Fall 1977

The Foxglove is a Delicate Flower

Meredith Steinbach

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation

Steinbach, Meredith (1977) "The Foxglove is a Delicate Flower," CutBank: Vol. 1 : Iss. 9 , Article 37.

Available at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss9/37

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
THE FOXGLOVE IS A DELICATE FLOWER

Zara took the little car, the German one, and drove the long road back to her, round and round the Iowa country roads, the gravel spinning beneath her tires. The land fell softly up and down in little mounds that they called hills. She closed the door. The wind rustled low through the grasses, whining around their roots. She heard it hum like the sound of moths behind a summer curtain. She felt it brush against her ankles, tickling at the divide of skin and new black shoe. The pasture lay not fifty feet from the family plot, and in the distance she saw the horses running. Flanks that would shine in the sunlight if only there had been a sun today.

Once, the horses had startled at the sound of an auto winding its way slowly, belatedly toward them, as the Reverend Grey droned on under the canopy. The minister glanced up to see a car stalling, a dark veil floating beside him. He began the prayer. The hood was thrown open. Steam rose, and the man ran across to the fountain where today this same daughter would take the watering can to nourish roses as she had done time and again. Long flames rose from the engine as the old man bounded between the tombs at the graveyard's edge, sloshing water from the can. He poured water on the engine. From under the funeral tent, Zara Montgomery watched him drown the flame.

The sod had been cut, the blade lifted, turned at right angles; the grass was unrolled like a carpet, replaced over the woman's body. When Forster Montgomery had gone home again, when the mourners had fallen asleep, tossing throughout the house in the dark vapors of whiskey, the rain fell like fingers against the window panes. Zara drove out again to her mother's grave. She ran her hands around the edges beyond the slick grassy leaves, beyond the roots thick like sponge to where the water ran in rivulets into the mud.

Zara could not remember when the change occurred, when her mother's outward healing gave way to a deeper wound. Kathryn lay bundled in the blue blanket, almost supine in her traveling chair, listening as her daughter pushed. Wooden wheels pressed against the earth. Branches clicked against their spokes as Zara wheeled her mother through the dawn to the favorite spot overlooking the cliff, the water, where Kathryn could see, remotely, Chautauqua Park down the beach where she used to sing, where the crowds used to
shout and wave their white handkerchiefs high over their heads to hear her again. The days grew shorter, the leaves fell about them, and it was crisp and life was full as the sun rose, struck them obliquely, shifting low through the shrubs and growing rose-coloured across the lightly capping sky.

Zara stayed with her a semester and then another, tending to her, carrying her about as her mother grew smaller, lighter, as if she were evaporating on their brief travels from room to room. And as they walked, Zara would press her belly to her mother, and Kathryn would wrap herself around it, coiled, as if a fetus wound about some revelation in the womb.

It was then that Zara thought perhaps this was not her mother dying here, but that she herself was dying wrapped up in her arms. The little bundle, the babe, the mother-child. “Little one, little one,” Zara sang and tucked her mother in and washed her skin and kissed her gently on the ears.

“Once,” her mother said, “once we took the train. All night it was bugs and rain and soot. And the conductor crying, Feet out of the aisles, Feet out of the aisles. All the way from Oakland with our legs cramped from riding upright. And how we hurried,” she said. “We hurried to get to the tent, we hurried to finish our songs, we hurried to catch the next train out. We hurried even when we slept. And, of course, we never did sleep. Not really. We were too tired. Hopping from train to motorcar to train, and when we did get a bed we didn’t want it. Bugs again. It’s funny,” she said. “Traveling all that way for a whoop or two. But, we were bringing something; the Chautauqua was. Zara,” Kathryn said. “Don’t be a crusader. If you have to have a cause, make it be yourself.”

“But Mother,” Zara said. “Wasn’t the Chautauqua route your crusade?”

“I thought it was,” her mother said. “I thought my work was important. But maybe I was wrong. It was important to me.”

The feathers were piled on the chopping table. Beside the pheasant heads, black eyes lay like polished stones.

“Have you washed your hands?” Mrs. McGehry asked the child. Zara turned her palms for the inspection. At the table, the woman reached into the flesh at the neck of a bird and with one motion pulled the entire skin away, the down intact. She handed Zara the knife. “Now bend the leg back and cut through the joint.” She took the girl’s
hands into her own, guiding the blade into the niche, and the child felt a little pride in being asked to help with this task. Zara cut the other leg herself, hearing Mrs. McGehry say, "Some day you'll be a fine lady. Someday you'll have to know these things." And Zara thought, Mummie is a fine lady, and she doesn't know. Why is that?

Mrs. McGehry poked absently at the whole pellets of corn in the green innards. "This is a fat one," Bridie said. "This one was still preparing to be served up with the sauce."

Mrs. McGehry measured out the milk for the afternoon scones. She poured it into a pool in the center of the flour. Zara's great grandfather had been an apothecary pouring syrups into bottles, Zara had heard her mother speak of this. Zara took the broom with the handle Mrs. McGehry had shortened specially for her. She heard the wooden spoon beating against the great blue bowl. She made the dust fly out the crevices on the back porch. Soon her mother would be galloping the mare over the far hill, soon she would fly up the road under the trees and walk the mare into the stable.

"Your mum will be wanting to hear your piano." Mrs. McGehry called from the kitchen. "Have you practiced?"

"Yesterday, a long time."

"You mean, a little. You'd better make tracks, Girl."

In the living room, Zara put the large dictionary on the bench. On the west coast of Ireland, Mrs. McGehry said, if you were a bad sinner, they put you in a wee little boat without oars and set you out to sea to fend for yourself. Zara wondered how bad you would have to be to deserve such a very mean fate.

Kathryn Montgomery wanted to say many things to her daughter asleep behind her on the bed. Selfish words, some of them. Sentimental phrases, too. She would have asked Zara to take her from this room, to carry her as she used to do. Impossible tasks now. There were other things. Zara slept lightly and all Kathryn needed to say was: Zara, I have a pain and I can't sleep. Zara would have opened her blue eyes, blue like her father's, blue as Kathryn Montgomery's were. She would have said, Foxglove, do you want me to rub your back?

Pink flower lotion on skin over bones, stretched very tight. Lotion and fingers to relieve the roaring in her ribs. Instead, Kathryn's pencil moved under the light at her bedside table, slating words in her crossword puzzle book, confining them in small tight squares.
Meredith Steinbach

She could not turn from her side by herself nor with help from anyone. Her world was divided into quadrants. Fore and aft, port and starboard. At the edge of her puzzle she wrote with a felt-tipped pen: I am stamped on my sheets like a label. She crossed it out again.

The culprit was the hip. The Hog. Or so she called the tumor rising there. She would have tattooed it with a fine fat swine if that too had not involved the pain. She drew fat features on the sheenless cover of the magazine. A pugnacious snout, the tips of teeth. She gave him legs with which to run. Cloven hooves throughout her body. A word for metastasis: stampede. Then went the devils out of the man, and entered into the swine: and the herd ran violently down a steep place into the lake, and were choked.

Kathryn adjusted the lamp. The slender beam picked out the ruffle of white at latticed window, a sailing ship of darkened blue on darker blue and papered wall, the red-black of roses drooping in her milk glass vase. She shined the light behind her toward the ceiling, fixing the table mirror on its painted stand. She tilted it until her daughter's face rose sleeping in the mirror's frame. Zara. Auburn hair tumbling around your oval face. A word for help, six letters: hold me. She put the book aside. Arms.

Doctor Montgomery had gone to the office, Zara was asleep in the basinet upstairs when Katie came down in her nightgown. Her little breasts were full.

“I need something to wear,” Kathryn said.

“There it is—” Mrs. McGehry pointed to the fresh clothes she had just ironed, crisp as new lettuce from the garden.

Kathryn took off her gown and put on the first dress. “This isn't right,” she said. “There's a crease in the collar.”

“Where's a crease?” Bridie asked her. Kathryn showed her the faintest of lines. “That wrinkle's been ironed out, Katie.”

“I can see it. I can't wear that dress.”

“It's on the back,” Bridie said.

Kathryn took it off and put on the next one, looking at herself in the mirror. “This one makes me look so bloated.”

“Katie,” Bridie said, setting the iron up on its end. “You could use a little bloating. Water, fat, take what you can get. You're scrawny as a mosquito.”

“Fat,” she said.

“Put on the blue one. You always look nice in the blue.”

118
She pulled it on after Mrs. McGehry had watched her rumpling the green cotton in a chair, her face puckered in the mirror.

"You look lovely. Comb your hair, you'll feel better."

"I can't find my comb."

"For goodness sakes, Katie. What's the matter?"

"I can't find anything to wear in this house. Not one thing I look decent in. I look like a hag in everything I own." She threw the blue in the chair. Mrs. McGehry could see it wrinkling without even laying her eyes on it.

"Here, Katie, I'll iron up the flowered one. It's the most beautiful dress you own." Bridie McGehry knew this. Katie could have rivaled anyone in that dress. The purple setting off her eyes like the Persian turquoise she wore at her neck and dangled from her ears. On top of those dresses, she sat down, naked and waiting, fussing with her hair, braiding it up and letting it down. Combing out the waves and then saying it never curled.

Bridie McGehry was careful not to scorch or crease it, even on the interfacing or seams. She said, "There. You couldn't have wanted it better from the Chinese laundry." She watched Kathryn Montgomery pulling it over her head, the folds falling over her shoulders, then drifting onto her breasts and belly.

"Now I've caught my hair. Now I caught my hair on a button."

Mrs. McGehry set her own small hands to unwinding the dark strands from the button. "My Lord, Katie. You are having a bad day."

"What makes this day so different?" Kathryn asked from under the cloth. "Every single day is unbearable for me."

"Why, Katie, the Lord should reach down and slap your face. You have a wonderful husband, a brand new baby, a big house. You don't even have to do your own cooking. You can do whatever you want." Mrs. McGehry zipped her up the side. "Now don't tell me you don't look good in this one. Don't try to tell me that nonsense."

"You don't know what giving up your work means."

"Go down town, Katie. See a movie."

"With whom? Who would go anywhere in this town with me except for Forster? Everyone hates me. They hate me because I sing, because I'm different."

"No one hates you, Katie."

"Then why am I alone everyday? Everyday I am alone and no one asks for me."
"People ask for you all the time. I go down town and everyone asks how you are and how's the baby. Mabel Willoughby inquires after you everyday when I see her."

"Mable Willoughby!" she screamed. "Do you think Mabel Willoughby and I have anything common? Do you think she wants anything more than gossip?" Then Kathryn Montgomery ripped her dress right down the front. The little pearl buttons she had chosen so carefully scattered all over the rug. She kicked the silk dress under the ironing board and ran upstairs. Bridie McGehry shook her head. She runs naked, she thought, right in front of the living room window, where anyone driving by can see her. Mrs. McGehry heard her sobbing for over an hour.

When Kathryn came down, she put on the first dress, the brown one, leaving the front open. She went upstairs and got the baby. She nursed her on the windowseat where the sun fell pink through the stained glass window spreading like leaves across her hands.

Kathryn had not been asleep for days now. Her mind made distortions of body parts the cancer hadn't yet affected. Each night she witnessed the loss of every hair, the slow bending of her bones. The week before, she thought her face another victim. "The Hog has gotten loose," she blurted, breaking into tears.

"What's that?" Zara asked, looking up from the book she was reading aloud to her.

"The Hog has done this, too."

"What do you mean?"

"It's my face."

Zara held the mirror for her mother at angle after angle. She held up old photographs: from under the flap of the great canvas tent, her mother stepped squinting into a silver sun. Zara took her mother's makeup from the drawer. She drew with the lipstick around the crest where her mother's lips rose in two soft curves; she filled in the center with the crimson flat of the tube. "Now, be objective, Foxglove."

"I can't," she said. "I don't know how."

"How do you like music camp?" Kathryn asked, taking off her shoes and setting them side by side next to the door. Belted at the waist, her skirt flared below the knees. Seams ran straight down slender legs. "Is it what you expected?" She watched her daughter folding underwear, arranging neat stacks inside the drawer.
"I like it alright," Zara said. The others were swimming now. Michael and her friends were in the pool.

"Only all right? I thought you wanted to come here this summer. I'd hoped you would be enthusiastic, Zara."

"I met a boy," she said, although she had met him before.

"A boy?" Kathryn looked out the window then. "But what about the music?" she asked, waiting for Zara to model the dress she had chosen for the evening concert.

Zara shrugged. The music. She remembered the metronome clicking, her fingers memorizing first scales. "I can hear you humming," her mother said. "Do you want me to hear you?" By the time she was eight, Zara had the mechanics. "Play with feeling," her mother said. Feeling, the child thought. Two hours on the hardwood bench each day and she could not know feeling, only her fingers growing stronger, more articulate.

Kathryn watched her daughter removing the long dress from the closet. "What about the music, Zara?"

"The music is fine," she said. "Everyone plays well."

"And you?"

"I do all right."

"Could you do better?"

"I do fine, Mother."

"You don't need to snap at me. I only asked if you could do better. We could all improve. I wonder if you realize that."

"I practice, I get better."

"I only wondered, Zara."

"You only wondered if I would embarrass you, if I was as good as everyone else."

"Of course you're as good as everyone else. I never doubted you, Zara."

You have always doubted me, Zara thought. She took off her jeans, untied the white, men's shirt where the tails had been knotted at her middle. "I have to shower now," she said putting on her robe.

So it is Michael O'Dea, Kathryn thought, sitting in the fourth row of wooden chairs. She watched the boy's eyes meeting her daughter's in quick glances as if their bodies were touching. The camp director pointed at individuals with his wand. The orchestra tuned. The notes falling like the random knots in the pine behind the white dresses and shirts, the grand piano and violins, the black claw-footed instrument stands in what had once been a stable.
One day Kathryn’s father had come home early from the bank and ordered the stable boys to bring the mare from the pasture. Kathryn sat on top of the fence and watched them put the collar around her horse’s neck, straightening the leather straps down its sides, shackling the mare’s hind legs so it could not struggle.

She could remember her father laying his tweed coat beside her, rolling his sleeves as he walked. The young boys hanging on, each to a rope. They planted their feet firmly in the grasses, as if they, not the mare, were tethered, waiting to receive the stallion: the black shadow moving against the earth as her father led it through the gate toward them.

"Give us a good one," he said, as the stallion scented the mare and rose up. His hooves glinting like shells in the sun as the mare tried to kick free. The stable boys leaning like the pickets of a fence in strong wind, their heels dragging. The hobbles creaked as the mare shifted. The stallion on top. The mare shaking off attempt after attempt, until "Hell," her father said and took the great pike of the horse in both hands and guided it in. Her father was flushed when he came for his jacket. He was silent.

Zara waited, hands lifted, fingertips on keys while the bow rubbed gently across the strings of Michael’s violin. It wouldn’t matter who he was. It made no difference how he helped her, or how she needed someone. Kathryn watched, listened to them tuning as the others did, but a crease cut between her eyebrows and ran onto her forehead. Every night when they were young, before Zara’s birth, Doctor Montgomery pedaled his bicycle up and down the rutted lane that made a circle in front of the house. Round and round he rode the rusted machine while Kathryn leaned out the upstairs window, the white curtain waving at her side. “Give Mickey a little ride, Forster,” Kathryn called as the dog yapped along behind him nearly catching his head between the spokes. The housekeeper drew her hands to her hips, crying from the front lawn: “That dog is going to bust his head off. Sever it off right above the collar if you don’t watch out.”

Doctor Montgomery wrinkled the corners of his eyes and cocked his head to the side. “Now Bridie,” he said. He always said, “Now, Bridie." Kathryn Montgomery remembered that. Then he reared up on one wheel and pedaled off, his coat tails whipping under the trees.

Forster stood a medium height then with light brown hair and beard, and his forehead was advancing on his hairline even then. This scarcity of hair had attracted Kathryn to him, that and the erratic way
the young man whirled into sudden motion. Doctor Montgomery liked to say he had saved her from a life of meandering with the Chautauqua from rooming house to small town hotel. "I took her off the railway," he'd say with his arm around her, "and what a struggle I had with that conductor." Then Kathryn would smile up at him and press her fingers gently at his side, thinking behind the azure pleasure of her eyes not of her husband but of the crowds and the sound of her own voice rising in the farewell songs from the railroad platform. She would look a little sad then and he would take it for the melancholic effects of love. "Would you like a little brandy, Darling?" he would ask her. "You look tired this evening." At this she would shake her head and smile at her guests, thinking how pleasant it was to have a husband who was concerned and gentle and protective.

Red streaks crept into Kathryn's eyes. "My leg is ruined. And my arm. Now the Hog has started on my nose."

Zara looked at the photograph. "Turn your head," she said. "You're wrong, Foxie."

"It's shrinking. It's twisted out of shape just like my leg. A dreadful chicken leg. And now my face, Zara. Look at it."

Zara took the picture to the window and examined it. She watched her mother a long while. Combing Kathryn's hair, she fluffed it forward, giving it the effect of its former fullness. She stood back and looked again. "All right, Foxie," she said. "It's changed."

Kathryn covered her face with the motionless fingers of the hand she called the Right One Gone Wrong.

"Yes," her daughter said. "It's longer."

Kathryn pulled the mirror toward herself. "Longer?"

"Yes. I think it's gotten rather long now."

Kathryn turned the mirror to its magnifying side and back; she held the tip of her nose down and let it up again. She studied the portrait. Her face went suddenly red with anger. "Zara Montgomery, my nose is not at all longer than it was. You lied to me. You lied and it was horrible. A horrible thing to do to me."

Zara shrugged, tapping her mother gently on the forehead. "How else was I to get you to believe me? Your nose is not shorter, Mother." She kissed her on the ear then and went to retrieve the book.

Kathryn fingered the edge of the mirror. "But, Zara—"

"Foxie. There are two things I'm positive have not been affected."

"What?"
They're your appetite and your nose."

"Oh," her mother said, knowing that, for some reason, even when she would be throwing it all up again, she was, as always, continually hungry.

On the trunk of the automobile, Zara leaned against the warm back window as she watched them pitching the softball back and forth. She could almost see the indentations their fingers made, the crest of their fingernails gone white as they wound up for the pitch. Burnout. That's the way they played it. Too hard for her, they said. Why then did they use the softball? she had asked; and they had not wanted to say that their older brother had taken the baseball and told them to move their game elsewhere.

It was the glove she liked, the leather of it around her hand. Her father's worn catcher's mitt with a bit too little padding in the palm. Yes, you could feel the sting of a real ball through that, but you would have to wait until one boy tired and the other wanted to go on with the game. Until they resorted to you as a partner. Today she was not waiting for them to summon her. It was her father for whom she was waiting. He would come out of the house soon now, carrying his black leather case, his anger transformed into hurry. Zara rolled the cuffs of her dungarees. What did it matter what caused it? They were shouting and the anxiety had filled the house and threatened to blow the top off. She had seen her mother recoil at her father's touch. She'd seen her make a joke of it. "Unhand me, you cad," Kathryn Montgomery said, an edge in her laughter, a chill across the shoulders. She watched her father's face, saw the quick motion of his throat.

Zara put her hand on the doorknob. "Dad, can I go on the housecall?"

"Yes," he said, without turning away from his wife.

"I'll wait outside."

"Yes, do that."

The ball flew back and forth smacking against palms. "Yes Kathryn. I know, Kathryn." The front door slammed, and Zara leapt from her spot on the back of the car into the front seat of the Buick.

"Where are we going?" she asked, watching him shoving the window button. The glass buzzed downward.

"Mary Colley has a belly ache."

"Mary Colley?"
“I’ve got aches myself,” Forster said. “And they aren’t caused by Mary Colley’s mother.” He looked into the rear view mirror as if he could still see the house. “To top it off, this damnable hayfever.” He crumpled a handkerchief onto the seat between them.

“Mary Colley goes to school with me.”

“Is that right?” Forster said.

“She’s in her last year. She’s up for autumn queen.”

“Watch your arm.” He reached for the button again. “It’s either bake and breathe or explode coolly.”

The window rose like a crack in the scenery as the road swerved into the country and straightened, narrow now with hardly any variation. Forster’s head turned automatically left then right as they passed the sections of farmland squarely marked when each mile had ended. The corn would be high in a matter of minutes, golden tassles pollinating in every direction. Forster blew his nose. Would the woman never stop needling him? Was it his fault, after all, that she was unhappy? He had not been the only one to want to move to this town, though she seemed to think it had been his decision. Even after twenty years she held that against him. And hadn’t she been the one to suggest giving up her performances? Yes, he had wanted it that way, but he had never said it. A few years after that the Chautauqua had gone down anyway. People were no longer interested in tent shows, Shakespeare and Schubert, when they could roll into town in their new automobiles and see a moving picture with sound in it. Yes, after that his wife’s voice had meant little or nothing. Forster turned up the lane to the farmhouse in time to see Mary Colley’s petticoats being hung out on the line like a row of tinted carnations.

From the corner arm chair, Zara sang one of the Haydn songs. Her right eye closed, as her mother tilted the mirror to see her. “My mother bids me bind my hair,” she sang one afternoon.

“So I thought you were going to read,” her mother said, “not bring down the house.”

It was this, Kathryn thought, watching her daughter sleeping behind her, that made the old women in town nod over their pale print housedresses saying the girl had a quiet wit. It was in this same way Zara had renamed her in her illness. Kathryn, lying in her bright yellow nightgown one afternoon, had looked into the oval mirror to see her daughter coming through the doorway: she stopped suddenly. “Oh little foxglove!” Zara cried, spying her. “You look so lovely!” It
was this that resurrected them from their gloom. It was Zara.

Kathryn pulled her notebook from beneath the crosswords. In her newly learned, left-handed penmanship, she scrawled a list for her daughter:

Rehabilitating Your Mama

Count pills.
Sponge bath with new soap. Skin cream for the bad spots.
When washing hair, avoid tangles — no circular motions.
Move cedar chest. Try bigger pitcher. Bigger pan on floor.
Change sheets. Hair hunt: Get strays off sheets or I won’t sleep. (You won’t either.)
A snack for the Hog. Swineherd craves a chocolate pudding.
Clip toenails.
Teeth — not white enough. New brush, paste, or something.

At night she lay in the bed with Kathryn, one arm slowly circling against the back, the ribs, soothing Kathryn toward an elusive sleepiness, while the other wrapped itself around a pillow pressed to her chest as if it were a man, someone she knew. Each day, lying there, stroking, her mother’s back crept away from her in subtle ways that neither noticed in this form of contentment. Sometimes lying there in this way, Zara would remember things that had happened to her and could not quite know their significance. Driving into the country with her father, Zara had watched him drape his handkerchief out the window and leave it there to dry as they swept up a new paved road. It was like a road he said that his father had helped to build and when they were almost finished all the men had thrown their hats in. Her father had tried to talk to her that day, telling her of things remembered. Then suddenly he had stopped the car.

“Listen,” he said. “Do you hear it? It’s a cuckoo bird.” She had heard it then, the song coming clear across the field, the rise and fall of it back and forth. “Beautiful, isn’t it?” he cried. “Can you see the bird? Can you spot it?” He put his hand to his forehead and scanned out over the rows of grain that lay like rails across the pasture. Again they heard the call, slightly out of tune now.

Her father snorted and closed the door. “Blue Jay,” he said. “Imitation. You have to watch out for that.” The handkerchief fluttered at the window like a gesture.
Zara put her head down on the kitchen table. As she wept, she made no sound at all. Coming into the kitchen, Mrs. McGehry’s heart quickened seeing this. She took hold of the table edge. “Zara, whatever is the matter?”

Zara handed her a scrap of paper. So this was the poem Kathryn had been writing all week with Zara excited and waiting to see it. Scrawled in a crippled script, it was as if a bird had scratched it there with its beak:

I am writing this poem
I am writing this
I am tied to my bed
I have given up.

“Ah God, Zara,” Bridie said.

Zara wiped her eyes on a napkin. “Finally Mother has accepted it,” she said, but Bridie McGehry could see Kathryn Montgomery’s daughter hadn’t.

“You go to the drugstore,” Bridie said. “Go have yourself a soda. I’ll sit with your mother.”

Bridie went into the laundry room, thankful that the girl had listened to her for once. She heard Zara upstairs saying goodbye to her mother. Mrs. McGehry pressed her hands fondly into the basket. For twenty years she had buried her small yellow-white head in the sweet smell of laundry, letting her feet guide her on the familiar path back to this house. She heard Zara on the stairs. When the girl came down, Mrs. McGehry was more startled than she could remember.

“Mother says she’ll be all right she thinks. She’ll ring the buzzer if she needs you.” Zara had on her winter boots and coat, her gloves and scarf.

Mrs. McGehry set the basket down. “Zara Montgomery, how long has it been since you were out of this house?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

“My God, girl. It’s spring. It’s been warm out for close to two months.”

“Oh,” she said, taking off her mittens. “I didn’t know that.”

Zara changed her clothes and was gone half an hour before she was back, her arms laden with magazines and lotions for her mother.
Kathryn studied the seed catalogs again, circling in a shaken hand the ones they would order. Feathery Baby's Breath. Blue Stokesia. Giant Primroses. *Primula Polyanthus*. Finest of the new hybrids, larger blooms ... brighter colors! Grape Hyacinths — Prince of Monaco. Fantastic clusters of closely set, dark blue bells on 6 inch spikes! Increase from year to year without care at all. Christmas Rose. One of gardening's most thrilling experiences is to walk through the snow and pick these glistening white blossoms.

Kathryn scanned the bedroom with her cone of light. In her notebook she wrote her way around the room. Beginning with the bed she named the objects, the legacy she would leave her daughter.

That night the rain came in torrents, the tent flaps shaking all around us, the beams and lines swaying in the wind. It could be a bad night for everyone, I said. Until this sudden downpour, the day had been hot and getting hotter. Up and down the aisles all afternoon you could hear the programs trying to beat out the heat and the talk of tornadoes and freak cyclone incidents. Families lifted out of their beds by the wind and laid down dead, side by side in the street. Pieces of straw driven straight into the sides of trees. By evening there was a crazy yellow light in the sky, and then the rain.

"We're going on with it," Roderick said.

"Yes," we said, looking out through the end of the tent at the jaundiced sky. Already the crowd was uneasy, shuffling back and forth rather than taking their seats.

I had on my blue dress. I remember I ripped the hem out as I rushed onto the stage. Schubert with lightning, I shouted. Right in the middle of my first song, Roderick shook his fist at me. I never sang so loud in my life. Good evening, Nebraska, I shouted. Did you hear me? A sea of white handkerchiefs rose into the lamplight for the chautauqua salute. It was like looking out onto rough water or rows of grain with tassels in the thousands gone white and moving in the wind. I was just coming into the line, Roderick used to laugh that it should be that line: The breeze of morn my ardent tale should bear, when George Henry came bursting up the aisle, waving his arms. The next I knew we were in the ditch and it was as if, by the sound, a train
were coming through. I looked up and the tent burst out suddenly like a balloon and at the center, through the top, one of the big poles came reeling into the air. It flew straight up and plunged down again into the earth, stuck like a mast. Canvas flew around it in shreds. Get down, someone yelled. Get down. Roderick Dawson put his arm over my face.

Kathryn dreamed of people in their Sunday suits and dresses gathered around small fires on the plains. She dreamed she opened her window to see her grandfather poking his way through early autumn fields. She dreamed about the times she lost her voice. Three times in all, and each time she remembered her own mother in the room, brown hair floating as she moved. Kathryn dreamed about the last time over and over again. She was fourteen, her mother forty then, wrapping Kathryn in quilts and blankets to stop her shivering: and Kathryn motioning from her speechlessness could only nod and reach for her. Sometimes late at night Kathryn could not breathe, and as she stopped, Zara heard the silence in the room and woke: she pressed gently on her mother’s chest.

Now beyond the window of her dream, an oak grew with yellow pheasants flying overhead. A small round animal was rooting at its base. It was nearly dawn when she awoke, when she felt the itch begin.

Thank God, it’s the left ankle, she said, grabbing for the light again and the mechanical claw she used to retrieve objects beyond reach. Blessed device, extender of limbs. She went for her bathbrush where it was hanging on her pegboard of amusements. She squeezed the claw’s trigger, watched it opening and clasping its silvered digits around the handle of the brush. She jerked it toward her. An itch of convenience: just above the anklebone.

Her left hand moved the brush back and forth around this disturbance. She listened to the sound of it as she worked the bristles into action. She sighed a sigh all scratchers know. She bristle-brushed between her toes, scratching to the knee, grinding energetically around the edges. Up to the thigh, testing this new pleasure. Cautiously, she approached the Hog. A tickle to a twinge and she thrust the brush aside. The pain? She would bear it. She lived in fear of the day when the Hog might conceive an itch. That, quite simply, would be the end.

Kathryn kept a secret list:
Funeral home — not the church
I want to wear my silk dress.

She thought of Zara reading this someday; she did not want to be cruel, offensive. Brushing a hair from the percale sheet, she thought of satin, smooth as speckled eggs. She wrote:

Could you make the pillow blue?
Piano music — not the organ
Everybody sings

Like the days when her grandfather led the parlor songs, his cane pounding on their English hardwood floor, shoes tapping with the most solemn hymns. The apothecary he was called. Bottles and barrels and boxes of powder and fix-it-yourself's. Jars of penny candies for Kathryn his pet. Perfumes and ribbons and hunting excursions. When she was almost Zara's age, they walked the marsh together. "Katie," he said. "Hold that gun tight against your shoulder. Move with the animal. Pretend you are that bird." With each shot, she felt herself rising; she felt herself fall. She was twenty-three when they buried him, his mustache waxed in two tight curls, one defiantly protruding from his face. When she reached out to touch it, her aunts and uncles gasped. You're never too old, he had said, for someone's sweetness. She remembered that.

Sometimes Zara sat on the floor beside her mother and Kathryn patted her back. The young woman's sobs shook the bed, jostling Kathryn. They woke the Hog but she said nothing. It was worth it to be her mother. Kathryn could not bend; she could not grasp a body to her frame. She could not hold her daughter.

Each day Kathryn let her daughter sleep until some need arose, or until she could not longer bear her own loneliness. Kathryn was accustomed to her daughter's presence now; she was dependent on her company. One day a boy from out of town came visiting. Zara stood on the front step and embraced him; she stayed where she could hear her mother calling if she needed her. When she came back and the boy had gone, Kathryn cried. "I don't want to die," she said, but it really wasn't that.

Kathryn watched her daughter's arms lying limply over the covers. "Hold me," Kathryn said quietly. "Zara, are you awake?" Perhaps she only feigns this sleep, Kathryn thought. Bones, Fragile Bones. Everyone is so afraid to break you. "The disease will turn me into powder anyway. Let them break."
The soft wool of the blue blanket rose and fell at angles over her body, drifting on her shoulder with the motions of her sleep, the fabric swelling unnaturally where the tumor distorted the hip. In the far corner of the room, Forster Montgomery watched his wife. He straightened his tie and restraightened it, pulling at the knot, running his hands stiffly along its length, over the place where middle age had fattened him.

He heard water running, drumming against the shower walls in the next room, whirling down the drain at his daughter's feet. Through the window the early morning light shown onto Kathryn's face. Her dark hair was thin now, the fine whisps of it stirring around her temples in the breeze, the rest drawn behind her head in a sort of tail to keep from bothering in her fever. He had offered Kathryn medications, insisting it would ease her pain; but she had refused saying she was saving it for some time when her agony would be more severe. He hardly knew how it could be worse than it was for her now, though he had watched the disease progress: the clusters of tumors throughout her body, spreading from bone to bone in fragile spiderings until each had grown brittle, yet heavier, as if in their weight they were seeking a depth, as if they had already ceased to live.

He felt his gaze go out from him, tracing the tiny ribbon his daughter had fastened around his wife's hair. There were many things Forster could not express now. Each morning when he woke to find himself in the guest room down the hall, he heard his wife and daughter in their private conversations and he felt his sadness grow.

He went to the window now and pulled the curtain toward himself. The light shifted away from her, piercing the opacity of a white plastic pitcher at the side of her bed, on the cedar chest. Something about this glow captured in the center of the jar, reminded him of the wood frame house where he had been raised; it reminded him of a stone basin there in Minnesota in that childhood forty years before. He had watched his mother standing over that basin, lathering her blonde hair in wintertime, the soap frothing around the basin's edge, spilling onto the cabinet. He remembered the thick white foam at the nape of her neck above the place where the satin chemise had ended.

His mother, too, had died young. Downstairs in the white painted kitchen of the little house, he and his brothers had set their chairs on
abrupt back legs as they listened to the wailings of her labor. When
the midwife came down, the bloodied sheets in her arms, and shook
her head, he had not understood what it meant to lose someone, to
lose a mother. That night he held out nails to his father for the
building of the coffins, the small one and the smaller one. He made
patterns in the sawdust with his feet, while his father planed the lids.

Now he pulled the blanket up a bit to cover his wife and returned to
his place of observation. It comforted him to keep her company, even
when she was not awake. He unfolded the newspaper and folded it
again. When Kathryn had been pregnant with Zara, their only child,
he had grown more and more frightened with her growth and finally
when, walking in her wide straddling pregnant way, she had voiced
this fear herself, he had said: Nonsense, Katie, death is far away for
you. And, after all his worry, it had been an easy birth. Then he had
chided himself: professional men should be beyond that sort of
destructive self-indulgence.

Now, he saw her wake and the color drain suddenly from her face.
She was reaching for the pitcher; it was this motion that stopped him
in his speech. Katie, I'm here, he should have said, and would have,
but now it was too late. Her body doubled on its side. Thin strands of
muscle worked along the bone of her arm as she threw green bile from
her mouth and nostrils. He would have announced it. The base of the
pitcher grew dark with contents. He would have said, Katie.

Perhaps she didn't know he was in the room: he would go to her.
He would hold this pitcher for her as he had seen his daughter do. The
sounds he daily heard in his work now rose from his wife. But always
when she needed help, it was Zara's name he heard: Zara. A tear
squeezed out the corner of her eye and rushed down her cheek to
where the circle of plastic cut into her face. Perhaps she had seen him
watching her. Maybe this pained her. The tear ran down the pitcher at
a slant and stopped in its movement like a small snail of innocent
condensation. He would stand up and leave her in some privacy, he
thought. Katie. But then wouldn't Katie think he had found her
repulsive. And if she had not seen him until this sudden departure,
then that surely would be her reaction. He clasped his hands together.
Slowly, methodically, he wrung his fingers, two against one, one
against the other, worrying them as if they were the beads of a rosary.

Her hand was groping on the bed behind her where she kept the
stack of towels. It ran along the sheet, the blanket, the bristles of a
brush until she found the soft nap of the cloth. She grasped and pulled
it toward herself, the towel unfolding as she did this, the bulk of it falling against the place where the blanket rose over her hip. He saw her wince.

She wiped her face. Under her hand, the mirror shifted on its pedestal until a gold rectangle rose from the hallway. “Zara,” she called, ready to have the pitcher taken away. There was a lilt in her voice as if this self-sufficiency had in some way pleased her. Feet, a chair moved in the corner. “Zara?” she asked, startled.

“Katie, I’m here.” He came around the bed. “Can I help you, Katie?”

Quickly she stretched for the towel, clutching it with one hand, placing it over the mouth of the pitcher. “I didn’t know, Forster,” she cried.

“You were asleep when I came in. I didn’t want to wake you.” He stooped beside the bed, his fingers on the handle of the pitcher.

“I thought —”

He set the pitcher down again. “I didn’t mean to startle you, Katie.” His hand moved along the sheet, his fingers a coverlet for the sudden immovable angles beyond her wrist. “Katie.”

She saw his features gone soft with pity, his hand lying upon the bones of the Right One Gone Wrong.

“Oh, Katie, don’t cry. I didn’t mean to creep up on you.” He laid his hand gently on her back. He felt the thin slices of bone like a fence beneath her skin, the ribs with nothing to conceal their tortured trembling.

Her gaze fell against the pitcher. “Didn’t mean to creep,” she repeated.

“I didn’t know what to do, Katie. Here let me take this out for you.” “I want to be alone,” she cried, the Right One Gone Wrong against her breast like a sparrow.

He stood a moment there, the dark blue tie dangling futilely. “Certainly, Katie. I don’t want to be here if you don’t want me. I just thought to sit here with you awhile would be pleasant for us both.” “Yes,” she sobbed. “Wasn’t it? Wasn’t it pleasant for you?” “I’m sorry, Katie. I really —” “Take it. Please take it out,” she cried.

Kathryn brushed her teeth quietly using her water glass; she washed with her new soaps. Then she called, “Let’s have music, Zara.” It would be a fine day: a slice of toast, a poached egg, a piece of
bacon. Dishes rattled in their water, silver against plates, plates against sink, while Kathryn made speeches to the day. “Hold me,” she said in preparation.

At the piano Zara stopped on her way from the kitchen. She played the songs her mother had sung on the Chautauqua. She listened fondly to hear her mother shouting out, “Three-four, Three-four;” and as Zara came to the softer parts, the places where her mother would have lowered her voice and whispered pianissimo, she heard her mother’s voice rippling in a kind of joy that Zara had never heard.

As Zara played it was as if she were curling on her mother’s lap while Kathryn fluttered the pages of Gainsborough, Blake, Madame le Brun. Out the window, she remembered this too now, the plains were passing in the moonlight, for they were on a train going across country. That night her mother had sung to her, as she was singing now, and she thought then that perhaps her mother’s voice had parted the huge shafts of grain and let the locomotive through.

Kathryn straightened the sheets around herself and brushed the stray hairs from her face as she heard her daughter on the stairs. Zara’s nightgown flowed along the rim of the mirror; her face came into view. “Sit on the bed with me, Zara.” Kathryn reached over her shoulder and took her daughter’s hand. “Zara,” she said. “It’s the touching I miss the most. I want to get up and hold you.” Now Kathryn stroked the hand. “I can’t help it anymore, I have to say it. I want you to pick me up and hold me.”

“But, Foxie, I don’t know how to do it anymore. I don’t know how to do it without hurting you.”

“Just once. Please try. I’ll tell you what to do.”

Zara could see the night when she was a child and a noise had echoed through the house. All night it had gone on. The hollow winging had stirred her mother from sleep and sent the woman pacing through the hallways in her long white nightgown, latching windows as she went. In the morning, her mother cried when she discovered the source: during the night a bird had fallen through the chimney into the dark chamber of the furnace and could not get out. In its frenzy the small yellow bird had beaten itself to death against the walls.

Kathryn told her how to slide her hands beneath the side and pull her onto Zara’s lap. That would be the best they could do, she said. As she watched her daughter’s reflection moving behind her on the bed, she reassured her.
“I'm not poking you with my fingernails, am I, Foxie?”
Kathryn shook her head as the sheet fell an inch away and then another. Together they came into the focus of the mirror.
Zara saw in the oval glass her mother's lips open and close. “I'm hurting you,” she said.
“No,” Kathryn said. “Go on.”
Zara nudged her leg beneath the tender side, lowering the tiny woman's frame toward her knee. In her palms, Zara felt a pulse flutter beyond the ribs. “Mother, are you all right?” Her mother's lips parted.
Kathryn's ribs did not crack like normal bones. As logs smoulder, then surrender suddenly to ash, her ribs gave way, the flesh folding in on itself around her daughter's hands. For a moment in the mirror then, the Montgomery women saw what they had meant to be, what had passed.