Unblinking eyes | Stories

Sara Agne

The University of Montana

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.
Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd

Recommended Citation
Agne, Sara, "Unblinking eyes| Stories" (2002). Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers. 3964.
https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/3964

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

**Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature**

Yes, I grant permission         ✓
No, I do not grant permission

Author's Signature:  

Date:  May 23, 2002

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author's explicit consent.
Unblinking Eyes

Stories

By

Sara Agne

B.S. University of Wisconsin Eau Claire, 1997
B.A. University of Montana, 2000

Presented in Partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
University of Montana, May 2002

Approved by:

[Signatures]

Date

6-3-02
Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ant Hills</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unblinking Eyes</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a Place so Small</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Cabinet</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Hemisphere Full</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life is Stronger than You Think</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You are with Me</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ant Hills

My grandmother taught us how to touch the dead. She thought that it was important to be familiar with a dead body, to touch the hair, the face, and the texture of the skin. When Ned and I were ten she held our hands against our grandfather's cold cheek and whispered, "Don't be afraid. It's like cold chicken isn't it?"

My grandmother understood death through touch. She spent long hours with her mother's corpse before it was buried. Her mother died in Siberia, in December when the ground was still too hard for burial. The family stored her body in the fruit cellar until the spring. My grandmother was seven, and she didn't understand that her mother was dead. She tried to warm her mother's hands inside her own, brush her hair, and arrange the frozen folds of her woolen dress. On days that her family had extra bread she would force crumbs into her mother's mouth. She checked every evening to see if she had swallowed them, and sometimes she thought she did.

Once my grandmother lifted up one of her mother's eyelids and screamed when she saw the brown iris fogged white with ice. She broke off three of her mother's eyelashes in the process, and placed them in her coat pocket where they disintegrated into lint and dust. Right before the burial, she loosened two rotten teeth at the back of her mother's mouth,
and these she kept in a silver box with pale blue seagulls painted across the lid.

Ned and I found the twisted black teeth when we were twelve, and had been snooping through our grandmother's vanity cabinet. My grandmother asked us if we wanted to hold them and I remember how light they felt in my hand, empty like the hollowed out shells of pecans. I think that's what bothers me the most about Ned. I haven't had a chance to feel his stillness, rearrange the collar of his shirt, brush his hair, and tell everyone that the mortician pasted his mouth together in an expression he never wore in real life. There has been nothing to let me know that he is really gone, no body, no clothing, and no bones. I don't even have an urn of ashes, or dirt from the ground where he died. I don't have anything to say goodbye to. The American embassy in Nepal told us that things like this happen in the mountains; sometimes people disappear. The last time I called, an old woman told me that maybe my brother didn't want to be found. Her voice was clipped and professional; she shuffled papers as she spoke. I told her that Ned was my twin. When we were babies we would sleep side by side in our crib and synchronize our breathing. She said she would try and keep me informed.

His fiancée Phoebe was the last person to hear from him. He sent her a postcard from Katmandu right before he left on his mountain trek. He wrote that the money he saved was worth it, the streets were tight in
the city, they felt like tunnels, and he had been blessed in seven temples.

I used to read the postcard when I went over to Phoebe's apartment. I tried to search the solid dark print for clues.

Phoebe calls me on the phone to tell me she has boxed up Ned's things. She wants to get rid of them before the memorial service my parents have planned for him the following week. She says it makes her too sad to have his things around any longer.

"I thought you might want to have his stuff," she says when I don't say anything. "It doesn't feel quite right to just throw it all out." I can hear her tapping something nervously on the other end of the line, her fingernails, or a pen.

I tell her not to throw out his stuff. I will come and get it.

It has been almost two years now since he disappeared. Some tourists found his sleeping bag and camera four months after we reported him missing, but nothing has been found since. Phoebe had the photographs developed, but they were all of mountains, trees, and sky. We used to try and convince ourselves that we could see Ned's shadow in one of the photographs, but eventually Phoebe determined the shadow was probably just a tree or a rock, and after awhile she stopped bringing them out at all.

My husband watches me talk to her on the phone, and when I hang up Sam touches the hollow of my throat lightly with his thumb.
“Phoebe?” he asks.

I nod my head. “She doesn’t want Ned’s things anymore. His things make her sad.”

Sam’s eyes look eggshell blue in the sunlight. His skin is so pale that I can watch his blood flush his earlobes and cheeks. It always strikes me the way he is the exact opposite of me and Ned. He is blonde, tall, and loud. Ned and I are tiny, dark, and quiet. Sam draws all attention to himself. Whenever we ate together, Ned and I drew back in our chairs and ate in silence. Sam always entertained our guests. I’ve always liked this about Sam. I get nervous talking to people, even sales people, waiters and waitresses make me uncomfortable. It’s nice having a husband that does the talking for me when I need him to. Still, I miss the quiet way that Ned and I communicated with one another. When we were children, we spoke in voices and used words that only we understood. My mother called it twin speak and for years we were forbidden to use it around her. Whenever we would whisper quietly to one another she would stomp her feet and threaten us with separation until we spoke loud and clear so that everyone could understand what we were saying.

When I get to Phoebe's house I see that she has all of Ned’s things packed into five large brown boxes. They are sitting on her orange tiled kitchen floor. Ned never accumulated much of anything in the houses or
apartments that he lived in. He rented an efficiency apartment his last year of college, and when I came to visit him I was always uncomfortable with the stark simplicity of his place. He had a twin mattress on the floor, a fruit crate full of books, and a metallic reading lamp. He never hung any posters or pictures on his walls, and he kept all his clothes in grocery bags at the back of his closet.

"Can't you even buy clothes hangers?" I complained.

"What's the use? I never hang my clothes up anyway," he told me. But his lack of material possessions was an inconvenience, especially when we wanted to cook. Ned had only one bowl, one fork, and one glass. We had to take turns eating until I got frustrated and went to the store to buy him three more of everything.

I stay at Phoebe's long enough to have a beer and catch up with her for a moment. Phoebe says that she is sick of thinking that Ned is alive. "It will be a relief to finally be able to say goodbye to him," she says propping her bottle of beer on her knee. "I think your parents are doing the right thing. It's time we had a funeral service. Ned deserved that."

I don't say anything, but I shrug my shoulders in an unsympathetic way and lift my beer up to my lips. I notice a new photograph taped to Phoebe's refrigerator. It is a photo of Phoebe and a strange man hugging in front of her lake cabin. When I glance at the
picture quickly I almost mistake the man for Ned. Around the kitchen I notice little things that are missing. A water pitcher Ned made out of clay no longer sits on the countertop near the fridge, his vegetarian cookbooks aren’t stacked in a colored pile in the bookshelf, and even the bright yellow color Ned painted the walls has been recently painted over in a respectable beige.

“Joanna,” Phoebe says, “There just isn’t hope anymore. If Ned were alive he would’ve found a way to get a hold of us. What kind of a guy doesn’t contact anyone for two years?” She shakes her head and opens her hooded gray eyes in a lazy lizard-like fashion. “Ned wasn’t like that. He’s dead.”

“We can’t know anything for sure.” This is a conversation we have been having since her therapy started last summer. She’s been trying to convince me to accept his death like she has. Now she’s trying to emphasize it so I’ll relent and go to the funeral service. She doesn’t want her hope to have diminished before mine. She still wants to appear the devoted fiancée. I want to tell her that I know that he is alive, that I am his twin and I can feel him, but I can’t. I don’t have a real sense if he is dead or alive.

“Maybe he’s injured,” I say. “Maybe he lost his memory.” Phoebe gives me a sad look. She looks down at her fingers and begins to peel off her beer label, and I notice that she isn’t wearing her engagement
ring anymore. There is a strip of white skin defining its absence.

"Have you been to your cabin lately?" I fiddle with my own diamond ring. My fingers are stubby and square just like Ned's.

"Yeah, every once in a while." Phoebe stands up and her baggy jeans swim around her tiny white ankles.

"I remember how much Ned loved that cabin. Didn't he help your dad finish off the roof?"

Phoebe pulls a bloated teabag out of an empty mug near the sink and sighs. "You know when Ned first disappeared I really thought that he would come back. It's seems so stupid now."

Phoebe tosses the teabag into the trash. It lands with a wet thud at the bottom of the wastebasket. "Last week I had a dream about Ned," she tells me smiling. "He was flying around the wooden beams of an old church sanctuary we visited once in South Dakota. He was singing incoherently, and making funny faces at me as if he was trying to tell me that everything was okay. For the first time since he disappeared I really felt at peace with what happened."

I try not to listen to what Phoebe is telling me. It makes me angry to even look at her face when she says things like this so I stare directly at her empty ring finger instead. "Ned didn't even believe in God," I say. Then I tell her that I saw a special on TV about a family whose son was kidnapped twelve years ago, and when the news reporter asked them if
they had given up hope they said that they never would. I tell her that I won't ever give up either, that I won't come to Ned's memorial service because there is no reason to go. The whole time I tell her these things I keep staring at her ring finger so that she knows that I know she has betrayed my brother.

"Joanna," Phoebe exhales and emphasizes the A's in my name. She bites her lip. "I'm sick of putting Ned's ring on every time you come over. I'm not going to do it any longer."

"Well," I stare calmly over the glass lip of my beer bottle. "I wouldn't want us to inconvenience you."

Phoebe touches the empty white skin on her ring finger. "Ned was never an inconvenience."

When we were in the fourth grade, Ned and I had a map of the world pinned to a cork wall in our bedroom. We used to spin with our eyes shut and jab the map with pointed fingers to find out where we would live when we were older. I always aimed for Europe and Australia. I landed there most of the time, partly because I would open my eyes slightly and focus through my fuzzy eyelashes. Ned always landed in the middle of oceans. I would joke and tell him that landing in the middle of oceans meant that he was going to end up nowhere. Ned was quiet when I said this. He wanted to land in Africa, and I got mad because he wouldn't cheat like I did.
Ned always made things harder on himself than he needed to. At recess he would sit beneath the monkey bars and build rock barriers around the anthills. He was worried because the other kids were always mashing them underneath their careless feet. The more that Ned wanted to save the ants the more the other kids wanted to stomp on them. In second grade, he tried to save an injured moth by carrying it in his mouth. Our teacher, Miss Davis, wouldn't let him bring it into the school after gym class so Ned pretended to let it go, and tucked it safely between his lips. He kept his mouth closed for almost a half an hour, but when Miss Davis finally demanded that he answer her, the moth half-fell, half-flew onto the desk below him. Some of the girls in our class screamed. The moth, damp and folded, struggled in a pool of Ned's spit. Miss Davis sent Ned to the principal's office.

Sam is sitting on the front porch when I pull my car into the driveway. He has his legs up on the railing and he lifts his baseball cap slightly to watch me struggle out of my seat belt and slam the car door.

"How's Phoebe?"

I trip on the crumbled cement of the porch steps. "You know," my voice cracks. "I'm glad that Ned is missing."

Sam leans forward and rests his elbows on his knees.

I clear my throat. "I'm glad my brother doesn't have to marry her. When he comes back I'm not going to make any excuses for her."
“Excuses about what?” Sam takes off his hat and rubs his silver-blond hair with the palm of his hand.

“Oh you are going to love this.” I stomp up the stairs towards him. “Guess who has a new boyfriend?”

Sam shrugs his shoulders as if he already knew.

I sit down on the white painted floorboards at his feet. “Can you believe her?”

Sam pulls himself onto the floor next to me. The air is hot and golden. The sun is sinking down below the tree line, and there are flying insects everywhere. The silhouettes of their wings and their long spindly legs dip up and down in the air currents.

“I thought Phoebe loved Ned.”

“She does.” He rubs his hands up and down the back of my T-shirt.

“Don’t you think he’s coming back?” I rest my head in the space between his chin and his shoulder. Sam smells like dry grass and Gold Bond powder.

“I haven’t thought he was coming back for a long time,” Sam says sighing. "Nobody has thought that, but you, and you know that. We've talked about this so many times."

“Thanks,” I say and use his shoulders to stand up. You think that one time he could lie to me, just one time take my side. Sam looks out
past the driveway, and I can tell by the way that he has fixed his jaw that he isn’t going to move until I go inside. I walk slowly with deliberate steps, and let the door clap loudly behind me. Inside the house I squeeze my eyes and fists shut as hard as I can. I think “Ned, Ned, Ned,” the voice inside my head is screaming. I focus all of my energy on his image, hoping to feel his presence, hoping he’ll give me a sign to let me know that I am right, that I’m not alone. Why can’t I have a dream where Ned tells me he is okay? Why can’t I feel, truly feel that he is gone? I wait a long time, but there is nothing, no sign, no sound, no feeling.

It has been raining for almost two days now, and it has made me aware of all the mirrors in the house. I try not to look inside them, because when I see my face I see Ned’s face. I see how our eyes are dark and deep like owls. They peer out beneath my long forehead, above my sharp chin, and I wonder if Ned is as sad as I am. I still haven’t gone through Ned’s things, but I can feel their presence in our study.

I open up the front windows and smell the rain and the earthworms. Their bloated bodies are massed together in puddles on the driveway. I remember how they bothered Ned whenever it would rain. He would see them everywhere and get sick from their water-drenched aroma. I never really noticed them before Ned disappeared, but now I see that they are everywhere. I just didn’t pay attention.

While Sam attends Ned’s memorial service I wander restlessly
around the house. After about an hour, I manage to make my way into the study. In my atlas, I have red dots marking each city and each country that Ned visited. I look at it to trace his path. I try to see deep inside the pink, yellow, green, and orange landmasses to find Ned.

Maybe he is injured somewhere, recovering in a white hospital, in a room full of patients sleeping in cots with ceiling fans whizzing above their heads. There is a nurse there who has taken special interest in him. She replaces cold washcloths on his forehead and tries to help him remember who he is and where he came from. He remembers my face, and says he feels like he has a part of himself that is missing.

I look down at Ned’s crumbled boxes. The edge of his sketchbook and the jade head of one of his Buddha statues are visible. I drop myself onto the floor and open the box that is labeled childhood-high school. In it there are pictures of Ned and me as children. I hold the pictures close to my face and stare at Ned’s expressions in each of them. I stare so long that he becomes a patch of colored dots instead of a face. I touch the part of the picture that is Ned’s black hair, and smile because his cowlick is sticking up. I remember how mom used to call him the flying nun because his hair winged up above his ears.

I try not to think of the funeral across town, but I can almost hear the minister chanting above the heads of my family, and friends. I picture Phoebe and Sam solemn and dressed in black with their heads
bowed in silence. I pull a flannel shirt from the bottom of one of Ned's boxes, and hold the fabric up to face, covering my eyes, and sucking the scent through my mouth and nose. It doesn't smell like Ned, none of his things do anymore. They smell like Phoebe, the vanilla oil she presses behind her ears, and the eucalyptus shampoo she bought when we went to the herbal fair together last spring. I toss the contents of the box out onto the floor, and pick through the things. I find a stone that Ned discovered by the riverbank the summer before he left for Katmandu. It's blue and is covered in a spider web of white quartz. Ned thought that it looked like an upside down peace sign. I put it inside of my mouth and click my teeth against its metallic coolness. Ned liked to talk about rock cycles back in high school. He used to tell me that rocks held the history of the world inside of them. He would hold them up to the sun and see little pieces of ancient volcanoes, and disintegrated mountain ranges. I would sit and sort them by color across the sand. I didn't care about what they used to be. I just liked to throw them in tiny sprays across the surface of the water, listening to the plinking noises they made when they fell.

In a tangled knot, the necklaces I made for Ned at summer camp are tied together. They are a jumble of glass colored beads, and miniature silver trinkets. Ned had never worn them, or the silk-screened t-shirts I made, which are folded tight like white envelopes near my bare
foot. I find a stack of birthday and Valentine cards from Phoebe in her long curving handwriting and there are old cassette tapes, college notebooks, letters, and in the center of a wad of browning Kleenex a handful of baby teeth. They fall out onto the floor, their roots stained in leftover blood, their surfaces pocked with tiny pits, the result of high fevers when Ned and I were five. I pile them up into my palm, and close my fingers around them. I’m not really sure if they are Ned’s or my own, but I imagine them forming in our mother’s womb inside of his mouth. His small pink lips opening and closing against the beating of our hearts, our embryonic hair, and our limbs entwined and touching in the darkness. I wrap the teeth back up in the old Kleenex, and place them in my pocket.

The house is silent around me. I search through the contents of Ned’s last box. Ned’s things feel cold and hollow in my hands, but I continue searching through them without pausing. Nothing in the last box is recognizable to me. They are things that I have never seen before: a silver crucifix with a red-beaded rosary, a pair of shiny Italian loafers, and a pile of conservatively colored ties and suit jackets. These are things that I never would’ve connected to Ned, and for a moment I feel like I am digging through some stranger’s possessions. It makes me angry to find these things, angry that I feel so separated from them, angry that they feel like some kind of secret that Ned had been keeping from me. Then I
remember the part of the Ned’s moth story that I always make sure to forget. I remember how he searched for me with his eyes when the teacher stood above him scolding him. He wanted me to help him, to smile, to do something so that he wouldn’t have to face her alone, but I had looked away. I had felt the same embarrassment that he felt. The same disgust coming from the eyes of the children all around him, and for the first time in my life I hadn’t wanted to feel what he felt anymore. I didn’t want to be his twin because I was ashamed of him. After that day at recess when the other children smashed his anthills I didn’t try to stop them. I watched them, and I laughed, and sometimes I stomped on them myself. The truth is there are some things about Ned that I could never understand. We were twins and I was supposed to know everything about him. I should have been closer to him than anybody else, I should’ve known the moment that he stopped, the moment he no longer existed, but I didn’t. When he disappeared I couldn’t even tell the difference.

On the wall above my head there is a framed photograph of Ned with his heavy backpack strapped to his broad square shoulders. He is smiling, but his head is cocked to the side because he gets embarrassed when his photograph is taken. His dark eyes are hollowed out by the shadow of a twisted tree at his side, and for the moment I can see them empty out into nothing. His face becomes a skull and his strong arms
and legs, white narrow bones that poke out of the snow on a
mountaintop I have never seen, and will never find. I reach for the wad
of Kleenex and teeth inside of my pocket and squeeze the contents
between my fingers. They feel heavy and cold in my hand, but I can’t let
go.
She knows that the couple’s baby is dead. A nurse mouthed, “She’s gone,” in the hallway as she hurried past, but it was illegal for anyone but a doctor to reveal this information. Jill kneels on the floor between the couple, bridging their hands together. She leads them in a prayer. "In God we ask for strength and the ability to withstand whatever trials and tribulations are set before us," her voice trembles. Jill is silent to the couple’s pleas and to their worried faces and questions.

“What’s happening?” the mother asks grabbing onto Jill’s hands. She kneads her fingers into Jill’s palm.

“I don’t know,” Jill says. “We have to wait and see.”

The father paces beside them. His breath is short and raspy. “She was just fine. We hardly ever let her into the bed. I swear to you, hardly ever.”

The grandmother is sitting by the far wall rubbing a tiny black rosary in her hands. “God hear me," she says over and over again. Every once in a while she lifts a silver crucifix up to her lips and whispers something in Spanish.

“You aren’t supposed to be able to drop a baby while you are sleeping,” the mother says to Jill. “It’s supposed to be a subconscious
thing.”

“It’s not your fault,” Jill says.

“Tell me my baby is going to be okay,” the mother says to Jill.

“Tell me that she’ll be fine.”

Jill avoids the mother’s eyes, wide and white, and suggests that they pray for solace and strength. She closes her eyes and prays with them that their child will live. The couple asks her to add that part, the part about their child surviving, but she wonders how someone delivering this type of false hope, these sorts of hollow prayers, could be doing anyone any good. She feels like a liar.

Jill has never dealt with a death before, not by herself. She has been an intern chaplain at the hospital all summer, but for the last month and a half she has only shadowed the resident chaplain, a Jesuit priest named Lewis, during his rounds. This is her first night alone at the hospital, this is the first death of a child she’s witnessed, and she isn’t quite sure what to say or do. Jill hasn’t been certain of herself since she joined the seminary last fall. Her parent’s had been disappointed by her decision.

“You have a business degree,” her father said. “I thought you were going into international business. I thought that was why we sent you to Paris for a year.”

Her mother had clicked her long fingernails against the kitchen
countertop, “I didn’t even know you were religious,” she said frowning.

“Well I am,” Jill had told her, although she wasn’t as strong in her faith as the other seminary students seemed to be. Her friend Peter saw God through other people, a small woman named Doreen said she felt God’s presence with her ever since she’d been a small child, and the lucky few Alice, Mary and a tall fair-haired man named Gideon had visions, prophetic dreams that gave them positive proof that God was alive and well. At first Jill hadn’t cared that she hadn’t had a vision, or seen Jesus, or felt God’s overwhelming power press up against her. She just wanted to serve. She wanted to help other people, and that she figured was enough. Faith, after all, is believing in something unbelievable. She figured God would come in good time. Yet after a year of seminary school, Jill was surprised to find her faith wavering. She was counting on this internship.

When the doctor finally arrives with the news of the baby’s death Jill is grateful that she doesn’t have to contend with the family’s physical ailments as well. The grandmother faints. Her head hits the floor and the sound escalates the cries of the parents who are huddled together, wringing their hands and sobbing. Their faces are accordions of grief. The nurses rush forward, antiseptic, collect, and cool-minded. They dab at the tangle of blood in the grandmother’s hair, and push Jill forward to hem in the hysteria of the baby’s parents, and take them to a private area
to view the body.

The parents don't believe the baby is dead. They pass it between themselves, wrapped tight in a pink hospital blanket. They touch its lips, and bring its mouth up to the skin on their cheeks. "I can feel her breath on my face," the mother says. "I see her chest rising," adds the father. They hold the baby, stiff and turning blue out to the nurses and to Jill. "Take her back," they insist. "She's still alive. Take her back and work on her some more." The nurse's eyes are calm and lifeless. They've seen many dead babies. They tell the couple there is nothing else to be done. The baby is gone. Its heart has stopped. It was probably dead before they'd even arrived. The nurses file out in a single line. They leave Jill to contend with the couple's grief. They've done all they could.

Jill hangs on the periphery, touching her fingers lightly against the woman's shirt. She tries to think of what Lewis would do. He always knew the right words to say. What would he say to the couple? Jill bows her head waiting for the perfect words to appear in her head, but nothing comes. All Jill can do is stare mindlessly at the black button eyes of the mother's pink bunny slippers that look up at her from the floor. The couple is dressed in their sleeping attire, the father wearing a raggedy maroon bathrobe wrapped loosely around his waistline. The mother dressed in a bright sport t-shirt, and boxer shorts. Around her eyes are pools of eyeliner it runs down her face, making her eye sockets look
elongated and ghoulislic.

She watches the couple as their faces become more and more desperate. They squeeze the child tighter and tighter to their chests, and as they do, even Jill can hear a high-pitched puff of air coming from the baby's body. The sound squeaks and falls away like a dog's chew toy. This is what the parent's are hoping is a breath, another chance, but Jill knows it is only leftover gases escaping from the child's lungs as she is crushed in their arms.

"The baby isn't breathing," Jill says trying to push her self between the couple. The sound of the baby's infrequent squeaking makes her feel sick. "Listen to me," she says in a loud voice. "The doctor's don't declare a death lightly. They worked on her until they were absolutely sure she was gone."

"Why the fuck don't you help her?" the mother screams at Jill. "Why don't you say another fucking prayer or something?" Her eyes are accusing. Jill backs away and the mother thrusts the infant into her arms. "Take her back," she screams. "Take her back and tell them to work on her some more. You don't come back until she's okay. She's still alive. I can see her breathing. I can hear it." The mother squeezes her hands together. "Help us," she sobs staring blindly up towards the ceiling lights.

Jill tries to calm the mother down. She holds the baby out to her,
"Don't you want to say goodbye," she says. "Sometimes it's easier to accept when you take a moment." She tries to place the baby back into the mother's arms, but the mother shrinks away. "I could give you a moment alone with her. Would you like that?"

The father collapses into a chair near the wall, and buries his head in his hands. Jill nudges the baby's towards him. "Sir," she says, "Sir, please take your baby." The father doesn't look up. He refuses to take his head out of his hands.

"Maybe a prayer would make us all feel better?" Jill asks.

"A lot of good that's done," the mother says. "This is a hospital. We don't want to pray. We want some medical attention."

The mother pulls her arms in close to her body, and then springs outward towards Jill. Her motions remind Jill of a snake striking. "What I want is for you to go and get a doctor. What I want is for you to help my baby, and stop wasting time telling me that's she's dead."

"Please," Jill pleads holding out their baby. "I know you'll regret this later on."

"Get the hell out of here. You were lying to us," the mother screams. Jill takes one more step forward towards her, but the mother waves her fist in the air, "Go".

Jill stumbles into the hallway. She cranes her neck up and down the corridor for a nurse or a doctor, but doesn't see one. What is she
supposed to do with the baby? Her mind feels as if it is buzzing. The couple's words hang in the air around her. They were right her prayers had been lies. She hadn't done them any good. Her face feels hot and tight. The long sterile hallway stretches out before her. She's done everything wrong.

Jill looks down at the infant in her arms. She has never held a baby this tiny before. It feels light, almost weightless in her arms like an empty hatbox. She touches her finger to its rounded cheek. It still feels warm, although its lips are tight and almost purple. She is surprised by how peaceful the baby's face looks, how if she didn't know any better she too might think it was alive.

"I'll take it to the morgue," she says softly under her breath. It seems like the right thing to do, the right gesture, a last chance for someone to care for the baby's small body with care and tenderness, before it is nothing more than another body to be handled and then disposed of. She doesn't want to even think of the baby in the morgue. Its body shut into one of those metal drawers too long and cold for a child much less a baby. Sometimes Jill's husband tries to argue back. "If they can see only your arm is injured why would they take your pants off?"

"They have to be safe," she tells him. "They can't take any chances that you have an injury they can't see."
Jill is unable to remove her eyes from the baby’s still face. As she makes her way to the elevators she notices a few people in the hallway glance her way and gives her and the baby small smiles as they pass. They think she is holding a sleeping baby in her arms. They think she is the baby's mother, perhaps noticing how her long dark hair blends into the downy fluff on the baby's head. They smile as if to tell her how precious the sight of them is, how reassuring. She thinks to tell them it isn’t hers. She thinks to say the baby is not sleeping. It is dead, but this seems cruel. It is best to adhere to the busy calm that hums around her like clicking insect wings, best to maintain the placid tension the hospital always seems to emit.

It seems impossible to her that the small lifeless body in her arms was alive just hours earlier, impossible the randomness of the couple’s story. The mother retrieves her crying baby from her crib in the middle of the night. She falls asleep while breast-feeding, the child resting in the crook of her arm. Hours later the couple is awakened by a thud on the floor. The baby has fallen out of the mother’s arms. The mother has dropped the baby while sleeping. The baby doesn’t cry. When the couple turns on the light to see if the baby is injured, it doesn’t respond. It doesn’t look like it is breathing. It was probably dead before they’d even arrived. That was what the nurses had said. It can happen just like that. It can be that simple.
At the door to the morgue the security guard seems surprised by her appearance. Jill holds the baby in her arms out towards him as if she is presenting him with a gift.

"I've got a body," she says without thinking.

The security guard looks down at Jill and the baby. "Who are you?" His eyes search for her identity badge, which she thrusts forward with a shaking hand.

"I'm interning as a chaplain, I'm from the seminary university."

"Are you supposed to be down here?" the security guard rubs his chin. He has a thick black beard that reminds Jill of bear fur. "I didn't know you chaplains came around these parts. I thought you stuck to the injured and the dying. You can't convert the dead. The job's pretty much over." He laughs momentarily at his own joke.

Jill shrugs her shoulders, "We go where we're needed." She is used to occasional hostility from the hospital staff, and even some of the patients. She thinks of the young man this afternoon with the Japanese fighting fish tattooed like a spiral of fresh orange paint on his forearm. When she had knocked on his door he had barely been able to move his eyes over in her direction. There were tubes stuck up his nose and taped to his upper lip. She could see his ribcage, sunken and sharp beneath his white hospital sheets.

"Would you like someone to pray with?" she'd asked.
"Pray?" His voice bubbled as if he were speaking from underwater because of his tubes. "No. I don't want to pray." He'd tried to push himself upright in his bed, although Jill could tell that it pained him. "I'm not Catholic, Sister," he'd said waving his arms to ward her away.

"I'm not a nun," Jill said. "I'm not Catholic, although it's okay if you are. It doesn't matter what religion you are," Jill had rocked back and forth on her feet smoothing down her cotton skirt with her hands. "I'm just here to pray with people, or we don't even have to pray we could just talk. Like I said it doesn't matter."

"I don't want to. I don't believe in God," he'd hollered at her. His pupils had become tiny pin-pricks. "I just want to lie here and feel like shit. Is that alright with you?"

"Sure," Jill said, "thanks. Thanks for your time." She pulled back into the hallway her cheeks hot. A nurse at the station across the hall had smirked out of the side of her mouth and shook her head.

"I can't accept this body," the security guard says eyeing the blanket and the baby wrapped in Jill's arms.

"It's okay. She's dead," Jill fumbles for words.

"I can't accept a body without the proper tags, identification, and papers."

Jill tries to peep through the rounded window on the morgue's doorway. "Isn't there a doctor down here? Can't I give the baby to
someone down here? I can wait here for a doctor."

"You're not even supposed to be down here," the security guard says his voice tensing. "The head nurse is supposed to bring the bodies down, and even she doesn't bring them down until they've been bathed and tagged and properly identified. We don't just take bodies from the streets."

"This baby isn't from the streets," Jill says. "I was just talking with her parents, and they were very upset, and I had to take the baby away, so I came down here."

"You shouldn't have," the security guard says. "I can't accept this body until it has the proper tags on it."

Jill looks around the hallway warily. "What am I supposed to do with her?"

The security guard shakes his head, "I don't know. Take it back upstairs. Get the body properly tagged and washed. You shouldn't even be walking around with it like that."

Jill remembers in a flash some of the secret ways that the hospital has of hiding bodies when they need to be transported. She thinks of the carts that look like they have supplies on them or are empty on top with a sheet hanging over a second compartment where a body is placed before it is moved. She thinks of all the service doorways and elevators that keep the general public away from the dead so that panic won't ensue.
Why had she brought the baby down here herself? What had she been thinking?

"I'll go get the proper tags," she says. "Can I leave the body here with you?"

"No, you can't," the security guard sighs. "What you need to do is go upstairs like I said and get the proper tags. I can't do anything with the body down here. I'm not authorized to do anything with the bodies."

"I'll leave it with an orderly."

"You can't do that either." The security guard slaps one of his fat hands onto his forehead. His skin is starting to sweat under the overhead lights. "Listen. Just go back up and talk to the head nurse on your floor. She'll take care of everything."

In the elevator Jill is embarrassed by her actions. What is she going to do with the baby now? Where does she think she is going to take it? What if she bumps into the couple again trying to get the proper tags? She would only further injure their already fragile state. The numbers on the elevator door illuminate as it climbs upward. On one of the floors a man steps on. He is wearing a blue suit and has a bald head. When he gets into the elevator Jill moves into the back corner. The man looks at her out of the side of his eyes. "How old is your baby?" he asks.

"I don't know," Jill says adjusting the pink blanket so that it covers the baby's face a little more. "It's not my baby. I'm just watching her."
"Oh," the man says. "I have two of my own. One's three and the other's four months. That's why I asked. She looks about the same size. She's cute."

"Thanks," Jill says and the next time the elevator's doors open she gets off. "Have a nice day," she says to the man in the blue suit. She isn't on the right floor. She doesn't even know what floor she's on so she waits until the elevator's doors shut and then presses the button to go down once again. The button is sticky and she notices the floor smells like pureed food and old hair. She gets back on the elevator. The baby has started to feel heavy in her arms, and its face is so obviously pale and lifeless. Jill is sure, suddenly, that everyone will see that the baby is dead.

When the elevator stops again, Jill holds the baby tight against her chest. She's made a big mistake by taking the baby down to the morgue. She knows this now. She wants to kick herself for not waiting for a nurse or a doctor to show up. Why hadn't she stopped by the nurse's station before she'd gone downstairs? Jill doesn't want to make this any worse than it already is. The nurses already only tolerate her at best. She'll just explain that she'd panicked.

When the elevator doors open Jill sees the couple right away. They are sitting on plastic chairs that are pressed up against the wall. There are two police officers standing above them in dark blue uniforms. Jill can see their badges glinting as they move. The head nurse is
standing behind them craning her neck up and down the hall as if she were searching for the baby and Jill.

"There she is," the woman says suddenly looking up. She rushes towards Jill losing one of her pink bunny slippers as she runs across the floor. "Marissa," she whispers pulling the baby from Jill's arms. Jill is surprised by how empty her arms suddenly feel. She feels as if a heavy burden has been lifted from her and is ashamed by how relieved she feels.

"I did everything wrong," Jill says.

"There you are," a nurse says coming up behind Jill in a hushed voice. The nurse's hair is fluffed out into a halo of disarray around her head. "We didn't know where you went," she whispers. "The parents said they gave the baby to you, but then we couldn't find you."

"Marissa," the mother says again softly. She looks up at Jill. The inky makeup around her eyes has been removed and her face is raw and open. "Thank you for watching her," she says, and with her free hand she makes a clumsy sign of the cross before turning around to join her husband and the officers.

"Are they here because of me?" Jill asks pointing down the hallway.

"No," the nurse says. "It's just procedure."

"I didn't help them," Jill tells the nurse.
"You did fine," the nurse says. She touches Jill's shoulder with her hand. "I made lots of mistakes when I was new. You'll learn," she says. "It just takes time."

In the chaplain's office Jill removes her identity badge and places it on Lewis's desk. The room is dark and she doesn't bother to turn on the light, but makes her way over to the window instead. She leans her head against the pane and notices how her reflection looks superimposed onto the headlights and buildings below her. She looks larger than all of them, as if she is watching from above. The sky is an orange haze, impenetrable as fog. She can't see the stars or the moon, but senses that they are there, just beyond reach. The city is hot and moving, the headlights of passing cars move in an endless stream past the hospital and the office lights of the buildings shine like unblinking eyes.
The Cabinet

Ella’s house is dark and silent. It smells like dust and closed air. The windows in the house are never opened, and the shades are always drawn. To Ella this is normal. She kicks off her shoes, allows her pupils to adjust to the darkness and then walks into the kitchen on the soft pads of her feet. Ben follows close behind her. He touches the hem of her white shirt to orientate himself. Ella pours herself a glass of apple juice, lifts the carton to Ben and when he nods his head she pours him a glass as well. He doesn’t drink, but watches Ella as she finishes off her glass.

“Do you want to see it?” she asks.

Ben doesn’t answer. Ella closes the refrigerator door with a bump from her hip, pulls his hand into her own, and leads him down the hallway towards her parent’s bedroom.

The cabinet smells like sex to Ella, at least, what she imagines sex to smell like. She found the key to it hidden behind her father’s loafers one wintry Sunday when her parents had gone to church and she had been too lazy to go with them. She had been looking for money, a stray dollar or two, so that she could walk to the store, and buy a soda pop or a magazine, anything to shed the yellow, sterile feeling Sunday mornings washed over her.

Instead she found her father’s collection of exotic sex lotions, toys,
and photography. There were stacks of dusty Polaroid pictures: her
mother bent over the rocking chair in the living room, her father's face
grimaced with his hair hanging across his forehead, her mother's legs
wrapped around his shoulder blades. She barely glanced at them, the
sight of her parent's limbs jumbled around each other; her mother's pale
skin so exposed and raw made her stomach lurch and her hands shake.
She blew her fingerprints off of the photo's surfaces and restacked them
into a wobbly pile. She was more interested in the vials of oil, the sex
creams, and the lotions anyway. They came in various colors. Their
gummy liquid seeped onto their papery packaging and stained their
instructions in oily residue. She read the tiny script on the side of each
bottle. *Tastes like cinnamon* one said. *Gets hot when you blow* said another.
Ella poured tiny drops onto the skin on the back of her hand and tried
each one.

Ella smiles at Ben when he looks into the cabinet, his neck
stretching, straining his veins into bright blue cords. He stares
unblinking at the covers of the porno movies, the women squashing their
breasts together, sucking on their fingers with pursed mouths, and
dangling their shapely legs, clad in long leather boots or red high-heeled
shoes, over the movie titles.

Ella moves Ben's chin so that he looks at her. She opens a tiny red
bottle, lets three thick droplets fall onto her fingertip, and spreads the
cherry liquid across her lips. "Taste me," she says. "It gets hot when you lick it."

Ben leans forward. He slips the very tip of his pink tongue out of his mouth, and lightly flicks it against the Ella’s lips. This movement is so brief and soft that Ella is taken aback. It’s as if she’s been licked by a small rodent, or brushed by the delicate edge of an insect wing.

"Don’t you want to kiss me?" she asks.

A red blush speckles across Ben’s face and throat. "Sure I do," he says.

Ella waits a moment, and when Ben doesn’t move, she tries to crush her lips into his, but Ben slides away from her. Her sticky lips press into the folds of his neck instead. He smells sweet like baby powder.

"Hey," he says pushing Ella a few feet away. "Why’s it so dark in here anyway?" He sits down on her parent’s bed.

The air in the room is still and silent. Ella’s mother is allergic to pollen, to dust, to cats, to dogs, to grass, to everything, it seems to Ella. When she was a little girl she thought that her mother was sad all the time, most days when she came home from work she had to lie down in her bedroom. She got horrible headaches behind her eyes. Ella had to bring her bath towels soaked in ice for her forehead. In elementary school, Ella would sit on the edge of the bed and stroke her mother’s hair,
her temples, and massage her hands when she had these headaches. Now that Ella is in junior high it is different. She makes sure to tell her mother that she has homework so she that she doesn’t have to waste her evenings being a slave to her mother’s every whim and request.

“My mother has allergies so we can’t open the windows. And we face south so we can’t keep the drapes open or it gets too hot. It’s like living in a tomb,” Ella rolls her eyes. This phrase and gesture she has learned from her older sister, Moira, and when Ella tells Ben this, she turns her head, just like Moira does.

Ben is looking up into the cabinet and drumming his fingers against his baggy shorts. Ella notices that his legs are bald and hairless just like her own. She sits next to him on the bed, and presses her leg against his.

“Can I have a glass of water,” he asks “if you don’t mind?”

Ella stands. “Sure.” She lets one ankle twist into the beige carpeting so that she can lean on her hip. Her girlfriends have told her that this stance looks provocative and sexy. But in the dark lighting her foot only looks blue and broken.

“Good,” Ben says, “I’ll just wait here.” He doesn’t remove his eyes from the contents of the cabinet.

Ella bounces down the hallway towards the kitchen. She watches her breasts spring up and down underneath her white tank top as she
moves. There is an ornate gold mirror at the end of the hall. It is carved out of wood, and dusted in gold foil. When Ella traces her finger along the wooden birds and flowers, little specks of gold, flake off onto her fingertip.

In the mirror, her thick brown hair is ruffled and standing on end from the static she created running through the carpet. She tries to smooth the halo of frizz back down with her hands. The oil that she spread across her lips is smeared out along the sides of her mouth so that she looks like a clown, and there is a streak of red oil on her tank top just above her left breast. She doesn't feel exotic or alluring. This is the way she had felt on the bus when she told Ben about the cabinet. They usually only talked about homework or how boring their teachers were. But she had noticed something different about him. When she had stepped on the bus he had watched her carefully as she walked down the bus aisle. He patted the top of his seat when she came near him, indicating that she should sit in front of him. He gave her a sloppy sideways smile, and Ella had felt a flutter inside of her rib cage. She wanted him to look at her as something more than a neighborhood friend. As she told him about her father's cabinet, he had. He opened his brown eyes wide as she spoke and when she leaned in to whisper in his ear, he had placed his hand on her shoulder.

She was excited when he agreed to get off at her stop. Her heart
thumped and a tingle moved up the back of her spine. This tingle made her stand straight and feel confident as they stepped off the bus together. She hadn’t really known what to expect. She just wanted something, some experience, to make up for her previous failure. She’d been dumped for not knowing how to give a hand-job. It happened on the ski bus, in the dark, when the teachers couldn’t see you if you scrunched down in your seat and covered up with ski jackets. Ella had never really had a boyfriend before. Usually she sat on the ski bus with a girlfriend, spoke in whispers, and occasionally flirted with whatever set of boys sat in front of them.

But on that ski trip it had been different. Ella had been dating Jason Hines, it was her first boyfriend ever, and for the initial part of the ride he had held his arm around her shoulders and smiled. She had stared at Jason’s straight white teeth, the dimple in his right cheek, and his hair that curled damp and sweaty from the snow near his temples. He had kissed her open mouthed, and even though Ella had never really kissed this way before she moved her mouth open and shut trying to keep in sync with Jason’s lips. His mouth had been warm and wet and Ella felt something like a fish moving her mouth awkwardly against his. Then suddenly, he had thrust her hand into his ski pants. The elastic pinched against her skin, as he held her wrist and curled her fingers around him. She could feel him hard and pulsing in her hand. She
didn’t know what she was supposed to do to him. She had heard of blow-jobs. She knew they were something you did with your mouth, and she knew about sex. But, she didn’t know what kind of thing she could do with her hand. Ella’s hand started to sweat and Jason’s breath was fast and shallow. “Do it,” he whispered.

Ella felt her eyes start to water and her fingers begin to cramp. Jason’s ski pants were tight around his waist and it made it difficult for her to move her hand at all. Her hand was smashed against his belly and his stiff hair. “Do it,” he said one more time and this time she squeezed him as hard as she could. “Hey,” he hissed. He pulled her hand out of his pants like it was hot, like she had burnt him.

“What?” She felt herself starting to cry.

“You know what,” he said. He pushed her away from him towards the frosted bus window.

And that had been the end of it. He said nothing else just switched seats and left. Later in school, Ella heard that Jason had received a hand-job from Anne Marie Stratton, a girl she had fifth period English with. He told everyone that Ella was pathetic, that she had given him the worst hand-job ever. He started dating Anne Marie and Ella had to watch them walk down the halls together holding hands and kissing. She felt like a failure, like she hadn’t been able to succeed at something so simple, something that even Anne Marie, a skinny girl, who no one had
ever paid any attention to before, knew how to do. Now when she passed boys in the hallway, they covered their crotches with their hands and mouthed, “Ouch.”

Ella was forced to resort to her older sister, Moira’s, advice and watched attentively while Moira demonstrated the skill of proper hand-job deployment on a can of soda. “You just move your hand up and down,” she explained, and it hadn’t seemed hard to do in the least.

Ella thinks about this as she makes her way back to her parent’s bedroom with the Ben’s glass of water. In her parent’s bedroom, Ben is sitting at the edge of the bed in front of the television. There is a movie in the VCR with a woman moaning on the screen. Ben looks up when she enters the room. “Your glass of water your majesty,” she says holding the cup out to him.

He waves the cup away and stands up. “I’m glad your back,” he says. He loops his arms around Ella’s neck and smiles down at her. He has large dark brown eyes, and Ella stares at the gold and green flecks that ring each of his black pupils. He seems different now than when he first came into the room. His voice is louder and he seems taller and more attractive. “I’ve been waiting,” he says.

“You have,” Ella giggles. She presses her body close to Ben’s and he starts to kiss her neck frantically. Ella moves her head down so that he is forced to kiss her lips. It is fast and sloppy. There is no rhythm like
there was with Jason on the bus and the smell of Ben’s saliva soon makes her feel queasy. She can feel his spit drying on her skin. He can’t even manage to keep his lips on hers most of the time, half of his kisses end up on her chin and her cheeks, but she lets Ben move her onto the bed. They lie with their feet on her parent’s pillows, and he begins to push himself against her. It’s like they’re having sex, but they have clothes on. It’s like a dog humping your leg, Ella thinks. It hurts her pelvis because both she and Ben are thin. When he moves their bones seem to crack into each other. Yet, it doesn’t feel altogether uncomfortable or bad. Ella finds herself grinding her body up into Ben’s, trying to match his rhythm. It is a sensation she’s only felt once before, when she’d been reading Twenty-Thousand Leagues under the Sea, on her bedroom floor in. She’d been lying on her stomach and rocking back and forth to a song on the radio when she’d had the desire to rock back and forth a little faster, then faster. It had been a wonderful, shocking, and afterwards she’d lain on the floor a long time wondering exactly what she had done to herself.

Ella tries to kiss Ben, but his head is too far above her and she can’t reach his lips. He is moving faster and faster and when she looks up to meet his eyes she sees that he is watching the TV screen. The woman in the movie is moaning louder and louder. She is saying things like, “Don’t stop,” and “harder, like that.” Ella can hear skin slapping against skin and a man with a low voice start to groan out, “Here it comes.”
Ella feels her own body melting up into Ben’s. She grips her hands tightly against his shoulders. He starts breathing very loudly and chanting her name. He says, “Ella, Ella,” and then, “I love you,” before he collapses into her.

For a moment Ella feels overwhelming tenderness towards Ben and she whispers, “I love you too,” into his white shirt, although her words get lost and muffled in the fabric. Ben hugs her very tightly and then rolls off of her. They both lie motionless on the bed staring at the ceiling. Ella can smell the musty odor of her father’s after shave even at the foot of the bed, and it makes her feel suddenly awkward and ashamed. She doesn’t know what to say to Ben, who she’d played with so often as a child. They’d been best friends until Kindergarten. They’d big wheeled together, built dams out of sticks and leaves in the street gutters, played Star Wars, and collected toads from the pond in her back yard with red plastic buckets.

Ben moves rapidly to his feet. “I’ve got to go,” he says. He pats Ella’s forehead quickly as if she is a small child and then turns and stumbles down the hallway. His heavy gym shoes snag and clomp along the carpeting. She doesn’t move until she hears him slam the front door shut. The house seems to huff a breath of silence, and the stillness jerks Ella into motion. She sits up on the bed. Her hair is tangled around her head like a halo and she has a wet stain on the belly of her shirt. The
porno film is still playing on the VCR. There is a woman dressed as a secretary with glasses and her hair pulled back in a bun. Her boss, a fat man with curly hair and a mustache, is firing her. He yells at her, tells her to leave, but she starts to unbutton her blouse. "I really don't want to lose my job," she says. "Isn't there anything I can do?"

Ella turns the VCR off, ejects the tape and opens the cabinet door. She and Ben did something she thinks as she places the tape back into its empty slot on the shelf. She hadn't chickened out the way she did on the bus, and although she hadn't given him a hand-job exactly, but Ben seemed pleased. He told her that he loved her. She wonders what this will mean. She wonders if she loves him now as well, and thinks she must because of what has happened between them.

At supper, she imagines all sorts of romantic interludes that she and Ben will share in the future. She sees them on the bus, holding hands, and giggling at some shared and close secret. She imagines them kissing in the hallways, passionate, movie star kisses with Ben's hand tangled wildly in her hair. She envisions Jason watching them jealously from afar, his hands clenched in balls of anger and disbelief. Everything was going to be different for her. Everyone would be able to see she was a mature, dangerous woman. She could already see it herself when she looked in the bathroom mirror before supper. There was a confident air about her, a mysterious and sexy energy. She'd whispered, "Mrs. Ella
Sorenson," and it had all seemed perfect, the name, her face, her new mature look. Ella tries to convey her new, adult knowledge to Moira across the dinner table. Whenever her parent’s aren’t looking Ella gives Moira a secretive smile. After several smiles and a few winks Moira, at last, shrugs her shoulders at Ella, “What?” she snaps.

Ella smiles and holds one finger up to her lips, “Nothing.”

The next day on the bus Ben is sitting next to Mike Thaemert. He doesn’t look up when Ella gets on at her stop. At school it is the same thing. He avoids her in the hallways, and in the one class they have with one another he doesn’t even respond to her hello. It’s as if she doesn’t exist. Why would he act like this? Why would he say he was in love with her, and then ignore her completely? It goes on like this for days and soon Ella sees that nothing is going to change. The boys in the hallway still cover their crotches when she passes, and Ben isn’t interested in her, not even as a friend. She finds this out when she tries to talk to him on the bus. He only answers her in monosyllables, saying “yes,” or “no,” making sure to keep his eyes averted to the suburban landscape that slides past the bus windows instead of her. When she asks him if he wants to look in the cabinet again all he says is no thanks. After that Ella doesn’t speak to him at all.

At home she continues sneaking into the cabinet. She handles its contents with light hands as if the objects are fragile and will fall apart.
She finds a small red book with vines and birds intertwined in intricate ropes on its cover. Inside the book it has illustrations of couples engaging in intercourse in various positions, only all of the movements seem impossible to Ella, the man's penis too long, extended in a pointed curve towards the woman's body, and the woman's top halftwisted so extremely that it doesn't seem connected to her lower half. The woman's vagina is exposed and opened as if it were a face. There are elaborate explanations and diagrams. One page in the center of the book explains that the best intercourse only occurs when the female and male bodies are perfectly matched, some females are labeled as does and some are hares, and men are categorized likewise. To achieve pleasure the book insists that a hare must be matched with a hare and a doe with a doe.

Ella slaps the book shut. She sits at the end of the bed tracing her fingertip along the feathers of an indigo peacock on the cover. She notices that her father's smell is overwhelming whenever the cabinet is open. It's as if it is the only place in the house where her father's presence can be contained, undisturbed. She has never really thought about it before, but her mother's presence seems to saturate every other space in the house. Her mother's perfume lingers in the curtains. The kitchen smells like her cooking. Their clothing is the smell of lavender, the smell of her mother's lotion, which clings to each crease folded into their bureau drawers. She imagines for one moment her father crouched
inside of the cabinet itself, his body stooped over its contents, his fingers combing through each bottle of lotion, each book and movie as if it were a precious jewel. The thought of this makes her smile, and feel ashamed for her father. The cabinet seems sad, the thought of her father digging for its hidden key behind his loafers, pathetic. She shuts the door.

In school people gradually start to forget about the ski bus. The boys begin to tease another girl in her class, one that gave a high school boy a blow-job at a party. They move their hands back and forth outside of their mouths and push one of their cheeks out with their tongues when they see her. "Wanna come over to my place?" Jason breaks up with Anne Marie Stratton. He starts dating a new girl named Shelly, who wears short mini skirts and wears a D bra. Outside of English class, Ella sees Anne Marie watching Jason kiss the new girl tenderly, his hand splayed protectively against the small of her back. Anne Marie stabs the nails on her right hand into her palm. Her shoulders are shaking beneath her blouse. She turns her head away, and meets eyes with Ella. They stare at each other for a long time, almost speaking, but then they turn, and walk in opposite directions down the hall.
One Hemisphere Full

My father rarely lost his temper. He was one of those people who let anger float over his features like passing clouds. His blue eyes might darken or he might cinch his lips up into a knot, but it rarely went beyond that. He prided himself with his ability to control his emotions. He never swore and never yelled. He believed these emotions belonged to the weak and the foolish. Whenever my mother and I would cry or scream he would leave the room, and once when my mother slapped him across the face during an argument he simply grabbed her wrist and said “Elaine,” until she dropped her hand defeated.

My father reserved his anger for his family, for their phone calls, and for their fits. I could always hear the sickness in their voices when they called. It made them gurgle and slur as if they were drunk or underwater. They called me darling. “Annie, be a darling, and put your father on,” they would say. It was polite. The depression made them unusually nice or unusually mean. It made them desperate.

I remember watching my father sometimes he would listen to them for hours on the phone. They never let him speak. It was always the same. First they rattled on about how much they loved him. Aunt Janet reminded him of how she thought of him as a son. My grandmother
lauded the way he never cries as a baby, and Uncle Artie reminisced about their childhood antics and games. After that came their problems, their delusions, and finally their anger. It was then that my father hung up on them. His lips pulled so tightly on his face that they were white.

"Why do you even listen?" my mother used to ask.

"It's my cross to bear," he always answered.

Growing up my mother liked to remind me how crazy everyone was on my father’s side of the family. She did this as if I were divisible, as if when I was on her good side I could belong to her, to the sane, and when I had done something wrong I could be pushed over to my father’s side of the family. “Don’t act like that,” she’d say. “You don’t want to end up in the loony bin. Do you? You have to be careful.” Sometimes she would admit that there were a few nutcases on her side of the family as well. People she wasn’t proud of, but no one that was really crazy, not in the clinical sense.

I understood what she meant by this at an early age. There was a mania in my family, a bi-polar disturbance. My grandmother had it, so did both of my aunts, and my uncle. My grandmother lost two of her brothers to suicide before they reached the age of thirty and my great-grandmother spent the last ten years of her life at a mental retreat. By the age of six, I was familiar with these places. I made the rounds with my
father, visiting the relatives during their treatments. The nurses gave me lemon drops, dusted in granular sugar when we signed in at the counter. I played with my dolls around the tropical potted plants in the conservatory, and the regular patients blew me kisses when I walked by.

The places my relatives went weren't like the mental wards I saw in the movies. They weren't sterile white and green buildings with systems of interlocking doors, caging the patients in like criminals. They were old estates with sprawling lawns and oriental rugs in the hallways. They had tissue paper peonies in their gardens and a pianist that came in on Thursdays to play Bach and Brahms. "Places to rest and relax," was how the family referred to them. It was money that kept them out of those other places. Although at times the same things happened to them that would've happened anywhere. There were shock treatments, medication, tracking bracelets placed on their ankles and wrists. Once I saw my grandmother tied down to her bed with leather straps. She tried to pull free when I entered the room. Her neck corded into purple knots as she strained upward.

"She was hurting people," the nurse told us. My grandmother had ridden a wheel chair over a man's foot.

"We had an argument," she said later. "He was being very stubborn." She had broken three of his toes and almost severed off another.
Each time it was a little different, a different delusion, a different theory, my Aunt Janet once believed that everything occurred in sets of three like the holy trinity. She looked for the pattern everywhere. During our visit she counted it out for us. There were three rounds of medication a day, there were the sun, the moon, and the stars, and there were Janet, her husband, Phil, and their cat. She got a hold of the resident chaplain’s rosary, and although she wasn’t Catholic she recited, “The Father, The Son, and The Holy Ghost,” over and over again until her fingertips were bloody from rubbing the beads.

My grandmother’s trademark was overdosing on various substances. The strangest ones being water and prune juice. During her sicknesses she often believed she was being poisoned and tried desperately to purge herself. The prune juice episode set her on the toilet for a week straight, and the water bloated her stomach up to the point that they had to pump it. It was the first time; I knew a person could overdose on anything and everything. In her room there had been signs everywhere that said, “NO WATER MYRTLE!” and pictures of bright blue waves with red X’s slashed through them.

They weren’t always crazy though my relatives went through long periods of normalcy. Sometimes they lasted years before they had another episode. My grandmother watched me, against my father’s wishes, every Tuesday until I started kindergarten, and she did all the
usual grandmother things. She made brownies, read storybooks, took me shopping, and let me have all the candy and soda pop I wanted. But, there were little disparities. At dinners, she would whisper words like diarrhea, shit and fuck to me when the other adults weren’t looking, and she let me play with the figures from her Christmas manger scene like they were dolls. Once when we couldn’t find the baby Jesus she cut the Virgin Mary in two with a butcher’s knife. She said that she was trying to give her a caesarian section. She was so convincing that I was surprised when nothing but chalky powder flaked away from The Virgin Mary’s insides. It turned out the baby Jesus had only been wedged into a corner of the manger where we couldn’t see him. My father didn’t let me go over to her house for a month after that. He thought she was instilling violence in me by wielding a knife in such a sacrilegious fashion.

When I was in seventh grade my health class watched a film about schizophrenia. I knew that this wasn’t what my relatives had not even close, but it started me thinking. I wondered how a mind could do things you didn’t want it to. How did it happen? How did it start?

I asked my mother about it. She was drinking an ice tea in the backyard. She squinted her eyes up at the sun and swirled her ice around and around in her glass before she answered me. “It has to do with chemicals in the brain,” she said. “They aren’t balanced.”
I pictured my relatives’ brains, one hemisphere full, and the other empty. I imagined them walking with their heads slightly tilted to one side like sinking ships. “How did they get unbalanced?”

“Oh,” my mother said. She started to thumb through the flimsy pages of one of her paperbacks. The tiny script on each page was illuminated in the afternoon sun. “It’s a genetic thing. They can’t help it. They just inherited it.”

I was quiet. The willow tree on the edge of the yard swept its yellow boughs back and forth in the wind. There were birds fat and heavy perched in its lower boughs too dull and vacant to move in the hot sunlight. “Will I get sick?”

My mother didn’t look up from her book. She kept her head low and the sun beat brightly against the jagged part of her hair. The fragile white skin underneath was turning pink. “You,” she said in a sleepy distracted voice that told me that she wasn’t really listening, “No. You won’t get it. Your father didn’t.” She patted the freckled skin on my leg with her hand.

My mother’s nonchalance scared me even more than her concern would have. My mother had opinions about everything. She was worried that I might get sick. I saw it in her eyes.

I wondered if somewhere deep inside of me that sickness was just floating around waiting to emerge. I spent time staring at myself in the
mirror focusing on my eyes. I tried to look deep inside of my pupils, past
the obviousness of my blue and gold irises down to where I really
existed. I stared so long at times, that my eyes began to play tricks on
me. They blurred the shadows under my eyes together, cast a silver-
green pallor onto my skin, and transformed my face into one that I didn’t
recognize, into something horrific and unknown. It could be anywhere I
thought, just waiting for me, hiding out in the crevices between my
molars, and moving silently underneath my skin. Where did this type of
sickness lie? How could I ever know if existed inside of me?

I lay awake for long hours. My mind was never at rest. I would lie
in bed at night with my arms tight against my sides waiting for it to
happen. I started to play a game with myself. I told myself if I did this
task or that task then it wouldn’t happen to me. The things I told myself
to do were small and strange. I would make myself touch my foot against
a certain stone on my walk home from school. I told myself not to eat
certain things. I would make sure that all of my dresser drawers were
shut, tight and neat before I went to bed. It didn’t take all that much
effort to do these things, but they started to occupy my thoughts. I was
late for school because the list of things became longer and longer. I had
to make my bed in a certain way. The blue pillow had to be covered by
the flowered one. The edges of my sheets had to be folded back into
crisp, straight lines.
"I'll tell you the secret to it," my father told me one afternoon when we were playing golf together. We were standing beneath an old oak tree waiting for the people in front of us to finish putting. "It isn’t a matter of not getting sick. It’s a matter of knowing when you are sick."

I butted the wood head of my club against the white toe of my golf shoe. My father motioned his body through a practice swing. He held himself, poised and still when he finished. His eyes searched the sky for the imaginary ball he had just pretended to hit. "Always hold your swing at the end." He said looking over at me. "You can always see your mistakes in your end swing."

I nodded my head uninterested. "Have you gotten sick?"

"Sure."

I motioned through a chip shot even though I was still holding my driver.

My father adjusted his golf glove on his fingertips. "What I’m telling you," he said. "Is that I think things that aren’t right. The difference is I know they aren’t right. It’s a problem when you can’t. That’s when you get sick. You can’t tell the difference any longer. Grandma and Aunt Janet don’t want to tell the difference. They’ve always wanted attention."

"They could stop it if they wanted to?"
“They could.” My father stepped up to the men’s tee. He shot a clean straight shot right onto the manicured fairway. “See,” he said. He was still frozen at the top of his swing. “When you hold onto your end swing it’s perfect every time.”

I walked up to the women’s tee. I sliced my ball into the trees.

“You’re bending your arm,” my father said, “and not bending your knees enough. Look.” He pointed his club to my bent knees, to my arm crooked motionless above my head. “It’s all there in the end swing.”

When I reached my ball in the trees I hit the ball just like he told me to. Everything was even and balanced and my shot soared in an arc onto the fairway.

The last time my grandmother had a breakdown I went with my father to the hospital. My grandmother was sitting on the edge of the hospital bed swinging a large white bra around her index finger.

“Look at this,” she said when we entered the room. “These are my new boobs.” She held out two balloon-like sacs in the palm of her right hand. She had just had a double mastectomy. “I guess Grandpa will finally have something to put his hands around,” she said tossing my father one of the breasts. She threw it low so it hit the bottom of his shin and he reached down to pick it up.
“Nice, Mom,” he said wiping little bits of sand off of its gelatinous surface.

“That’s what happens to you when you get older, Annie,” she shouted at me. “They start chopping you up. They take away your breasts and your ovaries. They took Grandpa’s balls you know some sort of testicular thing. One day you look at yourself in the mirror and you’re just bits and pieces.” She ran a hand through her hair. It was sticking up. The blue rinse she usually used was growing out at the roots so she had white hair near her forehead and ears. “God, they even chopped off the tips of Grandpa’s ears. Don’t trust those doctors Annie,” she shouted loudly at the entrance to her door as if some doctor might be lingering around her room listening. “They like to butcher people. They’re butchers.”

“He had cancer Mom,” my father said trying to calm her down. He was still standing in the doorway to the room. I noticed that he hadn’t taken off his jacket or even taken one step towards my grandmother’s bed. “They had to take the ends off of his ears because he had cancer.”

I sat down in an orange vinyl chair across the room. My Uncle Artie was slouched down in an armchair in the corner. He gave me a half-hearted wave. His eyes were red and blurry as if he had been sleeping.
“How are you feeling, Grandma?” I asked leaning forward to pat one of her hands.

She immediately snapped her hand back and pushed out her bottom lip. “I’m not well,” she said. “Not well at all.”

“You just told the nurse you felt fine,” Artie said sitting up and adjusting his toupee. It was hanging low on the left side of his forehead.

“How could I feel fine,” she said, “my son has a dead animal on his head and those doctors have been cutting me up?”

“Mom,” Artie said, “you promised to be good.”

“You’re not fooling anyone, Artie. Everyone knows that thing is a toupee. It’s a joke, a goddamn joke. People laugh at you. Why can’t you be courageous and be bald like a real man? My father was bald and he was proud of it. You have the same nice round head.”

“Mother,” my father said sharply. “That’s enough. Just because you’re sick doesn’t mean you can start in with all your crap.”

“You,” my grandmother shrieked chucking the other breast at him. “You are so righteous about everything. Everyone always has to behave. Everyone always has to be nice. You don’t love me. You don’t love your mother.”

“I’m not dealing with this,” my father said to Artie.

Artie shrugged and lifted his toupee up so that he could scratch the skin underneath. “Suit yourself. I’ll stay with her.”
"Grandma," I said in a quiet voice. "Why don't we talk about something else?"

"No," my grandmother said her face suddenly looked crumpled and tired. "Let's talk about all my crap. Let's talk about all of Artie's crap, and your father's crap too," she smiled up at my father and fluttered her eyelids as if she were pretending to be a movie star. "Or don't you have crap anymore? You probably don't even crap anymore you're so perfect. Isn't that right?"

"Talk about it with Artie," my father said lifting the fake breast up from the floor where it had landed near his shoe. He tossed the breast back to my grandmother and it landed on the bed next to her with a flat thud. "Annie and I are leaving."

"So soon?"

"Is there any reason to stay when you're like this?"

"Don't take my grandbaby away from me yet," she said her voice thick and syrupy, feigning sadness. "I haven't even seen her yet. Give your grandma a hug, little girl."

I leaned into the bed and let my grandmother embrace me. She trembled underneath my arms. "Maybe we should stay Dad." I said softly petting her stiff hair, but my father had already spun on his heels and was headed out of the doorway.
"Bye Grandma," I whispered. I waved over my shoulder to wave at Artie, but he didn't wave back, and my grandmother didn't respond to my goodbye. She had tears in her eyes, and she was once again swinging her white bra around her fingertip. Artie was shaking his head back and forth and saying Jesus, Jesus under his breath.

"She's such a piece of work," my father said slamming his fist into the steering wheel.

"She was sorry, Dad," I said. "She was crying when I left."

"It's all an act, Annie," my father said as he started up the car. His usually perfectly parted hair was mussed up all around his face. "You'll be able to see that when you're older."

"It didn't seem like an act," I said quietly playing with my seat belt strap.

"Trust me your grandmother's a great actress. She's had years of practice."

"That's all part of being mentally ill though isn't it? I'm sure she would act differently if she were well."

"That's what they've all been saying for years. She's sick, she's depressed, she's on medication. They'll say anything to make themselves feel better. I suppose anything is better than telling the truth. She's a lousy mother, and a lousy wife. That's the truth."
“What if it were me? What if I was like that?”

“You would never be like that Annie. I would never let you be.”

My father didn’t take any of my grandmother’s phone calls that night or for a week after that. He didn’t take any of their calls, not Artie’s or my Aunt Janet’s. He was quiet and on the surface he seemed calm, but each time the phone would ring I saw that his body flinched. Finally he made us take the phone off the hook altogether.

“I’m going to change our phone number,” he threatened. “I’m going to make sure it’s unlisted and I’m not going to give it to anyone in family, not ever again.” My mother and I nodded our heads, but we knew these were idle threats. We told our relatives that my father was indisposed, and I took my grandmother’s calls when he wasn’t home.

“He hates me because I smoked when he was a child doesn’t he?” she asked. “I always knew he hated it, but I never quit. I remember how he would blink his eyes because the smoke would sting them, but I didn’t care.”

“It isn’t that,” I assured her. “He really isn’t here.”

“Don’t ever start smoking, Annie,” she said. “It hurts everybody.”

My father wouldn’t take her calls. “I’m done with her,” he said. On the third week of my father’s silence I awoke suddenly. I could hear a gagging sound coming from the guest bathroom. I
wandered down the dark hallway thinking it was strange because neither my mother nor my father ever used that bathroom. My father was lying on the bathroom floor in the fetal position. "I'm spitting up blood," he said when I pushed the door open. "Call the hospital."

My father couldn't even stand. The paramedics had to put him onto a stretcher and carry him out to the ambulance. My mother and I drove in back of them to the hospital. The doctor told us my father had ruptured the inner lining of his stomach. He'd been taking too many aspirins trying to combat his migraine headaches and the acid in the medication had eaten an ulcer in his stomach.

"I didn't even know he had migraines," my mother said. She was wearing a pair of holey slippers and I watched as she scrunched her big toenail in and out of the hole.

"This was a close call," the doctor said. "It was very close and I am concerned."

"I am concerned," my mother said. "I'm very concerned."

My father looked white and shriveled in his hospital bed. He had IV tubes trailing down his left arm. His eyes were puffy and it gave him a heavy lidded look that reminded me of my grandmother.

"I don't want to talk to anyone," was all he said when we entered the room. Mother and I sat in silence near his bed. My mother moved
her hand over the radiator near the window watching a thread on her bathrobe float up and down above the hot air.

When my father finally fell asleep she cupped her hand around her mouth and whispered to me. “Don’t you dare let anyone know that your father finally cracked.”

“He didn’t,” I said narrowing my eyes at her.

“Don’t fool your self,” she said floating her hand over the radiator heat. “If I were you I really wouldn’t.”

For days after my father’s hospital stay the relatives called. I could hear a certain joy in their voices a slight lilt that floated above their words.

“We were just so concerned,” my Aunt Janet said. “He’s always been my baby brother. He’s always been so strong.”

“It was bound to happen,” my grandmother said. “It was inevitable.”

Uncle Artie laughed, “I can’t help it,” he said, “it’s just so reassuring to know he isn’t perfect.”

Mother took each phone call as a personal stab. “Ben,” she said to my father. “You call all of them back and tell them you didn’t have a breakdown. You tell them it was an ulcer just like the doctor said.”

“Why bother,” my father said. “I don’t care what they think.”
“Well I do,” my mother said slamming her fist down on the counter top. “I don’t want them to think you’re as nuts as they are.”

“It doesn’t bother me,” my father said calmly. “I don’t care because I know who I am. I know I’m not crazy.”

I patted him on the back and nodded my head, but didn’t say one word.
Life is Stronger than You Think

Miranda doesn't get to sing "Happy Birthday" to herself in Mrs. Johnson's third grade class because of her brother, Andrew's funeral. Everyone overlooks her birthday. It's like she hasn't even turned ten, and instead of having her birthday party or presents she goes Andrew's wake and the next day his funeral. Miranda is disappointed she doesn't get to sing. It's a tradition in Mrs. Johnson's class, and if she'd done it she would have won a frosty. She'd been practicing since the beginning of the year, singing in her bathroom mirror and in front of her parents.

Her parents didn't understand why it was a big deal. "I'll buy you a frosty if it means that much to you," her father would insist. "Do you want me to go and get you one?"

Miranda would shake her head. It wasn't the frosty she wanted so much as the pleasure of eating the thick chocolate ice cream on movie day all by herself. The joy of coating a plastic straw with malt sludge and letting it drip slowly into her mouth while the other children sat jealously fingering their empty desktops.

Miranda imagined herself singing, each night before she fell asleep. She went over it again and again. How she would not laugh or hide her head like Michelle Hahn, or whisper the song between her fingertips like Ella O'Hare. She wouldn't sputter the song out between
red-faced giggles or cry like Jennifer Lee. She would walk to the front of the class without hesitation and sing. She knew she would finish. She knew she would win that frosty.

But none of these things happen and Miranda only thinks of the song and her birthday as she sits quietly during her brother's funeral service. Andrew has a tiny white coffin and a long gown that is still a little big around his shoulders. Miranda thinks he looks like he is sleeping in his coffin, but when she says this out loud her grandmother presses her index finger to her lips and shakes her head.

"Miranda," she says moving her gloved finger away from her face. "That isn't the sort of thing you should say."

"Why not?" Miranda asks playing with the scratchy edge of her black church gloves. They are made with a spider web sort of material and she can see tiny pieces of her skin and the leftover flakes of the red fingernail polish her mother made her wipe off before the funeral through them. She wants to take them off and as she starts to unravel them at the wrists her grandmother shakes her head again and clucks her tongue.

Andrew does look like he's sleeping. Miranda leans her head in close to his face. She has to stand on her tiptoes. He seems so perfect although he no longer smells like milk and his lips aren't moving in and out like a puckered fish like they did when he was alive. He smells stale
and cold like the wood pews of the church and his lips are pressed
together in a still, gray line. She wants to pick him up and hold him to
her chest so that he won’t look so alone surrounded by all those white
ruffles and the lace pillow that looks too hard and stiff to be comfortable.
Her grandmother presses the flat of her hand to Miranda’s back, and she
has to move out of the way so that everyone in the church has a chance to
go up and look at him one last time.

Out in the cemetery Miranda’s mother makes her place a bouquet
of tight, pink rose buds on the lid of Andrew’s coffin. When she does
there is a burst of sobs from the women in the crowd. Miranda steps
away, feeling ashamed and buries her face into my mother’s long black
dress

Miranda moves her feet back and forth on the short trimmed
grass. She doesn’t want to step on it. Two weeks earlier, before Andrew
died, her grandmother told her a story about coffins while they placed
memorial arrangements on some of the headstones. Miranda’s
grandparents are florists and sometimes when she goes to their house she
helps them out around the shop.

“Be careful Miranda,” her grandmother whispered when her
grandfather was out of hearing distance. “During the war some people
were buried so quickly that they didn’t have time to make sure everyone
was really dead.”
Miranda didn’t know what war she was talking about, but she moved in closer holding her hand lightly around the white wing tip of an angel statue. “Weren’t they dead?”

Her grandmother wrinkled up her nose and cupped her hand around her mouth. “No,” she said. “In fact years later when the cemetery had to move the coffins to other locations, they found some that had the satin covering on their lids shredded off. The people inside of them had awakened and tried to claw their way out.” She reached her arm out and grabbed Miranda’s leg. “Watch out or they might grab your ankles when you walk across their graves.”

Miranda shrieked and jumped from her hand. After that she sat on the gravel paths around the burial plots, but wouldn’t go near the headstones. Grandfather threatened her with a spanking, and she got a swift one as he dragged her past the mausoleums, but she didn’t care. Later her father told her that Grandma was just pulling her leg. He ruffled Miranda’s hair, “You can’t take anything she says seriously honey,” he said. “She’s just trying to scare you.”

Miranda looks at her grandmother out of the side of her eye to see if she is watching the ground around the headstones too, but she has her head bowed like everyone else and her eyes closed. Miranda squeezes her eyes shut, but every time the wind blows in the leaves above their heads she can almost hear a skeletal hand pushing its way up through
the grass.

There is a reception at her parent's house after the funeral. Everyone is in black circling the buffet table. Miranda and her cousin Anne Marie spend the afternoon drinking Shirley Temples. They impale their maraschino cherries with the tiny plastic spears Uncle Walter garnishes their drinks with, and the grenadine stains their teeth red.

After the funeral Miranda's mom is different. Before Andrew died she always smiled. She thought that everything was fun, even track and field day, where she volunteered every year to pass out ribbons and announce the winners over the loud speaker. Miranda was always forced to be in the events that none of the other kids wanted because of her poor athletic ability. She threw shot put, although her wrists were so weak, she could barely follow through. She always lost, even the year there were only two girls in the event. Sally Taylor beat her by six inches, but her mother was still hysterical over the second place ribbon she received. She jumped up and down, clapped her hands and hung it proudly on their refrigerator for two months. Now her mother never seems to smile. She worries about the weather. She watches the weather channel constantly, and calls their relatives all over the country to warn them about storm systems that look a little iffy on the radar.
Now her mother forgets to wash Miranda’s clothes and she doesn’t make her cheese and crackers or sliced apples covered in peanut butter after school. She just sits at the kitchen table dressed up and staring into space. If Miranda asks her what she is doing she just shrugs her shoulders, “I’m thinking,” she says.

Miranda gets a weird feeling in her stomach when her mother acts like this. It reminds her of the morning Andrew died. When she came into the kitchen Andrew was in his bassinet on the kitchen table and her mother was sitting next to him dressed in a starched buttoned-down-shirt and a gray skirt. Her hair was pulled back into a neat French twist and she had makeup on. Miranda didn’t know Andrew was dead then, but something about the way her mother was sitting there, dressed as if she were going out instead of in her blue bathrobe and slippers prevented her from rushing to him as she usually did in the morning.

She didn’t kiss his soft, fat cheeks or press her nose into his baby hair. She stood motionless in the doorway. She wore a polyester pink robe that was supposed to feel like satin, but had ripped open along its hemlines showing the white stuffing inside. Her mother put her hand out towards her. The skin on her palm was white and red.

“Don’t touch Andrew,” she whispered. Her lips were lined in bright red lipstick. She wasn’t crying, her nose wasn’t running, but the rims of her eyes were pink and raw. She asked Miranda if it was okay
that she didn’t make her breakfast. She said she didn’t feel quite up to it.

Miranda doesn’t remember much else about that morning. She’s not sure if she stood in the kitchen peering at her brother in his basket, or if her mother hurried her away. She does remember getting dressed, putting on her red-corded-tights and her blue dress with the tiny houses sprinkled across it. Her mother braided her hair into two French braids that fell down along her shoulder blades and they sat on the couch together reading some books until her father came back from work. Her mother’s voice was soft, but steady as she corrected each word that Miranda pronounced wrong. Her manicured finger traced each part of the word so that Miranda could see exactly how it came together.

At night Miranda worries about dying. Andrew died in his sleep. There were no signs, no clues, he just up and stopped breathing. Her mother didn’t even hear it on the baby monitor. That’s why she can no longer sleep. She lies in the darkness and waits for her breath to stop. She listens to it slow and slow and before she is numb with sleep she bolts up in bed. She is determined not to fade away. Besides, it is hard enough to sleep with her mother coming in and out of her room. She makes Miranda sleep upright in bed with three heavy pillows stacked beneath her. She is forced to sleep in a sitting position. Once or twice an hour her mother sneaks into her room. Miranda pretends to be asleep, but she can feel her standing over her watching. She holds her hand out
near Miranda’s mouth trying to sense her breath. Then she places her fingers to Miranda’s sternum to feel the rise and fall of her ribcage.

One night when Miranda is asleep she wakes up to find her thumping her hands against her chest. Her father has to pull her mother off. The whole time her mother yells over and over again, “I’ll save you Miranda. Don’t worry. Don’t worry.”

The next day Miranda has black bruises all over her chest and her father takes her to her grandparent’s house in the city for lunch. They have creamed peas and roast beef and her grandmother makes Miranda sit in her father’s old blue chair that everyone knows is a highchair without the tray. Its cushions are made of blue sparkling vinyl and Miranda stabs her fingernails into it as she eats. She refuses her grandmother’s brownie cake.

“I’m too old to eat sweet food,” she tells her and sulks as the adults eat theirs, the tines of their forks sticking with rich chocolate frosting.

After lunch her father tells her that she’s going to start coming over to her grandparent’s house after school. “Your Mom’s going to start working again,” he says. She stares at his shiny black shoes and imagines them to be beetles smiling up at her in the sunlight. She focuses long and hard on this idea and when he crouches down and tries to pull her into his face for a kiss she turns her cheek away and gets scratched by
the brittle black hairs on his chin.

After school Miranda's grandmother pulls her blouse to the side to see the bruises her mother made.

"Does it hurt," she asks, and Miranda pulls away from her and closes her shirt.

"No," she says. "She was trying to save me."

"You don't need saving," says her grandmother.

"I'm dying," she tells her.

"That is nonsense," her grandmother says as she works her hands back into a batch of cinnamon rolls. "Your brother had something wrong with him, something that only happens to infants. You are ten and your lungs are strong. You won't stop breathing during the night."

Miranda can't be confident in her grandmother's assurances. "I don't believe you," she tells her. "How do you know I'm not dying?"

"How do I know?" Her grandmother wipes her floury hands on the hem of her kitchen apron. There is a row of pink embroidered lady slippers at its edge and her fingertips dust them with white powder. "I know because life is strong." She squats down to Miranda's level and Miranda can see the flat brown liver spots on her scalp beneath her thinning hair. "I'll prove it to you."

Her grandmother pulls a carton of eggs out of the refrigerator. She gets all her eggs from a lady she knows who has a chicken coop, so they
aren't the icy white kind found in supermarkets they are an array of colors: pale greens and blues, soft browns and buttery yellows. Some of the eggs are freckled like Miranda's arms in the summer time. "Pick one," my grandmother says and Miranda reaches for a bright green egg flecked with rich brown spots. The skin of the egg feels cold and light against her fingers.

"What are we going to do with this?" she asks. Miranda doesn't know what any of this has to do with her dying.

"We're going to hatch it," her grandmother says. Her blue eyes are sparkling in the afternoon sunlight. "We're going to hatch it and then you will see that life is stronger than you think."

Miranda is doubtful. She thinks about all the eggs she has eaten in the past scrambled, over-easy, and sunny-side-up. She doesn't think it could be true that if she'd waited and warmed them they would have become chickens, but she wants to try. She has always wanted to have a little chick of her own. Her grandparents display live baby chickens and ducklings every Easter in the front windows of their floral shop. Her grandfather cuts sod into small hills and valleys for them. He builds tiny wooden ladders and ramps for the baby birds to climb over and slide down into water trays. He surrounds all of this with tulips, daffodils, crocuses, and enormous Styrofoam eggs that her grandmother paints and coats in glitter. Miranda always wants to hold the tiny fluffy birds, but is
never allowed. She gets to stare at them through the glass like all the other children. If she hatched a chick of her own she would be able to play with it as often as she wished.

She follows her grandmother’s instructions on egg hatching perfectly. She pays attention to every detail for the next two weeks. Each afternoon she places her egg on the oven grill. She rotates its position every half hour and twists a warm towel around its sides to simulate a nest, but the skin of its shell never seems to warm under the yellow glow of the oven light. Miranda wants to turn up the heat, but her grandmother assures her that she has set the oven at the perfect temperature. “We want the egg to hatch not cook,” she says.

While she does her homework she listens attentively for the sound of the chick’s beak cracking its shell, the faint peeping from its newly formed throat. When it doesn’t hatch after the first week she asks her grandmother if she’s ever hatched chicks this way before. She says yes, many. Late at night she would find them pecking and scratching her wood floors.

“What did you do with them?” Miranda asks.

“I gave them away to a farm,” she says.

Miranda narrows her eyes into little slits.

“I’ll prove it to you,” she says. Her grandmother rummages around upstairs and when she returns she shows Miranda a handful of
feathers. They are curled and black. They remind Miranda more of the
goose feathers that fall out of her pillows at night than the soft yellow
down of baby chicks. But, she wants to believe so she says nothing.

At night instead of counting her breaths she thinks of her green freckled
egg. Each day on the bus she pictures herself finding the egg’s shell
fractured. She imagines holding the egg in her hand as the chick emerges
with its tiny wet wings unraveling and its neck circling in the new air.

After two weeks she becomes impatient. The egg never seems to
change. When she holds it up to the light in the kitchen she can see
nothing, no silhouette of a half-formed chick, no rounded yolk. It feels
hollow and weightless inside of her hands. She wonders if something is
wrong with it and when her grandmother busies herself with laundry she
-cracks it open into one of her grandmother’s china saucers. Inside, it is
full of bloody yolk. She panics. She wasn’t patient and now the chick
inside has died. Ashamed she throws the egg into the garbage and tries
to cover the bloody yolk with coffee grounds. Then she looks inside of
the egg carton at grandmother’s remaining eggs. She finds one that looks
similar and puts the replacement into the oven. Her grandmother
emerges from the basement with her laundry basket just as Miranda shut
the oven door.

“How’s your egg?” she asks.

“Its fine,” Miranda answers. Her voice is as thin as puddle ice.
"It should hatch any day now," her grandmother says.

Miranda nods her head in agreement. "Yes."

That night Miranda starts to worry about her breathing again. She wakes up each time her mother creeps into the room. She thinks of the bloody yolk in her grandmother's saucer. Maybe she didn't deserve the baby chick. She hadn't believed her grandmother. She hadn't been able to wait and now it was too late. Her chick was dead and maybe she would be to.

The next day at school Miranda is quiet. She tears her fingernails to thin shreds with the edges of her teeth. She barely eats during lunch. Her new egg won't hatch. The egg felt different. It didn't have the fertile, heavy feel of the first egg. There never could be life inside of it, and to make matters even worse Isabella Hembre asks Mrs. Johnson when the students who had birthdays in the summer would sing "Happy Birthday?" Mrs. Johnson tells her next week. Isabella, Joshua Smith, and Miranda, since she'd missed her chance, could try and win frosties for the next movie day. Miranda worries because she doesn't think she can do it any longer. She isn't even sure that she wants to.

On the bus she decides she's going to tell her grandmother about the egg. She'll tell her how she opened it, how she'd ruined its chance of hatching. But the when Miranda enters her grandmother's kitchen there is a cardboard box on the table. Inside is a fluffy yellow chick hopping
along the newspapered bottom. Her chick is alive somehow the other egg has hatched. Miranda scoops the chick’s tiny body up into her hands. It is light, delicate. Miranda can feel its heart beating inside of her fingers. Its heartbeat is frantic. “It’s okay, it’s okay,” she coos.

Her grandmother claps her hands together. “See,” she says. “I told you. I told you we could hatch it.”

“Yes,” Miranda says, although she knows that the chick couldn’t possibly have hatched from the egg she put in the oven the day before. The broken pieces of egg at the bottom of the box are white not freckled and green like her egg was. She holds the yellow down of the chick close to her cheek, and watches its tiny orange beak open and close. “We did it,” she whispers.

The following Monday right before gym class it is finally Miranda’s turn to sing. Isabella and Josh both fail. Isabella giggles through her song and Josh rushes through his too quickly, missing words and slurring his lyrics together. It was up to Miranda.

In front of the class Miranda hunches her shoulders and Mrs. Johnson has to hold her back so that she won’t be afraid. She can see all of her classmates staring at her and she feels frozen. She sees Matthew Reuter snicker out of the corner of his eye. Jimmy Mulligan sticks his tongue out. Miranda looks at her shoes. She thinks of the bloody egg she had hidden underneath the coffee grounds. She thinks about Andrew so
still and white in his coffin. She thinks about the tiny chick at her
grandmother’s house and her forgotten birthday and she starts to sing.
She doesn’t sing loud, or on key, but she can hear her voice clear and
precise. She is the only person to sing herself that song that year and she
sings it for herself, for the baby chick, and for her brother Andrew. It
floats over her classmate’s heads and rings in her ears.
You are with Me

Helena was the first in her household to contract typhus. That was in 1917, the year she turned nine. Her family lived in Schoental, Russia on the very edge of Western Siberia. They lived in a Mennonite village that no longer exists today, save for the remains of their brick house. The walls still stand, although the thatched roof has fallen into its innards, collapsing the second story and crumbling much of the stone fireplace. Their town had been stricken with typhus that winter when the men from neighboring villages returned from the First World War. They carried it with them in their woolen coats. It clung to the ice in their beards and the dirt underneath their fingernails. Twelve in the village had died by mid-December, and the ground being too hard and frozen, prevented their burials. The presence of their bodies stacked in woodsheds and storage cellars agitated the village dogs. At night they would howl, their voices magnificent across the snow, filling Helena’s young mind with inexplicable rapture and fear. She heard their voices call to her through her fever and felt that they were somehow trying to speak to her, that their voices were a warning of something mysterious and unforeseen.

The sickness took her, as was usual with typhus, with a heavy fever and a gland ulcer that stretched about an inch and a quarter
behind her right ear. This wound was pressed and cleaned with wet linen cloth twice a day by her mother. She touched Helena’s body with light hesitant hands and took frequent sips of wormwood drops, so afraid was she of contracting the sickness herself. Yet she was also very persistent that Helena live. She was the fourth Helena in the family. Three had died before her, all under the age of two, and her mother thought it unbearable to lose another one. Her insistence of this was so strong that when sister Thielmann, the village midwife, explained that Helena was not much longer for this world her mother bargained with the grocer to obtain a single red apple, Helena’s favorite fruit, in order to tempt her back into life. The apple she placed at the foot of Helena’s bed on a small simple shelf that her father had made from his trade as a carpenter.

When Helena’s relatives proceeded past her sick bed, their eyes pink and dripping with grief, her mother would turn her eyes towards the fruit to remind Helena of what waited should she recover. The fruit did not escape Helena’s attention despite her fever delirium. At times she felt herself gigantic, pressing to the very exteriors of the room that surrounded her. She floated above her sisters and brothers, who had taken on, it had seemed to her, the appearance of rotund pigs, fleshy, robust, and red, they stood hesitant in the doorframe with black blinking eyes. Other times Helena fell deep inside of herself, her world small and
dark, filled only with the pain that twisted inside of her stomach and the thick coat of mucus that had formed along the surface of her tongue. Yet throughout all of this the smell of the apple’s skin remained clear and sweet in Helena’s nostrils, and this desire alone pulled out of death’s grip.

On December 20th when her father returned home from preaching in Saratow the family all greeted him cheerfully. Helena’s mother told him “Lena’s ulcer is better and she can already get up,” although she had a serious headache. The next morning her mother did not get up from her bed. She had a fever and an ulcer thick as a hen’s egg on the left side of her neck, just above the sharp ledge of her collarbone. By four in the night, her suffering became so violent that sister Thielmann was called. Helena’s father went for the doctor in Ohrloff, but he was not inclined to come along and gave some medicine instead, but it did not help.

Helena was to be the angel in the Christmas service that very year. Her mother had made her a gown out of white satin that her older brother, Gerhard, had purchased during his studies in the Crimea. The dress fell in a bright halo around her feet. The hem circled the floor brushing the top of her feet with its soft shimmering. She couldn’t help but feel joy each time the gown touched her skin. It was the first thing she had ever worn that made her feel beautiful. The satin cloth colored
her cheeks, and her dark hair was contrasted by the white chicken feathers that arched into wings behind her head.

At the service she held a white candle beneath her chin. The flame illuminated her face and glowed against the frosted panes of the church windows. Everything seemed crystalline and silent as she spoke, “Do not be afraid,” she said, “for I bring you great joy. A child has been born to you outside the city of Judea.” She held the candle out towards the audience, and when she did, she saw that each pair of eyes was full of shining tears. It was then that she knew. She saw it in the congregation’s pity. All the childish joy she felt because of the gown and her beauty vanished. Her words hung hollow in her ears. There would be no great joy. The Christ child had been killed long ago. She remembered how the great wooden cross in the front of the church was covered every Good Friday in thick, black, cloth.

At home her mother was propped up in her bed with pillows. She had been bathed earlier that day so her hair was pulled neat and straight alongside her face. She had requested that the children be brought to her after the service. She could barely speak then, as her tongue was very swollen and coated, but she smiled weakly as they entered the room.

“Oh how does it hurt me for Daddy and the small children,” she said when they were near her. She took Mariechen, who was only five and Helena onto the bed with her. She stroked their cheeks and pressed
their hands inside of her own. Helena began to weep and she pulled her mouth close to her mother’s ear so that she could whisper into it.

“It should be me, Momma,” she said, “I should be the one, not you.”

“No,” her mother said. She touched Helena’s lips. “I see your future, long and happy.” Helena cried into the skin folded in her mother’s neck. Her mother no longer smelled like her mother. She smelled of bed linen and old forgotten hair, like locks of her grandmother’s that her father kept pressed between the pages of his bible.

Later that night, her mother stopped speaking because her tongue had become too thick in the back of her throat. By two in the morning, she lay motionless, and then towards the morning light she fell asleep and died.

The family couldn’t have a proper burial. The ground was still frozen, so her mother’s body was placed in the woodshed until the thaw. Each day, Helena found herself staring out the windows at the small, wooden building. She remembered when her baby sister Anna died how her mother would sneak in and out of the woodshed to look at the body. Each time she left the shed she had wiped her eyes on the ends of her apron. Helena wanted to see what her mother looked like now that she
was dead, so when her brothers and sisters were busy she snuck inside to take a look.

Helena was surprised when she saw her. The room was very dark, but she could still see that her mother didn't look as ill as she had looked in her sick bed. The yellow tint of her skin was gone, and her frantic shakings were stilled. She looked like herself, like her mother had always looked, and Helena's heart jumped in her chest. She walked closer towards the body. Her mother was wearing her best black dress. It had ruffles high up on her throat, and a series of black silk buttons along the bodice. She could see that underneath her dress she was wearing all of her stiffly, starched petticoats, and she had her church shoes on, black and pointy, their tips poked upward towards the ceilings, and it seemed strange to see her wearing them lying down.

Up close her mother looked even better. Her face was rounded and beautiful, her eyelashes curled gently above her closed lids, and her mouth wasn't white anymore the way it had been during her illness, it was full and pursed as if she was waiting patiently for a kiss. Helena thought of the story of Snow White, how the dwarfs had thought that Snow white was dead until a prince came along and kissed her. She leaned in low and kissed her mother's lips. They felt cold and hard like fingernails, and she pulled away in a panic. Her mother didn't move. It was so cold out of course her kisses couldn't wake her. Besides Helena
wasn't a prince, not even a man. She worried that her mother might be too cold. Her hands were bare and Helena picked one of them up to hold in her hand. At first her mother’s hand was rigid and cold like her lips, but as Helena held on it seemed to warm. She pressed her other hand to her mother’s cheek and it also began to warm beneath.

"Momma," she whispered. She leaned very close to her ear, "Momma?" Her breath blew a tiny piece of hair near her forehead. She saw her mother’s eyelid twitch briefly and her chest rise just slightly. Helena’s heart was so loud it seemed to rise up into her throat. She was alive. It was all a mistake. "Momma, I will help you," Helena told her. "I will bring you food. I will warm your hands and your face when I come and see you." She hurried back into the house to steal a piece of bread. "Here," she said pressing it into her hand. "You eat this when you have the strength. I'll bring more tomorrow."

That night the wind whistled relentlessly outside their tiny brick house. Helena couldn't sleep, thinking about her mother outside in that horrible wind. The woodshed had great gaps between its boards, and even during the daytime when the sun beat down on its roof it was bitterly cold. Helena wanted to bring a quilt out to her mother, or at least her coat, but she knew this would never be allowed. She knew that Father would be angry to even know that she had been in the woodshed, and her older brothers and sisters would scold her. They didn't
understand her mother the way she did. They hadn't seen her as she had
during her illness. Helena had seen a great halo of light shimmering
from her mother’s body. She had seen how whenever her mother
touched her skin they became one being instead of two, and she knew
that her mother had saved her just like an angel.

The next day in the woodshed, the bread Helena had given her
mother was lying on the floor. It had fallen out of her hand, but Helena
could see when she picked it up that part of it had been eaten. It was
much smaller, and she saw that the folds of her mother’s dress were
altered, and her cheeks had more color in them. She was getting better.
Helena held her hand tightly, "I knew it," she said. She crouched down
low and placed her mother’s hand on top of her head. She moved it back
and forth across her hair, mimicking the way her mother used to stroke it
before bed. "I won't give up."

Helena tended to her mother's body; smoothing her hair neatly
against her scalp, warming her exposed skin with her body heat, and
bringing the food she managed to pilfer from the house. Some days she
tried to push crumbs into her mother’s mouth. She didn't think that her
mother was eating enough. Most of the time it was hard to tell if she'd
eaten anything at all. Helena checked her mother’s mouth each time she
fed her, and when she found the crumbs unswallowed and whole she
would try and encourage her mother, "Come on Momma," she pleaded. "You have to at least try."

The weather was warming and one morning Helena awoke to the sound of icicles dripping from the eaves of their roof. Outside her shoes stuck in the mud. She heard her father speak to her brother Gerhard about preparing for the burial. "It's best to finish it off before the body thaws," he told him. "Besides I don't want the rodents to get to her."

Everyone in the village began plans to bury their dead. Helena’s father, who was the elder of the town, wrote furiously in his notebooks trying to prepare funeral sermons for all those who had been killed by the typhus. These preparations panicked Helena.

"You have to hurry," she told her mother, "I don't have much time." Her mother lay unresponsive. "Do you hear me," Helena said. She tried not to notice the transformation she had seen taking over her mother’s body in the last few weeks. She found frost clinging in crystals to her mother’s hair, and ice was caked to the folds of her mother’s dress. Helena told herself that these things meant nothing, but she too wondered about rodents, maybe they were eating her mother’s bread. Helena touched her mother’s cheek. It felt like ice. "Open your eyes," she commanded. "Open your eyes." Her mother didn’t move. Helena thought she would help her; perhaps if she opened her mother’s eyes and her mother saw how hard she was trying she would try harder herself.
Helena pulled back her mother's right eyelid, and to her horror broke three of her mother's eyelashes. They snapped like dry pine needles between her fingers. Helena placed them temporarily on her mother's forehead, and then lifted her mother's eyelid the rest of the way. Underneath, she saw her mother's iris was fogged white with ice. Her eye was like that of a dead fish, glazed and thick like milk. She screamed.

At the funeral Helena watched her shadow drawn long and thin across the cemetery. The villagers stood with bent heads around thirteen mounds of dirt as her father preached with his arms raised up towards the sky, "And low as I walk through the valley of death I shall not be afraid for you are with me." Helena held her hand balled in a fist inside of her coat pocket where she held three broken eyelashes. When her father's voice rose up into the wind and into the tamarack trees, which waved dark and heavy against the gray sky she was sure that she could almost feel them moving.
In a Place so Small

At lunch Holly can barely eat with the other teachers. She takes tentative bites of her sandwich, trying to avoid the places where her fingers touched the bread. She is certain there are tiny flecks of blood hiding underneath her fingernails. She sits at a table in the middle of the gymnasium with the rest of the upper grade teachers eyeing the children, making sure they don’t hit one another, and that they don’t leave early for recess. They don’t have a teacher’s lounge. It’s a small school in a small town. When people drive past it on the highway they usually miss it entirely. Last year the school had a live nativity scene for the Christmas Festival, with real livestock, and an eighth-grade Virgin Mary. The separation between church and state hasn’t reached their fringes of Montana yet. “We do what we want,” the first grade teacher said when Holly asked. “It isn’t like anybody checks up on us.” This is how Holly feels most of the time in her classroom, like no one is checking up on her, and she is glad that they aren’t.

All week Holly has been dissecting pieces of a slaughtered cow with her sixth grade class. James Harmon, a local rancher, delivers the body parts to them each day, wrapped neatly like pressed laundry in white butcher-block-paper. He brings them in stacks of three: the heart,
the lungs, and the rib cage on Monday, the head, the throat, and the stomachs on Tuesday, and so forth until they have looked at nearly every part. The body smells surprisingly clean like ice and metal, unlike the frog's they dissected weeks earlier. Their flesh was sopped in yellow formaldehyde. The preservative contained itself behind their eye sockets, in the spaces between their joints, and in their spotted skin, which flopped like wet rags onto the black table tops.

Holly hasn't dissected anything since seventh grade, when she'd still been too frightened to remove the frog corpse from the white plastic bucket at the front of the class. She tries to read the dissection manual at night. She tries to identify the tiny body parts from the vague sketches she sees on the faded pages of the old manual. The truth is she only knows the general area where things should be. The students bring her parts she doesn't recognize at all. She stares and stares at the diagrams, but can't find anything that even looks close. It is in these moments when she wonders why she's there at all.

This morning she had clumsily picked her way through plates of pink ice with an Exacto knife. Two of the children held the cow's heart steady for her on the table. The other children rummaged through the janitor's closet off the back of the classroom. They looked for tools that would saw or cut through the cow's heavy flesh. Holly had to chip away
the frozen blood before they could open the heart to look inside its chambers. Katherine, one of her students, held the top of the cow’s heart. Her thumb strained over the yellow tube of the aorta.

They made little progress with their crude tools. The blades broke off like rotten teeth when they tried to cut. The hacksaw sunk itself halfway into the lungs and stopped. It was immovable. Its handle cracked each time they pulled. Even the latex gloves were too old to work properly. The tips of the fingers snapped, and broke into dry powder when they tried to stretch them over their hands. And when they’d finally opened the heart and the lungs Holly had only been able to point out the most obvious body parts at best. “These are the four chambers of the heart,” she said extending her finger in a circle over the roughly cut heart. “Here are the bronchial tubes and those tiny little holes are the alveoli,” Holly put the palm of her hand over the lungs, and the students had scrunched up their noses trying to see what she was talking about.

“I don’t see them,” Dillon had complained.

Holly shrugged her shoulders. “You have to look very closely,” she said.

After lunch Holly almost vomits in a metal wastebasket outside the door of her classroom, but nothing comes out. The special education teacher pokes her head out of her classroom to see if she’s okay.
"I think I have the flu," Holly says.

The special education teacher squints at her in the musty light. They have the only two classrooms in the basement, and it is like a cave down there. The floors are still unfinished, and the walls constantly drip with water. Holly touches her hand to a watery stain on the wall, and the cool moisture seems to steady her nausea for a moment.

"You should go home," the special education teacher says. Her large glasses reflect the classroom light behind her head, and she looks like a gigantic bug.

Holly shakes her head. The only two substitutes they use are already there. The seventh and eighth grade teachers are at a technology conference in Billings. "There's only three hours left," Holly says.

In her room Holly places her head on her desk. The children are still at recess. She can see their feet and ankles above her through the tiny rectangular windows on the opposite wall.

"Miss Roll?" Katharine is standing in the doorway stooping her shoulders inward to hide her emerging breasts. She is too tall and thin for her own body.

Holly raises her head, and tries to wipe her hair out of her eyes. "Mm," she says. She smiles at Katharine. She is gentle and shy, and Holly's favorite student. She reminds Holly of herself at that age. She has
the same shyness, the same awkward sense of self.

"Can I come in and paint?" she asks. Her voice cracks a little at the end of her sentence.

"Of course," Holly pages through the class's partially dried paintings on her filing cabinet. They are copying Georgia O'Keefe this week. The girls imitate her magnified flower paintings, and the boys the New Mexican sand dunes, and skulls. Katharine's flower is done in various shades of blue and lavender.

Holly's not supposed to let them in early from recess. It's against the rules, but she knows the other girls in the class have been picking on Katharine. They leave her out of the group when they walk to lunch or to the library and Katharine sits alone on the school’s cement steps during recess.

Holly has learned how it is in a place so small. The things that you did when you were in kindergarten stay with you. Everyone remembers the time you wet your pants in the first grade. They remember how you smelled when your parent’s well wasn’t hooked up to the house yet, how your hair reeked of urine, and no one wanted to sit next to you. These things never disappear completely.

"What are you going to recite for your recitation speech?" Holly asks Katharine. She's been disappointed by the rest of the class’s choices
so far. Everyone is doing song lyrics or Shel Silverstein poems despite the fact that Holly brought in Dickinson, Wordsworth, Keats, and Elizabeth Bishop poems to inspire them. “Stretch yourself with your decisions,” she told them. “Be consumed by the masters.”

“I don’t know,” Katharine says setting her paints out on the table before her. “I’m thinking about the poem where the girl who won’t take the garbage out.”

“Oh no, no,” Holly gets up from her desk. “I thought you’d pick something more ambitious. What about a soliloquy from Shakespeare? You could do the famous, To Be or Not to Be, speech.” Holly walks over to Katharine’s table, and sits on the end of it. She fingers the curled corner of her painting. “That would be very ambitious. It would be perfect for you.”

“I guess I could,” Katharine says dipping her paintbrush into a dish of red paint. She holds the brush over the center of her flower, and paints in a bright scarlet stamen.

“I know you act,” Holly says encouragingly. “Shakespeare’s language could help you hone in on your dramatic energies. It would suit your theatrical flair.”

“Are any of the other kids doing Shakespeare?” Katharine asks.

“No,” Holly crinkles her nose at Katharine’s painting. She has
ruined her entire color scheme by adding red. “Add some white,” Holly says jabbing her index finger into the center of the painting.

“Maybe I should just stick to my idea,” Katharine says ignoring Holly’s suggestion. She runs the red paint up through the petals of her flower, making the painting even more garish and loud.

“Don’t be silly,” Holly says getting up to dig Hamlet out of her desk. “That’s what would make your speech unique. I’m counting on you to set the standard for the class. I’ll even lend you my book.”

Katharine doesn’t answer Holly. She dips her paintbrush into the white paint, and Holly smiles, glad that she has finally decided to follow her suggestion. She places Hamlet on the edge of Katharine’s desk.

“You smell like blood,” Holly’s boyfriend Evan says over the dinner table. “Are you still dissecting that cow?”

“It’s a big cow,” Holly answers. She turns her head to sniff her shoulder. It smells like the school to her, but not blood. “You’d be surprised how many parts there are.”

Tonight they are eating brown rice and sautéed chard. Evan is on a cleansing diet. Meat and dairy products were clouding his thinking. Someone at his work named Sunshine suggested this cleansing. Evan works at the only organic food store in town. He stacks and orders
produce. He takes his job very seriously, and since he started working there he won't let them buy anything that isn't organic. Now nothing in the house seems clean to Holly. No matter how long she scrubs the mildew in their sink it never disappears. Sometimes when Evan is out she uses bleach from the apartment's laundry room. She almost gets an adrenaline rush watching all the grime on the kitchen floor burn away under its chemicals, but afterwards she has to light incense and candles so that Evan won't realize what she's done.

"I couldn't work in a place like that," Evan says poking his fork into a limp piece of chard. "It's so confining."

Holly pictures him meditating in their sunroom, with his legs crossed, and palms outstretched towards the sky. Once he'd asked her if she could stop turning the pages of her book so loudly. She was disturbing his concentration. She didn't think he could work at her school either.

"You get used to it," Holly says taking a sip of water. This meal makes her feel like she's starving. She actually feels as if she's becoming thinner with each bite of chard. "It's worth it when you see you're making a difference."

"Are you?" Evan asks. He fingers a long white scar on his wrist for a moment, a remnant of his high school habit of cutting himself. "If I were
"I think I’m opening up their horizons. What if I wasn’t there to introduce them to new ideas? Remember how when you helped me moved into my classroom and the secretary said ‘and this is Mr. Roll I presume?’ and how shocked she looked when we said no?"

"That school is everything I hate about other people."

"I’m opening them up to different lifestyles, different points of view."

"Sure," Evan says rolling his eyes and taking a long sip of water. "Those people have just been waiting for someone like you to open up their eyes." He closes his eyes as he swallows, attempting, Holly thinks, to capture the very essence of the water he is drinking. "I’m sure you’re changing everyone out there."

Holly narrows her eyes at Evan. He is so negative about her teaching. He thinks public institutions stifle children’s creativity. She doesn’t want to believe him but she thinks of the evolutionary unit she taught in the fall, and how one of her student’s papers came back with the same answer written underneath every question. *I believe in God, not Evolution*. It wasn’t even written in the student’s handwriting. It was obvious that one of her parent’s had penned in each protest.

"Someone has to try at least," Holly says. "Why shouldn’t it be
The next day at school, they look at the cow's eyeballs and its brain. The brain is small and white. "It reminds me of cauliflower," Dillon says cutting off a section with his knife.

"Once we dissected a horse brain," Katharine tells Holly. She swings one of her thin arms out theatrically as she speaks.

"It was in second grade," says Brigit, who is tiny, and the unspoken leader of the class. She has a button nose, and freckles all over her face and her arms. "It was donated by Dillon's grandmother."

"It was my grandmother's horse, Stupid," Dillon says poking Brigit with his elbow.

"Hey," Holly scolds, "no put downs."

"Sorry," says Dillon before he continues. "The horse had brain cancer, and when we cut open the brain there were these big brown spots on it."

"It was all rotten," Lindsay says clutching her stomach.

"It was disgusting," Brigit says.

"I almost threw up," Katharine says. "I almost fainted. I had to sit in the office for two hours."

"You did not," Lindsay and Brigit say in unison. "You were faking
"You exaggerate everything," says Dillon.

"She makes a big deal out of little things. It's stupid," says Sam from the corner of the room.

Katharine curves her neck down towards the ground. There is a fine red blush at the very base of her neck where her ponytail exposes her skin.

"I'd probably faint too," Holly says, but the students ignore her. "I went to a dinner once that served monkey brains and I couldn't even bear the smell of them. I had to leave the room." Some of the students giggle at Holly's remark.

"I'd eat monkey brains if I had the chance," says Brigit. "I've eaten cow testicles at the Testicle Festival." The other students groan.

Holly grimaces and sticks out her tongue. "Yuck," she says smiling in Katharine's direction. Katharine smiles weakly back at her, but doesn't speak for the rest of the period.

On the way to lunch, Katharine hangs back and waits for Holly at the end of the line. "I thought I'd keep you company today," she says as they cross the dirt road to the school's cafeteria. The original school building is too small to hold all of the students for lunch so the school rents the community center in the town. They walk past a rickety ranch
A large red cow hangs her head over the fence rail, and snorts some air as they pass. Holly reaches her hand out to touch her wet pink nose. She smiles to herself. She still gets a kick out of the horses and cows that roam the pastures around the school. Before she came there she had never touched a cow before. She had never even been close to one, and had only seen them from a distance as she flew past farmland in her car. The students laughed at her the first time she pet one of their enormous heads.

"Are you scared?" Dillon asked smiling. His dimples appeared on both of his cheeks. He was from one of the oldest families in the valley, and everyone loved him.

"I never realized how large cows were before," Holly said. The rest of the class snickered. "They won't hurt you," Dillon said. "They're stupid."

The cow didn't move. Holly rested her palm against its head. It stared straight forward with its wet black eyes, chewing a piece of dirty grass between its teeth.

In the cafeteria, Katharine sits by herself, away from the rest of the sixth-grade class. She sits on the end of the fourth-grade table, slowly chewing her food, and focusing her eyes on some invisible spot on the table before her.
"I'm worried about Katharine," Holly tells the eighth-grade teacher.

John looks over the edge of his sandwich in Katharine's direction.

"She's never fit in," he says. "She's a good kid, though. People will appreciate her when she's older."

"I wish they appreciated her now." Holly spoons some strawberry yogurt into her mouth. The yogurt is curded and watery even though it's been in the teacher's fridge all morning, another downfall of eating organically, she thinks. Evan would argue that it is a small price to pay for quality food, but Holly isn't so sure. Shouldn't she want to eat it? Looking at the shriveled purple strawberry on her spoon she isn't certain she does.

"Her family is just too artsy for people around here. They're hippies from California. Her mother, Pam, is a painter. She's a really cool woman. You should talk to her," John says.

"Maybe I will." Holly sees out of the corner of her eye the other girls in her class. They are huddled together and whispering. They laugh in Katharine's direction.

Gideon, a second grader, sits near Holly's feet throwing sprays of white pebbles onto the tops of her shoes during her recess duty. She is leaning against the side of the building trying to warm her self in the sun.
Katharine has just given her Hamlet soliloquy, and Holly thinks she’s done an excellent job, although some of the other kids in the class rolled their eyes and laughed.

“To be or not to be a dork,” Brigit had mimicked in Katharine’s voice after she had finished. The rest of the class laughed, and some of the other girls said things like thou and art to one another in high-pitched English voices. Holly made each of the girls who giggled or made faces stay in the classroom five minutes longer than the rest of the students before lunch.

“You can sit here and think about how we treat one another in class,” Holly said.

“We were just being immature,” said Brigit, who was wearing a tight white t-shirt that said Nice in silver glitter on the front, and Naughty in red on the back.

“Guess what?” Gideon asks looking up at her. His bangs are cut severely in a straight line across his forehead, giving him an Eddy Munster look.

“Chicken butt,” Holly says. Gideon likes to shock the teachers by saying inappropriate things. Last week he yelled, “I have an anus,” during a school assembly until the principal escorted him out of the gymnasium. None of the kids in his class laughed. They were still too
young to know what he was talking about, but there was a burst of laughter from the upper grades. The sixth, seventh, and eighth graders smirked, and gave each other knowing looks. Holly always makes sure to say things that confuse Gideon. That way she doesn’t have to listen to his provocative questions or stories.

“Hey,” he says frowning. “You can’t say butt.”

“Why not?” Holly asks kicking the pile of pebbles off of her foot.

He scratches a scab on his forearm, and then breaks into a run towards the merry-go-round. A group of girls that are sitting on it, playing with each other’s hair, go shrieking away like startled pigeons. Gideon growls at them, opens his arms out as if he were going to grab them. The girls huddle together, giggling near the chain link fence. When he lunges towards them, they run towards the jungle gym.

Holly scans the crowd of students looking for disturbances. Her sixth-grade girls are standing on the sidelines of the basketball court watching the boys kick a hacky sac in a circle. She counts all of them twice, and gets eleven each time. She doesn’t see Katharine in the crowd. She looks across the rest of the playground, but she doesn’t see her. She wanders over to the side of the building. The students aren’t supposed to go past a pile of rail ties during recess, ever since one of the seventh graders got caught smoking pot behind the dumpster, but not everyone
adheres to this rule.

She finds Katharine crouched down beside the sunken window to their classroom. She is running her fingers through her hair, and swatting whatever it is she is trying to comb out of it onto the ground.

"Katharine?" Holly says stepping forward, her shoes snapping dry pine needles beneath them. "What are you doing?"

Katharine looks up at her. Her face is wet with tears and snot. Her eyelids are puffy, and her face, because she is so pale, is flushed with blotches of red blush. "They threw cow guts into my hair," she sobs. Her thin wrists shake violently as she holds out a hand covered in blood, and ropey red entrails.

"Who did?"

Katharine shakes more of the entrails off of her fingertips onto the ground. "Who do you think?"

"I don't understand," Holly says. "Why would they do that?"

"Because of my stupid speech," Katharine says throwing some of the cow remains out towards Holly. "Everyone thought I was stuck up."

"You did an excellent job. They're just jealous." Holly reaches out to pull some white goo from Katharine's shoulder.

"You don't understand anything," Katharine says standing. "They're not jealous of me. They hate me. I'm an outsider. You can't
change that. You can’t help me.”

“That’s not true,” Holly says. “Nobody hates anybody. You exaggerate everything. I’ll talk to the other girls. We’ll straighten this out.”

Katharine tilts her head. Her freckles look almost orange in the bright sunlight. “It doesn’t matter what you say, Miss Roll. They’ll do it anyways. They always have.” She walks slowly to the back door of the school, holding her hands out by her sides so that the blood doesn’t touch her clothing.

“I’ve reached my limit,” Holly says as she enters the classroom, the principal Mr. Ryan follows closely behind her. They call all of the sixth-grade-girls out into the hallway for a serious discussion. Katharine stands towards the back of the group. Her hair and the shoulders of her clothing are wet from washing out the cow remains in the bathroom sink. The other girls huddle together, and some stare down at the toes of their shoes, moving them across the floor.

“I’d like some answers,” Holly says. There is silence in response, and Holly stamps her foot against the floor. “Now!”

“Answers to what Miss Roll,” Brigit asks? She stands in front of the other girls, and stares directly into Holly’s eyes. She is almost exactly Holly’s height.
"Katharine," Holly says, "would you like to explain to the other girls and to Principal Ryan what happened to you before lunch?"

"No," Katharine says in a soft voice. Her wet hair shadows her features.

"Katharine you don't have to be shy about it. We all know what happened. There are going to be consequences." Holly has a stack of green slips in her hand. They are the slips she will sign to send the other girls to in-school suspension.

"Nothing happened," Katharine says again. "I got gum in my hair I had to wash it out."

"Miss Roll," Principal Ryan says. He strokes his graying mustache with his thick fingers. "If Katharine doesn't have a complaint," he holds his hands out wide in the air as if he were at a loss. Holly knows that he is somehow related to Brigit's father, and some of the other students in the classroom, but she has never thought of this interfering with his discipline techniques before.

"Katharine does have a complaint," Holly says walking back to where Katharine is standing. She puts her hand onto Katharine's back and whispers into her ear, "It's okay. You need to stand up for yourself."

"Katharine," Mr. Ryan says sternly, "Do you have a complaint?"

Katharine moves away from Holly's hand, "No I don't Mr. Ryan."
Everything is fine.”

“Well,” Mr. Ryan says slapping his pant legs. “I don’t know what to tell you Miss Roll. If Katharine doesn’t have a complaint then I can’t really do anything about the problem. You’re going to have to just work this out in class,” he breaks his way through the crowd of girls to reach the stairwell. When he reaches the bottom of the steps he points back at them. “Be kind to one another,” he says before turning around.

“We will,” some of the girls respond.

Holly stands with her arms crossed in front of her and her head down. “Go back in the room and take your seats,” she says in a soft voice. Katharine lags behind for a moment as if she is going to say something to Holly, but then she shrugs her shoulders and walks straight into the classroom without looking back.

At first the other girls watch Katharine carefully to see if she will say anything else. They watch Holly as well, looking for signs that they’re somehow still in trouble, but when they see that no further mention will be made of the cow guts or Katharine, their bodies relax, and their normal demeanors return. They joke and smile at one another. They even include Katharine in their conversations. She is, Holly sees, accepted back into her normal position through her silence, and her adherence to their code. Holly bites her lip, angry when she sees the grateful submissive look in
Katharine's eyes. She is happy to be back in the group, no matter what the price.

On the way to gym class Katharine doesn't lag behind, and wait for Holly. She walks with the rest of the group, although she is ignored, and pushed off to the side near the fence rails. She folds her arms across her chest and slumps her shoulders forward as if she were trying to make herself as small as possible. Holly walks alone in back of the class.

Outside of her car window on her way home from the school, Holly watches the valley narrow as she approaches the river. It is shining silver in the sunlight. Her little car snakes its way along its corridor, past tiny islands, and rocky cliff faces. Sometimes on her drives she sees big horn sheep and mule deer standing by the side of the road, their ears twitching and alert, but today the road is empty.

Holly looks at the river, at the smooth round rocks that line its shores, at its cliffs, and it seems like it never changes. It seems like its waters have always flown as they do now, silent and shimmering outside of her window.