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Girls without Faces & Other Stories

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Girls without Faces & Other Stories

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from
The College of William and Mary

by

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Accepted for High Honors
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Girls without Faces & Other Stories

Contents:

<i>Sea Stars</i>	2
<i>Girls without Faces</i>	18
<i>Scales</i>	27
<i>The Man with the Green Thumb</i>	40
<i>A Body of Work</i>	50
<i>Facets of Coal</i>	59
<i>Puzzleland</i>	64
Acknowledgments	89

Sea Stars

Gracie hated seafood. She hated seafood because she hated tasting the ghost of her meal's past life. The saltwater that shrimp or crab inhabited before fishermen netted and beheaded them, sold them by the pound.

Gracie wondered if aliens might taste air on humans the way humans taste sea on fish. Her mother would taste spiced, like mulled wine, because of her perfume. Her father would taste like fresh printed ink, just brewed coffee, spring in an old house that breezes through the cracks.

Gracie liked to think she'd taste of all things watermelon-flavored, hard candies and soft chews, slushy drinks at her mother's fundraisers. Real watermelon tasted too true to its name, lacking the heightened tang and pop of processed sweets. Names, as Gracie discovered, had a knack for misleading.

After dinner, the family perused a gift store connected to the restaurant. Shark teeth were on sale, two for a dollar, and watercolor prints showed topless mermaids being dragged by pirates or fondled by deep-sea divers. The store sold pet fish, guppies, Betas, and exotic varieties, too. A few eels, some snails, turtles the size of golf balls, hibiscuses painted on their shells. Gracie ignored all these and turned her attention to the lone starfish suctioned to the side of its tank.

She examined its body and recognized that yes, it was a star, but no, it was no fish. It lacked the fins, gills, and pouty lips that picture books and Disney films had taught her to expect. She asked the boy with acne and a brown collared shirt if it really

was a fish. He stopped adjusting a tiny Eiffel tower in the goldfish tank and knelt down to her level.

“Actually, it’s not. The proper term for a starfish is a sea star. They’re really closer to sea urchins than they are to fish.” He reached into another tank to show her the spiky, deep plum ball, a prettier version of the burrs that stuck to her cocker spaniel’s tail.

“A sea star,” Gracie repeated, tapping lightly on the glass.

She searched the trinket maze for her parents, finding her father only after he sneezed, *Ah-cha!*, the second syllable short, abrasive, as though he were chopping the air in half. She told him all about the pink and purple starfish that wasn’t actually a starfish and how alone it looked in a tank big enough for ten, maybe twenty.

Gracie’s father *hmmmed*. His daughter did not throw tantrums. She sulked. In corners, on stairs, behind the boxwoods along the driveway. She stripped all expression from her eyes and ate, drank, moved slowly, testing how agonizing a second could tick by. Her father would offer her the TV remote and her mother would offer her Cool Whip in a bowl and neither succeeded in reanimating their child until she’d received that day’s fancy.

Gracie walked out of the store with the starfish and all its accessories. Her father set up the tank in her room underneath the window. She did not bother with a lid. She could imagine no reason why her starfish would ever want to leave. Her house had Ionic columns perfect for hide-and-go-seek and her father never raised his voice. Well, once. About a missing golf cart and a headcover “used for the wrong driver.”

When the starfish finally did speak, it spoke in a helium-infused voice, the pitch bubblegum pink if colors had sound. It said, “I’m a *staaar*,” and in stretching this word, imbuing it with pomp and soft *haaa* breaths, the starfish seemed to declare itself a celebrity rather than a celestial body.

Upon hearing its voice, Gracie stopped plunking sugar cubes in tea and approached the tank. The starfish had one ray sticking out the top and waved at her.

She grabbed and held it by this one ray, letting its body dangle in the air. She examined its underbelly. A clear, viscous sac emerged where she imagined its mouth might be. It was his stomach. She poked the glob once and it deflated. “Please don’t do that,” the starfish said.

And having been raised by a Southern Belle, Gracie said, “Excuse me, sir” and offered it refreshments. She set it down in a chair beside her Troll Doll, Mrs. Butterfield, whose yellow hair stood stiff by rubber bands. She poured him a cup of her mother’s sweet tea and asked, “Are you really a star?”

The starfish replied, “Yes. I’m a sea star” and he said “sea star” the way a professor might ask his students to call him doctor instead of mister.

“From the ocean?”

The starfish nodded.

“Not the sky?”

It shook its top ray no.

“Oh.” Gracie sipped her tea. “You’d like it there. There are lots of stars you could be friends with.” She softened her voice as her mother did before a forehead-kiss. “I know you don’t have many.”

Gracie now remembered its tank as having been able to fit a hundred starfish.

It squinched into itself, embarrassed. The starfish's new creases made it appear to frown. "And these sky stars would like me?"

Gracie nodded. "Oh yes! You could even join a constellation." Though Gracie could scarcely distinguish them herself. Constellations didn't have numbers to facilitate the connecting of bright white dots. She longed to see big and little bears sleeping in the sky but saw only rashes instead.

"Are you in a constellation?" asked the starfish.

Gracie said, "No. I'm not in one now" and she wondered why she'd said "now" since she was a little girl and not a star, she'd never shaped a phantom sign before.

"Are you in one?" it asked Mrs. Butterfield.

"Of course not," answered Gracie. "And you shouldn't talk to her. She's married."

She named it Horace after her uncle in Devonshire. Both were fat. Human Horace from breakfast tea and biscuits, starfish Horace from being born the cushion variety of sea star.

With the name came the pronouns. Gracie began thinking of Horace as *he* rather than *it* because if Horace had been a girl, he would have had eyelashes. Instead, he had tiny tube feet that enabled him to move. These feet, thin as unwound paperclips, made his rays resemble slugs with centipede legs. Each itchy millimeter taken felt like a kiss-peck in her palm.

In his tank, Horace thought about Mrs. Butterfield. He thought about the water and her hair and how she lacked the gills to breathe. Gracie didn't have other aquatic pets. She had a dog whose snot streaked the glass but the dog could not fit inside his tank. He loved when Gracie handled him, he loved the closeness of her face, he could hear her eyes snap like a doll's when she blinked. But the air hurt. He shriveled and groped at water droplets in her palm. He could not bring himself to ask for water, to be plopped back in the tank, he did not want her to know the extent of his otherness.

"Is there water in space?" he asked Gracie over tea the next day. He tried not to look too closely at Mrs. Butterfield and her butterfly clip.

"Oh yes," Gracie said. "That's how it rains."

"And there are other sea stars?"

Gracie shook her head. "Real stars, Horace. There are real stars, but you look just like them."

"Then perhaps I will," he said, "go to space."

Gracie smiled, all teeth, and that smile nudged her glasses up her nose. Horace wanted to be happy, but he would miss those purple frames and the freckles underneath them, all the constellations he'd ever need.

She began to talk of stickiness. They would stick him to the sky. Her mother hid the Krazy glue, they'd use maple syrup and honey instead. These sat on the lower pantry shelves, so Gracie could easily reach them. "We'll try tonight," she said.

Horace leaned back and listened to the excitement in her voice. He dared to drape one ray over Mrs. Butterfield's shoulder. They were friends and she was married and that meant off-limits but Horace could not stop himself from liking her nakedness. He liked

her plump belly and pudgy limbs and overall squatness. He liked that her body mimicked his own stout frame.

He would've spawned with her, spritzed his sperm into the air like a perfume cloud, had Gracie not been in the room and had Mrs. Butterfield's jewelry not threatened his self-esteem. There, on her stomach, gleamed a golden gem, brilliant and perfectly star-shaped. Horace worried that it reflected Mrs. Butterfield's expectations about what a real star ought to be.

Gracie could not throw very high. She also lacked aim. Instead of throwing him straight up, like a tennis player, Gracie arced Horace across the backyard into dogwood branches, the garden shed, the open patio umbrella. Grass clung to every inch of him along with a few stray clovers, none of them four-leafed.

"This isn't going well," Horace said.

"More syrup?" Gracie eyed the half-empty bottle. While her parents watched *Footloose* upstairs, she'd snuck into the pantry and stood there in the dark. Mouth open, head back, she poured the sticky-sweet liquid down her throat. She closed her eyes and knocked over a sack of potatoes. Two tumbled out.

Horace had said "Gracie?" three times while sitting on a can of tomato soup. Gracie wiped her mouth, capped the syrup, unshelved the honey. She carried a bottle in either hand. Horace stuck to the front of her shirt. They escaped through the French doors in the kitchen. It was then 9:10 and the fireflies flew as high as the gutters.

"I doubt more syrup will help."

Gracie said, “Oh,” and laid down in the grass, her arms and legs spread as though to make snow angels.

Horace inched very slowly toward her and collapsed on her stomach. The syrup and the grass made him sluggish. He looked up at the sky and the stars and he looked at the second-floor window, still lit, that he knew marked Gracie’s room. From her perch on the dresser, Mrs. Butterfield could not see the sky, only a poster of Myrtle Beach at sunset. Horace hated the beach ever since he’d washed ashore. The hot sand and hot sun and only dead shells for friends. But he liked that poster. He liked seeing it when others saw it too.

“Gracie,” he said.

And she said, “A Frisbee.” She said, “We’ll stick you to a Frisbee because I can throw those farther.”

Horace agreed, though hesitant and unsure about what a Frisbee was, and he asked, “Now?” and Gracie said, “No, later.” She wanted to watch the red star blinking across the sky.

“Is it in pain?” Horace whispered.

“No,” said Gracie, looking up. “It can’t be. It’s with its friends.”

Gracie yelled at Horace to wake up. There was fog on the ground.

“And?” he asked.

Gracie pulled on her rain boots, wiggled her toes. “They’re clouds!” She knocked over her alarm clock searching for her glasses.

“I don’t follow.”

“We can stick you to one!”

Horace slumped further in his tank. He’d thought he’d heard Mrs. Butterfield say, “Hello” at last night’s tea party.

Gracie scooped him up, along with a few stray pebbles, and the pair trekked down the stairs, stopping to steal what was left of the maple syrup.

Gracie dropped Horace methodically and with poise, the action endearing in its cyclical nature of release, *sorry!*, pick up, repeat. She dropped him soft side down each time so that his feet might latch onto the cold, grey wisps. She did not stand in one place, but rather, start-stopped like an assembly line parallel to the patio.

“Use your feet,” she said.

And Horace lied, “I am!”

“Butterfingers,” Gracie murmured, releasing him again. “Sorry!” But the air whooshed as he fell and Horace heard “Butterfield” instead. He landed in a patch of dirt and curled his rays inwards, contorting into a prickly sphere. He could not bear for the Troll to know of this humiliation, of how dirty and ugly he’d become.

Gracie’s father watched from the window over the double basin sink. He sipped coffee and chuckled at his daughter, the gleaner. He thought about waking his wife. The sun had yet to rise and he could almost forget that he’d slept in the guest bedroom, counting pars like sheep. His wife always went over. Seven, eight, sometimes fifteen strokes a hole. She needed remedial lessons, never scheduled when he was home.

He thought about heating cinnamon bagels in the toaster like in the early years. Putting on another pot of coffee, Italian Roast this time. On their third date, she used the template joke *I like my coffee like I like my men* and he had sweated out the response,

hoping she didn't say something like *hot* or *dark* because being one-eighth Irish, he was *gangly* and *pale*.

Gracie's mother had leaned in. She'd said, "With sleeves" and then a too-tan muscle man walked by in a wife-beater. The most perfectly timed moment of their relationship. Not even their wedding day had run so smoothly.

Gracie was nearing the fence. She dropped Horace again and he landed in a pile of dog poop. She paused mid-bend, contemplating what to do, which alarmed her father more than her previous lateral ritual. He was about to go outside when the phone rang.

He answered it, "Hello?" then set down his coffee. "Yes, this is he. No, he's my wife's brother."

He did not see Gracie pick Horace up and use her shirt to wipe the poop off each individual ray.

Human Horace died at 7:49 a.m. his time. He choked on a chocolate digestive biscuit, generic Tesco brand. It was the last one in the roll. He had saved it for two days until he could enjoy it with the *Sunday People* and a nice cup of Earl Grey. In his final moments, the biscuit's betrayal hurt far worse than the obstruction of his windpipe or the reminder that he lived alone, no wife or children to perform the Heimlich on his stout frame, faint with B.O. trapped beneath fat rolls.

His body was flown to Georgia to be buried in the family plot. He had enjoyed cottage life to the ostentatious mansions of his old money roots and would've preferred cremation so that, in ashes, he might be as small as those early days of cells multiplying in his mother's womb.

When her parents told her, Gracie did not cry. She had only met him once at Christmas two years ago. But her mother's swollen eyes, her father's way-off look, convinced her that she should. So Gracie cried out of guilt and then cried more because she could not cry from sadness. She held Horace close to her chest and trickled tears onto his back and he loved her for it.

At the funeral, Gracie's black dress gleamed with snot. No one noticed. She stroked her belt's satin roses as the casket descended into its grave. She tugged her mother's skirt. "Where is he going?" Gracie asked and she thought fondly of China, of the oriental tea her uncle could blow cool. The cups wouldn't even have handles.

Her mother knelt down beside her, ratty Kleenex pressed to nose. "He's going to Heaven, Gracie. To be with Grandma and Grandpa."

"Where's that?"

Her mother looked up to bat away fresh tears. She smiled, pointed towards the sun. "Beyond the clouds and stars where nothing bad can happen."

"So he has to go down to go up?"

Her mother almost laughed. "Life's filled with wacky directions." She ruffled her daughter's hair. Stood. Squeezed her husband's hand and he let her because her friends were watching.

Back home, at the reception, Gracie's mother locked herself in her bedroom. She remembered all the holidays, all the so-so days, where she'd been too busy to call, too lazy to compute the time difference. Her golf instructor knocked on the door and she let him in, she did not care that only half the bed was made.

He did not know Horace, he did not know she'd even had a brother, but he brought a tray of cold cuts and asked if there was anything he could do. He leaned in, rubbed her shoulder. "Anything at all," he said.

His daughter was Gracie's age. They played mini-golf together and shared a favorite hole. Sixteen, because the giraffe's neck really moved and his bowtie twirled, windmill-like, when someone hit a hole-in-one.

"Hi Margaret," said Gracie.

"Hi." The girl rolled a turkey slice, stabbed it with a toothpick.

"How are you?"

"Have you seen my dad?" she asked. "He said we'd only stay for half an hour and it's already 4:00."

"No, I haven't seen him."

"Well have you seen your mom?"

"I think she's in her room." Gracie watched Margaret stab a cheese cube. "Why?"

"Forget it," she said. "Bye." She hopped off her stool.

"Do you want to see my sea star?" Gracie called after her. She did not turn around. She found the bald men's conversation about mortgages more appealing.

Gracie didn't know how to break Nilla wafers into optimal chokeable pieces. She mostly just crushed the cookies with her fist and hoped they didn't all turn to crumbs. She sat in a plastic yellow chair in front of Horace's tank, back hunched, shoulders tense, picking chunks from her palm and feeding them to him. She resisted the urge to touch his protruding stomach.

“Why aren’t we having tea?” Horace asked. “It’s ten o’clock.”

“Because Mrs. Butterfield’s in the hospital.”

“Is she okay?” Horace asked, voice spiking higher than its normal squeak.

“She had a baby,” Gracie said. “It’s over there,” she said and nodded at a blocky pink eraser swaddled in toilet paper.

Horace slid up and down the side of his tank, splashing water. “Oh, may I see it?”

“No.”

He stopped.

Gracie said, “I know you talk to her” and she fed him another piece. Listened for choking noises. “Mrs. Butterfield, I mean. I told you not to.”

“But I get lonely when you’re gone,” he said and then, softer, “We just talk. We’re friends.”

“No married woman has friends,” said Gracie. Her voice echoed her father’s. Stern and scared and full of longing. She’d overheard him on the phone, talking to his father. “At least, not friends that are boys. Because you know what happens?”

Horace shook his top ray no.

She said, “People talk.” She looked at Horace. “And then they stop talking to you.”

Three days passed and Horace did not choke to death. He did not cough once. Gracie watched him the way a mother does her newborn, anxiously and without blinking. His tank now sat by her bedside and she would wake three, four times a night to check that he was still alive, only to become disappointed that his rays still swayed. Some

nights she stared at him, trying to ascertain his exact shade of pink, but mostly she'd just turn her back to hide her pout from Horace, wary that he might possess night vision along with his power of speech.

On day four, Gracie sulked in the garage, beside two cans of paint, behind her mother's golf clubs. She'd spent an hour staring at the wall before her father found her. He'd thought Gracie was in her room, he'd been snooping while her mother shopped for groceries. He'd requested scalloped potatoes because there were no onions in the house. He'd lied about getting a promotion. His wife still agreed to cook for him on special occasions.

“What do you want this time?” he asked Gracie.

She told him. “I want Horace to die.”

Her father squatted down next to her. Debated if his daughter was forgetful, in denial, or just stupid. “Honey,” he began, “Uncle Horace did die. But even if he hadn't, you shouldn't say those sorts of things.”

“No, my Horace! My star!” Gracie hugged her knees tighter. “I want him to die.”

“Is that why you keep him out of water?” Her father hugged her. “It's okay if you don't want him anymore, Sweetie. Just let us know so we can give him to someone who does.”

“He talked to Mrs. Butterfield.”

“Who?”

“My Troll Doll.”

“Oh.”

Her father checked his watch. His wife would be home soon.

“Barbie called her a slut.”

“Gracie, where on Earth—”

“Barbie said the baby looks too pink.”

Gracie dug the hole with her mother’s trowel and Horace watched. Neither said a word until she had finished, a pile of dirt beside her.

“I’ll die,” said Horace.

And Gracie said, “I know. But you’ll go to Heaven. You’ll be in the sky.”

“I don’t want to die.”

“But it’s the only way. We’ve tried everything else.”

“The Frisbee?” Horace asked hopefully.

Gracie shook her head. “I lent it to Margaret. It’s on her roof now.” She’d never owned a Frisbee. She hadn’t talked to Margaret since the funeral.

Horace looked up at Gracie’s house. Her room was dark.

“I’ll turn off the sprinklers,” Gracie said. “So you can’t get water. It’ll take a few hours, I think.” She paused. “I love you,” she said and she wanted to cry because she meant it.

She smiled and lowered Horace into the grave, soft side up. One after one, his rays twisted skywards like a baby wanting to be cradled. “Please,” he said, but Gracie pretended not to hear. She was helping Horace make friends. She was helping, she was helping.

She brushed dirt back into the hole, using her whole forearms as bulldozers. She saved the dense grass clumps for last and patted them down as best she could.

“We’re going to be late to church,” Gracie’s mother called from the French doors. She adjusted her string of pearls so that the clasp wouldn’t show. Her husband was already in the car. He could not wait any longer in the house.

Gracie stood, dusted dirt off her knees.

“I’ll see you in a few days,” she told the mound.

Months passed. In October, Gracie’s cocker spaniel birthed puppies and these puppies liked to dig. One discovered Horace’s grave and chewed on the shriveled sea star by the boxwoods. Gracie never liked to repeat her sulking places, but today she knelt down beside the puppy, her knees tucked under her chin. She could not bear to be inside. The rooms rang too empty. The cardboard boxes stacked in one clean line resembled a casket. Ms. Butterfield and her baby slept in Horace’s tank that night on the kitchen island. They would travel in her mother’s sedan, being too precious to clunk inside the moving van.

“I don’t want to go,” said Gracie. She stroked the puppy’s ear and when the puppy did not turn around, she yanked its tail. It yelped and ran away.

Gracie did not recognize Horace at first. She picked him up by one ray. He was brittle and dry and grey. His tiny tube feet had hardened into nubs. These wound within his rays, outlined his five-point shape, like snaking vertebrae. She could not imagine him in the ocean or desert or sky because no one would smile after seeing his desiccated form. He was too hollow to hold love. It would drip out of him slowly with every frown shown to him and, eventually, with every mute expression.

He’d never made it up to Heaven. Ms. Butterfield still changed her name.

Gracie tossed Horace aside, knowing she'd no longer taste of all things watermelon-flavored. Just watermelon, bland and full of seeds. She'd swallowed a seed when she was four and everyone had warned her how it would grow inside her stomach. Expand, spread vines, make her belly swell as it housed its new gourd baby. They'd told her she'd explode. She didn't believe them. She couldn't believe that something so small could destroy her from the inside out.

Girls without Faces

In Virginia, in March, nine girls were born without faces and I was one of them. None of us possessed a nose, lips, eyes. The doctors sliced straight and stitched us mouths so we could breathe. We still had tongues and gums and that relieved them.

Nurses swaddled us in pink and marked our soles with numbers. Firstborn 1, secondborn 2, and so on through 9 who died within the month. Her mother hated her, screamed and flailed and never blinked. She called 9 a monster. She didn't even gift her a name; the birth certificate read 9 where the rest of us had beginnings and middles and ends.

We were thankful for these names, but seldom used them. We found solace in our numbers that no one else could claim.

The world knew us briefly as the No-Face Nine. No one remembers that now. Even we don't. We were babies and 9 was a baby and it was easy to forget she ever breathed because she was the last of us. Her number provided tidy death. We could so easily reduce, rename, become the No-Face Eight because no 9 hovered to remind us that we were ever more.

We grew up together and travelled together and interviewed together until we reached eighteen. We filmed our last talk show in Los Angeles where I met my boyfriend. He was in the audience. The mic circulated during commercials and Boyfriend said, Yes, this question is for the redhead.

His voice sounded nice, but I couldn't remember my hair color so I sat, mute, trying to feel color out of my split ends.

5 elbowed me and whispered, That's you.

She took an interest in these things. We all knew she was a blonde and not a real blonde, either.

Yes? I answered in his general direction.

He laughed into the mic and asked if I wanted to get coffee after filming.

They give us coffee backstage, I lied because I was young and a girl and had never held a boy's hand.

Funny, I didn't see it when I snuck backstage, he said.

And I replied, Neither did I.

Your smile when you said that, he murmurs into my neck. We're lying on the couch in our apartment. It's dark and we're nostalgic. New Year's does that to people.

Who needs eyes when you can smile like that? he asks.

Boyfriend works in retail. He's assistant manager and he has a headset. He hates folding jeans. Too many steps, he says. He loves dressing the window mannequins. They're plastic and hollow, shiny white and shiny black, male and female and hermaphrodite child.

No faces, either, he says. Not even indentations.

He works the night of my nineteenth birthday. I wanted him to. He sends everyone home early and offers to lock up. Girlfriend meet Quin, he says, and he runs my hand over the mannequin's smooth no-face. Cold and flat. Flatter than my own. My cheeks had elasticity, color, soft rose my mom assured me.

What's she wearing? I ask and he whispers, Nothing, and touches my sweater and I say, No, they'll see.

I hear him pat the mannequin as though it were a drum. Hear his footsteps grow fainter and metal ripple. More footsteps and grunts and *Goddammit*s murmured to the cement floor.

Boyfriend returns, out of breath, and says, They're in the changing rooms, and we make love in Clearance. Shirts topple off hangers as I grasp for imaginary bed.

After, he read me sale tags. Bleach on sleeve, he says and kisses my shoulder. Small tear under arm, missing a button.

I want it, I say. That last one.

He tells me it's ugly. Orange plaid, a men's medium.

And besides, he sighs, it's twenty dollars.

I need it, I say gently, and I feel our little nest for its sleeve.

A week later, 5 receives a face transplant. She throws a party after she has time to heal and invites the No-Face Eight. Only two of us show up.

6 and I sip punch by the fireplace with our plus ones. We keep one hand on the mantle and try not to knock over portraits or porcelain figurines. We cradle them in our hands and feel cat ears, squirrel tails, tiny raccoon paws.

The face belonged to a woman named Meredith Miller. She was once brain-dead and is now dead-dead. Her daughter is our age; she shuffles after 5 and strokes her cheeks, searching for her mother's mole that 5 removed. I know because 5 has been hissing, Stop it! Stop it! You're ruining my makeup! for the past hour and a half.

Nice punch, 5, I say as I hold up my cup. I am limited in my scope of compliments.

Call me Evelyn, please. Evelyn Stokes, she says, too loudly, by my ear. She has a face others can attach a name to now. Boyfriend counts 5's new/old name on banners and cakes and placards. Thirty-five, he whispers and squeezes my waist.

He says, 5, I think the caterers were looking for you, and he readjusts his stance so I can breathe. 5 has already *click-clacked* away, the donor daughter not far behind.

I'm vegan, 6 says.

I'm agnostic, I say.

We shake hands.

On our way out, Boyfriend smears the piping on a sheet cake. He tells me to lick his finger and I taste icing. Buttercream? I ask and Boyfriend says, YN. He says, It reads 'Congratulations Evel' now. He laughs, She might miss 5.

In the car, Boyfriend does not wait for me to ask.

It's droopy, he says. Like a Dali clock.

I roll my white cane in my hand. Is she pretty?

Boyfriend starts the car. The radio blasts on, then nothing. She can't smile, he says. Ugly girls can't smile.

Can you smile? I ask.

He laughs. I'm the prettiest Goddamn girl in the world!

Are you? I ask softly.

I hear his fingers *stick restick* onto the steering wheel. No, he says. I look better with a beard.

I reach to find his cheek, and find his curls first, his nose second. He grabs my hand and steers it right, his ear lobe parts my fingers. I tell him he can grow a beard and he asks me if I'm sure?

I know it itches your face, he says.

I say, Thank you, and lean back in my seat. He said 'your face' so simply and I love him for it. I love it more than when he says, I love you.

At home, I can't sleep. I wonder what 5's face looks like. Months will pass before I'll know, before she'll let me feel. She doesn't want our groping to bruise her fresh complexion.

I call 2 because of the three-hour time difference. She's somewhere West. I want to say Colorado.

Hello?

What time is it?

What good does that do you? 2 laughs. I hear the metallic *switch* of a lighter. It's 10:15 here, she says.

Where's here again?

Vegas.

You play poker?

Nah, a friend does. Studies my expert poker face, she says and breathes in deep. I wait for the exhale. It never comes.

A male friend? I ask.

He screws me, yeah, she says. Puts his hand on my face like a damn exorcist.

What are you smoking?

A cig, jeez.

How?

Through my sto-ma. 2 pronounces 'stoma' like a baby would 'mama' or 'dada.' I touch my own collarbone. No hole, perfectly human. I am silent for a long time.

I saw 3 a few weeks back, up in Portland, says 2.

Really?

2 breathes in again. She says, 3's an art installation. *A walking art installation.*

Can you believe it?

I hear thunder on the other end of the phone. I say, You're kidding.

She wears a burlap sack on her head, says 2. To protest beauty standards. Has a blog, couple hundred followers.

What a martyr, I say.

2 *mhmms* on the other end and says, She's fat too. 2 says, I knew before we even hugged. She waddle-stomps. I mean, the ground really shakes.

A car honks in Vegas, dips into a puddle because I hear the water splash.

2 asks, Is 5 fat? and I say, No. Just droopy.

Damn, says 2. Well, I hope her donor had brown eyes. She always wanted blue.

I'll ask Boyfriend, I say. I have one of those.

Good for you, says 2. You had the softest hands.

We hang up.

It's 4:00 a.m. my time when we speak again. We've both just received the same phone call.

7 died. Jumped from seven stories high. She tore 5's party invitation into tiny paper bits.

2 says, At least she wasn't 1, and I say, Don't say that.

I'm not mad at 2. Even when she says she won't fly in for the funeral, she's low on funds. I'll go with 6 the vegan, I assure her.

At the funeral, we line up and face the casket. 1, 4, 5, 6, 8. 7 had twin brothers. They stand like rooks on either end of us. Twin One tells us 7 requested open casket and we all nod because we understand.

We hold hands to restrain ourselves. We want to touch the planes and bumps and contours the collision created. The nose of cheekbone, the eyes of scabs, the lips of fresh-torn skin. Her unique markings.

The others leave once the service ends. Boyfriend searches for our coats. I sit in the back, a Bible to my no-face. I don't want to draw more attention to myself. I am already wearing the orange clearance shirt. I know because I feel its empty button-ness when I want to cry and cry more because I lack the eyes for it.

The pew creaks. An old man says, Which one are you?

I answer, Guess.

You all look the same to me.

I'm 8, I say to the Bible.

He touches my hand, lightly. I put down the book because his hand trembles and I imagine we both rely on canes.

He says, I'm sorry.

Don't be, it happens all the time, I say.

No, I'm sorry that you're 8 and there are seven now. The No-Face Seven, he says.

Everyone'll think she was 8 and that you're 7. Cleaner that way, to go in order.

But I'm 8, I say but I already don't believe it. I can feel the title changing in the world's brain, streamlining to compact us into ordinal progression.

At our apartment, Boyfriend asks me what I'd like for dinner. I tell him Italian because Italian restaurants have tea lights and I want to feel warm. He calls a restaurant, a man's name ending in O, and makes our reservation.

Is seven okay? he asks.

I'm fine, I think. She's dead, I say.

Seven o'clock?

I want to eat at eight. Call them back.

Boyfriend squeezes my hand and asks if I'm all right.

I ask him, Why was 6 afraid of 7?

He pleads, Girlfriend.

7 had a temper, I say. She cut 6's hair off, I say, smile, continue. But that's not the joke and neither is 7 ate 9. The joke's that 8's not there anymore. It doesn't exist, a verb's replaced it. And the numbers aren't in order but people don't mind, just this once, because it gives them something to laugh at.

Boyfriend says, You'll always be 8, and I want to believe him. But I was Erica Fleming before I learned to count. I was Erica Fleming in my mother's womb, before I had no face.

Scales

Put is the sexiest verb I know. Have you ever been *put* somewhere? It implies lightness, man lifting up woman, *putting* her in her place, proverbial or real: bed, dresser, laminate countertops.

Adults can keep their *kiss* and *hug* and *fuck*.

I want a man to put his lips on mine, teeth crashing in passion. Put his hands on my waist and squeeze until my vertebrae ruptures. Put his dick inside me again and again until he passes out. Jim never did that. If he had, I wouldn't be in a wheelchair. I wouldn't have grown a fish tail either.

My girlfriends are all jealous. They take turns spritzing my tail with coconut water after school. They stare for hours at its turquoise iridescence. The scales vary in size, but each possesses the same texture, thin as propeller seeds, smooth as glass. I wear maxi skirts in class so I don't distract my peers, Principal Dangerfield's special orders.

He's sixty, married for thirty-three years, and collects Brazilian geodes as paperweights. He uses greasy polish to clean out their holes. For shinier jewels, he claims, but we all know he likes to come between the amethysts. He dropped one the day my father wheeled me in after my aquatic transformation. In that day's meeting, Principal Dangerfield adjusted his tie eight times, coughed twice, excused himself once to use the little boy's room.

"Jittery fellow," said Dad.

Horny fellow, thought I. As with all men, the question whirred in the principal's brain like cotton candy, slowly gaining shape, but no real substance. Just the sweet

dissolving notion of *how*? How could I straddle him? Where would his penis go? Where was the ass he liked to see squeezed into a thong? These questions made him curious. Which made him want me. Which made him want me more since he, nor no man, ever really could.

It's October now and I have seven suitors, including one lacking an appendix, one with a sprained ankle, and one with an extra toe. The last one I enjoy the most. Landon lets me paint his toenails Coral Red 034. One coat, two coats, topcoat. Eleven toes spread apart with cotton tufts. He never laughs, we never kiss. We just sit quietly in the after-dinner stillness of my house, me painting, him wetting Q-tips with polish remover, watching the Home Shopping Network in the dark.

Jim's bald spot was hot. It wasn't shiny or comb-over worthy. He could easily cover it with a yarmulke. At thirty, he wore his hair longer than most men, curls hugged his earlobes. The other girls giggled. Told him to grow a beard, cut the scruff, fabricate a wig. I wrote it pretty:

*a bare patch where
the moss won't creep
in fear of waking
eternal sleep
of beautiful woman,
child too
lost from man
and Man in moon.*

I had an easy time romanticizing what I didn't see straight on. I could write away a back rash or ass pimples so long as the front remained intact and statuesque and that of a man's. The bald spot corroborated that I was investing in an older model, a more

experienced, well-travelled model that had seen Morocco and Portugal and the lobster shacks in Maine. Boys my age might've had sumptuous locks, but that meant nothing if they couldn't identify a trochee in a Dryden.

I first wanted Jim when he winked at me. It was day four of Walden Workshop, the day camp for burgeoning writers, grades seven through twelve. My poetry class sat in a circle in the too long grass. A game of ultimate Frisbee ran parallel in the Quad, a brunette and a redhead sunbathed by the fountain, bikini tops off and cushioning their cheeks. Only one actually had boobs. I'm sure the other had a great personality.

Jessica, the caesura enthusiast, and Colin, the spoken word stutterer, sniffed, poked, rolled, bit, and man-handled their clementines on either side of me. Jim had assigned us odes in the style of Pablo Neruda for that afternoon. Our instructor was elsewhere, nowhere, who cared? Ms. Myers didn't have an MFA, publishing record, or honey baritone voice.

After ten minutes of strikethroughs and doodles and raspberries blown to muses, Jim crouched down beside me, our knees so close they almost touched. His cologne saturated the air between us, all-consuming in its density and tang. I could've drowned in it, happily and with no regret. "No luck, Opal?" he asked.

"No luck," I said.

He told me to name it so I named it Clem.

"How original." He smiled and laced his fingers. "Now undress him."

"You mean peel it?"

Jim nodded. I scrutinized its orangeness, its pores, its near-spherical shape. Held it looser as words like *ball* and *seed* simmered in my brain.

I blushed, but wrote nothing, so Jim asked, “May I?” and I said “Sure?” and he reached, punctured, unfurled the clementine before me, hands gently orbiting like a potter’s molding clay.

“Veins,” he said, stripping off the thin white strings. His own veins ridged along half-sleeved arms. I wanted him to lift a dumbbell or a stack of books, just so I could see those veins pop, those muscles flex.

He pinched out a slice, handed it to me. Told me to taste it, all of it. Veins, flesh, juice. He watched me eat. First slice whole. Second halved. Juice trickled down my chin, stained my fingers citrus-sweet. Jessica called out *Hel-lo, T-A!* splitting syllables like line breaks, but he never turned away. He just focused on my lips, chapped and buzzing with unkissed nerves.

“Any ideas yet?” he asked.

I lied and said, “A few.” Mostly I thought about bananas and strawberries and how clementines were much, much sexier. He leaned forward.

“Me too.”

And then he winked at me. He winked at me and I had never been winked at before and the leaves stilled, pages stopped fluttering. I felt the heightened calm of my first open mic night. A sociology major played pop covers on his guitar and when he sang words like *love* and *beautiful* and *she*, his eyes found mine at a second row table, as if invisible thread tethered our lines of sight. I left before he finished his set. Stood outside, sipped my latte, watched him wind chords as he scanned the crowd for me. For someone, someone kind and warm, I wanted to play the never-known lover, just once, to test the role.

The following week, it rained. I loved this particular rain more than all the snow that cancelled school. Because my windshield wipers were broken and Jim offered me a ride home and I said, "Sure!"

I knew little about cars except he drove a manual. I liked that he did. I liked that it began with *man* as if to reaffirm his manliness, the sureness of his hands as he effortlessly maneuvered the stick, gliding it *up down left right*.

We might've listened to music, but I could only focus on the stoplights. I wanted red and he wanted yellow but we drove through six straight greens. I imagined tiny men inside the stoplights, stacked precariously on each other's shoulders. Heard them counting Mississippis until they might shine their colored lights. Each one knew our destination before I did and seemed to speed along the process, cheering *Go Go Go* with every burst of green.

Jim lived in a studio apartment with white walls, IKEA furniture, and no roommate. One meandering room comprised the kitchen, living room, bedroom. The bathroom contained a blocky tub. He asked if I wanted anything to eat, drink. Beer? Oreos? Clementines? Another wink.

"Water," I said. I wanted something to hold. He reached around me for a glass and then he kissed me. Lifted me by the waist and placed me on the laminate countertop. The cabinet's door handle banged against my skull. Jim slipped his hands between my thighs and pushed them out, pushed himself in, claimed that tiny fresh-formed space as his.

He whispered, “You’re incredible” and I loved the four syllable-ness of the word. Three more than *hot*, two more than *pretty*, one more than *beautiful*. Four whole syllables colliding into praise. That was the only thing he put in me, that idea inside my head. That I was more than just another girl, another woman. I was incredible, like an eclipse or mountain-view.

For two humans, who breathed love into words, we did little speaking. We communicated in sighs and arcs and grips. The loss of my shorts and shirt did not affect me, but the unclasping of my bra...that slight *click*, singular pull forward, off. My breasts exposed. Bare and soft and blurred in the rain-grey afternoon. I felt older, more allowed to touch his body, mine. To experience pleasure, to finally have sex. I was always pretty enough to. I had long, blonde hair. Clear skin.

But pretty has nothing to do with it. The pretty girl learns this when the man says, “It’s so hard to be good.”

And she mumbles “Good?” to his shoulder, loving the broadness of his back, the vast canvas-ness of it.

“Yeah,” he says, thinking onto the mattress and because she feels him drifting, slowly creeping away like fog, she asks him if he has a condom. He looks at her near-nakedness and says no, he ran out last week, he forgot to buy more.

They do not have sex because the girl is practical and is not on the pill. She cannot afford Plan B or X or Y.

And ten minutes later, while he showers, she finds a full pack of condoms in his bedside table. Beside a bottle of lotion, underneath a Nicholas Sparks novel that she knows isn’t his.

She will hate him for it. She will remember him as a first. First bra off, first missed opportunity, first real regret. He will occupy too many daydreams, too many long nights even though he's just a rough draft of a moment she hopes to some day have. And months later, in the bathtub, her tail sprawled over the edge, she will remember him as her first love and not just as the first asshole who rejected her.

Jim drove me home but didn't wait to see me unlock the door. I sat on the steps. When the rain let up, I went inside. My dad was painting butter on French bread. I told him later about the windshield wipers.

Upstairs, in the privacy of my room, I stood in nothing but my underwear. I bought it the day Jim winked at me. Ninety percent lace, purple. I was too scared to buy the red. I wanted to believe some cosmic force guided me to wear them that day. But I had been wearing them for six days straight. They were wet, but not with rain.

I stared at my closet, at the familiar white plastic hangers, yesterday's towel still damp. The pink chiffon dress from Camilla's wedding, my sister's graduation gown in the back. The piles of graphic tees I never wore because I was trying to dress more mature. So many clothes and I couldn't decide. My body felt too squished, too stretched, as though I saw it through a funhouse mirror.

No pajamas, I thought. I'm not sick. I don't want to feel comfortable.

No bra, beige underwear, a white camisole. I slipped on a pair of denim shorts, the band loose from too few washings. The American flag was printed on its pockets. I thought they were stupid and bought them anyways because they were on clearance. I saved \$3.98, lost \$14.99.

“I lost more than I saved,” I murmured and because we were on elegies, I grabbed a pencil. Used my knees for an easel as I scribbled in my bed. Lost my drive, started editing peer work instead. Colin’s was on top:

Ode to the Hiccup

*Never laugh-worthy
A bold rhythm squawked in beat
dict
Unpre able.*

Hardly swoon-worthy. He hadn’t even written an ode, just a haiku, a cheap pun. Colin stuttered so I never wanted him. In bed, at dinner with candles lit and melting, I imagined him leaning in to whisper, *you’re incredible*, like Jim had, and how he’d manage *you’re in-in-in-incredible*, his voice like dolphin squeaks, and how we’d split the check.

I thought about Colin in class, mouth closed, posture slack. Like that, he seemed almost capable of touching the flesh on my ribs. I thought about him writing, flipping pages, snapping mechanical lead. Graphite smeared along the edges of his hands. Dirty and beautiful all at once, those hands, like street puddles shining in three o’clock sun.

What would Colin do if he were here, right now? If his voice evaporated in the darkness of my bedroom? If no one ever teased him for stuttering? If no one ever bruised his delicate, teenage confidence?

Would he pin my arms up, shirt up? Would he unzip my shorts after having kissed between my breasts, my stomach, tongue gliding over the lacy, purple hem of my underwear?

I set Colin's poem aside, the pencil rolled off the bed. I took a deep breath and tried to relax. My body felt buoyant, desperate for direction. *Tell me how*, it pleaded. *Tell me how and I will*. I had never touched myself before. Only tampons inserted with a grimace, a quick clutch of comforter as I pulled out the applicator. My mother taught me to insert them lying down. I was horrified when I learned that other girls sat or squat. They all wanted to know if I did it naked. I said they were disgusting. I said that my vagina was so tight I needed to relax for a full five minutes before I could get one in.

But now I was thinking about Colin and his ode and oh, how marvelous that *ode* had *oh* in its name. And I was thinking about Jim and his bald spot and the almost moment. Him on top of me and me feeling warm and the wet spot the size of a quarter on my purple underwear.

I slipped my hand under, let it explore the short, coarse hair, the slight prickling sensation as my fingers dragged. I grazed something raised along my inner thigh and stopped, pelvis six inches above mattress, toes digging into sheets.

That's how I found the first scale.

I saw seven doctors in total, all with unpoetic names. Consonants sandwiched between consonants and vowels wearing dashes and dots like halos. I could never keep them straight, so I considered sets of seven when allocating nicknames. Seven sins, seven days of the week, seven dwarves with seven sets of noses, fourteen gleaming eyes, and six beards between them. In the beginning, I thought the dwarf idea might win, but with each scan and chart and X-ray, I learned that none of them were Bashful in the forceful prying of my legs.

The dermatologist was Red because of her lipstick. The ichthyologist was Violet because he choked on a raisin the first time I dropped skirt and flashed my anal fin. The gynecologist was Orange because of oranges because of clementines because of that wink because of the almost-sex.

“And were you aroused when he kissed you?” Orange asked during our first appointment. The tissue paper crinkled as I shifted my weight. I couldn’t cross my legs anymore. My thigh flesh had already begun to merge, blue, dissolve into flimsy scales. I had a difficult time with stairs. I slept on the couch with the loose spring and spaghetti sauce stain, *Full House* reruns lulling me to sleep.

“Aroused,” I repeated.

“Was there any vaginal secretion?”

I nodded. I thought it had been blood at first. The hymen breaking or whatever. “It was clumpy, fishy, dark green.” It stained the purple lace an ugly brown. Orange scribbled down my words. “More spongy than clumpy, I guess.” I picked at a scale.

“Algae paste,” she said. “Very common. You might have also experienced a stinging sensation in your hair.”

I touched my ponytail.

“Body hair, too. Trying to stimulate your partner with shocks. Did you or your partner experience anything that felt like static electricity?”

“You mean were there sparks?” I wanted to laugh. “Fireworks?” I rubbed my neck. Gills had replaced the hickey Jim gave me sometime between *I want you* and *you’re soft*.

“I’m not asking you about clichés, Opal. I want to know if you or your partner felt any physical pain.”

“No,” I said. “Nothing physical.”

She nodded. Scribbled more. “And what was your reaction when the first scales appeared?”

“Reaction?”

“Were you nervous? Angry? Upset?”

“I just was.”

I had rubbed the scale. Caressed it as though it were velvet.

Silver rimmed its edge, purples and blues swirled on its surface. It had seemed too pretty to be malign, too special for me to snip, tear, freeze, or burn away. I covered it with a Band-Aid and ate spaghetti with my dad, thinking and rethinking the phone call I’d make to Jim.

Orange folded her glasses. “You didn’t suspect any rough play or STDs?”

I shook my head.

I never called. I didn’t have his phone number. I didn’t go back to class. The next morning, my toes had webbed. I leaked ooze thick as rubber cement as my body began gluing my thighs together, plugging up the hole.

“What did you think was happening to your body?”

“A mean trick,” I said and then I asked for water.

“Would you care if I loved him?” I ask, handing Landon another bottle of nail polish. A sorority girl inspects the mascara beside us. She holds her shopping basket like

a purse, handle cradled in the crook of her elbow. Most Wal-mart customers give us a wide berth when they see my IV. Assume I have cancer or leukemia when I'm really pumping saltwater into my maxi-covered tail.

"No," he says. He examines the new bottle. "Too bubblegum." He scans the shelves himself.

"Landon."

"Fuchsia. My gut's telling me fuchsia."

"Because even if I had, you're the only one I want to be with."

Landon scratches his elbow. It scabbed over from a skateboarding accident last week. I bet he has more scabs I can't see.

"Is this fuchsia?"

"No, hot pink."

"There's a difference?" I nod and he shrugs, kneels down to see the instant dry line. His boxers poof out over his jeans. Shamrocks.

I dream about Landon, dreams spent remaking my time with Jim. We're in Wal-mart or the Quad, the coral reefs if I've had too much seawater, but usually we're in bed. Sometimes I have a tail. When I do, Landon peels it apart into two blue legs. They make a lip-smacking sound, that same suction noise of clementine halves separating. I wake up slowly and I'm humping the mattress, flopping like some beached whale. I want to touch myself, for real this time, but can't. I don't have that hole anymore, but I feel that want. That phantom sensation amputees experience, that ghost of a motion never fully appreciated.

"Landon," I say. "Would you fuck me? If I didn't have the tail. If you could?"

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t love you,” he says. He chooses a punch color and wheels me to checkout aisle three.

The Home Shopping Network was having a sale on jade rings that night. The rings had silver overlay in the shape of Chinese characters. He wanted *happiness* and I wanted *put* and they didn’t make either one.

The Man with the Green Thumb

His name was Harold Goldsmith, the man with the green thumb. The skin really was green, not kelly or Kermit green, but an odious chartreuse. Doctors dripped chemicals, burned flesh, but none could alter the coloring. College girls refused to hold his hand, mistaking his birthmark for gangrene, mistaking gangrene as contagious, so he hacked off the thumb with a cleaver. It grew back slowly. Bone stemmed, muscles branched, flesh trellised its frame. A fingernail blossomed and hardened, but now tasted of kale when he bit it to the quick.

His roommate said he knew a girl who baked kale chips. She used olive oil and salt and the oven in the late morning when he was just waking up and would Harold like to meet her?

Harold said she'd turn his thumb into a snack and his roommate said no, she's vegetarian.

They met for coffee. Harold wrapped his thumb in gauze. He'd tell her he sliced it chopping carrots for a stew. A garden salad, he amended, when she walked in and he saw her smile at the café's brick and the tired barista and the lone biscotti in its big glass jar. She chewed the biscotti thoughtfully as she scanned the shop for him.

"You must be Harry," she said, because she liked the sound of *Harry, my hairy man*, someday murmured into down.

"Harold," said Harold, and he gestured for her to sit.

Her name was Rose and Harold thought that a much crueler joke than his green thumb. His parents manufactured paper and he could not grow them any trees. He refused

to touch a plant, even a sapling seed because he knew what would happen if he did. If he preened boxwoods, watered gardenias, so much as blew a dandelion puff. He'd fall in love with their heartbeat-less lives and become a gardener, become a cliché. This he did not want. No fated euphoria could change his mind, especially after he entered high school and was slipped into a basketball jersey because it fit his 6'3" frame.

As though she read his mind, Rose said, "You're tall" and Harold was annoyed that this beautiful girl lacked originality like all the rest of them.

He asked, "How tall?" with the same stern brow and sweaty palms that might accompany, "Do you want children?" or "Do you believe in God?"

He realized, then, just how much he wanted to try one of her kale chips.

"As tall as a telephone pole," she said.

Harold leaned back, relieved. After coffee, after the next-playing film, after waffles at the diner open after one, after the silent car ride home, the kiss standing on the welcome mat, the kiss lying on the couch, the gauze slowly untangling in her hair, Harold asked her again, "How tall?" after noses rubbed, "As tall as a pine tree?" he asked.

Rose said, "No." She said, "As tall as a skyscraper" and she said "skyscraper" as if she were in awe of the word. A glass building scraping the sky, unsatisfied with touching, needing to scrape and mar that vast expanse of blue.

They made love and they married a year later, in December when it's cold, and at their wedding, Harold did not wear a boutonniere. His parents supplied the paper to fold origami flowers for the bouquets, centerpieces: lotus and cherry blossoms, day lilies and kusudama morning dew. "No roses," said Rose. She wanted to be the only one of her kind in attendance.

Harold became an accountant. He had a corner cubicle with his own swivel chair and set of multi-colored Post-Its. Before he changed his desktop from rolling meadow to tranquil tides or taped a photo of Rose to the wall, Harold moved the complimentary ficus to Bill Mabry's office even though it was a fake.

Bill approached him after lunch and said he was touched, but much preferred flowers, like the ones on Janet's desk.

Harold asked why she had flowers and Bill said it was Valentine's. Bill asked, "Did you forget?"

Harold replied, "Yes and no." He'd remembered the ritual of Valentine's in relation to his life. Reservations at the bistro where he proposed in champagne. Carrot cake with real carrots that Rose grated out of jest, cream cheese frosting for her to suck off his thumb. A night of soft changes, of love made to *Harry* and to *Rosie*, and the bouquet of flowers he fabricated for her, out of chiffon and pearls. "Your beauty will never fade," said the note he'd attached.

Harold forgot that he worked with other women who received flowers, real flowers, tender soft and perfumed. He feared the long-stemmed roses and the pink carnation buds, he feared walking and knocking over a vase, grazing a leaf, feeling the weight of a birthright calling.

He barricaded himself in his cubicle, missed his three o'clock meeting and ate the mints meant for his clients. He did not pee until he reached the Metro, he left the office dressed head to foot in poncho. The receptionist hid her smirk behind a box of chocolates.

Rose had just finished showering when he arrived home. He collapsed onto the couch and shivered at her touch. She smelled of rosewater.

“Rough first day?” she asked and Harold said, “Yes.” He said, “I know we have plans, but...”

“Of course,” said Rose. She kissed him on the forehead. “It’s too cold to go out anyways.” She stood and dressed and reappeared in sweats, taking her station in the kitchen. He closed his eyes and listened to the metallic swoosh of the grate, the gentle fall of carrot shavings on the counter.

He murmured for Rose to stop. To shower. To make herself clean.

“I’ve already showered,” said Rose.

He beckoned her over and said, “Use my soap. I want us to smell the same.”

Rose petted his hair. “You want me to smell like a man,” she said lightly.

“No, I want you to smell human.”

Rose stripped in front of him, let her clothes tumble to the floor. She made a show of stepping out of their piled holes. She showered and used his soap, the bar periwinkle blue, the shampoo bottle black and red. Her long hair smelled of sandalwood and that confused her. Her name confused her, too. She thought of Shakespeare and, *What’s in a name?* and how, *a rose by any other name would smell as sweet*. She was Rose but for tonight, she was not Rose or rose, but Rosie and sandalwood and man.

In their delicate states, they made love and conceived triplets that resembled kidney beans in the first of many ultrasounds.

Harold wore gloves in the delivery room and kept them on when he shook his father-in-law's hand. Two boys, one girl. Zero green thumbs. He and Rose had yet to decide on names.

“Rose said you'd be naming a boy after me.” The father-in-law grinned. “You could split it up, first name to one, middle name to the other.” His name was Michael David Prewett. He went by Michael or Mike or Mikey depending on the people, the place, and Harold envied the flexibility of such a name, to become a buddy or a businessman with a mere tweak of letters.

That night, Harold stroked Rose's hand with his green thumb. “Let's give them whole new names,” he said. “Nothing from either tree.” He did not want them to carry expectations like fettered wings on their backs. They named their children Glynn, Ephrem, and Amaris because they'd never met those names before, not once in a grocery store or in line at DMV, never in any classroom or a novel they had read.

The following year, Harold received a zen garden as part of Secret Santa. It possessed three rocks, a packet of sand, and a very tiny rake. He sat in his cubicle and combed circles around the greyest rock.

Bill hoped it would steady Harold's hands. They'd begun to jitter and spill coffee, mispress digits into calculators. “The bottle's no good,” said Bill and he patted Harold on the back as he left the office party.

Harold's hands trembled all throughout December as the wreaths were hung, the mistletoe tied, the trees lugged and lodged in corners, shedding needles. Every desk possessed a poinsettia. His higher-ups mistook the shakes and sweats as withdrawal.

They couldn't have an alcoholic handling others' money. They let him go just before New Year's so he could truly start afresh.

Rose asked, "What happened?" with a baby in her arms. She no longer smelled of rosewater or sandalwood, but dish soap and sweat. She smiled and Harold remembered the lone biscotti, sad and stale, and how she smiled that way now. He felt sad that she smiled so at him.

He told her he'd been fired and asked, "What would you like for dinner?" in the same breath so that she could not cry or scream or swear. He had yet to shed his coat.

Rose said soup and the baby in her arms yawned. "And maybe kale chips, too."

Harold turned on the eye and began to preheat the oven. He continued to ask, "What would you like for dinner?" every morning amongst the coffee maker's gurgles. He watched cooking shows and home improvement shows and assembled a bookshelf and organized the spice rack, and during diaper changes, he would ask Rose, "How tall?" to gauge how well they loved.

On good days, he was as tall as the Eiffel Tower. On bad days, a giraffe. On the day she felt the lump nestled in her breast, he was as tall as a sunflower stalk. She meant he was her sunshine, like the song, happy and uplifting. She thought his tears were worry that she might die.

Relatives sent flowers and their apartment smelled too sweet. Rose lost her hair, gentle as petals falling, and she liked roses to surround her. Yellow, white, red, she didn't care so long as they bloomed life into the air she breathed. She wanted her husband to see

beautiful roses when she no longer was one. She could not understand why he walked about museums instead of staying with her, in bed, in the little Eden she'd created.

When she fell and fractured her wrist, Harold was staring at a headless Roman statue in the Metropolitan. The marble would never regrow. *Perhaps the head had been too good*, Harold thought. *Perhaps the statue's shoulders could no longer sustain its common sense.*

"Perhaps it was bald," said Rose from her hospital bed. Harold sat in the corner, away from the bedside table stacked with yellow daisies. Bill sent them along with another zen garden, this time with shells.

"Bald as a basketball," said Harold. He slipped into bed beside her, away from the flowers, the side nearest the IV. He wore his high school basketball jersey and Rose was happy to feel its sleekness between her shoulder blades. He never talked about basketball because he hated it. The running and the blocking and the sheer fit of the jersey's baggy armholes disturbed him. But basketball led to scholarships that eventually led to Rose. For Rose, he would slip into another cliché. For Rose, he would embrace his innate talent and forgo his fear of failing.

He caught a cab to Central Park. He knew of no space greener. He knelt down on the sidewalk, next to a dandelion, it seemed fitting he should try his magic on a weed. He stroked it once with his green thumb, expecting beanstalks and giants and gold harps to pawn, but nothing happened.

He plucked it and rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger and nothing happened still. He wiped his hands in the grass, hurriedly, anxiously, as though to wipe off blood. Nothing was happening and so much could have happened. Grass stains, hay

bale rides, climbing dogwoods in Fred's front yard. Making a ripped blade whistle between his thumbs. Streaking the football field at halftime with the other senior boys. Picnics with Rose. Real Christmas trees with Rose, fresh pine sap sticking to his fingers as they danced, him guiding the trunk, her directing a little to the left or right.

Harold collapsed on the grass, feeling it for the first time on his skin. Feeling the Earth move underneath him, knowing that he would never be able to shake it.

"Hello, Harry," she said.

"Hello, Rosie," he said. It was always Valentine's in the hospital.

She ate orange Jell-O and asked for him to feed her. He picked up the spoon.

"No," she said. "Our way."

It wiggled on his green thumb and she licked it clean. She frowned.

"It tastes different," she said. "Your thumb, I mean."

At home, in the kitchen, Harold had sliced off his green thumb. Again and again, he watched it regrow, listened to the green thumbs thump onto the floor, one after the other, enough to string into a necklace. He chewed and swallowed one, once, to see if that made a difference. It tasted strongly of rosemary and he threw up in the sink, missing kale more than his children or his wife. With kale, he'd still held possibilities.

"That's strange," said Harold.

"It tastes like arugula now." She smiled.

"It must be the chemo."

"No, I think it's magic." She nestled further in her bed, slid the tray away. "I always knew. You used it to hitchhike us to Maryland. Do you remember that?" She shut

her eyes. “A car pulled over and it was Patrick MacKay. Patrick MacKay,” she said. Her first ever boyfriend whom she loved and still loved when she met Harold.

“He pulled over because he knew it was you.”

“He pulled over because of your thumb. Think of all those cars. All those people. And Patrick was the one who stopped.” She burrowed her head in her pillow. “I needed closure and I got it,” she said. “I got it when I saw those thumbs of his hooked in the steering wheel. Both so beige, so boring.”

“He was also fat,” said Harold, but Rose didn’t hear. She’d fallen asleep and shortly after, so did he.

When he awoke, two nurses walked by the doorway, their strides slow.

“Mrs. Goldsmith’s getting worse,” said one.

“Is her husband the man with the green thumb?” asked the other.

They kept walking and Harold followed them to the nurses’ station. He tapped one on the shoulder. “Excuse me,” he said. “But I’m not ‘the man.’ I’m ‘a man’ with a green thumb. Do you understand?” He said, “I’m just a man who happens to have a green thumb.” He turned around and said over his shoulder, “And yes, I am Mrs. Goldsmith’s husband.”

He walked down to the first floor gift shop and bought his first bouquet. A dozen red roses, an utter cliché, he’d never been more happy to spend his money before. He imagined the excitement in Rose’s face, how she’d press her nose to them, caress the white satin ribbon tied around the vase. How he’d ask her, “How tall?” and he’d still buzz with nerves awaiting her response.

He hoped he’d be as tall as the Sears Tower as he climbed the stairs.

From the doorway, he hoped he'd be just tall.

He'd never seen so many people in so small a space.

Doctors and nurses crowded around Rose's bed. His wife's breasts exposed, her hospital gown ripped, a machine tried to reanimate her. Her arms, legs, and torso thumped upon the mattress with every beep and buzz and "Clear!" Someone pushed him out of the way and he mumbled he was sorry. There was nothing he could do.

He'd never known what it felt like to be just a man.

He left the roses with a nurse and walked out to his car. He'd pulled into a space and now he needed to back out, but all he wanted to was to drive over the grassy median that separated road from parking lot. His tires couldn't clear the curb. He got out and cried beside the baby trees that still needed wires to keep them rooted.

A Body of Work

My muse approaches in a pink Chevy truck. Her father whirls into the lot and the truck lurches forward as he parks. Dust flies with all finality of tennis court chalk. I am pleased that when my muse stands next to me, her eyes are level with my belly button. I tell her father, "Give me an hour and she'll paint like Picasso," and he trusts me because I've stuck a paintbrush in my hair, I'm wearing a smock from Goodwill. I'm not naked as usual. My stomach is bound flat.

I specialize in color. I noticed that his truck wasn't pink, but salmon, and he had flecks of silver in his beard. I noticed this in the park, by the swings, at the stop sign near his house with the blue front door. I slipped a flier in his mailbox advertising art classes. Free! Free! Free! For children ages 5-7. His daughter looked about that age.

I ask him, "Why pink?" because I'd look more suspicious not to.

"I'm colorblind," he says. "It looked red to me," he says.

I thought as much. That's why I chose your daughter, I want to say. I want to say, I bet your furniture is ugly, mustard yellow or jungle green. I bet your home is drained of vibrancy. I bet your mixing bowls are white.

I want to show my muse real color before I exploit her for her eyes.

I wiggle goodbye with my fingers and guide my muse inside the studio. The floor's cement, the ceiling's fluorescents, I only have stools for sitting. She sees the double easels and the blank canvases, standing at attention, the paints freshly poured into neat circles. She is eager. She takes a seat. I tell her no.

“Draw your family,” I tell her. There’s paper on the table. Markers, colored pencils. Even glitter. I don’t care about the mess. Every girl should have the chance to sparkle, to feel resplendent in her bones.

She asks, “Where are the crayons?”

“Crayons aren’t for coloring.”

She looks confused. She’s confused because she did not know me as a child, the way I played with crayons. My mother confiscated the Barbies after I Sharpied eyes onto their bellies, foreheads, limbs. Their Bell Curve arches slipped into pink heels. They resembled Voodoo victims. My crayons did not have faces or breasts but they were skinny and I was skinny and I had a medieval princess hat, my very own cone top with an elastic band.

I constructed identities bound by profession. Orange the baker, Scarlet the opera singer, Violet the mime whom all the crayons loved. Black was the artist even before the accident. My mother stepped on him, snapped him in two, I wrapped his torso in tape, but I was too late to save his eyes. He was blind and my favorite and I stopped coloring because I was scared. I did not want coloring books to whittle them to nubs and eventually, to nothingness. They were my only friends.

My muse hands me her drawing and I see a square house with a triangle roof and a rectangle chimney. The sun in the top left corner, the pink truck below. Her father has balloon hands and no wife balloon hands to hold.

“Where’s your mother?”

“Maine.”

“Mine’s in Kansas,” I tell her. I grew up there, where the land was flat as the first-world map, oblivion waiting at the state boundary-lines. I left because I could not wear bikinis in the pool. I was afraid to show my belly with its slight parabola bulge. I tell her, “My dad lives there too, but they don’t live in the same house. They haven’t for a long time.”

My muse nods and says, “Mine since last Christmas.”

“Does your mother kiss you?” My muse says no and I cup her face and kiss her on the eyes, first right, then left. “You have beautiful eyes,” I say, even though they’re cardboard brown. I want her to see herself through beautiful eyes. To see with ugly eyes is to see the world through wax paper, the truth distorted, to be perpetually displeased.

I’m not her mother or my mother or a mother, but an artist who has learned the human body in classrooms too well lit. I understand the muscles in a man’s calf, the dip in a young woman’s collarbone, the science behind a pregnant woman’s glow. It’s primitive. Her bellybutton expands, inflates, briefly becomes a third nipple and the traces of cavemen and women in us coo, *how fertile*.

“What artists do you know?”

“Van Gogh,” she says. “He painted *Starry Night*.” She grins a front-toothless grin.

I say, very good, and lead her to another table where I’ve sprawled Art History books. “Do you know Salvador Dali?”

She shakes her head no so I enlighten her. Show her pictures of a circus with Gerridae legs, a woman’s thigh turned filing cabinet, a screaming skull with screaming skulls burrowed in wide orifices. She’s sad the giraffe is burning.

“Why did you show me these?”

“Because there are too many nude women in art.”

I do not show her those. She is flat and rectangular and they are plump and curves. She would feel like she failed in femininity. I do not want that for her. I hide Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*, Manet’s *Luncheon on the Grass*, Rubens’ *The Three Graces* with their satin-ripple skin.

“What do you think of this one?”

I hand her a picture of Dali’s backdrop in *Spellbound*. Ten big eyes drooping, sagging above passerbys’ heads. “How many eyes are there?”

She answers ten.

“How many more is that than yours?”

She answers eight.

“Than mine?”

She answers eight, slowly.

I smile. “I like to paint with my shirt tied up,” I say. I take off the smock. Unbutton my black gingham shirt. She watches and I fumble the last button, I’ve never undressed in front of someone before, not even a lover and I am twenty-three years old. Men don’t see me as a woman. I leave when they say *I like lights on* and then I am a prude or a lesbian, not fuckable, not a wife.

As I knot the ends below my breasts, my muse’s eyes grow very wide and she is still.

She’s seen the third eye embedded in my belly button.

It rolls and winks at her. She squeals, comes closer. Plucking the eyelid, she asks me to kneel down and I watch her eyes make triangles across my body. I love her for it. I

love the ritual of left, right, down, up. I feel guilty and dirty and ugly to feel excited by a little girl and I wonder, for the first time, what am I doing?

She asks me if I have superpowers. Can the eye see through walls, detect auras, catch glimpses of the future? Can it shoot laser beams or blow up abandoned warehouses? Can it smell like a nose?

“No,” I say, definitively.

When I was four, my father lined empty beer bottles along the picnic table and asked me to *Shoot, Oakley! Shoot!* He laughed and took another swig of Oktoberfest. I squinted all three eyes, pinched belly fat in, stretched belly fat out. Ten minutes passed and I began to cry from all three eyes. Snot pooled at my Cupid’s bow, tears soaked my panties’ elastic hem. My father knelt down and kissed my eyes closed, lifted me under the armpits and kissed my third eye, too. *I’ll call Professor Xavier in the morning.*

He left me to chalk circles on our patio. My mother made him build a fence ten feet tall to hide me from Topeka suburbia. She’d watched us from the window as she washed butter plates we never used. *Hello, darling*, Dad said, leaning in for a kiss. She turned her head; he pecked her cheek. *Please, the Goldings will be here in an hour. And for God’s sake, make Laura put a shirt on.* He dressed me in blue gingham. *To match your eyesssss*, he said. His hiss echoed the slow deflation of party balloons, happy and sad at the same time.

“I’m going to close my eyes,” I tell her. With all three open and exposed, I’m disoriented, as though I’ve had too many drinks. The room tilts at awkward angles as my brain connects the third eye’s line of sight with that of my real ones. I am nauseated, like always, I never paint with all three open. Those paintings always fail me, they’re mud,

they're therapy, they're a scream in a crowded place. The canvas does not cringe when I look at it, look at it, look at it. Afterward, I walk into department stores and try on clothes and do not worry that the woman after me rubs eye crusts on her flesh. "I'm going to close just the top ones. Okay?"

"Okay," my muse says, entranced.

And when I do, I feel top heavy. Like someone has glued a log to my head. I wobble as I stand, woman dense, child-sized. My center of gravity has warped. The tables have all grown. My belt-buckle has turned important in its new broche-like state. I touch my chest and I am nebulous space, I do not know where my heart beats. Above me and below me, it hovers in secret like the moon.

I prefer to paint like this.

Sometimes I alternate, top eyes closed, third eye open. Then top eyes open, third eye closed, and I feel as if I'm riding an elevator in short bursts. These paintings capture movement. In galleries, people stop and sway with them and I stand off to the side and nod, *yes, we move the same*. But the paintings people ooze for, that make their eyes go glassy, are those my third eye forms all by itself. These I paint from a child's point of view, from 3 feet, 5 inches above the ground. Critics call these: bold, complex, jarring. Dripping with raw, human emotion. They say this because I am grown, but can still be in awe of the world. I have a secret, I have a cheat code to eternal childhood.

"I want to paint an eye," says my muse.

I say okay.

She's dissatisfied. She says, "On me."

"Your father will be mad."

She says, “He has tattoos.”

The neat circles on clean palettes are gone. They are amoebas and paramecium in their organic rearing now. My muse paints and she is chubby and curled like a caterpillar shaping its chrysalis. Her fingertips drip white and blue and black. Her eyes don’t flicker upwards when she’s done. She looks directly at my third eye and smiles even though she’s missing her two front teeth. I can see inside her mouth and it is girl pink.

“Your turn.”

“I already have an eye.”

“Paint another.”

“I don’t want another.”

“Paint your shirt,” she says. “Fill in the white squares.”

I hesitate because I like this shirt, it fits me loose on the stomach, tight on the sides. I dip my pinky in, the paint thick and cold, tap one square on my shoulder, another on the knot. A sleeve, the collar, a fifth square seems impossible, but I do it anyways, on the chest pocket, and my breast is plump like those of Rubens’ women.

My hand slides across the palette, collecting color, and slides across my chest, lingering in the space between my breasts. Reds and greens and purples scream *Look at me!* I want her to see the shape a woman’s body takes. I smear paint along my jean-clad hips, the nape of my neck, the pit stops of my vertebrae, my ass, my own arched souls. I close my eye and everything’s dark, I hear my muse laughing, squirting paint straight from bottles, and I allow myself to touch that slight protrusion of cornea where other girls cave in.

She says, “You look happy.”

Her father arrives in the pink Chevy and he almost cusses me out when he sees his daughter, covered in paint, she is liquefied stained glass, but my muse gallops toward him, hugs his knees. She says, “Daddy, I had so much fun!” and the next week, she comes prepared in one of his old T’s, the sleeves frayed. As we paint broken mannequins, I learn she has a first name and a last name and I stop tying up my shirts because she can’t just disappear.

In the shower, I bleed paint. In the morning, I am clean. I examine myself in the mirror before I dress. I don’t wear makeup, but today I put on mascara.

I use the same yellow tube my mother did. I used hers once, after dinner with the Goldings. Sitting sprawled-legged on the bathroom floor, her makeup bag beside me, I shaped my lips into an O, and attempted to paint my lashes black. I kept poking myself in the eye because I flinched too much. I lifted my shirt and wiggled the brush along my third eye’s lashes. They were crumpled, like bed-hair, but I managed to curl them and high on success, I rummaged through the bag for eye shadow. I could not hear her stilettos on the stairs over the clanking of lipsticks.

What do you think you’re doing?

I said nothing. She snatched the tube from me.

You will never use my makeup again. Understand? It’s not yours.

I nodded.

Would your father want you to use his shaving cream?

I mumbled, he wouldn’t.

Good. She looked relieved. Now put that thing away and go to bed.

She threw the mascara away in front of me. Right there, in the empty wastebasket. No tampon wrappers or Kleenexes to muffle the cold clank of its descent. She'd just bought it the week before.

On the subway, I wear jeans and sneakers and only a bra with lacy details. I keep my third eye closed because the car jerks. The guy beside me has scruffy brown hair, thick-framed glasses, and looks like he owns a typewriter. He's reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but not actually. He hasn't turned a page in three stops.

I cough and say, "Hello."

He addresses my eyebrows. "Hi."

"You can look," I say. I expect this of my first day free. He blushes and glances down, but not as down I imagined. He stops at my cleavage.

I close my eyes and open my third eye and he looks about ten years older as he swears, "What the hell?" and jumps back, knocking a businessman with his messenger bag.

He composes himself and looks me in the eyes. He asks, "Are you some type of makeup artist?" He looks a little impressed.

"No," I say. "I'm art."

He loses interest because you can't fuck art. You can't even touch it. Signs tell you again and again not to, but today I am a walking contradiction. Touch me, my breasts say pushed-up, A-cupped. Don't touch me, says my third eye as it rolls. Admire me, screams all of me.

I say, finally, "My body is perfect."

Facets of Coal

Diamonds drip from her lips with every cluck of tongue. They tumble, marble-sized, into the altar boy's palms as she addresses the congregation. Her mouth clomps, heavy as equestrian footfall on cobblestone streets. She says, "There is no God!" and they cheer, look at how big she opens her hole! Look at that marquise! She says, "There's no such thing as sin!" and they whine because the diamonds stop toppling. Her tongue has touched her teeth and blocked the exit door.

"Amen!" a young man hollers from the back. He wants to keep her mining. The choir chimes, "Amen!" and begins to sing and clap.

Sister Margo clears her throat, her sermon is not over. Princess-cuts spew out her mouth and slice her gums in their haste to taste clean air. The woman in the front pew catches one in her hymnbook. No one notices. She slips the book, jewel and all, inside her purse, and does not care about the blood speckled on her gloves.

The priest pats Sister Margo on the back, once, twice. He watches for quarter-carats to trickle out like drops of drool. "Thank you, Sister," he says as he counts them in his hand. Enough for two pairs of earrings, one for the missus and one for the girl who twists her tongue the way he likes.

Sister Margo takes her seat.

The congregation rises to receive their sour blood, their bread that crumbles stale. As members pass, they stop and ask her questions that demand verbal recognition, no nods or shrugs can possibly suffice. Sister Margo enjoys the challenge of making her fan base think.

“What’s your favorite verse?” a man in a brown suit asks. She flips through a Bible and points to one at random.

“Where does your inspiration come from?” another man asks, this one clad in grey. She points up, presumably at God, and smiles because she’s just denied His existence but doubts that anybody heard her.

“I didn’t understand your sermon,” says a woman in a large green hat, complete with plastic cardinals. “Can you explain it in simpler terms?”

“Schöner hut,” says Sister Margo. She hands the woman the asscher-cut in the hope she’ll buy a new hat. The woman accepts the diamond without asking for a translation. No one knows Sister Margo grew up in Munich. No one knows where she lives or if she’s married. They do not know her age or even her last name.

“Today’s my birthday,” the woman with the hymnbook says. She smirks, she thinks she’s clever. What cold soul could deny wishing someone happy birthday? Sister Margo gestures OK with her fingers.

The next woman tugs at her son’s hand. He is five and chews a stuffed rabbit’s ear. “Today’s *my son’s* birthday,” she says. The woman with the hymnbook scowls at her as she sips her week-old juice.

“Happy Birthday,” says Sister Margo. A diamond cuts her uvula, but she swallows it back down. She thinks she can hear it clinking off her ribs like a pinball machine.

“You’re heartless,” the mother says. “Come along, Henry.”

The following Wednesday, Sister Margo attends Confession. She says, “Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.” She says, “It’s been seven days since my last Confession and these are my sins.”

Sister Margo first sinned in 1986. She was three. She swallowed her mother’s engagement ring and Santa Claus found out. He filled her stocking with clumps of coal and she swallowed these too. She wanted to clean the jewel and coal in her mouth, to make them pure with her own body. After the baptism, she chose to swallow because in her stomach, they’d be safe from the world, free from dirt and sin.

They clunked in her stomach as she walked to and from school until she turned eighteen. She spoke German and spouted consonant clusters, her throat worn as sandpaper from the coal. She wrapped scarves around her neck, now tucked under her wimple, to soothe the constant bite. Given enough time and heat, she could pressurize the coal into raw diamonds, their facets gritty as salt. She sinned a lot back then. “Forgive me, Father,” she would say, “but Adolph has choked on another diamond. I don’t know how it got in his mouth.” And then, not two seconds later, “Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. I just lied to you. I do know. We were making out.”

At twenty, she flew to America to hone her craft. In New York, she traversed Tiffany & Co., she’d seen it in a movie once, and learned the precise cuts, the exact measurements of carats in a specimen. In D.C., she gawked at the Hope Diamond in its spinning glass case. She coughed and hacked up phlegm, forcing mucused muscles to replicate its cobalt blue before security escorted her off the premises.

She never did perfect it. She can only create colorless, near-colorless, and faint-yellow gems. Once, she thought she’d finally mastered a red cherry pear-cut, but it was a

regular pear-cut that collided with a tooth and dislodged it. Both the tooth and the diamond shone red, but only due to blood. She washed them and kept the tooth, but flushed the diamond down the drain.

“What are your sins, child?” asks the priest today.

She tells him she’s lied three times. She’d said she wasn’t German, she’d said she liked her job, she’d said she was richer than the woman on TV who gave away free cars.

She tells him she’s contemplated suicide. Hanging in her closet. The rope tight around her neck, cutting off her air. Itsy diamonds dripping onto the floor, the last of their kind. She says she’s tired of tasting blood in her mouth. She says she doesn’t know where the coal keeps coming from. She thinks maybe from the hearth of hell and then she laughs, imagining herself the Devil’s walking pocket book.

“You mustn’t give up,” says the priest behind the mesh partition. “God loves you and we in the church love you as well.”

“Yeah, right,” Sister Margo mutters and in her sarcasm, a cushion-cut clunks to the floor, the size of a golf-ball. She’d popped her ears as her jaw dropped wide, making way for the behemoth. Her throat feels sore, grated. The giant diamonds come when she thinks about the end, as if to say, look at what you have to live for! Look at all your wealth! They do not understand that they hinder her worth. Every time they grow in size, she becomes less and less a human being and more and more a spectacle, more and more a dream.

The priest jumps up off his seat. “Let me guess,” says Sister Margo. “My penance for today?”

“Oh no, I couldn’t possibly,” says the priest. “It won’t fit through the holes. Hold on, give me two seconds and I’ll be over there in a jiffy.”

When she hands him the diamond, she asks, “Anything else?”

“What?” He is bald and can see himself reflected, a full head of hair, in each of the diamond’s slick facets.

“Nevermind,” says Sister Margo. She whispers the Act of Contrition on her way out of church. Catechism class has just released and the children follow her, gleaning diamonds like chickens pecking feed.

Puzzleland

Nurse Lillian asked, “What do you see?” and I said, “A circle” even though I really saw a disembodied head on a pike.

Over the last six weeks, I’d seen lots of things in lots of inkblots. Bats eating brains, lollipops spurting blood, a mummy with an erection poking through his gauze, but I simplified and said, “Trapezoids and lines and squiggles. Oh, yes, Nurse Lillian.” I’d wiggled my eyebrows. “Squiggles.”

During these sessions, I’d seen other things too. Nurse Lillian’s bare fingers, buttons straining against a too-plump torso, the way she missed her straw when Dr. Peterson walked by. He gelled his hair to Ken Doll perfection and even I stole glimpses of his ass the days he forewent the stark white coat. Even though she was thirty and grownup and could actually have Dr. Peterson, I’d sooner suck mucus off a frog’s hind legs than be Nurse Lillian. I was ten and I was beautiful and I was going places.

She sighed, she did a lot of sighing, but stopped posing more questions. In the beginning, Nurse Lillian rarely rubbed her temples, closed her eyes, counted to ten under breath reeking of Italian roast. She used to smile with actress white teeth, entreating me to ‘expand’ or ‘elaborate’ or ‘thiink.’

Now, she told me to draw my box and my fingers became pencil points, pushing air out, down, together, creating an invisible square.

“Good, and where do we think?”

I *open-closed*, *open-closed* one hand, simulating a ‘burst of creativity’ or a persistent case of arthritis. Sometimes I *open-closed* above my head or by my

bellybutton, but mostly I stuck to the inch of space nearest the square's perimeter. Once, I *open-closed* at my crotch and that got me a meeting with the real nurse, Nurse Roberts, who told me my vagina had better not get any bright ideas or she'd permanently unscrew that light bulb.

I'd refrained from telling her how grab-worthy I found the doctor's ass.

"That's right. We think outside the box. Very good, Carrie."

I did not receive a gold star. Nurse Lillian just opened her folder to explain how badly I failed today's test. "Participants in Dr. Dukofsky's study generated a total of fifty-three responses to describe the image. Some of their answers included a flower, a scarecrow, a lighthouse, a man having a bad hair day, a man—"

"It's 2:02," I said. "I'm late for Silly Pillies."

Nurse Lillian closed the folder, clasped her hands on top. "The participants were your age, Carrie. If they can be creative, why can't you?"

"I don't know," I lied and the words tasted like sand between my teeth, gritty and needing to be spat. "Can I go now?"

She jotted down *No improvement* and I made my way to Reid Wing. From behind her glass, Nurse Meagan handed me two Dixie cups: tap water in one, three M&Ms in the other: yellow, blue, red. We weren't supposed to know they were M&Ms. We were supposed to swallow, not chew, believe the doctors who prescribed us colored drugs. Orange for focus, green for calmer minds, brown for the bullshit they eternally spouted. Edith discovered the lie Day 1. The M&M's melted in her palm and only after did she tell us how afraid of pills she was. "I can't swallow them on my own," she'd said. "Someone's always made me take them," she'd said.

I downed the yellow, the blue, and saved the red for dinner so we could play Homicide that night. Gregory hadn't been killed in four days and no one gargled like he did. Sometimes his shirt even slipped up and I could see his bellybutton.

My mother hadn't even tried to hide the brochure from me. It sat on my placemat one night at dinner. Blue and yellow with white block lettering.

"It's called Puzzleland," she'd said. "Room and board, meals provided." She'd sipped her lemonade.

Inside was a questionnaire, asking if my son or daughter suffered from Acute Systemic Imagination Inhibition Disorder. Was A.S.I.I.D. corroding his or her chances of leading a happy, normal life? If I answered Strongly Agree or Agree for 8-10 questions then Puzzleland might be the cure to my child's affliction.

If not, well, please recycle, I'd thought, followed quickly by, *what a waste.*

"Mom, I don't have A.S.I.I.D." I'd said, "I tell Stevie weird stories all the time."

"It's true," said Stevie between meatloaf bites. Stevie had fine blonde hair that shone white in summer and a round, squinched up face. Pug-like, I thought, but adults said he pouted like James Dean. He looked made for mischief. "She made me pee myself earlier."

"Besides, I want to go to Camprantula." A month-long monster camp with haunted hay bale rides, werewolf makeup tutorials, mummified toilet paper in every latrine. The mascot was an eighteen-year-old tarantula named Terry who was notorious for her cage escapes.

“I know, honey, but money’s tight,” said Mom. Money had been tight since the divorce. “And Puzzleland really needs participants. They’re even willing to pay \$1000 if you stay the full eight-weeks. You could still go to the second half of Camprantula.”

“Send Stevie,” I’d said. He’d drowned his meatloaf in ketchup, made his corn scream like the villagers of Pompeii.

“He couldn’t hide it. But you...” Mom had set down her silverware. “Did you read where it’s being held?”

St. Albans, the dilapidated sanatorium overlooking the New River. I imagined the lobotomies and the schizophrenics and the séance opportunities. The real ghosts that I could meet instead of the sheets with holes in them at Camprantula.

“Okay,” I’d said. “But if these other kids are boring, I might shove icepicks in their ears and watch them gargle on their own blood.”

“Carrie, please,” she’d said. “Not so graphic. You’d kill them.”

“But not actually,” Stevie’d said.

“Are exaggerations creative?” I’d asked. We’d all looked at each other.

Mom had picked up her fork, started cutting her own meatloaf. “Just don’t talk to anyone, dear.”

From 2:30 to 4:00 we invaded the front lobby, our allotted free time for mental recuperation. The room was large and open; windows let in light from the courtyard, but remained shut, sealing in the center’s sterile smell. Chairs, couches, coffee tables cluttered the room maze-like, bruising unsuspecting shins and knees. I sat in the corner, stared outside, imagined Terry puncturing my eyeballs, crawling out my sockets,

devouring my thin top lip. One leg, two legs, pincers, eyes. Fur and lashes mixing, their web-threads like silver optic nerves. I could have cried at how pathetic Puzzleland's itsy, bitsy spiders were crawling on the walls.

If a nurse passed, I counted out loud. She'd ask, "What are you counting?" and I'd say, "The geraniums. First reds, then pinks, then reds and pinks, followed by purples, reds and purples, pinks and" she'd walk away and the tarantulas would turn into vipers.

"Look!" Nurse Rachael shielded her eyes with one hand, pointed up with the other. Outside of Puzzleland, she studied Theatre and had been in several community plays, but directors only cast her in numbered titled roles: Fairy 2, Barmaid 3, Boulder 1. Edith and I discussed this in the stillness of lights out. Nurse Rachael wasn't ugly, she had shiny red hair, she just had lousy ears that didn't hear emphasis the way they should. She stressed all the wrong words in a sentence.

At first, no one looked. But Nurse Rachael stood very still, so we tilted our heads back and stifled groans. Black paper footprints fluttered on the ceiling, just left of the fan that whirred too loudly on speed three. "How did those get *up* there?"

"You taped them," Gregory said. He sat in one of the itchy green chairs, legs-crossed, twiddling his thumbs. He used his middle finger to adjust browline glasses too big for his face. He enjoyed flipping the nurses off and playing innocent of it. He could keep his mouth ruler-straight the longest of us all.

"Then how did I do *that*?"

"You used a ladder," Edith said, not looking up from *The World Book Encyclopedia: QR* nestled in her lap. The nurses didn't dote on Edith like they did me. She wasn't what adults deemed 'cherubic.' Edith wore a metal brace for her spine and

pulled blonde strands of hair from its screws. She said it was more satisfying than excavating popcorn kernels from your teeth. She let me try once.

Nurse Rachael asked, “Do you see a ladder anywhere?”

“No, but you did use one. There’s no other logical explanation.” Gregory continued twiddling.

“Well, what *illogical* explanations could there be if you—” Nurse Rachael paused. The nurses were under strict instruction not to ask us to “use our imaginations.” We were here because we allegedly didn’t have those. They didn’t want to remind us of our deficiencies and make it harder for us to perform. “If you examined the problem differently, Gregory? Who do the footprints belong to, do you think?”

“No one,” Edith said. “They’re paper. You cut them out.” Gregory silent-snapped for Edith’s answer. To a nurse, he might’ve been digging dirt out from underneath his fingernail.

Nurse Rachael stepped further into the room, knocked into a coffee table, frowned at it. “What do they look like then?”

“Like paper,” Gregory said, annoyed. He twiddled backwards now. Bit the inside of his cheek.

“Construction paper,” I added. I expected her to beam pride at me for participating since I seldom spoke, I had a hard time playing blank. Nurse Rachael just stared at me instead.

“They’re taped wrong,” said Edith. “The left foot’s on the right and the right foot’s on the left.”

Gregory silent-snapped again. During ‘Christmas in July Day,’ he’d hung tinsel off her brace. She’d giggled and I’d gotten stuck with a burnt popcorn chain.

“Interesting observation, Edith. What *could* explain that? Did the man just put his shoes on wrong? Or did aliens slice off his legs and reattach them incorrectly? Or maybe—”

“Leading!” Gregory said and we all nodded. We wiggled our index and middle fingers, walking them through the air like hermit crabs, another Puzzleland device. Nurses weren’t allowed to influence our creative cognitive processes, though many of them tried. They couldn’t tell that we were lying, that we wanted to be there.

As we left the lobby, Edith and I found one another. She had just finished reading the entry on quails. We walked slowly and fell behind, but Nurse Rachael didn’t notice, she was too busy skimming her script for *The Glass Menagerie* in which she would play the unicorn. Edith came closer and my hand grazed the metal of her rig. “You know,” she secret-whispered, “The footprints were big. They might’ve belonged to a clown.”

“A serial killer clown,” I said, “with anti-gravity shoes.”

“Drunk vampire,” Gregory murmured behind us. “He was hanging as a bat, lost control, and changed back into a human.”

“His shoes wouldn’t transform with him, stupid. They’d be on the ground.” Edith whacked him with *QR*. “You’d see his toe-prints if anything.”

Nurse Rachael stopped and waved us forward. We exchanged curt grins before quickening our pace.

“A mailman *and* a judge?” Gregory asked. He took another bite of mashed potatoes. We had half an hour for dinner before visiting hours started. We dreaded when our families came. None of them believed we really had A.S.I.I.D. We were all just playing parts. The concerned parents and siblings, the hopeful patients. The large cast exhausted us.

We sat at tables meant for six and ate from brown trays with blemished silverware. Chicken, potatoes, rolls. Pudding cups with crumbled Oreos, gummy worms sticking up and out the top. The doctors hoped the presentation might inspire us to play with food. Make Teddy Grahams bleed syrup, drown them in chocolate milk. Before dessert, we all chimed “Leading!” as if it were the Amen! to punctuate our prayers.

“Yeah, they both died here,” I said. “Lobotomies.”

“I bet they were in the mafia. Mailman delivers the goods, judge lets his mafia buddies walk.” Gregory chewed his potatoes thoughtfully. “And really, mafia members would be electrocuted. More macho, right? I think—” Nurse Rachael passed by, tray in one hand, script in the other. “I disagree, Carrie. St. Albans closed because of funding and patients, not because of malpractice. There’s no legal way a sanatorium could host a children’s camp otherwise.”

Everyone nodded in agreement, our eyes trained on Nurse Rachael. Unlike the other nurses, she did not fawn over Dr. Peterson. He sat at the staff table like Jesus in *The Last Supper*, his disciples lustful women. Nurse Lillian’s straw went up her right nostril as she tried to simultaneously sip and stare.

Nurse Rachael exited stage right.

“I bet there are still dead people in the morgue,” Gregory said. “In those pull out wall shelves. Naked with tagged toes. Does a penis shrivel up when you die, do you think?”

I said, “You’re disgusting.”

Gregory replied, “No, I’m ‘deficient.’” He retrieved that week’s writing report from his pocket. “‘In my imaginative range of diction and imagery’ with ‘below average comprehension of similes and metaphors.’ And, I received a frowny face in not blue, but red ink.”

The table silent-snapped. Gregory bowed.

“Let’s hear one,” Clancy said. He was twelve, the oldest of us all, with a voice that bellowed and a cough that reverberated in your chest. He snored so loudly that he’d wake himself up during Improv to Improve. He missed today’s session though and we all knew why. His family was vacationing in Martha’s Vineyard next week and he needed to find his creativity before they booked the condo.

Gregory glanced at Edith. “Her brace is like a metal contraption specifically designed to correct her scoliosis.”

“That’s deep, man,” said Clancy.

“I’m nothing without my muse.”

“You gonna try to leave early?” he asked and Gregory said, “Nah.” Clancy scanned the table. “You guys?”

“My mom bribed me with Camprantula,” I said. “I have to stay here the whole eight-weeks or else I don’t get shit.”

“My mom’s divorced,” Gregory said and he said it so openly that I wondered why my mother struggled with it so. “Wanted the house to herself so she could fuck as loud as she wanted. I kinda ruin the mood when I waltz in demanding pancakes at eight in the morning.”

“What about you?” I turned to Edith.

She poked at her chicken. “I like it here. I have a bed to myself.”

“You don’t at home?”

She shook her head. “No, I do. I guess I like sleeping the whole night through.”

I wanted to understand Edith, the delicate words she’d strung together, but her eyes never met mine and I knew better than to ask her lids.

“Shit, this is gonna be good,” whispered Clancy as Gregory found the red M&M I’d buried in his gravy. Gregory pretended not to notice. He took a bite, the red M&M promising as a sundae cherry, and slowly slid the fork out of his mouth, a lone spec of pepper still clinging to his lips. We watched him chew, swallow, the motions exaggerated and prolonged. He never died the same way. Last time, he kept croaking, “CPR! I need CPR!” eyes locked on Edith, but Nurse Meagan walked over, and he righted himself in seconds.

“C’mon, we only have five minutes,” said Clancy.

Gregory gestured, wait, and then he clasped his throat. Bugged-out his eyes, sputtered like the last gurgles of a coffee-maker in the morning. He held his breath, face flushed. Pounded the table and made our silverware tinkle prettily. He fell out of his chair and onto the floor, body curled, knees at his chin.

“Help,” he coughed. “My appendix.”

“Appendicitis? Really?” I slumped with disappointment. “But you were poisoned,” I whined. He reached out and grabbed my hand and I was on the floor, kneeling next to him. Clancy and Edith leaned across the table to hear Gregory’s last words.

“It ruptured,” he said, “from too many bursts of creativity.” And he *open-closed* above his left side, just above his hip.

We tried not to laugh. I bit the inside of my mouth, pinched my arm, but I laughed and Clancy laughed and Edith laughed a little. Nurse Lillian passed by, on her way to stack her tray, and she hadn’t even touched Gregory before he righted himself. “Another seizure, Gregory?” she asked. “That’s the second one this week.”

“I’m just prone to them, ma’am,” he said. “Perhaps the doctors are prescribing me too many yellows.”

She popped a crouton in her mouth and walked away.

“Hail Mary,” Gregory whispered because those were the rules of Homicide. The murderer always had to come clean in Catholic fashion.

“Full of Grapes,” I said. He smirked as though he already knew. He was my favorite victim.

The table silent-snapped for his performance, except for Edith. She said, “Your appendix is on your right” and she ripped a gummy worm in two.

We slid our food trays onto metal racks. Mine above Clancy’s, Gregory’s above mine. Gregory took Edith’s and slid it above his because she could not tip-toe for an extra

inch, her brace prevented the stretch. “Just like the trays in the morgue,” Gregory whispered and he oohed at me with wiggling fingers.

“You have gravy on your glasses,” I said. Dr. Peterson watched us from his table, his back not touching the chair. Gregory wiped the lens on his shirttail. Murmured, “Did he see?”

I shook my head. “No. I don’t think so.”

We filed back to our table, waited for our families to arrive. Mom and Stevie appeared and my mother was Yellow. Yellow jacket, yellow skirt, yellow kitten-heels. She passed my table and Stevie said, “Hey, Carrie.”

“Where’s she going?”

“The doctor. She wants to apologize.” He grinned. “I got his wife real good with a grenade today.”

“You mean Flora?” I asked and Stevie nodded. “Why would Mom apologize? It was just a pinecone.” Stevie and I played Cowboys and Indians in the woods behind our house. Pinecones for grenades, mulch as wayward shrapnel. He liked the action, stabbing and shooting Nazis, and I liked the aftermath, sawing and stitching up Tommies. A high percentage needed amputations, a few turned into werewolves.

He grinned bigger. “Dave and I fill balloons with mud so you can really tell if someone’s dead. But sometimes,” Stevie lowered his voice, “we fill them with dog shit. Fresh too, so it ain’t hard. It splattered all over her dress.”

Gregory guffawed, really guffawed, because he’d spent too long with girls, and he began twiddling his thumbs, slower and slower, trying to regain his stoicism.

“I’m surprised you’re still alive,” I hissed and Flora walked in, dressed in cobalt capris, a light blue floral top. She wore sunglasses, oversized and white, and she carried a brown paper bag under her arm like a clutch. She didn’t look at Stevie or me, she saw the nurses and my mother swarmed around her husband, and her pace quickened.

“Wait here,” I told Stevie and I followed Flora to the staff table.

“Stevie’s absolutely mortified, you see. He doesn’t have very good aim. It’s nothing against Flora, I assure you,” Mom said. She touched Dr. Peterson’s arm and the nurses tensed, her hand a child’s in the cookie jar, needing to be slapped.

“Perhaps,” said Flora. “He’d throw better if he had a father to teach him how.” She kissed Dr. Peterson on the cheek, wiped away her lipstick. Slipped her hand between his white coat and belt. “Brought you chocolate cake,” she cooed.

“Gregory doesn’t have a dad either,” I said. “And Edith doesn’t have a mom.” My shoulders slacked at how perfectly they’d fit together, jigsaw pieces of a nuclear family. All that tinsel, valentines, streamers dangling off her brace, placed by Gregory with meticulous, twiddling thumbs.

“You’re absolutely right, Carrie,” said Dr. Peterson. He excused himself, and Flora’s hand fell, her face fell, as he went to sit at Edith’s table. Her father sat diagonally from her, in the corner, he kept telling her to sit up straighter, to arch her back. She pulled a blonde strand from a screw and began to wind it around her index finger. It grew fat and red and Dr. Peterson told her to stop. “I like my girls to have ten fingers.”

“*Your* girl?” Edith’s father said. He did not have Ken Doll hair, he had a bald spot, greys. He had bleary eyes that rolled in opposite directions. He sweated and his nose

was crooked, a permanent reminder that he'd been banned from Riley's Bar downtown three years ago. The boy had called him stupid.

"I'm sorry, it's an expression," said Dr. Peterson. "Like how a teacher refers to her students as 'her kids.' You understand."

Edith's father grumbled yeah and Dr. Peterson stood, buttoned his white coat. When he realized we'd all been watching, he cleared his throat and asked Nurse Lillian to deliver a chart.

"Which chart?" she asked.

"The chart, Lillian. The chart." He brushed back an un-gelled hair and walked out. Flora lit a cigarette and followed him and Mom just looked defeated.

"Do you want to say hi to Gregory's mother?" I asked. "You like Gregory's mother."

"She'll never speak to me again," said Mom. "That woman will say Stevie did it on purpose and the whole book club will follow her." She blinked a few times, up at the ceiling. "We hadn't even gotten to the sex scene yet and who can I talk to about that?"

I said, "Gregory's mother?" and it sounded more joke than solution. She'd been sanitizing her chair all this time, shaking like a hatching chrysalis. When she finally sat down, she did not touch the table or hold her son's hand. "She thinks crazy's contagious," Gregory had told me that first visit. "She doesn't get why I laugh and that makes it funnier."

"She'd talk sex with you," I told my mom. "Gregory says she fucks a lot of men."

"Carrie Anne Wily!"

"Sorry."

But Mom was relieved that I knew that word and its meaning, and she thought, maybe, since I'd already been sullied, she could talk to me about woman things and not lose Mom points. "No woman like that is going to want strange men touching her," she whispered as we sat down. "Hello, Angela," she said. "How's your week been?"

After visiting hours, I tracked Gregory down and I asked, "How does your mom fuck men?" and he said, "Excuse me?"

"At dinner, you said that she does, but she's, y'know, really concerned with clean and I was just wondering, how?"

"She doesn't talk to *me* about it," he said. He adjusted his glasses with his middle finger and I chose to believe it out of habit than a subtle 'get lost.' "But I heard her, once, with the mailman. She told him to fuck her husband right out of her."

"How long have they been divorced?"

"Two years this Christmas."

"And she's still not over him?"

Gregory looked at me, sad and not the boy from Homicide or Improv to Improve, but someone's only child, only son, forced to learn the cogs of a woman's mind too soon. "I don't think she'll ever be."

At 9:30, the nurses called, "Lights out." Girls and boys slept in separate halls, twelve beds in each. Puzzleland removed the white curtains that divided the beds. Kept metal frames, squeaky wheels, too starched sheets. Only Edith was allowed two pillows. Her back ached when she lay down. She squeezed the second between her knees like a

pregnant woman. Sometimes she stuffed it under her shirt and really played the part. She said it was a boy and I said it was an octopus. No backbone, no brace.

We slept in the far left corner, my back to the window, hers to the door. We spoke freely, but in whispers.

“Tomorrow’s Thursday,” I said and she nodded, adjusted her pillow. “I hate Thursdays.”

She said, “I know. I hate Fridays.” She said, “I’m beginning to hate 3:00 o’clock, too.”

“He’s started sticking me with needles,” I said. “Real needles. Every time he does, I have to sneeze.” Edith nodded again. We only mildly suffered through inkblots and improv, but Out of Body tested our sanity. Once a week, the nurses took us to see Dr. Peterson for poking, prodding, wires. Blinking lights, rods that jittered back and forth along a page. Now, I underwent acupuncture to get my ‘creative juices flowing.’

“Week One,” Edith said. “The needles came week one.”

I asked, “Now what?” because we were on Week Six.

“You know pigeons?” she said and I nodded. “You know doves?” I nodded again. “If you had to pluck feathers off of one, which one would you choose?”

I said pigeon and she said yeah, them too.

“Your metaphors stink compared to Gregory’s.”

“You don’t get it. The nurses think you’re *beautiful*.” Most adults did and I knew it, too. I wore blue to make my eyes shine brighter when I asked for a Popsicle, an extra fifteen minutes in front of the TV. And I knew that Edith was ugly. Perpetual skin rash, thin blonde wisps, a too-small, upturned nose resembling a Hoo’s down in Whoville. She

must've considered the brace a blessing, an explanation for the lack of physical contact she endured.

"Don't say that," I said because that's what you say. "Gregory likes you," I said because it was true.

I expected her to whinny, bury her head under the covers in horror, delight. But instead, she said, "I know."

"You know?" I sat upright. "Then why aren't you dating him?"

"I don't like him."

"Why not?"

"He's cruel. The way he talks about his mom. It makes the boys look at her like she's nothing."

"I don't think you have any right to be picky."

"Because I'm ugly." Her voice lacked accusation. "Ugly girls can't do a lot of things. Say no, for instance."

"To Gregory, you mean?"

She stared at the ceiling. "Yeah, sure."

She turned her back to me. I started imagining a bipolar patient who might've flipped one side to the other in his sleep in my bed, but then she said, "Dr. Peterson took off my brace last week."

I sighed in my head. "That's not too bad."

"He asked me, 'what else could I do with it?'"

"What'd you say?"

"Coatrack."

I tensed. “You shouldn’t have said that. It’s too creative. You could get kicked out and you wouldn’t get paid.”

“He’d never kick me out. He actually liked my answer, too. He took off his coat and laid it on my brace.”

“That’s stupid. It would’ve fallen off.” No response. “Edith?”

She was crying. I wanted to slip into her bed and hold her not because I loved her or pitied her or understood why she wept, but because that’s how you react to someone sad. But she slept in her brace these days and I wouldn’t have been able to wind my arms around it, so I stayed and watched her back rise and fall, lulled to sleep by her staccato intake of breaths, the light *clank* of metal on metal as her brace kissed the bed’s cold frame.

Nurse Lillian woke me up. She murmured, “Be quiet,” into my curls. She did not smell of coffee. She smelled of something other, acrid as nail polish, it burned the inside of my nose. She smelled like my mother when the pot roast burned or she missed the PTA meeting, when the phone rang and the other line was quiet and she cried, “I can hear you.” My mother cried, “Please come home.”

I was soggy with sleep, my limbs fluid, I could not bend them into sharp angles for walking, running. She picked me up and I liked her size, then. The cushion of her breasts, the security of flabby arms, I knew she would not drop me. She gripped me tight, and sniffled. The tears rolled down her cheeks and dropped onto the hand I’d curled into her scrubs.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked because she shuffled her feet, hesitant, she usually walked so quickly I had to jog to keep up with her.

She set me down, her fingers choked my wrist. I tugged away, just to see if I could. Her palms were sweaty. Maybe I could slip out, like a banana from its peel in Saturday cartoons. I hadn’t seen those in over a month. I’d begun to miss the laughing reel, uniform and sick.

“Dr. Peterson wants to see you for a session,” she said. “To monitor your creativity after having your REM cycle disturbed.”

“But Out of Body is in Byrne Wing.” The hallway was dark, tinged a dark green, the bottom of a lake, that same feeling of weightlessness, of drowning pervasive in this narrow strip of space. The vending machine shined ten feet away and it was the only vending machine in Puzzleland. “We’re in Reid Wing,” I said. Way in Reid Wing, we’d passed the pharmaceutical window where we received our Silly Pillies.

“He has a special room for you,” she said. “We have to hurry or we’ll be late.”

She squeezed my wrist and I trotted behind her. We passed no one. Down the hall, to the right, Nurse Lillian opened a door. I pressed against her and hated myself for it. I could distinguish three lines, three steps, but that was all. I could not see beyond.

“Come on,” she said and I said, “No.”

Her face blurred with the blackness and she smelled no longer other, but wrong. Musky, sweaty, ashamed. She’d doused herself in Nurse Rachael’s sweet pea perfume, fog-like, trying to conceal the familiar fat-smell that wasn’t even there.

She picked me up and said, “It’s just a test, Carrie.” My name dropped from her lips, heavy as lead, reaffirming that I was the one in need of assurance. She was perfectly in control.

“Thank you, Lillian,” said Dr. Peterson once we reached the bottom. The moon shone through the window, reflected off his stethoscope that I’d never seen him use. “Hello, Carrie,” he said. “I’m sorry to wake you up like this.”

Dr. Peterson smiled just like Flora. Only top teeth showing.

Nurse Lillian closed the door. The room was small, the paint chipping. Planks of wood and brick and cinderblocks adorned the floor. One wall glimmered, entirely metal. Dr. Peterson stood in front of a tattered gurney, mice scritch-scratched inside.

“Do you know where we are?” he asked.

I answered no. He walked over to the wall, yanked on a handle, and a tray pulled out in a clatter of sound. Nurse Lillian clutched my shoulder.

“Do you know now?”

“The morgue.”

“Very good, Carrie,” he said. “Now, do you know what goes in here?” He patted the tray.

“Dead bodies.”

“What else could go in here?”

“Nothing,” I said, I prayed. “Just those. That’s what they’re designed for.”

Nurse Rachael had asked us this before. About a refrigerator. “What can fit inside a refrigerator, kids?” she’d asked. We’d said cheese, we’d said carrots, we’d said milk. Not baseballs, not puppies, not dandelion seeds.

“Are you sure?” asked Dr. Peterson.

Nurse Lillian whispered, “What about a tennis racket?”

“Lillian!”

“Leading,” I said softly. I couldn’t remember how to move my fingers. I couldn’t remember how to move.

“Yes, that is leading, Carrie,” said Dr. Peterson. He looked pleased. “Now, I just want to run one test and then I’ll let you sleep, is that okay?”

I said nothing.

“Lillian,” he sighed. “Please.”

Nurse Lillian lifted me up and set me on the tray. I flailed, I screamed, I tried to bite her stupid fat fingers, but she was strong and a grownup and Dr. Peterson clamped his hand on my thigh, too high, his thumb grazed my crotch, and he was not Gregory or Clancy, he was not a boy, he was a man and that distinction had never been more clear.

They slammed me back into the wall.

Dr. Peterson shouted so I could hear. “Now, I want you to imagine everything that could possibly be in there with you.” He said, “Remember to think *outside the box*” and I wanted to bite his lower lashes and rip his skin across, erase the smirk surely plastered on his face.

“What’s in there with you?”

I was going to throw up. Everything was dark, the ceiling was two inches above my face, the height prevented my legs or arms from moving. A dead body has lain here, I thought. A dead body. I could smell it. I was sure I could.

“Let me out!”

“Are you scared?” he asked. “What’s there for you to be afraid of in there?”

“A ghost!” I screamed. “Rats! Dead bodies! Let me out! Let me out!” I pounded on the tray. “Tarantulas! Vipers! You, you son of a bitch!”

He laughed and I really wished people could choke on laughter. “Describe this ghost for me. Male or female?”

“Male.” I was crying and coughing because there was no fresh air, the dirty air seemed worse than none. “He had a lobotomy and he died” and I felt like he was on top of me, then, slicing me with a scalpel along my neck, my belly, down where the ghost of Dr. Peterson’s touch still lingered hot.

“What does he look like?”

“Like Edith’s dad.”

“No,” yelled Dr. Peterson. “Make it up! What does the ghost look like?”

“I told you!” I coughed more. I couldn’t stop coughing. My eyes watered, turning my head left or right didn’t help, because I imagined him lying next to me with bleeding lips, yanking my hair back, sucking on my neck.

Nurse Lillian pulled me and the tray out of the wall. I lurched forward and clung to her chest. I wanted water. I wanted water and sunlight and Puzzleland to burn.

“Very creative answers,” said Dr. Peterson. “Perhaps you could channel that energy into tomorrow’s lesson. See if we can’t discharge you early.” It wasn’t a suggestion; he wanted me gone. He turned around, using the moonlight to write on his clipboard.

“Lillian, take Carrie back upstairs. Set her up in the infirmary. I want Gregory Oaken down here in ten.”

“Meagan’s bringing him down now,” she said.

“Then Edith. And make sure she’s out of the brace. She can’t lie back when it’s on. It hurts her.”

“Yes, doctor.”

“And some towels,” he said. “She bleeds.”

He shrugged off his coat.

The next day, we had our last Improv to Improve session. No one told us it was the last, but we’d all been carried or dragged to the morgue that night and we’d all seen things. We discussed our answers because we were more scared not to, to let the fears fester in our brains, to ignore the experience we all shared and could not share with classmates come August.

“I saw your killer clown,” said Gregory. “It had your hair.”

I said, “Fuck you,” and looked away.

Gregory adjusted his glasses and sat down, leaving a gap between us on the itchy green couch. Clancy came and filled it, spreading his arms along the back.

“Earthworms,” he said. “Courtesy of yesterday’s leading pudding.” He shivered. “They were everywhere and I do mean, everywhere.”

I asked him if he’d seen Edith and he said no.

“I’m going to go look for her.”

Nurse Rachael walked in and told me to sit down.

Again, she asked, “How did those get *up* there?” and she pointed to the two black footprints and everyone’s hands shot up like flares. Today was our consolation day.

“Yes, Gregory?”

“So, there was this vampire and he was hanging from the ceiling as a bat, like a human-sized bat, not some wimpy fruit bat, but then...”

Gregory stood and acted out the fall, the fangs, the wings shrinking back into arms, slender and flecked with dark-brown hairs. He’d perfected the transformation seizure from all the games of Homicide.

Afterward, Nurse Rachael told us our parents would be there in an hour to pick us up, Dr. Peterson could no longer use us in his study, and no one was surprised. We walked Reid Wing up and down, tossing Silly Pillies into each other’s mouths, free to laugh when someone missed, when an M&M went rogue and hit a nurse’s breast, just Nurse Rachael’s. I hadn’t seen Nurse Lillian since the night before.

Edith was sitting in our room, *QR* unopened in her lap.

“We missed you at Improv to Improve,” I said.

“Dr. Peterson didn’t think I should go. He thought it would be too hard for me to see everyone.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Aren’t you going home?” I sat down next to her. “He told Nurse Lillian to get you. I heard him. You were in the morgue, too.”

“Yes,” she said softly. “I was.”

“Didn’t you imagine something in there?”

“No.” She stroked the hardcover. “I didn’t.”

“Nothing at all?”

She shrugged as much as her brace allowed. “Air.”

“But weren’t you scared?”

“No one else could fit inside.” She almost smiled. “It was so nice, just me in there.”

I couldn't understand. I thought, maybe, we'd been wrong. That Edith really was that one in a million kid, the uncreative one, the one we scorned in school. The one Puzzleland could make more creative, more capable of laughter, side-splitting, breath-damming laughter that made your face ache, eyes water. I thought we'd made her happy, all of us.

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The first story I ever wrote for this collection involved a Nessie-worshipping possum (who could talk). I have several people to thank for its fortunate omission.

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“It’s like God gave you something, man, all those stories you can make up. And He said, ‘This is what we got for ya, kid. Try not to lose it.’ But kids lose everything unless there’s someone there to look out for them.”

~ Stand by Me