Pieces

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PIECES

By

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For Allison, for making me brave
Jason directed his three remaining children in the planting of the new garden. His two oldest daughters, Gretel and Janie, were away at prep school.

Artemis, eleven, wore hard-soled shoes and dug large round pits into the ground with a spade. She was named after great great grand uncle Robertson Artemis Kiernan who fought in the Civil War on both sides.

Claire, three years younger than Artemis, knelt and poked a hole in the mud and quick before the oozing and filling, wiggled in a cluster of tiny white flowers. Her whole tight little body was involved in the procedure; her toes would clench, her face would pucker, and after tamping the earth firm at the base of the stem, she'd lean back on her heels, relax and rock. A straight border of baby's breath, behind that, pansies and marigolds.

Jake, seven, carried the prickly yew and rose bushes over to Artemis. They were heavy for him and the burlap root wrapping left a dusty screen-like impression on the soft white of his belly. He stood awaiting further instructions from his father who was deciding where to position the magnolia. By dark, the new garden would be finished. Jake
would be the only one burned tender by the spring sun.

The new garden was to be a surprise for Klara, wife and mother, when she returned from what was supposed to be her Arctic cruise. Even before her duty as an Army nurse, she'd longed for those foreign icy places, they were so germ free. During the Second World War, she boarded a troop train with fifty pounds of Arctic gear. A lengthy and digressive route eventually landed her in the South Pacific. Overnight, mold grew in her shoes. She met her architect husband.

The arctic cruise was thwarted as well. Off the coast of Greenland, the good ship Aurora struck an iceberg; even the captain ended up in a lifeboat. Klara lost nothing of value as she always slept with a packed suitcase under the bed—-a habit due to nightmare reruns of a childhood movie, fire in an orphanage and screaming children trapped in a smokey elevator.

For the cruise, money was refunded and apologies were made. Klara went instead to Germany to visit her relatives. She'd soon forget the drama of the accident and remember an incidental tangent. That tangent: a war poster depicting the floating debris of a blasted U.S. vessel, frothy peaks of red and black sea, a graspy hand of a drowning soldier, and the caption, "Somebody talked."

Jason was saddened that Klara decided to continue
travelling. He wanted her to want to come home. Before she'd left, he'd said, "I ask of you only one thing. That you be happy."

"I've tried. Desperately," she'd said.

"Or at least, be cheerful." Jason never raised his voice.

"I just have to have order, everything in its place so I'll know when it's worn out or stolen or lost--- I'm sorry. I'll try." She'd begun to cry again, softly.

Jason tried to make her happy. He designed the perfect thoughtful house atop the hill overlooking the city. It was all on one level; Klara had dreaded stairs while pregnant. Each room had large windows in case of fire.

But underneath the house was a fault in the hard red clay. It shifted, causing an inch of separation between the walls and floor. Doors jammed. Tiny armadillo bugs, spiders and centipedes scurried in. The toilets backed up into the sunken bath tub.

He had an elaborate stereo system installed, hidden behind built-in cabinets.

The speakers conked out after a week.

There was a cozy fireplace, a hearth of porous marble with fossil imprints.

The flue would not open.

The walls were lined with books.

About anything but sex.
And not to mention, a slew of children.
Those graceful achievers.
When Klara was home, she did not want to get out of bed.
To Margaret Mead, none of the above should constitute unhappiness.

Jason was comfortable in any situation. His social graces were a matter of instinct. He was an adept performer of classical piano, a composer of sad-lovely songs and a shrewd opponent in chess or tennis. His etchings captured the children with the sparest of lines and he was able to conceive tall buildings with the most abstract of blueprints.

Jason had good intentions but no perspective where his wife was concerned. He was comfortable in any situation except while driving up the hill towards home. He never knew what to expect. His efforts to make Klara happy were clumsy and backfired. What Klara needed was a hobby.

The site of the new garden was the largest flat surface of the house's three sloping acres.

Jason was saddened that Klara decided to continue travelling. The children were relieved.

To Jake it meant that he and his father could go fishing without the worry of staying too long and arriving home
late.

To Claire it meant that Oma, Klara's mother, came up to cook and would let Claire help. Otherwise, Klara's kitchen was strictly off-limits to the children.

Another effect, perhaps only coincidental with Klara's absence, was that Artemis stopped hanging Claire's dolls. Artemis swore that Raggedy Anne, especially, was a spy from the North and periodically strung her up by the neck from the bedroom window molding. Raggedy Anne was Artemis's favorite choice because the doll went so limp and her cloth face with Claire's drool stain grinned stupidly during the whole execution. Artemis and Claire were forced to share a bedroom; it faced east and looked out upon the new garden.

To Artemis, Klara's absence was synonymous with a rare and certain calm, a peace. "It" was gone. Artemis did not have a definition for it; it was totally unpredictable; it got submerged; you could feel it rise and swell and wonder who'd be its next scapegoat. With Klara home, if Artemis came from school and the kitchen door was locked, she knew her mother was angry. Artemis could never remember what she'd done to deserve it. Sometimes Klara, with her long red nails, would stroke Artemis's back and call her "little rebel." It gave Artemis shivers. She could never remember if she deserved it.

No tension--- she's gone travelling. Can't be this way when she's home--- we're too busy catering, anticipating, the
beck and call of her every whim. Yes, that's why, that's it. Just who does she think she is?

The realization caused Artemis a resounding surge of first-time-nameable anger, but like most anger, it did not yet echo an understanding: the entire family caters, anticipates her every whim---what ghastly pressure that put on Klara. Just who do you think she is?

Later, during some battle, Artemis would nickname her mother Awesome Power. For now though, this new and seeking rising-up formed into a question she asked her father, "Why'd you ever marry her?"

"Your mother?
You didn't know her when she was young, before you were born.
She had a nineteen inch waist and a voracious appetite.
The philosopher dies when he marries.
If I say, it might go away.
At least she's not boring.
You have no right to ask."
No right to ask. Her father shaded his eyes.

Surprise. When Klara returned, she feigned delight at the new garden. 'The kindest gift you could give to me,' she wanted to say. She'd purchased gifts for the children, of course, and distributed them. For Artemis, a pair of suede lederhosen, embroidered with edelweiss, enzian and an
imaginary red flower (Artemis continued to prefer her gray pants with the yellow stripe down the side). For Claire, a carving of a choir of angels with wood shaving wings (the carving was given to the piano teacher for Christmas). For Jake, a steam engine. By means of pulleys and cords, it powered other miniature machines, one sawed kitchen matches in half. (Jake flooded his bedroom with the steam engine and it was locked in the toy closet on the never shelf.)

The slides of the trip had no relatives in them. The photograph paused upon the longest was taken atop the Jungfrau pass, a shadowy stretch of vast white.

"It's damned artistic. Professional," Jason said.

"Children," said Klara, "it's above where trees can grow, tree-line. The snow never melts, snow-line."

Summer, the two oldest girls, Gretel and Janie, came home from prep school. They were treated with a special regard---allowed to sleep late and didn't have to weed---as though they were guests. They'd sit on the lawn in their print shirt-waists talking to boys who'd pluck at the grass. Gretel and Janie were adults; they spent their days waiting for dusk when it'd grow cool.

At dusk in the new garden the night-blooming primrose blossomed in a span of seven minutes. It was a pale yellow bud. It strained. Ever so patient and shaking, it opened like a fist. The gathered neighbors applauded. It was a
bright yellow star. Its color drained, it wilted.

Klara insisted on tending the new garden herself. She'd recruit the children to weed or search and destroy the beetles in the roses but the children were off. Off to the grapevine, threatening to snap at each swing far out over the steep incline. Off to a game called witches and elves or to secret places of nickels and dropped pants. Off to the sticker bushes and wild sour blackberries; off, good little swimmers. Off and squealing, it was so terribly important.

Klara insisted on tending the new garden herself but Jason hired a man to mow, rake and prune. A friend recommended him. The yard-man was called Norman Pelphrey. His face and hands, the only skin that showed, was a crumpled seinna. No matter how hot and humid it got he never even unsnapped the cuff of his heavy cotton workshirt. His stiff white hair stood straight up and had receded way back over his head, making him appear simultaneously scary and frightened.

Mr. Pelphrey yelled prayers or blessings or sermons over the sound of the mower, his voice full of warbly highs and fast dives, and he worked with such vigor that every blade of grass seemed a sinner. When he took a break for rest and ice water, he sat in the yard leaning back against a tree and sang, "There Is a Balm in Gilead" or "He Walked with Me." The children gathered and from his wallet, Mr.
Pelphrey would take an old folded piece of paper and smooth it out on his thigh. It was his most precious possession, the pride and proof of his life. A Check to the Bank of Heaven, made out in full and forever and fancy letters to Mr. Norman Pelphrey.

Mr. Pelphrey noticed the wart on Claire's knee and told her, "Peel a potato all in one piece. Rub the peel on the wart. Throw the potato away as far as you can. Dig a hole out back near that stump covered with the honey suckle. Let the peel fall in it. Bury it." The wart dropped off in three days.

To the children and neighbors' children, whiffle and kick ball was forbidden in the yard because conspicuous paths had been worn between the oak trees that served as first, second and third bases. Mr. Pelphrey planted a pyracantha bush on the bare spot that was home plate. Nearby he found the rabbits.

Eight of them squirmed around in the hole, each slightly larger than a thumb. Artemis was close. He called to her and pointed at them, then reached down and picked one out for her to hold.

Already a soft down. Pink translucent ears, laid back. Blind eye slits, sealed shut.

"Don't you tell nobody where they're at," said Mr. Pelphrey. "It's a wonder the dogs ain't got to them yet."
"I won't tell," Artemis promised, "and I'll watch out for the dogs." So tiny to so warm. The rabbitling had small prickly claws and dug at her palm.

"Lookee there," said Mr. Pelphrey, "greedy. It's looking for its mama's teat. Don't let's be here for long, the mama'll worry."

Artemis knelt and carefully replaced the rabbit. She dusted off her hands and stood in her "at ease" posture; hands clasped behind her back, head tilted, eyes squinting. The sun was right behind Mr. Pelphrey's head, haloing, showing what he'd look like if he were bald.

"Mama saw a snake the other day," said Artemis.

"Is that so?" asked Mr. Pelphrey.

"We were weeding. She wouldn't stop screaming."

"Your mama's scared of snakes?"

"I didn't think so," said Artemis, "I guess so. I'm not scared of them. I grabbed her trowel from her and dropped it. Right on the snake's back." The patterned skin of the snake split open into a v-shaped flap, underneath, a mass of red pulsing fibers. Klara wouldn't stop screaming. The snake had jerked and turned in on itself, its mouth wide and soundless.

"Did you kill it?" asked Mr. Pelphrey.

"Mama wouldn't stop screaming. The snake, just a blue racer, I think, wouldn't quit jumping, biting at where it was hurt. Finally, I got a concrete block, daddy's planning to
build a wall and dropped it. Right on top of the snake." Artemis pinched at the grass with her toes.

"What'd your mama do then?"

"She quit screaming. Went inside," said Artemis.

"So you killed a snake," said Mr. Pelphrey. He pronounced "killed" as "kilt."

"Guess so. We haven't moved the block."

"You shouldn't of killed it Artemis, shouldn't of. A killed snake'll get back at your unborn child, it sure will. I got to get to work." Mr. Pelphrey walked away shaking his head, leaving Artemis to glimpse down into the dark rabbit hole. Then she was off, to guard it. From a distance.

Snapshot: a corner of the patio stood on stilts above the new garden. Up there, Klara, her weeding interrupted by a sudden rain, reclines in a chaise. Pink-checked swim-suit, the straps off her shoulders; her thick long braid, sun bleached white-blond; her skin, bourbon colored. "Don't come near me, I'm all sweaty." She examines her fingernails, smiling, resigned. Janie sits at the foot of the chaise, poised and puzzling, he loves me, he loves me not. Her dress is fresh even though it's late afternoon and she's the only one of the children wearing shoes.

Jason, to his wife's right, leans against the center supporting post of the patio. His head angles back, laughing at his oldest, Gretel, because Gretel is laughing, some
open secret between them. Jason's hands rest on Jake's shoulders.

Jake is standing between Jason's legs, his head not quite reaching his father's belt. Jake holds onto a box turtle he'd found; he knew a place in the woods the turtles went when it rained. Claire went with him there. She's perched on the railing behind the rest, nearly hidden by the back drop of heart-shaped linden tree leaves.

Artemis, left and front, gazes beyond expressionless.

All in one place at the same time, before that became impossible, let them remain and shift, let the dusk bring a cool. Jason lights flares to drive away the mosquitoes. Supper is from a platter of cheese and crackers and a huge glass of Coca Cola. They sing songs with endless verses they don't remember learning.

No cares have I to grieve me,
No pretty little girls to deceive me

There's the Amsterdam Dutch and the Rotterdam Dutch
The Potterdam Dutch and the Otherdam Dutch.
Glory us! Glory us!

And I will l-o-v-e love you
All the T-I-M-E TIME
Rack 'em up, stack 'em up, any old time
Match in the gas tank, boom boom.

To the northwest the night sky glows a dull red from Miranda, the largest blast furnace in the free world. At some point, Jake leans against Janie and falls asleep. His turtle crawls back to where it'd been found.

Crickets scrape and hum, cicadas ravel and unwind in
the trees. Jason had no warning sign that the snapshot would make him ache when it became a piece of past, framed and fading. He didn't know, no one could tell him: regard this time as your zenith.

Bluebathrobed, Klara sits at the kitchen table. Morning, coffee, yesterday evening's newspaper. Her elbow is on the formica counter, her chin propped in her hand. A cigarette with a long droopy ash smokes between her fingers. She lists,

1. Boredom. Nothing is more boring than listening to someone else's allergies, operations or dreams.

2. Fall apples. Remind the children to collect the fall apples. Oma wanted them; the ancient and diseased apricot trees in her back yard hadn't borne much fruit. Something about the old woman's busyness at this time of year---the jars, the parafin, the steam---was irritating.

3. Rake leaves. Soon somebody will have to rake the leaves. Mr. Pelphrey was inaccessible. He'd recommended a protective mulch for the garden, a mix of wood chips, peat moss and turkey manure. The exact proportions were his secret. Klara trusted Mr. Pelphrey and often felt more comfortable with him than with her own friends. Jason said he'd get a hold of the wood chips and peat moss and Klara called the Lowry Hatchery for the manure. Lowry's was more than obliging. They offered to deliver. They dumped one
half ton, feathers included, on the front lawn between first and third bases. It made a small mountain and killed grass seven feet beyond its own edge. The smell was eye watering. Klara phoned the neighbors to see if they wanted any. "No thanks," one had said, "plenty's blowing over." The kindest gift. What was she supposed to do with it?

4. Get woolens out of mothballs.

5. Miracle drug? The name of that drug advertised in this month's nursing journal escaped her. The drug claimed to relieve indecisiveness, lack of interest, insomnia, crying, anxiety, fatigue, hopelessness, guilt feelings, lack of esteem, negativism and G.I. distress. The expected side effects, psychological dependence, head drifting balloonishly about the ceiling and Brahms heard through the heating ducts, were negligible. And it was called, and it was called---

6. Perfection. Perfection is a hospital ward without any patients. Gretel and Janie left for prep school, Jake entered first grade. Klara refused to suffer from any sort of empty nest syndrome; it's what she'd wanted for too long. They'd be home for supper.

7. Make the bed so you won't lie in it.

On Klara and Jason's king-sized bed was a quilt. Great great grand Aunt Lou actually poked her eye out in the sewing of the thing. Over a hundred years in a cedar
chest and now it's out. Klara should know the name of the pattern but she doesn't. She recalls a fancier one at her mother-in-law's house (a house Jason designed at thirteen, his Gothic phase). That quilt was pieced of green velvet and had shiney beads stitched across in webs of stars. Jason's mother had never cared much for it and would pick and snap off the beads and slip them in her pocket.

Even hands can't grant a more certain definition than Aunt Lou's quilt. Underneath, they dream. Klara left her shoes on her father's tool desk, her mother will be furious. Jason turns in the night to see his wife's body covered with burns. Does he love her then? The burns assume the form of rhythmically spaced flowers, it's the pattern. He stares fierce enough to wake her, she smiles, waiting some kind of recognition. It doesn't come, Jason goes back, fast and deep. Klara is slow to follow.

The nights lengthen; a quickening comes with the new cool. There's frost and fog in the mornings but by noon it's clear with the blue that hurts. Afterschool the children rake leaves and collect fall apples. They're still barefoot but soon it will be too cold. Their voices are crystal and urgent, one cry travels beyond the rest, "Wait for me, hey, wait for me."

Was that a cry or the memory of one? Klara, jolted
awake now, waited to hear it again. Alone, Jason? Jason was in Philadelphia presenting plans for a medical school amphitheater. During his trips, Klara used to have one of the children sleep with her, why no more? 3:30 in the morning—again the cry, trying to be words.

Artemis was curled and shivering on the kitchen floor, full of wild sights and mutterings, so confused by fever that she didn't know she was sick.

Black and white tile, cold. Body hot, wants out.

Klara carried Artemis to the king-sized bed, under the quilt. Remember, this one always plays alone. Remember, her tantrums, she wanted the moon, her way. Remember, it was sometimes necessary to push her away or she'd hug until it hurt. Klara pressed her lips against Artemis's forehead and eyelids.

Black and white snow at night, mama is the snow.

What is it this time, flower face, have I been ignoring you? Is it the flu or blood poisoning from blisters and new shoes? Have you committed some small awful crime and the worry and fear nag and wear at you until there's no way out but fever? You're too young for very many serious sins, little rebel, there's nothing you can do I won't forgive. It's all right, I already know. Here, I'll pay attention to you.

Klara wiped her daughter's face and chest with a damp cloth. This one won't be a child much longer. She made her
choke down strong hot tea; Artemis broke into a sweat, good, the call to the doctor could wait until morning. Klara could do nothing else, Artemis slept. She laid down beside her, remembering and listening to the acorns roll staccato down the roof. Which child is loved best? The sick one.

By the time Jason arrived home, it had been decided. "We'll have to Klara, it's the largest flat surface. I've already drawn up the plans." Jason never apologized.

"It'll be painful, that's all. I've lost my reason to go out. I keep thinking--- there should be some final act, some gesture, some preparation--- so we know, it's done, it's finished. Maybe we should've raised vegetables. But never did I consider this, never. All that work, all that manure. Might as well just stay in-side." Klara had almost said "in bed" instead of "inside." Jason would've gotten silent.

"Still no word from Mr. Pelphrey?" he asked.

"None. I did make his dental appointment though."

They usually talked before going to sleep and rocked each other, 'the rest of the world is crazy.'

As soon as Klara was breathing evenly, Jason disentangled himself and put in his earplug. Tonight, the Chicago classical station, Gina Bachauer playing Schumann's "Scenes from Childhood." The music would fend off the dream: the med school amphitheater, Jason watching from his seat in the gallery. A respected professor, a shiney metal instrument
In his hand, lectures over a sheeted cadaver. Unveiling, Jason himself on the gurney. Tonight, Gina Bachauer, Schumann, only a little static.

Klara, morning, bluebathrobed.

Get estimates. During the night, a huge spider-like shatter had silently radiated across the sliding glass door of the kitchen, more shifting of the fault. A pretty puzzle it made, costly.

The falling apart holds together. Perfection is a hospital ward. Nothing is more boring. The kindest gift you could give to me/ is to rob me of responsibility. The kindest gift. And it's called---. Some final act, so we know. Coffee, cigarette, page four,

LOCAL MAN SURRENDERS

Carl Philips Jr., alias Philip Walker, Walker Mayhem, Mayhem Norman and Mormon Pelphrey, voluntarily returned today to Will's Landing Federal Correction Institute after an unexcused absence of four years.

In a much publicized trial of 1955, Mr. Philips was convicted on charges of robbery, attempted manslaughter, rape and numerous traffic violations. He was sentenced to 99 years and a day by Judge Deuteronomy Lowry.

Mr. Philips escaped after a three-year internment. He lived in Montana under the impression that no one would think to look for him there. They didn't. He returned to the Black County vicinity six months to the day after his mother, Mrs. Carl Philips, nee Trixie Laurel Pelphrey, died.

Mr. Philips would not say how he managed his escape nor why he gave himself up. He entered a request to be placed on the prison chaplain's staff.
Mr. Philips never married and has no children that he knows of.

Klara rose, laughing. 'Do not end a sentence a preposition with, my God, even I could've said it better. Loco woman surrenders.' She walked about the house methodically locking all fourteen doors.

Sweet old Mr. Pelphrey. Was going to pay to have his teeth fixed, even trusted him alone with the children. Goddam Jake forgot to flush his toilet again. Goddam Claire left her slip on the dresser. Goddam Artemis for no reason. Filthy pigs. "Thus in sorrow bear children," wouldn't you say, Mr. Pelphrey? Collect the fall apples, thus in sorrow. It's the little things, the trivia repeated over and over and over. Jason hired Mr. Pelphrey, o excuse me, Mr. Philips, it's his problem. I give it to him. Give him house and garden and children and fault. It's his problem all his. To bed, to bed, as Othello said, to no one in particular.

At school the children were having practice drills, pushing their desks against the wall and crouching under them. "In case anything happens," said the teachers, "you are to remain under your desks until it is over."

The city was considered a prime target for a bomb because its outskirts contained Miranda, largest blast furnace in the free world. "Free" is necessary because "They" might or might not have a larger one.
Each evening, Jason recited explicit instructions to his children. "In case anything happens, I want you to meet each other at the corner of Fifth and Main. If one of you is late, wait. Then I want you all to walk home as quickly as you can, holding hands. Do you understand?"

Some morning in October, what woke the children, instead of the sun, was the sound of a huge bulldozer right outside their bedroom windows. The roses had just finished making hips; Oma could've used them for her tea. The bulldozer scraped the bark of the magnolia, avoided the yews but tore up the rest of the new garden. They watched as their father directed it to chunk out space for the new fallout shelter.
It's simply too much to take. Her knees crumple. She falls as though her strings are cut and curls tight on the kitchen floor, rocking herself, trying to cry. Squat-thrust spring-up, she opens the refrigerator to check once more for the grape juice. No coca cola either. Then she slams the damn door shut so hard that she spins. Spins,

All I really wanted was grape juice, is that too much to ask? Everything else is just perfect; been saving the pills for two months, finally enough of them, it's a Sunday night and nobody else is home. Shouldn't have bothered to plan it, it's been mapped out for me. Milk, milk will have to do.

She pours a glassful, sticking out her tongue and carries the milk to her bedroom.

Careful. Do not drip or spill or leave trail down chessboard hallway. Spill spells trouble, "Eat only at the kitchen table or we'll get bugs," eat only bugs at the kitchen table. Yammer, yammer.

She sets the glass on the bedside nightstand and pulls out the drawer.
Do not jar the glass.

Inside the drawer are Salem cigarettes bought by the carton by parents, swiped by the pack by me. Have one, yes thank you. Blessed smoke. Do be careful of the bedspread; if ignited, we burst into flame. No. Nothing that quick and dead, probably just a slow and painful melting.

She wiggles out her journal from under the full ashtray in the drawer. Also hidden, therefore forbidden, are two other books, a fat Fanny Hill and a slender Ariel. She doesn't want to be convinced or dissuaded, so she reads what she'd written,

You're gone. One part of me says I-knew-it-all-along, another part hollars just as loud, I don't believe it. It's all I know. You're gone.

In the beginning, I pushed you away, I was, we were, only twelve & what in the dickens could have wanted from me? Now I'm turned sweet sixteen, ah yes, sweet sixteen, & you push me away. You're too young.

That last time I swore I'd die without you & you said, "You'd do that to me, wouldn't you?" Damn right, I would. You hold my face in your hands & I make you say that you don't love me, I have to hear it come from your mouth or else I'll never believe. I'll keep on hoping, I'm good at fooling myself. "It's not you, it's me that's changed," you say & I say, say it Bruce & you do. Then you walk away without looking back & good thing maybe because I had mascara trekking down my cheeks.

Hear any violins?

That scene keeps re-running over & over &
over, to the point where it's as if I'm sitting in an empty theater. Movie's finished but there's that black/white flip/flap of the film against the reel. Or projector. Why can't I leave? Hell. Mine.

Mother's said we'd have to marry young & now she's looking at me with that I'd-rather-die-than-mention-it-but type stare. Papa's said that you wouldn't stay if I stayed "pure" & I guess he knows. "Takes two to tango," he says, "you can't dance alone." He knows.

Cigarette is burned out.

Go to bathroom.

While tub fills with water hotter than she can bear, she undresses.

Avoid reflection in mirror. Don't want to discover at this late date: vampirella, not there; gone, through the looking glass. I wish. That dream, in the strange house I live in, the phone is under the mirror, phones always are, why? It rings, I answer. Hello? Strange male voice says, "Hello." Who is this? In the mirror, I'm twisting a strand of hair, holding the receiver and asking, who is there? "Don't you know?" and strange male voice laughs. We know.

All the words for private personal anatomical parts are all wrong. Here. Close eyes. Cup. This is not a breast or a bosom. Those are heavy and serious, melon-like, wrapped in willow leaves. This is not a boob or tit either; those are silly, mocking and flounced across a stage. Touch but do not look, touch but do not look;
inkblot mark of his mouth on the white never seen, no word for,

Here. Play the game. Tip toe into tub, ease down slow. Ah, settle, hotness laps at neck nape; hairline will fuzz and curl. Play the game. Rules: bite from his mouth has been there for three whole months, was still there this morning. The stakes to win, lose or gamble: if aforementioned mark is gone, then we won't. If it isn't, we proceed as planned.

The thrill of victory, the agony of defeat.

Shush. Open eyes, no surprise. There still, then I will. No miracle, we gave us a chance, it is decided. O god. It should be gone, should at least fade. I didn't do anything that wrong, honest. There were the times when I was more than willing to, but o no,

"I love you too much to hurt you."

Hurt me, hurt me.

"I admire your father."

But three's a crowd.

"I can't. I respect you."

That's the clincher. He what's me? I didn't want his respect, I wanted to---

If she can't say it, how can she want to do it? It is another word that another word is needed for; fuck is too salt of the earthy, reputed to be an acronym for Fornication Under Carnal Knowledge; while sexual intercourse is much too
technical, an activity performed within a glass cubicle
and observed by white jackets.

Neither word sounds human.
Or humane.

Why wouldn't he?
What was wrong with me?

Hand hard smack water surface, flat palm. Let's make
a mess, yes.

Water droplets run down her glasses, remind her that
she forgot to take them off.

Stupid idiot.

She's been wearing them for as long as she's been
remembering and

Holy See

she hasn't learned to remove them before her bath.

Bet she leaves them on when she sleeps too, so she can see
her dreams, is that right?

Only when we were very young.

Smash bust break them, slam throw crush them against
the lavender tile of the bathroom wall.

Good girl, killed them dead.

Without specs, I am invisible. Invisible as Rupert,
my dear pet, my confessor and absolver, secret sharing
good dog who hides his head under the bed believing that
no one can see him or his fat tight shark body sticking
out.
The whole world should be near-sighted, no traffic accidents, ha, no traffic. The whole world soft and blurry. All the nearsighted people lost and slightly crossed and examining up close,

Is that you Fernando?

This year's Science Fair Winner: The Effect of Myopia on Introspection. Blue ribbon.

Second Place: A Bacteriological Study of Fingernail Scrapings, red ribbon.

Mad. To distraction. To extremes. There is no single word that means enough, is loud and strong and powerful enough to prove how mad she is.

Not that one, wasted it on a run in my stockings.

Pshaw.

Sounds funny, push-awe, has anyone ever said it aloud? Could start a trend, and they're usually regretable.

She plops her face in the water and blows bubbles.


"That child's just always bubbling over with joy, isn't she?"

Bubbles. The only cruel and unusual punishment Aunt Ginny ever perpetrated against me.

Bubbles? You've got to be putting me on.

O cringe. To be dubbled Bub.

Stupid.
Stupid. He's not around to tell her she isn't. As soon as he could have what it seemed like he wanted for so long, he didn't want it anymore.

God's little joke.

The omniscient Ralph Edwards slapping his thigh and pointing down from his cloud, laughing so hard he cries, "This is your life."

Gee thanks. You too can be a wiener,

Third place: An Ignored Major Cause of Heart Attacks: Irony. Yellow ribbon.

Four years she knew him, a whole fourth of her life. He is like this water to her, not a place on her he didn't touch. She can't look at herself without remembering and the remembering shouldn't hurt so much because that's all it is.

She leans back against the cool enamel and turns on a trickle of hot water with her toe. Water licks at and rises over the mark on her breast. She taps it and closes her eyes wanting some time before she knew him.

Must've been eleven or twelve, in a buckeye tree waiting for a tornado. They don't come too often; the hills along the river keep them away. Was a buckeye tree, peeled the tough husk of one and rubbed a mahoghany nugget. Rupert was circling the base of the tree; howling, wanting me to come down or was frustrated because he couldn't climb up. Can hear mother calling me, always calling me, but for this
once, I don't want to hear. I plug my ears with my fingers and listen. Conch shell sounds, sounds like round objects whirling around very fast. Wind gets stronger. The rain needles and prickles. Tree sways, drowns out mother's voice. I never did get to see the tornado but liked whatever it was. Mother was too glad to see me to be angry. The very next day though, I noticed that I was getting breasts or boobs or nubbles, or at least one of them. The achey lump, was it some kind of punishment for wanting to see the tornado, for hearing mother and not answering? Who could I ask?

Bruce started it. He made the first move. She made no overt invitation, no attempt to impress, he simply liked her.

He liked me.

What was wrong with him?

Can't dive, can't dance, is plain and plump.

Neither in the lovely and talented category, nor the pert and vivacious one.

Not a scholar, not a cheerleader.

She does many things well, but nothing better than anything else. She has moments of shininess, but for the most part, she is extraordinarily average.

Half of everyone is below average.

So why did he ever notice her? Because. Her desk in biology class was behind the aquarium. The teacher would
call her name (not the Bubbles one) and she wouldn't hear.

The snails. The way their horns come out and withdraw, shy-like.

She wouldn't hear.

The snails. The way they mount, their mouths slide slow on the glass.

She wouldn't hear. The teacher would come and tap her shoulder. Jump. Everyone laugh. She'd blush, that vein on her forehead throbbed outstanding. Because. She couldn't explain. It doesn't matter. He doesn't care anymore.

He doesn't. He's gone.

She soaps a washrag and begins scrubbing.

Grime doesn't pay.

Ears. Between her toes.

Self-centered, indulgent and unbearable. This skin is getting too tight, help me out, please.

Scrub a dub dub.

She twists the washrag to a point and dabs at the mark on her breast. Sure, sure, there are those who love her and those she loves. But they're mostly related by blood and don't do so out of any choice.

Here, here, have a looksee. Love me still? Uh huh. For shame. Forgive. Bubbles. Brazen hussy. Damn stain. They don't know who they love. They don't want to.

Tried to tell them. Stood at their bedroom door
watching papa's cigarette going up and down in the dark. Mother is always sleeping. Through the big windows, through the trees, lights of the city flicker. Trouble time. Older sister Sara gone way faraway to college, hasn't called home in three weeks. Papa worries, I can't add to that.

Papa, that fairy tale he used to read aloud, the only one, "The Happy Prince," it is him, isn't it? Mother was always sleeping. And Sara, going to a dance with rich boy tennis player from across the river. Sara in a yellow strapless dress, a cinched waist and full skirt.

Praying: someday let me be that way. No one else can play the duets at the great white piano with papa, no one else can make him laugh like Sara could. "You're a martyr to yourself but a sucker to other people," papa has said, but is he consoling me about Bruce or himself about Sara?

It takes two to tango.

No. I am not going to remember. I wrapped it up, pushed it off, saw it splash and sink.

Here it comes dragging back.

The last time Sara was home, I sat on the floor by the tub while she took her bath. It's when we talk, I wash her back.

"I just can't tell them why I flunked out last semester. I've told them too much already."

Massage into lather, the hollow of her spine, chain of bony vertebrae,

"I knew all along he couldn't marry me and I wasn't ready either. But I loved him."

spread the suds to her rounded shoulders, that yellow strapless dress,

"So I took a plane to New York to have it done. He couldn't come with me but he did pay half. There wasn't any other way. I loved him, can you understand that?"

No! I hollar, I am too young
but really I say, I understand,
and make circle designs in the suds with my fingernails, around her shoulder blades, those wing stumps, wing sprouts, did it hurt you?

"No. I just slept. They gave me something to help me sleep."

Bury it next time, until your time for understanding.

It's as though Bruce has died. I let him know me better than anyone else; inside out he knew me and he didn't like it. Doesn't like me.

The ultimate rejection.

She can't find anything within herself to replace what was him so there must not be anything there. Nothing there. Nothing matters, nothing perfect, nothing inviolable. She wants that nothing.

I just slept.
She won't pay any mind or homage to her family; she won't be around to witness their grief or hear their recriminations.

Recrim, recrim, recrim.

When my ominous absence is finally noticed, if ever, it'll be a real tear jerking scenario, reel to reel.

She shifts back to rinse off the soap.

Brother Kirk liked Bruce, o everybody liked Bruce. I went up a notch in the estimation of all. A veritable conspiracy. Except for Rupert. Smart doggie, goo' boy, you showed them yaller fangs and snargled. Knew all along he had evil intents, didn't you Rupe?

Kirk liked Bruce and used to threaten that he'd pin her down and tickle her until she cried or peed unless she let Bruce kiss her. She was only twelve,

spin that bottle. Each subsequent year, however, brought the addition of a new trick to their repertoire. Up and down and in between, until she arrived, totally unmar- ketable, as a sixteen year old semi-virgin.

I was always watching.

She'd sit at the top of the hill pretending to read while Kirk and Bruce played basket ball down below. Always watching, she only played and made baskets when alone. It was pleasing though to see Kirk and Bruce passing that ball between them. Her distance was such that she'd see the ball bounce or crash or swish before she'd hear it;
she'd imagine the syncopated music for their game.

When it got too cold to sneak out and meet Bruce in the woods, he'd knock at her bedroom window and she'd let him in. They'd lay in her bed, fully dressed, whispering, holding and staring at each other.

Not sleeping, the night was too short.

Nothing more blissful and fitting than his sweet taut body.

Unless it's precisely the right word.

Bundling.

On one of those occasions, Bruce had started sputtering, trying to crouch behind her and use her as a shield. Kirk was standing in the doorway. "What's going on here? I heard voices."

He's not the only one.

Bruce had laughed; he'd thought it was her father. She said, "Don't worry, Kirk. It's just Bruce."

"What's he doing here?" A sleepy threat.

"Nothing," said Bruce, "just resting."

"Everything's allright. I'll explain in the morning. Go back to bed now," she said. He did.

And last night she woke at three in the morning because Kirk was at the foot of her bed staring at her. They used to wake each other like that when they slept together as children. If the staring wasn't effective, the next method undertaken was to tickle a single hair up the sleeping
party's nostril. She woke. Kirk had on a face she'd never seen—-proud and embarrassed, glad and shocked, all and none, they changed so quickly—that she knew instantly, he'd done it, made love or whatever the word,

Papa and mother wouldn't do that to get me here, not me, not them, he'd insisted,

but she also knew he wouldn't out and out say so, so she asked him, "Well. How was it?"

"Great." That simple. Then he was gone, she heard the shower running.

Hope she was clean. Hope they were careful. Wish Kirk had stayed to talk a while longer. He's probably out doing more of the same tonight.

For shame. And it's a Sunday.

Water's getting cold. Her fingers and toes are crinkled. She steps out of the tub and dries herself. The water gurgle-sucks down the drain. Her body is far out of fashion, the broad shoulders, the round belly and legs that her father calls strong.

A budding Rubens.

She slips a fresh white nightie on over her head and glides into it with a swimming-up gesture. She brushes her hair, it's getting long. He'd told her it should be.

Don't should on me. Thou shalt not.

Even after, nails and hair continue to grow. In the even after. They know.
she'd imagine the syncopated music for their game.

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She stoops to pick up her glasses from the floor. They're shatterproof or else she wouldn't have thrown them. While she polishes the lenses with the hem of her nightgown, she looks at her reflected image, soft and unclear.

The mirror is not true. More true, but still not quite, is the reflection of a reflection.

That would be you.

I never said it was.

I said mercury is the stuff behind mirrors.

She turns away, murmuring, "See ya," to the blur in the glass and walks out whistling.

Her hand guides along the wall; corner, straight, corner, bedroom. She lifts her jewelry box from her dresser and sets it down carefully on her bed.

Mustn't jar the order of the precious things inside.

I have never considered rearranging this room. Mother does it. The Jerusalem orange tree coordinates with the yellow, cream and orange motif of the room. The floral bedspread is tastefully highlighted by the bright red flashes of decorative cushions and small rugs. I don't know if I like orange. I never thought: I live here. It doesn't have to be this way. I might have a choice, a say.


She sits on her heels, a hover, in front of the box. Calm and smiling, she lifts the lid; the maroon velvet bot-
tom of the box is lined with forty yellow tablets that resemble tiny satin pillows.

There you are.

She is still.

How unusual.

Her hands hold one another in her lap.

They keep these tablets beside their bed. Mother has put contact paper around both containers; they must have thought I was getting aspirins, if they thought. But these aren't aspirins; these are what is taken when Sara hasn't called, when sleep, just sleep, won't come because you want it so bad.

A stitch in time knits up the ravelled sleeve.

or when the dog gets run over by the mail man

What a tacky departure Rupe and you were such an original. How dare you leave me alone at a time like this

She cries without trying.

How unusual.

She lights a cigarette, opens her journal and reads,

I swear, I tried to tell them I smoked. They're always saying I'm such a good girl, I try & try to tell them I'm not. I leave full ashtrays all over the house & mother says, "Tell your friends that they can't smoke up here if they can't smoke at their houses." So now that I'm hiding them maybe she'll figure it's me.

"We don't have to worry about her, she won't disappoint us like Sara has." O no. They love me. They trust me. Love and trust, rack and mace.
The thought of anyone else touching me makes me gag. You were always calling me crazy, so now I'm proving it. "You'd do that to me, wouldn't you?"

In all those four years, there must've been a time when we were together, felt equally strong for each other, neither of us caring more. What there was between us was between us was almost holdable. With all the time and energy put into it, I can't figure out where it went or even what, exactly, was lost. It couldn't just vanish, couldn't be just nothing. Just nothing.

I want and want and want.

If there was a time together, it must be when we were running to meet on the path. After you got your driver's license, the meetings in the woods became obsolete and were replaced by back seat pantings, deserted roads, gold flecks around your pupils. I'd usually be on my back, could look out the windows until they steamed over. Stop now, no further. Stop now. I was always watching.

I want, want to forget that. Remember instead the running on the path, Rupert galumphing up ahead. So dark, all I can see are my feet. I know where I'm going and how to get there, I just don't know where I am. The path goes along a ridge, the lights from the city poke on and off through the weave of branches. The dark streak where there aren't any lights is the river.

Cigarette is done. She leaves the pen in and closes. She drops her journal on the floor and gently kick-slides it under the bed. She clicks off the lamp and waits until her eyes can recognize shapes.

Like tiny satin pillows.

No asps in this neck of the woods.

She puts the first pill in her mouth and takes a swal-
low of milk. She takes another pill, another gulp. After about ten of them, the ritual gets boring and she takes them by handfuls.

Now. Put contact paper covered jewelry box on dresser. Where in the hell did mother find contact paper that's the same color and floral pattern of the bedspread? Put cigarettes back in smelly drawer. Take glass to kitchen. Rinse it. Turn out lights on return trips. Make sure all doors leading out are locked. This house is so immaculate.

Sterile.

Do not wear shoes indoors. The terrace is mopped every Saturday morning: If that dog sleeps with you, he'll have to have a bath at night. And he did, seven nights a week.

Can't you forgive without forgetting? She only hit me once, but she happened to have a screwdriver in her hand. The crime has slipped my mind, probably something slobbish as I am prone. In retrospect, the episode is a sit-com soap opera. In this installment, Bubbles is accidentally stabbed. Dada da dum. Didn't know what hit me, didn't feel or realize until Kirk started bawling and pointing at the blood spreading through my shirt.

Upset by osmosis.

I sure couldn't cry, everyone else was doing it for me. Can't cry? Too sad. Read this: "The Nightingale and the Rose." Sunt lacrimae rerum.

Mother came back, red-eyed and with the iodine. Sara
yelled at her about police and battered children. She never did have enough sense to be afraid. Of anything.

Victorian English five forty nine, Oscar Wilde smells like iodine,

why remember that? Why not remember how your eyes used to be infected by something in the air and they'd secrete a a substance that hardened overnight and glued them shut. In the mornings, you'd wait for mother and she'd come with a warm washrag and wipe your eyes so that you could open and see. Why not remember that?

Because it didn't leave a mark.
Because I don't believe in accidents.
Because the maid did it. An open and shut case.
Fold back the covers. So good to lie down.
Without a ripple.
Only the good die young.
And vice versa.

One hand rests upon the mark on her breast, the other curves around to her ribs and the very small round scar.

Row merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a row, row, row. Quiet as snow, so. All through the house not a creature was stirring not even a mouse turd

A warm numbing radiates out from her stomach. All her parts, legs and hands, her heart and mercifully her head, are relegated to the dark.
Rises. Pressures. Tears at throat.

One hand guides along the wall, corner, straight,
O. Am out of bed.

corner.

Her hand is clamped against her mouth to force the pres­
sure back down. Or at least keep it where it is.

Let me make it to the bathroom, please, mustn't make
a mess

bathroom.

She collapses to kneeling on the floor in front of the
toilet. Heaves clutch and jerk her.

Can't catch breath, can't

She retches violently. It comes, passes through in
forces and pulls, leaves her trembling and comes again.

O god if pills won't kill then this will, can't catch
She flushes.


Shush. Don't anybody wake, no. Could never explain
what I was doing here, what time isn't

Her cheeks and mouth quiver.

Disgusting, sickening to throw up. Hate it. What did
I not do to deserve this?

She steadies her elbows on the cool smoothness of the
toilet seat and supports her head between her hands. The
tile is icy on her knees. Her body sways slow and gentle.
Takes two to tango, can't dance alone.
Would've been no accident if somebody hadn't hogged all the grape juice.
The thrill of victory, the agony of defeat.
I lose. I think.
Third place.
Thought I'd be in my Father's house of many mansions and here I am staring into a toilet.

Getting daylight, no denying. The sky has faded from amethyst to a pale blue striated with orange.
Teeth are brushed. Four times. Face is washed. Nightie is in hamper. No one the wiser. Sit on edge of bed, must keep feet flat on floor. Nekked. As the day you were born.
Naked. Except for those obscene argyle socks. And glasses.
Stop it.
Bubbling over, o joy, joy. And over and over. Keep feet flat on floor. Can't lay down. Walls spin, floor disappears, am falling. Look. I don't mind watching from high places, but I cannot abide that falling sensation.
She's had most of the night to think and should come up with something profound. Coherent. Unifying.
In forty-five minutes she'll begin dressing for school. There are squares imprinted on her knees from the bathroom tile. Curiouser and curiouser, Berea and Khe Sanh, Buffalo Creek and Angkor Thom, they are just words, there's a world, you know, imprinted squares. Out the window she can see the garden. Frost on a thorn. When her grandfather and sister died, pale pink rose bushes were planted. To be a pale pink rose bush would've been nice.

Her head is pounding, the sound fills the room. Makes her head ache. She covers her ears with her hands, there's a world, you know, a world you know, stop it. Stop it.

She holds her hands to the light, they seem transparent and won't stop shaking.

It's alright to love him even though he can't love back, it's alright, isn't it?
the hunt
or something about someone
playing their own instrument seduced me everytime

Remind me not to do that again.

To my composer father who wouldn't play
duets, to my brother who couldn't, to the violinist who pinched
my ass while my head was in an ice machine (yes, it's real), to the
flutist I followed, and finally, o finally, to you, with your pick
and steel strings.

* * *

Betcha play that way in yer huntin' shack.
Strummin' sweet til the fire cracks in rhythm
and houndawg howls in harmo-nee, yeah boy,
yer jes shootin' straight as an arrow down
the wachamacalit river in yer canoe. Yessir
yer alert, tuned so taut you snap when tapped
from be-hind,
tip tip, you sure skeer easy,
doncha? Uh huh.

* * *

Excuse my disdain for the hunt.

* * *
orug-chested, commie prevert hater; after twenty years of bliss, may "your" woman start slamming dishes and pans and say, "Nothing is wrong."

May she refuse to freeze your meat, clean your fish, and worst of all may she cease to ooh aah and undulate.

May the rest of your hair everywhere fall out.

May a grizzly swipe your Gibson!

Amen.

What'cha gonna do then, boy?

***

Well now, that's a nice furious fantasy. Ever notice how silly people can look when they're mad? Veins throb visibly in temples. And thighs. A mute song, indeed.

It's not going to work that way.

So. What happened? What really happened?

***

Not a thing. That's the whole problem. It didn't work.

He's afraid of his confusion, therefore angry. She don't act like no girl he ever knew; meaning she don't ooh, aah, etcet-era, meaning she doesn't act. She laughs too much. She's too serious. It isn't supposed to be this way.

Familiar complaints, it's only the him that's not.

Unfamiliar

200 pounds

of boneless heavy
and round, saying she's too little to be so fierce and mean.
Too small to put up such a fight.
Are you on the pill?
No, are you? In more ways than one, he
don't know how to take her, but he tries, yes he tries
She wants to, but can't apolo-gize for needing more time.

/Some muscians lack timing/ Guilty with her boredom and the
blind mouth scream, please
I am more
than a warm hole
in this very dark room
aren't I

/Some muscians can't hear/ hurry up, o squeeze the goddam trigger

If the history of man were perceived as a mile, only for the
last eighteen inches has it not been absolutely necessary for him
to hunt. The last eighteen inches.
No, she doesn't want him to say he loves her, just why he
avoids her face. Does anyone kiss anymore?

She not centrally located
in solely one place.

He says, "Talk to me?" but she sleeps. Utterly sad and
beautyless.

* * *
Ya'll come back, ya hear? Hopes he didn't hurt her, hopes they're still friends. Later, around.

Sure thang honey-chile, anytime. Anytime.

* * *

You're real good on the gee-tar, southmouth, but you're no musical magician, and I'll be damned if I'm gonna dance on your wand.

And watch out: if I do

I'll break it in two.

* * *

You say you play the harmonica?
What Else There Is To Do

I've got something to say.

I didn't mean to frighten you, no lock, no knock, no; don't get up. I'm not quite sure why I'm here, who is, yes? Call me bursting in or a victim of impulse or anything else you want, but give me a chance, stay in that chair until I'm done with what I have to say. O lord, let me remember what that is.

Yes. I thought about this visit while I was in the cafeteria, standing in line for a bagel. By myself. Usually that makes me very sad, standing in line, but when I envisioned myself doing this, actually getting up the gall and doing it, I giggled. Outright, outloud, more like a hoot. You aren't supposed to laugh alone in public. People stared, I had to leave. I lost my appetite, my place in line. I knew you'd be one of the elect to find the situation comic; it was your fault, you see, indirectly and in absentia, but your fault nonetheless, so here I am.

Which is where? And you stay there, in your chair or I'll forget what I have to say. I once overheard two women talking on an airplane. One said, "You mean you're twenty years old and you've already been married twice?"
The other answered, "What else was there to do?" She was leaving here, she was right. Have you looked at this town, its talk, objectively, like you're over it, overheard it? Yes, yes, I'm sure you have, you're very objective. Watchful, a choreographer.

Well. I figured it out on the walk over here. Listen. The cast of characters fits on five fingers. You were intrigued with me, but I was in lust with Ed, so you opted instead for my friend Millie who responded to you out of desperation in order to recuperate from malarial Brian who used to live with Sylvia, didn't really love her, just lived with her for six years, but none of us knew her anyway. You "accidentally" fell in love with Millie, fully cognizant of her unrequited affection for Brian. I was a sympathetic ear who did not believe in accidents. You told me how you felt, how you could've felt for me, held me brief and fleeting, then left town.

And that's just the surface, just the water bug ripples. I want to keep this simple but a dip and we see you rescuing Millie from a bout of promiscuity. You tell her you love her, not because you do, but because you want to give her something healing. We twist a little deeper and Millie is calling you adjectives, cool, deceitful, a suck of energy. I disagree but say that you are too handsome to be interesting. Or to interest me. Another stroke downward (actually it's ceased to be deliberate by this time
and we're sinking) and Millie is furious with you because she's beginning to care for you. Such a thing cannot be so she turns her sights to silent surly Ed, with my best wishes and unqualified blessing. We're still nowhere near the bottom; deep down there isn't one, we're all shallow aren't we?

Did I say welcome back? Welcome back. Back to this incestuous gas station for transients, back waving all your loose ends. O, I assure you, nothing unpredictable happened while you were out. Ed joined a monastery so he can wear his hair shirt full-time. Brian remains numero uno on Sylvia's list, although another body celestial, named Beau of all things, is ascending into second place. Brian and Beau are friends. Millie and I are friends, o yes, we're all friends, it's very civil and cozy.

Hush. I mean it. Do not, when confronted with a similar situation, as with your tendencies, I'm sure you will be, do not tell your lover's friend that you know her, she is aggressively fragile. No one is allowed to know her that well. Further, do not catch her and say, "O god you are, you are like a bird." She is well-trained. Her bones will hollow and fill with air. She hops to a corner of her cage, picks up a folded bit of paper, and with her beak, posits it into your hand. On the paper is written the fortune "heart." You ponder the word from every angle, heat, tear, art, ha, weighing and comparing it to other wads from your
pocket. She imagines that you spin daily amidst such confetti, and lo and behold, claps her wings and with a quaint device, turns into a harpy.

Do not move, stay where you are. Are you hurting? Are you capable? I cannot abide your hurt. There are a few people I've crossed whose pain is mine, and god knows why, but you happen to be one of them. Our mutual amorality? Our artist of omissioness? Our attraction for humiliation? For all I know, we were two swans in some past lifetime. Yes, yes, incurably romantic, but wait, I'm not finished. I'm saying all this so I can quit fantasizing you, I made you up, my mouth was made to bless you, to pronounce your name. The first time you saw me, I wanted to be sitting in the middle of the afternoon on the porch steps in a neighborhood of decaying elegance wearing a white dress, my head tossed back and laughing, my lap full of apples. You'd tell me I was lovely and I'd believe you. You'd promise me a piano and take me to Kentucky. Just at dusk, you'd untie my shoe, peel off my sock and kiss my sole.

I have to be at work in three hours and I wish I could deny any responsibility in coming here. I'd planned to walk in and babble you into submission, we'd seduce and I'd leave. Fine, fine now if we fall down to fucking, but it's really a step we've skipped and left below.

You don't think so? Shush. How funny, if it weren't
for you, I wouldn't have ever discovered my sneaky-seamy-sordid side. Miserable characters, aren't we, with a country western whine. "I should hate you but I love you," indeed.

And yes, as you predicted, the sky is blue, I'm getting married. In a week. Marriage, my grandmother went from the hands of her good mother into the hands of a good man and I go through a slew of frat lads, clumsy loners and gurus. Marriage, my father asks what else there is for a man or a woman and I'm not even the type of girl he'd marry but that's allright. Marriage, go directly to jail, do not pass, do not collect; all my wild oats sown and gone to seed. In a week. You are hereby formally invited to the wake. And there you will meet Wayne. No one else knows him either, least of all me. He's a companion, untouchable metaphysically. My parents consider him a good catch; his parents are simply very relieved. I make him laugh, I need that. He can afford my dentist.

You'll marry too. She'll be travelled and tri-lingual. She'll be tall enough to wear broad-brimmed hats and look graceful. She'll be at ease, won't she, whether she's up to her elbows in potting soil or attending a champagne reception for the art museum's newly acquired Corot. O god, and a clevage. I can't stand it. You're so well matched.

Stay there. Do not move a muscle. I have a favor to
ask. Would you hold me again, just for an instant? Until you, I hadn't felt that found or home-safe-and-sound or simply that held, since I was sixteen. Once maybe, but he was no threat to me, ie, already married.

Stop, wait. I sense you will recur again and again, you, no one like you. Goddam you anyway. And me too, I guess, I wouldn't want you damned alone. You are not going to make me cry, only my brother has that power.

So. Now you have me, all lost and I'm trying to catch up to what took you so long. It's never skipped or left below, is it? If I make a sound, you must promise to cover my mouth. And, five or ten years from now, when I walk into your apartment, past huge and healthy plants, past lovely and talented wife and bullfrog cheeked baby madly pounding on the stainless steel tray of highchair, if I walk into your amber study and ask you to kindly shoot me, you'd do that for me too, wouldn't you?

I have to go now. Sleep love, you careful bitch and son of. I must go. Anon anon.
Open the door, go ahead. Quiet, close it behind you. For a while they won't notice that you're gone. Dim. Milky smelling. Warm. Above the crib is a statuette of a robed lady with closed eyes and hands pointing together under her chin. We aren't Catholic. Opposite the crib is a single window looking out into a small greenhouse. Gardenias and bougainvillea, passion vines and hibiscus. Through a round black hole in the center of the greenhouse floor, a metal staircase spirals down into the fallout shelter. Rats and snake nests down there. But here, dim. Milky smelling. Warm. You are safe.

Move to the crib. Does she close her eyes when she sleeps? They bulge large and pale green, her eyes never close. Her head juts back, her neck strains. Her knees and elbows, ankles and wrists, are bent at right angles. Her belly is distended and taut. She makes slight noises, short sharp uh?'s, throaty gurgles and sighs.

You reach through the crib slats to pull damp hair strands from her forehead (she is blonde) or to stroke her belly (she seems to like it). Not even wings are softer
than her skin. You are always returning to this room.

Does she recognize anyone, does she know mother? How
does she show, what are her signs? How do you know? Does
she close her eyes when she sleeps? Does she count? Do
you pity her, do you envy her? Is it just her means of
expressing, her way out, that are cut off? Do you envy her,
do you pity her? What is the cause, whose is the fault?
Why?

Nothing is so blank, no nothing. No response.
Nothing. For lack of a better explanation, she is referred
to as the other sister. She is seldom referred to. Father
counts us on his fingers, a song for each child, each child
a song, does she count? As an infant, her eyes did not
come to focus or follow mother's finger. She did not move
when mother clapped, she was unusually quiet and good and
did not grasp.

A better explanation: premature closure of the fonta-
nelles. Her skull fused while she was still within the
womb, her brain wasn't allowed to expand. No soft spot
atop her head. She'll never see or walk or talk. Probably
won't live past the age of three. There is an operation,
risky though, no guarantee. They know. They did tests.
There are some excellent institutions for such cases which
save the parents from the constant anguish, duty and help-
lessness.

Mother was a nurse before she was a mother. The other
sister has lain in this crib, this room, ten paces away from your parents' bed, for thirteen years.

If anything happens to mother and father, the nuns will take care of the other sister. She is catholic, we are not. If anything happens to mother and father, who will take care of us?

Eunice, we hope. Eunice is the colored lady hired to help bathe and feed the other sister or to tend us when the other sister is being bathed or fed by mother. Eunice is our mother when our mother is not.

That is often.

I can't take any more.

Why don't you talk? You're a worry especially since you came after the other one. They know. They did tests. Your eyes cross, your teeth are yellow and soft, but you are all right. It has to do with the way the genes untie and unite during the first trimester of pregnancy. No blame.

The preacher has a pasty face, one-two-three-four-five little sweetesses, he says hugging and crushing all of us together. His black robe smells like snakes in a jar.

A monk swimming, Harold be thy name.

He flies on a table.

Islands float.

In the beginning was the mistake.

Who dug all the berries out of the smuckers?
I don't want to take a bath with them any more.

He was standing at the foot of my bed, dressed in a
cape and top hat, staring at me through opera glasses.
Race you barefoot over the gravel part.

Every morning at quarter til seven when Eunice comes up for work, her next door neighbor, a massive black woman named Elizabeth Tailer, who has eight illegitimate children and lives off the welfare, rocks on her porch and says as Eunice climbs into the taxi, "Goodbye sucker."

She doesn't do this for free?
She won't tell on us, she just says she will.
Quit pouting. Don't glare. Don't criticize until you're perfect. Sit up straight. Eat over your plate.
I'm supposed to do all that at one time?
You're the north, I'm the south, you're dead.
I don't like this game any more.
What do you want me to be, a goddam comedian?
Don't you bring home any colored friends, you hear?

Not Richard Stands, dummy, witches. Witches.
Where do they come from?
That's not for me to say. Ask your daddy.
He'll say magic, he always says magic.
Magic.
Even the other sister?
Especially her.

But how do you know it's a mockingbird?

Believe me, I always lie.

Your first words, perfectly enunciated, were, "My sister hit me."

One glass of sherry at 10 A.M. What a cliche.

Virgins stand up, whores lay down. Horizontal. Vertical.

Those shoes would fit me.

Where do birds die?

They put kittens in socks, pitch them and hit them with baseball bats.

I can't take any more.

It won't be like this when we grow up. Nothing will take us apart, we'll always be together, always have each other. Cross your heart? Hope to die. Stick a needle? In my eye.

You have to be engaged three months before you can get married.

I can't scoot over, the dog peed on my side of the bed. I'd give them away when they're two years old. Until then, they're totally dependent.

Ask your piano teacher to teach you how to play "Far-away."

You missed the base by a mile, you're out.

All the children come to this room. They are safe.
Talk, sing, read-fight-write.

Too old to be a sister, too young to be a mother, too skinny to be a mammy.

There's a dead mouse in the toilet. Should I flush?
No, I'll take care of it. And don't you tell your mama, she'd get all upset. It's our secret. We put out poison because a mouse had been tearing kleenex from a drawer for a nest somewhere. The poison makes it thirsty.

We nearly died when you were born. I was bleeding to death and you were drowning.

Sell you down river to Ala-bam.
Keep the noise down, your daddy's sleeping.
The dance teacher said she was very limber, but just not very coordinated.

(The metaphor of your life.)
A bottle of gin under the vacuum cleaner bags.
Stars are the same size as earth. Their distance makes them tiny.

He got up to sing in assembly, all by himself, in front of the whole school, opened his mouth to sing and threw up.
Threw up. In front of the whole school.

Everyone apologized. You were another girl and not a boy. I loved you all the more.

No one said it was going to be easy.

If you lighten your hair and wear your contacts and if we'd had your teeth straightened, you wouldn't be too bad.
She's begun the bleeding.
I can't take any more.
Where are you going?
Leave me alone. I want to be alone.
If you think her Marlene Dietrich is good, you should see her Imogene Coca.
You have her wide mouth and you'll get those deep lines, like parentheses, at each corner.
Just like mother.
Blew up for no reason.
Just like mother.
Just like mother, between sisters, the worst insult.
She cried every blessed night for thirteen years.
Does she recognize anyone, does she know mother? How does she show, what are her signs? How do you know? Does she close her eyes when she sleeps? Does she count? Do you pity her, do you envy her? Is it just her means of expressing, her way out, that are cut off? Do you envy her, do you pity her? What is the cause, whose is the fault? Why?

No words without end spring up to fill a well of thirteen years, no markers warn of icy bridges in foreign countries, no candle light to be snuffed out. But think of her when you mistake the sound of leaves landing on the ground as footsteps following you (they are hers); or when you know, not remember or imagine, the piercing sub-sub zero cold and
the slight fairy fingers of snow that wave across the road before and behind (they are hers); or when you light a match to the gas oven and are slam-blown backwards by a hot orange blue explosion (she lives there). Coming to, you can see to see your hands, you are allright, but your face is covered with black crinkles that used to be hair and eyelashes and brows. Think of her than and again when you can't shut out your mother's voice rebounding endlessly, tiny from a hospital bed, thick from under drugs, "You can sit there the rest of your life crying and it will not atone for one moment of the agony and grief and shame you have brought me."

Sit there for the rest of your life and try not to think, try not to think of your other sister, of how much both your mother and you want to be her. We are alike in ways we fear, we fear what we want. Nothing is so blank, no nothing. No response. Nothing.

After dedicating the better part of her life to our family, Eunice was retired with a bleeding ulcer. No one else was hired to take her place; all of us were grown or leaving. We thought it was the better part. She finished college and last we heard, was teaching school. Her petite and curvy white uniforms still spook out in the hall closet.

The other sister has been dead for longer than she lived but her name lodges in your throat like a thumb print, your speech is always filtered. All obvious signs of her ever
having been have vanished. The fallout shelter is a wine cellar. The greenhouse is storage for bottles, broken appliances and tools, and pots of rock hard dirt and tall dry brittle stalks. The other sister's room was remodelled into an elegant study that we avoid on the rare visits home. On the rare visits home, we wonder after the robed lady.


Vacuum. Suction roar has you imagine the whole life of the thing passing from you, a granny's summation at commencement: she was a wild one, didn't mean to hurt my feelings, it was so easy for her to do that, she must've been my favorite hands not fully developed until the fourth month. Presently one inch and an eighth long, weighing in at barely an ounce. You wouldn't notice much less recognize it on the sidewalk. Research. Step on a crack. Scrape away, scrape away, scrape away home. Carry me back, step on a crack, scrape away, scrape away, scrape away home. If your mother knew she'd make you wish you'd never been born.

Here. Scoot up. This is a pillow. This is a blanket. This is the dark relief. We leave the door open. If you need anything, don't hesitate to call
If you were not mine, perhaps I could excuse your degenerate behavior, your deplorable life styles.

--- If we were not hers, perhaps...
--- Uh-oh, do you think she's mad, Who, what, did it this time? Or could it be the same old cumulative effect?
--- O dear. We are lousy filth.
--- Again.

Lousy filth. One has an abortion. You didn't ask to be born? That's a cheap answer, even you can come up with better. One finally gets married but her mate worships Hitler and hides an arsenal under their bed. One is queer; Herr Doktor Freud calls the condition a search for the approving mother figure, I know that, but I call a spade a spade.

--- She does have a way with words.
--- Where are yours? Why don't you defend yourselves?
--- O la. My words as as the burned cookies seteth out upon the window's ledge which the red squirrel cometh upon and stealeths.
--- And buries.
--- Tut tut. Lost your cookies and don't know where to find them?
--- She does have a way with words, a surgical precision.
--- No, no, no. She is simply practised and adept in
the most lethal way of stabbing. One does not gingerly poke the knife in and out as though testing for doneness, but instead rips and shoves and tears up and down. That is how the most painful damage is inflicted.

And one, last but not least, the composite picture of all her sisters' worst faults and deeds and features, one is a parasitic backstabbing adultress.

--- Touche!

--- But it was lovely, thought she'd understand.

I suppose it was lovely for you, I suppose you thought I'd understand. I don't. You're wrong, you always were my daughters, my girls. Who did this to you? When did it happen? I've been a faithful wife, a good mother; I worry, there's nothing to confess. You never talked back, cried when scolded or had your stomachs pumped.

When you were born, your father put a pot holder on his head and danced my mother around her kitchen.

You were a long baby, learned to walk before your older sister and pushed her around in the stroller. Your spine grew s-shaped, your legs bowed from carrying the other younger ones, you, little mother.

You pounded locked doors, ran away naked and wailed for the moon. When you walked past the church, you always limped.

And you, my solemn pretty baby, I could dress you in lace and a huge satin bow, you were the only one who would
stay unmussed. Tore off your fingernail in the screen before I could stop—

--- stop heart, stop. It never obeys.

--- Why didn't any of us inherit her xift?

--- Because we know ho it feels. She never runs down. Or out. It is our duty to endure.

--- I tease her, reason with her. When she leaves me alone, I weep.

--- I agree with everything she says, not because I am what she says but because I can see how she'd see it that way.

--- I rebel and dream. When she calls me a nasty bastard, I have to ask, "What does that make you, mama, just what does that make you?"

When I'm in her house, I dream: she's tied to a stake with gold cord, wearing the white gown the artist made up when he painted her portrait. The stake slides down slow through the floor, pulling her to her knees. We stand in a semi-circle, watching, sympathetic. She calls for help, she calls each of us in turn. I wake, she really is calling me. I'm in her house, I fly to her room and ask what she wants. "Nothing," she says, "I was just dreaming."

--- All of us have that one.

And I lose my voice. An ache between my hip bones spreads upward, an icy claw grips
my throat from the inside. It's just the wind, it's nothing. The talon clutches tighter, until, even if I were brave enough to speak, if there were something to say to make her stop, I couldn't. Throat shut off, split tongue cut out, it's nothing.

I lose my voice. Irrevocably. Not with a bang, but a giggle.

You have an ideal body for babies, you know.

--- And a face only a mother could swat?

Rewards? Who said anything about rewards? I'd just appreciate a small freedom from the endless blivets. Rewards? I confess I expected your names in the paper for honors besides lawsuits, indecent exposure and DWI. O, yes, you've done well, you excel as lousy filth. I am sick, do you hear, of blivets, and this shame, this shame, this utter I want

an absence

of pain. If you think you'll find a man as crazy as you, you're insane. You won't marry. I'd have no respect for him if he could want you. He'll probably be colored. And that would once and for all, truly, do your father in. I'll pray for you.

--- God's little stone caster.

--- No thanks.

--- O dear. We are not worthy. We cannot comprehend the seriousness of any religious ceremony.
--- We would degrade the ritual with our presence and contaminate the congregation.

--- We are not washed in the blood of the lamb. We are not like sheep. We are not holy holy holy.

--- Holy cow. That's enough. Or too much.

Do me a favor, will you? Read these two books.

--- The word here is proselytize.

Do me a favor. This book explains that we are rational human beings who make stupid mistakes. And the thesis of this one: my generation is goal oriented while yours seeks identity.

You're gone.

I'll have nothing to do with you.

I don't recognize you, your face disgusts me. Your father believes you'll piss on his grave. I am cutting the cord. You are hereby released.

Quiet, close it behind you. For a while they won't notice you're gone. Evening sounds gently intrude from other rooms; a sister clears the dinner table, your father plays nocturnes at the piano and your mother draws water for her bath; outside, crickets hum and maybe a mockingbird calls. You reach into her crib, cupping her face between your hands as your prayer. Perhaps it comes together for a moment and is almost beautiful. The flourescent lights glow
in the greenhouse and a luna moth, like some raw huge leaf, rises up from the flowers and begins to drift, obliquely defining the limits of the darkling glass.
I live in a small cabin, a town called Maiden in the Judith Mountains. The place is empty but for me. At times I think it's empty.

My cat Abstract died of old age some years ago. When we first came upon each other, I was digging sego lily bulbs in the clearing and Abstract, already full grown, was furiously scratching at the base of the cottonwood tree over in the copse. Both of us paused to stare but neither of us approached. We then ignored each other or else one of us would've fled. Afterwards I recognized the cat only out of the corner of my eye, that taunt of quicksilver and blue favoring my blind spot. No matter how abruptly or casually I looked, nothing was there. The teasing and who-is-playing-with-who behavior lasted a year or so, an eye blink, until finally Abstract materialized to slide up and roll in my lap. Neither cat nor lap was strange to the other.

The creature shivered at touch, not out of fear but with a complete abandonment to touch. We knew our parts. All matters were clarified, obvious, no chance confusions. Once I allowed myself to notice how well my thumb fit the
hollow of Abstract's throat--- the v of toothpick bones, the fine vibration that came from between, how easy to--- and before that thought of intent could stray or pass further, Abstract's teeth shocked into the fleshy padding of my hand.

I never learned the difference between female and male cats even though I did examine a graphic photograph comparing the two. I remember it was graphic, but not which was which, hence the name Abstract, who really was not my cat. Abstract dropped in for its weekly affirmation and an impersonal reassurance that itself was still there. I'm sure Abstract visited other haunts.

Abstract crossed the shifting sands, the great divide, passed away away in my very lap, wearing the typical half closed eyed smile of bliss and delicately extending and tensing a paw at the sheer delight of having its belly stroked. Dead. Just like that. I laid the cat at the base of the cotton wood tree because I couldn't bear the image of digging a hole to cover it up. Next morning, Abstract was gone. Gone, carried off in the night I suppose by one thing or another.

Immediately after Abstract's death, I sneezed every twenty minutes. This might be called a replacement or sublimation for grief or the stroking, but sometimes, a sneeze is just a sneeze. A sneeze is the dispelling of evil spirits which prompts the response of "God bless you," don't get them
on me. (Not a soul was near to prompt.) Under no circum-
stances are you to spook a body engaged in the act of sneez-
ing, it will stop her/his heart. (This is a ghost town;
it's not the ghosts that scare me but the weekend bottle
collectors.) And, never attempt to restrain a sneeze. The
pressure can collapse the bones of your face (which in my
case might be a change for the better, except, I always
forget, it would be painful).

I'm a normal healthy person who finds an occasional
sneeze gratifying and little worse than a frustrated one,
however, enough is enough. This sneezing bout was terrify-
ing and boring. I could do nothing but recover from the last
and prepare for the next, nothing but endless sneezing. I'd
never sleep again. It was messy.

The sneezing siege lasted three days years ago, another
eyeblink, and I haven't done it since. I wouldn't mind one,
only one, and I seriously consider snuff and pepper. The
result though loses appeal when it's expected or forced.
There are many other facts concerning sneezing that I do not
know. The Hungarians regard a statement as true if it is
followed by a sneeze. I'm waiting. My body is keyed to
waiting.

the indirect object

Fools rush in where angels have already been for ten
years. Jet planes unzip the sky. Everything I say is
quoted from those who quote (even that line) and one of these days I fully intend to grant equal space and time to footnotes. The bulk of what there is of this paragraph would be attributed to my friend Ruth. I'd only been told of Ruth when I recognized her immediately at a Halloween party, disguised, inappropriately, as an indirect object, inappropriately because I've yet to meet and probably won't anyone more thoroughly enamoured of Her Self than Ruth nor anyone who had a more substantial justification. In that first jumbled and hasty exchange of histories, we discovered that we were related by blood through a mutual great aunt, Immaculata, who was the first woman to fly over Africa.

Ruth was made of a predictably helter skelter arrangement of parts; it wasn't the material that was striking, but rather the intricate stitching that joined the jagged edges, the mismatched, mishapen and vital pieces together. I composed myself simply to avoid becoming lost in Ruth. There was no one like her, as is now true of most I know.

NAME: Ruth Threlkeld. PERSONAL DATA: (date of birth) Friday. (place of birth) Bliss, Kentucky, nowhere near Pleasureville and Thrill Hill. (marital status) undeterminable. (sex) yes. (physical appearance) Hallucinatory, 5'9", 108 lbs., possesses or is possessed by that spirituality associated with some vague and nagging cryptic terminal disease. (health) Victimized by some vague and nagging cryptic terminal disease. PROFESSIONAL OBJECTIVE: To locate a man who will take her on trips to foreign and exotic places and will buy her pretty things. WORK EXPERIENCE: Is either unable or unwilling to cope with the necessary requirements of the pedestrian world, such as waking in the morning, eating and
earning a living. Held positions of idiot savant, femme fatale and enfant terrible simultaneously. MILITARY: Only on certain occasions. PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES: Founder, instigator and prophet of Free Speech Riots, now showing. HOBBIES, SPECIAL SKILLS AND/OR TALENTS: Sings.

She could sing, and the force and quality of her voice attracted and fascinated a wheel, a circle of doters, artists, and sundry mystics. I was included by fluke; my silence, firmly entrenched in awe, stupidity and doubt, was accepted as a form of knowing. The wheel spun, Ruth was frequently sucked into situations that exacted a good deal of remorse. O, she'd sing, with a willful abandonment, somewhat detached from her voice as though it were another instrument she played. She'd sit cross-legged on the floor, a hourglass shaped dulcimer resting flat across her knees. I'm sure she moved, her mouth for whatever words, her fingers to strum and press and slide, but I wouldn't swear, I recall a stillness, clean and deep. Did she make the song, the words and melody as she went along? Was a light generated following its own imposition of sound? Was it timbre, was it tone, was each note held-stroked-grasped-dropped for fitting and proper amount of time? I forgot to observe, I forgot to take notes. For a brief space, you see, Ruth's song had the power to reconcile all mad and rampant differences of those who heard and listened; her audience thought and felt as a single body, soul and cell; knowing their place, her audience had no thought or feeling but of the
song. The door barring the secret to the universe was coaxed to open of its own accord without a squeak and we were momentarily allowed to share a glimpse of the fragment. In other words, the ineffable.

Since the circle pushed and shoved for that kind of spontaneous magic, our sensation of unity didn't last very long or happen very often and when it fell through as it must with the returning hush, the distance between presences was even more accentuated than before Ruth ever parted her lips, as if her listeners were ashamed of attempting such an impossible inconception. I wish my arms were long and strong enough to grope into and through the black, to jab the right buttons, twist the right knobs and dials so that those waves of sound would come winding and reeling back. That would be my proof; I'm not just easily moved or touched. I hope they're out there, perhaps as a descant to Chopin's improvisations on the island of Majorca while George Sand was panted, smoking and horizontal under the piano.

Like most friends who grow close, Ruth and I developed and spoke in codes, in tongues. Slobbagishly, or, you talk like a waterfall, clot to burr anna nicht to, or, the world as we know it never existed until now; la, or, ding. Like most friends as close, our getting to the point was evasion and our emphasis upon honesty was pretense. I suppose we were close, rooted yet intrigued with the notion of being,
of being carried away. As a greeting in a crowded room, Ruth would run up to me and jump, wrapping her legs around my waist and her arms around my neck and howl like a banshee, especially if you've never heard one. I'd stand solid, embarrassed and flattered and try to figure out how someone as skinny as Ruth could be so powerful. She never jumped me when we were alone.

Something happened, was violated and that's all I choose to say of what happened. Perhaps I still cannot imagine or acknowledge the incident, perhaps I don't want to see what I say because then I'll know what I think. My response to the affair was to cut my hair like the nun Ruth once called me. My expression never varied, it remained immobile as though I watched a river. Then I wept. Tears nestled and crept in the folds of my habit. I wore the color blue, sunrays scattered most result in blue. The sky was my shroud, I pulled it close.

Of course the disguise is inappropriate, but it's the best and only I can currently reach and find. With verbs of asking, telling, showing, giving and so on, there is often a second or indirect object that names the receiver of the message, gift, etc. What's the question? We are our disguises, we believe them, suddenly and finally. Suddenly and finally with a wind and whoosh sound and vast flapping of wings, I viewed everything and one as though through the wrong end of a telescope. They were tiny, framed by a
circle, I was immense. Immensely foolish. This, I suppose, is called forgiveness.

I never really returned the entire way, I like it here. Ruth wouldn't hurt me again; I doubt if she ever realized how deeply she had. (I never said I was articulate and only the obscure was obvious to Ruth.) A phantom limb, an arm, a hand, tries to guide and sculpt an understanding of it all. No. Ruth will always be of the stuff that vanishes as soon as I'm out of breath and equal to it, like the run down image of sky water mirages on the freeway. And I'll always available, willing to step out of this little life and fly to her when and if she should need me. Provided she pays the travelling expenses.

an injection of reality

Yes, yes, yes. I should have a baby. I should be good.

I'll be awake in the night, nursing my child and whispering, "You will grow up." I'll tell myself that the baby won't mold itself according to my fancies or schemes; the baby is real and itself. Already. Already a supple lump of putty with dandelion hair and easy-to-translate signs—crying when hungry, tired or wet, sleeping or laughing the rest of the time. It will have nightmares that I have only one breast, in the middle and little. I'll rock the baby, marking time; the loss of miraculousness and dependency coincides with the acquisition of self-curiosity and
memory. As I sing, "My Gal's a Corker," the baby patters its hands into my mouth and eyesockets.

A baby on my lap would be my excuse and reason (This is why I'm not doing anything else. Do not expect me to do anything else.), my explanation and shield (Anything worth doing is worth doing well. Anything worth doing is worth doing all the time. Motherhood. Please do not look at me. It is all given, there is nothing left.), my achievement (Look at what I have done. This is why I was born?).

I can still see it now: I'd be banging away at this typewriter, a relic from an ancient age when the keys had not yet been arranged in an alphabetical order, an innovation designed to slow down the flying fingers of those first modern Gibson-girlish secretaries because they typed faster than the machine could print, yes banging away and wearing earplugs, earplugs I said, while in a corner--- my excuse and reason, my explanation and shield, my achievement, my child--- would be guzzling lestoil.

Those aren't the only stakes and not all that stopped me. I realize that the child would not be produced through parthenogenesis so I must confess: the moments and places of my life failed to conspire to unite me with any permanence to the suitable father-child-lover partner. It's a matter of timing. (In the probable rain, a common sparrow sings the only French I know, "Non, je ne regrette rien.") It's all right. The blank space between my hands fills itself
with brush strokes and tiny stitches, with ivory grace notes, the glory of profound typos and blank spaces. And that is ignoring my garden, the clearing and beyond the woods.

cupid's bow

When Ruth was twenty she had a baby on Halloween, a girl she named after me. Ruth didn't marry the man who she claimed was the father, a safari-outfitted circus Barker. After studying her daughter's hands for two years, Ruth ran off to Cincinnati to be a dancer. The girl, twenty now, was raised by Ruth's parents.

She was here yesterday, the girl was. Running away, trying to find herself. Some ironies of existence are kind; although I've deliberately or accidentally skipped maternity, Spockhood and all that other ringamarole, it has been granted unto me to be the ideal grandmother-fairy-godmother, a part as fitting to me as the proverbial glove. She praises my double-ruffled African violets, they bloom for her, and I praise her fine dark eyebrows and her type of mouth referred to as a Cupid's bow. A Cupid's bow allows no loose ends. I'd read of such mouth and visualized them to be shaped like the decorative bows binding gifts or presents or the fancy way a little girl's party sash is tied, but no, those are not her red and perfect mouth. Her mouth is the bow from which Cupid, baby-fatted god of love, shoots and twangs his
arrows of passionate, platonic or eternal love into the hearts of the unsuspecting. Contrary to popular belief, Cupid is not blind or just. He is more than able to hit the mark in the dark. His quiver even has an arrow that adamantly refuses and his supply of sharp and ready feathered shafts is never depleted even though he rarely retrieves them from his bull's eyes.

I can see Ruth saying, "You can always tell if you love someone if you imagine their death." Ruth is immortal. I'm feeling as old and dry as a milkweed pod and just about as close to splitting and scattering and nearly ready to give up on myself, give myself up as I could be, but not on Ruth's daughter. I imagine a world of horrid tortures for her; she falls in love with a white bull or she turns into a tree, she drives her motorcycle up a ramp and through a wall of flame and doesn't come out the other side, nothing never happens to her... these visions are only present when the girl is not. When she is with me, I don't advise, judge or worry about her (although she does smoke too many cigarettes), I only want to heat and carry water so she can bathe and wash her hair. I want to put her in a flannel nightie and give her hot almond milk with honey. I have chosen to live alone; there is no one or thing from which to be isolated, but the girl could stay, her company wouldn't distract or pain me. We are the same, we are always the same. We sat on my bed trying to avoid any
reference to the approaching winter. We fail. We are not natives or pioneers.

We do not cease to miss crickets, squirrels, lightning bug time or the color green. We know to always keep a quilt near the bed, no more unbearable hot humid nights of sleeping naked in front of a fan. We expect snow during any month, thunder when it falls, hails when it shines and laughs when it freezes. Mittens are warmer than gloves. We do not read One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich if it is February. It's coldest in the mornings, the earth has lost all her holdings of heat and hasn't had time to collect. It's coldest in the mornings and if we must go out, it's best to chant, "Balmy, balmy, balmy," as we walk quickly and wear down. This is understood.

"Last year, at about this time," the girl says, "I sold my chevy van and settled down in a trailer in Lolo. I was in the mood for solitude. I hiked along the ridge of the Bitteroots. The sun sets late there. I heard piano music, a Chopin symphony, must've been my imagination. I came to a place, a lake with huge red rocks stacked like pennies. I could stay here the rest of my life, I thought. I built a lean-to with my tarp and laid down watching the stars come out. Then it reversed, they blotted out, one by one, clouds. The sky sank, it began to snow, something fierce. All those stars. If I didn't leave soon, I couldn't find my way home. So dark. When I got in the valley the next morning, the
sun was shining, warm. It took me three days to get to San Diego."

I held her feet in my lap, rubbing and keeping them warm. She'd come a long way, had a long way to go and soon she slept, curved like the letter C, a magnet or a question mark. Her body empties, the breath from her red and perfect mouth creates a vapor that rises and mingles above. This is called dreaming, she loves it. All at once a nimbus wags his beard and says impatiently, pointing, "Here, right here, on my thigh." A goldfish grows according to the size of its tank. A woman, seaweed hair, bloated from drowning, still wheels her many arms to dismember herself. A changeling peeks and leers, leaks and peers around a bonfire. A wild eidolon, disguised as night in a navy hooded sweatshirt, flies flushed down the alleys in town, stealing spring lilacs. The room is filled with their scent.

templates

Winter is over, this season's quilt is done. I've spread it on the floor and set myself in the geometric center. The pattern I used this time is called Delectable Mountains. My fingertips are pocked with pin pricks. Each quilt leaves me with more scraps and bits of material than I had before. I never run out. It's like travelling, I suppose, even if you don't pick up anything, the suitcase is always fuller on the return trip. And you know you've for-
gotten something. I'm trying to develop a theory. Are the colors true? Who will warm this quilt? What good is it besides pretty? Winter is over.

I'm in an oak chair, it has a leather seat and brass tacks. The lilac bush outside the window is nearly ready to burst. They are already blooming in town, but then there, they water the sidewalks. I'm sipping Maker's Mark, smoking one of my two daily cigarettes, half-way waiting for the deer to step out of the fir fringing the clearing. Those are my eyes.

Lately, as I hope happens if you live alone, I often hear a voice, soft and desperate, calling before dark and carefully enunciating my name. God probably, and just another religious experience.

But the voice assumes a shape with rustler's shoulders and kneels, finally even to me, therefore not the moon. His shadow is blue. It must be raining somewhere, he's forgotten his mask and slicker. My hands can rest on the damp chamois vest, my hands, how easily they're satisfied with a skin not mine.

"Penelope," he says.

"I'd forgotten it was time. You've managed to find me out. Again," I say.

"You're never anywhere else. You're the only person in this entire irrational universe who can make me feel like I'm in one place."
That line has been sitting in his head since last year, I can tell from the practiced sound of it. He's a hopeless fool, bringing me dogwood petals. A seashell. Or the sheet music to a Leverkuhn prelude. He's out of his mind. I tell him so.

"I can't think of anything else to say," he says.

We lay us down.

What is his name? I go through an entire list: Political cartoons? A fiddle and fragile old-man-like ankles? Echo-location in bats? None of them fit, none of them are him.

O hold behold. When we first met, I was much too involved in what was going on to notice what was happening. And now I'm too aware of what happens, this is passion, to be very involved, for it to last very long or feel like much. It does anyway, I should've reckoned. I carry, I'm borne, as though by an odor to a place I though I'd forgotten.

At some point in the night, I'll note the frequency of times and different windows looked through, always seeing that same landscape of male shoulder and moon. At some point during the night, one huge man evolves.

As a child, the sky was a thick sheet, the stars were poked holes, and the moon was a tunnel. Some blinding source of light was covered. Dark hair whirs around the curve behind his left ear. As a child, I'd listen for my father's snoring, the sound reminded me of the ocean, that in/out
in/out rhythm. My father would snort sudden and stop, I'd be left jolted with the image of a fully crested foamy wave completely frozen and wondering, 'Is he dead?' but then he'd exhale and snore again and my wave could fall and roll.

What is his name? He jerks as though scared of landing. The more asleep he goes, the heavier he becomes. The weight is unbearable, smothercating, can't breathe. Want to shake him wake, heave him off and out the window. But no, I make circles with my hands in the small of his back, the hook of spine, the exquisite texture of that skin.

Good morning. "This smoke filled bar is something I ain't used to. It's dark as a dungeon and damp as the dew." He is singing from the bathtub, in his way. I slip into his travelling bag a carved ivory monkey with tiny hands clasped firmly over its mouth. I pretend he'll understand the message; I pretend he'll remember who and where it came from and that he won't give it to some hesitant and evasive young thing with wise almond eyes; I pretend he'll be surprised to find it amid the clutter some day before he decides to toss the whole kit and kaboodle into the grand canyon just to see it disappear before it hits bottom.

"Yes," he says, "I'll never forget. You were in the parking lot, the back seat of the red souped up convertible. Been riding on those windy mountain roads. I had no choice. You looked like you'd been through a fan. You looked like Veronica Lake. I quit staring when that slick and hefty
fellow of yours came back with your bottle of Dr. Pepper and got in the car without opening the door. The rascal didn't spill nothing either. Car took off with a squeal but I saw you look back at me. I saw you looking over your shoulder, drinking through a straw. I found you out, didn't I?"

Even though that's not precisely how I'd have him find me, I've never admitted, 'that was someone else, not me,' not that I haven't been someone else at times. "And you," I say, "you at the church picnic. Snuck up, almost scared me. You laughed and said, 'What if you'd been a deer?' and started taking your clothes off, handing them to me, folded. For a swim. God, I was young, trying to convince myself I'd seen a naked man in broad daylight before."

He doesn't say that that wasn't him either.

He makes an outlandish promise of taking me to the ocean and not worrying about time or his wife. We have our moments and a dream or two.

"And as for this one," he says with his preacher tone as I lace up his boots, "as for this one, some folks fly along shedding skin after skin. Other folks trip along picking them up, one after another, piling them on."

It remains our common ground even as he turns to go as he came. And some folks, I want to whisper, can't make up their wobbly old double-minded minds.