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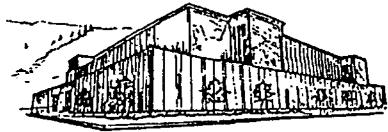

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Curiosities

by

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for the degree of

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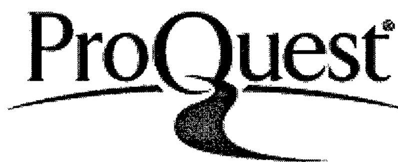

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"Truths"

Colorblind

On the long arm of the X-chromosome my father contributed to form me is a series of genes coded for colorblindness. This does not mean that I am or will become colorblind. I am a carrier only, as Queen Victoria was a carrier of hemophilia. The queen passed her X-linked abnormality to the royal lines of various European countries, causing unstoppable gushes of blood in select males of the family, and, inevitably, political mayhem. In my case the inherited flaw is not deadly, nor will it have such vast repercussions. Fatalities do occur because of colorblindness, but they are caused by accidents of perception, not anything as blatant as the blood's inability to clot.

The aberration in my DNA structure means that if I have a child and that child is male, he may have difficulty with greens and reds. It's a fifty-fifty chance. And if I have a girl and contribute the muddled X-chromosome, I may eventually have a grandson who not only looks somewhat like my father but also sees like my father.

Dad is red-green colorblind. In good light, natural light, if I point at something red, he will identify it as such, and the same with green. Fluorescent light makes things tricky, and when natural light begins to fade, so do reds and greens, quickly, before the yellows and blues he so easily sees.

When my sister and I were young I remember looking over the ocean at night and pointing at green and red lights scattered among the white ones on boats across the water.

"See the red one over there?" we'd say to him.

"I can see a light," he'd say, "but I don't see red."

It was delightfully odd to be able to see something that our father could not see. It was also a little unsettling.

In the retina of each eye are thousands of cone-shaped cells sensitive to what we understand as the color of light. There are three types of cones, each containing a pigment that responds to a different range of wavelengths, corresponding to the primary colors of light: red, green, and blue. The curves of sensitivity overlap at points so that at many wavelengths, more than one cone type responds. When the red and green cones, for example, tell the brain that they were stimulated by a certain amount, the brain translates the response as pale lemon yellow. The subtlest of colors appear, the colors we don't even know how to name – the maroons, puces, chartreuses, violets, and sea greens – according to the messages the brain receives. This mixing and translation is built into the brain. It can't be learned or unlearned.

The cone cells in my eyes are sensitive to different wavelengths of light than are Dad's. The coding instructions for the pigments in each cell are determined by certain genes, and Dad's genes have produced the wrong

pigments. I have the same genes as he does, but my normal X-chromosome corrects this mistake. Our brains, though, Dad's and mine, translate identically. When the brain's expectations do not match the realities of the cones, green can be seen as gray, and red as muddy brown. If the light is good, the cone cells are stimulated enough for Dad to see that green is green and red is red, but it's still not the same green and red I see.

Of all colors, Dad sees yellows and oranges best. A few years ago he wanted to plant masses of yellow wildflowers where he could see them easily out the bedroom window. For a time, Mom gave in and he saved seed-heads from the tall yellow wildflowers we found one year in the farmer's field. When he planted them, they grew up tall and rangy in front of Mom's rose garden, and when it rained they collapsed on themselves, tilting and weaving like cowlicks. But Dad loved them, and it was hard to convince him they just didn't fit in, that the yellow was a good touch of brightness, but misplaced among the growing order of my mother's English-style garden. Reluctantly, Dad cut them back after they bloomed, before they could ripen and drop seed. Even so, it took a few summers to get them completely out. They grew, a few stocks, standing straight up from the grass like small trees, sending out their starbursts of yellow.

I remember Dad telling us about a dormitory room he had once that he decorated with fabric, ceiling and walls draped in brilliant, glowing orange – a cavern of color. "Yuck," we said. "Wonderful," he said.

I asked my father once how he came to be color blind, and he told me the story of my great-grandfather, Martinus Pedersen, who wanted to be a sea captain. Martin was born on the island of Fuur in Jutland, Denmark, an island of farmers and fishermen and for a time, perhaps unknown to him, one of the world's largest population densities of colorblind people. When Martin was thirteen, he signed on a ship as cabin boy. He loved ships and being out at sea, and when he was able to, he started his schooling to become a naval captain. And then he discovered a fact that had previously escaped his family, his friends, his employers, and himself. He was colorblind. The naval board would not license a captain who saw all lights as white in the dark. Rather than take a lesser rank, Martin decided to move to America with his young bride, my Grammy Risë. In Boston, living in a Danish community, he became, of all things, a house painter. A few years later, my great-grandparents had a daughter. And when that daughter, my grandmother, married and had two girls and three boys, she passed the gene for colorblindness to one of the boys, my father.

Once Dad was old enough, he started painting houses with my great-granddad. By that time paint was mixed at the store, but for years Martin

had mixed his own. I've watched paints being mixed, the thread of frighteningly pure red measured by machine into a can of white paint to match the exact shade of barely-pink Mom wanted for the hall bathroom; the drops of raw umber for the eggshell white that covers the walls of all the bedrooms. I've taken oil painting classes and been made to stare long and hard at something I think is just plain white until I begin to see the tinges of green, peach, yellow, and blue. Matching what I see there with the colors on my palette is, I know now, a delicate and eye-taxing art.

"How did Granddad manage?" I once asked my father. "He liked plain old white pretty well," Dad replied. A man of simple tastes and talents, there are questions I want to ask my great-granddad Martin. What about the inside jobs for wealthy people who wanted to match their jewel-toned Persian carpets, luxuriant, with mauve or jade walls? I remember my great-grandfather as a silent man, smiling but firm. I imagine him gently convincing the lady of the house that white walls would allow her to bring in new colors and furniture, re-upholster her sofas and divans, hang new drapes, get rid of the old Persian carpet and bring in a new, all without needing to smell fresh paint again. And if the woman stayed firm, I imagine walls tidily and precisely painted with just a bit more green than was expected, or with a browner shade of red. But Granddad was a conscientious man. He knew his paints and his limitations. Maybe he called my Grammy

Risë out to the garage the night before he started painting to make sure he got the color just so before he hammered on the lid and loaded his truck.

My father first realized he saw things differently than other people when he was twelve and took a job delivering newspapers. An older boy trained him. Biking in the dim light of early morning, this boy handed Dad papers and told him which houses to deliver them to. One morning the boy said, "Take one to the pink house down the block on the left." Dad biked down the street. At the end of the block he hadn't seen a pink house, so he went on to the next. None there, either. He biked back up the street and told the boy there was no pink house. In exasperation the boy biked with him and pointed. In the poor light Dad looked close at the light muddy-gray color of the siding. That house sure isn't pink, he thought.

Soon after, my grandfather, a geriatric physician, took Dad into the crowded little office where he kept a book of color plates designed by a man named Shinobu Ishihara, a Japanese optometrist. Each page had a circle filled solid with dots of various sizes and colors. "It's a test," my father's father told him. "For colorblindness." Dad looked carefully, nervously, at each of the plates. Numbers appeared out of the dots and Dad named them. He was doing great, he thought. Passing. And then he found he'd been tricked.

Years later when I was in middle school, Dad brought home a copy of the Ishihara tests to let us see for ourselves. "Eight," my sister and I said when he showed us the first page.

"I see a three," Dad said.

"Nuh-uh!" we said. He flipped the page.

"Six," we said.

"Five," he said.

He traced the number with his finger. Even following closely, the five showed the whole of its form to him only, mere knees and elbows to us.

We flipped the page. "Twenty-nine."

"Seventy," Dad said, and this time we drew the numbers for him with our fingers, with the tip of a pen, with only a tracing around the outside so all of the pointillist band of color we saw was in plain sight.

"I just don't see it," he said finally.

This week I checked out a copy of the Ishihara test plates from the university library. The colors are the faded shades of 1971, reds and purple reds and greens and blue greens and oranges, grays, and blues. In my room I strain my eyes trying to make out numbers other than the ones that immediately rise from the background. I pull the blinds and put the book under my desk where it's darkest, and stand back to where I can just see. Colors fade, but still there is enough light that I see my numbers and only a

faint ghost of the ones my father would see. I borrow a pair of sunglasses, and still my number is clear. I flip to the middle of the book where I read that people with normal vision will apparently not find any number at all while a person with a red-green deficiency will. Staring hard, I begin feeling the frustration so many people with color vision confusion must feel. I know a number is there. The book tells me a number is there, and even what number it is. I find the quarter curve of a three, maybe the tip of a five, the notch of a seven, and then nothing. I am blinded by color.

I have found various figures on the colorblind population. An estimated eight percent of the male population in the United States has color vision confusion, usually red-green; 0.4% of women are colorblind. One person in 33,000 sees no color at all. Each estimate I find is followed by a "probably more" since many do not talk about or do not recognize their color deficiency. For many people it's not a big deal, like having a small number of taste buds but still liking food. For others it is a source of severe frustration and difficulty. For a few it's a danger. Industrial accidents, shipwrecks, and bad tooth enamel jobs have occurred because of color vision confusion. Red lights have been run.

My friend David, who is both red-green and blue-yellow colorblind, studied electrical engineering. In the course of gaining his degree he invented a device he could point at wires to distinguish the crucial coloration.

When he visited once, he pulled out his scientific calculator to figure something for me and cursed the blue writing of the keys against the dark gray background – an impossible combination in the dim light of my apartment. "I should write them a letter," he grumbled.

David tells me that when we met he was pretty sure my hair was red. I have light brown hair with a few red highlights when the angle of sun is just right. I liked the idea of looking so believably different without having to change the color of my hair. I asked David once what colors he sees, and he looked at me and said softly, tentatively, as if I wouldn't believe him, "I see so many colors. They're everywhere. Things that I think probably look one solid color to everybody else are completely covered in colors I'm not even sure exist." He tells me his junior-high fear of being drafted into the army. At first I don't understand. In the Vietnam War, David tells me, colorblind soldiers were highly coveted. They were put on the front lines because their eyes were not fooled by camouflage. He tells me he sees animals far in the distance before anyone else can see them, and I find out that it's true.

David took me on a hike once in the wilderness area surrounding his family's cabin just east of the Continental Divide. I was still new to Montana and wanted to see elk. The day before, riding through a grassy valley, we had heard the trumpeting of a bull, and though I had seen them on the side of the highway in a large herd once, I had never seen the creatures in what felt

like their own territory. David was sure we'd find them, and he led me to all the places they usually were. And finally we found them. In a small clearing, standing close to a few grazing cattle, was a cow elk and her yearling. Ungainly creatures, I watched them pull at grass and swivel their heads and lift their feet. They were wonderful, but I, like other newcomers, wanted to see antlers.

Walking over a rise in deep forest on our way back to the cabin, David suddenly grabbed my shoulder and pointed, "Look, a bull elk!" "Where?" I cried, bewildered, swiveling my head in the direction he was pointing. "There it goes!" he said, and still I could not see. A long ways off I heard the sound of brush breaking. My ears told my eyes where to look, and still I did not even see the flash of a white rump. "That was sure a big elk," David said. "Pretty old from the look of his rack."

Color perception, then, is not a mechanism for self-preservation. At some point we humans no longer found it necessary to worry about seeing wild animals before they saw us, and our active brains moved in new directions, searching for sustenance of a higher order. We need food for our bodies to survive, yes, but we need something more to maintain the desire to eat in order to survive.

"Color is soul food," Dad says to me on the phone, and it's true. Gardens, paintings, fabrics, the myriad colors of stone and soil, water, sky,

trees, insects, and animals, the color of eyes themselves, and skin and hair. We see more subtle variations than we realize. We try to name what we see, but the language of color is far from complete. Colors have taken names from gemstones: turquoise, jade, topaz and emerald. From bodily liquids: bile yellow and blood red. From plants: indigo, violet, rose and periwinkle. From insects come vermilion and crimson, varying translations of kermes, a scale insect used as a dye; and puce, French for the purple-brown flea. From soil comes sienna, a ferruginous clay used by artists as a yellowish brown pigment, or after roasting, a deep reddish-brown, the *terra di Siena*, the iron-rich soil of Tuscany. And from water comes the simplest of translations: *aqua*.

For tens of thousands of years, humans have ground earth, minerals and plants into useable pigments. Cave walls have been adorned with color and shape. Statues have been given brilliant gemstone eyes. Fabrics have been dyed and stitched into wearable pieces of brilliance. We look at colors and see the heavens, the gods, the glories of imagination, and the expression of emotions. We are soothed or frenzied. We gaze, or turn away, or close our eyes and admire the geometric bursts of greens, yellows, and blues behind our own eyelids.

But even "perfect" color vision is a slippery kind of seeing. Looking too long at colors makes them shift and jump like the dimensionality of a line-drawn box. Is it orange? Is it red? Red-orange, orange-red? Before I moved

away from home I often relied on my mother and artistic sister to tell me if my clothing matched. It's a skill I still have difficulty with, which embarrasses me at times. I look at combinations of clothing, and they seem to work. But the harder I look the more I can see it either way, like listening to someone else's truth and suddenly losing track of my own. I like the way the reddish-purple overalls feel with the soft, bluish-purple fleece pullover, but will this combination prove offensive to eyes other than my own? Do gray socks go with brown shoes? These are mysteries that I am not as good at deciphering as others seem to be. But apparently now clashing colors are making a resurgence in the world of fashion. Mismatches are riding a wave with patched together pants, shirts that lace up loosely in the back, and other things I see but do not recognize as trendy. And that's the problem: I'm not trendy. If I was, I could make the most of my inability and pick clothes from my closet based simply on panache – my blue linen, bias-cut dress flaring over red pants, layers of pink and green shirts and a maroon cardigan on top, my cobalt blue knitted aviator's hat on my head. But still, how to know which mismatch is hip, and which merely heinous?

So to some degree I know how Dad feels. For years, he kept a limited wardrobe – two colors of socks, white shirts, gray pants, and a wide variety of ties since any color could go with white. Mom sorted his socks, locking matching pairs together with a turned over cuff so he wouldn't look down in

the middle of the day in better light and see two different colors on his feet. "It may have been dull," he tells me, "but it sure was easy." Now he has branched into various colors of sweaters that must be matched with colored shirts that have to go with his burgundy or his brown suspenders, all joined together with a tie that matches his pants. When I am home, I hear him in the morning asking my mother for advice. If she has already gone to the kitchen to make her cappuccino, he calls me in to help decide on a tie. "The flowers or the peacock feathers?" he asks. "I don't know," I tell him. "Ask Mom."

For Dad some of this is skill, but not as entirely as in my case. He tells me about a recent trip to Northern Virginia. He forgot to bring socks, so he went to a store to buy some. He got a pack of medium gray ones he knew would match the pants he'd brought. After a week of wearing these socks to meetings, he went home. When Mom saw them, she asked why he'd gotten that color. Dad said, "Because they match my pants." "No they don't," Mom told him. "Those socks are olive green."

Dad misses his self-imposed uniform sometimes. Mistakes were eliminated, and getting dressed was a low-stress affair. I understand that too. For a time, when I attended British schools in the West Indies and in England, I wore a uniform – gingham checks in the summer and a gray dress with white shirt and red tie in the winter. Those were the easiest mornings of my life. No decisions. No comparisons. No wondering about matching colors.

For years I have wondered what it is like seeing through my father's eyes, or what it would be to see through eyes that do not perceive any color at all. Close to these questions are: what is it like to see through any other person's eyes, and would I find, looking through them, that what I have understood to be the color of autumn-turning leaves and the color of my mother's skin, and the color of the sky this morning, are really not those colors at all, but something quite different? Maybe one day when I walk outside, I'll see what things really look like. Perhaps I will find that all my life I've been colorblind.

Wittgenstein, in his *Remarks on Colour*, writes, "When we're asked 'What do the words "red," "blue," "black," "white" mean?' we can, of course, immediately point to things which have these colours, – but our ability to explain the meanings of these words goes no further!" Yellow, and green-veined, and tangerine-flesh orange are the colors of the leaves across the street. What do these things mean? They mean this leaf, and that, and the ones already fallen to the ground. They mean what I can point to, and what you, if your vision is assumed to be like mine, would also touch. They are signifiers, the signifieds of which are generally accepted fictions.

Since I talked with Dad about colorblindness, I've begun looking closely at the night. "When the light starts fading, so do the colors," he said. "It just happens faster for me than for everybody else." Holding the phone in

my hand, I have to think surprisingly hard. Don't I see colors at night? I think about green farm fields outside the car window when I drive around the familiar curves at home. I think about walks I've taken when the moon is full or the stars are so bright they cast shadows on the ground. In the autumn at night can I tell red from black? It bothers me that I've forgotten, and I realize how accustomed I am to seeing things as I think they should be and not the way they actually are.

I remember as Dad and I keep talking how I walked one night with my boyfriend in Iowa, passing through the woods behind our small-town university. The leaves were off the trees and there had been snow the week before leaving pockets of white in the dark places protected from the sun. All day in class we had discussed reality, how the mind sees things differently in different states of consciousness and understands life from these levels of perception. Reality, formerly a solid, was now sometimes a liquid, sometimes a gas. I was fascinated. But that night, as if I had never walked in the dark before, as if someone had flipped a switch in my brain, I looked around me and the world had become varying shades of gray. The trees, the steep banks up to the old railroad grade, and my boyfriend's body were flat, distant, and unreachable. I was on the outside, looking in at a world devoid of color, a world that looked so falsely solid I couldn't stop myself from gently tapping

my fist on my boyfriend's arm as we continued walking, to assure myself that he, at least, was real.

When we were finally inside again, a rush of warmth and color flooded over me and my heart pounded fiercely. Rather than being comforting, the contrast overwhelmed me, and I laughed almost hysterically at a joke that wasn't very funny. The sound of my voice mechanically churning out laughter was as distant as the black and white woods had been a few moments earlier, and I stood inside it, a tiny, still shape, waiting for reality to return.

For the next several nights after Dad and I talk about color vision, I lie in bed before falling asleep and think about what the world really looks like. I mull over the fact that what we call light is only the tiniest part of the electromagnetic spectrum, the only portion of that spectrum that our human eyes are sensitive to, and that color is simply a perceptual value. I look at my green bedspread and tell myself that really it is more red and blue in substance. All the green has bounced off its surface into my eyes. I think of it in those terms as if light were a liquid, two parts soaking into the fabric, one part splashing up and away. I think about black and white photography and realize I appreciate it because it makes me look more closely at form and shadow, because it can make me see familiar objects in different ways. But in

my surroundings I want color. In my home, in paintings, in food, in fields and by the side of streams, my heart and my mind are fed by color.

My first autumn in Montana, I talked with my parents and they told me that in Virginia the creeper was turning crimson and the dogwoods a rich, rusty orange. Trees at home turn all shades of yellow, red, plum purple. The colors meld in wild variegations, the yellows touched with red, glowing like boiled peaches. Here in Missoula the trees whose colors change shifted after the first frost into pale green yellow. At first I was disappointed. The only reds I saw were low bushes planted outside banks and fast-food places. But from Blue Mountain I looked down on the native cottonwoods and saw their goldening. In Pattee Canyon I smoothed my hand down soft, yellow larch needles. I started finding miracles of color, the ambiguous lines of rouge a certain herbaceous plant made on grassy hills, a color I realized my father would not notice.

And then green-yellow deepened into pure, glowing gold. I drove down the street one morning and realized I was surrounded by an autumn like I'd never seen before, and I wished Dad could be there to share it. I imagined him like a sponge, soaking in his best color to the point of saturation, making up for lost time. At dusk I looked out my apartment window to a huge, golden maple. As the light faded, the yellow glow seemed to intensify as if the leaves had been storing the sun all day long and now

slowly smoldered, reluctant to let go. In the middle of the night when I woke to the knocking of the heater and walked into the living room to shut it off, I looked out again, and the maple had settled into darkness. The leaves, vaguely illuminated by a street lamp half a block away, were gray as ashes with only a dusty wash of yellow. This night vision is perhaps the closest knowing I will have of my father's eyes, my great-grandfather's eyes, maybe some day my son's eyes.

Dad doesn't think about his colorblindness much, he tells me. A part of me feels sad when he says this, thinking of the richness and depth of color he sometimes misses, like not tasting the subtle flavors of rosemary and thyme deeply imbedded in a good soup, but when I realize I'm thinking this way, I have to laugh at myself. I know there are realities that go far beyond my perception of things. I know the world is less solid, less real than I perceive it, and that what I see every day is simply isolated patches of color and form, moving in ways my brain is accustomed to discerning; that the world is united in ways I can fathom only in intellect. It's laughable, really, how little I do see. But even knowing this I love the things I find beautiful, and so does my father.

At the end of summer when we walk by the creek at home, the brilliant red of the cardinal flowers that bloom unexpectedly by the water's edge leaps from the dull background like small fireworks. The blossoms are

a rare surprise, like a fox slipping across the trail. At first, Dad does not see them, but when I point he is enthralled. When the mountain laurels are in blossom, we sit on a rock and take turns describing aloud one flower, the single cup-shaped petal, the symmetrical fluted edge. Dad describes shape and shadow, the delicate veins and the number of stamens. I pick up a narrow twig and point: "Ten deep red spots," I say. Dad takes off his glasses and puts his face close, bending to let the light fall into the cup of the blossom. "Ten deep red spots," he says. "Amazing."

October 25, 2002

It's snowing and I live in Montana. It's dark out, and I have been sitting on the sofa working, and I only thought to poke my head out the door onto the deck because the wind is up – a steady sound that is not playing and moving, but just humming, low like machinery, or car tires in rain, and that's what I thought: "Maybe it's raining again." But I poked my head out the door and the deck was dark with wet and the wind blew in cold on my face, so I stepped outside under the eaves to close the door and keep the wind out, and something white flew sideways over the deck railing. I thought it was a late, crazy insect, out in the rain, and then I looked up at the small mountain behind my deck. This morning there was light snow on the mountain and then this afternoon there wasn't, and in the dark I could see that it is white again. The wind was blowing down from there, and I inhaled it deeply and then touched the wood of the deck and it was slushy. The wind backpedaled down from the Rattlesnake, and a swirl of snow came with it. Strange that frozen water can have a smell.

This morning, early, when I was thinking only about having to walk outside and get in my car, I flung myself out the door with my head down, and that smell hit my face and my head flew up and the first thing I saw was

a flock of birds wheeling my direction in the sky, and I didn't even think "pigeons" until the moment was past and they had swooped my head up and my eyes too, and I saw the one-third coat of white on the mountain's flanks, and I was inhaled by God, it felt like, and found it hard to catch my own breath. I had been reminded, again, to always look, and that there is little as beautiful as winter, and in particular, the first few snows.

Notes of a Scatalogical Tourist

I am becoming a scatologist. Informally. Not in the unkind (sometimes truthful) association the word has with names and jokes referring to varieties of feces unlike those that fascinate me. I am a daytime walker of forests and meadows, and do not often get to see the creatures that inhabit those lands and make their paths there. Animals hunt and gather and eat. Any child knows this. What almost all but children choose to forget, however, is this process's obvious conclusion: animals also digest their wild foods and leave behind what their bodies do not need. We have been trained to ignore or be suspect of such deposits, to carefully step around or over them, to point them out in warning to those walking beside us. When we avoid dung, though, we avoid much more.

Some years ago, the Leakeys made one of the great discoveries of our times in the course of throwing large, flat flakes of elephant manure at each other in northern Tanzania. One of them reached down to retrieve the next piece of it and happened to notice a human footprint embedded in stone. If it hadn't been for fun with feces, the Laetoli footprints may have been much harder to find.

My own lack of queasiness about animal dung stems from a childhood around animals and a family that cultured curiosity. When we were children,

my sister, like so many five-year-old girls, wanted a pony. Our house backed up against my grandparents' land in the middle of Stockton, California. They ran a small geriatric hospital there, and my grandfather reasoned the patients would benefit from the company of lively creatures. The police had already visited him when neighbors tired of the alarming cries of the guinea hens he let wander freely. Banty chickens were only slightly less of a nuisance, roosting high in the trees at night and crowing loud in the morning. The patients liked the pretty roosters and the dainty, round hens, though, and the banties stayed. In a rare concession to outside opinion, the guinea hens were "donated" in the night to a local wildlife park.

Since Granddad had built a small barn in the far corner of his small property, and quietly raised a few sheep, my dad guessed we could string up some electric wire in our back yard and fit a pony in with no one much noticing. No one really should have. Black Velvet was a small pony, a fine little Shetland. Though Pony (as we most often called her) was often a bit of a grump, my sister and I loved her, though my love, and probably my sister's, too, was rarely untempered by fear. I was four years old, and Pony was a good bit larger than me.

I learned how to hold my palm flat when I offered her bits of apple, or scraps of carrot, and when we discovered that she had a soft spot for roses, we gathered handfuls of spent petals and offered them to her velvety muzzle.

My dad stopped mowing the yard. He tethered Pony out regularly, rotating her between our yard and the yard behind the geriatric center. Fueled by grass, rose petals, and bits of sticky, molasses-covered grain, Pony popped out the sweetest-smelling dung around. Miniature horse-apples pelleted the ground, and we didn't mind a bit. My sister and I ran barefoot, avoided fresh bits, but at some point decided to use dry Pony piles as missiles. Luckily, our arms were small and our aim imperfect. John, the man who rented our converted garage, complained to our parents one day that we had assaulted him with manure. We thought it a great joke, but John was a big man with a loud voice, and we did not try pelting anyone after that.

Though I can't imagine my father (in his adult life) pelting anyone with pony apples, he did, in those same years, contribute a curiosity for natural life that has made me unafraid of things our culture normally considers distasteful. Dad is a notorious dissector. Around the time Pony began living in our backyard, I had a rabbit found dead in his cage one morning. Dad was preparing for medical school, taking pre-med courses at the local university. For him, the furry corpse meant an unexpected opportunity to practice with a scalpel. We were all sad about the rabbit, but Dad's enthusiasm buoyed me and my sister, and we leaned in close while he gently laid open its abdomen. With tender fingers we explored the rabbit's inner world, the delicate lungs, the tough heart, the soft folds of intestine. We

admired the rabbit, inside and out, before digging it a hole under the pecan tree and laying it to rest.

Dad's penchant for dissection does not stop with a scalpel and cadaver. He is a poker, a prier, one of the most curious people I've ever met, and one least able to contain his curiosity. When we moved to forested land in Virginia, Dad gained a new wealth of opportunities. He clears dry leaves away from pockets of fern and moss, digs with bare hands in cold creek beds for beautiful specimens of rock, and watches beetles and moths and birds. He crouches on paths, skillfully sweeps up a few twigs as instruments and prods at scat.

In Stockton we did not have much exposure to animal life other than the domestic and what we saw on "Wild Kingdom" and "Grizzly Adams." In the Virginia Blue Ridge, foxes run through our yard. A flying squirrel fell once out of an oak tree. Walking through the woods we're bound to startle deer or find a turtle or see beaver marks by the river. We once walked up to a skunk on the trail without seeing it. Luckily, we retreated soon enough to escape being coated in its rotten-egg stench. I was away when a black bear began stealing food from the box on our front porch.

My mother and I are both fascinated by bears. Early on in our life in Virginia, she heard a strange whuffing sound at night, a rapid expulsion of air like a controlled sneeze. She was sure it was a bear. Whenever we walked

in the woods after that and found scat on the trail, she'd peer at it and say, "it's got to be bear." It didn't matter what it looked like. As long as it wasn't deer and wasn't dog, it was bear. Finally someone told us that the whuffing sound was deer, the head female warning the buck of danger. It is a curious sound coming from such a delicate creature – an easy mistake.

But Mom wasn't wrong when she told me it was a bear that dragged the heavy wood boot box out into the yard and onto the picnic table, and that the bear devoured the nearly full 20-pound bag of cat food inside it. She slept light that week, listening for sounds from the porch. One night she heard a low shifting and scraping and crept to the door. Outside she saw indefinable movement. She flicked on the porch light and looked through the big window by the door. Directly opposite her, a big bear body stood itself upright and stared back at my mother. "That thing was quite a bit taller than I am," she told me. "I flicked the light right back off."

I was painfully disappointed to miss the *ursus* intruder, but now, in Montana, my opportunities for encounters are much more abundant. All this past summer, signs in my neighborhood warned of the unusual number of bears in the area, rummaging in garbage cans. By the end of the summer nine were trapped and two repeat offenders "destroyed."

I took a hike in late summer up into the Rattlesnake Wilderness Area. The trailhead is five minutes from my home, and I walk there often, but I

have not taken many long hikes along the main trail. It is a wide, graveled trail, an old road that I have seen a Forest Service truck driving on. It is not a wild trail, though it goes through wild land, and it is the most likely spot to run into large groups of people walking, families, chatty friends, and bikers. I generally avoid it. But that day I felt like walking a very long distance without having to think much about where my feet were placed with each step, and it was early enough to avoid the bulk of pedestrian traffic.

Around the bend where the trailhead map marked "terminal moraine," past two meadows and an abandoned apple orchard, I was in new territory. Bound on my left by massive sloping fields of glacial debris like hillsides covered in giant gravel, and on the right by a slip down to lower ground and Rattlesnake Creek beyond the trees, I felt very much alone. It was a good feeling, exactly what I'd been looking for. The cottonwoods riffled in the breeze and grasshoppers hovered over the gray stones of the hillside, clacking and dancing. I watched their flashes of yellow, their erratic motion, and only now and then looked down at the flat trail.

A few miles in, the road was less carefully maintained. Large stones protruded from the soil like canine teeth, and the growth of the narrow verge between path and glacial debris turned to thorns. I enjoyed the feeling I get when I've walked out my roil of built-up energy and emerge clear; when I can walk and only walk. I can look at the path in front of my feet.

What I saw on that path was bear scat. After so many years of guessing with my mother, I'd finally seen a picture of bear scat a few days before and knew what it should look like. The thorny growth on my left was berry growth, and the seedy nature of the scat explained why I'd seen no berries. They'd already been digested. I looked around me, searching greedily for a dark shape in the trees. But the scat was a few days old and crumbled when I poked at it with a stick. A few steps on there was another pile. A few yards on, another. In a quarter mile I passed a dozen. They were all old, at least a few days.

I kept hiking, waiting until my bones and the position of the sun in the sky told me to turn back. I passed a swath of just-ripe thimbleberries, glowing red and vibrant like a child's rendition of a raspberry, stuck bottom-side up on the wrong kind of plant. I reached out to eat one, and stopped myself. "Leave it for the bears," I whispered, and then I shuffled my feet and started for home.

Now that I had noticed the scat, I saw the piles without looking for them, and saw many other things – garter snakes and rippled mudstone – besides. I walked quickly, not out of any hurry, but just because I'd been walking for such a long time and had hit the rhythm of it. My thoughts were as hushed and settled as my feet on the trail.

Sometimes when I'm settled, nothing startles me. Other times, when I've grown too used to quiet, a new sound makes my whole body jolt. Still loosely attuned to the idea of bears, my body snapped to attention at the sound of something moving fast along the trail behind me. I felt the thud of a single pulse at my temples, and then the part of my brain that sorts noises I know, quickly, like a croupier at a deck of cards, made me step to the side of the trail to let the biker past. He slowed when he was a few yards behind and called out, "Sorry, didn't mean to startle you." I turned toward him and grinned sheepishly. "No problem," I told him. "It's just all this bear scat that got me thinking."

"What's that?" he said, pulling tiny plug earphones out of his ears.

"Bear scat," I repeated.

"Haven't seen any," he said, then smiled, waved, and biked off, screwing back in his plugs.

I walked a few steps more behind him and then looked down at a pile of scat at my feet, feeling lucky. I imagined the lumbering haunches, the gently padding paws, the lipping of berries. The trail was alive with bears. I felt them shuffle around and through me, and I reached out to their coarse, dark ruffs. I was in the presence of bears, and neither they nor I had to be afraid.

I thought about that biker for a while on my way home, and have thought about him since. I have wondered why he wore earphones, why block out the sounds of cottonwood leaves clicking in the breeze, or the run of the creek, or the abundant calls of summer birds? It is an easy enough question to answer: different interests, purposes, and desires. Perhaps the biker who passed me listened to taped birdsong in order to drown out the sounds of his bicycle. Perhaps he listened to symphonies – a soundtrack for the beautiful land he cycled through. Maybe he didn't feel like looking too closely, but just wanted to bike as hard as he could, enjoying the feel of his muscles working the pedals. I can understand that.

Walking, I can move my limbs fast until they do not feel bunched up anymore, or my mind can be so crowded with thoughts that I can pass through large tracts of land seeing nothing consciously of what surrounds me. Or, I can be silent and observe; I can even become Emerson's walking eyeball, seeing everything and being nothing. And in that seeing there are also layers. I can step over the scat, or I can stop and pry into its secrets.

I returned to the Rattlesnake a few weeks later on an overnight. It was starting to get chilly and I knew it was probably my last chance. I filled my pack and parked in the trailhead lot and embarked only a few hours before sunset. I slept that night on a small island in the creek, my tarp tied on one side to a fir tree and on the other to a young spruce. I slept well. In the

morning, I heard a dipper close over the embankment, singing in the clearing light, and I ate my breakfast apple sitting on a rock in the creek.

When I crossed back to mainland on the fallen cottonwood that was my bridge, I found I was not the only one who had breakfasted on apples. Three gnarled and overgrown apple trees stood close together on the other side of the path. When I bent to pick a few off the ground to take home for pie, there it was: fresh bear scat. It looked like the creature had taken a few chews, swallowed, and instantly crapped it out. Whole quarters and thirds of apples filled this scat, surrounded by mushy, ground-looking bits similar to the discard pile that emerged sluggishly from my grandmother's "Squeez-o" fruit juicer. Intrigued, I poked; I prodded. The apples, however, I left on the ground.

Several weeks later, flipping through my new Scats and Tracks book I found the entry for Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*). "Scat: Normally contains vegetation and is sweet-smelling." Sweet-smelling! My god, I thought. I may poke and prod, but I have trained myself to hold my nose at the same time. The missed opportunities! By that time the apples were gone from the trees and with them any chance of inhaling that sweet smell. I made friends promise to take a sniff if they came on any, but, frankly, I doubt their resolve. I will be moving on in June, before the apples come ripe again, or the berries. I worry that I may never get another chance. Let others lament a romance, an

unspoken love, or the absence of a final embrace. "If only I could turn back the clock," they say. Yes, I think. If only I could go back to that apple tree and lean down just a tiny bit closer.

I am still a newcomer to this land and these animals. Ignorance abounds. I have a few months left before I leave Montana, and I will use them as well as I can. It can be a blessing, sometimes, to live in a place so entirely foreign. The word "tourist" can be used as disparagingly as "scatologist," but there's something to them both. When you grow up in a place, you sometimes stop noticing the things around you. You stick around home, do your chores, your errands, complete your studies in books and in schools. Too often, you forget to be curious. It's a general rule – there are always those who break it and never stop looking. Of course, outsiders lack the vocabulary of a place and its absorbed knowledge of oral wisdom. The seasons have cycled past me only twice, and I fear I was sometimes the one wearing earphones. Still, when I remember to look, I am a scatological tourist, making my way in a world gloriously full of the objects of my attention, heralds of unseen creatures, great and small.

Spinning Wheel

My mother and I spin wool. We buy whole fleeces, straight off the sheep's back, and then we process those fleeces, step by step, inhaling the sweet smell of sheep and pastures and getting our hands greasy with lanolin, the natural oil that clings to fibers of wool. Though the process is much slower than simply going to a knitting shop and buying skeins of yarn, the point is to be slow, to linger and enjoy and soothe.

My mother and I were introduced to sheep at the same time, but I remember this introduction only through an old reel-to-reel film that my family and I sometimes watch when we are all home. After planting fruit trees, berry bushes, nuts and olives, and after raising white pigeons, my grandfather decided that what he wanted next was some mutton on the hoof. On-screen between my third and fourth birthdays is a flickering segment of two apparently ravenous sheep cropping short, green grass. It is California, winter judging by the blue jacket the tiny blonde me has on. I approach one of the sheep nervously. Almost as tall at the shoulder as I am, it lifts its head and moves toward me; I scoot out of the frame. In the next shot my sister is draped over the sheep's back, one arm around its neck, and I cautiously stick my fingers in its short fleece. My father holds the sheep's halter and scratches between its ears. "I have something to say," my sister shouts toward the

camera. She jiggles her arm, reaching for the microphone that materializes from the left of the now-jerky screen. She puts it right up to her lips, so close her breath is fierce in it. "The sheep is oily," she says, clearly pronouncing each word. She hands back the microphone and grins. I stand there petting the sheep, my hands becoming slick with lanolin.

A few reels later is the aftermath of a backyard sheep-shearing. There are no sheep in sight. White tufts cover the grass. My mother, long hair pulled back from her face with two tortoiseshell combs, slender legs encased in tight denim with a fine flare near the ankle, stands feeling one of the white tufts, running it between her fingers, pulling the greasy fibers gently apart. "Whatcha got there?" my dad's voice calls loudly.

Mom looks up, but her eyebrows are pulled together in concentration and she answers distractedly, "It's wool. Somebody should do something with it all. It's wonderful stuff." She looks back down at the fibers in her hands and reaches for another clump. The camera clicks off.

I remember the arrival of my mother's first spinning wheel. In my mind it was Christmas, because that's when the best gifts usually arrived in our family. My mother says, though, that she bought it somewhere outside Santa Cruz on our way to a friend's cabin in Felton at the beginning of summer. I remember sitting on a dark floor, watching my parents pull parts from a large box.

It was a simple wheel, an Ashford, roughly unchanged since the 17th century and still the most common wheel you can find. My mother read the directions while my father fiddled the pieces together, one spoked wheel, the size of a small car tire, resting on the hind two legs, a cord connecting wheel and bobbin, and a wooden foot pedal to make it all turn. When the wheel was complete, I edged in close. Sitting at my mother's knees, I pushed the pedal with my hands. Awkwardly, I worked it one direction, missing beats and forcing it back the other way, until I got into a rhythm and the wheel flew, whirring so fast I could feel its breeze on the crown of my head.

There my memories skip. I don't remember my mother putting that wheel in the car each Saturday for her spinning lessons fifty miles east near Sonora on Sheep Ranch Road. I don't remember her practicing at home, or dyeing her first lumpy skeins with black walnut hulls and knitting the yarn into an awkward sweater. I don't remember her selling the Ashford and buying a hand-made wheel, the one she still uses. I was much too busy being four and five and six. From the time I was seven and we moved to England to now when she lives in Virginia, my mother and her California oak wood wheel are inseparable in my mind. This is the wheel on which, many years later, she taught me to spin.

The parts of a spinning wheel are drive wheel, drive band, bobbin, orifice, tension knob, treadle and footman, flyer, flyer whorl, maidens and mother-of-all, names from the time of Shakespeare, still used on even the most modern wheel. The treadle turns the drive wheel which turns the flyer which turns the bobbin which in its turning creates twist along a yarn leader which the fibers of wool in a spinner's hand grab to which twist together to form yarn. From a handful of loose wool comes a continuous filament of knittable, weavable fiber, a feat marvelous and simple.

Humans have twisted fibers to form thread for over 10,000 years. Wrappings for mummies; simple, rough-woven fabrics for clothing; Persian carpets and European tapestries; sails enough for a four-masted schooner, a junk, a whaling ship; fine silk stockings and rough wool socks; kimonos and Austrian felted jackets; loincloths and delicate ladies' underwear; saris and tartans and winter skirts and gauzy dresses fine enough to be transparent; tablecloths and divan covers and pope's hats and artists' canvasses and the sacks that held flour and the cloths that strained cheese and the sheets and blankets and pillow cases of beds.

People in various parts of the world have spun what fibers were available: flax, cotton, silk, fleece from sheep and hair from goats and musk-ox, camel and alpaca, llama, and rabbit. Wheels turned by the hand or foot were not used in Europe until the late Middle Ages, though they may have

been used for longer than that in India, China, and Persia. For thousands of years people spun these fibers on straight sticks, turned by hand or by the weight of a round whorl made of stone or clay or wood, and, in some ages, of ornately carved and decorated precious metals and semi-precious stones. In remote parts of the world, dropspindles are still the technology of creating fabrics. Buy a handknit Chilean sweater and most likely the yarn was spun from a potato-weighted stick and dyed in a kettle over an open fire. It is a tedious process, dropspinning, but then so is spinning at a wheel compared to buying yarn from a factory.

Growing up, I watched my mother after dinner, or over tea, or during Sunday morning family time, preparing wool. Fleece is more easily spun when the fibers are worked loose, lined up, and the main debris removed. Expensive, show-quality wool comes from sheep that live their lives in tidy paddocks, their fleeces growing cleanly under protective jackets. Most sheep, though, live in fields that have a field's normal inhabitants: dirt, dung, twigs, and seed hitchhikers. These are the fleeces my mother buys. She pulls loose a chunk of fibers and her fingers pick out the largest bits of debris, dropping them into the tea towel on her lap. She lifts her carders, flat combs lined with fine wire teeth, gently overlays one with locks of wool and rests it on her leg. She brushes smoothly and firmly across the fibers with the other carder,

stroke, stroke, and the sound is of a thousand small wire teeth touching across each other with a pad of wool between. Surprisingly, it is a gentle sound. It is rhythmic and loosely pitched and slightly muffled. She pauses to pull bits of soil or weed stems from the wool, and when the fibers are lined up evenly, she works them loose from the carders in one flat pad and rolls the thing up like cinnamon bun dough. These ready-to-spin bundles are the size and shape of a hotdog, and that is what my sister and I used to call them, but my mother calls them by their real name: rolags.

Some Sunday mornings, my mother only made rolags, and the stroking and swiping and pausing to pull unwanted bits was what I heard while she filled her basket with tidy sausages of wool and we all talked or my father read aloud. *Black Beauty,* or *Oliver Twist* or a biography of Wilma Rudolph or the children's version of *The Voyage of the Beagle.* Always my father did the reading so my mother could work with her wool. He reads to her still.

If enough rolags filled her basket, the sounds I heard were the sounds of the wheel pulled close to her chair, the basket moved to her side, and then the first spin of the wheel with her hand, her foot following the motion of the pedal, working it into a rhythm.

My mother's wheel turns without squeaking, but it does not turn silently. It is a rocking chair sound, smooth rolling, up and down, no

clacking, no tapping, just a constant wooden noise of pedal turning wheel. It is a lullaby, a constant humming minus tune. Occasionally my mother's hand stops the wheel so she can take a drink of water, or the pedaling slows while she plucks a stubborn bit of grass from the wool and drops it into the towel on her lap. Other than that, the whirring of the wheel remains constant. When she is finished spinning, there is the sound of a door opening and the tea towel being shaken, snapping, into the bushes.

Growing up, listening and watching, the motions of carding and spinning embedded themselves in my consciousness, rhythmic, repetitive, sensory, soothing. For hours, I listened semi-consciously to the sound of my mother's carders or watched the hypnotic give-and-take motion of spinning: her hand pulling away from the wheel, the puffy fibers between her fingers twisting into strong yarn, her hand's motion reaching its zenith and moving back toward the wheel, letting the spun yarn wind onto the bobbin. Pull away, give back, pull away, and under it all the push of her foot on the pedal, turning the wheel smoothly and steadily.

The Sanskrit word for spinning wheel is *sutra chakramaha*. The literal meaning is thread wheel, or circle, or cycle. Out of the context of "spinning wheel," the two Sanskrit words have much more significant meanings. *Chakramaha* comes from *chakra,* literally circle or wheel, figuratively the basic

energy centers in the body that also correlate to levels of consciousness and the archetypal elements of nature, rotating wheels of life energy. *Charkha,* Gandhi's hand-turned spinning wheel, comes from the same root. *Sutra* is not just "thread," but "sacred thread," specific thoughts used meditatively to more fully connect the body and all the levels of the mind with the threads of pure consciousness. Practicing the *Yoga Sutras* means bringing the mind again and again to the *sutra,* letting the thought appear and disappear until the appearing and disappearing are the same – pure consciousness is fully exalted and the connection between mind and body fully established.

Like the repetitive motions of carding or the pull and release of spinning, the sutras settle and calm; the mind, given something to rest on, is allowed to spread vast and free, infinitely expanded, non-linear. The *Yoga Sutras* say that when one reaches this state of expansion, nothing is beyond comprehension. The mind can understand the simple and the complex, the infinite and infinitesimal, the perceptible and the imperceptible. All can be known and seen and experienced, and the sounds and sights and smells are absolutely present, pure perception.

The interaction between *sutra* and *chakramaha* helps explain why the activities done for pleasure or relaxation can have such important effects. Life's great insights often come when no insight is specifically sought. We walk or jog, thinking only of our feet touching the ground and the breath

moving in and out of our lungs, and suddenly the problem we'd spent an entire day trying to solve slips into finished jigsaw precision. We sit at an easel and focus our attention minutely on a single tulip in a vase, and the world silences and stills. We emerge with a vision that penetrates the fibers of things.

The practice that never ceases to engage my mother and me in this way is spinning. When the wheel begins turning, our hands know their motions without trying – pull and release – and the fine thread of wool forms itself between our fingers. We become still even in our motions, our minds slipping edgeways, rippled like the surfaces of water.

I learned from my mother to go deeply into the things that interest me. When we moved to England for a few years, she gained, suddenly, a much vaster array of sheep and spinning experiences, and immersed herself fully in that country's thriving wool culture. She started with the basic unit of spinning, the sheep in the field, and went from there. Sometimes I was along for her explorations, and they soaked their way into my mind as memories to be woven later into my own wool experiences.

One of these was the first sheep shearing I remember. I was eight years old, and my mother walked my sister and I down the road to Willingdon, and through the gate of the Chalk Farm. We passed the main

house with the springy green lawn where you could sit on a fine day and have scones with cream and spoonfuls of homemade jam. We walked toward the old barn built of chalk-crusted flint, the split faces of rock gleaming dully in the sunshine.

Inside the barn, sheep bleated loudly. A large man opened the gate of a holding pen and pulled out a single sheep from the mass of wooly backs. The ewe tried to keep a toehold on the slippery floor, but the man lifted her swiftly onto her backside and pinned her foreleg behind his thigh. Reaching for the electric clippers that dangled from the ceiling, he sheared down her fleecy belly. Leaning over her and shifting her body here and there he sheared her back leg, her hip, two strokes up her spine, her topknot, neck, and front shoulder, flip again and a few long strokes along the back, the cheek, the remaining legs. Done. He lifted her to her feet and she stood still for a moment, significantly smaller, dazzled. He herded her into another pen, rolled the fleece into one intact, rug-like mass, and laid it in a bin.

I was mesmerized by the seemingly continuous motion of clippers and arms and legs and sheep body. That year I put a National Trust poster of a Southdown sheep on my bedroom wall. I looked differently at wool, examining the flat-cut ends of the fibers and imagining the sheep now running naked in a field. When my mother invited the ladies from the wool guild to come make felt in our kitchen, I asked if I could join them. Eight

years old and painfully shy, I made my way through an hour in a room crowded with strangers and emerged with a lumpy piece of felt and a feeling of vast enjoyment – my first hint of the social ease that comes when I have fiber in my hands.

When Mom went to the annual Fiber Guild fair, I walked the tables with her, no doubt growing bored and antsy, but there nonetheless in the presence of knitters, spinners, weavers, and their handicrafts. Mom bought my sister and me drop spindles and tried to teach us how to use them. They were awkward, unwieldy things, poorly balanced, and so were we. Even standing on a stack of books we couldn't spin a very long thread before needing to wind the spun yarn onto the spindle's shaft and start over again. The spindles were soon permanently housed in a corner basket, growing dusty.

Several years passed, and in them I imagine the desire to have wool in my hands slowly sprouting, seedlike. By the time I was fifteen and we lived in Virginia, I wanted so badly to have my hands in wool that I picked apart an entire fleece I found in the attic, and discovered that though it still made my fingers slick with lanolin, it was no good for spinning. It snapped when I pulled at it. It was just too old and brittle. I picked through it nonetheless, because once I touched it, I could not stop. I imagine back to the film of my

mother pulling at that Suffolk fleece, entranced, and imagine that perhaps it is in the genes, this feeling of ecstasy that comes when wool is in our hands.

In my junior year of high school, my mother took me with her to the local Sheep and Wool Festival. We spent an hour by the stock pens, moving slowly, reaching through iron gates for handfuls of moving fleece. We pushed into thick coats, the depth of our wrists. Oily fleeces, gray on the outside, glistened white in their interiors of fiber. We smelled sheep and their straw and their sweet feed, and our fingers grew thick and shiny with lanolin. We read the breed names to each other lovingly: Corriedale and Merino, Lincoln Longwool, Border Leicester, Southdown, Romney, Jacob and Karakul.

Then we entered the tents filled with yarn and knitting needles. Stall to stall, we felt wool until we found the fleece I wanted: a soft Corriedale. On the drive home I looked at the autumn leaves and told my mother I wanted to dye this fleece the rich red purple of a dogwood tree. That evening I started carding my fleece. Then I began to spin.

At first, spinning feels awkward under the hands. The yarn, rather than being smooth, is, in places, monstrous, in others, so thin it threatens constantly to break. After filling a few lumpy bobbins, though, my limbs understood what they were supposed to do. My hands pulled and released, my foot pedaled effortlessly. I entered the realm of *sutra chakramaha.*

I used my mother's wheel to spin my first fleece. The next was spun on the wheel she gave me one Christmas. Mine is a traveling wheel. It folds up and fits in a canvas carrying bag with a shoulder strap, and I took it with me to college, and back home again during the summers. When I visit now, we sit sometimes, my mother and I, and spin together. We spin quietly, or talk, or listen to Dad read. It is a homey, comfortable thing to do – industrious yet performed almost purely for our simple satisfaction.

I go looking now for information on sheep and spinning and find an ample history and a rich mythology deriving from this ancient craft. Plato likened the axis of the universe to the shaft of a spindle with the starry heavens as the spindle's whorl. Arachne challenged the goddess Minerva to a spinning and weaving match and was turned into a spider. The three Fates spun and measured and cut the threads of mortal life. Spider Woman taught the Navaho the art of spinning. Rumplestilskin spun straw into gold. The use of a whorl at the end of a stick may have facilitated the invention of not just the spinning wheel, but the wheel itself.

I call my mother when I read that the Rambouillet, one of the finest of sheep for fleece, is just a Spanish Merino of a purebred line sent to Louis XIV to rear at a palace near Versailles. I call because I know this quirky bit of information will thrill us both, and it's more fun to share. I call to say we need to take a trip to New Zealand to visit the remote islands where Merinos,

brought and abandoned by explorers, have gone feral, shedding their fleeces as feral sheep have for centuries, becoming resistant to disease and fly-blow. We like talking about sheep and fleece and spinning and knitting. We get giddy.

The page in my dictionary that begins with "woodwaxen" and ends with "Wordsworth" is filled with underlined words. There is a star by woolgathering: "1. the gathering of tufts of wool shed by sheep and caught on bushes. 2. indulgence in idle fancies and in daydreaming; absentmindedness." Absence of mind can be, too, expansion of mind, the slipping edgeways, the productive move away from the linear. Absentmindedness and the gathering of tufts of wool, ready for spinning. We could be woolgatherers, my mother and I.

Back Flips

Down the three steps and onto the paved walk through the backyard, it's summer. It's afternoon, and not yet shady. The cement is warm on my feet and smells that dry and sweet kind of smell, like after it rains and the path dries so fast you can see the spots disappearing. It hasn't rained, but when Mom watered, the hose dribbled on the sidewalk. She's gone inside now, sewing, and my sister is at school, and I'm in the backyard, playing by myself.

I'm four, and I've seen the Olympics, and wish I could do back flips. I am a cautious child. I know my limitations and do not trifle with them, but what my body can't do, my imagination easily accomplishes. I stand on the path between the artichokes and the roses, and I jump high into the air and curve my spine and tilt my head back. I see the top of the little almond tree behind me, and then I'm on my feet again and my teeth click together. It was so quick, and I do it again, this time with my eyes closed so I can see my body making its complete rotation round an invisible axis. The time in the air seems much longer, and my teeth don't clack when I land on my feet.

It is afternoon, and I do not think of any other thing than my body in the air and the soft paddle of my feet on warm cement. I smell Mom's roses, warm in the sun, the scent splashing all around me, like I can smell it through

my skin. I jump again and again. I keep my eyes open now, and on the way up I see gray and deep green, and then blue, blue, and a touch of brilliant verdure that is the almond, and then back down in a rapid blur. Always, out of the corner of my vision, the enormous pom-pom bursts of roses. I am happy. I crouch down close to the cement, and see silvery criss-cross snail paths and smell soil and dampened leaves. I crouch tight like a roly-poly bug and then I push up and out, a kernel of popcorn, my jack-in-the-box, the green almonds we fling arching into blue sky.

March, 2003

It is early spring, and I am thinking about curiosity. I am thinking that curiosity is the sponge that continues and continues to draw in, grow larger, move amoeba-like where it pleases. Curiosity is the sponge that never reaches its saturation point. Curiosity has no internal editor.

Here, living in Montana, I have entered a land populated by unfamiliar creatures. Every time I walk I find scat. I have found what may be the scat of a very well fed marten, fisher, or weasel, but judging from the size is more likely wolverine. In the high forestland above Woods Gulch I find elk scat dappling the ground wherever I walk. Even close to home, a trail leading by the creek revealed bear scat in the late summer, and across the creek, beyond the organic farm, into a field now occupied by horses, I recently found scat I did not at the time know how to identify.

I was walking with my friend Elisabeth who patiently waited while I poked at the scat with a dried yarrow stem and made conjectures. It wasn't dog. It could have, I thought, fit the description of bear scat in drier times of feeding, but the habitat seemed all wrong. I have walked several times now in that field, and it is open and undulating and always filled with deer.

On this walk we pushed further north through the field than I'd been before to a grouping of trees we wanted to explore. On the small animal

trails we followed, I began finding bone, picked clean and drying white in the sun, and the closer we got to the trees, the more bones there were – large bones, deer-sized bones. Live deer scattered in front of us as we made our way over blind ridges. From across the field the trees looked as if they grew in a shallow indentation between hills, but when we got close enough we could see that it is a strange gully, deep and narrow, and at its opening we found the wing of a hawk. Brown and speckled white, the feathers were still smooth, unsullied, the ends of bone dried and graying. A few steps on beside a small boulder we found the leg of this hawk, talons still attached, and found that it was not a wild hawk, but one with a leather band on its leg. I imagined the bird breaking loose from its master, or diving for game and being caught and lost itself. I tried to imagine the creature that could have caught it. I thought of our crazy gray and white cat, brain slightly addled from inbreeding, and the speed and grace with which she snags small birds already in flight, away from the seeds scattered beneath the bird feeder. Cats catch birds, I thought.

We wound through the gully and found more bones, large and small, an old scat full of chokecherry pits, scattered piles of fur, the fuzzy foot of a squirrel, and, at the end, a tight-strung barbed wire fence. Turning around we could not see the opening back out into the field. The sky was dark with a light drizzle of rain, and as we walked through the gully a flock of birds,

invisible to us over the crest of ridge, flew up in a whir of wings, settled, and flew up again. We were both, Elisabeth and I, glad we were not alone.

That evening over dinner with friends, I described the place and a man who grew up and has lived in this area for more than 40 years said simply, "mountain lion." Late that night looking in my *Scats and Tracks* book, both the habitat and the look of the scat I found confirmed. When I told her about the strange, narrow gully another friend said, "You know, don't you, how mountain lions prefer to hunt? They find high places where they can look down on their prey and then drop and snap the unsuspecting creature's neck."

I have walked that field sometimes just as the sun went down. It is something to add to the list of things I have done, unaware of what could have been. I will not stop going to the field, though, nor, do I think, will it stop me from going back once to that strange, quiet gully, but I will not go alone. For once I am glad that my eyes and sleep habits cause me to walk mainly in daylight hours.

I may never, in its natural habitat, see the creature whose scat I found. If I could follow invisibly the supple shanks and waving tail moving along the edge of the field and watch the creature nod its head, sniffing at the breeze, and see it crouching high at the top of that gully, waiting for deer to edge in (and from bits of scat I can see that they do, sometimes, venture a

little ways in); if I could see the leap and hear the snap of spine and neck; if I could see these things, hidden from view, safe, invisible and unscented, would it be as I imagine it? Why do I imagine it?

"Fictions"

Respite

The marketplace was hot and smelled of garbage and fish curing in salt. It was still foreign to Anna – the black women walking with huge bundles balanced on their heads, baskets of christophene or heavy bunches of bananas; the rasta men, thin and wiry with large, brilliantly colored berets covering long dreadlocks; and the confusing darkness of the covered market after the blinding sun.

Though she could understand the island English for the most part, it was still like a new, exotic language, dancing out of throats in the same swirling motion as Calypso music. As she moved through the market, she listened to people talking, and found herself lost in the sounds, hearing only the rhythm and inflection, losing track of the words themselves. Jacob's tug on her hand was the one familiar thing.

When Anna reached the middle of the market, she found Josephine, the egg lady, sitting in her folding chair. Jacob was shy and hid behind Anna, wrapping one tanned arm around her legs. "Ah, good morning, Anna!" Josephine said, and Anna found herself blushing, surprised to hear her own name. She never expected people to remember it.

"Can I have just eight eggs today, please?" Anna asked.

"You can have however many you like, woman. If you want one, I give you the best one, so it lasts longer in your stomach." Josephine grinned at her and Anna wished she could pull up a chair next to this comfortable woman. She watched the lined hands lift and sort eggs quickly, like a magic trick. Josephine was so sure of herself. Anna felt a pang of envy and another of loneliness. If they had known each other their whole lives, they could talk about business, and weather, and people they knew. Henry would do it now, and she wished he could come with her to the market rather than being in classes. He would introduce her to strangers. "You don't belong here," the voice in her head whispered. "They wouldn't want to talk with you."

Anna pulled coins from her purse and handed them to Josephine. The woman dropped them in her box and reached under the table. She straightened her back and held up a tiny Banty egg. "A Jacob-size egg," she said and added it to the carton.

"Oh," Anna breathed. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure, woman! I wouldn't do it otherwise." Josephine waved her hand at Anna and laughed. "You've got to loosen yourself up and just take what the friendly people give you."

"Thanks," Anna said.

Jacob reached up and ran a small finger over the smooth roundness of the egg. He smiled and whispered, "Thank you."

Another woman came to stand at the table, and Anna smiled her goodbye and guided Jacob out into the sunshine. They walked past the courtyard shaded by palm trees where the post office and the prison squatted next to each other. The smell of salt water became less as the road turned uphill. Jacob tugged on her hand as they passed between the stone church and the graveyard. "Look, Mom. That tub with the water in it? That's the jumby-water. The boy down the road said if you have to walk through the graveyard, wipe some of that water on your forehead and the jumbies can't get you."

"What are jumbies, Jacob?"

"You can't see them, but they creep up behind you and make your neck cold, and then they can get you."

"They make your neck cold?"

He nodded and she didn't think he looked afraid, but it was broad daylight now. He darted glances behind himself still when they walked in the dark, and he held tight to both hands offered him, hers and Henry's, if they all walked together in the evenings.

"Jumbies aren't real," she said. "People believe things like that sometimes, but it's not true." It was, though, a perfect description of worry, how it tickled the hairs of your neck and how, if you couldn't slap it away it filled your entire body like cold clammy sand.

That evening as they sat together at dinner, Henry reached for the candles set close to the table in a little cupboard. He lit one and the small room brightened.

"Here, Jacob. Why don't you light the other one?"

Jacob dropped his fork and put his hands under the table. "Do I have to?"

"Haven't you ever lit a match before?"

Jacob shook his head.

Henry grinned over at Anna, "Well, that's a real oversight on my part, isn't it?" He stood up from the table and walked to Jacob's seat. "I loved lighting matches when I was a kid. See. You just swipe it over the rough part and it lights up. Easy." He lit a match with a flick of his wrist and blew it out. "You do it."

Jacob pulled a wooden match out of the box and rolled it between his fingers, then scratched it lightly across the rough strip on the side. Nothing happened and he looked up into his father's expectant face.

"Do it harder and it'll go," Henry said. Jacob scratched the match again, a little harder, but not enough for it to catch. "Come on," Henry said. "I know you can do it harder."

He swiped the match one more time and suddenly the flame flared up. Anna clapped and Jacob looked at it for a moment then blew hard on it until the flame went out. He rubbed at his nose and tears started up in his eyes. Henry looked down at him.

"Sulfur up the nose?" he asked. Jacob nodded, face turned down. "Want to try again and light this candle?"

Jacob shook his head adamantly and Henry laughed and tousled the hair on the back of his son's head. "Another time, then."

After Jacob was in bed, Anna tidied the kitchen while Henry went through the mail on the counter. She squeezed out the sponge, then stood looking through the window into darkness at the dim shapes of trees and water and bougainvilleas.

"I don't understand why he was so worried about lighting the match," Henry said. His blue eyes looked gray in the dim light.

"You wouldn't. You're never like that, afraid of things that aren't really that scary."

He grinned at her, his big, boyish grin, crooked and curious. "Of course I get scared about things. I've just learned how to make those things look small enough to myself that they seem harmless. Then it usually turns out they are." He watched her, smiling.

Anna gave a short laugh and started putting away dishes. "What is it, Henry? What are you cooking up? I see that look."

Henry tapped a pencil on the counter. "I invited someone over for dinner tomorrow."

Anna swung around to look at him. "Henry, you didn't! Who?"

"Dr. Nelson."

"Isn't he the head of the department? Why didn't you ask me first?"

"Because I didn't think you'd mind. You always liked having company back home. I thought it would be a good change."

"Change!" She felt her face get hot and the blood fill her ears. "The only change I'm thinking about right now is the kind that lets you buy things, like fish or bread."

Henry looked at her. "We're almost out?"

She nodded. "Your mom's check won't get here until Friday – Thursday at the earliest."

"Dr. Nelson is easygoing. He won't expect a feast, especially at such late notice."

"And he won't get one, either!" She glared at her husband, unsure whether what she felt was more anger or fear. She couldn't be angry with him. It was impossible to stay angry with Henry, and when that subsided just the fear remained.

"I'm sorry, Anna. I know I should've asked you first. You've been stuck in this house, though, for a month now, and you're not getting to know anybody."

Anna couldn't look at his eyes. She knew he was trying to read her, watching for something. She knew he worried about her. She opened the fridge and he came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her small shoulders. He kissed her head and pointed at the carton of eggs. "An omelet would be nice." Anna nodded, and he squeezed her tight. "You'll figure something out, and whatever it is, it'll be wonderful."

Sure there were eggs, but what would they eat for the rest of the week until the check arrived, Anna wondered as she flipped through flashcards the next morning with Jacob. She was proud of Henry for pursuing his dream of medical school, coming here to this island school when nothing else panned out. He had a brilliant mind but he'd been in and out of universities, finding it difficult to settle down for long enough to focus. She had thought Jacob would take after him, leaping off after things. "Dipping around crazy like a dragonfly," Henry's mother had said when Anna asked what Henry was like as a little boy. Instead Jacob took after her. In crowds he walked lightly, carefully placing his feet as if the ground in front of him might crumble away.

It was because of her, being with her so much. It must be. Or was it genetic? Had he been born shy?

She had pulled the chairs and card table and books out into the yard, frightening away a few long iguanas sunning themselves on the grass. It was a beautiful day and the sun felt good soaking into her skin, warming her dark, curly hair. She took a small pleasure in the brilliant blue sky playing against the red hibiscus flowers that surrounded the house, but couldn't dismiss the dull feeling that lay over her body.

Jacob squirmed and said, "Mom, we've gone through this batch twice and I haven't missed any. Can't we do something different?" She thought for a moment, then jumped up and went inside. She came out holding something behind her back.

"What is it? What is it, Mom?"

Jacob tried to reach behind her and she said, "Hold out your hand and close your eyes."

She put a new box of Rosebud`matches in his palm. When he opened his eyes, his excitement dimmed noticeably.

"Wait, Jake. When Dad had you do that last night I remembered that I was afraid of lighting matches until I was 10 – that's twice your age. You know how I stopped being afraid of them?" Jacob shook his head. "Grandpa

gave me a box of matches and told me if I could light all of them in less than five minutes he'd take me to the A&W for a root beer float."

"And you did it?"

"I did it."

"And you weren't afraid anymore?"

"I was so *unafraid* I almost burned the house down, lighting matches any chance I got. You want to try it?"

"There's no A&W here."

"I'll get you an ice cream when we go to town on Friday."

Jacob leaned his head back and twisted up the corner of his mouth the way Henry did when he was thinking things through. "All right. I'll do it."

As he looked at the box, Anna remembered her own silly, childish hands shaking so that the matches rattled against each other. She didn't want him to grow up like this. She didn't want herself to be like this.

"You can do it, Jake." She smiled at him and he grinned back. "Tell me when you're ready."

"Ready!" he shouted, and opened the box.

Anna looked at her watch. "Go!"

The first few times, Jacob scratched the matches lightly like he had last night. Twice the sulfur burned his nostrils, but by the end he was thwacking the wooden sticks so hard three of them broke. She cheered each time a small

match tip somersaulted into the yard. She watched him afterward, proud and full of energy, dancing around the yard. She knew she envied him.

As Anna made Jacob a sandwich at lunch, she tried to gather energy from each vigorous scrape of the peanut butter jar that was empty according to normal standards. She took a quick look in the fridge and cupboards, calculating. If Henry's professor wasn't coming, there would be just enough to get by until the check came. Enough. Enough. She closed her eyes and leaned against the counter and whistled. She couldn't remember if the tune was Mozart or early Beethoven, but it was simple and sweet. Jacob ran into the kitchen like he always did when he heard her whistling. He tried to whistle along, but only fragments of sound came from his puckered lips.

"Let's go exploring, Jake." She paused for a moment, surprised with herself. "We'll take the afternoon off."

When they arrived on the island two months ago, there had been the bumpy drive in an ancient taxi around the volcano from the airport at the north end of the island to their house at the south end, just 12 miles away. After that there had been walks into town to the market and the bank, and down the cliff path from their house to the water. The black sand beach was familiar with its sulfurous hot pond lying deep at the base of a gulch,

surrounded by thorny, scrubby trees. But the inland road was unexplored. They had walked up a little ways but turned back when the houses began to get sparse. Anna looked out the open window after lunch and decided on the inland road. She put a bottle of water in her old backpack and swung it over her shoulder.

Beyond the hibiscus hedge, the houses became by degrees more dilapidated until they weren't really houses anymore, but odds and ends of plywood and tin roofing nailed together in the shape of a box. Anna peered through an open doorway and could just make out the large shape of a bed filling a single room almost to its borders. Chickens scratched in the yard.

It was a hot day, but dry, and a slight breeze cooled the sweat on their faces. They stopped for a moment in the shade of a low, wide tree at the edge of the road. Hanging beneath the hand-shaped leaves were odd fruits the size of a newborn baby's head. "Breadfruit," Anna told Jacob as she fingered a bumpy green sphere. She'd seen them in the market and heard they used to be a staple food on sugar plantations, but she was not at all sure what to do with them and had avoided them. Now she took hold of one large fruit and twisted it in her hand, round and round like she used to do with the lemons at home, until it popped off its stem. It was heavy and she put it and two more into her backpack.

They walked back out into the sun, past a large, dry field with a few rangy goats. The sweat dried on her skin and she thought of being twelve, alone for an afternoon, walking the miles-long beach, how she walked and walked, and felt for the first time that she was someone individual, that she was a person, and that the feeling was both welcome and frightening. The big changes seemed to come quickly like that. Before the walk she was her parents' daughter, her brother's sister, and afterward she was still those things, but more. She was shy before that and after, but the shyness became more personal. She became aware of her body, and stiffened it, awkward. She became aware that she didn't understand people, not even her family sometimes, that she didn't know what people wanted, or why they wanted it. She became aware that living required pretense, pretending to know how to do things, moving forward in some direction and figuring things out on the fly, the forward momentum that made crossing a creek the near miss, one foot placed before the other, scrambling, keeping going until the other side was reached. She always reached the other side, but she didn't know how.

People began ascribing names for what they thought she was: capable, clever, able. When she heard the names she thought to herself, I have fooled them. Almost twenty years ago the change had come, and still she was that shy girl walking the beach, skin growing salty with sweat and sea air. Thinking about it made her legs jumpy like she needed to mover her body

fast to rid it of some latching, corrosive irritation. She felt like running, or kicking, or doing something she didn't know she could do – jumping the barbed wire fence like a deer. She bounced on the balls of her feet with each step, knowing she couldn't walk faster with Jacob there.

For a long time they walked, and the road narrowed and twisted uphill. Anna looked at Jacob to see if he was too tired to go on, but he still moved energetically, and now and then he blew through puckered lips, practicing his tuneless whistle. Tall trees covered the road ahead, and Anna could see dark cocoa bean pods hanging high in the canopy.

In the deep shade of the trees, Anna's skin felt like it was shrinking after the warmth of the sun, contracting in on itself now in the cool. Her eyes shifted slowly, adjusting to the dim light. Far off to her left on another road, a car backfired once loudly, and her body jerked, startled. With the motion, something seemed to lift and float in her. Her feet moved and she felt the weight of the breadfruit on her back, but it felt like her back was far away, and her legs moved without her making them – a padded numbness of feeling, like a foot gone to sleep. She turned her head again to look at Jacob, and he was walking on like normal, peering now through the vegetation to the speckled sunshine beyond, trying to see out to the field and the road beyond. He looked distant too, and the sound of his whistle seemed to come

through cotton. She turned her face forward, up the road, and let the strange legs carry her.

The smell of trees was not familiar – dry, pungent, almost sweet. She felt strange, intoxicated, and tried to isolate the feeling she had about this place and the smell, how the very unfamiliarity let her move easily and with this sense of being unreal. She was tired of trying to be real. Trying to be real. When she had this thought, she saw it like an enormous butterfly, like the one she and Jacob had seen a few days ago in the yard. It floated near her shoulder, undulating softly. Another thought emerged, and this one lifted higher, floating toward the cocoa bean pods. She had the feeling that she should try to reach for it and keep it from escaping, but her arms did not feel like lifting, so she let it go. Ha, she thought. Ha, ha. She could hear the sound of the thought far away like the recorded voice on a phone left off the hook too long, "Sorry, you're not good enough. Sorry, you're not good enough." Tinny, mechanical. The thoughts started flying up around her then, swarming like black flies, biting with a surprisingly transitory sting. Single adjectives she'd given herself: stiff, awkward, inept, boring, fradey cat. Some thoughts didn't seem to have words but were just swirling senses of things – not a good mother, not a good wife, not acceptable, just doesn't get it. She watched these thoughts curiously. Buzzing around her, they looked transparent, so very insubstantial. They looked ridiculous. "Ha," she

thought and swatted at them with her numb arms, numb hands flopping like mop heads. "Go away," she thought. "Go away!" They scattered and became small through the trees. It was as easy as that. She marveled at how easy it was, and how tired the effort had made her. Her skin felt hot and she wondered, briefly, if she had sunstroke. She sank down at the side of the road on a patch of grass and closed her eyes.

When she woke, two small, blue eyes were staring down at her.

"Mom?" Jacob's voice was husky, shaken. "Are you o.k. Mom?"

Anna sat up quickly and pulled her feet under her. She looked at the sky through the trees and saw that the sun was still high. She looked at Jacob again and saw the tremor in his arms and small knees. She put her hand up to her mouth and wondered, for a second, why, and then the laughter came. It bubbled out of her, a little ugly at first, heaving, and then loosened until it sounded to her like the voice of a little girl, round, succulent tones and deep belly laughs. Jacob dropped down to his knees beside her and put his hands on her arm, and she could see that he couldn't decide what to do, laugh or cry. She turned to him and cupped his face in her hands.

"I'm fine, Jake. I'm great. I'm so glad you're here." She kissed him on the forehead and pulled them both up to their feet. "We'd better get home and make something good for dinner. We've got company coming tonight."

She held his hand and they started back down the road. The breadfruit bounced against her back. "We'll have an omelet," she said to Jacob, "and breadfruit, and coconut from the yard, and we'll ask the man next door for a mango or two from his backyard. We'll do something nice for him. He keeps offering. It'll be a real feast." Jacob nodded beside her and grinned up in her face, swinging her arm. He did a little sideways skip dance and she did one too.

Small shadows floated behind her, she knew. They would be there for some time. It didn't matter. They would be replaced. Sometimes, maybe, they would be the same thoughts, but she would let Henry see them in her eyes and laugh with him until they went away. She would splash jumby water from the cemetery trough. She would pull up a chair and swat flies with Josephine.

Benedicte

Mornings, sometimes, were like phone calls from people Helen loved on days when all she wanted to do was be quiet. Three-year old Lily, usually so subdued, was stirred into squeals by her older sister's energetic voice. Serena twirled around the kitchen, calling to her shoes as if they were dogs that would come if she used just the right friendly tone.

"If I were my shoes, where would I be?" she shouted finally, and Lily, like a well-trained parrot, repeated the words almost before they were out of her sister's mouth.

"They're not under the sink," Serena shouted.

"Not under the sink."

"They're not under the table."

"Not under the table."

Serena pranced out of the kitchen and through the living room. The further away her sister's voice got, the more quietly Lily's echoes came. She picked up her spoon, finally, and took a bite of the cereal Helen had poured her. Lily chewed methodically, and as she chewed she prodded a cheerio with her spoon, pushing it under the surface of the milk and then letting it float back to the top. She did this many times, thoughtfully, before taking

another bite. Helen watched her daughter's face, her eyes, her tiny lips, and her ears as they moved up and down with each chew. She watched the fingers wrapped precisely around the spoon, and then she watched the cheerio itself, pushed and released, again and again, and let her eyes stay there, getting sleepy and unfocused.

The clock in the living room sounded its four notes for the quarter hour and she shook herself loose. "Come eat your breakfast, Serena," she called. "We have to leave in ten minutes."

"I can't find my shoes," her daughter shouted from somewhere in the back of the house. Helen got up and traced the sound of Serena's muffled feet to the bathroom. "They're not in here, Mom," Serena said, her voice pitched high with worry.

"I'll find them," Helen said. "You go eat some cereal." Helen gave her a gentle nudge out the door and walked down the hall to the bedroom the girls shared. She stood for a moment in the doorway. The room was a tangle of bright colors – beanbags, capes, Lego's, the painted posts of the loft Bill had built. She wondered how the girls could sleep in that chaos of objects and if their dreams were manipulated by the things they had to step over on their way to bed.

She walked into the room and picked up the pile of clothes Serena had deposited on the floor yesterday. Under the tangle of arms and legs were the

red sneakers, and she felt a moment of triumph. She was a mother. Mothers knew the answer to the riddle of sneakers.

Outside, it was cool still, with the shadowy feeling of early mornings. On the sidewalk, both girls held Helen's hands. When they crossed the street and stepped into the field that lay between their house and the school a block to the west, Serena broke loose and ran down the path. Lily quickly followed, her blue corduroy pants looking as if they were doing the running, not the tiny legs themselves. The grasses were tall, but Helen didn't worry when all she could see of the girls was the flicking top of Serena's ponytail.

They had found a monarch chrysalis a week ago, hanging green and smooth beneath a rubbery milkweed leaf, and had checked on it every day. When Helen caught up with them, Lily's little fingers were gently moving plant stems nearby while Serena talked to the creature, urging it to hatch quickly. From near the school Helen heard a loud voice, a woman calling to her child, telling him not to eat the playdough. For a moment she thought the woman was coming down the path and that she would have to lift her head and say hello and exchange a few friendly words. Some days that would be fine, even welcome. She looked up the path, over the tall grass where it curved, and saw the woman moving away, toward the street. Helen looked

down and smoothed her finger over a milkweed leaf and then took Lily's hand in her own. It was time for school.

Lily walked a little behind her now. The noise and burst of color that was Serena's kindergarten made Lily's face red, leaving blond eyebrows stranded like two bright fish in a tidepool. Serena ran ahead still, but turned back quickly when they neared the chain-link fence. She let Helen kiss her on the cheek, then opened the gate and joined the tangled crowd of children.

Helen felt a measure of solitude sink into her. Back down the path, there was no running ahead now. Lily was content to hold her mother's cool hand and walk silently beside her. Helen let her senses slow down to draw in the morning sounds and smells – a mockingbird rapidly changing songs, the muffled, steady hum of traffic a few blocks away, and the dry, sweet smells of eucalyptus and oleander. Out of the corner of her eye she watched the curly blond head beside her swinging from side to side like a cat's attentive ear. She felt in Lily's constant weight on her hand the relaxation of trust – she was Lily's guide, for the small blue eyes, though far from blind, were not following the path at all.

Back inside, Helen put crayons, paper and scissors on the little table in the sewing room. Lily sat down while Helen opened her machine and started to work. The sounds and motions of sewing were familiar and comforting. While Lily drew shapes and big swaths of color, Helen pinned and stitched

and pressed. When she was halfway through the left sleeve, a breeze came through the open window and set the row of prisms there in motion. Patches of colored light swam over the room. Helen let the sewing machine stop and turned to see Lily holding her crayon suspended over the paper. Looking back at the wall, it was hard to follow the individual flashes, and Helen slowly unfocused her eyes so all she saw was motion and color in one uninterrupted flow.

The heavy prisms gradually stilled, and Lily looked at Helen and laughed. When Lily laughed it was a wonderful thing – sometimes it set Helen's scalp tingling. The little girl picked up three crayons and tried to hold them all together to make parallel lines. Helen turned back to her work. It was a simple pattern, one she had done many times for the same woman in different fabrics, always beautiful fabrics. It didn't matter, really, whether Helen liked the fabric or not, but still she cared more about a piece if her fingers lingered on the softness of it, or the texture, or if her eyes did not feel jarred as she pushed the material under the needle. She was glad to have the work, and to be at home with first Serena, now Lily. It was easier with Lily, but even Serena had kept herself occupied most of the time while Helen cut and pieced and stitched.

Pinning the length of the skirt seam, Helen heard Lily pick up a sheet of construction paper and her scissors and quietly sit behind the sewing chair,

close. It was a habit Lily had created for herself, the little, dull scissors chewing away at the paper until all that was left was a tidy pile of brightly colored confetti on the gold carpet. When Lily did this, her body seemed to draw into itself and become compact and focused, absolutely still apart from the motion of her arms shifting paper and scissors. Helen understood.

After some time she realized the scissors had gone quiet. She turned in her chair and found the little girl curled on her side, sound asleep. The paper was half gone, lying on the floor next to the confetti. Lily's cutting had a rhythm that made Helen's own eyes want to close if she was still and put down her work to listen. Lily would sleep through the whir of the sewing machine, but Helen didn't start sewing, though she had finished pinning the last seams.

The silence was complete and she closed her eyes for a moment to listen. Lily always napped. Most days Helen left the girl sleeping where she lay, or put her on the big bed in her own room and washed counters and floors or sewed until Lily woke up and walked through the house slowly, her belly poking out from under her shirt, to find Helen. She needed hugging then, and time sitting together in one of the living room chairs, waking up slowly. Helen liked those times and didn't mind stopping her work to smooth her daughter's reemergence.

Another breeze came through the window, more gently. The prisms stirred and spun slowly, and Helen caught the scent of jasmine this time from across the backyard. There were things to be done, but today let them sit, she thought, and quietly she lifted the pinned dress from her lap and laid it beside the sewing machine. Moving carefully, though she knew Lily would not wake, she opened the cabinet and reached a cloth bag from the top shelf, and a large roll of fabric that leaned in the back. It was heavier than she remembered, and bulged larger than she had thought. It had only been a few weeks since she'd last lifted it out, and already she'd forgotten how much she'd done.

She crept out of the room and through the screen door to the wide porch. The bamboo hedge rustled gently in a breeze Helen could barely feel on her forearms. The neighbors had begun complaining of shoots coming up in their yards, but she loved the green wall of giant grasses. She liked the way it moved and shushed and made the porch invisible from the road. She listened, and behind the sound of the bamboo she heard tires crackling on gravel, the mailboxes at the edge of the property being opened and closed. One, two. She listened for the third to open and it didn't. She heard the crunch of a foot stepping down onto gravel and steps walking toward the wooden gate. She could slip inside and wait while he rang the doorbell and pretend nobody was home. But the doorbell was loud and might wake Lily.

She would have to speak to him, she supposed, and was surprised how difficult it seemed having to produce words. She listened a moment longer before she would have to start down the steps and toward the gate to meet him. The dog next door barked and the muted sound of the McCullough's doorbell floated over the gate to her. She felt the pulsing at her throat. She shook her head at herself and bent over the bags at her feet.

She pulled an old white sheet out of the bag and flung it billowing across the boards of the porch. She laid the roll of fabric at one end and undid it slowly. Colors emerged, and shapes. It was beginning to look right.

She had seen the stained glass window years ago when she lived in Virginia with her family, and went to a baptism just to see the Tiffany glass. After the service, they had stayed until everyone else was gone. They walked around the perimeter picking out the Tiffany's from the older, duller works. It was quiet except for their voices. Her father had bought them each bookmarks of the most beautiful of the windows, the one she had picked out as soon as they sat down in the pews and she had glanced quickly around the chapel. She had taken care of the bookmark, which was long and shiny and a good reproduction. She had kept it only in large books that kept it flat and hidden from wear. Now she put it down beside her work as a reference.

When Serena was a baby and Helen was no longer on her own during the days, she had almost gone crazy. Bill had tried to come home early to

give her a break, but when he was home, she wanted to be with him and did not do the things she used to love doing alone – walking, pulling weeds, reading outside under the redwood tree in the backyard. Serena didn't sleep much during the day, and slept only lightly, so Helen had to always be close by.

It was her mother's idea to start sewing for people. Orders began coming in, and she could do them while Serena amused herself in the playpen. Helen started earning money, but even better than that, she started getting orders from people with extravagant tastes in fabric – women who spent hours in a store testing the feel of fabrics between their fingers, checking colors against each other, waiting for the perfect bolt of cloth. There were always scraps left over, and they were too beautiful to throw away. A year ago, she had been given an entire roll of a heavy, cream-colored blend of cotton and linen from a woman who thought she might be able to use it. The fabric sat for weeks in Helen's sewing closet before she decided she would not use it for someone else. She would create the window, making it look as it did the day she saw it in Virginia, brilliant with sunshine.

She fingered the fabric now, smoothing her hand across its surface where, at the top, she had almost finished filling in the morning glory flowers. Her fingers felt silk, rayon, soft cotton. The colors glowed and rippled where solids gave way to runnels of batik and Indian tie-die. The

starred white centers of the trumpet-shaped flowers were mottled like the glass they imitated, and the variegated leaves were patterned organdy, not too symmetric as she had originally feared. She had finished the trunks of the five cypress trees but not the foliage, and they stood bare and graceful beneath the twined drape of flowers.

From the bottom of the bag she pulled a handful of blue-toned fabrics. Today she would start the stream that ran through the middle of the window and emptied into a pool at the bottom left. She loved water, and as she worked, piecing and cutting, she imagined she heard the sound of the creek at home. The sharp scissors cut cleanly through a piece of turquoise rayon, curving around white fish and bouquets of fan coral. The sound of bamboo, the rustle of papery, swaying leaves, sounded just like water, and the muted sunlight illuminated the tapestry. Her little girl was sleeping, and she was alone. When she was alone, she didn't have to smile. She felt the smile tickling through her skin and up toward her mouth, but her face could stay still in concentration.

She worked quickly, but carefully, and precisely. There wasn't much time. Lily would sleep for forty minutes, an hour at most. Of course, there was no reason why, really, she shouldn't work on it after Lily woke up, except that the work was hers. It was her solitude, her hide-away. She hadn't even told Bill about it, thinking first that she had better see if she could do it,

then that she would surprise him when she had finished. So far along now, she hadn't decided whether she would show it to him or to anyone for quite some time. There was no hurry. She would wait and see.

In the back of her mind, she listened as the clock in the living room marked the quarter hour, and then the half. She leaned over the water, up where she was sure it spilled from the hillside. The bookmark was so small she couldn't tell, but she felt it was there, and so she cut and pinned a small trickle gurgling out of the blue and mauve and green earth far in the distance. "Benedicte," she whispered to herself. "Benedicte." It was a church word, and she had never been a part of church. To bless, or blessings, or blessed, she wasn't sure, but when she worked, she saw the letters curving at the foot of the window even when she wasn't looking at them. They would be stitched on last, but she had cut them already out of a swirled brown fabric like cream and coffee that haven't been stirred completely together.

The chime of the three-quarter hour jolted her. She put in a few last pins, then swept up scraps, packing them into the bottom of the bag. She carefully rolled the fabric from the bottom, making sure the pins stayed in and lingering over the twine of morning glories again for a moment before tying the cord around it all. She slipped through the screen door and tiptoed to the sewing room. She could hear Lily's breathing, louder and snuffling now, waking up. She went in quietly and stashed her things away.

Tomorrow she would do more. The vacuuming could wait another day. She lifted Lily into her arms and walked to the living room armchair. "Benedicte," she whispered into her daughter's sweet-smelling hair.

While Helen cut vegetables for lunch, Lily sat on the kitchen stool and watched, gnawing on the end of carrot Helen had given her. "Will the butterfly come out soon?" she asked.

Helen hadn't thought of the monarch all morning and was surprised that Lily had. She imagined the chrysalis, swollen and taut as her own pregnant belly had been. She imagined the stretch and slow pumping flutter of damp, jewel-colored wings before the creature could lift into the air. "Maybe soon," she said. "You don't want to rush something like being born." She helped Lily get her shoes on.

From across the field they could hear the children shouting and see their brilliant shapes flitting back and forth across the playground. It was almost past time to get Serena for lunch, but they stopped at the milkweed patch, breathless. There hung the chrysalis, still and intact. Lily put her lips close and whispered to it, "We'll wait for you."

Helen scooped Lily into her arms and the little girl smiled and fitted her shape to her mother's. She played her fingers through Helen's hair and sang under her breath in words Helen could not hear.

Serena separated from out of the crowd of children and ran toward them. She skipped at Helen's side and answered questions about her morning, settling quickly into a flow of stories. Lily squirmed in Helen's arms and asked to be put down. She peered around her mother's body to Serena's quickly moving legs and imitated the motion, settling for a jerky half-skip. All Lily's attention was on her feet now and on her sister's energetic body. At the street, both girls took her hands and skipped across. Helen thought of the rest of the day, noise and motion now until the girls were asleep. It was all right, though. She felt the jerk and swing of her daughters' bodies like fish at the end of a line. She thought of the chrysalis alone on the milkweed branch and the roll of fabric in the cupboard. Two quietudes, they settled in her like sand into water.