

A FRAGMENTARY STUDY  
OF THE ANIMALS

by  
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A THESIS

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## ABSTRACT

This is a collection of short stories.

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HERE IS A PHOTOGRAPH OF THE CITY

Dear,

Here, the buildings are made of paper and string. There is wind, and sudden thunderstorms. I imagine you have trouble picturing the way the people are awake at night, every night, and on the radio the music starts at three a.m. The news that inhabits the station before the music begins is made up of no words, only a rush of noise like bombs, like streets collapsing. And how then there are parades, the stretch of dying, the drying grapefruit juice in all the glasses, the littering of streets with awful birds. The people march at three a.m. to music, their eyes fuzzy, radiating green, the way I used to wake up in the middle of the night and watch you sleeping, your outlines fuzzy and the only light the streetlight and the red light on the electric fan.

Dear,

Here is a photograph of the city. See the little edges. The way the buildings fit together with their notches, their fold-over tabs, the precise creases as if made permanent by fingernails. See the handcuffs, the combination of metal and feathers. The way the children lick at building corners as if they taste like bubblegum, like stamps, and so the corners of their kitchens are made softer, translucent. In the photograph, it is all so black and white, the colors as if drawn out through a straw, bleaching out the pools and bathtub tiles, and fancy balls in ballrooms, all the nooks and corners, and narrowing alleyways, and so only a façade, the building-edges, the outer shapes of stairwells going down and down, into basements, is visible. The people have their marching; they have their trumpets. I can tell you everything. Here is the everything. Here, there are strawberries, white ones, with a shading of gray.

Dear,

Here, the forests are filled with wolves, and at night the yellow eyes and howling. Picture this, the traveling, the feet. I keep thinking I will wake up in the morning sitting on the fragmented paper flakes of what was forest, of what were leaves, from attacks, with teeth, with claws and sharper things than even I can imagine, but this doesn't happen. Dear, here the lines are plotted, drawn in with rules, and rulers, and I can see my feet step between them, the pale blue lines underneath my shoes instead of crosswalks. It is calming, I think, to be inside so many lines. Here, the people freckle in the summers, and the girls sit on the doorsteps, count the freckles on each others' shoulders, use a blue ballpoint pen to connect them. And sometimes I throw balls at them and scream *catch!* but they are so absorbed that they don't. And sometimes they poke holes with tiny knives through each others' necks and shoulderblades instead, making long strings of red dots in the shape of arrows, and lions' feet. Here, there are constellations on knees, on elbows, and strange elements of weather, the people watching out their doorways, through their fences, through their skylights for the storms, the mothers knitting stockings in thick purple yarn that their daughters will never wear and will instead use to wipe off windshields of the wings of bugs, to polish mirrors, to catch the mice that flood their beds in afternoons before they nap.

Dear,

Here, is a map. Trace your finger along the lines. See the towers. See the bridges that link up all the banks, the sloshing rivers in-between and how so many people climb on them to dangle down their feet. It is an elegant city, fine-drawn. You will want to know the details. See the observatory, the stacked astronomical instruments, and their way of predicting the scattering stars; see the way the man who lives there eats soup. He lifts his spoon, to sip, keeps one hand flat on the table. And the way every city must have a cathedral, and so this one is ours. Look, look up, and there are bats, bats. They flood the sky, they hold the trees up. Here, I am looking for holes, rust spots. Here, there are fragments. Here, I make a fragmentary study of the animals, because there are penguins, because there are bees, and you wouldn't have thought so, would you? There are; they sting, and make dark black and white parades on all the streets. I have gathered up thick beaks, small wings. Here, the people speak in words that sound small, could be encompassed by a jar, a tightened lid, and they should be so contained – they are more dangerous, more unpredictable, and looping. I will put one in the pocket of this envelope; please make sure it doesn't bite your hand as you reach in, because it will.

Dear,

Here, here, here. When I first arrived here there were pinpricks, everywhere, and I held my hands behind them, and I could see my hands behind them and so I thought there had been battles, disaster. I walked along the streets and stepped onto the cobblestones and thought how I would tell you all about it, the battles, the disaster, the way I had observed it, everything. So you would think me brave. I found none, though everywhere were groups with hats pushed back on their heads and holding compasses, small knives. I could see them pick up walls between their fingers, blow between their whistled lips to see them billow out, fine and white and careful; everywhere someone standing outwards towards the street, standing guard. I hear, here, your breath. I will put so many things in envelopes. Here everything washes away, in the bathtubs, even skin, even toenails. The people tell me they have tugged and tugged, and pulled them – skin, toenails – off; they tell me they have lifted off entire heads of hair, looked at the underneath in their mirrors, then covered the mirrors up.

Dear,

Here, there is a carousel. Wooden horses, chipping pink paint. I have ridden it, round, around and round, though too much motion makes me dizzy. I have thought that when you left you would come back; you haven't. I have thought that when I left I would go back; I haven't. Here, there are plates, small plates, that mold over the important parts of skin, that mark the edges of fingers, that hold the hands apart even when placed together, grasping, though they are smaller now, thinner, the skin of people almost touching. But not touching. They do not touch. The people tell me they have bought them in the hardware stores, stacked up next to hammers. The people tell me the way it used to be, that they were thicker then, thick walls around them, cold and shiny like the metal bowl you pull out of the fridge that holds the grapes. And I think of you, feeling tired, and careful, not because of holidays, or screaming, but because you are made of lavender and fresh-cut grass. But because you are holding onto everything so tightly, onto the dog's leash, onto the sweater you have tied around your neck, and your hands are starting to bleed. I know you worry. I know your eyes are red and trembling; I know everything you see right now is blurry. Here, the old women embroider knives and scissor-blades on sofa cushions, napkins, the scarves they wrap around their necks to make the snow melt. Here, you are made of thin and linted gauze, burnt around the edges, or so I tell them, when I speak of you at dinner, when we are eating shortcake and brushing the crumbs off of our pants. I tell them you don't think of me, and might be right.

Dear,

I will want to capture your attention. Here are the photographs. Here are the maps; fold them softly, track my movements. Here is a building. Here is a building. Here, there are so many movie theaters, the steps going down and underneath the houses, and they show movies that are black and white and silent or full of dancing. A woman in a skirt runs the projector. The children sit cross-legged on the floor, and kneel, and bob up and down at the exciting points, when the women are lifted up, when the dancing goes too fast to see the feet. I know that you would like to dance, to spin, or at least to sit up high and watch. I know that, if you were here, you would think that I would hold you down, your popping up, the movements of your feet. The projectionist is on a stool, sitting, feet under her on a rung, one hand on the warming knob, and she lets the white light flicker over the flitting paper screen, watching for the bits of flame that she will stamp out, will run and catch, hair flying, feet bare, grinding them out before they spread and ruin all those spinning skirts and top hats and the sharp soft points of unprotected ankles, before the children see them catch on fire. I know that you would like to see this, to stamp out the flames like this, to be covered by the film as you protect it.

Dear,

Here, there are dangerous things. Yelling, and remonstrances. I have seen, today, the throwing of pianos out of windows, the bright papery crash and all those splinters, flying. Here, the hole, shaped somewhat by pianos but mostly not, mostly square and jagged, covers itself back up, mysteriously, and is gone in the morning. I presume tractors, orange cones, the heat of pushing repairs, but have not myself seen them, the work crew and the fixing, though I wish to.

I wish for things: a tunnel, an ice cream drive-through filled with lights. I wish for sleep in a dark room, a low fan hum, a front yard and fireflies and the kind of grass that covers your ankles and leaves you with bites that itch for days and for you to come and put your feet in my lap.

Dear,

This is an apology.

I have told them, everything. The little girl on the front steps playing shiny, sharpened jacks. The man who piles up the hammers in their torn-up tearing boxes, in the hardware store, in case of what everyone who lives here thinks will come. We sit on lawns and watch the storms. So many shades of gray in all directions. So many bees. I have told them about you. We think of you, often. Someday I will send you all the pieces. I am sure that you will want to see them. Please protect them. Dear, someday this will all be yours, and you will want it to be whole.

## INSTEAD, THEY ACCUSE HIM

Uncertain, though, where they should start. Here, perhaps. Here: a girl on a boat. A girl wearing a hat, holding an umbrella, a parasol, something to shade her eyes, something to make her see you better. You are standing on the dock on the shore with the water at the tip-ends of your shoes so you can see it better, so you can see her better as she is leaving you. Waving.

And perhaps blowing a kiss. The boat is tall, high, like one of those steamships with the deck chairs on the deck and maybe some tables with tea sandwiches. There are men walking around in seersucker suits carrying canes that glint at their tops because they are carved at their tops with eagle heads, or with the shapes of states, coats of arms. And there are smoke stacks, or steam stacks, or something to make it seem even taller, the boat, as the girl stands there in her red dress, holding a parasol, wearing a hat, everything to see you better on the sunny day as the sun shines, strikes out at you on the water, a sunburn in your skin already as she is leaving you, waving. This, they think, is what it's like.

Uncertain, though, how deep it is. How much the body will fall, or float. Because there's not a speed, in the water, so much as a growing, deepening weight; so the body, in its skirts, is pulled down. In its wearing shoes. In its wearing lacy underwear. It is pulled down by the ends of its hair, by the ribbons.

When he finds her it's late at night. When he finds her it is because she has floated to the surface, the way the body of water likes to shuffle its inhabitants around, skim them, spit them up, over what would be rocks in what would be moonlight, and her skin is that much more visible, surfacing. He has taken to walking late at night, to quiet what seems to be in his legs, what would more likely be called screaming in his ears or worrying in his throat or maybe indigestion, acid reflux. At night, he bites his fingernails and paces down the hallway of his house, makes a turn, on a heel, wearing shoes, walks another hallway, worrying. At night, he walks along the streets, along the river. When they question him, it is because they've never seen anyone so nervous, the police, and he is clearly covered in water, and in slime, and perhaps fish are in his pockets, a minnow, a delicate tail-end of snake; he has carried the whole of it with him, wearing a white shirt, still wearing his office pants, the creases sticking to his knees. When they question him it is because he cannot stop shaking.

They question him in a chair, in an office with windows. The windows look out onto the fields, the river, the street. There is a park. There are parking meters. There is a bank, and a thrift store. There is a grocery store with a large and shiny parking lot. Down the street, it is quiet. Across the street, a man opens up the windows, looks out: cars parked here and there, streetlights turning off. He doesn't hang out his sign, not yet, but polishes the window with his shirt.

It's an orange chair, plastic. He sits and watches the man across the desk, who keeps his badge on even in the office (he'd thought that they would take them off, like loosening a tie), who holds a pencil he doesn't write with. It's chewed around the eraser and the metal part is bitten-on.

They ask him things like: so, what were you doing at the river? So late at night? Really? Didn't you have somewhere else to be? Didn't you have someone else at home? They ask him things like: but

haven't you ever found someone? Have you ever looked? The policeman says something about finding a girl at a bar—there's a bar right down the street, he says, knocking his head that way to indicate direction. Girls there. There *is* a bar down the street—shut up, locked-up, and beer cans collect outside along the gates that hide the door. They ask him things like: so—chewing on the pencil—did you consider how much she weighed when you pushed her in? Was she dead when you dropped her there? Was she heavy when you carried her there? How much blood is in your house? Have you cleaned your carpets recently? We'll have to see your wallet.

When they question him it is because he has spent every night curled up, stained somehow, submerged into himself, somehow, and he projects this so everywhere he goes there is a tinge of something else—sad, with blurry edges. They have been talking about him, in a worrisome watchful way, a wondering *maybe we should look after him* way, but turning away from him as he walks down the aisles of the hardware store, of the grocery store on his way to get new milk. They don't know where to start, and they have been talking about the way he moves his arms, that strange and softer tilt to his head. It's little things—the news, the radio, the creaking of his gate—how he can't seem to fix the gate and it will always stop, for just a moment, as if permanently remedied, then creak again—that pester, worry him. How the water moves. How the limbs travel through it, light, then lighter, then heavier than that, constantly changing, so they turn into only limbs, not belonging to a person, not human at all, and he saw this, as he was plunging into the water to pull her out. It was cold, and not cold, all at once, so she became light, and he became confused, heavy, wanting to feel something, in the middle of the river, but not knowing what. When he was walking he didn't expect to find anyone. He didn't expect to find himself in water to his shoes and then his neck, still wearing his office shoes, the ones with heels that click on wooden floors and on the floorboards of his car. It

bothers him that his shoes announce himself like that. He is too heavy; he is too wanting to be quiet. They are ashamed to see him looking back at them, as if they have been caught, questioning.

Haven't you ever found someone?, they ask him. Your own someone, they are implying. Don't go digging other people's wives out of the rivers, they are implying. Get one somewhere else. The policeman sits back, puts his feet up onto the desk. He has a mustache. He has bitten fingernails. He drinks from a can of Coke that is crumpled at the bottom. Do you know where the river goes?, he asks him. Have you ever seen the river? Where have you been? Where have you been?

He works at a law firm in the city. He takes the train, then the subway, sometimes a taxi on the cold days or on the crowded days; he kicks at the walls when he comes home. He makes noise. His neighbors hear this, put down their chicken legs at kitchen tables, sit slightly forward to listen closer, to catch the shape of sound and make it settle so they can then figure him out. It's anger, they think, or sadness. And it is like that caused by a lost someone, they think, when they pick up their plates, settle them in dishwater to walk out towards the television, though they are not sure that anyone is lost, or that he would be this way if anyone were.

They come up with this: a conclusion. It involves knives. It involves something a little bit too late, at night, by the television. An argument. A disagreement. Long hair, pulled. And then she was dropped in, they think, into the body of water that billows out, that they have so much trouble controlling in the winters when it rains: water licking at the bridges, the expansion of the water into space and into the front porch-posts of houses where the families eat their toast and the children butter it and it lands right-side-up when they take turns hitting it out of each others' hands because it is too early in the morning for real fighting, so they are lazily hitting, so they are painfully snapping, rubber bands

and hair bands and spoons, at each other. Here the mornings are gray, and green, because there is so much water, and the televisions are on, showing the news. On the television a woman talks, looks down, looks up again. She wears pearls. The conclusion is that she was stabbed, and then dropped in, a necklace around her neck being the only weight.

Where have you been? the woman says, when she brings him a cup of coffee. She is the secretary who types up all the papers. Her skirt is wrinkled, and for her it is still early; she's still half-asleep, having gotten up before it was light enough to see as she rode her bicycle to work. When he says nothing she thinks maybe he is someone else, that he isn't the one she has seen in the grocery store, at the bank on Friday afternoons, at the post office waiting in the line with stacks of papers, and envelopes, and stamps. The one who opened the door that time, and waited for her to walk in, before him. It was Friday, and he was, then, smiling, hands in pockets. He was, then, taking up very little space. He says nothing, and she walks back to her desk touching all the desks along the way, as if to pat them back in place, as if she has disturbed something delicate, walking carefully in the high heels she has bicycled to work in.

They think she was a girl. But then change their minds, decide that she was a wife, having thus lost her description of girl. That maybe it was on purpose, lost, like a coin decided to be unlucky, like a dog left on a corner run away from, hurriedly, a hole in a pocket pried there by a thumb, to lose things through, on purpose. She must have left the category, the description, the trappings of girl behind on purpose—they were so shameful to her. Being a girl is trapping. She was light, though, small, and wearing her hair long, and her shoes red and perhaps a polka-dotted ribbon around her wrist. She was made bleeding somehow, by the pull of the water, by the tug of it on her tongue. So she was bleeding when they pulled her up, from where on the banks he set her down, then wasn't

anymore, the blood having taken on that green, so it didn't look like blood at all. He stood there watching, as they arranged her, dripping water himself, on his shoes.

There is a cluster of policemen in the station, the night shift, the ones who have been here waiting for things to happen, all night. They sit with their feet up on their desks, their hands on their stomachs or on their knees, flipping pens around on knuckles, their heads knocked back, toward the ceiling. They talk toward the ceiling. They tilt their heads back, ask questions. They study the stains on the acoustic tiles, the holes where you could lodge a pencil if your aim were good enough. They look like presidents, like foreign countries. They have kids and tricycles and microwaves. One by one they poke their heads out of the doorway, look down the hall.

There is a city in the distance. Down the river there are towns, an old factory. They spread out, have neat spaces in-between them, as if someone paced, walked along a line and counted out his steps to place a marker at every hundred or two hundred, or five, a marker to flag that new space that would become a town. Where all the people have been working, now that the factory is no longer such a place: convenience stores, an odd job, a here-and-there, a catch they made on Tuesday of a job like it is a fish, like it is a pale something to hold onto, briefly, before it is gone. They close the doors, sit down, think. Uncertain, though, how heavy she could have been, when she was dropped in. Of whether she was dragged. If all that water weighed her down. Uncertain, where she has come from, of exactly how far she has gone. From bricks, from traintracks, uncertain, how far down the river, from where she has come, of where she was. They know that she had long dark hair and a birthmark on her thigh in the wobbly foreign shape of North Dakota. They think that she wore glasses. They think that she drank tea, sitting on the front porch while it rained, knees up, under a blanket. There

was lightning. She did crossword puzzles. They write this down. They underline the questions, twice, to make them more important, to make them stand out.

He is in the hallway by the chairs, the chairs for people to wait in while they are waiting for things, for news, or just to rest, by the vending machine; he is sitting on the floor—linoleum and old carpet peeling up and sticking down in places by old gum. The secretary points him toward a chair, a real chair, a chair that isn't the floor, and he shakes his head, stays put. His knees jut up, his back against the wall. He has rolled up his sleeves; he has mud on his sleeves. He has water in his shoes. If he were to get up, to see that, or walk around, to see anything, to test his legs out, they would slosh, he would wobble. He sits by the wall drinking coffee out of styrofoam with the plastic top that flips up toward his lips while he is sipping it.

They come up with this: it involves trees, the ones that cluster thick around the banks. They think he stood on the banks, plowed in, to encircle her, carry her close, on the side on the river where there is so much water that he sinks in to his knees before he's even taken just one step. He is pulled in, reaching out for the girl who floats, who is caught there and stays. They think she was a girl, a girl once; once they all had thought that they would do something about that, that shift of language, how slippery it is on their tongues, how difficult to control, how they cannot decide on the differences between things and then speak them. They have all stood in front of mirrors controlling their accents by how their tongues move, trying to erase, trying to smooth out; the land here is flattened and green. But they talk roughly, always have. The people here do. They don't tell him this, shouldn't tell him this, they think: what they think about him when they picture it. Their theories all involve how tall the trees are, how much shade there has been—why they haven't seen her before, in her movement down the river, why anyone watching hasn't seen her in the river until now.

More and more of them are traveling to the city. They feel, though, different, and like they don't belong there when they go there, so that often they don't go there at all, at the expense of families, at the expense of having families. Their houses are empty, and the more stubborn ones endure the loneliness of that commute, the trains and walking and taxicabs, their shiny shoes and how they still come home to nothing, or the same thing anyway, once they are home, and they kick against the walls, feel the floors bounce underneath their weight.

The questions concern them. The questions: What are the questions? Who what where. Were. When. And is it over now, can they look.

The police station is cinderblock. The hallways are long, lined with doors, fluorescent-lit. It's dark, except for tracks of light along the ceilings, broken covers of the lightbulbs, exposing lightbulbs on the ceiling in the corner by the closet. The closet holds coats and scarves, the ones that have been left, or have been brought by all of those who come so early.

They are afraid to say that he has changed, to admit it, that it has affected him this heavily. That it has affected them this heavily. Instead, they accuse him. Instead, they say, did you really fish her out of the river? Was it really dark? Where had you been before? Insomnia? Can you prove that? We'll call your doctor—can we do that? They put him in the police car, in the front seat, and he didn't think to carry his shoes or to take anything out of his pockets. They check his pockets; they check the dirt under his fingernails, they bring him forms to sign. Sign here and here and here. Then you can go. They type up a statement, they settle it on the table. There are police things, little things that go on behind the doors, things he hasn't seen except on TV. They have brought him crackers in a

plastic packet. They have hung up his suit coat, smoothed the sleeves down so it hangs straight, on a hatrack, in the corner, by the door that leads outside.

The light is turning green, and the doors open and close and windows open and close, as the fans click on, as more and more of them show up, comb their hair in bathrooms and sit down at their desks, tilt and swivel in their chairs to test them out, testing out their legs, their spaces. The office hums.

Uncertain, how much anything has changed, except that it has. So they take a breath, sit down on the scatterings of chairs, put their feet up. They watch his knees, his pantlegs as they are pulled up by his knees, ankles exposed by falling-down socks. They know that he is thinking. They are afraid to watch him crumple. And they come up with this: a house, late, carpet stained around the coffee table; glasses of wine or coffee cups, around the couch that had been given, left-over from the movement of her mother from one house into another, a smaller one after her father died. Her mother gave them all her furniture, all the things she had no need for—a kitchen table, a set of corkscrews—though they only ever needed one, her husband would say, feeling truly married then, holding his wife around the waist and laughing towards her ear like it was a private joke that they would carry with them. She laughed back, sat down on his knee. This, they think: it was late, and they were watching television. She had cuts all down her wrists, along her neck, wearing a dress that made it seem she had gone out, had gone looking, for something, for someone, coming home to where he was sitting in front of the television's blue and green and dots of color, and the living room was dark around it. And it involves knives, what they think, though they cannot think to say it.

They know, we know, that something has changed. We know if he looks up he won't be able to stop walking, walking back to where something seems to have happened, walking back to the river, to see what has happened, to see how it has happened, to see what he has left there.

And we don't want him to leave us here. We want to put our hands on both his shoulders. We think of rescue —the both of them, of rescuing the both of them, and so we come up with this: he must have been angry, her husband. He must have been waiting for her, whistling through his teeth and counting all the hidden doors through which he could escape when she returned. He must have been watching himself, circling himself around the kitchen table, around around to keep his muscles snapping, to keep his legs awake, prepared. She must have walked in carefully, the way we would if we knew there were a secret we were hiding, if we were trying to avoid someone who might be too surprised. In the river she was wearing shoes. She should have taken off her shoes. She should have crept in silence up the carpet, up the stairs. We hold him still; we tell him this. She should have touched all of the walls, along the way, for luck.

SPACE

After school I screamed the alphabet while all the boys rode by on skateboards and bicycles, and I just listened to my voice, when I was little.

When I was older, I picked dandelions while my mother stood inside, shouting at the radio. She knew how to sing, but she did not. So it was quieter, and not quieter, when I came in and filled the house with dandelions and listened to my mother – she never slammed things, never stomped, never hit us, never pretended to, or threatened to, just yelled. It was other things that she was yelling at, the way she wrote so hard her pens broke, the way she twisted up her hair. So my sister and I practiced yelling at each other across the yard, across the tree and the swingset and the little pile of dirt we used to bury each other in. We practiced pushing our voices out like that, making them lift. I imagined opera singers, with our arms flung out, our hair lifting from our heads and crackling, further and further apart, so we could kick at all that space now in-between us.

When we are twelve and six, my sister is afraid of water, allergic to fireflies and grass. We walk along the street along the river by the traintracks, where the bridge just jumps over the water and the train streams along it, our hearts beating in our feet because we are afraid. We watch the train swoop, and my sister reaches out for my hand, swishes her hand around a little as if she cannot look down to find my own and so must search for it. As if she must look out ahead of her, watching, the way the

grass sways still in that train-rustle, the way the ground leaps underneath our feet. Though she is older than me and not afraid, I think. I thought. I am afraid of dogs but I never say that. My sister is afraid of lightning strikes, and I have been dreaming of wasps, of the sounds things make, and the little sounds just further underneath. When I am twelve, my sister eighteen, our house summer-hot and sticking to our ribs, I wake up knowing that the house is full of buzzing, that I have been humming, silently, in our bedroom that we share with two beds and a cat. My sister reaches up, grabs for a pillowcase, collapses all the wasps inside and carries them out, walks down the sidewalk while our mother watches her from the front porch. My sister is afraid of never being brave enough to do those things exactly the way she imagines them, though they are dangerous and poking through the fabric.

When we are nineteen and twenty-five, and in our house, the house we have been left, I pick her up and throw her, or I want to. We sit on the porch. We have been smoking and talking about the boys we used to flirt with, as if all of that was over, and we were going to sit on the porch and watch the boys ride by on bicycles and stay there, us become watching, become given-up, become given-in. Like we did when we were little, sitting on the porch in the old and broken swing, kicking up our feet, dirty and not caring that there was anyone but us. The neighborhood is full of children, and we are the only ones in the house, after our family has all gone, and my sister and I are spending daylight sleeping on the floor, stretched out because the house is hot and the summer makes our hair stick, makes our feet swell and our fingers curl up in the shower, like wilting. She says things to make me angry and I am angry anyway and want to grab onto her wrist and pull her hard, watch the steps on the front porch, watch her fall; or I want to, to see something crack, to see all of it crack.

When she is thirteen and I am seven, almost eight, my sister draws a fine line on her skin and then stabs, a pencil to her wrist. Our house is full of dictionaries. Rubber bands. Knives. The house is full of knives, but she sits there under a tree and we find her curled up in the grass, with a pencil: she doesn't use what she is supposed to use. And then there are hospitals, the smell of rubber, polyester, carpet.

So we sit there, surrounded by other people's babies, in the waiting room, waiting. My father comes and sits down next to me, holding a can of soda that he rolls around, unopened, holds against his wrist, props up on his knee, rubbing off the condensation until it surfaces again. The chairs are plastic, all in a hallway on a row. In one of them, my mother sits, still, feet on the floor, purse on her lap, hands under her thighs, held down. She sits straight. The hospital beeps. There are legs that run by quickly. I put my head on my father's shoulder, pull my knees up to my chest. My father holds the can of soda on his knee, turns it upside-down and shakes it.

It is when she is thirteen and I am seven, almost eight, that I am carrying pencils around in my pockets, all the time, that poke into my thighs, because I never know when I will need to write on paper, or on fences. Sometimes I scribble on the sidewalks, or on the walls, low, where my mother cannot see. When we are older, nineteen and twenty-five, I walk around the house and look for all those words that I had hidden. I want to smudge them with a fingertip, I want to see if I can pick them up, can pull them in, absorb them where my fingerprints had first put them down. I find them up and down the stairwell, along the wall that leads towards our bedroom: my name, the alphabet.

When she is thirteen and I am seven, she comes home from track practice messy-haired and sweating, and running up the street as if she had not been able to stop running, though they'd told her to with whistles or with flags, an arm across her chest to make her stop. I lie there with my chin

on the grass watching the sidewalk and the street, watching the houses across the street for the doors that might open, for the children who might come out and want to play. My sister waves at me, runs up the sidewalk, into the house, and I fall asleep, chin on my arms, arms folded on the lawn that starts to scratch into my skin and run with ants that trail into the house, into the holes that map the kitchen walls. I fall asleep because the traffic is like lulling and the house behind me hums the way my mother has turned up the radio and my father has come home and opened the newspaper, smoothing the edges, smearing words away, smudging on his hands and on the table, and I am asleep.

When I am seven, I lie on the front lawn, and I am asleep, my head toward the street, the house behind me. When my mother finds my sister in the back and yells towards the house I take it up too, the sharpness of voice, testing it out, pushing the edges so they round, feel like something I can pick up, and throw. I don't know what has happened. So I listen to my mother yelling, and yell back.

When we are young, young still though we will never admit it, our parents leave us. They leave the house to us and we don't know what to do with it. Suddenly it is a space. Suddenly we can feel our handprints on the walls as if something is pushing back at us. We sell things – chairs, the china. We polish them, get out the rags, the stuff that smells like lemon and like oil, but sell them anyway, cart them off wrapped in paper towels and in cloth, pack the cardboard boxes so they fold into themselves.

It's warm, so the bathtub is left. And we fill it up with water, watching it blue, watching the claw feet sit on the tile floor. I sit in the bathtub, watching out the window toward the lawn, toward the street. I let the water turn cold, turn color as it cools and changes shape.

When we sell things, people come to move them carefully, the piano and the dishes and the boxes of old dresses and the things that we have pushed down in the garbage bags. We don't count them up; we don't keep track. We pile the receipts down in the drawers and let them fill.

And we go prowling around the house, feeling separate from what used to be our own, but having nowhere else to go. As if this isn't our house, and it isn't. It isn't our house anymore; it is a space, and I am tempted to lie flat, feel the floor under my hands, lie as flat, as flat as possible. My sister crawls up, sits down, lies down, with so much space left in-between us, and there are cracks above us in the ceiling we've never noticed.

When we are seven and thirteen, my pockets whistle, the backs of my knees whistle. I ride a bicycle, up and down the street, back and forth, as if there is nowhere else but up and down the street, as if there are no corners, places to turn, no other streets down which to go. It seems as if there are no other streets, only one neighborhood, only houses where I know the names of people in them. The shapes of sounds are all defined: there is the whirr of bike chains and of gears and things that clink and creak and stretch, all of it humming. When I pass the house I stand, showing off, and when my sister runs up the walk, she runs. And I can hear that, the sound she makes, when I am lying in the grass, watching grass and the breathing of the pavement. Her feet are heavy on the pavement; her arms are pumping in and out.

When my father grabs me I think it is because I will not stop yelling. I will not stop yelling because my mother won't, because I want to match the sound, the volume, length and speed of it, the way her body tenses, curls its toes into the ground; the way she seems to grab out for the air to make things stop. When my father grabs me up I think it is because I'm turned around from being quiet, turned to something else entirely.

It causes something to collapse. My father picks me up, carries me into the house. He sets me down, sets me down straight up, feet on floor, back straight, and runs back out. The yelling's quieted, calmed down. When we are later eight, fourteen, it feels like something has collapsed. We are sitting on the lawn. My sister points things out to me: the girl who lives across the street, trails a jump rope around her wrist, tries not to trip; the boy who makes his money selling bottlecaps. She tells me things she'd heard about, the differences between the houses and the differences in the way they close the doors. If they slam them it means one thing, if they close them softly it is another; or maybe the importance is in the windows, we can't decide. She sits with knees curled up, digging holes into the green lawn with her hands.

When my father grabs me I snap. Spark. I am young enough to still remember that, the force that comes from sudden movement, sudden violence that sizzles up, unasked-for. He grabs onto my shoulders, holding my arms down, tight; he is pulling me away, afraid.

When we are nineteen and twenty-five, of course we know this, that we are afraid. That it is our parents that have, this time, gone away. We cannot bring ourselves to say it. We cannot bring ourselves to clean up all our mess. I sit on the front porch and sometimes she sits on the back, but then she drags a book, a blanket, sits with me on the swing as there are house lights all in front of us, lighting up the squares of windows while the outside is still light, in preparation for the people coming home. When we are nineteen and twenty-five we feel old. We curl up, feel old. Sometimes we scrub the bathtub but let the bugs in. Sometimes we leave the jelly out. Sometimes I want to hold on to my mother's dresses, keep her close.

When I am eight, my sister fourteen, I sit across from her, my knees so far apart from hers they barely touch. I look at her and then I move, sit next to her instead, still on the lawn but pulling grass

up with my hands, make a bare patch peeking through. We pull at the lawn. She twists her hair up with her hands, yanks it back. Our mother has cut her hair; our father has rubbed her shoulders, taken up a habit of holding onto her so she won't, unexpectedly, move. I sit. She sits, looks. If she stares across the lawn she can count up all the windows across the street – it's as if she knows, she says, what everyone is thinking by the colors of their curtains or the way they paint their doors. Brushstrokes sideways, brushstrokes up and down. The mail that piles up and spills onto the street. You can run over there and read it, she says. I wonder what it says, she says. How the people have moved, how the people have thought, what it will tell us. I sit next to her and listen.

When we are in the house when she is nine and I am three, and our parents are somehow gone, in another room, behind doors, somewhere else, and the house shudders with the way we hear them talk, my sister makes us crawl around, looking underneath the furniture.

She tells me, pretend that we are animals. She tells me, pretend that you can hear your own voice barking, that you can hear the way the sound breaks through your teeth. She tells me listen. Listen for the something that will hunt us. We look under the chairs; we watch, under the sofa. The floor is full of feathers and the dust, that collects, that our mother chases after with a duster before she sneezes. Our father kicks it right back under with his feet, as if to hide it better, like it is a secret, a private joke our mother won't be there for. We draw in it with our fingers, write our names in newer script and sometimes new things we have learned, and secret code our mother rubs with rags when she has found it, though she has memorized it all, could say it just the same as we all could. We feel changed. Our mother erases it. Our father is quiet, shuffling. He walks intently through the hallways, checking locks, closing one door behind him, then the next. When our mother finds it, she is angry and says nothing.

When we are nineteen and twenty-five I don't turn on the radio, don't play opera records on the turntable. In the closets are my mother's dresses with sagging hems, pinned-together waists, and they have stains around their collars, buttons coming loose to hang from thread. There are dandelions on the lawn. I find them – my name, the alphabet – they are large and small at the same time, and I don't smudge them, don't at all know what to do with them. When we are nineteen and twenty-five, we think she had been yelling to hold us down, keep us, close. Held her hands against our ears, kept us from hearing; we were protected. When we are nineteen and twenty-five, we gather up what's left. We are large, and small. We curl up on the porch swing. We speak softly, point out windows. Look there, my sister says. Look. Mail is piled on the porches. Children lie back on their lawns. My sister holds onto the porch swing, leans back, kicks her feet toward the rooftop, lets her hair brush on the floor. They would never let us do this, she says. No, I say, and I push at the ground to make the porch swing creak and sway and wobble, and I spin us upside-down to see the ground close-up.

## CONVERSATION

They talk on telephones and cannot touch each other. They say things like *hamburger*, *lemonade*. There are words now, that they can catch and hold on to, like moths. *Raucous*. *Rectify*. She's making lists of things. "Tell me what's next," she asks him. He breathes, and she can hear him breathe, and there is static, and he says, "What's next? Ok. I'm going to the drugstore to buy a toothbrush and some razor blades. There will probably be explosions – drugstores are always dangerous." He mocks her. But she's thinking snow. She's wondering, "Is there snow now? No? Ok, how about now?" She wants him to tell her everything. She wants everything he says to be important. She's like a child, and he tells her that. "You're making me late." "Late for razor blades?" "I'm going now, Amelia." "When did you get so hostile?" "I'm not hostile. You should go to sleep." It's three a.m. where she is, midnight on the other side. There won't be snow. It's October, it is hot. She's hearing trains, teakettles, bugs that scurry, sound like rats. "No, stay," she says. "It's getting dangerous."

There is always talking. He calls, he calls. It's dark. There are things they never say, and things they always say. There is a pattern. "I miss you," she says. And she does. Though she will think about it differently, the words will sound different; they will. "I miss you," she says. She wonders what this means. And he doesn't listen. He could say *paperclip*, *aluminum foil*. *Lemonade*, *summer*. They would be bright, they would mean more. Somehow. He says, "I'm going out." He says, "I'll call you Tuesday."

She sees them fall around his ankles. All in a string, connected – *colored pencils paperclips* – they mean more than what he does say. He doesn't say goodnight.

This is important: there is always talking. He is in California. They talk about the time, the weather. They smell like birthdays, those afternoons in California. And like getting stung by bees. He calls and says, "Are you awake?" It's afternoon, it's two o'clock – would she be sleeping? She doesn't say this. He's not listening. "There are alligators," she is saying. She talks about the water and the depth of lakes. He talks in hammers, nails, in semi-colons; he is calling from his house; the walls are falling down around his ankles. She goes out, gathers things: newspapers, post-its, cardboard boxes. She goes back home, goes back to sleep.

She will need them, she thinks – newspapers, post-its, cardboard boxes – protection, winter, comfort. She will need, she thinks, to ignite things, when she grinds her teeth, when she is scratching at her own skin in frustration. She will need them. She goes out, captures things, takes note of things, everything. *Everything* is a bigger word than she can think of. It breaks – there is too much holding onto it.

*Isometric. Radioactive.* They don't make sense. He never used to tell her *go away. I am not listening.* What he does tell her, now, it does not make any sense.

It's 12:45. He is calling from his bathtub. She didn't picture him having a bathtub, and she tells him this, and it sounds like echoes, space; there is no water, just him sitting there, his clothes on, too much bass. She thinks of sunglasses, afternoons in California; it's dark. He didn't used to have a bathtub.

They talk about green. “Do you think it should be this color, or that?” he says. He doesn’t say which is which. “That,” she says, as if that is the answer. She talks about ice cream, about dinosaurs. Wings and scales and mint chocolate chip: green. “I’m thinking about you,” she says. Which is what she always says. “I’m thinking I should go with yellow.” “But what about green?” she says. And this is all they say: yellow, green, blue. She doesn’t know. She can picture him in his bathtub, lying down with the tap above his head, dripping onto his neck, and he is wearing boxer shorts and dirty socks. “The stars,” she says. “What color are they?”

This is what is clear: she is never where he is. He is never close to where she is. This is what is clear: they will not get any closer to each other. They can only wait to fall apart. This is the disaster: that there is none. Only slowly, so you cannot see it. Slowly, so she can picture it. *Curvature*, she thinks. *Cupola*, *Dalmatian*, and stars and breaking things, all those spaces in-between. There is so much in-between, and it is unsettling, to think of it. She thinks of danger, she thinks of falling falling falling. It is too quiet. It is too dark. And she is too alone. She misses things. It’s hot. He calls her.

What she always says: *I wish I could come home*. What she means: *I wish I could come home*. What she starts to mean, slowly: *I don’t know. Maybe not*. This does not make sense.

She’s making lists of things, everything in her apartment, everything along the streets. There is nothing along the streets, though the garbage piles up, full of hairs and soda cans and windshield wiper blades, and she goes looking, comes back to her apartment with her fingers full of cuts and new diseases, bruises like a hand around her wrist. She doesn’t tell him this. “Where are you going?” she says, when he says he is hanging up the phone. Where are you going, where are you going? But she does not say this: how much she needs protection. She would never say that.

They could say *hello, goodbye, how are you feeling?*, and they would not make sense. It would be the same if they said *cupboard, cupcake, jelly bean* instead.

She tells him there are alligators, there are swamps. There are bats. “There are never bats,” he says. “Oh? But what about...” “I’m thinking black and white,” he says, “paint all the walls.” The conversations smell like aftershave, like forest fires. Outside she looks at swamps; she wonders about finding her way back. “Rocks?” she says. “Breadcrumbs?” What would you drop, she thinks, for finding your way back? “I’m installing a refrigerator. There are bugs,” he says. He is not listening.

On her street there is a tower; there are bats. She wanders out, to catch them with a net. She wears white skirts. They can see her, in the traffic – bats, cars, her blinking in and out like lights, and rushing in the streets – and when the power and the lights go out in her apartment, she walks right down the street and lies down in the sandbox looking up above her at the trees. “I counted them,” she says. “I’m going out,” he says. It’s two a.m. She has sandbox in her hair. She has bite marks on her arms.

“Soap,” she says. She could say anything. He does not listen. It’s morning, and there is buzzing, breaking things, all around the house, and blaring, and retractions, up and down the street, of sun, of shade. It’s hot. There are fires. Little fires, she sets with napkins and a match. They light, alight, and flicker, and it’s warm. She watches them. She breathes on them, curling up around them as she feeds them things. Cardboard boxes, post-it notes. She watches them. When they talk, they talk about helicopters. The wires that you pull out from a spiral notebook; though she says too many words for that, steps back. There are too many words for this. Step back. She is looking for something small,

so she can say it. It would be easier. *Soap*, she thinks – it would be easy. A small word. Small. She does not say this: it is mostly just imagined. She would not say that. This is important.

It is as if there are explosions, and she sets new things on fire. Maps and towels, fountain pens. There is a smokestack by the train tracks, and there are hinges on the door that fall apart when she is climbing, and she tells him this, about the climbing, says that everything is clear now, now that she has seen it from high up. It's clear now, she could see it all. Of course. She doesn't say that she is lying. "I'm glad," he says. He does not worry, has not. "I'm setting up the boundaries, the yard. The neighbors won't get in," he says. "They have dogs that look like children." "And children that look like dogs?" she says. "Yes," as if he is agreeing. "I'm going to the store to buy a hacksaw." She's picturing destruction, small and falling from a ceiling. She's picturing the sky. "Are there stars?" she says. She's thinking there are holes now, in his roof. And she goes out herself to check, as if she's answering a question.

She replaces what he says with: *Soap. Daisy. Daisy chain.* The words are smaller, but she cannot wrap herself around them – they do not work. *Eggshell. Electricity.*

She would like to lie down in the sandbox, stay there. There would be clouds. Kites. Sky. It would be open. Safe. This is what she cannot say. There is everything she cannot say. "Blue," he says. "And elephants. A leopard." "Sofa bed?" Piles and piles of things. Nets and skirts and paper, polyester. There are burn marks on her hardwood floors, there are smoke marks on her ceiling, thin lines shadowing her skin. There is no furniture; it is empty. There are piles and piles of things. He is talking late at night. He is talking. "Yes," she says. Furniture, and coasters.

There are never bats, there are never choking sounds of crickets, there is never anything to worry about, he tells her. This is not true. She would insist on this, but doesn't. He interrupts her, says something else entirely. None of what he says is true. She has listened to it anyway. This is important.

*Hula hoop taffeta velocity.* These would make more sense. *Poodle skirt. Galaxy.* Something.

He interrupts her. He interrupts her. There are smoke marks. She goes out. There are growing piles of things. This is what he would say: *just go to sleep. Just be quiet. Lollygag. Jeopardize.* When she walks out, she gets lost. She only has to walk out to get lost. There is everything to worry about.

Everything to worry about – there are bats (there are there are *there are*, she thinks). She is insistent. This is what is clear: she doesn't know.

He interrupts her. She is like a child, and he tells her that. She is only dropping words into the phone. He doesn't tell her that. She feels it anyway. She keeps them in her pockets for ammunition. As if she could protect herself. This is disturbing: everything is dangerous. She wanted to say *stay stay stay*, but she has stopped. She would have said this, before. She doesn't say this, now. He is in a house with walls. Which sounds so much like something solid. Safe. It is bright there, in California, dry and bright and warm, but she is picturing destruction, how all that she remembers is slowly chewing itself up. She has gotten used to this; she has come to wish for it. There will be stars, she thinks, when the roof has fallen through. She clings to this. It will be beautiful, when the roof has fully fallen through.

This is important.

It is spun, frustration, easy. It is revulsion, and it is hanging from the hooks she's nailed into her ceiling, it is nets and skirts and paper, all the paper she has gathered in a pile by the window. "It's alright," he says. "Do you think it is alright? I fixed the walls." She would have thought of asking him, before, what he was thinking. It would have been important. There was a before – this is important. She thinks of asking him, of asking him, of telling him. Anything. And she cannot. It's not alright. That is the answer. She hates him. She did not hate him, before. It's morning, and the smoke fills up the rooms, warm and comforting, like toast.

"I'm wondering about the bugs, Amelia." "About my bugs? I bought some spray, and there is chalk – the writing's in Chinese, but..." "They're crawling up the walls of the garage." She's thinking about explosions. She pictures this: the bugs, they crawl around his house, set up hives and burrow, deep; he would be sitting when the awning collapses in his lap. She thinks about the pillars falling over; she thinks about the thin bones in his thighs. They would fall over. Take him with them. *Crack*. Dry and bright, the air in Pasadena.

It's not 12:45; it's maybe three o'clock. It's afternoon; she is crying. He talks about the weather. He says it's beautiful; he says, "do you remember California?" Honeysuckle, lemonade. Ice cream trucks, Koreatown. She listens for the echoes, for the sparks. For the flames as they're chewing on the walls. She braces herself against a corner. Wraps a hair around her wrist, sits on the floor. She is shaking. This is important. Listen. "No," she says, though she is lying. "No."

## LANDSCAPE WITH BUILDING, ZOO, AND HARDLY ANY ANIMALS

1.

A girl grows up from a bird. First, the small slow dropping of feathers, the looping, the settling on wood floors. First, the opening doors: slow, careful, so that there is no creaking, only a soft brushing on a floor, like that of feathers. There is the floor; there are the windows. There is a walking in, of feet wearing heels, a clicking. There is a rustling, a movement of a coat, a taking-off of sweater and scarf, a patting herself down, to put herself back together after a cold walk from a grocery on the corner, outside. A woman comes in. There is a dropping down of a yellow purse, a letting-go of the stapled shoulder strap. There is a peering-down, a face close to the floor so that breath clouds up, and fog gathers on the floor that is dusty. There is a looking-down, a picking-up of feathers between fingers, letting them drop, to the floor, to catch into the cracks, to float into the corners. There is a small sigh. First the fingers on a window, first the touching of a lightswitch and the swinging, of the walls, into light.

2.

The building is tall, with many hallways, with dark blue-colored open spaces, and is quiet. Only the soft noise that happens when balloons brush against surfaces. In the hallway, there are balloons, round, pink, and they bob because there is an open window. They are tied to a light switch. There is

white paint, and a fire escape. In the hallway, there are doors. Plain doors, heavy-framed, heavy-cored, that resound upon knocking, that present satisfaction when knocked. A mailman knocks, puts his ear up to the door to hear no one coming to open it, sets a package on the stoop, and then walks away. He walks down the street to his truck, feels his feet cold in his boots, feels his hands cold in his pockets because no matter how hard he curls his palms up towards themselves, he is still cold. He blows out between pursed lips, an almost-whistle, and his breath freezes. Behind the door is a staircase that goes steeply up to a landing on the floor above, and turns into a hallway full of doors. There is wallpaper: dark and blue with large white flowers that droop. In a closet, there are red balloons, but these have been kept hidden out of sight from the girl who has been a bird because they would distract her attention, encourage her flight.

3.

There is a zoo on the edge of the city. Beyond it, are forests. Inside it, have been cages full of birds and crocodiles; glass walls on which the monkeys push, push off and leap back onto branches, waving tails like flags. There is an animal that bounces, that wiggles its nose, wiggles its horns, black-eyed, like a miniature deer. There are trees, and a path that goes from one cage to another, and old footprints pushed into the concrete, paw prints, as if to point the way.

4.

When the girl walks, slowly, down the hallway, wearing a dress that reminds her of feathers, there is a hop in her small feet; there is singing in the way she calls out down the hall to see if anyone is there. *Hello*, she says. *Hello bello bello*. She sticks her foot on a needle that has been left on the floor. She hops back, lifts her foot to see the underneath, to see the blood drop. She hangs there, one-footed, looking out, into the hallway. There is a radiator that steams and rattles. Her foot stings; her

feet are cold. She rubs at her eyes, at the corners of her temples; she sticks her hands into her underarms, to warm them.

5.

In the cellar, the woman sits on a hard wooden chair. Around her is wallpaper patterned with zeppelins. She is a woman sitting on a chair, knitting. She knits miniature things with tiny needles – a sweater as big as a palm, a scarf that can wrap around her pinky. She is, herself, a small woman, but still, is sitting in a wooden chair, still feet touching the floor, so she could be smaller, really, but isn't; so everything she's knitting is not at all close to her size. She rubs her eyes behind her glasses and lifts a red sweater up to her face. It dangles thread; it is still attached to needles, and she blows on it so that it puffs gently outwards, like the blowing of a candle, out. This is to test it, to make sure it's light, to make sure that it can blow about in wind, can lift up, safely. She is concerned with flight.

6.

The girl pulls herself up, looks out of the window that sits, square, at the end of the hall. The window is white-trimmed, broken into squares that are the size of her hand. Pulling herself up, she can see below her and in front of her: buildings, doors and stoops with steps, and rooftops, and bridges. The city expands, seemingly, always. There is no end, of buildings, of statues. It is mostly gray. There are, here and there, dots of color – a woman pulling off a mitten with her teeth, a man who carries a bag full of lettuce – but the color moves fast, is hard to catch and make stand still as she looks at it.

7.

It is a city of still swims on still rivers. Of boys in swimming suits that are too big for them,

swimming at night across the city, and looking up, at the sky, as they skim on their backs. Of bridges banded across, held there by feet that walk from streetlight to streetlight, across water black at night before rainstorms. The buildings are tall, with arched windows. Sometimes, on the ground floors, boys wearing blue hats stand inside the arched windows, holding their hands in their coat pockets because the day is gray and the building is cold to the touch, waiting until they can jump on their friends running below. It is, to them, all about the collision.

8.

In the cellar, the woman paces back and forth across a rug. In the cellar, there is a row of meters with square dials and red hands that shift, back and forth, back and forth. The meters are round faces on top of boxes. There are wires that connect them, that string the room, that spark and buzz and hum. There is a concrete floor. The hands capture exactly what is happening in the building at all times: the changing of the temperature of a room as someone leaves it; the shifting of a faucet from hot to cold; the way someone on the fourth floor takes a shower at three o'clock, every night, that is much longer than it should be. The woman lives in the cellar. She watches the goings-on, watches the building as it moves around, wakes up and sleeps and takes a bath. At night she imagines she hears scritchings on the ceiling above her head, floors and floors above her head, before the roof stops and gives way to sky. The scritchings make her calm, because they are normal. So many scritchings, she thinks, so much movement. There are many, many things to pay attention to. But it is night and she hears the doors above her head, and then the door that leads outside, open, slide shut, click slowly, and this is not normal, is strange, but she is cold, and so she rolls back into sleep.

9.

The people in the building feel cold. They wear fuzzy wool socks that are thin at the heels. They walk through hallways, slide in shoes on smooth wood floors. In a bag at the end of the hallway there are shoes and sweaters, with polka dots. They bulge, make the edges of the bag soft. There is a button, a scarf, in the bottom of the bag too, but still, filled to the top, polka dots in colors like yellow, tangerine. The people in the building kick at them as they walk by with bags of groceries, rest their shoe on top on them as they try to find their keys inside their pockets, hold their mail between their teeth. The softness of the bag comforts their feet. When they walk in to their apartments, they rest their heads against the wall in the same way – the coldness of the building comforts them when they walk in, when they have headaches, when they can feel the walking in their feet and want to slow themselves back down. What is happening in the building at all times? They have headaches. At night the backs of their heads – the tops of their heads, the backs of their necks – throb and twist, it seems, into knots. They can feel their bodies tightening as they are shifting in their beds, as the sheets get caught around their ankles and they try to pull themselves loose. They whisper to each other: *help*. The building is cold walls, cold glass. They rub each other on their backs, scratch each other on their heads, through their hair, hope that this will help them sleep at least a little while, eventually.

10.

The zoo, on the edge of the city, is empty. Cages rust horribly; grass grows like ponds in the places where ponds used to be. There used to be hippopotamuses. They had thick gray skin and short legs. There used to be a white bird, with a long neck, picking fish out of a jar, watching them in its mouth, watching them flap, flop, swim their fins into air before swallowing them in a gulp.

11.

In the cellar, there is a typewriter. It is orange, heavy. It types out fat words on thick paper, paper that spools out at the top and then is yanked out, dropped down to the table with a flourish of an arm. First, the notes say: bring water, send cookies. I have locked up the doors. I have taped up the windows. It is safe. Don't worry. Then, the notes say, nothing works. I am cold. I am worried. This is difficult. What, now, do you want me to do? The room is empty. It is cold. What should I do?

12.

The girl has been captured on film. The film, projected, is a little reel of wings. It is bent at the ends by hands that are careless, that load the projector too quickly, that want, too quickly, to see what it has inside. It seems the film is like a box, like it holds inside of it a collection of things in an attic: a wedding dress with an old-fashioned neck, a diary, monogrammed napkins. It seems to hold the kind of things you would look closer at, hold up to your nose to understand, to see those little stitches, to see your grandmother in the little stitches, and then put back into the box and shove behind the broken microwave, keep until the next time you are curious. On film, she is on a chair, wings spread, legs hopping. On film, she is a bird, a small one, palm-sized, white, a beak almost invisible on-screen, on the wall – the woman projects it on the wall so that the film takes on the bumps left by paint and brushes, plaster; the picture is wobbly; the bird walks on a wooden chair, slides a little on the part that is bent to make it round to fit a sitter, and jumps onto a windowsill, pecks at the glass.

13.

There is a statue, in copper, of a man and woman holding hands. It is copper, old, and so it is dripping with green, on a ledge on the building at the end of the long street. In the building, the

woman waves around an iron skillet, in the kitchen, in the cellar, wearing an apron, but concentrating on the skillet in her hand, thinking about how far it is above her head, how far it is from her body to the doorway, where her husband peeks through with just his nose. She has a headache. She is angry, worried. She would like to feel that sudden thunk, she thinks, that clang of iron on bone and then on the doorjamb as everything together fell. He waves a hand into the doorway like a flag. Today, the woman tells him, has been sad. He takes off his hat; they walk up the stairs.

14.

There is a forest behind the city, and around the borders. The forest behind the city runs with deer, runs with circus bears that still know how to drum. Sometimes it sounds like drumming, like whistles. The people in the city know that here, in the city, with the buildings and the buses, the animals keep moving, in a circle, around the city lines, unable to move off or to determine another course. They stay, moving, snuffling at the ground. It's like there are magnets in the streets, like there are gates at forest openings that close with solemn locks to make the trees stay still, make the hippos stay submerged in the lakes that have appeared between the trees. At the edges, when the line between the city and the forest becomes apparent, there are signs that say: dangerous. There are signs that say: do not pass this line, beware of your hands, of how far you are now reaching out your feet.

15.

In every hallway on every floor of the building, there are lightbulbs in a cabinet, each in its own small space, a square that cradles the glass. Each is rattly, pieces knocked about after burning, and gray on the inside, and they do smell like gray – like flannel – if you stand close to them, put them

up to your nose. In every kitchen, there have been burned-out lightbulbs. They happen when the people in the building walk to get a cracker in the middle of the night – that snap and sizzle of light, dying, the pop, and then the too-early removal of the lightbulb from the socket so that they have to hop, toss it back and forth between their palms like a potato. The rooms, because of this, are full of broken glass.

16.

And the people in the building stop for the bicycles. Always, there are bicycles, crowds of them, that turn the corners, swiftly, as a group, as a body, with a rider in the front who calls out the directions. The people in the building stop with one foot on and one foot off of curbs, to watch them pass. Standing still, hands in their pockets, groceries in their hands, they watch the girl wandering. She is pale, blue-eyed, short blonde hair that sticks up in the back. They say, oh isn't that nice, a girl running errands for her mother. They say, but really, she should be wearing socks. Shouldn't she? they ask themselves. They imagine her with a red sweater, imagine themselves buttoning it up, to her chin. This makes them feel content; this makes the picture in their imagination whole; content, warmer, they push off with their feet, walk the rest of the street towards home.

17.

Past home, past far, further – turn down all those streets and feel the corners sliding under feet the way the winter makes the streets feel slippery, the statues, the rooftops – there is a zoo, the rows and rows of cages tipped, their corners making sounds when all that air is pushing through the empty spaces. Here, there have been animals. The reptile house, the monkeys behind glass and climbing trees with leaves tucked in with glue. So many hissing things, the glinting of the lights into the animals with eyes. The softness of bears. The zoo is empty. Cages tip to tap their locks into the

concrete, dig into the ground their divots so they are now settled in new places, now solid in new places upside-down or sideways.

18.

And all of the rooftops are brightly colored. Here is a green one, a red one – the color of copper gone swimming, the color of climbing on the rooftop with a paint roller and a bucket, a long ladder because the building is high. Once, a painter fell, landed on his ladder, landed on the street on top of the ladder, and the ladder was twisted around him by so much speed. The street was aquamarine, splotchy, uneven, because after all the paint fell and was not brushed on. People shopping or walking dogs walked by, dipped their hands in, watched it dripping from their fingers, and it was like a lake, the way it sparkled. The painter, on his back, was twisted; he held his knee; he watched them walk away, blue footprints set by shoes onto the asphalt.

19.

The girl is cold, her feet are cold; her steps are hollow, the streets are empty, the buildings tall around her like a tunnel. The night is made of felt. She is wearing someone else's shoes. There is a garbage man who picks up the bags that line the street, who climbs into his truck and puffs away. There is a man who is asleep but selling hot dogs, the lights in his stand bright, his cheek on top of his hand on top of the counter, a radio playing waltzes to keep him awake.

20.

The moment of evening, between dark and light, is sad. They walk the streets. They think that they will lure her in with sugar, with handfuls of crushed oatmeal from a tin. The only color there is yellow from the stoplight, flashing onto snow, and in-between black, white. They walk together.

They walk slowly, check doorways. They are careful with their hands inside their pockets, careful to not melt the sugar, to not mix it up with pocket lint or broken buttons. The woman has left her knitting needles stuck into her coat; they poke into her hands; she keeps her hands inside her pockets, feels the points, tries not to shout. The woman is afraid of night and strangers' hands. The man has turned off his flashlight. They feel the danger of ground, of walls, the ways the corners just jump out and seem to trip them, the way the puddles seem to creep up through their socks.

21.

At the zoo, the girl looks in between the bars, to see if anything is there, to see if hippos are hiding in the hollows made by grass, to see if there is a movement, of bears. It's quiet. The lights and moon make shadows, make the bars stretch out along the ground, make the building that held popcorn loom. It still smells like popcorn. The ground still clusters with hulls. Here the man and woman hold onto the gate. They look to watch the girl look into cages. They don't follow her inside, just watch, watch the ground for holes, for old balloons that could wrap around her ankles; if any of this happens, their legs are springy – they could run, to catch her, to shore her up like a collapsing wall. They do not. She does not. She wanders off. She won't go back. The evening, she thinks, is sad. The night with all its space is sad. She feels her elbows ache with it.

22.

It's late. They are cold-nosed, cold-fingered. The man has turned off his flashlight. The woman is afraid of how the flashlight will reveal themselves and how afraid they are, of night. Their ears are painful, cold, on their heads. They hold their shoulders together, hold their hands together, hold hands. They open the door of the building, shove it open with their shoulders, hear their shoulders creak as they walk up the stairs, as they move their knees. The man steadies the woman with an arm,

gives her a hand, holds her up. Her knees crack. They walk up the stairs. In the room, at the top of the building, high, surrounded by windows, there is a paper airplane on the floor when they open the door, to sit. They sit, on chairs, in the room empty of everything but chairs and the wood floor. They do not look out the windows. They sit. The man pats the woman's head, rubs her ears warm. The paper airplane sits, nose tipped-down, wings perfectly creased, nose anchored by a penny, as if it has glided into the room to land and take a rest.

## MICHIGAN

It's deep red while we're driving – pomegranates, the inside of a palm when the light strikes through it. This is impossible to put into words. But we're traveling, the long road up to Michigan, where it is snowing, and I don't know where we are. She's not crying; she's looking at the map. It spreads out in front of her and inches up the window and on the dashboard, so I can't see, and I can't see her behind it. In her pockets and in the corners of the car: scarves, ribbons, paper napkins from the bar that she scribbled on, proving something. She wants to prove something, though I don't know what. Her moving, crumpling up, proves this: what time it is, what the gravity's like. I don't know. The car rattles and clanks.

It's the inside of the car that's red, dark upholstery that's scarred with cigarettes, holes you can stick a fingertip in. We stole it from our mother. "Borrowed it," my sister says. "*Borrowed.*" And she traces her finger on the map, the long line all the way up to where we're going, though she hasn't told me yet where it is.

She still has the scars on her wrists, my sister does. And she hasn't covered them up the way they told her to. "Serves me right for trying to do it the stupid way," she says. "The *normal* way. Ha."

"As if trying to kill yourself is normal," I say.

“Oh, because it *is*.”

We travel down the highway, my sister smoking out the window, her feet up on the dashboard. “Did I ever tell you the story about the man?” she asks.

“The *man*? What man?”

“*That* one. You know.”

“Just tell me the story, Annie,” I say.

“Hmm,” she says. “Maybe next time.” She’s laughing at me. “Ha. Ok, so it was a normal story. He walked down the hallway in the middle of the night and he thought he was hearing things, you know, like voices. And he looks into the closets, and he looks under the furniture. And . . . and . . .,” she holds out her arms wide so they brush against the windows and knock into the steering wheel, and then fall. This means The End.

“That’s it? You tell awful stories.”

“I know.” She readjusts her feet, laughs while biting on her fingernail.

“Ok, so there was that time we were in Florida, remember?” she says.

“What *is* a normal story, anyway?”

“I’m not sure. Anyway, so we were in Florida and Grandpa put us into the boat and we went down that canal, remember? And there was a shack just on the water, and we stopped to get some bait” – “Bait for what? We never fished out of that thing.” – “and Grandma stood there with her arms around some other guy.”

“That is *not* the way it happened.”

“And Grandpa jumped out of the boat and knocked the guy out with his paddle.”

“No,” I say.

“Uh *huh*.” She pulls her hat down over her head and sleeps.

It wasn’t in a bathtub. “That would be boring,” she told me, when I asked, when she was in my apartment, stretched out on my couch, after. “Should I have gone with sleeping pills? A rope a box a chain a pushed-out chair. A *boat!*” she says, sitting up, straight. “I should have done it in a boat.” I pushed her feet off of the couch and sat down, then pulled them back into my lap. “Yes,” she said. “Yes what?” “I don’t know.”

When I stop for gas and she wakes up, she says, “what are you stopping for?” “Car needs gas sometime,” I say. I get out. She follows me and holds onto my coat. “*Stop*,” I say. I slap back behind me with my hand, aiming for her hand, for the way she’s pulling me. It knocks into her head instead, and we walk in, where he stares at us, the old man behind the counter. “I’ll buy you a lollipop,” she says, to me. “Do you have any?” she asks the man. “Lollipops?” He doesn’t say anything, and she raises her eyebrows and takes off her hat, holds it against her chest. “Excuse me sir,” she says, “but my sister and I are in the middle of nowhere – not that your lovely establishment is in the middle of nowhere – but we don’t know where we are, and I think we like it that way, but I also think we’re in need of something a little bit more interesting.” She tilts her head and looks at him. “Will you tell me a story?”

She has made do with chocolate bars, and peels the wrappers off in the car. She stares out the window, her chin in her hand, elbow on the armrest. “Can you see the snow, Elise?” she asks me. Of course I can. But all I say is yes.

“Do we like it this way?” I ask her. “Yes,” she says. She is looking out the window, wrappers in her lap. We pass a sign, another sign. A freeway exit. A zoo.

I had asked her, as if I wanted to know the answer. And I did, for just a minute.

“It was because he was so staring-at me,” she says. She is talking about the man behind the counter.

“I had to ask him *something*. We should have stayed. I wonder what he would have said.” I had paid for gas and pulled her out the door without him saying a single word. She is still looking out the window. “I *know* what he would have said,” she says. She doesn’t tell me. “He looked so sad.”

“Could you have done it somewhere else?” I asked. I fell asleep with her feet in my lap, on my couch, in my living room.

There was a choice, I say. There was a long list of places: bathtub, treehouse, the inside of her thigh, her knee, her neck. “It was like...like I got a tattoo. Just walked down the street and got a tattoo. Easy, like that.” She pauses. She’s quiet. “It was the right place,” she says. “Do you remember the treehouse?” I say. It was in the middle of the yard. We had a bird who lived there, in a barrel on the lawn; we had a bicycle, the pieces torn up, scattered, and we hung them from the trees with string and when their flashings kept the birds away she took them down.

It was on the long fine lines on the inside of her palm, trailing, wrapping down around her wrist. “No more palm reading for me,” she says. “Damn. Did I ever tell you about the fortune teller under the freeway? I walked in and there was a monkey. Just a monkey. On a chair. Can you believe that?”

Monkeys giving fortunes. I walked right back out. I was hoping for an elephant, you know. They tell better ones.” She laughs. “Now I will never know what will happen.”

“Tired,” I say. “He was just tired.”

“I don’t know. Did you see the way he crossed his arms behind the gum display?”

“Well, he wasn’t angry at you. It’s ok, you know.”

“You’re mocking me,” I said. Her feet on my lap. Me staring at the wall; her staring at the ceiling. “I know,” she said.

“I know. I know that,” she says.

I have a scar, from when she hit me with a baseball bat, when we were children. She’s the younger one. The smaller one. But she smacked me with a baseball bat, and I didn’t hit her back. “I think,” she says, “that we should stop there.” She looks out the window. There is a building, burned-out, from the highway; there are faded letters on the sides, faded spots of red and yellow paint. “Is it where we’re going?” I ask. “No,” she says.

She had hit my knee, and then my elbow, with the baseball bat. And then grabbed at me with her fingernails. “And it was awful coffee,” she says. “I bet he was trying to take it out on us. Poison us, you know.”

“I think we need to stop talking about the guy in the gas station.”

She crosses her arms just like the man. “I don’t think so.” She pauses. “So decide on his name.”

There are factories that pass us, and fields, and the distance between lakes. There are buildings, streets with stoplights and grass growing up, and empty lots. “Did I ever tell you about the time I jumped over a fence, downtown? I went to look at the hotel. It was boarded-up. I looked in all the windows. I could see things, in there. I know I could. The one that only said ‘Hot Cecil’ on the neon sign. No e, no l. Remember that one?”

“I don’t think so,” I say.

“Ralph?” she asks.

“Yes.”

We pass buildings. Our mother told us we had to leave, so we took her car. Our mother watched us and was afraid, of us. So Annie grabbed me and we ran.

I *was* wondering, that wasn’t just a question – *do* we like it this way? The car dark and plowing up the highway. The red upholstery, her fingers testing out the holes, the burned edges. She fiddles with the sun visor, flaps it. “You sure you can see the snow?” she asks.

“Yes.”

I watch her arms, how she curls up in her seat, drawing pictures on the glass. “Can I smoke?” she says. “I don’t think I can stop you,” I say. I watch her. Her wrists curl up, curl in around a flame; she holds it, delicate, watches it move, light us up.

Or no, our mother wasn’t afraid of us, but of what we could do.

“I looked into the hotel, and I wanted to crawl in, stay there,” she says. “And no, it couldn’t have been Ralph. Isn’t that too easy? Too perfect,” she says.

“No.”

Our mother’s house is easy to break into. Pry up a screen with fingernails, climb up, jump in, land on a bed with dust on your knees. And it is so tangled-up and twisted-up and hallwayed that it is easy to hide in. She hid in there, waiting for my mother to come home.

There are factories. A power plant. The jaggedness of broken windows in empty buildings. And when my mother found her, she screamed.

“You know this was your idea,” she says. “To follow me. To drag me along. Alright. Tell me a story, Elise.”

She clicks hard on the window with the rings on her hand, the back of her wrist against the glass, her rings clinking, hard. Would you? That’s it, what I want to say. Though it’s not a whole question. “Would you?” I ask her.

And of course there is the *again*, that I leave off. What will happen if there is an again. And then the would. “Would you?” I ask her.

“No,” I say.

She had fallen asleep with my head on her shoulder, and I had kept all the windows shut, and the fire escapes. And I had drawn all the curtains softly, and locked the door, and kept my head on her shoulder, and stayed awake. She breathes on the window, softly. “No,” she says. “Of course,” I say. I don’t believe her. What can I do to make you not want to do it again?, I want to say. “Tell me a story, Elise,” she says. But I wouldn’t believe her, if she said something. “Are we going there? Or there?” I ask her. I point out the buildings. They are lining up along the highway, they are flashing neon into the snow. “No,” I say. She sinks into her seat. She has dragged out the map. She has propped her feet against the windshield. She could draw her finger along the lines, and I could try and help her find it, wherever it is we are going, but she pulls her feet up, props her feet up, and Michigan crumples up onto her lap.

## EXPERIMENT

Overcoat. Little girl. Red shoes. Ice. And it's so much brighter there, outside, where the swingsets are and all the children who run as if they're being chased, or chasing themselves. One little girl: gray coat, red shoes, and it's cold outside, and gray.

It's cold. They can see their breaths, all the children on the playground, carrying balls and jumprobes and the whistles that they use to call the cars. They think that they can call the cars, can call them just like calling dogs, just like summoning each other on rollerskates at the end of an afternoon, after school. They practice, two at one end, a group all at the other, bunched together; their rollerskates are scratched, waiting for the whistle that is bright, silver, when everything is gray. The cars flash by.

And there's so much red. The girl behind them stands still, watching. She is little, and they don't know whose she is – a sister? Cousin? The cousins are sharing rollerskates, one each on one foot, a pair between the two of them, the two of them joined together with their matching scarred red wheels. The cousins keep together. The others form lines, form groups, group around them. Their cheeks are red, with running. It's cold. January. It's a gray day, though it shines a bit, on the edges: zippers, house keys around a neck on dirty strings, barrettes with metal teeth. They scream and run and yell with shiny tongues, all calling out. Their words chase. Their names around each others' teeth. The finish line, when they race: the tetherball pole, the end of the asphalt, the lawn.

She stands behind them, back to bricks. A backpack at her feet that holds a pencil case. She puts one foot behind the other in a twist that looks like she is bracing herself up, so she won't fall down.

In the building, there are high windows, broken, jagged. Inside there is an empty building, empty floors, but the walls make noise, and the children are convinced that something lives there. They like it, that something lives there. They prowl around it in the afternoons, looking in.

She stands behind them waiting while they call each others' names and squeak their rusting-shiny skates, pretending they are flashing, that they are fast, with flashing, though there isn't that much sun. It's after school, before dark, before they're supposed to be inside, before the lights go on. It is sidewalks, though the sidewalks are broken, and asphalt, though the lines of games, of hopscotch and tetherball, are fading gray, only almost yellow, and the lines are broken too.

Snow. They wait for snow. It could come today, tomorrow. The air holds still and polishes itself and they can taste it. Soon, they think. The little girl stands, red shoes, all scuffed. She is quiet and slightly snuffly, as if her nose is running. They don't watch her. They should be watching her, they think. They all have younger children in their families and they know how to be the older ones, watching the smaller ones for falls or bumps to knees, but they aren't, just now, watching her. Should we be calling cars?, they say, instead. Their whistles are that strong – they could call dogs, they could call buildings. They have practiced calling stars. And in the summer, when it's warm, when they sit on beds, afraid of the dark, there will be fireflies, whistled, called into their hands, pulled from hands and into jars, on windowsills and blinking.

The building is brick. It has tall doors. High windows, then more windows, then round windows at the top. Rusted glass. Inside: no lights, and broken floors as if the underneath just leapt

up, cut the shiny wood in shards, in splinter bits that scratch up at the ankles of anyone inside. There is no one inside. It is shut up. The doors are locked. Chains are wrapped around the knobs, wrapped around, around, large links that they can slip their fingers through, pull out their palms to see them feathered with the rust that they will smack off on their pants.

She isn't lost. And they have practiced calling cars, dogs, whistling the fences to make them move. They have pictured fences moving, loping, like a snake, all slithery, the chain link slipping like a scarf and wagging its hips. The snake would talk. Behind them in the building: crawling things. Snapping pipes like breaking bones. Windows sliding into shards. Inside, there'd be an arm, a broken leg, a bone right through the skin. Snap.

What is sharp: a polished hint of edge. A key. A rollerskate. The children gather, crouching, at the edges of the lawn, pull out what's inside their pockets, pile on the grass a rubber band, a paper bag, a marble, stolen. Matches, stolen. They are out of breath from running and they whisper, solemn, mounding up the treasure while the wind blows in their ears, cold, and they decide if what they have is worth anything – worth keeping, worth piling up. The little girl behind them sits against the wall, back against the bricks.

They are sure she isn't lost. They think about it. They all wear each others' clothes, they all share each others' lunches; one is wearing green, the sweater from two years ago that everyone has worn, that all of them have shared, passed around between them at one point or another, and they all have cuts and aches from broken bones and knees that skin underneath their pants, shins exposed, ankles exposed, crossed legs, sitting. They all share looks. She looks, they think, comfortable.

In her pockets: her address. Her name, her mother's name. A piece of blue-green string she found on someone's lawn.

They all sit down. All of them, at once, as if they're all attached on strings, flopping on the ground, with sounds that smack into their overcoats and puff into their socks. They sit down when she does. She sits down when they do. She has blonde pigtails and a hood. She has a missing tooth, though they can't see that. And two loose ones, though they can't see that either. In their mouths are missing teeth that they waggle with a tongue, feel that looseness, hear their bones and bodies click against themselves, and they shiver.

There is a whistle, whisper, birds above their heads. They have crawled into the holes, once, into the building – crawled between the glass, glass sparkling through their hair, drawing lines onto their arms, red – inside, they bit down on their tongues, red between their teeth, in fear. Inside they saw the holes in floors, the nests in ceiling beams that crossed and held the nests like open palms. They crouched, waiting for the darting, for the sharpened beaks to point towards their heads. They felt their ears. They felt their teeth. The birds were black. It was too dark inside, the light from broken windows striping walls, splitting hands. They couldn't see, and so they felt them with their feet, with all their careful fingers, so that now they still remember where all the holes are, and all the broken pipes.

The cousins sharing rollerskates are girls. They have brown braids tied with ribbons at the ends, and rubber bands. Their mothers are sisters – they read books, drink coffee, talk on winter mornings in each others' yellow kitchens, talk about their children while their children listen to them. They worry, read magazine quizzes. The cousins have slumber parties, sleeping bags on floors, and they have made up words, code words, that are secret. One of them means run. One of them means yell. One of them means scream until your ears shriek just as loudly back.

They wait for snow. They wonder. They start to whisper. The cousins have taken off their skates, laced up their shoes, knotted up the buttons on their coats like armor. The cousins are in

charge. They stand together. She is small, the children think, around them, grouping. They could lift her up. They could cradle her. They say this. No, the cousins say – they don't like dolls. She is small. She has pulled her hood over her head so that her hair, clutched tight with pink barrettes, spikes out. They shuffle through the things in front of them – smashed coins, army men.

They have seen things: falling from ladders. The sheer edge of a saw and fingers. Someone is chewing gum. It pops. They huddle on the asphalt. The street is empty. They think they should do something with her. They should do something, before it is too late for that, too dark. She's red-cheeked, cold, hands in her pockets. She has seen their superballs and dollhouse chairs. They watch her look. She holds out her hand, opens it, palm up. There is something shiny in the center. They whisper. The cousins walk up, come back, whisper. They hold out what she gave them, and pass it back and forth between them, hold it on the inside of one pocket, then another, warm it with their bobby pins and rubber bands. They blow on it to check its shininess, hold it up to check its weight. There are ladders on the building walls. Stairsteps formed by broken windows, everything held together with rust.

She has walked, she'd say. Walked over the streets and to the playground, to the swings, where the yells of all the children called and shone, shiny things, their running, where she could join them, where she could not be so afraid. She'd said, here, here, holding out her hand, just watch me, I can climb.

You should climb, they tell her. Just climb in, they tell her. It will be fine, they tell her, bunched around her, her back to bricks. Their whistles are around their necks. They have stopped thinking they can fill the air with sounds and brighten it. It is too dark. They point to holes in

windows, tell her, watch out for the shards of glass, watch out for that window frame, and that one, that one. It's dark inside. She is small, and quiet. She is alone; they can't do *nothing* with her.

Behind them, the wings flap; the walls, like wings, flap. The cousins pull at all their jacket sleeves, yank on their hands, pull the others around them. They circle. They wrap their scarves around their necks to they look like colored flags: green, pink. They all have pennies in their pockets, house keys, skeletons of butterflies, things they have collected – they hold them out, they draw her in. They all have pulled wings off of birds – spread the wings and shiny feathers and bits of bone, and just pulled, just snapped, so all the bones would separate, all fly. They point up at the sky. They tell her, look, look – there are birds. The birds are inside at the top where the building rafters shine. They tell her she could climb, that she could see them, up close.

They have seen broken bones and missing fingers, smooth-sliced throats, heads held back. Their parents work in factories. Their fathers smell like iron. Their fathers all have missing fingers. They have all grown up with yelling, and the way arms dangle, broken, after accidents. It's almost dark; the streets light up their lamps.

She looks up. They back up, small steps, the whistles glinting around their necks, the wind in their ears, and cold. The cousins hush them, passing back and forth the feather and the flower and the rubber band. They are soft. They brush onto their cheeks. The cousins pull onto her shoulders, whisper in her ear. They tell her she could fly. Just fly, they say. They push her shoulderblades. They point up, look up, and though they are scared, and it scares them, they want to see her fall. They look up. Look, they say. Look at all the birds just letting go.

## MAGICIANS

They have to move the river. It would require trucks and bags, plastic bags – how many bags would it take to hold a river? She laughs. “It’s not a joke,” he says. It would require ditches, moving parts. Firecrackers. Dynamite.

She sits in the doorstep. She has a safety pin in her jeans, and silver rings, and no bra. It would require silver pins, elastic bands, a marching band, mayoral black tie dinners and celebrities who drink too much and slur.

He stands on the doorstep tapping on her knee. He is too close to her knee. She doesn’t remember him ever even touching her, but there he is. Ok.

He says, “Do you want to watch the parades?” She imagines lines of buckets, swooping arms, and the river in a giant water tower wrapped around with bubblewrap, protection for its traveling down the street. She thinks he’s asking her on a date. “Ok,” she says. She imagines long lines of water, swamps and wide-winged birds, and his hand in her back pocket.

It requires more than that. They bring in psychics and diviners. They bring in kids with colored pencils, drawing on the sidewalks, marking off the water lines. They bring in a magician, and he waves around some colored scarves, and he turns them into turtles, though the turtles look like they have hair. Around him, in the intersection, people clap.

She sits on the doorstep. She can feel the light behind her. She can feel herself glowing. And she likes to think the people walking by can see her there like that, glowing. She likes to think she gives off sparks. When he comes by again he runs his hand around her kneecap, feeling all the points and jabs of all those bones. And she can feel the light through her, the kitchen light, the low-lamp-light, the nightlight in the bathroom, all drilling through her skin and shooting through the streets. She wonders if he can feel it, his fingers wrapped around her knee and running down her thigh. She isn't used to anyone so close like that. She swears her skin is newly colored, smeared and jabbed and jarred, and all his fingertips are leaving behind marks.

In the mornings, when he leaves, he leaves behind some orange peels, curled up, dried up, in the sink. He leaves behind a bird feather and she thinks of the magician. She wonders if the magician would be able to get her birds, somehow – doves, maybe – they would coo on windowsills, cluck and clutch and purr, like cats. She thinks she'd raise them on a hatrack, instead of in a cage, and they would roost. They would fly around her head when she came home. She thinks she'd draw them to her.

It's more than that.

She sits in the window. They have started mapping out the streets, where they will divert it. She thinks there will be houses, floating-roofed, new-flooded by old river-water and new moss. She thinks the families could sit up in the attics, turn their living rooms to deep-sea diving practice grounds. Or maybe they'd lie on their backs on mattresses, and float away. She can't imagine they'd be dancing. She sees the land as flooded, sees the streets as slogged, breaking concrete lifting up to shards like ancient pottery. It would float down to Mexico; it would turn out, go out, turn up in South America.

When he comes over he talks about Antarctica. He reads too many travel magazines. All the photographs are bright and pretty, and the light is always perfect. “Don’t you want to go there?” he says. “Let’s go there,” he says, finger pointing. Croatia, Ethiopia, the Dardanelles. Like they’d bounce around the world. She imagines them never stopping. She imagines seeing beautiful things, churches, falling houses, walking beautiful streets. She imagines being very tired.

At night they’re making noises, all the preparation. They’re not drilling; there is no dug-up concrete. She can’t imagine what they’re doing. Do you take a river, grab it up between your hands and look at it wrapped-around, a cup – yourself a cup? She imagines fireflies, humming towards the water, buzzing burning leaping through and she imagines holding onto one and pushing it into her palm. She imagines it would glow, that it would travel up her veins like radiation.

He holds onto her at night and talks. Once he slept next to the bed, just next to the bed, on the floor. He started there, volunteering, assuming that affectation of polite, and then crawled his way up, one finger at a time, in the middle of the night. He thought that would be more acceptable. He doesn’t snore; he talks. He leaves behind what looks like teeth; he leaves behind a motion, forward, breaking into arrows, breaking off in all directions.

The river doesn’t move. She imagines them pushing it with bare hands, rolling up their sleeves, the river like a horse, and whinnying. She imagines they would sweat and sweat, cajole and beg and plead, sitting on the ground with their hands between their open knees and looking through a manual for the next best way to go. The manual’s on graph paper; it’s all in pencil; there are little lines and cartoon characters and a river with an arm, a body, a tone of voice. The river would sound rumbling, low-voiced and straining.

He calls her at night to talk about the weather. He has a plan, he says, and it should all happen in January. The weather would be perfect then. She imagines ice floes. Ferries breaking through, and chunks and spikes and breath in needles down her lungs. She imagines people wrapped up tight so all they are are noses, walking down the streets. “St. Petersburg,” he says. “Dalmatia. Don’t you want to go there?” She wants to watch the river as it skitters on the cobblestones, as it pushes up the streets, as it licks at the old houses and the walls, licks, splits, takes them over, breaks them through.

It requires capes. Straitjackets. Balls-and-chains. It requires divers with a mask and thumbs-up thumbs. They silt around the bottom; they shuffle through the mud. It requires cages; people watch while someone holds his breath, and times it, times it, times it, and they have to pull him up, since he has fainted, underwater.

Everywhere she’s seeing ditches, though the birds are flocking, treating everything the same. Sitting in that square of light, there are people, there is a river. The streets are thick and people walk and the children hold up capes and masks and tarot cards, plastic pigeons, doves. The spectacle, the cartwheels. She imagines buildings rushing-through with water, and the water grabbing up and climbing up, sliding silently into the places between floors.

He sets up stereo equipment on the floor, piles cardboard boxes along the edges, and the river is digging in, with hands, with teeth. They bring in yards of plastic, miles of it, long and draped and stretched, and they count off on their fingers the miles, all the multiple directions. They think: lift and push. Just drop it, it will slide across, like waterworks, like swimming pools. They wouldn’t even have to use umbrellas. But the river silts in deep, holds on.

In sleep. She can't, sleep. It's hot. She hears the trains, the river sloshing over banks. She hears things burbling from the water. She imagines things are living in there, dark and dripping mouths and arms with scales, galloping. She hears the teeth as they are grinding, plowing up, dirt and mud and breaks and bridges. He turns over, snores. She sees the outlines of his ribs in the bright light from the street. She can't, she can't. It's tangling.

He calls her honey, calls her darling, says, "We'll go to Argentina, see the puffins." He's standing awfully close. She wonders about the shape of the river. She imagines...not snakes. Rivers are always snakes. Maybe lions? Firecrackers. They have to blast into the banks. At night he grinds his teeth. He claims she kicks. She denies it. There are explosions. Bits of river, water, stone, thrown into the air.

In the plans it is in tiny squares, small and blue. The river winds. It twines through town, in-between the houses, in the places where the stores are falling-through, and all those footprints, lifting up and drifting. They can pick it up, she thinks, lift it on their shoulders, put it down, away, safe.

In the alleyways, the children have been paddling in buckets. They wear galoshes, yellow, blue and polka-dot. They wear newspapers folded, cornered on their heads. In the background there are explosions. The children yell and paddle with their broomsticks.

She thinks she catches spiders. In the bathtub there are spiders. She can never seem to catch them, though sometimes they leave, take a break, come back recharged.

At night, sitting in the bathtub, she watches one crawl up the wall. It crawls between the tile tracks leaving spider trails. In the living room he is playing something dark and whiskey-stained, that filters through the speakers leaving smoke. He is sitting on a cardboard box and plotting lines out on

a map spread on the floor. He's using colored pencil: orange, red. He sits, his knees propped up like traffic cones. He pulls her when she walks out from the bathtub, dripping, trailing out dark lines. Look at this, he says. There is an orange dot on Alabama. A long yellow line on Mississippi. But he's pointing at New Guinea. There aren't really any cannibals, he says. They have monkeys there. And giant snakes. When they go to bed her knees are sharp; she scratches him.

The children eat ice cream from a truck, standing by the river. It leaps up at their feet, licks. She watches from the bathtub and she's sitting there in lukewarm water, listening. She props her chin up on her hands, watches through the window. Her bones are soft and only elbows, propped up on the windowsill, propped up, held up, by the glass. She thinks she's softening; she thinks her bones are growing small.

Outside a woman's calling for a dog. In the living room he is playing something with harmonica. The woman's voice bleeds and runs between the music as she fumbles through the children, patting them as if they could have her dog inside their pockets. They are yellow, blue, their jackets, their galoshes – she peeps inside their shoes, puts her nose against their knees.

He opens the door, and drains the tub. He says, "Come on, come on, get out. I have so much to show you," wraps his hand around her flopping wrist and pulls.

The river grabs on, pulls, pulls. Men wash up on the shore, pale, translucent, absorbing river through their skin. They have bridges wrapped around their wrists and ankles, bits of wire, barbed and drilling, bits of stone between their teeth. There are solemn circles in the middle of the night, that gather at the riverbanks and look. There's very little crying, and men drink whiskey in the streets, hold up bottles like they're flags, like fireworks, and toast, to the water at their feet. It's little, they're

little, all their movements, and though she can see them, it's like they're standing still, and she wonders if they will collapse, all of them so close together.

When the parents hide their buckets the children take up rollerskates. They roll. The water sloshes around their feet. The water wraps around their ankles; the water reaches up. The buildings all smell small and dank and damp. The attic floods with spiders. They crawl in her pajamas when she's sitting in the bathtub, dry, looking out the window in the dark, pushing on the window in the dark, thinking she is licking at the screen, thinking she is pushing past. She has marks on her wrists, bite-marks, fingerprints. She imagines sparks and ticker-tape parades. Paper plates and cups and spoons and confetti made of bubblewrap. Trumpets, ants and bees, a picnic by a river bank twenty miles away, and what has happened to the houses in-between.

It's more than that. They'll be bringing down the bridge at 3 a.m. She thinks they'll have to sacrifice a baby; she thinks they'll have to watch the water rushing; perhaps it will all flatten out, perhaps they'll have a place to dance. In his sleep he calls her honey, darling, baby – his hands around her knees, his knees around her thighs, his hands around her throat. “We'll go everywhere,” he says. “We'll go see the last explosion.” She thinks he's asking her on a date. The children bob along the waterline toeing at debris and dipping hands in, dipping feet in, so they are light and holding flashlights, flashing at the sparks, the bricks, the cracks that seem to steady as they widen. She wants to hold on, draw them to her. She thinks that it would jolt them off their feet, missing space, holes in bathtubs; she thinks of running through the maps, on lines that take the place of streets and highways, rivers, running in a breathlessness like flight. The bridges will be light and quickly flash. They're trying wires, electricity, running cables. Perhaps the river will evaporate – they'll have a place to skate, up sides, down. They will pull them down, one by one. Perhaps they think that when the

bridges are all gone there will be nothing to hold the river in. They will not reach over it, embracing.  
The river, defeated, will give up.

## SLEEP

Bits of buttonholes, preserved there, like paperclips, on a shelf in the garage. She doesn't think not to go in, to go in and sit and hide, just like her husband does, just once in awhile, when it gets too static or too chaotic along the street, where there is so much asphalt, and children on bicycles. The garage opening onto the sidewalk, and she, sitting in an old and rocking chair, in the dark, or the near-dark, because bits of sunlight struggle through underneath the door. The houses are all close together, and the garages filled with bicycles and grandparents' broken Christmas tree ornaments, or the bits of broken grandparents, left behind.

Her grandparents' house always smelled, smelled like grandparents, she thought, when she was young and always on rollerskates, where the hallways were round, circular, the rooms spinning around them like a wheel, and there were old dolls in glass cases, with drooping eyelashes should you be able to pick the glass case up. Stuck onto tables, a whole room full of them, that she was never able to talk to, the way she talked to all her dolls at home, because they were in glass. When she was young, her mother left to be sick, and she stayed, with her grandparents, in a back hallway, where the white bedspread scratched, and her grandfather woke up at dawn to check the stock market at the kitchen table, all wood paneled, all solid and steadily waiting, a coffee cup by his hand, brown and chipped.

When they had children, there were causes and controls to all her time. This was important, the careful measurements of it. When she woke up screaming. She woke up screaming. She wakes up screaming in the dark, to find they all are gone, and her husband pats her arm to pull her right back next to him, curls up close, and she appreciates that now she cannot breathe, his arms are wrapped so tight around her. She doesn't think not to stay awake, and so she does, steadily, in the dark, until she is so exhausted she cannot possibly sleep, her husband's breath at her back, low at her back, as if the bed is pulling him down to the edge. She wakes up screaming. She wakes up to hear the phone call, and she doesn't think not to answer it, because the phone is calm in the yellow kitchen, and there are plants, the plants so much like outside, like summer, like the way the baseball fields are on television, bright green and breathing out for her, in white pots, by the shininess of the sink and the slow puff of the curtain at the window, the phone carefully ringing, as if it will just go on like that, and like it should, in the bright morning that she can tell will be hot already, will be hot, later, but the street is so close to the beach that maybe it won't be, that maybe she can't trust her feeling of hot, her feeling of maybe shuffling through the house in her bare feet and running a shower and just letting it run, her standing outside of it, the way she is standing outside of the ringing phone and the presumed phone call on the other end.

But she doesn't answer it, and she wakes up screaming. She wakes. Wakes. Wakes. And it is only a phone call, sometimes, as if someone is calling from just down the street to check if their newspaper has arrived safely, flown there from the end of some boy's hand, the one who wears a baseball cap that could never fit anyone else it is so carefully molded to his head, the hair his mother cuts. As if someone is just calling, not like the phone call that told them. It's not, she thinks. It is.

She sat in the garage. She sat. She sits, now, in the garage, her surroundings bricks, her books, her left-out old tables on which are placed the hearts, on which are placed the handprints, which hold the places. Table places, places in the car. You break my heart, she says. You break. You

break. She is asleep. Her husband holds on to her tightly, awake, and sad because she is, though she is asleep. She is sadder when asleep, he thinks. She is. He thinks. The room is warm. The room is just preserved there, and he holds on to her tightly, afraid that somehow she will float away. Feeling her under his hand, she is so light, the blankets, light. He keeps everything in the garage where she won't see, kept tight, locked up there, safe, or safe from, or her safe, he thinks. She thinks he knows, that sometimes, when she woke up she would walk straight to the garage and sit there, everything in her screaming. She wakes up. She thought he knew. She thought the reason that he held her close, held her close, closer, was that he knew that she was sad, that she was thinking, sad, and he would hold onto her and hold it down, inside, kept out, kept wrapped-around so that they would be close, so that he would be, she thinks, protection, keeping her from anywhere else. He thinks. He thought. He woke up to find her missing. He wakes up. When he wakes up he walks into the kitchen, and she has fallen asleep at the table. She fell asleep. She has fallen asleep and he carries her back, because she is light.

She goes to bed at eight o'clock. She goes, and he follows her, and they are asleep. It's eight o'clock and it's still summer, and she thinks sometimes of rollerskating, down the streets, down the hallways of the house when her grandfather followed after her, trying to scold. Trying. But not. Chasing her, and trying not to laugh, and she would spin. Spin. Spun. He holds on to her, her husband, hands around her stomach, around her arms, close, and her face into the pillow, as if she doesn't want to breathe. She wakes. She wakes. It was summer. It is.

When they had children, before they lost them, all of them, at once, there was a summer and a carefulness, something that she clung to, to wake up in the morning. She woke up screaming on the morning she had discovered it had happened. Or the day after. Two days after, she wakes up screaming. Three days after, she wakes up. She wakes, really, now, suddenly, always, because to wake

up any other way would be disgraceful, difficult. Different, really, to wake up. To scream, really, like a shattering sound, like any sound. To wake up. To wake. Or not up. Not up. Not up at all.

## KITES

Eva belongs to Matthew and to Jane. She is a small girl, for her age, three, and she likes to think in terms of sky: kites, swings. Jane likes to take her out without a sweater or a hat; Jane likes to spin her up on swings; Jane likes to laugh. Jane is a bright girl, young. Flighty. She likes to dance. They dance on empty floors, on summer mornings, Eva with her mother's knees, her hands held high up in her mother's hands. Her mother likes to dress her up in flimsy slipper shoes, and when one day she slips and hits her head on banisters and stairs, she is taken away, and she belongs to someone else.

She's just a little girl, who likes to think in terms of rivers: fish, water. She is just a small girl. When she is moved into the newer place where there is furniture on top of concrete blocks and an aquarium on top of books, she likes to think of fish, and her mother buys her fish pajamas. Her new one. New mother. There will be more of these, new ones. There are windows, and there are houses, and there are apartments. But there always seems to be sunshine; it's warm, and she watches cars go by, and fish.

Eva likes stories, popsicles, dogs. She likes to think of kites. Her mother takes her to the opera. They sit in velvet seats. They are far back and she can't see anything, but she thinks of dresses the whole time. Velvet. The cinch around the waist with ribbon. Shiny shoes. Her mother thinks of cake and the man who works at Rite-Aid. When her father is at work, her mother buys gum and magazines

she doesn't read. She brings the man who works at Rite-Aid home while Eva sits in the kitchen on a chair. They walk into the bedroom while Eva sits and kicks and draws in sugar with a finger on the table. When they come out the man who works at Rite-Aid shakes her hand. He pokes her in the shoulder, pats her on the head. Once the mother before this one took her to a park where they flew kites. This mother buys bubblegum, laughs with the man at Rite-Aid. The two of them, Eva and the mother with the flowered skirt, come home; they sit down on the couch, and the mother tells her a story, starts, "Once upon a time there was a bird. A little bird. A blue one."

Her mother thinks in terms of music, and her father says, "turn off the television," that's all Eva knows. Her mother hums. Her mother sings when pushing on the swing. Her mother thinks the music wraps around, ties up, the lines against the ankles, wrists, songs straightened out, stretched out. She thinks the world is just as soft as that, as music, and harsher, all those little notes stretched-out, spined-out, and dancing. Her father says, "go to sleep," and "*I'm* the boss," and pushes her mother against the wall. Her mother pushes herself against the wall. Eva thinks she could fall in, if she pushes hard enough. Wouldn't that be nice, to disappear? Wouldn't that be nice, her mother is always saying, some cake, some ice cream? Everything is *nice*. They will go dancing, she tells Eva, when she's washing dishes, when Eva's sitting at the table watching her wash dishes.

This father says no ice cream in the house; this father says no television. This time there is carpet. In the house there are no other children, but there are holes in attic floors where Eva climbs. The house has red curtains; the house is quiet at three o'clock when the mother goes to sleep with her clothes on and a blanket, her face into the pillow on the sofa, and Eva tries to find things, hidden things, as if the house will tell itself. The mother sleeps. Eva finds a broken plate, a crumpled paper in a corner where the wall opens to the grass, and a little bird that crawls in. There is a shower curtain, squeaky vinyl, and a dog. The dog drags itself across the floor and the mother swats at it

with magazines. When the dog bites Eva, on a spot above her ankle, she just watches blood rise up and drip, and she doesn't tell her mother, and she lifts up a corner of the carpet and lets the blood drop there, then covers it back up.

The fathers try, they do. They fall asleep on magazines, stretched out in their laps. And the mothers listen to the radio. The mothers are afraid of lightning. The mothers put her to bed, softly, touch her cheek. They get in fights, at night, after they've put her to bed. They think of Eva, really. They do, but they are always fighting; they are always so distracted. There are large things, large worries, to think about, and they go to bed shaky, their beds too big for them. They are not entirely sure that they want children. Though they can dress her up if they are the kind to do that, and some of them are.

Her mother picks up dinner plates, holds them up next to Eva's face while Eva sits, high up, on the countertop. The mother lets her sit, feet dangling off, though it is dangerous. She wants to see if they match, her eyes, the dinner plates. She is impressed with color, with light. She likes art; she likes shape and space and bleeding-through and lines all crossed-together, drawn-apart. She doesn't like children. She thinks Eva is a mess of colors – her dress, her eyes. The colors change: azure, sapphire, cerulean. They do – they match, they change. Eyes like dinner plates, and the mother is impressed. Big blue eyes, blonde hair. She turns around, puts the dinner plates in cabinets, and there is no clinking, no locking tight together of the china. She sings too, carefully, as if afraid her song will break, wipes down the countertops, wiping off her fingerprints. The house is close, and small. The kitchen is sunny, overwarm, but it is always clean, shiny – until there is the smell of burning plastic, and the kitchen leaps in flame, a spatula sliding from the stove down to the floor. The mothers are sad, and smell like smoke, their skin burning like fire.

This father makes grilled cheese sandwiches, in the afternoon, and puts them on heavy plates, and settles them at the table, Eva in a too-high chair. He watches her, and thinks about her squeaking on the chair seat, thinks about her sharpness as she is small, as he carries her. This father wears squeaky shiny shoes, has bruises around his wrists from his clutching, twisting at his watch. He has bruises in the corners of his eyes from always rubbing. He sings along with the radio in the car. When he pulls up, he waits, in the driveway, door open, looking at the house, and thinking just how long it'd take to drive away. He drives off, hurriedly, past the gas station and the grocery store. The roads are long and strung-together, held together with the telephone poles and traffic.

The mothers make secret telephone calls. "Come pick me up at noon," one whispers. "Don't leave me here." They are always tired. Sometimes they think they should go somewhere and leave Eva somewhere else. She is a small girl, they could leave her somewhere, easily. The supermarket? The post office? They picture her standing in the middle of a marble floor, and walking off, and driving off, hurriedly.

Eva thinks there is a reason for this – only her and mothers, fathers coming in too late when their ties have already loosened, and the mothers shift away when the fathers reach their hands out toward their mothers' shoulders, to touch their necks. The mothers read her fairy tales. Dragons, knights on horses. She thinks of princesses and towers. One mother thinks of wrapping Eva up, putting her on a step, and ringing the doorbell. She is a small child, and the mother does not want any more trouble. They have all gone to so much trouble, they think.

They think of the streets, the buses, the forces of those long high hills. At night it is a tunnel; at night it is empty. The bus rattles and the street is wide. Store windows light up mannequins, and the mothers sit with books on their laps, and watch as the streets dip from skyscrapers to neon, and wonder how far it goes, those traffic lights. Eva has taken a bus, with a mother who held her hand, who told her a story, and they pointed out the window, though it was in the daytime, at the art museum, and at the movie theater, and at the people who wore wings as they rollerskated in the tunnel left by traffic.

Eva sits up on the counter, wearing a school dress, hands like wings, kicking at the cabinets underneath her. “There was a dog,” she says. “We followed him through the playground and then we tied him to a tree. And then Rachel poked him with a stick, and Thomas poked him with a stick and we tied him up and left him there.” The mother is impressed. She thinks the story should go further. She is tempted to ask, “So then what happened? What did you do then?” She wants to know. She does not like stories, and she does not like dogs, but the cruelty of children impresses her.

The mothers play piano. They have eyelashes sticking up and lipstick bleeding, fingers cut by scissors. They smoke. They dance while doing dishes late at night while no one’s looking. Though the fathers creep in, put their hands against their shoulder blades, try to soften all that movement, for a moment, for that holding-on. The mothers slap their hands back; the fathers go to bed. This mother creeps down hallways, hiding things that she has stolen from in town. She hides them carefully, while listening. She steals things carefully: dirty pennies, safety pins. Rubberbands on all the doorknobs; electricity, staticky, sparkles on all the doorknobs. Eva’s curious about these houses – how they hold things in, how sometimes, at night, they spark – just watch. There are so many

houses. This mother's always careful, always quiet. The next one's loud and yelling, drinking bourbon from a juice glass. When it breaks, the glass, it crackles, like ice.

She sleeps on a mattress, Eva. The mattress crackles. In one house there are no sheets. She sleeps curled up, and dreams of rats, wakes up afraid. She is afraid of sounds: *buckle, crash, smack*. She is afraid of what happens, and she sleeps curled up, and the mothers, they sneak out, carrying their shoes. She imagines where they go. They have fur coats in closets. They stand in closets, close the doors.

One house, two. She is learning, to brush her teeth, to tie her hair with ribbons, to bake. Her mothers bake cookies while they drink bourbon from a juice glass painted green with jellybeans. They wear aprons. They have pockets on their fronts for paper towels and for spoons. In the mornings there are sirens and there is music from a record player. Eva watches as it spins and as the record falls off. The father carries the broken pieces close to his chest for days, swaying a bit, and singing songs that sound like murders, slashing record pieces out into the air.

Eva is sitting in the circle at the top of the staircase. The new one. New staircase. It's clear and plain to her, that circle, and there is a hand that reaches down to pull her out, or pull her up – they cannot see the circle and they step into the edges, don't notice the changing of their feet. There are women from the neighborhood, and aunts and uncles and cousins, milling through the house. There is a party. There is sunlight, spooling out. There is the mother, who kneels down, wearing a lilac skirt and looks at her and looks sad, and says nothing. And the father who pats her head. Sometimes there is a speck of dust that shows a border, and sometimes there is a burn-mark on the hardwood floor, but really they don't see the circle until they step inside the line and Eva pushes a hand, wrist

locked, down on the high part of the foot, where the bones are easily cracked. *Crash. Smack.* It is a woman wearing a shiny red shoe with straps. She has red toenails. She has come over for coffee cake. She smells like burnt paper and like grass. She pushes her knees towards Eva, tries to bend down, and almost falls. The circle pulls. Eva won't let anyone inside.

It is clear and straight around her, like string, the circle. On the playground at school she has found a circle – a spot of grass turned brown, awash, surrounded by bright green. She has decided it is magic; she has decided anything can happen; she puts her feet out and they disappear, she puts her feet straight out past the outline of the circle and they disappear.

There is soap. There is her father – new one, new father – pushing her under the bathwater. He is wearing a tie. He has his hand wrapped around her neck; he has big hands, and his thumb pushes against her spine. He says, “Don't do that again. Don't you ever.” She has broken something. Or forgotten something? Or lied. She likes stories. She likes to lie – it is like telling stories. He pulls her up, pushes her back down. The tiles are bright turquoise blue. The water tastes like soap.

It is a bubble. “Don't tell so much. Don't talk so much,” the mother says and pulls her down the street, in the morning, towards the store. Eva imagines something breaking, bright, in the curving of her arm. A new dress like a fever. She imagines sitting down, in the corner, and waiting. There are supposed to be secrets; listen, wait – like mice. She thinks of mice. Eva thinks of holes in walls and following so someone else will catch her. Wait, she thinks, she wants to listen. Anything can happen, right?

She belongs to Joshua, and to Mary. Mary is an architect. Mary sits with Eva at the kitchen table and they build things out of paper – tall buildings, bridges draped with pretty string that sway in the ceiling fan like they are in wind, in real wind, in city-wind, the kind made by buses. Mary stands her up against the wall and says, “Don’t move darling, I’ll be back.” Mary smells like car exhaust and pencil lead. The buildings they have built look like castles, and Eva has drawn on all the walls, and shiny windows.

She goes out, the house behind her. She sits still, still, until the lawn is flooded with birds. She is sitting, small, in the grass, and the grass cuts into her legs and no one else is watching, and there is nothing but that, the flapping of wings and the little chirps; the sound is large and flapping and bright. Mary says, “Come in, come *in*,” when it is dark. She is talking from behind a window screen, in the kitchen, where it is only halfway lit. The curtain falls back down. Eva imagines a telephone call, Mary whispering into the phone, a corner, standing in a corner, whispering to someone to pick her up. It is like a story, like this: someone is kidnapped, someone is captured. She imagines a story. The story is red, like curtains. And soft, like whispering, Eva thinks – there should be whispering, it should be quiet, quieter, in a tangle of rooms – dip into the holes, watch the light green like on buses, watch the air spill and turn into something else. If she is careful it will turn into something else. She imagines Mary wandering out, turning down the path, spinning the story out, and leaving. She imagines flight. There is a shattering of broken glass on all the lawns; she goes in, careful, in the dark, up the sidewalk walkway; she worries for the birds.

In the afternoon Eva sits and crosses her legs, quiet, because the living room is quiet. She is staring at the walls; she thinks about what lives inside. There must be something that lives inside. In the air conditioner Eva hears it. Mary walks slowly across the room, in the heat, in the sunlight, and turns it

on. There is a squabbling, scraping inside, like birds, like squirrels, bright and warm inside, and then the motors go on. Eva thinks of blades, of scissors, of knives. They are sharp, and shiny. Eva puts her head between her knees so she can't hear anything. She squishes her ears between her knees, hard, so she won't hear anything, and when it is time to go to sleep, she can't go to sleep, and she does not sleep, and won't, and Joshua pulls her up, pulls her into the living room, weight heavy on her wrist, and slaps her, hard. Eva steps back, towards the wall. She starts telling him, is about to tell him, just a story, a reason, an anything, and stops. She looks at his knees. She steps back, back, into the wall, before he slaps her, when he is reaching out, and she imagines it – it will be magic, that space, like listening to the radio, like whispering, like dark, and she pushes herself back, so the house will pull her in.

## ONCE, THERE WAS A GUN BATTLE

Now, umbrellas are unreliable. It is, this early, this heavy: rain that guts lawns, ruts carpets, but these are only hotels, so no one minds. She leans back against a wall and there is mildew in her hair; he tells her not to do that. He is listening to a radio. He is listening to traffic. He walks, in front of a mirror, in front of a window; he is planning. *Okay*, he says. *We'll go to that one next. Next?* she says. She is lying on her back, wearing only underwear. The bed is dirty, the sheets are twisted. *Yeah*. He puts on a shirt. He listens to traffic. Planning. It's too early, and it doesn't sound like birds.

This is a hotel. There are only hotels in Echo Park, the kind with neon green signs that twist along their tops. Or is this Echo Park? Right now? Maybe they are somewhere else. There is a lake; there are freeways. They trudge up the hill in the middle of the night and there are freeways to their left, like rivers, binding them in. They walk up in rain and in the mud, dragging behind them suitcases, thinking this is like a reservoir, thinking all of this is like it's wet, mud up to their knees. The hotels have dirty lobbies and women with hair on their chins who buzz them in and give them peppermints, pat her on her shoulders so she feels warm.

They left too quickly. Threw things in suitcases. Drove a yellow car. Stopped only for gasoline. She hasn't yet decided on her name. He says, *Just pick one, pick one*. Her name is Adelaide. Adele. Adeline. She is the daughter of a drunk who collected record players and toy trains. There were trains on

shelves, on bookcases, in the attic under boxes, and there were tables in their house her father painted green with rollers on a pole when he should have used a brush, his arms all elbowed back, calling loudly to his daughter in the kitchen. It was as if he were far away and she were standing there on a stool watching him from far away, high up, and he had to yell because she was that far. Her father, too, could not decide; he called her everything: *Babycakes*. *Dandelion*. They were tables the trains could run on, he said – green, green. He had green underneath his fingernails. He kept newspapers in his pockets, and he began to sleep on floors, in corners, in the dust before she picked him up, put him to bed, stepping carefully around what had been broken.

This is a list of hotels. One, two, three. Next.

One: a room with buzzing things. There are no bodies, nothing that hovers, slightly lands, wings lifted up, on dingy curtains. No wings, or legs without the rest of them, no left-behind and missing pieces. But still, buzzing. All night, all day, as she sits in front of the refrigerator, the open door, soaking up the cold. She never finds anything, wings, though she looks, spending time between the time she sleeps, trying to take up all the time that she is waiting for him. The curtains cover up the windows, dirty, like a tongue had licked them.

Two: just up the hill. Her hand floats over freeways, tracing the paths. She imagines she can feel it floating beneath her fingers, skating – the road, the traffic. In Los Angeles, the freeways plunge toward fog. There are brake lights in the fog. There are screams of brakes, of tires, red. Their new room has a sagging mattress. It is sagging in the middle, where someone's body used to be. She wonders about that: just in the middle? Like there was only one man sleeping there, only him on the bed, and he stayed there, over and over, always, til the bed had curled around him. She slides down the embankment. She slides into him in the middle of the night and her arm crushes into him, and he grunts, slapping at her thigh in sleep.

They stay there just a little while. *Move quick, move fast*, he says. *Next*, he says. They are old-movie-moving – fast, sped-up, the reel flapping – and she feels she should be whistling, hands behind her back to hide the evidence. He says that they are checking off the street signs, looking at the architecture. *Just look at this, those lines*, he says. This will be easy, she thinks – moving, running away, escape. One hotel. This one with windows, this one with columns that twine up, jump up, climb down. They have driven down the coast, stopping only at gas stations, eating candy bars, ice cream bars that melt over her fingers. *We are touring*, he says, *we are sightseeing*, he says, *just look, look at that, look at those columns*. Next. The hotels have soggy carpets. Peachy-colored doors around a parking lot. Next.

One: there are two little girls in red bathing suits sitting on the step in the front by the lobby. They drink Coca Cola from glass bottles. The smaller one clamps the bottle straight between her knees, and she blows into it, making noise that whistles toward the cars all lined up in the parking lot. They are blonde girls with brown eyes. He pats the little one on the head and gives her a penny. He kneels down, whispers in her ear. His whisper makes a whistle. There are glass doors and there is a gumball machine she puts a coin in, and it sticks.

She was her father's only child. *Babydoll. Fairy Queen*. Her father could not decide. He would wake her up at night and make her try on something new, a new name – check the fit around the head, around the waist, and how if it's too small it holds the elbows, tight – as if it were a sweater or a slightly warmer coat. Her coat had holes – holes in the pockets that she would dip her fingers into as she was blown around in wind, holes and in them pennies and the bobby pins that had held her hair together. Her father looked at her, standing in a doorway, hands on both his hips with both his elbows pointing out. She sat on a chair. She felt the urge to spin, say, *Is this ok? Is this?* So she was

seventeen, and calling herself – she didn't know. A list of choices in her pocket. *Make me choose*, she says, when they are driving, when they are turning in a driveway toward the first.

Two: just up the hill. The room's the same. Wallpaper, pictures, squares of wallpaper underneath them dark when the picture frames swing. It smells like smoke; those sliding glass doors. *There was a gun battle here*, she says. *What?* he says, from the little bathroom, the mirror and the sink on the outside, not the inside, of the door, so she is reflected, or at least her knees are, cut off from the rest of her. She sits in a chair, puts her feet up on the windowsill, the window shaking in the frame when her foot touches it. This should be dramatic, she thinks. *Of course*, she says. It was a western. There were men who came in wearing boots. There was a woman tied up in the hall, heels tight, ankles tight, as if she were in danger, as if a train were coming toward her. And a fight. There was a screaming fight. There was a gun battle.

One: *Adele*, he says. So it's settled. Adele. It sounds like...something. Not familiar, but something. She is on the bed. His hands have covered up her shoulders, bounced off to her thighs. He has looked at her, kissed her on the forehead, once. He walks away. She sits. She has three pairs of underwear, a skirt, a suitcase. She has walked to see that there are marbles in a jar in the lobby downstairs. There is a woman who picks them up, sucks on them like bubblegum while she's waiting for her shift to end and for the television at the other end of the desk to magically switch back on. In the lobby, things clink, things hum. Pen in mouth, pins in hair, the woman can see herself in her reflection in the television screen, turns her cheek so her face thins out. In their room, from where she's sitting on the bed, she studies him, her knees up, back against the wall. He rubs at his face, rubs at his eyes, stares at himself in the mirror. It is quiet. And she could tell him anything she wanted. *Listen*, she could say, *there is a river that never ends in South America*. He would say, *of course it does*. *Listen*, she could say, *there is too much green in Alabama*. He would laugh. She could tell him she

knows all the capitals of every country in the world, and every bird that goes in them, but she doesn't tell him that. She doesn't say anything, though she could, though she wants to. They have slept curled up, his hand around her arm, pulling her to him. He would say that she is lying, ruffle her hair. *Baby. Sweetheart.*

Next.

Two: he gets into a fight with a woman in a nightgown over the ice machine. He holds her head next to the ice machine, so she can feel the crunching metal teeth next to her neck, and she is not quiet, the woman: she shrieks. She shrieks and shrieks and he cannot cover it up and soon the staff comes running. His pajamas have cuffs, are clean. His pajamas shine with little bits of melted ice, and perhaps some bits of the woman's hair, her teeth. They reach to hold his arms back. They make a move to grab his hair, put an arm around his neck so it will bruise.

It is hotter rain than L.A. ever has. And there is fog, and she likes to think of it as mystifying, mysterious. It's like a puzzle, pry the lock: why? It covers them over. The nights are hot. He stood next to the ice machine, forehead on the metal, cold, like he was thinking, like he was waiting, listening to ice. Planning. The machine was humming, a large metal box. She watched him from the doorway. He grabbed onto the woman's neck, shook her, shook her. She was wearing a nightgown that barely skimmed her knees.

One: she found a hole inside the closet, looking down, down, though the edges fell off, dark. She opened the closet door, looked in. She thought she could reach in, feel around, find something. She looked closer. She reached in, not expecting rats, but found them anyway, the ragged edges of the hole and the damp dust of floor. There were bodies, squeaking, and she kept her hand in, did not jump back, the slip of tails between her fingers, the curl of tails toward her palm. The hotels: they

are all the kind that curl around a pool. They are all the kind with doors on the ground floors, windows looking out. Orange flowered curtains that slide across on poles, burlap, cross-hatched, the kind that make an imprint on your cheek if you were to lean against them or be pushed.

Two: she thought the body settled in the center of the bed, and in the middle of the night there were noises. She doesn't sleep. What if he had settled there, the body, and no one came to find him, curled up? It was dark; he lay there, dying. His head back, his arms out. The stairs curled up around the building and their room held still, looked down. Take the stairs, spiral up. Look down. There was an umbrella left in the room. False eyelashes on the sink. Static, static when the radio turned on. He fiddled with it, swore, and listened to the news. *Weather's changing*, he said, though the news said something different. *Watch for tornadoes, hail, thunder*, he said. Though the news said something different. She could see that he was lying. Next.

One: the girls shook the Coke bottles, stuck out their tongues, their thumbs over the bottle tops. They went running around in tank tops squealing, their hands flailing and the Coke like fountains over their shoulders. She should stop them, she thought; she should reach her arm out, trip them, she could talk to them while they were sitting on the ground, they would say hello, she would pat their heads, she could hold them there, a little while, talk to them. She could pull them to her, she thinks, hands around their wrists.

One: the ghosts of flies. One: it smelled like menthol, and lantern oil. One: it smelled like car exhaust and cheap green apple dishsoap. One. One. One: in the middle of the night he came in, sat down, at the table, by the lamp. He turned it on; the room was bright. *Aren't you glad you're here*, he said, pulled the blanket off from where she was pretending she was sleeping.

Now: three. Three: she could sleep with a hammer. A screwdriver. A nail file. There is a clock, red, on sharp little metal legs that stands up and crows like a rooster in the mornings. There is a mass of

squawking birds outside, in trees. The birds cluster, group and flock. She sleeps with knees close to her chest. In the heat, it is hard to sleep. He has always slept. Now, three: he doesn't sleep. He gets up, gets up and walks around, looks out of the windows, peeks under the curtains, drops them, and she doesn't move. He has told her, *shh*. He has told her, *be careful, your feet are heavy*. She has smudged all of the edges of the pictures in the papers, seen beaches, seen car wrecks – look, there are eyes, look, there are men who haunt the streets with pennywhistles, keep their hands palm-up, looking at you, asking; she looks out of the window; *careful*, he says, *don't touch the glass*.

Two: she washed her underwear in the sink. Red and dripping – hanging from the showerhead, the curtain rod, the radiator, the bathroom red and dripping – stretched where they had held onto her hips. Outside were a lake, a parking lot, a tin can, a marching band of children, cracks and pops and dips and creaks and little whistles, a sidewalk stretching up the hill. It is hot. She wears long sleeves; she has holes in her jeans. She cuts her hair with a razorblade, sitting on the bed, no mirror, just snapping her wrist until the hair snaps free. When she was a child she memorized all the names of bugs, as many as she could find in the yard where there was grass and a turtle in a pond, and she drew them on her wrists, in ballpoint pen, squatting in the grass so it was tall, looking closely so she could go inside and see what kind they were, swishing through the pages of her books to find that shape in ballpoint pen. When she is young, she wears white dresses with hems above the knees, but they are always marked with pen, always blotted, accidentally. She does not wash them out. Her father falls asleep, flat, on his back, on the lawn. *Honeybunch*. *Sweetiepie*. Their yard is full of turtles, full of tall high grass and broken bottles, concrete chips and broken glass; the bathroom floor is footprints full of mud.

It's hotter than LA's ever been. But she doesn't know this for the truth, really – it's just what they say. The air conditioner runs and runs and drips, clanks. She kicks it, puts her ear up close, hears

what scrabbles around inside. There are no ceiling fans. There is no air. They say that there will be tornadoes. The men who stand around the lobbies, the floor-to-ceiling glass of windows onto parking lots, eating doughnuts – they talk about it, tips of tongues between their lips. He says, when he comes back from looking in, from buying soda: they are heavy, the drivers, names over their chests and shirts that gape at buttonholes. He imitates their hairy chests. He imitates the way they move their lips, the way they waggle hips and butts. *Tornadoes*. He laughs. They are sure of it, with powdered sugar on their chins. They flock out to their trucks. They say there will be flocks of birds churning up the air from Mexico. They will be bright. Green. Yellow. They will bring with them hail, and yellow fever. *Watch out for it*, he says, smiling – he has his arms behind his head; he has the bed, flat, back from when she'd taken it, claiming it for his, comfortable.

One: a blonde girl cracked her head against a corner, against the wall. Blood ran down the carpet into the lobby. *No no no, I wasn't chasing you*, the other one said, in a little voice, while she squatted on the floor. *Get up get up*. She pleaded with her face close to the floor; the other one, her head down, blood into the carpet. No one came, and Adele watched, cross-legged, elbows on the floor, chin in her hands, from the doorway, across the little parking lot. *Adele*, he said, in their hotel room, at night, testing it out on his tongue. *Just be that. Just for now*.

One: a hotel. Windows that slide open but are rusty. In the lobby an old man sits reading maps at night, with a red pen in one hand and a cigarette in the other, a ball cap pushed-back and sweaty. There is a bell next to him and he knocks into it occasionally. It rings, but not the way it would if someone were to slap his hand down onto it – just a little clumsy ding, a side-to-side. She stands with her back to the building, watches across the parking lot, feels the smallness of the bell. The maids sit talking in an upstairs hallway, taking off their shoes, sitting with their heads against the wall. They talk of children, of babysitters. It's evening and she has gone outside to watch. There is

the highway; there is the maid who in the mornings shakes her hand, calls her sweetheart, pulls her toward her pockets: a peppermint, a doughnut. She feels small.

Her father whistled while standing on a stool. Then, when she was older, sitting down, leaning against a wall, slipping further so that his back crumpled up. She made dinner; she cleaned the microwave, she opened the mail. She paid the bills. Talked to herself when the kitchen was empty, when the house, with its window seats and rooms attached to each other, rattling on the side of the hill, was empty. She watched him slip. She was afraid of him, slipping. And she thought he would be safer there, asleep, so she left him, while birds flew into the house. Birds flew into the house, in the holes that had been pushed into the walls, but she locked all of the doors before she left, locked him in, moved quickly, escaped.

Three: blood in the sink. The car refusing to start and they walked up the hill in the rain, and she dragged their suitcases behind her, walking behind him, everything wet, and her shoes, washed her face in the hotel room, rubbed at her eyes in the tiny bathroom, curled up on a bed, pulled the sheets up. *Baby. Darling. Sweetheart.* Her ribs knit themselves together. Adele, she thinks. Adele. It is – something. It feels strange. It's hot, night, neon, the tin of radios, of car exhaust. The hotel is strung up and swinging, dizzy, and there are toothbrushes in a plastic cup, in a little bathroom, where the light buzzes, and the cup is bitten on, teeth marks looking for water.

Escape with me, he said. It was a beautiful question. It was. The way he said it, it was a question. Escape with me. Then, it was a question. She took a second to think. She went.

Three: she has taken other people's photographs, pulled them out of suitcases left in lobbies, left to rot in cars, and slipped them into her pockets, carried them with her up the hill: they are men in hats and holding onto hands and pursing lips or opening lips, about to speak; they are women with their hair curled tight. Roller coasters, children. Conversations, and so many pianos. *Look at them,* she says

to him, *who are they, where are they going? Tell me.* She holds them close up to his face while his hand is on her wrist while they are walking, her fingers on the faces of the photographs, making them warm, sticky, hard to pull off of her hands. Next.

## THE POOL

It's not Jenny who runs, or Elizabeth. Or me, though I am supposed to. It's not the way it is when you throw things at each other, duck and cover, ditch, all scrambling, all brambles unexpected in our faces. It's not unexpected. And it's not all of us who run, who surround, who slip in or charge or surge. We don't all move, though we are supposed to. We're all in bathing suits, wearing shorts pulled up around the bottoms. It's not until Chloe steps towards us, pulls at us as we're standing in the grass, that we all go, and there's pushing, but a ragged single file. It's when Chloe says, "Look, this is where we're going," no question, no asking, that we go. Chloe stands straight. And Elizabeth pulls on my hair just a bit to let me know she's there, and we walk into the crack at the back of the pool building, a hole that's boarded up, tongued back, loosened, and flaps scrape into our backs as we walk in.

It's green. And Chloe's wearing an orange bathing suit, bright against the dark and blue and mold.

I'm in my bathing suit, my hair tied back behind me with a rubber band, and Elizabeth keeps yanking, just softly. I remember in our gym class, in our high-windowed shiny-floored and greenish gym class, in dance, she held on to me then too: lift up and spin. Steady, so we wouldn't shake. All of us, we taught each other that, while our teacher tapped out rhythm, and read a magazine, tapping the pages.

Inside there are no lights. The streetlights are spinning fireworks, the diving board, the swimming pool. The strength of chlorine as we slither in, through the holes in walls, in boards; the streetlights spin through holes in walls and boards – we take off our shorts, our bathing suits bright, and then wait. We're quiet. Chloe calls my name. Our names run sliding out ahead of us, telling her we're there. We are a soft line, a long string, at the edges in the back, under the windows tall and dripping white.

When Lainey comes in we pounce. We move – it's like a punch, a prickling, like jumping into the pool, that quick. She slips from us. And Chloe says, to us, "Run!"

There are trains and whistles just outside. The whistles twine into our hair. There are gravel sidewalks, gravel in our knees. Stoplights hang above the street on strings. The streetlights are flickery and full of bugs. We are supposed to trail. Attack. Our bicycles outside in clumps. Lights burn holes into our arms. We are supposed to pounce.

We ride bikes. But Elizabeth her skateboard and Jenny her shoes – she runs, runs. To get there we rode bikes. Around the pool, our flipflops, our bare feet flopflip slap and smack and slide around the wet, so we hold on, onto the walls, like we're skating, children skating.

We pull Lainey along behind us. We pull, like she is rope and we are tugging, all in one direction. She skids, her feet on shiny floors, and we do too, the floors like they are grabbing on our ankles, and Elizabeth grabs for my hand.

There are purple marks from bike chains on our legs. There is a whistle right behind us. Chloe sits in corners, whispering, at lunchtime. Lainey draws on walls, on tables, in what looks like secret code. She sits on top of tables and she draws like she is spelling with what looks like letters stretched out, dancing. Chloe points them out. But they are just letters, dancing. I don't say anything.

I remember that, that we were all each others' partners, while the boys were taking weight lifting instead. We were wearing leotards and spinning each other around, cha-cha, swing. We were all shuffling along the floor and shoving our own hips, and on our tiptoes, the way we weren't supposed to be, pretending we were dancing. Lainey went off doing splits. And back and forth we said your palms are sweaty, don't twitch your hips like that. It was hot in the gym. The teacher wasn't looking.

When we run, through the hallways, the pool behind us, chasing, it's like riding bikes. All of us in a line, and Lainey, somehow, now, in front of us. She's small, and tripping, and I can only see her edges.

There will be no boys, Chloe had said. We sat around a campfire made of newspapers and Coca Cola, and all our faces looked watery and dark. She plotted out things as if her arms were our directions. This is a plan. One arm flung out, and then another – she was an arrow. This way, that way. There. She was checking off things on her fingers. “There will be no boys, there will be no screaming.” There will be just us tied in a knot telling Lainey the way it is.

There are too many of us, older girls, the ones who squawk, slide shoving down the halls with lipgloss, who point out if your pants are wrinkly, who laugh behind their books behind their locker doors. There is Chloe. Chloe wraps a rope around them. Chloe pushes speeches through her hands all cupped around her lipgloss and her bubblegum, when she's standing in the halls, through the light of all those cracking windows, spearmint tiles. Chloe standing high up on a step, so no one can get past. Chloe twisting her finger into my back, saying, “you'll be there.”

She has marker-splotches on her fingers. Jenny thinks, if Chloe puts her fingers on your face, just pushes, only fingertips, there would be purple, blue and yellow on your cheeks. Jenny's afraid of colors; she says her mother taught her that. Elizabeth and I, we tell ourselves it's our mothers' meatloaf, we talk about the spiders in the showers, we say look!, then duck and hide under the bleachers, running from the Duncans' dog. We were supposed to run, to follow; it skips and strangles and startles itself – we were supposed to run, to chase, and me, especially, supposed to, to catch.

The pool's behind the traintracks, and rattling; the pool is rooms stacked-up and empty; the pool is closed, since outside it smells like fire. And Lainey's scientific – she says that's the way that autumn smells, like burning leaves, like old chlorine, trees in morning and the dirty roads and like houses right under the porches where the dogs are, and the rats.

Chloe calls me at night to tell me where to sit. Lainey calls me at night to talk about science class. We talk about stars, and refraction. We talk about light. I think about the streetlight at the corner by the bakery. It always fizzles out when you're walking underneath it; I wonder why it does that. "Electromagnetics," Lainey says. "Or ghosts? Or superheroes?" Lainey believes in superheroes. I believe in ghosts.

Behind the pool the rooms all bend at corners, and we grab onto Lainey, tear her struggling and scraping at the paint. She squirms; they kick; her hands tear out to reach around their ankles, grab for their shoes; they push her, push her back, back.

Chloe said to me, "Alex," drinking Coke in bottles behind the Circle K, her pinky up, toe scratching at the dirt, "we have to get her back." "We have to pull her back in," Chloe said, like she is loose, like she is something running off, that we can capture, change, return, and Chloe looks like

cages, sharp, her hand behind her smacking words into the wall. Lainey doesn't run. I don't say anything.

We bunch and threaten. Our fingernails are pink. We sat around in Chloe's den, the coffee table pulled up to our knees and our knees all cracked and crunching under it, and painted all our fingernails, before we gathered up our bicycles, yanked on our shoes.

Sometimes we slipped into the water, watching our feet turn white, then green. "We could dissolve in here," Lainey had said, seriously, and Chloe laughed. "No, think about it – what would happen?" I thought about our bones, turning clear at first, then dripping. Lainey watched her feet, and Chloe's feet, and I saw her counting all the toes under her breath, making sure they stayed there. She was afraid, sincerely, then, wanting us to stay there.

They pull at her hair and they scream. Or maybe something else does – walls, chlorine. Chloe is tall, taller than us, and wide, and she has the movements of the slapping of a boat, the striking of a wide-reaching sail in sand.

The walls are soft, and they crumble under fingernails; red sneaks up Lainey's face like scars.

Sometimes we sat on the pool steps and watched the fireflies, chlorine behind us, and long pool-waves on walls, all underwater, all dark. We kept the doors open just to sit there, just to be washed in cooler as we were sweating behind our knees.

Lainey said that she would run and mock the train. We sat there, in the pool doors, the tall high grass and the narrow winding tracks curving on and out and long. We were watching it, that line, and then the whistle. She said that she would chase it, or that it would chase her, that she would

outrun it. We saw her leaping over traintracks, pink t-shirt, white shorts, before the arms came down and there were whistles.

She left us standing there, waiting waiting while the train rolled by slowly, and there were only wheels in front of us, and grease, and the empty holes in boxcars, bugs biting at our knees, surrounded by the grass. I listened. Chloe held me there. She kicked.

So it's not me who runs, though I'm slammed into a wall by someone taller.

The pool is strong. Lainey is small, and pale. She has the imprint of a whole hand on her cheek. She is clawed and scratched and bitten.

Chloe watches; we are tangled; eyes in knots and lights are wrapping strings around our wrists and all our ankles, tight. She's watching to see what tangles. I'm watching her to see if she'll undo it, like a puzzle, like a knot in rope. "You'll do it," she said. "*You* will." She could, and it would stop; it is an it, a something, dangerous.

In the back, there are little rooms that weave, in and out like gophers in a field, like lightning tangling through the trees. We didn't have to draw a map, or know where all those doors led. Chloe talked about it like lost was all we wanted, lost and tumbling and pushing her into places we didn't even know were there, leaving her tied-up and wrinkling, leaving our breaths inside the rooms with the bathing suits and mops, and us wandering our way out, where the mold is, and the dark, where the flaps are loose in walls, to leave her there.

Lainey had told us she could fly. We watched her leap, lift her arms, and spin into a ball before she landed, and it was loud, when she was landing, like buzzing, like she had torn something

in the air, and something was flooding through, and when she landed, arms spread wide. “We’ll just leave her there, that’s all,” Chloe said, when she was blowing on her fingernails.

I think: if you just sit still, if you just sit still, if you stay, we will go home and have a soda. Make marshmallows in Chloe’s fireplace when her dad comes in to light it. Elizabeth holds onto my hair, Elizabeth behind me. Chloe stays and stays and stays. She stands next to the wall. There is green and red and breaking, bright. It’s my sister that will call out from the door when I go home, it’s my dog and my parents in the back room watching television, and I’ll go in to sleep, just to sleep; we’ll ride bikes home. Lainey’s not afraid of Chloe; she will laugh.

Sometimes we sat on sticky seats in an empty car, the three of us. It was an empty lot, behind a house, and then another house, and then a chicken yard. Chloe stretched across the front seats and Lainey huddled on the dashboard. Her knees were bent up towards her face. She was chewing on her fingernails, then looking at them. She spread them out in front of her, then leapt them back together, quickly, like a living thing that had been surprised. She was surprised when I told her what the plan was. She was surprised when I took her out next to the field behind the school, where no one else could see, and told her to be prepared, but I didn’t tell her everything.

## THE WOMAN AND THE ARCHITECT

1.

In the city, the buildings collapsed one by one, with a poof, like pillows smacked, feathers drifting. They scattered bits of colored glass, bits of iron into the crosswalks while children walked in rows of two, holding hands, drifting out of school toward playgrounds on the corners. Red flags fell out of windows, old scarves. The children had decided that the buildings dreamed of goldfish; the afternoon was bright, like goldfish; they watched the dust scatter, they watched the buildings drifting to the ground, and what was inside of them. It was almost gentle.

In the city, a man and woman looked into the shops, peered in at bicycles, at pink dresses hung from ceilings. They asked questions of the shopkeepers, pulled out maps, pointed to the streets, to alleys, to endless passageways and the ones that ended suddenly in buildings. The buildings collapsed. Out of them came letters, letters that flocked the streets like birds, and anyone sitting in the coffee shops could read them. They said *how are you*, and *where are you going*, and *when will you be here? Please come*, they said, *I am still waiting*.

Around the man and woman, as they walked, dust and bricks. Shadows. Gray things. Dim light. Tulips. It was spring and so the people were on bicycles, at café tables, sitting on the sidewalks, drinking sodas out of glasses, dunking cherries with a straw.

2.

In the city, you feel yourself fall out of windows, lean out of balconies. In the museum, a collection of small shells, and monkeys in glass cases, their eyes filled with plastic, surrounded by paintings in gilt frames. Past the museum, a train shudders, steams and hums and whistles, lifted up on metal tracks. Downstairs, the sunroom is full of bees. In a moment, the crowds will find them, and will run out screaming. For now, they hum and hum and buzz and bounce against the paintings and the tulips sealed in glass. You are standing on the outside. Looking out and up and in at the building on its staircase, how it goes up and up and up, those wide stairs, those tall doors. When the building begins its collapse, you feel yourself fall out of windows, lean out of balconies, just like the people on the inside in their raincoats, their long hair tied back with ribbons, and on the outside, on the ground, it starts to snow. You feel yourself fall. Across the street, is a lake. It's odd, surrounded by a city – a lake larger than a hand, larger than the train car, or the tracks – but the city streams around it, holding on. They seem to hold themselves together – the lake, the city.

3.

In the coffee shop, the woman sat to read the newspaper. Around her, people talked, chattered, and there was the hum and clatter of cups on saucers, cups slid into buckets and carried into the kitchen through the flapping doors, dumped into the sinks in the madness of china. It was in the morning, and she held out an eyelash, to wish on. She held onto a coffee cup, tightly; she looked out of the window. She held herself still. In the morning, she woke up, walked along the street from her hotel, read the newspaper, smudged it on her finger, made her hair stick up straight when pulled on top of her head. She pulls at her hair when she is nervous. She pulled at her hair, bit her lip so there was blood left on her tongue, and she watched out of the window for falling trees.

In the city, the buildings fell down at a near-constant rate, and the trees fell along with them. Tulip trees, the tall elms. In the evening, the caution of walking, of walkers. They wore shoes, took careful steps off of curbs, looking both ways for bricks and flying steel beams. But still, some things happened: a man stepped off a curb, was squashed flat. A little girl climbed up steps toward a stoop and disappeared, leaving behind a small stuffed rabbit and a broken plastic watch. The young man, an architect, drew lines in pencil in a notebook, small and the size of his pocket, contained by the size of his pocket, by the size of his notebook and the ruled graphed lines, wandered the streets, became dizzy, saddened by the constant puffs of brick smoke, by the bending of beams. He sat in a green velvet couch in a coffee shop and looked out, and looked sad. Tell me, he said to the waitress, what is happening to the city? The waitress wore high-heeled shoes and seemed to hardly land when she took a step. She set down his coffee, touched the napkin lightly, shook her head so that her chin shook slightly, and turned and walked away toward someone else. The architect rubbed his hands on the knees of his pants, looked out to see the falling bricks and falling flags as the hotel went down, bricks falling first off of the top, falling quickly, scattering, then further and further down, and stood up.

4.

As the old men holding chessboards come up from the subway, there is a noise. At first, it is a noise. At first, they hold their hands up to their foreheads, then hold them up like visors, and they are looking out, like tourists across a valley – look at all the little houses, they would say to themselves, look at how the sun glints across rooftops.

It is louder, louder than it was. Roof tiles crash to doorsteps; the fronts of houses fall, intact, into the streets, so exposed are bathtubs, bookshelves, nests of pipes. People look out, from the front. People look out, from the new cartoons of their buildings, blink their eyes since now there is

too much sky, too many outside things to know what to do with. Once, there was a baby in a hat, the baby curled up on the inside, soft like on the inside of a pocket. He was so small, and the hat was blue, and the old men with their chessboards passed him around between them, like a plate of cookies, like a family photograph. They touched his soft hair, admired his round cheeks, but by the time he had gotten to the end of the line they had forgotten about him. Now, the men forget about their chess games, sit down under trees and watch, the city collapsing around them, the grass bright green and the sky bright blue. There are too many things to look at, they think. They lie back; they rest their eyes; they are tired, their hats on their eyes, the way the ground shakes, the way the falling buildings expose the basements, reveal what should be on the inside always protected.

5.

Once, the woman and the architect lived in an attic on the edge of a field. Piled along the walls were all the things of attics: quilts, projector reels, transparent slides and photographs, and dishes that had belonged to someone else. They shuffled through them. They sat up late at night, surrounded by the boxes, feeling protected by where other people had been. She took photographs of tractors; he drew pictures of the buildings he wanted to build. They would have spires, they would have trap doors and tiny bridges between rooms, walls of colored glass. They would be surrounded by grass, by low gray skies, be supplemented by treehouses, would sparkle. She would take baths at night, he said, lie back, look up through the skylights in the ceiling, at the stars. At night they looked up at the stars; they plotted a map of their coordinates. They poked at the map; they looked closely. Here here here, they said, pointing at the far-away places, at the streets where they imagined there were houses piled with snow. He touched her nose, said no, here, we should go here, pointing, pointing at the map, pointing at a spot that was blurry, fuzzed over. The woman looked closely, saw the hazy blue of

lakes, saw the distant green of parks and the rusted-over tracks, saw the way things rose, in glass, the skyscrapers, and the whole map blurred as she was looking, and she said yes.

6.

Yes, he keeps singing as he falls. The world slips, slides past him – trees here, a piece of building there – and everyone on the street below him, feet on and off the curb, the concrete, cars, stopped. Yes, there are children playing marbles in the dark, below. The music floats down, heavier than notes should be, as if they can be picked up, held onto in hands like pocket watches, like bits of china kept, on a dresser, in a bedroom, and in the dark, and underneath the streetlights, light reflecting off his shoes, his belt buckle, his hat that has a medal pinned to it – he'd found it in an alley, it reminded him of his grandfather, and goldfish. The song is beautiful but tinny, as if pulled out of a victrola, and his mouth curves around the words, opens, closes. The children shout, when they win, when they lose, pocket the marbles as there are pieces of paper, notes, passed along through the crowd, questions about the music, about the lyrics, about the speed and the trajectory, and when exactly the man who has jumped out of the building will land, because they are afraid of it, they are afraid of landing, and he doesn't.

7.

Around him the city clinked, like a dollhouse filled with pennies. A woman and a boy walked through the rain, the woman wearing a dark dress, carrying an umbrella. The boy carried a balloon, on a string, the balloon bouncing against the glass of windows and the signs clarifying street names. The architect followed them through the alleyways, ducked into doorways when they turned to look in windows, peeked out and tried to memorize their shapes: the curve of the woman's waist, the roundness of the little boy's head in a baseball cap. The train curled around the city, and there were

whistles, the clinking-together of rails, the steam and slide of brakes. He wanted to stop them, wanted to ask them things, but didn't, afraid of how their voices would sound, that they would be harsher than he imagined them to be, so when they turned into the gates, the turnstile, pressed their faces against the glass, whispered to the ticket taker, pushed into the swimming pool, he stopped, walked back towards the center of the city in the middle of the wide street. There were no buses, only an occasional bicycle.

The swimming pool had been there since the days when people dug by hand. It had been dug with shovels, mud carried out in buckets, to make a hole. It had opened in the summer, its surface blue, its sloping sides painted, blue, and the children in a pack took running leaps, splashed in, all at once. They laughed with happiness. They sank like marbles to the bottom, their swimming shorts and suits with skirts as if weighing them down, as if the water weighed them down, and though each one had been pulled out, scooped out by arms and opened-up jackets, the pool had never been the same.

8.

The people work in stores, in offices, with white rolled sleeves, red handkerchiefs in their pockets. What makes up their days? Are there streetcars? What are the subways like? The subways are long and full of sounds. As the train is crashing through, the tunnel is whole, complete, shiny tiles announcing intersections, stops. A boy who thinks that he could ride the subway always, it is so comforting, so much bright light, sits on a train car, switches seats often, does not want to miss the way the train feels underneath his feet in different spots. At Fifth Street it is rough; at Elm, round and liquid like the ocean. The streetcars crack and clink in all their metal, and in the center of the city, where the city circles around itself, where all the roads connect and then spin outwards, radiating, a man holds a canary on a fingertip; the woman holds an alligator on a string. The people

stand, look and sit down, and stand back up, excited, clap. There is a show of jumping dogs, there is a dancing little bear. The people are afraid. Their mouths are full of teeth. In the city, there were dance halls, street lights, trolley cars; now there are hotels and movie theaters, a carousel, the floors all covered with glass, the walls all missing bricks. The woman has found an apartment; the woman has taken her suitcase, her spectacles, her shoes, unpacked it. The woman keeps the alligator in the bathtub, feeds it goldfish, lets it walk around her rooms, sit on her sofa. The windows are cold. The building shakes slightly. The woman considers the motion, thinks she could dance to it if there were happiness involved. Thinks about the two-step, the fox-trot. Thinks about the movement of hips, about the solidity of floors. Her name is Lily; she has taught the alligator to dance. She pets the alligator; she sits in silence on the sofa not wanting to listen to noise.

9.

The city was made of granite, pillars. Tall windows, and iron balconies. Marble statues, carved capes and gowns and curling hair, the tops of columns. The falling had begun when no one noticed, and then continued, slowly, in small progressions. A problem of falling, the people say; the city is heavy; the people are heavy: long velvet dresses, dark and three-piece suits. On the lake there is a beach and there are striped umbrellas and women in long bathing dresses, covering their thighs. And always there were people who wanted this collapse, who pushed at places in foundations, at the corners of the buildings, the elevators, the pillars; people who stayed up all night sitting at their desks, looking out of windows, burning lamps behind them, staring at plans in front of them, rubbing their eyes dry, the way the traffic swirled, and the street lights. The city was a map of electric lines, of reaching out from centers, of volatile sparks and stacked-up floors, and bricks, and bricks. The city had been researched, careful, in the beginning when it was built, and then after when the collapsing had begun. At first a small touch of a finger, a flattening of a palm on a brick wall. First they listened for

the ways the buildings settled at their touch. Then they planned, accounting for weather, accounting for movement: one tap, one practiced hard-landing jump, and everything would go. It was in this way the aquarium had fallen: one man pushing at the corners with his feet, knocking at the walls, hard, with his fist, circling around the hallways where the sharks hung, in the middle.

This is a problem, the architect said, of beams. Of foundations, of the formations of bricks, of what everything is made. No, the woman said, no no no. She looked, and the city was full of peonies, of flags hung out of windows, of the delicate fitting-in of glass, and how it sparkled. The buildings falling through themselves were beautiful, she thought. It was beautiful and confused, and many crimes had been committed, and many people had sawed straight through the iron bars covering the pool, where this time they jumped into the water and drowned and drowned.

They, the city and its officials and the police and the men on the street corners and the women in the bookshops, were not sure if the purposeful collapsing was intended as relief, to hurry it up, the waiting and the worrying over crossfires. They were not sure if it was angry. The people in the city waited. And they were afraid, and any number of other things. The people kicking at the corners of the buildings, pushing at the walls with flattened hands, worked alone. They worked quickly. They said nothing. They wrote letters, sent them to no one in particular. Often, the letters spoke in desperation, in curses. Often, the letters said, simply, *I am tired*.

10.

In the solarium, the architect draws in pencil, on graph paper. He draws the city falling. How even slowed into a drawing it happens fast. Here is the crash. The people sit on curbs, on stoops, close to the ground so they can feel it shaking, so they can feel their feet flat on the shaking, and say, remember this? Remember this? A man gets up, peers into a window that is empty. He breathes on the glass. It's empty, he says, when he turns around, looks at the men sitting on the sidewalk, their

hands between their knees, tweed hats pushed back on their heads. Look at this, he says, look at this: matches scattered on the stairwell. Feet clattering on cement. In the room behind the window there is a stack of metal letters, big as buildings, red and chipping paint, peeling off, falling down, like dominoes. The man peers into the window, fogs up the glass and rubs the fog away. The wall stretches back to where he cannot see the end. He looks hard, but still he cannot see the end. The men who sit down on the curb get up, shove him out of the way; the men insist he shouldn't look. We don't want to know, they say, what is inside of anything.

11.

You can count up the collections, things that used to sit inside the buildings: here, a box of patterned band-aids; here, a bookcase full of tiny metal cars, some dented at the fenders, made to run on race courses made of books and pots and pans, often winning at the end, finally. Here shelves and shelves of nesting dolls, inside themselves, so many more of them than you would know. They didn't want to know. Here were the lists. Here was where they plotted all the buildings, made everything into lines, points, numbers. Here were the fine thin lines in straight black ink – pure, protected. Collapse the goldfish in, they thought. Collapse the wild animals. The lake, the colors of the water. Wrap it around with trains, and how they all remain on schedule. We are standing at the station. It is 3:42. You feel yourself slow down. You shake it off. Here is the train, here is always the train, and here is a birthday cake – it holds the city in.

12.

The woman couldn't answer her own questions. She walked. She walked to the opera house; she rounded herself around corners; she sat in a velvet seat and watched the orchestras, watched the flutists purse their lips, watched the dancing. She was horrified at the harshness of the ballerinas, the

sharpness of the trumpets, the way, when she fell asleep, she was chased by a large and swimless fish. The fish chased her around the stove. She hacked at it; the knives she found in kitchens – the kitchens always changing, all of them different but having the same front door – were very sharp; the pieces just grew back. The fish was never finless, never missing tails or scales or head, no matter how much she tried to make it stay deformed. When she woke up the room was strange. She had trouble escaping from the seats, from the music stretching out in front of her. She had trouble knowing what she was doing there, the way the floors were always shaking, and the way she could tell from what direction the falling was coming. She shouldn't be so used to this, she thought.

13.

You feel yourself slow down. What do we know? Are there people there like this? People who are devoted to the city, to the spaces, preservation; people who would hold up walls, themselves, with just their hands, build a structure made of baseball bats and tables, bedframes turned over on their ends, to shore it up? Yes. Is the architect devoted to the woman? Does he instead go seeking out the sparking power lines or searching for the places where the crosswalks seem to sink? Both, maybe. He is not concerned with fixing. She has left him; he doesn't follow her. The people in the city have never gotten to the moment when they can time it, can predict it, can plot out any patterns. How has it affected them? They carry secrets in the forms of tiny coin purses, lucky rabbits' feet. They hold onto their charms while crossing streets, whisper words under their breaths; they hold their breaths, they feel their feet still on the pavement. They are glad, that their feet are still on the pavement. That they stop still at stop signs. And so they walk quickly. And so the woman rides the trains, unsleeping. And so, there are buildings. The architect looks up. He sees the windows. He pushes, so carefully, to see them fall, the strike and smash of rustling glass, the way the bricks rain down.

## START AGAIN

She leaves him evenings, the place down by the river, the hatchet. She leaves him at the point just when the sky is breathing out to dark, when the bugs are gathering and the lawns are turning green. She packs up a suitcase, walks down the highway to the train station, the station seeming like a cardboard box standing by the tracks, with no one there to watch, so you have to catch, so you have to leap, a swinging sign above the door announcing the town that will be left. She leaves him a pile of old bread, and her mother's collection of keys that fit no locks at all. She has wanted to leave him everything, but her underwear was necessary to take, and a used lipstick the color of someone's car.

He was in the bed in their apartment, where everything was empty, and asleep. The white walls, the wood floors, the maps tacked up. It's before she leaves that she wonders, and after she leaves that she feels it is important to feel sad, and so she does, but she walks anyway. The street winds out, toward the tracks, and passing her are trucks and endless streams of cars that wave to her, that flash her glints of license plates and lights. The town is washed in sounds of trains, and she is tired, of heat and burning tires and the smell of darkened wood and bricks and glass. The town is sadder. She is tired. He is asleep, in the apartment where the light is quickly falling and all his books are on the floor; the blanket twists around his chest and all his clothes are dropped around him, and he looks quiet, calm and childlike, the way he always looks when he's asleep, and he is snoring. She has mapped out all the places but she doesn't know yet where to go.

It's common knowledge that when you leave a place you are distracted. You forget things. It's common knowledge that car parts cause fires, that birds will never disconnect themselves from telephone lines until the rains come, and that rains will never come in winter. She, Margaret, has always been the one who likes the rain, and Jacob the one complaining about the dust spots on his car that surface afterwards. It's common knowledge that you forget to feel things. She leaves, and he is not asleep, watching her quietly shut the door behind her, on the street that's gathering green the way the twilight does, carrying a suitcase, wearing a skirt because it seems to work with traveling, wearing skirts – traveling is something proper, and should require dressing up, she thinks – since she doesn't really know how such things are always correctly done. He watches her and doesn't stop her going. She has left him a dripping sink and a water bill.

She walks down the stairs, wooden ones, toward the outside of their building. She walks around the corner, walks down the street. The streets are green, the grass all down the street is green, and tripping, and she walks unsteadily because her shoes are broken, a little, or hurting her feet, a little, since she is not the type to wear expensive shoes. It's uncomfortable, though she isn't sad, not quite. Before she left she kissed him goodbye, rearranged the bedsheets, put on her shoes, and she didn't have train tickets, or anywhere or anyplace to be, and she only left because she thought she should be leaving, because something had been missing, though it's not like she was searching for the pieces. She grabbed onto the train. It's possible to leap on when everything's in motion, but she had never done so and so she did it, awkwardly, dangerously, so she could feel her shoulders ripping carefully apart.

Before she left, she didn't kiss him goodbye. They'd always had problems with that, who would do what and who would take the first chance or would they meet each other in the middle. Who would risk themselves. It's vague, all of it, when she thinks of it, of what has happened. Their relationship was an it, really, a something to get over. To pick up and turn over and look at, carefully, observe, to see if maybe, while you're holding it, it will change, and those spots along the underside, they will move and make everything warm, and comforting, the uglinesses in those lines shifted. Turn it over, around. She could flip herself up and upside down to see it shaking from the underside, all her hair turned up and brushing on the floor. To see if something will fall out, reveal itself. Their relationship was something she could easily misplace, keep it in a pocket, let it fall, accidentally. She thinks. She convinces herself of this. So it's easy to leave. She doesn't worry about how she will get back home. Or back here, which is what she's never thought of as home, though the trees reach high above the buildings, taller than any trees she's ever seen, and it's beautiful, really, the green in that, the darkened clouds, the hanging heat.

Margaret met Nathaniel at twelve forty-five on a Tuesday at the train station in Savannah. She'd left her parents in their house, the house where she'd grown up, and was going back towards home. She was sitting on a bench, and she had never seen him before, or maybe she had, in a museum, in a grocery store, while she looked at all the colors and the spots of all the fruit, and he jingled coins and keys in both his pockets as if the noise were a device, that something would change if just the right combination had been found. He looked like everyone else, tall, with dark brown hair. They are in a train station, and he sits down next to her, carefully positions his knee so it is close to hers, and she pretends that it's normal, that all men sit like that, so close to hers, that it's meaningless, that sharp space between their knees, and he looks at her and talks about the weather, asks her where she's from, where she's going. They have a conversation, the kind with both of them glancing occasionally

at the tracks, waiting for the train. It's as if they're looking for the conversation to end, or wondering when it will, as if afraid of that, before anything has even begun. He's a tall man, wide in the shoulders, not wearing a suit, but pants as if he were, just a second before, wearing a suit but had left the rest behind in some imaginative escape. Though he is normal, a bit ruffled in the shoulders but normal, he looks like he'd be content to ride the trains all day long, happy to do that. She is a girl who types letters and spills ink over her hands so it gets into her fingerprints, so it smudges on her book spines. So she goes home thinking of thunderclouds at the end of the days at work, having sat all day inside, behind the piles of papers and white-out in the office where she works. So she won't want to talk to him, the man at the train station at the orange bench wearing the suit with his knee so close to hers. She does, though, all that ride back to Alabama, talk to him. It's common knowledge, the first is always indicative of the everything. The break is always a cause of the before.

She leaves him playbills and telephone bills and the parts she found out in the road, the nuts and bolts fallen off of accidents. She gets on a train, walks up the steps, with the conductor or the man who mans the desk holding out his hand in case she falls, calmly walks down one aisle, then another, sits down, by a window, and the outside is green. She doesn't have to run, or to hold on, to anything – there is no fast movement – just walks up the steps. It's simpler now.

Margaret met Nathaniel at a train station in Savannah. She was waiting to go home, to take the train along the coast to Alabama. On a Tuesday. Where Jacob was asleep. At a train station. To Mobile. Where he was asleep, in a bed the color of faded navy blue. The train would dip and loop and wander by the gulf, and swamps, and rivers. She would sway, standing up, because she never liked to sit on trains. The trains are always the same – it's the outside that passes. Or something like that, she would say, being a cautious one. She is always careful with her opinions, holding onto them at the

edges so she can take them back, just in case. She would never say *I like this, I like that*, meaning that she does, that she likes so many things that she cannot keep them still. Meaning that she's always happy to watch, to listen, she would say. If maybe you asked her. Ask her. She would say sit, sit, to the people all around her just so she could stand, just so she could see above their heads, watch through the windows cracked open. On a train all the way to Mobile there would be swamps, the green that comes from too much deep, from too much water, from the water that deepens along the coast into the marshes and the birds that fly straight up.

So she leaves him. As if the country were all stretched and put back close together, everything all close together, Mississippi with Vermont, New Hampshire all the way down by the Gulf, as if she can just go and it would be close, anywhere she thinks of going would be close to skip across to. That anything she were looking for would be easy, to find. So she thinks of running when she leaves him, so she thinks of breaking glass when she thinks of him. So she only thinks of him, but in that way that means erase. A fight, a breath – they fight in kitchens, they fight on porch steps.

It was now, she felt, the time just right, the early afternoon, when the heat felt just like melting but was tapering slowly off, and the outside slightly wavered through the air, and he, Jacob, was asleep just after work, and she, Margaret, walked straight out, carrying everything in a bag, bits and pieces of the things that she had left. She walked straight, walked straight down the street, turning left to where the train station stood, in a little hollow between track and empty street, the triangle of a building with a swinging sign, with never anyone inside, never any cars parked right out front. And now, now she is in a city, in an apartment looking over water, looking over streets like water, where there are no car parts in the empty lawns, no graveyards waiting to be filled, no lawns at all. The city streets are loud in morning noise that isn't noise, so much the city bounces back and claims to miss

you when you're gone. She is preoccupied with the way things work and in her new apartment she bends down, to listen to the floor.

A neighbor plays a trumpet.

A neighbor starts a fight on porch steps.

A neighbor starts, and a neighbor closes a window to keep out the rain.

Read this aloud. Come to the ending, flip it up, start over. Start again. Everything looks different upside down, don't you think? Anything could have happened in any other way. Everything could always be different.

Nathaniel met Margaret at a train station in Savannah. They met, shook hands, and talked. And nothing happened. But she imagines there is something else. That there could have been, that there should have. In some other situation, there would have. So she leaves him. Both of them. So she could do nothing else but leave both of them. That reaching-out of them, that misconnection.

She would be unclear on that. On what has happened, exactly. Shaken, she would be unclear. She *is* unclear, on who she is, exactly. It feels wrong, somehow – imaginary. So she left, because nothing is clear. And it's terrifying, those contradictions. So: a notebook, a postcard collection, a sweater: all she has carried with her. Teacups and wood floors. She would make a list of what there was in the cupboards and the parts of all the things that disconnect, like bolts, like ratchet sets. It's a jumble, what was imaginary and what was true. Though she hasn't been planning this, to crumple all of it together. So that she feels nothing now, just that movement, just that sway, train-like, everything confused. The running-away, confused. She feels nothing, and a mess at the same time. What was imaginary: afraid. It doesn't feel right to say that, to bare it just that way, what she didn't know, what

she could never decipher, that fear – it was not something she could pick apart, peel apart. Explain exactly what had happened, she thinks. Will you? It is important only that she leaves him. That she has caught herself in motion, that she has stopped.

Her new apartment is a room. The walls are walls and there is hardly any light and the distance is distracting. The walls are not falling in. The apartment house is solid. Though the streets are slipping out – grab onto them with your hands, steady yourself. Be careful with them – they are pretty streets, unblamed and always listening. There is the harshness of the winter and the endeavoring of burying the house, on purpose, with snow. She is in someplace north, and it is winter. Don't tell me there is love there, she thinks. There is not. I know I'm knee-deep, ruined.

## COLLAGE WITH GIRL AND ROOFTOP

When they find it, the body on the floor is twisted, knees curled up to chest. It is wearing slippers and a bathrobe. It is wearing a ponytail, its hair tied back. It has bitten fingernails. It looks normal, though one foot is twisted in the wrong direction and it seems to be walking more than one way at once.

Once, I was a radio. I sat, at the kitchen table, swung my legs because I was short, ate cereal, and it smelled like birds, all of it, the orange bowl and the spoon and the Cheerios and the yellow box, and my mother stood washing dishes and humming. She said, don't you think it'll be a good day today? I looked out of the window; it was gray; it was winter, there was snow, and I did as I was told – *look, look* – but all I saw was window, and my mother, her hands on a plate, a dishtowel tucked into a skirt, and the cages swaying slightly in the waves from the furnace, and Alice opening doors looking for something. Lucy? my mother said. What do you think? Yes, I said. I watched the slow fall of slush from a balcony, I watched the gray outside and the rush-by of traffic and the way the linoleum was cold when I would step down and when I would walk to school and how the kitchen was cold around the edges. I thought I could hear things if I leaned up against the walls, thought I could predict what would happen. Yes, I told her, and pushed the Cheerios down with my spoon in the milk, and pushed at the dripping bowl and moved to hide under the table. Look, she said. I looked out of the window from between the legs and underneath the strip of tablecloth. Look.

Inside everything you say is a little boat. I hear the skipskipskip of voices along the lines, because there is static, and I don't know what to tell her; I think myself a bad sister, a bad set of protection. Inside everything you say, I say, is something cradled. I held the phone up to my ear and tasted glass.

Look: The word *alice* must not be taken in its geometrical sense. It must be looked at from an angle, it must be danced and spun and looked at from above on tiptoe, given careful questions held out, shaking, on a shiny silver spoon so as not to injure, harm, especially yourself. It will reach out, you know, fight back. Though Alice was always the one who stood the stillest. I think that she was waiting. In the afternoons, when everything is pale, light, has the least amount of light, she calls me from her porch, tells me what is wrong with all her windows, how she never gets the right amount of light, or air, or sound or lack of it. I tell her she should sit, close all the space around her, see what happens.

On the day it happens, they are little girls wearing polka dot dresses, standing staring into a puddle, waiting for it to go away. They want to cross the street. The water stretches, would catch and crawl into their shoes like frogs, like bugs and spiders, and wet, if they were to try and go across at all. Across the street are more houses, more apartment buildings, more gray. Across the street are parked cars, left-on televisions, their friends and sort-of-friends who leave their gates open – come on in, they would say, we have pets and small siblings to treat like pets, mothers who make cakes and fathers who switch on radios in garages, wash cars, fix the undersides of things and come up scratching at their backs, black smudges on their shirts. When they go in those houses there are shiny things, figurines, grandfather clocks; they think about the way these catch the light; they grab them in their hands, shove them out into the spaces left by open windows. Or the buttons on their coats, or the eyelets in their sneakers, made rusty around the edges by the rain and by washing machines, and now the rust leaking into the white of their canvas shoes, spreading so they are never all the way white and clean. If they go back into their house it isn't clean; it's more like dusty on all the floors, green sofa squishy in the middle so you never can get out and have to have your sister pull you up, trodden carpet, tracks of flatter made by feet from sofa to kitchen to back towards the bedrooms with their orange flowered curtains and their windows that always stick if you try to open them, if you try to reach to touch the edges of the middle of the courtyard.

In the middle of the courtyard there is a fountain. It's dry, and blue, the color bleached to green, and we sit around it, watch it, wait for it to turn itself on, or for the angel in the center to jump. In the summers, there is lightning made of heat. The sky sparks. I sit on the balcony and feel my fingers blister, feel my teeth all crack together, search for spaces where they can hide. I have been dreaming of my teeth in my mouth, my mouth full of blood and teeth I could crunch down on, with my bloodied empty gums, everything jostling around and wet. The air sparks, and I slip through the bars, run once around the house and come back in, because it is dark. I am eight; Lucy is six. In the middle of the courtyard there is a fountain and the buildings that surround it go far, far up, and no one has ever turned the fountain on to see the water.

We watch a film that tells us about buildings, and how they fit together, and about fireflies. Alice is on the opposite side of the room, getting pushed by someone in the head. Her head is in a purple hooded coat. She has been locking me in my room at night. On the film, on the screen, while someone in the fifth grade sits in the middle of the room on a stool and clicks the little wheel that makes the film go round when it beeps and makes the picture change, there are walls that get put up frame by frame by men wearing construction hats and hammers. Little brick by doorknob by bracing and beam: how the building goes up when it is new. It's supposed to be magical, when there are fireflies that somehow spot the images, when there are bits of light that turn up in the spaces between projector and screen, but all they are are bits of light. It's supposed to be magical, the way the movie moves forward but the people stand still, and the voice that tells us about walls squawks from a tape recorder on the floor, knowing exactly what is happening, all the time. But it squeaks forward and is rusty. There is snuffling, coughing. A girl falls asleep with her head on my shoulder, and I have to shift a little bit to get her to move, but I am afraid to wake her up, since I anyway never want to be woken up, not when I am asleep surrounded by people. There is the whole school in the gym. We are stuffed in, shoulder to shoulder. All there are are bits of light in between us and the pull-down screen that has holes in it around the bottom, and we are all sitting cross-legged on the shiny scuffed-up floor of the basketball gym and it is after lunch and it is winter, and we are sitting on the floor since the bleachers are where children fall through and their arms crack and their feet that try to catch them crack, and the teachers have become afraid that we will hurt ourselves.

I am in a house in a spot on the side of a hill. There are houses close together, and the street leaps, up and down, lifting and falling, like air, or a magic carpet. My sister Lucy has stayed in the place that has snow. It's winter here, she says. I feel strange, she says, like my legs are lighter than the rest of me, and the world is somehow conditional, tentative, tenuous. I talk to her on the porch, while the woman who lives next door, who takes up the other half of the house, stands behind her bricks, behind her door that has the number on it, and listens. She keeps potted plants; she kicks them over, onto the doorstep. My sister believes that none of this is real. On the street there are electric lines that would spark if you were to touch them on a whim, jolt through the keys in your pockets, jolt through your tongue between your teeth and startle you, permanently, to the floor. My sister believes that she has stayed in a place that isn't real either, that when she touches it, it is jellylike, shakes. That when she looks at it it is heat-blared, blurry. Or perhaps blurred by snow. There is a row of houses on a gray street. There is a dirty empty swimming pool at the end, gathering the remnants of trees at its bottom, and drowning children, and winter scarves.

I believe you, Alice says, more delicate than water. I sit down with her in the space between the buildings and the fence; we curl our knees up, breathe on them as our bare feet scratch at bare wood and the caution turns us into light blue girls, hair on our arms standing up and the insides of our elbows cold. Turns us light-colored, distant from ourselves. And it makes me feel better. I am young, eight, but I am tall and wear heavy boots. I wear a coat the weight of blankets, heavy on my shoulders, so I can feel my bones right underneath it, so I can feel my ribs. Now, they can put a finger between my ribs, men who sleep in my bed when I am home. I dare them to. Talk to them in dark, our shoulders nesting up against each other, dare them to. Dare them to point their fingers around my bones, to match their fingers with the shadows the lamplight causes. They're blue, the bruises, and the palest shade of yellow, daffodil, careful careful, in the mornings when I turn on the radio, wash my hair. I still have a bathtub, still take baths. There are plants and a dirty television screen. A fire escape, with scrolls that could choke a baby's neck.

My mother's death is a set of staircases. If I look closely I can watch them waver, grow into and out of one another, twist and twine like ropes, like dancing held by music, snakes. I wonder through all of the events. Lucy calls and writes me letters. She drives the streets in her Toyota, trunk softly opening, closing, the soft yellow of the inside of a sickened arm. Rust around the wheelwells. She kicks it to make sure that she's still there, that there's still something pushing back at her. She calls and it is night and she is twisting at the phone cord with a finger and she is leaning against a kitchen with her shoulder and she is crying underneath what she has told me, and I can hear her underneath the sound of the refrigerator that she leans on and all she is is sound. I don't believe anything she says.

See how little this is? I carry a box through the streets full of birds. My mother has decided that it is important to carry them around, expose them to sunlight. My mother has decided that I am the perfect one to do this, the littlest one, and so able to slip through small spaces. But who would I be running from, I ask. Oh, you know, she says – just put your hands along the walls and crawl through. If you get in trouble. If you can feel the walls you'll be ok. Keep your head close to your shoulders. Keep your shoulders close to your ears. Keep your ears close, close, to your head. It's true, as I walk along the streets, that I keep looking for narrow spaces. The buildings all have balconies, and there are bottles all along the streets, crushed-up soda cans and bicycle tires and children running around in diapers. No one seems to want to steal the birds. They huddle, curl around each other in the box. They are a box of small soft noises. In the streets there is running with black the color of Coca-Cola or of oil, and I don't stick my toes in it, though I want to.

Lucy screams until her face turns purple. She has gotten lost in the maze made by houses and walls, with all around her concrete blocks stretching up. She is afraid because I have told her about mice, told her they will crawl up her legs, around her arms, twine themselves around her neck. I told her they are furry but long, flexible, and they will bite her ears and slide their tails across her face until it tickles. She puts her hands into her dress pockets and screams, tries to squeeze herself into herself, tight. There are no windows on this stretch of alley between the buildings, just a fence on one end, a fence on the other, no one to look out and see us. After that, she always had nightmares.

Something happens. You will be everywhere, waiting. The sound of a crack in an ankle, the sound of the switching over of traffic past a red light, the sound of an air conditioner switching on, fill up the time. You will be sitting still, and listening. You will be waiting when she comes in, sits down, expects you to take care of her. Her hair is falling out; she has pale fingernails and shaking in the shoulders, waiting on the couch with a cup of tea, waiting for a phone call. She thinks that she has lost something. You humor her. She thinks that she is cold, though the living room is planted and bright, planed with curtains and with dishes you brought home from Mexico, bring in on certain days that feel like rain to make the room feel like color, instead. Or yours is, your living room. Your living room is bright. When you try to picture hers, you can't. Moths have been in the sink, flapping wetly in the drip from the faucet, and sometimes they go away, but you don't know where they come from, and sometimes, then, they come back. Her worrying is all composed of weather, how long it takes to get to there from here, here from there, how much snow there should be to constitute there being snow at all, how long it will be before the snow falls again. In the mornings, you hide from the telephone, though she says she wants just a minute, just to talk, just breathe into the phone, she says, to prove that you exist, just listen, just listen to me. You put the phone down, leave a hair dryer on next to it, breathing. Your sister has said that she feels orange. You tell her to explain. You don't sound orange, you say. She doesn't laugh. The world feels blue.

My father has decided to be a miner. He has decided to go into the basement and sit there, as if underground, to watch the world from underground, or the lack of world, because there are no windows, not even the small kind. When I go there, underneath, I see him sitting in a chair he has scavenged from outside, see him watching walls or running his hands over the bricks that make up walls, see him quietly judging the structure, see him watching the whole of it drip. He sits quietly. He takes careful notes, makes notes of all the changes in the temperature and the ways the walls hold light, or water. He rubs at his forehead, scrunches his eyes up. It's dark. The sounds the boilers make and the pulleys that run the elevators and the trash compactor, fill up the corners. I sit and watch the engines run machines, watch my father run his hands over his hair, rub his palms on the legs of his pants, watch the color of his shirt blend with the color of his face, he has been sitting there so long, there is so much smoke, he has smudged himself so easily. He pats me on the head, turns me gently around by the shoulders towards the stairs up to a door that opens to the outside to the courtyard where there is air, and I come upstairs with smudges on my hair and on my dresses. I sit, while Alice watches tv, makes macaroni and cheese from a box, pushes me towards the table, says, Lucy, just eat already. At night I have to sit in the bath for so long I turn red, feel dry. I pull the water up around my shoulders, listen to the churning underneath the building. I can feel the walls rattle, creak, and it makes me sad, then, and I am so much smaller than it, than noise.

We reimagined the neighborhood dangerous. Because we had forgotten this lie to ourselves, we laid in wait. Reimagined, we ran out into grass, into anemones and prairie fires, into grass that stung the bottoms of our feet like bees. There was so much concrete but we saw grass and we saw bugs and ponds and horses and we saw our own feet running. It was hours before our mother would call us in. We sat cross-legged, looking out over the traffic like it was a river, like we could cross it on small boats just by the force of our arms, and of waves. I know that everything that happens to us happens this way, with these things: bathtub, Cadillac, broken bits of tile. And somehow the story comes together in its trappings. Don't wait up for me, Lucy says, when she's stepping out the back door. There is tall grass and a blinking lowering signal, and a few old cars along the empty lots, almost hidden by green.

It is summer. It is hot. They ease into bathtubs, watch their feet float. There is water surrounding them, each in her own bathtub, each in her own sloshy compression of space. They stand outside and talk of weather, and the colors of it. They talk of colors. Here are the gradations in-between them, they say, here is what I am afraid of, the melting and being unable to tell the difference, like a pail of paint made dark by too much dripping of the wrong, wrong shade. By green, when they are talking, they mean outside, they mean the outsides of all the buildings that outside are falling down; they mean night and how, sometimes, in the light of all that traffic, the black can sometimes turn to something else. They shout into their telephones; they breathe, up close, to windows, make the air drip down like sweat, draw in it like they are children. Pulling their hair out makes them feel different; pinching bruises into the skin under their arms makes them feel different. In the mornings, when they wake up, they still feel the same, still pull all the curtains closed so they can walk naked in the heat. Lucy is heavier, as if she is carrying something extra in her pockets, under her skirts, but that weight is spread out through her heavier arms, through her heavier thighs. In the winters, when they were children, they would wear tights under wool dresses, tights that bagged around their ankles and made puffs around their knees, so they would constantly have to be pulled up. They would chase each other, this way, around their yard where there was snow and cold cracking concrete, and trip, often, pulling up the tights while they ran to keep up speed, pulling holes in them, finger-shaped and fast. Those winters there were bruises and blue fingers and constant pushing in front of the television, sitting on the carpet. Each wanted to be in the middle; neither wanted to share, or to see it just off-kilter, from another angle, to see it in a way that could be different.

Our mother could have been carted around by her hair; she could have been made to wear thin paper dresses so she could feel, on the backs of her legs, stale air that was made of breath. They could have sliced into her arms, connected veins right to machines so she could see her own blood churning, struggling in and out and cycling, bright bright red and almost about to drip, on the floor. Pulled them out. They could have pulled them out. If it were me, I would have been afraid that it would drip, on the floor, afraid my blood could be and would be so exposed, my body so open like that, stretched, held down, and then a wash of a machine break, and my blood trickling towards a doorway. I was afraid. Alice told me I was lonely, I was small. It doesn't happen this way. It never does.

Alice, my sister says, I feel light. I hold the phone. I pace around the house. The woman who lives next door puts her ear up to the wall, pulls at her wallpaper-colored dress, scratches at her neck but is careful to not make any noise. Through the corridor of the hallway to the kitchen: front steps back steps back, again. There are cool tiles; there is warm carpet. I push the screen doors open just to hear them thwap. In the afternoons, I watch tv, watch the heat settle on the hardwood floors, watch the scattered patterns on the screen from where, too many times, I have shaken it. Where you are it's winter, I say. Where I am it's almost, I say, but not quite, and I think we are past it, already. It's warmer now. This makes the way I'm thinking change, I say. My skirt-hems all feel stretched and when I put them on they waver, wobble, as if I had been stepping on them as I put them on, stretched them out, up, as if I had been imagining myself taller than I am. Where are you, I say. On the streets there is a magician, my sister says. He makes things disappear.

There are doorways, a hospital. Our mother is held down, made to stay still, made to cough into a stranger's hand, and the stranger puts his hand inside the pocket of his coat, and I remember thinking that could be dangerous, collecting a cough inside your hand to keep and put inside your pocket. I remember thinking it would stay there, surrounded by wool and pocket lint, being sticky and slightly gummy around the edges, dripping a bit with green, the cough, though the stranger walks out, filled with happiness.

I loved the cataloguing of bridges, loved the naming of sounds, lined for emergencies, so I could pull them out, could explain what is happening, what is certain to come next. In the summer, over the fields, there is heat lightning and light. In the summers we fit ourselves into the shapes of containers, huddle ourselves in because it's too hot to be anything but compressed. We huddle in hallways, behind sofas, even when we are fifteen, thirteen, even when we're too big, theoretically, to do so, wait for our father to come out so we can be surprising. It is punishment, like accounting for all we've done til now, like making certain we will never do it again. The streets are covered in water and in dust, and birds that have fallen in the night. There are no floods here, I am certain of this, the way things have been and the way things will always be. Lucy wants to say, remember how we used to look at the weather, and predict how our parents would act? Remember how we used to sit, on the roof, and look at the weather and then go down and see if we were right? I listen and she doesn't say it and I think it's because I don't want her to and moving my feet makes her shift, in thought. I go outside and see if we were right, leave the phone, leave her talking into it. She will talk me into this, she says, and I go outside and see the darkened edges of a storm, of the porch, of a storm and the street and how it leaps downwards, down the hill.

Their language, now, is percussive. It bounces, bangs around. The walls are always changing, and the stars and shapes of things, the stars like shapes, the sources of the things made to make sense, or seemed to make sense, then, the way things never seem to make sense now. They never think, this is what's supposed to happen. They never think, someone should be doing something, making plans, making ice cream. They feed the canaries. The corners of the apartment gather dust, and it becomes apparent that there is something underneath the rugs, something growing in size and space, and that they will someday have to stamp it down before it reaches up, grabs onto their ankles. In their dreams at night they dream of walls and their father comes up from the basement smelling like fire.

In the basement, the engines work like this: there are pistons and churns and charts, gears and wheels and flywheels and counterfly wheels, and things that fly, and spin. A man comes around with a pocketful of grease, to make them glide, to make them keep going. I sneak downstairs and watch them spark. It makes the sound of hiss, of hot metal, and squeak, that spur, flushed. It makes the sound of hot, I think, when I am young and standing next to them watching. This is what heat sounds like, I think. I don't know, then, how else to describe it. When I am young, I'm small, a small child, everyone says, and then they measure with their hands up from the ground, resting on the top of my head – yes, they say, she's only that big – and then marvel a bit, turning me around, perhaps wanting to lift me up, spin me around with one hand like those strongmen do at circuses, like I am made of metal and pulleys and parts. Here, look, here is an arm, an ear – stretch them out, they think, to see what happens. When I yell at them to stop it makes their ears creak, makes the glass in their old spectacles break. Dropped, I am landed back on grass and I am dizzy, weave a bit. All the lawns are sloshy, all the buildings squishy on their sides, about to fall. I swing around, feel the ground, spinning. Alice says I'd fit under her sink, would fit inside her closet, could huddle under her porch where the mud sloshes in. She stands on her porch, holding the phone while she talks into it. You could fit under here, she says.

My sister is concerned with the thinness of maps, with the delicateness of paper and space. When we are children we hide underneath bridges, those little bridges that run over gutters and so there are gutters underneath, and mud, and occasionally frogs, perhaps tadpoles. A tadpole is a shape of space; a tadpole is a sound, a kept-in-pockets moving. A tadpole, was, then, what she held in front of my face, the little sister trying to scare the older one into taking her home, making her cereal in her favorite bowl, and sitting in the kitchen in the afternoon where it was clean, and bright.

Alice is the oldest one. When they are young, they live in a place where there is snow. They live in an apartment building, in an apartment with small rooms, on the first floor, a furnace underneath them that roars and makes heat crack its way up towards the kitchen. They eat in a kitchen where their mother keeps canaries in a cage by the window. There is one cage, on a shelf above the sink, so the canaries fluff themselves, puff, having gotten wet. It seems, sometimes, that there is a kitchen full of them, especially to them, being small girls who imagine things different, but there is only one, with two canaries that sing. There are buildings around a courtyard; there is a fountain in the middle. They go outside and Alice puts mittens on her sister, tugs her hat over her ears, tugs her own hat over her ears, and walks the both of them to the bus stop in the mornings before school.

When I woke up in the morning, the little girls outside waiting for the bus were carrying on, hands in their pockets, toes onto the sidewalk, waiting for warmth. In the morning, there was frost. There was a school bus that drove past, spraying all the people, the children and their parents, standing there with all that used to be down in the gutter. I could hear them calling to each other, and the street was bright. Pink coats. Scarves they'd wrapped around their wrists and dragged like flags. Through the window, it was brighter. And I was waiting for what would happen if they stayed. It snowed. I could keep them there. Keep their teeth white, keep them standing there, still, while the cold dropped and their feet, their hands, would start to freeze.

We went, on Thursday afternoons, to the spaces between the buildings, rambling between them to the stores on the edges of the neighborhood, before everything hit the traffic and the highway, before the streets collided into themselves. We slipped things into our pockets, held them closer to our thighs so they wouldn't rattle. Lucy rattled, the sound of scrunching plastic and I stepped onto her toes to make her stop. It's on Thursday afternoons that they take the signs down, set them on the street for cleaning. The men in all the shops force water at the metal and at the letters with a hose, and it goes running down the curbs and past the sidewalks, sliding off the sale signs, sliding off the closed ones. They aren't looking, and it is easy for us to slip in, slip out, keeping our hands close to our pockets and the shapes of things inside. We slip out onto the streets with candy bars and plastic watches, things colored pink and see-through. We wave to them, hats on their heads, eyes towards the sidewalk; we skip a little on the sidewalk, do a little dance. Lucy spins. By then, we are all out of breath, avoiding bicycles and traffic.

You are, she says, this: you are breath and bicycles. You are wings and wire. You are disconnected stars, what happens to them when they are disconnected from their sockets, when the light just goes out.

On the day it happens they leave the house and wander. Neither of them says anything. They walk quietly out, leaving their father to find her too, in the same way, on the same floor. He does, find her in the same way, on the same floor, and feels the same curious lack of anything, thinks, strangely, of clothing and scarves, thinks, what is he going to do to cover all this up. Outside, they take a stick to chicken-wire fences, walk with the sticks in their hands, first slowly, then quickly, and feel their hands bounce and the sound the sticks make and the way the vibrations travel up their arms toward their elbows and their rib cages, feel like someone picked them up and shook them for a good long time. It gets dark. The street starts to be cold. Snow starts to fall. They come back, take the temperature of the building, push their hands against the walls, wondering if it is safe to go back in. They see, in their heads, before they go back in, the floor crowded with misplaced, unattached limbs, as if their mother had fallen apart in there, and they will have to clean it up.

Lucy drives the streets. Lucy travels down the country, down the long flat roads through Indiana. Lucy walks in the door. Lucy walks in. It's hot, she says. We sit at the table, in the kitchen. Lucy wears a nightgown, looks around the room, at the dishes, at the broken chairs. It makes me feel dirty. I make soup. She kicks her feet, like she's too small and short to be here. She has pulled all of her hair back, tight, tugs on it occasionally to make sure it's still there. She yanks her head back. I tell her, really, it's ok to be here, really, you can be here as long as you like. She stirs her spoon around in her bowl, makes it clink along the sides and says, can I put my stuff in that space by the door? Can I hang everything up in the closet? Of course, I say, that's what space is for. Though my apartment is too small, even for just me. But I want her to stay and I say yes, yes, of course. Take up as much space as I have.

As children, it's winter, and we face each other, knees to knees, cross-legged. Alice holds a bird in front of my face, wings broken. She holds it by the neck. She has her hair pulled back, and she pushes her glasses up and she pushes her sleeves back, and all day she has been talking about the kids she knows at school, how they play basketball on the cracked concrete, and slip because it's cold. She talks about how the blood runs down their arms, pools on the underside of their elbows, because they have fallen, and hit the ground hard. She describes everything clearly.

A girl blown onto a roof. The wires string all the houses together, so they are held up, and so all the kitchens, inside, are yellow and all their conversations, inside, are about tea. The electricity sparkles. There are deer and wolves. There are holes blown into the wallpaper. Wind. The electric lines sparkle. And there is a gray sky, and the girl wobbles, clinging to the pipes and the exhaust and the chimneys that stick up from the roof, clinging on with her shoes, about to fall. Here, there is wind and snow. She looks down, can see traffic and people walking by, underneath her, and she wants to call out but she doesn't – she is so high up.

When we are young, we live in slush; we live in gray on roads that crack and there is salt that makes our boots grow holes. We are afraid of our feet growing holes and we stomp once, twice, to get it off and to make ourselves bounce. Alice pushes me in front of the bus. I am six; she is eight. I am small, wearing rubber boots, clumsy, and they have newspaper in the toes because my feet are slowly growing and they are supposed to soon take up that space. We live where there are trees that die and dry and crumble and where we watch the televisions inside of the houses as we walk by at three o'clock since it is dark – you can see everything, then, on the screens, and the women in blue bathrobes with nothing underneath. When we are young, the bus passes us, every day, since we are late, every day, and I pull my hat down on my head and run and run and never make it, wading to my knees in snow. It's mostly dark, gray. But sometimes there are bits of red; sometimes there are bright coats and mittens and we get to school and walk in, late, late, and walk home to watch our mother feed the birds in the cages in the kitchen at three o'clock, having seen everything on every television and in every window along the way. We can tell her what is happening, though she keeps the tv in the other room switched on and she could know, just as well as us, what has happened on the game shows she calls out the answers to. Our mother's birds in cages in the kitchen are yellow, then, and bright, in the kitchen, in the dark, and she wears an apron, and slippers, keeps running her hands through her hair while she washes dishes. She drips with soap. On the way home Alice walks in front of me, and I study her back, and pick out the spots that would be easiest to hit.

I know nothing of calamities. Of calamine and bandages and making things that have gone badly better. I know nothing of splints and carpools. I walk down the street towards the televisions that are showing the news in wavy lines, all of them in the store window turned to the same channel. A woman wearing a red coat, holding a microphone, the screen flashing pictures of a fire, of an accident. I am the only one on the street, standing in front of the window, watching the televisions. The streets around me are straight. They have intersections and bright white paint that mark off their divisions, tell cars exactly where to stop.

There is a bedroom, and we bring her tea on a little tray, and keep the curtains closed, and hear the sounds that things like walls make, and closets, and our mother pats us on the head, says, good, good, and we go out. At night there are sounds that mean she is curled up, and sweating. In the early morning, and at night, we sleep lightly, dangerously, as if something will wake us up and bite us at the elbow. We wish for this, for bruises, and we ready ourselves, hope for something we can fight off. We are disappointed when nothing happens, when we find ourselves sitting somewhere cold and nothing happens and in the kitchen we turn the radio on and the stove and the faucet all at once and the microwave and the oven and the little electric teakettle and nothing happens and we have no one to yell at. We sleep carefully, curled around our soft parts, afraid we will soon be attacked. We are protective of the bones in our knuckles, the shapes of our hands, the spots on our skin. We are red and red and more red, and Lucy always wakes up before she's even really been asleep.

You are high ceilings and invisible lines, or what sound escapes into. You are leather couches and burnt milk in metal pans. You are late at night and screen-door-screens that have gone rusted and dirty, that squeak and so do not hide entrances or exits. You are here: in the shape of caryatids, on rooftops. In the intersection in the middle of the town, that ushers in and out the ones who accidentally come through. You are accidental. You are make-believe and mold in the spaces between walls.

Lucy knocks on my door in the evening, July. The sun is going down, and the sky is blue, and green, behind the trees that have turned dark, and the neighbors in the houses across the street who sit on their porches and smoke. I open the door but leave the screen door shut. She makes an outline, is criss-crossed with wire, creates little targets, creates a bulls eye. She carries a suitcase, holds a coat. Her shirt is wet around her arms, around her collar. Her shoes are scuffed. Her hair is long. Come in, I tell her. Don't come in, I tell her. Alice, just decide, she says.

In my dreams, I grow from a lemon, yellow around and smooth and curved, like walls. I crawl out from it and my arms are creaking and my knees are cracked and everything is as if pushed to an abnormal angle – watch me with my head so big like that, so much bigger than my body, and my hands twisted from lack of space. Though we sat on the porch and flagged down the ice cream truck, though we wore coats and seemed normal, seemed like shiny-bright cars and sidewalks in suburbs, seemed like shiny bright little girls. I rollerskated, held my knees down with my hands as I flew over those bumps in sidewalk made by tree roots. In summer, there were babysitters. I stood in front of the television and watched it, and watched my reflection at the same time. I felt strange, as a child, as if everything were happening around me, and I was standing still. So we sat in driveways, we sat in parks on grass just far enough away from the swingsets to see them but not be able to go up close. I didn't want to go up close. I watched the metal, and the long straight lines. Just stay there, Alice said, her hands straight out, pushing me back, pointing me down. Just do what I tell you.

Because it's summer, what is far-away is green, sticky. It drops into us, makes us uncomfortable, all the possibility of seasons and the newness of children with kites. I watch the children behind windows, polish the frames and paint and glass with socks and with my shirt. The radio has switched itself back on, or Lucy has snuck in behind me, switched it on with silent fingers, made the sky spotted with sound. She sits and tells me things at the kitchen table, rolling balls of yarn onto the table with her fingers as if she is polishing its surface. She tells me exactly what her street looks like; she tells me exactly how many closets there are in her house. She tells me she left by following the streets. On the radio, there are voices that state the news, discuss earthquakes in China. At the grocery store, I find a man half bent-over, made to look down below him at the bottom shelf of canned peas. He sticks his elbow up, so bent-over he starts to fall. At the grocery store, I pick out seven limes, and put them in a blue bowl on the countertop. They are cool, and heavy, when I put them in a plastic bag.

I am a loss, a hopscotch, a bus stop. My sister, she is a bunch of images made dance.

In the basement, are engines. They run elevators, they run pulleys and wires, they run electricity. They hold the building up. In the basement, are furnaces. They breathe in, out, light, relight, on fire. The building is gray concrete. The building has balconies that line the outside, that line the floors on the inside, that face downwards towards the fountain in the courtyard. The girls run in and out of doors, screaming, carrying baseball bats and pots and pans like baseball bats and dolls and coloring books. In the basement, are engines. In the night, they can hear the noises, the wheels and wires turning, the pistons, they can hear the whooshing, and the lighting and relighting of fires. They imagine it, what's living there. When they are eight and ten, their father decides to move down there, to stay. He's warm, but he brings blankets anyway, and sits with them wrapped around his feet and plays chess. He grows his hair long, gray, to his shoulders, and he wears his blankets around him like a coat, wears coats around him like a blanket so that he seems less softer than he is, less quiet.

Pulling her hair out makes her feel lighter. The definition of sorrow: bridges. The town is surrounded by loneliness and water. By green and by the connections now between green and blue. By surfaces. The town is surrounded by surfaces and blending in. All you have to do: blend in. All we have to do: mistake ourselves for being alive. Turn ourselves inside-out, think that we are different, that we have come to believe in something that is true. In the storm, the birds disintegrate. A man finds a knife in his pocket. A man walks down a street, holds onto a lightpost in the dark. Its difficult to believe that all of this will change.

We sleep in past noon. In the heat, our bodies are flat, flat, flat. We loll around like cats; we stretch our arms above our heads, we are unable, unable, right now, or ever, it seems, to move. The light is yellow and there is no wind to blow the curtains. I am wishing for underwater; we are wearing t-shirts and underwear, our hair messy and sticking from our heads in haphazard places, the dirt and groggy haze that comes from sleeping much too late. And every day we sleep this late. We console ourselves that it is summer, that no one will know that we are missing mornings and perhaps a rooster or a bit of something alive – there is nothing alive in this neighborhood, no cats, no people, it is hot, there are buildings, we curl up into corners hoping wishing it will go away, that in August the weather will come back to protect us, that we will come back, hope for wind and the brightness of water. We get into showers, take the coolness into the curves of our old skins, feel slightly, briefly, newer. Our hair shines. Alice says, oh look at you, hands me a pancake on a plate. There is a rickety table in the kitchen, propped up by a stack of newspapers, rounded and edgeworn and chipped. I sit there with my knees up, eating a pancake, letting syrup clutter up my yellow dress.

These were the things that held themselves in pieces then: clocks, cuckoo clocks, bicycle wheels, the pieces of wire my father strung into impossibly tiny dolls and trucks and trains. Things that can be taken apart: dollhouses, ceiling fans, vacuum cleaners, the insides of cameras. Our mother sitting on the couch, staring at a turned-off television. My father had them all out in pieces on our carpet on the living room floor, built up impossibly beautiful things from them, made them towering towers, high, taller than his daughters, who were, then, small. Picture a tall man, with long tapering fingers on large hands, making small things.

Alice buries me in the snow. I feel my feet freezing, my fingers freezing, one by one – I could count them off, on my fingers. All I can see is white and she is the one who has crawled out of the hole we have dug in the snow next to the building at the back, one wall of it gray concrete brick the rest snow, curled around me like a blanket, like a softer version of a wall itself. I see her feet as she scrambles out, and then as she stomps on top of me to make the hole pat itself back down, fill itself back in, and the holes between me and my scarf and my jacket, those fill themselves in too.

Lucy said she still tasted blood, and flower petals. She said, when she was curled up and I was leaning over her, my socks pulled up to make myself feel tall, that she was feeling things fall out, that she could not get up, for fear of things falling out. I touch her feet; I rearrange her limbs. She is on the sofa, surrounded by newspaper and broken glass. The living room is a mass of projection and carelessness. I break them into further little pieces, accidentally, when I'm trying to walk, when I'm trying to be careful. She says she threw them at the door to try it out, and when I walk in in the evenings there are leaves everywhere, and glass everywhere, and nowhere to step. The telephone hidden under a sofa cushion; fingerprints on the wall, low, by the carpet. I try to be careful. Gather up bits of glass, and porcelain, put them in my pockets for later. In the mornings, turn the sheets so the rooms are clear, clean, and I feel clear, clean. And once, a plate bounces out of my hands, bounces on the floor with a little rolling ring.

Everything is haunted. My heart runs slow. The water runs, the sink drips, the bathtub gathers rust around the edges around the pieces of the metal around the drain and the shower curtain hangs, when I grab for it, dizzy. It's a full moon, and there are rotting cars, and too many rotting lawns from so much rain. In the house, the walls shudder, the doors rust. In the house, the walls are so fine and pale they attract a fist and holes if you touch them with a fingertip, find your finger up to knuckles in the plaster dust, if you just lean yourself against it; in the house there are women who wear skirts that have been cut off at the knees. They are, daily, constantly moving, as if, if they stand still, the ceiling will drip on them. In the house, which has a back door and a front one, and then a little door on the side, like an afterthought for short people, the women lounge, fanning themselves in heat, in the humidity that makes the walls wet and dripping, that makes the wallpaper peel off in strips, their feet up on the arms of velvet sofas and the mended blankets that cover them, checking out their knees for bugs and scars and bugbites and the scars for them. Though they are certainly not girls, not anymore, and not little enough, really, to do this, they collect fireflies in jars, hope they die so they can watch the struggle and the gasp. They push their noses up to glass so they can feel their own bones crunch. In the house are piles piled up on floors, things gathered from the edges of the roads, just in case we need them later, yellowed newspapers and old tin cans and jars with tops screwed on crooked, that make noise as I walk into them at night.

We are on a front porch. The chairs creak when we set them down in front of us, when we put our feet up on their seats. Empty street, summer. You have moved to the south, my sister says. Yes, I say. I don't look at her. The street is dark with fireflies. The town is like boiling water, and we watch fireflies after it has started to cool off. There is dark grass. My sister says, I have done so many things. Where do you go, she says, when you have done so many things? I feel like I am clattering, she says. It's the afterwards, the after-leaving, that she is worrying about. We sleep on dusty mattresses. I have set one up for her, on the floor, by the sofa, by the cardboard boxes and the record player and the plants. It makes her sneeze. I wait for her to say, where do you go? To ask me, directly, and for me to say, just because I'm used to talking, the truth. Just because I'm used to talking, I tell her, doesn't mean I know what to say. It's hot, summer. My knees, behind them, sweat. I feel myself dripping onto the concrete, into my shoes. I am wearing the clothes I found in boxes when I moved here – skirts, shirts with too-short sleeves. I wonder about the dolls I found lined-up on the windowsill. The screen door pops and snaps and flaps when there is wind, which isn't often. We stare out into the dark; my sister stays, staring out into the dark, even when I look at her, watch the outline of her chin. Watch, watch, she says, when there are cats that skitter by, run quickly, blur themselves. You can believe me, she says. We are sitting in the dark so we can see it better, our eyes adjusting to the light and lack of light. I know you, she says. You have nothing left.

Eight-thirty in our childhood at night. There were things we were supposed to do before eight-thirty, before it was time to settle in to dark. Water, and bathtubs, and the skirts we'd pulled out from the closets, pulled over our hips, thinking we were lighter than we were. Pretending, pulling from a box of clothes we kept under our beds. Our mother came out of her room, and we were jumping on the furniture, doing pirouettes in space. I held onto a lamp, twined around it. It was copper, tinged green along the bottom by the humidity of summers. Alice ran into our mother's legs, did a headstand up against them, using her for balance and a wall. Our mother held onto her ankles, then used the wall behind her as she fell over.

It is complicated. We are children. We wear skirts, short flat shoes that curl around our toes like boats, that make my feet cold with their letting in the air around the edges. We stand on a porch. We wave at the traffic. Lucy looks small, standing by the porch-post in front of the building, standing on the small square of concrete that serves for a doorway into the courtyard, into the stairwell that leads up. We are standing there, waiting for people to go home, because they're only there because our mother has died, and the building feels like it's breathing out, heavy on the grass like that, the people collected like that, eating pies and making the ground rock they are stepping so heavily. My sister sits, looks down at a pile of photographs like they are playing cards. I don't know where she has gotten them – collected them, one at a time, or found them all in a pile, somewhere, underneath something, so they are covered with dust and fingerprints and only collecting more fingerprints in their dusts. I think maybe this will be the way they find her, if someday she disappears, how she leaves her fingerprints on everything. I sit down. Pull my skirt around my knees so the boys across the street cannot look up it, and I say, here, give me one, when I really want her to give me more, so I can compare them all, so I can see what they all are, really. She shakes her head, bounces her ponytail against her neck, and purple ribbons. No, she says. Where did you find them, I say. No, she says. She shuffles them around like she is playing solitaire, like she is sorting them into piles. Did you win, I say. I am joking. No, she says. She has been biting her fingernails, so there is blood on some of the edges of the pictures, so they are black and white and red, I think, remembering a joke. Who is this, I say, pointing at a woman in a chair; who is that, I say, pointing at a group of men all sitting at a table. There is no one there, she says.

Here there is a canary, there there is a small boat. Here, the clicking of the refrigerator, here the sitting on a couch, here the walking in. Here the walking in, and almost tripping on the walls. It's easy, Alice says, to hold still. Though it might have been dark, and it would have been hard to tell the time. Can you feel what time it is in the way your arms hold still?, she says. There's something in the hair on your arms, she says, the way your muscles link and weave themselves together that can feel things that maybe your brain can't think. You can tell exactly what time it is, she says, if you're careful. This is what happens in the hallway – she sits and tells me things and we make shadow puppets on the walls. I make birds, making my fingers flap and the feathers small. Cup your hands, she says – here's a small boat, here's an anchor or a set of stairs. When we go to sleep my feet are cold and I look out of the window, see all the way down the street.

A woman in your kitchen wears a yellow dress, puts her feet up. Makes a grocery list in handwriting that slides over the paper, slants and dips and pulls itself back up again. It says: scissors, tape. It says: corkscrews, bottlecaps, aluminum foil, paper plates. Where are the vegetables? you say, where is the orange soda? Tell me what you're thinking, she says, tell me where you've been. And all you want to do is hide, tell her you're thinking nothing, tell her you're thinking about leaving your kitchen and walking out to the traintracks to wait for the ghosts from that bus full of children who died. You've always wondered how to conjure them. You're always wondering, she says, how I manage to know everything, how I manage to tell you nothing, nothing at all. And you say, yes. You sit down, pour a glass of milk, say yes.

I have always been afraid of mice, how small and squirmy they are, how if I held one in my hand it would squirm around, feel like bones inside a beanbag, inside a furry sock, and how easy it would be to crush it, accidentally. So delicate. Not afraid because they'd bite, because they'd dart or get into your shoes, but afraid because I would have no idea of how I'd act, no way to predict what I would do or how my hands would suddenly decide to move.

In the morning, I find a body. It is blue and bloody fingernails, hair held between teeth. I kick at it, make sure it's dead. I wear sneakers and a scarf around my neck. In the house, it's cold. The wallpaper is cold if you touch it, and the birds on it seem to huddle up. We circle around it like a cat who walks around something new, sniffing, backing up and moving forward again. Lucy has her hands in her pockets and is walking just to keep me going, walking heel-toe like a little girl on a playground, head down. Do you need a magnifying glass?, I want to say. This is the living room, I say. She says, yes. Yes, she says, and looks up at me. There shouldn't be people like this in here. Yes, I say. We have a yard for that, and good chairs, and a little table, to put drinks on. Go outside and watch the traffic, I say, you'll see. I'm taller than her, as I've always been, and can see her hair standing up on her head, bits escaping from a ponytail, in spots. She has just come from buying milk, worried about me and my lack of mornings. You should have cereal in the mornings, she says. She is eight. Here, pushing the milk carton towards my chest, take it, the plastic bag that she has taken it out of still in her hand. Our mother, or the person on our floor, is cold. We walk around it, open the curtains, say, light, we need more light.