Venery

Tiffany L. Trent

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VENERY

by Tiffany L. Trent

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Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

University of Montana

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When I was seven or eight, I used to creep down to the basement when the men came in. It was not that I was afraid of my dad or uncles or what I would see, but that I had an instinctive desire not to get in the way. They'd already taken pictures on-site, my dad in his blaze orange cap and half-grown beard holding up the antlers with a gloved fist. By the time I entered the basement, they'd pierced the hocks, strung the buck up from the low rafters, and spread a tarp beneath it. The smell of freshly chopped wood and chainsaw oil dimmed in comparison to that of flesh. Peering into the hollow of the buck's body, I saw a cave edged in white, blood-spotted fur. I watched as they took down the hide, as it came off with the sound of ripping fabric, revealing dark muscle sheened with fat and moon-white integument. As they tugged off the thick hide, drops of blood spattered on the tarp like rain on a tin roof.

The deer carcass signaled that the year was circling down past its height into something rich and strange. It was the part of the year I waited for—when the trees spoke in flaming tongues on the hillsides and bucks finished honing their antlers into hard bone. This time harvested my family to me—my grandmother would often come down from Wisconsin, and my Aunt Val and Uncle Class would come up from Georgia. It was an annual ritual. My uncles and dad would go out into the woods to hunt for a week. They hoped for deer or turkeys. What I hoped for were the stories, the deer stories they told around the table that day when they returned for Thanksgiving dinner.
Whenever autumn transformed the Blue Ridge, we’d take a trip down to Amherst the following weekend. Early in the morning, still grumbling about missing cartoons, my cousins Deanna, Kim, and I would pile in the bed of my dad’s green Dodge. Uncle Dicky sat up front with Dad, smoking and telling dirty jokes. We huddled under an old quilt, eating sausage biscuits, drinking orange juice, and trying to keep the cold wind from tangling our hair.

The drive was long. We took the Parkway, heading north until we came down from the winding, leaf-shadowed roads—usually in Glasgow. Then, the road crept up again, hugging the mountains that were part of the Jefferson National Forest. My cousins and I leaned over the fenders trying to scare ourselves as we gazed down the steep edges, down to where the James River cut like a green artery through the heart of the hills on its way to the sea. We knew we were getting close when the signs appeared for Big Otter Pond, a place that had not seen otters for years, and Big Island, where the tongue-thickening smell of the pulp mill drifted up out of the river bottom.

We always stopped at the country store before we actually got to Amherst. We piled out of the truck, our hair mussed, shivering in the mountain morning. I was drawn to the section of the store where stuttering refrigerators held the sweetest and rarest drink ever devised by mankind—Peach Nehi. Nowhere else could this ambrosia be found. Its sweet fuzz sparkled down my throat, my delight magnified by fulfilled anticipation. I asked my dad once if he thought the angels drank this in heaven. He just laughed and started singing “Special Angel” to me.
Our annual pilgrimage was not simply a joyride into the country. We were here with a purpose—for the men to scout deer trails and to fix any of the tree-stands that might have gotten damaged over the course of the last year. A few times, we also built new tree-stands. We girls were there ostensibly to help with the construction, but usually we just fooled around and got in the way until someone yelled at us to be still or find some straight limbs to use as steps for the stands. This was all prologue, a promise of things to come. The land where my father and uncles hunted had a mythology all its own.

The place belonged to the Sneads, old family friends from way back. I remember these men very clearly—three brothers all living on the same land. Their names were Shorty, Frank, and A’thur. (No one ever pronounced the ‘r’ in A’thur’s name). Shorty, whose real name was Wayne, was stout and thick as a barrel. His flannel hunting shirts often strained across his generous belly. Frank was gentle and quiet; he walked with a cane and wore a special thick-soled shoe. He had broken his back and leg in a construction accident, building the Roanoke Civic Center. Dad said it was a wonder he wasn’t dead—he’d fallen several stories off a scaffold onto concrete. A’thur was somewhat estranged from the rest of his family. He lived in a little white house closest to the woods where the shutters were always drawn and packs of hungry, tick-ridden dogs roamed, howling and barking. We never saw much of A’thur, but I recall a tallish man with sagging eyes and three-day whiskers.

The Sneads lived in the basement. I dimly remember the little white house where we first visited them, down in a hollow not far from a large pond. Eventually, the house
became too small for Shorty, Frank, his wife and sons, and Grandma Snead, so they built a new house just off the gravel road that led down to the woods. The new house was a brick ranch with skylights and porches. They loved giving us the grand tour. They showed us through the living room with its dyed plume grasses in a tall brass vase and plastic-covered couches on which people never sat. Next, they'd take us through the kitchen, where the brand new refrigerator and cabinets stood humming and empty. The linoleum was so clean it was almost blinding. The unused kitchen table sported placemats and linen napkins clasped in mushroom-shaped napkin rings.

The basement was where the Sneads did most of their living. There was living room area with an old TV and a couch. There was a bed where Grandma Snead slept. There was a bathroom with toilet and shower, the only room partitioned off from the rest of the basement. There was also a full kitchen, with stove, sink, and microwave, but Frank's wife, Florence preferred to cook off the woodstove. The unfinished concrete room held the heat in like a strongbox. It was always hot, no matter the season.

Usually when we went down, Frank's wife, Florence, would fix us a good Southern meal—bland cornbread and beans, accompanied by pickled beets and some other relishes. Florence's iced tea was as strong and dark as coffee. I'd listen with half an ear for the random story, stretching the greater part of my senses toward the outside, toward where the trees waited with their broad, listening leaves. Shorty might tell of the time they were in the cabin and dad or one of my uncles woke up yelling with his sleeping bag full of warmth-seeking hornets. Or about the time my father called the hen
turkey to him and shot her under the pines on Thanksgiving Day. The stories prophesied
the season of the hunt.

Frank Snead had two sons—Howard and David. I don’t remember much about
Howard; he was older and seemed to spend a lot of time away from home. But I do
remember David. He was thin as a rail, and a greasy cowlick stood up at the back of his
head. He talked with a nasally twang that I’d come to associate with country people, and
it was strange to hear him call my Dad by name, stretching the vowels between the
consonants—“Deyn-nyis” for Dennis.

He asked me once if I’d ever eaten a persimmon. I shook my head no. “You
ain’t tasted nothin’ ‘til you’ve tasted persimmon,” he said.

So he led me down the road, along a rutted track that followed a fence. He toted
his gun with him, and when we flushed some quail, he shot at them. Dry leaves twisted
into tattered paper; barbed wire tinged. I paused, waiting for David to check the bushes,
but he marched on. I hurried to catch up with him.

We came to a green pasture. My grandmother, whose farm I had visited in
Wisconsin many times, had always warned me, “Never enter a pasture with a bull in it.
They’re dangerous; you never know what they’re going to do.” I hesitated as I eyed the
grazing cows.

“C’mon, what are you waiting for?” David asked, as he held the gleaming fence
apart.
I stumbled through, then stopped. The bull looked up at me, grass hanging from his jaw. David frowned at me as I edged carefully around the pasture, always keeping my eye on the bull’s red flanks.

The persimmon tree lived in an adjoining pasture, alone at the bottom of a gully. It leaned toward the forest, its branches curving skyward. The globed fruit hung down, and David, after setting his gun against a fallen branch, plucked a couple persimmons and handed one to me. He ate first, chewing the crisp flesh and oggling his eyes in enjoyment. I followed suit. The taste was green and pleasant, like a Granny Smith apple, only wilder. Then, I felt my mouth drawing inwards. My throat was coated with a sour fuzz that made it impossible to swallow. As I began spitting, David bent over, spewing the green persimmon from where he’d been holding it in his cheeks, and laughed. I steered clear of David for a while after that.

Whenever my cousins and I went scouting with the men, we’d drive down to the end of the gravel road. Young trees stood along the way like sentinels. The forest road was rutted and pocked with an occasional stump. We’d ride in as far as we could, then walk the rest of the way. The men had the place all mapped out in their heads. There was Coronary Ridge--so called because it was so steep it would practically give you a heartattack to climb it. There was Buck Run, where bucks supposedly congregated year after year, though no one ever shot one. There was also the Condominium, a huge treestand that Shorty had supplied with a roof, rails, and very comfortable chair, in great
contrast to the traditional plank between a couple limbs. My Dad joked that Shorty should charge rent for the Condominium's use.

My favorite place was a ridge that overlooked the Pedlar River. Flint gleamed whitely from all over the moss. I always thought I saw arrowheads, but don’t know if any of the rocks I picked up and saved were truly knapped by anything except my imagination. That was where Dad taught me what a buck scrape was and how to look for one, and how to tell the size of a buck by how high and deeply he’d horned a tree. I remember one time that ridge was an avenue of scrapes and rubs. Antler-shredded bark revealed the hearts of trees, white as bone. The dark earth was frozen in contorted mounds where bucks had pawed and urinated. I could almost see the bucks muscling each other back and forth across the mossy earth, their antlers clacking in the stillness.

We were walking along that ridge one time when I got tired. I whined and pleaded, like a typical seven-year old, hoping we could go home and get more Peach Nehi into the bargain. But instead, Dad and Uncle Dicky left me alone. Dad perched me on a tall stump. “Stay right here.” The trees closed a curtain of falling leaves around them. It was soon silent and I hugged myself, thinking of bears and the legendary panther my grandfather once saw. A shuffling of leaves, like a small train chugging uphill, came as if in answer to my fears. I tensed. Just when I was about to let out the biggest holler those woods had ever heard, a doe emerged from the thicket opposite me a little way up the trail.

She stepped lightly, her cloven hooves barely pressing the earth. She was followed by another doe and a yearling fawn. I slipped down, scraping my pants full of
splinters. I think I had some notion of holding my hands out to them, and letting them
lick the salt from my fingertips as though they were calves in a petting barn. Instead they
danced across the trail and leaped down the ridge, their tails a disjointed banner of truce.
I rehearsed words that would describe what I had seen to my dad. And when he returned
fifteen minutes later, I recited my own deer story.

After that, I became an expert (mostly in my own mind) at being able to spot deer
tracks even on the stoniest ground. I thought I saw horned trees in almost any woods I
entered. I liked walking the way my dad taught me, heel first and then rolling up on the
toe, never crunching on gravel or cracking twigs. When dad would take his guns off the
rack to clean them every year, I'd watch fascinated as he buffed and polished the smooth,
heavy wood of the stocks. I loved the sound of his hunting knife sliding against the
sharpening stone. One year, I even took the camouflage paint dad sometimes wore and
painted black, brown, and green leaf shapes all over my face.

Dad did take me squirrel hunting with him once. I shivered with cold in the dirt,
trying to hold myself still until he took his shot. Then I retrieved the limp bodies and
placed them carefully in an old Boy Scout satchel. I watched, fascinated, as greasy red
stains added to the collage already on the bag. I don't think I felt more than a twinge of
remorse. My favorite food then was fried squirrel, biscuits, and gravy, and I was only
thinking of the delicious smell of them frying in bacon grease on the stove.

I asked for a bow for Christmas one year when I was 11 or 12. I'd been reading
about Robin Hood and Maid Marion and Artemis, the Virgin Huntress, who shot silver
arrows from a silver bow. There was a ripple of surprise at this, but nevertheless a red,
plastic bow showed up from K-mart that Christmas under the tree. I practiced with it for
a while feverishly, setting up targets against the hill in my back yard and landing arrows
anywhere but in the center. I developed burns along my forearm where the bowstring
twanged against my arm. I soon got tired of practicing.

I never graduated to guns. I went along to shooting ranges, when the men would
sight in their rifles, but the loud report forced my eyes closed, as though someone had
slammed a hammer against my ears. And I feared the “kick.” In the Thanksgiving deer
stories, sometimes my uncle would talk about using Shorty’s gun and how it kicked so
hard it almost knocked him out of the tree-stand. I gave my father’s guns a wide berth
after that, afraid they’d kick me somehow, like mad cows. It took a few years before I
figured out what they meant. It was part of being a man.

My dad and uncles always left the Saturday before Thanksgiving. My father
made his methodical grocery list and the packing began. Soon the house emptied of men.
I spent my time that week, sharpening the edge of my anticipation against the women’s
talk. I tried to be good. One year, I even succumbed to my mother and let her teach me
to embroider. I worked on a sampler of a golden retriever for about two days before I ran
outside to frantically miss targets with my red bow. It didn’t occur to me to ask if I
could go hunting with the men. It was an unspoken fact. There was no such thing as a
Woman Who Hunts, except in old myths that no one but me read. On Thanksgiving, I
polished the silver, breathing shallowly against the burnt metal smell of the polish. I
made the fruit salad while I watched the Macy’s parade on TV. My grandmother refused to watch, for fear the majorettes would kill themselves with their twirling batons.

Mostly, I waited. Other family members filtered into the house. The dining room table stuttered apart and was fitted with its two extra leaves. My aunt Val coaxed pies out of the oven, exclaiming “Holy Balls!” when the bourbon-scented steam rose from the pecan pie. And if I so much as hinted at a taste test, Mom would turn and say, shaking her finger at me, “Now, you know that pie’s the sole possession of your uncle. He’d be mighty upset if somebody dug into it before he did.” Silver-rimmed china and the newly polished silver rested side by side on the crocheted lace tablecloth, settings placed for the adults. Grandma’s cranberry sauce, made from berries brought from Wisconsin, quivered like a ruby heart. Mom fussed over the stuffing, shaping the seasoned breading into balls the way my father liked and hoping they’d be done before he got home.

They’d come after we’d reheated the gravy at least twice, and wetted the stuffing balls to keep them from drying out. The dog would bark or I’d hear a door slam and go racing in that direction. If they parked in the driveway, we knew they’d had no luck, and I knew better than to say anything about it. If they pulled the truck up to the basement door, I knew I’d have not only good stories, but food, for that winter. After they came up the basement stairs, I’d try to stay as close as I could to keep myself in the circle of that pungent smell. It was the odor of sitting on tree-stands for days, drinking Jack Daniels, and playing poker at night. I imagined I could smell gun-powder and face paint and the good, red odor of blood on their knives.
This particular Thanksgiving my Dad and uncles had developed a new hunting technique. I listened from the living room where I sat eating with my cousins while silence blanketed the table and my Dad began the story:

"There was 6 inches of snow on the ground. Bright, clear, and cold--a perfect day for huntin’. Dicky was down at Maple Creek, which is down in a steep sort of box canyon. We’d seen lots of horned trees there, and so he found a spot in the middle of a good deer trail at the bottom of the ridge. I was on the other side of the road on Deer Ridge. Dicky had Daddy’s old .30-.30 Winchester rifle, and the damn thing’s so old it’s basically worn out. But anyway...

"About nine o’clock, I heard somebody shoot about 7 times in what sounded like 30 seconds. And I knew it wasn’t Dicky ‘cause you can’t fire a .30-.30 so quick in that short amount of time. So, I waited ‘bout thirty minutes, and then went on down to find Dicky.

"Well, when I got there he was mad as hell. I said, ‘Was that you shootin’?’ And he said, ‘Yeah! Damn deer tried to kill me!’ He looked kinda scared actually, and there he’d done cut his finger on the trigger where he’d pulled it so hard.

"‘What happened?’ I said.

"And he said this deer came charging down the ridge, its antlers down like it was gonna gore him. He jumped up and tried shootin’ at it--7 times--and it jumped everywhere, even over him once, he said, all around the damn ridge.

"And I said, ‘Well, you know--the reason he was after you was because you were in his livin’ room.’
"'What?' he said.

"'You were in his livin' room. Where he's got all his scrapes and horned trees and stuff. And there's only one way to catch a big buck like that, when he's charging down on you.'

"'How's that?'

"'You got to crook him'

"'Crook him?'

"'When he goes by you the first time, you gotta stick your finger up his ass, dig in your heels and hold on'"

My aunt Val threw back her golden head and set the windows to rattling with her high-pitched laughter. Everyone bellowed, some of us spewing the food we'd been placidly chewing. Others of us choked until the tears streamed out of our eyes. When I got back to school after the Thanksgiving break, that was the first story I told my deskmate. She laughed so hard we both got in trouble that day.

We went down to the Sneads' once in late May or early June, to have a family picnic on the Pedlar and for the men to do some very preliminary scouting. We drove up to the house, to let the Sneads know we were heading down to the Pedlar. My cousins and I were about to run out into the woods, when Florence stopped us.

"'Y'all want to see Spike?" she asked.

Spike? We looked at each other, then nodded. Florence brought a bottle with her, and we followed her across the field in the direction of the hunting cabin. She
stopped at a small pen that had been built just at the edge of the woods. We hadn’t noticed it when we’d driven by.

As she unlatched the gate, a fawn, all thin legs and white spots, ricocheted out into the field. He stopped his cavorting when he saw the bottle, and mouthed eagerly at the rubber nipple. My cousins held the bottle until he made their arms sore, then handed it over to me. It was exactly like the times I’d fed the calves in the barn at Grandma’s, my arms jerked up and down by the force at the other end of the bottle. That urgent need for life sucked and tugged against my flimsy strength.

We later learned that David, hunting out of season, had shot Spike’s mother. When they’d discovered that the doe had been nursing, Shorty tracked down the little orphan, and carried home the gangling, big-eyed fawn. Spike stayed with them until the buttons of his antlers flowered from his skull and the fence became too short to contain him. But every now and then, he came back, strutting across the Sneads’ field with a doe at his side, and Florence would put out a little feed for him. I couldn’t have hunted in those woods, knowing he was around.

I was not thinking of this when, years later, I walked into my father-in-law’s woodshed to view the doe my husband had shot that day. But I felt my knees quivering the way they used to when I was a little girl. The carcass hung from its ankles, its head already wrapped in the hide and buried beneath sleeping trees. Its ribs opened the cave of its body; the red flesh was sheened with fat in the 50-watt light. I did not touch it, listening for the blood dripping its music into the dirt. I was reminded of all the old stories, and how they seemed to rest on the walls of my mind the way Dad used to hang
up the racks he sawed off the bucks, the date carefully penned in black on the remaining bit of skull.

There was a sadness back there in the gloom. My Dad and uncles stopped hunting in Amherst many years ago. The Sneads paved the road back into the woods and built trailers with noisy generators right on the banks of the Pedlar. Scared away all the deer, my Dad said. My dad and uncles tried hunting in National Forests, camping out in leaky trailers and coming home after a couple days. They even once sheltered an old blue-tick hound under their trailer, feeding him cans of beanie-weenies because they had nothing else. They were startled awake one night when he bumped his head against the bottom of the trailer and howled. But it still wasn’t the same. These days, my Dad has stopped hunting all together.

That loss is sometimes bitter as a green persimmon. My cousins and I were all girls. We will never inherit our father’s guns or partake of the ritual of the hunt. That tradition silently died with our births. But there is still that one tree reaching out to its fellows in the forest. The green-gold Pedlar winds away between flint-strewn ridges. Bucks hone their antlers against the flaming trees of autumn. In memory, these things are resurrected. In story, they ripen, softening into ambrosia. So I will keep holding on, coaxed and tugged by the words that are waiting.
ELEGY FOR PETER’S CREEK

Peter Kinder and his wife sit around the table with their children, along with Mrs. Cassell, her mother, and the Cassell children. Their faces flush with laughter and the aura of homemade wine. It has been raining for days. They have had to care for the cows and horses in it, the hot mud sucking at their boots and splattering the miserable animals’ hides. The Cassells have been stranded here, unable to release their trading cart from its imprisonment in the muck. But now at last they can all sit, clean and dry, listening to the rain rattle the roof timbers outside.

It is late, and time for bed. Mrs. Kinder, whose name is as lost as the name of Lot’s wife, perhaps goes to blow out the lantern outside, or to gaze out from the porch onto the dismal night. When she opens the door, water swirls around her ankles in cold snakes. The buildings on the hill below are dancing crazily in the rain. A distant lowing carries through the pounding hiss. The black water tests her toes.

The Kinders and their guests run to the attic, following the instinct for higher ground. They place boards on the collar beam and sit on them, watching as their house is subsumed, as the burbling water rushes upward, past their feet, up to their armpits in the dark. Peter declares that the day of Judgment has come at last. He asks to kiss his wife, maybe pats the screaming baby’s head that she holds against her shoulder. As he reaches for her, the flood drags them under. Their cold lips touch, white pages pressed together in the darkness. The baby slips away like a closed lotus pod.

When the waters recede, Mrs. Kinder’s body is found first. She hangs by an arm from the branches of a sycamore. The water has scourged her clothes from her, and her
long hair tangles in the branches of the tree like Spanish moss in trees farther South. Peter's body is found next, armless and headless in the stinking sand. The baby's body is never found.

The others survive, floating on the house roof top in the dark. Dawn finds them half a mile downstream. They tie a rope to a nearby tree and hold on. Of the Kinders, a Moravian missionary, Samuel Eckerlin, would say, “Thus the children of man pass away in their security. He who fears the Lord is watchful. We live in a wicked and evil world the fruits and berries of which are speedily ripening.” The four remaining orphans are doled out to nearby homes. Their histories are lost in the flood of time.

As a child, I felt enfolded by the Blue Ridge Mountains that ringed my city. I liked to stand on the hill in our backyard and gaze out at Fort Lewis Mountain’s green ridges. Its peak folded in on itself like dough punched down by an invisible fist. I knew all the mountains by name then—saddlebacked Tinker Mountain peak, the leaning peak of Twelve O’Clock Knob, Roanoke Mountain, Potts Mountain, Mill Mountain with the blazing neon star on its brow. These mountains surrounded me with an embrace that smothered even as it comforted. I loved them, but my father and I loved their creeks more.

I can’t remember when creek-wading became our past-time. We fished a lot when I was a little girl, and perhaps fishing evolved into wading. Jennings Creek in Arcadia was our favorite. There was an old swimming hole there, where the stream had carved a deep, green bowl from the rock. We hung over the pool with our arms extended
in the sun, mimicking the angel-fins of trout below. Once, my dad lost his keys while we were swimming there. They glimmered on a rock ledge just above the void, but he couldn’t dive down against the current. His body floated up like a balloon. In the end, he paid a kid twenty dollars to retrieve them. After that, we’d usually wade upstream, letting the water slide past our calves. I became adept at crawling over mossy rocks without losing my balance. The riffles flowed past my ankles seamlessly as though I wasn’t there. Dad would show me things—water striders skating over the still backwaters, silver minnows refracting light over yellow and blue stones. He pointed out the occasional trout or sucker torpedoing away from the clouds of silt we kicked into motion.

Once a copperhead stared up at me from where it coiled on a cracked boulder. The water was silent against my thighs as I skirted the rock, keeping my eyes on the pitted nose, the slitted eyes, the thick, marbled body. I remembered how I had once stood, on the rocks above the Roanoke River, staring across the water like a conqueror. I looked down. A fat body uncurled itself from between the rocks. Its width was greater than that of my arm. I had heard that copperheads will chase you, and in recent years, I’ve read of how they can leap up to two feet when they’re on the strike. I had jumped down and hurtled through the reeds, shouting at the top of my voice. But, this time, we merely stared at one another. I flowed by, moving with the stream, and the copperhead continued its unlidded rest.

The first time I went to Peter’s Creek was with my father, on a day when we couldn’t get out to Arcadia to wade. In its upper reaches, Peter’s Creek is a smear of oil-
tinged water. Just before it entered our neighborhood, it curved around an old plantation	house, the Hubbard House, fingering through our subdivision on its way to the Roanoke
River. When it reached our neighborhood, willows hung their hair in its shallows and
sycamores dug dappled feet into its banks. My father led me into this secluded gully,
towards a ridge where I could look down and see the creek winding through the rocks
below. We stopped next to a tree, a tall, young sugar maple. “Look here,” he said. I
looked at the tree, at its bark scarred with letters, some scratched lightly on the surface,
some so deep they were black. I could see where recent names had been carved; they ran
red with sap until the juice overflowed and stained the bark. “How did these get here?” I
asked. I put my hand against the sticky trunk.

“It’s a sweetheart tree,” Dad said. He took out his pocket knife and unfolded a
blade. “People carve their initials in it, and then they stay there forever.”

I ran my fingers over a wobbly heart. Two sets of initials, joined by a plus sign,
rested in the center. “Why would you want to do that?” I asked.

I don’t remember his reply, but his knife scored the bark. He cut my initials in a
steady hand. I turned away, watching the creek run silver as he carved.

“Come here,” he said. He brushed at the trunk with his thick hands. The wood
shavings curled on the maple’s roots. The letters hung just above my eye level. T L M.
I reached up to touch them, torn between guilt and pride. The letters glistened with sap
which brimmed and wept down the trunk.

The rest of that first excursion, we picked our way over the lichen-covered rocks.
A hemlock grew out from the bank like a comfortable seat and rock spread like a porch
beneath it. We continued to explore, wading carefully through trash and deadfall. Old tires, radiators, a rusted broken shopping cart, broken bottles and swathes of black plastic fencing were tangled in a rotting pile of branches and leaves. The back of my throat softened at the stench of creek mud and trash. I blushed when I tripped over a tree root and saw a sanitary napkin peeping up at me from the debris.

My dad learned to swim in Buck Creek when he was ten. He was fishing with my grandfather and his friends. Their boat hovered over a deep, still hole where bass and perch glided through the green silence. My grandfather said, You want to learn to swim, boy? I suppose my father nodded. Then, my grandfather hoisted him under the arms, lofting him like a sack of flour out into the creek. My father yelled and spluttered. But I learned how to swim, he said. My father and his brothers roamed all over the Roanoke River and its tributaries. Their house was not far from the Roanoke River dam, and they could catch snapping turtles in the deep reservoir behind the dam that some said could swallow a person whole. They would run away for days sometimes, hiding out at the cave across from Buzzard Rock. Torch-smoke stained the cave walls as they peered at symbols left by long-vanished people. I wonder what my father dreamed when he slept by the river at night.

Peter’s Creek was a dot compared to those places, a pocket of forest walled in by houses and roads. I went there because it was all I had, the only wild place I could return to as often as I wished. I sat on the hemlock’s trunk, eating Oreos and reading The Chronicles of Narnia until late afternoon called me home. I looked up at the sycamores
across the creek, lifting their white arms as they swayed along the water’s edge. A face, like that of a lion or a woman, peered back at me from a knotty bole. From then on, I called that sycamore the Aslan Tree. I watched it through many seasons—through winter when its mottled bark gleamed like bone in weak sunlight, through spring and summer when its leaves scooped wind like sails, through autumn when those same leaves crinkled and fell into Peter’s Creek like shreds of burned paper. I seldom dared to touch its hallowed bark.

The land sent me dreams. Light scintillated off a million mayfly wings as a black bear wallowed through a cattail marsh. A heron rose like a blue phoenix to the tallest branch of the Aslan Tree, while I danced with white-robed women on the creek bank below. Whenever I passed by the Hubbard House, I imagined its porches bustling with Southern Belles, fanning themselves with the elegance of willows swaying in the heat. I saw old candle-glow over its porches at night. I thought fondly of the farmer who once owned all this land, cattle erupting from the fields like mushrooms. I felt sorry that he’d had to sell these hills and the creek, leaving them to be carved into little squares of houses and driveways. I imagined Rebel soldiers sniping across the field. I wondered if the Shawnee had ever hunted along Peter’s Creek, terrorizing the peaceful Totera who once inhabited the banks of the Roanoke River further down.

In July, Dad decided to take me and a few friends inner-tubing down the Roanoke. We all rode in the back of his pick-up, clasping our inner-tubes as if they were unwieldy balloons. We put into the river far upstream of the sewage treatment and
viscose rayon plants. The sky was like beaten metal over the mountains. Even the leaves of the trees seemed edged in brown. The river mud rose in a cracked crust around tree roots. Sometimes we had to scoot on our bottoms through the thin water, sliding in slimy algae. There was only one place where we came to deep water, where the curling leaves formed a brown scum on the water. A copperhead tracked a sinusoidal wave through the stillness.

We came to a place where the river divided around an island of willows. My father cautioned against the quickening current, advising us to stay in the left-hand part of the stream. We took it the first time, sluicing down past the island. My friend Gerri caught up in the current and I watched her struggling to hold onto a sycamore as we shot past. The river had us solidly in its grip, our nostrils full of its foam and stink. It deposited us into a cove flanked on one side by cliffs. It was the first real rapids we'd been through all day. We raced back up through the willows, barely telling my father what we were about in our hurry to get there. We grinned through our dripping hair and flopped our 'tubes back into the water. My skin was tight and red with sunburn.

I watched my friends rocket past, carried down toward the swimming hole, while the river floated me closer to the bank. A long elbow of white wood stretched out in front of me. My inner-tube smacked against it. I heard the flat spank of water against rubber as the current pulled me under.

I slid down into soundless rushing. My eyes fluttered. Snapshot images of grasping roots, black water. I kicked up glittering clouds of silt that forced my eyes closed. My lungs longed for air, and I kept turning, seeking a way back to the blazing
atmosphere my body craved. But I was like a glass fish trapped in the inertia of a paperweight. The roots snagged my T-shirt, suspending me in a tunnel of water. I felt tired and wanted to go to sleep, waking up when I hit bottom. So I gave up air and motion. I turned with the current, hanging in the void.

I felt a hand push my whole body down in the middle of my back. As I rose with the current, golden wings of silt brushed my eyelids. I saw my father on the riverbank, shouting then. He had seen the whole thing, and was moving towards the sycamores, wondering if he could save me. I slogged through the water, dragging along my inner-tube, streaming water and sand. I had just experienced my first full immersion baptismal, but for my father, the magic of the river died that day.

In 1985, the Roanoke Valley experienced the worst flood it had seen in one hundred years. It rained two inches in an hour. There are still pictures of it downtown—merchants swimming just below the ceilings of their stores, houses and cars tumbling like toys in the brown surge. My mother, fearing that we might not be able to cross Peter’s Creek to get home, came and picked me up early from school. As we approached the bridge, I wondered if my mother would try to drive through the flood the way she had once when I was little. I dimly remembered my fascination with an intricately frosted cookie, my father’s anger when he came to pick us up in the rain because Mom had flooded the car.

The water swelled in a greasy funnel over the bridge, past the Hubbard House. A white Datsun pickup was stranded, its headlights drowned by the high water. Mom
pulled the car over. We watched as two men attempted to go to the truck. They were swept away before they could reach the doors. A rescue worker in yellow raingear tied a line to his waist and bounded down through the water. He reached one of the men, who had managed to grab hold of a sycamore's branches that bobbed on the rushing water. I don't know what happened to the other man.

We waited in the rain a long time, staring across the brown divide. A kind woman took us to her house and gave us sandwiches, but when the rain slackened, we went back down to the creek and stared towards home. The creek's pace seemed to have slowed, the greasy wave of water over the bridge had receded to an irregular hump. We decided to attempt a crossing, making a chain with others who lived on our side of the stream.

I quelled the immediate urge to urinate as the cold water slipped over my calves. I sank in up to my thighs until my feet found concrete. My mother held tightly to me, mooing in her fear. I expected smooth pavement, but was surprised when an uneven edge beneath my feet almost caused me to lose my balance. The force of the water had pulled up sections of the road and sent them careening down toward the Roanoke River. A pocked and unreliable surface hid beneath the glistening brown roil. I tried to smother my sudden fear, and pretended my feet slid around rocks. I glanced for a moment down the creek bottom at the sycamores and willows weaving in the water, and made myself believe the Aslan Tree was guiding me home, a white candle in a brown fog.
The first hint of loss came when I was fourteen. After crossing the creek, I discovered a new trail, like those cut for ATV's or motorbikes. It unwound back to the Salem Turnpike, across which the Hubbard House huddled on its hill. The last tenants had left it long ago. Its porches sagged. Its upper right window was black like a bruised eye where teenage kids had set fire to the upstairs rooms. At twilight, it gathered in on itself, while the wild shrubs around it closed their coral blossoms in the gloom. Its open doorway whispered, *Beware*.

After the trail was cut, the trees further upstream disappeared all in one day. My dad explained that the demolition was in preparation for a road that would connect Peters Creek Road on the other side of the hills all the way to Lee Highway, a road which followed the Roanoke River. He seemed pleased. "We've been needing a road like that for years," he said.

My part of the patchwork forest was next. In the months that followed, the land across the creek was cleared, all except for a few trees at the water's edge. The banks were shifted and leveled. Bulldozers hulked amidst the downed trees.

Now a road stretches across the flattened hills. Gray soundproofing walls hide the scarred earth, the riprap and black plastic fencing, the sprayed-on seed mats that will wash away with the first heavy rain.

The developers began to take Hubbard House down, too, but they made a rather messy discovery. As they pried down the drywall, they discovered hewn timbers and hand-forged nails. A flyer caught in the plaster read "Hubbard's Tavern—1865." They had just uncovered the oldest building in the entire valley. For a while, historical
societies clamored for preservation, but no one could produce the funds. The house
stood like a decaying carcass--its cranium open to the sky, its log walls blackened ribs.
Soon, even that was gone. The timbers were numbered and put in storage in the hopes
that someone might resurrect it someday. Scant hope for the house, but none for the land
that gave it birth.

The geography of my childhood is gone, as are the geographies of my father and my
grandfather before him. The changes on Peter's Creek prophesied more than just the loss
of my secret world. Even now the Roanoke River and many others like it undergoes
channelization and alteration, punished for floods and damages mostly caused by human
ignorance. But, although my memory is scarred by what is irremediable, the dream of
the land remains. From the leaves of sycamores, the feathers of herons, the litter and
debris, I wove a portal, a gate that connected me with things I am only beginning to
understand. Though the Kinders and their descendants are dust, though only the
chimneys of Hubbard House remain standing, though the Totera and the Shawnee have
long since vanished, the land remembers and turns, seeking us in the void.
THE FLOWERS OF THE UNDERWORLD

I

"From the Great Above, Inanna turned her ear to the Great Below..."
-from "The Descent of Inanna", translated in Inanna, Queen of Heaven
and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer

I am told that my first attempts at speech were almost unintelligible. I remember standing on a chair looking out over the frozen hill of our backyard through the dining room window. Trying to put words into the air was like trying to thread a needle. “F-ffff-fruitt l-llll-loooops,” I said. My mother instructed me from the sink. “Fruit Loops. Fruit Loops,” making me say it over and over until I got it right. I wonder if that was before or after my tongue was clipped. I have no memory of that operation at all. My mother always declares proudly how my facility with language improved miraculously after that. After that delicate tip was snipped, and the little groove appeared. Like a raven whose owner slits its tongue so it, too, can speak.

Behind my grandparents’ house in southeastern Roanoke, my parents had a large garden every summer. We usually went over to work in it two or three times a week, more when the plants ballooned into fullness under the hothouse skies of high summer. My parents may even have harbored some notion of going back to the land then. My mother in those days canned everything they produced. I sweated through it with her, peeling hot tomatoes until the kitchen ran red with their blood, rinsing and cutting the tops off beets until I was stained with their juice.

I loved going to my grandparents’ place, but not because of the garden. I loved going there because of the Fisher boys—Derek, Troy, and Jeremy. They lived four houses down from my grandparents. At seven, I had a huge crush on the middle brother, Troy,
who was twelve. I once even chased him around with a broom, demanding that he marry me. I found out later that our mothers used to plot out my wedding to Jeremy, the younger brother. On nights when Marion would baby-sit me, I remember Jeremy holding me while we watched TV in the boys’ room, like the older brother I never had.

We staged elaborate feats of arms. They built an entire village of scrap wood down in the woods and we coursed through the shacks, sharpshooting at each other with our Daisy air-guns. If it snowed in winter, we’d build huge palisades, lobbing ice balls and pellets at each other until we were too frozen to stay outside any longer. I was valuable, the certified damsel in distress. Once, they tied me by my wrists to the low branch of an apple tree and dueled with tomato stakes for my honor until I spoiled the game by crying about my chafed wrists and bloodless fingers.

My hopes died of marrying Troy, though, when we played Cowboys and Indians one day. I was the “squaw”, and I had to go out of the woodshed we were using as a lodge to get food for my “family”. I sneaked down the hillside into a gulch, hoping the cowboys wouldn’t find me. Instead, I found Troy at the bottom of the draw, sketching hearts in the red clay with a stick. He drew someone’s name inside the heart. Diana, it said. “That’s the girl I like,” he said, piercing my silly heart as though he’d jabbed me with the stick. And that’s the girl he married years later at the little Nazarene church at the end of the road.

Right next door to the Fishers lived their aunt Harriet, uncle Jake, and first cousins, Rachel and Will. I was amazed when I realized that here were two brothers who
had married two sisters living side by side. It was even neater than the fact that my
mother and her twin had both married men named Dennis. The Fishers did everything
together—hunting, camping, church, family vacations. Since my Dad grew up with them,
he knew they were good, wholesome people. A couple times we went with them on their
family trips. We always drew names and exchanged gifts with them at Christmas time.
Marion or Harriet always took care of me when my parents went out on the weekends.

*Early summer 1979. The voices reach a crescendo. I run to the only shelter I can think
of in a short amount of time. Not the basement. I crawl between the heavy wooden legs
of the table, wishing the tablecloth went all the way to the floor like in fancy restaurants.
I huddle there, my hands over my ears, but the angry words penetrate my fingers and
lodge in my mind.*

*My nostrils prickle with the scent of wallpaper glue. Dad is in the bathroom,
trying to hang the wallpaper by himself. Mom nagged him to do it, and now they are
screaming at each other. I don’t understand what love and neglect have to do with the
act of wallpapering. There is a crack of thunder in the bathroom. I cry silently, certain
that Dad has killed Mom.*

*When things finally quiet, I crawl out from my hiding place. As I pass the
bathroom, I see the little wooden stool my aunt gave me, the one with the nursery rhyme
carved into it about the cow jumping over the moon, the dish running away with the
spoon. The cow is split squarely down the middle; there’s a crater in the moon where a
meteor struck, the hammer in Dad’s fist. I don’t say anything, but my father mumbles,
“I’ll fix it,” before turning back to the wall. My silence is golden.*

II.

Rachel Fisher was tall and slender, seventeen and fully budded. She boasted that
she was descended from Indian princesses, thus her clear, olive skin and glossy black
hair. I often wished, even as early as seven, for her long-limbed grace. She could scale a
tree or leap up to the support pole of the swingset quick as a cat. While Will and I
swung down below, she’d walk the steel tightrope of the support pole, looking down at us
like an arrogant, dark angel. The time she drew my name for Christmas and gave me a
bottle of Love's BabySoft, I hoped it might be the magic potion to make me beautiful like her.

She stopped by with her parents one afternoon as we were finishing work in the garden. That year we had a berry patch, and the strawberries hid under trefoil leaves like soft hearts. There was one particular strawberry I’d had my eye on for some time, trying to say nothing in hopes that Dad would let me have it. He proudly displayed his garden—the curling squashvines, the bushy overgrown asparagus, and tomato plants firmly bound to their stakes. When he came to the berry patch, all eyes seemed to fall on that one strawberry. He reached down under its leaves and plucked it. "Here," he said, dropping it into Rachel’s palm, “you’ve never tasted anything so good.”

She oohed and aahed all the way back to the porch, her dark eyes swallowing me. It was twilight now, and the mosquitoes had come out in fierce platoons. I went inside and stole caramels from grandma’s candy jar.

Late summer 1979. I have come here hoping to play. Everyone else is gone. Come here. I have something to show you. The room is all lavender—a safe color, like pink or powder blue. I wish I could have a four-poster canopy like that. It smells like Pine-sol in here. Probably from the woman who cleans and cleans, then sits in her room and cries.

I enter the closet. I am not sure how to think of the one I follow—is she a girl or a woman?

Rachel shuts the door behind me. We are in a walk-in closet. Her father has just finished building it, she says. What do you want to show me, I ask. Rachel pushes me into the racks of clothes, into the disembodied skirts and blouses. She pulls my shorts around my ankles. She puts her tongue between my legs. She yanks me out of the clothes. Her eyes are electrified in the bare white light. Now do it to me, she says. She thrusts me down on the floor while she pulls off her own clothes.

When Rachel lets me go, she says, And if you tell anyone, I'll take my daddy’s gun and I’ll shoot you. Dead.
One night, after she had fruitlessly forced me to try to bring her to a conclusion I could not understand, I woke unable to breathe. I struggled against the paroxysms in my lungs. I tried not to wake her, but my wheezing would have woken anyone in the same room, much less the same bed.

"Stop it!" she hissed. "Stop it!" she kept saying, rising over me. Her shadow, a spread cobra hood, pressed against the canopy.

Finally she hauled me to her parents' room. After she woke her mother, they took me into the bathroom. I choked and fought for a little free air. Harriet turned on the shower, and soon, clouds of steam floated into my lungs and eased the constriction. I breathed, but Rachel was glaring at me. My teeth were chattering as she led me back to bed.

I never cried or begged my parents not to take me there. There was no language for me to even express what was happening. Of course, we had code words for body parts—muffin equaled vagina in our family lingo—but it was taboo to even say those unless one was in physical pain. When my mother suspected me of masturbating, she asked me if I had been touching my muffin. "No," I said, looking at her sharp eyes behind their shutters of heavy make-up. Her look alone was enough to tell me that touching oneself "there" was wrong, something I had suspected but never known for sure. It was the first lie I remember telling.

Rachel's power lay mostly in humiliation. Most everything she did was calculated to subdue me by some secret knowledge. On a family vacation to Shenandoah Acres, for instance, she forbade me to wear underwear, knowing that if my mother found
out, I would be punished. (Not wearing underwear was a misdemeanor in comparison to masturbation, but still in the same class of crimes). She took me over all the bumpiest bike trails, while I cringed and flinched as my crotch was continually slammed against the hard seat. At the resort’s spring-fed lake, we found hundreds of dead frogs eyeless and empty-skinned in the amber shallows. I could not explain it to myself, but it felt as though the outer world reflected my condition.

And I discovered soon enough that I was not the only recipient of her attentions. She once stuffed me and her little brother, Will, in a barrel, and sat on the lid, saying she wouldn’t let us out until we’d “looked at and touched” each other there. Meanwhile, she boasted how she’d seen “everybody’s” in the neighborhood. “Will’s, all my cousin’s—everybody’s.” Even she could not say the words. Will and I quickly realized that she had no way of knowing whether we did what she said or not. Through the knothole in the barrel, I could just discern his features—the snowy blonde hair, the sad blue eyes, even at five. We waited a few minutes, scuffling in the closeness of the barrel, then announced that we’d done what she asked. She let us out, smirking, and I wondered if this was why everyone tip-toed around her, if this was why even the Fisher boys, those great knights and crusaders, seemed afraid of her. Why her mother went off to weep silently for hours in her room.

It ended as abruptly at nine as it had begun at seven. She was leaning back against my mother’s brown washing machine in the basement, her hips poking sharply through her jeans. I was cooling my tongue from the nine atomic fireballs I’d just consumed. Thinking to give her a spontaneous kiss, thinking again that perhaps finally I
could please her, I tilted forward. She turned her cheek away, looking out of shuttered eyes at me. She continued talking as though nothing had happened. I picked up the silent cue and bent back to the laundry, feeling my tongue slowly melt and dissolve away, as though it had been scorched by more than cinnamon candy.

Spring 1980. The sunlight tricks out the old workbench as though illuminating a secret. Paint stains the work surface in splotches of green, white, and silver. I remember painting rocks here with model airplane paint. I see my own graffiti on the wall near the window, unintelligible letters written when I was five and just learning to write. I climb aboard the bench. It pops and shifts under my weight as it always does. And as always, I look around, wondering if something or someone will appear out of the silence and catch me.

I open the magazine, a dark energy jumping inside my chest. I have traced these magazines to their source, as though I could smell their obscenity even hidden as they are beneath innocent auto manuals and old license plates. Flesh writhes when I flip open the glossy pages. Women sprawl, their legs apart, their tongues lolling like thirsty dogs. There are photos of women alone, women with men, and...women together. I look at these closely, looks for some sign of what these are called. Enjoy these luscious lesbians as they fuck and suck through the following pages, I read.

I wonder if that is how I should think of myself. Lesbian. The word feels thick and ugly in her mind, like something I shouldn’t say around Mom. I wonder. I stuff the magazine back under the auto manuals with its counterparts.

At this same time, my mother baby-sat some kids, a common practice in the ‘70’s for housewives trying to earn a little extra cash. Mark and Michelle were a couple years older than me, and they fit in well with the neighborhood kids, who were also older. I was particularly interested in the treehouse that the kids across the street owned, and was easily lured when they promised that I could finally come inside with them. They all climbed the ladder first. I followed, amazed at how high I was climbing, how far away the grass seemed as I neared the top. Their faces grinned at me from the open trapdoor, pale hollows with bright eyes. When I set my fingers on the edge to pull myself inside,
they slammed the door down. I heard laughter inside as I backed down, barely able to curl my smarting fingers around the rungs.

Perhaps that was why my Dad gave me my own version of a treehouse, a treehouse that was on the ground. It was an old shipping crate he’d gotten from work that had been used for telephone switchboards and other such equipment. We removed the lid and set the crate on its side, then put a tarp over the back. I could then crawl in underneath, to my own little domain of spiders and pillbugs on the backyard hill. I pulled in an old silky comforter that my parents no longer used, and curled up in it when I brought books with me to read.

Experience should probably have taught me not to invite the neighborhood kids into my little clubhouse. But, above all, my mother had taught me to be generous. In order for them to share, I’d have to share, too. Most of all, I hoped Terry, the girl down the street, would let me sit in her room and listen to her yellow canary sing. I don’t remember any girls being in the clubhouse with me that day, though. Mark held me down while Jason, Terry’s brother, pulled down my shorts and stuck his fingers as far up my anus as he could reach. I remember thinking, That’s not what you’re looking for, with a clarity that kept me still. I did not struggle, sure that my resistance would only be met with a fiercer need for conquest. I did not go into the clubhouse again, though. And years later, when I saw a mallard drake hold down a squawking hen while another drake mounted her, I felt nauseated but relieved that I was not the only one.

III.

October 1981. I sneak into my mother’s room and tug the heavy bottom drawer open. I pull the cherry chiffon lingerie out, smoothing its fabric against my body, caressing the droopy satin bow on the bodice. The first time Mom caught me with this, she seemed
angry, then embarrassed. Did you forget to ask me something, Mom said. And I stood there, with the gown wadded up in her small hand. Mom was stirring something at the stove, and she stopped, saying, It’s OK, I guess. I can’t wear it anymore anyway. Then she picked up the spoon, her thickening waist obscuring the chrome oven handle, and the spoon plinked against the pot’s metal sides as she stirred again.

This time I make sure that she doesn’t notice me taking the gown. I tiptoe downstairs. I take off my clothes, and the perpetual chill of the basement pricks my skin. The gown falls over me in shivering cherry folds. It whispers against my calves as I try an experimental turn.

I fish the record out of Dad’s massive collection. Selections from Tchaikovsky’s Nutcracker Suite. I think for a moment of Clara and the Nutcracker Prince. I watch that every Christmas. There was one Christmas Eve where my parents played cards with her aunt and uncle while I watched “The Nutcracker” downstairs, feverishly trying to dance myself into the prince’s palace. I want to try to do it again.

I set the needle carefully into the groove, as Dad told me to do so as not to scratch the record. Sound cuts into the speakers with a pop and hiss; I line up my feet on the floor tiles carefully, and take a deep breath before the music starts.

I took ballet once, probably for about a month, hoping that I could be another Gelsey Kirkland. I remember the little flesh-colored shoes, and how I stroked their beautiful skins onto my feet. But I was afraid of the ballet mistress, the woman whose hair was a shock of white that assailed the air, whose eyelids and lips were bruised with make-up, who had the shriveled neck of a chicken. The ballet mistress had a dark sister who could not speak, who slumped over the piano keys and groaned instead of spoke, as though she had no tongue. This was the result of a stroke, something I didn’t understand. When it was the my turn to go up to the barre, the ballet mistress took my left leg in her bony hand and stretched it back and up, over my head. It felt as though my leg was being torn out of its socket. I heard the cracking as my hands tightened on the barre in shock. That was the last time I attended ballet class.

But I have read how a person might somehow step into another place and time, if only for a moment. I have read how Lucy stepped through the wardrobe and found Narnia, how Alice fell down the hole and found Wonderland. I believe that music is another door, if only my body could be the key. The Waltz of the Flowers begins. She sails across the dull rainbow of tiles—rust, powder-blue, checkered white, pale yellow.

The darkness in the corner seems to watch me. It dissolves. The sunken plaid couch, piled full of staring dolls, disappears. I whirl faster. A forest fills the distance. A presence seeks me. My arms become questions in the dance. I whisper, Come. He steps from the wall, his face hidden in shadows. His touch against her small waist is a breeze and shiver. If only he could lead her through the wall, beyond the forest, where his palace raises tall spires against the gloom. But the music fades again before she can accomplish this, and she wonders why her power is not enough. She is still and hot. The chiffon gown clings to her sweating body.
There are pictures of me when I was five that demonstrate to me how much my father must have wanted a boy. In one I am not wearing a shirt, but I am wearing big, heavy boots and yellow shorts. I am helping my father wash his car and he is smiling around his red sideburns. At a family reunion when I was seven, I remember how much it had rained that July. I was trying to get on the merry-go-round with the big kids. They shouted at me from the whirling center to just run, grab on, and pull myself up. I tried. I fell backwards into the thick moat of mud that surrounded the merry-go-round. My dad took me up to Mowles Spring and made me take off my shirt so he could wash the mud out in the freezing water. I stood there, naked to the waist. A boy came by and peered at my chest, my short hair. “Are you a boy or a girl?” he asked. “Girl,” I said through chattering teeth, suddenly feeling my nakedness. Dad was concentrating on the mud-soaked shirt, but he had a look on his face, like he’d just realized my gender for the first time.

Womanhood came like a stampede. Breasts at 10, my period at 11. My only preparation came from sex-ed films from the ‘60’s, in which cartoon boys and girls whispered secretly to each other about their body parts. I watched a cartoon penis rise from between a cartoon boy’s legs, and felt no connection between that and the world I knew. I woke up one Saturday spotting blood, and my mother sighed. “You’re a young lady now,” she said before she rushed to the grocery store to get some maxipads. It seemed as evil and unspeakable a thing as masturbation. I felt ugly and powerless.

Of sex, my mother once said to me, “Sex is a beautiful thing when you are married.” There was no other discussion of what it was, what it felt like, what
happened when you did it. For the longest time, I thought women carried babies in their stomachs and then vomited them up when the baby was supposed to be born. Even when I got my period, I still wasn’t entirely convinced that I wasn’t bleeding from the same place I urinated. It took a long time to realize I had two holes, like a primitive flute or a bead on a necklace. And even then I was still confused--the sex-ed films and *Playboys* seemed incongruous, as unbreachable as my mother’s silence on the subject.

It was easy to get confused. First Rachel and then the afternoon with Mark and Jason made me wonder what was wanted, how I should relate to the sexes. I had no gauge. I remember still with great embarrassment, how unthinkingly I came to my father one day when he was reading the paper. I was wearing my first bra, my training bra, and thought of it in the same fashion as I thought of training wheels on a bike. “Do you want to see my new bra?” I said, half-lifting my shirt in my eagerness. He lowered the paper and stared at me. There was something between disgust and amusement in his eyes. “No thanks,” he said, and lifted the paper back over his face. I ran to my room, blushing, realizing somehow that I’d made a dreadful error in judgment. But not knowing exactly what or why.

*Any season, 1982. At night, the sounds are unbearable. From the other side of the wall, I hear the rhythmic groaning. I grit my teeth. I think of going down the hall to get a glass of water, but know I will be yelled at to go back to bed.*

*The TV is right on the other side of the wall, and I know what flashes across its curved screen--moving pictures like the kind in the work bench magazines. I smell cigarette smoke curling out of the living room where Dad sits.*

*The moans rise and fall. I cry, wanting sleep, powerless to stop the canned sounds of porn stars fucking. I know he doesn’t think I hear. I know he waits until he’s sure I’m asleep to turn on the Playboy channel. But what he doesn’t know is that even if I’m in a deep sleep, those sounds will wake me up.*

*I do not understand women or men. When my aunt and uncle visit from Atlanta, my aunt sits adoringly on my uncle’s lap. They fondle one another, take showers together. It is not something my parents do. My uncle watches the Playboy channel with*
my father. They drink brandy together and smoke. I think women have to be purer somehow. But what about Rachel or the women in the magazines? My aunt speaks of my uncle's proclivities with a forgiving fondness and I suppose that it's just the way men are.

But I still cry when the moaning and groaning starts and continues for hours on the other side of the wall. And I do not believe that the prince in the wood has anything to do with these sorts of things.

As I grew older, my parents' connection with the Fishers dissolved. We still visited my grandparents, of course, but the garden shrank until it was almost nonexistent. My parents took me with them on Fridays to their midnight bowling league instead. I sat in the TV lounge watching Shogun and scalding my tongue with bowling alley fries. Or, I'd con five bucks out of my dad and go alone to the Magic Ballroom, a video arcade where I became the queen of Ms. Pac-man. Where Amazons bursting from their leather armor posed on the pinball backboard, frowning when I lost my ball. Soon enough, even the nights at the bowling alley ceased. My parents fell into the monotonous hum of middle age, even as I roared mutely into adolescence.

I read incessantly. I read all of The Chronicles of Narnia by third grade, and read Madeline L'Engle's A Wrinkle in Time in fourth grade until the cover finally fell off from so much use. I was working on The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings when I entered fifth grade. I went to the mythology shelf of my elementary school library every time my class visited. There was a book about the myths of Aphrodite and Demeter that I dearly loved. On one side of the cover, a fair woman in a long toga held up one of the golden apples of the Hesperides. On the other, a hooded woman with chestnut hair held up a sheaf of wheat. Over and over, I read of Persephone, of Atalanta, of Eros and Psyche, seeking clues to mysteries I could not understand. I had discovered a special magic
about books—that when I was in a book, really in it, the world around me dissolved and
ceased to exist. It didn’t matter how many times I read the same book, because for its
duration I could rest in the moment of the words, and know myself elsewhere. Even the
music to which I still sometimes danced could not do this so completely. Wherever I
went, I carried a book in my hand. I could hide in silence, unafraid.

IV

Almost all of my friends in middle school had experienced some form of sexual
abuse. Sara hinted at molestation from her brother Gary. Rose was molested for 5 years
by an uncle. It had happened to Carrie but she would never reveal who or how. Ann was
raped and repeatedly molested by an older brother. Not a one of us was pure or innocent.
Not a one of us had escaped with our original selves intact. I was not shy of telling my
friends what had happened to me. The story became worn into me, like those songs
played over and over on the record player, the needle wearing deep into the crackling
grooves. And through this sharing, I was part of a secret tribe, whose initiation was
through the violation of the body, and whose handshake was silence.

We formed a corps of misfits. We were used to being hated. We endured the
boys who scrawled obscene messages in our yearbooks, who called us “ugly bitches” and
“four-eyed geeks” We endured the snide disdain of the popular girls, the girls who
rode horses and took modern jazz lessons, and walked as though they carried invisible
crops. And like the other members of my tribe, I suffered all the wounds of adolescence-
braces, perms gone wrong, and pimples galore.
There was only one who had escaped. Heather was lithe and dark, and at the time we became friends, her chestnut-blonde hair rippled in still waves down her back. She had clear, dark eyes that gazed at you when you talked to her as though her very breath hinged on everything you said. When she walked, she floated, small and compact, a dancer or a fairy. I fell in love with her almost immediately, though I did not know what love was then. I am amazed that even for a little while that love was returned. So much separated us—wealth, beauty, opportunity.

Her father was the wealthiest and most respected cardiologist in Roanoke, and they lived accordingly. She spent her Christmas in Germany, spring break in Nassau. Her family’s house was a sprawling mansion compared to my parents’ little brick ranch. I could have wandered for hours through her house’s many rooms, staring at the intricate wallpaper, the polished wood, the portraits of brooding herons in her stepmother’s sitting room. The odor of woodsmoke and burning leaves permeated everything there. On the first weekend in December every year, her parents went on a trip to New York City for Broadway plays and musicals, fine dining, shopping, and skating in Central Park. It was everyone’s secret hope to be chosen as Heather’s companion for the trip, an honor I garnered twice.

I was embarrassed whenever my friends came to my house, and Heather didn’t seem to like it there. She was confined in the cheap golden wallpaper and flimsy beige curtains of my bedroom, a butterfly trapped under glass. We usually stayed at her house, and one winter we were snowed in for three days. We shoveled the driveway for Heather’s stepmother, Elaine, pretending as we worked that we were princesses
enspelled by an ogre to do hard manual labor. When we escaped, we took our sleds down on the Hunting Hills golf course, and tried ineffectually to push through the snow on the slight grade. We made angels in the snow, and then lay side by side quietly under the beech trees, watching the crystal points sparkle out of orange clouds.

Our favorite place to talk was the closet in the spare bedroom. We pulled ourselves through the little, white door, and curled on piles of wool sweaters and Egyptian cotton sheets. Heather shut the door, and in the dark, we whispered of all the things we could not say in the day. We breathed for a while in pure silence. It was a place out of time—a vacuum, a womb. It was the first time in a closet where I did not feel that heart-hammering fear, where my tongue felt loosened from the container of my mouth. I told Heather of what had happened to me there, of how confusing it all was, of my fears that I was a lesbian like the women in my father's porno mags. I don't remember what she said. Mostly I think she just listened. Listened, and held my hand.

We wrote notes to one another in History class, while the boys threw spit-balls and made fun of our teacher with his limp wrists and bow ties. I told her of the world I saw behind this one, the world that hid beneath this one, that waited for us only to draw back the curtain over our eyes to see it revealed. I looked out of the barred windows, and saw not scraggly pines twisting over red dirt, but a dense, mist-wrapped forest. Out of which a familiar, dark-eyed man stepped, the prince with whom I had danced in the dark recesses of my basement, the lord who rode with me through the forests of my dreams at night. I told her of him, of his world. I showed her the stories I wrote in pink and purple ink. And when she frowned and said, "Do I have no place in this world of yours?"
it was not long before a young woman appeared there, with a heart-shaped face and chestnut hair.

On weekends in spring and summer, I often went with Heather to her parents' house on Smith Mountain Lake. They had a split level cottage there, hovering just at the edge of the water. An old oak grew up through the deck. Heather and I usually spent our afternoons in the young forest nearby, eating squishy peanut butter sandwiches and reading *Emily of New Moon* together while we lay on the dry pine needles. I wrote long, looping poems about unicorns and magic. Heather smiled at me, and say, her voice low with secrets, "Show me your latest."

May 1984. A blue moon calls through the window; the lake tosses dark wavelets against the docks. They wait until Paul and Elaine have gone to bed, then creep down the carpeted stairs, out the door and into the night. My body pulses. The wind in the oak leaves startles me. Down the deck steps and out into the newly-planted grass, up the secret way we found yesterday through the neighbor's yard. I follow Heather through the waving catkins of what we call fairy grass. At last, on the lightless road, we breathe. We laugh and dance down the asphalt. Fireflies blink through the pines. A round-faced moon leans over the brushy tips of the trees. I believe then that unicorns hide their white flanks in the dark somewhere, gazing out at us with lavender eyes.

And when we turn to go down to the dock to sit up most of the night and talk under the limpid stars, I feel Heather embrace me. The small arms reach around my waist, the slender body floats on my back. "I love you," she says. And I stand, silent. I cannot breathe, drowning in the firefly flash and the blue moon riding high. Heather does not see my tears as we go down to the water. That moment is suspended for me—pure love hallowed in the dark amber of memory.

V.

It is a difficult thing for me to try to write about my mother. She is not a whole person, I think, and thus it is hard to grasp her, like trying to touch a shadow. She is a twin, half of a person, a character from Greek myth. My mother is the weaker of the two, both mentally and physically. I wonder if the constant knife of unspoken trauma is
slowly whittling away her memory, so that one day she will be as senile as my paternal
grandmother, for whom my mother cared until she died, a most faithful, if inept, nurse.
Physically, my mother has a congenital heart defect. Her circulation was so poor when
she was a child that her extremities and lips were always blue. She was constantly teased
because of it. She endured five heart surgeries, two of them open heart. Yet they
couldn’t entirely cure what ailed her, mentally or physically.

When I think of her, then, it’s a Siamese twinning of anger and guilt. I tried, but
cannot altogether stop wishing that my aunt, Mom’s twin, was my mother instead. Val
has a masculine self-assurance, a devil-may-care attitude that my mother has never had.
In fact, Val was named for Jean Valjean. And she claims that she never could have
children because she had “too many male hormones”  Case in point: Once some kid
shot the family collie, for no reason at all, really. Val found out about it and beat him to
a pulp when they got off the school bus the next day. Val is a short name for “valiant”,
in my opinion. The time I told Val what had happened to me, she said, “You’re not the
only one,” and she held me and we cried.

So, I don’t know what I thought I would hear at seventeen when I decided to tell
my mother about what had happened to me when I was seven. Ten years seemed long
enough to keep a secret. I talked to my friend Carrie on the phone and she encouraged
me, saying, “It’s time to tell her. Time to heal.” I think I thought that I would finally
bridge that chasm of silence between us. I think I expected a similar cathartic moment
like I’d experienced with Val.
I went into my parents’ bedroom, so pink I wondered how my father still had any masculinity left. She was holding her old pink-handled mirror between thick-knuckled fingers and examining the back of her head. She got her hair styled every week at that time in my life, because she simply couldn’t do it herself the way she wanted it done. Aqua-net set my nose on fire. I can’t remember what I did, exactly. Whether I marched in and announced it boldly and stiffly or if I sat on her pink bedspread for a while and thumbed through the mountain of catalogs stacked by the bed. I don’t even remember what I said.

But I remember that she turned. She stopped what she was doing. Heavy eyeshadow made her eyelids twin awnings, one over each eye. “I’m sorry that happened,” she said. “I wish I’d known so I could’ve spared you that.” I warmed to that a little, about to open my mouth to say I forgave her, to say I understood. But she wired my jaw shut with her next words, “But just put it out of your mind. Pretend it never happened. Never speak of it again.” I felt my head buzz. A column of fire rose and whirled behind my eyes. I was afraid to open my mouth for fear I would burn her. My tongue throbbed with unsaid words as I nodded and left. I wondered if you can feel ghost pain from a wound you don’t remember receiving.

A week or two later, the wound only deepened. I was at the beach. I called home to tell my parents I’d gotten there all right.

“I told your father what you told me,” my mother said.

“About what?”

“You know, what you told me about...” A silence.
“You told him?” There was an exclamation in my question.

“Yes.”

I hung up the phone. I didn’t ask what he said, nor why she’d told. I felt distinctly betrayed for some reason, as though she’d stolen some power I had. I think now it was the power of openness, the ability to speak not in silence, but in words.

My father never mentioned it to me. I was bitterly reminded of it all when we were watching TV together some years later and a program about child molestation came on. “If someone did that to my child,” he started to say.

“What?” I said.

“I’d take my gun and shoot ‘em. Dead,” he said. He looked at me a minute, flicked ashes off his cigarette, and turned back to the TV.

I said nothing. But I began to wonder about the lies we tell our children to make them feel safe, and what the truths are.

Summer 1999. I am visiting Marion and Jim Fisher’s house for the first time in years. The comforting, confined smell of their house wafts memories to me. I remember the green and turquoise name plates that used to hang on the boys’ bedroom door. I remember Derek Fisher watching war movies all the time, and how Jeremy used to let me sleep next to him, cradled in his Bambi sheets, while everyone else watched TV. I remember how Troy and I hid one time under an old tractor, how he shielded me behind its wheels while the other kids fired BB’s and threw chestnut burrs at us.

Marion takes me into the old TV room to show me her cockatiel, Patsy. I am surprised to find it converted to a shrine. Family pictures of all Marion’s children, nieces, nephews, and grandchildren cover the walls. Rachel’s face hangs there above me. She looks tired and old. Her face seems yellowed and her eyes sag. Her hair is short and kinked by a perm.

She’s married now, right? I ask.

Marion nods. Has two kids, too.

I stare at Rachel for a long time. I think about how deeply this woman scarred me, how her darkness forced my mind open and my tongue to sing. Flowers had sprouted in the underworld. The prince had ridden from his forest and saved me. I wonder for the
first time what might have happened to her. I have read that sexual molesters are often re-enacting their own stories. Who might have done these horrible things to her, too?

Years ago, I had worn a black dress to Diana and Troy’s wedding. I’d worn it to shame Rachel, sure she’d know, as she stood against the wall with her screaming child, what secret message my funerary garment was meant to convey. But now I feel sure she didn’t. I have a feeling that a child was murdered in her long ago. Patsy nips at my finger, squeaking for my attention, and I forgive.
LADY HERO

Her swinging sword flashes like the nine falling suns shot by Yi, the legendary bowman;
She moves with the force of a team of dragons driven by the gods of the sky;
Her strokes and attacks are like those of terrible thunder;
And when she stops, all is still as waters reflecting the clear moonlight.
-Tu Fu, upon seeing Madame Kung Sun

Spring and Summer 1988

When I was sick once, maybe thirteen or fourteen, my mother brought me a gift.
She had gone to Ram's Head bookstore, the place from which all the most wonderful books came in my childhood. This book was hardbound; its smooth dustjacket wrapped smartly around its cover. I had not had a book like this in a long time. A Newbery Award was stamped in foil on the front cover, and I turned it back and forth, making the gold sparkle beneath the title. The Hero and the Crown, by Robin McKinley. On the cover, a tiny person wearing makeshift armor and riding a white horse raised a sword. Flames licked around their forms, flames vomited forth by the black dragon that loomed over them. They looked so small, so helpless, yet so full of hope that I could not resist opening and starting right away.

My fever made me boil and freeze by turns, and my eyes felt like flattened frogs in my head, but after the first few paragraphs I could not put the book down. I generally gobbled up any fantasy book that I read. I had read Tolkien in record time, devoured Lloyd Alexander's Chronicles of Prydain series in one great swallow. But never in all of the stories I had read had there ever been a main character like Robin McKinley's. Never had any of those main characters been a woman. Never, in all the books I had read, had a woman taken up a sword like Aerin and fought her own battles. I read The Hero and the
Crown all in one day, collapsing back into my blankets at last with a smile. I curled around the book, resting my cheek on its cover, and slept.

And in that sleep, I returned to a land I had been building since early childhood, a place I called Mellione. I stood on one of the mountain peaks that ringed my land. A great river spread its arms around a hill that rose from the valley floor. The sunlight flooded down past my shoulders, tricking out the temples and towers of Mellione on her high hill. I crouched against the cold earth, my fingers sprouting feathers, my shoulders stooping into the line of wings, my feet curling into claws. As a falcon, I sailed down into my city, to the house of the one who waited for me. I shimmied to being in his garden, into the form of a queen with flashing blue eyes and honey-gold hair. My dark lord, whom I called Este, came to welcome me in his arms. I looked up into his eyes, dark topaz shot with gold. "Teach me the sword," I whispered. He nodded, then crushed me into deeper sleep with his kiss.

In ninth grade, I was about as awkward as a person can get. I was in my last year of braces. My hair was growing out from a really bad perm. I waged a battle on two fronts—one with my ever-increasing weight, and the other with pimples and blackheads. I fought periodically with my mother on how I dressed, but I was always on the losing side. People laughed at my silly, cheap clothes. I was not popular. On top of all that, I had just switched schools again. My parents could no longer afford the tuition at the private school I had attended for the past two years. I was forced to leave my friends and
teachers, the tree-lined walks and comfortable buildings. I retreated even deeper into my interior world, seeking shelter from my own adolescence.

Salem High School was like a prison. The halls were a maze where each classroom was the same. There were no windows in any of the classrooms, and the featureless walls occasionally engendered breathless claustrophobia. The only windows were on the two doors at the back of the building that let out onto the track field, and they had bars on them. The usual harassment of freshmen was carried on by the upperclassmen. I got detention once for being late to study hall because someone had taken the doors off all but one of the bathroom stalls and there was no toilet paper. It was a bad place to be new and alone. It was a while before I made any friends.

I met Cathy on the bus. I remember watching her come flying out of her house in plaid pants and black denim jacket, and smelling the stale cigarettes on her clothes when she sat down near me. There was something older about her, something older in the clumps of mascara on her eyelashes, the hot pink lipstick. And there was something infinitely kind in the way she smiled. We had gym, Algebra, and English together, but it was on the bus that I began to tell her about my secret world.

"I have a place I go to," I said. I explained it all to her as quietly as I could over the engine roar. I had learned it was dangerous to reveal such things to anyone. My Dad had once seen one of my stories about that place and laughed until he was red in the face at the ridiculousness of it. I swore after that that I would only tell people I thought I could trust about Mellione.
Cathy listened, smiling. When I was finished, she said, “I have a place, too.” And she told me about how she and her best friend, Janet, had developed a world when they were little girls. “Your secret is safe, sweetie,” she said, patting my hand. I felt like I’d been granted a small miracle.

Shyly one day I slid my story notebook under Cathy’s math notebook before Algebra class. “Read it,” I whispered, as the teacher began her daily drone.

My heart was racing as I tried to pay attention to class, even as I prayed the teacher wouldn’t notice Cathy wasn’t paying attention at all. I had visions of the teacher snatching up my story and reading it aloud to all the class, while they snickered and giggled at me. I had nothing to worry about, however. The teacher kept on with her monologue, her metal pointer tapping out a cadence like a metronome. At the end of class, Cathy handed the notebook back to me, her eyes bright. “Keep writing, I want to read more.”

“Really?” I clutched the notebook to my chest. Encouragement was something I desperately craved.

“I really want to read more.” She was rushing down the hall ahead of me to her next class, when she turned and said, “But if you really want your characters to use swords, you should come with me to class sometime.” Then she disappeared.

I caught up with her again in gym class. As we were changing clothes, I asked, “What did you mean when you said that earlier about swords?”
“Oh, I go to a martial arts school, Shao-lin Dragons Martial Arts Academy. We just all call it ‘the school’, though.”

I had been attending karate classes at a neighborhood church, and remarked upon it as I pulled my shirt over my head. “But you use real swords and stuff?” I said. We didn’t do anything like that in karate. A blonde girl next to me cut her eyes at me and scooted further away from me. I thought I heard the word “geek” hiss out of the corners of her mouth.

“Yeah,” Cathy said. She narrowed her eyes at the blonde. “We use all kinds of weapons. It’s a Chinese system—the oldest martial arts in the world.” She pulled on the stiff, navy-blue gym shorts. “You ought to come with me to the next class. First class is free.”

The gym teacher came through the door. “All right, girls, out on the track!”

“Well...maybe I will,” I said, as we filed outside.

“Just wait ‘til you see Andrew,” Cathy said.

“Andy? What’s so special about him?”

“Andrew. He is not an Andy. You’ve never seen anything like him in your life.”

“All right, girls, get moving!” Our teacher was bearing down on us with her beetle-like brows and waving arms.

We divided into teams, and I was left to trip and stumble over a new enigma.

When I entered the school, my nose was immediately overpowered by sweat and molding gym shoes. To my right, a glass-fronted case displayed photos, plaques and
gold-plated trophies. To my left, a grizzled man sat on a stool behind a desk, talking on the phone. A blood-red carpet spread from my feet back to a wall of mirrors. People in black uniforms revolved in movements foreign to me, fringed sashes sliding against their hips and thighs. My shape was dimly reflected amidst that twirling forest. More trophies gleamed through a powder of dust from the rafters. The ceiling of the converted warehouse vaulted away into an uncertain gloom.

As I followed Cathy to the women's locker room, a girl with pale eyes and flaring hips grabbed my arm and turned me toward the carpet. A boy came sailing across the floor toward us, his feet barely touching the ground until he landed right before us. "Look at that butt," the girl hissed. His dark eyes flashed death as he crouched low and swept his right leg in a tight arc, then rose, and continued his series of moves back the way he'd come. Cathy returned to where we were standing. "That," she said "is Andrew." I nodded, unsure what to say. I truly had never seen anything like him before, either in karate class or anywhere else. The only comparison that even came close was watching Baryshnikov perform the acrobatic leaps and twists of "The Nutcracker".

But this was not ballet. There was absolutely nothing feminine about him as he sauntered to the weapons rack on the near wall and picked his staff out of the others piled on the rack. He spun the staff, whirling and twisting it through the air so fast my eyes could not follow. I heard Janet's audible sigh when he vaulted upward in a Chinese crescent kick, landing on the same leg he'd pushed off from, the staff flying in an arc around his head. "Janet's crazy about him," Cathy said. And Janet, the girl who had grabbed me, punched Cathy on the arm and grinned at me.
The head instructor, David, clapped his hands loudly, and emerged from behind the desk. Everyone scurried out onto the carpet. Andrew returned his staff to the weapons rack and went to his place in the front of the room. Cathy lined up among the blue belts, waving me back to my place with the beginners. As David bowed, we returned it; the other beginners, like myself, doing it awkwardly. It was not at all like the bow I had learned in my karate class. This felt more elegant, more real.

We did calisthenics for forty-five minutes, then floor exercises for half an hour. David called them. “Forward rolls!” he yelled. Andrew went first, rolling down the floor without stopping, a human ball. Others followed. I was terrified. Cathy had not warned me of this. I was horrible at gym, and avoided physical activity as much as possible. I was already trembling so hard from the calisthenics that I could barely stand up. I shook at the edge of the carpet. Other beginners huddled with me. “What are you waiting for?” David asked. His voice was low and dangerous. I pushed myself forward, rolling and coming up in a twisted, moaning heap, my neck protesting against the strain. But I did it, again and again until I got to the mirrors. I did not look up at anyone as I stood up.

“Backward rolls!”

I was ready to give up and go home. I had never been able to accomplish this at all in school. My gym teacher had given up trying to teach me to roll backwards, in fact, finally sending me in exasperation over to a bench so I could practice cartwheels (which I had never succeeded in doing, either). The phone rang. David went to answer it. As the next highest rank, Andrew took over. The line thinned down to us beginners, some of whom began rolling in untidy heaps backwards down the floor. I looked down at my

Andrew came over to me. “What’s the problem?” he said.

“I can’t do this.”

“Sure you can.”

“No, I mean, really. I never learned how to do this.”

He squatted beside me. I avoided his eyes. “Like this,” he said. He did it, and I watched, but it did not help my understanding. I shook my head.

“Here.” He put one hand against my back. “Now tuck your head.” I tucked. “Now push off with your feet.” I pushed. His arm propelled me backwards, forcing me upside down. My neck screamed against the strain. “Tuck!” he said. And as I did so, I felt my knees crashing down over my ears. I sat up, shaken. “See,” he said. “You can do it.” He paused. I felt, rather than saw, the smile in his voice. “Now keep practicing.” It seemed like an agonizingly long time until I reached the other end of the carpet, but I finally did so, rolling backwards all the way.

“Not bad,” Cathy’s new boyfriend, Jason, said, as I stood. He seemed very tall, and it seemed like I had to look up a long way before I could meet his very blue eyes.

“Thanks,” I said.

“But you may want to tuck in your shirt.” He smiled at me, his eyes laughing but friendly, before he went down the floor, in a movement called a crescent kick.

I felt my face getting red, but I tucked in my shirt, and clumsily moved down the floor when it was my turn.
I soon traded my sweatpants and Dirty Dancing T-shirt for the black pants, black T-shirt, and black kung-fu jacket of the school’s uniform. I attended every class I could—Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday nights and Saturday mornings. My parents did not know how to respond to my interest in the martial arts. They thought it another fad, something that would pass, like my earlier interests in ballet or horseback riding. It seemed rather a source of embarrassment than of pride. They found such past-times unladylike, and could not share my interest. I fought with them often, usually not about the sport itself, but about the people at the school. “There’s some pretty unsavory characters out there,” my dad would sometimes say.

I found that kind of attitude hypocritical, coming from my father, who had grown up so poor that he often went hungry, mostly because of my alcoholic grandfather. I drifted further and further from my parents, who seemed to constantly want something I couldn’t give. They would have loved it if I had found such camaraderie with our church youth group, rather than the bunch of “low-lifes” that came to the school. Low-lifes like Donna, who worked at a textile mill. Like Jason who had been going to community college and failing for years. Like Tracy, who had two kids and a husband who didn’t love her. Like Mikey, whose parents hated him so much they’d made him move in with his grandmother. And Cathy, whose insane sister had once tried to kill her with a butcher knife, and whose mother left her alone for weeks at a time, while she rode the trucking line with Cathy’s stepfather. Like me, who had been molested at the age of 7 and who
had lived virtually all of my life through books. I was not about to give up these people. With our art, we transformed anger into deadly beauty.

Beginners worked on class material directly in front of the mirror, so that we could judge if we were performing our techniques correctly. Most often, though, my gaze wandered to my friends as they worked on their techniques. They worked hard, practicing weapons like staff and short stick, then returning to empty-handed techniques with few breaks. In particular, my eyes were drawn to Andrew. He practiced before, during, and after class, doing everything with a grace and artistry that seemed effortless. I watched as he spun through the air with his spear, the rattles on its tip hissing like a serpent, the red-dyed horsehair flying around the point. I watched as he crossed and uncrossed double broadswords behind his back as he rolled backwards in a circle, never missing a beat. I lost myself gazing in the mirror, dreaming of a day when I might do those things, like Aerin in The Hero and the Crown.

My eyes refocused on Andrew standing slightly behind and to my left. He was a third-degree brown belt, about to test for his black, and the gold stars of his rank marched against his outer thigh. "Have you learned the Hung form yet?" he asked.

"No." I avoided his eyes, embarrassed that he had caught me loafing. The Hung form was the first form taught to beginners as part of the requirements for achieving white belt rank. Forms are sets of movements designed by the early Shao-lin monks. These movements often imitate the fighting techniques of various animals—tiger, crane,
praying mantis, to name a few-- and serve as mnemonic devices for practitioners. The Hung form is a tiger form, requiring lots of open-palmed strikes and targeted footwork.

Andrew showed me the first few moves, then let me repeat them. I swept my arm backwards, readying it to round on my imaginary opponent in a clawing strike. He corrected me, and then we performed the move in tandem, our hands gliding back toward the mirror like swans leaning to catch their reflections. I looked up then, and fell into his eyes. They were dark as topazes, with golden lights dancing in them. They were the eyes of the dark lord to whom I fled in the nights; Este, whose adventures filled the pages of my story notebook. I wanted to grasp his sleeve, the one stiffly embroidered with the symbols of his rank, and ask if he recognized me, too. But, he moved on to the next beginner, and I was left standing, the whole world breaking down and building up, the forms in the mirror dissolving and whirling like a kaleidoscope.

My first tournament came that May. Our school hosted the tournament, and it drew people from all over the Mid-Atlantic region for competition. We were unique in that we were the only soft-stylists in southwestern Virginia at the time. When we attended tournaments, we had to go further north to Washington DC or Baltimore if we wanted to be judged fairly. Further south, the hard stylists, karate and tae kwan do practitioners, laughed at our silk uniforms and acrobatic moves. Plenty of them still attended our tournament, though. The chance to win trophies, cash prizes, and possibly qualify for nationals was incentive enough.
My father dropped me off early that morning so I could help mark out the competition rings with heavy masking tape and set up the trophy table. As more people trickled into the junior high school gym we’d rented, I was carried on a frenzied tide. School members from all around the region roved the gym like gangs, claiming sections of bleachers for themselves and guarding them with haughty glares at perceived interlopers. The volume of people talking, stomping on bleachers, karate practitioners shouting, merged into a chaos of sound that set my heart racing. I stalked around just as proudly as everyone else in my uniform, screaming and clapping whenever someone I knew competed.

Andrew helped David find judges for each division, placated irate senseis, and directed lost students. He was digging in a box where David had told him to look for something, more masking tape or scorecards, when I saw him stop. Carefully folded inside the box was a black satin sash, fringed with black tassels. A single gold star winked from its folds. He picked it up slowly. “Now you’ll have to change divisions, I guess,” David said, and clapped him on the shoulder. He was seventeen, and had achieved his first-degree black belt the fastest ever in our system—five years. He allowed himself a small smile, but otherwise his face remained carefully neutral, even when he was surrounded by others of our school who cheered and celebrated. When the excitement died down, he disappeared.

I said to myself many times later that I was not looking for him when I found him. I assured myself I was just roaming the halls. But I turned a corner and there he was. I had never seen him in his tournament silks before, though Jas had told me before how
much he wanted a uniform just like them. Red silk licked up his legs like fire. A
matching silk belt with gold trim rode his lean hips. A flame-colored shirt, also
embroidered with gold, slid one sleeve down his left arm, leaving his right bare. He
sketched a long, elegant tournament bow. When his eyes lifted, they hit mine with a
brutal force that made me gasp and stammer. “I was just...I didn’t mean...to disturb you,”
I said, and I bowed awkwardly. He gave me a cursory nod before returning to practicing
his form. I continued down the hall, trying not to look back at a beauty so deep it hurt.

That day he competed with broadsword. The twin flags on the broadsword’s hilt
snapped as he drew the shining blade through the air. He launched into an aerial,
somersaulting and whipping the sword beneath him before landing into a full split.
Everyone roared, but I remained silent, my eyes seared by and hungry for such flame.
Cathy gave me a photo she took at the tournament for Christmas that year. In it,
Andrew’s head is bowed, his arm lifted as if in invocation, his sword clasped firmly in
his other hand against his side. It captures the perfect moment of beginning, the final
mounting of tension before the release.

I realized very quickly what was happening. I tried to keep it from Cathy and Jas,
but they laughed when I finally told them. It had been written on my face all along, they
said. I wrestled with it, trying to stamp out my love as though it were a sparring
opponent. I resolved to be better than I was. I asked to be allowed to practice by myself
in the afternoons before anyone got there. Tracy had keys and would let me in, and I
would push myself through the forms, trying desperately to mold my quivering body into something hard and solid, something worthy of being loved.

Part of my new resolution involved becoming a member of the school's demonstration team. Demo team members acted as ambassadors to the community, performing routines both to entertain audiences and to draw in more students. The team was present at every local festival, and only the best students were allowed to be on it. Try-outs were held once a year, and those desiring to be members of the team had to try out twice. The incumbent members then voted. If even one person objected, the candidate could not be on the team. About the time I joined the school, David had decided that it might be good for people to see the full spectrum of our ranking system, from white belts to black. That way, he said, people could see where we started and what it was possible to achieve.

Trying out for the demo team was one of the most physically challenging things I had endured at the school, aside from the belt ranking tests. Demo practice took place after class, after we'd already done almost two hours of calisthenics, floor exercises, and regular class material. The team was organized in a similar fashion to the wushu demonstration teams of China. Wushu evolved from kungfu when the Chinese government forbade martial arts during the Cultural Revolution. Wushu is an ornamental sport, full of acrobatic high leaps, aerials, spinning kicks, and dramatic stances, perfect for drawing sighs of exclamation from crowds. Andrew and David had spent a six-week training session with the Beijing Wushu Institute in China, and many of the moves for our demo team had been adapted from those they'd learned.
Team members were taught things that normal students might never learn. I had often watched in admiration when Andrew lifted his straightsword from the weapon rack, its long, blood-red tassels swinging from the hilt. The straightsword was traditionally a woman’s weapon, lighter, quicker, and requiring more dexterity than the broadsword. But men who could prove their ability were sometimes taught, and the coaches in Beijing had deemed Andrew a worthy student. He and David had choreographed a straightsword form for the female members of the team. Every time I saw Cathy, Janet, and Doima practice the form, I became more determined to earn the privilege they possessed.

Though I had attended class for months, the only major physical improvements that I could see were that I no longer got out of breath as quickly and that my calves were solid muscle. Cathy had once commented on my “healthy glow”, but I could never tell if what she was seeing was real or just the redness of exertion. I tried out for the team twice as required, and was amazed when I was invited to be a member. I could not believe I had made it on. Andrew was captain of the team, and I felt sure he’d blackball me, not out of any malice, but simply because he couldn’t abide mediocrity. And, despite all my long hours of training, it was becoming obvious to me that I was mediocre. I still could not do cartwheels and certainly could not fall into the full splits that Janet and Cathy could accomplish. Yet, despite all that, I still had not lost my desire to learn the sword and make the books come true.

Andrew put the first sword I held into my hands. The wrapped pommel felt rough against my palm; the short green tassels caressed my wrist. He whipped his sword over his head, and the crimson tassels brushed my cheek with deadly precision. "The Chinese
used to weave glass into the tassels,” he said. “Yet another way to confuse and wound their enemy.” I smiled. Chinese ingenuity never failed to amaze me.

“The first thing you should understand about straightsword is that it’s used for stabbing, not cutting or slicing.” He twirled the sword high above his head, then dropped, his legs crossed beneath him in a dragon stance, the sword reversed and stabbing an imaginary opponent behind him. He stood then, took my sword and removed the tassels from the ring at the hilt before returning it.

“Now, this is the hardest move you’ll ever have to learn dealing with straightsword.” I steeled myself for a leap, a dive, an impossibly high kick. He flipped his sword through his fingers and over his wrist. Through his fingers and over his wrist. Slowly at first and then so fast I could not see whether the sword was returning or leaving his palm.

“Now, you try it.” The sword wriggled awkwardly through my fingers, almost falling to the ground. I looked up, embarrassed, but his eyes were gentle. “Try it again,” he urged. I tried, but couldn’t see any improvement. “Keep practicing,” he said. I held in a sigh. It seemed easy enough for him to say when things came so naturally to him. He was about to walk away, but he turned and came closer to me, closer than I’d ever been to him. “Sometimes it helps if you give your sword a name,” he said, almost whispering. He seemed a little embarrassed, as though this was not something he shared with everyone. “It always helps me,” he said. Then he turned and went over to join Donna in their fighting set. I stood at the mirror, flipping the sword awkwardly over and over, stunned. Again, it seemed I’d stumbled into a fairytale.
But Jas ended my folly, severing my hopes with words that cut like bright steel swords. He took me by the shoulders one night before class started. His eyes were cerulean, almost supernatural in their brightness. “I have to tell you something and you’re not going to like it, but I think you need to know.” I kept staring into the pits of his eyes, a bird mesmerized by a serpent. “Andrew has a girlfriend.” My heart beat once, twice, three times, then shattered. I did not weep then. I went home and wrote anguished poems in my journal. I had known all along that my love was folly, but I could not help myself. I could not help loving the truth I saw in Andrew, his beauty and brightness, his quiet kindness.

I saw the truth of it, though, soon enough. Two girls came to the school one night. One was blonde and petite, her hair perfect, her body slender and firm. Andrew went and talked to them for a few moments. The blonde laughed. He came back out on the floor. Incredulously, I watched as he removed his shirt, and picked up a whip chain from the floor. The flags at either end of the chain ripped the air as he worked it, spinning it around his neck, through his hands, between his legs. He was showing off. I turned away from the mirror and concentrated on my short forms. Every blonde giggle made my kicks and punches faster and more furious.

I was surprised then, two weeks later when he spoke to me after class.

“Are you going to the tournament on Sunday?”

I shook my head.
"Why not?" He pouted at me, a little boy expression I'd seen only a few times before. "That's OK. I know you really don't care." He went into the boys' locker room, giving me one last pout before he shut the door.

I went. The only other people along were David, Andrew, and Andrew's parents. I tried to hide my nervousness by laughing and joking all the way to Lynchburg. I wondered why Andrew's girlfriend had not come along, but thought it best not to ask. I was just trying to take Tracy's recent advice, to "enjoy the experience of liking him", and to expect nothing more than that. But I was worried that this time together would only make my longing worse, would only make the face I saw in my dreams look more like the one I could not stop loving.

We entered an old gym. Gray light spilled through oval windows onto walls and floor of dark wood. It was a small tournament. The trophies stacked near the bleachers seemed to outnumber the competitors in the rings. Andrew walked to the registration table, favoring his right foot. During practice two days ago, I'd watched as he'd been practicing butterfly twists. The harsh landings had produced a stone bruise. "Are you sure you want to do this?" I said. "You can barely walk."

He eyed me as though I'd said something incredibly stupid, then went to warm up. I sat with his mother, trying not to nip at my cuticles. His first performance went well, though I could see that it had cost him. Still, he had won his division, and would compete for Grand Champion.

He decided to perform staff, and I watched him warming up, spinning the staff confidently, trying to save his bruised foot. When the call came, he stepped up and
bowed smartly, then began. He whirled the staff, executed the first few jumps with incredible precision. But as he came over from the aerial, spinning the staff in his hands, it leapt away from him. The staff clattered across the floor, opening a vast and bitter silence. I had never seen Andrew lose a weapon before. He bowed out of the ring and retrieved his staff. He squatted on the floor, his head bent. Andrew’s mother said to me, “You better go talk to him.” But I couldn’t. I was fastened to the bleachers, to that moment when the white willow staff pitched out of his hands and tumbled end over end on the dark floor. David got up and helped him limp to the bleachers.

The eyes he rounded on me were black and open. I looked and saw a person so intensely alone that my own sorrows seemed trivial in comparison. His only friends were weapons. The confident, gallant instructor was a skin he wore, a mask that hid a lonely child. I reached out and touched his knee. I did what I could to comfort him. And then I tried to turn his mind to other things. “You need to take care of yourself,” I said. “Aren’t you taking your girlfriend to prom next week?”

His expression ruffled in annoyance. “No, I don’t have a girlfriend. And I probably wouldn’t go to prom if I did.”

I couldn’t say anything. I was too busy trying to keep my heart from soaring upwards into the gym rafters, singing so loudly that everyone would hear.

Spring and Summer 1990

It took over five hours to drive to Baltimore. We had all tried to sleep in the school van, but when we tumbled out into the gym parking lot for Anthony Goh’s
tournament, most of us hadn't slept since 3 am. I had given up on competing and was only along as moral support for Andrew. We had not yet begun to date, but we had been out a few times, and there seemed to be no question that we would continue. I had never known until now how nervous these tournaments made him. He had already popped three Pepto-Bismol and still complained of an aching stomach.

The gym was packed as we entered. Those who were competing hurried to register and change in the locker rooms. The rest of us claimed a spot on the bleachers. At one end of the gym, a drum beat time while a young girl practiced with a war fan. Two brothers in black kung-fu uniforms and gauzy sashes carried long-handled broadswords past us. The room was filled with soft-style competitors. This promised to be good, and I could not wait to see Andrew compete against some worthy opponents. A rumor buzzed around the bleachers that several coaches for the American Wushu Demonstration Team were scouting this tournament. Supposedly Yu Shao-Wen was among them, one of the finest wushu coaches in the US.

Andrew returned from the locker room in his red silk uniform. Before he could finish making sure his shirt was securely fastened, his division was called. "Which weapon?" I shouted, as he began running across the gym. "Staff!" he called. I scooped it up from the bench and followed. They had already begun when we got there. He took the staff from me nervously, went over in a nearby corner to stretch and keep himself warmed up.

"Andrew Trent!" One of the judges called and he stepped up, bowed, then backed up to his starting point. He struck a deep cat stance, extending into a formal
bow. He brought the staff up over his head, whirling it down and cracking it against the floor. The audience around me fell silent. As he vaulted upward, somersaulting into the aerial, a murmur rose, swelling to a roar as he came down into a rock-solid stance. He turned and whirled, approaching the end of the form. The staff sailed under him once, twice, three times as he executed a ring of flawless butterfly kicks, the most I’d ever seen him do. The crowd rose, screaming, as he finished and bowed out of the ring. He won first place, qualifying again for Grand Champion.

We were making our way back to our school’s section of the bleachers afterwards, when a small Chinese man stopped us. “That was very good,” the man said, looking at Andrew with eyes sharp as a bird’s.

“Thank you.”

“Do you know who I am?” the little man asked. He reached into the inner pocket of his jacket, and I saw that his forearm was roped with sinewy muscle.

“Coach Yu Shao-Wen?” Andrew shifted, trying to seem calm.

The man nodded, withdrawing a card. “You were very good. But you are still a bit slow.” He smiled a little and handed Andrew the card. “I would like you to be on my team. Call me anytime you like.” He turned and disappeared into the crowd. I ran shouting to the benches, while Andrew followed more slowly behind.

The evening was heavy, dripping with humidity for mid-May. The sun was going down, a ruby eye swathed in blue clouds, when we arrived at Carvens Cove. I parked my car under the pines and we walked out to the reservoir. Its flat surface sparked red with
the failing sun. We took a watermelon I’d brought out of the cooler and split its skin there on the shore, feasting on its pink heart. We heard the whistling of mallard wings and watched them fly over. I pointed at the tall shape of a heron stalking through cattails in the shallows.

We walked down an old fire road. Our fingers joined tentatively. I was afraid to look at him, afraid he’d suddenly become unreal. The promise of an evening storm drew our breathing taut. The trees seemed intensely still. We came to a footbridge, and stopped to look at the water. The rushing creek made the only sound, white foam over slick rock. I looked out at the water, at the night softly drawing its curtain down and obscuring everything in the gloom. I felt his face come close, closer than he’d ever been. I inhaled the deep gold and leather smell of his skin. My eyes darted to his. I swallowed hard at their brutal tenderness. His sword-callused hands brought my face to his. As our lips met, I felt the dream come awake.

Later that night, I stared into my mirror, trying to believe it was truly me. My face was unblemished, and my teeth shone without the aid of braces. I looked into my own eyes, gray-blue as twilight. I felt again his hands on either side of my face. I remembered how he had brushed my hair aside, long, thick waves that fell almost to my waist. Somehow I had changed without noticing it. The girl I’d been a year ago was gone. I could see the faint outlines of muscles through my nightgown; I could pull aside the fabric and see the hard calf leading to the hard outer thigh. I could see the outlines of my ribs, and tight stomach, full with the food of first love.
On my seventeenth birthday that year, I opened a long, muslin-lined box. The lacquered sheath with its yellow dragons had been polished and shone with a high luster. The green tassels rested along its length. I pulled my sword from its box, tears in my eyes. I looked at Andrew where he leaned against my parents' couch and saw his answering smile. I thought I heard Lady Aerin's spirit in the ring of the sword as I pulled it from its sheath.
THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT

When I enter, I am bracing myself because I am sure I will smell death. I am at least sure that I will smell old people. I am sure that I will see ghosts; I will hear the terrified grunts of my grandmother as my mother hauls her from her hospital bed. I am sure that I will hear the crash of my grandfather falling off the toilet in the throes of an aneurysm. But I don't, exactly. I do hear a deathly quiet; I smell that old person's smell—the smell of empty toilet water bottles and dead flies on the windowsills. As I walk into the house, I remember quite suddenly—no one died here.

I pass through the dark-paneled living room to the kitchen. The floor has been torn up here to its barest bones; the subflooring is black with the dust of age. My father is in the basement drilling through a sink pipe, which he triumphantly brings upstairs. “No wonder the sink wouldn’t drain right,” he says, and I look at the clogged artery of lead. Only a scant couple of inches is left free within the diameter of this five-inch pipe. Years, layers of memories. Perhaps even my grandfather’s hair is still stuck in that calcified plaque.

We are here to lay waste to these bones and add a new coat of flesh. In a few months, this house, this place where my grandfather did not even know my name, will be mine—mine and my husband’s. We plan on living here for a couple of years until we finish our college degrees. Then, after we leave, my parents plan to make this their permanent home. Today, we have been commissioned to tear down the closet in the front room while my father continues to patch the subflooring in the kitchen. My husband begins the work, skillfully digging out the nails and pulling down the drywall.
Insulation, pink as Pepto-Bismol, drifts down on his head. I notice how carefully he pulls down things, without the enthusiastic rage that I might have. "It's to avoid snakes," he says.

"Snakes?" I look at him dubiously.

"Yeah—in the winter they like to get inside and get in the insulation. Keeps them warm." I think of the black snake that once shed its skin in the basement and nod.

Soon enough, I am relegated to pulling nails out of the boards my husband is taking out of the wall. He always wants to save everything, and clumsily I pull at the nails, puffing, until he comes to show me how I should do it. Gently, he takes the claw hammer and rocks it back so that the force of its pushing against the board pulls the nails out. I am impressed, but nevertheless still clumsy.

Finally, it is time to put down the plywood my father has purchased for the kitchen floor, and we stop work on the closet to help him. Since I seem to be inept at much else, I end up trying to sweep up the dust that lies heavy and black against the floor. "Coal dust," my father says, and I immediately think of blacklung. Despite the open windows, I quickly cannot breathe, choked by dust, the memory of my poor grandparents and their children huddling in this room for warmth. Instead of the funky '70's paneling with its Liberty Bells and Patrick Henry busts, I see flat green walls. I hear a child (my father?) screaming in the glow of the coal stove as my drunken grandfather beats him with his belt. I go outside.

The garden is dead. Husks of squash lie petrified against their decaying vines. Dead tomato vines cling pitifully to their stakes like executed criminals. Patches of red
earth show through the crabgrass at the garden's edges, scabs of dirt. But there are hoofprints here. Just on the edge where the earth dips and becomes brambles, then pines--huge half-moons, huge apostrophes sunk in the dirt. I follow them across this edge to where they lead, down a little gully and into the woods.

On this edge of the row, closest to the forest, I see something glinting in the glancing light of the March sun. As I reach down to pick it up I see, in the convex mirror of memory, my father bending to the tiller, turning it off in mid-row to lean down and pick up some curiosity from his childhood. I pick the crust of red clay from the object and discover a glass marble, swirled with hues of russet, black, and sea green, colors that remind me of drowning in a well. I remember how my father would give each marble he found to me, infusing it with a story as he pressed it into my palm.

The story of this marble's raucous colors is plain. *Where this garden is now, there used to be a well. Then it dried up, and we started usin' it for a trashpit. Mama would never let me play around there. She had this dream, she said, of me fallin' in there, fallin' down into that old well. Even after Daddy filled it in and planted flowers in it, Mama kept me away from it.* I close my fingers tightly over this dark dream of a marble, and slip it in my pocket. I will put it with all the others I have kept--in a glass honey jar. When the sun strikes the marbles, they shine like jewels in its light, the stories in each gleaming at the heart.

I look again at the ground, past where the prints fade into brambles and feel a sudden embarrassment. There, lying half-hidden in the dense tangle, the brightly colored, unnatural shapes of old detergent bottles, milk jugs....trash. Tires are sunken in
the wintry vines; some huge metal object, probably an old hot water heater, lies like an
abandoned spaceship halfway down the hill. My family, my grandparents, came and
threw this here, leaving the effluents to seep out as they chose into the soil. I try hard to
imagine the woman, the little, stooped, senile woman I knew as my grandmother walking
down here and tossing this junk into the briers. I see the face of a tired, beaten mother,
her brown hair streaming around her dark-circled eyes. Her mouth is a thin line, pulled
taut from screaming at her twelve children. Only now, when she has this power over the
earth which lies so still under her burden, does she stand straight. With an almost red-
faced shame, I realize my grandparents were what others would call “white trash”.

I walk all around the yard, letting the dust sink in my lungs, smelling the cool,
mild air. Birds flit everywhere around the perimeters of the yard. On the dogwood that
my father planted as a child, a woodpecker is creeping, poking sharply at the twisted
bark. Chickadees and cardinals perch in the elms in the next-door neighbor’s yard. A
mockingbird hops militantly around the forsythias, flicking his tail like a sergeant on the
march. I look at the bluebird box wistfully; it is not quite their time to be here. Yet I
know they will be; soon, I will see the little king and queen flitting back and forth with
food for their young.

I enter the house again; the noise of the skillsaw shears through my eardrums. I
have always hated the sounds of building things--the implicit danger, the angles of ruler
and line, the way my father turns the air blue with cursing when the board will not fall
exactly into place. But I feel compelled to help, so I grab the tool that I still do not know
the name of and start digging in the remaining drywall of the closet. As my husband
and I are taking down another section of drywall, my father walks in through the cloud of white dust. He points our attention to the two balled up pieces of newspaper we find, wedged between the drywall and a chimney we’ve just discovered.

“Know what those two wads of paper are there for?” he asks, and I sense a story coming. We shake our heads. “One night your grandfather came home drunk and decided to have a little temper tantrum. So he put his fists through this wall, forgetting there was a chimney there. Broke his hand. So to patch it up, he stuck these two pieces of newspaper in and plastered over ‘em.” What my father doesn’t say are words I hear anyway—Old bastard. I was really glad. I want to touch the chimney, as if to take away the violence. But there is no blemish on the brick—just the memory sifting to the floor with the white dust.

When we feel too tired to cut boards anymore, my father gets up from where he has been nailing the plywood. He jumps up and down vigorously, and the rolls of fat jiggle under his flannel shirt. His smile is the Santa Claus I remember. He says, “That ain’t going nowhere. That’s solid as can be.” The pale pine boards lie like bandages over the dark floor. I jump up and down, too. All I can smell is the clean, sharp scent of warm sawdust.

The light is fading from the March sky as we look at the unfinished floor. We pack up the tools by laying them on the floor in the middle bedroom. “Never seems to be enough time when we come over here. I get here at nine in the morning and alluva sudden it’s five.” My father sighs. “Well, I reckon we better get home to your mom.
She’ll probably have dinner on the table, wonderin’ where we are.” I nod, seeing in my mind the ice melting silently in the tall tea glasses on my mother’s table.

We turn off the few lights that are still hooked up to the circuit breaker, and my father locks up the house in the dark. I turn to look at the house as the night settles around it, and it grins at me out of its empty windows, like a disembodied skull. I look at it carefully, at the white posts holding up the green-shingled eaves, the single crack high in the right window. I am waiting for it to speak, but it remains silent, withholding whatever it might tell me. The power lines above it crisscross the stars, swaying sharply in the evening breeze.

The next time we come to work on the house, it is an equally fair day. After such a long winter, I can finally feel the beginnings of warmth from the sun shimmering across my fingertips as we pull into the driveway. We arrive late, our car stuffed with various gardening implements we plan to stow in the basement. As we step out onto the gravel drive, I see birds flying back and forth from pines to power lines.

My father and my uncle have just arrived, carrying with them a greasy sack of hot dogs. I look at my uncle as he shoves the dog into his mouth as far as it will go, wanting to laugh at his moon-faced gluttony. After he finishes that one, he quickly shoves another one into his mouth, and the chili stains the rims of his lips.

As we eat, my father and uncle discuss the house. My uncle pushes back his green baseball cap and rubs his forehead with his hot dog-stained hand. He philosophizes on the merits of taking down the window frames to put up the drywall as opposed to
keeping them and nailing the drywall around them. This has been a point of contention between my husband and my uncle for some days now, and I hear my husband's soft snort of protest, but it goes unnoticed. Slowly, softly, my husband recedes into the grass at our feet. He would rather fade into the pale spring day, then provoke another heated discussion about the need to keep the window frames matched rather than tear them off to put the drywall under them.

Drowsy after lunch, I look at the white-painted posts that hold up the front eaves of the house, at the green paint on the porch peeling off like an old skin. "They's some paint in the basement, if y'all want to paint that porch," my uncle drawls. I look at him, startled, watching his kindly face twitching with impatience to go to work again.

"OK," I say, only half-listening to him as he tells me about how he and my aunt painted that porch, how they built the rock wall in front of the house on which we are sitting.

"Break's over," my father says suddenly. He is looking perturbedly towards the doorway. He is ready to continue with the reconstruction.

We go inside to take a look at things. This time we work in my grandmother's old bedroom. My father has decided that this will be the bathroom, and the current bathroom will be a laundry and storage room. We have to tear down the dark paneling and put up blueboard, a type of drywall that resists moisture. Again, in this square of a room, I feel unsure; I am afraid to tear down the walls for fear of what I might find. As it is now, the images are locked, trapped under a layer of linoleum, paneling, false ceiling -- all laid down and put up by my father and my uncle.
But it begins. With a high nervous energy, my uncle takes a crowbar and forces it under the clenched paneling. We are all scurrying to follow after him; he is like a man who has had more than his allotted share of coffee or grief. Down comes the dark paneling in a creak and rip that sounds like dresses tearing. Pink drywall the color of flesh emerges from the darkness as if from a hard, calcareous shell. Lighter spots on the walls tell me where pictures and a mirror hung, where the dresser stood against the wall. I am afraid to touch these places, intimate as fingerprints. Twelve children were conceived here. At night...but I daren’t think of it. I daren’t let loose the fear I feel here, the subordination.

As we continue, we find a door beneath the wall that once adjoined the two rooms. I am put in mind of my father, sleeping in a bed with six other children, and how he told me once that his favorite dog had her puppies under that bed. I am wondering if any of those children, like me, got up in the middle of the night to ask their mother for a glass of water. If we opened that hole in the wall, what would we see? Little boys with mussed-up hair rising out of bed to stand in the chill dawn in their homemade underwear? Did they tell stories to one another at night? What land would I see beyond that door?

In the frame of the door, we find a soft cap of insulation. “Is that a mouse’s nest?” I ask, almost hoping to see the pink babies purling in the nest.

“Naw..” my uncle replies at first. Then he bends down, scoots it back and forth with his crowbar. “Well, yeah, I b’leve it is,” he finally decides. His face wrinkles with
disdain. But I am somehow pleased that these walls were not poison. Something can live within these old bones.

It becomes quickly obvious to me and my husband that we are more of a hindrance than a help here, as my uncle and my father begin to tear down the pink drywall. White dust sets us to coughing and choking, but my father and my uncle continue, unhindered by the particulate cloud. “Why don’t ya go outside?” my father says to us, seemingly irritated with our sheepish grins and coughs. We eye each other, shrug our shoulders, and leave them to continue demolishing the room.

We go in the front bedroom to check on the carpenter who has just arrived. He gives us a greasy grin of welcome as he shoves his thumbs in the loops of his overalls on either side of his bulging beer belly. He is working on framing up the closet in the front room. I step closer to admire his handiwork. From the remains of what we have torn down, he has built a solid frame in which to mount a becoming, if overlarge, door. The long, white boards will be new bones with which to lay the foundation of our life here.

Since we are not sure what else we might do to help, we walk outside, casting around for a tape with which to measure the wide, weed-enshrined garden. In the end, we measure with our eyes, and decide it measures up just fine. When I look at it, I already see the sunflowers turning to follow the sun, the tassels of corn waving in the wind. I see the raised beds we plan to build solid on the earth, full of rich loam and spring lettuce.

We wander down to the edge of the garden into the brambles that border the forest. Already, my husband is drawn to the young trees, feeling their bark as if he is
touching the arm of some young girl. He looks up speculatively into the branches, pulls
the ends of a twig to him, and gazes at the tight-fisted bud. "Know what kind of tree this
is?" he asks. I swallow the sigh in my throat and peer at the tree. This is an old ritual
between us. He asks, I say I don’t know, and then finally he tells me.

I give up. "I don’t know," I reply.

"Black cherry," he says, and points out the tree’s salient characteristics.

"Wild cherry?" I ask, knowing how the birds love wild cherry.

"No, but almost as good."

He casts his eyes at another tree, and I walk over to stare at the trash heap. All
down the gully are scattered the remains of paint cans, food cans, spray paint cans. Glass
bottles of almost every color and shape blanket the ground near my feet. I try not to
wonder how many of them are whiskey bottles. Nothing seems to move here. It is
difficult to imagine that anything else but trash ever existed here. I muse again, this time
seeing my grandfather in his balding white hair and glasses throwing paint cans and car
parts down here after he’d finished with them in his garage.

My husband calls me over, out of my musings, and quizzes me on more trees that
I don’t know the names of. We meander down the wash. My husband has the silent
grace of a deer as he steps through the vines, but I find myself stumbling, hearing the
brambles rip across the denim of my jeans. But I am intent on reaching a place, and I
continue down an overgrown trail to the spot.

Beneath a white and gold sycamore a long time ago, the neighborhood kids came
and dug a huge hole in the dirt. I am expecting that gaping hole I saw many years ago. I
am expecting to see the sun shafting down into the artificial orifice, and the little midges
dancing upward like gold motes into the sun. But I see nothing but a mute red wall of
clay. Suddenly, the hand of my mind clutches at another marble, red as the heart of
burning coal. And I remember when my father told me the story of how he and his
brothers burned these woods down. Burned it down. We was playing Cowboys &
Indians, and of course, I was the Indian. They tied me up to a pine tree and left me
there. Earlier, I'd set a fire and smothered it out with pine needles. Brilliant, right?
Well, them dry needles caught, and there I was all tied up. Thank God I got loose. I
tried to smother the fire out with my coat, but it had got too big. Burned practically the
whole woods down. Brought the fire department and everything. I'd just bought a new
moped, too. Burned that up, too. Boy, did I get skinned for that one.

We are walking back, meandering towards the house when all of a sudden, my
husband goes stiff. My husband is looking up with that rapt expression ornithologists'
wives must dread, and I know he has seen a bird. I am a little out of visual range, as I
have been examining some rock or tree I used to climb, but he motions me over
impatiently, and I try to sneak, albeit not very quietly, over to him.

“Look, up there,” he whispers excitedly, “is that a red-headed woodpecker?” I
stare up into the tree he is pointing towards, and see a flickering motion on one of its
topmost branches. Suddenly, the bird comes into view, backing jerkily down the trunk of
the tree, and testing with his bill for insects.

“Yes, I think it is,” I whisper back, noticing his brilliant red cap. We are caught
and held by this moment, trapped by his tiny, precise movements. In the distance, I hear
a strange cry that makes me want to shiver, a cry I repeat over and over in my mind so as
not to forget it. *Meow-went, meow-went, meow-went.* The woodpecker seems to sense
we are watching, and giving an alarm call, flies off to another tree nearby.

We remember to breathe, and look at each other with a rapt excitement no one
else could really share. The air seems to sparkle and tingle. We continue creeping back
towards the house, and are delighted to see a downy woodpecker rapping lightly at the
base of a dead oak. We see the delicate rings of holes a yellow-bellied sapsucker has
tapped into the trunk of another tree. “It’s amazing because they know just how deep to
penetrate the trunk without hurting the tree,” my husband says, smoothing his fingers
over the bark. Amazing perhaps, but not surprising to me.

However, I am surprised by the *life* here. When we entered perhaps an hour ago, I
saw only glass bottles, rusted paint cans, ugly brambles and thorns. Now, as we are
leaving, all the little birds are darting back and forth in the undergrowth. The
woodpeckers are pecking, and that odd bird is calling in the adjoining patch of woods.
We have seen signs that deer come here at night to lie down.

We go up to the house, puffing as we climb the hilly terrain. Suddenly, I realize
how long we have been in the woods; I feel my face flame, as if we have been doing
something secret and naughty. My uncle quickly calls my husband into another room to
help him measure and cut the blueboard for the new bathroom. The last bit of
integument has been peeled away and the original skeleton has been revealed. I peer out
through the dark ribs of the outer walls. Drafts of air blow through, caressing my face
and torso with the scents of sap and dandelions. I see grass and the gray light of day
through the pores. Beneath the dim sound of hammering, I hear old wounds softly beginning to close.