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Serial Fictions: A Collection

Abstract

This collection of fiction that is not only a compilation of short stories, but a "serial collection". That is, the stories are organized into series, and these series placed in a series as well, making up the book. The purpose of this organization is to figure out to what extent the arrangement of stories significantly contributes to the reader's understand of, and engagement with, the particular elements of each story as they are both replicated and modified within and throughout the series. If plot is, as E.M. Forster describes it, the narrative of events with an emphasis on causality, then this arrangement can show how plot can exist in varying forms. Specifically, it can disrupt the cause and effect rationale in favor of a more dynamic associative logic.

In this collection, the first series of stories revolves around a set of characters, namely three sisters; the next around a single event, an abduction; and the third around a theme, the individual forging space in the social melee.

Traditional story lines can oversimplify the correlative relationship between events--a single story line allows for a single answer--and ignore the complex interactions amongst characters, the stories that contain them, and the consciousness of the reader reading them. In Serial Fictions, aspects of the stories are interchangeable but not identical. The objective, then, is to require a different type of reader interaction than that most often required by the chronological structure; that is, one of participant rather than observer.

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SERIAL FICTIONS:

A COLLECTION

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of Arts and Humanities

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

By

Danielle Rado

June 2011

Advisor: Laird Hunt

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Introduction

The Serial Killer and Serial Writing

When I began this project, I initially thought it would be a collection of short stories that revolve around the figure of the serial killer; not so much the facts surrounding real life serial killers, as society's perception of and fascination with the general idea of the serial killer. In his book *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*, Mark Seltzer examines how the serial killer, particularly the American serial killer, manifests as an "abnormally normal" symptom of the public/private divide in which private desire morphs into public spectacle. My work revolved around this concept, approaching mundane aspects, such as life insurance policies, through the context of the serial killer.

But after writing several stories my interest in the figure of the serial killer began to fade. I began to write stories that felt tonally similar, but lacked the serial killer theme. Rather than try to make the argument that these new stories were somehow serial killer related, I went back to Seltzer's book and looked for what else may have attracted me to it. I focused on his examination of the role public spectacle plays in the "looping effect", which is where "public knowledge about kinds of people has a way of interacting with the people who are known about and how these people conceive of themselves" (15). It is the looping effect that transforms individuals in types. For Seltzer, this phenomenon is epitomized in the serial killer, but for me it is an implied commentary on writing, not

only when working within a specific genre or formal tradition, but also when working with particular themes, especially ones that may be cliché. The reader brings his or her familiarity with that tradition to the text and therefore shapes it. The writer, as both a writer and reader, cannot help but be influenced by this. Their writing, in turn, adds the public's knowledge and perception of that type of writing. And so on.

My particular mode of inquiry involves the series, since it is through a series that the looping effect is most immediately played out. This is where I finally realized my true interest was all along, not in the killer, but in the seriality of the method through which one examines the reproducibility of type in the public sphere as juxtaposed to the private.

In her text "The School of the Dead", Hélène Cixous states: "All violence has a history. When we arrive at a certain degree of subjective, phantasmic, or sociopolitical violence it both reproduces secondary violence and creates new violence" (47). That is, seriality is inextricably linked to violence, and violence, through incessant reproduction, will find its way to the public sphere. My interest then, lies in writing more about societal experiences and public psychology than personal experiences and private psychology.

So I set out to write a serial collection, a collection of short stories that is a series of series. Each series consists of at least three stories of varying length; each story will have a form specific to itself. One series revolves around a group of characters, three sisters; another around a single event, an alleged abduction; and another around a theme, an individual lost in a social melee. These three aspects are commonly found organizing principles for collections. However, unlike a standard collection, the serial collection cannot be simply an accrual of "facts" within the text that reinforce each other's legitimacy. In his article "Something from Nothing: The Disontological Poetics of Leslie

Scalapino”, Jason Lagapa describes Scalapino’s writing as “a serial mode of accretion” that ultimately negates itself (Lagapa 40). Lagapa uses the term “disontological poetics” to express the quality of transience or impermanence in Scalapino’s writing, in which the text cannot be said to exist as “a reified object... [but] an ongoing action or process” (35). Or, as Scalapino says, the text only exists “as occurrence” (qtd. in Lagapa 35).

But I believe seriality pushes past this point, as shown in the method of the serial killer, who erases the identity of the individual and rewrites the person and the body as text. That is, reproduction involves negation first and then creation. Through negation, every element undergoes an incessant qualification, and so builds and diminishes simultaneously. These negations, then, open up the field of inquiry from one occurrence to the next, which, in the case of a collection of fiction, is not just from one story to the next, but from one element in a story to the next analogous element within that story and the others. Therefore the in-between space becomes critical. Cixous, in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa”, describes the work in this in-between space as a “process of different subjects knowing one another and beginning one another anew only from the living boundaries of the other...” (415).

In the serial collection, two things happen simultaneously in this space: (1) the initial roles of the participants (by which I mean not only the reader and the writer, but all the other elements of fiction as well (plot, character, tone, etc.)) in this dialogue are negated, allowing us to ascribe new values to them. But, unlike Scalapino’s seriality, these reevaluated elements exist as more than just occurrences; they are essentially the material with which the reader will build the structure of the collection within his or her own cognition. Therefore, (2) the space in which this revaluation occurs shifts from the

page to the reader. In this respect, the constant recontextualization that occurs in a serial collection, which simultaneously undoes and reinforces causation, must occur outside the boundaries of a reified text. That is, action must occur in the space in-between, or the paratactic gaps within and between stories that allow the reader to meet and therefore know the “living boundaries of the other” participants, as defined above.

Beyond Negation: Fictional Elements Revalued

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle claims the first and most important aspect of tragedy making is plot, meaning the arrangement of incidences; followed by character, meaning the virtue by which we ascribe qualities to the agents; and thought, meaning a general truth enunciated. Aristotle classifies all of these elements as objects, though their forms and functions are less stable than he suggests. If we consider as rough equivalents to the elements of fiction, then we will find that in a serial collection new values or functions are ascribed to these elements. Essentially, they are realigned along Aristotle’s scale: characters now fulfill the role of thought and become the proof of their own statements; stories take on the role of characters, which perform the actions; and the collection itself becomes the plot, the imitation of the action of arranged incidents. For example, in the Three Sisters series that will be part of my dissertation, one sister is named only “the engaged one” in the first story, the “married one” in the second, and “the mother of the recently deceased” in the third, each term holding in it the general emotional truth (even cliché) of the idea.

Aristotle also claims that a complex plot contains a moment of recognition or *anagnorisis*, accompanied by a change in action to its opposite action. In order to fulfill

their role as characters, the stories must not simply show but undergo recognition and change. They are no longer the space or stage, but the actors. These stories as characters perform this role through negative accretion within themselves. Of course, the stories/characters move beyond this disontological point, or occurrence, and become actual beings, even if they are just, as Seltzer would call them, “statistical individuals” (236). That is, they have a type of formal equality and interchangeability as a result of being part of a series, but each story is still embodies and depends on the body. Although the sister mentioned above may seem to be undergoing a linear progression, the action actually occurs as each story evaluates anew which elements from previous stories are useful to its current situation. This is the moment of recognition and change—redefining the emotional facts that are now needed to enunciate the general truth. In other words, limbs lost in one story are regrown in the next.

Further, the structure is no longer found in the organization of the stories of the collection, which is now the plot, but in the way the elements of the collection are organized in the mind of the reader. This is a point beyond plot, which privileges the role of the reader as the space in which these synapses are leapt and connections are made.

Seriality, Again

Although I have mainly discussed the reader’s role so far, in my serial collection I am also focusing on what it is to be a writer creating the text anticipating the reading of it. This is an unreproducible moment, the moment in which the writer is the writer as the reader reading in the moment of creation. It is flux, or an occurrence as Scalapino would say; perhaps it is also the first instance of violence we may view “as trifling even though

it was decisive” (“The School” 47). The question for me then becomes how do I as a writer move from this unreproducible moment to create only reproducible moments? I find my answer is passivity. (Although I have mentioned Cixous, I do not mean passivity as she uses the term, as part of a feminist critique of the male/female dichotomy and its relation to the active/passive one.) By passivity I mean writing that does not assert its individuality through newness or derive its meaning from being different; it is not actively disrupting or waging a critique. It is simply having an accepting relationship with genre. It is writing with the goal of having a collective experience of accepting genre.

My idea of passivity stems from Sartre’s discussion of seriality in *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*. This final work of his represents his unfinished or underdeveloped shift in orientation from individual existentialism to a sociopolitical dialectic, and my use of it here seems appropriate since I am also trying to work within the shift from the private to public sphere. Sartre discusses two types of social collectivities. One is the group, which is “an ensemble each of whose members is determined by the others in reciprocity (in contrast to a series)” (*Critique* 457). The members of a group recognize their shared goals and knowingly, or actively, work towards it in a unified fashion. Sartre contrasts this with the serial, which is the level at which individual actions are constrained by “worked matter”, meaning the material conditions and existing circumstances created by past activity and solidified in very real things. The distinct characteristic of a seriality is that the members work towards the goal passively, which means that although they share the same goal, each person is ostensibly works in isolation for his or herself. Sartre uses the example of a bus stop. Individual behavior is dictated by past experiences with the transit system, as well as the physical structures of

it. People know to go to the designated stop, line up to get on the bus, pay the driver, etc. Seriality is the level at which we intuitively follow, based on historical and present contextual knowledge, the implicit rules of our systems.

All actions, then, are social acts, and Seltzer's looping effect can be seen as a specific mode of this phenomenon. Since this worked matter is constantly being shaped, it can hold and extend a created object past its moment of conception. In the serial collection, this means that working within the bounds of established genre guides the work past that unreproducible moment of inception, past the occurrence of a reader reading in his or her particular context, and into the realm of the body and the text. I do not mean to suggest that these are stable things, just that they have moved past the point of negation. Cixous claims that when we create, "we institute immurement" of our own and the other's body ("The School" 27). The body remains fixed, the soul (for lack of a better word) remains in the transitory state of death. For instance, in the second of the Three Sisters stories, one sister cuts a toe from her dying niece and slips it under her own skin in the hopes of regenerating the child. Of course this fails, but it helps to define violence in the context of passivity: passivity enacts and then defuses violence as it recognizes the constraints of social forms, genre, and public knowledge and then provides a way to accept these restrictions. Violence creates a separation or break, and, as mentioned before, it is in the in-between space thus created that we come to know the other, as Cixous says. That is, passive violence begets empathy and possibly loves.

If, as is often claimed, the main standard for a collection of fiction is that every story in it must be able to stand alone and yet be more than this when read in the context of the collection, then the collection itself would be akin to a group as defined by Sartre.

Within this organization, each item causes the reader to re-think the previous one(s), and so allows a reader to construct a chronology within a linear trajectory. The actors in the group (i.e. the stories) recognize their shared goal of working towards a climax within each story and for the collection as a whole and *actively* work towards this goal. Reading and active or group collection, then, is an act of accumulation or positive accretion, and, more importantly, posits the collection as the “totality”, which is Sartre’s term for an entity composed of many parts constituting itself as a thing. It is both a material and social organization, and so, like Cixous’s bodies, fixed and moving.

A serial collection, however, shifts the “totality” from the book to the cognition of the reader. I still would not call the reader’s role an active one, as in Cixous’s dichotomy, since his or her role is also predicated on the acceptance of genre, and thus the passive stance. Further, since the unreproducible moment, or moment of inception, is in the hands of the writer, the reader must accept the initial direction of the text, that is accept the initial diversion of their own desire. This is where the acceptance of genre that is part of passive writing becomes the collective experience, and the book becomes the public spectacle. For the writer, the work is also, in a sense, pre-shaped, or as Cixous describes writing, “it is preknowing and not knowing, blindly, with words” (“The School” 38).

Further, in subsequent stories in a series, the writer turns over the unique aspect of the unreproducible moment for this collective experience. The writer and reader take on familiar roles, like two people in a conversation who exchange personal narratives. Their stories of break-ups or deaths, for instance, share similar forms and images, and so in many ways they tell the same stories, and yet they do not since each story remains attached to different individuals. Indeed, Cixous says life and writing are the same in that

as soon as you claim ownership, as soon as you say “my”, “as soon as [you] forget to unceasingly recognize the other’s difference” you verge on a form of murder (“The School” 13). Passivity, then, is also never claiming “my”. It is starting with a personal narrative, as all my stories do, and using the breaks inherent in the series to mark the point of difference and allow the reader entrance.

Solitary versus Collective Experience

Sartre notes that the gathering of people automatically produces isolation, since solitude does not lift one out of, but rather keeps one in the visual and practical field of the other. Thus, solitude “realizes itself objectively in this field”, most notably in the conformity of behavior that is visible to others (*The Philosophy* 458). Does a collection, then, mandate reciprocal conformity of its stories enacted through the readily recognizable objects of repetition (character, story line, setting, sign/symbols, events, etc.), or those elements that are privileged in an Aristotelian linearity? What do stories in a serial collection owe each other? Cixous claims the book is always of foreign origin, written in a moment of “immeasurable separation”. Therefore reading and writing are escapes from or rejections of the other and so produce solitude (“The School” 20). Could the book be the object of realized solitude?

By positing the stories as characters, a serial collection provides an avenue from these isolating experiences back to a collective one. A group orients itself through its common objective, which determines its common *praxis*, but neither of these can define a community (*The Philosophy* 465). A *praxis* is an actor or a system that produces and is produced, and so is related to the looping effect. However, if the stories in a collection

function as a group and if the goal of the collection is acknowledged as the common goal for each story, then the *praxis* becomes based on simple repetition on the part of the writer and recognition on the part of the reader, precluding collective unity and organizing *praxis*.

Sartre uses the term practico-inert to refer to reified institutions, which thus present an opposition to a *praxis*. If seriality is a “mode of coexistence, in the practico-inert milieu, of a human multiplicity each of whose members is at once interchangeable and other by Others and for himself” (*Critique* 459), then it depends on rigid structures, and social motives will trump individual ones. But for Sartre passivity is born out of an unawareness of the way these institutions shape the individual’s behavior. I argue that, like the practico-inert, genre serves as a defining structure, but passivity in writing depends on the awareness and then acceptance of this structure. It is this awareness that renews the importance of the individual (the writer, the reader, and the stories as characters). Though interchangeable and/or reproducible, the individuals are not repeatable. That is, they cannot be done or performed again. For example, each story in the Three Sisters series will be titled “The Sisters at the Cape”, even though only the first story has Cape Cod as its setting, thus highlighting the incongruities that arise through reproduction in the series.

Active repetition, with its dependence on materiality, reifies the object that is repeated within the group dynamic. Passive repetition occurs at the level of composition of the overall structure. For example, rather than an object taking on the significance of a symbol, the repeated object simply holds the place of symbol. Again, the vital level of context is not so much the collection, but the cognition of the reader. As Lagapa says of

Scalapino's work, it employs the parataxis that is common to seriality in order to establish a mental process of negation in which every element is incessantly qualified (Lagapa 40). Ultimately, it is a matter of reification versus qualification.

In a group, then, when the collection ends, the stories are ended entirely. They are not resolved, but closed as if the momentary exercise has fulfilled the immediate need that prompted it. In her story "A Conversation with My Father", Grace Paley's narrator refuses to finish a story she has written because she feels, "Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life" (168). And though Paley's story ends, the narrator's story of the drug-addicted mother and her son never does. In order for a character's destiny to stay open, his or her story must remain open as well. The open story or destiny is similar to Cixous's concept of bisexuality, by which she means the way one locates the self and takes form within "a multiple and inexhaustible course with millions of encounters and transformations of the same into the other and into the in-between..." ("The Laugh" 414). But, as mentioned before, this form must be sought without the active goal of critique, feminist or otherwise. If everyone deserves an open destiny, surely stories do as well, especially if those stories act as characters in a serial collection. This open destiny is, again, found in the passivity of the writer in order to privilege the reader as the space of the organizing structure.

Writing Passively to Create Serial Fiction

Like members of Sartre's serialities, stories and the elements within them are interchangeable as they shift in and out of already defined roles. This is the dynamic of the serial killer as well, who attempts to play the role of serial killer as imagined by society.

Therefore he acts on past circumstances to constantly reinforce, negate, and redefine this concept. In this context, passivity allows me as the writer to avoid the violence of asserting an active role and the confusion of an indefinite one.

One characteristic of the passivity of the writer is his or her embrace of the arbitrary or “interchangeability as the impossibility of deciding *a priori* who is in excess” (*The Philosophy* 461). Passivity, then, shows that a writer will “accept the impossibility of deciding who is in excess in terms of the intrinsic qualities of the individual” and so “remain upon the uncertain terrain of common interest” (*The Philosophy* 461). Serial order, extending from passivity, creates a community.

The intent for my collection is to keep the stories in a series and never allow them to lapse into group formation. This involves maintaining their individuality and interchangeability while multiplying or serializing them, all while denying a common goal. This is done by simultaneously acknowledging and accepting the practico-inert structure of genre, and denying the collection as the object of the organizing event or plot, so that it does not become an object of solitude. Using the stories as characters allows me to write about social experiences versus personal narratives, without erasing the individual. Rather, it repositions it so that it is in direct contact, first and foremost, with the life of society versus its own life. That is, the individual experiences individual experience first through the organizing *praxis*, then through the consciousness. This way the stories are in direct contact with the series, and not themselves. There is collective and not just self-referencing.

A serial collection moves beyond repetition and negative accretion by focusing on the object of each moment as if it were born in that moment. That is, the shared goal is

only established by the “characters” acting in the *existing conditions* in which they are interchangeable but not identical in relation to the objects that affect their serialized condition—collection, writer, and reader. This requires that the serial structure be established in an individual cognition, rather than external super-structure. The writer creates the previous conditions through the unreproducible moment from which the reader will orient himself towards the expected behavior of the reader as he pursues his own actions. The reader becomes both the individual and systemic parts of the practico-inert structure; or the arbitrary, vulnerable facet as well as the omnipotent. That is, the reader becomes a collaborative writer, based on the condition that he or she remains passive, meaning the reader does not try to assert individuality through creating newness or actively waging a critique, but allows his or her desire to be diverted to the in-between space. This is the space in which difference is recognized, and although individuals are interchangeable, it is only through the unceasing recognition of difference, as Cixous claims, that we steer away from violence, and rescue the victim of a serial killer from becoming simply another public spectacle.

I.

MISSING PERSONS

Things to Consider While Locked in the Back of a U-Haul

While locked in the back of a U-Haul, you'll have time to consider certain circumstances of your life. First, consider how you got here. I know, we're not supposed to blame the victim, but let's be honest, there are certain types of people to whom certain types of things happen; people like girls and things like getting themselves locked in the back of U-Hauls.

Instead, consider how although the wall is hard and cold, you find it strangely yielding to your fists, as if all its smooth dents you remember seeing before the door was closed had been caused by similar girls in similar situations. But don't consider other girls right now; assume your experience is unique; that this is the first time something like this has happened to someone like you. Pound your fists repeatedly on the thin metal of the right wall. This can be considered the right if you are facing the way the vehicle is going, the way the driver is obviously facing. However, it's your left side if you are facing the way you'll be facing when that rear door opens and you'll have no choice but to turn and face it. Kick the wall. Scream for good measure.

You feel the loose metal of the walls and floor rattle as the U-Haul hits bumps in the road. A pothole could split this carriage in two and send you tumbling out into the traffic of cars and trucks you hear all around you. Though consider which would be a better (or worse) fate—to fall into the street and be hit by a car, or to be cowering in the corner when the rear door is finally drawn up by that same person who drew it down?

The next thing to consider is not the swelling in your hands nor the motion sickness in your stomach, but the nature of the driver of this vehicle, who, before he became the driver of this vehicle—and before he became the one who drew down the rear door, and before he becomes, as one would assume, the one to draw that same door up—had been a new employer, and even possibly, as some bosses have been known to become in exceptional situations, a new boyfriend. Before he drew that roll-up door down, he had had the easy charm and grace, and let's not forget youth and good looks, that can disarm girls far less intelligent than you. The thing to consider is, what will he become when he's done being the driver of this vehicle?

A pain in the big toe on your right foot (which is the right one no matter which way you're facing) tells you the toenail is split. Continue to kick as you consider the fourth thing to consider—how long you will have to be gone before anyone notices your absence. Perhaps now you'll feel a brief pang of regret for recently leaving that lover who certainly would have noticed such a thing. Though it was this lover's ability—or tendency, or compulsion—to notice every damn little thing that precipitated your leaving. That ex-lover will now certainly not notice your absence, or at least not this manner of absence. In another manner—specifically in the manner in which she opens the door each day to the emptiness of an apartment brought about by the use of another U-Haul at another time—consider that your absence is keenly felt.

Etched in your memory from when the door drew down is the current driver's head turning sideways in order to watch until the last possible moment the changing expression on your face as it dawned on you this was an early coming night which you

now find yourself kicking and screaming against. It makes you forget it was only noon when this all began.

Consider where this vehicle—this U-Haul that's otherwise empty except for the driver in the driver's seat and the passenger not in the passenger seat but in the cargo hold and so now more cargo than passenger—is ultimately going to end up. It will eventually need to be returned to its pick-up location, the spot where you, after being assured you would be reimbursed, walked in and signed for the truck, paid for it with your own credit card, and tried to flirt with the pock-faced man behind the counter, who for some reason refused to flirt back. Consider how you didn't think it odd at the time that the new employer didn't pay for this himself and instead asked you to use your credit card and your name, which is now on those papers in that office, and potentially the last trace of you.

Consider, as you lean to the right as the U-Haul turns left, how much the extra mileage will cost if this asshole keeps driving in circles.

Maybe eventually the rental company will send someone to look for you or, more likely, the vehicle. Don't consider that, for them, retrieving the truck will be a higher priority than retrieving you. You know they won't look tonight because the man behind the counter, the one with the pock-marked face, seemed only invested in his job only enough to give you a hard time, but not enough to stay at work late tracking down missing vehicles. Maybe he'll notice in the morning.

For now, feel grateful you had to sign for the truck and leave proof that you were there. You don't doubt that the name this new employer and current driver told you isn't his real one, and that the only thing that could lead back to the real him now is you.

Whatever other motives he has, motives most likely formed long before you responded to the ad looking for a personal assistant, a certain one is the erasure of this final clue.

Consider a U-Haul abandoned on a dusty service road, the cab empty, the license plate removed, the VIN scratched off, the glove box gaping; no wallet, no phone, no copies of rental forms, no parts broken or missing, no sign of struggle except the rear door's strap swaying in a breeze that gathers a layer of blanched dirt on the bed of the vacant carriage. How long before two boys from the near-by houses wander to the ridge of dead grass that runs along the cleared space under the power lines and see an empty U-Haul waiting there below? How long before yellow police tape cordons off the truck and surrounding area? Before orange crime scene flags are placed by what *could be* shoe prints and what *could be* drag marks, but what *definitely are* being covered by drifts of dirt as the cool evening air moves in? Before search and rescue dogs are brought in? How long before your missing persons report is matched with the girl who tried to flirt with a pock-faced man? Before you're named as the one who signed the papers in that office hours ago?

Stop kicking and allow the pain in your toe to pulse its own rhythm. Get down on your knees, not to pray, because won't give your mother that satisfaction, but to sweep the floor with your hands. At first, sweep in a circle around you, turning again and again to search the area; then realize you should be more methodical. Creep to the edge and run your fingers along the ground adjacent to the wall. There's a build-up of dirt and debris there. Slowly, crouching now, move along the perimeter. Wonder if the driver of this vehicle has noticed the lull in your screaming, and if so, if he's pleased by it or if he'll

soon pull over, throw the rear-door open, assure himself you're not dead, vaguely wonder what you're up to, and draw the door down again.

Consider what it is you *are* up to, as your mother would put it.

In a corner you find something small, hard, and sharp on one end. It may be a tack loosed from some bureau or couch moved in the U-Haul long ago. You hope it's metal. Suck on it to make sure. It tastes like when you bite your inner cheek too hard, but don't consider blood right now.

Go back to the wall. Stumble on your way there as the U-Haul makes a hard right. Beat the wall with your fists. Kick it. Feel the pain in your split toenail. Know your sock is soaked with the thing you're not supposed to think about.

Scratch your name into the wall. After you finish, consider writing "was here." Instead put the date, your new employer/driver's name, (even though you know this is not his real name), and your address. Your address is also on that wallet sitting in the passenger seat next to the new employer, where you placed it after renting the truck, imagining you'd be sitting there as well. Or maybe your license is already removed from the wallet and tucked into the rear pocket of the unnamed driver's jeans. Imagine it tacked in a line with others on the wall of a shack or some basement room. But don't consider other girls who, like you, have their names, photos, and addresses on those licenses. Or think about them just long enough to wonder if their credit cards were also charged extra for the miles as the truck drove in seemingly endless circles.

Consider what other information you should write. Add your phone number, though your cell phone is sitting on the passenger seat as well. Consider putting your

mother's number next to your name with something like "mom" written next to it. Or "please call."

How long will it take them to notify your mother? Will they call right away, or just write the number down in their notebooks and wait until there's more to report, or until they need the mother to do what most mothers do in stories like this.

Don't think about such things. Make a list in your head of things not to think about. Put blood and your credit card at the top. Then your mother and her faith in faith. You never consider adding your ex-lover to the list of things not to consider, but you do include identifying bodies.

You return to the wall. Instead of writing more, you pound and kick.

The U-Haul stops and you lurch to the front. You're right behind the driver's seat where the new employer, now unnamed driver, and soon to be ex-driver, sits. You smack the wall, hoping the vibration will jar his head, maybe jar out of it whatever thoughts have been sealed in it since he placed the ad, hired you, and started driving these roads—thoughts content with the plan so far, happily imagining future ones.

What if this is the last stop? What if he's about to turn off the engine and become the ex-driver? What if by opening the rear door he is about to become that something else? Add that something else to the list of things not to consider. Quiet your breathing. Shake the needles out of your hands. You don't hear the cab's door open and close. In a moment the engine sputters back into motion. The vehicle turns left, you lean right, and this time you tumble to the ground. Bits of dirt bite under the skin of your palms.

You have to admit—with your sight already gone, your hearing reduced to an incessant buzz, your hands sore, dust in your nose and a metallic taste lingering in your mouth—you're feeling weak. As the ex-lover would have said, you have to know your limits. You wonder if exhaust is seeping up from underneath you. You wonder if this has been the plan all along, if this is the explanation for the tortuous course we have been on.

You sit in the middle of the box. You pull your knees to your chest and wrap your arms around your legs. You consider what to do next.

The ex-lover would have helped, would have advised you not to go on the interview to begin with, would have said that this new employer did not seem “on the level.” The ex-lover would have employed that phrase, as ill-fitting clichés often slipped out of her mouth, the type of clichés that only work when actors imitate real life and not in real life itself. She tried them on but never could muster the gusto to pull them off. Either way, it can't be denied that the original ‘Help Wanted’ ad was not on the level. But who will inform the ex-lover of your current circumstances or your soon-to-be circumstances, which are on the list of things not to consider? She certainly would have called the appropriate authorities. You grip your knees to secure your body in a tight ball. You are sore and tired. You know you should sit up.

Consider what your mother will say if they call her, how this must have stemmed from your lack of faith, your pride, your sinful lifestyle with that woman, your failure to attend church, your registration as a Democrat, your reluctance to accept Jesus Christ as your savior even in this, your most obvious time of need. How God, as a test, constructs

each moment of everyone's life in order to rescue him or her from his or her own ignorance. How you had the chance once to be rescued and approach the pulpit with penitent knees, your mother at your side. How you *could* be saved this very moment. How you *could* open yourself up to Him here and now, in the back of this U-Haul. How you definitely shouldn't consider of yourself opened in any way right now. But she wouldn't say that, that's what you would say to her if she were here; that your body being split is on the list of things not to consider.

You need to consider more things. What else? You feel around for your tack. You find a small cold object and hope it's it. There's only a short time left for edits. Consider which ones to make.

You kick and pound the wall, the rear door, the other wall, behind his head. Another sharp turn and you stumble into the corner. Your toe no longer hurts, but instead offers up the idea of numbness to your entire body. When it accepts that proposition, this will all be over.

Consider what it is to be truly numb—your body still, your mind far away. Could you make that happen when you most need it? Not right now, but when this unnamed driver, soon to be ex-driver, becomes the something after that?

You lay yourself on the floor. It's mostly cool except for the part directly above the exhaust pipe, which divides you with a straight line of heat up your back. You stare at the ceiling. Everything is dark so you try to imagine stars, but you can only imagine you in a field alone, no lover—ex or current or possible—with you.

The bumps in the road—and make no mistake, the road *is* getting bumpier—make it difficult for you to lie still. Your head vibrates against the floor. Your body hums and bounces as the U-Haul bounds along. Try to hold your position. Try to relax. Put your hands behind your head. Cross your feet. Consider things far away.

Mitigating Circumstances

The detectives called and left a message that said they were investigating an abduction. An *alleged* abduction, they said. There were certain facts, they added, that were in dispute. They did not explain the nature of this dispute—whether it was between two people, or two people and the known facts, or the known facts and the possible facts—only that there was one. This suggested there were facts that were not in dispute, facts that were known, or facts that at some point could become known. Furthermore, the detectives said, they understood, though they did not say where they had gotten this understanding, that there had been some—ahem, they cleared their throats, as gentlemen do when faced with these facts—mitigating circumstances between her and Ms. K—.

This was a fact she could not dispute. She and Ms. K— had had some mitigating circumstances. In fact, they had mitigated each other for nearly three years. They had often mitigated each other in the evenings, and sometimes in the early afternoons. Occasionally they mitigated each other in the mornings, before the groundswell of domesticity reared its head against them. Sometimes they mitigated each other to the disturbance of the neighbors, and sometimes to the disturbance of themselves. Until, finally, Ms. K— had mitigated her out the door.

She had assumed that the past few months had been enough to mitigate her presence in Ms. K—'s life, as new experience upon new experience should have diluted

her substance in Ms. K—'s pool of memory. But now here she was, present again, or at least reconstituted as a vague figure on the periphery of Ms. K—'s world.

She dialed the number the detectives had left at the end of their message and, when no one answered, left a message on their answering machine in turn. She said that she was willing to cooperate, though she was unsure what cooperation meant in these circumstances. She was sure they wanted something from her. She was not sure if she could provide that something. She was sure something had happened to Ms. K—. She was not sure if she was a suspect or not. She was sure that if she was not, then there must be someone else out there, another shadow figure now lurking in the periphery of her own life.

In the message, she spoke as if everything she said were fact.

At home, after work, she made coffee and mitigated the pot while she waited for the detectives to return her call. She took out a notepad and mapped out different possibilities. An abduction was clear-cut—someone is taken by someone else to somewhere else. Things are done to that someone in that somewhere else. When it's over, the memories of that someone and that someone else are diluted by time.

But in an *alleged* abduction, there are many possibilities. Someone is taken or is not. Someone else is there or is not. Someone else is one or is many. Somewhere else does or does not exist. Someone returns or does not. All variables combine to create thousands of scenarios. Here are some of the ones she wrote down:

Scenario 1: Ms. K— is taken by someone she doesn't know to some place she doesn't know. Things are done to her while she is there.

Scenario 2: Ms. K— is taken by someone she knows. She opens her door, invites someone in, puts on coffee that will be left to mold in the pot.

Scenario 3: Ms. K— is not taken at all, but merely leaves of her own accord and chooses not to inform anyone of this decision. Currently, Ms. K— is on the road halfway across the country, or on a plane to begin her backpacking tour of Europe, or just over in the next town in a lovely two-story home going by Mrs. L— or perhaps Mrs. M—.

Scenario 4: Ms. K— is not taken, nor does she leave of her own accord, but, being the poor driver that she is, careens off the edge of the road into a section of ditch that is conveniently located just below the casual eye level of passing motorists. Her body mitigates its flesh as it waits for discovery. The blue car rusts.

Scenario 5: The detectives take Ms. K—. They knock on her door and when she answers, they allegedly abduct her. They leave her somewhere and wait several months. In the meantime, they go about their normal routine, clocking in and out of work, investigating other crimes, following leads to their dead ends, until they have sufficiently forgotten where they have left her. Then they create a file and begin to investigate. They go to Ms. K—'s place and, after sifting through the mountain of magazines and envelopes underneath the mail slot, they pull and electric pill that contains an overdue notice and her name alongside Ms. K—'s, since this was something they shared before she was mitigated away. Therefore, in the ensuing investigation, she is the first lead they call. The only question she has for the detectives is whether or not she's now responsible for paying the bill.

Scenario 6: The detectives' phone line is merely an assemblage of recorded voices running through thousands of scenarios in an endless loop.

Scenario 7: She has taken Ms. K—.

Scenario 8: Ms. K— is not now nor has ever been anywhere at all.

The following evening, after still having not heard back from the detectives despite her several messages, she went to Ms. K—'s rented row house to see for herself if anyone was home. Though she recognized the porch, the shutters, the hum of the porch light in its filthy fixture, the place seemed unfamiliar. There were no lights were on inside.

As she stood on the porch a car pulled up on the opposite side of the street and cut its lights but not its engine. Inside the car was the silhouette of a round head and large frame. Or a narrow head and slight frame. It either turned and looked at her, or continued to stare straight ahead. She stood directly under the porch's light, her own shadow a slight pool beneath her as if it were her insides and not the car's that was leaking oil.

She stood on the porch under the light, unable to move even when the car door opened and a leg extended its heavy foot and placed it on the ground. Then the other leg and other foot, just as heavy as the last. Then the head and soon the entire body hoisted itself from the innards of the car.

The car door closed and the figure was a shadow once more. She stood still lit under the porch light. They assessed each other as if they were each a side of a sundered moon that, after the explosion, was sent hurtling around the earth in one or the other direction until they met again halfway through their orbits to hover in the confusion of spectral memory as they faced the convexed side of the self they had never seen before. If

a moon was out that night, it was canceled by the glow of the buildings and trees created by the street lamps surrounding the scene around them.

The detectives called the next day while she was at work and left another message. They wanted to remind her that they still needed to talk with her, that they still understood that she could help them. They were certain that she had some information that would clarify the alleged circumstances; that she would be cooperative and call them back in order to help mitigate the list of scenarios.

When she returned home that evening, she called them again, and again left a message. She could help them, she said. She had information, valuable information. What she had was a list of facts that were not in dispute. While waiting for their call, she made coffee and reviewed her list.

Fact 1: Ms. K— is or is not abducted.

Fact 2: Something always allegedly happens.

Fact 3: The detectives are concerned with Facts 1 and 2.

Fact 4: Only one investigatory path can be followed at a time.

Fact 5: The electricity at Ms. K—'s has not been shut off.

Fact 6: Answering machines only record the particular circumstances of the moment and not the larger context.

Fact 7: At a certain point, a body's deterioration, like a car's, like a house's, like a relationship's, is irreparable.

Fact 8: There are always mitigating circumstances.

After leaving her message, she went to Ms. K—'s house to note the security of the locks. The fact that they had been changed since she moved out made them more secure, so she removed her key to the old lock from her key chain and placed it under the mat. She looked around as she did this to see if someone was watching her place it in its old hiding spot.

She returned to Ms. K—'s house to check things out. When she found that her old key no longer worked in the lock, she grabbed a fist-size rock from beside the porch and punched it through the front window. She undid the latch, raised the window, and climbed in.

She felt her way to the front of the room and flicked up the switch by the door. The lights did not turn on. Her memory arranged the dark shapes of the furniture in the places she had last seen them. There was no way to know if the furniture was still in those spots or if Ms. K— had since redecorated, until she left the safety of the wall to stumble through the house.

She found only that Ms. K— had not moved any furniture. She climbed back through the window.

A small yowl alerted her that the cat had circled around from the back of the house to the porch. It rubbed itself against her, smearing the oil and dirt of its fur onto her trouser leg. Its purr had the warble of a feral cat, though this one had been theirs its whole life. She bent down and scratched behind its ears.

The cat, returned to its feral state by the missing of Ms. K—, circled her on the porch. Its fur stood in a straight line down its back. His eyes were black moons against the dirty light of the porch as he stalked around her. She bent to pet him but was rebuked by his hiss.

Instead of crawling out the window, in the dark she undid the latch to the back door and exited, hopefully unseen. In the alley she stumbled across a woman prone on the ground. Without any light, she could not tell the circumstances of this woman. She prodded her with her toes.

Woman 1: rises to her feet and shouts what the hell does she think she is doing. She steps back, her hands up trying to signal she meant no offense, and stumbles over a broken wooden chair. The back of her head hits the pavement.

Woman 2: does not respond. She prods again, this time harder, just to make sure.

Woman 3: is a trash bag that has fallen out of the bin.

Woman 4: is Ms. K—, even though during their relationship Ms. K— never once took out the trash.

Woman 5: is actually a crouching detective, taking notes on the circumstances of Ms. K—'s abated daily life. He says to her, brandishing the notepad in which he has written down *everything* regarding the cat, that the other detectives will certainly be interested in this.

Woman 6: rises up on his heavy feet, a shadow still over his face. The detectives now have two alleged abductions to investigate.

Woman 7: they passionately embrace.

Woman 8: Nice girls do not frequent alleys.

Later she returned and poured a bag of cat food onto the porch. The light in the neighbor's front room flipped on. She dropped the bag and ran into the nearby alley.

When her chest calmed, she walked home. The intervals of streetlights suspended her and the debris she could not help but disturb in occasional shadow moments.

The detectives called again and left a message. Without introduction, they read a list of names and asked if she recognized any of them. They read the names slowly, clearly smoothing out the mispronounced syllables with straight edged tongues as if names were just verbal cement from which to begin constructing the world. The list was in alphabetical order by first name. One of the names was hers. She recognized other names and others she did not. All of the names seemed suspect.

The next day there was a shoeprint in the cat food. Nearby, the cat crouched in an island of cleared space, thrusting its chin out repeatedly as it worked the food down its throat. She knelt by the print and felt the hard pieces of cat food press into her knees and palms as she leaned in for closer inspection. The shoe had left the hint of vertical tread lines in the crushed food.

She looked around to see if anyone was watching. The suspicious car was again parked across the street, though the driver was absent. The neighbor's light was still on,

or had been turned on again this evening either because the neighbor did or did not hear a disturbance on this porch.

She scooped up some cat food from the edge of the pile. The cat did not look up at her, but continued to concentrate on clearing its perimeter from the food.

The cat cleared a perimeter so wide it eventually encompassed her as well. She and the cat sat on their island of cleared space and dreamt of rescue as the change of seasons became the only discernable marker of time. As the leaves melded colors with the row houses' muted façades, she wondered if the detectives had started an investigation for her alleged abduction. But first she wondered if this is where Ms. K— has been all this time, isolated on a parallel island with a parallel cat.

A police car pulled up. The lights were flashing but the siren was not on. It parked angled in the street so that it blocked traffic in both directions. Not that there was any traffic on this street at this time of night. That must be why, she thought, someone had placed a call about suspicious behavior. The police officer stood with one arm on the hood of his car and the other draped over the open door. His face was intervals of red shadow as the light spun behind him. She wondered if he could see clearly the circumstances of the porch.

She filled her pocket with pieces of cat food and walked home.

She listened to the detectives' message again. She reviewed the possible relations the names could represent.

Name 1: is a boss.

Name 2: is a former lover.

Name 3: is an alleged.

Name 4: leads to arguments.

Name 5: is Ms. L— or Ms. M—.

Name 6: is mitigated by Ms. K—.

Name 7: is mitigated by Ms. K—.

Name 8: is mitigated by Ms. K—.

Name 9: is mitigated by the circumstances.

She scattered the cat food on her kitchen floor. She stepped with her right foot, crushing the food between her shoe and the linoleum. She lifted her other leg so that all her weight was on this one foot. She carefully stepped off. She knelt and examined the print.

She went to the closet and retrieved another pair of shoes. Actually, only the right shoe. She put it on. She stepped next to the first print and shifted her weight in the same manner. She examined the print. She made a pot of coffee. She wanted to make more prints but had run out of cat food.

The next day the food was cleared from the porch and the cat was gone. In light of those circumstances, she decided not to sweep her own kitchen floor until she spoke with the detectives.

The detectives called. She told them she had valuable information.

She was at work again when the detectives called. Their tone on her voicemail was beginning to sound irritated. They felt she was avoiding them. She did think that they did not think that Ms. K— was just avoiding them. But, after all, she could tell them, it is not unheard of that Ms. K— would avoid people.

Avoidance 1: Ms. K— comes home late from work without calling. After she is gone, there is no one for her not to receive phone calls from.

Avoidance 2: Ms. K— is abducted.

Avoidance 3: Ms. K— is not missing at all, but merely has begun to do everything on completely different paths than before—traveling a different way to a different grocery store, making appointments with a different doctors, taking a new route to a new job, for example—and therefore has gone unnoticed by all the people who used to notice her.

Avoidance 4: Ms. K— no longer leaves her home.

Avoidance 5: She discovers that she is not the one being avoided, but on the contrary, is the one used to avoid someone else. That is, Ms. K— had used her in order to avoid something else somewhere else. Now that Ms. K— is ready to face the person she has been avoiding, Ms. K— has returned home, not to the home she and Ms. K— shared, but to the home Ms. K— shared with that someone else. When Ms. K— returns, she in turn will become the aberration. Such is the strength of Ms. K—'s convictions that she will become not only an aberration in Ms. K—'s life, but in her own as well. Then there will not even be alleged circumstances for the detectives to investigate.

Avoidance 6: Do we really need to talk about this here?

Avoidance 7: She does not answer the phone when it rings.

Avoidance 8: Lists.

When they called, the detectives said they now understood so many things. It is a comfort to all involved that they do.

With her coffee in one hand and her phone in the other, she listened to the voicemail and thought about the nature of understanding, the knowledge of articulated words and expressions. She thought about how understanding is given to others; that it's never given, just taken, thrown into the full light of the world to be poked and prodded, cracked, opened, examined, mitigated, gotten. But something always remains underneath, silent and shadowed, that wells up only in its own disarticulation.

Disarticulation 1: A limb is separated from the body at a joint.

Disarticulation 2: She walks down a street lined by alleyways. Whichever path she chooses precludes the choice of all others.

Disarticulation 3: Ms. K—'s body is traced, part by part.

Disarticulation 4: By her with her hands.

Disarticulation 5: By detectives with chalk.

Disarticulation 6: By someone with something.

Disarticulation 7: By a series of words and not words mitigated by time and diluted by memory.

Disarticulation 8: They say psychopaths typically begin by practicing on animals. Either way, she does not see the cat again.

Disarticulation 9: She ties a string to her ankle and the other end to the coffee pot. She walks to Ms. K—'s house. From there it is an endless extension of twine back home.

Her messages have not been returned, so she goes to find the detectives. She opens the door to the labyrinthine station. The man sitting behind the front desk does not look up at her. There are things, she understands, that need to be said. His face is shadowed by the brightness given off by the walls and floor and even the desk. He waves his hand tiredly behind him, indicating the direction she can or must head.

She walks past him. Immediately there is a dissection and she must choose. Both hallways look exactly the same, either contains the same swallowing light. She chooses one and walks down it. She turns one last time to assess the other. It does not promise anything different than the one she is in. It does not give off a smell or warmth that appeal to her senses any more than the one she's in.

Other divergences come. She follows them without plan or method.

Hallway 1: leads to an interrogation room where they are waiting for her. They sit her down, handcuff her to the table and, looming over her, proceed to question her. There are some things they wish to understand, they say, things that need to be gotten to the bottom of.

Hallway 2: leads to the evidence room. She deposits the broken bits of cat food on a shelf and marks it with a tag that reads Ms. K—, along with the date.

Hallway 3: leads to Hallway 4.

Hallway 5: leads to a dark room. A light flips on in the other half. She sees her pale reflection in the glass and knows the figures she sees on the mirror side see their full

reflections. In a line is Ms. K—, Mrs. L—, Mrs. M—, and others. She is asked to identify which one is hers. It depends.

Hallway 6: leads to a dark room. A light flips on on the other side. She sees her reflection in the glass and knows the figures on the other side see the shadow of their reflections and her fully illuminated. A voice asks her to step forward and say these lines. We are all (ahem) mitigated by the circumstances.

Hallway 7: leads to the alleged abductor. She says she has come about Ms. K—. The alleged abductor asks, who?

Hallway 8: leads to the center. Everyone is here. I've come about Ms. K—, she says. They understand. Wait here, they say. They clear the room of everything—the table and chairs, the filing cabinet, the bookshelf and its books, themselves—except for her and the light. When they close the door, that clears away as well. The bare bulb overhead swings slightly, suggesting a breeze she does not feel. As she stands in the center, her shadow leaks morphing shapes beneath her.

She thought about how understanding is given to one's self. Every time you remember something the circumstances become further embedded in your brain, while the facts become further diluted. To recall is to dilute, but we only know this has been done when we test it against irrefutable fact.

She reaches down and unties the string around her ankle. She holds it in her fist and wraps it around once. As she follows the twine back out, she continues to wind it around her fist until it resembles an impotent glove.

Lost Self

Recently, I began looking in earnest. I might have started looking earlier, I can't remember, but I know I wasn't even aware I was looking until that morning I woke up and noticed I was gone. I mean, I could have been gone before then, but it was only that morning that I finally noticed. And that's when I started looking intently.

I don't know what happened to me exactly, I just got up that morning and couldn't find myself in my apartment. I wasn't in my bed. I wasn't in the shower. I wasn't standing by the counter in my kitchen with my hand waiting on the plunger of my coffee press as I stared blankly at the wall.

Other than that, my apartment looked like it always looked. Each night before bed, my habit is to put my clothes back in the closet and wash all the dishes in the sink; I vacuum up any dirt from my shoes and wipe up any dust that may have settled. This used to mean I am a relatively clean person, but now all it meant was that I had erased all traces of my activities and left nothing behind in my apartment I could use as a clue to discover what might have become of me. I wondered if I should put the cleaned dishes away; if I would appreciate myself for that when or if I ever came back.

There was one potential clue though, my keys were still in the black dish on the shelf, meaning I was in a hurry when I left or I didn't intend to leave at all. I decided my best course of action was to go out and look for me. I left without locking the door, in case I came back while I was gone. Only when I was outside the building, with the main

door latched and locked behind me, did I realize I'd forgotten to take the keys. I did have a car, after all, and I wouldn't have minded me using it. My bike was locked up securely too. That key was inside as well, looped with the others on their ring.

For the first time I was grateful for my inconsiderate neighbor—not for his trash left in the hall, nor his loud music played at all hours, nor his shoulder thrown against my door late at night when he comes home drunk and can't figure out why his key won't work in the knob while I lay curled in bed hoping the deadbolt holds—but for the fact that he was also inconsiderate of his bike, which sat unlocked next to mine on the rack.

On Bike

I circled my block slowly and then two blocks and then three, expanding out the circumference of my search as my legs stretched on the oversized bicycle and my feet performed exaggerated orbits around the crank. This all ran contrary to the task I'd undertaken the last few months, the one where I sought to abridge my world, to slowly shrink my existence down to only its smallest possible perimeter. Now a centrifugal force was driving me farther and farther out until, there it was, the coffee shop.

Assuming no one else was involved in my disappearance, I was the type of person to be found either in the coffee shop or the bar, depending on my mood. But I didn't know what mood I could be in, so I had to check both. The coffee shop was a local one, with mismatched mugs and saucers, a chalkboard menu hanging behind the counter, and tables made from reclaimed wood where customers sat, staring intently at their laptops like people doing serious work. I suddenly thought, What if I am just at work?, but then remembered that for months I hadn't had a work to go to.

I looked around. I wasn't in the coffee shop, but she was. Right then I was glad I wasn't there to see her, because that would have only upset me. I stood by the counter and watched her, timing the intervals between which she'd look up from her computer and smile at the person sitting across from her. It came out to once every three minutes on average, over the course of an hour. Enough to indicate her affections clearly have moved on. I resolved if I ever found me, I wouldn't tell me about this.

Or did I already know about this? Had I already been here to see it, today or some other day? Is that what set me off? Was I just somewhere brooding? If so, I'd be at the bar and I wouldn't be hard to spot because luckily, during the daytime, bars are the less frequented cliché. Still, when I arrived at the bar a few blocks farther out in my orbit, I found the regulars there all the same, though I wasn't among them.

I approached the bar. The bartender stretched a smile under his beard as he brushed his hands against the towel hanging at his waist before placing them on the bar. He bent down closer to my height and asked what he could get me. Nothing, I said. But have you seen me around here lately? I'd looked something like this, I said, and pointed to my face. He studied the face. Yeah, he said, I used to see you in here all the time. Not lately though. Not lately? I asked. No, not lately, he said.

If I hadn't been here lately, things must have been going all right. This was not necessarily good news. If things were all right, then I probably didn't disappear from my apartment of my own accord.

Do you remember the last time I was in here? I asked. Was I with anyone? I added. No and no, he said. As far as I remember, you always only came in here alone. Did I seem happy then? I asked. The bartender took his weight off his hands and stood to

his full height, crossing his arms. Happy or sad in general or in this place? In general, I guess. Then I don't remember. Well, thanks, I said. Will you keep an eye for me anyway though? Sure, he said, turning away from me; without being asked he picked up an old man's empty mug and refilled it with watery beer from the tap.

My disappearance was starting to look like bad news. Outside the bar there was further bad news, someone had decided to follow my example and pilfer an unlocked bicycle.

On Foot

There is something to be said for going more slowly. You don't cover as much ground as fast, but the covering of the ground is of higher quality. As I walked, I took the time to study the façades of houses I never noticed before. On one house there was a stained-glass piece above a door, and although it didn't depict any discernable figures, its hues suggested the symbols of saints tortured into martyrdom, the holy version of my worst fears for my missing self.

Imagining the family behind the passion of that door made me want to call my sister and ask her how her child was doing. But then she would have just accused me again of never being there and what could I have said when I in fact wasn't there, or here, but gone to who knows where? And to tell her I was missing before I knew all the details might worry her unnecessarily. Of course, I didn't have my cell phone anyway.

But then I realized, if I didn't have my phone, then maybe I had my phone. All I had to do then was find thirty-five cents a pay phone and give myself a call. This was all assuming pay phones still cost thirty-five cents. So, with my gaze divided between

looking up for a phone and down for loose change, which would have been a better metaphor if I ever had considered myself a sinner, I headed down the sidewalk towards the main street of this middling city.

The city's center is stubbornly held by neoclassical houses that gradually give way to worn apartment buildings that radiate outwards. The main street marks an abrupt transition from one type of neighborhood to another, and since I lived in a barely not worn down neighborhood on the periphery, this was like crossing through my own home to straddle worlds on either side.

The main street, like all main streets, featured stores selling things you can get anywhere else—fast food, cigarettes, gas, corn nuts, on the bus, accosted by beggars—arranged in endless harmony of storefront insignia lined under suspended traffic signals that carried the strains down the road and out of sight. Two blocks away a man stood on the corner by a stop light, holding a cardboard sign.

How's it going? I asked him when I approached. He kept his sign facing the oncoming traffic, but turned and looked at me from under his dingy ball cap.. Fine, he said. The light turned red and he turned backed towards the stopped cars. When the light turned green, I tried again. How's it going? Already told ya. No, I mean how's business? Fine. So, do people always give you dollars? I asked. That or nothin', he said. No, I said, I mean, do people sometimes give you change instead of dollars? Only if they're cheap. Wouldn't the cheap ones be the ones who gave you nothing? I asked. What's your point? I don't got all day, he said. I was wondering, I said, if you had any change I could borrow, but before he could answer the light turned red and I had to wait silently while he attempted to connect with a driver's evasive gaze by directing an unwavering stare

through the windshield of the first stopped car, until the light turned green again. I need to make a phone call, I said. I'm looking for someone, I added. Yeah, who? he asked. Myself, I said. Did that once, he said. Oh. How'd that turn out? I asked. A goddamn waste of time is what it was, he said. Well, I'm gonna keep trying, I said and tentatively extended my hand. To my surprise, he dropped three dimes and a nickel into it.

On the Phone

Farther down the street I found two pay phones standing side by side. One had a sign on it saying it was out of order, and the other had a man on it who was having an argument. He didn't know what she was talking about but he did know that she shouldn't talk, considering what she did last time, and so she couldn't talk. And besides, he didn't even do anything no matter what anybody else said because he's the one she should trust and not anyone else, who just says things just to start trouble anyway and how could she not know that by now when everybody knows that. So, she should quit being so hypocritical and let him do his thing because she knew going into this that he was the type of guy who liked to do his own thing, not other people's things, because that's the kind of guy he is. And so, therefore, and in conclusion, she shouldn't talk at all anymore until she knew what it was she was talking about.

All of which I think I said once to that girl in the coffee shop I was glad I didn't see.

Then he slammed the phone back on the receiver and turned and looked straight at me. He was pissed, I guess, because I was standing so close to him, and clearly had been able to hear what he was talking about. Like all strangers, I should have stood in the

background and been only an extra in his daily personal daily drama. But here I was, encroaching, listening, taking his narrative and maybe adopting it into my own. But what was I to do? I was lost and didn't know my own story because I didn't know what had become of me. Should I have just stood on a corner holding a torn piece of cardboard with the words Out of Work, Lost Family, Lost Narrative. Please Give, written on it? Even an anecdote helps, scribbled onto a torn piece of cardboard? Who knows, maybe that's what I was off doing right now.

The man huffed and walked away, muttering. Either I or the person on the other end of the phone line was a bitch.

After he'd gone around the block, I picked up the phone, dropped my loose change in, and dialed. The phone rang four, five, then six times. The voicemail picked up and an automated female voice told me the number I dialed was not available but offered to let me leave a message. Hey, it's you, I said. I'm looking for me. Do you know where I am? Or what's happened to me? If so, let's meet back at the apartment. I hope I'm okay. I thought a moment, then added, You're fine, in case you were wondering.

I hung up. The change clattered to its new home in the depths of the phone. Who knew how often they came around to collect it.

On My Own

Where would I have gone if I decided to strike out on my own? I know once, before I began my project of abridgement, I was prone to long walks, tracing the sidewalks of this city with my steps with no more pattern or purpose than putting one foot in front of the other and watching their progress. Though they say everyone, not just

serial killers, has some type of M.O., so I too must have had some unconscious reasoning that guided my path. Of course if I'd been abducted, I'd have to extrapolate the route not from my, but from someone else's, unconscious reasoning. Even so, I'd first have to extrapolate from my own unconscious the type of unconscious most likely to abduct me. It was worth a shot.

So I began the search for my own unconscious. If I were lucky, it'd be with my missing self, and if not, perhaps once I found it I could harness it and have it lead me back to me like a police dog following a scent. If my unconscious was attached to an abductor's unconscious, I would just need to stalk that unconscious until it led me to the abductor, who hopefully, if I then staked him out, would lead me to me.

To find my unconscious, I began with my dreams. I didn't go into them, but tried to bring them out to the city around me, to see the buildings not for what they were, but to feel them as the emotions they felt like in my sleep state. In a brief haze of heat they grew taller, their straight edges warping like a cheap pan in the oven. The roads stretched into highways that layered and wove through the city. The cars multiplied and turned the same shade of green. I was the driver of every one of those cars, but I didn't see myself inside them nor out from the inside of them. I only saw the cars from my one vantage point from where I was standing on the city block, and had to anticipate, by which I mean just guess, the turns and twists in the road that spiraled out of my line of sight. I pulled the wheels sharply left and right and never acknowledged what I knew, which was that although I was responsible for directing these vehicles, they were all truly out of my control. But as long as I could not know I knew that, the whole system of winding roads and green cars would not come crashing down. So I blindly steered on.

Simultaneously, the sidewalks cleared of people, except for random pockets of gangs lingering at the farthest edges of my sight. Again, I knew only my affected confidence kept them at bay. But no amount of confidence, no matter how feigned, could keep away the tsunami wave that I knew always approached in any of my dreams. The only safe place was on the fiftieth floor of one of the corkscrewed buildings. Although the wave terrified me worse than never finding myself, I also knew once it crashed it would end this precarious and concentrated denial of mine that was needed to keep the pace of this new city flowing.

Would my unconscious be fifty floors up, or stay at ground level? Only it knew. I just had to guess whether to stay here and wait for it or begin to run up a staircase and hope it'd be there when I got to wherever.

On the Stairs

Why can I drive all these cars and raise all these buildings, but never manage to summon an elevator? The truth is I'm too afraid to try. The rules I've laid out for my dreams are always precariously perched, and I know that all it takes is for one aspect, no matter how small, to break a rule and refuse to act like I want it too for the whole thing to fall apart; and I needed it to stay together for just a while longer. As I ran up the stairs, I tried not to think of the time I had my forefinger aimed at an approaching perpetrator, my thumb raised as the hammer ready to fall; and if the offender refused to acknowledge he'd just been shot when I snapped down my the thumb, I'd lose everything, not just my life. No, you're dead now, I'd say. No, I'm not, he'd say.

At ten flights my thighs burned. At twenty my breath gave out. At thirty I had to pause and grip the handrail to keep the rising nausea from keeling me over. My cities are never equipped with warning sirens, just the feel of the ground under me being pulled back by the rip current as the wave drew everything in in its great inhale. The base of this building was bending seawards like the edge of a looking glass, the pull rising up the staircase, elongating each step below me and I knew if I didn't keep going my legs would soon be sucked back in this undertow as well, stretched into useless rubber limbs.

I began to run with speed and strength I don't have in real life without letting myself know that at the time; so I ran from the wave and from that knowledge, and from my neighbor and his stolen bike, and from the girl and her coffee shop smiles, and from phones harnessed to angry conversations, and from the fact that I didn't even have enough decency to leave myself a note to let me know where I was going before I left and when I could expect me home, and from the predators of my dreams, and from the idea that no one, not even me, might ever see me again, and from the things I never want to see but see in places like this all the time, and finally from the clichés that those things make my dreams into. I ran until I reached the fiftieth floor.

On the Fiftieth Floor

It was filled with cubicles, mostly empty but a few with curling photographs tacked in one of their walls. One had a calendar with a day circled on the wrong month. Or maybe it was the month of my dream. Otherwise, empty.

I walked to the window and looked out. The sky hadn't clouded so much as the clouds had been stretched along it by the vacuum of the impending wave. The sun picked

its way through them like they were worn sheets on a line. I could see the bottom and the top of this building arching under and over me.

I circled the windowed perimeter of the floor, trying to stare into the fiftieth story windows of the surrounding buildings because I knew, if I were here, that's where I'd be, searching the perimeter, gazing against the quivering glass. I glimpsed the crest of the wave on the horizon past the city limits, but tried to ignore it.

It was when I went to the east side, the side opposite the approaching wave, that I saw it looking back at me. It wasn't me, but we recognized ourselves instantly. Like I had feared, it had severed from me and was there alone. What was I doing out there without it?, I wondered. How long have we been apart? The pull of the wave bent the world towards it, except for us, who remained cupped safely for the moment in the midway point of our building on the fiftieth floor.

The cars I was supposed to be steering careened off the roads. The building shook beneath and above us. Then it suddenly felt like we were swallowed in a leviathan's massive gulp, and almost as quickly spat back out. Sea level was at our feet.

On the Hunt

My unconscious looked from me to the water to me again. All I needed to do was swim across the swells and get it. Its disfigurement prevented it from coming to me. I motioned for it to throw open the window, but it only smiled broadly at the eccentricity of my gesture. I always did have a fine sense of humor.

I scoured the floor for anything I could break the window with, hoping something would be there that I missed on my first survey. In the corner by the stairway exit, I found

a fire extinguisher, the color of faded-emergency red. The sign on it read, Fire extinguisher →→here ←← break glass. I grabbed the chain that was supposed to have the tiny hammer attached to it for just such an emergency, but the end of it was empty. Who knows how long it had been hanging impotently alongside the case. The cubicles were empty except for the remnants of photos or, more often, the unbalanced rectangular ghosts of where pictures used to be.

I had thought people usually left more stuff behind when they abandoned a place. I left everything in my apartment when I took off, including myself. I searched more thoroughly around each cubicle again anyway, hoping to find a wheel from a chair or a cracked piece of desk that was broken off in the stampeding exit of the place.

But each time I crawled round a partition only the empty landscape of some past workday welcomed me. I was losing hope, and my unconscious was losing patience. It was watching me wide-eyed, and occasionally scrunching its upper lip to its nose in that pained breathing of incomprehension; its hunched self drew closer and closer to the floor in exhaustion. I went back to the window and stood facing it. Don't worry, I said, and knowing my voice couldn't carry through the glass, I said it again, carefully mouthing the words, Don't worry, and again, but this time without saying anything at all and only moving my lips in the pantomime of language that means nothing to a being whose twisted tongue has never spoken a word. Why then do I say I love you in these moments?

On Water

I went back to the fire extinguisher and punched at the case. I expected a dramatic shatter of glass, but only got a painful rebuff of my fist bouncing off the Plexiglas. I

punched it again, this time with more abandon. My knuckle split, and let loose a modest trickle of blood. I aimed at the smear on the glass and laid into it again. It was still my dream and in my dreams things were supposed to break when I punched them. And I wasn't supposed to feel this pain radiating up my arm. Instead of saying Don't worry or I love you or running away from my sister's house as death moved in on it, I punched and punched at the glass using my blood as a target until the web of cracks shot through it to let me know the next one would do.

I grabbed the fire extinguisher before my hand became too swollen to grip and ran to the large window. My unconscious lay on the ground. It half turned its head towards me and rolled its eyes the rest of the way until its pleading moons directed all their force onto me. I swung the extinguisher and broke the window to the roar of the waters just below. I ran back and grabbed a cubicle partition and threw it onto the swells for a makeshift raft. I jumped on and pushed myself across the rapids of the narrow alley.

On Cubicle

I laid on my belly and hung onto either side, knowing I'd have to stay alive if I was ever going to be found.

The night I left my sister's house I stomped my boots through the frozen layer above the snow and braced myself against the wind's ice like I braced myself against this sea.

When I reached the other side I lifted the extinguisher and brought it down hard and deliberate against the glass prison of my unconscious.

On and On

I fashioned a papoose out of my shirt and tied my unconscious to my back, and now its clubbed feet bounce against my thighs as I run down the fifty flights of stairs. After the wave broke, the buildings, steps and streets straightened and retracted back to normal size and I have to hope that by the time I reach the bottom the deluge will have dried. If and when I return home, if I'm not there already, I'll begin the process of piecing me together, even with the things I recall I'd rather leave abandoned.

The Past Event

There was so much there, she felt it best to break it down into smaller tasks. But that was stupid. It simply needed to be cleaned, to be returned to the way that it once was, transported back in time to before the act without, somehow, erasing the act itself. Could she do this? Could that nearby dumpster, where she was going to dispose of the smaller parts, also serve as a depository of the past event? Just the act, not the result of the act? Could it create a clean and simple vacancy in the timeline and spaceline where there once had been?

The inside of the car was growing hot, so she rolled down the window. A breeze blew in and got stuck. It swirled around the interior like a thick spoon pushed it, stirring the air. She leaned over, across the empty seat, and opened the passenger side window as well. Without the glass to magnify it, the sun's glare immediately lost its force, and she finally noticed what a pleasant spring afternoon it actually was. This was the thing, she realized now, that had really been troubling her. It wasn't wondering whether the event could be entirely erased, but the utter uneasiness created in someone when the outside environment refuses to acknowledge the significance of an event that is still ricocheting through her. Or maybe the docility of this day was only trying to tell her that the event was not significant at all, but was, in fact, as she wished, being erased from the sequence of her and the world's memory of events by the neutrality of weather.

At the Café

The kids hover around the café, nursing their sugar-soaked/milk-dampened coffee while sitting on the bent metal frames of the chairs at the tables placed under the elongated legs of a woman who's bending them up and behind either ear, exposing what should be supple flesh of the back of the thigh and framing a green-tinted face while her arms dangle in front, propping her up on some imaginary object that the artist has forgotten to paint into the mural that takes up nearly this entire wall. An empty table, which I hope will still be empty for me by the time I return with my coffee, is under the man riding a unicycle, holding his stick arms out and looking up in anticipation of catching the juggling balls which are also not painted on the wall.

Other figures walk tight, unpainted ropes, or hoist disappeared dumbbells towards the sky.

I enter and head for the counter to place my order. There's nothing appealing about this place except for that table outside close to the intersection, and an occasional patron.

Outside, at my table, I sip my coffee, and let my nose linger in the mug to fortify it against the smell of the chicken processing plant hard at work down the road. The kids, teenagers really, at the nearby table are growing louder. I try to read my book but their conversation slips into the lines on the page and so, without meaning too, I'm suddenly

reading about boys teasing girls, taking their purses and holding them up high in their reached back arms, causing the girls to stretch over the table top and, daintily, their arms extended now as well, reach for their purses. The boys smile as the girls' bodies hover just above their own. They giggle and screech and then somebody twists somebody else's arm just too hard, or pinches them just too roughly, or holds the purse aloft for just too long, or just uses one of the forbidden words that just crosses everything from fun over the border into terror. Then the girls scream their shrill screams, punch at the boys' arms without playfulness, and stalk off down the street.

If you continue down this street, it opens up into a flat and straight highway that heads all the way to the chicken processing plant. One day, while driving down it, I saw a cage on the shoulder of the road that had fallen off one of the trucks. The chicken inside wasn't dead, though it lay on its side, its black spec of an eye winking at the sun. Since it's beak had been cut, I couldn't really tell the front of his head from the back. It breathed heavily, and occasionally its wing acted the weak motion of a whimper.

I mark the space in my book, putting the piece of paper below the paragraph I have just finished, the one I've hurried up and finished when I peripherally saw that she was walking away down the road alone, in order to let my future self know where I have left off, and also to let this self know that something important has happened because I didn't leave off where I'd have liked to—at the end of one chapter and the beginning of the next—but in the middle somewhere, on a page with no break; and even if that future self doesn't remember the reason for this interruption or what the story was up until that point, then it may at least recall the thrill of excitement I feel right now carrying this book down the street.

My Person Personally

I'll carry her back to my home and divide her in my room in the dark. I'll let her do it to me too. We'll mark the days on each other's arms like they're cell walls. We'll pretend we're in a debtors' prison and get poorer and poorer as our bodies shrink on rations of bread and water. Every mark will put us further in debt, so soon our arms won't be payment enough. We'll scour each other's boney bodies for every last bit of change. We'll grip what we find, hold onto it like it's the only thing on earth.

When our benefactor comes to bail us out, we'll hear his entrance echo from down the hall and look up from our crouched positions of concentration over each other. Moonlight will reflect constellations of us along the wall, and we'll fear the fluorescent light that will soon dispel the cozy dimness filtering in from above.

When he does come, he will beckon us with his hand slipped through the bars. The jailor will insert a key, then slide the door open. This is when we run, past their grasps and into the drizzling night. We duck into a side street and quiet our breathing to listen for the sound of their footsteps. The volley of clacks of polished shoes against the slick asphalt drowns out our heavy breaths. After they pass, we emerge and make for the alleys and secreted routes of this cityscape. There we'll stay, hidden in the darkened passageways of this bustling world.

II.

THE SISTERS

The Sisters at the Cape

Three sisters are spending a weekend at the Cape. One is engaged; one is a recent graduate with a B.A. in business; one is a lesbian. Here's how their conversations go:

“Are you seeing anyone?” the engaged one asks the graduate. She does not ask the lesbian.

“Yes. His name is Chris. He was a business major too,” replies the grad.

How dull, thinks the lesbian.

They drink Long Island iced teas out of tall glasses. Plastic stirrers peek over the rims and ice sweat clings to their hands. They sit on the private beach outside the house that's their parents' vacation home. In low wooden chairs they dig their toes through hot white sand until they reach the cool dark sand underneath.

From a distance the sisters look the same. They sit slightly slouched, legs relaxed, glasses in their right hands. They sip in unison. Each feels a part of something. Each feels differently about what that something is. Up close, however, genetics and personal taste ensure they look nothing alike.

They always sit in the same order: engaged, graduate, lesbian. This is not the order in which they were born.

When the drinks are finished, sun pieces float on the water and their skin is nearing the color of dark sand. On it they feel the peculiar moisture and salt stickiness that the ocean throws their way. So far they've discussed plans for the bridal shower, their crazy mother, and the upcoming election.

"What should we do about it?" asks the recent grad.

"Do I have to be around?" asks the lesbian.

"I hope so. You're part of this too," reminds the engaged one.

For dinner they have pasta primavera. The lesbian cuts vegetables in quick cold movements that speak of efficiency requiring no conversation. The engaged one and grad chat while they drain limp noodles and stir popping sauce.

"Tell me about Chris," says the engaged one.

The engaged one and the grad talk until the meal is ready. This is what the two sisters learn about Chris: He is tall with dark hair. He does cute things; he calls the graduate when he gets off work just to see how she is, he unlocks her car door first before getting in himself, and, when he sleeps, he drapes his arm over the graduate's side and tucks his forearm under her breast.

The engaged one and the graduate are amazed at the similarities between the boyfriend and the fiancé. Who would have thought that both of them, sisters, would find men who did such similar things? (Not the lesbian.)

The lesbian picks up the cutting board and pushes the vegetables into the sauce, scraping the back of the knife along the wood. Small droplets of red appear around the

pot as if they've apported there rather than splashed. Wordlessly, the engaged one wets a paper towel and wipes the pockmark drops from the white stovetop.

Before they came to Cape Cod, the sisters went to be fitted for their dresses. One white (it's tradition) wedding dress with a corseted back, and two maroon (September wedding) bridesmaids' dresses, with haltered tops and dipping bust lines. The grad liked the dress and gave a luscious smile when the seamstress announced she had a body to fill it beautifully. The bride was beautiful too (of course). The lesbian's breasts were too small. She stood (silent) on the pedestal while the lady (silently) augmented them with cups, blanking the dark nipple with smooth white foam.

As a last (sisterly) hurrah before life's more pressing relationships (matrimony) disrupt this bond, the engaged one has brought her sisters to this house on the Cape, and here they now sit, three points around a table, making neat whirlpools of pasta on their forks and sipping merlot.

In the morning the engaged one's right hand is missing. She comes downstairs to the kitchen where the lesbian is buttering toast and the grad is flipping past newspaper articles on the candidates.

"Good morning."

The engaged one takes a moment, brushes the bangs from her eyes with the stump, and responds, "Morning."

“What are we doing today?” the grad asks, a page of newspaper falling with a mild ruffle against the air under its own lightweight before it matches ink to ink with the previous page.

“Weren’t we going to go into town to look for decorations for the shower?” the engaged one asks. The lesbian sets three plates of toast and three cups of orange juice on the table.

“I wanted to tan today,” says the grad.

“We’re here for a whole week. You can tan tomorrow,” reminds the engaged one.

“We’re already tan,” remarks the lesbian.

“Fine then.”

They agree.

After breakfast the lesbian kneels below the bottom step, where the engaged one sits, and loops her sister’s white laces around themselves to hold her sneakers in place. She moves to a stair above her sister and, sitting now, pulls her dark hair three times through an elastic to hold it in a ponytail. The grad, already in the car, honks the horn. They head to town.

The engaged one was born first. She had dark hair and was not pretty. Now she dresses trendy and has great tits to fill out her wedding dress.

The lesbian was born second. Her naturally pretty (not words she’d use) face can’t be seen under the nose ring, lip ring, eyebrow ring, and a dozen earrings. When she removes them for the wedding, she’ll put in clear plastic spacers to prevent the holes from closing. Her makeup will make her a spackled and repainted wall.

The graduate is the youngest and cutest. She has blond hair that bounces as she walks. She insists on working on her tan the entire week. She insists on always having the center beach chair (despite the birth order) because it reclines the farthest.

The lesbian drives them to town. On a street with even sidewalks, potted plants, and store facades lined up flush, they point (more difficult for the engaged one) at items through glinting glass. If they were to refocus their eyes they would see themselves reflected as in a pallid mirror, standing three in a row. They do not stand in order of height.

They introduce themselves at each store by announcing their business.

“We’re shopping for a bridal shower.”

“I’m getting married.”

“She’s getting married.”

The sales clerks at the stores congratulate not only the engaged one, but the grad and the lesbian, too. They are happy for the happiness sisters must feel for their sister’s happiness. They show the sisters vases, silver ladles, candy dishes. The lesbian remarks she would have nothing to put in any of those. The ladies look uncomfortable, shift from one leather-sandaled foot to the other—fanning their feet with the slight swaying of their summer dresses—until they’re distracted by the gleam of another object that they then walk over to and say, “Well, this is lovely too.”

The youngest is the tallest, a version of her sisters stretched extra inches from the bones out. She can be described as knobby or thin.

The eldest is average.

The middle is short. So short her parents took her to a doctor when she was little(r). She sat still so as to not crinkle the white paper pulled across the vinyl upholstery of the exam table. The stethoscope marked cold circles on her back and chest while the doctor told her to breathe deeply. They showed her the X-ray (the peculiar interior) of her hand. They drew blood, a seemingly endless fountain to fill the vial.

The doctor told her parents nothing was wrong, this was just the way she was. They considered growth hormones.

The sisters return to the house with bags of decorations for the bridal shower—tasteful ribbons and tiny vases for flower arrangements, stenciled place cards for the seating assignments, exfoliating cream, lotions, a candy dish for prizes, and other lovely, lovely things.

The next morning the lesbian is spooning batter onto a pan when the other two come downstairs. The engaged one is missing her right forearm. The recent grad is bald.

After breakfast they change into their bathing suits and head down to the beach. The lesbian rubs sun tan oil on the grad's back and continues the circular motion, sliding oil up onto her scalp, until the entire pate is covered. They sip iced teas again.

At midday the sweat of stillness dips tanning oil in their eyes (more so for the grad). They go inside to mix more drinks. The grad calls her boyfriend.

“Hi Chris.

“Good.

“We went to town yesterday.

“Something for you? Maybe.” She giggles.

The lesbian forfeits her drink, goes upstairs to her room to nap.

There are three rooms upstairs. They did not choose rooms in order of most men slept with.

When they would come here as girls with their parents, the lesbian would share a room with her younger sister, the grad. During one trip, she sliced the bottom of her foot on the broken edge of large shell, which had been embedded in the sand hardened as the tide pulled away. It was her sister’s job to help her climb into and out of bed each day. But then the grad became upset at her one morning and left before she awoke. She doesn’t remember if she ever called out for help, only remembers the fiery sensation in her foot as she landed on the ground, then twisting her leg to watch the bandage spot with fresh blood. She said nothing to her parents and walked with her weight on her right heel for the rest of the vacation, careful to let the pain would make up for whatever it was she said that made her sister mad.

In the morning the engaged one is missing her right arm and all the fingers on her left hand except the ring finger, from which the .9 carat (much cheaper than a 1 carat and no one can tell the difference) diamond of the engagement ring continuously winks. The grad is missing both feet. One walks and one hops down the stairs. The grad’s hands grip the banister to steady her rocking. Scrambled eggs and juice are placed on the breakfast

table. At the bottom of the stairway it can be seen that the eldest and youngest are now the same height.

At the table, in between holding the egg-heavied fork and then the juice to her older sister's lips, the lesbian cuts purple ribbons and ties them in bows around the tiny vases.

"You're doing it wrong," the grad says, then bites and sips her food as well. The lesbian pushes the vases towards her sister, the bows held around them with strangled knots. The grad ignores them.

They spend the morning on the beach. The lesbian has placed one straw in the hollow of another, creating an extended tube from the glass on the arm of the engaged one's chair to her sister's mouth. The sweat circle at the glass's bottom darkens the gray wood of the beach chair, the pooled water beneath reaching its fingers along the unsanded grooves. The youngest two decide to swim. On the way to the water a million specks of sand work like sunken pedestals to hold the stubs of shins that hold the recent grad. The lesbian swims faster over the breakers, spitting foam sea salt to the side.

When they rejoin their sister they brush towels against themselves. The recent grad reapplies tanning oil while the lesbian smears on sun block. Even after it's rubbed to a hint of grease on skin, the lesbian continues to flutter her fingers over the series of white (seemingly whiter because of the tanned skin around them) scars on her left arm (she's right handed). She alternates between this and sipping tea.

The youngest and most recent grad has slept with the most men. Yet she shies away from conversations that use medical terms like vagina, penis, menstruation, ejaculation. Men like her.

The eldest and engaged one has slept with the second most men. Though the fiancé is the first she brought to their parents' house (not this house).

The lesbian has slept with the least men, though her sisters' numbers are not to be considered excessive. She would (however) have had the greatest number of partners if women were counted, (a number always considered excessive by her family.)

That night at dinner the phone of their parents' beach house rings, and since it's not the fiancé nor the boyfriend, it must be the mother. The lesbian (her second one) answers it.

"Hello mom.

"We're having a great time.

"I don't know, you'll have to ask her.

"I don't know, you'll have to ask her.

"I don't know. Let me put her on."

She stretches the cord over the counter top and tucks the receiver between her older sister's shoulder and cheek. The engaged one uses her (glinting) ring finger to steady the mouthpiece under her chin.

In the morning the recent grad bumps down the stairs on her butt, legs missing from the knee down. The engaged one has no arms, only balls of joints that swirl cauterized flesh.

After breakfast the lesbian suggests they go for a run on the beach. She squats and the grad puts her arms around the lesbian's neck. Braced against her back (something they never did when younger), she piggy-backs her younger sister to the beach chairs and sets her in one (the one that reclines the farthest). She puts lotion on her back and scalp and lets her do the rest.

At the house the lesbian takes off her older sister's nightshirt and slips on a tee shirt. She holds open the waist of a pair of shorts and the engaged one steps through the leg holes. She ties her sneakers.

The engaged one then asks, "Can you?" and motions with her eyes to the nightstand. The lesbian goes over, removes a pendant from the thin chain of a necklace and slips the ring (.9 carats) onto it. She clasps it around her sister's neck. For now she tucks it into the side of the sports bra, so it won't bounce against her (nice tits) as she runs.

They walk down to the foreshore where the sand seems solid if stepped on for only a moment, but becomes malleable if one lingers. As they stand there and stretch before beginning, water is pressed to the surface and small mounds start to form around their feet. Then they run. The engaged one's shoulders swivel. The lesbian pulls ahead, her arms providing balance so she can move at a quicker pace. She pauses and waits for the engaged one to catch up, waits to see her sister's red serious face moving between the ocean and sand. From this distance, the dots of the two sisters have disappeared into the

million dots of sand. The lesbian knows she looks the same to them. Water seeps through her sneakers.

The sisters return sweaty, their own salt contesting that from the breeze of the Atlantic. Inside the lesbian helps her sister undress, shower, redress. When they join the grad on the beach chairs they bring a (lesbian carried) fresh tray of drinks. As margaritas (they like to mix things up) sink into glasses, the lesbian readjusts the engaged one's straw so she can drain the last drops of blended ice.

Then she stretches her arms up, hooks fingers with fingers and holds her palms upward. She pushes her legs out, fans her toes, arches her back and pops her belly outward, feeling every muscle in her (short) frame elongating. She suggests the next day they rent a tandem kayak.

The lesbian sits in back, utilizing the footrests nearest her seat. She presses her feet into them to steady her body as she slides her paddle through the water on the left then right. Her scars are (glistening) white against tanned skin. The engaged one sits legs crossed in the middle. The grad sits harnessed (two mesh cords attach her life jacket to the interior of the kayak) at the front, slapping sprays of water into the kayak with her careless paddle strokes. The engaged one watches the water splashed gurgle back through the scupper holes. They do not sit in order of mental health.

Each daughter was a planned pregnancy and each has heard not only the story of her birth, but also of her conception. The engaged one and the recent grad find this

comforting, and sink into the collective history of family like ink already pressed. It makes the lesbian uneasy to know her father had the flu.

The lesbian puts her paddle against the waves that gently, persistently, push their bow off course.

The engaged one is the healthiest. She graduated summa cum laude. She's engaged to a man her parents like.

The recent grad has job offers from marketing firms and a likable (if dull) boyfriend. She can be charming, or red faced screaming (like their mother), or sporadically cruel.

The lesbian has been on antidepressants (Zoloft now) for seven years and is not married or profitably employed. Occasional conversations with her mother go like this:

“I worry about you.”

“You shouldn't.”

“But I love you.”

“You love [engaged one] and [recent grad] too.”

“No, not the way I love you.”

“Worry about them.”

It's not love like an unwanted gift, but a cut that gives view too far inside. (Like the cut that brought the lesbian to the hospital, and got her stitches, antidepressants and her mother's worry (love).)

Only when far from shore does the recent grad complain.

“My arms are tired.”

“At least you still have arms,” the engaged one says before the lesbian can respond.

The grad says, “Shut up,” throws her paddle at the floor of the boat.

“Damnit, you almost hit me,” says the engaged one.

“Well, you can still move out of the way.”

The lesbian, hearing familiarity in rising voices, says, “It’s okay. I’ll do it.” She dips her paddle into the rising tide and pushes against it. She straightens the boat. Her arms burn like phantom pain by the time they hit shore. She draws the boat onto the beach, cutting a neat path through the hot dry sand. She helps her sisters to the house.

“That was a stupid idea,” says the grad to the back of the lesbian’s neck.

That cut (too far inside) on her shoulder caused the anonymous doctors and nurses (interns most likely, white coats definitely) to strip her in a soft walled room in the back (psych ward) of the hospital to reveal more twinkling swells on her arms and thighs. In order to be released, she told them anything they wanted to hear. She reasoned it out for them: it was because she felt no one would (did) care. But look at her family there, she said, enduring an all-night-waiting room, the piss coffee. The four of them in the plastic chairs (a family). She could see them as if through a one-way glass. She knows now, she told them. Let her go home, to the silent shelter of her room. They released her the next evening.

In the morning, clouds blocking the sun like eyelids, the engaged one is missing her right leg and the recent grad has lost her thighs.

They decide to stay in. They listen to the candidates' agendas on the radio. Peace and prosperity are promised. Security and growth are heralded. The engaged one, tired from hopping, plops in a kitchen chair. She doesn't know who to vote for. Both sound so good. Just like the chicken and the veal she has to decide between for the reception. She has just finished discussing it with the fiancé (a veal man) on the phone. The recent grad, in true business major style, has decided to vote for tax cuts.

The next decision is hairstyles. Up or down? Buns, braids, bobs? The lesbian is silent.

"Come here," the grad says. Sitting next to her sister on the couch the lesbian is careful to stay on her own cushion, a game of territory they played as children. The grad tangles her fingers in the lesbian's long straight hair and pulls it up (drawing her sister nearer). Stray strands brush at her eyelids. The engaged one looks over, considers it. The grad sweeps her fingers through the hair again. The lesbian feels it fall differently around her head.

"Pretty."

Again. The hair is pulled to almost painful tightness on her scalp. Beautiful, the sisters agree. The grad relents and the lesbian feels the tangle of hair collapse on her head. She suppresses the desire to run a comb through it, to straighten it out (ha ha). Instead she stays, smiles, suggests a fresh round of drinks.

When she returns with the tray the radio is still on. Diatribes like mosquitoes fill the room. The lesbian isn't registered, but she votes for the chicken.

Last time all the girls were at their parents' other house, the mother complained of the tattoo on the lesbian's back.

“Why'd you have to get that for the wedding? I had to order special make-up to cover it.”

“I got it four years ago.” With her fork she pushed fatty meat to the other side of her plate. She stabbed it once, twice and watched oil swell out of the pronged holes.

“Besides,” she said “It's not nearly as bad as the scars on my arm.”

Silence. The other sisters speared meat into their mouths, chewed it and words thoroughly.

“Did you order cover up for those?” the lesbian asked.

Silence. Then the clink of a fork on a plate, the stomp of feet on stairs, the slam of the door to her old room. The only time such things were discussed.

At night the lesbian piggy-backs the grad up to her room, then acts as a crutch for the engaged one as she hops up the stairs. She hands her younger sister a toothbrush and glass of water. She brushes her older sister's teeth and hair and puts a glass to her lips. She helps them with other toiletries before bed. They do not fall asleep in order.

Final morning at the Cape and two sisters nothing but torsos and heads. The lesbian enters each of their rooms, lifts them—her arms around their ribs, the balls of their hips on the juts of her pelvis, their face to her face, chest to chest, belly to belly

(that's all the body to match)—out of beds. She brings them downstairs to the best breakfast yet.

The order down the aisle will be lesbian, grad, engaged one (soon to be married one).

The lesbian feeds them, wipes their mouths, dresses their torsos, packs their bags. She dials the phone and tells their mother they've had a lovely time. The sisters nod in agreement as if nods had audible capacity.

They take a last walk through town; the recent grad in an oversized child carrier on the lesbian's back, the engaged one in a stroller. The lesbian is surprised at how heavy just torsos can be, as if the weight of a person is a centered metaphor not to be distributed by blood, oxygen or tissue to appendages. In a window meant to display lovely things, she sees them as a three headed monster from the same womb stalking down the bricked pavement.

At the house the lesbian checks rooms for forgotten items. Then she drags three bags and two sisters to the front porch. Again face to face, arms around ribs, nice tits against too small tits. Also, breath on the hairs of a neck, the scent of sisters perfuming and the lesbian's spine arched so the tips of vertebrae pucker at the tips of vertebrae, holding all weight in such a gesture.

Outside she props everything against the railing and kisses the two that are her sisters. She takes the largest bag, almost as large as her, and heaves it into her car.

“Do you want a ride?”

They say:

“We don’t need to.”

“Chris is coming.”

“My fiancé's coming.”

From her driver’s seat, she waves towards the engaged one and recent grad, her palm outward, fingers straight then curling over due to gravity, tightness of skin, lassitude. She has left a tray with iced teas (no alcohol now) on the porch to sip while they wait for their rides.

The Sisters at the Cape II

The sisters have moved on since their last visit to the Cape. Since then photos have been printed, fights forgotten, mothers forgiven, sand washed from clothes and suitcases that have been returned to the top shelves of closets to await future trips, and, of course, limbs have been regrown.

The engaged one after her lovely wedding, despite the rain, is now the married one. The recent graduate quickly got a job and is now the marketing executive. The lesbian, however, is still the lesbian. Well, not all the sisters have moved on.

And their mother, though forgiven, remains their mother, and so predicates each phone call to her daughter on the same question: “Still?”

“Still,” the lesbian replies, as her most recent relationship rolls over in the bed to ask who’s calling so damn early.

But this morning, rather than giving her usual response, the mother instead relays happy news. “Your sister’s pregnant,” she says.

The lesbian knows she should call her sister but doesn’t. She continues to not call for several weeks. She hasn’t told any of her family about her recently losing her job and she doesn’t want this to accidentally come up during the conversation. The family believes in progress, meaning that each generation will surpass the previous one in intelligence, life expectancy, and income. This involves faith in god and evolution;

whichever is the most convenient explanation for the current moment. Mostly they believe that progress is written into the genes, and all the sins of one generation can be forgiven through the penance of employment and procreation in the next.

“Except for yours,” the marketing exec tells the lesbian over the phone. “Now call our sister.”

The lesbian thinks it'd be better if every trait a person acquires during his or her lifetime could be passed on to one's progeny. That way, children would be born with all the knowledge and skills their parents had acquired up to that point. Generations would improve exponentially, instead of in incremental and accidental steps. The lesbian imagines her sister's child bypassing thirty years of painful folly. Or would the folly just increase exponentially as well?

The lesbian still does not call, but several weeks later receives an envelope from her older sister. There's no note inside, only a wallet-sized ultrasound photo of her child. The lesbian takes the picture to the front porch to study it in the light of midday. When her most recent relationship returns home from work, she is still there. The relationship drops her briefcase at the bottom of the porch steps, pulls off her jacket in the warm evening, and says, “No work today?”

The lesbian holds up the photo and the most recent relationship climbs a few steps so that she is now standing over the lesbian. She bends down and peers at the picture.

“What the hell is that?” she asks.

“My niece.” She turns the photo towards her again, “Or nephew. My sister didn't say.”

“Did you make dinner at least?” the relationship responds.

The relationship straightens herself and then walks past the lesbian and inside the house, leaving her briefcase and jacket outside. The lesbian hears the clang of plates and the muted whir of the microwave. She stays outside on the porch until it's only by the dull light of her cigarette that she can continue to study the photo of the curled babe delicately bringing its newly formed foot to the burgeoning mouth of the sizable head. Other than that, the ultrasound photo reveals nothing.

The door opens behind her.

“You're still out here?”

“Still,” the lesbian replies. Then she rises, collects her lover's briefcase and jacket from the bottom step, and enters the house through the door being held open for her.

The next morning, the lesbian wakes early to get the coffee going before her most recent relationship has to leave for work. She hadn't meant to be unemployed for this long, but she always knew she was born with a finite amount of inertia. Once she is brought to a stop, it's difficult to get her going again.

She can't afford a plane ticket for the baby shower, and doesn't want to ask the relationship. She's already told her sister she can't make it because of work responsibilities, and she hopes the marketing exec won't reveal the real reason. She also knows she's still expected to send a gift. Luckily, what she wants to send doesn't cost anything.

After the most recent relationship leaves for work, taking a travel mug of the damn watery coffee with her, the lesbian goes into their storage closet and removes the

bike with the flat tire, the casserole dish that was a gift from her mother, the relationship's boxes of old files, the winter boots, and that box of decorations that contains a pieces for every holiday, but not enough to decorate for a single one of them. Underneath all that are the flattened moving boxes that she and the most recent relationship cut the tape from, folded flat, and tucked them to wait against the wall of the closet, all in tacit agreement upon moving in together.

She pulls out a small box and pops it back into its cube, folds the flaps, and tapes the bottom closed. She sits in the chair in the corner of the living room and begins to think. She begins with the ultrasound photo of her sickled niece or nephew, then of this niece or nephew's shrinking tail and closing gills, of its becoming. She then thinks of other moments of becoming—of just being born, of being with a woman for the first time, of getting married, of the earth's crust cooling, of going on a trip with your sisters, of becoming a mother—she thinks only of those moments and not beyond. When she thinks enough about this and her mind feels as swollen as the baby's skull looks the photo, she places the box over her head and exhales her thoughts into it. She presses her stomach muscles into her lungs as hard as she can to breathe out every last bit of it that may be hiding in her bronchioles. Then she slams the box to the ground and quickly layers the tops flaps so they hold shut, holding all the knowledge inside as if it were hope.

When the most recent relationship asks her what she did today, she'll say nothing, but dinner will be made and laid out on the kitchen table.

Each day she thinks into the box. She thinks only of good moments. These are the moments when something begins. When she is done, she places the box on the ground and quickly folds it shut. Then she tucks it under the bed.

A pink birth announcement arrives, letting her know her niece is seven pounds eight ounces and twenty three point five inches tall, and that all this came into being at six thirty a.m. four days ago. Her niece is already tall, or will be tall when she can stand.

The accompanying picture shows wide deer eyes peering out from under a pink blanket bundled around her. In the ultrasound photo the eyes are hollowed and make the forehead look enormous, but now here she is in the world, full, perfect, alert. Beneath the photograph is her name.

The phone rings, and, as if she's inherited her omniscience from her mother, she knows it's her mother.

"Did you get your sister's card?" her mother asks after the hello.

"I'm looking at it right now."

"The baptism is in two months.

"Are you coming home for it?"

"Your sister wants you to be the godmother."

The lesbian tacks the pink card on her wall, next to the ultrasound photo she has framed and hung over the couch in the living room after taking down the large print her most recent relationship bought and had professionally framed for that space when they moved in. She does not call her sister, but continues to think into the box.

The next day another pink announcement arrives in the mail. She tacks it on the wall next to the other one, but still, she does not call.

The next day, two arrive. Then two more. Then three and four and five and so on until the mailman stops putting them in the mailbox and instead leaves ever-larger stacks bundled in rubber bands on the doorstep each day. The lesbian takes these rubber bands and shoots them into the street, then gathers the letters in her arms like kindling and carries them inside. One day there is just a large canvass bag with pinks envelops spilling from its top outside their door.

Still, the lesbian will not acknowledge the birth, at least not to her family. Instead she tacks all these cards to the wall, so that hundreds, thousands, of pictures of the growing baby radiate out from the ultrasound photo. The baby's height, weight, and age increase in fractions from one card to the next. She has to layer them one on top of the other along the walls, the baby is always in the state of becoming what she is.

The pink litter spills out onto the porch when the tide along the walls becomes too much. When the lesbian opens the box to think into it, she even finds pink envelopes, torn along the dried glue, hidden inside.

The baby is well on her way to outstripping her parents and grandparents.

The layers of pictures on pictures eventually winnow the rooms in the house down to the width of hallways, until they finally crowd out everything but the birth, the new life, the new branch of the family tree and all its potential, this includes the most recent relationship, who cites this as the reason for her leaving as she squeezes herself and her suitcase through the foyer and out the front door. Actually, the lesbian just

assumes this is the reason, as the “I can’t take it anymore” offered by the most recent relationship could really apply to anything, and the lesbian will admit that there are many things to apply it to.

After she is gone, the lesbian stands in the house alone, the wall of photos pressing against either shoulder, and tries not to think of her claustrophobia. Instead, she thinks about where the thinking box might be.

When the marketing exec finally gets the lesbian on the phone—when the lesbian finally undertakes the task of ferreting the ringing telephone from the mess of paper and photos piled in the house—she asks why hasn’t she responded to the family’s correspondence for months.

The marketing exec tells her not to be so damn selfish. The lesbian concedes that she is, indeed, by herself.

The marketing exec tells her that the baptism is this week and she better be there if she still wants to be the godmother. Even though her younger sister’s fierceness now seems to make her a better candidate, she admits she still wants to be the godmother, but she doesn’t have any money for a plane ticket.

Her sister sighs. “Do you have some paper to write this down on?”

The lesbian grabs a pink envelope and a pen as the marketing exec rattles off her credit card number and expiration date.

Later that night the lesbian retrieves the remaining suitcase from the closet and dusts it of pink scraps (as she once dusted it of sand), then begins to pack. She pushes aside another pile of letters and retrieves her thought box from under the bed.

On the plane, the man sitting next to her is short, which she knows not just from the distance his head reaches on the seatback, (he could be slouching), but from the fact that he's wearing a vest with his suit. She knows from her own experience that small people can't appear too casual, lest their evolutionary progress come into questions and they're treated like children.

She has often considered just getting fatter, to let herself expand until she needs two seats on an airplane, for instance, or until her width rivals her height and then her general mass would be a force to reckon with, one that, like Sisyphus's rock, when it gets going, would be impossible to stop. The lesbian enjoys planes because it's the one time her smallness makes sense.

The man is saying "...traveling for?"

"What?" she asks.

"...traveling for?" he repeats.

She guesses what his question was. "Um...family" she says, hoping the curt response will end the conversation.

"Business," he says.

"Yeah, family business," she answers.

"No, I'm on business," he says.

She wonders if he has already told her what kind of business he is in, but she doesn't even know what her younger sister actually does, so why should she learn what this man's job is? She wishes he'd be quiet and let her revel in the flight. She does this by imagining the air pressure is condensing her and her thoughts, as if she were a novel

being composed on one single of a page, and the words were written over and over each other until everything meant everything and nothing made sense.

So she says, “My niece is getting baptized.

“I’m the godmother.”

The marketing exec picks up the lesbian at the airport because she arrives during her lunch break. But the marketing exec doesn’t go through the standard greeting that happens after the suitcase is thrown into the trunk and the traveler, now decompressed, hops into the passenger seat.

Instead, the first thing the marketing exec says as the car pulls out into the slowly circling traffic, “The baby is still.”

“Still what?” the lesbian asks.

“Still a baby. What do you think still means?”

“I don’t know.” The lesbian admits, shaking her head at the familiar tree line along the interstate.

“Still. Doesn’t move. Still.”

Her sister drops her off at their parents’ house, noting she needs to return to work right away. Business.

“What did you get for the baby?” her mother asks before she can even carry her suitcase up to the spare bedroom.

The lesbian opens her bag and pulls out the thinking box. It’s wrapped with pink envelopes taped tightly around it. “It’s light,” her mother says as she takes it from her.

The mother insists the lesbian go and see the baby before the christening the next day. Although she's just arrived, she's ushered to the garage and into the car. She and her mother drive to the married one's house.

The married one opens her front door while they're still in the driveway. The baby is braced on her hip, leaning her full weight against her mother's chest. The lesbian approaches and holds out the pink box, which the married one can't take because it requires both arms to hold her flagging child.

"Finally," her sister says, and moves to let them inside. She leads them down the hall to the baby's room and dips the child from her hip while supporting her head with her other hand, and lowers her into the crib. The married one finally takes the box from her sister and places on the dresser. Then, to the lesbian's surprise, she folds her arm tightly around her sister into a closeness she has not felt for some time, even before the recent lover left. After letting go, and not looking at her sister, the new mother returns to the crib and lays a blanket lightly over her baby, then pulls her arms out from under it, citing the warm temperature in the house. The baby looks at her mother and then this new stranger in the room. Her fingers wave slowly and tepidly, as if they were butterflies emerging from cocoons doomed never to spread their wings. Otherwise, her body does not move.

It rains the day of the baptism, not a hard rain, but the light and windy kind, the kind people brace themselves against as they make their way from their cars to the church doors. Their heads down, they seem already penitent.

As the lesbian enters the church with her parents, a man standing just inside the door takes hold of her arm through her borrowed raincoat. He's an older man with glasses and a profoundly round head, a few strands of unruly gray hair, and wrinkles that begin on his neck and push up through to the top of his skull. He leads her down the narrow hallway off to the side and into the back office.

He shuts the door and goes to stand behind the small wooden desk. He doesn't sit, so she doesn't either.

"You're the godmother?" he asks.

She nods. She looks at the two other figures that were already in the room when they entered. At first cursory glance she thought they were altar boys, but now that they're standing behind the priest, she can see that they're two grown men.

"I haven't seen you at Mass, ever."

"I don't live here," she says. The priest places his knuckles on the desks and leans his weight on them, but since the lesbian is not seated, he can't look down at her, so instead he must raise his eyes the slightest degree to peer over the top of his frames.

"When was the last time you attended Mass?"

The other two men step forward and she sees the white they're wearing isn't that of robes but of lab coats.

"When was the last time you went in for a check-up?" the one on the right asks.

"Last year," she answers.

"Last year!" the priest says.

"No, last week!" she says.

The priest stands back up to his full height. “You can’t be the godmother if you don’t attend Mass regularly,” he says.

“I do.”

“We need to know that you’ll raise this child in the traditions of the Church if the parents pass away.”

“Are you in good health?”

“I am.”

“Any aches, pains, allergies, medications we should know about?” the other doctor asks.

“So I ask you, are you a practicing member of the Catholic Church?”

“Yes. No.”

“What!”

“I mean no, yes.”

“And will the priest of your congregation vouch for you.”

“Will you take care of this child’s medical needs?”

“Yes.... Yes.”

When she was forced to go to confession as a little girl, it always seemed to her like the priest believed she had committed more sins than she was willing to tell, so she would make them up until he was satisfied. She had sworn at her parents, coveted her friends’ belongings, stolen, born false witness against one or both sisters, worshipped a false god, failed to honor her parents, and committed adultery. She had done whatever it took to satisfy the priest of her wrongdoing. She should still have credit for all the

absolutions she did back then for those lies, and so doesn't need anyone's forgiveness now. But did science offer the same deal?

"And do you have a primary care physician?" asks the one on the left.

"He has an office right next to my church, back where I live," the lesbian says.

In the front pew of the church stands the lesbian, the married one, her husband, and the godfather, who is the married one's husband's brother. The married one is holding her daughter, who's white dress billows over her mother's arms so that it looks like the baby is resting on a shelf extended from the mother's navel.

The priest stands in front of the altar, facing them with the two doctors on either side. The priest begins the Profession of Faith.

"Do you believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth?" the priest asks.

The lesbian and the brother must answer for their niece. "I do believe," says the godfather. "I believe too," says the lesbian.

"Do you believe in modern medicine, creator of antibiotics and inoculations?" the doctor on the right asks.

This time the lesbian follows the brother's lead. "I do believe," they say in near unison.

"Do you believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord, Who was born and Who suffered?"

"I do believe."

“Do you believe science can heal any and all ailments, such as aches and pains, cancer and hyperthyroidism?”

“I do believe.”

“Do you believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting?”

“I do believe,” says the godfather.

“Sure,” the lesbian says.

“Do you believe in stem cell research, in utero testing, gene therapy and the resurrection of the body and life everlasting?”

“I do believe,” the brother says. And all the family too.

Now the godparents must take the baby to the font. The lesbian scoops her from her sister’s arms, carefully cradling the neck in the crook of her elbow, not just because she’s relatively new born, but because the baby’s neck, like the rest of her body, is too weak to support itself. Her niece is like liquid, she takes the form of whatever arms or stroller holds her at that moment. Like holy water takes the concave shape of the font, her niece bends to the curve of her arms. Later, the lesbian will think about forms, about how we never think of them until they begin to dismantle themselves in from of us, about how one only becomes apparent when something goes wrong with it’s reproduction, and then we realize how we’ve always taken for granted that a relationship or a family or a child should be cast this certain way, about how precarious these molds are....But right now her sister is crying. The lesbian carries the baby towards the altar. The godfather follows, keeping his left hand gently on the baby’s shoulder.

“Will you be baptized?” the priest asks.

“I will,” the godparents answer.

The priest cups his hand and dips it into the font. “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” With each name he tips his hand and lets a few drops run over the baby’s forehead. Some water slides back over her skull and some runs through the crinkles of her brow to find its way into her eyes. She blinks her eyes hard and looks up at her aunt. She wishes she could shake her head and remove the drops from her eyes.

Next the doctors step forward. The one on the left picks up a syringe lying next to the holy water. He lifts the billows of the white dress to reveal the atrophying meat of the baby’s leg. The lesbian tries to turn away, to put her body in between her niece and the doctor, but the brother’s wide hand is now on her shoulder, holding it firmly to keep her in her place. She freezes there under the hand of the brother and the knowledge that this is what her sister wants. This isn’t her child. She watches the doctor pinch the skin of the baby’s leg between his thumb and forefinger. Her niece is too weak to pull her leg away, and when the needle enters the only indication she gives is a rough twitch of her eyes, from which a tear or pooled holy water finally falls. The doctor draws out a vial of blood. The other doctor daps the leg with a cotton ball dipped in alcohol, which he then wipes along the baby’s forehead as well. The sterile smell embeds itself in the lesbian’s nose, blocking out the soft scent of her niece’s new skin.

Now that the ceremony is complete and the baby’s soul is guaranteed life everlasting, the family needs to know what’s wrong with the body. From the vial of blood, the doctors will deduce the problem. Several days later, they call the married one

and her husband into their office. They lay a diagram on the desk in front of the parents. They point to the offending gene they've labeled with a green highlighter. Then, to help the parents better understand, they raise their fingers and trace in the air in front of them the branches of family trees that have carried the recessive gene through generations, "Much like the tournament brackets," they say to be helpful again, narrowing down the winners on each side until now, in the championship slot, their child. As they explain, they move their fingers back and forth between the parents and the baby who sits quietly in her mother's lap. Parents to child and back again in the terminal lineal loop.

The lesbian is alone in the marketing execs apartment while her sister is at work. Her thinking box and wrapped and on the counter. She didn't want to bring it to the baptism, but would rather open it in private with her niece, to make sure she is the only one to catch the disseminated thoughts. Godparents are supposed to take responsibility for the child if the parents die, but is the reverse true as well, is she supposed to take responsibility for the parents if the child dies? She knows even if she wanted to, they wouldn't let her. The last thought she had before closing the box was of the meagerness of this gift. The marketing exec had gotten their niece a tiny diamond bracelet as a christening gift; her parents had bought a brand new pram; her brother-in-law's brother had booked them a weekend at a nearby resort for when it was all over. The lesbian didn't feel bad because she hadn't spent an inordinate amount of money on the gift, it was that she worried her thoughts were paltry as well. What had she been thinking about those moments when her most recent ex-relationship was away at work and she sat in the chair in the living room they still shared? Was the box just filled with her unhappiness?

What had she learned in these roughly thirty years? Was it just filled with her ignorance? And why did it take her so long to call her sister? This was the worst thing that could ever happen to her, and it wasn't even happening to her.

She found a piece of scrap paper in a drawer in her younger sister's kitchen, and scrawled a brief note: For my niece, I thought I was formed by what came before me, but it may be that it's from what comes after.

When the marketing exec returns home this evening, the lesbian will be gone. With the little money she has left, she will have called a cab, been driven to the airport, exchanged her ticket for an immediate departure. When she gets to her house, emptied of everything except the layered pink letters, she will throw down her suitcase and begin to strip the walls. When a trash bag is filled, she will put it on the curb, lined up next to the others, until black trash bags snake from the sidewalk in front of her house around the block. She will not know when trash day is, but will leave the bags there for that day. When the walls are nearly stripped and full of thousands of tiny holes from the removed tacks, the lesbian will seek out the original photo, the one of her niece in the ultrasound, curled like any fetus, safe in the womb and full of potential.

In her kitchen she'll find a paring knife in a drawer. She'll pull it several times across the sharpening steel, on each side, concentrating her effort on the tip. When this is done, she'll lay the photo on the counter in front of her and lift the left side of her shirt. She'll cup her left breast and make an incision between her sixth and seventh rib. She'll cut across, about half the width of the photograph. She'll fold the photo in half and slip it in the slit.

Over the next several weeks she won't answer the phone, which will ring incessantly, she'll only imagine she feels the fetus in the photo growing inside of her. She won't imagine it will become a new niece, though she wishes she could, but only imagine her niece's existence hinges on this potential, on the photo being kept alive. As the weeks wear on though, she'll feel her torso stiffen as the supple paper begins to calcify like the bones surrounding it. Burrowed in between the pressed walls of her apartment, confined now to the single chair in the living room, she feels what she wanted to feel on the plane, the impending stillness and quietude of her family.

The Sisters at the Cape III

The sisters return to their parents' house via flights delayed years ago and back into our story one at a time. So much has changed for the members of this family in such a short period of time. This is not in the order of their arrival. The youngest, the marketing exec, is now a V.P.. The married one, who was briefly the new mother, is still the oldest, but now the mother of the recently deceased. The lesbian, however, is still the lesbian. She did manage to arrive at the parents' house first, though, and so now drags her sisters' luggage up to the vacant bedrooms on the second floor and put them not in the same bedrooms they occupied as children.

The mother of the recently deceased and the VP are placed in the large rooms with the queen sized beds because they each bring their husbands, leaving one to wonder why *they* aren't carrying these heavy suitcases up the two flights of stairs to place them in the waiting closets.

When everything is settled, they all gather in the family room.

Before now, little has been said of the father. For convenience sake we've allowed it to be assumed that all characteristics of the father—thoughts, opinions, mannerisms, feelings, etc.—have been in line with the mother's. In fact, his entire character had been usurped into hers, and vocalized through her because she is the most vocal. This is a common complaint amongst the three sisters, though the other two never understand how it's particularly grating for the third.

But all three sisters don't understand how fortunate this is, because if it were the other way around, if the father were the stand-in for the parents, then they would never have learned the opinions, thoughts, feelings, etc. of the parents because the father never vocalizes such things. Think of all the time they would have wasted trying to deduce these from his actions. But now, since the celebrations the recent tragedy has passed and the sisters find themselves in a moment of reprieve, they have time for the father. He enters the room, unassuming, his head, with its thinning black hair, barely reaches the top of the fireplace's brick mantel, under which he now bends to drop the armload of firewood onto the hearth.

Everyone looks up. His face is ruddy from the effort, not from the cold, since it's unseasonably warm outside; but he's built a fire for his family every winter—except the last one when the only tradition they followed was the timeless one of mourning—and this one won't be any different. His voice is soft, almost mocking softness, when he addresses his daughters, but his tone changes when he speaks to the husbands, he's brusque, manly, he puts on the demeanor he never got to use as one, two, three daughters and one granddaughter came into his life. Now there's only one, two, three daughters, one wife, and one spayed cat off somewhere stalking the luminosities of the evening. The father he doesn't speak yet. No one has spoken so far during this visit.

The lesbian wonders if she ever brought anyone home how her father would talk to her. But she'll never bring anyone home. This isn't because her parents care much about that anymore, certainly not after recent events, but what's she to do, bring someone home to sleep pressed beside her on the cot that's in the oversized storage room she now occupies.

In the morning she unfolds the cot, rolls from its sleeping crevice, stretches herself out to a full-length imitation of the cat, and descends the stairs. Her sisters and their husbands sit around the kitchen table, sipping coffee, eating pastries, passing sections of the newspaper around the circle as if they were spheres in perfect orbit.

She pours herself a cup of coffee and sits down. The sharp smell of ink wafts up from the newspapers that pass beneath her nose. This is the information she absorbs in the otherwise quiet morning. After several minutes, she rises, dumps her coffee in the sink and leaves.

She goes outside. She has forgotten her jacket, but snow hasn't even fallen yet this winter and the sun is out, making the bare trees look like they've winnowed themselves for no reason. The father is out here as well. They both know she is the most like him, despite the fact that unlike her sisters, she does not carry the recessive gene he has passed to his other children and that is the source of their recent tragedy.

Actually, she doesn't know if she carries carried this gene or not because she's never had the blood test. When her father asked her why she wouldn't get tested, she said it was because she wasn't going to have children. When he asked her again, she said it was because she knew he'd feel worse if he knew he'd passed the gene to all three of his children. When he asked her a third time, she said she'd be pissed if it turned out the only sister who could safely reproduce was be the lesbian. Then you'd either hate me or believe in God, he said, because who else is there to be pissed at? She still hasn't found anyone else, so now she goes to her father, bends down, and helps him at his task.

The family moved into the this house twenty years ago on a blizzard filled day, causing each member, without ever telling the others, to secretly regard the house as

more than a house, as a type of sanctuary from the dangerous elements, despite the fact that the house was poorly built. The center of the foundation is sinking. The father has installed extra load bearing pillars in the basement, but the house is failing from underneath, as if it's being sucked into the ground rather than pressed down from the floors above. Sometimes, when they are all sitting on the couches that line adjacent walls of the family room, they are all suddenly tumbled forward into the bowl of the floor, and shudder there like pebbles dropped in the last Mancala pit before they are still.

At night, after untangling from her family, the lesbian pulls the phone into her cocooned cot and calls the most recent ex-lover.

In the morning, the father is making waffles. He makes one at a time and sets it in front of a member of his family at the table. When someone finishes, he immediately makes another. Each member of the family eats one and then another, a dozen and then two. The father churns out waffles like a smoke stack rises from his back while the lesbian carries the waffles from the father to the table and the empty plates back. As long as there are waffles, everyone keeps eating, and as long as everyone keeps eating, there are waffles. No one wants to move on to the next tasks. These are the giant syruped Eucharist of their grief because in an hour they will all have to go to Mass. They don't know yet if the lesbian will go.

No one speaks. Silence is not unusual in this family, but this prolonged silence is. They've always spoken better on the phone anyway. The family feels freer when they don't have to look into the imploring face of another.

The V.P. calls to check in at work. She misses the view from her window from which she watches wire extend in thin strands from the ceiling of her factory like spiders'

parachutes to spindle themselves around giant spools turning below. There are hundreds of pounds of wire on enormous bobbins when it's all done.

While the V.P. is on the phone in the other room, the family looks out the sliding glass door to see the cat, this storied version of the cat, sly and self-sustaining, slip by in her predatory sleekness. The outdoor light over the back deck senses the motion and turns on. Every light in this house is hooked up to a motion detector and so turns on when it senses any movement. This was the father's innovation, to place one of these in every room. But after twenty years the system is failing, so now, even in daylight hours the lights turn on, even if you flip the switch to off and roll over in the middle of the night, the lights turn on.

Today's Mass is in memory of the recently deceased. The family finally readies themselves and leave and after a time, sensing nothing, the lights turn off. Maybe everyone has gone. We still don't know about the lesbian, but if she's in the house, she's folded herself back up in the cot and is hidden from all sensing's of motion. During Mass, when it comes time to offer each other the sign of peace, her older sister will turn to her husband and her younger sister will turn to her husband and her parents will turn to each other and embrace and she would be left at peace with no one but herself, if even, and if she's in the cot, she is closer to there. To this end, she has moved the folded cot into the smaller closet. She didn't do this as a metaphor for her sexuality, but only so the automatic light won't reach her. This isn't a metaphor either, just the best way to find sleep and quiet in this house. From the double shelter of the cot and the closet, the lesbian calls not the most recent ex-lover, but the one before the one before that. She believes she only ever loved them to have people without sympathy for her to call in times like these.

When the sisters' grandmother died, they were each allowed one item from her house. The mother of the recently deceased, who was not at the time, took old framed photos, rosary beads, and a few pieces of silver. The V.P. took the pearls that the grandmother prized so highly she never wore and which look stunning on the V.P. the lesbian didn't get to take what she wanted to take. No one understood why she would want the calendar that hung from the magnetic hook on the side of the refrigerator with each day circled and crossed out. But not all the days. The lesbian assumes the circles were made in the morning and the Xes in the evening because the last day to be marked at all, the 12th, the one on which the grandmother suffered her fatal stroke, is only circled and not Xed. This seems profound until you realize that all of us, eventually, will have that one day on our calendars, whether we keep a calendar or not, which we circle but never X.

The lesbian also wanted the tobacco stained dentures and the bag of pills stashed behind the toilet tank, where the grandmother had hidden the medication she had stopped taking for over two weeks. But these, along with the calendar, were thrown away in the general course of cleaning.

At night, in the cot in the closet, with a calendar she's found in her parents' study, the lesbian circles but does not X all those days that can be circled but not Xed for the people she's loved. The lesbian only circles that one day for the recently deceased. There's only one circle to make and the time it takes to make it is infinite.

While we wait, let's follow the wire:

To make wire, first silver nuggets, tin anodes, and nickel rounds are melted down and run through a threading machine until they're coiled into 3000 lbs of fourteen gauge copper plated wire, which is then shipped to the drawing department, where multi-wire machines make, for example, five ends of thirty eight gauge tin plated copper multi-wire (labeled 5E-38AWG TPC Multi-wire) or seven ends of thirty two gauge silver plated copper multi-wire (labeled 7E-32AWG SPC Multi-wire); before it is sent to the Bobbin Department whose job it is to wind the material onto number sixteen (3" in length) carrier bobbins or number twenty four (4" in length) carrier bobbins and lubed with a paraplex purchased by the V.P. herself in her office with the view, her feet on the desk in perfect confidence, from the Ohio based Hallstar Company, so that the strands of the bobbin will not separate, not on the V.P.'s watch anyway, when you, for example, after you buy the wire at the local hardware store and bring it home to extend a trail of electrical current, uncoil the fifteen feet of the 5E-38AWG TPC before setting about your task; otherwise the coils go to the Stranding Department which has larger reels, like the din400, the din560, the din630, to make products like 24AWG-19/32 TPC, or nineteen strands of thirty two gauge tin wire that becomes, almost magically, at least as far as her sisters could ever understand it, 24AWG wire when it's stranded on the Kinrei Double Twist Buncher machines, those large steel boxed machines that pull down the spider stands of wire from the ceiling through their constant churning that wraps the wire up into 600 lb bundles as they sit ostensibly motionless like soon to be extinct mammoths lining the floor that is the view from the V.P.'s office window.

Once the wire leaves the factory the V.P. loses all control of the material, so off the bobbins and strands go to other factories to be unwound, twisted together, and coated under the watch of some other V.P. before being shipped once again to distributors who ship again to the local hardware stores where someone might go to purchase the wire for those projects around his house, stores like the one the father walks into twenty years ago to buy the wire for the lights in his new home that's being built, the skeleton of it now standing against the summer heat that makes it at the time seem like this partially finished frame is the ideal design for a house and that it should be left as it is, despite the fact that there's a blizzard coming; and as the building crew worked around him to flesh out the body of his house, the father cut the wire the electrician had already put in place and re-routed the electrical system to his motion detectors and computers, the whole internal make-up we never think of until a light malfunctions, flashing on and off all night to deprive the it and anyone in it of sleep, even if one is ensconced in her cot in the closet; and when the house is done, the mother, who we haven't seen here until now and who now begins her thunderous descent down the stairs, this mother and her one, two, three daughters enter from twenty years ago from the blizzard that chases them through the front door with a gust of snow to see the father standing against the darkness of the foyer, webbed in white coated nickel plated wire, panting, a cutter in one hand, a fist-full of tack nails in the other, stunned but finished just in time for his family's arrival and for the mother and the one, two, three daughters to remove their gloves and hats and scarves and leave them to puddle on the tiled floor of the foyer and approach the father, still out of breath and startled by the sudden onslaught of weather so the lesbian, though too young twenty years ago to know she was such, takes the wire cutter and nails from his hands,

carries them to the hearth and lays them there as an offering to this new house of theirs that they all secretly believe will protect them from the howling outside, and this right here, right now, right then, is their fatal flaw twenty years ago, to make an offering to this house to keep them safe and never think of their internal selves, of their genetic make-up, the neglected altar of their own bodies, which at this point lays silent, waiting, as all together the mother and three daughters approach the father and begin to slowly untangle him from the wire, contracting slivers from frayed ends as their fingers move lightly over these metal strands like they all, in stolen moments in the oldest sister's house years later, moved their fingers over the glass beads of the grandmother's rosary beads which the oldest sister also took from her home to lay in the crib of her first great grandchild, the recently deceased.

The sisters leave the house, except the lesbian. From her forgotten cot in the closet she calls her older sister.

What it was like?

It was like nothing.

It had to be like something.

It was like the end of a life.

No, that's what it was. What was it like?

The mother of the recently deceased sighs. The lesbian can't tell if it's a sigh of exasperation, fatigue, frustration, or contemplation, she only knows that her sister sighs. This is all she'll ever know. That, and that, It was what it was like.

Mutation Stop

Mutations don't change but produce a new type, allied to their ancestors as a branch to a tree. Distinctions between 'saltations', 'mutations', and 'variations of slight degree' lead to confusion from the slightest to the most extreme; these are all a single class called mutations. The term carries no restrictions, unlike 'babe', which is applied to children who can speak and walk, and 'baby' which is reserved for those who can't. A tiny thing, a baby in arms. But what happens when a child is old enough to speak and walk but cannot. What do we call her then? In a sense perfect, but for the strange mutation life yields.

Mutation is signified too in the change in the order of sounds that make a melody. A hand shifts from one position to another. Or it's a place on a highway where post-horses are changed. Or it's a step in the evolution of organisms. Pillars of stone, on which are inscribed the distances between cities, stations, and mutations, sometimes occur, as even the best gene analysis of parents cannot assure all combinations will be favorable. The presence of mutation allophones demands we consider the various sounds of our phonemes to be the result of an abrupt transition that produces an organism with heritable characteristics differing markedly from those of the parent type, supposed by fools to be a new species. Sober or gay over a jointed babe in full mutation stop. The power to make marvelous mutation, to leave one name and take another in the same sound.

The changes which make mutation involve the alteration or deletion, insertion or rearrangement of large sections measured by our mutations. If one thinks of mutations as being simply inherited changes, pictures in books become necessary; ornamental borders interworked with cupids and grotesque figures. An organ stop whose pipes sound, defined as an assemblage of individuals united by a specific identity and common descent that differ in minute but constant characters, the overtones of the fundamental note of the key is struck.

The Ear Canal

When my throat closed up, I thought it was only temporary.

When my right lung collapsed, then left, when my stomach shriveled to the size of a prune pit, I knew it was time to do something.

I called from my room, at the back of the house, hoping someone would hear me.

“I haven’t breathed in four days,” I said, “I haven’t eaten in six.” I paused for emphasis. “I don’t know what it is to drink water. Sometimes my mother,” I added, “puts an ice cube to my lips.”

You pause. You sigh. You say, “I don’t know what I can do.” I think you hang up.

The click of the phone on its receiver catches in my earflap, but the noise continues on, its heat melting the helix down and fusing it to the earlobe, trapping the sound that’s there inside, and locking all other sound out. Sound waves pinball down the tube, crumbling the walls of my ear canal as they bang back and forth. They hit the eardrum, compress it in and rarefy it out, like an accordion under the pressure of hands or the ball of my belly rising and falling with my diaphragm. As you know, my lungs are too weak to suck in air otherwise.

The pressure is too much and the thin skin of the eardrum tears, but not before the three analogous bones—hammer, anvil, stirrup—pound, shatter, jar the fluid housed in the inner ear, shaking the nerves and rupturing the cochlea, spilling fluid back into the

canal. The water builds like a tsunami of minute proportions in my ear and breaks against the impasse of the sealed lobe. The rupture starts the impulses that spark and burn along the auditory nerve all the way to my brain, leaving behind only the ashen cord of the dead fuse, like the long ash of the cigarettes you started smoking when they first called to tell you about me. Pressing the receiver to the crumpled lobe, as my mother often does when she tells me auntie is calling, it's clear to me that this has no way of ever leaving my head.

Letterbox

She drives into the sun assuaged, chasing the snow's glare and moving through it. The Christmas cards lay in the passenger seat, bound in their stack. One hand to hold the phone and the other to brace the wheel against the elements, she calls her younger sister because no one else in the family will.

She places the glossy photos with seasonal greetings onto the flap of the mailbox, then lets the weight of the stack snap the lid shut and plummet itself to the bottom. But it doesn't plummet at all; instead it rests on the mound of foregone seasonal greetings, all of which will be postmarked the day they turn off the oxygen. Handwriting shrinks the more you try to fit sentiment on a card.

The line from her belly to her hand was clear and millimetered. She pulled the stopper on the syringe back and for a moment the two were bound as one continuous line. Then she plunged the fluid medicine her belly as the child worked saliva down her throat. Later, traversing the short distance of her body, she guided another tube down the narrow esophagus and sucked the mucus that lay like tar in her alveoli. A child who can't stand grows in length, not height.

The panting pulse of relief the moment after. When one is waiting, every phone call—every ring then answer—is a cut then clotting.

At some point a card moves from one space to another on the conditions of a stamp, a postal system, and something that needs to be conveyed. She can forgo the stamp and take the card in hand. It's written from the past, the day she went to that museum and saw shelves of antique jars filled with fetuses. Though, some were babies. If she pretended this was only a paused moment, then it was a world constantly emerging, stretching its molasses-soaked joints at a new sun. Everything new, the viewer and the viewed.

Several months later she leaves a birthday card and balloons by the urn in the back room of her older sister's house. Then she sits on the bed, which has not been converted back into the guest bed, the bed she is still denied when she comes to visit and so must sleep on the couch in the refinished but cold basement, and she calls her mother, who says she got a pedicure today because she would always say to the baby, look at Grandma's pretty toes.

Later in her apartment, she unwraps the package from the most recent girlfriend. Honey, tea, a teapot. Her cat sits in the cardboard box, eyes wide at the noise of tissue paper and husked envelopes.

From the postal box, she drives into a colossal bend of sky, like the pear-shaped belly of the babe. She knows if she can reverberate again with the heat of incubation, she will emerge not to the waning sun, but to the cool formaldehyde gaze of this jarred world.

III.

FAMILIAR NARRATIVES

The Love Song of Goosealot and Henevere

Goosealot is in love with the wheelbarrow, and we're in love with Goosealot. We tell his last love, the three foot plastic Santa, not to get upset. We had told it never to suspect that love is not fleeting.

Each day in the yard, Goosealot waddles up to his wheelbarrow and cranes his neck over one of the wooden handles. Some days the left. Other days the right. But always his head hangs over the jutting piece of wood as if severed. Goosealot, we warn, heroes like you shouldn't stick their necks out.

Often wind sweeps the dry layer of dirt from the fields of struggling wheat past the fence, over the barn, around the stoic ass at his trough, against the little chicks who narrow their eyes to black slits, across the yard and into us, through us, then out the back door. After, when we look up, Goosealot is there, he and his wheelbarrow a silted silhouette. How, we ask, are we going to move the compost if he won't let us use the wheelbarrow?

Goosealot's loves have included not only the wheelbarrow and plastic Santa, but the old kitchen chair on the porch, the shovel, the baler, the piece of gutter that fell from the barn's roof, and the ass's trough. After he moves on to a new love, they come crying to us. Over coffee and a slice of rhubarb pie, we do our best to comfort them.

The chicks love Goosealot. They love his plumage. They love his waddle. They love the fine lines of his beak, his dark eyes, his arched neck. We tell them that they aren't his type. It's not an age thing, we say, it's an animate object thing.

We've been unable to fertilize the fields without the wheelbarrow. We place a torn tractor tire in the middle of the yard and hope it catches Goosealot's eye. One of us suggests we move the wheelbarrow while Goosealot sleeps. Or turn it over. This one of us is convinced that the positioning of the wheelbarrow is entirely to blame for Goosealot's infatuation. It's not infatuation, the rest of us say, It's love. It may be fleeting, but it's love all the same.

From a distance, you can hardly tell when wheat is dying in a field. Goosealot and the wheelbarrow have been very happy lately. As we look out the window and see the rattle of time that is the wind sweep up and over us, we ask ourselves what is it we're looking for. There are not enough windows for all of us to look out of at once, and so we cannot ask ourselves this question in unison. Instead, some of us must stand in the back, blanking our minds of everything—so even if we are not asking the question, we are not asking it—until it becomes our turn to approach the window and stare out on the field of former loves. We never disturb Goosealot's current or former loves. The gutter is still fallen, the shovel and baler unused, the kitchen chair still broken on the porch, and the ass's trough unmoved. The ass is not unappreciative of this. We appreciate his appreciation, even though we've left it for Goosealot and not him. We don't know if

Goosealot will return to any of his old loves, but if he does, we want them to be easily found.

We try to approach the wheelbarrow while Goosealot has gone to the barn for feed. We have things that need to be hauled. But Goosealot senses a disruption in the aura. He comes running at us, neck straight and tense, wings extended like a viscous angel, squawks roaring from his beak. We run back to the house and pray Goosealot will forgive us. We're starving for Goosealot's love.

As the chicks mature the promise of eggs stirs in their bellies. When Goosealot passes, they swoon, not like limp leaves, but like blossoming flowers. Our windows sweat with our condensed breathes as we watch our hero shamble over the crusted earth of our waning farm. In the chicks nests are woven the stories of gods and Goosealot. Is this our history or future? Not one of use will venture an answer. Our stomachs rumble with the boding of eggs eggs eggs.

We sweep our hands under the warm rumps of the matured chicks and gather only splinters in our fingertips. At night we slip sewing needles beneath our skins, binding ourselves further to ourselves through threadless stitches, and pop out the hay splinters.

Henevere has grown the most of all the chicks. Her nest is on the highest platform in the coop. She's the matron or mother superior. She reeks of chastity. Even Goosealot fails to move her.

Some of the time we drown ourselves in our sleep, drooling as we dream of ham and eggs. Sometimes the thoughts of food crowds out even our love of Goosealot. He senses this. We hear him weeping to his wheelbarrow in the early hours, before even the rooster wakes. We want so badly to take him a slice of rhubarb pie, but we've sewn ourselves to the house, to the porch, to the coop of missing eggs, to our threadbare lives. One of us one day plays the fox, and sneaks to the henhouse. There, beneath Henevere, dozens, hundreds, thousands of eggs.

We rush the eggs back to the house, two by two, one in each hand. It's impossible to break a healthy egg by squeezing it with even pressure all around. If they are unhealthy, we don't want to know. Who wants to know of nascent illness?

In the morning we lard the cast iron pan. Heavy with gristle from years before, when we were fat on food but not love, it takes three of us to lift it to the stove. We would not go back, we say as we watch the grease pop and sting our bare arms. We line the eggs along the counter. Goosealot stands on our porch and watches us through the window.

Henevere, in her loneliness, is circling the coop. Goosealot cranes his neck around and watches her. We know from the back of his head that his gaze is one of longing.

Henevere bends down, pecks a grub from the dry earth. The white plum squiggles and is gone.

We crack the first egg. The snotty glair trickles, pulling with it the sun yellow yolk against the blue glaze of our bowl. But in the bowl is the slickened fetus of a barely degilled chick. Outside the kitchen window, the old rooster preens his cockscomb. If he knows he's been cuckolded, he says nothing. A wise move. Who would choose him over Goosealot? We're inside, but not safe from the dirt that finds its way through the cracks of doors and windows. We had never told ourselves that we lived in a world where hatchlings didn't die. We debate whether or not to eat the eggs. All of these eggs, one of us says, sweeping a hand over the table, are tombs.

Some one calls out, Look! Goosealot's approaching Henevere! We rush to the window, make it sweat with our breaths. Quick, to the wheelbarrow! A flag is unfurled, a trumpet sounds, a cavalry charges from the house. The ass looks up, swishes his tail at our approach. But one of us lingers behind and with two fingers I slide the chick fetus up the side of the bowl and, after making an incision, slip it between the ribs on my left side to finish its incubation.

We use the wheelbarrow regularly now, though we can tell its sorrow from the sag of its wheel. No one brings it a slice of rhubarb pie because the only thing we can comfort is our own stomachs through omelets seasoned with beaks and tiny tri-toed feet. Not we. I don't eat, and if they notice I'm the only one not fattened, they say nothing.

There's elation on the farm for the first time since the wind turned dry. They hold court around the table and feast, trusting the fields are being fertilized with Goosealot and

Henevere's love. The other chicks now lay their eggs and drop them in Henevere's roost. When the pile is high enough, we are allowed to take some eggs from the top of the pyramid. Sometimes she's generous and one of us uses the wheelbarrow to cart them away. We're free, someone says, Free to love at last.

The rooster and I sit on the back porch. His coxcomb hangs deflated over his right eye. His left eye looks suspiciously at my left set of ribs. It's been growing, I know. If I don't eat soon the shape of the chick will present itself under my skin. The rooster pecks an ant from the step on which I rest my feet. Then another and another. He pecks around and between my toes, but soon he can't keep up and the black dots begin their roving wave up my calves. He works feverishly, stemming the insect tide for as long as possible. I feel a kick in me. Weak, but it's there. I lift my shirt and cup my hand under the silhouette in myself. The rooster sees this. He steps back, flares his wings and beats them. The ants hang onto my flesh for dear life against the ensuing wind. The rooster lets out a cracking BAWK! BAW-BAW-BAW-BAAAAAWK! Then scurries away. What's he trying to tell us, my little chick-a-dee? I sit on the porch with a mug of black coffee warming my hands. The others are working in the field and I watch their heads rise and dip in the waves of wheat.

The others eat eggs—scrambled eggs, fried eggs, eggs benedict, eggs and ham, hard boiled eggs, poached eggs, raw eggs, sometimes they make custard with beaks and claws sticking from its smooth top like fossils fighting their way up from tar. Me and my chick-a-dee sneak to the front porch, steal handfuls of oats from the trough to choke down. The

ants have built a colony in my legs. The rooster hasn't joined me on this porch for months.

We're throwing a gala for Goosealot and Henevere to celebrate their love and the newfound prosperity of our farm. Some of us say it's not so much new found, as found again, revived, reincarnated even. I touch my chick-a-dee. What will you tell me when you burst forth? Will you swoon for Goosealot? Will you lay eggs the others will devour?

My thinness is threatening to give us away. I tuck pieces of ham and eggs under my tongue at meal times to spit out later. Chicks follow me to gobble up the treats I dispense. Cannibals, I tell them, a flock of cannibals. Occasionally they pluck a juicy ant from my calf.

Goosealot is in love with Henevere, and we're in love with Goosealot. They walk in stately procession into our kitchen and sit at the head of our table. Our table is round, but they're like a magnet, causing the compass to swivel due north, always towards themselves. Henevere lays her basket of eggs on the table. It sags under the weight. The chickens are stirring in the coop. The others are stirring in the house. The ants are stirring in my legs. Chick-a-dee, when will you stir again?

I'm on the porch when I hear the pop pop pop pop pop of shotguns blasts. Inside, the walls are dripping with thick strings of yolk. The others have flecks of white and brown shells in their hair, stuck to their skin, impaled in their eyes. Pop pop pop. A chick fetus,

another version of my chick-a-dee, lands at my feet. Another and another fly across the room, still curled in their sleep position until they slam against the wall. I check my ribs, but have no more room for them there. Pop pop pop. Goosealot and Henevere duck under the table. Some of the others dive over them, throwing their bodies in the line of fire to protect them. Half formed chicks crawl from cracked shells. They stretch their slick necks over the edge of the basket. They slip over and splosh onto the table like a bag of mud. They gimp across the tabletop, a slime of half formed evolution in their wake. The flapping of Goosealot's wings is muffled by his guards crouched over him.

The ass has climbed onto the porch to reach his trough. He flicks his ears, either at a fly or the screaming inside. I pull my ears back, pull myself into my animal self and crouch over me, protecting my belly from the shrapnel of shell.

After, everyone heads outside. Goosealot stands on the porch and the rest of us step down into the dirt. We're so in love with Goosealot, as he stands there, white feathered and long necked. He'll go on a quest for more eggs. He'll come back with indestructible eggs. He'll come with endless eggs, golden eggs, hard-boiled eggs, scrambled eggs, salads of eggs.

The trumpets sound and the banners raise. The ass is harnessed and led to the porch. One of us lifts Goosealot onto him. The ass's tail twitches like this too was a fly. Henevere dabs her black dots of eyes with a white kerchief, then hands it to Goosealot as a token.

We put our arms around each other's shoulders. Heroes inspire us to such acts. We stand like this a long time. It takes that long for the ass to sidle out of view.

The ant colony in my legs tunnels towards the embryo inside me. I go to the barn and find an old lamp. I sprinkle the remain of the oil onto my legs and light it. The ants become a peppered river of flames flowing up and down me. I run from the barn, from the errant timber of stray straws of hay, and roll on the ground.

It's been months since Goosealot left, galloped away, cutting through the swaths of wheat into the sunset. When he returns I won't be able to see him, since I'm confined to the rocking chair in the corner of the living room just off the kitchen. Occasionally one of the others rewraps my burns, smears on a layer of cool fat first. But mostly I'm left alone. It's painful and hot and I don't enjoy the rocking though I believe my chick-a-dee might. I do it. We're low on food again. Since Goosealot left, the stream of eggs has dried up and the wheat has been allowed to rot in the field. At night I sneak out, crawl to field and lay on my back on the hard cool earth. With my teeth, I strip the kernels from the fallen stalks of wheat. When I inhale I see the outline of the chick in my ribs against the moon. I slough my clothes, my bandages, and my skin.

There are days the others sit, miming pie into their mouths, believing Goosealot gone forever. From my chair I see the rooster's blaze cross the window. The blanket, soiled and rough, slips from my lap. One of the others turns from his place on the porch. His mouth is still open to the bite of pie that is not there that rests on the fork that is not there. He

places this fork on the plate that is not in his lap. He points to my ribs, to where my chick-a-dee curls. Egg, he mouths. Eggs, and points.

They drag me to the table and lay me over it. My legs hang over the edge. There is no one to save me or chick-a-dee. Henevere, I say as they hold me down, she gave me this. She has them all, all the eggs. They turn on her immediately, tie her to the pole so tightly that she has no choice but to stand stoic. I gimp to the edge of the crowd. The rooster, returned, comes and stands near me. I hunch, allowing my shirt to hang straight down over the protrusion of chick-a-dee. One of the others reads the charges of treason. Then Goosealot is there in a sudden vision. On his mount he sweeps through the crowd, sword ablaze. The rooster's head falls at my feet and before I have time to look up my mid-section is undone. I fall to the ground and from my cracked ribs my glaired chick-a-dee slides. Goosealot continues to chop his way toward Henevere. The headless rooster runs through the crowd. Others jump back, horrified. Like a phoenix but more like a quail rooted out by a hound, my chick-a-dee, wiped clean of blood, begins to flap his wings. soars from me as Goosealot reaches Henevere and the lovers embrace. From the ground, I take in the land, the galloping Goosealot, and the line of archers aiming not at the knighted goose, but at the sky where my chick has gone. There's a release of arrows and these words, No one ever told me, they tell me, that I lived in a world where all things born had to live.

Granola Bars

It begins during a lesson, a child sneaks into the closet to check the contents of his lunchbox. “Hey,” he says, “My granola bar’s missing.”

Before the teacher can stop it, there’s a stampede to the closet. The children grab their lunchboxes from their cubbies and pry them open. They tally their lunches. There are several missing granola bars.

Parents call the school and demand drastic measures. Children refuse to let their lunchboxes out of sight, and carry them around all day. The teacher tells them to put them away, but they refuse. She insists, and only gets them to agree by appointing one of them “Closet Monitor.” Every child who needs to go to their cubby must notify him first. Although it’s not required, he writes down their Name, Time Entered Closet, and Time Left Closet.

“Jack’s going in the closet! Jack’s going in the closet!”

“It’s nothing,” the teacher assures them. “Jack needs a pencil.”

“But he has to tell *me!*” the Closet Monitor says.

“He told *me* and I said ‘yes,’” the teacher replies.

At home, the teacher’s lover tells her not to worry. Not that exactly, she tells her not to make it into a problem. “But it already is,” the teacher says. She slices the

sandwich she's made and puts half on a plate. She's wrong, her lover says, it's simply not her concern.

The teacher steps around the counter and places the plate on the coffee table in front of her lover, who lounges on the loveseat, feet tucked up under her as she leans against the right arm of the sofa. Smoke gradually escapes her lips until she decides to expel it all in a quick puff, which is quickly dispersed by the ceiling fan. The lover speaks only in between these dramatic inhales and exhales. She leans toward the table but does not take the sandwich. Instead she stubs her cigarette in the dregs of a coffee mug.

The teacher wonders why her lover never seems hungry. She wraps the bread, seals the lunchmeat, and scrapes the intestines of tomato into the trash. She stands behind the counter and eats her half.

Let the little bastards work it out themselves, the lover says, a new cloud rising.

“Jen's going in the closet! Jen's going in the closet!”

The teacher sighs, lowers the chalk from the board, and turns to face the class.

“Jen,” the teacher reminds her, “you must tell the Closet Manager.”

“Monitor! Monitor!” the class corrects.

“I need a pencil,” Jen says, staring not at the ground directly in front of her, but at the ground off to the right.

The teacher sighs again because she knows this aversion of eyes means some type of lie. She notes the plumpness in Jen's face, the protrusion of her belly, the doughiness of her arms. She feels suspicious despite herself.

At lunch time the teacher escorts the children to the cafeteria, then returns to her classroom. She shuts and locks the door, although she knows that, technically, this is a fire code violation, (unless there's a man in the school with a gun, then it's the required procedure). She steals into the closet and finds Jen's book bag. Unlike the other bags, it doesn't have bright colors, silver swishes, or an over-abundance of straps. It's dull and ratty and smells vaguely of animal urine. She places it on the ground and unzips it. Granola bar wrappers puff out like hackles. She pulls out a handful. The residue of syrup sticks to her palm. Immediately other wrappers take their place. She pulls out another crinkling handful. Then another. Another and another. Always there are more wrappers to take their place. Wrappers welling up. Wrappers piling at her feet. Their sweet smell is crowding out the smell of chalk and used books, of sneakers and tiled floors.

The teacher and her lover are in the grocery store. The teacher picks up a box and reads the ingredients carefully. "You never know what they put in these things." She uses this as an excuse to surreptitiously check the price.

Her lover complains they've been in the store *forever*.

This is their Sunday ritual. The teacher likes this time of week, this time of day, when her students are tucked neatly away under a vaulted ceiling with their parents, listening to Mass, perhaps or contemplating what they'll have at brunch afterwards. She likes the diminished danger of running into them. She also likes to linger in the rows, to imagine the various dishes she could prepare, to imagine the chopping and rinsing and the smell of garlic and oil crawling over the scent of smoke. She likes to imagine the

satisfied face of her lover over the dish. But she should hurry. In the cart are only the same staples they buy every week. This time, however, there's also a box of granola bars.

When the children arrive in the classroom, the desks are cleared to the side. Several granola bars hang from the ceiling. The lesson today: get a granola bar.

The teacher sits behind her desk in the corner of the room and monitors their attempts. Some students go to the desks and try to push them to the center of the room. Most jump, and keep jumping.

One student takes a broom from the closet and tries batting at the slender bars, but he can't balance the weight of the brush at the raised end and brings it down hard on the shoulder of another boy. The boy comes to the teacher, crying.

"Work it out yourselves," she tells him, leaning back in her chair. He goes back and places proprietary hands on the broom.

A girl gets on a boy's shoulders. She tries to grab a dangling bar, but kicks out her legs and forces the boy beneath her into the two students struggling over the broom. The girl tumbles on top of them.

At once the children realize how this must happen. Student upon student throws their bodies in a heap on top of the girl, the boys, and the broom. They begin to scramble to the top. They pull at hair and clothes, anything to gain a slight advantage. The teacher is about to stand, but hesitates. This must be the real lesson.

The walls of the classroom are lined with bright posters displaying the alphabet in upper and lower case cursive letters, the months in English and Spanish, the multiplication tables up to 9. Like neatly lined grocery store shelves, they promise an

order to knowledge. She looks at the writhing students. How would she explain this to the principal if he were to walk in at this moment? She'd say she was testing their problem solving abilities.

The Closet Monitor crawls out from under the pile. His hair is tussled. A slight stream of red trickles from his nose. His face is flushed and determined. He is any romantic hero. He steps back to the wall, and then rushes the mound. He races to the top and snatches a granola bar. The pile of students rolls and shakes beneath him, but he keeps his balance. He looks towards the teacher, his hair like proud plumage. He pumps his fist gripping the bar in the air. Then he tears it open and devours it.

Inevitably, the complaints come in. The teacher is summoned to the principal's office. There, bookshelves are lined with few books and many trophies from the school's peewee sports teams. Little plastic men covered in gold paint pose on pedestals, ready to swing or kick or dunk. He sits her down. They can't have people worrying about granola bars, he says. Fix it, or he will. He refers to himself as a "pinch hitter."

She doesn't want this burly man in her classroom, disrupting her order with his baseball metaphors, regulating the cubbies with his bat. She promises to take care of it.

At the grocery store the teacher feels more determined than ever before. She rushes the snack aisle. By the time her lover reaches her, breathless, she has filled their cart with boxes of granola bars, and only granola bars. The shelves are bare. Wait until the kids see this! She is almost giddy. Her lover asks what the hell she is doing.

In their bed that night, the teacher eats granola bars. Her lover must wade through the wrappers if she wants to join her.

This is sick, the lover says. She climbs onto the mattress as if pulling herself onto a raft. The lover's head aches from the smell of sticky sweetness. The teacher unwraps another and eats it in two bites. She tosses the wrapper overboard. Out at sea, without rudder or sail, her lover looks warily towards the approaching swells.

The Closet Monitor is blocking the classroom door. A line has formed to his right. His stance is wide, his hands folded behind him, his chest out. The teacher moves to put her key in the lock. "I'll do that," he says, stepping to the side and taking the key from her, so that in one motion he's facing the lock and blocking her from it. He unlocks the door but does not open it. He pockets the key and returns to his original position. The children in line shift from one foot to the other.

He motions to the first student to step forward. She spreads out her arms and legs and the Closet Monitor pats her down. She opens her lunchbox and he nods at the contents. He makes a check on a pad he's pulled from his pocket. He steps aside and allows her passage, then pulls the door closed. When all students have passed, he looks at the teacher. She's a small woman, and he's just beginning to show signs indicating the onset of puberty, signs that this very teacher had discussed with the class at the beginning of the year. How little he knew then, being pulled aside with the other boys to gather in a tight nervous circle and await indoctrination into the future metamorphoses of their bodies. Like an implacable lock in the channel of this hallway, he continues to bar her passage.

As the teacher feels her and her lover drift farther from the bedroom shore, a hunger is almost satisfied on the rolling mattress. Their bodies strain to keep a balanced rhythm, to keep their weight centered on the bed in a hope to prevent capsizing. They try to move with the rock of the waves. They try to keep a long and languorous pace. Muscles shake under the skin. Hands tremble over it. Lungs feel starved. In many ways, it's like drowning. In other ways, it's so close to being fulfilled. Through all this the wrappers swell.

At Mass the members of the congregation wade through wrappers up to the altar. They put their hands out for the Eucharist. A piece of transubstantiated granola bar is placed in the open palms. It is the greatest gift, they know, but lacks some of the feast element they're used to. The emptiness of their stomachs is barely touched by the granola and sugar and miniature chocolate chips. They stumble from the pulpit, a hollowness churning in their guts. They are faint and weak in the pews. They clasp each other's hands, nearly fall onto each other's shoulders. They gasp, "Peace be with you." They try to make it through.

The organist starts the final hymn, the doors open, and then it's a wasted, ruined, desert crawl toward the oasis of fresh strawberries and cream, lox, bagels, maybe a bisque. This is the hunger brunch was invented to satiate.

The teacher is called to the principal's office again. He's still getting complaints. Strike two, he warns.

The teacher knows she must work this problem out herself. She must confront Jen and fix it. She must grab the child her by the ankles and shake her until the bars fly from her pockets and clink to the ground, until it rains granola bars.

Then, on Sunday, when the parents and their children approach the church, they'll need to open their umbrellas wide against the deluge of sticky sweet granola bars. Once safely through the cathedral doors they can close them, hand them to a waiting usher, and remark how it's certainly coming down out there. As they genuflect they'll whisper to their fellow parishioners, "My my my. It's like the end of the world out there."

The Mass will proceed as it should—a reading, a liturgy, a collection. The audience will stand, sit, kneel. The glass windows will show no sign of the tumult outside. The interior is still and calm, the congregation's expression as immobile as the statuary saints along the walls.

When it's time for the offerings, the teacher rises from the back pew. She's perspiring in her Sunday best. She has tried to dress in a matronly way, as she supposed one should for these occasions. That morning her lover asked why she bothered, and rolled over in the bed. The teacher had looked at the lover laying there, at the tangle of hair on the pillow, at the smashed cigarettes in a cup on the nightstand. She took her coat and left.

The teacher picks up the child lying next to her in the pew. She walks down the aisle, through the hungry gazes of the congregation and the admonishments of the statues' painted stigmata, towards the waiting altar boys. She hands them the offering. The congregation bows their heads as the priest murmurs the blessing and makes the sign of the cross.

The teacher—without being motioned to or asked, without being thanked or acknowledged, without being bent or scarred, without being polished or renewed, without partaking in the everlasting covenant so that her sins may be forgiven—slips outside, and immediately recalls the way her lover looked laid out in bed that morning. Then she thinks of how she has forgotten her umbrella.

The teacher is in the grocery store alone. She can buy anything she wants, but wants nothing at all. She can't imagine the things that are contained in these boxes and wrapped in this plastic becoming meals in her kitchen.

She pauses in the cereal aisle and takes a box from the shelf. \$4.25. Is that expensive for 16oz.? She reads the Nutrition Facts, the serving sizes, carbohydrate and protein contents, sugars, fats and vitamins—an orderly breakdown of their values. She imagines what it is like to eat 1 Cup of this.

She looks up. Mothers and fathers and children are pouring into the aisle. Their carts bang against each other, rattling the thin metal cages. Parents sweep their arms along the shelves to shove as many boxes into their carts as they can. When a cart's full, they pass it to their child to bring to the checkout and go find another.

The teacher puts the box back and begins a retreat. A mother notices her and calls her name. She wants to pretend she doesn't hear, but the woman is already in front of her. Things have improved, the woman tells her, but she still has one little concern. She holds her forefinger and thumb in front of the teacher's face to indicate how small the concern is.

The teacher's eyes swivel around her. She sees she's walled in by the shelves and the approaching crowd. This woman is blocking her only means of escape. The teacher sees the white of the dairy section at the back of the store and longs to make her way to it, away from the encroaching din. She wishes she wasn't alone.

The shelves are nearly cleared. Crushed cereal boxes, their insides devoured, are discarded shells in the wake of the carts approaching her, the ones that are so close now. The woman is still talking—she wants more rules, more order, look at the measures they have to take just to make sure their children have enough to eat. The mother gestures towards the crowd behind her, but the teacher ducks under her arm and runs to the end of the aisle. She rounds the corner. She sees more parents and more children in every aisle of the store. She hears her name being called—Ms. ___! Ms. ___!—as she runs for the exit.

Cars are still pulling into the parking lot. Parents step out of them and shout after her. They just want to know one thing. They hold up their forefingers to indicate just one thing. The teacher rushes to her car, jumps in, and speeds away. She lets the parents and their kids work it out themselves.

The red tables and red stools in the cafeteria are filled with parents. They try to tuck their legs under the tables but bang their knees. Each hip crowds into the hip on the stool next to it. The parents on the ends must grip the edge of the table so they don't get bumped off their seats when any slight movement rumbles down the row. Soon the plastic trays are set in front of them. Pale peas in one section, cold breaded chicken nuggets in another, and, of course, tater tots. They bite off the corners of ketchup packets

and squirt out the contents. Some accidentally put their milk cartons on top of their peas. They remark that brunch isn't what it used to be.

When it's all over their stomachs are still grumbling. The teacher gets them in line and leads them out of the cafeteria, into the hallway, and through the double doors out into a glaring sunlight. They shade their eyes instinctively. When their pupils adjust, they see granola bars dangling from the limbs of the trees. The teacher is has disappeared.

More and more wrappers. They cover the teacher's lap now as she sits in the closet and pulls out still more. Up to her arms. She's swimming through them to reach the bag, to free still more. Up to her neck. Still more. Her head. Still more. Her hands working rapidly to tread these wrappers and pull out still more. Where is the Closet Monitor? The teacher's in the closet! The teacher's in the closet without permission!

She thinks of her lover wrapped tightly in the bed sheets, the mist of sweat she creates while sleeping a stickiness that the teacher pulls away each morning when she wakes her. But not this morning. It gets harder to breathe. She forgets to struggle against the deluge of wrappers and goes under.

The lover is here, scanning the classroom and the children. She's come to admonish them. Lovely woman, tell us now our sins and at the hour of our deaths. But she has no interest. She wants to know why the desks are pushed aside, why the closet door is closed. She says nothing, continues to survey the room.

What is she looking for? The Closet Monitor will find out. He walks to her and instructs her to spread her feet and put her arms out to the side. He pats her down. A crinkle rises from her pocket. He pulls out a wrapper, holds it up for the class to see.

They gasp and murmur. He brings it close to his face for examination. He smells the inside, dabs it with the tip of his tongue. He runs his finger over the rough traces of glue. The students wait for his conclusions. Granola bar, he pronounces.

The students rise and crowd around her. Boxing her in the corner near the teacher's desk, they keep her from whatever she came here to find. In the press and sweat of metamorphosing young bodies, she picks a tiny chocolate chip from the corner of her mouth and eats it.

The teacher clears a small space in front of her face. She tries for breath. She can no longer see anything past the wrappers. Every noise she makes is muffled over with incessant crinkling. How, she thinks as the sticky-sweet smell overwhelms her, will her lover find her here, her own door locked, barring passage?

A loud crack and splinters resound throughout the room. The Closet Monitor has broken through the closet door. He dives in, swipes away wrappers with broad strokes of his arm until he uncovers a bit of flesh. He grabs the skin tightly and pulls. Clutching the nape of her neck, the Closet Monitor drags the teacher from under the weight of the wrappers and into the open room. He drops to his knees, tilts her head back and checks in her throat for obstructions. He pulls out a wrapper covered in phlegm. He performs CPR with long full breaths. He presses on her sternum. He breathes in again, noticing the expansion of her cheeks, the swell of her chest. He thumps the sternum. Finally she coughs, sputters, shooting bits of granola from her mouth. They make long, graceful arcs above her head. She looks into his eyes. Is this love?

Homunculus

What are they doing, these mannequins in the display window—are they on their way to a date, or perhaps a picnic, as suggested by the sweaters carefully balanced on their shoulders, as they'd need to be, considering these mannequins have no heads, only stumps of necks that won't keep the sweaters from slipping if the mannequins suddenly launch themselves forward into the promised steps of their poses as they continue with this picnic date in this happy narrative of headless mannequins.

Inside the store she approaches the rack of sale items. She pushes them back and forth, scraping the metal hooks of hangers against the circular pole of the rack, alerting the salesclerk to the customer. The salesclerk approaches to find the woman holding forth a sleeve by its tag. The tag tells her everything she needs to know—the size, the fabric, the washing instructions, its inability to be ironed.

“Can I help you?” the clerk asks, smiling bright and without curiosity. The woman drops the tag she's holding; the sleeve disappears back into the melee of fabric suspended from the rack. She does say “No”, because she does need the help, nor does she ask, “Why don't the mannequins have any heads?” because she know this salesclerk won't offer an answer, but only stare at her with a disinterested curiosity, the look one gives to soapboxers on the sidewalk as she hurries by. She asks, “Where are the sweaters displayed in the window?” instead.

“Over there.” The clerk extends her arm in the direction of a table on which neatly folded sweaters arranged in stacks of red, blue, green, pink, purple, beige, brown (two shades of) white, and black sit. She walks over to them and the clerk, noting the hesitation in this customer’s body movement, does not follow.

At the table the woman picks up a beige sweater. She holds it by the shoulders up in front of her face. She shakes it a bit. How is it so limp and lifeless in her hands when it looks so animated thrown over the shoulders of the mannequin couple?

Checking the couple again, she notices for the first time that there is a small headless mannequin between them. This couple isn’t on a casual date, then, they’re on a family outing. The child has a sweater is thrown over his shoulders as well. A boy, she supposes, since it’s blue. She also notices the metal stands that protrude from their backsides to hold the family upright, but can’t be seen from the window.

The sweater she’s still holding up in front of her would be appropriate for the holiday party she has to attend. Though “has to” is not the right phrase—it’s not compulsory, her job does not depend on it, but it’s just one of those events—like weddings, reunions, funerals—that maintains the tenuous ties with acquaintances that are easier to carry on than to make the conscious decision to break, at least until some internal or external force intervenes.

At this thought, the sweater grows heavier, taking on a conscious weight. Her arms, lifted in front of her, fatigue and droop it onto the table. She tries to refold it into the perfect rectangle of the other sweaters on the table. She lays it down, carefully creases each side just inside the shoulder, tucks the sleeves in and across each other, folds it in half—but it looks more like a ball of knitting now than anything else. She tries again,

beginning with it open and flat on top of the pile. Crease crease fold fold and still no success. She tries again. She fails. She's getting nervous lest she draw the salesclerk's ire. She doesn't want that woman back by her again, saying her it's okay as she grabs the sweater from her hands in such a way that belies her patient voice. She simply wants it to be okay, to have the sweater returned to its original position as if she had never been there to disrupt it at all.

Then there is a hand on her shoulder. She turns, afraid the face with the bright vacant smile will be there, but instead, where the smile should be, is only empty space. She is looking right over the stumped neck of the female mannequin and into the display of spring dresses on the opposite side of the floor, lined up in bouquets of prints, ready for those already fashion conscious of the impending season. The mannequin's hand slides down her arm and rests there, the fused fingers cupped gently around the biceps, as they stand face to not face with each other.

The female mannequin turns, the sweater still jaunty on her shoulders, and begins to walk off. The male mannequin is following, working the rigidity from his limbs. He pauses, reaches behind himself, and removes the metal stand from his backside. She politely averts her eyes, but he twists back forward and wields the silver stand like the upstroke of a perfect golf swing.

And they are heading towards the sports and recreation section of the department store. The male and female mannequins walk with the ungainly motions of stiff joints. They do their best to walk in a straight line. When they bump into a display table or rack,

they move one step at a time to the left until they have cleared the obstacle and can go forward again.

She follows behind them, tentatively at first to leave enough space for the headless child to run his stilted run past her and catch up to his parents. On the escalator, they lean against the rail. She tries to mimic this casual posture as are raised, partly to hide her excitement, the other part to hide her anxiety. She's never been to the second floor before. She's never been there with a family.

The salesclerk, leaning with one hip against the counter near the register, eyes them as they ascend. When they cross the down escalator and its ramp cuts them from her line of sight, she reaches into the drawer below the register, pulls out a magazine, and flips it open with one hand. Page after page fans down from under the subtle release of her beige fingernail.

The second floor of a department store is filled with spare time things, things of not necessity. There are golf clubs and treadmills, lawn chairs and margarita makers, ellipticals and outdoor grills. The second floor is revelry.

The mannequins make for the tennis equipment. Their limbs bend much more fluidly at the joints now, but they still walk in the same tentative straight lines. This makes it easier for her. She knows exactly what they want since their bodies always directly face it; finding a synonym for the word facing, since its inappropriate metonymy is suddenly apparent, is a much harder task.

The mannequins make several swipes at the dangling racquets before they each grab hold of one and pull them off their hooks, crashing the ones hung in front to the

ground. Meanwhile, she's gotten tennis balls. She pops open several cans and waves away the gust of packaged air that bursts out. The male and female mannequins are waiting in the aisle between sections. They stand several yards apart, racquets resting at their sides. The child waits in the middle, unsure of which side to run to. She hurries over to the male mannequin and lays can after opened can in front of him. For a moment she feels like she's giving an offering to a headless statue of a Roman god after its too late, when the war is over and her city is in ruins.

The male mannequin kicks over a can of tennis balls. She thinks this is by accident until she notices that he's arranging them in a diamond in front of him with his foot. He bends down and picks one up. He tosses it up and whacks it in the general direction of his wife. She assumes she's his wife; mannequins don't usually wear rings. The female mannequin, however, is watching (again an inappropriate word) the child come towards her, as he's finally chosen a side. The tennis ball hits her in the chest, its hollowness ringing against her own and throughout the otherwise empty second floor. The game is on.

The husband picks up another ball and serves. The wife swings her racquet when the ball reaches the right distance, but she is at least two feet away from it. The family keeps doing this, swinging wildly and occasionally shooting a ball back with the ping of a tightly strung racquet. She stands close enough to act as line judge, even though she's too nervous to make any calls. Mostly she just replenishes the balls while dodging the yellow streaks and wild swings.

She's at the other end of the second floor, gathering balls into the pouch she makes from her shirt front, when she hears the clatter of dropped tennis racquets. Then she hears shuffling feet punctuated by the thud of a fiberglass body bumping into something solid. She releases the clutch of her shirt, scattering the tennis balls like mice across the floor, and runs back to the sporting goods section.

The mother is performing a brisk power walk on a treadmill. Her arms, bent at the elbows, pump back and forth. She would be breathing heavily if that were possible. The father is lying on a bench, his stump of a neck just under the press bar. He waves his arm in her general direction, so she walks over and picks up a cylindrical disk. It's forty five pounds, so she lifts her thigh against the bottom of the weight in order to raise it just enough to slide it onto the bar. She does this on the other side as well. He motions for more and so she adds another disc to each side. She slides the clips on to secure the weights, then stands behind the bar.

The woman has worked herself to a full out sprint on the treadmill. She is increasing the incline, running up a hill that isn't there. The man wraps his hands around the bar and presses it up. He slowly lowers it down so that it hovers just over his chest. Her hands rest below the bar, on either side of his own, ready to jerk it upward and away from his easily cracked frame if need be. The child has knocked down the medicine balls, and with his full hollow weight pushing against one, he tries to push into another. Meanwhile, the father does nine reps, but struggles on the last. The mother's feet pound against the treadmill as the hill gets steeper and steeper. Her sweater slips from her shoulders and is thrown to the ground by the belt. The bench press bar is hovering just below the hooks. She's straining her weight back against it, desperate to get its threat

secured away from his fragile chest. In this moment only she is sweating, and she sweats until he finally locks his elbows and drops his straightened arms back until the bar crashes against the upright and clanks down on the hooks. At this moment, the child, pressing his whole hollow weight against an eight pound ball, sends it slowly rolling into the ten. They gently touch as he falls to the ground, deprived of the balls resistance, then are still.

The family stops at once, gets up, leaves their tasks, and heads in another direction. The treadmill whines to a halt. They play their way through all the sports equipment. Baseballs and bats, footballs and helmets, golf balls and clubs scatter throughout the store until she finally gives up chasing them all down and resumes meekly following in their wake.

In the cycling section they domino an entire row of bikes as they pull three from the line. They place the child on one with training wheels. She grabs a helmet for him, then, embarrassed, puts it back on the shelf, hoping they didn't notice. She's then embarrassed by that thought, but doesn't say anything, just keeps that thought in her head so they won't know it, though now she feels even more guilty about having a head.

The parents give the child a push to start him off. Then they grip the handles of their bikes, swing their legs over the top tubes and set off down the aisle. She doesn't know whether to follow or not. She picks up a bike from the ground, but, instead of hopping on it, returns it to its place on the rack. She hears them bouncing against displays, the clang of metal and the shatter of glass. She guesses they've made it to the kitchenware section and rushes to catch up with them there.

A five-piece crossback oak dining set has stopped their forward progress. They've knocked two chairs over and broken most of the dishes set on top. They drop the bikes in the shards and suddenly resume their stolid poses from their display in the department store window. She's afraid they'll tumble over without the assistance of their rear metal rods, but she's frozen too in this narrative of waiting.

She picks up a fallen chair and sets it back in its place at the table. She picks up the other chair and does the same. Stepping around the male mannequin she puts her hip against the table's corner and pushes it until it's no longer aslant. She picks up the placemats and shakes them free of the glass and stoneware bits. She uses one mat to brush off the table. She shakes it out again and resets it in its proper place. She goes to a nearby display, picks out four red plates and four red bowls and places them on the table. She retrieves four amber colored cloth napkins and folds them into triangles that she then sets by the plates. She finds forks, salad forks, knives, and spoons. Through all this, she feels as if she is being watched.

Department stores aren't known for their food selection, so she's willing to take whatever she can get as she roams the second floor. Near the small kitchen appliances she finds a small table display of sausage and cheese gift sets, each tightly bound with a cutting board in holiday colored plastic wrap. She grabs several of these, along with a tin of caramel corn that's been seemingly abandoned by the display but some past customer.

She returns with her bounty to the dining set. She spends several minutes tearing a hole through the layers of reddish plastic around one of the gift sets. Once through, she slips the tiny serrated knife out and now, with quick, full, gleeful strokes she unleashes

cheddar cheese blocks and sausage logs, Monterey jack and pepper crackers, Colby squares and tiny jars of mustard. Each is wrapped in its own plastic and so her fingernails and the tiny knife set to work against these layers as well.

Finally, when it's all undone and the waste of plastic and rinds are added to the broken mess on the ground, she begins to cut half inch discs of meat and set them on the plates in four equal proportions. She looks at the arrangement of peperoni discs fan along the edge of the red plates, then at each of the motionless mannequins posed around the table as if they are walking to it for dinner. She visually measures the size of the child against the size of the male. She moves a few discs of sausage from the plate on one of the longer sides of the table to the plate she imagines is at the head of the table. She begins slicing the cheese. She finishes each dish with a handful of caramel corn set in the center of the orbital arrangement of appetizers.

She sits in the chair opposite of the child's dish, her back to the frozen family, and waits. Her elbows on the table, she entwines her fingers in a gesture of patience or one that could be mistaken for a silent grace said before this meal. Someone watching her would never know that this couldn't be prayer because she never prays this way; as a child she was told curling her fingers would make the prayer take longer to get to god, since it has to travel in the downward direction of the fingertips first before, like a compass needle to the north, rerouting itself heavenward. Also because she doesn't pray.

She opens her eyes when she hears the legs of three chairs scrape along the floor. The mannequins, reanimated, have gone to their seats and are now attempting to scoot themselves in. It's been years since she's had a family dinner. She waits for them, the

father mostly, to make the first moves towards the food. He removes the silverware from the napkin, picks it up, unfolds it, folds it into a rectangle and places it over his lap. The wife and child do this too. The little one has the unmistakably clumsy gestures of one still learning through mimicry. She, like the child, follows the parents, but she's not like the child in this at all. He can't observe the movements and behaviors of others, so he must absorb them, like all things he must learn, through the innate sense of his species. She, on the other hand, has none of that ability, and can only crudely copy what she sees. It's like knowing the sounds of words, but none of their meaning.

But, though she must keep close watch of them, she isn't here to observe them. She's here as their guest. She waits until the mother and father mannequins pick up their forks and begin poking at their food to do the same. She stabs a cured piece of meat, then a cube of cheese. She lifts the fork to her mouth and pauses to look at her companions. They too are raising the food to their mouths, or at least to the approximate space their mouths would be. They then lower the forks, remove the food from their prongs by scraping them against the edge of their plates, then they gather more and again gesture to their lips. Every so often one of them picks up a cracker.

Other than the noise of the plates, everything is silent. The family members do turn their bodies slightly toward each other in between bites, and she soon realizes this is a language between them. But she doesn't know if it's genuine communication or just an animated window display.

The child has dropped bits of food on the stump of his neck. The grease shines in the searing fluorescent lights of this place, making it look for a moment like he is sweating. But they can't sweat and when she realizes this she lifts her napkin from her

lap, goes to stand by the child, and picks the pieces off by pinching them with the napkin. She folds it several times and wipes the stump with a clean corner.

The family stands up. She goes back to grab her plate in order to bring it to the kitchen. Clearing the table is an automatic action for her, but she quickly realizes, looking at the couple and the child stalk off to the next section, makes little sense here. She puts the plate back on the table and follows the family to Bed and Bath.

The three mannequins sidle up to a shortened display bed. The mother pulls the comforter back and the father pushes all but one of the decorative pillows to the ground. The child scrambles up into the bed and the parents tuck the blanket to his chin as he curls into a pose. His stillness is more than that of sleep. It unnerves her.

The adult mannequins move to another bed and begin to unbutton their tops. Although this is not an unusual thing to do before going to bed, witnessing it makes her suddenly aware of their surroundings. Although no one else appears to be on this second floor, she still feels like this is too exposed an exhibition. She wants to go to them, pull back on their shirts, which they're now twisting their shoulders out of and bringing renewed attention to the stiffness of their movements, button them up, find their sweaters or maybe some robes to pull over them and tie around their waists to layer them against the bareness of this floor and their own bodies. But that seems worse than what she is doing right now, which is watching them.

They stand naked, near sexless, posed much like when she first saw them. The gleam of their limbs and torsos is still perfect, which surprises her. She wonders if they'll move again or if this is their final repose, but when they make towards the bed, larger than the child's but still shortened for display, it startles her from this rumination. They

are about to climb in; the woman mannequin braces herself on the mattress with one arm and with the other makes a small gesture. She doesn't know if she's beckoning her or smoothing the sheets. It's her turn to stand still as they—she and the mannequins—watch each other in these final moments.

If there's a secret and low language between these mannequins, she doesn't know it or even if she wants to be a part of it. If she moves now or they come near her, if her skin touches the cool fiberglass of their shells, she knows all this will be over. She will pick them up one at a time and carry them back down the stilled escalator that earlier sliced them from the view of the cashier who must be on her way home by now, and bring them back to the window display that should have remained their sole habitat, from which she should have, she realizes now, prevented them from wandering, and right their metal stands left there in the initial surge of activity, force their backside back onto them, and arrange their arms and legs again into those unfinished gestures that were originally designed to sell the sweaters they lost from their necks long ago and nothing more.

She goes back to kitchenware section and picks up the plates still full of food. She takes the dishes to the restroom located at the rear of the store. The tile is pale blue, but makes the fluorescent lights seem starker in the enclosed place. It also seems to make the odor of bleach staler too. She knocks the food in the trash and rinses the dishes in the sink. Tiny beads of grease circle and enter the drain. She examines the mirror above the sink, then her face suspended in its frame. Dark hair, dark eyes. Her cheeks are flush. If she doesn't go back, will everyone be all right? She suspects they'll still be standing there, unaware of her absence. The hum of the lights that makes everything on her

reflection quiver. She reaches for the stack of plates, intending to return them to the kitchenware section, but instead washes her hands and leaves them on the counter to gather watermarks as they dry.

She goes back to the sporting section and lifts the bikes back onto the rack. She puts up only a few before she pauses and surveys the equipment scattered throughout the second floor. She decides to give up before she really gets started, and return to the first floor. She walks down the ridged stairway of the lifeless escalator, and before leaving, approaches the table of sweaters, chooses one, and takes it to the register. The salesclerk and her intimidating smile are no longer there, so she reaches over and grabs a bag from underneath the counter to stuff the sweater into. She puts all the cash she has, which is not enough, on the counter and leaves the department store by pushing her way through the heavy glass turnstile.

Outside, the edge of the small crowd that has gathered around the empty display window parts to let her by. With her sweater, the fruits of her outing, held tightly by her side, she hunches against the cold air and rushes away from the crowd in the direction they assume is home.

Passers-By

She heads for the door, picks up speed, hits the handle hard with her palm and bursts out into the streamlined street. The droplets of people gathered outside watch her rush past and as they turn they coalesce into a crowd that follows behind.

They skirt over the urban terrain of concrete and asphalt, heels and leather shoes, since this began in the business district, click sharply around vendors and fire hydrants. They pick up more as they go, food carts are left abandoned, car doors have no time to be closed. At intersections they anxiously mill until the red hand relents, releasing the flood of them again into the street.

She's always just in front of them. They begin to throw bags and briefcases aside to become lighter and faster. Rings and watches drop from hands, coats and jackets are shed to the late autumn air. Ties are loosened and then thrown like so many bouquets. There's a molting of stockings, shirts, trousers, skirts.

The streets rumble under the stampede of feet, begin to crack under the weight of clothes. The steel frames of the buildings whose peaks seem like no more than singled barren branches reaching towards the clouds absorb the vibrations like massive tuning forks, sending hums through the concrete, plaster, and brick that clings to their frames. Buildings shake off their materials like dogs shake off water. Pieces fall to the ground and join the suits and wedding rings and panty hose, the socks and Dockers, the blouses, the briefcases, the purses, and the shopping bags lining the sidewalks. The tremendous

weight of the discarded ruptures the ground. The earth unzips as the weightless crowd runs just before it.

And she's just before them, light and free with her pack in pursuit, and she can see now, if only in her mind, that clear and endless space she is leading them to.

But the crowd realizes something is amiss. They are nearing the edge of the cityscape and the blank horizon they see before them elicits a sudden panic. Like an avian flock, they veer left then right, but then they explode, each fragment running to the nearest entrance of any buildings not swallowed yet. Automatic sensors hold doors open for a flood of people to rush into the bank, the corporate headquarters, the deli, the private club, the doctors, the office building, the government agency. They head towards the only counters still standing.

They grab for paper, for any forms. They reach over the counter, search underneath. They frighten away the receptionists and clerks. They snatch deposit slips, requests for medical history, registrations of all kinds; they bite and claw for a chance at the dangling pens. If there's a glass divider, they throw themselves against it, beg the people on the other side for more writing utensils. They curse their scattered purses and briefcases, which held their pens and pencils, even scraps of paper they could use now.

Those who have snatched one of the few pens begin a voracious filling out of the forms. Lines on top of lines—names, dates, health insurance, date of birth, marital status, number of dependents, car makes and models, addresses, emergency contacts, like, dislikes, allergies, medical histories, favorite foods, titles of novels read, movies watched, choices of meats and cheeses—all spilling out onto the paper, chains jingling as the pens pull and push and press their ink with an ever increasing fervor, pouring everything they

have into the task. Then the papers, hundreds, thousands, scrawled with scrawl on top of scrawl, are pushed to the other side of the counter, shoved under the glass. Process these. File these. Please, put them in the records. Flooding the far side of the glass barrier, flooding over the countertops, insisting—

She is outside the large windows facing the street, but no one turns to look at her. The sensors on the sliding doors are indifferent to her form passing in front of them. She walks back and forth, but can't get them to detect her. She's stuck out here, abandoned by her crowd, the space in there filling up without her.

Sightless Fish

My apartment is the bottom of the ocean and my eyes are those of a sightless fish. Or at least they used to be before I took them out and placed them in a contact lens case. Before this I spent months without turning on the lights. Since I live alone there was no reason to. I knew from memory where things were placed, even if I didn't remember why they came to be placed there. I adjusted. I sensed vibrations in the hallways and moved accordingly through the rooms. When I took my eyes out and put them in the case, nothing changed.

I can imagine what they must have seen when the lid came down and twisted shut, because it must have been like this darkness I see now, which, although it's constant, feels like it's always come on suddenly as I turned a corner because I expect dusk's light to be creeping through parted curtains and illuminating my world in a way that I haven't forgotten.

A sound wave decreases amplitude without limit, which means, put simply, your voice will never leave this apartment, and so now I never will either. I follow the smaller and smaller ripples of the sounds you've made from room to room. They bounce off walls and ricochet off me. Sometimes they leave cuts, and after my body lays down enough collagen fibers to repair my tissue, it doesn't stop. It continues to lay down layer after layer until keloids form on my shoulders, across my chest, and on my legs. They grow in inverse proportion to the diminishing sounds. I can touch their swells, but it's not

enough. I want to turn on the lights and see the scars reaching around to embrace me, sheltering me from the waves that caused them. But I know what a useless gesture is. It's this rattle in the contact lens case. It's this missing of you.

Some More Appliances

The family is getting some more appliances. They already have a refrigerator, an oven, a microwave, a washer and a dryer, but they don't know where to put these new ones. Appliances typically reside in the kitchen, the basement and the laundry room. Though, the laundry room is really just a closet in the basement.

The new appliances will be burrowed into tiny duffel bags or set atop thin metal poles that have small black wheels splayed beneath them like predatory avian feet that have momentarily alighted on the ground. Because of their size, they can be kept anywhere, really, but the family must predict where they'll be needed most.

Most appliances belong the same genus of machines. The trait they share is that they're a mix of electronics and mechanics designed for only one purpose. Any deviation from this purpose results in a new species or sub-species, which is then categorized by its fulfillment of the new purpose. The toaster is a perfect example. The toaster-oven a mutant breed. Ultimately, if the purpose is not useful, the appliance will not survive.

The appliances arrive one at a time, so each new arrival raises the question again of where to keep them. Their instinct is to keep the herd together, so if they move one, they'll have to tuck the tubes back in the bags and zip the pockets, release the locks on the black plastic wheels and move them all down the hall.

The family has a single purpose—to be a family. Two undertook this with instinctual virility. Appliances multiplied. Large ones came first; lumbering into the basement or kitchen, the guttural roars of their engines churning out their single-purpose purpose. The predation of domesticity and all its promises. The two lay in bed, awake and alert.

Then the smaller creatures arrived. One with a tube as long and thick as a vacuum hose. Another with tentacle wires and a computer screen that chirps warnings. They heighten the sense of fear in the family. They want to keep them in the back bedroom, but will need to access quickly for emergencies, which is the real purpose of these new appliances.

Some more appliances come. They are larger, and don't blend with the pack. One of these, a solitary creature, grumbles in the back room, constantly condensing oxygen. They take the vial from it and bring it into the bedroom, to the smaller appliance that's hungry for it. They insert the vial. They pull on the vacuum-like tube and bring it to the nose. They hold it there with a swathe that fits over the entire head.

They flick switches and turn knobs. The monitors of life and its progress chirp awake. When the one appliance presses air down the tube to the nose, a moan is sounding, followed by a long cry when they pull it away

He tells her to write down everything the appliances have done. The times. The dates. Her emotional state when such things occurred. He buys a ledger for this and reads it at night when he returns home from work.

He tells her she is using a particular appliance too much. The appliances help the small body function, but too much depletes it. It must work harder and harder to make up for what's taken away. The body only has so much energy.

A family is like an island, with a single purpose—to be that family. There's no time to be gentle. An appliance shoots air down the lungs to loosen phlegm and bacteria, then vacuums it back up with a roar that also pulls forth screams. The family wishes to define itself. It defines itself as three. Will the family still be the family when it must define itself as two? In the meantime they take care. They use the small appliances, but don't overuse them. Overuse results in batteries being worn down and bodies being worn out.

The small appliances gather around the smallest family member. They reach out to her with tubes and wires. They enter her through her nose, her mouth, the plug in her stomach. They are symbiotic parasites. When enough arrive, she'll be the vestigial organ of some new beast.

He lays the ledger on the counter. Most of the pages are blank and will remain that way because despite all of this—the record keeping, the alert nights, the arrival of even some more appliances—this is still a brief story; the alignment of genes carries her into then out of this world.

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