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SUGAR NINE: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

by

emily lee dyer

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

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GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT

SUGAR NINE: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

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This collection of short stories explores the different ways women tolerate violence in exchange for some form of validation. The narratives focus on women and the reverberations of small moments which carry violent mass. While the violence occasionally includes physical elements, the collection is more concerned with the ways women accept emotional and psychological violence—specifically from men. Themes, motifs and symbols from the Clytie-Helios myth are threaded throughout the collection as well as a concern for space and touch, art and the creation of art, silence and voice. All of these elements involve control as the women characters in these stories struggle to resist their own objectification. A critical introduction which explains how form and language amplify story precedes the collection.

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This collection is dedicated to all my sisters.

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INTRODUCTION

I grew up in a small house in a small neighborhood in an old California town, a horse ranch across the street with a cow pasture behind its corrals. I watched stories unfold in my front yard in silence, in seasons, in the same way I watched shadows move across the grass. Stories whose plots were incremental, almost imperceptible changes or the stark reality of unexpected consequences. When it rained, I watched the cool silver of the creek expand across the sand of the ranch. I watched it recede leaving mud and bent sticks. I watched horses break—from wild and beautiful to obedient and expensive. I watched them as they trotted in circles on the end of a rope, as they jumped gates, as they stood in their corrals with their heads over the fence. Sometimes the cows escaped and came charging down my street. I watched them from the top of my swing set. When they reached the end of the road, my neighbor's yard, they stopped and stood there, huddled together. Cowboys came and quietly rounded them up.

I grew up, I went to school, and I've found that I tell my stories like the stories I saw in my front yard. I find myself seeing these same stories in the people I meet and the relationships I witness: the consequences behind a dropped hand, the meaning in closed eyes, the stories behind the words. I find myself writing stories that reflect the way the creek slowly rose to a river, then receded, leaving a wreckage of water-damaged debris. The most fascinating stories to me are the ones that explore the consequences of small, seemingly innocuous events in human relationships.

The stories in *Sugar Nine* are written as a study of these kinds of moments. Their narratives focus on women and the reverberations of small moments that carry violent mass. While the violence may include physical elements, I am more concerned with the

consequences of women choosing to be silent, choosing to allow unmet or lowered expectations, failing to take a stand, or objectifying themselves in return for some form of validation from men.

Because of the stress involved with psychological violence, I initially planned on having more short-shorts in the collection. I was interested in the short-short form among other things because of its ability to focus in on one moment or crises. In the introduction to *Sudden Fiction International*, Charles Baxter points out that in the short-short, “Stress is applied immediately and efficiently to [the] characters; one might almost call this the fiction of sudden stress” (20). I’ve found, however, that while this quality is true of short-short fiction, the longer story can also magnify stress. The magnification is achieved through intense language and an attention to the idea of silence and restraint. What is not said is just as important as what is said. In this way even a longer story can resemble the tension of a short-short or even a poem. While I thought I would have mainly short-shorts, textured with longer stories, I have found that the stories I needed to tell needed to be longer because their tensions demanded expansion. The finished collection is mainly longer stories contrasting with a few short shorts. I see the short-shorts as accentuating the longer stories with bursts of tension. This contrast of forms and the expansion and contraction of stress layers the violence in the same way growth rings are created in a tree. Each ring tells a different story—wide rings and narrow rings depending on the climate.

I see what Baxter identifies in short-shorts as also true of the stories in my collection. Baxter points out that in very short stories the focus is on the reaction of the character. In a collection concerned with choices I find this an important form because I

believe even a reaction is a choice. Baxter says, “Reactions are not decisions, exactly, or choices; they tend to be automatic. Perhaps they are unconscious choices. But they tell us more about the way people as a whole behave than that particular individual behaves” (20). The short-short then allows a study of how a reaction happens and what it reveals about not just the one character but humanity. While my stories are longer than a short-short, I do see them as achieving the intense focus on the reaction or the unconscious choice. Recognition depends on being intimately involved in the character’s thought processes—a quality which can be intensified in the short story.

Reaction and choice—conscious or unconscious—are significant to this collection because of the violence against women. Most of the violence includes a choice by the woman being violated—a choice to stay with an abusive man, a choice to dress a certain way for attention, a choice to exchange sex for validation. The choice in no way justifies the violence, but I am interested in why the choice is ever made. My hope is that the stories in this collection expose the way our own motivations sometimes betray us as women.

The short story form allows for this exposure of the moment. A choice can be studied from different angles and in slow motion, because every moment in a short story carries so much significance. Speaking of novels, Flannery O’Connor quotes John Peale Bishop in her discussion of creating literature:

“You can’t say Cezanne painted apples and a tablecloth and have said what Cezanne painted.” The novelist makes his statements by selection, and if he is any good, he selects every word for a reason, every detail for a reason, every incident for a reason, and arranges them in a certain time-

sequence for a reason. He demonstrates something that cannot possibly be demonstrated any other way than with a whole novel. (75)

What is true of novels is also true of short stories except the story is exponentially focused because there is less space, less time, and fewer words. The intensity of the story is heightened because the space is so compact.

As in poetry, the language in a short-short must function to its maximum ability. In writing the stories in this collection, I actively seek to use language, as Margaret Atwood suggested once in an interview, “as a lens rather than a mirror” (“Articulating” 68). This language relies on a concentration of simile, personification, metaphor, sound, rhythm, image and an attention to syntax. I’ve found the result of this kind of language creates what Marilynne Robinson calls a “tensile strength” (“Marilynne” 123). Language which compresses emotion creates an inherent tension or tensile strength, and allows the audience to see the world differently.

This theory is influenced by my interest in the sculptor Andy Goldsworthy. Goldsworthy constructs sculptures from materials he finds in a natural environment *within* that environment. His art is a *rearrangement* of materials already in plain view. His rearrangements not only result in striking works of art, but they force us to see the natural world in a different way. Goldsworthy rarely uses tools besides his own hands. He examines and places. He reorganizes. He creates shocking patterns out of the most ordinary natural elements: leaves or icicles or petals. He simply moves them into place.

Like poems or short-shorts, language in short stories can achieve this same effect. Different aspects of life can be magnified or arranged in a way that the reader sees them differently for the very first time. My stories focus on everyday experiences and common

emotions: cutting an apple, getting ready to go out, drawing. My materials are not leaves, rocks, sticks or mud. My materials are those of every writer, words and everyday occurrences, but I use them to compress and concentrate experience. My hope is that the stories in this collection provoke readers to see things they haven't seen before because they rearrange ordinary moments into the extraordinary.

I seek to write stories whose meaning is found in their art. Marilyn Robinson said:

I consider a novel to be more like a painting than it is like a newspaper.

It's a *made* object, an art object, although I know it sounds pretentious when I put it that way. But I can't think of another phrase that will do[...]

Art is interested in the function of creating order because it feels it has discovered an order that inheres in the world[...]

So, when you write a book or a poem, you make certain choices of your elements. You present them, open them out, if you will, showing their coherency[...]

Art has meaning. But that's a very different thing from a statement of meaning or a 'message.' ("Marilynne" 126-27)

Within the stories of this collection I seek to use and organize language so that is not just telling a story, but telling the story because of its art.

I discovered how language creates this kind of art in high school when I was assigned to read, *The Sound and the Fury*. I could not get enough of the mystery in Faulkner's sentences.

Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see the hitting. (1)

*A face reproachful tearful an odor of camphor and of tears a voice
weeping steadily and softly beyond the twilit door the twilight-colored
smell of honeysuckle. (95)*

She smelled like trees. (72)

I read the book when I was seventeen. I still can't get the sentences out of my head.

It wasn't until college that I found the root of this mystery in poetry. All my life poetry was fascinating and obscure. Like looking in a window I couldn't quite see through. I felt like J. Alfred Prufrock's yellow fog, always circling the house but never going inside. I didn't understand it, but the words kept me wondering.

For an assignment in a contemporary literature class, my teacher asked me to memorize a poem from Robert Hass' collection *Praise*. I picked "Weed" because it was short. Only twenty-four lines. Five times I read out loud: *Horse is Lorca's word, fierce as wind, or melancholy, gorgeous, Andalusian* (33). I didn't understand. The words made no sense. What do Spanish horses have to do with weeds?

But the sixth time—*melancholy, gorgeous, Andalusian*—I understood. The words were crystal clear. *Fierce*. They made sense. I realized poetry is about the experience. It's about delight in language—the texture of words, the rhythms, the unexpected simile.

Poetry is about taking your sweet time tasting each word.

It wasn't long before I realized my favorite books were doing the same thing.

When asked what she thought made her fiction good, Toni Morrison said:

The language, only the language. The language must be careful and must appear effortless. It must not sweat. It must suggest and be provocative at the same time. It is the thing that black people love so much—the saying

of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them. It's a love, a passion. Its function is like a preacher's: to make you stand up out of your seat, make you lose yourself and hear yourself.

(123)

The genius of storytelling is the language. The language must stir.

In her essay "Reading Blind," Margaret Atwood explains the ridiculous difficulty of telling a story to a child. Children have short attention spans. They do not want to hear a boring story and they don't want to hear a story you don't really want to tell:

They will not put up with your lassitude or boredom: if you want their full attention, you must give them yours. You must hold them with your glittering eye or suffer the pinches and whispering. You need the Ancient Mariner element, Scheherazade element: a sense of urgency. *This is the story I must tell; this is the story you must hear.* (1425-26)

Atwood argues *all* literature needs the "Ancient Mariner" storytelling element. A writer can't tell any good story without imaginative power and imaginative necessity. In prose, poetic devices, such as personification, metaphor, simile, imagery, sound and rhythm, lend their glittering eye but they also offer their glittering voice. It's this glittering voice which ignites the reader's imagination. It's this glittering voice which compels the reader to ask questions and engage the story.

For a story with glittering voice there must be an immersion in language. Atwood explains, "You can't write poetry unless you're willing to immerse yourself in the language—not just in words, but in words of certain potency. It's like learning a foreign language" ("Articulating" 29). The process is the same for writing prose. Writing with a

concentration of metaphor, rhythm and personification, in prose, is like speaking a different language. The author must think about the world differently to write with these devices well. The foreignness of the result produces a voice which speaks through language instead of plot. It is the poetic compression in prose sentences which creates an inherent sense of mystery and the “tensile strength” Robinson discusses.

Tensile strength in prose allows readers to experience story in unexpected ways. The compression creates questions. Consider the beginning paragraph of *Tuck*

Everlasting:

The first week of August hangs at the very top of summer, the top of the live-long year, like the highest seat of a Ferris wheel when it pauses in its turning. The weeks that come before are only a climb from balmy spring, and those that follow a drop to the chill of autumn, but the first week of August is motionless, and hot. It is curiously silent, too, with blank white dawns and glaring noons, and sunsets smeared with too much color. Often at night there is lightning, but it quivers all alone. There is not thunder, no relieving rain. These are strange and breathless days, the dog days, when people are led to do things they are sure to be sorry for after. (*Babbitt* 3)

How does the author get mystery to leak out of every sentence? It is the language. The language in this opening paragraph not only creates a distinct voice, but establishes a palpable tension. The same tension of a hot August night. The tension is as Chekhov says, “grasped at once—in a second” (1447) because it grows out of the language.

Chekhov argues “a true description of Nature should be very brief and have a character of relevance” (1446). Nature is animated when the author is “not squeamish about

employing comparisons of her phenomena with ordinary human activities” (1447).

Creating voice is the same as creating setting. It grows organically out of the language.

Atwood describes this kind of voice as, “A speaking voice, like the singing voice in music that moves not across space, across the page, but through time. Surely every written story is, in the final analysis, a score for voice. Those little black marks on the page mean nothing without their retranslation in to sound” (“Reading” 1423). The words on the page and how they combine, act as a catalyst for meaning in the reader’s mind. The sound *includes* the images it carries within the mind of the reader. When voice is well-written, images are vivid and transmit the story in the senses. *Melancholy, gorgeous, Andalusian*. Three words which carry sound and also color, texture, smell, and taste in the connotative memories their sound recalls.

The result of voice with its sound and images makes the language, as Robinson says, taut with strength. Consider these sentences from the short story, “Letters in the Snow” by Melanie Rae Thon:

At twenty, I let a doctor scoop me out. *Better this way*, I thought. I let a nurse flush me. Gone, this fast, my second child. *You were so small and you slept in a little dollhouse forever and ever*. My children! One walks the earth and one I carry still: she’s a fist in the heart, a pulse in the pelvis. She could be anywhere, any age, her spirit returned in any body. *Be kind*, she says, *you owe me*. And I am kind. (267)

The music in these sentences evokes a physical response because they are strung tight with images and connotations. It’s fear that strings the voice so tight. When William Faulkner won the Nobel Prize he said a writer must teach himself to be afraid. Without

this fear and this risk, “his griefs grieve on no universal bones, leaving no scars. He writes not of the heart but of the glands” (“Human” 245). *She smelled like trees*. Faulkner leaves a scar. *I let a doctor scoop me out*. Melanie Rae Thon leaves a scar.

Fear creates originality. Robert Frost explains the necessity of originality in writing poetry: “Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting” (12). The originality must come from the poem itself. A story too must ride on its own melting. Originality comes when an author has, as Atwood says, the Ancient Mariner element. The story must be told—it can’t help but melt. The result is sublime. Poetic devices facilitate the flash, the moment you can’t get back.

For this trigger, language must be clear. It requires no extravagance. Raymond Carver argues anything, “a chair, a window curtain, a fork a stone, a woman’s earring,” can have “immense, even startling power,” if described with precise language (104). In stories where *telling the story* means *telling the plot*, the words are as Carver says, “blurred” with imprecision and inaccuracy. The lure of finding out what happens next causes the readers’ eyes to slide over the words—there is no internal change (104). The result isn’t art. It’s a manipulation.

Willa Cather said:

To keep an idea living, intact, tinged with all its original feeling, its original mood, preserving in it all the ecstasy which attended its birth, to keep it so all the way from the brain to the hand and transfer it on paper a living thing with color, odor, sound, life all in it, that is what art means, that is the greatest of all the gifts of the gods. (qtd. in Slotte 109)

Any fiction which takes advantage of this “gift” takes advantage of the devices used in poetry—particularly the contrast of image and silence. Ezra Pound said, “Use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something” (64). Poetry is potent because of its restraint. The images are real because they leave room for our own experience. The poem relies on the readers’ ability to make connections. Robert Hass’ words, *melancholy*, *gorgeous*, *Andalusian*, mean nothing without the readers’ experience with them. Perhaps there are specific memories, perhaps there is only the effect of the sound—but the poem depends on the readers’ ability to participate with the words and the images. If there is a way to purely communicate, poetry comes the closest because of its reliance on the image—the result is somehow both universal and intimately personal. There is no reason prose can’t have this same quality. Poetic devices create images with weight. Color, yes, but taste, sound, texture, smell. The author chooses the details—the pattern—the places to leave dark, the places to let light shine. The result is a three-dimensional art.

Robinson describes the artistry of this process: “When you find that you have a sufficient language for experience in your mind, you can say something about it. The experience is very intense, very dreamlike. It is, I suppose, an aesthetic experience—the pleasure of beauty” (“Marilynne” 125). I heard her read and speak about her writing recently and she said her novel, *Housekeeping*, is a product of her desire to push language into this delight in beauty. Consider the voice as the narrator describes her grandmother’s parenting style:

She had always known a thousand ways to circle them all around with what must have seemed like grace. She knew a thousand songs. Her bread

was tender and her jelly was tart, and on rainy days she made cookies and applesauce. In the summer she kept roses in a vase on the piano, huge, pungent roses, and when the blooms ripened and the petals fell, she put them in a tall Chinese jar, with cloves and thyme and sticks of cinnamon.

(11-12)

Every word has a purpose. The reader can *feel* grace in the images, *taste* it in the sound. The words are not commodities thrown down because they sound nice and look pretty on the page. The voice in *Housekeeping* creates a visceral tone of beauty because the words and sentences function in its meaning. The sounds of the words, the images, and the rhythm create a tone of beauty which is almost edible. Voice is a real instrument to meaning. Robinson reminds us that sometimes “we forget about the potency of syntax, its amazing ability to capture meaning” (“Intensifier” 181). Syntax builds voice. Voice contributes to meaning. It can be the connective tissue between plot and art. Voice captures and holds not with the promise of the resolution but the *art* of the resolution. The emphasis is not on *what happens* but in *how* and *why*.

The voice in *The Sound and the Fury* captures because of the questions it compels the reader to ask. Who is Caddy? Why does she smell like trees? Why does she sometimes smell like honeysuckle? In books like *The Sound and the Fury* and *Housekeeping* the language is the melody because the natural result of well-used poetic devices is an irresistible song. For this reason, Li-Young Lee prefers poetry. He explains “In poetry, you’re being used by language. Language is the master in poetry, it masters you. But in prose, it feels to me, you master the language in order to talk about something else” (56). I believe language can be let loose in prose as well. It results in what David

Huddle calls “Mega-Prose,” a style whose devices plunge us, “so deeply and so immediately into experience that much of what we’re doing when we’re reading is trying to figure out what the hell is happening in the story. This is the ultimate degree of intimacy between reader and story: the reader has been pulled so far into the story that he is struggling to see the outside of it” (154). Mega-Prose uses poetic devices to the extreme but when it succeeds the result is powerful.

Sandra Cisneros uses it in a short story which begins with this paragraph:

Lucy Angiano, Texas girl who smells like corn, like Frito Bandito chips, like tortillas, something like that warm smell of *nixtamal* or bread the way her head smells when she’s leaning close to you over a paper cut-out doll or on the porch when we are squatting over marbles trading this pretty crystal that leaves a blue star on your hand for that giant cat-eye with a grasshopper green spiral in the center like the juice of bugs on the windshield when you drive to the border, like the yellow blood of butterflies. (3)

Why use poetic devices in prose? Li-Young Lee said of his attempt to write a novel, “The more poetry, the more eternity in it” (111). Imagery is the most intimate way to connect the reader to the plot. From the start of Cisneros’ paragraph, the reader is connecting and asking questions and interacting with the text: why does this character know about *nixtamal*, why is she playing with paper dolls and marbles, how does she know butterfly blood is yellow? Considering syntax and its ability to build voice, why are all these images in one sentence?

While I occasionally use what Huddle defines as mega-prose in this collection, I am always concerned with using language to connect the reader to the story. I am concerned always with revealing the emotional plot through the language I choose. Sometimes this language is clear and simple; sometimes it is complex and demanding. In writing this collection, I have learned that language is not just a tool, but a part of the story.

In “The Moonlight,” language heightens the damage of the climactic moment. In this story, Lucy is slapped without warning by a man she respects. This is a violent moment by any definition, however, the language of the narrator puts into sharp focus another moment—more insidious and dangerous because it keeps the former unspoken. When Lucy lets the man touch again, the narrator says: “Jay Carver dropped his fingers from her face and slid his hand down towards her waist where he touched the small of her back. Lucy let him” (58). The first sentence slides down the spines of the readers with its length and series of physical movements. The second is as acquiescent as the moment and literally illustrates the passiveness of Lucy’s choice—three words, the last word ending with a soft exhaling of breath. It is this resignation, this trade of rationalized violence for the assurance of physical validation which I find most disturbing.

“The Moonlight” is the only story that includes physical violence. I realized after writing the story that I was more interested in the different ways women tolerate emotional violence in their lives and relationships. This tolerance, rationalization and acceptance is what I found compelling and necessary to explore. The slap became a symbol for other ways men abuse women: control, disrespect, misunderstanding, underestimation, and manipulation. I wanted to write a collection which would explore

why women are willing to tolerate any kind of violence in exchange for validation from men.

When I finished the last story for the collection I found the stories were much more complex than just illustrations of psychological violence against women. There are threads of myth running throughout the collection, and in addition to these threads, a conscious concern with seeing and being seen, art and creation of art, space and touch, and silence and voice, all of which weave into themes of control.

The second story I wrote for the collection, “Clytie,” came from the Clytie-Helios myth about the nymph who falls in love with the sun and follows him until she turns into a flower. Clytie believes if Helios sees her again he will love her. The literal waiting for validation, so critical in this myth, exhibits itself in different ways throughout the collection. Almost every story involves an element of seeing or wanting to be seen. There is an interesting element of control between who sees and who wants to be seen. To be seen or recognized is a form of validation. Those who see have control. In the myth, Clytie willingly gives up control of her own validation when she decides to wait passively for Helios to look at her again. “Clytie” is a monologue of what happens to the mind when a woman puts herself in this position. In this case, Clytie’s mindset literally changes her physical being in an attempt to be seen. She turns into a heliotrope, which by definition is a plant which follows the sun in order to maximize its internal functions. This is a beautiful metaphor for a phenomenon which happens in our society more than many people are willing to admit. All too frequently, women change themselves in order to be recognized.

Seeing as a function of control is seen in various ways throughout the collection. In “By Very Cold Water,” seeing is important in the creation of art, and being able to create art is a way of having knowledge. The ability to transform “seeing” into a medium of art is a kind of power because it involves being able to convert a physical form into definable lines—this process involves evaluation and judgment and for Cora, loss of innocence. For her, in the moment she “sees” through touching Danny, she loses control. The story “Sugar Nine” shows a woman who tries to take control of her situation by constantly *watching* for her husband. This control ultimately destroys her because while she keeps careful control of where and how she watches, she loses control over other everyday choices: interacting with her daughter, eating food, finding happiness without her husband. “The Kiss” is a short-short where the protagonist literally sees an object of control, a key which she can physically touch and literally swallows. These stories show the different ways women attempt to take control—attempts which sometimes fail, and sometimes contribute to the violence.

Control is also involved in idea of art and the creation of art throughout the collection. There are many allusions to other myths which correlate with the Clytie-Helios story, or illustrate the way women are seen and immortalized in art by men—in painting, sculpture and writing. In addition, many of the characters within the stories create some form of art. I see this as an attempt by the characters to push against being seen as creations of men, an attempt for women to create themselves. Whether it is in drawing, sculpture, imagination, finding water, dreams, or building a glass room, the women attempt self-validation through creation. The characters react to the opportunity to create in different ways; each reaction is a different layer in the study of how women

choose to see themselves. In “Clytie” the protagonist literally creates herself into another form, a form she sees as more desirable to her source of validation. Cora, in “By Very Cold Water,” resists being drawn by men by turning her face during practice sessions. In “Still-Dances” creation is simultaneously an act of control and a loss of control. The main character has precise control over her body during the photo-shoots, but she loses herself in the obsession with an art which objectifies her body.

The women of the collection are acutely aware of their surroundings, especially concerning men. Space and physical touch are crucial because the women use these elements to attempt to control their environment. Sometimes the characters willingly give up their space and sometimes they don’t—it is the reactions to these situations which force them to make a choice. In “Water in the Snow,” Maren tolerates the invasion of her space because of others’ expectations. She is expected to marry and to let men take care of her. Her talent in finding water is her way of resisting this protection. She can help society simply by being herself—however even this is objectified by the men around her. Michael sees her as a miracle, something to be worshipped, John sees her as something in pain, something which needs protection—neither really loves her. “In the Mirror” shows a woman’s dissatisfaction with the assumptive nature of the violation of her space. The woman lies on the bed at the request of her husband and is suddenly very uncomfortable with a gesture, his arm around her neck, which in other contexts is very dangerous and violent. In all cases, the characters fail to retake their space. It is this failure to react which allows the violence to occur. Sometimes this violence is as disturbing as allowing a man to touch them again, or as frustrating as allowing a man to continue to misunderstand and disregard them, or as disconcerting as objectifying themselves.

Space is also intimately connected with the characters' voices. Characters use their silence as control and as a barrier. Because they sense they cannot say anything that expresses or corrects their inner stress, they choose silence. They do not have to answer questions, they do not have to say polite greetings, they do not have to talk. Maren uses this in "Water in the Snow." She does not know how to explain herself and so she lets the men around her assume. She finds control in the choice to *let* men undervalue her and overprotect her. Cora also uses silence as a defense against a man who both attracts and intimidates her. When she chooses to stop using it as a weapon of resistance, her space is violated. In this case, she willingly touches him without realizing the consequences—an emotional connection which can neither be supported nor broken.

Myth is important to this collection because the stories are still relevant in our society, in dangerous ways. The Clytie-Helios myth does not scientifically explain the behavior of flowers which follow the sun, but how many women make themselves into inanimate objects in their obsession with men who have rejected them? Also how many women are obsessed with being "seen" by men? Women objectify themselves every day. Myths are an attempt to create understanding, and the stories in this collection are also an attempt at understanding the kind of elements involved in the violence women allow in their relationships.

My task in writing the stories of *Sugar Nine* is to accomplish what the women in the story fail to achieve. I give these women characters a space, a voice, and recognition for their stories. The stories create an art which consciously exposes the way men—and women—objectify women. The objectification allows the violence. Language and form are critical to the collection because it is what gives these characters their story. The short

story form can put their subtle moments of violation on a pedestal. The audience can see the horror of a hand on the small of a girls' back, can experience the violence in an unclasped bra and can feel the grotesque obsession in a pose. The result is a collection which screams beautiful words and images at the top of its lungs. Like the song of a siren, the scream is irresistible, but it tells of devastating pain.

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Cumaean Sybil

I will tell you a story in a grain of sand.

I will tell you dreams from the side of a water drop.

I will sing you a song without my tongue.

SUGAR NINE

I saw him leave. I was in the corner of the yard planting sunflower seeds. The dirt was dry and not dark enough but they'd grow tall anyways. I scratched into the dirt half my finger deep. I let the seed drop and covered it up with the sandy soil. I had three holes left when I heard the screen door open. I turned just my head so I saw him leave over my left shoulder. He didn't take a suitcase but I knew he was leaving. Mom didn't know it. She didn't ever know it. I knew. He wasn't coming back. He got in his car just like going to the store. But I knew. I knew because he'd always say to me, "Goodbye Sugar Eight." He always called me 'Sugar' plus my age. So the day he left over my left shoulder he should have said, "Goodbye Sugar Nine." But he didn't say anything. He looked at me going down the porch steps. He saw me sitting in the dirty garden. It was my birthday. He was supposed to say, "Goodbye Sugar Nine." But he turned and got into his car and he drove away. I planted nine sunflowers. I was going to plant ten but by the time my mom came out of the house I was finished. I liked nine. I liked nine years. I liked math. I liked three squared.

I could tell my mom thought he'd gone to the store. Maybe the hardware store. She came over in her bare feet to look at my seed mounds. "A circle, Hayley?" she asked. I looked at the half-moons of pink on her white toes so pretty in the dirt. "I like circles," I said.

"You'll have to water them. It won't rain much this summer."

"I know."

She went back into the house. The sunflowers would grow so tall it would make a fort. I saw a picture of it once in a magazine. The magazine had glasses of lemonade and

frosted cookies on the front cover and inside the photograph of the sunflower shelter spread over two pages. In the picture, the walls of sunflowers were crowded with other plants, there were kids having a tea party inside. I wanted a fort. A fortress of shade.

My mom came back out with a watering can. I sat there in the middle of the circle while she let the water pour out in thin streams. The water flattened the mounds.

She weeded the tomato garden. She raked around the peach tree. I watched her cut roses.

She only cut the pinks and oranges. She never cut the lavender or white. She said they smell better outside. We never grew red roses. "That way," she always said, "your dad will have something to bring me."

She took the roses inside. She came out and mowed the grass lawn in front. She mowed the grass in back. She mowed the lawn barefoot, with her hair hanging down around her head and just above her shoulders. She always wore her hair down. It was smooth and blond and never got in her eyes. It was because she used to be a dancer. Nothing got in her way when she moved, not even her hair. She was tall and tan and when she mowed the lawn it looked like she was doing something beautiful. I wondered if I could ever look like her. She always said I looked like my dad. I had dark hair like him, but they both had blue eyes, they both had nice faces. I could never tell.

After the lawn, she watered the vegetable garden and the roses. She watered the purple flowers down by the road. She went back inside. The yard smelled like wet rocks and sun.

I sat in my circle of mounds. Russian Giant (*Helianthus giganteus*). The package said each plant would produce one bloom. The small lettering on the back said they'd

grow to be three meters tall, and if I wanted to save the seeds I could cut the head off and hang it somewhere dark and dry. The package said they'd come out in eleven days. I wondered if the seeds were soaking up the water already. I wondered what was happening on their insides, I wondered if they were growing yet.

I looked down the road. I wondered where my dad went. I wanted him to come back with red roses and tools to fix the leaking sink in the bathroom.

*

The sunflowers grew tall but they didn't make a fort. I could still see through their thick stems: the house, the road, the tomatoes, the roses. He never came back.

All that summer my mom let her hair grow long. She said he always loved her hair long. He always said when it was long it looked like the sun. She said she shouldn't have cut it. She said he would come back when it got long.

But his car didn't come back when I started the fifth grade, or Christmas, or Valentine's day, when her hair grew past her waist. In the mornings when I walked past her door on my way to school it spilled itself over the pillows like ribbons of water.

*

After school one day I walked to the restaurant where my mom worked after my dad left. I went around to the back door because she worked in the kitchen. There was a man standing in the doorway smoking. He was enormous and his apron was splotted red and brown from the sauces. The smoke mixed with the smell of tomatoes and made me sneeze.

"Is Clara working?" Her name sounded strange in my mouth.

“You’re her girl, right?” he said.

I looked up at him.

“You got all her face didn’t you?”

I didn’t know what to say.

“Even prettier,” he said and stepped outside.

I could see her when he moved. Her hair was tied up in a bun even though she never tied her hair back at home. There was a net over her hair. Her face looked different—like she was naked. She couldn’t see me. A man was yelling something at her.

“Mom,” I called out, but she couldn’t hear me over the roar of the fans and the dishwasher.

I turned around and looked up at the man. “I’ll come back later,” I said.

“My name’s Hess.”

I knew I was supposed to say something but I couldn’t think of it.

I went next door and bought an ice cream. I ate it in the park and waited for her. But when she walked out in her blue jacket and black pants, hugging her purse, I didn’t think she was my mom. I followed her down the street. She walked slow and never looked behind her. I thought about what Hess said. I decided I didn’t believe him. My mom always said I looked like my dad.

At the peach tree she stopped. She pulled her hair out of the bun then she went into the house.

She started sitting on the front steps after work. I’d sit with her sometimes. I told her stories about school. She asked me to measure her hair. She asked me what I thought

it looked like. I told her it was the color of uncooked spaghetti, the color of gold Christmas tinsel, the color of marigold silk. I told her it looked like lemonade, honey, gold necklaces, canary wings, chiffon icing. I never said it looked like the sun. I didn't want her to think he was coming back. She sat in the grass in her bare feet. Her shoes were the first things to come off after work. She'd let her hair down by the peach tree and take her shoes off in the kitchen. I'd make her a ham sandwich for dinner and take it out to her. If I sat by her, sometimes she'd eat it.

*

One day, she walked out and sat on the lawn. She said she could see better from there. She sat in her bare feet and looked down the road. I brought a sandwich out with a blanket but she said she liked the grass, so I sat on the blanket. I lay down and looked up at the sky until it turned purple. Before I went inside I put the blanket around her shoulders.

*

"Come to my house tonight," my best friend, Susette, said one day while we were walking home from school.

"Sure," I said. I thought about how my mom had gone to the grocery store a couple days earlier. There would be enough pasta for spaghetti and we'd have lots of sauce.

"Did you see Steve Black and Sharon at lunch today?" Susette asked.

"Yeah," I said. I thought about the pile of clothes in my closet—I'd need to do some wash.

"She's so lucky."

“Yeah,” I said as we turned the corner to our street. I remembered the hot water and wondered what was wrong with it. “How late can I come over tonight?”

“Just whenever you want,” Susette said, “I really want to make some cookies. Do you have any chocolate chips?”

“No.”

“I’ll tell my mom to get some for us.”

We were at my house. My mom was sitting cross-legged in the grass. Her hair was down and the ends folded over themselves onto the lawn. Her bangs were too long and in her face.

“Hi, Mrs. Stuart.”

My mom didn’t answer and she didn’t turn her head or her eyes from the road. I thought about where the scissors were inside the house.

“See you tonight Hayley,” Susette said.

I turned to walk up the steps to my house. I liked walking home with Susette because she never asked why my mom was always sitting on the lawn.

*

I was sitting at the kitchen table eating spaghetti the afternoon I realized my mom wasn’t getting better. I saw her walking down the street in her work clothes. I saw her stop at the peach tree, take down her hair, take off her shoes and sit in the dirt. I got up and walked outside to her. The tree was full with peaches. Some of them had already fallen to the ground. The air around the tree stung sweet with the smell of the fruit.

“Mom, what are you doing?” I asked.

“Just sitting, it’s so nice out today,” she said without looking at me.

“Why don’t you sit over on the grass?”

“Its fine right here. I can see better.” She leaned forward so she could see around my legs.

“What can you see better Mom?”

“The road.”

“Why the road Momma?” I didn’t want the neighbors to see her out there in the dirt and rotting peaches. “Momma please, let’s go over to the grass, I’ll get the blanket.”

She didn’t answer me or look at me. She looked down the road.

I went around the back of the house to get the rake. I raked the leaves around my mom and the overripe peaches. I pulled the stragglng weeds. I was thirteen. Sugar
Thirteen.

*

The first time someone said my mom was crazy I was in my 9th grade PE class. Susette and I were walking around the curve of the track as slow as possible. We had to run the straight parts but Mr. Riley let us walk the curves. Susette and I were walking together when Sharon and her friend Natalie came up behind us. Sharon and Natalie were tall and wore make-up and looked cute even in their PE uniforms.

“Hey girls!” they said together. Their voices sounded like a party. I wanted to go to that party. So did Susette. We both laughed. “Hi Sharon, hey Natalie,” we said together.

“You all had class with Ms. Devinham, this morning didn’t you?” Sharon asked.

“Yeah,” Susette and I said together again.

“I think she had a hang-over. She looked bad. I don’t think she even brushed her hair and she smelled terrible. She kept having to leave the classroom,” Sharon said.

Natalie laughed. “She’s so gross.”

“No one should ever leave the house looking that bad,” Sharon said.

“The sad thing is she doesn’t have to be hung-over to be ugly,” Natalie said.

Susette laughed. “It’s sad.”

I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t laugh. I liked Ms. Devinham. Even when she came to school hung-over.

Sharon looked over at me. “I saw your mom yesterday.”

The other girls were quiet.

“You did? Where?”

“In her usual spot,” Sharon said. Natalie didn’t even try to contain her laugh.

“Your mom is crazy.”

My stomach dropped.

But Natalie asked, “What’s it like having a crazy mom?”

My stomach felt everything I should have said. I calculated how much time I had before we had to start running again. I wondered if I could get away with saying nothing.

Susette wasn’t laughing, but when I said, “At least she’s not as ugly as Ms. Devinham,” Susette laughed and said, “Just crazier.”

Sharon and Natalie and Susette all laughed. I laughed too, even though it made my stomach feel like a giant rock.

Sharon said, “Hey do you want to come to Steve Black’s party this weekend with us?”

I let Susette say yes for me.

*

I don't know why my dad left. I always imagined he went somewhere very different from where we lived, but I thought I saw him one time. He was standing downtown at a street light with a tall woman with sleek dark hair. She was wearing high heels and he had a tie on. I could almost smell her perfume from the across the street. It smelled like exotic flowers from places I couldn't imagine—Australia, New Zealand, Zimbabwe, Morocco. They weren't really standing at the street light. He was holding her at the streetlight. He had his hand all in the back of her short dark hair and one arm around her waist. He kissed her cheek and her forehead and whispered something in her ear. When the light turned green he led her across the street with his hand on her back. I watched them walk into a fancy restaurant—the kind with cloth napkins, heavy silverware and lighted candles. Susette and I were going to the movies. She didn't remember him anymore. She watched them as they crossed the street. We watched together as he opened the door for the woman and followed her into the fancy restaurant. She could only see his back so she couldn't see he looked like me. Susette said, "Someday I'm going to marry a man who can take me to expensive restaurants."

*

We went to lots of parties with Sharon and Natalie and we went to lots of parties even after they got tired of being our friends. Susette went for the boys. I went to get out of my house. Darkness filled with loud music. Bonfire lit cigarettes. Someone playing a guitar.

Susette spent hours planning what she would wear. I didn't have anything but my jeans and a few t-shirts. I watched boys over other girls' shoulders. I never expected any attention.

I was surprised the night Steve Black found me sitting in the back of the ring of kids around the fire pit. He held my hand and I let him pull me into the woods away from the group. He didn't say anything. He stopped as soon as we couldn't see the campfire any more.

He was standing so close and touching my hair I guessed I should feel something. I felt nothing. A nothing that made me feel sick. I took a step back. I almost turned around. I should have walked away but then he said, "Hayley, you're so pretty."

He said, "Hayley, I can't ever get your eyes out of my head."

He said, "Hayley, I like you."

He said, "You're beautiful."

He said, "Hayley."

"Hayley," he said, "come here."

It sounded like "Sugar Nine."

CLYTIE

For Lindsay

Green grows from my fingernails now. My hands have been too much in the dirt. The translucent slithers ache for the sun. They make my hands more beautiful than ever. He will love them. I think they are his favorite color. They are becoming more beautiful than ever and I don't look at them because the sun is in the sky and I watch him with my blue eyes. My beautiful blue eyes. I plucked my lashes so I can see between the bright and the blue and the glare. My lids close in his face but in bright slits I wait for him to see me. To see how beautiful I am becoming. My skin violets with light. He is done with her. Her dark perfume beauty. I don't blame him for wanting to fill her with his light. But he will remember me. I sit here in the open. My head uncovered so he will see the bright in my hair. I am beautiful. He will come for me. Nine days is not long to wait for him. My eyes are burning blue. I don't know if the sun has moved. There is no way to measure. My chin stretches up. The tips of my hair sprinkle warmth on the small of my back. I feel green in the roots of my hair. He will see me soon. He will see me. I am light and growing green. If he sees me he will remember.

I stretch my arms into the sky to relieve the ache in my fingertips.

BY VERY COLD WATER

Every night in her bed Cora listened to the trains scream like banshees and she dreamed of finding combs by the river. In the dreams she knew she wasn't supposed to pick them up, but she couldn't help herself. In the mornings she woke up, she put her hair in a pony tail and drove to Hellgate High School, home of the Knights. She forgot about the combs but she remembered their beautiful shapes.

Sometimes at school Cora felt like she was swimming. And the water was cold. She couldn't keep her head above the water. Sometimes she felt like she was looking straight up, floating with just her face above the water. She wasn't sinking, but then the sky drowned her.

She felt mostly like this when she walked from class to class. She was alone in the ocean. There were friends to talk to and boys who said, "Hi." Their words were tooth-picks. They didn't help her float.

The trains and shapes haunted her all day. She thought about them at the drinking fountain as she watched the water swirl into the drain, she thought about them when the teacher wrote letters on the chalkboard and she drew them in her art classes and in the margins of her notes.

The combs came out as trees, flowers, hair. The sounds of the trains came out as human forms. Always women. She didn't know how to draw a man.

*

She didn't have a problem with boys. She let them ask her out. She was a nice girl. She always said yes.

She watched them look at her. They talked but their words weren't meant to soak into her skin. They were meant to distract, to fill the space between, they weren't made to touch her on the inside. One night a boy leaned in and kissed her. It was supposed to be exciting. It was supposed to make her feel like all the lights on a Ferris wheel. *Like apples on a stick, like make my heart go two-forty six.* Like spinning, like melting, like swimming for the first time.

But he kissed her like he was drawing something ugly on her face.

Maybe it looked like the movies but it made her remember a song she never liked. *Ink, Ink, a bottle of ink, the cork fell off and you stink. Not because you're dirty, not because you're clean, just because you kiss the boys behind the magazine.*

*

Cora noticed Danny Rollins the first day of Mr. Evans' ceramics class spring semester of her sophomore year. He was older and knew about ceramics. Most days Mr. Evans let Danny work on his own projects sculpting or working on the wheel. Some afternoons Mr. Evans made Danny show the class advanced techniques on the wheel: throwing large pots in sections, stack throwing, pulling off the pot, pulling on the pot, faceting, trimming, soft squaring.

The first couple of weeks Cora watched how he took blocks of clay and turned them into pots as big around as old tree trunks. She watched how sometimes they crumpled in on themselves and he would start over again. The first time she saw it she felt sick to her stomach—the round shape so full and smooth looked symmetrical, but something was off and when Danny used his fingers to pull the pot higher, it caved inward. The spinning crumpled the pot into a distorted shape. As Cora practiced

centering her own mound of clay, she watched Danny as he folded the wet disfigured clay, wedged it, kneaded it, and started over.

He made sculptures, strange looking handmade pots and twisted, minotaur forms which were so big they sometimes needed wood boards to hold them up. But Cora liked it most when he made pots. She liked their hollow fullness. She liked thinking about what could fill them up. She'd fill the celadon pots with river stones, she'd fill the glossy red pots with the birds of paradise she saw in pictures of California, she'd fill the black ones with oranges, and the cobalt blue with cat-eye marbles.

One time Cora walked into the glaze closet and found Danny sitting on a stool staring at the shelf with the jars of mineral colors. The closet felt too small with him there, and she felt the lack of space like choking smoke. She didn't know what to say so she didn't look at him. She studied the shelf of glazes like she hadn't seen him in there at all

“Hey,” he said.

“Hi,” she answered, but she didn't look at him. She studied a can of black cobalt oxide. The mixture was black, but after the firing it would be a deep blue.

“What color should I glaze my pot?” he asked.

Cora still didn't look at him. “What is it for?” she asked. There was a sudden rush of heat that ran right through her face to the roots of her hair. It burned her scalp.

Danny was silent for a minute.

Cora's heart felt seasick.

“I'm not sure. Mr. Evans wants me to enter some of my work in one of the galleries this summer.”

“What other colors have you used?”

Danny flicked a piece of paper onto the floor. “All of them.”

The glaze closet was silent, Cora’s heart beat nauseous pulses through her body.

“Come here,” he said.

“What?”

“Look at me.”

“What,” Cora said as she turned to look at him.

“Look at me,” Danny said again as he leaned forward and looked at Cora’s face.

“What color are your eyes?”

“Blue.”

“They’re green. You don’t wear contacts?”

“No.”

Danny leaned closer.

His face was so close Cora could see the clear line around his iris which meant he wore contacts. He was looking for the same line on her eyes.

“You have pretty eyes,” he said. Then he stood up and grabbed a can off of the top shelf and walked out of the room.

Cora felt the nausea rush to her feet, she imagined it oozing out her toes like runny fired-glaze. She stared at the black cobalt oxide until she could move again. She decided on the blue because she knew it looked good even when it looked bad. Cobalt was hard to mess up. It would be fine for her candle holder.

*

The day her ceramics class started the final project of the semester, Cora lugged a new dense block onto her table. The clay always came wet and wrapped in a plastic bag. Cora loved the feel of a new block of clay. The first thing she did was fold the plastic down so she could touch the cold with her fingertips.

“I want you all to look up here as you prepare your clay,” Mr. Evans said turning off the lights. The class dimmed but blue Montana sky poured in through the windows.

Cora looked at her clay. A rectangle lug. Before she could roll and wedge its heavy coldness into a warm ball, she liked to imagine how the grainy smooth would curve and arch into a new shape.

Her teacher started flashing images on the screen in front of their art room. Pictures of classical art flashed amid the various instruments of creation covered in dried clay.

Michelangelo's *David*, Praxiteles' *Hermes*, Rodin's *Kiss*.

“As you know we are starting our final project today, either a face or torso sculpture, you choose.”

Venus de Medici, *Aphrodite of Knidos*, *The Dying Niobid*.

Cora worked the clay as she watched the flashes of sculpture on the screen.

Danny Rollins washing his hands at the sink.

Venus de Milo.

It was just high school, they wouldn't have a model.

Cora wondered if Alexandros of Antioch had a model for his Venus. She looked at her clay and tried to imagine a torso. She couldn't do a bust. Lips were complicated. Eyes weren't even from this planet. A torso she could do. She could make that shape.

*

After school that day she went on a walk by her house. She liked the feel of outside against her face. She liked to see the shapes and lines in outside things. She tried to memorize them any time she walked anywhere.

Cora walked across the grass and dirt and onto the road. There were no sidewalks on North California Street. She studied the house across the street. It was more of a compound: a small square house surrounded by two trailers and an assortment of storage sheds, cars, and stacks of wooden crates. Also chickens. The chickens roamed freely about the fenced dirt yard. The Rivas had lived there since Cora was five. She'd watched their compound grow as their sons grew up and left home. They always came back with something to add to the yard—materials, they said, for their restoration projects—now they were working on an old boat. Cora looked at it in the driveway on its supports. Mr. Riva liked to sit in it on Sunday afternoons, he always waved when he saw Cora.

Their old dog, Rambo, hobbled to the fence on his old legs. Cora crossed the road and scratched his nose which he pushed through the chain link fence. She picked up a stick and trailed it along the fence as she walked north towards the river. It made a sort of music against the metal. Rambo followed along. He could keep up because Cora always walked slow. When she reached the corner of the Riva yard she turned right and followed a trail to the California Street foot bridge. Rambo turned right too and followed his own trail on the other side of the fence.

She never crossed the bridge all the way. There was a park on the other side. She never went. She wasn't allowed when she was little, and now even though the rule didn't exist, she liked the boundary. Rambo barked one time as she walked up the steps onto the

bridge. It was a truss bridge with a tower and supporting cables. Cora liked it because it was painted red and looked like a railway bridge. The maple trees were burning green with spring. The leaves scattered the trail and the water and circled in the Bitterroot Valley wind. Cora walked to the middle of the bridge. She let the wind fold and unfold her hair. It felt good against her bare neck.

Cora stopped underneath the tower. It was steel and painted blue and looked like a tall goal post in the center of the truss bridge. On either side there were semi-circular observation decks. She called it Hellgate in honor of the town's original name, in honor of the bones and bodies the trappers found in the canyon on the east side of the town.

She leaned over the curved railing on the east side and looked down-river. The water rolled and coiled against the bank of an island sandbar just below the bridge. She liked looking at the river where it was strong and undisturbed. Where it looked like the torso of *Venus De Milo*. Smooth and shaped by strong water muscles.

Danny Rollins was fishing on the opposite north bank.

She watched him sitting there holding his rod. She stared at him. From this distance his face didn't look like anything. She couldn't see any lines, just a general round shape. She could draw that. She could draw the easy way his arms cast the line and she could draw the way he stood on the bank, like a John Denver song. She didn't tell anyone she listened to John Denver. It gave her the same feeling as wearing sunglasses. Danny Rollins looked like a John Denver song, standing there with his fishing rod. She stared at him. She tried to memorize his shape by the river.

She never could. He came to the river almost as many days as she came to the bridge. If he saw her, he never made any sign. He looked different by the river. She drew

him in her mind. When she got home she could draw the lines but they made a different person. The guy in the drawing didn't look anything like a John Denver song.

She looked to the opposite bank where she came from. Rambo was waiting for her. She could see him sitting by the fence, shaded by trees. She turned to walk back. A shout made her turn. Danny waved.

Cora looked at him but turned away again when the wind blew her hair in front of her face. She walked back towards Rambo. She went home.

*

“Cora,” her mom said to her when she walked in the door, “Can you help with dinner?”

“What are we having?”

“Tuna casserole and cucumber salad. Can you shred this cheese?”

Cora took the block in her hand. She thought about the ways it felt different than the clay. Besides being orange, it was rubbery and stiff at the same time. She ate some shredded pieces. As she rubbed the block over the grater, she thought about Danny. She felt like she was shredding the lines she'd memorized.

Her mom peeled the cucumbers in the sink next to her.

“When's dad coming home?” Cora asked.

“He should be here soon. How was your day at school?”

“Good.”

“Do you have any dates for this weekend?”

Cora felt the air in her chest wrinkle. “Not yet,” she said.

Her mom always wanted to know if she had dates. Cora didn't like talking about it. If her mom asked, she told her their names and what things they did—the movies, the dinners, the bonfires, the canoe trips, the hiking excursions. She didn't tell her how she felt cold when boys held her hand or put their arm around her. She didn't tell her how she knew how to sit still until they slid their arms and hands off her.

As Cora finished grating the cheese her dad walked in the room.

“How are my girls doing?” he said. He gave Cora a kiss on the cheek and hugged her mom from behind. Cora put the cheese back in the refrigerator. As she closed the door she watched how her dad touched the button on the back of her mom's blouse. He unbuttoned it, and then buttoned it again.

After dinner Cora went to her room. She took out her sketch book. She took out her best pencil. She couldn't remember Danny anymore. She drew a woman with hair so long it wrapped around every part of her body.

*

The first time a boy drew her, Cora didn't know how she should sit. It was Josh Bernhard—she'd known him since kindergarten but she still felt exposed. She felt like a painted nail. Like he was looking at her. He was. He had to. She put one knee up. She could hide behind it. She looked out the window the whole twenty minutes. She looked at the Missoula sky. Earlier that day her history teacher told them *Missoula* came from a Flatfoot Indian word meaning *by very cold water*. She thought about why the Flatfoot tribe would need the word. She wondered about how and when they would use it. A word which means a whole phrase in English. A word so specific. She wondered if there was a word which meant *by very warm water*.

She stared into the October sky. It looked like very cold water.

When Josh was done he asked her to look at the drawing. She told him she needed a drink of water. She went out into the hallway. She didn't want to see the way he saw her.

*

Cora left her project in the ceramics room all summer. Her teacher didn't finish grading by the last day of school, so she left it there. She went by one Friday in September to pick it up after her classes. Danny was there talking to Mr. Evans. Cora said hello to Mr. Evans, ignored Danny and went to the storage room where the projects collected. Bowls, cups, plates, small sculptures, glazed in earth tones which made her think of the desert. She found her sculpture behind a green glazed bowl. She picked it up. She'd glazed it red and titled it *Hellgate Venus*. It wasn't perfect. The torso was elongated and skinny. The shoulder blades lopsided. Breasts small and still too big. The red glaze mottled and fire-dripped over the clay form. Cora liked the way the cold, fired-clay felt.

She didn't know how to carry the sculpture to her car. It was too big to put in her bag and too naked to carry out in the open. She hugged it against her sweatshirt so just the neck and upper back showed. She walked back into the studio.

Danny was waiting by the door.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi."

"Are you going home?"

"Yeah."

“Me too.”

Cora continued walking to the classroom door.

Danny followed.

“I took a summer class,” he said as they walked outside.

Cora didn’t say anything. Her tongue was too big for the back of her throat. She couldn’t look at his face. She was too close.

“I helped Mr. Evans fire your sculpture,” he continued, “the red came out like hell.”

She could feel him look at her. She looked down at the top of the sculpture.

“I like her name.”

“Thanks,” Cora managed to say.

“She’s beautiful.”

“Thanks,” Cora said again.

“Why aren’t you in the class again?”

Cora thought about all her attempts at bowls and cups on the wheel. “It’s different than drawing.”

“How?”

“I don’t know, it’s harder.”

But Cora knew why. Something about the wheel. *Making* lines out of circular pressure. It was different than drawing a line. Different than shading a line. It required physical strength and touching. It was difficult and made her feel different. She couldn’t decide if she liked it or not.

The first time Cora did a self-portrait she stared at herself in the mirror for an hour before she drew anything. She looked at her eyes, they were pretty—the color at least. She looked at her nose. Skinny and long. She looked at her mouth. Skinny and long. She considered the shape of her face. Skinny and long. She decided she wasn't beautiful.

She went to her wall and took a photo of herself off her bulletin board. She couldn't draw faces from real life. They came out flat and without noses. No matter what her teachers said about shading and light, she could not see the lines. She couldn't translate those lines onto the paper. It was easier to draw from something already two-dimensional.

In the picture she was smiling.

She wondered why boys asked her out. Her hair was flat blond, she wasn't tan, and she wasn't flirtatious. The girls at school were glossier and brighter. Maybe it was like bathroom doors, trees and walls. Maybe it was the urge to mark something. It didn't matter what she looked like.

Thirty minutes later she had a drawing of her face. It looked like the picture.

*

In the spring, Cora took another drawing class. Danny walked in five minutes late and sat down at her table.

The first time they had to pair off to draw each other, he was her partner.

Cora went first and sat in the chair with one knee up.

She turned her head and looked out the window.

“Can you look at me.”

Cora turned her head. She removed all expression from her face.

He looked at her like the way he touched clay. Like the way she saw him make pots.

She kept her face still but looked at the wall above his head. Black and white photographs of downtown Missoula—Staggering Ox sandwiches on Higgins avenue, the old Milwaukee train station, the old library.

She could hear his pencil like it was drawing lines on her skin. Every part of her paid attention to him except her eyes.

Twenty minutes passed by like a million years. Danny asked, “Do you want to see?”

She looked at his face. She tried to figure out why she liked it so much. She tried to see the lines which constructed its shape. She tried to memorize how she could draw it later.

“Is it harder to draw?” she asked.

“It’s different. You use light differently.”

“Really,” Cora asked, “How?”

“Yeah, when I throw a pot I have to think how the light will hit the clay...to find the shape I want. When I draw I have to figure out how the light shows the shape...Do you want to see?”

Cora swallowed.

He turned the paper before she could say no.

He’d only drawn her left arm. One line for the left side of her neck leading into her bare shoulder with the tank-top strap on it. Her shoulder looked like an apple with its round, muscle shading. He’d drawn her arm all the way down to her fingertips. He’d

drawn the three dark freckles above the elbow, and the scar on her wrist from the time she jumped out of the tree in her front yard, and the fainter scar on her thumb from when Sarah Hayes' watch scratched her in the 3rd grade. He'd drawn the glints of hair which grew blonde on the top of her forearm and the turquoise bracelet. He had drawn the creases in her bent fingers, and the way her pinky finger naturally stuck out further than the other fingers.

"You only drew my arm?"

Danny turned the paper so he could see the arm again. "I only had twenty minutes, was I supposed to start somewhere else?"

Cora touched the grain of the paper with her finger. "It's supposed to be an outline sketch, to practice drawing lines. We're supposed to do them fast."

"I like arms," Danny said. Cora knew why. They looked like thin vases. She didn't tell him the drawing was good because he already knew.

"Your turn," he said and sat on the chair.

Cora sat down on the other chair and put the drawing board in her lap. She drew a roughly shaped oval for his face and then outlined his shoulders and started working on his arms.

She couldn't draw his face. She didn't want to look at him there. She wished they were at the river. In the classroom, his lines were harder and he didn't look comfortable on the chair. Most of the guys she'd drawn before were her same size and age and they weren't very muscular. It was different to draw boy who was actually man-sized. His tendons and his veins stuck out and he had muscle-lines she had to consider. She didn't say anything to Danny, but she liked drawing his arms best. Mainly because she could

see the skin and the veins and the muscle lines. But she didn't draw his face. She didn't even try.

He looked at it after class was done, but he didn't say anything.

*

Cora went out with Mark Billings that Friday. She knew him from history class. Sitting in the Ferris wheel, Western Montana State Fair, Cora thought about the composition of their positions. They would make a beautiful painting. The circular gondola, the lights flashing as the sun crept to the ground. She leaned on the rail and looked out over down-town Missoula and towards the dark cut-out of mountains. She wore her sunglasses in the squinting light. They made her feel mysterious and famous. She wasn't in Missoula anymore. She imagined an ocean of blue cooling the August heat. The wind was really a sea breeze, and the crowd noise was the crush of waves. She looked and looked and imagined so she didn't have to look at him. She'd never been on a Ferris wheel, and never with a boy. She'd been to the fair before, but always with her parents or friends, and she never had money for rides. She looked at the animals, the cows, the giant hogs, the horses, goats and the fancy chickens and she bought cotton candy, but she didn't have the kind of money to go on rides.

Mark didn't talk very much. He didn't talk much in class either. He gave her some tickets to throw balls into little red dishes. They played two rounds. Afterwards he asked her if she'd like to ride the Ferris wheel with him. They waited in line without talking. Cora watched a girl from school with her boyfriend. They were in their own gondola. They sat close together and he had his arm around her. Cora watched the girl's

face. She wondered how to draw it. She searched for the key lines and shapes that made her friend look so happy. She studied how she could isolate and transfer them to paper.

When they boarded the gondola Cora seated herself closest to the sunset. She really did feel famous sitting there with her sunglasses. She waited for him to sit next to her.

He sat across from her, behind the gondola pole. She couldn't see his face.

Cora would paint an ocean all around them. A Ferris wheel island.

*

Monday Cora went for a walk again. Past the Rivas' house, up the trail to the bridge, Rambo following her on the other side of the chain link fence. She walked up the stairs, there was no one on the bridge. She walked to the middle and looked over the side of the railing. She always looked at the water—it never looked the same. Today it was smooth and copper colored in the sun.

“Cora!” She heard someone yell. She knew it was Danny. Cora smiled even though she knew he probably couldn't see from that distance. She waved. He waved. He waved like he wanted her to come over.

Cora thought about it. She thought about sitting on the rocks with him, watching him fish. She waved again and leaned over the railing studying the water.

“Cora!” Danny yelled again.

“Hi!” Cora yelled.

“Come here,” he yelled.

Cora waved back. She didn't want to go over there, but she thought about what it would be like to touch the lines she drew in her sleep at night.

She turned around and went home.

*

That night Cora was putting silverware on the table when her father came home from work.

“Cora,” he said, “how was your day?”

“Good,” she said.

He put a hand on her shoulder then walked to the sink where her mom was cutting strawberries for a salad. She watched how he kissed her cheek. Cora noticed how her mom stopped cutting the strawberries. She watched as her mom stood there with the knife in her hand and let her dad stand behind her. When her dad turned around to get some plates out of the cupboard, her mom went back to cutting strawberries.

*

The next day at school Danny didn't talk to her in class.

“Hey Danny,” she'd said at the beginning of class. He nodded his head.

Cora didn't like how he was so careful to look busy and Cora noticed that he didn't look at her even when she wasn't looking.

She didn't like how she felt like she was on the Ferris wheel island again.

*

Cora couldn't walk to the river fast enough. She didn't take her books inside. She got out of her car and walked straight to the bridge. She didn't stop in the middle to look at the water. She crossed to the other side and down to the left on the east side of the river. She didn't know what she was doing, but she walked up behind him. She noticed

how his shirt folded over his jeans, one side higher than the other. She noticed how long his hair was getting. It curled down underneath his dark red UM hat.

“Danny,” she said.

He turned his head and shoulders while still holding his fishing pole.

He didn’t say anything.

Cora sat down on one of the large rocks that dotted the shore with their ancient stone skins.

Danny reeled in his line.

Cora pulled out her paper and started drawing one of his arms—she tried capturing the way the tendons flexed and released under the skin.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Drawing your arm.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve never seen it like that before.”

“You’ve seen me throw pots.”

“It’s different.”

“How come you never draw my face?”

“Because I don’t know how.”

“You should really practice, you know.”

“I know.” Cora kept her head down at her drawing, only looking up to look at his arm as he continued to reel in the line.

When he was done he came and sat on the ground in front of Cora.

“Draw my face,” he said.

Cora looked down at her drawing, she looked at the detached arm, she'd gotten the tendons looking like they were contracting under the skin.

Cora turned the page of her sketchbook and looked at him in the face.

He looked straight at her face while she studied him.

"You don't have to look at me while I draw you," Cora said.

"What if I want to?" he asked.

She watched his hazel eyes turn green. She watched his pupils dilate. She started with the eyebrow. She knew he was watching her. She tried to draw the short hairs on her paper. She drew three short lines. She stopped. She looked at him. "I can't do it," she said.

"Come here," he said and stood up.

Cora thought he stood up the same way his tendons flexed when reeling in the line.

She put the paper down and stepped towards him.

"You have to come closer, or it won't work."

"What won't work?" Cora asked.

"Come here."

Cora took another step towards him. Being so close to him, Cora couldn't think. She didn't feel cold. She wanted him to come closer to her.

He didn't touch her.

"Closer," he said.

Cora stepped closer so the front of their bodies touched. She could feel his torso against her chest and his knees against her thighs. He left his hands at his sides, so Cora

was careful not to lean into him. But she couldn't breathe. She felt so small standing against him, like standing against a cliff. She could smell his shirt and the smell behind the shirt, of skin and river and different than her. She could feel his heart beating in the pulse in his stomach.

"Touch my face," he said.

Cora tried to look up but the angle was too steep.

"I can't see you."

"I know, just touch my face."

She could feel his heart beating through his ribs. She lifted her hand and touched his eyebrow with three fingers. Then down the side of his face around the eye socket and onto the bridge of the nose.

Cora felt like the river was inside her and it was so cold it felt hot.

She felt like she was touching only one stone in the whole wall of China, she didn't know Danny at all.

Danny held her wrist and lifted her other hand to his face, "You have to use two hands."

"I can't see you."

"That's the point."

Cora couldn't breathe. She didn't know how to touch his face.

Danny said, "This is how I learned to make a pot, so I could feel the shape when I was making."

"Oh," Cora said with her fingers on his cheeks.

"You need to press harder."

Cora felt like her arms and hands were blocks of cheese. She couldn't move them the way he wanted. She pressed on his cheek bones and into the hollows of his cheeks. His skin was oily and felt rough because of his stubble. She ran her fingers from his forehead down to his chin on each side a couple of times and then didn't know what else to do.

“Touch my eyes.”

She moved her fingertips over his eyelids and then again around his face to his chin.

Cora could feel the wind against the skin on her waist where her shirt came up from reaching up to his face.

“My nose,” he said.

Cora thought about a salt-flour map of Missoula she'd made in the sixth grade.

She held her hands over his face like a butterfly and ran her thumbs up and down his nose, like she was sculpting it into a different shape, but feeling its shape at the same time. She used all ten fingers to touch his face. She used her palms until her hands and his face were the same temperature.

“You haven't touched my mouth.”

Cora heard a train whistle scream. It sounded the way she felt. Like her body couldn't stretch anymore. Like his words were burning all the way down her throat.

She placed her hand on his jaw bones and pulled his face down towards hers. Cora heard the train scream again and again, and she kissed Danny the way it made her feel. She touched his mouth. She touched the inside of his mouth. She touched him until he touched her back.

Danny kissed her the way she knew he would. Like he knew exactly where she should be kissed. Like he was making a piece of art. He glazed the kisses with words like, “I love your...” “gorgeous,” and, “beautiful.”

His hands touched her hips, cold from the wind.

His hands touched the line of her spine.

He unclipped her bra strap.

The train whistle was still screaming in her head so she let him touch the skin on her shoulder blades even though she felt cut in half.

She let him touch her even though she felt like he was drawing something out of her.

She kissed him more to take some of it back.

His hands were holding her face.

“Try drawing my face now,” he said.

Cora looked at his eyes and felt like she was looking up at the cliff again.

He sat back down on the rock.

Cora reached up behind her back to clip her bra back into place. Her hands were cold now and they iced her skin. It was difficult to arrange herself under her shirt. She turned around so Danny wouldn't see her.

“You have to know how to touch.”

Cora heard him say this as she re-adjusted her bra and her shirt. She didn't want to draw him anymore.

She wanted to go home.

His glazed words were still burning her on the inside so she sat down on the rock.

She picked up her pencil from the dirt and looked at his face. She looked so hard she didn't see any lines and she couldn't see how he was looking at her. She used the lead in the pencil to shade the shapes she saw.

When she was finished the sun was shining directly across the river. Danny was starting to squint. It only took her a glance at the paper to know that the drawing was good, that the face looked like a man's face—that the face looked like Danny.

“Let me see. Did it work?” he said.

Cora looked at him one more time. He was standing up now and the light was hitting every line of his body in just the right way. He wasn't looking at her. He was looking at her sketchbook.

“Maybe tomorrow,” Cora said. She shut her sketch book and picked up her backpack. She walked up the hill and onto the bridge. She didn't pause in the middle of the bridge. She walked home and she didn't look for any lines. She was thinking about a line she didn't like. A line from the place behind her lungs to the east bank of the river. With every step she wanted the line to stretch and break. But she knew it wouldn't. It would stretch and stretch thin across the bridge, tight around the Rivas' house and glinting invisible across the street to her room where she would try to break it with lines of trees and hair and flowers. She knew it wouldn't break.

THE MOONLIGHT

Lucy looked in the mirror. She considered her eyes. Almond-shaped and naturally puffy underneath. No amount of cucumber masks or cold spoons could get rid of the puffiness. Tonight it didn't matter. *When the night has come*, she hummed along with the radio, *and the land is dark*. Tonight, the freckles didn't matter. Tonight the little scar on her eyebrow didn't look so bad.

Lucy looked in the mirror. *And the moon is the only light we'll see*. She sang out loud. The dress was pink and sparkly and she felt in love. Despite her puffy eyes boys did ask her out. But never Jay Carver. She smiled into the mirror. She practiced winking. She heard a car pull up on the street. She picked up her purse and walked like a woman in her new high heels down the stairs.

In the car, he held her hand from the start. He asked her about school. He talked about baseball practice. He talked about college applications. He talked about his dad's new car. Lucy hummed quiet.

At the restaurant he pulled out her chair and helped her with her coat. Lucy knew he would. Jay Carver opened doors for girls. But he also danced close and kissed words into her neck. He led her into rooms with his hand on the small of her back.

She can't remember why but sometime later that night, he slapped her face. After the dancing, after the kissing, as they were leaving the party. Hard and clean. It left a red print on her left cheek. She saw it in the mirror over his shoulder. They were standing in the hallway by the front door. No one else saw. Lucy turned and opened the door. She walked out onto the driveway. He was close behind her. Lucy spun around to tell him

something. Something like she's not that kind of girl. But all she saw was Jay Carver.

The guy who opens doors.

He put his hand on her face so soft.

"I made that," he said.

Lucy heard it as a question.

He kissed her left cheek five times.

"You're so pretty."

Lucy looked down the street.

Jay Carver dropped his fingers from her face and slid his hand down towards her waist where he touched the small of her back. Lucy let him.

THE JEWELRY BOX

When Gloria turned forty-three she finally asked her husband, Dan, to remodel their house. It wasn't a bad house—a craftsman two-story, painted green with brown trim—it was just getting old. They'd been talking about it for years. Gloria made lists of what she wanted to change. The silverware drawer was too far away from the table. The kitchen cupboards were too dark. The light switch in the bathroom was on the wrong wall. She wanted crown molding in every room, she wanted to repaint her bedroom, she wanted French doors in the office.

The morning of her birthday she woke up and looked at the ceiling. For the first time she couldn't look at it: the whiteness and the gentle-swirl texture nauseated her eyes.

Gloria rolled over on her side. The large, awning window took up most of the west wall. When she stood in front of it, Gloria could see all the roofs and trees to the end of the neighborhood and the cornfields stretching themselves out past the horizon. When the window was open, she could hear the wind blowing over and through these same things—it sounded like the waves she'd seen on Coronado Island once when she was little. From her bed, all she could see was a rectangle of bright, burning blue.

The morning of her birthday Gloria watched it for a few extra minutes. Dan had already gone to work. She didn't really like being in bed by herself because she didn't like the feeling of the one-half emptiness. Even when Dan was gone she never moved into the middle—it felt wrong. She was the kind of woman who opened her eyes and got out of bed. But today, on her birthday, she stayed a few extra minutes. She looked at the rectangle piece of sky and she thought about how her body felt in the warm sheets smelling like over-sleep. She felt the insides of her arms pressed against the mattress, the

fat in her middle pressed against her stomach, intestines and bladder, the heaviness of her thighs pressing into each other and into the mattress. She imagined herself from above, her white body half covered in dark blue cotton sheets, the dark mole on her shoulder and the small one by her ear. She decided she felt like a jewel.

It wasn't until after cutting an apple for her son's lunch that she changed her mind. She chose the apple from the blue bowl in the corner by the toaster. She recited the alphabet when she twisted the stem and pulled the stem off on "d." She rinsed the apple and peeled off the produce sticker. She placed the apple on the cutting board with her left hand and picked up the knife with her right. She looked at her hand holding the apple. She looked at the skein of skin connecting her thumb to her first finger. She noticed how the lines criss-crossed its thick-thin surface. She noticed how textured it was, she noticed how the skin looked almost stretched-out. Gloria cut the apple into four parts. She cored each part and cut each one in half. She put the apples, a sandwich and a soda in a brown paper bag and handed it to her son as he came into the kitchen with his backpack.

Gloria sat down at the kitchen table.

It was the semi-dark of late morning. The sun too high to hit the windows directly.

She looked at her hand again.

Her skin looked like a walnut shell.

She looked at her feet against the cool wood floor. She thought about how she needed to vacuum and maybe wax it. The dirt was showing in the cracks.

She stood up to clean the counter from making lunch but instead she called her husband. She told him she wanted to remodel the house. She told him she wanted a

bedroom with windows as walls. She wanted skylights. She told him she wanted to see the sky everywhere.

The renovation took three months (they slept on the pull-out couch in the office), but on the first day of June, Gloria walked into her new room. The ceiling was a series of skylights six across and four long. The three walls were replaced from floor to ceiling with seamless glass windows.

The workers left in the evening, but Gloria convinced her husband to sleep one more night on the pullout.

“I want everything to be ready,” she told Dan. Dan was tired and did not care where he slept, so he kissed Gloria good night and told her to enjoy arranging everything.

Gloria waited to walk into her room until the middle of the day.

She ate her sandwich and familiarized herself with the shapes in the grain of the new maple cupboards. She imagined her room. She knew what it looked like from the outside. She knew how the sun reflected off the windows so she couldn't see inside. She thought about how the window panes looked like a clear shell, the gloss of mother of pearl. Gloria imagined how it would be to sleep in a room with nothing but a pane of burned silicone between her and the sky. Gloria thought about how she'd loved the sky her whole life. She imagined how it would be to live in a room surrounded by blue all the time. She imagined how it would be to live in that color. She imagined her room would be part of the sky—where she could see everything.

When the kitchen dimmed into the darkness of noon, she walked up the staircase to her room. She looked down at her feet against the new cream carpet. She walked down the hall, enjoying the colors of each new-painted room. She picked the colors because she

loved the names. She picked them for places she'd never been before: Isle of Capri, Monaco Beach, Ocho Rios. She ran her fingers of one hand along the hallway wall: Havana Soda.

The second floor was brighter without the foliage blocking the light, but with the sun directly overhead its brightness was still dulled. At the end of the hall Gloria could see light shining out from under the doorway to her room. It reminded her of smoothness, snow fields, empty bowls, water with no ripples, cement, frozen ponds, bare sand, scooping a spoon into cream. She stood with her hand on the door and felt smoothness carve her body into ribbons of memory.

After a moment she opened the door and walked in. There was no furniture, only hardwood floors and blue. Gloria opened two of the skylight windows and the corn-scented breeze spiraled into the room. She looked at her garden in the back yard, the tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, the planter of strawberries. She studied the roofs of the houses. She looked over the fences of her next door neighbors. Besides the breeze, nothing moved and Gloria felt invisible in her new room. She felt a part of the sky.

After she swept the floor clean, Gloria put the bed back together herself. She brought the pieces out from the closet and when she'd fitted them together, she lugged the mattress back onto the bed. The sun slid from pane to pane until it was shining directly through the room in a blinding mess of bright pink, hot purple and blistering orange. Gloria almost couldn't open her eyes. She put the bed against the north window in the middle of the glass wall. She left the bookcase in the closet with the dresser, the mirror and the two lamps. She liked the clean lines. She liked the spare space and emptiness.

“I don’t want curtains,” she told Dan that night before they went to sleep.

“Everyone can see, it’s like a movie screen,” he said.

“There’s nothing to see.”

“We need curtains,” Dan replied as he got into their bed with the dark blue sheets.

He fell asleep but Gloria stayed awake in the glassed darkness.

She fell asleep that first night but she kept her eyes open for a long time. She was very still and watched the stars until she felt them like lights on an empty dance floor. She let them spin around her.

In the first days of sleeping in her new room, Gloria woke up, took a shower, got dressed, helped her son off to school, and then watched the sky. Sometimes she sat on the floor, sometimes she lay on top of her covers. She didn’t want anything between her and the sky. In her glass room, she felt visible and hidden at the same time. She didn’t want to leave. She studied the blue, its shade and the intensity of its light. Normally, around noon, she went downstairs and cleaned, but came back upstairs to lie in the breeze and the blue.

The blue sky made her remember things she never remembered before. The first time her mom French braided her hair. The woven braid made her head feel different, tight and grown-up. She had two French braids and when she went to school the next day she enjoyed how the other girls touched the braid to examine how the hair was woven so close to the head. She caught a boy looking at them at lunch. She turned around and he was looking at her. Looking at the sky she remembered how that moment felt—like breaking an egg for a cake.

She remembered the time she wore a grown-up bathing suit to Luke Walker’s pool party. There were no ruffles and there were no bows, only blue with white dots and

a clasp in the back like a bra. Luke Walker had a diving board and after a while she took off her shirt and her shorts to join the others diving and doing tricks. She stood there for a moment with her toes curled against the edge of the board. She looked up at the side of the pool. There was a line of boys waiting for their turn and watching her. She saw something break in their eyes. She felt their attention like a blanket on her shoulders. Looking into the blue sky she remembered what it looked like to feel that break in their eyes and know what it meant in the same moment—like it was her birthday.

The sky made her remember the time Dan introduced himself. She was with two other girls sitting in the university library. He barely looked at them while he claimed she was in his biology class and told her she should go out with him on Friday night. She couldn't think why she would forget something so simple. She just remembered him asking her out. She'd forgotten how he claimed she was in his biology class, she'd forgotten how she said yes because his eyes looked so blue.

Looking at the sky she remembered the day she told Dan she was pregnant. She was surprised the moment came back to her so clear. They were standing in the bathroom and the tile was cold and the morning light was white and clean. He looked at her like she was magic, he came so close and kissed her lips without touching any other part of her body. He said, "Gloria." He said, "Thank you."

She thought about small moments:

The time in third grade when she was Lady Liberty in the school play. Looking at the sky she remembered the exact shade of green of the dress she wore. It was light jade and it wrapped around her in folds and folds. The fabric was shiny, and

the way it wrapped around her made it difficult to move. She wanted to spin, but it was hot and sticky, and the fabric clung to her and to the floor where it draped. Walking into the gym at her junior prom. All the dark and light swirling on satin-covered bodies and shiny hair. Eyes like jewels looking at her. Standing in her heels like a ballerina in a jewelry box.

Walking home from the bus stop every day, crossing the roads. Counting the cracks in the sidewalk. Being careful not to step on them. The grass and the dandelions squeezing through the cracks. The rose bushes growing among the bushes. Wondering who took care of them. Looking for the cars when she crossed the street, staying in between the wide white lines. Making sure the cars stopped. How their fronts looked like faces with their headlights like eyes waiting to open. Walking her son around the block. Pushing the stroller so smooth on the white cement sidewalk. Seeing faces in windows of cars driving past.

Running with Dan in the mornings. The ends of her ponytail against her shirt. Sweat dripping down from her scalp. The flatness. Running into and then out of the rising sun.

Some days she stayed in her room all afternoon. At night she slept on top of the sheets. She imagined she was sleeping in the sky. She left the skylights open. She wanted to feel the cold sky on her skin. Every time Dan asked for curtains, she told him no.

He started sleeping in the study.

When school ended for her son, she stopped getting out of bed. She stopped going to the grocery store. She didn't shower. She stared up at the sky remembering. When her eyes hurt from the blue, she closed her eyes and studied the black.

Dan asked her sister to come and stay with her during the day.

The sister came but she couldn't help. She sat next to Gloria and watched her watch the sky. She listened to Gloria tell the stories of the moments the sky made her remember.

"I was twelve and you were fourteen," she said to her sister. "We sang in church, and we were wearing matching dresses and I couldn't stop looking at Mrs. DeLora's hat and Mom was crying."

Her sister remembered, but she remembered that she couldn't stop looking at the clock. She remembered how she confused the ticks of the clock with the beat of the music.

"I was six and you were eight," Gloria said to her sister. "We were in Tyler Webb's backyard. We were playing tag and Tyler never caught me, he kept trying but he couldn't catch me. I was too fast and he wanted to catch me, we were laughing so hard."

Her sister remembered, but she remembered Tyler pushing her down in the ice-plant, she remembered how her shirt got dirty, how the stains didn't come out even after her mom washed it. She didn't remember laughing.

"I was sixteen and you were eighteen," she said to her sister. "We went to the Halloween party and everyone loved our costumes. We were witches and we each had an apple. Yours was red, and mine was green. We decorated our hats with black crow feathers we found in the garden and old black buttons from Mom's sewing box. We wore

black fishnet stockings and everyone stared at us when we walked in the room. Jerry Wright tried to kiss me that night.”

Her sister remembered, but she remembered thinking the crow feathers were dirty. She remembered Jerry eating her apple.

One day Gloria’s sister told Dan she couldn’t come anymore. She didn’t like remembering Gloria’s memories.

After Gloria’s sister left, Dan walked Gloria to the shower each morning. He picked out clothes for her and left them with a plate of food on the end of the bed. Gloria ate the food slowly and rarely put on all of the clothes. One morning, Gloria ignored the clothes altogether. She walked from window to window. She imagined she was wearing the sky.

Standing in the middle of the east window-wall, Gloria remembered the time she was little and she went to the beach for the first time. She didn’t have a swim suit. No one told her to bring one. Everyone else was swimming. She was standing on the sand by herself. She wanted to go in the water. She stepped out and a wave came. She didn’t think she was drowning, but everyone came running. She was embarrassed because she was soaking wet and her clothes were heavy and felt wrong. She had felt sick to her stomach, like she was in trouble even though her dad hugged her and wrapped a towel around her and put her in the back seat of the car.

Gloria walked to the west window-wall. She cried because she remembered how cold she had felt and how the salt in the back of her throat had made it hard to swallow. She cried heaving sobs which tightened her stomach and bent her over her knees. The door opened. She couldn’t stop crying and she couldn’t see because her eyes were

blinded from the bright sky. When the dimness cleared, she saw Dan looking at her like the day he saw her in the library—like he'd never seen her before, like he didn't know her yet.

“Gloria,” he said.

When she didn't answer he walked into the bathroom to change.

Gloria hid her face in the window. She stopped crying.

The next day, Gloria waited for clouds. The sky was too bright. She got out of bed and put on a robe. She walked from window to window looking for the clouds on the horizon. She put on her black wide-brimmed hat. She walked from window to window staring at specks on the horizon hoping they would come closer, hoping they would be clouds, hoping they would cover the sky.

There were no clouds.

The next day she pulled the sheets over her head, but the sun was still too bright. Her eyes ached even when she closed them. For a while she refused to get up. She felt too exposed. She didn't want anyone to see her.

The room was too bright. She stood up, she took a shower, she put on her clothes and then she went to the hall closet. She took out as many sheets as she could find.

She spent the afternoon tacking the sheets up. After thirteen sheets she realized it wouldn't be enough. The blue was too bright. The sheets had small holes through the woven threads. Her neighbors could see her, people could see her. Gloria left the sheets hanging and went downstairs.

She didn't want to look at the sky anymore.

She didn't sleep in the room that night. There was a full moon, and she didn't like thinking about the light shining through the white sheets. She knew they would glow full of light like sails on a ship.

The next morning she went to the fabric store and bought three bolts of black silk velvet. She took down the white woven sheets and tacked up the heavy dark fabric. Yard by yard she blocked out the sun. Yard by yard she clouded the blue with black. Her arms hurt putting up the fabric, but the velvet made her think of jewelry and oysters.

That night Gloria slept in her bed and she dreamt of the day on the beach when she fell in the water. In her dream no one came to get her and each water drop was hard and round as if the ocean were made of marbles. In the dream she let the water drops slide around her body until she felt round and precious like a gem.

Dan woke up and couldn't see Gloria. He searched the house, the kitchen, the garden, the spare rooms. She wasn't anywhere. Their son didn't know where she was and their friends hadn't seen her. But that afternoon, while making the bed, Dan found one blue pearl among the dark blue sheets. The pale luminescent blue reminded him of the first time he saw Gloria and couldn't forget her eyes.

He took the pearl and held her carefully in his finger tips. He went to the closet and opened Gloria's black jewelry box. She'd had it since she was a little girl. Inside, jewelry from her childhood mixed with the few necklaces and rings he'd given her over the years. He cleared the top velveteen shelf and carefully placed the blue pearl against the black fabric. Dan understood. She wouldn't want to be seen.

IN THE MIRROR

He was lying on their bed staring at the ceiling. She couldn't see him from where she stood in her black slip curling her hair. All she could see were his shoes hanging over the edge of the bed.

Her arms were getting tired from holding the rod above her head. She could feel the heat in the handle. Heat that drifted through her spiral-wrapped hair and gathered around her head like a halo. She put the curling iron down and reached for another section of hair. She thought about the new dress in the closet. Dark green and cotton so light it looked like silk. And the high heels. It was July and hot through the night, but not too hot for high heels. Ten years. Ten years and how much. She looked in the mirror holding the hair tight around the rod. January wedding. A cold January wedding. Ten years, almost seven months. How many Friday nights was that? She couldn't count. Her arms were tired. He never missed their Friday night dates. He always planned them too. With a small mirror she checked the back of her head for stray pieces.

She walked to the closet. He'd been sick so much the last months. She was just happy he felt up to going out tonight. She would make it worth it. She slipped the green cotton dress over her head and it felt like swallowing water. She walked back into the bathroom so she could zip up in front of the mirror. Three kids but her waist was still there, still small. She went back to the closet for the shoes. Chocolate brown three inch heels and she would still have to look up to kiss him. *When they got home.* He respected her. That's how she knew. He was the only guy who kissed her like she wasn't easy. She never had to tell him no.

She put on her perfume and earrings and put some lipstick in her purse. She walked out to the bedroom. He was looking at the ceiling. "Are you ready to go?" she asked.

His eyes closed and then he looked at her. "You're beautiful."

"Thank you."

He didn't move. He looked back at the ceiling.

She looked at herself in the mirror on the door.

"Come here by me."

"On the bed?"

"Yeah, come here by me."

She took off her shoes.

"Come here."

She didn't say anything, but she lay down next to him.

She felt strange and uncomfortable in her dress on top of the fully made bed. Like she couldn't move, or talk, or breathe. She wanted to get up.

He rolled onto his side and pulled her into him so her back pressed against his chest. He held her like that, breathing into her hair and the place between her jaw and her neck.

"I love you."

She couldn't move in her dress. The white cotton covers clung to her. Her legs strangled tucks and bunches, and her back heaved against twisted seams. She couldn't move her shoulders.

She swallowed.

She could see her face in the closet mirror. Almost hidden among dark hair and green on white. She looked at her eyes. She studied how they looked different sideways. How green her skin-tone looked next to his. How his dark hair made hers look light. She thought about his arm, holding her so close, enfolding her neck and chest. She looked at his white sleeve against her skin. She thought the green of the dress must be pressing into her skin. Leaving a stain.

“I love you.”

She tried to relax.

She tried to ignore the tightness of cotton pulling cotton.

STILL-DANCES

I never look in mirrors. Not decorative mirrors. Not mirrors with gilded frames that hang above fireplaces and in hallways. I never frame myself. I don't look at myself sideways in shop windows. I never examine my figure in the glared reflection. I never cage myself that way.

I know exactly how I move. I can feel shapes of space against my skin. I feel my position in muscles and tendons. I never look in mirrors because part of being beautiful is never wondering.

I spent a childhood in front of mirrors. I spent a childhood learning how to move my body—memorizing the feeling of a lifted arm, the sensation of perfectly bent knees, the pull of pointed toes. I performed enough to realize performance is not a self-conscious affair. There are no mirrors in a theater.

I grew up. I moved to Paris. I danced and danced and danced. I got married.

My husband took the first pictures. He sold them to magazines. Then a man named Willy took my picture wearing hats, my husband sold those too. Finally, men like Horst P. Horst and Irving Penn took my picture. It was all about the clothes, but the photos made me famous.

A short catalogue of lost/unavailable photos:

***Passion of Ophelia*—series of three. Fernand Fonssagrives, Summer 1933—
childhood home, Sweden.**

The water is cold and joyous. Between the sun and the aspen leaves shining like silver coins I can barely open my eyes. But I can see. A heaven of blue sky, yellow dandelion

on the bank, my husband sitting with his knees up. I can feel the water against my body. I wonder about the billions of droplets, I feel how my arms and legs disturb them, make them re-form, make space for my toes and fingers, for every strand of my hair.

Swimming feels like dancing.

The water is cold like silk and feels like the first bite of an apple. I dive down headfirst and suspend myself somewhere between the blue surface of the sky and mud surface of the earth. I stretch and stretch until I feel like my body is a line. I stretch until I am a line pulling the sky into the mud. Like the night-heron I saw yesterday, gliding, stretching itself from the sky. I wonder how I can dance this line. I wonder if it's possible to translate this one movement into a series of movements or will the translation create something new entirely and what it will be.

I roll over on my back and look up through the water into the sky. Although colors are dulled by the water pressing against my eyes, I watch the bubbles fall to the surface like pearls, rolling into the light. My face breaks the surface and I float on my back. I don't know how long I float here. Between the cold and the sun, pressed between the sky and the earth, feeling the muscles balance against water and gravity.

I feel something hit my chest. I lean up. Fernand is throwing dandelions at me.

"Come in, my love." I pull my arm from the water and wave to him.

"I'm enjoying you from here," he says to me.

"Come in and swim with me."

“I’m enjoying my private gallery.” He throws two more dandelions at me.

“Come in, please, come swim with me.”

“You don’t know what you look like from here.” Another dandelion.

I don’t understand. I lean back. I like being pressed against both water and sky. I feel several more dandelions hit the water and one lands on my torso. I leave it there, I give Fernand no attention.

I cannot stop watching the sky. It is the deep of summer. Twilight is coming. I don’t know how late it is. Clouds slide their bellies across the sky slow and in all the shades of shells: white, gray, iridescent lavender.

Stillness seeps into my skin like syrup. I think of nothing, but the heavy blue of water and sky. I close my eyes. But my body sees. The alternating shade and light like silver bracelets moving on a wrist. My body feels glint of green, gleam of blue, glimmer of purple. I have mother of pearl skin. And dandelions, I can feel them floating near. One is on my stomach. I feel two against the side of my left rib cage, one in the curve of my waist on the right side. There is one by my eye. I let them touch me. My hair is floating in folds and ripples. It folds and moves like the dress in a sculpture I saw once. The sculpted passion of Saint Teresa of Avila. So much movement unfurling in stone. Movement in stillness.

I am still.

I feel all the things I love—the night herons, the dances, the dandelions in water—burst my cells and liquefy my muscles.

I am *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* in eclipse.

A sound like a stone dropped in water.

I open my eyes. I have floated near the bank. My husband stands over me with his camera in his face. He's taken a picture of me. I didn't know. I look at him with wide eyes changing my center of gravity to stand up. Nothing looks right. My wet hair is heavy and makes my head ache.

"Fernand."

He still has the camera in his face. He takes another picture of me.

"Why didn't you swim with me?"

"Because you are so beautiful alone with the water."

"I don't want pictures. I want you to swim with me."

"Wait to see what you look like." He brings me a towel. He wraps me up. He hugs me.

He combs my hair with his fingers.

I think about how I don't need a picture.

The camera clicks again.

Hands—fragment, Horst P. Horst—1935 Paris

The sweat is going to show. I know it. I don't want to be here. The lights are hot. I'm sweating on the dress. I don't know how to stop it. I don't know how to sit here.

Horst is organizing his camera. "I'm just doing a test today, just act natural."

"What would you like me to do with my hands?" I ask.

"Be natural."

My stomach sinks I can't be natural in this dress, it won't let me move. I can't be natural on this chair. It's hard and ugly. I cross my legs. Horst is looking expectantly at me. I'm shaking. I lean into the back of the chair and push my weight towards the floor. It doesn't help.

"Just look at me and I'll take the photograph."

My hands are gripping the chair on both sides.

Now they are in my lap. I look like I'm praying. I'm dressed in a red silk gown, but I'm sitting like a nun. I look up to ask what I should do.

Horst clicks the shutter.

Sotto-voce, Horst P. Horst, 1935—Paris

I should have never looked at the pictures. He showed me, they are terrible. I do look nervous.

I go to the Louvre every day. I study the portraits, I study the lines. I want the photographs to look like the pictures Fernand takes of me. I know now how I should have worn that last dress, the failure makes me feel unfinished. It's the failure that made me come back.

Horst doesn't make me wait under the lights today. I eat grapes while I watch the men set-up. The grapes are cold. They taste delicious. I eat them carefully. I'm wearing a gown but I can't name the color—neither lavender or gray. It's silk and makes me feel like freesia. It's the sheer silk which is almost rough. The kind of silk which touches my skin rather than sliding against it.

When the lights are finally ready, Horst escorts me to the set. I am supposed to model the dress against a backdrop that looks like stone. Under the lights, my dress is dark lavender. I'm not nervous this time. I know how to move my hands. I know how to make the dress look beautiful. My cells move inside my body like midnight. Like the smell of dirt, and dew and stars which are far away. My body is a reservoir of calm on the outside, but I will let Horst catch the subtle movement in my insides. I will let him see how I breathe silk, I will let it unfurl out of my eyes and he will use the photographs.

“Beautiful,” Horst says, “Are you ready?”

I don't speak. I look at the camera.

The shutter whispers like a thought.

Rising from the Sea, Irving Penn, 1950—Huntington, Long Island

I am addicted to the flash to the click to the shutter of the close. My body dances in stillness my nerves bend light. An obsession with lines. Seams, necklines, line of neck, sleeves, wrists, calves, hems, hips, waist, hair. I can feel when I make beautiful shapes. An expansion in the glands below my jaw, a lightning in the soft muscle leading to my thumbs. No one tells me what to do anymore. I know. I give them a ballet in a sideways

glance. I give them the Moulin Rouge with a hand behind my head. I give them all of Homer's sirens with a strapless black dress, opera gloves and an upturned chin. Dido with my outstretched arms and heavy satin wrapped skirt, standing on a window ledge, loneliness dancing in the tendons of my turned neck. I shift my weight to the left, I am Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, clothed and veiled. I stand triumphant, my lines irresistible and I am Beatrice waiting for Dante in celestial folds of chiffon.

I know he's watching me. Even from this distance. I'm standing on the beach. I hate being hot, and I've been under our pink umbrella too long. I need to swim. I'm walking away from him into the waves, but I know he's watching me. I don't have to look at the camera anymore, I know when the photographer is going to take the picture. My body is still, I know, I know when he's going to take it and my body is dancing in stillness. The photographs capture the moment *just before*, so the girl in the photograph seems to move anyways. I send the film vibrations of movement with my eyes, my muscles, my cells. I know just when the camera has clicked I can feel it now, in an end of movement.

I know he's pulling out his camera again. The light too perfect, the ocean too dark against my light skin, the contrast of horizontal with vertical curve too compelling. He can't help himself. I don't mind, a Titian blonde in couture bathing art. But I keep walking. The water feels like cold glass on my feet. He's taking out his camera, he's setting it up. I feel the vibrations of the water rising to my knees. I think of what laughing looks like. I feel the lens on the small of my back, a wave surges forward, I turn my head to look. The shutter closes like the weight of a wave.

THE KISS

The room is dark and my stomach is falling. There is a man in the room. I am scared. He says he loves me. He comes close and holds my face in his hands. I don't know how to move so I don't stop him. I don't know how I got on the floor but I am underneath him and he is heavy. I open my eyes and there is a key in his mouth. His mouth like a door lock.

I see the key and I know how I can move. I draw it out from his lips and I run. Close the door—he is running too. I run. I must get away. I run fast. I see the dirt of my hiding place.

I am still underneath him. There is no blood in my arms. I can't push him away. He leans forward. Turns the key. Turns the key in my mouth. It is gone.

I swallowed it.

WATER IN THE SNOW

Maren watched the frozen flakes of water fall to the ground. Maren watched them melt from crystals to drops on the window glass. She watched the drops slide down. She traced one with her finger. The cold seeped underneath her nail. The water made her wrists hurt.

Outside, the snow silenced the green, the dirt, the fences, the trees.

She felt the silence like she felt the cold.

Maren couldn't feel Michael in the room, even though she could see him reflected in the windowpane—sitting in the chair by the bookcase. She couldn't feel him in the room even though he was reading out loud.

“Were Niagara but a cataract of sand, would you travel your thousand miles to see it?” He read aloud, but Maren knew he wanted an answer.

Maren traced another drop down the window pane.

She never felt like talking when it snowed.

He kept reading out loud. Her silences never disturbed him.

He came this morning to keep her company. This meant he would read out loud and stand in front of the fire and watch Maren sleep. He would stay until after her errand this afternoon to the Roberts' house. They needed a new well.

Maren thought about cataracts of sand. Her imaginings made her uneasy. There was something claustrophobic about sand falling—vessels filled, ditches caved-in, holes blocked, lungs sealed with choking density. She saw an hour glass. She saw dust-pasted hair. She smelled dry skin, dry weeds, dry bread. She heard cracking glass and breaking bones.

*

At three o'clock in the afternoon, Michael put on his coat, crossed the room and touched Maren's head.

Maren knew when it was time to go. She wasn't really sleeping. She didn't need Michael's hand on her hair.

"I've got your coat."

Maren stood up and let him hold her heavy coat while she put her arms through the sleeves. She left her ring on the bookcase. She went to the back porch and put on her boots. It was still snowing. In the cold, her ring finger felt empty and stripped. She wrapped her scarf around her head and neck. She put her gloves on last.

Michael brought two horses from the barn. While Maren waited, she walked to the corner of the porch and looked down at the long brown carton with the leather strap. It looked like a rifle case. Maren slung it over her shoulder so the carton rested on her back, the weight was light and easy for its size. She watched Michael cross the yard through snowflakes as big and as cold as silver dollars. Michael handed her the reins and she put one foot in the stirrup and slung herself onto the horse. She could feel her body melting the cold in the saddle and watched how her breath sought to melt the air in respirated puffs of warmth.

"You're tired today," Michael said as the horses turned onto the road.

Maren watched Michael's horse as it walked in the snow. She watched how the flakes layered its dark hide in white, how the flakes piled on Michael's hat and on his back. She looked down and watched how the flaking ice encrusted the ends of her hair and the wool of her jacket. "It's the snow," she said.

“Are you sure you can do it in the snow?”

“My dad always could,” she said looking straight ahead. Anyone could. That is what her dad always told her. The weather didn’t matter. That’s just on the surface, he’d say, you feel what’s underneath. He said anyone who paid attention could find water. He said horses could find water. He told her people didn’t like paying attention. He told her people wanted other people to pay attention. He gave her a dowsing stick when she was four years old and let her come along with him. Maren couldn’t remember a time when she couldn’t feel water.

But her dad was wrong about the weather. Maren could feel the weather. When it rained the water was like a magnet, it made her veins ache until she went out and stood in it and soaked her skin. The snow was different. Dry water. It caused a different kind of ache. Like wanting to melt.

The snow drifted over the road and fields in heavy dragging veils. The ground, the fences, the earth all lay silent and open as if waiting to be covered up and hidden in frozen scales of ice. Maren felt a snow flake on her cheek and on her lower lip. She felt sympathy for the ground, for the earth wanting to be enclosed in something light and delicate. Layer on layer until it changed the surface. Drop upon drop until the face was disfigured to the outside. But Maren could feel underneath the ice. She could feel the warm pulse of movement under the frozen drops of water and dirt. Passing under the trees swollen with snow, she could feel the green veins pushing against the cold.

“Maybe we should do it tomorrow when the snow has passed.” Michael’s words floated with the snowflakes and melted in her ears.

“They need the water. They can’t go much longer.”

“The ground is frozen.”

“Not all the way through. The Roberts have the tools, they can drill.”

Michael was silent the rest of the way. The snow was too thick to talk. He followed Maren. The silence layered with the snow. Maren let her horse find his own path—they’d been there so many times before. The Roberts were Maren’s closest neighbors, there were times growing up when there wasn’t a day her mom didn’t have some reason to send Maren to their house.

There was never a time when Maren didn’t know John, the oldest son. He was there always before she could remember. Born four years before her, with no sisters, Maren was a novelty and a responsibility. Like a special, rare kind of horse it was his job to protect. He did a good job. He was there the first time she found water. Maren couldn’t remember, but he told her even though he never told anyone else. He never wanted anyone to know. He didn’t like how she left him. How her eyes went blank, how she wandered off in the heat and flickered like a mirage. He found her lying in the dirt with the wishbone branch still in her hands. When she woke up she said she’d been practicing. They didn’t have to dig to know what she’d found. John knew she could find water. Maren’s father never knew about that time. He always thought her first time was at the Allen farm. When she was ten. By then the nausea didn’t bother her.

John never told Maren that he loved her, but Maren knew. The way he always found the ribbons that fell out of her hair. How he picked them up, handed them back to her like lost birds. The way he talked to her—low and soft like he didn’t want to scare her. How he watched her like a mother horse watches a colt.

Through the veils of snow she studied how the flakes deformed the trees which still had their leaves. She'd never seen it snow this much in September. The snow fell heavy on the leaves and branches. She knew some branches would fall off, weighted by the ice.

Somewhere between Lone Jack Bridge and the Roberts' lane, the snow stopped. Maren recognized John's blonde hair from the road. She recognized how he stood with one arm on the fence and his feet a little bit apart, the same way he stood while he watched the horses training. He met them at the gate. He took the reins of Maren's horse. He led them around the back of the house.

Maren knew John loved her, so of course he would do these things.

John offered his hand for her to dismount but Maren knew he loved her so she got down by herself. She put her gloved hands in her pockets.

John shook hands with Michael.

"How are you both doing?" John asked.

"Good. There's nothing like riding in the snow," Michael answered.

John looked at Maren. Maren looked down and took her case off. She walked up the steps of the porch and took out the long wishbone willow branch from the case.

"Do you miss the city?" John asked Michael.

"Never, especially on days like this. We never get snow this thick, especially in September."

Maren noticed how Michael's black hair and brown eyes glittered dark against the white sky. "It'll melt fast," she said. She took off her gloves and sat down on the bench and ran her fingers over the smooth, stripped surface of the willow-rod.

"All the more to enjoy it," Michael said.

"We're really glad you came, we've been melting snow for the past two days," John said.

"I'm glad I can help." Maren smiled. She gripped the rod tight with her thumbs and then quickly let go.

Mrs. Roberts burst out the door in a flurry of warm smells. She sent the horses to the stable with Will, the youngest, and hugged Maren and put her hands on the sides of Maren's face and kissed both her cheeks.

"Your dad would be proud," she said, "and we'll drill wherever you say, your dad always said you were never wrong, he said you had the touch stronger than him." She walked back up the porch steps. "There'll be dinner afterwards."

Michael was smiling. Maren knew he loved that people loved her.

"Where do you want me to start, John." Maren walked down the stairs back into the snow. She looked at John. He'd come out without a scarf and Maren could see one of the moles on his neck. She remembered a time when they were younger and went swimming. It was the middle of summer. She was sitting on the bank on a rock in just her undershirt that left her shoulders bare. She was looking at her shoulder and noticed how tan it was getting. They'd been going swimming every day. She liked how her

shoulder looked like the skin of a fruit. Pink and red and with freckles. John was watching her as she looked at her shoulder. He noticed the freckles too. She said, *It looks like an apricot*. She smiled but she saw something close in his eyes. He didn't want her to have freckles. He talked about sunburn. He talked about damage and skin. He made her wear his shirt home. That was the last time they went swimming together.

John didn't like her finding water. He wouldn't have asked for her if it wasn't an emergency.

"You know where our old well is, we were thinking we'd start on the other side of the house. We want it to be close, but we know there might not be anything there," he said.

Maren took off her jacket and handed it to Michael. She held the forked ends of the rod in her hands. Thumbs pressing on the wood, fingers wrapped and pressing also. She didn't start sweating until they reached the east field. The sweat formed in beads on her forehead and in her hair and on the backs of her knees. She could feel the drops sliding down her chest into her underclothes and down the backs of her calves, soaking her stockings. She thought about Michael moving from New York to be close to her. She saw his face and how he didn't ask, how he said, "Marry me." How she felt the stillness of the rock in the ring he handed her. There was no water there. She thought about how Michael read books out loud but didn't see them inside his head. The same way he talked to people. How he thought he was saving her. How he thought he was in control. She saw the flowers, the lilies of the valley, mounds and mounds of them heaped on the gleaming wood. She remembered how she'd felt water in the wood, very still cold water. She

remembered the last time. How she knew what it meant to say goodbye. She focused on the water. She imagined the ground like a body, so thin the skin, too thin to cover the lines of veins. She concentrated until she was alone walking on a pulsing skin. All she could see was white, even the air was white. She couldn't see the men behind her. She couldn't feel the nausea that always came. She focused until she had no thoughts. She focused until she could hear past the white to the waterfalls running horizontal, she concentrated until she could feel waterfalls running in her arms. Until her wrists hurt like when she traced the rain drop on the window pane. She concentrated until something broke. Until she saw so much water it turned her eyes black.

She opened her eyes before the men reached her. The sky was purpled with snow clouds. The willow rod was broken. Maren rolled over and threw up in the snow. The snow cooled her arms as she spit thick saliva. She wiped her mouth with the inside hem of her dress. She ignored the way the snow knifed cold against her legs and her bare arms.

“That’s my girl! Is this where they need to dig? That’s the fastest I’ve seen you do it,” Michael shouted.

It was John who helped her up and covered the mess with snow.

It was Michael who threw a red rag to mark the spot.

“No,” Maren said, “this is black.”

Both men were silent as Michael changed the marker colors. Black markers were for residual echoes of the stream. Red marked the center of the water source. She used their distance to measure depth.

Maren was already walking off to the east side of the field where three willows grew together. “I’ll need a saw,” she said over her shoulder.

She stood under one of the trees, directly under the branches. She stared straight up through the tangle of jagged branch lines.

Michael stood right behind her. She could hear his breathing. She wanted to send him away. She wanted to send him back to New York. Back to where the snow didn’t ever fall in September. She wanted to tell him to stop watching her. She wanted to tell him to stand away from her. She turned around. He put one of his hands on her face like laying a blanket over a bird. She couldn’t move.

“You are a miracle, this is amazing,” he said.

Maren thought of her vomit in the snow.

John came with the saw. Maren pointed out the branch. She watched him reach and cut it down. Maren took out her own knife. She cut off a sturdy y-shaped stick. She stripped the leaves. She cut off the corollary twigs. She left the knots even though she knew they would hurt her later. She trimmed the forks to make them the right length. Eighteen inches for her. Twenty for her dad. That’s why the last one broke. She shouldn’t have been using it—it wasn’t really hers.

Again she stood holding the knotted willow-rod. She started from the black rag and continued walking, focusing on the water. Feeling it rush from the ground into her veins. She focused on how it pulsed. She counted her steps. She ignored the sick feeling in her stomach. She let the sweat drip. She paid attention to the way her wrists hurt.

When the rod jumped, cutting her hands and jerking her whole body forward, she stopped.

She could barely breathe she felt so faint but she asked Michael to throw the red rag in the snow where she stood. She looked down at the cuts on her hands and watched how the blood looked so bright and fresh against the white of her hands and the white of the snow everywhere. She let it drip, she didn't wipe it off.

"You walked twenty paces, twenty paces from the black marker, I counted. What does that mean? How deep do they have to go? Twenty paces!" Michael shouted.

"It was twenty-two," Maren said. "It's close to the surface, 65 feet."

"I counted. It was only twenty paces," Michael said.

Maren looked at her hands. She didn't answer him.

Michael went to measure the paces between the red and black rags.

John took out one of the black rags and pressed it into Maren's hands. She knew he would do this and she knew her wrists would hurt which was worse than the blood.

Maren looked at the buttons on his shirt. She noticed how they were brown and matched the brown plaid stripe. "Will you tell your mother I can't stay for dinner," she said. She walked away into the snow towards the barn.