

We would come to the edge

by

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Abstract:

This small collection centers on ideas of dislocation and place. With a sharp awareness of the Midwest, its gory history and oppressive weather, many of these pieces delve into these obsessions through a speaker who is both a guest struggling to come to terms with landscape, and a native accustomed to these things.

We then experience a transition where the work turns away from the windows, looking at the politics of place when place is the living room, the dinner table.

We leave the Midwest to enter Europe where the examination of war, beauty, and bloody landscape continues. Through references to iconic art, holocaust imagery, and the fumbings of a tourist, we witness the minutia of dislocation, the haunting confusion that comes with a strange place.

We are then left with our final location: The American West. The final frontier in many senses of the phrase, this is amplified when viewed through the eyes of a child.

All of these works grapple with place--the smothering humidity of Kansas, the staggering Eastern Block, childhood, death. In addition to a sense of disorientation, this small collection aims to reveal what we reach for when we reach for familiarity.

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The Farm

She had always wanted one, but not like this. It was supposed to happen with Saltines by the bedside to curb nausea, his roughened hands on her stomach in the kitchen, his lips against her bellybutton like a tin-can phone right to it, whispering about how great it was out here. She was supposed to stretch headphones over the expanding lump and play classical music so it would be better at math than she was. Strangers were supposed to stop her and touch her and she was supposed to be indignant about it later on the phone with her friends.

But the business had taken longer to get off the ground than expected, the renovations on the house and barn had been more costly, he was still waiting for a soon-to-come raise, and there was no reason yet to go off of the Pill—things were, in his words, still shaky.

Her mother, at Sunday dinner, had said, “If you keep waiting for the perfect time it will never come,” and the next Sunday said, “The perfect time just used to *find* folks and people didn’t worry so much about the how.”

And then her younger sister showed up from wherever she had been for a long while now working some temp job, and took a plate like no time had passed at all, and did not accept a beer, and at dessert said it, and was smiling even though no one thought she should be once she had said it all the way through. And then the mother said, “Well, I’m not about to be a mother again, so don’t you think you can pass this off on me.”

And that night, at home with the barn like a buffalo's still shadow in the distance, the older sister said again to her husband that they had plenty of space in this house, and there would always be more excuses than reasons for change. And she said if her sister moved back to this town for good they could possibly be pregnant at the same time, and then the baby would always have someone in the world, the way she had with her sister. Which made his eyes widen in the dark; she couldn't see it, but she knew he was giving her a look, the way he always did when she used hope as if it were reason. But she put her hand on his leg, and her head on his pillow, and they shared breath until they fell asleep.

Soon all practical measures were taken. The doctors said *patience*. At home her sister's belly held a bowl of popcorn when she came over to watch a movie. Soon it would hold a plate of nachos while she was standing up.

Touching her own belly was like the pang of locating a cavity with caramel.

The mother grew more nervous, like a pacing zoo cat. She would shake her head and roll it around. She looked her in the eye and said, "I don't know what kind of home she's thinking of setting up there in that apartment, but they can't live here."

And the older sister said back what she always said about her younger sister, about not worrying about it.

She went into the barn and flicked on the lights. Some of the rabbits stirred with the change, causing the hanging hutches to sway a little. Some of the rabbits remained still and sleeping. Some of the hutches were empty, waiting for the kits to be weaned and grown enough to fill them.

The fans whirred from all corners of the room, keeping the temperature soft, and a soothing hum in the barn. She moved to the red cooler against the wall, and filled a bucket with feed.

As she walked along the aisles she looked into each hole and let out little greetings to each one. A sweet-tempered buck in the corner moved to greet her—or the food—and she reached in to touch his fur. It felt like her fingers could sink forever into the softness and never find him. A kit rustled the straw in a crate next to a broken-faced Doe. She stayed sleeping. The aunt adjusted the small tag on the cage charting the genealogy of the doe, and her kit, and secured it with another twist tie.

After feed had been poured for all of them, she got a rake and began to gather the pellets from where they dropped under the cages to bag and sell as fertilizer. As she worked, several rabbits began to piss, and it sounded like rain pouring from gutters, or water overflowing from dishes in the sink.

...

Everyone looked a little different in the shifted light of the new season. The baby came and was named Fairley. The younger sister took it home, and the circles around her eyes got darker and darker, but the lines forming on her face were from smiling.

The husband said, one day on the drive home from Sunday dinner, “She looks like a before and after photo for plastic surgery, and she’s working on the before part now.” And they laughed, and they squeezed each other’s hands in a way that had over time become shorthand for a much longer conversation.

Practical measures were still being taken, but she continued work on the barn, now with the intent of expanding the business sooner than planned. At work he put in a few extra late nights than usual, and they would collapse into bed like dropped bananas.

The younger sister announced at Sunday dinner that she had begun seeing someone.

The now-Grandmother stopped eating and said, "I knew it."

The younger sister said she was very happy, and everything was going very well, and Fairley was happy too, and as if to prove it she clapped her toy and dropped it.

Outside on the deck, while inside the husband cooed to the baby the now-Grandmother did the dishes, the younger sister put a cigarette to her lips and lit it. She said to the older sister, "He makes really good money. He paid for *cable* last month." And, blowing smoke toward the reaching branches, said, "And you should see him with that baby."

"Do you think it's serious?" the older sister asked. She immediately hated the question. It was such a her-question to ask.

"Like, marriage?" asked the younger sister. She paused, and bit her thumb a little, and smiled. Then shrugged a little, and continued her cigarette.

The women turned and watched the husband lift the baby up and put his lips against her belly, and the baby's face twisted into boundless joy.

"Yeah," sighed the younger sister, "That'll getcha everytime." The older sister hadn't noticed, but she had put her hand over her heart.

That night the older sister and the husband made love. The next morning he kissed her eyelids and said he had a good feeling about this time.

He went to work, and she worked in the barn. Everyone was waiting for something. His raise had only just come through when.

....

A neighbor had heard the baby start to cry around 1:24am, but there were no other sounds in the apartment. *The paper-wall palace*, the younger sister had called it after she had first moved in, after she had heard the microwave ding every evening in the elderly couple's apartment, followed by a theme-song at top volume. After she had heard the girl living next to her call the man making love to her *Big Daddy* again and again, and the next morning had had to make small talk with both of them about the road construction across the street.

Nothing went unheard. But at 1:24am the baby started to cry and the neighbors heard no reluctant sheets rustle. No toes were stubbed No *there there*. No click to heat up the bottle. The baby's soft complaint pulled like taffy into a wail, and then a desperate, piercing shriek.

Hours later a neighbor knocked on the door.

There was no indication that anyone was home. The knob turned easily, and the door opened. With the cold light coming in from the parking lot everything looked ancient and distorted. The neighbor tried the light switch, which worked fine, not like if it had been a movie. He felt stupid for thinking of this. There were a few cans of soda on the coffee table next to a couple of empty baby-bottles cloudy with a milk residue. A

gossip magazine under an old National Geographic. Some paper towels crumpled in a pile with baby food dried in globs.

“Hello?” the neighbor heard the baby shift in the next room, the slight crinkle of her diaper. “Hello? Lady?”

He could see the bathroom door was open, and it was empty of anyone. A curling iron was plugged in and hung like a vine, but when he checked it was turned off, and dusty.

Down the narrow hall, which was small enough to just be called a *pause* between rooms, the neighbor saw the foot of the bed, sheets piled as if they’d been kicked to the bottom, two shoes shyly overlapping each other on the floor. The neighbor crept slowly, barely noticing the prayer coming out of his lips and into the humid air. Just as he’d reached the part about *Madre de Dios* he flicked on the light and held his breath.

In the bed was a neatly rolled up pair of socks, a necklace, a modest pile of folded fabric, and a light pink hard-cover book. “Lady?” he called.

But it was quiet. He was saying *Madre de Dios* again by the time his fingers were in the small warm armpits of the baby, and they were almost all the way out of the apartment in three of his quick strides.

...

Driving there she realized three things: 1. The man she had spoken to on the phone was a police officer. 2. She was driving. 3. She was still in her pajamas.

Light was just beginning to peak over the mountains. The sky was dappled with light-pink speed bump clouds as far as she could see, ahead and behind. Everything left on the earth was black and shadowed, even the clean white cars, and the trees fanned up into silhouette, and the garbage in the gutter seemed oddly still.

The apartment building used to be a motel, and still looked like one. Along with the teal iron rails and the sun-fade of a (No) Vacancy sign, the feeling of temporary had too remained. At least, it had seemed this way to her when she visited her sister, and bounced Fairley on her shin, the baby clinging to it like a carnival ride. And they had always said *when not if* she gets out of here and into some place better. Some place permanent, adult.

Scattered among the usual cars and motorcycles of the parking lot were a few police cars, but no lights were flashing.

She got out of her car and slammed the door and stood completely still.

*Are you the sister of We're gonna need you to come in and answer a few
We can't answer that, ma'am.*

She drifted to the iron stairs, and up, and was stopped, and identified herself, and had to wait for someone to come and get her. Finally, she was led to the couch where she was asked to sit.

“Okay, here’s the situation—”

“Are you the one who called me?”

“Yes. Here’s the situation. According to a neighbor your sister seems to be missing. No signs of a struggle, no signs of foul play, we’re treating this as a simple cut-and-run—”

“She’s missing?”

He made an mmm sound, like she had forgot to carry a one. “‘Seems to be missing’,” he corrected. “She’s an adult, and she can go wherever she wants whenever she wants with whomever she wants. We’re not too worried about it, she could be back any minute.”

She looked around.

“Her car is gone, her keys are gone, her purse is gone. So we don’t say *missing*. Honestly, we normally wouldn’t have even called you down here. Only issue, of course, is she left that baby of hers—”

“Oh my god, Fairley!” she jumped up and ran to the crib, which was empty and neat.

“Calm down, she’s at a neighbor’s place, the guy who called it in. Really we’re only here because he said his hair stood up or something, which the dispatcher thought meant he saw blood. So we got all these people down here taking all of these expensive precautions, but everything’s fine.”

“Neighbor?”

“Ma’am?” The cop was suddenly blushing, and gesturing with his head at her, like a horse with a bit. She looked down. The pink of her nipple had slipped from her pajamas.

“Fuck,” she said, and tucked it away.

“What happened?” her mother asked, storming through the door dragging a much slighter officer who was failing to anchor her.

“Fuck,” she said again.

The officer explained it all, this time to the Grandmother, about how no one was *missing* exactly, and in terms of this problem being solved, now it was just a waiting game to see *when*.

And the Grandmother said, “I knew it.” She said, “I knew when she said she met that man it meant she’d be gone again.”

And then they broke the conversation to let the officer in, to make sure he wrote down the man’s name. Darrel Something. Darren Something.

The officer interrupted the mother halfway through her next question to say, “She’s with the neighbor next door who called it in. We’re only here because he said his hair—”

The Grandmother said, “I swore to her, didn’t I swear to her, that I would not be a mother again with that baby.”

“Well ladies,” the officer flicked his notebook closed. It looked practiced. “This is looking more and more to us like a family matter. So we’re gonna go ahead and leave it to the family to sort it through. I’ll go get the baby.”

The two women stood alone in the apartment. “I got arthritis,” the mother said. “I can’t be up and down all the time.”

“I know, Mom.”

“I can’t believe she.”

They sat on the couch, and the daughter looked at the mother. The lines on her skin quivered like crumpled paper unfolding in a trash can.

“I’ll take her, Mom.” She said. “We got plenty of room.”

The mother looked at her, and with this decision suddenly the change this event meant for their lives had been made real enough to sit with them.

“It’ll be temporary, you know,” the mother whispered. “Don’t worry, she’ll come right on back again, and we’ll be expected to act happy about it.”

The officer came in with Fairley, and paused before the two women. The daughter raised her hand, and he handed her the baby, who was watching the whole thing with curiosity.

...

Soon Fairley was crawling, slapping her palms against the wood floors of the aunt’s house like she was trying to splash in them. Her aunt followed her around with ready hands, poised to scoop her or catch her at a hint of danger.

The advice books on raising children stacked on the living room table unanimously said not to do this, but she couldn’t imagine bruising her peach face, especially if at any moment Fairley’s mother would come back and ask what had happened.

Fairley’s mother had been gone for almost a year. At the grocery store the aunt had long stopped saying *No, Aunt*, when she was stopped and asked about her baby. The women in the community had began inviting her to their playgroups and birthday parties,

with invitations addressed to *Mom and Baby*, accompanied by a picture of the baby getting into some sort of mischief around the house. Usually the babies were missing an important article of clothing, or naked entirely. The photos went on the fridge. She had received one invitation, though, with a baby dressed as a flapper, wearing a sequined headband and pearl necklace, but the aunt just squinted into the photo, and then tucked it gently in the trashcan.

Fairley's own birthday was coming up, and the aunt began following her around with a camera. She kept it at the ready during meals and time in the sandbox, hoping to catch the charming mistakes that infants make of spilling something or misusing a tool.

But Fairley did not cooperate.

During meals she would stare politely at the aunt or uncle, her mouth open like the lion-shaped drinking fountain at the zoo, waiting for the mush on the end of the spoon. She would slop it around her mouth, and onto her fingers, and examine it, making a sound like a revving engine.

In the sandbox it was much the same: she would grasp as much of the sand as she could in one hand, and bring it close to her face, and study the grains until she had lost them all to gravity. When she had tired of this she would stare into the lawn, or trees, and make little noises like an animal trying to summon an ally from the shadows.

"She's a genius," the aunt concluded one night, putting lotion on her hands in bed.

The husband smiled at her. "She's curious, but—"

"No," the aunt said, shaking her head, "she's so smart. She's so contemplative for a one-year-old."

While the husband was at his office the aunt would work in the barn, strapping Fairley to her, or putting her in the sandbox or playpen just outside the door. They would go inside the house during the hot parts of the day, and eat, and read stories, and the aunt would clean while Fairley found ways to play or sleep.

The aunt would still follow Fairley with the camera, sometimes hiding behind a houseplant, hoping to catch her doing something these other babies had done; something to use as evidence of their normalcy.

One day the aunt put Fairley next to the white wall in her bedroom. She scattered crayons and markers around her, and waited with the camera. Fairley chirped, and twirled the red marker around in her hand before setting it down for the blue one. She picked up the green and the yellow at the same time, and dropped them all, and the rattle they made against the floor seemed to surprise her, and the surprise made her laugh. She began to pick up as many as she could at a time and drop them.

The aunt put the camera down. She took off the lid of the blue marker, wound Fairley's fingers around it, and pointed it at the wall. She waited. Fairley raised it above her head, and dropped it, leaving a bright blue checkmark on the wood floor.

"Oh goddammit," said the aunt, scooping her up, and moving her to the living room.

They sat together for awhile on the floor. Fairley pulled at the edge of her Tshirt, and said *bopbopbop*.

At almost-lunch-time the aunt began to sort through the fridge and cupboards. She pulled out a plastic container, opened it, and had started to heat it up when she paused. Instead she put the leftover spaghetti in a plastic bowl, and set it on the tray of the high-

chair. She stripped Fairley naked, and set her in the seat. She opened the lens and put it in focus. Fairley looked at the bowl and the high-chair, and then back at her aunt. She opened her mouth and said *agh-agh-agh*.

“Ohforchristssake,” the aunt said. And she lifted up the bowl, and dumped it on Fairley’s head. In the photograph the baby stares out from under the sudden coldness on her head, wide-eyed and mid-flinch.

...

She went to the barn at night. She flicked on the lights, and inside it felt the same as if it were noon; the sounds of the fans and the blaring, hanging bulbs kept it consistent during these hot nights. Many of rabbits were still molting, shedding their fur in clumps and patches. She would brush the worst of them, and reserve the hair in canvas bags.

And at night or in the early morning she would distribute papaya pills to help digest and pass the hair they had already licked and eaten. She would check their health, their temperament, their progress. If she needed to she would make notes.

The largest seal doe was on her side, her dark ears laying stark against her pale body, her dark nose occasionally twitching with the air. Several white-tailed kits were crowding her nipples, their legs kicking each other and her for a better position. They were getting big, almost the size of the mother, and almost ready to be taken out to their own holes.

She opened the door of a nearby cage and flipped over a fat pale doe. With the tips of her fingers she began expertly prodding her midsection, feeling for any lumps that

could be waiting kits. The answer at this stage could still only be *maybe*, and she pet her and cooed to relax her. The bottoms of the doe's feet kicked the air, stained yellow with urine. She put her back in and clicked shut the door. Moments later she inserted a small crate filled with hay—if the doe built a nest with it she would be kindling soon. If she left it alone then she was just fat.

All of the money from the rabbits sold in the last two years had gone toward paying the rent on her sister's unoccupied apartment. The money won at each competition had contributed to upkeep of the barn, as had some of her savings. Fairley was now walking around the house, hanging on cabinet handles and reaching for anything that perched on an edge.

For awhile the Aunt had returned to her sister's apartment once a week or so, just to see if anything had moved, evidence that perhaps her sister had come back for something. She called it *getting her sister's mail*, to anyone who asked.

She would sit in the same reclining chair, and look at the soda cans, the pile of magazines, the position of the furniture, and realize how alien the place seemed to her. She hadn't spent enough time there. She didn't know her sister kept extra mouthwash in the hall closet, or white vinegar under the bathroom sink. She didn't know it well enough at all.

After Fairley's room had been emptied and pillaged for her new life at the aunt's house, nothing had ever moved. Dust had settled quickly over the stilled surfaces. The TV stared at her from its heavy cabinet with a ghosted face. Around her the other apartments swarmed with voices and clatter, signs of life.

From her position in the chair she would try to feel her sister in the apartment, and then she would try to feel her in the world, imagining sending a million small fishing lines from her body to wrap around the earth, to hook her. She never caught anything. The lines stayed weightless against her body, impotent and invisible as spider webs

The first week she had visited the apartment, put mail on the counter, and sat in the chair. From there she had heard a small mechanical whine coming from under the couch. She sent a blind hand under the frame, and it returned clutching her sister's phone, whimpering and flashing a LOW BATTERY across the screen.

During a Sunday dinner the Grandmother said, "I think it's time you stop wasting your money on that place," and when no one said anything to agree with her she added, "You have enough to worry about," which no one could disagree with.

So later that month the Grandmother and the Aunt went to the apartment, and climbed the stairs with the painted-teal railing, and opened the door. The Grandmother muttered, "Filth," and kept standing in the doorway. Then she said, a little softer around the edges, "You sure she hasn't been back?"

The two women bagged up the trash first: paper towels crusted with now-molding baby food, soda cans, receipts, unusable pens. When tossing in expired food in the refrigerator the Grandmother said, "Sure not a lot of food in this house."

The mail on the counter followed. Next were a few now-rusted-through pots and pans in the sink, all the bottles of half-used shampoo or lotion.

"That's enough for one day," the Aunt said. As they descended the stairs she said, "I can keep everything in my barn for awhile." The Grandmother looked at her, and shook her head. She tossed everything into the dumpster, and got into the car.

...

Fairley was left with the Grandmother, and the husband and the aunt left for date night in the city. They had now been married for almost eight years.

“This is nice,” one or the other of them kept saying on the drive there.

Over dinner she talked about a buck who had fallen sick, and she didn’t know with what, but she had isolated it. He used to joke that she worried about those rabbits like a mother would a child, but a couple of years into the marriage he had stopped saying that. Now he said, “That was a good decision. I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

He told her about a story at work that was fast becoming an anecdote; a new secretary, an accountant, and a temp walk into the copy room.

Pretty soon they were both laughing and eating dessert. They were both thinking of Fairley, and said so. Then he said, “You’re a good mother.” And she smiled and said he was a good father too. “She actually does look like you right now, a lot,” he said. She nodded.

“I don’t think she’s coming back,” the aunt said. “And I don’t think she’s okay.”

This conversation lingered on the edge of all other conversations like someone trying to climb back into a boat. After the baby was asleep, during naptime, at Sunday dinner. The Grandmother maintained the sister had changed her mind, and changed direction without notice, again.

The aunt said it wouldn't have happened that way this time, that Fairley made everything different.

The police said *not missing, gone*.

The family didn't want to have this conversation anymore, but it sat with them at every dinner table, clinking their silverware, and covered them like a cold blanket when they were trying to sleep.

Here on date night the husband took her hand and said what he usually did: "We don't know anything for sure yet."

And then they drove to the hotel room a few blocks away, and from their room on the highest floor they could see the river that almost bordered the state, the glimmering lights of the city.

After they made love he handed her a box. Inside was a tiny metal shoe.

"They're Fairley's first," he said. "Eight years. The bronze year."

She knew he was asleep by the steadying of his breath. She watched the curtainless window from their bed, watched the river churn, the banks black and tangled. The whole earth was like this: a mess of overgrowth and ditches. Cliffs and overhangs. Fast water and fast cars. Unpaved, feral, mine-shafted, and storage-housed.

...

Next they boxed up the clothes, books, set of matching dishes, unused candlesticks, framed posters, and records. Some went into SELL boxes, others DONATE.

Next came the furniture, which the Grandmother carefully vacuumed and spanked the dust out of. The husband was bringing a truck for everything, and they were taking them to resale stores or donation dumpsters in grocery store parking lots.

In a smaller box the aunt placed some jewelry, and the pink-fabric-covered book that had been on the bed. The book was BABY'S FIRST YEAR, and inside it were three photos: Fairley swaddled in her mother's arms, light coming through the hospital window; Fairley asleep in her crib at home; Fairley asleep in the arms of the Grandmother. She added in a record that had once been the sister's favorite, and labeled the box FOR FAIRLEY.

The husband arrived, and he and the aunt negotiated the couch down the stairs. The now-lightened book case followed, and the Grandmother carried down twin lamps with chipped seashell borders. The husband unplugged the TV and put it in a corner of the room for later.

They were all tired, but now there was nowhere to sit and rest. The husband scratched his head at the cabinet where the TV had rested and then said, "I think I can do this one by myself." He started scooching it toward the door when the Grandmother whispered, "What is that?" and then a little louder, "What is that?" and then the aunt also said, "What is that?"

Where the cabinet had just barely covered was a frighteningly large dark stain. The edges appeared almost rust-colored or black. The aunt moved a little closer. The stain was crusted and obvious. The divot in the carpet where the cabinet had rested left two distinct impressions: one slightly to the left of the other. The three stood around and peered at it.

“We should probably call the police,” the husband finally said.

...

Samples were taken from the carpet, and from whatever trash they had gleaned from the home they had found the sister’s hairbrush and lipstick and three cigarettes in an ashtray still perched on the window in the bathroom.

Almost a month later they called to say yes to all of the questions they had spent the time asking themselves: *Is it really blood? Is it hers? Is this very bad?*

The stain changed surprisingly little about their lives: it *suggested* something, the police said, but perhaps the stain had come from an injury before she disappeared.

Perhaps it had been she who moved the cabinet to cover it.

Her name now went onto a new list at the police department, but ultimately she was as gone as she’d been before, and still no one knew how or where.

...

In the barn the hair of the rabbits climbed up and into the spider webs until they looked frosted in the light. Kits crinkled in the hay, blind and desperate. She poured in the feed, popped a papaya pill into the mouths of a few shedding animals.

Outside in the noon sun two rabbits hopped in a pen covered with a blue tarp. Fairley had forfeited her chance to color at the picnic table or build in the sandbox to join them. The aunt had answered, “To protect from big birds,” when Fairley asked about the

bright blue plastic sheet crunching over her head. Fairley had said, “I’ll help too,” and gathered the young rabbits up to her curled body.

She spoke softly to them in melody.

It was happening, and the aunt recognized it from the beginning chapters of the books she had read when she first took in Fairley. She was nauseated, she was tired, she felt almost electric pangs in her swollen breasts. She walked through the cages and watched the does being milked by their kits, heard the cheeping from the small crates of hay. She tweaked the genealogy cards on a few cages to make sure they were still secure, and refastened any loose ones.

After Fairley had gone to sleep and her husband was perched at the edge of the bed, she took the small plastic wand into the bathroom. When she emerged she was blushing and smiling and scared.

...

The husband and Fairley would whisper into the globe of her stomach, and they would each kiss it. Fairley looked at it like a Christmas present waiting to be unwrapped. The husband looked at it and placed his rough hands over it and breathed.

Fairley was in school during the day—coloring, napping, learning the beginnings of numbers and letters. At home she would point to the back of her juicebox and ask, “What does this say?” In the barn she would point at each genealogy card and ask, “What does that say?” and then “What is that?”

During the credits rolling at the end of a movie she was insatiable:

“What does that say?”

“Executive Producer.”

“What does that say?”

“That’s a list of people’s names.”

“What does that say?”

“Music By.”

“What does that say?”

“It still says Music By.”

“Oh.”

Fairley followed her into the barn. She would whisper at the bunnies, and coo at them. She would screech with laughter when the small brown pellets dropped from the cage to join the pile below, or when urine would spill in a faucet-sound.

The aunt brushed a few of the rabbits, and let Fairley try it. *Gentle*. She let Fairley distribute the papaya pills, pointing her at which cage needed them.

“What are we?” Fairley asked one day, looking at a mottled pile of rabbits sleeping in one corner of their cage.

“What do you mean?”

“Are we Indians? Or what?”

The aunt paused. “We’re white, honey.”

“That’s a color.”

“It’s a thing, too.”

“Oh.” Fairley reached her fingers in to pet the fur of the sleeping rabbits. “What do white people do?” she asked.

“What do you mean, honey?”

“What do we do? Indians talk to animals.”

“Who says?”

“School. And my friends at school.”

The aunt thought. “Well, there are lots of different kinds of white people. There are Irish, and German, and Dutch, and English, and Italian...well, actually now, I don’t know about Italian...”

“What are we?” Fairley asked, perking up.

“We’re a mix. Pretty much everyone isn’t just one thing anymore.”

Fairley was quiet, disappointed.

“What’s the baby gonna be?” she asked, pointing to her stomach.

“Well, I’m white, and your uncle is white, so the baby will be white too.”

Fairley stared into the rabbits’ cage.

“See,” the aunt continued. “Remember these cards?” she pulled down a genealogy card from the cage of a young buck. “This half talks about the mommy side, and this side talks about the daddy side, so we know what each rabbit is made of. Humans have a mommy side and a daddy side too.”

“You’re from my mommy side.”

“Yes I am. And so’s Grandma and the baby is too. And on our side we are a little bit Irish, and English, and German, and probably a lot of other things too.”

“And what about my real-daddy side?”

The aunt was quiet, and hoped kissing the top of her head would be enough. But it wasn't, so she said "We don't know about your real-daddy side. We can't fill that in."

She saw Fairley imagine the blank half of her card, and how impossible it made it to fill in what comes after. Her little fingers reached out and touched the card, and she pulled back her hand as if it were hot.

"So, I could be anything!" she finally said.

The aunt smiled back. "I guess that's probably right."

Fairley followed her to the light switch, and they left the now-dark barn.

She scampered ahead toward the house, and sang back "I'm probably an Indian!"

...

Fairley scampered toward the house.

Fairley scampered through the garden, around the trunk of the tree, and toward the house.

And out of the house, and down the bath, and around the trunk, and through the garden, and into the woods.

Fairley would linger in the thick dank for hours. She would emerge with lines of dirt jammed into the half-moons of her nails. Sticks in her hair. Grass in her hair. Stains on her knees. Stains from kneeling in the dirt and digging in the ground. Stains from sitting in the dirt and looking at the canopy.

She always wanted to see an animal. She would say, I want to see an animal.

On all of her movies the princesses who were pure of heart could talk to the animals. Fairley wanted a deer to tell her its problems, a bird to put her socks on.

She looked for her reflection in puddles.

She made ripples in her face with rocks.

As she raced through the ivy, breaking the vines like finish lines or startling lizards away, she felt like an Indian.

She thought about how, before she moved here, before the barn with the rabbits was even here, there were real Indians.

They knew how to make fire out of nothing at all. Fairley wondered about that, how to do that without lightening or matches.

They knew how to talk to animals but also how to cook animals.

They wore stones and feathers and the skins of animals and they lived here.

Sometimes Fairley would lift the leaves of the ivy to look for their footprints. She would touch a tree, hold her hand on it, and try to feel all the other people who touched this tree. Where were they now, and why did they leave.

Fairley charged with a stick around the forest, hunting the air.

Fairley would not often see an animal. She would see squirrels and birds and lizards and occasionally a mouse but they were all skittish and would not stay to talk to her.

Once she saw a sleeping lump of hair and approached it and whispered Hello.

And she whispered that she knew all the secrets of the forest and to not be afraid. That she wore feathers in her hair but not to worry they were feathers that she had found

in the dirt and not feathers she had ripped from a living thing. She would not hurt anything especially a little furry thing.

And she said her name and age and grade and that she wanted nothing more in the whole world than to have a secret friend.

She would keep its secrets, and meet its family, and protect it from bigger animals and together they would teach bigger animals to love and be kind just like in all the best stories.

But the animal didn't move. The animal stayed sleeping even as she approached it, stepped over it, bent to see that its front hide was missing and there was a mess of bone and red and a worm coming from its mouth.

...

When Fairley could not find an animal she knew where to find them. She would move over the ivy, around the roots and puddles, back into the clearing and toward the barn.

She was allowed to go into the barn by herself but she was not allowed to touch anything. She was not allowed ever especially to hang on the cages even though it looked like so much fun.

Fairley would go into the barn and she would say Hello.

She would say Hello do you guys know that your ancestors used to play in the forest?

Did your ancestors pass down any stories about Indians?

Did your ancestors tell you that it's okay to talk to Indians because they are of the land and so am I so it's okay if you want to start talking to me any time.

At first she thought they were shy, or that she needed to give them more time to talk it over. To let some of them object to the idea and others say that they really wanted a human friend and others say that they were going to talk to her no matter what anyone said. And then one day she could go back into the barn and they would all be ready to talk to her, maybe even have party hats on like for a birthday but no one would tell the aunt because they would keep each others secrets.

...

Fairley watched the squirrel carefully.

No one had ever told her how old squirrels were. Some trees lived to be hundreds of years old—thousands!—and they were still living even if it was in California. Fairley looked back at the squirrel. Some turtles live to be a hundred. Fairley always thinks this means that the trees and the squirrels lived through seeing the first light bulb get turned on. Then she remembers that they are outside and maybe even some of these trees and squirrels have still never seen a lightbulb.

Fairley didn't know if there were any of those really ancient trees around here. She looked up. These trees had young faces.

She looked back at the squirrel.

How old are you, she wondered.

Maybe this squirrel used to see teepees in this forest and know all the names of all the Indians and then suddenly the Indians disappeared and the squirrel was alone until she got here.

“Don’t worry,” Fairley whispered. “I’m here now.”

...

Fairley sometimes went into the woods to look for her mom.

She didn’t remember her mom. She felt bad about that, and she wondered if her mom remembered her. Maybe if her mom couldn’t picture her face anymore then it was okay if she couldn’t picture her mom’s face. She worried sometimes that someday her mom would come back and put her in the corner to punish her for not remembering her face.

She dreamed about a blurry woman who’s voice sounded far away coming in to eat dinner but she couldn’t sit at the table. Like a magnet was pushing her away.

Fairley would walk through the forest and lift up the leaves but her mother wasn’t ever there. If she ever was, Fairley worried sometimes, how would she even recognize her.

...

The Grandma worried about Fairley playing all alone in the woods.

The aunt worried too, sometimes. She would sit up at night, shaken completely from sleep, and go make sure that Fairley had made it back inside. Of course she had seen Fairley, picked a stick from her hair, made her eat a warm dinner and take a bath. Let her watch a little TV before bed. But still again and again she checked that Fairley was where she was supposed to be, was not gone.

...

The aunt was keeping her patience.

The aunt was keeping her patience on a leash and letting her patience be the thing that reached out and kissed Fairley goodnight, that asked Fairley to pass the peas.

The aunt was exhausted, was nauseous, was overjoyed.

There were certain things she had to do to protect herself: certain ways she could not clean the cages, namely the fastest ways. She had to watch out for these invisible parasites. They would wiggle in and make her child blind, or worse. But for right now she was laying on the couch with one hand over her stomach (had this always been her posture or was this new? she must remember to ask the husband, the Grandmother, she could look through old photos and see) and listening to the sound of Fairley talking to her stuffed animals.

It would be great if her sister were here.

They could:

Compare. Advise. Wonder Worry.

It would be horrible if her sister were here.

They could:

Compare. Advise. Wonder. Worry.

Oh, that tiny pinprick of relief. How she hated it.

For most of her life she would dread seeing her sister, make herself stone for a designated time of misery. She had practiced at it. She had made a pathway in the brain that made lead from the promise of seeing her sister right to despair. What would either of them do wrong, missay, mishear.

And now when there would be cause to see her sister—a holiday, an announcement—it would just take a second, an instinctual flash, but she would race down that same path and land at dread, misery, until she remembered she would not be seeing her sister and shining through the agony of loss was a small pinprick of relief.

This, of course, she would say to no one.

She tried to make up for it in other ways, to atone. She was good to Fairley. She protected her sister's memory from their mother, who was quick with blame or a heavy sigh which she would feel pressured to even, to balance, to righten, all actions that she hoped would shield any shred of glee peeking through.

She once thought: I will never be made miserable by her again.

And then of course she realized that in this loss, this grief, she was more miserable than she'd ever been.

Oh Sister.

How I hate you for it.

...

The rabbits did seem happy out in the grass, shielded from the hawks and bumping into Fairley's ankles.

They would sit up straight, wiggle their noses against the rush of grasses, flowers, distant animals and cars.

What was it like in that barn. What limits to the smells their must have been, what small light could they find to lay in.

Did they love each other. Did they love each other even across cages, across the room. Did they huddle for warmth or instinct or something else.

Was this the food they would choose for themselves.

They were born naked, bald, in need.

They were designed to look at each other. To help. To desire and solve.

Here outside in the grasses they would burrow their noses. They would hop and

pause

and then chew again. Toward each other or away they would move and sometimes they would even move together. There would be small families in the grass and they would look like families and sometimes in other seasons there would be a buck and a few does and the hope that some decisions would be made.

The sister had met him and he had paid for the cable.

What had they wanted from each other, really wanted, really given. What had it looked like when they had first circled each other, sniffing: what did one smell on the other that made them decide.

And now.

Something had happened. It was a terrible phrase but so often repeated. And even if, what, even if they find a body, remains, evidence, this will only say what happened to the body—and even then it will be someone’s guess—and it will not tell what made the thing happen. What was said, what light went off in the eyes.

The newspapers had never picked it up, or the news. It was a line for a week and then was gone again.

No one seemed to be waiting anymore, not even the aunt, Grandma, Fairley.

...

Sweet dreaming girl.

The aunt watched Fairley's face twitch a little, her hair matted just at the forehead with sweat. The light from the hall formed a bright gash over them. Fairley was still and deep in sleep far away. The aunt touched her and she was so warm and the aunt was warm and touched her belly and wondered what kind of siblings these two would be.

Fairley's nose was twitching now in her sleep. She turned her face away from the light and the aunt moved to the door and whispered. *Good night.*

...

The rabbits were everywhere and some were wearing jackets. One had a pipe. But still they were not standing on their rear legs, they were hopping on all fours.

We knew the Indians but oh they left.

The walls, made of ice cream, were softening. The roof was sinking down on them. Once it had reached them it would be time to go outside and fly into the stars.

...

It turns out he had a farm.

They could barely remember his name—had the sister even said it?—until all of this began. But now they knew it. And the lawyer used both names when he spoke about him because otherwise it would mean that they were familiar with this person, that he was like family.

And the lawyer said his name when he had news.

They didn't find the farm by driving down the road and him waving from the front.

They didn't find it by looking up his address to send a letter asking *How are you? How have you been?*

They didn't find it when it came to them in a dream, a remembered conversation, an accident or happenstance.

They didn't find it when the lawyer did a full assessment of his asset.

They found it when the lawyer did a full assessment of his mother's assets.

The lawyer had called the aunt and said:

If we know more about him we know more about her.

If we know where he is we may know where she is.

If we know where he might have been we may find out where she is.

If we can have access to places he has recently traveled we may find out where she is.

If we can find out a list of properties he may have private access we may find out where she is.

We may not get there in time, he said, but we can find her.

The aunt wondered about this: find her. It wouldn't be her that they were finding, now, would it, is that what he meant? It wouldn't be that she would sit up, say *You found me*, flatten her feet against the floor and stand for the first time since she'd been gone and

walk out and squint into the sunlight and ask *What's for lunch*.

That's not what he meant.

What he meant was that we would find hair, bone, skin, maybe clothes (why dirty? Why was she picturing dirty clothes? Was this a way of knowing that the sister was buried? Was this even maybe the sister telling her this, somehow? Of course the sister is buried, right, because she is hidden, this is why there is dirt on the clothes, because I have seen this before in the news. On the news one time they did show pictures of clothes because the police were seeking to identify a victim and the face of the victim was unavailable. The face of the victim was gone, was lost somewhere, or the face of the victim was gone, destroyed and unable to be recaptured. Which was her sister) maybe a shoe or a driver's license.

Not that we would find the sister. The sister is gone.

Or, the sister is not gone. Or, the sister is gone but not gone-gone. Is now blonde, dealing cards in Vegas, tan, maybe pregnant again.

But if that were true then why was the barn such a wonderful promise.

The aunt had wanted to go to the barn but the lawyer said first the cops have to go and then the lawyers have to go.

And the aunt asked, Then I go? And the lawyer said he would have to check.

And the aunt asked if this meant that they were going to find her.

And she said *her* but she didn't mean it but she didn't say anything about any of that.

And he said Maybe.

It was better than what the cops said.

The cops said:

Are you sure she's gone? Double check.

They said, What about her place of employment.

What about school? Is she in school?

What about friends?

What about other family?

What about vacation? How can you prove someone is not on vacation who you are not looking directly at.

They said, is anything missing?

They said, What about her purse?

What about a wallet?

What about anything from the house?

What about a specific or important outfit?

What about a car?

A ring?

A necklace?

A photo of the two of you, like this one?

They said, is there anything extra? Double check. They said:

What about a letter? Did she leave a letter that wasn't there before?

They said what about a note?

A hint of any kind.

Her phone. The aunt thought so often of the phone she had found under the couch, not buried, not missing, but dead.

...

The lawyer called and said the police are at the barn and you can't go there.

Fairly was standing up and using the window sill as a table, lining rocks and feathers in the sun, picking up one and turning it. She would turn it in the light and turn it in the shade and return it to the light to watch how it changed, the new things that appeared.

The aunt pinched the phone between her ear and shoulder as she picked up the pot and poured the water into the strainer. She missed what the lawyer said as the pasta dumped in and made a splash. She forgot to jump back from it and felt the hot pricks leap through her shirt.

"I'm sorry , what?" she said.

"I can tell you're busy, I can call back," he said.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said. "What has happened?"

"I don't really know anything. The police are there, so no one else is allowed near it."

The aunt paused, watched the water strain through the tiny holes of the colander like light from a spaceship.

The lawyer said nothing else but he was not hanging up and he was not saying

goodbye. He was waiting for something. The aunt watched the pasta, huddled together, clinging, and wondered what he wanted her to say. What secret was he extending to her through this silence.

“Not even I can go near it,” he said. “They’ve got a lot of different operations going on right now on land.”

Something in the way he hit the last word made the aunt remember all the barns she could outside of town.

There was the old rickety place that had fallen down even before she was a child, had steadily greyed, had been left alone.

There was the new barn on that hillside that belonged to the Texan who only summered here, and then stopped coming all together.

There was the trio of barns in the valley beyond the hills.

And there was that road that snaked back toward the river: the barn that sat on the road, the barn that sat back from the road at the edge of the forest, and, a few miles later, the barn on the river.

“Oh, I’d imagine,” the aunt said, finding her keys, looking for Fairley’s other shoe. “Divers then, they got there?”

“A few,” the lawyer said. “Well, I’d best get going now.”

She didn’t wait for him to hang up before turning to Fairley and saying, “Let’s go for a little ride.”

...

By the time they got there, the aunt was beginning to realize, the sun would be close to setting. But still she powered the car down the dark road and toward the river.

Fairley sang in the back seat, still holding a rock, watching the fields of wheat turn into soy turn into wild.

There were no other cars coming this way.

The aunt let herself imagine that this was the place. She rolled down the window to see what it smelled like, this damp rich land. This could be the place, this was the place.

Oh sister.

There were no cars. The forest thickened. The aunt wondered if she'd be able to find the barn, if she'd already missed the turn. It had been years since she'd been down this road, young, taken to the shore to make out with a stranger after a dance. She had

been smart: there were other kids in the car, other cars of kids, all going to the same place to keep an eye on each other and make out. There were too many of them to die out here, the aunt thought, and here I am. Oh sister, I begged you to learn from me. The aunt put her hand out the window and let the passing air come apart over her hand. Had anyone lived in this barn for years, she wondered. Had she seen this man, the mother of this man, ever before.

No.

It had to be no.

It was unimaginable otherwise, to have passed the mother on the road and given that rural (anchored-wrist) wave. To have reached for the same can in the supermarket. To have gotten their hair cut, one right after the other.

But it happens all the time, she reminded herself. In small towns, to other families.

Small dirt drives were starting to appear. Some were turn offs to campsites, some to the river, some to trails into the forest. Some were once roads and now just decoys.

One of these, the aunt stiffened, was the road.

She turned another corner, then another.

“Where?” Fairley asked.

“Just a drive,” said the aunt.

They had come to this river as children, held hands, held a rope tied to a tree to protect themselves from a current.

Oh sister.

Their mother waving from the beach.

A silver arc of silo glimpsed above the treeline, just for a second. The aunt watched for the drive and took the next dirt path.

It unfurled like a tongue, long, blank, she wanted to see the barn. She wanted to know this was it and suddenly a shift in road and the place was swarming with cops. The lights weren't on. The aunt wondered why she noticed this, the lights being off.

Cops were ducking in and out of their cars, getting something, putting something back. They were leaning on their cars for a break, to talk to each other, to radio something in. They were using their cars as a table to write something down. They were walking toward the river.

The aunt would not be let in.

A small herd of officers started walking toward her as she drove, a bad sign. They shouldn't already want to talk to her when all she'd done was enter. It should take more than that. She rolled down her window.

"I'm her sister," she said, without thinking. The cops said:

Nothing to see.

You shouldn't be here.

We can't tell you anything.

We haven't found anything.

You're who's sister?

You'd better move along.

The cops gave her room to turn around. Fairley looked worried now.

“What happened?” she asked.

“An accident.”

The aunt pulled the car just out of sight. She knew they should leave but she wanted to be close. She sang softly to Fairley who began to drift off in the shade of the tree, as the sun went down and down and pinkened everything and then took that pink away and became black.

Now the lights were on.

Now the lights were on and the blue and red flashed through the trees.

The aunt knew they could be leaving at any moment, would pass her, would make her leave or take her downtown for questioning or a talking to. She pulled the car onto the main road, so dark, so long, and started to drive.

Fairly stirred at the sound of spinning gravel but settled again. The aunt thought of the times she was in the back seat—how long had it been since she'd been *driven*—and her mother was in the front. The radio would be on, some horrible music that she now, too, loved coming in through the speakers, washing over her, lulling her. Next to her, her sister, also sleeping, or dancing, or smacking her for some reason or talking to

her or wanting something she had or having something she wanted or asking the mother a question or telling the mother a story or sleeping, head bent severely and forming folds in her neck, or begging that she was hungry, tired, had to go to the bathroom. How long had it been since they'd sat side by side, wanting the same thing.

And this, the place, maybe.

The cops had said nothing but here they were, the barn, swarming even after dark. That couldn't be for nothing. The aunt rolled down the window again, let the air come in and smelled it.

The aunt let herself imagine that this was how it happened:

The headlights lit the dirt road, brightening it white, blackening it at the halo of forest.

But of course they would have been going the other way. They would have been driving toward the barn, not away from it, at night, to be murdered. The aunt stopped the car and turned around, again facing the barn. She started to drive.

Oh sister.

The forest, black. The forest, silent and teeming with eyes and animals and the shacks of the poor. The sister would have watched this, right, from the front seat of the car. She would have watched the road going past, the forest, so black as to not even be there, the light on the road showing where they were heading.

Would she have known, the aunt wondered. Would she have been happily prattling, adjusting the radio, oh, or singing! Would she have been singing to whatever pop was blaring from the speakers, would she have been moving her arms and body in a suggestion of what she was capable of were she not strapped in. Would she have been talking to him. Would she have been saying *We're out of milk*. At what point would she realize something was wrong? When would she start asking where they were going, or start screaming *What are you doing?! Turn around!*

Would she have known.

If she knew, would she have been trying to talk her way out if it, *I promise, I promise*, clinging to him, begging. Would she have been trying for the locks on the car, the door handle.

Would she have been hurt.

Would she have been beaten, unconscious, in pain. Drugged, drunk.

In the trunk.

Would she have not seen any of this, not this road, not the headlights, none of this. But heard it.

The aunt closed her eyes.

The felt it now, the jumping of her body in response to the road, how she jiggled and bounced. She heard it, too, and how much louder it must have been in the trunk, the

low rumble of the road, the pop and crunch of dirt and leaves and rocks.

Would she have been already dead.

The aunt opened her eyes. Would she have been already dead, not seen any of this, not heard the road or felt her own body. The aunt looked back and saw the wide eyes of Fairley on her, wondering.

...

Oh sister.

...

But no call came from the police saying

We found something!

Or

We found nothing.

OR

We found someone else.

There was no communication from the lawyer. The aunt did not want to tell the Grandma about the barn, but the lawyer had, and now the Grandma asked, and the aunt shrugged and said, It's probably nothing.

The aunt said, There is so much empty space in the things we say to each other.

The aunt said, There is so much empty space in the air because no one is saying anything.

The aunt wanted the phone to ring.

Why.

“Closure,” said the Grandma.

The aunt pictured it. She would be in her pajamas (why this? It is always this, on TV, in the movies, and why? As a suggestion of you at your most vulnerable, of you at your most intimate—of an invasion of this with news, a disruption of this by the event) and a knock would come at the door.

The aunt would go to the door, of course. She would check out the window because she is now more fearful, because of everything that has happened.

Because of everything that has happened.

There would be too police officers.

Would they remove their hats?

No, they must stay in uniform. It must be official. They would tip their hats.

What would they say? What is it they always say in the movies? They would say:

We have news.

No.

We regret to inform you.

No.

There have been some developments.

No.

Your sister is dead.

No.

That's no way to begin.

The aunt couldn't imagine it, she realized, what they would say. So she pretended that whatever it was they said it. So, what would she feel, now.

Your sister is dead.

She wanted—she didn't want to want it, she hated it, she didn't know what it meant—to see the body. Let me see the blood-matted hair. The skull. The bloating.

And now what?

Let him hang?

No.

Now there was nothing to do or be done.

....

The Grandma piled the aunt's plate with steak, and an extra chicken kebob. The aunt said, "Mom, that's plenty." When the aunt bent to retrieve Fairley's fork, the aunt scattered bacon bits across her salad like chicken feed.

"Mom, what are you doing?"

The Grandma just smiled a little. "So Fairley, you some kind of bird tonight?"

Fairley pulled at the feather in her braid. "I'm an Indian."

"Oh yeah?"

"I talk to the trees and the animals."

“And what do you all talk about?”

“Don’t pollute.”

“Seriously, Mom,” the aunt said, scraping some of the steak onto the husband’s plate. “You’re going to give me a heart attack here. What about that asparagus over there?”

“Well that’s some good advice from the trees and the animals,” the Grandma said to Fairley. “They tell you anything else important?”

“Um,” Fairley looked at the feather, “Listen to your heart.”

“Mom, asparagus?”

“Well that is just beautiful.”

“And... the wind knows everything and sees everything.”

“It sure does, it can go everywhere, can’t it?”

The aunt stood up, and went to the corner of the table, and picked up the bowl of asparagus. The husband exhaled with her as she sat back down.

“The wind knows how old the earth is,” Fairley said, pulling the splinters of the feather apart, and trying to smooth them back together.

“How old?”

“I haven’t asked yet, Grandma,” she said, laughing, “It’s just something it knows.”

“Oh, okay,” the Grandma smiled. “Eat your meat, everyone, it’s good for you.”

“I’m eating nothing but meat, Mom,” the aunt said. “What’s the deal lately?”

“It knows how many babies are in the bunnies tummies, and how to hatch eggs.”

“Eat the meat.”

“And it knows where all the flowers are buried and are gonna come up from before they even come up.”

“You especially,” the Grandma finally looked at the aunt. “Eat.”

“And it knows where my real-mommy is buried too.”

The room made noise without them: the ceiling fan grating against itself. The windows rattling with each passing car. The bass from the bedroom of a teenager next door.

“Honey,” said the husband.

“Don’t worry,” said Fairley, her eyes suddenly urgent. “I haven’t asked yet.”

“It’s okay, honey,” said the aunt.

“I won’t ask, Grandma.”

“If you eat the meat about this time,” the Grandma said to the flowers on her plate, “you’ll have a boy.”

“What?”

“Meats for boys, sweets for girls,” the Grandma said. “I think this family is about due for a boy, don’t you?”

On the car ride home Fairley wailed. Her English was indiscernible through her anguish. She whooped and mouthed I’m sorry sorry sorry, and called the aunt Mama, which meant things were really bad. She shook her tears and the feathers in her hair like a bird in a bath.

They lay in the same bed until she fell asleep.

“She’s hurting pretty bad,” the husband said.

“She won’t remember it in the morning.”

“I mean your mom.”

“Oh, yeah,” the aunt said. “I know.”

“Did we wash those feathers before we put them in Fairley’s hair?” he said *we* but he meant *you*.

“No. She said they weren’t dirty.”

...

Fairley stayed inside and kept her shoes tied. She watched black and white TV and colored. The aunt found the feathers and pebbles in a pile outside the barn, and brought them back in the house.

“Hey honey, do you want to keep these in your memory box?” she asked.

Fairley shook her head, and kept coloring.

Litter

The question was not just how the shoes got on the side of the road but how they stayed there. One black hightop. One work boot. One girl's shoe pink as anything. And also what became of their people. Dead, of course, would be natural, but why—could shoelessness be so fatal? Anyway, whoever they were they were at least surprised. Asleep maybe, with one foot out the window like it was the 60s again, and then wake up and it's all over and colder.

There were other things too that we noticed. Cups, big ones, flecked with mud and bleached. So many plastic bags. And sometimes animals with the red inside squeezed out like cinnamon toothpaste. When that happened we would turn away like it was bright, but also laugh, and our mother would say "It's oookaaaaay." And spiderwebs in the trees that looked like a veil had just whipped right off the bride's head into the trees, but she wouldn't care or want to stop, because they were going to their honeymoon!

And so many plastic bags, and big black ones, and cloth bags like for going to school. It's because people would feel bad running over a bag full of cats if they knew what was in it, so they put their extra cats in bags and the bags get dropped on the highway. My dad said to my mom "Don't tell them that," which was dumb because it was after she told us already. If he didn't want us to know he should have said before we got in the car or were born, "Don't tell them about the cats."

The men in orange jumpsuits had all done something wrong. They were gathering the shoes and cups and bags into other bags. We were worried. We turned all the way around to look at them. What if they got into the car somehow, through the windows maybe like smoke.

So the people I guess never went back to look for the shoes once they fell off. Or else it was night. Or the shoe fell off and they laughed and were ready for an adventure. Or they were dead.

But when my sister was dangling her stuffed monkey out the window by its long strappy arms the wind got it fast and sucked it behind us. And we screamed and she cried and my mother said that she guessed we'd just take the next exit. We had to make a big square. And driving the same road again we saw these cups and bags and maybe a shoe, and this crumpled soft brown thing that still smelled like us, that was ours unless we kept driving.

We would come to the edge

Every week of every summer we would walk down to the river, my sister and I. My mom called it a *creek*. She is from the south, and has family there even still, but we are from the west, my sister and I. And then once we saw it, The Mississippi River. And we knew that what we had back home was not a river to *them*, maybe, but it was a river to us, because it was the most water we could find in one place that wasn't just standing still. And every week of every summer we would walk to the river to look for a dead body. I always pictured it as a woman, with maybe red blonde hair that I would later find out was called *strawberry blonde*, and I thought that sounded delicious, and it made my body warm that anyone could be named for something so sweet and wild. My sister, I have never asked who she pictured finding, but I bet it was the same woman. My sister and I often have the same nightmares. We would come to the edge of the river that ran beneath a road in our neighborhood and we would look at first as far as we could see along the north and then we would cross the street and look along the south. We would check under the road, the part of the water that was hardest to see and is the most likely place where someone would want to hide a body. There was never a body. Sometimes there would be a volleyball, or a plastic bag that we would open, ready to scream no matter what was inside. So we would just drop a leaf in on the south side and run to the north side and watch it pass. I still don't know where the river leads, but I know we were both imagining

sending our leaves and sticks very far away, carrying imprints of our fingers. When we were probably getting too old to walk there because we could almost drive, and too old to go together because we were making friends outside of the family, we went to the river during the hottest part of the summer. There was nothing on the north side, but on the south side of the river was a bald, cold, headless body of a chicken. We knew it came from a grocery store, and we knew that a whole bird cost a lot of money, because we remembered our mom talking about it every Thanksgiving. We weren't sure who had decided to throw it away like this. But it was naked, and dead, and ours. We nestled on the bank as the day washed into evening and pulled it to the shore, and poked it with whatever we could find, and didn't say a word.

What I Wrote To My Sister on Her 21st Birthday

Three lemurs outlined by a swath of blue decorate for a surprise birthday party for a very special human girl. That blue could be the sky rich with jungle, which would mean they were on the highest branch. It could be the wall paper in Gary the 2nd lemur's apartment, the one he inherited from his aunt and has always said he will change someday, but will soon admit to himself that he is a lazy and apathetic lemur, and will just get a big couch facing opposite of the blue wall. Sometimes Timor, the 1st lemur, says to Gary that he must start lifting his tail and being more flouncy. Timor knows that Gary is lazy, but will not tell this to Gary. Farfel, the 3rd lemur, who keeps her tail holy and close to God, strings the banners. She then flips on to her back and bats at them with her tar-black hands, giggling at the rustle and wind she makes. Gary says he does not know what they are doing at this party in Texas, they are supposed to be endemic to Madagascar. Farfel worries because endemic sounds contagious. Timor says it means where someone is native, where they belong. Farfel says she thinks that since they are family they are endemic to each other. Gary says Hush, someone is coming.

The wife is luminous and slides

The wife is luminous and slides closer. Inside the husband are sparkling leaves in wind. It is a storm when her lips are on his neck. In the kitchen the fruit flies perch where the napkin is greased through. They suckle and suckle. She takes the apple in her mouth and clamps. They are older now so they lay a blanket on the floor to unburden the knees. The ceiling is marked where water has wanted through. The cracks in the wood floor are plaqued and debrised. Afterward there is a slight pressure on the coccyx, which is to be expected.

Great Short Story in Ten Parts.

- I. It is somewhere rainy and lush. Everyone's t-shirts are dirty. There are irreconcilable halves of bumper stickers. There are not very many roads in.
- II. There is only one house of note, in which most everything occurs.
 - A. The house is stoic and grappling.
 - B. The garden is polite.
 - a. It is very easy to grow here.
 - b. Look up: what is bougainvillea? And also: where?
 - c. Many of the flowers have bright bushy heads, like puppets.
 - C. The entry way is splotched carpet.
 - D. Something intended for keys now catches spare change, movie stubs, and somehow, rubberbands.
 - a. Keys are still lost.
- III. The woman has fox-color hair down to her nipples
 - A. Sheer T-shirt
 - B. White
 - C. One cigarette

- IV. A man comes in. We do not know if it is the lover or father. He knows a lot about paying bills but also her T-shirt is sheer.
- V. The lover says something that reveals he is a nice guy most of the time, but everybody makes mistakes.
- VI. The woman thinks something that makes her unforgivable.
- VII. Are we the woman or the man?, the audience will ask.
- VIII. The cigarette ash becomes very important here.
 - A. It is long, it burns for itself.
 - B. She must be distracted by something else, or otherwise lost.
 - C. The ash gets on the carpet, and contributes to spots
 - D. The brand is cheap and burns too quickly.
 - a. It must be a made-up brand so as to avoid her being associated with: cowboys, punks, hippies.
 - E. The lover says nothing about the cigarette ash, nor does he smoke, which indicates they will not last much longer.
- IV. Something happens outside to break the tension, which by now should be swirling like water threatening the drain.
- V. She says the name of a certain flower. He touches something that is not her.

Gallery I

They had been together long enough for her hair to grow into a braid, and for him to shave a beard, grow a beard, shave it. Looking at photos, fingers would print the glossy smiles and voices would remark, Who is that, or, That's you? Framed on their walls or posted on the internet were phases they had passed through together, so subtle they hadn't even felt them. Their house was a museum of stages, like this one of the museum in New York, the pose tensed against the chapping wind. If a critic were to walk through he would say, Here is their plaid period, notice the flannel and pearlescent buttons. And on the bedroom wall, Here is the redrock period, note how the earth tones are played up by the dirt on his face and her sandals. And here, this was the cycle where they were troubled by war, the band t-shirt signifying rage, the flour on the hands indicating a return to a simpler time. Here they tested lines. This was characteristic of. And here a lot of reclining bodies, doesn't it remind you? In this interval they rested. And here, this was the most productive period, look at how the world is just so

I'd just like to ask you some of your opinions

I like to picture what people are doing while the phone is ringing. Some are probably in the shower, and will leave wet smacks down the hall to the phone. Some might be stirring a pot, tossing in a handful of something. Others are helping their children with remainders or that song about the order of the Presidents.

You can tell a lot about how someone says hello. If they say it primly, then even their refusal will be gentle. Something like, "Oh. No thank you. We are not interested at this time. But thank you for calling." If they slur a "Helluh" through a background of television noise or barking dogs, expect a loud slam of the receiver. Some guy who worked here before I did lost his hearing for a week after one of them blew a whistle through the phone before hanging up. Those people are predators. The phone is like the yellow cube of cheese and we are the mouse.

I say the thing on the screen for every call, "Hi, this is (name), and I'm calling from (place of business). This is not a sales call." Then I talk about how we are calling to follow up on how you felt about the Mayor's speech, or to speak to the lady of the house about her level of satisfaction with her current blender. But it doesn't matter to them that we do not want their money. They hang up anyway.

I don't think they think about what we are doing while the phone is ringing. The girl to my right is sometimes crying about her boyfriend while she reads the introduction. The boy to my left reads a book about the ways in which philosophers have failed Jesus. The man behind me is working on his novel, and paper is stacked on the computer, shelves, and in half-open drawers. Many of the workers here are very drunk, or otherwise preoccupied.

I think I would be great at a number of things. I could probably do any of the crosswords that so many of us do. I can read the script on the screen like everyone else without having to actually look. I like to draw the whole time. I am currently designing a line of clothes for pregnant women. Next to all of my sketches are tiny arrows and the word (stretchy) because that is what makes them different from regular clothes. The star piece of my line is a dress with a photo of the planet earth where the belly would be, because I believe that to be pregnant is to have the power of the world growing inside of you. When I show my sketch to people and tell them this they nod, because what if you didn't believe that being pregnant was like birthing all of the possibilities of the world? Everyone would think you were mean and very depressed.

Sometimes people don't answer, but I bet they're home. Where else is there to be? And no one is at work at eight at night, unless you're a night watchman or something. And there just aren't that many night watchmen.

Someone here brings their cat. It wanders down the aisles and stings our laps with its claws, and onto the keyboards. The answers to some people's questions about construction on the interstate read: askldjfewiea;kodsfjlaksdjfoiwe. But this is not anyone's problem, so we keep hitting enter and moving on.

Inflation

You have just come home from job #2 and heave to the couch, see-sawing me to the kitchen. I chop this, whip that with the other, pile it under the broiler, and return.

Your face is alight with your inbox or scores. Your delicate lips quiver into a smile or frown with each change in florescence. My fingers smell like onions. My arm spreads on the cushion under the weight of itself. I should start working out.

You ask if I need you to do anything. By the time I would be able to say: remove the tray, turn off the oven, grind the pepper, grind the salt, place a cooling herb, smash the bread onto the other piece of bread, cut it on a diagonal, they each get their own plate, remember napkins, I could have done it myself, so I do.

We eat by the light of the TV, our eyelids sinking like coins in a wishing well.

as your waterglass sweats on the cherrywood table,

I remember summers catching butterflies:

Curtains usher summer in and it stays. We live in one room, we say *only temporary*, and during the hot months we try not to move or use the range. We live in bed, mostly, and when we eat we eat it cold—red tomato and pepper off the same fork, slowly. Today our only breeze comes off the pages of your grandfather's books: soldier photographs, the common names of butterflies. The corners of the books are baring; I could count the threads, but don't.

Outside our window the street rises and breaks in patches, like Europe after the war. It would look better in black and white. The heat haunts through asphalt, in gas like waves, from some unknown source. Our grandfathers over there, all of them. I try not to think of it: they say they found broken fingernails dug deep into the cement. Faces like ladders to nowhere. I have the same war-memory installed in all American 3rd grade children—all broken cement looks bombed out. I have the same distrust for Charlie Chaplin; it's nothing personal. History is an umbrella.

It comes to us faintly—screeching chlorine from a community pool, meat crackling on a nearby grill. The sun is browning savages in every mother's garden—hunters, hunted, cowboys, Indians, reckless feet.

As your waterglass sweats on the cherrywood table, I remember summers with lofted nets. The weight would come suddenly, like a noise heard through my arm. Their

wings turned translucent and my fingers took the color, a powder that would stay for hours. I wanted to be that soft. After dinner, wings painted to look like unblinking eyes left scattered on the driveway. A hot empty gaze until the rain cooled it away.

Flanders Field

There we were, as we often are, on a used leather couch, with a used TV, a book of HD's *Trilogy* on our used table, labeled USED from the university bookstore.

The history channel was on, blackandwhiteing WWI at us, or WWII. Beaches were stormed, fields darkened by rain.

It's strange to think that somewhere in those reeds cicadas were probably humming, or hiding, over shattered wasps nests. Nature didn't stop for it.

I imagine HD, in her London flat. Her patience as she waits out the bombardment, fingers tapping against her pockmarked wooden table. Could she summon the mundane? Click a silver spoon in her coffee—was there coffee?—or tea—was there tea? If anyone came to visit, would she open the door—perhaps they would signal her at the window first—throwing stones like junior lovers in blackandwhite movies.

On the screen women move through a poppy field, skirts lifted. They look like padded soldiers marching. They search.

His feet rattle against mine beneath the blanket. His hand brushes mine and I remember the first time I touched a boy's hand, how hot my ears became, a sudden rush of loud silence. We learned soon after, in science class, or sex ed class, about the female praying mantis, and how she would bite off the male's head. They looked at us like they believed it. Later I would think it sounded like things friends of mine were trying, wearing leather. Even later I would learn it was the quality of being observed: in the wild

the mantis makes love and leaves, like everyone. If she knows you're watching, she will attack her mate.

On the screen the women are plucking the flowers and putting them in their baskets. The history channel doesn't say why, it must not be relevant, but later everyone has flowers pinned to blazers. It seems the women are still searching, trying to fix something, or bring something home, like a lost button.

I think of the boys buried beneath the field, or stuck into the field from soil softened by rain. Their buttons are there, their crosses and icons, their scraps of clothing. If we go searching there now we could find buttons forever. I imagine, as the women walk slowly, that they are feeling the ground with their feet, and listening. What if their weight snaps bones, would they hear it, would they recognize their child? So many languages there, translated into silence. The same silence.

The poppies bend in the wind on pale stalks. They look drunk, how they lean and straighten, and have wild red hair and black eyes, like after a bar fight.

All the poppies, all those boys, just passed out.

Summer in Kansas

In winter you will be a kettle, steaming air to air, holding boxed wine while I rescue my sock from a hungry boot.

Depend on this: seasons change like the guard. Don't let down, dear. For now waxwings melt in crabapple trees, becoming branches, becoming perfumed and tiny blossoms.

In morning the crow is just sound, tastes like coffee, and sleep.

This is how we live now. In a house old enough to echo Lincoln, wood floors dented from errors not ours. Anxieties of war and borders. Ghosts are guaranteed, even if we have to make them ourselves. I stay up manufacturing footsteps toward you. Breath on your neck.

We wake up holding hands as if walking for hours.

There have been three afternoons: two crossing into Brooklyn, and one here, in bed. From these we glean and de-bone, from these we eat.

There are rabbits in the park, turning up clover and their noses, rushing through tunnels until the roots of fences. You have pointed to stains in your shirt, but we leave them. We have no soda water, no woodcleaner, no salt. We let the evidence set in. There is

tradition, of course. My hands deep in the sink, bird feet in the pie and under my eyes.
From rooms away you come to hug me from behind.

I will talcum everything: my face, that baby, between this or that. To fix the floor, and
suck up the blood. All the wetness I can find.

This free soil, fertile soil, seeps.

Miles ago our days were mountains, and now flatlanded, we spread and squint against the
horizon. There must be a clue as to what keeps the people in.

Here kitty

The neighbor's cat is maybe freeing something. It is cracking its mouth like a pond in winter and freeing something. It is done freeing something. It is sitting up in the sun: making a canyon where before there was only a fur prairie. It is making space for something in its chest and throat. It is ghosting air from its crabapple lungs. Sounds like *mother* if you say it like *ma*. Like, hey ma what's for dinner I'm home from summer camp. Better, it sounds like the Russian like *maht*. *Maht maht maht*. I'll pull your ushanka for a kiss on the mouth, maht. The neighbor's cat is scratching at the door and wanting mother. The neighbor's cat is swatting its paws under the door to pull you through.

Russia

A woman in Russia lost all of her tea from an uneven table leg. My friend recounts the story:

he uses drastic accents and makes an onion dome over his head with both arms. The women there loved him, he says, and once he bit into a vareniki and thought there might have been a finger lost somewhere in the pinched dough and ate it anyway. The steeples of his twinned fingers are pointing at the sky, St Basil.

There isn't much to it, I guess. Mostly be nice to people and travel a lot. Accept food offered to you if you are a guest and never let a guest go hungry. Give a panting dog water and hold whatever hand reaches for you during a big moment for the community. Oh and give children the window seat.

He says in Russia everyone walks around at night bumping into each other because they searching for the space stations, the ones that at first you accidentally wish on because you think it is a star.

Canyon

my how the sky can pinken in just a few hours and then what happens do we open all the windows do we pour coffee into something clean this is how a cathedral must feel depending on light for color shrouding some shimmering rectory who blows the dust off the wine bottles, is it the priest or some young thing they must be right it must be easier to get to god through the mountains or else why would I even mention a cathedral at a time like this when the pines' guts are trembling with beetles and the strong beaked birds couldn't be happier about it

“Radio Quit and They Flew Blind Over Invisible Ocean”

after Amelia Earhart

This is no miracle. A miracle is to be gone and then to come back.

This is about how machines make a life. Like this: If the rotor turns just so we could sail the air or be pulled against water for miles. Let's make accidental landings. Let's make palm leaf skirts and tiny graves for our shoes and radios. Let them make something out of nothing: a fiber caught on a branch. A Japanese stranger who says *They fell here*.

Let's put our laughter in the trees where it will be safe and rattle forever.

An Interview with Amelia Earhart

Interviewer: Amelia, thank you so much for being here.

Amelia:

Interviewer: You were so popular for such a very long time before you disappeared. And then you disappeared. And then you became even more incredibly popular after you disappeared. Could you speak briefly about that quiet moment of disappearance? What I think of as the low point of the graph?

Amelia:

Interviewer: Did you worry about swallowing those little cuticles of fish bones? Or was it more about whether or not certain windows would open at all?

Amelia:

Interviewer:

Interviewer: Will they find cut marks on his leg, or your leg?

Amelia:

Interviewer: Amelia, many have observed that a plane is actually very heavy. Some estimates say probably like a million pounds. Amelia, what the world wants to know is—
how does an airplane manage to stay in the air at all?

Amelia:

Endorheic

The water is green and thick trees lean like skinny girls with dirty knees. Either we can't see the horizon or this is it. Somewhere is a photo of you on a horse staring down a corral, and not getting older. This water has been ours forever, an inheritance of land and sediment. Were you born again, born in the blood, or just born. Did your people swim here too. There is something of dirt in your skin that we're both too young to understand, like you've already dug your own grave and each day is a stone to line it with. We blink the sun down, hour by hour. Are you a Faulkner man or a Bible man? All you can say is *salmon live off their own flesh during the breeding phase, then die at the place they were born*. You smile wide as our waters put your mouth to my neck.

My mother is a fish, I say, or think.

Sins were washed away in this water, but no river carries them out. I swim from bank to bank, letting each ancestor's trespass trespass over me.

Popular

At school it was not like in the movies, where I would have had a crush on the blondest most popular boy with the whitest teeth. Usually the opposite was true: who would want to be married to someone who thought you were going to hell, or assumed you were a witch, or whatever else these boys did. So usually we stuck together, those of us who were witches, or going to hell, and I had crushed on the boys in metal-band T-shirts, the boys who were rumored to be able to get acid the fastest.

Acid

There was one day where we did not have school. It was a beautiful day, cool but sunny, and my boyfriend at the time, and two of his friends, decided it would be a great use of a day to do some acid in a park.

No one was surprised when I declined the small slip of paper. I held it up to the light, not like I was thinking about it, but like I was searching for evidence to justify my saying no. So, at the park, I was given the assignment of writing down all the things they would say because they wouldn't be able to remember them. My boyfriend laid his head on my legs and watched the clouds. I spent most of the time hoping his sweat wouldn't carry the drug from his pores into mine. I would quiz myself on my own life to make sure that I was not becoming affected.

Within a few hours some cops pulled up. One stood with his legs very far apart, as if his penis was too large to bring his ankles any closer together. I remember him almost being in the splits. He kept his sunglasses on, adjusted the aforementioned crotch with aggression and frequency, and said "Yo" a lot. The other cop spoke with what I recognize now as a fake Irish accent. Once they checked to make sure our district was, in fact, out that day,

By the end of junior high I'm sure most people assumed that I was on drugs—or that I had been on drugs ever, which would have been enough of an accomplishment at that time. But, despite appearances, I was still and always would be a clean, nervous honor roll student.

But I let them think whatever they wanted.

From *Non* Series:

Syla

I would watch Syla for most of our English class. I thought she was perfect. She was blonde, tan, and often had to wear a uniform to class for whatever teams she was on: track, volleyball, softball. On these days the girls would also wear a ribbon in their hair tied in a doll-like bow as if to counteract the masculinity of their knee pads.

There was a rumor her father was Cherokee. There was a rumor they owned most of the buildings downtown. When she looked at me my face got hot.

From Miss Eve

When cleaning out my room I came upon the Jehovah's Witness guide for youth. It was something like *What Does God Have To Say About It?*

I hadn't noticed before, but it had a section on sexuality. It assured me that if I was having strange feelings about another girl, they were likely feelings of admiration, and not love. I was relieved, remembering the faint glint left and then hidden again as Sylva crossed and uncrossed her legs.

This Story For Me

Does it begin when I was very young, first looked up from my desk, and noticed a difference—I was not wearing a matching silver ring and I had seen all of the cartoons on Sunday morning.

Does it begin when my mother moved to Park City.

When my mother became a teacher and therefore needed a break, and moved from the Midwest to Park City.

When my parents first locked eyes, realized they had been dealt the wrong partners for this motorcycle trip, switched halfway through and moved in together two weeks later.

When my father's people packed everything into handcarts and pointed themselves at Utah.

When my father's people boarded a ship from Europe and pointed themselves at Utah.

When the tents started going up for a revival and everyone became a seeker.

When he went into a grove in Palmyra, New York.

When I found the ring on the playground.

When I recognized my name in genealogical records I didn't want or need to be my story.

When I moved away from Utah and everyone asked where I came from.

When we met, he and I, and thought we'd make a life of it.

When my parents locked eyes.

When my mother moved here so my parents could lock eyes.

Colony

She was probably nervous. She would have wiped her palms against her skirt before shaking hands. Her face was still dark from time spent canning on the porch, floating a mountain lake with a joint pinched between two fingers. Her teeth were bright, and would have been exposed to these strangers in an inviting smile.

They led her into a conference room, and she sat at the table along with these official people who were ready to ask her some questions about her previous work experience, her philosophies on the direction of childhood education.

Finally one of them, it could have been any of them, said:

“I’m sorry, I just have to ask: are you LDS?”

Maybe this is the way the story begins, at a job interview in the late seventies.

Maybe instead she got up, moved to Washington State, married a real Indian. Or she took a train to California and got stuck on some farm hand-making ceramics for rich people’s gardens. Or she went back home, slept in her parents basement, pulling the scent of Midwestern mildew over her like a blanket.

But none of that happened.

Someone said to her: "I'm sorry, I just have to ask: are you LDS?" And the story goes that my mother began searching her catalog of certifications, *CPR*, *MA*, and didn't find it. Finally, she said, "I'm sorry, I don't know what that is."

And everyone in the room looked at each other and at my mother and at the table and at their hands and finally someone whispered: "Mormon."

And my mother said "Oh," and tossed her head back, and laughed, and said, "No, no I am not."

And they were so flustered, and she was surprised, and soon they were offering her the job and she was taking it and this time their hands were being dried against the legs of their pants and skirts, probably, before they shook her hand.

And she stayed in Utah, and then I was born.

And then I found the ring on the playground.

Other People's Moms

I came home from first grade crying, is how another story goes.

This is not the day I found the ring on the playground. This is months before.

The day I found the ring on the playground was my day of not giving up my seat on the bus. But on this day I didn't yet know I was even on a bus.

Our first grade teacher had said something about, "And then all of your mommies can come and volunteer!" And like magic it started to happen. Sylva's mom, Madison's mom, Erica's mom, everyone wanted to help me glue macaroni to a piece of paper or color in Paul Revere's hat.

I could not tell Sylva's mom, Madison's mom, and Erica's mom apart. They each had closely cropped hair in a swiveling perm and it was such an even color. Whoever was there that day, her eyes had a thick, shiny crayon-streak all the way around the rim, darker than the glittery powder on the lid. She wore necklaces and rings that I recognize then and now as Grandma Jewelry: the gold and the stones were real and big. My own mother would have made a face at them, much like the face I'm probably making now. Most of all her shirt was tucked in! Not a shirt, a blouse, sometimes with a matching sweater or vest or sweater vest, and her belt buckle had flowers on it.

So I came home from first grade crying. I threw myself on the bed. I kicked and kicked, sending each shoe flying. My mother put her hand on my back: What is it.

I turned over.

“You don’t look like the other moms.”

My mother’s hair was long, loose, a kiss of grey forming at the temple. She didn’t have anything painted on her eyes: her face was too crowded with face to have room for that, even if she wanted to. She wore a white t-shirt and denim cut-offs unraveling at the knee. I could see the faint dark Os of her nipples. She smelled like the garden, the rocking chair.

“What do you mean? How am I different?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Nothing.”

And maybe we said, *Hey, let’s just forget it. Let’s go to a movie.*

But instead she said: “No, tell me.”

So I told her.

She asked if I wanted her to look like those other moms, because she could, it would be real easy. To show me, she popped her eyes open wide and opened her mouth in a way that was supposed to look like a smile but instead looked like a crocodile cooling itself at the edge of the water.

I said no, and meant it, but not because I had been made to appreciate anything I had: I was afraid that if she suddenly looked like them I would never find her again in the pile of other people’s Moms. It would have been easier if she had just looked like that all along, so I would already know how to find her.

Isn't That Nice

Two women about my mother's age lived next door. Since we didn't go to the neighborhood church, they threw a party for us when we first moved in so we could meet other kids. They invited all the kids in the neighborhood so everyone had our phone number and we had theirs. The phone book was so nice to read, all those beautiful names in such prim writing, the phone numbers of the neighborhood all beginning the same way, even mine.

The two women owned two dogs who were very well behaved. They would run along the fence with me, and one of the women or my mom would say, "They'll sleep well tonight!"

When we first moved in a woman from across the street brought some cookies, and assured my mother that no funny business was going on next door with those two women, they were good church members, they were just very dear friends.

My mother patted the woman's hand and said it didn't matter to us either way, and thank you for the cookies, we love cookies around here. My mother's nipples were showing through her gardening shirt. People knew we didn't go to church just by driving by, my mother explained to me, and not just because we were home and having fun on a

Sunday, and not just because she didn't dye her hair, but also because her gardening shirt didn't have sleeves, and once a woman was married she was not allowed to show her arms.

“Her shoulders,” my father had corrected. “Or really, you're not supposed to show the *garments* underneath.”

I started looking for it everywhere: the thin crease indicating a secret shirt under their regular shirt. The woman with the cookies was wearing a cardigan, but not buttoned all the way because it was July. And she said we had a lovely home, and she hoped no one was allergic to walnuts.

When gay marriage started gaining ground in Hawaii the women next door put their house on the market. That's how my mother tells it. The neighbors tell it like this: “Her mother lives in Hawaii, and she got real real sick, and her friend went along to help, isn't that nice?”

On The Scrolls

My mother and father were at a party.

I was either at home in a crib or in my mother's arms or in the arms of one of my parents' friends or not born yet.

Someone asked my parents if they were LDS.

My mother said No at the same time that my father said Yes.

My father whispered to her that he had to say yes because his name was still technically on their scrolls somewhere or whatever. My mother said he should not say yes because the answer was no: he drank coffee everyday and they had had premarital sex many times, once even on a motorcycle, and he engaged in light recreational drug use. You're drunk right now! she may have said. Everyone would have laughed, especially my father.

Seventeen years later she would refer to his affair as *polygamy*.

Twenty-six years later I would become pre-engaged to a Mormon man. Any good Utahn would say *Jack Mormon* because he drinks coffee and does not go to church and is really on the fence about that whole divinity thing. But to the world he will always be Mormon. To my mother he will always be Mormon.

Genealogy Part One

So, I'm pretty sure the way it went was one family was on one team and the other family was on another team.

The objective was to pull everything they owned across a continent in a wheelbarrow before they died of starvation or frostbite.

One family made it to Wyoming, broke down, starved, got frostbite, and eventually built a barn and had lots of wives.

One family came back to get the ones who didn't want to starve and build barns.

This is the legend I'm working on right now. My father's great-grandfather watched that barn get built. My boyfriend's great-grandfather came back for the rest of us.

This is how I understand it, having never had anyone tell me the story before.

Genealogy Part Two

When I was a teenager I found out that my dad's parents were Mormon. I thought that my Grandma was just old, that's why she wore that jewelry, that's why she had that swively perm. My mother says that my Grandma asked all the time how we were liking church, how we were taking to our primary school lessons.

My mother would say, "We aren't Mormon." And the next weekend my Grandma would ask if we had made any good friends from church.

Growing Up Mermaid

I have a sister.

I haven't mentioned that yet.

She is younger than me, and she isn't Mormon either. Right now she is living in Peru, using Reiki to heal me from a distance. I am not technically sick. I am not sicker than your average person in this room, but people get so many dings in them that it always feels good to close your eyes and picture healing and have someone tell you that you're doing a good job with it.

At our Grandma's house we would sit on her carpeted stairs and play with plastic horses, or pretend we were orphans stranded on the steps of a boarded-up building. Our cockneyed pleas for help would grow so loud that our mother would come over and say, "Girls, the grown-ups are trying to visit. Do you think the orphans ever get lost in a forest?"

Outside we would climb the fattest lowest branch of the only tree.

Now we were faeries or mermaids whose tails had split and it had hurt.

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