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The Last Thing I Said: Eight Stories

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THE LAST THING I SAID: EIGHT STORIES

By
Jacquelyn Lea Ladnier

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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Approved by

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For Holly, Amariah, and Laith

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ABSTRACT
JACUQLYN LEA LADNIER: The Last Thing I Said: Eight Stories
(Under the direction of Tom Franklin)

The stories which make up this thesis are connected not through setting or subject but through a commitment to subtlety. Together, they represent my own exploration into whether or not profound realizations or actions can come out of and be fully represented by quiet narratives.

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Introduction

The short story is intrinsically a minimalistic form, and there are a few authors—Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver—who are thought of as masters not only of the short story form but also of a minimalistic style where imagery and descriptive language give way to spare and direct prose. In my own stories, I am interested in applying that minimalist idea elsewhere. I keep the imagery and the adjectives and work instead on minimalizing the time and space in which my stories take place.

What I experiment with in the following stories is a minimalistic plot structure which pushes the focus of each story into the characters' internal reactions and feelings. My question for myself while writing was not "What happens next?" Instead I asked, "What is the feeling or idea that I'm going for here?" The plot, then, follows the individual feelings— isolation or jealousy, for example—and ideas—double standards between sons and daughters or a child's response to death—that I wanted to convey. These stories depict emotional conflicts and resolutions which exist in situations where not much seems to be happening. My belief is that these quieter moments can foster interesting emotional stories and are therefore worth paying attention to.

For example, in "The Swamp"—a story about a young girl who lives with her father near a small swamp—most of the action centers around the father; however, the story is told from the daughter's point of view which shifts the focus away from the father's actions and onto the girl's emotional response to her father and to the place

where she lives. What could have been a plot-driven story about the father's chosen profession then becomes an emotional narrative about the imagination of a child and about how imagination works as a coping mechanism for the narrator.

"On the Urgency of Solitude" does this by focusing on the main character's internal narrative as she organizes a shelf. As she cleans she thinks about her relationship, her own dissatisfaction, and the guilt she feels for being unhappy and destructive in her relationship. Even her interactions with her boyfriend are related through her own internal narrative:

He was smiling at her, and she wanted to be alone. To be making coffee by herself in a quiet apartment. She wanted to eat alone and wash the dishes alone and to shower, dress, leave, and come back alone. To spread across the bed and sleep alone. It was hard for her to be smiled at. Kindness was too vulnerable a thing this early in the day.

There are a number of writers whom I admire and whose work has no doubt influenced my writing in one unconscious way or another, but while writing these stories it was important for me to try to distance my writing from my reading. I did not want my stories to sound like imitations of my favorite writers. What I did often turn to instead was visual art.

"But Not for Me" began as a description of William Claxton's famous photograph of Chet Baker and his then wife Halema Alli at Redondo Beach. In the photograph, the couple is sitting in front of a window and Chet Baker's trumpet hangs between the two of

them. The black and white photograph is peaceful and still, and that peace between two people who look very comfortable together was what I first started to write about:

Eleanor was folded around her third coffee, brown legs pulled up onto the soft, worn velour of the arm chair, naked save for a thick green band pulling her hair away from her face. She looked out the window, drank her coffee, thought about rent and babies...Sal was playing something she didn't know, but she could tell it wasn't his. She finished the cigarette while he played it.

I wanted my story to capture a quiet moment between two people in the same way that Claxton's photograph had. Oscar's character—a young boy who lives in the apartment above Eleanor and Sal—came in later as a way to introduce conflict into the story.

Another of the stories, "On the Urgency of Solitude", started as a description of a set of film stills from Massy Tadjedin's *Last Night*. In the pictures, Joanna—played by Keira Knightley—clears the table where she ate breakfast, washes dishes, and organizes a shelf of magazines after her husband leaves on a business trip.

These moments are very short and there is no dialogue, but they convey this strange feeling of loneliness and isolation as Knightley's character becomes adjusted to a place where she has just been left alone. My challenge to myself was to find a way to put into words the feeling of a scene which worked so perfectly because of its silence. In Tadjedin's film, there is a sense of loneliness and of listlessness that comes through in those very short scenes, and I knew that a short story which conveyed the same feeling would have to be very internal:

Jordan walked to the book shelves that lined the walls of their living room and started pulling things down. Small things at first, the figurines and picture frames

that had collected themselves, poised at the ledges, among the heavier books and magazines. There was a small glass bird, picked up at a yard sale years ago, but she couldn't remember by whom, only the story of finding it, of wanting to leave with something. She wasn't sure who told it first.

Everything we learn about Jordan and her relationship comes from her own thoughts.

This, I felt, was the most effective way of keeping the same interior and isolated feeling of the scenes in Tadjedin's film while still telling the story I wanted to tell.

"The Swamp" started as a poem about a young girl who lives underneath Louise Bourgeois' *Maman*, a thirty foot tall bronze sculpture of a spider created in 1999. At the heart of the poem is a girl with a large imagination and a love for this sculpture which is both formidable and protective. For the story, I wanted to keep the girl's connection to this piece of art, but I wanted a more realistic setting for the story, so the sculpture became the swamp behind the narrator's childhood home:

There was a swamp behind our house, and I used to drop things into it. I threw in the food scraps that my dad put into an old Kemps ice cream bucket. I dropped in the pennies that people left on the railroad tracks nearby... Sometimes I'd sit at the edge of that swamp when I was angry, and after a while it felt like I had dropped my bitterness into it.

"On the Urgency of Solitude," "The Swamp," and "But Not for Me" started as descriptions of images, but each of these stories also deals with specific ideas which are separate from the images from which they originated. In "On the Urgency of Solitude" I wanted to touch on how unhappiness and destructive behavior play off of one another. I

was interested in writing about a character who is honest about her unhappiness, who acts selfishly, and who has isolated herself within her relationship, and I wanted to see if I could, by the end of the story, redeem her in some way:

It still felt wrong. Two people who weren't supposed to exist at the same time and place. She felt guilty. Clara was putting down her grocery bags and saying goodbye to Adam, and Jordan was making a decision.

“The Swamp” concentrates on the imagination of the unnamed narrator and on how her imagination helps her cope with a distant and aggressive father and an absent mother. The swamp is something the girl imagines as a kind of maternal, protective entity—like Bourgeois’ sculpture—which she visits and speaks to. I also wanted to focus on how that imagination changes over time by having the narrator tell the story as an older woman:

I tried to forget about them, but I was never able to go down to the water at night again. Then I thought maybe it was a bad omen, something biblical I couldn't decipher. Now I think it was just a sign in general to pay attention.

I wanted the story to show the two sides of this one character: the younger girl who is isolated but who has her imagination to lean on and the older narrator who has had time to reflect on her childhood near the swamp and what that experience meant to her.

“But Not for Me” may have begun as a description of Claxton’s photograph, but the story became about a boy’s first crush. It is about desire and jealousy from a child’s point of view. I wanted to write about these complicated themes from a child’s

perspective because I am interested in the idea of a person experiencing these complex emotions for the first time.

For instance, when the boy, Oscar, walks in on Eleanor and Sal, what he feels is jealousy, but because he is so young it would sound strange to say, for example, that he was ‘overcome with jealousy.’ Instead, he feels “packed with salt, angry and dull and heavy all at once.” Having children as main characters in my stories pushes me to consider even common emotions, like jealousy, from inexperienced perspectives and adjust my language to those perspectives.

Many of the stories—like “The Swamp” and “But Not for Me”—in this collection are about children. I wanted to write stories which treated children as intelligent people with legitimate emotional stories, but I also wanted the stories to reflect the way in which children respond to unfamiliar emotions and ideas.

“Sons” looks at the double standards held between sons and daughters through the eyes of two adolescent characters: Leah and her younger cousin Joshua. Leah is very much aware of the double standard that exists between her and Joshua. It was important for me when writing the latest draft of the story that Leah not only recognizes that double standard but also that she reacts against it by taking the ax from Joshua.

The story is also about Leah’s compassion. In the original draft, Leah walked away from Joshua and his father and felt bitter and contemptuous toward her cousin, saying, “With all the contempt she knew he felt for her, she felt sorry for him.” In the revised draft she is able to see her cousin and her uncle as two separate people and understand that she and Joshua are on the same side:

What looked like contempt when his father was around was now shyness. Leah looked around for her uncle.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said. She picked up the ax again and brought it down hard into the fallen tree, and it stayed with its blade thick in the wood. “Let’s go inside before he comes back.”

“The Pool” is also centered on children, but the main theme in this story is death and the way in which children react to death. After the drowning of a young boy, the narrator, Mikey, is told about the boy and is warned by his mother to be careful in the neighborhood pool. Laura—another child who swims with Mikey—is not given the same lecture, and she reacts to the boy’s death in the same way that she would react to a cartoon death: “death by anvil, death by piano.”

The story becomes about these children who are not yet versed in what is and is not appropriate when talking about death. Death a concept which these children are not—and shouldn’t be—familiar with, and Laura’s actions, which at first seem harsh, reflect her inexperience with death.

Children also play a large role in “Blackberries” where two young girls discuss rumors that a teacher from their school has been domestically abused. This story and “The Pool” are similar in that they each approach heavy, complicated ideas—death and abuse—through children’s perspectives.

I enjoy approaching ideas this way because it allows me to write about heavy subject matter through narrators who do not have—or have very few—defined ideals in regards to these difficult subjects. In “Blackberries” it is easier to forgive Camellia when

she asks, “What do you think she did to make him hit her?” because she is a child, but it also brings up questions about violence toward women and how that violence is expected or is seen as justifiable even to very young girls.

With “Under an Ill Star” I wanted a story that went in a different direction. A story with children in their own environment, not thinking about double standards or death or abuse. I wanted a story where children were being children, and I wanted to look at conflicts within that environment. “Under an Ill Star” is about a single summer afternoon in which Charlie and Alana—who are friends and neighbors—have breakfast, flirt, and ride their bikes through the neighborhood. The conflict comes from Charlie and Alana’s attraction to one and their uncertainty about what that attraction means. Each of their problems is adolescent and relevant to their own small world.

Each of these stories is about children and their perceptions of and reactions to larger, difficult themes: feelings of jealousy and isolation, the concepts of death and abuse. What is most important to me, though, is that each of these ideas and emotions comes out of a quiet narrative. Camellia and Lena talk about their teacher while washing dishes, most of Jordan’s thoughts occur while she organizes a bookshelf, the unnamed narrator of “The Swamp” recalls her last days sitting around the swamp behind her childhood home.

What happens in these moments does not always seem significant, but in these quiet moments characters are able to reflect on more complex ideas and tell interesting emotional stories.

Although “On Silence” was not inspired by any visual art and is not about children, it does share in this idea of a quiet narrative. Not only is the plot minimal, but the character speaks only two words. The minimal aspect of the story allows for the narrator to convey her internal, emotional reaction to the vow of silence she takes:

Then she heard things she couldn't see. Like children and concertos and once the halting sound of a car crash, and at first she was frightened, but in the second month that went away and she was only curious. She thought maybe she was making the sounds up. Like an audible hallucination.

By the end of the story, the narrative is about more than a quiet woman. It is about commitment and how easily commitments can be broken, but it is also about kindness. It was important to me when writing this story that the narrator's silence be broken by an act of kindness on both her part—thanking the man she meets—and on the part of the man who gives her a flower.

I also placed this story last in the collection because I feel that it is indicative of what I am interested in for my writing in the future. The piece is a bit long to be considered flash fiction, and is still fairly traditional in style, but I am interested in exploring different forms—flash fiction, lyrical essays, poems, visual poems—in my future work and I think this short piece came partially out of that desire to look at form in a new way.

Even if the form of my work changes, I think what I have established with this collection of stories—an interest in quiet narratives—will stay with me. I have been able

to explore so much within these small moments, and like the narrator in “On Silence,” I have found that more happens in a quiet moment than one would expect.

The Swamp

There was a swamp behind our house, and I used to drop things into it. I threw in the food scraps that my dad put into an old Kemps ice cream bucket. I dropped in the pennies that people left on the railroad tracks nearby. Anything I got tired of went in the swamp: Barbie dolls, training wheels, the little blue and green New Testaments the school handed out before Christmas, burned matches, chunks of cinderblocks. Sometimes I'd sit at the edge of that swamp when I was angry, and after a while it felt like I had dropped my bitterness into it.

It was more fun to drop things in in the summer because the swamp grew this thin green layer of algae, and if you dropped something in you could watch the slimy surface close back up around whatever you fed to it. The flies were bad in the summer. In midday it'd be shady with flies, so I'd sneak out after dark and go down and walk out across a cyprus that had fallen. At night the algae was blue black and looked like solid ground, and if a fish came up to the surface or an owl shit into the water the whole of it moved together and it was like gravity had forgotten itself.

Dad used to tell me not to go around the swamp because there were alligators, but it was small, and if there were alligators I would have seen one. Most that lived there were frogs and flies and a handful of trout that sometimes ate the food scraps I threw in. I kept hanging around the swamp, and Dad started calling me 'Gator. I was the only 'gator anywhere near that swamp which was a lonely thought sometimes and other times it was nice because the place really felt like mine.

I never swam in it because Dad said it was nasty and said it would make my skin green, but what really kept me out was that he'd catch a cottonmouth every once in a while near the house. He'd beat it flat with a shovel and nail it up on one of the Cyprus trees as a reminder. He liked to make a display out of anger.

I always wanted to swim in it though. I'd only ever swum in the Escatawpa which wasn't much fun because you had to keep swimming upstream to get back to whatever sandbar you started at. I wanted to float in the swamp algae, to be really still in the water until all that green met up again with my body. I wanted to go under the film of it and see what it looked like from underneath. Instead I kept to dropping things in and sneaking out summer nights to look down into it and swirl the algae around with a broken limb. I made up songs to sing to the swamp. I had one for summer and one for winter and different songs for morning and night. My night song went something like

Blue still water holds lots of light

Green wet algae seals it up tight

Hiding in the water deep and cold

Buried treasure silver and gold

Dad went down to the swamp sometimes just before dinner, but he never let me go with him. I'd seen him fish in it a couple of times if the weather was right on a Saturday, but he always threw back whatever he caught. I thought for a while that maybe he sang to it like I did. Maybe he had his own swamp songs and he wanted to keep them private. It bothered me sometimes though that he went around the swamp without me there, like he was reading my diary. He'd come back up with wet sleeves and wash bits

of algae off of his arms, and that made me think he was fishing out all the things I'd dropped in, but he never said anything about it.

One night I went down after he'd gone to bed to sing my song and sit on the cedar and toss in some chipped marbles I had. When I was close enough to see the water I stopped. Standing all around the swamp were these birds, white and long necked like cow birds but twice as tall. I'd never seen anything like it. At the time it seemed like hundreds of feathered white bodies. At some point I realized they were sleeping, their heads bowed and necks curved like a river. It was like a mirage all that white in a dark place, like heat on asphalt. I almost couldn't tell if they were really there, but then under all the insect noise of night I could hear them breathing. A collective white noise of feathers shifting.

I didn't want to move and I was afraid of what would happen if I stayed, if they all woke and looked up at me. All of my energy went into getting out of there quietly. I took my sandals off and walked back to the house barefooted, and when I got to the house I went to bed in my clothes and cried because I felt like I'd seen something I wasn't supposed to and because I was happy I'd seen it.

The next morning they were gone. Flew off to Florida or north somewhere or, the thought that scared me most, had disappeared as soon as I'd looked away. I tried to forget them, but I was never able to go down to the water at night again. Then I thought maybe it was a bad omen, something biblical I couldn't decipher. Now I think it was just a sign in general to pay attention.

Two months after that night, just as I was starting to forget about it, the sheriff from Stone County caught Dad moving crank for a man named Skin. Dad would wrap the

big ziplock bags of the stuff up in plastic and sink it in the swamp until someone came by to pick it up. An aunt I didn't know came to stay with me until they moved me to a place in Hattiesburg, but before I left, the sheriff's department dragged parts of the swamp to make sure they hadn't missed anything. All the things I'd dropped in, the Barbie dolls, the deflated, blackened basketballs, the plastic toy parts and marbles, got caught up in the nets and pulled back up on to the grass along with little flapping minnows and great globs of warm algae. I'd dropped those things in and I'd meant for them to stay there. I watched the men poking around in my things with sticks, picking up hair clips and empty pens with latex gloves. I realized I was leaving the swamp, and I came up with a leaving song.

Fresh water swamp dragged clean

Fresh water swamp so mean

Fresh water swamp so blue

I ain't sad to be leaving you

On the Urgency of Solitude

Jordan groaned as the dog licked at her cheek, woke up and flipped the pillow over to its dry side. In the hallway, she could hear Adam and the slow, quiet steps he took up when he knew she was sleeping. She didn't like the courtesy. If he was ever sleeping and she was awake, a rare event, she became impatient, let every door slam, ran the half-broken electric kettle she had kept since college. When he finally woke, she would apologize, ask if she were being too loud, and he would tell her no, kiss the top of her head, help himself to coffee. That was hard too. The understanding and the forgiveness.

She pulled the white sheet away, stood, and picked up the blanket that had fallen off—or been thrown off—during the night and flung it onto the bed. She picked up a sweater and a pair of knit pants from the floor, dressed, and went into the kitchen. Coffee was made, the warmer still on. The stove read 9:22. On a weekday, she could never sleep past 7:00, would be showered, dressed, and at work by now. There was something there about sleep cycles she knew she'd learned. Adam was scrambling an egg.

“Want one?”

Jordan shook her head. “Just toast.”

He looked at her, and the small change in his face made her angry. He was smiling at her, and she wanted to be alone. To be making coffee by herself in a quiet apartment. She wanted to eat alone and wash the dishes alone and to shower, dress, leave, and come back alone. To spread across the bed and sleep alone. It was hard for her to be smiled at. Kindness was too vulnerable a thing this early in the day.

And then, as she was pouring coffee, he stood behind her and put his hand on her shoulder and slid the palm of his hand from her shoulder down to the bend of her elbow, and that simple movement of his hand—down, up, three times—reminded her that she loved him, and that because she loved him, she could also stand to hate him. So she would make her toast and pour her coffee and would sit with him at breakfast and eat and read the paper, and when she finished she would stand and sit across his lap and hold his face between her hands and tell him she loved him.

The feel of his cheek was still new in her hand when he stopped her.

“I have to get groceries. And you have to start getting things ready for later.”

She felt stupid. Her hand was still resting against him, her tongue still settled in its recent *you*, and there was nothing except him telling her no and shifting the weight of her off of his lap and her sliding into the chair he was leaving. He walked into their room, slipped on yesterday’s jeans, a plain, blue t-shirt, a navy jacket. He ran his hands through his hair, checked for his wallet, read off a grocery list from the fridge. He was asking her if she needed anything, and she thought what a stupid thing to ask. She shook her head, pulled a string hanging from the sleeve of her shirt.

“I should be back by lunch. I’ll help you when I get back.”

He walked to her, and she was still sitting in the chair he’d left. He reached his hand behind her head, pulled her to him, kissed her hair for a long time, and she wondered if he was apologizing or if she only hoped he was apologizing.

“Six thirty,” he said.

He walked to the door, unlocked it, stepped out, and locked it again from outside. She was sitting in the kitchen, and there was only the rolling sound of the coffee pot still trying to keep the coffee warm and the street, slow and murmuring, and the breath of cold air let in by the the opened door. Only an hour ago she had hoped so much for this. To be left alone. Now that it had been given to her, she didn't want it, and wondered what she was to do with it.

What was it she was supposed to be getting ready for? And on a Sunday? Like things that come to you when you're not trying hard to remember them, Anna and Sylvia came up, and she remembered last week's run-in with the two. They were Adam's people, kind and proud and accommodating. Educated. Wealthy. Proud and stupid she thought. She had seen them and invited them to dinner to seem kind, and when the couple accepted and walked away, she thought about what that dinner would be like, the polite conversation and the short toast to health and promotion and everyone a little more drunk than they thought they would be. She hadn't placed herself into that idea, hadn't thought of the dinner as a reality until she'd told Adam later and even then had only considered it for the moment, set it aside for other thoughts until this morning.

Jordan walked to the book shelves that lined the walls of their living room and started pulling things down. Small things at first, the figurines and picture frames that had collected themselves, poised at the ledges, among the heavier books and magazines. There was a small glass bird, picked up at a yard sale years ago, but she couldn't remember by whom, only the story of finding it, of wanting to leave with something. She wasn't sure who told it first. There were stubby candles, sticky and velvety with dust, a

black and white photo of Adam's grandparents in a rusted tin frame that she moved slowly and with both hands to the kitchen table where it would be out of her way. She pulled the books from their places, stacked them in short piles around the living room. She cleaned the shelves, wiping dust and the occasional dry bug from the painted wood, ignoring the oily spots left by candle bottoms.

There were other things, she realized, that needed to be done: sweeping, taking down the trash, emptying the morning's dishes from the sink. But she'd had the impulse to do this one thing, and she thought it best not to waste the want to do it. After she cleaned the shelves, she started to place the books back, hers in the top three shelves and Adam's in the bottom two. They had made it so far as to put them in the same area of the house, and Adam was insistent that he had no problem combining them and getting rid of double copies. He'd wanted to take them from moving boxes to shelves all rearranged together. Jordan told him she would do it and had put them up separately.

She wiped the dust from the spines of each book and put them one at a time back into their spots on the shelf, and as she did this a glimpse of her dream, disturbed and forgotten, made itself foremost in her thoughts. She remembered taking her own teeth out, carefully, one by one, two from the top and three from the bottom, and rinsing them off in a bathroom sink careful not to let them fall into the drain, and after drying them on a white towel, fitting them back into their respective, tender sockets.

She had the top shelf filled before she was interrupted by someone's knock at the door, so foreign to her own thoughts she didn't recognize the sound, and once she did the memory of her dream was so quickly dropped that she lost it and would not recall it again.

*

“I’m sorry to ask, but Rachael’s on some work trip thing, and I promised my mom I wouldn’t let these die. It’ll just be for two weeks. You don’t have to water them much, just when you think about it.”

Clara was still standing out on the landing. It was October and the cold air coming in on Jordan’s bare legs tempted her to close out Clara and go back to the shelves and the piles of books.

“It’s fine if you can’t.” Clara was shuffling, jogging in place a bit, and the gold key that hung from her finger bounced and chimed.

“I’m sorry. You should come in. It’s too cold,” Jordan said and pulled the door open.

Clara brushed the bottom of her boots on the mat outside, walked into the apartment. They had never been together here. It was just the way it worked out. Jordan’s laundry, her groceries, were hurried into Clara’s apartment, left on the floor for an hour, two hours, fifteen minutes, overnight once, and then picked up and taken home.

Jordan became highly aware of the apartment. There was a kitchen with room for a table attached to the living room, and through a cracked door she could see the bed, its sheets pushed down to the bottom edge. Everything looked new and clean, even the stacks of books and magazines lying around looked nice, as if they were there on purpose as a decorating choice.

“Sorry about the mess. I was cleaning.”

“Works better if you put things *in* the shelves”

“No, I know. I was—do you want tea? I just poured out the last of the coffee.”

“Yeah, ok.”

Jordan was standing in front of the kettle staring into the bent image of the kitchen reflected by its clouded silver surface, listening to the beginning roll of the water. For a second it was quiet, and she felt that she was alone again. She heard Clara take her boots off and line them up against the wall. The sound of the water deepened into boiling, and Clara was behind her, sliding both of her hands under Jordan’s thin sweater. She felt the comfort in having those two cool palms lying on the warm skin of her shoulders, familiar against the back slopes of her ribcage. She listened to the sound of the boiling water, the slow traffic outside, the hum of the refrigerator, and the door of an upstairs apartment closing, and while she listened, the warmth of Clara’s palms moved around to the space just above her navel and to the edge of her breast. Jordan knew the small pang of irritation, the itch of it that other people described, but in truth her want for space was much more rabid, jowl slapping and foaming, the brightness of teeth sharp enough in sight alone.

She poured water over the tea bags and shrugged Clara off.

“The sugar is over there.” she said and handed a cup to Clara. “I have to finish this before Adam gets back. We’re having a dinner tonight. I’m supposed to be cleaning.”

Jordan took her own tea, moved back into the living room, and sat down among the stacks of books that were on the floor. Clara watched her walk back into the living room. She put her cup down, still steeping and unsweetened.

“You know, I forgot I was supposed to meet someone, and I really should have been there half an hour ago.”

Jordan picked up *Swann's Way* and wiped its spine, set it down at the left end of a shelf with room for its volumes to follow.

"I'll just leave this." The gold key with its singular ring lay on the low coffee table next to Jordan. Jordan turned to look at it but did not touch it.

Clara was gone, and for the second time that morning—or was it afternoon now?—Jordan felt both the comfort and the immensity of the silence in the apartment. As a child she had convinced herself that she could breathe underwater. It wasn't only that she had learned to hold her breath longer than the other kids. When she would go under, she became so calm it seemed that it must be her natural environment, and time would slow. She would bring herself back up when the sound of her mother's voice reached a certain frequency of shrill.

She had forgotten what that felt like until now, in a silence so like the hollow sound of things under water. She sat very still on the floor of her apartment and felt that it was her place to be. But as that silence faded—as it does when listened to for any stretch of time—and was replaced with the low sounds of the street and the heating coming on and going off again, Jordan noticed the white blanks of the unfilled shelves and, checking the clock on the kitchen wall, realized that it was in fact afternoon, and well past two.

As if on cue with her thoughts, Adam walked in, arms draped in plastic bags, pushing the door open with his shoulder. In one hand he carried white flowers still wrapped in brown paper. Just behind him, Clara walked in with more plastic bags.

It felt wrong. As if she'd wandered into someone else's apartment and was watching some strange couple with their groceries. Clara and Adam were talking about

the cold outside and produce in the city. Adam looked into the living room and saw her staring.

“Oh, Jordan, this is Clara.”

“He seemed like he was struggling with all this.” Clara held the bags out and shrugged. She looked nervous and Jordan knew she hadn’t realized who she was helping. Adam was saying things about dinner, but Jordan was staring at Clara. After the panic went away, Jordan watched the two of them together again—this strange couple putting groceries away in her kitchen—and it still felt wrong. Two people who weren’t supposed to exist at the same time and place. She felt guilty. Clara was putting down her grocery bags and saying goodbye to Adam, and Jordan was making a decision.

Adam closed the door behind Clara, and walked into the living room with the flowers he’d bought, and as he pulled one flower from the rest and handed it down to Jordan, he asked, “What happened in here?”

“I got distracted I guess.” Jordan took the flower and thought about the dishes in the sink and the crumbs on the table and the full trash can and about Adam walking Clara out. Adam walked back into the kitchen and she heard him putting the groceries away.

“They’re supposed to be here around six I think,” he said.

Jordan stood and started putting the books and magazines back into the shelves, undusted, unorganized, just up. Adam looked into the living room and watched her pushing them into the empty spaces.

“That’s not what I meant. Finish your thing. You’ve got time.”

Jordan lifted one more stack of magazines which, with their glossed covers, threatened to slide, and fit them into a shelf. She wiped her hands against one another.

Adam was putting boxes of cereal and canned fruit into the shelves in the kitchen, his back turned to her. She walked over to him and slid both hands under his shirt and placed her warm palms flat on his back, still cool from the air outside.

“No, it’s ok. I’m going to wash the dishes.”

Sons

Joshua chopped at the tree with all the enthusiasm that a boy gathers from performing a chore under the watching eye of his father. They had to have brought the ax with them. It couldn't have been from the shed—the handle was too clean, the blade too bright—everything in the shed used to be their great grandfather's. Joshua was working toward the heart wood of a fallen pine they had dragged over to the fire. He pulled the ax up over his right shoulder and let it fall against the trunk over and over while she watched the white pulp of the tree, too green to burn, splinter into the dark space outside the light of the fire.

There was a tradition of this. Joshua's family lived in a New Hampshire suburb. The trips they made back to North Carolina for Thanksgiving and Christmas meant that the kids got to play and work outside, and since Joshua was the oldest and the only son, he was expected to enjoy the same chores that his father was obliged to do during the visit. Leah wanted to tell Joshua that chopping the tree into logs would only make splitting the wood harder, wanted to walk to the shed to find the crosscut saw, show him how to start with the blade nearest the handle and keep long strokes to save it from dulling, but she knew that that would only irritate her uncle and embarrass her cousin, so she sat staring into the fire and tried to ignore the white chips that scattered toward her and caught in her hair.

Even for an Anson winter, it was getting too cold for this. Leah had rolled the log she was sitting on as close to the fire as she could without searing the knees of her pants, and while her face burned she still felt the cold, damp air coming through the back of her

jacket. In the morning, if it rained the way it so often did this time of year, the fire would be the same frozen slush as the rest of the yard, and when Joshua's family left the next day and the ground had dried, she'd be left to spread out the ashes, by then a numbing, blistering task since the rain only ever brought more cold.

Leah heard her aunt urging the two younger cousins inside for baths, and while they squealed with delight at being able to outrun the tired reach of their mother's arms, she groaned with frustration and exhaustion, her shoulders low. Eventually, she managed to perch one child on her hip and pull the other by the hand toward the house. The same single level home that her grandparents had lived in since they had moved to North Carolina in the sixties. Where her uncle and her mother had grown up and where she now lived. Leah knew that the front door stuck in winter, that the side door worked better, but she didn't correct her aunt. When the three shouted goodnight to the rest, Leah turned to wave a sleeve covered hand and saw one of the children carrying a handful of leaves, and she remembered when she had been young enough to be excited by the idea of collecting something from the outside to take in.

Joshua's father walked back into the woods to grab the garden shovels and plastic rake that had been given to the youngest two for the day. She looked over to her cousin to check his progress and realized that the dull thump of the ax had stopped. Watching him, she saw him as she knew he wouldn't want to be seen. His face was still turned to the space that his mother and sisters had just occupied, and Leah saw the round profile of his features, sweat dotting his brow and upper lip even in the cool air. In his face she saw the defeat and humiliation of poor performance. Leah knew he never did work like this at home. She had never visited her uncle's house in New Hampshire, but she knew from her

younger cousins' boasting that the fireplace in the New England home ran on natural gas, and aside from shoveling snow in the winter, chores rarely found their way out of doors. Joshua looked down to where the ax leaned against the broken tree, and Leah, seeing a wet frustration in his eyes, looked away.

“I can chop for a while if you want,” she said, “I just need the gloves.”

“Joshua can handle it,” her uncle said.

Leah hadn't noticed his return. She looked up to see him lay a wide, defensive hand on her cousin's shoulder.

Leah and Joshua had been close when they were younger. There were only two months between them. From what she had learned from her grandparents' quiet admissions, Leah supposed she had been born in a quiet hospital room at the county medical center without family or friends to pass her around and say which side she took after or guess who she'd be like or whose eyes she had. She guessed her mother had tried for the first couple of weeks, leaving the baby with her parents to work part time at whatever small jobs she could hold until finally she quit, forgot to tell her parents she was leaving, forgot to pick up the baby. News of Joshua's arrival must have been the distraction the family had been waiting for.

When Easter Sunday approached, the three week old grandson would have been passed around to great aunts and grandparents while Leah was rocked silently by her grandmother and kept quiet with a bottle. Later, when her uncle's family visited in the summers, Leah and Joshua ran through the woods that surrounded their grandparents' home, trying desperately to beat the other to the best climbing tree, or swung their six

year old frames squealing into the lake just off the property, each trying to splash bigger, diving for a fistful of mud, proof they had touched bottom.

As a kid, Leah had been innocent of her mother's actions, but now she was old enough to understand them, and her indifference was alien and unacceptable to her uncle's family who had so harshly condemned her mother's decisions. Somehow, in her mother's absence, it had been expected that Leah should take responsibility, that her teenage goal would inevitably be to articulate the perfect apology, and her refusal to do so was offensive to her uncle. At some point Joshua had figured this out and, without question, adopted his father's opinion.

When Joshua's family had wound their way down the long, wooded drive and unfolded and stretched their bodies in the snow dusted lawn only days ago, Leah had known that it was settled. The long internal debate that Joshua had fought through a Thanksgiving and an Easter had been decided upon and Leah had lost. There was no squeezing, hoisted hug. He couldn't look at her directly. Held air down in his lungs while he spoke to her in short sentences and watched spots over her shoulder. She had reached in the trunk for his bag, but he'd pulled it from her hand, and on his way to the house dropped it twice because he'd taken too much to carry. She'd wondered if he knew why he was doing it.

Leah's eyes were raw from the heat of the fire and the wind. She wanted to bathe, knew that as soon as she walked into the house, the smell of the fire would make itself known in her clothes and hair. Normally it was a comfort to end the day a little unclean, to wake up with a splinter of outside still stuck in the tangle of her hair, evidence that she

had done real work. But around her uncle's family she wanted to be scrubbed to shining, to glow with the cleanness that she knew they didn't expect. Her aunt would still be bathing Emily and Kate, using one of the plastic cups from the kitchen to wash the soap from their hair, shielding their eyes from shampoo with the shade of a hand. Normally, only the youngest two were allowed the luxury of a bath. There were too many people for the outdated water heater to keep warm. In the mornings, when everyone tried to shower at once, Leah's aunt pulled the kitchen timer from the drawer by the refrigerator and allotted six minute intervals to each person. If she went in now her uncle and cousin would be behind her before the tub filled.

Her uncle walked back into the woods, something he'd forgotten.

"I really don't mind," Leah said, "You've already done a lot today. I can just finish up this part."

Looking up from the fire, Leah was surprised at how little she could see now. In the winter, things were swallowed up in gulps of darkness until it was all gone and replaced with night. The fire was dying down, being eaten by the cold.

"It doesn't all have to be done today," Leah said.

Joshua hesitated for a moment, handle resting on his shoulder, considering, but let the ax fall again as his father came back pushing a wheelbarrow.

"Too dark now to do much more." Leah's uncle put the rake and shovels into the wheelbarrow. "I think Joshua and I can finish up here. Leah, why don't you run inside and help your aunt with the kids? Give us guy time."

Leah wondered what difference it made whether she was there with them or not, what it was about the absence of a girl that made time specific. Looking up at her uncle

and her cousin, she thought how strange it must be to watch yourself become more like your father, not knowing when it would stop, how much of yourself would be left outside his impression, how much of yourself was just you. She thanked the open air between them that she had only her grandparents who were so separate from her.

That same square hand found its home again on her cousin's shoulder.

"You know," Leah said, "if you're going to finish this you'll need help."

She walked over to Joshua and picked the ax from his hand. His shoulders straightened and she knew he was glad to be rid of it. She started chopping at the tree and the weight of the ax felt good in her hand. Her uncle watched her, this plain young girl with the strength in her. Without speaking he pushed the wheelbarrow toward the shed. He was away and Leah had a rhythm going. When she stopped to turn a piece of wood, Joshua held his hands in front of her.

"Thanks. I was getting blisters."

She looked at his pink, chapped hands until he stuffed them back into his pockets. She felt for this boy with his tender hands and his flushed face. What looked like contempt when his father was around was now shyness. Leah looked around for her uncle.

"Don't worry about it," she said. She picked up the ax again and brought it down hard into the fallen tree, and it stayed with its blade thick in the wood. "Let's go inside before he comes back."

Blackberries

Mrs. Henley had rules. Her two boys, Marcus and Joel, were allowed only within the area that stretched from the Methodist church at one end of the street to the dead end at the other. Camellia, the middle child, had to stay with her brothers. Lena didn't have rules, but she stayed within Mrs. Henley's limits anyway. In the summers, when the blackberries came in full, Lena was the only one allowed to go underneath the bridge across from the church where the vines were never cut back by the city workers.

And so, for her friends, she tiptoed through the briars to pick the heavy berries by the handful and gather them into the front of her shirt. When her shirt was full and dripping with the sticky weight, she took them up to the three dark faces that watched over and waited for her and she dumped them over into waiting bowls, sometimes into a plastic sand bucket, once into a Bundt cake pan.

She did this until they were full or until she was too scratched up to keep going. After they helped her out, the four of them would walk back down the road and sit on the sidewalk to eat the berries unwashed. What they didn't eat, Mrs. Henley put into pancakes or sealed up as preserves. They usually ate too many and felt sick. That's what summer was for the four of them. Too hot, too full. By Lena's third year there, it was routine.

Lena didn't know how long the Henleys had been on that street. Probably forever. Probably their great great grandparents had had children there and eaten dinner there and died there. Their house stood across from hers. If she sat on the front steps, she could look into their wide living room window, and in the summer mornings, while Marcus, Camellia, and Joel slept in, she did. She watched Mrs. Henley fold laundry, pick up toys,

eat fruit cocktail from a can, rub her hands along her bad knee. The first time Mrs. Henley saw her staring, she stared back out at her for a second, then shrugged and went back to folding.

One morning Lena walked out to the steps and sat down next to a black and orange cat. She wasn't allowed to waste food on the strays, but she picked pieces of the bologna she hated from her sandwich and put them on the step next to a bowl of water she left out. When she looked into the adjacent window, Mrs. Henley was talking on the phone and folding laundry. Lena picked at the crust of her sandwich, pinched together the edges of the soft, white wonder bread, and thought about scrambled eggs. When she looked up again Mrs. Henley was pacing, waving a yellow checkered dish towel and holding the cordless between ear and shoulder.

Lena thought maybe she shouldn't watch, maybe Mrs. Henley wouldn't want her to, so instead she watched her own hand run along the length of the stray. She lifted her hand after reaching the end of its tail and let the loose fur drift away from her open fingers. She thought about Camellia sleeping and wondered how loud Mrs. Henley would be from inside. She thought about her own mother sleeping inside her own house and about how hard it was to wake her on a Saturday.

Lena was inside the Henley house as often as she was inside her own home. Mostly sleepovers with Camellia. Sometimes to help with chores that had to be done before any of the kids were allowed to go outside. If Mrs. Henley wasn't working at the rehab center, she was probably inside that house. Making dinner, sweeping, half asleep

on the couch while Joel tried to explain the difference between tyrannosaurus and triceratops.

Mrs. Henley always cooked dinner. House rules dictated that when she cooked the kids cleaned, so after they finished eating, girls and boys took turns with dishes. One Friday after school, while Lena washed, Camellia brought up Ms. Pullman while waiting to be handed a clean plate to dry. Ms. Pullman was Lena's teacher. She taught one third of the fifth graders at the elementary school and had come back only last week after missing four days of class.

She told the class she had been in a car wreck and apologized for her absence. She had a dark, fading crescent under her eye, and the bridge of her nose was bruised purple and yellow. She was dressed nicer than usual, heels instead of flats, hair fixed and down, but couldn't—or wouldn't—even look directly at any of them, stared at the color wheel on the back wall for the whole speech. Camellia thought Ms. Pullman was lying, said that Lindsay Henderson—Camellia's class—lived on Ms. Pullman's street and knew for a fact that her boyfriend hit her. Said she saw the cops come and everything, that's why the Sub never mentioned it. Lena picked a pot out of the water it had been soaking in, dumped bits of food back into the sink, and started to scrub around the rim with the abrasive side of a sponge. Lena didn't like Lindsay Henderson, but that didn't mean she wasn't right.

"It's a shame. Why would she just let him do that? She should leave or something," Camellia said while she waited with a dish towel draped over both hands.

"Maybe she did leave," Lena said and handed Camellia the pot.

From the living room where she was sitting with the boys watching cartoons, Mrs. Henley said through a yawn, “People will always take punches from the people they love.”

No one had anything else to say about that. Lena thought it must be true.

That night, lying on Camellia’s bedroom floor on top of a purple bed spread, Lena watched Camellia braid her hair into two long plaits that rested against the sides of her face. She watched her fingers weave through the hair until they snapped a tiny black rubber band at the end of each braid. When she finished, Camellia pulled her knees up to her chest and pushed her feet under the blanket she had been sitting on.

“What do you think she did?” Camellia asked.

“Who?”

“Ms. Pullman.”

“Probably just called the police.”

“No. What do you think she did to make him hit her?”

Lena didn’t know. She said so.

Camellia’s breathing slowed, and behind the shut door across the hall, Lena could hear the thumping noises die off as Marcus and Joel got tired of their toy guns and fell asleep. Lena wondered if one day Marcus would hit his girlfriend or his wife or his daughter. Probably. Maybe one night he would get really mad. Not even because of something she did, just because of a bunch of small things added. He wouldn’t mean to do it, but he would. In his head he’d want to hurt something, and it would come out through his body faster than he could stop it, and the crack of a cheek or the pop of a

shoulder would shock him, and he would cry and try to tell her he was sorry. He may not mean to, but he would probably really hurt someone one day.

The next morning, Lena woke with Joel's knee in her rib. She pushed him off, told him to go back to sleep.

"But everyone else is up already." He ripped away her blanket, held it around his shoulders and ran out of the room. The room was bright and she could smell the breakfast Mrs. Henley was cooking. She got up, went into the kitchen, sat down alone at the bar counter.

"Everyone else has eaten already. You want pancakes?" Mrs. Henley was standing by the kitchen sink drinking coffee.

"Yes, please."

Mrs. Henley stirred a bowl of batter, poured a thick spot onto a hotplate. The door was open, and through the screen door, Lena could see Camellia sitting on the steps, bent over, extending a hand to pet a stray.

"You need to stop feeding those cats. They're starting to come over here now," Mrs. Henley said. She had very hard hands and Lena thought she could probably flip the pancakes over with her fingers and not be burned. She handed a plate over to Lena.

"Yes, ma'am." Lena took the plate and ate.

The Pool

Toby Lawrence was the name of the boy who drowned in the pool. He was younger than the rest of us, but we still liked to play with him in the shallow end in the summers. The pool had an American flag painted on the bottom and we would run our fingers through the stripes and empty our lungs and lay down on the blue square of stars. Maybe Toby sank to that same spot. Like he was ready to be wrapped up and folded away. Probably he floated. Bumping against the edge where the filter trapped bees and straw. In the movies, the body is always face down and maybe that's science. Maybe it's because it's difficult for people to look at the bloated faces of the drowned. I don't know which way Toby floated, but part of me hopes he wasn't found staring into that stupid flag with its 47 stripes and its 24 stars.

At first none of our mothers would let us go back to the Lawrences'. As if it were something foul about the pool itself that drowned Toby. But they had the only pool in town, and we were good at asking things in a certain way. Insistent and without grace.

We were familiar with a certain kind of death. Death by anvil, death by piano, x-eyed death. Big laugh punchline death. But this somber kind of death was new. When we finally went back, Mom parked the car and said to us before we got out "Mikey, don't run by the pool. Remember Toby?" or "Layla, no flips from the diving board. Remember Toby?" Toby had justified every rule our mother had.

Laura messed everything up. Laura and her brother and me and my sister were the only kids over that day. It had been months, but we were the first over after the accident. It was such a hot day Laura's mom swam with us instead of sitting in the shade drinking

with the other parents. Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence were out by the pool talking with my mom and dad and Laura's dad, and Mr. Lawrence had his white cooler by his feet and a row of empty beer bottles lined up by his side. He opened bottles on the arm of his lawn chair and passed them around. My mom and Mrs. Lawrence wrapped their hair and rolled the sleeves of their shirts up to their shoulders and gossiped.

Laura was seven like me, but she was the better swimmer. In the deep end I sank if I didn't keep moving. Laura would float in the same spot and watch me swim around her and laugh. This went on for a while until Laura shouted, "Can't you swim, Mikey? Don't be such a Lawrence." The lawn chair crowd got real quiet at that, and Laura's mom made one of those we'll-talk-about-this-later faces, but Laura just laughed it off and everyone went back to swimming and drinking.

A little while later though, Laura and I were still swimming in the deep end when Laura said, "Mikey, who am I?" and then laid face down in the water, let her arms and legs float out around her, and floated real gently. There was something Wile E Coyote about her imitation, tongue out and eyes crossed. I almost laughed, but I remembered my mother's warnings. While Laura was floating Mr. Lawrence was watching, and I could tell he knew what she was getting at.

Her head came up laughing and Mr. Lawrence stood up at the same time. "Did you guess it?" she asked smiling, and then Mr. Lawrence started on a long streak of swears like, "You shit head kids. You think this is a goddamned game?" He was so angry the sweat seemed to spray out of him from all over. Mrs. Lawrence was pulling at the back of his shirt so hard the skin where the sleeve was turned bright red and then white and his swears got choked off a little. Both of them were crying. He threw his plastic

chair in the pool while we were still floating in the deep end. In the pool, we were all staring, and I was so still I started to sink, and Laura was so stunned she forgot to dodge the chair. It glanced off her arm and she started to bleed into the clear water.

Laura's mom was staring just as dumb as the rest of us until Laura started to cry really softly like she was embarrassed that her arm had been gashed open, as if something immodest had happened. As soon as Laura's mom did notice, she broke out in a perfect breast stroke which was weird because she'd just been floating around watching us from the edge of the pool all day. I'd even thought maybe she couldn't swim, but there she was cutting through the water like an Olympian. She tried to cover Laura's cut with her hand which made Laura scream.

Mr. Lawrence stopped screaming when Laura started and then he was the one staring and he started crying in a different way. He tried to help the two of them out of the pool, but Laura's mom wouldn't let him and took Laura to the ladder on the opposite side. I got out behind them and was a little grossed out because I didn't like blood and had to swim through the pink, cloudy water Laura left, and out of the water the cut looked worse because all the blood just pooled in Laura's hand and then dripped down her elbow. It was getting all over the concrete and staining through the yellow towel that Laura's mom pressed over it. Laura and her mom left quick, and my mom and dad were gathering up our stuff so we could leave too, but before we did Mom leaned over to Mrs. Lawrence and touched her arm and said, "I'm so sorry, Mary" real softly.

Later that week in Sunday school Laura pulled up the puff sleeve on her blue dress—muscle flexed like Popeye—and showed me her stitches like little dried up spiders. "Nine," she said, "and they hurt real bad." The cut was dark and dried but the

skin around it was still pink and tender looking. Laura pulled the sleeve back down. She flipped her bible open to whatever passage the teacher was talking about. I thought she was concentrating on the verses, but then she said, “Still, I guess I’m better off than Lawrence.”

Under an Ill Star

A boy pushes his fingers through those of the neighbor girl while they lie face down on a trampoline. She makes up stories to tell him. Her mouth doesn't recognize how close the boy is, but her hand can feel the rough edge of a scab on his palm, and while her lips move with the motion of her story, she holds tightly to the boy beside her. It's June, but at night the air is cool and thin, so he shares his jacket—lays it over the two of them, moves closer and slides his hand into the back pocket of her cutoffs. She doesn't move away but puts her arm between them. Charlie. The girl's heard him fight with his mother over that name.

Mama, nobody knows who Charlie Parker is.

Lots of people know Charlie Parker.

The kids in school call him Charlie Brown. There's a viciousness in it. The girl doesn't know this; she's in a lower grade. But she knows his mouth tastes like water that boiled rice and smells like figs and salt. She knows his mother calls him Bird. He pulls a pink lighter out of the back pocket of his jeans, and the girl watches him thumb it on and off, pushing the metal top of it into the elastic surface that breathes beneath them whenever they move. The girl wonders if this is some new trick he's trying out, like holding the gas inside your hands and watching it light and burn up in a ball. He showed her that once. She realizes he's just burning holes in the trampoline.

“Stop. Why do you always have to mess up things?” She tries to take the lighter from him but he pulls it back from her too fast and starts burning holes farther away.

“I don't. It isn't going to make a difference. It's just a trampoline.”

“They’ll spread.”

“What?”

“The holes. They’ll spread. Get bigger.”

“Did you buy the fucking thing? What do you care? They’re not even going to spread. It’s a trampoline not a pair of fucking nylons.”

“Jesus. It’s not that big of a deal. Just stop because I asked you to. And don’t say fuck.”

“Fuck that.”

The girl sits up and swings her legs over the edge of the trampoline, and as she does the cold metal presses and sticks against the backs of her thighs. She walks toward the house and Charlie calls out after her, bobbing up and down on the slick shine of the trampoline.

“Come on, Alana!”

Alana’s careful with the screen door. It swells and sticks in the summers, and she wants to be quiet. When she comes back out she’s carrying a white paper plate, and she can see the lump of Charlie still on the trampoline and the small flame of the lighter going on and off. It’s dark enough now she has to walk slow and look for clear spots to place her bare feet, the white soles somehow brighter in the evening light than in the full afternoon sun. When she gets to Charlie, she hands him the plate and somersaults back onto the trampoline. There’s a peanut butter and jelly sandwich cut in half, and grape jelly’s spilling out of the edges onto the plate.

“Did Mama see you make this?”

“Nah. She’s bathing your sister.”

“You know I get in trouble for this shit? I don’t know how things work next door, but the food here belongs to Mama.”

“Shut up and eat what I made you.”

They eat the sandwich, and Charlie grabs Alana’s hand to lick the jelly from her fingers, and she pretends to be mad about it.

The next morning, Charlie wakes Alana up with the doorbell. It’s ten thirty, and she’s the only one in the neighborhood still asleep. Her window is open—all the windows are left open during the summer—and without opening her eyes, she rolls over in bed and yells in Charlie’s direction.

“Charlie, I’m sleeping! Jesus, don’t you know I’m sleeping?”

“Come on, Alana! I’m dying here. Mom left Marty today.”

Marty is three years younger than Charlie but only two grades behind. This makes Marty impossible to like.

“That’s your problem.”

“I brought you a pancake.”

Alana considers for a moment, squints one eye open toward the bright window and sighs.

“Blueberry?”

“Maybe.”

“Jesus,” she breathes. She flings away the damp, floral sheet she’s under and picks up a pair of shorts from the floor.

When Alana opens the door, Charlie is sitting on the steps holding a single, cold pancake as big around as his palm. Alana sits down beside him and takes it. It's blueberry. She pulls it apart in pieces and eats it slowly, and when she finishes she goes inside to get a glass of water that she shares with Charlie. Sweat is already dripping down the side of his face.

Their street is quiet during the summers. In the distance someone is mowing a lawn. Alana's bike is lying in the overgrown grass of the front lawn, baby blue paint chipped, plastic handles sun bleached. There's the top of a basketball peeking out beside it.

"Where's Marty?"

"She's watching TV at the house."

"You're a bad sitter."

"I guess you get what you pay for."

"She's your sister though."

"Don't make me want to watch her."

Alana knows she can't really argue with Charlie about his sisters, so she doesn't. They take turns drinking the water until it turns warm, and Alana pours it into the grass. She goes in and fills the glass again with ice this time, and she and Charlie chew pieces on the steps until they too melt and are poured into the grass. They sit and watch a car, two cars pass by. Charlie chews on a long piece of grass he picked up on the way over, and Alana wonders where he is, what he's thinking about, if inside his head there's the simple hum of contentment or the agitation of something lacking, if she is lacking. She stands and walks to where the grass is highest and lays down in it. Sometimes she is

embarrassed by how high her mother lets the grass get, but when she lies in it, it is cool, and she feels hidden, and she forgets to mind so much. She lays her face on the damp belly of the yard and, arms stretched above her head, pushes her fingers into the wet dirt, cool and arousing. And she thinks about Charlie, sitting on the steps with that green grass rolling around between his teeth.

“Marty ate breakfast?”

“What do you think?”

Alana stands and looks up at Charlie for a moment. The shirt around his neck is dark with sweat and his brown arms, resting on top of his knees, shine with the light of the sun at near noon. She walks across the grass of the lawn and across the street which separates her house from Charlie’s. She is opening the screen door and stepping inside, but Charlie just watches. He thinks about this girl, this beautiful, freckled girl with legs like two strong branches walking away from him. He doesn’t understand her. Doesn’t know when she wants to be yelled after or left alone. There are no patterns. If she wants to go she will and if she doesn’t, nothing he says will make any difference. So this time he watches her walk away from him, and even though he knows it’s what she wants, what she expects, even though a stubborn nature protests against it, when she is inside, Charlie gets up and follows after her.

Marty is watching *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. It is the only thing she watches. She knows every line, every song, every sound. She leans back small in a deep couch, legs crossed with a cold pancake in one hand, half eaten but momentarily ignored as she talks along.

You mean you could've taken your hand out of that cuff at any time?

No, not at any time, only when it was funny!

She laughs at herself and takes another bite from the pancake and turns to see Alana walking in.

“Where’s Charlie?”

“Outside.”

“You want to watch *Roger Rabbit*?”

Alana sits down beside Marty with her legs laid out beside her and digs at the gritty earth under her fingernails. She waits. Charlie will walk in soon. What else could he do? He could sit on the step like a fool or follow her. To Alana, those are his only choices, and it pleases her. Something about him is off today. Maybe his mama said something. Maybe it’s having to look after Marty. She only knows that it will be taken out on her, subtly, throughout the day, and it’s too hot for that.

“You know, Mama says we’re not supposed to leave the house until she gets home.”

“You going to tell her he left?”

“No, I’m just saying is all.”

Marty is plain and sweet, and Alana thinks this is a terrible combination. If only she had the bronzy beauty of Charlie’s long limbs or his bitter meanness. Either one on its own would do. Plain and sweet is nothing to work with. But Marty likes Alana and for this Alana likes Marty.

“Are you Charlie’s girlfriend?”

Charlie comes in quietly, pulls his sneakers off with his toes and sits down on the other side of Marty.

“This fucking movie.”

“I think Alana’s your girlfriend.”

“Fuck off.”

Alana ignores them, focuses hard on cleaning out the dark crescents of dirt, but she feels what he says. Charlie knows this, can see Alana pause a moment when he says it, and feels sorry. But she isn’t his girlfriend. He hasn’t asked her to be. It’s that fact which makes him feel better, and it’s that same fact which makes Alana feel worse.

“I’m going to bike.”

It isn’t really an invitation, but she wouldn’t have said it if she really wanted to be alone.

“I’ll come too!”

Alana’s out the door before she can answer, and Charlie pushes his sister back down into the couch before he follows Alana out.

“Mama says don’t leave.”

He says this with a shrug and a shake of the head as he pushes open the door as if to say, *there’s really nothing I can do*. He picks up his bike in the garage, pushes back the kick stand with his heel and guides it across the street toward Alana, pushing with the tips of his toes against the bleached pavement. Alana is wiping dried grass from the seat of her own bike. She swings a leg over and, standing on the pedals, pushes hard to get the bike out of the grass and onto the road. When she passes Charlie he whistles, and when

she looks back at him he's grinning and shaking a hand like it's been burned. It's like the whole mood of the morning breaks, and they're okay again.

They play in the street every day. Biking from one stop sign to another, racing, popping wheelies, hands tucked into smooth armpits, elbows high. Sharply told not to by tired mothers. But there's no park, no sidewalk. The deal is that they ride on the flat streets, three blocks, no farther. But there's a road on a hill near, a long, turning one, and coasting down without hands, eyes wet and chipped teeth bared is too sweet.

Alana rides slowly and smoothly down the road in front of Charlie even though she isn't holding the handle bars. Her hands are busy pulling her hair up into a mess of a bun, and she guides the bike with the slight weight of her body, leaned right or left. Charlie's never learned this. He can't go more than a couple of feet without having to guide the front wheel back into alignment with his hands. He's a bit jealous of her. Of how naturally it comes to her. He is riding a bike; she, it seems, is just being herself. The day is at its hottest now, and Charlie slips the front of his damp shirt over and behind his head. Alana's turning left at the corner of their block, and just as she slips from his view, he starts after her and catches up.

Alana turns widely in the road, moving from one side of the street to another, while Charlie moves in a straight line just in front of her. There are never many cars on these streets, and there are fewer during the long days of the summer than there are during the hours after school. They pass by Mrs. Schultz's home. She's the music teacher at their school. She's quiet even when she teaches, but she likes to bang out ragtime for them on an old ivory chipped upright.

She's been mowing. When Charlie and Alana pass, the push mower is at one end of the line where light, trimmed lawn meets the darker, tall grass. Mrs. Schultz is sitting on the steps in front of her home with a glass of water in her hand and a blue bandana tied around her forehead. It's strange to see her red and sweating like this in dirty jeans and yellowed sneakers. Charlie and Alana wave hello, and she lifts a hand back to them. Mrs. Schultz keeps a small lemon tree on one side of the walkway. When she is gone, Charlie and Alana steal lemons and eaten them like oranges by the side of the road.

They ride like this, coasting on the flat roads, for an hour. Bumping the backs of each other's tires with the fronts of their own, laughing at the slight jolt, racing one another to spots in the distance without warning, only a look from one to the other, a cheeky smile, and then a quick pumping of the legs as one pulls ahead and the other follows. *Not fair! You cheated!* The day is still warm and heavy, but the air around them as they pedal is cool, and it's getting cooler. Their mothers will be home soon, and they're reminded that this, the momentary relief of a space that belongs to them, will end soon.

"You want to go up to Bumper?"

Bumper is that long, turning road on the hill. It is the line which makes an H of two longer streets, bumps into them at both ends.

"We gotta ride back by Marty first."

Alana smiles widely even though she knew he would say yes when she asked. He loves it as much as she does, but she likes the way he tries to hide it.

"Okay."

When they get back to the house, Marty's sitting outside in the center of the yard reading a book. They don't stop, and Marty yells after them.

"Where are you going?"

"Bumper."

"I'll come with you!"

They can hear the beginning of her protest—*You're not supposed*—but they've left her, and newly excited, they pedal fast to the hill.

"Ladies first."

They know it is dangerous. Once they start down the hill they can't stop, so one of them has to stay at the bottom and make sure there are no cars driving by and signal to the other at the top of the hill. Alana walks her bike up as quickly as she can, and when she gets to the top, she swings her leg over and waits for Charlie, small and dark in what's becoming a yellow light melting between the homes. He looks down the street for a minute, waits for one car to pass and another, and then turns to Alana waving one arm.

He knows how much she loves it. Not just the ride down but the high point, overlooking everything, the moment before. Waving the signal's almost as exciting as tipping the bike. She pushes the bike forward, lets it fall into the hill and laughs as she gains speed. She sits back on the seat and bits of hair loosen themselves from their bun as the wind smoothes itself around her face and echoes in her ears. Everything is cool and quiet and at the same time wild. When she is near the bottom she begins to brake so that she won't ride over the next road and into the ditch. It's perfectly timed. She stops right beside Charlie smiling, hair once animated by the wind stilled in a messy circle around

her head, stretched t-shirt hanging off one shoulder. Her skin is brighter, her eyes darker, her teeth somehow whiter. He laughs at her.

“You should see yourself.”

“Shut up. It’s your turn.”

He’s still laughing when he realizes she’s become very quiet. She’s looking up the hill into the sun and holding a hand flat against the light. He hears the tires first, a bit like the sound of water running, and then there’s Marty, backlit by the sun and waving at them. She’s thrilled, small tears streaming back from the wind. Charlie thinks she looks like something from the calendar in the convenience store nearby, an eastern god, sitting high and glittering, offering up flowers and conchs and gold. Alana thinks she looks beautiful. She must have gone up a side street. Both of them are terrified, but there is no reaction. Charlie and Alana are fixed. As suddenly as Charlie sees her, she is past them, and in a wave of green bike and grin.

The brakes on Marty’s bike give, and she overshoots into the ditch. When Charlie and Alana run over to help she bounces up like Roger Rabbit, “Tah-dah!”

There’s blood on her chin and a missing baby tooth in her smile.

Charlie breaks his best swear streak. He’s pulling Marty up from the ditch and asking questions so quick he can’t want answers. Marty’s still smiling though Alana can tell she’s trying not to.

“Did you see me ‘Lana?”

Alana looks at her, still a little shocked, and then smiles with her. Charlie’s got Marty by the arm. He’s still swearing. He keeps swinging Marty as he looks around in the grass. Alana asks him what he’s looking for.

“Her fucking tooth!”

Alana and Marty’s smiles broke open, and they laughed at how serious he was.

But Not for Me

I. Blue

Every morning Eleanor made coffee while Sal put his horn together. She made hers in the Mr. Coffee, five cups of weak with lots of milk to drink through the whole morning. For Sal she boiled equal parts coffee, sugar, and water in a small pot over the stove. She'd take it over to him thick, sweet, and burning hot, and he'd drink it quick like a shot. Before he played, he would walk over to the kitchen sink and rinse the loose grounds from his cheeks and teeth.

Putting the horn together wasn't a difficult process. A mouth piece fit into its opening, a couple of slides shifted, valves taken out and oiled. It was mundane maintenance, but to watch Sal finger the cool silver plating of the horn and tap the valves into smoothness was like watching a preacher turn to Psalms, no effort at all and an obvious comfort.

Once everything was in place, once everything moved smoothly and shone, once the cold metal had been warmed up by the touch of his hands, Sal would run through scales. C, D flat, D, E sharp. Major and minor. Blues scales. Low and gurgling until his lips were right, until his soft embouchure firmed, until finally he would run off into something. Take a scale and twist it around backwards, dip into something minor and let it play out, put his large, flat palm over the bell and make the sound sink deep into itself.

It was like cold, white butter warming. Yellowing and melting against his lips until it browned and sizzled and popped. His right foot stomped, bare ankle flashing beneath a wool pant hem, and his face squeezed in on itself like it was ready to take a punch. *These lips could blow over a mountain.* Endless slurs and riffs. *That's the best*

part. You could go on forever. He could go on forever. Eleanor was sure of it. An entire mouth which was so soft with smiles and you are my sunshines in the evenings, hard as marble in the mornings. Not so much blowing air as pressing himself, his whole body, through a trumpet. An instrument which looked big and formal, she thought, in anyone else's hands. Sal had a way of taking in the things he touched, gently or otherwise.

Some days it made her dance, like fire on her soles and all through her limbs, quick and light, hips shaking, ankles twisting, hands clapping. Her hands would be numb with clapping. Some days she went into a different room and wept with the sadness of it, wondering where that sadness was inside of him and recognizing it somewhere inside herself. Some days he cried too. Some days the sound was so clean she could feel it vibrate and melt through her whole body like the warmth of a first glass of wine. Eleanor couldn't sing, but some days the sound begged not to be alone, and she'd put in all she had.

There was something in trying to understand it. In sorting through the low, muddy sound of it until something shone clear through. Like trying to wipe pouring rain from a window, a moment of clarity and then the soft distortion of more water. That wasn't the way it was supposed to be though. Wasn't the way Sal said it was supposed to be. He'd told her not to think too hard about it. *You don't need a translation. You speak this language already. You always have, and if you'd just listen to it, you'll know it.* Eleanor thought that was some romantic bullshit if she ever heard any. She wanted to know the mechanics of it. How he knew when to dip a half step or run up into another key. Popular songs were less of a mystery; he played what he heard. It was the improvisation she couldn't place. She thought maybe what he improvised was what he heard in his head all

the time. While everyone else thought about rent and babies, Sal was thinking blues chords and chromatics.

Both of their chairs faced the open windows which let out to a small balcony. The air outside was spring cool, but the sun was seeping just inside to the edge of the room. Eleanor was folded around her third coffee, brown legs pulled up onto the soft, worn velour of the arm chair, naked save for a thick green band pulling her hair away from her face. She looked out the window, drank her coffee, thought about rent and babies. Above she could hear the Herrera boys waking up, jumping down onto scrubbed floor boards, running around missionless in the gap of time between waking and breakfast being ready. She reached for an ashtray on the windowsill and found a cigarette only half smoked. Sal was playing something she didn't know, but she could tell it wasn't his. She finished the cigarette while he played it.

“What was that?” she asked when he finished.

“Something LaRoy was playing at Paddock last week. He was sprinting through it with Jim and Charles, but I thought it would sound better slow.”

“Does it?”

“You tell me.”

“Don't know the original.” Eleanor finished her coffee and got up to fill her cup again.

“It sounded just the same but faster.”

“I guess it depends. I like anything slow in the morning.”

When she walked back over to her chair, Sal took the coffee from her and put it down on the floor. He put his hands around her wrists and slid them up to her elbows.

“That right?”

Girls at the club cut up to Eleanor about a musician’s hands. Mostly she rolled her eyes and kept quiet, but they weren’t wrong. Sal’s fingers pressed to the soft inside of her arms like they were trying to get something musical out of her. What she wanted to tell those girls didn’t have anything to do with the deftness of Sal’s fingers. What she wanted them to understand was how it felt to make a blues man put down his trumpet for a while. To have that improvisational brain put to use on the insides of her arms, the long plank of her back. Like playing god in a way.

II. Green

Before David was born, Oscar would walk into the kitchen where his mother was, and she would let him stand beside her, and she would hand him small pieces of toast or meat while she cooked. Now he watched her feed the baby from her heavy breast while she turned over pancakes and poured thick milk into small jam jars.

Oscar sat at the kitchen table and drank the milk from one of these jars, let it leave a creamy arc over his lip and licked at it. Sal was playing something slow downstairs, and his mother was humming along to it. Without looking over at him she said, “I need you to ask Ms. Eleanor for some coffee. Finish that milk and take the jar with you. Rinse it out.”

David’s head looked wet the way his hair lay, and around their mother’s arm he watched Oscar heavy eyed and interested. Sal had his hand over the bell of his trumpet and everything went underwater for a minute. Oscar noticed the blue light leaving the

room, and he heard his brothers jumping down from their top bunks, and the milk had warmed up in his hands and looking at David made him tired again.

He thought about Eleanor. He dropped the Ms. in his head. He was often sent over with leftovers or to collect clean, empty dishes. Eleanor had long arms and wide eyes. If Sal wasn't there, she'd let him in and give him pieces of chocolate that she broke off of a bar kept hidden in a sewing tin. She'd whistle and ask about girls at school. She'd hum and sway around the whole place. Sometimes standing in that room with her was like those rare moments when things were just quiet enough—when the ice maker wasn't humming and the bugs had died down in the winter and the baby had shut up and Sal wasn't playing or knocking around—and you could hear the bottom sound of the church bells ring, heavy and humid sounding, like a dab of syrup in the fog. Oscar was a little afraid to look right at Eleanor. Most of the time she remained a fine blur in his periphery. Sal's faults he knew in detail. A dark spot on the left cheek—not a freckle or mole, something like a permanent smudge of brown ink—a lank to his arms run through with thin lines of quick, flexible muscle, splay footed. Oscar guessed he would lose his hair.

His mother knocked the spatula against the side of the stove.

Sal and Eleanor's door was missing all its numbers. Dirt had been swept away from the baseboards. Oscar could smell thick coffee and the outside air from an opened window coming through the door. The place was no palace. Inside, pieces of yellow foam poked out of the furniture. Sheet music was stacked all over in no particular order. The wooden floor squeaked and buckled. It was clean though. The way that most people in the building kept what they had clean. Eleanor would wash dishes and leave them on the

kitchen counter, the table, the arm of the couch, wherever she was when she finished drying them. She was resolute about keeping out dirt and always made Oscar take his shoes off out in the hall. More than once, he had walked in while she was scrubbing the floorboards like in movies, with a big, bristled wooden block wearing a white apron with her hair covered.

But he smelled something rank coming out with that cool air and coffee. Like how his brothers sometimes smelled after the walk home from school. He thought maybe she'd forgot to hang her wet clothes up to dry, left them to mildew in a pile on the floor while she smoked cigarettes and swayed around.

Sal wasn't playing anymore, but Oscar could hear him talking to Eleanor. He toed the door open and looked around at the apartment as it unfolded: kitchen sink, stove, wide pink rug, couch, and then by the window, crowded with armchairs, Sal with Eleanor spread around him, swaying in her way, eyes watery and dumb in a way that reminded Oscar of David.

He stood with the empty jar in his hand. Sal pressed his mouth into a dark nipple and Oscar felt packed with salt, angry and dull and heavy all at once. Looking at him now, Oscar could see how ugly Sal really was: chapped red elbows and unshaven, yellowed hair and crooked nose. He heard the sharp sound of the jar hitting and saw the soft flash of glass spread against the floor before he felt the jar leave his hand. Sal's eyes went wide, and his whole body stiffened. He tried to cover Eleanor. When Eleanor turned around in Sal's lap and saw Oscar, she laughed hard. A laugh so loud her whole body shook around it. A laugh Oscar could still hear at the bottom of the stairs and in the kitchen and when his mother asked where the coffee was.

III. Bittersweet

On Thursdays Eleanor went to The Olive to hear Sal play with the house band. Oscar passed by the club to get to the bus stop before school, and in the daytime the sweet and sour trash smell added to something bitter and sad about the building front.

At night the place was so changed Oscar might have passed it if he hadn't heard Sal playing. He'd never been on this part of Dauphin at night and there was something fluid and alive about the place that he never noticed during the day. The garbage smell was still there, but the evening light and the hurricane sound of music made the street move like something on fire. He thought about his family sleeping and about nights when he'd thought he was the only one still awake. How impossible that was.

There was a man at the door shaking hands with the people who walked in, nodding at their dates. Down the street another man called out to him and the doorman went to say hello. Oscar went in and kept close to the wall. One side of the room had folding screens separating the tables and he slid over and tucked himself into one.

The house band was still up, and Sal was front and center. The trombone and piano players weren't playing. While they listened they wiped sweat out of their eyes or drank from bottles by their feet. The saxophone droned on behind the trumpet's sound. Sal played all around the place. It made Oscar nervous. Every new phrase sounded like a small disaster, like a toddler's steps, all the time about to fall apart. But Sal kept steady until the end, resolved the whole mess in a way Oscar couldn't understand. Nothing had ever sounded like that coming through the apartment floor. He wanted to put his fist inside the trumpet bell, feel around for something he hadn't heard before. A couple of people put their drinks down to clap. The piano player came up to the mic.

“Thank you. The band’s going to take a short break, folks.”

Sal laid his trumpet in its case and walked off the stage and to the bar. Oscar looked around for Eleanor. She was leaning over a billiards table playing with a group of men who were laughing at all her exaggerations: hip cocked, eye tight. She put a solid into a corner pocket. Sal walked over to the table with his drink and slipped a hand around her back. One of the men walked over to shake Sal’s hand.

“El’s bringing home more than you tonight, Sal. Good set though. Next Lee Morgan.”

“Rather be Dizzy.”

“Don’t push it.”

They talked while Eleanor finished her game. She walked around the table and picked a ten out of one man’s shirt pocket, slid it into the top of her dress, grinning all through.

Someone put Holiday on the jukebox and Eleanor and Sal left the pool table and danced to *Darn that Dream*. It was a different kind of dance than Oscar had ever danced with her. Up in her apartment, when Eleanor had spun around him, it’d been a show—a dance like a gust of wind or hard daytime rain—but Eleanor and Sal were barely moving. Neither of them looked happy. There was something like sadness there but not sadness. Something very close and serious. Something like what Sal had been doing on stage. Oscar thought about Sal’s playing, tried to remember and hum a line. He closed his eyes and concentrated on getting the dip and rise of it right.

He was still working it out when a hand spun him around. He opened his eyes and followed the hand up to its person. One of the guys from the pool table was squinting into his face like they had met before and the name was failing him.

“Whose kid?” the man called out.

Oscar looked around now afraid of what it meant for him to be in this place. No one paid any attention to the man.

“Sal, you know this kid?” the man called out again.

Sal and Eleanor stopped dancing and looked over in Oscar’s direction. Sal looked irritated by the question, but Eleanor looked him over a minute before asking her own question. “Oscar? Oscar, what you doing here?” She looked at Sal. “One of the Herrera boys.”

Oscar hadn’t been able to go back to Eleanor and Sal’s after he’d seen them together. When his mother would ask him to go over for flour or coffee he’d sulk until she asked one of the older boys. He’d known Eleanor’s hours well enough to pass her on the stairs or catch her cleaning in the hall, and he used that same knowledge to avoid her. But he didn’t hate her the way he wanted to. He was embarrassed, pure and simple. He wanted to go back, to have Eleanor give him chocolate and ask about girls again. Something about Eleanor and Sal together had stuck though. He wanted to see them together again to work it out.

Eleanor and Sal were staring at him, waiting for an answer, and a couple of other people in the place were starting to pay attention. Oscar bolted. Took off so fast he lost a

shoe. The man who had called him out yelled after him, “Hey, kid, your shoe!” and a few men laughed as he tried to pitch it to Oscar on his way out.

Oscar ran the three blocks down Dauphin. He turned into Lawrence and slowed down. All that embarrassment from weeks before started to creep up again, but it was a normal kind of embarrassment, a tripping in the street embarrassment, not the painful thing he’d felt before.

He stood in front of his building. All the lights were out. He thought about Sal’s music. He thought about it coming not from Sal but from the instrument itself, the sound falling over and over again in on itself, as if the trumpet was trying to figure out exactly what it was. He hummed something to himself even though what he’d heard earlier had been forgotten. He walked up stairs, past Sal and Eleanor’s door, into his own family’s apartment, slipped off his clothes, and slid into his bottom bunk. He dreamed about putting his hand inside a trumpet bell and pulling out white sheets and peaches and blue bottles and lightbulbs and cups of sugar until all the space around him was the things he’d pulled out of that golden horn.

On Silence

She felt like bread crumbs, like what the old man shook out of the bag for the birds. Which is not to say useless, only small. She heard her body, how it vibrated quietly. She didn't speak for two months, which was hard because you needed a voice to make a deposit or order food or say 'Thank you' or 'I'm not interested.' At work, people hardly noticed. She smiled when people said good morning. She rarely had to answer a phone. All of her work was typed and emailed.

Three weeks in, she started to hear things she hadn't heard before. First, quiet ringing notes. The kind that bothered people. But with all the quiet, she was fond of them. Some were like piccolos warming up. Or bees. Or sometimes they were mechanical and sometimes they had a rhythm to them.

By the fourth week she began to hear her own voice which was strange because she hadn't realized that she'd stopped thinking in a voice. She had silent conversations with herself. In her head one day, she started to talk to other people: her brother, her mother, the first boy she'd kissed, the mustached girl who bagged her groceries.

Later she talked to people she would never really be able to talk to: the First Lady, Chekhov, currently deployed astronauts. She thought up these conversations at home. At work, on the bus, walking under the bypasses on her way to her apartment, she tried to listen to everything outside of herself. At first there were the normal sounds: traffic, buildings humming with air conditioning, everyone—mothers, businessmen, children, street cleaners—on cellphones.

Then she heard things she couldn't see. Like children and concerti and once the halting sound of a car crash, and at first she was frightened, but in the second month that

went away and she was only curious. She thought maybe she was making the sounds up. Like an audible hallucination. After two months, an old man in suspenders touched her shoulder as she passed him on the sidewalk, and when she turned around he was handing her a tulip from a box hanging around his neck. She took the flower and said Thank you. What surprised her more than the actual act of speaking—and after all this time, two months of silence broken by an old man with a flower—was that she sounded no different. Her voice was low and clear and everything it should be. The man smiled, and she thanked him again, and she walked away with her nose in the tulip.