AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Jaclyn Watterson for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on April 16, 2010.
Title: After We Lost the Wind.

Abstract approved:

_____________________________________
Tracy Daugherty

My thesis is a collection of short stories in which I explore themes like loss, identity, and memory. The collection includes both short stories and short short stories, and through in-depth exploration of character and form, the stories here attempt to fit into a tradition of writers articulating the experiences of people trying to make sense of their most private, vulnerable selves, as they try to live with those selves; in spite of the necessity of living outside those selves and with others. Most of these stories are non-linear, focusing more on a particular sensibility than movement.
After We Lost the Wind

by

Jaclyn Watterson

A THESIS

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APPROVED:

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

_________________________________________

Jaclyn Watterson, Author
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Introduction

At a recent department function, when a prospective MFA student asked if I were a minimalist, I said no and Tracy, the advisor for this thesis, said I was a shortist. The three of us laughed and the conversation moved on, but as I prepared for my defense, the term kept popping back into my head.

I think anyone who’s read my work would agree that it’s decidedly not minimalist, and yet as those on the committee know, there are thirty stories in this collection. By most standards, they’re short. But not minimalist. I’ve attempted, in these stories, to consider each and every word, because I think that’s as important in fiction as in poetry. I’ve tried, too, to write stories that move. I want my stories to move my characters and move my readers.

To me, the best stories move us in a familiar and yet entirely new way. The stories I love move me in some primal way that I know I’ve wanted to be moved in, but haven’t quite been before. And they move me so that I can’t quite go back to where I was before. Good stories, to me, relate simply and impossibly and always to life—and the requisite longing in life—by considering, above all else, feeling. “Breathing Jesus” from Amy Hempel’s Reasons to Live and “The Deep,” a novella, from Mary Swan’s The Deep and Other Stories (among others) are examples of stories I think do this particularly well.

In my own stories, I strive for this same poignancy, this same depth of feeling and closeness to characters’ psychologies and inner lives. I want my stories to leave readers—including all of you—a little changed, with a new feeling, a feeling that is
familiar and yet not familiar. I want you to feel differently after you’ve read my stories because you understand my characters’ feelings and movement, or their lack—often inability—of movement.

My characters usually lose in love and in their relationships with other people in general. Sometimes the characters can’t understand their mothers; sometimes they can’t talk to their lovers. Sometimes their friends desert them, and sometimes they can’t bring themselves to love. For my characters, life is experienced in feeling, and often feeling cannot be articulated or understood. My characters, like the narrator in “The Tea Whale,” Amy in “In the Wood,” and Lil in “My Place,” find themselves alone with their imaginations. For these characters, life is an inner condition, something that they learn to experience alone. For some of them, this is redemptive, and for others it is not.

Some people might accuse my stories of being non-narrative. But to me, narrative is not about moving from point A to point B, or even from point A to point D. To me, narrative is about what happens between those points, about those moments of inner life or interactions with others that leave characters—and all of us—changed, not more or less like we were, but more or less than we were. To me, as a writer, change doesn’t necessarily happen as we move forward. Change can happen while we sit still, and sometimes a refusal to change or an inability to change, to move forward, can be the only possible “resolution,” to use a traditional term, for a character.
My stories don’t often move in linear fashion, and they don’t concern themselves with cause and effect directly, because I don’t think as humans we experience life as cause and effect. To me, and for my characters, effect isn’t necessarily felt right after its cause. Many of the “causes” of events or feelings for my characters happen outside the story frame, so that my stories are mainly concerned with effect. Often my characters are not able to acknowledge or comprehend the direct causes of their present feelings, but instead engage in imaginative screening, or avoidance, of what’s at the heart of their present conditions.

Consider, for example, my story, “Front Porch.” This story is not concerned with a direct or nameable cause; the devil can represent any number of things, as can the honey and the books. I’m not asking readers, in this story or in most of my others, to interpret any specific or direct symbolism, and I’m not asking them to make any direct connections between cause and effect. I want them, instead, to feel the effect, to feel that because they understand that effect, they’ve gained something, whether that something is an understanding of the particular effect of the particular story, or whether it’s an understanding of some more—and I cringe to use this term, but think it’s the most accurate here—universal truth.

In “Front Porch,” I want readers to feel as the characters do, that a way of life is lost, that meaningful connections are lost, because of the choices the wives have made. Here, as in many of my other stories, the narrative is not concerned with movement, but with the “stuckness” of these characters between the points of, perhaps, “death” and “recovery.”
I have to take responsibility for these lofty ideas, but of course I didn’t come to them on my own. As I worked on compiling and revising this thesis through the fall and winter, I created a stack of Important Books in my house. I slowly added to the stack books that felt important to me, books I thought were doing, in part, what I was trying to do. Books that proved I’m not alone.

I read and re-read, marked passages and read aloud to myself and my cat from books like Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated*, Nicole Krauss’s *The History of Love*, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Donald Barthelme’s *Sixty Stories* and *Forty Stories*, Trinie Dalton’s *Wide Eyed*, Mary Swan’s *The Deep and Other Stories*, Amy Hempel’s *Reasons to Live* (and other collections, too), and many, many others, including Albert Camus’s *The Stranger*.

I think, and hope, my work fits not into a particular genre—I’m no more an existentialist than a minimalist, no more a romanticist than a nihilist—but into the tradition of writers who consider their every word, writers who use their words to get at the inner lives of their characters and consider what happens between those often public points, A and B. Maybe I’m a shortist, because I’m not interested in going the distance between points, but in going deep into that (sometimes) short space between points. I hope to fit into a tradition of characters and writers trying to make sense of their aloneness in relation to others. People trying to make sense of their most private, vulnerable selves, as they try to live with those selves; in spite of the necessity of living outside those selves and with others.
Backyard

Charred and dead, charred and dead. The children hold hands and dance in a ring, singing. The cat in the middle of their circle is charred and dead, and the children are witches. Charred and dead.

Rosalie, in her pink pinafore, laughs round with the rest of them, for she knows the story of the plague. With a pocket full of buttercups, she sings, Charred and dead, charred and dead, and thinks of her mother, at home sucking on a bottle.

The children grip each other’s hands tightly and press closer to the cat. Charred and dead, charred and dead.

Rosalie, in her bare feet, grins the hardest, for the next game is hers. They will chase each other through the trees, brandishing ribbons and belts and swigging clear liquid from bottles that never grow dust. Maybe today will be the day Rosalie cracks a bottle on someone’s head.
Dresses

Downstairs, family is mingling, the women with wine and the men with beer in bottles. The cousins and Jennifer’s brothers are feigning a closer kinship than they have, fielding questions from one another’s parents and elbowing each other on the floral sofa, stiffer than the couches of their own living rooms. It will be another two hours at least before dinner, and Jennifer will need the time.

It is Jennifer’s Thanksgiving ritual to whittle, from dresses and accessories, a past for her grandmother. A present for herself. It is her ritual each time she visits the house. Downstairs, Jennifer’s grandmother is talking with Carl, the widower from next door, and her mother is carefully ignoring it all, looking down at her shoes, the way Jennifer knows she learned as a girl.

As she fingers a knee-length avocado long-sleeved with orange sequins like her mother’s nightmares, Jennifer nods her head up and down so her nose nuzzles the mauve velvet of a longer, even slimmer dress, next in the line. Her grandmother’s closet is so large it reminds her of her own bedroom, the only place she wants in those horrible moments at recess when boys ask her, What are you doing? and girls tell her, This game is only for two.

The closet is so large it is full of clothes she has never seen her grandmother wear, clothes from other times when her grandmother was sizes smaller and when orange and green together was fashionable, when pearls were not embarrassing. These are times Jennifer has to try to imagine.
She starts with her grandmother’s hair, which would have been smooth and glossy atop a smaller, creaseless face. Her eyes, brown and freckled gold, would have glowed out under creamy lids, and her lips would always have been, even when she first rose in the morning, red as pomegranates.

Jennifer can see her grandmother, the prettiest girl for three hundred miles, and always knowing just how to act. She can’t remember hearing the story anymore, but Jennifer’s sure that on the day she graduated from high school, her grandmother was carried out on the wooden chair she sat in each day, and one boy even got so caught up he proposed right away. He was the first of many.

Jennifer looks for the shoes her grandmother would have worn with the purple floral dress, years later. Even on normal days, she would have been pretty enough for holidays. With her orchids and bulbine, she would have worn these strappy open-toed heels. She would have known just how to walk in the elegant shoes with her loud dress. She would have come home to find that her husband had brought her flowers, and they’d dance in the living room while the blooms grew larger and louder, to match the music her grandmother loved.

What had her grandmother worn on Thanksgivings past? Jennifer sees a lovely brown satin with an empire waste and pink silk sash, or what she imagines is a sash. It has to have been a party dress, but perhaps for her grandmother’s summer birthday. When she was nineteen and unfettered, probably receiving flowers from men who were not Jennifer’s grandfather. And she would have known what to say when they asked, What are you doing? She would have known what to say so they
smiled and asked another question; she wouldn’t laugh or turn away. And she would have told the other girls, I’m sorry, but I can’t invite everyone to the party.

But Jennifer’s grandmother, for all her popularity, would have dreamed of the day she had someone who understood, someone like Jennifer. Jennifer’s sure that in the graduation picture now so famous in the family, she can see a wistful expression, her grandmother imagining, even so young, that she’d one day have a granddaughter like Jennifer, someone who was different from the rest, someone who would understand that she would not get rid of any of her dresses, that they belonged to her.

Jennifer has understood this for a long time, longer than she can remember. And she has seen these dresses before, though always in this closet. Today she’s looking for something else, a clue or a concession. Because this morning her grandmother said, Jennifer, after you’ve had time to play, I need to speak with you.

Even the mauve velvet has lost its touch, is too familiar. Jennifer moves past the dresses that she’s already incorporated into her own story, to the trunk under the window at the back of the closet. It’s a heavy trunk and an old one, the kind Jennifer is sure her grandmother has kept secrets in. Jennifer has never opened this trunk, though her grandmother told her this morning, It’s full of old things you’d love.

If I open it, Jennifer whispers to the gauzy curtains, Grandmother won’t have any more secrets, and maybe Mother will stop looking at her shoes.

The curtains, Jennifer notices for the first time, are too short for the long window. But they seem to whisper back. Yes, yes, yes.
She throws up the heavy lid of the trunk. Not the hats or purses or gloves she half expected, but photographs. Not boxed or labeled, but stuffed and overflowing the trunk. One of her on her grandmother’s lap, when she turned seven. Jennifer’s foolish brothers, with their arms around meaningless cousins. Her parents on their wedding day, her mother looking eternally down, perhaps admiring her satin shoes, but more likely wishing her feet smaller.

Jennifer digs through these familiar scenes, to the black and whites at the bottom. Her grandmother’s famous graduation picture, her own wedding, her cotillion, because her father had been rich and she was the youngest and most beautiful sister in a time when everyone was beautiful. The pictures tell the story Jennifer has always known, and she understands. And yet, where are the old things for her to love, the things her grandmother promised? The pictures show dresses and hats, shoes and bracelets, belts and stockings Jennifer has known all her life.

And then, buried under so many dazzling pictures: a box. A small, metal box. A box small enough to hold something very special, a box strong enough to keep that thing forever. And it’s locked.

Jennifer’s grandmother told her to look in the trunk, and she knew the box was in the trunk. And she locked the box.

Jennifer cannot find the key, and soon her mother will call her for dinner.

You didn’t want me to see in the box, Jennifer whispers to her grandmother’s graduation picture. And she notices for the first time how proud and smug her grandmother was that day. Does her grandmother still look like that? Jennifer
wonders. The short curtains blow straight up as a clouded wind comes in the widow, and Jennifer stands to close it. She steps carefully over the hundreds of glamorous faces of her grandmother, and then piles them neatly back in the trunk.

The locked box she leaves in the center of the closet floor, and she returns to the trunk, to wait for her grandmother. Her grandmother, she thinks, must mean the box for a surprise.

Almost as soon as Jennifer begins to wait, her grandmother walks in with a wine glass, what Jennifer once called a swan glass, in her hand. The two-inch heels of her shoes click with authority up the wooden stairs and down the hall, then go silent as they bend in, navigating through the thick carpet of the bedroom.

Jennifer sits inside the trunk under the closed window, already imagining her grandmother’s hug and then her flushed-cheeked telling of where she wore all the dresses, how she once danced all night, how the meanest lion in the zoo purred at her whenever she went. And then, Jennifer thinks, after she repeats her favorite tales, she’ll explain the box she was keeping secret. Perhaps it contains a gift for Jennifer.

Jennifer looks out at her grandmother, and her grandmother pauses beside the bed without seeing her. Then she takes another step.

Of course, her grandmother walks as though she were floating on a few feet of water, but what surprises Jennifer is that Carl, the widower from next door, crosses the room and cups her grandmother’s elbow in one hand, tilting his bottle in the other. Jennifer watches for some of his beer to spill out, but her grandmother laughs and walks over to the bureau, to lean against it and put down her glass. Carl follows, and
places his bottle on Jennifer’s grandmother’s bureau, beside her gardenia scented perfume and the picture of her—alone—on her wedding day.

Today, Jennifer’s grandmother is wearing a navy button down dress, one that looks like a man’s shirt. Jennifer has never seen her grandmother pull nervously at her clothes, but she does it now and the dress goes taut across her legs for a moment. Then, closing her eyes just too long for a blink, she picks up her glass.

Jennifer rubs the insides of her feet together, scuffing the patent leather of her shoes. The closet door is open, but the bedroom is far away.

Carl chuckles, lifts his bottle, and takes a long drink, then puts it down on the bureau, inside the ring of wine Jennifer’s grandmother hasn’t noticed from her own glass. Jennifer watches as he takes a step closer to her grandmother. She waits for her grandmother to step back, get Carl the thing that they must have come into the bedroom for. Her grandmother doesn’t turn away, and she doesn’t say anything. Jennifer wonders how it is possible for them not to look at her, sitting in the closet like a pink silk bow, ready to delight.

They don’t look.

Her grandmother reaches out a hand veined like lace and lays it on Carl’s forearm. With her heels, her grandmother is the same height as Carl, but she looks at him like he’s a foot taller. No one says anything.

The plush carpeting stops at the closet door; here in Jennifer’s space, the floors are hardwood, wood Jennifer knows her grandmother ordered specially and against her husband’s wishes. Jennifer puts her heels down with the kind of authority
she knows her grandmother will tell her mother about at dinner. She will put her arm around Jennifer’s shoulders and pull her close, saying, Jennifer is like a grown woman already. She will wink at Jennifer’s mother and say, she’s more like me than you.

But the moment after Jennifer clacks her heels is too long; her grandmother does not look into the closet, though the door swings closed just a few inches more in a breeze Jennifer can’t feel. Then, after it seems like the dress she is wearing should hang in the closet, a relic of another lost time, Jennifer’s grandmother takes her hand from Carl’s arm and turns.

Jennifer, she says. But her cheeks are the pale color of Easter stockings. What are you doing in here?

Will you show me the picture of you in the blue checked dress? Jennifer asks. The one from the zoo?

Jennifer, her grandmother says again. Carl pulls on the waist of his pants, tucking his belly a little tighter.

What? Jennifer says stupidly.

Go downstairs.

At dinner, Jennifer eats only potatoes. Her grandmother does not look at her or say, You always look beautiful on Thanksgiving.

After dinner, her grandmother does not bring her upstairs and explain the locked box.
Jennifer thinks of her bedroom, and her tiny closet there. The ride home seems longer than it’s ever been. Even her mother falls asleep, but Jennifer looks at the dark space inside the car. The front seats are like hunched old men, sinister and still.

When they finally pull into the driveway, Jennifer’s mother wakes and says, Christmas will be here before we know it.

Jennifer goes to her room.

The walls are the pale blue of her grandmother’s silk bathrobe, one she suspects her grandmother still wears. She’ll tell her parents tomorrow she wants to paint them, but for now she climbs into the closet and sits on top of the toy box. She finds a space next to a stuffed zebra and tells it, I look more like my mother than my grandmother. And then she looks down at her feet.
Eighty-Two Percent Humidity

In the heat, Sophie’s body is swollen and bloated, and she wishes it were covered in smooth fur. Her thighs are marred by craters and her elbows deeply dimpled, but if she had fur, not even she would know these dents existed in her skin. And the other girls, instead of gawking at her rolling gut, would admire her sleekness, and try to touch her as she walked by. Sophie would be a comfortable brown, like a grinning dog, and she’d never have to wear any clothes. No longer the embarrassment of terry shorts, pulled up like a curtain where her legs meet. No more bra straps slicing into her shoulder flesh, and no more staring in the mirror and feeling for her collarbone until she’s bruised. Sophie’s skin is slick olive oil in the heat, and there’s more of it all the time. She tries tasting ice and filling herself with glass after glass of water, but even fat people get hungry.

Fur would solve this problem.

She sprawls beside the community pool, not daring to go in, for a wet one-piece is even tighter than a dry one. She’s learned from experience. Neither can she sit up and look the other girls in the face, because then they’ll see she’s just a fat melting gumdrop.

When she was a kid, Sophie’s mother used to read to her outside in autumnal chills. They sat on cheap lawn furniture, huddled under a scratchy blanket stretched between
their two chairs, and Sophie’s mother read aloud. They would stay out later even than the deer. Sophie’s mother was a large woman beside her own walrus sized bones. They only ever did this when it was cold outside because, Sophie thinks, that was when her mother and father fought the most, although he moved out in summer. All that rainy spring before, he took Sophie’s Saturdays and made her ride around in his little car. He said he wouldn’t move into a house she didn’t like, but she didn’t like any of them. And she remembers looking at the swell of her father’s belly over his seatbelt, comparing it to her own smaller swell. She hoped that hers would never be as fully in her lap as his was, hiding nearly half his thighs.

Perhaps if Sophie had been furry and soft in those days, she would have comforted her mother and father, and her father wouldn’t have moved into an apartment, the loophole in his promise. Perhaps if she had fur in those days, she wouldn’t need to feel so hard for her bones now. She pets her own head, but it is frizzy hair, not fur. She is fifteen, and can’t remember when dogs didn’t seem lucky.

Her mother, in her shining blue one piece and ankle length cover-up skirt, returns from the bathroom and says, Honey, Can I help you with your hair?
In the Wood

I was always staring out of classroom windows. Because I didn’t like classrooms or their windows. But, staring out the window, there were things I liked. This day it was a red, red leaf. And I wanted to put it in my mouth. I wanted to taste it, crisp and bitter, like a small, fresh cranberry.

The problem was this—the leaf was in my imagination, because at the beginning of spring, I wanted fall.

I can go on imagining, even now, but I’m waiting for my imagination to come true. This is what will happen when it does:

The glass in that classroom window will start dripping. Slowly at first, like very cold and thick syrup, and no one will notice. No one but me. The drips will turn to trickles, and before I can stop the teacher’s drawling, the window will be a puddle at his feet. Then, the leaves will sail in through the hole left by the melted window. And we will all be buried to our eyelashes, and then that last leaf, the red one, will muscle past all the rest. Into my mouth.

Things that came first:

Come in to supper, Susanne called, and I was young and liked that she did not say dinner, like my own mother.

I followed Claire into her house and her mother’s supper. Her father was sitting at the head of the table, drinking beer—something my own father never did.
Hello Amy, he said to me with a swallow.

Please, call me Loretta, I said to him.

Well hello Loretta. Please be seated. May I ask from whence you come to our supper table?

I’m a very poor child, I told him. Papa’s been out of work since before the Depression hit, and the good times you fine folks had in the twenties left us behind. I do greatly appreciate the victuals you offer me this evening.

Claire giggled, and her father turned to her.

And you young lady, he asked, are you also a child of the Dust Bowl?

Yes sir, I surely am, she told him.

More that will eventually be true:

With that red leaf in my mouth, I will be able to swim. I have never swum before, but when I find myself in the center of the biggest ocean I can conjure, I will not be alarmed. Simply, I will swing my arms forward and sway my legs along, and I will swim. No need for clothes or floats, because I can swim. And the leaf will taste of Claire’s lip mark on a wine glass.

I will swim ashore, and there she will be, a specter in broad sunlight. She will brush aside the red leaves covering her, and then we will swim together.

But the things that came before:

Harriet Tubman, I suggested.
It was summer, and Claire and I had exhausted the ’30s, the charming northwoods nomads, the war between the states, and even the great westward migration.

That’s the same as the war, Claire said. I’m tired of it.

And that’s when I got the idea for the gallows. Hot weather and romantic notions of people who had gone too far, and publicly paid the price, went to my head like they had been there all along, waiting these hundred odd years.

A beautiful woman who slept with the man she loved instead of her husband, another who drowned her baby in the river for reasons too profound and tragic for the townspeople to agree on, a man who sold property he didn’t own and then murdered the people who did own it, even a child who burned his father’s barn down with the father inside. These people, I was certain, had hanged for their desire. And being such passionate people, they were immensely imitable.

So we decided to play gallows.

Claire, at first, misunderstood.

Will we hang the rag-dolls my mom made? she asked.

And then she thought we’d be the hangmen.

But the leaf came first, because spring precedes summer:

During recess, we decided to play lizard poachers. We were evil men, on a mission to destroy all the lizards of the earth in order to turn their skin into polka dots for rich women to sew on their dresses and hats.
We collected the tiny green flowers of budding maples and they were balled lizard skin.

Sir, Claire as lizard poacher said, I must warn you that you are hunting on my land. Therefore, I shall kill you.

As a gentleman, I replied, I must challenge you to a duel.

You are no gentleman, Claire’s character reminded mine. You are a cad; you have lived as one, and now you must die as one.

Our duel took longer than was left of recess, for we could not agree on who would emerge victorious. We realized too late that the rest of the class had gone inside.

We caught up, and the teacher, who we liked to think of as a schoolmaster, was not happy with us. I imagined his thrashing me, or putting a dunce cap on my head, and wished for such ignominy. And I stared out the window, at a read leaf that was not there.

What will be true when my imagination is:

Claire will come to me, alive and dead at the same time. A girl again. I will ask her if she is a ghost, and she will smile seductively. Remember the gallows, she will whisper. And she will unfold her fingers to reveal that red leaf.

At first, we used the tree fort, a low affair among the larger bottom boughs of a pine in Claire’s backyard. Sometimes I would be the condemned, but I liked better
to stand in the crowd, watching as Claire played the part of the near-to-death. She had the most eloquent last words, and many times I was able to cry for her, as she implored me, the crowd, to pardon her.

But there was never a pardon.

Something that came later, after the game had been going a while:

It’d be better if we had real wine, I suggested.

I don’t even know why we would have wine, Claire said. It’s a public execution, not a sacrifice.

But the wine makes it more like a ceremony, I said. I didn’t know why I wanted a ceremony, but the game would be more thrilling and real with wine, I knew.

And so we stole some from Susanne’s pantry. Because she had so much, we were certain she wouldn’t miss just one bottle of red from the bottom shelf.

I brought a swallow of wine into my mouth after putting a leaf on my tongue. I pretended the wine was the spirit of Claire’s leaf. A liquid woman, like a dryad made of wine. And I was drinking her.

I’m still waiting:

I know someday I will find that leaf, on a branch at the edge of the gallows. The gallows will shine, and the leaf will be like the perfect jewelry Claire’s mother wore, going on dates with Claire’s father, while we stayed home and filled our mouths with merlot and our paper with plans for the gallows.
After school, one Thursday:

Good people of Fir Township, Claire as horse thief and adulterer began. I assure you I was driven to these desperate acts by these desperate times. Not only has my husband always been a poor man, he has always been a poor lover. He has been cruel to me, and left me shivering in the cold more nights than I care to reveal. The only thing I could do to get any affection at all was to join Mr. Wilcott in his enterprises, and in his warmth.

Pray for your soul, wench, for you find no sympathy among us, I shouted up to her.

I beg of you, good people, give me another chance. I shall seek spiritual guidance, and give up my wicked ways.

Hangman, release the scaffold, I shouted.

And Claire took a big swallow with her stained lips before she jumped.

This will happen:

I will go back to that classroom, and Claire will be there, a fresh noose round her neck. Leaves will scurry across the floor at her feet, and she will be dressed in the calico we once fought over before she hanged. This time, I will bring the wine and we will share it with the whole class. Claire’s lips will be the darkest, and she will wear the leaf in her hair.
We built it ourselves:

Now that we have wine, I said one Saturday morning, it’s a bit ridiculous to be jumping out of a tree fort.

What do you mean? Claire asked. This is a good game.

I mean we need a gallows. Like the one in the history book.

Ooh, Claire let out a breath. That would be amazing. Where could we get one?

We’ll have to make it.

Father, we require wood, Claire said to James when we found him.

Daughter, there is wood in the shed. May I ask why you need it?

No, you may not. Are there nails and a hammer in the shed as well?

There are. Clean up after yourself, please. Amy, will you need some wood, too?

We’re working together, I told him.

We began right away, but we didn’t end up with a gallows that day. There were problems we couldn’t, as unseasoned carpenters, have foreseen. We worked on that gallows in the back shed every day after school and most Saturdays for three weeks. The trap door, the most important part, gave us the most trouble. In the end, we had to ask James to take us to the hardware store to buy hinges. I felt uncomfortable involving him, but there was no choice. We told him the project was secret, and he didn’t press us.
The day we met:

I was the new girl at school. My family had moved across town, and I felt too far from the sea.

At recess, I sat at the farthest edge of the schoolyard, gazing westward, straining my eyes to see the shore, three miles away. I was getting ready to pirate a ship and take the sea as far as it went.

Where’d you move from? Claire asked as she traipsed over to me.

The other side of town, on the water, I told her. Her hair was the blondest I’d ever seen, nearly as light as mine was dark.

That’s far, she said. Do you like it here?

No, I said.

I’m going to play woodswoman. You can too if you want.

No one had said anything like this at my old school. What’s woodswoman? I asked.

You put leaves from this tree in your hair and you pretend to be made of wood. When you talk, you have to sing it soft and deep like this—and she sang, Oooh, I am the Beautiful Lady of the Elm.

I think instead of a woodswoman, you should be a dryad, I said.

What is that? she asked, as she slid a red, red leaf behind my ear.

The day we finished it:
Wooden and creaking with newness. An unsettled, fresh smelling gallows. A gallows with promise.

It was a pride I’ve never known since. We kept it in the back of Claire’s parents’ lot, away from the house and among the trees we considered a wood. It belonged, and looking at it among the rustling leaves, it looked so natural and pastoral, I marveled it hadn’t always been there. A chipmunk crawled along the platform, and hopped down the steps like it could deny eternity.

You try it first, Claire said. It was your idea.

Okay, I said, and unzipped my backpack. But first I have a surprise for you.

What?

I pulled out the noose. I told her, I made it. I found the rope in my garage. Now that we have the gallows, it’d be stupid to use a tie.

Put it on, she said, touching its tight spiral and blinking.

I did, and as I mounted the steps to the gallows, I became my favorite—the woman who drowned her baby because she couldn’t bear for it to grow up in poverty.

Neighbors, I began my last words. You are as guilty as I. Have you not turned blind eyes upon my suffering, and my need? Did one of you, ever in all your prosperity, offer me either food or shelter? Did one of you ever offer me a kind or encouraging word? You did not! Hang me, but know that you will be the ones to burn.
And, with the noose snuggly about my neck, I fell when Claire pulled the rope, releasing the trap door in the floor. I wished, as I fell to the ground, that a pile of leaves was waiting for me.

(white space)

Something that will one day be true:

I will go back to the gallows, to find a fresh coat of varnish on it. It will be darker this time, a rich cherry finish. It will gleam with the setting sun, and Claire will be there, waiting to mount the steps upon my arrival. She will clutch a bottle to her chest, and drink long before she sees me emerge from the trees at the edge of the clearing.

I will bring the noose—a new one made with love in the morning—and she will embrace me when she sees me. I will slip it about her neck, and climb the stairs with her. We’ll reach the platform, and I’ll be just tall enough to tie the other end of the rope about a tree branch.

April:

We had been playing several months. We had four nooses by then. I had made three, and gotten more skilled with each. Claire had made only one; hers was of a fine, silky rope like her hair. It was the one we used for the children. We draped the three extras from the hanging beam, and I longed for necks to fill them.

Should we make another? I asked her.

No, we already have four, and we can only use one at a time, she said.
I looked at her and swallowed. I thought about pouring the rest of my wine down her dress front. Instead I said, Let’s use your noose.

After the game ended:

I had just started junior high, and felt too far from the wood. Gazing out a newer window, all I could see were basketball courts. I imagined Claire coming into the classroom, taking my hand and drawing me out into the silent corridor, then out the school doors, back toward the gallows.

I’m sorry, she would whisper.

Later in the month:

I think I’ll just keep my jeans on, Claire said. And I should have known then.

Instead I tried to reason. I said, No way. No one ever hanged in jeans. At least put on the overalls.

Someday:

She will not protest when I tie the other end to a tree branch. Simply, she will walk across the platform to the trap door. I will go back down the steps and ready myself to pull the rope to release the floor on which she stands.

Have you any last words, Betrayer? I will ask her.
She will look down, and her lips will be plum colored with wine. Amy, she will say, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I don’t know why I stopped, and I don’t know why I told. They were the best days.

Pray for your soul, wench, I will say as I release the trap door. She will not be surprised, but content, even after her tongue lolls out of her mouth. She will be remembering, and thankful.

May:

Do you want to be the crowd? I asked her.

No, I’ll hang.

Who do you want to be? I asked.

She finished her wine and climbed the steps, a little unsteadily and with a grimace. She didn’t say anything, but at the top of the platform, she looked out across the treetops. I’m thinking about kissing Tim, she said, a little too loudly.

What? You’re supposed to be saying your last words. What’re you talking about a stupid boy for? I asked.

Ugh, she said. Hang me, just hang me.

But I couldn’t do it.

Later, much:
I was working in the grocery store, scanning cakes and bagged produce after school and Saturdays. My next customer in line was Claire’s mother, and I could tell she didn’t recognize me, not yet or not anymore.

Hello, Susanne, I said as she placed her items on the belt.

She started up, and smiled falsely. My own mother wouldn’t have bothered. And, had he been there, James would have been a little more comforting.

Amy, she said. I didn’t recognize you. You look lovely. It’s so good to see you.

I didn’t return her smile, but I still missed her just a little.

The last time:

Amy, she said, are you going to the fall dance?

Just put the overalls on so we can play. I’ll wear the ruffled skirt with the apron, I said.

Listen, I want to talk about that dance. Are you going to go without a date? she said.

Can you please just get dressed?

She didn’t look at me, but climbed the stairs in her jeans. She walked squarely onto the platform, above the trapdoor. She pulled the rope herself, and when she landed, she walked away, toward the house.

I watched her go, in jeans so tight we would have both laughed at them a few months ago.
We had just started junior high. The next week in school, Claire pretended she didn’t know me, and held hands in the hallway with Tim.

She told him too, because in gym class some of his friends hanged themselves at me, by sticking out their tongues and rolling their eyes while tilting their heads away from raised hands, holding the ends of imaginary nooses.

It will happen:

She will be a ghost, and haunt me. She will be iridescent, with a glass of wine in her hand and red leaves in her hair. She will appear from the branches of a tree, like a shadow of sunlight at first, but she will glimmer out of the tree, into herself. And she will be all the people we ever hanged, and all the people we never thought to, and a dryad and a woodswoman wearing poached lizard polka dots. She will be a girl again, and beg me to play.

And we will. Over and over again, and we will hang her properly, her feet dangling a few feet from the dust.

And after we have played the game:

Sea colored koalas, coming down from the maples to join me in revelry.
Breakfast

I eat my oatmeal straight from the pot with a wooden spoon. I sit in the dusk of coming morning waiting for the wind to pick up and hoping for snow. And if it snows, I’ll change my socks to wool without showering or getting dressed. I’ll make another pot of coffee and pretend the portable heater is a fireplace.

It’s only seven now and I have nowhere to be.

Here in the middle of the country, surrounded by grass and trees, I have time. I hope desperately for snow, and the freedom to go nowhere. My toes are cold with a comfort that’s grown unfamiliar, though I remember it.

I was away so long.

If it snows, the wind will drift piles against the house, and I will be anchored here. Home, safe from the ocean. I’ll never have to go back and I’ll have oatmeal and coffee every day, never missing the fresh vegetables of my life on the shore.

I don’t miss the people I knew on the shore. They spoke so quickly and they said, Harriet, this isn’t the place for you.

College is not for everyone. The people there don’t know.

They don’t know that the afghan has been folded over the couch that same way all my life. That Aunt Helen made that afghan before I was born. That Mom and Dad both are at the jobs they’ve worked for twenty years, and they’re happy I’m here. That the bird feeder Chris made in seventh grade, before any of us knew he was dying, is still hanging outside the kitchen window. And that makes it almost as if none of it ever happened.
The sky is starting to snow.
The shop is crowded

The shop is crowded, but she has the knives to herself. The knives are cunning, and perhaps they’ve arranged for this. She likes the way it sounds, and mouths to herself. Perhaps they’ve arranged for this. She likes the way it sounds, like the satisfaction of chopping zucchini beside her last boyfriend’s voice. He was in a band, and a vegetarian, and his voice seemed like raw zucchini turned to music. The music was high and clean and sharp, and this reminds her of why she’s come.

Probably a dull one would hurt, so she’s looking for a small, sharp, clean, little blade. A paring knife perhaps. She’s already decided just where it will go: the dip nestled next to her collarbone. On the left side, because she wears her watch on the right.

The shop is crowded, but she has the knives to herself. To herself.

Her last boyfriend, the singer, the vegetarian, must have gotten confused in the crowd. He must have thought the other woman looked like her. He must have thought the other woman was her. Else he wouldn’t have done it. He wouldn’t have kissed the other woman, there on the stage, after the show, when everyone was still clapping and whistling, when there was still the chance of an encore.

Here are some knives with rubber or silicone handles, but she’s looking for something made of wood. She’s looking for something that can absorb sweat, if it needs to.
Here are some with hardly any tang, only a stub, but she’s looking for something made strongly. She’s looking for something that will withhold abuse, if it needs to.

Here are some that come in matching sets, but she’s looking for something more like herself. She’s looking for something that will give her the scar, like it needs to.

The knives are cunning, but here is one for her.

It’s a knife she can comfortably use, a knife that won’t slip. The handle is wooden and the tang extends through the handle. It will give her the scar, the scar she needs.

The gash is deep and she is dizzy. She sits on the floor, thinking, Perhaps they’ve arranged for this. The gash is deep, and in a few weeks, she’ll have the scar. She likes the way it feels now, a surprising flap beside her bone. She likes the way it feels, a surprise for everyone.

That music was high and clean and sharp, denying it had ever grown. Maybe someday she’ll chop zucchini with a machete and her own voice will boom low and heavy, like the comfort of spring mud. And people will see her scar, and no one will say, You are just like the rest.
Warden

I’m dying my hair, and if the color on the box is accurate, pretty soon it’ll look something like Warden’s. I haven’t seen Warden in a long time, but my memory of him is clear.

He belonged to a man I used to sleep with, a man nostalgic for the Old South. He had a sword and was always whistling Dixie.

Then there was Warden. Not named Lee or Beauregard: Warden.

The day we met went something like this: I had just moved to a new town and was walking past the house. Small with pretentious pillars. And before I had noticed him, Warden came barking down the steps. He was young, and his ears were a softer chestnut than they were later, when I loved him.

The man came after Warden, apologizing but laughing.

I didn’t like him and I knew we’d sleep together.

I couldn’t lie yet, so I said, He’s a beautiful dog.

Purebred, the man said.

I never invited the man to my house, and after sex I always went out to Warden naked. On the couch, I’d wrap my body around his and try to forget the man. Warden’s breathing made a sound like my name. The man called me Miss Sophie. I slapped him at Miss once, but he hit me back.
My father was a hunter and with his thumb and forefinger he shot at the dogs in our town. I remembered this when I asked the man why he called his dog Warden and he said, For you.

I was whistling John Brown’s Body, but only in my head.

One day, the man and his friend were eating pizza in the living room. I was sitting quietly on the floor with Warden. The man said, You know Miss Sophie’s fucking the dog? The men laughed and laughed.

I went into the kitchen and called my father. I asked him, Why did you always shoot your fingers at dogs? The liar said, I didn’t. And when sixty seconds had passed he said, You know, I tried to get you a dog once. Before the divorce. But your mother said no.

I don’t talk to men anymore. I prefer to think of Warden, and now my scalp is tingling and soon my hair will be ruddy brown. Like a dog.
What I Do When We Sit Quietly at Home

I spent today designing sinks in my head. I started with the basin: porcelain is always tasteful, though granite can be stately, and wood unique. I would simply coat the wood in an invisible lacquer, and it would work as well as any nonporous material. I’d also like to try glass. With glass, the pipes beneath would be visible, and so they’d have to be glass as well. Little, detachable segments would make up these glass pipes, so we could keep them clean, but still watch the water flow through them. This is something I think you’d enjoy especially in summer, when there is no rain or snow for you to watch. The basins can be big, generous bowls or the negative space of a cube.

In most cases, the pipes are not an issue, and so I move right from basins to faucets. I can always appreciate the stainless steel necks, curving up before they turn back down, and yet still delivering excellent pressure. This style goes well with any of the basins. The granite and a self-conscious rustic spigot make a fine pair—because of their contradictions. Although the wooden basin would also go nicely with the spigot, I came up with a wrought iron faucet especially for it. Because I’d use dark stained wood, the wrought iron would look quite distinguished. The glass basin could have any one of those faucets, but its own true love is the short silver tube shooting water. A decadent, yet simple combination. One our house might benefit from.

And then I design the handles and my sinks are complete. I like the classic porcelain handles labeled HOT and COLD, but they’d not as versatile as the stainless
marbles atop the same tubing I used for the last faucet. These are modern and voluptuous. Of course, I’m not above using wrought iron or wooden handles, but I’m still working on the shapes. I’m firm that one handle is unacceptable; all my sinks have two.

Yesterday, it was lamps while you sat beside me on the couch. Humming, I think.
Household

I’m climbing up the curtains in my living room.

Let me begin again: The curtains in my living room reach the floor, and they are lace. I’m considering shredding them, with scissors. Or a knife, before my lover gets home. My lover loves the curtains and will be sad to see them go.

Another try: The curtains in my living room mean something to my lover. What, I cannot tell you. I don’t know. The curtains in my living room block the view. Light comes in, and I want to see out.

Once more: To combat the curtains in my living room, and my non-combative lover, today I will bring a turtle into the house. I will buy it at the pet shop, and when they ask me if I want a ten or a twenty gallon tank, I will say, No thank you. Not for me.

The turtle will roam free in the living room, and if she likes, she shall climb up the curtains. I will laugh. When my lover gets home, I will laugh.

I stare into the floor. It is dark and shining wood, and I stare into it like water. I am not at work, but alone in the house I share with my lover.

I stare into the wood and see my reflection, among other things. I lost my job and now I work on the floor. In the morning I mop, and in the afternoon I polish, and each day the glow is a little deeper. In the evening, my lover comes home and does not say a word.
My lover goes to bed, but since I don’t have a job, I stay up late. I look at my reflection, and I look at the shimmers and chimeras in that glorious floor. My turtle and I, we look into that floor, and we climb the curtains, or the shreds of curtains, and we laugh all night while my lover sleeps.

And in the morning, my lover will not say anything about my turtle, or ask why I didn’t come to bed, or what happened to the curtains or the floor. In the morning, my lover will leave without a word. And I will go to work on my floor.
The Tea Whale

I discovered I’d been nursing a misconception. I thought whales, like other animals, are born in spring.

But contrary to nature, most whales are born in winter. Is this why so many whales are endangered, because their babies are born in harsh winter conditions?

I can see it: A beluga, like a friendly ghost, in frigid Russian or Siberian waters. This mother, small for her age, and young to be so pregnant, is about to birth her baby. The baby, greyer than the mother, and just smaller than my great-aunt Hester would have been as an adult, comes out with a face as sad as the moon on her back. But her eyes are clean in a way that no land creature’s can be. The baby doesn’t scream, because her mother is there. But there are things she doesn’t know.

The two swim on, farther from the deadly shore, but the baby will not live to see better times.

There is a whale called the right whale. Because it was the right one for whalers to capture and kill, years ago. The wrong kind of whale to be, and I hate myself for the joke.

Hester’s drowning, sixty years before my birth, is my first memory, though I’m not sure when it came to me.

From my grandmother, I inherited a glass whale. It came from a tea company, the kind that put little glass animals in the tins.

Tins or boxes? I think it must have been Earl Grey.
Killer whales kill. When I was younger, I thought they were called killer for their smashing looks.

I’m not sure if they kill each other, but a pack of killer whales, worse than wolves or dingoes, closes in on a family. The seals will soon be victims, and they know it, but. They swim hard, and a baby is the first to go.

My grandmother, I can’t always remember her. But I’m sure I remember when she was six and watched her sister drown. My grandmother, she held a spring daisy in her hand and called out, Mama, Mama, Mama.

The blue whale is the largest creature that has ever existed, and yet it feeds exclusively on krill, tiny krill. They taste like shredded coconut, the kind my mother says her mother baked with during holidays. My grandmother? I want to ask.

The sperm whale has teeth, and is named after a milky substance in her head. People thought it was sperm when they fist saw it. The sperm whale is the largest toothed animal in the world. I learn this sitting under my window, ghost puffs of dead flowers floating by outside. No wishes today, but the puffs are full, like my memory of my grandmother’s body.

I was three and small; she was old and massive. The sunlight on her white dress, and her nipple a shadow behind the fabric.

Are you still looking for Hester, I asked her. The only time I’ve been slapped. She said, You don’t know Hester.
Humpback and fin whales are also baleen; without teeth they eat their tiny krill. Nothing larger than a daisy can pass through their mouths. How do they nurse? The milk, strained through the baby’s mouths to their tongues, tastes like coconut milk.

The tea whale was actually ceramic, now that I think about it, but the difference between ceramic and glass is the difference between the families of orcas in the Pacific.

The sperm whale has suffered more injustice than the others, being so named. Why should a whale, so smart and so dignified, have sperm in her head? I feel sick.

My grandmother, when I knew her: huge, with moles like barnacles jutting from her flopping neck. She was formidable even in sunlight, fingerling through the dirt in her garden overlooking a canyon far from the sea. Wearing a thin linen dress, just like the one she wore the day her sister drowned.

The smallest whale is the dwarf sperm. I can see her lying in wait at the bottom of the sea, partly covered in black sand. The kind of sand that sucks at her flipper, trying to bring her deeper, deeper, ever deeper. She moves her flipper, and the little valley at the bottom of the sea fills in as if it never was. She’s royalty, and this whale can feel raindrops like peas falling on the surface of the water, a mile up. She doesn’t move, because like me and like Hester, she’s small and waiting.

Whales are conscious breathers, living underwater but breathing air. Only one side of their brain sleeps at a time. If they fell all the way asleep, they’d forget to
breathe, and drown in shallow night water, moonlight on their backs, but no air in their lungs. This reminds me of myself, because I too am afraid to sleep. Sometimes when I sleep, I see all the murdered whales of the world, and I feel myself swallowing hard in my sleep, coconut on my breath. I worry I won’t wake up, and I’ll have to spend all eternity with murdered whales—right and killer, humpback and blue, sperm and beluga.

I’d have to climb inside their bodies, like a whaler. I’d be forced to slice through blubber and haul out bones, slap at their skins with a stick. And at end of the day, I’d return to a brooding cottage, mine, threatening to tumble into the sea. And in that cottage, Hester, my grandmother’s drowned sister, would look out the window at the shadowy sea.

My mother wouldn’t be in the cottage. My mother hates Hester, and she’d remain on the sea, hunting and murdering.

Whales give live birth, and they breathe the same air I do and Hester did. Mammal air, mammal babies.

Whales are not fish, and I hate to hear people talk of them as if they are. My mother gave me a goldfish and said, I got a grey one. It’s like a mini whale. She meant it kindly. But how freeing it must be for those whales who grow strong enough to leave their mothers behind, in cold seas to birth new babies.
Humpbacks feed only in summer, because they’re too busy birthing in warmer waters during winter. Most whales are smart enough to travel to the tropics for birthing.

Every place has its dangers and I live at the lowest point in the valley.

I remember being a pregnant teenager, hungry.

Trying hard to follow the rules her grandmother taught her, floating on the moonlit surface, she wakes and concentrates on sinking to the low bottom, turning off her right hemisphere and letting the left take over. Her eyes remain open, and she longs for the day she herself was born, into the sea as the rain fell. She knew that day the sea was not as big as she had feared, napping in the womb.

Hester only made it to three; my grandmother was six. I asked my mother once if my grandmother knew anyone besides us when she died. She told me, Your grandmother looked all her life for Hester.

But Hester was at the bottom of the sea, and my mother does not like people who hide. When I was a child, she put bricks under my bed, so I could not pretend it was the sea and I was swimming with Hester.

The Bryde’s whale’s name is pronounced brooda, not brides or brutus. She is the humpback’s tropical cousin, but I don’t know what they share. I think Hester would have been a Bryde’s, and I am one. We are nobody’s bride.

My mother flushed my fish down the toilet because I didn’t name it.
Six years old, and my grandmother watched her baby sister drown. She wasn’t even a strong or steady walker yet, but Hester decided she’d swim. The ocean was her backyard, and she must have felt entitled, because with her short dress billowing in the breeze, she teetered toward the water. My grandmother, holding that spring daisy, watched and sang wordlessly in the wind. She didn’t tell Hester not to go in the water, because she never imagined Hester’d go that far. And when Hester did, my grandmother went on singing, because Hester seemed to be swimming. My grandmother thought her sister was born in the water, and knew her way in it. But a wave came and took Hester, and it wasn’t enough that my grandmother screamed out for her mother.

The ceramic whale is a right whale: I think so by the pictures. The whale that murderers used to seek, to turn into corsets and lamps; the kind in the cottage where my grandmother grew up.

My grandmother drank tea all her life, and she said, This whale is for you.

I made popcorn in my mother’s kitchen on the afternoon of the morning they took my baby. My mother came in.

She said, What are you doing?

Making popcorn, I said and gulped milk from my glass.

Why are you here? What happened at school?

I didn’t go today.
I drank more milk. I wanted my belly not to feel empty. The pain was less than I’d expected, but I had never been hollow before.

Why the hell not? she asked.

Why are you home? I asked. She should have been at work in a taupe building beside a canyon.

You can’t just decide not to go to school, she said.

I told her, The dwarf sperm whale is mostly a solitary creature, and when she’s scared, she can expel a dark reddish substance from her body to scare away predators. I don’t know where she expels it from.

Dammit, she said, smacking her hand down on the counter. But she left the kitchen.

Hester’s dress would have come off, torn by waves and wind, within a week. Or maybe that would only take a day, and within a week her body would have taken on some sea, and been swollen and puffy, like the spermaceti inside the dwarf sperm’s head.

That was the day my grandmother gave me the tea whale, but when I told her it was the most wonderful thing anyone had given me, she said, It’s a trinket.

I never told anyone where I went that morning.

I see it all the time.

Perhaps Hester really was swimming, and went off to meet a giant blue and her daughter. The mother would have recognized Hester as a baby, and tried
kindness. She would have nursed her, and maybe Hester migrated with the whales. Perhaps my grandmother should have looked not at the bottom of the sea, but in the blue whales’ winter waters. Perhaps even now, Hester is there, an aging matriarch sleeping with only half her self.

But no. Because the killer whale, orca, is the natural enemy of the blue whale. Killers live in packs and hunt together. Some even eat other whales. Hester, early on, would have had a run-in with them, as they hunted her new blue mother and sister. The murder of this second family would have taught her finally that she was meant to be alone. She would’ve vaguely recollected my grandmother, but.

Later, if she met a family of humpbacks, she would have smiled without slowing her swim. I didn’t see my baby after they took her, but I remember that day was seventy-six years, exactly seventy-six, after Hester’s drowning.

Whales live in matrilineal families, when they can stand to have families.

I have no grandfather, because my grandmother didn’t marry him. And I have no father, because my mother didn’t marry him. This is because we all watched Hester drown.

I asked my grandmother about Hester only once.

Whales have a highly developed communication system; they can talk and laugh and call to one another. And they can say when they’re sad or when they’re angry, but I’m sure they don’t tell each other lies. I say this to my mother, and she says that I’m a grown woman and should stop making up stories about Hester. She
says Hester was my grandmother’s problem, not mine. She says I didn’t know either of them.

But my mother doesn’t know.

When the old matriarchs die, their bodies sink into the deepest sea, down where the creatures don’t have eyes. Their massive bodies feed the eyeless, nearly brainless, creatures for months. Without the whales, these creatures could not exist. Perhaps they somehow knew, and gave up their eyes for this.

A Bryde’s whale has just reached the bottom. Both hemispheres of her mind sink with her, and when her body thuds silently to the black sand at the bottom, they break like glass or ceramic thrown down a canyon. Each hemisphere is a million or a billion pieces, and they scatter at the bottom of the sea like the eyeless creatures when only the Bryde’s bones are left.

Hester’s eyes, picked out by fish soon after she drowned, still reflect the sea. My grandmother too suffered misconceptions, but she died on the edge of a canyon far from the sea.
Like I Could Fit in a Bottle

I was glad when I found out my dad fell down the stairs. I thought it meant I wouldn’t have to stay with him for the next several weekends.

He fell the day we had the fight, but hours after I left.

I got the idea, as a girl, that someday I would fall in love. I usually blame this on my mom, but when I was fifteen, trying to fit into a pair of jeans three sizes too small, my father walked in. He said, Where are you going.

Mom doesn’t let me go out on weekdays, and I’m not sitting in this apartment all weekend, I said.

Where are you going, he said.

I was lying down on the twin-sized bed that took up almost my entire bedroom in his apartment. The mattress was nearly as hard as the floor and there was no box spring. I always apologized to my stuffed animals for it before I went to sleep there.

Can you go out, I said.

I breathed in until my chest was so tight I felt like I could fit in a bottle. But when I tried the button again: skin and Hanes still separating the two sides of the fly from each other by at least an inch. It wasn’t happening. I arched my neck so my stuffed monkey was upside down in front of me. I scooted closer and rubbed my forehead on his furry, padded feet.

My dad leaned against the doorframe.
I’m going out, I said.

You’re not going to fit into those jeans, he said. So you might as well stay here.

I have a date, I said. Don’t tell Mom.

We could go to the mall, he said. I’ll buy you new jeans.

No, I said. I sucked in hard and pulled at the button again.

He walked past me to the window and ran his finger along the top of the frame. I’ll wait up for you, he said.

So I don’t get pregnant? I asked.

I knew that if I did ever have a child, she’d be tall, even as a baby. She’d love me to take her to the mall for new jeans, and she’d ask me to keep her inside and read to her, even on the balmiest days. My daughter would fit into small jeans, but she would be mine and teach me to swim and wouldn’t let me sit alone beside the pool or on the dry sand.

Sophie, my dad said. And he turned back to the window.

I’d have the baby, I said, not suspecting what a lie it was. But of course that was before he fell down the stairs. And before we had the fight or I went on the date anyway.
Sticky Animals

I make small animals out of sticky rice and I’m going to open a restaurant.

Ryan, Jean’s boyfriend, laughs like a hyena at this. He says, You only know how to make a few dishes and they’re all too salty.

You choose your animal, and then a dish to match.

You can order a tiger if you feel sexy, a snake if you feel stormy, an elephant if you feel sad, or a gazelle if you feel sneaky. And if you’re feeling brave, I can make you a little stand-up man.

Ryan doesn’t know this.

Next, you choose your dish. I make the most succulent mushroom gravy and a dal so thick with cumin it makes Jean blink. I use plenty of cilantro in the gazpacho, so it tastes like a bite of the breeze.

But the taste can be deceptive.

Whichever dish you choose, you pour it over your rice animal and watch him crumble into a little heap you can eat.

I invite Jean to my house, because I don’t have the restaurant yet. I’ve made a whole row of little Ryans, because Jean likes to eat and he’s gone for the weekend.

I feel a heaviness, plums in my chest, waiting to see what Jean will do. First she dabs her lips with her napkin. Then, with a swoop of her arm, the gravy is poured and the whole row downed.

They were all Ryans, I say.

If only it could be that easy, Jean says, smiling.
I watch her and eat my tiger.
Well

Her mother told her, Don’t play near the well. When I was your age, my best friend disappeared down it.

So Alice thought, I will find your best friend. And she went dutifully to the well.

The well was very old, and Alice’s family did not drink the water anymore. Alice could not remember anyone using the water from the well. She wondered if it had a smell, but turning the handle to draw up the bucket, she found there was no chain or rope wrapped around the spoke. No bucket.

This must be why Mama’s friend disappeared, she said aloud, and she thought she heard a ripple or a tiny, one-drop splash deep down in the well.

She looked up at the tree branches, still bare, and down at the grass, still brown. But a ring of purple crocuses grew around the well, and they looked so like a napkin ring or her mother’s full skirt that she put her hand into the well. The little blooms beside her pointed boots didn’t change at all, so she leaned over and put her whole arm in the well. The air that touched the arm was warmer and she thought in the shaft she could feel the grass roots below starting to grow and the clouds above thawing.

Summer would come again and she would plant a bucket in the well.

Alice took her arm out of the shaft and leaned over so her head was over the opening. She smelled moldy braids and ribbon thirty years old.
Hello, she whispered. The well did not echo back to her. Hello, she said again, a little louder. Nothing.

Alice looked at her dog, a red setter in the brown grass beside the well, and told her, No echo. But I know you hear something. Her dog blinked three times.

Alice had taught herself the year before never to say anything more than twice, lest her words stunt her growing. She kept a list of things she had already said twice, and went to her bedroom now to add “Hello.” Alice’s dog, her nose to Alice’s elbow, trotted beside her, carrying the pencil.

Her first love told her, Don’t bite. The sun slanted in her mother’s bedroom window, and Alice swallowed hard. Her throat felt like a lump of clay from the bottom of a well. The word Crawfish came into her mind and she said it once.

What? her love asked her.

Crawfish, she said again. And she wished she could see her mother’s car pulling in the driveway.

Alice’s dog, going grey around the muzzle now though her ears were still red, licked her nose and Alice understood. She stood from the bed and took the pencil from her dog’s ear.

Alice’s love narrowed his eyes, but he was not her love anymore so she was not hurt.

Go home, she said. And in her own ears Crawfish rang.
He went out of the room, leaving the door open behind him and Alice watched him go down the stairs and out the front door. She counted to three as slowly as she could, smoothed the blanket on her Mama’s bed, and then skipped to the well in the backyard.

Putting her head and shoulders into the shaft, she sang out, Crawfish. She had said it three times now, but she was not afraid.

And deep, deep down, the voice rang back. Crawfish, crawfish, crawfish.

Alice pulled up her bucket, and it was full of clay and crawfish.

Thank you, she called into the well. She spent the rest of the afternoon writing a poem she called Crawfish for Mama, and when her mother did pull in the driveway, Alice’s skin was lemony-fresh with soap again and her dog brought paper and pencil to her mother.

Mama will write a poem for me, Alice told the girl in the well.

Don’t act so high and mighty, her enemy said.

With the pages in her hand, Alice tried not to tremble. She thought instead of the slate bricks of the well, going down into the dirt toward the secret water. She would put seeds at the bottom, and if a tree grew, she would know her enemy was not real.

I just write them when I have nothing else to do, Alice said as she folded the papers.
You never have anything else to do, her enemy said. No one wants to spend time with you.

Alice felt the clay in her throat, and she wondered if a watermelon or a lemon tree could grow from her stomach.

No one wants to spend time with you either, Alice said.

And when she got home that afternoon, Alice wrote her enemy’s name three times on three pieces of paper and dropped them into the well.

She smelled lemon and melon while she sat on the tiny well roof writing her poems, the poetry of teen-aged foes this time, and as the freight train passed a few blocks over, she thought she could hear someone singing at the bottom of the well, so she began to sing too.

Her dog whistled and kept time with her wiggling nose at Alice’s feet.

And while Alice sang, another voice—not from the well—joined. She saw her mother on the porch and waved, but when her mother came over to the well she stopped singing and said, Alice, you’re too old for this.

Her doctor said, Don’t cross the mountains after dark.

As he said it, Alice realized she hadn’t buttoned her pants again. She thought she felt her inflamed uterus swell a little more, but told herself it was embarrassment.

Oh, I think we’ll be fine she said.

Still scribbling on her chart, the doctor said, The roads really freeze up at night. Does your mother know you’re going?
Alice tried to remember who had referred her to this doctor. She thought of the weekend she would spend on the other side of the mountains with her dog, a three year old with white speckles on a rump the blackest shade of blue.

I’m eager to get there, she said to the doctor. I may buy the cottage if I like it. Really, the doctor said. And Alice knew the doctor didn’t care about her at all.

She pressed her fingers to her abdomen, and felt her uterus, blooming like a cabbage in the field beside the well. She thought, Maybe if I don’t believe it’s inflamed it won’t be.

Alice’s mother didn’t know about her uterus and she didn’t know about her trip to the other side of the mountains.

Later, as Alice drove up and up, her dog’s comfortably warm and dry nose nuzzled into her ear, she decided she would either stay on the other side or crawl into the well.

I love you, she said to her new dog, but sometimes I still miss my old dog.

I’ll go into the well or through the mountains with you, her new dog said. But I think it’s one or the other. And your mother isn’t going to like it if we go into the well.

Alice thought about this for a long time, and three years passed.

Don’t forget to write, her best friend said when Alice left for college—better late than never—on the other side of the mountains.
Alice thought of squeezing her friend’s hand, wondered if it would feel like her dog’s nose or be wet and smooth like the slate bricks of the well. I’m only going to the other side of the mountains, she said.

Be careful, her friend said. Your mother didn’t write.

And Alice’s friend, now a lanky nineteen-year old though her soggy braids never changed, took her hand off the crack in the door where the window hid. So Alice rolled the window up and drove away.

She was halfway up the first mountain before she realized she’d forgotten to turn on the radio. She punched it on and changed the channel. I’m looking for a song to help me mourn my friend, she said to her dog.

But it was winter, and the moss was dripping and curling round the trees in the most bewitching way. After a few more miles, Alice forgot to remind herself she was mourning.

After all, she thought, her friend would never leave the well, so she mustn’t let the guilt creep over the mountains with her. And Alice’s dog, who hadn’t spoken in a very long time, nodded in agreement.

Don’t forget to water the plants while I’m away, her new boyfriend said. Alice would be in charge of the plants, the mail, and the cat. She was twenty-two.

Don’t boss me, Alice said. And she clapped a hand over her mouth. She saw an exclamation point floating through his living room and her dog, grown aged and wise, leapt up with a yelp like a puppy’s.

I’m sorry, the man said. Please remember to water the plants.
Alice saw two exclamation points and as her dog licked her hand, Alice tasted raspberries on her own tongue.

But he went on the trip anyway, and when he came back he said, Don’t tell me you forgot to water the plants.

You’re insane, Alice said, and she laughed and laughed.

Did you do it on purpose? he asked.

And Alice and her dog walked out without answering the now ex-boyfriend, though they said kind goodbyes to the cat, who understood.

Don’t lie, her brother said. Mom never had a friend who died in a well.

He had flown in the night before, and Alice was drinking coffee because he was. Her stomach gurgled.

Yes, Alice said. She told me when I was a kid, but I don’t think she liked to talk about it.

The well in our yard? No way, her brother said.

Alice’s new dog, a curly brown one, shifted her weight onto her elbows and almost whined. Alice looked at her and the dog folded her legs and put her chin down.

Yeah, Alice said. I used to be obsessed with it. I was always playing around that well.

That’s because you were weird, her brother said. Mom probably said that to try to make you more normal. You didn’t have any friends.
Alice thought about the braid bound in burgundy ribbon that she still kept in a shoebox in her closet, but her brother was doing the crossword puzzle. She stood and went to the sink, and her dog moved with her. She emptied the mug into the drain and locked her knees.

I guess you’re right, she said. And she reminded herself he was only staying four days.

But when she tried to fall asleep, Alice’s stomach gurgled again. She laced her fingers through her dog’s silky fur, and then said to her dog and the darkness, When I was a little girl, my best friend lived in a well. And he’s telling me she wasn’t even real.

Her dog whined and rolled over, placing her nose in Alice’s palm. Alice remembered the well had been lined with moss. The bottom was black, but how far away had it been?

Don’t stay like this, Alice said to herself. It was her first morning alone again; her brother had left the night before.

Don’t stay like this, she said again. And she counted to three, not unreasonably slowly she thought, and tossed the blankets to her side. Her dog panted smilingly, and Alice swung her feet to the floor.

It was spring, and Alice thought crocuses were probably blooming outside in spite of her brother’s visit.
Yes, she said to her dog. We have a whole day to ourselves, and we don’t need them anyway.

Have we met? Said the woman with the little-girl-braids at the park. It was the fourth day in a row they’d seen each other there, and their dogs had grown less and less tentative in their sniffing of one another. Now they strained on their leashes and wagged their whole bodies eagerly. Alice leaned back against her favorite tree trunk to gather strength, and then she stood.

I’m Alice, she said.

Chloe, said the woman. And she tossed a braid behind her back and let her dog off the leash.

Alice crouched down and kissed her own dog on the nose. I haven’t been to the well in years, she whispered. And Alice’s curly brown dog licked her nose, and Alice tasted raspberries and lemons on her tongue. She stood and unbuckled the leash from her dog’s harness.

She began to fold the poem she was working on, and then changed her mind. She sat back down and placed the paper beside her, word side up. Sit. Sit, sit, she said to Chloe, as she plucked a crocus from among the tree roots.
My Place

Down on the bathroom floor, either I will get up or I will stay.

I hear Lucinda’s footsteps above me as she catalogues the items I imagine in her dressing room: photos, sequined gowns, dungarees, lace shifts, marble and ivory statuettes, chain link belts. All relics of her past, all things given to her by ex lovers.

I was still in bloomers when my parents died. My nurse concealed their bodies from the world and from me for seven years. We stayed on in the manor house and I never asked my nurse why we didn’t have company, and I didn’t know that my mother was dead and I was not. Her voice was like gravel underfoot when she read to me, and my father was as absent in death as in life.

Down on the bathroom floor, I wonder how I got from there to here, Lucinda above me and my nurse on her side now. My nurse, who warned me not to leave the manor for Lucinda. My nurse, who kept me from the horrors of my parents. Lucinda, whose very bone structure suggested opulence. Lucinda, whose first words to me were, You look like fire. Both of them up there now, filing and organizing without reason, acting like chimpanzees with too many bananas and too few enemies. Lucinda and Nurse there, me here.

Lucinda’s hair, curly and dark, makes dry swirls on the bathroom floor, and I wonder whose job it is to sweep. If I ever get up, perhaps I will do it.
In the manor house Nurse and I lived, and my mother’s wispy shadow flitted and danced about in the daylight. I had to learn, Nurse told me, and she put me in the library with my books. While I read, my dead mother would shimmer and sway, in the same spot every time, so I read aloud to her. She liked best the stories where the heroine fell in love and lived happily ever after, but I liked the ones when the men sailed to sea and stayed there ever after.

I never read now, in Lucinda’s house.

The footsteps change rhythm, and Lucinda stands before me.

Lil, she says, Why are you on the floor?

She says this as if being on the floor were the basest thing I could do, even as she crouches and strokes my hair, cropped short like a boy’s and straight like needles. Her own hair, like a midnight waterfall just south of the tree line in the darkest forest on earth, cascades to her waist. We have been together seven months and she has just come into the bathroom, but I can’t remember ever seeing anything that was not her hair.

I haven’t answered her, and she hasn’t forgotten. She’ll never forget anything. She kisses me.

Just as my tongue is beginning to stretch to meet her, she pulls back.

It doesn’t matter why you’re on the floor, she says. I’m leaving.
I tug at one of her curls, but it springs away the way my dead mother’s shadow did when I read sailor’s stories. I pout, hoping for another kiss, but her mouth is a tight line now, and she untangles her arms and begins braiding her hair.

Silly girl, she says. I’m only going across the sea for a fortnight. Nurse will come with me, and you will watch over the house with your cat. Here.

And she holds out her ring of keys, something I have never been allowed to touch before. The shock of it brings me to my feet, and I notice her lips are full as ships’ sails again. She is standing now, too.

I want you to go through each room at least once per day, she says. Carry your cat in a basket and go through them all but one. Stay out of my dressing room.

As she says it, she looks up at the ceiling, the dressing room’s floor, then cruelly into my eyes. The toilet gurgles and she is gone.

I nearly go back down on the floor, but then my cat comes in, jumps onto the bathroom bookshelf, and rubs my chin. From the bathroom window, I watch Lucinda’s scarlet robe swirl around her legs and waist, and her crimson scarf ripple atop her head as she steps down the stone stairs leading from her house. She dips out of sight before she gets to the bottom, and the wind picks up. I close the window.

Nurse was with my mother’s mother when she was born, and with my mother when I was born. She looks the same now as she did the day I was born, for I remember that day better than any.
As tears refused to glisten across my mother’s eyes, I refused to come out. Seven long hours passed, and before I knew she was my nurse, I could hear Nurse cursing my name. She’s a small one, Nurse said, but deceptive as a lily. My mother panted for a long time, and Nurse said, Maybe she’s too small to live.

And then, as my mother burst into tears, I was born. The first thing I saw was Nurse’s craggy face, lit from beneath by a long white candle. She grinned at me, and I made my first mistake. I reached out for her.

We’ll call her Lilly, someone said. I cried my first cry, because already I didn’t know if it was my mother or Nurse who spoke.

And still Nurse holds me, because I reached for her.

Lucinda is sailing across the sea, and my cat and I are in charge of her house. It is not the first time, but we both sense it might be our last. The end is near, I sing to Diego as I load her into the basket. Her purring, I think, matches my tune. And as we begin our rounds in Lucinda’s pantry, I am glad I’m not on the bathroom floor.

The end is near, my cat sings too.

With my mother and my father dead and my nurse hiding it, seven years passed without my going outside. From within the manor, I could see rain pummeling our windows and the land outside, but I never felt it on my skin. Each day, Nurse dressed me in my alligator skins and plucked the hairs from my head with gold tweezers that once belonged to my mother. My mother had used them lovingly
and with precision before parties, but Nurse often took chunks from my scalp and one
day I was sure she was gouging her initials into my head.

When my skull was freshly bald and bloody, Nurse would send me to the
library.

Please, I’d say on brave days. May I wear a dress? The skins scratch me.

Sometimes Nurse would slap me, but sometimes she would gather me in her
arms and peel the alligator skins from me as lovingly as my mother had changed my
diaper. Nurse didn’t allow me to wear a dress while I studied, but if I was careful and
very quiet, I could pull an old shawl of mother’s, big as a blanket on my slight
shoulders, about me.

But most days, Nurse made me keep the alligator skins on, and she locked the
door behind me as soon as I was in the library. When I was alone, my dead mother
came to keep me company. But when Nurse came in too and locked the door, my
mother never appeared. The things Nurse did were too violent for Mother to witness
again. For of course they were the things Nurse did to Mother before she killed her.

Now you look like the bloody reptile you are, Nurse would say.

Diego and I go through Lucinda’s house, and we look at the things her other
lovers gave her. We find clothes and dishes and rugs, but nothing that tells us a scrap
about Lucinda we don’t already know. We take inventory and sweep each room, but
we are getting neither closer nor farther from Lucinda. A decision seems impossible
and my mother, as on all the other nights in Lucinda’s house, does not appear.
We continue through the night, until afternoon comes again and Diego leaps from her basket, flicking her tail like she’s invoking a hurricane. We’ve made it all around the house and nearly back, and I am about to go back to the bathroom when Diego starts in on trouble.

We stand before Lucinda’s dressing room door, the forbidden chamber. From the crack at the bottom of the door, blue light pulses. My empty basket hangs lightly on my arm and Diego swishes her tail and wrinkles her nose at the blue light, pawing at the space between door and floor.

We have never crossed this threshold, and in my hand, the smallest key on the ring spins around until its blue matches the door’s. And Lucinda’s hair.

I stand at the door, Diego mewing up at me, and I know I will disobey Lucinda for the first time. I will go into her dressing room because she told me not to. I will go into her dressing room because she sailed across the sea while I was down on the bathroom floor and because Nurse is gone with her.

Lucinda’s hair was the first thing I saw when I left the manor, and I mistook it for the sky. I was only thirteen, and still in alligator skins when I climbed the ladder in the library and found a secret window. Small and covered in dark blue and navy black stained-glass in an indiscernible pattern, the window was the greatest promise of my life to-date. With the heel of my hand I smashed away each tiny pane and then peeled away the metal framing. The hole was little, but so was I.

I was only at the second storey, and I leapt.
I thought I was falling into the sky, but when I landed, Lucinda was on top of me. Her hair was more alluring than the sky-covered sea in my favorite tales, and if I hadn’t already been on the ground, I would have leapt again, into it.

She laughed the same low way I felt my mother must have laughed when she met my father, before I was born and she was killed.

You look like fire, Lucinda said as she gawked at my scalp. Are you all right?

I didn’t ask her what she had been doing under the secret window in the library for two reasons. One was that she was much older than I was, twenty-five at least, and two was that I had not been outside in seven years. I hoped she would help me.

Hello, I said.

She didn’t hesitate, but took the red sash from around her waist and tied it around my head. With the sash gone, I noticed her dress was a blue that matched the window’s, and her hair was like a stormy sky. I didn’t know yet that my own hair was blonde, and I was foolish enough to hope it might grow in like hers. I reached out to touch a curl, and she was gone. She had vanished the way my mother did when I tried to get her to listen to my stories, and I remembered why I had jumped out the window.

I went to the village in search of Lucinda, or my mother, but there I found Diego. And I told everyone there my parents were dead. People in the village thought I was an apparition, dressed in alligator skins with a blood colored sash tied about my scabby head.
I went back to the manor with Diego.

But Nurse didn’t know about the secret window, and before long she believed she had given me the cat.

I stand before Lucinda’s dressing room now, the key poised and ready, and I take a moment. Lucinda has gone away, Nurse has gone away. My mother has gone away, and I don’t even know if she named me first.

I have a right to go into the dressing room, because maybe I hate Lucinda. She loved me only as long as I was bald and meek. I tell myself this is the story my mother would like. I have not read a book since moving in with Lucinda, and I want to know what she keeps hidden from me.

The key goes cerulean as I insert it in the lock and the door is more fiery than Lucinda’s skin. And then I know this is what Lucinda wants.

Behind the door: not the things Lucinda’s lovers gave her, but Lucinda’s lovers themselves. All dead of course. And most of them younger than I am. Lucinda’s girls, blue as the light and dead as my mother.

The first is Angelie.

Lucinda told me Angelie was her first friend in the world, but Angelie’s face is covered with gashes. I ask her what happened and she tells me, Lucinda and I fought. We fought every day until the day she asked if I wanted to play in her dressing room. And then we stopped.

I can bring you some bandages, I offer.
Oh, Angelie sighs. Thank you Lil, but we stay the way we were when we came. Lucinda likes it best that way.

I touch each of her gashes as gently as I can, and then I ask, May I kiss you? On the forehead, she says.

So I kiss her. But still her skin is blue and her gashes scarlet.

Next is Regina.

Her eyes are closed and a little dog is wrapped in her arms, and I think she must be sleeping. But then she smiles.

Lucinda sewed them shut, she says, but that’s because they were bluer than hers. She’ll let you keep yours open.

How did you get here? I ask.

Sweet Lil, she says. I came in, just like you. Of course I only wanted a peek.

And Regina begins to laugh, the crown of poinsettia petals on her head trembling madly. I feel sorry for her, but I move on.

And then there is Soledad.

Soledad, the youngest and loveliest of all. Soledad, who herself sailed across the sea to be with Lucinda. She wears lace and pearls, an opal pierced through each of her earlobes. She is the picture of a child bride.

Lil, she says, we’ve been waiting for you. You can start reading again.

There’s time. Now Lucinda will be out looking for someone new.
There are others, for of course I am the seventh, but there will be time to meet them. My tiny sepulchre, carved into the rock of the hillside Lucinda created, is next to Soledad’s. The light inside this one is blue, too, and I take my place, Diego at my side, among Lucinda’s girls.

Because I love her, and I want to be ready when she returns from sea.

I have been in my tomb only a moment when I hear my mother’s voice. I know it is hers and not Nurse’s because she says: Lil, My Lilly. Now you will live happily ever after.
A Small, Clean Space

I’ll put a hermit crab terrarium on the dresser, she said to the grey evening. They’re easy to care for, she said, washing a spider from a crack in the wall. It fell into her sudsy bucket, and she heard the swish of the front door.

I’m upstairs, she called, hearing footsteps on the worn wood by the door. She swiped at the crack again, wondering if some putty would cover it.

A baby only needs a small space, she said to herself, listening for footsteps on the stairs. Just a small, clean space.

She leaned back, looking at the walls. They seemed grimy still, but once she settled on goldenrod or sweet pea, things would be different. The stairs were quiet, and she adjusted the huge elastic waistband on her pants.

Are you coming up? she called out. She couldn’t hear anything downstairs now. She switched on the light and sat down on the broad empty floor, placing her hands over her belly.

What is the song about the singing bird? she asked its taut roundness.

Her father had tried to sing the song to her. He had tried, haltingly, only when she was very small and he thought she was asleep. It was the summer when she learned her mother’s name had been Nancy, and then, even though she couldn’t remember her mother at all, named all her stuffed animals Nancy. She thought of that now as she listened for footsteps on the stairs, in the hallway, beside her in this soon-to-be nursery. Her father had thick, ungainly footsteps as he walked toward her feigned sleep.
It had been hot, so pressingly hot, all day. No one was coming up the stairs, she knew, and there was no one to help her remember the kind of bird or if her mother had sung it to her.

All a baby needs is a small, clean space, she said again. All a baby needs is a small, clean space. She said it once more—All a baby needs is a small, clean space—in a fierce whisper and threw the grey sponge at the grey wall.
Eight O’clock

Your pee is yellower than mine, she said. She was off the phone now, and he was in the shower.

What? His head emerged at the side of the shower curtain.

Why didn’t you flush the toilet? she asked.

His head disappeared again, and she put the toilet cover down and sat on it.

The mirror needed cleaning.

Who were you talking to? he asked.

My brother. Did you wash your hair yet?

I’m starting now. What did he say?

I think I’ll go to bed, she said. Condensation coated the mirror.

Kath, it’s like eight o’clock.

Maybe we’ll go away for the weekend, she said.

Sure, if you want, he said. Where do you want to go?

She closed the door carefully behind her, but she knew he could hear her leave. He wouldn’t slip his head out to look, but maybe he’d wash his face again, by mistake.

In the bedroom, the strange light of dusk made green things look yellow. It wasn’t eight o’clock yet, and the bed was unmade. She considered changing the sheets, but stood looking at the open blinds covering the windows. They were open, but not pulled up. In the morning, they would make bars on the floor as the sun tried to get in.
He came in from the shower and looking at him, she wondered if she had put on weight too.

It’s a nice night, he said. We should go for a walk.

No, she said. I want to go to bed.

He put his arms on her shoulders. They were damp and heavy. She bent her knees a little, and waited. What did your brother say, he asked, and she pushed on his shoulders and backed away.

It was rainy there today, she said. She pulled a pair of shorts and a yellow top from the dresser and changed quickly as he pulled pants on. She hoped he wasn’t watching.

What else? he asked.

He saw my mom last week. Can we really go away this weekend?

Yeah, do you want to invite Tom and Lorraine?

No, let’s not go. I should clean up in the garden. We have so many weeds this year, she said.

He tugged at her hair, but didn’t say anything.

She went around to the other side of the bed and examined her fingernails.

Nick, I have a lot to do this weekend.

How did your brother say your mom was? he asked.

She’s fine. They’re fine. They’re all good, she said. She pulled a shred of skin from the side of her nail and dropped it on the floor while he rubbed his eyes.

The curled piece of skin landed and she fixed her eyes on it.
Did your brother say if he and Sharon are going to come out here this summer? he asked.

They’re not. They’re going to have a baby, she said.

Once she thought whiskey referred to a cat with preciously long whiskers and that bonfire was a type of flower that grew along the beach, but she had learned otherwise before she met him. Now he stood there, drops of water behind his ears rolling toward his bare shoulders.

He said, I didn’t know that.

Her own cat’s whiskers had been short, and she wondered now, looking at the skin on the floor, if that was why she left her cat behind when she moved in with him.

Well, she said. They are. They’re going to have a baby.

Really, let’s go away this weekend. Just us. We can go down south a ways, he said.

They’re going to have a baby at the end of summer. My mom’s really going to start bugging us now.

She picked up the shred of skin, hardened already, and tore it in half, then set both pieces on the nightstand.

It’s short notice, he said, but we could try to get that cabin we stayed in last fall.

Are you going to put a shirt on? she asked.
He stood looking at her, and she thought of the deep-colored snapdragons in the back garden. They were something like what she thought *bonfire* should be. He turned and pulled a shirt from his drawer.

It smelled funny, she said. And there was nothing to do. We drank too much that weekend.

I thought you had a good time, he said.

I don’t care if they have a baby or not.

Hey, he said. It’s okay. Hey.

He pulled her face into his neck, and she let him.

Nick, when I was a kid, I thought that a dinette set was china with a sunset printed on it, and everyone in the world got married and got one.

Why?

Well, it makes sense. Dinette, sunset. You know. I thought everyone got one, but that they weren’t all the same. I thought there were different variations, and I wanted one with lots of red.

We could try to find something like that, he said. But now he let go of her, walked toward the door and stopped. He rocked back and forth over the squeaky floorboard just inside the bedroom. She stepped back, farther into the room.

It isn’t real, she said, rubbing her eyes. She pressed hard with her fingertips, and was relieved when spots clouded her vision.

We can get married, he said. He stood across the room, and grabbed at something fuzzy floating through the air.
Maybe you should go for that walk.

We can get married. He opened his fist, and the fuzzy thing drifted out.

I want to stay here by myself for a while, she said. Just a little walk?

He was quiet, and she hoped he wouldn’t say it again. Please, she said.

He walked out of the bedroom, and things that had looked yellow deepened to green. Her bed was green, and little green flecks, like seedling weeds, showed again in the rug. She changed her shirt, and picked up the cordless next to the shreds of her skin.

Mom, she said when her mother picked up the other end. Did Kevin call you? Did he tell you about Sharon? She’ll be the mother and I’ll be the aunt and you can spoil your only grandchild. It’s going to be great.

She held the phone, and she listened for his breathing in the hall.
At the End of the Day

At the end of the day, I braided my sister’s hair.

In the morning, I had woken to find blackberries smeared into my clothes in the closet.

I didn’t know she was coming, but when I saw all my whites and creams turned to purple, the color I can least stand, I knew only my sister could have done it.

Anne, I called.

She came slowly but not meekly, and stood beside my bed. Neither of us looked at my ruined clothes, but she held her ear lobe between stained fingers. We hadn’t seen each other in two years, and her face reminded me that my own face was lined.

Hello, I said.

Your nasturtiums are beautiful, she said, gesturing at the blooming hills outside my window.

They’re mine, I said.

Of course they’re yours. Everything is yours, darling.

I wanted her to hear me grumbling as I rolled my blankets down my body and rose from my bed, and I was sure she noticed my sinewy arms and plump breasts beneath my ribbed chest plate. I wore a pearl colored nightgown of lace, and no one has ever overlooked me in that.

Why are you here? I asked, but my sister didn’t answer.

Do you have coffee? she asked.
Only tea, I told her. Jasmine. My last husband had left coffee behind, but I would never let her know.

Eggs? she asked.

Lord, no. It hasn’t been that long and you know better, I told her. Her hair was auburn, and mine plain red. I had to take my victories when she didn’t know she had a choice.

I came to tell you that our father’s grave has been robbed, she said.

Why would the cemetery keeper call you? I asked. I was the more attentive daughter.

No one called me, she said. I dug him up and discovered it myself. Inside that beautiful rose-colored coffin is a dark little box filled with coarse gray ashes, and not another thing. His possessions are gone and his body burned. She raised her brows and bugged her eyes as she said this.

I saw his face at the wake, tight with the tribulations of raising you, I said. You probably robbed him yourself and then burned his body.

He suffered because of your loose ways, she said, and that is how I know you were the one robbed and burned him.

I can see you’ve come for money, but I am a divorcer, I said. I have nothing to offer.

She demanded wine.

Red or white? I asked.
She chose a bottle, and while we waited for it to chill we drank another. She told me if not me, then our mother, now dead, may have stolen from our father.

Our mother was a wealthy woman, I said.

Lord, yes, she said. You ought to know better. If she robbed him, it was so we couldn’t do it.

I asked her if she had dug up my mother as well. She raised her exquisite brows and bugged her eyes again.

Unable to stand her bland and arrogant face, I leapt from my chair. I could not let her steal what I had gone to such lengths to get. She lies in the parlor now, on a bed of nasturtiums, for your viewing.
Hoax

Her husband told her, Don’t you dare. She didn’t know if he was telling her not to leave her clothes on the floor just inside the door or if he was telling her not to walk past him and up the stairs without speaking.

She considered both. If she took off her clothes, perhaps the trembling would stop and her sweat would dry. Perhaps he would leave his chair to touch her. If she walked past him, perhaps her ears would stop ringing and she’d be able to blink. Perhaps he would leave his chair to touch her. She knew already that he would be her ex-husband, though she thought she could make it another few years.

She stood still a moment too long, and he said, Please.

His hair was as sparse now as November flowers, and she could see each strand sprouting from his scalp, too white to be young anymore. She wanted to say, I’m moving out because you didn’t understand I wasn’t joking about the pineapple tree.

It was cruel of him to throw out the fruit, even if it was rotting. She’d spent an hour in the grocery store, looking for just the right one to plant.

She thought, I’m too young to be at the end of a marriage.

He pushed off on his elbows and she thought he was going to stand. He repositioned himself in the armchair and put a hand over his belly. Did you eat? he asked.

She reached back to unfasten her hairclip and then thought better of it. Without unbuckling her sandals, she pulled each off with the opposite foot and
stepped farther into the room. No, she said, peeling her jeans off. Pantsless and barefoot, she straightened her back and looked at the banister. Shiny.

I’m not hungry, she said. A compromise, she thought. Still dressed and we’re speaking. She put her hand to the banister.

Don’t you dare, he said. She sat on the bottom step and draped her pants over the banister. She took off her t-shirt and threw it up the stairs; it landed four steps up and she thought it looked like the flag on the moon. She moved up one step without changing positions.

Roe, he said. Why won’t you talk to me?

She took another stair, and the wood was cold through her underwear. I’m talking to you, she said after he had changed the channel twice and turned the television off.

He didn’t stand or turn, and she moved down one step. Why are you in your underwear? he asked.

The television sparked with static and she was surprised to see light from the other side of the muslin curtains. She recalled the sun-roof left open in her car and wondered how quickly leather faded.

Her bare shoulders, in the mirror on the landing, reminded her of the strapless dress she’d bought the same day she bought the pineapple. I like that, he had said when she wore it.

Looking down she thought, I should buy new underwear.
I saw a special last week, she said. It really may have been a conspiracy. The whole moon landing, she said. A hoax.

They both stared at the convex screen of the television, and then, as he turned it back on, he said, Who do you think started it?
The First Year

I’ve been married a month, and I’m meeting dead women in the bathtub.

The first time, a Saturday, I go into the bathroom, early grey morning creeping at the windows, to scrub.

I do the sink and the mirror without incident, and because my husband is sleeping in the other room, I start to sing. Pulling back the curtain to get to the tub, I look behind me and the light is no more advanced at the windows than it was an hour ago.

It is early summer, and I turn back to the bathtub to find it full with steaming water and lovely pink and blue bubbles. And in the bath a dead woman sits. As I watch, a drifting bubble floats onto her hair and pops.

We moved into the apartment because of the bathroom, but I haven’t taken a bath yet. The rest of the rooms are cramped and unremarkable, drab and perhaps a little offensive. But the bathroom in the apartment, the second floor of an old house, is larger than the bedroom. Two windows, intricate tile work, and a bathtub like a twin-sized bed sealed the deal for me, and my husband agreed because it’s close to the train and the rent is low. We signed the lease the afternoon of the wedding and moved in.

The dead woman in the bathtub less than a week later isn’t violent. Her skin is perhaps a bit sallow, but not bruised or cut, and she’s hardly bloated. She’s taller
than I am, and her knees are bent sharply so that she’s submerged almost to her neck. She doesn’t look dead at all, except for the way her eyes stare, like a painting in a movie, right at me no matter where I move.

I reach down between those angular knees, past the calves and then the thick curling toes, which I can see even through the bubbles, and pull the stopper to drain her bath. And I go back to the bedroom.

My husband rolls over and says, You smell funny. I crawl in beside him anyway, and when I get up an hour later, the bathroom is clean and empty, sparkling in the light.

This is the first time, a Saturday morning.

On Sunday night, I’m headachy and ask my husband to make me tea. I’ll be in the bath, I say. Will you bring it to me?

I almost ask him to brush my hair, but we have been married a little over two weeks. He rubs my head for a minute, kisses my temple, and goes to the kitchen without saying anything. This is worse than it seems, because he never brings the tea. I sit in the tub until the water chills, waiting.

I don’t know if he forgets the tea, but I find myself forgetting. For example, I forget to go to work on Monday, and I forget to put the coffee on in the morning.

When he gets up, my husband says, Darling, you didn’t make the coffee.
But he isn’t mad. I know because he climbs into the tub with me. And while the coffee percolates, we wash each other. It’s lovely, except for the iridescent purple bubble that lands on his hair with an audible pop.

I sit behind my husband and stroke his wet arms, and he says, Now we’re married.

Now we’re married, I say, clenching my fist around the sponge and wringing water over his shoulders. He tries to turn around, but I say, Darling, let me wash your back.

And he does.

It’s a different dead woman I see in the tub that afternoon. I am unsettled for a while, but later I learn that there are just three, and I’m better.

My husband is quite handsome, and has a reputation in the town for being rather wicked. This is why I married him. He looks exactly like his grandfather, who was killed in the mine before his father was born. And my husband’s father, who resembles my husband the way brothers do, drowned in the lake before my husband was born.

But my husband dressed in costume on two occasions, since old-fashioned clothes were all he needed to be exactly like his father and grandfather, and he had a professional take his picture. So we have portraits of three generations of his family, all in black and white, to brighten the sitting room, which is windowless.

I have no family myself.
The first woman is older than I am, and she usually comes in the morning. Her skin is a little discolored, but she looks otherwise almost healthy. She has only seven or nine grey hairs, and these spring tightly from her head while the rest, dark and sooty, fall loosely past her shoulders. The ends dip into the water, and bubbles float about her the way I used to imagine flies do about a corpse.

She always leaves the bathroom clean, though I never see her anywhere but in the tub.

I wish I could do something for her in return, and I spend long hours in the tub thinking.

My husband comes in late, and he doesn’t know I’ve been home, planning dinner since I got up this morning. We’ll have carrot soup. He mixes drinks while I ladle. I wonder if the bathtub is empty, and offer a pretext.

Darling, I say, I was just about to run into the bathroom. I didn’t expect you just yet.

He smiles without parting his lips, deliciously plump lips, and says, It’s after ten.

I have to powder my nose, I say.

He laughs, and I leave him setting the table. I take my drink with me, but the bathroom is empty, so I pour the drink down the bathtub drain, and take my time coming back out.
My husband has lit candles. When will you serve the main course? he asks.

He doesn’t notice I haven’t put on any makeup.

There is only one course, I say. You’re eating it without me.

The second woman is heavier than I am, and she has the best complexion I’ve ever seen. She sits in a tub full almost to the brim, and I’m sure if she ever moved, she’d slosh gallons over the edge. The water she sits in is clear like a cold lake, and she never uses bubbles, though the room, when she’s there, often smells of honey.

I’ve never touched her water, and after that first time with the other woman, I’ve realized how rude it is to drain someone else’s bath. I realize because the tub, during the first bath I take alone in this apartment, never has more than three inches of water at the bottom, though the plug is tightly lodged in the drain and I never see or feel the water draining. It just keeps pouring.

I see the second woman for the first time on a Wednesday afternoon when I’m looking out the bathroom windows. Leaves yellow as teeth or corn are floating down from above on their way past the windows, and I watch them for a long time. No one walks by on the street, and there is no sound. The air grows humid, and when I turn, the second woman is there. Her tub has silently filled behind me.

Young wives often spend Saturdays with mothers and sisters, and now I have my bathtub. I never go to work anymore.
One of my husband’s most endearing qualities is that he loves to dance. I think it is this, perhaps, that earned him his wicked reputation. The snow comes every day now, so we haven’t left the house. We are here together each day, and my darling husband gets up to chip the frost off the windows and light the fire in the dark of morning each day before I wake.

On a Thursday while I’m unwrapping my flannel robe, ready to step into a hot bath, my husband says, Let’s have a party tomorrow night.

It’s the first time he’s spoken in a week, so I acquiesce before even a toe touches the water. And then we bathe each other and kiss.

The party is a mad, reeling affair; everyone for thirty miles seems to come and the snow accumulates at three inches an hour. Our apartment is so cramped that even the bathroom and the bedroom become part of the dance floor, and at one point while I’m whirling past the bathroom windows, I see the snow has come up as high as the second storey. But when the fiddle stops, all I see out the window is blackness, and my own reflection, flushed at the cheeks and white at the hairline.

No one else is reflected in the window, though there are revelers packed so tight around me we can hardly dance. I try to stand still and talk with some of the other wives, but we are all drinking and dancing and we cannot understand each other.

When I wake in the morning, my husband is not home, but the house is so clean it gleams. I’m surprised I don’t have a headache, and I draw a bath in the empty apartment.
The third woman is the third woman because she is the last to appear, but she is no doubt the most like me. Though she is young, her belly is wrinkled, and she will never have children. She has not told her husband, but she’s sure he doesn’t care. She knows it will all work out. Her eyelashes are so long they sweep her cheeks when she blinks, but the eyes beneath them are like wet sand.

She visits for the first time late at night, the night after the party. My husband still has not returned and I can feel snow settling on the roof above me like heavy, heavy hands.

I will take another bath—there is room for us all in the tub.
Dear Sonja

Whenever we see each other, I draft letters in my head. I look at my friend Sonja and many times I smile and I say, Hi!, drawing out the word like it’s a piece of hard candy. And in my head I write: Dear Sonja, Do you notice we haven’t seen each other in a month? Your Friend, Lynn.

Today we are in a cafe, a place we often meet. I don’t like it here, but Sonja is partial to the pea-colored walls and distressed wood tables, and I try to be agreeable. She was here when I walked in because she’s always early, and she stood as if to hug me just before I slid into the kitschy bench across from her. We did not touch. Then I wrote: Dear Sonja, Why is this awkward? We have so much in common. Your Friend, Lynn.

Now Sonja is telling me about a meal she recently cooked. She lives alone and I live alone, and we often discuss our meals but seldom eat together. Sonja’s house is a little ramshackle, to be kind, and when I do go there I imagine we are college girls and we share the house, our parents paying rent and us watching scary movies together on our thrift store couch and hosting parties where only beer is served.

But my parents are dead, and Sonja never talks about hers. And when we watch movies together they’re films, and not meant to scare.

Sonja sips her twelve-dollar glass of wine. Dear Sonja, Do you remember the time in your backyard when the blackberries were not quite ready for picking? And we picked them anyway, and then you were wiping tears away, in the sun, with bees
droning around you? And for a moment, I couldn’t hear anything at all, and it was like a horror movie when the sound cuts out and the picture is a dripping blade or a swinging lamp.

    Don’t worry, Sonja. I’ll never ask why you were crying. Your Friend, Lynn.

    Lynn, Sonja says now. Are you listening?

    I sip my wine and do my smile routine. I want to reassure her.

    She’s telling me now that she’ll be traveling for the holidays and asks if I have any plans. She doesn’t say where she’s going, only that she won’t be here. Last year, we spent the holidays together, with some other friends. Sonja cooked, and I brought some dishes too.

    After the holiday, I didn’t see Sonja until the trees were coming back to life. I didn’t see anyone. It was a fine holiday, but afterward whenever I thought of calling Sonja, I felt queasy, remembering the way the napkins perfectly matched the silverware, and the plates had sprigs of real holly balanced on the edges. As if they could hide the rest of the house.

    It was a fine holiday, but it was Sonja’s.

    If she travels this year, she’ll be happy to see me when she returns. But she sits across from me now, her lashes spidery with mascara, and she doesn’t care whether I have plans or not. Dear Sonja, Do you know that I don’t have a hamper? I put my dirty clothes on the floor, sometimes next to the dishes. I clean up when you come over, but I do not cry. Your Friend, Lynn.
Sonja finishes her wine. Should we have another? she asks, eyeing my half-full glass.

No, I say.

There is a thrift store in our town that sells cats.

I have to go, I tell her, thinking of the orange tabby and the holiday we’ll share. In a messy apartment alone, happy together.
The Dinner Guests

By the next night, we would all be gone, so we lingered, dirty dishes between us, across the floor.

The dishes were mine, and as soon as I washed them, I would pack them into the unlabeled box waiting where the table used to be. But no one made a move to clear the meal. Gravy was hardening on plates and spoons were sticking to bowls.

There were two of them and two of us, and as four we had lived in this small town for a number of years. We had loved the town and we had loved each other. But.

It was a town surrounded by hills, and living in it had always felt to me like living at the bottom of the ocean. I was surprised whenever rain or snow fell far enough to touch me. Living in that town had brought me to this: two of them and two of us, and we were all leaving. Joel and I had decided the most mature and reasonable thing was to say we could never last, and remain friends. Cynthia and Jack were going to try to make it work, but the two thousand miles that would separate them were a lot, and they were old enough to know.

Should we have more wine? Cynthia asked. None of us said anything, but Joel went into the kitchen, where only the spice rack remained in place, and brought out another bottle.

The more we drink, I said, the less I’ll have to take with me.

It was a stupid comment and no one said anything. Joel uncorked the bottle, the fourth I think, and we slid our glasses to the middle of our circle, to wait. With
candlelight beneath them, we saw our thick lip marks on the rims and our greasy handprints on the outsides of our glasses. Only Joel’s still looked clean. He poured more than was polite into each of our glasses and I was thankful.

What time will you leave in the morning, Adele? Jack asked me.

As early as I can, I said. Maybe even before it gets light. Joel’s going to drop me off at the station on his way out.

It’ll be a long day for me, Cynthia said. All of you will be gone by the time I wake up. And she sipped her wine hard.

You have a lot of packing to do, Jack said.

Cynthia took another sip instead of looking at him and Jack turned to Joel and me. I’m glad we all decided to leave on the same day, he said. It would have been weird.

Yeah, Joel said, and I knew he thought it was profound.

I don’t want to talk about any of it, I said.

The house had grown dark except for the candlelight, and out the south window I could see the hill I knew best. On our one year anniversary, Joel and I had brought a picnic to the top. We’d thought to be alone together, but we hadn’t spread our blanket before Jack and Cynthia appeared—by chance they said. So we ate together and Jack played his fiddle and we all danced and fell asleep as the sun went down. I woke much later covered with dew and saw Joel, looking back at me. If Joel and Cynthia hadn’t been there, I think now, perhaps Jack and I would have finally kissed there on that hill.
But instead Joel and I went on staring at each other that night, without saying anything, until Jack and Cynthia woke up laughing.

What are you looking at? Joel asked me now. With two feet of bare floor between us I decided not to answer, but I pointed my toes at Jack. Joel wouldn’t notice.

Adele, Cynthia said. You look so good in brown. Let me get my camera.

Cynthia, I said.

I have a lot of good ones, she said. I’ll send them to you.

You better, I said, as she took my picture again. She kept the camera pointed at me, and I kept talking.

I need new ones for my frames. The pictures I have framed are all at least two years old, I said. And I want to put some of us at the shore into that big one. We all look so thin and tan in those pictures. You almost can’t even see my scar.

Cynthia stopped taking pictures. Adele, she said, this is a good night.

Early in the morning, as he drove me to the station, Joel said, If I come back here, I’ll buy a house on the other side of that hill. You’ll come back too, then. He pointed with his chin, but I didn’t know which hill he meant. There were so many.

In the disappearing moonlight, they looked more like mountains, and I marveled that in all that time they had never fallen on me.

Later I would dream that these people were just one town over from my new home, but as I got out of Joel’s car, I didn’t take note of his flared nostrils or tell
myself to remember the shape of his eyebrows. And I didn’t feel guilty that I hadn’t answered the phone just before light that morning.

So long, I said, even though his hand was so warm and dry on the back of my neck I wished—just a little—that I did know what hill he was talking about.

So long, he said, and took his hand back. I got out.
Pedaling

We reached the dustiest town I’d ever seen, and Jan stopped. The dust over the road was an inch thick, and I was glad for the rest.

We’d been going so long our bikes weren’t shiny anymore. And Don pushed a little farther. He was thirty yards ahead of us and panting, but still acting superior.

What’s wrong girls? he called back.

Jan didn’t answer, so I didn’t answer. The sun, impossibly, was still searing our necks. There were no mosquitoes or flies in this town; it was too dusty.

Do you think this is a ghost town? Jan asked. She had been looking for one since morning, when we decided to ride our bikes across the country. We were in our thirties, but we didn’t know how it had happened.

I think it’s a dust town, I said. Don was walking his bike back toward us now, and I climbed off mine and shoved it down into his path. My water bottle fell out of its holder and spilled into the road, and the dust swallowed each drop. Everything was dry again in an instant, and Don ambled out of the way.

Come on girls, let’s keep going, he said.

No, I said. We’re tired.

Yes, we’re tired. Let’s stay here a while, Jan said.

Don swiped a finger across his bike, which was blue. Dust came off with his finger and floated through the town, though there was no wind. We all stood in the middle of the road.
This ride was your idea. We didn’t want to come, I told Don. Even as I said it, I couldn’t remember if it were true.

No, Jan said. It was your idea Roberta.

Oh, yes, I said. But I thought at least one of you would be dead by now.

Don’t be so theatrical, Don said. He was holding his bike up with one hand, and now he drank with the other. His water looked like it was still cool.

Jan, I said, You should leave him.

We could leave him here, she said. And we’ll go home.

But of course we didn’t. We stayed on in that dusty town forever, just the three of us. And we never saw anyone else.

*

Jan and I were only married one summer, but that was the longest season.

New freckles appeared on her face each day until her fairness was a memory and her skin was several shades darker than mine, and she was lovely. At the end of summer, she met Roberta, and the two of them chased me up a tree. We had been riding bikes, and they said, Climb up and look for water. I hadn’t climbed in years. I was unsteady. They kept screaming, Higher, higher. And when I finally looked down, I saw that they had taken all the branches, making it impossible for me to get back to the ground. So I kept climbing, but there was no water. And the branches got thinner until they broke beneath my feet.
I tried to tell a friend about it later and he said, That sounds a lot like my divorce.

Still, I’d be willing to try again.

*

Roberta said we’d ride across the country, and that early in the morning, it seemed possible. In the heat, we wore ponytails and felt girlish, though we were closer to forty than twenty.

Roberta and I rode together, and Don went ahead of us. She told me about the town where she grew up, and about an old house there that was supposed to be haunted.

She said kids she knew threw rocks at the windows almost every night, but each morning, clean glass glittered in every pane. As she said this, her ponytail was slipping out, and the space above her mouth was shiny with sweat. I asked her if it was still going on, but she said she hadn’t been there in fifteen years.

We were coming into a town, so I suggested stopping soon, and Roberta agreed. Maybe Don won’t notice, and he’ll keep going, she said.

The aged summer made the dirt road thick with dust, and our tires struggled through. Roberta and I fought down the main street for a steady course, and finally Don called back to us, so we stopped. Roberta had forgotten to pack a lunch. I shared mine with her. The peanut butter was thick as the dust, and no one enjoyed the sandwiches.
Don suggested moving on, but a hot breeze blew through the dried leaves over our heads, and Roberta clenched her jaw. She pressed her hands into the dust all around her, surrounding herself with handprints.

No, she said, so I took off my shoes and made footprints to join her hands in the dust. Later, we made arms, legs, torsos, heads, while Don threw branches at us.
Baking

The smell was sweet and bland, like a cemetery at the top of a hill, and I walked toward the back of the house expecting bread.

But what I found when I reached the kitchen, spacious but dim, were rows and rows of pale cookies, and B loading the oven again. He wore a bandana over his hair and a too large t-shirt, but there was not a speck of flour or egg on him.

He put the loaded tray in the oven and turned to the strawberry-colored bowl on the counter. He cracked three eggs into it and measured the flour precisely, spooning the extra back into the sack, then added milk and oil to his bowl and stirred slowly, purposefully, without looking at me.

Sugar cookies? I asked, still pretending.

He didn’t say anything. I looked at his neat row of ingredients and didn’t see any sugar.

How long have you been baking? I tried.

He didn’t answer.

I pulled out a stool and sat down as B spatulaed thin cookies from a tray to a cooling rack. His rows were exact.

B, I said. I wasn’t gone too long.

He picked up a cookie, dabbed his tongue on its edge, and then took a tentative nibble. Finally, his eyes moved sideways toward me. He saw I was watching and refocused on his cookie.
I could have picked up some sugar on my way home, I said, and tried to touch my finger to this chin. But he turned and spooned dough onto the next sheet.

We have sugar, he said, measuring with his fingers the space between each cookie.

It’s been four years, I said after a while.

Yes. Today is her anniversary, he said. I want you to take these to her.

Oh, B. I was already there. That’s where I was all morning. I watered her flowers and left her a pinwheel. She’d like that, don’t you think?

It wasn’t true. I’d spent the morning in thrift stores on the coast. I thought now of the suitcase I hadn’t bought. A bright floral pattern, large and loud, probably not authentic vintage. I should have bought it, and kept going south.

I didn’t use sugar because of the ants, B said now. The ants in the cemetery. He wiped at some dough that had fallen on to the edge of the cookie sheet. Even after the edge was clean, he wiped and wiped with a corner of his rag.

I could go with you, I said. It’s not so bad there. It really isn’t. I think you’d feel better if you saw it.

She’d be five this October, he said.

I think you should see it. She has some shade, and the stone is lovely.

She’d love baking, he said. We’d put sprinkles on top.

The timer buzzed, and B moved to the oven. As he placed the tray on top of the stove to cool, I cradled the bowl of dough.

I can help you, I said. Let’s add some sugar.
He looked at me for a long time, but he took the sugar down from the shelf. We baked until the kitchen couldn’t hold another row of cookies, and when I said, We could keep the ones with sugar for us, B nodded. It wasn’t the same as the suitcase, and though we packed her sugarless cookies into plastic containers and left them on the counters, we didn’t ask each other to go to the cemetery anymore that day.
Friend

She doesn’t have a single plant, and I think of this every time I visit. Her place is small, yes, but there is not one. Not in the living room, not in the kitchenette, not in the bathroom. I assume the bedroom is plantless too.

You should get a plant, I say to her. It’ll make you feel better. I think, as I say this, of the dried and shriveled African violets, flowerless at least a year, that sit in my kitchen. I wonder if she’s noticed them. I don’t think of the ivy thriving in my living room despite my inabilities. I am also careful not to think of how funny this undying plant is to another friend, not mutual to the two of us, or of the time the other friend and I fell to the floor, we laughed so hard.

What do I want with a plant, this friend asks. It will die soon enough, she tells me.

But maybe if it lasts a bit, you get a fish, I suggest.

A fish, she snorts.

Maybe a beta, I say. They live in tiny glass bowls, and they don’t need much care.

The ones that fight each other ’til death? she asks me.

Those are the ones, I tell her.

We both take a sip of our drinks, the gin she always keeps and a splash of the pineapple juice I brought, and then we look out the window of the apartment she has recently moved into. She lives alone, and I live alone, in an apartment similar to this one. Really, very, truly similar.
After a while I say, I could bring you a plant.

Sure, bring me one, she says.

I consider bringing her the ivy, but I think African violets are gentler, between women like us. She is not ready for a fish. And as she hands me my coat, I wonder what is in her bedroom. Perhaps she’ll put the violets there, and show me.
Front Porch

On the front porch, the wives tilt their heads back with their glasses, swallowing mint juleps. It is late morning, and their mouths will be washed clean by five o’clock, when the husbands come home.

Late morning and midsummer and the devil is out of sight.

Hannah takes eleven small sips without returning her glass to Betty’s wicker table.

In a few months more, she says, we’ll harvest the honey.

Yes, Betty says, we’ll harvest the honey on a day as blue as this one.

A fly buzzes on her brow and rubs its arms greedily.

What if he comes back? Hazel asks.

Shh, Betty hisses and swats Hazel’s fat arm.

Hannah cracks ice between her teeth and leans forward in her rocker to put down her glass, waiting for Betty to refill it.

On the front porch, the wives cannot hear the husbands or the children and they have another round. The devil, who they knew so well in spring and who brought them the books, is out of sight.

Hannah wipes her upper lip dry with the corner of her apron and hopes, for a moment, that her daughter—Rosalie—is not in trouble today.

Rosalie loves honey, she says. When it’s ready, we’ll bake honey pies and fry honey doughnuts.
The honey will bring good times back, Betty says, and pulls a black tooth from her mouth.

I’m not sure we’ll ever get rid of all the mold, Hazel says.

Shh, Betty snarls and the fly leaves her brow to land on Hazel’s arm.

Hannah rocks forth and back in her chair. Rosalie is somewhere down the block, and she is wearing clean clothes. Rosalie didn’t read the books, and won’t remember the spring. Certainly not in a few months more. Hannah looks up at the half-moon faded in the blue day-sky and brushes the flies from her brow.

When everything is moldy, she says, no one will mind. She looks at the diagram of honeycomb in the book at her feet and rubs her toes on the soft, mold-coated pages.

He’ll be back, she says.

The wives—one like a pear, another like an apple, the third like a tiny plum, and all of them rotting—sit in the afternoon shade, grateful their husbands and children all are dead.
Waiting Cold

The frost on the insides of the windows made them look like they were made of older and prettier glass than they were. In the dining room Lana was peeling an orange and Eda was reading a scrap of paper.

The phone rang ten times. Neither of them moved. They were waiting for news.

The phone stopped and Lana pulled the first wedge from the rest while Eda pulled a small pencil covered with tiny teeth marks from her coat pocket. The pencil was so bitten it looked like it could have been cracked from the ice. Eda added something to her list.

Lana, chewing slowly and puffing out her cheeks, pulled a pulpy string from her fruit and held it between two fingers in front of her face like it was the tail of some small and nasty creature. She separated another sliver and took a bite.

Eda tried erasing a word from her scrap; the eraser was gone and the sharp green metal cut a triangle-shaped hole in the paper.

The phone, an old rotary, began its clanging again and the two counted silently to twelve. The last ring faded and they could hear the frost spreading and thickening across the windows. Lana chewed her orange hunks like chores until she got to the last and when she bit it in half, juice spurted onto Eda’s paper. Eda put her pencil down on the table and it rolled past the pile of peel and landed on the floor just as the phone began again.
Lana walked across the room to the small table, bare but for the phone. She lifted the receiver and placed two fingers down on the switchhook to disconnect. She did this quickly without hurrying, like she was washing her hands, and then placed the receiver beside the base.

I couldn’t listen to it anymore, she said as she returned to the table.

Eda began to tear her scrap into shreds, and then the scrap was a little puddle of yellow curls around the pencil on the floor.

I guess she’s gone, Lana said.

They sat at the table for hours. It was noon when they got up and panted on the windows to disappear the frost. Slowly, latticed ice began to soften and slide past their noses to collect on the sill before freezing again. Through the new blears they saw their mother’s farm—frozen at least two feet down and snowless. They saw the farm and the neat fence covered in glittering, frozen dew stretching away into the country and they knew.

Panting still, Eda said, We’ll have to sell it.
The Button Lady

On the long drive up, buttons of all shapes, materials, and sizes came snapping into Louisa’s head. The cottage she’d rented long distance was a place she’d seen years ago. She knew, like all the other houses in our town, that one day it would try to get her to live in it.

Pulling into the dirt drive, wooden buttons plinging and plastic ones clicking and little glass ones dlinking, and all of them trying hard to keep her brain contained, she turned off the headlights and watched the welcoming bugs melt away in the moonlight. Louisa wondered, through the buttons, if they were fading into the cottage scene or another.

You’ll see already that this is not the story of the Button Lady you know. This is the one only I tell, the one with Louisa in it.

The front porch she came to that first night was a wide and shallow trough, the door unlocked, and the little house sparsely furnished. Toeing through the rooms, she found all the walls and furniture somewhere between grey and white, the place unclecked. With all those buttons holding her insides tight, she knew only that it was evening and the trip was over.

She printed her fingers in the dust on the mantle and decided a jar of buttons there would fix a few problems. A large, old, glass jar with all kinds of buttons.

And that is how her collecting began. She found buttons in fabric stores and used stores, in laundromats and on sidewalks. Between the seats at the theatre and on the bus. In time, the jar was full and she was sewing buttons on cushions and
curtains. She had a bowl of buttons on the kitchen counter, but even without clocks time passed, and this was not enough.

When I met her, she was twenty-eight, and I was thirty-one, young by today’s standards, but old for back then. And the town was small enough and the summer long enough that the children had begun to gather early each morning on that downtrodden porch and sing, *Louisa, Louisa, I’ve got a button for you!* *Louisa, Louisa, come get your button in blue!* *Louisa, Louisa, crazy old bat, come get another button for your hat!*

She could hear the children chanting and later laughing down the stairs, and she knew that when she was younger, she would have watched them go by and longed for the courage to join in their taunting. Now she waited for them to leave so she could go out looking.

She sensed that it was early in the day; she could not disturb the clocklessness in this place. Each day when the children left she went into town, and there, one late morning, she saw a button more alluring than any she had seen. She needed it.

I wore a high collared dress, with buttons all down my back to the floor, and it was the lowest button she desired. Of course I didn’t know it then. I was in the grocer’s ordering a bolt of taffeta when I felt someone step on the hem of my dress. I straightened my neck, lifted my head, and gave a small, polite cough. The foot did not move.
I expected a child or a man, and I would have known what to do with either. But turning and finding Louisa, I was conscious of the collar of my dress tightening at my throat, for even as I looked her up and down, her foot was firm.

I remembered a story I had heard of a woman, a few counties over or a few centuries ago, who had climbed up a tree one afternoon and stayed there sixty years or longer, until she fell down dead.

Excuse me, I managed.

Yes, she said, as if she didn’t know she was standing on me. She was much shorter than I was, but I knew she hadn’t noticed.

I think, I said, you’re standing on my dress.

She stepped back and I could feel the sun outside was still on its tracks.

Thank you, I said. She was very thin and all my buttons were in place.

In the night, Louisa tried to remember how old she was. She couldn’t think why she left this place or how long she had been back, but it was many days since she’d had a new button, and she’d seen the loveliest of all. That button glimmered in her mind, and in a neat row with all its sisters, it kept her snugly fastened to the cottage.

She did not think of the hurricane some months back, in another state, and she did not notice the moon staying on its path.
I placed a marble on my porch to see where it would roll, and took a sip of water. Back then each day brought a high noon, and I tried to remain stately through mine. A woman was coming through the bushes, up the path. And an approaching woman was something I had never experienced before.

It was Louisa of course, and she wore a short dress with long sleeves. This was our first meeting since the grocer’s, though our town was even smaller in those days and we must have gone to school together. At high noon that summer day she mounted my porch looking like a sorceress and bowed before me.

My rehearsed pleasantries fell flat, but Louisa murmured along with me. Pretending to fix her braid, she used a small mirror to peer into my living room behind her. She paused for a moment to look at the miniature sewing table in her mirror’s face and her eyes got a little rounder. Pretending not to notice, I placed another marble on the porch.

You have lived in this town all your life, she said.

Yes, I agreed.

And you live alone, she said.

I nodded and she put her mirror down. I was thinking how odd she was and wondering why she had come when she thrust her wrist before me. My marble, green and opaque, rolled to a stop beside a dandelion in my yard.

Do you like my buttons? she asked, pulling at the cuff that nearly covered her hand.
Her buttons were shaped like tiny black beans, but they were various colors and, I noticed now, speckled brown.

I’ve never seen any like them, I said. Where did you find them?

I used to live here, she said, but when I turned nineteen I left. I thought I was never coming back.

Where did you go? I asked because I knew she wanted me to.

South, she said. To the tropics. I stayed eight and a half years.

I asked her why she left there and she said, Hurricane. But I didn’t leave until I had to.

And it was late.

She told me then that before the hurricane, she had a man, a child, and a spotted dog. She loved them and they loved her and they loved each other.

Our favorite thing to do, she said, was dance under the moon. We’d point our fingers into the sky, trying to guess where the moon’d be at the end of the song, the end of the night, the end of our lives. My man and my child, sometimes they would guess right, and the dog would howl and howl. I was stupid enough to laugh, but my moon predictions were always wrong.

She said, We knew before it came that the hurricane was coming. It was all everyone talked about for days. It was coming, coming. First people talked, and then they boarded up their windows, and then they started leaving. Pretty soon, every time someone left, three more families would say, So-and-So left, so we’re going too.
Then the town was empty, but the breeze was still just a breeze and the waves were still just licking, not biting at all.

She paused and ran a finger along the edge of her dress, and I noticed the hem was fastened by three rows of buttons like the ones on her cuffs, but larger. She put her fingers to the buttons like she was playing piano and said, After a while my man got scared. He said everyone else was gone and it was uncanny. He said it couldn’t hurt to get out of town for a while, that we’d just wait it out and come back when things were normal again.

I laughed at him and when my child asked if we could leave I laughed again. When my dog tried to plead, I simply swept the floor.

I didn’t believe in the hurricane and it came.

I lost my man and my child and my dog. And my house, like it wasn’t even fastened to the earth at all, went up to meet the moonless sky. Because I didn’t want to leave.

Louisa pulled a button from the hem of her dress and placed it in her mouth. She drew her mouth down at the corners, as if with the weight of the button, and went on with her story.

The hurricane passed and there I was, sitting in a puddle of pride. Nothing else left, and I felt so stupid. I was sitting like that when a spider, picking her way through the debris, came to rest on my hand. She was a soft, brown spider like a button with legs that reminded me of my dog’s. She and I had survived the hurricane, but it was too quiet afterward.
I whispered with the spider all through one night or two and decided it was finally time to leave. Come morning, I had a plan. I put the spider on my collar and told her, Fasten on like a brooch. We’re going north.

For the first time since she’d come, Louisa looked at me. I didn’t know how to help her, so I held out a glass of water. She gulped and looked at the sun. There’s more, she said. I tried to imagine a dog at her feet while I waited for her to go on.

At first, she said, I felt the spider snug in the hollow at the base of my throat, and I pretended she had woven my dress to be her web. I thought I would take her here, and it wouldn’t be going back if the two of us came together.

We passed through a swamp and all was still, but as we emerged from the tropics, a breeze started in faint and grew steadier for a time. I wasn’t driving fast, so I decided to lower the front windshield. Northbound the breeze became a wind, and I was fooled into comfort. I had even arranged a cottage to let, over the phone.

I thought my spider would set up on the front porch and we’d rock together in the evenings.

It wasn’t until I stopped for the night that I realized the spider was gone. I still don’t know if she blew away with my caution or decided she couldn’t leave after all.

I thought we’d leave together. But I came back here alone.

We were quiet for a long time, and though I knew people would call her crazy, I wondered where the spider was. Finally she said she needed to use the
washroom. She didn’t seem misplaced, when so many others had, there on my porch.
And so I said, It’s the third door on the right.

I didn’t go in with her.

Neither, for a time, did I notice the last button on my going-to-town dress missing. Until I noticed it, I stopped putting marbles on my porch and I expected her to come. For weeks, I made fresh lemonade every morning and baked crumbly sugar cookies. If she came, I was going to say I always had them on hand, for company. Then maybe she’d come regularly and I would tell her.

I’d tell her how in my younger days, children and men flocked to me. I’d tell her how finally, and just once, I had gone with a man to his room. And while I was in that room, the sun didn’t move at all in the sky, but glared down from the same spot until I screamed. I screamed and ran, sure that my cottage was gone, burned by the steadfast sun. When I found my house intact, I looked up to the sinking sun and thanked her. I knew that I would never be swayed by a man or child again. I had learned how deadly they were, and thrown them aside.

I waited for Louisa, ready to tell her this.

In our town now, they still tell the story of the Button Lady and everyone has forgotten she was Louisa. Of course, someone came and took them all away; the house overflowed with buttons and the walks were colorful button gravel. In place of flowerpots she had buckets of buttons and the trees were strung with them.

She collected them forever, and then she disappeared, the children say.
But I know she’s still there, because come summer I always find a blank envelope on my porch. She places it on the very bench she sat on for an afternoon, and each year the envelope holds a single button.

I was crazy too, to wait for her. She’s the same as a child or a man, but worse. And yet, she brings me buttons, and I’m happy to receive them. Simply.

I keep my buttons in a large, old glass jar on the mantle, in her honor. And sometimes, just for fun, I pour the buttons out and put my marbles in instead. But only for a minute.

The sun and the moon seem, these days and nights, to have forgotten they ever had tracks, for I find them now roaming all over the sky just as they please. And the marbles roll off my porch, and I love to see them go. The children, they sing—*Miss Josephine, Miss Josephine, the marble fiend; Miss Josephine, Miss Josephine, you’ve got no friends*—, but they haven’t forgotten Louisa, and they’re afraid to even touch my gate. All is well, and that’s where my story ends.

One day, I’ll go rolling off this porch, too.
a secret room

They had the house built so she could show off. Dark, gleaming wood floors, a formal dining room, a view from almost every window. A wild and untamed garden between exactly straight paths that always met at ninety degree angles. A huge, though always empty verandah, and a formidable foyer, the staircase behind the front door.

There is a secret room in my father’s house.

Even now, when I live thousands of miles away and haven’t seen the house in fifteen years, those words come to me. I don’t remember when they began, but the voice is not my own. My friends say, Let’s go to the movies, and I think, There is a secret room in my father’s house. My cat rubs the doorframe in my tiny apartment, and I think, There is a secret room in my father’s house. My professors say, You have done well, and I think, There is a secret room in my father’s house.

It was really my grandmother’s house, her show. And until I was five, my grandfather lived there too. My father grew up there, in that prosaic house on the hill outside of a small town where everyone was at least sixty-five.

There is a secret room in my father’s house.

I only have a handful of memories of the house, and I suspect even those are largely made up. We only went there for occasional holidays, and my grandparents never hugged us or noted how we had grown.
Christmases, we would wait all day to open gifts at my father’s house. The adults drank endlessly, and no one thought to begin cooking until long after dark.

Gifts are after dinner, my grandmother would say if anyone complained. And then no one would complain again for years.

Waiting, waiting we’d wander the house.

There is a secret room in my father’s house.

There were never enough lights, and several of the wooden spindles of the staircase were loose. Pop used to take them out to hit me, my father told me once.

Pop wasn’t so bad when you knew him, my mother tells me on the phone now. His fall mellowed him out.

My mother doesn’t know what I’m telling her, but I know the story of the fall well. Drunk, Pop fell down the stairs one night about five years before I was born. His wife, my grandmother, heard the fall from her bedroom, but left him there, as a lesson, until morning. Doctors said the next day that he had a ten percent chance of survival, and it was a long time before he came home. After that, he only drank vodka and slept most nights on his armchair in the parlor.

There is a secret room in my father’s house.

I saw the room once, because it was just a spare room at the end of the hall. The wallpaper and the bedspread were merlot red and the window was small and cramped; showing a view of a tree that grew too close to the house. A limb as thick as my waist bisected the upper and lower panes, and I could not see past the twisted branch. I’m certain the window was never opened. The glass was drippy and
warped, so you couldn’t trust what you saw out it. On the walls in that room Pop’s belts hung, and the ties he wore when he was still practicing law were draped over a chair in the corner, the only thing out of place in the whole house.

I saw the room once, because I heard a dog growling. I heard it from the bottom of the stairs where my brother and I were feeling for loose spindles, and I said, I hear a dog. You don’t, my brother said. There’s no dog here. And he went to the kitchen, where the adults were pouring another round.

I heard the dog growling, growling. So I creaked and banged my way up the stairs. The growling grew softer, and turning my head to follow it, I saw a door, a door at a curious angle at the end of the hall. A door I had never seen before. The dog whimpered and gave a high little bark, and I crawled on my hands and knees to the door at the end of the hall. Listening, I crouched there for years, until finally I put my hand to the door to push it open.

What are you doing? Pop asked from behind me.

There is a secret room in my father’s house.
Prophetess

When I was a little girl, living in the hills outside of town, I used to say I was going to grow up to be a prophetess. Now I live with my oldest friend; we have known each other nearly a year.

I sit on the bricks my friend calls a terrace, and she mixes me another drink while I test my eyes, trying to decide where blades of grass turn to blurred. I cannot tell if I see lines a yard away, but she hands me my drink and I see an ant crawling along my toe. I point to it, but my friend is stirring her own drink with a meaty finger. She smells of lavender and cigarette smoke, and reminds me, tonight, of my teenage years.

I tell her that on my first date, when I was seventeen, an unnaturally unpimpled boy took me to see a famous singer.

Which singer? she asks, but I brush the ant from my foot. I had not heard of this singer before the boy asked me on the date, and I have since forgotten her name.

The singer’s hair was so dark it was almost light, and later that night I ran the bath water so hot it was almost cold, thinking of her. Her voice reminded me of my impersonations of witches’ familiars. I was an expert on those sounds, when I was a child.

Three years later, when the boy, Danny and lately pimpled, asked me to move in with him, I thought of that singer’s croon and said yes, I tell my friend now.

I remember the first man I lived with, she says.

How old were you? I ask her. I know I don’t see any blades of grass now.
I think nineteen, she says. But he was older.

Danny was the same age as me, I say, remembering the moss colored carpet we slept on together in a city that seemed far away.

We didn’t have a bed, I tell my friend, and I thought the rug-burns I found on my skin in the morning meant we were in love.

I look at her, and we both laugh. I worry, as I shake with the memory of that rug, that my drink is sloshing over the edges of my glass. But I am safe, my glass already half empty.

I’m going to need another, I tell my friend. I tilt my glass toward her.

My second lover was a woman, she tells me.

I chuckle. I think you told me that before, I say. And she refills my drink, this time without the juice or the ice.

I swallow and she swallows. We are both quiet for a while until she says, From here, it looks like that hill is far away, but when I’m driving home, it looks like it’s almost touching our hill.

I forget that we live at the top, I say to her. I’ve lived in so many places.

I know, she tells me, and touches my leg.

I slap at her, but scoot my chair a little closer. The cat we took in a month ago jumps to my lap, and we both pet her for a minute. I lived with Danny for two years, I tell my friend. We started dating in high school. I haven’t thought of it in so long.

Where did you grow up again? she asks me.

New York, I say. Not far from a tiny town.
I lived in Maine one summer, she tells me, squinting toward our neighbor hill. I don’t remember much that happened there, but I remember not wanting people to think I was a tourist.

I laugh and refill my cup. The light is sinking, and I am building up my arms. Even as a little girl, I always knew it would come to this.

That wouldn’t have been the worst thing, I say, To be a tourist. She wraps her square, ringed fingers around her drink.

You never were a tourist, she says, and I remember.

I say, I have a story for you, and she swallows. So I tell her about how as soon as Danny stopped coming home at five o’clock, I knew I’d leave him. Mornings for a week I would search the classifieds for used cars. I only had a little money left over that my parents had given me for high school graduation, before they stopped talking to me. It took me a while to find anything I could afford, and when I did, it was old. An old white car I bought from a dead woman.

My friend snorts at this. You bought a getaway car from a dead woman? she asks. That’s one I can’t claim.

Well, from a dead woman’s husband. He was alive, I say. His wife, the owner, had been dead a year, and she drove the car for fifteen years before that. I bought it cheap, and without saying anything to Danny, I packed it up with my clothes and a poster of that famous singer and drove away one afternoon while he was at work. I didn’t know where I was going.

We’ve all been there, my friend tells me.
No, I say. I was in the dead woman’s car. It didn’t matter that I was leaving. I was living in a pearly ghost car.

What did you do? my friend asks, topping off our cups and lighting a cigarette.

I drove, I tell her. I barely ate, and I spent all the money I had on gas, and I drove farther than I had ever been before. I didn’t have a lot of money, so it didn’t last long, but I was a tourist alone everyplace I went.

Did you think a lot about Danny? she asks.

No, I tell her. Not then. I thought about the dead woman. I pretended she was in the seat next to me, and I talked to her.

I half-expect my friend to laugh at this, but she doesn’t. About what? she asks.

About things that had happened to me, I tell her. I told that dead woman about a time I picked a prize peony from my mother’s garden even though I knew it would get me locked in a closet, about how I never believed the thunder was angels bowling and told all the neighborhood kids it was witches arguing over which souls to take. I told that dead woman about how the first time I tasted whiskey, I knew it was already familiar, and how I never believed anything I told the other kids. I told her what I used to want to be when I grew up.

It doesn’t sound like you thought about the dead woman at all, my friend says.

I did, though. Thinking about her, I knew she would have been the type of person to look out the window, without a word, while I said all those things. Even if
she had to pee, I say. My friend asks me how I knew this about the woman. Because, I tell my friend, the car was perfectly neat, but I found a map of the country hidden underneath the spare tire in the trunk.

Did you keep it? my friend asks me now.

No, I drove on until I found a job, I say, and then I sold the car for almost nothing to another desperate woman. I left the map under the spare tire, along with my stupid poster of the famous singer.

My friend squints at the sky, and I think it must be overcast. Our bottle is not quite empty. We are old women now and we will not move anymore, but stay in this house, sitting on the terrace with our cat, telling our stories until we remember each other’s.
Laura

Your first memory was of sunlight, vague but bright. Sunlight streaming in a window, and everything so glowing it was colorless. You could not see the objects in the room, but by the smell you knew it was beginning.

Being so new yourself, you could not identify these smells. But later, you felt at home with silk, hundred year old roses, new rubber, onions with earth still clinging to them, worms wriggling in the rain, rotting leaves.

Later, as these smells sprouted names, your first memory was replaced a thousand times.
Blue

A little girl is staring at my breasts. I don’t blame her; I have very beautiful breasts. Many women and men have told me this.

But when I dressed in this suggestive silk, I did not have little girls in mind. I am in a city I do not know, and while it is not exactly love I am looking for, I am also not looking for little girls. I have my own.

In a city I do not know, I find it comforting to think of rainforests—ancient, dark, and brooding in a way that is only vaguely sinister.

The rainforest, a place I have never been, is where I feel most at home. I’m looking now for someone who might yet understand. (I’d like to take you to bed without telling you I’m in the rainforest, and imagine while we are between sheets that you will know what I mean when I say, Let us pause a moment for the bromeliads and orchids.)

A little girl could not understand this. In my own girlhood I was offended when Santa gave me a stuffed blue bear. Bears, in those days, were never blue.

And now I long for rainforests filled with blue bears, filled and overflowing. So that I do not have to be in a city I do not know where a little girl is staring at my breasts.
In the August sun, glaring, you are cutting an onion. You say you will make soup. Why, I ask, would you make soup in this heat. You only look at me, and make no reply. The air is humid and oppressive, and the smell of onion makes it worse. You are crazy is what I think, but don’t say. You are cutting outside, on the sidewalk. Onion juices are seeping across the rough surface, and I wonder if there will be any left for the soup. I search for your eyes, but look away before I find them. I ask if you want me to get some bread for the soup, but you say it’s too hot for bread.

I want to walk through the screen door, then close the heavy wood and lock you out. I want you to stay there on the sidewalk cutting your stinking onion until the heat dissipates and it begins to snow. But even then, you probably would suggest ice cream.

There’s no chance of rain.

And now I smell myself mixing with the onion. I imagine it’s the foul fruit making me tear up, and kick my flip-flop off, in your direction. Again, you do not say anything. You go on dicing the onion, ever smaller. The sun’s moving closer, and I want to go up to my room, where I know the blinds are closed, but I stand here, watching you with your onion, wondering why it is no carrot. After all, my room is only a room in your house. I am nearly middle aged, and there is no doubt you are old, but still we live in your house. I think other daughters, who live with their mothers, claim the space as their own. They make the old houses new, and belong to
themselves, these daughters. I have known some who have done this, and I can imagine many more. But still I have a room in your house.

Orange

OH, DO YOU THINK ANYTHING HAS EVER BEEN ORANGE?

it hasn’t.

Black

I see the segmented body of a worm coil out and then quickly back in to the earth. It is something to believe in, after so much rain.

I regret not cheating on my last boyfriend, the one my mother liked, and think: birds poop from the air.

If I could just focus on the segments of the worm—a hermaphrodite—I might understand some of these things. Journeying through the earth, eating my way through its delectable crust, that is who I might be.

Forgetting boyfriends and birds, I could be a worm.

Yellow

Like rubber ducks or rain boots. But Laura cannot play with rubber ducks or splash in puddles. She has discarded her childhood.

She’s going to be a teenager when she grows up.
Her hair, her mother insisted, must be bobbed. And so it is bobbed and veryvery bright. Her head glows and she resents this. She wants to get kisses from boys and drink cold wine from a box, and it is her glowing, bobbing head that is preventing these things.

And her mother is still buying her underwear. She chooses little flowers and stripes, full coverage. In response to this, Laura is listening to music.

It is the music her mother tells her is trash, especially when Laura rocks her hips at the fastest parts.

Laura’s mother comes home to find the house dark, the music loud. She begins to shout, but her voice is lost. She switches on the light, and there is Laura, whirling and swinging through the living room, with painted nails and shadowed eyes.

*Gold*

It was hard to come by, and I almost didn’t.

There wasn’t a glitter or glimmer.

It was in the farthest corner, in the back of someone else’s dresser drawer.

*Silver*

Lies I told my sister:
In the vastest ocean lived a wolf and a whale. The whale had an advantage, being an expert swimmer, and very kind. And the wolf also had an advantage, being an expert snarler, and very cunning.

You were born in that vast ocean; the whale was your father and the wolf your mother. You inherited none of their traits, and were the stupidest and slowest thing in the ocean. The whale and the wolf were greatly disappointed that their child was human, and you put a great strain on their relations, being so stupid and human.

You weren’t even kind.

Finally, they were at a breaking point. Even the whale, who was very kind, said to the wolf, My dear, we got on so well before the child. Even she is unhappy. Perhaps it is best for all... But the whale was not so unkind that he could finish the sentence.

The cunning wolf, however, understood what her husband was saying. And so that snarly, cunning wolf, who was your own mother, bit your flesh, tore your legs. She bit them to ribbons, so that you could not walk, and the water was tinted with your blood for miles.

You cried out, and so the whale, who was after all still a very kind whale and a good swimmer, put you on his back and swam you toward shore.

He left you sitting and sobbing in the sand at the edge of the land, and that is where my mother, the human you think is also your mother, found you. She was neither cunning nor kind, but was a swimmer (else how would she have found you?)
and rather snarly. She needed another child, a worker, so she took you home and never told you that you were an alien ocean baby.

Those scars on your legs, which you were told were burns from when I dropped a pot of boiling water on you, are the bite scars from your real mother. Because she didn’t love you.

My sister was not so stupid that she disbelieved.

Red

This girl, Laura can tell with a glance, grew up with a red couch. But Laura cannot glance away. Think of this girl, as a child, bouncing on a red couch—scarlet or cinnamon, maybe burgundy or crimson, but red-red-red.

People are divided two ways, she knows, those who had red couches as children, and those who did not. Laura did not. But this girl did, so Laura stares.

She is sure, and this certainty is not something she is familiar with, perhaps because the couch she sat on as a child was not crimson or scarlet or even burgundy or cinnamon. And it smelled like smoke.

The girl Laura is staring at smells like apples, beacon or red delicious. She is sure. She has never been sure like this before.

If she approaches this woman—Laura considers the consequences. Maybe her preoccupations will cease. Maybe they will move in together and buy a red
couch. Fill their whole house with red furniture and red carpet and red wallpaper and
dishes and sheets.

But she is not so sure she’ll approach the girl.

_Purple_

It seemed possible, in those days, to live only inside. It was raining, and the
clouds were coming in closer every minute. I could not remember what the streets
looked like, and there was nowhere to go. Bottles crowded in close around the sink,
and dishes mounted nearly to the faucet. I was low on money and trying not to turn
the lights on unless I had to. The more bottles that joined the crowd, the less it
seemed I had to.

I was living alone, in those days. My mother was dead and I seldom had
company. I ate a lot of cabbage. I hadn’t painted my nails or worn makeup in years,
but I still looked in the mirror every day. Just once.

Later, I did go out. And I found a great depression in the earth, where the
street had been. At the bottom, roses had choked. This seemed very cruel and very
beautiful, like the kind of woman I’d imagined, as a girl, I’d be.

I wanted to find a way to the bottom of this gorge, but. But still I was only
eating cabbage, and wasn’t very strong.
I imagined that maybe the thorns of those choked roses would be like fountain-of-youth-water; they’d give me strength and vitality like I could only pretend to remember.

But it seemed the greater possibility was rain.

Brown

Just once. Laura was in a cabin, rented for the weekend. Leaves were crisping off the trees outside, and her companion was softly, darkly bearded. There was a fireplace, and they used it. There was wine, and they drank it. There were lips and tongues, and they loosened them.

There was a couch, but they used the floor. There was sweat and tousled hair, and the beard grew softer and just slightly longer as she stroked it.

He did not say a word, and it was the greatest conversation. His breathing was slow and careful, and she was almost able to match it.

Later, after hours of silent conversation, he drew a bath.

Come in with me, he said pulling back her long bright hair.

Let’s light candles, she said with a small smile.

They couldn’t find any, but it didn’t seem like the tragic foreshadower it was.

Not just then, because they had slipped into a bath.

I could live like this forever, he said.

Yes.
But they were wrong. It was just once.

*Grey*

She used to pretend to be a wolf as a child. Not an alpha or a dependent teenager, but strong and needing no one but the orange moon.

She would play this game not in the bathtub or her bedroom, but between the fences of the backyard, and only on cold days. When the weather was warmer, she never could feel quite like a wolf.

*Pink*

I was born inside the hot wax of a burning candle. I was burned at birth, but the candle was pink and rose scented.

I have returned here, to these smoky shores of my childhood, in order to feel uncomfortable.

Never so smoky before. And oddly more wild now than ever in days of greater imagination. An island I remember walking to at low tide is miles and miles away now, shrouded in ghost dust. Horseshoe crabs once fucking and funny in the sand are now ancients dead and floating in murky water.

Who belongs here?
Birth inside a candle people often mistake—they think it the same as being born inside a glass jar. But jar babies look out; I look in. I look to absurd islands and lewd creatures. And I always smell like synthetic roses, my birthright.

That island, did I make it up? Real, then or now?

Things I know are real:

-I took so many I thought I’d die. To see how many it took before death seemed possible.

-I swam from a wax cliff, all the way to the opposite shore, another wax cliff. This happened in my first moments of life.

-I told my sister our candle was not real. She believed me.

-I once got lost inside a red and white checkered tablecloth, and hoped I could stay.

There are others, but just now, with the heady smell of smoke and roses, I cannot recall.

*green*

a woman was crawling along a broad jungle leaf when she came upon an aphid. the leaf was in a backyard, in a suburb.

can i help you find something, asked the aphid.

can i help *you* find something, asked the woman.
you are the one out of place, said the aphid.

that is arguable, said the woman.

they looked at each other for a moment, and then each heard the lawnmower start up.
Your mother and your sister, the lovers you had known—dead or gone.

You could revisit places where you had known them, but the places were empty. Your first memory might have been hands under your arms, lifting you; or your bare foot next to your sister’s shoed one, still smaller; or a kiss on your forehead from indiscernible lips.

But instead you thought of things you couldn’t see, in the back of your mother’s drawers. A knife, an antique brooch, a lighter for the scented candles. And those things were in your sister’s drawers too; and your lover’s. Your own drawers you tried to keep free of clutter. And in the days that followed the ones you remembered, you found that the best you could do was stare into a slow stream at the corner of your mother’s property.

Everything was very bright, or very dark, but you couldn’t make out a single object. You thought you smelled something—a strange hotel room, or your mother’s kitchen, or earthworms. Perhaps new rubber, something shiny, or a wolfish lie. You looked, for a time, for the thing to hold on to, the thing that could connect it all.

Things were two ways at once, or a million. Colorless, but a prism shadow of light. There were the things you had known, and the things you hadn’t. But these were the same. Things were as empty as the places you had been with others and you had one memory. You had a hundred or a thousand. Maybe thirteen.

You tilted your head and the space you were in grew darker, and the water was pink or perhaps finally orange with light. Everything surrounding the scene was green or blue for a million miles, until it wasn’t.
You tilted your head again and there was no color, only illusion. You could not tell if darkness had come, or if perhaps all the colors had mixed and too many meant nothing. Life had begun pinkly, but green or purple could not be an ending. And you could not stay in your mother’s stream.

So you put your hands in your pockets and stood.