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Thousand Buddhas

Brenda Miller

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A THOUSAND BUDDHAS

by

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Thanks to Keith Scribner, and to all my teachers.
What I want happens not when the deer freezes in the shade and looks at you and you hold very still and meet her gaze but in the moment after when she flicks her ears & starts to feed again.

—Robert Haas

Praise
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Hunger

The wrinkled list demands only peanut butter, bread, and milk, but the bananas look so good and the oranges smack their lips and whisper juice and a dozen eggs gleam to make me hot for French toast so now they perch, twelve singing mermaids in the rocky bay of my arms. I teeter to the checkout stand, holding my food in one huge embrace, as if I were Kali Ma gathering the children of India to her many-faceted bosom. A bag of tortilla chips leaps to my hands and swings back and forth, giggling against my legs. The woman ahead of me buys white bread and pork chops, her spine curved over the blessed conveyer, her squat fingers reading Wonder, as her bread circles forward to the ringing machines. Newspapers rustle in their cages: Half-man, Half-girl Makes Self Pregnant! and naturally I wonder how, and then I wonder what it would take, and then I’m lying in a bed, some bed in a dark room with ten candles burning and the shades drawn and a silk robe covering my knees. My left hand soothes my belly and holds it steady while my right hand does something I don’t want to know about, I turn my head to face the wall and try not to cry when I penetrate though the pain is exquisite. My sperm surges up, my egg plummets down, my womb creaks open, I scream when they meet, both of them mine, both of them hoarding my face and my eyes, the color of my skin. I may remain hungry for other flesh, but in this room I incubate with infinite patience, by a window, in a rocking chair, an ancient one, handmade, and I do not breathe a word, only hum a lullaby or a birthing song. The gestation period for a mammal of this sort must be years and variable. I will look it up in books, I will pad to the library on swollen feet, I will hold my hands at the small of my back and push a grocery cart with my belly. Prowling these aisles. Ravenous.
Miscarriage

Melons age, late tomatoes
bulge with blood sweet, acid
to the tongue—plenitude hurts
these vines. Zucchini are gone
but spaghetti squash still burgeon
their pale and transparent green.
The garden slinks out the summer
with a spell of abundance and good will,
and we nibble what’s left,
not weeding, watering where we choose.
Whatever dies nourishes next year,
and after a season of gluttony it is good
not to care so much, the burden
of preservation lifted, failure not a word
we utter among the exhausted vines.
Pain is unforeseeable—we don’t know
what else blooms in the dark, what else
strains toward harvest, seduced
by momentum, merciless and wild.
The Shooting

By accident, I saw a man shot
from a cannon. In the spotlight
he climbed, all sequins—the crowd
rustled and puffed, they knew
he could do anything.
Cannon wheels, high as the bleachers,
swayed the gymnasium floor.
He crawled backward down the barrel,
his brightness descending bit by bit.
Children edged up on their seats, hands
clenched and sticky, mouths ajar.

I stood
at the weight room door, my nose
pressed to the tiny glass,
as if I were a child too poor
for the price of admission.
My muscles shook from the weight
of my last set, and I leaned
slack-jawed and simple—

Children
stood on their seats. A woman
in green sequins and feathers
bent over and clutched at her knees.
He could have been curled like a fetus
or a worm unearthed for bait,
but when the fuse ignited, a giant
hissing lifted the crowd, and he
flew, enraptured, his long body
arced, his arms outstretched
as if in welcome,
or mouthing the word wonderful.
He rolled in one slow flip-flop
to the net, bounced up
whole and cheery, white suit
impeccable, sequins ringing,
smoke trailing from his hair.
Wow, wasn't that something,
a tall boy behind me said.
He cupped his hand on the door
just above my head.

The man
in white waved to a crowd gone wild
with love. I thought:
this boy might touch me with his palm,
an accidental wave of affection,
as if we were survivors of something
terrible, a catastrophe
that could change us forever.
Ghost Town
(Challis, Idaho)

1
Old light mosses these windows
that don’t even try
to gleam anymore. Perhaps the low sun
snags a tooth of jagged glass
and silver geysers erupt, but now
it’s all one dimension:
the velvet wood, the astonished panes,
torn curtains caught in the gaping lower rim.
Snow on the false fronts, snow on the roofs
and the parody of roofs behind.

2
A hand tied back the curtain?
Knotted the rag still gripped
in the curving shape
of restraint?

3
There is more at work here than ghosts.
An old pressure bears
when we leave the road and stumble
near the deserted cliffs.
Our palms grow dappled with rust.
Tin walls stand in attitudes of falling
so oblique we lean with them
and tilt our heads.

But a wood cross stays
erect, black bird-print hoisted
up from the unrelenting snow.
Kilns hewn from bone-rock
of this Idaho mountain
that tumbles and yeehaws
toward town. Boulders chip
with age and silver.
Up top, bandits slip
and come around, the best of them,
invisible, creep up to the saloon.
Women tie back the new curtains,
lean from their windows and warble
sweetness to the boys downtown.

No fire in the hermit's house.
On outlaw feet we trespass
silently to the graves.
Harlots

Come summer it's the roses,
gone loony in their wide-open
lust, long petals lolling
like tongues, or languid
as thighs opening, murmuring
smell me, make me yours,
drink deep, drink way down
the middle of my thick stalk,
thorns and leaves and hard
roots, sip at the ancient
cleaving, the slow-groaning
part, the creaking-bones apart,
the long-aching gape of love.

Watch

The yawn of great
blue herons lifting
excess wing.
Letter To Rhea In Ukiah

Rhea, six years gone, but spring
feels the same: constant in its plumage,
its sad, sad heart. A new mother then,
you looked at me as if I could save you,
held your baby out to me, said Here,
Please, I just need to get some rest.
You wanted him to feed from me, from my flat
tits, all nipple, and he suckled, screwed up
a mouth so angry, tired, confused.
You took him back, and he wallowed
in your breast, gulped and choked
on the hot flush of milk. Six years,
and my breasts have grown. You’d be surprised
to see how they nudge against my shirt.
They grow like I’m pregnant, but I think
it’s the opposite: the rest of me is draining
away and my breasts are the only parts left
that seem full. I wake up so dizzy I skid
to the bathroom, rest my head on the toilet seat.
I never throw up, but sit a long time,
coddled by the low hush of hand towels
on the rail. Around four in the afternoon
I can eat again, carefully slipping the food
down my throat, bits of chicken with broth, rice,
an egg or two. You might smile if you saw me,
the way I stand hunched at the counter,
spooning bland food to my mouth. You might laugh
and put your arm around me and say Honey,
it’s not worth it, this will pass
like everything else. You might take
the spoon and press it to my lips,
or lift your shirt and fold me in your lap,
rock my tender body with your hips.
Your nipple might graze my cheek,
and your breast glide into my mouth
like hope, or all the things that turn
to hope after they’re done with love.
All that belongs to the body returns again at last:
easy office of skin, pendulums of blood,
a tiny ache of fingernails as they grow.
Your daughter’s hair? It’s yours again
and still as cool against your cheek.
All that was good remains so,
and all that was bad is not so much forgotten
as transformed: the knife in his hand
is a gift; the woman who falls, rises
without the help you failed to offer,
washes away, her neck unbroken.

Here it is snowing, but it’s summer. Softball teams
rotate in the fields. Athletes flick snow
from their eyebrows like sweat. To them
it is a dream, but to you it’s only weather
out the windows, commonplace veils
of remembrance—your frozen hair snapping
in chunks; steaming waters you lie by, sleeping.
Light pulls plants on an axis, and music is heard
as vibration, nothing more. Distance (all distance)
is measured in syllables, while you peer
out every window at once, the snow falling
in sheets, the periphery of your vision
expanding to encompass everything. Still,
there’s the dim picture of yourself in retirement—
the lawn chair with arms wide as shelves, a good book,
a good glass of lemonade, clothes that filter the heat.
But your husband is gone, your child,
and the children who skipped fertilization
by a few millimeters. You don’t miss them
exactly, but you thought they might be here,
you look for them out the corner of your eye,
which has no corners. Every rim now
bowed and faintly blue as glass.

You don’t know when the snow stopped, or how,
but it’s clear now. All that was yours
to lose is recovered: the cocky slant
in your eye, the narrow hips, skin
so stainless it gleams. Of course,
the purr in your heart. Your mother’s face
so near again, and her finger on your nose. 
Your own fists, weightless as butterflies 
tossed against your cheeks. Then what? 
The naked eye. The shallow, upturned palm. 
Saucers of glass that gather, and spill.
Bring Me Something

For a year Jon and I lived near the helicopter landing at St. Patrick’s hospital. Several times a day the choppers cruised by overhead, fetching back the wounded from the isolated plains of Montana or the rough, shaggy mountains of Idaho. At first the urgent flights startled us, and we froze in the living room like veterans suffering flashbacks of war. But after only a week, the helicopter blades faded into a harmless background hum, along with the early morning traffic on Orange Street and the rattle of squirrels on the attic roof.

It was the year I started teaching full-time, and the year Jon and I talked, in deliberately vague terms, about getting married. It was the year my brother Jake—the “normal” one of my family, the child who never strayed—revealed a long-time addiction to cocaine, and, to clean himself up, left his wife
and children to join a new-age treatment program in Seattle. It was, according to the Sierra Club, the year of the spotted salamander, a creature endangered by the uncertain future of its habitat.

That year, I often woke before Jon and made coffee as quietly as possible. We lived in a tiny attic apartment—one room with expertly fitted dormers on three sides. It had been advertised as a “penthouse.” All the walls were paneled with thick planks of cedar, and the windows opened into the branches of a large Maple. It felt like a tree house, someplace to hold initiations and secret rendezvous.

Jon liked to sleep until the last possible minute, then lurch up and scramble his way to work. He often glared at me if I woke him too early, his eyes glowing beneath the pillow on his head. Since every sound echoed—the squeak of the refrigerator, the clank of the kettle on the stove—this happened with some degree of regularity. In warmer weather, I took my coffee out on the deck and sat for an hour or more, sometimes reading but most often watching the gradual shift in light among the trees.

I sat with my feet up on the rail, my hands cupped around my mug, feeling sad most of the time, a sadness so complete it teetered on pleasure. Jon and I tried too hard to make a go of things, tried so hard we wore each other out with constant
attention and judgements. We loved each other for long stretches at a time—days, weeks, intervals that felt as if they might last a lifetime. We talked earnestly over dinners and cleaned windows with a cheerful communality. But always we reached a peak and started a descent, began circling each other with squinted eyes, making mental lists of the other’s deficiencies, or ignoring each other completely.

I first got the notion I was pregnant while sitting on our deck, basking in the brief morning shadows of the fir trees. The knowledge came to me in a swift rush, not an intellectual awareness in my head, but a rapid tingling down the length of my whole body. I balanced my coffee cup on my abdomen.

“Well,” I whispered, “what do you know?” The hospital helicopter swooped overhead, flying low and fast, and I glimpsed the long, silver body above the trees. Across the river, the courthouse bells chimed seven times. Jon and I had made love the night before, almost violently, as if we were angry at something, not at each other, but at something beyond our control. He had bitten me on the shoulder, and I’d squeezed my hands around his neck. Afterwards I’d felt sore, raw, and split open.

I sat on the deck in a stupor, not moving, aware of the steady trickle of breath against my nostrils. I felt a distinct sense of relief, as if a decision had been made for us, set in
stone. I didn’t have to think anymore. I imagined the baby floating upside down, a placid smile on its face, ordering the world from its command post inside my body.

I didn’t tell Jon that morning. He was sleepy and distracted; his classes weren’t going well. He taught high school physics to students who looked at him askance and rolled their eyes as he tried to explain the mystical passions governing the universe. When he finally barked that everything hinged on the laws of attraction, he told me some of the girls brightened and sat up straight, quickly raising their hands.

I didn’t tell him I thought I was pregnant, but he knew something was up. That morning, he turned on the radio and hugged me before he got his cereal. It was a nice hug, without clutching, desperation or boredom. We sat across from each other at the kitchen table, and he rubbed his big toe along my calf.

Two weeks passed, and still I didn’t tell Jon. I practiced the words in my head at night, but in the morning I felt tentative, as if the words might spring from my mouth incorrectly—I might convey doubt instead of joy, for instance. These words had weight enough to shift whatever balance held between us. I didn’t go to a doctor because it was too early—she’d probably pat me on the shoulder and send me home. I sat on the porch in the mornings and fluttered my fingertips against
my taut belly. The shape of my body did not change, of course, but I felt something rippling below the surface, a vibration that most often felt like heartburn. The dull ache spread up from my abdomen and prickled inside my chest.

I went to my classes and stood leaning on the podium, smiling encouragement. But behind the smile I remained attentive to something else; I felt the inside of my body growing, stretching, changing. My smile became wistful sometimes, and my eyes glazed, and my students shifted uneasily in their seats.

During this period, my brother called me long distance from his room on Seattle’s Capitol Hill. Jake and I hadn’t talked for a long time, but I knew his voice the minute I picked up the phone—the grumble in his throat as if he needed to cough. My father had been the one to tell me Jake had moved to Seattle, but he’d refused to go into detail. He’d only used the word cocaine once, and then, in the same breath, the word prostitutes. I didn’t press him at the time. I knew Jake would call sooner or later, and during those weeks I jumped every time the phone rang.

“Stacy?” The line buzzed and hummed; distant music swelled across the wire.

“Jake? I can’t hear you too well. It’s this phone.” For
weeks our phone had been shorting out, forcing even local calls into an ear-straining ordeal. Jon insisted he could fix it himself, but his careful engineering hadn’t worked. He walked the line across our roof and discovered that squirrels had chewed right through the wire.

“How are you?” Jake yelled. He enunciated each word, as if he were speaking to a deaf foreigner.

“Good,” I shouted, unconvincingly, “I’m fine.”

Before the news, the adjective for my brother had always been *stalwart*; I thought I’d always know where to find him. He worked as a stockbroker. He married a sweet, predictable woman he’d met in college, and they bought a house two miles from my father on the fringe of Santa Barbara. In the average amount of time they had two children, a girl and a boy. In the pictures he sent, once a year, the pose was always the same, give or take the addition of a child: he stood in front of his garage, his hands behind his back, his feet planted to either side in military posture. His wife, a large woman with smooth, well-brushed hair, leaned against his shoulder; the children knelt in front. Jake rarely smiled for the camera, and his mustache made one grim line across his face.

Jon always said my brother looked like a magician in these pictures, a tribal sorcerer brought away from his native land and forced to dress in modern, western clothes. It was the way
Jake’s neck swayed up from his shoulders, his head bobbing at the end, the mustache so carefully straight, like a drawing. His eyes, so fixed and bright. Now, hearing his voice, I tried to picture my brother, a big man in a small room, his heels drumming on the wood floor. He’d be wearing jeans, but not Levis, something thinner and ill-fitting, and they might sag a little below his crotch. His T-shirt would pucker around his neck.

I wasn’t sure how to communicate with this Jake who had brought to light a self different from everything we thought him to be. We—meaning my father and I. At that moment I realized I’d been missing my brother for years. Missing the point of him.

“So,” I yelled. “How’s everything?”

“Great,” he said. The phone crackled and hissed. “I guess you heard?”

“Dad told me.” We were silent a minute. “What happened?”

“Well,” he said through the static, “I became addicted to an outer substance to mask my emotional needs, to silence my wounded child.”

“Oh.” I wasn’t sure what he meant. I pressed the phone tightly to my ear, which only amplified the noise.

“But it’s good here,” he said. “I can see the space needle from my window.”
I wanted to ask him all kinds of things: Was he scared? Lonely? What was his plan? Instead I said, feebly, "I've always liked the needle."

"What?" he yelled.

"Jake, I'm sorry, it's too hard to talk on this phone."

"That's okay," he shouted. "I was planning a visit. They think I need to see you."

"They? Who's 'they'?"

He cleared his throat, in a way that rose irritating goosebumps on my shoulder blades. "My support group. But I want to see you too. It's part of my process."

"Your process?" I said.

"Are you up for company?"

I was feeling nauseous every morning, and Jon and I had veered into a phase of stubborn growling. I was teaching three sections of freshman composition, all with papers due every week.

"Of course," I yelled. My hand flew to my throat. "Come whenever you want."

We made arrangements for him to drive out the next day, arriving in the evening. I gave him directions ("Take I-90 east 490 miles, then turn right"). We said our goodbyes, interrupting each other, shouting, then I flung myself face down on the couch. I clutched a pillow to my face, sucking on the
cover. What would I say to Jake? I thought about calling my father. He might now be willing to report on this new Jake, give me a clue as to the process on which he'd embarked. But I knew he wouldn't talk openly. My father took Jake's revelation as a personal affront, and, I realized, so did I. Jake was supposed to be the steady, burning light—the one fulcrum around which the rest of us could rotate and rest.

I'd been to Santa Barbara, staying with my father, a couple of months before, but I hadn't seen my brother. No one was talking. I called my brother's house and spoke to his wife, but she told me Jake was in Seattle, on a business trip. She ended our conversation quickly, her voice funny, excusing herself because one of the children was crying.

My father finally said it. He seemed more embarrassed than hurt or surprised. "Cocaine," he said. "All those commissions up his nose."

I asked him to repeat himself. "There's nothing more to say," he said. "There were prostitutes, too. What more do you want to know?" He ripped open a package of mini-oreos and dumped them in a bowl. "You can imagine the rest," he said. "Whatever you imagine is probably true." To distract me, and himself, he hurried into the living room, shoving aside piles of papers and books. My father was in school again, another
masters program, this time in Sanskrit.

He wanted to show me old home movies that he’d transferred
to video. He fiddled with the TV, his feet curled under him,
looking almost girlish though he was more than six feet tall and
carried the broad shoulders which Jake had inherited. A blurred
picture fluttered on the TV. “I ran them on the movie screen
and videotaped off that,” he said, proud of his independence
from the latest technology.

I thought of my father alone in the darkened house, the
images of our family flickering across the screen, emitting a
meager, ancient light. I could see him crouched in the kitchen,
his eye to a peephole, capturing those tremulous moments again.
It must have taken him days.

“It took a few days,” he said. He grabbed a cookie from
the bowl.

On the screen my father’s fingers gripped a hand-lettered
sign that read “Stacy and Jake, Marin, 1957.” That was the
year Jake was born; we lived in Marin for five years, in a house
that almost had an ocean view. The frame tilted, cut, then
zoomed in for a close-up of me, three years old, sitting on the
porch with a baby in my arms. The camera teetered to the baby’s
face, half-hidden in blankets, while I tapped my fingers on my
brother’s nose until he began to cry.

The frame blurred, then switched to a close-up of my mother
peering from behind the screen door. She put up a hand and waved the camera away.

I glanced at my father. He chewed slowly, his hand covering his mouth, cookie crumbs on his chest.

There were no more shots of my mother. She died when Jake was six months old. One day she was there, and one day she was not. Later my father told me it was an aneurysm, something no one could predict or control. At the time, I think I knew only a blankness, a terrible sense of something missing. My father said I wandered the house for days, perhaps weeks, looking under beds, checking the closets, mouthing the word “mama” over and over.

My father’s face appeared nowhere on the screen, only his fingers holding up the white signs. In a rare, candid shot, we saw my brother, five years old, dragging a giant piece of sea weed down the beach, the tail curling behind him like a bulbous snake. He brought it to me, a little girl in a frumpy bathing suit, and I hugged him, rolling with him onto the blanket. Jake brought me lots of presents when he was a kid—stones, crow feathers, hunks of mangled driftwood. Whenever I hugged him, he smelled like the ocean, and his skin felt salty and granulated next to my cheek.

An out-take, something that didn’t make it on film: the day he brought me sea kelp, Jake sat on my lap and asked me about
Japan. “Japan,” Jake had whined, pointing out over the calm tide. “Mr. Gregg says it’s over there, but I can’t see it.”

“No one can see it,” I said. “It’s too far away.”

“Then how do you know it’s there?”

“Because people visit and come back.”

Jake pulled at my lips. “But they saw it,” he insisted.

“Mr. Gregg pointed and everyone said it. Japan.”

“They pretended.”

Jake thought about this a minute, then shook his head. He wasn’t one to pretend. He tottered down the beach, muttering “Japan, Japan, Japan.” I watched, and he came back a few minutes later, his cheeks flushed, gripping something in his fist. It was a large agate, oval and smooth, banded in red.

“Japan!” he shouted triumphantly, throwing the rock into my lap. He leapt away and ran down to the sea.

On the TV screen, I saw Jake and I were already teenagers, sullenly reading books in the backyard, trying to ignore my father’s camera. I sighed and looked away. The rest of the house was dark, empty, and quiet. I could feel the rooms, the furniture in them settling, the pictures on the walls tilting in their frames. I thought of Jake, snorting cocaine in back-alley bars. I felt lonely then, and afraid, as if I were perched on the edge of a terrifying void over which I had no power. My father held out the bowl of Oreos. His smile was the most
tender thing I have ever seen.

I buried my hand in the bowl. My brother’s face flickered on the screen, young and unformed, his hair stiff in an oiled crewcut. Someone ran up behind him and put two hands over his eyes. I laid a cookie on my tongue and thought: my brother is always my brother, my father is always my father. I said it like a mantra, and the words echoed in my head long after the movies were done.

After Jake’s call, I pushed myself up from the couch, took lettuce out of the refrigerator and tore it apart at the kitchen sink. Jon emerged from the bathroom with a copy of Newsweek dangling from his hand. He rubbed his chin across my shoulder.

“So?” he said.

“So Jake is coming to visit.” I kept my eyes on the lettuce.

“Ah,” he said, “the shaman embarks on a pilgrimage, scratching out his roots.”

“Jon, this is going to be hard enough.”

He rested his hands on my breasts. “Maybe,” he whispered, “he’ll bring us powerful love potions from the promised land.” He kissed me on the neck, and I turned around, trailing a wet lettuce leaf across his cheek.

“Maybe he’ll bring manna from the gods.”
“Or a magic snake,” Jon murmured, pressing against me. We slid down to the kitchen floor. Everything looked distorted from there—the towering refrigerator, the precarious tilt of our stove. I closed my eyes, and Jon unbuttoned my shirt. It seemed like a long time since he had been tender with me, and I felt grateful. Distracted and grateful.

“Is he expecting to stay here?” Jon mumbled. He had his mouth on my breast.

“I don’t think so,” I said, but I wasn’t sure. I hadn’t told my brother exactly how small our apartment was. “But he could sleep on the couch.”

Jon rolled his hips over mine. “He could listen to us fucking. That would be exciting.”

I opened my eyes. Cornbread crumbs and bits of dead flies littered the linoleum. I smelled the garbage can under the sink. “God, Jon,” I said, pushing him away. “Don’t be so crude.”

He widened his eyes. “That’s a new one. Crude? Me?”

“I mean it. Stop.” I sat up against the cupboard. “Can’t you be serious about anything for even two minutes?”

He looked at me calmly, moving his jaw back and forth, the way he might appraise a new class on the first day of school. “What’s there to be serious about?” he said.

“Jake, for one. Me, for another.” I could hear my voice
rising, approaching hysterical. I pounded my fist on the floor. “Everything keeps changing every minute.”

“You mean with you and me?”

“With you, me, everything. Nothing’s constant. Nothing’s steady. It makes me sick.”

Those weren’t the words I meant to say. I stared at the fake wood grain in the floor.

“Everything is uncertain,” Jon said. I recognized his teacher voice, the one he used for lecturing, and it irritated me. “The only constant in the universe is change,” he said. “We can try to control it, but it’s all fabrications, lies.” He shrugged and traced a circle on my kneecap.

“I think I’m pregnant,” I said.

Jon looked at me, startled, and for a moment his face was completely open, a blank slate untouched by our life together. I felt as if I could reach over and pass my fingers through the boundary of his skin. In a second, though, he became Jon again, still open, but separate from me.

I think I’m pregnant. I had said the words to myself so many times that to hear them aloud was strange, like an echo, or a line from a movie. Jon didn’t say “What are you going to do?” He pulled me up from the floor. Music could have been playing, the lights could have gone low. We both could have been in soft focus and beautiful, our skin glowing, our eyes large and dark.
He kissed me, for so long I thought I might faint.

"Let's put your brother up in a hotel," he said.

The next morning I threw up twice before going to school, and Jon, still in bed, groaned and turned his face to the wall. A few seconds later he was beside me, kneeling next to the toilet.

"You going to be all right?" he said, stroking the hair back from my face.

"Yeah, fine," I said, but I was not fine. I felt wobbly most of the morning, and my stomach ache grew steadily worse until it felt like a burning ball in the center of my pelvis. When the discussions in my classes fell silent I did nothing to revive them, just said "that's enough," and waved the bewildered students out the door.

In my office I gulped some Alka Seltzer, which made me feel a little better at first. I pulled out a stack of papers to grade, but I couldn't concentrate. Finally, I rolled my chair to the open window. The fresh air felt good. It was the beginning of May, May 10, a Wednesday. On my calendar, written in red, was a doctor's appointment for four o'clock that afternoon.

My office was three floors up and overlooked the quad. Below me a stream of students flowed in surprising geometric
patterns, the primary colors of their new spring jackets bright and glossy. The lilacs were budding, and when I leaned out to see them better I glimpsed a dead bird on the sill, half-eaten, its belly exposed. A sour taste rose in my throat. The phone rang.

It was my brother. "I'm in Spokane!" he shouted. He was in a phone booth on a busy street; I could hear the roar of traffic behind him. "I just wanted to let you know I'm stopping for a bit in Couer D'Alene. I might be later than I thought."

"That's fine," I said. A spasm of pain jerked low in my belly. I sat upright and took a deep breath, thought about telling him to turn around. Instead I said, "I can't wait to see you."

"Me too. I'll be there in about four-five hours."

"Okay. Jake..." The traffic roared on, behind my brother in another town. Two girls laughed shrilly below my window, and the pain swelled again in my abdomen. I thought of the home movies, my little brother snuggled against my lap.

"Stace?"

"Jake, bring me something, okay?"

"Sure," he said. His voice faded. "What do you want?"

"Anything. A souvenir of your trip."

I hung up and rolled my chair back to the window, but I kept the phone in my lap. I was going to have to call someone
in a minute, I knew that, but I wanted to wait just this little while. I touched the windowsill. The pain in my belly was extraordinary. It receded to a small pinprick then ballooned again. I felt tired, too tired to think. Too exhausted to work out the necessary motions. I leaned back, closed my eyes, and held onto that pain as long as I could.

I thought about when Jake was six, and he had brought me a Mother’s day present he made in school. It was a cereal bowl sculpted from clay, the edges fluted like a sea creature. The word MOM was carved into the bottom. Jake handed it to me, then slid off his chair and made for the door.

“Hold it,” I said.

He stopped, his back to me, his hand gripping the doorknob. His neck was stiff, straight as a ruler. His red knit cap hugged the tops of his ears.

I was nine years old, and too young to say what I had to say.

“Jake,” I said. “I’m not your mom.”

“I know.” He jerked the door open and flew outside, his knees pumping all the way up to his chest. Halfway across the lawn, he tore off his hat and flung it toward the sky. It could have been a caricature of joy, his arms outstretched, his chunky body arching in the air. But I knew, even then, it was something else. It was the expression of a little boy straining
to understand, to fill in, the holes in his existence.

It is a gesture I could make nearly every day of my life.

In memory, it seems my constant view of Jake is from behind, gazing at the back of his coat or the soles of his shoes flashing through the air. Always running away, slipping out of my hands. But as I dozed in my office chair—not dozing, really, but lapsing in and out of consciousness—and the pain in my belly cracked through my senses, I saw my brother coming toward me, his face round and young, his hands cupped around some present I might be ready to receive.

“Miss Metcalf?” I opened my eyes, and one of my students stood in front of me, her hands clutching a sheaf of papers.

“Are you okay? You’re white as a sheet.”

“Shelly?” My voice squeaked out. I tried to push myself from the chair, but I felt dizzy, and the burning pain grabbed me in my pelvis.

Shelly took over. She touched my shoulder and pulled the phone out of my lap. I heard her call 911. She called someone else, too. I gazed at the back of her neck and the mass of curly blond hair, remembering that Shelly majored in Phys.Ed., or some other hardy profession. She put one arm behind my back and one arm under my legs, lifting me from the chair; for a moment I felt light as a child in her arms.
"Don't worry." Shelly was brusque, efficient. "I've got it handled." It felt nice to be lifted above the floor, to be floating against her sturdy flesh. She placed me gently on the couch and knelt down, holding my hand.

The ambulance came. There were men, needles, sirens, and Jon's face hovering over me at a great distance. There was the clack of wheels in the corridor, a swift procession of bright lights along the ceiling, the steel dome of an operating room.

When I woke, the phone was ringing on the bedside table. I struggled to remember what that meant, a ringing telephone, then my hand reached out and picked up the receiver. The plastic felt clammy under my hand, heavy and unfamiliar.

It was my father. "Stacy?" he said. "Are you there?"

I tried to say hello, but only a croak came out.

"It's okay, baby. You don't have to talk." His voice crackled in my ear. "You've been out for hours."

I swallowed. My throat felt puffy. My eyes stayed closed when I tried to open them.

"I made them put me through," my father said. "I had to be sure you woke up. You're okay now. Thank god it was only appendicitis. Thank god they got you there in time."

"Appendicitis?" I whispered. My eyelids opened, but I couldn't move my eyes. I stared at the ceiling, shimmering there, out of focus.
“Jon’s voice was awful when he called, honey. It scared me. You know how it must have scared me.” Was that an accusation in his voice? I couldn’t tell. It was a struggle even to listen.

Jon walked through my door just then. I couldn’t see him, but I knew his footsteps. I tried to turn my head but the phone was in my way. My father was saying, “Do you want me to come? I could be on a plane. I’ll come if you need me.”

“No,” I whispered. I tried to sit up, but Jon put his hand on my shoulder. “I’ll be fine,” I said. “Daddy?”

Jon slipped the phone out of my hand and talked with my father. He reassured him that I was fine, the operation was simple and fast, not too much blood had been lost. He said I needed to rest now. He talked to my father as if he, my father, were a young and shaken boy. I lay there, listening to the blood whisper in my ears. After he hung up, Jon lifted my limp hand and kissed my fingers.

I couldn’t look at his face. I wanted to fall back asleep, to slip into the dark and start over again.

“So he told you?” Jon said.

I rolled my head toward him. My hair was matted against my forehead, and my skin felt waxy and hot. I moved my left hand down my abdomen and felt the lumpy bandage on my groin. Jon placed his hand over mine, carefully, barely touching.
"I'm sorry," I said.

"There's nothing to be sorry about," Jon said. "Nothing's your fault. We thought something was true that wasn't. Happens all the time."

I stared at him. What I felt was a thick mixture of love and regret. It tasted like mucus in the back of my throat. I could hear the helicopter lift off its landing pad, swinging across the river, and I wondered who had been hurt, how bad the accident could be. I closed my eyes and started to drift. I imagined bodies strewn across the highway, their necks bent at a nauseating angle. Jon didn't say anymore, but he took back his hand and moved away from me on the bed.

More footsteps at the doorway, heavy ones, probably a nurse, a doctor, someone to take charge. The bed squeaked as Jon stood up.

"Jake," he said. It was more a question than a greeting.

I opened my eyes. My brother stood in the doorway, his hands behind his back. A nurse peered in over his shoulder. She must have been standing on tiptoe. For a second they looked like a comedy team, the nurse's chin propped on my brother's jacket, a puppet's head. But then I saw she had a scowl on her face.

"Five minutes," she said, and disappeared.

Jake looked thinner than I remembered, and he had shaved
off his moustache, exposing a different face, asymmetrical, the
left side of his mouth pulled into a permanent frown. He raised
one hand in a wave, as if I were far away.

I lifted my head a little off the pillow.

"Quite a production," Jake said, eyeing my chart. "You
didn't have to go to so much trouble for your little brother."

I smiled. I didn't mean to. Every part of my body weighed
down into the bed, but my lips edged up into a smile. My
brother kept one hand behind his back. "What are you hiding?" I
whispered.

He seemed more shy than I ever remembered. He looked like
a little kid again. "I brought you something," he mumbled, his
pale cheeks flushing red, "like you asked."

His eyes were bright. He was my brother. I knew nothing
about him—not the meals he chewed with strangers, not the
bruising ache of withdrawal in his chest—but I loved him. I
loved him without thinking. I had just lost a baby that never
existed. That loss loomed in me, a wide hole, but my brother
had brought me a gift. Something from another state, from a
land impossible to see from here.
Tricia

The month of newly-broken rivers. Puffins ruffle their cartoon feathers on the rocks. Ptarmigan slough off their winter whites and fuss their plumes to the color of mud. Bald eagles cluster in packs, yanking silver salmon from the waves. Clam Gulch: the lips of a continent. The air tastes of limes and primordial juice.

Tricia is an old-timer. Her hair shifts in one pungent mat across her back. Her skin sheds rivulets of sand, and her fingernails are crusted with green. Sometimes I imagine gills slit into her neck. She lives, like all of us, in a tent on the beach, but somewhere she lost her stakes, and tonight a pernicious wind—a tempest that arises stronger each night just at the hour sleep thumps into dreams—this wind flings her out
the door and nabs her tent, rolling it, a lopsided beach ball out to sea. Tricia runs naked in the sallow moonlight, her buttocks square and gritty, her voice one persistent Hey! that hurls round and round, the cry of a dazed seabird. None of us dare leave our tents in that wind, so we only watch Tricia wade knee-deep into the water and plead with her tent to return.

This is 1966. The world pulses with covert operations. We feel possessed of secrets, acclimatized to change, willing to breathe each breath as if it were our last. Tricia turns from the water just as her tent blows sideways toward Asia. I see her breasts. I see the wings of her pelvis. My hand waves, and she drifts toward me trailing the scent of fish and garlic. Her eyes flare, nuggets of obsidian that melt when she smiles. Oh Well, she shrugs, then rolls inside, her hand takes hold of my hip, her voice slides to a groaning purr that burns between my legs: Who are you? she says, pressing one finger into my belly button.

I love her, with a devotion that edges on madness, even more so because I know the exact duration of this particular insanity—one Alaskan night. Even as her thighs scissor mine, my feet practice a tentative movement inland, across the tundra, home. My hands palm those sturdy buttocks, and under them I find a furrow shaped like a melon, rough and scaly, scooped out with a brief sloping edge. I trace the scar until my finger
aches, and Tricia moans Yes, Oh yes, as if I've roused and fired
a patch of virgin flesh.

Afterward, we lie on our stomachs with our heads in the
sand, and polar bears emerge at dawn, swimming south toward the
Aleutians. I touch her again.

What is this? I say.

Her teeth shine blue as ice. It was the name of someone I
loved, she says. Past tense.

Did it hurt? I say. To dig it out?

Tricia rolls onto her back; her smile is a slash across her
face. Not as much as putting it in. She grabs me by the
cheeks. Digs in a little with her nails.

I don't flinch. Training. I scoop up her right hand and
guide it five inches below my navel. A scar to share. You show
me yours, I'll show you mine. My scar is puckered to the shape
of a worm.

Her index finger worries it, brushing flat the pubic hair
above and below, exposing the dimpled gully in-between. She
rises on her elbows and presses hard, but the nerves yield
nothing, as if a scrap of rubber flexes from that point,
connecting finally to my spine. A natural diaphragm, barring
the inlet to my womb?

What is this? Tricia says, yawning, vaguely stirred.

I tell her the snippets I remember: the head of a doctor,
haloed by surgical steel. His lips smashed flat beneath a mask, but still moving: You know this operation will make you sterile? His voice, muzzled, dripped in slow motion. I giggled, still counting back from 100. Oh yes, I said, completely free of germs. I fell asleep with the surgeon’s eyes on me. Two heavy eyes like bowling balls. While I slept, someone carved pain out of me with instruments no bigger than fountain pens. Not a baby, no. A lump of flesh coiled where it didn’t belong.

Tricia wraps her fingers around my mouth. That’s enough, she says. She wiggles away. My last vision of this woman: Her rump. The remnant of someone’s name, an imprint of love, sliding out the door.

It’s always love coming or going. Always, love the shape of absence under my hand.
Wolf Dogs

Eleanor breeds wolf dogs, but she doesn’t trust them. The dogs sense this and often strain against their leashes, baring their teeth at feeding time. Eleanor strides through the kennels with buckets of food and squats in front of the pens, eyeing the huge animals. All of them are at least a quarter wolf; most are half-breeds.

Eleanor lives in the trailer across from mine. We’re up the highway about a half-mile from the Wahweap Marina on Lake Powell. The desert here is red and cool in the spring. From my back yard I can see the shadows of Window Arch across the bay, and the shaved mesa of Gunsight Butte. Junipers and Cottonwoods line the road into town.

Except for the dogs, Eleanor lives alone. Her husband, Frank, was killed in a bar fight three months ago. The stab
wounds were long—longer than Eleanor thought possible. She told me about them later. One gash began at his temple and split the flesh all the way to his collarbone.

At the hospital she didn’t recognize him when they lifted the sheet. Her whole body relaxed, and she said, “Oh no, that’s not Frank.” She closed her eyes and smiled, opened them again, turned to the police officer and touched his hand.

“Are you sure, Ma’am?” he said. His eyes were heavy-lidded and weary. “I’ll have to ask you to look again.”

Eleanor looked. Beneath the torn skin she saw the curve of Frank’s upper lip, and the slight, taut ridge along his cheekbone.

“It was like a picture,” Eleanor said. “It was like someone handing me a picture and saying, ‘How do you like it? What do you think?’” She came to my place straight from the hospital. Her jaw hung slack, and her fingers shook on the rim of her coffee cup. “I didn’t know it was him,” she said. “I didn’t know.”

It was five in the morning; my face was puffed up and strange. I didn’t feel anything like grief. My lips twitched. My hand rested on the table between us. Across the street, the dogs barked in the pens as the sun rose, and feeding time passed.

“It wasn’t like a real person there at all,” Eleanor said,
suddenly lifting her head. She gripped her cup. "So what am I supposed to feel, Nikki? I don’t know what I’m supposed to feel." She gazed at me so hard I had to look away. I stared at the battered metal cabinets in my kitchen, squinted at the dishes piled in my sink. I didn’t know what to say. Everything I thought of sounded like a lie.

“Oh God,” Eleanor said. “I’m going to throw up.” She stumbled to her feet, knocking the coffee cup to the floor. It shattered, and coffee sprayed across the linoleum.

“Oh,” she gasped. “I’m sorry.” She slid to the floor and started to cry. Her sobs quickly turned into retches, and she leaned over, wrapping her arms around her stomach, choking up coffee-colored bile. That’s when I roused myself. I finally acted like a friend, kneeling, putting my arms around her.

“It’s all right,” I said. “It’s okay.” I rocked her and pressed my head against her neck. She smelled faintly of sour milk. Her sobs grew deeper, and I held her tighter, hugged her tighter than I had my own children. My children. Soon I was sobbing with Eleanor, the two of us shaking and hot. I almost blurted it out then, about my children back with their father in L.A. But across the road, the dogs’ barking grew loud and frantic.

“And he left me those damn dogs to feed,” Eleanor said, lifting her head.
I picked up pieces of the shattered cup, avoiding the small puddle of vomit. Eleanor stared at nothing. I felt emptied, and numb, like a robot. "C'mon," I said. "I'll help you." Eleanor didn't move. "It'll be alright," I said. "They're hungry. We've got to do it."

I followed Eleanor, carrying a bucket of dry food, clutching my bathrobe closed with one hand. "Frank's gone," she told each dog as we opened the pens. "Frank's gone." The whisper hung in the kennel. The news traveled in the morning. Frank's gone. Eleanor set meat in each dish, and I followed up with a scoop of dry food. The dogs' tongues brushed my hand as they lunged for their bowls.

One of the dogs is nearly pure wolf—his name is Aaron. He usually broods in corners, licking his fur and watching us with liquid brown eyes. We entered his pen last. He stood in back, his head low, his eyes sharp. Aaron used to ride shotgun with Frank in his jeep. Eleanor knelt by the food dish and whistled.

"Here boy," she said. "Come on." She rattled the dish, and Aaron slunk toward us, then stopped and crouched on his haunches. A low whine rumbled in his throat.

Eleanor said, "Aaron, buddy, he's gone." Aaron's whine curled into a short bark.

"He's gone," Eleanor shouted. Aaron howled then, and Eleanor yelled "He's gone, he's gone," her voice keening high
above Aaron's. The other dogs picked it up, and for a minute the whole kennel vibrated with their yowling. Eleanor squatted with her head thrown back, her neck stretched taut, and her mouth straining wide open.

The last time I saw my husband he had a knife in his hands. He was crying and the point of the knife swayed in front of my belly. When I think about this I do not remember the knife so much as the chicken parts splayed on the kitchen counter. Pale blood pooled and dribbled off the counter, streaking the cabinets, beading on the floor. I stood in a half-crouch, my hands open and swaying, as if I were balanced on a plank. My purse hung over my shoulder; I had just walked in the door. My husband’s teeth were clenched shut, but his lips were open, and he was talking, saying something to me. Light must have glinted off the blade, but I don’t remember. I remember the smell of chicken skin, instead.

I don’t recall the actual whirling away, the few leaps to the door, the vault into my car. I came to my senses on a side street just a block from our house. I stopped the car at a curb and got out, but nothing looked familiar. An old woman I’d never seen before stared at me from her porch. She had circles of rouge on her face the size of silver dollars. A group of kids ran past me, screaming. That’s when I remembered my
children. I leaned against the hood of my car, my head in my hands; the engine smelled dusty and hot.

I couldn’t go back. It was physically impossible. Believe me when I say I tried. I turned the car around and drove toward home, but veered off when I came to the corner. I tried again. Sweat ran down my cheeks. I idled on the cross street. I watched the house in the rear-view mirror. Once, I thought I could do it—my hands stopped shaking, and I shifted into gear. Then I saw my husband bolting down the lawn.

He’s a short man, my husband, and overweight. When he barrelled down that lawn I almost expected to see him pitch over and start rolling like a beach ball. I started to giggle. Even as I ground the car into first gear and slammed the gas pedal, I was laughing. The front wheels scraped the curb, my neck jerked wildly, and I screeched out of the neighborhood, my head thrown back, gasping like a clown on top of a bucking horse.

It’s been six months, but every day, many times a day, I think about the miles of barren land between me and Los Angeles. I can’t remember driving them. I want to remember, because I have a daydream that a person who looks just like me is standing in a kitchen back there, still cowering, straining away from the knife. Maybe the woman who lives in my trailer, on Lake Powell, isn’t a real person at all, but just a fantasy, a vision of escape.
Eleanor became my friend without asking questions. I saw her watching the trailer as I moved in, her hands on her hips, and when I waved she didn’t wave back. I thought it meant trouble, but the next day Eleanor was at my door with a cast-iron pot of chili. She stood there without smiling, then nodded, as if she agreed with something I’d said.

Up close, she didn’t look as big, square, and forbidding as she had on first glance. I saw she was only a few inches taller than I, and though her shoulders were broad, they tapered into slender, delicate arms. Her chestnut hair was pulled back in a bun so tight it strained the skin of her forehead.

"Let’s eat," she said.

The chili was thick with hunks of beef and hominy, and we slurped it with big pieces of cornbread, our heads over our plates, juice on our chins. I felt ravenous, and I shoveled in the food, but Eleanor finished first. She sat back and put up her feet on the kitchen table. Almost daintily, she hitched up the knees of her trousers. Her tennis shoes were covered in grime. She smiled then, and I smiled back. My mouth felt peculiar, as though my facial muscles had been petrified to a permanent frown.

That day, she introduced me to the dogs. This was when Frank was still alive. She let them out of their pens, and they
milled around us, sniffing our feet or grabbing each other’s necks in their jaws. I kept my hands jammed in my pockets at first, while the dogs brushed up against my legs.

"They won’t hurt you," Eleanor said. She sounded annoyed. "They look mean, but they’re just babies."

I took my right hand out of my pocket and dangled it in front of the biggest dog I saw. I wanted Eleanor to be impressed.

"That’s Aaron," she said. "He doesn’t normally take to anyone but Frank." Aaron licked my hand. I knelt down to pet his head, but he whined, then barked, baring his teeth. I backed away.

The screen door of Eleanor’s trailer slammed, and both of us jerked up our heads. Frank stood in the doorway.

"You bothering the dogs?" he said, but he didn’t look mad. He was smaller than Eleanor, and leaner. His skin was dark and smooth as baked clay. His black hair shone as if it were oiled, and it hung down the center of his back.

This is a man who preens, I thought. I couldn’t look at him straight on, his eyes were too bright.

He bent down as Aaron came loping over, and he looked him in the eye. The dog planted his paws in the dirt and growled as he tugged on Frank’s sleeve.

Eleanor touched my shoulder. "Frank, this is Nikki. New.
From across the way." Her voice was low, lilting, and careful.

Frank didn’t look up. He grunted, then rolled onto the
ground underneath Aaron. His hair covered his face. Aaron
stood with his forepaws on Frank’s chest, his tongue dripping on
Frank’s chin. Three puppies pranced around them, darting in to
lick Frank’s neck. After a few minutes, Frank decided to play
dead. He sprawled on the ground, spread-eagle, paralyzed. The
dogs, all except Aaron, whined and backed off.

It was then I realized Eleanor was holding my hand, the way
you might take hold of a sister’s hand to watch something
frightening. Except she wasn’t the one that was scared. She
looked absolutely still, breathing through her skin, and I felt
tiny then, as if I had to tilt my head way back to see her face.

Eleanor doesn’t trust the dogs, but she’s not afraid.
“It’s not often a dog turns,” she whispered to me, as we stood
there watching Frank play dead, “but it happens.”

She told me, keeping her eyes on Frank, about the time a
wolf-malamute turned on him. Frank was inside the pen, training
the young dog. His voice was high and sharp as he gave the
commands. The dog, poised on the edge of “sit,” leapt up and
flew at Frank’s chest. Frank shouted and flung up his arm; the
dog’s jaws closed on his hand. It took 24 stitches, and they
shot the animal the next day.

“I called that damn dog a son-of-a-bitch,” Frank yelled
from underneath Aaron. "He probably took it as a compliment."

I’ve never mentioned my children. Not to Eleanor. Not to anyone. It’s as if a word about them will cause a disaster. The longer I go without saying anything, the space between my children and me thickens, until I can hardly see them at all. Often I wake up, and I know I’m forgetting something, just for an instant. And then their faces hit me like exploding balloons. Sometimes I think I’m misremembering them—the exact pear-shape of Anna’s mouth, the slight crook in Jerry’s nose. Finally, I get up from bed, half out of my mind, and drive through this startling, movie-set landscape. Always, I picture myself from above on this drive into town, scurrying at the base of these glowing sandstone towers.

I’ve thought about going back to get them. I’ve got every detail planned. I’ll arrive late at night, creeping through the alley. I’ll tap Anna’s window screen. She’ll wake up frightened, but I’ll whisper to her—*It’s a game*. Her pale, sharp face will smile then, and I’ll explain to her, carefully, how to wake up Jerry so he doesn’t yell, how to unhook the screen, how to hand down her brother to me. She will be giggling. Her hair will be done up in perfect French braids.

Of course, I still have a key to the house. I could march right in, flip on the lights, order my husband to stay in bed
while I pack a suitcase for the children. Me, with a flared skirt and cowboy boots, sometimes a whip. My husband, pale and sweating. I have to laugh when I think this way. I turn on all the lights in the trailer; I twist up the volume on the radio. I stumble to the bathroom and throw up, I’m laughing so hard.

Eleanor takes the dogs out once a day and runs them through the Wahweap campground. The campsites are not yet officially open for summer, but one camper is parked there, a family that’s set up housekeeping. A laundry line is strung from their camper to the showers. Two girls, both blonde and fragile-boned as birds, jump on a picnic table and clap when Eleanor and the dogs come around.

I run with them when I can. I have a job tutoring English to Navajo children bussed in from the reservation. I beat out some local people for the position, and I get glassy, hostile stares when I go the supermarket in town. And the kids at school don’t take me seriously. They roll their eyes to each other when I ask questions, and pretend as if they don’t know any English at all. There is something about them that is wild and uncontrollable, and I come home feeling sick, exhausted. I lie down on my narrow bed and listen to the dogs.

When Frank was alive his voice mingled with the yelps, as if her were speaking a language made of growls and whimpers. He
never yelled at the dogs; they circled around him, even the youngest ones, and responded to a lift of his hand or the angle of his back. He never yelled at Eleanor, but sometimes I saw him watching her while she hosed down a pen or brought groceries in from the car. I recognized that look, and it made me slink back from the window.

When we run, the dogs automatically fall into a formation, like sled dogs. Aaron is at the point, and the younger dogs fan out into a ragged V. Eleanor and I run behind. I falter first, and then Eleanor. Frank used to run in the middle of the pack, his hair flying loose behind him. The dogs chugged around and around the trail, their fur slick, eyes bright, until Frank blew the whistle that brought them to a halt. He had them well-trained, and they always behaved on these runs, pacing themselves to Frank’s commands, running slow at first, then turning it up in the home stretch to leave him far behind.

Today is a bright day, the hottest side of noon. The heat simmers along the water. The dogs lie quiet, curled in their pens with their noses buried in their tails. Eleanor didn’t take them running yesterday, and today they are slack and lethargic. They didn’t even lift their heads when I slipped by their pens.

“I could sell them all to a national breeder,” she says, “and have enough to start something else.” Since Frank was
killed, business has fallen off—Eleanor is brusque with buyers, and the dogs misbehave.

We are sitting in her front yard—me in a hammock strung between two cottonwoods, Eleanor sprawled half in the dirt and half on the tufted grass. There is a breeze here and it’s easy to imagine staying in this one position forever.

"Like what?" I say, covering my eyes. "What would you do?"

"I don’t know like what." Eleanor sounds annoyed. "What kind of question is that—like what?"

"Sorry." We’re silent a minute. I feel embarrassed. A meadowlark whistles down by the water and the sound echoes up the canyon. My eyes flicker open and shut.

"It would be a good day for the boat," Eleanor murmurs. "A perfect day." Her boat was sold years ago, to finance the dogs. "Two thousand miles of shoreline," Eleanor says. "Two thousand. We could go, and no one would even think about finding us."

"Beer," I say. "We’d need plenty. And suntan lotion. The one that makes you shine."

"We could stock up at Bullfrog. Cut your hair and dress you like a boy. Send you through the lines to shoplift for supplies."

"And what would you do?" I say, rolling sideways in the
hammock. "Keep the ship from sinking?"

"That's right, sweetie. I'd wait on the deck with binoculars, praying for your safe return."

"As long as you hold up your end."

"I feel like crap today," she says. I look at her face for the first time, and her nose is red and puffy. Her skin looks washed out. "I'm catching a goddamn cold. Beautiful weather, and I catch a damn cold." She looks over her shoulder at the dogs. They are up and stretching, their noses pressed to the cages. The whining starts, and a few yelps.

"We've got to get those dogs running today," she says. But instead of getting up she sprawls on the ground and covers her eyes. Her legs rock back and forth. The dogs are leaning up against their cages, pawing the fence.

Eleanor speaks without raising her head. "Will you take them Nikki? I just can't handle it today." She kicks me gently in the hammock, but I lie very still. "You can do it," she says. "Just take them down where we always go. They'll behave." She kicks a little harder. "Please Nikki." "It'll be fine. Just take them for a little while." The high pitch in her voice makes me nervous.

"What is it with you?" I say. "You've never been sick before."

"Well," she says, "excuse me for being human." She gives
me one hard shove with her foot, then starts to get up. I roll out of the hammock quicker than I thought possible.

"Sorry," I say. I lick my lips and glance at the dogs. They are panting. "I'll take them. Just show me what to do."

The dogs are good on the way down to the campground, and they jump out of the pick-up without snarling. They mill around the truck, sniffing at the grass and pissing on the tires. Eleanor gave me leashes, but so far it doesn't look like I'll need them.

The two girls are out of their camper and up on the picnic table. They wave to me and clasp their hands in front of their chests. Two of the dogs lick my calves.

I blow the whistle once. The dogs bark in unison and sit on their haunches, restless and straining. I blow the whistle two short toots, and they take off, Aaron leading and rest scrambling behind.

I'm running with the dogs, and they seem to be going slower than usual, or maybe it's me going faster, because suddenly I'm in the middle of them, right behind Aaron. His flanks are pumping, and his back legs stretch out long with every leap. He has white fur below his collar and at the paws; the sun glints off these patches as if they were metal.

We run along the water, then turn up the east loop of the
campground. The dogs are running easily, and I feel fine and powerful. My legs are weightless. We complete a circle and immediately begin the west loop, heading uphill and toward the highway. No cars in sight, just long stretches of blacktop between the sparse trees. We turn with the trail and head back down toward the lake.

I slow, and the dogs slow with me. I’m surprised they’re behaving so well, and I give them the signal to take off as soon as we round the hill. They accelerate in one motion, like a machine, and streak toward the water.

A man is fishing from the shore; I think it is the man who owns the camper. His black hair is pulled up in a ponytail. The girls are yelling, stumbling along the beach, and their pink dresses fly up as they run.

The man turns as the dogs run toward him. I remember seeing him a few days ago, hunting rabbits on the land across the highway. He had a gun under his arm and a hungry look in his eyes, an urgent hunger that made him walk with long purposeful strides across the uneven terrain. I heard several shots, but he came walking back with only two jackrabbits—tough eating. I thought of those little girls eating jackrabbit stew, their tiny teeth gnawing at the stringy meat.

He drops the fishing pole and backs up. I know it will be all right; the dogs are running their usual course, and the
trail will turn them off, and veer back up toward the campsites. I wave my hand over my head and start to shout something, but my breath is coming hard, and only a croak squeaks out.

The man is not looking at me anyway. He is staring at Aaron. Then he does something I know is a mistake. He crouches and stares the dog right in the eye. Instead of turning with the trail, Aaron heads straight for the stranger, and all the dogs follow. I fumble for the whistle inside my shirt.

The first blow is feeble. Three of the dogs turn and trot back, but the rest keep on. I blow again—three more hesitate then sit on their haunches, straining and yelping. Only Aaron and a silver-haired female are charging, hard and fast, down the beach. They are not barking, but the rest of the dogs are whining and trying to howl. The little girls are frozen on the beach, clutching each other around their waists. They scream "Daddy!" at the same time.

Aaron springs. The man yells "No!" and buckles under as Aaron hits his chest. The female prances beside them, then crouches with her chest low to the ground, barking. Aaron has the man's arm in his jaws.

I run to them as fast as I can, but still it seems to take a long time. Aaron is not snarling or moving, and he grips the sleeve lightly between his teeth. His head is cocked sideways. The female darts in and licks the man's face.
They are playing. The stranger realizes it the same moment I do. At first it looks as though he will laugh, then cry, but in a second his face goes dark and angry.

"Get these fucking animals away from me," he says through clenched teeth.

I blow the whistle, sharp and strong this time, and the female sits back, panting. Aaron drops the sleeve and looks at me. I touch the back of his neck. "Come on, Aaron," I say, gently. "C'mon."

I pull him by the collar off the man's chest. He strains against me, but doesn't growl or bark. The dogs behind me are yelping and whining. The man lies there on the sand, his arm flung over his eyes.

"Sorry about that," I say. "These dogs—"

"Those dogs are a goddamn menace," he shouts, then leaps up and swipes furiously at his clothes. Sand flies onto me and Aaron. "Fucking wild animals," he says. "Who keeps goddamn wild animals?" He looks at me as if he expects an answer.

The girls come shrieking down the beach. "Daddy was attacked by a wolf!" They are gleeful. "Daddy was attacked by a wolf!" They prance up to their father who raises his fists above his head. All of us back off, including the dogs, and the girls fall silent, holding their hands behind their skirts.

I feel dizzy. I have to close my eyes. Aaron begins to
snarl and strain against his collar. When I open my eyes, the man has turned away; he is picking up his fishing equipment. I know by the set of his shoulders and his abrupt movements that he has decided to pretend I don’t exist. I mumble another apology, smile faintly at the girls, who don’t smile back, and herd the dogs back to the pick-up.

It could mean trouble,” I say, but Eleanor holds one hand on the door to Aaron’s pen and shakes her head. I’m standing next to her with my hands in my pockets and my eyes fixed on Aaron. A cold breeze comes up from the lake and ruffles the dog’s fur.

“No,” she says. “We’ll just keep a watch on him is all.”

“I should have kept them in line. I could have had better control.”

“I shouldn’t have made you go down by yourself.” Eleanor squats in front of the cage. Aaron comes to the fence and pushes his nose into her hand. I squat down next to them, and Aaron turns his head. His face is bigger than my own. There is white fur in streaks across his forehead.

“It was a mistake,” Eleanor says, not looking at me. “You can’t always trust them to do what you want them to do.” She puts her arm around my shoulder, and I lean my head against her. She smells like the soap she uses on the dogs, and something
else—juniper or sage or sweet tobacco. In a second I’m crying, my eyes pressed into Eleanor’s shirt. I know what’s hurting me. I don’t know if it will ever stop.

The shot, when it comes, is not a surprise. The dogs howl, and I hear the frantic rattle of their cages. I’m halfway out of bed when I glimpse a man running through my yard, and I shrink back under the covers. His feet pound the gravel under my window.

My heart is thumping in my throat. When I can hear my breath again, I sit up and look out. One light is on at the back of the kennels, and it casts a yellow glow on the cages. All the dogs are up, barking, their paws bowing the fence. I can see Aaron, in silhouette, standing stock-still, his shoulders massive, watching. And someone is walking along the perimeter, slowly, her arms cradling a gun. Eleanor.

She walks the length of the kennels, then turns and patrols back. She is walking so upright her spine arches, and her hair billows wild in the wind. I put up a hand to touch my window screen. I feel like one of the puppies, sleepy, pawing to be let out.

Eleanor stops in front of Aaron’s pen and stands with her back to the cage, her feet planted far apart. I move my hand an inch across the screen, and she cocks her head. I move it
again, and she nods, lifts her hand in a wave. I'm about to tell her something. My mouth is open. My fingertips ache. Any minute now, the words are going to come.
Debussy. The music brushed her, the drowsy breath of a lover. In the aisle for tuna fish and baked beans Mona stopped, her hand hovering over the Dinty Moore. Debussy? She sought to remember if this had always been the case—the swell of strings, the light ruffle of the piano—here at John’s grocery on the corner of 25th and Bellevue. She didn’t think so. She recalled teenage boys slouched on the steps, pulsing under the loudspeaker to the tinny sounds of rock and roll. They would stare at her slant-eyed when she sidled past them, her chin tucked into her coat. Today she felt a broad relaxation in her muscles when she walked up the steps, but hadn’t noticed the boys’ absence. She glanced out the plate-glass window. An old woman rocked on the stoop, hugging her purse to her chest. Cars swooshed by on the damp, uncrowded street.
Mona’s head swiveled away from the window, her gaze falling evenly across the grocery store terrain—past the motor oil display, the tortilla chips, the long rack of magazines. She nodded to the proprietor, Mr. John, who stood behind the cash register like a sentinel, his hand flat on the counter, supporting the weight of his rigid, outstretched arm. He nodded imperceptibly back, his eyes flickering with disapproval. Mr John did not believe in shopping as a pleasurable experience; he scowled at customers who lingered too long among the merchandise.

That was why he installed the Debussy, the Mozart, the brooding Bach. He wanted music designed to repel what he referred to as the “the bad element.” The radio music had attracted kids, who quickly became gangs; their spindly bodies and languid voices grated on Mr. John’s sense of decorum. They wafted through the store, leaving greasy thumbprints on magazines and a plume of juvenile arousal. The trick had worked so far; the boys doubled over as if they were vomiting the day they heard Debussy tinkling onto the street.

Mona’s gaze returned to her hand. It looked lovely, the way her fingers arched in this attitude of reaching. She thought of the long necks of women in paintings by Botticelli, the porcelain curve of their flesh.

Mona remembered a ballet she had witnessed many years ago.
The dancers drifted naked across the barren stage, borne up, clothed only in the music of Debussy. Mona sat up straight and burrowed her attention on the dancers. They were brief, ephemeral creatures sustained by the promise of beauty, and Mona had felt the longing to stretch out her arms, bare her breasts, reveal the healthy sheen of her bones in exchange for a life of radiance. Hearing the music in this brightly-lit aisle, Mona felt suddenly exposed, a coolness on her belly, and she glanced down at her body and fingered her new spring dress. Mona felt waves of extraordinary gratitude and love.

Mr. John sighed and tapped his fingers on the register. The store became crowded with the regular 5:50 rush, more crowded than usual because the shoppers loitered and fondled their prospective purchases. As if one bag of Fritos could be different from another, Mr John thought. He checked the front stoop. A man in a blue business suit had joined the old lady with the purse; they sat shoulder-to-shoulder, blocking the way of customers who stepped around them to enter the store.

A young man in bicycling pants strolled up aisle B in search of peanuts. He heard the singing of violins in the back of his mind, and didn’t recognize it as music, but as a fiery pumping of adrenaline in his blood. He found the peanuts and stood for a moment, stroking the voluptuous glass jar. The next aisle over, Mona wrapped her palms around the Dinty Moore. At
the freezer case, a young girl licked her lips in a quandary over ice cream, mistaking the piano ripple as a fleeting shiver up her spine.

Secretaries gathered on the sidewalk, arcing their long thin cigarettes in the air. Their coiffures became frizzed and unruly, but they noticed only their own gladness at being out on the streets in the silvered light. A policeman stopped at the pay phone and dialed home, responding to an exhilarated, but steady, drumming in his heart.

Mr. John stood rigid in his cashier’s pen. He lifted his arm to the stereo knobs, just as Mona turned and caught his eye. She felt a breeze on her skin like the rushing of silk. The bicyclist gripped his jar of peanuts. Ice cream was plucked from the case. Strings of sadness tugged at Mona’s hands, and she staggered to the check-out counter, anxious to pay for what she needed and step out the door for home.
Mother’s Milk

Vermilion, for the blood salt, whose rush reminds me of death. Cobalt. Cold-eyed and moist. Emerald. Tight drops sweet with luxury. Morsels of paint from my weary brushes throbbed on each finger. Color across my tongue. Mother’s milk. Milk in waves drowning the cortex, muzzling the pain, smoothing the ruts of muddied avenues flat.

I slept. I slept with color on my eyes and nose and lips and chin, but the colors did not infiltrate my dreams. My dreams remained swathed in black and white swaddling clothes, my feet bound with maternal mercy. I woke, and the bed creaked beneath me. The swirl of maple wood beneath my arm. The glow of hard wood. Heart wood. My heart did not skip its beat, but remained steady while my breath fluttered in and out in short gasps. I touched my tongue and came away with violet mist,
spit.

So many things came true that day. My paintings slipped off the walls, my hands shook, I could not eat and my mother called, wanting to know why she hadn't heard from me though I had phoned her just last week and discussed the move to the new apartment, the new avenues, the gallery that inquired about my work. She hadn't heard any of it, and I wondered, again, why I bothered to speak. Her milk still strangled in my throat, rich and coagulant.

I'm sending you underwear, she said. I don't need any, I said. I'm your mother, I can send you underwear if I want to, it's on sale. Her voice purred, and I could not speak. Well, she said. Well?

Mother, you don't understand. What don't I understand? I'm your mother, I understand every little thing about you, I know from the sound of your voice what you've been doing at night, what you've had for breakfast. Cookies. Am I right? You had cookies for breakfast? A girl your age? Your teeth are going to rot right in your head.

A girl my age should not eat cookies for breakfast. Dentists look in my mouth and cringe with disgust. A girl your age, they say, you've got to take care. Spongy gums, bone loss, bacterial plaque. They shower me with toothbrushes and floss, but I spread paint on old canvass with the brushes, and pry egg
off the frying pan handles with the floss. I rarely put my fingers in my mouth in any kind of cleansing motion.

My mother's milk was too sweet, from the languor of her breasts. I was the only one to suckle, my father having given up the quest many months before I was born. Her anger swirled through me like sugar. My sausage fingers pushed at the fat of her breast, and the milk gushed to the back of my throat. I choked. Mother pried her fingers into my esophagus, and the colors began then—the violets and greens, the blues and browns—swirling behind my eyes like a patterned dress that I watched and watched, my eyes looping around and around until I closed them tight, and then it was my head nodding off from my body, and my fingers, my skin. Mamma shouted No. I heard that No pry its way deep into my blood, and I swam up to give my mamma an answer, an answer she liked because she held me to her naked chest, and we swirled together, me tasting the salt instead of sweet for the first time in my oddball, lonesome life.

It was a taste of jubilation and fear, a taste that seared streaks of fuchsia inside my tongue. The breast returned, the nipple nudged my cheek, and the milk lapped again at my tonsils, again I sputtered, again mamma dangled me and slapped my spine, pushed her mammoth thumbs against my chest. What's the matter with you! Again the salt, again the sweet. The milk coated and cooled my tongue.
What's the matter with you, my mother said. Nothing. Nothing, I can't paint today, everything's gone wrong. I hate this place. I hate the new streets, I hate the new car. So, my mother said. So what did I tell you? You don't belong so far away. You think you have some success and the whole world falls at your feet. You've still got to work. You've still got to eat.

Yes I still have to eat, I said.
I've never seen your paintings.
I know.
When do I see what the fuss is about?
I don't think you're ready, I said. My mother's breath licked my ear, skidding through the telephone wires, slithering from underground. Her silence colored my kitchen in mauve.

Mauve implies complacency and decadence and indelicate subjects. Mauve lives two steps away from scarlet, the color of prostitution.

My mother's breath asked me a question, and I rubbed my back against it, burrowed into it like a tiny mole. The hair on my arms turned golden and light, and I smelled oranges, brilliant citrus baubles bursting in the street. My window hung open, and I saw a man perched on a fire escape across the alley, and even though he was far away I smelled his oranges, the juice
as it spritzed in his white hands. I leaned out the window—the phone on my ear, my mother dangling—waved my arm in one slow arc, then another, through the frosted air. The man opened his hands and showed me the mandarins; he smiled, nuzzled one crescent then another, held them on his tongue, his tongue I couldn't see, way back in his beautiful mouth.
A bed big enough for four—this need became our focus and obsession. John’s bed was ascetic and narrow, appropriate for dark moods and fits of self-punishment. Peter’s bed, a queen-size piece of industrial foam, was almost wide enough but smelled of mold. I never owned a bed. So we most often arrived at Mary’s loft: a bed soft and thick with down comforters, flannel sheets and extra pillows. It might have been perfect, but the ladder up to the loft was steep and precarious, and we constantly hit our heads on the rafters. No railing, so if one of us rolled too carelessly it meant a quick, painful fall to the kitchen floor. Peter and John alternated sleeping on the outside, their arms and legs hanging over the edge, while Mary and I huddled in the middle, our breasts rising together in an
offbeat rhythm as we dozed.

Later, much later, the baby would fall from that loft.

It was after we'd called it quits. It was after too many bruising nights, when the moans of love on one side of the bed transmuted to moans of despair at the other. Each orgasm pierced someone's heart. Gazing up from between Mary's mother-to-be breasts, I'd see Peter gasping for breath, his mouth snarled and white. Or over John's shoulder, Mary gouging her palms with her nails. Someone always whimpered out of sight. Mary's belly grew and grew, demanding more bunk-space. Our inability to find a comfortable bed became symbolic of our most intimate failures, so, in a gesture of conciliation, we divvied into orthodox twosomes.

Mornings, Peter sat in the lotus position and cried, his eyes tightly shut, his bearded chin quivering. I drank coffee and watched him, memorizing the pattern of whiskers on his neck. I felt like someone named Tanya, in a Romanian village, learning to love the husband with whom I was arranged. Once, I pulled a scarf over my head and teetered at the edge of our deck, gazing into the moist ravine. On my birthday, Peter made carob pancakes with canned apricots on top. I love you, I said, but it was like mumbling the phrase to my mother on the phone—a farewell with a question mark at the end. He said he loved me, but something was missing. John's cock? I suggested. Mary's
tits? We could petition for borrowing privileges, perhaps? Peter pushed away from the table, threw his plate in the sink. It shattered, and mice scurried behind the walls. I shrugged. Peter mumbled I was callous. I said he was ugly, deep down.

In the house up the road, Mary threw a hairbrush at John. John wandered into the woods and did not return. After dark, we found him singing nursery rhymes at the river, and Peter helped him up from the damp rocks; the four of us returned via a narrow trail, single file, Mary in the lead, our hands linked together like a rope. Deer watched from the ridge of the barren hill.

Soon there was a baby in Mary’s house, and I began to nap with him in the loft, my fingers on his back, and tried to recollect a time when he didn’t exist. Ghosts of our exploits loitered in the bed, but they seemed frail and laughable compared to this rugged, normal baby breathing under my hand. Life settled, after all, to basics—potatoes sprouting in the field, water lines bent from drought, mute nights of solid, uninterrupted sleep. Peter and I tethered ourselves to our bed, John and Mary to theirs, and any flare-ups of residue passion were gagged by a wounded glance. Mary was in charge of this; she orchestrated our guilt and grabbed for the baby when he tumbled out of the loft.

She missed. Sean plummeted to the wood floor as if he’d been catapulted from heaven. He streaked past the hanging
rosemary, and Mary screamed, lunged forward to catch him. He didn’t cry at first; he looked stunned and almost smiled, but then he opened his mouth and began a savage wail that did not stop for three hours. Their car screeched by my house in reverse, and all I saw was Sean’s wide-open pink mouth, the gums glistening, and just as John shifted into forward gear I ran closer and pressed my hands on the car window, and I saw the lump growing on Sean’s head and Mary trying to give him the breast. She looked up with a face that dissolved in panic, and I backed off as they swerved onto the road.

They got to the hospital in Ukiah in record time, fifteen minutes on dirt roads that normally take forty-five, and the doctor said Sean would be fine, the bump looked more awful than it was, there was no permanent damage, and John waited while Mary pumped the doctor for answers—would Sean be dizzy? would he sleep through the night? should they wake him?—and by that time, Peter and I showed up and consoled John in the waiting room. Peter rubbed his hand on my shoulder, and I cradled John’s head against my chest, and finally Mary appeared, carrying Sean, and we swarmed around them, Mary surrendering the baby to me though he still wailed, though his gums still glistened that awful neon pink. John and Peter wrapped their arms around Mary, and she leaned into each of them in turn, then took the baby from me and brushed her lips against my cheek.
Her hair, normally up in a tight bun, straggled in pieces around her face, and I patted these back behind her ears.

The doctor said Sean would be fine, but Mary fretted about the falling dreams he might have from then on, as a child and as a man, the terror in the night, the wrench from sleep. She touched the baby’s face as he slept and worried that he might never love. He might lie with a woman, enraptured, and rise on his elbows to gaze into her face, then reel with a sense of falling, a pain searing through his head. Would he pull away and lie sobbing on the bed, unable to explain? It would sound absurd: You see, I fell out of the loft when I was three months old...the women might smile patiently, stroking his back, cooing assurances, but they would leave, one after another; eventually he would just stop trying, and he would hate his mother, she knew it.

I made scrambled eggs while Mary smoked a cigarette, and John and Peter talked in solemn tones out on the back porch, but they returned looking mischievous; it was late summer and still early morning; behind the kitchen windows the rhododendron dripped with dew, and large white buds hovered on the point of opening. I pointed these out to Mary and she nodded, her face luminous with gratitude or perhaps a fleeting moment of lust, and I became awkward then and nearly burned her arm as I scraped the eggs onto her plate. Sean woke while Mary ate, and I
gathered him on the couch, lifted my shirt and pressed him to my breast. He took it for a time, his tongue hardening my nipple, his fist kneading my flesh. His forehead was damp, and he closed his eyes as he sucked, not caring about milk just then, merely grateful for my skin.

John and Mary built a railing on the loft, tight-slatted, of birch the color of buttermilk. Peter and I helped, handing up nails, drills, lemonade. I found the process ironically profound—fencing in the site of our historic abandon. Mary worked grimly, her mouth set in one hard line, but John laughed and pretended to lose his balance, arms flailing, back arching; then he toppled, but the fall was short and Peter caught him. I screamed. They sat huddled on the floor, John leaning into Peter’s chest.

This isn’t a game, Mary said, invisible in the rafters.

A month of mumbled conversations. Conversations where no one looked at anybody. All Saints Day: John and Peter moved to Marin, sheepish in their flight. Mary refused to emerge from her house the day they left, but I leaned on the hood of the packed Falcon, mindful of the way the sun lingered on my face, glazing me with beauty. Sean dozed in a sling across my stomach, drooling a quarter-sized spot on my shirt.

Well, I said. Peter had shaved off his beard; his face looked newly-hatched. When he bent to kiss me, I smelled
eucalyptus and mint so sharp I caught my breath. His cheek against mine was soft and forgiving. John kissed me on the lips, then folded himself around Sean and sobbed. They beeped the horn three times as they backed out to the road. I lifted Sean’s hand. We waved.

The season turned cold overnight, and in the morning frost covered the woodpiles. My house echoed with absence; walls groaned at the floor, and my breath slipped out in a wheeze. My fire was hard-starting and flickered numbly at the logs. I heard Mary chop kindling up the road, and I wandered that way, my head tilted, considering my thighs as they ached against my jeans. She stood up the hill, her back to me, the axe swinging high in the air, but the chop-block was empty of wood. She whacked the bare stump again and again. When I reached her she was crying, and I wheedled the axe from her grip. The handle was slick with heat.

_Dammit, I’m me again_, she said. _I wake up, and it’s me._ She cupped her hands to her face. I nodded and stroked her hair, so lightly I doubt she felt it on her head.

A year later, Sean fell off the washing machine, breaking both front teeth and spattering Mary and me with blood. A year after that he tripped while crossing a footbridge and swam, like a puppy, to shore. Mary clutched Sean’s body to her chest while I fluttered nearby, briefly kind and reassuring, wiping tears
from their cheeks. Mary rocked the baby, and I made scrambled eggs, then pressed Sean’s mouth to my breast when he woke. Mary gazed into the baby’s bed, stroking his flawless feet: *Ah, she whispered, how will this child ever love, how will this baby love? And I answered, my skin so close to hers it sparked: How do any of us, I said, love after the falls, the injuries, the accidental inflictions of time?*
A Thousand Buddhas

My hand’s the universe,
it can do anything.
—Shinkichi Takahashi

I.

I could tell you I once received a massage from a blind person, but that would be a lie. I’ve never been touched by someone blind, but I imagine what it would be like. Her hands touch my body as if I were a book, full of secrets she needs to unveil. She reads me like Braille, her fingertips hovering on the raised points of my flesh. She undoes the layers of my skin and peels them back, lays one finger on my quivering heart. We could beat like that, two hummingbirds, and become very still. Her hands might move across my abdomen, touch the scar below my belly button. My eyelids might flutter at her touch, and my
skin dissolve into hot streams of tears.

I have never been touched by a blind person, but I have given whole massages with my eyes halfway closed, and the bodies I touched became something else. Their boundaries dissolved, and they spread out on the table—masses of flesh, all the borders gone. I touched them in tender places: between the toes, under the cheekbones, along the high arching curves of their feet. When I opened my eyes they coalesced into something human, but I would walk outside and slip into the pool, feeling like a primordial fish, all my substance gone. I'd see them afterward, and they leaned toward me, their mouths open, but they hardly spoke. My arms opened and they fell against me; I held my hands on the middle of their backs, holding their fluttering hearts in place.

Sometimes they cried. I was too professional, then, to cry, knew that I had to keep some distance in order to make it work. If I had cried, then we would have been lovers, and that would make it wrong somehow when they handed me the check for thirty dollars. Sometimes, they pressed it into my hands and looked away, said I can't even tell you. I pointed them in the direction of the baths, and they went like obedient children, their naked bodies swaying under their towels as they shuffled across the old, wooden bridge.
II.

I have a picture from that time—of myself in the hot tub at Orr Springs. At least, some people claim it is me, pointing out the slope of my breasts, the flare of my hips, the unique circumference of my thighs. Positive identification is impossible since the woman in the picture cradles her face in her hands.

Light streams through a low doorway into the gazebo, and this young woman leans her back against the deck. The sunlight zeroes into a circle on her belly. Jasmine bush and bamboo are reflected in the glass. The woman bends her head and covers her eyes as if she were about to weep.

It must be morning because the tub is only half full. Someone scrubbed it at sunrise—alone with the river and the baths, the abalone sky. Steam rises in flurries and beads on the glass, obscuring detail and memory.

The woman is not weeping. She is scooping up the water from the tub and splashing it to her face. If this woman is me, she is thinking some kind of grateful prayer, alchemizing the water into a potion that will heal.

It’s easy to know what we’re doing, once we’re not doing it anymore.
III.

Before I lived at Orr Hot Springs, I spent a summer baking bread for fifty children on a farm outside Willits. I didn’t know I was in practice for becoming a massage therapist, but I knew I mended wounds buried deep inside me as I handled the huge mounds of dough.

(Wounds such as these are not mended easily, and not by intellectual examination or analysis. "Talking it out" carves paths around and in-between the issues. The body knows. The body knows things the mind could never face.)

The repetitive motions of my hands—the grasping and pushing, the bend of my waist, the slow ache in my shoulder—before long, I became automatic and blank. The dough came alive under my moving hands and, soon, that numb cavity began to fill out and be warmed. I kept my hands covered in flour and thought continually of food, of what is nourishing, dreamed of my mouth open and filled.

Children fluttered around me, tugged at my apron, took little balls of dough and rolled them lightly between their teeth. The bread rose and came out of the oven, broke into tender crumbs, tasted good. I watched the children and gave them small lumps of dough to press. I touched their miniature shoulders and smiled, but said very little. At the mid-summer dance, they braided flowers into my hair and held my hands, as
if I were an old person convalescing from a long, wasting illness.

IV.

Today I look at my hands. I remember the bodies I touched, the lives that came through them. I look at my hands sometimes and trace the edges of my finger, like children do in kindergarten on newsprint with green tempera paint. Hands become what they have held; our hands shape themselves around what they hold most dear, or what has made an impression, or what we press on others.

My friend Dana once grabbed my hand off the stick shift as I drove through L.A. “Hmmm,” he said, running a fingertip around my palm, “healing hands.”

I drove with my left hand on the wheel, while he examined every finger of my right. I swerved to avoid a dog.

“They’re like a sculptor’s hands,” he said dreamily, dropping my hand and gripping his own.

Dana is a sculptor, with a propensity for twisted nude forms, estranged limbs, fingers in a bowl. Once he left for Peru, and painted all the walls, the appliances, even his books, a startling white; a “blank canvas” he said, for his friends to spill upon. And we did, troweling up purples and reds, oranges and blues, a cacophony of personalities rolling across his
walls.
I pressed my hands in blue paint and hand-walked an awkward bridge above his couch.

V.
What follows may, or may not, be true:

"It’s been a while," he said.

Jon stepped inside and closed the door, settled himself carefully on the edge of the massage table. “I just came to soak in the baths, decided to get a massage on the spur of the moment,” he said. “I didn’t know it was you.” He fingered the white flannel sheet, blindly traced the pattern of violet posies.

We stared at each other. I don’t know what he saw in my face, a barrier perhaps, a careful retreat, but in his face I saw a deep sorrow. My eyes involuntarily shifted into professional gear, and they flitted over his body, making notes: a slump in the left shoulder, a grim tightness in the left arm and fist, chest slightly concave, breathing shallow.

In massage school, before we were lovers, Jon and I had been partners. The teacher insisted on partner rotation, but somehow Jon and I ended up together more times than not. We learned well on each other. We breathed freely; we allowed each other’s hands to cup the muscles and slide so slowly down the
length of connecting fibers and tissue; we allowed thumbs to probe deep into unyielding spots. It was like a dance, the way our teacher said it always should be, an effortless give and take, back and forth, with the breath as well as the body. Communication—transcendent and absolute.

"Listen," Jon was saying. "I understand if you don't want to do this." His body leaned toward me, and my spine tipped forward in response. A massage room is a very close environment. Intimacy is immediate; truth prevails.

I glanced away from him and gazed at the far wall, at the painting of *A Thousand Buddhas* Jon had given me as a graduation present. For the last year, I had looked at that picture every day, and every day it reminded me of Jon less and less. A process of pain. The primary Buddha sat in the center, immovable, surrounded by a helix of buddhas that spun around and around.

My palms relaxed, a good sign. "It might be awkward," I said. "but I'll try."

"I'm glad," Jon said. I took a deep breath and whatever had been prickling at my throat subsided.

What did my body feel when I placed my hands on Jon's back? My palms curved instinctively to the crook of his shoulders; my own shoulders softened and I asked Jon to breathe, and he did, and I inhaled with him, stretching my lungs, and on the exhale
my hands slid down his back, kneading the muscles on the downward slide, pulling up along the lats, crossing over his spine, and again, and again, until he seemed to flatten, and there was no distinction between the flesh of his back or the bones in his arms or the curve of his buttocks, no distinction in fact between his breath and mine, and I felt a small opening in my heart, a valve releasing, and an old love, a love aged and smooth as wine, flowed down my arms, and it sparked on Jon’s skin. I knew, then, that sometime in the night I would remember this gushing, and I would be shattered by a sensation of tremendous loss, a grasping ache in my palms, and I would cry, but even this certainty could not stop my hands in their circular route through Jon’s familiar and beautiful body. He inhaled and began to sob. The tears shuddered through his back, his arms, his legs, and I felt them empty from him in one bountiful wave. My right hand fluttered to rest on his sacrum. My left hand brushed the air above his head in long, sweeping arcs.

There is a powder that covers the heart, a sifting of particles fine as talc. It is protection—gauzy and insubstantial, but protection nonetheless. Occasionally, a hand rubs against you and wipes a patch clear.

That’s when the heart bulges, beating with a raw and healthy ferocity.
VI.

There is another picture, one that is hidden in a drawer. It is me, before I moved to Orr Springs; me, before I even knew such places existed. I am young, young, young.

I am standing barefoot on the porch of a forest service cabin in Prairie Creek State Park on the north coast of California. It is late summer. I am wearing a purple tank top, tight Levis, and a forest ranger's hat. The morning sun is full in my face, and I am smiling a goofy, lopsided grin, my hands at my sides, my feet planted solidly on the wooden planks.

I am pregnant.

I am about three weeks along, and the embryo is curled tightly in the fallopian tube. The pregnancy will end one week later in a long, terrifying miscarriage, but in the picture I do not know this. I do not know about the indifferent hands of nurses, the blind lights of an operating dome.

I don't even know I am pregnant. I am 21 years old and healthy from a long summer in Wyoming. It is a beautiful morning, and I am happy to be back in California. My world has not yet shifted to include the smell of bandages seeped in antiseptics and blood.

Look carefully at the belly for some sign of the child, at the face for some indication of motherhood. There is none; the
snapshot is flat and ordinary: a young woman on vacation, nothing more. But I look at this photo, and I sense a swelling in my pelvis, a fullness in my breasts. I feel my skin inviolate and smooth, the substance of everything I’ve lost and meant to regain.

VII.

Someone called them midwife’s hands. A midwife’s hands cradle and protect, hold a life between them. The classic posture for the hands in photographs you see: one hand cupped under the baby’s emerging head, the other lightly curled on the baby’s crown.

There is a polarity position like this: at the client’s head, cradling, not pulling but imparting the sense of emergence just the same. If you stay long enough—motionless, breathing little sips out of the air—the head appears to become larger, grows and trembles. The eyelids flutter. Sometimes I have touched the top of my head to the top of my client’s head, and we are plugged in; we take big breaths, heave long important sighs.

Usually, I got up and walked to the other end of the table, plugged all ten fingers onto all ten toes and breathed some more. I once did this with a dear friend of mine; after a few minutes, her body began to tremble, then she laughed and rolled
onto her side, laughed in big, breath-gulping guffaws.

"What is it?" I said. "What's so funny?"

She rolled onto her back, and she was crying now, sobs lifting her chest, her eyes squeezed shut, tears streaming down her cheeks. I went to her, placed a hand on her forehead, stroked back the hair from her face.

"What is it, baby?" I whispered.

She shuddered, then smiled. She rubbed her cheek against my hand, puckering her lips like an infant. She opened her eyes, and they startled me, glinting like dark, polished jewels.

"God," she said, squeezing my palm, "I felt like I could fly."

VIII.

Sean was born. Not from my body. From Rhea's. I held the mirror at an angle so she could see the crown of his head as it split her body in two.

The midwife placed one hand on the skull and rotated it so the face pointed toward heaven. The eyes were open, glazed with an unearthly shine.

Rhea screamed. The world paused and listened. The body followed, sheathed in cream and wax.
IX.

What does the body hold? And how do the hands release it?
In the late seventies, “hug clinics” opened on college campuses in California. Distraught people were invited to drop in if they needed to be held in place for a moment by a pair of strong, encircling arms.

One of the most powerful massage holds I’ve used has the client on his side, curled into a fetal position. I cupped one hand to the base of the spine, the other lay flat on the back between the shoulder blades. These are the two places our mothers’ hands fell when holding us as babies.

Some people cried with little shoulder-shaking sobs. Others fell promptly asleep. Most of them believed my hands were still on them long after I’d walked away.

X.

They came to me hot and pink from the baths, most of my work already done. They came naked and slick and gorgeous.

What did I give them? Nothing but myself, and not even that, but the benefit of my whole attention, the focus of my hands on them, the focus of my heart. I don’t know how long the change lasted. They left the room and lingered in the baths, got out, got dressed, and drove the two-and-a-half hours home. I waved goodbye and walked up the steps to my cabin, looked out
my window to the luscious woods, and thought about these people more than I probably should have. When the time approached for me to leave Orr Springs, I thought about them with a frantic longing for a life that could be balanced and whole.

I wanted to massage myself before I left; I wanted to send myself off with a stroke of my fingers, a hand along my spine, an affirmation for abundance. A momentary release from every memory that weighed me down. I thought it might help, if only for the drive out on the rutted and dusty road.

XII.

In the hospital, the nurse stuck an IV needle into the back of my hand, over and over. I squinted and clenched my teeth.

"Does that hurt?" the nurse said, looking up, scowling.

I nodded.

"It's not supposed to hurt," she said, and threw the needle aside, tried again.

When she was done, I lay on top of the covers, shivering, my eyes halfway closed, my palm flat on the bed. The IV fluid ticked into my blood. Already, I could feel myself forgetting everything.

My body was a container of pain. And then it contained nothing. An absence so absolute I couldn't even cry.
XIII.

The hand is shaped to touch the different parts of the world. We hurt and the hand reaches to the chest. A baby’s head fits snugly into the center of your palm.

The midwife had fingers so long I almost asked her if she played the piano. The words were nearly out of my mouth, but then she handed Sean to me, and I forgot about pianos, about music.

I held him while the midwife and Rhea struggled with the afterbirth. I held him against my shoulder. His eyes were open; he blinked slowly and rarely, like a baby owl. The light in the room was gold, the color of honey.

I thought I saw something in his eyes, but I can’t be sure. I thought I saw a nod of acceptance, a little man bowing to me, his hands pressed together in an attitude of prayer.

XIV.

Years after I left Orr Springs, I worked for the Human Resource Council in Missoula, Montana. I didn’t massage people anymore. I tried, but I zipped through the parts of the body as if I were taking inventory. I chattered like a barber giving a haircut. I thought about dinner, gas mileage, bills to be paid.

In my job, I interviewed clients and determined their eligibility for a heating assistance program. Many of the
people I saw were elderly and disabled; all of them had stories to tell, stories that could take a lifetime. I had only twenty minutes to spend with each one. I found that when I gave them my whole and complete attention for even five minutes, that was enough. I looked them in the eyes and smiled, laughed with them, murmured consolations. They looked back and told me what they knew. My hands kept very still on my desk.

One 76-year-old woman spoke to me in short, disjointed sentences, her head nodding emphatically with each word, spittle forming at the corners of her mouth. She smelled of cigarettes and bitter lemons. As I walked her to the door of my office, she swirled and grabbed me around the waist. She was only as tall as my chest, and I settled my arms onto her shoulders. We stood like that for a few seconds under the fluorescent lights, the computers humming around us. I slid one hand down her back and held her there; my hand quivered, near as it was to her old and fragile heart.

XV.

I've never been touched by a blind person. But I have been touched by people whose vision was absolute, perfect, and clear.

I've also been touched by sighted people who could not see me at all, but saw someone else, someone they might have liked me to be.
XVI.

I'm lying on my massage table. It's for sale. I'm lying on it, and I feel utterly relaxed. My breath swirls though my body in a contented daze.

I'm lying on my back. I open my eyes, and I see my face. I see me leaning over the table. My right hand comes to rest on my womb; my left hand hovers over my throat.

_Forgive Me_. Those are the words which pass between us.