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Blood Signs

by

Pamela Ann Kennedy

B.A. The University of Colorado, 1994

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

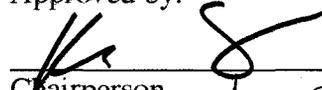
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1998

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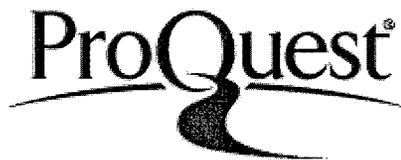
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Stories by

# Blood Signs

Pamela Kennedy

*This collection is dedicated to the strong women in my life whose love has brought me here; and to the one woman who held me as we watched the lightning storms roll across the Illinois corn: my mother who taught me the stunning power of lightning.*

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I am on a lonely road and I am traveling  
traveling, traveling, traveling  
looking for something, what can it be  
Oh I hate you some, I hate you some  
I love you some  
Oh I love you when I forget about me  
I want to be strong I want to laugh along  
I want to belong to the living ...  
I am on a lonely road and I am traveling  
looking for the key to set me free ...  
- Joni Mitchell "All I Want"

to be yourself, in a world that  
tries, night and day, to make you  
just like everybody else -- is to  
fight the greatest battle there  
ever is to fight, and never  
stop fighting."  
- e.e. cummings

Loneliness I taste. The chair I sit in the room, the house, none of this has substance. I think of Hemingway, what we remember of his work is not so much the color of the sky as it is the absolute taste of loneliness. Loneliness is not, I think, an absolute, but its taste is more powerful than any other. I think that endeavoring to be a serious writer is quite a dangerous career.  
- John Cheever 1979

A strong woman is a woman who craves love  
like oxygen or she turns blue choking.  
A strong woman is a woman who loves  
strongly and weeps strongly and is strongly  
terrified and has strong needs. A strong woman is strong  
in words, in action, in connection, in feeling,  
she is not strong as a stone but as a wolf  
suckling her young. Strength is not in her, but she  
enacts it as the wind fills a sail.

What comforts her is others loving  
her equally for her strength and for the weakness  
from which it issues, lightning from a cloud.  
Lightning stuns. In rain, the clouds disperse.  
Only water of connection remains,  
flowing through us. Strong is what we make  
each other. Until we are strong together,  
a strong woman is a woman strongly afraid.  
- excerpt from "For Strong Women" by Marge Piercy.

*So Fine, Just Right*

I'm not ignorant. My best friend Marlena and me were getting tips from Rowena, the local drag queen, when my mom's raggedy old Honda pulled up. Just sits there. Waiting. Glowering at us through her rear view. Staring like a chauffeur with privileged information. She pretended like she had nothing to say when I got in. Pulling away from Marlena's stoop, my mother looks to the rear-view, then to the side-view half mirror, then to my straight-ahead face.

"Can't believe you can see out of that thing," I say sliding the ashtray open and shut, the blue vinyl underneath is marked with cigarette burns.

"I can see well enough," she says, Kool in her mouth, finger poking the lighter in. The pictograph of a lit cigarette smoke lifting in a little 's', is half worn off. She holds the smoke in the fork of her fingers, closest to me. It makes me think of the forks in trees, and roads. No real forks in city roads. When I think of a fork in the road, I think about some prairie road out past White Bear Lake, townships where you come to a road and the decision can mean something. It takes you somewhere other than the same grid of city blocks.

"Shouldn't you fix that mirror, take it some place? Get some kind of high bond glue. How about that kind in the commercial where the man's hanging from the steel beam in the construction hat?" I say, though what do I care? She's the one who nearly sheared it clean off coming home one night. It's just something to say cause she's pissed.

Her hair is down and sleek from work. She's a writer for an insurance company in St. Paul. She's got her suit on, the power suit. High-queen color and she's going to lose her cool any minute. The park's lake is surfaced with sheets of gray ice, the huge city goldfish frozen underneath. I think about that for a minute. Bloated orange fish, mottled with black like rot. They swarm over each other in the summer when the basketball courts

are filled with pick-up games and slivers of green glass. They don't surface delicately, like something out of a Japanese story book, these are American fish, swarming and hungry and too bright for the trashy lake water. I wonder how much room they have in the winter.

My mother drives the parkway. Past the apartments, low and brick with gold scripted letters over the door. The Peacock Building is Marlena's favorite -- every time we pass it she covers up the 'pea' and then can't stop laughing for the next three blocks. My best friend Marlena's crazy, but she tells me I am C- R-A-Z-Y. She says that because I don't wear socks in the winter and the two inches of bare skin sometimes get all cut up by sharp crusty ice and snow. No gloves. It makes me feel like a fucking pioneer. Wearing only a trench coat without lining that I found in Ragstock for five bucks, you see them piled on beds at family reunions, hanging on hangers at Denny's or in the local Lutheran church, wedged behind old-lady smelling black wool coats. You know the kind. Marlena was bent over with her big beluga-butt in the air pawing through a barrel of army fatigues. Queen Mother would have me clean up my language. She threatens that the coat is going out, do you hear me, out with the next spring cleaning load of cardigans and ancient ski sweaters.

My mother holds the unfit cigarette. "Do you," she starts slowly, calmly, her words sounding like they should be skirting the ice out there, "have any concept--", she shakes her head and exhales nothing but clean air--, "any clue, what kind of situation you could have put yourself in?"

The lighter pops hot and orange-coiled and she jams it to her Kool and draws. She's pissed about Rowena. I'm supposed to sleep over at Marlena's tonight and it is now going to be an issue, capital 'I.' She knows how to inhale, my mother. Not like Marlena. I explained to her as best I could. Lighter, inhale, pull out the carb. The clouds of smoke rolling over themselves, and when you pull out the carb its sucked into your lungs. A scientific law. Marlena's like this: light, inhale, inhale like it's her last breath before

swimming the length of the pool underwater. I can see it's gonna happen but I can't warn her quick enough. I can see the hitch in her breath, the catch. She's still pulling and coughs, the force blowing the carb toward the ceiling, arcing it like a rocket. Marlena's Auntie and Mom, who laughs and says "Shana" when I try to call her anything else, sat in front of the bright blue cotton bedspread hung for curtains, a winding, turning, viney kind of print billowed out full with the almost-night winter air coming in. The radiators go full blast and the windows are kept wedged open with old bricks. Shana laughed and doubled over coughing. "Party foul," Auntie shook her head, "we're going to have to teach you a few things. Connie has this down, but you, you we've got to work on."

My mother taps her ash out the open window. She cracked it open an inch last month and it hasn't rolled back up since. Convenient. Over the potholes on Hennipen and the glove box pops open across my knees. Nothing is organized in there. No manuals, not a single smart thing like a tire gauge, or AAA pamphlet. No tiny notebook with logged mileage in neat black numbers scrolling down, no stapled invoices for muffler work, exhaust systems, clutch replacement, not even a book of matches. There are a few maps stuffed in and folded wrong, Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana. I take it upon myself to flip them back along the correct creases, creating even rectangles. There are a few scattered packages of Sweet n' Low, and half an old Pearson's Nut Roll. So anyways, when she pulled up to the curb Marlena and I were taking walking lessons from Rowena -- jamming our feet into her monster boat heels, swallowing my foot nearly to the ankle. Her heels: high and bright orangey-red, the reddest, livest thing on the block. All we see is curbs piled with dirty-oily slush piled, brown concrete, the grass brown-dried, even the IDS Tower downtown looking dirty-metal gray, sticking up through the clouds. Rowena has the longest nails I've ever seen.

"No honey, shoulders back and move your ass. I mean understand," and at this point she looked to Marlena, doubled over with her dark curly hair nearly three steps down

ahead of her, laughing. Rowena with her stop-light-red toenails on the icy stoop, " you are never going to have much of a booty girl, you ain't made that way, so shake what flat little pancake you have."

Marlena, shaking with that mass of hair, giggling, her bubble butt shaking: "You are one soooooorreeeeeeee walker."

The wind is cold. Wet. Wind chill advisories out in the plains. The city in comparison feels like a 32-degree heat wave. When mom's car pulled up she didn't even get out. Looking straight ahead. She will not say drag queen. What she does do is pull a soft Kleenex from her purse, crumpled. She licks it. If she could get her hands on me she'd pull that mother cat deal -- like I was nine and smudged with chocolate. Handing the wet thing to me she tells me, " I'm going to tell you only once, Constance, get that cheap shit off of your face."

No way she can make me, that's how I feel. I flip down the vanity mirror. Red lips, under rims of my eyes asphalt black -- Auntie showed us how to pull out your bottom lid a little - the pink wet ledge closest to your eye, the rim that takes the black so well. Just right she said, with either hand on my cheek, looking into my eyes, just right.

My mother has all these unreasonable rules having to do with me. My father never wanted me to cut my hair, my mother wanted clean-cut order. Not that I remember my father as anything but flat images. My mother keeps stacks and stacks of albums. Large square flat ones with small square pictures of my parents in Japan. My mother is white-blond shining and standing in front of a fish market in Tokyo. In heels, huge next to the Japanese with their jet-black hair. My father is caught running in a long green coat, taking a running start to cross a steep bridge in Kyoto. That's the way my mother always says it. The album will be across her knees and she will say, " And this one here. That's the bridge where you needed a running start to get across. That was Kyoto." Pictures of her

with dozens of velvety red roses unfolding in hotel rooms where she wears a light pink kimono the color of little girl's lipstick, the kind of color that is supposed to look natural, but like light is coming up from somewhere making it more natural than natural. The pink of the kimono always seems too soft. The inside of my wrist. I imagine sliding rice-paper doors. Paired shoes at the door. I love the shrines. The temples red, gold, swirls of green. My favorite picture shows a tree filled with wisps of paper. My mother says that they do that in Japan to wish for something. Prayers, fluttering like early blossoms. Each blossom a wish for someone. I wish that Matsuo's market would stop wrapping the fish in newspaper. It is Taiko's wish to stop smoking. Good gardens. Good seasons for fish and shrimp. Safe pilgrimages. Happiness. I wish she wouldn't cry at night.

In a watch case, in her top middle drawer, is this silky white fine hair. It is tied in a bundle, wrapped with rubber bands. My mother has lots of old jewelry cases in there. Hudson's cases lined in velvet she got with her graduation gift from the University of Michigan, green-gold flat leather boxes filled with receipts from gifts she'd given my father. I think it's gross. The hair, bundled like that. Like corn silk. Mom kept it when my hair was first cut. You can see the picture. It's in one of the albums with the psychedelic covers. I'm four and my hair is lopped off to my shoulders. I'm standing in these damn ugly blue plaid pants, and white cotton shirt. The barber is balding and bent over, picking up hanks of my hair curled beneath the metal chair. Mom claims that my father cried, which seems a little messed up to me. But there were always these rules. That was my point. Connie you can't cut your hair. Connie you can't wear makeup until you're sixteen. I began to think she'd been reading too many of those teen mags. Sixteen was like some magical age where I'd be able to pierce my ears, wear makeup, date, and I figure I'll fly off to Los Angeles or someplace warm and start working on my tan, my walk. Last summer my uncle got married back in Michigan and I got my first pair of real earrings. Four years early. My cousin was getting her ears pierced, it seemed only fair.

Even if the gun did get stuck halfway through my ear. Says something that it hurt a hell of a lot more when I got it done at Walgreens with sterile conditions and "professional" equipment, than my second holes that Marlana did in her bathroom with a sewing machine needle.

I've practically got Michigan folded back up so you can see the front panel where the front panel is supposed to be by the time we park in front of our apartment. She's out the car and flying down the walk with her purse knocking at her hip. She's making even strides like she is late to catch the 16 downtown, or a lunch date. She stops, drops the cigarette, places the ball of her foot on it and pivots. Looking to see what's taking me so long. Pivots like a dancer and I make sure my Converse comes down flat on top of the white flattened stub.

She's holding a washcloth. We're the same height now, she's heading towards me in her stockinged feet because she's kicked off her heels at the door. It's been a long time since we've really stood this close to one another. She looks thinner, and meaner. She has thick gold hoops in her ears and a fine silver eye shadow, barely there. Her nails are unpolished and thick. She still wears her wedding band. Muscles constrict in her jaw. I know she grinds her teeth at night. I know cause when her mother was in the hospital, hooked to machines, Grammy ground hers, clenching her jaw. My mother held her head and stroked her temples, the way she used to when I had the flu. She traced her eyebrows, the way they arc like mine, like her own. She held her mother's jaw and tried to get her to stop. She cooed to her. "Yeah Mom, I know, I know," the words low and sweet and softly pushed from the back of my mother's throat. The sh-sh-sh. "I'm here. Oh God. Mom, I'm here." My grandmother. Mean as a snake and twice as twisty as they say. The thwump-shoosh of a machine breathing for her. The little clear tubes of urine going out, I.V. going in. She wasn't one I ever thought would allow herself to die. My mother just

looked at me later and said, "I never thought so, but I'm just like her." At night, sleeping in the bed next to her, I could feel her crying. Then later, she lay on her back in the dark. I could see the cleft beneath her cheekbone, the way the muscles knitted themselves together and apart. I watched the headlights on the ceiling.

Her hand is on my jaw. Rubbing. I can feel her nails on either side of my chin. I try to dodge, turning my face away, but she snaps it back.

"You think this is pretty? Is that what you think?" Spit is gathering at the corners of her mouth. She has to take a deep breath to suck it all back in. I open my mouth to answer but the washcloth is over it. Slapping over it again and again.

"You want to end up like Marlana and her mother? Is that what you want?" No I want to end up like you. Crying and not even noticing that I water down your fucking gin. "After all that I do for you."

"Let me go." I say. She's got her hand in my hair now. Short enough to grab just a handful of. And I'm thinking of Marlana and how she met these guys. I'm thinking of the makeup she's planning on tonight. The wet lip-gloss that comes from a tube, the tiny little brush dipped in the eyeliner. The huge gold hoops. I'm thinking of the way people smile at you. I'm thinking of how that changes the way the dirty lake looks, the way the wind hits you. It makes the cold feel good.

We're in the bathroom, seven paces from the front door and she's got one hand on my hair and the other flicking on the bathtub tap. Did I mention there are pictures of the two of us together in the tub. I'm this tiny, wet shiny thing. My mother's hair is caught up at the top of her head. She smiles at me and I am ringed by soap bubbles. Everything looks white and clean.

What I think about is my mother in a pink kimono holding an arm load of roses. What I know is why he sent her roses. What I know, what I know is that if you look close enough at those pictures you can see the fine tracing of blue veins beneath her eyes.

The steam is coming up from the tap. It smells like metal and Dove soap from the last shower. She is pulling my hair and I am screaming. I elbow her right below her rib cage. Her silk suit is water spotted, her hair plastered to her cheek. A sharp intake of breath. The small bathroom is clouding with steam. She slips a little in her pantyhose on the chipped tile floor. With her weight she wraps her arms around me, one hand still in my hair. She's got her other hand holding my arms from behind. She lunges forward, and I'm two steps from the yellow bath. The edge of the tub cracks me just below my knees. She's over me. And water is streaming through my eyes. I'm coughing and it's coming out my nose. My head slams hard on the open mouth of the faucet. She's pulling me up like wet laundry from a broken washer. I can see that blood is snaking along the back of my neck, mixing with water. Pink.

She has me against her and I'm bleeding on her suit, leaving black marks along the shoulder.

"You are so fine," he'll say. We'll walk in the park. Marlana will get the shorter one. We will walk to the bridge. I will walk ahead and cock my hips just right. I will take long, even strides to the top of the bridge and look down. He'll put his arm around me and I'll let him, but not cause I'm cold. I'll look down and know that those fish are there, trapped underneath the ice. Trapped and far from where they belong. When he slips his tongue in my mouth I'll let him press against me, cause I feel beautiful and just right.

Third Time

The third time that Joyce gave up on David it was over baseball. Baseball. No shuffling feet. No plastic seats. No small figures moving down below. There were no cardboard beer trays on knees or kids with giant styrofoam fingers and those headbands with springs dangling little tomahawks. It was over baseball diamonds. The physical space. It was over perfect diamonds of wet green shimmering between banana trees.

She met David and Katharine at a costume party --Katharine while trying to fish her bracelet out of champagne punch, David while spilling his all over the floor. Statue of Liberty, Spiderman, Cow. Joyce was distracted by Katharine's green paint, white teeth, red hair. Katharine had a job painting produce specials on huge scrolls of white grainy paper for a Co-op popular around the University. She painted cabbages like green roses, bushels of peaches, glistening carrots and beets, red onions the color of expensive tissue paper. She took photos and painted and did collage. She said she couldn't get out of her food phase though. Everything was restaurant signs and hot dog stands, people eating outside at Bon Viande. Waitresses arm muscles under trays of double cheeseburgers and greek salads.

David spent the night throwing nets over women he found attractive. Joyce had stayed in the kitchen and watched him cross the room towards a woman with her back to him, unsuspecting. No one wanted to snare a Guernsey cow. Joyce wore ears and a black and white spotted t-shirt and had strapped a plastic, inflated surgeon's glove to her stomach. David was working toward a Phd. in Economics. Late in the evening when he'd discovered she was ABD in Comparative Lit. from a fine school in the East he'd struck up a conversation. He assumed she was detail oriented. He ignored her point that she was

now in advertising and that the last project she'd worked on was a local bank ad that featured, for no apparent reason, large gorillas sitting on top of tiny models of the city skyscrapers, debating interest-bearing accounts. He'd asked her over for some help proofreading his dissertation bibliography. Chicago Manual style.

A year into the marriage and it was falling apart. He spent nights hunched over his computer going over labor statistics in Thailand. Rejections to his applications came in the mail and she held them up to the light trying to read them. Once she read the rejection from NIU in Dekalb, Illinois, through the desk lamp and ran down and replaced it in the mailbox. It seemed too much to know, too weighty on the coffee table. Ah well, he'd said. What kind of economics department could you expect from the town that invented barbed wire. Conferences came and went. His advisors e-mailed infrequently and his friends were in Cambodia on research grants. He secretly hoped for the insurgency of the Khmer Rouge, even though he liked his friend immensely. Her first birthday gift from him was a year's subscription to The Nation and a bicycle helmet, which she took as a sign of commitment.

"Really, when you think about it, " she told Katharine, "The Nation to David is what to any other person might be long stemmed roses."

He left messages on the voice mail for her. He cut out ads and left them scrawled with marginalia, for her to find. When she felt as if she were losing her footing, and mourned the loss of the dream of the dusty cramped office on the second floor of an old chem building with shiny banisters, oriental carpets worn down to the warp, shelves of books he tried to comfort her. She often sat mourning in the common room of the agency where the C.E.O had recently thrown over individual offices for the more "creative" option of open spaces where people roamed about, jingle-producing nomads; where she had

placed her coffee cup on one of the long, broad shiny tables and come back from the bathroom to find it had disappeared. Common property, David would love the thought. The coffee cup had been given to her by one of her graduate school friends who had recently been offered a tenure-track position in a small liberal arts school on the Oregon coast. GOOD GIRLS DON'T GET PUBLISHED it said. When she mourned she thought of files of undergraduate papers that students would have never bothered to pick up, of a campus clock chiming even if it were simply a recording. In an attempt to console her, David would remind her how he'd convinced her to buy her first used car with a single remembered tune. "Oh my Subaru. You've got the brains and the beauty too." Just like you, he'd said. She loved that he had shoe boxes of old love letters, pictures of his junior high dance photos where he wore a ruffled tux and his hair looked vaguely Who-ish.

In the months approaching the December position deadlines a kind of uneasy silence settled. He had no interviews. It was almost as if he hadn't even sent out applications. When Joyce was being considered for a small role on the Nike account, he went on for weeks about Nike and the labor industry. He left articles on real wages for the Asian women and the relative costs of Air Jordans stuck under food pyramid magnets on the fridge. She was in the middle of pressing coconut milk when he called her into the living room to hear a speech on labor and international human rights. The speaker told about how when a Nike worker was brought to the U.S. and all the corporate heads refused to meet her, that the coalition had brought her into a shoe store. She wore flat sandals with thin rubber bottoms. She put on a pair of Nikes and walked around. She looked at herself in the mirror and said, through her interpreter who held back tears. "I look very distinguished. These are very well-made shoes."

"Can you believe that." He shook his head.

She went back to pressing milk. He turned on the Bulls game.

"What you need," her mother said, "is a vacation."

"What you need," Katharine said, "is someone who sees past his vita."

Her mother presented the tickets over Banana Brule with a Macadamia Pastry from a recipe she'd lifted from Gourmet in the dentist's office.

"Dominican Republic, Mother? A vacation in a war zone?"

"You're thinking of Haiti sweetie," she said opening the brochure, "and besides, the beaches."

Not like the picture of a European beach at all -- she'd imagined fat German men in speedos and old tanned women wearing nothing but bikini bottoms and wide straw hats. The brochure pictured young couples on beaches, in small villages, on donkeys and wind-surfers. She had commanded herself to stop looking. Stop looking. She couldn't stop. It was the same with the mail order catalogues that came folded in half and stuffed in the mailbox, ones with dogs and models in saw grass or in front of mountains. She'd find herself connected by phone to a small East Coast village and an underpaid college student determining whether the Cotton V-neck Fitted Knit in the Late-Summer catalogue that came in Glacier, was the same color as the Cotton V-neck Fitted Knit in the Pre-Season Fall Catalogue that was listed as Atlantic. She was even taken in by the food magazines. The recipes of Napa Valley placed between pictures of grape colored linens and tall women caught in gusts of wind that were kinder to them than they had ever been to Joyce. Ad layouts showed stark clean rooms of polished wood floors, a single sleigh bed piled high with thick pillows and wrapped in 200 ct thread cotton, small afghani prayer rugs in the sunlight. The photos never gave any indication of the photographers waiting behind the lights. No hint of what waits at home for the model with a forkful of black bean and yellow corn salad: dirty litter pan, second round of chemo, a non-committal lover.

"You know this recipe called for a blowtorch."

"What?"

"Recommended caramelizing it with a blowtorch."

She had visions of her mother with a welder's mask strapped to her head bending over each individual tartlet. Her mother worried about her. Worried that her daughter might not have the kind of skills needed to maintain a happy marriage. She worried that her best advice had gone unheeded. And perhaps her mother had a point since Joyce preferred desserts out of cartons and containers and wrappers.

She ducked out of work early, feeling vaguely subversive. She put her sunglasses on because they made her feel hidden as she spun out the revolving doors. There was a small bookstore on the corner next to The Garden. Katharine's painting this week showed rainfalls of kiwi. Joyce stood in front of the travel guides. She read, On Jan. 12, 1493 Columbus arrived in the Samana Peninsula of the Dominican Republic, but was kept at bay by the Ciguayos; he named it the Golfo del las Flechas [the Gulf of Arrows.] Areas said to be settled by American slaves, shipwrecked from their sloop the Turtle Dove. Joyce liked the idea of men and women lining the peninsula between the palms, firing arcs of arrows into the bay. She imagined three centuries later and the crew and passengers of the Turtle Dove in cotton shirts caught with wind, the tearing sound of the boat against the reef. She thought of Columbus in retreat, and of escapees standing on arrowheads buried in the dirt. On her way home she popped into The Garden. Katharine was fastening a banner of mangoes on the wall. Joyce thought she understood why redheads in Celtic villages used to be put to death. A mark. A light like a kind of beacon. Light falling on it, making it glow like the frayed copper ends of electrical cords. She had to tread lightly here. There were currents. She was never clever enough to check to make sure of her grounding. "I'm leaving on vacation," was what she said. "I'm going, but I'd I like to see you tonight." Katharine

told her to bring Ouzo. She told her eight o'clock. There was orange beneath her nails from painting the flesh of tropical fruit.

"What do you think?" she'd asked Katharine. Katharine was busy painting her room to make it seem as if she were on a Greek island. "Would it be better to die on a ship, or in a plane?" She poured more ouzo, "I mean the water pouring in, the panic." She made a shivering motion.

"Well, there's that whole women and children first ethic." Katharine painted, foil christmas paper crumpled on the floor and catching the drops of paint from the roller. The small gift box sat next to her wine glass. Katharine's feet were bare. Joyce could see every bone in her foot as she reached up. "In a plane you'd probably be dead before you got your shit together, tucked crash position or not" she suggested. She put her roller back in the tin. "So, if your question's which is a better death, then I'd say plane. It worries me that you're thinking fatality rates and not survival rates."

"I'm a half-empty girl, I guess. What about a crash water landing?" She'd countered. Why had she told her mother they'd love this trip. Why not an inland flight. Baja California, mountains of Mexico, she would have settled for Florida.

The arch of Katharine's foot reminded Joyce of pictures of crumbling white Roman aqueducts. All roads lead back to Rome. All roads lead back to the fine tracing of veins in her foot. The hard bareness of her calves.

On the plane Joyce read her newly acquired guidebook with the semi-circle of white beach on the cover. Covering the eastern two-thirds of Hispaniola, the island it shares with Haiti, the Dominican Republic lies 600 miles SE of Florida, and is separated from Puerto Rico to the E by the 68 mile wide Mona Passage. She studied the tiny crack in the double layer of plexiglass. She'd

always hated flying. So much so that she'd nearly convinced David that they could drive the Pacific crest down to Venezuela for their honeymoon instead of flying. He'd gotten her some Xanax to take instead.

She imagined take off and the sound of a glacier cracking, a rumble as her window fractured and the aluminum sides peeled themselves back over the frame. Katharine would be called in by the FAA as her emergency contact. It would be wet and gray and the asphalt gleaming and greasy, the area cordoned off by orange cones. Taillights of the white coroners vans would reflect in the pools of standing water and debris. K. would recognize her bag and identify her linen suit she'd bought for an island vacation and the bottle of expensive salon shampoo sealed in a ziplock freezer bag. Katharine would think later about how her luggage had survived when she'd been sprayed across the tarmac. Joyce bet that she would be forced into buying the cheapest luggage then. No more Coach for her. She'd buy second hand, cracked, old, one latch broken, guaranteed to tumble and burst. It seemed too terribly sick any other way. Her mother would keep the suitcase and never have the guts to toss it. Joyce had seen footage of the reassembling of various wreckages: Scotland, Hawaii, Paris-Bound, Korea. Planes ripped in half and yet rows of seats remained untouched. It reminder her of a child's model of the body where you could take off panels of the chest to see how the circulatory system worked. Take off the roof and see all the people. When the Hawaii jetliner crashed on landing photographers were there to catch the evacuation of people in flowered shirts and winter tans. People were strapped into seats and looking through jagged holes in the plane's side. A woman who lost her husband and son on a flight to Paris was given her husband's timex and his wedding ring, which she put on the mantle in the living room.

"You have a better chance dying on the Dan Ryan than up in the air " David said, "and you drive that every day."

She didn't respond and bent the emergency exit card in an arc and it snapped back and she stuffed it behind a magazine. She wondered what it was about the number three. Disasters came in threes, but then again, 'third time's the charm.' Isn't that, she wondered, what people say? Planes crashed in threes. Planes crashed in threes. Her mind was on a continuous loop. The windows of planes always struck her as being more like portholes.

After leaving Katharine's she had come home to the house lights on and David asleep, his suitcase neatly packed at the end of the bed. He would have packed his college sweatshirt, the one with the frayed cuffs, the one that pulled across his chest making her think that he must have been a scrawny young man. He'd have folded neatly the cotton t-shirts gone gauzy with ten years of washing and his three good button-down shirts she'd put on her credit card but never told him. Let him think she was more responsible. He would have packed one toothbrush, and left his second one for the morning. He would have packed his razor and blades since the last time they went on vacation he grew a beard and she laughed at him telling him that balding men with beards just looked like they were trying to compensate. She packed silently and wondered if she should have bought new underwear. A nightgown. She left the packing half done and climbed into bed. She noticed flecks of paint on her forearms. David rolled towards her. He reached his hand for the flat bone of her hip. She found herself noticing cobwebs in the corners and what looked like the beginning of settling cracks. She tallied up dry wall and plaster and cement bolting figures in her head, getting confused when she had to carry numbers and remember what the first column had come to. She studied his face above her as moved, seeming mechanistic and automatic. She put her hands on the small of his back he withdrew and laid his body against her. She put her head in the hollow of his neck where she could feel his

pulse crashing and felt like she should know the right words at this moment when he was giving in the way he knew how, and it wasn't enough.

She slept and dreamt. Her mother stood in the middle of a kitchen. Her mother went on about the value of the color of yellow when redecorating and Joyce picked up the wrought iron claw of a bedpost that had somehow come apart. Outside the windows you could see nothing but run-ways. Women sang in French through the screen door. Delphine, the mug-giver and recent Oregonian held out her left hand at arms length, tilting her hand back and forth, letting her huge diamond catch the light. She wore bands of heavy colored glass the size of saucers, three inches thick in all shades of blue around her wrist. Every time she lifted her arm to look at the ring it was an immense chore. Delphine lifted her sparrow's arms, the bands of glass catching the light, jangling on her wrist. Sparrow went on about her honeymoon to micronesia, indonesia. Meanwhile, Joyce's mother had shifted the topic to aprons, specifically a red and white checked apron that her mother wore as a stewardess with American Airlines. She accused Joyce of having stolen it. Joyce implored her mother to stop cooking. Like a robot, her mother set eggs, bacon, popovers, and oatmeal on the stove. Blintzes and bagels. Hash browns and gravy and biscuits and grits. Omelettes and French toast. Prime Rib. Salmon molds with slices of olives for the eye and cucumbers for scales quivered on the back of the range. Butter ran thick down to the floor. Her mother had arms filled with melon balls. Women sang in french, Delphine's bracelets clanked.

In the car, on the expressway, on the way to the airport, David nearly collided with a blue Buick Skylark with a red hood. She could see people on the el bent over newspapers. She read: Mangrove forests are found along the coasts; these water-rooted trees shelter sponges, coral, oysters. Some species live out their lives in the shelter of the mangroves. Life is sustained

by what comes in with the tides. They build the land, building up enough soil for the black and white mangroves to take over. Meanwhile, the red mangroves have sent out floating seedlings--they drop into shallow water, touch bottom and implant themselves. In deeper water they stay afloat and, crossing a shoal, drag until they lodge.

Katharine hugged her at the gate.

"Take care Dave." David hated when women called him Dave. He was very specific. David to women, Dave to men.

"Third time's "the" charm, or "a" charm? Three in a row in hockey is a hat-trick, but three strikes and you're out.

It was the landing gear. The whirl. Over David's shoulder she had seen a spine of sand. Glancing quickly she now saw trees so thick as to be indistinguishable from one another. She wondered if, in the rainforest, the people who lived there had hundreds of ways to say green in the same way that Inuits had a hundred words for snow, or that the desert Navajo had for wind. The green of the cane when whales come. The green of the rice paddies when pigs roast for Navidad. The dark and turning green of hurricanes. She reached for David's hand as the wheels hit the runway.

Outside and alive. She took her first full breath and David wrapped his hand around her, resting on her hip. Sweat slid between her breasts. "How's my girl," he whispered in her ear and the world seemed to align itself again. Glass doors off of their tracks slid anew, capsized Catamarans in Lake Michigan righted themselves, sticky numbers on the touch-tone pad of her phone bounced efficiently back, the swollen window shut, the uneven door hung true. Click. Swoosh. And the world was seamless again.

The highway to the hotel cut through cane fields. The driver spoke into a microphone. David was thumbing through his day-book. She had been hesitant about a package deal. They weren't resort people. They were the type to try to speak the language. They packed light and stayed at small local inns, ate in tucked away places. They tried public transportation, if available, and bought textiles and fruit at roadside stands. Long rectangular bolts of cloth that women used to tie their babies to their backs so they could still work in the fields. The cloth ended up on polished dressers, or hanging on the wall of her office.

They tried to remember and replicate local recipes. She learned how to make coconut milk in Belize. She'd made dinner for David's advisors the week before leaving. For his ex-girlfriend Zenta who was in the middle of writing a textbook. She was complimented on her Guacamole: thick cubes of avocado, tomato, onion, cilantro, chilies.

"It's so refreshing Joyce, to meet someone who knows how to cook something other than meta-midwestern." Zenta said. "I am just too busy too cook."

She had tried a recipe that her brother had brought back from Colombia, red beans and shredded beef. He'd also learned how to tie knots and hang hammocks. Ironically, half-way into coffee and mango sorbet the phone rang. She turned down U2 singing Christmas carols and answered. Ted, an economics prof, and Zenta, and David were all in a heated discussion over "Growth Rates and Labor Strikes in Post-Deng China." Ted knocked over his coffee cup with his elbow.

Her brother was calling from the jungle to tell of his break-up with his lover.

"You better re-patriate soon, the whole family refers to you as 'Michael and the Colombians'."

"Jesus Christ, they make it sound like a bad lounge act at the Holiday Inn."

"You should see Joe's tree. Covered with pictures of naked men. Classical to modern, and an erect penis on top. Very tasteful." She could hear her voice, tinny and delayed. "I don't know what to say Mike. We all loved Juan-Carlos." At this point the conversation seemed to gather in momentum and David was slamming his Nike shoe repeatedly on the table.

"You can still love him, it's not like he's dead. It's all very complicated, has to do with his firm, and these chairs he's designing, and this Germanic 2nd generation asshole. Jesus, what's going on over there?"

"My Dinner with the Economics Department. Zenta, Ted, David, Deng and the collapse of Chinese communism."

"Raging over philosophical tenets?"

"Yawn. Back to this Juan-Carlos and his new lover. If his grandparents emigrated from Germany you can be reassured that he's probably a nazi."

"I never was one for excessive order, maybe that's the whole thing, a search for order."

She didn't respond.

"Did you say Zenta? I thought that insufferable snob was out of the picture. You, my dear, have poorer judgement than I."

He snorted. Traffic and a high foreign sounding car horn.

If Mike were here they'd be laughing.

As the van pulled into the gates of the resort complex the guide said, "and here there were abundant wildlifes. We hunted and fished. But now, it is beautiful." David scowled.

"The Gap has a factory just inland a few hours towards Santo Domingo," he said.

"Ted gave me a contact, but we're going to need a car."

She stared at him as he chewed on a pencil. The second time she'd given up on him it was in Venezuela, and then only briefly. In Venezuela little girls sold bits of chocolate and tiny handmade dolls on the side of the road. They tied their pet monkeys in patches of dirt with a collar and chain. She saw a brewing replay of that. They'd argued over that. She'd voted for Cruel, he for Cultural and Not Subject to Scrutiny.

"Well, everything's cultural. Apartheid. The Holocaust. Pol Pot. So those things aren't subject to scrutiny because they're not of our culture?"

"Joy, it's a fucking howler monkey, not genocide. We're talking about very complex social interactions here. Everything isn't so cut and dry, honey." He mentioned that she needed to think a little bit more on the whole subject and they could hash it out when she'd developed a rational argument. He'd told her he loved her the night they flew home the city glowing green and orange, flickering like a vast electronic console all along the shoreline.

She looked at him now. She had the feeling that he was receding from her, she offered no words to bring him back.

All residents of the complex were to wear color-coded bracelets stating their affiliation to one hotel or another. Neon green, dark green, royal blue and hot pink. On the peninsula of four inclusive resorts they were told that one had the best restaurant, one the best water aerobic program, one the better cuba libres and theirs the best discotheque. The beach was studded with thatched roof cabanas serving tall drinks with pineapple to people. It was crisscrossed with volleyball nets, bisected with rows of lawn chairs as if everyone were waiting for some event, like the landing of a shuttlecraft, the destination of which changed every hour with the sun so that the chairs rotated like sundials. David spent the morning arguing with the concierge in an attempt to leave the peninsula and rent a car to see

the island. The argument seemed to revolve around the fact that it was the height of the Christmas holidays, and of course most cars were reserved by those who'd thoughtfully planned ahead, and besides there were such lovely pool-side shows and merengue in the Disco. The first day they settled with walking far along the beach past the farthest visible point, David's pants rolled above his knees photographing men spear fishing from a reef.

The photograph shows the men with one hand gripping cheap neon snorkels like something sold to children at the K-mart. The clouds cover the sky and it photographs clear white, blending with the crests of the waves. No one had told her mother that Christmas was the rainy season. The fish hang, lopped over one another, speared through their heads and dripping blood down the arms of the small squid at the bottom of the string. The top fish runs pink to its tail, both men hold this single strand of fish, one man looking down, the other scowling. The man looking down has a tank top on that reads SUN CLUB in english letters over an outline of a giant palm tree and a volleyball positioned in the upper quadrant like a revolving planet.

"Is it possible that the best way to photograph them would be to ask?" She said this quietly, remarking that David seemed to have a white mark between his eyes, a tiny triangle where he didn't tan.

"Jesus, its not like they are some lost Phillipine tribe afraid for their souls" he snapped. She wondered if he'd missed the sunscreen on that spot. She began to rummage around in her large straw bag.

"What'd the concierge say about the car?" She was looking forward to movement. She looked a little closer at his face.

"That they were serving drink specials at the swim-up bar and pedicures at the salon."

Had he always been like this? It occurred to her that the white mark was from his scowling.

"If it were the two of us on the street somewhere, wouldn't you want someone to ask before they went around snapping pictures?" she asked.

He looked ridiculous in his khakis wet at the cuffs and dripping down his legs, tinged with sunburn. There was a drop of saltwater on his glasses and his hair fell forward in a curl on his forehead. He looked at her for a moment in the silence, picked up the camera again and stared at her through the lens, framed in green and the shutter clicked again.

Her face is in sharp detail. The water, sky and peninsula of land an indistinct mass of color, the crest of the waves identifiable in the tiny arrowheads of perfect white. He has caught her face at exactly the wrong angle so that in order to make out her features you have to tilt the picture back and forth to catch the light, like a hologram on a driver's license. When the picture's surface and the light meet at the right angle you can see her in partial profile, her eyes sliding to the right, right eye caught in a moment where there is no iris and her lip is lifted in what could be the beginning of a reluctant smile, or that of a sneer.

Second day without a car and David was at the front desk trying to find an adapter for his laptop. He'd had one too many rum and cokes the night before and tripped over a pool chair on their way back to the room. Poinsettias lined the sidewalks to the bungalows. With infinite concentration she set the tripod up ten feet from the largest bush. She felt crazy. Her heart seemed somewhere around her throat. She was sweating in the heat. Her nipples were chafed and raw against the short linen dress. Resort Wear page 292. A-Line Linen Shift in Aegean. She looked through the lens and noted the perfect square of

concrete, poinsettias shoulder high and vivid in the sunlight. She pressed two buttons and ran to the concrete square. She ran her hands through her hair and turned slightly sideways for the narrowest angle of her hips. She threw her arms out wide and the red light blinked three times and the camera's clicked. The hotel developing delivered them to the door of the bungalow. She pulled out the picture she'd taken in the poinsettias where she stood, arms flung out and laughing, sun shining through her shift. Her legs were slightly apart, her feet bare and legs tanned. Her hair tangled with salt and humidity. In slanting black pen she wrote on the back, "Rainy season, why again am I here?" She slipped it in an envelope, addressed it to Katharine, and gave it to the concierge to mail on her way to the pool. The room was damp, the comforters and sheets damp, the clothes that she'd unfolded neatly had that smell of detergent and damp fabric from the suitcase. The laptop's screen glowed green. Dave stood in front of the mirror and clutched his fist, brought his arms out to the side. He turned sideways and took a deep breath. He tried the cable and got CNN as he flossed his teeth, wrapped a yard of floss between two fingers and tilted his head, jutting out his bottom jaw like a piranha, down, up click, down up click, down up click and a quick untwisting and refurling of the floss to reach the back upper molars, click, click. A merengue beat sounded outside against the pock of tennis balls.

The rental company only had a small Diahatsu van with the engine in the back and a flat face. Sitting in the front gave Joyce the impression of hovering above the road. She seemed to see things in a way she'd never noticed in a car. She could see the pavement just as it slipped beneath them. They drove along the peninsula and tarantulas slid beneath the car. Dave drove with both hands on the wheel and Ted's hand drawn map spread out on the dash. He would drive. Look down. The Factory was circled in thick red pen. People at the side of the road lifted their hands two fingers extended.

"That must be some kind of greeting," David said.

"Actually, I think they think that we're public transportation," she said.

People bathed in huge metal tubs. Small one-room houses were strung with old-fashioned Christmas lights and cut out foil angels. A family drove by on a motor scooter. The little girl was in her Christmas dress, frills catching in the wind, her hair bows snapped back trailing like the tail of a kite. She was sandwiched between her mother in back holding a baby, and her father who drove.

"I think we were supposed to take that fork back there." She said, looking at the guidebook. "If we keep heading along the coast we'll end up on another peninsula and we need to go inland."

"Look at the map Joy-Joy. It clearly says that we stay on this road until we hit another major roadway."

"I'm just suggesting-"

"Just let me figure this out, I know where we are. Don't get all panicky on me."

He looked down at the map again.

"God K. would love this."

"I'm sure she would."

"Not us, this. The landscape, all of this." .

A man drove by on a Vespa with two pigs strapped tail-to-snout on a two-by-four. Joyce realized, with a sense of displacement, that it was Christmas Eve. Singers roamed from house to house. Villages smelled of roasting pig. Traffic slowed. Men stood in the road in fatigues and guns strapped across their shoulders. They motioned people on with their guns. Motor scooters weaved in and out of traffic. David swore. They were at a standstill, up ahead on the road a man and donkey blocked the way. David reversed, looked at his map, and headed up a small road into the interior.

"See this little loop here." He pointed. "We can curve up through these villages and come back down on the outskirts of the city. A kind of Dominican highway city bypass deal."

"I don't think so, what you're seeing is actually some kind of coffee ring or something" she took the map from him, attempting to wipe it with her finger.

"Trust me."

"You?"

He looked at her in a way that made her want to unpeel all the layers of their talk back to just the core.

"You want to get in to this. You really want to get into this?"

"Into what," she said, "what could we possibly have to get into." She gripped the map.

"You think you're subtle, but it is so obvious Joyce. That's the true tragedy of all of this. You think you're so difficult to figure out. You think I can't notice your pulling away. You think I'm that god damned selfish?"

The van rounded a curve and she saw water in the road's ruts. "I don't know what you're talking about." She thought about tearing the map in half.

"You think I'm going to ask? You think I care what asshole executive you've got your eye on? Some hotshot who tells you he can get season's tickets to the Bulls?"

She saw the white speck in the road, far enough off, at the bend. Her blood level seemed to rise, as if you could look in her eyes and see the sloshing, the whirring, the motion. He looked at her, the map caught cracking in the wind coming in from the rolled down window. She wanted to get into this. She waited. The thud came and sounded to her, solid and in a strange way, satisfying. Chicken feathers were stuck in the van's grill. David stood over the bird and nudged it with his foot. The neck was clearly broken. They

stood outside a tin roofed shack. A man came out of his house, his wife behind him, both shouting and gesturing, the man's brightly printed shirt hanging nearly to his knees, the shirt of a gangster on vacation. He looked down at the chicken. He looked to David and pulled a feather from the grill, pointing in his direction. He pointed down to the chicken, to his house, to David, and to her. The sky was gray and full, as if the clouds were holding something back. Leaves as big as elephant ears turned their undersides to the wind. David stood, patting his pockets. He only had traveller's checks. The rain began, large drops hitting the dirt, leaving wet spots like quarters. The man looked at his checks and shook his head, his wife picked up the chicken and offered it, hanging by its feet to Joyce. She shoved it toward her again. It swung like something hanging from a Chinatown window. David, meanwhile was trying to explain to the man how a traveller's check worked. He stood there, pantomiming signing, and pointing to the man, indicating that it now belonged to him. The man shook his head. Joyce opened her purse and handed David a crumpled five-dollar bill. The owner of the chicken looked at David and shook his head slowly. Quietly laughing. Joyce took the chicken from the woman. It was already stiff and cool to the touch. The woman offered her soft mangoes in an old flat marked with circles from bottles of orange soda. Now the rain began in earnest.

Joyce put the chicken in the backseat. David insisted on throwing it out. "What in the hell are we going to do with it? Barter?" They drove slowly down the road, back from where they had come. The road had cleared. The soldiers solemnly motioned them on. The road that David was looking for was nowhere to be found. In the village light shone through the uneven boards of houses and they stopped in the town square to look at the map.

"It should have been right back there," he said, leaning against the stable of a nativity scene. She let a few seconds pass. She thought of what she might say. She

thought of this island with its thatched roof shacks, metal tubs and laundry strung on lines. She thought about the man with the pigs, about the girl in her Christmas dress, of the tiny lights strung outside the cantinas.

"What must it have been like, do you think. A slave from Georgia, from the delta, washed up here?" She thought of the porches she'd been past in Mississippi, the one-strand on the wall stretched out from wire broom handles and tacked on to the pine boards.

"I can't even possibly imagine. It seems like the end of the earth." He addressed the nativity scene directly.

They drove until it was nearly dark. She had the feeling of being completely alone and the world had dropped away, she had lost all context. It had been such a simple motion, the woman holding the chicken out to her. It was a business transaction like any other. They should have laughed about it. They should have scratched their heads and wondered how they had gotten there. She could tell herself there was a time when things would have been another way. She was in a car, on an unfamiliar narrow road on a tiny island, and she felt every inch of the island, the shore, the water between her and the rest of her life.

David stopped the car. It was getting dark. They were not going to find the road. They were not going to find the factory. He walked on ahead in the road. Everything seemed to unfold in the wet after the rain. Between the broad leaves of banana trees there was a kind of glow. She and David walked toward it, he ahead of her. He clasped the back of his head. He kicked a stone. He stopped, took his glasses off and wiped them on his shirt. He dropped to his haunches. He put his head in his hands. She could hear the cooling tick of the van's engine. Abreast of him she could see over the road's ridge and down a slight slope where a perfect baseball diamond lay among the underbrush. Lighted, fenced. It could have been midnight in Cocoa Beach, Florida.

She watched, unable to say anything as he walked to the pitcher's mound and sat down. Then he laid down. When the sky went dark the bright lights shined off of the trees. She thought it strange to see a baseball field without the cool of fall nights, the clink of chain link. It shouldn't be so warm. The humid air clung to every inch of her. The third time and she thought perhaps the last.

In Samana the next morning when they woke up in the hotel David used the phone to call Ted. She walked. Houses were painted in pink and purple washes. On the bay fisherman cast for snapper out of flat-bottomed boats. Every house had a cross, and the town church bells rang.

She noted, with no small amount of irony, that the locals referred to it as the bridge to nowhere. Sandpipers raced along the shore. She walked the tall bridge that spanned the islands beneath her, the water crashing and every cycle seeming to come from the muscle of her heart, a roaring through her chambers. Golfo de las flechas, the gulf of arrows. Penetration, death, and cupid. Joyce imagined herself shipwrecked from the Turtle Dove and floating in the bay and every muscle of your body ready to give itself to the tides. She imagined seeing the ridge of sand, a sinking ship all around you. Survivors, holding onto planks, saw the night sky clear with brilliant southerly stars. They thanked God for what they left behind. They had no choice but to swim, shadows of manta rays beneath them, and cough blood and salt water when their heads slipped under. They prayed to God, to the Virgin, to gods they didn't know for delivering them into tidal marshes and stands of mangroves. They dug their hands into the wet earth. Rubbed it into their bodies. Swallowed it wet, not with the taste of cornfield rain and Georgia clay, but sweeter as if the cane had infused the very shore itself. Opening her, and engulfed by her, they were home.

# Blood Signs

My mother blames me for missing the first weekend release my sister's had from Clinton Valley in six years. She doesn't say so out loud, but I can hear it in her tone. I'm on the phone the woman who runs the St. Ignace Smoked Fish and Meats is kind enough to let me use, though it's through a door marked Private and bolted to their kitchen wall next to their promotional calendar, which has yet to be turned though the month's half gone. When I flip it I see October has a picture of a nice buck: small rack, sides swelled with corn and the last shoots of summer backyard gardens. Clinton Valley is a state facility for the mentally ill.

She exhales. She's smoking again, I can tell, and I can hear her open the drawer in the kitchen to pull out the glass-blown kidney-shaped ashtray. She, I'm sure, is sitting on a barstool and looking out the windows to the lake. Lanyards clinking against masts, the luffing of a sail. It seems late in the season to have boats on the water. The days seem mostly gray and heavy with low clouds that roll in over Lake Michigan leaving the water sealskin dark.

"You're not coming, is that what you're telling me? Tell me that is not what you are telling me. What exactly happened? where are you?" she says, suspicious now that I may actually still be in St. Paul and am calling from John's and my bedroom.

From behind the counter I can see through the plate glass window above the rack of magazines: Field & Stream, Outdoor Life, Soldier of Fortune, Penthouse, Wildlife Today. Outside a man in an orange cap is loading a basket of apples into the back of his Bronco whose bright green bumper sticker reads Michigan Yes! The woman takes the man's money and slips it in her pocket. As he drives away she straightens the sign above the bin

of apples that reaches as high as her hip. A black dog trots after the Bronco as it pulls back on to Highway 2.

"I'm just outside of St. Ignace." Silence. She is calculating. She navigates by landmarks and is trying to remember if St. Ignace is before or after the section of the Hiawatha that burned. The second growth is tangled and dark green, ferny. The charred trees give the illusion of early winter, the branches bare and showing the open world behind, the small blue house with tin roof and satellite dish, the old green Ford pick-up with a flowered couch in its bed. It seems right -- bare, and broken and stripped.

She's got it now. "You're less than two hours away," knows exactly where I am, I can tell by the way she clears her throat.

"Uh-huh, I guess," I say glancing down at my watch as if it could verify that fact.

"What exactly happened?"

"I had an accident." I say, looking out the window at the woman and the dog.

"What kind of accident? You're all right?" she says, as if this were in doubt, as if we hadn't been calmly having a conversation minutes before.

"You know how it is up here this time of year. I wasn't really paying as much attention to the road as I should have and I hit a deer." A tow truck from Bill's of St. Ignace pulls up and the woman points out my car, white and crumpled, its windshield webbed, concave. They talk, Bill and the woman, while he slips the boots behind my front tires. She laughs and waves her hand at him, turning around back towards the shop. He hooks the bumper. The car is lifted onto its back tires, jaunty at this angle, pathetic, a begging dog. I imagine I can see bits of hair, blood, skin caught in the crumpled metal.

"Mom. I'm O.K."

I don't tell her about how I'd been thinking about John, and his refusal to come, about my sister and my mother and how to escape this obligation. I could tell her I was going to the conference with John, that I was pregnant, that I had to do whatever it is you

do to a garden this time of year. John had said, *Think a bit about how this all fits into your ontological structure.* Just to infuriate me. *You're hardwired for guilt and martyrdom.* Says the man who accepts bushels of huge zucchini from his mother because he can't bear to remind her it's his one food aversion. Loaf upon loaf of zucchini bread he can't even eat. I pawn it off on coworkers, his students, my doctor. Don't hide behind that academic crap I'd said, say what you really mean. I'd been trying Zucchini-Spice bread, and batter flew from the spoon across the room and splattered on the Japanese print above the couch.

*Susan.* A calming tactic when he used the fullness of my name. He said he worried. About me. About the stress, my age and barely pregnant. My family, I'd said it slowly, *fam mill lee.* What am I supposed to do? If you're so goddamned worried then cancel and come with me. I'd like to keep up this dialogue, he'd said, when I slammed into the kitchen still hugging the mixing bowl. How this led into my sister's abilities, I don't know. When I say my sister I mean the woman I knew twenty years ago, not the one in the locked ward at Dearborn. I imagine it was the A-frames that reminded me. Dotted along the narrow highway, with their scalloped lattice work along the roof-lines. Milk-maidy colors to remind you of Switzerland. This, perhaps started me thinking about the Alps, which started me thinking about skiing, which I haven't done in years though it used to be a passion. From houses to countries, to sports, to my sister and her gift. She skied like she could never die. Under a sky that seemed flat and blue between the pines, until you saw it arch and deepen overhead absorbing the god-given sun, she moved with the snow, melting into it, rolling along with it, catching lips, free-falling to land where it seemed only natural to land, and bounce off again in a spray of snow in a path anyone watching would swear was the only path, moving under the sun. A separate world without broken bones, hesitation or fear. And by god she was beautiful. People died skiing, plowed into trees, impaled themselves on the poles of racing gates, dropped off cliffs, or were caught in avalanches and pulled out frozen solid, ice droplets fringing their open eyes. My sister

would not be one of them. She'd look over her shoulder at me one last time, ski-tips already above the steep slope, her slim arms catching her body's weight with her poles, catching my eye before she dropped into the white.

Dropping into the white.

The road disappeared for a minute, that much I'll own up to. One moment I was noting the hand-lettered signs for deer bait, and bear guides and the next I was jarred by something the color of a golden retriever out of the corner of my eye. I don't tell my mother about the thud. How a state trooper named Randy came by and stood over the animal as its lungs rattled like ball bearings in a can and shot it. He pointed out an arrow at an awkward angle in the doe's side. Said that was the problem. Hunters thought they were good with a bow and missed clean heart and lung shots. Stands are too high in the trees, deer are so far beneath them they're lucky to get a clean shot. Deer are left to a slow death for as long as it takes to track them by the blood signs. Smears of blood along the leaves. He was trying to comfort me. Said you could trace a deer's path through the woods these days by the gunshots ripping through the woods and clearings. He asked me if I wanted the meat since the person who hits a deer has first choice. The DNR doesn't see a reason why the animals shouldn't be put to some kind of use. I offered it to the woman of the smokehouse who called her husband. She interrupted him in the middle of a deposition to get directions on how to field dress the deer. I went to call the service station and missed them slitting the doe open, her stomach warm with rotting apples and swallowed blood, steaming in cool air.

"Where's Gil?"

"He's taking Mary sailing."

"Jesus Mom, isn't it a little late for that?"

"You're coming, tell me you're renting a car and that you're coming."

"I'm coming," I say and immediately wish the doe had crossed my path in Escanaba and I would have been too far away to make it worth the drive. I try to imagine my brother and my crazy sister, he ordering her around as if they were still racing together, as if they were 18 and not twenty years older. I imagine the wind picking up and the sun low in the sky, most cottages dark, closed for the summer their docks taken up.

"You should see it," my mom says and I can hear the tap being turned on, "Gil and Mary are tacking toward the point." She swallows water and the rim of the glass hits her teeth. "Even enough wind for the spinnaker. You are coming?" A demand. I can see the sail fill with October wind.

"I'll do my best." I say and wonder what the woman did with the dead deer. I think about the rattle in its chest and wonder how long she'd been wounded before I hit her. I think about the road into the cottage through the old apple orchard that must be filled with whitetail by now, bounding and zig-zagging at the sound of cars on the gravel. I think about Mary at sixteen showing me where she'd go to read underneath a rusted boat lift. She walked me under the birch and past the pines, pointing out the thin twisting overlap of trails worn in the moss and grass, deer paths between the orchard and the lake. I'd never known they were there.

"I'd better close the blinds before we end up killing some birds." Mom says. Three walls of the cottage are glass and at early morning and evening birds hit the panes if we don't close the blinds. Some break their necks, some are just stunned: cardinals, woodpeckers, chickadees, phoebes.

"Well you stay put." she says. "Family is family and how often do we get to see you."

I'd place bets she's methodically washing the water glass she just used. One from the set rimmed with gold, hand-painted with birds and neatly printed beneath: *Wood duck. Aix sponsa.* Every year the paint fades more. The ducks lose their iridescence, the

woodpeckers : *family Picidae* their spiny tail feathers, or their feet clutching a small section of tree trunk.

"We'll be there in a few hours. I mean, when was the last time we've all been in one car? Ages."

She'll signal Gil out on the lake, and he'll have to come about. The boat will be heeling, the seat of his khakis wet with lake water. He'll shout "prepare to come about" and Mary won't budge. Our sister. The boat is a racing hull, built for that lake and meant to cut through water. That boom can kill you.

The woman who owns the Smokehouse is named Mary, ironically. Mary directs me to the bar across the street. I think of all the women named Mary linked hand to hand across the state of Michigan and it makes me giggle maniacally for a moment. Mary from Flint, Mary who sells bags of cherries in a roadside stand outside of Traverse City, my sister from Dearborn, Mary from Novi. Novi was the sixth stop on the Pony express. Roman numeral No. VI. No VI, Novi. Strange what things become over time. I'm panicking a little. They would like to pretend otherwise, but I happen to know my sister is dangerous.

"Do you know that the world is like a tennis court?" she said last time she called collect. John was in the living room trying to determine the simplest way to wash the outside of third floor windows. He sat on the ledge, his feet hooked onto the couch, half of his body outside. I had ahold of his feet. I imagined letting go. We all think those things don't we? Human, isn't it? Right? Those brief flashes of the unspeakable. Sometimes I want to tell Mary to give it up. I'm tired. Honestly. We could all let go, but who stays behind and makes sure we get fed and clothed and don't end up wandering on Wabasha with sticks in our hair? The rest of us, and we are thought of as the lucky ones.

It was early summer and I'd just cut an armload of lilacs and they sat on the dry sink. I could hear someone screaming behind her. Someone's always screaming.

"Have you talked to Chuck lately?" she asked. She stuttered, hemmed and hawed. She said, "ahhhh, ahh, um," before she started again. "Uh, uh ahh, Have you, ahhm, have you talked to Chuck, you know Chuck had a bicycle and he ahh um, do you ever bicycle? Be careful in the hills at night."

She'd dated Chuck when she was eighteen in Colorado. He may have called in the first few years after her break. He may have even stopped by one hospital or the other. Could've been the day she'd shaved her eyebrows, or the time she'd jerked the phone cords out of the wall, or the winter the mixture of medications that made her index finger twitch, bending and unbending like an inchworm, the year she hit 250 pounds, the year her teeth yellowed. The year she wanted to be taken only to K-mart, not to Saks, and preferred the plastic gold-painted pin shaped like a leaf that spelled out Jesus inside in fake rhinestones to Mother's gold circle pins. The birthday or Christmas she was coherent enough to send gifts, which invariably were ones she would have wanted twenty years ago--sealing wax, candles with peace signs, small trolls with wild hair, incense.

"After I kill my mother I'm going to kill my sister," she said, perfectly enunciating each word. John squinted at each swipe of his cloth, I could see the other building behind him, its white-painted brick sloughing off, showing crumbling, rotten bricks. The lilacs seemed so sweet as to almost stink, to reek. The finest of lines. The way water in a bath that you've drawn can hit your skin, so dazzlingly hot or the water of Lake Michigan so mortally cold, you can't tell if you're freezing, or scalding.

She must have been driving eighty miles an hour to arrive as soon as she does. American car--this is Michigan after all. Given a chance Gil will regale you with the urban myths of the American-born Japanese beaten to death downtown within blocks of the

Renaissance center. Hondas with bowling balls through the windshield. He drives an Audi and I don't believe his stories. I have spent the little over an hour sipping a vodka-cranberry minus the vodka and talking to Jim Fishcarrier who runs the bar. He's told me how the U.S. Government tried to screw the Indians out of their land up here. The Indians were the ones who controlled the Great Lakes fishing, pulling in bulging nets of fish. Wet, silver in the light. They built the best goddamned canoes, they harvested food, they set themselves up to be the ones who were needed. Saved the Black robed Jesuits ass giving them passage to Canada. They even bought back their land. As tax-paying citizens the people of Michigan supported them, because if they can take a tax-paying citizen's land, even if he's an Indian, they can take your own. I agree that yes, that's true. Shrewd move, he says, washing the bar, moving to the other end. He swears at the Lions, losing again, and flips the channel. So close to Wisconsin I'm practically an official Packer, he says and smiles, waves as I pay for my drink. I think about how I learned somewhere that some tribes thought of madness as prophecy, not some short-circuit in your neuron web. I walk to the car with my hand upraised, pretending I am Ottawa, Chippewa.

My mother stands in front of the idling Chrysler looking skeptically at the Smoked Fish and Meats. It seems a particularly risky move to be in front of the car like that. I check to see if Mary's in the front or back, how close she is to the gas pedal. I can make out my brother in the passenger seat. I breathe a little. My mother is wearing wool crepe pants and a pale green silk shirt the color of new leaves, a scarf around her neck. Unusual for her not to dress for the season. I'd have expected sable, red. I decide it is a sign of her distraction. Her hair is thick and white. Sometimes at night she'll rest her head in her hands and I can see the blackest hair at the nape of her neck. She would do it in exasperation. She would teach us: shouldn't, couldn't, wouldn't, weren't, rather than shunt, cudnt, wudnt, wirnt. She would smooth her fingers from the bridge of her nose to her temples and hold her head in the 'v' of her hands when we slipped. "You," she said to

me after I'd been in the Twin Cities for years," sound like you've been taking voice lessons from Gunnar Olafsen. I don't trust you living in a place where wind-chill factor is a source of pride." She spots me walking across the street and raises her hand to my own. She is casually smiling, waiting for me to hug her, she lifts her cheek to be kissed. My brother, a lawyer from Detroit, has his feet up on the dashboard. I hear the trunk release. I put my bags by the spare tire and climb into the backseat with Mary.

Mary chain-smokes Marlboros. She rolls the window down in a quick motion. Every motion is quick, a burst of energy, and then it settles back into her quiet bulk. Her eyes dart. She quickly puts an arm around me in greeting. Laughs nervously, one cigarette burning in her hand at some indeterminate point over my shoulder. She smells like heavy drugstore perfume. Charlie. I sing it's jingle in my head:

I can bring home the bacon  
fry it up in a pan  
and never never let you forget you're a man  
Cause I'm a woman

She rolls the window up, then down, then up.

"Mary, stop that." Gil speaks to her as if he would to a dog, a small child. A small child you weren't related to but had to watch and were resentful about it. Gil throws an arm in my direction, shrugs, his feet still on the dash. My mother climbs into the car, the smell of Chanel floating around her still. Gil wears khakis, a denim shirt, deck shoes close to falling apart. He fiddles with the radio and finds a station playing something soothing. Female vocalists, guitars.

I take a moment to look at Mary. She has dark circles under her eyes, which is normal. She breathes only through her mouth. When she looks at you she doesn't focus. Her breathing reminds me of the kind that you hear from an animal on Wild Kingdom. The Siberian tiger they have to tranquilize and tag, whose breaths come in quick pants, and you

hope it is too whacked out to attack. She is wearing a horrible pink and gray jogging suit, size twenty something? It is my mother's doing.

"Mary, I like your jogging outfit," I say, "was that a gift from Mom?" She doesn't answer. She has spilled something down the front of it. Gil is paging through Audoban's Guide to the Great Lakes. Pencil line drawings of birds on the cover, fine lines, wing patches in yellow: Canada Warbler, House Finch, Carolina Wren.

"Susan, should we stop for anything?" My mother asks. "We could stop for dinner at the Pier."

It makes me think of John's and my engagement party at The Pier. Yachts with Cincinnati, Chicago, Bloomfield Hills addresses. Lights strung across the railing outside the window. I am between John, and Mary. Mary's fine lines of muscle in the arm clasped around me. She is eighteen and her skin freckled and pulled over high cheekbones. She wears long beaded earrings and you can see the straight white line of her scalp through her part. I can almost imagine the feel of her soft breast against my arm, loose beneath her cotton dress. The Pier is dark wood and plate glass overlooking water. Soft music and bread plates, pats of butter stamped with their tiny logo. That night, after a few bottles of wine, Mary walked into the Pier's bathroom and put on an old formal dress of mine she'd dyed purple, a drop-waisted, a wide-bowed, silk and chiffon affair. She had brought it with her, tucked into her purse. She'd made us stop at a townie bar. She'd dragged Chuck in there, John and I stumbling drunkenly laughing behind, feeling twenty-three and too old for this kind of nonsense. Waltzed in barefoot, tangoed with a rose in her teeth, across the room and back, and straight out the door. She laughed and her hair nearly reached her back, one hand still holding the rose.

"Well, I'm not really hungry," I say, thinking about the handful of Cheetoes I'd had at the bar, the venison jerky, the smoked whitefish.

"That," she says, "is unusual for you."

"I could use a nice bloody steak," Gil says, closing the book and marking a page.

"I should have made reservations," our mother says mostly to herself. Gil turns up the radio playing Joni Mitchell. I have a copy of Miles of Aisles that was Mary's last sane gift to me. The name has flaked off of the spine and I've long lost the record's sleeves. It skips on *The Last Time I Saw Richard*. Mary shakes her head like a dog whose heard a sudden rustling behind her.

"Mom is murdering birds again," Gil says, turning around.

"Gilbert."

"How many times, Mom, really, how many times have I told you you need to close those shades?"

"I thought you were going to cut out some kind of hawk thing for the opposite wall."

"Hawk thing?" I say.

"A cut out," Gil says, "for the north wall. The birds see the trees on the other side and ignore the living room, but if you put the outline of a predator, they are less likely to fly right into its clutches."

"I didn't kill it," my mother says.

"Moms don't kill birds, glass kills birds," Gil mocks. "A scarlet tanager too."

"It was on the deck when we left."

"I guarantee its neck is broken." Gil unwraps a piece of gum and throws the wrapper out the window.

"We'll see. If it's there when we get home you win and I pay for dinner. If not then it had a concussion and flew off, and you pay."

"Red Lobster," Mary says.

"Red Lobster?" Gil snorts, "oh my fucking god, mother." Mary's window buzzes up.

"Gil, please, do you have to be so foul-mouthed."

"Red, red, red, red, red, red, LOBSTER" Mary's window buzzes down.

"SHUT UP," Gil says over his shoulder.

"I really like that suit Mary, maybe we can go shopping tomorrow," I say, noticing that Mary's hands are shaking, that someone has given her a high-class color job to cover her gray, and a nice haircut.

She says, "RED LOBSTER RED LOBSTER," spits a little. I feel a slight burning in my chest. Sweating.

The last time I was home for Easter Mary paced Gil's apartment drawers slamming open and shut, angry about shopping, talking about fucking, about Jesus, about the ward. Sex and God, it all comes back to sex and religion when you're crazy. Gil had left to pick up the ham, my mother was arguing over where to shop with Mary, and I was putting a puzzle together with Gil's twelve-year-old daughter Suzy. A Sierra Club *East Pawnee Butte, Pawnee National Grassland, Colorado*. It showed a slope of grassland with spiny plants in bunches, and a cone of sand that looked to me like a huge breast rising into the clouded sky. We were working on the sky. Can I tell you that I think Mary has more control than she lets on? She controls herself around us in a descending order, the most with my father, now dead, the next with Gil, then with my mother, and the very least in my company. She paced, and slammed, and paced. I whispered to Suzy to call her father from the back bedroom, and then to run, very fast out the door and away from the house. Suzy was just running back face red and splotchy from crying to see her grandmother and me at the doorway, and her father wrestling her aunt into the car. Back to Clinton Valley I gave Suzy a silver pen for Easter. No religious symbols, John is Jewish and I gave up on God a long time ago.

"Red Lobster what? Mare. Put that cigarette out," Gil says. He is the marshall.

"Sue, can you grab Mom's purse and pull out the meds? Did you remember this morning,

Mare?" I see Mom's left hand move to the control panel where she flicks the door locks.

The cigarette in Mary's hand trembles, smoked nearly to the filter.

"Out, Mary" Gil holds out his hand for the cigarette.

I imagine Mary opening the door and tumbling out across the Mackinac Bridge. We are driving past the small abandoned hotels that used to fill up in the summers before the bridge was built. The Seashell Motel, The Lakeside Inn, each has little individual cottages square, in yellow and blue with matching metal chairs outside the doors, evenly spaced flowers sprouting from the cheap landscape rocks. Each advertise cable and low rates. Every third business sells pasties. When John first drove through here he said that it was as if they were advertising strip joints on every block...pah-sties John, I'd said, rhymes with 'lost'.

Mary very slowly looks to me. She smiles and blows smoke through her teeth.

The smile does not reach her eyes. I'm riffling through my mother's purse. Kleenex, nail file, lipstick, calculator, address book with pansies on it. No medication. Gil's look is one of concern, I have to say. It's a look he might turn on a judge who has overruled an objection of his. My mother taps her nails on the steering wheel. Mary takes her cigarette between her thumb and forefinger. She reaches toward mother whose neck is in front of her. She thrusts her cigarette, still burning, next to my mother's ear.

"Here," she says.

Mary walks to the cottage ahead of us. You can see spots on the cedar siding of the cottage where porcupines have chewed the wood. Three feet above the ground where the winter's snow level had been. When they were five and I was ten I told Mary and Gil that porcupines stood on each other's backs to reach those spots. Like Yertle the Turtle. Gil takes my bag out of the trunk.

"Suzy said that Mare called to her in Boulder last week. Right during exams before the break. That she said she had a new friend whose niece was in the army and it made her

think of Suzy." His voice leans a little on the word friend. "That this woman's niece was a paratrooper and jumped out of planes." He drops the bag, pantomimes leaping, looking like he's doing half of a jumping-jack. I think of the seconds from the rip-cord to the jerk of the sails unfolding above your head, holding air. "Mary said she almost wished she had a parachute that wouldn't open." He puts his arms down, fakes a quick short scream, and then holds both palms as if they were a B-52 spiralling to ground.

The waves hit the rocks along the shore, and the sun catches the round birch leaves. My mother is on the phone calling the Pier to make reservations. I can see the Moshers' boat coming to dock, its rigging halfway down, Gil calls to them from the deck, a drink in his hand. The dinner bell rings from camp at the point, a steady gonging. Mary sits knees up flat against the bar, flicking her cigarette into the ashtray. She gulps quickly from her can of Diet Coke. She slams it on the bar. I can hear her quick breathing. She slouches over. I study her. I see nothing that connects her to my sister. She grinds out her cigarette and stands, paces to the screen door, back to the bar, back to the screen door where she yanks it open and walks through, leaving it open. I notice that Gil's cats have left claw marks up and down the screen and that our mother has allowed it. Things have gone to hell. There was a time when my father was alive when sails were folded and put away. They were laid on the lawn to dry in the sun, and meticulously folded into their bags. They tossed the extra sails last year because Gil had allowed rats to chew through the canvas bags and nest. My stomach is upset, not unusual for me lately.

"Dad would be furious about that screen," I say.

"Your father wouldn't be furious about anything," Mom says, "furious wasn't his way. Disapproving. That's a better word."

"GIL," Mary shouts, and laughs nervously, a false laughter. He has her in a headlock on the deck. He is balding. There is a roll of soft flesh over his belt, beneath his

tucked shirt. He lets her go, and she walks with arms limp at her side, shuffles inside. She opens the refrigerator. She closes it. She opens a drawer. Closes it. She opens a cupboard and she slams it shut. She pulls out another glass and sets it on the counter like the world is slippery and everything she touches has to be firmly knocked into place. Like a toddler. My mother settles into the cushions and unties the scarf around her neck. She drapes it over the arm of the couch. She has poured herself a gin and tonic in a mallard glass.

"John has decided this family's too much for him?" she asks, raising her drink. Gil is on the dock talking to Bill Mosher. I consider lying. No, that's not true. I consider omission.

"Work," I say. Mary slams the bathroom door.

"And you've made a decision?" She asks. This is amusing. This is sly. She has said it in such a way that belies the investment she has in my reproductive choices. It is what she has wanted to ask since I phoned her hours ago. I know her well enough to know that she has been imagining the female line. Mary slams her bedroom door. I sigh. She will sleep.

"No turning back, " I say knowing the risks for a woman my age, knowing what happens to eggs past their expiration date: Down's syndrome, Down's syndrome, Down's Syndrome.

"If you have an amnio, or chorionic villi," she says, naming a few tests, she's been boning up, "and if you find, well. If you know beforehand that the child is going to be, well." She looks out to the lake. She looks out there at the wind in dark patches at the surface, "abnormal, what choice then?"

"We haven't dared even to think about that," I lie. "What I *do* think about," I start, not knowing where this is going. "Is this strange thing. They've been revamping the school," I say and she snorts. I teach in a massive, rambling industrial nightmare bisected

with thick panes of broken glass, smokestacks revealing it as the old garment building it was. Five days and two nights I convince adults that this place is one that will give them, as they say in the brochures, 'the first step on the rung of the ladder of success.' Mother's seen it. She only refers to it as the shirt factory. As in, 'how are they progressing at the shirt factory?'

"The shirt-works?" she can't resist saying it.

"I've been obsessed with this nest outside my window. A pigeon's nest, eggs even. Here's the thing. Made entirely of scavenged metal. Strands of wire. And I keep going back and thinking, all that metal, on a ledge above a street."

"Is this some kind of metaphor?" She asks.

The apples in the orchard are the size of tennis balls, half of them rotted and dropping in circles around the trees. The deer come at dusk. We used to visit in fall and make apple pie. Mary would be the patient one, gathering perfect apples. When you sliced them open they were shocking in their whiteness.

When Mary wakes from her nap she is lined with marks from her pillow. Her pallor is what I imagine prisoners have. She sits at the same stool and taps out a cigarette. The motion is astounding. The quick tap of the pack against her wrist, the easy way it handles as one slim Marlboro glides out ahead of the rest. She plucks it with her fingers, and places it in her mouth. She reaches for the matches and strikes one, lifting the light to her cigarette. She cups her hand around the flame. It is a gesture as normal as anything I've seen. The hands, though raw-knuckled, belong to my sister. She takes one puff and grinds it out. Gil has gone to the Moshers' to discuss how to handle the caretaker. It seems he's been allowing the local hunters access to our land. We border Forest Service land on one side, and are the only two houses for miles to the dirt road. Our orchard has

become a trap. The stands are in the trees only if you look for them. The hunters claim that this land is like deer nirvana. They're so thick there's hardly any sport to it. No wait, no anticipation of the clean snap of underbrush. You hardly ever miss. You can see the rolling hills of orchard to where the land clears with berry bushes, what we called as children 'raspberry wilds.' You always come home with meat.

Mary paces. She breathes heavily. It occurs to me that we never solved the medication question. My mother has gotten up to put her glass in the dishwasher. Even she has given up on trying to preserve the ornithology of the tumblers.

"I'm hungry," Mary says.

"We have to wait for Gil, " I say, and then realize I've drawn attention to his absence, and wonder if it matters. My mother is walking outside, through the grass. She used to comb the nearest woods for huge pieces of fungus attached to trees. She would bring them home cradled in her arms and show us how to draw on them, carving into the dark brown skin, leaving white furrows in its flesh.

"Last week, on the ward, I went to the gynecologist's office," she says, matter-of-factly. She looks at me evenly. Challengingly.

"Uh, huh," I say, taking the mallard glass out of the dishwasher.

"I went to the gynecologists office and I had a dream," she says a little louder, opening drawers. She goes to the pantry, I can see her out of the corner of my eye.

"Where should we eat, Mare?" I say, moving to the sink where I begin to wash the glass by hand. I can see the Moshers' through the window, a hummingbird feeder hangs from the eaves.

"I had a dream." I believe at this moment, there isn't a single thing she has to say that I want to know.

"Did you say Red Lobster, Mare?" I ask and vow that this, this is it. This is the last time.

"A man's hands were inside my cunt and I HAD A DREAM." I turn to see that my mother is on the deck along the south wall, searching for the bird. She looks up at me and at Mary through the glass.

"Black men want to fuck you," Mary says, "and then you have an abortion." Her sentences are coming closer together. I walk slowly from the kitchen towards the living room and my mother seems frozen on the other side. She slipped up once and told me that the night my father died in his chair in the den he'd been reaching for nitroglycerin pills that weren't there. Mary had taken them. It was the closest she'd come to admitting fear.

"Abortion is a sin against GOD," she says, "AGAINST GOD." She sees my mother, standing on the other side of the glass. It's as if one or the other of them were at the zoo. There are bookshelves along one wall. The wall is panelled with weathered siding from an old barn my mother had liked. There are silver bowls won in sailboat races engraved with dates. There are old wooden decoys, an old green glass lantern from a fishing boat, a wooden horse carved all from one piece of wood by a relative visiting from Kentucky. There are vases Mary has made which snake and fall to one side. There are Petoskey stones, an old wooden radio polished to a high gloss--on a good night it picks up French Canadian stations. Behind me, through the north wall, I can see Gil coming across the path from the Moshers'.

"AGAINST GOD I was in the gynecologist's office and I was fucked by God." Her breathing comes quickly and her skin seems almost green. Strands of hair are pasted to her forehead with sweat. I am still holding the dishtowel. I can feel every weave of the linen between my fingers. There are rivulets of sweat sliding down along my ribs. My mother doesn't seem to move. I hear the creak of the screen door in the kitchen. A breeze picks up off of the lake and blows through the sliding screen doors, lifting my mother's scarf slightly from the arm of the chair. In one fluid movement Mary throws herself at my

mother. She stops short of the glass, taps it with both of her palms flat against it. Gil is behind her. He has his arm on her shoulder. He has a prescription bottle in his pocket.

My mother smooths her hair, coming in through the side door. "No sign of the bird," she says.

We make reservations at the Pier. Mary has changed into another pantsuit. My mother has chosen a red shift that reaches nearly to her ankles. Gil drives with my mother beside him, up the driveway. It is nearly dark and I imagine the shine of the headlights catching in dozens of pairs of hidden eyes. "What a fine looking family," my mother says, "what a blessing that you've come."

Missoula 9:11 p.m.

Your telephone call finds me in a valley cut by rivers, six months after I left you in Tucumcari with a bucket full of roasted hatch chiles steaming off their own skins. This, a town sliced open, strapped to the land, blued in the moonlight. A place for gutting deer, blood and fat catching the night's light and the thick curve of a broad blade. I tell you that here, in winter, cow tracks pressed into the mud are rimmed with frozen thaw water and constant winds push between the metal silos. They clamor, like the patients' voices on the ward each time my mother called, across the fields of broken drifts like ice floes. I choose these places. I raced a freight train into the Missoula valley, the graffitied boxcar against the lodgepole pines. Boxcars marked in Portland, Maine [where you didn't take the picture of us on the cobblestone streets on the wharf that I hoped you would, in the silence after rain, twelve steps from a bar where sailors, in cotton stiff with salt, laid knives against one another's throats a hundred years ago], Buffalo, Detroit [where I left a tattered version of my mother walking her neighbors' Airedales and washing dishes part-time], Milwaukee and Minneapolis where the Grain Belt Beer sign moves against the downtown sky like a headache. The places I favor are the inhospitable, the bitter, the drained. Daughter of the murdered, the alcoholic, the bloodied, the insane. What words could you have told me then that convinced me of living.

Knee-deep in a garden pulling thick cords of asparagus, sandy green running to white at the bottom, harvesting with a clean wide stroke I could fill a basket in the time that it took you to notice I'd gone and call for me through the screen door. Let you be coherent I thought. Let it be a day with synapses like firework displays, afterimages that play against your closed eyes. We lived in places with blackberry brambles as high as your waist,

where blackbirds settled in trees like visiting gods, murders of crows lifting from the amputated elms, orange-ringed and marked for execution. In 1979 the Skyway Theater downtown had its plush seats pulled from their roots by a late-August tornado, the sky the color of your worst bruises the day before strangers stop noticing. You fuckfuckfucking bitch you said. You whore. Spread your legs for them all, chanting in a rising latin tone you could have been in mass, the guttering of candles, I imagined stained glass in blood purple, red and high, rising blue, wedged between cold sweating stones, and your voice rising in my ears like an aquifer of blood tapped by hand-dug wells, pumped with derricks, rerouted, dammed, partitioned and parceled off, spread across the country from Maine to Minnesota to Missoula, irrigating, salinated and saturated, poisoned and useless.

You call and I hold the telephone like a weapon.

The morning before your call, Missoula. Hellgate Canyon. The riverbeds are littered with million year-old stones that my friend claims dinosaurs used to hold in their throats for digestion. I roll them between her fingers, color of Arizona sandstone, size of tiny Montana plums that fit in the depression of your palm. I will believe anything.

He is of Penobscot bays and red mottled lobster flesh, and Russian fishing boats docked out in Camden Harbor, his smile knotted across his face and settled in the bottom of his eyes like dirt in a water glass. He is of asparagus patches and thorn ripped seams traversing our legs like secondary roads on maps, the remotest ones that led us to the washed out gullies, the abandoned quarries with rusted metal cords winding underwater like lightbulb filaments, the hollows filled with trash.

Mass, velocity, density, mass chaos, critical mass, weapons of mass destruction, the masses.

There is no reclamation, no salvaging of ruined lands. I know that's why you've called. The clarities, the hospital garden, the oranges dropped in Christmas stockings. The fish dinners with sea-shells trapped under glass tabletops, your first sharp words of love, honed by all those days on the bay bringing nets up empty. As if I'd take you back when you remind me of being ankle-deep in water-cress, in moments before I could trace your rages like the trajectory of stars, the genesis of us in Owls Head, on the Vinylhaven mail ferry, upper lips crusted with salt. I suckled you like a newborn and you grew bloated, and heavy like a spoiled child, dropping from my breast like overripe fruit from a branch. When you dropped to the ground I split open, weeping through seams. And don't I remember, you ask, how you traced my vertebrae pretending it to be the spine of a continent, Chilean, curving in upon myself? Mining the land, razing the forests, slaughtering the cattle for export. Claiming territory these days is considered an act of imperialism, punishable by death.

My divining rod led me here, to arid space, tap a fork against my head, put a forked stick in my hands. Canada geese, you say, are splayed across the Minnesota sky in formations that remind you of my fingers holding a cigarette. Been a dry season without a kill you say. Every season in Missoula is dry. Ask me if I recall the regulations: consider possible drag routes before shooting, adrenaline makes the meat gamey, a poor shot can damage a good cut, rupture intestines and stomach. Shoot a standing animal in the heart or neck. Nudge animal with your foot, gently touch your gun barrel to its eye. Any reaction shoot it in the head or the heart. Hang your deer by the hind legs for up to ten days.

In Missoula the water pulls through the canyon, churning through silt and ancient bones. This morning I saw a dead deer laid out by a circle of flowers beneath the underpass. Not swollen like steer we'd seen caught in barbed wire in New Mexico. Winters in Missoula bring blizzards that freeze cattle to the ground, huddled against fences in clusters for warmth.

Crossing the bridge in the full moon my hands feel greasy with the blood of an imagined butchering. A single light in this town's only highrise blocks across the sky like lighthouse beams. Years ago on Pemaquid Point I tore the soles of my feet open on barnacles beneath the lighthouse. You held one foot in your hand to stanch the blood. You told me I had never looked so beautiful. A call in Missoula, and the moon's light across the ridge gleams like an exposed bone.

Your voice smacks of transubstantiation. I remember the smell of dry cold snow winter against your clothes, how you tell me I smell like a gun, like steel and cordite. Flesh of my flesh. Take this body. I think of wet dark blued moon of nights, asparagus patches and raspberry bushes. The awkward light of thunderstorms, the half circles of pink on your fingernails. You come to me and every time it is the chaotic silence after rain, in sepulchral tones you lift your voice to me. I wake with building block church stones wet and heavy on my chest, room filled with shards of shattered stained glass like the last pieces of color in the world.

Pure Love

The minute my wife stepped out of the car in front of the vet's I locked her out. Locked her out just like that. Janie's on my lap and she's heavy, not like she used to be, but still big for a Labrador. Her rib cage contracts and expands a little more quickly than it has been. She's in the car. She knows something's up. Her brown muzzle is flecked with gray and her coat's losing its winter thickness. She nestles her head in my armpit. Carol walks towards the entrance, her sweater is unravelling at the cuff and she keeps grabbing the loose threads of wool with her hand. I want her hand in mine, a crushing want to have my wife put her hand in mine, reach for me to balance her, stepping out wet and dripping from the lake. The hands are immediately identifiable, long fingers and the nail beds, squared off nails, rough with sun. I've seen them holding sunfish rudders, curled around stems of glasses on decks, beneath wind chimes when she stood so close to me I felt a day of sun rising from her skin. Sun turned my hands into that of a farmer's son, her's into those of sailors, golfers. Janie moves her head, though I've reclined the seat so she can lie down against me, she touches her nose against my cheek, rumbles in her throat a little. When she could stand she would lean against me in the kitchen, in line for bagels outside Lucille's, on the porch. Pure love I might have said at some point. Animals are pure love. My heart is pounding in my ears, the sharp-edged tulips cutting through the dirt against the side of the building. Crows settle in the bare branches of an elm, split by our last big storm, but Janie doesn't notice. We ran for the last time the morning after that storm. I run slower since the first time her hips gave out. I attempted to sing all of the words of Bruce Springsteen's "Nebraska" which kept my strides slow, and even and long. In my head we are heading for tall grass and grouse season and the flat, hot baked gold of September and not the bitch of a cold April. My left knee twinged and I imagined ligament

tearing and my leg jointless and dangling and outrageous medical bills and a ticket to middle age. And I hated myself for a few minutes. Hated myself, hated my wife, hated whatever keeps us here in a place that has no goddamned mercy. If I were a better person I'd have seen some kind of beauty. Ice coating every branch. There is a sharp ache that I can't swallow past. Clouds are breaking apart in thin strands above us.

On canoe trips Janie'd bark at a herons and startle deer. I would point out the plants along the shore. A farmer's son, I can recognize switchgrass and timothy, and what looked like prairie indigo. Janie leapt from the canoe after something, her chin hitting the water, the heron lifting in slow motion off of the bank, its legs dangling behind. We'd watched hundreds of snowy egrets lift from Lake of the Isles, rising like fog. I promised Carol we'd watch the Sandhill crane migrations in the river flats of the Nebraska plains, and I'd make love to her as the sky darkened with the sounds of thousands of pairs of winds lifting from soft river mud.

In the garden at home I'd say wild carrot, locoweed, shooting stars and sweet peas and shatter cane, all of them opportunistic and need to be torn up. Carol would pull them up and pile them with clods of dirt still clinging to their roots. My wife pulls her purse up on her shoulder and one hand reaches for the door. I want to honk the horn, do something to make her stop, but I don't. She walks one foot in front of the other and keeps pulling at her cuff. She used to leave notes stuck on things in the refrigerator, in my shoes, underneath a bunch of bananas in the kitchen. "You drive me you know where"... "love you from your head to your toes." She wanted the kitchen a kind of dusty green, and cupboards without doors.

At night I've taken to coming home and lying next to Janie on the kitchen floor. She flattens herself against the tile. Often she lies so that her nose nearly touches the leg of the kitchen's table. I join her, still in my suit, feeling her warmth. Her hips have gone frozen and her back legs drag, I help Janie over to the fridge, and feed her salami by hand

out of white butcher's paper. I pick her up then and we sit on the back porch and look out into the garden at night. Carol's tomato plants spindly with what I can imagine are tiny green tomatoes, the even rows and dark turned dirt. I can usually hear the neighbors' conversation across the alley, someone laughing and opening a sliding door. I plot what I could do for her garden, improve the soil, maybe lie tile to retain moisture. I imagine my father on the seat of his tractor, his fingers moving back to a soft, fresh scar running up his arm where he'd slashed himself with a castrating knife. He'd been sawing through some plastic irrigation pipe and laid his arm open. He didn't want to worry my mother, or bleed all over her kitchen so he sat still while the farmhands called for an air-lift to Eau Claire. I guess at the time I thought I couldn't ever be like him. We were different, the two of us. My father never could understand a girl like Carol. I imagine monster zucchini, red huge shiny globes of tomatoes, carrots as thick as baseball bats. State fair vegetables piled high and shiny with little cards next to them: 25 lbs. 6 oz. Ridiculous I know, to think she'd love me again through prizewinning beets. On those nights when she's god knows where, in the dark garden I can hear everything, the cars on the avenue, planes coming in from wherever bound for somewhere else, sirens, even the slight wind through the leaves. On those nights I guess I'm waiting for some sign.

Janie's breath is labored and she won't take the salami. It's time, you know it's time, Carol said this morning when Janie couldn't lift her head and her kidneys failed her. Janie sat in the kitchen and tried to walk to me, her back legs dragging and her head bowed. It's time my wife said, you know it's time.

My wife has come back out and is knocking at the window. A tap at first, politely with her nails, then her knuckles. Now she's pounding on the window with the heel of her hand. Janie doesn't seem to notice and I stroke her head and her rib cage rises and falls, she snorts, catches, shudders. I can smell the steely smell of her, and though I know it

can't be true, I'm sure she's been to the riverbank. She's been to the river bank and slid down the red clay and grasses, her nails sinking into the mud before she hits the current. She's come home smelling of river water and run through the neighbor's yard, underneath their drying sheets. I put my head against the back of her neck, and I hold on.

# The Way Home

He had thought of her as he handed out skates at the rink, as he watched the figure skating lessons where an eight-year old blonde in a blue norwegian print sweater pirouetted, blurring kicking up soft cold shavings of ice around her small white skates. Other students marked off their sections of the ice where they waited. The small girl stopped and wobbled on the ice, her arms circling as if she were on the edge of a cliff. He could see her frown as she watched the instructor do a pirouette and she skated around in a small circle. That is what Chris must have looked like-- tightly braided, clean and matching, smiling for approval. He tried to remember if there was going to be a good game when he got home. If so, he and Chris would order a pizza and sit on the floor and she could read, and he would put his head on her lap. Most of the time he thought that this was pretty much all life was about, but then sometimes he seemed too young to have found all the answers. It made him suspicious that there might be some other life out there. He pictured it like a model house on the subdivision lot, sparkling and without history, bordered by newly poured concrete and sod rolled out like red carpet just waiting for him to walk on in.

"When was the last time you were really happy?" Jack had asked him the night before.

" Like happy, happy? I don't know, last few months in Maine maybe. What's that mean anyway."

"The way you feel when you slip a good shot past me at the rink. That perfect moment where all you can focus on is the muscles in your arm, and that goal." Jack laughed licking the salt from between his thumb and first knuckle.

Pete had leaned back in his chair. He could see Bennet the bartender pouring draft. Someone had selected "Melissa" for the third time, and a woman who had been leaning over to make a shot into the corner pocket straightened up and started dancing by herself to the song, cue in one hand, the other moving slowly to her hair. Smoke rose to the rafters in layers and Pete just knew he wanted another drink. It happened that way sometimes. He'd swear he'd have just one, but the smoke, the click of the pool balls, Bennet nodding his head in their direction, the old music, the feeling that somehow that moment was all he'd ever have. It was a rising joy. Exhilaration. A crisp morning where your breath freezes in your lungs and there is a dusting of snow like flour over the ice of the lake, lacing your skates by the heater of the car, and stepping out in the February dawn with the old street lamps just turning off, kitchen lights just coming on, sliding out with the contraction of muscles hearing the scrape against the ice and being all alone in the cold silent morning where nothing else mattered.

"Happy happy?" asked Jack who lifted one eyebrow and stood up to show the young dancing woman a thing or two about pool.

"Happy happy."

June. They had been driving along Maine's Route One next to the ocean and it had been slightly foggy, the mist had curled the hair around her face. She had her hand out of the window of the truck thumping in tune to the song on the radio. Roses were blooming alongside the gray shingled cottages and sand was blowing across the road. It was like something out of a Wyeth painting. Cottages interiors distorted from the uneven thickness

of the old panes. Like those Helga paintings, a woman staring out and he could see clear through the bare room with red geraniums, and shells on window sills to the ocean. He'd thought about Wyeth's sketches of lobster boats, and beached dinghies and weathered salt boxes on top of hills of waving summer grass. Maine: bare stark beauty, black ice, mud season, and absolute loving desolation.

It had been at a Wyeth show last Spring when he decided she had to come home with him. He stood in front of a painting of an empty bed and a sandy floor. She had to see Maine. Her footsteps click clacked on the marble off into the next room and he stood before his home. He wanted to call after her to say, here it is, here's where I come from. "After Blueberry Picking." Wyeth's wife Betsey asleep in a field drained from sun and blueberry picking -- a carton of blueberries, a coffee cup, binoculars, and their yellow lab rattler sleepy-eyed, surfacing above the summer wheat. When interviewed Wyeth said he just caught this perfect moment -- her asleep as thunder sounded and the dog behind her raised its head. Stark fields, and bare boards, and lobster traps and a yellow thundering sky. Pete wanted to love someone enough to record a moment in their life forever, stretched under an approaching storm. He thought of the Russian fishing ship docked way out in Camden harbor, how Chris could be eating a veggie sandwich wrapped in wax paper standing under the statue of Edna St. Vincent Millay, and he would motion her over, her hair blowing, and he would point out the ship, hardly the size of a stamp on the horizon and he would laugh and tell her how he used to trade cartons of Marlboro's for vodka.

They spent the rest of the spring in Denver living together and spent the summer in Maine.

June. They drove. He'd been taking swigs out of the beer bottle he'd been holding between his legs, and when he'd come up over a rise he'd seen a huge black spot in the road. He'd pulled over, crunching on gravel, walking barefoot on pebbles and sand. A turtle was trying to make it back to the beach. He'd placed his fingers along the back of its shell, larger than his two hands spread across, and looked back to her as he picked the turtle up out of harm's way. She had smiled at him, and as he set the turtle down its jaws had whipped towards his fingers in a loud cracking snap. Back in the truck he'd wiped the sand off of the bottom of his feet and she'd kissed him hard on the soft skin between his earlobe and his jaw.

She'd said, "Timing's a funny thing. What if we'd just gone right on by, we could have killed that big old thing or if not us, then the next people. A tiny thing like that."

"Notice how grateful she was," he'd said, "tried to take the first two fingers on my hand." But he had smiled and felt good to be next to her in the damp summer evening, the waves, the sand blowing across the road.

It became a symbol of the summer. Timing's a funny thing he'd say to her in the morning as they set up shop. They spent the summer working for his stepfather at the Pawn Shop. It was actually referred to as "Old Mill Mall," antiques, jewelry, guns, table saws, leather jackets, used CD's, tackle, old traps, clamming shovels, and v.c.r.'s, tvs, building after building of things taken in lieu of a "loan." The buildings sat on an island of cracked tarmac where weeds struggled through here and there, and daisies grew in the ditches. There was a coin-operated car vacuum standing by itself, and coin-operated dispensers that spit out shammies and turtle-wax. Makes money, Dennis said. Not like the bookstore that ran for one summer, carrying sun-faded copies of old mass-markets nobody wanted-- it was storage now; not like the ice cream shop that still bore the sign and the scratched enamel freezers behind the boarded-up window. In the morning Chris would set

up the old plywood on top of the saw horses, and arrange the table saws, and chain saws, and tools, the large white price tags flapping in the wind. Pete would come in later with Dennis and see her lining up the saws by size, and color as his mother stood on top of the three cement steps to the shop in her tight jeans, and new perm, and heavy eyeliner, smoking. Chris would see the Bronco coming and run her fingers through her thick trimmed hair. "Timing's a funny thing," she'd say. "I was hoping you'd save me." Before then she'd told him, she'd never even been in a pawn shop. He handed her a polishing cloth and she opened the glass display case and stood looking at the handguns. She didn't want to touch them-- he could tell by the way she shifted her weight from foot to foot, slightly extending her hand as if reaching for something that might bite. He wanted her to touch them. He smiled at her as she held the butt of one, faux pearl-handled and black. It's so heavy, she said, palm out. She put it back in the case and quietly shut the door, locking it. She moved on to polish the jewelry. Each night before closing she would polish the rifles before they went back into the vault, her dust cloth circling the polished wood, and she would go outside to bring the handsaws in. He tried to stay out of the house if he could, if he couldn't he would lead Chris to his bedroom, past the dusty boxes, and old clothes, and animals scratching in and out, and they would lie on the bed and try to tune in something on the tv. The bedspread smelled like cat piss, and when he looked to the ceiling he saw that they had never finished putting panelling in his room, and that the silver backing of insulation was showing through. The first evening of their stay she came back from the bathroom hugging her clothes to her chest, her nightgown to her knees. Her face was pink and flushed from the shower. She smelled clean. In the big room he could hear Dennis yelling. Chris looked at him. She pulled on her robe and they walked, picking through the strewn boxes, and lowering their heads through the narrow doorways. Pete's bedroom was an addition to the original one room and loft, as was the living room.

From what had originally been the back door of the kitchen you stepped down into the living room with its vaulted unfinished ceiling and ceiling fan above a padded vinyl brown covered hot-tub. The hot tub was stuck in the middle of the unfinished floor, boxes all around like a storeroom, sitting there like it was waiting to be delivered. Plank boards were fastened to the walls to approximate a library for all the books they never sold at the failed bookstore. Dennis was playing Pavarotti loudly on the CD player in the back of the room. He held a beer mug filled with whiskey and he was in his underwear. He ruffled through his wallet next to him and pulled out a twenty and offered it to Chris, who stood there shifting from the balls of her feet, to her heels, in her clean white nightgown with her well-scrubbed face. Richest Man in Babylon, he said. If there's one book to read that's the one. How to make money and keep it. Pete here knows it by heart, he said raising the beer mug to his lips. Don't forget it, The Richest Man in Babylon. Chris looked to Pete who stood behind Dennis's chair, take the money, he mouthed, nodding like a horse trying to loosen its reins, take the money. Chris looked at the glass jar of nuts below Dennis' clutched fist, and to the way Pete's mother smiled as she arched her wrist and held her cigarette, its ash growing longer and longer, flaking onto the cushion next to her. Inhale, exhale, clink of ice-cubes, laugh. You are nowhere in this world if you don't have money. Remember that. He called for his wife. Jackie, he yelled, Jackie he yelled louder. Get me a drink. Nowhere, remember that. He held the twenty toward her. It's the way Dennis shows his love, Pete told her later. Pete kissed his mother goodnight and led Chris back to his room. The house got quiet, Pavarotti got turned off, and he could hear his mother and Dennis climb the loft's ladder to their room. He and Chris walked quietly into the big room, lit only by the nighttime light coming in from the sliding glass door fogged with smoke. He pulled the cover off the hot tub, and slid in, activating the jets. She pulled her nightgown over her head, and gingerly climbed to the hot tub. He felt his hands in the

warm water slip over her body, lost in both. From upstairs they could both hear the tv playing an x-rated film. Back in his bedroom Chris stood against him at the end of his bed, her wet hair dripping in long cords down her back, in nothing but her underwear. He gripped her shoulders tightly, and felt her move closer next to him. What do you want, what do you want, he whispered. He twisted her around and put his hand over her mouth and whispered into her ear, her hair wet against his chest. This what you want, is it, huh? He threw her onto the bed. Timing's a funny thing.

As the summer wore on she polished the guns. She could hold them in her hand and polish every inch now. She picked up the faux-pearl handled gun, and stuck her finger near the trigger. She braced her right wrist with her left hand and brought the gun up to her line of vision in her best Charlie's Angels pose. Bang. Bang. She winked at him. Who ever would have thought, he'd said on their last night there. You in a pawn shop. She didn't look back as they pulled away from the shop, daisies and black-eyed susans lining the ditches waving with the wind of highway traffic.

The last night in August they'd flown back West.

Pete had finished his gin and tonic. Chris sucked on her ice cube with its hollowed out middle so you wouldn't choke her mother had always said. The ding of the fasten seat belt sign came on as they began their descent into Denver. Pete looked down to the scattered lights on the plains, merging closer and closer to one another and he looked to the darkness and wished he could see the mountains. The planes wheels hit the runway and he looked to Chris as she rested her head on the back of her seat, and looked out the small window, smiling.

He'd been exhausted enough to sleep with his clothes on, and she'd stayed awake reading. She had slipped off his boots, and taken off his belt and laid a quilt over him. She had nudged him awake sometime later, the room lighted only by the light of street lights on the avenue, and the moving headlights of passing cars. She lay there, taking shallow breaths.

"What?" he'd opened his eyes moving onto his stomach. The sheets smelled like bleach. He'd felt like he could feel grains of sand. He'd shifted his toe to stoke her calf. She didn't move.

"Honey?" Above them voices had raised and lowered and raised again.

"Can you hear that."

"What?"

"That." She said nodding to the ceiling.

He listened. He couldn't hear the words. He could hear the tone. His mother always said he had an animal's hearing. She claimed that when he was on the ice that she could yell to him and whistle with her two fingers and he would lift his head. She claimed that he could hear her above the blades on the ice, the wood against wood of the stick, the rattle of plexiglass, the slam of a body against the boards.

"Not really. I can hear something like an argument or something. What? Man, you're all wound up. Just close your eyes."

They breathed next to one another listening to the volley back and forth. His stomach had started to tighten. Something large hit the ground.

"What was that?"

"What, are you scared? Come here you scare-dy cat," he'd said sliding his arm underneath her. She'd pulled away.

"No. Jesus. I guess I'm just jazzed from the flight." She'd flipped the switch next to the bed and picked up her book from the table.

He'd closed his eyes against the light. He'd rolled over onto his back. Stomach. Back. Stomach. The memory had been creeping in with its smell of carpets that needed a good cleaning, its smoke-filtered light: *Fuck you, whatdoyoumean fuck you. Shhh. You're going to wake Pete. You shoulda thought that before you bitch oh yeah, bang letgo, fucking cunt where'd you go when I was gone huh bang get the fuck up.* silence crying inhaling of breath and mucus door bang footsteps bang of the screen door, engine tried once twice in the swirling snow *ohgodohgod just let it catch* and the engine in the night the low even pitch of crying in the kitchen, the wall cold against his back. A thump, a scream, a shuffle of footsteps. In the winter it would get so cold that the blankets on his bed would freeze to the wall. No more cold for me he'd told his friends when he said he was leaving for the West. Heading for a place where the sun shines more than Florida, and hard snow moves lightly past you, not sinking deeply into you. Before his mother married Dennis, when his father was around and Pete was closer to adulthood than childhood he would leave the house behind him, screen door slamming closed in the brittle night. He would drive to the pond, and lace up his skates his fingers stiff with cold. He would skate, his legs pushing out, bent slightly forward his scarf freezing with the condensation of his breath. He would cross-over, and feel the cold sink deeply into him, the stars overhead in the black night spilling across the sky. His eyes would tear, and he would skate, his parents voices distant next to the sound of his strides against the ice, his even breath.

He had looked to the ceiling and thought how strange it was to be able to trace two stranger's movements from room to room. He'd imagined he could feel the wall shake. Chris had looked at him.

"What? What do you want me to do?" he'd said. "Go back to sleep, I'm sure it's OK. Someone's just had a few too many. Hon?"

"Yeah," she'd said, looking at him over her book.

"Nothing" he rolled onto his stomach pulling the pillow over his head.

"What, just tell me." A car passed its bass reverberating in a steady beat.

"Nothing."

"What?"

"Do you know where my mouth guard is?"

She had raised her book and remained silent.

A few nights later he woke to Chris sitting on the edge of the bed, looking at the phone, listening to the banging upstairs escalate into a wailing--high-pitched and unchecked like a dog he and Chris had stumbled across hiking. They'd come to a part where the trail evened out and curved above houses with the first stars of the evening above the trees, gates below clinking closed, mothers calling in children. They had stopped and he had put his broad hands on her hips and held her a moment. He could smell her salty sweat, shampoo and facial soap. Further along the trail sat a dog, just beyond where paramedics were gathered around its fallen owner. Over and over the dog lifted its head, and howled. Pete felt the hairs on his arm stiffen. He'd gone first as the light faded from the canyon. He remembered this listening to footfalls, and the slamming of doors, footsteps down the stairs, and the catch of an engine starting.

"How can you just sleep? How can you do that?" she'd asked as he rolled over.

He just looked at her.

"How can you roll over like it's just traffic noise? For Christ's sake, Pete." She edged out of bed, pulling her hands through her hair, and walked into the bathroom,

switching the light on, leaving the door ajar. "That just fucking gets to me when you turn off like that. What are you thinking?" He could hear the stream of water against water.

He thought of Chris's wet hair against his chest, her warm naked body in the light of the hot tub, bands of light rippling across her stomach, his fingers in the soft flesh of her shoulders, *what do you want*, her pulling away from the hand across her mouth, jerking from his voice at the hollow of her neck, over her with his hand across her mouth, her hair dark with water, her eyes tightly closed. Bang, bang she laughed and he thought of silent night-time ice. What he said was:

"I have to be thinking every minute? I tell you what I'm thinking, it's never what you want to hear. What the score of the game was, if I can get ice time tomorrow, I need to clip my toenails. It's nothing shattering." The roll of toilet paper.

"You know how sick I am of asking? Asking and asking and getting nothing, nothing, nothing. Jack shit, no one home. You know I talk to you and half the time you haven't heard a word that I've said."

"When there's something to say, I say it." Toilet flushing.

"Then say something."

"Don't do this."

"What?" She crawled into bed, rolling away from him, her back a ridged silhouette.

"This martyr thing," he'd said, "this poor me, no one listens to Chris, no one cares about poor Chris." He heard her sniffing in the dark. After a time he got up, dragging the quilt with him, and slept the rest of the night in the other room.

Last night he'd returned home from the Dark Horse and tried to sleep. He heard the screaming begin upstairs. He could feel Chris stirring next to him. She had moved towards him and pressed her body against his and he had kept his eyes closed. His heartbeat wah-whum, wah-whum thudding. Chris was awake he could tell. She rolled

over. She tugged on the sheet and uncovered his feet. She put a hand on his shoulder. Wah-whum, wah-whum. He opened his eyes to Chris tearing the covers off of the bed, slipping into her sneakers, stepping on the back of the heels, her hair knotted and her breathing quick, her nightgown fluttering wildly around her. She'd picked up the bat he kept in the corner with his sticks, and she'd slammed out the bedroom and out the front door. She'd made it up the stairs before he'd pulled his pants on. There was a break in the noise upstairs as he heard a banging on the upstairs door. Now she'd be asking if everything was o.k., if she should call the police.

He'd stood there holding the buttons of his pants he couldn't hear the reply. Wah-whum *Just open the door champ. Wah whum .On the concrete framed by glass edged with icemelting with the heat of his palm swaying banging wah-whum clatter of the plastic phone and the old rotary dial scratch clickclicklik, scratch clickclicklik, pound, wah-whum, come on champ, scratchclickclicklik youfuckinggoddamnwhoreyoubetterfucking prayldon'tget in bangbangbang*

He'd heard footsteps toward what he imagined was the door where she stood on the other side. He'd felt like he was eavesdropping. He'd felt frozen in one place. "Who the fuck do you think you are," Chris was screaming in a voice that seemed much louder and deeper than could possibly belong to her. The bat splintered something, "Stay the fuck away from me," he could hear her say in a voice so calm it unnerved him. She had glared at him as he stood at the bottom of the stairs watching her walk down breathing raggedly and close to tears. "Nobody deserves that," she'd said, "nobody deserves that."

He walked towards home, towards Chris through the quiet streets of arching trees, blazing sky and houses filled with tiled kitchens, quiet foyers, and lit living rooms.

He dropped his bag in the living room and turned off the lights Chris had left on for him. He pushed open the bedroom door her asleep, curled on her side.

He climbed into bed and felt the warmth of Chris's body next to his. He tucked his knees up behind hers. He reached beneath her soft cotton nightgown and cupped the relaxed flesh of her stomach. He tried to even his breath with hers. He stayed awake listening to the traffic on the street and to the footsteps moving from room to room above him. Somewhere, he thought, there's still water and a house light on. Somewhere clean and warm where dinner is cooking.

Premature

### **The Pictures Behind the Pictures**

My parents met in a bar in Florida beach town. There are pictures of the first night that they met.

I've come across the scattered square black and white photographs stuck in behind color photos of my fifth birthday party. We were in Illinois then, in the town that invented barbed wire. The streets were wide and sectioned off by fast-food parlors and laundromats, cornfields in rows to the vanishing points towards the highway, towards Chicago. In the pictures I'm wearing a rainbow halter dress, my white hair in a ponytail, tanned and blindfolded, swinging at a Woodstock pinata -- my parents on either corner of the picture separated by a least six little party guests. We are all beautiful and no one knows anything different. For the moment before I notice the old square polaroids behind, I study my birthday party. You can see the square cinderblocks of Suburban Apartments. My mother is in a white pantsuit, one hand securing her hair caught in the wind. I am about to swing the huge yellow plastic bat, and I will swing too low so my father will eventually have to lower it right to my level. The grass is trimmed and Junegreen. I want to put my hand on that little girl's shoulders, take her blindfold off, pick her up on my hip and whisk her far away from there. Behind that are the pictures of my father.

He stands behind a dark wood bar in a white shirt, and narrow black tie, and black jacket. His hair's slicked back and sideburns are long. He's caught with a drink in his hand, the man next to him frozen in a motion where he looks as if he were about to clap my father on the shoulder. There are a few of these photographs, in a bar where there seems to be nothing besides my father, a dark bar, a drink and some unnamed man with a fringe of crew cut. I can hear the low conversation of the bar, and the clink of glass, and the creak

of bar stools, the scrape of chairs against the wood. He'll meet my mother that night. He's married. She's fled, pregnant, from her life in Michigan. She'll try to drown herself in the surf. He's an alcoholic but she doesn't know the signs.

He'll hit her for the first time after they've been married three years and living in De Kalb. It will be Christmas Break and the Business Professor and his pretty blonde wife will travel to see his sons in Florida. He'll be gone for three hours getting cigarettes in a town just outside of the Florida state line. She's just explained that she's pregnant with his child. She has no car keys. She's not at home. There are no closets to hide in when he comes home drunk, no footlockers to squeeze behind. The motel has a flowered earth tone bedspread and cheap mass-produced art you'd find on sympathy cards. Waves breaking. Gulls. Pelicans on wood posts. This is the true beginning.

That first night though, he pulls her from the surf. She's drunk and twenty-four.

In my mother's lap, on the bentwood rocker and she told me my father had died. An accident she said. A lie. I learned the truth later from a newspaper article stuffed between my mother's mattress and box spring. But that day she held on to me and rocked. She held on to me and the world dropped away. She cried at night and I crawled into bed to make it OK. I was her own. I was her own. I was the one thing that ever went right.

### **Gemini in Cancer**

My mother goes on and on about the day of my birth.

My little miracle she calls me. My tiny little miracle. Mom tells me the story of my birth and how the doctors shot her up with alcohol to try to stop the labor. She's talked about it:

The room is bare and she's staring up at the acoustic tiles. She is getting drunk. The edges of her vision begin to blur. It smells like ammonia and there are no walls plastered with posters of bluebells spilling out of canyons. She has lost one child already, years ago in a Florida hospital. Twenty-four and unmarried and she never saw its death certificate. A friend she met in a bar bought her a second-hand ring in a shop on the main street. He introduced her to the landlord of her new apartment as the wife of his best friend, an Air Force pilot. No unmarried women here, the landlord said. Saw a woman from Sarasota the other day, don't know how she can live like that. What a nice young man you are to help out a friend. Bright and shining star, the landlord's wife had said.

I want to help you the man had said in the bar. She'd been in Florida for a month. She was in a bar with her friend Gerry, surrounded by broad young men with flat white teeth and military cuts. There. At the bar, second from the end. Older. Safer. Holding a green bottle underneath the brown thatched roof above the section of bar. What would you say if I told you that I'm not what I seem, she'd said half-drunk. What if I told you that I'm pregnant and want to die. She'd walked herself into the ocean as the tide came in, seaweed wrapped around her ankles, beach tar on the bottom of her feet. He put both of his arms beneath her armpits like a lifeguard and dragged her out of the water. She knelt in the wet sand and vomited salt water, Vodka, a handful of peanuts and Cuban food. I'd tell you that I'd do anything I could to help he'd said. I'd tell you I'm your friend.

She lived on canned food and plastered her walls with old New Yorker covers. Her water broke when she was across the hall at a neighbors' borrowing sugar. If she could have called her mother in Michigan she could have told her what to expect. Her

mother would be up at the cottage, playing golf or on the lake in the middle of sailboat faces.

## Greece, Spain

### *Her Hair*

*I think of my mother in Greece.*

*How lengths of her long hair were tucked into a wig, a cap of strands swept and blond to her cheekbones,  
fine whorls of white at the nape of her neck*

*the only hint of hiding.*

*In square-toed soft leather heels she balances on the wharf's uneven cobblestones*

*over bits of seaweed and crushed mussel shell caught*

*in the sea-water that edges through crevices*

*up and around the stones like the steel ball that she manoeuvred as a child,*

*the wooden box in her lap,*

*tilting the labyrinth with the knobs she held between her thumb and forefinger,*

*avoiding the wrong turns that dropped the ball*

*with the thock of metal to the empty space beneath the surface.*

*I see her fine silhouette paused to watch the men in blue and white with braided caps*

*drag heavy hand-knit nets to shore behind them*

*standing next to one another*

*staggered like men*

*flushing a field for game, or walking head-down*

*through thigh-high grass*

*scouring for a body*

*And the man she's with tells her not to watch*

*not to shame them because the*

*nets they pull behind are empty.*

*I believe she looked down*

*to the stones and slipped her feet from her shoes*

*the waters seeping through the nylon mesh,*

*that she peeled the wig back from her scalp and let her hair uncoil*

*That she looked up to the men and waded towards them,*

*the sea already*

*to her ankles*

*when the first man finally had to look at her streaming toward him*

*and look away.*

My mother wears a leopard skin coat by the Parthenon. Smiling in a short wig and short skirt in the back alleys of Spain in the middle of the World Cup. Spanish men with red scarves and hats, encircling her as she tried to remember how to say, "go away" and could only come up with cowboy slang from her youth of Roy Rogers films -- vamoose, vaminos, come on. Her own mother with her black alligator shoes and bag and kelly green Chanel suit snapping pictures. Men hanging off of iron balconies from dark stone buildings, the alley twisting to curves beyond her nervous smile and hands slightly extended, fingers spread, palms out, head slightly bent to the side.

I always think I can hear her high heels on the cobblestones, the click of the shutter, and the laughing of the men. It's the same trip they spent on the Costa Del Sol in some hideaway of the jet set and almost met King Hussein. Someone famous wanted to marry my grandmother, who was all of maybe forty-eight at the time. My mother laughs and says, "and I looked at my mother and couldn't understand what these men were thinking, didn't they know she was old?" She laughs and exhales cigarette smoke, and taps the ash, and pulls one hand through her hair. She tells me about the town that was all pastel stucco and tile, twisting vines, sunlight. It was the trip my mother told my grandmother that she'd left Michigan because she had been pregnant. They were drinking Martini's and were suspended in a strange little orbit of idle rich and those not rich but resourceful, in a dining room in a hotel on the off-season beaches of the sun coast. My grandmother confessed she'd been pregnant when she married her second husband. They cried. My grandmother later used that information against my mother to bar her from the cottage, and dared her ever to extend her immoral tanned legs onto the property at Walloon ever again. I imagine my mother in her Lily Pulitzer shift with some pastel animal with tennis rackets, or golf clubs, or something all over it. I can see her shaking her blonde hair and climbing into her Spitfire convertible and saying to hell with all of you.

She tells me everyone should have a time in their life when they can fit everything that they own into their Triumph Spitfire and hit the road. Everyone should learn to smile engagingly over their martinis, or wine glasses, or beer mugs, but know that in the end they could just hit the road, feet pounding on cobblestones, car door slam. These are the travelling stories.

### **The Travelling Stories**

New York in 1969. She had to be at the airport before the break of dawn. No one in New York took checks and she had no money, and was on probation for nearly missing

a return flight from San Antonio, and there was a small family-owned business across from her apartment. She tells it that she went in, and there was a big surly man behind the cash register who glared at her in her curled hair, and false eyelashes and American Airline's uniform. I can see her and the way her eyebrows arch, and the way she runs her tongue over her teeth when she is nervous, hands flicking to her hair, her watch. She tells this story at parties to people who have lived in New York, who know what it means when she says she lived there and loved it because she could leave. I don't know what kind of store it was, but I imagine it as clean, and with narrow aisles, and a small space between the doorway and the cash register where my mother stood framed by rushing traffic. I hear her voice retelling it. Deep gruff voice, "don't take checks." Soft, pleading voice, eyes downcast and hands wringing in mock-distress: "but please please sir, I am going to lose my job, and I'm running out of time, and I don't have any cash and I'm honest and I promise I will pay you immediately, I can give you ref..."Gruff voice: "we don't take checks"...Pleading voice near tears: "oh please reconsider...."Gruff man with gruff voice at this point pulls out a twenty from his cash register, slaps it on the counter, and glares at my mother and says.... "We don't take checks." She, of course, makes her flight with the aid of the grocer, or cleaner, or cobbler... and returns with a beautiful extravagant pastry bought at one of the fabulous bakeries down the street. I see her set it down on the counter, it's white chocolate shavings, and delicately spread frosting, and next to that an envelope with a crisp twenty. She stands there smiling and blonde, and out of uniform and he says, "me and my wife are on a diet, what in the hell are we going to do with this?" These are what people do for my mother. They make exceptions, they craft things, they love her. I wonder sometimes if they love her because she loves to leave more than she loves to stay.

My father stands at one hand. The doctor at the other. More alcohol to stop the contractions. The ceiling crumbling plaster looks like Greece. Faux leopard coat and matching pillbox hat. Pictures taken from a plane's window where the sky is bluer than anything real, crumbling white structures below. Athens. It was the trip that held mostly American Airlines personnel as passengers. They took off at such an extreme angle that the pilots in their civilian clothes, with their narrow ties and handsome air force faces were almost green, as they clutched the arms of their seats. It, they told her later, was the closest they'd ever come to being in a Jumbo jet that stalled in mid-air. Greece. In Greece there was Solus Bobarakus. Solus introduced my mother to all of Athens, the ruins, the Parthenon, the Acropolis, in the days when you could actually still walk the grounds. They bought Ouzo and drank at sidewalk cafes and he introduced her to his aunts and great aunts and black clothed relatives. He took her to a shop where she found an earring. Gold hoop the size of a dime with tiny circlet of turquoise.

Those the jeweler explained to Solus, who translated, "no no no, you can't want that," "but yes I do," my mother said, "but there is only one?"

"Those" he said, "are for babies," moving his arms as if he were rocking something.

"This is the one I want," she said, sighing to only have one.

The jeweler made her a match. After the shopping, and the ouzo, and the sights, the only thing Solas asked, abashedly, of my mother was that when she returned to the states he would absolutely be overjoyed if she could send...he was embarrassed to say it....zippers? You see here in Greece we do not have zippers. He blushed and she promised although she never sent them. Zippers in those days were an intimate thing, one didn't just go around sending zippers to men you hardly knew.

And then there was the Joseph Heller story. For years my mother had this battered blue paperback edition of Catch-22 gathering dust at the top of her bookshelf. One time, when I was in the airlines...it began. My mother was working some commuter flight out of New York and saw this earnest man hunched over a manuscript, and biting a pencil, and wiping his brow, and generally looking distraught. My mother approached, and asked what he was working on, and it turned out to be a play, and she asked if she would know anything else he had written if he was a writer, and he said, well Catch-22? which my mother happened to have stuffed and dog-eared in her coach purse in the galley. She ran to get it and he signed it. If you're in New York I'll give you my hotel and I hope you'll come to the opening of my play-- We Bombed New Haven. My mother, says in retrospect, that she couldn't imagine that he was sincere, how could she have known, where could that have gone. She opened the paper later to read We Bombed New Haven bombed in New York" and of course, she wished she had gone. She wishes she had sent the zippers.

Dr. Boyle stood on one side holding one hand, Dad on the other. Premie births are the hardest kind they say because the baby doesn't have the strength itself to inch its way down the birth canal and the mother has to push that much harder. It was June in Dekalb, Illinois, and the corn reached in rows and rows behind our apartment building where my brothers sulked because they'd been planning on seeing Song of the South and my mom was patching my brother Michael's pants when her water broke. They'd known my mom for three years at that point and spent summers in Illinois with my mom and their dad, and the rest of the year they lived with their mom in Florida. It was six days before my mother's thirtieth birthday.

Once I was born they whisked me away to the preemie units of incubators and feeding tubes. They told my parents, "don't even hope." I imagine my brothers were sitting on the hot cement of the complex pool and watching one another's daredevil dives, climbing up the metal ladders over and over again while their babysitter filed her nails and leaned against the chain link fence. What my mother must have thought at that moment. Something of her own. Something to love her. Something she did right. My own, my love, my beautiful baby girl.

*Kyoto 1969*

*The edge of the picture is stamped OCT69*

*it is the bridge in Kyoto where you needed a running start to get across*

*and you are smiling against the sun's glare*

*you—wearing your sideburns and your long coat*

*greenblack like the river flowing between us*

*I am in the fishmarket in the fitch coat I bought in NY with money from the airlines*

*its front is caught slightly parted*

*and I look very young against the gray Tokyo sky*

*So far from where we'd eventually arrive:*

*broken cornstalks cracking in the blowing snow*

*you dead*

*me telling our five year-old not to worry -- to climb up on the chair and look out the kitchen window--*

*look for Mommy running around the rows of corn behind the apartment*

*running because burning in my legs and lungs meant feeling something*

*meant I could remember you -- your crooked smile*

*your shadow behind you in Japan.*

My newborn pictures show a small red, wrinkled thing, covered with fine down, tiny tubes attached to me, tiny pieces of tape, incubator like some strange space-age containment unit with a circular porthole. Mothers could not feed or touch the children. After I was whisked away the nurse asked, "Aren't you going to ask about your baby?"

Not again. They wheeled her chair into the room with the incubator. They told her to put her hand next to me. They told her I would squeeze her finger. The only time she touched me in four months she reached her hand in and my tiny hand curled around her index finger. She smiles to this day as she looks at the finger and traces halfway around the first knuckle. My hand reached halfway around her knuckle. I held her finger. I was her baby, her own, her success.

Another picture the day I came home. I'd gained five ounces from my birth weight, was up to three pounds. My mother's hand reached from the crown of my head to the base of my spine. My legs and arms seem narrow and long. She would stand by my incubator and coo to me.

My mother has my identification bracelet in her jewelry box, no bigger than one of her rings. My mother has said more than once that I was the one thing in her life that she did right. I was the one thing that made her life worth living. I was her little miracle.

Dinner Party

My father leans against the radiator. His hair is thick and dark, wet-from-the-shower slick, back from his forehead with a barber's comb. It is night, the kind that comes when you don't expect it. The first early dark of October when you turn from the window, cutting eggplant, and turn back to see the light gone and the ridge of mountains flat against the sky. He's bleeding on my kitchen floor. It happens every time. Thick blood between his fingers, dark and running dark and thick and black-red, purple-red. The thick color of eggplant rinds, holding a spot of light from the overhead hanging bulb. He bends over, hands clasped as if he were at St. Joan's with one cupped palm nestled in the other, only they're pressed against the coiled ropes of guts I know he's holding back, not raised to catch the host. And I hate him for wearing the Aran knit sweater. Thick cables. Diamonds and interlocking ropes, tiny purled links like chains up and down his chest that my mother labored over for hours in the station wagon from Florida to Illinois. Illinois to Colorado. Blood is creeping up the ropes like dying autumn vines on the University halls. Purl and knit from oceans and shell shops to cornfield and barbed-wire. Knit and purl from cornfield and barbed-wire to Monarch Pass and groves of aspen. He's put it on for me. That sweater. For me. For Colorado. For mountain snow. He died in Florida and nowhere in Florida, in February is it cold enough for that.

I've imagined my mother, me, bleeding from our mouths, our ears. I've seen our skulls fractured, pebbles of shatterproof glass scoring our skin like cloves in ham. Torn

bumpers at the junction of Hwy.2 and 8, under the red sign of Fruehauf's German restaurant. Highway patrol lights in the chrome of the cars, blood filling the foam core of the upholstered seats. I've dreamt her '76 Duster underwater, the lake pouring in around her head. Even in my adulthood, in my dreams she is long-haired and thirty-six, water pouring over her green silk dress, blackening it against her.

He was in a closet in my apartment in Minnesota when they came, the Daughters of Norway. In the narrow closet with the slatted double doors, sitting on the washing machine. They came bearing lefse and lutefisk and pastries scattered with powdered sugar like blizzard snow. We sat and talked while they looked for matching furniture and wall-to-wall carpeting and Terry Redlin prints of deer pausing on wooded hills above lit cabins. I served coffee, cream and sugar in pitchers and bowls respectively, doilies underneath. They sat like flight attendants, or Mary Kay consultants, wide-eyed and frosted with their manicured hands folded in their laps as if waiting for the sermon at the Lutheran church. They blinked like irritated contact-wearers when I told them I had to have the carpet pulled up because my murdered father comes at nights, no matter where I am. I tell myself that next time I will ask them for their recipes, for white sauce and creamed corn and swiss steak. I will ask for the number of their pastor, the date of the next fun-run marathon around the lakes, the name of their Chevy dealer. I will inquire after single sons, cousins, nephews tall and blond and owners of Fischer cross-country skis, men who cut down their own Christmas trees. Their gold jewelry will wink and seem to absorb light, and more light as I talk, as the words pour out. The jewelry on left hands, around the wrists, along the clavicle, from the edge of earlobes, gathering light like a black hole, bloated and heavy with every moment in the room that isn't dark.

He leans his forehead against the window's glass. The garden is covered in hay.

When she lies in bed wearing an old Brown t-shirt belonging to an east-coast ex, looking stripped bare and so young I feel as if it were a face reserved solely for me, a visible pulse at the base of her neck. The heart a machine like any other. A fist sized muscle, the strongest one, the easiest to tear. It seems too thin, this skin, between the world and the river of blood beneath, too easily penetrable. In these moments she just talks. The world's leading exporter of kiwi, the evolution of modern shingle, the aspen. The world's largest organism threading through the ridges and tied beneath the surface where no one can see. The point is not lost on me, this connection that the world doesn't see. It is customary that she leave wet footprints from my shower to the phone when she calls across town, to home.

The eggplant needs to be quartered, boiled, its pulp scraped out, pureed and mixed with cheeses and eggs and bread and spread over the flat skins again. His hat is the tweed one he wore the Christmas before his death, the brown wool blanket wrapped around his shoulders with the gold wool coin pattern across it. I line the pan with the bloodblack skins, careful to turn the skins shiny side down so I can't see the reflected light. I study the ingredients on canisters. I run tap water until the windows bead with steam. He is an arm's length away, yet he doesn't reach for me.

Now that I've moved to Colorado I expect an expedition team. I've set up footholds and handholds along the bare east wall. They track along the wall like strange fungal growths, ear-shaped, fan-shaped, suitcase holds and long flat ledges. Ropes coil like rattlers at the base, carabiners like unlinked chains scattered along the floor. When they come they can bivouac and cling to the wall in purple sleeping bags. They can set up tents in less than three minutes and stack their Sportea in my cupboard. Sunned skin, weather

stripped hair and cotton they'll sit with their legs apart, elbows on their knees, hands clasped and dangling towards the floor, head bowed like they've been told they won't reach the summit before the weather turns. We'll discuss ski lengths and wax types and binding release settings. I'll have to apologize as they stand in their long underwear and Alpaca wool hats with dog ear flaps, brewing tea. I'll explain about talking to the Melbourne police, how sand grinds beneath your feet on the sidewalk. I'll point out the outfit I wear that doesn't change, it always looks like the long nightshirt and levis that I pulled on when the phone call came. Bleeding to death, they assure me, is much like freezing to death. You feel nothing. All you want to do is sleep. It's the kindest death they say, the one they would choose. Down a blue Nepalese crevasse. Thundered through tsunamis of snow in Banff, ice like needles against your open eyes. Aha. So, I say. The kindest death, that's good to know. I'll tell him when he comes.

Last week I called her at her home, battery run down and stranded behind the emergency of DGH off Larimer, the night filled with the first light, dry snow trailing and swirling in taillights like wedding streamers. "The lot by the emergency room doors," I told her. Down the street I saw the old depot, the Amtrak line hidden by the building, laid car by car along the track towards Salt Lake and points West. I was in there once last year, the red lights flicked along the streets and sides of buildings as the ambulance pulled away. They have renovated since. Polished high-backed benches like church pews, floors of polished green marble. Hands clasped over my ears from the cold, against the dead car's bumper, I thought of people and the heading to, the leaving behind, the promise of things unseen and the strange unholy freedom of misery. We're brought along from place to place by love and death alone. She had cried to have me call her there and, I think, over "this insanity, this morbidity."

I sit in the glass cubicles off emergency rooms with their rows of curtained beds. I see kids blinded in cars from bottles dropped off the I-90 overpass, toddlers limp in arms, blue, or their eyebrows split on coffee tables. Once, a woman in square-dancing crinolines whose face was beaten bloody and raw. The worst of them you can't see for the paramedics, the nurses, doctors, the friend, the husband, the sister. Car wrecks, gunshot wounds, collapsed lungs and ruptured spleens. I've seen them walk through the door with Velex blankets seeping blood from fingers severed by handsaw blades, the brother-in-law who packed the digits in ice, following behind. Seen some with cheekbones flapping razor cuts. I know the one I'm looking for you have to travel to -- the suicides, the murdered. When someone dies their breaths come shallow and staccato quick, and not at all.

Can't you see I'm cooking, I say. You are blocking the cupboard. The gas stove's door opens nearly to the sink and built in drawers along the opposite wall. One has to stand on either side of the door and approach its contents at an angle.

Can't kneel and stick your head in the oven that way, my mother would joke. No Sylvia Plath bake-offs here. The top window is cracked in a half crescent at a corner. A black metal silhouette of a cat's face, marbles for eyes, is propped behind the clasp of the window's lock. For a garden. For keeping birds away.

Can't you see I have your chin. The crooked smile that pulls the bottom lip down slightly farther on the left side. Mom claims the square of my palms are yours. Can't you see.

I've glimpsed him in the air of Colorado, in the river flats thick with blades of grass you hold between your thumbs and blow through like a reed. He raises an arm, and his mouth moves, like someone you've left at a platform in the Gare du Nord, on your way to

a place with fewer people, and a greater purity of light. Like someone you have left who still has one last thing to say. He is eighteen and in Air-Force wings, or twenty-five in a tie thin as a yardstick. But the moments on my hardwood floors, on the hexagon tiles, black and white and pink, on my rugs and carpets, he is forty-six and doesn't try to speak.

Her touch on my arm through layers of down and flannel felt far away, a pressure barely there. It was the perfect night for a train, the tracks clanking into sage and buttes and canyons. There was nothing I wanted more than to see the glint of light on the aluminum hull of our train, snaking along a curve. To leave, to be the one waited for. Folded blankets and bleached sheets, fresh-cut flowers, orange juice in the fridge. To travel to, towards, home. Had I asked her weeks ago we could have caught the aspen.

I'll have them all for dinner -- the Daughters of Norway, the mountaineers. The fair in reindeer sweaters, the fischer ski christmas tree gatherers, the unattached handsome relations. The guides with ropy muscles. The dog-owners. The ones for whom Alaska is the ultimate goal. The reindeer sweaters will talk babies and church events. They will hover over steaming pots and tie neat aprons over their slacks. They will be held aloft by the guides, the thin soles of their flats scraping against the stone holds. They will break the first and third fingernails of their left hand reaching for a hold that would mean the top. They were girl scouts with badges, brownies with tiny gold pins. They had attended fly-up ceremonies. They grew up with men who skied and drove large hunting cars, they knew the meaning of finishing something. The fischer men will stand with the mountaineers bringing their knees to the floor in a telemarking turns. The dogs will roll over for the tree gatherers who secretly prefer the hunting breeds to the northern work dog

and my girlfriend will walk in the door. A polished city self. Smooth hair and dry-cleaned clothes balancing grocery bags and struggling with the door, nudging it with one polished shoe. And she will be, I'm sure, a mystery to me. Her, in the doorway, arms filled with food that we will cut and cook and chew and swallow. Food that will fuel our bodies, the movement of our blood.

What is it we would have the dead see? The things we can't. What traces beneath, the movement that is our very own in the unfolding of our arms, a flightless span. Ourselves. How we come to choose our words. How we enter a room. How we leave.

I've decided his wearing it was a gift to me, the sweater, with its dropped stitch -- deliberate, purposeful. My mother's hands moved like the women of the Aran islands with Monarch Pass outside the window, tundra along the crest like lichen, dropping one because only God is perfect.

Zero Gravity

It was a starless October evening and the light fixture dug against her back as if she were camping and it a tiny rock beneath her, inconsequential at first lying down, but impossible to ignore in the middle of the night. The ceiling of the house was peppered with little nobs of old gas fixtures no longer used, round breasts that one stopped noticing. After nearly four hours against the plaster Xiao-Wu had come to the conclusion that, at least in their own homes, few people ever looked up.