Blue skin and other organs

Kellie Wells

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BLUE SKIN AND OTHER ORGANS

By
Kellie Wells
B.A., University of Kansas, 1985

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MRS. MILSTEAD

The two neighbor boys who rotated her tires and opened tight jars thought because she was seventy-eight and drove an impeccably clean white Ford Fairlane, she’d have wads of money zipped in baggies hidden beneath pork steaks in the freezer, money stuffed in mason jars concealed in the frayed pockets of housecoats, money rolled, rubber-banded, and planted in the moist earth under the philodendron.

They walked toward her with stiff grins and water guns, pushed them into the soft billow of her abdomen. Mrs. Milstead slowly unbuttoned her white eyelet blouse, the handkerchief beneath her watch waving like thin wings as her palsied grip moved down her chest. She lifted an empty breast from its cup, tenderly, as though she were coddling an infant. It lay flat across both hands, and she offered it up as if it were a sandwich, a ginger snap. One boy nudged it off the plate of her palms as he shot her again and again, soaking her stringy chest.

They ran howling through rooms, bumping like clumsy dogs, rifling through closets and drawers, and gathered a booty of old dolls with cracked faces, rusting fingernail clippers, keychains, a bag of frozen chocolate Kisses, and Mrs. Milstead cried, Sweet Jesus as the skateboard cracked flat against her brittle skull.
CLOSING THE WOUND, 1965

Aunt Amelia stood atop the kitchen
table with the roasting pan locked
between her ankles and gave
birth. The jellied body, molded and still
and only as big as a fist, slipped
silently from the opening like a secret
she could no longer stand to keep.
She fingered the cord that had moiled and fed,
and snipped it clean with pinking shears.

She was found with lips green-black and brailled
like the skin of an avocado, stewing
in the hypnotic musk of decay.
Neighbors stared squint-eyed and cupped
their groins, coughing into their collars.
The air was thick as cheese, pungent and clinging.
Next to her head, on the nightstand, stood
a can of Bon-Ami and a droop
of nasturtiums whose once sun colors
had turned to shades of soil. Aunt Amelia
lay crisp and white as a teacup, the gash
packed tight as a clot with tea towels,
the raw flaps of flesh sewn halfway shut
with coarse twists of string and a poultry
needle, as a black gnarl
of blood hardened
beneath her.
FLASHBACK

when I was five
the snowflakes
were big as pancakes
and fell out of the sky
like cartoons

they just kept falling
year round
like me
wet ghosts
that filled my shoes

when I was five
my face was shiny and poised
a bowling trophy
a boysenberry
and the days atrophied
beneath my patent-leathered feet

when I was five
she left with the man
who twitched like a gerbil
and made me pull his finger

the sympathetic cows
welcomed me with open
eyes like old spoons
they grazed on forgotten graves
and licked me clean

on May 28, 1968, at 11:59 p.m.
sleeping beneath the mossy moon
I had a lucid dream
the complexion of herring
in which my father and I
sat at a tiny table
eating peanut butter and banana sandwiches
drawing pictures on an etch-a-sketch
of stiff dogs fetching presents

papa’s big sloppy eyes
rolled back in his head
in a hallucination of birth
it shone out his mouth
like a silent home movie
spraying white light on the wall
my dream bled with color
the numbers wound down
and when I awoke
I was six
WATCHING THE BODY STOP

In your body, fluid streams
just beneath the skin, winding under
unsuspecting follicles. It runs clear
and moot as a placebo to your spongy heart
whose edges are shriveled and sallow
as old broccoli.

I remember
when you dropped the Tonka truck
on your big toe; your body twitched
as you tripped over the pulse
of pain. Gravity gets me down, you said,
and your toenail blackened and left you
like a seasonal antler.

Now your body
is like cake mix, white and mulched
with grains. I bend and blink
my eyes against a pith of sutured
stomach. I am pushed inside and snake
down a vein, sliding like a breakaway
clot in a blue stream until
I fall through a raveled seam.
Wading through a soft muck of organs,
I spot you perched next to your sleeping
bladder, flat and quilted.

Then I recall
the poised hands that showed me pictures
the thick lips that read me verses
and the voice soft as flannel
that said, Shakespeare and Playboy
both have bawdy parts.

Together
we peel strips of cuticle from our fingers
and play poker, betting with good cells
as the watery lights grow dim, and I’m back
on the outside with my hand on your chest,
counting the hurried seconds between beats.
FLESH AND BLOOD

Your slow blood, father
creeps through my veins
like an insult,
looking for escape,
a place to spread fear.
Genetic hand-me-downs
rumble inside me
as the DNA curl and fidget.

Here in this viewing room
with colored windows
bright enough to lick,
the Blood of the Lamb
chops living into
bite-sized pieces.

It restoreth my soul,
blistered and mean
where you rubbed it.
Unbandaged, the soul breathes,
but it wheezes and whispers
and asks for macaroons.

At the hospital
I kissed your waxen feet,
sucking on your grey toes,
because, unlike your current face,
they looked like you.
I wondered if
you hovered unseen,
counting our pain.

The new pink of your cheeks
alights like a loud sunset,
unnatural as the gaggle
of flowers that follow you
from room to room,
blooming at your head
like an ironic bonnet.

I look for the snooty angels
with their bloody noses
and sagging socks,
but they are too busy playing
good cop/bad cop
with confessional children.
The mums are inconsolable,
and the sickly moon outside,
crusted yellow with impetigo,
shines nervously
on the swayback awning.

My hands,
flat and impractical,
clumsy ping-pong paddles,
flap at my sides
unable to grasp
the big picture.

The air is thicker than plasma,
and the heavy, velvet curtains
shudder with medicinal whispers.

These people, armed with casseroles
and blessings, take it all in daintily
through a medicine dropper,
though they gush and gawk
and wonder if we'll scream
when we're alone.

They twist their pockets
and think about brisket.
This residue of sympathy--
curious squirrels
in search of a nibble, a contrast
like blood on a Barbie doll
to confirm their suspicions
they are alive.

Your feet are now a secret.
The flesh around your neck
folds out in soft waves
as though this suit of skin
were several sizes too big,
or as though you were only
an exoskeleton.

Your shrine of Elvis postcards
should be here as your emissary,
though people would send stamps
instead of snapdragons.
We could mail your grave
someplace far away exotic
where emus would watch over you.
I can't help thinking
of your inky fingernails
growing without you
as we zip you into
your new seed.
RELEASE

His breath spreads over my body
wet and feathery as tomato soup.
His hot hand, drawn into my naval
by my groping breaths, goes through me,
pressing through a fumble of organs,
through and through the mattress,
box springs, as I lie there pinned
like a science project, a carouseled
cricket. He covers me wholly
like a fleshy film, matching
me pore for pore, and I
scream through the past
an invocation to my

Grandpa, I’m sorry
I bit your spotted hand till it bled
when you tickled me; sorry
I sneered at All-Star Wrestling,
poking fun at the harnessed groin
of your headlocking hero, Handsome
Harley Race; sorry I spent more time
with your teeth than I did with you
as they swam alone at night
in their glass chamber, me imagining
they were Houdini; sorry Grandma
snuck out of the house, jealousy
creeping beneath the strained skin
of her temples, to bring me tuna
and twinkies while you sat at home rocking
to the rhythm of your loosening skin.

You were both grandfather and -mother
to me as Grandma was too busy cleaving
to my childhood, trying to siphon it
out of me and into her dry bones.
She kissed my freckles individually
as if this act might retroactively shape her
into a budding teen angel;
and when she forgot to take her medicine,
her emotions swelling like a smashed thumb
inside her, she twisted through the kitchen
like a funnel cloud, lobbing crystal goblets,
running barefoot across the broken patterns
of the brittle bone china. She wrapped
herself in curtains, clawing outward
like a bagged monkey, and it was you
who picked the tiny spurs of glass
from her shredded feet. You traced    (no break)
her torn toes with the Merthiolate
wand so methodically as though
you were drawing on a thimble.
I remember her arms so tiny and blue
they were helpless tubes beneath
the grip of straps and her gauze-
covered clumps of feet, red
exclamation points at the ends
of her legs. Her mind was as cluttered
as her dresser top, and her eyes,
old and sharp as hat pins, reached
out to me as though she were
only an unwilling conduit
for madness. That year
the cancer ate her inside
out like a child with an Oreo.

You just sat there, fingering
the ceramic poodle and her chain
of offspring, looking sleepy and lost
and staring at the broken compass
on the coffee table. And I'm sorry finally
that I ate chicken noodle soup
from a styrofoam cup while others wept
on your folded hands.
``

My blood rustles, his hands winding
through my roots, his tongue in my
heart, and I let it all go with
my breath, hoping your last gasp
was as easy as instinct.
GHOST

I am beside myself
doppelganging
like there was no tomorrow
I’m schizophrenic
and so am I
haunting my own subconscious
as if it were a forgotten pub
where bad memories go
to drink themselves silly
so we can look back at them
and laugh
my memories wear
tinkerbell bottoms
and peter pan collars and say
how do you make a dead baby float
two scoops of ice cream
root beer
and a dead baby
and the memory of my mother
stands crossing guard stiff
with her memory of a child
who is as yet unborn
nursing a beer
loving it
as if it were her own
and in walks a purple cow
I thought I’d never see one
tenderly carrying the milk
of human kindness
as if it were our only hope
one of her sacred stomachs growls
a bovine tune
of occasional grass
as she chews on the strings
of my mother’s gingham apron
and ruminates
on the meaning of my life

_fodder for thought_ I mutter
and slip out the window
back to my eyes
rapidly moving with dreams of sleep
and tuck myself in
beneath heavy lids (no break)
wedding the ring
of milk
like dew
to my grassy lashes
as I kiss myself goodnight
SAVING GRACE

Aunt Grace was Our Lady of Perpetual Emotion. The memory of her voice like air that is allowed to escape slowly from the tautly stretched throat of a balloon, still skins me alive. Carefully tempered beads of emotion always dotted her eyes. And she was a squeezer: nothing malleable escaped her pincers. We knelt together with King James' crowning achievement; she waved it in the air with flabby zeal, the gold embossed lettering gleaming, and it proved nothing to me except that my fear of God gave me the hiccups. She dimmed the lights, clenched my hand, jerked my arm upward. She pleaded to the plastic, glow-in-the-dark crucifix nailed to the wall. She lifted it off, pulling the nail out of the chalky plaster and leaving behind a clean patch of flowers in the shape of the cross.

Hear us! Hear us, O, Christ! O, Christ! I aped reverently. I trembled. I felt I was suspended not by a golden thread, but simply by a child’s thin arm from God’s navel. Aunt Grace poured grape Nehi down the front of my white gown and incanted:

May the blood of the lamb cleanse your rancid robe. She pushed my head down and stretched my arms out on the floor. Help us, dear Lord, dear Lord, to be worthy of our suffering. My knees throbbed. The braided rug burned its pattern into them. I felt branded for life like the cows I liked to wave at.

It was my sister who saved me. She burst in on our sticky communion and snatched me away from the ensuing depiction of eternal damnation. Jesus Christ, Aunt Grace! she said. She grabbed me and spirited me up to the attic whose precarious fold-up stairs frightened Aunt Grace’s varicose-veined calves. She slapped at my shirt with a dusty rag.
She was extremely annoyed.
She started in on me.
How many times have I told you to steer clear of Aunt Grace, anyway? She’s a nutcake. And she’s ruined another of your god-damned gowns. Now repeat after me:
Owah
Owah
Tagu
Tagu
Siam
Siam.
She put her hands on her hips which sat angrily atop her spread legs, spread like my P.E. teacher’s, and demanded: Now say it all together.
Owah tagu siam. Owahtagusiam. Oh, what a goo Siam. As we sat in the attic, we listened to the rhythm of penitent sobs.
Aunt Grace wept.
TUMOR

After the baptism, God hung over me like a debt (the old bathtub ring), his stringy chins dipping down in his morning mug marked G, the hot steam curling through his nose like brocade. And I said, God, baby. No one looks like Monty Clift this early in life. His chubby eyes blinked sadly, as if marking off whole eras.

Fair morning, but we've got to get you in shape, I purred, pinching my lip for effect. So then what-do-you-think but the old cod got the bends, folding himself in like a napkin, snapping into a triangle. That's rich, Mr. G. Simply divine, but seriously.

And in the whirling flurry of a time-lapse tempest God swooped to my level, shaped in the putty of my mother. The muddy brown pin curls spilled around the edges, gilding the worn face and lying silent beneath the protective mesh of the lavender snood. Face cream glinted off-key lime green and framed the features like a wet bed of lettuce. The quilted housecoat belled around the body, spewing a flowered print in all directions. My father's pajama bottoms sprouted beneath the hem like a postscript, stopped just short of the slippered feet. This busy diptych of God/Mom whistled in my brain as an arm rose and reached behind a tree like a vaudeville hook. It wrapped around an ageless, gaunt boy whose body looked lived in. He stood unsteadily under a geyser of white hair. Listen, deary, I'd like you to meet my only boy, Jesus, my God-Mother said, pushing him toward me like a blind date. He extended a spindly arm cuffed in leather bracelets radiating spiked (no break)
shafts, a silver sun. He wore a black t-shirt
with the glitter-glow letters announcing
BABY and an arrow pointing up.
It's great to finally meet you,
I sputtered. I've heard so much,
and he reached in his pocket,
pulled out a circle of yarn.
He wove it through his fingers
with autistic attention. Pulling
it tight, he peered through the threads
and said, Jacob's ladder.

The ladder went limp as he reached
through my shirt, unbuttoned my stomach,
and climbed inside. The cells knocked
about in my body and blood
leapt from my fingers, into the earth.
The merging birth burbled
within me like hunger, and I teetered
with the zoom of being
and the extra weight
I would not try to lose.
The J-Man and I went to see the Last Temptation of Himself. When it was over, he kissed my ear and said, It wasn’t the last, you know. We walked out into a night swollen with angry people who walked in circles and said, That’s not my Saviour. My Saviour did not have such dreams. My Saviour dreamt of lesions and fire and of licking the blood of sin from the invisible hands of God. Oh yeah, Jesus said, well if he has to wear a crown of thorns again, it’ll be on your heads. The crowd sizzled with hissing, and Jesus whispered to me, It wasn’t so bad, really. Endorphins are a wonderful thing.

We walked away from the murmuring mass, and I told him how I had always envisioned him dreaming of persimmons and chickens and kissing the soft spots of babies and how I thought his human side was his good side because it meant he understood our struggle to be more than instinct. J-Bird fished his eye from its socket and slipped it in my mouth. The better to see you with, he said.
GRAVEYARD SHIFT

I saw the Angel of Death at the 7-11 last night. She was eating a Piña Colada Icee and eyeing a glassed-in, skewered sausage. The spindly legs sprouting beneath her mini skirt were mottled with bruise, and her socks slunk, tired elastic puckering around knobs of ankle. "How are you feeling today, fraulein?" she asked through a sneaky grin. "Sniffles, shingles, lumbar stiffness, pink eye, ring worm, swollen lymph?" "No, no. I feel spry as a Slinky, Mort," I said. "Thanks for asking." Mort closed her eyes, her lips twisted in frown. She looked old, older than coal, and I wondered if I counted the wave of wrinkles on her face, if I'd come up with her age. "What gives, Mort? Why the long mug? Job got you down?" "Death," she said, "has lost its meaning." Her nervous freckles twitched against her pale cheeks like buzzing insects around a bare bulb. Her hair was sparse and flat against her scalp and curled around her head in black scribbles. "What a world, hunh Mort? What's it all coming to when A Very Brady Christmas beats out 60 Minutes?" "Go figure.

Each day another species of tree, grass, beetle, bird slips away as if it were only a bromide dropped in water. Gone are the honey eaters, whose only remaining signature is the brightly plumed cape of King Kamehameha, sugar maples, whose tender bark and roots have disappeared under the sizzle and snap of acid rain, and the once rich biotas of archipelagos trampled by the aggressive stomp of spreading cogongrass. It's got me down."

I shifted and sneezed, said "We'll always have Paris." Mort smiled and grabbed my hand, her touch soft as gauze. "Be glad you're not a Toolach Wallaby," and before Mort left, she fished an aluminum can from the trash, pressed it to my ear. "Here," she said, "it's for you."
ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE

So I had this dream, lucid as glass, I dreamt I was sleeping and dreaming and gathered around me were people who'd gotten on my nerves over the years, and I was able to speak to them freely, honestly, without fear of repercussion because, after all, they were only synapse, if that: Your mind, I said to one, is closed and narrow, clasped tight as a coin purse--to the boy who constantly pinched my milk money in second grade I said you'll be bald in no time, then suddenly they all turned to me and said let us go, we are boring, let the narratives rupture. That is what's interesting--I woke up and woke up and felt somehow fraudulent.

14

His hair has grown so long in my absence, and his legs are quite thin, pool cues

but who am I to talk, I am barely protoplasm and my complexion is sallow from poor diet--so tiring, the thick brown light parts the rind of remaining flesh and I am beginning again--does the past tense of begin mean is because I am not, yet.

13

I can hear her footfalls, my hazy lambchops, and feel her perspective pressing against the small of my back, can almost taste that tender pink ankle embroidered with sweet veins, the one that caught the viper's eye.

12

I hope it will not hurt, this messy business of being, being zipped into a fine skin again, pressed into density, conjugated into mass, this was slash am I feel as if I might leak once we hit the air above. I do look forward to new settings an escape from tired images and ill-tempered three-headed dogs--

I'll not be up for dancing tonight.

11

Eurydice Eurydice those well-oiled syllables the combustible mantra of a healthy machine-
I will play her favorite song as a guide
and a promise until the line
breaks

Lyre lyre I can already feel the blind eyes
in the back of his head beginning to glow, on the heels
of this is always the look that kills, that blurrs
the jointed syntax of my outstretched arms, that leitmotif
look, I can feel it in the skeleton I left behind
he will turn, my bleary-eyed patrician, and interpret me
back into faded form, a vague phrase (he always does

I feel the doubt the indigestible theme
welling up inside me like a fist in my chest
my breathing is tight and short I cannot hear
her behind me the tiny pressure
on the pine needles makes no sound, I must
know, the plot pulls my gaze aside
the variables are waning, must turn to her (I always do)

He turns, a verb poised on his lips,

You there connecting these words with meaning, imposing
significance--it is you who last see her

your eyes that condemn her, for your entertainment, your

private epiphany, for your vicarious
but for the grace of gods go I

melancholy. But it is not too late to spin
her out of this perennial fiction

your denouement has arrived and it is time
to sink back into the sinewy space between perhaps (no break)
and absolutely because
2
a new gap can be filling. . . .
1
eyes closed. They leap and burst to the surface of the earth
0
but
CLOWN

1
The doctor walks in, coated in white
like a milky tongue, somber as paste.
I'm sorry, he says, but you have another...
 thirty or so years to live. He laughs and bends
at the knees, squeezing the woman's shoulder.
Her face muscles flex and fall slack, snapping
the flesh as though just beneath the skin
there were tiny bands of spandex louvering
her responses. Her half-grin carves
a false moon in her face. The stiff, green
intern helps her up and leads her out.
He steps gentlemanly on the black, rubber
sensor and the doors slide open. She is left
on the concrete to reflect. Her bright future
glares down at her, blinking, bouncing
off the building behind her. The mirrored panels
of the medical arts complex glint like foil
glad tiding balloons. Moving through flashes
of heat and people, she wonders
about the accuracy of clocks,
the certainty of nature. She prays
for the safety of trees, the earth's collapsing
lungs, and questions the necessity
of tattooing the gums of bears; she curses
the unctuous entrapment of otters
and the fishermen who weed the screaming
dolphins out of their silvery booty of tuna,
tossing them aside like old shoes. She reaches
into her purse and pulls out a hollow rubber
likeness of Richard Nixon. She pulls
it over her aspic-firm pincurls
as she thinks about Slinkys.

2
Before it reaches the other side
the chicken is pressed
into the asphalt by the radial
tire of a Buick Skylark.

3
A hunched and sweaty man with a gummy red
nose, ears the size of cabbage leaves,
and a bright billow of plaid pants
that bag him in with striped suspenders
pauses in an alley. His knotted hand leans on the "u"
of a graffitied FUCK as a dog licks
mayonnaise off his inflated shoe. He's late (no break)
and worries that if he does not get home soon, his neighbor will pronounce him dead then scavenge from him the last Hummel figurine she needs to complete her collection. He sweats at what seems to him a feathery crown of angels as they wipe their sneakers on his scalp. *You’ll not take me alive,* he whispers, slapping his cheeks. The dog wonders if there is food hidden in his ears and jumps to taste them.

4
A comedian on the Tonight Show jokes about his wife’s ovaries while at home she decorates the refrigerator with milk carton portraits of missing children.

5
In a park, children sit clean and stiff beneath the box-elder trees. Occasionally, pumpkin colored bugs drop into their hair, and they shake and run and scream at the sky. One boy sees a cloud shaped like God, and he pinches his groin shut as though it were a coin purse. The children are waiting to be stars in a commercial for laundry detergent in which they will gouge themselves with dirt and squeeze jelly fillings down their fronts. Then, like new moths, they will shed the soiled skin and put on clean copies, as though they were their own well behaved twins. Urine slips down the leg of the boy as the director shouts, *Action.*
CRAPS

*God does not play dice with the universe.*

---Albert Einstein

1

I rub circles into my fat feet, my voodoo dolls.
Tense crystals crack and blood circulates.
Elsewhere in my body the pain becomes syncopated;
slows, slow, stop.

2

Photons float in motes of light,
mirrored polarizations, cloned fates.
Two embark on subatomic vacations, drift and surge,
diverge at Albuquerque.
The spoors of their travels glow thick with invisibility.
Inside, the particles swirl and burble with probability,
waiting for a fix, to be perceived.
Outside, a dog.
He smells something, sees something falling.
A caddis fly? A feather?
The glossy residue of energy taunts him and he jumps.
The swooping particle flashes its zero mass,
its immortality.
The seen is altered and light years away,
near Dubuque or Canicula,
the flight of the twin lilts accordingly.

3

Here and there two people settle into the density of
themselves.
They push against their legs as if testing for life.
They find great comfort in the thickness of thighs,
comfort in solids, in graspable things.

Here: the person watches people on television jump
and stretch and straddle and lunge.
She sees how their skin wraps tautly around their muscular
stuffing.
The bouncing woman in front, the vertex of a vibrating V,
instructs her viewers to take their pulse.
The sitting woman is pleased to find her pulse
well within the displayed target range.
A man enters the room and watches the woman watching
aerobics.
He scowls overtly at her.
There: the woman inexplicably gravitates toward cheesecake.

4

Forest P (uninhabited):
a ponderous tree drops hypothetically

Forest Q:
A bevy of displaced birds and insects caroms off a rushing front of air, and a ranger asks "Did you hear that?"
Shoes

On the night Molly’s husband, Eli, died, she bought him four pairs of socks and a high-tech toy for his upcoming birthday. The toy had a name: Tron. It was a glowing orb, whose fuzzy electric center snapped out with current toward her touch. If Molly placed her hand on the buzzing globe, tiny bolts heaved and bent toward her palm. It made her think of the orgasmitron in Sleeper.

The socks were all dark colors. As soon as Molly got home, she snipped the plastic lines connecting the pairs and mixed them up. Eli was colorblind, and she knew he expected this of her. It began as a joke but became a commitment. Eli liked to know for sure his socks didn’t match.

Eli’s birthday was three months away at the time. Molly liked the phrase "long haul" and liked to think of Eli’s age in the context of it. He’ll be a quarter of a century old, she’d think to herself, like a tree or a house, something enduring.

A month before Eli died, Molly decorated a cake for their next door neighbor, Mrs. Olivetti. Mrs. Olivetti had
left layer cake pans, a Tupperware cake carrier, and an icing bag with its different nozzles on their doorstep with a note which read: *Once you turn 73 like I will be doing one week from tomorrow, you no longer have the energy to bake and decorate. So much hoopla. I hope you will enjoy these things.* Jan. 18, 1990. A day to forget. Please don’t fuss.

Molly attempted to squeeze icing onto the cake in the shape of rose petals, though it appeared hunched and roving like inch worms. Eli watched as Molly squeezed out the indecipherable pink symbols. "Hieroglyphics. Interesting. Can you do roses?" Eli asked.

"These are."

"Practice," Eli said, "and on my birthday, Decoration day this year, we’ll squeeze flowers onto the graves of people with interesting names like Odella Hunsucker or Reverend Aloysius Clay."

"It’s a date," Molly said, twisting the bag for a lumpy flourish.

Molly was watching a made-for-television movie when she decided to shop for Eli’s birthday. In the movie Peter Fonda, Loretta Swit, and two others tooled around the country in a Winnebago. Peter Fonda witnessed a satanic sacrifice, and from that point on, the other people in the movie were not what they appeared to be. There was a sheriff and a librarian, but Molly knew they were secretly quenching an
evil thirst with the blood of chickens; a mechanic and a barber who dreamt of goat heads, she was sure. "Drive to Kansas. Drive straight to Kansas," Molly said to the television. Molly wished she could tell Peter what she knew, wished she could affect the outcome of the movie. In the end, the camper broke down in a shadowy meadow as a ring of hooded, candle-carrying people emerged from the black perimeter of the television screen. "If you'd only listened," Molly said.

After the movie, Molly began worrying about Eli. He was attending his friend Robert's bachelor party at the VFW hall, where the Circle Jerks were playing. Molly always worried about Eli when he was at the VFW hall without her. The night the Dead Kennedys played, she stayed home with pleurisy. Eli came home early the next morning with a concussion and a stitched scalp. Someone had torn a long stretch of board from the front of the stage and started spinning in circles like a propeller. Eli stood as he watched the plank fan toward him, fell as the board cracked his face.

"Too cool, Mol," he said, pointing to the cut on his head. "Lightning shaped." The hair never grew back over the scar, and Eli was proud of the jagged path that crept through his hairline. "This old thing," Eli would say when someone remarked on his hip haircut, "it's been this way since before I was born."
The night of Robert's bachelor party, Molly envisioned the smooth, white skin of Eli's temple splitting in soft petals as the metal spike of someone's bracelet pushed itself in; she saw the crowd sarcastically part as Eli dived backwards off the stage. It was these thoughts that impelled Molly to shop for Eli's birthday. You don't buy presents for dead people, she thought.

Though Molly often had these prophetic feelings, she rarely heeded them and the people in potential peril survived. She often imagined family members crumpled in cars, friends dangling from light fixtures. She believed these fearful visions were the result of Baptist church teachings, which maintained that the end of the world would only occur when everyone, every single soul, least expected it. This apocalyptic moment would be on the mind of no one when God chose to swoop down and gather his booty of believers. As a child Molly would constantly chant "Armageddon, Armageddon, Armageddon" to ward it off.

Molly did have a dream when she was eight years old, however, that foreshadowed her grandfather's death. But it was a comforting kind of prophecy, and she let it soothe her. She dreamt her grandfather was enormous, a monument to himself. She sat on the back of his huge grey hand, next to a knuckle, and he pointed to a liver spot big as a stop sign. "You are here," he said. Then he shrank to a speckle and sat
swinging his tiny feet over the side of her hand. He waved and said, "See you on the other side," before slipping away through a pore.

A frequent protective dream Molly had as a child was that her sister had died and was buried in the backyard beneath the swingset. In the dream Molly would sit on the teeter-totter, and a distant voice beneath her feet would ask for a fudgesicle. Molly still has this dream from time to time, and she is sure it is the only thing keeping her sister alive.

Eli's mother, Inez, is a hand model. Her hands have appeared in ads for dishwashing liquid and margarine. They have been seen wrapped around fine crystal, pressed into the firm coils of a durable mattress. They are her favorite part of herself, and she has always stood beside them. Her second husband left her when she began oiling her hands at night and swaddling them in a soft web of cheese cloth. She soaked them in vitamin E oil and Half and Half for an hour before tucking them in to their gossamer bedclothes. She kissed each cuticle gently and whispered things into her knuckles before turning in. "Husbands are fleeting as time and beauty," she said, "but hands are forever."

Once Molly brought Inez a pinkie ring from a trip to the Ozarks. It was inlaid with turquoise and goldstone in the
shape of a Phoenix. After only one day of wear, it turned the tender flannel flesh of her finger green and crusty. When Inez removed the ring and saw the glazey green circle on her finger, she emitted short bursts of sound, staccatoed gags like a child imitating a machine gun. Molly cleaned the finger with egg and aloe until the color faded and the skin softened.

Molly told Eli what happened when he came home that evening. He went outside and came in twenty minutes later. He went upstairs to his mother's bedroom and moved toward her with stiff, outstretched arms and fingers like a little Frankenstein. Around each of his fingers glowed the phosphorescent insides of a vivisected firefly. "Not funny," Inez said. "These hands pay for that fancy cowhide on your back, you costly little ragamuffin. Punk is right."

Inez has come to stay with Molly. It is three months since Eli's death. She is on hiatus from hand modeling. Lately her jobs have involved turning up the tiny volume modulators on hearing aids and rubbing bursitis-dulling creams into the knees and elbows of other women, women whose joints look less worn than her own. "I'm not a knee and elbow model," she had said to Molly over the phone. "Never been a knee and elbow model."

Inez and Molly are watching Jeopardy. Inez's lips twist tight as a clasp as she watches the host chat with the
contestants. "I think that Alex Trebek fellow is a might stuck up, kind of full of himself. I bet he’d just as soon piss on you as jaw with you." Inez speaks as she does her sitting exercises. She kicks her legs in the air, a sedentary chorus girl. "Four more, three more. Come on, you can do it." Inez huffs. "I really believe you got to be your own best friend. You believe that Molly-girl?"

"I don’t know. I wouldn’t know who I was befriending. You know what Eli said when I first asked him what you did for a living?" Molly pulls her long blue-black hair to the side and begins to braid it.

"No, but I can just imagine. That scamp. What’d he say I did? Read palms? Groom dogs? What?"

"Hand jobs."

"Mercy." Inez stands, kisses the top of Molly’s head, and walks into the kitchen.

Molly allows all of her muscles and skin to go slack until she feels herself falling. She grabs the arm of the couch and throws her other hand out in front of her, violently, as if she were trying to get rid of it. She holds her breath. She feels her braid fly upward like a lever and her cheeks press into her eyes. "Don’t," she says.

Inez calls the local chapter of Weight Watchers to see if she can weigh in and attend a meeting. "They’re going to
be talking about the evils of bread consumption," Inez says, "and how to rise above it." Inez winks and laughs. Molly thinks she can see the edge of the world through the gap between Inez's front teeth. "Got to always be thinking about that lard factor," Inez says. Inez counts calories religiously, almost fearfully, as though she might be hunted down and shot if she surpassed her daily limit. She peels the skin off chicken, dabs at fish sticks with an absorbent paper towel she keeps in her purse for that purpose, eats Egg McMuffins without cheese and only half a muffin.

She is training for a slot on her local public access station's aerobics program. Rumor has it the woman performing the modified intensity version will soon be taking maternity leave. "The thought of my whole body being seen on television makes me tingle," Inez says. "That'll show those swine at Washington High School Class of '49 who voted me most likely to disappear without notice. That'll show them." Inez laughs through lips that do not grin.

Molly thinks of Eli's visitation. The casket was closed, and Molly kept knocking on it. "Eli," she whispered, "don't forget to write." She laughed. "We'll always have Kansas." She smiled wide. "At least this way they won't sew your lips to your gums," she said. "At least you won't have to look pink and unreal."

Molly's mother squeezed her shoulders. "Why don't you
come and sit down, dear. Would you like some hot tea?"
Molly’s mother guided her to a row of folding chairs beside a thick gathering of chrysanthemums and azaleas, peonies and gladiolas.

"Is he wearing any shoes?" Molly asked. "Do you think he’s wearing shoes?"

"Yes, Molly dear. I’m sure he is. Why don’t you not think about it."

"Will his toenails curl inside them?" Molly asked. "Will they twist around his toes?" Molly laughed.

"Really, Molly," her mother said.

"Really, Molly," she mocked back.

"Please, Molly."

Molly fell from the chair laughing, slapping her thighs, grinding her heels into the carpet.

Molly’s mother grabbed Molly’s arm and yanked. "For God’s sake, Molly. Get a hold of yourself. You’re disgracing Eli’s memory," she said in a thick whisper.

Inez walked over and pulled Molly up off the floor. She pressed Molly’s thin body into her and hugged her hard. Molly screamed into her breasts and went limp.

Molly and Inez are watching a home video. There is footage of Eli slam dancing at the Foolkiller Theatre as Tupelo Chain Sex plays in the background. His body slaps and
circles like a bumper car. There is footage of Molly spinning the giant wheel at Lotto America. She grins as the flipper stops on $10,000. The audience bursts into applause, the picture wobbles. Eli whoops and whistles loudly, close to the mike. "Buy a vowel, Molly," he screams and laughs. The grinning host asks Molly how she feels. "Lucky," she says. "I expected much less." There is footage of Eli and Molly slow dancing in the living room in which Molly and Inez now sit. Eli wears only a black bow tie; Molly wears only black high tops. Eli sings "I’ll come running to tie your shoe" over Molly’s freckled shoulder and winks at the camera.

Molly watches the screen turn white; she stares into the hollow eye of the television. She smells food frying and hears the rasp of idle engines. She sees words begin to form on the screen. The words The Rapture flash across a dark velvety backdrop of dried blood colored curtains. "I saw this at church when I was six years old," Molly says. A little girl with long, black hair, freckled fair skin, and grass green eyes appears. "That’s me when I was eight," Molly says. The little girl wears a Bugs Bunny in King Arthur’s Court T-shirt and red shorts. "I dub you Sir Loin of Beef. It was my favorite shirt," Molly says. The girl’s tiny red tennis shoes are untied, and she takes careful steps as she walks. She walks into an empty kitchen, into the buttery light that spills across the floor. Behind her a pan
of bacon fries. In front of her a billow of steam rises from the hot, running tap.


She stops laughing. "He put Monopoly money in the collection plate once. He will eventually rape my best friend, Marcella Sinclair. He will say, 'If you hadn't wanted it, Miss Marcella, then you oughtn't to of said 'no.' And anyway, my daddy's a lawyer and drives a Lincoln Continental.' I never saw it coming until it was too late."

The boy comes closer and stops. I believe now, he screams.

Forgive me father for I have sinned. I believe, I believe, I believe. Don't leave me. The boy's knees buckle, and he folds and falls. The little girl screams. Molly screams.

Inez grabs Molly and rocks her. "It's just a bad daydream, child," she says.

"Where's Eli?" Molly asks.

Inez kisses Molly's ear. "Shh, shh, shh."

Molly's mouth twists, searching for a soothing shape. She laughs and laughs and laughs.
Sometimes at night Molly feels something pull at her stomach. Something tugs at her navel. An unseeable thread. An umbilicus. She knows it is Eli. She thinks she can feel him braiding himself into her. She feels his long, soft hair floating in water inside her; the scar on his scalp rubbing along her intestines; his big, boxy feet stretching against her womb. She feels his lips pressing into her liver and his rubbery pink palms cupping her bladder. She feels his stubbled cheek hovering behind a breast. "I can't stop feeling him, Inez," she says. "I can't stop." Molly rubs her hands over her breasts, down her ribs and hips.

"It takes time, Muggins," Inez says. "It will always be there, that feeling. But eventually it'll just be a tender pulse in your neck, a twitch in your eyelid." Inez pats Molly's face with a wet washrag. Her hands tremble. "I miss him, too," she says.

Molly thinks it is time to see it, to imagine Eli's end. She knows no matter how horrifically she envisions it, it will not summon him back. "Eli's dead," she says. "Eli's dead. He lies dead." She tries to see this. "Three small syllables. A single breath. But it doesn't mean anything."
Molly sees. She slips herself behind Eli’s eyes, and she looks.

Eli and Robert leave the VFW hall, whose well of tequila has run dry. They decide to go to the Alameda Plaza so they can ride the glass elevator and look at the city. They are inside the elevator, whose corners are lit up with big, white light bulbs like a life-sized makeup mirror. The city’s blinking face follows their ascension.

Eli does not see this ride as the penultimate journey. He does not see. The elevator stalls on the eighteenth floor. Eli and Robert decide to explore this clogged artery. They crawl through the hatch in the ceiling of the elevator. "We’re pupating," Eli says. He fingers the scar on his scalp. "What do we do now?"

"We jump," Robert says. Robert springs from the roof onto metal rungs that stick out of the wall like huge staples.

Back at home Molly has slipped into good thoughts. In the movie she is watching, Peter Fonda is grinning silently after eating a large meal. Molly feels his full-stomached complacence. Her guard has lowered like a boom, and she sees herself and Eli in old age, in for the long haul, wrinkled and white, happy on the front porch as they lick freezer pops and swing. The Talking Heads play on the stereo in the background. *Same as it ever was.*
Molly sees more. She sees Eli standing on top of the elevator, looking down at his favorite shoes--his black leather London dock worker shoes. He jumps.

As he passes the sixteenth floor, he remembers being hysterically blind at age eight. He had watched a solar eclipse on the evening news. As soon as he realized what he had seen, his vision tunneled and blackened.

Past the tenth floor, he sees himself tripping with Molly. The tiny paper wafer they slipped beneath their tongues said We Are the World, and he came to understand what that meant. They sat at Potter’s Lake and watched big, golden dogs catch day-glo frisbees. They laughed loudly when they heard people discussing chaos theory. They sang Sesame Street songs. "One, two, three, FOUR, five. Six, seven, eight, NINE, ten. ELEVEN, TWELVE. Twelve strawberry milkshakes. When I step upon the bus, and they step upon my foot, it makes me mad..." They held each other cheek to cheek and both saw the Labrador walk onto the water, both heard his toenails clicking as if he were walking on glass, and both said, "Jesus" as he picked up the frisbee and flew away. They trembled and scratched white lines on their arms, worried that they were little more than the other’s hallucination.

As he passes the seventh floor, he sees the public television station where he works. He is editing one of the
daily promo reels. A large bear forages in a river, swatting at fish. Eli listens and grins as the announcer’s resonant voice reads his copy. You’ll be glad you’re not a salmon when Nature reveals the bare facts about the grizzlies. Tonight on KMPT, Channel 12.

Passing the third floor, he watches as he and Molly make love for the second time. Their bodies slide and wave, matched pore for pore, grooved and locked, a rhythm of skin. Inside them wings beat and lift, and their cells mix, their roots weave. "God," they say.

Back at home Molly’s stomach snaps. On the television, the credits roll over the Winnebago, which is encircled in candlelight. Molly’s face tightens with worry. She claws at her throat. She decides to shop for socks.

Molly sits up in bed. Inez presses Molly’s head to her chest. "Eli’s dead, Molly." Molly doesn’t laugh. She wants to see Eli, to visualize his face. She can only see waxy white feet stepping into white socks and shiny black shoes. She feels as if she is landing, as if she is easing down into herself, then past herself, beneath a heaviness, beneath an itchy thickness. "Genesis, Genesis, Genesis," she says.
Compression Scars

I'm into you so far, I'm out the other side.
--Robyn Hitchcock, "Satellite"

The summer the bats came, Duncan began wearing only blue and my breasts grew a whole cup size as if I were just feeding them better. The day I first noticed the bats, I had gone outside to watch the Roto Rooter men dig up the Dorsett's backyard. Mr. Dorsett paced back and forth as the muddy men lifted parts of the lame septic tank out of the hole. I admit I was sort of glad about it. I could tell Mr. Dorsett was embarrassed by the whole thing because he was smelling up the entire neighborhood. It was the end of May and even though it wasn't too hot yet, neighbors were shutting their doors and windows and turning on the a/c.

Mr. Dorsett looked over at our yard periodically to see
if my dad had come out to watch the cavern that Mr. D's backyard was becoming, and I'd wave and smile like we were old pals or something. Across Mr. Dorsett's yard, I saw Mrs. McCorkle. She was kneeling in her garden, tugging at something. When she looked up, Mr. Dorsett waved nervously at her, and she smiled and yelled, "Hello, Ivy." I smiled back.

I didn't like Mr. Dorsett. When I was eight years old, he wouldn't allow his thirteen year old daughter, Judy, to play with me anymore. He claimed he was afraid she would pick up infantile habits or her brain wouldn't be properly stimulated if she didn't hang out with kids her own age. Personally, I think he didn't like me because of my religious views. He was steamed because I told Judy that when I prayed, I said it to my stomach because that's where I thought God was--on the inside somewhere, maybe swimming in my small intestine or spinning around in my pancreas.

Mr. Dorsett was a deacon at a church where going to movies, even Bambi, was a sin, though it was okay to watch television. You weren't supposed to dance either. It was probably a sin if you were even caught swaying a little. And music was definitely out unless it mentioned the blood of the lamb or rising from the grave or something. I went to this church. Once. I sat between Judy and Mr. Dorsett. The minister didn't talk, he yelled like we all had a hearing
loss of some sort. He leaned out over the pulpit and practically screamed the Word. His face was puffy, and the thick folds of his cheeks filled with red. I don’t think he got enough oxygen. He exhaled quite a bit, but I didn’t see him inhale much. He had grey cowlicked hair that kept flying forward in an arc over his eyes. It’s funny how some people think they have to look like they’re having a stroke to convince you of what they’re saying. I remember shaking and kicking my feet during the sermon, and Mr. Dorsett slapped my knees.

So this septic tank thing sort of tickled me because I thought it definitely pointed to Mr. Dorsett’s ailing karma. Actually, I was only a selective believer in karma. I believed in it when I thought people were getting what they deserved, which is pretty rare. But I still had a hard time accepting the idea that hungry babies with bubbled, empty stomachs were in that predicament because they had previously been serial killers or jewel thieves. Babies are blank, nearly smooth-brained, with a wrinkle for complacency, a wrinkle for fear, and a crevasse for hunger and thirst. So it’s not like they’d learn a lesson or anything.

Anyhow, as I watched Mr. Dorsett pop Tums like they were Sweettarts, I saw them, I saw the bats. I didn’t know what they were at first. I was picking a scabby fungus off our sycamore tree, half-expecting it to bleed, and thinking it
was odd the tree already had a few dead leaves. Then, a little higher up, I noticed these yellowish-brown bulbs, and it appeared our sycamore tree had suddenly grown peaches, like it was tired of simply being a sycamore and thought it might get more respect as a fruit-bearer.

I reached up to examine one of these dead leaves, and as I touched it, an electric feeling zipped up my arm and into my cheek. This leaf was soft and angry. It started shaking and screeching. I instinctively fell to the ground in case it was going to try to dive bomb my head or something. It unfolded its wings that were like little flannel rags, then it and a few friends dropped and flew off. As they screamed by, I noticed their faces. They had crumpled, furry, cartoon faces. They looked like one of those pictures you'd see in the backs of magazines, and if you drew it and sent it in, somebody, somewhere, for a small fee would tell you whether or not you should go to art school.

I examined the tree more closely and noticed there were about fifteen bats total. Some were hanging freely on the branches doing a dead leaf dance and others were curled up tight like tiny fists beneath real leaves. They ranged in color from yellowish to orangish brown, but none were black like bats are supposed to be. After I fully realized what I was looking at, I got a little spooked, thinking maybe they got their coloring from blood feasts. Then I noticed how
beautiful they were. They looked like yellow flowers gone to
seed. I reached up to touch one tucked beneath a leaf.

"You all right?"

Mr. Dorsett. He scared the bejeesus out of me. You
know how you’re getting ready to touch something, maybe a
smashed snake or an unidentifiable dark object lying in a
corner, and some wise pants comes out of nowhere and says
something, and for a microsecond you think the thing spoke to
you, you think you just had a bonafide religious experience?
That’s what I felt, but just until I heard the gate close.

"Ivy?"

"Hi, Mr. Dorsett." I brushed myself off and bent
forward so my hair fell over my triple-pierced ears. "Too
bad about your yard," I said. "Quite the terra carnage."

"What were you doing?"

"I wasn’t dancing." I smiled. I thought of the old
joke about Baptists, who won’t have sex standing up for fear
it will be mistaken for dancing. Even though it had been
eight years and Judy was now the sort of over-achiever, Type
A personality I wouldn’t hang out with anyway, I was still a
little peeved at Mr. Dorsett. I didn’t feel like being
overly civil.

"What were you looking at?" Mr. Dorsett moved in closer
and looked up at the tree.

"I was just looking to see if that new tree food was
working."

"What new tree food?" Mr. Dorsett looked intently at my face as if he couldn't believe his eyes, as if my nose had just fallen off and a big tulip had grown in its place.

"A couple of months ago we got this new grow food they were selling on television. You know, it comes with Ginsu knives if you order early. You plant it beneath your tree and within a couple of months, you get fruit, apples or peaches or sometimes mangoes. Look." I pointed at the furry orange balls dangling from a high branch. Mr. Dorsett gave me this look like he'd had just about enough and if I didn't come clean soon, he was going to go to my parents and tell them I should be locked in the laundry room or chained to my bed or something.

"Bats," I said. The way he dropped his jaw and began to back up, you'd think I'd said jackals or two-headed goats. "I think they're way cool."

Mr. Dorsett grabbed my shoulder and pulled me back from the tree. "Bats are dangerous," he said. "They're evil."

"No, they're not." I didn't like how Mr. Dorsett was all nosy and pushing me around in my own yard. "They're just little, fuzzy bats. They're not going to turn into Barnabus Collins or Bela Lugosi for Christsakes." My heart raced as I said this last part because I knew it was going to make the blood rush to Mr. Dorsett's face.
"You listen here, missy." Just then there was a small explosion next door and black, foul-smelling stuff started spewing from the hole in Mr. Dorsett’s backyard.

"Looks like you got a gusher," I said, and then I started singing the theme from the Beverly Hillbillies quietly to myself as Mr. Dorsett raced out the gate.

I decided to go over to Duncan’s to tell him about the bats. I knew he’d think it was totally mod that we had bats hanging out in our sycamore tree. Duncan’s my best friend. He moved to Kansas City from Topeka when we were both ten years old. The day he moved in, he came over with two turtles, and he let me paint a red "I" on the back of one for Ivy. We tried to race them, but they kept going in opposite directions. Duncan said that was their secret plan, that they whispered to one another, "We’ll have a better chance if we split up." Duncan and I have been fairly inseparable ever since. Now, every day, Duncan’s father will say, "Are you two attached at the hip?" And Duncan’s mother will kind of crinkle her nose and say, "No, dear. They’re attached at the heart," and then she’ll wink. It’s sort of nauseating. Duncan’s mom is real nice, but she can get on your nerves. She’s the type that asks you every ten seconds if you’re warm enough, cool enough, hungry, thirsty, etc. I think she watched The Donna Reed Show a little too closely when she
was growing up. Once Duncan and I made these signs that said, YES, WE'RE WARM ENOUGH. OUR BODY TEMPERATURES ARE EXACTLY 98.6 and NO, WE'RE NOT HUNGRY. WE'RE FULL AS TICKS AND COULDN'T POSSIBLY EAT ANOTHER MORSEL. Mrs. Wedermeyer smiled and said, "Oh, you two," but she still asks.

Mr. Wedermeyer is pretty much a world class cornball. He's the kind of guy that steals little kids noses, tells them that eating beets will put hair on their chests, as if that were a perk, and renames them. Of course Ivy is an easy target; Poison is an obvious addition, not to mention Intravenous. "That girl's poison, Duncan," he'll say. "She'll squeeze the life right out of you." When I was younger, he used to say, "I need a love transfusion, I.V." Then he'd make me kiss a vein. Mr. Wedermeyer calls their five year old neighbor, Jill Shipley, Daisy June, for no good reason except that it makes her madder than hell.

If the caption What's Wrong With This Picture? were beneath a Wedermeyer family photo, you'd pick Duncan out in a second. Duncan has nappy brown hair that curls off the top of his head like it's trying to get away. It's cut real short on the sides and there's a yin/yang symbol shaved against his scalp in the back. His favorite shirt is a Zippy the Pinhead T-shirt that says, All Life's a Blur of Republicans and Meat. Don't try to figure it out.

Some of the beef-necked deltoids at school pick on
Duncan. They wear these disgusting buttons that announce they are the Fag-Buster Patrol. The insignia on the buttons is a limp wrist with a circle and slash. They call Duncan fag-bait and say, "Bend over, Joy Boy, I'll drive." And I say, "You realize the implications here are much more damaging for you. You're obviously suffering from Small Penis Syndrome." Then I put my finger on their big, clunky belt buckles, run it down their flies, and say, "You really ought to have that looked at." Of course they shoot back agile and witty as the redwoods they resemble with, "Shut up, cunt." These guys listen to Guns and Roses and dream of the day they'll bury their girlfriends in the backyard. Real princes.

Duncan, on the other hand, is beautiful, completely beautiful inside and out. His skin is white as glue and if you look into his grey-green eyes too long, you'll slam your foot down because you'll feel like you're falling, falling into yourself, which is the scariest place you can fall because what if you never hit bottom, what if it's empty? I know it sounds kind of dweebish and I'm not trying to get deep or anything, but it's true, absolutely true. No lie. Duncan says it's constitutionally impossible for me to lie, though I obviously have no problem pulling Mr. Dorsett's leg.

But out and out lying can make me sneeze just thinking about it. Don't get me wrong, I can do crummy things all right.
But even white lies make my ears itch.

So about Duncan. After I watched Mr. Dorsett race around the heaving hellmouth in his backyard for a while, I went to see Duncan. Mrs. Wedermeyer answered the door, and she busted out crying when she saw me. I wondered if I had carried some of Mr. Dorsett's eau de septique with me. I was afraid it might be secretly clinging to my skin and my own nostrils had become desensitized to its rankness due to overexposure. "I'm sorry, Ivy," she said. "Come in." She hugged me hard and for a long time like she'd just gotten me back from a kidnapper, ten years and 40,000 milk cartons later. She pushed my hair behind my ears and cupped my face in her hands. "You kids are so young," she said, and I could tell her voice was about one syllable away from giving out. "Duncan's in his room."

You can imagine my mind was racing back and forth inside my skull with such a greeting. I started wondering if Mr. Dorsett had called the Wedermeyers and convinced them I wasn't brainy enough for Duncan. I imagined he warned them to separate us once and for all or else his IQ could dip to that of a gifted mandrill's. And I kept saying to myself, Get a grip, I've. Mr. and Mrs. Wedermeyer wouldn't listen to that weasel. They know you and Duncan got exactly the same scores on your PSAT's except that your math score was two points higher. Parents always groove on standardized tests,
especially if you do well.

But as I walked into Duncan’s room, I instantly forgot what it was I was stressing about, like some big invisible, cosmic hand reached into my head with one of those pink erasures and rubbed out those brain cells. Duncan was sitting on his bed reading *Breakfast of Champions*, again, and listening to Fad Gadget. *I choke on the gag, but I don’t get the joke.* Somehow Duncan seemed even paler, as if the glue had been watered down; his lips looked almost blue. "Hey, Dunc, what’s up? Your mom’s tripping."

Duncan stood up. "Look," he said and started unbuttoning his jeans.

"Whoa, is there a full moon out or what?" I made a feeble attempt at averting my eyes. I was curious about what kind of underwear he wore—one of the few subjects we’d never covered. Striped boxers. Cool. He hiked his shorts up a little and pointed at his thigh. I said, "The scars from your moped accident. I’ve seen them. I like them. I don’t have any good scars." He turned around. The scars wound around his thigh and ran down his legs in wide, white lines past his knees. There were three lines that stopped at different places as if they were racing. The lines were eerie; they looked almost fluorescent against his pale legs. They looked like symbols or rebus, like they were trying to tell us something, like maybe they’d spell out a message when
they reached the appropriate point. Duncan put his jeans back on. "Jesus, Duncan. Your scars are growing. What gives?"

"So much for swim suit season," he said. He tried to smile. I hugged him. I hugged him like Mrs. W. had hugged me. Even though Duncan put his jeans back on, I kept seeing those lines, as if a flashbulb had gone off and branded the image on my retinas. I saw the lines lift off his legs and circle around my head, curling in through one ear and out the other. I saw them slip under the surface of the skin in my face, making little, fleshy speed bumps. I thought about the movie Squirm and the electrified worms that terrorized people, getting under their skin, literally. I wanted to make the gray half-moons under Duncan's eyes go away.

"Hey, Dunc, remember that scene in Squirm when that woman turned on the shower and the worms started oozing out the holes in the shower head, and then she turned the faucets back off and the worms retreated?" I laughed.

"They think it's some weird, rare untreatable thing called morphea." Duncan pulled me toward him and kissed me. It was a desperate kiss, as if he thought it might have some therapeutic or medicinal benefit. His tongue went everywhere, touched everything, took complete inventory. I believe if he'd had more tongue, he would have kept going straight on down to my intestines or something.
I pushed him back. I wondered if this was one of his games. Sometimes Duncan is very childlike, almost obsessive-compulsive. He makes up these games or rituals and convinces himself that his wish will come true if he completes his task. Like if he can successfully throw and catch his boomerang twenty times in a row while juggling cantaloupes, it’s a sign he’ll be accepted at Cornell or receive manna, or something like that. The spooky thing is that it almost always works. I guess the psychologists would say it’s just a self-fulfilling prophecy, but it’s still kind of unsettling. I mean Duncan’s no Nostradamus or Jeanne Dixon or anything, he just knows what he wants.

"Morphea?" I said. "That sounds like science fiction. Are you making this up?" We sat down on his bed. I was starting to get creeped out.

"No. I’m not."

"Well what does it all mean? It isn’t adding up in my head. I don’t get it."

"I thought you were the math wiz," Duncan said, smiling. "Spill it, Duncman. You’re making me nervous."

Duncan fingered the shaved path of the yin/yang symbol etched into his scalp. "I don’t know if you remember the niggling details of my injury or not, but these scars I got aren’t from being cut or anything like that, they’re from the impact, you know, from being pressed up against the curb.
They're compression scars." Duncan stopped and looked at me like what he had just said was thoroughly illuminating and he was waiting for me to say "Oh" knowingly.

"Yeah, so?"

"So, evidently we should have held out for more insurance money. Evidently compression scars can come back to haunt you. They can lie dormant like some goddamned succubus hibernating in your leg. Then they come to life and spread across your whole body, covering you from head to toe with these attractive markings, and then when they're all done decorating the outside, they can rip through your insides, clipping the sharp edges off your internal organs like goddamned pinking shears. Fuck." Duncan bent over his waste paper basket. "Maybe you ought to go. I think I'm going to be sick. I don't have a stomach for tragedy," he said.

"Wait. I don't believe this," I said. "I've never heard of anything like this before. This sounds like Star Trek or something. Surely there have been zillions of people who've had these compression scars. How come I've never heard of this?"

"I guess it's not high up on the research priority list." Duncan wrapped his arms around himself. "They just don't know shit about it. Fucking doctors. They're not even willing to say definitely that that's what it is." Duncan
began rocking slowly back and forth on the bed.

I twisted the spirals of hair that hung over his forehead. "Why didn't you tell me about this, about these scars?"

"Because. I didn't really know anything until today."

I felt my stomach start to knot in a way only a Boy Scout could appreciate. It felt like thousands of little hands were pressing against the walls. "So is it for sure..."

"Time to feed the worms? Should I prepare for the big dirt nap?"

I nodded.

"They don't know. You could fill a thimble with what those bastards know about it. They said it can stop spreading and maybe it will never go inside. They said it could take a few months, a few years, a few decades, maybe never happen, maybe happen tomorrow. Real conclusive stuff."

Duncan looked straight into my eyes and softened his voice to a whisper. "I'm afraid to move," he said. "It's like I have this big rip in my pants or something, and if I move, I could die." He kept looking and looking at me, and I felt like he could see my thoughts, could see me thinking. If you die, Duncan Wedermeyer, I'll cut off my hands and feet and sit in one place until I can come too. His eyes. I steadied myself against the bed.
Duncan reached out and pressed his hand against my left breast, the larger one. "I don't want to die a virgin," he said.

I always thought this would be a great moment, that I'd feel velvety needles prickle against my skin, but it wasn't like that at all. It wasn't like anything. I couldn't feel it. If I hadn't seen his hand on my breast, I would never have known it was there. My breast felt Novacained, heavy, but it definitely did not tingle, not a single goosebump, and I bump easy. I wanted to say, "Yes, Duncan. I love you, Duncan. Take me, take me" or whatever it is you say between hot gasps in moments such as these, moments that until this one, I had only experienced vicariously through the lives of Chelsea Starling, secretly passionate nurse, and Vanessa Vandehorn, bored but sexy rich girl. But I couldn't. I couldn't even say something stupid like, "Could I please have a pretzel first?" if I'd wanted. My brain and mouth were momentarily disconnected. All I could do was stand up with my numb breast and dysfunctional lips and walk out.

Things can get so strange so fast.

The sun was going down, and the cicadas were humming. I wondered if the sound bothered the bats, if it disturbed their sleep. I sat very still on the picnic table. I decided to keep an eye on these sneaky leaves. My brain was still
buzzing from Duncan's bomb. Morphea. It sounded like a name for a host of late night horror flicks--Morphea Bloodletter or something. I know I should have stayed with Duncan and tried to comfort him somehow, but when I get confused and have trouble comprehending something, I get sort of paralyzed mentally, sort of brain dead. I mean if somebody were to do an encephalogram on me at these moments, well, I bet it would be pretty disturbing. Zombie mode.

The bats were still snoozing. Mr. Dorsett still had a not-so-royal gorge in his backyard. I considered mentioning something about sky-tram rides across it next time I saw him, but decided against it. I guess I felt even old Mr. Dorsett deserved a break. He was probably at church praying his head off, begging God to have mercy on his crummy plumbing.

I kept my eye on the little, brown, wrinkled leaves. You couldn't even see them breathe. I thought about their metabolism, how it must slow during sleep so they can preserve energy for flying and foraging. I imagined their lungs were little bubbles, filling only once or twice a minute, their button-sized hearts beating slow and steady as a bathroom sink drip.

I thought about Duncan, about Duncan before all this. I thought about the night we rode our bikes toward a storm. The lightning in the distance was constant and bright. We counted the seconds between lightning and thunder and stopped
riding when the flash and bang were almost on top of each other. We parked our bikes and walked along a dirt road that sliced a huge cornfield in two. The air smelled hot, burnt, and my mouth tasted like metal. We stared silently at the lightning like we were at a laser show. You didn’t have to be looking in the right place to catch it, either, because it was everywhere. And then I noticed the fireflies that hovered over the field. I grabbed Duncan’s arm and pointed. "Intense," he said. There was a yellow blanket of fireflies blinking above the corn in an uneven rhythm, a floating net of intermittent light; they were bright and fleeting stains against the black sky. I don’t know how long I had been holding my breath, but all of a sudden I started gasping. Duncan pulled me toward him. He widened my mouth with his hands, turned his head, and put his mouth on mine. I was surprised at how well we fit together, no overlap, better than clasped hands. Then he breathed. He just breathed. I wondered where his tongue was and what it was doing, but it was only air that passed between us.

My stomach burbled with the memory, and a strange feeling like lit fuses sparked and trailed from my nipples down to my thighs. I wished Duncan were here touching me. I was pretty sure I could feel it.

The bats began to stir. The dead leaves began wagging. I was a little worried that if Mr. Dorsett saw me watching
them, he might feel compelled to protect me from them. Maybe 
he would start sermonizing; that would surely drive them 
away, permanently. But all was dark at the Dorsett’s.

The bats were dropping off one by one and flying in an 
erratic, noisy mass above the tree. The sycamore suddenly 
appeared a lot healthier. Up in the air like that, the bats 
looked like little, jittery birds. The street lights snapped 
on. The bats flew over and circled the lights, swooping into 
the buzzing glow periodically, feeding on mesmerized moths 
and June bugs.

Then I heard screaming, and my first thought was, Oh, 
God, they’ve attached themselves to someone’s carotid artery. 
But it was Mrs. McCorkle. "What?" she yelled as she moved 
slowly across her backyard toward Mr. Dorsett’s hole. She 
kneedled at the edge and looked in. "Harlan? Are you in 
there?" She pulled a spidery vine out of the mud wall. 
"We’ll have to clean this up. Mercy. Come on now," she said 
and walked back to her house, disappearing through the back 
door.

Then I heard screaming again and things shattering. I 
waked around front and across Mr. Dorsett’s meticulously 
groomed front lawn toward hers. She was yelling at some 
invisible person, something about blue flowers and pork 
roast, and smashing glass on her driveway. She lobbed an 
armful of plates and cups and jars onto the asphalt and shook
her fists in the air. She ran into her house and pulled her
gauzy curtains off the rods. She ran back outside and
started ripping them into thin strips. She spotted me at the
end of her driveway. She looked at me with narrowed eyes and
tense lips, like she wanted to club me or something. My
heart was pounding hard inside my chest, as though it wanted
to get out before it was too late. I didn’t know what to do.
I knew Mrs. McCorkle had these spells if she forgot to take
some kind of medicine. I think she intentionally neglected
to take it sometimes just because she was bored or lonely.

Once Mr. Dorsett was about to get into his car to leave for
work, when she ran over and started clobbering him over the
head with a newspaper. She thought he was trying to steal
her gladiolas. I admit I thought it was sort of amusing at
the time, but now I felt like everything in the whole world
was completely mental, wacko, and it was beginning to scare
the hell out of me. I wondered if some strange chemical had
been released into the atmosphere, some chemical that could
take a completely normal existence and turn it into a horror
movie. Or maybe the magnetic field reversal was finally
here. Things were definitely out of kilter; my lips twitched
 uncontrollably.

"You," Mrs. McCorkle said, still sneering at me. "You.
Where’s Harlan? What have you done with him?"

"He’s at Medicalodge South, Mrs. McCorkle, the nursing
home. Remember? He's been there for a couple of months." I stretched my arm out toward her for reasons I can't begin to understand. I think the only reason she would have taken it would have been to rip it out of its socket and beat me over the head with it. Mrs. McCorkle began laughing and ran inside. When she came back out, she had a large ceramic vase and a wall mirror. I backed up into the street. Mrs. McCorkle threw the vase and mirror into the pile of shards. She smiled and kicked off her shoes. She raised her dress, and I could feel my stomach trying to push its way up through my esophagus and out my mouth. "Don't," I yelled. She hopped onto the sharp rubble and started dancing around like she was stomping grapes. Then she went down on her hands and knees.

I think I may have screamed, but I couldn't hear it. I couldn't feel my feet or my arms. I walked unsteadily toward Mrs. McCorkle, my legs springy like pogo sticks. I wondered if the bats were watching and if they were glad to be bats with their breezy lives, hanging in trees and eating ready-made meals. I would have swapped places with them at that moment. I would have given it all up--Duncan, my Robyn Hitchcock records, my collection of bones and teeth, my breasts--the whole shmear.

Chill, I told myself. Chill. I made my way to Mrs. McCorkle. I grabbed her off the pile and wrestled her to the
ground, which was no easy feat. I don't know if she'd been secretly pumping iron in her sewing room late at night or snarfing iron-enriched fiber or what, but she was not the weak little old lady she appeared to be. Suddenly she became this 70 year old Terminator---Grambo. Crimany. At first I was afraid if I handled her too rough, I might crack her bones or something, and then I was afraid she might crack mine.

I finally wore her down and began picking the spurs of glass from her hands and feet. She held her hands up and smiled like a child who's made a mess of herself with spaghetti or ice cream. She looked pleased that we were both now covered in blood. Mr. Myers next door finally came out to see what was going on, and he started running around the yard screaming, "Oh, God. Oh, my God, my God. My God, Effie." He picked Mrs. McCorkle up. She was playing Itsy Bitsy Spider on her fingers. I could tell she was a little miffed when he made her lose her place. He took her inside. My stomach finally made its way up into my throat, and I spit bile into the bloody grass.

I wished the bats would swoop down and pick me up by the collar and carry me off to some cold, quiet cave and feed me flies.

Duncan came over the next night and apologized like mad
for being so pushy and forward and anti-romantic and all. It made me feel really crummy because I thought I should be the sorry one. I mean, I was the one who had abandoned him in his moment of need. It wasn’t like I had been morally offended or anything; I think I was mostly afraid his skin might start falling off if we did it, like that horrible film of the aftermath in Hiroshima they made us watch in sixth grade. The captured shadows branded onto walls and those people in the hospitals. And they just filmed it like it didn’t matter that the people were completely raw, almost jellied. I always wondered what those cameramen had eaten that day, pears or bagels or rice cakes or what, and if they had been able to keep it down. Anyway, you can see that this lurking fear would not have made for a pleasant first-time experience. All in all, it could have been pretty damaging.

"I think you’re going to live through this, Duncan," I told him. "In fact, I’m sure of it."

"Yeah, what makes you so sure?"

"Well, last night I had this dream that we were old, about 195 or something, and we were sitting in a porch swing attached to this tree that I’m sure didn’t have as many rings as we had wrinkles, and "Take the Skinheads Bowling" was playing in the background. We were talking about the concert we went to last week like it was the good old days. And then we started comparing scars. We both had scars all over our
pruney bodies. I had a cool fish-shaped one across my stomach. You were impressed."

Duncan laughed. "At night I see my scars in my mind, and I watch them disappear as if someone had pulled up the plastic sheet on a Magic Slate."

I noticed that Duncan was dressed completely in blue. Usually he wore ten or twelve different, bright colors, and you could only look at him for so long before things started vibrating, visually speaking. But today he had on a navy blue bowling shirt that said "Earl" on the pocket, blue jeans, blue Converse high tops, a blue bandana around his ankle, and a globe earring. "Say, what's with this color-me-blue look?" I asked.

"It's chromatherapy," he said. "I saw it on Oprah or Sally Jessie or someplace. Certain colors have certain effects on you emotionally and physically. Like red is a stimulant. If you surrounded yourself with red, you'd constantly be doing pushups or something. Blue is supposed to be healing." He shrugged his shoulders.

That's one of my favorite things about Duncan, how he gives anything or anyone a chance. He accepts the absurdity that's everywhere and knows anything is possible, even good weird things.

I told him about the bats and about Mrs. McCorkle. Duncan loved Mrs. McCorkle because she always said outrageous
things even when she remembered to take her medication. Once she told us if she were president, she would impose the death penalty only for excessive chatter in movie theatres. "That would rid society of an insidious element," she said, "and help defray the population explosion." I think she meant it too. Duncan wanted to send her some blueberries and morning glories.

I showed Duncan the bats. They were resting again, striking their withered foliage pose.

"Are you sure they're bats?" Duncan asked. I pointed to the peaches near the top and showed him the ones clenched tight under leaves. "Wow," he said. "They're really beautiful. They look like something ancient and sacred. Like something in cave paintings." Duncan's voice began to crack. He gently placed both his hands on my breasts. "Do something for me," he whispered.

My breasts were tingling; they felt hot-wired, bubbling with current. "All right," I said.

"What do these bats eat?"

"Insects mostly."

"What time do they start feeding?"

"I don't know. Around sundown." I was beginning to wonder what it was I was going to end up agreeing to do. I had a feeling it wasn't what I thought it was.

"Green and yellow are good colors, too," he said.
"Restorative. I’ll be back," he said, walking away. He turned around. "Tomorrow night."

* * *

When Duncan showed up, he was wearing only a busy Madras pair of Bermuda shorts—no shirt, no shoes, nothing else. I hoped his scars wouldn’t glow in the dark. He was carrying a blinking jar full of fireflies and a coffee can full of dead bugs. "Will you humor me, I've?" he asked.

"This isn’t going to involve chicken blood, is it?"

Duncan smiled and shook his head. "What are your parents doing?" Duncan had this very serious look on his face; he looked sort of like Spencer Tracy in Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner, like he was getting ready to make a big speech.

"I don’t know. Watching a mini-series or something."

"Will they come outside for any reason?" Duncan grabbed my arm like he wanted me to think before I answered.

"Not likely. Unless the couch catches fire."

"Good. What about the Dorsetts?" He cocked his head toward their house.

"I haven’t seen them. I think maybe they left town."

"Cool," he said. "Where are the bats?"

I pointed to the street light; a dark halo circled around it. "A couple stick around the tree and dive at the
porch light occasionally."

Duncan took hold of my shoulders and led me under the canopy of the tree. He raised my arms and pulled my T-shirt over my head.

"Couldn’t we at least use a tent or something?" I asked. For most things you can count me in; my name and the word "trooper" come up a lot in the same sentence, but an exhibitionist I’m not. I don’t even like to get undressed in front of a mirror.

Duncan spread my shirt on the grass, pushed me down, and lowered me to the ground with my head in his hand, as if he were baptizing me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a bat dive into the light. Duncan took the dead insects out of the coffee can and arranged them on my stomach: a June bug, a cricket, some flies and moths.

"Duncan, you know, this is weird."

"I know," he said.

"I refuse to eat them, if that’s what you had in mind."

My stomach itched, but I was afraid to scratch, like any movement might activate the insects and make them bore into my navel or something, as if Duncan had preprogrammed them. Stepford bugs.

"You don’t have to eat them," he said.

I was relieved. Around Duncan I do things that under any other circumstances would lead me to believe I’m totally
insane.

Duncan sat down next to me. He took some fireflies out of the jar, held them between his fingers, and crossed himself, smearing the phosphorescent abdomens onto his chest. He lay back. Duncan scissored his arms and legs like he was making snow angels, only I guess they were actually earth angels. "Close your eyes," he said, "and do like I'm doing." I flapped and kicked, and it felt sort of nice, like I was a low-flying, upside down bird.

I felt something brush against my stomach. My skin was sparkling, crackling with heat. I felt my stomach and my heart lift out of my body, as if they were going to strike out on their own. My legs shook. I let myself feel it.
Gus licks his finger and runs it across his wife’s dry, silent lips. He breathes in the sterile hospital air. It smells like something stiff and white, something that’s been scrubbed with an abrasive cleanser. He feels as if he’s been hermetically sealed inside his own skin but knows it is really Lillian who is trapped. He takes the lipstick from her nightstand and dabs on the rosy color carefully, as if he were putting the final touches on a sacred painting. He takes a step back and looks at his work. The lipstick is blotchy and uneven like a bruise. Her lips are parted slightly and look as if they’ve been smeared haphazardly across her face. Her mouth is an open wound, mean and
Gus and Lillian met years ago at the elementary school where they both worked. He was the custodian, and she was a teacher’s aide. On her break she would bring him milk and graham crackers, and they would sit in his broom closet on footstools among the fumes of ammonia and lye and talk about breathing.

Gus had been asthmatic as a child, and Lillian’s father had died from emphysema when she was very young. They both believed that people took unobstructed breathing for granted. Breathing is one of the few things that separates the living from the dead. “Breathing and not breathing are but a heartbeat apart,” Gus always said penitently.

As a child, Gus would wheeze like a bellows in his sleep and dream of hands like pincers around his throat, holding him underwater. His own hands would reach above the water and clutch at the cool air he could not get to. This would go on endlessly, seemingly far beyond realistic endurance, until his bronchi relaxed and the angry claws around his throat became praying hands like his parents’ bookends. The gentle fingers would lift him up out of the water, into the air, into the sky, where he would touch lips with a hazy, divine face that would blow easy air into him.

Gus believed this really happened for when he awoke, his
whole head would be wet and his lips would tingle as if they were the only part of him that had been sleeping. He confided this experience to his Sunday school teacher, Mrs. Obermeyer, who told him it was a dream and only a dream. "Only angels are allowed to touch lips with God," she said and made him repeat the twenty-third Psalm over and over again until it was nothing more than a sleepy chant and he was convinced.

As Lillian sat beneath the assortment of mops, she spoke of the deathwatch of her father. When he had gotten ill, he was moved to a room by himself near Lillian's. One night the rattle of his breathing became loud and desperate. Lillian was alone with him in the room, reading to him from the Book of Knowledge about the luna moth. He writhed on his bed and scooped handfuls of air toward his face as if to extinguish his struggle. He pulled at his cheeks and tapped his foot on the end board. Lillian stood motionless watching her father flail about helplessly like a capsized beetle. She climbed on top of the bed and blew as hard as she could into his face, as if she were making a life or death birthday wish. She inhaled deeply and blew and blew to subdue the fire in her father's lungs. Her father's gasping was high-pitched and multi-toned, like a chorus of tortured screams from tiny people. He eventually stopped thrashing and touched her lips. He coughed hard, and his breathing slowed to a low hum
like a prayer. A thin line of blood ran from his nose. With one of his handkerchiefs, she wiped away the only visible evidence of his battle. She creased the cloth down the center of the stain, and a Rorschach blot of blood crept away from the fold. The gold threads of her father's monogram initialed an untouched corner, as though to claim the design.

This handkerchief with the bloodstain now sits in the drawer of the nightstand next to Lillian's bed. Gus knew she would want it near. She kept it, she said, because it was more than a memory; it was more than a vague notion like a photo or a pressed flower. The substance of the stain had once given life to the passing idea of her father; it had pushed life through his body until, tired of the assignment, it had tried to escape. The handkerchief contained a signature of life.

Lillian has cancer of the pancreas. It has begun to spill out into the rest of her body. Gus imagines he can hear it moving through her body, feeding on her organs, foraging through her heart. Sometimes he sees it as a hungry, yellow Pac Man, like the game in the school cafeteria, moving glibly through her body, eating up her strength.

A nurse comes in and fluffs the IV bag, pinching bubbles
out of the tube. Gus stares at the bag. It is a disembodied bladder of magic fluid; it is a carrier fit for dime store goldfish; it is a prolonger of superfluous life. It makes Lillian’s intake of breath seem redundant. The nurse pats Gus’s shoulder as she leaves. He traps her hand under his and says, "Can’t we let her go?"

The nurse slips her hand out from under his. "Go home, Gus. Go home and get some rest." The word "home" echoes over and over in his mind’s ear like a melody that can’t be shaken. It is a mantra whose repetition transforms it into only a sound. Like a breath.

Gus stands up and holds his wife’s hand to his chest. "Out of the cradle endlessly rocking," he moves up and down on his toes rhythmically as his voice slowly rises in pitch and volume. He closes his eyes. "Out of the mocking-bird’s throat, the musical shuttle, Out of the ninth-month midnight."

He sits down on the bed next to Lillian and takes hold of her other hand, placing the limply splayed fingers across his mouth. "Over the sterile sands and the fields beyond where the child leaving his bed wandered alone, bareheaded, barefoot..."

A nurse comes into the room and says in a loud whisper, "Mr. Hershberger, please! You’re going to wake the..." "Dead? Yes." He stands, places his wife’s hands by her
sides, and strokes the crepe paper skin on her arms. Weakened capillaries create bloodied spots that bloom beneath the skin like tiny explosions. "It's her favorite," he says.

The nurse comes close to him but does not touch him. "Please," she says.

He bends over and lays his head on Lillian's stomach, withered beneath the blue periwinkle flowers of her gown. "She's trapped inside. Someone is holding her down. She can't escape. Can't wake up. I can hear her scratching to get out. She cannot breathe in there. We have to release her."

HOLD IT

Music slips out in waves as the door opens and closes. Gus walks up the steps and stops at the door. He notices his breath rolling in and out of his mouth like an ocean of air. He opens the door and walks up to where two large, thick doormen are standing. Their crossed arms give them the defensive appearance of stone lions. They are young and their muscles bulge and bow, crammed tight into the space of their arms and necks.

One doorman nudges the other and says, "So, should we check your I.D., Pops?" Gus takes out his wallet. "You wouldn't slip us a fake, would you, Pops? We can spot a poser, you know." The men laugh into their shoulders.
Gus hands one of the men his driver’s license. "Gustav E. Hershberger. Born February 1st, 1918. That makes me an Aquarius. Water-bearer. I know about the stars. Graduated high school with honors, 1936. Millard Fillmore High. Didn’t go to war due to bad lungs and sinuses but worked feverishly back home recycling rubber." Gus grabs his driver’s license, and the men grin and roll their eyes. Gus’s eyes narrow as he leans into one and says, "You beat me up when we were in fifth grade because I ran off with that baby pig you tried to drown. Remember that, Eddie? I named him Hamlet and taught him to shake and gave him to Lenore Wilcox, whom I believe you were sweet on, for Valentine’s day." The doorman’s grin slips, and Gus walks into the music and smoke.

He sits down at a table at the side of the dance floor. A tall waitress with even taller hair walks by and, noticing him, backs up. "What can I get you?"

"Nothing. Thank you."

"There’s a two drink minimum," she says, pulling a strand of hair off her shoulder.

"I had them before I came," he says and hands her a five dollar bill. She shrugs her shoulders and leaves.

Gus looks at the rotating, mirrored ball hanging from the ceiling. It casts down little pebbles of light that spread across the walls and floor like an illuminated rash.
Music pours out of the walls. The heavy beat resounds beneath Gus's feet and opposes the beat of his heart. People dance in ways Gus has never seen before. They are peppered with light that crawls along their bodies like determined, silver bugs. Gus is pleased to see that the once controversial pelvic grind is still a popular move; it is not as fluid as he remembers it, but he recognizes its origins beneath the jerky circles and subtle thrusts. A sharp pain shoots through his abdomen, and he lays a quick hand to his side, holding it tightly as if the pain might break through. It is a sympathetic pain, an umbilicus connecting he and Lillian.

Gus thinks of a documentary about Elvis impersonators. He sees each of them standing beside one another in the manner of a police lineup. One tall, one squat, one black, one one-armed and all bedecked with heavy black sideburns, thick plastic-looking hair and jeweled sunglasses. He recalls one impersonator in particular who impressed him. Directly following his act, a man interviewed him in his dressing room. The impersonator was still breathing heavily from his performance, which "teetered on the brink of explosive," according to the interviewer. When questioned about his line of work, the impersonator said he preferred to think of himself as invoking the spirit of the King rather
than merely imitating him. He said he knew he didn’t really resemble him physically, even with the sideburns and white fringed, signature suit. He was shooting more for the internal essence of Elvis—the spirit beneath the glitzy veneer that inspired dogged loyalty in so many people. The interviewer seemed somewhat ruffled by this. He did not want to mix misguided spirituality with the obvious, aimed for cheese of his documentary. But Gus believed the impersonator was sincere. He could hear it in the heavy, telling breaths that slipped between the words. They had a thickness of conviction that was friendly and familiar to Gus. He remembers watching the broad ballooning movement of the impersonator’s diaphragm beneath the stretchy, white fabric and thinking that he was alive in a way the interviewer, whose controlled breaths barely displaced his jacket, would never understand.

A woman in a black and white spotted rabbit fur coat sits down at a table near Gus. The woman removes her coat, revealing a black skirt freckled with white hairs. Gus’s eyes begin to water. He is not sure if he is allergic or simply frightened.

Once, while playing with a neighbor’s Angora rabbit, Gus nearly died from inhaling its hidden dander. The air just stopped flowing as if someone had twist-tied his lungs. The passage of air seemed as thin and precarious as a silk
thread. He fell onto his side and squirmed slightly in search of a friendly angle. He felt his collapsing lungs, bound tight like the atrophied feet of an ancient Chinese woman. He saw himself as a desperate Houdini locked in fear inside a glass box of water and a trick that wasn't working.

Gus drinks in air in heavy gulps as wild light spills into his focusing gaze.

"Want to dance?" A woman stands to Gus's side. Her smile is broad but not sarcastic. She holds out her hand with a mock-formal stiffening of the back. Gus stares at her face. It is soft and inviting as a feather pillow. He puts his hand in hers. They walk silently to the dance floor, whose nervous lighting makes Gus dizzy. He keeps hold of her hand and lightly grips her shoulder. She leans into Gus and says, "I'm Laura."

Gus turns his lips to her ear. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Gus. I'm afraid I move a little slowly. My joints aren't as accommodating as they used to be."

"That's okay." She centers her face directly in front of his eyes as if she wants him to read her lips and smiles.

Gus looks down at all the fevered feet around him. He feels the small heel of Laura's hand resting in his palm like a tiny bird. He begins to hear the music as it becomes more than a vibration beneath his feet. He is able to discern
words. He hears the word "think" and a series of "ah’s" that slide up and down the scale.

*Girlfriend in a coma, I know, I know it’s serious.*

Gus stops moving. He lets go of Laura’s hand and puts his hand on her shoulder. He pulls Laura into him and asks in a cracked whisper, "Why are they saying that?"

"What’s the matter?"

*Do you really think she’ll pull through?*

"What does that mean? What they said?" Gus feels the soft pressure of Laura’s breast against his chest as she leans closer, straining to understand him. The music becomes sharp and pointed, slicing at his ears. His breathing thickens and his skin prickles with a flush of heat. He releases Laura’s waist and shoulder gently, as if he were setting her free and walks away.

**EXHALE**

Gus sits beside Lillian on her bed, the lowered guard pressing into his dangling calves. He holds her upturned hand in his and massages circles into the palm with his thumbs. "I felt you dreaming about me," he says. He raises her palm to his mouth and kisses her lifeline. He cups her hand and blows into it. "Wouldn’t it be wonderful, Lillian, if holding your breath meant you could actually bear it in your hands and see it living right there, within your grasp?
See it connecting with you, contradicting death?" He rocks her hand slowly back and forth. He lays his head on her brittle chest and interweaves his fingers with hers. "You have water in your lungs, dear heart. I can hear the tide rising. It’s drowning your breaths."

Gus sits up and releases Lillian's hand. He gently slides his hand beneath her feathery, white head. He cradles it carefully in the crook of his arm like a precarious infant. He pulls her up slowly, careful of the tubes and wires that flow out of her body as though she were only man-made life. He rests her head on his shoulder and unties the three bows on the back of her gown. He pulls the gown forward as he lowers her down. He moves the gown along the encumbered arm, down the path of tubes, and drapes it over a ticking, dribbling box. The box now looks to Gus like something mysteriously important to be unveiled only in the right company.

Gus gazes at the shrunken body in the bed. It is shriveled and pale as a dried root. The clean whiteness of it comforts him. Large veins are visible and crawl conspicuously beneath the skin like blue worms in milk. The chest ripples with bones. He lifts a drawn breast with both hands and lays his head atop it. He turns his head slightly and kisses it. It lies lifeless and elongate in his cupped palms. "It begins and ends here," he whispers into the
parched skin.

He sits up and reaches into his pocket. He pulls out a key chain with three keys, a tiny, light blue princess telephone, which had been slipped secretly to him by Lillian with her phone number many years ago, and a penknife. Gus fingers the tiny, obsolete dial on the telephone. He opens the penknife slowly and licks the end of it. With his other hand he presses his thumb into his index finger. He jabs the knife quickly into the finger and drops the knife and keys to the floor. Blood bubbles out. He watches it pool. He runs the oozing finger along Lillian's lips and fills them in with the red color. "I love you, too," he says and bends his cheek to her bloodied lips. He sits up and stares at Lillian's quiet face. The lips almost vibrate with the thick color and appear as if they might fly away.

Gus walks to the sink and gets a bedpan from beneath it. He turns on the water, adjusts its warmth, and fills the bedpan. He looks in the mirror at the drying memory of Lillian's lips on his cheek. He grabs a white washrag off the basin. Walking with heavy, deliberate steps like a careful child, he carries the washrag and filled bedpan over to Lillian's bed and sets them on her nightstand. He walks to the end of the bed and kisses each of her waxen feet then returns to her bedside. He runs his hands along her legs and abdomen as if he were smoothing a wrinkled sheet. He bends,
lays his head on her bloated stomach, and stares down the path between her breasts at her lightly fuzzed chin. "This ablution will allow your pores to breathe again, so that you may escape, Lillian." Gus rises and soaks the washrag in the warm water, squeezing out the excess. He wipes it along her speckled arms and thinks of a picture in an art book Lillian gave him one Christmas.

It was a depiction of the crucifixion that had been commissioned by a hospital specializing in the treatment of St. Anthony’s fire, an extremely painful skin disease resulting from the ingestion of moldy rye. Christ’s skin hung on him pocked and torn like a tattered robe, looking much the same as someone with this disease might look. At the time of the painting, people had considered it gruesome and sadistic, but Lillian had thought it was the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen. "How comforting to be able to reach out to the sores of Christ for alliance in death," she had said.

Gus continues wiping down the fragile body. He cleanses each finger and toe individually. He dabs at her eyelids and circles each ear. He wraps her breast, one at a time, in the warm terry cloth, allowing the moisture to seep into the flesh. He finishes by tracing the lines of her ribcage, beneath which her struggling lungs lay nearly dormant.

"I must tell you some things, Lillian. I know you've
heard them before, but you must listen closely again." He sits on the side of the bed. "When I was a boy, I thought everything was relative to my inability to breathe. My parents brought home a nervous little Pomeranian pup. Grandma Hazen, an accomplished reader of tea leaves, told them that small dogs suck the sickness out of you, lap up the disease like milk." Gus places his hands on the distended tent of Lillian's stomach. He moves his hands slowly over the mound like an expectant father looking for invisible signs of life.

"The only treatment for asthma back then was a medicated candle you burned and inhaled. The odor was so foul I was shut in a room by myself and left to commune with the smell alone, beneath a towel. I thought I was being punished for not trying hard enough." Gus holds his hand loosely over his mouth.

"At church they sang 'Bringing in the Sheaves.' I sang 'Breathing in my Sleep.'" He looks down at Lillian.

"You must let go. You needn't be frightened. I imagine it is much like being born." He leans forward and lifts Lillian's head up, staring at her closed eyes. "Just slip back out, and they'll slap you home to where the breathing is easy." He eases the pillow out from under her and lowers her head to the bed. Her mouth snaps open. Gus places one hand near her mouth to feel the thin, creaking breaths escaping.
He moves his hand down to her chest and counts the long seconds between beats. "I can't do it for you," he says, laying his head on her sharp chest. "But I'll walk you through it." He inhales deeply and holds it.
Blue Skin

Clancy is watching the Oprah Winfrey show. There is a woman on who maintains that the male "y" chromosome is directly responsible for war and high interest rates. Her face vibrates as she speaks and she shakes clenched, white fists at the ceiling. Her gums are completely visible.

Clancy prefers Geraldo. He prefers the sensationalism and sleaze of the Geraldo Rivera show. He especially likes it when Geraldo gets down on bended knee and squeezes the thigh of the sobbing guest. Yesterday on Geraldo, there was a man whose wife had been slain by a maternally crazed woman. This woman could not have a child of her own, so she stalked a pregnant woman, kidnapped her and her unborn fetus, slit her nervously down the middle like a melon, and stole the baby from out of her womb, all the while looking over her
shoulder as though she were cracking a safe, as though it were something she was entitled to by the mere fact of her infertility, her poverty. The no-longer-pregnant woman clung to a tree as blood slipped from her and fed the moist earth beneath her. A person out for a walk saw the dying woman, and she told him this story.

Clancy imagines his family will one day be the focus of an edition of the Geraldo Rivera show. He sees Geraldo looking intently into his eyes, caressing his knee.

Clancy grew up watching mostly game shows and cartoons: *The Joker's Wild, Match Game '79, Rocky and Bullwinkle, Tennessee Tuxedo*. He remembers a particular afternoon when he was nine years old and watched his all-time favorite cartoon. He sat directly in front of the television set while in another room, behind a door, his mother and a man spoke in squeaky, muffled tones like muted trumpets. On the television a cartoon frog sang *Hello my baby, hello my honey, hello my Ragtime Gal*, in an imitation of Al Jolson as he danced, straw hat in hand, across a shoebox. An animated man looked on and kneaded his thick jowls.

Clancy remembers tapping on his knee with a plastic hammer and kicking his leg in the air. He tapped up and down his legs and began hitting harder. He chipped away at his shins. He dropped the hammer and ground his fists into his calves. He bent and bit his feet.
Clancy's mother, Melba, emerged. She rushed up behind him, dropped to her knees, and wrapped arms mottled with blue and yellow around him. She grabbed his tiny fists. "Your arms are colors," Clancy said. "Sky colors."

She shrouded Clancy with her body and rocked back and forth.

Somewhere in the house a door slammed, and Clancy broke away, fell on his side. Melba began massaging his legs. "It's okay now," she said. "The colors will go away."

Clancy sat up. "No," he said. "My name used to be Clancy." He turned toward the television.

"What is it now?" Melba rested her chin on his shoulder.

"Clem Cadiddlehopper," he said, staring at the television.

Melba wrapped her arms around Clancy again. He traced the bruises with his finger. "I'll always love you, Clancy," she said. "But I won't always be here."

On the television, the man's forehead looked like a sprinkler as sweat jumped off it in streams. The frog ribited indifferently. The man picked up the limp and malleable frog by the scruff of the neck. He set him on the back of his hand and kicked his frog feet with his fingers. He puppeted the frog along the shoebox, kicking and dancing. The man let go of the frog, who slid off his hand in a heap.
The frog ribited.

"Neither will I," Clancy said.

It is evening and Clancy is at the Rosebud Bar and Grill. A charred sled hangs on the wall behind him. His band, Leopold and the Frontal Loebs, has just played. They covered songs by Joy Division, Roxy Music, Kurt Weill, the Velvet Underground, and Patsy Cline. A few people on the dance floor slammed into one another and there was some halfhearted stage-diving but very little bloodshed. The Rosebud is one of the few bars left in Kansas City with this sort of mauling energy. Most clubs have gone the way of music that employs the heavy, throbbing rhythm of the beatbox. Some clubs set aside a special night for Acid House Industrial Hip Hop. The new genres confuse Clancy. The layers of rhythm make him blink and swallow in time. He is only nineteen and not inflexible, but he prefers the simpler eras and droning dirges of death and glitter rock.

A tall, emaciated woman has sidled silently up to Clancy. She appears apparition-like before him. She is clad in all black. She is so thin that her face and long white hair seem fleeting. Her skin is almost translucent like the invisibly scaled body of a neon tetra. Her veins and blood vessels create a faint Madras effect beneath her thin skin.

"Pretty solid tonight," she says. Her wet, red lips
look like two pieces of hot candy.

"Thanks," Clancy says. When he hears the word "solid" it occurs to him that her appearance is that of liquid, viscous and mutable. A test tube of flaccid substance. His mind gropes backward to Mrs. Shepherd's fifth grade science class. "The body is 83% water," she had said, her smoky breath heating his nape.

"My pad?" The woman's voice shakes him by the ears. He shrugs his shoulders and follows her out. The bouncer grabs Clancy's face as he's about to pass through the entrance. He slaps it twice and pinches Clancy's cheek. "Can I see your I.D.?" he asks then laughs and pushes him out the doorway.

"So, are you Leopold?" The woman and Clancy sit at opposite ends of a turquoise vinyl couch with six perfectly square cushions.

"No."

"Who's Leopold?"

"He's a guy who killed someone just to see if he could get away with it." Clancy feels his heart thumping hard and uneven within his chest, as though it were trying to reposition itself.

The woman smiles and kicks off her shoes. "Friend of yours?"

"No," he says.
"So what is your name? Something like Johnny Sinew or Dash Riprock?"

"Clancy." He takes off his glasses. Things blur and his heartbeat slows. He runs his fingers through a cowlicked spew of brown hair.

"Clancy? That sounds like a clown's name." The woman moves onto the cushion next to Clancy and pulls her legs under her.

"It was. It was the name of a guy my mom knew in Florida. He went to clown college there." Clancy begins focusing on small molecules of light that swim across his gaze.

"Wow. Vuja de. Synchronicity, hunh?" The woman laughs, puts her hand on Clancy's neck, and squeezes. "I didn't even know you could go to college for that. Wonder if it's Pass/Fail. My name's Dora."

Clancy reaches behind his neck and brings Dora's hand over his head. He shakes it. "Charmed," he says, staring at the small, green lizard tattoo on her hand.

"Yeah, right," she says. She notices Clancy staring at the tattoo and says, "Green is the most painful." Dora stands up. "I have an eating disorder, but I'm getting counseling." She puts her hands on her hips and swivels. "Do you think I'm overweight?"

Clancy shakes his head. Dora raises her eyebrows and
leans forward as if to ask, "No what?"

"No, ma'am," Clancy says. "If you stuck your tongue out in profile, you'd look like a zipper."

Dora does not laugh. She nods her head vaguely and says, "Yes. Thank you." She grabs Clancy's wrists and turns them over. "No scars," she says. "You could almost have been a girl, you know? You have slender fingers and you move like you're just an instant replay of something."

"You'd look like a zipper."

Dora smiles. She scoots close to Clancy. She leans over and licks his cheek. "Mmm. No stubble," she says. "Do you want to fuck?" She moves his shirt up and puts her finger in his navel.

"No," he says.

"Didn't think so. You're an insy." She begins to maneuver her fingers beneath his jeans. He grabs her wrist. "You do have a cock, don't you?"

"I have a cock."

"Just not led around by it?"

"Blind leading the blind," Clancy says.

Dora runs her fingers along the white, t-patch of scalp that glares through the closely shorn hair on the side of his head. "Why a cross?" she asks.

"A St. Christopher's Medal was too involved," he says.

She gets up and walks into the kitchen. Clancy
glasses back on. He notices a copy of National Geographic lying on the lacquered, petrified wood coffee table. On the cover there is an aerial shot of a spotty rainforest with an inset of its native inhabitants. They have long, black and gray hair and weather-worn faces deeply incised with dark furrows like relief maps made of leather. Round plates thrust their lower lips forward pleadingly, as if asking to be filled with food, relief.

Clancy traces the Indian's lips with his finger. "We're destroying the earth's lungs," he says. "We are our own cancer."

"I don't smoke," Dora calls from the kitchen. "I only put sugarless Sorbee hard candies in my ashtrays." She returns carrying a bowl of bean dip and a bag of pork rinds. She sits on the couch and says, "You know, you should really do more Joy Division covers. I could really get into a good Ian Curtis imitation."

Clancy feels his heart begin to knock against his chest again. "He committed suicide," he says.

"Yeah," she says, smiling at the bean dip.

Clancy stands up. "Goodbye," he says.

Dora raises one side of her shirt, exposing a breast small and fragile as a teacup. "Goodbye."

* * * * *
Clancy thinks his younger sister, Willa, looks like her name: delicate and windblown, though she’s actually quite sturdy. Clancy once watched as her black patent leather shoe met the step, toe to edge, and she fell backwards down a flight of wooden stairs. She had on a ruffled, white dress and looked like a pressed carnation spread out on the floor. She picked herself up and walked back up the stairs, patting the bannister gently, saying, "nice stairs," as though they were a horse that had just bucked her. She never screamed, and she didn’t bleed. She eats a lot of fruit.

Clancy teases Willa about the amount of fruit she consumes. It seems strange to him that a ten year old child would voluntarily choose apples over Ho-Hos. Yesterday Willa ate three peaches in a single sitting, and Clancy said, "Crimany, Willa. You think those things grow on trees?" Willa kicked him as she reached for a banana.

Clancy and Willa live with their stepfather, Buddy. Eight months ago their mother, Melba, disappeared. She just didn’t come home from work one morning. She worked graveyard at a convenience store called Gitty-Up-And-Go. Her purse was found lying in the parking lot of a Denny’s in downtown Kansas City, Missouri. Her keys, billfold, lucky squirrel’s foot and sunglasses were still in it, and there were two ticket stubs from the American Royal and a half-eaten Cherry
Mash. In her billfold there were three five dollar bills, two Susan B. Anthony silver dollars, a newspaper clipping about a child born allergic to her own skin, and the paper picture that came with the wallet of a grinning family of four.

Clancy and Willa and Buddy were on Unsolved Mysteries. They ate lunch with Robert Stack and the television crew at the Denny's where Melba's purse had been found. The producer of the show, a tall, thin man with long sideburns and three gold teeth asked Clancy to tell him everything he could think of that might be revealing.

Clancy leaned close to the producer's ear and spoke in a confidential tone. "Once, when we were painting Easter eggs, she told me there were people who lived in the Appalachians that had light blue skin, the color of robin's eggs, as a result of inbreeding."

"Good. Very good," the producer said. "Now we're getting somewhere."

Buddy was the only one who was interviewed on camera. He began to sob and said, "Melba honey, if you're out there watchin' darlin', please." He lowered his face into his hands. "Cut," someone yelled. Buddy pulled out from under the divan a ceramic plaque that read When the smoke alarm goes off, dinner's ready. Atop it were four neat lines of white powder, and Buddy rubbed some on his gums. He inhaled

"On the edge," one of the cameramen said. "On the edge of fucking Kansas."

The woman who portrayed Melba in the reenactment scenes gave Clancy an eight by ten glossy photograph of herself and her agent's card in case he ever decided to pursue an acting career. "You got the jaw for it," she said. "And those hands."

She gave Willa a bag of oranges, a Sea Monkey kit, and a kiss. "I'm going to plant one right there," she said, pointing to Willa's cheek. She scratched it with her fingernail, kissed the spot, then patted it down. "There. Maybe it'll grow."

Willa and Clancy watched as she left in a rented car. The car had two bumper stickers; one that said, Worlds of Fun and another that said, If Today Were a Fish, I'd Throw it Back.

It is now two months later, and Willa wants to activate the Sea Monkeys. "I think I'm ready," she says to Clancy.

"All we have to do is add water and presto, dancing
"What if they don't wake up?"

Clancy looks at the animated pictures of Sea Monkeys on the front of the package. One is grinning and waving and another is flexing its biceps. "It says here that they're developing heartier strains of Sea Monkeys all the time." Clancy knows that they won't last long and wishes he hadn't said this. He knows Willa will name them and look for distinguishing characteristics. She will claim that one has green eyes and that one can sing. She will give them occupations. She will say, "If he were human, I think he'd make a fine math teacher."

"I don't think I know enough, yet," Willa says. "What if they want to know where babies come from?"

Clancy pulls Willa's shirt up, presses his lips against her stomach, and blows hard. Willa laughs then says, "I'm really much too old for that now, you know. But you can do it if it makes you feel better."

Clancy and Willa decide to let the Sea Monkeys remain dormant a little longer so that they will all have something to look forward to. "We'll give them nine months to get ready," Willa says.

Willa wants desperately to go to the Rosebud to watch Clancy play. "Please, please, please?"

"You wouldn't like it, Willa. People smoke and wear
spiked bracelets."

"A woman named Dora called today. She asked me if I was yours, and I said 'yes.'"

"Good."

"She said she has an eating disorder but she's getting counseling. I told her I'd make her a French Silk pie if she came over, and she hung up."

"We can go to the river now," Clancy says.

At the river, Clancy and Willa wait for land-roving catfish to appear on the banks. They read about them in an issue of *Omni* magazine. These catfish have developed semi-prehensile fins and tails and hearty lungs. They have been spotted perching in banyan and palmetto trees in southern Florida. They have also been seen meandering along the highways. Willa is certain they have migrated to Kansas. She believes that they will be attracted, like the rats of Hamlin, to the soothing hum of tires against the woven metal of the ASB bridge, the "singing bridge." She feels certain they will become mesmerized during rush hour.

Clancy pokes a long branch at unidentifiable objects bobbing in the murky water.

"Do you think they call this the Kaw because crows live here?" Willa asks.

"Maybe. Maybe it's the snoring sound that the river makes late at night when the fish are sleeping."
"Yes. I bet that's it." Willa throws popcorn onto the water. Grey-green snouts surface and make the popcorn disappear.

"The world according to gar," Clancy says.

"One of the catfish will surely want to take a walk," Willa says. "Maybe he will have seen Mama."

Clancy drops Willa off at home. They did not see any strolling catfish. Clancy knows Willa is nervous and curious. She looks for things to connect with. "My friend Emma Perkins has a Petunia Pig watch," she says. "I have a Petunia Pig watch." "Smitty, Mrs. Baumgartner's dog, has curly brown hair," she says. "I have curly brown hair." "The front of the Buick has two big eyes and a smile like me," she says. "Seek and ye shall find. Seek and ye shall find," she says every night before bed like a prayer. Clancy imagines she is calling the number that connects her with an endless, measured thump, thump—the number for Frankenstein's heartbeat. Clancy used to call it when he was a child, and he would listen to it for hours on end. If Frankenstein ever expired, Clancy was going to be there to hear it. He imagines Willa listening to it at this very moment. "Frankenstein has a heartbeat," she is saying.

Clancy wishes he could take Willa to Bagnell Dam where the friendly, fat catfish swarm for the tourists whose hands
are full of Cornuts and Milk Duds. He knows she would love the big paddleboat and the free-standing faucet of running water suspended magically in midair. He also knows she would be appalled by the glassed-in chickens that peck at toy pianos for a handful of feed. He knows that he would buy her a goldstone necklace, a pair of Minnetonka moccasins, and that she would look deeply into every face of every stranger.

Clancy is at the Pierson Park Tower. He climbs over the tall fence despite the warning to KEEP OUT. The tower has been off limits for many years, ever since a little girl climbed it, unguided, and fell from the top, her head bursting on the concrete like a water balloon. Clancy climbs up the six stories and looks out over the city. He thinks he can see the blue and yellow lights of the Southwestern Bell building flickering on. He looks down and sees a girl climbing the fence. She waves at him. She climbs the tower stairs and stands next to Clancy.

"My name's Zooey," she says breathlessly.

"Clancy." Clancy's palms begin to itch.

"Too cool," the girl says. "In numerology z's and o's are totally sacred, so, like, maybe I'm the Messiah." Zooey laughs. "Unless you know someone named Zozo."

Clancy shakes his head. "You must be it," he says.

"I'm sorry. Am I being way too forward? You look kind
of familiar."

"It's the hands," Clancy says and turns his hands palms-up for her inspection. He looks at her hands clenching the railing. She has the letters H-A-T-E written in blue ink on the fingers of her left hand and L-O-V-E on the fingers of her right.

"Do you go to Pierson?"

"No."

"Wherever you go, there you are," Zooey says. "Or is it wherever you are, there you go? I saw it on a coffee mug in Macy's."

"Can I put my hand on your breast?" Clancy asks. "To see if I can feel?" Clancy removes his glasses and puts them in his pocket.

"What do you mean?"

"I think I've lost the feeling in my hands," he says. Clancy's mouth begins to water, and he vomits over the railing. He lays his head down on his leaning arm.

Zooey takes his free hand and places it on her breast. It feels to Clancy like a knee or a hat or a bagel.

"Fuck," he says.

* * *

Clancy dreams of Jesus. Jesus is sitting in Willa's
stiff plastic wading pool. The words SON OF GOD are tattooed in green across his chest, and he is wearing an ankh earring. He is clad in skimpy red and blue Speedo swimming trunks. Liquid shoots out of his wrists and colors the water an inky blue. A grinning, green plastic frog sits silently on his thigh. Jesus inhales and holds his breath. His face begins to drip into the pool, and Melba's face appears. Her skin is transparent but reflects the dark water. Under her skin she is filled with white liquid like milk in a blue glass. Clancy walks toward the pool but never gets any closer. He hears Willa's voice behind him and turns around to see nothing. When he turns back, there is only a chalk outline of a fish in the grass.

Clancy hears the telephone ringing. Or is it wind chimes, he wonders. Or is it the pulse in his ear? The grass, the chalk outline have disappeared. There is only the black of the undersides of his eyelids. Fringed light darts across like a paramecium. He opens his eyes. It is the telephone ringing. Clancy rises and walks into the living room. He feels a smooth, weighted dangle of genitals brush against his inner thighs like clay bell clappers. He hears the click and rumble of the answering machine. Howdy, the machine says.

"Melba?" Clancy says. "Mama?"

You've reached the home of Melba, Buddy, Clancy, and
Willa, but we’re not in it. Leave a message, and one of us will get back to you as soon as we can. Oh, and if this is Sheldon, your pony’s fine. Eats like a horse. Wait for the beep.

"Hey, dudesicle. What’s shakin’? The scenery is here, etc. Oh, by the way, fuck you. In the words of the inimitable Frank Tovey: ‘I choke on the gag, but I don’t get the joke.’ Hey Leopold, I don’t give a rat’s ass if you don’t have a prick. Really. Call me anyway. See you. Ignite. Burst into flames."

Clancy takes the small cassette out of the machine. Buddy only recently turned the answering machine back on. Willa insisted that he leave the old recorded message intact. She was convinced that if Melba ever called and heard her own words, she would be drawn magically back to them by acknowledging her former life at the other end of the phone line. Willa believed Melba would be transfixed by the sound of her own voice, that her mind would walk along the miles of underground cable, snapping with current, until it reached their front door. Clancy puts the cassette in a shoe box on which Buddy has scrawled the words Personal Effects. Clancy does not want Buddy to have the last word concerning Melba. Using a pencil with an eraser in the shape of Fred Flintstone, Clancy inserts the word side.

Clancy remembers the origin of the Fred Flintstone
eraser. He remembers Willa clutching the eraser in her tight fist like a secret. She had gotten it at the Ice Capades. Melba had taken Clancy and Willa to the Ice Capades to watch big, lively incarnations of the Flintstones characters cavort on ice skates. There were Fred and Wilma and Pebbles Flintstone, Barney and Betty and Bam-Bam Rubble. There were also Kazoo and Dino the Dinosaur. Fred fell down repeatedly, often taking Barney with him. Clancy remembers thinking this was somehow symbolic. Wilma and Betty were graceful, with their big heads cocked to the side, and looked like sleek animals as their spotted dresses waved.

Melba knew one of the ticket sellers and got fifth row seats on the bottom tier of Municipal Auditorium. Every now and then when the skaters came near the railing nearest them, slicing to a stop, they could feel a spray of ice prickle invisibly against their cheeks. Once Bam-Bam leaned over the railing and shook the hand of the little boy in front of Willa. Willa shrank into her chair at the sight of the big, cushioned palm reaching out.

Suddenly the lights began to dim, and Dino swished to a halt, center rink. A voice announced that it was time to determine who the two lucky ticket holders were. The children with the winning tickets were going to ride on Dino’s tail as he wound around the rink, looping and curving. The numbers were called, and Melba raised Willa up by the
waist, shaking her in the air like a protest sign. Clancy stood and pulled on his mother’s sleeve. "No," he said. "She’ll get hurt. No, please."

Melba smiled and ignored the tug on her arm. Willa hung silent and limp as old celery. Dino picked up the first winner on the other side of the auditorium then swung around and backed up near Willa. An usher took Willa from Melba’s arms and placed her on a cushioned indentation in Dino’s tail. She placed Willa’s arms around the stomach of the little boy in front of her who held on to one of the pointed plates that ran down Dino’s back and tail. Clancy remembers thinking that the animated Dino didn’t have armored plates running down his spine, that they must only be there so that small children can ride on his tail. Willa looked back over her shoulder as Dino’s four legs skated away, the tip of his tail swatting the air behind him. The song "Dizzy" played over the speakers. Children clapped and bit the heels of their hands. They waved fluorescent pinwheels in the air.

Clancy saw Willa release. He watched as her arms let go of the boy in front of her. As she tried to clap, she toppled backwards off of Dino’s tail. She lay sprawled on the ice. All the people in the auditorium cooed "Oh" at the same time like a canned sitcom response. People dressed in white skated out and scooped her up off the ice like debris. They took her to an office where a sleepy medical student
waited for just this sort of calamity. The medical student looked somewhat disappointed to discover that only Merthiolate and Band-Aids were called for but forced a smile as he handed her a kazoo and a Fred Flintstone eraser.

That night Melba held Willa in her arms. Clancy rubbed Willa's feet as Melba rocked her back and forth. They fed her mint chocolate chip ice cream and bright pink marshmallow rabbits. Clancy colored in Willa's toenails with her turquoise blue magic marker as they watched *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* on television. Willa cried at the thought of the deportation of Mrs. Livingston, the Japanese housekeeper, who always spoke low and hushed like a humming child. "She's the one that makes things calm," Willa said.

Dry sobs bent Melba's body, and she kissed Willa's bruised knees and scabbed shins. Melba laid her head on Willa's knees and petted her thighs. "Your knees aren't speaking to me," Melba said. "I'm sorry, chicken," she said. "So sorry."

"It's only blue skin," Willa said, patting her mother's cheek.

Clancy rummages through the shoebox. He touches all the objects: crocheted gloves, a tarnished Eastern Star ring, photographs, a mermaid shaped shoe horn, baby teeth, a gold brocade coin purse. He looks at a picture of Melba. Her
face is blurred into the landscape behind her. She is clutching her arms. Her greyish skin seems too big for her, as though she were getting ready to shed.

Clancy sets the photograph down and slips his hands into the stretchy gloves, taut as new skin. He takes the picture of Melba outside and digs a hole in the dry soil. He places the picture in the hollow and smooths the earth over it.

Back inside, Clancy clutches the Fred Flintstone eraser in his dirty gloved hand as he walks to Willa’s room. With blue chalk, he draws the outline of a fish on her chalkboard. He sits down beside her and kisses her knees. Willa’s eyes open. Clancy lays his head on her chest. "And you have a heartbeat," he says.