

“AMONG WAITRESSES”: STORIES AND ESSAYS

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The following collection represents the critical and creative work produced during my doctoral program in English. The dissertation consists of Part I, a critical preface, and Part II, a collection of seven short stories and two nonfiction essays. Part I, which contains the critical preface entitled “What to Say and How to Say It,” examines the role of voice in discussions of contemporary literature. The critical preface presents a definition of voice and identifies examples of voice-driven writing in contemporary literature, particularly from the work of Mary Robison, Dorothy Allison, and Kathy Acker. In addition, the critical preface also discusses how the use of flavor, tone, and content contribute to voice, both in work of famous authors and in my own writing. In Part II of my dissertation, I present the creative portion of my work. Part II contains seven works of short fiction, titled “Among Waitresses,” “The Lion Tamer,” “Restoration Services,” “Hospitality,” “Blood Relation,” “Managerial Timber,” and “Velma A Cappella.” Each work develops a voice-driven narrative through the use of flavor, tone, and content. Also, two nonfiction essays, titled “Fentanyl and Happy Meals” and “Tracks,” close out the collection. “Fentanyl and Happy Meals” describes the impact of methamphetamine addiction on family relationships, while “Tracks” focuses on the degradation of the natural world by human waste and other forms of pollution. In total, this collection demonstrates my approach to both scholarly and creative writing, and I am grateful for the University of North Texas for the opportunity to develop academically and achieve my goals.

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PART I
WHAT TO SAY AND HOW TO SAY IT

Frequently, we contemporary authors encounter and employ the notion of ‘voice’ in discussions of our craft. Yet, even those among us familiar with literary criticism find ‘voice’ an elusive concept, dredged as it is in a morass of jargon and equivocations. As Ben Yagoda observes, “Voice is not a perfect metaphor for writing style” (xxxix). Nevertheless, its continued recurrence across literary studies indicates the need for a clear, complete definition of this concept and identification of examples of it in contemporary fiction. Once we understand this concept, voice allows writers to think critically about our work. Voice prompts us to consider how we influence the text and how we can use this influence to spur innovation in literature. As the work of Mary Robison, Dorothy Allison, and Kathy Acker suggests, the choices we writers make regarding the flavor, tone, and content of our work determines what type of voice we will develop. Through an examination of the linguistic flavor, tone, and content of their fiction, these female American authors demonstrate how to create a distinct authorial voice in a competitive literary marketplace. For novice writers eager to achieve recognition, such examples provide the guidelines necessary to develop a voice capable of distinguishing them within the literary community.

First and foremost, what exactly do writers and literary critics mean when they talk about voice? While no single definition of the term exists, this project will focus on the application of voice to imaginative literature and creative writing. Without doubt, handbooks like Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style* prove invaluable for the fields of composition and rhetoric, but students of creative writing must look elsewhere for a meaningful definition of voice.

Fortunately, Jerome Stern provides one in his book *Making Shapely Fiction*. According to Stern, voice refers to “the writer’s style as it is expressed in the character’s speech and thoughts” (24). Similarly, M. H. Abrams defines voice as an author’s “presence” in the text as the person “who

has invented, ordered, and rendered all these literary characters and materials” (228). In both cases, Stern and Abrams define voice in terms of the author’s influence upon the text. In a like manner, literary scholar Kathryn Hume defines voice as “a combination of verbal flavor, attitude, and subject matter designed to display [the author’s] attitude and [to] encourage it in readers” (487). Though the definitions of voice presented by Stern, Abrams, and Hume differ to some degree, they all address the author’s role in crafting their work. Whether it’s called style, presence, or attitude, voice as writers use it deals with an author’s influence upon the text. For the purposes of this project, voice denotes an author’s decisions regarding the flavor, tone, and content of their work.

From this definition, we now turn our attention to its components: flavor, tone, and content. What exactly do these terms mean for creative writers? First, flavor refers to an author’s use of diction to create mood and atmosphere. As Jerome Stern observes, “Style and voice are created in part by word choice” (120). For instance, Ernest Hemingway chose to rely on spare sentences composed of short words, while Henry James included elevated diction, foreign languages (notably French), and convoluted sentence structures. Though Hemingway and James adopted different approaches to diction in their work, their choices in this area determine the type of authorial voice each writer developed. Novice writers must learn to balance simple words and structures, which *do not* draw attention to the narrator/author, with exotic words and complicated syntax, which *do* draw attention to the narrator/author. As Stern cautions, “some writers fall in love with their own words, and sacrifice their stories on the altar of ingenuity” (121). If novice writers fall into the trap of “purple prose,” or flowery writing, the flavor of their work becomes off-putting, both for publishers and the wider reading audience.

While flavor refers to an author's word choice, tone and content deal with an author's decisions at a more abstract level. According to Janet Burroway, author of *Writing Fiction*, tone refers to "an attitude conveyed, and this attitude is determined by the situation and by the relation of the persons involved in the situation" (292). In fiction, tone may contradict or emphasize the meaning of the words on the page (292). Writers use tone to convey an attitude toward the characters, subject, or situation, which may be judgmental, sympathetic, agitated, or humorous. Although tone is somewhat intangible in fiction, as in real life, creative writers must shape the intensity of the words on the page toward an appropriate attitude, which may involve "matching meaning, contradicting, overstating, or understating the language (293). In the process, writers develop an authorial voice through their use of tone.

Like tone, content addresses some of the first decisions authors make in terms of structure, plot, and conflict. Though content may seem incidental in some works, or far from a discussion of literary voice, this is not the case. When authors focus on a particular subject, they assert that it deserves the literary spotlight; in this way, authors who describe the experience of groups marginalized by society—such as racial minorities, the homeless, and gays and lesbians—suggest such stories deserve to appear in literature. Through such choices in content, authors legitimize the experience of those whose personal and political voices have been silenced or ignored. An author's decision to include characters and situations that treat sensitive issues within the community—such as condemnation of black-on-black prejudice Ralph Ellison presents in *Invisible Man*—represents an important choice that determines authorial voice. Moreover, this choice also represents a political move on the author's part in that it attempts to promote discussion of social inequality. Ultimately, the choices writers make regarding the flavor, tone,

and content of their work determine whether or not they will be able to stand out in a competitive literary marketplace.

Conversely, choices in content may also expose the personal or political prejudices of the writer. As Jerome Stern notes, when authors decide to include certain types of content, they may discover “problems [they] don’t know they have” (230). For instance, if a writer creates a female narrator who remains passive and adopts a child-like manner in her relationships with others, the writer might want to consider whether some unconscious prejudice has surfaced in the text.

Although prejudice may not emerge in such obvious terms, but writers must weigh their choices regarding the content of their work if they hope to produce texts that faithfully depict the varieties of human experience. A writer who strives to produce texts that facilitate meaningful discussions of inequality will develop a distinct authorial ‘voice.’ Ultimately, the choices writers make in terms of flavor, tone, and content determine whether or not their authorial ‘voice’ will garner recognition from the literary community.

Certainly, a strong definition of ‘voice’ based on flavor, tone, and content provides novice writers with a place to begin their creative journey. However, an important part of this process, as Jerome Stern notes, consists in “recognizing what is secondhand, what is someone else’s style, and listening at the same time for your natural style” (229). Here, Stern picks up on a dilemma faced by many young writers, namely, the powerful sway of stylistic giants like Hemingway, Joyce, and Faulkner. When writers encounter these masters, they are seduced and prompted to imitation; however, the work they produce often seems “derivative, secondhand” (230). Yet, the influence of these stylistic masters need not be negative. Rather, young writers may look to these authors for examples of rhythm, structure, conflict, and resolution. As Stern notes, “the more deeply you understand the style, the more you can learn—not to imitate it, but to see how to find

your own style” (230). If novice writers train themselves to recognize those aspects of ‘voice’ that distinguish literary masters from hacks, they can also turn their powers of analysis to their own work, and so identify the flavor, tone, and content that defines their authorial ‘voice.’ Influence need not impede creativity; instead, it might allow young writers to encounter literary traditions and guide them into uncharted territory.

For a writer like myself, the work of contemporary American women authors, particularly Mary Robison, Dorothy Allison, and Kathy Acker, demonstrates how choices in flavor, tone, and content contribute to authorial ‘voice’ and continue literary traditions begun by writers like Eudora Welty, Willa Cather, and Flannery O’Connor. Mary Robison continued this tradition when she published *An Amateur’s Guide to the Night* in 1983. In a review of her collection, Richard Yates praises “the icy pressure of [her] prose” (par. 2). Here, Yates identifies an aspect of Robison’s flavor that contributes to her ‘voice’ as a writer. What Yates calls “icy pressure” other critics describe as minimalism, which involves the use of spare, short words and sentences. In addition, minimalist fiction describes a complex social reality through brief scenes and descriptions of life, and produces what critics call the “iceberg effect.” From above, an iceberg appears small, but in fact something much larger lies beneath the surface. A similar phenomenon occurs in Robison’s collection. Every line of it seems distilled, reduced until each word becomes deliberate and necessary. In the title story “An Amateur’s Guide to the Night,” the narrator states:

Mom and I passed for sisters. We did it all the time. I was an old seventeen. She was young for thirty-five. We would double-date...We saw all kinds of men. Never for long, though. Three dates was about the record, because Mom would decide by the second evening out that there was something fishy—that her fellow was married, or running from

somebody. (16)

The short sentences Robison uses in the above passage represent a choice on her part in terms of flavor. Specifically, the narrator of this story, Lindy, describes the unusual relationship she has with her mother in a concise, frank manner because it's an ordinary part of her life (16). When Lindy states she and her mother "passed for sisters" and "did it [double-date] all the time," she uses spare language to describe a complex, unusual relationship, and in so doing propels the narrative forward (16). Like the tip of an iceberg, Lindy's minimal description of the relationship she has with her mother indicates something more complex brewing beneath the surface. Though this relationship is far from conventional, Robison's decision to describe it in minimalist fashion distinguishes her from other writers. The compacted prose forces readers to approach an unusual family dynamic as though it's normal, and as a result the audience cannot agonize over the relationship because the narrator does not give them the opportunity to do so.

Throughout *An Amateur's Guide to the Night*, especially in stories like "Coach" and the title story, Robison creates flavor through spare sentences and minimal language. In addition, she also employs vivid description to balance her use of minimalism. In Lindy's story, for instance, Robison places the language of astronomy, an emerging interest for the narrator, alongside spare descriptions of Lindy's family life and place of employment. While Lindy uses brief, banal language to describe the relationship with her mother, she uses vivid, detailed language to describe the stars. When Lindy describes "Epsilon's quadruple stars—the yellows and blues," her language blends the poetic and scientific, and she says she feels involved in something that "made sense entirely" (15). In Lindy's story, Robison uses the language of astronomy to develop flavor. The minimal descriptions of family life balance the detailed descriptions of the stars, and also suggest Lindy feels closer to the stars, light-years away from

her, than she does to her family. In a similar manner, Robison's story "Coach" blends spare, minimalist language with vivid description. For instance, during a scene in the kitchen between Coach, his wife, Sherry, and daughter, Daphne, the narrator states:

Their daughter, Daphne, wandered into the kitchen. She was dark-haired, lazy-looking, fifteen. Her eyes were lost behind bangs. She drew open the enormous door of the refrigerator... "Eat and run," he said to Daphne. "I've got a reporter coming in short order. Get dressed." He spoke firmly but in the smaller voice he always used for his child. (40)

Here, Robison uses slim, pared-down language in order to create the terse dialogue and utilitarian descriptions typical of a character like Coach. For instance, Coach's use of "wandered," "lazy-looking," and "lost" to describe his daughter indicate a strong paternal bond that he feels somewhat uncomfortable addressing since his child has become an adolescent (40). With three words, Robison suggests a complex father-daughter relationship that attentive readers will appreciate. Similarly, Coach uses the imperative tense with his daughter, giving orders as he would to a running back, but he uses a "smaller voice," which suggests tenderness on his part (40). Again, Robison's use of spare, minimal language suggests a deeper, more complex relationship than a cursory examination would suggest, and her choices in terms of flavor contribute to the authorial voice she develops throughout her fiction.

Furthermore, Robison balances the spare, minimalist language of her fiction with vivid descriptions. During a scene in the kitchen with his wife and daughter, Coach describes "a thread of water that came from one of the taps" (39). Here, the apt comparison between a thread and a stream of water suggests Robison has a unique view of the world. Similarly, Robison describes the cloudy, Pennsylvania sky as "colorless and glazed, like milk glass" (52).

Again, the comparison between a gray, “colorless” sky and “milk glass” engages the audience and suggests Robison interprets and observes the world in an interesting way (52). By using minimal, spare prose opposite vivid description, Robison develops a flavor unique to her fiction, which contributes a great deal to her authorial voice.

As with her use of flavor, Robison distinguishes herself through tone. As Burroway notes, tone as creative writers use it refers to “an attitude conveyed, [which]...is determined by the situation and by the relation of the persons involved” (292). In Robison’s collection, tone expresses the attitudes of the characters toward life and the world around them. Lindy, the narrator of the title story, takes an interesting view of her work as a waitress, as when she says:

The job I had was on the dinner shift, five to eleven, at the Steak Chateau, Friday and Saturday evenings. Waitressing and bussing—I did both—could really wear you down. That evening I had been stiffed by a group of five adult people. That means no tip; a lot of juggling and running for nothing. (18)

From her attitude, Lindy clearly does not feel her job at the Steak Chateau will help her in the future (18). As she admits, the work “could really wear you down,” and the example of the “group of five adult people” who stiff her demonstrates this quite clearly (18). Yet, Lindy does not complain about her job when she’s off the clock. Instead, she goes star-gazing as soon as she finishes her shift (19). While Lindy could bemoan her situation, she does not; rather, she focuses on the night sky, where the stars are “swimming in their own illumination” (19). Lindy’s attitude distinguishes her from other characters because she does not bother worrying about things she cannot change, like her job or her mother’s mental illness. Instead, Lindy turns her attention to the night sky, which always makes “sense” to her (15). In terms of tone, this

represents a wise decision on Robison's part. If Lindy adopted a despairing attitude toward her life—which is certainly bleak—the story would fail. A despairing tone in bleak circumstances would represent an obvious, unimaginative choice on the author's part, like using rain to depict a protagonist's sadness. Instead, Robison develops a tone that is somewhat optimistic, and in so doing makes Lindy's attitude interesting and unusual.

Similarly, Robison develops a tone that is both critical and pragmatic in her short story "In Jewel." The narrator, a high school art teacher, lives in a small mining town ironically named Jewel. Time and again, the narrator watches her best students give up their dreams to work in the mines, just like their parents did before them (105). Despite her efforts to encourage her pupils to pursue a college degree, she also recognizes that "it's infuriatingly true that all the kids end up in the mines" (105). Throughout the story, the narrator mentions leaving Jewel with her fiancé after their wedding (107). She says, "I wouldn't mind waving goodbye to Jewel," and certainly her contempt for the mining company that dominates the town's economy drives her decision (109). For the narrator, though, leaving is no easy matter. When the narrator left for college out of state, she "got mangled or something" by the educational system (109). She says she "really wasn't present," and some other "version of me graduated" (109). Here, the narrator suggests that though Jewel is an economically depressed, environmentally polluted place, it is still where she "feel[s] at home" (110). No matter how much she wishes for things to be different, she "feel[s] at home" in Jewel, and so wants to remain there (110). Again, Robison develops a tone critical of the economic forces that exploit residents of a place like Jewel, but she also indicates these same economic forces hold our communities together, and as a result are not easily erased. Rather than a simple condemnation of industry, which is the domain of nonfiction writers like Upton Sinclair and Eric Schlosser, Robison uses tone to

address the social forces that perpetuate economic disparity. In this way, she develops a tone that distinguishes her from other contemporary writers content to avoid discussions of exploitation and inequality.

Like flavor and tone, Robison's choices regarding the content of her work distinguish her from other writers. Throughout the collection, Robison delves into the nature of family relationships and domestic life, as in "An Amateur's Guide to the Night," "Coach," and "The Dictionary in the Laundry Chute." In each story, the narrator confronts a crisis in their family, whether it involves a mother's struggle with mental illness, as in the title story, or a wife's desire for independence, as in "Coach." Regardless of where the conflict arises, it matters for the characters because it threatens relationships. In addition to family conflict, Robison weaves descriptions of mental illness into her stories. In "The Dictionary in the Laundry Chute," the narrator, a middle-aged man named Ed, cannot understand his daughter's mental illness, and calls on a psychiatrist when she stops eating (8). In addition to starving herself, Ed learns from his wife, Angela, that their daughter "is hearing voices," which they think is "a very bad sign" (13). When Ed and his wife learn about their daughter's symptoms, however, they react differently (13). Whereas Angela cannot stop crying and feels their family's falling apart, Ed takes a hands-on approach (13). Ed firmly believes she will be fine if they "keep her away from drinking" and "make sure she takes those pills" (13). Here, Robison recreates two common tropes related to the treatment of the mentally ill. For Angela, a complex mental illness, like schizophrenia, horrifies her, and she responds like her daughter has received a terminal diagnosis (13). In contrast, Ed approaches his daughter's illness as though it were any other medical condition; that is, he thinks a regimen of pills, exercise, and rest will restore her to the full bloom of health (13). Robison poses these different views of mental illness against each

other, and in so doing addresses the impact of mental illness on families and relationships. By including this experience in the content of the story, Robison suggests mental illness deserves the attention of a literary audience. Much as Charlotte Perkins Gillman's choices regarding the content of her short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" spurred debate over the treatment of postpartum depression and hysteria, so Robison's decision to address mental illness with the content of her fiction promotes discussion of the prevailing trends in psychology and mental health across contemporary North America. Also, the inclusion of characters who struggle with mental illness—whether they directly experience it or deal with its impact on the life of a family member—represents a political decision on Robison's part as an author. That is, by focusing on mental health in the content of her fiction, Robison suggests the prevailing attitudes toward mental illness need revision. Through this choice in content, Robison develops an authorial voice that distinguishes her from others in the literary marketplace.

While Mary Robison's collection relies on "icy pressure" to reduce the text to its most spare, concentrated form, Dorothy Allison takes a different approach (Yates par. 1). In a review of her collection *Trash*, the *San Francisco Chronicle* claims, "Allison can make an ordinary moment transcendent with her sensuous mix of kitchen-sink realism and down-home drawl" (par. 1). Here, "kitchen-sink realism" and "down-home drawl" draw attention to a recurring element in Allison's fiction, namely, her description of the southern United States (par. 1). For Allison, the South proves a fruitful geographic and cultural base, and she incorporates the fabric of southern life into her flavor, tone, and content of her work. In this way, Allison continues the literary traditions of southern women writers like Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor. Her choices in flavor, tone, and content allow her to develop an authorial voice that distinguishes her as one of the most original and engaging writers in print today.

In terms of flavor, Allison frequently includes the language of the southern United States, but this process involves much more than the use of a “down-home drawl” or dialect (*San Francisco Chronicle* par. 1). Certainly, many of Allison’s characters speak like southerners. For instance, the narrator of “Don’t Tell Me You Don’t Know” remembers her aunt saying, “Bitching don’t make the beds and screaming don’t get the tomatoes planted” (Allison 100). Allison’s use of don’t recreates the flavor of real speech, and the emphasis on domestic tasks like planting tomatoes indicates the speaker lives in a rural area where backyard gardens are an important food source (100). Although southern speech may evoke visions of a simpler, pastoral life for some readers, Allison subverts such assumptions through her description of the endless domestic tasks the characters, particularly women, must complete (100). Allison also uses flavor to recreate the intricacies of domestic life and family relationships. In “Don’t Tell Me You Don’t Know,” for example, the narrator describes memories of her Aunt Alma’s house, which contribute to her sense of identity. In a description of dinner at her Aunt’s house, the narrator states:

I used to love to eat at Aunt Alma’s house, all those home-cooked dinners at the roadhouse; pinto beans with peppers for fifteen, nine of them hers. Chowchow on a clean white plate passed around the table while the biscuits went the other way. (100)

Here, the narrator’s description of food clearly identifies her as a southerner. Allison’s use of “Chowchow,” “pinto beans,” and “biscuits” suggests Aunt Alma knows how to cook soul food, a type of cuisine developed in the south to make the most of cheap, starchy ingredients like beans, potatoes, and grains. Allison’s emphasis on the food of the south, and its ability to bring people together with a “home-cooked dinner,” represents a choice regarding the flavor of her

work. Through rich, sensuous descriptions of southern food, Allison develops a flavor all her own, which distinguishes her as a writer.

As with her use of flavor, Dorothy Allison employs tone to express the experience of life in the south. Though most of Allison's narrators are southern women, they are far from debutants like *Scarlet O'Hara*. Most of the characters come from the lower- or lower-middle classes, and as a result constantly struggle to achieve financial security, which often eludes them. By focusing on the experience of the poor, Allison develops a tone critical of economic disparity in the United States. For example, the narrator of "Don't Tell Me You Don't Know" studies tirelessly for years to keep her scholarship and earn a college degree, which she believes will provide her with financial security (100). When the narrator graduates, however, she discovers she can't find a job (101). As an educated, gay, lower-class woman, the only job available to her is working at a photo shop (101). The narrator expresses disappointment throughout the story, and her Aunt Alma echoes this attitude when she says, "Your mama said you were doing shit work for shit money. Not much to show for that college degree" (101). Here, Aunt Alma echoes the narrator's attitude toward institutions of higher learning. Throughout childhood, advisors and educators encouraged the narrator to study and earn a degree so she could escape poverty (100-101). However, when the narrator must take a job "doing shit work for shit money," she feels disappointed, and her relatives express disgust at the institutions that deceived her (101). Allison might have written a version of this story where the narrator finds security and happiness through her pursuit of a college degree, but this would perpetuate the myths of equality fostered by institutions of higher learning. More specifically, the narrator absorbs the ideology touted by her advisors and teachers, which suggests institutions of higher learning provide the disadvantaged with the opportunity to achieve

financial success. As most college graduates recognize, a degree does not guarantee financial stability. Allison's decision to describe this experience requires her to create a character who feels cheated by the educational system, and this choice represents an important component of her authorial voice. In a literary community where many writers retreat to the safety and anonymity academia, Allison distinguishes herself by adopting a tone critical of institutions of higher learning and the false expectations of prosperity they foster.

As with her use of flavor and tone, Dorothy Allison also develops a distinct authorial voice through her choices in content. Many of her characters struggle with poverty and financial instability, but another factor often influences their lives: homophobia. In stories like "Demon Lover," "Her Thighs," and "A Lesbian Appetite," Allison describes the experience of women who practice alternative lifestyles. For these characters, their preference in sexual partners makes them outsiders subject to discrimination, and their experience of ostracism is compounded by poverty. In addition, Allison's decision to focus on lesbian relationships represents a choice on her part regarding the legitimacy of same-sex couples. In "Her Thighs," the narrator uses sensual language to describe her relationship with a woman named Bobby (122). The narrator says, "I wanted to lay the whole length of my tongue on her, to dribble over my chin, to flatten my cheeks to that fabric[her jeans] and shake my head on her seams like a dog on a fine white bone" (122). The narrator's language indicates a strong sexual chemistry between the two women, yet their relationship fails because, as the narrator says, "Bobby loved the aura of acceptability, the possibility of finally being bourgeois, civilized and respectable" (122). Bobby's goal of assimilating into "respectable" society destroys their relationship because it indicates a desire to imitate middle-class, heterosexual couples (122). For the narrator, such a desire indicates Bobby harbors some self-loathing regarding her sexuality.

Ultimately, the relationship fails not because the two characters share a gender, but rather because Bobby desires to escape poverty and become “respectable” and “bourgeois” (122). Without a doubt, these concerns end plenty of “respectable” heterosexual relationships, and consequently Allison’s description of lesbian partnerships characterizes them as valuable and deserving of the same protection afforded to heterosexual couples. Through choices in content, Allison describes lesbian relationships as deep, meaningful emotional connections appropriate for the literary stage. As a writer, Allison’s choices in terms of the flavor, tone, and content of her work create a distinctive voice that has earned her a wide audience and artistic recognition.

Although Mary Robison and Dorothy Allison both use flavor, tone, and content to develop authorial voice, their approach seems conventional compared to that of Kathy Acker. Within literary studies, Kathy Acker continues traditions of transgressive writers like William S. Burroughs and Samuel Beckett. Like other writers in this tradition, Acker subverts the conventions of literature in her fiction. In a review of *Literal Madness*, Catherine Texier notes, “Kathy Acker’s voice, sometimes raw to the point of bluntness, sometimes rising to a savage purity, tears through the smooth surface of contemporary fiction with a scream of rage” (par. 1). Here, Texier addresses the tone Acker develops, which is an important contributor to her authorial voice. However, like a true punk, Kathy Acker complicates discussion of her work by rejecting the notion of voice entirely (Hume 485). As literary scholar Kathryn Hume notes, “[Acker] came to affirm her lack of voice as ideologically desirable” (485). For Acker, the phallogentric, Western traditions of literature demand that writers create something original, and this in turn forces the writer to dominate the world he or she creates (485-486). Because Acker rejects the “capitalist and phallogentric” values of Western culture, she also rejects the notion of voice. Although Acker attempts to escape the demands of originality by rejecting the

idea of authorial voice, in practice she faces precisely the same choices regarding flavor, tone, and content that her predecessors encountered. Acker's use of flavor, tone, and content differs a great deal from the work of other authors, but her decision to produce a literary text in the first place means that she must develop an authorial voice, even if that voice seems fragmented and polyphonous instead of unified and coherent. As Hume observes, "If scores of voices speak out in a dozen novels, and every fourth one or so has the same tone and talks of similar material, then a coherent and recurrent...voice emerges" (486). Thus, despite her rejection of the concept of authorial voice, Acker produces a distinct voice through the decisions she makes as a writer.

To begin, Kathy Acker develops flavor in her fiction through a combination of linguistic devices meant to unnerve the reader, such as unconventional grammar and obscene language. In the end, this leads many to avoid her work. Yet, her use of unconventional grammar and obscenities contributes to the flavor of her writing, and so influences her voice as an author. For example, in *Empire of the Senseless*, the narrator states, "Insofar as I know myself I don't know either the origin nor the cause of my wants" (Acker 248). In this case, the use of "either" and "nor" in a parallel form—when either/or would be correct—ignores conventions of grammar (248). Later in the story, the narrator says, "I smiled, I lowered my head, the barber trembled, my flesh peeled off my head and the tip of my ear, the officer by his red leather boot crushed my shoeless foot" (251). Here, Acker ties several independent clauses together with only commas. Obviously, this deviates from Standard Edited English, and this deviation represents a choice on Acker's part regarding authorial voice. Yet, Acker's disregard for conventional grammar begs a serious question. Does she lack a mastery of the English language, or does she ignore grammar for some other reason? Although the examples above

may not indicate it, thousands of Acker's sentences *do* follow conventions of English grammar; in fact, her use of unconventional grammar attracts attention because so many of her sentences are correct. Acker knows how to construct a grammatically correct sentence, but chooses not to do so when it suits her purpose. Then, she subverts conventions of English grammar to give her fiction an informal, colloquial quality. By using language akin to that of informal, private documents like diaries or journals, Acker reduces the distance between the narrator and the audience. Though Acker's unconventional grammar may unnerve readers conditioned to expect polished, edited prose, those willing to delve into her fiction will find there an intimacy lacking in other texts.

As with her use of unconventional grammar, Kathy Acker also employs obscenities throughout her work, which contributes to the flavor of her authorial voice. Although numerous writers use obscenities from time to time, Acker's approach to obscenities suggests she employs them to a different end than most writers. In *Empire of the Senseless*, for instance, the narrator says, "In my imagination we were always fucking: the black whip crawls across her back. A red cock rises" (261). When Acker uses language like "fucking" and "red cock," she does so to subvert the reader's assumptions about the role of language in daily life. The narrator of *In Memoriam to Identity*, for example, states, "the sun was shining through two kitchen windows as yellow as piss" (272). Here, Acker uses something obscene, namely "piss," in a comparison with sunlight, which may symbolize hope or renewal in literature (272). In this case, Acker employs obscene language to subvert the audience's expectations. By choosing to include obscenities in her writing, Acker encourages readers to consider how they approach language in daily lives. Her decision to employ obscenities in situations where readers do not expect it influences the flavor of her fiction, and, as a result, creates a memorable voice.

If Acker's use of unconventional grammar and obscene language proves too jarring for sensitive readers, her use of tone will likely add to this unease. As Catherine Texier and other critics have observed, Acker's writing conveys intense emotions, from "a scream of rage" to paranoia and depression (par. 1). Throughout her fiction, Acker uses tone to express the attitudes her characters adopt toward the world around them, which is frequently a dangerous, violent place. In *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini*, the narrator states:

I'm diseased. I hate you. There's this anger hot nauseating in me that has to seep out then destroy...I hate the world. I hate everyone...I always was miserable. I like banging my head into a wall. (200)

The repetition of "I hate" emphasizes the narrator's attitude toward the world, which is one of intense "anger" (200). Furthermore, the narrator's hatred extends not just to one person, "you," or to herself, but to "everyone" and everything (200). The narrator's intense emotion drives her to "destroy" the world around her (200). Ultimately, it is the narrator's anger that makes her "diseased" and isolates her from the rest of society (200). Acker focuses on the experience of social outsiders and misfits in order to recreate the experience of isolation, and this in turn influences the tone Acker develops throughout her work. Whether they express anger, depression, or paranoia, Acker's characters are driven by emotion, and this surfaces in her use of tone.

Rather than garden-variety bouts of anger and sadness, Kathy Acker's characters experience intense emotional crises like depression, psychosis, and paranoia. In each case of crisis, the characters express anxiety over the stigma associated with mental illness. The narrator of *Empire of the Senseless*, for instance, says, "Before I was psychotic, before I stopped sleeping, my dreams told me someone was trying to kill me" (256). Once the narrator "stop[s] sleeping,"

she becomes “psychotic,” and experiences an episode of paranoia in which she thinks everyone is “trying to kill” her (256). Later in the text, the narrator’s lover, Abhor, describes her as “masochistic to the point of suicidal and, actually, physically damaged” (259). Whatever trauma the narrator experienced has twisted her into a “suicidal,” emotionally unstable person, and this influences her attitude toward the world, and as a result, the tone of the text.

Throughout her fiction, Acker uses tone to describe the experience of those on the margins of society because of class, race, health, or religion. By using tone to express the lives of outsiders, Acker encourages her audience to empathize with others because, as humans, we all endure pain and hope for happiness.

Although Kathy Acker’s use of flavor and tone are no doubt unusual, by far the most controversial aspect of her work involves the content of her fiction, which includes graphic sexual material and portions of plagiarized texts. For instance, Kathy Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School* describes an incestuous affair between a father and daughter. Moreover, Acker supplements the explicit words on the page with drawings of genitalia and sexual acts (102, 109, 116, 119, 121). The narrator, Janey, suffers from madness brought on by pelvic inflammatory disease, and ignores her failing health in an attempt to back win her father’s affection (117). Similarly, the narrator of *Empire of the Senseless* describes the rape of a young boy by a pirate in graphic, vivid language, and the remainder of the text regularly includes descriptions of prostitution, rape, and sodomy (249). Without doubt, these graphic descriptions of sexuality lead many readers to put down Acker’s work. If this is the case, why would Acker would use such explicit material? What possible role could it serve in her work? In part, an answer may come from Acker’s novels. In *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini*, for instance, the narrator states, “Schools teach good writing in order to stop people writing

whatever they want the way they want” (201). For Acker, writing about sex and sexuality reflects her choice as an author regarding the content of her work, and she must “writ[e] whatever [she] want[s] the way...[she] want[s]” in order to fulfill her role as an artist (201). As a result, Acker’s use of graphic sexuality reflects a decision on her part that influences her voice as a writer and makes her a memorable author.

As with her use of controversial, graphic sexual material, Acker also distinguishes herself among contemporary authors through her plagiarism of other texts. In her novels *Great Expectations* and *Don Quixote*, Acker includes words, characters, and other material from literary masters alongside her own work. For instance, Acker begins a chapter of her novel *Great Expectations* with a section titled “Plagiarism,” which she follows with a section from Dickens’ novel of the same name. Acker writes:

My father’s name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Peter. So I called myself Peter, and came to be called Peter. I give Pirrip as my father’s family name on the authority of his tombstone and my sister—Mrs. Joe Garery, who married the blacksmith. (150).

Here, Acker appropriates the opening paragraphs from Charles Dickens’ novel *Great Expectations*, though she changes “Pip” to “Peter” (Dickens 1, Acker 150). Acker begins her text with a plagiarized paragraph from a 19th century novel, but in the paragraphs that follow the narrator moves immediately into a description of her mother’s suicide in “September of 1979” (Acker 150). As the story proceeds, it constantly evolves. First, the narrator is a young woman walking along the street, and then the action jumps to a description of violent war crimes and acts of sexual violence (151-152). Consequently, the narrative appears unstable, chaotic, and

fractured, which is precisely Acker's intention. In her plagiarism of other texts, Acker forces works revered by Western culture, like Dickens' *Great Expectations*, into close proximity with mental illness, violence, and graphic sexuality. As a result, Acker forces her audience to see art in a new way. More than any other characteristic of her writing, Acker's use of plagiarized material represents a choice on her part regarding the content of her work, and this choice has made her the enemy of many literary scholars. Ultimately though, Kathy Acker's use of sexually graphic and plagiarized material distinguish her in terms of the content of her work, which when combined with her use of flavor and tone makes her one of the most memorable, innovative writers of the 20th century.

Just as Mary Robison, Dorothy Allison, and Kathy Acker develop an authorial voice in their work that distinguishes them as writers, so too does my collection, *Among Waitresses*, demonstrate my stylistic choices, which, ultimately, shape my voice as a writer. Yet, as Jerome Stern notes in *Making Shapely Fiction*, "Finding your own style is a process of recognizing what is secondhand, what is someone else's style, and listening at the same time for your natural style" (229). Because developing a strong, authorial voice requires writers to "recogniz[e] what is secondhand," assembling my collection required me to consider whether or not the voice in it was entirely my own or an imitation of other authors I admire, like Mary Robison, Dorothy Allison, and Kathy Acker. Writing and revising *Among Waitresses* forced me to consider the choices I made regarding the flavor, tone, and content of my fiction, and whether or not those choices produce a distinct authorial voice.

To begin, the flavor of my short fiction combines the spare language of minimalism with the use of the present tense to recreate lived experience. Mary Robison's deft use of slim sentences and spare language encouraged me to try my hand at it, but my stories include longer

scenes and descriptions than she typically employs. Throughout *An Amateur's Guide to the Night*, Robison uses brief scenes—between one or two pages long—to construct her stories. I also build my short stories from short scenes, but these sections average between two and five pages in length. For example, the opening paragraph of “The Lion Tamer” begins with spare language, as when May, the narrator, says, “We’re the new people in church. Dad speaks for us. I smile when he mentions me, but keep my mouth shut.” The short, pared-down sentences rely upon minimalism, but unlike Robison’s use of minimalism, my work runs longer and relies a great deal on description. Also, many of my short stories use the present tense, which gives them an immediacy absent from Robison’s collection. Specifically, since many of the narrators in *Among Waitresses* adopt the present tense, whatever conflict or crisis they face is ongoing. As a result, the narrators describe life not from some later point of reflection, but as they experience it. Because human beings experience life in the present tense, its use within fiction mimics lived experience. Although I deeply respect Robison’s minimalism, my own approach to spare language in fiction differs in regard to length, breadth, and narrative distance.

As with flavor, my collection of short fiction also uses tone to develop a distinct authorial voice. Many of the narrators represent the lower- and lower-middle classes, and their financial insecurity influences their attitude toward life and their hopes for the future. In regard to tone, the work of Dorothy Allison served as a constant example of how an author must strive to faithfully recreate experience. More than other writers I have encountered, Allison expresses the attitudes of the poor in dignified, genuine manner. Likewise, the narrators in my collection represent the lower- and lower-middle classes, but they differ in their view of educational and government institutions. Throughout my collection, the narrators regard such institutions with ambivalence. For instance, the narrator of “Hospitality,” Beth, certainly laments her poverty, as

when she must hang wet laundry outside on a cold, windy spring day because she doesn't have the money to repair her dryer. Beth's attitude indicates she feels she has missed opportunities in her life, such as attending college or traveling the country. When an emu suddenly appears at Beth's home, she expresses hope that this animal will linger and provide her with a source of friendship and excitement. Beth's optimism surrounding the emu, however short-lived, differentiates her from Allison's characters in terms of tone. Specifically, though Beth comes from the lower-classes, she is willing to suffer through poverty if she can satisfy her desire for companionship. For many of Allison's narrators, however, poverty is insurmountable, a permanent condition of their lives exacerbated by government institutions, colleges, and discrimination in employment. While poverty certainly contributes to the attitudes of the characters in my collection, they also express optimism about the future, which distinguishes my use of tone from Dorothy Allison's.

In addition to flavor and tone, my collection of short fiction also reflects my choices regarding content. Throughout these stories and essays, the narrators experience unpleasant, violent, or transgressive acts. Regarding content, Acker's description of graphic sexuality, drug addiction, and violence strikes me as particularly innovative. Her ability to constantly shock and unsettle readers resembles that of the Marquis de Sade, and like him, Acker's choices regarding content limited her audience and acceptance in certain literary circles. As a result, my choices in content reflect an awareness of the brutality and violence of life and a responsibility on the part of the characters to do something about it. For instance, Linz, the narrator of "Managerial Timber," discovers the dead body of an infant in a dumpster and struggles with how the police will find the culprit. Ultimately, Linz must accept that the world is a violent, dangerous place where terrible things happen. Similarly, Leah, the narrator of "Blood Relation," describes her

decision to sleep with her twin brother. Unlike Acker's descriptions of incest, which frequently involve a step-father and younger daughter in a struggle for power, Leah and Jim are twins, and so share power in their domestic and social lives. As a result, when Leah sleeps with her brother, they engage in an expression of affection and that may later subject them to social taboo. When the characters encounter the nasty side of life, they assume a degree of responsibility, and so come to terms with it. In addition, my use of sexually graphic, violent, or transgressive material occurs less frequently than in Acker's work, which allows the audience to experience shock without feeling overwhelmed. Consequently, my choices in terms of content reflect the violence of life without forgoing continuous plot lines or character development. My goal is, after all, to render explicit content palatable to readers.

In addition to seven short stories, two works of nonfiction end the collection. Both employ first-person narration. In "Fentanyl and Happy Meals," first-person creates a voice capable of approaching the emotionally-charged subject matter, which is the impact of drug addiction on family relationships. Although this essay deals with harsh content, it allows readers to explore the impact of addiction through the lens of lived experience. The rural setting of "Fentanyl and Happy Meals" becomes the focus in "Tracks," an example of nature writing. Here, the voice develops comparisons and figurative language to depict the environmental impact of human beings on a local creek. In this essay, the narrator suggests the trash and litter contribute to the seclusion of the place, and so to its beauty. For this reason, the narrator refuses to clean up the landscape, and instead cherishes the abandoned mattresses and ratty furniture. In both essays, voice remains the central focus. Among contemporary women writers, those who possess a distinctive voice, like Joan Didion or Annie Dillard, move

effortlessly between fiction and nonfiction. To this end, *Among Waitresses* includes examples from both genres.

Through an examination of literary criticism and contemporary fiction, this project identifies voice as the stylistic choices of an author, which may be subdivided into flavor, tone, and content. Within literary studies, voice matters because it draws attention to the dialectical nature of reading and writing, facilitates discussion of an author's presence in and influence upon a work of art, and encourages authors experiment and challenge themselves. Voice deserves the attention of writers working in imaginative literature, but why should this matter for others? How can writers use voice to affect change in the world? In "*What is Literature?*" and *Other Essays*, Jean-Paul Sartre claims that "the writer gives society a guilty conscience" (81). Here, Sartre draws attention to the power of authors to affect social change through writing. When writers choose narrators who struggle with poverty, abuse, discrimination, or illness, they force readers to think critically about who's to blame for the situation. Ultimately, this is the penultimate goal for writers; namely, writers hope to spur dialogue within their communities regarding equality, opportunity, and shared values. Certainly, artists are not legislators or politicians, but voice allows writers to influence public opinion in concrete, measurable ways. Just as Mary Robison legitimizes the experience of the mentally ill and Dorothy Allison legitimizes the experience of gays and lesbians, so too all writers may turn the attention of their audience to the experience of groups routinely marginalized by contemporary Western culture. In so doing, writers can encourage dialogue and empathy through the use of their art. As Sartre notes, "although literature is one thing and morality quite a different one, at the heart of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imperative" ("Why Write?" 991). For Sartre, the goal of morality and the goal of art are one in the same; that is, both art and morality hope to create a

more just, free, and beautiful world. So long as moral goals like democracy, liberty, and social equality remain important in Western society, writers will use voice to illuminate the problems of society and press readers to imagine practical solutions.

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PART II
STORIES AND ESSAYS

Among Waitresses

I avoid whole eggs. For omelets, scrambled eggs, and migas I use a jug of pre-whipped egg product from the fridge. The stuff's the exact color and texture of buttermilk. When customers describe their fluffy omelets, I think of the jug. The menu should have quotation marks around eggs on the menu. At least diners would have some idea what they'd ordered. Whatever it is, it doesn't come out of a brown or white shell.

"Robbie, T-bone and eggs, no hash," Marguerite says, and clips a ticket to the line. It slides down to me over the pass bar. My Mom named me after her father, Robert, but added an "a" because I wasn't the boy she wanted. I tell everyone to call me Robbie.

"What kind of steak do people think they'll get here at four in the morning?" I ask.

Marguerite doesn't answer. She jogs over to Sheena, a newby, at the first sign of panicked stumble under a heavy tray. Marguerite catches it in time to save the food, and Sheena's tip. During the six months Marguerite's been here, and my full-blown year in the greasy kitchen, we've learned to recognize fear in our fellow waitresses. The only thing between us and disaster is our willingness to watch out for each other.

Marguerite takes the tray from Sheena and passes the food around to a group of five chubby, middle-aged men in identical navy blue parkas. They must be cops, or maybe firemen. Sheena approaches the pass bar and gives me the dazed, over-excited look of someone who's stepped out of the path of a city bus just in time.

"Fuck me," she says, "This is so hard. Can I have a sour cream, Robbie?"

"Sure," I say, and pass a cup filled with a small, white dome of sour cream to her. After this near disaster, Sheena probably won't need any coffee for the rest of the night.

"You'll get the hang of it," I say.

“Am I terrible at it?” she asks.

“No way. Give yourself some credit, girl. You’re doing fine,” I say.

Sheena smiles and walks away. Her tattoos show through her company-issue dress shirt. She might be eighteen or thirty-two—her forehead furrows in three lines when she listens to her customers. They intimidate her, and there’s nothing worse for someone in our line of work. I try to be invisible, a human extension of the grill too insignificant to notice. Mostly, it works.

When a customer orders a T-bone, I have to fetch the steak from the walk-in fridge. The place is cold, cramped, and soaked with a smell that will knock you over. It’s a musky, vegetable funk with a sucker punch of bleach cleanser. The steak ages in a plastic bin below the milk shelf. The second I open the bin, the smell tells me one of them has turned. There’s no way to tell which one it is, and I’m too tired to bother. Mr. Pike, the manager, wouldn’t care anyway. If anything, he’ll blame me for the natural decomposition of meat long past its expiration date.

The T-bone dribbles as I carry it to the grill, so I cup my other hand under it to catch the blood. The steak pops and smokes like firecrackers when it hits the hot grill. It’s a satisfying sound. You can’t taste the meat if you sear the hell out of it, so I usually do. My foot punches the sink pump and water spurts out of the faucet. The blood swirls down the drain, somewhere into the sewers of St. Louis. I wipe my face, neck, and chest with the inside of my apron. My hair’s completely wet, a long, stringy ponytail, and sweat trickles down my back and between my breasts. I’m the only cook working the line tonight, and it’s hot as hell. Marguerite’s drops another order on me, and even though I’m exhausted, I don’t mind. She’ll drive me home after work, and maybe even give me a beer.

“What’s the guy want instead of hash?” I ask.

“Grits,” she answers.

“Gross,” I say.

She smiles then, and shows her small, even teeth. I like making her laugh, and smile as I pour a pancake-sized blob of eggs onto the grill. They bubble up, reacting to the intense heat, but a good poke from my spatula keeps them from burning. The grits come in a packet, like instant oatmeal, and thicken the moment they touch boiling water. The eggs wobble under the spatula, and I ease them onto the plate beside the small bowl of grits and the T-bone. Ruddy juice collects under the eggs. The ticket said medium rare, after all.

“Order up,” I say, and slide the plate onto the pass bar. Marguerite strides over and picks it up. The orange street lights outside illuminate the snow as it falls, flake by flake, to the frozen streets.

At six a.m., it’s still dark. Marguerite and I scrape the snow and ice from her truck’s windshield. Her battered Datsun pick-up starts on the third crank. We wait for the cab to heat up, exhaling clouds of breath until the defroster kicks in. Marguerite lights a menthol and I crack my window.

“Guess what Mr. Pike gave me,” I say.

“A social disease?” Marguerite says, and inhales cigarette smoke.

“Charming, but no,” I say, “It’s a pin. I’ve been sweating back there for an entire year.”

I hold it up to Marguerite, but it’s too dark to see it. She glances over at it, nods, and looks out the windshield. The pin is smaller than my thumbnail, just a dark-blue numeral one attached to a safety pin.

Marguerite creeps out of the parking lot, and as the truck putters toward the interstate I drop the pin out the window. It belongs in the muddy slush along the road.

“It’s freezing out there,” Marguerite says, “Roll up the window.”

“The smoke hurts my eyes.”

She groans and turns on the radio. A local morning DJ tells fart jokes. Fart jokes at six a.m. Marguerite turns the radio off again and taps her cigarette over the ash tray.

“This is the only cigarette I’ll have all day, Robbie. Let me enjoy it,” she says.

She smokes with her mittens on, and it makes me smile.

“What?” she asks.

“You look like a little girl trying to smoke,” I say.

“Fuck you, Roberta,” she says.

“No need to use my whole name.”

We drive onto the frozen interstate and chug on through the snow. We don’t speak on the way home, a trip of two slow, comfortable miles. Marguerite turns into the parking lot as the black sky lightens to a pre-dawn purple. She lives in building twelve and I live over in seven, but we ride together to save gas. She pulls into a spot close to her building and kills the engine. The truck lurches, and we step out into the cold. The snow’s coming faster now – the noise of it surrounds us like a ghost, there and not there at the same time.

Marguerite unlocks her apartment and we shake snow from our coats. Flakes of it melt into my hair. As soon as I walk in, I remember how comfortable I feel in Marguerite’s home. The smell is unmistakable, a blend of vanilla, baby powder, and sweat that always relaxes me. Marguerite drops his voice to a whisper.

“I’m going to check on Jack. Help yourself,” she says, and points to the kitchen.

Pictures of Marguerite and her family cover the fridge in a patchwork of smiles. One shows Marguerite, Jack, and I all dressed up for Halloween. Jack was eleven months-old, and went in an orange sack dressed as a pumpkin. Marguerite was Dorothy from *The Wiz*. She gave Diana Ross a run for her money. I splattered an old apron with ketchup and went as an axe murderer, except I couldn't find an axe. I'm not great with costumes. Marguerite has a twelve pack of Negra Modelo, my favorite beer, waiting for me in the fridge. I don't see anything to eat, so I open my beer and go into the living room.

Marguerite comes in with Jack on her hip, and he smiles a gummy, slobbery smile.

"Hey, big Jack," I say, and kiss his tiny fingers.

He's a picture of Marguerite in miniature, the same smooth, chocolate skin, the same wide, dark eyes, and the same two dimples. I don't like kids, but I adore Jack because he's so much like Marguerite. It's hard to explain my affection for her. When I think of us, we seem like soldiers in a World War II movie, or patients trapped in an asylum. I hope we'd be friends even if we were yuppies, but I doubt it.

"Is your Mom sleeping?" I ask.

"She's in the shower," Marguerite says.

She sets Jack on the carpet and gives him a raggedy-looking stuffed frog named Ernie. Jack curls his arm around it and points to the TV.

"You want me to make something?" I ask.

She frowns at me, thinking.

"I don't think there's anything to make," she says.

"I'll figure something out."

The beer gives me confidence in my culinary ability, and I rummage through Marguerite's scant pantry. She makes Jack oatmeal and chocolate milk while I work. With some improvisation, a red apple, a cup of applesauce, half a cup of rice, and some pork chops, I produce something decent. By the time Jack's full and sleepy again, I have a plate ready for Marguerite. When her mother, Nadine, comes in, I make one for her, too.

"Morning, Mrs. Baker," I say.

"Robbie, if I'm going call you Robbie, you have to call me Nadine," she says.

"Ok, then."

We sit down to eat and watch the seven-thirty news. Every morning is always the same. First, the weather, then some ghastly headlines followed by a local report from a restaurant inspection. A Hispanic man in a sharp blue suit stands in front of a map and gestures at Missouri.

"This low-pressure system could drop another three to four inches of snow on us over the next twenty-four hours," he says, "It'll be cold and nasty. Use caution on the roadways."

"It's *winter*," Nadine says, "How is this news?"

Marguerite shrugs. Her mother nods and stands up, still chewing.

"Got to catch the bus," she says, "Love you."

She kisses Marguerite on the forehead and hugs me. She wraps herself up in layers of coats and scarves, as though her body's a present, and then shuffles out into the snow. Her boots leave holes like caves in powdered sugar. We watch her leave in silence. A snowflake catches in my eyelashes, and the heat of my body melts it.

"I love your Mom," I say.

Marguerite leads the way back into her apartment, and shuts the door behind me.

“She does her best,” she says.

“Can’t say the same for my Mom.”

Marguerite sits on the couch and slides the end table drawer open. From it, she removes an antique silver cigarette case. She flips the case open, retrieves a joint, and lights the tip.

“You smoking?” I ask.

“Duh. Are you?”

“I guess.”

I sit down next to her on the couch. I try not to judge my friend because I don’t have many of them. Marguerite’s my age with a kid and a crappy job that doesn’t pay enough. Who cares if she smokes? It’s not like she’s my Mom, turning tricks at our ratty duplex. Still, every time she lights up, I feel myself justifying her actions because I’m disappointed with her, and with me, and with everything in the world. If I smoke with her, I’m equally to blame, and closer to my friend. Then, we get to laugh at game show hosts and celebrities. We talk about what our jobs will give way to, trips to Spain, college, and simple, pretty homes with landscaped yards. Everything doesn’t seem so impossible then, which is the real justification for smoking at all, the real reason we settle for what we have. During these moments, I don’t worry about Jack or all the things Marguerite can’t afford to give him. He’s sleeping in the bedroom, quiet, more content than we’ll ever be.

The snow falls in thick, downy clumps as I hurry across the complex to my cramped efficiency. It’s half-past nine, but clouds hide the winter sun in a gray gloom. Industrious commuters lean over frozen windshields with ice scrapers, moving their arms in jerky arcs

because their coats don't stretch. My neighbor, Luke, shifts his weight as he leans against the front of building seven. He's trying to light a cigarette. He waves his gloved hand and shuffles over to my front door.

I like Luke. He's shorter than me, but I'm 5'10," and past hoping for a man to look up to. Luke works nights at a twenty-four hour mechanic shop off the interstate. Sometimes he comes by the restaurant for waffles and coffee during his lunch break. He stays long after he cleans his plate to chat with me. Marguerite says he looks like a hipster with his black, square-frame glasses, but I know he's legally blind without them. He can't drive at night, so I usually drive him to his league games at the bowling alley on my nights off. He buys me cheap nachos with gobs of orange cheese sauce and tells me corny jokes between his turns.

"Hey, Robbie, I was gonna leave you a note," he says.

I can't see his face – a fuzzy hat with earflaps and a scarf hides most of his features. The tip of his nose sticks out, though, bright red with cold.

"How come?" I ask

"There was some lady here knocking on doors, looking for you," Luke says.

A billiard ball drops from my throat to my stomach.

"What'd she look like?" I ask.

"Well," he says, and shrugs, "Homeless. Had a bag of junk with her. Seemed kind of beat up."

"Sort of tall? With a scratchy voice and a red coat?" I ask.

"Uh...yeah. Do you know her?" Luke asks.

He tilts his head sideways, like he doesn't understand. I don't have the energy to explain my mother to him.

“It’s this crazy lady who panhandles outside the restaurant,” I say.

“That’s scary. She might’ve followed you home. You outta tell the cops,” he says.

“She’s harmless,” I say.

“I don’t know, Robbie,” he says, and gives me a long, worried look.

“I’ll be okay,” I say, and smile.

“You better be,” Luke says, and claps his hands together, “We’re up against those dickheads from Firestone this week. You wanna come?”

“Sure, if we’re not snowed in,” I say.

“We’ll figure out something to do,” he says.

I don’t say anything, and Luke clears his throat. He looks away, grimaces, and walks back to his front door too fast. He’s the shyest guy I’ve ever met. When he’s uncomfortable around me, my skin tingles on the back of my neck. I feel it moving down my shoulders as I slide my key into the lock.

My apartment’s a cozy rabbit hole compared to the blizzard outside. I shed my clothes and shoes at the door, and shake my hair. On cold, unpleasant days like this, I wear the ugliest pajamas I own. They’re coral fleece with elastic around the sleeves and a lace collar. They came with attached booties that didn’t fit my size ten feet. I turned them into cat toys.

My sheets chill me as I slide into bed, except for a warm spot. I stretch my toes out and touch fur. With a meow, my cat, Peepers, pokes her head out of the covers. She nuzzles my chin and smears cat spit onto my chin. Peepers makes greeting me a full-contact sport when she first sees me. In half an hour, she’ll forget all about me. Cats have no long-term memory.

For now, I’m grateful for the company of a quiet friend. My mother flits in and out of my mind. She wanders over to my apartment complex every few weeks, and usually forgets

which one is mine. I don't answer even if she gets it right. I push the memory of her away, out into the cold, white world. Sleep rises around me like warm bathwater, and I stop caressing my cat's ears. She purrs, her paws opening and closing, opening and closing against my arm until I'm not awake.

Marguerite and I leave for work an hour and a half early. We take her truck because it handles better than my Toyota hatchback. Even with extra time, we roll into the restaurant parking lot with less than twenty minutes to spare.

The restaurant reminds me of a used car lot. Every parking space has a car in it, and a line of customers stretches out into the cold. Mr. Pike, the manager, works the cash register, barking orders and chewing Tums one after another. Sweat shines on his wide, bald forehead. Marguerite and I stare at the crowd with our mouths open, dumb with awe.

"Jesus," she says.

We look at our unkempt manager. As soon as he sees us, he lashes out.

"Don't stand there," he says, "Get back there, Robbie. Marguerite, we need you in smoking. Take tables six through thirteen. Move it!"

We do what he says. Order after order comes down the line. In the chaos, I burn my hand on the grill. An enormous, pale blister bubbles up under my skin. I don't have time to take care of it. Plate after plate goes out, another set of pancakes, omelets, Belgian waffles, or biscuits, and everyone tonight wants bacon. Black specks of charred food and drops of grease speckle my arms. Four hours pass before Mr. Pike comes back to give me a break.

As soon as he takes over, I slather the blister with antiseptic and cover it with a band-aid. Mr. Pike gives me a cigarette; maybe he's satisfied with my performance. I throw on my coat

and go out the back door to smoke. Steam curls up from the dumpster. The wind makes my eyes water. It thrashes the other side of the building with snow. The plows run back and forth down the interstate, leaving high, white dunes along the service road. Downtown, dark buildings cast white and orange beams of light into the sky, and they give the purple-grey clouds a strange radiance.

A man in a parka walks around the corner of the building. He shouts at somebody and trudges over to a station wagon. As he opens the driver's side door, he yells again.

"I said leave me alone!" he says.

Another voice echoes through the parking lot, muted and indistinct. The man in the parka drives around the back of the building. His car turns down the access road, toward the interstate, and my Mom follows his car toward the back of the restaurant. Her gaze follows the station wagon. She holds her hand stretched out, palm up, like she's testing the air for rain. Her too-big red coat flaps around her, cinched at the waist with a man's black leather belt.

I haven't seen her in months. She moves between the restaurant, my apartment, and the Catholic Church three blocks away, always moving because moving is a reason in itself for her. When she shows up somewhere, she doesn't know me. I'm grown now, tall, dark-haired, and nothing like the sandy-headed, buck-toothed girl she remembers. Is she looking for that girl, or trying to find a place where no one will chase her off? Guilt settles down on me, tight and fast as a net.

"Goddamned men won't do shit to help. He knocked me off the bus. Everyone's in such a fuckin' hurry," Mom says, but not to me so much as to the whole, evil world around her.

Mom rests her hand against the steaming dumpster and climbs the stairs to stand beside me. She never stops talking, but nothing she says makes sense. Maybe everything she says makes sense, but only to her.

“Give us a drag, sweetie,” she says, and takes my cigarette.

She stops talking and breathes in smoke. Luke was right – she does look beat up. A palm-sized bruise covers her left cheek. She must’ve lost her dentures. She takes the cigarette from her mouth and wipes her nose with the sleeve of her coat. Snot leaves a shiny trail along the fabric, and her chapped nostrils start to bleed. I know it’s her, though, by the coat and the vertical scar that divides her right eyebrow. No recognition flashes across her face, but it’s hard to ignore that she’s my mother. Mom holds the cigarette back out to me.

“Keep it,” I say.

She smiles, but it vanishes quickly.

“Thanks. I needed a smoke,” she says, “You believe this town? Every other street, it’s just cops and thugs. They’re working together. Each one of the bastards gets a piece.”

She stops talking and takes another long drag. She stares at me.

“You don’t say much,” she says.

“I don’t like people,” I say.

She snorts and nods in agreement.

“People fuck you over. Gotta keep one step ahead,” she says.

I reach into the front pocket of my jeans. The thirty-six dollars I wanted to save for bowling with Luke fits easily into my palm. My money won’t help her; no matter how much I save, I’d never have enough to fix anything about her broken, ragged life. I want to douse her with holy water, to shoot her with a silver bullet, or to drive a stake through her heart. It would

be like a movie, where the junkie, crazy part of my Mom dies, but the rest of her survives. I could carry her to my apartment, tuck her into bed, and make her soup and grilled cheese sandwiches. She would slurp from a spoon, smile with content, and our lives would be so much better than normal.

But it won't happen. This is a bigger fantasy than the trips, colleges, and pretty houses that I talk about with Marguerite. This dream turns me upside down. It buries me, and makes me nauseous when I hold my hand out to her.

"Here, take this," I say, and hold the money out to her.

She stares at me.

"I don't have anything to sell," she says.

"That's ok. Just go get on the bus. The Salvation Army downtown will let you stay the night," I say.

She snaps the money up, counts it three times, and stuffs it somewhere inside her coat. I take a step toward her and stretch out my hand. Mom shoves me back against the building and walks back toward the parking lot.

"Crazy bitch," she says, "I don't know you."

She disappears into the dark. My stomach tightens. The cold surrounds me, and I shiver. The shaking spreads through my body, and stays even after I return to the heat of the kitchen. At the grill, a line of tickets wait for me. I want to cry, vomit, or throw myself onto the scalding flat surface.

"I can't do this. I can't do this," I say, "Fuck, how does anyone do this?"

No one sees my distress. Customers slice their pancakes into manageable bites, blow onto their coffee, and chat across the shabby Formica tables. I swear not to cry. I swear to stand

here with my spatula and to finish cooking this plate, and then the next, but I'm not staying forever. I can't. Two, ten, or twenty years down the road, I need more to show for all of this than a collection of dark-blue pins. I throw a disc of frozen hamburger patty onto the grill, and press it down with my spatula. The meat spits, steams, and sizzles – it can't resist the pressure and heat. I can do more than that, and I will.

Restoration Services

As soon as he walked in, Clyde heard flies, a lot more flies than he saw. One of them zig-zagged past his face, and he shooed it away with his arm. The fly lighted on his boss's back, a small, dark spot on the white, plastic bodysuit. The sound of so many insects reminded Clyde of the buzzing trashcans at the park where bees drank the sodas and melted snow cones kids discarded. Ahead of him, his boss, Gabe, and co-worker, James, stopped moving three steps into the apartment.

“Jesus Christ,” James said, “Look at this place!”

Clyde squeezed next to Gabe and saw the entire room for the first time. Heaps of trash surrounded the linoleum by the front door, and the floor stuck to his boots. He'd only seen places like this on television. Clyde sat through hours of talk shows with his Mom when she was too sad to work. She and his Aunt Eva got all weepy over people who couldn't say no to thrift stores and garage sales, and he pretended not to watch.

Towers of old magazines, books, and stacks of paper lined the walls. Plastic crates and cardboard boxes full of who knows what flanked the small loveseat and television. There were fishing rods, a treadmill, and a hand-painted statue of the Virgin Mary. Black trash bags—some bulging, some only half-full—covered the kitchen floor and dining table. Thousands of insects and other small animals probably lived here.

“It's a hoarder!” Clyde said.

“He,” Gabe corrected, “And yes, he's a hoarder. Now he's dead, and it's our job to get him out of here.”

“What a fucking nightmare,” James said.

“No sense bitchin' about it,” Gabe said, “Let's get to work and find our lucky man.”

Clyde followed James as they squeezed single-file down paths through the debris. This was Clyde's third job with Masters of Disaster, Gabe's clean up company. He and James had been friends since high school, and Clyde believed him when he said the work was easy money. Once you got the body in the bag, you were almost done. This time, though, he wondered how they'd find a body in such an awe-inspiring mess.

"Do we know where this guy is by chance?" Clyde asked.

"Yeah," Gabe said, "The land lady said he's upstairs."

"There are stairs in this apartment?" James said.

"We can only hope so, kiddo," Gabe said.

They found the stairs, which were really a narrow, ascending ledge along a cliff of junk. On the way up, Clyde saw boxes of china, an old Lite-Brite game, cases of Bush's Baked Beans, and two-hundred three-ring binders stacked like weird bricks. He watched James as he inched up the stairs ahead of him, anxious about what he'd do if his friend fell, but he didn't.

The apartment wasn't any better on the second floor. Mounds of laundry reached as high as Clyde's chest. Gabe took a step forward, in the direction of the bedroom, and a cockroach scurried out of one pile of clothes and into another.

"That sucker was big," James said.

"Swamp roach. They're all over Beaumont," Clyde said, "Makes me wonder what it smells like in here."

"Don't wonder. That's why we have these," Gabe said, and tapped the mask covering his nose and mouth, "Let's check the bedroom."

The dead man, stretched across the bare mattress and surrounded by waves of clutter, resembled a cast away who didn't make it to a desert island. Gabe dug holes in the garbage

underfoot, and Clyde copied his heel-first technique until he reached the bed. Gabe gave one end of the tape measure to James, who pressed it to the dead man's foot. Gabe held the other end beside the crown of the man's head.

"Seventy long," Gabe said.

Then, he stretched the tape measure across the man's bloated belly.

"Fifty across," he said.

Gabe pressed a button, and the tape measure retracted into its metal housing.

"Okay, guys, that means we have to clear a path at least fifty inches wide," Gabe said.

"Goddamned hassle," Clyde said.

"Overtime, kiddo, we call it overtime," Gabe said.

Clyde bristled every time Gabe called him a kid. He was a year older than Gabe, for one thing. If he'd kept his baseball scholarship at Lamar University, they might have been friends. Instead, Clyde had shit and Gabe had a degree, so he was the boss. In the end, the guy rotting on the mattress wouldn't know the difference between them.

They started in the living room, as close to the front door as possible. Clyde pawed through a mound of stained linens and cassette tapes. Two broken lamps jutted from the bottom of the pile. He carried them downstairs and launched them into the dumpster. The sound of something breaking thrilled him. Outside, the drone of televisions and stereos had given way to the songs of nocturnal insects. The sky reflected orange light from the refineries with low-hanging clouds, blown in from the gulf. A block away, eighteen-wheelers barreled by on I-10, rushing in and out of town on rolling waves of noise.

They took a break every hour. The July night air hung in thick, velvety sheets around them. Clyde leaned against the truck. James drained the last trickle of water from the red cooler.

He swirled it in his plastic Dixie cup to make it last longer. The light from the refineries blended into the sunrise, melting orange, pink, and blue-green together like a mood ring.

“It’s gonna be hot as fuck in a couple of hours,” James said.

“Agreed,” Gabe said, “I’m guessing this guy weighs about two-fifty—.”

“Three-hundred, easy,” Clyde said.

“Okay, three-hundred,” Gabe said, “We’ve still gotta get him out.”

“The fire department guys have that winch thing,” James said.

“There’s no room for it. We’ll use the big bag, with one guy at the top and two going down the stairs,” Gabe said.

James threw his cup across the parking lot.

“You’re buying breakfast,” James said, and pointed at Gabe.

“Aw!” Gabe said, “Are you kids hungry? Poor babies!”

Gabe opened the truck’s camper and pulled out a long, black bag. He tossed it to James, who slung it over his shoulder. The black plastic sheath with the zipper down its center reminded Clyde of the suitcase his Mom used to carry her dress clothes. Laid out, though, he knew this one was bigger.

“On three,” Gabe said.

James stood across the mattress from them, ready for Gabe and Clyde to roll the body.

“One. Two. Three,” Gabe said.

When they moved the body, a gurgling, liquid belch came from the dead man’s mouth. James stepped back and toppled the nightstand. Something inside it broke with the sound of a plate hitting the floor.

“Damn,” James said, and set it right-side up. He slid the drawer open.

“Fuck me,” he said.

Clyde and Gabe froze. Anything might be in there.

“Watch it,” Gabe said.

“What is it?” Clyde asked.

James pulled the broken pieces of a mason jar out of the drawer and laid them on the nightstand. Then, he took out a wad of folded money.

“Looks like a rainy day fund,” he said.

James spread the bills across the mattress where they made a green ribbon beside the man half-rolled into the bag.

“How much is it?” Clyde asked.

James touched the bills and whispered to himself, but he lost count and started over.

“Looks like it’s all ones and fives, so...maybe two-hundred or two-fifty?” he said.

“No big bills?” Gabe asked.

“Not even a ten,” James said.

“Can we keep it?” Clyde asked.

Gabe didn’t answer right away. In the silence, James and Clyde looked at one another.

“Who’s gonna know?” James said, “I don’t think he’s had company over in a long time.”

“Yeah, and he’s not spending it at the strip club now,” Clyde said. He chuckled, but Gabe didn’t laugh.

“Breakfast’s on him, I guess,” Gabe said, and shrugged.

“Sweet!” James said, and held the money out to Gabe.

“I don’t want to touch it,” Gabe said, and raised his arms.

James unzipped his suit and shoved the money into his pants.

It wasn't an easy lift, even after the excitement of the money. Clyde and Gabe went downstairs first, so they had the hard part. Clyde made it down five steps before he lost his balance and fell. As he went, the body thumped down after him, accelerating with each step until it smashed onto the lower half of his body.

"Goddamn it," Gabe said.

"Hey, man, we can't kill him twice," James said.

Gabe laughed this time, but to Clyde it seemed he wasn't laughing at James's joke so much as at him, turned over at the bottom of the stairs and half-smothered by a body in a bag.

"A little help?" Clyde said.

James and Gabe lifted a corner of the bag, and Clyde wriggled free.

"Not as easy as it looks on TV, huh, kiddo?" Gabe said, and slapped Clyde on the back.

Clyde was grateful for the mask over his face. Without it, Gabe would've seen his snarl, and this job would've been another waste of time, another thing his Mom could use as evidence against him.

"Sorry, boss," Clyde said.

"We've all done it," Gabe said.

Outside, they heaved the body onto the gurney, strapped it in, and headed for the truck. It was early, but already the sun felt too bright and close. Last night's dew would disappear in half an hour. Noise from televisions and alarm clocks collected around the apartment complex—the tenants were waking up.

A woman with too tan skin, who could've been thirty or fifty, stepped out of her apartment as they were leaving. She wore a silk robe, and pulled a lighter from one of its

pockets. She lit her cigarette, and then she saw them. She saw the gurney, the black, bulging bag, and the guys in their bodysuits and masks. Her mouth fell open and she forgot to exhale.

“Good morning, ma’am!” Gabe called to her, and raised his blue-gloved hand in a salute.

The woman coughed, dropped her cigarette, and ducked back into her apartment.

“It’s funny every time,” Gabe said.

The guys laughed and rolled the gurney over to the truck.

The second they got the dead guy loaded, they stripped off their white hazmat suits.

Gabe and James both lit cigarettes, and Clyde patted the outside of his pants.

“Shit,” he said, “They must’ve fallen out upstairs.”

“That’s weird,” James said, and took a drag.

“Well, hurry and go get ‘em before this guy stinks up the truck,” Gabe said.

Clyde bounded across the parking lot. His cigarettes weren’t in the apartment—they were in his pocket, the pack wilted with sweat. As soon as James found the money, though, Clyde knew he had to go back in alone, had to search out the dead guy’s stash.

Without his mask, the smell struck him like a slap. His eyes watered and his stomach dropped. Clyde recognized the wet, fruity smell of rotting food and dirty dishes, the tang of old sweat, and, underneath it, the death smell. He held his breath and clawed his way upstairs.

He started with the medicine cabinet, but the strongest thing in it was Tylenol PM. Under the sink, he dug through stacks of towels, packets of oatmeal soak, and cartons of Epsom salts. He kicked the wall and went back to the bedroom.

“Where?” he asked the empty room.

He knelt down and looked under the bed. There, he found a plastic container packed with prescription drugs. Jack pot.

Clyde took everything with warning labels. Some of the names he recognized, like Percocet, Xanax, and Seraquil. The ones he didn't know he took anyway, stuffing his socks and underwear, any available space he could find. He carried his cigarettes to seem casual, and lit one as soon as he stepped outside. Clyde strolled back to the truck, smoking in long drags. He slid in beside James, and did his best to seem tired instead of giddy.

“To Waffle House,” Clyde said.

“After we drop off handsome,” Gabe said.

“Sure,” Clyde said, but he'd forgotten all about the dead man. He was daydreaming of seared ham and warm syrup, of egg yolks breaking under the pressure of a fork.

Bass shook Clyde, and drums drowned out his heartbeat. He closed his eyes and gripped the beer bottle in his hand. So much sound made it a sin to move or breathe.

“Pretty sweet, right?!” James yelled, “I had the system on lay away for six months.”

Clyde opened his eyes and pointed down with his index finger. James adjusted the volume, but not by much.

“Awesome,” Clyde said.

“It's fucking sweet, right?” James asked, “It took a while to pay off, but it's totally worth it. You want to smoke?”

“Sure,” Clyde said, “Mind if I take a piss first?”

“No sir, I don't.”

Clyde put his beer on the coffee table and found the bathroom. The place was clean enough for a sorority girl. James had matching towels, a cobalt blue jar for Q-Tips, and an aromatherapy candle the size of a brick. No dust bunnies in the corners or scabs of toothpaste in the sink. Clyde opened the cabinet above the toilet. Neat stacks of soap, washcloths, and rolls of toilet paper lined its interior. He shut the cabinet and sat on the edge of the bathtub.

He counted the xanax twice, the way businessmen count money before a bank deposit. He put the bottle to the side and took off his t-shirt. He separated it from the yellowed undershirt he always wore. It stunk, and James wouldn't notice if he took it off. Clyde wrapped the other bottles in his undershirt and knotted them into a hobo's bundle. He did have to piss, and when he finished he stuffed the bundle into his jeans.

James had a joint poised and ready when Clyde returned.

"I've got a surprise for us," Clyde said.

"Oh?" James asked, and lit the joint.

"Yeah," Clyde said, and set the orange bottle of xanax on the coffee table.

He picked up his beer and took a long drink. James raised the bottle to read its label.

"Where'd you get this?" James asked.

"At the job," Clyde said, "It was under the bed."

"How much is this?"

"If we split it, we each get twenty-two."

"Fuck me," James said.

Clyde sat down next to him. On TV, Chuck Norris demonstrated a brand of exercise equipment.

"You know any buyers?" James said.

“For the xans?”

“Well, yeah, man. It’d take me half a year to use all that.”

James passed Clyde the joint. As he inhaled, he held his breath to keep from coughing. Then, he passed it back to James. Clyde changed the channel to a show with two white guys tromping through a wetland. They were old men, red in the face and shiny with sweat. They pointed to a green plant shaped like a vase.

James hit the joint in small tokes, trying to breathe the smoke in smoothly, but he coughed anyway. Clyde laughed and sipped his beer. He divided the xanax into two piles of twenty-two pills.

“You got a baggie?” Clyde said, “I’m gonna take the bottle.”

“Sure,” James said, and a clump of ash dropped onto his t-shirt.

“What are these guys doing tromping through the muck?” James asked.

“They’re living the dream, man,” Clyde said.

They laughed, and toasted with a half-bar of xanax and a swig of beer.

Clyde’s shoes were cinder blocks anchoring him to the sidewalk. Each step brought the threat of a fall. On Xanax, falling was easier than walking. He remembered going tubing on a Scouts trip to the Blanco River. Brilliant green algae covered the rocks on the river bed, and when he tried to walk back upstream, he slipped and tumbled back into the cold, rushing water.

If he fell here on Liberty Street, two and half blocks from the safety of his Mom’s house, he wouldn’t get up again. The yards here had automated sprinkler systems, and each plush, green patch of St. Augustine looked more and more inviting. The shadows of passing clouds mottled the groomed lawns. He leaned against a knotty live oak bearded with Spanish moss.

This yard, with its half-moon of rose bushes in full bloom and an asymmetrical koi pond, would make a great cemetery. He could lie down there under a pink granite headstone and disintegrate into the dirt.

A man in khaki shorts and a yellow polo shirt opened the front door and stepped onto the porch. He stuck his hands in his pockets and cleared his throat. He didn't say anything, but Clyde knew enough to keep moving. He turned left down an alley and right again onto his street.

From far down the block, an idiot could tell something wasn't right about his Mom's house. The grass stuck up in brown, wild tufts, and every kind of weed took root and flourished. A wrought-iron Christmas wreath, maroon with rust, hung from the mimosa tree. The mail box bulged with junk mail and bills with "Urgent" and "Open Immediately" printed on the envelopes. When Clyde opened the screen door, he saw a red flier marked "Final Notice" fluttering from the handle. He pulled it free of its rubber band, folded it in half, and slid it into his back pocket.

His Mom and Aunt both worked nights at the Mobil refinery, and when they came home they were exhausted and desperate for Advil. It must've been after ten o'clock because *The Price Is Right* blared in the living room. His Mom was four inches shorter than his Aunt, but as they sat on opposite ends of the couch with matching plates of food on their laps, the only obvious difference between them was their haircut. His Aunt preferred a crew-cut because it made finding a girlfriend in Beaumont easier. His Mom didn't want to date anybody, so she got a co-worker from the refinery to cut her hair whenever it grew out past her hard hat.

"Did they do the showcase showdown?" Clyde asked.

"Not yet," his Aunt said, "The first one's coming up."

"There's dinner on the stove if you're hungry," his Mom said.

On screen, a toned, dark-haired model wheeled a red and white popcorn machine out onto the stage. The contestants stared as she lifted her arm in front of the machine and smiled with perfect, white teeth.

“Who would want this crap?” Clyde asked.

“Carnies,” his Aunt said.

“A movie theater manager,” his Mom said.

“This last guy’s gonna bet one dollar,” Clyde said, “Watch.”

The contestant did bid one dollar, but lost out to a huge, nervous woman in a hand-painted t-shirt. She waddled up the stairs to the game show host and hugged him like they were family.

“These people,” Clyde said, “Ready to cry or shit themselves over a thirty-dollar lamp.”

“Popcorn machine,” his Aunt corrected, “And it was six-hundred dollars.”

Clyde groaned and walked down the hall, past three framed pictures of his family. In one, Clyde, his Mom, and his Dad posed before a backdrop of Maple trees and a dark blue pond. In the second, he and his Mom were dressed like bikers for Halloween. Last, there was a picture of him, his Mom, and his Aunt at the beach in Port Arthur. There were other pictures of his Dad, but Clyde destroyed them.

He wasn’t hungry, but he got a fork—probably clean—from the dishwasher and dug into the hamburger casserole congealing on the stove top. His Mom must’ve made it—everything she cooked needed salt. He sprinkled it liberally as she came in with her plate.

“Some of us have to limit our salt intake,” she said.

She turned on the faucet and water ran over her plate. She always bought the cheapest brand of dish soap, and it chapped her hands.

“Sorry,” he said.

Clyde’s Mom put her plate on the rack to dry and wiped her hands on her pants. She turned to face him.

“I saw that disconnection notice, Clyde,” she said.

He chewed his food longer than necessary. He wanted the silence between them to spread and harden into a frozen lake.

“You have one responsibility here, Clyde. *One*. I asked you to pay the gas bill, right?”

“Something came up,” he said.

“Well, that’s too bad,” she said, “Because I can’t afford another deposit if the gas gets shut off.”

“I know, I know.”

“So pay the bill!” she said.

Clyde gripped the fork in his hands until his knuckles turned greenish-white. He forced himself to breathe slowly and avoid looking at his mother.

“I’m not stupid,” he said.

“I know, but you sure act it sometimes,” she said.

He pushed her—hard—into the counter. She cringed and held her hand to her back. He knew her aging flesh would give way under his dry, hard knuckles. Clyde threw his fork at her chest, and it left a spot of yellow sauce on her shirt.

“Bitch,” he said.

“Pay it!” she said, following him to the garage apartment.

“This is my house,” she said, “You’ll be out on the street if you—,”

But Clyde had slammed the door and locked it, and nothing she said would open it up again.

When Clyde woke up, the sun had left a green and purple belt above the horizon. The phone rang. Clyde wanted to ignore it, but the caller wouldn't let him. When he answered, James was there, and the music and conversation in the background meant he was at a bar.

"Hey, what's up?" James asked.

"Where are you?"

"At Dirty Dog," James said, "You should come over."

"Should I?" Clyde asked.

"Definitely," James said, "There's these two smoking Betties up here, and they're looking for some candy."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. They paid cash for my stuff, and they say they're down for more."

"How much?" Clyde asked.

"One-ten, which works out to five bucks a pop."

"Sounds good to me," he said, "I'll be there in twenty."

"My man!" James said, and hung up.

Clyde showered and dressed. He didn't shave—his facial hair never grew in thick enough to shave. His undershirt, still knotted to hold the prescription bottles, kept its creases and wrinkles after Clyde untied it. He lined the orange, plastic containers up in order of increasing size until they resembled a xylophone. He wanted a girl whose name started with 'L' this time.

"Linda, or Lisa, or Lanie," he said, "Maybe even Lydia. Lydia's real nice."

He liked the way the names felt in his mouth when he said them, like the names of twisting rivers. He liked it so much he put all the bottles in his backpack and headed to the bar. Outside, the sky was purple-black in the center and orange along the horizon where the refineries gave off constant light and stench. The moon, yellow as a tooth, rose in the east. If he looked quickly, it seemed full, and its light cast shadows under the trees. As he stared, though, Clyde traced one slender edge missing from the right side.

He turned down the alley, and along a neighbor's privacy fence moonflowers bloomed in the night air. Moths spun in dizzy curves between them. Moonflowers didn't last—as soon as you pick them, the petals droop and fall in on each other until the whole thing shrinks down into a popped balloon. He picked one anyway, to see how long it took to die.

Beaumont had two kinds of bars: honky-tonks and college dives. Dirty Dog fell into the second category. Kids from Lamar University kept the place in business—the grimy wooden booths, leaky bathrooms, and shoe-sized roaches scared off everyone else. He heard the bar a block away. Clyde came through the back, past dumpsters in the park lot leaking a tiny, dark stream.

Even on slow nights, the bartenders took forever. They never made eye contact with Clyde. It might be ten minutes or half an hour before he got a beer. When he stepped up to the bar, the tattooed guy behind it turned to face the liquor bottles. Clyde lit a cigarette and waited. A pale guy in a baseball cap sent the cue ball knocking off the pool table and onto the floor. James laughed and leaned over slap the guy on the back. A blonde, chubby girl laughed with him and twirled a curl of her hair around her index finger. Beside her, a dark-haired girl with a blunt haircut exhaled a plume of cigarette smoke. The blonde girl smiled and grabbed James's

arm. He laughed with her, but the other girl didn't react. She shifted her weight and crossed her arms over her chest. Clyde liked how angry she looked.

He took a wide path to the pool table. Clyde tapped James on his right shoulder, and then stepped far to the left in their own private game.

"Aw, bro!" James said, and pulled him into a hug.

"This is Clyde," James said to the girls. The dark-haired one uncrossed her arms. She might have smiled.

"He's the guy?" she asked.

"Oh yeah, he's the guy!" James said.

Another song came on, and the blonde girl screamed and raised her arms.

"My song!" she said, and grabbed James, "Come dance with me."

James moved over to her, and she wrapped her arms around his waist. Clyde moved back to the wall, and the dark-haired girl walked over to stand by him. Her lipstick looked black.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"What's your favorite name?" she said.

Clyde smiled. She leaned close enough for him to smell her sweat, her perfume, and how many drinks she'd had tonight.

"Lydia," he said.

"That's funny," she said, "My name's Lydia."

She wore a silver ring made from a spoon, and her hand felt hot when he held it in his. A birthmark covered part of her forearm like a red lake plotted on a map.

"Lydia," he said, "You want a drink?"

"Why not," she said, and went with him to the bar.

She hooked her arm in his, and Clyde stumbled a little. He swallowed hard, so thirsty he couldn't speak. With a pretty lady on his arm, the bartender stepped right up to take their order.

"Two lemon drops," she said, "Put it on Anderson."

Clyde took the shot, and his nose started to run. Lydia put her hand on his chest, and her thumb moved back and forth over his collarbone. She stood on tip-toe to speak into his ear. If she'd asked him to poke out his eyes with the tiny plastic swords on the bar, he would've done it.

"So, you have something for sale?" she asked.

"Sure do," he said.

Clyde wrapped his arm around her like they were friends sharing a cozy blanket.

His Aunt Eva nudged him with her boot until he opened his eyes.

"Afternoon," she said, "Your foot's covered in fire ants."

The sun threw fierce rays of light down at him. Clyde couldn't focus his eyes. Sweat beaded his forehead and upper lip. Drops of it trickled down his scalp. His mouth watered, and he pulled himself upright to vomit. He shivered, and a mustard yellow stream poured out of him onto his jeans and sneakers.

"I guess that's one way to get them off," Aunt Eva said, "Stand up and take your clothes off."

He fell three times before he managed to stand. He pressed his forehead against the flaky, bloated siding along the rear of the house. He closed his eyes to keep the ground steady under him. Aunt Eva's hands unhooked his belt and removed his pants. She took his shoes off one at a time.

"Okay," she said, "One more time with your feet."

Clyde lifted his left foot and fell to the right.

“My God, kid, what’d you do last night?” she said.

He wanted to say, “I don’t know,” but what came out sounded more like, “Na nan an ah.”

“Is that right?” she said.

His aunt pulled off everything except his boxers. She sprayed him with the water hose until he could stand up, and then she carried him inside and put him in bed. He slept for fourteen hours, and woke up the next morning when his mom and Aunt Eva came home from work.

“Where’s my backpack?” Clyde asked.

“I didn’t see it,” Aunt Eva said.

“Fuck,” Clyde said.

Aunt Eva and his mom looked at each other. Mom opened the silverware drawer and took out a stack of money. She set it on the counter in front of him.

“Where’d it come from?” she asked.

He had no idea, but didn’t want to say so.

“Saw a guy who owed me money,” Clyde said.

“Who owed you five-hundred dollars, Clyde?”

“This guy,” he said, “You don’t know him.”

His mother slapped the counter, and his aunt spread her legs and crossed her arms over her chest.

“What difference does it make?” Clyde said, “I got it, so now you can pay the gas bill and get off my back.”

“Watch it,” his aunt said, “You dish this bullshit out to us, but the cops might not think it’s so funny.”

They waited for an explosion. Clyde wasn't up for it, though—he had a headache and wanted a xanax.

“Sorry, guys,” he said, “You know I love you.”

He relied on this phrase only as a last resort.

Clyde looked for four days, but he never found his backpack. James didn't remember any more than Clyde, and treated the incident like a lost sweatshirt that would turn up eventually. After all, James said, Clyde had the money, right? No harm, no foul.

Clyde didn't go out after work. He sulked at home and tried to sort through his memory. In movies, amnesia was a fog that disappeared once it served its purpose. When Clyde concentrated, his memory winked out, replaced by a fuzzy, black hole like a turned-off television.

Work was work. Gabe came to pick him up in the truck, and he did his best to stay quiet and be polite. He had two nights off before Gabe called him about another job. The place was an old, yellow house split into apartments. The one Gabe led them to didn't have a lock. Gabe jiggled the handle, and the door swung open. Somewhere inside, a television churned out the news.

“Okay,” Gabe said, “There are three inside. We'll do them one at a time.”

Clyde and James followed Gabe into the apartment. It wasn't big, but it looked that way because of the absence of furniture. Plastic crates stood in for chairs in the front room. Sheets and aluminum foil covered all but one of the windows, and a portable stereo sat on a box in the living room.

“Looks like they're in the back,” Gabe said.

Gabe went in first and turned off the television. He stepped to the mattress and stood over the two bodies staring at the ceiling. James went to the other side, and Clyde waited in the doorway.

On the wall, propped against the television, was Clyde's backpack. He read and reread the button that said, 'Can't sleep. Clowns will eat me.' He bought that button during his first semester at college. His hands shook and sweat glazed his body. When he looked up, James and Gabe were stretching out the tape measure. They didn't know yet.

"Check the bathroom for me, kiddo," Gabe said.

Clyde swallowed and went to a half-closed doorway on the right wall of the bedroom. He pushed open the door and stepped inside. In the tub, tangled in a torn down shower curtain, was a dark-haired girl with a birthmark on her forearm. Her eyes were open and unseeing. The name floated up to him out his dark, broken memory.

"Lydia," he whispered, "Oh fuck."

A thousand police chases, culled from years spent watching television shows, surfaced in his mind. The criminals never made it. The cops got them with dogs, pepper spray, and helicopters. It ended the same way, no matter how smart the crooks were. Still, they ran. They ran because they saw the future coming and hoped to escape it, if only for a little while.

Clyde pulled the door shut as he came into the bedroom. Gabe and James busied themselves with the bodies on the mattress.

"One in the tub, boss," Gabe said.

Gabe nodded, but didn't look up.

"Okay," Gabe said.

"Want me to get the bags?" Clyde asked.

“Sure, kid, that’d be great,” Gabe said.

Gabe unzipped his hazmat suit and fished out his keys. He tossed them to Clyde, and hit the wall by mistake. The keys fell onto Clyde’s backpack.

“Lock it up when you’re done,” Gabe said, “There are crack-heads around here.”

Gabe didn’t notice when Clyde left with the keys and his backpack.

He stripped in the hallway and left his white suit, mask, and gloves on the doorstep.

Gabe would report him before long. New Orleans was his best bet. He gunned the engine and merged onto I-10 east. In the rearview, the refineries faded into grids of pipe and steam, and the road stretched out long and flat before him.

Hospitality

Lloyd spears the breast, a chunk the size of a Thanksgiving turkey. He uses both hands to lift it from the grill.

“Right there. You see it, Beth?” he says, and points at the liquid oozing from the meat.

“I see it,” I say.

“When it turns from red to clear, it’s ready,” he says.

Lloyd gives me the barbeque skewer. He leans over to kiss my mouth, but I turn my head so he gets my cheek.

“You smell like smoke,” I say.

Ordinarily, I’d scrunch up my nose and laugh, but I’m upset and don’t want to quit fighting yet.

“Love you, baby,” Lloyd says, and jogs back to our sad, sagging trailer.

Lloyd’s my husband, sort of. We never got married. He came home one day with a ring from Sears. I was seven months pregnant at the time with my daughter, Nikki. The ring wasn’t much, but it was enough to bind us together without the hassle of a priest and a dress that wouldn’t fit. My fingers are too fat for the ring now, so I wear it on a chain around my neck. I haven’t asked Lloyd for another ring, and he’d never think of it on his own. Sometimes, though, when I’m holding Nikki or my baby, Dean, they grab the chain. The ring jangles down to their tiny fingers and reminds me how different my life was before Lloyd. When I’m walking by a plate glass window and I don’t recognize my reflection, I remember life before all this.

I’m uncomfortable by the grill for two reasons. The smoke burns my eyes, and I’d rather go sit with my mother, sister, and the other women. They look pleasant in their picnic chairs, facing each other in a little half circle, talking, drinking iced tea out of mason jars and sharing a

pack of Virginia Slims. Beside them, I could braid Nikki's hair. She might fall asleep on my chest. I'd keep still, stroke her hair, and forget my thoughts.

The sun's half-way to the horizon, and the bare, black-armed trees leave criss-cross shadows on the new, green rye grass. Two of the daffodils I planted by the driveway sprouted. I want them to hurry and open their yellow faces. Then, I'd have something to admire while I hang clothes on the line. I want Lloyd to come and take this skewer from me so I can forget about where he got this meat. I want the guests to go home. Lloyd's taking his time, though. He lets the screen door slam behind him and strolls to where the other men stand huddled around the cooler. Men love ice chests. Lloyd pops a can of beer. I stare at him, hoping he'll look this way. He doesn't.

Over the voices of the guests, my baby, Dean, lets out a scream that scares the grackles from the trees. My mother's holding him, and she stands up as soon as he cries. Dean's only six months-old, and skinnier than Nikki was at his age. Everyone still seems charmed when he cries, but I know they'll be less sympathetic once he's three. I go to my mother and swap Dean for the skewer.

"Poor little Dean," she says, "Grammy loves you."

"He's ready for dinner," I say, and hold him to me.

"Need me to watch the food?" my mother asks.

"Please and thank you," I say.

I take Dean to the little back porch Lloyd built. It's warmer than usual for February, but a Texas spring changes as soon as you get comfortable. If this warm spell lasts, I might get the laundry done. The rickety porch swing creaks under my weight. I unbutton my dress and unzip my maternity bra. Dean quiets down the second my nipple reaches his mouth. He closes his

small brown eyes and falls into a trance as he nurses. He opens and closes his miniature hands the way kittens do when they suckle.

Not six feet from the back porch, a dark mound buzzes with iridescent flies. They circle over the bloody innards and black feathers. My legs stop pushing the swing. Lloyd knew I didn't want to see this. I told him to take everything far off into the woods, away from the house. Instead, the black feathers with their gray flecks, so elegant and royal, lie knotted up with the rest of my pet. Its long, dark legs with backwards knees, its three-toed feet, and its brown-ringed eyes with feathery eyelashes are in that pile. Everything I loved about it brought so low shrinks my chest and makes it hard to breathe. My vision blurs. I want to get up, find the shovel, and bury what's left of it. Once the daffodils bloom, I could lay them over its remains. But Dean's sucking lazily, nearly asleep, and the mother in me won't let the rest of my body move. He'd wake up.

Our animal guest showed up four days before the barbeque. A hateful, strong wind blew in and brought warm air. Little Dean had a tooth coming in, and I'd run out of baby Tylenol. He cried non-stop for four hours. I tried ice, pacifiers, even my mother's remedy of a rag with a dab of whiskey on it, but he wouldn't stop. Lloyd had the truck, and nobody answered when I called my sister's house. Dean's crying made Nikki cry, and soon I gave in out of frustration. I thought about calling 911. What would I say? They'd ask me what the emergency was, and the answer I had (my baby won't stop crying) didn't seem good enough.

I had to get out of the house. The wind and sun would dry a load of laundry, so I pulled the clothes out of the washer, piled them in a plastic hamper, and let my kids cry. The wind ripped the screen door out of my hand and slammed it against the trailer. Flecks of paint cracked

from the siding. My hair blew into my face. The wind took all the noise with it once I left the house. It was like being in the ocean, where the only sound is the water, and it's so constant it seems like silence. The wind made hanging clothes hard work, but I knew it would dry them, too. With the dryer broken and no money to fix it, I have to keep watch for bright, windy days.

I don't know how long it took me to hang the clothes, but when I turned around the biggest bird I'd ever seen stood in the yard. At the time, I thought it was an ostrich. I hadn't been to the zoo since seventh grade, and the only bird I'd seen that big was an ostrich. This one was darker, but I thought maybe it was a special breed, like those mix dogs they sell at the flea market off of I-20.

The bird didn't approach me. It watched me with its head cocked to one side, took a breath, and fluffed up its feathers. I held the plastic hamper in front of me in case the bird attacked, but it didn't. There was a tight, green pine cone on the ground, and I threw it at the bird, but the wind carried it wide of the bird. I thought maybe I could intimidate it – they say to do that if a mountain lion attacks.

“Hey, bird! Go on, now! Get!” I said, and held the hamper over my head.

For good measure, I jumped up and down. Even with the basket, the bird was a foot or two taller than me. It didn't seem scared so much as amused by my actions. It turned away and went to investigate the leaves under the pecan tree. I ran for the front door and locked it behind me, though how the giant bird would have opened it, I don't know.

Both the kids were still crying, but I didn't notice. I wrapped an ice cube in a rag, held it to Dean's gums, and, finally, he quieted down. Nikki fell asleep on the couch half-way through a peanut butter and banana sandwich. I let both of them sleep and got on the phone.

“Jean's catfish house,” my mother said when she answered.

“Mom, it’s me,” I said, “You’ll never believe what’s in my yard.”

I spent the rest of the day talking on the phone and looking out the window. By twilight, Nikki knew something exciting had happened. She ran from room to room in her underwear.

“Watch, Momma, watch!” she said, and threw herself onto the couch. Then, she jumped up, ran back to her room, turned around, and began the whole thing over again. I thought about spanking her, but gave up on it. Just after six, Lloyd’s truck pulled into the driveway. He got out and left the engine running. I opened the front door and called to him.

“Lloyd! Come inside!”

“Where is it?” he asked. He pulled a .22 rifle from the gun rack on the truck’s back glass. He left the headlights on and loaded the gun.

“I’m not sure,” I said.

“Well, let’s find it,” he said.

“Can’t we just leave it alone?”

Lloyd didn’t answer. He circled the house, and I followed behind him. Nikki’s voice, softer from outside, moved from her bedroom, down the hall, to the living room. The trailer reminded me of a broken train car, but when the kids laughed it felt familiar and cozy. We went around the house, but we didn’t see the bird. Lloyd pointed his gun at the ground, satisfied the bird had gone.

“Will you watch while I take the clothes off the line?” I asked.

He smiled and lit a cigarette. I felt stupid. The bird wasn’t there, and any minute Lloyd would start asking all kinds of questions. Was I drinking this morning? Did my sister come by and give me drugs? Maybe the bird had a leprechaun riding on its back? They were questions

meant to humble me, to show me this kind of thing happened to women who wanted attention. My heart sank when I thought of Lloyd telling this story to my family at Christmas. I moved the clothes pins quickly and laid the shirts, pants, and sheets across my left arm.

Lloyd leaned against the truck, and the barrel of his gun pointed at the dead grass. In the falling dark, the bird stepped into a square of light from the living room window. I held the clothes tight against my chest.

“Lloyd,” I whispered, and pointed at it.

He turned and raised his gun level at the animal. I closed my eyes and waited for the shot. I heard a click, then nothing. I opened my eyes, and saw Lloyd staring at the bird. The glow from the headlights glistened on the bird’s brown-black feathers. At the very least, I thought, Lloyd wouldn’t be able to ask me stupid questions, or at least not the same stupid questions.

“It’s an ostrich, right?” I asked.

“Nah, it ain’t,” he said, “Color’s not right.”

“What else could it be?”

“I believe it’s an emu,” he said.

“A what?”

“Emu. They raise ‘em for meat. A guy in Madisonville has five-hundred head,” he said.

“This thing walked eighty miles?”

“It’s probably from around here,” he said, “I’ll give Arnie a call. Maybe he’s heard something.”

Lloyd unloaded his gun and killed the truck’s engine. He grabbed a bag of groceries from the floorboard and shut the door.

“Come on,” he said, and headed for the trailer. We walked right in front of the emu. It didn’t move except to turn its head. Lloyd acted so calm about it. Had I overreacted? Maybe I was one of those women who wanted attention. Maybe no one else would’ve thought twice about an emu in their yard.

When we came inside, Nikki latched onto Lloyd’s leg. He set the groceries on the counter and turned to pick her up. He lifted her high in the air and blew on her bare, pot-bellied stomach until she screamed with giggles. The noise woke Dean, and he started crying.

“You get the baby Tylenol?” I asked.

“In the bag, Beth,” Lloyd said.

“Dinner’s in the oven,” I said, and dug through the bag until I found the Tylenol. After a dropper-full, Dean didn’t cry for the rest of the night. The quiet felt so strange I went to check on him twice to be sure he was breathing. Both times his face reminded me of a porcelain doll, smooth and relaxed.

Lloyd ate dinner on the couch. The Mavericks were playing the Lakers, I think. I fed Nikki, gave her a bath, and put her to bed at eight-thirty. Lloyd fell asleep with the game on and an empty plate balanced on his lap. He didn’t move when I took it. He slept through the first half of the game while I did the dishes and packed his lunch for the next day. He snored in his soft, even rhythm. I’m so used to it that I can’t sleep when he’s gone. Lloyd’s still handsome. He’s twenty-nine, which is two years younger than me. His hands absorb oil and grease all day at work, so they always smell mechanical. Like his snoring, the smell’s so familiar to me that I prefer it to cologne.

With slow, quiet steps, I went and stood over him. My hand smoothed the hair falling over his forehead, and Lloyd opened his eyes.

“Mhmm,” he said, “Kids asleep?”

“Yeah,” I said, “What’d Arnie say?”

“Said it’s an emu. Guy in town has some. Might be his,” he said.

Lloyd shifted his weight and put his hand on the back of my knee.

“You coming to bed?” I asked.

His hand slid up my leg with practiced desire instead of impatience.

“Soon as the game’s over,” Lloyd said.

I turned off the lights and got ready for bed. In the bathroom, I looked out the tiny window. The bird was invisible in the dark. The metal siding outside rattled in the wind, and I listened to it until I fell asleep. My dreams frightened me awake with visions of rustling feathers, and when Dean started crying I was glad for an excuse to get out of bed.

I wanted to show the emu to someone, but my sister, Leda, didn’t answer the phone. She was the only person who might enjoy the bird. Leda’s smarter and prettier than I am. Anytime I can entertain her, I’m happy. She spends her time sleeping around, getting beat up, and paying bills for grown men. When she didn’t answer the phone, I worried about her, but she’s twenty-seven. What can I do about it? To take my mind off of Leda, I went to find the emu. I took half a loaf of stale bread with me. Ducks and geese like bread. How different could an emu be?

The wind blew itself out overnight. Clouds stretched themselves into a high, lacy tablecloth over the sky. Two gray cat squirrels barked at me from the pecan tree. They ran down a limb and stood up on their hind legs to reveal their cream-colored bellies. Leaves carpeted the yard, crunching under my sneakers as I walked around the house. Every minute or so, I yelled for the emu. Our house is ten miles from anywhere, so other than a few birds or a

sleepy skunk, I didn't disturb anyone. The bushes and briars were still when I stopped walking – no rustling or bird songs broke the silence.

I gave up and went to the front of the trailer. We had picnic chairs leaning against the front porch, and the air was bright and warm, so I took one to the middle of the yard. I set it down in a patch of sunlight. A wood spider that made his home on the chair spun crazily on a clear line. Its fat, brown body dangled and its striped legs tried to find a better anchor. I pulled off my sandal and batted the spider to the ground, where it scurried away. I hate killing bugs with open-toed shoes, so I let it escape.

From the yard, I heard Nikki talking to the TV. She might not notice I was gone for another fifteen minutes. A squirrel climbed down the trunk of the pecan tree and stared at me. It crept forward, stopped, and came forward again. I took out a piece of stale bread, tore off a corner, and threw it. It landed in front of the squirrel. He walked up to it and bent to smell it. Satisfied, he grabbed the bread with his small, dark hands and shoved it into its mouth.

I threw another piece, this one a little closer to me. He crept up to it and swallowed it whole. I threw another piece, but the squirrel turned and ran up the tree trunk. I turned, and there was the emu.

“Were you hungry?” I asked, and tossed it the remaining bread. The emu was less careful than the squirrel – it grabbed the bread, raised its head, and swallowed with two jerks of its long neck. I took out another slice of bread, and the emu ate it from my hand. I'd never been this close to such a big, strange animal, and it thrilled me.

The emu bent its knees backwards and sat down. I dumped the rest of the bread onto the ground. The emu ate quickly for an animal with no hands. If the emu entered a pie-eating

contest, I'd put money on it. Each time it lifted its head to swallow, the sun caught its feathers. They glinted yellow, purple, and turquoise all at once, like gasoline spreading over a puddle.

When the emu finished the bread, it rooted through the grass for crumbs. There weren't any, so it turned its head to nibble its feathers.

"Why would you come stay with us?" I asked.

The emu's head bobbed as it preened. The skin around its eyes had the silver-blue glitter of a waitress's eye shadow. It devoted more attention to grooming than I did to making dinner, braiding Nikki's hair, or fucking Lloyd. I envied its dedication.

"I hope you stay," I said.

The emu turned its round, brown eyes on me, and they seemed to understand. I wanted to touch it, to find out how its feathers felt, but I was afraid I'd scare it away.

It was Thursday. Lloyd likes to fuck on Thursdays. It helps him relax and get up for work on Friday. Otherwise, he'd sleep through his alarm clock or call in sick to Arnie's body shop. Some Thursdays I feel like it, some Thursdays I don't, but I always give in when he kisses my neck, then my ear, working his way around to my mouth.

That day, he held out for eight minutes, which was long enough for me to enjoy it. I put on my t-shirt after we finished and pressed my head against Lloyd's chest. His heartbeat slowed, and he wrapped his arm around me.

"Better?" I asked.

"Much," he said, "What about you?"

"I always feel better," I said.

His chest was pale, almost hairless, and very different from his tanned, oil-stained arms.

“I asked Arnie about the emu,” Lloyd said.

“What’d he say?”

“He said you clean it like a deer. The meat’s tender, and ideal for grilling,” he said.

I propped my chin on his chest and looked at him.

“So?” I said. Lloyd shrugged.

“Arnie’s gonna come help me dress it after work tomorrow. We can have company over on Saturday. Get some beer, some charcoal, and we’ll be eating for days...”

“You’re going to kill it?!” I asked. I sat up and moved away from Lloyd.

“Well, yeah,” he said, “Why not?”

“It hasn’t done anything. It’s not in the way,” I said, “What if someone’s looking for it?”

“Why are you upset about this, baby?”

“Because it doesn’t make sense, Goddammit!” I said.

Lloyd leaned forward and held his arms out. He wanted me to lie down beside him and be quiet. I couldn’t do that.

“Please don’t do it, Lloyd. For me,” I said.

“Do you want to keep it? Like a pet?” he asked, “We don’t have room for that, Beth. Where are we gonna get money to build a pen or to feed it?”

“Can’t we just leave it alone?”

“Well, it came here. If it leaves, fine. But if it stays, we’re taking him,” Lloyd said.

I took the comforter and a pillow to the living room to sleep on the couch. Of course, Lloyd was wrong. He’d come in later, kneel down by the couch, and admit it. He’d say thanks for what I do to make our lives work, for what I’d given up for him, and for the kids. Then, I’d forgive him. We could pawn my too-small ring and build an emu pen. Nikki would run in, and

Dean would take his first steps, and my life would be better and easier to bear. None of this happened, though. Soon, Lloyd's snores echoed through the house.

Dean's tooth bothered him again the next day, and Nikki wanted to watch and rewatch *Sleeping Beauty* every hour and a half. Dean didn't cry as much, but he wouldn't take his bottle. I tried twice to feed him before he finally drank a few ounces of formula. Nikki spent the morning dancing through the house in two of my old night gowns, one blue and one pink. She sang along with the movie. By lunch, she'd watched the movie three times. If I had money to buy more movies for her, I'd have taken the cassette outside and buried it in the yard just to escape the songs. Dean slept once I got him to nurse a little, and by then *Sesame Street* was on, so Nikki gave up *Sleeping Beauty*.

"Mommy's going outside," I said, "Come get me if Dean wakes up, okay?"

"Okay," she said, "Big Bird has a teddy bear like mine."

"Yes, he does," I said, "Someone must love him."

"I love him," Nikki said.

It was chilly outside. I only had on my housedress and slippers. The emu wasn't in the front yard, so I ran around to the back of the house, calling for it. When it wasn't there, I ran back to the front. I kept going like that, around and around, screaming for the animal. As soon as I got to the backyard, I thought I heard it in the front, and when I got to the front it wasn't there but in the back.

In my hurry, I ran into a stump and fell face first into the leaves. It happened so fast my arms didn't break my fall. I laid there, breathing ragged through my mouth. The musty, brown smell of dead leaves and dirt surrounded me. My shin throbbed where I hit the stump, and I felt

a rising bump that would become a bruise. I pushed myself up and picked a leaf out of my hair. My shin was red and swollen, but not bleeding. The pain surprised me as I dug a chunk of bark out of my skin. A bead of blood rose up through the skin.

I stood up and hobbled to the swing set my mother bought for Nikki. The swings are tiny, plastic squares suspended on skinny chains, and the warning sticker advises it shouldn't be used by persons over one-hundred pounds. That definitely included me, but I squatted down on a swing and waited for the set to collapse. It groaned under my weight, but didn't break. The sun cast shadows through the bare trees. On the leafy ground, the dark lines became crooked snakes sliding off to the pasture. A red-breasted robin fluttered down onto the slide. It hopped twice, chirped, and took off again.

Something rustled behind the house, and the emu came out toward me. It walked slowly, stretching its head forward like a horse who knows its master has a sugar cube. My leg throbbed, but I didn't care. The emu might bite me or attack. It might have a terrible disease—maybe emu carried rabies like bats and coyotes. I didn't know. What if it bit Nikki or Dean?

The emu turned its head so it could see me with both eyes. Its legs were strong, brown, and scaly. The wind rustled the leaves, and the emu narrowed its eyes. It circled around the swing set and sat down. I reached out my hand, and the emu sniffed my open palm. It wanted food. When it didn't find any, the emu took my thumb in its beak. It didn't bite me—it was more like the emu wanted to shake my hand, but didn't have the required equipment. The emu's tongue flicked against my thumb, and then it let me go.

“You have to leave,” I said.

The emu searched through the leaves for bugs and fallen pecans.

“Please understand,” I said, “Lloyd won't let you stay.”

The emu found a pecan and raised its head to swallow it. The bird was calm, happy sitting in the sun with me, but Lloyd would come home in a few hours. It had to disappear before then.

“Go on, now,” I said, and stood up.

I leaned against the swing set and waved my right arms over my head.

“Go on, now! Get!” I yelled.

The emu got up and watched me.

“You have to go!” I said, “Now, get! Get out of here!”

The emu didn’t understand, so I hopped forward and pushed it. The bird’s body was warm and muscular under its feathers, but it didn’t budge. I tried again, and the emu stepped back. My slippers shifted on the leaves and I fell. The emu cocked its head and leaned over me. An endless blue sky spread behind its darkly feathered head. I threw a handful of leaves at it.

“Please go!” I said, “Please go away.”

The emu turned away when Nikki opened the front door.

“Mommy?” she said, “Dean’s crying again.”

“Okay, baby,” I said, and limped back to the house.

“Why are you crying, Mommy?” she said, “Are you hurt?”

I hugged her and carried her inside.

“Yes, baby,” I said, “But it’s my own fault.”

I’m not someone who prays, but I talked out loud to the empty kitchen while I cooked dinner. Each time the meat tenderizer slammed down on the pork chops that night, I thought

please leave, please leave, over and over. Once dinner was in the oven, I sat on the front porch and waited for Lloyd.

Our trailer sits on top of a hill down a long, gravel road. No one drives down it but us, not even the mail man. You can see cars coming long before they arrive. Dusk painted the sky a deep blue-green, and a bone white half-moon rose over the pasture. Far off, the Masterson's dairy cows lowed, each waiting their turn in the stall.

The emu wasn't around. Maybe if Lloyd couldn't find it, he'd give up. He worked all day, so if I got him in front of the TV and gave him dinner, he might forget the whole thing. I hoped so, anyway.

The sky was blue-black when two sets of headlights turned down the road toward the trailer. Lloyd's truck pulled in first, and behind him was Arnie, his boss and fishing buddy. I like Arnie, but that night I was ready to kill him with a cast-iron skillet. They left their headlights on and got out.

"I think it left," I said, and walked over to them.

"Aw, damn!" Arnie said, "I was looking forward to a barbecue. Your deviled eggs are always the best, Beth."

Some other day, I'd play the pleasant housewife and thank Arnie for the compliment. He could stay for dinner, even smoke inside if he wanted.

"That's too bad," I said, "I can make some anyway."

"Listen!" Lloyd said.

From the brush across the road, the emu stepped out onto the gravel. Its feathers reflected the moonlight.

"There he is," Arnie said.

He reached through the door of his truck and took out a rifle. Lloyd followed suit, and soon both were ready to fire. My stomach turned over and my mouth went dry.

The last time I ran was in high school, but I ran that night. I shook my arms and screamed like one possessed. The emu didn't run—it watched me cry until Lloyd dragged me back into the yard.

“Leave it alone!” I said.

Lloyd made me sit down on the porch steps. My breath came too fast. I'd never cried so hard in front of Lloyd, not when I was in labor or when our dog Biscuit got run over. His expression made me feel like something so complicated it wasn't worth trying to understand.

“Baby,” he said, “What's going on here? Talk to me.”

But I couldn't. When I tried, my words broke into sobs that didn't make sense.

“Jesus,” Arnie said, “If it was a stray kitten, maybe, but this...”

Lloyd stroked my hair and rubbed my shoulder. He took on the same voice he used to read Nikki a story, but they all have happy endings.

“Go inside,” he said, “You know I'm right.”

“Lloyd—,” I began.

“It's for the best, Beth,” Arnie said.

“It really is,” Lloyd said.

It wouldn't help to fight with them. I could throw myself at the emu or tie myself to it with a rope, but in the end I'd have to go inside—I'd have to give up and go back to my life, which was taking care of Lloyd and the kids. Even if I convinced him not to do it tonight, he could wait for days until I dropped my guard. Snot ran from my nose, and I wiped it on the sleeve of my house dress. My leg hurt, but I limped back to the emu. It stepped over to me, and

I held out my hand for it to smell. Its breath tickled my palm. The emu shifted its three-toed feet. The country music station on Arnie's radio filled the yard with the twang of steel guitars. It was a song I didn't like.

"I'm so sorry," I said.

The emu bent its head to pick at the gravel. I sunk my hand deep into its feathers and felt the warmth of its body again.

"Wait until I'm inside," I said, and Lloyd nodded.

I crossed the yard alone. Through the open door, a square of the living room glowed. Nikki sat on the couch, swinging her legs and picking her nose. She wouldn't remember the emu in a month or two. She waved to me when I climbed the porch steps. She's such a happy, good little girl, really.

I waved to her and touched the door handle. Behind me, two shots cracked the night open. Somewhere, a dog started barking. It was over. I opened the door and went inside, where Nikki wanted me to explain the sound to her.

The Lion Tamer

We're the new people in church. Dad speaks for us. I smile when he mentions me, but keep my mouth shut. Dad prefers talking about my brother, Adam, the tan, lithe state wrestling champion.

"Ought to earn him a scholarship next year," Dad says to a middle-aged man sitting behind us.

"So long as he stays out of trouble, eh, Champ?" Dad says.

Adam, or Champ, as Dad calls him, sits beside me in the pew. Dad stands next to him: square glasses, honest haircut, a modest gut bulging over the waistband of his slacks. Dad looks like the middle-aged man behind us, like most of the middle-aged men in this sanctuary. His girlfriend, Matilda, unwraps a peppermint and pops it in her pink, lipsticked mouth. She grabs my elbow and pulls me to her. The bracelets around her wrist jingle when she cups her hand to my ear; she breathes peppermint and stale cigarette smoke onto my face.

"These are Southern Baptists, May," she says, "Cross your legs at the ankles or they'll think you're cheap."

I clench my legs together, but don't move them.

"It's the fifth church this month," I say, "They're all the same."

Matilda smiles at me with the ferocity of a pageant queen.

"Not to me," she whispers, "My mother was Southern Baptist."

I stare at my shoes and fold my arms. Dad slaps Champ on the back, squeezes his knee, and says something to Matilda. Champ jabs a finger in my ribs.

"All this time, I thought her mother was a golden retriever," he whispers.

People trickle into the sanctuary in twos and threes. A gray-haired woman shaped like a refrigerator waddles past us with a walker, and Champ elbows me.

“Check it,” he says.

Champ points to the black, ragged slip drooping below the hem of her housedress. The old woman climbs into the pew in front of us, towing an oxygen tank behind her. She smiles at us, watery-eyed. The plastic tube strung over her ears snakes down to her nose.

“Welcome,” she says.

Her neck and arms are spotted brown like a ripe banana. Matilda shakes the old woman’s hand too hard when she introduces herself. I don’t get her enthusiasm about church. Dad and Champ probably don’t get it, either. She and Dad met six months ago, and now she keeps a toothbrush at our house. Dad never drug us off to church before Matilda came around.

The old woman turns from Matilda and waves to someone behind us. I turn and see her, tall on platform shoes, black satin draped over the curves of her body. Her figure’s more developed than mine, and totally at her command. I follow the line of her dress down the arch of her waist and the swell of her hips. Long, black hair hides her face, and she leaves a smear of lipstick on the old woman’s slack cheek when she slides into the pew beside her. The girl sits in front of Champ, but her dark eyes settle on me first. I’m nervous across from her, more than around the boys at school, but I don’t understand why.

“My grand-daughter should be about your age,” the old woman says, and points a thick, yellow fingernail at me.

The dark-haired girl grins. She taps a silver ring against the wooden pew.

“Do you have your license yet?” she asks. She bats her thickly-lined lashes, and I wonder if she recognizes my anxiety.

“No,” I say, “Just my permit.”

She nods and rests her hand on top of mine; I hope she leaves it there, at least for a little while.

“I’ve got mine, but no car,” she says, “I’m Tammy, by the way. My Dad’s Brother Charles, the pastor.”

Tammy takes a bag of cinnamon red-hots from her purse. She slips a few of them into her mouth. Tammy chews, and her wet, red mouth hypnotizes Champ. I clear my throat, blushing. Champ and I watch Tammy and breathe hard through our noses—she smiles like she enjoys it. She pours some red-hots into her palm and passes them to me.

“Thanks,” I say.

Her hand left the candy warm and moist. My tongue presses the small, sweet pebbles against the roof of my mouth and begins to tingle.

“Are you from here?” she asks, “Or just visiting?”

“Both, I guess. We’re sort of looking for a church,” I say.

“Hey!” Tammy says, “We should come here. I bet we’d get to be best friends.”

Tammy says “friends” in a thick, slow voice that reminds me of clover honey in a plastic bear. I nod, but don’t speak. She might notice my enthusiasm. I don’t know her at all, but Tammy fascinates me. How did she learn to move and speak with invisible purpose? Who taught her this, and could I learn it, too?

The pastor walks up four carpeted stairs to the pulpit and breathes into the microphone. The service begins, and Tammy turns around to face the altar.

“Welcome!” the pastor says with a speech impediment I’ve never heard.

Tammy runs her fingers through her hair, and I catch a strand as it falls. I think of spells, of an incantation to extract Tammy's magic. Down front, the pastor introduces the choir director, and a pack of robed men and women file into the sanctuary through a side door. They're all old and white. The choir director claps his hands to begin a verse. Matilda bounces her knee in time to the music, and Dad tries to follow the rhythm.

Champ takes a hymnal and prayer request card from the back of the pew. He slides a pen out of his pocket and scribbles a note for me.

Total fox.

I scribble a reply. Over the past month, Champ and I have learned to entertain ourselves in church.

I noticed. She talked to me.

Champ jots down something else. The choir director stomps his foot on "Pow'r." Pow'r in the Blood.

So? You wouldn't know what to do with her.

Champ's gotten the pen sweaty with his athletic hands.

I'll figure it out. She doesn't look shy about asking for what she wants.

The choir director raises his arms and everyone stands for the last verse. Tammy leans on one leg, hair as black and smooth as her dress spread over her neck and shoulders. The pastor leads a prayer and my eyes creep over the slow curves of his daughter's ass. Amen.

The congregation sits, and the church deacons pass around the offering plates. We drop our red Oak Grove Baptist "Visitor" cards in with the bills. The pastor opens his Bible and speaks into the microphone, red-faced and thin-lipped, *not* like Tammy. Even from twenty feet away, perspiration gleams on his mostly-bald head. Champ writes down another message.

What if what she wants isn't you?

I don't write back, but read and re-read the message. I twirl the strand of Tammy's hair around my finger. Champ punches my leg, one knuckle pushed forward to make the best bruise possible. I yelp, and Dad reaches over to take the pen from Champ and the card from me. He shoves both of them into the pocket of his jacket, pulls a Bible from the back of the pew, and then shoves it toward me. The thought of the card in Dad's possession bothers me. He doesn't care enough to read the note, I know, but it's about Tammy, and I want to protect it.

Instead, I open the Bible to *Ephesians*. Tammy's hair spills over the back of the pew in an inky waterfall. With the Bible in my lap, I lean forward. Tammy's hair is so close. I lick my lips. Champ bites his fingernails, staring across the sanctuary at a sleepy old man. Dad nods his head in response to the pastor's message. Matilda crosses and uncrosses her legs. My fingers shake, but I run two of them down a curl of Tammy's hair, trying to be gentle. Nothing could be softer. The curl is silky, shiny black, the way the satin must feel on her skin. Tammy sighs, and I jerk my hand back like I touched a stove.

The pastor raises his arms and everyone stands for the invitational. The choir sways back and forth with the hymn; two ancient women howl in the first row, trying to out-sing each other. The tall, pink-haired one with a yam face screeches with surprising strength. The pastor walks to the altar and clenches his fists. He closes his eyes.

"Oh, but come home!" he bellows. I take a long look at Tammy's hips; do they look like this every Sunday? She tosses her hair and glances back at me. I always thought of Champ as strong, but watching Tammy, I know her body's disciplined in a way that his isn't. I try to swallow, but my tongue feels too thick. Would Tammy lay her hands on my bony legs and teach me to walk like she walks? Would she put her mouth over mine and teach me to kiss?

My heart's an angry drum as I stumble over Champ, Dad, and Matilda to the aisle. Dad lifts an arm, and Matilda raises her eyebrows, but I'm gone, alone, facing a long stretch of red carpet and rows of quiet Christians. The people on the ends of the pews stare at me as I head for the altar. The pastor looks down at me over his glasses and takes my hand. He pulls me to the first pew and we sit down together while the congregation sings.

The pastor leans forward, smiling. His hand is big and hot against my back. He brings me to him with gentle but persistent force. I squirm, afraid, and close my eyes. The pastor's breath smells antiseptic, flammable, like the mouthwash my seventh grade science teacher drank in class.

"I'm Brother Charles," he says, and squeezes my hand, "This won't be hard, child."

The smell of his mouth surrounds me, and I hold my breath.

"Do you accept the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal savior, having recognized your own imperfections and sinful nature, and repent of all your past transgressions with the full knowledge of the fate you will avoid because of our Almighty Father's great sacrifice of his holy son, and do you also pledge to resign you will to God's plan for your life and open the temple of your physical body to our Lord's heavenly ghost that you may be a living emblem of God's goodness?" he asks.

I clench my mouth and eyes shut, waiting for him to finish. A few seconds of silence prompt me to answer.

"Yes," I whisper.

Like a miracle, his heavy hand and stinking breath disappear. I gasp, filling my lungs with air, and open my eyes. Black spots swim in the air around the pastor. He faces the congregation and waves.

“Hallelujah, brothers and sisters! A young girl, moved to accept Christ. She’ll join in young Kyle Johnson’s baptism tonight,” he says.

All around me, in one voice, the people say, “Amen.”

The pastor smiles and says, “So from all of us a big . . .”

“WELCOME!” the crowd replies.

The pianist bursts into music and people shuffle out of the pews. I turn around and look for Tammy first and my family second. I scan the thinning congregation for Matilda’s red, frozen hair or Dad’s salt-n-pepper comb-over. They aren’t there, but Champ waves at me from the sanctuary doors, alone. I step toward him as a plump, ringed hand squeezes my shoulder.

A short, chubby woman with glasses stands beside me. The quarter-inch lenses make her pupils gigantic, black quarters.

“I’m Sister Patsy,” she says.

She breathes through her mouth. A fleshy hand with shiny coral fingernails shakes mine—it feels limp and cold.

“Would you mind stepping into the rectory with me for a few minutes?” she asks.

I follow her thick hips to a door beside the choir loft. Patsy opens it and turns on a light. The room she enters is richly furnished and free of dust. She points to a green wing-back chair and asks me to sit down. The door shuts, and Patsy wheels a leather office chair next to me.

“Such a spirited message this morning!” she says, and smiles.

I nod in agreement. Patsy walks behind a wooden desk covered with papers and digs through them. She looks at me with the bulbous eyes of a black goldfish.

“Maybe I didn’t introduce myself,” she says.

She turns a framed picture around and I see the family together: Charles, Patsy, and Tammy.

“I’m Brother Charles’ wife and the church secretary,” she says.

“And Tammy’s Mom, right?” I ask.

Maybe Tammy’s adopted. She looks nothing like her red-faced Dad or bubble-eyed Mom. Champ and I don’t resemble each other, either.

“Yes,” Patsy says, and sits in the leather chair.

Behind her, crouched in frozen anger, sits a stuffed mountain lion. Its ears are flat, mouth in a snarl, claws stretched out. Its glassy green eyes stare with no hate in them, though, no soul. Lines of muscle bulge under the lion’s skin, phony striations of his former power; his tongue appears shiny, wet-looking. Patsy gives me a pen and two forms. She looks back at the lion and shivers.

“Charles says he was lucky to shoot that thing in New Mexico, or maybe it was during his trip to Oregon. I can’t recall, but I remember I was pregnant,” she says.

“With Tammy?” I ask.

I write down my name and address on the forms. Patsy takes them and leans close to the paper.

“May Byron?” she says.

“Bryan,” I say, “May Bryan.”

“Bryan,” she says, “Bry-an. Yes, Tammy wasn’t due for another two months, but I went into labor while Charles was out of town.”

“That’s too bad,” I say.

“It was just awful,” she says, and raises her hands, “They did a hysterectomy right after the delivery. The doctors said I lost a lot of blood, but the Lord Jesus delivered me.”

She doesn’t seem crazy, but something about her sudden honesty unnerves me. No one in my family prizes this trait. Maybe that’s the difference between us.

“Tonight, you’ll take part in the same ritual as our Lord Jesus. He too was baptized, and we follow his example to symbolize repentance and rebirth,” she says.

Her cheeks flush and spit collects in the corners of her mouth. She has the expression of a girl my age at a rock concert.

“You’ll join Kyle Johnson tonight,” she says.

She leans toward me and holds out her hand. When I take it, she covers my hand with both of hers. She stares without interruption—a fleck of grit floats in her eye, magnified by the thick lenses of her glasses.

“I know when I was young, I had a very rebellious spirit,” she says.

She rubs and squeezes my unmoving hand.

“Sometimes, young people need help making the transition to righteous living. Let me show you how to ask God for strength,” she says, “I’ll lead a prayer.”

Does Tammy pray? I imagine her kneeling before her bed, a vision of devotion in a pink, eyelet gown, but the idea doesn’t fit her. I bow my head. Patsy clears her throat and puts a hand on the back of my neck.

“O Lord,” she says.

Her hand tightens against my neck. At first, her grip feels light, as though she’s holding a coke can. As the force behind her fingers increases, I can’t concentrate on the prayer. I grind

my teeth, and the muscles in my neck flex in resistance. Her grip becomes a terrible pinch, and I whimper.

“Amen,” she says.

She pulls her hand back to her lap. Patsy stands and shuffles over to open the door. I walk immediately to it. Before I can leave, she pulls me to her in a hug that’s too tight, almost desperate.

“Oh May,” she says.

Her mouth is close enough to my ear that I feel her breath against it.

“I hope the prayer put the love of Christ in your heart. Baptism at six o’clock tonight, and don’t forget to bring a change of clothes,” she says.

She lets me go and I step back into the sanctuary. Behind Patsy, the lion crouches in permanent anger, stuck, stuffed. Patsy closes the door and leaves me alone in the large, empty room. The aisle stretches on forever, and I trip in my hurry to get outside. No one’s there to see me fall.

Champ meets me at the door, and we walk to the car.

“Nice work, jerk,” he says, “Dad’s dragging us to that steak house he loves.”

I turn back to look at the church.

“What’s your problem?” he asks.

“You’ll never believe what’s in there,” I say.

Champ and I open opposite doors and slide into the back seat. Matilda’s nagging Dad about steak, butter, and cholesterol. Champ cocks an imaginary rifle at the back of her head, fires it, and grins.

* * *

Dad refuses to buy a separate steak. Matilda bitches because he's cheap, because he'll eat her steak and complain that it's overdone. Champ shoves a roll in his mouth, tears it in half, and chews.

"For Christ's sake, Matilda," Dad says.

Matilda glares at him, but doesn't say anything. She spreads her napkin across her lap and turns to me.

"May," she says, "We were surprised to see you join the church today."

My hands fold and unfold a napkin.

"Your father and I intended to pick a church as a family . . .," she says.

"You shouldn't have just run off like that," Dad grumbles, "You should have asked us about joining the church. FIRST."

"Why didn't you wait?" Matilda asks.

"The Spirit moved me," I say.

Champ chokes on iced tea, coughing, spitting.

"That's total bullshit!" he says.

Dad brings his fist down and rattles the water glasses.

"Champ, you do not speak that way in front of Matilda," he says.

Our waitress, who has the sparse teeth and sunken eyes of a crystal meth addict, reappears with our food. She twitches involuntarily, and snaps at Dad when he asks for an extra plate. Champ's lunch is a chunk of meat floating in a pool of blood. No one speaks. Dad, Matilda, and Champ replace conversation with chews and swallows. The skin on my chicken leg glistens. Bones crack and juices flow. I climb over Champ and out of the booth, running to the bathroom, suddenly unwell.

* * *

Dad and Matilda lock themselves in their bedroom; they say they're taking a nap. Ten minutes later, the whomp whomp of their bed against the wall resonates through the house. The nap is another part of the church ritual, one Dad didn't do with any of his other girlfriends. Before Matilda mentioned church, they never fucked while Champ and I were at home. Now, every Sunday, Matilda leads Dad to the back bedroom, grinning like a kid. Champ and I find ways to entertain ourselves.

He sits in front of the TV and gets drunk on whiskey from Dad's liquor cabinet. He passes out on the couch as sleep creeps over our suburb. I shut the door to my room behind me.

A button on my dress snags in my hair, taking four or five strands with it. I unhook my bra. My breasts don't seem impressive in the mirror. They're smaller than Tammy's. Maybe her nipples pink, like mine, even though she has dark hair. I want to stand like Tammy, to let my hair fall across my face like hers does. My body doesn't obey me, though, and I look skinny, ragged, and silly. Tammy knows what to do with her body. To me, that makes her a woman. I pull on a t-shirt and cotton shorts and crawl into bed. I wonder what dreams I might have: a red-faced pastor and his fish-eyed wife torn to pieces by a blood-thirsty mountain lion, and on its back sits Tammy, with me behind her. But I don't dream.

Champ runs in my room and drags me out of bed. I drop onto the carpet, and he pulls me another three feet. I howl, rubbing my carpet-burned legs.

"Asshole," I yell.

He slaps his elbow and falls on me, jabs me in the gut. I yell, kicking him, but he pins my arms and legs. He leans over me and puckers his lips. A shiny, silver glob of spit oozes out

and splats against my forehead. I scream, and he jumps up, squats, and farts. He walks out of the room, flipping me off.

“Matilda wants you to come to dinner. She made tuna casserole. Thanks to you, we have to go back to church soon,” he says.

I wipe my face, climb up, and shut the door. My closet doesn't have anything in it that Tammy would wear. I can't decide between two outfits, so I fold one up to wear after the baptism.

The kitchen smells like burnt cheese. Dad's reading the newspaper and sipping a cocktail. Matilda sets a rectangular slab of casserole on the table. She turns around, and Dad pinches her from behind. He wraps an arm around her waist and brings her back onto his lap. Matilda squeals as Dad probes the wrinkles of her neck with his graying moustache. Matilda looks at me through half-closed eyes.

“May, would you get the lemonade out of the fridge?” she asks.

I do, and Matilda takes the pitcher from me. A scream of music echoes through the house as Champ opens and shuts his door. He comes in shirtless, with a long strip of blue fabric tied around his forehead. Matilda returns to the table with a steaming plate of rolls and pours a glass of lemonade.

“I'm having a coke,” Champ says, and goes to the fridge.

“Me, too,” I say, and Matilda frowns.

“Ladies drink lemonade or water. Sodas are too sugary; you'll ruin your figure,” she says.

She places a glass of her gritty, saccharine lemonade by my plate. Champ sits down and pops open a coke.

“How was your nap, May?” Matilda asks.

“Not as good as yours, by the sound of it,” I say.

Matilda grabs Dad’s arm, and his eyes narrow when they fall on me. I don’t regret what I said, even though Dad makes me wait outside until they finish dinner. In the overturned flowerpot by my window, I hid a pack of Lucky Strikes two weeks ago. I slide one out and put the rest of the pack in my pocket. I use a chrome zippo stolen from Matilda’s purse to light my cigarette. Our porch is dirty, littered with lawn clippings and dead bugs, but I don’t care. A long line of ants march across the concrete slab to the corpse of a beetle. Champ opens the front door, somehow dressed, and sits down next to me. He reaches for my cigarette with two fingers, takes a drag, and passes it back to me.

“Matilda’s gonna rag on you for smoking as soon as we get in the car,” he says.

He exhales smoke through his nostrils in a long, dragon’s breath.

“Fuck her,” I say, and try to blow a smoke ring.

Champ nods and digs the heel of his shoe into the grass. He takes the lighter from me and taps it compulsively.

“Tammy’s pretty and all, but she’s a girl, May,” he says.

“Yeah?” I say.

“Oh,” he says, “You’re a lesbo?”

Champ holds two fingers in a ‘V’ over his mouth and wags his tongue through the slit between them.

“So what?” I say, “Is that such a big deal?”

Champ shrugs. I smash my cigarette on the concrete as the automatic garage door creaks into action.

“Lots of people think it is,” he says, “Who knows. Even if you’re a gross bitch, I’ll still talk to you when Dad and Matilda kick you out.”

“Aw,” I say, “How sweet.”

I lean forward and kiss Champ’s cheek. Dad and Matilda pull the car into the driveway. Champ punches my shoulder, and jogs around to the other side of the car. I open the door and get in beside him.

“Have you been smoking, May?” Matilda asks.

Dad backs into the street and shifts into drive. I ignore her and try to think of something interesting to say to Tammy.

We get to church twenty minutes early. Matilda looks through a magnifying glass at a copy of *Reader’s Digest* while Champ and I play tic-tac-toe. Five quiet, cold minutes pass in the empty sanctuary before an elderly couple joins us. The man waves to Dad. After another five minutes, Brother Charles comes in with Sister Patsy. He shakes everyone’s hand, and slaps Champ on the back. Sister Patsy hugs me into her fat.

“God bless, dear,” she says with mothball breath.

“Patsy will show you to the bathrooms,” Brother Charles says.

What if Tammy doesn’t show up? She might stay home tonight. Patsy’s ass shakes as I follow her out of the sanctuary. Patsy leads me down a hall lined with windows.

“Isn’t it glorious and beautiful?” she says.

Her voice booms in the narrow hallway, doubling back on us. Light blazes through the stained glass, and colors bleed around me in a spinning kaleidoscope. This narrow hall, bright and prismatic, reminds me that I’m faking everything. Sister Patsy doesn’t notice my

inattention, and opens a door to a small room with cushy, brown carpet. She points to a skinny set of stairs with the same carpet.

“Those go up to the baptistery,” she says, and pushes her glasses up her nose.

“This is the ladies’ room,” she says.

I follow her into a sea-green bathroom. Patsy goes to the sink and turns on the faucet. She smiles at me and holds her hand under the water.

“Hot water, of course, and Tammy’s hairdryer is in the cabinet behind you,” she says.

She turns off the water and walks toward me with her hands out, huge bubble eyes staring. Patsy holds my face in her hands. Long, powdered hairs dangle from her chin.

“I’m glad for you, sister,” she says.

She looks back over her shoulder as she holds the door open.

“The last stall is the biggest, and it has a shelf for your things. I’ll be back when it’s time,” she says.

The door closes behind her. The last stall is without a doubt the biggest. I stand on the toilet seat and look out a high window onto the church parking lot. There’s a two-tone Chevy pick-up parked in the last row, a small weedy patch of grass, and a back door on the opposite side of the building. Nothing beautiful; no Tammy.

I get down and hide my pack of Lucky Strikes under my extra clothes. The pianist strikes a chord two walls away. All my steps echo in this room. With nothing to do, I unbuckle my shoes and pull off my tights. The bathroom tile is cold under my feet, and I shiver, but my steps are quiet—no more echoes.

“Hello?”

A small, mouse-haired boy in jeans and a dress shirt speaks through the partially open door. He can't be more than six.

"Hi," I say.

He walks into the bathroom and stands a few feet away from me. His blue eyes widen in excitement.

"I got a racecar," he says.

He takes a miniature corvette out of his pocket and kneels on the floor. The little boy makes the sound of an engine revving.

"Looks nice," I say, and sit next to him.

"Here," he says, "You can catch it and roll it back to me."

He pushes the car across the tile to me, but it catches on a piece of gravel. I lean over, pick it up, and shoot it back to him.

"That was pretty good," he says, "What grade are you in?"

"I'm in high school," I say, "My name's May. Who are you?"

"I'm Kyle. I'm gonna get baptized today, you know."

"Really?" I say, "Me, too."

He nods like this is a situation he's encountered in the past.

"Watch this," he says, and stomps his sneaker against the tile.

Red lights blink through a piece of plastic in the heel.

"Pretty neat," I say.

"You have brothers and sisters?" he asks, and I nod yes.

“My brother, Jake,” Kyle says, “He got baptized two years ago, and I wanted to go with him, but my parents said I had to wait until Jesus spoke to my heart. Jesus has to speak to your heart, and then your heart tells your brain.”

“Oh,” I say, “You sure know a lot about it.”

“Yeah,” he says.

Patsy opens the door and looks down at us. Kyle stands up, and she grabs him up and kisses him. He giggles.

“You know better than to be in the ladies’ bathroom, Kyle,” Patsy says, “Come on, May, it’s time now.”

Barefoot, I follow Patsy. She wraps an arm around me and leads me to the stairs, now lit from above. Kyle waits behind me.

“You go up first, and you’ll see Brother Charles, and when you’re done Kyle will help you out, won’t you Kyle?” she asks.

He nods and sucks on his fingers. I climb the narrow stairs to the baptistery. Kyle clings to the banister, still holding the racecar with his right hand. At the top, I see a platform and stairs going down. There in the water, hand stretched out to me, is the pastor. The baptistery is the same sea-green as the bathroom, but smooth. Along its shiny jade lip, the corpses of crickets lay upside down, legs folded in death. Clumps of them float in the corners of the water like bits of pine bark. A single live cricket thrashes in the water, spinning wildly.

I step into the tepid water and it surrounds me. The stairs are slippery, and I have to take Brother’s Charles’ hand so I don’t fall. He pulls me to him and his robe swirls around my legs. My dress sways in the water. Brother Charles lifts his hand over my head.

“Hold your hands over your nose when I dip you back,” he says.

“Okay,” I say.

“Are you ready?” he asks.

“I think so,” I say.

The eyes of the congregation fall on me. I don't look out at them. Brother Charles prays over me, and I hold my nose closed. He pulls me back into the water by the neck, his knee digs in my back, and I choke on lukewarm water. I open my eyes and see his face, pink and blurry. He pulls me up, and my hair hangs over my eyes. I cough and spit. Amen.

I scoop the drowning cricket into my hand before I climb up the stairs. Kyle laughs as I drip onto the carpet. He steps down as I leave the baptistery. Brother Charles reaches for him, and he takes his hand. Wet footprints follow me down the stairs. At the bottom, holding a towel, is Tammy. She blows a bubble with her gum.

“Hey, girl,” Tammy says, and wraps the towel around my shoulders. She follows me to the bathroom and holds the door open for me.

“My Mom will be back to check on you in a bit, but she sent me in the mean time,” Tammy says.

I walk, dripping, to the last stall. Tammy steps around me and slaps her purse down on the shelf. She pulls out a pack of Camel Lights and peers into it. The cricket wriggles in my hand.

“Damn,” she says, and looks at me, “Do you have a cigarette I can bum?”

I reach under my socks and pull out my Lucky Strikes. I take out two and Tammy touches them with the flame of a plastic lighter. I keep one cigarette and pass the other to her. She reaches up to open the window, and as her dress creeps up her legs, a strawberry birthmark

peeks into view. I cough, and Tammy laughs, blowing smoke outside. I hold my hand out the window and drop the cricket.

“What’s that?” she asks.

“A cricket,” I say, “It was in the baptistery.”

“And you saved it?” she asks.

“All God’s creatures, right?”

“Anyway, thanks a million,” she says, “I get desperate for a smoke during church. You should change out of those wet clothes. Don’t mind me.”

My wrinkled fingers struggle with the buttons on my shirt. Tammy leans against the wall and smokes. I undo the first button, and my fingers start to shake.

“I’m not that into church, really,” she says, “I’d much rather be doing things my parents hate, you know?”

“Definitely,” I say.

“The more I come, the less they ask questions, right?” she says, “Do you need help with that? Your hands are shaking.”

Tammy holds her cigarette between her lips and steps closer to me. Her fingers move quickly over the buttons. When she finishes, she peels the wet shirt over my shoulders. It hits the ground with a slap. Tammy smiles and takes a drag on her cigarette. She holds it in her left hand, and slides the other inside my bra. My nipples are cold and stiff, and she squeezes one between her fingers. I suck in breath.

Tammy smiles and bends to kiss me. Her mouth is so soft and warm, and her tongue tastes like smoke. She presses me against the wall and her teeth tease my bottom lip. I touch her cheek, and she pulls away.

“Mmmm,” she says, “Yummy.”

She takes a last drag on her cigarette and drops it in the toilet.

“You should get dressed,” she says, “Maybe we can go get ice cream or something.”

“Sure,” I say.

“I’ll be waiting,” she says.

The door swings shut behind her. My hands pull off my wet bra and panties; all my clothes make a wet heap beside the toilet. I unfold my other outfit: sweater, skirt, long sock, and a bra with rosebuds on the fabric. Something isn’t there. Sweater, skirt, long socks, and a bra—no underwear.

I stand naked in the stall and don’t know what to do. With my toe, I pick up my soggy underwear. When I ring them out over the toilet, only a few drops of water fall into the bowl. I throw the wet underwear down again and pull my skirt up over my bare, skinny hips. Once everything’s on, I check myself in the mirror. My hair fights my hairbrush, but eventually surrenders. My clothes make a wet bundle inside the towel.

Outside, Tammy’s voice floats through the air. I stand on the toilet again to look through the window. Tammy stands there on the grass with a man. He’s at least ten years older than me, with the dark tan of someone who works outside. His hands move over her body, and the sounds she makes sound very adult. Tammy takes a step back from him and puts her hand on his chest. He says something too quiet to hear, and she laughs again.

“I think about it everyday,” she says.

“Let’s get out of here,” he says.

The man takes Tammy’s hand and with her to the parking lot. His hand slides down to rest on the plumpest part of her ass. They get into the two-tone Chevy and drive off into the

night. My breath comes in heaves, my face feels hot, and I cry. Champ repeats “Lesbo” over and over in my mind. I wait for God to speak to me, to send me comfort or condemnation. Nothing happens. I feel hollow, like any slight wind would pick me up and blow me out to sea where sharks would leave my clean, white bones on the sandy bottom.

It’s dark now. Without the sunlight, the stained-glass windows become blue-black bruises. Robes hang over the chairs in the choir room, abandoned by churchgoers anxious to get home. In the hall, Brother Charles and Patsy talk with Dad and Matilda. Champ spins the car keys around his index finger, waiting for them to finish.

“Let’s go,” I say, and we head for the parking lot. Nighttime insects hum in the twilight.

“Where’s your girl Tammy?” Champ asks.

“Gone,” I say, “And she’s not mine.”

Champ kicks a rock, and it skitters across the concrete. We walk to the car under a sky sprinkled with shattered diamonds.

Blood Relation

Mom made pork chops when she left. It was in the afternoon—the six o'clock news hadn't gotten to the weather yet. Mom didn't usually cook dinner—she worked, so most of the time Jim and I cooked spaghetti or made sandwiches. That day, Mom spent two hours in the kitchen. We watched her from the living room and waited for an explanation. She wore her hair up in a ponytail, and loose strands of it stuck to her sweaty neck as she stood over the stove. She mashed potatoes by hand, baked and buttered biscuits, and sliced jade-colored discs of cucumber into a salad. When Mom finished, she set the table and arranged the steaming dishes. She dabbed her face with a washcloth, and her make-up smeared over the fabric. Mom called Jim and I to the table, and we sat across from her.

“You see, kids, sometimes things don't work out,” She said, “No matter how much you want to quit, life goes on. It'll be hard, but at least we've got each other.”

The butter on the mashed potatoes melted into a rich, yellow pond. Mom put mushrooms on top of the pork chops; Jim and I always hated mushrooms. She wrote down a phone number and stuck it to the refrigerator.

“This is Rosa's number. Call me there if you need anything, okay?” Mom said.

“So, are you guys getting divorced?” Jim said.

“I think so,” Mom said.

“Why?” I asked.

Mom stared at the table. She inhaled like she was going to say something, but she didn't. Mom rubbed her temples, working in circles down her neck.

“Your father did something bad today,” she said, “And I've asked him to leave.”

“Why aren't we going with you?” Jim asked.

“You’re sixteen,” Mom said, “You’ll have to decide where you want to live. Your father wants to talk to you guys, and I don’t want to see him, so I’m going to stay at Rosa’s house.”

“What should we do?” I asked.

Mom sighed and shook her head. She offered no suggestions. While she packed an overnight bag, Jim jabbed the pork chops with a fork. On any other day, Dad would be home by now. At the door, Mom hugged us. She gave me an envelope with two-hundred dollars inside and drove away in her Toyota. Jim and I watched her leave through the open front door. Her right-turn signal flashed yellow for a moment, and then disappeared down a side street.

We threw away the food and ordered a pizza. I wanted to watch *Nova* and Jim wanted to watch a football game, so we compromised and picked a zombie movie. It was a Romero, I think, but not the one in the mall. Jim did his best zombie impression and spent twenty minutes lurching through the house to cheer me up. We ate the pizza and finished the movie, but Dad never came home. He didn’t call or answer his cell phone.

“Should we call Mom?” Jim asked.

“Let’s wait,” I said, “If he’s not back by midnight, we’ll call.”

We waited. Something happened that day, and the moment Dad’s car pulled into the driveway, we planned to interrogate him. He might come home drunk, stoned, or unemployed—maybe even all three.

“What if it’s drugs?” Jim said.

“I think it’s an affair,” I said, “You know how Dad flirts with that lady at the grocery store.”

“It’s gotta be big, right?”

“Big enough to make Mom leave,” I said.

Jim took two bottles of Dad’s Miller High Life out of the fridge. He opened them and gave one to me. I swallowed a mouthful and let the bottle to sweat until Jim finished it. We laid out the sofa bed to keep watch through the window. One of our neighbors shuffled onto her porch with a can of cat food. She opened it, and a fluffy, gray cat leapt from the roof, to the oak tree, and down to the ground. The cat stood on its hind legs and pawed the woman’s skirt. She shook the food into a bowl and bent to rub the cat’s ears. Its body rose to meet her touch.

“Maybe Mom will get us a dog,” Jim said, “You know, to make up for all the trauma, or whatever.”

“She’ll still hate animals.”

“I’m gonna ask anyway,” he said.

Midnight came, but when we called Mom the number didn’t work. Jim insisted we watch *Conan the Barbarian*, and since every other channel was an infomercial, I didn’t argue. I fell asleep after Arnold killed the snake and escaped with his buddy and the blonde. Snakes with yellow, diamond eyes slithered through my dreams.

We woke up early. A metal bar crisscrosses the underside of the sofa bed. My body fought against it all night. I made Jim to walk on my back; he pressed a long, narrow foot against my spine. He balanced his weight between the wall, his other foot, and my back. The pressure built until my joints popped like a sheet of compressed bubble wrap.

“Oh,” I said, “That’s better.”

“Happy to help,” Jim said.

The clock said seven-thirty. We should have been taking showers, packing lunches, and trudging off to school. The pencil yellow bus rumbled by our house, but we stayed home. If

disaster hit our family, somebody would give us an excuse. Jim called the number Mom left, and it rang this time, but nobody answered. We tried her at work, but she wasn't there yet. While we were on the phone, Dad unlocked the front door.

Other than camping trips, I'd never seen Dad unshaven. His gray whiskers aged him ten years. The hair on one side of his head laid flat against his skull, but the other side stuck out in wiry tufts. He went to the refrigerator and got a carton of orange juice. He unscrewed the cap and drank half the container in long gulps. When he finished, he sat down at the table. The pizza from the night before was still on the table.

"Why aren't you kids at school?" he said.

Jim and I joined him at the table. Jim opened the cardboard pizza box and tore off a hard, leftover slice.

"We were waiting for you," I said, "Nobody told us what happened."

"I see," Dad said.

He picked up the other slice of pizza and raised it to his mouth.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Dad lifted the juice carton, drank, and belched. He didn't say anything.

"We deserve to know," I said.

"I got arrested," he said.

"Why?" Jim asked.

"For something I got caught doing a long time ago," he said.

"Like what?" I said.

"It's none of your business," Dad said, "I promised your Mom it wouldn't happen again, and I fucked up. That's it."

“But--,” Jim said.

“End of discussion,” Dad said, “Get dressed. I’m taking you to school.”

We did what he said. On the way to school, I looked for evidence in Dad’s backseat. I found an empty soda bottle and an ATM receipt.

Jim and I don’t hang out during school. He’s more fun than my girlfriends—he doesn’t cry as much or agonize over his weight, but we have other friends so we won’t be outcasts like the Dillard triplets. They use code to talk to each other and nobody sits with them at lunch. Every afternoon when we tumble down from the bus, we’re chipper, relieved even, like we’ve taken off an itchy sweater. Jim gossips with me about the guys who really get laid and the ones who lie to save face. It makes me an insider and gives him a confidant.

That afternoon, the sun painted our suburb with rich, amber light. Acorns littered the sidewalk. They popped when we stepped on them. Halloween would come in a few weeks, and then our birthday, but the green, vigorous plants in the neighborhood didn’t care. They wouldn’t give up until a frost hit North Texas.

We headed for the park, and Jim slung his arm around my shoulder. He leaned close to me and did his best Yogi Bear impression.

“H-hey, h-hey, Booboo bear,” he said, “I got us a pic-a-nic basket.”

He unzipped his backpack and showed me a pint of whiskey.

“Ugh,” I said, and wrinkled my nose, “Where’d you get that?”

“Bought it from Jesse Milton.”

“Do you have anything to go with it?”

“Oh,” he said, and swapped his Yogi Bear for a Pepe Le Pew style French accent, “I see mademoiselle has a refined palette. May I suggest an herb salad?”

Jim took a joint out of his pocket and gave it to me. I grabbed him in a hug, but he pushed me away.

“Cut it out, Leah,” he said, “You’re such a sap.”

We walked down the grassy hill to the park, past the rusty monkey bars that predated the vivid, plastic slides and swing set the city added two years ago. We crossed the soccer field, following the trail through the weeds and briars to an abandoned house. It had the look of a sad woman—it burned years ago, and the soot around the broken windows reminded me of smudged mascara. Two live oaks, their trunks scarred and cracked, leaned their branches against the roof. The trees were dead, and someday they would fall onto the house and finish what the fire started. Bottled and cans were scattered through the yard. Kids did everything here—people from school got into fist fights, sprayed the walls with graffiti, smoked, drank, and never cleaned up.

The wide, gray honeycomb of a wasp nest hung from the porch. It bulged with white eggs, and adults with black wings and red bodies crawled over its surface. We ducked into the house. Sections of the wall were missing, either from the fire or from kids like us tearing through them. The furniture included a few broken lawn chairs and a stained mattress. I dusted off a chair, and Jim sat on the mattress.

He unzipped his backpack and took out the whiskey and a lighter. I lit the joint while he popped open a can of coke. He took two gulps from the can, and then added some whiskey. The wind rose in a sudden gust, and one of the trees creaked over the roof. Jim and I looked at each other.

“I hope we don’t die here,” I said.

“There are worse places to die,” he said, and swigged from the whiskey bottle. He coughed and passed me the bottle; I gave him the joint.

“You want a shotgun?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said.

Jim turned the joint around with the cherry in his mouth. A jet of smoke billowed from the tip, and I inhaled as long as I could. The smoke hurt, and I coughed until I fell out of the chair. My eyes watered, and Jim laughed. I saw him looking at my legs, at my skirt and the shadows beneath it, but I pretended not to know.

“Come sit by me,” Jim said.

This wasn't a good idea; I knew that, but I did it anyway. Jim hit the joint and exhaled through his nose. We smiled at each other, and he cupped my face in his right hand and kissed me. I should have been shocked and disgusted. I should've gotten up and run home, or slapped him. Nothing about it felt wrong, though—it was such an easy thing, our mouths together, tasting our sameness. I pulled away from him, but not because I wanted to stop.

“We shouldn't,” I said, “There are laws about this stuff.”

Jim rolled his eyes. He screwed the cap on the whiskey bottle and put it in his backpack.

“There are laws about lots of things, Leah,” he said, and raised the joint between his fingers.

“I knew you'd be like this,” Jim said.

“Like what?” I asked.

I pushed him back onto the mattress and held him down with my shoe.

“You stay right there,” I said.

Because I loved him, and because that place was sacred, I lifted my skirt, slid my panties down, and stood with my legs spread above him.

“We’re twins, right?” I said, “So it’s okay to look. It’s like a reflection.”

Jim licked his lips and stared at me. His breath came faster, and he held onto my knees. His face was strained and nervous, like he’ll break apart at any second.

“Leah,” he said, “I love you. Just you, and it hurts.”

I stepped back and pulled up my panties. Jim groaned and adjusted his cock.

“Come on,” I said, “Let’s see if we can get Mom on the phone.”

Jim poured another dollop of whiskey into the coke can and polished it off on the way home. By the time I had my key in the door, he was complaining about how much he needed to piss.

“Fuck it, I’m going here,” he said, and turned to the weedy flower bed.

“Nope,” I said, and pulled him inside.

He stumbled on the front steps, but I managed to get him in the bathroom. I unbuckled his belt and lifted the toilet seat.

“You’re the best,” he said.

“Don’t spray the floor,” I said.

I poured a glass of ice water and dialed the number on the fridge again. A man answered.

“Is Mrs. Greene there?” I asked.

“Who?” he said.

“Eleanor Greene?” I said, “She left this number with me. I’m her daughter.”

“Oh!” he said, “Lena’s daughter.”

“That’s right.”

“She went to the store with my wife, Rosa. I’ll tell her you called,” he said.

“Thanks.”

Something crashed in the bathroom, and when I opened the door Jim was standing in front of a stack of fallen towels and rolls of toilet paper. He’d knocked the cabinet over onto the floor.

“Sorry,” he said, “I was gonna put more toilet paper on the roll.”

“That’s okay,” I said, “Just pull your pants up.”

Under the mismatched towels and tiny soaps Mom stole from hotels, I found a VHS tape. The label along the side read *Bill & Ted’s*.

“Hey,” I said, “It’s that copy of *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure!*”

“Who hid it in here?” Jim said.

“I don’t know,” I said, “Maybe Mom and Dad got sick of it.”

“Fuck,” Jim said, “Let’s watch it.”

We put the movie in the VCR and flopped onto the couch. George Carlin came out in a space-age trench coat and explained the plot. Electric guitars wailed in the background, and the camera focused on a suburb a lot like ours, except this one was in California. Jim mis-quoted half the dialogue, but he was drunk.

At a quarter to six, Mom called. She apologized twice before she let me talk.

“I’m just so sorry, Leah,” she said, “I’m sorry I wasn’t here.”

“It’s okay, Mom,” I said, “But we need to know what’s going on.”

“It’s hard to explain,” she said.

“I get that, but Dad said he got arrested,” I said.

“That’s right,” she said, “I bailed him out this morning.”

She went quiet. A radio played somewhere on her end of the line.

“What’d he do, Mom?”

She cleared her throat.

“Solicitation,” she said.

Her voice cracked—she was crying.

“I don’t know what that means,” I said.

“Its prostitution,” she said, “Your father paid someone for sex.”

Mom blew her nose and sobbed into the receiver.

“What do we do, Mom?” I said, “I don’t know what to do.”

“Don’t worry, Leah,” she said, “There’s nothing you can do about it. Go to school, watch out for your brother, and be good.”

“What do I tell Jim?” I asked.

“You’ll know what to say,” she said, “You know him best. I love you, Leah.”

“Love you, too, Mom,” I said, and hung up the phone.

“Well?” Jim said.

“You won’t believe it,” I said.

The VCR whirred, and static striped the TV screen. Instead of Socrates and Napoleon cavorting through a mall in Southern California, the gray lines gave way to grainy shot of a room and a bed. The camera shifted, and Dad’s face appeared. He adjusted his glasses and stepped back from the camera. The bedspread and framed pictures suggested he was in a hotel room.

Dad stepped out of the frame. When he returned, a skinny woman with stringy hair and scabby, toothpick legs stood next to him. They spoke, but their voices were muffled and indistinct. The woman laughed.

“You got the money, baby, I’ll do all that,” she said.

They laughed and moved to the bed. Soon they were naked, moving together. Jim had porn like any teenage guy, and I’d seen plenty of sex scenes in movies, but this was different. Sweat collected on my upper lip and shame slumped my shoulders.

“Jesus Christ,” Jim said, “What is this?”

“Our father,” I said.

Behind us, the front door opened and closed as Dad came home.

We didn’t do anything wrong, but the moment Dad walked inside, I felt guilty. Jim and I stood there while the tape continued to play. When he saw it, Dad’s mouth fell open and he gasped. He pushed us aside and turned off the TV.

“Dad,” I said.

“This is private!” he said.

He yanked the tape out of the VCR and held it in front of me.

“Can’t you little bastards stay out of my stuff?! Huh?!” he said.

He stepped toward me, and I felt very, very small. He kept coming, and I backed up against the wall. Mom and Dad never spanked us, and the flush creeping over Dad’s face and neck, the tremor in his lower lip, and the force behind his voice were unfamiliar to me. When he raised the cassette again, he brought it down on my shoulder. The plastic cracked and I dropped to the floor.

“Please--,” I said.

“Stop it!” Jim said.

He took a step forward and punched Dad. Dad blinked twice, like he’d felt a raindrop strike his head. Jim hit him again, and Dad stumbled back onto the linoleum. Blood ran over his chin from a split lip. He touched his face and blood spotted his hand.

“Okay, then,” Dad said.

He stood up and stared at Jim.

“Don’t,” Jim said, “Don’t you move.”

Dad rushed him, and they fell down together in a struggling heap. Jim got on top, and Dad hit him in the chest. The wind rushed out of Jim. He raised his fist and punched Dad once more. Dad’s body went slack against the floor.

We left him there. Jim brought me a wet washcloth because I was crying and rubbed my back until I stopped. I leaned against him and breathed in his sweaty, spicy smell. I pulled off his shirt and saw the light blue marks on his chest. Tomorrow they would become bruises.

“Does it hurt?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said, “But it’s okay.”

“What are we gonna do?”

Jim shrugged. He locked his bedroom door and brought a pack of cigarettes from his desk. We sat on the floor and watched the sun drop to the horizon. Jim opened the window, and we shared a cigarette. As it met a ridge of low clouds, wide, golden shafts of light broke across the sky.

“Nobody’s going to help us, are they?” I asked.

“We could call Mom,” he said.

“And tell her what? That we found a tape and got in a fist fight with Dad?”

He didn't say anything, exhaling through his nose. I took the cigarette from him.

“We've got each other,” Jim said.

“Yeah,” I said, “You've got me.”

Jim's brown eyes drank me up, and I bent to kiss the blue mark on his chest. Jim kissed me then, but not the way other boys kissed, ramming their tongues down my throat and coating my chin with slobber. With Jim, it was like he was drinking me. We unbuttoned each other's buttons—it was a game, pulling clothes off, knowing and not knowing our bodies. I remembered the birthmark above his bellybutton, but not the dark, tangled hair below it. Jim unhooked my bra and breathed against my neck.

“Leah,” he said, “Love me like I love you.”

I pulled down Jim's pants and straddled him. My hips pushed down against him, and his hands traced circles over my body. I didn't stop him; I didn't stop myself.

“I do love you,” I said with my hands in his hair, “I do.”

The room was cloudy gray when I woke up. Jim stood with his back to me, and blew cigarette smoke out through the open window. He was an early riser. The cold coming into the room woke me, so I took the quilt and cuddled up next to him. A light came on across the street, and it left a gold square on the grass. The rest of the neighborhood was still asleep, blinds and curtains drawn. In a few hours, soccer moms, kids on bicycles, and efficient lawn care companies would dominate the landscape. At that hour, though, the street belonged to a lone black Labrador retriever. It nosed through the garbage cans, crossed the street, and circled the

tree in our front yard. It sniffed the ground and arched its back the way dogs do when they take a shit.

“Ha ha,” Jim said, “He’s leaving you a present.”

“At least it’s organic,” I said.

Jim kissed my temple.

“You can sleep if you want,” he said, “We don’t have to be up for a while.”

I shook my head from side to side.

“Might as well get up,” I said, “You heard anything from downstairs?”

“The microwave,” he said, “He’s awake.”

The dog stepped away from the tree and lifted its head. It galloped to a porch where a woman stood in a robe. The dog ran up the steps and put its front paws on her chest.

“Mom’s not going to let us get a dog,” he said.

“I don’t think so,” I said, “I hope they don’t split us up.”

Jim didn’t answer. Maybe he hadn’t thought it was a possibility. Maybe he had, but like me, the suggestion paralyzed him.

“Get dressed,” he said, “We’ve got to talk to him.”

As soon as we swung Jim’s door open, we expected Dad to be there in the hall. I imagined him in the usual: a short-sleeved dress shirt, khaki pants, and loafers. He wasn’t there, but I smelled coffee brewing downstairs.

Jim went first. I leaned against the banister even though I knew every step. Dad cleared his throat, probably from the kitchen. Jim squeezed my hand and turned the corner. Dad was

sitting at the table, eating a bowl of oatmeal. The spoon scraped against the porcelain as he ate. He looked up at us, and then his eyes returned to his breakfast.

“Come in here,” he said.

We sat at the table with him. Up close, blotchy patches of Mom’s make-up covered the bruises on his face. A red scab like a capital ‘I’ stretched across his upper lip. He slid each spoonful of food into his mouth delicately to avoid tearing it. He left the spoon in the bowl, set it to the side, and folded his hands.

“I’m sorry for how I acted yesterday,” he said.

Plenty of Dad’s half-apologies from years past popped into my head. He began them with “I’m sorry,” but ended with something negative. I’m sorry, he would say, but maybe you should’ve worked harder, or I’m sorry, but no one gets a free ride. He never admitted a mistake and bought us ice cream like the funny, sensitive Dads on television.

“My whole life, I’ve been hiding it,” he said, “I should’ve known better.”

He breathed hard through his nose, and sweat frosted his forehead. He kept his eyes on the wall and spoke with purpose.

“Sometimes when you make a mistake, you can’t fix it with an apology,” he said.

“Mom said you were getting a divorce,” I said.

“That’s right,” he said, “She wants me to leave.”

“Are we staying with Mom?” I asked.

“That’s your decision,” Dad said, “She wants to keep the house.”

Dad breathed shallow through his mouth. His nose reddened and started to run. He blinked quickly and pulled off his glasses—he was crying.

“I have to leave today,” he said.

Dad covered his face with his hands. He did not move or breathe for several seconds. Finally, he spread his fingers and exhaled a long, trembling breath.

“You guys have school,” Dad said. His voice cracked as he spoke.

“Go get dressed,” he said.

He stood up, and I hugged him. The sight of him, bruised and weepy, drove me to it. He hugged me back. After he did, I licked my thumb and smoothed an orange, cakey patch of make-up on his cheek. He winced at my touch.

“Sorry,” I said, “Just smoothing this out.”

“Thanks, Leah,” he said, and walked back to his bedroom.

I showered, blew my hair dry, and found something clean enough to wear. The whole process took forty minutes. Jim was ready to leave in ten minutes, and spent the rest of his time watching TV.

“What the hell’s taking so long, Leah?” he said.

“I’m a girl, okay?!” I said, “Chill out.”

Jim waited by the door. He jingled his keys while I searched the pantry for a granola bar. I tore the wrapper open on my way out of the house. As we walked to the bus stop, Jim wrapped his arm around my waist. He held me to him and exhaled into my hair.

“What’s happening?” he asked, “Our family’s going crazy.”

I shrugged and bit into my breakfast.

“I think we’ve got to adapt,” I said, “We’ve got to stick together.”

“No problem, Sis,” Jim said, and squeezed my hand for a moment.

The bus’s engine groaned as it shifted gears and accelerated down the street. Jim stepped away and pulled his arm to his side.

“We can always tell Mom a dog would be therapeutic,” I said.

“That’s not half bad,” Jim said, “Like a ‘Get out of Jail Free Card’ for therapy.”

We smiled as the doors opened, and stepped inside to take our place among the other sleepy students.

Managerial Timber

My Toyota lurched to a stop, and an orange light above the odometer blinked three times. Probably the transmission, and another six-hundred bucks down the drain. At least I made it to work. The car could wait a few hours for attention.

“Shit,” I said, and got out.

The weather was miraculous for November—a bright blue, Sistine Chapel sky traced with lace ribbons of cloud. The scrubby hills along the interstate reminded me of a Marlboro advertisement. The only thing missing was the weathered guy on horseback, raising his cowboy hat in salute. Mike, my only employee, left three bulging, black trash bags piled beside the backdoor when he closed the store last night. Typical. A responsible employer would give him a written warning. Mike’s not a bad kid, but he’s eighteen, and cares more about his GTO than demonstrating initiative. His parents made him get a job, and I guess he picked my shop to get under their skin. I own and operate Lotta Luv Video, an adult media and novelty emporium just outside of Salado, Texas.

To his credit, Mike did lock the doors. From the smell of it, he also burnt a half-dozen frozen burritos in the microwave. I propped the backdoor open with a cinder block. Fresh air might take care of it, but coffee certainly would. Nobody emptied the coffee grounds last time, and now they were a gray, furry heap. I dumped them into the trash and cleaned the moldy components with soap and scalding water. The suds persisted longer than I expected, so I left the water running and went to turn on the lights. Then, I piled four spoonfuls of caramel-flavored coffee grounds into a paper filter, filled the coffee pot with water, and flipped a red switch. The machine gurgled to life. While the coffee brewed, I pushed a carpet broom up and

down rows of product. When I see the store like this every morning, full and empty at the same time, I'm proud to own the place. It's not a bad for a thirty-two year-old woman from Kansas.

The trash bags were beaded with dew and heavier than I expected. The dumpster sat on the far end of the truck-accessible parking lot. I'd have to make two trips to haul the trash. Mike and I were going to have a chat about responsibility later when he got to work. The dumpster's plastic lid was down, so I dropped the trash to open it. An enormous, mushy cardboard box took up most of the space inside. I moved it to the side to make room for the trash bags.

Under the box, the frozen, blue face of an infant stared out with milky eyes. I closed my eyes tight, counted to five, and opened them again. The baby was still there. My breath caught in my throat—I hoped it was a doll, but the face was mottled, and something crusty caked the corners of its mouth. A dirty, pea-green blanket cradled its body. I didn't want to touch it. I wanted to run. Instead, I leaned into the dumpster and tugged on a corner of the blanket. The baby's body shifted like a piece of particle board, stiffly, all at once, the way only dead things move. Gnats swirled up in a cloud from the body, and I jumped back, scared one would fly into my mouth, my nose, my eyes.

My sneaker slid when I tried to run, and I landed in a black, greasy puddle. The dirty water soaked through my slacks, but I couldn't move. The miniature blue-dead features spun through my mind again and again, a short film on repeat: small eyes closed, tiny, frozen fists, and a rising cloud of gnats. Saliva filled my mouth, and I vomited in a doubled-over, involuntary response. My half-digested breakfast splattered against the concrete, and when I looked up something else was looking back.

A jackrabbit, standing tall on its hind legs, turned its brown ears and red-ringed eyes on me. It watched from the vacant lot behind the store, unblinking, completely attentive. Then, it

bolted through the dead bahaia grass. I followed suit and ran across the parking lot for the store. I locked the back door behind me, and my fingers dialed 911 on their own. When the operator asked me my address, I couldn't remember it. I could recite my bank account, social security, and driver's license number, but I forgot where the store was when I needed to know. My hands started to shake.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I know it. I do. I just don't remember it right now."

"That's okay," the operator said, "We can find you. Just stay put until help arrives, ma'am."

I wasn't going anywhere, though. Not with my car busted and a dead baby outside my place of business.

My emergency cigarettes were still in the top drawer of my desk, tucked under a stack of industry magazines. They sat in the same spot for a year and a half, going stale. I was grateful for them, though, and tore into the pack while I waited. I couldn't find any matches, so I used one of the novelty lighters from the display by the cash register. Each has a buxom woman painted across it, and when you hold them, the heat from your hand makes the woman's clothes disappear. In a normal week, I sell ten lighters like this, and the women all look the same.

Dressed or naked, they wear desire like a veil.

The office window faced south, toward town, and I opened it half-way so I could smoke while I kept watch. Sparrows lighted on a wire running from the building to a telephone pole in the parking lot. One at a time, they dropped from the wire to the ground, searching out crumbs and insects. When too many of them gathered there, moving between the concrete and the grass, they spooked each other and took flight. The sun coming through the window felt warm and

balmy, and I stopped shaking. My cigarette tasted like overdone toast, but I smoked it to the filter and lit another.

Smoking gave me a way to measure the wait. I was on my third cigarette when flashing lights crested the hill and sped north along the service road. The sirens came like a train's whistle, getting louder and longer as they approached. I went outside as soon as the first cruiser pulled into the parking lot.

Salado had three salaried cops; all of them showed up, along with a state trooper, a fire truck, and an ambulance. I didn't know Salado had a fire department, but muscular guys in navy t-shirts and neon pants tumbled off the truck. A tall, black man with a neat moustache jogged over to me from the fire truck.

"Where's the problem, ma'am?" he asked.

I pointed to the dumpster, and they moved toward it. The local cops huddled by the trooper's squad car. They sent the youngest one among them to talk to me. I knew him already—he worked with my best friend, Greg, at the police department. Greg had a job there as an administrative assistant, slash network technician, but he wasn't really a cop. Greg's gay, and in a town Salado's size, that's a big deal. When Greg got down about it, he'd threaten to move to Austin, or maybe farther west to California. So far, I'd managed to talk him out of it, but that wouldn't work forever. To them, he was always a target.

"Morning, ma'am," the cop said, "We got an emergency call from this location."

"That was me," I said, "I'm pretty sure there's a baby in the dumpster."

"Right," the cop said, and turned to face the other cops in the parking lot. He gestured, and everyone went for the dumpster. The cop came back, this time with a pen and a memo pad in his hands.

“Tell me what happened, ma’am,” he said.

“I got to work...and then I found it,” I said.

“Okay,” he said, “Let’s start with the basics. Can I have your name, first, last, and middle initial?”

“You know my name,” I said.

“Just for the record, please, ma’am,” he said.

“Lindsay Ellis,” I said.

“Middle initial?”

“I don’t have one,” I said.

“Alright,” he said, “Now tell me everything you can remember. Just start from the very beginning.”

I tried to explain it. First, there was the orange light flashing in my car—now, it seemed ominous. I told him about the gray, furry mold growing in the tray above the coffee pot, about Mike leaving the trash outside, and the jackrabbit bolting off into the dead grass. None of it made sense, and I couldn’t answer his questions. The store didn’t have a video surveillance system. I had never been pregnant, and if Mike had a girlfriend, he never mentioned her at work. Roughly fifty percent of my clientele would qualify as “suspicious looking.” The cop scratched out detailed notes in his memo pad. He licked the tip of his pen every time he began a fresh page. Finally, he flipped his memo pad closed and slid his pen into his shirt pocket.

“That’s fine, ma’am,” he said, “You’ve given us some good information. Don’t worry about it now. If you remember more, give us a call, okay?”

“Okay,” I said.

“Let me get the chief,” he said, “I know he wanted to speak with you.”

The cop crossed the parking lot. The other men hung yellow tape in a wide rectangle around the dumpster. The fire truck left, clean and gleaming red in the sunlight. The EMS workers wore blue, latex gloves; they did not rush through the task ahead of them. I leaned on my right leg, and felt the beginning of a bruise on the back of my thigh. I took out a cigarette and searched my pockets for the naked lady lighter. It wasn't there—I must've left it inside the store. The cigarette felt good between my fingers, though, so I held it unlit between my fingers.

The chief approached me. He wore cowboy boots and mirrored sunglasses. A toothpick jutted from a corner of his mouth. He shifted it to the other side with his tongue. His hair was a plot of silver grass.

“Ms. Ellis,” he said, “Officer Rickert says you gave him some promising leads.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Yes, ma'am,” he said, “Every little bit helps, as they say.”

“What happens now?” I asked.

“Well, first, we'll process the scene,” he said, “Would you mind closing up shop for the rest of the day? It'll make our job easier.”

“Sure,” I said, “Do you think they'll come back? I mean, is it safe up here?”

The chief plucked the toothpick from his mouth, turned it around, and put it back.

“I doubt the person responsible poses any threat to you or your employees,” he said, “But if you're scared, I recommend pepper spray. It certainly never killed anybody.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Were you gonna smoke that cigarette, or is it just for show?” he asked, and smiled.

“Oh,” I said, “Yeah, but I left my lighter inside.”

He fished an engraved zippo from his pants pocket, flipped it open, and cupped a hand around the flame. I leaned forward and touched the tip of the cigarette to it until it glowed red.

“Thanks again,” I said.

“My name’s Chief Brunson,” he said, “Bobby Brunson. You give me a call at the department later this week, alright? We’ll set up a time for you to come by and give a formal statement.”

“Yes,” I said, “I’ll do that.”

“Have a nice day,” he said, and shook my hand again.

The chief went back to the dumpster. I smoked half my cigarette, and then stepped on it with my shoe. The store had a distinct Starbucks smell, but I didn’t want coffee. A full pot of it sat on the burner—I could give it to the cops, but then I’d have to clean up their mislaid Styrofoam cups. I turned off the burner and dumped the coffee down the drain. My actions were a reverse of what I’d done earlier, like God was rewinding my life. The lights went out, I shut down the computer, and when I went to my car it started on the first crank. Two unmarked police cars turned into the parking lot as I left—the window tint was so dark I couldn’t see anyone driving.

Pearl, my gray-faced blue heeler, was asleep on the front porch when I got home. She perked up when my car crunched into the driveway, but didn’t gallop over to greet me the way she did when she was a puppy. Those days were long gone. She let people come to her.

“Hi, Pearl,” I said, and sat beside her on the porch steps.

She wiggled over to me and lifted her front paw, a sign she wanted me to scratch her belly. I obliged her, and she tongue hung, slick with drool, from her mouth in an expression of canine pleasure.

“Yes,” I said, “You’re a good girl.”

Up in the bare-limbed pecan tree, a squirrel barked. It climbed down the trunk in spurts, a little at a time, until it reached the ground. Then, it hopped through the grass, searching out fallen nuts to bury. It looked up at us, and then returned to its work. The squirrels weren’t afraid of Pearl anymore—sometimes they’d chase her onto the porch, and I’d find her hiding against the front door, embarrassed.

“It’s okay,” I said, “I don’t like them, either.”

The noise of Greg’s motorcycle echoed through the neighborhood. It lasted twenty seconds before he turned into my driveway. He wasn’t wearing his helmet. He had on khakis and a polo shirt; he must’ve been at work.

“Hey, you,” I said.

I stood up to greet him, and he hugged me to him.

“Are you okay?” he said, “I heard them talking about it at the station.”

“I’m alright,” I said, “Didn’t you have work?”

“I asked the chief for the afternoon off,” he said, “I wanted to check on you.”

“Thanks,” I said, “I’m glad you came.”

Greg squeezed my hand, and we walked to the house. I rented it from an elderly couple named the McGuire’s, and apart from a draft in the bathroom, the place was nice. The store grossed almost two-hundred thousand dollars last year, and if it kept growing I planned to buy

the house. Pearl liked the fireplace. She waddled up to Greg as we went inside, and he bent down to rub her ears.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Greg asked.

“Not really,” I said, “Should I make myself talk about it? Like therapy?”

“I don’t know,” he said, “Maybe you’re in shock.”

“I think I’m just hungry,” I said, and held my hand over my stomach.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“Whatever. There’s leftover Chinese in the fridge.”

“We can do better than that, can’t we?” Greg said.

He went past me to the kitchen and opened the pantry. I never learned to cook, but sometimes Greg tries to teach me. Last summer, he spent three nights teaching me to cook pasta. We made every kind of cold noodle salad you can imagine. Whenever possible, I prefer to let Greg do the cooking. He took three cans, an onion, and a bottle of oil from the pantry and set them on the counter.

“Do you have any sour cream?” he asks.

“I think so,” I said, “What’re you making?”

“White chicken chili,” he said.

“White chili?” I said.

“You’ll like it,” he said, “Trust me.”

I shrugged and got a dog biscuit for Pearl. She broke it into pieces and licked the crumbs up from the linoleum floor. I brought a dining chair into the kitchen so I could talk to Greg while he cooked. We didn’t talk about the baby after that. Greg wanted to tell me all about the new guy he met online, and I was glad to listen.

The next day at work, Mike won't leave me alone. I didn't tell him what happened—he found out somewhere else. Maybe it was on TV or in the local news. As soon as he showed up at three-thirty for his shift, he wouldn't shut up about it.

“Was it, like, pretty gruesome?” he said.

“I'd really rather not discuss it, Mike,” I said.

“That's cool, Linz,” he said, “I understand.”

I gave Mike a stack of DVDs to tag with 10% coupons. He clicked away with his price gun for a while. It was slow that day—none of the locals came in. The only customers were truckers, who were either indifferent or oblivious to local disaster. An hour later, Mike went out for a cigarette break. I wanted to go home. When Mike came back, he had curiosity on his face.

“Hey, Linz,” he said, “One of my buddies said it was, like, a cult thing. Is that true?”

“Really, Mike?!” I said, “I told you I don't want to talk about this.”

“Sorry,” he said, “Nothing like this ever happens around here, you know? It's like that *CSI* show or something.”

“Listen, Mike, why don't you go home?” I said.

“Shit, am I in trouble?” he said.

“No,” I said, “But no one's coming today.”

“Okay,” he said, “Well, let me know if you need me later.”

I closed the store at five and went home. A cold front rolled in, and steely clouds hung low over the highway. I went home and curled up on the couch. Pearl jumped up beside me, and settled down onto my feet to keep them warm.

Pearl woke me up at eight-thirty that night. She licked my face until I got up and went to the kitchen. Then, she sat by her bowl and waited for me to fill it.

“You hungry?” I asked.

Pearl looked at me with a blank expression, as though my question insulted her. I poured a cup of food into her dish, and she dropped her head to eat. Rain rattled down the gutter along the roof and rushed into a barrel by the backdoor. I pressed my hand to the windowpane and the glass around my fingers went foggy. It had gotten colder. Maybe it would snow. Pearl coughed up a piece of food onto the floor. She sneezed, licked her muzzle, and bent for the lost bite.

“Gross, Pearl,” I said.

I took a shower and got into my pajamas. I got into bed and laid there until ten-thirty. Sleep wouldn't come again. Greg didn't answer when I called—he might have a date with the online mystery guy. The house felt stuffy to me, so I took Pearl and drove up to the twenty-four hour truck stop. I bought one of those cappuccinos that come out of a hot chocolate machine and a stick of beef jerky for Pearl. She ate it as soon as I got the plastic off.

The neon sign above my shop washed the parking lot in pink light. I parked by the back door and got out. Pearl circled the grass by the building, sniffing, and then squatted. I unlocked the backdoor and waited for her to finish. When she did, she dug her back legs into the grass, tearing at it for a moment before she trotted over to me.

Pearl headed straight for the office and her fleece bed by my desk. I sat above her in my chair and waited for the computer to start. What the cop said about security systems was on my mind. The websites I found had pictures of other managers, smiling, middle-aged people, happy to endorse security companies. One guy called it a savvy investment. The manager of a Choctaw casino recommended onsite monitoring as part of a plan to address loss prevention.

There were plenty of systems available: hidden cameras, sensor tags, monitors, radios, and recording equipment. You could buy an under-the-counter gun rack. All I had to do was enter my credit card information. I sat there a long time. I watched the screen and tallied numbers on a notepad.

At quarter after midnight, Greg called my cell phone.

“Hey,” he said, “Sorry I missed you.”

“That’s okay,” I said, “I figured you were busy.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, “With Derrick. Or getting busy.”

“Awesome,” I said, “I’m game for details.”

“I’ll stop by,” he said.

“I’m not at home,” I said, “I came up to work.”

“Why?” Greg asked.

“Insomnia,” I said, “I can meet you at my house in twenty minutes.”

“Nah,” Greg said, “It’s late. Just gimme a call tomorrow.”

“Deal,” I said.

I folded the page scrawled with numbers and slid it into my top desk drawer. Pearl whined and stuck her head in my lap.

“Alright,” I said, “We can go.”

The rain wouldn’t stop, and fog hung over the interstate in a milky sheet. Pearl stretched her front paws. As I headed for the car, Pearl’s ears perked up and she turned toward the parking lot. Someone was there. Pearl bolted, and a woman darted away from the far side of the store. She fell, and Pearl barked, running up on her.

“Don’t sic your dog on me!” she yelled, “Please, don’t!”

I ran after them. Pearl growled over the woman.

“Pearl, stop it!” I said, and she came to me.

“Who are you?” I asked, “Are you the one who left the baby?”

It wasn't just the rain. The woman was crying. Her salt and pepper hair hung like Spanish moss from her skull. She was soaked to the skin. I didn't know what to do. She could have a gun. She might want to kill me. I had to call the cops.

“I covered him,” she said, “He was cold, and I covered him.”

“You have to come with me,” I said, “I have to call the cops.”

“Where did they take him?” she asked.

“I don't know,” I said.

“Please tell me,” she said, “I want to go there.”

She was still on the ground, crouched with her hands above her head. My hand came forward, and I extended it to her. The woman looked at me and took my hand.

“Come on,” I said, “I'll take you there.”

I walked with the woman to my car, and opened the door. Pearl hopped into the backseat, and I shut the door behind me. The woman stood outside the passenger door in the rain.

“Your dog won't hurt me?” she said.

“No,” I said, “Are you going to hurt us?”

“No,” she said, and got into the car.

I drove her to the police station, which is half of a community center co-owned by the First Methodist Church. The place was dark, deserted—I called 911 and asked them to send

someone to meet us. We waited in the car. Pearl leaned into the front seat, tongue wagging, unafraid.

“She’s really a good dog,” I said, “She’s never bitten anyone.”

“She scared the hell out of me,” the woman said.

Pearl sniffed the woman’s hair and reached forward to lick her face. The woman smiled. She rubbed Pearl’s ears, and her eyes watered.

“I know where we are,” she said.

“It’s where they took the baby,” I said.

“It’s okay,” she said, “I want to go.”

Pearl heard the siren first. There was only one cop this time, and he parked behind me with his lights flashing.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, and opened the door.

Velma A Cappella

I wake up on the floor, unsure of where I am. A half-eaten moth, its wings torn, glimmers on the carpet beside me. I get up and turn the alarm clock to check the time. Someone's knocking at my door, and I stumble to answer it with sour breath and a full bladder. My cat, Possum, lopes after me, all feline curiosity.

The door swings open, and my mother's standing in the sunlight with a guitar case. Her hair shines in a brilliant copper curtain.

"Velma!" she says, and pulls me into a one-armed hug, "Isn't this glorious weather?"

She smells sweaty, smoky, and familiar. Possum mews around my feet, intent on escape. I step out in my pajamas and close the door behind me.

"Wow, Mom," I say, "This is a surprise. What're you doing in Austin?"

She ignores my question and gestures to the street behind her.

"Look!" she says, "I bought it yesterday. Pretty cool, huh?"

The only car on the street is a bronze 1970s van. Orange lines criss-cross the exterior, and the tear-drop-shaped window and chrome back ladder reflect the morning light.

"The van? How much did you pay for it?" I ask.

Mom has the expression of an explorer ready to climb Mt. Everest, but I don't understand, and stand squinting in the sunlight.

"Come inside, Mom," I say, "I just woke up."

Possum tries to sneak past me, but I push him back with my foot and head for the bathroom. Even without me in the room, Mom talks like I'm listening—her words sound dreamy and optimistic through the wall.

"What was that, Mom?" I ask.

My bathrobe is somewhere in a pile of laundry on the floor. Beer bottles and my turquoise bong cover the dresser. I tumble everything into the sock drawer. My alarm goes off, and I trip on a sneaker with my arm stretched out for the snooze.

“Are you okay, Velma?” Mom says.

She walks into the bedroom with Possum cuddled in her arms.

“Fine,” I say, “Everything’s fine. I have to be at work in forty minutes, but everything’s fine.”

“Okay,” she says.

She leaves the room, and I get dressed. Pots and pans clatter in the kitchen. She must be digging through the cabinets. I put on a shirt and sweater, find a pair of mostly clean jeans, and slip on my Birkenstocks. Mom moves cleansers and rags from the cabinet under the sink to the counter. Possum zig-zags through her legs, which aren’t bed for a fifty-two year-old woman. Possum’s red tabby tail curls around her pale, muscular calves.

“Where do you keep the cat food?” Mom asks.

“I feed him at night,” I say, “So, why did you decide to come see me, Mom? Did something happen with Dad’s insurance policy?”

She doesn’t look at me while I’m talking to her. Her eyes move over the whole kitchen, and she grimaces when she opens the fridge. She picks up a jug of milk and read the label on its side.

“What’s that smell in here?” she says, “This milk expired a month ago, Vel.”

She opens the jug and pours it down the sink. Mom wrinkles her nose and turns on the faucet.

“I hope you don’t eat anything from this fridge,” she says.

I inhale a long, deep breath. Mom turns off the faucet, and I notice the bare finger on her left hand.

“Where’s your wedding ring, Mom?” I say.

“I put it in a safe deposit box,” she said, “I rented one when Mr. Lemmon’s wire transfer came through.”

“Who’s Mr. Lemmon?”

“I sold him the tax office. When the money came, I bought the van and put the house on the market. It reminds me too much of your father. I want to get out, Vel, to visit all the places I never got to see.”

The slippery flesh of my cheek bleeds as I squeeze it between my molars. Mom’s freckles dominate her face, and with her long, red hair, give her the appearance of an overgrown child. She smiles wide and shows her crooked bottom teeth. Mom today seems animated and gregarious, much more than the Mom I grew up with. Is it because of Dad’s death? Is she having some post-menopausal crisis? Anything’s possible, but the clock says quarter to eight, and the bus won’t wait for me.

“I have to go to work, Mom,” I say, “I’ll be back at six o’clock, so you’ll have time to clean the fridge, if that’s why you came. Call me at work if you need anything—the number’s on the fridge.”

I grab bag and keys. Mom watches me, leaning against the wall with her arms folded over her chest. Possum stretches his front paws on the carpet, and a shiver of pleasure runs down his spine to the nub of his tail.

“I came to see you, Velma,” she says in a milk voice, “I need you to some things about your father and me.”

I sling the strap of my bag over my shoulder.

“Sure, Mom,” I say, “It’s good to see you.”

Outside, white pillars of cloud march through the blue cap of this May morning. The grass glints silver with dew, vibrant and weedy. I gawk at Mom’s van as I pass it on the sidewalk, and break into a run as the #7 bus lumbers down the street to my stop. The doors open and I hope for an empty seat.

From the bus stop, I cross the street and walk to the library. A homeless couple with a dog sit by the entrance. When I walk up, I recognize the woman’s yellow eyes, leathery cheeks, and stringy, orange hair; she smiles, and I smile back. Everyday, the man and woman trudge up and down the street. The woman’s stride is exactly like my Mom’s. When she strolls down the sidewalk or up to the bus stop, it’s as though Mom’s put on another woman’s skin. I don’t know how to address her resemblance to my Mom, so I treat her with more kindness and humanity than I would otherwise.

This morning the man’s wearing a straw cowboy hat, sport coat, and dirty, loose jeans. The dog barks and bends its head to lick its sagging tits.

“Morning,” I say, and slide my into the lock.

“Morning to you, too, ma’am,” the woman says.

Her mouth has the sunken look of a toothless geezer.

“We come to Austin from outta town, and now our car’s busted a cylinder. Can we use your bathroom?” she says.

I turn the bolts and open the glass doors. The man rubs the dog’s ears, and its tail thumps against the concrete.

“Sure,” I say, “Just give me a second.”

I weave through the tables and flip lights on in the building. More than anything, the smell of my workplace charms me: a papery, academic musk cut through with Xerox toner and ink stamp pads. When I return, the woman stands by the circulation desk. She twitches involuntarily while she waits.

“It’s back there,” I say, and point behind me.

She cuts through the maze of tables, headed for the bathroom. I go outside to empty the night drop box. The man coos softly to the dog. The box holds only five books, and I cradle them to my chest. I lock the box and go back into the library. The books boom when they smack down on the circulation desk. I finger the spines and open them read the title pages: *Beautiful Hawaii: An Illustrated Guide*, *Sharks from North American Waters*, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, *Battleships of the Second World War*, *Southern Romance*. The homeless couple take turns holding the dog, and knock on the window to wave goodbye. I put down my check-in stamp to wave back. No one comes in for hours, and as I re-shelve books I imagine my mother walking down the street in the homeless woman’s skin.

Three papers ran articles about Dad’s death, each with a different picture: one of him and the Lions Club, one with the district attorney, and one of his blue Grand Marquis smashed through a pipe fence. I laminate each of the articles, even the one with the picture of his car. Oddly enough, the only story that mentions the allergic reaction that killed him is also the one with the photo of Dad’s smashed car.

The articles don’t mention his family, but call Dad “a superior leader in the community who’ll be dearly missed.” I don’t know what I miss about Dad; I never liked him. When he

died, I knew it was ridiculous to force myself to grieve. What I remember is his nose dotted with burst blood vessels and his constant, hacking cough. I remember the first time my best friend spent the night in high school and Dad bullied her into dancing with him. He spilled scotch and water down her back. Dad didn't do anything illegal that night, but my friend never spoke to me again.

I remember Mom being quiet and Dad being loud, Mom sitting still and Dad pacing in the living room, Mom cool and reserved when Dad was coarse. I never understood why she married him in the first place. They had little in common. To me, Mom was a martyr, tied to someone bent on destroying her. This morning, Mom was so different, and the reason must be Dad's death. Maybe she's as ambivalent about it as I am.

After lunch, Mom calls to say she lost Possum.

"I just opened the door," she says, "And he ran outside. I tried to catch him, but he snuck under your neighbor's privacy fence."

I bite my fingernails and stare out the window.

"Oh, it's okay, Mom," I say, doing my best to lie, "He does this all the time."

"Thank Heavens," she says, relieved, "I was so worried you'd be upset, but I'm sure he'll come back."

"Yeah, Mom," I say, "I'll take you out to dinner, and I'm sure when we get back--"

"Why don't I come pick you up after work, Vel?" she says, "We can take the van. It's cozy; I'm sure you'll love it."

I drag my hand over my forehead. Two black boys, maybe eight or nine years-old, come in with their mother and chase each other to the children's section.

“Okay, Mom, the library’s not hard to find, but I’ll give you directions,” I say, “You don’t know Austin.”

Mom pulls into the parking lot at six-fifteen. She walks over to me, and the wind whips her eyelet skirt around her legs. Mom hooks her arm in mine and coaxes me toward the van.

“You need to see it from several angles to get the full effect,” she says, “Come on.”

The back door screeches as she opens it. A mattress, complete with pillows and a quilted bedspread, sits inside. Brown, ratty carpet covers the interior, and a miniature mirror ball swings on a silver string from the rearview.

“Well,” I say, “It does look...cozy.”

She brushes my hair back over my shoulder in a gesture of familiarity.

“Get in,” she says.

I open the passenger-side door. The bucket seats are covered in cushy, brown velour pocked with cigarette burns. Mom gets in on the driver’s side, turns the key, and fastens her seatbelt.

“Where do I go?” she asks.

Mom waits for a woman with a stroller to cross the street. The woman peers at us through the windshield. Mom waves, and the woman moves her diaper bag to the other shoulder. She pushes on toward the bus stop.

“Go left,” I say, “I’ll take you to Ararat.”

At Ararat, we sit on silk floor cushions around a mahogany table. Our waitress brings us hibiscus tea with rose water. Downy hair curls from her armpits when she adjusts the strap of

her tank top. Mom orders lamb and I order hummus and taboleh. A dancer with long, brown hair emerges from behind a curtain, accompanied by strange music. The customers applaud, and as she bows small coins on her blue, organdy skirt and matching top gleam. Her stomach shines with sweat as she dances through the tables. Anklet of tiny bells jingle as she sways back and forth on slim, bare feet.

“You know, I read that belly-dancing and hula-dancing are very similar despite originating in cultures with radically different views of women,” Mom says.

“Yeah,” I say, and change the subject, “When did you take up the guitar?”

The dancer saunters by our table and a bead of sweat trickles down her spine to the waistband of her skirt.

“Last week, after Dad’s funeral,” she said, “I bought it from a man named John. He teaches guitar in town.”

Mom takes a deep breath and lays her hand over mine.

“I need to tell you something, Velma. Since your father died, I need to set things straight,” she says.

She squeezes my hand.

“You always seemed to resent him.”

“He was a drunk,” I say, “Never mind that he flirted with my friends.”

“You shouldn’t hate him for that, Velma,” she says, “He had some problems, but marriage is complicated.”

I roll my eyes.

“Don’t think I didn’t know what he was like,” Mom says, “I did my best to keep it away from you. Your father was always popular, but when we got married I really thought that meant something, you know?”

“Part of it was my fault,” Mom says, “The first time I caught him, we were still in college, and I left him for two weeks. Who knows how things would’ve turned out if I hadn’t gone back to him.”

The waitress returns with steaming plates of food. Before she leaves, I tear a pita in half and shovel hummus down my throat. Mom keeps talking, but this story makes me anxious and sick to my stomach.

“But I did go back,” Mom says, “Your father convinced me that he wasn’t the one with the problem. He wanted me to do different things...sexually.”

“Oh God,” I say.

“Tell me about it,” Mom says, “I was too embarrassed to talk to my friends or your grandmother about it. Your father was a persuasive man, and I believed that if I did what he wanted, he’d be a happier husband and I’d be a happier wife.”

I listened to the sound of my jaws moving, of the food in my mouth turning to mush. Mom hasn’t touched her food—she’s saving it for after her story’s complete.

“When that didn’t happen, I had a hard time coping with it,” Mom says, “I saw every therapist in town, and they all gave me variations of the same advice. Get a divorce. Cut your hair. Take a cruise and have an affair with a yoga instructor.

“I didn’t want to get a divorce, though. I loved your father. I erased myself to be what he wanted, and I was scared of who I’d be without him. So, I stayed. The doctor gave me pills to make things easier, and life sort of went along without me,” she said.

Mom stops for a moment. I'm done with my food, but I don't know how to reply to what she's said.

"When he died," Mom says, "I knew I was on my own. For some reason, I didn't feel afraid anymore. I felt excited, like my life was brand new again."

"I hear forty is the new thirty," I say.

"Does that make fifty the new forty?" she asks, and laughs.

"Sure, why not?" I say.

"Whatever happens," Mom says, "Know that I did love your Dad. He may be dead, but his memory matters to me."

"I understand, Mom," I say.

Mom smiles, takes my hand, and kisses it. The dancer comes to our table and looks at my mother.

"Would you like to learn?" she asks, slick with sweat.

Mom rises, and the dancer bends Mom's arms, places her hands on my mother's hips, instructs her. Mom mimics the dancer's pivoting hips and graceful arms. She follows her around the table, gyrating. From a corner of the restaurant, two men clap and whistle. Mom sits back down.

"Very good," the dancer says, "Excellent for a beginner."

"I had no idea you could dance, Mom," I say.

She drinks half her glass of iced tea. From the corner, a man in dark slacks and a red shirt comes over to our table.

"You dance like an angel, my dear," he says, and offers Mom his hand.

"I didn't know angels danced," she says, "Do the seraphim have soul train?"

“Oh, yes,” she says, “But you put them to shame. I’m Jorge, and my cousin and I would like to join you. May we offer you a glass of wine?”

“Sure,” Mom says, “We’re on a roll.”

Tipsy, I sit on the floor with Jorge, Mom, and Jorge’s cousin, Ignacio, in my apartment. Mom plays songs by Joan Baez and Cat Stevens. We sing along when we know the words. I lean against Ignacio, and he squeezes my knee. Jorge swigs a mouthful of tequila. He whistles and passes the bottle to Ignacio, who also drinks. Jorge runs the tip of his index finger up my mother’s shin. She looks sideways at him and giggles. The affection budding between them unnerves me. Ignacio passes me the tequila, and I fill my mouth, wincing, choking it down. Mom stops playing to take the bottle. I’ve never been drunk with her, and it feels bizarre. This is the part of my life that I hide from her.

Ignacio grips my shoulder and kisses my neck. Mom sees it, and I blush to the tips of my fingers. Mom puts her guitar in its case and Jorge puts his hand on her thigh. Ignacio whispers something in my ear, but I can’t listen. Jorge removes my Mom’s shoe and rubs her pale foot with his hands.

My mouth fills with spit and I run outside. Ignacio follows me and closes the door behind him. Mom’s laugh echoes through the walls of my apartment.

“Are you okay?” he asks, and brushes the hair away from my forehead.

“Fine,” I say, “Just kind of freaked out about Jorge and my Mom...getting familiar.”

Ignacio nods.

“You look like your mother,” he says.

“Sort of,” I say, “But I have blue eyes.”

He wraps his arm around me; his thumb traces the line of my jaw. I stand on the tips of my toes to kiss him.

“Come on,” I say.

I lead him to Mom’s van. The door slides open with a metallic scream, and we climb inside. Ignacio closes the door and kicks off his boots. The mattress is soft and bouncy under me.

I pull off my shirt, and Ignacio kisses the hollow above my collarbone, the valley between my breasts, and the ticklish patch between my forearm and elbow. He unbuttons my jeans and slips two fingers into me. His tongue tastes sweet, not at all like alcohol.

I unbuckle his belt and slide his pants over his hips. His dick is like a bird in my hand, impossibly warm, throbbing, ready to fly. I take off my jeans, and he spreads my legs.

“So beautiful,” he says, and kisses me, “Just beautiful.”

He slips into me, and I gasp, my hands caught in his hair. His sweat smells like sweetgrass or Carolina Jasmine, intoxicating and natural. I forget Mom and Jorge. Down the hill, bright green streetlights wink on and off.

Ignacio wakes me with a song I don’t know.

“My Tia Lourdes taught it to me,” he says, and kisses my breasts, nose, and forehead.

“Really?” I ask, “What was she like?”

He shrugs and puts on his socks. I lean on one elbow and watch him.

“She was very devout,” he says, “But she loved to fish. She took me in when my mother died. I remember she had a birthmark shaped like a star on her shoulder.”

Ignacio writes his phone number on a crumpled receipt. He whistles as he strolls down to the bus stop. Jorge's car is gone, so I go inside.

In the bathroom, Mom looks blurry and blue through the shower curtain. I close the toilet lid and clear my throat. She pokes her head out, and a meringue of lather covers her head.

"Morning, Vel," she says, "What happened to you last night?"

"I slept in the van," I say, "The idea of you fucking some stranger in my home didn't appeal to me."

"Oh, don't be so dramatic," she says, "Didn't you fuck somebody in my home when you were younger?"

"Well, yeah," I say, "But that's different."

"How?"

"I was a kid, Mom!" I say.

"Exactly," she says, "And I'm an adult. A consenting adult."

Mom catches water from the showerhead in her moth, and then spits it out.

"It's just..." I say.

"Just what?" she says, "Just weird to think your mother wants to have sex with someone?"

"Yes," I say, "It's too weird for me."

Mom shuts off the shower and wrings water from her hair.

"That's okay, Vel," she says, "I'm sorry if it upset you. It's over now, so pass me a towel. I'm starving."

I get one from the shelf above the sink and pass it to her. I wait in the living room while she gets dressed. When she's done, I shower and call in sick to work so we can go out for breakfast.

Full of omelets and coffee, Mom and I drive out to the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. We walk through fields of yellow, blue, and red blooms spread before the sky. Mom knows the names of all the flowers: evening primrose, Indian blanket, cowslip, wine cup, and bluebonnet. I like the Bachelor's Buttons. Mom says phlox is her favorite.

We sit on a bench by a waving field of Indian paint brushes. Mom pulls my hair behind my shoulders and stares at the clouds rolling by.

"Look," she says, and points, "That one really looks like a guitar."

The cloud reminds me of a woman lying on her side. Mom describes the songs she plans to write; one's about the Donner party, one's about burial, and another's about dairy farmers. They sound terrific.

"It's been strange," I say, "But I'm glad you came, Mom."

She slings an arm over my shoulder.

"I'm glad I had you," she answers, "Best thing I ever did."

We visit the gift shop on our way out; I buy Mom a packet of bluebonnet seeds and she buys me one of Indian blanket. In the van, I give her a postcard with a close-up photograph of phlox.

"You can pin it up in the back above the mattress," I tell her, "And take your favorite flower with you everywhere."

* * *

Possum's asleep on the doorstep when we get back, and my eyes tear up at the sight of him. I scratch his ears and chin while Mom loads her stuff in the van. I put Possum inside and close the door. At the curb, Mom gives me a shiny, new harmonica.

"I love you dear," she says, "I want you to make some music."

She waves as she leaves, her long hair trailing from the van's open window. It disappears down the street, past two kids riding skateboards. I watch until she's gone and blow discordant notes on the harmonica.

Fentanyl and Happy Meals

A week before my birthday in July of 2003, I made appointments for my younger sister and I to have pelvic exams. Like most methamphetamine addicts, my sister had discarded social conventions like work, hygiene, and friendship. I scammed her into a few haircuts and doctor visits with limited success. I was due for another pap smear, and I find the experience of gynecological procedures—the crunchy paper gown, white ceilings and fluorescent lights, chilly stirrups, and the inevitable speculum—seems less horrifying if I'm not alone. I called to tell her about the appointment, and she was moaning circular, incoherent pleas.

"He won't believe I'm not cheating on him," she said.

It was something with her boyfriend, the unemployed high school drop-out.

"Maybe he's paranoid. The appointment's on Tuesday," I said, "Two-thirty at the Planned Parenthood on North Broadway."

"I feel so shitty....," she said, and broke into heaves and sobs.

This stage of her addiction was familiar to me. My sister said it was "coming down." She described it as falling down a rocky hillside where each slip brings crushing exhaustion, intense hunger, rage, and crippling depression. At the bottom of the hill is the crash, waiting to break whatever's left. There's no other experience I've seen her go through as difficult as this one. It's enough to crush a diamond-plated heart.

"What can I do? Do you need something to eat?" I asked.

She sniffled into the phone.

"He says his words so mean I believe them," she said.

In the background, her boyfriend yelled—only the obscenities were clearly enunciated.

I wanted to help her. Whatever she asked me to do wouldn't stop her suffering, but I knew I'd do it anyway.

"Can you bring me a sandwich?" she said.

I jumped at the opportunity.

"What kind?" I asked.

"Turkey. No, ham. With mayonnaise and tomatoes. Actually, could you put turkey and ham on it?" she said.

"No problem," I said, "You want some Gatorade or water, too?"

"I'm too tired for a drink," she said.

She mumbled something else and hung up. I made her two sandwiches and bought two bottles of Gatorade on my way to her apartment. I lived with my parents that summer and tutored at a community college where my Dad also worked. My sister lived in a three-room apartment in town. She moved away for college, but flunked out soon after she tried ice. We were both in a kind of limbo—I had a couple months before I would start graduate school, and she floated between jobs. We didn't have many friends apart from each other.

I pulled up to my sister's apartment. Her car wasn't there, and no one answered the door or telephone. I waited for twenty minutes, watching ants march single file to the carcass of a dead beetle. They covered its exoskeleton in a moving maroon blanket. Nothing moved but the ants. The summer sun wilted both flowers and the enthusiasm of children. My forehead dripped sweat, as did the soft skin behind my knees. I left the sandwiches and Gatorade on the doorstep and returned to my car.

A week before I made our pelvic appointments, she showed me a new way to smoke meth. She sat across from me in her dark, musty apartment, her body pale and bony,

transformed from the tan, muscular eighteen year-old I knew six months earlier. She inhaled a line of powder through a hot, five-inch glass tube. She exhaled smoke. Instantly, she changed—her pupils dilated, and her tortoise-shell eyes shrank to resemble the ring of sunlight during a solar eclipse. She angled the smoke toward the ceiling fan as she exhaled, but I caught the smell of it from where I sat on her torn, dusty loveseat. The aroma's a combination of ammonia, pee, and burning plastic that still turns my stomach. My sister passed the metal tray in her lap and glass tube to her boyfriend, who repeated her actions with a longer line of powder.

"That's a hot line," she said.

She looked at me with the expectant, vacant stare typical of ice addicts. She pulled her long hair back into a ponytail, the top half dark brown roots, and bottom half crunchy and bleached beyond repair. She walked into the kitchen and paced from the open refrigerator to the silverware drawer, back and forth, in an ineffectual hurry, for ten minutes. She forgot part of what she was doing each time she crossed the kitchen, but repeated it over and over anyway. Meth does this to everyone.

I didn't know anything about meth until the previous May. My sister's behavior prompted me to buy a copy of Robert Julien's *A Primer of Drug Action*. The book was in my purse every day after that with a laminated soap label nestled in the middle to keep my place. I showed my sister and her boyfriend Julien's graph that compared dopamine levels in the brains of meth addicts and paranoid schizophrenics. I said it was the reason she screamed uncontrollably and heard things that weren't there. Julien didn't include a paragraph in his book about how people on ice don't care what happens to their bodies. Once my sister was on meth, whatever I said didn't matter because I didn't do meth. Julien didn't mention that people on hard

drugs, like meth or heroin, distrust anyone who isn't also on their drug of choice. In this sense, I was lucky just to be there in my sister's dilapidated apartment.

From across the room, her boyfriend bent to pick at an invisible object in the carpet. He didn't see a roach scurry out from a bag of rotting fast food. A pile of these bags collected in a corner of the living room. My sister's addiction meant her apartment alternated between hospital sterility and enteric filth, with almost no middle ground. That day, she and her boyfriend hadn't slept for close to two weeks, and the wear was evident on their bodies and surroundings.

My sister insisted she hadn't lost weight since Christmas. She's always been small, even when she won competition after competition in power lifting. For two years, she dominated the ninety-eight pound and under category with her long, taut muscles. That July, her capable form shrunk, and she reminded me of a featherless bird, skin stretched translucent over hollow, weightless bones. Much later, my sister told me she weighed seventy-three pounds that summer, and it didn't surprise me. It was a mile-marker, proof of how close she'd been to death, and of my complicity in her addiction.

As she and her boyfriend set about their repetition, I stashed the joint I brought over to ease their withdrawal. Somehow, they managed to get money and more ice before I arrived. I said goodbye to my sister, who didn't hear or acknowledge me; I hadn't spoken to her boyfriend at all during the half-hour I'd been there. He held a dirty fork in his hand to help him comb the brown, ratty carpet, his face six inches above the floor.

I left their apartment and stepped out into a typical July afternoon. Dogs panted from porches, their bodies stretched flat against shady concrete or settled in the cool dust under raised houses. An enormous, iridescent dragonfly with cellophane wings rose up from my car. I kept coming back to my sister's apartment because I wanted to tell her something resonant enough to

stop her addiction. I wanted to string words together so they'd imitate a drug. They would stick to the receptors in her brain and erase her dependence. I never achieved this, and doubt such a thing is possible.

I didn't hear from my sister, and when Tuesday arrived I assumed she wouldn't show up for her appointment. Either she'd found a way to get more ice, or she was crazy and delirious with exhaustion. Her car wasn't in the parking lot on North Broadway, and I didn't see her thumbing through magazines in the waiting room. I read a chapter in Julien's book on anxiolytics. The appointment was predictably uncomfortable, the doctor typically clammy and mild between my thighs. The ceiling wasn't the sterile white typical of hospitals—some of tiles bore water stains, rings with the asymmetrical edges of lakes on a map. During the entire visit, I never saw my sister. No one would tell me whether or not she'd come for her appointment.

On my way home, I stopped by my Mom's vet clinic. It's a comfortable place for me, in part because every aspect of it, no matter how disgusting, is familiar. I talked to my Mom, who asked me if I had time to bathe a dog for her. This happens whenever I go by the clinic. Self-employed parents usually recognize the free labor children provide. My sister came back into the kennel while I gave a manic Blue Heeler named Killjoy a Mitaban dip.

"Where were you today?" I asked.

Killjoy struggled to jump out of the tub. My sister didn't respond, and marched past me to grab a bag of dog food.

"What's your problem?" I said.

I lifted Killjoy out of the tub, and dip soaked my t-shirt. I would smell like insecticide for two days. Killjoy followed me into his dog run and shook more dip onto my arms, jeans, and

shoes. I took off his leash and closed the run behind me—Killjoy jumped onto the chain link, leaning against it with his forepaws, a veined, slobbery tongue-lolling at me. My sister leered at me and waited with the dog food against her hip. She spat her words out like throwing stars.

"I don't need any of your shit today, Jess. I went to my appointment, okay? I'm fucking *pregnant*," she said.

I couldn't speak, whether it was because I hoped she was lying or because I knew she was telling the truth. What words could there have been? Maybe it was a moment when language doesn't matter, when time passing is communication enough.

On my drive home, my thoughts collapsed in a cycle of worry. I felt guilty and responsible for my sister's unplanned pregnancy. I knew my sister and her boyfriend had started using ice in January, soon after Christmas, but I helped keep their escalating addiction a secret. Even as her muscles disappeared and her only friends became other people on ice, I never breathed a word. I was afraid of losing her, my only friend in east Texas, afraid to admit I should have intervened. I should have been fierce and angelic, and swooped in like Michael with my fiery sword drawn to taken her home. What matters to me now, as it did then, is that I didn't do anything soon enough. I made useless plans to help that inevitably exploded back on me.

After I saw her at my Mom's clinic, my sister didn't speak to me for two days. I called her obsessively. No one answered. My parents acted as they always did, which I interpreted as blissful ignorance. For two days. I scraped every dime I had together, a total of six-hundred and fifty-two dollars. My sister was weak and strung out, completely incapable of carrying a child to term. Abortion seemed not only logical, but terribly necessary.

The next Friday, my Mom took me out for breakfast at a local bakery. It's small, clean, and unusually metropolitan for my hometown of three thousand. We ate there regularly on

weekdays, and ordered all of our birthday cakes there. Like most mornings, my Dad left for work while my Mom and I finished our breakfast. Today, though, my Mom had a particular agenda for me.

"Your sister told you about her appointment, didn't she?" Mom said.

Her hair, down to the middle of her back, was tightly braided.

"Yes," I said, unwilling to give anything away.

"I want you to drive her to Dallas next week," Mom said.

"Sure," I said.

I planned to take my sister to a clinic there already, and didn't question my Mom's decision or instructions.

"Her appointment's on Wednesday, and you'll have to leave by at least ten-thirty that morning to get there on time," Mom said.

Finally, her chin twitched and her eyebrows met in an emotion I understood. She didn't cry—she managed to teeter away from it, stronger than I could understand.

"Your Dad will divorce me if he finds out," she said, "But I can't let this happen to your sister."

We didn't speak again about the trip to Dallas. Mom gave me an envelope of cash to cover the visit: five wrinkled hundred dollar bills. I told Dad my sister and I wanted to visit the Dallas Museum of Art. At first, he asked questions about the trip. Why did we want to go? Was there something special there he might want to see? I described the fictional exhibit as a feminist approach to found art, and with words like 'gynocentric' in the air, my Dad quickly abandoned his questions. My parents' marriage never mattered to me before. Their union was something I

took for granted, a constant status quo. It was my Mom's pained, terrified expression that finally made their marriage into something delicate, a balance worth preserving. I felt determined to keep my Dad in the dark about my sister.

The Wednesday of the appointment, I drove my '98 VW beetle over to pick up my sister. She was rolling a joint on a hardback collection of *The Peter Rabbit Giant Treasury*. Her boyfriend was asleep on the couch in his boxers. A tuft of pubic hair peeked through the fly. He didn't move or respond when my sister said goodbye and followed me outside. He was still in his boxers, unshaved and un-showered, when we returned that night.

My sister and I drove through crisp hay meadows, the grass dry as wood shavings from a lengthy drought. At ten forty-five, the-air wavered with heat, and, as they approached from the opposite direction, cars seemed to drive through a wall of water. We didn't speak to each other about where we were going. We knew the directions to the clinic and the goal of the trip. It felt deceptive that the reason for the trip, growing and dividing inside my sister, would pass without verbal acknowledgment. We let it go silently.

My sister and I smoked the joint during the first half-hour of the two-hour drive to Dallas. I mentioned that she shouldn't smoke before her procedure. She said "why not?" with such complete indifference that it shut me up. When she told me to stop so she could buy a blunt, I didn't protest.

Back on the road, we took IH-30 west to Dallas. I watched the countryside, pocketed with cattle ranches and dairy farms, give way to billboards, fast-food restaurants, and small, empty motels. My sister cut the blunt open on my Rand McNally road atlas, and emptied the shredded tobacco onto its cover. She rolled the passenger window down and set the

empty, curled blunt wrapper in a cup holder. I saw her lift the atlas from her lap. Surely, she must know the flimsy book would fly out the window at this speed. My sister held the atlas up, and the rushing air whipped it outside. She turned to me, horrified, her hands over her hollow cheeks and dropped jaw. Her expression, more than the actual event, shook me with long, loud spasms of laughter. It was her absolute shock about something I anticipated that struck me as amazingly funny. We laughed in circles around this accident, moving back and forth, but we always collapsed in giggles just where we began.

As we approached it from the service road, I thought the building looked inconspicuous beside similar offices with the same beige brick and black, tinted windows. I gave our names and photo ids to a security guard so we could enter the parking lot. He was red-faced, sitting in front of an oscillating plastic fan in a tiny kiosk without air conditioning. He waved us on through an eight-foot high chain link fence surrounding the property.

"You think the perimeter's secure?" my sister said.

We parked far out in the lot under an elm tree, and shared a liter of water before going inside. As we crossed the asphalt, shimmering with heat, our paranoia doubled, compounded by the blastula in my sister's shrunken womb.

The clinic was extraordinarily safe. We passed two more security guards with guns in their holsters before we reached the waiting room. It was unlike any other doctor's office I'd visited. Its walls were a soft, creamy yellow hung with Monet prints in silver frames. Instead of overhead fluorescents, this room had accent lighting; the whole place smelled of cinnamon. Tasteful, unworn couches and chairs lined the walls. Close to fifty people were crowded in there, and my sister and I had trouble finding a place together on a couch. She went to check in with a statuesque nurse at the front desk.

On the couch to the right of me, a middle-aged man sat holding a woman's hand. Her hair was shoulder-length and exquisitely styled, and the black streaks in her coiffeur accentuated her ebony glasses. She worked on a crossword puzzle while he read a John Grisham novel; their hands separated only momentarily to turn a page or scribble an answer. My Dad had the same Dockers shirt this man wore. To my left, a Muslim girl not more than twenty waited with stoic clarity in an amber gown and white head scarf.

An older woman in blue sat beside her, with neatly folded hands. A teenage girl in purple fidgeted on the far end of the couch, impatient. In the entire room, I didn't see anyone crying, alone, or staring at the floor.

My sister returned with a stack of medical forms on a clipboard. We both worked for half an hour to complete them. The last was a consent form for anesthesia. Listed in pristine type and precise doses were the drugs my sister would receive during her procedure.

"What the hell is this?" she said, and traced the tip of her pen under one name.

"Fentanyl?" I said, "I'm not sure, but we can look it up."

With that, I opened my purse and pulled out Julien's text. We smirked together as we thumbed through the index. Some people looked our way at the sound of suppressed laughter.

"It's an opiate, like heroin or morphine," I said, "The common street name is, 'China White,' and it's routinely used in medical practices and hospitals to treat moderate to severe pain."

We read the entire entry on fentanyl three times, and smiled over its counterculture names. My sister turned to me just before the nurse called her into the back, through a wide door.

"We are the only people in this room with a book like this," she said, "Does that make us weird, or bad, or something?"

"I wouldn't know about good or bad," I answered, "But I hope we're both always weird."

She didn't reply, and walked toward the nurse through the wide doorway. I couldn't read while I waited. My eyes moved over the words in Julien's book with the rhythm of reading, but in an hour and twenty minutes I didn't turn a single page. None of the sentences stuck, and I couldn't tell which paragraphs I'd read. Another nurse pushed a pudgy blond girl in a wheelchair across the waiting room. The couple to my right stiffened as she approached. The girl didn't open her eyes, and the nurse lifted her arm to reconnect an IV bag of fluids. The woman touched the girl's hair, and whispered words softly, like a spell. The man set his hand on the girl's knee and squeezed it gently. He held the woman's hand in his right and stroked it slowly.

The girl in amber on my left rose when the nurse called her. Soon afterwards, the girl in purple started whispering to the older woman in blue, who must have been her mother. Their language was indecipherable to me, but their tone was not. Each of the girl's phrases had the lilt of a question, and each response from the woman had the finality of rebuttal. I watched the other people, and sensed the comparability of our situations.

I wandered through memories of my sister. I thought of her the previous fall when she first moved to Austin; I had lived there for three years, and she called me every time she got lost, usually three blocks from my house. She worked at an ice-cream shop run by the Indian mafia, and often brought over a pint of cinnamon-double dark chocolate swirl purchased with her tips. I dyed her hair the slightest shade of pink, helped her with College Algebra, and gave in when she drug me off to parties at rich kid's houses. Without our parents, my sister and I became inseparable, reliant on each other for what we shared as much as what we didn't. In my mind, I

condense these months to a black and white photograph of us at sunset, our hands holding carnations that could be pink, white, or yellow. She is radiant, calm, completely happy, and I seem so as well because of her. Suddenly, I need this picture—I imagine going around to each person on the couches and showing it to them. Look, I would say, she was beautiful, is beautiful, will always be beautiful, and I would lose an arm to spare her this.

But the photograph was at home, slid sideways in a plastic sleeve of my scrapbook. Time crept on and left a shiny trail in its wake like a snail. When the nurse brought my sister through the door in a wheelchair, her eyes were open. A blanket covered her legs, and the nurse rubbed her shoulders in firm, round circles.

"It's cold in there," my sister said, her eyes sleepy but unmistakably conscious.

"Are you okay? Didn't they give you enough to make you sleep?" I asked. She nodded her head.

I took her hand and held it between both of mine, trying to transmit the nervous, sweaty heat I felt into her icy hands. She was completely recovered from anesthesia in twenty-five minutes, and the nurses gave us several pages of specific instructions.

"She should eat something," the nurse said as we turned to leave.

Before we started on the return trip home, I stopped at a McDonald's down the street.

"I bet a happy meal would make you feel better," I said.

She smiled and lit a cigarette as we pulled through the drive-thru. She watched the smoke curling and disappearing in the wind through the open passenger window.

"I was awake through everything," she said, "I remember everything they did. Everything that happened. Shouldn't it make me cry? Why haven't I cried?"

"I don't know if you *should*, but I know that you will," I said, which was only half true.

We both cried, and what separated us physically, emotionally, and spiritually seemed to recede in the face of our simultaneous grief. It had no end, not when I dropped her off at her apartment and saw her boyfriend come outside, groggy and dirty in the same pair of boxer shorts. I pulled into a field and wept in my car. Thin slivers of cloud streaked the sky as evening approached, and cicadas droned among dry, dusty tree trunks. Then, as much as now, I knew this sadness wouldn't go away. My sister could never escape it, and I couldn't help her. What passed did not leave, but waits silently, a ghost in my parents' house. Addiction never leaves once it takes hold of a person—meetings and discipline may help, like chemotherapy for a cancer patient, but relapse remains a constant threat. It haunts our family still, a small spirit we cannot exorcise or ignore.

Tracks

Wind steals the sounds of small creatures when it's strong enough. The music of birds, squirrels, and frogs disappears, eclipsed by the noise of air in motion. North Texas harbors jealous winds; they descend like the bearded faces of mythology whose cheeks bulge and whose lips form a permanent 'O.' When the leaves turn in autumn and birds migrate through the area, the winds return to jostle and intimidate them into silence. In spring, when the sounds of new life threaten to drive all plants and animals into a giddy frenzy, the wind shows up to stop the advance with icy blasts.

I have no reason to step out of my car and into the fierce weather outside. The branches pitch back and forth, and last fall's leaves dance in rising arcs, swirling in dust devils across the dead grass and single-lane road. In the bare, thorny branches of a wild plum tree, a red-breasted robin shifts its weight from one spindly leg to the other. His feathers puff up like a balloon inflating. How does something so small manage to keep its perch in the face of such insurmountable force as this wind? No other birds glide past the stretch of sky before me.

My cheeks tighten when the cold blasts hit me full in the face. I lean my whole weight against the car door to close it. As soon as it slams shut, I bury my hands deep in the pockets of my coat. My breath warms the knotted yarn of my scarf, a vibrant, striped affair my sister gave me last Christmas. Texans don't often have occasion to wear scarves, but I'm grateful to own one today.

The tracks follow the crest of a hill through the pastures west of town. I found them by accident. Three years ago, I moved back to Denton, Texas, to finish graduate school. I lived in the area once before, but I was sixteen then and without transportation. My world revolved around dusty library nooks and stained dormitory couches. When I came back, I had a car, a gas

card, and plenty of curiosity about the area. One afternoon, with a full tank of gas and a stack of work I was desperate to avoid, I turned right on my street and kept driving west.

The road wound through neighborhoods and parks, out past the new hospital and the interstate. Town gave way to hay fields and aging ranch houses. The road's name changed twice, and I wasn't sure if I'd gotten lost without knowing it. The road continued past the regional airport and a string of natural gas wells. It narrowed to a single, oil-top lane, and then crossed a yellow-brown creek where beer cans glinted like mussel shells along the bank.

Then, I saw the bridge, and the tracks above it. I'd seen plenty of charming or impressive bridges in the past—this one was neither. In truth, it was a narrow, concrete tunnel that cut through the hill. The gaping hole resembled the entrance to a mine. As I drove through it, the graffiti along the walls caught my eye. After the tunnel, the road passed a small, brown field and met with a highway I didn't recognize. I turned my car around and drove back the way I came, but the trip became a pattern for me. When I missed the wide pastures and lapping ponds of my hometown, I drove down to the tracks. I've done it once or twice a week ever since.

To get to the tracks, I have to climb the hill on the grassy side opposite the creek. Brambles and much make going up the other side impossible. From the top of the rise, though, the view stretches on for miles, revealing rolling pastures and herds of cattle. Whether I look north or south from that vantage, the tracks run on for miles. They are anonymous, no different from every other set of train tracks that crisscross the countryside. To anyone else, they would seem mundane as telephone poles and red lights, the parts of civilization that fade into the background. They have no name, no distinguishing features beyond the rocks, trees, and muddy creek.

These tracks draw me to them because they aren't obviously beautiful and striking. When I stand with my sneakers on the tracks, cold, parallel metal rails run in either direction, farther than I could ever walk. I take comfort in this. The tracks don't stop—my feet could tromp down them to Fort Worth, Austin, or even Mexico for days, weeks, and months. My hair would tangle in grotesque knots; I'd become one of the hobos I'd seen in movies. If I surrendered to following the tracks, chasing them to where they met the horizon for the rest of my natural life, I'd be someone completely different.

North of the concrete tunnel, a rusty trestle spans the creek. The structure's much too precarious to honestly call it a bridge—trains move over it without incident, but only a narrow metal grate separates me from a tumble through space to the cold, dirty water. A warning sign prohibits people from walking over the trestle, but I ignore it. The metal sways back and forth under me, and the choppy water churns over the rocks. Foam collects in tiny islands along the bank. The water moves constantly, incessantly, musically. The creek speaks its own language. I envy sailors with their fluency in this liquid dialect—I have no such ability. The slosh and jostle of the water as it moves over the objects in its path sounds incoherent, innocuous, no different than the gurgle of waterslides or garden fountains.

A large gray rock, likely knocked this way by a passing train, rests near the edge of the grate. The toe of my sneaker pushes it out into space. The rock falls, hits the water, and creates its own kind of watery percussion. Concentric rings spread out from it in all directions. Six months ago, I stood in this same place. I wore a black wig, heavy make-up, and a low-cut dress that made me uncomfortable. A good friend of mine had enlisted my help with a short film. The movie consisted largely of shots of me walking backwards down the train tracks, leaning close to

a guy wearing eyeliner, and his hand squeezing my knee. My friend also wanted a shot of a rock hitting the water from the bridge. While she filmed, it was my job to drop the rocks.

“Try throwing it instead of just letting it fall,” she said.

I did as she asked. I repeated the drop ten times before we finished. From the shady roots of a willow tree, a red-eared slider turned and hurried head-first into the water. Had I struck some of its relatives with the other stones? Would they understand that all this was necessary if my friend was to graduate college?

“Do you think I hit anything?” I asked.

She shrugged and shifted the camera’s weight from one arm to the other.

“Mud?” she said.

My friend and I filmed in late April, at the peak of spring’s greening. The creek brimmed with rushing water. The sun and rain transformed the barren fields into a moving blanket of rye grass and goblin flowers. Insects of all kinds – including a newly hatched crop of mosquitoes – flew in dazed, wide arcs around trees and over the water. The view from where I stood that day was idyllic—today is a grim sight by comparison. The noise of the water soothes me, but the wind picks up and cuts right through my coat. The water’s a dull, brown-gray refraction of the sky above me. Is the turtle I saw last April nestled in a leafy hollow somewhere, sleeping through all this? The fish must have slunk into deeper water downstream, but I prefer to imagine them motionless below, resting in suspended animation. Their gills and eyes would seem frozen and wavy through the water, but by March they would twitch first one fin, then another, and with a burst of energy shoot out of sight.

The creek’s a pleasant distraction, but the tunnel always promises new graffiti. Past the trestle, down where the tracks cross the county road, cans of spray paint litter the ditches, a

harbinger of the colorful displays below. From every possible angle, adolescents and malcontents cover the blank walls with messages, thoughts, declarations of love and war. Where the tracks cross the tunnel, a spry artist has tagged a steeply sloped ledge. She, or possibly he, must have inched down the ledge by degrees to paint “Punky Kim Rulz” across the concrete. I’ve sprayed obscenities on the sides of several sheet metal barns—once I went so far as to tag the brick wall of our middle school with my friends. Still, whoever he or she is, “Punky Kim” has far more guts and ambition than I ever did. “Kim’s” glory isn’t entirely out of reach. I could stop by the hardware store on my way home, and stand before the two-shelf display until I settle on a shade and formula that suits my purpose. Later, I’d return under the cover of darkness and leave my own mark on this place. This fantasy appeals to the most adolescent part of me, the part that resents authority and prizes rebellion.

The tracks soothe me with their uniformity, but the tunnel is an evolving public canvas. The graffiti spreads across the mossy, concrete walls with viral speed, and every weekend that passes brings with it new skulls, peace signs, and hearts. The taggers pick fantastic shades: robin’s egg blue, sunset orange, silver, and cerise. About two weeks ago, someone began an immense piece across one of the tunnel’s walls. It was a heart, probably ten feet across, done in clot-red paint. A silver border left a pleasant sheen along the heart’s edges. Across it, in the same silver paint, the artist wrote, “Someday you will die.” Anyone could have painted it. Most likely, some kid from town, motivated by boredom and insubordination, did it by the glow of car’s headlights. Even so, I press my hand to the chilly concrete, and hope for a connection to someone else’s experience of this place.

On the other side of the tunnel, the creek flows under a single-lane road bridge with guard rails on either side. The creek crosses the road, doubles back on itself, curves around to

change direction, and crosses the road again. Then, the water spreads out into a wide, pebbly pool. Along the banks of this pool, the carcasses of sofas, armchairs, and mattresses rot. These forlorn articles of furniture appear as if by magic. I've never seen anyone dumping them. I don't top the hill in my car, or come into view of the creek from around a grove of trees, to find a scraggly person lugging furniture into the brambles. I like to think the furniture moves here of its own accord, that the ripped lazy boy shuffled down the road last night in the dark, or that the sofa turned itself end over end to get here. Perhaps they committed a kind of suicide, bringing their broken, mangled bodies to the only place where destruction would be swift and permanent.

Nothing about the abandoned furniture adds beauty to the creek. Tires and beer cans do not accentuate the natural world any time of year, but certainly not in January. Natural beauty isn't what I prize about this place, anyway. The members of the surrounding community have almost destroyed it with junk and pollution. Yet, the land, air, and water do their best to endure. If I owned a tractor-trailer, or was independently wealthy, I could change everything about this place. I could clear the banks and ditches of man-made debris and transform them into a sort of groomed wilderness. If I did this, though, the beauty of this place would show. My silent walks along the tracks might be interrupted by kids on bikes or men walking dogs. I prefer the tracks to stay messy, to hide their beauty behind a veil of trash only the careful and persistent bother to lift.

In a few months, when spring sets in and brings with it one or more good-sized floods, the creek will shake off the trash along its banks. A rush of dark water will come, biblical in its proportions, and cover the road. The couches will drift downstream to settle in back pastures or floodplains. Eventually, the water will recede and leave branches and up-rooted, skinny saplings in a wide ring around the banks, reminiscent of the greasy film left after a sink-load of dishwater.

On walks down the tracks, I've seen a muddy stray sofa at the edge of a field of grain sorghum. The sofa's life hasn't entirely ended—mice and skunks will carve dens into the fluff and springs to shelter their litters. Maybe a pack of grandchildren will discover it and incorporate it into a clubhouse. It might just decay into lint, rust, and pulp. I'd like for the earth to open up, for it to receive the couch back into itself. Ultimately, though, the couch's fate is as much a mystery to me as the identity of whoever left it here in the first place.

I kick a rock along the tracks with my shoe. It bounces, skipping end over end, and settles to a stop a few feet ahead of me. The railroad ties pass by evenly under my shoes. Even if I lengthen my stride, my legs aren't long enough to span the distance between the wooden ties. Every other step, my heel crunches down into the black and gray rocks between the tracks. The wood's tarry perfume surrounds me, a scent as familiar as it is intoxicating. The drizzle from last night left the railroad ties the same dark auburn as my mother's hair. I stop for a moment and breathe in and out through my mouth. Snot drips from my nose, already numb with cold despite my scarf. Up close, the curves and valleys along the wooden ties have the textural appearance of my mother's hair. It knots at the slightest humidity or tousle, and she must separate the tangles into rows as she rakes a brush through them. I should call her, but I know I'm likely to forget once I return the messy bustle of my apartment.

I walk on past the creek and the tunnel. The clouds break into thin, gray strips, and the sun behind them is a bright white disk. The wind quiets for a few seconds, returns, and disappears like a ghost. In the sudden stillness, a bird flaps to my right, and settles into the upper branches of a dead tree. Its size and white-gold breast tell me it's a red-tailed hawk. The hawk looks in my direction, and then cranes its neck to the east. It bends over to groom the feathers on

its stomach. For the tree, its bark striped black by a bolt of lightning, the hawk is a rare ornament. It's elegant as it preens, slope-shouldered, relaxed.

The hawk straightens up and stretches its head forward. It leaps, flaps its long-feathered wings twice, and glides fast and low over the winter grass. My eyes follow its swift progress through space. I've seen this moment countless times on nature shows, but in never before in person. The hawk catches something in its talons, and flaps up and around in a wide orbit. It hovers for a moment and settles on a different branch in the same scarred tree. I can't tell what the hawk's caught—it might be a squirrel or a rabbit, but the hawk's beak dispatches the animal quickly, and whatever distinguishing features existed on the small creature give way to the carnage. I don't know whether or not to feel sympathy. Was it a rabbit, like the sentient members of the warren in *Watership Down*? Did it have offspring somewhere waiting for a meal that wouldn't come? The natural world offered plenty of dramatic conflicts, but often reneged on resolution. I decide to identify with the hawk, who achieved its goal in one fluid swoop.

I step away from the train tracks and stumble down a gravel hill. Endless stumps and brambles cover the pasture ahead of me. It's not unlike the bombed-out pictures history books include to cover World Wars I and II. Every tree's been cut down, but no one bothered to cart away the stumps and brambles. Walking through here involves coordination and balance, which I was not lucky enough to inherit. Long, dry thorns run through the dead winter grass. One of my shoelaces snags in a barbed tendril. I fight the urge to just pull against them. Instead, I bend over and extract my shoelace. It comes loose without great effort.

The field stretches all the way back to the highway. A pipe fence runs along the edge of the field, past the brambles and scrub brush. I climb over it and keep walking. Just ahead, great chunks of concrete jut up from the earth like slabs of fallen sky. The blocks and sky are equally

dismal. I approach a piece of concrete twice the size of my body. Rebar juts from it in rusty, skeletal arms. I lay my palm flat against the gritty, cold concrete. It chills me instantly, but I hesitate, relishing the intense cold. When my fingers go numb, I shove my hand back into my pocket.

Around the rocks, evidence of teenagers clutters the ground: broken bottles, a discarded prophylactic, someone's baseball cap. A deserted sky-blue velvet recliner – possibly brought over from the creek, possibly dumped out separately – sits beside the charred ring from a bonfire. As with the tunnel, this place also sports graffiti. Across from the chair, for instance, someone has painted, “Nice boobs, Jana!”

The lost and discarded items here make me suddenly jealous of the kids who come here to drink and screw around. I admit I did plenty of this as an adolescent, but now I miss it. As an adult, my friends all have houses and apartments. The urge to venture out into strange, unpopulated places cools with age, but my need for this activity sometimes bears down on me. The closest I've come to something like it was last summer. Local news programs ran stories on a meteor shower; when it passed close enough to earth, strings of shooting stars would jet across the dark, velvet night sky.

“Let's go watch,” I said to my then fiancé. He grimaced.

“Where would we go watch it?” he asked.

“I know a place,” I told him.

I packed up a pair of lawn chairs, insect repellent, and a jug of iced tea. We drove into the deep country dark. When I pulled onto a gravel drive that led up among the concrete blocks, my fiancé turned to me in disbelief.

“What're we stopping here for?” he asked.

I shrugged, killed the engine, and got our stuff out of the trunk. The place was deserted and supremely dark. It was near midnight when we arrived. The ink-blot sky winked with faintly colored lights. I settled into my chair and lit a cigarette. I didn't notice my fiancé's discomfort for some time. He rooted around in the trunk of my car for twenty minutes before it caught my attention.

"Do you have a tire iron?" he asked.

"Why? Do I have a flat or something?"

"No," he said, "I meant for protection."

"From what?" I asked.

He walked over to my chair. A long, pale green trail of light shot across the sky.

"Did you see that one?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said.

My fiancé didn't open his chair or sit down the entire hour we stayed. The place made him fidgety, which I didn't understand. To me, it was a familiar, quirky place to spend an evening. For him, it was the kind of desolate location where serial killers brought their victims. He didn't relax until we drove off and left the blocks of concrete behind us. That night, I wondered if he had a place like this of his own.

"That was really stupid," he said as I drove back, "Someone could've killed us way out there."

"Nobody goes there but me," I said.

"You shouldn't, though. I don't like it."

"Don't you have somewhere like that? Some place that's just yours?"

"No," he said.

We didn't talk about it again. Maybe he didn't know what I was talking about, or maybe he understood and chose to keep his place secret. Either way, I knew the tracks weren't something I could share with him. How did memory and experience transform a place so its unpleasant features became charming and pleasant? My life provides answers to this question. The sight of my parents' house elicits an emotional response from me. In the same way, this collection of concrete blocks now charms me. My memories have bound me to this place.

From the concrete yard, I cross another pipe fence. On the other side, the last field waits, this one blessedly free of stumps and brambles. Crunchy, brown grass breaks under the weight of my body. I know when I get home I'll have inch-long lengths of it to pick out of my socks. Walking through the last field between me and my car, I pretend for a moment that I'm an astronaut returning to my spaceship. It will provide warmth, sustenance (in the form of a small bag of jellybeans), and transportation. I know when I get in I'll crank the heater up, turn on the radio, and drive off to reward myself with hot chocolate. By the time I'm back home, snug in pajamas, warm from twelve ounces of cocoa, the wind and the cold will seem worth it, a badge proving my hardiness and fortitude. I won't think about the graffiti, the tunnel, or the slabs of concrete for days.

But once my three day hiatus ends, I know I'll return. Whatever force draws monarch butterflies to Mexico and salmon upstream draws me to this place. Why this place above others is unclear to me. I can try over and over to explain the merits, character, and oddities of this place, but each attempt seems flaccid and insufficient. Coming here allows me to lose myself in tracks that don't end, mutating graffiti, and self-propagating furniture. Giving myself over to this mess once or twice a week endows me with a drive and purpose I find nowhere else. It's a

sanctuary all my own, hidden in plain sight by a façade of spray paint, ripped furniture, and thorns.