1994

Of appetite

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Of appetite

by

Jennifer Cognard-Black

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English
Major: English (Creative Writing)

Approved:

In Charge of Major Work
For the Major Department
For the Graduate College

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
1994
To my family:
Andrew, Elizabeth, Anne and Roger
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When faced with the prospect of actually writing and putting together a master's thesis, I asked myself, for the first time and with genuine curiousness, Why do I write? It seemed a harmless question, one asked so often and by so many as to have become trite. Yet the ramifications of my answer were important not only for discovering my own motives but for deciding if such a venture would be one worth doing. Face it — why embark upon a draining and frustrating project if I didn't utterly believe in its production? And so I contemplated the "function" or "task" of writing, of being a so-called "writer," and came to a tentative conclusion: the storyteller's task is to crystallize, with all sorts of blunders and mishaps, her "self" for others to read and interpret as they will. Detail, then, is important, for writers are constructing their world for another's inspection, and the reader must be given the chance to view that world in as much of its totality as possible.

Admittedly, I risk pain, for criticism of my writing would be not only criticism of a story or essay, but criticism of how I chose to live life. Still, writing my particular translation of the world seemed more important than such personally protective worries; in fact, it seemed necessary. I suppose it was this urgency, this "necessity" of writing in my life, that transcended all other pretexts. Regardless of my various motives, it was the process, the action of translating my inner self to an outer world, which ultimately I found paramount.

If there is a theme to my collection, then, it is unity of self connected to a greater unity with all of womankind. The collection contains ardent and avid descriptions of sexual politics and coming-of-age revelations, themes which focus upon personal chaos within a world of gender hostility. Despite this evident chaos, however, the consciousness behind the parceled stories and essays is a
whole mind, no matter how incompletely presented within the space of a separate and separated writing. The collection reflects a turbulent time in my life where I felt dismembered: my body here, my intellectual life there, my spiritual existence somewhere else. Yet I was whole the entire time; I simply didn't know it. I believe that the life I live daily -- working toward my career, peeling an orange, contemplating the nature of the divine -- is always a whole life, no matter how contradictory or chaotic. Human experience is innately paradoxical and diametrical but, finally, whole in spite of its external, incomplete forms.

What follows, then, are glimpses of one woman's attempt to make meaning from her "whole" experience. These experiences are innately female; they originate from inhabiting a body with breasts and curves and a cultural expectation of "femininity." The milieu is current, approximately the mid-1980's to the present, and the moments of revelation and reflection are bound to that time-frame as well as to the cultural rituals of the Midwest.

Specifically, this collection attempts to discuss the damaging consequences of what it is to be young and female in American society. I include stories and essays which explore what it means to be valued as a sexual object, as a thing-which-implies-sex; using sexuality to grasp at a false self-esteem; coming to terms with the ubiquitous expectation of marriage; reducing one's body and intellect because the culture prefers Twiggy to Marilyn Monroe; claiming oneself feminist while still enjoying, even courting, male approval; and trying to establish one's worth by pushing the boundaries of human capacity.

However, the collection is not meant to represent, nor does it assume, the female gender in its entirety. I simply believe that as American women our "choices" to famish our bodies, use them as vehicles for a false sense of worth, or willfully
ignore the bodies' wounds (literal and figurative) would never become mandates if young women were encouraged to challenge their culture's consciousness which reveres as well as exploits women's bodies as epitomes of beauty.

The collection is also an experimentation of form. I am including both short stories and personal essays, although these designations are somewhat arbitrary: my fiction stems heavily from my personal experience; my non-fiction is shaped by imaginative interpretation. Other women writers over the past two centuries have attempted mixed-genre pieces -- the fictionalized autobiography of Virginia Woolf's Orlando; the prose-poems of Annie Dillard; the biomythography of Audre Lorde; or the choreopoem of Ntoszake Shange -- and succeeded in demonstrating that traditional designations no longer apply. Women's fictions and non-fictions, coming out of different cultural and spiritual models, often do not perceive the world in traditional terms -- women's experiences naturally flow among differences, attempting partly to reconcile these differences but also, comfortably, to exist side-by-side with these differences.

These pages are a tract of sorts, an invitation to explore female perception, motivation, and above all, spirit. One woman's voice is thus added to what has gone before and to what will come hereafter, as a validation of the individual writer, of all writers who give language to women's experiences and to the writing process itself.
I always woke up, back then, to the smell of oranges. My bedroom was bathed in potpourri; bowls and jars brimmed with apricot leaves and lemon rind. Even though I can't recall certain details of that time -- how many days I went without food, or how many pounds I lost in a week -- I remember the smell of my room, fertile and earthy, like the deep inside of an old cedar chest. Smells were all I had then, and even now, catching the scent of something aged and spiced, something fruity and dried, I return instantaneously to that life, curling myself in it as if I've never left. For a moment I am again without weight: a body filling with light and air, displaced muscle and mass. Once, years after my starvation days, I took my mother to a candle shop in the mall. When the proprietor lifted up scented candles to us, I became so giddy with lightness I fell on my knees, crumpled, an over-sized doll, and had to wait outside for Mom to finish shopping.

It's strange how smells can transport a person. It's as if an older version of the body meets a younger one to touch hands and pay its respects. Although my present view of that time is clouded with anxiety, I remember how my younger body, slight as a reed, deeply tanned and always tired, wasn't worried or conscious of the horror it lived. That young me found comfort in the routine of it all, the lock-step control she had over herself. I still admire her, am still jealous at the simplicity of her pursuits. And although she had to die for me to live, the things she taught me about human limitation and perfection are lessons I retain and use.
I find myself wondering about beginnings. When did it start? When did I cross-over, making the decision to reduce myself? When I was still a healthy 140 pounds, I remember measuring breakfast: cereal, milk, banana. My mother had a set of gleaming measuring cups and a cookbook with a calorie chart at the back. The bowl held one-and-one-half servings of cereal: 195 calories. The usual splash of skim milk, 1/3 of a cup, contained 45 calories. An average-sized banana was listed at 112.5 calories. So at first, this was the fuel I allowed my morning mechanism: 352.5. Those mornings I sat alone at the breakfast table, my parents already at work, and I watched the summer sun climb through the six windows of the kitchen. I breathed as I ate, my diaphragm in a rhythm with my stomach: breathe, digest, one breaking down the stuff of life, the other using it. I swelled up and out, breasts rising toward the ceiling, bra-less and loose beneath my T-shirt. In my mind, my stomach swelled too, this once-empty vessel, grinding and gurgling its contents, filling like a small balloon. With the first few moments of the day, I knew the weight of my body. This is all I can recall of how it began.

I was seventeen and working at a swimming pool that summer. It was a place defined by heat. The cement blistered even the most callused of heels. Bodies lounged and perspired, dove and swam. Flesh was everywhere, hued red or gold, thighs and legs and buttocks and breasts bumping into each other, displayed. Attempting front flips, girls as thin as rulers barely kept their swimsuits on. Boys de-pantsed other boys or snatched bikini-tops from flat-chested girls. Little legs, just beginning to take shape, showed a ridge of muscle along their sides as they strode. Small arms were solid and curved, pulling
confident strokes, tossing Pepsi cans, or pushing others into the water. Flat tummies peeked through holes cut out of the middle of sleek suits.

My body felt cumbersome in its ugly, city-issue swimsuit with bra cups and low-cut leg holes. Although most of the women wore "real" suits under the uniforms, I was never brave enough to tuck the outer itchy fabric up under the smooth spandex like everyone else -- stretch marks on the very upper part of my outer thighs tanned a different color than the rest of my legs and hoisting the fabric up higher only revealed them. Instead, I wore a towel around my waist, dropping its protective cover only on the guard chair where it was too hot to keep it on. While guarding, I kept my feet pointed as a ballerina because I thought this kept my thighs from spreading on the chair. How long I could hold my breath became a sort of game for me -- it was easier to suck in my stomach if I didn't breathe. I rarely leaned to pick up a cup or whistle from the chair's platform because my breasts hung heavy when I bent over. It seemed to me that I was the only guard with physical defects, with wrinkles on her wrists and little bags of fat around her kneecaps. My body was immense with its own import, with dimples and swell of flesh. Sometimes, in the hazy languor of mid-afternoon, my mind floated, fantasized about long, polished knives. Brutal knives, able to cleave without trace. Or clean tubes of suction, hollowing out the inner core of me, purifying. Sometimes I changed bodies, extracting my mind as in a Disney film, moving all that was me into someone else's shell. If I could have made such a switch with anyone of my own choosing, it would have been Maureen.

Maureen was one of those guards who peeled off her uniform as soon as she hit the chair, rebellious, our manager having explicitly stated that uniforms
must be worn at all times. Maureen got away with it because she was breathtaking: her hair almost white, fuzzy about her small face, her features brown and delicate as a cherub. Maureen was five years older than I, and her body was everything I longed for. As she perched on the chair, twirling her whistle around her second finger, she glistened with magazine-cover perfection. She was one of those women whose lipstick didn't smear, legs protruded lean and long, breasts swung high and full, and hair defied humidity.

It was Maureen who showed me how to brush my hair with long strokes, recommending special conditioners and sprays to bring out my highlights. She teased me about my make-up, applying her own, bold colors to my cheeks and eyelids. While I carefully painted Maureen's hot-pink nail-polish on my toes, she asked me questions about boyfriends: Had I ever gone on a car date, and did I know how to attract a boy? What sort of look do you give a boy, Maureen asked, when he talks to you for the first time? Over-the-shoulder, eyelids down or a straight-forward one with a small, slight smile? What might I say, Maureen supposed, if a boy asked me to go to first base? And most importantly, how should I turn a boy down whom I didn't like? Over the smells of chlorine and nail polish, I wished for a boyfriend, one I could wrap in my arms and press to my body. One I could feel needed me. One who could make me real.

I asked Maureen to help me go on a diet. She cheerfully brought me her fat counter book and Jane Fonda workout video. "I'm always watching what I eat," she confided. Looking over the book at home, the words were incantations: count calories, weigh food, measure portions, work out. The rhetoric was frantic, "You can do it -- if I can, anyone can!" But the real hook were the pictures: tiny, glossy Maureens filling the pages. These were flawless women: no bulges, no
wrinkles, no soft spots. They wore form-fitting leotards and exotic tights. Their butts rounded in two perfect mounds; their stomachs rippled. Maureen’s world coaxed promise: follow these steps, and you will look like us.

It started slowly. First Maureen devised a number: 1200 calories a day. For weeks that number became the measure of my worth, the yardstick of my conscience. Next she implemented the training: substitute yogurt for sour cream, broil instead of fry, use spices and herbs in lieu of heavy sauces. I kept breads and dairy products to three servings a day, vegetables and fruits to four, meats to one. I eliminated high-fat foods, which meant no hamburgers (one patty, 500 calories), ice cream (one conservative scoop, 200 calories), french fries (a small order, 300 calories) or candybars (250 calories a piece). I initially craved these foods, finding myself with an ice cream bar completely out of the wrapper before I made myself throw it away. Sometimes I nibbled a part of my sister's potato chip (30 calories), or took a bite from my best friend's sundae (40 calories). Finally, I bought a box of chocolate mints, allowing myself just one a day (10 calories each). And every evening, just before bed, I tallied the results. When I was over the mark, my body felt bloated, huge. Climbing into bed, I'd curl myself into a tight ball, imagining how my skin and fat molded itself to the contours of the mattress. When I was under 1200 calories, however, I sensed my body in a bikini, stretched on a towel, wiggling its toes, flying away. Moments like these were savored, for although I didn't look like Maureen, I could imagine I would.

Maureen praised my progress. "You've definitely lost weight!" She pinched my arm, nodding her head. I was sure I looked just the same as I did before the diet -- pudgy -- able to disguise my imperfections only with the greatest of pains, yet I was down to 110 pounds, 30 less than I had weighed six weeks
before. My muscles ached from relentless workouts. The slap, slap of tennis
shoes against pavement served as my metronome, amplifying acceleration. I
threw out the box of chocolate mints. I stopped taking nibbles and bites. No
longer using 1200 as the mark, my calorie limit became more and more stringent:
1000, 800, 550.

Life was a game of living moment to moment, always evaluating my
progress, willing myself to lessen and fade. Now the guard suit hung on my
shoulders. I was always thirsty, so I drank water, so much water I often had to
leave a guarding shift just to use the bathroom. Shivering cold engulfed me
when I dived in the pool, so swimming slowly ceased. I wore more and more
clothes while on break, stuffing sweatshirts and sweatpants into the small space
of my locker. The cement no longer scorched my feet: instead, it felt like the
heat of life, searing its way through my capillaries and veins, feeding my
exhausted muscles and bones. It never occurred to me that by losing insulation, I
also lost the ability to warm my own body.

It was during this time that I made myself examine and feel my body for
the first time since childhood. Standing under the spray of a scalding shower, I
gazed at my reflection in the chrome of the door. The collar bones bulged like
growths, as did the hip bones. Each rib was neatly outlined, the flesh sunk
around it, making a tidy row of planks down my side. Yet, the stomach still
hung a bit, slight dimples of skin appeared if I bent over. With my legs together,
I still couldn't see a space between my upper thighs (as the fat counter book said I
should after a few weeks). Turning around, I still noticed the minute jiggle of
my butt, the two small bunches of fat just below my waistline -- what I had
always called my "poochies."
I didn't believe what I saw: a young woman with a slowly starving body. Instead, I closed my eyes and felt every inch of myself. My fingers grasped and pinched. And within that darkness, hot from the water but cool from the unpadded skin, was a soft, pliable self. There were a few more bony protrusions than before, but the body wasn't firm, wasn't without curves and yielding flesh. Then that darkness transformed into hate, hate pounding at the tenacity of my fat and blood and bones. My fist hit my stomach, hard, hit it again and again until I was too sore to move.

Madness. I suppose that's exactly what I experienced -- the calculating, focused mind of the insane. Hunger was my only consciousness. I slept hungry, dreaming of lavishly set tables, food brimming from bowls and platters. My waking moments were black voids of hunger peppered with the small joys of smell. To this day, I have yet to smell the slow roasting of a turkey, the baking of candied apples, the cooling of homemade bread that equals the aromas I drowned in back then. I'd sneak up on my sister as she took a bite of a Snickers bar, inhaling the chocolate and caramel and nuts. At staff parties, I stood over picnic tables lined with potluck goodies: barbecued chicken wings, fluffy potato salad, baked beans with ham, plump, sweet fruit. Distractedly, I talked with people while watching what they put on their plates. I put food in my own mouth only to spit it back out when others weren't looking. I memorized recipes, always asking someone, What goes in this? I found pleasure discussing which variety of nuts worked best in a Waldorf salad. Yet I only talked, only smelled. My parents asked about my empty plates; the pool staff teased me about not eating. "We've got a regular Jane Fonda here," they chastised, shaking their heads. I said I didn't feel well, or I'd eaten earlier, or was going out to eat later.
on. Because my schedule overlapped so little with my parents, and because we rarely ate a bona fide meal at the pool, people didn't know much. Amazingly, the most they said was, "You look like you're going to blow away," but their tone was admiring rather than anxious. They didn't know I was on my third day having consumed nothing but water; they didn't notice my anger when I finally broke down to eat half an apple. They didn't detect my teeth clenching and clicking against each other as they ate in front of me. But most of all, they failed to see what I wanted them to: me, high in the air above them, my body blown by the South wind, naked and barely visible, not sure how I'd managed to do it or what I'd done to deserve it, with no time to tell anyone what had happened, only a wish that they'd chance to crane their necks upward and catch a glimpse.

In movies, endings are more clearly defined than beginnings — someone dies or gets married, or the bad guys are driven out of town. We expect the dramatic: a heart attack instead of cancer. But my illness was one of those unremarkable, slow ones where death comes in increments — a progression down a scale: 110, 108, 105 and still no one laughed or pointed or screamed, swooping me up into their arms and carrying me to safety. Once a little boy at the pool called me chicken legs, sticking out his tongue. When my grandmother came to visit, she grimaced as she hugged me, said I was a bag of bones. And then suddenly, as the people around me continued to ignore my weight loss, I got a book one day in the mail.

It was just a promotional Time-Life book, but it looked important, like a Bible. The book's cover was crimson, fake-leather, and stenciled with a gold-colored paint. I got to keep the book for thirty days without having to pay one penny, or so the insert read, and if I wanted to order the entire set, one book
would come each month for the next year. The series was on American military history, a subject I knew little about, and this particular volume highlighted World War II. When I opened the package, I remember I was drinking a Diet Coke. It was one of the few times that day I had tasted anything. The bite of the bubbles on my tongue reminded me of eating, and as I looked at the crimson cover, I thought of meat: steak, hamburger, bacon.

I skimmed the introduction, idly flipping through chapters, stopping at grainy pictures of Hitler, swastikas, soldiers, bombers. But then the pictures changed. Instead of perfect, ordered ranks there stood people in chaotic, jumbled masses. The erect, broad bodies of the soldiers were replaced by shrunken, hunched figures. Faces that looked boldly from previous pages, eyes alight, were now turned, caught in the act of a semi-doze or blank stare. The heads of these people rested uneasily on their shoulders, like dolls with mismatched faces, their bodies too small to support the mass of gray matter, hair, teeth and eyes. And finally, at the back of the book, there were only mounds: once-strong frames heaped in dust. I traced the black-and-white outline of ribcages with my finger, of brittle twigs that were supposed to be arms, legs. As I looked on with horror, with a sick feeling engulfing my innards, the one that asked why without answer, I let myself feel hunger -- recognize that feeling as hunger. I pulled my own body in, sitting cross-legged, and wrapped my arms tight as a bandage around my middle.

I wondered about myself, about what had changed in my world. At first, I wanted to diet only for the sheer control it gave me, for the motion into which it set me, the clutter it would expel from my brain. I thought of the diet as a safe venture, one I could sustain, an enterprise that would gain me praise from
friends and strangers alike. Maybe parts of this explanation were true. But I know now, as I began to know then, that what I denied myself wasn't mere food — mere stuff of energy. Although I thought my body could cross the boundary, jump from a life of gravity to that of air, I was really a masochist driven to the ultimate state of self-hatred, willing my body to vanish completely, without trace.

Two weeks after I got the book, my best friend told my parents I was starving myself. After conferring with the high school's guidance counselor, my parents put me in therapy, and I began the slow process of learning again how to eat.

Five years later, I took a job as an educational programmer for a campus Women's Center. Although I presented workshops on a number of gender issues, my favorite; and most requested, was the one on body image. These sessions were held on dorm floors for audiences of eighteen-year-old girls. At the beginning of every program, I'd have the girls flip through popular women's magazines and pick out advertisements directed at women consumers. We pieced these advertising images together on posterboard, discussing what we saw, dissecting them the way the camera dissected the women's bodies. I started collecting the posters, putting them up on a wall in my apartment, calling them my "hate sheets." When anyone visited my apartment for the first time, she or he always asked about that East wall in my living room. Over time it became covered, from ceiling to baseboard, with the magazine ads. Every ad had as its
center a woman, or part of a woman. All of the women were about my age, no more than twenty-two or three, glamorous and thin. Some had long legs covered with black lace. Others showed off their plummeting cleavage or luxurious hair.

Sometimes at night I took to sitting in front of them, cross-legged, holding a glass of white wine (4 ounces, 90 calories). I stared at the faces of the women in the photographs, making my eyes go out of focus. The models wore a lot of red: flaming red lips, brilliant red dresses. Their expressions were puzzled, alarmed, aloof or surprised. None of them looked comfortable, their legs twisted up in jumps, their arms spread high above their heads, the heads themselves thrown back, lips open, eyes closed. I imagined myself in these positions, wearing these clothes, making these faces. Then I'd get up and peer more closely, searching for small lines, chickenpox scars, almost-hidden stretch marks. I couldn't find any. The women crinkled as I touched them, whispering something almost beyond hearing. We're perfect, they said. See our hairless legs, ageless faces, tiny waists, glinting teeth. Don't you want to look like us? Don't you want our flawless skin, radiant smiles, shapely buttocks, buxom breasts?

But they couldn't get off the wall and do anything. They couldn't touch other people, or taste my wine, or enjoy the smell of my dinner in the oven. As I turned off the light to go to bed, to sleep and to dream, they remained frozen, gaping at nothing with their long-lashed looks. And I knew this: these were not women I wanted to be.
fiction: downstream

It is during the week of hard frost, that January. Two friends walk to a bar, feet numbing under hose and dress boots. The spry one, Eliza, holds the tall one around the middle of her winter coat. Sometimes the tall woman, Maddie, slips on a patch of ice and Eliza keeps her up.

"Shit," Maddie whispers, slipping again.

"You should have scuffed the bottom of these new boots before you wore them out the first time," says Eliza.

"Well, they're getting plenty scuffed now," Maddie tells her.

The women's breath puffs out of their mouths, white clouds circling up around their heads. Eliza's small nose and crescent earlobes are already a deep red. Earlier, in the car, the two had joked about living in a cardboard box on a night like tonight. Now Maddie doesn't think it is very funny. A wind, more like a gust, pushes at them as they cross the street, blowing up under their skirts and making pinwheels of them.

"God, I think my hose just froze to my underwear." Maddie tries to push her calico skirt down with the hand that isn't clutching Eliza. Looking up momentarily from the billowing cloth, Maddie sees a figure moving fast toward them. It is a man, walking awkwardly. His gait is more of a shuffle then a stride, and his arms hang limp at his sides. Maddie sees as he comes closer that his body is something like a bag of brittle sticks with a face caved in on itself. His legs are completely bare, protruding like two wiry prongs from his long, flapping raincoat.
"Holy shit. It's so cold," Maddie says, mostly to herself, wondering how the man could wear shorts in this weather.

Eliza gives her a patient look, red nose crinkled. "Hold on. We'll be there in a minute."

"No." Maddie gestures with her head at the approaching man. Now the man is almost upon them. "Look."

Eliza glances away from Maddie, squinting. She refuses to wear her glasses until she fails her driver's test without them.

"Who is that?" Then Eliza takes in a small, sharp breath. "Maddie, my god. He must be absolutely freezing."

The man stops himself at the corner, meeting Eliza and Maddie as they finish crossing the street. He is wearing a pair of rubber rain boots, the kind with laces and leather trim, and thick wool socks. He also has one tiny silver earring shaped like a coin. His hair is a strange sort of white-blonde that looks almost dyed. He stares at them, not speaking, eyes a vacant blue.

Eliza drops her hold on Maddie and peers at the man. "Are you okay? Do you need help? Can we help you?" Eliza puts out her hand, tentatively, holding it far enough away from the man so that the gesture is friendly but removed.

"The bus stop," says the man. His voice is sharp, clear and high-pitched. "I need to know where to get the bus."

"You mean a city bus?" asks Eliza.

The man shakes his thin head, slowly. Maddie realizes that the skin on his legs is pure gooseflesh, very pale, and that he isn't wearing any gloves. On one of his second fingers he sports a heavy metal band. My God, thinks Maddie, this man with hardly any clothes on is walking around in the dead of night and
wants us to help him find a bus. He's going to ask us for money. He's going to pull some sort of weapon from his coat.

"I need the Greyhound," says the man. Eliza lowers her extended arm. Maddie starts to move back a little, thinking she should grab Eliza's sleeve and run. She's seen this sort of situation in her mind's eye a million times: alone on a dark street, standing at an ill-lit corner and a man comes out of nowhere. The man is mostly silent, eyes alight with knowledge. He knows what your mother told you about him -- how she warned you to not walk by yourself or with just a girl friend after dark, not to dress in your tight, slinky blouse or short, black skirt, not to be in a place where no one would come running if you screamed. Maddie suddenly remembers that two weeks ago a woman's body was found in the Stillwater Creek. The body has yet to be identified. Maddie eyes the man's hands. They do not twitch. Eliza tells the man that the Greyhound station is two blocks down, just past the intersection of "P" and Randolph. Maddie stands ready to act, to run or to protect herself, but as soon as Eliza stops speaking, the man mutters his thanks and moves toward the station, pulling his worn coat around him with one deft tug.

Maddie watches after him, her muscles relaxing, her shoulders coming down from their arched position. She breathes deeply, drawing in the frozen air, mixing it with the heat of her lungs. When the man finishes crossing the street, he turns back to face Maddie with a quick jerk of his body, almost like an afterthought, and whips his coat away from himself for the briefest moment, exposing a shriveled, naked body. His nakedness is stark against the snow, a rough etching on white paper. Maddie flinches, tripping on the ice, and Eliza catches her around the waist, saying, "I'm going to die from cold if we just stand
here. Come on, let's get to Chesterfield's." Maddie turns mutely to Eliza, aware that she has not seen anything. Her mind flashes an image, the man bounding back after them, agile as a primate, gaining speed. Maddie hastily puts her arm around Eliza's shoulders as they make their way to the bar.

Once inside, the two women shake themselves, stamping feet and pulling off coats. The darkly stained wood and red brick walls make the room feel close and bookish. Eliza looks for their friends, eyeing them over by the kitchen. She waves, then pats Maddie on her forearm, asking, "You coming?"

"I'm going to get a drink. You go ahead."

Eliza bundles both her coat and Maddie's over her arm, walking briskly to the small booth where two other women sit. Leaning over the bar, Maddie crosses one foot behind the other and tries to catch the bartender's glance. A woman in a bold blue dress perches next to her. The woman's nylons are flesh-colored and sparkly, and her pumps exactly match her dress. While Maddie orders her drink, the woman is approached by two men, business-types, smoothing down their ties as they come. One of the men looks Maddie over with a slide of his eyes. Maddie evades his stare, shifting her weight, brushing her skirt against the bar. Waiting for her drink, she examines herself in the mirror over the liquor bottles. The tips of bottles blot out her chin and part of one cheek making her look weary.

Finally, the bartender -- a very young woman in a tuxedo vest -- comes back with a short, squat glass filled with clear fluid on ice. As Maddie places her money on the bar, a male hand brushes it away. "Here. I'll get this." The man gives the bartender a five, waving at her mention of change, then moves his face
so that Maddie can see him straight on. It is a severe face, striking in its hollows. "Your ears are still red from the cold," he says, taking a drink from a glass of beer.

Maddie is surprised, assuming the hand belonged to Mr. Tie-Guy. This man is anything but a cellular-phone-type: his pants casual and loose; his shirt unbuttoned at the collar. Although his face is somber, his eyes are mischievous and lucent. He has thick, curly hair pulled back in a small ponytail and wears a tiny gold band on his pinkie. "Thank you," Maddie says. "For the drink," she adds, resting a hand on her glass but not lifting it.

The man nods once, subtle, staring past her at some point on the floor. Maddie looks down as well, seeing only her feet and his. His shoes are brightly polished loafers with silver-colored coins tucked in the slits made for pennies. She notes that he wears argyle socks, which is strange given his un-preppy appearance.

"Were you outside long?"

"What?"

"Outside." The man motions to the door. "Out there a long time?"

"Long enough," Maddie smiles at him, but the man’s face remains solemn. What’s this guy got for lines, she muses, the weather? She sees the sides of his cheeks move slightly, as if his teeth are slowly clenching and unclenching. What’s making him so uptight? She is sort of intrigued by his anxious melancholy. "So," she ventures. "What’s your name?"

"Oh. I’m sorry," says the man. He shakes his head, sighs deeply, and then his face does change, smiles broadly, teeth too white for his shadows, eyes crinkling up so much she can barely make them out. It is a pleasing smile, and Maddie feels a sudden ease, a loosening of her body, joints once suspended by the
ice giving way to moving blood, warming. "It's Nathaniel." When Maddie raises her eyebrows, he says, "Or just Nate."

"No, no. Nathaniel." She pauses, liking how the name makes her tongue do a little flip against her top teeth. "A regal sort of name." She waits for him to ask hers. Instead, he continues his abstracted gaze. "Mine's just Maddie," she offers.

He absently swirls his glass of beer, asking, "For Madeline?" almost as an afterthought.

"No." Maddie says this with a slight, stubborn delay: the emphasis a person gives when she's been asked the same question many, many times. "My real name's actually Veronica. But I've always hated it."

Nathaniel smiles again, this time to one side and with less humor, although he looks pleased for some reason. "You want to sit down?" He suggests while gesturing toward a table with a pitcher of beer on it and a jacket thrown over the back of one chair.

"Let me tell my friends," says Maddie. Nathaniel nods, then starts to walk away from her. Maddie catches Eliza's eye from across the room, pointing to Nathaniel's table and shrugging when Eliza mouths "Who?" at her.

As Maddie sits down across from him, Nathaniel makes a garbled explanation about being stood up and not usually going out for pitchers of beer by himself. He then swiftly maneuvers the conversation to his work. It turns out that he's an art teacher at a local high school and a part-time graduate student in arts management. As he warms up, she notes how much she likes the way he uses his hands as he talks. They are broad hands, with wide, but not thick, fingers. She imagines them covered in clay or bits of bright paint and
smiles to herself. Although Nathaniel converses with more ease nestled further away from the crowd at the bar, he still rarely meets her eyes. Instead, he fixes on an ash tray, his index finger, the pitcher handle — any object within close range except Maddie herself. When he does look at her, however, his gaze is utterly intense, his eyes so dark they appear black in the low-level lighting.

Maddie talks about her work — she is a recent graduate from college, landing a job as a copy editor for a local advertising agency — and about Eliza since they got to know each other through the firm. Nathaniel probes her about the kind of advertising her company produces: What products do they handle? Which magazines do the ads appear in? How liberal is the staff? Does she believe in limited censorship of the media? Although she answers each of his questions with detail, he always seems to want just a little more, as if he senses her holding back, taunting, keeping him at a distance from how she actually views things.

He keeps abruptly switching topics. She, answering a question about the agency, finds herself maneuvered into another topic, her opinion on Clinton and the Whitewater mess. His approach is rapid, Socratic and agitated, yet she continues to sense a kind of casual ease about his almost limpid body. She finds him a strange sort of mix, really, a messily-dressed man full of ideas and words and what seems to be an odd kind of low-boil fierceness.

Then he begins telling her about a former girlfriend.

"Tricia. Tricia and I were, well, what everyone says about such things. Perfect for each other? Happy? I don't know."

Maddie wets her lips, asking "What happened?" They finish one pitcher of beer and begin another. Maddie notes from the corner of her vision Eliza's
glance, her raised, well-plucked eyebrow. Maddie smiles, a genuine smile, and Eliza nods with an air of amusement before resuming her own conversation.


"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Please don't be," Nathaniel flashes one of his severe, feverish looks.

"Believe me, it was for the best." For the first time all evening, he reaches his hand over to Maddie's, patting the top. "Really. Don't be."

Maddie detects a hesitation in him; his forehead scrunches and he closes his eyes for the briefest moment. She feels an urge to tell him something with meaning, something to dissuade him from turning harsh or sarcastic. Her mind seizes on the image of the flasher, on her horror and disgust. So Maddie relates the details of the incident, the man's drained body against the bare snow, the arbitrary cruelty of his demeanor. Nathaniel sits rapt, eyes narrow, concentrating. He shakes his head as she describes the fear.

"I can't believe some guys can be so cheap. He must have known he was freaking you out. That's unforgivable."

Maddie continues, "I was so scared. I knew no one would hear a thing; the streets were so deserted because of the cold. It was spooky."

Nathaniel touches her again, this time with more urgency. He cradles her hand rather than clasping it.

"So," he says, snapping his head back and uttering one, odd chuckle. "We should get you out of this dreary cold. This kind of climate isn't good for you. You know," he pauses, as if remembering something. "You should come down
with me in a couple of weeks. We've got semester break, and I'm heading South for a conference. To Florida, actually. Orlando."

"An art conference?"

"No, actually an administration conference. You know, one of those feel-good session things where they tell you how to make friends and influence people."

"You mean how to make money," she says.

"That too," he agrees, grinning.

"Well, let me get back to you on that," she says. Maddie smiles a slow smile, shy, as if she's just been asked to go to second base for the first time.

"So," Nathaniel says, rubbing the top of her hand with his thumb, "you want to go somewhere else? Get back out into that cold you like so much?" Asking her this, he sets his eyes on hers, seeming to will that they stay there instead of wandering back into their familiar, cloudy abstraction. She instantly flips through the roll-a-dex of pick-up scenarios in her mind: his place, my place, the car, a hotel. Unable to see Nathaniel in any of these environments save the bar, she finds herself curious.

"Okay. Let me touch base with Eliza. We like to come and leave together."

"Wise," he says, drawing away from her and leaning against the back of his chair. "Don't fuss about it. It was only an idea."

"Oh, no. It's okay." Maddie's rushes her answer. She takes a deliberate breath, putting her glass down squarely. "I'll just go over and tell her, okay? You stay here."
Nathaniel sweeps his arms as if surveying a richly laden table. "I'll stay put."

Maddie makes her way over to Eliza and their mutual friends, sliding herself in the booth to face Eliza. "I'm going to go, I think."

"What?" Eliza turns to Maddie, eyes round. "You don't mean with the slouchy Bohemian, do you?"

"He's cute."

Eliza and Maddie's two friends excuse themselves to go buy a couple of drinks and some cheese sticks. Eliza grasps one of Maddie's hands, her appearance stern. "I thought we had a pact."

"Eliza. You have people to go home with. Don't get on my case because you think I'm deserting you."

"What, me get on your case?" she asks, biting. Then she grins. "What's he like? Is he bright?"

"Yes, he's bright. An art-type, you know."


"Oh please," says Maddie, dramatically rolling her eyes. "We're just going to get out of here and go somewhere else. It's not like that."

"Right." Eliza's head is bobbing. "Well, he is a cutie. And I suppose I'll make it home all right."

"You always do," says Maddie. Eliza chooses not to pursue the sarcasm of Maddie's remark.

"Well, call me tomorrow and tell me everything."

"Okay," Maddie agrees.
Eliza's eyes linger on Maddie's face, then she smiles a small, wry smile. "And be careful."

Maddie gives her a gentle shake. "Don't get serious on me. Don't worry. I'll hold on to the artist so I don't go sprawling on my ass." Maddie makes a sliding noise on the wood floor by shuffling her boots. "Really. I'll be okay."

"Just don't forget to call me tomorrow." Eliza hands Maddie her coat, then smoothes her disturbed skirt back over her knees. "And don't do anything I wouldn't do," she adds.

Maddie points at her, wagging her finger as she goes back over to Nathaniel. "You ready?" she asks when she reaches him.

Nathaniel remains silent, probing Maddie's face as if searching for a lost truth. For a moment she feels a bit like an exotic fish, a living thing whose only purpose is to be looked at. Her bones ice up for a minute, grating. When Nathaniel grins, she is loose again.

"Of course I'm ready," he says. "Let's get out of this warmth and cheer, what do you say?"

The air outside has weight, a pressing heaviness, squeezing Maddie into the shell of her coat. How do animals live outside on nights like this? How could any amount of fur keep a thing warm? She tucks her body under Nathaniel's arm, turning her face to his shoulder.

When they reach Nathaniel's car, he opens the passenger door first, giving Maddie a small flourish of his arm as he nestles her in. He drives without speaking, switching lanes much too often. He looks uncomfortable behind a wheel. Maddie watches the changing scenery outside the car and for a moment it all reminds her of an ancient city bathed in moonlight, like Greece or Rome. But
then another car’s headlights blind her, and she sees the modernity, the steel and chrome.

After winding through a suburban neighborhood, Nathaniel makes a left turn into a long driveway. There are so many apartment buildings that Maddie can’t see anything else. Nathaniel is whistling, badly. Maddie laughs, a little bit shrill.

"What? We’re here. You don’t like my place?"

"I don’t like your whistling."

Nathaniel doesn’t respond, getting out of the car and coming around the back to open her door. She opens it herself and he stops. Maddie follows Nathaniel through a glass security door and up three flights of stairs. He fumbles with his key ring in front of a nondescript door marked 34. The apartment is cluttered and dusty. Statues, vases, and bowls sit on every flat space. The statues are all human bodies: faces, legs, torsos, entwined arms. The pottery is rough, like sand, with uneven glaze dripping down the figures. Maddie is somewhat chilled by their expressions: moaning mouths, roving eyes, dripping cheeks. Nathaniel moves to the kitchen, and Maddie hears the clink of glasses.

"No alcohol for me," she calls.

"Diet coke? Grapefruit juice?" There is a pause. "Or something that appears to be very old ginger ale?"

"Water is fine."

"Coffee?" he asks, poking his head out at her.

"Okay, coffee sounds good. I take it black." Then she adds, "Please."

Maddie notes that the sketches on the walls are less extreme than the statues. Nathaniel copied Etcher’s famous hands and then, just beneath it, drew
the same picture with two feet holding the pencils. He has done a number of pieces in black and white, giving the room a lack of color, a starkness. When he comes in with her coffee, he nods toward one of the statues.

"You probably don't like them much. Most women don't."

"Glad to know I'm included with most women." Maddie tries to make light of his seriousness, taking her coffee.

Nathaniel grins briefly, and Maddie unwinds into the cushions of his couch. They talk about the Olympics since Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan have yet to skate. Nathaniel jokes about Letterman's abuse of Tonya Harding. (Apparently he never goes to bed without watching Letterman.) They banter about whether or not "Dave's Mom" should be addressed as Letterman's mother or with her own name. Nathaniel says they do it to protect her identity; Maddie believes they won't call her by her real name because she's a non-entity without Dave's fame.

Nathaniel puts on some music. When he comes back to the couch, he sits closer to Maddie. She rests her mug on his coffee table, slipping an arm over his. This is what she wants. When he kisses her, Maddie is surprised. She expected a softer approach, tentative, even bumbling. Instead, he kisses her with confidence, slowly moving both of them down on the couch.

He rests one of his hands at the place where Maddie has tucked her blouse into her skirt and waits, as if pondering something else. She turns her body the slightest bit. Then his movements quicken. In one fluid, practiced motion, he unzippers and wedges himself beneath her underwear. Awkward, Maddie shifts her legs, allowing him in. He comes by rote; it's over before her mind forms any
words. Nathaniel’s eyes are the only image that clears its way into her bleared thought. Their blackness, slits, merge with stone.

Maddie sits up holding her blouse close. She looks around the room, eyes barely resting on his sculptures and paintings, black ink legs and arms, roughened cheeks and thighs. Rolling away from her, he stands, mutters "Be right back." He hitches up his pants and walks into the hall.

Maddie smooths her skirt, her hair. She shakes her shoulders and head, hard, reaching for her coat. Water runs from what she assumes is a bathroom. She quietly lets herself out.

Heading in the direction of the main street, Maddie tries to tuck her blouse back into her skirt. From somewhere far off, a male voice yells an incoherent phrase. Her pace quickens. The long, silver earrings her mother bought her have become bits of icy flint, burning against her cheeks. The streetlights in this section of town have sallow yellow lights instead of white. She closes her eyes, taking a deep breath of the frozen air, searing her lungs, remembering the man who flashed her. She has an image of him heading toward her with that shuffling motion, his naked body revealed as his coat streams behind. Then she imagines him at the Greyhound station. He is standing behind a woman. The woman is there by herself, and the station has closed up for the night. Maddie thinks about this Greyhound-woman’s half-clothed body in a river, the water so cold that the meat of her muscles is partially frozen. The man in the raincoat is standing at the river’s bank, smoking, still naked under his coat. He laughs at the frost-bitten sky, his sound carried by smoke and cold and air. Then her body is moved downstream by the current, bumping against rocks, scratched at by
twigs, floating while her hair swirls over her face, until sometime later, her hair catches in a branch, and she waits to be found.
I can hardly remember life before men. It was living in a world of magic; of possibility. I was the creator of my existence, the world defined by my intuition. Looking through my fingers at far-off objects, I pinched them, cinching up my line of vision, making a tree or a car or a whole house disappear. I pressed phone receivers to my ear and thought about sound as electric, pink energy whooshing down the lines at inconceivable speed. Each passing minute was constructed by little blue people in matching overalls the minute before I lived it. And although I tried living minutes faster so I could catch up, I never caught a wisp of blue hair or a fragment of patched overall. I wondered about someone slicing off my head -- how long I'd continue to see and think thoughts, even talk, before realizing my body wasn't there. Mom and Dad told me bacteria crawled on my hands, and I thought they should tickle. Watching snow on TV, following the dots and dashes without blinking, I searched for encoded messages from outer space. Beyond the sky, I knew the earth was surrounded by a layer of balloons from children's clumsy fingers. It was a bouncy, brilliant surface I wanted to walk on, undulating with the motion of a million stretched membranes. At night, I listened carefully for Mr. Bear to begin whispering with Bunny, as in the Velveteen Rabbit story. I believed in the large-eyed aliens ready to abduct me if I left my window open. Miracles happened in every object; magic was made with the tips of my fingers or the push of my thoughts. The world was charged with mania: the buzz and hum of existence.

Then I met Barbie. It was clear she was serious business. Adults handed me petite, shiny dresses; tiny high-heeled shoes; minuscule combs and barrettes.
"Make Barbie pretty for her big date with Ken." I learned buttoning, zipping, smoothing, patting, pulling, rubbing. Ken came to fetch Barbie, suave, debonair, perfect plastic hair and a strikingly stiff smile. "Ken should ask Barbie to marry him." So next I learned these rituals: I made a wedding dress from fluffy white Kleenex, glued cotton balls, and gooey sequins. Dandelions served as flowers, rulers as pews, Mr. Bear as the minister. I marched Barbie up and down the makeshift aisle, chanting incantations: "'Til death do us part" and "I do." It was a new mysticism, a seeking of the divine. Adults talked about the future moment with rapture: my wedding day. The day on which to pin all my hopes, the fairytale, the pinnacle of my adult existence.

Barbie was a voodoo training doll. The pins I stuck in her hair and on her clothes were meant for me. I anxiously sought my own Ken. When I was twelve, I met my first one.

Posters were a thing then. I ordered them from my copy of Dynamite magazine, pushing my nose close to the tiny images, aiming for a better look. Or flipping through the metal-edged racks of them in the record stores, clack, clack, I gawked at the Real McCoy: Scott Baio glistening in swim trunks, John Schneider cocking his ten-gallon hat in salute, Shawn Cassidy in white wing-tipped glory.

It was the Shawn Cassidy poster I craved. He was six-foot tall and smiling, decked out in a white leisure suit with gigantic lapels and a thick medallion slung casually about his neck. All my other posters were reduced-size men with cut-off legs, but this one spoke life. One foot forward, Shawn walked off the high-gloss paper. I finally saved enough money -- lathering the dog and pulling weeds -- to buy him.
I put Shawn behind my bedroom door. No longer did I dance in the backyard, clap at the sky; instead, I talked to Shawn about my life. I'd seen adult couples arched over each other in solemn conversation, brows knit, hands folded or tucked in the crooks of their arms. I placed a chair in front of Shawn, crossed my legs and made sweeping gestures as I told him about concrete matters: my newly acquired understanding of fractions, sit-com television facts and favorites, or who had to stay after school and why.

Yet I didn't forget the crimping and primping. I stole makeup from Mom's drawer, fastidiously spreading purple and blue again and again over my eyes. I burned my neck using a curling iron, wearing the mark like a brand. I tottered in pumps. My model was Daisy Duke, so I squeezed growing buns into short short cut-offs, tied Dad's checkered flannel shirt in a knot under my breasts, and stuck wadded kleenex in my AA bra.

I played wedding, although now I got to dress myself, fitting my fake breasts into one of Mom's evening dresses, standing teddy bears and dolls as attendants, spinning Shawn's latest hit, Da Doo Ron Ron, as I took careful steps down an imaginary aisle. When I reached Shawn, I stepped up on a milk crate so I could look him in the eyes. After all those rehearsals with Barbie, I knew the vows by heart. Shawn murmured; I quivered; Mom's shimmery dress slithered down my shoulders, catching between my knees as I wobbled. I put a ring of twisted tinfoil on my finger, pulled in a breath, and readied myself for the moment.

This was the part I enjoyed the most. Passionate kissing lessons came off the TV, which meant I rolled my head around a lot and smashed my lips against the wall behind the poster. Shawn's lips were flat and cold. We were married.
Mom had read me the *Where Do I Come From?* book a few years earlier. (The one with soft-shoeing sperm in top hats.) I desperately wanted to have sex with Shawn, give him the most I had to offer. My notions were simplistic and idealized, even after Mom and her prancing sperm. There was a script. My part was easy: I needed to be small, beautiful, fragile in a flimsy negligé. Shawn was supposed to sweep me up into his arms and carry me into a bedroom flickering with hundreds of candles. After that we'd know just what to do. Obviously Shawn didn't have a thing, but neither did Ken, and it seemed somehow this would take care of itself.

Late at night when the rest of the house was asleep, I slowly took off my clothes in front of Shawn and gently pressed my naked body against the poster. The effect was hard, immovable. I put the arms of my biggest teddy bear around my bare shoulders as I clung to Shawn, feeling as if he embraced me back.

At school I kept my relationship a secret. When my girlfriends came over to spend the night, they'd sigh over the poster, telling me how lucky I was, how they'd die to have one just like mine. I wanted to protest, insist they couldn't possibly have a Shawn of their own. My poster wasn't a mass-produced teenage pin-up anymore. He was a man, and I was the only person who really knew him. I was the one he confided in when his Hardy Boys series was canceled. He celebrated with me when his newest single made it to number one on Casey's Top 40. My friends still thought of Shawn Cassidy as an idol, but to me, he was real.

A few months after I'd bought the poster, my cousin Joanna asked me to be a junior bridesmaid in her wedding. I was ecstatic. Here was my chance to be a part of "the real thing" in a bona fide church. I wanted to learn more than the
essentials; I wanted to know it all. I asked questions like crazy, about the choice of flowers, the kind of cake they ordered, which songs they chose and why. The bridesmaid dresses were absolutely perfect: billowing sleeves of sheer, floating material; wide silk sashes that cinched the waist; lace around the hem with tiny embroidered flowers. No cotton balls or Elmer's glue. No pinning up of the shoulders or padding of the bra. Right before the ceremony, Joanna wove delicate white flowers in my hair. I felt magical.

I walked down the aisle as I had practiced: slow, stepping, my feet close together and keeping my mind on the beat of the music. My hands clasped the stems of the flowers, aching slightly from their weight. A photographer squatted at the front of the aisle, clicking pictures, making my eyes see spots. Music swelled from the organ, so different from the tinny Sears turntable whining Shawn's high voice. People looked on and smiled. The candles flickered; the attendants shone.

Listening to the ceremony, I saw Joanna's eyes flash as she spoke, "I do." The groom took her hands in his, holding them gingerly as if she might break. He then pledged his love, speaking the soft words so only Joanna could hear. I swayed a little with the heat of so many bodies and the height of my heels. Suddenly my mind flashed a million images from movies and commercials: a woman in a floral dress skipping amid a field of sunflowers, a man dipping a woman low during a sensual dance, a couple holding hands and sharing ice cream. Then it hit me, really hit me, that I couldn't ride a Ferris wheel, or swim naked on a blistering summer night, or zip off on an exotic honeymoon with this supposed husband of mine. My husband was a poster. He was no more than a millimeter thick. My cousin kissed her groom; the minister pronounced
them husband and wife; and as I watched Joanna and her new husband riding off in their streamered car, waving, their other hands clasped where no one could see, I knew it was over between Shawn and me.

As I grew older, I learned how to kiss a real boy whose curving lips were actually warm. I learned other things as well — how to make conversation on a first date, wear clothes in such a way so they revealed enough to keep a boy's interest without making me look like a slut, and drink a beer slowly so that I'd always have a can in my hand but wouldn't get drunk. My friends and I stopped buying Teen Beat and ceased talking for hours about the imaginary dates we would have with superstars if given the chance. Instead, we swapped notes about boys' kissing abilities, exchanged warnings about boys who wanted to go too far, borrowed each other's clothes for dances and parties, and smoked our first cigarettes stolen from our mother's purses. We incessantly compared ourselves with each other: Cheryl had thick, plush hair; Marty had legs to die for; I was often told what clear, smooth skin I had. We wanted to be as thin as possible, seething that women like Brooke Shields actually walked the earth and drew breath. We tried Dexatrim without our mothers' knowledge, began ambitious but ultimately doomed exercise programs, ate chocolate with each other so we could say, "I shouldn't be doing this," with someone else. But most of all, we wondered what it would be like to "do the deed." We secretly envied, though publicly denounced, the girls who already had.

After such training, we never met a man, any man, without asking ourselves, Is this the one? We knew one day we would be expected to marry one of these boys. Our world was built upon details of appearance and mannerism instead of an all-encompassing wonder at the miracles in the world, the miracles
of ourselves as women separate from men. Each concrete element of an encounter with a man supposedly revealed a truth about his interest in us. I learned to watch faces: a full grin and I was in for a Prince Charming; a pair of pursed lips and I immediately knew his last try left him cold; a mincing half-smile and I was about to become his counselor. I listened with care for his first line. "Too slick," I'd think, "too bumbling"; "too He-man"; "too lives-with-his-mother." My stock set of Kens.

I became defined by these men and their needs for my intellect, my body, my nurturance, my food, my comfort, my humor. For one of them, I was a slightly risqué intellectual, full of emphatic statements about the status of women, the notion of truth vs. reality, the new budget plan, and the like. For another, I was a quiet supporter, someone to study with, rest his head against, rub the day's strain from aching neck muscles. For yet another I was entirely a body: a meshing of skin and hair and smell. It was a world wholly too decipherable, predicated upon acting a "type." I was unable to think of a man just as a man, of myself simply as that: a self.

So now I find myself catching raindrops in my mouth, or contemplating how a bug feels smashed against a windshield at 75 mph, or seeing if I can send my thoughts out with enough force so my date repeats what I'm thinking. But my imagination is hemmed in; the comb in my hair hurts; the buttons on my dress stab. As soon as I feel a freeing, a weight lifting, sandbags dropping from their accustomed places on my hips, face and hair, I wonder if he saw my tummy sticking out as I stepped out of the car, and I am immediately slammed back into the minute imperfections of my body, my conversation, my sense of humor. I am heavy with pins telling me how to look, how to act, and, most importantly,
how to think. It is then I turn to my Ken, whatever his form, and realize I cannot escape.
fiction: a tidy life

Kate's head rested on a bed of packed snow. She'd slipped and fallen and now her left leg was surely broken. When she looked down, she saw the lower part of her shin leading off at an impossible angle. She was trying not to move, gazing up at the flawless night sky and telling herself not to notice the pain as it soared up from her shin with each pump of the arteries. Kate closed her eyes, seeing orange. She took deep breaths. She imagined Jack sitting at some restaurant under a shaded outdoor table, sipping a beer and making eyes at a dark-skinned woman. Jack, dressed in a white linen suit, pretending to examine the latest statement from his wife's lawyers, a smile crinkling up his tan face. And here she was, sprawled on a downtown corner, leg broken, her younger sister off calling an ambulance. Kate knew Jack would say this: "typical."

She wondered what it might be like to crawl to the hospital. She rehearsed how she would lift her leg over curbs and fast-food line-up lanes. After seeing war movies where wounded soldiers slunk for miles on their elbows over thick jungle terrain, she thought she could do it. The bright side: no snakes in suburbia. Somewhere between thoughts of the jungle and the pain, Kate heard her sister calling in the distance.

Kate immediately conjured an image of Marion moving through a field of long grasses, calling behind her as she ran. Marion's hair billowed out about her face and she wore a flowered sundress. The sky was one of those crystal skies in mid-June with billowy clouds that take on shapes. But in the vision, Marion's face was severe, panicked, as if she couldn't find a place to keep her safe.
Kate woke up again in the ambulance. During the maniac drive to the emergency room, Marion chatted at her inert, limp body in the passenger seat, trying to keep Kate's mind off the leg.

"Kate, Kate. You're going to be fine. They've given you some pain-killer, so you'll be drowsy. You sleep if you can. Keep your eyes closed." Marion's black hair hung so it covered her eyes.

Kate tried to speak as the ambulance swung out around a corner, almost on two wheels. Marion wrapped a strong hand around the metal stretcher for support.

"Call Jack," Kate said finally. "Call Jack. He's in Margaritaville."

"Oh, yes." Marion paused, frowned. "I'll track him down, okay? Just keep quiet, now." Then Marion busied herself pulling Kate's arms up to a folded position around the tube stuck in her hand. "We've been through worse, haven't we?" she asked Kate, not really wanting an answer. "Remember when I was six and almost drowned in the hotel swimming pool? God that was scary. Daddy jumped in and took me by the hair?"

As Marion worked her way through various childhood tragedies, Kate's mind let loose. Marion had invited Kate to stay winter break with her and her family in Colorado, and with great effort Kate convinced her department head she could get a lot of work done on the new book. But the visit wasn't truly intended for writing. Kate called it "the escape." Amid the clutter of a makeshift desk of milk crates back in Nebraska, Kate's answering machine was full of messages from Jack's-soon-to-be-ex-wife's lawyers trying to establish Jack's
infidelity. Many more of the messages were from Jack himself. ("Hey, buttercup, we'll be out of this mess before you know it.") Kate knew that the wife should have signed the papers two months ago, but she didn't want to be a part of Jack's mess.

She remembered feeling relieved when she arrived in Colorado. During that ten hour drive she deliberated the details of her life with Jack, from the initial meeting in a supermarket parking lot to the first time they'd made out in the stacks of a library.

"...And then there was that one day," Marion continued. "I'll never forget. You were up in the neighbor's tree house. And that boy, what was his name -- Randy -- pushed you from way up there. I saw it all from the ground, waiting my turn to climb up." The ambulance swerved to the right. Kate groaned. "These stupid ambulance drivers. Don't they know any better? Aren't they trained?" Marion glared at the young EMT across from her. He ignored her. "So anyway, there I was, staring up at you while you're hanging from one hand on a branch. And when you fell, I thought this is it. No more big sister. But you came out with a minor sprain and a few bruises. And that Randy kid got it, didn't he?

"Oh, Katie, I can see the hospital from here. You're going to be just fine. You feel okay, don't you?" Kate nodded, wanting only to get in there, to have them give her another blast of something morphine-based. With a final lurching swerve, the ambulance pulled in front of a pair of sliding glass doors.
Once Kate came back to the real world instead of flitting awake between pain medicines, she found Marion gently caressing her cast.

"You're awake," she breathed, pressing a palm to Kate's forehead. "Jesus, we've been worried. It took the doctor so long to set you up. Thank God you're okay." Marion smoothed the limp hair from Kate's face. Kate's eyes were gummy, making Marion look like she was behind a scrim: her normally chiseled features were soft; her black, blunt hair fuzzy. "I called home. Steph wants to see you. I told her about the fall. She's worried sick. She keeps talking about your leg bent up, 'twisted round.'" Marion's blue eyes were as bright as ever, though her usually crisp clothes were a bit crumpled.

Kate's gaze slipped from Marion to the wall behind her and she asked, "Can I have some water?" Her mouth had that old, unused taste.

"I'll get you some. There's none here," Marion looked around, then stood up. Pointing a finger, she said, "Stay here. I'll be right back," and hurried off.

Kate looked around the room. Flowers lined the window and some wilted balloons graced the monotony of the paste-colored walls. Marion had always been scared of balloons. On one of her early birthdays, some boys had started stomping on all the bright balloons and Marion had run off. Later, Kate found her in the closet unable to stop crying.

Now Marion clipped through my hospital door, briskly balancing a pitcher and two glasses. She seemed more crisp, like the small task had ironed out her edges. "Had to wring the nurse's arm for these," she said as she stopped at the bed and began to pour. "She kept telling me to just wait a minute, she'd come do it herself. I know what a minute is to these white-coats." She handed Kate the glass and sat down on the bed.
"Thanks." The water tasted of antiseptic.

"Now listen Kate," Marion began, taking one of her hands. "When we get home, I don't want you to worry about a thing. Dennis has talked to Steph about keeping quiet and not bothering you. We'll call that department of yours and see how long you can stay, okay? Just leave everything up to me."

"Marion, I don't want to be a burden."

"Oh, stop it. Everything is going to be just fine."

Later that afternoon, Dennis came by the hospital to pick up Kate. He told her that Marion would be home later after she dropped by her office to "arrange things." Kate wanted to know what sort of arranging he meant but didn't have the energy to ask. At home, Steph helped Kate wash her hair in the kitchen sink. She climbed up on the counter and mixed the soap into the hair, squishing individual clumps with her small hands. She babbled as she scrubbed, about short hair and how she wished Mommy would let her cut hers, about picking at a scab on her knee at daycare and getting yelled at, about a boy named Tommy she was in love with.

After Kate dried her hair, Marion came home for dinner. Dennis made a tuna casserole and peas while Kate watched Steph set the table. "Where do the forks go, Aunt Kate?" Kate pointed, telling her she thought it was all backwards. Forks should go on the right, since most people were right-handed. Steph looked at Kate, her eyebrows knit. "But it's a tradition," she scolded.
Kate considered this, hoping Steph wouldn't embrace fanatical religion when she grew up for the same reason. "Steph, tradition isn't always good."

"Says who?" came Dennis' voice from the kitchen. "Ronald Reagan certainly thinks it's okay." Dennis was a soft man, with dimples and thinning hair: a dyed-in-the-wool Democrat if there ever was one.

Marion sat crosslegged in an oversized sweatshirt and jeans. Her hair swung just under the ears where it cut off, the effect making her look much younger than she was. She chucked Steph under the chin and turned to Kate. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm not too bad." Kate turned to Steph. "You want to have a race?" Steph giggled.

"Well Kate," Marion began, "I've talked to your department chair and it looks like we've bought you a couple more weeks if you want them. You know you can stay here," Marion looked at Dennis, "and of course you don't want to go back to that mess in Nebraska with the leg and everything. So, we'll just take care of you here until you can get back to teaching."

Being awkward and dependent upon Marion sounded less than ideal to Kate, but the truth was she wasn't sure if she was prepared to deal with Jack.

"I'm a little worn out, Marion. Can we decide for sure in the morning?"

Little tugs appeared at the corners of Marion's mouth. "Okay," she nodded. She turned her head to tell Steph where the good napkins were kept.

"Anyone want to eat?" asked Dennis as he emerged with the steaming casserole dish.

"Me! Me!" said Steph, her hands holding the napkins.

"Well, then, let's dig in."
Dinners at Marion's house were similar to the ones of the sisters' childhood. Everyone talked a lot about politics and reached for things instead of passing. No one ever said grace. Any men Kate had ever brought home for dinner never quite got used to all the commotion. They said things like, "Please pass the butter," and "Thank you very much," while the rest of the family argued over the mayor's platform. For the two years of their affair, Kate had not taken Jack to meet her parents. Maybe it was because Jack would get his elbows greasy along with the rest of them, and Mom would be charmed before she even knew he was married. She'd sequester Kate in the kitchen while pouring coffee for dessert and say, "This is such a nice young man. Do you think it's something serious?" Then Kate would have to explain Jack's situation.

After dinner, everyone cleared the dishes, although Kate just handed them to Steph from the table. Dennis took Steph up for a bath and Marion poured two glasses of wine. Watching her move about the dining room, Kate realized that the immediate version of her was not the one Kate carried in her mind. Each time Kate looked at her, she was surprised by the shorter haircut, expecting to see a head of long, flowing hair pulled up in a ponytail. Marion's face was beginning to show wrinkles, her body sagged a little at the hips. She seemed larger than she should, not someone to climb backyard trees or hang upside-down from Steph's swing set.

"I hope white is okay. I know you prefer red," she said as she sat at the table across from me.

"No, it's fine. What made you think I liked red more?"
"Oh," Marion took a sip from her glass. "I guess when you were in college and you would sometimes take me with you on your beer runs, you always picked up a bottle of red wine."

"Really." Kate smiled to herself. Red wine had been the fad of her then boyfriend, Kyle.

"How was work?" Kate asked. She knew little about what Marion did for a living: all that frosted glass and those brass nameplates.

"The usual. I'm working on an immigration case. Tedious stuff, really."

Dennis appeared on the landing, telling them that Steph wanted to say goodnight and then he was going to burrow away to do some reading. Steph padded down in her Sesame Street pajamas, soft and clean. Kate inhaled the top of her head as she hugged her, smelling the mix of child and shampoo. Then Steph went to hug Marion. Kate watched them, Marion cradling Steph's head and Steph's thin arms wrapped around her mother. The two were frozen momentarily, and Kate thought of them as a scene at the end of a long tube; a Kaleidoscope through which she peered where shapes didn't move if you held absolutely still.

Then Steph bounded away, up the stairs to Dennis. He took her small hand in his and led her to the bedroom.

"She's precious," said Kate, watching the two figures fade into the dim of the hallway.

"Yes, my bundle of joy," Marion agreed.

"When I think about it, you know, it's kind of crazy that my little sister has a child."

Marion lifted her face, curious. "What do you mean?"
"That just yesterday you were asking me about your algebra or how far to let some boy go with you."

"Oh." She was quiet for a moment. "I suppose you still feel protective of me."

"Of course I do. You're my baby sister."

Marion's winced, almost imperceptibly. She shifted in the chair, rubbing the stem of her wineglass between her fingers. Then she set her jaw, as if she were readying herself.

"Kate, as your sister, you should know that I'm the one worried about you. You haven't said anything about this Jack business since you've been here." Marion kept her gaze at her glass, clinking her wedding band against it.

"Well, there's not a whole lot to say. We're sort of at odds, at the moment."

"But how can that be?" Marion asked, reaching halfway across the table, hand spread flat. "He's divorcing his wife for you. You no longer have to worry about when you're going to get caught."

Kate paused. "Marion, I'm not going to marry Jack."

"Then why did you get him to dump his wife?"

"I didn't. He did the dumping."

"You certainly participated, didn't you?"

Kate delayed before answering. "He didn't tell me he was going to tell his wife, Marion. It just happened. He meant it as a surprise, I guess. I was supposed to be thrilled, but I wasn't." Kate remembered when Jack came to the apartment that day, beaming. He held a dozen wrapped roses with a card that read "freedom."
"So Kate," Marion had a edge in her voice. "When is this going to become tiring for you? After falling in love with a married man, you tell me that if he isn't married, he isn't interesting. That's just ridiculous."

"I didn't say he wasn't interesting." Kate would have stormed out had she been able. "I said he's not the one."

"You have been sliding around all your life; you live in a house that always looks like it's ready to be packed up at any moment. And when commitment knocks on that door, you do pack up. It's become a habit."

"A habit worth keeping if my destiny is to be with a man like Jack."

"Jesus, Kate. You've been with a man like Jack for two years. More to the point, you busted up a fifteen-year-old marriage. Aren't you happy yet?"

"I guess I'm just not like you and Dennis." Kate said Dennis' name with a hiss.

Marion looked stung. Kate knew that being with Jack for two years was a long time. It had been a comfortable two years. Her life had finally found a rhythm. She taught in the days, went back to her house at night, occasionally had Jack for an evening. Her friends were also her colleagues: they barbecued. On the weekends she read trashy horror novels -- Stephen King, Clive Barker -- and perfected her recipe for chocolate chip cookies. Kate's life with Jack had not been sordid, as Marion assumed. It had been easy.

"I just don't understand why you do it," Marion said like a sigh. She got up from the table and picked up our glasses with one hand. "I'm going to bed. Do you want me to help you up the stairs?"

"Thanks, no. I'm going to stay here for a while."
"Okay. Fine. Goodnight. Let's see if we get arrangements nailed down tomorrow, okay? Get you settled in here for the long haul?"

"We'll see."

Marion put the glasses in the sink, came back over to Kate and touched the top of her head. "You know I love you, don't you?"

"Yes." Kate looked up at her. "I love you, too."

Marion nodded with an air of satisfaction, crossed to the stairs, and was gone.

Kate hobbled to the couch in the next room and stretched out. The family room had a comfortableness about it, paneled in warm wood with thick, dark carpeting. Her sister's tidy life appeared in the pictures above the mantel: Marion and Dennis at the top of a mountain in Colorado; Steph ripping open a gift; Marion's family arm and arm with Mom and Dad at Christmas; their wedding party standing on the steps of the church. Kate's own face was sober in the last, her body wrapped in pink taffeta, hands holding her sister's train. Marion and Dennis had a quick courtship. "When you know, you know," Marion had said with a shrug.

Kate felt a little giddy, as if she'd had three glasses of wine instead of one. Closing her eyes and pressing a hand to her forehead, she remembered a time when she had owned a real crystal ball. Kate had seen it in an Oriental shop window, perfectly spherical and resting on a bronze stand. She had pressed her nose to the glass, peering at the way light played over its surface. Mom was there at her shoulder, telling her it wasn't a toy and she'd break it if she touched it, and yet Mom secretly bought it for Kate's eleventh birthday.
Kate cherished that ball. Marion always tried to touch it, but Kate never let her. For hours she'd sit on the bed, eyes searching the ball's bright inner core for some clues about her future. She was too young to know how to ask the right questions, or, for that matter, understand any answers, and often she'd simply stare blindly past her precious doll house or clothespin rocking chair in frustration. This was the shroud of her childhood, her bedroom, and amid its hushed security, Kate pondered escape. She looked for a boyfriend's face to appear; her body in a lush wedding gown. Believing that she would be told all in time, she locked herself away every day after school, moving her hands over the ball, asking, asking. Who will love me? Kate held the ball to the sunlight from the window, watching the prism of light it threw upon the wall, looking for a face—a dark, smiling, older face. Who will he be?

One afternoon Kate came home from school to find her ball missing from its secret place behind the cedar chest. Frantic, she combed the house. When she found nothing, her hands returned to the empty place to feel if the ball had dissolved somehow, leaving behind a sticky residue. Maybe, magically, it had disappeared for some reason. At dinner that night, Kate kept quiet while the family buzzed. She was afraid to ask them about the ball because she thought she's be blamed for being careless. Marion kept looking at her, poking Kate for a response. Kate simply shook her head, keeping her gaze to her plate. When they were finally excused, she went to her room and shut the door. Kate lay on her bed, glared at the ceiling, sure now that she would not find him; that her destiny was lost.

Later, Marion told Kate that she had taken the ball while they sat at the end of Kate's bed. Marion said everything quickly, eyes averted. As Kate listened
to her, she rubbed her palms against the patchwork comforter. Marion confessed she had thrown it into a pond just south of their house because she thought the Lady of the Lake, whom she had read about at school, would take the ball as a gift and come rising up to repay her with a wish. Mom had found out and insisted that Marion tell Kate the truth. "Katie, can you ever forgive me? I'm so, so sorry," Marion said, sobbing.

That night Kate watched the ceiling over her bed for a long time. The headlights of passing cars made parallel swaths of light across the shadows, but there was no magic in them. She longed for the ball; for the feel of its cold, smooth weight in her palm. And she blamed Marion for the treachery, for the fact that Marion had destroyed her chance at a happy life.

Kate opened her eyes and studied Marion's face in the pictures. Even though Marion had little crinkly laugh lines, she stood tall and steady and mostly sober in the frames -- a woman reliably connected to the world. Marion always knew the names of constellations and all the planets in the solar system; she could tell Steph which berries out behind the house were poisonous and which were good in breakfast cereal. Once, using a small diagram of a spreadsheet sketched on an old phone bill, Marion had explained to Kate how to organize her checkbook on computer. Kate knew none of these things. She couldn't use a compass or decipher Publisher's Clearing House Sweepstakes directions or remember idioms -- saying things like "Easy as cake" and "Ugly as a doorway."

Kate felt suddenly afraid of not knowing things. She looked around her, seeing books she had never read, kinds of wood she could not name, reproductions of art from time periods lost to her. Commitment meant
pretending to know something, pretending to know how it feels to love someone for the rest of your life. How could she do that? The world changes, legs break, crystal balls are lost, love recedes. Messiness is all Kate understood. She rubbed her palms on the crimson fabric of Marion's couch, its touch a comfort. Gravity held her, the couch and her aching leg fast. She sat without motion, and in that moment, was secure.
Nadine calls me to tell me she's getting a divorce. I breathe quick breaths and keep my body motionless while she talks. She's divorcing Scott almost eighteen months to the day after her wedding. I was in that wedding. As her "personal attendant" it was my job to run to the store for extra hose, help light candles, arrange hors d'oeuvres and rub scuffs off shoes. Nadine tore the bumper off her Rabbit when she picked up the flowers, running over a concrete divider in the florist's parking lot. I had to think fast because she was losing it, so we told her parents she was sideswiped. Before the ceremony, I was the one who got her into that fabulous, frilly white dress, button by button, and held her hand mirror while she put on one last layer of lipstick. Nadine planned her wedding for over a year, each detail recorded in a wedding book, each stage of the process captured on Kodachrome, but now her voice is weary and muffled like speaking through wadding, telling me it's all over. She says the divorce was announced in the paper today.

Eighteen months. Nadine's world is whirling away from her, helter-skelter, all of those trim and well-reasoned promises strewn to the wind. She's unhappy, she says. Ever since the wedding, her idea of a perfect life has slowly eroded. She even went through post-nuptial depression counseling as if walking down the aisle were the most important event of her marriage. When I ask her what went wrong, what motivated her to quit, she says Scott decided they didn't have the relationship he had envisioned. Maybe Nadine's new-found job security, and hence reliable income, shook him up. Maybe her passion for exercise -- once Scott's terrain as star football player -- gave him pause. In any
case, he took up with some girl from med school. Nadine says she's already been out in her new cowboy boots, line-dancing with friends from work. She says she's not going to waste any time.

Fingering the phone cord, I send out thoughts; I think of where my husband and I are in relation to this mess. Ever since my own wedding eleven months ago, I've taken control for granted. I envisioned my husband and I as two reasonably intelligent people consenting to mutual debt, agreeing to do the budget together, cook together, clean together, shop together: the Siamese twin pledge. Yet the reality is that decisions don't always wait for both of us; dinner falls to whomever arrives home first; and cleaning is left for the moment when the toothpaste buildup in the sink motivates a half hour of frenzied scrubbing, sweeping and hiding. The everydayness is messy.

The people around me assume ours is a tidy life; they ask questions "How's married life treating you?" or "Is the honeymoon over yet?" They expect a calm and cheerful response, perhaps a not-serious sarcasm. They don't want a description of the way our marriage really is; they want the media version, crystallized in an oral sound bite. When asked such things, I usually just point to a picture we keep on the wall as if the flat representation says all there is to say on the subject.

It's a silly picture we took the day after our wedding. We came back to my parent's house in the morning to load the car for Colorado, and my crazy Aunt Shirley yanked at our shirts, asking for pictures. We grumbled, eager to get on the road, to begin a new family apart from this one, but we got dressed once more in our respective tux and gown, just the same one day later. (I've since been told what bad luck I've brought on our heads by doing so.) The morning was one of
those early summer ones with rising heat and a backdrop of impeccable blue sky. Aunt Shirley insisted on taking all of the pictures in the backyard. In the photograph we keep on our living room wall, I'm on Andrew's shoulders, my skirt surrounding him like a giant, fringed bell with Andrew as the clacker. It's a fleeting reality: a moment where two people posed, joyful, clouds and mosquitoes and flowers caught in various stages of flight and blooming. My children and grandchildren and possibly even some researcher digging through archives will view me in this moment, where my uneven haircut, small red mark above an eyebrow, and newly-cleaned teeth become symbols of who and what I am, suggestions of how much sugar I eat, my choice of hairdresser, and possibly the fastidiousness of personal hygiene habits. It's a picture immortalizing a moment that may or may not be definitive in my life, but here it is, framed, edified, those small eyes peering out from the surface into my real, seeing ones.

What was that picture-framed me thinking? Maybe I focused on Aunt Shirley fumbling with her tripod, typical bright red balls dangling from her earlobes. Or maybe I noticed the heaviness of my bouquet, the edges of the roses slowly browning. I might have thought about the long drive ahead of us, the monotonous crossing of the Plains on I-80, ten hours to Denver, two more into the mountains. Or perhaps the warmth of the day, the scratchiness of the lace on my legs, the rumbling of our whimsical, wedding-night pizza from my intestines. I'm smiling, clean teeth winking, and I'm sure I remember happiness, ridiculous euphoria even, surging through the electrified air of a post-wedding Sunday.
This tiny woman, a miniscule me, a symbol of my own generation yet shrouded in the wrappings once belonging to my mother, where is she now? She's lounging on this couch, ear at the phone, sipping lukewarm coffee, listening to her friend. Today I wear comfort, not scratchiness: my husband's large, torn sweatshirt. My hair is cut straight by a better stylist. Temporal reality moves in a fluid continuum; my hand lets go of the phone cord; my eyes drop from the picture; I remember again a time when Scott and Nadine went with us on a camping trip. We were the prototypes of 90's newlyweds: energetic, full of aerobicized muscle and vegetarian blood, biking, cooking on the grill, seeing who could climb to the top of the observation tower the fastest. Our late-night discussions focused on a hazy future, a depressed job market, a constriction of graduate school admissions. We marveled at Scott who was actually studying medicine, probing once-live bodies, seeing each of our inner workings from the inside. We congratulated Nadine for passing her RN examination and debated with her whether she should run the New York marathon. Scott asked about my teaching, about what it felt like to be considered an authority, someone who supposedly knows something of value. We teased Andrew for his earring, for his Prince Valiant haircut, speculating if he'd be worse off in the job market because of them. Now that reality is gone. What's left are the static representations, the artifacts: Nadine's wedding ring, a bunch of pressed and dried flowers, her own pictures.

Her photographs are ones where Scott's wrapped his arms over her shoulders and they've smiled, staging happiness for a future to hold onto. Their poses are for modern culture's consumption: marriage is big business; security, a much sought commodity. Yet except for the artificial merriment, they were
incapable of sustaining mirth after the flashbulb. And so I examine this frivolous picture of Andrew and me and ask, Does the woman in the photo represent me? From the exact millisecond of the taking of the picture, I've existed as a married woman, as a "wife." Here, now, I am a living icon of marriage. If that archivist could capture my look now, and the next second, and the million seconds after, could she reconstruct my life as a modern spouse? Is my partnership role discernible from a gesture, look, turn of torso? Does my smiling, jubilant face somehow reveal what modern marriage is for a young woman?

I am the product of a generation of Type-A women, driven by an unsure economy, overprotective and neurotic mothers, and ever-expanding opportunities for women. I know I am more marketable because I happen to have breasts. My husband knows he might make less than I; he might stay home and raise our child. Modern culture urges me, "Flash, move, scintillate, stimulate, catch our eye and keep it coming," while billing marriage as a simple formula: seek a solid investment strategy; buy a souped-up minivan; eat as much bran as your intestines can take; and all else will fall into place. This glitzy version of marriage asks for it all -- now it's not just hunt animals and grow food to feed the family; wash dirty things; make babies; and teach children the basics of work and social finesse. Now it's a partnership of acting together as money-managers, mutual therapists, lovers, parents, educators, housecleaners, nurturers, and successful (i.e., rich) individuals. Husbands are supposed to be our best friends, which poses a conflict of interest: the person who knows the most about me and assists in creating stress in my life is simultaneously
supposed to be ready to hear all deep secrets and personal fantasies at any given moment.

This current system means work. On top of all the various expectations for the relationship, it's like I'm a duck who's been mated with a fish. I've always found it easy in the company of other ducks because we have such similar thought-patterns, decision-making processes, discussion methods, ways of loving and being loved. The society of the air is cake: I was born to it. My little feathered frame rings with archetypal flight. But my husband is a fish, blowing bubbles and flapping fins. I quack. He makes funny motions with his mouth. I am a Christmas dinner treat. He is salmon steak. I don't understand him, this other species, yet I am expected to bear and raise children with him, create a whole and sustaining life with him.

But what's my alternative? Should I engage in multi-marriages? I'd have to introduce all two or four or six of my husbands to the family, get them all approved through Dad's little basketball ritual, argue with them all about where we're going to spend the holidays. Or the other extreme: I live alone, contracting parentage like a mortgage, choosing lovers only as lovers (roses, candles, chocolates: the works), keeping separate, and probably female, best friends. But I'd miss putting my cold feet on that same pair of legs night after night. I'd miss frantic family meals, Mom and Dad as titular heads of the table, spooning and cutting and telling horrendous stories of my childhood for Andrew's entertainment. I'd miss our patterns of arguing, the predictability, the knowledge that it's possible to do homework, cook a meal, balance the checkbook and make love all in one evening with the same person.
I've committed myself to a "good," stable choice, a man who listens patiently to my lesson plans the night before ("That phrase illustrates your point really well," he says), brews coffee, folds towels, defers dictating big decisions, cleans the toilet, surprises with occasional flowers. He is a person who doesn't expect me to hold in my tummy, who will forgive my face when it turns from twenty-five to fifty, who actually checks on the risks of cancer for birth control pills at the library. He's not the Marlboro Man of my mother's generation, using sex as his only form of intimacy. But I suspect he won't leave me for a small, spry blonde when we're done raising the kid, and even if for some unforeseen reason he does, I can count on my own money being there to see me through.

The picture itself is a transformation, I suppose, a fluidity of movement from a time when women in wedding dresses stood by their husbands rather than wrapped their legs over their husbands' shoulders. There's an ease in the pose, a looseness of limbs suggesting prior intimacy. Andrew's face is bent a little, trying to miss my encroaching hem, and I'm holding the dress down a bit in a gesture of seemliness (probably for my Aunt). So the image is also in transition, two people caught in the act of doing two things at once. Perhaps these details will not elude the archivist; she will note the activity, the comfort, the change in manners. She will see this couple as emblematic of some sort of bridge between hard-and-fast marriages and ones which disintegrate after only eighteen months. I cannot stay married for the sheer sake of marriage, as women have in the past, but I also cannot break my marriage because I'm disappointed that the minivan doesn't equate happiness. The evolution of the Macho Man means I'm expected to feel more than immediately dainty and
feminine and desirable; instead, my husband is to be my economic-emotional-spiritual partner as well as my lover. My face is history; my smile is genuine.

I see Nadine, caught, gasping, bleeding, left with vestiges of her version of truth. She might be sitting as I do now on a couch; she might be grimacing at a cup of cold, congealing coffee with cream; she might be looking at a picture of her and Scott, that blip of her life trapped in the eternal facade of an eager, radiant, newlywed couple. I encourage her to run the marathon in November. She says to say hello to Andrew. I tell her to call anytime she needs to. I hang up the receiver, standing to reach out and touch my small form behind the frame. This is me, I think; this is the compromise I've made. My dress flashes in that June sunlight, and I think how in two weeks Andrew and I will drive to the Ozarks for our first anniversary. We're supposed to eat year-old crumbly cake, make a romantic card for each other. We're supposed to be sappy and love-struck, giddy. But maybe I should grasp his upper arms firmly in mine, look in his eyes, stare with determination, and tell him I love him in spite of his perpetual hair in the bathtub, his forgetfulness with the dishes, his neglect of flowers before an intimidating speech. Maybe I should tell him I couldn't be married to anyone else.
fiction: a shadow instead of something real

Tonight it is Nick. Ruth corners him within the first ten minutes of her arrival, reminding him of their shared speech class. He steadily fetches bottled beer from the ice-filled trash bins and hands them to her. She asks him to dance. Nick is taller than most of the other boys at the party; his dark head bobs above everyone else's as he walks back and forth in the crowd. He moves with an athlete's grace, slipping around tight couples, turning his head to miss the top of a doorway.

Ruth is feeling a bit self-conscious at first, looking around her as they talk. But her attention for the University's star basketball player goes unnoticed by the crowd. Nick's one of the nice guys — he usually skips parties. The rumor is he carries a 4.0, but Ruth isn't one to feel intimidated once the stream of cheap beer loosens her up. The dark, the heat and the beer make this boy ultimately look like all the others. Hungry.

She's been through it all before, of course. Boys amble up to her through a jostling throng, lean their forearms against the wall above her head and grin. They ask her about classes, about her plans for summer break. They tell her how much they drank at the last party. They brag about how much they intend to drink that very night as they shake their bottles. ("This is already my fourth.") Ruth has listened to all of their lines, watched their cool, averted eyes. Their itching, jittery bodies always give away their intent. She thinks of it as the lust dance.

Now the bump and grind on the linoleum basement floor is getting too hot, the beer too warm. Ruth suggests they go upstairs and outside, even though
it will be muggy with late-spring heat. Nick agrees as she knew he would. He takes her hand and leads.

Going up the fraternity's wide stairway, Ruth is pressed through a line of familiar, animated faces. Each has its own version of a drunken stupor -- mouths wide and calling, sometimes closed around the top of a bottle, or brushed against the neck of someone else. The girls wear large earrings which jangle as they toss their heads. Ruth feels sticky from the combined body heat as these people work past her. A couple of boys smile dazedly at her, saying "Hey, Ruth," and try to catch her shoulder. She just shakes her head and smiles at them. Once she winks.

Ruth loses Nick's hand at the top of the stairs. He continues to weave toward the door, his wide back turning sideways to avoid the knots of people. Ruth squirms her way past two shouting, waving women, and makes it to the ticket table by the front doors. This is when Kurt "Hook" Hookstra catches her. He has been calling Ruth on a regular basis, asking if she wants to "do something sometime." So far, Ruth has managed to stay polite to him.

"Looking good, Ruth," he breathes, his head inches from her right cheek. Ruth pauses and doubts that she looks very good. She is sweaty, her short hair wet around her ears and at the back of her neck. The old Levi's she's wearing are smudged with basement dirt and her T-shirt has been pulled too much about the neck.

"Thanks, Hook." Then she appraises him -- a long look from his toes up. He is as crisp as any other frat boy, though some fine hairs hang in his eyes.
"You, too."
Hook grins, then gestures at her with his beer. "Who you with? You with anybody, Ruth?"

"Yes."

Hook spreads his pale arms in an animated sweep. "I don't see nobody. You sure you're with somebody, Ruthie?"

"Yes, I'm sure." Ruth imagines Hook in bed, lumbering his way around her breasts, groping the flesh of her thighs. He hangs his pleated pants gently over a chair. And how he would look the next morning -- a pasty shine on his nose.

"Come on, little Ruthie," he says and reaches for her sleeve. "Don't you want to hang with me for a while?" Hook shifts his weight from one shining loafer to the other. Ruth doesn't want to watch him start the dance.

"I'm with Nick McNight." She says it flat, a drop of tepid water.

Hook's smile turns into a curious smirk. "Nick? You're with old Nick tonight? Well, I'll be damned, Ruth." He takes a step back from her, looks at his beer. Just when she thinks he's going to back off, he changes, makes a sly wink at her, and puts his nose close to hers, his beery breath on her face. "Oh, Ruthie. You've had all us frat boys and now you're going for the jock angels, is that it?" He draws back with a lurch, nodding his head. "Yep," he says loudly, "old Ruthie going to saddle up for a prince tonight!" He barks a laugh, his cheeks red with the effort. "Just remember, Ruth. Just remember what kind of girl you are."

Ruth watches him. Then she spits in Hook's face -- a wet spit. Pushing past the ticket-takers and out the front door, Ruth hears Hook swearing behind her. She sees people looking, but she doesn't turn back.
The fraternity has a long cement porch around the front, and people are sitting all along its borders of short brick wall. Nick is nowhere in sight. As Ruth walks toward the end of the porch, people nod to her, tipping their beers her way. A girl from Ruth's house, an overgrown freshman named Sammy, runs up to her with a squeal. Sammy is too slim in her sundress, all knees and teeth.

"Ruth! I need to talk to you right now. You know that boy, the boy that sings in the choir? He's here! I've never seen him at a frat before. Do you think that means he's with a date? I mean, a sorority girl? You know I've liked him forever." Sammy's bright eyes are wide with the drama.

Ruth has had to sit next to Sammy at all the house meetings -- their names are successive alphabetically. While the officers give their reports, Sammy writes notes to Ruth on sorority stationary. Ruth usually doesn't read the notes, just nods and says nothing. "I don't think I know him," Ruth says and shrugs.

"Of course you know him; don't be silly. He's the one from choir. He's the one I've told you about over and over. I sit right in front of him. There!" Sammy's finger points like an accusation. "He's over there. Between Rose Philpot and Laurie Reisser. Can you see him?" Sammy stands on her toes to get a better look. "They better not be with him or try to hit on him. I just know Laurie knows I would die for him."

Ruth glances over, seeing a boy she once made out with in a bathroom. He's wedged between two deeply tanned women.

"Oh, him." Ruth wants rid of her, so she follows with, "Sammy, he's not that great."
"What do you mean he's not that great? He's absolutely gorgeous. You just don't see a good thing when it's right there in front of you." Sammy swivels on her bony ankle, fanning her hair across Ruth's face as she turns. "I'll see you later, Ruth," she calls as she strides off.

As Ruth watches Sammy go, she spies Nick. He's over on the other side of the porch, leaning his head toward another boy. He looks intent, as if the words of his companion are important and grave. Ruth makes her way to him, standing just beyond their conversation, waiting.

"Coach said Frahm is going to red-shirt in the fall. What will we do if he does?" The boy beside Nick is another basketball player with too many freckles and slow eyes.

Nick is shaking his head: a sad, methodical shake. Then he turns to Ruth, his body motions fluid in the light that bathes the porch. "What happened to you?" he asks, eyes on her.

She opens her hands in an I-don't-know gesture. She's pleased he hasn't forgotten her. Nick nods to his friend who briefly says hello to Ruth and leaves. Nick puts a careful arm around Ruth's shoulders.

"Who said you could do that?" she teases, touching his arm.

He doesn't answer, taking the last drink from his bottle.

"Good party, you think?" Ruth asks. "They spent a lot of money on this one. End-of-the-year bash and all."

"Want to go?" asks Nick. He waits for a reply before moving.

"Sure, where?" Ruth feels a twinge of excitement. She looks up into his solemn face and sees nothing. She has no idea if this is a hit or not.
"Back," Nick says and gestures vaguely towards her side of the campus. "I'll walk you to your house. I'm ready to get away from here."

As the two of them cross in front of the porch toward the street, Ruth sees Hook waving his beer in front of a girl sitting on the wall. The girl is giggling. Ruth nuzzles her head up against Nick's side. She's a full foot shorter than he is. Watching Hook as long as she can, she finally gives up trying to give him a face.

The farther Nick and Ruth get from the party, the more the sound blends into one rumbling noise. Nick removes his arm but Ruth quickly takes his hand as they walk past the darkened campus buildings. Ruth thinks the buildings look a little like eyeless monsters. The brightness of the moon and the haze of humidity allow for a ghostly kind of light to penetrate the trees just beyond the sidewalk. The effect is disembodied and threatening.

She hears herself chattering happily, as if listening to a stranger. "... so what made you think of coming here? With your talent you should have been able to choose your school."

Nick smiles. His teeth are a startling white from the moon. "I guess I didn't expect to go to school for basketball." He pauses, as if making a decision before he speaks, but only says that he wants to be a teacher.

Ruth can't imagine him as a teacher, tall and hard above a class of thin, pimpled youth. "What do you want to teach?" she pursues.

Ruth watches Nick's profile in the purplish light. "History."

"Why?"

"I like it." Nick's voice is cautious. "I see those dates, you know, in my mind's eye. See the people in waistcoats and hoop skirts. I'd like to ask them
what it was like." His gaze is up at the tree line. Ruth likes the shape of his jaw at this angle. She wants to trace the slope of his nose with her finger.

The effect of the beer is wearing thin, making Ruth a bit uneasy. She isn't sure if she can say the right things. She decides that he's trying to feel her out, see if she has a sense of humor. "I've never done well with history myself," Ruth ventures. "I always got the Spanish Armada and Christopher Columbus confused."

Nick's eyes have dropped and he doesn't smile now. He clenches her hand a bit, slick in his palm. His voice sounds suddenly mechanical. "History is kind of boring, I guess."

Ruth doesn't have any idea what to make of him. She thinks that she'll just stay quiet, but then she says, "So, do you get tired of all your popularity as the big basketball star, or what?" She smiles as she talks, deliberately tossing her hair off her forehead.

Nick frowns slightly, then looks ahead down the sidewalk. "I don't feel much like a star."

He says this so simply, with such utter lack of feeling that she takes it as a joke. She throws back her head in a false gesture and laughs. A gaudy, loud laugh into the glowing night.

They walk for a while in silence. The air is choked with its own heat, and Ruth feels the dampness beneath her breasts and along her back. Occasionally the noise of a conversation or a revved-up car drifts to them from the moonlit streets. As they near her sorority, Ruth decides she needs to be frank.
"Look, Nick. Why don't we go to your place instead. The house doesn't allow men on the second floor. We . . .," she thinks of how to say what she means, "we wouldn't get any privacy here."

They stop in front of her large brick house trimmed in peach. Above the door is the sorority insignia, blazing in small, white bulbs. Nick looks down at her, his features hardened by the glare of the sign. He takes her free hand in his, holding her like a departing relative.

"Ruth, I don't think so." His shadowed eyes look right at her as he gives her hand a slight, noncommittal squeeze. "I'll call you. After finals. We'll get together in a couple of weeks, okay?" His voice is dull, rehearsed.

Ruth nods her head, saying, "Well, I guess this is goodnight, then."

Nick gives her a lopsided smile and leans his head down as if to kiss her, but just brushes her cheek with his lips. As he turns away, Ruth quickly slips into the entryway of the house. She turns to look over her shoulder and watch Nick's lanky form walking away. Then she punches the code for the inner door lock and quietly pads up the stairs, past the housemother's suite. The hall of the second floor is hushed — too early for many people to be back from the parties. Her own room is dark and cool with electric air. After she flips on the light, she sees a note taped to the message board telling her that her roommate is staying with her boyfriend for the night.

Ruth sits on her bed, the bottom bunk. She sweeps her eyes across the clutter of the room, counting gifts. A red heart-shaped teddy bear, a pair of champagne glasses, a half dozen roses already wilting. She pulls off her shoes, setting them neatly by the headboard. She wonders whom to call. She can't go to bed yet; she's not sleepy.
Her first thought is Nick. She could call him, explain that she was drunk and didn't know what she was saying earlier. Ask him to go get food or a cup of coffee, something without expectation. Ruth imagines how she'd turn his mood. Then she dreams about the drive back from the restaurant. She thinks how they might stop at the soccer field at the edge of campus, her body bright in the gray grass, his dark above her. Her thoughts are interrupted by the look on his face when he left. Suddenly it looks like pity instead of something tender.

She rifles through the last few weekends in her head, turning their activities over like a roll-a-dex. She settles on the image of a boy named Trevor. Trevor is short, blonde, blue-eyed and wealthy. He cracks jokes about overweight girls and smokes pot. He had been quick in bed, but held her for the rest of the night and didn't force her to walk home alone in the early morning. She thumbs through the campus directory on her desk and gets his number.

As she listens to the phone ring, she looks at her face in the mirror above the dresser. Her hair is askew, her makeup faded. There is a short, faint streak of something dark on her left cheekbone. She moistens her thumb and begins to rub it off as the phone is answered.

"Room sixty-nine for a very good time. Can I help you?"

The voice is deep, rolling. "Is Trevor around?" There is short, clipped laughter in the background. It is the laugh of a tipsy woman.

"And who may I say is calling?" the voice booms.

"Tell him it's Ruth."

"Ruth? I don't know if Trevor knows a Ruth." The receiver is covered and she can hear the muffled voice talk to someone else. "Well, little miss," the
voice draws back on the line, "you're in luck. He seems to have a glimmer of recognition in his eye."

"Gimme the phone, you shit." Trevor's voice sounds small and trivial next to his friend. In the background, the big voice laughs.

"Hello? Ruth? Is that you?"

"Yeah, hi. Are you busy? Am I bothering you?"

"No! Not at all. We're all just drinking the night away. Shooting the shit. What you doing?"

"Nothing, really." Ruth eyes the vacant room about her. It seems closed, jumbled and lifeless.

"Well, hell, come on over! We've got plenty of beer. And this asshole Matt is going to be leaving very soon with his broad." A dim roar rises from this comment. "And," Trevor speaks in a loud whisper, "we could be alone later."

"Okay." Ruth thinks through reapplying her makeup, changing her shirt. "I'll be there in twenty minutes or so."

"I'll be waiting." Trevor hangs up quickly, the commotion of his room snapped off with a click. The silence hangs around her, a fog to wade through.

She begins by picking out a brightly colored shirt. She pulls the damp one over her head and throws it in the direction of the dirty clothes hamper. Then she decides to change her bra as well, the one she is wearing still sticks. As she rummages in her underwear drawer, she glances back at the mirror. She stops rummaging and stands up straight.

She examines her body, slowly turning one way and then the other. Her shoulders are slender, defined by a high collar bone. Her breasts hang; slight blue veins run crisscross under her large aureole. "Silver dollar nipples," a guy
named Frank told her when she was only fifteen. She picks one breast up, then lets it flop back. She read in a story a few years earlier of two middle-aged women who thought they were washed-up because they didn't pass some game called the pencil test. This test consisted of sticking pencils under your breasts, and if they stayed by themselves, you didn't pass.

Ruth walks over to her roommate's desk. She pulls two pencils from a mug and turns back to the mirror. She lifts her right breast and nestles the pencil under it. It stays. Then she puts the other under her left breast. She walks from the mirror to the door of her room and turns off the overhead light.

In the dark, she fumbles for the belt on her jeans. As she bends to pull them off, the pencils rub against the skin over her ribs. She slides her jeans and underwear to the floor, then turns to open the curtains by the desk.

The room's windows are large, spanning from one foot below the ceiling to the floor. Their view opens behind the sorority house to the parking lot and the cramped backyards from one block over. As she pulls the curtains open, she is instantly surrounded by the light from the moon mixed with amber streetlights. It fans around her body, turning her skin bluish. She touches her fingertips to the glass, finding it warm under her fingers. She is almost colorless in this light; she examines her forearms as if looking at a specimen. They hardly look human to her.

She thinks about what the boys see when they look at her in this kind of light. A bruised woman, perhaps, or a shadow instead of something real. She feels the many prints of the past on her breasts, down her stomach, under her buttocks. They glow in her mind as tiny arcs of phosphorescent brightness, marking her.
She suddenly stands and pushes her whole body against the glass. The pencils stick out from her sides like tiny daggers as she looks up at the wide moon with its circle of haze. She allows the glass to warm her body. When the phone rings some time later, she stays where she is and doesn't answer it.
"Pretty as a picture," Mrs. Lombard said to my mom. We settled ourselves in the chairs farthest from the piano bench. I itched. Mom had starched my white dress stiff, prickling my arms and legs. A cream bow was nestled in my hair. My patent leather shoes gleamed. I tried to see the reflection of my panties in the toes of my shoes while the first kid took his place at the piano. I didn't have much luck.

Mrs. Lombard was my grade-school piano teacher. She held these recitals twice every year, like clockwork. I always played Bach — this year I had graduated to the Minuets. Mrs. Lombard tried to be friendly with my mother whenever she was in the studio, paying me compliments, telling Mom, "Jenny's so talented for a nine-year-old!" Secretly, I knew she was a witch.

Mrs. Lombard had lots of strange-looking vials, ashtrays and vases in her basement where we had my lessons. Her house smelled old, like rotting fruit. I had never seen a Mr. Lombard or any kid Lombards; I imagined she had boiled their bones for her potions, creating the pungent smell of the house. When I looked at Mrs. Lombard's face, she had nothing distinctive in her features, her deep lines erasing the personality she once was. She wore coral on a string around her neck and a big, gaudy ring with a single black stone. I was convinced that if I were to mess up too much, she'd turn me into something horrid — a toad or an eel.
During my lessons, she used a wooden pointer to tap along with the clicking of the metronome. Sometimes she tapped the ledge of the keyboard; other times she tapped my shoulder or my head. Being a stickler for perfection, Mrs. Lombard didn't have much patience. If I accelerated too much or made too many mistakes, whack! — she'd crack the pointer down on the back of my hands, hard. Those days I got into the car to go home with small, red lines over the bridge of my knuckles.

Just then Mom nudged me, and Mrs. Lombard nodded from across the room. It was my turn. I walked the long stretch between my seat and the piano, mindful not to look at the other kids. Reaching the piano bench, I carefully sat down, my hands curled in my starched lap. I looked at the keyboard, the flat white keys divided by the round black ones. Mrs. Lombard's two pianos were old uprights, shiny black, and I could see the reflection of my torso in the piano lid. I couldn't remember how to begin my Minuet. Hearing another kid snuffle, I felt the weight of my mother's anxious stare boring into the white of my back. I raised my hands to the keys, closed my eyes and began.

Dr. Berger's office was small and cluttered. He was a psychology professor who dabbled in music therapy. The first time I went to see him I was seventeen. I remember what he wore -- jeans, cheap tennis shoes and a white fish-net tank top. He was whistling as I entered, gazing at the ceiling, hands locked behind his head of dark curls. His bony legs were propped on a worn wooden desk. As soon
as he saw me, he hopped up and bounded over to where I was, offering me a huge smile. His black skin shone beneath the netting of his tank top.

"I prefer this casual dress stuff -- ties just aren't my style," he explained as he pulled the netting from his chest.

To begin our session, Dr. Berger motioned for me to recline on a threadbare couch. "We're just going to move you through some relaxation techniques." His hands fluttered about his body as he talked.

"I'm going to start by asking you to relax each part of your body, one piece at a time," Dr. Berger said while sinking into an old leather chair next to the couch. He bent one leg over the other at a jaunty angle. "Don't worry about anything for the next hour, ok? You just let the worries of the world go down the drain." He laced his hands and cracked his long, black knuckles.

I fidgeted until comfortable.

"Close your eyes," he instructed.

The dim light that filtered through the cheap venetian blinds made stripes of orange and purple on the inside of my lids while Berger told me to imagine my brain. "Think of that brain of yours just smoothing itself out," he said. I thought of it as gray, of course, tightly coiled, buzzing with electricity. Berger said my brain was a rubber band, one that was twisted tightly and could be slowly unwound. But I didn't think my brain was a rubber band. Instead, I saw it beeping, sending out its signals and receiving ones back. As he talked through each joint and limb of my body, I tried to pinpoint which part of my brain controlled the stage fright. I wondered why I couldn't control that part just as easily as I could control my breathing when I held my breath. I wanted to hold
my fear...big gulps of holding, turning that part of my brain blue, keeping the fear from spreading through me like a fog.

"With each breath you take, energy is flowing out of your fingers and toes," Berger whispered. I envisioned myself in a Walt Disney film -- a real person in an animated world -- my fingers and toes alight with bright bands of orange energy. I threw the energy at Mickey Mouse. He ducked and it hit Cinderella in the side of her head.

Once we moved through my body, Berger told me we were going to take a trip on an elevator. "I'm going to let you in at floor number ten, and then I'll talk you down until we reach one." I wondered how these images were connected -- rubber band, flowing energy, elevator. "As we work you down," he said, "you will become more relaxed with each passing floor. You ready?" I heard him shift his weight in the chair.

"Now just keep breathing steady." He paused for a moment and then said, "Ten."

I built the inside of this elevator. I covered it with mirrors -- even the ceiling had them. There was a wooden handrail around three sides and a deep red carpet at my feet.

"Eight..." I held on to the rail, looking at my reflection in each direction. I decided to wear my favorite jeans and an old sweatshirt. I didn't bother to curl my hair.

"Five..." Looking closer in one of the mirrors, I noticed dark half moons beneath my eyes and speculated that the overhead light was casting shadows. I decided to put on make-up so that they wouldn't be noticeable, rubbing on pink foundation I found in my pocket.
"Three..." I thought I heard the elevator cable break. I felt the swooping plummet and saw my innards splatter as I was smashed flat as a pancake. Then I told myself that this wasn't a very relaxing thought.

"Two..." I looked up through a hole in the ceiling of the elevator and saw Berger still on the tenth floor, leaning casually against the wall, peering his face over the side. He continued to press a button that said "down," while repeating "relax, relax" over and over.

"One..." he mouthed from above. Then, "You've hit the ground floor."

The elevator opened to an ocean at sunset. Berger said it was my special place of relaxation. "You can come here yourself. You can get away from the rat race anytime you want," he told me. Berger asked that I walk down the beach.

As I walked, he said I should imagine myself playing piano at my next competition. "Think of each piece of music, each and every one, and then play through all of them up on that stage under all those lights." An audience was fanned out around a bright stage. I sat upon a wooden bench at its center. A grand piano, its keys polished and white, waited in front of my seated form.

I saw that the audience was mostly made up of piano teachers, balding and sun-spotted. A commanding woman sat in the front row, close to the stage. She didn't smile. She was older, in her fifties, bespectacled and heavy-set. As I looked at her, I noticed the grand piano in her glasses, tiny and distorted. She held a pencil poised over sheaves of music and looked up expectantly. A judge. I couldn't remember one note.

During the visualization Berger chatted on about the salt in the air, a warm breeze, the rustling of grasses on the hills surrounding the beach. From
my position on the stage, I faintly heard the crash of waves, blurred and indistinct, much as in a dream.

My first and only solo piano recital was in the early spring of my tenth-grade year. We held it at my parent's house, and Mom planned a small reception afterward in the dining room. It was to begin at four o'clock, and by two thirty I was dressed, had begun each piece, and had worked through the "starting places" I could start at if I messed up or forgot. This left me an hour and a half to roam the house, bumping into people, watching the fuss that was all on my account.

The relatives arrived first, bearing food, clucking at me in proud tones. My mother told them that I was playing pieces fit for college students. "Jennifer's Debussy was the closing piece for the winner of the Van Cliburn two months ago. She's really advanced for her age," Mom added. The relatives nodded, faces glowing.

My aunt Shirley brought a comb to put in my hair. She had made it from small cloth flowers and fake pearls. At fifteen, my hair was the longest it had been since I was a little girl, and the comb helped to keep it out of my eyes. The colors of the comb matched my floral print dress. My cousin Helen set about to make the food table into a perfect display of color, dishes, and texture. She wouldn't set the crackers next to the mints or the cake next to the cheeses.

Ms. Harris, my high-school piano teacher, arrived next. She was the opposite of old Mrs. Lombard. She was young and tidy, her short, highlighted
hair combed back and her dress pressed and crisp. She busied her hands
straightening programs, patting shoulders, arranging napkins, keeping me out of
the music room and away from the piano. She talked to me about my starting
places, when to bow, the order of the program, what to do if I messed up. She
said, "Never show that you're worried, even if you hit every note wrong. If you
fall off the piano bench, just keep on going."

Mom had that anxious gleam in her eyes. She followed me about, telling
me that it was probably scarier for her than it was for me. "I don't have the
control that you do," she reminded me. "I just have to sit, watch, pray, and hope
for the best." She fed me the typical lines as she pinned my corsage on the front
of my dress. "Imagine everyone in their underwear; remember that the
audience goes to the bathroom just like you; if you make a mistake, no one will
know except me and Ms. Harris." The corsage was heavy and pulled the floral
material away from my body.

The audience finally came, unwrapping themselves from their coats,
bearing small gifts, giving me private smiles. Making my mind blank, I looked
at them, packaged in shimmering garments like exotic fish in an aquarium, each
pressing up to the glass to see me better. I was the sprinkler of food, bits of music,
a little boredom, a chance to get out of the house and away from their kids for
two hours. As I agonized over eleven pieces, two breaks, and one encore, they
would think about their week, the fight that they had had with their spouse, or
when they were going to make time to do their taxes.

I looked away from the streaming people and saw Dad in the next room,
whispering urgently to Mom, leaning into her. She shook her head as he spoke,
looking away. Dad turned from her, angry, balling his fists. He walked toward
me, and as he came close said, "You'll be okay, Little Bear," using the nickname he gave me as a baby. "You'll do it fine." He patted my head as he passed. He didn't look convincing, just sad and helpless.

The time approached. I went into the kitchen, away from the chattering throng. I flexed my hands, wiggled my fingers. I wiped my moist palms on a paper towel. I looked outside the kitchen window, into the backyard, and thought about walking away, into the neighborhood, into the trees and green and sun. These people would still have their coffee and cake and I would keep walking along, gaining speed. As I looked, I saw my own face in the window, the grass showing through my cheeks, bare branches coming out of my head. I could see my eyes, wide and startled, a young doe caught by a hunter, prepared by her mother for this moment, but not knowing what to do now that the moment had arrived.

Then Mom rounded the corner into the kitchen, grasped my upper arm and said, "Time to go."

My memory of the recital is blurry up to the moment I blacked out the piece. It was a Mendelssohn Song Without Words. I had begun this piece only six weeks before the recital and had memorized it quickly. My fingers hadn't had enough time to learn the movements by rote. After playing the first three measures, I couldn't remember what came next -- couldn't feel where to go, couldn't grasp a pattern from the keys. I tried to begin a few times, then turned to look at my piano teacher. Ms. Harris was calm and whispered, "Go on to the next piece."

I did. Debussy's Gardens in the Rain, the flashiest and best memorized piece I was working on at the time. I started rather well, with the quiet melody
and whizzing left hand runs. Then came the parallel octaves with the left and right hands together and I started to lose control. I was playing too fast. It became a game of clank, batter and fly as fast as you can. When I got to the repeated parts, I chose to skip them and plunge on, afraid that at any moment my fingers would lose the keys entirely. The performance was all technique and no feeling. I pounded out the notes, one clicking on top of the other, my left hand garbling up and down, my right spearing out a melody of sorts. I sacrificed all of the soft, sensitive moments, pushing to get it over with.

Walking out for my second break, mortified but unable to cry, I knew that the third section was yet to complete. Barely resting, I went back in to finish the last three pieces. At the end, I stood by the piano and took a single bow as the people awoke, clapping. I didn't play my encore, but instead hurried through the music room, past the gaping eyes, out the back door of the house, and crouched behind the big green converter in the corner of our yard. Holding my heels, rocking back and forth, I cried.

I'm driving through a summer rainstorm to the university. I've brought my music books with me, nestling them in the passenger seat, mindful they don't slide down to the gritty floor. The piece I'm accompanying in three weeks is a Mendelssohn violin concerto, but I've also brought a few new pieces along from my rapidly diminishing repertoire. I don't get to the new pieces as often as I used to because I quit taking formal piano lessons two years ago. This has meant a steady decline in my hours of practice and, consequently, my technique.
I am longing to make myself learn a new Chopin *Ballade*, but the dogged perseverance needed to pull it off fails me.

Arriving at the university's music building, I place the music inside my T-shirt and bolt from my car to the front doors. I don't manage to evade getting wet, reaching the doors soaked. The music, thank God, remains dry. I hope that since it is summer and a Saturday night the good practice rooms will be available. I also hope that I am not spotted by any professors. Since I graduated a month ago, I no longer have the "right" to use the facilities. But tonight I am lucky. I spot no one and find my favorite room open -- a black Steinway baby grand with ivory keys.

The room is small. The piano, a bench, a garbage can and a folding chair crowd against the walls, creating a tight space. The walls of the practice room are cement block, painted an institutional cream color. Acoustic tiles have been tacked to them with velcro; these are cushy and covered with a cheap burlap material. Sometimes, when I'm practicing late into the night, I pull the acoustic tiles off of the walls and stack them on the floor to take a brief nap. The piano itself is pock-marked and worn from trumpet cases, pop cans, pencils, rulers, books of sheet music and metronomes. The keys, however, are pristine, neither chipped nor blackened with finger oils.

On the back of the door is a long mirror for singers to watch the shape of their mouths as they sing. Without a singer to block its reflection, it shows the piano bench and whoever is seated upon it. Sometimes I watch my fingers as they race along the keyboard, but I enjoy this activity less and less, not wanting to witness the inevitable decay of my ability.
I take a moment to look at my hair in the singer's mirror before I begin perusing the Mendelssohn violin concerto. I am trying to grow it out again. I hold it up on the top of my head, wisps falling hither and yon. I try to remember the last time I had long hair, five-years-old, crying while Mom pulled each knot out with a blue comb, the "no tears" shampoo bottle resting by the tub. For my first year of piano lessons I could almost sit on my hair when I was at the piano, legs dangling short of the pedals. That time seems unreal, as if I inherited someone else's cowering body just before pubescence and now cannot regain the young child's ambivalence.

I began taking Inderol after blacking out the Mendelssohn Song Without Words. Berger said it would inhibit my adrenaline and take out the shakes from my hands and legs. It didn't work -- I still vomited before and shook all the way through competitions. They all continued to talk about music as my life career. After all, they said, how could I waste such a talent?

Everyone but Dad seemed pleased when I announced that I would continue piano in college. Mom and Ms. Harris were sure that I could lick the fear on my own -- that it was just a "phase" of my musicianship. Mom called it a "growing experience," an expression that implied a painful ordeal which, in the end, would prove good for me.

I stare at the music I've brought with me. Finally, I pull out the violin concerto, sheaf through the first two movements and begin with the third. It's marked allegro con agitato. This means play damn fast and sound really pissed off. I begin with my left hand only, working the leaps, deciding the best fingering for the runs. Marking the fingering above the notes reminds me of hours of
Bach and Mrs. Lombard's conviction that fingering was all-important to precision and speed. I remember her vicious pointer, marking time.

Mrs. Lombard is now dead and cremated in San Diego. I can't imagine Mrs. Lombard in San Diego, her pursed, thin face under perennial sun and crashing surf. I remember her as an eccentric Nebraska woman, wearing mismatched print dresses, strange jewelry and thick shoes. She seems too hard for San Diego, hard like a sod house, an open prairie, a plow. She was a woman who might do anything to survive: eat her children, if need be. Maybe San Diego killed her, all that predictable weather without a chance for a good tornado or a blinding snow storm. She always said that a good musician needed to do it "the hard way." Maybe surviving became too easy.

In my sophomore year of college, I quit. I quit seventeen hours before I was to perform for a world-renowned pianist. I didn't waste much time thinking about my decision. I picked up the phone, called my piano professor at his home, and said I wouldn't be a part of the performance the next day. He didn't believe me at first. He said, "Jennifer, you're just scared. You're the best pianist the university has. You'll do fine. You always do."

And before I let myself buy it, let myself ride on the wave of another's security, I spoke into the receiver. I denounced fifteen years of training, of two hours a day in front of a keyboard, of missed dates because I hadn't finished practicing, of music scholarships, of promised greatness. The tiny girl, the one with hair brushing the back of her starched dress, stared into the reflection of those patent leather shoes and saw herself. She reached through fifteen years, her fingers at my face...and I said, "I'm sorry. I quit."
I notice in the singer's mirror that my eyes are tired and decide to call it a night. I close the violin concerto and look at the new pieces, their bindings uncracked, the language of notes and staffs within them waiting to be translated. I wonder if I'll ever play through them, knowing that my fingers will never fly as fast, that what I hear in my head will not be realized.

I still rummage around for that fear spot in my head, talking to it, trying to show it that there isn't much to be afraid of. The worst has happened -- I forgot the piece. And I survived. I want to play for Ms. Harris, for my mother, for the memory of Mrs. Lombard -- with control, fire, and passion. Most of all, with passion. It is impossible to show passion when wrestling with one's body. The minute becomes all-important, each shake, each flutter of the stomach holds the mind in a vice, praying that the moment will end, that the piece will end. This is not music. I've labored for years in search of music, and I've received mere execution -- a fast, well-memorized display of technical will. I've performed without passion.

I prepare to go back into the summer storm, wrapping my music books, taking a sheaf of paper from the garbage can to cover my head. As I gather my things, I catch how the lacquered lid of the piano reflects my hands. In the reflection, they are perfect pianist's hands -- long fingers, short nails. They neither shake nor sweat. I press one palm to the wood, meeting its sister image trapped within. The two hands meet, briefly, as through a chink in a wall.