Linoleum| Stories

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The University of Montana

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Linoleum

Stories by

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[Signatures]

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"Cross yourself," she whispered.

The little boy knelt in the high wooden rectangle of the church doorway. He fumbled at his chest, making a vague X with one hand.

She stooped towards him, "Wrong hand."

A pair of old boots and the stub of a red candle lay on the doorstep. He looked up at her with his large eyes, bent his head and crossed himself again.

She stood up and stepped inside, the rivets on her overalls reflecting copper light from shafts of sunlight which fell through the cracks in one wall. The undersides of the roof rose steeply, towering above the door and running back over the altar and the two rooms at the building's far end. The shingles made a pattern, torn here and there with the glaring light of the sky.

The girl bent down and took the boy's hand, led him forward across the floorboards to where the altar would have been. His bare feet made soft sounds in the dust. He had to take long steps to keep up with her even though she walked slowly. Step, pause. Step, pause. He tried to imitate her motions. Chin rising and falling, arms stiff, held slightly away from her sides.

"You have to think of God," she whispered.

He looked up at her quickly, nodding. She looked down at him through the corner of her eye.
At the far end of the church, where a small wooden platform rose six inches above the rest of the floor, she stopped and knelt. He pulled his small, brown fingers from between her larger ones and knelt beside her in a perfect imitation of her pose. Somewhere above a bird’s wings flapped against the shingles. Dust began to fall in a small stream to the floor. The boy did not look up. He sat still and tense, watching the dust fall through a shaft of light.

“See,” she whispered.

He nodded, one of his fingers flicking nervously at his knee. She stood slowly, motioning to him to stay where he was. He knew not to move.

The white parts of her eyes shone in the shadows, and she moved past him in slow motion, around towards the little staircase that led to the loft behind the altar, above the back room where the boy imagined that boxes of rotting Bibles were still stacked, waiting with mice and beetles for the church roof to cave in.

The boy watched her until she disappeared, and then he moved quickly, pivoting around on his knees so that he could see behind him the square of light that marked the open door. His breath came loudly. He stood and turned back again to look over his shoulder at the wall behind the altar where he knew she would be climbing up the stairs.

“Sit DOWN,” Her voice was low and loud under the roof, filtered as if part of it had flown out through the holes, into the sky. The boy turned quickly and fell onto his knees. He clasped his hands in his lap and stared forward, trying to stay perfectly still.

When she came down the stairs again, she shone white all over, naked except for the shadow where her legs met. She held something closed in the cup of her hands.
"Take off your clothes," she said in a hard, loud voice. Birds flapped, and the boy looked up to the ceiling quickly, fidgeting with his fingers, not meeting her eyes. "Take them off," she said pushing at his knee with her toe. The boy pulled one knee out from under him and began to stand. "No," she whispered, a bit more kindly. "Stay there."

The boy looked down into his lap at the snap and zipper on his pants. He moved his hands towards them and fumbled there until he got both undone. He had to sit back to pull the legs all the way off. She reached down with one hand, holding the other behind her back, and helped him pull his shirt off. He sat still at her feet in white underpants. She knelt down beside him facing the altar, cupping her hands around something. A deep orange light poured in through the cracks in the wooden wall.

The boy looked up into the girl's face. She was watching him, waiting for him to look at her. She smiled at him slowly, almost gently. Her expression made him want to get up, run out into the fields and down the road toward that house that shone at night with the cool blue light of a television, the place where noisy boys and girls owned a small, brown dog. He knew he couldn't go to his own home. She'd find him there. His father would let her in, touch her face, laugh and tell her where he had hidden.

The boy reached one hand carefully back behind him. His fingers touched one of his pant legs.

"Close your eyes," she whispered, raising her cupped hands together. He shut his eyes and leaned back to pull his pants closer to him. She leaned forward, her hair hiding her face. He opened his eyes and watched her. She held something small and soft in one hand, with the other she pulled two rusty spikes out from under a piece of cardboard and lay them before her in...
the shape of a cross. She leaned away from him to the side and dragged a small block of wood toward her across the floor. Above, birds fluttered.

Again the boy turned around to look toward the door. The square of light was dim. The girl looked up and in one motion let go of the block of wood and turned. Her hands grabbed and pulled his hair. She pulled down hard at the back of his head, turning him around. "Think of God," she hissed, bending forward with her mouth against his ear. She pulled him forward so that he could see what she was holding in her hand.

The light shining through the cracks in the walls had faded to a paler orange. The church was growing dark. The girl let go of the little boy's hair and, with both hands, held something out in the air before her. It had tiny arms which she spread with her fingers, a huge round belly or body, but it seemed to have no legs. The thing's head hung limp on a long neck. She held it out like a wilted Jesus, shaking it and pushing it down onto the crossed spikes on the floor for him to see. It was a baby bird.

The girl looked down into the boy's face and watched him stare at the thing she held between her hands.

"Touch it," she whispered.

He shook his head slowly, not taking his eyes from the hanging head of the bird.

The girl leaned forward, swung her arm and knocked the boy's head with her elbow. Her tiny breasts jiggled. The boy leaned back, groping behind him with one hand, still with his eyes on the bird. The light was fading, and the wind pressed the walls. The shingles creaked. The boy clenched his fist around the cloth of one of his pant legs. His eyes dropped to the shape of the spikes laid out in a cross on the wood. He saw the block of
pine, and the shape of something small and grey running in a straight line across the floor against the wall.

The girl's body glowed in the last light, and then, slowly, as they sat in the still cooling air, the glow faded. From out of somewhere her voice came quietly. She dropped her hands, and the bird fell with a soft, warm clunk to the wooden floor. He looked at her and at her face, which now was hidden under her hair. "Go home," she whispered. He lifted one knee to stand, and then quickly the other. He turned around, afraid over and over that she would, this time, change her mind. He ran back over the boards towards the door, tripping and catching himself, jumping, with his pants trailing out behind him by one leg.

Outside under the sky, the first watery star was shining. The air smelled of hay and dust. To the west light still glowed over the cottonwoods. The boy jumped from the steps, turned toward the road, running, his bare feet pounding in the grass and gravel. He pictured his father at home and his older brother out back in the shop working on the valves and cylinders of an engine block. He slowed and began to walk. The boy pictured his brother's strong hands black, his own small body and brown skin smeared black and blue with the grease from his brother's car. He stopped and leaned forward, lifting one bare foot to pull his pants over his legs, to button and zip them with his hands. He looked behind him for the shape of the girl following him naked in the darkness. He sat down by the road and waited for her. It was late. He thought of his father angry, opening the door and letting orange light and the smell of cooked onions pour out onto the doorstep. He thought of the little boys and girls in the house in town, safe in their blanket beds. He thought of the girl's hand holding his, pulling him in
through the kitchen quietly and putting him to bed between his own white sheets.

Back in the door of the church the girl's body shone white. She stopped on the steps to put on the clothes she carried in her hand. The boy knelt by the road waiting. When she got to him, he stood up. Looking up at her, he drew the lines of a cross on his chest with one finger, and took her hand.
I've walked around the block five times, and I am still walking. Leo says I distract him when he's working. He says it's my arms and my breathing, but I don't see how it could be them. Leo tells me he can't even hear himself move when I'm in the room with him. He sits at his bench with all his tools in piles and boxes, and he glares at me. He says I'm the reason he never gets any work done, I'm the reason the rent is late and all the plants have died. They weren't my plants. Leo bought 'em. He's always buying all kinds of weird stuff we never need.

Leo fixes kitchen appliances, blow dryers, pinball machines. Really he doesn't fix much of anything any more, on account of me. And me, I've always stayed out of his way, fed the kids, waited up for him when he went out late with them, walked out taking each by the hand in their little dresses--fishing with bait he called it. He used to take them to the pool hall with him. I don't let him do it any more.

Don't get me wrong, I've never said no to Leo. Not for anything. I just kind of make it hard for him to do certain things--and the girls, they avoid him the way they ought to.

Last night, I woke up with Leo leaning over me, breathing hard. He said I was driving him crazy, though near as I could tell he'd just been up too late again, drinking too much coffee and smoking too many cigarettes. He sat there by the bed while I tried to sleep. His eyes kind of stripped the...
covers off till I felt so cold I wanted to get up and get all my clothes out of my drawers and put them on, make myself all big and puffy, stiff like a snowman, a snow woman. I did that once. It felt good. It was before Leo stopped sleeping with me, before he decided he wanted to be so pure. He says I drive him crazy but I think he's making himself dizzy and sick just staring at me there in the house all day long.

Leo says I'm dirty. He says I have the devil's curse and every month when I menstruate he wears rubber gloves and one of those white paper masks. I'm hoping the girls are gone before they start bleeding. They're used to his stares and curses, but they will never really feel like women unless they are allowed to bleed on their own, in private where they can be proud.

This morning Leo woke up while I was still dressing. He threw a blanket over me and said that even with my clothes on, my breasts tempt and ruin him. He says they are evil.

He's been breaking bottles in the garage at night--to keep his mind clean, he says. The sound of the glass breaking on the walls makes the girls cry. Their screams and all that shattering blend and wobble up out of the dark, and I wake and run. The girls are there together in one bed with their mouths open, little black holes in that pink room. We sit and rock together, and I whisper jokes to them about the whale and the brine shrimp. They laugh and we all cry till morning when Leo is gone and we can dress and eat our breakfast.
Perhaps I just need to cover myself better. Perhaps if I tempted him less he wouldn’t get as angry. I could dye my hair black, wear his old pants and long T-shirts. I could sit in the cellar by the freezer chest and break open purple grapes. I could work the juice of their skins into the skin of my face.

Leo is home. He has brought groceries. The girls are hidden. All their hair is black pitch and they have on all of their clothes. It has gotten hard to see that these girl’s smooth bodies are jutting into the bodies of women, but they are. Leo will never know. They are so quiet. He will stare at their short stringy hair and think of boys, not smooth quick young boys, but thin, pale boys with grape blotched skin. It is hard not to take them out of school. The boys there look at them as if they really were boys, sickly ones and not girls who drive their father crazy.

Leo doesn’t look at me anymore. I have stopped bathing. I take bacon grease from the fry pan and run it through my hair. I wear three shirts and a jacket and pull two pairs of pants and a skirt on every morning over my legs. When Leo sits listening at his bench, all he hears behind him is the click of bugs hitting the lamps out back in the parking lot. I am as still as water, as quiet as stone. I am nothing at all and he is fixing pinball machines. Bing, bing. Bing, bing.
EASTER TOES

I.

The man is bald. He is sitting sunken into an overstuffed sofa. His feet are bare and he has a can of soda pop in his right hand. He is staring at a blank TV set. He wiggles his toes.

BANG! There is a carton of eggs in the microwave. It has exploded. It is Easter. The man has painted his toenails pink.

The man’s cat is an old Siamese, cross-eyed, deaf and part bald. She stares into a crack between the refrigerator and the wall. She has never been there before.

The man’s eyes blink. He has yellowish eyeballs. His pants are ironed neatly. It is Easter. He has ironed them himself.

Somewhere the man has a daughter. She nags him now about the money, about his drinking. He thinks of her as a little girl. He thinks of her mother. His daughter had blond hair then. She had curls. He remembers she used to sing a song. “La La dumpling, La La shoe, La La pretty toes, I -- love -- you!” He used to love to watch her sing. Her little mouth opened and her lips moved. She had tiny feet and she used to take off her shoes when she sang. She used to wiggle her toes and then kiss him with her little dry lips when she was done.

The man lifts his arm and takes a sip of the pop in his hand. The couch springs creak as he moves. The bubbles in the can make soft sounds. He holds the can to his ear and listens. Outside he can hear someone clipping a hedge with shears.
The cat gets up and walks across the kitchen floor. Her nails click on the linoleum. She drops down with a thud in a small square of watery sunlight at the far end of the kitchen. Her paws smell of linoleum. The man can hear her licking her feet.

Outside somewhere church bells begin to clang. The man's face wrinkles in a smile. He is thinking of his daughter and her mother in white gloves. He is remembering little gloved hands on his face. Dry lips on his cheek. The microwave timer is buzzing.

The cat is still licking herself. The man leans forward and sets his can of pop on the surface of the table. He stands up and walks across the shag carpet of the living room into the kitchen. His feet are bare. The rug fibers are green and they squish between his toes. His white shirt is clean and ironed. He ironed it himself. He steps lightly across the cold linoleum and peers into the microwave. Patterns of yolk and white and colored shell are stuck all over the inside of the glass in the plastic door. A smell like burnt hair is coming from somewhere. The man looks down at his toes. His nails are painted pink. They glisten in the light from the kitchen window.

The man walks to the refrigerator and opens the door. His hand snakes through the unlit space between rows of molding tomatoes and shrunken apples. His fingers touch the surface of an aluminum can. He takes it, holds it up in front of him, brushes his lips against it as if it were a human face. His eyes close. He is standing in his kitchen in bare feet looking down.

Out on the street, a young woman is passing. She holds a small girl by one gloved hand. It is Easter. She is waving goodbye to him from the street.
It is morning. All the lights are on. Sounds of water dripping come from the other room. His daughter is singing. She has tiny, round shell-shaped toes. With her mother's nail polish she is painting her toenails pink. Her mother is in the kitchen lying down. Dark red dye is dripping off the counter on to the floor. It will be Easter tomorrow. The little girl is singing, "La La dumpling. La la shoe. La la pretty toes. I love you!" She is sitting in her daddy's lap. She is singing her pretty song. Easter bells are ringing. She wants to get down on the carpet and paint his toenails. She wants to kiss them all, each one. She wants to paint them pink.

The man's hands are wrapped tight around the metal of the aluminum beer can. It is Easter. The refrigerator door closes with a padded thud. The man opens the can and empties it into the sink. It foams up, smells strong. The bubbles make soft sounds. He puts his ear down and listens. He can hear the cat behind him sleeping, his daughter somewhere far away breathing.

The man is sitting in his car with the windows open. The inside smells of plastic and new carpet. The paint is green. He fingers the sharp edge of the key in his hand. Quiet music is playing in the house. He is shaking. A child's high voice screams out down the street behind a hedge. The man's neck jerks; his head turns. The sun is shining. Children are hunting for Easter eggs in the grass.

Running his finger along the curve of the steering wheel, the man breathes. He licks his finger, wiggles his toes. He is thinking of Easter eggs. He is dyeing Easter eggs and she is watching. His daughter is counting colored eggs and singing. He is singing. His voice surprises him. He starts the car.
The city outside flies over him. Eighty miles an hour. Pieces of the freeway pass, disjointed, deadly solid. His lips are kissing air. At home his phone is silent. His feet are bare. His toenails are pink. Already he can feel the soft touch of white gloved fingers on his eyelids. He can taste the flesh of his own hands. It is Easter. His cat is at home staring into a crack between the refrigerator and the wall.

II

A young man is kneeling on the floor straddling her, his arms out straight, pushing, leaning on her breasts. Her flesh stretches. Her soft, white skin moves under his fingers. His hands are small, rough. There is dirt under his nails. Underneath him the woman reaches up, pulls him down. She is small and her eyes are painted black. Her pink panties are looped around her right ankle. With every motion of the man's hands they sway and wave and her buttocks mold over the patterned linoleum of her kitchen floor.

The man's clothes lie in a pile in the living room. His blue boxer shorts are draped over one arm of the sofa. There is a framed picture of another man and a little girl long ago. The little girl is sitting still on her daddy's lap, his grey hair hangs down into one eye. There is a woman in the background, in a kitchen that is off through an open doorway. All that is visible is the woman's back; her long, strong, angular calves, hands that hang down at her sides.

In the kitchen there is a high squeal and then a deep groan. The woman on the linoleum is lying back with her eyes open. The man's eyes are closed. His jaw is set tight. His whole body is moving. Her body is moving under his. She reaches up and, with her long, dark pink nails, grabs the flesh
of his back with her two hands. Her panties swing from her ankle and her 
breath comes slowly, slowly, slowly and then fast. Fast.

The woman's shoes are lying by the couch in the living room. Her 
carpet is threadbare. Her windows are heavily curtained. There are open 
cans of soda pop and an ashtray full of cigarettes on a crooked table by the 
TV set. A new Bible wrapped in plastic rests on a shelf. Next to it sits a 
telephone and a letter from a man who lives alone. He is remembering her 
young. He is thinking of her sweeter. It is Easter morning and he can see no 
more than the polish glistening on the nails of her small, pink, shell-shaped 
toes.

The young man sleeps and the woman sits curled in a corner of the 
couch. She listens to the radio playing soft music. The light falls orange on 
the carpet, and outside the wind tears the brown buds of leaves from the 
trees. The young woman thinks of the feel of her mother's long, gloved 
fingers, the smell of willow sap, and the sound of glass breaking over concrete 
and stone.

III.

A woman stands beneath a bare bulb, staring up. The water in the 
sink is running. Behind her in the living room her daughter is screaming, 
singing. The little girl is banging a bottle of nail polish against the coffee 
table to keep time with her song "Crack-crack, crack-crack. Crack-crack, 
crack!"

The woman reaches for her purse, pulls it from the kitchen counter 
slowly. Her husband behind her is singing in a hoarse voice, banging his fist
The smell of nail polish breaks over the woman. Her nostrils sting. Her eyes are wet. Behind her her daughter is touching her father's toes. She will paint his toes. He will hold her and kiss her. They will walk barefoot together into the yard to hunt Easter eggs.

The woman turns and leans against the counter. She watches her husband reach up to paste pink paper rabbits to the ceiling. His grey hair sticks up in back. His pants need ironing. She will iron them herself. She reaches down to smooth her dress with one of her gloved hands. A stain of red and blue falls and spreads. She turns again to the counter where cracked eggs lie in cartons, colored dark red and a green that is almost black. Pools of color lie on the counter. The woman reaches out with one hand, sets her finger into one rectangular-shaped pool. She draws a red circle over the lump below her heart. She stands still with her hands down. The room flashes and her daughter's laughter seems to come from far away. Red willows sway by a creek and the smell of green water rises. The woman whispers part of a song she learned from her mother long ago. She stands with her hands down and thinks about angels. It is Easter. Bells are ringing. The woman turns and tries to follow her husband and daughter out the door onto the lawn, into the air.
The blade of Berit's trowel hits glass. She feels something give slightly, break. Carefully she digs it out with her hands and a soft bristled brush. It is a jar, broken in two, its lid rusted through. The shape of something brown and shrunken lies curled inside.

With both hands, Berit turns the jar. The shape inside seems to shift. It is wrapped in a moulded cloth. It has fingers, tiny fingers, shrunken and brown. Its face is wrinkled, dry, almost brittle. It is a baby, a new born.

Berit sits on the rocks at the edge of the river. She pulls off her boots and then her socks. The water feels slick on her ankles, syrupy and cool. She slips in and lies with her head up stream, in an eddy, where water circles back behind a half sunken log. Through the sounds of water she hears the metallic clank of a pick striking rock, up the bank, back towards the remains of the cabin where she has been digging all day.

Pulling herself out of her clothes, Berit floats. Her shirt and shorts drift from her fingers into the current and down stream.

The water presses against her like many oiled hands. With her palms, she pushes off from a rock and moves, feet first into the current where the river turns and pulls her east, out of the mountains.

Sun strikes the mounds of soil laid out in rows on the ground around the remains of the cabin. A man in an oversized hat kneels in the shade of a huge douglas fir tree, shaking a screen full of dirt onto one of the mounds.
On a folding wooden card table by the river an array of labeled objects lies spread out like a meal.

The man in the hat is thinking of a woman's body. He is listening to her laughter, smelling the salt of the sweat in the hair at the back of her neck. The man sets down his screen and picks a rusted nail and a bent tin spoon from among the pebbles left in the screen. Removing his hat and running one dirty hand through his grey-brown hair, he stands and walks to the card table where he will write a date, a time, the site name and a grid number on a tiny white label which he will tape to the spoon and the nail.

They were in the lab. They were labeling the parts of a skeleton from the upper cemetery.

"They're beautiful aren't they?"

He looked up at her then, "What?"

She held up a stained length of femur, "These."

She reminded him of a girl he'd loved in high-school. He watched her bend over her white labels, watched the way her hair fell. He listened to her pen scratch, the rasp of her breath falling over her tongue.

Berit tilts her head back in the water, closes her eyes and hears the panicked click, click, click of pebbles tumbling over one another, swept up and dropped again further down stream. Berit's legs drop. The water sucks her down over a boulder. She feels the skin of her back scrape over moss coated wood and granite.

She opens her eyes and stares up at the ragged tops of huge Douglas Fir. They float back and away from her across a deep blue sky. Somewhere
she feels her blood seeping through tiny capillaries, leaching out into the current.

Back beside the cabin, on the river bank, the man in the large hat stands on a small square of grass clutching his trowel. The ground before him is marked out in precise squares with string. He smiles and runs one hand over the stubble on his cheeks. He pictures Berit the week before kneeling with a tape measure, stakes and string, laying out the grid. He'd wanted to kneel then beside her and kiss her on the cheek. But he couldn't touch her. He couldn't bring himself to.

The man turns toward the cabin where the long handle of a shovel rests up-right in the shade. He walks to the cabin, stoops and peers inside. Shafts of sunlight fall through holes where shingles have rotted. Light shines on grass growing and two sleeping bags left unrolled against one wall. The man ducks out of the doorway and turns to stand facing the river. He calls a name softly, waits and walks back to the trenches where he begins to dig again with his polished trowel.

The river carries Berit out of the hills, down into the farmland where the river banks are muddy and cows graze between the trees.

She lets out a breath of air and sinks into the water. On one bank a large, white house rises up, towers over small planted trees and a lawn where a huge fir once grew. Two girls play on the bank. Berit can hear their shrill voices and laughter as she raises her head for air. On the bank the girls' voices change. They emit long shrill screams. Berit sees the jar before her, feels her own lungs tense.
Berit floats face down. Her legs and arms are limp and numb. She feels the sun on her back, soft between her shoulder blades. She thinks of a man and a woman long ago. She pictures them kneeling in the grass behind a cabin they built themselves.

Something small and slick, touches Berit's thigh. She tries to brush it away with her hand but can't.

Perhaps it had been winter. The woman was alone. She had no food, no wood for the stove. She had to melt snow for water. The baby cried. The woman knelt in the snow, used a pick to break the ground. She killed the baby herself, smothered it with the blanket, wrapped it, carried it outside and buried it in the jar.

The man stands on the river bank holding his hat in one big, brown hand. He stares at a pair of boots left empty in the rocks at the river's edge. He looks into the water and turns. His face is flushed. He is sweating. He walks quickly towards the cabin, tries to block out a picture, an image of her bathing, the shape and movement of her body in the water. He picks up his spade and continues to dig.

She would lie in the water and wash slowly, methodically. She would comb her hair on the bank where her body could dry in the sun. All the fine, white, hairs on her arms and thighs would shine in the heat of the afternoon light. Her stomach would be white— and her breasts. The man stands and turns towards the river. He calls her name softly.

Berit feels the pace of the river quicken. She opens her eyes, stares up into a sky that is a pale blue, almost yellow. There are no trees. Here the water is warmer, gritty. Somewhere two men are talking. Their voices rise.
and fall, almost whispers. Berit hears a woman's voice, and another. The four voices blend together. Their words are garbled. Berit listens.

He had hiked into the valley with some of the tools and specimen cases. They began working on the dig behind the cabin together. His eyes seemed to follow her. He was always there, right next to her. He would smile and look down modestly when she caught him staring. He turned his back when she had to change, left her alone for a time, morning and evening. She didn't need to ask.

It was the sleeping that bothered her. Every night he lay only a few feet from her, and after awhile she couldn't sleep. She dreamed of eyes, blue eyes and a man's naked, white body. The body was sewn to hers, its belly to her back. Whenever she moved she felt the sutures pull. The movement of her body excited him. His motions pulled at the thick, waxy, black string that sewed the two of them together. She always became pregnant. The baby she bore always shrank or stretched or turned into something else. When it nursed, it chewed her nipples with small brown teeth. When she held it she could only think of squeezing it or dropping it, throwing it away.

The man stands in the grass behind the cabin. He stoops over the hole where Berit has removed two small, blue glass bottles and a large jar. The jar is broken in two and stuffed with an old, brown cloth. The man turns to the river. He pictures Berit floating, her head bobbing in the water, her hair spread out like a fan.

The sky turns yellow. A road winds beside the river. A raccoon stands on a rock washing a dead fish. The sounds of dogs barking rise.
sharply and disappear. Berit floats feet first in the green-brown water.

Tractors whirr. Sunlight slants low and orange through the apple trees.

Dried grass ripples on the banks. The wind carries the smell of soil and
manure, car exhaust.

Berit hears his voice, the whisper of it. It is kind, almost pleading. His
hand touches her shoulder, the nape of her neck, as if he knew where to
touch her. It would be so easy. She'd imagined it before. Making love to
him. She hears her own voice too loud in the dark under the cabin roof
"No."

She had meant to be kind.

She tried picturing them together, waking together in town, in her
own cluttered apartment on sixth street. He would wake at nine, dress and
read the paper. He would eat toast and coffee, tease her about her oatmeal,
the grits and fruit salads. He would always sit up straight in her chairs,
always eat at the table, always stop and brush his teeth before getting into
bed.

The sky burns deep orange. The water whispers. The man wakes on
the bank staring into the water. Her boots are there. He imagines her
floating, her body stiff, her fingers curled as if she were asleep. He pictures
her face, her eyes looking down and away from his. He tries to hear the
rhythm of her breath, pictures her body wrapped in stiff, brown cloth,
curled by the heater in his bedroom apartment.

There is a sound in the trees behind the man. He turns quickly,
staring through the dusk. He rises and runs through the grass and pine
cones beneath the trees. Only once he screams her name.
Berit pulls her head from the water and lowers her feet. The water is warm, like urine. Her feet touch slick rock, fine yellow-brown mud. She looks up. The orange light of street lamps plays on the water. The pylons of the Eighth Street bridge rise like douglas fir. The banks are smooth and angular, concrete. A path leads up to the street. Cars pass. Berit curls naked in the water at the river’s edge.

She waits for the sky in the east to begin to pale before she rises and walks through the streets to the tiny apartment where she lives alone.
Bert and Zoebob are sitting together on the rusted hood of a car in the alley behind the apartment building where Zoebob and Martha live. Bert and Zoe have spent all night in this spot, slicing limes, drinking, and throwing bottle caps at the big red lips of a woman on a billboard poster advertising lawn mowers. Zoebob has just lost his job as manager at The Premium Plaza’s downtown store.

"It all got too complex, Bert. One day it was tidy, and the next it was a mess." Zoe licks his lips and wraps his fingers tight around the neck of his beer bottle. "I hate messes, Bert. I hate them. You know I always have."

Bert leans forward to look at his feet and where they rest on the car’s front bumper. The metal of the hood creaks. He stares past his shoes to the patterns of pebbles on the blacktop, the lines of dust and shadow. "Messes are good things, Zoe. You’ve got to love the way things get crazy just when you think you have them all under control. We’d all die of boredom if things were too tidy. My mother used to throw things out the window, make a big pile and give it all away if life got too good. She figured she knew how to make life good for herself, she didn’t need things to be tidy. She didn’t need to own much or do things the same way every time she did them. She had friends and they loved her. They thought she was crazy but they did love her.

"What finally broke my ma, Zoe, was that things finally got too tidy, too simple and easy--and they stayed that way. Nothing she did made her
life seem different. She kind of got in a rut. It all got too orderly. Even
throwing things out the window onto the ground seemed the same old thing."  

* * *

It is January and Zoebob is sitting at home watching television. Martha won't be home until four. Zoebob is contemplating the colored tile in an commercial for scented soaps. He thinks of how much better his and Martha's bathroom would look in tile. He has scrubbed linoleum daily for three months now and he is sick of it. He is sick of the smell, of the color and flowered patterns. He is sick of the texture of linoleum. He knows that Martha won't understand how he feels or why it is he wants to do their entire kitchen over in ochre and white-checked terra cotta. Martha will be thinking about the Dow Jones industrial average. She'll kiss him sweetly and tell him not to worry, tell him how she thinks that the linoleum is just fine and that she loves the way he has rearranged the garage and cupboards, and stacked the cord wood in tidy rows out back.

Zoebob is unemployed. He is tired of looking for work that is worthy of him, tired of the need for cleaning house and cooking dinner. He is sick of worrying that he is not worrying enough about what he is doing with his life. Martha will make him a nice martini. She'll put her cool hands on his face and kiss his thin lips. They'll have dinner and go to bed, sleep soundly and peacefully before he can even remember to worry about what he will do with himself when morning comes.

* * *
Bert, however, has a new job. He is Assistant to the Executive in Charge of Sales for a local plant which manufactures biodegradable packaging products. When he went for his interview the month before, he had to look the word biodegradable up in the dictionary. He feels he has it down now.

Bert is working hard. In fact, he’s a little worried about all he has to do. He gets up at six AM, fixes himself breakfast, toast, coffee, high-fiber cereal. He walks four blocks to Front Street and takes three buses to get all the way down-town to work. So far everyone he has met seems to be peculiarly serious, efficient and unable to take a joke. This makes him nervous and self conscious. He has been repeatedly encouraged to look into buying a new car or mobile home through the company finance plan.

It is evening, Friday. Bert puts a tray of fish sticks in the toaster oven, sips his wine, tries to relax. He watches a television program on Alaska, watches old black and white clips of black-haired girls chewing and softening leather with their teeth. They have coal black eyes, round cheeks, and white, white teeth. There is a clip of white-haired men and women dancing, close-ups of small wrinkled eyes, feet in skins stepping to a rhythm. Bert is almost sure he knows, remembers. He leans forward, close to the screen. There are pictures of a man leaning over a pile of little black fish, looking at the sky, looking at the fish and then at the sea and then again at the fish and the sky.

* * *

Zoebob is at home, sitting on Martha’s couch with a book of tile samples in his lap. He is having a crisis. It has been six months to the day since he lost his job. Martha is growing weary of him. She has stopped
answering his worries with reassurances, stopped kissing his thin lips with her full ones. She comes home and fixes him two martinis, both at once. He watches her. She has a special way of stirring them. It makes a wonderful sound. She sets them down, both heavy glasses right next to each other on his Pledge-polished coffee table. She goes into their bedroom and shuts the door.

Zoe is a little scared. It is not as if his life has fallen apart suddenly. No, it has happened very slowly, so slowly in fact that at first he didn’t really notice. One day Martha snapped at him for turning down a job as manager of the downtown Burger Queen, the next night she climbed into bed in a pair of her old red, one-piece pajamas and wouldn’t take them off. She has canceled both his credit cards and started to fix him two and a half martinis every night instead of just one.

Zoe wants to call Bert. He wants to get up from the couch where he is sitting and go curl up with Martha under the quilts on their queen-sized bed. He wants escape, some promise and certainty that everything will be OK, that Martha won’t go into the bathroom and put her pajamas on tonight, that when she comes home she will kiss his lips and put her cool hands on his soft, white stomach. He wants to hear Martha say she loves him. He wants to call Bert and ask him to understand it all but he can’t, he won’t, he isn’t even sure if he would know how to begin.

Zoebob falls asleep on the couch, in front of the TV. He imagines a place of peace and order, a place where dust would never settle and his bathtub would never get rings. He thinks of a place where he wouldn’t have to have a job, where he and Bert could sit for weeks on the hood of an old car talking and throwing bottle caps; somewhere simple where he could be everything to Martha again. Zoe falls into a deep sleep. He dreams of
television and living in a world paved with clean, smooth, terra-cotta checked bathroom tile

* * *

Bert is sitting in his office, staring out over the city towards the sea. He has a stack of books and periodicals two feet high by his left knee. He has been asked to give a presentation on styrofoam and various biodegradable alternatives at the annual stockholder's meeting on Wednesday. To Bert it feels as if he has been doing nothing but giving presentations for five months straight. He picks and orders facts, makes graphs and tables, plots production, consumption, disposal, supply, demand, distribution, transportation, decomposition. He has become very proficient at ordering and structuring chaos. He stares out over the grid of the city, thinks of bar graphs, flow charts. Disgusted with himself, he draws his blinds and sits in the semi-dark staring at a small photograph of a brown, pink cheeked woman with coal black eyes.

It is twenty-five years earlier. A woman stands at the side of a dirt runway on the Alaskan tundra. Behind her, a plain and a river stretch to the horizon. The river shines in the low sunlight, winding and curving randomly until it disappears into the sky. The woman stands tall, round faced, waving one red mitten in the air. Goodbye.

Bert is very small, he is nestled in the crook of his father's arm waving to the woman out on the runway. He feels that she is trying to say something to him but can't. Bert waves his own hand behind the plastic of the airplane window. Goodbye. The woman turns away, covering her face as the wind from the plane propellers kicks up clouds of dust, blowing her
straight black hair up, swirling with the dust and bits of paper, up over her head into the yellow summer sky

* • *

Zoebob is in Martha's kitchen. "Martha's kitchen," he repeats to himself scrubbing with both hands at a stain on the surface of Martha's linoleum floor. "Martha's kitchen," he says standing up and beginning to realign the cookbooks on her shelves, moving tins, cooking utensils, pots and pans so that all come to rest at ninety degree angles. He smiles, looking around. Perfect order. "Perfect order," he mumbles. "Perfect Order." He hears a floorboard creak in the hallway past the living room and senses that Martha has decided to come have a look at him. He stands with his back to the door, perfectly still, holding his breath. She will have her peek at him and go back into their room, into her room. There is nothing he can say to change that, nothing at all. It is too late; for a long time it has been too late.

Zoebob calls Bert from down at Smith's bar. Loud music is playing in the background. Zoe is drunk. "Come on down, ass hole." He shouts at Bert. "I haven't seen you in weeks. No excuses. I don't want to hear any of that shit about all the fucking articles you have to read on saving the whales and trees from the descending tide of Republican styrofoam and plastic. I want to celebrate! It's almost spring. Let's have a good time, let's talk it up like we used to, get crazy, get irresponsible. Let's hold up a bank and buy rounds until our heads roll off and down the gutters!" Zoebob's voice has risen to a howl and he is grinning at a cocktail waitress who is headed for the bathroom. She leans towards the pay phone receiver in Zoe's hand and calls into the phone.
“Yeah come on down Bert, come liven the place up for us!”

It is 4 AM. Zoebob is sitting on the curb in front of the bar feeling the skin on his arms and his chest which, along with both his hands, has gone numb. The city seems deserted. A stop light is flashing red in the distance and Bert is lying on his back in the street, staring up. He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, turning his head towards Zoe on the curb "You know I could stay like this forever, just lay here and watch the stars spin and the sun come up and go back down again."

Zoebob looks down at Bert spread-eagled on the blacktop. He is thinking of Martha at home asleep in their bed. He wants to tell Bert how she's asked him to leave their apartment. He wants to tell him how he is too scared to try and go home. He looks away from Bert, and stares instead down through the squares of the sewer grate at his feet. "You're crazy Bert. You know you need your work. Christ, you love it. If you tried laying here for more than an hour you'd probably get so bored you'd die."

"No, not me. All I ever wanted was to be an astronomer."

Zoebob looks up beyond the buildings to the sky for a moment. The light of a million stars seems to shift and move uncertainly somewhere in his head or out in the dark above. He looks down again quickly, staring into the sewer grate, trying to ignore the dread he feels at the thought of staring up into the sky for a living. "Yeah sure."

Bert is quiet for awhile, there's no sound but the sound of his breathing and the roar of traffic off on another street. "No really, no kidding Zoe. When I was little my dad and I lived up in Alaska. In the winter I used to ride out of town on the back of a snowmobile with my mom. It was always dark and we'd ride with the headlights on, up the frozen rivers on
the ice until we couldn't see the lights of town anymore. I remember once we stopped out there somewhere, all bundled up and warm. We turned off the headlights and lay down on our backs in the snow staring up. I could have stayed there forever looking at those stars. I've never seen anything like that."

Bert is quiet. Zoebob looks at him lying on his back on the pavement and tries to picture him as a child. He tries to picture Alaska but can't. All that comes to mind is Martha, the pipeline, polar bears and snow which stretches like warped linoleum forever through the dark to a frozen sea.

Bert rolls over on the pavement. He is growing sober watching the first hint of light flush the sky to the East. The stars above are fading. The sound of garbage cans rattling on the next street sets up a strange feeling of inertia in his body and head. He is tired of inertia, tired always having the feeling that he has lost something which he can't even remember owning.

"Let's go to Alaska, Zoe"

Zoebob is sitting still on the curb, staring down into the squares of the grate by his feet. Feeling is beginning to return to his fingers and toes. He has been drinking too much. Images of Martha and her martinis begin to collide inside his head. He looks up.

Bert meets his glance. "You and Martha having a rough time?"

Zoe is very still. He wants to hug Bert with all his might-- just for understanding-- just for trying to anyway. He stays very still. He is tired of feeling that everything is beyond his control, tired of cleaning and washing and fixing things. Slowly an image settles before him on the street: He and Bert out on the surface of a frozen sea, polar bears and seals in herds running and crawling away in all directions, the pipeline stretched straight
and black across the ice, a city on the horizon, no roads, no cars, no jobs, no husbands, no wives. He shakes his head and squints into the rising sun.

Bert is lying on his back again, staring at the sky. He is thinking of his mother and the sound snow makes falling, trying to remember what sound snow makes when it is falling, settling. Around him the city wakes. Next to him, Zoe begins to tap one shoe lightly against the pavement. The sound is regular, like the ticking of a clock. Bert shuts his eyes hard, listening, trying to remember, but he can't.
MAGGIE

Maggie went to Roy's house only once. She went for tea and ended up spending four days with him. They worked in the garden together, cooked, ate, and read out loud to each other. They took turns picking books off of Roy's shelves. He picked all the light hearted ones. Maggie picked the tragedies, the saddest stories. She sat reading them in her deep voice, her body wrapped in his striped pajamas, long legs laid out and covered with cats. The two of them laughed and cried and made love under Roy's flower-print sheets, sleeping and talking until the fourth morning when the sun rose and Maggie woke up to find herself very happy. She lay in Roy's arms and the early morning light which fell through a window onto the cats and the covers and all the books and dirty dishes that had collected over the last three. She decided then that it was time that she had better go home.

Roy's kiss good bye was a long one. He told her to come back when she could and she said she would. She walked home light-headed, ran down the 19th Street median and and found herself taking chances with the traffic on main street. She ran all the way across the park between 12th and 17th streets. It all seemed so sudden and spontaneous. She hurried the last three blocks of side walk and forty feet of dirt alley-way back to her own little apartment on Eighth Street.

The following morning Maggie went back to work. She got up, took a shower, put on her blue skirt, stockings, her shoes. She ate breakfast, toast, coffee and cereal. She put on her coat.

On the bus she realized she'd put on the coat she'd worn to Roy's. It smelled of cats and tuna fish and was covered front and back with small
white, brown, black and orange cat hairs. She stared down at the many fine
tufts, squinting at the way they’d woven themselves into the blue threads of
her jacket. The man in the bus seat next to her stared at Maggie. He
watched her sit in her seat, hands at her sides, her chin on her chest.

Really things were not at all as they usually were. That morning, her
bed had felt different, her apartment seemed to have collapsed in on itself
and begun to shrink. Even her breakfast cereal had tasted a little more
bland.

Maggie thought about Roy, his large kind hands, his brown eyes and
voice. She thought about how he’d loved her knees so much. How he’d lain
kissing the backs of her knees, biting the soft skin of her calves, running his
fingers along the curves of her toes, the back of her neck. The bus hit a
curve and Maggie sat up with a start. Her uniform and the contents of her
purse lay spread out on the bus floor. People were beginning to walk on
them as they headed for the back door. She’d missed her stop.

Maggie’s day did not go well. She burnt twelve loaves of french bread
in the kitchen warming oven and caught part of a table cloth on fire as she
was lighting candles on the cafe tables at lunch time. She sat all through her
evening break staring at the multi-colored cat hairs on her favorite blue
coat.

"Maggie!" It was Sarah. She was standing at the kitchen door in one of
her pink and silver spandex pant suits, yelling across the kitchen. "Someone
go get Maggie. Clayton’s on the phone again.” It was almost six and Maggie
was still sitting in the break room. She looked up when she heard Sarah
yelling her name.

"Tell him I’ve gone out” she whispered. She got up quietly and
headed for the door at the back of the kitchen.
"Maggie!" Sarah was still yelling over the sounds of clanging pots and pans, "Maggie, it's Clayton!" Maggie stopped and leaned forward resting her hand on the nob and her head against the door. She looked back over her shoulder just as Sarah caught sight of her and began making her way across the kitchen.

Maggie didn't want to talk to Clayton— not now. She wasn't ready. She was sure he would read everything in her voice, smell the cats and the tuna in her coat, see all the fur. She could see his eyes, hear the hurt and anger in his voice. She could hear him snapping pencils, dropping the halves in the empty trash can next to his desk. He'd gone through a whole box of them, broken them one by one, a year earlier when she'd lost the job he'd gotten her downtown. It had been said she was too slow, too moody and quiet, too untidy in her appearance. All she'd known was that the job had made her tired, very tired. She was only thirty-two and she knew she was too young to be so tired. She watched Sarah walking past the deep fryers towards her. She wouldn't understand. Maggie turned and headed for the alley.

When she got home there were thirty-seven messages on her answering machine. She'd done her best to forget checking it when she got back from Roy's the night before. She took off her coat, grabbed a note pad and pencil and sat down on a chair by the phone. She pressed the button by the blinking red light. Clayton's voice sounded level and patient.

"Hi, hon. Your land lord called and said your little barrel garden on the deck there is drawing bugs. He says he's asked you twice to spray it or get rid of it. He said tomorrow he's taking it to the dump. I know how much you like fussing over that thing, but you know better than to make him mad. I'll talk to you tonight. Bye." The tape was quiet for a few seconds. Maggie
held her breath and leaned back in her chair until she could see out through
her apartment's dirty sliding glass doors onto the deck. In the pale lamp
light she could see the smooth cement surface spreading out towards the
street. Her potted tomato plants and overflowing barrels of spinach, carrots,
parsley and beets were all gone.

"Maggie, it's almost eight. I'm at home. Call me when you get in."

"It's me again. Guess you're not back yet. I love you, dear. Call me."

There were five clicks where she could tell Clayton had called again
and again and then hung up. It all seemed so familiar, his even, predictable
voice on the phone, his order and advice. His life was so a part of hers. She
pictured him sitting at home in his tidy living room, a martini in his hand
and the evening news turned down so low that when you walked into the
house from the street you thought he was just watching the pictures flash on
the screen. Camouflaged army tanks in jungles, ambulance lights and
stretchers, the little man in the suit and tie, his mouth moving, pausing,
moving hypnotically, more pictures of soldiers, people running, a thin man in
overalls standing in the middle of a big brown field full of dead brown corn.

"Maggie, it's Sarah. Clayton's been calling me every hour, on the hour,
all day today to see if you've come in to work. He's driving me crazy. If
you're home would you just give him a call. Things are real slow here today
The whole kitchen seems hungover. They've been asking about that tea you
made for them last time-- the one from the funny looking roots. Anyway, I
think they'll survive. I'll talk to you soon."

"Maggie is there something seriously wrong? I've called your mother
and your sister. I've called Sarah and I'm almost ready to call the police. If
this is some kind of joke I want you to know that I don't find it funny. Call
me as soon as you get home. I'm really worried." Maggie took a deep breath
and let it out slowly, looking down at her note pad. There was a series of clicks before Clayton's voice came on again.

"Maggie I just don't understand this. Your mother just called. She said she's talked to you, that you say that you're fine and that we shouldn't worry If there is something wrong you should talk to me I'll always be here for you. If you are home please call me You know I love you more than anything. We can work this out if we talk about it, I know we can."

Maggie breathed in again and out slowly She felt a tear run off her chin onto her skirt. She thought about her spinach, her tomatoes in their barrels, over turned in a sea of colored plastic and styrofoam at the dump. She thought about Clayton, his cool, smooth hands, manicured nails, their last night together; dinner out, a bottle of wine, her head spinning a little, home to his apartment. He undid each of the buttons on his shirt and she watched while he turned down the bed and closed the curtains. It was warm and the wine made her sleepy. It made her not want to care that she'd rehearsed for three days how she'd breach the subject, how she'd ask if maybe it had ever occurred to him that he didn't have to sit down on the bed, unbutton his shirt from the top button, down to the bottom, take it off, then the undershirt, unbuckle the belt, unzip the pants, stand up, smile nervously (he always did that-- got a sort of dare-devil look in his eye) and she could predict his next movement, his pants down and folded over a chair, him back down on the bed and under the covers, all in one motion, all in the blink of an eye this last part-- and somewhere in there she took off all her clothes and sometimes maybe she'd walk around like that. Sometimes she just got into bed. He was always worried that the neighbors might see some part of her, her shadow maybe, a silhouetted breast or two. But the wine had made her forget to ask, to see if maybe they could just talk for a little while,
maybe just lay there for a bit staring up at the shadow of the tree from the
street that was always up swaying on the ceiling after he turned out the
light and she got in bed.

Maggie sat listening to the answering machine click. He loved her. He
really loved her, she knew he did. He was so predictable, but she needed
that sometimes. It was not as if she really felt unhappy with him.

She looked down at her skirt. The cat hair had begun to make a
pattern, like paisley almost. How could she have done such a thing. She got
up and went to her closet to get a bag to put her coat and skirt in. She would
take them to the dry cleaners in the morning. She took off her skirt.

The answering machine was still clicking when she came back to turn
it off so that she could go to bed. There was a pause and a low voice laughed
up from the speaker by the little red light. “I can’t believe you have one of
these things. You know the cat’s miss you and I found a book you’d love-- it
looks terribly sad.” There was a pause “I could send it to you.” And
another pause. “Things feel sort of different here, Maggie. Maybe if you
come back and visit you can help me put in my corn. I put some spinach in
yesterday and prepared the beds just like you said. I hope your beets are
doing well. Come for tea sometime. We’ll cook a few meals and plant some
corn.” Roy’s low laugh rose out of the speaker again and then there was a
click. Maggie stood by the phone in her nightgown, bare feet on the cold
linoleum of her kitchen floor. She curled her toes and looked out the
window towards the hills. The moon was just rising. She pressed the off
button on the answering machine and walked to her closet, leaned down and
got her coat. She stared at it for a long while before she set it back down
and called Clayton.
There was, she knew, sometimes a mysterious comfort in his voice. It was so known to her, so solid and certain. In him it seemed was contained all the order of life. He loved her. It seemed so simple and logical, yet still, long after her blue coat had been cleaned and hung carefully at home in her closet, long after she'd replanted her barrel gardens, and stopped standing naked in front of the window in Clayton's bedroom, years later, on cold, clear nights, when the shadow of the tree from Clayton's yard stood and shook in tiny tremors on the ceiling of his dark room, Maggie would lay in his bed and remember the sound of Roy's voice.

They were sitting in his garden together, thinning radishes. Maggie stopped. She held up a perfect, large, red and white radish she had pulled out by mistake.

"Roy, I live with another man sometimes." He looked at her.

"I thought you might. There's been a bit of a black hole in what you've told me of your life." He paused, taking the radish from her hand and rubbing the dirt off it with his fingers. "Are you happy with him?"

"Yes, I am sometimes." She took a breath in. He smiled.

"Are you unhappy with him?"

She looked back down at the row of radishes, "Yes, sometimes."

He ran his fingers along the skin of her wrist, "That sounds a little sad." His voice was low and quiet, like the sound of water falling in a creek-bottom, "But I guess you might like that."

She looked at him and thought of how Clayton would take her back. He would ask no questions. Once he knew why she had been gone, he would pretend she had never left him. He would erase Roy and the part of Maggie that had been with him as best he could. She would have no time to feel
guilty. She closed her eyes and could almost feel Clayton's hand on her arm, the pressure of his fingers. Her voice sounded stronger than she thought it would, "Yes, sometimes it is hard, and it's best that way."
An old woman wearing a plaid shirt and brown pants knelt in a garden. Thea ran along the sidewalk. She felt her footfalls, regular, loud, hard rubber on cement. Her arms and chest tingled. She could feel her breath driving in and out. The trees on the street grew in size and then disappeared behind her. Her feet fell with a regular sound. Her breath came, in and out, in and out.

The old woman ahead in the garden stood up. She watched Thea running towards her on the pavement. She shook her head, smiled, and called out, "You need a bra. You'll hurt them if you run like that." The old woman clutched her own chest with her hands, knelt again, and went back to pulling weeds.

Thea passed the woman's house. She looked down at the round shapes of her own breasts. They rose and fell with her footfalls, danced up and down beneath her shirt.

Thea stood in the shower. Water ran over her, over her breasts and the slight bulge of her stomach. It ran over her legs, which were freckled and muscular. She turned off the faucet and stood in the air, leaning forward, watching water drip off her nipples onto the tile of the bathroom floor. Her breasts were large. She felt their weight, their sway as she reached for her towel. The skin above them had stretched into little lines, vertical scars.
She thought of the shape of her mother's chest after her first mastectomy. Her mother had stood in the bathroom doorway in a towel. Thea was fifteen.

"Promise you won't faint or scream?" She lowered the towel and stepped into the glare of the bedroom lights. The scar was like a little knot on the white flesh. The other breast was full, the nipple dark and round. Thea sat on the bed, swinging her feet. Her breasts were still small, lumpy. She thought of her brother's chest, how smooth it was, level, tight. One side of her mother was now like that.

"Promise you won't faint or scream?" Joey pulled his shirt over the short, bristly hair on his head. He flexed the muscles in his shoulders, and his chest tensed. Beneath the thin hair on his left breast, three words curled in blue type script.

Thea leaned forward, squinted. JENNY MAY WILLIAMS. "Who?"

"I'm getting married, Tee."

"Oh, god."

"Really."

Thea leaned and picked up her bag of groceries from her brother's floor. She felt heavy and old. "You're crazy. You--" Her brother smiled. "We'll be OK. You've met her. She's the model, the dancer. She makes a lot in tips. We're going to have a baby." Thea tried to picture the woman. It had been late. Thea was drunk. Joey had talked her into coming to the bar with him. The woman on stage had tassles on, she swung them in circles, in opposite directions. Her skin gleamed powder white. She seemed not to sweat.
The next woman was brown and oiled. Little beads of water formed on her stomach and between her shoulder blades as she moved. She danced with a man who wore nothing but a loin cloth. Through the cigarette smoke, Thea could smell his skin. He and the woman seemed to mesh and slide together like oiled gears. Their skin seemed to blend and fuse. When they stopped, Thea could only think of how the water of their baths would run over them in dark smooth streams.

Joey took Thea's hand. He smiled, clutching it to the letters on his chest. "She was the one with the tassles."

Thea sat in the chair by her kitchen window. She thought of her father, how the hair on his chest had turned grey, how his breasts sagged as he grew older, how her mother divorced him and moved into an apartment in town. After her first mastectomy, Thea's mother bought several false breasts, some heavy silicon with nipples, others light cotton made from something like quilt batting. "It's not so bad. I never thought too much about the things anyway. It's your father who liked them so much. He says he doesn't care that I only have one now. But he stopped touching me the same way. He stopped touching me at all for a long while."

Thea's mother grew bitter. She teased him about how he was growing enough breasts for the both of them. When she lost the other one and started talking about the joys of being flat chested, about not wearing any falsies at all, he flipped. He shot a hole in the living room wall. He was aiming for the breasts on the woman in the painting that hung over the fireplace. Then he had a heart attack.

Thea took a sip of her tea and watched sparrows out the window, picking at weeds along the edge of the sidewalk. They hopped from bush to
bush, scattering into the air and trees when cars passed. A man stood on the
curb staring towards Thea where she sat in her bathrobe at her kitchen
table. She looked down quickly to see that her top had not fallen open. She
looked up. The man was still there, staring at her, as if he were satisfied just
thinking that her robe might fall open. Thea set her cup of tea down. She
pushed back her chair, stood in front of the window, and pulled the flaps of
her robe apart. Her breasts hung white and gleaming in the morning light.
The man across the street touched his fingers to his lips and blew a kiss to
Thea standing bare chested over her toast and tea.

When the sun had set, Thea lay and thought of her mother's breasts,
where they were now. Thea felt along the lines of her ribs. Her mother's
breasts had probably been buried. Or maybe they were incinerated, their
ashes sprinkled on some suburban doctor's garden. They fed his lillies and
narcissus. How easily her mother had let them go. Thea rolled onto her side.
She felt the weight of her breasts shift and fall.

That morning, after she jogged past the old woman in the garden, Thea
stopped and looked down at her breasts. They rose and fell slightly with
each breath. She turned and called back to the old woman kneeling in the
soil, "But I do have a bra on." The woman looked up again and smiled. She
set down her trowel and smoothed the fabric on her blue flannel shirt with
both hands. Thea stood still on the sidewalk, breathing. The woman slowly
unbottoned the top three bottons on her shirt and sat grinning down at the
skin of her own bare, white chest. It was smooth and flat, level with two
tiny little knots where the nipples once had been. □
Lilah Endures Eighty-Eight Birthdays After Death

Lilah died of old age on the morning of her eighty-eighth birthday. After eighty-eight days in purgatory, she decomposed and nourished a red currant bush for several years.

Lilah inches the car up close to the deposit slot in the cancer center’s parking lot. She drops in her small, pink lymphatic tumor and speeds off down Main Street towards the freeway. She thinks back to the beginning of the day.

She had woken up next to her husband James. For awhile she lay still staring up at the ceiling. Then she leaned up on her elbow and stared into his face. It had to be the morning of her fifty-second birthday. James breathed slowly, the breath of one concentrated in dream. He looked young and beautiful to her and she wished she could wake him. Carefully she pulled back the covers on her side of the bed, swung her feet to the floor and hobbled quietly into the bathroom to try and find a bottle of pills. Twelve days in purgatory was already too many for her. She'd had enough.

Lilah knew though that she was getting a feel for the rules. She knew that on this morning, this birthday, just like the others, James would have to sleep. She could not whisper into his ear like she had used to. She couldn’t tickle him until he opened his eyes, groaned, sat up, grabbed her, kissed her, pulled a present out from under the bed, kissed her again, and sat with her
while she slowly unwrapped the package he'd given her. The unwrapping had been her favorite part. Wrapping was his.

She missed him. But perhaps that was the point. Already she felt she was growing bored. To compensate, she had started doing some foolish things. The latest was trying to wake her mother. She too slept. It hadn't gone well. All had flashed back to the delivery. Suddenly Lilah was seven pounds, four ounces. Forceps. Masked nurses. Gloves. Everything was slick and cold and bright. There was a lot of blood.

Out on the freeway, Lilah drives with her window down. The air outside is cool and the sun is still low and watery on the peaks and ridges north of town. In her head she sees James' eyes open as she reaches beneath their bed for the small, round, blue package. Her tumor. She knew he would give her a tumor. His schemes were getting devilish, almost obnoxious. She could tell he loved her. He really did.

The women in The Cancer Center stand in rows, in blue smocks and paper shoes. Lilah imagines they are used to getting packages of the sort she has left them. They cut off the bands of strapping tape, peel back the brown paper, take out her pink lump of flesh and throw it onto a conveyor belt covered with other bits of flesh. Off in another room, it will be buried beneath a vast mound of limbs, tumors and other pieces of fat, muscle and skin. Lilah imagines the smell of the room, a woman in blue, sorting. Dozing. Sorting.

Lilah has always wanted to go back to college, back to 1967. She's wanted to visit herself as she was in college, in Berkeley. Lilah grips the
steering wheel of her old, brown mazda, presses down hard on the gas with the bare toes of her right foot. She pictures her mother sleeping, hears her breathing change. She mouths out the words “I’m sorry mom,” and runs her car into the cement supports of the Highway 10 overpass. That is all it takes. The sirens will shriek and, miles away her mother and husband will sigh and turn over in their sleep. Lilah will move on to another birthday, another day of penance. This time it will be one dreamed by her mom.

“Hey, mama. Got any hash?”

The man sidling up next to Lilah on the sidewalk is staring at himself in the lenses of her dark glasses. Lilah shakes her head and points to an open window further down the street.

Last time she was twenty-five Lilah smoked cigarettes and snorted a lot of coke. The idea does not appeal to her now. She’s going to the library to find an article on uncertainty. She knows a man in a thinktank. She’s had his phone number for years. It spells out his name.

Lilah searches for a phone booth. As always, it is her birthday. Twenty-five years old today. She looks down at her legs as she walks. Smooth, firm flesh. She sighs and feels the solidity of her breasts inside their C cups, the strength of her arms beneath her shirt.

Lilah loves getting the feel of these old and new selves. Too bad it lasts at most a day.

Lilah finds a pay phone and stands picking at the sequins on her leather jump suit while the phone rings. A man answers in a sleepy voice “Hello, Mario? It’s Lilah, Lilah Curby. You and I spoke at a seminar in the city in May last year.” The man on the other end of the phone line pauses. Lilah begins to add more. “We got really drunk and stood on the roof at the
reception discussing simultaneous realities and watching stars." He seems to be thinking, remembering, and then there's a sharp click and a dial tone.

Lilah's thinking maybe there's a leak somewhere. Somehow people seem to recognize that for this day she has changed. She passes a street corner cafe and notices her mother sitting watching her. The expression on her old face is an odd one, mistrustful, almost predatory. She seems to recognize that something in Lilah is all wrong.

Lilah shifts the look and feel working behind her eyeballs. She turns and meets her mother's eyes, smiling and waving with her hand.

"Mom, what the hell are you doing here? You look great. It's good to see you. Shouldn't you be back home in bed? I hope you didn't drive all the way down just to--" Lilah stops in the midst of moving around the table to give her mom a hug. Her mother seems completely unaffected by her words. She seems to be studying Lilah, studying her as if she were watching an actor give a performance. Lilah takes a step back and again, meets her mother's eye.

"Why do you keep doing this to me?" Her mother's voice is even and angry. She disappears before Lilah can pull out a chair to sit down and try to talk. Lilah stands and stares down at her mother's empty chair.

"Something is wrong," she whispers, "Something is definitely wrong."

Lilah buys a pack of gum and gets change for a dollar from a man in a smoke shop near the University. He winks at her as she's leaving. She takes the 47 bus down San Pablo Ave. to the Richmond train station. She is just in time for the 3:00 South-bound. On the platform, the air vents hiss and men and woman stand, stone faced, waiting.

An engine's lights shine far off down one of the rail tunnels. The platform vibrates and three nuns stoop to gather up their bags. Lilah spits.
her gum out, runs through the crowd, jumps onto the tracks and lays down in front of the train.

Lilah is small and pink and diapered and now she’s screaming. Her father stands guard above her waving flies away with a towel. Lilah lets out another wail and begins to drool. She tries to stare past her dad’s doting face at the ceiling. She always hates it when she ends up back anytime before she’s four or five. The days are long and it’s so hard to find a way to die before midnight.

Crib death isn’t easy. It’s next to impossible to get baby’s limbs to do anything but thrash, kick and circle uselessly. Lilah knows she should wait until night time. She knows these years were harder for her mother than any others.

Somehow her mom had always sensed that her Lilah-filled nightmares were nearly real. On Lilah’s birthdays she tried to stay awake. She sat up drinking coffee or reading, but in the end always fell asleep, sometimes on the couch, other times just sitting up in a chair.

The sun slants through the windows on the west side of the house and Lilah’s mother is sleeping on the floor in front of the TV. Her father is now in the kitchen scrubbing, bleaching, starching and ironing the stacks of ruffled diapers which line the sink. Lilah turns her wobbly head and looks across the room at her mother sleeping. She thinks of her dreaming and feels a rare remorse, a sadness. She lies still a while listening and then begins to swing her arms back and forth quietly, rolling herself over on to her face.
Lilah wakes in bed next to James. She looks around, down at her hands, at the room, across the sheets at the face on the pillow next to hers. She is twenty-nine. They have been married only five years. Lilah looks into James' face and thinks how cruel it is that, like her mother, he should have to dream through this day, an apprentice to this one and so many other birthdays that seem to end so badly. Lilah slips from the sheets into the cold air, leans down and peeks beneath the bed. It is there. A small, wrapped box, oblong this time. She thinks back, and tries to remember what will be in it but can't.

Lilah stands naked staring out the big window over her desk. She sighs, noticing how beautifully empty the fields are, how certain buildings are absent. The sky is a richer, deeper blue.

In the bathroom Lilah brushes her hair and thinks of her mother, at home in her apartment, sleeping. She opens the bathroom cabinet and reaches for a bottle of tranquilizers she remembered should be there. She empties half the bottle into her shirt pocket and hides the rest in a hole in the floor of the linen-closet next to the sink.

Once she's dressed, Lilah takes a bike from the garage and rides through the still, early morning streets towards the center of town. Outside a brick building on 6th street, she stops. Inside, on the second floor, her mother is sleeping in a yellow nightgown. She is dreaming of Lilah. She is dreaming of her standing outside in the sunlight on the empty street, staring up. Lilah wishes her well and turns back, pedaling north, out of town.

Lilah sits on the bank overlooking Mortar Creek. These years before the subdivisions are her favorite ones. She watches fish rise in small, clear, deep pools. Birds dive for insects in the shallow water on the other side. Near her foot a toad crawls slowly through a deep mat of layers of fallen
leaves. Lilah lays back in the long grass watching the heavy seeds sway in the wind above her head.

The morning she turned sixteen Lilah remembers waking to the sound of her mother's crying. She remembers listening through the wall as her mother told her father how that night she'd again watched her daughter die. "It is awful, Ed, I'm watching and she's down-town somewhere walking past all her friends on the street as if she were another person and didn't see them or want them to see her. They're all turning and staring at her and she stops, whirls around, puts her fingers in the corners of her mouth, makes a face and jumps out in front of a logging truck. She gets hit, head on by the front bumper. She's there dead and still, and then she just vanishes, disappears."

When Lilah was twenty four, her mother went into therapy to try to learn how to control what happened in her dreams. She spent years trying but somehow, Lilah knows, she never mastered the complexities of the lucid dream.

As the sun begins to set over the cottonwoods across the creek, Lilah leans forward and scoops a handful of water from a pool in the creek by her feet. She thinks of all the options she has for the evening. She knows she could take all her money out of the bank and rent a room at the Red Lion Downtown. She knows she could steal a car and drive south to Hamilton to visit friends there. Funny, she thinks, how friends are never the way she remembers them.

Lilah thinks back to her high-school years, all the moodiness, the hormones, and the acne. She remembers going back to being sixteen, finding herself in the dream she had once heard her mother telling. She was walking along the sidewalk hating herself and the dull stupidity life. Groups
of people she was only half sure she recognized began to follow her. She ran.

Lilah remembers well the gentle smash, the impact of the logging truck. She remembers how good it felt to be gone.

Lilah sits up in the grass on the bank. It is dark and the stars have come out to circle between the clouds. She lies back again wishing she could go home and curl up with James beneath their covers. He, she knows, was a man of humor, one with more foresight than she or her mother ever had. When her mother died and he was the only one to have the yearly dreams of Lilah, he figured out exactly what to do. He learned to give them twists and turns, left Lilah weird dream presents she could actually open. tumors, children, lovers she’d have to deal with for the day. She missed him.

It’s growing cold out. She has no sweater. Back at home she remembers that James had one wrapped up in the oblong package beneath her bed. Again she misses him, looks out at the stars reflected on the moving pool. She scoops up another handful of water from the creek and takes the pills.

Lilah finds herself at six this time and is now in a better mood. She is amused by the tiny limbs and little friends gathered around her in the yard. Her best friend Peter is next to her trying to kiss her on the cheek. He has sweet, milky breath and chocolate cake all over his face. Lilah is struck with a sudden inspiration. She takes his little head in her hands and kisses him hard and long, square on the mouth.

Next thing she knows, all her friends are staring at her. She is wishing that she could take Peter down into the cellar where she could teach him to play doctor with her in the dark. “Peter,” she’s about to say, feeling more than a child’s desire between her gangly, little girl legs. “Peter, let’s go down
into the basement. Let's go be alone together somewhere else for awhile." But she stops before she says it. A row of grown-up faces are staring at her through the glass of a window across the yard.

Lilah stands up and takes Peter's hand. He and five others follow her across the mown grass in search of the drain cleaner she knows is hidden under the sink in one of the bathrooms inside the house.

Lilah almost wishes she could go back to being sixteen again. It's a day she feels she wasted in a bad mood, not being patient or creative, just suddenly jumping out in front of the nearest logging truck. Ah, she reflects, closing herself up in a closet and downing the drain cleaner, there's always seventeen and eighteen and all those other precious years.

Lilah sits in a hair salon. She is eighty. It is her birthday and Jeneane is giving her a pink rinse. "Come on Lilah, you never used to go in for this sort of thing. What happened? You change your mind in your old age?"

Lilah feels Jeneane's finger's in her hair. She thinks back a moment. She has been eighty for exactly four hours. She smooths her fingers over her wrinkled skin, feels the ache in her right shoulder, the tight solidity of her bowels. She knows this one's going to be a short one, only a half day. She wants to get her pink rinse and a manicure and live it up.
Wade throws his tie over his right shoulder, pulls a small, red, terry cloth wash rag from the glove box. One hand grips the wheel, his foot eases off the clutch and his car inches forward, following the car ahead. The car behind his inches forward to follow him. For miles ahead and miles behind, cars inch forward heading west, hands grip steering wheels, little red rags are pulled from glove boxes and from under vinyl seats.

In a small, stunted garden ten miles behind Wade, Marta leans over her bare toes. Her face is stained in lines and she breathes in gasps. Her fingers scrape at a hole in the soil. She stops, tries to focus her eyes on the white line of her cuticles. A centipede crawls from under a leaf, headed west, legs moving a very small distance, a pair at a time.

Wade’s thighs are hot, his fingers sweat, he spits in his palm, lays the red rag across his lap, reaches beneath it, rubbing with one hand while he drives with the other. He steers with his knee while he shifts. Behind him a woman in a new white car hikes up her tight skirt, reaches down between her legs with her hand; ahead, a man in a jeep caresses himself, moving west, inching in a line, stopping and starting again and again.

Marta kneels between her squash plants. They are sickly brown and the rotting fruits are covered with flies. She is burying something in the soil there, a glistening pink oblong loaf partly wrapped in a sheet. She digs with a trowel, working down through the soil into the earth.
Wade can feel the hum of his car’s engine. He can feel the hum of others, millions of others idling on all sides of him. He smells the pure, sweet odor of new vinyl, stiff carpet and smooth textured plastic. In his neck he feels his own heart beat, but he thinks of nothing but his red cloth, the small square multiplying, covering the earth, bathing his body, carrying him forward inch by inch, west.

Marta has finished burying her package. She stands still over her blistered squash with her hands at her sides. Behind her, sprinklers are turning in perfect circles, water rises from pipes, falls through the air. Inside her, where a small shape has slipped from its place, absence is making its way towards her heart.

Wade’s face is stiff like a mannequin’s. His mouth is open and his eyes fix on the bumper of the car ahead. Beneath him tires hum on the road, layers of cement and asphalt, layers of pipe and wire stretch ahead, behind, and then off in all directions. Pipe runs beneath Marta kneeling in her garden, beneath every road, down from every drain into the earth below; from the cities to the oceans, the mountains to the cities, north, south, east and west, huge robotic intestines.

Marta leans over her broccoli plants. Her fingers caress the folds of a cabbage leaf. Her breath comes in short gasps. Inside the house her bedroom door is open and the sheets on the bed are pulled down. The room smells of growing things, thick, damp and sweet-strong. There’s blood and a large water spot in the center of the single mattress.
Ten miles west of Marta on the freeway, Wade climaxes in a line of cars. Beneath his hand his body is rigid and jerking like a dying fish. His face is still as he continues west, breathing with a thousand others, each exposed only from the shoulders up, stopping and starting, one behind the another, staring straight forward at the shiny bumper of the next car in line.

Marta is on her knees again. The hem of her nightgown is black with soil and her toes curl to hold the whole round earth still and solid beneath her knees. Between her legs her womb is empty and bleeding. Her hands beat her thighs and her eyes search the ground for what she has buried in the soil.

Down on the ground, the centipede is crawling west. Its feet all follow a head. Its hungers are simple. It has found a hole in a pipe where it will mate and feed. Its mutant young will grow up to follow the pipe lines west into the city, each pair of legs set behind the ones in front, each set on moving forward inch by inch.

Wade folds his red cloth and puts it in the glove box. Inside its folds lie parts of his body, little cells like tadpoles, a mass like phlegm. He follows the car ahead of him, west, breathing in the vinyl smell, the rising smoke of a million cars, a million other people staring straight ahead.
When the little girl started to turn blue I tried to calm her. I told her to try to swallow, to cough. She sat on the cement bench with her mouth open as if she wanted to scream or cry but couldn't, so I got up on my old legs and stood behind her, grasped her by her sapling waist. I knotted my fists into the cloth of her dress and pulled up in short jerks, under her ribs until a wadded up piece of bologna sandwich came out with a pop and she was able to cough again.

These women never watch their children. They make money and spend it. They dress themselves and undress. Half the time they just look in the mirror--as if they'd lost something there, as if that was maybe all they had.

I sat with the little girl a while after, seeing that she could breathe again, stroking her hair while she cried. She was going to be o.k. I knew she was.

When all the others, the stiff men and the women came back, waltzing in a group, laughing and rustling shopping bags, they saw me sitting there and her crying. She'd soiled her suit laying on the ground and I thought perhaps she might get some trouble for that, so I tried to explain. They strangely seem never to hear me. My mouth moves and my hands fly up to make shapes in the air but their faces don't change. They talk to each other about me. While Ella cried they knit their brows and scolded her, but one woman stopped them. She saw how scared the little girl was.
When we all go places together, as we must sometimes, I have to follow slowly. From the street sellers I order soft things, eggs, oatmeal, potatoes. I used to take pills with my meals but I've stopped. They made me even slower and it seemed I'd started to forget things.

These flighty people move too quickly for me. It's like with the mirrors, they seem to be looking for something. Ella likes the way they move about. Her eyes are always hungry for something different. She cries and pulls clumps of her hair out if she has to stay in one place too long. I'd like to think that it is for her that they move so much, but I don't think it is.

My mother had a name for restless people, the sort who would never stay in one place long enough to grow a tree the size that they could be buried under. To my mother, such people were Soil Stealers. She said they'd just rot in the earth and wash with the rains down the muddy river to the sea.

When I was a child most of the trees were already gone. Nothing would grow. My family moved out of the mountains, down into the valleys. We needed work, ended up living in one of those box homes set in rows along the highway. We sat in those homes for years and years and years. The city grew out around us.

Ella has begun to stare at me mistrustfully. I try to tell her stories but my voice scares her. There is the story my mother told me about the trees on the mountain-top above the lake. Those trees drew the bodies of the dead from the ground to make branches, twigs and leaves. At night they whispered up into the wind, and in the fall they changed color and then slept for months under the deep blown banks of snow. I remember my mother's stories, her rhythms and the song of her breath. I remember them better.
than I remember dinner yesterday or where I slept last night. Some nights when I sit alone on my bed staring into the shadows of the curtain and the patterns in my hand, it is like my mother and the trees are not really gone. It doesn’t matter that I don’t know where the mountain is anymore.

Ella has bad dreams if she looks into my face before she goes to sleep. They keep me away from her bed at night now. I would stay away myself but I sometimes forget. I want to sit and whisper to her the story about the trees.

When she was a baby they used to lay her in my lap for hours so that they could go out. She and I sat in the window day after day. I rocked back and forth to keep her quiet, staring out onto the street through the cracked glass and the power lines. I watched children fight, old men die, and one night, a pigeon which caught her wings between two power lines, flapping through the smoke, settling soft and dead on the cement.

Yesterday my hip gave out. I was standing in the tub wishing my skin would dry, but that takes so long. I wished I had clean clothes, mine always smell so soiled and old. I reached out to the hook behind the door to pull my dress in the water with me and I slipped. I woke up lying on the tiles naked. Someone was pounding on the door. I wished they would come in and help me, but they don’t like to look at me undressed.

I let my body float there on the floor while I listened to them whispering behind the door. They wouldn’t come in until I said it was OK because I told them once never to do that. My bath is the only time I have to myself. Telling them to stay out is the only thing I have ever asked them to do.
For two years I've shared a bed area with two others, or I guess it has been lots of bedrooms, all of them much the same, never quite identical. The two old men, they sleep in my room behind the curtain. That is all they do there, sleep. They get up in the dark to go to work, zip up their pants, button their shirts, never turning the lights on, or speaking out loud until they have pulled our curtain open and are out the door and down the hallway on the stairs. I lie in bed and listen, hear the whispered curses of others. I try to breathe like I'm still asleep.

When all these people were children I used to sit down on their beds at night and whisper to them about where the dead go. I tried to tell them the story of the trees on the mountain, the story of the roots and the branches, the story of the voices of the old ones hissing out of the leaves. Like Ella, these children could never listen. They still do not know what a hawk or a field mouse looks like. They can not picture the way a body wanders, shatters and is taken when there are no trees.

They were all pounding on the bathroom door again. I guess I'd locked it because they had to break it in with a metal bar from the alleyway. When they picked me up I felt like a child again. They carried me out into the living room and into the car. Staring up at the white ceiling, I remembered how they would all run now to wash their hands.

For an hour my head was full of sirens, I saw them standing at rows of sinks scrubbing at all their fingers until they bled raw. I wasn't a child again. I was dying, shattering and rotting on the inside, slowly, so that all that was left was a stinking shell.
At night here, in the room off the hallway, with the tubes in my nose and the tubes in my privates, I listen to the movement of bodies and voices. I smell the air for a hint of home or the past. Wood smoke and soil. Here I smell alcohol, medicines, hear the creak of sleepers in a hundred rows of beds. I think of Ella and the bad dreams she has of me at night. Sometimes I wake believing I have looked into her face and she has smiled. I dream of sitting in a field of long grass under a twisted oak, braiding her hair and telling her the story about the trees.
Ellie wrapped her scarf around her face and turned from her house to the street just in time to see a car slide through the 6th street intersection. She watched it move in slow motion, curving into a spin, almost noiselessly skidding on the ice of the street, coming to rest stalled and quiet beneath a tree and a lamp post a little ways away. The sun was setting through the tops of the trees. She stood and watched the street lamps come on. It was quiet. Nothing moved. There was a curious peace about the street, an enveloping silence and comfort. No one moved inside the car. Ellie imagined death. She imagined quiet, a face still and honest in the lamp-light beneath the tree. The sky grew dark. Ellie turned and as she did she heard the car door open. She turned again and watched the shape of a drunken man stumble out onto the street to vomit in snow.

* * *

It was a summer night. Outside, cars passed and the glare from their headlights swung round the walls. Ellie leaned back into the black naugahide of the waiting room couch. The room was cold and the smell of it stung her nose; a sort of sickly sweet scent over a sharper one. Fake flowers in black painted baskets stood on stands on either side of the room’s two doorways. A box of Kleenex lay on a stand by itself against one wall. Even now, when the mortuary was closed, taped organ music crept from the red draped walls and canopied ceiling.
Outside it was dark. Silas was working in one of the back rooms. It was going to be their first date. Ellie could hear the sound of his feet scraping on the tile in a room down the hall from where she sat. A wedge of bright white light shown towards her feet on the floor. They were supposed to go to a movie, a double feature, *Goma* and *Night of the Living Dead.*

"Ready?"

"Yep." Ellie watched Silas make his way across the waiting room carpet towards her. His big form was silhouetted against the light of the hallway. His hair was greying at the sides. His hands were large and chapped. She thought of him touching dead bodies. She stood up.

"Don't forget your coat," he said, reaching down and picking it up from the couch, giving her a shy smile. He opened the door for her as they went out, then locked it behind him with a key.

The next morning Ellie lay on the grass of the park in a pair of shorts, her legs covered with the tangled red imprints of grass blades. Her skin was white and her short hair messy and unevenly cut. She thought of Silas, the hot feel of his skin through his cotton dress shirt; the sweat that had seeped from him as he struggled to keep their conversation going while they ate their linguini. They talked of her job and her childhood, how her older brother had died when she was sixteen and her mother only the year before that, of breast cancer. They talked about her younger sister who lived in Boise, about Silas' brother who ran a plant that manufactured caskets in Emeryville, Texas; Silas' father who drank too much and was at one time, like his son, also a mortician.

Ellie turned over on the grass and thought of the feeling that had rushed up into her breast and shoulders when Silas took her hand half way
through the second movie. She thought of the distaste she had felt for the heat of his damp palm and his fingers, the pleasure she felt in the weight of them, the solid reality of his skin. They'd walked home laughing and talking through the dark. When he hugged her good night she felt like a school girl. She had not dated much the past few years. She had not really felt attracted to any man in a long while. It never seemed quite right. She was never able to find the right sort of quiet and humor, the honesty and sense of peace. No man seemed simple or true enough for her. Silas was not simple but he was odd and somehow true, honest, more honest than she, or her sister Jean, or her father.

"I hear you've finally got yourself a boyfriend." Jean's voice over the phone had an edge to it. Her lips sounded tight as if she were pursing them to smear on lipstick, or half trying to say something nice.

"Yeah. I do. We've been going out for two weeks now."

"You in love?"

"Drop dead, Jean."

"Oh come on, I'm just trying to be nice. Tell me the juicy details. How is he in bed?"

"Can't you think of anything else?"

"No. So tell me."

"It's nice, Jean, peachy. He's a nice man. I met him at work. I had to make a sign for the place where he works. Now leave me alone. I've got to go."

"No you don't, and don't hang up. I've heard weird rumors. Dad's about to have a heart attack about it. I want to meet this Mr. Adams."
"Good bye, Jean." Ellie lay her phone back on the wood floor next to her bed. She thought of her second date with Silas. They’d met on a Saturday at the fair grounds. It was auction day. As a child, Ellie and her brother had always gone there together. Silas had never been.

She stood in the parking lot waiting for him. He’d gotten off work early so that he could meet her. She watched him walk across the dusty field from his car. He had on a white dress shirt again, and Levis. He had a spring in his step. He’d brought her flowers. She watched him smile shyly as he handed her the bunch of daisies. It looked as if he’d picked them himself. As they turned to walk together towards the fair grounds, Ellie’s eyes fixed on what seemed as if it could be a light smear of dried blood. It lay like a crayon mark along the lower edge of his shirt collar on the right side.

They stood still and she imagined of him in the room with the tile floors, the bright lights, the quiet faces that stared up at him there, their eyes bare, mouths open, everything exposed. She thought of death, her brother’s face in death, more calm even under the layers of skin colored paint and rouge than it had ever seemed in life. His body had seemed so full and smooth then, beneath her father’s suit. She’d wondered. She’d wondered what his face had really said in death. She wondered if he’d found peace, if there had finally been some truth in his neck, his arms, his skin, his thin, hunched shoulders. He’d lied to her, though he’d always told her far more than he told anyone else. Still he’d never said enough. He’d worn his face like a mask, his smile a shield until everyone stopped asking him questions. Ellie had known. He’d told her he no longer wanted to do it, didn’t even think of it.
"Jared, are you there?"

"Yeah, El." His voice was a whisper. Ellie could see him sitting hunched on a cushion in one corner of the bay window. The room was dark and the window opened out on a lightless valley and a sky full of stars.

"You O.K."

"Yeah, much better." She could make out the shape of her brother's lips set in a smile. "Everything's O.K. El, really." It had sounded odd to her even then. Nothing had ever been just O.K. with Jarred.

Ellie had her own demons. Their paint caked faces leered at her every night, boys, little girls, old men and women. She lay awake at night in a corner of the cellar, willing forward the weight of cool hands, the press of still faces, the breathless scent of white faced boys who would never speak.

She thought of Jarred's demon's differently. His would be great rust colored bats, huge, naked, with immense claws and fluorescent genitals. They would perch on his bed posts at night and whisper to him about things. They painted the world with charcoal sticks and the light of house fires. They whispered of all that was complex and irrational. They made him fear everything unknown, uncertain. They made him fear the motion of his own arms, the thud of his heart, the rasp of his breath, his thoughts.

He had lied to her.

"You promise it's O.K.?"

"Yes. I'm fine. Really." He'd even smiled again, and hugged her

When they found him, the papers called it an accident, his car wrapped round the one solid tree between Lakesmith and Wesville.

Ellie had wondered how they'd glued him back together. She'd stood before him in the church to look for seams. She wanted his face to speak but
she knew it couldn't under all its paint. He'd seemed quiet, peaceful finally
But she was never sure if it was real. She'd wanted to touch him. He'd lied
to her

Silas was taking her hand, she shuddered at the wet heat of his palm,
held the flowers before her and led him towards the bleachers and the cattle
pens.

It was late at night. Ellie and Silas had been walking along the train
tracks west of town for several hours. Now they made their way to the edge
of town, along the tracks through the back streets. Dogs barked, old men lay
huddled in the bushes below the grade. Ellie could hear them coughing,
stirring in their sleep

"Silas, what is it like?"

"What? To be a mortician?"

Ellie nodded at him. He looked down and, in the pale street light,
smiled. Ellie smiled back at him.

They made their way through town to the mortuary. Silas took his
key and unlocked the door. The waiting room and hallways were dark. He
didn't turn on a light but instead took her hand and led her towards the back
and the rooms where he worked. At the end of the hall, he pushed a door
open and they went in. Ellie could feel her feet on tile. A few small, colored
lights shown from a panel on one of the walls. The hum of motors,
refrigerators, small air compressors and pumps echoed from another larger
room. Silas let go of her hand and moved to a long table where he turned on
a lamp. Beside the table were rows of small instruments, brushes, sponges,
hundreds of low, glass jars of flesh colored paint, and make up, all set out in
tidy rows: nail clippers, scissors, files, irons, lint brushes, hair brushes,
curling irons, safety pins, needles, thread and a whole array of surgical
instruments. Ellie gasped and, as the light and color burst up at her, she
almost fainted.

Silas was at her side whispering in her ear, "It's O.K. El. It's alright." The smell of the place was so sharp and clean, so complex with its many
undertones that it soon settled her, gave her something to focus on. She
turned to Silas. His hand was hot. "I'm sorry," he said. "Do you want to go?"

"No," she said. "This is what you do?" She pointed to the paint and
the make up, the nail polish and hair spray

"Yes." There was a cautious pride in his voice "It's important
somehow. It means a lot to them."

Ellie looked into his eyes, "Not to the dead."

"No, not to them."

Ellie looked around the room, her eyes sought the corners, the table
tops, the instruments. There was no sign of death there. The room looked
more like a beauty salon than anything else "It's like lying, Silas."

"All the make up? I know. But a lot of us think of it as an art."

"Do you?"

"I'm not sure. It seems too practical for that. Sometimes it's not easy."

He looked down at the long metal table in front of them.

Ellie took a step towards it, lay her hand down to feel the cold, steel
surface "Can I come back sometime. Can I see them before-- I've seen
them after. It's different. It's not real then. They can't say much that way.
They seem to lie even more then than they do in life." She looked at Silas
again, "Do you know what I mean?"
He nodded faintly, looking down at the shiny metal table, his own reflection and hers. His voice was kind, "Sometimes its best that way, you know."

Ellie began again to dream of corpses almost every night. They danced on the wooden floors of her apartment in big boots, their painted faces leering at her, grinning in pain or joy or pleasure—she could never tell which. Sometimes they got into bed with her. She could feel their cold hands smooth along her thighs. Then the paint would peel from their faces and beneath would be the face of her brother or her mother, still and quiet. She'd wake hot and breathing hard, sit up in the dark and watch shadows from the tree outside her window waving on her ceiling, shaking lightly in the street light. She felt different, not at all as she had as a child making love to death. She would sleep again, folded carefully between her sheets, wishing, until morning, that Silas' arms and voice were there to hold her.

"Hi Dad."

"Hey, El! How's my big gal these days?"

Ellie let the sound of her father's slur slip through the line, into her ears, her head. She could picture him well, seated in his same chair, everything around him set in stacks, arranged in tidy rows or ninety degree angles, everything dusty, dishes stacked neatly in the sink, an array of empty wine bottles lined up in rows in alphabetical order by the garbage, on the back porch. She could picture her father's body sunken into his chair, his big, veined hands getting whiter and whiter, his skin paling to a pasty blue-white. Ellie could see the smile fixed on his lips, his slack, blissful leer. He chose to acknowledge emotions, conflicts or problems by making jokes and
puns. Many people thought him a jolly man. He had once been quick and
sharp-tongued, honest, even mean. She had liked him better that way. He’d
known his own faults, allowed other people theirs.

"I’ve been OK dad. I--"

"That’s great hon’. I’m sure you’ve nailed down a real nice job now
too."

"Yeah, I’m thinking of becoming a mortician." Ellie could almost
picture his face, still now for a moment, angry. Why did she always have to
do it. She’d wanted to say something else, something very different. "No dad,
just kidding. I’m painting signs still. It’s a good job. I’m meeting people,
making friends. I--"

"Yeah, hon, that’s great. It’s nice to hear your voice. Glad you’re doing
well, working so hard." There was an uncertain waver in his voice, "Take
care now. Bye, bye, sweetie. Love you." She could hear bells and cued TV
laughter in the background. For a second he was waiting. Then there was a
click.

Silas unlocked the door. Ellie followed him through the waiting room
and back down the dark hallway to the room with the tiled floor and the
long, steel table. The air was thick, sharp, sweet. In the dark Ellie could feel
the soft presence of something cold and still. She could hear the rustle of
stiff nylon and plastic. Silas was uncovering the shape on the table. She
closed her eyes, heard the click of the lamp, felt the warmth of the light
against her lids. She took a step forward and opened her eyes slowly.

An old man lay sleeping before her. He was pale, an opaque yellow-
white beneath his freckles and moles. There was hair on his chest, grey
stubble on his cheeks and chin. His lips were parted, his eyes almost closed.
Ellie had never seen a face so still. She reached out her hand. She heard Silas move next to her, and then she touched the face on the table beneath the lamp. The skin seemed stiff, but it gave under the pressure of her fingers. She looked at the place she had touched, saw the impression of her fingers on the skin. She felt Silas' hand on her shoulder, felt the heat of his skin through her blouse. She shuddered, reached out and took the hand of the body which lay naked on the table. His hand was cool to her fingers. His face seemed soft and quiet. No smile hid the mix of sadness and joy in the lines around his eyes. His mouth was open. He was dead, beyond deceit. Ellie felt calm. She felt a rush of heat creep up into her chest. In her hands she held his fingers, she felt the smooth of his skin, leaned and kissed the tips of his newly trimmed and filed nails.

Silas lay next to Ellie on her bed. She reached out and ran her fingers down the length of his stomach towards his thighs. She felt the cool skin of his shoulders, touched her lips to his cheek. He was warm, she could feel the moisture of his palms slide across her breasts as his fingers reached up for her face, her lips. The sweat was cooling on his stomach and arms, his thighs. They both lay still.

Ellie and Silas moved in together when fall came. In June Ellie sat in a chair in their kitchen and let Silas paint her face. He spread a surface on in layers with tiny brushes and a sponge. He painted her white and then pink, erased all her lines, her freckles and sun spots and then he gave her a red clown's smile.

Silas stood waiting for her while she looked at her face in the mirror. Her father would be meeting them at the church at ten. She stood up and
turned around in the morning light. Her dress glared white in the sun which
streamed through the kitchen windows onto the counters and tile floors. She
pushed back her veil and held a mirror up for Silas. He painted himself a
face, laying down layer after layer, giving himself deep worry lines, sad
wrinkles and a healthy grin. Ellie stood up and put on a sweater. They put
on their coats, walked across the snow through the streets of town to the
church, up the steps, down the isle and to the altar to take their vows.

"Silas, I love you."

"Ellie, I love you too. You want to go take a walk in the graveyard?"

"Sure, Silas. That sounds nice. We can go and sit on the stones under
all those nice, solid trees."
Red was the first color. It crept in, between the fibers in the cloth of the bandages, that small pressure somewhere back between Bernice's ears when her face was pressed to the light bulb in her husband, Richard's desk lamp.

Weeks after the operation, when the bandages first came off her eyes, Bernice's doctor gave her dark glasses to wear. Her pupils didn't open and close when they should have. They didn't know what to screen out or take in. When she opened her eyes, it felt as if her face were being smashed, all the bones crushed and broken. Sight first came to Bernice like a pressure so sudden, so forceful and strong that it produced pain.

* * *

Rene rests one palm on his small, silver belt buckle. He cocks his head to one side, turns from the canvas and stares at Bernice. His fingers twitch.

"I'd lose the black on the whole left side."

Tiny, white balls of spit have collected in the corners of Bernice's mouth. She licks her lips, moves a thin hand to wipe the spit away. The light in the studio is rich orange. Her canvas is huge. It reaches half way to the ceiling, covering one of the windows and part of a door.

"Too gloomy. It's all too heavy in contrast with the figure on the right, Bernice. You need better balance, color; red maybe. Yes, the whole left in
red, passionate red with touches of orange or some other lighter color to add to the contrast." He turns to look at her.

She stands stiffly in a black dress, her fingers matted in the hair at the back of her neck. She seems to be holding her breath-- ready to burst or collapse.

Bernice stands in the shower. Her head is down and her black hair is flowing with the water over her breasts, her back, her stomach. The water pounds on her shoulders. She is thinking of orange. What is orange? What is the color? It is made from red and yellow. It has a wave-length of 6000 Angstroms. It is the color of a dress she wears when fall comes. It is a color for vegetables, for silent, lumpy things. It is passive. It is still and buried in the soil. Golden beets, carrots. Something that is not really red.

Rene's voice rises in pitch. He speaks quickly. "No? You don't like red? You have a religious problem with red? A social problem? Is it political? What the hell is the matter with red? Your paintings are so sensual, they would really benefit from that hint of passion." He pauses and stares at Bernice whose eyes seem fixed on a point between his small, silver belt buckle and his smooth neck. "Frustrated? Well, I'll tell you now, it's only the beginning. You have to try harder. It's that simple. For four years I've said to you, 'I think you're good, really good.' I've been patient, Bernice. But I don't see you changing. I see you stuck like a child with a prodigal ear for language and a love of baby-talk. It is time to wake up, B. Look at what you're doing, what you're saying here. Look at your work as communication, what it might mean to people who live outside your own little world."
Bernice is in bed and her eyes are open. She is staring at the ceiling listening to the sound of water dripping from the tap in the bathroom sink. It pounds into her ears like the sound of a white cane knocking at a sidewalk. She could, by listening to the echoes, still know the shape of almost any room, even without opening her eyes. She tries to listen instead to the rasp of her own breathing. It is slow and her listening makes it uneven, difficult, almost panicked. She thinks of smothering, suffocating in a sea of red.

Red is for closed eyes. Red is bright lights shining through eyelids. Red is the light of the sun filtered through the blood beneath her skin. It is when there are things to see that can't be seen.

Black is when it is quiet. It is when there is peace. It is when all the lights are out and there is nothing to see that can't be felt with the fingers, smelled, heard, touched. Black is calm. Black is missing nothing, knowing what there is to know.

* * *

Bernice is lying on a flat tray. She is being wheeled along a cold hallway into a room crowded with machines. Her face is wrapped in cloth and her eyes are bandaged. People are standing over her. They will give her sight and make a present of what she has never had. She smells the ointment they are spreading on her blank lids. They will give her sight, she whispers to herself. She will see

"My face is broken, Richard."

"No, it's not, Bernice. Your face is beautiful."
"Beautiful? Like river stones, smooth, cool, heavy, granite ones, polished glass, skin. Tell me the colors Richard. Say the words. I want to hear them all, one by one. I want to imagine they look like they sound. Heavy, light, sharp or soft, rough or smooth, cold and warm, salty, bitter, sweet, hot--"

She stops. He squeezes her in his arms and she begins to hold her breath. Her fingers tighten on his wrist. They loosen as he speaks. "You have to wait. I can't tell you. They're colors. You'll see them. You will."

She runs her fingers up the inside of a tendon that begins in the palm of his hand. "You seem to think I'll know them when I see them but I know I won't. You'll have to show me what each one is, all the colors, one by one I won't know them. I'm not even sure they will be beautiful. I'm not even sure I'll want them once they're mine."

Bernice is at home, sitting at her desk with her face in a long armed lamp. She can feel the glow of the bulb on her cheeks. She is practicing. She takes her fingers and places them over the bandages on her eyes. She presses down on the cotton, then takes her hand away. Somewhere in her head there is a warmth, a small pressure in a place there has never been any before. When she puts her fingers up again, it dies, it goes out like a slap. She can still feel the heat on her cheeks. She is practicing.

* * *

Bernice is fast asleep, dreaming. She still dreams of smells and flavors, still feels the weird air of flying, never sees the ground below. Sometimes she dreams of colors but they bathe her like liquids and are
never really seen. Sometimes she dreams of touching faces. Sometimes she's making love to someone she doesn't know. She feels the temperature of his flesh, from his cold toes to his palms, his soft cooling testicles. She feels the skin move over his muscles. He is a color, orange. He is like her vegetables. Quiet.

* * *

Bernice is floating in her father's bath tub. She is small and only her toes and fingers touch the sides. Her chest is smooth and level. She can feel the cool air of the room falling on her stomach. She can hear someone opening the door, breathing. Out in the living room music is playing, people are talking. Glass bottles clink. The water is warm. A hand comes to rest on her stomach.

The fingers on Bernice's stomach are smooth, as if they are a woman's, but they are not. They are not her father's hands. Bernice has swallowed her breath. She feels her brain between her ears, muted by water. She is still in blackness, her eyes open but only her lips and nose are left to tell her, her skin to speak of what is being done.

* * *

To Bernice, passion is not red, something else is red. Bernice remembers this. Her mother once read her a poem. She read it to Bernice long, long before, back in her earliest memories, before the bath tub and the smell and taste of salt and beer, the hand, the water and the blood. She
knew then that blood was red. She is sure she has always known what color blood should be.

* * *

"I hate it that you are so stubborn." Rene's fingers crawl like bleached spiders on the green cloth of his hip. His lips are dry and they move in little jerks. His eyes sting, jab, like little pins. His voice quiets. "There's little use in your asking for my criticism if you don't intend to listen to it. There's little point in being an artist at all if you don't really care that your work is actually accessible to anyone but yourself. Why subject other people to it when you know they won't understand it, when you know that what you intend and what you feel is so completely different from what they perceive? It's like lying, Bernice. You have to make some effort to avoid it."

Bernice's eyes follow the long seam lines in the linoleum floor. They follow the scrolled green patterns back to Rene's feet, up his maroon pant legs to his chest and finally to his face and the tight, wet pupils of his eyes.

"This love of blackness, Bernice, it's your death. By now you must know your colors are just not the colors other people see. You have to see what colors mean to other people, to someone besides yourself. No one is going to care that black is to you, passion, that black is peace. They couldn't possibly know this. Blackness scares people, Bernice. Black is fear and death. It isn't passion, Bernice. It just isn't."

* * *

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Shapes were always elusive. Color seemed more solid and permanent, more objective.

When Dr. Krane sat Bernice down on the padded bench, Bernice smelled iodine and plastic, mint breath wash and hand lotion, rubber gloves. Dr. Krane unwound the bandages from Bernice's eyes slowly. Before she took the pads from Bernice's sockets she turned down the lights.

Bernice didn't understand what she saw. Sight was like a sound, like static. It didn't make any sense. It was as if a million hands were touching her, pulling at her and forcing her, disappearing before she could take them in her own, follow them up, take their wrists and arms, follow them to find their faces, feel their lips and ask for their voices so that she could know who they were, why they were there and what they had to do with color and sight—the substances which, through life, she had been told were so solid and real—all that which had now become like a new dimension of dream, a nightmare of liquids that could never be felt or tasted, understood in any language except one that was very foreign to her own.

* * *

A sweaty hand is pressing down on Bernice's chest. She is suffocating, sinking. She wakes up in the dark, unsure if she has opened her eyes. Suddenly it is as if she were blind again. She goes to her canvas and begins painting, laying paint down with her fingers, by texture and temperature, by smell. The world is colorless, blind. People pass her canvas and stop to feel with their finger tips, smell and lick at the paint with their tongues. Then, again, a hand is touching her, pressing down on her stomach. A tongue has descended to lick along her thigh. She wakes. It is nearly dawn. The city is
grey  Color comes slowly, first red, then orange and yellow, or green, blue
Purple finally falls away out of the black shadows. Sun shines bright on the
roofs across the street, the grey columns of sky scrapers, phone lines, the red
smear of plums and blood.

* * *

Bernice’s eyes are lightly bandaged. Voices speak in the room around
her  She hears Richard move towards the kitchen from the couch. She is
asked if she would like more tea or cake  People move past her  She knows
that if she could see them, they would be smiling, looking at her, staring at
the colors of her dress and the paper on the walls. All she can see is the red
glow of the room light. If it went out, she would know, that is all she could
know  If it went out, everyone in the room would be blind. She would be
missing nothing. There would be peace  She would be missing nothing, seeing just what everyone else would see

* * *

"Bernice, this is yellow "
"Which? This part?"
"No, this. That’s blue, like this."
"Right. And this here then is yellow too."
"No, that’s orange "
"Oh. That’s the carrot."
"Yep. And the blue thing?"
"That would be the handkerchief "

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"Yep, you've got it."
"OK, then the two leaves on the bedspread, those are green?"
"No, they are flower petals and they are red."

Bernice is crossing her and Richard's living room. She knows she could find her way through the furniture with her eyes closed but she wants to keep them open. She tries to rely on her eyes to tell her where the coffee table is. Richard has moved it. He has moved the couch and all the end tables and chairs. Every shape changes as she moves and still she finds it hard to tell shadows from the objects that cast them. Often the shadows seem so much more solid and real.

"What on earth would make you want to become a painter?" Bernice can see that Richard's eyes are on her. His lips have twisted into a frown but his voice is calm, patient. He is still not used to her being able to see his face. He forgets her sight. He knows how to disguise his voice for her.

He has on a shirt that is striped. It is red and blue she knows. She remembers. In this light she can not really tell what colors things might be.

She reaches out one hand and touches her fingers to the fabric of the couch. She sits down. "I want to know everything there is to know about colors. I want to really feel them, use them. I want to learn a language which now, I don't feel I really know."

"Bernice you know it fine. It will come when it will. Be a little patient. You can see shapes well now. You understand most of that. Let's try to go on with our lives. Being able to see colors will never tell you anything but what color things are. You've lived without colors all your life, you know very well they aren't everything."
Bernice is laying on her back, calm, black. She can feel the sun and warm air flow around her, smell the river and the sap in the trees. She breathes deeply, hears leaves above her shudder on the trees, the wind coming from far off. It is black, calm, beautiful. She is a child. There is nothing to see.

Bernice's eyes follow Rene's hand across the square of her canvas. His veins are blue and his palms yellow, dull, white-yellow, almost, but not quite, orange. She can see every color in the print on his shirt, she knows the wavelengths, values, compliments, opposites, hues, tones, temperatures of each. Red can not be passion. Red is a blindness aware of what is to be seen.

Bernice pictures a place, a garden thick with plant smells and the sounds of water falling. She pictures a long, still, black pool under a willow tree, a place where she could go to leave her eyes.

Rene's mouth opens and closes, his hands move, she can feel his breath on her face. Bernice closes her eyes. In her head she can see her canvas better than she can with her eyes. In her head Bernice can feel her canvas, the texture and lines of each brush stroke, each rubbed plane and raised line. Black, Bernice knows, is the only color that she wants there on the canvas with her, the headless, fingerless woman lying naked and white under the smooth, wet hand.
Bernice thinks of a painting of a girl, long and quiet, clean-naked under trees in a sky full of hissing wind. Bernice fingers the seam that runs down the side of her skirt. Through her lashes she watches Rene turn around in the red sunlight which streams down through one of the skylights. Bernice closes the door behind him. Once he is gone she takes off her clothes and stands naked in front of an empty white canvas. She stands in the light of dusk mixing pigments with oil to make color after color, yellow and blue, red and orange, green and purple, brown and, finally, the color black.