossible. I bought everything you ever said to me, drunk on first love.

II.

*“Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come...”*

It seemed to me you had everything. You spent your days raising roofs. I spent mine buried in books, thesis chapters, and stubborn academic advisors. Graduate student and college drop-out. You built houses and I generated ideas. I studied film, black and white dialogues, 16 millimeter spools, wide angle lenses, outlines, action, and plots. You lifted frames, pounded nails, centered trusses, sawed off rough edges, beveled planks, and sanded to smooth curls and curves. I couldn’t get enough of the concreteness of you.

There was that afternoon you came to my place after work, burnt by the sun. I offered to rub cool aloe on your shoulders, our first intimate touch. My fingers trembled as I pinched oil from the plant on my window sill. You pulled your shirt off easily. Nothing scared you. I let my hands grow warm, rubbed them together, thick with evergreen goo before touching your skin. I massaged circles across your spine, walked the pads of my fingertips up the staircase of your vertebrae, wrote words and let you guess what they

were. I grew brave, bent to kiss the mole between your shoulder blades, thinking it should taste like chocolate, awakening the sweetest glands on the tip of my tongue as I inhaled the smell of green. Your arms were thick, broad in my hands, landscaped with muscle.

“You’re the brains, and I’m the brawn,” you said with a laugh. But you were gentle that first time. When you turned to meet my lips, I couldn’t find what made you so tough. You ran callused fingertips down the inside of my thighs, the textured hardened skin causing me to shiver. Instead of directly touching my skin you kept a millimeter away. I could feel the circles of your fingerprints.

Your nails were rounded, filed and short, despite the day of work. They raised goosepimples over my flesh. I wanted to drown in you. Your tool belt, hard hat, and overalls snaked across my floor in a strange trail, and afterwards I laughed because they seemed like props. How could they be such a part of you?

You were a girl in a man’s world. In more ways than one. What you omitted when people asked what you did for a living was the houses you built were for battered wives who couldn’t otherwise afford a home. You took extra, part-time jobs in order to make rent each month. Served coffee, typed memos, walked dogs, but never explained to anyone you’d spend eight hours standing in line at social services just to have papers signed for women you’d meet, maybe, once. You’d give up a day’s pay to get a single signature or convince silk tied suited men to push loans through. You’d spend hours with a dictionary, computer, and a small circle of light, selecting perfect words to obtain magical grants. You didn’t bother to explain why you took crap jobs when what you truly loved was to work with your hands. You’d set aside pine boards, hammers, levels, chewed up pencils, and heavy difficult extension corded equipment to take clients to lunch, teaching them in closet sized restaurant bathrooms how to use makeup to cover a bruise.

III.

“Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead

Scribbling on the sky the message [s]He Is Dead...”

I’m the only person you said goodbye to. I didn’t realize it at the time, but you shook my hand, and told me to take care of myself. You sounded grave, but it was the way we always said goodnight. “Like proper gentlemen,” you said. A comedy routine we’d invented over time. I would respond in stolen movie talk. “It’s not goodbye, it’s goodnight, Gilbert,” I said my line. You’d sometimes reach out and touch me. The cheek, the hand, even a hug, an embrace, once a kiss, outside, where everyone could see. “Don’t call me Gilbert,” you’d say with that half grin of yours, cocking your eyebrow and walking away. It was our every time game.

What did you expect of us, K.C.? Of me? We were supposed to have dinner that night, you idiot. Me and my fucking fancy ass bottle of wine. I wanted to impress you with my good taste and willingness to spend it on you. I walked into your apartment with a single sharp knock, which I’m sure you counted on. We’d grown to that point in our relationship. We still knocked a warning entry, but had moved beyond answers to comfortably stepping uninvited into the room. The lights were dim, the table set. You’d put out your parents’ wedding china, cream colored with a single gold rim around the edges, inherited that past holiday when they finally realized you were as settled as you’d ever hoped to be. No weddings for the Myron’s daughter, did you hear?

Not that I didn’t have different plans for us. Long drives to ski lodges in Lakewood, to win you over to my future visions of us as long time companions in wooded homes built with your Herculean hands. We’d flee to the opposite side of the country of my Mom and Dad -- Plastic Pop, as you called him. No wedding dishes of my own, just you and the vision of a couple dogs snow plowing behind us as we skied wintered trails.

IV.

*“Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves...”*

I smiled at your simple gestures. Cloth napkins. Tablecloth. Unlit candles. Who to put on the stereo so when you emerged from the bath I had set the exact mood? I lit the candles, scanned the CD rack, and uncertain, moved to knock on the bathroom door. We had not arrived at a point in our relationship I would enter that particular room without a word. Yet none arrived. There was a silence I hadn't noticed earlier. A stillness, a funny smell that reminded me of the odor coins leave in your hands after holding them. I knocked harder, louder, over the quiet. I pounded, called your name, panicked. For Christ's sake, K.C., didn't you know I would panic? I didn't even try the doorknob. I called Andie quickly, desperate. When she asked if the door was locked, I felt foolish without an answer, but she told me to hold still. So I did. I didn't move. I didn't breathe. I held still until she burst through the door the way Andie always does. No knocking for her. Lena was at her heels, running her hand over her newly shorn head, the candles reflecting in Andie's glasses. Lena came straight to me, sat down, put her hand on my knee, while Andie knocked on the bathroom door again.

“I'm sure she's fine,” Lena said, squeezing my knee. We all seemed to know what was happening but played along anyhow. It was as if we had already read the script but still had to keep up.

Andie pounded louder, harder. I held still. When she tried the knob, it turned.

I wanted to bolt out the door and never come back. I wanted to run and run, out in the middle of the street, run until my lungs burned, until they bled, run until I couldn't feel my limbs, until I became completely detached from myself, until I found you, sitting there, smiling, laying out wedding dishes for my arrival.

V.

*“[s]He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest...”*

What becomes important after death is fascinating. You'd think I'd have been torn apart because I hadn't ever told you I loved you, waiting for it to be okay to say, because I'd spent fifty dollars on a bottle of wine I'd have to drink with someone else, or that I didn't have the right kind of dress for a funeral. I didn't have a dress at all and I couldn't face your mother in my suit and tie, the way you'd have loved. Instead I was devastated I couldn't tell you our summer softball team had won the tournament, or I had finished the chapter of my thesis, the one you helped me write even though you denied knowing anything about Fellini, and what in the hell “8 1/2” really meant.

You were so certain about everything, even your end. No car crashes you could have survived, ropes that could have been cut, or guns that only wounded. Not for you. No left over metallic smells, or gory bullet holes, or brains smattered to white washed walls studded with shattered skull. No dropping fifty stories to dull thuds and gymnastic like death landings or swallowed drain cleaner burning holes through intestines. No silent sleep brought on by shut windows, garage doors, and running pickups. Someone could come along and open a door. Not even mixing pills with clear vodka people would have to sniff to see if it was water, so you'd fall asleep, slowly suffocating yourself, because hell, who knew if you'd take enough. No. For you it was a hot bath, a brandy, and Brawny blades. Blades reeking of rubbing alcohol and you. Bath water tinted pink, against your skin, porcelain white. All we had to do was drain the tub. Neat clean up provided exclusively by you.

VI.

“My noon, my midnight, my talk my song;

I thought love would last forever: I was wrong...”

Andie didn't want me to look. She held her arm out like a barricade, although Lena and I hadn't moved. Lena's hand pressed painfully on the edge of my knee, as if to keep me in place, so I couldn't rise against the pressure. I ignored them both. I moved as if I could feel air, and couldn't see anything but the bathtub around Andie's shoulder where you floated like a doll. A beautiful foreign imported china doll, your curls fanning behind you, and all I could think was I hadn't realized how long your hair had grown. You always wore it pulled tightly back, wound in a thick knob at the base of your neck, a braid coiled under a hat. Your wrists were drained, trailed with paths of deep red like menstrual blood between legs. You were a stained glass image of Virgin Mary, as if sun came from behind you, beneath you, lit by the shade of your skin. You were lovely. I hadn't realized how beautiful you were until that moment, your pale eyes open, wan, faded green and staring. You were peering through the water, and I couldn't believe eyes like that couldn't see. I wanted to kiss the curl of your upper lip, the way it tilted at the corners and met like a steeple at its center tip. I wanted to touch you, K.C. because you looked untouchable.

The rest that followed was, of course, another borrowed movie scene. I could have written it. Frantic searches for notes, explanations, calls to authorities, parents, police, nearest relatives. The typical difficulties of describing who was responsible for whom, the uncomfortable squirm doctors, coroners, officers give when questions are answered regarding husbands and companions. We'd been through it all. Greg's death, Jake's, and Steven's. And of course Wanda's, when they lifted her dress and found out who she really was. The long AIDS parade which has grown exhaustingly cliché, even to lesbians, numbing and boring. We had also seen Sarah through her cancer, and Christina through her grief. We have a large circle of friends. We've practiced death, you and I.

You weren't sick. That wasn't why you did this. Would you believe they tested you posthumously? Your parents insisted.

"Who'd give it to her," I'd screamed at Lena, while Andie tried to calm me down.
"Who in the fucking hell would give it to her?"

There were no explanations. Not for anything. They shook their heads, threw up their hands and gave you, K.C., a label. Another "gay suicide." You have become a statistic.

They let me, your parents, after questions and hospitals and morgues and funeral homes with too many flowers, they let me be alone in your place. "As long as you need," your mother said, the same way she'd said, "We've heard so much about you," and kissed my forehead. Your father, eyes full of tears, only gripped me in a hug I couldn't bear. They are kind K.C. So kind. No wonder you found my family full of humor, "Roseanne meets Donald Trump," you said, laughing. Plastic Pop and Ma. They didn't even know your name. They didn't know you existed. Now I don't ever have to tell them.

"The stars are not wanted now: put out every one:

Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun

"Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood:

For nothing now can ever come to any good."

~W. H. Auden

You are twelve, and you know what beautiful means while older Russian men talk to you and you stand in a blue bikini, the one dotted with yellow and white daisies from the Gap. You clutch a sweaty Coke in your right hand, a miniature backpack falls just above your butt, clad in tight new curves with cut-offs pulled low on hips so the waistband of a June new swim suit peers out. The splashing of the pool rises behind you in a chlorinated fog of kids' laughter. "Marco!" shouted, "Polo!" answered and you stretch your leg, arch your back. Giggle. You are twelve, and it is a profession. You're tan and thin and love being alive. Love being a girl.

He? He is foreign and cute, leaning on his green sports car, something as alien as he, from the other side of the globe. His arms fold across his chest to talk to you. You can only understand every other word he says, but you understand the rhythm. The bass pounding from his car, vibrating against his cocked hip – that, that is *your* language.

You are with your four best friends: Stacie, Krissie, Becki, and Lara. You hope – no, no, you *pray* – you're the one he wants. You will think of him later that night, alone, in your bed. You'll blush. You didn't want them, your friends, to know how much you really liked him. Under the covers, in your own dark room, the one you don't have to share, your hand will crawl under the cool early summer sheets, move between your legs and you will wonder how it would feel to have him there. What would it feel like to have someone breathing like that, male like that, moving like that, between your legs?

You'll talk about him tomorrow at school. How he pulled out a cellular phone, made a call while watching you, never taking his eyes off of you, even when he dialed. The buttons beep beep beepity beeped and you laughed, made fun of the show-off boy from another country. You'll insist, later, it was Stacie, or maybe Lara, he was looking at. Boys always look at Lara.

But inside, your stomach crawled. There, at that pool, under the sun, your chest thick with humidity, his eyes, while he spoke into the phone with words you didn't know, words that came in thick throngs of syllables, his eyes, dark and watching, never left

yours. He wore droopy jeans. Clownish pants, slid below his hips, cool, but the wrong brand of boxers peered above. Clipped around his neck were three gold chains, one had the shape of a cross, dangling from its slick shiny curl. You wanted to hold that cross in your hand, feel the corners dig into the heart of your palm like mosquitoes. You really liked his dirty white, untied tennis shoes. Hightops. The only thing that made him look American.

You wondered what kind of house he went home to at night. A one story flat topped ranch like an old fashioned haircut? Or a three story old Victorian? Who appeared when he came in the door? Did anyone ask where he'd been or did they notice he was gone? Did he share a room? How many brothers filled the space? You wanted to hear his accent from the other end of the phone, like you would have if you'd given him your number, the way he asked.

"Please," he'd said. "You are so, you know, pretty. May I have the numbers to call you?"

"My phone number?" you asked, as if he were a moron, flipping your bleached tipped hair over one shoulder. You knew your best asset. Your friends snorted behind you in a safe guarded picket fence line.

"Numbers to call you," Krissie imitated. Meanly. Hand on jutted out hip.

"I don't think so," you said, trying to meet his gaze. Trying to connect outside of your friends. Wanting him to understand. Wanting telepathy, to send the digits mentally to him. 545-9876, you thought. 545-9876, 545-9876, but the lovely stranger boy with the clumsy tongue couldn't read minds, apparently, even though every time the phone rang for two weeks after, you hoped it was him. Hoped he'd found you, searched you out, looked for you. You wanted him to want you that bad. To work for it.

But you're only twelve. Twelve and too young, Mom says. Too young to date, too young to wear makeup, too young to drink or smoke, and too too young to even *think*,

Mom says the word so strong, even *think*, about what two people do in bed together, Emalee Marie.

But you do. You're not so young as Mom thinks. Think. You think you know so much I don't, Mom says. She hasn't a clue how far from true she is. She doesn't know her daughter smokes. A little of this and more of that. You like the sting of menthol cigarettes on your tongue and how Big Red tastes chewed after. You know things. Things like Jim Beam is easier than J.D. and shots of tequila work fastest, but make you sickest. You know the smell of vomit laced with alcohol. You've held pony tails out of faces and slept nights on friends' bathroom floors, cheek lined with bath mat criss-crosses when you wake. You know pot is weed is grass is Mary Jane is ganja, and even tried, just once, a tiny tiny little tiny bit of crystal meth. It made you crazy. Like you could fly. Like you could take that Russian boy, any boy, into your body, the one that suddenly, without expectation, turned old overnight, and you could make him feel you. Feel you come. Come, thick and warm and like a woman. A real woman. The woman you'd become. You could press your size C breasts right up against the dark hair on his arms and let him know how real women operate. Operation, like the game you'd had as kid. The metal lining of a plastic human body zapping unsuspecting fingers when the process was carried out wrong. Electric shock. You could feel how each hair would brush each nipple, dark like centerfolds in PlayBoy. Zip. Zap. Zup. You can taste sweat from the crease where leg meets thigh, there with all that on your tongue. All that and then some. That's how he'd taste. You don't care about makeup, but make Mom think you do so she won't ask about the rest.

There's so much Mom doesn't, won't, ever know, no matter what she *thinks*. "T-h-i-n-k," she spells. "Get your head on straight and think, Ms. Know-It-All, Smarty Pants," Mom says. But there are things she and Stacie and Krissie and Becki won't ever know. Like the time you and Lara kissed. That time she'd stayed over, slept over, and Lara pulled out the Absolute, the Citron kind, and you'd giggled, bit into lemons, downed

shot after shot, and told secrets from sticky sweet lips. By midnight Lara told you she'd once tried to kill herself, pulled up the long sleeves she always wore, even in humid 95 degrees, even at the pool, and showed you the scars. You'd cried for Lara. Then for life and how hard it was to be alive and how much you loved it sometimes but how much it scared you sometimes and how much it could hurt. You'd held Lara's wrists and touched the faded lines with your Desert Maroon colored nail tips. Lara reached up and lifted a tear from the corner of your eye. "Diamonds," she'd whispered, letting it break as she smiled at you. You leaned in and smelled Lara's citrus breath, and the kiss was the softest thing you'd ever felt. Not like Derrick Robbins who frenched you in the bathroom between sixth and seventh period and put his hand up your shirt, giving a rough squeeze. Why did boys always think those things were for squeezing? Squishing, mashing, pushing, pulling like the knobs on a T.V. No, no, Lara's mouth was like marshmallow cream on peanut buttered bread.

You let Lara kiss you again. Real slow. Her tongue run against the inside of your upper lip, caught on your canine tooth, the one that stuck out just a little bit. Vampire tooth, you called it. You let Lara take off your clothes the same way. Slow. First unlacing your black Doc Martins, then all the buttons on your Tommy, USA Grrl, g-r-r-l, bottom fly jeans. One, two, three, four, five, six. You'd done it on your parent's bed, big and soft with slippery satin sheets. You wondered if you were still, technically, a virgin cause you'd never done it with a guy, but Lara had slipped her short fingernails inside of you, and it was just like doing it yourself, only better, because Lara seemed to know a whole lot more than you ever did. You were left breathless by the tingle rushing through your body, exploding at the base of your spine, while you rose uncontrollably up against Lara's hand like a horse. You trembled for an hour afterwards. Told Lara how you'd always wanted a horse of your own.

Now, now you and Lara hardly talk. She watches you with her black black eyes from under her boy's haircut, and once whispered, in math class, she wished you guys could do it again. You shuddered with embarrassment.

You started to call Becki your best friend after that and didn't tell Lara anything anymore, and told Stacie and Krissie you thought Lara was weird, and told Becki you thought Lara was gay, or a lesbian, or whatever the right word was. Becki said how that was just the cool thing to do right now, and you told her no, you were serious, and Becki told you that was immature to say just because Lara had a flat chest and could kind of look like a boy, especially when she wore those overalls.

So you began to watch unknown boys, like that Russian one, trying to forget Lara's hand spread across your navel like a smooth fleshy starfish. Lara, so different from all of it. Especially things like Rich Stark, the freshman, who once at a party, when you were so stoned you couldn't move, asked you to have sex and you were sober enough to still say no and then he tried to get on you anyway. You started to scream and cry and bit his hand, drawing blood before he climbed off and told you now you had to go down on him or he'd die from blue balls. You told him you hoped he did and they crawled all up inside of him and he went straight to hell like the dickless wonder he was. He called you immature first, then a bitch, a cunt, and a whore as you tried to straighten your sheer blouse, the black one with the Asian pattern up one sleeve in velvet red, and zipped up your skirt, tightening the checkerboard scrunchie on your ponytail. You knew the next day at school he'd tell a whole bunch of lies about you to even Teddy Maxwell, who you thought was the sweetest cutest guy in the whole seventh grade.

Maybe you and the Russian guy could just get away. Together. 'Cause he didn't go to your school and wouldn't know the stuff Rich made up, and wouldn't know Lara, and then maybe you and the Russian guy could go to dinner at Denny's and he'd pay and everything and drive you to the lake with paper cups of hazelnut cappuccino, the kind with a foamy mustache top from the machine at 7-11, the kind your mom wouldn't let

you drink. You'd talk, you and the exotic boy, while it rained on his sports car and you'd call Mom from his cell phone to tell her you were at Becki's and then call Becki so she'd cover for you and then tell Becki you were out with Teddy Maxwell, could she believe it? You knew after that Becki'd call Krissie and Stacie on three-way and they'd all talk about what a liar you were, and Stacie would say, "She's such a compulsive," using big words like she always did. Krissie would pretend to get it and say, "Yeah," real mean like, and Becki would say, "Emalee's just not *mature* yet, you guys, you wouldn't believe what she said about Lara," and then they'd talk about that all night.

Lara would maybe, maybe understand but you wouldn't be able to call her, which would make you feel pretty crappy, sad almost, and you'd maybe even think about telling Lara the truth, maybe even that the Russian guy was sweet, like her. And kissing Lara had been weird, but nice. And you'd lied in math class when you told Lara you never thought about it, not ever, and that you shouldn't ever talk about it again. Because sometimes, that's all you wanted to do. Curl right next to Lara and feel her all warm up and down your side, and tell her about Rich too, and Lara would say, "I know," in the way she always did that felt so so good, like touching your baby blanket again, like the one folded and hidden under your pillow so no one knew, because the whole reason Lara had cut her wrists and wanted to hold you so close in the first place was her stepdad was into her. Almost every night, and like you, Lara knew there wasn't anyone she could tell but her best friend. Who she didn't have anymore, you knew, because you couldn't even make yourself look at her.

Even if Lara told someone at school about her stepdad then Miss Mary Johnson, the nosy-ass school social worker who always thought she understood stuff she could never get, would butt in and break up Lara's family. Even if her stepdad liked her that way, it was the only dad Lara ever had and he made her mom pretty damn happy, and got her over that depression thing, the time when Lara's Mom couldn't even get out of bed. So Lara didn't want to get him in trouble. She'd told you this, and you knew. You didn't

have a dad either. He'd moved out when you were six, and you hadn't seen him since. The way Dads disappeared like that, it ripped this space, right there inside of you, that nothing could ever really fill.

You bet the Russian guy might even understand all that. You believed he was different. You had to. Like the posters from *Bop* magazine on your walls. All those guys who'd be so different. And funny too. When you laughed at the Russian boy, it would be real quiet like so he'd know it wasn't at him, but just cause you liked him, and that's why you were laughing. He made you feel that way inside. Not like Krissie making fun of how he talked. You thought how he talked was kind of cute. You'd pull the laces on his shoes, untying them just for fun, and he'd say, "Don't open my foot," and you would laugh and laugh and laugh, and then you'd laugh some more, together. He'd be all about different. Just like Lara. His hands soft, without those rough white spots that felt like mushrooms. No, no his hands would feel like vanilla scented lotion.

He wouldn't smoke and would tell you he wished you didn't either because he cared about you and you were too pretty to think about dead with rotted out black lungs like those plastic things Mr. Fisher passed around in health class. You'd blush because not a lot of people think you're so pretty, or at least never say so, except maybe Lara. She told you she thought you had the most beautiful, longest eyelashes in the whole world. "Like feathers," Lara said.

The Russian boy would tell you his secrets. You guys would share. His biggest would be that he was an artist. He'd get all shy, blushing and everything, and want to show you a drawing he did of you on this tiny piece of paper. He'd flush when you'd tell him how good it was, and he was really talented and all, and he'd look out the window and tell you the old wallet where he kept the drawing used to be his dad's. His dad who couldn't leave Russia even though the whole rest of the family had, all those brothers you didn't even know if truly existed at all, but still you imagined their dad stuck somewhere far

away, where dad's always seemed to be, and that would make the Russian boy more like you. He'd pat your hand kind of awkward and cute, embarrassed, but finally get brave cause after all he'd almost cried in front of you, so he'd pull you up against his chest and you'd breathe together. You'd hear and feel his heart beating right up all close to your ear. He'd smell like Brute cologne and you would have to rest your head on him around the gear shifter thingy and that would crink your neck so he might pull you across it, even under the steering wheel, so you were in his lap. He'd be all warm and safe and want to know if you ate, cause you weighed so little. You'd say yeah, even though sometimes you skipped breakfast and only had Diet Coke for lunch, just to loose a little bit of that chunk around your waist. You wouldn't tell him because he thought you were too skinny. Even though you knew from *Seventeen* you were supposed to weigh less because of those charts on height and weight.

You and Stacie and Krissie and Becki and Lara had weigh-in every Saturday to make sure none of you were pigging out on Snickers and Twinkies and regular Cokes and Doritos. Krissie always said that even without weigh-in she could tell how much junk everyone ate by how many zits they had. Stacie would act all smart and say, "You can only get zits from touching your face with oil on your hands, duh Krissie."

Before they could start fighting though, Lara would tell a joke, usually about Mrs. Ronald, who all the kids laughed at because she weighed like 500 tons or something and sweat all the time and had big wet moon craters under her arms and smelled like B.O. One time you'd all walked past her in the hallway at school, a big gang of you, Becki had whispered how she wanted to give Mrs. Ronald a stick of deodorant, and then Krissie suggested you all yell SURE, really loud like it meant something else but you were really saying the name of a deodorant. So when Mrs. Ronald was almost gone around the corner, you all yelled it loud, and then ducked, giggling hysterically into the girls' room. You almost fell over each other in the bathroom, laughing. "She's so GROSS!" Becki

said, snorting. Lara's eyes met yours. You guys thought it was kind of mean. Later, later Lara and you said so. But then, right then, you laughed too.

The other teacher everyone made fun of was Ms. Stemner, from P.E., who had hair shorter than Lara's, like a military buzz or something, and her head looked like a big khaki colored bowling ball. She had really big muscles like a man. Everybody called her dyke and boys would yell it in class, out loud like a grunt if they got hit in the stomach or fell in jail pin dodge ball or something. Ms. Stemner never said anything. She'd just blow her whistle really loud and turn all red and make them run laps or something. Girls wouldn't change their gym clothes unless she was way way WAY out of the locker room and if she came in Leslie Tyler would do this secret whistle three times short and fast and everyone covered up real quick. You almost always burned in the cheeks when it happened, and wondered if Ms. Stemner knew that you'd let Lara do it with you, cause maybe lesbians knew stuff like that, like ESP and all.

You actually felt kind of sorry for Ms. Stemner but really wished she'd just grow out her hair and not wear those stupid blue sweat pants with the yellow stripes down the side. Didn't places have ladies' sweat pants or something? *Lady FootLocker*, you wanted to say. You never said anything out loud though, because once Missy Kelly told everyone they shouldn't be so judgmental, her mom was gay so could they please just try and be nicer because it really wasn't that big a deal. Everyone started calling Missy dyke-baby, and some guys egged her house once, and last Halloween wrote LESBO with purple spraypaint on the sidewalk in front of her yard. She and her mom and her mom's friend, or lover, or whatever, moved to California or something.

You thought if anyone ever did that to Lara it would piss you off pretty bad, but no one ever called Lara dyke because she was really really pretty, even with super short hair, and a lot of boys liked her and she even went to seventh grade prom with Teddy Maxwell's best friend Petie. It kind of made you sick to think about Lara letting Petie stick his tongue in her mouth, but you were glad Lara at least pretended to like it cause

she wouldn't have to move to California then. Even if you guys didn't talk so much anymore, it would suck if Lara moved away.

You didn't know what it meant that you felt how you did about Lara. You liked to look at the pictures of famous boys on your walls, but whenever you got totally lonely and wanted somebody to just to talk to, you'd start to dial Lara's number. Then hang up real quick in case it actually rang or something. It really bit how you only saw each other now in your group of friends, and then you'd only look really fast at each other and then down at the ground or something.

You thought about how Lara's hands felt running down your back to that spot near your waist that made you jump when she touched it. You thought about how once, before, you'd made hot fudge brownie sundaes at 2am at Lara's house because she lived right by Safeway and you guys could walk there and it was open 24 hours and you had been hungry and Lara thought it would be a cool idea and even paid for it because her stepdad gave her a lot of money so she wouldn't ever tell on him. You guys didn't tell anyone at weigh-in, and pinkie linked, spitting over your shoulders, promised to never tell. You thought about how Lara's toes pressed into the back of your legs and how Lara's face had been so close you could count all her freckles. The ones you couldn't see from far away. And you thought about the day in the lunchroom when Todd Baker dumped his tray down Lara's front and she'd had mashed potatoes and gravy dripping from her brand new j-crew silk shirt. Instead of getting all mad like Krissie would have, or all prissy like Stacie would have, Lara just tipped back her head and laughed and laughed. You would never forget how that sounded. Stood still in the middle of lunchroom grossness and there was Lara's laugh. She told Todd that now he had to buy her lunch and after that they sat together every day and became really good friends, and Todd went from total geek freak to an ok guy just cause Lara made it that way. Lara could make friends with anybody and you knew it was because she made them all feel the way she made you feel. So proud just to be you because someone like Lara liked you

for it. Lara had these dimples when she laughed that everybody was jealous of. Even with her boy haircut, everyone wanted Lara to like them. And Lara liked you.

You just didn't know what to do with it all.

You had this picture of Lara where she had on a big old Stetson cowboy hat as a joke. "I'm a cowgirl," Lara said, winking at you. In the picture Lara had her head turned just a tiny bit away and her face looked like a beautiful autumn day, all light and golden. You kept it tucked in the back of your diary, the one you hid under the mattress, and would run your finger down the reproduction of Lara's jawline sometimes, alone, in your room.

You missed Lara. You missed her like a toothache that wouldn't go away. You never could see anyone shoot hoops the way Lara could. How she so carefully taught you last year. "Like this," Lara said, standing behind you in gym class, arranging your hands. Ms. Stemmer never could have gotten away with that. She'd probably touch someone's ass. But Lara just lined you right up and swish. Right in the hoop. Lara could really play. You thought she might even be a star when you finally got to high school, then Lara could go to college on scholarship and go WNBA. Lara thought you were nuts, but you really did believe stuff like that could happen. And you'd gotten an A+ on the basketball test that year. Ten outta ten shots right in row.

"You're such a dreamer, Emalee," Lara said. But then later, when no one else was around, she whispered in your ear, "Nobody's ever said anything so nice to me before."

You got sick and tired of trying to make sense of stuff sometimes. That night, the one right after meeting the Russian boy, you'd just closed your bedroom door, locked it, stuffed a full sized fuzzy pink towel across the crack and smoked some. You lit the incense Mom gave you for Christmas so that's all anyone would smell. You turned up the stereo real loud and listened to the music rocking a beat you could feel inside your stomach. You wanted to dance and twirl with your hands high up over your head and feel light footed in just socks. Instead you laid on your bed.

You wished you and Lara could walk down the street holding hands and go to the movies and kiss right there out in the open in front of the whole world. You'd be that proud. Here was this girl, all about sweet, with pooled brown eyes and dimpled cheeks. She sparkled. How she sparkled. She would hold you all night long, and make all of it, Ms. Stemner and far away dads, and judgmental moms, and dumb boys, and stupid friends, Lara would make it all go away. With her breath like spring coming in through an open window, and her hands full of a wisdom you had never felt before.

Then Lara fuzzed out as you took another a deep drag on your joint, holding the smoke in your lungs til you thought they'd explode. As you slowly let it out, you closed your eyes again.

No, no, all you *really* wanted was the safety of that Russian boy. His thick hips pressed against yours. The way he'd come pick you up after school in his car so everyone could see this older, non-native, liked you and how he'd offer to take your books because he didn't understand nineties American women. You'd say no, thank you. Always polite. Smiling. You wouldn't mess it up. You'd go to the movies and make out and then go for a walk afterwards and try to figure out the plot so you could tell your parents, and you'd light up a cigarette and he'd kiss you, right there on the street, in front of everyone.

Then he faded too and your eyes filled with tears. It was all just so unfair.

Choices Emalee, you could hear your mother's voice in your head, there are always choices. Come on, Emalee, she'd say, don't give me that crap there isn't anything you can do. Mom had said it about so many things you'd labeled unfair. Missy's family leaving, the teasing of Ms. Stemner, Miss Johnson who wouldn't leave anyone alone, Mrs. Smelly-Ronald, and even once or twice Becki, Krissie and Stacie. But never, never once, had you said it about Lara. Even though that seemed most unfair of all. "The world isn't fair Emalee," Mom said.

It's just, you couldn't really explain, but it just wasn't all that simple. Sometimes, sometimes, even when you wanted a Russian boy more than anything, to sort it all out, to make it all stand upright again, sometimes it wasn't really about choices at all.

The summer breeze lifted the hair from off the back of your neck that afternoon you stood in front of the squat square shaped poolhouse, giggling with your friends. Your best friends, Stacie, Becki, Krissie, and Lara. There was a boy, a foreign boy, a Russian, leaning against his green sports car in the parking lot. His car vibrated with sound, music, and he pulled out a phone to make a call, and kept his eyes hooked on yours.

the stories i've been told

The place where I grew up bred stoicism like some cities breed idiots. Winslow's a small southern town where everybody knows everybody else's name and business. I've grown used to it over the years we've watched my sister Carol Ann balloon from her grinning senior picture to a woman I hardly recognize. Her once gaunt jawbone puffed like cotton ball cream since the day she took a dive from Kipfer Peak. Splash. Headlong into the river and right out of our lives. Since then I've memorized whispers, undertones, downcast eyes, and how a gaze can be never met or answered. How mumbling seems to grow outside of our family and we stop hearing it, the way grass grows under heavy Winslow rain. July green and thick with so much silence it's like it doesn't happen at all.

I've memorized those faces as much as the stories I've been told. Each ancient photo from ten years before tells another hand-me-down tale. The old fashioned kind of pictures, square not rectangle, with white boxed trim smudged grey from dirty fingerprints and Mama's loopy writing scrawled across the back. *Carol Ann, senior year, 1981.* Carol smiles over her shoulder, wide set green eyes peering from under glossy wheat colored hair. Eyes the same color as Kipfer River. A face since gone bland. From caviar to oatmeal. A life accessible only through folk legends, passed by generation. Moments told so often I can smell Carol Ann, hear her, taste her, but she's done up and gone. Cinnamon and nutmeg, crystal clear water against thick pottery fired aquamarine, butternut squash on the sweet tastebud tip of tongue, my sister in sense memory, although I couldn't tell anyone why. I try and count the stars in a nighttime picture, where Carol tosses her head back and laughs, where she shimmers: *Carol Ann, Rio Grande Valley, 1980.* A woman twisted in Raffe's legs, lounged in front of a red domed tent, perennial hair falling just above his belt. Ten years and erased. Raffe, he still hangs around. Helps out with the story telling. Touches Carol Ann's pudgy cheek and tries to hide the shaking of his hands. "That's the night she bit her tongue when our raft hit a rock," he'll say. "When we kissed I tasted her blood."

Not many people let their kid sister, their kid half-sister nonetheless, tag along everywhere, but Carol Ann did. Her mother and my mother never met, but our father, him we shared. Carol Ann and I had in common that ever absent father. Reoccurring character of our lives. She the orphan who didn't hate me for it. I can picture her mother wet and dripping, like a photo, *Marianne, 1963, Indiana Dunes*, in a see through gauzy white dress clung to her thin hips, heavy with water, skirts swirling around her chapped knees, Carol's face reflected from the real photos I know. My father, a hero only in my imagination, lifts Marianne from the white capped waves and carries her to shore where they make love in the sand. Carol Ann's mother has to shake it from her Victoria's Secret before going home. Carol Ann conceived somewhere behind a dune in Indiana, before her mother drowned herself on that same beach. Her knight gone and married, unable to rescue her again.

My own mother's The One Who Did Everything Right. She didn't own any fancy underwear. Her single lifetime mistake was marrying my father, I'm told. When they married, Carol Ann was ten, and wanted a mother something terrible. I came along a year later, my father killed four after that. Served him right, my mother says. It's probably the only indecent thing I've ever heard her say. Like I said, she did it all right. All the right schools, the right people, the right places and faces, Grandmother would've said -- if she still spoke to us. But in her single fall from grace, a throw-back from the city, a movie star looking man who told stories of stealing women on moon crested beaches, and bearing little girls alone, my mother was swept away. My father had thick blonde curls and a cherub smile. A single dimple in his left cheek. He was eight years Mama's elder, and none the wiser. He'd returned to Winslow loving women like Mama with her fine boarding school manners and sweet naiveté. How she trembled when he first touched her breasts, and feared his hot breath against her neck. She wasn't the type to roll around on beaches or shake sand from her drawers. Or drown herself in the ocean. Everything his first wife had been, my mother was not. There wasn't a hair out of place

on her head. But how she loved him. How she loved his firm anger and his stories and the lack of truth within them. How she didn't care. She loved his thick strong wrists and the way when he held her she felt made of china, like he'd stolen her from the glass faced case in her mother's dining room. His callused thumbs gracing her by the edges, the way a man holds a delicate plate. And, I believe, she loved the violet drawn bruises he left after drunken rages. They were, I think, a sign of everything.

What my father loved was leaving. He loved that most of all.

As did everyone in our family. Grandmother disowned Mama the minute she was engaged. A sharp blow to the best behaved daughter of Winslow, and my mother, in tradition of her only husband, tells how she wept under the bitter scented pines that January. "What was I supposed to do? The man I finally found lost me everything. But you don't give that up, Allie, you just don't."

She and my father stayed married almost two years. Mama learned to love kisses laced with bourbon, whiskey, and gin. Ice clinks against frosted glasses rimmed with gold. That was Mama's life. She learned how to count bottles, cans, saturate empty vodka with water so a drunk who'd forgotten wouldn't break them at her bare feet. Six stitches laced across the soft patch of her left heel a reminder. And still she loved those hands. "His thick tree stumped hands," she says. Thumbs pressed against her clavicle, "I could kill you, you know," murmured under his breath. "He growled," she'll say, smiling sadly to herself. "Sometimes it was just play."

A fall from a tree, a trip while going up stairs, a fender bender in the parking lot, suicide lakes, semi-trucks and compact cars, fist smashing uterus, and diving accidents. We are a family held together by casualties. Mama's marriage ended with her ability to bear children. "I've my two girls," she'd said, curling Carol Ann, old enough to remember, in her arms, my toddler chunky body between them. My father's hands strong enough to destroy her body from the outside in.

“You’ve suffered quite a trauma,” the doctor told my mother. “It’s done permanent damage.”

Her sweet school trained smile, and her husband’s ability to lie, “It was quite a fall.”

Carol Ann could remember like I couldn’t, the fights, rages, and pain – violent passion poured into Mama’s life like sickly sweet drinks. Carol pressed bags of frozen peas over Mama’s swelling eyes, folded checkered dish towels around bleeding knuckles, drove the car at the age of twelve to the ER, so Mama’s uterus didn’t fall out to the ground. I see Carol’s adolescent shoulders, bent over my car seat, buckling me in. Her young eyes serious and drawn as she fished the car keys from Mama’s purse, settling her in the front seat, leaned against the window, Mama clutching at her aching insides like a sick dog. Did Carol Ann drag Mama from the house? Fireman lift her to the car? I don’t know, but in my mind the story unfolds while I slept soundly in my snugly pj’s, the kind with feet, and the yellow satin edged blankie Carol Ann didn’t forget. I can see Carol learning stick shift across town, jerking and grinding us through Winslow’s August humidity to the hospital. *Carol Ann, hero, 1976.*

I am witness to moments I’ve never seen. Carol Ann’s refusal to live with her father after the divorce. I can see her standing strong and certain, barely thirteen, but forty aged wise. Dressed in her untied converse and cut off shorts, arms crossed over her not yet developed breasts. “No.” An astringent word even as a polite girl, our Carol Ann knew. She chose to stay with her Mama, not even blood related, and her sister, only about half so. I see her standing, not quite as tall as the witness stand, in her silver lined voice, carried over the heads of all the adults in town, telling out our family secrets. “I won’t live with a man who beats his wife.” Carol Ann was always crystal clear.

I see Carol’s grief six weeks after Dad died, as she fast balled bottles of bitter liquid against his head stone. The candied smell of rum exploding into waterfalled tequila. Carol screaming her throat strawberried raw against the sky. “I hate you, I fucking hate you!” Her Lilliputian body loomed over the fresh grave, and she buried her weeping face

in the dirt, which was just beginning to sprout seedlings of grass. “Like his whiskers against my cheek,” she told Mama in the version I know. I, not quite six, oblivious to such loss, slept soundly at home in my mother’s bed, thumb pressed against front teeth.

The day Dad died, no one cried. Not Carol, not Mama, no one. His Fiat spider car smashed against the overhanging cliffs of California, thousands of miles from us, like a bug. I dreamt of my father as a giant splotch on the Grand Canyon night after night. His skull smashed against rock, the truck’s trailer swinging out like an arm, pinning Dad in a mechanic wrestler’s hold. Dad’s instant fly death. Served him right. That’s Mama. He smashed, crashed, rammed, slammed and thank you ma’med Mama’s life, and she says, “Served him right.” I traced a healing scar arched over Mama’s right eyebrow when my father died. “He’s gone visit the other half of the moon,” Mama whispered in my ear. I was just a kid, and pictured my father hanging, by crooked knees, upside down, from the corner of a sliced moon. *Daddy, 1978, man in the moon.*

You can’t really remember, people say, but I do. I do. I remember my father. And my mother’s sorrow. And Carol Ann’s. Served him right.

My father used to swing me as high as the trees. He’d spin me so the outside looked like Monet’s Morning Mists: blurred pink, blue, and lily green. Together we saw color and light. My father fuzzes in memory like soda pop, specked with his voice dark and gentle against my ear. “Sweetness,” he’d say to me. Sweetness. I breathed daises when he kissed my earlobes. I pressed my tiny fist against his chest and he’d bellow a laugh. “My sweetness,” he’d breathe. My father was tall and handsome and proud. He’d served in the navy till they kicked him out when he twisted his knee walking down a wet narrow staircase from deck. Honorable discharge. “The only thing honorable in his life,” Grandmother was rumored to say. I’d know the sound of his limping thick soled boots anywhere. And that isn’t true. My father was about honor, that much I know. He knew how to love, my dad did. He knew it was all about letting go and there’s not a goddamned thing fairy tales can do against all that. Mama and Carol Ann, and me.

Those were his truest loves. “Sometimes, though,” I imagined he’d say, you just gotta go.” If you can love and hate a man all at once, that’s how I felt about my Daddy.

Non-verbal memories that stuck my heart like barbed wire.

He used to tickle my feet and buy Carol Ann and I orange popcicles, the kind with the creamy inside that tasted like summer. He bought me a tricycle when I turned three, and brought my mother tulips even after their marriage fell through. He went to California because, “I never got over lovin’ you,” he said to Mama. He’d rather be smashed against California rock than be reminded of walking with Mama under the evergreens, their hands stuck together with sap because my mother just couldn’t resist touching. “He loved us,” Carol Ann would whisper me to sleep. “He loved all the whole three of us,” she’d say. And I remember. I do. I don’t care what anyone says, I remember a whole hell of a lot before his end. What I don’t, I see in us. I see in Carol Ann’s building flesh, Mama’s tenacity, and my own determination. My father knew honor, the same way he knew us. Distantly related. But he tried. No matter what anyone says, my Daddy tried. And that, sometimes, is all there is to love.

I want to say Carol Ann is beautiful. All I can say is she was. My father’s heart would break to see his daughter now. He’d rage. I know that. He’d take it out on anyone he could blame. He’d pound the rocks she knocked her head against, over and over and over until his knuckles bled raw, and then he’d go home and smack my mother’s head against the wall. “That’s how it feels,” he’d say. That’s how it feels to lose your wife, and your daughter, and your wife, and your daughter, and then your own life. He’d keep smashing until Mama’s head was broken through. “That’s how it’d feel,” he’d say. Then weep while collecting her brains in his lap.

Carol Ann’s voice sings from those photographs, the ones I know so well. Her voice comes clearer than the water running by a tent left in the mythical west, and creeps out into the open night, to all the stars, echoing somewhere in bordered canyons, left there. Lost, twisting down riverbeds to nowhere and reminding of Carol Ann’s transformation

to pink cut off sock tops waffled around her wrists, stained from the drool she hasn't the sense to wipe away. That talent turned to the howl "Don't touch me" when Mama tries to pat her hand, Carol Ann rocking endlessly, spinning her shorn hair to a cowlick straight up top. Hair they shave bald once a month so she doesn't rip it out, twirling and tugging. Is this the voice of sunlight filtered through early summer leaves? That somehow fictional sister I must have created who sang me to sleep when I was afraid? Is this that same face? Carol Ann has become the guitar in the corner of my room no one knows how to play, the cassette tape of her leftover songs, and voices overplayed to worn warbles: "This is my little sister Allie, Allison the brave, tell everyone hi, Allie," Carol Ann says. And together we sing *row row row your boat, gently down the stream, merrily merrily merrily, life is but a dream*. A dream. Carol Ann left but a dream

I think Carol Ann just wanted to fly. She took that leap off the cliff like her father smashing into it. She and Raffe swimming on a July afternoon, dotted with gnats and grass stained sweat against the back of thighs. *Carol Ann, Kipfer Peak, 1983, learning to fly*. Raffe dared her to jump from that rock, that one, up there, the highest. The really pointy one. And Carol Ann did. Like I said, I think she just wanted to find somewhere else and someone gave her permission to. Soar to your mama left underwater, and your Daddy, smashed somewhere near it. Go Carol Ann, go. When life has you so damn anchored to the ground, to people you gotta love cause there ain't anyone else, sometimes the best you can do is take a leap. The last time any of us saw the Carol Ann we knew.

After the accident, the weeks she never opened her eyes, there are no photographs. My ninth birthday disappeared under the bleep blip of machines, tubes running all over my sister, my mother using everything she had to get Carol Ann to open her eyes. Raffe remembered to bring a balloon to the hospital and Mama cried because she'd forgotten, and Carol Ann's eyes fluttered but never opened. I didn't care about my birthday, I didn't care about Raffe's dumb balloon or the tears in my mother's eyes. I cared about my sister, now half dead, hands still warm against hospital sheets, and that she was the

only one who knew how to keep my father alive. How to tell stories. How she'd lift me on her shoulders and say, "This is how high Daddy made you feel," and we'd giggle and giggle and I kept Carol Ann seven and she taught me how to be eighteen. Her clear painted fingernails and the smell of her and Raffe together. We played family, I think, mostly. Fireworks on fourth of July, Christmas parades, and shopping at Safeway. All those pictures in all those albums. I didn't know anything in my eight years without Carol Ann's touch.

Raffe cried emergency room bright and siren loud when Carol Ann didn't wake up. "Not now Carol Ann, not now," he wept. "We need you, you can't go and do this to us, you just can't!" Silence. Woosh, whirl. Not even an eyelid fluttered. "Fuck you, then Carol," Raffe yelled. "Fuck you!" Not even a gasp from the audience circling the bed. Carol Ann's eyes never opened and Raffe moved beyond the rules. We all did.

Then, one day, simply as we'd lost her, she woke up. She woke up glazed like doughnut. They said maybe she'd come out of it. Maybe she would. Maybe we'd see Carol Ann again. Tell her stories, they told us, remind her who she was. So I did. I talked and talked, about Daddy, and the tape, and the pictures, and songs. "Here Carol Ann," I'd plead, "touch your guitar, touch it!" She drooled over its chestnut wood, squeezing her eyes shut, and smacking her jaws. I couldn't bear to see the instrument treated like that. "You retard!" I screamed at her, wiping the saliva off with my sleeve. "You fucking moron, that's Carol Ann's!"

I forgot who I was talking to.

So easy to forget *Carol Ann, Chicago, 1982*. A woman walking backwards around the Hyatt restaurant, clad in bluejeans, a Harley Davidson T-shirt and hiking boots. Crimson colored rose clenched between teeth, right arm out front, left bent behind her ear, Greta Garbo style, because Raffe dared she never would. The patrons in that fancy schmanzy place hypnotized to infatuation by the jade eyed stranger who sang "Amazing Grace" like an angel as she curtsyed and bowed. Sparkled. Even in dining dim lights, bouncing the

glint of orthodontic perfect teeth off silver edged wine glasses and two pronged forks, Carol Ann was spectacular.

“That’s you,” I whispered to her. “See Carol Ann, there you are, remember? Remember how we laughed?” Carol Ann took the photo from me and pressed it to her nose like a glossy Kleenex, smearing a heavy film over its surface.

I got up and left the room.

Carol Ann never did come back. She blathered nonsense, colored deep red explosions, wept thick mucousy tears, and screeched with joy, all for no apparent reason. I’d hold her face between my hands, stare at her, my sister, eye to eye. She was there, but Dear Lord she so wasn’t, and I was too young to make sense of that. Until the weight started to build, and her cheekbones pudged up to chipmunk proportions, her eyes clouded away from mine, and it became months, years, since I’d heard her sing. The voice that once lulled me to calm, told me all about our Daddy, and Mama’s ways of making it all ok, that voice of stories and lies, some of it so true it hurt like ice, and some so made up, and its weight of distances traversed for family that wasn’t really yours -- it all disappeared under pounds and pounds of flesh. That’s when I realized, the real Carol Ann had died.

I said this to Mama a few years after the accident. We’d just finished a visit with Carol Ann. Happy Meadows “it’s just like home” supervised living facility. We drove away in our yellow Ford wagon, vinyl sticking to the back of my knees, and I said it out loud. “The real Carol Ann died.” The way Raffe would’ve. The way Carol Ann once said no. No room for complicity. A voice at twelve I hadn’t known I had, but hasn’t left me since. My mother pulled the car over to the side of the road, and staring straight ahead, out the windshield, said, “Don’t you dare ever say that again, Allison Louise.” Triumphant with pride, I lifted my chin and met her eyes as she turned toward me, the way I know she looked at my father. I said, “The real Carol Ann died.”

My mother hit me so hard my head jerked to the side and smacked the half way rolled down window. The world pulsed. Blood dripped from my nose. I lowered my chin and sucked in my cheeks. I didn't touch the soupy red trail from my nose. I watched it drip to tiny spots on my skin. I shook my head and looked Mama again. "The real Carol Ann died when she jumped off a cliff, and you can hit me as many times as you want and that isn't going to change a goddamned thing." I'd never said a dirty word in front of Mama, much less taken the Lord's name in vain. I took a deep breath, and slit my eyes. "And she ain't coming back, neither," I said, sticking out my bottom jaw. I could feel the bruise Mama's hand would leave. My nose stung, but I didn't move. I understood Mama's love for my father right then and there better than I ever understood anything at all. I'd feel that throb the rest of my life.

Her head bent and dropped to the steering wheel. She didn't say anything, but reached out her arm. I slid across the sticky seat to curl under it, beside her. "I love you, baby," she said quietly.

"I love you too, Mama," I whispered, the smell of cherry blossoms and diesel fumes surrounding us, swirling into a drunken haze. "I love you too," I said. *Family portrait, Winslow, 1986.*

lost angels

The same summer Jackie Henderson, a girl from my freshman English class, disappeared, my mother was taken to an institution. My father, younger sister and I lived on heated cans of baked beans with chopped up hot dogs and Kraft Macaroni and Cheese, the occasional tuna casserole tossed in midweek. Without my mother there to lay out place mats on our massive butcher block table, the one dotted with old flakes of paint, without her slender hands positioning ceramic hot pot holders with steamy bowls of fresh green beans and mashed potatoes center stage, my life seemed altered in ways I knew would never again be the same. Jackie's mysterious disappearance had the same effect. Was it growing up or away, I wondered. Or just learning how to not need anyone? Fifteen year old girls vanishing without a clue or trace, stories tacked to their names, endings left undiscovered for years, it all seemed to be more pieces to that same big old puzzle you've only got about half finished by that age. The same way I didn't realize my mother wasn't the person I thought she was. She wasn't the woman I remembered nor the woman I thought I knew. She was just plain crazy.

It was a hot August night when my best friend Gina Berrelli and I snuck out to the movies with Jaysen Ryan and Chris Taylor. The same night my mother was asked to leave the Safeway on the corner of Turner and 4th. Mama never needed anyone to laugh with, she just laughed. Once she took Aria and I to that same store and picked up a jar of bread and butter pickles, sliced like fans, and asked, "Aren't these the most beautiful things you've ever seen?" I circled my index finger over my right ear, and rolled my eyes at Ari. My sister and I were eleven months apart, which made us both best of friends and worst enemies. Ari giggled. "They're Chinese paper lanterns," my mother whispered, spinning the pickles in their incandescent juice. As I watched them swim, I was swallowed in tiny sea creatures swirling all over the bright fluorescent lights bouncing off stark shiny white tile floors, shooting all over the store. Mama laughed and laughed.

That was the way it was with her. She took you into her world, and most of the time you never wanted to leave. I could understand why she might want to stay there forever.

The night they made her leave Safeway she was throwing jar after jar of pickles onto the floor. Smashing them off the shelves in the same straight lines they appeared. One after another, ducks in a row. My mother tidepooled the floor in sticky green, weeping the entire time. Dad told me they hadn't wanted to handcuff her, they simply didn't know what else to do.

A week earlier Jackie had disappeared. One night. Late July. She didn't come home. Her parents trusted Stephen Cox, her boyfriend of a year, to take Jackie to the movies and home again by midnight. Even though he was eighteen, and almost too old for her, they believed Stephen was a trustworthy kid. He probably was. Usually when senior guys dated freshmen women it was all about one thing, and everyone knew what that was. Stephen and Jackie weren't like that. They had something most of us kids couldn't, for the life of us, make sense of. But when Jackie disappeared, fingers pointed even at Stephen. Especially at Stephen.

I was surprised how quickly nice friendly neighbors turned on one another. Although throughout the year we'd seen Stephen and Jackie's parents together at all the holiday parties, the Valentine's potluck, Easter egg hunt, and June barbecue, laughing with G and Ts in hand, ice clinks melding with block party voices, those sounds disappeared with Jackie. The Coxes and Hendersons, that last fall, went to all of Stephen's soccer games together. The four of them spent every 8am Sunday morning huddled under a red and black flannel blanket, Jackie in the middle holding a tall sliver thermos from Mr. Henderson's hardware store, filled with thick strong coffee made by Mrs. Cox. Suddenly they were passing like strangers on the street. Worse than strangers. More like parted

lovers. Mrs. Henderson wandered around like a ghost, red rimmed eyes, pasty lavender skin. One day, a week or two after Jackie was gone, Mrs. Henderson glided down past our house, a pastel ghost floating across our front lawn to stand and stare at the ancient rusted swingset in our backyard. It creaked eerily in the light breeze, unused for years. Mrs. Henderson's sleeve caught on the chain link fence as I watched her from the kitchen window. She took off her powder blue Isotoner slippers, the kind that look like ballet shoes, and carefully climbed the fence in her bare feet. Her robe flipped up and I could see a ragged pair of cotton Hane's hanging loosely in the rear. She went and sat on the glider. It was the two seater kind. Ari and I used to face each other and scream our heads off, rocking higher and higher, daring the other to jump off. We dreamed of flying. That afternoon I was doing the dishes by hand, surrounded in the smell of the yellow kind of Joy, and looked down at my wrinkled hands holding a sponged soap wand. I felt, without seeing, my father get up from the kitchen table to look over my shoulder. I heard the back screen door slam as he headed out and sat across from Mrs. H. I was afraid the white plastic seats would crack with all that adult weight. Experienced, my father lifted Mrs. Henderson by the elbow, and like a gentlemanly escort, lead her in her faded sea foam green terricloth bathrobe, back home. Her slippers remained tossed at our gate.

Neighborhoods change when people leave. Years before that summer, when Mama used to sit on the porch and braid Grandmother's hair, people passed and waved. The August I was nine I sat on the porch between Grandmother's knees, and she gently pulled tangles from my long messy hair while Mama's hands wove Grandmother's grey braid tight. We stood like a train, me between Grandmother's legs on the porch, Grandmother in the wicker chair with the high rounded back, and Mama the caboose, standing behind Grandmother's throne. Grandmother told stories. "The story of many peoples," she called them. Trails of tears and wounded knees. I imagined deep skinned Indians with basketball leg supports limping their way across country, lines grooved in their cheeks. I

thought their tears must have been made of iron. I could smell gun fire. "I half belong to them," Grandmother said, turning my cheek to look at her. Her hands were rough. Her eyes green. "That means you too," she said tapping my forehead. But we never talked about that part of ourselves after Grandmother died. "Breed blood," Grandmother called it in herself, and I colored all the Grandmothers in every coloring book after that, half burnt sienna, blending it with the peach crayon once called flesh.

August stretched endlessly in front of me that day, school a safe three weeks away. Grandmother's hands, like Mama's, like her daughter's, were insistent in my hair. Both rock strong and paper gentle. She refused to use a brush. Her fingers gnarled with age, twisted in and out of my hair like branched winter waves, and massaged my scalp. I can still feel the tingle at the base of my spine. It was the last time I'd ever feel those hands on my head. Grandmother died the following week and I always believed August was out to get me.

The further Mama faded that fifteenth August of mine, the more I struggled for something concrete. I stole an old sweatshirt of hers from the laundry hamper in the upstairs hallway. It was turquoise blue and dirty. Dotted with dried flecks of paint. I wrapped it around my pillow and slept with it at night. The paint chips left tiny red scratches on my cheeks. Its faint smell was hers, and recalled our Laundromat Sundays at the Sparkling Bubble. We had a nice washer and dryer in our house, but Mama like to take Ari and I to do laundry when it rained. We'd watch the rain slide down the windows, painted with thick ads, "EXTRA LARGE DRYERS -- 75 CENTS!" and "BUBBLE SPECIAL!! -- TWO LOADS FOR ONE!!" We'd eat soft serve ice cream cones dipped in chocolate and crunchies, and Mama told us stories about Van Gogh, Picasso, and Basquiat. The dryers spun like the art she told us about, and once, before they took her away, when Ari was six and I seven, Mama painted a mural on the outside of the picture window. She brought her tubes of watercolor, easel and all her brushes

seeped in turpentine jars. A huge spinning washer and dryer in abstract forms spun across the window when she finished. I remember watching her arms, flaying like peacock feathers but her wings left behind stains of blue and gold and crimson and yellow. "Be more specific, Anastasia," Mama would say. Midnight, copper, cerise, and lemon. Mr. McCraig, the owner of the Sparkling Bubble, told Dad it was beautiful, and he didn't mind so much, he just wished she'd asked. Dad nodded and apologized, offered Ari and I up to wash it away. While we stayed behind, he led Mama home. Just the way I'd watch him lead Mrs. Henderson home years later. The paint smeared like rainbow tears and it took Ari and I two hours to clean away all the paint. All of Mama's colors wiped gone. The stink of Windex making my stomach churn.

I wondered where Jackie had gotten off to that summer. Sometimes I thought maybe she left on her own. She chose to go. Away. Because she liked to walk. Because she could. I would have too, if I could. I would have just up and walked away. It was in my blood. But I had to stay. I had to watch out for Mama. My Mama. A wild bird with hair like a swan that fell past her waist and brushed my cheek when she leaned over me to tuck me in at night. She'd give me our special kiss: one on my forehead, one on my nose, one on my chin, each cheek and sealed with the lips. It was the only way I could sleep.

I didn't know where my Mama'd gone anymore than I knew where Jackie had. All I knew was she was gone. The day they took her to the institution I refused to cry. I went straight to my room, locked the door, and closed my eyes. Behind the trembling lids I watched painted art and spinning dryers. I wanted to slice my ear off and send it to her. Echoing somewhere outside my head was my father's voice, breaking against my door, "She wasn't safe for herself, Anastasia, she wasn't safe for herself." The goddamned word safe hadn't a meaning in the world for me right then. A summer that had swallowed a girl my age and my mama was too much to take all at once. I sat up and

hurled a pottery vase stripped with a turquoise scene of dawn, left to me by Grandmother, against the door. The pieces exploded and scattered like school kid's voices down a squeaky clean hallway. My father left me alone.

When parents disappear from their children's lives, there is no mourning period. No proper length of time when the abandonment goes away. There's this piece that goes with them, those lost parents, a big chunk of everything you once believed, and it all gets erased. Your puzzle never gets complete. You carry around this big black hole the rest of your life. A space left where your Mama once danced and danced, singing in her own angel sweet voice: "*Que sera sera, whatever will be will be, the future's not ours to see, Que sera sera.*"

She spun round and round, swung me up high, over her head, a couple of months before Ari was born. "Our baby," she whispered in my ear. "Our baby is going to know how to fly, Ana," Mama said. She pressed my infant cheek to her billowing belly and I think our hearts, all three of our hearts, beat together.

"You can't possibly remember that," my father said, shaking his head at me. "You have your mother's imagination, Ana. You were only a couple months old."

But I asked Mama, and she said it was true.

I believed everything my Mama said.

I wondered if Jackie's mother felt her heart torn out like mine. Did her old long ago disintegrated umbilical cord tug and pull at her stomach after Jackie disappeared?

After picking up the pieces of my grandmother's shattered vase, I slid one of its sleek cut pieces against the thin flesh of my abdomen. That shard the same color as Grandmother's skin. Right below my bellybutton, where I had a mole that matched Mama's, I slipped the smoothed edged piece of earth. Dug it into my flesh. Ari had a mole there too. When the cut open, and blood touched air, I couldn't feel the sting. I

watched the thin trickle breathe, run in a small trail to my thighs. The space between my legs ached. I ran my thumb down the cut and watched the blood smear like paint. War paint. A battle portrait drawn of love for my Mama. I licked it from my fingers, tasting iron. All women taste like that, I thought. I slipped my stained fingers beneath my underpants to inside myself. I wanted to rock my knuckles hard against my own body like a bone game. As I moved to a rhythm that felt best, slipping up and down against my own hand, my breath picking up, the sobs gathered in my chest like a coming storm. I rammed against myself, slapping my other hand over top my wounded skin. I wanted that pain. I wanted to grasp the most intimate part of myself and rip it out. I wanted to hurt and hurt and scream raw so I never had to feel space inside of myself again. I wanted mutilation. As I came, my body clutching and clenching around my fingers, swaddled in a bloody mess, I knew pleasure, from that moment on, would forever be out of the question. That's exactly what I wanted. Torture like a tattoo.

I wanted my Mama back.

"You're just as crazy as she is," Nick Gilspe had said the previous May.

Gina Berrelli told him to bug off.

Nick told me this because that day I told him I was going to go to the junior prom with Chris Taylor and not with him. Nick was mad at me. He had also been the only person who ever came over to my house. Six months before they took Mama away I loved Nick. He had the sweetest smile I thought I'd ever seen. It hurt like rock candy to see him grin. All these crazy crooked teeth fell to dimples in both cheeks and disappeared behind a trim goatee. Nick had shaved his head when he was a freshmen two years before, and left it shiny bald since. He glowed. Looked like the kind of angel you'd expect to find in hell. Black booted tough but achingly kind, and he stole my heart clean away.

He came over almost every day back then. We did homework together, for real, and took off our shoes, rubbing our socked feet together under the table. It was somehow the

sexiest thing I'd ever done. He'd whisper his advanced trig problems in my ear, and I'd answer with ninth grade Shakespeare passages we were required to memorize. He'd draw me stick men with daisies on the lined margins of my notebook, and I sat once for three hours drawing him a portrait of myself by watching my face in the bathroom mirror. Nick was someone I began to tell things to. I told him about my grandmother, and wasn't embarrassed to say things about how she believed in spirits living all around us. "You can change your story, you know," Grandmother said. I could tell Nick my grandmother's skin was caramel colored and as smooth, like coffee with just enough cream, and how she saved all the hair she cut from my head and burned it, shaking the smoldering braid while swirling herself in barefoot circles around our house.

Nick never laughed.

He didn't laugh the day he met Mama either. When he came over and my mother had just painted the floor in the kitchen fire engine red, the walls slated grey with bars, and when he arrived, I was trying to get her off the kitchen table. She was painting the ceiling navy blue, dotting it with silver glitter stars from a sticker package, smearing and making a god awful mess of the sky. We looked like we were in a slaughter house without a roof.

"Look, Ana," Mama whispered, standing there with her dripping brush. She looked so tiny, so small. She was only five feet and one half inch tall. Her thin hands trembled as she pointed over our heads. Sometimes she forgot to eat. Paint slid down the brush and her arm, leaving a blue trail that matched her veins. "The little bear and his Mama," she said. "Can you see the constellations?"

"Mama, please get down," I begged, ignoring her. Just ignore her, my father always said. When she gets like that, girls, just ignore her.

"But Ana, can't you see? See Orion is going to shoot them, and it's so so sad, Ana, so very sad." She looked down at me. "My little beautiful girl," she said. Then back up at

the ceiling. “The little bear is going to die and have to be a star forever.” Mama choked on a sob.

“You just put them there,” I told her. I looked at Nick helplessly. He was standing in the doorway and I wanted to cry. I sucked in my cheeks and turned back to Mama. “Please get down, Mama, please.”

She looked down from her perch, wild bird she was, from beneath that heavy cap of hair. “Don’t let them shoot you little bear,” she said to me. The tears in her eyes like the stars she’d just put in place. Smearred and lovely. “I will never let them shoot you,” she said covering her mouth with her hands. The paintbrush clattered to the floor as she dropped to her knees and began to sob. The kitchen table was covered in red footprints of Mama’s toes, and grey fingerprints of her own unique swirls. Like nothing else in the universe. None of the paint had been let to dry and our kitchen looked like a mad gnome had left his strange tracks everywhere, changing from one thing to the next before we could catch him. Mama had paint thick on her body, in her hair. Rainbow trout, her white shirt fallen open, blue between her breasts.

Nick walked into the room without a word, lifted my Mama in his arms, and I noticed the muscles didn’t even pull as he carried her off to her room.

In May I dumped him to go to the prom with Chris.

I loved Nick more than anyone I had ever loved by then.

Jackie Henderson went to the prom with Stephen, of course. It would have been nice if they had been king and queen too, but Jackie was too young. Technically only seniors could be on court. Technically freshmen could only go to prom if asked by a junior or senior. So Nick asked me, and so did Chris. Chris, Gina, Jaysen Ryan and I were buds from bio lab. We hung out some weekends too. Stephen took Jackie and Gina went with Jaysen, Chris’s best friend. After prom, Nick never talked to me again.

The night they took Mama away, I reached for my phone.

I dialed Nick's number.

Three rings and his dad answered.

I hung up.

Then called again.

One ring, an annoyed "Yes?"

"Nick, please," I said.

I heard Nick's dad call his name, the shuffle, Nick covering the mouth piece and saying "Hang it up." Then his hello.

I wanted to cry all over again. My stomach had stopped bleeding, but I hadn't cleaned up the mess.

"Nick?"

He didn't say anything. I wanted to say, I can smell myself on my fingers.

"It's Ana," I said instead.

"I know," he said. Nothing else. I could hear him breathing.

I love you, I wanted to say. I love you but the world is too scary for me to love anyone right now, I wanted to say.

"They took her away, Nick," I said instead. "They locked her up and took her away, and I don't know what to do, and I cut myself and I'm feeling sort of weird."

"Are you ok, Ani?" He was the only person who sliced my name like that.

You are my blood, I wanted to say.

"No," I said instead. "I want her back, Nick. I need her **back**."

"She's safe now, Ani."

What does that mean, I wanted to say.

She doesn't *need* to be safe, Nick, I wanted to say. And did.

"Everyone does, Ana."

I swallowed. "Do you still love me, Nick?"

"Did you ever love me, Ana?"

I hung up the phone.

Jackie left on her own free will. We'd learn that ten years later. She hopped on a bus and went to L.A. She wanted to live among lost angels. Like Nick. Like me. Like all of us.

We found out when they discovered her body, decomposed, except for bones and teeth. Dental records are miraculous, they said. Finding her was miraculous, someone else said. Good things come in three, another person said. I didn't know what that meant.

Jackie went to L.A. to get into the movies and told no one, not even Stephen she was going. He hadn't known. Honestly. Just like he said. He'd dropped her off at home, not knowing her knapsack was hidden under the porch. Not knowing she was planning a get away. Not, by then, did it matter. She just up and left, without a real plan except to go. That's what Cal Ripkin said. He said it on the TV. Cal met her outside the bus terminal. She was trying to light a cigarette, and he could tell right off she was a runaway, he said. He offered her a light, and a place to stay. He gave her high heels and a mini-skirt. He taught her tricks. He kept half the cash so she still had some left to play, he said. "I wouldn't hurt a hair on that kid's head," he said. His hair looked unbrushed but he looked right into the camera's eye. Some people claimed Cal was so jealous he'd once threatened to kill a guy who kissed Jackie on the cheek. Lines of people appeared on the TV, answering questions and telling their version of the same story. "The only truth that is real is the story you tell yourself," Grandmother once said. One sloppily lipsticked lady said Cal really threatened the cheek kisser, pressed a gun to the guy's gut, his shirt collar pulled up in Cal's massive hands to strangle him. Cal says Jackie was his prize, his jewel, his best girl. "She never loved any of the johns but me," he said.

So they asked Cal to pick out the one who killed her.

"Don't know," Cal said. "Any of 'em would've loved to kill a whore."

Mama didn't die. She stayed in that place where they took her for years. At first no visitors. At first Dad didn't care whether they said so or not. We couldn't go see her. "Not good for anyone involved," he said.

As time passed people seemed to care less. Them, at the hospital. The infamous capital T, Them. And then Dad too. As weeks melted to months and months to years, and my fingers played with the scar across my belly that faded like the seasons over all that time, from its thick red rivulet to a pink raised fault line to a faded white seam, I stopped caring. I didn't talk to Nick. Not ever again. I let Chris sleep with me that September. I let Jaysen one night too, when we all got drunk together and Gina passed out and Chris and Jaysen asked if I wanted to sandwich. I didn't realize they hadn't said *a* sandwich. And I let Stephen Cox too, who never went to college, but stayed in town and drank and fixed cars and always had dirty hands, but they were still quarterback beautiful. He got pretty angry sometimes. He gave me a black eye once. When he found out about Jackie, he went to Sonny's and Sonny himself had to lift Stephen off the bar and carry him home. When I showed up at Stephen's house later, I washed the vomit from his cheek and hair, but he didn't even want me near him that night.

I think I may have even let my father have me, if he'd come. But he didn't.

Ari tried, for a while, to hold it all together. To hold us together. She would come into my room at night, ask me questions, even tried to check my homework once or twice. Like she was five years older, and not the baby. She even left a box of condoms on my night stand one time. I ignored her.

Dad ignored both of us. I ignored him in return. Ari tried love.

When she turned eighteen she gave up and went away. To college. Safe, sweet, and sound. Aria, a song, like her name. "We were destined by name," I told her. How could an Anastasia be anything but me? I don't know where Ari is now. I don't know where she went. Or my father either. Or Gina or Chris or Jaysen or Stephen. Although I tried once, to find Nick.

But I can tell anyone about my Mama. I can tell where she is and how, before there, she used to cook gardens I loved to eat. Omelets sunny with cheese and green with peppers and artfully arranged garnishes. I can tell about her paintings, the real ones, the ones that people bought, of barns with light funneling through so they look like sunsets and portraits of Ari and I as children, goldenrod haloes encompassing us. The ones of women the color of Grandmother, naked and so softly dark. I can tell about Mama's slippers, wool lined with plastic bottoms, and how they whispered down the hallway, past my bedroom each night. How I can still feel her breath on my face, how you expected it to smell like winter and it always did. I can tell how she was so much taller to me than she was. How she stuck her tongue out in the rain, and lifted her hot cheeks to the snow, and how when I went to see her finally, a visit, she lay in the middle of her bed, fetally curled, facing the wall, softly moaning and smacking her jaw. How her hair had been sliced to choppy breaks and strings. I can tell about the wool padded shackles like her safe slippers clanking against her bed. The whiteness of her skin, of her scrawny rear end peering through the hospital robe that did not close, and how there were no flowers in her room or paintings on the walls or any color near her at all. And I can tell about the umbilical cord drawn across my body like a trap, aching like the wind, for her.

My Mama, she was a wild bird. My Mama was.

insomnia

It is Missoula, midnight, a time to no longer care, and I cannot sleep. Curled in a corner on the mattress left without a frame, where white washed walls sticky with glow-in-the-dark neon stars meet, I confront us. The part of a couple I don't know how to be. Drawn over my face I imagine a blanket of medieval chain mail and can't believe I don't bear more scars of this life.

I came here only a year ago and already crawling across my insides I find facades of people, waltzing and breaking in deafening crashes, infinite and blissful. I wonder if there truly are only two people in the world, recycled over and over. I see the same faces a hundred times. Only hers vanishes.

Sour leafy smells surge in the pit of my stomach. A reminder it was under autumn air I both found, and lost, her. The word once rolled easily from my tongue, *loss*, dripping to western thin air, concave like the big dipper sunk in the night sky. A poem her mother recited while she turned to that pattern of stars, chin lifted, lit by the moon. I watched in silence, metallic silk claws twisted around my chest. She was born in the city that invented barbed wire.

When the phone rings, even in this midnight stillness, I won't answer it. Crave it to be someone it is not. How I'd weep to hear her voice against my ear, that close again. Sweet corroded anger pulls at my spine. We destroyed one another, left ourselves to this, smashing fists against walls, like men, so knuckles split with exposure. Blue blood boiled red with air. I want the safe dark dampness of fevers under electric blankets, disease thick and alive against my teeth, her legs entwined with mine.

The world is drained. I don't want to taste that word again, *loss*. It keeps returning deep in vibrating rhythms which cannot answer what I don't understand myself. She was the unexplainable love, the kind never spoken but met with passion in high arched doorways to the bedroom, suede coats over nothing but dark cotton underwear, and her lips wet and insistent against mine. She tasted like August cherries.

Walking down the street this afternoon I looked out to see a reflection etched in the burning glass of the corner Bon Marche, steaming against cooling air. Who is that child capped with a halo of such shorn and wild hair? Who is that poor broken woman with eyes the color of rivers that splits cities in two? Who is that?

Recognition explodes like an olive -- that is me.

I've turned bandit in this town everyone leaves. The train howls its timing. We touched, she and I, I know we did. We touched in six am sunlight, midafternoon slanting dust through venetian blinds, and two am mad caps of whiskey scented kisses on All Hallows Eve. A Madonna and her infant tinged with incense, she looked maternal against me, smelling as sweet. The wailing call of that faraway train remains left unanswered; the distant clicks and switches derailing what I cannot see. She once stretched like the word sea, touching every side of me. I am now a caged animal, frantic, chewing its own flesh until candy palated blood flows against eardrum, whispering rough swirls. Peasant skirted barefooted girls dance somewhere under constellations tonight, but she is not among them.

Maybe I will never again answer long distance ringing. Tear the phone from its wall and watch the wires expose their red blue spider tails. I no longer desire the unknowing voice I will hear. The way the unexpected slides erect against skin like throbbing sex. How she never felt between my thighs. But how she wanted him there, like that, and went back for more. Teaching me to know the depth of a word like betrayal. What protects us from revelation?

I am no longer safe.

She was London rain colored without the accent. I, salt-veined and full of apology. I needed the sting of her coast, biting like nicotine and nothing like Grandma's kitchen late at night. She never watched sunrises even though she got up at five am every day. She preferred to hide. Sometimes inside of me. Swimming from river to bridge, catapulting across expanse -- I will not believe she has left.

October is the ending of everything. I'm warned about the winters here, relentless drifts and icy highways screeching with slices of brakes and spinning glass falling like coins against linoleum floors. The season consumed by passing, we all find ways to hibernate, and I possess the urge to relinquish my hold on everything that breathes. I welcome the season of stolen contamination. I'll scream until my throat swells strawberried raw and slides down itself answering ivory corpses left so lovely against their satin beds. The pavement creaks its aged creases, the dingy hills full of yeast rise like bread, and I know I have been abandoned.

Within the claustrophobia of hidden love, nothing changes. Everything sounds the same. When silence speaks it's too loud. When I look out into strangeness, she isn't there, and a wet wash rag stained with chocolate, creeping with fungus, hangs dripping off my faucet. I can hear dampness, a cheap whore in my kitchen.

Would she listen if I told? Would she care? At sunrise we met in goodbye, her face dormant and inescapable. Without expression. She was supposed to be the net to catch me, not the rusty nail of sin to catch upon and rip delicate membranes left to infection. She's become the one to teach what obliteration really means. Laughing at me. Those engaging slender fingertips tapping against laminated table tops circled with coffee rings. "You knew this was how it would be."

I wanted to be her prisoner.

I can no longer tell a linear story. I'm reflect shame. The easy glare of traffic lights pass in puppets on my walls, and I can't bear this mortal flesh any longer. I keep an angry stillness inside of me like unshed thunder. I run with the seasons, gone granite like a spoon, yearning for everything I can't clutch in my desert palms. I won't stay still for longer than a day. I want to move and run and run and go and go and keep going until there's no place left to leave. I envision sewing graceful ribbons through my nipples to keep her close to me, the kind she never wore in her hair. I will rise from my bed,

undress like a child in front of the mirror, touching this dandelion I call my body. I taste poisonous apples startling my tongue. Naiveté is flavored this way.

My listening ceiling mourns with me, boxing with shadows falling down the walls. She and I pirouette against criss crossed beams like paper doll cut outs overhead in an unfamiliar dance. Sheets twist, exhausted by curves as I kick them away. I feel manicured, like a doll. Purged prayer rips at rubber lips, vacant of organs. I drown my pillowcase with watered down thoughts of time passed too quickly and days swallowed by seconds, hours, minute hands crawling across the face of clocks that would shake sleepy heads awake, too unversed to realize what stood before them, echoing, thick with loss.

She is gone.