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# She Fell To Her Knees And Other Stories

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She Fell To Her Knees And Other Stories

by

Karen Brown Gonzalez

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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## Table of Contents

### She Fell To Her Knees and Other Stories

Abstract	ii
Introduction	1
Beautiful	11
Uction	29
The Living Room Show	45
The Ropewalk	62
Mouth of Friend and Stranger	82
Confession	92
Manifold	107
She Fell to Her Knees	123

## She Fell To Her Knees and Other Stories

Karen Brown Gonzalez

### ABSTRACT

These collected stories represent a culling from a portion of work that shares a similar theme of loss—its manifestation, its channeling, by various fictional characters, into the palpable and sensate, into the physical world of the body. They are people, mostly women, who have lost their hold on the world to which they are accustomed, who become entangled in situations where their bearings are skewed, their judgment faulty, their decisions based solely on a physical, most often sexual, attraction that simultaneously depletes a sense of worth, while providing its semblance.

The loss stems, at times, as in “Manifold,” from beyond the control of the character, from the world of adults who cannot, for their own reasons, handle their own despair. It comes from the unavoidable presence of mental illness, and the inability of the character to perceive, amidst the confusion of change, a stable view. Often, as in “She Fell to Her Knees,” there is no reference point upon which to base a way to live. Memory is only a trigger for more loss. The characters’ own choices bring about loss in other ways—an abandoned infant, promiscuity, an encounter with a stranger—all choices made in an effort to ease, and which result in compounding precarious situations. Brief solace in sex results in inevitable emptiness. Relationships are sought for the safety of their impermanence. The respite from loneliness is always temporary, and almost always

sought with the hope that from the physical will emerge the gift of emotional commitment. The stories seek to reveal, not the histories of the characters, but the maps of their emotional pasts. They attempt to portray the routes from which the women have stumbled, and in this way illuminate the emotional present of each story.

## INTRODUCTION

The need to invent stories was a reflexive one, triggered by childhood insomnia. I was the oldest of five children all close in age, and bedtime, for my mother's sanity, was always six p.m. In New England, winter nights fall at four-thirty, and I submitted to sleep in the lull of darkness. But in the summer months, with the color of twilight, and the sounds of the neighborhood beyond the window screen, I realized I had been duped. I cannot say now whether my sleeplessness sprang from resentment, but I was aware, finally, that there was no getting around it. I would not be released from my room, and something would have to fill the time. I found that I could create stories as aids to sleep, that from night to night I might repeat one, embellish and alter it, until it became a running serial that I might return to, and never lose.

Those first stories arose from early television images and fairy tales from nursery school story hours—Flash Gordon's black and white bravado, a handsome costumed hero, the science fiction world. Before I could write them down, they emerged in pages of coloring I spent days creating, all in narrative order, each crayoned image capturing a frozen scene—Kings and Queens in royal courts, the battlements of castles, the subjects arrayed, the protagonist a lost princess, or a poor girl deserving of a chance. Once I could read, I wrote, and everything I wrote I saved. I do not know why. I still have my first poem, rhyming quatrains on the provided theme: *If all the flowers were yellow, and only I was red...* some teacher's lesson in diversity circa 1967, written in what must have been a

newly acquired cursive script. Around fourth or fifth grade I received a manila folder, and on the cover I wrote *Poems and Stories*. Here is where I saved the bulk of my childhood writing—plays penned for neighborhood shows, *The Memory of the Fleetfoot Sisters*, a musical with songs and lyrics that never was performed, a short story called “The Glass Heart,” published in our fifth-grade literary journal, the two poems that won first and third prize in our local library’s poetry contest—“Life is a Stream” and “The Fawn,” both full of rhyme and bad metaphor, interesting only now when I realize that in third grade I felt the need to explain something unnameable with the things around me I could name. I still have the series of angst-ridden poems I wrote when I was thirteen on a steno pad my mother purchased for me. I know my age because it was then that I started keeping track of time, and the dates are there, scrawled at the top of the page like an afterthought.

I would not have written if I hadn’t read. All of my early writing is inspired by my childhood reading. I had two close friends who shared my interest, and a summer day for us was highlighted by a trip to the library, and a stack of new books, and an afternoon sitting around reading them. We found an author that we liked and read everything they’d written. We often read out the lines of characters in plays we found in an old college literature text. (Later, in college, I would read a play by Synge, and suddenly realize why it was so familiar). We read “The Glass Menagerie” and “The Adding Machine.” We did not have many books in our house, but what we had I read, and of them I remember Pearl Buck, and the two lone editions of the Harvard Classics (*The Iliad* and Shakespeare). I read *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* and wrote forty pages of a bad romance (the only thing I have ever physically torn up). I discovered Shelley and Keats and Coleridge and

Tennyson. I memorized “The Lady of Shalott” and “Kubla Khan,” and Hopkins’ “The Windhover.” I read Auden and Eliot and Yeats. I fell in love with the sounds of words.

My uncle was a poet, living in New York City. He was published regularly in *The New York Quarterly*, but at the time I didn’t know this as an accomplishment. He arrived, off and on, to visit, and he asked for my poems and read them. He never gave me advice. He read them out loud to Thanksgiving guests in his booming voice, as if they were real and finished and important. As if he admired them. He always grinned at me and told me to keep at it. He gave me a directory of little magazines and journals, and told me to send things out. I was thirteen when I attempted this, and I received comments back from editors who said my poems were too florid, the metaphors trite. So I changed the way I wrote—resorting to spare lines, and obscure references. The comments came again: *Too vague! What?* I wasn’t discouraged. I learned I could alter my style and not risk what I needed to say, that I could combine words in other ways and come up with something not better or worse, but different. At some point I stopped submitting and just wrote. And then, for some reason, I stopped writing. I have nothing saved for a number of years.

My evolution as a writer, then, is broken into two parts. In high school, I produced very little, a poem called “After the Rain,” published in the school’s literary magazine. Except for Salinger’s *Nine Stories*, nothing I read compelled me to write, and the impression made by Salinger’s collection would not be revealed until much later. The only other writing I did was in the form of letters to friends, long ones, often twenty to thirty pages. I met one of these friends recently and she told me she had saved the letters, but that they had been lost when her house was destroyed in Hurricane Andrew. I don’t

know what the letters might have recorded, and I often think about them, but when I began college at the age of twenty, that time of my life became a point of departure, an unknown I tapped for stories I would again begin to write.

At Hartford College for Women I took a composition course taught by Dr. Oliver Butterworth, who wrote the children's story *The Enormous Egg*. He was older, ready to retire, and receptive to my writing, a teacher who became another of the teachers whose comments had encouraged me throughout my school years, who served, essentially, as my audience. For him, I wrote a short story that I've somehow lost in my move to Florida, but I know it was set in my childhood suburban neighborhood, that I wanted to achieve a certain tone, and it was the first time I had ever worked to do this—the influence of Salinger's stories emerging. At USF, in Composition class, I received an "F" on a paper for a comma-splice. I wrote prose from the sounds of words, like poetry, and the sentences fell together in phrases (like lines). I found it impossible to write nonfiction, so I fictionalized my essays, using fake scenarios. My struggle with prose, with the *complete sentence*, began here and ended, finally, in Dr. Sanders' fiction course, where I was told, among other equally important things, to purchase a grammar text and study it. At the time, I thought that grammatically correct sentences had little to do with my art. And I was correct. I received a "C" on my first sketch, and remembered the editors' comments on my poetry submissions. But I knew I had to write, and that there would be a way to write well, and that I could learn it.

Dr. Sanders met with me on one occasion, in the old coffee shop on the second floor of Cooper Hall. He gave me an intent, forceful glare. "Is this what you want to do?"

he asked, his hands folded on top of the plastic tablecloth. This was the first time writing was presented to me as a real vocation. I felt the power of his question. It required a commitment, an unwavering belief. Did it assume a talent? Was it spurred by some secret knowledge of my ability to succeed? And now, I cannot remember if he ever said I was good. There were only a lot of bad things that I was doing—too much attention paid to things of little value, a diffusion, too many words, too much, basically, of everything. He told me to read Hemingway's short stories. I went to the library afterwards and checked out collections. I changed the way I wrote, not poetry this time, but fiction. I imitated the short, spare lines. I found the one thing to describe, simply, to evoke the feeling I wanted to create. I worked on style before I ever had a real story to tell.

Eventually, the Hemingway lines gave way to other imitations (Toni Morrison and Garcia Marquez) anyone who worked with the sounds of words. I wrote sketches and stories, took Narration and Description and Fiction I through III. My audience continued to be the professors who read everything I wrote, and it had expanded to include the participants of workshops, some who continued to read my writing after the semester ended. I mention these people because I wrote for them. In the long years of creating stories, of storing them away in an accordion folder, they were the people who waited to read what I wrote, and I believe they were as necessary, in their waiting and obliging me, as the daily writing itself.

Eventually, I submitted stories, and some were published, and many were not. Publication afforded a wider audience of editors and readers, some validation. This is *good enough*, it seemed to suggest. At Cornell University's MFA program, I met other

writers dedicated to writing, worked with authors whose lives were devoted to their art, and I began a novel constructed, much as my early writing was constructed, of lines of poetry, of small vignettes, like stories. I look back over this completed work and I see much that I like, and I see, too, that I was still writing *stories*.

The story form allows me to visit a place, to come upon, almost accidentally, a situation. It gives me the chance to invent people who have contributed to this situation, who must react and wonder, whose histories need only be slightly revealed in glimpses. The story form is delicate and fragile. It happens and disappears. I like catching its moment. And I like forgetting it, abandoning it for another. I found that I admired Salinger's tone, but also his characters, distanced and bruised, shown in their weakest and somehow, sweetest, moments. (The brother in "War with the Eskimos" offering the chicken salad sandwich from his pocket, Seymour Glass's obsession with the child's feet in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," Mary Lou bumping her leg in her drunken rush to Ramona's bed in "Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut.") These characters' actions reveal an underlying turmoil, but not an incomprehensible one, or one that was beyond my own experience, but some tragic aspect of the everyday. As a young writer this helped me recognize the potential of simple action to reveal character. The stories collected in *Nine Stories* encapsulated a sense of loss, the impossibility of return. This became the thing I most wanted to reveal.

To accomplish this, though, I had to discover a way to write, and the characters to use. Through reading, I knew what I could *not* do. I did not have the encyclopedic knowledge and attending vocabulary of Updike, or the dark humor of T.C. Boyle, but I

did want my stories to arrive at a similar emotional place. I wasn't concerned with following the traditional story narrative, but I also didn't want to experiment with language and form to the extreme. My first stories used young protagonists, and I was told I used them effectively. That well of teenage years, all unwritten, was vivid to me. I enjoyed poking into it, remembering the odd, sometimes perilous event, creating people to relive it, and making it mean something to them in the end.

I also found that most of these stories began with a place, usually one I'd visited. It was an easy jumping off point—one I believed I invested with meaning and manipulated to become a suitable backdrop. Out of the place characters emerged. But I have come to see my use of place differently. It is safe territory, a way into the story. It comes now imbued with its own meaning, and I've learned to trust its leanings—toward sadness and neglect, toward an impersonal vacancy, or high tension, or impending loss. I am particular about the season. An establishment of place, atmospherically, is important to me. I am careful about what smells are in the air and what might be blooming, and what this means to the sense of the story and its characters who must live there, and breath in the smells, and feel the outdoors on their skin.

I am not interested in citing an abundance of specific detail. I was urged away from this years ago, and have trained myself to choose, carefully, one or two things to notice in a room. I admire writers who are able to extensively list specific details that hold my interest. I am not able to do it without sensing I am drawing attention away from my story. Somehow, my story lies elsewhere. Place establishes expectations, and it carries, too, other distinctions, particularly class. I like the way Cheever and Updike

evoke suburbia, how their characters move within this world, both contradicting and satisfying what we expect from them. Because it is a world with which I am familiar, I look to these authors to dispel its myths, and I am never disappointed. But I am not this kind of writer.

At some point I know I should arrive at what it is that compels me to write at all. Is it simply putting words together to create something beautiful? Should it need to be more than that? Each story I write is almost always influenced by something I've read, usually poetry, where meaning is conveyed by brevity, where one line tells the whole story. It might be Robert Lowell, "Is the one unpardonable sin our fear of not being wanted?" or Jane Hirshfield on dying, "Like a lover, your life bends down and kisses your life," or Jeffrey Skinner, "It is the middle of the day but your hair has that scrubbed protein smell once locked in the center of a star." I'll read Roy Porter's *Flesh in the Age of Reason*, or an account of living with Carthusian monks in Arlington, VT, and what I read may match the place I've chosen for a new story. The image and the place will click and become the thing the story is about.

Place comes first, and this is stored in memory—a motel I've driven past for years, an abandoned Novitiate I visited once in rural Connecticut. Random events combine—what I'm reading, the teenaged boy wandering up and down my street one morning, the yellow blooms on the trees, a gray day that looks, impossibly, like snow. Though I will never know what events will occur to combine in ways that interest me, I am assured of their occurrence. I am always patient, and happy to wait for them. If I can begin the story with the right tone and voice in the first paragraph, most of the work is

done. The story and I are on even ground. What I intend, and what the story says, coincide. The character knows what will happen and when. My work becomes choosing the words, and the way they sound strung together on the page.

This is rarely the case. I have misstarts. I tell the story the way *I* want, and the character is lost, misplaced in my wish to pin her down, to make her think, specifically, what I've planned for her. She is no more than the woman I passed walking to my car in the elementary school parking lot. I haven't done anything to make her real. I haven't given her any motive to speak. Then, this complicates. I move the story on without her. What she does is meaningless (Mary Lou rushing drunken to Ramona's bed without the reader knowing why Mary Lou is so intent on pushing her daughter into the middle of the bed, into the space Ramona leaves for her imaginary friend.) I am the only one who knows what my character's gestures reveal. I have given them to her for a reason I have neglected to lay out. It will take me weeks to recognize this error. Or longer. Or never.

Some stories remain in the accordion folder, or in its more contemporary counterpart the computer hard drive. They languish there, with their parts that lure me back in, and their confounding parts that force me to resist. I cannot say what makes one worth the effort of revising, how I am called back to one, and know to leave another alone. These failures are ephemeral things to which I cannot give a voice. I regret that I did not fulfill their promise, that I no longer remember what it was that drove me to discover them, half-formed in their just-glimpsed state. And once I am off track, I am, really, as lost as the character. Both of our gestures are unworthy of the words that comprise them.

I have spent these last two years writing stories. The places they originated are logged in journals, evolved from notes and quotes of poetry and remarks on the weather. I can trace the stories back to their inceptions and find the pieces that influenced what they eventually became, but I cannot retrace the moments I spent putting their words in order, making the sounds fit, hoping the one thing I'd chosen to describe—ice dripping into the sand, little girls' painted fingernails, jacaranda petals on black asphalt, oily parts in metal bins, arms slipped from the sleeves of a leotard, a dishwasher's cough—might do justice to the people I've invented. I will continue to be drawn to this business I adopted as a child, making up worlds and peopling them, because I have learned that if I am honest enough I can place the reader within the truth of the story, and the story becomes more than something I can make—it is, then, something I can give.

## BEAUTIFUL

She was just Lorna when she applied for the job. She wore bangs and cut-off jean shorts and flip-flops. She went with her new friend, Yolie, who was already a bartender there, her exposed skin sticking to the seat of Yolie's car in the Florida heat. Yolie told Lorna he would like her, not to worry, and she pulled her through the door into the darkness of the club, the expanse of it empty and wide and dank, the oval-shaped bar, lit underneath by yellow bulbs, up on a dais in the center of the room, and all around sections with booths cordoned off with brass railings. He came out from the back, from the office. His eyes in the dark held a phosphorescence. His shirt was a blue oxford, untucked. He wore leather slippers.

"Arlo," Yolie said. He seemed as if he would walk past them, jingling his ring of keys.

"Oh," he said. He stopped and Yolie put her arms around his neck and kissed his unshaven cheek.

"This is Lorna," she said. He looked over at her, and she heard him breathe, one breath in, then out. The keys in his hand shook.

"Yes," he said. He looked down at the keys.

They followed him back to the door into the office. Inside, under garish fluorescent light, sat a glass-topped desk and a leather armchair behind it, and on the

floor, dingy gold sculptured carpet. The walls were paneled, the kind people put in their 1970's refinished basement. A full-length mirror leaned against one wall, by a door that led into a small white-tiled bathroom. He took a leotard from its wire hanger and handed it to her.

“You’ll have to try this on,” he said, looking at the shimmering thing held in the air between them. He appeared hesitant, almost apologetic. When she took the leotard from his hand their fingers touched, and she stared at his face, pale and damp under the new beard, waiting for him to look up, but he did not. Yolie pushed her, grinning, into the bathroom, and shut the door. In the dim bathroom light she was alone, and her heart raced. The leotard, red with white stripes on the bottom, blue on top, with white stars, looked like a Wonder Woman costume. She moved quickly, taking off her clothes. She could not wear anything under the leotard because of the high cut on the legs, the scoop at the neck and back.

“You need to come out,” Yolie said.

She did not want to leave the white-tiled bathroom with its dull light. In the mirror over the sink she saw her flushed cheeks, the sheen of sweat along the top of her breasts. She saw her chest rise and fall with her own frightened breath. But she needed the job, and it didn't matter, she told herself, what anyone thought. So she opened the door and stepped barefoot onto the gold carpet, into the spotlight of overhead fluorescence. He looked at her body in the leotard, but not her face. He stared at her so long she looked down at herself. “What?” she asked, masking her embarrassment with anger. And then he looked up into her eyes, his own eyes creased and pained.

“You are beautiful,” he said, quietly. The way he said it made it something she believed for the first time in her life.

Months later, the club will close and reopen under new ownership as a country and western saloon. One night, Lorna will be on the back of a boy’s motorcycle, riding very fast on a major thoroughfare, and the streetlights and the headlights of cars and the storefronts in the strip malls and the white lines on the road will all seem bright smears. It will be early spring, the air sharp, carrying the smell of exhaust and the perfume of women in cars with the windows rolled down, and further off, orange groves in bloom. She will hold the boy tightly around his waist, feel his stomach muscles under his thin T-shirt, press herself up against his back, and she will both want and fear the speed at which they travel, believing, because he has told her he loves her, that he will not do anything to harm her. He will slow down in front of a strip mall and pull into an empty parking lot and tell her to get off. Come on, he will say, as if time is pressing. It will be late at night and no one will be around. Tell me you love me, he says. Lorna will look at him, his hair blown back, his soft, brown eyes, the chin with the cleft. You know I do, she says. His face will reflect a dawning despair. He will take off on the motorcycle without her and ride headlong toward a stucco wall at the end of the lot, and not slow down, or attempt to stop until the last moment, when he applies the brake and slides to the side. He will right the bike and head back to where she stands, with her hands over her face. Were you watching? he will ask. What are you doing? she will want to know. Tell me you love me,

he says again, and he gives the bike some gas and the back wheel spins on the black tar lot. And she will hesitate because suddenly she doubts her love for him at the moment that she must not, and he will see and accelerate toward the wall, his speed even greater this time, the sound of the engine rising at an increasingly higher pitch, until she finds her breath stopped in her chest. But he will pull back like before, at the last minute. He will ride back to her, and look up at her, tears streaking his face. I love you, she will say, and he will tell her to get back on the bike, and she will, her arms around his waist shaking with something she will never identify for sure. Fear? Love? Desire? Or are they all, she will wonder, the same?

At first, Lorna worked afternoons at Arlo's club to learn the job. But it was so slow she didn't learn much. There was always someone else with her, to show her things: "This is the soda gun, for ginger ale and club soda and all," each small button's code long eroded. "You just remember, you know, top is Coke, left is soda, right is ginger ale." That was Susie, who set her long blond hair in electric rollers so it bounced and swung around when she moved, wiping out ashtrays, restacking glasses, checking the stock in the beer cooler. She spoke quickly in a high-pitched voice, her blue eyes darting up and down the bar, watching the only three customers. "This is the well, you know, it goes vodka, gin, rum, bourbon, tequila, and then the grenadine and the triple sec." Lorna nodded at everything, and promptly forgot it afterwards.

"Why don't you go see if that guy wants another one," Susie said. She lit a cigarette. Lorna dreaded confronting the man. She wasn't used to herself in the leotard,

the required L'Eggs Sheer Energy suntan pantyhose, the high-heeled shoes. She had taken on a role she could not perform. Susie gave her a look. Go, it said.

Lorna walked down the length of the bar and stood in front of the customer. He wore a golf shirt and his thinning blond hair swiped to one side. The sun had freckled the bridge of his nose. The skin around his eyes was puffy and white where his sunglasses sat.

"I've been waiting for you to come over," he said, under his breath.

She didn't know what to do with her hands so she placed them on the edge of the wooden bar. She smiled, but his eyes, moving from her face to the blue-backed stars on her chest, unnerved her, and she felt the smile falter, and knew he saw.

"Would you like another drink?" she asked.

"If *you* bring it to me," he said, and put the glass to his wet lips and tipped his head all the way back to drain it. He placed it back on the bar and the ice resettled. "I'm drinking rye," he told her. She took the glass in her hand and he put his hand on hers to stop her. His hand was heavy and cold, and he gripped hers tightly, so she could not walk away. "I'm not going to even ask your name," he said, his eyes intent. "I just know you know what we would be like together. And I'm going to give you this card," and he pulled a white business card out of his shirt pocket, "and I want you to call me." He placed the card on the top of the bar. Lorna looked down at it, and the customer still held her hand. "Take it," he said, his voice low, melodious, laced with threat, and she picked it up with her free hand, and he let her go.

Lorna had no idea what making the drink entailed. She looked at the liquor bottles on their mirrored shelves, reading all of the labels. Susie watched her. “Rye,” she said, annoyed. When Lorna could not find the bottle, and glanced up at her in defeat, Susie grabbed one from a top shelf and made her the drink.

“You be nice to that girl, Susie,” the customer called from the end of the bar. “I like this one.”

Susie handed the drink to Lorna. She smiled, showing all her teeth. She flounced her hair. Lorna brought the man the drink and placed it on a white napkin in front of him, enduring his stare, his wet grin. She took the ten he handed her, his fingers lingering on the bill, along her palm. She couldn’t remember the price of the drinks. They hadn’t let her do the money yet, so she gave the bill to Susie.

“The rest of that is for you,” the customer yelled. “And Susie-Q, her ass is sweeter than yours.”

None of this mattered, Susie said. They pooled their tips. Lorna worked two afternoons with Susie, and didn’t see Arlo at all. There was another man there, named Larry, who was the assistant. He would lean on the bar and smoke cigarettes and ask her questions about herself. Where are you from? he would ask, and Lorna would pretend to be busy, wiping the top of the bar with a damp rag. And you left because...? She would lift his cigarette out of the red plastic ashtray and dump the butts, then replace the cigarette and set the whole thing back in front of him. Because I wanted to, she told him. Do you always do what you want to do? he asked her. He had a wide mouth and dark eyes that were always only half serious. She looked at him, and he blew his cigarette

smoke out of his nose. “I mean, look, Lor, it’s really slow in here, and we’re both doing nothing, so what do you want to do *right now*?” he asked, the words carrying a significance she would pretend not to understand.

On the third afternoon Lorna worked with Yolie, and both Larry and Arlo came into the bar. Arlo wore his usual shirt unbuttoned halfway down his chest as if he’d forgotten to finish dressing. His hair looked dirty. He shuffled past the bar without acknowledging her and approached Larry.

“Who the fuck is that?” he asked.

Larry looked up at Lorna with mild surprise.

Afterwards, Yolie laughed, reassuring her. “That afternoon he hired you he was out of his mind,” she said. “You’re just lucky.”

Arlo came out of the office and stopped at the bar. He was slight and almost delicate, like a boy, but older than the boys Lorna knew. His hair hung in wisps over his eyes. He always held a cigarette. Sometimes his hand shook, other times it didn’t. On this afternoon he stood in near darkness and watched her bring a drink to a customer. With his eyes on her now, Lorna felt awkward, hideous. He whistled under his breath. “Oh baby,” he said. “You have amazing legs.” She wanted to turn on him, and strike him. She wanted to take his face in her hands and kiss his mouth.

After the country and western saloon closes, the club will become a Chinese Buffet. Lorna will work as a hostess at the airport’s revolving rooftop restaurant. She will wear a long, black Lycra skirt, and seat elaborately dressed couples on their

anniversaries, businessmen in dark suits, their hair cut cleanly around their ears. She will lose track of the tables as the restaurant turns, spill Tom Collinses onto a woman's silk lap. But she will meet a man who will call her "Lo" and take her out in his Ferrari. They will eat outside at an iron table on the leafy patio of a hotel restaurant, and he will pour her wine and light her cigarettes and they will talk. The hotel will be a famous one on the beach, and they will watch the sunset, which will strike her as overly pink and orange. She will tell him how different the beaches are where she grew up, and he will ask the differences, his head cocked to one side, his eyes warm and interested. She will explain the ones she can articulate—the sand on the beach is coarse and brown, littered with mussel shells and seaweed, and the water is darker, and colder, more green. She will not be able to tell how the debris that washes up, the pieces of trees, the milk cartons, the occasional shoe, makes the beach feel like suffering. But he will intuit a kind of sadness in the way she describes it, and look at her with compassion. He will have graying hair and a wry smile that she likes because it reminds her of someone else. At the end of the night he will tell her she has a beautiful heart, but it will be just her body that he desires, and only that one weekend in a room in the pink hotel on soft, expensive sheets, and then he will not see her again.

When she got the job at Arlo's club, Lorna lived in an apartment complex with a pool surrounded by a hibiscus hedge, which for her was its most alluring feature. She shared an apartment with a girl she met some weeks before, temping at an insurance company, and spent her free afternoons lying out in the sun by the red flowers and the

chlorinated blue pool water. Here, dragonflies dipped and circled her body on the chaise, their wings opaque and gold-veined, their hovering movements timed, it seemed, to inaudible music. She slit her eyes against the sun and watched them, their appearance in such multitude like a portent. She dreamed about Arlo, how she might kiss his smooth chest, the softness above the button of his pants, how his mouth would slide into his smile, one side first, tentatively, fearful of revealing too much.

She had already forgotten her boyfriend, who had brought her to Florida, run out of money, and gone back up north without her. She told him to go because his only skill was as a painter, and it was too hot, he whined, to paint here, and anyway, she did not love him, and did not want to support him. The only problem with his leaving was that now she had no car. Her roommate was never home, so Lorna could not ask her for rides. One day, Yolie picked her up for work at the club, but the other days she asked a neighbor to drive her. She had seen him in the afternoons at the pool, pretending not to watch her climbing out of the water. She saw him leave the complex at night in a silver Fiat, the top down, his hair slicked back with gel. When she approached him at the pool about the ride, he was lying on a striped towel on a chaise, his torso oily, smelling of coconuts. He stared at her bare stomach, considering, then back up to her face. He grinned. Well, sure, he said. He drove her, willingly, almost joyfully, his hand sliding on the stick shift, his legs revealed in shorts, covered with curly hair. He would shave first, and put on a pressed shirt before he picked her up, and she realized, with an almost faraway kind of acceptance, that she would owe him in some way. One day he would exact a price.

This happened when Arlo decided to close in the afternoons, and no one called her to let her know. She arrived at the club in the Fiat with the neighbor, and he slid his hand between her damp thighs and leaned over and kissed her. She turned away, but his mouth moved into her hair, and in her confusion and surprise she sprang from the car and slammed the door and stalked off. The Fiat sent up gravel at the parking lot exit before she realized the club was closed. From there she walked to the 7-Eleven in her high heels and suntan hose and cut off shorts, the leotard hot and clinging underneath. She called her roommate from the pay phone, knowing she was not home. She called Yolie and left a message. She wasn't able to think of anyone else. The manager of the store came out twice and asked her to move on. And then a car pulled in, a black 280Z. The boy ambled into the store in gym shorts, the back of his T-shirt wet with sweat, and came out, tapping his pack of cigarettes onto the palm of his hand. He made a sad face at her, one she accepted as sincere. And she thought, this is OK, to be pitied.

“Need a ride somewhere?” he asked.

And she gratefully got into the car.

The upholstery was slippery and cool. She told him the name of the apartment complex, which was all the way across town, a route that she had never paid attention to as a passenger. He took the interstate, humming to himself, and everything suddenly looked unfamiliar. She had never seen those houses with the tin roofs before.

“Which way are you going?” she asked.

He looked at her, and shrugged. “The only way I know,” he said.

His cheeks were chubby. His mouth was small, the lips pursed. He was whistling, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. He smelled of scented deodorant. He asked her name and she told him Lorna, but he didn't hear, or he didn't listen. "Do you work at the club back there, Laura?" he asked. Her heart pounded in a place at the base of her neck. She put her hand on the door handle and imagined leaning on the door, jumping out onto the swiftly passing shoulder. She was sorry she slammed the neighbor's car door. She was sorry she didn't allow his kiss, his groping between her legs, as payment for the week's worth of rides. She wanted the air-conditioned darkness of the club. She craved Arlo's face, pictured it like a salve, the dry edges of his lips, his sorrowful brows, the reddened rim of his nose. She was sure she would never see him again. She was sure she would suffer now, at the hands of this stranger whose car maneuvered skillfully at high speed between lanes of an interstate she did not know.

And then, "Here we go," the boy said, and they pulled into the complex with its withered tropical plants, its asphalt radiating heat. He gave her a piece of paper with his name and his phone number. She took it from him with a trembling hand, her eyes wet with unshed tears. "You really are pretty," he told her. And she recognized his pity again, his genuine sadness mixed with checked lust, and despised herself.

As the Chinese Buffet, the building that once housed Arlo's club will finally achieve some success. People will flock there from the surrounding office complexes for inexpensive lunches. Lorna will go with some coworkers from Suncoast Realty one afternoon, and she will not realize it is the same place, until one of the men mentions the

outfits the bartenders wore there when it was a club, and another one recalls a night when he got into a fight in the parking lot. The two women will shake their heads and roll their eyes, and Lorna will look around the interior of the restaurant and make out the old brass railings, see where the bar has been replaced with a sushi bar in the center of the room. She will recognize the same air-conditioned darkness. She will foolishly admit she worked there, and the women will raise their eyebrows and glance down into their plates, and the men will stop chewing their food and never look at her the same way again. Really? one will ask. They will have trouble believing she served drinks when she is so inept at the copier and the coffeemaker, and though everyone will laugh, a new tension will invade their group, one that prevents the wave of memory from suffusing her. They will nervously stack the white plates with the remains of rice and Lo Mein, gather their purses and pull out their wallets, preparing to leave. Later, the men will begin to ask her out, and she will refuse them, even those she likes, who she has dreamed about alone at night, because she does not trust their attention, their eagerness to have her. Suddenly, the only thing she will have that they desire isn't the thing she will desire to give.

The leotards had been Arlo's last ploy to draw customers, but business was slowing down for good. There was still money on weekend nights, when a band came in and played on the stage up front, and people filled the tables in the sections beyond the brass rails, and their bodies moved together on the dance floor, lined ten deep at the oval bar. Larry told Lorna that Arlo wanted her to work Friday and Saturday night. She could

make a rum and Coke and a Jack and Coke, a Seabreeze and a Screwdriver. Yolie showed her how to make a vodka martini. “That should be good enough,” she said.

The first night she stumbled around behind the bar, in everyone’s way. Six girls worked, three on each side, all of them with weighty hair and whip thin legs, their leotards crawling up in back like thongs. Lorna acquired a reflexive motion of tugging hers down that customers found beguiling. She thrilled them in her idiocy. I’d like a Kamikaze, someone might say, and she would look at them, And that is...? and the customer would throw his head back and laugh. Yolie, working next to her, would place her lips near her ear, “Vodka, splash triple sec, splash lime.” The bottles still felt heavy and slippery in her hand. She still pushed the wrong button on the gun. She miscounted change in her hurry to get out of the drawer. But, by Saturday night she became used to approaching the people at the bar, their faces part of a larger blur that was the rest of the club, the band on the stage, the hum of bodies pressed in close. She liked the make up she wore, her glossed lips, the way whatever she did, filling glasses with ice, tipping a bottle and replacing it in the well, bringing a drink to a customer, became timed to the band’s music, her body its own song. She took the money the customers pushed toward her across the bar, or folded into the palm of her hand, their eyes teasing and sly. She sensed the bargaining going on, none of it having much to do with the drinks. They paid, and they waited, and they never got what they wanted. Behind the bar, she was untouchable, on show, like a museum piece.

She aroused the fury of the other bartenders. They looked over at Arlo where he sat at the bar, wondering when he would notice her incompetence. But he said nothing,

continued to sit and sip his drink, his eyes glassy and electric, following her movements. Now, Lorna wanted his eyes on her. She leaned over the bar and lit his cigarettes, and he gave her his slow-motion smile. He chatted with customers, ignoring the running of the club, the band's lengthy breaks, the scuffle erupting on the dance floor, Larry's pleas to return to the office and speak with someone on the phone. Arlo's eyes, watching her, felt like a caress.

At the end of the night he called her into the office. He sat under the fluorescent light in his leather chair counting out one of the register drawers. Larry was there, with his half serious expression. Arlo had the drawers stacked on the floor, and lines of cocaine on the glass top of the desk. He told Larry to get Lorna a drink, and Larry looked at her, smirking, and asked, "So, do you know what you want?" She stared at the top of Arlo's bent head, waiting for him to finish the line. When he looked up his eyes were watering and red.

"What should I drink?" she asked. She sat in a chair across from him, her legs curled up underneath her, her tips in the blue Crown Royal bag beside her on the floor. She played with her hair, piling it up on top of her head, and letting it fall.

"Grand Marnier," he said. He settled back into his chair and they looked at each other. She did not know what he saw when he looked at her, but when he did something in his face broke and smoothed out, some slackening of disdain, a softness he didn't offer anyone else. She sipped the drink that Larry brought her in a tiny glass. It burned her throat, tasted of oranges, and deep down, an amber-tinted sadness. Arlo said nothing to her at all. The drawers stayed there stacked on the gold carpet, and he leaned back in his

chair and tipped his head and watched her. She memorized his face, the shape of his hands, the soft hair on his arms below his rolled up sleeves. He put his hand over his mouth, and they stared at each other endlessly, until Larry began to count the drawers, muttering to himself, and Yolie came in and told her she was ready to go home.

Eventually, even the Chinese Buffet will fail, and the club will become an empty building with a sign for sale, and weeds growing up through the parking lot. Lorna will marry a man who makes the claim that he loves everything about her—her intelligence, her humor, the smell of her skin, because he will know, at the time, this is what she will want to hear. She will learn the truth when she discovers her role involves clothing and hairstyles and, among his friends, a certain silence. He will become immune to what he saw as her beauty when she allows gray to thread her hair, and lets her body lose its firmness, when too much dreaming pulls down the corners of her mouth. They will live in a house in a new subdivision, where the houses are different, but oddly the same, stucco homes painted in the hues of pastel Easter eggs. There will be her own pool, with a screened enclosure, and beyond that a pond with water spraying up out of a fountain at the center. There will be woods that she will see in the distance, and other neighbors with young children in strollers and leashed dogs, their porches and front lawns decorated for each holiday. She will conceive two children but never carry them. She will have an affair with a man, simple and straightforward, with no pretending he wants her for anything more than the one thing she has learned to give, expertly, with no trace of herself. She will meet him at his apartment on his lunch hour, and when they are in bed

together he will ask her if she is happy. What is happy? she will say. What you pretend when you have everything you thought you wanted? He will turn his head on his pillow, decidedly miserable, and tell her he shouldn't see her anymore. And then one afternoon she will come out into her suburban yard and find the dragonflies again, their dance among the one tree's branches and the bird-of-paradise. They will not have meant anything until that moment, their power to foretell delayed by years.

She did not go home with Yolie that night. Larry counted the drawers and put money in zippered bank bags for the deposit. He stood in the doorway to the office, terse and concerned, for once completely serious. You all set? he asked Arlo. Arlo's head seemed heavy, his eyelids weighted. He waved Larry away with his hand. Larry made a noise under his breath and turned and left.

"You know why you're here?" Arlo asked her.

She had finished her drink and all the dark lines on the paneled walls wavered.

She stood up and crossed the gold carpet, knelt down in front of him in his leather swivel chair and put her hands on the tops of his legs. His brows knit together. He pulled back and took her hands in his. "Don't do this to me," he said. He shook his head and laughed, softly, the laugh catching in his throat. He looked away from her so she could not see his eyes.

"I have nothing to offer you, sweetheart," he said.

She kissed him anyway, and he put his hands along her face, and Lorna, standing on her manicured lawn sees herself again, slipping the leotard off her shoulders, each arm

pulled from its sleeve, the outline of her bathing suit marked by her tan, the string ties, the cups of white. How she looked, loving him, her eyes shining with it, her mouth trembling on his, and then his mouth, wet and roaming, his hands on her shoulders shaking with the tremors of what he used to know as desire, the memory of it stirring in his head and nowhere else. He told her he wasn't worth it. He begged her to stop, and then said not to. He wished he could be who she wanted. She told him she loved him the way he was. But nothing she said or did was any use. His body, drained and wasted, refused them, and none of it, he assured her after they had tried and tried in the cold, air-conditioned office, was her fault.

His eyes took her in. "You are something," he whispered, sorry and sickened, his hands damp with regret along the side of her face.

"Just forget this," he told her. "Forget everything I said."

But watching the dragonflies she remembers. She sees how he must have called her into the office that night to let her go, how Larry had to do it the next day, telling her on the phone that they were cutting back, business was too slow. She recognizes her grief, the taste of oranges and bitterness mixed with his saliva in her mouth, all of it, in her confusion then, a betrayal. Now, standing in her front yard by the blooming plumbago, she can read his tortured eyes, feel his skin under her fingertips, hear his hoarse pleas against her neck, in her hair, and see how she has spent a long time foolishly searching for him in the faces of others. How could she have realized it was her love, expended that night, breathed out into the shoddy office, worn down under the

fluorescent lighting, that would emerge flailing and beating, the most beautiful thing she has ever known?

## UNCTION

They gathered each morning at seven o'clock in the bookbinding machine shop, in the back where the parts were stored in long, narrow metal bins and stacked on metal shelving to the ceiling. Fans spun the dusty heat. They drank cups of dark coffee. They moved, their teenaged bodies dull and inarticulate, to the plywood counter where thick sheaves of computer printouts listed the parts they needed to count. It was a summer job, this inventory. Lily was pregnant, seventeen, and no one knew, not Orlando, the young draftsman, who taught her to drive his Renault, or Tish, the owner's niece, who brought in bags of the watermelon candy Lily secretly craved, not even Matthew, with his soft hair in his eyes, with his bashful glances that made her feel a part of herself had come undone, a blouse button, the clasp to her shorts, the silent, swift unraveling of her heart.

There were six of them hired to work the inventory. At first, Lily did not spend much time getting to know any of them. She took her list and went off into the aisles of shelving, working on deciphering the language of screws and pins and bolts and clamps. She found time went faster this way. At lunch she bought a sandwich from the truck that came and parked in the lot. Later, the notes she penned would bring them all together in ways they would come to wish otherwise, but until then they ate at the long tables in the lunchroom, and wandered the aisles flanked by tall shelving, knowing nothing about each other.

The machine shop used to manufacture the bookbinding machine parts, but it had been closed for two years. Only a husband and wife ran the shipping department. There was Matthew, hired to build the wooden crates, to operate the forklift, and pack things up to ship. A few machines remained operable. Two men ran those. Most parts were made in another of the owner's factories down by the Connecticut River, a bigger, more efficient place. The sense of the small bookbinding machine shop was of desolation, and decline. Its dirt and grease, ground into the brick floor, were ancient, from another time. The sun lit the high row of narrow windows filmed by dust, a pinkish orange. There was no other source of light beyond the hanging florescent lamps. Each morning Lily came into the heat of the shop and felt a new, raw wave of despair.

They worked without supervision. After a week they grew bored. There was no one to please with their progress through the stacks of computer printouts. The notes were Lily's idea, grown out of the boredom and the impossible state of her body, its languidness, its inconceivable second heartbeat. She did not know for sure about herself until July, when the heat in the machine shop was the worst, and the black grit settled grimly on the handrails of the tall rolling ladders they moved up and down the aisles of shelving, seeking out the parts. Her breasts hurt. She drank her coffee in the morning, and promptly threw it up. Only Matthew noticed waiting outside the ladies room for her, the worry in his eyes something they pretended wasn't there. He would brush her hair from her face. He would grin wildly, to make her smile. In the afternoons, he would sit on one of the high ladders and draw caricatures of all of them, or the comic book superheroes he created. His body, large and ungainly, would curl in on itself, double over. His arm bent

along the wide white paper moved lithe and supple, like the appendage of someone else. He would present the drawings to her, rolled up into long tubes, paper clipped at the ends. She sensed her happiness was, to him, of the utmost importance.

No one seemed to care that she did the least amount of work. She sat with Jamie at the plywood counter amid the printouts, thumbing through them, organizing them, pretending to mark things off. They separated the work into piles for everyone. Jamie smoked Camels, dropping his butts on the floor and grinding them with the toe of his boot. He kept his blond hair cropped short. His eyes perused her when he looked, lingered, needy and intent on her face, her mouth, on the slope of her shoulders down to her breasts.

“This is unendurable,” he would say, his eyes fastening on her bare legs spread out under the counter. She looked back at him, and shook her head, refusing him, her body taken over by an inexpressible lethargy, an emptying of desire. She felt drawn into a current of deep and swirling water. One afternoon it began to rain. The rain on the shop roof was like something rising and building to a heightened pitch, the sound of it hollow and metallic. Its thrumming made her lonely. She felt slighted by the condition of her body, as if it no longer had any other use than the one that now occupied it without her permission.

She did not know who the father was. There had been a succession of boys at the time. She would leave her parents’ house and walk the three blocks to the center of the small town, to the outdoor mall and its fountain, onto the town green’s damp evening grass, and meet her friends, and wait for the boys. They would appear like gliding birds

in their cars, paint jobs shining from a new waxing, the tires thick and ready to grab the parking lot's black asphalt. They stuck their heads out of car windows, their hair wet from the shower, from a quick swim in oval-shaped pools, from the lake in Suffield where some of them skied and a few would die in a boat accident the following summer. They lived without any fear of death. They stuck their heads out into the wind and grinned and promised a fearlessness that she would desire more than the inexperienced movements of their hands on her body, their mouths' wet urgency, their rising heat beneath her sliding palms.

They would never force themselves on her. She was practiced at how to make them want her. It became a simple game. Each boy was a new beginning. Each had an eventual parting, signaled by a new girl in the passenger seat of his car, or a general disregard that she learned to intuit, never an angry rebuff, never with any malice, just a folding away of himself from her, a closing off that made her sad at first. She would remember the smell of his upholstery, the salty taste of the skin on his throat, the way his mouth parted, or how he used his tongue. She would pine for the places they parked: the meadow beyond the reservoir, the smell of the grass dampened by rain. She would miss his groans, his efforts moving inside her, the way he fell panting afterward. She held their faces the same in her hands. She gazed into their eyes. They all had a way of not looking back, of shielding themselves, as if from the force of her love.

That afternoon she came around from the back of the rows of shelving and found Jamie with his cigarette at the counter. He gave her a look and then glanced over at Geri, moping on one of the ladders, her fingers flaying her hair. Geri was tall and had a long,

bushy mane of hair that she spent time twisting and piling and clipping back. She wore her boyfriend's UCONN T-shirts. Even these, Jamie announced, could not hide the bouncing effect of her large breasts. Geri was good-natured about Jamie's observations. She would stick her tongue out at him, and disappear down an aisle of shelving.

“Do you think she wants me to follow her?” he would ask Lily. “We could fuck in D row, under the Smyth sewer bolts.”

Lily suspected that Jamie was working the job, like she was, as some form of penance. He had been hired under similar circumstances through a friend of his father. A safe occupation for the summer. He wasn't resentful. With his paychecks, he claimed, he would put a down payment on the Trans-Am his father had already refused him. Lily had been hired to work in the shop's front office that winter. She got the job from her school disciplinary counselor, who met with her one afternoon after she had been discovered inebriated in French class. It had been French V, Advanced, and the other students, with their straight A averages and bowl-shaped haircuts and polyester button-downs, had been shocked. Madame Dorn had led her by the hand out of the room. She had chastised her in French. You disappoint me, she'd said. They stood in the beige brick hallway, on the pale and shining waxed floor tiles. Lily remembered the bright blue of her eyeshadow, the way her small hands had clung to her wrists, the sound of the verb, *decevoir*, like an unending and upturned sadness. The disciplinary counselor was gruff and stocky with a broad face. He was missing half of one of his thumbs. He set up the interview with the bookbinding shop's office manager.

“You need this,” he said. “Keep you out of trouble.”

She worked every day after school making blueprints on the large machine. All the drawings of parts were stored flat in long metal file drawers. She kept them in order, filed by their part numbers, some of them very old on tobacco-colored paper worn at the edges. She found that making the blueprints, the mindless feeding of drawings into the big machine, its emanating heat and hum and ammonia smell, kept her content, and she was grateful, in a way, for the job. When they'd assigned her to the summer inventory, she found she'd become good at accepting whatever she was given.

On the roof, the rain kept up its thrumming. Geri moped on the tall ladder.

"I like that big head of hair," Jamie said. "I want to put my hands in it."

Lily tore a piece of the computer printout. She wrote this down with one of the pencils, in cursive script. "Put it in a bin on her list," she said.

"Add something else," he told her, grinning.

Lily wrote what she believed Jamie would want from Geri, what he wanted to do to her. *I can't keep this a secret. I am overcome with lust.*

Jamie stubbed out his cigarette. He looked over Geri's abandoned list, and took off down the aisles. She didn't find the note at first. They watched her, waiting. They went off with their own lists, keeping an eye on her. Lily climbed to the top of a ladder and found the heat had collected there. She took the bin down to the floor and spent the afternoon counting and losing track and recounting three hundred and twenty feeder nuts, finally placing them in piles of twenty-five on the brick floor. At the end of the day lining up to punch out, they noticed Geri's face, flushed, distracted. Tendrils of her hair stuck to her forehead. She said nothing about a note. But Lily saw her eyes take in the fine sheen

on Orlando's dark skin, the way Matthew's pants had slid down on his hips. She saw them sweep across the broad space between Jamie's shoulder blades. Lily saw her wonder what his back looked like without his shirt. In her eyes was lit a kind of startled heat.

That summer, few of the office workers ever came to the back. Lily knew that up in the front offices women in accounts receivable gossiped and split blueberry crumb cake, purchasing agents lounged in each other's offices, sipping from cans of soft drinks, tipping cigarette ashes into cupped palms. The office manager carried on an affair with a file clerk, the blinds to his office drawn, and a receptionist sat at a switchboard facing the double glass doors, by the American flag in its stand, waiting to greet the mailman. There were foreign engineers, three of them, spread out in cubicles, their suit jackets draped over the backs of their chairs, their drawings clipped to slanted tables, their ashtrays spilling over with the ends of hand-rolled cigarettes.

Once in a while the Russian engineer would saunter through the shop. He would make a point of walking over, and stop, and ask for Lily. He needed a blueprint made. He couldn't find a drawing. He wore his dark suit pants and polished shoes. His shoe leather creaked, making his footsteps menacing. Matthew's face reddened when he saw him approaching. They made up excuses so Lily would not have to speak to him. That spring, the engineer had asked Lily to model, to pose wearing a nautical shirt and white shorts and a sailor's hat, with a bow thruster he had developed and patented for the owner as a side job. She had agreed, flattered at first. Celie in purchasing had done her make up in the ladies room. The engineer had taken the photos himself with a Nikon. He stood, stiff

and unfriendly, issuing orders. He had her straddle the design, something that looked like a heavy, riveted pipe. Then, she stood up beside it with one hand on her hip. Frustrated, he gripped the fleshy part of her arm above her elbow to position her, and his thumb and forefinger left a darkening print.

They took the photos in the machine shop. The late afternoon shone serene and unconcerned through the high row of windows, and the dust swirled about. She was not ready to reveal to the adult world her own knowledge of sex, and so she pretended she did not read anything in his eyes' movements over her body, his positioning of her, roughly, in the poses of his liking. She could endure his gaze under this pretense, her hips and mouth prodded to assume falsely, awkwardly, the expression of seduction. Later, the engineer tried to persuade her to attend a trade show with them in Boston and hand out brochures, offering to pay her hotel room, her traveling expenses. But the office manager intervened, pointing out that she was a minor, and Celie had taken her aside. "Don't go," she'd said, grimacing. "I wouldn't if I were you," fully convinced of Lily's ignorance concerning the engineers in their suits, their thick waists and formality, their other uses for her they were not telling. The engineer improvised with a photo made into a life-sized cut-out to stand alongside their display—Lily in a sailor's hat, a hand placed on her outthrust hip, her look conveying a disarming innocence.

Matthew had been in the shop during the shoot. They took the photos once everyone left for the day, and he stayed under the pretense of working late, suspicious of the engineer's intentions from the first. Later, he drew a scathing caricature of the Russian holding his camera, his over-sized head stern, his one exposed eye, sly and

lascivious. During the summer inventory, Matthew would draw a whole series of his characters. They were heroes from fantasy stories, men and women who had survived the last battle on earth, who lived to fight a latex-suited foe from space, or mutant animals, lion-mouthed, vulture-winged, left to inhabit earth's dark recesses. The human survivors wore only remnants of their old clothing. Their near-naked bodies swirled in motion, spun on muscled calves, swung weapons that looked cumbersome and medieval. Their faces tightened in anger or horror or pain. Their eyes glared or softened or filled with tears. Matthew would bring the drawings to her, shyly, when the others weren't around. Lily had never seen anything so beautiful emerge from a pencil on paper before. She held the drawings in her hands and her hands shook. The characters looked back at her from the tumult of their movements, frozen in the midst of their unfolding stories.

She wouldn't say much. She would hand them back and look at him and smile, and she could see he knew what she felt, that she believed his ability was a gift, something that resided in some self other than the one maneuvering a forklift, stacking castings on wooden pallets, searching out one hundred and five Casing-In bolts. His caricatures of all of them brought out their beauty, the small defect in each of their personalities—Orlando's simpering, his debonair nose, Tish's crossed eyes and self-deprecating smile, Geri's horsy face, its lack of imagination, Jamie's rakishness, a Camel hanging from his bottom lip. Of herself, Lily could only sense a kind of tragic weakness, her eyes too wide, too seemingly childlike, and she believed he had gotten her wrong. He would not draw any others of her, only real sketches he would not show her until later, near the end of the summer.

The days in the shop stretched endless as the sheaves of printouts. Orlando was the only one who could describe the parts they sought, their size and shape, what to actually look for in the narrow bins. But once the notes started they grew weary of consulting him, and they counted anything, their hands oily from the screws' threads, gray with dust from the castings piled up on the floor, their part numbers raised metal that no one, in the dim lighting, could truly read. If it looked like a lever arm, Jamie said, then it was the lever arm on the list. The notes, unsigned, unmentioned would become the mystery that kept them searching in the bins of parts. Lily wrote confessions of desire and Jamie placed the notes in bins on everyone's list. *Yesterday, I couldn't breathe, watching you, and, I want, more than anything right now, to taste your mouth.* There was a certain stealth required, a cruel urge to unsettle and disconcert. Tish had come in each morning, primly, in a different colored sleeveless blouse, carrying her canvas tote bag. Her father wanted her to learn the value of hard work, she had told them, crossing her brown eyes. She would leave each afternoon, her face shining, her blouse ringed with sweat under her arms. Now she wore lipgloss, which she reapplied every hour or so, her thin lips glimmering and suddenly soft. Orlando grew a small, slim mustache and wore sleeveless tank tops. Geri arrived one morning in a halter, her breasts pressing the V of the front, spilling out over the edge of the fabric. Jamie leaned back in his chair, ecstatic.

Only Matthew seemed unchanged. He still gave her his quiet, thoughtful glances. He still waited for her in the mornings outside the ladies room, his back pressing the brick wall, his arms folded patiently across his chest. He drew her when she least expected it. He would need only one or two quick looks, and those he would take while

she was busy, unaware. Once in a while, she would catch him, and they would meet each other's expression without knowing what their own reflected, hers sorrowful and lost, his fueled with love.

Sometimes, Celie would come to the shop to check on things. She wore bright floral skirts and high heels and dangling earrings. She seemed uncomfortable in the dark shop, as if she might become soiled. She would stop in at shipping with her stack of paperwork, and then head to the other end of the shop, where the parts were kept, and the six of them would take off into the maze of shelves, pretending to look busy. Orlando had the best performance. He would hold the printout like a book in his arms, and thumb through it. He kept a pencil behind his ear, and always seemed to appear from around a shelf, at the appropriate moment to report in to her.

“We've got all the Rounder Backer parts accounted for,” he'd say.

Celie would smile at him, making a special effort. Her earrings shook and made a sound like small bells. “Wow!” she'd say, shaking her head. “Good.”

Orlando had applied as a draftsman just out of trade school. The summer inventory was the only job open, but they had emphasized there was potential to learn, and the possibility of a later position. In the beginning, Orlando worked to entrench himself. He brought the engineers samples from his family's bakery. He made a round of the front offices daily, presenting himself, an affable employee. Lily begged the driving lessons from him. She knew he would have to steal time from the company he was trying so desperately to join, that he did not want to do it. But she saw, too, that summer there was something about her that no one could refuse. Matthew wheeled the big ladders

around for her. Tish brought her the watermelon candy. Matthew and Orlando, finally, unbolted the green vinyl couch from the break room's linoleum floor. They carried it to the back wall of the shop, beneath the high row of windows, hidden away behind the last aisle of shelving. They said it was for everyone to take turns. Jamie offered to double up with Geri. But they relinquished it to Lily, who fell asleep every afternoon, her eyelids heavy, her limbs lifeless, her body drawn under invisible tidewater.

A few days a week, after lunch, Orlando let her drive in circles around the empty back lot where the machinists used to park. Orlando gripped the door handle when the car jerked and stalled. Sometimes, he cried out in Portuguese, and put his hand over his heart when her foot confused the clutch and the brake, and she came too close to the shop's brick wall. Lily liked the smell of his car, the afternoon sun warming up a mixture of talcum powder, and the baked crust of the bread he'd brought in that morning. She liked the way she could confuse him, how in the little car with her he stammered, no longer the expert.

All day, Lily ate the watermelon candies, placing them one after another into her mouth, letting them dissolve on her tongue, and wrote about what hands would feel like on someone's chest, sliding up a smooth stomach, riding down below the curve of a waist, the rise of hips, the warm, damp place between legs. She felt her body surge and slip into some region of wakefulness, a kind of knowing that mixed with the smell of the oiled parts, the paper and ink of the computer printouts, the artificial watermelon, the plywood counter where she piled the candy's cellophane wrappers.

Tish believed that Matthew had penned her notes. She came to Lily with them all smoothed out and pressed together, in a kind of order.

“Look at these,” she said.

Lily looked. She already knew what messages they held. She had, she realized intended her to believe that Matthew had written them. She had mentioned his large Catholic family, the three sisters, the four brothers, the nieces and nephews, the value he placed on their closeness, the uncreased and simple sacrifice. Lily had thought they would make a nice couple. She had wanted Tish to pursue and capture him, to spare him from herself. In Matthew’s notes she had written things she believed Tish might reveal. Her respect for her father’s stringent rules, her mother’s alcoholism, her loss, at fifteen, of a boyfriend to leukemia. Some of these were things Lily had learned. Others, she had made up. She held the scraps of paper in her hands, and saw, through the disguised handwriting, the thoughtlessness with which she allowed the notes to lead lives of their own, assume their own history, their stories stretching out to contain moments that had not even happened yet.

“What should I do?” Tish asked. Her small lips trembled.

Lily shrugged, wordless with regret. The notes were unanswerable, their messages misconstrued. Already, Jamie had tried to approach Geri and been rebuffed. Now, sitting at the top of her tall ladder, twirling her hair, Geri looked down at Orlando’s head bent counting over a bin, with a wistful longing. Orlando thought his notes came from Tish. He confided in Jamie and raised an eyebrow, and ran his tongue over his lips. “I can taste that gloss,” he said.

Jamie became surly. "I'm done with this," he said. They stopped writing and hiding the notes. He sulked for three days, refusing to count anything, smoking his cigarettes and dropping his fist down on the counter top. Soon, the spell of the notes faded and was replaced with Jamie's irritableness. No one had the nerve to approach anyone else. No one knew how to feed all their wanting. Lily felt responsible, her own body, she believed, immune. But then she fell asleep late one afternoon on the green couch, and when she woke she could tell, from the slant of light, the way it colored the grimy brick, the gray metal shelves, that it was later than she'd ever slept. Matthew was there, near the top of one of the rolling ladders.

"I didn't want to wake you," he said. His voice floated from above her, resonant and strange. She knew the shop was empty, that everyone had gone.

"What time is it?" she asked. She imagined her mother waiting outside in the parking lot to pick her up, her exasperation, her refusal to go inside and inquire, the easy assumption that Lily had left with someone else. Now, she imagined her parents sat at the dining table, silent and still assuming that Lily was with a friend, or at the mall, or any number of places that Lily had invented in the past to appease them. Their cutlery clanked against the china. Her father glanced up occasionally as if to speak. In the flickering crystals of the chandelier, in the polished handles of the silver, the colors of the room bled, the magenta of her mother's blouse, her father's Kelly green golf shirt, the still brilliant but wilting centerpiece of flowers, all of it tinged with presentiment.

"I can give you a ride home," Matthew said. He descended the ladder. She slid over on the couch, and motioned for him to sit beside her. He hesitated, then dropped

onto the vinyl cushion, casually, looking away. He let his hands rest on his thighs. She stared at the curve of his neck, his cheek. He would not turn to face her.

“Don’t do that,” he said, barely a whisper.

Lily could see the twilight slipping through the narrow windows, its sifted particles converging. She felt the air in the shop like a presence on her skin. She rose up onto her knees. She turned his face toward her with her hands. He was caught there, and resigned, he allowed her to look at him. His face stayed impassive. His eyes confounded her, like those of his characters. She slid her hands down his shoulders. She felt the tops of his arms, their hardened muscles. Her hands came to rest on his.

“Why didn’t you write to me as you?” he asked.

She felt a conflagration of loss. She felt consumed.

He did not know, exactly, what to do with her. But he had a restless sense of what he needed, and how to get it. His mouth was soft and clumsy. His hands, large-knuckled, tentative, touched her face, her eyes and mouth, her nose and ears. They smelled of the oil from the bins. They settled on her body like a blessing. She felt the ache in her rise to the surface of his fingers. She had, she admitted, allowed herself to imagine this. She had even created the story of what might come after, his large family ready to take her in, to tend to her, to accept her body and its child as his. She saw bureau drawers layered with tiny, pastel-colored clothes, lamplight in an attic room, a window looking out into the ruffling dusk of waving leaves. She saw herself relent to this unfolding, her loneliness purged in soft breath and fine hair and the lulling scent of milk. But lying with him on the vinyl cushion, their hipbones pressed together, his need released, his love at her disposal,

she felt only the betrayal, keen-edged, merciless, and knew nothing in her grasp would ever ward against loss.

She did not finish out the summer. He would never know how her body swelled, or didn't. Her breasts filled, or not. She kept only one of his drawings, that of herself just awakened on the couch. He drew it that day from above, on the ladder. In it, the twilight is a color on the brick. The vinyl couch casts its own darker shadow. Her legs are folded, one on top of the other. She looks up. In her eyes he has placed a perfect, earnest love. She leans on one arm and the other curves in a motion of possession over her abdomen. Everything, then, still part of the story.

## THE LIVING ROOM SHOW

The living room shows were rumored to have started on New Year's Eve a year ago. They took place in Doug Brannon's Spanish Mediterranean, in the bowling alley-like living room that held little more than a fireplace at one end, and a pair of long, moss green couches arranged in an L at the other. The band set up in front of the fireplace. They placed two mounted speakers on either side, and Doug and the other guitar players set up their amps, and brought in an array of guitars on chrome stands. The drummer, J.B. Levine, placed his red sparkle Ludwig kit in the middle of it all, and whenever enough people had arrived, or the band members grew bored milling around, or it was just late enough and everyone was drunk enough, they would play.

Margaret Carr told us about the shows, and after accompanying her to one they became a monthly part of our social routine. Margaret is one of my husband John Rushing's old friends, a divorced woman with no children, whose own Mediterranean, acquired in the divorce settlement, was just beginning to fall into disrepair. The awning in the front had torn, and the pool deck was cracked and discolored with mildew. There were porch lights with broken glass, and a lichen-colored run-off from the roof streaking the exterior of the house. The night of the living room shows was always a Saturday, and it would always start with drinks at Margaret Carr's. We'd sit out by the pool under the frangipani and the fifty-foot high cluster of bamboo and have various Martinis stolen from the menu of one of the newer restaurants. She served them in over-sized plastic

Martini glasses tinted different hues, and the success or disaster of the evening was something I associated with the color of my glass.

The night of the last show, a chartreuse night, took place in early April, and the air was thick with blooming jasmine and tangerines rotting in the grass. A cat was in heat somewhere in the lush overgrowth of Margaret Carr's landscaping, and John decided to have an argument with Margaret Carr's new boyfriend, Manuel, about his mint '85 Corvette. He made an unkind comment, something like, "What would make you want to collect a car like that?" and Manuel, believing the question to be in earnest, began detailing all of the car's special features. He was in his twenties, with dark eyes and a wide mouth and a chiseled torso that strained against the front of his cotton shirt. John gave him one of his looks, part disdain and part feigned shock, and he waved his hand and turned away from him in his chair to ask Margaret where she found him.

"Behind the register at your hair salon? Handing out towels in the country club?"

Margaret flushed, because as usual John was close enough to the truth to make her uncomfortable, and she had told me earlier she met Manuel in the country club entryway, where he was waiting with an application for a waiter position at The Nineteenth Hole. At this point Manuel realized his error and jumped up in anger, and John stayed in his chair with his legs crossed, his pants perfectly creased, sipping from his Martini glass. Margaret stood quickly, and placed her hand on the front of Manuel's shirt, and whispered something in his ear and led him off into the house. Through the open door I could hear her mules clacking on the Saltillo tile, and Manuel's voice, its urgent pitch, fading into the house's depths.

We left for Doug Brannon's around ten-thirty, following Margaret with Manuel in his Corvette. The Mediterranean faced a four-lane street and its grounds, separated from the same street by an ivy-covered wall, took up nearly a city block. The driveway was in the back, and the parking extended to the narrow streets behind the house, where the cars queued up along the curb and snaked through a neighborhood of tiny bungalows and cement block homes. Everyone went in up the driveway, through the back kitchen entrance, and on this night we parked behind a sizable line of cars, and joined a group heading down the sidewalk. We passed the hedge of gardenia and the two Magnolia trees flanking the driveway, and the darkness was balmy, scented with their flowers, tinged with a nervous excitement that took over everyone as we entered the kitchen.

Doug Brannon's house was built in the twenties of terracotta block covered with heavy stucco. From the outside it was an imposing two-story structure with an arched portico and an odd carved relief of a ship at sea over one of the windows. The flat, pebbled roof could be accessed from a doorway in one of the upper bedrooms, and it created a porch along the front of the house, where bougainvillea climbed and shed its fuchsia petals all over the front walk. Guests would not see this, approaching at night from the back. Inside, they would remember the plaster walls, painted colors like saffron and squash and clay, and the high ceilings and oak floors, and the living room itself, which was forty feet long and lit by a large crystal chandelier dimmed by a switch near the door. On one wall three arches led to the kitchen, the dining room, and a small alcove, and on the other a bank of windows faced the four-lane street and a major intersection

with a light, where the waiting cars, if they had their windows down, would be able to hear the living room show going on.

In the kitchen, people left their bottles of Jack Daniels and Absolut and Sapphire gin, their mixers, unloaded beer into a few coolers of ice on the floor. You didn't know who was there until you went into the living room itself, where the amps were set up, and the guitars waited shining on their stands, and everyone gathered in clusters, or claimed spots on the couches, or if it was crowded, moved into the adjoining room that held a large screened television that I imagined Doug watched when he was alone, but on the nights of the shows was never on.

I left John Rushing in the kitchen mixing his drink, and Margaret taking Manuel through the butler door to the dining room on a tour of the house. I stepped up onto the stair landing, and down again, through the archway into the living room that shimmered with people, the chandelier light glinting in the glasses in their hands, off the bottles of beer, the watches and bracelets at their wrists. The stereo music played, and the men's voices were laughing and loud, the women in their circles more calculative, their murmurs focused on lipstick shades, and the attractiveness of shoes. I recognized nearly everyone there, having seen them at the grocery store, or waiting for a table at Bella's, or take-out at the Thai Palace. I knew a few from the afternoon pick up line at St. Johns' school, saw others at one time or another in the mall parking lot, sliding in or out of their new Navigators, their BMW convertibles.

I didn't have a drink because I knew John Rushing would bring me one, and I stood by the arched entry waiting for him, when Alicia Hardcastle came up beside me

and clung to my arm. The wine in her glass sloshed out onto the wood floor. She wore a sundress and sandals with high, spiky heels, which she tottered in, still clinging to me. I didn't know Alicia well, but when we drank together at fundraisers and private dinners we would become friends for the evening. She had wispy blond hair that always seemed to fall into her face, and small, tanned freckled shoulders. Her husband, Guy, was new to John Rushing's firm, a young attorney with longish hair the color of his wife's, and a kind, gentle manner the others imitated behind his back.

"Listen," she said. She slid her arm around my shoulders and whispered in my ear. "I want to have sex with Doug Brannon."

I looked at her, and widened my eyes.

Alicia bit her lip and appeared desperate and at a loss. "Tonight," she said.

We both looked over at Doug Brannon's microphone, at his aquamarine guitar on its stand, and Doug Brannon himself stepped out from the shadows of the dining room archway, moved past the cables and leaned forward toward the mike.

"Hey," he said, his voice throaty and amplified. "What about it? Are we ready?" He wore a gray silk shirt and his arms hung loosely by his side. He had sideburns and shaggy hair, like a boy. His eyes, even in the shadowy room, shone bright and blue. Around him, the other band members appeared and stepped into place, dipped their heads under guitar straps, and made noises on the strings.

"Oh God," Alicia said.

John Rushing came up beside me and handed me a glass, its sides wet from the ice, then moved past me without saying a word. I watched him disappear into the crowd

in the adjoining room, where he would probably continue on through the French doors that led to the courtyard, where a fountain ran, and garden torches gave off a bluish, smoky light, and everyone sat in folding chairs or gathered in groups with cigarettes. Alicia still held onto my arm. She brought her wine glass up to her mouth and took a large swallow, her eyes on Doug Brannon, tuning up his guitar.

It was not difficult to find someone you wanted at the living room shows. Once you walked into the house and the band began to play, the rules changed. I cannot say why, or how everyone knew it, but the air became charged, the music absorbed into the plaster walls, into the planks of the floor. It followed you outside into the courtyard and beyond, to the pool, where it became a steady, unnamed urge in your body. Now, as Doug Brannon leaned into the microphone, and the drummer counted out the first song, everyone's head, men and women, swiveled in that direction.

They were all there for the band. The men shed their suits for faded jeans or khaki shorts and topsiders. They pretended they were young again, with no children or responsibilities, and they eyed the women and joked and bobbed their heads to the music. After the band finished a set the men would call one of the members over and invite them into their groups and tell them they should put out a CD, that their cousin worked at MCA records, that they might know of a backer to help them get started. They offered them cigarettes out in the courtyard, brought drinks around from their stock in the kitchen. The band would stand within these groups, with someone's arm draped over their shoulder, and grin awkwardly, even Doug Brannon, whose acquisition of the house

was always the object of speculation, who was asked at every show its square footage, how many bedrooms?

The band was more at ease with the women. They dropped their guard and their smiles grew sly. We leaned our bodies into them, grabbed their hands and pulled them down onto the couches, tugged them into corners—the living room alcove, the dining room, where the only light came in from the streetlights outside. Cornered by us, the band was always ready to be taken, but only a few of us actually knew the places to suggest. It was not just the band members we ended up with. The other husbands there were potential objects of desire as well, though that was much more tricky, and didn't occur until near the end of the night, when you lost track of who you came with, when the rooms blurred and you couldn't remember how you got outside.

Margaret Carr and I knew more about the house than anyone else. Knowing the house was like learning Doug Brannon. The rooms downstairs were open and public, where nothing could really happen except whispered exchanges, or hands lingering in places unnoticed in the cover of the crowd. Margaret Carr found the library, a small room with a couch off the dining room, on the ground floor but private enough because of a narrow French door that kept it separate from the rest of the house. There were ceiling-high shelves of Doug Brannon's books, Pascal and Bertrand Russell, Kafka's *The Castle*, a collection of Chekov's stories, Kerouac's *On the Road*, a set of Shakespeare, and a copy of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* with its original cover. There were the thick American and British Literature anthologies, a survey of Medieval History, books required by the local college for courses Doug must have taken. Scattered in with these I

found glossy, hardback books on boats and Arnold Palmer that were probably gifts, and romance paperbacks from the supermarket, which I imagined were left by the women who spent a weekend with Doug Brannon out by his pool. Sometimes a book would be left on the end table by the lamp—*T.S. Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays*, and I liked to sit on the library couch with my drink and read the last page Doug Brannon read, marked with the book flap. Margaret Carr liked to take men into the library in the beginning of the night, when they had just had a few drinks, and she wanted to know how their mouths felt on hers, decide if she wanted anything else to do with them later.

The most private room downstairs was the laundry room that led from the downstairs bath at the foot of the stairs. Most people thought it was a closet, with its simple painted door. Once, on a periwinkle Martini glass night, I took the drummer, J.B., into the laundry room, and even he hadn't known it was there. We set our drinks on top of the dryer, and he pressed me up against the wall to kiss me, his hands roaming under my clothes. J.B. is funny and friendly and wears madras shirts, and is more unlike John Rushing than any man I have ever met. But even now, as he winked, and waved a stick in my direction, I remembered little else of the night except the smell of laundry detergent, and thinking that up close, that would be the smell of Doug Brannon's T-shirts, his khaki pants.

On another night, or maybe the same one, J.B. took me out to the poolroom. This was through the courtyard gate, a part of the house connected to the garage, with its own set of French doors and an awning covered with jasmine, and pots of geraniums on the cement step. At the doors, J.B. produced a key. Inside, amidst the jumble of band

equipment—a drum kit and amps and mike stands and cables coiled on the floor, and overturned ashtrays and rows of empty beer cans, he found a couch. The poolroom was dark and silent, and you could pretend no one was outside, treading the grass by the door, or beyond the screened enclosure, lounging in the chaises by the pool. You could lie down and spread out and take off clothing you may or may not find afterwards.

The upstairs was one of the most convenient places to go, but also the least secretive. Almost anyone would see you climbing the stairs off the pass-through archway between the kitchen and the living room, and though there were bathrooms up there it was evident where you were headed with some else's wife or husband. Only two of the bedrooms were furnished, if that mattered to you at all. The stereo music would boom up through the floor, or the band's music, if you were with someone other than the band, which might be something to experience, if you were lying down on the bare heart of pine floorboards.

I had only been upstairs once, the time I followed John Rushing, who had Margaret Carr by the hand. They went into the guest bedroom, which held two twin beds and a bureau, and had the bare, impersonal tone of a motel room, except for the door to the roof, and the set of long casement windows that faced east and looked out over the pool. I am not sure why I followed them. Maybe I had to see for myself, to watch them together out of curiosity. At the time, I believe I wanted them to know I knew, as if that would make me part of their secret. But we are almost always wrong about what we want.

As the band began to play on the night of the last show, and Alicia Hardcastle held onto my arm, I wondered what she wanted from Doug Brannon. She might have heard from the other wives that he would be seen occasionally playing golf at the club, that from their tables at the Nineteenth Hole they would watch him and not recognize him at first. She would hear he went to Little Monkey's coffee shop with his paper, picked up his cleaning from Morris Fonte, worked during the day from his house, though no one, really, knew what he did. Outside of his house he could easily be mistaken for the boy in wrinkled khaki pants, ordering his girlfriend a Colosso at the Dairy Joy, and once he stepped from behind the microphone at the living room shows he could mingle with the crowd and safely be overlooked. I could have warned her Doug Brannon knew how to slip in and out of an embrace and leave you untouched by the end of the night. But singing with the band in front of his fireplace, with the guitars' melody reverberating through the room, and the bass coming up through the floor, he handed you something, like a gift you could not resist—part song, part himself.

Doug's band played its own songs. Occasionally, near the end of the night, they might do a request of another artist's music, but this was rare. The band's music was so good that no one cared, a kind of sixties, psychedelic rock, with melodies that followed jangly guitars, and lyrics inspired by the library's holdings, Kerouac, and *Pensee*, and Eliot's "Quartets." There were bars and clubs where you could hear "Stranglehold," or Rolling Stones covers, where the front man could pace a stage and pretend to be a rock star. On the night of the last show the band started up and the music invaded conversations. The people in the courtyard, John Rushing among them, moved back into

the house and filled the space in the living room, bringing the smell of the oil from the torches, the jasmine, their cigarettes. It was so loud no one could speak. They pressed in close and Doug Brannon sang, and Alicia's eyes were on him again.

"I just love him," she said into my ear, and I knew she would find him that night in the crowd and grab hold of his gray silk shirtsleeve and tell him this, that he would smile at her and shake his head, his eyes slit with doubt. It would be somewhere dark and advantageous for her to whisper in his ear, to slide her lips along the curve of his neck and taste his skin. Her husband Guy stepped up beside us, and his arm fell comfortably across Alicia's freckled shoulders, and I moved off into the crowd, where everyone's cologne mingled, and I could smell the lime in their drinks, where I did not have to think about Alicia's misguided love for Doug Brannon.

After a while, I decided to look for Margaret. I wanted to tell her about Alicia, knowing the story was one she would appreciate, and I found her out at the pool in a chaise with Manuel. They were sipping from one of her Martini glasses, brought along with her in the car. No one was outside at the time, and it was a warm, spring night, and the potted tropical plants waved in the breeze and the smell of orange blossom came from across the fence in the neighbor's yard.

"Look who's here," Margaret said. She raised her eyebrows at me. Her blouse was all the way unbuttoned, and her feet were bare.

"You know Alicia Hardcastle," I said.

"Why, should I?" Margaret asked.

Manuel looked up at me, drunk, his wide brown eyes glazed, and placed his hand on my bare leg. I stood there and suddenly did not want to say anything. Manuel slid his hand up under my dress, and I stepped back and stared at them both on the chaise.

“Well?” Margaret asked.

And I knew then that Margaret had planned for me to have Manuel. She smiled and winked, her eyes lonely and full of the masked guilt that kept her seeking ways for me to pay back John Rushing, as if I still believed being unfaithful would hurt him. I glanced down at Manuel, the comb marks etched in his hair gel, his white shirt front stretched across his chest, and I felt the emptiness of the four martinis, the carved out place the vodka inhabited, vast and sorrowful. So I shook my head and turned from them, pretending to need another drink. I walked back across the lawn, through the gathered people in the courtyard, with Margaret calling me back, and Manuel piping in, “I’m sorry,” as if that had anything to do with it. The band had stopped playing, and I watched the groups of people for Alicia and Doug Brannon and I didn’t see them, and I realized that he had given in to her, maybe her eyes, her admission of love. He had taken her somewhere, though I did not know where until later, when I saw Guy Hardscastle coming down the stairs.

He was pale, and expressionless. His sandy blond hair covered his eyes. I assumed he had seen them go up, or someone else had seen them. I imagined it might have been John Rushing, who approached by Guy looking for his wife had not been able to resist. He would have pulled him aside, and spared nothing, and Guy would not have believed him.

“Go look for yourself, then,” John would have said, dismissing him, moving off to a group of friends to tell the story, just as I had.

And Guy had gone up the stairs to the first door, which was the guest room, and not found anything. Perhaps he heard her voice, that certain quality it held during sex, soft and full of secrets, or something else that moved him forward to the door that led to Doug Brannon’s room. The hall light was off, and he could have opened the door and they might not have seen him standing there, watching them. No one followed him down. He came furtively, clutching the banister, and brushed past me heading into the living room to mingle with the others.

And eventually the band started back up for one last set. It had to have been near two AM. I had seen Alicia come down, carrying her shoes, but I had not waited to see Doug round the stair landing. Guy Hardcastle, whose face remained white, who held a glass of iced-down scotch, stood in a small group of people he did not know in the TV room, and nodded at things they said, his eyes underneath his blond hair scanning the crowd for Alicia. As the band began to play she went right up to him, her dress ruffled, smelling, probably, of the palms of Doug’s hands. Guy looked down at her and asked her a question. I never found out what it was. The music and Doug Brannon’s voice filled the rooms, spilled out into the courtyard and drifted up past the billows of cigarette smoke, and Guy turned from Alicia and put his fist through one of the French door panes. If you didn’t see it happen, you wouldn’t have known anything had, and because of the crowd, and the music, no one reacted, except one or two people out in the courtyard, whose faces exaggerated shock, and who moved through the doorway and walked off, laughing.

Most had already headed into the living room once the band began, but there were a few who had lingered, who noticed the blood, and Alicia bending over him, trying to squelch it with the bottom of Guy's shirt. I stood near the back of the group that slowly gathered around Guy, who decided to take him out into the courtyard because he was making a mess, the blood pooling and seeping into the cracks of the wood floor. Outside, in the light of the garden torches, Guy's face appeared ghostly. There was some confusion about what to do, with Guy assuring everyone he was fine, and trying to walk away, and Alicia pulling him back. At some point he must have weakened and sat down, and I noticed, before I went back inside, that several people had cell phones out to call the paramedics, but no one among them knew the address. They all had operators on the line, telling them different things—"Doug Brannon's house," someone said. "The Spanish Mediterranean on the corner of—what was it?"

I looked at Guy's face, the hopelessness in it, and imagined what he must have seen in Doug Brannon's bedroom. The casement windows would have been opened, and he may have even felt the night air from where he stood at the door with the bed in full view. He may have watched for a while, the lights around the roofline shining in and lighting up their clothes on the floor, their bodies moving on the bed, their faces and the expressions on them. It had been winter when I had followed Margaret and John up to the guest room. The windows had been closed, and the room was filled with the scent of Margaret's perfume. That time, the hallway light had been on, and I had opened the door and seen them clearly—John holding her back on the bed, looking like the posed and passionate movie stars in old films. Margaret had lifted her head off the bed and squinted

into the glare of the hall light without recognition, but John turned and saw me and gave me his look of irritation and told me to shut the door.

I do not know what my face had registered. I shut the door and moved on to the next door, which was Doug Brannon's room, and gone inside and lay down on Doug Brannon's bed. The band played downstairs, and gradually my eyes adjusted to the roofline lighting and I could see the bureau top littered with things—scraps of paper with song lyrics, matchbooks from different bars, golf tees, and a photo of Doug and two other people who may have been his brother and sister, who may have been anyone, standing on a pebbled driveway, their shoulders touching. Behind them was an old, restored truck, its paint job shining in the sun, and behind that an ivy-covered house with mountains rising up around it, shrouded in mist. Doug's face looked out of the photograph at the person holding the camera, or at someone else beyond that, with his blue eyes and the same expression he wore when he performed in his living room, and glanced up and caught you looking at him.

Now, downstairs the music filled everything. Margaret Carr sat on one of the couches, her shirt only half-buttoned. Her eyelids were heavy, and every so often she would nod off. Beside her a woman had passed out sitting upright, her head tipped at an awkward angle. I stood in the alcove beside Manuel and he took my hand, and I didn't say anything because it was two or three drinks later, and his hand felt warm and callused at the creases, and his shoulder smelled like starch, and John Rushing had moved in beside Margaret on the couch, and she was laughing and looking around the room for

something, maybe us together in the alcove, maybe the small group gathered around Guy in the courtyard.

The bass thudded up and down the plaster walls, the crystals on the chandelier shook, and somewhere the ambulance maneuvered between rows of cars parked on the narrow neighborhood streets, while Guy Hardcastle bled onto the courtyard tiles, and Alicia knelt beside him, her hand over her mouth, disbelieving the amount of blood, the whiteness of his skin. I would never know what it had been like, if what she wanted from Doug Brannon could be found in a night. What we did—that groping under clothing in the laundry room, those hands, cold from clutching iced glasses, finding skin on the poolroom couch, was not the sex she expected from him, had nothing, really, to do with love.

Manuel threaded his fingers in mine. As I stood there I didn't know it would be the last living room show, and I watched Doug sing, the rueful chandelier light moving across his face, his voice straining with the longing that shifted everyone's mood, their heads turning, eyes riveted. Now, I realize that the Doug Brannon I had tried to picture, the one with the women out at the pool, the one whose golf clubs leaned against a wall in the garage, who had read Eliot, whose ashtray in the poolroom overflowed with cigarette butts, whose aquamarine guitar was just then slung across hips, had a life beyond one I could ever imagine, filled with his own loss and sadness, the spikes of happiness and endless regret, things of his that I will never come to know. But that night, I watched him sing with the force of the band behind him, felt the song on his voice move through me

and break my heart. And I have to believe you did not need to taste his skin to have what you wanted from him.

## THE ROPEWALK

I never named my daughter. She lives with her father on the coast of another state where it snows, and the snow melts as it lands on the salt marsh, on the brackish still water of North Cove, on the gambrel roof of the house we bought together. When she was born I handed her over, a small bundle weighted with sleep. I remember only a red, wrinkled fist, the smell of milk on my blouse. Now, she may have a new mother whose hands smooth down hair I imagine is my husband's color. She has my grandmother's eyes and smells of the Lily of the Valley that grows, secretly, behind the hedges at the front of the house. She goes out in the dinghy with her father and he tells her the stories of the sea captain's houses—Pratt, Hayden, Bull, and Starkey—of the square riggers and schooners that came to the Essex port, their cargos of ivory and silk, sandalwood and teak. He tells her about the drawbridge and the road through the great meadow. They will take the dirt path and have picnics on the big rock overlooking the river. Her hair is long, to her waist. She writes her name on the rock with a small stone shining with mica. I am filled with longing for this other life, but who knows what I would have longed for if I'd lived it?

Where I work the patrons come in for draft beer and wait for someone to single them out for a game of darts, or pool. It might be a weekday, or a weekend afternoon, the heat and the sun slipping in through the door with them, the humidity curling the posters tacked to the walls—*Thursdays, Ladies 2 for 1, Dollar Draft Friday Nights*. It might be

the dinner hour, when only a block away people are waiting for a table in the new French Vietnamese restaurant, or sitting down in dining rooms with wives or husbands and children and cloth napkins in their laps. Here in the bar they light up a cigarette and wedge it into the notch in the plastic ashtray and let it burn down, forgetting. They switch to bourbon when it grows dark. They tell me about the women they love, the men they despise, casually, as if it is the most normal thing in the world to love anyone that obsessively, to plot the ruin of someone who has hurt them. They twist the truth to invoke sympathy, or to hide from me their dire need. They are desperate people and they do not know it.

The owner of the Tap Tavern approached me eight years ago and offered me the job. He sat down next to me on a bench in the neighborhood park, newly landscaped with palms and Bird of Paradise and Caladium, its life-sized concrete lions spitting water, and children running through it barefoot, their nannies holding tiny socks and shoes. I felt out of place in my clothes from the evening before. He was a stranger, and I ignored him. It was a December afternoon, with a breeze. There is a sculpture in the park made entirely of keys, thousands of them strung on thin, dangling wires that I could hear from my apartment's balcony, and we heard it then, sitting there on the bench. He cocked his head, listening. "Imagine every one of those keys deprived of their tumblers," he said. I looked at him, surprised. I may have smiled, thinking about what he said. He took my hand then, and introduced himself. He had damp palms and wore jeans with bleach stains. A full white beard covered his chin. He held my hand in his endearingly, and squinted at me in the warm winter sun. I remember his hand shook with tremors, and I thought he was a

gentle old man who had mistaken me for someone else, or a lonely person seeking solace in conversation. He is none of these things.

His name is Dr. Chambley. At one time, he practiced veterinary medicine. He still retains the manner of treating people calmly, as if they, like his animal patients, held the potential of sudden revolt with nails and teeth. Now he is an alcoholic who imagines himself a poet. He bought the Tap Tavern two days before he saw me on the park bench. He had noticed my silk Prada pumps, the way my slit skirt showed my thighs. His plea for me to tend bar was initially a pick up line, an elaborate one that had me standing that evening in my heels and skirt, pouring draft beer, while he posed as my first customer. He sipped from his frosted glass and told me I looked like the woman in *The Bar at the Folies-Bergere*. The wet glass left water droplets on his beard. He had changed to one of the Brooks Brothers shirts that hung in the small back room, still wrapped in the dry cleaner's blue plastic. I had my own drink beside the well, and I thought the game was slick of him, and I planned to play it all the way through, just to see where it would take me.

I am still here. The Tap Tavern is on a narrow brick-lined street in the heart of a neighborhood built in the twenties by wealthy citizens. The large two-and three-story bungalows had known a long period of decline. Paint chipped off wood siding, jaunty striped awnings decayed, porches with elaborate balustrades sagged, and the heart of pine floorboards, rare and expensive, succumbed to termites. During this time houses were split into apartments, and less affluent people moved in, and a few eyesores popped up, buildings that now, since the neighborhood has been so impeccably restored, everyone

pretends aren't there—a frame shop, and an accountant's office hidden by kudzu, overgrown philodendron, and wild, climbing jasmine. They remain signless, and known only to the people who have frequented them for years, and by word of mouth. The Tap Tavern is one of these, a small, windowless, concrete block building, with an old wooden screen door and an appropriate sense of the forlorn about it.

Inside the door there is no opportunity to assemble yourself to make a good impression, to peruse the crowd without being noticed. There is just the one room, twenty-five feet by fifty—pool tables to the right, bar to the left. Directly in front of you against the wall is a refrigerator, an ancient white Frigidaire that Dr. Chambley inherited from his deceased mother, and between the door and the back wall are some round tables with metal chairs. The floor is pine boards, darkened and swollen with age and spilled liquor. Ceiling fans spin the cigarette smoke overhead. Two air conditioners cool the place off, even in the winter months when the metal door is left open, and the screened door lets in the smell of the neighbor's orange blossom.

I like the odd, homey sense of the place, as if you have just walked into someone's kitchen. I like the people who come every night, and the newcomers who pop through the door expecting something else, the looks on their faces, startled, then amused. We get couples in evening clothes, tired of the party at an associate's house. There are young people, tattooed and pierced, and pale shaking ones who appear at all hours collecting their drugs. And on weekends, the men and women who work in offices, as legal assistants, as real estate agents, as secretaries and marketing experts, searching each other out, seated on the stools at the bar. Some of them, like me, live in the

apartments made from the old houses. Some live in the newer lofts and townhomes built in the empty lots left by houses that were torn down. They slide their fingers up bare thighs, play with shirt collars, flatten their hands against chests, order pitchers of drinks they teach me how to make. They keep me, conditionally, on the fringes of their lives, and I rarely see any of them outside the bar.

Darla isn't an exception. She has been coming here for two years. Her blond hair flips out at her shoulders, sixties-style. Freckles sprinkle her narrow, upturned nose. She carries herself with a dancer's torso, and I am almost certain she came from a family that taught her to smile at cashiers and cab drivers, and say, "Yes, Ma'am," to anyone older, regardless of class. She wears expensive jeans, and flimsy halter tops, and looks like she has a regular job, which I know she does not. She lives off the child support provided by her ex, the clothes leftovers from her life before. She has two children, little girls whose blond hair she must have had as a child, fine and white. I have seen the photos she pulls out late at night, when they are supposedly with their father, and she is particularly unhappy with her life.

At times, it has been during closing, and I am the only one in the bar to show them to. I try not to reveal to her the wrenching feeling I get, looking. How the photographs of her daughters chart for me the passing of unredeemable time. Other nights, a crowd will gather, kindly and respectful. "This one's Ada," she'll say, pointing her manicured finger, "And this is Lenore." At two a.m., no one can see the image too clearly. But the women will make their cooing noises, and sigh, and remark on the girls' beauty, and one of the men will say Darla looks too young to have two children, and

another will mention how much they resemble her, to which she will give a watery-eyed smile. “Don’t they?” she’ll say. She’ll fasten her look on the man, and he will know he has scored a point with her, that maybe, since the kids aren’t there, she will take him home with her. I am a little saddened that most kindnesses in a bar are calculated, that everything that happens here blooms from the alcohol. There aren’t any sudden and unplanned instances of love.

Dr. Chambley is friendly to Darla, but he keeps his distance, which surprises me sometimes, because I know his type. I often point out women he might love, and he tries to pick them up. We do not pretend to only want each other, but I choose the women half-heartedly, and when he is successful I feel a vague unease. I find someone from the bar for myself, though I still do not know if he recognizes this as retaliation. One Friday night, after Darla had left and we were ready to close up, I asked him why he didn’t go for her.

“Why should I?” he asked me back. He was zipping up the money pouch, a little unsteady on his feet. “She’s trouble.” He looked me right in the eye, the way he did before he planned to kiss me, or take a splinter of glass from my finger.

I stepped back. “She’s just like everyone else,” I said, though as I said it I realized it wasn’t true. The room was smoky, and the door was open, and I wanted to get near the air. He took my arm then, and turned me around. He gave me the look, wary and serious, of someone considering my best interests. He had lined the empty bottles up on the top of the bar, and turned off the lights and left one of the air conditioners running. Dr.

Chambley is annoyingly meticulous at times. He has to follow the same patterns every

night, counting the drawer two, sometimes three times, checking the door twice before he walks away. I am never sure if I should trust his advice, knowing these weaknesses. He still has a wife and three grown children and a membership to the country club. He lives four blocks away, in one of the renovated bungalows. He was undeserving of his wife's love, he'd said. We were in bed in my apartment at the time, on one of the first occasions we'd slept together. He told me my set of rooms was once part of a stucco villa that belonged to the man who brought the Pepsi franchise to the city. The room was dark, and the streetlight came in through the old casement window glass, and the air conditioner hummed from the other room.

“Whose love do you deserve?” I asked him. I slid my body over his, pressed my forehead to his chest.

He laughed. “No one's.”

“Why is that, do you think?”

He sighed. “Don't try to figure yourself out with my story. Go to sleep now.” But his presumption angered me. I had tried to keep my past a secret, and already he assumed he knew it. I grabbed my clothes and slammed the apartment door and dressed on the stair landing, in the light of a weak, yellow bulb, and the neighbor's cooking smells. I went down the stairs and out into the courtyard and knew that up in the room he was still in my bed, expecting me to come back, that at that moment I might choose to return to the room and tell him my story, listen to myself telling it and understand, finally, what I ever meant by my leaving, feel his mouth on mine afterwards like forgiveness. But I did not, and then he came down the stairs and got into his car and left, and I missed, instantly,

the softness of the bed, the weight of him balancing the mattress. I missed the smell of his fingers, like limes, the way they smoothed the hair from my forehead. You can miss anything, I saw. It didn't mean it made you happy.

That night after I mentioned Darla, Dr. Chambley and I stood together in the parking lot. He did not offer me a ride home, which meant that he did not want to sleep with me. It was summer, and the air was heavy. Thunder rumbled, distant and almost comforting. My apartment was only a block away, close enough for me to walk. I did not usually drive to work. Dr. Chambley always drove the four blocks back and forth to his house in an old Stingray convertible he bought after he sold his practice. On the nights I had someone waiting for me, Dr. Chambley would walk purposefully to his car, preoccupied with his keys, and he did that now, though there was no one waiting. I wished there was someone to lure into my life, to take home and wonder what he thought of me, watch his face during sex with the detachment you get watching an accident happen to someone else. The crumbled shells of the parking lot shone white and bleached in the streetlight. I dreaded the walk home, abandoned to the night's looming rain, the interminable sound of the sculpture's keys marking the empty place Dr. Chambley made when he chose not to be with me.

A few nights later, Darla came in early, at five o'clock. I felt the afternoon heat come through the door with her, smelled it clinging to her bare arms and shoulders, heady as her Guerlain. She had already been drinking. I smelled that on her, too. She put her arms around me and hugged me hello. She wore her hair plaited in two small braids. I

imagined the little girls at home with their plates of Spaghetti-O's and bread and butter, sitting in front of the television alone. She would have given them their bath, and patted them each with powder. The evening news was on the TV over the bar. Darla lit up one of her long, thin cigarettes. She offered me one, and I took it, and as she leaned in with her lighter I saw her eyes well up, and as she sat back I saw she had begun to cry.

“Beau's trying to take the girls away,” she said. She wiped under each eye with a finger to stop her mascara from running.

Beau was Darla's husband. We had never talked about him before. I just remembered the name from times she had used it in passing. “Beau took the girls to Sanibel,” she'd said. “Beau's mother is getting the girls' ears pierced today,” she told us all once with a wounded pout.

“Don't you think that's my department?”

Tonight, I made Darla her Old Fashioned and brought it over to where her cigarette burned in the ashtray, and she sat with her face in her hands. I touched one of the braids with my fingers. I knew I wouldn't have to say anything, that I could just listen to her while she had her drink, and the place would fill, and someone else would appear to tell the story to, and I would overhear it told two or three, maybe four times before she left, each telling revealing the variety of ways in which she is taken advantage. The regular patrons would all offer their advice, and some of it would be good, and some wouldn't, but none of it would matter. Darla, I assumed, would end up doing nothing, and her life would simply happen to her. Sometimes, I know, this comes as a relief, this resignation, this kind of surrender.

Years ago, I took the walking tour of the town where my husband and I bought our house. He had grown up there, and I knew no one, and he was often away on business. I was visibly pregnant, and the guide, a retired man, kept glancing back at me with a nervous smile. Our small group made its way down Pratt Street in the new spring light, beside the patches of bright grass, beneath the wheeling of gulls, and he told us the story of the old Ropewalk. It was eight hundred feet long, he said, raising his arms to show the span, a low wooden shed with small windows. Inside, the workers made rope by hand, twisting the hemp into heavy hawsers, into bell ropes and string used for kites, the room alive with ropes spun from the great wheel. They made the rope for ships in fathom lengths, drawing it through the doorway and out into the street. The guide recited Longfellow, *Human spiders spin and spin, Backward down their threads so thin*, and I remember his voice, how the sun was warm on my head and shoulders, the way the wind sounded in the elm leaves. We paused at my husband's family's house, and the guide pointed out its handsome federal style, its roof's shallow pitch, its double chimneys, its original owner who ran the block and spar business. I stood outside of the house on the sidewalk with the others, marveling.

In the end, I would not choose that life, its wealth and history like a closed wheel, but standing there at the time I did not know it yet. I felt only a small swell of uncertainty, the baby's kick, my heart's quickening. In the Tap Tavern, my hair full of smoke, and my hands smelling of spilled bourbon, I knew that the ropes were like lives stretched out infinitely into the sunlight, that it didn't matter which life you picked. The

one you didn't was yours anyway, drawn out alongside the one you lived like a possibility.

“He says I'm *incompetent*,” Darla whispered. She gave me a wide-eyed look, and bit into a piece of ice. “He thinks I'm neglecting them.”

We both knew she was neglecting them, but we maintained the pretense that she was not, that her love for them cancelled out all irresponsible actions on her part. I put on my shocked expression. I lit another cigarette. And the place filled up, and I became too busy to placate her. Dr. Chambley came in later, and she was still at the bar, and he sensed her story in the air, like the fine, silver tension before a fight. He cornered me at the back of the bar and asked me what was happening. His eyes glittered in the light from the beer sign. He wanted the satisfaction of seeing a prediction fulfilled, and I did not want to hand it over to him. But I knew he would find out from someone, and so I told him.

He watched my face with his penetrating look. Most of the time, I loved this about him. “And what will she do?” he asked me.

I shrugged. “She didn't say.”

“Because,” he said, “she doesn't have a leg to stand on.”

We had never disagreed about anyone in the bar before. It was never an issue to care about them too much. When her husband sent in someone the following night to inquire about her visits to the bar, I avoided him. I did not want to tell the truth, but Dr. Chambley was there, listening, and there were other regulars the man talked to, and it wouldn't have helped for me to lie. The man fit in, and had seemed like a new patron at

first. He wore a seersucker sports coat. His hair was thinning, and he kept flattening it with his hand. His nose was large and he was perspiring. I thought he was a drunk, a salesman, a traveler. We get those, occasionally, as if there is some kind of beacon on the place. He gave me a sad, conciliatory smile, and leaned on the bar's surface, his coat sleeve sopping up the condensation from his beer.

“She pretty wasted when she leaves?” he asked.

His upper lip shone. His eyes moved, for a moment, toward the V of my blouse.

I glared at him, and did not speak. He waited until my silence forced him to turn away. Later, Dr. Chambley pulled him aside and they talked for a long while sitting at the corner of the bar. I shoved the bottles into the well with unnecessary force. Two glasses slipped from my hands and shattered in the metal sink. I went up to a man at the bar, a regular customer with long hair pulled back, and round framed glasses. He'd been trying to take me home for weeks, and I'd always resisted. Tonight, I leaned over and kissed him on the mouth and tasted the drink I'd made him, a Manhattan. At closing, Dr. Chambley confronted me, holding my hand in his two palms.

We stood in the dark bar and the man waited for me outside in a Riviera, and I wanted to taste the bourbon on his mouth again, feel the car's vinyl seats, his hands search beneath the fabric of my blouse, under the hem of my skirt. I could take him home and watch to see if he looked at my books on the shelf, if he commented on the absence of photographs, on the bare and simple way in which I lived. Or we could do what we needed to in the car, right there in the parking lot. Afterward, I would have him drop me off, and I could pass through the courtyard and listen to the old fountain, see the basin of

rusted pennies in the moonlight, smell the gardenia, listen to the keys of the sculpture, their sound a mournful reminder of the life that I was missing. Sometimes, I wallowed in it like the sadness of a mistake.

Dr. Chambley gave me his inquisitive look. “What’s this Darla business got to do with you?” he asked.

“Nothing at all,” I said. Dr. Chambley watched me. He didn’t make a move to leave. I saw him lick his lips and glance away, befuddled for once. I had to tell him I had someone waiting in the parking lot. He still looked, hoping for some revelation.

“Do you know what I really want?” he asked. He made a careful business of folding up his shirtsleeves. He breathed in and out, emphatically. “Some honesty, for once.” His eyes were worn and dismayed. We went out the door and he went back and checked the handle, twice, and got into his Stingray. He didn’t give me a backward glance. I was left with the taillights of the Riviera, its chugging engine, its foul exhaust spilling out, my own regret at what I might always fail to give him.

Two weeks later Darla came in at nine o’clock, towing her girls. They wore matching nightgowns, long ones that came to their shins, made from batiste. They followed their mother, the oldest shy, yet alert, the youngest one half-asleep, her eyes lit with fear. Darla came up to me at the bar and gripped my forearm.

“Please,” she said. Her lined eyes were wide, the mascara smeared a little under each. The bourbon smell came through her skin’s pores. The little girls climbed up on two empty stools. I saw their small faces framed by their whitish hair. I noticed their

hands on the bar, the little fingernails, painted pink. I smelled their apple shampoo. The oldest, Ada, was seven. Lenore was five. They both looked at me, curious, expectant, their eyes replicas of their mother's, blue-green, like something sea-washed and soft. Dr. Chambley had not come in. He sometimes didn't until eleven or twelve, and Darla knew this.

“Let them stay,” she said. “Their father is coming to take them away, and I can't leave them at home.” She said this last part leaning in, as if to prevent the girls from hearing, but she did not lower her voice, and I saw they heard and already knew what was happening. They lived in a small rented house I had seen the few times Dr. Chambley and I dropped Darla off after closing. I had thought about the girls in there alone, what they would wake to in the morning, with Darla stumbling in, sometimes passing out right there in the living room on the couch, or the rug. I thought, too, about how I had served her the drinks, and I felt a small tug of complicity. But now, with the girls in front of me, their breath and skin, their sheer nightgowns, their little feet shod in flip flops, tucked on the top barstool rung, I felt my chest constrict.

The oldest, Ada, asked me for a Coke. I was surprised that she asked, but then I understood she was asserting herself with me, showing me she was grown up, that she was the one who woke her mother, and got her out of her soiled clothes, and made meals, and handled everything at home, and so I gave it to her, without a word. The youngest was silent, still frightened and somewhat pale.

“Would you like anything?” I asked her. The bar was almost full, noisy with the games of pool and darts. The air conditioners were on, but it was still smoky, and I saw her eyes begin to water.

“She’ll have a Sprite,” Ada said. Lenore nodded, and Ada placed her hand over her sister’s on the bar.

Darla, distracted, glanced around the room, looking for a regular to confide in, to seek advice, to find some kind of aid. She lit a cigarette. She met my gaze and her eyes asked me for a drink, and apologized at the same time. Darla was beautiful with a hopeless and shining desperation. She sighed. She looked at my shoes, the Prada pumps that won Dr. Chambley. “I like those,” she said, wistfully. She blew smoke out of her nose. Her lips were thin and dry. She looked at her two girls with a love so resigned I had to look away.

My husband bought the Prada pumps at Neiman’s. They were a gift, at the end of my pregnancy. The salesclerk had raised her eyebrows at the stiletto heels. The department store had been over-bright and sterile, filled with the smell of new carpeting and spray samples of perfume from the nearby fragrance counter. “For after,” my husband said, grinning, his tie loosened, his throat pale and vulnerable under his collar. The idea of the places I would have to wear them, how I would wear them to please him, overwhelmed me. I realized I had not thought beyond the pregnancy, that I could not bear to live the life he had planned for me. I did not want him anymore. It was a simple thing to recognize, this lost love, as if it had slipped underneath some hidden layer of my life

and I could not find it. And still his love persisted. I was pinioned by it, bound and helpless under the department store's fluorescent lighting.

In the Tap Tavern, Darla sipped from her drink. She picked it up and set it back down with a shaky, slender hand. Ada watched her, and then glared at me for a long time, and I saw she blamed me. She was a little girl, but her eyes were wise and sad, and I knew then that maybe a life with their father would be better for them, but it would never replace the one they would live with Darla, her attention, her lovely hands in their hair, her fearful eyes on them, needy for their honest professions of love.

Darla sat at the bar and cried. The girls were used to her crying, and they seemed almost disinterested, preoccupied with the stirrers in their glasses.

I let them stay, a mistake I can admit to now. At the time, it seemed the only thing to do. None of the other patrons minded. We put on a movie on the TV over the bar, one that was only partly appropriate, and they propped their heads in their hands and watched. The patrons coughed loudly, or placed tobacco-stained fingers over the girls' eyes when an actor swore, or during a love scene. Someone brought them bags of potato chips. Someone else gave them lollipops that stained their lips red. Lenore dribbled her Sprite down the front of her nightgown. Darla sipped her one drink, making an effort not to overdo it. And the patrons gave her advice. Some told her to give them up, that it was the only way she'd ever see them again. Darla's eyes grew puzzled. I saw that this had not ever occurred to her, that giving them up was something she could not understand and I admired her foolish resolve.

Lenore fell asleep at the bar, her head on her folded arms. I waited for Dr. Chambley, for her husband to come in and find them. I had expected he would, that they would search for them here first, but Darla confided in me that she had left a note, claiming she had taken the girls to Orlando, to her mother's.

"Just to buy time," she said.

"Where will you really go?" I asked.

Darla put her mouth to my ear. "Louisiana," she said. "To my best friend's house in Shreveport."

I was surprised that she had a plan, that she was so calculating. I thought then that she might succeed, that she would get away with keeping them despite the husband's sober authority, his judge's order. Darla looked at me and smiled, tentatively. She put her two hands out and held my face in them, a mother who knew how to administer love.

"I'm going to keep them," she said. "No matter what."

When you are alone, you become used to not being touched. You become suspicious, and learn not to relent. Maybe, you let one person take you in, like Dr. Chambley, a man of extreme patience, with practiced hands. But even then, it is only part way, only a piece of yourself you give up, your body during sex, and that is it. Darla let her hands fall. I glanced away and busied myself with stacking the glasses, with the patron at the far corner, sliding off his barstool. I would not look at Ada, whose eyes followed my movements with a silent expectation. Somewhere, in a town I fled, a child I might have known slept. She would have a bed with cotton sheets and a blanket, even now in summer. I know the smell that comes through the window screen, chilled and

sharp, the flowers beginning to fail in their blooming. I know the room where she sleeps, with its dormer window and its eastern exposure. I see the sun on her face. I see, too, her chest moving with her breathing. Her hands are still small and childish-looking, grasping the edge of the sheet. She is only eight and unburdened with worry. Her dreams tell her nothing about me. I am not even an absence to be missed. I am unremembered.

Near the end of the night, Dr. Chambley came in. He stood in the doorway and his eyes lit on me, filled with a curious disappointment. He told Darla, “No uncertain terms,” that she must go with the girls. They were both asleep by then, and one of the patrons carried Ada slung over his shoulder, her little batiste gown sliding up her skinny legs. Darla carried Lenore, her face buried in Lenore’s shoulder so I could not see it. I left the bar and the patrons and their demands, and walked them out to Darla’s car, a Mercedes she was awarded in her divorce, battered now, covered with months of dust. I cannot say what compelled me to do this. I watched them all pile in, the two girls in the back, both of them awakened, but groggy, struggling to find comfortable positions amidst the luggage stacked behind the seat. The air was warm and carried the orange blossom, and the smell of the cigarette smoke clung to our clothes. I leaned into the driver’s side. Darla’s mouth was set, a thin line, and she tried to smile to say goodbye.

“Wait,” I told her. And I turned and walked past the patrons gathering in the lot with their drink glasses, their bottles of beer, past Dr. Chambley who had now come out to witness their infraction. He raised his hand to take my arm, but I brushed past. Behind the bar I took the bills from the register drawer. All of them, a nice stack of twenties, tens, a few fifties. And I brought the money out to Darla and handed it to her. No one

made a move to stop me, not the patrons, whose mouths opened and then closed, giving me their assent. Though I knew the money meant nothing to Dr. Chambley, I expected he would object to the principle of giving it away, of aiding their escape, and I dared him to stop me, like one of the dogs in his old office, its teeth bared. Darla took the money from my hand, her own hand soft and lingering on my arm. The car idled, and I felt the air-conditioned space inside. The girls called goodbye, their small voices rising out of the darkness of the backseat. I took off the Prada pumps and tossed them into the front. And Darla grinned then, and put the car in drive.

It is not such a hard thing to imagine, the three of them moving off into another life in Louisiana, one undiscoverable and so, uninterrupted, driving into balmy nighttime down an interstate, halogen-lit, into daybreak, the girls pressed together in sleep, the unknown a soothing prospect. But I watch the taillights disappear, and knowing I cannot call them back, I think about the Ropewalk, and what lay beneath Longfellow's imagery—men who toiled long hours walking backwards from the great spinning reel, twisting handfuls of hemp into the long coils, keeping the tension of the rope with cramped hands, while ice formed a fragile layer on the Cove, while flies swarmed the doorway on sweltering afternoons, the air in the long, low shed thick with burning tar. The car hurtles away. It will stop at service stations with unkempt and despairing attendants. The girls will eat small packaged doughnuts coated with confectioner's sugar. Darla will panic and pull over for a drink. I feel a blinding terror for them, encased in the metal of the car, their delicate limbs, the veins and skin covering them, their soft mouths,

their wildly beating hearts. There is no surety, no safety, just Dr. Chambley's eyes on me where I stand without shoes on the crumbled shells, stripped bare, ready to be loved.

## MOUTH OF FRIEND AND STRANGER

I saw him first. He was safe in his group of friends, his friends cushioning us from each other. I did not know him. I had my copy of Lowell, just purchased from the used bookstore, and I sat alone. We were at the Cuban restaurant, outdoors at the plastic patio tables lit by tiki torchlight. The Mambo band played. Or we were in the dim space on the swiveling stools of the bar next door. We were passing each other on the sidewalk by the beauty salon in the Mediterranean-style plaza—Cuts for Ten Dollars. Either way. He wore a pinstriped shirt. His hair was mussed. At first, nothing seemed to pass between us. He was from Missouri. He was a law student. Or he wrote poetry at Yale. He was an auto mechanic. He sold famous knives.

In his eyes I saw the boys who played baseball with the girls on the wide lawns of the street of my childhood. Their hands all knuckles, stuffed in their gloves. That intense look, the boy thing underneath, always something to prove. Chestnuts fell onto the lawn in their spiny casings. The leaves floated down, one by one. The fathers' cars sat shiny and streamlined in each driveway. The mothers' station wagons sat beside them, two long cars taking up little space in the scheme of the winding tarred drives. Lampposts with yellow light. He could have been one of those boys, grown up. On him, I saw the games of manhunt and freeze tag, the scuffle of bodies in the dark, my childhood handprints glowing on the skin of his forearm.

I followed him into the restaurant. The steamy, heavy smell of the place—picadillo and roast pork, chorizo and boliche. The painted tables thrown together with their chairs on the cement floor. We stood by the restrooms and waited. The air freshener, the smell of the soap in the dispenser, the urine and stale perfume, seeped out under the doors. He looked at my legs, at the outlines of them all the way up under my skirt. I watched him look. Then I waited for him in the little hallway outside the bathroom door. As he passed me I grabbed the cuff of his sleeve. I held his arm captive, and he let me. He turned around, not very surprised. I felt the weight of the sleeve of his shirt, read the expression on his face, his eyebrows up, his mouth half-smiling, not ready to give in to anything.

“Sit with me,” I said.

He shrugged, and grinned. He was singled out, chosen. I was someone he was happy to have done this. Everything, at that point, pleased him.

You learned about presenting yourself. Here I am, you would say, rounding the stair landing, facing your parents and their friends in the dining room. A dinner party, Mrs. Winslow lolling, drunk on sidecars, my father in the kitchen, filling fresh glasses. The men wore ties, the women silk dresses. In the dimmed chandelier light, the food dried on the bone china, the candles burned down to their wicks. Everyone turned, everyone poured their attention. My mother with her eyes bright, distracted, the other women tight-lipped, the men rubbing their chins. I passed through the room and felt my hair swing along my waist, the back of my neck tightening, aware. I cut a swath through their silence. I felt the silence fall about me, pressing close enough to kiss.

In church, you held the missal just so in your hands. You bent your head, smiled sweetly, devout. Around you the fathers in their suits stank like the morning's hangover. The mothers' hands were veined and thin, their mouths drooped, tired in their lipstick. You smelled the sheets on their skin through their clothes. You felt their heat and guilt, their shining relief at the end, when we filed out into the morning sunlight, into spring and all the dogwoods blooming. I kept my hands folded. My thoughts were always chaste. In confession, I made up sins to say, my voice quaking with the sin of saying them.

Outside, his group of friends never missed him. I watched them laughing in the growing dark, in the torch light, through the plate glass window. We sat at an empty table inside and talked. We brushed aside the waitress suggesting drinks. Even then, we had other ideas. I told him things he didn't care to really hear. Who I was, where I was from, what it was like there this time of year, still buried under winter. He took the book from me, still in its bag from the bookstore, and slid it out. He held it in the palms of his hands and read the cover, rubbed his thumbs along the spine, and riffled the pages. *Life Studies*. Something dropped out onto the table.

"What's this?" he said. He picked it up and looked at it, some printed verse on heavy paper, the cover of a card. He read part of it out loud.

His voice, reading, was low and bemused.

*Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me....* He shook his head.

He handed it to me. It was decorated with a figure in robes, with prancing lambs holding staffs. On the back was a note to someone, written in a slanted hand.

“It’s St. Patrick’s breastplate. A charm,” I told him. “To protect him against the Druids.”

His eyes were doubtful of me. I slid my chair close. I put my leg up on his. He propped his face on one hand, still with that quizzical look.

“I like the bridge-jumpers,” I said. “Berryman. Kees?”

I told him Berryman’s father shot himself here in this city, in 1926.

“Where, do you think?” he asked.

“Maybe down the street, behind that stucco apartment building.”

He glanced over his shoulder, slowly, toward the patio and his circle of friends. His fingers found the hem of my skirt and slid up.

“I like good old Tennyson,” he said. “The early Swinburne.”

Under the table things happened.

*Would I not hurt thee perfectly?* he said.

I leaned over and placed my forehead at the base of his neck. I breathed in the smell of him under his shirt. His hand swam up, his fingers graceful swimmers. Behind us the waitresses whispered, girls with dark, curling hair and red fingernails. He took my arm and we pushed the chairs back, and looked around. Who knows what you look for when your knees tremble at the swishing fabric of your skirt? A place with a door, a corner to drape yourself against him. A place to be supine, prostrate, to feel Swinburne’s *delicious things—pleasure, sorrow, sleep, sin, to wax amorous.*

The palm of his hand was hot, concentrating on my fingers.

Once, my childhood girlfriend and I took a bedspread out into the pasture. We knew what we were doing, walking out there. We had a plan. At the base of my spine was a small tingle. It was April. The trees in the old apple orchard blossomed white and pink. Below the little wizened trunks, beneath the gnarled branches, the damp ground looked snow-covered. We laid the bedspread out on the white ground. We pulled the ends in around ourselves and took off our clothes. We pretended to be the babysitter with her boyfriend on the couch, the glow of the television lighting up her stomach's bared skin, his hand creeping up, their mouths pressed together. We knew to move against each other, to make soft moans. Under the canopy of flowers, with the smell of the wet new grass, we did not know what our pretending meant, where our bodies took us, close enough to being lovers. A man and woman came by, two strangers. The man held a pair of clippers. The woman's arms were full of blossoms. They looked at us on the spread. We were covered up, but our shoulders were bare, our skin flushed, giving them ideas. They looked at us a long time, wondering, then moved on.

With boys, we stumbled onto places. Hamonasset Beach, under a woolen blanket. A cold day, almost wintry, with a haze. The sea roared up and back. There were pebbles in the sand, mussel shells, breathtakingly sharp and glinting, the revelation of an arm with a wristwatch against the tempting darkness of the blanket's depths. You never wanted to emerge, blinking, to place yourself. You were underwater, all legs, all needy mouths, craving sustenance.

There was the front seat of a '64 Mustang, the gear shift impossibly placed, the pine tree freshener dangling from the radio dial, something playing, headlights off, the backdrop the assorted wrecks of the Mobil station's lot. Or the back seat of his mother's Chrysler Country Squire, the long, vinyl seat cushion, the hot summer afternoon through all the wide windows, the tall reservoir grass waving outside, brushing against the tires, a few blackbirds perched to watch. There were basements, old recliners with torn upholstery, the throaty start of the furnace revving up, the smell of laundry detergent, dryer lint floating like milkweed. Or rec room shag between your shoulder blades, the record snagged on *Gold Dust Woman*, the backyard floodlights triggered again and again by prowling neighborhood dogs, upstairs, the boy you really wanted with someone else.

Later, there was a bed in an apartment, or a house. And still, you ended up on the couch, in your grandmother's wing chair, in the tub, in the shower, steamy and scalded, the hot water always running out, the steam peeling off the wallpaper. You missed the places you would find before, so you found them again. He took my hand and we slipped down the restroom hallway, and outside, through the door to the alley. Acacia hung over a fence from someone's yard. It was dusk. I had left my book and the card behind on the table. The note had said: *To Lise, Do not forget to remember me, Charles.*

I wanted time to gather him in, to distinguish his face, but he placed his mouth on mine, and it dreamed up, out of nowhere, a place all its own. I let myself fall in. I was languid. I was mercuric. A warm breeze, eddies of it, circled in. He pressed me up against the brick wall. There was the exhaust fan's whirring, his soft open hands' sliding, the general disdainful clank of dishes. The yellow acacia blooms tumbled over into the

cobblestones, into my hair. One tucked itself along his collar. The dishwasher came out in his dirty apron for a smoke. My skirt was up. Our clothes were luminous in the dim light. The breeze brought the smoke by, mixed it with the acacia, the fruit trees in the back yards, the smell of fried plantains. The dishwasher looked, then looked away.

There was never space, but always some clever way to wriggle up or on top or beneath. Bucket seats and bench seats, vinyl or leather and armrests and contours you could not fit. Sometimes, spread out on starched white motel sheets. Golf courses and reservoirs and parks after hours. My knees in pine needles, my back against roots of trees, lake docks, the deck of tossing boats. In heatless cabins, surrounded by snow. The agonizing interruptions: policemen shining their flashlights, roommates wandering in, parents slamming doors downstairs. Clothes half-off, damp skin stark in the glare. The boy's guilty glance up, his apology, his regret, everything dwindling to a kind of starving.

In the alley, his mouth wandered down. He held my arms back against the brick. I tasted everything I could along his neck. The rest of it: *Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger*. At first you thought, isn't just this mouth enough? The different mouths of boys. New Year's Eve, fifteen, drunk on Chianti, two bottles we had been instructed to bring from our mother's house to that of a friend. We crossed the pasture in the snow, passing the heavy bottles, the snow crunching under our feet. Overhead the stars were out, blurry in the black night. The wine made our lips sweet. We went instead to a party. Inside the house was hot. I lost my coat. At midnight I started kissing boys, one after the other. Their mouths tasted different, but the same. Their tongues slid around,

quick or slow. I held each one to me, my hands on the backs of their necks, on their shoulders. I was passed on, like the bottle of wine. In the end, I found myself standing alone in the snow on the front lawn. One boy I'd kissed fought with his girlfriend, and put his fist through the garage door window, and the police came.

Later, you discovered the limitations of your mouth on his. It would go on. He would wear some sad, tortured guise. We would be breathless, getting nowhere, our lips numb, everything raw and overdone, the waiting drawn out like a tight wire. You wanted the end of it, even though you knew once it was over, you would not have a need to remember what you did not know of him to begin with. Your heart, free of grief and dreams, would be ready to move on.

His hands were soft and boyish. His hands were calloused and covered with brown hair. His fingers were thick and stubby. His hands, his fingers, were small and beautiful. I felt his face. I felt through his shirt—the collarbones, the tops of his arms, and underneath the planes of his chest. My hands dipped past his waist to the bones of his hips, below the undone button of his pants. My hands forgot themselves. It was always this: you give something and take something, until the edges blur and you are not sure if you are giving or taking enough, taking or giving too much. Then suddenly, clearly, you see that doesn't matter.

It was a selfish relinquishing. You wanted the ache of his mouth, to be ravished. Some of them refused to do it. They were afraid of themselves, of everything waiting, feverish, under my clothes. I let them pretend to love me, to profess it, like a password, like a secret code. His voice was soft and lulling. His voice was hoarse with longing. He

told me what he wanted. He told me nothing, and guided my hands. In the shadows thrown by cars' map lights, in the deep ends of pools, our legs thrashing strangely pale, on the countertops of kitchens, there was the silent language of need, the repository of wordless inquiries and assents. He grabbed my hair and pulled me down, he put his hands on my shoulders and gave a little push.

The way it should have been: I learn his name. He invites me to sit with his friends, finds another plastic chair and pulls it in. We listen to the Mambo band. We fan away mosquitoes. Sitting together, I find little to say, and never talk about the poets who took their lives. I bum a cigarette and sit silently, seeming mysterious. Maybe, the boy across the table, the one I never noticed, likes me better. He will be the one, later, to ask me out. I will think, wistfully, longingly, of someone else. There will be a time set, a place to meet. He will decide, well, what of her? I will never love him. This in the alley would never have happened with him.

This: the weeds between the cobblestones, the litter of wilted petals, the remains of the dishwasher's smoke, me pressed against the brick. The back of his shirt wet. I heard my own breathing, ragged and soft, his voice, still bemused, saying things into my hair. His hands held my face, slid down and up again, finding me with his palms, his thumbs. I was mute, catching my breath. His eyes closed. I watched him keep them that way, until the end. It was done when his hands dropped away like stones. I clung to him and he zipped his pants. He placed his mouth on my neck. He brushed my hair from my face, and stepped back, adjusting his clothes. He left with the delicate, telling part of him

I could never urge with my tongue. I heard his footfalls. Through the kitchen's screen door I heard the dishwasher clear his throat.

I was *the girl who does know better but*. I was the newspaper, folded and abandoned on the train. I was the whore tidying her room, achy and pleased. I was the woman driving home with the secret between my legs. I was posed on the rail of the bridge, clutching the cables, caught by the wind, euphoric with the desire to douse myself in cold, black water. Berryman waved to the people first. "Here I go," he must have said, stepping off into his high-flung moment.

He went back to his friends at the table. In the torchlight and the din of too much beer, no one detected my traces. Once in a while, I looked for him. But he had left for Cambridge, he was running drugs from Haiti, working the Alaskan pipeline, teaching English in Japan. He was never there to refute me and so, he surrendered himself to my memory.

Some nights, I dreamed he told me everything.

Later. At last. I said I knew him.

## CONFESSION

She chose the motels. The first time, they met at the one that sold tropicals in back. There was the handwritten sign up front—*A Plethora of Plants*, and old, fifties-looking neon flashing *Sunny South Motel*. Just one strip of rooms with doors the color of a nail polish she once liked back when she wore sundresses with little ties on the shoulder, when she had dreamed of having a daughter, and smooth muscled arms from lifting and holding her. Peachy-pink, the inside of a whelk. How she had wanted him. How that drove her there, the wanting maneuvering the car beyond her fear of not knowing, really, anything about him. It was the bright glare of noon. There was the chain link fence in back, the gate with the bell they rang for the proprietor. He emerged, eventually, from an office in the midst of the nursery plants, tanned and stooped and wearing a straw hat. They stood there waiting, a couple, but still he never knew which they wanted, frangipani or a room. There was a certain number of hours available to both of them. There was the need to get it over with, already.

At some point in their history, desire had flooded her. She had kept it to herself, her arms and legs aching with it. She slept less. She grew thin. There he was, on a weekly basis, committed, like herself, to someone else with whom vows had been recited in front of witnesses, or the eyes of God. Paperwork had been filed. Finances meshed. For her, there had always been the difficulty in getting out of it. The *note of eternal sadness* had set in. A languishing despair. Years had gone by before she met him. She was still not

sure how he knew. Had he caught her looking? Had he seen on her face some evidence of her longing? Once he discovered her interest the wish to experience her body began, a mindful reeling in with messages contrived to win her. Comments on the way her hair fell in her face, the color and texture of her blouse. A whole other world took shape. His idea of her, her idea of him. Things converged.

The first time it was all business. Nothing subtle. This went here, that fit this. It wasn't a mystery, sex. Outside the window they could hear the bell on the chain link fence, the proprietor pitching five-gallon jasmine, papaya, and Japanese plum. They heard the voice of a woman inquiring, a child's whine. They could both imagine the tug of the child on the woman's arm, the drudgery and selflessness. They heard a man's voice, appeasing, silencing the child, a good father in his Saturday clothes, his topsiders flattening the powdery dirt. In the room the air conditioner dripped rusty water onto the carpet. They lay on the blanket they never pulled back. Their legs were tangled. Their bodies slick.

"Now what?" she said.

"Why are you whispering?" he asked.

They had been mostly quiet. There were things she had wanted to say, her mouth pressed to his ear, along his neck, but hadn't. She felt she had not taken advantage of the moment. There were the other usual things she had planned never to reveal about herself, and these overwhelmed her now in the finished space, in the silence of not knowing what to say next. The two of them were nearly without introduction. No more than a hundred words had ever passed between them. She had guessed some things, imagining others. He

seemed confident about her, a strong supposer of who people were. Whatever else he thought he had invented for his own pleasure.

Missing were the hours of putting the pieces of each other together over dinner, or in a car driving to destinations. Absent were the precursors, the gazing, the pinning of faces to memory, the handholding, the quick but potent kiss at the door. They dispensed with that. There was no opportunity, no place absent of potential discovery. And they agreed none of it was necessary. He would never save her from her life. She would never make a mark on his. Their meeting would always be a respite, a dalliance. She lay in the dim room on the blanket. She kept her hands on him, like a claimed package. She could not predict anything she would take away from this, any moment she would remember later. Already, it had become a blur. Sex in a room. The linens stiff with professional laundering, the dank carpet, the mirrored bureau, the dark television screen like a closed eye.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked.

“Just this,” she said, which was not really an answer, and he knew it. But he did not press her further. She thought he assumed she liked it all, which she had, her body almost lifeless on the blanket, her limbs loose, her clothes scattered about the floor, invisible in the shadows and lost to her. “Here I am,” she said. “Naked on a bed.”

She could see him smile in the dark. If they had a deck of cards they could play Gin Rummy. The television could be turned on, blaring and brilliant, and something viewed, idly. Up the street was the House of Ribs, an old bungalow nestled among live oaks, where people sat out on the porch to eat, drinking sweet tea out of mason jars. They

could drive there and bring back food they would never normally eat, spread it out on the bed in its greasy wrappings, in its Styrofoam packaging. But they had not chosen each other for any of that. She felt her role was limited, and she did not worry about being anything else. She would lie there and wait until she would be of use again. And then he began to fill the silence and she let him. She listened to the timbre of his voice, his cheek pressed to the blanket, the way it became part of the room, competing with the air conditioner, the passing traffic, the squeak of the chain link gate, the proprietor's movements, repositioning the plants on the black tarp.

He gave spare details about himself. He gave his opinion. He gave her enough for her to form an impression, and a softness for him. Enough, he knew, for her to keep wanting him. He was from a small New England town whose main industry used to be a watch factory. His relatives were all town people buried in the old St. Joseph's cemetery. He grew up on a lake, and boated and skied. He had an older brother who died as a teenager. He had a way about him when he told her, off handedly, looking elsewhere. She asked few questions, just listened, her body alongside his, her face propped in her hands, her hair spread over his chest.

His brother had cancer. He was sixteen years old, and they brought him home to die. She saw the house on the lake, its cedar shingles. The dock with its algae-covered pilings, its weathered gray boards. He would have breathed in the smell of the lake through the windows' metal screens, the water in summer cold and filled with particles of debris, sour and brown, the pieces clinging to his skin when he swam. He would have listened to the leaves' dry rustling in the fall, watched them tumble, papery, onto the back

yard and gather at the lake's rim. Ducks bobbed on the water, even later when the ice formed sheets like glazing.

After his brother's death, he would have read beyond the bland stories in the school textbooks, worried over the ideas, the forces at work, the underpinnings of sitting, still and dazed in a school classroom. The sky would always be an upturned bowl. The freshly painted yellow lines would always mark the narrow black tar road. He could go back and still smell the lilacs near the garage, the forsythia tangle up along the house. Those photographs would sit on the same shelf, those motes of dust hover, miraculous, sentient, over the plaid upholstered couch. The longing that struck up in him would last and alter itself to different places, show itself as a different form of impatience. He knew what it meant to tire of something, to discover it and move on.

The afternoon waned. She did not know if she was good at being who he wanted. He was polite, and kind, and would never admit any disappointment. The worry of losing his interest fell on her as she walked to her car, under the flurry of jacaranda petals, through the balm of ginger lily. Who was she now? Her past did not define her. She lived the life she had stumbled onto when she was young and didn't know any better. At some point she had decided there wasn't any better to know. This afternoon she had gotten what she desired, and she pretended she understood what that was, that she had expected nothing else.

The next time it was a place called The Lamplighter. A colonial façade with columns, the rooms stretched out from its sides like two arms, black iron lamppost out

front, off of the main road. Years ago, a band that played a local club stayed there, and as a teenager she had gone back to a room with the guitar player. She had put him off, believing then she should first win his love, that he should be made to confess it in the throes of wanting her badly enough, like the other boys. But he had resigned himself to kissing her on the bed, sliding his hand up under her shirt, unzipping his pants and rolling away from her to complete the act that really had nothing to do with her. When she left, he stood with his hands pressed to the window, half-dressed, watching her with an expression of mild regret. She had not felt anything. She had gotten lost in the maze of surrounding side streets, amidst the small, squat, cement block houses still strung with Christmas lights, the overgrown fenced yards, the litter of sun-faded plastic toys, the kiddie pools filled with standing water.

Now, in the heat of summer, the landscape seemed charred and threadbare. The humidity held everything damp and immovable. They met at night, and the windows of the occupied rooms were lit yellow. He had gotten in touch with her, after weeks of silence. Nothing was needed beyond this. All of his previously laid groundwork was in place—she still remembered the things he had said to her, the way he looked at her, his mouth on hers, his body without clothes. Along with this she held a small, sad sense of a missed chance she believed meeting him again would eradicate, like an antidote.

He was there first, waiting in the room. He seemed the same, still grinning at her, his eyes with the same ardor. He told her he had not stopped thinking about her. What *about me?* she'd asked, kicking off her shoes. She did not know if she should have been flattered by his thoughts of her legs, the way her body felt under his, but she was. She

was aware that his thinking of her in this way was all she could expect. She would never tell him the story of the guitar player, fearing he would wonder about her old longing for love, worry that the remnants of it would resurface and complicate what they had now. This time, when he held her down on the bed to kiss her, she felt the weight of his hands, the texture of his skin. She felt the soft hairs below his waist when she undid his pants. The room was dark, their bodies hard to pin down. She felt him out with her hands, blindly, seeing with the tips of her fingers, her palms. She saw him in his boyhood bed, its crocheted spread, the lake lapping at the dock outside his window, and the sounds of loons in the morning. She saw him wide awake, listening for his brother dying downstairs in the bed set up in the living room. She saw his baseball cards in a special box with a lid. She saw his row of leather-bound books, the titles in gilt italics. Outside his window, a moon, and the curtains blown out and back, the night air rife with the odor of the afternoon's mown grass.

His hands slid up and down her length. She breathed in the slide of his hands, their movement, their gentle urging search for her. She stopped them with her own. He looked up at her, puzzled. How to explain that moment before giving in? That quiet "Don't." She could not tell where the resistance came from. But she knew how to back it down, swallow the word, succumb. She knew where to go, which mask to put on. In this way, she avoided the old guitar player story. She circumvented the need for something she would not have, and spared herself.

The room's darkness was broken, a bit, by the yellow lamplight from outside, its hazy shine through the curtain's join. It left a line across the bed, splitting their bodies in

two. He bunched a pillow under his head. His hand never stopped moving, reflexively, over some part of her skin. He looked at her in the dark. She felt his eyes on her, questioning. There was the same air conditioning noise. A car door slammed outside. Footsteps approached. His hand froze midway up her stomach, and the footsteps passed by, on to another room. She heard him exhale.

“Are you nervous?” she asked, teasing him.

He cleared his throat. “A little,” he said, always honest.

She put her hand on his chest and felt the thudding there. She laughed.

“No one could find this place,” she said.

The closest main road was two miles away. There was a famous hot dog restaurant where she had told him to turn off. He kidded her about the places she chose. What about the Holiday Inn? he’d asked. Wouldn’t a Marriot work? She told him how she drove around to find the motels, always some reason why she picked the one she did, its proximity to some odd landmark, its kitschy sign, its past popularity replaced with a forlorn look. He told her he liked the hot dog place. It had a big gaudy pink and blue sign, rimmed with shiny chrome, studded with lit bulbs. Had she ever eaten there? She told him once or twice, as a child. That was all. Next door to the restaurant was a Dairy Queen where she would have liked to get a sundae with whipped cream. He said, Do it. Get extra whipped cream. But she did not feel like getting dressed, driving away from him, leaving him behind in the room.

“Come with me,” she said.

But he would not budge. He moved his hand up into her hair. He shook his head, No, and pulled her face to his and kissed her. "I could taste that on your mouth," he said. She bit his lip. She slid her body onto his. Sometimes, she thought about him at home with a wife, doing daily things. Sitting at a table with a book, half-listening to her tell a story about people whom they both knew, her hands busy in a sink. Watching her dress in the morning, or at night, flinging off her clothes, and having it mean nothing much. She imagined them together in their bed, covered with the sheet, in sleep, his body turned toward her, or away, his body touching hers, or not. It did not bother her to imagine these things. She did it once in a while, to remind herself he was someone already loved.

He told her a story about skiing once with his brother. He was eleven. His brother fifteen. Their parents let them take the boat out on the lake, and they watched, from the porch. It was an eighteen-foot Chris Craft, he said. It had been his father's boat, a wooden classic, 1952 Runabout. He knew how to handle the boat, but on this day, for some reason he still could not explain, the throttle stuck as he turned to pick up his brother bobbing in the water. The engine gunned, he swerved in time to avoid hitting him, but one of the skies was tossed up and struck his brother on the head. There was a lot of blood. He was unconscious at first, still bobbing in his life vest, a darker circle spreading out in the muddy brown lake water.

She listened to the story. She already knew he hadn't died then. But still, to hear him, it seemed he believed he had. His voice was awed, the words small, hesitant sounds.

"It turned out alright," she said.

“That time,” he told her. He readjusted the pillow under his head with his balled fists. He was resentful, angry. He stopped talking. She got the feeling he would have liked him to die then. That he should not have been made to fear the event twice. She hadn’t known what to say to him. She saw he lived with an unremitting expectation of loss, part of himself held in a deep and untouchable reserve. She set herself to his body, as if she was hungry. She distracted him from the past and he returned to her and the bed and the quiet room and attended to his relentless need, his face above her beautifully cruel, until it was time to go.

The Lamplighter was surrounded by what was once a stand of longleaf pine, invaded now by laurel and turkey oak. There was still one pine left in the middle of the circular drive, its tall trunk impervious to flame, its crown of long needles falling soft and aromatic, onto the hoods of their parked cars. Outside, he would not touch her. He did not say he would see her again. She was prepared now to see him, or not see him, and she ignored him climbing into his car, the sound of the engine, the sweep of his headlights pulling away. She brushed the pine needles from her hood with her arm, slowly, taking her time, waiting in the dark, though for what she wasn’t sure. His headlights circling back? Something else from him? A word, a moment she would not forget, some miracle falling out of the sky, through the ancient pine boughs, onto her body waiting tense with its own promise.

They met again throughout that year. Once or twice at the motel in the orange grove with its gift shop and produce stand on the side, its round, ripe oranges advertised

on a peeling wooden sign. The orange blossom smell would get caught in her hair. He would keep his face there, breathing it. A few times at the New Orleans, a two-story motel with ironwork balconies, with rumors of mob hits, surrounded by strip malls and marquees. Next door was the Space Odyssey, a strip club with a replica of a flying saucer on top, where they had seen the girls arriving for their afternoon shift, the sun on the asphalt radiating heat, making their faces wax-like in their makeup. Another time at the beach, at a place with a large plaster Buccaneer, and a miniature golf course next door, and the metal of the door corroded with salt, and the windows stuck shut, and everything mildewed and smelling of the Gulf. They had listened to the tide move out, the long, withdrawing over sand and pebbles and coquinas. Eventually, he said he could not see her anymore, and she knew he had met someone else, had tired of it all, which she had expected. She had not risked anything to keep him.

Secretly, she had mapped and unmapped her own life on his body. He could not see in the dark. He had no way of knowing how much of her she left like silver trails, and then erased. She was unsure why the burden of the past followed them there, to the room. Why he always told her something he had not thought about in years, how each irreversible error she had made traveled with her into his arms. How she would keep it all in check, saying nothing. Yet she saw, clearly, he was someone in whom she had invested the whole explanation. She asked him for one last meeting, at the first place with the nursery in back. He had agreed. I'll buy you a keepsake plant, he said. There was nothing sentimental about it. They had uses for each other that prevented that.

They met and it was afternoon again, almost a year later. The jacaranda petals blew down, a violent splash on the concrete. The odor of the plants, yellow Poinciana, camellia, and sweet viburnum, followed them into the room. They didn't think of it as the last time. It was just the same as any of the others. He still appreciated her body, more so now, out of nostalgia. They had their own history. They had times before that set precedents, they had moments particular to certain meetings. She knew his loneliness, his longings, the places to move her mouth that pleased him, how to lie, when to *hold still*, how much to say. He was still the boy in the house on the lake, in the town with narrow roads and clumps of mayflowers and galvanized mailboxes. He still carried some guilt for the loss of his brother, desperate and self-serving. His eyes glowered with it. The muscles in his arms tensed to fight it off. She still eased him into the present, her body making its invisible mark, her own past held at bay. Out of respect, he granted her this silence. To prod her would be a false step into some form of caring, which they both knew to avoid.

They stood apart from each other in the room, and he smiled at her. He never reached for her first. He always waited. She had to show him that her desire was not something she could suppress, that it filled her lungs like a long intake of breath requiring release. She had to say she wanted him, aloud, always meaning it, never like a line she knew she was supposed to speak. She smiled back, revelatory, corroborative. Something he could read and know she meant. She would say what she wanted and not hesitate to slide his shirt up, to touch his skin, to take his face in her hands and just look at him. He let her do all of this. She knew he believed that maybe she had grown to love him, and so this time, the last time, his eyes were worried, somewhat tender. Don't be angry with me,

they said. I do care about you, a little bit. But she'd kept herself a stranger, and there wasn't much, really, of her to love.

"I want a ginger lily," she said.

He let his arms fall and was relieved to have something to give her. He went out the door, the sunlight dropping in for a moment, until the door swung shut. She heard the bell on the gate. She heard him speak to the old man, their footsteps among the nursery plants. When he returned he had the lily, its blooms white and heavy and sweet smelling, the leaves shiny green spears. She took him in her arms, laughing. She felt a small, terrified happiness. She would not ask him if there was someone else, though she felt the weight of this while he took off her clothes, while his mouth found hers, and his hands, softly sliding, drew her in.

She had given herself up and not confessed. She had made herself a prisoner, trapped in her body's longing for something else. At one time, years ago, she'd thought it was a child. She had imagined it solidly in her arms like a warmth, a reprieve. She imagined the child's hair, its skin, its body growing long and beautiful, its eyes on her, waiting for a sign she feared she would not, finally, know how to give. She had gotten pregnant and then panicked, realizing her error, and she had gone on her own and gotten rid of it, and come to this motel, to the old man in the straw hat who had handed her a key. She had been newly married. She had not told anyone. She had wanted to be alone afterwards. She had thought, maybe, she would not return home, that all of her mistakes might be so easily erased, and she would start again.

But the doctor had botched it, somehow, and she had bled too much, awakening on the bed in it all, her surprise a kind of dulled one, mixed with a strange grief. Outside, she heard the old man in the nursery, moving around the plants. She heard the chain link gate open and shut, its rusty latch. It had been late afternoon. The sun slanted in, hot looking, filled with dust, lighting up the sheets and the bright blood, her clothing wet and stiffened, her arms cold and pale and dampened. She had not been afraid. She had lain there and accepted it, her life ebbing away, a steady pulse between her legs, until the wanting to go on living urged her up. She knew that she would pull herself to the door and summon the old man, that he would come into the room and see the mess and call someone else, that the paramedic's penlight would awaken her and drag her back from where she had been headed, a blank space, palely lit, where she did not ever need to know what she wanted, or what she was expected to give. And later, she would be delivered into her old life, the life a debt that had not been satisfied, that had increased now, the ledger expanded to include *one child*.

In the room she saw the sun slip low through the Venetian blinds. She felt his hands glide, kept her mouth on his, wet and soft like a wound. She smelled the lily in the room, its scent moving into the folds of her skin, into the places nothing reached. The day was everything they had. Her body forged on ahead. It opened itself, it gave an edge to the light. She was not without the knowledge, always, that when they left the room the world they'd made dissolved, transformed to molecules, blood, skin, strands of hair, traces on sheets shaken out by maids. The moment no longer existed to hold anything of them together, the lake's lapping water, the stillness of the cedar-shingled house, the boy

in his childhood bed believing in a last breath, still waiting, inexorably, for some truth to be revealed. What she confessed with her body's movements was dismissed by her silence, made unceremonious and absent of farewell. She held him down on the bed. She fixed the lines of his face, that mouth, those eyes quizzical and afraid. What is true enough? she wanted to say. How far can memory go and still be love?

## MANIFOLD

Where they sit, out of gas in Billy Buckley's car, they have a wide, sweeping vista of the neighborhood, the houses at the bottom of the street plotted out around curving asphalt, the typical drives and roads and lanes that loop up and down the hills of the Connecticut valley. At the top of one slope, the graveyard stones of Bloomfield Cemetery line up behind chain link, look into backyards with cedar decks and above-ground pools. From here the trees fan out like a blaze. The leaves are blown in cycles around the car. It is an October morning, and they have skipped the day of school and gone instead to Shelley's house, where they smoked two joints Shelley rolled on her mother's tavern table, its top's scars and burns and ale glass rings all part of its worth as a Colonial artifact. The gas gauge signals an empty tank, but they cannot quite believe this. Surely, Shelley says, the gauge was broken before they left.

"It must be the manifold," she insists—something she may have heard from a boyfriend once. She is in the passenger seat, both hands gripping the dashboard. Her hair is soft and brown and wind-blown from their walk through the woods to the pond behind her house. Lisette thinks it has been hours, at least, since then. She is behind the wheel, a junior, the older of the two, the one Billy Buckley loves, and so, the one entrusted with the keys. The inside of the car, a long, finned 1970 Delta 88 Olds, is sun-warmed and comfortable. The seats are copper-colored vinyl, torn in spots, the dashboard gauges large and round and meaningless to them. They sit quietly, staring out the big windshield. They

play the radio, soft with static, and wait for something to happen. Every so often, Lisette tries the key in the ignition. Shelley cocks her head to listen. Then she shakes it, smiling.

“Can you *believe* this?” she says. She throws her head back and does the laugh that reassures Lisette that not knowing what to do is fine. On their left is an abandoned apple orchard, the trees’ branches weighted with wormy, misshapen fruit. To their right are houses bathed in autumn light. The lawns are wet from melted frost. It is not that early, and most people have already gone to work. She thinks that Billy Buckley’s love will temper any fury he feels for them not returning when they said. It is a love that he has never confessed, that she has not had to acknowledge, but she knows it is there, reads it in his eyes, in his awkward half-smile, his gangly movements walking away, and feels it like a bolstered cushion, a reassurance. He is someone who, with his silent devotion, will give her whatever she asks and in return expect nothing.

This morning was Shelley’s idea. She had forgotten something at her house, she said. Ask Billy for his car. He stood outside the high school, by the low wall where everyone smoked their cigarettes, left the butts on the ground for the janitor’s wide broom. Billy wore his bomber jacket. His hair stuck out in all directions. He held the keys up, balancing the ring on one finger.

“You’re coming right back?” he said, his face unreadable and closed to her. Lisette took the keys, gave him her usual smile that promised something far off and unattainable. She wouldn’t worry, yet, about what the absence in his face meant. She saw that she could drive by the Sunoco station and see if Miller was working. She had met him that weekend at a keg party at the reservoir. He was going to be an actor, he’d said,

brushing his sandy hair back from his forehead. He was moving to New York City in a month, after he collected two more paychecks. The bonfire smoke burned her eyes. Her hands were cold and she kept them in the pockets of her pea coat. Miller had slid his two hands on top of hers inside her pockets, pulled her close and kissed her. His mouth tasted of beer. Its softness was something she wanted to fall into. He lowered his head to her shoulder, and his hair smelled of wood burning. Sitting in Billy's car, staring out the windshield, it occurs to her this is what love is most commonly mistaken for, this anxious trembling, this feeling on the verge of something.

The radio plays Boston, and Shelley sings the words to the song, staring out the window. She has her hands folded in her lap, her head against the seat back. She had not really wanted anything at her house. They had pulled into the driveway and gone inside, and Shelley put on Teddy Pendergrass while she rolled the joints. Lisette didn't ask her why they'd come. Shelley's reasons were never clear, but Lisette trusted her to always have them. They have not been friends for very long, but a year later Lisette will learn that their fathers at one time were close. On the mantel in the den at Lisette's is a photo of their fathers with two other men, posed on the deck of the *My Joy*, a boat they chartered out of Niantic. From that trip, Lisette remembers her father returning with a cooler full of blue fish, which he cleaned, making a bloody mess in their white porcelain kitchen sink, and then stored in the double freezer in the basement.

Her father persuaded her mother to use the Lenten Friday as an excuse to prepare the fish, which she did each week, grudgingly, broiling it in the oven on a pan covered with aluminum foil. Lisette and her sister, Dolores, hated the smell, the oily taste, the tiny

bones they swallowed by mistake, that their father assured them he had removed. They were children then, and trusting. Dolores would try to read Lisette's diary, and wear Lisette's clothes, and become friends with Lisette's friends, and Lisette would avoid her, and throw things at her and say things that now, she worries, were hurtful. But back then, Dolores went to school like anyone normal, and had a Bobby Sherman fan club with her own girlfriend down the street, fully able, Lisette believed, to ignore Lisette's resentment. Now, Dolores leaves the house and wanders away. They look for her in their mother's wood-paneled Country Squire, cruising up and down the streets of their neighborhood as if searching for a lost dog. Dolores wears the same clothes every day—jeans with knees faded white, a dirty purple parka. She forgets to brush her hair. In a year, she will have a real diagnosis and months spent in the state hospital in Norwich, but at this time, no one dares to suppose that anything is really wrong with her. Lisette simply doesn't talk to her, a sister born so close that for one month out of the year they are the same age. Sitting now in Billy Buckley's car, Lisette does not think about her father, who came home in the middle of the night again, slamming the cabinets, or her sister, who left the house that morning before anyone could stop her, or the photograph on the mantel—men she does not know, posing on the deck of a boat.

She sits behind the wheel, imagining Miller's hands sliding around her waist, how she would hold one of them in her own and slip it up under her Fair Isle sweater to her breast. She falls back into the softness of his mouth. Shelley sighs.

"I guess we should try to find a phone," she says.

They look at each other. Neither of them want to leave the haven of the car.

“Do you know anyone who lives in this neighborhood?” Shelley asks.

Lisette looks out the windshield, down into the cluster of homes, mid-sized split-level ranches, painted different colors—rust red, sage green, a pale yellow like aged lace. The sidewalks are new, and the front yards contain a few young, spindly trees supported with wires.

“No,” she says, honestly. “I don’t.”

Shelley tries to adjust the radio dial. “Nothing’s on,” she whines.

Lisette knows they have been sitting in the car a long time. Too long, she thinks, worrying about Billy’s expression that morning, wondering what it meant. “Let’s go,” she says.

Shelley looks at her, surprised. “What do you mean?” she asks.

Lisette opens the car door and steps out. The door groans on its hinges. Shelley gets out on her side and they begin to walk down the road. The wind catches in their hair, swirls leaves about their ankles. Shelley puts her arms up and spins around. They stand in front of the first house and consider it. The lawn is threadbare. A rusty red tricycle sits abandoned by the garage. All of the windows reveal drawn shades. There is a smell about the house of trashcans filled with rotting garbage. Lisette thinks they should move on.

“Too vacant looking,” she says.

Lisette lives five miles away, in a neighborhood like Shelley’s, with pillared Colonials, and beds of rhododendron bordered with white pebbles, and deacon’s benches under the wide arms of elms, and hickories, and sugar maples. Their homes have slate roofs, and copper windmills shaped like galloping horses. Shelley’s house is decorated in

antiques, and that morning, they'd rummaged through a pine bureau in the hallway, looking for a sweater for Lisette. Shelley wanted to walk in the woods, and Lisette wore only a cotton blouse. She had pulled out the Fair Isle cardigan, and tossed it to her. They had already smoked one of the joints. "Wear this," she said, grinning.

Lisette looked at the sweater with suspicion. "It's your mother's, isn't it?" she asked.

Shelley's mother did not like Lisette. She'd told Shelley she could no longer spend time with her. "That girl," she said, "is not allowed in my house."

The sweater smelled of the old pine drawer. Lisette put it on and mimicked Shelley's mother. "Let's go young lady," she said, doing up the buttons.

Shelley led the way out the back porch door, down the incline of dried lawn. The woods were a mix of hemlock and silver birch and maple. The leaves were light and papery under their feet. It was a cool day, and windy, and the wind brought the remaining leaves down around them. Shelley stopped and held out her hands as if to catch them. Lisette smiled, watching her. The sweater was warm, and she liked its smell of the drawer, and the smell of the dried leaves and pine boughs. The sun slanted through in spots. The floor of the woods sloped, and they clung to the young saplings and made their way toward the edge of a pond. Lisette had never been there before. She did not even know a pond existed so close to Shelley's house. It was not very large. Its surface was muddy colored and rippling. Shelley lit the other joint and sat down in the leaves, and Lisette joined her. They didn't say anything. The trees ringed the pond, dropping their leaves into it, casting their shadows. Closer to the water was an old rowboat, half-buried

in the mud. It was the gray color of wood exposed to the elements. Its bow was deteriorating, like a fallen log.

Lisette will remember the boat a year later, when her father tells her the names of the people on the deck of the *My Joy*, when he tells her how Shelley's father died. He had been struck by lightning, her father will say, fishing on a pond behind their house. He had his son with him, a little boy, about six or seven. The boy had run for help, but there was nothing anyone could do. Her father will hold the photograph in his hand, and she will watch his hand shake. She will avoid his face—the broken veins, the eyes, soft and sad, pleading for a chance to compensate for some mistake. He will put the photograph into a cardboard box with fishing reels, *Car and Driver* magazines, golf tees, a hammered tin ashtray, things he will pack up and take away to an apartment she will never see. Sitting in the leaves by the pond, Lisette has only recently guessed that Shelley's father is dead, because Shelley does not ever mention him, because her mother and her brother have a kind of quiet, deflated yearning about them. And inside Shelley's house, Lisette has sensed expectancy, as if someone is missing, and everyone is always waiting for an arrival.

Now, they wander up the street and pass house after house. Their excuses are the same for some. "No one's home there," Shelley says. "I can tell." Lisette takes her word for it. Another house looks too run down. "Axe murderer," Lisette says. Shelley nods her head. They forget to look at the houses, and they just walk, and then they spot one—white with gray shutters, with chrysanthemums and pumpkins on the porch, a green Falcon parked in the driveway.

“You talk,” Shelley says.

They approach the door and Lisette pushes the bell. “Who should I call?” she whispers.

“Just call the school office and get Billy out of class,” Shelley says.

The high school secretary is a friend’s mother, and she will help them out, and chastise them later. The door opens and a woman looks out at them through the storm door glass. She has her hair pulled up messily in back, and wears a camel’s hair car coat like Lisette’s mother’s. Underneath it they see she has on a nightgown.

“What?” the woman asks from behind the door, as if they have said something she doesn’t understand.

“Our car ran out of gas,” Lisette says. “May we use your phone?”

The woman smirks. “Right,” she says. Her hair is reddish blond. Her face is young and pretty. She shakes her head at them and some of the hair falls out around her face. Lisette is not prepared for the woman to doubt them. Shelley makes a noise of disbelief. “Really,” she says. “It’s right up there at the top of the hill.”

“Well,” the woman says, slowly. From behind the glass of the storm door she sounds oddly muffled. Shelley glances at Lisette, and rolls her eyes. Lisette cannot tell if she is still high, or if she is in the silent, empty space the high leaves her when it recedes. From inside the house she hears the cry of a baby that is hesitant at first, then moves into a piercing wail. The woman’s face blanches. Her eyes light with panic. She opens the storm door and steps outside onto the cement porch with them. Shelley and Lisette make room. The woman smells faintly sour, like unwashed clothes. She is without shoes. She

stands there beside them saying nothing. The storm door clicks shut and they hear her breathing.

“So,” Shelley says. She takes a few more steps back.

The woman covers her face with her hands. It is as if she believes she can no longer be seen. Lisette feels the woman’s terror like a wave coming off her coat’s shoulders.

“Can we do something?” Shelley asks. For the first time, Lisette reads alarm on her friend’s face. She doesn’t think it is something Shelley ever allows herself to feel. Lisette sees her eyes fill with tears, and she feels her own body repel being drawn in. She grabs Shelley’s jacket sleeve and moves down the cement steps, tugging. *Let’s go*, she mouths.

“What’s happening?” Shelley asks. Lisette hears the tremor in her voice.

The woman removes her hands and her face is wet and old mascara has run in black streaks down her cheeks. She shakes her head, *No*, and the tendrils of reddish blond swing and stick to her face. The woman sinks to the top step and sits there, hugging her knees. Leaves cling to the lacy hem of her nightgown. Her feet are pale white, and delicate-looking against the dirty cement. From inside the house come the baby’s cries. They sound through the windows, through the storm door, long, and loud and tormented.

“What’s wrong with it?” Shelley asks. Lisette has pulled her to the curb now, and they are on the asphalt of the road, and she has her firmly by the sleeve.

“Don’t worry about it,” Lisette hisses.

Shelley turns and gives Lisette a look—hard and full of indictment. Lisette does not know what to do. They watch the woman take a set of keys from the pocket of her coat and rush across the dead lawn to the Falcon. She holds the nightgown up, and her legs flash pale and thin. She gets in and starts the car up and white smoke comes out of the tailpipe. Shelley watches, stricken.

“What does she think she’s doing?” she asks. Her voice sounds like Lisette’s mother’s did that morning, full of condemnation. At home, this morning before Lisette caught the bus, her mother was still asleep. Her father slept in the spare room on the single bed intended for guests, the odor of gin seeping from his pores, the sound of his breathing noisy and troublesome through the cracked door. Dolores was up, moving around her room. While Lisette was in the kitchen eating toast, Dolores came out and wandered the upstairs hall. Lisette stopped eating. She heard Dolores’s voice, its dull monotone, telling something to herself. At night, Dolores walked up and down the stairs, sleepless. She stood in the doorway of Lisette’s room and Lisette, irritated, a little afraid, yelled at her to go away. Now she felt a twist in her stomach, a dull tightening. She heard Dolores on the stairs and then the front door opening, the storm door’s swing and bang. And then her mother was in the kitchen doorway, her robe sloppily tied, her hair puffed up on one side, her face lined from sleep, looking older than Lisette had ever seen.

“Was that your sister?” she asked, her voice shrill, knowing the answer.

Lisette looked up, and they looked at each other. Both of them denied being the one responsible. “You let her go,” her mother said, tugging angrily on her robe’s sash. The kitchen filled with the smell of her Jean Nate. Lisette got her books together for

school—Calculus, French, her copy of *Heart of Darkness*. The hardbacks were covered in brown paper bags, and on the bags she had drawn in blue and black ink—her name, lines of poems, song lyrics, whorls that formed intricate patterns. She knew then not to say anything.

The baby's mother backs the car out of the driveway and passes them heading up to the stop sign at the top of the street. Lisette sees her face as she passes, an almost giddy expression of escape that Lisette understands. They are left by the curb, smelling the fumes of her exhaust, listening to the baby scream.

"Maybe she needs something at the store," Lisette suggests.

But Shelley is already moving back up the walkway to the cement steps. She is inside the house before Lisette can stop her. Lisette stands on the curb a while longer. She is cautious when it comes to possible disaster. She hesitates and feels the dull pull of shame, its accompanying despair like a small, fluttering bird lighting on her chest. She understands she has failed her sister by choosing to believe she does not have the power to help her. She thinks of Billy Buckley, his hopes pinned on the sound of her voice, the smell of her hair, his dependence on her presence—nudging him with her shoulder, her arms around him to thank him for giving her something—lunch money, a cigarette, the gloves from his hands, his car keys. She suddenly cannot bear the burden of the disappointment she must become to him.

Shelley does not come out. Lisette is forced to follow her, to pull open the door and step into the woman's house. It is clean and orderly and smells of lemon cleanser. The living room carpet is marked with the tracks of a vacuum. Shelley has discovered the

baby upstairs. Lisette hears her talking to it, making reassuring sounds. She feels her heart step up in the sudden quiet.

“Shelley?” she calls from the bottom.

And then Shelley appears at the top of the stairs with the baby. She holds it cradled with two arms. Its body is wrapped in a pale blue woven blanket. Its head is hairless and shining with dampness. She comes down, slowly, and stands next to Lisette in the foyer. Across from them on the table is a phone, and she tells Lisette to call Billy at school.

“What are you doing with that?” Lisette asks.

Shelley holds the baby as if it is something she is used to, as if it is her own.

They are both practiced at finding what they want. They go to G. Fox’s and slip innocently into the dressing rooms of the different departments, approach glass counters manned by busy, distracted salesclerks. They carry large purses, or bags from other stores. Later, they surprise each other with things they thought the other would like—a suede fringed belt, large-belled jeans with a rainbow stitched down one leg, a pair of Aigner leather gloves. Lisette believes it is the constant appearance of new things that makes Shelley’s mother nervous. She will never admit that her daughter has taken them without paying. In her mind, it must somehow be Lisette’s doing.

Lisette is used to accepting the blame for things. She understands the reasons behind the accusations, and she is strong enough to suffer them because she tells herself most things are not in her control. She cannot stop her father from drinking. She cannot change her sister back to the way she was before. She cannot pass Calculus, a system of

confusing signs and codes that despite her efforts at concentration, refuses to be of any use to her. She will fail Advanced English because the teacher insists on a definite plan behind every text, an approach in which the intentions of Conrad take precedence over *The Heart of Darkness*. Lisette stays quiet in class. She keeps notes about what the novel means, and what it means changes every day.

“It’s a boy,” Shelley says. “See the blue clothes?”

The baby is round cheeked and pink-skinned. It looks up at Shelley and puts his small dimpled hand in his mouth and makes sucking noises.

“It’s hungry,” Lisette says.

“*He* is,” Shelley tells her. “Go call.”

Lisette does what she is told. She finds a phone book in the table’s drawer, and dials, and speaks to the secretary. It is a long time before they find Billy and she hears his voice on the other end, deadpan, a pretense Lisette hopes is for the office staff. Shelley bounces up and down with the baby. She moves from foot to foot, rocking it with her own body. And still, the woman has not returned. Outside on the yellow lawn the leaves whirl. Lisette thinks they have blown from other neighborhoods like her own, from the woods that border the backyards and the edges of town. She imagines they have tumbled down the hill from the cemetery, where the oaks and elms stand in small groves over select plots. She waits at the window watching the leaves dance and pitch about the lawn while Shelley rummages in the kitchen for formula. The baby, it seems, simply wants to be held. It has not cried once since Shelley picked it up.

Lisette tells Shelley that they need to go back to the car. On the kitchen clock they see it is lunchtime, and Billy will find a ride to come and get them. Shelley gives Lisette a dubious look.

“You go,” she says.

Lisette does not know why this annoys her. “No,” she says. “We both need to go.”

Shelley looks at the baby, and back at Lisette. “Hold him while I mix up a bottle,” she says.

Lisette has never held a baby in her life. Its weight, the way it squirms, surprises her. He smells a little sweet, like marshmallows. When she holds him he stares into her face so that she feels compelled to look away.

“Hurry up,” Lisette calls.

In the kitchen Shelley shakes up powdered formula and water in a bottle. She comes into the living room and stands beside Lisette. “Look how you’re holding him,” she says, laughing. Lisette plops him quickly back into Shelley’s arms, and Shelley widens her eyes. “Careful,” she says.

The decision to take the baby with them to the car is Lisette’s. Shelley will not leave him, and Lisette doesn’t want to face Billy Buckley alone.

“That woman is gone,” she tells Shelley. “We’ll have to call the police, or something.” It has been nearly an hour since she drove away. “We can probably see the driveway from the car, anyway,” she says.

Shelley agrees. She wraps the blanket around the baby’s body for warmth. Out in the sunlight, he squints his eyes, and Shelley drapes a corner of the blanket over his face.

It is still cool, but the sun has changed the way the neighborhood looks. It is more stark, unfriendly and deserted without the contrast of morning shadows. The wind and the blowing leaves make the uphill walk a nuisance. Shelley talks to the baby the whole time. She tells it *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. She sings it a song that she claims her mother sang to her about a ship loaded deep, *but not so deep as the love I'm in, I know not if I sink or swim*. Once they reach the car, Shelley is relieved that they can see the woman's driveway. They get into the car and close the doors and the inside begins to smell of the baby's sweetness and the formula that drips out of the corner of his mouth when he gnaws on the bottle's nipple.

Lisette turns the key in the ignition of Billy Buckley's car, expecting it to start. Sometimes, she's learned, if you expect things to happen they do. But this time, it does not, and she feels foolish for hoping. She cracks the window and the wind hums in and fills the interior of the car. There is a chill to it, a bit of winter, hollow like remorse. She lights a cigarette. The smoke billows out the window and up, caught in the wind that eddies the leaves. She doesn't think about Miller anymore. Thinking about him too much will open up the possibility of disappointment. He may have forgotten her, after all. It isn't too hard to imagine being forgotten by someone whose life is busy, who is full of plans.

She watches out of the windshield. Every so often she glances in the rearview mirror, wondering from which direction Billy will appear. She wants him to be angry, to tell them what to do with the baby. She wants him to look at her and finally understand what she is like, and yet despite everything, still love her. And then through the wide

windshield she sees her sister. She is walking toward them on the same street, but a good mile away at the bottom of the hill. Her hair flies out, knotted and wild in the wind. She wears the purple parka. The leaves gather around her ankles and swirl up between the legs of her jeans. Lisette cannot see the expression on her face, but she no longer tries to imagine what she thinks or remembers or feels, anyway. She sees her sister will reach the car. She will come up the hill on the side by the old orchard and pass them, and Lisette knows she will let her walk by as if she is not the girl posed beside her in photographs of her childhood, the two of them wearing Easter dresses or Christmas robes, identical except for color.

Beside her in the car Shelley holds a woman's baby and sings, gently, a mother's songs. For her there is no lapse of love. The wind buffets the car, fiercer and insistent. Milkweed floats past caught in some other current. The leaves spin by. The sun lights up the dashboard gauges, casts a glare over the neighborhood. In time, Lisette's life will move into its future and she will be a passenger, watching it. Things will occur that she will not know about ahead of time, things less assured of happening, things she could not predict. And despite the refuge of Billy Buckley's love, the sturdy body of the car and its windows rolled up, despite the comfort of the moment before events are decided, she foresees, in the life that is planned for her, things from which she will never recover.

## SHE FELL TO HER KNEES

Nell met him the first time she went to the house. He came across the back yard with his drink. His clothes were rumpled, as if he'd been lying down in them—a dress shirt, a pair of gray trousers. It was a weekday afternoon. They stood by the sea wall and he asked her what she was doing there. The ice in his drink slid around. His eyebrows came together, laughing at her. He had sandy hair in need of a trim. He was the neighbor, and had noticed her car. He could fill her in on a number of things about the house, he said. Take that tree, for instance. Nell noted the fine bones of his hand, gesturing, the way his sleeve slid up to reveal his slender wrist. He was younger than she, and in need of saving. He did not as much say this, as attempt to hide it. She forgot his name as soon as he said it, and later, she had to ask.

Nell inherited the house from her mother's boyfriend, Vince Morrell. She had not seen or spoken to him since her mother's death, when she was seven, and her initial desire was to decline the key. It was bronze, with a cardboard tag, and it dangled from the attorney's bright fingernails like something plain and easily resisted. Nell asked her to sell the house, but the woman talked her into visiting it first. There may be something you want there, she said. For your children. Nell's two children were grown now, and away at school, but the attorney made her feel she owed them something, a memento, or a souvenir. Nell understood now how she submitted to the coercion, that the attorney's suit, its wool fabric fitted perfectly against her body, her pearls resting in the hollow of her

throat, her scenario of a house holding a secret history that must be passed down, had all undermined Nell's wish to avoid the place and its contents.

She went to see the house on a Monday afternoon, driving thirty minutes on the interstate to get there. The neighborhood was announced by a wrought-iron sign—the name *Sunset Park* written out in ornate lettering. Nell had passed the sign on her visits as a child, every other weekend when her mother had been alive. She did not have many memories of the house, and only a few of her mother, who had been denied her in the custody hearing. Now, the sign leaned, rusted and off-kilter, its tiered brick base sunk into layers of limestone and sand, but in the fifties, the twisted black iron curls established the neighborhood as lavish and upscale.

The house had not been difficult to locate. It was one of those long, rambling ranches, built of hollow block with bricks inlaid on either side of each window, in the semblance of shutters. There were wrought iron supports on the front porch, and a screen door with the outline of a flamingo. The roof was white barrel tiled, slick with moss, blackened by mold. Azaleas occupied the front beds, rangy and almost leafless with a few early pink blooms. Grapefruit ripened on the side yard tree, the branches weighted to the ground with the neglected fruit, and through the carport Nell watched the open bay tremble under pale winter sun. The rest of the neighborhood was comprised of new homes interspersed by bare lots of dirt etched with tractor's tires, where other ranch houses had been razed. The new houses were large ones with Mediterranean influences—iron balconies, terracotta tile roofs, their stucco exteriors painted yellow and pink and a color like beach sand. Built high off the ground to meet flood codes, they towered over

the few remaining ranches in a way that made Nell feel uncomfortably part of the space of years that separated the aged doctors and lawyers from their younger counterparts.

Nell's mother's affair and the ensuing divorce had been scandalous for its time. As an adult, Nell admired her mother's audacity, but as a child, she resented it, and always held it against her. She entered the house that first day and remembered how it felt to believe she had been overlooked, to think that in the larger picture of her mother's life she was inconsequential. Nell stood outside the front door and found her hand fitting the key in the lock shook. She stood on the threshold, overcome with an uneasy sorrow for herself. Once inside she felt urged to leave the door open, to keep the outdoors and its humidity accessible, and prevent the smell of the house from invading her clothes—dust and mold, the scent of burned linoleum, of charred plaster and ceiling rafters and plastic coated electrical wires. She had gone through the main rooms and opened all the windows, just glancing at the furnishings—the sofas and their sagging cushions, the tall glass beaded lamps, the wallpaper, damp and peeling from the walls, the horrible blackened hole in the kitchen ceiling. All of it made her apprehensive. She went out through the den's sliding glass doors, down a small cement walk through a stand of tall juniper to the sea wall.

That afternoon, standing there, she met the neighbor. He told her Vince Morrell had set fire to the kitchen. Vince was old, and incompetent, and finally a year ago removed to a nursing home to die.

“That's too bad,” she said, absently. They stood by the sea wall, and the bay water hit the concrete with a languid slosh. Nell tried not to imagine big Vince Morrell, his

darkly curling head of hair turned gray and patchy, his thick appendages whittled down to a helpless thinness. She had disliked him as a child because she believed he had taken her mother from her, and she felt sorry for this now. There was a slight breeze off the bay, warm and heavy. It was rancid, like the run-off silt filling up the canals. Nell could not admit a relationship to Vince, or the house, so she lied to the neighbor and told him she had purchased it. He gave her an admiring look, as if she impressed him with her business sense, and then the look went on, Nell noticed, intending something else.

“I would invite you to sit down, but I don’t know about the chairs,” she said. The brick patio was grown through with tall weeds, and four lawn chairs were grouped in its center, their plastic seat slats dangling, their metal frames corroded with rust. The neighbor looked over at the chairs and smiled.

“Vince and I might have managed those a year ago,” he said.

Nell did not want to talk about Vince. Behind her, through the open sliding glass doors the smell of the house came out into the back yard.

“He was an interesting old guy,” the neighbor said. “God, that was awful, watching them take him off. You know, all that struggling, having to be subdued. You don’t want to watch that happen to anyone.”

Nell stared at him. He looked a little afraid. “I imagine,” she said.

He squinted and sipped his drink to the melted ice, and then he glanced down into his glass. “I like your eyes,” he said. “They don’t give much away.”

Nell found she could not respond. She felt her heart step up. The neighbor took a sip of his drink. He smiled at her with his wet lips. His own eyes were sad and greenish, like the bay.

“I don’t suppose you have any gin,” he said. He looked behind her, toward the house.

“We could see,” she suggested.

That day, he would not follow her inside. He waited out by the juniper, and Nell went back into the darkened interior. She saw, in her search, a game of backgammon abandoned on a table, the Chinese screen she used to play behind, the chandelier dangling glass beads like her mother’s earrings. Everything was covered with dust and cobwebs, acquired in the year since Vince had been removed, or probably before that, when he was too old to dust and clean. She crossed the slate floor in the family room to find the round cabinet filled with dusty bottles. She did not want to emerge too soon with the bottle, to seem that she had any previous knowledge of the place. But she wanted to return to the neighbor, to his empty glass and his rattling ice. She liked the idea of him waiting for her with his barely concealed need. It gave her a kind of power she had not felt since Sweeney, the man with whom she’d had an affair, years ago, when her children were young. From outside the open windows came the smell of the bay and the grapefruit that had fallen to rot in the winter grass. When she went out with the bottle, the neighbor was gone.

Today, she sat in her car in the house's driveway with the heater running. She had been coming to the house for nearly a month. The weather had been warm and humid for December, but yesterday the humidity broke and the temperature dropped. She had parked in full view of the neighbor's house next door, decorated for the holidays with swags of pine over the iron balconies, and a string of lights along the line of the roof. She felt observed, and waited. Now, she knew his name was Teddy, but there was only always the two of them, and she rarely used it. She knew, too, that he had lost his job, and was supposed to be searching for another, that his wife was a pediatrician. The woman had crossed the driveway with her hand extended one afternoon as Nell emerged from her car.

"Are you the new neighbor?" she asked. She had a practiced composure. Her hair flowed thick and blond from its roots, down past her shoulders. Nell clasped her small hand. They told each other their names. Nell felt the wife's eyes take her in—her blouse, its small tear by a buttonhole, her faded jeans, her hair worn twisted back, her face without make up exposed and assailable. She saw her eyes feign interest for the minutes they conversed. Then they parted. Teddy's wife's heels clipped along the paved driveway, up the long set of stairs. Nell watched her disappear into the house. She did not think Teddy would come by that day, but he did. He stood outside the sliding glass doors and the breeze off the bay caught his collar.

"So, what did you make of her?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," Nell said. "What did she make of me?"

Teddy laughed. He shook his head at her, slowly, and would not answer. He shook the ice in his glass.

“I think she misjudged me,” Nell said.

She had slid the door, and stood in the opening. The smell of the house came out from behind her. It passed through her clothing, like a specter.

Waiting in her car in the gray afternoon Nell saw how Vince Morrell’s roses still climbed the trellis along the side of the house, how the lawn had become crabgrass and horse nettle with patches of dirt. The house had always seemed huge, and maze-like, its box hedges neatly trimmed, hiding the Easter eggs she and her mother spun around in coffee cups filled with vinegary dye. The azaleas bloomed pink and gaudy. There were parties by the bay on a brick patio, her mother in a long green dress and rhinestone sandals, smiling showing all her teeth, her hair long and blond and held back with a barrette. She remembered the smell of Vince’s Vantage cigarettes left burning in all the ashtrays, the crumpled packs wedged between couch cushions. Nell would go around and put the cigarettes out, the filters dented by the grip of his thumb and index finger.

Vince Morrell loved the Sunset Park house, and once, to hurt him, Nell’s mother called a realtor and signs appeared, one in front facing the street, another in the back for boaters on the bay. The maid, Aurora, told her that the house’s sale would be ensured if she buried a statue of St. Joseph, and so her mother told Aurora to just go ahead and bury one. Nell remembered Vince Morrell on the lawn one night, digging holes with a trowel, trying to uncover it. There had been drinks, and arguing, Vince’s glass set on the walkway while he dug, the amber liquid shimmering in the lamppost light. Her mother

had stood in the doorway, goading, calling out to him every so often, to see if he had found it. Nell watched from her bedroom window. She smelled the metal of the window screen, the leaves of the azalea plants. It was Christmas then, too, the house trimmed with a row of lights that cast color onto the hedges. Her mother and Vince's voices reverberated against the balmy silence of the neighborhood at two AM. There had been other fights, suitcases thrown out onto the lawn, her mother in her robe wandering off, and then sought, her robe translucent in the car's headlights. Nell never mentioned the turmoil of her weekends with her mother to anyone. Even as a child she knew to assume, as they did, the guise of normalcy.

Nell turned off her car and got out. She put the key in the lock and swung the front door open, breathing in the house's smell, different now, as if both her and Teddy's presence these last weeks had altered some chemistry. The first time he had come into the house he whistled through his teeth. He stepped carefully, his arms out a bit from his sides, as if he thought something would topple over and break in his wake.

"This is like entering a time warp," he said.

The house retained its original nineteen-sixties furnishings. Fabric had begun to give way—throw pillows, sofa cushions, lampshades, all worn or ripped or yellowed. The tables were spare shapes, their tops marked by the rings of Vince Morrell's drinks. The floors were oak parquet, warped in spots. The house's structural weakening showed in long cracks in the plaster ceilings and walls, in water damage that left wallpaper stained a color like dried blood. The kitchen, galley-style, had pine cabinets, worn down around the handles by years of Vince Morrell's grasping fingers. The roof's beams were exposed

here, along with dangling wires and the air conditioning's metal ducts. Nell did not go into the kitchen with its injured ceiling. There were shelves in the living room filled with book-of-the-month club selections of the forties and fifties—Cozzens *By Love Possessed*, *The Bedside Book of Famous British Stories*, *The American Character*, Lin Yutang's *The Importance of Living*, and the *Fireside Treasuries* of short stories and humor and essays. Nell and Teddy looked through the books one whole afternoon. They sat on the parquet floor. They had one of the bottles from the liquor cabinet nearby, and refilled glasses Teddy found in the kitchen cabinet and rinsed out in the sink.

“I hate warm gin,” Nell said. She took a sip.

Teddy grinned at her over the rim of his glass. “Don't drink it then,” he said.

Nell did not know if she liked him very much. The books were before both of their times. They felt damp in her hands, the pages mottled and tinged brown at the edges. Nell would have liked to tell him how she once sat on the couch in this very room and tried to read them as a child, but she could not. Her deception made her quiet, and hesitant. Next door, they heard a truck with a trailer pull up and a landscaper's crew run its mowers across Teddy's lawn. The smell of the books mixed with the scent of oil and cut grass. That day, the wind took the smell of the bay somewhere else.

Nell watched Teddy. He opened the books in his lap, carefully, flipping through the pages, looking up at her and shaking his head. He talked to her about each one, assessing it, giving his opinion. Nell felt his talking like a kind of mask over what they wanted from each other. After, she did not remember a word they exchanged. She had wanted to lean over the stack of books and place her mouth on his, and then she had done

it, interrupting him mid-sentence. She felt his mouth, still shaped around the word he'd spoken. It tensed with surprise, and then softened. His free hand slid up along her face. The lawn crew cut its swath, the noisy mowers drowning out the sound of their sighing. The number of ways to kiss him unfolded. They stretched out on the parquet. He asked her, implored her, to remove her clothing.

“Just this,” he said, undoing buttons. She put her hand over his and he stopped and groaned. The light in the room dimmed until they could make out only the glow of their clothes, the revealed places of skin. Outside the windows the lamppost left a halo of light on the front lawn. Teddy rolled away from her and stood, slowly, brushing down his shirtfront. He fumbled with one of the lamps and it lit the room the yellowed fabric of the old shade.

“Do you have to go?” she asked him. Nell could see the whorls of dust under the skirt of the sofa. Teddy looked around the room, flushed and amused.

“Why didn't we go on a couch?” he asked her. He reached for his empty glass and tipped it back.

Nell propped her head in her hands. She grimaced.

“How bad could it be?” he said, and he plopped down on one and bounced. Nell stayed where she was, and Teddy smirked. “I assume there are bedrooms.”

Nell had not been down the long hallway to discover them.

“I assume,” she said. She felt the air from the open window. She felt her body on the parquet, a long seam of heat. The warmth rose out of her blouse. She thought he might want her to go to him on the couch, but she did not. She put her head back on the

floor. She closed her eyes and heard the rush of air accompanying a car passing, a child's call from inside one of the houses, squirrels scrambling in the trees. She heard a grapefruit hit the ground, heavy and ripe. When she opened her eyes she was alone, resentful of his leaving her.

Nell did not go to the house every day. She kept her purpose for going there vague to her husband, who had wanted to send a truck to cart off the contents, and who she only temporarily held at bay. Sometimes she brought boxes, to fortify the pretense of packing things up, or clearing them out. She was not sure yet, why she went. She liked the way Teddy wanted her, forcefully, without much talking. She craved his limey tasting mouth. She thought she could make him want her enough to lure him away from his other life, to secure an admission of love. But then yesterday she saw two children playing in his driveway. One pushed a yellow metal truck, his bottom round in diapers. The other, a girl, and older, had a doll in a stroller. Both were fair-haired and dressed in bright, clean clothing. Nell watched them play from the confines of her car. The nanny, an older Latino woman, sat in a folding chair in the garage. She held a magazine in her lap and looked up from it occasionally to call out to them. "No, no," she said, and then some words in Spanish. The children understood the warning that came each time they approached the end of the driveway.

Nell remembered when her own two children were little, though she could not separate the memory from Sweeney. The long days of preparing meals, cleaning up spilled juice and crumbs, sorting pieces of puzzles and toys into their respective bins,

changing clothing and diapers, the tediousness of her life, was charged, suddenly, with the longing for his mouth, her body sore with wanting him. He had been a swim instructor at the country club. For the time they were together Nell was troubled by desire. She would notice things like the striated colors in the sky, birds in formation shifting and wheeling, leaves blown across her windshield while she was driving, and feel them all like a violent longing. His body smelled of the heavily chlorinated country club pool. He lived in a small, shoddy apartment accessed by a wooden outdoor stairway. He left his towels on his bathroom floor to stiffen with mildew. When she left at dusk he would turn on the lamp by the bed and she would see him, the expanse of his bare chest, the taut skin that joined his hipbones, illuminated through the uncurtained window glass.

It hadn't lasted. He quit the club and she stopped hearing from him. She assumed, finally, that he had grown tired of her leaving him, and found someone else. The summer of the abandonment, Nell went to the beach with her children to get away. She had not wanted to see her husband's happy, steady face, pouring his morning juice, humming to himself. She'd used her father's beach house on Anna Maria Island. All day the children had busied themselves in the warm sand. Nell remembered her despair now, how much it had bothered her to be forgotten. She would give the children their baths and put them in bed. Then, sitting by the water she drank. The little waves came in. The coquinas dug themselves back under the sand. She awoke each morning with a headache, morose and silent. She could not understand it. Her life with her husband and children was a course of events already set in motion, impossible to breach. She would not, like her mother, abandon one life for another. Surely, it had been only the sex she wanted. There wasn't

any absence of love, just his body missing from her life—his adoring mouth and hands, the light pressure of his hips, the simple way their bodies fit.

“I want him one more time,” she’d whisper, an addict.

She knew the same thing had happened again with Teddy. She never vowed not to let it. She was heedless. This time there were no children to occupy her, their little bodies under her hands, expectant and greedy for her ministrations. Now, there was only Teddy, his mouth wet with gin and lime and ice, his forehead scarred from the skate blade of a childhood hockey game, the mole on the inside of his arm, the sheen of sweat on his chest, the soft timbre of his pleading she could not refuse. She had begun to imagine them together other places, in restaurants she liked, at the beach house, on trips that she could easily pay for. But in the house she knew it was just their bodies and what their bodies did, and there would never be anything more than that. Yesterday, Nell watched Teddy’s children from the car until the nanny took them inside. She saw Teddy come out the front door and stand at the top of the high brick steps. She drove away as he descended to come to her, blind to everything but his need.

Today, Nell breathed the house’s stale air. Its heaviness dulled her movements. Inside the front door was a plate of switches, and she hit them all, flipping on a foyer light, and the porch light and the lamppost on the yellowed front lawn, an ornate piece of wrought iron, with three glass-shaded bulbs. She went through all the rooms, opening up the windows, and then out the sliding doors where she saw Teddy was already waiting for her. Some days, he had not come, and she would sit in the house on the old couch

cushions, and remember the way she had, as a child, waited for her mother to return on the nights she and Vince went out, watching the headlights pan across the wall, knowing again how it was to feel their absence. Out by the sea wall, Teddy wore a white t-shirt with his trousers and his feet were bare, as if he'd partly undressed, or made some kind of quick escape. He carried a bag of ice and his glass. He looked a little wrung out and sheepish.

"I forgot my shoes," he said. He wiggled his toes. They were white and chilled in the dead grass.

"Do you really need them?" she asked.

He shrugged. Nell had come later because, she told him, she wanted to see the sunset on the bay. He had mentioned it before, and she wanted to see for herself. She did not want to tell him the truth, that she had finally agreed to let her husband send the truck in the morning.

"I almost missed you," Teddy said.

They stood by the sea wall, looking at each other.

"Did you think I wouldn't come back?" Nell asked.

Teddy stared for a long time at the base of her throat, then turned and glanced at the choppy bay, hiding his expression. Nell wore a sweater. She supposed he was cold, the way the wind came off the water, and blew his hair over his eyes. The bag of ice dripped into the dirt of the yard. Around them the wind bent the tall juniper so that it appeared to bow in reverence.

“Do you want to go inside?” she asked, though she did not know why. A formality, the way she would ask her husband if he wanted the newspaper when he came downstairs in the morning.

Soon after their first afternoon together, she and Teddy had gone down the dark hallway to the bedrooms. He had opened each door, and they had glanced inside.

“This must be little Jimmy’s room,” he said. He leaned in the doorway. She stood behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist, slid her hand below the clasp of his pants. Over his shoulder she saw a twin bed with a chenille bedspread, and a pine chest of drawers. On wooden shelves stood trophies and models of army airplanes. This was Vince Morrell’s son’s room, Vince Jr. Nell remembered the smell of model glue coming out from under the door, how she would knock and ask to be let in, and he would refuse. He died in his twenties in a car accident on the causeway. She knew the room across the hall would be the one she stayed in, that it, too, would be the same—white French provincial furniture, a bed with a canopy like one she had pointed to in a Sears catalog, and her mother had sent Vince out to purchase for her.

“Little Sally’s,” Teddy said. He had flipped on the lights. The canopy fabric hung in tatters. Nell could still make out the pattern, purple stripes, like ribbon, and pink roses. The blinds on the windows that looked out to the road were bent. There was a large patch of spreading dampness on the wall underneath them, as if they’d been left open during a storm, and the rain had filled the sills and spilled over. Nell’s mother’s collection of horses still stood on the desk shelf. Nell had never liked them, their fiery faces, their

heads rearing back to show dilated nostrils. She had thought the manes, soft real hair, the only redeeming thing about them, but she had taken them down in a false show of devotion when her mother asked, with her sorrowful eyes, why she never played with them.

The room beside it was the master bedroom, darkened with drawn shades. The carpet was faded and stained. The bedcovers were kicked down, as if someone had just gotten up, a turquoise blanket, and yellowed sheets. Nell had pulled Teddy back into the hallway, her mouth on his neck, her fingers undoing the buttons of his shirt. Nell had learned as a child, through overheard adult conversation, that this was where Vince had found her mother, overdosed on Seconal. She had imagined for herself what the adults would not say, that her body had been sprawled across the sheets, that there had been no pulse and nothing for the paramedics to attempt to save. Nell knew which robe her mother wore, the silver velour, slit up the front to reveal her long white legs. She saw her eyes, open and glassy, with their same questioning. *What?* she would ask, when she caught Nell looking. She would be on her way out to the patio with a drink, or dressed for dinner, her earrings caught in her hair. Nell would look away and say nothing. Not, *you are beautiful*. Not, *I love you*.

The last bedroom had been Aurora's. It held a twin bed with a bare mattress. The curtains were sheers, pulled back, and the light came in from the bay and wavered on the bare parquet. There was no other furniture in the room. Teddy lay down on the bed and folded his hands on his chest. He looked up at the ceiling, like a patient.

“Do something with me,” he whispered.

She climbed up and draped her body over his.

“Say what you want,” she told him, pinning his arms back, willing to give him whatever he asked.

Today, Teddy followed Nell into the house. She felt his eyes on her legs below her skirt. She went to the family room first, to take a bottle from the cabinet, but Teddy dropped the ice and the glass on a table and took hold of her around her waist. He buried his face in her hair and exhaled, a long sighing breath. Nell felt a surge of panic and desire she tried to hide.

“What?” she asked him, drawing back.

This angered him, her cold detachment. “Stop it,” he said, as if he might cry, or strike her.

He did not want a drink. He wanted her in the back bedroom, spread on the bed without clothes. He took her by the hand down the long, dim hall. Nell remembered Aurora coming out of her room in the mornings—her face drawn and pale, her dark hair like a hood in the shadows, her scuffing slippers. Her eyes softened when they saw her. She and Nell had gone into the kitchen together and made hot chocolate, warming the milk in a pan. Aurora let Nell stir. She remembered the heat coming off the burner on her arm, the metal spoon heating up in her fingers. Outside the sliding glass doors the bay was alive, skittish, changing colors. Nell’s mother had gotten up next in her long silk robe. She stood looking at the bay through the doors. Her perfume smell hid in the robe’s

depths. Her hands stayed deep in the pockets. They came out to light a cigarette, and then, they shook.

“Do you like it here, Nellie?” she asked. Her voice was tentative and unsure. Nell saw now that her mother’s love had been withheld in fear, waiting for a sign, that it might have poured from her, a liquid warmth, but Nell with her silence fended it off. She let Teddy hold her down on the bed. She let him slide off her clothing and cover her with his mouth and hands, with his own shaking limbs. When he was finished he rolled aside and pulled her up against his thudding heart. Underneath her the mattress was wet and cold, with a dank odor. They listened to the bay slap the sea wall. They heard the voices of his children playing in the next yard. In the houses around them small and mundane things continued, the food preparing, the laundry folding, the sex in bedrooms, the safety of rituals tiding everyone over. Nell thought of her husband waiting at home for her, wondering about her absences, his plate of food on the table, his years of investment in her presence, and now, an empty house, her unsorted mail piled up on the counter. In the room with Teddy the sunset tinged the walls the color inside a conch.

*You will always have to go*, she said. She looked down at his face, his eyes and their sad cast, his mouth saying her name. If all those years ago Sweeney had asked her to leave her life she saw now she might have done it. If her mother had once held out her arms to her, Nell would have gone there, too. She still did not know if she was spared, or robbed. She looked down at Teddy’s face and he watched her, wondering. She saw they would have love and terror, or they would have nothing. Nell felt her love for him, dire and urgent, like a hand over her mouth.

She sat up and found her clothing where he had tossed it. She dressed and went, moving through the house, its rooms in twilight, its decay masked. She felt at home there with the dust and the smell and the disuse. The St. Joseph had been small, plaster, the size of her hand, stolen from the nativity scene in the living room. Aurora had given it to her to hold while she dug. He wore a brown painted robe. He held a staff, the other arm extended, beckoning. He was the patron saint of the family and home, Aurora told her. That night was damp and starless. She had remembered to put on the quilted robe her mother gave her, draped across the foot of her bed.

“This is for the best,” Aurora said as she dug. Nell had smelled licorice on her breath that came out, cloudlike, around her head. Aurora swore her to secrecy. She told Nell that her mother and Vince would be better apart. “Sometimes that is the way of things,” she said. In her fervent child’s heart Nell had wished it so.

It was Nell’s mother who told Vince the statue was there, somewhere, who’d watched his drunken, desperate search from the doorway. Aurora packed and left the house in a cab. Nell, watching him on the lawn from her bedroom window, had felt her complicity, a powerful devotion. Vince dug for hours in the wrong place. He had made holes, they saw in the morning, all across the front lawn, cutting through the St. Augustine with his trowel, scattering little clods of grass and dirt. A day later the buried statue would become part of her mother and Vince’s reconciliation, a joke between them, and in the living room, the remaining figures in the nativity scene continued to pose in their tableau—Mary alone by the infant, her blue robe chipped, the wise man standing aside, waiting, his gift glued into his wonderful hands.

Nell stood on the lawn in the lamplight. She had forgotten her sweater, and the cold slipped down the front of her blouse. From the front porch she took twelve steps along the azaleas and stopped. The statue was there behind the hedge, buried in close to the house. Nell moved in among the dry branches and scraped at the dirt with her hand. It was dense with the azalea roots, and smelled as she remembered it, of the fertilizer Vince used to make the shrubs bloom. Around her the neighborhood houses lit up warm and yellow. The darkness was a body, bending over the hedges. She was not sure who watched her, or if she was entirely alone. But she would fall to her knees because she had held the little statue in her hand, and she knew where to find it, prostrate in the bed of soil, its robe's folds the same, its plaster palm, upturned, still held out in the semblance of redemption. And though Nell's limbs kept Teddy's memory fresh like a wound, she sensed, already, the unconscionable ease with which she would forget him.