

PROMISED CYCLES

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SECTION I: WATER



Anonymous, 200 (*Money*)

WATER SONNET I

A crashing lies here,
So here let's begin:
It's now over, the womb dream
Summersault-filled round swim

When they start The Girls walk with a feeling like this:
Looking out just-cleaned windows as bright as blue salt
Breathing air thick as foam
Air their mothers put there

The Girls want to be streams that can move far ahead
They think womb dreams are over
But the crashing comes next
And they see they are whirlpools, see just how water is:

Water only can leave to then come back again
Doesn't know how to move, knows only how to spin

THE MOURNING MOTHERS

It isn't anything new, but the mothers wish it were. They wish it'd been only one or two children pulled under if any had to be pulled under at all. They'd take two over the nine now gone, the nine lost to blue ripples of chlorine and leaves. I know this because I've watched them, studied them, tried to make sense of it all. Nobody knows the mourning mothers like I do.

Pulled under? the neighbors all ask. *Pulled under by what?* This is a major concern according to everyone talking about the mourning mothers. They think this means the mourning mothers have lost something other than their children, that they simply aren't well. I don't know what pulled those children under, but I believe the mothers when they say it. I heard one mother say that there's no other way of putting a thing like this, that if some exterior force didn't pull her baby under, she might as well jump off a bridge and feel her body hit the cold hard water. *Of course they were pulled under*, the mourning mothers say. *We watched them so close.*

There are eight mourning mothers total. Seven of them lost one child each, and one lost both her children. There are also the mothers who lost no children, and mine is among them. Mine says the mourning mothers had it coming. "Neglectful, is what they are" she says. "That would never happen here. I watch you girls as close as a person possibly could."

I'm thirteen and far too old to need to be watched in the pool, but my sisters aren't. My mother doesn't admit it, but I think she feels for the mourning mothers. I think she watches my three little sisters splashing around and imagines them being pulled under too.

I go to the park to watch the mourning mothers most days. This is what they do, just sit in the park. I tell my sisters I'm taking them there so they can swing and play, but really I'm only going to watch the mourning mothers. My favorite is the one with long blonde hair. She wears

floral scarves and cries the loudest out of everyone in the group. She's the group leader, I've decided. I also like the one who lost both her children because of the way she comforts the other mothers. I like each of the mourning mothers for a different reason, but I like them best as a group.

Most people here have a pool, though most of the pools are now covered. I feel bad for the children whose mothers have decided to cover their pools because it's August and living here without a pool sounds cruel to me. I said this to my aunt when she covered up my cousins' pool and she said, "What happened to those children was cruel." My aunt and my mother disagree about what happened to the drowned children. "Think about it," my aunt likes to say. "Nine children in only six months. And all living so close to each other. That's more than neglect if you ask me."

"Then what do you call it?" my mother asks.

"I can't say," says my aunt. "But it doesn't tell us who they are as mothers."

I'm glad my mother hasn't covered our pool. On hot evenings, she brings a liter of orange soda out to the pool and I help her force stiff water wings onto my little sisters' arms. Hallie and Liv don't argue, but Mackie, who's close to six, is always sure to remind us she's much too old. "Just stay in the shallow end," my mother tells her. These are my favorite nights. My mother and I sit on lounge chairs and read or talk or watch my sisters swim. My mother and I drink orange soda from tall glasses filled with ice, and my sisters drink from plastic cups with cartoon characters on them.

"Mom?" I ask.

She turns towards me.

"We won't have to cover our pool, right?"

"Of course not," she says. "Don't be silly."

“And you aren’t worried?” I ask her.

“Of course not,” she says. “I watch you all so close.”

I only spot seven mourning mothers at the park the next day. I count them once and then once more again. “Seven,” I say. “How can it only be seven?”

“Seven what?” asks Mackie.

“Nothing,” I say. “Why don’t you go play?”

“I don’t want to,” she tells me. “Hallie and Liv are no fun.”

“At least Hallie can speak in full sentences now,” I say.

“I’m not impressed,” says Mackie. “Can I sit here with you?”

I nod.

Mackie sits down next to me on the bench. It’s the best bench in the whole park because it’s right across from the mourning mothers’ spot underneath the weeping willow.

“One, two, three, four –”

“What are you doing?” Mackie asks me.

“Quiet,” I tell her. “I’m trying to count.”

“Why?” she asks.

“Mackie, please. If you’re going to sit here you’re going to have to let me be.”

“Are you counting them?” she asks, pointing.

“Please, Mackie,” I say. “Don’t point.”

Mackie pretends to stay quiet, but I hear her raspy breath whisper-counting in my ear.

“Eight,” she says.

“Really?” I ask her. “Are you sure?”

I count again. Seven.

“No, Mackie,” I say. “You counted wrong.”

“Well are you counting the moms, or the kids?” she asks.

“I’m only counting them,” I say. “Them underneath that tree.”

“I know,” she says. “But are you counting the moms, or the kids?”

I take my sisters home from the park early and tell Mackie to go to her room. I watch her face turn hot and her fists become tight and small. She screams and cries and tells me I’m not in charge.

“What’s all that noise?” asks my mother.

“She’s making me go to my room,” cries Mackie. “For no reason.”

“Really, girls,” my mother says. “I’m trying to work.”

She goes into her room and shuts the door.

“Great,” I tell Mackie. “Now you made mom mad.”

“You did,” she says. “Just leave me alone.”

“No,” I say. “Tell me why you lied.”

“I didn’t,” she says. “Those women had kids sitting with them and I thought you were counting the kids. I was trying to help you.”

“Just go play with Liv and Hallie,” I tell her, and I head right back to the park.

I walk to the park feeling my heart beat loud. I’ve been watching the mourning mothers all summer long and I know them better than anyone else. I’m not at all afraid of what Mackie says because she doesn’t know the mothers at all, hasn’t spent the time with them I have. I breathe a

big sigh of relief when I see them still underneath their tree and I take my seat without hesitation. The leader is crying nice and loud, and the mother who lost two children is rubbing her back. The mother next to them lost her daughter only a few weeks ago, but she cries less than the other mothers. She sits up straight and nods at something the mother next to her is saying.

I count seven again and try to decide which one is missing. It's not the one with the turquoise backpack or the one who carries around a jar of iced tea. Not the one who carries embroidered cloth handkerchiefs around or the one with who doesn't like letting her legs touch the grass. I think for a moment and try to figure it out. When they're all together, I can easily recognize all of them without giving it a second thought, but now, looking at them, I can only tell that someone is missing.

I watch them for a while and imagine ghost-children sitting on their laps. I imagine shivering blue children all soaking wet with blood-shot chlorine eyes. I think I see one of the mothers hug someone small, but I realize it's only her jar of iced tea. The loud-crying mother looks up at me, and I feel myself shrink smaller than the bugs crawling beside me on the bench. I mouth *I'm sorry* without being quite sure of why and get up off the bench before any more of them have the chance to see me. I walk home quick and sorry, reminding myself that I don't belong or know them.

It doesn't hit me until I'm standing in front of my house that it's the mother who likes to stay very quiet, the thin wispy one who wears more necklaces than I own. That's the mother who's missing. I do know the mourning mothers, I tell myself.

I go inside and call out to my own mother. The house feels very still, impossibly silent. I look for my mother in her bedroom and the stillness is there, too. I look out the window and see

her sitting by herself on a lounge chair by the pool. She's holding a tall glass of orange soda with ice cubes floating all around. I walk out to the pool and she looks up at me with her gap-tooth grin. When we smile, people say we look the same. She's splotchy tan and her eyes look wild and tired all together, which is exactly how I feel.

"Good walk?" she asks.

"It was okay," I say. "Where's Mackie?"

"Aunt Julie picked her up to go play with the cousins. Liv and Hallie went too."

"Oh," I say. "How is she?"

"She's fine," she says. "Want to sit with me?"

I nod and put a towel down on the chair next to my mother. I sit down and look up at the sky, think of how wide, how impossibly blue it is. I don't think people talk about this often enough, how strange it is to be living underneath something so open. The pool always looks incredibly open to me too, especially down underneath.

I hop off my chair and run up to my room, find my favorite purple one-piece crumbled on the floor. I smell it and smile at the chlorine smell, smile at the smell of the sun dried into it. I run back down the stairs and out the door, run through the open gate of the pool and jump right in without even feeling for warmth. The bubbles move around me and I look up at the sun, think I can make out the whole wide-open sky and the form of my mother lying in her lounge chair.

I pop my head up above the water and hear the phone ringing inside.

"It's so loud," I say. "Is it always that loud?"

"It does sound loud," my mother says, but she doesn't get up.

"Should I go get it?" I ask her.

“No,” she says, but then it rings another time.

“For God’s sake,” she says.

I watch from the pool as my mother gets up off her chair and storms to the house. The ringing stops and the pool begins to feel very still, very cold. The water doesn’t move the way it usually does, and I start to feel closed in. I get out of the pool and find a sun-dried towel on the ground. I run inside wrapped in the towel, water dripping on the little stone path between the pool and our house. My mother is down on the kitchen floor, barely moving. The phone is sitting in between her knees and her face seems to be looking towards nothing at all.

“What is it?” I ask her.

“Hallie,” she says. “Hal.”

I ask again what it is, and she says the same thing. It’s not what she says that pulls me down to the floor along with her, but how. It feels like a new word, a new name. It leaves her mouth in a quick, sharp way, and suddenly it feels forbidden, like the worst word a person could say. I ask for something else, but this is all she can give. She won’t say drowned or dead or gone, just *Hallie*, *Hal*, *Hal*.

Summer’s been over for months, and still my mother refuses to join the mourning mothers. Mackie and Liv sleep in my room and my mother sleeps in hers with the door locked. At first, there were always people in the house. We had more food than we knew what to do with, but now all that food is gone. Now our faraway-relatives have flown back home and the house is back to being quiet. I let Mackie and Liv sleep in my room because it’s all I can think of doing. My mother has never looked so pale, so not there. The pool’s covered up and we don’t have orange soda

anymore. Mackie and I stay up late talking most nights while we watch Liv sleep between us. I've started letting Mackie talk to me about the mourning mothers.

"Did you see the skinny one try and get up today?" she asks. "I thought all those necklaces were going to topple her over."

"I know," I said. "I think about that all the time. The group leader didn't seem to be crying too loud today. I wonder if eventually she'll just stop."

"Maybe," says Mackie. "Maybe that's how it works."

"The one with the cloth handkerchiefs didn't look so good. Don't you think?"

"Yeah, she seemed worn out."

I look down at Liv and listen to hear quiet breathing.

"How were the kids?"

Mackie doesn't answer.

"How were they?" I ask again.

"I know you don't believe me," she says.

"No," I say. "You can tell me."

"They're sad," she says. "All I know is they're sad."

I don't say anything.

"I still haven't seen Hallie," she says. "I know that's what you're asking."

"Do you believe Aunt Julie?" I ask.

"About what?"

"About how the cover was on and the gate was closed. I heard her say Hallie was nowhere near the pool and then she was, that she got pulled down under through a crack in the cover. But it just doesn't make sense. Why would Aunt Julie lie?"

“She didn’t,” says Mackie.

“Did you see it?” I ask.

“No,” she says. “I’ve told you.”

“Why do you believe her then?”

“I just do,” says Mackie. “Of course I believe her.”

My mother hasn’t spoken to my aunt for three whole months. The house feels smaller than it used to, and the stillness has spread straight into me. I don’t spend much time outside anymore, at least not for fun. Mackie and I only go to see the mourning mothers about once a week, and it’s certainly not for fun. “Do you see Hallie?” I ask each time, and she slowly shakes her head no.

When I asked my mother to go sit with the mourning mothers, she sent me to my room. I asked her what she was talking about and then she said it again. She never used to send me to my room. She was never that kind of mother. I went to my room like she said and stared out my dirty window at the covered pool. She’d told me that day about the men coming to fill it in. She’d told me that soon, there would be no pool at all. I told her she wasn’t that kind of mother and she sent herself straight to her own room.

After Hallie got pulled under, I promised Mackie I’d never go see the mourning mothers without her, but today I do just that. Mackie’s napping with Liv and I’m here looking out at the circle under the weeping willow tree. I look at them and wonder if they’d let me join, if they’d let me be a mourning sister. I wonder if a little invisible Hallie would crawl into my lap and snuggle up against me, if she’d go from the icy-cold I’m sure she is to the warm I used to feel when I let the sun dry my face after swimming. The mourning mothers sit contained under the tree, and I

think they might have what I want. I want to feel contained, contained just like Hallie should get to feel. My great aunt Claire told me that Hallie's floating up in the sky now, which made all of me shiver and tighten. Hallie is too small to want to float up in the sky. She wouldn't be safe in a space so open.

I get up and walk home so I can sit next to Mackie and Liv as they sleep. When I get there, I hear something very loud and look out the window to see the men my mother promised would come. The men are filling the pool in, just like my mother said they would. I don't want to watch or linger. Instead, I run up the stairs and slide into my bed between Mackie and Liv. I lie next to them without any desire to move, getting up only to close the door tight around us.

THE GIRL WHO WISHED FOR WATER

I: The Girl Falls Down the Well

The girl watches as the rocky sides of the well close in tight around her. The girl doesn't know how she got here, only that this is where she is. She girl was sitting by the edge of the well only moments ago. She was sitting close to the edge without realizing that she was going to fall and fall fast. The girl is small with sorry edges that will only turn sorrier once she reaches the bottom of the well. The girl makes the mistake of looking down before she hits the bottom and notices a striking absence of water, which only makes the well feel tighter. The girl closes her eyes and tries to get ready for what will come next. The girl wonders if she'll be able to remember her fall after she's hit the bottom. The fall feels long enough that she thinks she just might, and yet she's so very keen on forgetting.

II: The Girl Forgets Again

The girl is keen on forgetting many things, though some things are more easily forgotten than others. The girl's mother was difficult to forget at first, but once she forgot her she couldn't get her back even if she wanted to. On the days when the girl wants to remember her mother, she must sit in her room and squeeze her eyes tight. Even then, she can only see bits. Some days the girl remembers such ugly bits that she vows to never remember her mother again, but then the next week she's right back to it, eyes shut tight and mind racing backwards. When the girl fell, her mother entered her mind for what felt like a while. The girl let this memory in, may have even wanted it, but she can't be sure because the feeling passed when she met the cruel emptiness of the bottom of the well. With that, the memory was gone once more.

III: The Girl Gets a Craving

The girl has a terrible ache in her head and she's been thinking only of water ever since her head hit the cold empty bottom of the well. She can't seem to stop wishing for water whether it's boiling water, rushing water, or still, stuck water. The girl wishes for a waterbed and burns her raincoat in the woods, sure she'll never need it again. She jumps around in the bathtub and sleeps with wet washcloths on her face. When the girl tells her father about her new desire for water, he tells her this doesn't sound one bit like her. She regrets telling him anything at all.

IV: The Girl Meets a Snake

The girl is not afraid of snakes – not at all. The girl hasn't thought much about being afraid of snakes or *not* being afraid of snakes, because up until this point there was no reason for it. She's gone for a walk in the forest and the snake is suddenly right in front of her, hanging from a dead tree. The girl can tell that the snake wants to get close to her, and she finds this odd. The girl is in the forest to get away from her father because she doesn't like the way he moves around the house with no clear place to go. The snake, the girl realizes, moves a lot like her father. The girl doesn't want to get close to the snake even though she is not afraid. The girl doesn't have to be afraid of something to not want to get close to it.

V: The Girl Speaks Loud and Clear

The girl's father loves pacing the floor. He also loves pretending to talk to the girl when he's really talking only to himself. When the girl's father moves, he never ends up anywhere. She often wonders if his blood has a slight chill to it or if their organs are made out of stone, as his words and way of walking are both so very cold. He never speaks sentences she hasn't heard already,

doesn't know how to use words to make even a heart move. The girl tries to be as still as she can be. *What do you think of that?* he asks, and the girl doesn't answer. *Yes*, he says. *Yes, I agree*. The girl tries to be as still as she can be, but since she fell down the well she's been craving a level of movement that she isn't allowed to have. *And what do you think about this?* her father asks. *Well*, she begins, and the unfamiliar sound of her voice makes her father nearly jump.

VI: The Girl Meets a Waterfall

The girl bites her tongue hard each time her father speaks to her, but she can only take so much of this. She decides to run off for the day, but she doesn't want to go back into the forest in case the snake is there. Instead, she finds a more open, trust-worthy place to walk, a trail right by her house. She walks along the trail for hours and decides to keep walking until she doesn't recognize everything. Everything is always so familiar, the girl finds, and wouldn't it be nice to splash in a puddle or a stream that she's never met? The girl finds unfamiliar ground. She hears unfamiliar music, unfamiliar vibrations. The girl walks down rocky steps and feels certain that they were designed to take her off the trail. The girl can smell water. The music gets louder, and the waterfall reveals itself. She loves the way this water moves. It is certain water, water that knows exactly where it's going. The girl reaches out and feels it move towards her.

VII: The Girl Makes an Appointment

The girl is determined to heal on her own, but her head is getting worse and worse. The girl calls the family doctor up but when he asks for her symptoms she draws a blank. *Chills?* he asks her. *A cough, perhaps? Or is your stomach aching? Is it your back? Your feet?* The girl can't remember what's wrong but she can remember what isn't wrong, and none of the doctor's suggestions are

what she's calling about. The girl closes her eyes and sees the edge of the well, but she decides to not make herself remember.

VIII: The Girl Waits

The girl has an appointment set up with the doctor, though she still can't remember quite why. The girl blames the doctor for this, as he is a doctor and doctors are meant to ask the right questions. This doctor is old with wobbly hands. He runs a very small practice entirely on his own. This doctor has no lady to answer the phone, no intern to make him look important. The girl wishes she could go to a different doctor, but she's a part of a family and this is her family's doctor. The girl knocks on the door and the doctor answers it. This doesn't feel like the kind of door to just open, and the doctor seems happy that she knocked. The doctor tells her to take a seat and wait, but the girl has no idea of what she's waiting for. The magazines in this room are stale and dusty and there are no other patients waiting to be seen. The doctor sits at the front of the room on a flimsy table and pretends to write something down. The girl's head aches and aches.

IX: The Girl Gets Her Head Fixed

Aching: yes. The girl's head is aching. The girl has gone to the doctor because of her head. She's cracked her head, she thinks, though she can't be certain. The girl thinks she may have cracked her head because of the noise she heard when she made contact with the bottom of the well. If only there had been water in the well, the girl thinks, then she wouldn't be sitting there in that strange little room. The girl exhales and crosses her arms. She's afraid of what the doctor will find. She's been wearing the same black bandanna around her head ever since she fell and she's become horribly afraid of taking it off. She's only just remembered she's wearing the bandanna, as it's

begun to feel like a part of her. The girl waits and waits, but in the end it's worth it. The doctor fixes her head like it's nothing and soon she's on her way, bandanna-free. The doctor never tells her if she cracked her head, only that she's all fixed. The girl can't remember what he does, but she doesn't need to. The girl is so very thankful to be fixed.

X: The Girl Doesn't Feel Right

The girl has been stuck in bed for two days even though her head has been fixed. She is still so very thankful to the doctor for fixing her, and she prays he doesn't find out about this little episode. He's a very good doctor, and she knows he knows her better than she knows herself. He said this to her, which she suspected he got from her father. The girl's father is always saying things like this. The girl asks her father to bring her water, but he tells her she doesn't know what she wants. *Please*, she begs. *I know my own self*. The girl's mother also claimed to know herself, but when the girl tries to remember her, she only remembers her father. The girl wants to keep this thought buried away and forgotten, but all the time stuck in bed has made her head swirl. When the girl's mother acted like her own self, the girl's father would fix this, though the girl can't remember how. She remembers only that it worked.

XI: The Girl Gets a Visitor

The girl is trying to sleep when she hears something tapping at her window. The snake is asking for permission to come into her bedroom, and since she doesn't know how to say no she says yes with a great big grin on her thinning face. The girl was already thin, so her thinning face is quite striking. The snake notices it right away and asks her if she's hungry. The girl says yes. The snake says he's hungry as well, and slivers on over to her.

XII: The Girl Remembers a Pain

As the snake moves towards the girl, she remembers a sharp pain she once felt in her foot, a pain that was incomparable to any pain behind or in front of her. She remembers her mother pulling the pain right out and showing her the dead little body, telling her it didn't mean to hurt her, that we can hurt others and others can hurt us without anyone wanting it. She remembers her mother putting the dead innocent little body in a jar and tying it with a thin yellow piece of string. She still sees her finding a lid and letting the girl make a bow from the string. *Look at that sweet little creature through the loop*, she said. *Look through the loop and it won't be the same thing that made you hurt. It's different now, see?* This, the girl decides, was her mother being herself.

XIII: The Girl Tries to Answer

The snake is wrapped around the girl's body. She wonders if this may be a good time for her to become afraid of snakes. The girl asks the snake what he's going to do, but he doesn't answer. He asks if he's hurting her and she says yes, but she tells him he's only hurting her a little. Truth be told, the snake is terribly heavy. He is crushing her chest and making her dizzy, but she reminds herself that he doesn't mean to be hurting her. She holds her hands in front of her face and makes an "O" with her fingers. She looks at one little bit of him and tries to see a different snake. *Am I hurting you?* he asks. *Maybe a little*, she says. *I'm sorry to tell you but yes, yes, you are hurting me.* The snake doesn't move. He wraps himself tighter around her. *Am I hurting you?* he asks. *Yes*, she says. *That's much too tight.* He gets even tighter and the girl feels less and less right. *Am I hurting you?* he asks again. *No*, she says. She tries to make another "O" with her fingers, but the snake wraps himself around her arms and hisses loud in her ear.

XIV: The Girl Feels Just Fine

The girl decides she can't spend another day in bed. The snake could come back again, she worries, or her mother could come back into her mind uninvited. There are many reasons not to stay in bed, she decides, many things lingering that are of no help to her. The girl sets out to find the waterfall once more. She wants to think of water, wants to spend all her time in it. The girl doesn't care if the doctor says he fixed her. She knows herself and right now, water is all she wants. She feels just fine, better than fine. The girl knows exactly what she wants, and right now all she wants is to move confidently ahead.

XV: The Girl Listens Hard

The girl has found the waterfall. She can't remember quite how she got here, but this is where she is. The water hums soft all around her and squirrels, chipmunks, and a couple of deer peek out from the bit of forest by the rock she's resting on. The rock is hard and hot in the white sun. The girl begins to freckle and feels her body become loose. She looks up at the birds all resting in their nests but she can't hear them sing. She hears only the waterfall and she wonders if the waterfall can hear her as well. *I know you're sorry*, she says as loud as she can. *I know you didn't mean to let me fall.*

XVI: The Girl Plans Ahead

Each time the girl searches for water, she feels as if she's protecting her future-self. She feels certain that there was supposed to be water in the well, and if she can only find the water calling to her now, the water she's been craving, she thinks she'll always have something waiting there to break her fall. The girl's mother had nothing waiting to break her fall. If anything, she lived her

life waiting to be pushed. When the girl's mother died, her father stood over her dead frame and told the girl not to come too close. The girl's mother wanted to die, he told her, but the girl knew her mother had learned to want everything she was told to want. The girl has chosen to forget this, and yet she knows to worry that she might someday remember.

XVII: The Girl's Father Gets Too Close

When the girl gets home, her father comes up to her room and demands to know where she's been. She tells him she's only been out walking and he sits down on her bed. He sits down right on her leg, but he doesn't mean to be hurting her so she doesn't say anything. The girl stays quiet as he gets much too close. *Where were you?* he asks again. The girl tells him about the water, how it's all she wants or thinks about. She doesn't want to be telling him this, but she feels him moving even closer towards her. The girl's father says she doesn't sound right. *You want to stay in bed*, he tells her, but the girl tells him she only wants water. The girl's father asks her if she knows herself better than he does. *Yes*, she says, trying to hear her own voice. *I know myself*.

XVIII: The Girl Does as She's Told

The girl's father leaves her room only to come back with two big pitchers of water. He sits back down on her bed and tells her to drink both pitchers. The girl drinks half a pitcher before gasping for air. She grabs her stomach and looks up at him. The girl's father puts the second pitcher of water down on the floor. He tells her to prove she knows herself and tips the first pitcher into her mouth. She drinks and drinks it as her stomach grows fuller. The water moves down her throat like a waterfall, but not one she wants to get near. She imagines rocks in the bottom of her stomach

and a forest sprouting from the walls inside of her. Her father hands her the second pitcher and she drinks until she can't remember what it is that she wants.

XIX: The Girl is Not Her Mother

The girl's stomach still hurts when she wakes and she feel as if she'll never want water again. She can hear an owl outside and she can see stars stretched through the sky. The girl hears her father stir. He has grown tired of her, she knows he has. He's grown tired of her just like he grew tired of her mother. The girl suddenly finds herself running down the stairs and out the door, through the streets and into the open trees. She runs faster than she ever has before, and soon she's in the forest. The girl is not her mother. Unlike her mother, she knows how to fall alone.

XX: The Girl Gets Stopped

The girl is running through the forest, running towards the waterfall, when the snake springs down in front of her. *Please move*, she says. *I have places to be*. He says, *No. I won't. I want to wrap myself around you again, remember that?* The girl tells the snake that he is hurting her. He's hurting her head, her thoughts, her plans. He is making something very simple impossible, and he is hurting her. The girl has had enough even before the snake wraps himself around her again. She feels his mean coils and bites him as hard as she can. She savors his scales and feels like someone else. The snake asks her to stop but she cannot hear him. She asks what he said and he says it again, but she cannot hear him. He has one small bite-mark, one tiny girl-sized half-moon on a massive black snake. The girl asks him if he's all right and he says no. The girl stands on the snake and asks again if he's all right. The snake does not reply.

XXI: The Girl Follows a Better Sound

The girl walks past the hurt snake and sees her father all wrapped in his blankets, wrapped up and just begging to get away. She sees him wrapped up and falling off the bed, falling off the bed and hitting his head hard. The girl doesn't know what will become of her father, only that he won't choose what becomes of her. The girl decides to lie down and think of something else. She lets herself fall onto the forest floor and the hard thump only makes her wish for water once more. The girl never had anyone there to catch her, but she tells herself the water isn't to blame for this. She can't choose what will become of her, she decides, but she can try to come close. She gets up off the ground and walks, does not run, towards the distance hum of the waterfall.

XXII: The Girl Falls Forward

When falling, the girl grabs onto the water and lets it become a rope in her hand. She holds on tight and swings slowly down. Her head and stomach become very light. She looks down and does not feel her mother enter her mind, looks up and sees only the animals gathered around the top of the waterfall. The animals look down at what she once was, what she is, what she is falling into. The deer nod and the birds cry loud and sweet. The black bear roars and, even submerged in the white flow of water, the girl can hear it. She tries roaring back at the bear. She cries loud and sweet. She feels her legs melt into the walls of foaming mist. Her eyes produce water and then she becomes water. At the bottom of the waterfall, a circle of white foam emerges. If you look through it quite carefully, you just may be able to see her.

THE WAVES THAT CAME TOO CLOSE

If I think quite carefully, I can just begin to see it: I'd move straight through waves, wouldn't flinch or plug my ears. I'd move the way the water told me to move, wouldn't question its push. I can see it until a wave comes and knocks this thinking over, until a fake wave pushes me back to my safe, still bed.

This is why I stay away: the ocean is loud and deep. This is why I stay on land, far away from it. I don't care for waves, for wildness. I explain this to him, but he keeps buying me swimsuits. He leaves them tucked in the bushes outside my house because he thinks this will get me to the beach.

I keep the swimsuits scattered throughout my room so I can see them from every angle. They're my fascination, my art, my little collection. The first swimsuit he gives me, a black one-piece, is laid across my desk, poking out from my books and schoolwork. The next, a navy strapless two-piece, hangs from my bedpost.

The next swimsuits he leaves me are smaller and brighter, so I try to find special places for them: the coral halter with the tiny bottoms hangs from a nail on the wall, the pink and lavender knit bikini is taped across the headboard of my bed, and the neon green top with thong bottoms all covered in black stars stays in my closet where it will be safe.

There are more swimsuits hanging all along my wall, but I choose to lose count. I don't care for posters or photos on my walls because I'm constantly changing my mind, changing my favorite

band, changing my friends. I like how constant the swimsuits are, how even though they're all different, they could stay up there forever and always seem to match me.

I don't wear any of the swimsuits. I tried one on, the knit bikini, and something inside me turned away. I do not care for things loud and deep.

He is not my boyfriend. The girls at school are against this. They love the word: *boyfriend*. They say it loud and often. Megan has been seeing Todd for one month. Lanie has been with Ben for three. Amber has only just begun to see Drew.

I filled the knit bikini out well and held my hands there. I know he would like to do the same, but he hasn't. Everyone thinks he has or that I should let him. My friends have all already done it, all of it, though I don't believe them when they said they're enlightened.

"It's unlike anything else," says Amber.

"I agree," says Lanie.

"I don't know how you haven't yet," Megan tells me.

"I don't either," says Lanie. "It's beyond words."

"I've got a word," says Jenna. "Enlightenment."

"Yes," they all agree. "Yes: enlightenment."

I don't tell my friends that I doubt they know what enlightened means. Truth be told, I don't think they've been or ever will be enlightened. I know this because I was once enlightened. When I thought I might be enlightened I felt a hand reach behind me and grab my back. I remember that

the sky was hot and dark and ocean waves were reaching in too close. There was a lightning bolt in the sky and even after it should have left it stayed and stayed. I felt something inside me turn away and then I turned and no one was standing there. I looked back to the sky and the lightning bolt was still there, like I was staring at a painting. The hand grabbed me again, and this time it reached down lower.

I'm not certain that I know what enlightenment is, only that I was enlightened. I did not turn around the second time I was touched. I just stood there and looked at that lightning bolt stuck in the sky, watched as it hovered above the ocean. I closed my eyes and imagined I was in a nice green field full of dry grass. When I was young my teacher told me to do this anytime I felt afraid. Truth be told, I'm not sure I was afraid. I'm not sure a person can be afraid when they're so busy being unsure. The only thing I'm sure of is that my moment of enlightenment was the thing that made me stop wanting people nearby.

He hasn't learned how little it takes to push me past wanting a person nearby. *Come to the beach,* he says. *Come to this party. Climb down your window wearing only what you have on now, come be wild and free.*

Come be wild and free. Come find true enlightenment. Yes, he wants me to be wild. But free?

I don't know how to put it other than this: without him, I am a person, and with him, I am not. Despite all this, I can't stop checking the bush outside my house for more swimsuits. I check

anytime I get home from school, always with a beating heart. I'm embarrassed by this, by my beating heart. I'm embarrassed by it even though I'm the only one present to witness it.

When I tried on the knit bikini, I was not embarrassed. I looked in the mirror and stood taller than I ever had before. I did not cross my arms over my forming chest to hide all the growing. I wanted it all to show. It all looked right. It all looked too right. I began to want him close by. I imagined him seeing me like this, too close. I looked out my window and saw the ocean, noticed the sly way it moved. I realized it was the only thing I could hear or see. I covered myself up with a towel and put the bikini back where it belonged.

Of course he finds it odd that I hang the swimsuits in special places instead of wearing them. Of course he asks me to put them on. "Do you hear that?" he asks. "Hear the waves right out there, right across the street? Let's just run right in, right into the waves. What are you so afraid of?"

I don't answer him when he asks me this because *What are so you afraid of?* is not a question that wants an answer. *What are you so afraid of?* is a trick, a trick way of saying *Don't be so afraid*. It really isn't a question at all. For example, when I was a child I liked eating sardines right from the can and somehow, god only knows why, my mother let me bring cans of sardines to school for lunch. *How can you eat that?* the kids would ask. Only they meant, *You shouldn't*. But I was a child, and as a child I still knew how to listen, hear, hold a sardine above my mouth and say, *Like this*.

My friends have also asked me this not-question, and I've stopped trying to answer. For one thing, I know they don't want an answer, and for another, I wouldn't know where to begin.

"What are you so afraid of?" asks Lanie. "The pain?"

"You have to do it some time," says Megan, "and he seems nice enough."

"Are you afraid you'll grow feelings?" Amber wants to know.

"That he won't want you?" asks Lanie.

"Is that what you're so afraid of?" they ask.

I'm not surprised when he calls me and asks if I want to go to the beach, never am surprised by this. I'm only surprised when I agree. It's like I've seen it all happen before it has the chance to. He brings a blanket like I knew he would. He watches me take off my clothes and lie down in the green bikini with black stars. He gets on all fours and holds himself up right above me, breathes heavy on my neck. He moves down lower, but never all the way down. He kisses my stomach and holds his face there. He breathes on me and I know there must be something there, must be some noise escaping his body as he does this, but I'm only able to hear the ocean waves. He lies right on top of me and my breasts ache, but not in the sweet way I've heard a chest can ache.

"Wait," I say, "I've changed my mind."

"Okay," he says. "Should we leave?"

"I picked the wrong one," I say. "I've picked the wrong swimsuit."

"Is that all?" he asks.

"Yes," I say. "It's just the wrong one. It just doesn't fit."

We walk back to my house and he says he'll wait outside. I run upstairs and peel off the green bikini all sprinkled in stars. I look around and think of removing one of the swimsuits from its home, but I can't imagine disturbing any of them. I run down the stairs and out the door wrapped in only a towel. He's sitting on the grass looking out at the ocean.

"Not there," I say, pointing back towards the beach.

"What about your room?" he asks, and I shake my head.

"Your house," I say. "Everything else is too close by."

He doesn't ask, never asks, what I mean. He doesn't try to touch me as we walk towards his house, doesn't try to walk anywhere near me. He doesn't ask if my feet are okay on the hot sidewalk, doesn't say a word about the towel I'm wrapped in, doesn't say anything for the half hour it takes us to walk to his house.

"No," I say when he pulls me towards his room. "Too close."

"We can't use my parents' room," he says. "We can't."

I point to the room all the way down the hallway. The door's open ajar and I can see a small bed in it.

"The guestroom?" he asks. "Why?"

"That's the room I want," I say. "I want it there."

He doesn't ask or argue. We go inside and he pushes me down on the bed and I feel myself fall deeper than I knew I could, hear a violent rushing all around me.

"Wait," I say. "Is this a waterbed?"

"Yes," he says. "Is that okay?"

“No,” I say. “This won’t work. What about in the grass? What about in the nice, steady grass? Wouldn’t that be good?”

“This won’t work?” he asks.

I tell him no, it won’t work, but suddenly the towel is off. *Not the beach*, I think I hear him say. *Not the beach, not your room, not my room, nowhere will work. Wrong place, wrong swimsuit, wrong moment. That room is too close, this swimsuit doesn’t fit right, my hand doesn’t feel right there, or there, or there, and now the bed’s no good? What are you so afraid of?*

He might say all this, probably does, but there’s no way for me to be sure. There’s no way for me to be sure, because all I can hear is the water moving around inside the bed, the water throwing itself all around, or us throwing it all around. I’m not sure if there’s a difference anymore. I think the water in the bed should feel closed in, but it doesn’t. It rushes forever loud and deep.

Find enlightenment, I tell myself. *Find a way to want what you’ve been told you want. Be the thing you promised you’d be without knowing you were promising it.*

THE SISTER WHO COULDN'T SEE

The three sisters promise without knowing why they're promising. *Promise you'll listen,* their mother says, *and you'll be able to see.* The three young sisters lean in towards the stream, trying to see. When the third sister says she can't, her mother rubs her back and asks her to look again. *You'll see them if you listen,* she says. The first and second sisters lean closer in and say they see. *Right there,* they said. *Just like mother said, we see.*

Listen close, and then you'll see. Listen close, and you'll see just this: round bellies facing the moon, lips perfectly still, no tear shed, a little body emerging from each mother, no baby crying either, all of them just floating, beaming, living.

The three sisters come back to the stream the next day and the day after that. They sit there each day, trying to decide how much they know. When they look into the stream they see rocks without algae, fish who never die, and water so clear, so blue, that it's hard not to believe the rest. The three sisters have heard the story multiple times, but rarely the same way. Sometimes, the women are said to have built the stream. Other times, and far more often, the stream is said to be a gift from the forest. Every time, though, the stream is said to have worked.

The sisters have heard the story from their mother, their aunts, their grandmother and older cousins. The story is told before bed, when their father is asleep, and the sisters lean towards each other and whisper, *Is that part true?* and, *What about that?* The first sister believes every word. The second can't make up her mind. The third believes in none of it. *How can we know?* she asks. *How can we be sure?*

The mother turns to the third sister and tells her she'll understand someday, though this never happens. The third sister goes to the stream as often as the first and second sister, but to her,

it looks only like a stream. Yes, the rocks are always clean, but she sees no way to be sure that the fish never die, nor that this ultra-clear, ultra-blue water is something special. The third sister feels this way throughout her childhood, but she soon learns how to silence her doubt. She goes to the stream with her sisters and they sit, look, say they see.

The way their mother tells the story is this: long ago, though she won't say when, all of the expectant mothers began to die. Instead of one life added to the world, two were taken, and mother and baby were mourned. The forest near their homes felt for the mothers, though no one can say why. The forest conjured up a stream, a stream to stop all the dying. The mothers woke with sudden knowledge of this stream, but no doctor or husband believed a word of what they said. The women kept asking to go to the stream, but because the men kept them inside, the deaths went on. Finally, the sisters' mother claims, a group of expectant mothers made it to the stream, and out their babies came, alive and well. When the three sisters ask their mother if the story is true, she says she doesn't know. She says she doesn't know until the night before she dies. On this night, she looks to the sisters and says, *It's true, every word. Listen well and you'll see.*

The mother dies the very next day, falls right on the kitchen floor with a heart that's forgotten how to beat. On the night of their mother's death, the grandmother wraps the sisters up. She wraps them with blankets, with words, with a gentle touch passed down for years. She pulls the blankets from old shelves and tells the story on a loop, tells it through once and then again, then once more and still once more again. She only stops for a sip of tea, then on she goes, about the first ones to find the stream, how the very first woman was her mother's mother's mother's mother's mother's mother, or something further or closer than that, how the girls should not cry, how their mother is listening too. When she hears the grandfather's footsteps, she holds her breath

and stops, waits to make sure he isn't coming up the stairs, hears him put a book back on the shelf and walk back to his little sofa, then onward she goes, acts like it's all new, like it's the first time she's said, *The women, for the first time, had given birth, not dead.*

Then again the story starts, the sixth or seventh or eighth time that night, the sisters have lost count. They nestle close, the third thinking of believing, but somehow not able to. *Again*, they all cry. The grandmother clears her throat, rubs the three little backs, and once again, begins. *Once, right here, right where we live, something terrible happened.* The second sister sits up, can't help it when she says, *What was it?* The third sister stays lying down low, can't understand this one bit. She wants to say, *We already know*, but instead stays quiet and watches the moon outside, doesn't listen to her grandmother's words. Her voice is so old, she thinks, so hoarse, and she also pauses too often, waits too long to get to the end. Her mother, when she told it, was steady, never too slow or too fast, never let her voice waiver this way.

The story is over once more and the sisters still don't want to sleep. *Please*, the sisters beg. *Tell it again.* Their eyes go shiny as hair rises on their arms. They can't stop thinking of their mother's dead form, the way they found it on the floor. They want to hear of mothers not dead.

Once, right here, right where we live, something terrible happened.

What was it?

It was the mothers, the sweet, expectant mothers. Those mothers all round and full of life, so ready to give birth to their babies.

What happened to the mothers?

Well, the mothers all began to die when they went to deliver their babies. Now, this was known to happen from time to time, still is known to happen from time to time, but this was not one

mother or two mothers or three or four or even five mothers. This was every single mother who tried to give birth to a baby.

But what about the babies?

They all died too. Right when the mother was ready to have her baby, she would die along with the poor little thing she'd been carrying all those months. No one could explain it. The doctors tried everything, everything they could think of, but each and every mother who tried to give birth ended up dead with a priest hovering over her like a vulture, all too ready to see her go.

The grandmother stops for a sip of tea. The third sister listens close this time, for the loop playing in her head, the one of her mother lying dead on the floor, the three sisters running down the stairs to find her like that, is far worse than the loop of the story. The grandmother's pause feels too long, and the first sister can't help but cry out, *And then one night?*

Yes, says the grandmother. And then one night, after months and months of this terrible string of deaths, the forest began to weep. Now, you can often find beads of water on the trees after it rains, and it looked something like this.

But this was different?

Yes, this was different. This was different because the water began to collect on the leaves without one drop of water falling from the sky. The forest, you see, could feel the heaviness of all these deaths, and it began to weep. It wept slowly at first, but then, as the deaths went on, it began to sob, it began to produce more and more water. It parted the ground to create a space for all its tears to lie, and with all its sadness, it gave the women a stream.

The first woman to find the stream was your mother from years past, but she is still your mother just as she is still mine. She awoke in the middle of the night, and without knowing how, she walked right into the forest with the baby she'd been carrying all those months, the baby she

was sure she'd lose. The forest guided her deeper and deeper in, until finally she saw the clear blue glow of the stream, and she knew. She went home and forgot what she had seen, but then the next night the forest called her once again, and with her it called another expectant mother, then another with the next night and still another with the next. Soon, each and every expectant mother knew about the stream, and though they were afraid, they decided that they must tell their husbands and doctors.

The mothers told the men about the stream, explained that if they gave birth in this wonderful gift from the forest, then they would be able to keep their babies along with their own lives. The men asked them how they knew this, and the women explained that they simply knew. The women offered to show the men the stream, but the men believed the women to be ill and kept them at home. The women tried to leave but were locked up inside, forced to see more doctors and then, when it was time for them to give birth, these poor mothers lost their lives.

As they watched the others die, the remaining expectant mothers, only six of them left, vowed to run away to the forest and live by the stream until their babies were ready to come. These clever mothers escaped in the night and ran away, lived on the stream as planned, and then, all on the same night, three of those women, one of them your mother from years past, were ready to have their babies.

What happened next was this: the three mothers not yet ready to have their babies helped the three screaming women into the stream, and suddenly their sharp pains were gone. The mothers floated on their backs, round bellies facing the moon, lips completely still, not a single tear shed, a silent, peaceful child emerging from each mother. No mother or baby cried in pain or left the earth; all of them just lie there floating, beaming, living. The women, for the first time, had given birth, not dead.

But what happened next? cries the second sister.

Well, says the grandmother, *some of the women were lucky enough to make it to the stream, and still others were not. The rest, I'm afraid, we don't know, but please just remember this: Even when the women returned home with their babies, the men did not believe them.*

So we need to listen? the first sister asks. *Use our ears and minds and not just our eyes?*

The grandmother nods.

But how could something so terrible happen? the third sister asks. *Not the women dying, but the men, how they didn't believe. I think they'd help them, that's what I can't see. I think the men would believe.*

The grandmother lowers her head and takes the third sister's hands. There will be other nights to answer, she decides, but tonight is not that night.

And what about now? asks the third sister, still reaching deep. *Why don't the women die anymore now, even without the stream? Why didn't our mother have us there?*

Because this is how we live, says the grandmother. *Not as bad as it was, but this, this is how we live. Listen to what's around you, and you will see.*

The grandmother does not say anything else.

The first sister asks to hear it again, and the grandmother nods her head. She tells the three sisters to sit perfectly still, peaks in her bedroom to find her husband fast asleep, closes the bedroom door just to be sure, then creeps back into the sisters' little room. She clears her throat, takes a sip of tea, and once again begins.

The years pass quick, and soon the grandmother passes on. Soon the sisters are left with only themselves, plus the stream. The three sisters sit by the stream each day and each night. They

sit by the stream as their waists go in, as fat leaves their cheeks and finds their chests, as their hips widen and their legs grow long. They sit by the stream and look for years, try to see what their mother once said was there. The first sister, now nineteen, has never been surer. The second sister agrees. The third sister, looking deep, only lies and says she sees. When she looks, the third sister still sees only a stream moving ahead, sees nothing down underneath. Sometimes she sees her reflection, but as far as she can tell, this is the only woman in there.

One day, looking up, the third sister sees a woman in the place of the girl she knew to be the first sister, and with this, she notices that her waist has widened. The third sister turns pink and covers her face when the first sister asks why this is. *Fine*, she says. *Yes. Yes, sometimes I do like the hardness of men, sometimes I do like how very soft men can make me feel. And yes, I let him get close enough that someone new is coming.* The third sister then begins to weep.

Tell the story, says the second sister. *I bet she'll like it.*

What makes you so sure it's a she? asks the third sister.

The first and second sister only turn and say, *Of course she's a she, of course she is.*

The first sister cries into the stream and throws pebbles against the trunks of trees.

The second sister cries along and hugs her sister's waist taking care not to squeeze. She whispers, *Once, right here, something terrible happened.*

The third sister holds her own waist tight. She hears this line ringing, this line spoken so clear, too clear. *What would Grandmother or our mother say?* she wants to ask, though she knows it's already ringing in her ears.

Ready? asks the first sister.

The third sister looks up and nods, decides to look at the trees instead of in the stream.

Once, right here, something terrible happened.

What, oh what, oh what, oh what was it? asks the third sister. Her sisters both look up, staring long and hard.

I just wanted to tell the story, says the first sister. *Is that okay with you?*

Of course, says the third sister. *I was only saying my line. I'm ready to hear about the doctors, priests, and husbands, how they were all so mean.*

The first sisters tells her to go home, tells her she's in no mood for that today.

Let's just hear it, says the second sister, *but can you tell it like Lila did?*

Lila was wrong, says the first sister. *She just told it the way Aunt Sage did.*

Right, says the second sister. *And we also tell it the way our mother did. But how do we know?*

Our mother and Aunt Sage both heard it from Grandmother, and Grandmother told it our mother's way. Besides, how could a bunch of pregnant women build a stream all by themselves?

How could a stream make the mothers and babies stop dying? asks the third sister. *And why wouldn't the men believe? The story's not right, if you ask me.*

That's not the point, says the first sister.

Let's just hear it, says the second sister. *Tell it whichever way you want.*

None of them are true, says the third sister.

The second sister, calm and sure, clears her throat and stands. *Enough,* she says.

The first and third sisters argue, but the second sister says it again: *Enough.*

All of them are true, the second sister says. *Even if you can't see in. They're all around, all true, truer than just words said. Don't you see?* She points so strong it seems as if she's pointing to all the world, to everything all around them. *All of them are true,* she says again. *Just listen and you'll see.*

Each time the sisters come to the stream in the days that follow, the third sister watches the growing waist in front of her. It always looks the same, she thinks, and yet she knows it to be changing.

Round bellies facing the moon, the first sister says, holding hers tight. *Lips perfectly still. No tear shed. A happy, silent baby born from each mother. All of them floating. All of them beaming. All of them living.* She doesn't look at her sisters sitting in front of her as she speaks, nor does she look down at the river. She only looks down to the one she's speaking to. She tells the story breathing heavy and deep, holding onto the baby swimming inside. The first sister looks at the tightening fabric surrounding her stomach and thinks she might see the growing.

As the fabric grows tighter, the first sister's storytelling voice only gets clearer, too clear for the third sister, but clearer nonetheless. She lets her voice rise where she sees it fit, then fall, twist, turn, move all the way to, *The mothers, for the first time, had given birth, not dead.*

Soon, it's the second sister saying it, the third sister touching the first sister's forehead and saying it also, no longer concerned with trues or falses, only concerned with seeing a small body emerge. *The mothers, for the first time, had given birth, not dead*, says the second sister. She takes one small breathe before, *Once, long ago, right where we live, where we now give birth to healthy living babies with our own hearts all still beating just right, something terrible happened.*

Where is the doctor? asks the first sister.

What was it? asks the third sister.

It was the mothers, says the second sister.

Where is the doctor? asks the first sister.

What about the mothers? asks the first sister.

Where is he? asks the third sister. *He said he'd come right away.*

They began to lose their lives when they went to have their babies. Now, this was known to happen from time to time, still is known to happen from time to time, but this was not one mother or two mothers or three or four or even five mothers. This was every single mother who tried to give birth to a baby.

Where is that doctor? He said he would be here. He told me to wait right here for him.

What about the babies? asks the third sister.

They all died too. Right when the mother was ready to have her baby, she would die along with the poor little thing she'd been carrying all those months. No one could explain it. The doctors tried everything, everything they could think of, but each and every mother who tried to give birth ended up dead.

He told me to stay right here. He said he would be here.

The third sister begins to scream. Blood moves from her body, and the two sisters pull her dress up, tell her to get ready in voices unsure.

We need the doctor, says the first sister. The blood moves from her body too quick. It runs down the mattress and meets her quilt, the ones she's had since she was born.

He's here, says the second sister. *I see him walking up.*

I need him, says the first sister. *Now.*

The doctor comes in and tells the second and third sister to wait outside the bedroom. The sisters look at the stream of blood and ask him if the first sister will live.

She'll be fine, he says. *Now move away and give her some space.*

The second and third sisters leave the room and listen in through the door.

Look, says the second sister. A stream of blood trickles underneath the door and runs around their ankles, then runs in a circle back into the bedroom. The third sister feels her insides shift. The screaming continues, then stops. They open the door and peak inside. The doctor is standing over the first sister, holding a silent baby. The blood lies on the floor in a neat round stream.

I'll give you a minute, says the doctor, *to say goodbye*.

The second and third sister nod and look down at the first sister's dead frame.

She said she was ready to have it, the third sister says. *You said you'd come quick*.

That's not it, says the doctor. *Twenty minutes wouldn't change a thing. Just think of it as a thing that happened, a thing that would happen no matter what I did*.

I don't believe it, says the second sister.

She didn't seem very ready, says the doctor. *And clearly she was not*.

The doctor leaves, taking the still baby with him. The sisters find a mop and watch as the blood splits into more streams, streams of pink soapy water.

Is he sending someone over to take her? asks the third sister. *To help us?*

I don't know, says the second sister. She looks down at the dead sister and breathes in very deep. *All true*, she says. *All too true*.

The two sisters stand there in silence and watch the pink stream move towards them, then away. They watch it move down the stairs and out the front door, watch it leave the house and run away far. Away to the forest, the third sister thinks. Away to the forest so the forest can weep. They watch it move and, without shifting or thinking or speaking one word, not a single word, the third sister sees. She knows only then that she's heard it, seen it, many times before, only now it has a rusty pink that moves through her, and now there's a woman staring up at her, not begging

her to listen, not able to speak, quiet as a forgotten stream. Now she sees without being able to look anywhere else.

WATER SONNET II

The Girls can't make a move without coming up thin
So they dry off and sit low and lower their heads
They're not children, they whisper
But grown Girls who know fear

No more vastness, they promise
No more doubting words shared
No more crashing, they holler
No more waves, drains, or wells

No more falling down deep
Only sitting real still
They are not ever-moving
Shouldn't reach up to stretch

So The Girls promise safety
And they look straight ahead

SECTON II: GREEN



Else Blankenhorn, *Untitled*

GREEN SONNET I

The Girls look straight ahead to the sting that is spring
It's a sweet sting, they think
Looking up at a tree
The Girls try to be green things

Alive, still, and tame
But the green can be wild
Can reach for new height
And the promise they see in the way the leaves blow

Is the promise of looping
Leaves stuck dancing for days
As the world and sun dance to make their decay
But for now let The Girls think there's stillness to spring

Let them hold onto branches
And look up just the same

THE BIRD WHO COULDN'T FLY

He held my waist like I wasn't anything else. As he argued, yelled, even as he stood up to walk away, he held onto my waist. It felt impossible to ask him to remove his arms from me, from the thing we'd made, but it was me he was holding, I said, and didn't he see that this was the whole point? I wasn't showing yet, but still he knew it was in there and he felt like he was holding a thing not me. *But this is the whole point*, I said again. *This is what I've been saying for years.*

Before he left he turned and asked me to hold on. I was home, didn't have a place to go, so I stayed where I sat and nodded without knowing what I was holding on for. I only knew that he was still holding onto me even if he meant to be holding onto something further in. *Hold on*, he said, and ran outside to his car. He came back with a bouquet of flowers from the grocery store arranged only to be rearranged and put in a vase. The plant food packet was only there to be thrown away. He handed me the flowers and I told him I didn't understand. He'd bought them before he knew what was coming, he said, and now he didn't want them. He turned to leave only to stop in the middle of the living room and turn around again. *They're freshly cut*, he said, like he was offering something.

After he left I thought of putting the flowers into a nice tall vase of water, because wherever they came from, whoever had given them to me, the flowers were only flowers – the flowers had nothing to do with it. I found a nice tall vase, white with a blue rim. I looked to the arrangement on the counter, cheap plastic wrapping that held pink roses, Baby's Breathe, and daises that were forced to drink blue dye, daises that were made to be something they were not. It also held flowers I didn't know the names of, flowers that were meant to look wild but, trapped with the other flowers in that wrapping, only looked stuck.

I ripped open the plastic and began sorting through the flowers. The wild bunch of nameless flowers went straight into the vase without much thought. The pink roses were split into two smaller vases along with the Baby's Breathe, one for the kitchen windowsill and one for the bathroom. Then there were the blue daisies, which I thought should go into the trash. But it wasn't the daisies' fault, was it? It wasn't the daisies' fault that they'd been put through this, and weren't they just flowers like all the other flowers? I cut the dyed blue daisies to fit a small glass of water and placed that on the kitchen table.

Then, without warning, I heard my name.

Allison?

I hadn't even heard him open the door.

What? I asked. I turned around and saw him hovering there, the door open just wide enough for his head to poke through.

I don't know where to go, he said. I left only to realize I had nowhere to go. I couldn't think of anyone to call, not a single person I could call. Can I stay here just tonight? Can I stay here until I think of who to call?"

You scared me, I said. Why don't you come inside?

He thanked me and I didn't say anything. I looked at the flowers on the table and decided that I would throw them away after all.

Where would you sleep? I asked.

The bathtub? he asked. *Like in the Beatles song.*

So you can set the house on fire in the morning? I asked.

He doesn't set the house on fire.

Yes, he does. At the end of the song.

He shook his head. *Absolutely not*, he said. *He just means he lit a fire in the fireplace or something. To stay warm.*

Okay, I said. *So sleep in the bathtub.*

Don't you believe me about the song? he asked.

It doesn't matter, I said. *I only wish we had a couch. I only wish we had more than three rooms in this place. Isn't there anyone you can call?*

He slid against the kitchen cabinet and sat on the dirty floor. He looked down and didn't say anything. He didn't want to leave ever, he said, and didn't I see how hard this was for him? Didn't I see how much he did for me, how much he was going to do when the baby came? He'd even brought home flowers, he reminded me. He'd brought home freshly cut flowers. Did that not matter to me at all? I sat down next to him and he reached out to grab my waist again.

Please, I said. *I'm not in the mood for this.* He told me that this had nothing to do with me. He was just going to miss her so much, was going to miss out on so much with her all because of my stubbornness. I reminded him that he would still see her and he said no, it wouldn't be the same. I asked him again to please take his hands off my waist and he told me it had nothing to do with me, that he was trying to feel *her*. I stood up slapped my hand against my stomach. *This is me*, I said, slapping it again. *And this is me*, I said, slapping myself hard in the face. *And this, and this, and this. It's all me. This is what I've been saying for years.*

He'd never liked my line of work. I did bachelor parties, mostly, sometimes strange birthday parties. Once, when I was sleeping, he managed to super glue me into my bra. When I asked him how on earth he'd done it, he said he just poured the glue into the first bra he could find on the floor, lifted my shirt up, and prayed I didn't wake up when he pressed it down to meet my skin. I was shocked, still am shocked at myself for asking how instead of *why*. But I knew why,

saw it in his face when I had to cancel on my client that night, when I spent the night instead soaking in a steaming hot bubble bath, pulling gently at first and then ripping, ripping and screaming and thanking him when he offered to help. Thanking him when he offered to help just like I thanked him when he offered to wash his own dirty dishes, when he offered to clean his own spilled coffee. Thanking him as he yanked and said *Got it* and looked down at my pink peeling skin, his smile shining just a little too bright.

When we met, I told him I worked the nightshift at a hotel. It worked until it didn't, and then he wanted to know who the other man was. I told him and he asked again who the other man was. I said, *No, I'm telling the truth.* I went to my closet and pulled out my secret bin, the one I kept on the very top shelf underneath the winter coats I never wore. *Why else would I have clothes like this?* I asked him. *Why else would I know how to dance like this?* He asked me how else I could dance and I said like this, and like this. He liked this until he didn't, and soon I was sitting there in the bathtub, trying to find my own skin.

I'm still not clear on any of it, he said, holding my waist again. *What have you been saying for years?*

I won't say it again, I said.

We could try again, he said.

I wanted to say no, but instead I nodded towards nothing at all.

He held me, then quickly pulled away.

Hold on, he said. *I got you something. It's right in the car. Stay right here – don't move.*

I stood perfectly still in my kitchen, though I couldn't help looking out the window at the trees swaying just right, the plants and flowers that had not been told to be a certain color, had not been forced to drink blue water that didn't match them. My concentration on all the shining green

fell when I saw him running up the driveway with more dyed daisies, this time red and purple and a shade of green that didn't exist in nature.

I looked down to speak to the baby, which was one of my favorite things to do. I liked that she was someone and no one altogether, sort of like me. *Hello in there*, I said. *Would you like to hear something? Should I grow up, I want to be the daisies who get to drink the clear water. That's what I want. I want to be a white daisy when I grow up.*

THE GIRL WHO SWALLOWED A BEAN

My mother wants to be a mother when she grows up. I'm ten when she tells me this and five years later she gets a bump and bumps me out. I go to my daddy who doesn't know he's my daddy. I knock on his door and tell him who I am and ask if I can stay and he says, "Christ, which one are you?" and I say, "Christ, which what am I?" and he says, "You can't stay but want some X?" and I say, "Fat chance." He says, "Your mother's fat."

My mother's always been fat, he just doesn't know she's getting fatter. I am too. My belly's getting all swollen even though I've never done it. At first I think this must be out of empathy but then I realize I have no empathy inside me and before I can think anything else my belly gets more swollen and a baby comes.

I call my baby Little Bean because I swallowed a magic bean and that's how he got in there. I wonder if the Virgin Mary ate a magic bean too, or if God just did her like everyone says. God couldn't have done me. God doesn't even know I exist, though Jenna from sixth period said he asked about me once. Of course I don't believe Jenna from sixth period. I didn't even get my sixth period. I had five little periods and then a baby.

My mother who's a new mother calls me up and, "You have to see the baby" is all she has to say to me. "She really is the cutest thing, really. I'm doing it all right this time, really. Come home, Little Bean," she says. "I never took your room apart."

It's only then that I remember my own mother swallowed a magic bean before me.

"Mom," I say, "who was my daddy?"

"Cut it out, Little Bean," she says. "You know who your daddy is. He told me you went to see him and you told him he was your daddy and asked to stay and boy did he have things to say

about that. Now come on, Bean, enough about your daddy. Why'd you ask something you already knew?"

"I don't know a thing," I say. "Who in God's name gave me my bean?"

"Now what's a thing like that supposed to mean?" she asks. She thinks things have to mean something but I know things are just things. I don't dare correct her because parents are supposed to be smarter than their children and once they realize they aren't they lose everything they thought they had.

"I don't know the most important things," I say. "But I don't think I'd like to know them. The most important things to know are the most important things not to know."

"Now you really aren't making any sense," she says. "Just come and see the baby, hhhmm?"

My bean is on the floor, looking up at me and smiling. I agree to come over and see my mother's baby. I agree while I stare at my bean.

I don't have the staying kinds of neighbors so it's hard to find someone to watch Little Bean. The whole place smells like smoke and I sometimes worry that their smoking breath will seep into his skin and become all that he is. The only kinds of people who come to a place like this are the cheap men who make greasy business deals and the used-up girls who keep them happy. No one here's fit to watch something so soft and new.

I look down at Little Bean and adjust the towel he's wrapped in. He sleeps in the drawer of the nightstand that came with the room. When I got here I opened the drawer to see if there was anything important in it and all I found was a dusty Bible with lots of little words written inside. The book was too heavy so I threw it out the window and gave the drawer something important to hold. I leave Little Bean sleeping in the drawer on the carpet and lock the door tight.

I haven't been home since my mother got knocked up. I chose the closest motel because I knew she'd call when the thing came. I know what motherhood is to her. It's something to show off, something to do right. It takes me two hours to walk there and I pray to something that Little Bean is all right. Everyone knows you aren't supposed to leave babies alone.

I don't know if I'm supposed to knock or walk in so I stop when I get there. The door tells me to go straight in but I can't remember how to use the doorknob. The door stares me down and tells me the house missed me and at first it sounds sincere. I hold my fist up to knock and it starts to wince. It tells me it's been hurt by a lot of different hands lately. I touch the doorknob and try for the life of me to remember the secret code. There's a secret code for everything these days. I remember a time when doors used to want you to come in, but this door is different. I tell it I don't buy a word it says and it says it hopes I freeze. "Fuck you," I shout, and my mother comes to the door.

"Sara?" she asks, looking down at me. "Did you curse?"

I stare at her and see it right away: the glow. She got rid of all the lamps that used to be here because she lights up the whole house with her glow.

"It's still there," I say.

"What is?"

"I thought the glow was supposed to go away after the baby came."

"Glow?" she asks, like she's never heard such a thing in her life. "Do I really have a glow? I feel fat. I look just awful, I know I do. But really, Sara, really. You have to see the baby. The baby's the one with a glow."

“Wait,” I say, grabbing her arm. “Just tell me: is the glow supposed to stay? Is it supposed to stay right after you have the thing? Or does it get birthed away with the placenta and the baby? Is it just birthed away and gone forever?”

“My God,” she says. “What are you talking about? Honestly Sara, how should I know a thing like that?”

“Never mind,” I say. “Show me the baby.”

She leads me to her bedroom even though I’ve been there before. I hid under her blankets when I learned to be scared of myself and she was always there to scare me some more. She’d tell me all the things I was and we’d watch the stars in her skylight. She’d tell me I was brave and smart and that I’d find my way like everyone else. She said the things that made my heart race. I’d look at the stars and ask them why I had to be this and they’d tell me I’d only get to know if I fell asleep.

There’s a crib in my mother’s bedroom and somehow I’m surprised when I see it. The crib is white and looks severely new. I look down into it and there’s a baby. My mother tells me her name is Joanne, my grandmother’s name. She’s been saving it.

“Mom,” I ask, “who’s the baby’s daddy?”

“Sara, please,” she says, picking the thing up. “Just enjoy being around a baby.”

I don’t say anything. She starts to hand it to me and I say no.

“I don’t want to,” I tell her.

“Come on, Bean,” she says. I don’t know which one of us she’s talking to.

“I can’t,” I say. “I don’t enjoy being around babies much.”

She’s gentle and mean as she pushes me down into the rocking chair. She shoves the baby into my tired arms and sits on her bed, watching us. This baby is fatter than my baby. This baby is

better. This baby could win a medal for being a better baby than my baby. She has little rolls on her arms and legs and she looks like she's going to live a long time. She drools glittery drool and crinkles her nose when she hears my mother's voice.

"See?" my mother says. "I see you falling in love with her right now. Babies do that to you."

Babies do a lot to you. They whisper true, mean things in your ear and then they smile. They look at you like they might die at any given second and then they ruin you. The thing about babies is they never quit. They never quit ruining you and they never quit smiling. I look down at this baby and decide she's not so different from Little Bean. She's better, sure, but not so different. I'm not so different either. I tried to ruin my own mother and smiled the day I won.

Of course she asked for it. She asked for it just like I asked for it with my own bean. There's no such thing as a good child just like there's no such thing as a good mother. We claim to try and help each other but at the end of the day it's just a lot of broken words and iron burns. At the end of the day all the rights they throw at you stop seeming so right and you start to see the blue sky out the window and you start to think there might be something else.

At the end of the day my arms always stung. She made sure my clothes were ironed and when that wasn't enough for me she'd get my little arms. She was never enough for me. My skin was always too white and she knew how I craved those bubbles. I asked for them on my arms because I knew I wasn't brave or smart and that I'd never make it like everyone else. That's why I asked for the bubbles that burned so nice.

"I'll never love this baby," I say. "I'll never love this pudgy thing."

"Honestly," she says, getting up from her bed. "Honestly, Sara, I don't know why you have to be difficult. Why can't you try and be happy?"

“Don’t you even wonder?” I ask.

“Wonder what?” she asks.

“Wonder something,” I say. Boy, can I think of things for her to wonder. Wonder where I’ve been all this time, wonder why she doesn’t love me, wonder why she loves that pudgy thing, wonder if she left the iron on, wonder when she’ll stop loving that pudgy thing.

“If you’re going to be like that you can just go,” she says. “I won’t have you hanging around here if you’re going to be like that.”

“Is my room really still here?” I ask.

“Yes,” she says. “I wouldn’t have said it was if it wasn’t.”

“You say plenty of things are that aren’t,” I tell her. “You said the cat was safe when it wasn’t.”

She rolls her eyes and doesn’t ask. I bet she remembers. She wouldn’t admit it in one million years but I know she remembers that cat. She remembers saying that warm sweet things can live a long time, even in a place like this. She remembers saying they can be left alone, that cats take care of themselves when you leave them alone.

“How long was it?” I ask. “How long were we gone that time?”

She sighs and walks to the laundry room, her favorite room in the house. I swear that one room’s bigger than the rest of this grubby place. She gets a new washing machine and drier at least once a year, sometimes sooner if they really wear her out. She has clean white tubs with all the stuff you need to do laundry. This gets these kinds of stains out, that gets your whites more white, these ones are safe to use on this kind of fabric, and all those make your sheets smell like being young. The baskets used to be boats, but now they’re just baskets. The ironing board is and always has been a tree. The iron used to live on the high shelf so it could only burn me on the days when

I needed those bubbles, the days when she was alone with herself too long and needed proof that she was as bad as her little bean.

“How long was it?” I ask again.

She hums and pulls little clothes out from the drier. They’re small enough to fit on her fingers and I tell her she can make finger puppets when she gets sick of the baby. She hums louder and I say it again. She turns away from me and folds the clothes. She smells each one before placing it in the basket.

“Why’d you never dress me in pink?” I ask. “You never dressed me in pink, did you?”

“It didn’t suit you,” she says.

I nod and she tells me to please go look at my room. She tells me to please think of staying with her and the baby, who she calls Baby Joanne.

“I know she’s a baby,” I say. “Jesus.”

“I never said you didn’t.”

“Then why’d you call her Baby Joanne? God, Mom, I get that she’s a baby.”

“See?” she says. “Do you see? This is what you do. This is the exact thing you always do.”

The clothes begin to shrink and she starts folding more quickly. She knows they’ll shrink into nothing if she isn’t quick. I tell her she’d better be quicker than that if she wants to keep the thing.

“I won’t stand here and be attacked,” she says. “I can call her Baby Joanne if I want to. People love it, I’ll have you know. People say it’s the cutest thing they’ve ever heard.”

“People?” I ask. “God, what people? What people do you even mean?”

“Everyone,” she says, folding a microscopic dress. “Every single person I’ve talked to has said it’s the cutest thing they’ve ever heard, that she’s the cutest baby they’ve ever seen.”

“Which way is my room?” I ask. “Is it where it used to be?”

“God, Sara,” she says, folding the last speck. “It’s where it always was.”

Nothing is where it always was. The walls in the hallway got narrower, for one thing, and for another the bulb in the bathroom was taken out and replaced by her glow. The glow doesn’t reach me so I have to pee in the dark. I know Little Bean must’ve peed more than his diaper could handle, and I think of going back. Suppose he started crying and someone knocked that door down? Would they know how he liked to have his back rubbed or how he liked to have his world ruined? Would they know the things he whispered to me all those nights, the things he didn’t dare tell anyone else?

I try to get to my room but it’s pushed way back down the hall, even further than it’d been on the days she liked me the least. Today’s different from those days because it’s hiding itself from me more than she is. This time she might really want me to find it. The door has something to say about that, though. Just when I think I have it it backs away a little more. The doorknob tells me to come back when I want to be there and I tell it I do want to be there.

“Please,” I say. “I do want to be here.”

“I know a lie when I see one,” it says.

I tell it lies aren’t something you can see and I remind it that it’s a door, and a senile door at that. I tell it my room wants me.

“You can’t keep me from my room,” I say. “It’s my room.”

“Oh, I can do a lot of things,” it says.

“You’re just a door,” I say. “You’re just an old wooden door and I’m a person, I’m a real person and I can do anything I want.”

“You can do anything you don’t want,” it says, and I feel it locking.

I find my mother watching the clothes spin round and round. I tell her the house doesn't want me anymore, that I've overstayed my welcome. I watch her words spin round and round and I feel myself leaving.

"Why do you feel this way? Are you well? Why are you talking this way?"

"I left my bean," I tell her. "I left my bean alone all this time."

"You did what?"

I tell her beans can't be left alone just like cats can't be left alone. I tell her I was left alone and that it's her fault the bean came. I tell her it's all her fault, always was her fault. I think of a sweaty bed and bright lights as I say all this and can't stop thinking of that until I leave the house and find the neon motel sign. I can still hear her words spinning round and round and I can still see the iron falling towards me. My shoulder tells me I should've controlled myself and not said all that to her. It tells me it isn't fair it has to suffer when my mouth did all the talking. It reminds me irons don't have to be hot to hurt.

I find the door I locked so tight and it makes a nice little click and lets me in. My bean is wet like I thought he'd be but not dead. I pick him up and say I'm glad he isn't dead. I tell him I never want him to be dead even though God told me I should want that. I tell him I'll stop listening to my mother and God and the iron and that instead I'll just listen to him. Little Bean doesn't forgive me. He whispers the meanest things I've ever heard in my ear and smiles a huge baby smile. I tell him he can be as mean as he wants but I won't stop being his mother. He tells me I'll change my mind.

"You sure are a nasty thing," I tell him.

He looks up at me and the sweaty bed and bright lights come back. A voice says it'll be okay and calls me Sweetie, something I've never been called before. It says things I've never heard

before and then it leaves. It leaves me cold and scared and makes me crave those nice warm bubbles. My hand finds the phone and remembers the secret code.

“Hello?” she says, “Sara?”

“Hi, Mom,” I say. “The baby was real cute.”

“She is, isn’t she?” she says.

“I never went inside my room,” I tell her. “I’m sorry I never went inside my room.”

“Don’t be sorry,” she says. “I miss you, Bean. I just miss you a whole lot.”

“Was I glowing?” I ask. “Do I still have a glow?”

“I didn’t catch that,” she tells me. “Baby Joanne is crying. Baby Joanne’s been crying so much lately and I’ve been so tired. I’ve been pacing which the doctor says means I’m on edge. He says it means I’m just not all that happy.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Well, I don’t know,” she says. “I don’t know why they say what they say.”

“No,” I say. “Why aren’t you happy anymore?”

“You’re missing the whole point,” she says. “I’m not saying I’m unhappy, I’m saying that’s what they’re all saying.”

“So you are happy?” I ask.

“Of course,” she says. “I always got everything I wanted so of course I’m happy.”

I nod even though she can’t see it. I tell her I need to go. She says she should go too, and reminds me that baby Joanne is still crying. I nod and think of that pudgy thing with her face all red. I end the call and can’t think of anything else.

“What do you think, Little Bean?” I ask, “What do you think?”

“Of what?” he asks. “Of anything in particular?”

“No,” I say. “Just what in God’s name do you think?”

“I don’t think,” he says. “I know.”

I ask him what he knows and he whispers all of it into my ear. He tells me all of it, all the things I thought I needed and all the things I never asked for. He asks how I feel as I place him in his drawer-home.

“I don’t know anything,” I tell him. “I still don’t know anything at all.”

THE PLANTS THAT WOULDN'T RISE

We didn't know anything at all, but we talked like we did. At first, we both said: *Misunderstanding. Dead phone. Back tomorrow.* After a day of those kinds of stories, we said: *Car crash. Hospital. Call coming soon.* When I stopped telling stories, my mother only fell deeper in. *Murdered,* she said. Then, *Lost. Taken.* I told her we didn't know, that we just had to wait. She said fine and made a home on the couch by the phone, but this only made her stories grow. "She's trapped in some deep, dark basement," she told me. "That's what it is. Some creep has her down there, and he's keeping her as his little thing." I remember waiting, but not for my sister to come home. I only remember waiting for my mother to stop waiting by the phone, for her to stop with the all the stories and this act of knowing.

What I remember most, though, is the dying, the dying I could see without having to wonder. First came the death of the big potted plant in the kitchen, then all the long draping leaves hanging in the bathroom. Next were the little ones that sat on the kitchen window, then the ones in the living room and, finally, the three in my mother's bedroom fell dead. My sister had been missing for four months by the time the last plant died. I walked around the house, unsure of when it'd happened. One day they seemed to be green and bright, and the next they looked like skeletons. I found the watering can lying on its side in a pile of dust underneath the sink and felt all of myself turn.

My mother lay on her side too, mostly on the living room floor. I sat on the couch and listened to the crunch of the dead leaves as she rolled on top of them, felt the crushing cause a strange hurt inside me. "He probably has her tied up," she told me. "She might even think she

wants it, at this point. Maybe that's it – maybe she's down in that deep, dark basement thinking it's what she wants, being brainwashed.”

“We don't know anything,” I reminded her. “God.”

“Yes,” she said. “God help us.”

My mother loved three things, and three things only: God, my sister, and her plants.

“The plants are dying,” I reminded her. “Don't you see it? The watering can's just right under the sink. Wouldn't it be nicer around here if the plants were all plump and green?”

“Yes,” she said. “So nice.”

I don't know which day it was, or why, but I picked that watering can up and filled it. I watered as she lay on her side, and she began to scream.

“How dare you?” she asked.

She stood up, grabbed the watering can from my hands, and threw it against the window. The window did not break the way she'd hoped, didn't smash through and add to her scene. Instead, the watering can fell down the wall impossibly slowly, like God was hovering above it. It then landed back on floor where it lay on its side once more and let its contents bleed on the living room rug.

“They'll be watered when she's home,” she told me. “How dare you force life into plants that want to be dead?”

I don't know why I wanted the plants watered. I'd never liked them. Before my mother stopped watering them, before my sister was gone, I told my mother that the plants looked completely ridiculous, that our house wasn't a goddamn greenhouse. But then, seeing them die and somehow still keep dying, I got the feeling that not watering them was wrong.

Each way I moved, the crisp, dead plants would brush up against my skin. They would crunch under my feet, and I got the feeling that I was killing them even more. “You don’t want to be dead,” I told them. “How could you want to be dead?”

When my mother slept that night, I tried watering them again. I told myself I was a very good person, far better than my mother, and spoke to each plant as the water sunk into the dried dirt. Instead of sleeping, I looked up at the ceiling and begged something, something I’m sure I don’t believe in, to make things right. I tried to be vague like that, thought I could outsmart whoever I was saying it to. “Help make things right,” I said. I said it again and knew that even if there was something up there, they were plugging their ears. That’s what I would do.

The phone rang the next morning at breakfast, and when there were no developments, my mother made her own. “She’s going to be a mother so young,” she said.

I looked up and watched a leaf fall from the plant sitting on the kitchen window sill. I’d forgotten about my watering spree until that moment. I spent my mornings trying to hold onto the gentle block of things lost during sleep, tried to keep blocking them as they turned up throughout the day. Like plugging my ears, only further in.

“A mother?” I asked.

“Yes,” she says. “I can just see it. She’ll probably have six children against her will. That’s how these things always go. I can just feel it. It’s a mother’s intuition, this feeling I have.”

“We don’t know,” I said.

“I know she’s alive,” she said. “And why else would she not be home yet?”

I watered the plants again the next night, thinking I was meant to do it. The next morning I sat and let myself remember what I'd done the night before, then I wandered around the house to look at the plant graveyard. At what point, I wondered, is a plant dead beyond any possibility of return? I don't remember how long it took for me to reach in and check the dirt, but I remember a new hurt spreading through me when my fingers made contact with the impossible dryness of it. I dumped all of the watering can's contents into one small plant and watched the dirt drink it up. I put my hand in and felt the rock of soil. I picked the plant up and felt the floor underneath: completely dry. "You have to go," I told the plants. "Go if you don't want to be here."

The next day at breakfast, the plants on the windowsill looked more like piles of crumbs than like plants. This, I told myself, was the point in which one must declare a plant dead. I turned to my mother, who was reading the orange juice label like she might learn something from it, like it might tell her what she needed to know.

"I have an idea," I said. "And it's okay if you don't like it."

She kept reading. I felt a breeze run through the kitchen, but the windows were closed. I felt all the plants in the house, even the ones I couldn't see, keeping dying.

"What?" she asked. "What will I not like?"

"I said it's okay *if* you don't like it."

"God help you," she said, sighing big. "Just go ahead and ask."

"I've just been thinking about the plants," I said.

She looked up and the house, the kitchen, all the plants inside it, stood very still. She looked at me with a face that I knew, still know, was asking me why I came home that day, why I was still sitting in front of her while her sweet little thing was not.

“I can just see him,” she said. “Can’t you?”

“Mom,” I said. “I’ve been thinking about the plants.”

“Again with the plants,” she said. “Why can’t you just leave them alone? Why can’t you just let them be?”

“I only wonder if you have a green thumb, you know? If maybe they only want to be watered by you?”

“And so what if I do?”

“It’s only that I tried, and they didn’t want me.”

“I told you not to do that.”

“Please,” I said. “Please water them.”

“God help you,” she said. “God help both of you.”

“Please just do something,” I said. “Or I’ll throw them out.”

My mother began to cry, and she went to the living room where she lay on her side and crushed the dead leaves and waited for a ring.

“I can just see her,” she said. “I can see them both. He dragged her down to that deep, dark basement and she’s stuck down there, crying up to me. I can see his eyes, can’t you? Big yellow eyes – barely even a person.”

“Yes,” I said. “I guess I can.”

She continued to cry.

“Are you going to bed?” I asked her. “Or are you staying down here?”

“Can’t you just see her?” she asked. “Can’t you just see her down there?”

I looked up at the ceiling and prayed for a change in the leaves.

THE FALLEN FRUIT

I've been praying for a change in the trees. They're looking terribly thin. I can't sleep as long as they look this way. They're thin because the apples have been falling more quickly than they should. Now all the apples are on the ground, covered in flies and ants. My sister makes me go out there to pick the apples up. She is interested in cleaning up what has fallen. This doesn't interest me. What interests me is stopping things from falling. I don't speak to her about my interests.

I am also interested in looking deep into the mirror. When I look deep into the mirror I see things I'm not supposed to see. This doesn't stop me. I see my face and all the things around it. I see the shadows on the wall behind me and the empty spaces in my skin. I used to look at my reflection in the window but now when I look there I'm distracted by the thinning apple trees on the other side of the glass. For this reason, the mirror is my best option.

I keep mentioning this to my sister, keep telling her that something must be terribly wrong. *Sister, I say, Sister, the apple trees have been looking terribly, terribly thin. Sister, I say, Sister, what if it means something worse than we realize?*

My sister doesn't buy into this kind of reasoning so I try to bury my thoughts alive. She still hears her own voice screaming and can't imagine another reason to fall on the floor. She can't imagine something like thinning apple trees meaning panic. She thinks she's gone through everything a person can go through, that there's a limit.

In the beginning I sleep in small waves: two hours on, three off. I wake with dry, burning eyes and run to the window to make sure some – any – apples are still up there. I lie back down and stretch my legs so my feet hit the foot of the bed, then I run them along the cold pink wall. I

breathe in and out, much too quickly to find any kind of peace. It isn't peace I'm looking for. I'm looking to make my body panic, to make my body match the rest of me. Three hours in and my eyes insist on closing, so I let them close. Two hours of nothing-sleep, then three more of nothing.

This doesn't last long because I'm stronger than the made-up parts of me, the parts that want to sleep. Before long I learn to stand by the window and stare at the thinning trees all night. Before long I learn to panic loud and long and honest. My sister doesn't buy into this kind of behavior, so during the day I behave well. This works out for me because my panic is worst at night when I can only see the apples falling in my mind. My panic is worst when I scare my own self.

Sister, I say, Sister, what do you think of them today? The apple trees? What do you think? Why do you think they've become so thin?

My sister doesn't have a voice. She screamed it out, maybe, or maybe she didn't. She screamed something out. I've never heard so much screaming, but imagine how I feel living in an ex-nursery. I have to lie there, dead pink walls and all, and pretend to be home. I have to pretend to live in this sad, broken house, when I don't. I've had to pretend to live here for the past ten years, most of my life, when I don't.

The apple trees do live here, which makes us different. They must live here – they're life, after all. They're life just as the apples are life. The apples are life falling. When I was young I often found myself falling. Out of bed, hard against the sidewalk, out of my mother's arms. I am barely alive these days, which makes me more like the apples than like the trees.

The apples are piling up, my sister reminds me each morning. I want to tell her I know, that unlike her I could never forget a thing like that. She tells me she doesn't want flies and ants in

the yard, that it makes the whole lawn look unpleasant. I bag the apples up and put them in the trash, though this never feels quite right.

Why now? I ask. Why are they falling fast now when they weren't before?

My sister thinks all questions are rhetorical, so I let mine sit and fly away. My sister is a simple thing. She leaves for a dusty desk job at the same time each morning and cooks us sad, dead food when she gets home. She doesn't notice that I've stopped sleeping because she's too busy being nowhere.

I also feel nowhere these days, which is horribly depressing. I try to tell myself I'm not depressed, but isn't a lack of interest one of the warning signs? One of my main interests, looking deep into the mirror, has become less and less appealing since the apples started falling fast. The window was best for studying my face because it gave me just enough sight. Now when I look I see far too many empty spaces. The doctor told me their name, and now when I look at them, I imagine him chipping my face with an icepick. I asked him if he thought my scars looked like they were made with an icepick and he did not answer. I told him the name sounded wrong, and he blamed this on all the other doctors. When I'm not answered, I have to imagine what others might say. I look into the mirror and I imagine I'm my doctor, thinking of what I'd say about my sad, poor little patient:

The girl, age fourteen, is full of empty spaces. She can't quite say how they got there, only that they cease to vanish. The girl knows that far too many things vanish, while at the same time the things that should vanish, the things that don't belong, never do. The empty spaces refuse to vanish, though the girl finds it impossible to explain why.

I stop, I realize I've got it all wrong, and make myself start again:

The girl, age fourteen, is full of empty spaces. She can't quite say how they got there, only that they cease to vanish. The problem is that something, the skin that belonged where it was, has, in fact, vanished. The spaces on her face are merely emptiness, nothingness. The spaces are everything that once was, everything that was taken from her. She's tried filling the spaces in with everything, you name it: special lotions, deep, dark foundation, powder the color of sand, balms, salves, creams, ointments, rinses, butters, masks. The girl touches her empty spaces far too often, trying to fill them. The girl should refrain from this behavior if she wants to avoid infection.

I'd like to believe I didn't think this way when I used the window to look at my face, but something deep inside me says this isn't the problem. I try looking out the window to see if it helps, but I only see that the apples are falling more quickly than I could've imagined. We have quite a few apple trees or else I'm sure they'd all be gone by now. I lie in my haunted little room and try to come up with a plan to stop the apples from falling. They just don't belong on the ground, they aren't meant to rot. The apples are meant to end up somewhere else, somewhere better. They're meant to end up in pies and crisps, in eager stomachs. The apples aren't meant to live only so they can die.

I decide to stop thinking of the apple trees for just a moment. Instead, I let my room haunt me. It's not the baby haunting me. It's the room itself. Before there was supposed to be a baby, this was supposed to be my room. It never was my room because my sister took a hopeful test around the same time our mother ended up in the ground, which is what prompted my move. My sister asked me to live on the sofa and got the precious room ready for someone never coming. My sister screamed never for our mother but weeks for her baby. I try to pretend the baby and I have nothing in common, but then I think of her lying in that still space that doesn't want her and the room tightens around me.

I'm sorry, I tell the ex-nursery, but it doesn't speak back.

I've also been speaking to the apple trees, but they haven't spoken back either. I ask them why they're rejecting their own fruit. I ask them why they're pushing it out but they only stand tall and wise and mean. They are mean apple trees, they must be. They're still incredibly alive and they don't seem to care that the apples are dying right at their feet, at their roots. I still have to go out there each day and fill a large plastic bag with the dead apples. I've stopped throwing the bags in the trash.

I'm not sure if I'm choosing not to sleep or simply not sleeping. I'm not sure if there's a difference. I lie in bed and think less about the apple trees and more about the bags of rotten apples. I've buried them in the woods, which took me hours. I begin to wonder if they're okay, if it was a mistake to place them so far deep. I wonder if they're lonely down there in the earth, if they miss the sky. My heart begins to race, but it's a new kind of panic. I realize how very lonely I am for the apples.

I rise out of bed and head out the door. I run to the woods, bend down and let the leaves and rocks and sticks and whatever else there is sink deep down into my tired knees. Tired, my knees are tired. My body is tired. I dig with my hands and let sharp pebbles hit my fingernails. I let the woods howl and drip water down my back, let the mosquitoes take and take.

I find four bags and decide this has to be enough. The bags glide along the lawn with me as the apples twirl around in their rotten juices. I enter the ex-nursery and it looks down on me like I'm an intruder, only now I'm not. I rip the first bag open and pour the apples into my bed. It only gets better with bag two, then three, and finally four. I grab handfuls of the rot and rub it into my face, then lie down and pull up the apples like covers. I tuck myself in and let the room go black.

I wake up sticky and bright. *Apples*, I ask, *Apples: have I slept for seven years? For ten? Fifteen? Have I slept at all?*

The apples don't speak, but I know deep inside that it's only the next morning. I get up covered in the sweet juices and find my sister standing at the kitchen window, staring at the dark sky. We wait for the sun, but it isn't coming. She waits to go to her dusty desk job, but the dark holds her in. We wait days for light, but the sky hangs heavy above us. I can no longer see or imagine the apple trees. I continue to sleep where I'm meant to sleep, in the pile I've set free. I keep pasting the apples over my face and let the dark stay where it wants to stay. We don't speak about this, we know better. We don't answer to each other, to the ex-nursery, to the apple trees. We lower our heads and answer only to the dark.

GREEN SONNET II

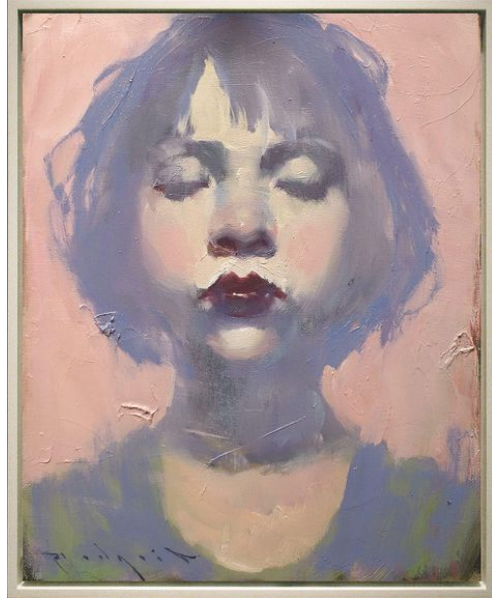
It all looks just the same
Only now The Girls see
That the crashing is in them, a thing living deep
The Girls find wobbly beds and pull covers up high

Let it turn, The Girls whisper, Let the trees fall down flat
The Girls gave up on water and give up on green
And they wrap up in blankets of something close by
What is it? they wonder, and yet they all know

The Girls fall deep in dust and let flowers fall far
They let plants wither further and press themselves in
They say, Growing can stop now
And here's what they see:

The Girls see in a sliver of all that they've been
Not themselves standing still but the still holding them

SECTION III: THE DARK



Malcolm T. Liepke, *Little Pink Girl*

DARK SONNET I

They're held still in the dark but The Girls try to see
Try to see their deep wants that they hold in so thick
But they'll soon fall to stillness
And let their eyes dim

And as wants fall down far
They'll be cold silent things
For the cycling won't listen to beating or cries
It won't stop for a prayer or a looking far up

It's in front of them now and around draping in
Yes, some Girls let it be
And some Girls look away
But they'll all be pulled into the promise now made

Bright white cannot hum for The Girls all because
No Girl can erase all the parts she's made from

THE CLOSET

Twenty-Four

I answer only to the dark inside me. It's an empty, cold dark. I'm tired of answering to something that doesn't answer back, so I spend my nights begging for red. *Just a little*, I whisper. *Just a spot*. The empty cold dark doesn't say a word, but still I must check. Each time I sit in the bathroom, pulling the soft fabric down and checking by my mother's flickering nightlight, I feel the absence inside me settle. Dark, hollow, and cold, I tell myself. Too dark for anything to ever grow, is what you are. I pull the soft fabric back up, darkness confirmed, then walk back to my room.

Nine

Before I answer to the darkness, the emptiness, I answer to my mother. She tells me very little about what will happen, but I savor every word. Her words normally move away, but now they are steady. She's a shy, timid creature, but she speaks now with a kind of certainty that makes my ears go wide. She shows me her drawer of products and tells me how often it will come, though she won't go far beyond this. *This is all you need to know now*, she says, and the drawer shuts tight.

Eighteen

They wait for me and I wait for them. They sit in the dark hallway closet all snugly wrapped in bright inviting plastic, and each time I open the door to get a towel I feel my heart go fuzzy and small. Each time I move down the hallway, I feel the contained black in the closet peaking through, so determined to remind me of something I couldn't possibly forget. The sight of the packages

used to make my heart race and swoon, but it now does something different. Now when I swing that door open I feel foolish for forcing light into a space so set on being closed in.

Twelve

My friend Mary calls me up to tell me it's come. *Does it hurt?* I ask her. *Yes*, she says, *but only a little*. Her mother brings her to the pharmacy and she gets to pick it all out, learns which colors are meant for which days. Her mother buys her candy bars and lets her skip school. She's the first one, but the others follow closely behind.

Ten

None of us have it, only the strange girl who sits in the corner alone at lunch, and we only know she has it because she tells everyone. None of us have it, but still we watch intently as the commercial comes on and the women play sports while keeping it a secret from all the world. Keeping it a secret, we learn, is key. We ask our mothers for the products that will do this, and some of them are willing to buy them early. My mother is one of them, as the idea of getting it done long before I have to reveal anything suits her perfectly. *This kind goes all the way up*, she says, *and this kind lies flat below*. *Got it?* I nod, though I haven't been anywhere near up there. I worry these products and I won't fit together, but I don't know how to put this worry into words.

Fourteen

The worry doesn't go away, but I eventually find my way to that part of me and make other things fit together, things I didn't know could. I make my body twist and shake, careful to keep my mouth closed tight when the world falls down on top of me and then goes still. I put words I'm afraid of

into my search engine and learn how to clear my history fast. I search again and clear, search and clear, search and clear.

Fifteen

I make a habit of making my body shake, but soon it's not enough. My friends don't talk about it and so neither do I. It's not something to be proud of, making your body shake. It's just a thing that happens.

My friends do like to talk about the shiny tin bin in the bathroom stall at school. They wish they had one at home, they say. They like how it's right there next to them, made for them. They don't like using the little bins in their bathrooms at home, the bins filled with their fathers' dental floss and their brothers' used band aides. I sit in the bathroom stall at school and open the shiny bin, though I know it isn't meant for me. My heart moves quick as I look inside at all the neatly wrapped cotton with little spots of blood peeking through. I look into the toilet and flush, watching as the pale yellow paper dances and spins away from me.

Nineteen

I often think of telling my mother, though it seems possible, even likely, that she already knows. The things she bought me all those years ago still sit in the dark closet all cold and untouched. She could bring it up just as easily as I could, and it's clear to me that she's choosing not to. My mother is kind when I speak to her, always kind, but she's always over there in the corner, always over there out of view. My mother is the sweet background noise you savor when you're home alone.

She's the lull of the TV, the upstairs neighbors' conversation you weren't meant to hear. You can believe that these noises make you safer, but they don't change the fact that you're home alone.

Sixteen

My friends and I are sitting in a circle on the pavement outside of school and Mary's grabbing at her body and moaning. I stay quiet when this happens, careful to take in all their words. I take in all their words as if this will bring it out of me, as if it's been hiding in the darkness all this time and listening deep will set it free. *Being a woman's just cruel*, they say, then, *What day are you on? Want some of these?* Mary nods her head yes and holds out her hand. *Here's some water*, they say, and then more: *Mine's usually just a few days. God – mine lasts a week. For me it's five, but light.* Then suddenly, all at once, they stop and look at me as if my silence is screaming in their ears. *We're sorry*, they said. *It must be hard.* I hold my breath, hold in all the words I've heard them say all these years and then I let them all back out, only rearranged. *Really?* they ask, *When?* I say it was last month, that it should be coming again soon, that it's no big deal by my age. They want to know why I didn't tell them so I say it again, as if I know something they don't, as if I'm suddenly the wisest one there: *It doesn't matter much at my age.* They smile and the circle we're sitting in widens so I fit completely inside. Mary swallows down the pills and lays flat on her back, the sun all too eager to hit her already-glowing frame.

Seventeen

It takes me longer to tell the doctor, as it's not a lie that can be untold. I tell her because of the way she looks at me at my annual checkup, like she can see into my darkness and knows I'm broken. *Last month*, I say, *so the next one should be coming soon.* She doesn't hide her sigh of relief, just

as my friends hadn't. I look down at the shiny floor and see something close to myself, maybe myself rearranged. *Wonderful*, she says. *Congratulations*.

Twenty-One

I know my mother must know. That, or she doesn't want to. I spend my time torn between the two possibilities, though I know she'd be too far off in the corner to hear it anyway. Still, maybe she really hasn't noticed the dusty unopened packages in the closet, maybe she thinks I went off and bought my own years ago, that I forgot she put them in there. Either way, the packages still wait. I lie in bed and think I feel it set free, think I'll have a reason to rip the packages open, peel off the paper and stick those ones flat below or place those ones up inside, take them out all red and used the way they're meant to be, roll them in clean white paper, place them in the bin, hear my insides talking to me, not dark, not anything special or wrong, just beating, cycling, being what I was told they'd be. I get out of bed and check, but it's nothing. My friends like to talk about false alarms out in public, panic setting in, checking, relief. But what about accumulating panic? What about panic that only gets worse each time you check, panic that tells you to answer to the closet, to the unstained lilac fabric all bunched up on the floor, to the dark that stays and stays? What about panic over absence?

Twenty-Two

Worst case scenario, says my brain, think of that first. No screaming thing to take care of, and is that so bad? That's the worst case scenario, if you think of it right. No screaming thing to take care of. No need to worry about being your mother, because where is your mother? You can barely see her over there in the corner, always off to the side. You can still see her putting those packages in

the closet, so off to the side, so away from everything else. And is that so bad, to not have a reason, or even the ability, to become that? Flat stomach, no red. Think of it that way, and the dark doesn't win.

Twenty-Three

I move back to the search engine, but it's different from all those years ago. Before, it told me I was a normal growing thing, eliminated panic. Now, it confirms it. And yet, I'm set on the idea that it can help me. I sit on my bed, covers pushed to the floor, and search. *Infertility cure? Is it wrong to lie? Is motherhood overrated? How to pray? Do tampons expire? How to pray right? How to feel right?* With each search, I'm sure to clear. I imagine my mother coming into my room, looking through my computer, finding out something she didn't already know. Finding out something I don't already know, I realize, is all I'm after. It's all the same now, all the same words from every site, the same lies that leave my mouth, the same feeling I've been trying to move away from for years, that my mother's the liar, that she somehow broke a promise. *It's not a broken promise*, I tell myself. *A broken body is not a broken promise.*

Twenty-Five

The doctor wants to know which day of my cycle I'm on. *I'm not sure*, I say, and the room goes small. She asks me when the last one was. *A week ago*, I say. *I think a week ago*. She nods and records the precious information, then looks down at me like she can see through my sweater, through the boney arms I've wrapped myself in, into the absence that I am. She keeps looking and asks if I'm all right. Doctors aren't supposed to ask this, I don't think. Doctors are only meant to believe their patients when they tell them everything's just fine. *Yes*, I say. *Everything's just fine.*

She looks at me deeper, not breaking eye contact, and I picture everything inside her working just right.

She gets up to leave but I hear myself speak. *No*, I say. *It isn't. Everything isn't fine.* She wants to know what it is, says she can tell from my face. I try to change my face, try to will my entire body to change right then and there. If I say it, it will be true. I grab at my body the way Mary did that day at school, but I'm not aiming to ease my overworked insides. My body doesn't do any work at all, doesn't even try. She says my name, but it sounds strange in this room. *I'm a woman*, I whisper, but it's not my voice. She looks surprised, confused. *Yes*, she says. *I know you are.* I look down at the shiny floor and whisper it again, but not to her: *I'm a woman.*

Thirteen

Four, I say. *Two girls and two boys.* Emma smiles and writes this down, then she turns to the next girl in the circle. *Just one*, she says. *Just one girl.* Everyone nods and Emma writes this down underneath my answer. *Mary?* Mary thinks. *Three*, she says. *The first is a girl, then a boy in the middle, then another girl. She'll always be the baby.* We go all the way around the circle and the list grows. We stuff our shirts with tissues and talk about what kinds of homes we'll have, what kinds of mothers we'll be. *They won't have a bedtime*, I say. *And I'll cook them anything they want.* The circle laughs at this, but then Emma admits that she agrees. *Yeah*, she says. *I like that.* I smile big and wide, then reach for the box of tissues and start pulling out handfuls and stuffing. *Look*, I say, showing off my rounded belly. *She's coming any day now.* The circle laughs and points. *Congratulations*, they all say. *Congratulations.*

Twenty-Four

I've been thinking far too much about the closet lately, far more than I used to. Before, I'd pass by it, and even on a bad day, even on a day I knew nothing was ever coming, I'd be able to walk by. Now, I can't walk by without looking inside. I look and see them still in there, never moved, completely untouched. They're on the highest shelf, right in the corner. I try to walk by and take only a simple quick look, and on some days I'm able to do this. On other days, I read through the instructions, dare to touch all the plastic, all the boxes. I sit on the floor with the closet door wide open, the forced light shining right into it, and stare up at those once-glowing, now-wilting products. I stare and ask that they fade, that they disappear. I imagine lighting a match and setting them and the entire closet on fire, watching them wilt for good. I imagine ripping the packages open and dumping them in the trash, watching the pads fall out all neatly wrapped in green, watching them raining down like finally-dead leaves. I imagine all of this, but I can't do a single thing. I spend hours and hours at the closet and wait, but I don't think I'm waiting for red. I spend hours waiting for absolutely nothing.

Twenty-Five

I'm sorry, I tell the doctor, *I don't know what I meant*. She asks me again if I'm all right. I start again and hear myself say it all, hear myself make it true. I tell her about the darkness that lives inside me, about the empty darkness I am. I tell her there wasn't one little bit, not even a drop. She nods and pretends to look unalarmed. She tells me who I might see. She tells me there will be more doctors, that they can let me know. *Let me know what?* I ask, and she doesn't answer. She looks alarmed, pink. *Well*, she says, *let you know why*. I tell her there isn't a why, and that even if there is, I know the answer. I know I won't get what I was promised. *It's okay*, she says, and I can just

see her insides glowing through. I can just see it all: her blood gathers where it's meant to gather, ready for life should life choose to come, ready just in case. Her bright insides promise to let it out, and then they let it out. It's simple, quick, exactly right. She hands me a card with a name and number written on it, someone to tell me why, but my hand can't move towards it. *I already know,* I say. *I've asked and nothing's answered.*

THE THINGS THEY CALLED BIRDS

The people of Willow Lane have forgotten how to ask or answer. They've chosen to forget, really, and they've chosen this as a response to the little black birds who sit in neat little rows in front of their houses. The birds sit in neat little rows on the edge of the street without moving, only on Willow Lane. Some of the people feel a boiling fear in the pit of their stomachs when they look at the birds and others do not, but everyone, fear or no fear, knows better than to ask what the birds might mean. They know better than to ask why these birds suddenly showed up two weeks ago, why they sit in such perfect little rows, why they scare people the way they do. Most importantly, everyone knows better than to ask when they might leave.

Jeanie who lives in the yellow house is one of the people who the birds scare. She's been faking sick for the past week so she won't have to leave her house and enter the birds' path. Jeanie's become desperate: she rises early each morning and pours hot sauce down her own throat, which she then chokes down to make herself sweat and turn warm. She then runs up the stairs and slips back into bed, coughing loudly to make sure her husband hears it. *I just can't get out of bed*, she says. *Can you take the kids to school?* Jeanie doesn't know how much longer she'll be able to keep this up, as her husband is also afraid of the birds and this fear has only increased with each passing day.

Heather who lives in the purple house is not afraid of the little black birds, but she is afraid of her husband. Perhaps this is why the little black birds don't scare her, because she's used to being scared when she knows she should be. Heather doesn't live in uncertainty. She walks around afraid and then comes home afraid and gets a new blue mark on her body. Heather's husband, on

the other hand, is quite afraid of the little black birds. He wants to ask what they're doing there, what it all means, but even he knows better than to bring this up. Instead, he walks past them and lets that boiling fear settle into his stomach, then he marches home and does what he needs to do to feel right.

Sylvie who lives in the gray house is sick of hearing people talk about the birds. Her mother spends far too much time on the phone telling her friends how many she saw in each neat little row that day. As far as Sylvie's concerned, far stranger things have happened. Even the girls at school want to talk about the birds, but even they, the high school girls, know better than to ask what it all means. Sylvie listens on the staircase as her mother talks to the other mothers, trying to catch a slip up. *But why*, she'll hear her mother begin, then pause. Sylvie knows what her mother keeps almost asking, but she doesn't understand what's so wrong about asking it. Sylvie would also like to know why the birds are sitting on the street, and she asks this question freely. She asks the girls at school, even her teachers. *What do you think?* she asks, and the girls at school slowly back away. *Why?* she asks, and her teachers tell her to take her seat.

Jeanie's husband wants to call a town meeting to talk about the birds. "It's the right thing to do," he keeps telling her, but she only asks him to quiet down so she can get some rest. She's still faking sick, after all, and in addition to not wanting to talk about the birds, she wants to sell her illness.

Jeanie's husband won't quit. He knocks on the doors of all the Willow Lane people's houses and makes his case. "It's the right thing to do," he tells them, and most of them only ask, "For who?" The rest ask him if he can please go away so they can have some peace and quiet. Jeanie's husband won't give up there, either. With each step he takes, he feels the birds staring

him down and making him feel smaller and smaller. His chest begins to feel tight, so tight that he imagines the birds slipping rubber bands onto his heart until the whole thing collapses in on itself. The entire street feels tight, too. He refuses to let himself become smaller, so he goes back home and runs up the stairs to convince Jeanie that something has to be done.

Heather's husband doesn't care for Jeanie's husband. He's always found him to be too nervously talkative, too unsure, but his visit to the purple house that night is his least favorite encounter yet. "Can you believe him?" he asks Heather, who's been trying to get dinner started for over an hour. "It's the right thing to do," he mimics. "The right thing to do for who?" *Well*, says Heather. *I guess I don't know*. Her husband isn't satisfied with this answer. "Well," he asks, "what do you think he means?" *Well*, she says, wishing he'd leave her kitchen, *I guess he means just what he says. He thinks it's the right thing to do. He thinks sitting down and having a conversation is the right thing to do*. "A conversation about what?" Heather doesn't answer, and he asks it again. "What's he want to talk about? There's not a word to say, is what I think. They're just a couple of birds! Just a couple of birds sitting outside on the street. It doesn't mean a single thing, don't you agree?" Heather looks at him and nods. "So you agree?" *Well*, she says. *I don't think meaning has anything to do with it. So what if it means something and so what if it doesn't*. "So you do think it means something?" he asks, getting closer to her than she likes. *No*, she says. *I'm not one bit afraid of those birds, just as I know you aren't*. Her husband nods and talks for fifteen minutes about how the birds don't scare him one bit, how he doesn't understand why they scare Jeanie's husband the way they do. He then stops, looks at his watch, and asks her why dinner isn't ready.

Sylvie has been watching the birds from her window. She wasn't the least bit interested in the birds, still isn't the least bit interested in the birds, but she noticed that one of them seemed bigger than the rest when she was walking home from school and she couldn't help the boiling fear that followed. *I'm not afraid like the rest of them*, she told the bird. *I'm not afraid to look right at you and say exactly what I think, not afraid to ask why you're here*. The bird then looked up at Sylvie and made her feel very strange. *Don't you ever fly?* she asked the line of them. *Birds are meant to fly. Don't you fly?* The bird began to flap its feathers, but its feet didn't leave the ground. Sylvie screamed louder than she knew she could and ran into the house, unsure of why she was so afraid. *But I'm not afraid*, she told herself. *I was never afraid of those birds*.

Sylvie now finds herself parked at her desk, staring out the small opening of her lacey pink curtains. She keeps the curtains as closed as possible so she can see the birds without feeling like they can see her. Sylvie sits like this for an hour, maybe two, but the birds only stand like statues. She gets up only when she hears the panicked hum of her mother's voice. *Well, why doesn't anyone do anything about it?* she says. Sylvie leaves her room and sits down in her usual spot on the stairs, though she feels anything but usual. Usually, Sylvie listens only to try and prove her mother wrong, to try and have some fun. Usually, she doesn't feel the same boiling fear that she hears in her mother's voice. *Why not call animal control, for God's sake? Nobody is doing anything. Why not force them out? They don't even fly – we've all been talking about it*. Sylvie imagines throwing a rock at the birds, but she knows this won't make them leave. Her stomach begins to ache. *Oh, he's no help. Town meeting! This is not a problem for the town. This is a problem for our street and I would like to see us, the people of Willow Lane, do something about it. Yes. Okay, yes, yes I will. Tell him I say hello*. Usually, Sylvie runs from the stairs the minute her mother's conversation ends, but tonight she can't make her body move.

Jeanie is still sick on the night of the meeting. Town Hall has refused to take any part in the problem with the birds, so Jeanie and her husband have agreed to host it in their own home. Jeanie has gone through three bottles of hot sauce and her throat has begun to swell, as has the boiling fear inside her. *I can't get out of bed*, she tells her husband. *You'll have to do it without me*. "You have to come down," her husband tells her. "Come on, I'll carry you." He moves towards her and tries to pull her from the safe warm bed she's made her home. *No*, she says. *I can't*. "You're fine," he tells her, and before she knows it she's in her kitchen, pulling spinach pastries from the oven with her husband standing ready by the front door.

Jeanie sits in the kitchen and waits for the first guest to arrive, but no one shows. Then, at five past eight, the phone rings. "Are you sure?" she hears her husband ask from the living room. "How can that be?" *What is it, dear?* Jeanie asks as she pokes her head into the next room. *What can't be?* She feels the boiling fear rise and has to sit down on the sofa. "Right," he continues. "Well, thanks for letting me know. Tell her to feel better." *What is it?* she asks. "That was Mrs. Peterson. Her poor little Sylvie's in just terrible shape. Said she's been calling everyone and warning them ever since talking to Sylvie. Now no one wants to leave their house." *My God*, says Jeanie. *Warning them about what?* "It's the birds," he says, looking down at the carpet. "They're growing." Jeanie runs to the kitchen and grabs another bottle of hot sauce, which she drinks quickly. She sits on the floor and doesn't dare to look out her window.

Heather is one of the last people who the birds don't scare. On her way home from the park, she stops and looks at the fattest one, now the size of a cat. *Hello*, she says, and the bird looks up. *Are you aliens from outer space? Robots sent here by the government to spy on our little street?*

What's that? You're only a bird? Yes, she says, laughing to herself. I thought so. And yet, she isn't satisfied with this answer either.

She goes into her purple house to find her husband lying on the couch, watching TV. He asks her where she's been and she feels the kind of boiling fear people seem to feel when they look at the birds. Heather's husband hasn't been to work for three days now, not since he got the news about the birds growing. It's a cold, he's been telling her, a very bad cold. Heather's husband looks at her with a deep fear in his eyes. She thinks of telling him about her interaction with the bird, thinks of telling him that there really is nothing to worry about. She thinks of this, but she doesn't want to find herself on the floor. Instead, she just looks at him and says dinner will be ready in an hour.

The birds have now been sitting on Willow Lane for three weeks. Each and every bird has since doubled in size. They never fly or make any noise. No one has seen them eat. As the birds grow, so do the rows. Before, the largest row stretched only as long as one house. Now, the longest row stretches from the yellow house all the way to the purple house, ten whole houses down. The only gaps in this row are in front of each driveway, which unsettles everyone greatly.

Jeanie's husband says it's as if they're letting us leave, Sylvie hears her mother say on the phone. But let me tell you one thing: they aren't letting me or not letting me do a single thing. They're only birds, let's remember. They must fly around at night when we can't see them and gorge themselves on worms and little animals. That's why they're so much bigger. They must just like to travel in groups, which is why they sit in rows – plenty of animals do that. There's nothing strange about any of it if you really think about it. Nothing strange at all. Sylvie's mother pauses.

Yes, I know. I know. I'm just trying to make sense of it all. She begins to cry. Oh, God, she says. Why can't they just leave?

Sylvie is doing just fine, other than regretting telling her mother about the fat bird. She's convinced that if she hadn't said anything, no one would have noticed their change in size. She's convinced that she made them all grow, because really, the Willow Lane people would see whatever they were told to see. It was that damn boiling fear, the one she'd heard so much about but never believed in. It was the fear that made her cry to her mother. Sylvie listened on the staircase in horror that night as her mother called each and every person on the street to make the fear spread. She still can't be entirely sure, but Sylvie thinks that at one point, delivering the news triggered a smile on her mother's face. This smile, Sylvie thinks, is what made the fear leave her body. She wants absolutely nothing do with this mess, and since being afraid made her more like her mother, Sylvie must have just wished the fear away.

Jeanie's husband has rescheduled the meeting, and this time everyone has promised to show up. "It's even better that we had to reschedule," he tells Jeanie as she pulls more spinach pastries from the oven, coughing a terrible cough. "Now, everyone can see that this is really something we need to talk about." Jeanie nods her head and puts the pastries on a light blue platter. "That's just what I told them on the phone, too. I told them that the birds growing is no reason to stay home quivering in fear. The birds growing is a reason to get out and really talk it through. It's the right thing to do, for the people of Willow Lane, to just sit down together and really talk it through." Jeanie nods her head again and opens a package of cocktail napkins. She looks towards the sink and wonders if she should switch to dishwashing soap, if maybe that would get her sicker.

They'll be here soon, she reminds her husband, and with that he rushes her to the living room so they can wait by the door together.

Sylvie's mother never likes going places alone, which often leads to her taking Sylvie places she shouldn't. Throughout her childhood, Sylvie has found herself at couples' dinner parties, the neighborhood cocktail club, and Halloween parties that turned rowdy just after 9pm. For this reason, Sylvie knows she shouldn't be surprised when her mother asks her to come to the meeting about the birds, and yet she is. *Really?* she asks. *Do you think that would be okay?* Sylvie's mother looks at her and touches her shoulder gently. *Of course*, she says. *I don't know*, says Sylvie. *It's just right across the street in the yellow house*, says her mother. *You must come. You're very mature for your age, and you just had that interaction with the birds. First you were the one who noticed the birds were – are – growing, and next it flapped its wings at you just as you asked it about flying.* Sylvie moves away from her mother. *No*, she says. *I told you I don't want to talk about that. Did you tell people? I told you not to talk about that.* Sylvie's mother touches her shoulder again and says, *Of course not.* She tells her that this is why she must come to meeting, so she can tell them. *We'll see*, says Sylvie, and she begins to feel very afraid.

Heather is trying to convince her husband to go to the meeting. She imagines him as a little egg, a little egg you have to tap very gently on the counter so it breaks just so, taking care not to let it smash, or even worse, fall and explode on the floor. "Heather," he says, "I feel terrible. My head is aching and my skin feels hot." *Sweetie*, she says. *You've already used up all your vacation days. This has to stop.* "I'd love for it to stop," he says. "Don't you think I'd love for it to stop?" She doesn't want to smash the egg, but she can't help herself. *Well that's just it*, she says. *That's why I think we need to go.* He asks her what she means and she asks him to please just ignore her. *Never mind*, she says. *I wasn't making sense.* He gives her a new mark on her body, which will be

blue tomorrow, then a deep purple-gray the next day. He tells her he'll keep giving her these marks until she tells him what she means, even though he already knows. "Say you don't believe me," he says. "Say you think this will only stop when the birds go away, that you think I'm afraid." Heather thinks for a moment. If an egg is balancing on the edge of a counter, ready to fall, is it better to try and catch it, or to stand back and let it become what it will become? *Fine*, she says. *Yes, I think you're faking sick. I think you're afraid and I just thought that maybe if you were around other people who were also afraid it may make you feel better, because you aren't the only one who's afraid and I don't see a single thing wrong with it. You're allowed to be afraid.* Heather gets one last mark, right on her face, and yet, he listens. By the time Heather gets herself up off the floor, her husband is nibbling on a spinach pastry ten houses down, waiting for the chatter to begin.

Seven people show up to the meeting, and Jeanie's husband welcomes them in graciously. Sylvie and her mother are the first to arrive, then the couple who live in the green house across the street, then the man who lives in the white house along with the woman who lives in the pink house, and then, only ten minutes late, Heather's husband who dared leave his safe purple house. "So glad you could come," Jeanie's husband says at ten past eight. "I honestly didn't think you'd show. You didn't seem too wild about the idea when I pitched it a week back." Heather's husband only nods and sits down. "Have you already started?" he asks. "No, no," says Jeanie's husband. "We're expecting a few more." When the few more don't show, Jeanie nudges her husband and tells him to start. "Another minute," he tells her. The room looks uneasy. Jeanie turns to him and shakes her head. *You don't want the ones you have to leave.* Jeanie's husband agrees and stands up tall, then quickly falls into a slouch.

“Well,” he says, “Thank you all for coming. I’ve called this meeting because, well, because – gosh, this is harder to say than I thought It’d be.”

Because you’d like to discuss the birds, Sylvie’s mother declares.

“Yes,” he says. “Thank you. It’s so silly, isn’t it? To say it out loud, I mean. It feels so silly once you say it out loud. They’re just a bunch of birds.”

The room goes quiet.

Jeanie looks up at her husband and mouths “itinerary,” which she’s holding in her shaking, sweaty hand.

“Ahh, right,” he says, taking the piece of paper from his wife. “First on the agenda is the idea of writing a letter to animal control. Now, I know many of us have tried calling with no luck, as the birds aren’t exactly *doing* anything, but I think a strongly worded letter could be very effective.”

“Why involve animal control?” says the man from the green house. “I honestly do not understand why no one’s tried dealing with the problem himself.”

“How so?” asks Jeanie’s husband.

“Rocks. A gun. Cinderblocks.”

“Well,” says Jeanie’s husband. “If it doesn’t work out with animal control.”

“I say we go for it now,” says the man from the green house.

“Agreed,” says Heather’s husband. “These birds are more pests than anything else. Nothing to worry about, in my opinion, but I still want them gone.”

“Okay,” says Jeanie’s husband. “Any volunteers then?”

The room goes silent.

Maybe they aren't so bad, says the woman from the green house. *They don't really do anything. They aren't causing us any harm.*

Yes they are, says Sylvie's mother. *I tried to tell myself the same thing but they absolutely are causing us harm. Tell them what happened, Sylvie. Tell them.*

Sylvie shakes her head at her mother.

"Well, what is it?" asks the man from the white house.

Sylvie asks her mother if she can go home, but her mother only asks her again. *Please, Sylvie,* she says. *Tell them about the boiling fear you felt, tell them how it threatened you.*

Sylvie remains quiet. She feels unsafe.

"On to other things," says Jeanie's husband. "We can come back to that. Now for item two on the agenda."

Heather gets herself off the floor and finds her way to the bathroom. She looks in the mirror and sighs. She doesn't feel like covering this mark up, not today. She looks out the window and smiles as she makes out the row of birds sitting on the dimly lit street. She has a steady feeling, but she knows it can only last for so long. She goes outside and walks along the row of birds, then finds herself in front of the yellow house.

Do you hear that? asks Sylvie, sitting up in her seat. *Do you hear that knocking?*

Jeanie's husband shrugs his shoulders, but agrees to check.

Heather, says Sylvie. She's only talked to Heather once or twice before, just at the silly parties with her mother, and yet she suddenly feels her entire body become loose.

Jeanie tells Heather to have a seat. No one asks about her face.

Thank you, says Heather. She sits down next to Sylvie.

“On to item three,” says Jeanie’s husband. “The idea of setting up a video camera.”

“And what would that achieve?” asks Heather’s husband.

“Well, we could catch them.”

“Catch them?” asks the man from the white house. “Catch them doing what?”

“Well, one major concern, perhaps *the* concern, is the idea that they don’t move.”

“How do the cameras come in?” asks the man from the green house.

“They’d just help us to know what we’re dealing with.”

Sylvie shifts in her seat, which prompts Heather to do the same.

I don’t think that’s such a good idea, says Sylvie.

Heather nods her head, but doesn’t speak.

“I know it’s scary,” says Jeanie’s husband. “But we can’t let fear stand in our way.”

I’m not afraid, says Sylvie. *It’s only that I think you’re thinking about this all wrong.”*

“What does she know?” Heather’s husband asks, turning to Sylvie’s mother.

No more than you do, says Sylvie. *The thing that happened is nothing, really. I asked one of them if it could fly and right as I said this it flapped its wings at me. I didn’t really realize it just then, but as it flapped its wings it changed.*

“Changed?” asks Jeanie’s husband.

As it flapped its wings it grew a bit bigger, and its beak grew a bit smaller, like it was turning into something else.

The boiling fear rushes through the room.

“How did you not notice this before?” asks Heather’s husband.

It’s subtle, says Sylvie.

Sylvie, says her mother, *why don't you go on home?*

No one in the room argues.

Sylvie walks home with her arms wrapped around her body. She turns to the birds and watches as they grow even more. Sylvie feels the boiling fear enter her body even though she knows there's nothing to be afraid of. The birds look up at Sylvie and their beaks become even smaller. They change into something different altogether, though Sylvie doesn't know what this is. She tries her best to push the boiling fear away and just then, in that small moment before the people of Willow Lane leave the yellow house, she feels steady.

Heather decides to leave the meeting early. As she exits the yellow house, she sees the creatures, creatures that no one would ever think to call birds. They blend in wonderfully with the black night. She does not feel afraid, but she begins to wonder how long this will last, as the words she heard at the meeting are still moving in her head. She sees Sylvie sitting on the stoop of the gray house and gives her a little wave. Heather thinks of walking over to the gray house and sitting down next to Sylvie, but she doesn't do this. Instead, she ignores Sylvie and the creatures and goes into her purple house, careful not to bother them or the thick black night with any more words.

As Sylvie continues to watch the creatures in front of her, the fear moves away. She enjoys the silence that Heather has left her with, and while she knows nothing good is coming for her or the creatures, she chooses not to look ahead. She chooses to ignore the worry of what will happen when the people leave the yellow house and see the creatures sitting on the edge of the street, the worry that their screams will make their way into her, the worry of fears to come. Instead, she looks only at what sits in front of her.

The creatures don't turn into monsters or aliens from outer space.

They don't move or roar or try to eat her.

They just sit on the edge of the street, being whatever they are.

THE GIRL SPUN FROM FORCE

I sit on the edge of my chair, trying to be whatever I am. *Who are you?* she likes to ask me. *This,* I say. *This thing you're looking at now, this is what I am.* She sits in her seat very comfortably which makes me want to move closer to the edge of mine. *Who you are,* she says. *You're a who, not a what.* I'd like to fall off my seat, but I sit perfectly still. *What's the difference?* I ask, and she tells me I'd better come back again next week. *We need more time than I thought,* she says. She's been saying this since we met.

I don't feel much like a who. A who doesn't enter the world the way I did.

You're lucky, she likes to tell me. *You're lucky you're here. And you're good. It's good that you're here. Do you hear me?*

I lie and say I agree. That's what she wants to hear, that I agree. *Yes,* I say. *I'm so lucky.*

Her name is Eve.

I see Eve on Tuesdays. My sister drives me there and asks if I'd like her to wait. *No,* I always say, but she likes to ask anyway. She's my sister mostly but not completely. We have only the same mother. My sister is a who because she entered the world properly. My sister is more my mother than my mother is. My sister has done all of the mother things for me for as long as I can remember. My sister still talks to our mother but I do not.

When I first began to see Eve, she wanted me to talk about my mother. Now she wants me to talk about myself. The difference between these topics has begun to lose its shape.

Do you resent her for telling you? she used to ask. *No*, I'd say. *For keeping you, then? Do you resent her for the choice she made?* I said no to that as well, but she insisted that I must resent her for something. *I don't resent her for anything*, I promised. *I don't even know why I'm here.*

Not knowing why I'm here is exactly why I'm stuck here with Eve. This, or thinking I shouldn't be here. When my mother made the choice she did, the choice Eve wants me to talk about, I had no say. I have no say now, either. Seeing Eve was certainly not my choice. My sister says she thought of it, but I suspect it was another choice made by my mother. All I am is a choice made by my mother.

Now, instead of asking about my mother, Eve tries to get me to talk about myself. *Do you think it defines you?* she asks. *Because it doesn't.* I'm not sure if she's actually asking me, but then she says it again: *Do you think it defines you?* I want to tell her that she's already spoiled the answer, but I humor her anyway. *No*, I say. *It doesn't define me.*

I once heard my aunts talking about me all gathered around in the kitchen. It must've been four years ago, because I remember them talking by the remains of my purple cake with the melted nine candled on top. I heard them talk about how strange it was thinking back to the day they got the news, how strange it was thinking about their reactions, that they and everyone else insisted that she make me disappear into something easily forgotten.

I don't mention this memory to Eve, but I know it's just the kind of thing she'd love to hear. And why have you held onto this memory? she'd ask. I don't have answers to any of the questions she asks me. I only have questions.

How, for example, could my mother have not seen a thing like that coming? I've seen photos of her when she was young, and none of the men standing next to her speak safety. I've looked at the photos trying to pick my father out, but she says he was only a stranger. I don't believe her, somehow, but I listen to her story anyway. *It was a silent, black night* she says. She says, *This is what happens when women walk home in the dark.* She says the world wasn't meant for us, that you could be the most careful woman in all the world and still a thing like that could happen. My response when she first said this was, *Were you?* She looked at me and said, *No, how could I be? How could I be the most careful woman in all the world?* I said all the things you aren't supposed to say, asked what she was wearing and what time it was and why she was out so late in the first place. She gave me her reasons, reasons a person like Eve tricks someone into believing.

What I remember most about my mother telling me is the strange way my dolls came into my brain. I still had them displayed on my shelf even though I was far too old for that. I thought of the girls I knew as a little child who liked to pretend their dolls were real children, the girls who liked to tuck them in at night and ignore the tags that said where they were made. I wasn't like this. When I played with my dolls as a small girl, I admired the plastic, ran my hand along the dolls' made up scalps to feel the strange texture, tried to decide if the soft bodies were filled with cotton or foam or pellets. Even after I was too old to play with them I like to read and reread the tags, tap their perfect little glass eyes and imagine how they were made.

I went into my room the day my mother told me and felt a heat deep inside, felt a heat that made me squint to try and hide from any sign that my dolls were soulless empty things. I threw them under my bed so I wouldn't have to look anymore, so I could pretend I didn't know how they were made. It was childish, I knew it was, but it was the dolls that made me stop feeling like a who that day.

It was one year ago that my mother sat me down to tell me. I nodded and pretended it was the first I was hearing of it, and somehow I felt that it was. My sister was the first one to tell me, but she made me promise to never let our mother know. I don't blame my sister for telling me. She told me only because I asked and I asked only because I'd seen it everywhere I looked for years. I blame my mother because it wasn't a thing I asked her to tell me, and when she did I saw it more than I knew I could. *Most people wouldn't have kept you, she told me. Most people wouldn't have kept you like I did. And isn't it great that now you get to be here?*

I tell Eve about this during one of our sessions. *What did she want?* I ask. *A round of applause?* Eve moves to the front of her chair. Her face turns pink and her hair looks undone. *I'm sure she didn't,* she says. I lean back in my seat and try to look through her. *You think I'm unkind,* I said. *You think I was unfair.* She tries to lean back. *No,* she says. *But I wonder if you do. Do you think of yourself as unkind?* I cross my arms and look around for a clock even though I know there isn't one in the room. The only clock in that room is on Eve's wrist because she's the keeper of all answers. *Is my time up yet?* I ask. *What do you think?* she asks. *Do you think you're unkind? Who are you?* I frown. *I don't know,* I say. *I only know I don't want to be here.*

Eve tells me I need to start living my life. Eve tells me I need to start living my life, but I wasn't given a life to live. I was forced into my mother and then forced into the world. Eve tells me I need to start living my life, but I'm only a body, a body that came into the world through mean force. *Stop forcing me to go*, I keep telling my sister. *Stop forcing me to speak*, I tell Eve. *Stop forcing me to want what I don't*.

I want to tell Eve you can't force life into someone like me, but I don't. I tell her I'll live my life and be happy about it. The room we speak in contains us both in a way that makes any bit of heat left inside me dissipate. I know my sister is waiting outside and I know my mother is visiting next week and know all the words in this room will fall through the walls and not find their way to me. I already know who I am.

I'll live a good life, I say, looking down at my shoes. Eve leans back in her chair and says, *Yes, you'll live a good life*. *Yes*, I say. Eve tells me our time is finally up and I stand. *You'll live a good life*, she says again. I walk out the building's front door and do what I do after every visit. I let every hope I ever had to be a who fly up past the clouds and far from my empty body. Some days the clouds are white and creamy, but today they are black, sagging, wonderfully heavy. I look up, but only for a minute. After counting the minute out, I slouch my body back downward and move my legs towards wavering hum of my sister's car.

THE WAY WE LOOK IN THE DARK

Mother and I live our lives in slouched bodies. We're the empty girls, the ones who look under the table for scraps even though our plates are full. We answer only when Father speaks to us, and even then we say nothing. We're the tired voices you hear in the back of your mind when you can't sleep, the restless feeling in your legs, the inside noises you ignore. We're the places you've never been to and the memories you'll never have.

We love each other greatly on the days we remember what loving another person is, and we desperately want the other dead on other days. Mother tells me she wasn't always this empty and I tell her the same. We throw things at each other and blame ourselves and then Father and then the poor tired woman standing in front of each of us.

We throw out all our mirrors because looking at each other tells us enough.

There was a time when our backs were young and tight, back before I was born. Mother says she would rise early and run, back when running was something she was allowed to do.

"But I've never seen you run," I tell her. She slouches deeper when I say this and reminds me that she had a life before me. We don't talk much about life before me, but when we do we're sure to speak quietly. It's less because we don't want him to hear us and more because we don't want the dried-up parts of ourselves to overhear the conversation and remember what they're missing.

"I was beautiful," she likes to tell me. "I would run for miles and keep my back perfectly straight. I didn't even stop to drink water. I didn't need it."

"I don't see you drink water now either," I remind her.

She tells me I'm missing the point.

Father doesn't father me but he's in charge of Mother's mothering. He watched closely as she gave birth to me, worried she'd do it wrong. He watches closely as she says grace at the dinner table and reminds her to remind me to thank God for each and every breath.

"Thank God for each and every breath," she tells me, and I hold my breath.

At age nine I asked Mother what claustrophobic meant, thinking it would be my big life answer. When she said she didn't know I asked if it was maybe the fear of small spaces. She got it right away: I was telling her I understood.

"Yes," she said.

"Is that what I am?"

"Is what what you are?" she asked.

"That word."

"The one you just said?"

"Yes."

"I can't say what you are."

"Can I say what I am?"

"No," she said, letting her shoulders fall.

At age fourteen my posture was so bad that Father took me to the doctor to get a back brace. Mother sat in the back of the car to keep me quiet even though I was nearly an adult, and a quiet adult at that. I sneezed once, but silently, and Father talked on his phone about important

things. I watched the trees rush by and wished, always wished, that I were them. The wind was bossy and kind all together which was enough to make me ache in places I could only access on long drives.

On the way home I rode with the seatbelt wrapped around the metal wrapped around my limp body. Mother fell asleep next to me with her arms wrapped around her sad little torso. We loved each other on this day.

The rules for the brace were simple: always wear it unless you can't. Wear it when you sleep, when you bathe, when you fall into the hole that's been carved out for you. Always wear it unless you can't, and even if you can't, wear it.

The brace comes off at age twenty but my posture is worse. Father pretends it was meant to straighten me, which we both know was a lost cause. The brace was nothing special, nothing noteworthy, but going to the doctor all those years ago still stands out in my mind.

"Why didn't we try to leave?" I ask Mother softly.

We're lying in her bed (our bed). We are one thing and Father is another altogether, which makes asking each other things nearly impossible. I never have answers for myself, so I know it's barely fair to think she'll have them for me.

"We went because you needed a brace."

"I didn't ask why we went."

"Don't be cruel to yourself," she says.

"I'm not," I say. "I'm trying to be kind."

"Cut it out," she says. "You're spiraling."

"So what if I am?" I ask.

“I guess you’re right,” she says. “So spiral.”

“I just don’t understand,” I say. “All those people and you said nothing.”

“I used to be so lovely,” she says. “I’d run for hours, just run. I’d run with my back perfectly straight. I could run without taking a break, without taking a breath. I’d run all night and all day, just run.”

“That’s what I thought,” I say, and the light goes off.

I wake up smaller the next day, smaller than I’ve been in years. Father is standing at the door, watching us breathe in and out. He’s cradling the brace in his arms, looking at me. Father is getting older but Mother isn’t. Father’s getting older and stranger and wilder.

“Put it on,” he says, handing me the tired old thing. He’s changed his mind.

“It’s just as tired,” I say. It’s a morning thing to say, a thing to say in the morning before your feet hit the floor and you remember your own mind, or rather, you forget your mind and remember your place.

“As tired as what?” he asks.

“As tired of me as I am of it.”

Father is very good, has always been very good, at reminding me of my place, whatever that may be. I’ll tell you one thing: this is quite the place. I try to keep my back straight, keep my thoughts straight, keep my Self away, but when he hands me the brace I know I cannot.

This place is where Mother and I live, and the world outside is where Father lives. I’m not angry or sad or scared about this, just nothing. I am nothing about it. I am nothing about it until he hands me the used-up brace.

“I remember when I used to run,” I tell Father. “I used to run with my back straight, before Mother had me. I used to run for days, just run. I didn’t even have feet, but I ran fast, I ran without water, I ran through the wind and rain and snow, even through the fire.”

He keeps trying to show me my place. Mother is involved now, and so is the brace. He leaves and we lay there, both in it. I don’t think much about that part, about the part where my very own father straps me and my mother into the same brace he made me wear for six years straight. I think more about how pathetic, how terrible, it is that Mother and I have shrunken small enough to both fit in the same bars.

We breathe in and out, let the sun go down and let the room turn icy black. We hear him pace downstairs and let his footsteps echo through our hollowness. We think about wanting something to eat, but we decide against it. Mother has taught me and I have taught Mother to stop wanting.

We hate each other then, hate the feeling of our broken backs rubbing up against each other, hate the way we look in the dark.

“I could kill you,” I tell her.

“Like that would be anything new,” she says.

DARK SONNET II

And these are the parts The Girls are made up from
The tight hugs of mothers that pull them towards dust
The promise of spinning passed down
Without thought

The Girls can't find their place in the water spread wide
Not in green honest trees or the black in their minds
The Girls can't find an answer from up or below
They just spin right along and spin once more again

For to be a smart Girl one must listen and bow
But some Girls look beyond
What a Girl's meant to have
Watch The Girls stand up straight and pretend it's all fine

And now watch them lie down
To crash deep, round, and high

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