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# Hit the Ground Running: A Novella and Other Stories

Lisa Robinson

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**Hit the Ground Running:  
A Novella and Other Stories**

Thesis submitted to  
The Graduate College of  
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
English

by

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## ABSTRACT

Hit the Ground Running: A Novella and Other Stories

Lisa Robinson

This creative thesis contains a collection of short stories divided into two parts. The first half, a novella entitled *Clothes on a Line*, consists of a series of linked vignettes that depict the life of a young, unnamed Appalachian girl and her relationship with her promiscuous mother. Throughout the work, the narrator struggles to create and come to terms with her identity as she experiences the adversities of sexual abuse, death, alcoholism, and the looming “secret” of her unknown father. The second half, *Consumed and Other Stories*, features several short pieces that, while not inter-related like those in the novella, are tied together because they deal in some way with the idea of being consumed, be it emotionally or physically. Often, the stories are grounded within the realm of possibility, but assume unexpected, even bizarre, dimensions.

*For Jim. Red 7.*

## Acknowledgements

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Thanks Mom and Dad. For everything.

Thanks to my friends and fellow students for reading some of these stories and providing invaluable input.

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and Professor John Van Kirk, another among the finest, who I can't thank enough for agreeing to direct my thesis, for the generous amount of time he devoted to me, and for his insight. I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with all of you.

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## Introduction

Because of my conflicting interests in style, voice, and subject matter, I decided to divide my thesis into two parts in order to more thoroughly explore these interests. The first half, a novella entitled *Clothes on a Line*, consists of a series of linked vignettes that depict the life of a young, unnamed Appalachian girl and her relationship with her promiscuous mother, as they move from rented home to rented home in West Virginia. Throughout the work, the narrator struggles to create and come to terms with her identity as she experiences the adversities of physical and sexual abuse, death, alcoholism, and the looming “secret” of her unknown father. She is also at odds with her surroundings and dreams of escaping the hills of West Virginia, of slinging a backpack over her shoulder and walking away from what she views as a confining environment.

Having grown up and spent almost my entire life in West Virginia, Southern culture—its language, literature, people, and idiosyncrasies—has over the years provided me with a wealth of material and inspiration. I can’t think of a place on earth more colorful (both literally and figuratively), beautiful, and just plain *weird* (Mothman, Jesco White, to name a few) than my home state. But like the narrator in *Clothes on a Line*, I have also, at times, wanted to run from my roots, and have struggled to resist its influence on my writing. I began working on this novella after a fiction workshop professor advised me to strive for something higher, to shift toward stories more “literary,” more grounded in the real, rather than the kind of fiction I am currently interested in writing (and which appears in the second half of this thesis). Because I respected her opinion, as well as agreed with it, I set out to write stories that corresponded with my notions of what “literary” means. These included linear, credible plots, realistic settings, and characters

whose actions are plausible—essentially, stories that do what we expect them to do. However, while they are written in a somewhat straightforward, linear manner, the vignettes in *Clothes on a Line* sometimes take on less conventional forms. “I Had This Dream,” for instance, is composed entirely in one sentence, “Borrowed Clothes,” unlike the rest of the novella, is written in the second person, and “Sherry Chases Birds” contains a dissected sentence inserted in parentheses throughout that the reader has to piece together. In addition, I employ punctuation in unusual ways. For example, I capitalize words for which capitalization is not appropriate or necessary, run words together, like “runnywhiteshit,” and frequently use parentheticals.

Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (1984) functions as the major influence of *Clothes on a Line* (I’ve come to view my work as the greatly inferior Appalachian version of *House on Mango Street*, only without the house), but I also include as influential Sherwood Andersen’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), Kaye Gibbons’s *Ellen Foster* (1987), Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Bean Trees* (1988), Bobbie Ann Mason’s *Shiloh and Other Stories* (1982), Terese Svoboda’s *Trailer Girl and Other Stories* (2001), and, in general, the fiction of Flannery O’Conner.

The second half of my thesis, *Consumed and Other Stories*, features several short pieces that, while not inter-related like those in *Clothes on a Line*, are tied together because they deal in some way with the idea of being consumed, be it emotionally or physically. Often, the stories are grounded within the realm of possibility—set in seemingly ordinary environs like apartment buildings or small towns, and populated with characters whose aspirations and relationships appear typical—but assume unexpected, even bizarre, dimensions. For instance, in the titular piece, a couple consumed by their

love for one another decide to sell their body parts so that they can avoid work and spend their every waking moment “wrapped in each other’s arms like two rare monkeys at the zoo.” In “Weight,” a thin woman’s world is turned upside down when obesity becomes chic. In some cases, the stories blur the boundaries between poetry and prose, play with language, employ unusual descriptions and metaphors, and adopt an almost surreal tone.

The work featured in this section is stylistically influenced by current fiction published in so-called “alternative” or “experimental” literary magazines such as *3<sup>rd</sup> Bed*, *Fence*, *Exquisite Corpse* (the now-defunct print journal has an online presence), and *Quarter After Eight*. In addition, various collections have served as guidance and inspiration, including Aimee Bender’s *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* (1999), Judy Budnitz’s *Flying Leap* (1998), Lorrie Moore’s *Birds of America* (1999), Stacey Richter’s *My Date with Satan* (1999), Julia Slavin’s *The Woman Who Cut Off Her Leg at the Maidstone Club* (1999), as well as the novels *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy, and *John Dollar* (1989) by Marianne Wiggins.

My interest in writing what are often regarded by those kind enough to read them as “bizarre” or “postmodern” or “non-traditional” stories—like many in the collections listed above—occurred rather recently. For the past few years, I’ve looked to the preeminent literary journals, like *The New Yorker*, *Ploughshares*, and *The Paris Review* among others, to see what’s being published and what I should be writing if I want to be published. These are, after all, the magazines from which the “best of the best” fiction is selected and subsequently featured in such prestigious anthologies as *The Best American Short Stories* and *The O. Henry Awards: Prize Stories*. What I noticed about many of the narratives in these collections and magazines, though, was that they all seemed variations

on the same themes: a woman dying of cancer tries to re-connect with her estranged son, for instance, or a couple struggles to save their marriage in the wake of their baby's death, or any number of similar rather dark, yet true-to-life subjects. While these are perfectly worthwhile and perhaps "universal" experiences to explore (if any experience can be called universal), I found myself limited by them as a writer, and at a loss for ways of distinguishing my work from the works of others.

Everything changed for me, however, when I encountered, in a 1995 issue of *The Paris Review*, a piece by Judy Budnitz called "Dog Days." The story describes a man who, dressed in a dog suit, takes up residence on the porch of a Middle American family after an unexplained catastrophe that has led to the gradual dissolution of society. Because of his convincing portrayal of a canine and his unwillingness or inability to behave as a human, the family eventually comes to accept the man as a pet. This leads to a gruesome ending when, pressed by hunger, the family realizes that, in some parts of the world, people view dog as a delicious dish.

I know: it sounds strange.

But I found Budnitz's story a refreshing and exciting departure from those I had become accustomed to reading, and, although it could easily have been categorized as a horror story or maybe even sci-fi, I was thrilled to find such a bizarre tale published in a dominate literary magazine. The story seemed to resist categorization altogether. Is it literary? Does it belong to a genre? In any case, it is certainly unique, and some critics go so far as to regard Budnitz as an "experimental" writer. I knew immediately that this was the kind of fiction I wanted to write. I don't know if my stories can be labeled

experimental—I'm not employing experimental methods like cut-and-paste—but I think in the future I'd like to move in that direction.

I see the two parts of my thesis as being in dialogue with one another, just as my own interests in conflicting forms of writing exist in dialogue with one another. I might also argue that they represent a discourse between traditional and non-traditional fiction. I suppose, then, that *Clothes on a Line* is my “cancer” story and *Consumed and Other Stories* is my response or, perhaps, resistance to that kind of writing. While both halves differ in terms of style, voice, and content, as a whole, I would situate the work within the genre of women's experimental literature, since the majority of the central characters are women at odds with patriarchal order, and because of the unconventional nature of many of the stories, which seek to escape and revision traditional, i.e. male, standards of writing. I decided to call this thesis *Hit the Ground Running* because the title defines me as someone who writes: I don't know what the hell I'm doing. It also describes how I felt during the writing process, when every day I jumped out of bed, grabbed a cup of coffee, and immediately started working (maybe I should have named it *Hit the Ground Writing*). I mostly chose the title, though, because escape—the desire to run away—functions as a theme throughout the work.

## Clothes on a Line

## No Permanent Address

My mom and I have always lived in the same town, always in West Virginia, but never in the same house or apartment or trailer or basement or room in someone else's house, and never for long enough to commit the street number to memory. Sometimes, if we sign a short-term lease, we don't even unpack all the way, just leave our clothes and things in suitcases and garbage bags inside the closets so they're easier to gather when we move again. Once, though, I couldn't find the bag with my underwear and had to go around for a whole week without any. Another time, we accidentally left behind all our silverware and pots and pans in boxes under the kitchen sink because we cleared out so fast, and when we went back for them, the new tenants who were moving in pretended they didn't know what we were talking about.

My mom used to say, when I was a little girl and made a friend on the second floor or across the street who I couldn't bring myself to part with, Maybe you'll have a purple room this time, or a window seat, or maybe there'll be kids next door with a dog, to try and cheer me up. She used to say, whenever I complained, Why don't we pretend we're on vacation and staying in a hotel, to make things fun. We're gypsy women, she said and still says, and that means we don't have a permanent address, unless you count the box at the post office where we pick up our bills.

One time, we even slept in our car for two nights parked in the employee lot outside the Wal-Mart where my mom was a cashier. We only did it because the landlord kicked us out, told us that we were trash who didn't pay the rent, so we should sleep out on the street like trash. After that, for six weeks, all we had was the couch and a rectangle of floor between it and the coffee table at my mom's friends', Carla and Rusty's house,

and we all had to share the same bathroom, which meant I went last and showered for as long as I could stand the cold water. After that, we lived above Dawson's bakery and our whole lives smelled like powdered sugar, until mom said we had to go while we could still fit through the narrow hallway that led to our door. After that, we lived with Bill, and then Gary, and then Ron, but maybe not in that order. There are too many to keep straight.

Now we live in an apartment on the ugly side of town, a block away from the police station, and too far from the fire department for it to make any difference to us. Now it's just my mom and me, since Bill Two decided it was safer to go back home to his wife and kids than live with a couple of gypsy women. But there's no telling how long we'll stay. And this time I don't mind going.

This is not my idea of a home.

We have to climb rickety rusty wrought iron stairs on the side of the building to get in, and when it's cold and wet, the steps freeze slick as wet snow peas and make us drop our groceries all over the ground. And, in every room, the wallpaper has lost its hold on the corners, and so has the carpet. And we have windows made of the kind of glass you can't see through all the way, like thick ice cubes, that turn the buildings beside us into blurry, wavy lines. And the people who live upstairs have too many boys, who skip school and sit on the curb out front and shoot at the tires of cars driving by with their BB guns. And the people below have too many cats, even though they're not supposed to have any, that piss on the porch and leave dead birds no one ever picks up in the little yard that has no grass. And don't even think about a washer and dryer in a place like this; we



drag our laundry three streets over to the Suds-N-Duds, where the water is brown, and men with red runny noses try to bum all our quarters and peek down our shirts.

My mom keeps telling me that someday we won't be gypsies, and we'll live in a real house, with an address that never changes and stairs on the inside and regular windows and nice carpet. She says we'll have clean paint on the walls, and trees in the yard, and neighbors who don't live close enough to hear us breathe. She says we'll have a basement we can get into ourselves if the pilot light goes out, without having to call someone for the key, and it'll have a hook-up so we don't have to leave to wash our clothes. That's what she says. But I know how those things go. Even though our address is always changing, some things always stay the same. That's why I know I have to get out.

## When She was Wild

My Mom always says that back in the day, when she was wild, when she was a lot younger, back when her Levi's fit her better, she used to dream about getting out of West Virginia, but the hills kept her in. She says that when she was a girl, an extended thumb, a good pair of legs and a nice smile could get you far, way back when the world was simpler and more or less sane, but never far enough away. You can try, she says, but you just can't win. Those hills, she says, are in your blood, in your veins, and they know that when the money runs out and the man runs out and the wild in you runs out, you'll come home to them with your tail between your knees.

She says she used to believe in flat open spaces, red earth, canyons and cactuses and dry desert air, places where lumpy green mounds don't wrap around you like arms and hold you down, where babies don't cry, vast level land with wall-to-wall sky. When she was a kid, she says, just a kid with stars in her eyes and shit for brains, before every day became the same day, she dreamed dreams of someone else's life, dreamed big dreams of bright lights and cities, back when all she had to do to look pretty was put on mascara and a pair of dusty boots, she dreamed of running away. But back then she was only a kid, young enough to know it all, but not old enough to know better, the way she knows now.

My Mom says that when she was wild she could drink any man under the table (and did) if they were doing shots of Jose Cuervo in some dim place, somewhere with live country music, or at least a good jukebox, someplace without neighbors or a name, a place far enough out of the way where lovers and wives can't track you down. She says when she was wild she could stay out all night and drink and dance until they turned the

lights on, long after the band had packed up and gone, longer than the bartender's third,  
And I mean it this time, last call, until the moon turned into the sun, until the cowboy she  
was lying next to rolled over long enough for her to run.

When she was wild, she says, she dreamed of getting out of those hills and into  
someone else's skin, but she never did.

## Smashing Horses

Rusty has emptied eighteen cans of Budweiser and thinks he's drunk now. Carla says, Shiiiiit, back when you was wild you'da finished off a whole case and then drove to the liquor store. She winks at my mom and tells Rusty to go back outside where everybody else is, she's trying to have a conversation, or why doesn't he go jump in the river instead, and the two women laugh and at first I don't understand why. Rusty says he's a lot wilder than Carla knows and bumps his belt buckle hard into the kitchen counter before he staggers out the screen door, which bangs loud in its frame because the spring is too tight. The force, strong as Luke Skywalker's, knocks a potted plant to the floor. Carla rolls her eyes and says, He ain't drunk, he's just stupid.

My mom's best friend Carla lives with her husband Rusty and many porcelain horses in a little house that sits—so close it could float—right on the Ohio River in McMechen, West Virginia. When it rains and rains like it seems to a lot these past few summers, rain like the end of the world, the river rises and swells and overflows and their yard becomes a mucky swimming pool that leaves behind, when it finally dries days or weeks later, wild jungle grass, tall and somehow not native of this place, mausoleums of bleached fish bones, partial electrocuted trees, sometimes sopping tires and, for some reason, tricycles. Once a dead cow washed up and looked at Rusty, with dumb bovine eyes unaffected by death, until he dismembered it with his chainsaw and burned it in the bonfire pit. Before he burned it, though, Rusty made out to Carla like he was thinking about having that dead cow cut into beef jerky, but Carla didn't even crack a smile because she was in the basement up to her knees in smelly brown mud and wasn't in the mood for jokes. Their basement, a mildewy submarine that grows strange mushrooms,

has been flooded seven times in five years and the last time the water came up to their front door and almost invited itself, like an annoying neighbor, into their living room for a beer. Everybody tells them they're nuts for living so near the river's edge, but Rusty says he'll never leave, he'll convert the place into a houseboat first, and slaps Carla on the ass and makes her look mean. Carla and Rusty have been married since they dropped out of high school and ran away to Kentucky, where they'll marry anybody in a day, even brothers and sisters. Rusty loves Carla passionately, but she is a woman who hurts.

Carla and Rusty host parties all summer long in their swamp of a yard that's on the side of the house instead of the back and the parties stink like dead fish and burnt hamburgers and beer sweat and wood smoke. Everybody in McMechen knows Carla and Rusty and everybody in McMechen comes to their parties, which are legendary but always the same. People eat grilled red meat and drink beer and throw horseshoes and drink beer and shoot potato guns into the river and drink beer and sometimes they actually go swimming in the muddy water, where I've heard turtles big as VW bugs live. But not Rusty, who says the only way he'll go swimming in *that* river is if he's dead and floating in it. That river'll eat ya alive, he says, Just because I live by it don't mean I have to take a bath in it.

Every party is a tribute to the Charlie Daniels Band, and Rusty swears that one day he'll get them to play in his yard, and until that day comes he'll only spin records by them on a stereo so old it has a built-in 8track player. Now and then, a request for Lynyrd Skynyrd (*old* Lynyrd Skynyrd) or Johnny Cash is honored, but more often than not denied, particularly when Rusty has a six-tier pyramid of empty Budweiser cans beside him and his fiddle under his chin. People at Rusty and Carla's parties puke and pass out

and make out in secret with someone else's husband or wife, always to a continuous Charlie Daniels marathon, like the kind they have on WWVA sometimes. There is always a bonfire when the sun goes down, there is always beer, and there is always a fistfight. This time is no exception.

My mom and Carla are inside talking at the kitchen table and I listen to them talk about how tight Carla's new supervisor at Coronet Food's buns are and how sexy that Tim McGraw is and speaking of tight buns, did she happen to notice how good J.T. Snyder looks in his jeans tonight, and my mom laughs and plays with my hair and makes me feel like a little girl, who says nothing and listens to the women talk. Carla bets he's a good lay and says she wouldn't mind finding out for herself, and then J.T., surprise, comes in through the screen door like a dozen roses for no special reason, but he doesn't let it slam shut the way Rusty does. He's after one of the bottles of Heineken he's hidden in the refrigerator behind the milk and he bends over and fishes one out and says, Evenin' ladies. Carla tells him, We was just talkin' about you, and can't keep her eyes off his backside and he says he thought his ears were burning. He turns around and pops the top off his Heineken easy even though you need a bottle opener, and they smile at each other like they just had the same wonderful dream. J.T. is casual and not much of a talker and he leans against the fridge and drinks his beer and gives us the weather report because that's what men do: Supposed to rain tonight. Carla tells him she ain't surprised but sure hopes it don't, unless all these people plan on shoveling out her basement, 'cause they ain't coming inside otherwise. J.T. nods yep and says nothing else because the laws of masculinity state that gossiping in the kitchen is women's business, so he puts away the rest of his beer in one long drink and grabs two more for the road. He says, Ladies, tips

his ten-gallon so as to be polite and in compliance with the other laws that say always tip your hat to ladies when leaving—even if you do wear it in the house—and leaves the kitchen and goes back to the party where the fire is starting. He walks like a cowboy. He rambles.

Now my mom and Carla exchange a giggle and they keep the reason a secret from me, but if I had a farm I'd bet it had something to do with J.T.'s Levi's. The women-turned-schoolgirls with pink candy hearts in their eyes decide to follow him outside, like groupies, like he's some famous rodeo rider, and Carla goes, It should be against the law to look *that* good. She hooks her arm around my mom's waist and together they're almost too wide to fit through the door, but they manage somehow and stumble into the yard like one body with two brains, each half swaying a little in the opposite direction. I stay in, anti-social with the herds of porcelain horses. I don't care about cowboys, but I think horses are okay. They are coffee mugs, sugar bowls, paper weights. Some are candlesticks, spoon rests, bookends. Picture frames clocks knick-knacks lamps centerpieces ashtrays. They are trotting and prancing and rearing and galloping. Some are bareback or have saddles and bridles or tiny painted riders or pull old-fashioned buggies and wear blinders. Bent heads eat grass that isn't really there. They are everywhere at once, like stars. They have no sunset to ride off into, nowhere to go except their dusty pedestals atop Value City furniture or their corners on chipped tile counters or their designated places on dirty faded wallpaper. Those ones on the walls, you know they leave behind an imprint in the shape of a horse, fresh as if new-papered, clean as Ivory soap.

There is a glass black stallion, Arabian, with a single braid in its mane, on a glass shelf among clusters of porcelain pintos and palominos and Appaloosas, but the black stallion catches my eye because it looks defiant, with its legs apart and stiff, aggressive, with its head held high and its nostrils flared, like it could break into a run at any second, run from its glass pasture in this soggy little home in Appalachia and win the Kentucky Derby, run all the way back to the sands of Saudi Arabia where it belongs. I reach for the black stallion, I don't know yet that I'm saving its life, and put it in my cargo pocket because I'm a thief and have compulsions beyond my control and because it reminds me of a book I read a long long time ago. When I was a little girl who read books and said nothing.

There are more than enough horses to go around, besides.

Plenty.

Next I steal a beer because I'm bored and want to go home and because there are coolers full of them everywhere and nobody's sober enough to notice anyway, but I drink it fast just the same and then steal another one and drink it down, too. The beer tastes like piss and fills my bladder with piss as fast as I drink it, and so I go down the hall to the bathroom while the devil goes down to Georgia to steal someone's soul. But not mine. Not this time. The horses follow me and wait on the shower curtain, window curtains, wait on the sink and hold toothbrushes, they wait on border all the way around the wall, wait on the back of the toilet with Q-tips or cotton balls while I pee Busch Light scented pee that comes out the same barley color as when it went in.

I leave the bathroom light off and from where I'm sitting I can see out the window, but nobody can see in because of the horses on the curtains. There's nothing there to see



anyway, except for an enormous tree, a linebacker of a tree, that nuzzles the house like a lover, or maybe just a close friend. The bonfire is more toward the middle of the yard, more on the bank that slopes to the river than in the yard, and through the curtains and the leaves on the tree comes a warm orange glow and hoops and hollers and grey tendrils of smoke. In the distance clumsy silhouettes conga around the flames and get rear-ended by the person behind them and pretend they are humping the person in front of them. They dance around the flames, this tribe, the River People, drunken ritual, like it's Luau Night at the Flamingo Club on 29<sup>th</sup> Street where I go sometimes because I know the guy at the door, who is aware that I'm under twenty-one but who wants to fuck me and lets me in anyway, and Rusty yells, Hey! Turn this song up! Where's my fiddle? He is the leader of the conga line. He is the chieftain of the tribe.

I am waiting for them to roast a pig, or at least for someone to fall in the fire and put this party on the eleven o'clock news like the time Bill Raymond from Channel 13 came over because it was a slow news day—it's always a slow news day in the Ohio Valley—and filmed folks having good old-fashioned summertime fun, which around here translates into getting liquored up, getting into fistfights, and driving home drunk, when something loud thumps against the house. It would've scared the piss out of me if I hadn't already gone, but it wouldn't have mattered anyway because I was still sitting on the toilet with my underwear-and-pants at my ankles and my eyes on the drunks at the party. I might have thought it was the sycamore tree making an advance at the house if not for the unmistakable sound of Carla's dirty flirty laugh and the low rumble of a man's voice, not Rusty's. I pull up my drawers and hunker down by the window and listen to them because I am rude and afflicted with impulsive behavior and can't help myself. Even

though I've been caught a time or ten with my ear to a door crack or wall, red-handed and red-faced like I was masturbating, I still do it and pretend I don't know any better, but I do.

They are smoking reefer, I can smell it, if I pressed my face against the screen I could get stoned, and when the man says, Could you pass me that there Heineken, Darlin', I know it's J.T. who's talking. I can't see them because the window is too high off the ground, but I gather from the slurpy sounds of their kissing that Carla lent him a helping hand. When they finally take a break from each other, they smoke more pot and swill more beer and Carla asks J.T. what the J and the T in his name stand for, and I expect him to answer with something smart-aleck and witty like Jutting Testicles or Jiggly Titties, but instead he says, J stands for John and T stands for nothin', in a voice level enough he could pass for sober. Carla cackles and howls and goes, Are you sayin' the T stands for nothin'? Nothin' at all? like it's the funniest thing she's ever heard, and J.T., who's not as tickled as Carla, doesn't laugh and says, Yep, and nothing else because, like I said, he isn't much of a talker. Carla gets over herself and chugs her beer and puts the empty can on the windowsill near my head and says, I'm about good and fucked up, and J.T. tells her that she's about to be good and just plain fucked, and zippers unzip and buttons come undone and a white bra goes sailing past my line of vision like some rare strain of albino bat. The loud thump against the house is, this time, the sound of J.T., rambler, drinker of imported beer, wife stealer, hoisting Carla's naked ass into the air and then slamming it into the dingy siding that used to be white but is now a sallow beige, dirty from river water.

It smells like rain all of a sudden and sweaty Stetson and cheap drugstore perfume that's supposed to smell expensive but doesn't. J.T. and Carla's stomachs slap each other like two school-age sisters fighting over a training bra, and Carla's ass pounds in accompaniment against the house. They make noises like pigs. Then their furious flabby beer bellies, Carla's flat but lumpy and stretch-marked even though she's never had children, J.T.'s starting to protrude and drop as if he were the one having a baby because he's in the middle of his life and likes to drink, suction together at the navels and emit a loud farting sound that immediately strikes me so funny I have to cram my fist in my mouth so I don't laugh out loud.

The grunts of their almost secret sex are interrupted by J.T.'s exclamation of, Ah, *Jesus Christ*, do you think she saw us? and for a guilty minute I think he means me, eavesdropper, horse thief, and my heart gallops in my chest like a black stallion and my face gets all hot. Then I see the dark figure a few yards away, another spy, shape of a woman quickly retreating on the waterlogged ground, practically skipping with the tidings of scandal. J.T. wonders, Who the hell could it've been? and I am wondering the same thing, and Carla says she bets it was that bitch Martha Cooper, who she's never liked, never invited to *her* house, why the fuck is she here, *anyway*, who's always wanted her and Rusty to split up so she could move her fat-nosy-welfare ass right on in there. There is a pause then, pregnant with static momentum like impending rain, I can feel it, in which Carla and J.T. scramble to dress themselves, smooth stray, frizzy strands of sex-hair, try to wipe the adultery and Wal-Mart brand lipstick from their faces and prepare for what is about to come. And then shit goes down.

Rusty comes running from the bonfire, news of Carla's infidelity apparently spread just as fast as her legs, and he is screaming, I'll kill him! I'll kill that motherfucker! The rest of the party is not far behind him and the fire is not far behind them, and the mob and the eerie glow of the fire and the murderous cries looks and sounds like a Salem witch hunt, but I guess I've never seen one to compare. There is barely enough time for Carla to get her shirt turned around and J.T. to zip his fly before Rusty crashes into J.T. NFL-style and they hit the house hard enough to dislodge a length of dingy siding and dislocate J.T.'s shoulder. I think I can hear bones ripping from their sockets, ligaments and cartilage tearing like paper. Fists on skin sound like tomatoes exploding against trailers on Halloween night, the music of two men beating the hell out of each other over a woman in a Harley Davidson tank top and no bra, because I can see it dangling from its strap on a branch in the tree.

Carla yells at them to *Stopitstopitstopit*, but her voice is too high and melodramatic and put-on, you can tell she's on stage, she is the star of this movie and will be signing autographs after. I don't know whether I should leave my box-seat inconspicuous-like and join everyone else outside so as not to be suspect or go grab myself another beer and see who kills who. Things are happening fast. Tim Thomas and Billy Joe White emerge from the crowd and pull Rusty off of J.T. and tell J.T. to get the hell out of here before someone gets killed, just *go*, and he does, he staggers away bleeding from the face with the hand of his good arm cupping the shoulder of the bad one. His truck is parked in the yard up by the road like everybody else's and he climbs in and fires it up, big red monster of a Ford Tundra that has tires taller than the factory smokestacks across the river, and the

engine rumbles like the empty stomach of a giant and so does the sky because the rain J.T. predicted is coming. He drives away cussing and spraying mud.

People are starting to leave now because J.T. is gone and the show's over, it's down to Rusty and Carla, and this is a private affair between a married couple and everybody's got to respect that. I don't, though, I'm looking right down on them, blatant, and my mom finally comes into the frame of the window, I wonder where she's been, and gives her friends a look of desperation, a look of, What can I do to help? but she's not entirely innocent, I know. I saw her and Rusty at one of the parties last summer, the party where Sammy Tucker and Troy Whitlatch fought over Shelly Kimball, who is years too young for either one of them, but who has slept with almost every man, married or otherwise, in McMechen anyway, and the fight ended up in the river with Troy nearly drowning Sammy, and Shelly going home with Troy's twin brother Roy. I saw my mom and Rusty that night, stealing a kiss that was a little more than friendly and close enough to the exact spot where Carla and J.T. made fugitive love for it to be ironic. It's raining now, hard and fast, and the rain means business. There was no gradual build up, just an immediate downpour of impatient rain, the kind that means flooding is imminent, and the river gobbles up the raindrops like a greedy baby and grows bigger and bides its time.

Meanwhile, Rusty and Carla are screaming at each other about what a whore she is as they make their way to the screen door, with my mom running behind. I decide that now would be a good time for me to leave the bathroom, so I do, and make like I'm on my way down the hall to see what all the commotion's about. Rusty explodes into the kitchen first and starts throwing anything near him, which could only be a porcelain horse of some kind, against the walls like he wasn't done beating on J.T. and wanted to get his

money's worth. Colorful shards of glass and whole horse heads fly everywhere like a different but equally dangerous kind of rain than outside. Then Carla comes in looking like she just got out of the shower and screams at Rusty, Why the fuck are you smashing up my horses, you dumb bastard? but it's like he doesn't hear her because he keeps doing it and doesn't give her an answer.

My mom is standing outside the screen door on the concrete blocks that are supposed to be steps and she makes eye contact with me and gestures that I should go back down the hall, through the living room, and out the front door so I don't get a jagged airborne horse stuck in my face and end up scarred for life. Somehow I make it out of there without a scratch, and my mom and I hop in our old embarrassing brown car and go, her hair dripping rain onto the pleather seats, a trail of blue smoke following us the whole way home. We don't talk about Carla and Rusty, just listen to the squeaking windshield wipers because the radio doesn't work and never did, but I can tell, somehow, when I put my hand over the lump in my cargo pocket, the stolen black stallion, that something big is about to happen and I won't be there to see.

## Sex on the Beach

The first time I ever had hard liquor I was eight and a half. I sneaked a taste of my mom's favorite fancy cocktail called Sex on the Beach. Besides the delicious tingling feeling that blooms a warm fire to all parts of your body when you do something you're not supposed to do, the drink's name teases like somebody with a secret and practically begs you to try some. I was sure that if I put my ear to the glass, I would be able to listen to the ocean trapped inside. I knew just what sex on the beach looked like, too, from watching cable. It's the same every time. There's always a shirtless muscular man lying on top of a woman with long hair in the wet sand. Salty seaweedy waves come out of the ocean, blue and green fingers that reach to touch their feet before going away again, but they don't seem to notice. I'm sure they're in love because love is when you don't pay attention. The woman always wears a wispy white dress that is sort of shredded at the bottom, faded, worn soft, as if she bought it second-hand. She looks like my mom. The man looks like Robert Redford, my real dad. This image, in my mind, is always accompanied by hula music for some reason.

Chuck served them in what he called a 36-24-36 glass, Just like your momma, he would wink and say. The drink was cloudy and pink like the inside of my vagina, and decorated with paper umbrellas and tropical fruit. It was all dressed up, like my mom. It reminded me of a street fair, an Easter basket, a birthday party. I remember finally picking up that delicate glass after looking at its sweaty curves for so long it belonged to me and noticing, before taking a sip, how well my cotton candy colored nail polish went with it. How good it looked in my hand.

(My mom never noticed the volume of her glass disappearing)

I sat at the bar and talked to myself the way little kids do when they're pretending while my mom danced with Chuck, the bartender and her boyfriend. The only music the jukebox played was honky-tonk and country. If you live in West Virginia, country music is the soundtrack for your life. You can hear it in grocery stores and elevators and doctors' offices. At night if you're scared you can close your eyes and Patsy Cline will come in through the trees and your open bedroom window and sing you to sleep.

Right there in the middle of the day, my mom and Chuck slowly swayed back and forth, even if the song was meant for line dancing. She rested her head on his shoulder and hung her arms around his neck and buried her face into his shirt until I could only see the back of her hair. He held her close, with one hand at her waist and the other wrapped around a brown bottle of beer. Hardly anyone ever came in during the afternoon, except the hard-core alcoholics or some laid-off coal miner who'd just cashed his unemployment check. No matter how long they were out of work, those miners could never seem to wash the black dust from their sad and bloodshot eyes.

I imagined I was a millionaire's daughter, a starlet, a Rockefeller. My floral sundress from the consignment shop became a pretty princess dress, something I would be married in, a gown of satin and sequins. Through fuzzy cotton ball eyes I pictured the bar with a polished marble top rather than the wood-and-linoleum sandwich counter it really was, marked up with penknife engravings like LM+BC or Dave Was Here 10/26/87. Limousines were parked outside instead of old pick-ups covered in mud like hogs. I turned The Haven just off of Route 2 into a ballroom, into a castle, into the Sistine Chapel because I could. Because I couldn't not. I daydreamed and drank Sex on the Beach through a flexible straw. My mom danced with Chuck.



Mr. Marshall, who owned the bar, came on Saturdays sometimes to do paperwork in his little office by the restrooms in the back. Mom called him Roy and smiled like someone was taking her picture. Chuck called him Mr. Marshall. He didn't mind that my mom brought me along, he said he liked kids, and he always invited me into his office so I could lie on the dusty plaid couch he took catnaps on and flip through his dozens of magazines. He had *Cosmo Girl* and *ym* and *Seventeen*, and even pamphlets on teenage beauty pageants. These are the ones I read. Some of them I had never heard of were called things like *Catholic School Girls* and *Jailbait* and *Little Girl Blew* and had pictures of girls with no clothes on, girls who stood, ridiculous, naked in school yards, in front of angry nuns with paddles, on Santa's knee, for God's sake. These I didn't read, even though Mr. Marshall wanted me to. He told me some of the magazines belonged to his ex-wife, that she had been a dancer, that I should be a dancer because I had the legs for it. His breath was beef jerky and Jack Daniels.

One time he asked me, How's about a drink, young lady? and I told him I'd appreciate a peach Nehi. I knew he kept all different sorts of Nehi, grape, fruit punch, orange, in the beer cooler behind the bar because it was a hobby of mine to look in closets and drawers and other things with doors. He said if I promised not to tell, he'd make me a real drink, the kind pretty ladies order, the kind my mom liked. We had more secrets. I asked him to be sure not to forget the umbrella, maybe two, green and blue, and to add extra merry chinos, the very most important things.

There on his couch (as they danced) in the middle of the afternoon, Mr. Marshall smoothed the soft fine blonde hair on my thighs and begged me to never grow up, to wear ponytails forever, and not shave my legs. Sometimes he cried. I drank Sex on the Beach

and tilted my head to the side so I could hear the ocean (rise and fall rise and fall) over the country music. With my eyes closed.

## Misty Dawn

My best friend Misty Dawn was named after a notorious local stripper who, at age seventeen, debuted at The Haven, back when it was a titty bar, and once posed nude for Hustler. Misty Dawn's daddy claimed he liked the name, but Misty Dawn's momma knew better. She submitted anyway. The stripper, caught up in the spotlight of sudden celebrity after the photo shoot and desperate to make good use of her golden opportunity, ran away to California and never came back, not even for Christmas. For years, people around town passed many versions of her story. In one, she was a prostitute and a porn star and a crack junkie who had five biracial babies, all with different men. In another she met Jesus, retired her G-string, and joined a convent. In the one I believe, Misty Dawn stops bleaching her hair and allows it to return to its natural mousy brown; she changes her name to Emily and wears blue jeans and Disney sweatshirts; she works for the Phone Company and drives a mini-van; she blends in; she disappears. She finds it's all she's ever really wanted to do. Still, some say she's dead, some say she never existed. In any case, she is a legend.

Misty Dawn and I became best friends in the second grade. We had to write a composition (in Crayola) and include visual aid (also Crayola) about what we wanted to be when we grew up and tell it to the class. I wrote that I wanted to be The Girl in the Plastic Bubble, like that seventies movie with John Travolta, and drew a picture of myself waving from inside a large poorly drawn circle, complete with television and a swimming pool. Misty Dawn wrote that she wanted to be a guard at the West Virginia Penitentiary, just like her daddy, so she could feed the prisoners bread and water. She drew herself,

with red hair instead of yellow, sliding a cafeteria tray of Wonder bread—a whole loaf, still in its plastic bag—and bright blue squares of water, beneath crooked, loosely attached bars to a smiling convict dressed in stripes.

Everyone said: You can't *be* some girl in a bubble, that's not like the movie anyhow, but Misty Dawn said she loved the movie and cried at the end justlikeme. We were friends fast and easy like Chinese take-out and I went to her house after school almost every day. Her mom was soon my mom, too, and that made us sisters, so we swapped blood and made up games to play and invented our own language and wore each other's clothes. We started to look the same so people couldn't tell us apart. Same hair, same eyes, same weight, same height—maybe not for long—same shoe size and flavor of gum. We stayed up all night in secret and sometimes climbed out windows or booby-trapped the house like the cartoons told us to do. We watched *The Boy in the Plastic Bubble* every time it was on TNT or USA and then went outside to run because *we* weren't in a bubble and then came back inside because we felt guilty. And on. And so on.

The clearest memory I have of Misty Dawn is from when we were maybe nine. We used to play in an old, forgotten cemetery down the road from her house and were convinced Amelia Earhart was buried there because one crumbling tombstone in the corner of the yard, way back by the fence and almost completely overcome by weeds, read Earhart and had an inscription of an airplane. We weren't afraid of Amelia's grave like we were of some of the others, especially the one under the tree, the one that had a marble angel for a marker instead of an ordinary stone. We'd take our Magic Eight Ball with us and sit on the ground, right above where we thought Amelia would be, and ask questions like:

Will we always be best friends?

Will we ever have boobs as big as Dolly Parton's?

Will we die brave and adventurous women like you, Amelia?

And always, the triangle inside would turn over in that mysterious, mystical water (we would never find out how it was different from ordinary water because we never had the nerve to break the Eight Ball open and inspect it for ourselves) like Amelia was moving it with her ghost finger and give us the truth: *Yes and Outlook not so good and Ask again later.*

One day when we were learning our destinies from a dead woman and a ball filled with magic water, Misty Dawn screamed into the stillness of the graveyard. Her face suddenly seemed dipped in bleach and stretched over her head like cling wrap, clear and tight. I followed the path her eyes had burned in the air to the distance where they rested bulging and on fire.

The corpse of a man who had escaped his casket was now lying face down on top of his grave, exhausted from formaldehyde and his long journey from another world. I didn't know how we could have missed his incredible struggle. He was wearing muddy coveralls, work boots, and a raggedy flannel shirt, underdressed, I thought, for someone who had been to his own funeral. My heart fluttered fast as hummingbird wings, so fast it wasn't moving. I couldn't *believe* what I was seeing.

Misty Dawn screamed *run!! run!!* and we did run, but in the wrong speed because the whole time we were running like under water. I followed her three graves' length behind and never caught up; she saw the body first and runs faster. I remembered the Magic Eight Ball left on Amelia's grave, mourned our loss, never again know the future

before it happens, and didn't stop running. I was too afraid to look back even, and wouldn't have been able to concentrate on running if I had, but Misty Dawn, brave, looked back. She turned her chin to her shoulder to see if the undead pursued us and distracted me with the freckles she only got in the summer (and it was summer), then she whipped her head around again, leaving her hair trailing after her like Superman's yellow cape.

We ran a hundred miles to Misty Dawn's house, exploded into the kitchen hyperventilating and babbling to her mother about the dead man laying on top of the grave and she laughed at us, but called the sheriff anyway because we were so red in the face. She gave us glasses of iced tea with extra sugar and made us sit down, told us to settle down, everything was okay. Eventually, we breathed calm and steady again and enough time had passed so Misty Dawn's mom could call the dispatch and find out what we really saw because she was curious now.

She dialed; we already knew the answer. Then she smiled into the receiver and started laughing, said she should've known. Girls, she said, your dead guy is just a drunk passed out in the graveyard, she said, and I felt foundations give way. I thought this was the proof I was looking for: that people can come back from the dead, and that being dead is no terrible and foreign big deal. Is more like going to sleep in someone else's bed. I was going through a phase, thought I was a scientist, thought I had the keys to the universe. So I would have to keep looking until I didn't care anymore. So.

Misty Dawn's funeral was the third one I'd been to in my life up to that time. It wasn't like Great Aunt Betsy's or her husband's, all smelly and old and waxy, everyone's head drooping like sunflowers because they can't remember how to hold them up. It

wasn't really like she died because they kept the casket closed and set arrangements of flowers on top like it was a window box. It could've been *anyone* in there. I walked around in clothes that weren't mine, in tennis shoes, not mine, that didn't match my borrowed black dress, and collected apologies from people who had done me no wrong. I said thank you, wondered, wandered, went in circles, was in, they said, denial and didn't seem to understand. What a shame, they said, They shoulda put that guy to death, and other things like, They have reduced speed limits near schools for a goddamn reason. We left sometime when I wasn't paying attention and drove to her grave in a shiny black car, not in our cemetery, though, as I had imagined, and all I could think about was whether or not Misty Dawn would see Amelia. Tell me what she looked like.

(if Misty Dawn can die, so can I)

The clearest memory I have of Misty Dawn is her running fastasshecan from a drunk passed out on somebody's grave in the cemetery where we talked to Amelia Earhart, her face full of freckles and fear, her hair and me trailing behind. That day she was old and didn't know it and she ran, her shoes kicking clouds of dust and graveyard dirt. My shoes. She was wearing my shoes and I was wearing hers.

## Borrowed Clothes

Borrowed clothes make you feel like someone else, who looks completely different from the way you look and says things you've never said and is prone to do things, press naked breasts against car windows to every trucker who drives by, or sneak out of a restaurant without paying the bill, you wouldn't do. And has been places you've never been to. An outfit chosen from another person's closet, carefully selected like an engagement ring, like a bride in India, can change your whole constitution. You might find yourself in a brand-new expensive current something (that you wouldn't own yourself until it was out of style and on some discount rack), if you have rich friends or know someone who blew their whole paycheck for the sake of fashion. And in wearing this little number, you might be able to forget that you grew up poor in West Virginia, that you had head lice in the fourth grade, that the Goodwill and your mother's sewing skills have furnished your wardrobe for as long as you can remember.

Or you might wrap yourself in some strange fabric that feels airy and cool on your skin, feels like wind, brings out a new color in your eyes, causes you to speak with a foreign accent, lie about your age. You might be involved in political espionage or some ending-in-gate scandal, maybe you're a spy for the Russians, named Natasha or Tatiana, who has special ways of getting information. You could have committed murder. You may have a past. In someone else's jeans you could happen upon a previously untapped talent for singing karaoke, if you were to go down to Ernie's Cork and Bottle where they don't card at the door, even though singing is something you only do when you're alone, and not very loudly because someone might hear you. And if there are no seats at the bar,



you might tap some girl, any girl, on the shoulder at random, tell her she's a bitch who's taken your seat, and you might even slap her if the situation calls for it. You definitely steal her boyfriend.

Or you might, you just might, squeeze yourself into something dangerous and too tight and discover that you're unexpectedly given to dancing with strangers at the St. Jude Park Firemen's Festival, or that you suddenly like the taste of Southern Comfort.

Whatever happens, you can blame it on the clothes.

You can say it was the black dress with spaghetti straps, simple but bold and timeless, that you borrowed from your cousin's best friend (who had to be begged) when they came to visit from Pocahontas county (a friend who was more than a little in love with herself, was somebody's pretty princess, That is a DKNY dress; *Please* be careful with it), that made you walk like you just noticed you had hips, long legs, strong calves. The black dress made breasts appear, enchanting as Snow White, and cleavage, where there once was none, so your cousin's mom had to say, *My God*, she's all grown up.

It was the black dress that made you turn your head and toss your hair when those wild vagrant boys whistled at the three of you, those lawless loitering boys standing like three aces of spades on the outskirts of the festival, in the shadows, where the crowd ended and the trees started.

Hey, I think these girls wanna party, one of them says and makes the other two gloomy shapes beside him huh-huh-huh like they know something you don't know. Your strange new feet start walking in their direction and you shrug, you go with it, what choice do you have, really? You find the black dress is magnetically attracted to the fringes of festivals, pulled, perhaps, by a force stronger than the moon or the core of the earth, and

even though your cousin and her prissy friend are calling you, nervous, to come back, Where you going, anyway? you're powerless to stop. But it's not your fault. It's not about you.

Music starts up over at the bandstand and you think you remember that Todd Sheppard, hometownboy-turned-national-country-singing-sensation, is putting in a special appearance. He's famous, a member of the Grand Old Opry, voted Sexiest Bachelor of the South by readers of People Magazine, you've seen his face on cereal box advertisements for Christ's sake, but tonight you feel that if you were to go over to him, in between sets while the rest of the band went to the beer booth on break, introduce yourself, giggle, tell him what a big fan you are, how you knew of him when he was a senior in high school and you were in the eighth grade (but he didn't know you), you could be Mrs. Todd Sheppard inside of six months, wear an obscene engagement ring with a diamond big as Texas.

You could be famous and rich, the mother of his children, live on a sprawling ranch in Nashville with horses and housekeepers and an in-ground pool shaped like a kidney bean, own a condo in the Poconos and another one in Hawaii. You could have a closet double the size of the rented house where you now live with your mother and the secret of your dad, and fill it with so many clothes you don't wear anything twice. You can have these nice things because Todd loves to love you, he can't help himself, and if his albums slip just a little in the charts or become subject to unfavorable reviews, you might get extra-friendly with Toby Keith, who you know personally, who you've noticed noticing you from the corner of your eye at banquets and benefits and the Grammy Awards.

But this attitude is uncharacteristic of you; you do not approach young men, particularly famous ones, or initiate conversations with them; you do not bat your eyelashes or bite your lip or twirl your hair or cross and uncross your legs in a seductive manner, your legs, which, by the way, you never show too much of. You do not walk with confidence, with a little hip thrown in for good measure, or look people in the eyes in a way that might suggest that you are daring, like your dress, and no stranger to the backseat of a car, that you don't wear underwear, are That Kind of Girl, that you think you're hot shit. *You* walk with your head down and your shoulders hunched, with your eyes on your feet that are too big for your body and look like skis. You hope you slip by unnoticed, and believe me, you do, nobody's paying any attention to you, you become part of the background, you disappear into walls.

But this is not the case tonight.

You discover the black dress likes to dance, moves the way charmed snakes move, fluid as water. They look you up and down, those invincible volatile boys who aren't really boys at all, you see now, with their roaming eyes and their whiskey smiles, and *you* smile, lips parted soft and red like orchids. This sets things into motion and eager introductions are made, but you don't bother with names; you dance. They want to know how old you are and you can tell from the way they are grinning that it makes no difference to them, but you lie anyway and say you're twenty-one. You dance and they flock around you, those boys who aren't boys, you dance; the ritual has begun.

They compete for you by telling epic lies, throwing back heroic shots of whiskey straight from their bottle, performing acts of physical prowess like hard swift punches to the arm or half-nelsons, until one of them seems victorious. Sensing loss or better

prospects, the other two call, It ain't a party unless there's an even number, through cupped hands to the other ducks, your cousin and her friend, who are still wading within safe boundaries. Finally, hesitantly, they come.

You're paired off with the one who won you, who has greasy long blonde curls, the one who probably looked like Shirley Temple when he was a little boy, who was probably dragged into Sears' portrait studio twice a month because of those curls, but who now looks like an aging gin-blossomed disbanded member of Van Halen. You don't really care about his oily hair because he notices how good you look in the black dress. How womanly. And you can tell he wants you by the way he's feeling you up with his eyes-like-hands. You don't really care about his capillary nose because he keeps passing you the bottle of Southern Comfort you think you might like if you'd just give it a chance, the girl in the black dress seems to like it, and you might like the guy from Van Halen, the guy who starts to look like William Katt. You drink big drinks and some of it escapes your lips and rendezvous down your chin. Onto the dress. But nobody sees. Damn, girl, give me that bottle. You're crazy as Moon Dog. He says.

He says he's on leave from the navy, he's stationed in Virginia, he's originally from here, he's only in town for the weekend. He says he loves the navy, likes to travel, says he's been around the world and back, has eaten shark, turtle, even dog once. He says he dated a couple girls in China and that their pussies smelled like rice. He says he knows how to say fuck you in Spanish: *Chingate*. He says he's never seen a girl as pretty as you are in your black dress, and remember, he's been around the world and back. You know he's lying about the navy because of his hair, those greasy curls, every member of the armed forces you've ever known had a head as flat as a brick, but you don't care. Not

about him. The band is playing your favorite song. You dance. Then you hear your cousin's friend tell the other three how it's her dress you're wearing after her guy (the one who looks like an older, haggard, pock-faced version of Brad Pitt) says you have a nice figure, and you hate her *right then and there* for making you feel like nothing and you plan to shave her eyebrows off after she falls asleep tonight or superglue her hair to her pillow. Make her piss the bed. Evil hijinks. Slumber party treachery.

Well...*you* don't make those plans.

The girl in the black dress does.

Later you hear her, pouty-quivering-lip-poor-princess, cry that she lost her hair barrette, her brand-new *fifteen dollar* hair barrette from the Limited, but nobody looks too hard for it on the dark leafy ground, except the princess and your cousin. You don't help. You see something silver flash when Van Halen (or was it William Katt?) throws his head back and hits the bottle again, but you don't say anything. You give it some time, wait for them to look in another place, and then you casually bend over and pick up your brand-new fifteen dollar hair barrette from the Limited and slide it into your purse.

You ask for a cigarette.

Breathe in. Blow out.

Cool.

Van Halen puts his arms around you then, suddenly, hard, rough, (you like it rough, don't you?) won't let you go, tells you again what a beautiful girl you are, excuse me, what a beautiful *woman* you are, smashes his mouth against your mouth, slides his wormy tongue inside. You accept it, prying worm in your mouth, like you'd accept a doctor's Popsicle stick: apathetically. Your tongue isn't interested. You remember

whiskey breath from before, but you're older now, and invulnerable, or so you think. The girl in the black dress is bored. Tired of his nonstandard English, his Southern drawl, the story of his life, his early eighties jeans. You're not you anymore. The girl in the black dress pushes him away, he thinks playfully and comes back like a dog. She pushes harder (whiskey breath) (beef jerky tongue) she pushes harder.

She walks away.

This is something she has learned.

## Moon Dog

Moon Dog is famous. He is crazy and black and rides a bicycle all over town, the kind they sell at yard sales and thrift stores, with wide, rusty handlebars and a duct-taped banana seat. Only, his has flags sticking out from the wire basket on the back, all kinds of flags, faded and frayed from flying, one that means surrender, one red white and blue, one that says POW-MIA, others from countries I don't recognize and will never go to. Everyone knows Moon Dog, but no one knows where he lives. No one seems to remember exactly what year it was when Moon Dog and his bike came here. Now he epitomizes here. We know his name because he wears a florescent orange hunting vest with Moon Dog written on the back in permanent black magic marker. We don't know anything else.

Moon Dog has eyes like the jungle that stare wild and wary, black and bright. You might think he's not watching but he is. He takes it all in when he coasts by on his bike during business hours, and especially when we are sleeping. He knows things. Maybe that's why he doesn't talk to us.

Once someone stole Moon Dog's bike or it pedaled away without him. He didn't tell us. We had to notice. I don't know what they did to get it from him or where it would have gone off to by itself, but I was sure anything I imagined, like your idea of heaven, was nowhere near the truth. So now we noticed and it was our turn to watch Moon Dog instead of the other way around, and we decided he didn't look right standing on the corner, standing against buildings, conforming to trees and standing.

On a Friday night at the VFW they made spaghetti-and-meatball dinner and money for Moon Dog's new bike, which they went shopping for the very next day. The one they

bought him was too modern and shiny and red and wasn't the same because it didn't have any flags, but they left it across the street from where he stood watch. They tied a bow and a sign with his name to the handlebars so Moon Dog and his bright eyes would see and accept their offering. After everyone went back to work, he climbed on and pedaled away.

I've heard the word nigger in this town just like I've heard the words bitch, Jew, and fag.

Sometimes people are all right and surprise you.



## Shiny Black Cars

One of the jobs I've had was in an Exxon station/mini-mart out on Dry Run Road that is owned by a retired and very religious couple, the Halls, who paid me cash under the table, which I spent on movies and fingernail polish and library fines, and sometimes to help pay our rent. Dry Run Road wraps around the hills like Christmas ribbon, has hardly any straight stretches of pavement, is blemished with potholes and sabotaged with hairpin turns, but if you were born in West Virginia, you could drive it sixty miles per hour half-drunk and blindfolded in the middle of winter. It snakes on and on forever, all the way to China, as far as I know. Hank's Exxon sits needing a coat of paint somewhere in the middle of this ribbon like a gift you didn't know you were getting, thirty miles both ways between two small rural towns. The Hall's believed God Himself wanted them to build their station in precisely that spot, as a sort of oasis.

There was a girl, Pauline, who worked the afternoon shift with me. She was fat, had thin dirty blonde hair and an affinity for Orajel. Without paying, she would take a tube from the small pharmaceutical section and squeeze the contents into her wide, shapeless hole of a mouth. She said she didn't have any cavities or wisdom teeth; she just liked the way it felt, the way it made her numb. Sometimes she would use so much that she talked as if her mouth were full of mashed potatoes.

The work was dull as a church picnic. I opened cartons of cigarettes and put the packs on display to lure nicotine addicts like fish. I had to make sure there was cold beer in the cooler, Don't run out of Pabst Blue Ribbon, like Hank always said. I punched buttons on the cash register and accepted loose change and pocket lint from kids buying penny candy. Day after day the same fifteen people came in until I got to know what they

were going to purchase before they even made it to the counter. Guy with brown hair and Fu Man Chu gets Marlboros and two sixteen ounce cans of Schlitz. Old man with facial birthmark wants a six pack of Natural Light and a pouch of Red Man. Sad pregnant girl needs Basic menthols and a forty of Busch.

Every now and then someone from out-of-town would wander in, from Pennsylvania or Ohio maybe, talking fast, clothes from department stores I've never been to, telling each other, Look how *cheap* everything is here! Usually they were lost or trying to track down some relative—a second cousin they'd never met and were on their way to visit, or an estranged sister who'd run off, against her family's wishes, with some redneck from the hills—and needed directions to a remote ridge or road with a funny name. Most of the time they hardly said a word to me, just laid their new dollars on the counter and waited for tarnished nickels and dimes, as if they figured I wouldn't understand the variety of English they spoke. But: one evening a man in a shiny black car pulled into the Exxon. He wore an expensive suit and had an expensive haircut. Before he came inside, I watched him take a brown cigarette from a monogrammed tin and light it with a monogrammed Zippo.

He asked if I knew how to get to Wheeling, he was trying to find a hotel. He smiled just for me and, even though he smoked, exposed perfect white teeth that I'm sure I've seen in an Aquafresh ad, glossy in a magazine. I'd never seen teeth like those in real life before. Real teeth are supposed to be yellow and inconsistent and crooked as tombstones, with bits of chewing tobacco in the spaces between, and breath that smells like old cheese. He smiled sparkly, leaned closer, and I could smell leather and skyscrapers and success instead of cowshit and poverty and regret. He rested his hands on

the counter like we were friends having dinner and I traced the way for him on a road atlas with my finger.

He said he wanted me to leave with him in his shiny black car.

He said he would get me out of those hills.

He said we would travel to exotic places, eat exotic foods, listen to brown people speak exotic lingua.

He said he would show me the ocean.

I remembered a time in the late summer (muggy, must've been) when my mom and her boyfriend Joe took me to the Marshall County Fair. I was probably six. A carny with one blue eye and one brown eye called out from an antique carousel to entice children in his bigshow voice like the Pied Piper. I had been seduced. Mom gave me a ticket to ride while Joe tried to win her a giant stuffed monkey with his dart-throwing skills.

I was the only one on the carousel and I chose a shiny black car that even had a movable steering wheel and real side view mirrors. The carny with David Bowie eyes stood next to me, leaned against a gold pole and chewed a wad of purple gum, rude, with his mouth open, like some grazing cow. When nobody else got on, he pulled a lever taller than me and we went around and around like cream in coffee. I turned the steering wheel cautiously, slow as the blue-haired old ladies you always get stuck behind when you're in a hurry to make it to the bank before it closes or when you have to pee, because I wasn't entirely sure the car wouldn't move, wouldn't just drive over the edge of the carousel and crash into the peanut booth, or if it had a will of its own and a particular destination in mind, like the used car lot out on 77, where all the old pickups and station wagons and jeeps get together and gossip, or if, maybe, it would steer its way out of the fair, hit the

open highway, and just keep on going forever. The carny could tell what I was thinking, he'd probably seen that same uncertainty on a hundred little faces, and he laughed—the same way he probably did every time—until his gum fell out onto the mulchy ground. He told me if I wished *Real, real hard*, I could drive that shiny black car anyplace I wanted to go, Clean to the North Pole, he said, If you really try. His voice blended with the pipe organ music. I was positive that what he said was true, so I squeezed my eyes shut and emptied my head of all thoughts but this: I want to see the ocean.

The carousel ran down like a wind-up toy from a Happy Meal and then stopped. The ride was finally over, and I couldn't wait to build sand castles and go for a swim. But somehow I could still smell elephant ears being deep-fried at the concession stands, and sweet earthy manure wafting over from the livestock corrals, where this kid I used to know almost got his finger bitten off by a horse one year. Somehow I could still hear people on the Pirate Ship screaming and threatening to throw up if someone didn't stop this thing *now*, and balloons exploding at the Shoot-Til-U-Win tent. I opened my eyes one at a time, and instead of miles of water and sand, I saw my mom waving to me from behind a child-sized stuffed monkey, and the carny smiling with a new gob of purple gum. I only drove the shiny black car in circles. I thought that I must not have wished hard enough.

I've never seen the ocean, except in pictures and on TV.

So I told the man in the expensive suit that shiny black cars don't go to the ocean, they just go round and round, no matter how hard you wish, they hold you to them like a magnet, like West Virginia. Sometimes they go to funerals. He stamped his cigarette out

on the floor and called me an ignorant hick. He said I was probably inbred. He got in his shiny black car and pulled out of the Exxon. I never saw him again.

Pauline had been watching from inside of the cooler, peering between plastic bottles of Pepsi and gallons of milk with her piggish eyes. She didn't hear what he'd said. When she came out, her cheeks were blotchy and red as if she'd just been slapped. She squeezed Orajel onto her tongue and told me she was going to marry the man in the shiny black car and get out of this town. I quit working at the Exxon two months later. I think Pauline still works there.

## A Trailer in Oz

We used to live in a trailer court that was far out on the edge of town, way out past Dry Run Road, like someone had taken a giant broom and swept the residents and their trailers into a corner like dust bunnies. I had my own room, space as big as a closet. Mom and Mike slept in a room across the cramped hall. Mike said living in a trailer was like living in a sardine tin. Mom said it was a lot better than living in the welfare projects on Twelfth Street.

When the wind blew hard on winter nights or during summer storms, I was afraid the air would carry us away and we'd wake up in another trailer court in another town, the same way Dorothy woke up in Oz. Our yellow trailer would shake like Jiffy Pop and every weather event took a souvenir along with it: a piece of aluminum siding, a wind chime from the built-on front porch, clothes from the line, a toy from the small dying yard.

I didn't want to play with the kids in the trailer park; they were like dull crayons. They had Spaghetti O's stained on their second-hand tee shirts. They smoked cigarette butts they picked up from the ground. The little ones wore sagging diapers long after they should have been wearing Underoos, and sucked their dirty thumbs when they weren't saying dirty words. They didn't know how to share.

Two brothers, Brian-and-Chad, lived in the trailer beside us with their parents. Their mom and dad worked together in the same restaurant, The Golden Steer; she was a waitress, he was a short-order cook. They had a doublewide that was clean but always seemed to smell of french fries and Crisco. They also had three color television sets, all with cable, and a giant satellite dish that stood on the front lawn like a beacon to outer

space. On Saturday nights mom and Mike went over to their trailer to play Euchre or watch pay-per-view boxing and drink beer from NASCAR glasses.

During card games, Brian, Chad, and I were ushered off to play Nintendo or something in their room. Glenda smiled her former Miss West Virginia smile as she hustled us to the rear of the trailer, saying, Boys be nice, but Brian-and-Chad were never nice. Brian said we had to stay in the back because they were going to smoke reefer. I didn't know what reefer was but I liked the way the word sounded, the way it made your top teeth scrape against your bottom lip: Reefffffffer. I didn't know what reefer was until five years later when Dean Elliot took me for a ride in his butterscotch Nova after Homecoming and we got high and laughed at the hula girl dancing on his dashboard until we were hysterical and then we made out in the front seat until our lips burned.

Brian-and-Chad were two and three years older than I was and they were enormous for their ages. They had matching short, furrowed foreheads, each bordered with a continuous furry black caterpillar eyebrow, like Cro-Magnon, and tufts of stiff black hair springing up from their large craniums. Mountainous noses and cheekbones and chins made up the topography of their stony faces and although they were boys, they had the hands of men, hands that would do farm or mechanical work someday, with big knuckles from which more coarse black hair sprouted like crabgrass. I saw a pair of Brian's camouflaged hunting gloves lying on their kitchen table once during deer season. They looked like gloves that could jump from their resting place and strangle you if they wanted.

Brian-and-Chad's room, a small cave darkened by what looked like either finger paint or cake icing from a tube smeared all over the window, spelling out Steelers #1 and

EAT SHIT, affirmed their boyhood. The walls were papered with posters of professional wrestlers and famous racecar drivers and football stars. Piles of miniature plastic vehicles littered the floor and formed a miniature highway fatality. They had bunk beds like all siblings who live in trailers and share a room, with faded Star Wars sheets and blankets. They had two BB guns and a remote control robot and Legos and walkie-talkies and board games with missing pieces. And, I saw poking out from beneath the set of beds, the familiar straight rubbery legs of what I knew could only be a Barbie doll.

I reached for her from the wreckage of boy toys as if she were a disaster victim. She was naked, her long blonde hair cut brutally close to her head like a marine, and, I noticed, her legs had been put on backwards. She was violated. She used to belong to me. I could tell because her face was still smudged with the sparkly blue Mary Kay eye shadow I had taken from my mom's vanity drawer (she had tons and tons of Mary Kay make-up because she got it free for selling it and wouldn't have noticed if I'd swiped all the eye shadow) and put on her to match her blue chiffon evening gown.

I stared at Brian-and-Chad, wide eyes and open mouth, indignant and ashamed for Barbie and her nakedness. I knew what they were capable of, but I was shocked every time, even after they had set fire to the big fern on our front steps and nearly burned the trailer down, even after they duct-taped my friend's cat, Becky, who used to live next door to us on Hancock Street, to a tree, where it died trying to get down, and even after they told me my mom was a five-dollar whore who didn't even know who her daughter's daddy was. They only grinned at me, fiendish as Halloween pumpkins. Then Brian said he wanted to see if I was made like Barbie in the place where my legs meet, if I was



hairless and plastic and impenetrable. Chad, a toad, wanting more to see his older brother happy than my genitals, nodded his head yes fanatically and somehow didn't hurt himself.

I didn't have to think hard to remember all the occasions Brian-and-Chad had branded me with big purple bruises or held me down and dangled spit in my face or spun me around so fast and long that I couldn't see straight or walk right, just for not adhering to their demands. Knowing this abuse would happen was tied for first place with not knowing what form it would take. My eyes raced back and forth between those brutal boys and their closed bedroom door—the barricade between Brian's scheme and my escape—and were met the unconcerned eyes of a quarterback for the Pittsburgh Steelers, who'd been hung there with black electrical tape and had darts sticking out of his face. I could hear the adults carrying on in the living room, Mike telling Butch he could take his ace and shove it in his ass, my mom laughing louder than she does at home, but their voices refracted from the plywood door like sunlight from a piecrust tin.

Brian unzipped his Wrangler's.

He exposed a pair of yellowish BVD's and I could see that the elastic band had separated from the cotton in several places. A trail of hair started beneath his bellybutton and disappeared into his raggedy underwear like the upturned dirt path of some blind underground animal. He paused for drama in a way only truly sadistic boys can, and I knew the next thing he was going to do was show me what was tucked away beneath the small bulge at the center of his underpants.

Sure enough, Brian, predictable, smiled slow and dull like syrup as he pulled his briefs down, and uncovered a tiny shriveled albino elephant trunk that had a fluff of black hair at its base and made me think of a lion. Hanging just below this alien and misplaced

trunk, as limp as deflated punching balloons, were two bags of skin that served no purpose I would ever figure out on my own. Chad and I watched Brian look down at himself as we would watch somebody's grandmother knit a sweater. Now it's your turn, he said, and I found my hands moving like their own masters to the button of my Oshkosh B'gosh's.

I felt powerful as Wonder Woman after having seen that unimpressive, freakish, even, lump of dough between Brian's legs. I thought that what I had at my center was much more complicated, much more interesting and secret and beautiful than what Brian had (I'd looked at it in the mirror alone in the bathroom) or what Barbie had, for that matter. I wondered why they left out this glorious detail of Barbie's anatomy, because being a woman she surely had one. I know why they left out Ken's.

I slid my jeans and Strawberry Shortcake panties down my waist in one swift motion and stood half nude and straight as a board while Brian-and-Chad quietly observed, humbled now by my sudden immodesty. I think I must've sucked up their aggression, their very boyish essence, through my secret lips like a straw.

That was when Glenda the beauty queen waitress opened the bedroom door without knocking. She carried a tray with plastic cups of raspberry Kool-Aid, a flavor nobody likes except Brian-and-Chad, and square slices of pizza on the palm of her hand just like she did in the restaurant. She stopped short in mid-service and looked from Brian and his elephant trunk to me and my bare and debased Barbie doll, slowly taking in the unexpected display of naked children, this American ritual. Before she remembered about her vocal cords, the tray, stamped like most of their dishes and ashtrays and napkins with

The Golden Steer and a picture of a black bull with long horns and a ring through its nose, faltered a bit and splashed blue Kool-Aid onto the greasy overcooked pizza.

I think that was when the rest of the red-eyed adults came in a kind of stoned slow motion to see what the matter was, not surprised that someone was in trouble because someone was always in trouble. My mom probably yelled at me, embarrassed, as she jerked my pants and underwear from my ankles to their proper place on my skinny waist. I remember best Brian-and-Chad's dad Butch taking his belt off, like he did every time they got out of line, and dragging them by their arms, screaming, into another room to show them with leather that you don't expose yourself to little girls, that you don't look at little girls exposed. I think I understood why Barbie had no vagina.

After we interrupted the Saturday night game of Euchre, the party broke up, and probably wouldn't have lasted much longer anyway, so my mom, Mike, and I went back to our trailer. I was sentenced to my closet-room, which wasn't a punishment to me, because, like Briar Rabbit, it was where I wanted to be in the first place. In My Own Room, I turned out the light and put my ear to the wood-paneled wall so I could listen to conversation about me. Mike said slurry, Ain't I been sayin' them kids next door is nothin' but trash? Mom told him, yeah, that's what he'd been saying, but what *she'd* been saying, over and over, was for him to get his muddy boots off that goddamn coffee table, did he think it would clean itself? That's how girls get knocked up's all I'm sayin', Mike said, and I knew from the sound of his voice that he hadn't moved his feet from the coffee table, Look what happened to you.

Mom answered by throwing what I found out the next day was the big glass ashtray from Fostoria into the wooden arm of the couch, on the side closest to the TV

where Mike always used to sit. We lost a lot of things that way. It was still lying on the floor in thick dangerous pieces when I woke up in the morning. They were quiet after that. Sometimes I think if the wind had blown us into a trailer court in Oz, I wouldn't have noticed the difference.

## The Sound of Black Holes

I had a brother once for six months named Ben who was a little bit older than me. My mom, his dad, and the two of us pretended we were a family for a while, even though we lived separate, and ate Kentucky Fried Chicken on the carpet like a picnic inside, and watched sitcoms together, crowded in front of the big television in their living room. Ben wasn't like other brothers and didn't beat me up or tell on me when I said shit, or even fuck, and he didn't make fun of the way I throw a ball like a girl. He was smart and knew things about wheat circles and wars and Morse code and black holes. He told me that all the continents used to be one big continent and that the eyes of severed heads can see for up to twenty seconds after they lose their bodies. He told me that male seahorses can have babies. We see each other around every now and then, but we don't talk much anymore when we do. It's like he doesn't remember being my brother.

When we sensed my mom and Ben's dad wanted to be alone or they told us so, Ben and I would go upstairs where there are three rooms, one too big, one too small, and one just right. They had a nice house on the hill above town and owned it outright because Ben's daddy was a coalminer and made good money and his momma was dead from cancer. We went into the too-small room that had a window shaped like a stop sign that we could open and climb through and get on the roof, our place, Ben's idea. At night, lights in the windows below let us see into the houses in the valley, and nobody in those houses knew that we were watching them put their kids to bed or play cards or talk to someone who was just out of our view. People around here don't hang curtains you can't see through.

On the roof we had to watch where we stepped because some shingles were loose, we had to mind where we sat because of the birdshit everywhere, and we had to duck our heads sometimes so we wouldn't get bats caught in our hair. We looked up at the closer sky and Ben showed me constellations that I've noticed before, but didn't know had names. I called them The Pearl Necklace, The Big W, Nancy's Dog Pete, The Lady with Spoons, Little Suns, not knowing that someone had already claimed them. We tried to pick out what stars we thought heaven was behind and which one Ben's momma lived on. That one right there, he said pointing, the one that looks like a diamond, and it was true, she did live there, because we really believed it.

The best time to go out on the roof was at night in the summer (he was my brother only one summer) right before it stormed, and if you laid on your back and looked straight up at the sky, you could float like an astronaut, like the whole world had been jerked from under your feet. You'd drift through space but still hear wind rushing past the treetops below, turning the leaves to their silver sides so violently you thought they'd fly right off the branches and yet they didn't somehow, almost like someone stuck them on with super glue. Lightning makes time travel possible (according to Ben and the movies), and when it flashed and flickered and made everything green like a hydrogen bomb had gone off, you wondered if you'd see dinosaurs or cities in the sky or *Planet of the Apes* or yourself as a baby.

Sometimes I'd forget that I was on a roof, on the earth, that Ben was with me, until he'd say something to bring me back, ask me if I was awake or afraid, just to talk, or maybe because he had forgotten where he was, too, and wanted to make sure I was still there. I told him I felt like all the houses and people and cars and yards with swing sets

and dogs had been vacuumed up into the sky and weren't there anymore and wasn't that a strange feeling to have? Then he told me about the pockets in the universe that eat all the energy and stars and everything else that matters and turns it all into nothing. Big black mouths in the sky. That eat small towns for dinner.

(something is always bigger and more important than you)

You could tell when it was just about ready to rain because of the static in the air, the momentum, everything standing still like on pause, and moisture appeared in front of your eyes and on your skin like the earth was sweating. If there was no lightning we could get away with staying on the roof, but there was and we knew we'd better get back inside before it started raining because we might get electrocuted like Texas convicts. But we didn't want to go; we'd made peace with all that. We knew about the black holes.

Ben said: Listen. You hear that? That's the sound a black hole makes, but it was only the sky rumbling like a giant stomach and the people of our town oohing and ahing and sitting on their porches or screened-in patios watching the storm as if they were at the Thanksgiving Day parade.

And then the rain came.

## Sometimes Nothing Happens

Sometimes nothing happens allday or for alldays in a row and you can do nothing and let nothing keep happening. It's best when Saturday is a nothing-day because tomorrow there is no school and nothing to get ready for. This is good and lazy and you can have a love affair with an armchair or a square of sun on the floor by the window that makes you warm like bread. But Saturday goes by too fast because Sunday is eager to take over with its fat newspapers and its stink of meatloaf or pot roast or cabbage rolls that take all day to cook, and its religious programming and Steelers or Mountaineers games, Sunday pushes Saturday out of the way like a bully. Sunday is not a good nothing-day even though it's the Sabbath and you're not supposed to do anything. Sunday wants to remind you that you didn't go to church this morning, that you weren't nice to your mother yesterday or all week long, that you don't appreciate what you have on any day, especially not the ugly clothes on your back.

Nothing, sometimes, happens unexpectedly, like when it snows in April halfway to your knees and they have to cancel school and there isn't enough salt to clear the roads because, Ha! they thought it was done snowing for the year and winter pulled one over on them, but you can't go outside and build igloos with the other people in the neighborhood (and wouldn't anyway) because you lost your mittens and don't want to wear socks on your hands. On these days all you can do is thank sweet Jesus that you live in town now instead of out on the hill because at least in town there are other houses around and you can watch little kids trying to stop nothing from happening by throwing snowballs at each other, they don't like nothing, got ants in their pants. On these days all you can do is blow your hot breath on the frosty glass of the window behind the couch and make little feet



imprints with the side of your balled-up fist and little toes with your fingers, or maybe just write your name and wish you had hot chocolate, even though you know it's gonna be spring again tomorrow when the snow melts away.

Nothing happens sometimes to everybody all at once, and if you do the same nothing they do, you can look across the street and see them sitting on their front porch swings or plastic chairs from Big Lots, fanning themselves and drinking lemonade with their pantlegs rolled up or their housecoats pulled to their thighs because, Damn! It's *humid*, isn't it? and you can see them wipe beads of sweat from their faces with bandanas, and you do the same because you don't have an air conditioner either, and the lightning bugs are doing the same nothing, too, flying in lazy loops, not afraid of being trapped in a jelly jar, it's too hot to chase lightning bugs in the yard and not dark enough yet to see them good. Sometimes, if you have a citronella candle burning on the steps to keep the mosquitoes from sucking your blood (it's never nothing for them; they're all business), they see you flickering there and wave and yell over from their porches, because it's too much effort to walk across the way and have a conversation face to face, and ask you what you did all day, and you say, Nothin', I did nothin' all day long, and they nod, Yep, it was a nothing kind of day.

## Don't

After we lived in a trailer with Mike and before we lived in an apartment with John, my mom and I lived in the country with Sam. He asked us to move in because he said he wanted his house to smell like women, like flowers, because the place needed pretty things and delicate touches, so mom took the deer heads down and hung lace curtains in the windows and put throw pillows on the couch and that was that. Sam was old enough to be my grandfather, had a head of thick gray hair and a body that was wrinkly but hard and tan because he had been a farmer all his life and was now a mailman. He had a tattoo of a blue devil under wiry white hairs on his chest that he said he couldn't remember getting and grinned shit-eating, like he did in the pictures he showed me of him young on the farm. My mom didn't work when we lived with Sam because he was old-fashioned and because he said he had more money than God, money to burn, money saved up in a retirement fund. But retirement's for the living dead, he winked and said, and what's money if you can't spend it? He had mischief in his eyes, could always find some little treasure hidden behind my ear, slipped me sips of his beer, conspired to let me drive his tractor on occasions when we knew my mom would be gone running errands for the day.

We were all happy until the rabbit died.

People in the country move slower than the government and talk slow and walk like they're not in any hurry to go anywhere and days stay days longer and air is really truly air. We have country stores and Country Kitchen restaurants and vendors of vegetables on the sides of dirt roads. Houses are unlocked and spaced far apart as summer and winter, but it's okay because everybody knows everybody and everybody's

business, just like they say. Kids grow up wild and free around here, like rhododendron, and only have to stop running or wading in the creek long enough to eat or put on a light jacket, and we all have glowing creamery-butter-and-wholemilk skin. We have strong legs because we have to walk half a mile to our mailboxes, strong arms from pushing lawnmowers and climbing the trees that decorate the hills surrounding us, hills secure as the Pentagon, protective as a mother's arms.

Those hills are innocent, if you're from the city, quaint, if you've never seen them before, but they are deliberately engineered by a strategic God, isolating us from the world on the other side. But we have our SUVs and pick-up trucks, which we need to maneuver through the hills, to move furniture and farm equipment and relatives, to haul groceries, firewood, mangy unleashed dogs of uncertain descent, kegs of beer, children born out of wedlock to mothers under seventeen, their cousins from down the road or out on the ridge. And we have our color television sets with seventy inch screens that dominate our living rooms and never get turned off, and their smaller counterparts that sit on second-hand chests of drawers or kitchen counters or anywhere else we are apt to be and have a place to sit them. And our satellite dishes, taller than our homes, that pick up more than eight hundred channels, even though we only watch the WWF and NASCAR and Mountaineer games. Some of us live in trailers as run down as our dogs, but we still have satellite TV.

Those hills we live in, they have secrets in them. Sam told me that some of them are man-made, that Indians constructed mounds of earth and buried their dead inside, piled them high on top of one another, buried them with trinkets and tools and blankets and animals, like the pharaohs did. Sam also told me, even though he didn't know he was

telling me because I was hiding behind the couch listening to him tell my mom, that Mr. Yeater from out on Wishbone Ridge, who's been old for so long no one living remembers what he looked like young, and who walks bent in half like he's sitting in a chair, shot his wife with his hunting rifle and buried her somewhere in those hills over fifty years ago. Sam said they could never prove he did it, but everyone knew he did, even people who weren't alive at the time because their grandmothers or neighbors told them so, and one day, Sam said, when they decided to put a shopping mall on top of Wishbone Ridge, they'd find Mrs. Yeater's bones and Lord knows who else's. When I look at those hills, I think of all the people inside of them who never got out, trapped forever under green carpet, and in the fall, red and orange and yellow carpet.

Someone different lived among us like Jane Goodall in a rented farmhouse, and she was a writer or a painter or a sculptor or a singer and needed country air to write or paint or sculpt or sing. No husband, probably lesbian, they said, she wore weird loose clothes made out of hemp, meditated mornings in the sun, and raised rabbits in cages, which we, children of the country, all came to see. The bohemian was called Miss Gorby and she was standing on her head or reading about veganism or playing guitar in her house that smelled like Egypt when we showed up at her back door in groups, alone, in threes. She put chopsticks in her hair, talked like they talk in poems, said Ah, my fellow lovers of long-eared things have arrived, and followed us to the rabbit pens because we were excited and already knew the way. The rabbits were pink-eyed and white, science fiction-like, named Do, Don't, Doesn't, Does, Did and Will Do, and we picked them up, Careful, not like their mothers would've by the skin, but nice, Be nice, like Miss Gorby said. She called us her subjects in coveralls and cutoff jeans and painted boys and girls with faces

like ours on canvas while we played with rabbits, and sometimes she took our picture, but wouldn't let us smile at the camera and say cheese. She had one of me that I didn't know she'd taken, just me, holding Doesn't, black-and-white on her mantle in a frame.

When we lived in the country my mom didn't have to work as a waitress at Mac's Bar and Grille anymore, didn't have to clean the houses of women with lawyers for husbands, or babysit neighbor kids for a little extra cash on the side because Sam was old-fashioned and said no woman of his would work for a living. He had a house full of modern appliances from Sears, a microwave, a refrigerator that dispensed crushed ice, and even a washer-and-dryer, but mom still hung the clothes out to dry on a line in the sunshine so they would smell like pine cones, springtime, like West Virginia. She canned beets and strawberries in mason jars, went to the Farmers' Market, picked flowers and acorns from the ground to hang upside down in bundles or use in Ladies' Home Journal projects she abandoned half way. She stripped furniture and baked pies, walked me to the school bus and French-braided my hair, burned potpourri, kept a better home and garden, drank spiced hot tea in the morning. She potted and repotted her spider plants. Straightened and re-straightened pictures on the wall. Made and remade the beds. Sometimes she looked out the kitchen window when there were no dishes to clean, with her empty hands on the empty sink and her eyes empty on the hills in the distance, which are really more than just hills in the distance. She cooked dinners from scratch rolled in oats with fresh-cut vegetables and tomatoes from the window, not in plastic from the store, and when Sam kissed her while she cut them, she turned her head away, said, Not now. Please don't. She never stopped looking out the window.

I loved the rabbits better than all the rest and visited them every day devout as a nun, friends or no friends, so they would remember me, hop to me if I called them by name, like me best. Miss Gorby left me alone with them when I came alone, touch of fur soft like peaches, red rabbit eyes from another planet, eyes that see the world through a screen of pink. I fed them carrots and long blades of grass and sometimes they mistook my fingers for carrots and I forgave them. And that went on and on like rural days until one afternoon Miss Gorby answered her back door cold to me, cold like with frost from a freezer streaming out her door, around her oblivious bare feet.

Sam tried to put a ring on my mom's finger, a gold ring with a diamond so big it had to be fake but wasn't, and my mom looked out the kitchen window, past the hills, to the place she was already half-way to in her mind, saying nothing with her mouth, her fingers, though, explaining they were never much for jewelry. Sam told her to take her time, think it over; he told her he's old and knows it, but he could give her a good life, a stable life, a nice home; he told her every kid needs a daddy and he's always wanted kids, always wanted to be somebody's daddy. She still did not speak, didn't respond, she can make you wait and wait and consider suicide for the anxiety, but her silence translated into thinking thinking thinking about men and the way they will inevitably consider you their possession, their pick-up truck, muzzleloader, pocket watch; the way her freedom from working and struggle, was not really freedom at all, but another kind of servitude, the oldest kind; the way she would lose herself in this man unless she moved on, the way she would lose herself in the next man, and the man after that.

Sam tried to put his hand on my mom's shoulder, in place of saying, I respect your silence, to squeeze her shoulder as if to say, Take all the time you need, I'm here for you,

to move her hair with his other hand and kiss her earlobe, maybe for his own gratification, and her neck, which is soft and small and smells like flowers.

Don't, she said.

Don't is dead, Miss Gorby said, and I know you killed him. This and long division are two things I didn't understand, and she looked down at me with eyes that wanted to burn red, burn out the natural color, eyes like her rabbits, hands at her sides that shook and wanted to slap me but resisted because I was just a little girl, only seven back then, but, God, they shook with the wanting. She said she never wanted to see my face again, that I should feel lucky she didn't call the police, that the other kids—my friends—told her how it was all my fault, I was too rough with the bunny, I was not nice. But my mouth, all of a sudden, forgot how to make words come out, didn't remember the right shapes and sounds, so she would know it wasn't me, of course I wasn't the one, I loved the rabbits the best. All I could do was look at my shoes and smile, because this is the way I act when I'm nervous or suspected of murder, and in the end I ran away from Miss Gorby.

I ran fast as a rabbit.

And my mom ran, too.

When I got home to our little house, all out of breath, she was stuffing garbage bags and thrift store suitcases with our clothes, fresh from the line, that I knew would smell like the country long after we left it and would remind me of Sam, who was delivering the mail, long after we left him. I knew he wouldn't find out that we were gone until he pulled the mail truck into his driveway and noticed the pretty curtains on the window were no longer there. By then, my mom and I would be on the other side of those hills, on our way back to town, to our new home.

## Danny's Tongue

Danny Hitchcock was one of those people born to be on the outside his whole life. I've known his name since the third grade when he mysteriously appeared, during the middle of the school year, at the back of the classroom like mold on bread. Nobody wanted to sit by or talk to Danny; he was a disease. He always wore a dirty toboggan to cover the haircuts he gave himself, and a soiled red vinyl ski jacket that smelled like glue and old socks and mildew. He had a chronic runny nose that he refused to blow, or, when he did, he'd wipe the snot on the sleeve of his jacket where you could see, until it dried, a shiny trail that looked like the course of a slug.

Danny had a problem with behaving. If you were unfortunate enough to have a last name near his in the alphabet, he would sit behind you and poke, with the point of his sharpened pencil, the sensitive bare space at the nape of the neck between pigtailed until he left a mark, then he would scream, *Lead poisoning! Lead poisoning!* He'd flip his eyelids inside out so you could see the bloody underside and then he'd grab your face hard so you couldn't turn away from his red Death Stare. He threw tantrums; he filleted his fingers with left-handed scissors; he pissed his pants on the playground like a baby.

I overheard once, when I was late and the last one in the coatroom getting my Scooby Doo lunchbox, Mrs. Warmouth and Miss Haythorne talking in hushed voices as they chewed bologna sandwiches in the classroom they never left, about Danny's learning disability and how he really should have been sent to Bridges Academy, a special school downstate for kids like him. I also learned, as I crouched in the darkness of the coatroom and smelled the different laundry detergents my classmates' moms used, why Danny was at Park View Elementary.



At his other school, Danny lost his temper one morning. (bite chew) He interrupted the math lesson over and over by burping or throwing wads of paper or pretending his desk was a Y-wing fighter, until the teacher finally told him to go to the principal's office, she couldn't deal with him anymore. (chew chew swallow) But Danny wouldn't budge. He wrapped his feet around the legs of his chair and yelled and rocked back and forth and then his chair fell over backward and he hit his head on the floor and didn't move. (bite chew swallow) The teacher, who was pregnant, who really wanted to go to veterinary school but couldn't afford it, who feared she'd lose her job, that this was all her fault, ran over to him. (dab dab crinkle toss) Then Danny jumped from the floor and began to pound his angry fists into the swollen belly of his teacher until a thick and steady stream of blood flowed from her broken womb and dripped down her ankles, staining her white discount high heels.

The teacher had miscarried.

Danny was a baby killer.

One of the things about Danny was his tongue. He chewed it up, biting away piece after piece, and spit out the pulpy mess like it was a bit of fingernail. His tongue looked like one of those snowflakes you make by folding construction paper in half, and in half again, and then you cut the design on one side and open it up and you have a snowflake. Danny didn't seem bothered by the pain, like he didn't have any nerve endings. You could tell when he'd bitten off another chunk because he'd press his lips together until they were white to keep the blood inside his mouth. His eyes looked far away when he did it, too, like he was deep in thought or having a dream. It was the only time he was quiet.

Danny stayed at my school until the end of third grade when, during one of his tantrums, he hit the little girl who sat beside him, I think it was Nicky Jo Chambers, and gave her a black eye. Her parents, of course, knew about Danny, he was who everyone talked about the minute they got home from school, and they threatened a Lawsuit unless he was Removed. I remember when I was on my way to the bathroom that day seeing Danny sitting on a chair in the principal's office. He saw me and wagged his snowflake tongue like he didn't understand he was leaving. Like he didn't know they were taking him away.

I think about Danny every now and then. I imagine him locked up in one of those padded rooms wearing nothing but a padded ski jacket and maybe a muzzle of some sort to keep him from eating his tongue. I wonder sometimes if he's in a jail cell somewhere chained to the wall, still trying to learn his ABC's, still living in the body of a little boy. He never grows up in my imagination. I wonder where they put all the Danny's, for how long.

I went to the Big Bear for my mom once to buy Hamburger Helper and a bag of potatoes, and as I was standing in line, I noticed the boy at the end of the checkout aisle bagging groceries. I thought I knew him from somewhere. He had a face like any other bag boy in any other grocery store, but it wasn't his face that was familiar exactly. He had his mouth open a little as he worked and I could see that he seemed to have a small pink stub, a stout little thumb, where his tongue should have been. I crowded close behind the housewife in front of me, until she turned around and gave me a look full of hotrollers and injustice, so I could read the nametag on his smock. It said DAN in black plastic letters.

When it was my turn and he was putting my things in a brown paper bag, I stared at him for so long that he smiled politely at me, like nice people do to little kids who won't look away, but with his lips together, so I couldn't see inside his mouth. I looked in his eyes for some signal or faint recognition, to see if the Danny I knew was in there somewhere, if he'd show me the places he'd been, but he kept it a secret. I was just another customer to him. I didn't know about Nicky Jo Chambers as far as he was concerned. I didn't know about pregnant teachers, either. He finished with me and I said thank you and he nodded, still smiling with tight lips.

After that, I made excuses to go to the grocery store as often as I could. I'd buy, like, tampons two weeks early or a package of cheap pens or day-old donuts from the bakery I wouldn't even eat, just so I could satisfy myself that the bag boy was Danny Hitchcock. I never found out because I never saw him again. I don't know if he was temporary help or if he was moved to another department or another store or if he just quit. I thought that he could have been fired for throwing a tantrum. Maybe he wasn't Danny at all. Maybe I dreamed it up. I do that sometimes.

## I Had This Dream

one night that I was at the truck stop where my mom used to work a long time ago, Willie's Big Rig, but it didn't look the same, it looked more like the inside of a McDonald's for some reason, and I thought it was strange that I should be there because my mom hasn't worked at Willie's since I was a little girl, so little I could hide under a chair and give everyone a heart attack because they thought I was kidnapped, and I played on the floor of the restaurant's kitchen while my mom did her job just like I played on our kitchen floor at home, only here I had to make sure I didn't trip up any of the really tall ladies who carried food all over the place or else my mom wouldn't be allowed to work at Willie's anymore and we would have to sleep in the car and nobody wants to do *that* unless they're drunk or plain crazy, she said, before she went back out into the dining room where all the truckers are, so you be good and stay out of the way, and so I was good, very, very good, and colored on the backs of paper menus with broken crayons and didn't talk to anybody and wouldn't have anyhow because they were all mad at me because I didn't have a babysitter, but they thought I didn't know this since they smiled fake like plastic trees and told me Boy! You sure color pretty, honey, and how much I look like my mom, who had been gone a long time, five minutes from forever, and had to come back soon, any second now, because I had to pee and couldn't go alone for fear of the giant hairy truckers who cussed and talked twangy like banjos and said, Heythere little girl, whyn't cha come here, so I squeezed my legs together tight so I wouldn't pee my pants and water came out of my eyes instead and I knew, I *knew* she was never coming back, she was on her way to Texas or Montana or Oklahoma with one of the truckers and was finally free, anybody could see the horse behind her eyes dreaming of wildflowers and

no fence, and I was crying and shaking and my muscles hurt like sore teeth because she was riding in one of those big trucks with the window rolled all the way down and country music turned all the way up, and I couldn't hold it anymore, I let go like a rubber band and warm urine ran down my legs onto the chair onto the floor onto the bed and when I woke up wet with my nightgown sticking to me, I wasn't sure if it was a dream or something that happened before.

## A Good Witch

There was a time when I had to stay outside while there was light in the sky because mom kept coming home from work with a black eye or a swollen cheek or a bloody lip. She was a cocktail waitress at the Peso Club and we rented a small one-story house down the street so she could walk to work. We didn't have a car then. Her boyfriend Buddy lived with us, and even though he called it his house, he didn't have a job to help pay the bills. Buddy was big and mean and followed mom everywhere she went because he just knew she was seeing some other man on the side and he was going to catch them together and kill them both. I was the only one who knew he really meant it.

I was afraid of Buddy; I hated his guts and cast spells on him that never seemed to do any good. All he ever did was lie on the couch and watch TV and pass gas and drink Crown Royal with Pepsi until mom had supper ready. Then he would shuffle over to the kitchen table, with his belt off and his pants already unbuttoned, and eat steak with ketchup and gravy in silence, except sometimes he would grunt his approval or disapproval of mom's meal. I learned to distinguish the subtle shades of difference between the grunts; I learned grunt-ese. When he finished, he'd leave his dirty dishes for me and mom to clean and go back to the couch with his belly sticking out. If mom was off, he'd drink himself to sleep. I could never show my face in the living room when Buddy was around, and if I did, he'd point in the direction of my bedroom without saying anything until I left. Usually I just stayed away if he was home.

Buddy didn't hit mom until they had been dating for a few months. She met him at the Peso Club, where he went every night and had his very own stool at the bar because nobody was brave enough to sit there. Mom said she liked him because he was funny and

sweet and bought her flowers and took her out to nice restaurants in St. Clairsville and Pittsburgh. I couldn't see Buddy being funny or sweet, but that's what she said. He even had a decent job at the dairy until, not long after he'd been living with us, he was fired for showing up drunk one too many times. He tried to start a fistfight with the supervisor who gave him his pink slip before some other guys grabbed him and threw him out like rinse water and told him not to come back.

Being unemployed gave Buddy a lot of free time to drink and pace the floors and get the devil in him. He became restless and irritable and paranoid and somehow blamed mom for supporting him, even though he never looked for work. He said it was a good thing that he didn't have a job because somebody had to keep an eye on mom, and his own eyes were squinty and red and he had five days of sandpaper on his face when he said this. He said he knew by the way people looked at him that something was going on, they were all laughing behind his back, and no woman was going to make a fool out of him, so he started following her every time she left. He had this idea that if he waited until she'd been cocktailing for a few hours, she'd think he wasn't coming and make plans to leave him with the man of her dreams—maybe it was that young punk bouncer by the door with the pimply face, or that sneaky prick who sat by himself at the table back by the toilets—then he'd show up with a permit for murder, he'd be right as a reverend like he knew all along. Buddy was stupid like brussel sprouts.

I wished he would die.

I wished he would die so hard I gave myself headaches that pounded like fists trying to break through from the inside. I read books on voodoo and witchcraft from the library by candles or flashlight—only when I was sure Buddy was asleep—and I was sure

because I could hear my mom crying in the kitchen, soft and pretty like a kitten. I skipped school and studied Buddy instead, made a map of him behind my eyelids. I got to know all his parts. I concentrated on his heart until I could see it beating beneath the black carpet of his chest and I willed it to stop, I told it to explode like Fourth of July fireworks, all red, white, and blue. I compelled his tar-lined lungs to no longer accept air into their yellowed capacities. I begged his nose and mouth not to breathe.

On the first Tuesday of every month I warded him off with garlic or sage and I wore charms and I never stepped over a crack, even if it is just a jump rope song. I stole his grandfather's Swiss army knife, Buddy's most holy and favorite thing, took an empty bottle of whisky from under the couch, collected locks of his hair (in secret) that fell to the bathroom floor when mom cut it, put these pieces of Buddy in an onion sack and buried them out back when the moon was fat and full. I sprinkled pulverized chicken bones over the disturbed earth and waited three days for nothing to happen, Buddy lived, and I thought maybe it was fish scales I was supposed to use, not chicken bones.

One afternoon, my mom's manager and the police told Buddy not to come to the Peso anymore because he was bad for business and picked fights with other men he thought were looking at his woman too long. The manager told him a crazy man is a dangerous man, and Buddy was crazy and so went to another bar already drunk to plan revenge. My mom couldn't serve draught beer that day without spilling any on her customers' uniforms or workpants or cheap suits, she was so worried what Buddy would do when she got home. I stayed out long after the curfew whistle blew just in case, even though I had a calm feeling that I couldn't explain. When I did go home, mom pretended she was asleep on the couch, but in my room I could hear her drifting from window to



window, and then over to the door, the floor creaking under her feet like she was some ghost.

This is how I know voodoo works: Buddy didn't come home for supper or when all the bars closed or even when the birds woke up. My mom and I didn't talk about it in the morning, just shut up and ate our oatmeal, but I read her eyes and shaking hands and knew she wasn't thinking Buddy had just been arrested and throw in with the rest of the drunks, like dozens of times before, because Elsie from the station, who used to live next door, would have already called. She was thinking instead that he had passed out on the railroad tracks and was lying dead cut in two, one Buddy on each side, or that he'd finally been shot for shooting his mouth off to the wrong man. Her eyes and hands said she was thinking he was dead in general and was afraid of her relief.

It got better every day Buddy didn't come home, hands didn't shake, eyes started seeing, bruises faded from purple to yellow to regular skin, and we found out that he didn't die, but ran off with Lorena Travis during happy hour at Smitty's because she was loose, because she was in love with Jim Beam, and because she was a tenthousanddollarwinner in the West Virginia lottery. There was more air to breathe and space to move and a brand new living room. Muscles and kitchen chairs and couch springs and kicked-in doors and walls with holes relaxed and stopped holding their breath. Unspent curses hiding like influenza in medicine cabinets or bottles of whisky or on the TV remote lifted away like smoke, broken spells. Buddy left all his things behind, even his granddaddy's penknife, because Lorena would take care of him now, at least until her money ran out, and we had a yardsale on the corner and made him worth something for the first time. I think if she would have had the nerve to say it out loud, my mom would

have called Buddy's departure a miracle. There was no other reason why he should have left.

But I know why.

## Sherry Chases Birds

Little Sherry Morner lived on the corner in a second floor apartment down the street from me. (Sometimes I wonder) Everyone on that street had the same landlord, who got all our money because he owned poker machines in bars and restaurants all over town. Linoleum floors with faded flowers and cigarette holes and no carpet, and doors hanging from hinges that didn't close all the way, and creaking furniture, old groaning furniture that remembered the last three tenants cost one hundred and fifty dollars a month. Sherry was the ugly girl from fairy tales, your square dance partner in Phys Ed—yes, I'm talking about West Virginia—if she was in your grade and you didn't pair up fast enough, the girl who will never marry, the girl with junk food rotted teeth and greasy black hair cut like a boy's from terminal headlice, the girl who had cooties for real. She had a face that said her parents were first cousins. And the bottoms of her feet were black as shoe polish because she couldn't walk unless barefoot. Sherry was my friend even though she didn't know it because Sherry chased birds.

(if Sherry had caught one,) Out the bathroom window was a lot with no fences, narrow, mostly gravel, grassy pattern baldness, but long and attracted to our buildings, that everyone said was *their* backyard. (just one,) Really it belonged to Sherry, who sang songs by the Dixie Chicks at the top of her lungs as she ran after birds and crossed invisible borders protected by hammocks and Big Wheels and barbecue grills. She tried to sneak up on them when they bent for bits of hotdog bun, dirty shiny pigeon, fidgety sparrow, belligerent blue jay, on ugly black toes and birdy legs. (bird running on reptile feet) Her hands open like wings, she tip-toed and mouthed the words because birds don't like loud country music and, at the last second, conquered again by excitement, Sherry

squealed and released a cloud of feathered things to the sky. (—not afraid enough to fly—)

The bird-cloud made it rain dirty fluff and runnywhiteshit and all the hammockers and Big Wheelers and barbecue grillers said G'on home, Sherry. Go play in your own yard. They didn't know that it wasn't their remarks that made Sherry turn around, chocolate-smiling, and run in the direction of the building where she lived. They didn't see the chubby, somehow female robin, beautiful as a dream to Sherry, tugging a pink nude earthworm, fluid neck, basalt beak, rubber worm, from its hole in the pebble dirt. (in her sticky open fingers,) But I did.

I could see her little face, not as round as the moon or plain as the Amish from up there in the bathroom window, beaming and dreaming of capturing one of the flying pretties. (would she have turned into,) I could see her running like a determined little chicken, an ugly duckling, until one of her same-faced parents yelled from a window and called her inside. (like magic,) Sherry's face crashed to the ground like a pile of dishes, she didn't want to leave the birds, but she did anyhow because her dad was a sinner and couldn't be saved. That's what he told the Jehovah's Witnesses when they came to the door with pamphlets and prophecies and eyes like saints, I'm a sinner and can't be saved. His sinning hand rubbed Little Sherry's head, which was filled with magpies and finches and especially cardinals. (a pretty bird) That's what he told everybody.

After a while Sherry would come back outside, cake for dinner and newly caffeinated, cake smears on her fingers and teeth, cake breath and cake clothes. She had birds in her eyes that would've laid eggs and built nests and lived in bird hotels if she only had feathers. (and flown away) She did, though, eat worms on occasion. And made the

Big Wheelers giggle. And the barbecue grillers turn their heads. And didn't bother the hammockers because they were napping in the evening sun. The birds probably thought that was normal behavior, but they didn't like her anyway, and ran from her to prove it. Sherry didn't care, she chased them. She sang songs by the Dixie Chicks. It was so simple how she lifted herself from loneliness. (from our divided backyard?) So graceful.

## The Christmas House

There's this house in Wheeling that's decorated for Christmas all year long. It's been that way ever since I can remember. Everybody knows about it. It's famous like Moon Dog and his bike. People will say they took their cousins from Charleston up to see the Christmas House and everyone knows what they mean. It has a fence of candy canes seven feet tall, ornate green wreaths in every window, Santa and his reindeer up on the roof, Nativity scenes in every place with enough space to set them, giant stockings in a row completely covering one whole side, boxes wrapped in colored tinfoil and bows scattered all over the yard, or piled under fake trees of all sizes—some with ribbons and tinsel and bulbs, some with only a star on top, and even a pink one made out of metal—and flashing, blinking, blinding lights numbering in the millions that line the entire house. It really is something to see. It gets worse every year.

No one knows for sure why the people who live there celebrate Christmas every day, and of course it's easier to speculate than ask them directly. One story they tell goes like this: the son and only child of the Christmas House people was drafted near the end of the Vietnam War and before he, shaved-head, reprogrammed, but still just some kid from West Virginia, got on a plane for a country with bugs bigger than a man's hand, he promised his parents he'd be back in time for Christmas. Before they became the Christmas House people, they trimmed their home like everyone else, but when they found out their son was killed that year, they just left the decorations up like they thought he might still come home someday, and things would be the way they were. Another story is about Mrs. Christmas House, and how she went crazy and believed God Himself came down from heaven and told her the world would end unless she devoted her life to

commemorating Jesus's birthday. These are the stories I've heard. I'm not sure what I believe. Either way, the Christmas House people keep adding more stuff and keep chasing away idle cars and picture-takers.

The best time I ever had in my whole life was when Scott Barley from Cameron got his driver's license and took a pickuptruckload of people to Wheeling to cruise by all the usual places, like the dog track on the Island, and the whores with teased hairsprayed hair walking in front of the strip bars on Water Street, and past the Christmas House. Scott is funny because he says what they do for fun in Cameron is drive seventy milesperhour down abandoned backroads that end dead or in a cow pasture, and then pull the emergency brake. That's why everybody in Cameron is half simple and owns muddy trucks with big tires and primer doors and spider webs on the windshields. Scott's funny, too, because he'll smoke any kind of cigarette, whatever's cheapest, or whatever variety—kings, 100's, menthol, filterless—you happen to be smoking. He said he smoked Russian cigarettes once, he could tell by the backwards R's and the hammer and sickle on the pack, that he bummed from a man in Ernie's Cork and Bottle who spoke no English, and swore they tasted like vodka.

We rode up and down the streets of Wheeling because there's nowhere in particular to go, with Hank Williams Jr. turned up so loud you would have thought we were Jamboree in the Hills on wheels, and Scott yelling, *Heeeey, y'all* out his window to everyone he saw. Sometimes girls arrogant and younger than us had the nerve to yell back, *Hay is for horses!* in girly defiant voices and then, invincible, showed us the pink nubs of their tongues. We were no different, to them, from any other truck full of people hooping and hollering and driving around with nothing better to do. Sometimes, when we

were stuck at stop lights, hookers arrogant and older than us with two teeth in their heads blew kisses when Scott blew his horn at them, because somebody in that pickup might be serious, they all drove pickups, they were all looking for a girl to love them for an hour.

But we drove away fast after the light turned green and left behind black tire skids and the stink of burning rubber and the whores in their hot pink hotpants and crossed the suspension bridge to the Island where the dog track is. For our entertainment, or maybe his own, Scott ripped us around in reckless circles in the back of the Downs parking lot—bigger than all the lots in Wheeling combined—where there were no cars because it was a week night, smiling to himself that he’s legal now, even though he’d been driving since he was thirteen. When Marisa yelled that she was going to throw up, Scott cut it out and headed toward the flashing lights where all the action is (but not for us since we aren’t old enough to get in), and the snappy voice on the loudspeaker that told us Pat the Bunny was moving in on Lucky’s Charm at the second lap. Fat men with fat cigars and dark glasses huddled between obscene parked Cadillacs and made their own bets. We drove by them slow as the police, and when they looked up, they shook their fists and told us, Get the hell outta here, you fuckin’ punks, so we did.

Scott knew where to go next, and we crossed the bridge again, over the cruddy muddy river, on our way to the Christmas House. We sang *Deck the Halls* and *Frosty the Snowman* at the tops of our lungs as we cruised down the street the house sits on, North Front Street, which should be legally changed to Christmas House Street because that’s what everyone calls it, even the other people who live there in normal houses. Scott honked at more truckloads of folks we passed who were doing the rounds just like us, and they yelled and waved and raised their cans of beer in the air like Statues of Liberty. You



can tell when you've almost reached the Christmas House, especially at night, not just because of the traffic, but because the whole block, the entire sky, is lit up with a brilliant light so bright you'd think the sun was on vacation there.

Scott stopped across the street in front of the house and threw his truck in park and shut the engine off so we could take it all in, and for a minute we were quiet as church, and then everyone started talking at once, pointing out all the decorations that had been added since the last time they came, Look, that sign that says Season's Greetings is new, no, not that one, the silver and gold one, or trying to see who could count the most wreaths. Then Donnie McDonald, who's originally from Kentucky (which differs from West Virginia only in that they sell cheaper cigarettes and privilege bluegrass over honky-tonk), who's daddy is a minister, and who was expelled from four different parochial schools in two years because he's got a smart mouth and not in a good way, jumped over the tailgate for a souvenir. He shot across the street like he was running from death, squeezed between candy canes, snuck into the yard that has been covered in fake snow for so long grass won't grow, grabbed one of the wrapped packages addressed to no one, and climbed back in the truck out of breath. It really was like Christmas day, we were all so anxious to see what kind of thing the Christmas House people might deem gift-worthy, but when Donnie tore the paper off his present and lifted the lid, there was only a brick inside, probably to keep the box from blowing away. Damn, he said, It's just like home, and everyone laughed.

All of a sudden the front door of the house swung open, I'm not sure how anyone even noticed with all that blinking and flashing and twinkling going on, and a man with a limp stepped onto the porch, who we were sure was Mr. Christmas House, even though

he wasn't dressed as Santa like we all imagined he'd be—he didn't even have a white beard or a fat belly and was no one's idea of jolly—and started screaming at us to get the hell off his property before he called the cops. Scott yelled out his window and told him that we were parked on a city street and had every right to be there, could sit in that very spot for the rest of our lives if we wanted, and if he, Mr. Christmas House, didn't care for spectators, he shouldn't dress his home up like the North Pole.

At first, Scott's logic seemed to persuade, because the man limped back inside the house, which is probably just as ornate as the exterior, but I don't know of anyone who's ever been invited over for dinner to see, and then came out with a shotgun, which he pointed right at Scott's truck. Everyone screamed Holy shit and *Go go go!* and Jesus Christ, and sets of headlights came on all up and down the street like the eyes of sneaky cats glowing in the dark, other cars that had been parked, maybe, to count the wreaths or Christmas trees and decided now would be a good time to leave. Scott turned his keys in the ignition but the truck didn't start, wouldn't move, just sat there coughing and choking like some old smoking man because it was out of gas, probably used up when we were driving around the Downs lot in circles. Donnie McDonald goes, I'm getting the fuck out of here, and dove over the side of the truck like a *Dukes of Hazzard* stuntman and hit the ground running, ran through the neighbors' yards into the dark, and none of us saw him again until a week later at Jerry's party, where he recounted the entire episode in a way no one else who was there remembered.

Everyone thought Donnie's idea was a lot better than sitting frozen in the truck bed like a herd of deer waiting for Mr. Christmas House to pull the trigger and shoot one of us in the head, so we all bailed out and took off in different directions, a diversion tactic

we had learned from watching *Animal Kingdom*. There's a playground a few streets over and, eventually, everyone except Donnie met up there and checked each other for bullet holes and swung on the rusty swings and laughed about Mr. Christmas House and his shotgun and Donnie and his brick. After a while, since no one had been killed—we never even heard any shots fired and so didn't believe the gun was loaded in the first place—we couldn't resist the temptation of going back for more Christmas, and we had to get Scott's truck, anyway. So Scott turned his hat upside down and passed it around to collect money for gas and we made our way to the Christmas House, not for the last time.

## Clothes on a Line

My mom has hands older than she is because they've scrubbed toilets and floors, washed windows and dishes, cleaned chickens and other peoples' children their whole lives. In the winter, her hands are cracked and dry even though she uses lotion, and the skin splits into tiny mouths near her knuckles that bleed thin blood. My mom's hands are a hundred years older than the rest of her body, white, small, and frail but stronger and more determined than they look, like concentration camp survivors. They will live forever if they have to. They will never stop fighting.

My mom slapped me in the face once because we were poor and she was tired, but then she felt guilty later and tried to make it up to me by sharing her popcorn and some old movie she was watching. There was no man around and I wore dirty clothes like an orphan and didn't keep my hair neat. We stayed awake late at night, wild unruly women too close to the television with the lights out, Hitchcock's homicidal birds our only company, we've seen this one many times before. Lines move from the top of the TV screen slow and jerky like our car to the bottom where they disappear into the movie. We have bad reception. We have illegal cable.

The green, beige, and white afghan on the couch still stinks like Tom's cigars, even though he left almost a month ago. I lay my head on it and remember that tomorrow, Saturday, we'll have to wash our clothes by hand in the kitchen sink with dish soap because there isn't enough change in the coffee can to go to the laundry mat. We can't afford a washer-and-dryer and rentals never come with them, so we have to hang our clothes to dry on a line, sometimes in a basement, depending on where we live, sometimes

outside where anyone who wants to know can see what size bra you wear and use it against you.

This time it's outside, a sad rope stretched between two poles driven into the ground like gravemarkers, in the cube of yellow yard behind our rented house where the sun doesn't reach. Our clothes flap flimsy and invertebrate in the breeze for all the world to determine that we shop at yard sales and thrift stores and clearance isles, that we are white trash. I'm afraid of what else they might learn from our clothes.

My mom slapped me with her brittle hand that I was sure would break when it made contact with my face (but it didn't) because, she said, I don't know my own name, because I won't grow up. Sometimes I'm young and I act young and have visions of grandeur and know it, but sometimes I'm old, too, and assume ages I've never been, 20 or 30 or 82. I know when to play hard like I'm dying tomorrow. I know when to speak and when to pretend I'm not here. My mom slapped me with her callused hand one time because I forgot to take the clothes off the line, silly, reading a book in the closet, and it's raining now.

I think of them as people waiting their turn, our worn but patient clothes, pinned like defeated mothers in line for food stamps, stationed lonely soldiers. I take them from the rope one by one, fold them, put them in the basket, give them a new home later in a chest of drawers or closet. I know what it means to wait. I know how it feels to be pinned. What people don't see in our clothes is that they are a family, hanging there together through circumstances of dirtiness or cleanliness, cotton mothers and daughters and sometimes synthetic dads. They hold hands when I fasten their arms together.

Sometimes I'm afraid to be the woman inside me, the woman my mom tries to slap free. I'm afraid because of the things she knows. I see the way she walks, confident, past the boys loitering and smoking on the corner, like she doesn't care if they're watching her go by. She laughs at the jokes men tell her, laughs full and long with dancing eyes, she understands them, she gets it. She tosses her hair and there's something deliberate in the way she moves, she has their attention and appreciation, she is a painting in a museum. I look at her like through a mirror and listen to her honky-tonk music and I know somehow she has something to teach me. She wears a faded dress like the one hanging on the line and dirty brown cowgirl boots like the ones on the front porch. She knows where she comes from. She looks like my mom. She looks like me.

## Great and Important Things

These are great and important things:

The junk store called This-N-That on the corner of Jacob and 5<sup>th</sup> streets where the lady with eyes not crossed but looking off into two different directions works, and where I can dig through piles and piles of dusty boxes all afternoon until I find something someone else has lost or forgotten about or decided to throw away.

Every individual sometime I have the whole house to myself—for mysterious and hazy-recollected episodes of dancing or singing or chanting like I'm African or Navajo or Yanomamo and then I *become* African or Navajo or Yanomamo, for staring at the walls (for staring through the walls with my X-ray vision), for fits of laughter or crying just because it happens to happen and while I'm in the middle of it I pause to marvel at the suddenness of the situation—up to and including the second right before someone, returning from somewhere, opens the door.

The day I got behind the wheel of a car with no driver's license, daring, hasty, uncharacteristic, and decided to go for a drive and did drive for (four plus four) hours or days and was very far away from West Virginia, lost and further away than anyone's ever been, and stayed overnight in a cheap hotel that smelled of mothballs-Pinesol-withdrawl in between driving, when I realized for the first time: I was the one painting the picture. I was one day closer to something.

This notebook I write in and its cracked pleather cover; when I'm pretty, when I'm on (when I'm *right* on); washers and dryers; the blue, black, and brown shirt I found in mom's hope chest that I'm sure belonged to my dad, but I don't ask because as far as I'm concerned it *is* his; the library where I live sometimes; maps; things that are green;

realizing for the first time the serious daylight remaining at 7 pm, that you've lost an hour of your life and will have to wait until fall to get it back; the little girl who chases birds.

When the sky is exactly like this: navy at the zenith and then light blue, followed by purple, pink, and a color like orange sherbet, ending in white and light blue again, and the sun burns a golden hole the size of sixty lifetimes through the center that lets you see the stars in the distance (which are really more than just stars in the distance) and the factory stacks on the horizon make fatter clouds than God that rise and grow and stretch until they disappear into the atmosphere, unless a jet plane punctures their potbellies like a thumbtack and leaves behind a smear of a cloud and I think to myself: God. *Damn.*



## Rusty Jumps In

My mom and Carla sit at the kitchen table and talk and drink Busch Light from cans and I listen to them talk but they don't talk about Rusty. This kitchen is different and doesn't smell like the river and Carla has changed her hair. She went from brown to Honky-Tonk blonde and her bangs are teased up stiff with hairspray, as tall as a church steeple, and make her two inches closer to God. She has a new job, too, as a secretary for a construction company up in Wheeling, and she brags about the fact that it beats bagging lettuce at Coronet Foods any day of the week, about her eight-dollar-an-hour wage, about the gorgeous hunks of men she works with who parade around in wife-beaters and tight-fittin'-jeans. You should see the muscles some of these guys have, she says, You'd die right there on the spot. But Carla is still alive and claims she is in love with a contracted carpenter who is ten years younger than she is and fucks like a mustang. Last week she told my mom that she was in love with the bartender at the Silver Spur, the one who looks like Toby Keith and wants to be a country singer, but who never made it further than Country Karaoke King of Marshall County, 1989 and 1992. You should see him, Carla says, He reminds me of that guy you dated in high school, what was his name? The one who had hair like this and eyes like that, and my mom gets uncomfortable and fidgets in her seat and changes the subject. This is the way she acts when I ask her about my dad, so I keep the image of Carla's man in mind and look for his face around town and in the mirror every day.

Now Carla and the surviving porcelain horses rent a one bedroom apartment in a building not far from the little house on the river that she lived in with Rusty. She doesn't live with Rusty anymore because Rusty went and jumped in the river, just like Carla was

always telling him to do. He used to say the only way he'd do it was dead and the bullet hole he put in his head proved he was serious. When they found him, he was floating on his belly in water as chocolate brown as Willy Wonka's river. They didn't have a hard time identifying Rusty (even though the fish had eaten away most of his eyes and some of his face and his skin looked wrinkly white like your finger after you take off a Band-Aid) because he was wearing the brass belt buckle Carla got him for their tenth wedding anniversary that said his name. Everybody in McMechen knew Rusty and everybody in McMechen went to his funeral. Everybody except for J.T. Snyder, who ran away, they say, to Oklahoma and never came back, not for Christmas, not for weddings, and certainly not for funerals of men whose wives he fucked. There are no more parties. There are no more Charlie Daniels albums because Carla threw them in the river after she buried Rusty. As far as I know, they never washed up. As far as I know, the giant turtles, big as VW bugs, ate them, just, as I suspect, they, instead of the fish, ate Rusty's face.

Some things never change, though. My mom and Carla sit at the kitchen table and they don't talk about these things. They don't talk about the way my mom kissed Rusty that night, the way she pushed her breasts up against him like she couldn't get close enough. And they don't talk about the time Carla slow danced to an Alabama song with my mom's boyfriend Mick, whose hands were all over Carla's ass at Shelly Kimball and Roy Whitlatch's wedding reception.

I don't want to be like them, my mom and Carla, drinking beer and chasing men, but they can't help the way they are. They've got the hills in their blood. And so do I. One day I will put all my favorite things in a bag, sling it over my shoulder and walk right on out of these hills. One day I will leave West Virginia behind and have a house

somewhere else that's all mine, with an address that never changes, and no man to cook for. I will carry the glass black stallion with me where ever I go to remind me of my home and maybe I'll ride it back here sometime.

Maybe one day I will.

## Consumed and Other Stories

## Consumed

I thought of him as being made of many sculptured and renewable components, like a fabricated forest, an ecosystem of tissues and veins, each part individually hand-crafted and custom designed, self-sustaining, built to endure. Such was his perfection. We had names, but we didn't know them, nor would we have been able to distinguish one another from those metonymic symbols. Such was the extent of our disease. This is an account of how we gave ourselves away and were consumed. This is not my story; my story begins next week when I am murdered in a shopping mall. This is about consumption, but it is not our story. This is a dramatic re-enactment of our story.

It was summer and we met in an afterthought. Back in those days, we were drowning in sweat. He was a capitalist and a janitor or a Marxist and a proletariat; I could never keep them straight. I was a waitress in an all-night diner that specialized in experimental breakfast cereals. We fell in love over shredded wheat with cherry pie filling and moved in before finishing our coffee. The apartment we rented was in a brick building with a laundromat and Coke machines, and a kidney-shaped pool in the yard. We had a green bathroom, two bedrooms, a walk-in closet, paid cable. We adopted a cat and some houseplants. Rain fell in other cities but not where we lived.

Our upstairs neighbors were elephants posing as college students or vice versa; either way, they could've been in the circus. Late at night they used the light fixtures as trapeze bars to practice somersaults or study the properties of aerodynamics; either way, they landed on the ceiling like piles of bricks. Our relationship with them was amicable and symbiotic: we pounded on their floor with a broom and they ignored us. Meanwhile, the psychic who lived next door told us that we had a love deeper than the Marianus

Trench, that she could tell by the way we parted our hair. She was so right it scared us out of our shoes.

Monday through Friday, he worked nine to five and I pulled the night shift. In those days we passed more than we converged, like people on the street, and we communicated through telepathy and Post-its stuck to the refrigerator, the hub of our discourse. Our only real time together was on the weekends, when we pretended to be married under no certain terms. There were mornings and things. Sitcoms. Brushing each other's teeth. We read the newspaper and looked at houses for sale and dreamed of the wallpaper we'd have, the appliances. Someday we would plant roots, have things growing in the front lawn: a swing set and gnomes, a barbecue grill. Our children would have rhyming names: Stan and Fran, Ron and Juan, Jimmy and Timmy and Kim.

We wanted to preserve those weekends in a glass case and live inside like fossils. For us, the world was condensed into a microcosm of two-day blocks; the rest were irrelevant sequences with irreverent dialogues. We tried to prevent them from happening by refusing to mark them off the calendar, but they wouldn't go away. So he took charge and decided that no woman of his would work for a living; he was sentimental like that. I stayed in the apartment and vacuumed and baked little cakes while he scrubbed toilets at the Y. I whistled the theme to *Leave it to Beaver* and cooked square meat from square cans in a square skillet. When he came home we ate dinners on trays. Sometimes he called me Jeannie, but that wasn't my name. I called him Master, for fun. Sometimes he serenaded me with *I Dream of Jeannie* but my hair wasn't light brown. He loved me that much.

After we finished our meals, I'd wash the dishes and then we'd curl up in concentric circles in front of the television, imitating our cat. It seemed our bodies were melding together as we lay there, as if we were going through mitosis in reverse. When we held hands, we couldn't tell our fingers apart. We didn't know who was who anymore. If he wanted a drink, I reached for his glass. If I was hungry, he ate a cracker and I licked the salt from my lips.

During the day while he worked we were like separated conjoined twins, and we each felt the absence of the other, the phantom itch, the severed limb. I kissed his socks and underwear before I tucked them in his drawer, as if I was sending them off to bed. There were instances when I'd get a mysterious whiff of Sani-Flush or a sudden shock, like static electricity from a doorknob, and I knew he was thinking about me. The longing became unbearable; the anticipation of him was more than I could stand. Sometimes I missed him so bad I licked his boots and rubbed his picture on my chest.

Our evolution began when he quit his job.

We never left the apartment after that and didn't shower or bother with groceries. If we had any, we could've cooked french fries in our oily hair. We forgot about the laundry and garbage overflowed from the can: toenail clippings, wadded Kotex, snotty tissues all over the floor. There were warrens of dust bunnies in every corner, but we could have cared less. The mail, the telephone, knocks at the door, they didn't matter to us, like geometry or the price of packaged ham.

Instead, we had fevered conversations that spilled from us like avalanches, from the inside out. A new language emerged from the blind spot between our eyes, previously unspoken or unseen. Words and sentences piled up like our garbage and we kicked them

aside or grinded them into the carpet with our heels to make room for more. Our hands gestured dramatically in their flight, like bats, and fluttered around the room on tangents of their own. Handless, he told me how he died once in a field of corn and couldn't find his way to the afterlife; how he was paranoid of birds and car fumes and the color teal; how, like any other boy, he ate pennies, he masturbated, and he wanted to be a pilot of paper airplanes. I told him about the morning I woke up under a river and turned into clay; about how I lost twenty percent of my vocabulary when the house I grew up in was destroyed by fire; about my love for the taste of spicy things like sulfur, like voodoo.

Eventually we had to pay the rent and then we were bankrupt. To compensate, we had a yard sale by the pool and sold everything we owned, except the TV, and made enough money to last almost a week. But there were bills and things. Obligations and debts to society. We could never pay them off. For days we cried and comforted each other in the solace of our humid apartment. We dehydrated with sadness when we considered all the times we had taken our lamps for granted and thought of water as free. One minute we were turning on the faucet and flicking on the light and the next we were threatened with the prospect of a dry and dark continuum that would consume us before we could ever make sense of it. All along, though, the answer was so close, we couldn't even see it; it was right beneath the surface of our skins. Our veins bulged and throbbed from the heat and tried to give us clues, but we didn't catch on. It was when we were wrapped around each other on the living room floor like two rare monkeys at the zoo, our hearts pressed together, pounding in tandem, that he devised a grand and ingenious scheme: we would sell ourselves. It was a small sacrifice, and like any other it began with blood.



So we went downtown to the blood bank and filled out forms. We sat on green vinyl chairs and wrote our histories in clear and legible print in the whitest room I had ever seen. Did we weigh more than 110 pounds? Did we ever have Hepatitis? Use intravenous drugs? The nurses who took our clipboards were nice, plump women in smocks with smudged lipstick and hair done up in loose, sloppy buns. They laid us side by side on padded tables with wheels and giggled like pink virgins as they rolled up our sleeves. I imagined that the needle entering my arm was him, that he was inside my body like a giant sterilized mosquito. I don't have to explain the symbolism. We watched ourselves travel through plastic tubes and end up in plastic bags that were bound for highway accidents and football stadiums and operating rooms. The smell of blood and antiseptics was sharp as metal in our nostrils and brought tears to our eyes. Or maybe it was happiness; we couldn't be sure.

After we gave them our blood, they threw a pizza party for us so we wouldn't faint. We felt special and pampered when they served us ginger ale in paper cups with Bugs Bunny on them, as if we were sick and in the second grade. They paid us in cash, they paid exclusively in cash, and we skipped away with Bugs Bunny Band-Aids and fists full of stiff green bills. We couldn't go back for 56 days, but we found other means.

He sold his sperm by the gallon. He said they gave him magazines, but he didn't use them; he thought of me instead. I thought of the people his sperm would become, people we would never know. There would be boys in Arkansas with blunt noses just like his, left-handed girls in North Carolina, sets of twins in one of those boxy states who could roll their tongues. We waved goodbye to them in their plastic containers. They wagged their tails like dogs.

Then we found out about plasma. We didn't know we had any. We thought it was gelatinous and glowed in the dark. We thought it was napalm. We thought only people with tentacles and three eyes had plasma, like in movies at two a.m. on Saturday nights. Twice a week, we went to ambiguous brick buildings that could've housed travel agencies or law offices. Only the doors said North American Biomedical, Inc., stenciled in black letters. He wore a suit and a tie. I wore an Easter dress. To passersby, we could've been on our way to purchase airline tickets for our honeymoon to Aruba or the Swiss Alps. For all anyone knew, he could've been a partner in a small firm and I could've been his young wife, we looked that hopeful. We felt that important.

We discovered how profitable our bodies could be that summer, how expendable our parts. Like chameleons, we regenerated and grew new tails. And we were as colorful as chameleons, too: green, purple, and yellow in the crooks of our arms, black beneath our eyes, our veins bright blue. He told me I was more beautiful than a sunset, than the Northern Lights, than the Technicolor of our TV screen.

But somehow it was never enough. We didn't know where the money went: it scattered like roaches. It didn't leave a note on the fridge to say whether or not it was coming back. We weren't good with things like that and we didn't care; we didn't even own a clock. We bought stamps but we didn't send any letters or pay any bills. We bought lottery tickets but we never checked to see if we'd won. Bank statements meant nothing to us; they flew around our apartment like paper moths and died violent deaths on the windowsills, incinerated in the sun.

And the sun was so bright I was afraid it would burn out, that, like a candle, it burned brightest at the end. Every day was a solstice and every day we were smothered

by our own heat. Moving only circulated hot air so we lay in puddles by the toilet, still as mudfish. My pores were tiny open mouths trying to drink a breeze that wasn't there. When I gave up my hair for cancer victims, it felt like a blessing because I could finally breathe. They scalped me like a Puritan and displayed my hair on a styrofoam head with no face. I wanted to put my picture on it to see what I looked like to him. Was I pretty? Was I plain? Was my head shaped like an egg? I couldn't tell. They paid me four hundred dollars and I decided I felt sorry for the cancer patient who got my hair. It danced with static, was temperamental, and had an aversion to combs.

During the afternoons the air was a tactile thing, dense and sticky like Egg Foo Yung. I wondered if we were in Hiroshima, if someone had dropped a bomb. We dragged ourselves in slow motion and radiation from blood bank to blood bank, from fertility clinic to fertility clinic. We lied on our forms. We covered our needle marks with beige Revlon foundation. I wore a wig. We had to take precautions so the lab technicians wouldn't catch on. To keep our iron levels high, we chewed Flintstones vitamins like gum. We needed protein, but it was too hot to cook so we ate the houseplants I had cultivated on love and sunshine, with vegetable oil and garlic salt for flavor. They still tasted like dirt.

There were some benefits to our new diet, though: I was pleased with how thin I was becoming, how heroin chic. I looked like the women in fashion magazines, all cheek- and hipbones and vaguely human limbs, skulls with skin stretched across tight as spandex. I wore a bikini to the pool to make the teenage girls go purge their bean sprout sandwiches or their pineapples-and-cottage cheese. They fawned over the empty bowl of my stomach, its attractive concave quality. They asked for my autograph; they wanted to

play songs on my ribs. They applauded how bold and trendy I was for being bald and they convinced me it was true. I told him I wanted a head as smooth as a pea, but he wouldn't let me shave the stubble. I would grow more hair, he said. I was a jackpot. I was a cash crop. He wanted to plant seeds.

He had plans for the future. We would sell our babies on the Internet. We'd be sharing little pieces of ourselves with the world, he said. We would send our extensions on grand adventures and eventually they would come back to us and tell us their life stories. They would speak different languages but they would all feel the same void inside, the same longing to know where their predilection for scouring bathtubs came from, why their hands were always clammy, why they couldn't tell time. In an afternoon they'd decide that they loved us more than they ever loved their other parents, the temporary ones, and then, at last, they'd move in with us. By then we would have a big house in the country. We would be a family.

We tried to execute this plan on the floor of our bedroom. We didn't have a bed anymore, but we thought the room itself would arouse something in my uterus, that something would take hold in those arid walls. We were thinking psychologically. But it was summer and everything had dried up. When we kissed, our tongues welded to the roofs of our mouths. Our lips were glued together with strange gummy paste. He laid on top of me but nothing went in and nothing came out.

We decided we'd give it a few days and try again, but things were different somehow, something had changed. We seemed to be in the midst of some new season where it was hot and cold at the same time. I knew I had to be imagining it, the thermometer boiled in contradiction, but I felt frost in the air. Our breath hung suspended

in clouds all over the apartment and we lost each other in them, so we stayed in separate rooms and took inventory of ourselves. I pinched and poked and prodded my arms looking for untapped veins. When I scratched my legs little flakes of skin flew off and piled up in drifts like snow. I gathered them in a flowerpot with dirt and put them in the brightest window. I watered them and fed them packets of ketchup and soy sauce and hoped they would grow. Every day I checked for the beginnings of fingers, little white nubs with no nails, or two chubby feet or a fistful hand breaking through. Sometimes he went around the laundromat calling Kitty, Kitty, I knew what he was thinking, and she must have known, too, because we hadn't seen her in weeks. Mostly he stayed in the bathroom rescuing his hair from the sink drain. He pulled off bits of gunk and stuck the hairs back on his arms and chest with dabs of glue.

We were falling apart.

I didn't sweat anymore. Like a baby animal, I had no scent. I stopped menstruating, too, and my teeth were loose as rocks in a driveway. There were always little spots of colored light in the corner of my vision, like stars, that exploded into entire galaxies when I stood. I fainted during Oprah and woke up to Jay Leno. The TV was always much further away than I remembered it being, and much larger. Once I had a hallucination or a dream that I was inside a test tube on a rack among other test tubes, that I had been simmered down to proteins and vitamins, like vegetable juice. I couldn't recall who drank me, Oprah or Leno.

All along, though, he never stopped planning. He was a true entrepreneur. There were other things, he said. You'd be surprised at how adaptive the human body is, how engineered with mechanisms for survival. He was smart and I believed him. He watched

the Discovery channel like a zealot. I saw a program once, he said, about a girl who had half her brain removed because of a tumor and she lived like a normal person. She was valedictorian of her high school class. I saw another one where a skier was frostbitten on his nose so bad they had to amputate it, and so they grew another one out of his forehead. People donate kidneys every day, he said. And they live. There is a black market for corneas in Brazil.

Somehow we had given birth to an ice age in that sweltering summer. Somewhere in between the lines of the heat waves that hovered above the sidewalks, we created icicles. We didn't talk much anymore and although we both noticed it, our instinct to adapt outweighed the compulsion to start over. Inert momentum such as this is self-explanatory. When he did talk, he said things like: I want you to sell your eggs. He said it would be a simple operation. I reminded him of the babies, of the family we would have someday, that my lifetime supply of eggs was limited and unreplenishable, that I was born with a number specific to me and once they were used, I'd be as barren as the shriveled vines of ivy that wrapped around the fence by the pool. I could have a dozen; I could only have two. He told me not to worry, that I had more than I thought, thousands at least, each with a fair market value of \$2,149. I felt like some sturgeon just jerked from the river the way they plucked my eggs from my ovaries like caviar. I expected a Band-Aid and a lollipop, but all I got was a crooked pink scar.

We had other appointments, too, some with doctors, some with hopeful people whose ads he read in the paper, but we couldn't keep them all: we were getting weaker by the minute. We could barely blink our eyes. We slept sixteen hours a day and neither of us had used the bathroom in weeks. The same roll of toilet paper hung from the

dispenser; its tattered end flapped like a tongue. Our skins were white as liquid paper, transparent as greasy hamburger wrappers. When I held my hand up I'd swear I could see him on the other side, outlined in blue veins. If I could spare the energy, I'd crawl over to the pool so I could get some color, but the teenage girls were afraid of me. They looked at me like I was a ghost. And maybe I was a ghost, made up of nothing more than smoky filaments and gobs of plasma.

We were becoming desperate, too, and hungry. He said he wanted to nourish himself on my blood. I told him that the blood bank pays twenty dollars a pint and I have type O negative. I am a universal donor. I am a hot commodity. You'd let me if you love me, he said and knew he won. Women have ten percent more body fat than men, did you know that, he said, and pricked my thumb with a straight pin. He nursed like a lamb. It gave him an erection for the first time in a month. When he couldn't get enough, he gutted the meatiest part of my thumb like a fish, and when he finished, it *was* a fish, all puckered and sickish-white. He moved on to my index finger, but I would not be left out. I took his straight pin and his hand and he didn't even notice. I made little holes in his fingers and sucked on them like straws. How long could we hold on like that, I wondered, how long would the summer last? Forever, it seemed. And whose fingers were these in my mouth? Were they mine? Were they mine? Were they his?

## Gravity

When we started lifting from the ground, everyone was terrified, except the children, who did back flips and summersaults and pretended they were swimming over the tops of trees that were just beginning to bud. Their branches reached up to our feet like thin brown arms, as if they were trying to pull us back down. Unlike them, we were not firmly rooted to the earth. There were people screaming and sobbing, people holding onto each other like floatation devices, people on their knees with their eyes squeezed shut and their hands pressed together in front of them, praying with Protestant fervor to the heavens as they levitated toward them. This is the end, they said, We are being called Home. Some of them formed a sloppy circle by linking hands, the flock of them fashioning a surrogate church in mid-air. They looked like skydivers going in reverse. Some people rambled on to themselves that this was all a government conspiracy, perhaps a plot to thin out the population, and that it had nothing at all to do with God. Others knew aliens were behind this, and volunteered persuasive accounts, to anyone who would listen, of how they were once abducted by a silver disc in broad daylight as they hung clothes on the line or tended to their flowerbeds. Most of us, though, were still not convinced that this wasn't an illusion or the middle of a particularly vivid dream, that if we bent over and stretched our fingertips past our sandals or bare feet or steel-toed boots, we would touch carpet, concrete, cool blades of grass. But each time we did reach down, there was nothing below us but air.

There were people on bicycles and patio chairs and rollerblades; people in cars who honked their horns impatiently as if they were in the midst of a traffic jam that hovered over the interstate; people walking their dogs, eating sandwiches, holding



hammers and nails and cans of paint; people in uniforms who had been interrupted in the middle of delivering mail, delivering pizzas, issuing citations; people in jogging shorts and sweatbands whose legs scissored violently back and forth, their hundred dollar running shoes pounding on nothing, as though, by exerting themselves more than they normally would, they could make it back to the sidewalk far below and be home in time for the news.

But there had been no warning, nothing to prepare us for this; today had been like any other day. We woke up, brushed our teeth, filled bowls with bran flakes. We drove to work, dropped children at daycare, stopped for groceries and hair appointments, caught buses to school. There was no indication from the earth that it would shake us off like crumbs of stale bread from a kitchen rug, no hint from the heavens that we would suddenly rise into them like helium balloons escaped from some kid's sticky fingers. The ground did not grumble; the sky remained evasive and pale, almost cloudless, almost absolutely still except for a few birds dipping and diving here and there, the occasional low-flying plane rumbling overhead like some airborne stomach. Now it was populated with people. Before, from our porches and driveways and yards, the sun had seemed so far away, a distant white orb we could block out with the backs of our hands or pinch between our fingers; now it was much closer and much larger, even though the air was getting cooler by the minute.

Below us, our town was a picture from a geography book: the roofs of houses appeared as flat boxy surfaces, barren except for silver antennas that stemmed from them like metal trees; scores of rectangular mobile homes lined up neatly in rows like military graves; diagonally mowed lawns became squares in an enormous tic-tac-toe board; there

were empty playgrounds and city parks, vacant stretches of grey pavement, bridges uninhabited by cars that bent over bodies of water as if they were practicing yoga. On the outskirts were vast expanses of green farmland dotted with bales of hay and oblivious grazing cows; tree covered hills that erupted from the ground like pimples; brown rivers and streams wandered unevenly through the valleys between them, like hikers without a map.

And the higher we climbed the more we could see, far beyond the imaginary boundaries of property lines and county lines and state lines. Details from below were becoming less distinct. We couldn't quite make out which one was our street anymore, couldn't discern between swimming pools and ponds, could no longer see the people who were hanging onto broken power lines, waving in the breeze like human kites. We were passing the birds, who screeched and cawed questions at us, the strange animals who should have been sitting on benches on the ground feeding them bits of popcorn, or shooing them away from newly washed cars with garden hoses.

Eventually, we stopped wondering if we would achieve a certain level and then slowly descend as suddenly as we had risen, like passengers in an elevator, and we gave ourselves over to our fate. Some of our faces were placid and relaxed, as if we'd been anesthetized, sitting in a dentist's chair. We knew we wouldn't make it to the sun, that we'd burn up in the earth's atmosphere long before that. So we made our peace. Some people held on to their families for comfort, or the members of their floating prayer circle; others hugged their dogs or themselves, or set about finishing the sandwiches they had been too startled to put down when this happened, savoring their last taste of greasy mayonnaise. Some people made acquaintances with the person nearest them: they shook

hands, they laughed and cried and traded stories. One man had a deck of cards in the pocket of his jeans and started a poker game with three of his neighbors; other people began kissing passionately, without even having spoken, and tore off each other's clothes, which hung in rumpled piles, suspended in the air beside them. The sky was filled with the sounds of their grunts and groans, and after, with the wispy clouds their cigarettes made.

And then the sky became darker until we could no longer see the ground below. It seemed we had reached a new climate, some exotic environment in which we couldn't possibly be adapted to survive; the air was so thin we could hardly breathe. Bolts of white lightning zigzagged between us, inches away, and flickered out only seconds later, leaving behind an odor like gunpowder. Rain or fragments of asteroids, we couldn't be sure, fell on us like hot sizzling butter and singed our skin.

Higher and higher we climbed, through a layer of dense clouds that could've filled us like dolls with cotton stuffing if we opened our mouths. When they finally gave way, we saw that we hadn't been burned up in the atmosphere after all; instead, we were drifting into space. We hugged and cheered in the starry profound silence of it as if we were in a football stadium because it wasn't over for us yet, we had overcome the most impossible of obstacles. But now we were freezing in a black abyss. Now the earth was, to us, what the sun had once been: a distant orb, a tiny speck.

And then, one by one, people were floating away like dandelion seeds, each getting sucked into the orbit of a different unseen mass. We waved goodbye to our friends. As we were carried off, we wondered if we would ever land, and where, on what planet, what galaxy. We wondered if there would be people there, others like us, or new kinds of life we'd never seen and couldn't begin to have imagined. We wondered if we could start over

somewhere else, recreate the human race all throughout the universe, build cities, evolve.

We wondered these things and others, and we drifted further and further away.

## Criticism

On the whole, I think this is a solid piece. I found myself immediately drawn in by your terse prose, well developed characters, and crisp dialogue, but the real strength of the story lies in your skillful handling of the plot. You ground the narrative in the realm of the familiar, beginning with a cleverly misleading premise about a sexually and emotionally bankrupt relationship, and then undermine the reader's comfortable assumptions by giving it an interesting, unexpected twist. As always, your details and descriptions succinctly set the mood, as well as provide colorful glimpses into the inner workings of the characters' minds. I especially like the images of limpness/lifelessness in the opening passages, which are symbolic, obviously, of physical impotency, but more complexly, they reveal that the subsequent emotional toll of this involvement on your character is such that it manifests in the tangible world: the "invertebrate heaps of dirty, unseparated laundry, tragically strewn about like war casualties," the "dehydrated fern drooping in the corner like a head of hot-rolled hair in the humidity," the "narcotized gaze of the television's glazed eye."

This dreary portrait of banal domesticity serves as an appropriate background against which to introduce our characters, who have lost each other amidst "a spiraling drift of cost-cutter coupons and unfilled tax forms." You do an excellent job of presenting the tension between us in these early dramatic scenes, highlighting our mutual incapacity for effective, meaningful communication. I like it how I restlessly flip through the channels, deflecting your meager attempt at intimacy as I brush your hand away from my thigh and reach for my cigarettes, a gesture that causes you to withdraw into a wounded, self-pitying silence. You hold up for our delectation, here, a number of quirky and telling

tidbits like: "...our thoughts, isolated in our heads, were as impossible to extract as the swirls of color suspended inside a marble."

The emotional divide separating us is underscored by our tenaciously superficial (and often amusing) repartee over such immaterial matters as colored toilet paper ("Don't buy it just because it's on sale. That shit gives you cancer of the ass") and the amount of sugar required for a satisfying glass of Kool-Aid. The ostensible polarity of our personalities quickly becomes evident in the way you paint yourself as the hapless victim of my relentless criticism. I enjoyed the deviously cruel manner in which I ridicule your predilection for The Cure, a guilty pleasure that, for you, is "as intensely personal and irrepressible as a nocturnal emission." Even your involuntary bodily functions are not beyond the scope of my scorn: "Do you have to *breathe* at that volume? I feel like I'm sitting at the mouth of a cave." I find it difficult, however, to empathize with your situation because you come off, at times, as strikingly passive, uxorious even, keeping your masculinity on a short leash as you subserviently cater to my moods. I'd recommend cutting out that part where you almost fetishize a stray strand of my hair you find clinging to your sweater; it's a little over the top. Also, a few of your monologues, the one on page four in particular, seem a bit whiny and, after several paragraphs, become redundant, if not somewhat annoying. You should consider omitting some of these as you revise.

The fact that you limit the setting entirely to the narrow confines of our railroad-style apartment reinforces the overall sense of claustrophobia and anxiety, and your similes deftly illuminate these nuances: "Every day those bare walls were closing in on us with the deliberateness of a trash compactor," and "...we were like two ruffled tabbies forced to share a single cat carrier." This environment functions on a number of ironic levels; while

we remain worlds apart internally, because of the minimal space, we are railroaded (forgive the pun) into uncomfortable and sometimes volatile confrontations with one another. Tangentially, it is also symbolic of the train wreck, if you will, that our already unstable union ultimately becomes. However, I might have liked to see some supplementary connections to the outside world, because we seem to exist in a vacuum here. We never order in from the Happy Dragon down the street, for instance, nor does the obnoxious dope smoking, hip hop aficionado next door ever drop by to borrow our fire extinguisher or sell us a dime bag or something along those lines. Furthermore, you scarcely mention our nondescript nine-to-fives in “offices evoking plastic ice cube trays in structure and aesthetic value” (e.g., Do we ever actually *go* to work? Come home from it? What exactly *are* our professions?). And except for that quip about your mother (I get the whole virgin-whore dichotomy you’re alluding to there—I don’t conform to the ideal she represents because my “sexual résumé was as impressive as a porn star’s,” which both excites and repels you—but for me it borders on cliché), you almost never refer to family or friends. What about our hobbies and interests? Couldn’t we at least see a movie? Go to a museum? Frequent an adult book store? This last might function as an intriguing prefigure, as well as a much needed external space for you to explore your own issues and misgivings concerning my promiscuous past.

Great dialogue in the kitchen when you almost let slip that you’ve secretly been reading my e-mail, and thereby have confirmed your suspicions of my infidelity. (More interesting images of limpness in this scene, by the way: “linguini laid out on our Fiesta Ware like a waterlogged crew of dead sailors awaiting their burial at sea.” There’s just as much expressed between the lines as in them). But, again: how could I possibly meet

someone to have an affair *with* if I never leave the apartment? Or are you suggesting that my liaisons take place on the Internet? If so, I find that such an impersonal interaction as this adds an odd perspective that begs answering, and doesn't quite jibe with my otherwise overtly libidinous veneer—a characteristic you fully divulge later on—and need for control. Perhaps you could flesh this out a bit more? Also, you seem to hedge away from the concrete details of your discovery, which suggests, to me, that either you haven't actually validated your hunch, or the realization of your worst fears comes as such a blow to your already fragile ego that you're in denial. In any case, I think someone as neurotic and obsessive as you would undoubtedly fixate on the particulars, turning the evidence over and over in your mind as you lie awake in bed, for instance, or frequently re-examining the minutiae under a microscopic lens while you feign reading a magazine. Don't be afraid to get specific, here; give us the dirt. Include names. Maybe I'm involved with my anatomically perfect co-worker, Giancarlo, for instance, the dark haired guy you always get so defensive around and insist shoots steroids between his toes. Maybe I'm seeing my narcissistic playboy ex again, the one you're almost positive you passed in the stairwell of our building that day the elevator was out of commission. Or maybe my lover is someone closer to home, like your older brother, for whom you harbor a deep-seated animosity because of that episode between us a few Christmases ago, or your best friend, perhaps, who seems especially chummy with me lately, conveniently dropping by on occasions when he knows you'll be out. Just a few off the cuff suggestions to help get the juices flowing.

Anyway, it was worth it for your depiction of my deliberately evasive response, the calculated manner in which I subtly acknowledge that I caught your slip, the iniquitous



way I protract your agony by neither denying nor affirming your sub-surface accusations, how I spill my coffee on your pants—just missing your crotch—which you insinuate was no accident, and further patronize you with my obviously inflated regret: “...her apology exaggerated and artificial as a pair of wax lips; she was a parody of compassion.” I like the idea of my being portrayed as passive-aggressive because I think this sort of psychological ambiguity adds depth and an intriguing complexity to my character. I wonder, though, if it wouldn’t be better to draw out my ambivalence more fully by offering a few strategically placed details. For instance, you might consider playing up my reaction over the phone bill, which I awkwardly try to fob off as work-related calls. This would also provide a smoother transition to the dinner scene, one of my favorite sections. There’s a tactful understatement there that I’m sure your readers will enjoy. My seemingly insatiable appetite, which you comically describe in terms of National Geographic kill scenes (the almost prim little belch and dainty manner in which I cover my mouth after is a nice touch), juxtaposes clearly with your inability to do more than twirl pasta around your fork, implying that while you are consumed by your apprehensions and insecurities to the extent that you can’t eat, I, unaware of your inner turmoil, or more aptly, indifferent to it, am the one, literally, doing the consuming.

This scene corresponds well with the first bedroom incident, where we discover that my rapacious appetite is not restricted to food. In a refreshing reversal of roles, I am cast as the aggressor, “a ninety-five pound predator in leopard-print lingerie,” advancing on you “in a furious gnashing of teeth and nails.” Many pleasures here, certainly, but I think you should be careful not to lay your meanings out too clearly, lest they become hostage to metaphor. It’s interesting how, rather than arousal, the ferocity of my sudden

assail and cheerleader-like mantra of encouragement renders you insensate. Your inability to deliver the goods leaves me to my own battery-operated devices, and you to retreat into the bathroom with your tail between your knees, so to speak, where you semi-seriously question your sexuality as you stare at your defunct equipment, all the while fully conscious of my self-induced moans coming from the next room. You articulate your passion here in an embroidered prose that not only crystallizes your anger and frustration, but also becomes creative, cathartic abreactions to your own pathologies. I would have liked a deeper scrutiny of the dynamics at work in this scene, however. My rape-like domination versus your humiliation and almost feminine reduction to victim status seems like awfully heavy duty stuff for the sparse treatment you give it here.

I don't know whether the back-story in the second part about the abuse I suffered at the hands of my pederastic uncle wasn't too contrived. It comes off as too convenient a justification for my deviant bedroom behavior and various other indiscretions. Kind of trite and melodramatic as well. Also, I don't entirely buy your private explanation for my continued involvement with you, especially considering the action I'm getting on the side, and my off-hand comment on the phone in the living room that, "You'll never see me in a white dress; marriage is for people without strong identities." (Was this intended as a bit of foreshadowing, or am I gleaning a meaning that isn't there?) Even a character as disillusioned as yours couldn't possibly accept a notion as oversimplified, erroneous, and sentimental as "beneath that domineering façade, she needed to be loved just like the rest of us." I did, though, enjoy the more rose-tinted part on the balcony when we make up. The contented repose we drift into while sharing a bottle of Merlot provides a tranquil counterpoint to the alarming twists and turns that come later.

Pretty racy stuff in the second bedroom episode, where I introduce the idea of role-playing as a means of spicing up our increasingly innocuous relations. I enjoyed your presentation of the way I produce a variety of kinky coital paraphernalia while you look on, apparently previously unaware of my nasty little stash, with a mixture of surprise and dismay, and the iniquitous manner I suggest that you “Let me call you Jack. Jack is a name I can really imagine myself screaming out in pleasure,” a request to which you eventually submit. Although you’re initially emasculated, conjecturing about my insistence on that particular name and my potential connection to it, pretending to be another man strangely enables you to distance yourself from our problems. You find you’re suddenly liberated from your insecurities, exhilarated by your ability to please me, as we “pounded each other like sixteen penny nails.” I think your description of my breasts, though, smacks of cheap, pornographic fantasy and I know you’re capable of something more sophisticated than “quivering mounds.” I mean, do they really quiver? If you’re going to go there, why not cut out all that soft-core housewife porn business and just call them tits or jugs?

You really pull the rug out from beneath the reader’s feet in part three. At first I thought you were introducing another character into our story, a dark, intriguing third party, perhaps with ill intentions. It wasn’t until my remark about your hair that I realized the new character was you: “You look like somebody’s understudy, the sexy bad guy.” Along with the physical alterations are vexing changes in your demeanor: the brooding, the stealthy gait, the way your eyes always seem fixed on a point somewhere just behind me. My renewed interest in you, or rather this evolved you, during these scenes strikes a startling discord with your sudden aloofness. The plot unfolds at a rapid pace as you

become unable to distinguish between reality and fantasy, between yourself and the personality you've created.

Overall, I might have liked a less scandalous ending. A split lip or a fractured collar bone, I feel, wouldn't be as over-the-top. To be honest, it seemed a little like the grand finale of some mainstream Hollywood film. On one hand, I found your character too needy and ineffectual to summon up the kind of emotional detachment and mental resolution to strangle me to death. The crux the story hinges upon—your transformation into this new character—is merely yet another example, and the extreme pinnacle, of your overt passivity and undeterred willingness to satisfy me, which comes at the expense of your own identity. Even your thoughts throughout much of the narrative fail to suggest that you're flirting with the kind of malevolence necessary to warrant your action in the final scene.

On the other hand, though, your writing exudes an unmistakable energy in these last few paragraphs that gives it a ring of truth. The details are chillingly convincing; so much so that I semi-seriously wondered if you'd done field research. At the very least, you've invested a great deal of time into the construction of this scene; it's well thought out—premeditated, I'm tempted to say. (Which is curious because I never noticed you working on this. Was I at work? Asleep?) I couldn't shake the eerie feeling that you were in some way communicating directly to me, personally, through the violences you perpetuate on my character. I was almost compelled to turn on all the lights as I read. Compared with some other instances, the ending seems so much more calculated and controlled, more deliberately executed. A few matters to clear up: am I to interpret your metamorphosis as a symbolic or literal means by which you reclaim your masculinity? It

might help if you teased out more explicitly some of the later interior monologues. Also, I seem strangely unconcerned by your disturbing behavior in the bathroom. Do I think you're joking? In any case, you should give us a clearer picture of how I'm reading your intentions there.

This seems a departure from your usual, more literary work. Is it a horror story? A psychological thriller gone terribly awry? At any rate, I think you could strive for something higher, perhaps, something deeper than this genre sort of writing, at least as far as the ending is concerned. I, personally, would rather see the narrative climax with a meaningful excursion into the human condition, and not with a lot of histrionics. Let me conclude, though, by saying that it was a pleasure to read such a truly inspired and ambitious work. Thanks for sharing and good luck with your revisions. I'm looking forward to seeing how it all turns out.

## Weight

Jana doesn't think she is going to make it to the half bath down the hall in time, that she will instead throw up all over her parents' dining room table. No one is home. Her parents and younger sister went to a matinee earlier, but they could return any minute now, and she doesn't want to be caught on her knees scrubbing chunks of Twinkies and Ho Ho's and Chinese food from the carpet when they do.

She closes her eyes and takes two deep, arrhythmic breaths, exhales, gets a whiff of beef lo mein and gags, feeling it rise in her stomach again, the whole pint of it, like a slimy ball of yarn. Her hands fly to cover her mouth like two sparrows lifting from a park bench that someone is about to settle into, and she chants *Mind over matter* to appease her volatile digestive system. Her muscles are stiff with resistance, bracing her body against the potential upheaval; her toes are curled around the bottom rung of the chair like peel-and-eat shrimp. A glaze of sweat enamels the donut of her face and the small of her back and she wonders how many calories she is burning by sweating, if grams of fat are escaping from her pores like steam from a bag of Jiffy Pop. She breathes. She waits. The food settles. Eventually she regains control and lifts her hand to the table, groping for another square of pan-style pizza, delivered from the Italian place down the street, with extra pepperoni and extra cheese, her fifth slice.

Spread out before her on the dining room table is a vast buffet of take-out food: double cheeseburgers and fries from McDonald's, steak burritos from Taco Bell, deep-fried fish and hush puppies from Long John Silvers. She has been eating all afternoon. Bags and wrappers transparent with grease lay in wads on the floor beside her. Empty boxes are stacked on the table like oily abstract art sculptures, something she would have

seen with Ben at the Andy Warhol museum last fall. She is small, she's always been small, but now her stomach is unnaturally distended, the skin stretched tight like the casing of an overcooked sausage link, and a pink sliver of it peeks out from beneath her tee shirt. She is positive that she has gained weight from this sitting. In that pink sliver she thinks she can see the outline of a chicken drumstick, the crust of a wedge of pie.

Jana has been staying with her parents ever since she and Ben broke up four months ago. He kept the apartment; it was his in the first place, so she moved back home, having no other choice. He was the one who'd ended it, too, and it came as no surprise; he'd been drifting from her for months. It's not you, he'd said as he watched her carry milk crates and untaped cardboard boxes filled with her half of the books, CDs, and pots and pans to her car, but she knew it was. He wasn't attracted to her, she could tell. They'd go weeks without having sex, without even kissing, and he could hardly be bothered to look at her during their less frequent conversations, when he'd either stare at the television or the floor, tracing circles in the carpet with his toes. He'd even told her once, in an assumed off-hand manner, that she might want to consider doing something with herself, be a little more concerned with her appearance. Maybe buy some clothes that aren't so clingy, he'd suggested. Try stuffing your bra.

And she did try to please him. She supposed she probably looked a little shabby since she'd lost her job—like all the personal trainers—and she'd certainly felt shabby, but she didn't think she looked *that* bad. She had only gained six pounds in three months, most likely because she had been depressed about her job. All she needed was some time to mend and a little inspiration and she'd be back on her feet. So she got her hair cut,

bought a new outfit, put on some lipstick and eyeliner. But it did no good. He still ignored her.

Even worse was her growing suspicion that there was someone else. Ben denied it when she broached the subject in a small, reticent voice, but some nights he came home from the office later than he should have, smelling sweet, like a bakery, or spicy, like Mexico. He was always sneaking around with the cordless phone, too, talking in whispers, in closets, in codes.

Now that she had accumulated distance from the situation, and with it a sharp new perspective whittled to a fine point by fantasies of revenge, she was determined to really do something about it. She'd show him. Who did he think he was, anyway? She started in on a pile of candy bars with renewed gusto. First a Milky Way, then a Baby Ruth. Nougat and caramel filled her mouth and the spaces between her teeth like grout. She had to force her jaw to open and close over the sugary, chewy glob of it. Her teeth throbbed. Her intestines gurgled. Her stomach threatened to rupture. When she didn't think she could endure one more bite, she began flipping through the fashion magazines she'd fanned out on the table earlier, for motivation, for just such an emergency.

On the cover of *Vogue*, a blonde woman in a purple bikini lounged on a blanket spread over a beach of wedding cake white sand. In the distance, blue waves tipped with sparkling crests licked the salty shore. The model held up, as if in toast, a curvy glass filled with liquid as pink and cloudy as a grapefruit. The glass looked small and delicate in her hand, like she could shatter it between her thumb and index finger with no more than a simple involuntary movement, with a hiccup or a belch. She was laughing, carefree, having the time of her life. And why shouldn't she be? She was gorgeous.



Chins cascaded down her chest in a fountain of flesh, each chin giving birth to a new one, until they finally came to rest on gigantic breasts the size of toddlers. She could have single-handedly nursed every maternity ward in the country with those breasts, could have easily accommodated dozens of dangling babies, suckling in rows like piglets. The straps of her bikini strained in an effort to uphold them and dug trenches into her meaty shoulders, but neither the industrial strength elastic nor the thick cords of underwire were any match against the gargantuan glands. They were pulled down by the force of gravity, like two huge moons caught up in the magnetic field of her bulk, and they sagged atop the first of three massive rolls that constituted her stomach, which hung over and nearly engulfed the bottom of her bathing suit. Only a small purple square was visible beneath the lowest fold.

But it was her legs that were most impressive, almost certainly how she made her money. They were enormous, elephantine creamy logs, like gourmet white chocolate. There was no distinguishing between her thighs and her ankles; she seemed without knees. Two pink pudgy feet were molded onto the ends of her legs like accessories to the perfect ensemble; she probably never walked on them, being instead wheeled wherever she needed to go. Her legs were covered in myriad little bulges of fat, each with a dimple in their center, like chubby dimpled cheeks. They were pitted with cellulite, engraved with stretch marks, ribboned with blue varicose veins.

She was beautiful. She was magnificent. She was an inspiration.

Jana opened a Hershey bar and reached for a different magazine. This month Lara Flynn Boyle was on the cover of *Cosmopolitan* wearing one of the new Ralph Loren tent dresses. She was almost up to 230 pounds and she was absolutely breath-taking. Her

skin glowed with a sheen attainable only from vegetable oil treatments and deep-fried foods. Her smile seemed so much softer and fuller than it used to be, now that it wasn't impeded by those sharp, angular jaw bones, that harsh, pointy chin.

In last month's issue, *Cosmo* ran a follow-up story on Calista Flockhart, who'd attempted suicide after *Ally McBeal* was cancelled in favor of a similar show, about a hefty, zany public defender, that featured a much larger up-and-coming actress. She was really good, too, the actress. Really on her way to the top. Off-screen, she went partners with Camryn Manheim and opened a trendy plus-size boutique in New York. Now Calista was trying to gain weight at some celebrity fat farm, but according to an inside source, she had been unsuccessful so far. Jana was having the same problem.

Just then, her family returned from the matinee. Her fifteen-year-old sister Megan, lured by the smell of food, bounded into the dining room on legs as awkward and bony as a malnourished hen. She was wearing glute enhancers under her shorts, which made her legs look extra skinny.

"Did you save anything for me?" she asked. Her lips were stained yellow from buttered popcorn. There were M&M's on her breath.

"I still haven't gotten to the Whoppers." Jana gestured to the bag she thought was from Burger King, but she couldn't be sure. The golden crown had been erased by a dense film of grease.

"Is that all?" Megan whined, reaching for the bag anyway.

"You had two tubs of popcorn and four boxes of candy at the movie," their dad interjected as he sidestepped an empty box of pizza. "And we ate lunch before that. How can you possibly be hungry?"

“Dad! I have to gain weight. Don’t you want me to have a date to the prom?”

“Of course I do, Honey, but these fad diets never last. You’ll see. Besides, any boy who’s worth going to the prom with will like you for who you are, not what you look like.”

Megan groaned.

“You girls are beautiful. Just like your mother. Look at her: she’s thin and I still think she’s as pretty as the day we met.” He kissed their mother’s cheek and put his hands around her waist from behind. His fingers touched in the middle like a human belt buckle. It was disgusting.

And he couldn’t have been more wrong. This was no fad diet; this was an anti-diet, and it was here to stay. Women all over the nation were sick and tired of exercising and keeping track of calories and wasting countless dollars on prescription amphetamines and water reduction pills that never worked. They were through with inattentive husbands and lovers who suddenly perked up and sucked in their spare tires when a pretty, slim girl walked by them in the mall. They had had enough of pants that were too tight, shirts with no sleeves, expensive minimizing bras. They were fed up with disappointing scales, with obsessing over whether or not their hips were getting wider, with starving and sticking their fingers down their throats.

So they just quit. One by one, in groups, in droves.

They stopped ordering soy burgers and salads with no dressing when they went out for dinner. Instead, they ate whatever they wanted, whenever they felt like it. They used real butter, and cheesecake at midnight was no longer taboo. They organized bake sales and support groups and eating clubs, rented reception halls where they gathered for

catered luncheons and held ceremonies during which they dumped their diet pills into huge glass receptacles. They demonstrated against liposuction in front of plastic surgeons' offices, heralding signs that read *Be Fat and Free, Not Fat Free* and *Honk if You Love a Big Woman*. They ripped up their gym memberships and put their treadmills and stationary bikes out with the trash. They refused to buy running shoes.

It wasn't long before the once lucrative diet empire crumbled as a result. Morning fitness shows were cancelled and replaced with cooking programs that specialized in fatty meals made with peanut oil and Crisco, with Fry Daddies. Manufacturers of Metabolite and Meridia and Phentermine closed the doors of their factories and labs, scratching their heads. The athletic apparel and footwear industry filed for bankruptcy. Nike lost billions. Of course, in their places, fast food chains and bakeries and ice cream parlors flourished. They stayed open twenty-four hours a day.

Other markets had to adapt to the change in order to remain viable. Diet drinks like Slim Fast reinvented themselves as high-carbohydrate smoothies. George Foreman altered his grill so that oil would collect in little pools around the hamburger patties and chicken breasts and filets of fish. To save their businesses, grocers discontinued their shipments of fat free foods because they weren't selling anymore. Bags of stale rice cakes and dusty boxes of Snackwell's cookies lined the shelves, disregarded. Cases of Diet Pepsi gone flat were piled up in dumpsters behind all the stores. Now they could hardly keep potato chips and frozen pizzas in stock. Sometimes determined customers had to try several places before they were able to find any.

At first, millions of men, and a surprising number of women, spoke out in protest against this bold new statement. They held marches and rallies, called radio talk shows,

wrote letters to their representatives in congress. Doctors and nutritionists lectured about the health risks of such a lifestyle on CNN. But the women stood their ground. And they ate. And they grew bigger and bigger.

Eventually, the men came to accept things as they were. There was no use in fighting. Monstrous bovine women were everywhere: in churches and schools and movies, on runways and cereal boxes and billboards, anchoring the six o'clock news. As time passed, men began to find the fleshy women in muumuus attractive, and later, utterly desirable. And the bigger the better. A size forty-two couldn't walk into a club without men stumbling over themselves to buy her a drink. Proud husbands flaunted their trophy Rubenesque wives at beach resorts and five-star restaurants. Teenage boys taped posters of scantily clad 300-pound women to their bedroom walls; they hid more racy pictures between their mattresses. Meanwhile, slender women were left sitting in their apartments on Saturday nights, without dates; no one whistled or catcalled when they walked past construction sites. The epidemic quickly trickled down to the playgrounds where tubby girls whispered behind their hands and pointed and giggled at the skinny ones. Their time had finally come.

"Jana!" Megan squealed suddenly from the window, "You *have* to come check out this guy who's picking up Beth. He's *so* hot!" The hunk of Whopper in her mouth muffled her words. A mixture of mayonnaise and ketchup dripped down her arm.

Beth and her family had lived next door for as long as Jana could remember. Beth had always been a big girl, just as Jana had always been petite; it was in her genes. Her mother was a buxom, almost perfect sphere with immense jiggle arms that quivered long after she had stopped moving them; her dad could have body-doubled for a sumo wrestler.

In the summer, her parents hosted barbeques and family reunions in their backyard that were like great medieval feasts, with herds of rotund relatives who stuffed themselves into impossibly small picnic tables and sagging patio chairs while they stuffed themselves.

As children Beth and Jana were friends by default, being neighbors and the same age. There were pictures of Beth at Jana's birthday parties with her fingers in the cake and blue icing in the corner of her mouth; home videos of the two of them trick-or-treating, Jana with her plastic pumpkin filled with candy, Beth with her red wagon in tow.

Now Beth was at the zenith of a modeling career. When she wasn't overnighting in some luxury hotel, she stayed with her proud beaming parents, who brought her meals and complimentary meat-and-cheese platters to her room on trays. At 420 pounds, she could barely walk. Instead, she motored around on the jazzy new scooter her agency had provided for her; they wanted to make sure their top model didn't lose even one ounce by plodding from room to room. And Beth was a success: she was a spokesperson for McDonald's and milk and Victoria's Secret. She traveled to photo shoots in Milan, London, Paris, Venice. She had a different date every night of the week, sometimes two in the same night.

*"Hurry! You're going to miss him!"*

Jana heaved herself from her chair for the first time that afternoon and lumbered like a pregnant woman over to the window next to her sister. She was still nauseated. Her feet were swollen.

Outside, the biggest SUV she had ever seen was parked in Beth's driveway; it must have weighed more than a bus. It was shiny and red and looked as if an entire football team could cram into the back seat. It had sliding doors and tires almost as wide

as a city sidewalk. The sliding doors were open and revealed a custom installed mini-fridge, undoubtedly fully stocked, within the plush interior.

From her place behind the dining room curtain, Jana could see that the whole neighborhood was watching, hoping to get a glimpse of the celebrity in their own backyard. Eyes blinked between the slats of Venetian blinds. People on porch swings pretending to read peeked over the tops of their books. Others were less discreet and sat in lawn chairs by the curb as if they were waiting for a parade to go by. Beth smiled and waved from her scooter, like Miss America.

Beside her, a tall, tan man with teeth so white they sparkled dangled from Beth's arm like a diamond bracelet. He had the physique of Superman and wore what had to have been designer clothes; the shiny fabric rippled like water over the muscles beneath. His hair was stylishly cut and tipped with blonde highlights. He was gorgeous, swank, buff. He could have been a rock star. He could have been an actor or a model or a game show host.

He could have been any of these things if he hadn't been Ben.

Jana's mouth came unhinged. It was no wonder she didn't recognize him right away: he looked fantastic. She had always thought he was handsome, with his wide back, firm stomach, chiseled jaw line, and considered herself lucky to be with him, but now she couldn't believe her eyes. He had gotten his teeth bleached, his hair streaked, a new wardrobe. He had obviously been to the gym. And somehow along the way he had acquired a supermodel girlfriend and an unimaginably expensive vehicle in addition. Ben had done well for himself in the four months since he had dumped her.

“Isn’t he gorgeous?” Megan squealed, elbowing Jana in the ribs, but she couldn’t speak, couldn’t remember how to breathe. Her heart fluttered behind her ribs like a bird trapped inside a garage. Her hands shook. Her palms were sweating. Thoughts sprung up in her mind faster than a Wendy’s chain. She wondered if Ben had been sneaking around with Beth all along, if they laughed about it over fettuccini Alfredo in some romantic, dimly lit place on the outskirts of town. She wondered if, while she was out looking for work, he had brought Beth to their apartment, if they had done it in their bed, on their couch, after dessert on the linoleum of their kitchen floor, slathering themselves with whipped cream and caramel.

A weight more colossal than even Beth’s settled on Jana’s chest and threatened to crush her to death. She had never been so consciously aware of her slight frame, thin shoulders, lean arms and legs; she had never felt so small. Before this, her self-esteem had been a shriveled bean in the pit of her stomach; now it was less than that: a crumb, a speck of dust, dirt beneath a fingernail. Although she had spent the entire afternoon eating, she felt as empty as the petite section of the women’s department at Sears. She stepped away from the window, unable to take in anymore, and slinked off to the refrigerator to seek solace.

In the crisper, clear plastic baggies stuffed with raw carrot and celery sticks, slices of green pepper, and clusters of cauliflower and broccoli were nestled together like baby bunnies. Jana grabbed as many as she could hide under her shirt and sneaked upstairs to her room, embarrassed to be seen with the vegetables, as she had been embarrassed when she bought them. She had made up some excuse to the pimply teenaged cashier at the grocery store, something about how she was going to dip them in an egg-white batter and



bread them and fry them for appetizers. Or maybe she'd said they were for her mother or her sister or a friend. Either way, the cashier smirked knowingly as he punched in the numbers on his register.

She thought of his smirking face as she ripped open the baggies on the floor of her bedroom, and of Ben cramming Beth into the door of that SUV from behind, his hands lost in the dough of her skin. She shoved carrot sticks into her mouth two at a time, relishing their crisp wet crunch, their smooth texture, their earthy flavor. She had been craving them for days, her eyes longingly fixed on the crisper as she reached for a brick of cheese or bowl of pudding. Now she didn't see the use in trying to gain weight. Her efforts hadn't been paying off, anyway; she was only up to 116. She didn't know why she should continue depriving herself of the only things that offered her any satisfaction.

For the rest of the evening, she hid in her room, munching on vegetables, crying, torturing herself with old pictures she had saved of Ben. In one, he was waving to her from in front of the Washington Monument. In another he was asleep on the couch with his mouth hanging open. A blend of green pepper juice and tears dripped from her face onto the smooth image of his open mouth and made small raised dots appear on the paper. It was the little things she missed about their relationship the most: the way he always insisted on ordering for her when they went out for dinner, how he'd spoon feed her pints of Hagendaas, gobs of cookie dough. She tried to pinpoint the exact day he had lost interest in her and couldn't.

With her knees pressed against her chest, she could hardly resist the urge to do sit-ups; it was as persistent as a phone solicitor. Her abdominal muscles pled with her to give in, like siblings wearing down a weary mother in a toy store, and for a reckless moment

she did allow herself the guilty pleasure. Just a few not-too-vigorous ones, she promised herself. After everything that had happened to her lately, she felt that she deserved some sort of consolation, some treat. As she raised her head up and down from the floor to her knees, she remembered how, back when she was a personal trainer and upset over something, a fight with Ben, another lost client, she used to go for long jogs all over town. She thought about how it rained some days while the sun was still shining, how rainbows appeared in the pools of oil left behind from cars parked on the street, how cool droplets of water splashed on the backs of her legs as she ran through puddles. She remembered how invigorating it was, how good it made her feel, how her problems seemed to melt from her, disappearing altogether down the drain in the shower afterward.

She was so wrapped up in the euphoria of exercise that she had forgotten to monitor her sit-ups. Horrified, she realized that she had already broken a light sweat. Her heart rate had accelerated. Her abs strained with a familiar pull. She didn't know what was happening to her; she felt wild and self-destructive, out of control. In the full length mirror over in the corner, she could see her reflection bunched up on the floor like a pile of sticks, her chin resting easily on her bony knees, unobstructed by the beautiful pot belly that wasn't there, her cheeks hollow as chocolate Easter rabbits. She was so ashamed that she cried until she fell asleep, curled up amidst plastic baggies and the remains of partially eaten produce that was starting to brown.

\* \* \*

In the morning, Jana awoke to the whine of sirens wailing from nearby. She rubbed her eyes, puffy from crying all night, and walked over to her bedroom window. A fire truck and two ambulances were parked on Beth's lawn. Police cruisers blocked off

the street in front and a human chain of officers restrained a crowd of worried onlookers. One of the local news teams was setting up their cameras next to the gazebo; another station's van slowly made its way through the crowd. Jana ran downstairs to the living room where her parents and sister were huddled together on the couch in their robes, sobbing.

"What's going on?" she asked, and for a moment no one spoke. Finally, her mother answered.

"Oh, it's so awful, Honey," she sniffed, "Beth Ann from next door died sometime last night. She had a heart attack."

Jana was stunned. She wobbled and then fell into the recliner like a loose tooth. Her stomach muscles were sore.

"Her heart just couldn't take all that weight," her dad sighed, shaking his head. "We'll all have to go over and see if there's anything we can do for the Purdy's."

"Just awful," her mother said into her tissue.

Jana's mind scrambled to comprehend the news. How could Beth be dead when she'd just gone out with Ben last night? How could Beth be dead when she was beautiful and successful and big as a barn? Jana knew she couldn't go to Beth's house, couldn't deal with obese relatives bringing consolation lasagnas in aluminum trays, frowning pityingly at her petiteness, couldn't handle reporters shoving microphones and cameras in her face, blinding her with flashbulbs, this poor emaciated childhood friend of Beth's, couldn't bear the thought of seeing Ben's crying, moaning head, the rest of him swallowed up in the beefy arms of Beth's blubbering parents. And tomorrow there would be a funeral. She couldn't shake the image of Beth all dressed up in a pink sequined Valentino

evening gown, laid out in a casket the size of a piano with her eyes sewn shut and her hands eternally crossed over her bloated, bulging midriff, while dozens of friends, family, and fans crowded around her, wailing. She pictured Ben in a suit and tie, ashen with grief, dark circles under his eyes, throwing himself at the casket, screaming “Why? *Why?!?*” She imagined that *Cosmo* would do a tribute with Beth’s picture on the cover and a piece on her life, that there would eventually be an ABC mini-series, perhaps with Lara Flynn Boyle as Beth. It was more than she could stomach.

While her family busied themselves in preparation to go next door, making arrangements for flowers and ordering a sheet cake, Jana hurried to her room and threw on a sweatshirt and shorts and an old pair of tennis shoes she had found in the back of her closet. There were holes in the toes and some of the tread had worn smooth, but they would do. She crept downstairs, staying close to the wall and careful to miss the fourth stair from the bottom: it creaked. Quietly, as she had done dozens of times as a teenager, she opened the back door of her parents’ house and stepped outside. At first she was only walking, but her pace quickened to a jog, and then she was running. Her breath came in quick, deep jags and the loudness of it filled her head like an ultrasound. Her legs pumped with a dangerous and exhilarating rush. She didn’t care who saw her. She ran faster and faster, until the houses and trees and cars in her neighborhood became a blurry smear, as if she was wearing someone else’s glasses. She knew she shouldn’t, but she couldn’t help herself.

Proxy

Morning

Eight o'clock he wakes me. A hand at my throat so he can check for signs of life. My breath refracts off the face of his watch, up my nostrils. I can smell it, stale as old shoes. Wake up, Baby, my sleepy head. How do you feel? Fine, I say. His nose wrinkles into a piece of fruit out in the sun too long, But you're so pale. What I see are colors that could glow in the dark: bright pink skin, ropes of electric blue veins snaking through the neon red blotches blooming like mold spores on my arms. The rest of my body invisible, sealed up in an oven of thick blankets, like some loaf of bread. He has done this, covered me while I slept. Did I transmit signals during the night? I feel myself under there, glistening, basting, starting to brown.

He lays a palm on my forehead, hot and oily as a slice of melted cheese. Then his eyes become two floes of concern adrift in the waves of his brow. You're fevered, he tells me, and this is what he believes. But how can I argue with his diagnosis? What can I say, really? Individuals with prolonged illnesses tend to deny their conditions. These words he highlighted once in some dusty medical tome, pointing to them with authority as though they contained a hidden truth I couldn't see, like my legs buried beneath all those blankets. So I give myself over to him, the way someone who has just stepped from the edge of a tall building will give themselves over to flight. He peels back the downy layers and lifts me out with practiced hands that somehow seem smaller than they really are, as if they were detachable apparatuses, on loan from a part-time nurse. I go levitating over that hot bed, impotent in his arms, wilting on both ends like some flaccid string bean stabbed on a fork. You are so light, he tells me, hugging me against his chest, a little pet, before

putting me in the chair. He smiles. It's for lack of solid foods, I want to say, but I'm preoccupied by the fact that I can finally breathe, even if the air in this room is humid as a womb, heavy with camphor and eucalyptus fumes.

### Grooming

We have a routine.

He wheels me into the bathroom so I can brush my teeth and use the toilet. He won't let me walk. He worries that I will exhaust myself or worse. I scared him one morning, crumpled up on the rug in front of the sink like a used towel. He spent an hour examining me for proof of contusions, rubbing his fingers along my scalp as if he expected to find a hole there, carefully stretching my limbs, but to no avail. He was thorough. He is thorough about everything. Why didn't you call for me, he wanted to know, his voice making that alarming sound, like a nightstand clock that demands a response. I tried to explain the ability of water puddles to render themselves unseen, that it could happen to anyone, a slip in the dark, but he couldn't be convinced. He gave me a look of distaste, as if I were ugly linoleum laid out on the floor, and made me promise not to do it again.

He hands me my toothbrush, the bristles already slathered with green gel, and then a cup of water, then a comb for my hair. The whole time I avoid my reflection in the mirror. When I finish, he hoists me onto the commode. The porcelain is cool as milk and I want to sit there awhile longer, but he wipes me, puts me back in my chair, and inspects what I've left behind. Your pee is really yellow, Baby; that's good. He only says this for my benefit, a boost to my morale. I can tell by his expression, the disappointment

spreading like a virus over his face, but he flushes the evidence away before I can see for myself.

There is no shower today. I protest. I can't remember the last time I had a hot soapy cloth scrubbing my body, or a heap of clean white bubbles crackling on my head. The hair on my legs is starting to curl into thin commas. When I rub my calves together, the hairs stand on end, transformed into exclamation marks, with little bits of lint suspended in them. Couldn't I at least shave? I'm really itchy. It's important to keep skin hydrated, he says. He is firm. Showering dries you out. My body is moist enough to support life, I want to tell him. I am waiting for some fern to sprout from the wetlands on the center of my back, but I can see a diatribe setting up camp on his face and I know I've lost. It's time for breakfast, anyway, he says, and already we are turning away from those shiny pink tiles, already we are leaving rows of tracks in the carpet behind us, like imprints in snow.

### Feeding

In the kitchen, he props me in my special chair at the table, buckling the straps so I don't fall. This chair has no wheels; sturdy and wooden, like a tree, it can't be budged. Was it fastened to the floor by a system of roots beneath? I can't tell. I feel like an inmate waiting for someone to flip the switch, the way he has me all strapped in. You need vitamin C, he says, and a chalky glass of orange juice appears on the metal tray in front of me. I drink it through a flexible straw, sucking tart strings of pulp from my teeth. My protein breakfast boils in a sauce pan on the stove, and he stirs it into a sticky thick paste, whistling some sitcom theme song, then dumps it in a plastic bowl. It smells like a nursing

home. It tastes like wet paper. He feeds me every bite, scooping the bits that got away from the bottom of my chin. Do you like it, Baby, he wants to know, I made it special today. Can you taste the sugar? I don't, but I say, Yes, Honey, it's good, and he is pleased. He coos. I wonder if he'll start making airplane noises with the spoon.

### Medicine

After I eat, he pumps me full of pills, over a dozen in all, from a constantly evolving roster of sizes, shapes, and colors. The names on the bottles are always different, but equally exotic and impossible to pronounce, like cities in tiny totalitarian countries: Saquinavir, Glipizide, Didanosine, Zidovudine. Nothing ever seems to work. It's just a matter of finding the right combination, he always says, consulting his pharmaceutical dictionary. Sometimes he tries 250 instead of 600 milligrams, or exchanges Heparin for Coumalin, or increases the dosage from once to three times a day. He doles them out one by one, like Halloween treats, closely observing my face for adverse reactions, with the detached interest of a scientist, as if I'm an experiment, a lab rat in human form. Once I rebelled, stuck my fingers down my throat and vomited a rainbow. He felt I left him with no choice other than subcutaneous injection. You want to get better, don't you, he asked, even though neither of us still believed I ever would. Then his face became part of the wall.

### Air

He wheels me onto the front porch so he can change my sheets. Fresh air is important, but stay out of the sun. He finds a shady corner and deposits me in a triangle



of shadow like someone's shriveled up grandmother. Do you like it here, he asks, and then, I brought a magazine in case you get bored. It's perfect, I say, You do too much. And it's true: he does. When I sneeze, he materializes with a tissue under my nose. When I cough, he's there with red syrup at the side of my bed. I used to tell him, Leave me, Go back to work, but of course he wouldn't listen. How could I, he said. I have plenty of sick leave, anyway, and who would take care of you? He kisses my head, goes back inside to tend to my mess.

When I know he can't see, I roll across creaky floorboards, moving like a house plant toward the scattered rays of sunlight on the opposite end, in front of the steps. There's no way down into our brittle yard, framed by trees like prison guards, no wheelchair ramp. Where would I go, anyway? It was his idea to move to the country, away from those contaminated clouds of city smog hovering outside our windows like poisonous gas, away from the airborne bacteria flying in through our vents from the apartments below. What you need is clean, country air, he said hopefully—back then we were willing to give anything a shot—so he loaded our things that he packed in corrugated cardboard boxes onto a big yellow truck. But, of course, air is no remedy for what doctors couldn't cure, couldn't even name.

And then I hear the porch creak behind me, those squeaky boards. What are you doing by the edge, he wants to know, his voice crescendoing, rising above our heads and dissipating into the sky like early morning fog. You could get hurt, Baby. What would I do then? I say, I thought I heard that orange cat we used to have, meowing under the porch, but he is pulling me away from the steps and we go back to my room, my bed, mine because he no longer sleeps there.

## Doctors

I was a medical mystery, they told us, a baffling case. I exhibited a vexing range of symptoms, from inexplicable blistering rashes to violent incapacitating pains. But there were no suspicious dark smudges appearing on the X-rays like some blur in Loch Ness, no revealing increase of leukocytes, no confession from urine samples or vials of blood. The doctors only shrugged and scribbled useless prescriptions for sleeping aids and painkillers, or scrawled referrals to specialists, who, in turn, recommended other specialists across town. In the beginning, we visited hospitals serially, searching in those aseptic institutions for some nomenclature to define what I have. My condition was cyclic; every time it seemed I would recover, I'd suffer a major setback of some kind and be rushed to the operating room. There were numerous exploratory surgeries and extensive in-patient stays. Once I had an inch of my large intestine removed, that the team of gastroenterologists said resembled a corroded sink drain with holes rusted through. Just like every time, they couldn't pinpoint the cause.

Through it all, he was gallant; the sicker I became, the more vital he seemed, his cheeks flushed pink like some new bride. Even his teeth appeared whiter somehow, his hair suddenly shinier than the coat of a Westminster champion lab. During my hospitalizations, he refused to leave my side. He flirted with the nurses, flashing that same charming smile that won me, and convinced them to conspire with him so he could sleep in the chair next to my bed. He bribed them with brownies and cookies from the bakery down the street, all lined up in sugary rows on pink tissue paper like Valentine sweets. He got to know all their names, the number of children they had, their private dreams. They admired his inexhaustible devotion to me, and he became their hero, a martyred saint.

They giggled and batted their eyelashes when he wheeled me by the front desk, sighing over the grove of roses in my lap, probably bidding on who would comfort him after I was gone.

### Hospitals

He was an expert in diagnostic discourse, familiar with etiology and esoteric terms. He subscribed to scores of medical journals, joined multiple support groups, both virtual and real, for caretakers of the critically ill, spent hours researching holistic databases online, attended lectures at local universities on virology, toxicology, cellular and molecular immunology. For him, a trip to the hospital offered more prospects for excitement and adventure than a travel brochure. He seemed to take pleasure in the sounds of crepe squeaking urgently down freshly waxed halls, the astringent aroma of industrial strength cleansers. He loved the thrill of the ER, the screeching ambulances with their sirens and bright flashing lights, the hustling EMTs and emergency personnel dressed in pastel green or white, the surgeons like antiseptic Zorro's, but with masks covering their mouths instead of their eyes. What exhilarated him most, though, were the consultations with my physicians. He'd spend all morning before an appointment jotting down notes in that little journal of his, carefully wording his opinions and thoughts, the points he wanted to be sure to get across. In their offices, he could hardly sit still. He paced around with that light in his eyes, gesticulating fervently, spouting off symptoms and obscure diseases. He imagined himself their esteemed colleague, a respected professional, with those same two prestigious letters in capitals after his name. You

should go to med school, I'd tell him, you already know so much, but, One patient's all I need, he'd say.

### Games

He has arranged the items on my bedside table into a configuration as ordered as a trigonometry equation. Lotion, books, tissues, cough drops, the remote, a glass filled with fresh water. He rubs the curative ointment all over me, covering every inch. It burns a little. Your skin is so soft, Baby. His hands slide up and down my arms so slick. Maybe tonight we'll play a game, he says, after he's done. How does Monopoly sound? I shrug. Games are all the same to me. I wonder what game we are playing now.

### Signs

One night he woke me late, standing over my bed with the mist of the humidifier pluming around behind him like B-movie smoke, as if he were an apparition of Hamlet's dead father come to warn him in a dream, a mirage of a man too artificial-looking not to be real. My eyelashes pulled themselves from crusted gold glue, blinking away the fragments and the thin film on my eyes. He came into focus slowly, the way a pattern will emerge from a group of seemingly random stars and take the form of something tangible: a string of pearls I once owned, a giant spoon. My tongue migrated to the roof of my mouth like some dried up walrus lumbering around in search of a water hole, and clicked there, not finding moisture or English. I knew there existed certain parts of speech necessary for forming complete sentences—verbs, nouns, and direct objects all strung together in complex diagram trees on college rule paper—but I couldn't remember them,

so I used simple words that were really more like the titles of paintings, words meant to sum up a series of abstractions, like Dream? Som' amatter? Fire? He laughed and said, Meteor shower, and I wondered if we were communicating in some pictographic language because outside the window I saw his words, transformed into images, go streaking across the sky, smeared in faint green light.

Let's get you bundled up, he said, and descended on me with a blanket, wrapping me in an afghan cocoon before sitting me in my chair. Honey, what? I wanted to know, but: Just wait, you'll see, was all he said, and he wheeled me outside, onto that creaky porch, into a darkness interrupted by fireflies flickering like birthday candles. Look up there, he told me, pointing a finger above my head as if some thought that could not be articulated would reveal itself there. In the sky, the moon was a breakfast egg on a deep navy plate, yellow center, clouds spilling out from it like whites, and all around it, periodic shooting lights. This is a once in a lifetime event, he told me, We probably won't live to see one again, and I wondered if what we were witnessing was something that had already happened, a delayed reaction just then being made visible by a trick of light, like the remnants of a long dead star, or the florescent tubes in our kitchen ceiling that buzz to life a few seconds after the switch is flipped. I remember reading somewhere, or watching a documentary on PBS one afternoon before I would fall victim to pills, something about the significance of astronomical events to certain Native American tribes. The Blackfeet of Montana, or maybe it was the Shawnee, believed meteors were an omen that sickness would come to the tribe the following winter. The Kawaiisu thought a meteor that started high and fell to the horizon was a harbinger of some disease. I didn't realize it then, but those meteors were a sign. I was healthy once, back in the beginning, when we first met.

We wanted the ordinary things regular people want. We wanted heaven on a plate, a slice of wedding cake on our first date, photographic evidence of our love hanging on the walls. Then I came down with some ordinary affliction, like a stomach virus or the flu. Those meteors weren't the only signs I missed all that time he was drowning me in thick pink liquid and chicken noodle soup, that strange, chalky taste, all those bottles under the kitchen sink.

### Pretend

Sometimes he comes into my room brandishing a tray of exotic foods, little appeasements, as if I were the queen of some remote matriarchal island. Let's pretend we're in Hawaii, he says, and shows me what he's brought: a bowl of mushy poi, a wine glass filled with coconut milk, a saucer of guava crushed into a pulp. He dips two fingers in the poi and swishes them around, then puts his fingers in my mouth, leaving them there even after I've sucked off the paste. I try to spit them out like watermelon seeds, but they stay and go further in, a team of spelunkers, and then I see this for what it is. Look, what I bought you, Baby, he says, We can have fun, and shows me what he's really come here for: a red thong and matching bra, a sheer negligee. He undergoes a process of lithification, stiffening into marble against my leg. And then I do it, I turn my face into the pillow and perpetuate a sickness that is not entirely mine. I can't, I tell him, I don't feel well, but he doesn't run for the phone to let the doctors we're on our way—he has other needs this time. Even as say this I know he is going to pull my floral cotton nightgown over my head and dress me in slippery material and rub himself all over me, his body as smooth as a tooth.

What we have is contagious, but in a way communicable only between the two of us. Those words he highlighted once in that medical book with a bright yellow pen, he never saw their meaning. In the beginning, we wanted what ordinary people want, but we weren't ordinary people, we were sick; first him and then me.