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## Bean People

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## BEAN PEOPLE

NO WIND COMES THROUGH the chimes in this heat. No breeze blows through our shirt-sleeves either, so we take off our shirts and sit in the kitchen stitching Bean People. When cicadas hiss their static from the trees, we sweat into our underwear. Dad's boxer shorts become skins. Dad's socks make strong skins for bean bodies. I'm not mother or father of Bean People. Neither's Mom. She's God: Him.

She's He: the big bearded He.

God and I fill the Bean People with beans because we have heat and cicadas. We make them move because we have sweat. When the skin under our knees slickens, we don't care. God swats a fly.

(And even when Mom can swat a fly and I think she's God, she isn't yet Odessa Smith. All this is before Mom gets a name at all, before the Bean People fill the house. All this is fourteen years ago, before I can think.)

The Dragons' losing-streak can be charted. Statistics, years, names, and photographs compile so that when the byline "Teresa Smith" appears in the Warren Area High School newspaper beneath an article on basketball losses or the annual Girl Scout-sponsored father-daughter pig roast, I know the report is accurate: I get the facts.

"A little emotion, more feeling," Mr. Cassell said yesterday during the editor's meeting. His pen pointed to the photo of badge-wearing girls clustered around an open pig belly. "Try to bring more of the human element to your articles." Facts are easy. Emotion, the "human element" of the pig roast, is more difficult to capture. Emotion's elusive.

Especially with pigs.

Not so for my own family!

A Smith fact: An animal rotted in Dad's car for weeks. We didn't look for it. Better to hold our noses. When we did finally raise the hood for the cause of the stink, we couldn't find anything. But we knew it was there, badly decomposed, and Dad

and Aunt Tina blackened their hands in the hood, touching part after part.

"We know you're in there!"

"Stinking body! Stupid, stinking animal!"

"Come out, come out, little dead guy! We want to bury you nicely! You'll have a nice place underground all to yourself."

"What kind of animal climbs into a hot hood?"

"Kind of animal that's going to go extinct soon."

"Feel in the air vents."

"Thing deserved to die."

A typed sheet and a hand appeared on my desk a few minutes ago. The typed sheet and the hand shouldn't have made me think of the Bean People and Aunt Tina and Odessa and the animal body, but it did. Mr. Calper's bony arm and face attached to the sheet and hand. Paused at my desk. Dropped a paper.

Mr. Calper

12<sup>th</sup> Grade History

1<sup>st</sup> Marking Period, Family History Report

Due Date: 10/10

This project will let you feel some of the tasks of the historian. It will also help you learn some family facts. Concentrate initially on your immediate family, and see how the project unfolds. The report will be completed in two parts: 1. Design and label a family tree with appropriate names and dates; 2. Add relevant facts (i.e. birthplace, place of marriage, occupation(s), date(s) of death, relevant moves in location, etc.). Be able to give an outline of your family's unique history to share with the class, in poster or report form (8 1/2" X 11" paper) by the due date above.

The facts are so far gone now I'll only find a bone, if I'm lucky. A bit of rib blackened by the heat of the engine. But emotion sends its stench out like seedpods or three thousand decomposing bodies. It's everywhere.

Mr. Calper knows my history anyway. He should. It's



the most exciting story in Warren County.

"Teresa," Mr. Calper says after the last backpack goes from his classroom, "If you want—"

"Oh, I want to do the Smiths. Our history's fun," I say. He twists his lips. Rubs his stubble. "Fun. Good."

I write my name on my desk with my eraser. Look up at him. Pick up my backpack.

He nods. "Right. Yes." Fun, good, right, yes. My backpack goes with the others.

When Mom smoked cigarettes I sometimes sat on her lap and the brown circumference of the mole on her chin matched the size of her smoldering cigarette's end. The mole was as untouchable as the lit cigarette above it. Pushing the button would have burnt the fingerprint off my index finger. I'd wander the streets without an identity. I'd be able to open Dad's boxes under the bed and take the bottles out of Mom's medicine cabinet; the police could dust for fingerprints and there'd be none. I'd be untraceable.

Odessa herself was untouchable. Dad tried to touch her late at night sometimes. Yells and curses came from the kitchen. When Dad poured his Wheaties in the mornings his hands quivered with the burns.

Never mind the tomato soup spilled and dried on the linoleum. Mom's *body* had burnt Dad. It was simple. He had tried to touch her. She was untouchable. She was hot.

The phone rings as my backpack (history assignment shoved in) hits the linoleum at home.

"Hello?" I say. It's not a telemarketer; there's a cough, her breathing.

"Hello?" she says.

"Hello?" I say.

"Hello?"

"Hello?"

"I need cigarettes," she says, and hangs up.

Dad's sister Tina told me some of what she knew four years after Odessa and I made Bean People, when I had three missing

teeth. Aunt Tina didn't see my feet drawn up tight against my chest; she husked corn and carved jack-o'-lanterns and changed the oil or the television channel during the telling, speaking like she was dictating a recipe for scrapple. My history's something relatives and friends would rather I heard as background static; they'd rather I didn't really pay attention, but they feel—none-theless—compelled to speak. It's all in my head, lies and truths probably, and I'll figure out which is which and lie the truth down next to the lies and dispel rumors so when all's said and done Mr. Calper will have a diagram and a written description typed and tucked into a plastic portfolio with my name on the front clearly lettered TERESA SMITH 12<sup>th</sup> GRADE HISTORY 2<sup>nd</sup> MARK-ING PERIOD FAMILY HISTORY REPORT. Oh, he'll get what he wants. I'll get what I want. Good. Right. Yes.

When she calls again I recognize her before she speaks. The pause after I say hello. The static line of the State Hospital.

“Cigarettes,” she greets me.

“I just mailed you a carton,” I say.

“The new lady steals what you mail,” she says, “You have to come yourself or I won't get it.”

The Bean People still line the shelves in this house where Dad and Mom lived. When I see the shelves and all those beany bodies I want to know if Odessa was like me once.

But the truth might be that she always cut Dad's driver's license into quarters and sprinkled it in the stinkweeds, or put potholders in the freezer. The truth might be that Aunt Tina didn't buckle Odessa into the back seat and drive away with her to Somewhere They'll Take Care of Her in Her Condition.

At the beginning I wasn't smart. Aunt Tina came to school and said Teresa's mother couldn't be here but Teresa is bright, needs a good strong education, what with her—because she does have a head on her shoulders, even if—

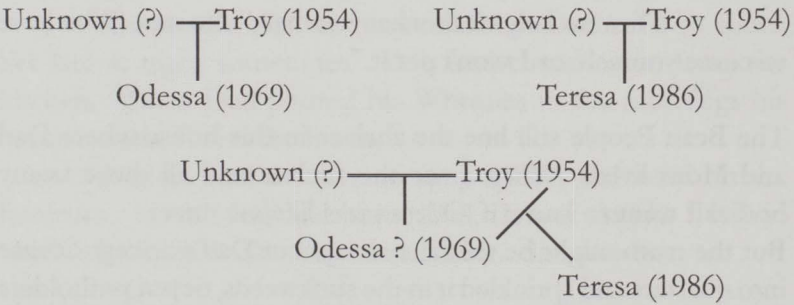
And they said I could wait in the hall while they finished the meeting.

They gave me vocabulary tests and games. They gave me paints and a telescope and a microscope. I was given *Being*

*There* and *Jane Eyre* in ninth grade, *The Color Purple* and *Tom Jones* in tenth. Chance, Jane, Celie, and Tom slept on the floor next to my bed at night. I liked them. There was plenty of room for them at my lunch table. I watched rocks thrown to hopscotch boards over the rim of *Frankenstein*. At the moment when Jimmy cracked his head open celebrating his kickball homerun in sixth grade and all the kids circled him and all the heads looked for a playground monitor and someone yelled, “Jimmy’s hurt bad!” and “Did you see how far he kicked it?” I was reading the words, “like the archangel who aspired to omnipotence, I am chained to an eternal hell.”

All of this great education leads to this knowledge: a family tree should be something singular. But what should be isn’t always what is. So my family tree, for the purposes of the report, won’t be one tree. It’ll be a forest. It’ll be a national park after someone drops a cigarette and forgets to stomp.

Family Tree



Three weeks have passed since she called. Ravioli from the can tastes good tonight and Aunt Tina’s not here to stop me from having it this way—she’s off helping the older Warren relatives now, the ones I don’t know or care about, the ones who don’t have their health—so the spoon scrapes the metal base and the sauce there collects on the spoon for one more spicy bite when the phone rings.

“Teresa,” she says.

“Odessa.” I hang up.

There’s one story that Aunt Tina told several times during our



walks down Prospect Avenue after school, or on drives past the refinery to the dam. She looked straight ahead of her as she told it, and stopped to curse at the menaces who shouldn't be allowed on the streets, the drivers who didn't give us the right-of-way.

Troy Smith was born in Odessa, Texas, in 1954. He was thirteen in 1967. That's the year he says he became less of a man. That year, there was a sandstorm in Odessa.

"He had a good red bike and he rode it to deliver papers every morning—very strong arm he had," Aunt Tina said. "We thought he could make it big with that arm, get us lots of money playing professional football someday. Well, he was out riding this bike with the newspapers one morning and a sandstorm came. Said he pedaled fast but the storm rode along with him."

Dad liked to tell the story too, when he had a drink or two in him. "You've never seen anyone scared as I was," he said once. "Felt like this whole hell was moving at me and over me, on top: needles in my skin, in my eyes, needles all through me and into my chest these dark needles so I put one arm over my face like this and went faster, you know, and faster, not even breathing, faster than you've ever seen anyone pedal into the dark, up and down and up and down, my feet going faster and faster and the needles kept coming and coming and then—then I just fell. Worst sandstorm Odessa ever had. Thought it'd never stop. Thought I'd never ride out of it."

He never rode out of it. Maybe it rode out of him, when it wanted. "After that you should've seen him," Aunt Tina said when she first told me, and hit a squirrel with the Buick. "Fuck." Her grey eyes appeared in the rearview mirror, scanning the street for the squirrel. "Found him crying in the dirt. Storm part blinded him. Troy was the best chance we all had to get any standing and move somewhere good. After that he saw shadow shapes but nothing so clear anymore. Couldn't play football for Mo-Jo Magic. Dad was maybe sadder than he was—you know, no Mo-Jo Magic."

I'd like to make this story into something epic. I'd like to make up sentences that could appear in my report:

1. "Blindness took not only sight for the son, but also hope for the father."

2. "An heir's entire potential was dashed along with his vision."

3. "Troy's father cursed the gods."

4. "Troy's eyes, stung with Odessa's own sand, released floods."

I'd like to film all this in my head. I'd like to add music. Apocalyptic movie music. To play it all in black and white, or in slow motion, with wind and heat and blood.

But none of it was like that at all. It just happened. Regular speed. A few people talked about it. That's about it.

Troy didn't want to go but they went: up and moved from Odessa, Texas, to Warren, Pennsylvania, in 1968. There were relatives in Warren, relatives who'd been there before the family'd moved to Odessa, relatives who'd found a way to make money even after Warren's own oil busts. The Smiths hoped for some sort of fast fortune, or at least stability, somewhere other than the sandstorm city.

Troy's fast fortune came in Warren. He met a girl and they made their fast fortune together.

"An older girl," Aunt Tina said as she reached into a hollowed-out turkey body. "I'm sure. Troy wasn't around much after he turned fifteen. Then he was gone about a week on what he said was a camping trip with the guys. We were just glad he'd made friends, not seeing well and all, and being from Odessa. Brought a baby girl home with him without a word." The stuffing mashed into the turkey body and her hand emerged for more. "Told our mom his girlfriend had the baby and they were going to move off and get married and be respectable. But she had the baby and disappeared." Aunt Tina's hand was the same color as that bread-mush. "Mom said the girl probably moved away to keep herself from a mostly blind fifteen-year-old husband who wouldn't bring her class or a name or even a decent place to live."

That girl wasn't named to me. I don't know if Aunt Tina knows her name. Her child was Odessa, born in Warren, Pennsylvania, in 1969. That child is Mom. The mother of Mom is a bigger mystery. Aunt Tina said before Troy came home with the baby she thinks they were sleeping in Troy's car, in the back



lot of Cabrini Motors, where the owners used to see raccoons tipping trash cans.

When we make the Bean People, God sits under the kitchen light two inches deep and dense with all the bugs. "Cooler in there than out here," God jokes. God fans Himself with yesterday's *Times Observer* and pokes the Bean People with His pinking shears. God yells, "Hotter'n hell in here with all this light!" and tacks a trash bag over the windows.

A silk tie becomes three Bean People. Because they're silky and few, the tie people receive more beans than the rest. This makes them stiff despite their silkiness. A terrycloth robe stained with maple syrup and coffee and shaving cream and blood becomes twenty-seven Bean People, thin and agile due to the beans being divided among so many.

More sentences for the epic:

1. "A bust came that same year, 1967, after the sand-storm."
2. "Odessa's skyline charted her economic flux; oil pump jacks moved up and down along an otherwise barren flatland."
3. "Odessa had her booms and her busts, but always, sand remained."
4. "With the cutting of Troy Smith's clothes in 1989, when Teresa was three, Odessa instigated a ten-year battle."
5. "Those involved in this battle must be, like the Bean People, cut into squares, sorted, reassembled, named, and understood. Known."

Troy called the child Odessa out of nostalgia. Nostalgia for the home that'd blinded him.

Since Troy was only just a boy (God bless him) and didn't know any better anyhow and spent his days at work at Cabrini Motors not seeing good anymore, Aunt Tina came to help with his child. Odessa liked to make puzzles. She liked dolls. "She was smart," said Aunt Tina. She learned to read early. She made fungus pies in the wheelbarrow while Dad was groping car parts and grease. She smeared her mouth and cheeks with poisonous berries and pretended to have eaten them. She drew eyes in

white chalk on all the trees and claimed the trees had yelled at her. Dad didn't like that. "Trees can't yell. They don't have mouths," he said. When he said that, Odessa went back outside.

When she came back, the trees had mouths. They had all the ripe tomatoes from Aunt Tina's garden seedy red against the bark.

When she told me this, Aunt Tina, brushing her teeth, took the toothbrush from her mouth and said Odessa the child was as bad as Odessa the city and probably worse than the mother who wouldn't be named. Then, mouth foaming, she spat.

October 6th she calls again.

"When?" she asks.

I hold a pencil, to take notes for Mr. Calper's report. "Did you ever meet your mom?"

"Yes," she answers, "She didn't say a word. Very shy."

"When was this?" I ask.

"In a dream," she says.

When God's God, He sees the skin of the Bean People as he gnaws His slippery chicken wings. God is satisfied.

He sees that the Bean People, no matter the cloth, lack eyes, hands, and legs.

Lucky for them! God would tear them off. Bean People should have no appendages. They should have no eyes or limbs or voices of their own; God should move them. God does!

Aunt Tina told the best part of the story only once—while she mixed mayonnaise with tuna and waited on hold with a credit card company. That's the part sometimes I believe and sometimes I don't. It's about how Odessa grew a belly below her belly in 1986 when she was seventeen. The belly below the belly was Odessa's curse and it's the part that interested kids at school.

Kids at school said she was pregnant and a man from Clarendon had come and done it. Odessa said she wasn't pregnant. Troy didn't say anything at all.

Aunt Tina said that because of that belly, she thinks it was Odessa who gave birth to a girl in 1986. I ended up in the



house, anyway, and grew up there on Prospect Street—with Troy and Aunt Tina and Odessa and a yard full of car innards.

“Hello?”

“Hello?”

“I’m coming.” (If I come she’ll write a history. Tomorrow’s October 10<sup>th</sup>. Mr. Calper will want the pile of reports on his desk. The keys don’t just hang by the door now; they dig into my palm. The keys jingle and then go into the hole for keys and a key turns and then there’s just the noise of Aunt Tina’s engine. Hearing the noise of the engine, steering, notebook on the passenger’s seat, I imagine Dad in a hot, dark factory of loud machinery—either in a factory or on a tropical island.)

The Buick stalls at the wrought-iron gate. Impatiens raise their symmetrical white heads and salute with symmetrical green petals at the gate in neat rows beckoning into a clipped weedless green lawn. At the end of the lawn, two fountains front a symmetrical door that opens into a brick building.

In the gate, in the building itself, it’s much darker, dingier.

A lipsticked woman with bleached blond hair sits behind glass by the framed mission and vision statement and plaques awarded for the institution’s goodness. Tyra, says her nametag. Tyra gives me a Visitor Authorization Form.

“Good,” I say. “Thanks.”

For ten years—1989 to 1999—Odessa fought her father and maybe my father. When I was three we made Bean People of Dad’s clothing while he was at work. Odessa was God or else Mom but not yet Odessa. She said I could call her Mom but she wasn’t; she told me we were sisters and our mom had gone away.

In 1999 the place under Troy’s bed filled with spiderwebs and the boxes that had been there piled in that car where he and Odessa’s mom may’ve held each other when Odessa was a baby. Maybe he went back to Texas. Maybe he went to Erie or Jamestown for a better job, Odessa said.

So since then, Odessa has been a Noibans waitress and



a Burger King employee and a Blair telemarketer and a janitor for Beatty and an Unemployed Single Mother and a Whirley factory worker and a Welfare Recipient and a Resident of the State Hospital. Aunt Tina and the Warren Area School District made me the local wild child. I had my mother's stubbornness and my sister's imagination and my father's quick fingers and my grandfather's work ethic. They said this jokingly. In jest. Because no one really means much of what they say about me; people just like to talk.

There's no equality between Bean People. The silk tie Bean People say dismissively, "We were cut of different cloth." Their seams are sewn shut on all sides. The silk tie Bean People don't give beans to the twenty-seven terrycloth robe Bean People, who move gracefully and seldom complain.

The Bean People, upon completion, become distinct personalities. Some Bean People are named after our streets, others after our neighbors, most after names that have nothing to do with anything that is ours: Big Bird, Ferrari, Jackpot, and One-Fish-Two-Fish-Red-Fish-Blue-Fish. There is LMNOP. There're President Reagan and Neil Armstrong and George Washington and Malcolm X. Jefferson is soft-spoken and pale blue, one of Dad's socks. Alvin Chipmunk's the evil Bean Person. His skin is Dad's roughened red flannel.

We group them. Thanks to my naming, each Bean Person is distinct; thanks to Dad, each has his material, which comes from some particular item of clothing.

I give each his story. Each is a hero or villain.

The stray cat we won't name tenses his muscles. He gets very still watching the Bean People. He crouches his anonymous dirty body on the kitchen floor as if he belongs there, twitching his scabby tail, stiffening his bony back, watching Neil Armstrong.

Then he uncoils; he springs. They tumble—Neil and the cat. Afterwards, seated separately on the kitchen floor, neither Neil Armstrong nor the cat comments on the outcome of their skirmish. Stoics, both. The cat licks his paw and looks away. Neil Armstrong doesn't even blink.

\* \* \*

Patient's Name: Odessa Smith

Unit: CTU

Date: 10/9/2003

Time: 3:30 p.m.

Visitor's Name: Teresa Smith

Relationship to Patient: ?

Address: 24 Prospect Street, Warren, Pennsylvania 16365

The Bean People, now unmoved, without God, and with only me in the house to speak to, don't move themselves. They don't argue or fight amongst themselves. They're lazy. They sit around like hippos in mud.

Lizards on rocks, grapes on vines, mud on river-beds, rocks on tar. They lounge on the shelves before our books. They nestle in our hanging plants and atop the backs of couches. On Odessa's yarn blankets and beneath her dangling yarn God's eyes, they cluster.

"Relationship to patient?" Tyra asks, holding my form. "You need to complete the form entirely."

For the report—a note. A visitation rule: "Visitation will be refused if you are involved in Protection from Abuse Actions with the person you wish to visit."

"Daughter," I say.

"If Dad's going to use the old windshield wipers he picked up at Cabrini Motors as a weapon," Odessa told me in 1989, "I'm going to put my foot down. She put her foot down: a PFA on Dad. Dad picked up his feet and walked out.

"He'll be back," I said.

"For a man who can't see—" she said, "And if he does come back, he'd better not come within five hundred feet or that back of his'll be in a ten-foot cell."

She picked up his underwear and cut a neat square from its rear.

Dad did come back the next week, and when he did a



Bean Person made of his best suit greeted him quietly from the toaster.

So an arms race began; Dad put a PFA on Mom. That meant neither could come within five hundred feet of the other, I decided, or they'd both be put in jail. His car burnt tire marks out by the stop sign and I thought that was the end of seeing him.

But he called a week after that, and she spoke and they moved back in together and so for the year 1989 (and even for the ten years after, when the PFA wasn't in effect anymore) whenever they were within five hundred feet of each other I imagined calling the police and having them both put in jail, maybe in adjoining cells. That's the way they'd want it.

In the elevator: a denim-clad woman, a gnome-like man who chews an enormous wad of fluorescent yellow gum, and me. Friends of Odessa? Her new family? And Odessa would talk to this new family, denim-woman and gnome-man—about the weather. The nation's foreign policy. World politics.

A wiry grey-skinned man unlocks the door to the CTU.

"Thanks," I say. The poster by the door—"People With Mental Illness Enrich Our Lives"—lists famous names of the mentally ill.

"Patty Duke!" I say to the man, pointing, "And there's old Ernest Hemingway!"

"Sure," he says, squinting at my nametag.

He leads me down a door-lined hallway (each door displaying a construction paper nametag: Sissy, Herman, Tammy, Joseph) and unlocks the Visiting Room and unlocks it.

"Thanks," I tell his back, and open the door. Odessa sits there on a couch. Mole intact. No cigarette. I nod. Smile.

"Hi," I say.

"Hi," she says.

"Hi."

The blue in all the God's Eyes has gone grey so the house now is ripe with hanging grey eyes, dull eyes. There's dust on the unicorns, dust on the porcelain Cyclops, dust on the Permian Panthers mug and Mo-Jo blanket. Dust clinging like dew to the fake



flowers in the orange vase on our kitchen table. Dust overflowing from a cornucopia of plastic fruit. On a plastic dart set, each ring, and the bullseye itself, is dust or a hole. The Bean People collect their dust too. They don't converse.

So many unmoving bodies, bubbles of energy, little pockets in space. They stare out from under dusty grey God's Eyes and are mute. We found the stray seven years ago, in a pile of such dust. Neil Armstrong has no more cat to wrestle. There's no movement for him now.

No talking about "our unique history" here. No relevant facts. We sit. Pen tapping notebook. Tapping.

Visiting Room:

1. One blue floor.
2. Four white walls.
3. One circular table.
4. Two pink heart placemats on one circular table.
5. One half-completed jigsaw puzzle picturing the crashing ocean on one circular table next to two pink placemats.
6. One piano. Locked.
7. Two stiff couches set against three of four white walls.
8. Three paisley flower couch-covers covering two stiff couches set firmly against three of four white walls.
9. One Teresa Smith on paisley flower couch cover.
10. One Odessa Smith, here, not talking, not being talked to, on paisley flower couch cover.
11. One grated, screen-covered window.

Back at home, some are shoved onto the beds with letters and newspaper clippings and receipts and prescriptions and phone numbers and bank statements: mixed, stacked, shuffled. I don't need this information for the report; I can go by what people have said. I could write the report by the way they looked at me, but that'd be relying on emotion.

No talk. No questions. Odessa stays on the couch. I stand and look out the window. Two women smoke next to a radio on the ground below.

"So," I say.

"So."

"Let the good times roll," sings the radio below the window. I give her the cigarettes. She tucks them into her sock.

"So."

"So."

"What do you do for fun here?"

"Nothing," she says. She shakes her head. "There's no fun here."

"No fun at all?"

"No fun at all. Not even a picnic yet this year."

"Well, what are they waiting for?"

"Rain," she says.

No questions or answers. But—more unique facts for the report.

Four White Walls in Visiting Room:

1. Five framed posters:

- a.) poster of plant drawings, labeled
- b.) poster of fish drawings
- c.) poster of flowers, captioned
- d.) poster of bird species
- e.) diagrammed, framed fungi

2. At each poster's base, Smoky the Bear points at the viewer like Uncle Sam.

"You, too, can help prevent forest fires," I say in a deep voice, "Protect our wildlife."

She stands and taps the window grate to the beat of the music.

"Well."

"Well."

"I have to go to the bathroom," I say.

She looks down at the smokers who must still be standing below. Waves her tarry fingers.

"4:15. It's almost time for me to smoke."

God gets old. He stops moving the Bean People. God becomes Odessa Smith. He becomes she. Teresa Smith doesn't pile the Bean People together in a long sock; she doesn't poke out their beans one at a time. She doesn't and won't slide the skins of

two—blue plaid and red flannel—against each other. Leaving them alone and separate, in rows, she won't ever do any of this again.

*Reader's Digest* once said that speaking of oneself in the third person is a sign of mental illness. Teresa Smith suspected this was true. She turned to another section; she read "Humor in Uniform."

My notebook is all lists. A note: in the bathroom down the hall from the Visiting Room, the stall door locks don't extend to their holes. The doors swing freely on their hinges. Teetering from the toilet, I reach to hold my door shut.

If I asked her—I could ask, "Did Troy ever—" or "Do you think I—" but my stomach feels heavy, heavy, and my eyes want to be crushed. The door swings wide. I jump up, grab it, and return to the toilet. If I asked, or said, she's still not going to be---

Flush.

"Teresa, this is Debbie," Odessa says when I come out of the bathroom.

"Hi," I say.

"Hello," Debbie says. We follow Debbie from the Visiting Room and down the corridor. Humming, Debbie strokes gold necklaces and waddles.

A padlock seals the door to the CTU. "Locked," I say, rattling it.

"That's what I'm here for," Debbie says, "You need me more than anything else right now." She grins and jingles a set of keys.

"Goodbye," I tell Odessa. There's a knot in Odessa's shoelace and I crouch to untie it.

"Leave it alone. It works," she says.

"There's a knot in it."

She's going to die here. I think of that as my fingers dig into the knot—her dying here. Her mole will blacken with her smoker's lungs. Funny. Something will eat her mole! I'll never push it! And if I did—



Slam. The CTU door. No hug.

"Goodbye!" I call through the door to her. Hugs are unnecessary. We didn't talk.

"You always have to have things just right, don't you,"  
Odessa yells from behind it.

I'm stepping on a bug body in that same house, that Warren house, its floors littered with bugs crisped by the light and the remaining hairs of the stray who pounced on the stupid eyeless Bean People we made of Dad's clothes because we had nothing else to do, nothing else to keep in our hands, no better thing to think about but what Bean People'd be doing because you can't tell what's good or right and everything's stupid heat.

Disappointment bows in the floorboards; disappointment creaks under the boards. Disappointment clings to every hair. Disappointment cakes the inside of cheap porcelain unicorns and cyclops. Ringing its brown stain in the Permian Panthers mug, winding through every fiber in Dad's Mo-Jo blanket, balling into beads along the fake flowers in the orange vase, spilling from a cornucopia of plastic fruit: falsely ripened, colorful, plastic, heavy disappointment. It's sealed in a plastic dart set so each ring, and the bulls-eye itself, is disappointment or else a hole. Not that there's a difference. I kick the walls to loosen the disappointment and make it fall like old paint.

It's fresh; it doesn't.

Maybe Odessa's right; I always want things just right. They aren't just right, but what's the problem with wanting them that way?

The people who want things just right are the ones who make the world go 'round. They're the ones who keep the birds from getting into the fungi poster. They're the ones who help prevent forest fires. They're the ones who italicize the print and frame the institution's mission statement in glass and hang it straight and keep the fish from swimming into the plant captions.

They're the ones who lock the piano in the Visitor's Room and put grates on the windows and keep a radio to play "Let the Good Times Roll." The people who want things just right say things, in their posters, about enriching our lives. They

make lists. The people who want things just right chart things. They graph them out. They write reports.

But the report won't be written.

I'm sitting in a chair in the kitchen. Under the bugs—the same bugs that were there fifteen years ago. I'm lifting scissors and making dots on this table with their sharp point. Dot. Dot. Dot. There's nothing right.

A report: the way she tangles her fingers in my hair. A report: not touching the mole. If I could lose the fingerprints, let them gurgle into those roots, tawny like Dad's drink—into the dirt, deeper and darker into that mud and sludge, down through the worms and things we can't name, the bugs that won't be seen, who'll burrow and twist their bodies into that same soil—then what?

I could make the word "maybe" a report. Maybe there was a moment when Odessa was a child who looked at his teeth and hiccupped. Maybe Troy bent low and she fit a blade of grass into the crack between the front teeth. Maybe she pushed her fingers (not tar stained—not yet) into his. Maybe she held them as they walked to the slides or the trees in the backyard (the trees with the eyes). Maybe she listened as the trees spoke to her, or to him—to them both.

Maybe it wasn't just Odessa that heard the trees talking.

A report: heat. No wind. A trash bag over the window. We sit in our underwear: little pockets of sweat, little bubbles. Hissing static. Somewhere behind the trash bag. Skins for Bean People. Polka dots. Stripes. Plaids. Dad's boxer shorts. Dad's socks. Strong skins. Bean bodies.

Hissing, hissing. This is fourteen years ago, before I can think. This is when I know things.

Mom isn't Odessa. I'm not Teresa. Mom isn't the big, bearded He. There're no Smiths.

No Mom. No me. We. We're God: Him. We always were; I'd forgotten.

We're He: the big bearded He.

Boxer shorts and needles. In and out and in and out.



Pins, long and sharp. Then Bean People. God makes them move when He won't. Names. Heroes and villains. Shoves them to the spice rack.

Years of naming. Years of heroes and villains. Then dust.

Now they're beating on the canvas, on the silk, on the felt and flannel fabrics; they twitch. They're going to be let loose. Torn open and pushed into mud. To begin again. No more thread. No more sewing things together.

When it's hot in the kitchen someday, maybe Mom will come home.

Maybe Mom was never home. Maybe, years from now, the Bean People won't have a home. Maybe there'll be no more Neil Armstrong. The trees will hiss and there will be no ears to hear, or mouths to say it. There'll be no Jefferson or Jackpot or Ferrari. No girl scouts or pigs or emotion. No President Reagan. Beanless, the silk tie Bean People will be the same size as the stinking gym sock people, emptied of beans, poked open and ripped apart and jammed underground, under fossils, under chipped arrowheads and snail shells; the beans won't be daughters or sisters. After the plants and animals go, there won't be mothers or grandfathers or God. Not fish. Not flower or fungi or bird. After years and years from now, after heat, after words, after facts and epics and naming, after heroes and villains, there'll be soil and beans.

A history: in the beginning there weren't families but everything was related.

A report: God raises His scissors.

Lowers them. In go the scissors—into the thick skin of a terrycloth Bean Person, into its beany blood and guts, and into its dark beany heart.