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*The University of Montana*

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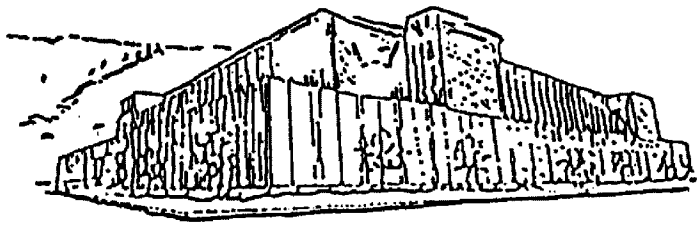
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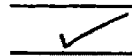
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ARCHAEOLOGY OF AN INTIMATE LANDSCAPE

by

Karin Schalm

B.A., Wesleyan University, 1987

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Science in Environmental Studies

The University of Montana

1996

Approved by:



Chairperson



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Schalm, Karin, M.S., Spring 1996, Environmental Studies

*Archaeology of an Intimate Landscape*

Director: Ron Erickson *RE*

*Archaeology of an Intimate Landscape* is a creative non-fiction thesis which demonstrates through accretion and association of stories the parallels between personal and geographic landscapes. I relate both the instability of my family and the unchecked human growth of San Diego County during my childhood years—describing personal accounts of sexual abuse as well as observations of insensitive development in fragile, arid chaparral country. Just as vernal pools cannot be "rebuilt" once dug up by tractors and backhoes (the exact composition of dirt, plants and stone that holds moisture in arid lands has not been mastered by humans), the very cells of a body cannot be "unviolated" once a person has suffered molestation. Rehabilitation, if it occurs at all, is an extremely slow and timid process.

Although I relate many stories of destruction, the primary goal of my thesis is restoration. By excavating memories, I hope to regain access to my own elusive inner core, allowing my body to drop its burden of constant vigilance long enough to register alternative ways of being. In terms of the land, restoration seems almost impossible when referring to the many acres of denuded chaparral in Southern California where mini-malls, housing complexes, freeways and golf courses have been built. By telling the specific story of how unmitigated growth in Southern California affected me, I hope to promote the philosophy of preserving wild lands wherever they still exist.

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## Introduction

When I began the Environmental Studies program in 1991, I had been living out of the back of my truck for a number of years working as a wilderness guide in Mexico, California, Arizona and Alaska. I looked forward to settling down and living in one place for awhile, and the Environmental Studies program seemed like a perfect match for me. I remember setting my sights on becoming a famous writer and--perhaps in my spare time--saving the world. With the mentorship of excellent professors like Donald Snow and Mary O'Brien, these goals actually seemed attainable if I simply followed their step-by-step instructions. The harder I tried, though, the farther I got from accomplishing what I really wanted to do.

By my second year at the University of Montana, my mother had a relapse of breast cancer and needed my personal care. While participating in her end of life care, many ideas about who I am and how I must function in the world began to slip away from me. Actually, this shift in consciousness took place over many years after her death. My immediate reaction was simply to shut down. I found I could no longer keep up the high-performing, fast-paced life I was familiar with. I started practicing tai chi and letting my responsibilities drop like over-ripe fruit in the garden. I stopped listening to my brain and let my body's needs take over. If I wanted to sleep, I slept. If I wanted to eat ice cream all day and night, I stocked the freezer with my favorite flavors. If I wanted to cry in class, I cried--no matter how uncomfortable or inappropriate it might have seemed.

I started writing again, and I found that my grief went much, much deeper than my mother's death. Her passing acted as a release for all I had buried. Unearthing stories about my childhood and the places where I grew



up allowed me to reconnect with myself and the world in a much more stable manner than ever before. My work took on a steadier and more sustainable quality. I allowed my written pieces to develop in an organic manner, letting form follow content. I no longer felt the need to please. Where I had holes in memory or awareness, I simply allowed there to be holes in my written work. If my thinking was disjunct and scrambled, I let the words enact these qualities. Traditional narrative form fell by the wayside.

Although many people helped me to tell these stories, I owe a great deal of credit to Leslie Ryan. Without the ground breaking writing done by this brave and talented writer, I might not have found the courage to write with such honesty about difficult topics like incest, abandonment, sex and suicide. Her writing--for the first time ever--showed me what was possible. I'd also like to give direct acknowledgement to Cathy Joy, Candace Crosby, Leslie Burgess, Patrick McCormick, Kelly Baraka, Geri Maib, Tom Roy, Ron Erickson, Dee McNamer, Virginia Carmichael, Mark Levine, Joel Thomas-Adams, Molly Miller, Sheryl Noethe, Christian Sarver, Jenny Flynn, Julie Cook, Sally Cobau, Mary Liz Riddle, Vicky Rostovich, Margaret Baldwin, Susan Thomas, Lee Bridges and Robin Mochi.

## 1. Archaeology

Once my mother loved to buy sports cars,  
yellow sports cars  
especially. She drove them  
to her waitressing job or the dry cleaners.  
Once my goat Lucy  
jumped up on the Porsche,  
denting its hood.  
Mom paid a man to steal the car once  
and drive it across the border.  
I think it was our neighbor—he liked guns.  
He ran around the place barefoot,  
helping me chase down the cow with a rope  
and a bucket of alfalfa.  
Once he shot all our animals.  
Once Mom took a serrated knife with a plastic handle  
into the bathroom. The lime tree scraped  
against the house, the whole tree  
moved back and forth in the wind.  
It felt as though the house was moving.  
Even now I feel it moving inside me.  
My sister says we carry thirty pounds  
of black tar in our colons. She thinks  
rotting is the cause of all illness. She thinks a lot.  
She fell off a cliff in high school. Her forehead  
smashed into seven pieces; her femur pushed  
through her pelvis.  
I caught rides to the hospital  
with a man who wanted his hands  
rubbed in rose-scented lotion.  
My sister cried when I lifted the metal weights on her bed  
or pressed the pear-shaped pan  
beneath her. The two of us lived alone  
in a mustard-colored duplex.  
Tangles of sea figs spread their rubbery fingers.  
One day I turned all the knives  
in the wrong direction.  
My mother told me on her death bed  
how embarrassed this made her.

She thought I should shave my armpits.  
She thought my sister and I were trying to kill her.  
She's dead and my sister lives in Texas.  
We had a garden once with summer squash.  
I grew sunflowers in a clump  
crowded at the center. When I think of my mother  
I think of yellow. My mother and I were gardeners,  
but we had other things in common.  
We taught school together in Stockton  
after her second divorce and first mastectomy.  
She married a man who went on  
to make the plastic pails McDonald's puts their pickles in.  
This is what we call America. He made a lot of money  
and proved it by buying a Ferrari.  
Stray bullets pierced the garage from the freeway.  
I spent my time walking in asparagus fields  
along the levee.  
"She didn't go to the doctor till her whole breast  
was purple and hard," my mother's  
best friend told me.  
She wore a blue terry cloth robe and little  
scuffing slippers because  
she always had the right clothes  
for every occasion. "Where's my miracle cure?  
I'm so young. Who will take care of me?"  
My sister and I made lemon jello.  
Then we held teaspoons of sugar water  
up to her mouth, feeding her like a bird.  
One pill counteracted the side effects of another. The dosage  
kept changing. She thought we were trying to kill her.  
She wouldn't lie down for fear  
of falling asleep and dying.  
Her feet pooled up with blood and turned black  
from all that sitting.  
A student of mine called this summer to tell me  
she had tried to cut her own breasts off.  
I try to draw a red picture of a flower, but I have a hard time  
concentrating.  
"May I get you a soft drink, a blanket or a pillow?"  
My mother worked a first class flight  
with James A. Michener as the only passenger.  
She got his address to write a letter.  
All I can remember is that the book  
was one thousand and eighty-eight pages,  
and for years after I had a keen desire  
to be an archaeologist. I like to keep track of things.

I used to have a collection in my head  
of license plate numbers: 688-KQQ, 592-RJZ, 372-URP.  
By the time I turned twelve I had memorized  
quite a few numbers. When I went with my mom  
in the car, I would lift my toes  
as we drove across bridges. It was like jumping  
over the river. I remember being truly happy  
we didn't live in the dry, sandy desert.

## 2. Orienteering

Whenever I tell this story I throw in the part about Muhammad Ali, how I met the champion in the Claremont General Hospital after Kenny Norton busted up his jaw in '73. I was eight and remember very little of Ali, but that never stopped me from describing our meeting as one of the central experiences of my life. An unfortunate and yet tenacious part of me believes I'll be jockeyed into history through random encounters with famous people. It's like the Beatles and how everybody knows somebody who's met them, even the cigarette vendors in Liverpool who sold Lennon's first wife her smokes. Everyone's got a story.

Mine goes back to Andrew Black, the first journalist "ever" to interview the Beatles. When Andrew smoked he let ashes fall on our green shag carpet--which drove my mom crazy. He told stories about John, Paul, George and Ringo, using words like "mug" instead of face. Back in England he'd had a thriving career as a paperback writer, which is why the Beatles wrote a song all about him, and then one for his wife, Max, a jeweler. When I asked Andrew if his wife really hit people over the head with a little silver hammer, he said, "songs don't always tell how things happen, you know."

Dark clouds rolled in across the ocean the day Andrew arrived. At the airport we found him sitting horseback on his plaid, zip-up suitcase crooning, "It never rains in California"--which sounded more like "Califonya" in his delicate English mouth. Two days later his bravado collapsed as he stood on our front porch peering into the dripping, grayish-green avocado leaves.

"Looks a wee bit like England," he shouted through the open door. My older sister Kelly and I nodded our heads up and down, our eyes fixed to the television set. With Mom working nights at the bar, we tried our best to keep Andrew busy. After the Beatles there just wasn't a whole lot to talk about though.

Andrew stayed a few weeks at our "farm"--a white two-story house surrounded by orchards on one side and a row of plaster condominiums on the other. Late at night I slipped past the chicken coop and avocado trees to empty our garbage in the condo dumpsters. From our southside second-story windows we could see a slate-blue wedge of ocean and the grandstands of the Del Mar Race Track. In the other direction, past the ancient Bull Pine and the Cactus Lady's broken down fence, sat Eden Gardens--a Mexican barrio where my friend Lupe lived in a small house tucked between wide-leafed banana trees. Her mother swept dirt into a hole in the floor and then covered it with a ceramic tile. On Christmas her family received boxes of canned goods from St. James Catholic Church, the same church that rented us our farm.

At the beginning of each month I'd carry a check, or one of Mom's long explanatory notes, up the hill to the Monsignor's office. He'd make me stand beside the red leather chairs facing his desk while he penned a response to my mother. I usually brought my goat Lucy (short for Lucifer) and tied her to the fence beneath his window. She'd cry and cry until she found a tender bush to munch on. I never felt bad about her foraging in the church gardens because the Monsignor had his own plans for destruction. He wanted to build a back road to the sanctuary which meant tearing down our house as well as the neighbor's and then bulldozing through the orchards. He remained patient with my family's flexible payment schedule only because he intended to evict us as soon as the city approved of his building project. A

zoning dispute gave us almost three years at the farm, from the time I was eleven and a half to fourteen.

I remember the house as having beautiful crystal doorknobs, lots of windows and a funny floor plan with the kitchen and living room upstairs. Thick weeds filled Kelly's downstairs bedroom window, whereas the front door opened out on a broad landing at the top of a flight of stairs trellised in morning glory vines. Hundreds of midnight blue blossoms interlaced the green wooden steps and hand railings. When Andrew stayed with us, he often stood out on the stairs smoking. He'd snuff his cigarettes on the wet banister and pinch at the soggy flower heads. During one particularly dismal downpour he retreated to the black Naugahyde recliner by the t.v. and jotted down notes in a miniature three-ringed binder. He spoke out loud, describing his ideas for the screen play he was "batting about" with Dustin Hoffman.

Kelly and I sat propped on either end of the sofa watching *Gilligan's Island*. God knows we'd seen every episode ten or twenty times, but I harbored a secret, romantic love for Gilligan, the man-child of the seventies. I kept my amorous feelings concealed by feigning disappointment whenever the show came on. "Oh that one again," I'd say with a calloused tone of boredom. I critiqued all the elaborate devices (like cars or washing machines) the castaways constructed out of bamboo, palm fronds and coconuts. "I'm sure," I'd say, "like they could really make a homing devise with just bowie knives and a radio. . ." My sister and I usually did our homework in front of the t.v., but out of deference to Andrew we held off--making ourselves available for his rambling conversations. During commercials he'd look at us with a surprisingly docile "what now?" expression, but we didn't have much to offer. The three of us spent our evenings staring at the fuzzy black and

white screen while Andrew's cigarettes burned down in quarter inch increments, dropping into the rug.

It soon became apparent the "original-interviewer-of-the-Beatles" had nowhere to go and wouldn't be leaving on his own accord. He didn't pay rent and drank Mom's liquor. After a week of flash floods and exactly zero phone calls from Hollywood, Andrew spent his days hibernating downstairs on Kelly's heated waterbed. Refreshed by afternoon slumbers, he'd talk until late at night. I'd nod off as Kelly combed out each strand of her long, dark hair and prepared her make-shift bed on the couch. Once, while sloshing Jack Daniels over the rim of a frosted glass onto his shaking fingers, Andrew bemoaned his choice to leave England. He described his current situation as a tragedy, no less traumatic than the break up of "the boys." Mom came home from work at two or three each morning. Kelly and I woke early, wading through the rising lake in the front yard to feed the cows. Weekdays we caught the bus for school at six-thirty. Andrew tired us out pretty quickly, but Mom let him stay because he was a friend of Jack's. As usual, Jack was nowhere to be found.

One morning when I was still in the first grade, I looked out my bedroom door and saw a very large man walking sleepy-eyed down our narrow hallway. The stranger wore Mom's terry cloth robe, which barely covered his upper thighs; although when Mom wore it the thick folds reached down to her calves. He ducked into the bathroom. I heard him peeing out a steady stream for over a minute, and when I went in later I had to pull my sleeve over my nose because the toilet smelled like a skunk in heat. Mom introduced the man to Kelly and me as the top sixteenth heavy-



weight boxer in the nation, and in a short time she started calling him our "new father."

Six foot six, Jack sported long, fat sideburns and a reddish-brown mustache that dripped off the edges of his jaw. He had a wide nose, squashed into the center of a curved face. His eyebrows sat beneath a thick fold of skin in his forehead, and his chin pointed out like the bow of a sturdy rowboat. Mom had met Jack at Bully's, the bar and steakhouse where she waited tables. She said he'd ordered two full-cut prime ribs--complete with steamy baked potatoes, a pair of dinner salads and a tub of horseradish--yet still found room for a thick wedge of strawberry cheesecake. After finishing, he wiped the grease from his fingers, dropped a hundred dollar tip for his pretty blond waitress (my mother), and stepped over to the bar where he drank steadily until closing.

Ever since Mom divorced Dad, she'd had problems with men and money. Bill collectors stood on the front stoop, shouting. Once an enraged, unshaven mechanic held a fist up to her face, demanding she pay him what she owed. Scared, I wrote a letter to God, drawing silver-colored angels in the margin. I flung the letter over the back fence, half expecting to see it to waft up towards heaven. Instead it slipped down into the canyon, settling on a thorny bush. At the age of seven I stopped believing in miracles. I felt humiliated every time I passed the weathered piece of paper just out of my reach. Mom, on the other hand, renewed her faith in Jack, bringing him home--drunk and noisy--to our small apartment on Humming-bird Lane.

It wasn't long before Jack bought us a big redwood house near the ocean. Mom quit her waitressing job and spent her time decorating the new kingdom. She circled the outside of the house with ferns, desert cacti, rock gardens, star pines and bright orange poppies. Inside she filled the huge,

empty rooms with an assortment of end tables, love seats and knick-knacks. The kitchen got a hanging rack of copper-bottom pots and colorful glass canisters for storing flour, tea and sugar. In the living room she lined the mantel with scented candles which she only burned when company came over. For my bedroom I picked out a garish canopy bed with diaphanous butterflies fluttering across the white, gauzy coverlet and two Marie Antoinette dressers. After a year I grew into a tomboy and stripped off the dusty canopy of my bed, storing the plastic posts in the new single-car garage of the condominium we moved to after Jack left us and we lost the big house.

Back when things were still good, though, Mom had time to worry about all sorts of things rather than money--like my sister's intelligence. Kelly took a test in school that said she was a genius. With our new financial status, Mom enrolled us both in private school. My sister and I wore blue wool blazers with golden emblems sewn over our right breast pockets. We studied Algebra and Greek mythology, making friends with millionaire's children: schoolmates who lived in mansions and whose parents owned Swanson's t.v dinners, O'Harrah's Casinos, and local car dealerships.

We mostly rode the bus to and from our new school, but on special occasions Jack picked us up in his huge, white Oldsmobile with maroon carpeting that ran up the insides of the doors. Each time the heavy doors opened, little lights went on in the foot wells--and when they closed, air flattened out behind them. On the day we planned to meet Muhammad Ali, Jack waited for us beneath budding sycamore trees near the headmaster's office. I let him scoop me into the trunk of his body with his big hands and kiss me with his thick lips, which reached from my chin to the bottom of my nose (even when he squinched them together). He lifted Kelly in the other arm, carrying us side by side to his car.

At the hospital Ali's mouth was stitched shut with tiny wires, so Jack did all the talking. I hung back shyly in the doorway while Kelly stood near a plastic chair pretending to read the perforation instructions on an unopened box of Kleenex. When my new father held up his hands in half-clenched fists, I thought for a second he wanted to play "one potato, two potato" with me and the champion. Instead he turned his back to me and made a quick speech, one heavy-weight to another. He punctuated his phrases with shadow punches: "...Norton not too shabby...(upper cut with the left)...but you're the champ...(side swipe with the right)....forever." I kept busy drawing imaginary hopscotch lines around the floor tiles. A black and white checkerboard pattern presented a minor challenge to me, but I hopped my mind successfully through the correct squares--down the hall and back again. Once when I glanced at Muhammed Ali, I noticed the whiteness of the gauze around his brown face and a blank look staring back at me.

At parties I usually segue a more glorified version of the Ali story into a line about being backstage at the Grateful Dead when I was eleven because Mom went out with a songwriter for the band, or how Jack starred in *Superman*, playing the big, dumb villain. I like to keep moving in order to maintain a sense of mystery. After each punch line I duck and weave. If asked too many questions, I simply turn the tables with an "enough about me, what about you?" move. When caught in a corner, I have a hard time explaining how the songwriter killed himself and Mom lost her only copy of the tape he made for her, or how Jack hurt his back in the flying machine. Everything gets complicated quickly. Airplanes, I've learned, are not good places to begin impromptu conversations about Ali. Cramped quarters and

seatbelts, combined with extremely high altitude, make a fast getaway rather risky.

The problem is, gravity—even just the regular standing on the ground type of gravity—plays havoc with my insides. Somewhere between my brain and feet is the "identity sink" where my guts get a funky, turbulent feeling. It starts out as a hard knot that shatters into hundreds of sharp-edged pieces like eggshells crunching and swirling in an electric garbage disposal without enough water. When I try to make the feeling go away, it only gets worse. For example, in college I had a hard time writing a paper for my Milton class. I started slipping deep into the identity sink. Instead of taking a little time off, I shaved my head and wandered the neighborhood streets both bald and naked. People honked their horns. I got dressed and went to my professor's office where I announced, "*Samson Agonistes* is really getting to me." He took one look at my shiny head, then gave me the extension I needed.

That night I made a bed of dried leaves in the woods, throwing a plastic tarp over a flimsy stick structure for shelter. I fasted for three days and nights. Upon returning home I drank only diluted garlic juice, hoping my problems would rinse away like globs of rotting tar dislodging from my colon. Feeble and tired, I finally sat down at my desk with a pint of *Vanilla Swiss Almond Hagen Daz* ice cream and wrote the damn thing. Abstinence had failed me. I let my hair grow long and stuffed myself silly on sugar and dairy.

I still get all tangled when I try to solve the knotted puzzle inside me. I'll begin by following some small unravelling, but it always leads me back into another mystery. Once in a helicopter I saw the full circle of a rainbow—all questions and answers laid out in simple detail. The memory doesn't stick, though, and I find myself searching for the pot of gold out there, somewhere. The map I've been following all these years keeps me digging

for treasure in the most unlikely of places. One clue leads to another, and another--until suddenly "x" marks the spot--and I palm the shovel. I put some sweat into it. For a brief moment I'm happy just to be digging. Then I find myself days later standing in an empty hole--no treasure, no gold.

Sometimes when I get caught up in my thoughts, trying to figure everything out, I just have to turn my brain off and go outside. When I was in elementary school I knew how to do this sort of thing better than I do now. My friends and I would climb the chaparral-covered hill behind the condominium complex where we lived and wander down to the slough. We'd lose our shoes to the stinky, black swamp mud and make precarious rafts out of barrels, the junk lying around in marshes. We'd float our makeshift barges down to the Pacific Ocean, capsizing in its rough, salty waters, and then walk along the railroad tracks--daring each other to stand out on the long, narrow bridges until a train came and everyone scattered. Once we explored an entire section of cement drainage pipe, squirming through a small tunnel under Interstate 5 with flashlights and candles. We each took turns sticking our heads up into the noisy air shaft that opened in the middle of an oleander hedge separating north and southbound traffic. On the other side of the freeway, where the chaparral went on for miles, we built forts in scraped out sandstone caves and burrowed endless passageways through the dense chemise, black sage and wild sumac trees.

My best friend Alisa and I took our shirts off when we entered chaparral country. We did this every day until sixth grade when the knot beneath my left nipple grew noticeably larger. We wore hand-tooled leather belts from Tijuana that we slung our shirts on. Alisa owned a dull knife with

a two-inch nicked blade that she kept in a holster on her belt. I coveted it greatly. We both carried corncob pipes in our pockets and smoked dried white sage. We ate cactus apples with sticks and made bows and arrows out of green sumac branches, bits of sharp glass and yucca fibers. We wanted to be Indians desperately, and if we couldn't be Indians we wanted to be boys.

While Alisa's mom warned us to be careful of black widows, rattlesnakes and scorpions, my mom cautioned against scraggly hair and torn clothing. She said boys weren't interested in girls who looked raggedy. She dated plenty of men and hinted that her popularity had something to do with the hydrogen peroxide she put in her hair, the way she crimped her eyelashes with a metal tool that opened and closed like a small pair of scissors, and the clean chemical smell of her clothes which she brought home weekly from the dry cleaners. Alisa and I looked past her when she said these things, as if the dust settling had infinite more appeal, but her words reached us all the same. Although we wanted to be boys, we weren't immune from wanting to be liked by them as well. At the age of eleven I felt destined to lose on both accounts.

To make matters worse, Mom said I took after Dad's Aunt Margaret and Cousin Ginny. It was no secret that any association with my real father, a Lutheran chaplain in the army, was not a compliment. Mom clicked her tongue and shook her head saying, "you're just gonna be another 90 year old virgin like Margaret and Ginny, staying home instead of marrying." Of course staying home was never really an option in my family. Mom moved out when I was fourteen, leaving my sister and me to pay the bills with our meager child support check the government automatically deducted from Dad's salary. We scraped the rent together by frying burgers in fast-food restaurants and cleaning houses--often the homes of our friends from school.

Meanwhile Mom fulfilled her lifelong dream of becoming a flight attendant. She worked for Braniff Airlines, living first in Dallas, then Denver. She wore designer dresses made by Halston and passed paper cups of jelly beans out to first class passengers. But, just as she reached the pinnacle of her new career--layover flights in Europe--Braniff went under.

Back in the States, Mom got stuck with a small time commuter in Stockton, serving salty peanuts to salesmen, cattle ranchers and farmers. When this second airline folded, she married John, a short, fat cigar-smoking man who wore blue velour shirts and listened to Neil Diamond. Although unemployed when she met him, John went on to become the local distributor of the plastic pails Mc Donald's uses to put their pickles in. Our farm had already been transformed into the Monsignor's beloved access road, so Kelly and I lived in a mustard-colored duplex where we kept a garden in the vacant lot next door. We grew chard, tomatoes and onions, the kind of food that spices up a packet of *Top Ramen*. When Kelly graduated from school and went off to college, I shuffled my few worldly possessions from one family to another. On the phone Mom said I could move north with her and John, but she always prefaced her invitation with the opinion that I'd do better where I was--taking advantage of my full scholarship. I cried a lot but never questioned her logic.

The summer I turned sixteen, I visited Kelly at Cornell and disproved the second half of Mom's equation--the part about virginity. Kelly had taught herself to knit, making intricate sweaters during her neurobiology lectures. She claimed busy hands kept her mind focused. Her strategy must have worked, too, because she got A+'s on all her exams and the University asked her to be a special research assistant over the summer. She spent long hours at her job castrating hamsters, mashing their tiny gonads in a blender and

dabbing the noses of pre-pubescent female rodents with a crushed testicle mixture—all to prove the obvious, that girls develop differently in the presence of male hormones.

Young and curious, I had time to experiment on my own. One night while Kelly worked late, I decided to walk down to a bar with a blinking blue neon sign shaped like a dog. The bouncer, a chunky guy in his thirties named Larry, let me in. And after the bar closed, he walked me home. We kissed in my bedroom for a little while before he excused himself to use the bathroom. He stayed in there for a really long time. When he came back he didn't say a word. He lay down on top of me, pinning my hips to the bed with his big belly. I got the picture he wanted more than kissing, so I tried to reason with him, "ahh . . . I thought I said I didn't want to do this. . . ahh . . . Larry . . ." He showed no interest in negotiating. Larry reached down and pulled a wad of cotton dress up towards my chin. Scooping my underwear aside, he shifted his weight up onto my belly. Frightened, I lay still as Larry's plastic-covered penis dangled against the inside of my thighs. His eyes stayed closed the whole time.

I didn't scream. In fact, it never occurred to me to cry out, even with my sister sleeping in the other room. Screaming meant losing control, and losing control wasn't an option in my mind. Instead I heard Mom's voice haranguing me about 90 year old virgins, and I decided--just as Larry put the full weight of his rocking hips behind his stiff penis--that losing my virginity to a balding bouncer I didn't know, or even like, was something I should want to do. I didn't cry, even when he felt like a burning tree turning inside me. After he finished, Larry had sweat all over his face. He asked if I liked it. I had the nerve to say "no," so he made a big show of having his feelings hurt. He decided we should try again because sex was supposed to be



enjoyable, and he was certainly enjoying himself. "Something must just be wrong with you," he chuckled. I lay on the soft mattress with my legs open, letting him push into me all over again. My body moved with the mattress, up and down and up and down and up and down--until finally he crawled off. A bunch of pennies fell from his pants when he rolled over. He left a small pile of change in the bed, a gooey condom and a spot of blood as souvenirs.

Years later, after graduating Phi Beta Kappa with a double major in English and Afro-American Studies from an equally prestigious college as my sister's, I returned to my home town to shack up with a surfer. I don't know why I moved in with Claude, except that I thought I was supposed to get married after school. He was the only person who claimed to be in love with me. I met him during a short vacation in Del Mar during my senior year of college. After knowing him one week, I agreed to cart my belongings across the country and share his small rented room. When I arrived in California, I discovered Claude's penchant for young women--at the beach in bikinis, at tiki-torch parties, at band rehearsals where he smoked pot with high school groupies. I decided to concentrate more on my appearance, shopping for tight, imitation-tiger-skin dresses, dark hues of lipstick and cheap high heel shoes at the many mini-malls sprouting up on the bulldozed and terraced hillsides. I wore my slinky new attire to the clubs where Claude's all-white reggae band performed, but it didn't take long before I learned my place off on the side with a smile and a drink. At home I provided sex, cooked meals, paid my half of the rent and practiced keeping my mouth shut whenever we disagreed--which happened quite often.

One day Claude and I were lying in bed when he said, "I know you gave Richard a blow job." Richard, a friend of Claude's who made hand-carved wooden boxes, was a man I'd known since the summer I turned eleven. Mom had rented out our condominium to gamblers during racing season that year, so we stayed in an old garage converted into an apartment behind Bully's. While Mom worked, Kelly and I hung out on the streets. Richard was probably twenty then. He had dark skin and black eyes. He laughed at little things nobody else thought were funny. Sometimes he gave me rides on the curved handle bars of his bike. As a kid I loved him deeply.

In high school Richard and I crossed paths again. I'd lied about my age to get a job waitressing at a fancy outdoor seafood restaurant a block up from Bully's. I was seventeen, dating a twenty-seven year old jazz guitarist, and thought I knew everything. Peter, my boyfriend, had an all-encompassing obsession with becoming famous. Although a kind and gentle man, he was tenacious when it came to his career. He kept a regimented practice schedule which didn't leave him a whole lot of time to dote on me--at least not the way Richard did. Richard stood barefoot in front of the restaurant where I worked and played his bamboo flute, pushing purple bougainvillea flowers through the holes in the fence towards me.

One afternoon when Peter was out of town, Richard invited me to see the tool shed behind his mother's house that he'd converted into his home. I was intrigued--it sounded like the forts I'd made as a kid. We passed a sage cigarette back and forth while we walked along the high beach cliffs towards his shed. When Richard accidentally touched my hand with his warm fingers, I felt a fluttery happiness. In the late afternoon sunlight the water looked like a solid sheet of gold.

After showing me his Buddhist altar and prayer beads, Richard pushed me onto his low bed. I admit, I wanted to be close to him, but not anything like this. He climbed on top of me, pressing his knees into my shoulders as he unzipped his pants. He straddled my neck and shoved his dick into my mouth, jamming it repeatedly into the back of my throat. He pushed so hard I couldn't breathe. Some of his cum went down my windpipe, and I started to choke as he pulled me from the bed, tossing me out into the alley. After Richard slammed the door of the shed, I stood beneath the heavy fragrance of an angel's trumpet, coughing and wheezing, wiping strands of hair out of the sticky goo on my face.

When Claude said he knew about me and Richard, I panicked. I'd guarded this secret for years and assumed Richard would do the same. "How did you find out?" I croaked. Claude's face lost its playfulness. "I was just *joking*," he said with a sneer, as if I had deeply betrayed him. "I didn't think it was actually true." Claude's eyes crept up and down the length of my body like little brown beetles. Silently, he moved out of bed, tucking the blankets down between us so we wouldn't touch. He didn't say another word to me for the rest of the day, and he later explained how his silence was meant to teach me a lesson. What this lesson was, I couldn't possibly imagine—except, perhaps, that I was forbidden to have a past.

Claude's silent treatments became routine around the house, but as soon as I started packing he'd buy me flowers and promise to change. Frustrated, I left the relationship twice to be with other men, men who seemed more my type—a fellow getting a master's degree in organic farming, and then a wilderness guide in Alaska. For some reason I always returned to Claude, though. The more times I left, the nastier he'd be once he'd wooed me back. The whole cycle would start again, until our love felt like a rubbery

umbilical cord tightening around my neck. We kept it up for three years. Then he started sleeping with a fourteen year old girl he was giving trumpet lessons to (after dating her mother), and we both decided to call it quits. I ran off to the desert, ditching my slinky dresses and high-heel shoes forever.

It soothed me to get outside again. I wore baggy Bermuda shorts without underwear and men's long sleeve dress shirts. I kept my hair tied back in a sweaty baseball cap and went for weeks without looking in the mirror. Claude's sex triangle with mother and daughter made me feel a sharp pain in my gut that I wanted to run away from, but the desert offered no relief. Instead I contracted giardia and chronic diarrhea. Weighing in at 105 pounds, I carried my own stash of toilet paper as I led two week backpacking trips for high school students in the Sonoran Plateau deserts. Under the relentless sun I hauled my gear across leagues of dry terrain like a tortoise carries its home. The students and I scrambled down steep arroyos, slogged our way through arterial rivers and ascended mesas covered with rattlesnakes. To find our way in the desert, we had to follow the lay of the land. We had to trust our senses--but trust never came easily for me.

In fact, my wilderness courses had the uneasy feeling of "the blind leading the blind." Before straying too far from the vans, I'd teach triangulation--an orienteering technique requiring a topographical map, compass, and a few known geographic features. (Distant and yet prominent mountains work nicely.) By transferring bearing lines from the land to map, a triangle forms on paper, representing the triangulator's lost location. This method of navigation calls for a sense of abstraction and a small amount of mathematical skill, both of which I had developed adequately in school.

Unfortunately real life is another story. One day in Joshua Tree National Monument I pointed to a rocky hill in the distance and said, "We'll be scaling Queen Mountain tomorrow." My students, who simply looked around for the largest pile of rocks within walking distance, tapped me on my shoulder and stretched their arms towards a looming mass 180 degrees in the opposite direction. "Excuse me, but isn't that where we're going?"

Now, I may not be able to find my own hand in front of my face, but I certainly know the mechanics of triangulation. I've taken bearings all my life--placing Muhammad Ali on one arc, Jerry Garcia, Superman and the Beatles on another, looking for myself in the criss-crossed vortex at the center. Perhaps I have remained lost all this time because pop-cult figures don't offer a very stable map to live by. Even with good maps, the world is infinitely more complicated than an intersection of vectors. Maps have their uses, but they don't say what to do after traversing miles of cactus labyrinths and loose rocky slopes only to find a dry creek bed where the cartographer has drawn blue. In the desert heat you must drink water or die. If the river is dry, you must dig a solar still to survive.

Let me try again. When I was eight I sensed Ali's importance because Mom invited him and his wife to dinner. She wanted to boil lobsters and make a red sauce that took two days to cook. I don't think she ever got over it, not making Muhammad Ali lobster. When Mrs. Ali refused, saying she didn't care to eat with white people, Mom told the story over and over, mincing the words "white people" on the phone, in grocery store aisles, down at Bully's where she'd started working again. In the end it didn't really matter if the Ali's turned down her dinner invitation because Muhammad

got his jaw busted and couldn't eat for months after. Jack was losing fights, taking the third mortgage out on the house without telling anyone. He disappeared days before the men came to put our furniture out on the street.

A neighbor generously agreed to take us in until Mom pulled together the down payment for our condominium in Cardiff. That's where I met my friend Alisa and got my first real taste of the big outdoors. We had miles of wild land to roam in, and we did. I loved our new home until Jack came back, waving money in Mom's face. He'd given up boxing and started a new career in Hollywood. He cornered a "bad guy" role in the new Robert Mitchum movie, inviting us all to stay with him on the Queen Mary while he finished filming. I had a bad feeling about it, but Mom and Kelly caved easily. I spent hours sulking in our cabin while Kelly ran around the boat exploring. She rode the electric handrails on the three-story escalators and challenged fellow passengers to shuffle board.

Jack tried to buy me off with a metal pencil sharpener wedged inside a miniature replica of the ship, but I didn't fall for it. Mom spent all four days lounging in an orange bikini, sunning her tawny body. When we finally packed to go home, Kelly swiped the elaborate sewing kit (complete with scissors) from our cabin, and I buckled under the souvenir pressure just enough to cram a plush embroidered wash cloth in my bag. At home Mom quit her job once again, got her official colors done and bought "autumn" clothing at downtown department stores. She even recarpeted the condominium to suit her newly discovered skin colors.

Jack and Mom went on a number of short trips--over to Nevada where they gambled or down to Mexico where they drank margaritas at the Rosarito Beach Hotel. They seemed to be in love again, but it wasn't long before the phone calls started and everything went to pot. Sometimes it was Jack,

sometimes the guy with a gravelly voice asking for him. Either way, it was always the same, "I'll be home soon," or, "have him call me, all right?" Kelly and I took the messages because Mom was back at Bully's to pay the new bills. She prided herself that George Bullington, the bar owner, only hired beautiful women. She said George tried to get his waitresses strung out on speed, begging for loans against their wages. "After he fucked 'em, he fired 'em." She claimed George hated her because she never borrowed money. On her thirty-fifth birthday George started making cracks about "running a charity ward for useless old bitties." With eight years of serving prime rib, pushing through a crowded bar on high heels with drunk men reaching under her miniskirt to pinch her butt, she quit for the last time. We had serious debts, but I didn't blame her for leaving.

Jack called about a month after he disappeared. When I saw Kelly crying on the line downstairs, I picked up the phone in the hallway by my bedroom and cradled it against my ear. "Kelly....y'know 'ow much I love you?...Karin? ....I love you ....y'know that don't you?"--and Kelly would sob "yes" while I sat listening. All I could think about was how we'd have to deal with him because Mom was at work. Jack promised he'd come home soon, and he said over and over how much he loved us. But now we had to do something for him--something important. He gave us two names, long complicated names. He kept slurring and changing the order of letters as he spelled the names out, interrupting himself with claims that the mafia was after him and demands that we go to the police if he disappeared. In the end Kelly and I ended up with two completely different lists: mine written in dull red crayon on a coloring book and hers scrawled across the back of a dirty napkin. When Mom came home, she swore she'd kill Jack herself if he didn't bring the money he owed her.

Jack didn't have time to collect all his things before he disappeared. He left what Mom called the "Boner Bong," a pipe made out of green stone and wood. The stone part looked like the knobby end of a bone, the wood part--shaped like the tip of a penis--had a hole for sucking on. Mom kept Jack's Boner Bong in the living room wrapped up inside a black sock. It sat on a low shelf next to her matchbox collection and a bronze container full of pot--mostly stick weed, but I didn't know any better back then. I was nine when I started smoking pot. I didn't mind doing it with just Mom and Kelly, but I didn't like her friends. Once Jack left, Mom had two or three new guys hanging around. I didn't like it when they tried to talk to me and my mouth felt all cottony.

I had a miniature collie--not the yappy kind, but a good-natured, quiet sort of dog. Mom called him Tippy after her childhood pup, and I loved him so much I let him go everywhere with me except school. Tippy slept up on the pillows of my bed at night. When I fed him celery or banana pieces to see if he still loved me, he swallowed each bite. He would walk devotedly back and forth beneath my outstretched hand when I didn't feel like petting him. Sometimes I dressed Tippy up in stretchy shorts and knotted T-shirts. I made him do jumping tricks and run in tight circles. I laughed at the way he looked, but I never felt good about Mom getting him stoned.

She'd hold Tippy down and blow smoke into his mouth until he couldn't fight her anymore. He'd finally conk out under the stairs, next to the piano, hardly able to lift his panting nose off his paws. Mom would laugh, as if Tippy were the funniest thing in the whole world. I laughed too, although my heart just wasn't in it. Sometimes when I couldn't talk or



swallow and my mouth felt like dried paste, she and her friends would laugh at me. Mom never forced me to do anything. One night while smoking pot she said, "just try it," as if she'd put a new type of vegetable on my dinner plate.

I remember now the worst part about being backstage at the Grateful Dead was sitting on the speakers, stoned, watching Bob Weir shake his head at me during a long, drawnout guitar solo. In my paranoia I thought he kept saying "get off the speakers--get off of there kid" with each toss of his head, but I couldn't tell if I was imagining it, or if it was real, and I felt too self-conscious to move anyway. The second worst part was trying to find the bathroom.

I had my first sexual dream when Kelly and Mom and I moved in with Jack from our apartment on Hummingbird Lane. We had never lived in a new house with an electric fireplace and walk-in closets before, but now Jack brought home enough money to have the backyard dug up with a bulldozer and a swimming pool built to Mom's specifications. She followed the design on the cover of *Sunset* magazine--waterfall with rocks, jacuzzi, black cement. I dreamt that a boy, a little older than me, was floating on his back in the pool. His skin puffed out on his sides like a burnt marshmallow. I ran along the flagstone walkway, sprang off the edge of the pool and cannonballed on top of him. I remember being in the water, straddling his chest as if he were a log. I felt a funny tingly feeling from my legs all the way up through my chest. I knew my weight would sink the boy, but I didn't want to climb off him. I felt his body slowly deflating beneath me, even though he kept reassuring me, telling me everything would be okay.

Jack liked to rub his penis up against Kelly and me when the whole family swam naked at night. With all the lights out, the black-bottom pool

stayed as dark as the sky. He held us close to him in the jacuzzi, as if he were giving us a hug. With the bubbles on, nothing could be seen below the surface. Mostly he had to make sure Mom didn't see. With her he could squeeze her breasts or lick her face, but he wasn't allowed to do these things with Kelly or me because he was our new father. Sometimes Jack took me to work with him. We jumped rope together down at the gym. I played with my dolls while he hit the punching bag and sparred with other boxers. He wore terry cloth bands around his forehead and wrists to catch the streams of sweat.

One morning Jack touched me down between my legs. I could hear Kelly in the other room watching cartoons, and I imagined myself in front of "Scooby-Doo" instead of in the bedroom with my new father inching his big, sweaty hands up my feet to my thighs, and higher still. He kept pushing his thumbs up between my legs, opening the hole down there wider and wider. It wasn't like the pool where I could swim away and pretend that nothing had happened. I just lay still, counting the mountains in the cottage-cheese plaster ceiling, and listening to Scooby howl. My mind felt like a pinprick of light out on the dark ocean. It felt like a small boat weighted down with sand, sinking deeper and deeper. In my head I kept repeating--this is wrong, wrong, wrong.

Once Mom drove south with Kelly and me across the border into Baja. We went to a beach where she laid out her blanket on the side of a hill and slept in the sun for a couple hours while my sister and I made castles, swam in the breakwater, and played jump-rope with seaweed. In the background we heard motorcycles, but the beach was otherwise empty. After hours of lying in one place, Mom suddenly got up and moved her blanket--everything about the spot felt "wrong" to her. Seconds later a motorcycle flew over the

top of the dune and landed exactly where she had been sleeping. Sometimes wrong can be a very precise sensation.

### 3. Feeding the Geese

One hand holds corn, the other  
pebbles. I want to swim back.  
Which hand can I open?  
I'm anxious about the geese.  
Last time I saw them, I tied  
a string to their tails—by now  
it must be broken. They fly  
all day in the middle of winter.  
A voice says, "save yourself."  
*My dog, my silly dead dog.*  
I reach for the lamp, cracking  
its glass with my clumsy fingers.  
Corn spills out. All the pebbles  
sink deeper. I want to pet my dog  
in the close, dark water.

#### 4. California Farming

I was a 4-H drop-out as a kid and preferred doing homework over hanging out with sheep. My older sister Kelly and I loved to read. She liked science fiction and fantasy, whereas I liked historical novels about archaeological digs or modern-day bedouins who walked right out of the Bible--which I also tried to read, starting with the Old Testament and leaving off somewhere around Leviticus with all the rules for sacrificing which seemed so silly. My mom and sister and I worked hard for the odd scraps of meat we raised. Just getting our animals to hold still while we slaughtered them took a concerted effort. For the chickens we fashioned a chopping block with two nails that bent over their necks, leaving just enough room for the axe to swing down. I didn't mind killing chickens, but hosing the yard off after the headless bodies ran twitching and spurting blood or picking feather quills from the carcasses took forever. I hardly felt like sharing with God afterwards. He could go find his own dinner for all I cared. Our two and a half acre suburban farm north of San Diego, near the ocean, was really too small of an operation for him to bother with--but then again, I thought of God as more like the IRS than Social Security, and I believed my family would be audited before we ever received public assistance. I was an odd kid, though, in an odd family. While my friends collected plastic horses and Barbie dolls, I lined my bedroom shelves with James A. Michener hardbacks. Weekends my sister and I holed up in our dark rooms downstairs to read, consuming books like sweet food meant to be savored and shared, yet devoured by us greedily and in private.

Sometimes Mom got mad about all the hours Kelly and I wasted with books. She'd barge into our rooms and threaten to keep us home from school if we didn't make ourselves more useful. The few times she actually followed through with this threat, I worried about the new rules and formulas I was missing in math class. How would I study for the tests, and would I make an "A" still? Would I? It was enough to cry over, but crying only made Mom angrier. "What, you think you can just read all day?" she'd ask. Of course the chicken coop needed a good sweeping; tomato plants had to be staked, weeded, watered and fertilized; the rabbit hutches next to the poisonous oleander bush must be moved immediately; the stairs vacuumed with the hand-held hose; her turquoise, beat up Pinto stationwagon washed and waxed; the cows walked down to the beach and back; all houseplant leaves shined with a milk and water solution; avocados had to be picked with the long pole, then toted down to the highway and sold—10 for a dollar; someone needed to start a new batch of yogurt in the little glass jars in the fridge; and who was cooking dinner anyway and what were we having? Top Ramen and steamed chard or macaroni & cheese with a can of tuna thrown in. After that, who would wash the dishes and empty the scraps of food stuck in the sink drains, then carry the daily garbage over to the the condominium complex, waiting to make a break for the big dumpster until all our city neighbors were out of sight? Mom devised a plethora of chores each day for Kelly and me, but the worst one she ever came up with was training the sheep.

Baaaaa, baaaaaa, baaaaaaa, the two wooly yearlings called from their pen. As far as I could tell, "training" meant keeping those voracious sheep quiet, and that could only be accomplished by providing them with a steady stream of little green pellets. The bag Mom had said would last a few months

was already two-thirds gone within a week. She complained I wasn't training them right, saying she wasted good money on trying to do something special for us, but we just didn't appreciate it. Mom didn't yell at Kelly about the sheep like she did me, though. She claimed Kelly misbehaved in other ways, like "lying" or "being selfish." After she did her chores, my sister would retreat to her room to read or play games with her friends, games like Dungeons and Dragons that required different types of dice and reference books with endless combinations of adventures. Each round went on for weeks and weeks. I, on the other hand, never even made it through a full game of Monopoly--which exacerbated my sister to no end when we were stuck together at our father's for holidays.

When I think back on the order of things, I imagine Mom decided to get those sheep right after showing us her green, satin 4-H sash with the merit pins stuck all over it. Recalling a happy time from childhood, she no doubt wanted to give us a similar experience. I remember how I admired a photograph of her at my age--pageboy haircut and gawky elbows, her little upturned nose and high cheek bones the only signs of the beautiful woman she'd become. She was standing next to a large calf with a white spot over its eye and holding up a first place ribbon. On the back of the photo was penciled the name "Ike" and the date "1953." I wondered then if I would grow up to be as pretty as Mom. I wondered if she would ever let me wear that green sash with the gold metals. I imagined that if I was in 4-H she'd find more time for us to spend together. We could stroll through the livestock barns at the fair, patting the flanks of animals, admiring their fine breeds. People would notice us--how we looked alike, like mother and daughter.

My sunny fantasies of 4-H clouded over on the day Mom brought home two actual living, breathing, feeding, pooping, crying sheep--claiming,

majestically, that they were now in our care. She warned about letting the animals eat too much rich grass, saying they might swell up and "founder" before fair time. She also showed us the full bag of green pellets with an empty soup can inside for scooping. After that we were on our own. Within twenty minutes Kelly returned to her room where she pushed through the fourth and darkest volume of the *Tolkein Series*. Alone with the sheep, I persevered--stepping in and out of the pen with tiny tin cans of pellets, trying to avoid being pummeled by their sharp hooves.

For some reason the sheep were nothing like the cows Mom had brought home from the UCSD medical research lab. I met "Angelina" and "Stitches" late at night when she led them into my room, letting them lick me awake with their sticky tongues. Those cows were more like pets than livestock. Most importantly they never cried and didn't require training. The sheep, on the other hand, were hopeless. For months I spent hours working them unsuccessfully with choke chains and dog leashes. They remained indistinguishable to me: "white and fat" and "fat and white." Although Mom had signed us up as official 4-H members, nobody said anything about meetings. Where were all the kids who sat around on hay bales going over the in's and out's of animal husbandry? The kids near us lived in condominiums with an assortment of swimming pools, jacuzzies and club houses to keep them busy--or over in Eden Gardens, the poor Mexican barrio where 4-H would have been considered nothing more than an elite American hobby. Left on my own with the sheep, I said "heel" and "sit," but they continued to press up against the gate when I brought food and cried when the food came late. When I arrived with their pellets, they'd butt their heads under my arm, trying to knock the can down before I could pour it out into their long trough. Mornings they were particularly hungry and



hopped up on their rear legs, flailing their front hooves at me, flinging mud on my school clothes.

Caring for the sheep was bad, but the looming threat of summer and fair time was exponentially more painful. Our upstairs porch overlooked the grandstands of the Del Mar Race Track and Fairgrounds. Not a day went by when I didn't glance at the metal-roofed horse stalls and livestock barns. In a reoccurring nightmare I saw myself tromping the ill-behaved sheep out into a large ring with other kids and animals. Before long I was slipping through piles of manure, attempting to grab hold of my wild and vicious lambs. I kept interfering with other children who were docilely leading their sheep about with a riding crop or a small staff. The judges had long since disqualified me, but I couldn't catch my malicious mutton misfits. In the nightmare I heard the 4-H judges berating me over a loudspeaker, "get back, back, baaack, baaaack!" until I'd wake up in a panic, realizing the sheep were crying again and I better go feed them.

To make matters worse, our next door neighbor Jim had a gun and didn't like to be disturbed. One morning when the sheep woke him, he walked out on his front porch in brown corduroy pants and no shirt, his belt unbuckled. Leaning up against the green railing, Jim held his pistol out in front of him, a limp extension of his right hand.

"I should just shoot 'em now and put 'em out of their misery," he said, sighting down on the unwary animals.

"Pow! Pow!" he shouted, laughing at my uneasiness. Then he pointed the gun at my dog Sage who sat near my feet. I'd just nursed Sage through distemper, a dreadful coughing, wheezing disease for dogs. I didn't know what type of breed he was, but he looked like half collie and half coyote, a

mixture of Lassie-like loyalty and intelligence with all the scruffy williness of the chaparral.

"Pow!" Jim puffed again, this time cocking his gun and pointing it at me. He giggled, then put his hand over his mouth as if he were trying to stuff the joke back inside himself, only laughing even harder. Then he turned silent and walked back through the open doorway.

"Come 'er Sage," I called, trying not to cry. I was eleven and already knew better than to show fear. Mom had warned Kelly and me about Jim a few weeks before. She said he'd waited for her in the dirt driveway one night, standing under the towering lime tree which separated our two houses. He tried to "sweet talk her," she said, "then he got a little mean." Mom didn't tell us what that meant exactly, but she said to watch out for him. She started carrying her own gun around, hefting it in her brown, leather purse and sleeping with it under her pillow at night.

Somewhere in the middle of all this my godmother Mary moved in. She'd just been through a divorce and an unnecessary hysterectomy performed by a swindling doctor who she was in the process of suing. A twenty-four year old soft-sculpture artist from Michigan, Mary had crazy black hair, olive-colored skin and full lips which she painted bright red. Mom waitressed nights at a popular bar and steakhouse called Bully's. She got Mary a job serving brunch. Like most of the other women who worked at Bully's, Mom had carefully coiffed blond hair, a thin attractive face and a petite, athletic body. Some of the regulars said she "looked good enough to eat," and I'd have to agree with them. In her flouncy skirts and cotton blouses, she resembled a perfect piece of fruit halfway unpeeled. Mary, on the

other hand, looked more like a prickly pineapple than a tantalizing tangerine. She wore long, Indonesian style wrap-around skirts with fancy chopsticks stuck through her wild hair. When the owner told her to show a little more leg, she flashed him her dark, unshaven calves. With a grimace he suggested she try tights. From then on she arrived in lime green leggings and polyester miniskirts, with sweat socks and sneakers for comfort.

Although homesick from the day she arrived, Mary tried to adapt to living on our farm. When a new K-MART complex went in a few miles away, she spent hours wandering the aisles, sniffing the anonymous air, fingering the familiar products. The large chain store made her feel as if she could be anywhere, even Michigan. Mary brought a gray, tiger-striped cat named Matisse with her and an assortment of scarves that she hung over the dry wall separating her room from the garage. Mom and a guy from Bully's had built the extra room in a weekend. They even installed a mirrored sliding glass door so Mary would have her own entrance. Mom claimed the Catholic Church that we rented from wouldn't mind the changes to the old house. I guess the number of catholic worshippers kept increasing because the Monsignor decided to pave over our farm--making extra parking and a back access road to facilitate the flow of Sunday traffic. Within three years the church would turn off the water in the avocado orchards and tear down the two white farmhouses with crystal door knobs and fancy beveled windows. In their place would be a few terraced parking strips, a new road and a patchwork of tumbleweed islands surrounded by ice plant. For the time being, we felt free to do whatever we pleased with the place. Unfortunately, our neighbor Jim felt the same way.

I heard a series of shots one night and rolled over in bed to bury my head deeper into the pillow. When the shots were followed by screams, I got

up to look for Mom in her bedroom. She was gone. Panicked, I looked down through the front window and saw my godmother crouched under the fat date palm. She had something dark beside her, and when Mom came out of the sliding glass door with a bath towel that she draped over the dark thing, I realized it was Matisse. I got dressed and went out, hearing Mom say she'd already called the veterinarian. The two of them drove off with the bleeding cat while I just stood there in the driveway. Around the other side of the house I found Kelly hovering over a few dead birds near the chicken coup. Next to her lay Sage's empty collar and chain. Stunned, I stepped past my sister into the ring of trees and called for him.

"Sage, where are you? Sage"--nothing. I ran back upstairs and grabbed the flashlight from the kitchen, then set out through the orchard, up the back hill, casting the beam of light back and forth through the tall weeds. Dry seed heads stuck in my socks, poking at my ankles as I walked. I went as far as the church, making sure to leave a wide girth around Jim's place. I kept trying to work through what had happened in my head. Did Jim shoot our animals? Did he steal my dog? Was he torturing Sage? Would he shoot me? Being alone near the church at night kept making me think about vampires, no matter how hard I tried not to. When I came home without Sage, crying, I found Kelly piling dead chickens into a cardboard box. She agreed to go looking again with me. We didn't know when Mom and Mary would be back, so we left a note and went off through the condominium parking lots. We looked out on the highway, past the train tracks--calling his name--all the way down to the lonely ocean. We didn't find him that night--not ever.

Mary moved back to Michigan soon after the killing spree. She left to find some peace and quiet but, oddly enough, ended up marrying a police officer in Detroit. Matisse had stitches where the bullet ripped through her flesh, but she soon recovered. Our neighbor Jim got his just deserts when a surveillance helicopter spotted an open-roofed shed full of marijuana behind his house. Kelly and I chased the helicopter down, watching it land on the hill by the church. From up there we saw the dust clouds from three police cars as they raced up Peppertree Lane towards our driveway, the end of the road. By the time we ran back down the hill, the cops had pulled Jim out of his house, cuffed him and were in the process of throwing him into the back of a squad car. I saw him look back as they drove away, passing between the long lines of giant sunflowers we'd planted.

The sheep, after surviving the shooting, ended up getting killed after all. Mom came home with a chainsaw one day and said our plans had changed. She shot the animals in the head with her pistol, strung the bodies up to an avocado tree and chainsawed through their ribcages and necks. It was Kelly's and my job to cut the hide around their feet with sharp knives. Together we pulled their skins off, inside out, like removing two heavy sweaters. We stretched the hides over hangers to let the fat dry up and glisten. The flies swarmed in and out of the garage for weeks. Mom never finished the job, though, because she slit her wrists in the bathroom one day with a plastic-handled steak knife. She watched while her blood swirled down the drain until she actually decided she wanted to live. How she got to the hospital I don't remember. The only thing I'm absolutely sure of is that nobody called an ambulance. That just wasn't my family's style.

Mom and Kelly and I lived on the farm from the time I was eleven to fourteen. When the church obtained its permit and began to pave over the particulars of our lives, we had to go. We moved to a duplex off the highway, finding make-shift homes for Angelina and Stitches, as well as the last of our other animals. Mom quit Bully's to become a flight attendant. She moved away, sending us lots of fancy postcards. Kelly and I kept a garden for salad greens on the vacant lot next door. We studied harder than ever, and after two years together, then two years on my own, we ended up at our respective colleges on the East Coast.

Looking back on the time at the farm, I see it as the last chance my family had to be together. Quite frankly, I didn't know who was taking care of who--if Mom watched over Kelly and me, or if we watched over her. It didn't seem to matter, though, because we were kids and loved our mom more than anything. It was like living with God, you might say, and all the sacrifices he required. He'd smile down on you from heaven, and make you feel good to be alive in this world, but you never knew what he'd take from you in return.

## 5. Red Bird

I push two sticks into the ground  
and wait for them to blossom.  
A red bird hovers above me,  
carrying honey from the orchard  
to my window. I must be impatient  
because my mother is dying.  
I have prescriptions to refill,  
Top Ramen to buy at the grocers.  
I must keep the washcloth close  
and sponge her hot forehead.  
Each time I hold her fingers  
I see them blooming into roses.  
The red bird is burning  
from inside her own belly.  
Let me say *Poland*, or *Schubert*,  
and have it all be over.  
Let me change this story,  
say the red bird flew away  
and the flowers turned to honey  
without her.