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Crackerjack

Lydia Jaworski

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
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ABSTRACT

Crackerjack
Lydia Jaworski

This collection consists of eleven short fictions centering around two major themes: narcissism and obsessive desire in a southern Gothic framework. In four of these fictions, the emphasis is on the characters' perceptions as they collapse into these states and its resultant madness. The characters' visions, instead of revealing clinical or "typical" delusions commonly associated with deterioration, result in a hyper-magnified visual field. The other fictions explore narcissism and obsessive desire through seemingly banal or domestic situations; the characters may not experience these states themselves, yet they reach the same kind of epiphanies through observation of others. The characters' clarifying perceptions of themselves and their worlds link both sets of fictions. The fictions are akin in another way. All characters have unusual relationships to family or have make-shift associations to represent the concept. The trope of family is used to display the characters' social context as well as their general relationships to their worlds. The first fiction, "The Joker," is stylistically different from the rest of the collection. A dark satire which focuses on the family theme and the bizarre sets the tone for the collection. The language of the collection, at times poetic, at times experimental, is designed to heighten the allusion of an emotional state -- inducing a fictional dream which aids the reader through the character's journeys and resultant epiphanies. Due to artistry in language and the poetic nature of the fictions, not all stories in the collection neatly appropriate the above-mentioned categories.

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Each time I get into a taxi a shadow of my mind is asking me "where to?" I figured out why they're so fast about it, pummeling around other cars, dumping me off at some destination in the night. They disappear into the dark, drain-smoke in their wake.

If I stay in the car too long I might find them out. Recognize something in that moldy odor of resin. Too familiar. They cover it with cherry or musk cardboard-cutouts. When they sense I'm on to them they distract me in other ways. A week ago this shadow started up with: "I'm a big animal lover starting way back in the Fifties and I've got a drum in my stomach that tells me so" -- and my mind was blown to bits. Flapping remains of my face and that little bit of lip and tongue smiled back and said: "Well yes, aren't animals great!" The next thing I knew I was paying and stepping out and up, my face smooth, sealed, as if it never happened. I wanted to tell someone but I forgot about what they were hiding

It's in the blood.

My family's blood is transient. Where darkness is uncluttered and thoughts rip out of your head when you're sitting in some diner in some new city. First, your hand looks all skin

colored. The raised parts of it show another color which could be named "oil blue", but there are many colors in blood. Red pales into non-colour, into the white of the table. The hand on the edge of the ceramic cup turns porcelainized. All dissolves into a white-gray backdrop for the sugar packets with those fresh bright slashes of color. Brown and yellow campy animals.

The amazing drowning red of the American Cuckoo: *This bird inhabits heavily wooded areas. Its red crown tells you it is more real than you.*

Once I saw a dead fish weeded into the back seat of a cab. Luminous rainbow scales on red plush. Didn't say a word about the stink. Gave the cabbie a good tip too.

Every evening when my father was drunk I knew he was thinking about the furniture, the appliances, and how they interfere with the colors of darkness. All kinds of appliances, broken or simply out of use. Located on hidden sawdust shelves in the basement and garage. Boxes of things from different families: leather tap shoes, baby bottles, a popcorn maker with a pink cover, a popcorn maker with a blue tinted viewer.

To one of a like mind darkness becomes cluttered and gives you trouble in your sleep.

Summertime and the fly strips crackling in our suburban backyard. All that energy with the tranquil pool, artificial blue and heavy.

Dark figures hiding out. Police in our bushes again and they come in through the basement windows which haven't been sealed since the last time. They wait where the storage boxes are full of all those things.

The father put the end of the gun in the sea-shell center of his daughter's ear I was looking at the carpeting. All those grooves went round in circles with paths that led back to where they began -- no out. And the carpeting held things, spills of orange juice chocolate milk vomit booze blood, all spilled. Those moments locked in the stain no matter what cleansers were used and I thought I saw the carpet breathing like a shore washed lungfish. He was looking down at it just before he broke and then they had him down as I'm being tossed about.

Powdered and fish eyed, a counsellor sits across from me. She awaits the inevitable drama. And I try to find it for her somewhere within and beyond that night of bright lights, but all that comes to mind is the obvious and overpowering. The stiffness and abrasiveness of those bulletproof vests against my bare arms. An odor of synthetic fabric, faint at first, then a fear smell like my own. Sea salt, cream smell oil. Scent of urchins shedding gametes at the moment of death.

I try to find things from my memory to release me from the windowless air-conditioned office. Past the revolving doors into sun-warmed afternoon wind.

Mother sunbathing. Pasting sequence on Styrofoam. Sunlight sublime.

Passing time until Christmas.

A great cloud came upon us and chilled the chemically-treated lawns, raised my skin. And it was as if the Earth froze and all the people died. The last things they were doing trapped them with the boxes in the basement. She was looking at my ear, blaming my ear.

And the word "sentiment" came to mind and how it rings of "cemetery" and "mint" or "sweet breathless death " I knew then what the best thing in life for me to be was.

Now I remember the important things, like the synthetic homey feel of cabs, knowing when I get out they will go and pick up someone else. Knowing I can catch one in any city.

Cabs are the inverse of furniture.

The counsellor was still waiting. Her carpeting was just as bad as ours but without the grooves. Tight with yarny wools sticking up. I knew dust flakes of powder and terror of children had spiralled deep within them. All the things the carpet held. The carpet in our living room, in my own room, my parents' bedroom. All the carpets at other people's houses; brown, teal, peach, shagged, shaven carpets creeping out of homes and spreading across porches like some synthetic moss over the chemical lawns, under fences, holding and smearing secrets. The people of the world sinking into them.

I realized that carpets were bad luck, like furniture and popcorn makers, and it was then I decided to hit the road.

. . .

She wore blue mascara better than anyone back home. I thought her lashes grew that way right out of her skin.

Jonni arched her back and squinted her eyes, her milky tissue-paper hair falling about her. Body shaking with the buzzing crackling sound of cicadas and the warm ocean air around us. Then she mechanically opened her mouth as if by mistake and threw me a crooked

smile just before she showed them her tits, and I was thinking she's made of some amazing blue electricity

They always came in Impalas, Corvettes, blasting stereos as if that would shepherd us in

A group of us were running from them and I didn't know Jonni from the rest of the girls
Me and Jonni broke ahead. We made it to the fences and even when one sends someone out or gets out of the car himself, they can't run as fast as us, not while wearing all that shit and they just can't do the fences.

In Miami there are fences everywhere.

It was all street and free and in and out of cabs, cars, beds, sitting out in parking lots, straddling fences, chewing gum, Marlboro Lights, Orange Crush, sizzle rocks, wearing any old thing, a red bandanna makes a nice top and Jonni's wearing a yellow one.

Hot pulsing colors.

And Jonni's soft murmurs into my sea shell ear and suddenly all in stereo and warm dry land. We had to jump-start run all the time and my leg got infected from not fully clearing that spiked fence, yellow fish pus wept out of the hole, crusting as it hit dry air. I thought I'd have to go to the hospital and get screwed another way. Jonni rubbed some Wild Turkey right into my second wound and said being caught would mean living indoors and then she'd go "free-lance or fuck it" and I'd say it over and over in my mind's mind.

And the first time we ran and it was as if we were squirrels. We cleared that fence and won. I looked at Jonni and she flashed them before I did. She must have been doing it all

along Just like me but alone. We ran away together into warm summer warm, laughing,
distant barking fading out

Fences around every corner.

Jonni once told me she took off because "Every day was just every day" and then she spit
on the gravel which made it hiss, and I saw a blue glow around her and the splash sound
of the ocean was suddenly in my ear as if all that water had moved a couple of blocks
closer to the park we were sitting at.

I can hear everything now.

Then it all became underwater slow and Jonni's face changed to no color -- an erased
static TV face. I tried to tell her about the carpets but then she stuck her gum in my
mouth. Dizzy I sucked on the warm strawberry wad before I chewed and I thought I
wanted to run with Jonni forever.

Same night she pet a black cat.

Jonni was caught in a fenceless alleyway and I started hanging with girls fresh off the bus.
The kind that are thinking about becoming models. Jonni showed up in a dream facing the
wall of a carpeted and air conditioned room. I ditched my last pack of strawberry gum.
Lipstick made lips redder but I needed some blue electricity to keep running.

Like some great warning came the stomach pains. On a toilet in a Howard Johnson's a
dark cloud bled onto white. An alleyway smear in the cotton panel of my panties: brown
and red with the residue of smokes, late nights, chocolates and cum, and I'm thinking it's

some kind of a sign. Charlotte's web in my crotch Or the end of the world. Then I
figured things out and bought a box of Kotex Made a collect call home

High school, freshman year. I made the track team.

One day when I was running out the door my father gave my mother forty bucks He told
her to give it to me. She said I wouldn't need it as the screen door was about to close So
he tossed it in my general direction and mumbled that it was for the cabs.

Future House

They walked out of the dark restaurant. They walked out ahead of us into blinding vacation sunlight. Wrigley gum colored sandals on my mother and on the women of both families. Me and Eza chewing the mint flavored toothpicks into a pulp of blood tinged saliva and wood. Then they stopped, without warning and turned their hair-do heads and plastic rimmed sunglasses toward us.

"You girls are big enough to go where you want on this trip -- to go by yourselves."

Just like that we were given this. My cousin Eza stepped on my foot, pressing, as I grabbed onto her lank arm. We were all sharp angles and transparent peroxide hair.

"Future House!"

It came out at once, our secret, our knowing what to say. Future House showed on every billboard and restaurant place-mat.

On the drive, arrows and cartoon hands pointing the way.

It was closed and they took off in the air-conditioned rental car. Leaving us in quiet, windy, warmth. Future House would open in fifteen minutes and Eza and me would be going through it together. There were already a few stragglers; the beginning of a line-up.

Future House was there and it was the same piece of Styrofoam we spotted from the pool at the hotel and from the lake on the other side of town. A white chunk on the hill surrounded by miniature bluish green pines. It was there, only big. Big but the same. Until we came up real close. Then it was something different. It was dirty, real dirty, like white vinyl seats in an abandoned car. Peeling and cracking with the stuffing oozing out. Everything around it, on the hill, on the slope didn't match. Everything around it was beautiful.

Eza picked off a piece, the inside was pink, wounded. She made a face and threw it at me like it was my doing. Eza read from a brochure with a painted picture of Future House on its cover, white as frosting against green spruce: *"Known as the 'living house', this house is completely solar, it lives off the heat of the sun."* Eza took out her lip wand and it looked as if she were painting her mouth with nail polish. It made her lips red, red.

"Give me some," I said, and started shellacking my own lips, but I knew the red went better with her "Mr. Freezy" blue colored eyes. I was looking at them when Fisher came. The line-up was full of old people and suddenly he was there between them. We saw him and Eza lit up. We had one cigarette we were saving for this. He came around soon enough, tossing his hair back, told us his name was Fisher and went for Eza. Then the guide popped out as if out of nowhere. He spotted us.

"You girls tanning your lungs?" he laughed. The man had dark shiny hair and full lips, but his clothes were bad, matching and tucked in.

"Ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to Future House. My name is Jerry Starrs, I'll be taking you through Future House, *the living house*, so let's go!"

Fisher laughed and put his teenager arm on Eza's shoulder. I was the only one walking alone.

"We're in the tunnel, not a Foyer, not a hall. Everything in Future House is igloo-shaped to make the most of the Sun's powerful rays."

We went through the Styrofoam tunnel, into the recreation room, through the kitchen. Future House had the same things that were in any house but the walls were thick and white with sparkles and there was a round window on the ceiling of each room. In each room Jerry Starrs stopped and told us how the shape of the rooms were designed to maximize the solar rays. How there was a connection between the Sun's warmth and Future House's ability to live.

Fisher tickled Eza as she walked up the ramp to the second level. She doubled over and walked up the ramp that way, swaying. Fisher's hands on her waist.

I stayed on in the kitchen.

"Look at this, *we* have a loner. What will *we* do? When you're in Future House you're part of Future House. Why don't you come up and join the rest of us?" said Jerry Starrs.

I looked around but we were alone. Laughing, I started up the ramp with him. He put a hand on the back of my neck, it was heavy and wet.

"I prefer green eyes myself, your eyes." Jerry Starrs spoke without closing his lips.

"Can I see you after the show?" he said and rubbed a circle with his hand on my neck. I nodded and he quickly took his hand away as we approached the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we almost lost one!" Jerry laughed. We all laughed.

The solar room had the largest ceiling window and it was the brightest room. I gave Eza a look and she was on to me and Jerry.

"I'm thrilled to death!" she whispered, pinching her chipped nails into my arm.

We climbed another ramp. Up to the master bedroom.

"This room, like all the rooms in Future House, is completely insulated. It makes you cool when you're warm and warms you up when you're cold."

The master bedroom was all soft glow with a champagne glass master bed. A giant champagne glass full of big fluffy pillows -- it turned. Eza and me nearly died.

I wanted to be in that champagne glass with Jerry.

It was suddenly over and I stepped out into sunlight. Everyone drove away in their air-conditioned rental cars. A crumpled brochure tumbled by me but I could still read *"the*

living house, has everything you need." Me and Eza and Fisher shared another smoke. Thinking of ways to stay longer. My aunt was coming to pick us up at three-thirty and it was three. We could have Jerry and Fisher meet us at the hotel that night. We were allowed to go walking by the pool and fountains but we had to tell Jerry.

"So where is this guy," said Fisher with a toss of his head.

We looked in the windows but they were empty, small, doll-house. He must be on the third level. We walked around the back.

Part of the hill went right up to the top of Future House. I climbed up to the third level and looked into the master bedroom. He was laying there and he was pulling at it. In the champagne glass with his pants around his knees.

"What gives?" yelled Fisher.

"He's not there, let's go."

At the crossroads my aunt's rental car turned toward Future House.

. . .

We would walk around the pool and then meet Fisher. I would go back to the room and watch TV while Eza and Fisher would go walking. Eza would be laughing, blinking her eyes too much and pulling her hair behind her ears. She would be shellacking her lips when he'd leave to bum a smoke and she'd be checking to see if she had bad breath.

In the room I could control the temperature with the climate dial I could slip just outside the door to get a Pepsi from the vending machine. I could flip through channels on the TV. The families would be outside talking in a murmur. Laying in cocoon sunning chairs and smoothing anesthetizing lotion on their burns.

B a t t e m e n t

"Begin at the beginning -- the king said gravely. . . " King of Hearts, **Alice in Wonderland**

Yesterday it tried to make me drown myself in the kitchen sink. And then I'd click on the TV until that feeling came out of me and hid inside any hard thing I'd look at. It would go into the table, the couch, the armrest, or the calendar. When it hid inside the wall clock, the ticking hurt my eyes, and it would jump out screaming on the hour.

Sometimes in different animal shapes but always with that soft papery voice. He comes out first -- the director. "Hurry, hurry you want a good seat. The performance is starting!" He whispers close by somewhere, "Sounds like someone smoking a cigarette of crushed velvet, a tiny sound deep inside the inner ear. Don't think about it or you'll stop listening! It's an old movie, isn't it? Oh look . . . she's naked! Or it seems so . . . her shapes don't look right . . . she is quite ordinary, womanly," he hisses.

Something jerks and moves and displaces. The camera eye pans across. Stopping and resuming. Walking. Over the form of the woman drying on the stone couch. From the back, her labia appear contracted and closed. Dried gray dish rags. The eye moves,

pauses and zooms in -- close-up into her eyes. Persistent embers. Marbles or ground glass with a fleeting glow of panic, as if they only recently gave up. She's already webbing from the inside, meshing outward. Extinguished. She tries to pull her head back, away from the stone, but it doesn't work. All the pieces don't go with her. Funny-shaped strips of face and tongue harden on the naked rock. Large red spiders carry some of the pieces away. The face on the stone is different from her face -- it's become my face now. Everyone can see she is upset by this. The performance ended.

I woke up chop-blinking.

Some drugs make it so I don't remember the dreams. I can feel them through the day, the taste of something indistinguishable. A ground up spider in the back of my throat.

Four months, three days, and six hours ago I was a professional ballet dancer. They said you can't ever stop. That you have to go on until the end. It said that above the studio, an engraving from *Alice in Wonderland*.

I should have become a ghoul by now when the rigor mortus set in. They said there were signs. But I saw the ghoul instead. Yesterday, in the subway. I knew her by the eyes -- painted a full inch all the way around, bleary eyes, magnet black. Everywhere she looks is black-framed like looking out and up through an underwater basement window.

The ghoul could cut and edit life scenes by squinting and chop-blinking.

She got off at Fullerton, linked arm with a stranger woman. Someone's grandmother who didn't realize, like when Frankenstein visits the blind farmer. The ghoul was the woman's inner monster somehow materialized.

The first sign is to see it in others.

The ghoul sat down with the woman and lay across her lap. Strange pieta. And all I could see went magnet black.

The train started up. Before the tunnel, the window framed them for a second, and then it hit the black. We locked eyes, and I felt her insides were like cotton candy all strung up, drenched in a hideous red.

I saw my face, her aversion to human and, worst of all, both of us knowing.

I have money, all that I want. And a place downtown on the waterfront. Sometimes I have moments I can hardly explain. Some kind of giddy madness that takes me into a foreign time and place of danger. A space of furniture and decay like running into outrageousness with open arms and eyes. It happens when I think I'll get up and wash my face, brush my hair. I see myself on the phone calling the university about an application. I use the voice of someone who could be satisfied by such things. Then the meshing spirals outward and I'm comforted by my grounding and identity.

The art of grieving my own kind.

Sometimes my mind speeds and falls backward to show me the fear story again and again. I weaken and I can't stop the images.

His hands were placed face down on the desk. His pupils contracted and opened showing me the slow projection of images: recliner, cocktail, newspaper, house addition, tile

cleaner, and a man and a woman in a bedroom for years. Then I saw the doctor tiny inside his own eyes, on the recliner with the metronome on the mantle inaudible to his smiling ears. A time warp. A land of slow motion and decay.

He said the words again as if I didn't hear them. Slower, with a gluey film of paste snapping from his lips -- wicked wicked words. This time my arms grew long, and I tried to push the words back into his mouth. It was only imagination. I saw myself going over to him and put my hand on him, unzipped and wrapped my mouth around it. Years of *pirouettes en attitude* and *port de bras* also worked my throat muscles. Maybe this will work. He will talk-breathe out "Ballerina I'm a fool . . . nothing is wrong . . . untrue words! . . . your knees are not damaged . . . they are exquisite, exquisite and should last forever!"

And I removed my mouth and dance tape. I wound it round and round his mouth, arms moving rapidly, webbing. Dashed past the front desk and didn't pay. Through the revolving doors which opened into a hideous reddening sky. I walked -- ran -- then sprang, using the strength in my exquisite knees and flew and ran until I was only flying above the heads of the street people. Cool soft cotton air whipping my body. I swallow it in dizzying gulps of laughter. Knowing his words are trapped under the tape. Forever, officially, sealed.

I go higher and higher, above the heads, traffic lights, flagpoles, chimneys, and down, as if breaking over the top of a Ferris wheel into the old Studebaker building. Inside of me pounds in accord with Prokofiev as his music floats out of the polished windows. I choose a window to fly through and hear the pounding of her foot with the pounding within me and then the yelling. My feet land smoothly and silently by the toe, then the ball of the foot, before the heel on the freshly worked and newly rosined cherrywood and the

light is bright and warm and the mirror reflects a golden hue around my knees and the lashes continue in 3-4 time and the screaming in Russian while spilling droplets of her chai onto the beautiful glistening wood.

"And what's this! Movie star has arrived. What happened to the back? No arms, no legs, and chin scraping the floor! Your derriere hits me in the face! Or have you become strip-dancer? Woman with large kitchen? No, circus horse! You think you could just fly through the window to impress me? I want to see *plie* and strong and good and now!"

Then she laughed and embraced me. But there is no music. No sliding and settling and accommodating of cherrywood against my Niccolinis. My feet are restrained and flattened against human shoes. I plod horselike on cement and dirt and other common ground.

The doctor didn't get it, how you can't stop. It's like telling your arm to stop being your arm without taking a saw to it.

Each time I hit the wall, I feel a fun-house inside me. A Ferris wheel with my creaky seat at the top just about to break over a starlit ocean. My head feels good when I'm doing it. When I stop, there's a blood taste in me.

I got a television.

And a VCR.

Now I can watch and edit people from the street.

A kind of learning but the cigarette smoke keeps them far -- I see them through distant clouds.

Thoughts come to me in the form of a blind woman carrying a breadbasket of spiders. It shows me over and over how it happened. How my knee softened, didn't want to hold me during the fourth *pirouette* -- only the fourth. I hit the floorboards and landed, heavily.

On two feet.

And the first time it was a joke and I went along as if I'd pulled a chair out from beneath myself. I didn't feel the dropping and the weakening or the flash of white nerve flying from the knee to thigh into labia up through my spine into my back. The place where their eyes had fallen, knowing. The second time I returned to the ground, they came.

The most beautiful first.

Jennifer. Alabaster legs and lightning *battement*. Mila. Arms and neck and chin and back. Then they all come to me bringing what they have, unable to discard it in my wake. Ethereal cooing while moving their powerful wings about me. I looked at the corner, on our box of rosin, an angry spider was shaking its way across the top. Burial of the broken. My labia become small at the thought and dried up into my uterus. Jennifer drew closer and put her wet, soft, seemingly boneless arms as strong as steel around me. Strong *battement* is she.

I saw another specialist today. The same words from many faces -- Seattle, California, New York, and Chicago Orthopaedic.

Once I saw them in the way you would. Jen and Josef move as if made from synthetic elastic steel. They glide in time with Slava's chords.

My doctor would have made a good dancer -- strong chin. He tried to trick me.

He asked me to accept the inverse and I asked *him* to accept the inverse.

To get on all fours as I walk on two feet. To crawl. "How long can you do it?" I asked. "How many months can you be a dog?"

I've been a dog for months now, using foreign strained movements at all times. I envy dogs because they have dog brains and dog hearts and I have a dancer's brain and dancer's heart in a dog's body.

When I used to breathe, we used to breathe together. *In corps de ballet*. Jennifer, Marika, Mila, Josef, Anna, Joshua, Danielle. Danielle's rib cage was a little larger, it would take her longer to exhale.

Marika looks diffused in the clouds. Small in the television. Long electrical legs made of some alien stone, polished and worked to be powerful, yet soft and moist and flexible as an odalisque. She is linked-arm with another dancer. I can't recall her face, bone bleached, pale, even for a dancer, foreshadowing . . .

I stop the videotape.

Living is to see this, and I wonder how fantasy or thought can be outside of this. I think that everything from the outside is not, it is inverse, edited.

In dreams I saw the monster, cretonne odor with that huge bird Walking toward me from somewhere far away. Heavy gait. Gray orthopaedic shoes, slacks and blouse. I knew her face under the shroud -- her weak chin. We were born at the same time. I sped up -- she kept pace. Creeping, affecting my body peripherally through others.

Marika had a knee scare.

Months later, I would still watch her knee at the *barre* during *ronde de jambe*. It quivered a little *en l'air*. I kissed that knee. Skin salt. Losing my mouth on hope I imagined a miniature tenacious creature holding her tendons together. Then Josef would hold her knee as if in some kind of trance, and Jennifer would watch us all, indifferently brushing my hair as if she was immune to all harm.

That knee would affect our whole body and it became all things. I sucked the venom out of her only to become poisoned myself.

The ghoul was dormant, a strip of smoke-smelling wool in the borders of my dreams. Waiting. Then she killed Marika during the wait.

There were signs after the knee healed. Early dangers: wide hands and wide at the base of the skull. At sixteen, Marika's hips began to soften and move outward like those of a small woman from the street. Her breasts swayed when she pulled off her leotard and we looked away in the locker room; while looking. And we realized Marika had a weak mind. If you thought for them, thought hard enough, they wouldn't grow.

She wore tight brassieres, but their weight showed through. More warnings, men from the street -- looking. Sometimes they shouted things, and out of love and pity I yelled back at them as if it was for me. Degrading myself, as if I was the one who was becoming mortal.

For two years it went on -- the growth.

It was three hours after a rain. The worst possible conditions. Hot, muggy, grayish yellow outside the studio windows. Our bones and ligaments and tendons revolting. No arms, no legs, no timing, and Madame Vara limping from her girlhood injuries and with one of her headaches. Madame Vara then throwing her chair. Calling us beggars, side-show performers, and married-human-female-woman with a house and children and dish soap. And it was almost as if we could believe her. My own body possessed. I saw myself in the dark as a soft pregnant body, stretched organs, pulled ligaments. Washing at the sink with a television sound in the background of that house.

We all feared this, as if we would be forced to abandon each other. Bodies of bacon with a quivering layer of corpseflesh. Overripe. Touching becomes a horror film.

On that day, Marika moved slow with an extra movement in her *battement* and her arms all *brise'* and her breasts danced in time to a distant music.

It was as if domesticity had hold of Marika. Madame Vara threw her little gold chair out the window for 'effect' -- she asked us to fetch it for her from the alley, but later. Madame approached Marika and pulled out one breast. As if showing us the source of contamination, she whispered, so softly with closed teeth, "Circus."

I changed like lightning that day and didn't wait for Marika. Running down the steps of the Fine Arts building as if I could escape.

Some say Marika became a ghoul.

I had seen her in the street, more than once, stationary in a crowd of ordinary people.

Then the knee pains started -- started in me.

I'm softening to it. My arms doughy with a mold smell. The more my body softens, the more I feel its anger. Yesterday it threw plates and I cut my hands as it threw them. Then it tried to make me drown myself in the kitchen sink.

Cold water is good before performances, keeps the make-up from running, and the head clear.

Looking up I see the ghoul -- her face wet.

But I always look odd in this flawed mirror and overhead light. I'll stick my tongue out -- so does she, *faster*, a crazy face, another one.

She keeps up in perfect tempo.

Her face is gray and quiet, around those eyes the darkness goes forever.

Something's telling me what I've been thinking all along. A tiny voice coming through somewhere far away, an old phonograph, about to fade out.

"Begin at the beginning, the king said gravely. Then go on until you come to the end -- then stop."

How they wore their hair

The boy fancied that his mother had already killed three people. Either he would run up the path leading to the Esterbrook's or through the back and try to make it across the lake.

He decided he would go by water.

"Charlie!" The boy's mother had been calling. The *action-figure* fell from the branch, into the drain. Charlie put his ear against the grassy metal ridge and tried to hear the black spider which moved in shaking fits. Breathing. The other *action-figures* waited across the low branches of the fir bush. Their chipped plastic faces gave them a cross look. A look of expectation.

"Charlie!" He ran toward the house leaving the body in the drain. Knowing the spider had lifted one of its legs.

The house formed a rectangle with gingerbread-colored bricks and neat block-shaped bushes with knotty branches near the roots where Charlie played. A stripe of marine blue sparkled on either side.

"Charlie!" Jan thought her little boy looked pale and asked Sharon to add some carrot sticks to his snack. Sharon was Jan's 'mother's helper'. Sharon arranged a scrambled egg, canned pear, and carrots into a smiley face -- the way Jan expected her to. The ketchup smile broke gliding across the plate.

Jan firmly placed the one-hundredth and eight piece of a puzzle depicting an endangered Maldivian chameleon.

"In eastern Europe girls wore their hair in a single braid, married women in two braids. The single braid to denote virginity," Jan said into the receiver. She talked about these kinds of things with her neighbor Kate.

Andrew pulled into the drive with a box of carob-covered orange slices which lay snugly against the leather of the passenger seat. It was Jan's birthday. Thirty eight. Last night while they were making love Jan told him they should have the ceilings repainted. "R-143," she said.

Andrew watched Sharon sweep the driveway. Her long black hair moved in heavy shimmering waves. "Jimmy-June" he cried to himself -- an expression he'd made up. He imagined his life suddenly filmed. Viewers would think that Sharon was the "other woman." He caught himself laughing at this idea and suddenly numbed. Then he stared dumbly at the waxy package on the passenger seat.

Looking down from the fourth floor Andrew looked like a panther in a suit. Kate watched him from her oval bathroom window. A fat panther with soft jowls and piercing eyes. It

struck Kate so strangely that she held her burning to urinate and waited for the panther to step out of the car to see how it would walk.

The digital clock glowed five-thirty. Andrew's lover knew he would be arriving home now. Emily was sitting in her eleventh-floor apartment in the heart of the city. The evening lights had just come on and the buildings were glazed, candied. She looked toward the northern suburbs. Andrew's was past the mountain. It looked like rain. With her massive windows open she did her breathing exercises in the nude. Emily's yoga instructor said it would be good for her chronic cough. The pneumonia she had last year from working too hard. Emily imagined a sparkling river flowing through her, carrying the impurities of the cough in its crystal stream. The air turned cold. As she closed the windows it was pouring.

"It's the most brilliant storm I've ever seen!" Jan exclaimed. Her face glossed with tears. "Come out with me, darling," she whispered intensely to Andrew. "It's my day." Andrew knew it was the sugar -- it happened when she took the sugar. His mind did a snapshot of tying her hands.

"Where's the laughing rabbit?" said Sharon as she lured Charlie into the rec room.

Outside was what Andrew expected it to be -- cold. Jan's face bloodless as she kissed him with false enthusiasm. He thought to himself *what a wretched child* and a sheet of warmth swept over him. He became semi-aroused and lost it as she took to heavy sobbing. He turned to see the laughing rabbit pressing against the window. Charlie's slim arm then making it bounce. Andrew led Jan back to the house as if returning a confused patient to bed.

Kate was already in the kitchen. She let herself in through the back and was lighting candles sunk into a flat spongy cake. When she saw Jan she immediately blew them out.

"My sweet, sad, birthday girl." They gave each other quick, weak, hugs and moved apart.

A puddle-colored sparrow hit the bay window. Its beak cut into its skull, blinding it a second before death. The beak against the glass made a stiff "click." Kate walked over to check the stove. The "click" was a "thump" for Jan as if the house was settling. She felt the room expand.

It had been ringing for a long time. Emily, calling to tell Andrew she wouldn't be meeting him tomorrow evening. Her cough had worsened. She prepared her voice to sound professional and 'work-related' when Jan picked up. As she rang she rubbed clove oil on her chest making her breasts glisten in the mirror when a sad thought moved her. Emily mused about the woman, while shopping, how she saw her own face on that strange woman. Emily wanted to share her face-loss with Andrew but no one was answering.

Charlie ran into the kitchen, making the rabbit bark. The sound so horrible, it struck Andrew, Kate, and Jan as the most terrifying toy they had ever seen.

"Where's my huggy boy," said Sharon as she started to crawl under the kitchen table after Charlie.

From beneath the table the adults had no heads. The bodies frozen. Straight arms with knobby fists. Charlie saw Kate raise an arm as if she would touch his mother but withdrew. He thought of the spider raising its leg.

It was so quiet it made Charlie remember his ceiling before sleep. It was as if they all wanted sleep and had erased the ringing phone.

Charlie pulled himself up to see out the window. The fir bush rocked uneasily in the wind. He imagined the *action-figures*. Cold raindrops glued to their plastic bodies. Unable even to wipe them off.

f a t i g u e

Iole shot Pat as the shutter worked in time with a silent streak of lightning which flash-bleached the gray fields outside the window. Then she watched the camera glide the Polaroid out of its straight mouth. Pat lay piled up lazy with her naked back facing the other three. So unnaturally still it looked as if she had been sleeping for years. But they were all tired, an irritable teenage-tired.

It made En tear his broken fingernail down to the moon.

Sprawled on the floor they feigned the relaxed postures of a harem and scattered the photos onto the tiles. Fanning themselves only to circulate the hot air, while outside the crickets sang for rain.

It was En's grandmother's barn but it had been worked to be something else.

Imported tiles, skylights and chaise lounges. Over sleeping Pat stood a heavy lacquered table with the cheeses and fruits they had eaten earlier.

When En first opened the barn door a creak of white light fell across the black and white tiled floor. Something hit them, strong and feathery shrill. En batted his eyes with that bug to eye reaction. For Iole it was the invisible day-moon come into weight. Orelio pushed the owl up so it whooshed over their heads.

"Wild animals are trapped indoors for a reason," said Orelio, musing, watching it fly toward the darkening purple clouds.

"Don't start with the soul and the Brazilian proverb thing," said Iole, as it started hissing -- the rain, hard and sudden. The air so moist you couldn't tell where your skin ended and the air began. Iole started up with how rain always made her feel all slippery. Then she pulled at her gauzy smock dress which unraveled as if it were alive. It sprang to the floor as if on fire.

Her breasts moved slow and heavy but they were small and high. Iole sought Pat and Orelio while En sought Iole. Orelio and Iole kissed Pat. At first she laughed too much. But the hands quieted her and excited her until she moved in a way that pleased them. Iole watched Orelio's half closed eyes as he sunk his head into Pat. Pat arched and rose and breathed in a way as if daring them to something. It was at that moment the three felt differently.

They were strong on her -- marking.

"Let's live in the barn forever," Pat had said on the way up. Her hair all over from the top down and everyone smiled. Pat was the favorite. Iole took her hand, the palm was fatter than her own and moist. She rubbed the palms of her own hands which were soft and cool

in the heat. "I'm having fun," she whispered to herself and inhaled her words with the wind that shot in from the side window.

Pat slept and woke to purple-blue beans, rows and rows, framed inside the black foam edges of the car window. Roadside vegetable stands with yellows and reds and a shadowy figure seated behind a register. When she woke again it was corn and a lonely farmer way out there on some kind of farm machinery. They stopped for caramel apples. The old man gave an extra apple to Pat.

"One for the road and one for when you get there," he said fiercely. Iole enjoyed the attention on Pat. She slipped her a thin silvery bracelet.

Inside the barn, after the rain, Iole quickly chilled. She thought of an abrupt sundown at the beach. She was suddenly aware of her nakedness against the rug and the hardness of the floor under it. It was not how she expected it to be, with Pat. Pat wasn't one of them. Iole dressed into Orelia's shirt and Orelia draped a white blanket over Pat's legs.

The clock hands were painfully loud.

Iole scattered through the photos and passed a Polaroid of Pat with the caramel smears on her cheek. It was over-exposed with the face whited out and hair lost in the wind of a darkening orange-purple sky.

"Pat is a blueberry, blueberry, blueberry."

"Iole, shut-up, it's dumb."

"You shut-up. You'll wake her -- freak. And why are you shaking?"

The ashes of En's cigarette broke and fell involuntarily. Then they all looked away. At Pat. At the hollowing of her spine and the soft miniature shadows which marked out her muscles. Her translucent skin seemed so tightly fastened to her rib cage. Seashell.

Iole crawled about the floor, stopped, and spit at the rug. A huge glistening ball appeared between her teeth and fell onto the floor. It rolled toward En and hit his foot. He stared at it dumbly as if waiting for the ball to hatch. He imagined some small creature climbing out of it and presenting him with a fortune scroll.

"Too sweet," Iole said and shook her head crazily in a figure eight, hair sticking to her wet lips and tear filled eyes. Orelio scooped the green jawbreaker from En's foot and threw it into the magazine rack.

"Get it off," whispered Iole, her eyes narrowing into slits as she stared at Pat. A large brown fly crawled across Pat, moving territorially. Orelio blew at it and they watched it fly toward the ceiling. It settled inside of a track-light.

Iole slid her cool hands on Orelio's legs, then she mounted him. It was Orelio's indifference to her which drew her, or it was knowing about their indifference to everyone. En was tired, he looked away, at Pat. Occasionally he focused on the pale greenish bruise on Iole's left buttock. It made him dizzy.

Afterward, Orelio put out his cigarette on a millipede. The front and hind segments remained un-charred, leaving a dirt path between broken bracelet ends

Outside the air had cooled. En fully dressed and made his way out back, through the three rooms that led eastward, out into the mossy fields. A cold fresh smell hit his face. He walked across the soft earth until the ground became wet and clumps of mud slapped against his shoes. He went out to find the tracks. All covered but one long rail shot out silvery among the soggy earth. Once the tracks led out, far across the fields and dryer lands until it reached a city. As a boy he followed it as far as Baryne County, but the rail didn't surface after that hill and now there was no way to find that road.

Looking up was all stars. The quiet bodies of Iole and Orelia were constellations watching him try to find an out. He thought of Pat and looked back at the barn. An ominous block against the moonlight and a loss of breath stabbed him but he knew there was nothing he could do about it now.

En walked around kicking at an old fence until the chilly air numbed his skin to the bone. He decided it was safe to come inside.

Iole brought out a samovar and set it on the Turkish prayer rug before she disappeared. En and Orelia started a game of chess and Iole could hear the placement of the pieces on the ivory board all the way from the bathroom. On the wall she saw *Love seducing innocence, pleasure leading her on, remorse following*. The frame was too large and shiny for the delicacy of the print. The griffin clawed tub is what she had expected. Before filling it she looked into the mirror, *pleasure is a well-fed child* she thought. Then she heard the muffled sounds of Orelia and En, laughing about something two rooms away.

Her slim legs looked wider in the water, she dunked her head and stayed under. She saw Pat's legs again and then felt them in her mind. Some water went up and soda popped her

nose, giving her mouth a blood taste. Coming up for air she opened her eyes before breaking the water, spilling out the corners of her eyes and clearing her view of the red ceiling drape. *I am that color* she thought and a strange feeling possessed her. She remembered the stupid things Pat said and how Orelío looked when he touched her.

She came out of the bathroom wearing a colossal red robe which dragged behind as she sauntered. With her hair wet the bones in her face showed large and beautiful.

"Drop the robe," said En.

"I'm tired of you my liege," she said as she shook her head and smiled, showing her small animal-like teeth.

"Drop the robe," said Orelío.

"I'm tired of you my lord."

"There was a monkey," said Orelío. "It walked down a sunshine street. It stood up and said I'm a silly monkey."

"Both of you are stupid. Come. I want to show you something amazing." En walked up to a wall and pushed against a small closet door. Opening the view to a darkened staircase.

"Come," said En, his legs disappearing as he headed down.

On the walls, harnesses on hooks, shovels and pitchforks. En moved on through a narrow walkway. On the floor lay pieces of a model train and a miniature schoolhouse chalkboard with faint ghost letters which spelled "eN". Untouched since childhood. Through a narrower opening the air became moist. A smell of fresh cut grass and water. An effervescent sound bubbled in their ears. Under a small iron grated circular window stood an enormous glass tank. Iole could already make out what they were, hundreds of them. Sea horses. Up close. Miniature pointed bodies twisting and riding within the huge cake of water.

"It's like a merry-go-round," said Iole, her index finger tracing the circular movements of a thumbnail-sized horse.

"I don't know how they stay alive, someone comes up only once a week."

"They make me happy," said Iole as she took Orelío's and En's hand.

Before they went upstairs En saw a large horse dart-cut through the water. It got hold of a tiny, translucent one, and tore a piece out of its neck.

Upstairs they turned off the track-lights and lit the great fireplace. En brought out fruit cut up into wedges and three kinds of bread. Orelío polished the serving plates and then started with the stories.

"Brazilian," he said, "but not another fable. In the village my mother came from, it was a good evenings walk to Padra, the closest village. A young couple was walking home from Padra at night. The sky is bright above the cleared path, in the jungle the sky is colored black when you look up. The man, he had to go pee, so he went in the jungle. The

woman stayed on the path holding the baby under the moonlight. Out sprang a crazy dog and jumped on the baby. The woman held it high in her arms, to the sky. The dog tore at the white blanket pulling strings before the jungle took the dog back. In their village, the woman brought a candle to her husband, who was smoking at the table. He smiled at her showing the white strings caught in his teeth."

"No! And he jumped on her too," said Iole.

"He couldn't turn into a wolf," said En.

"So she chased him out with a broom and kept lit candles every night," said Orelia.

"Why did he do it?"

Orelia took a deep drag off his cigarette, making the end glow like a miniature searchlight.

"The baby was just born and for that alone the wife loved it -- how can you not be jealous of that?" His eyes were shiny dark and he smiled at Iole and En in a way that made the three touch hands.

It was as if they understood the moment, without the situation, and now they could see it all as if they were on the rooftop looking down into the room.

They all looked at Pat and it was En who decided to touch her.

Then he turned her.

. . .

None of us knew exactly when Pat left us or which one of us really did it.

And it was as if Pat and our memories became my invisible day-moon, but when it came into weight, in the night, our thoughts turned into one voice that can only speak about one moment. Schoolchildren, gorging ourselves on berries with the shaded leaves pressing against our faces, in passing, and it's not as if there was only one thief.

The Joker

The Hopes didn't like us, the family, the house, the dog. It was our inner city blood, and before that, the deep jungle.

We were the family with the clothesline, a boozing father, barefoot kids who played until two a.m. in mismatched clothes, running with fish-head sandwiches.

We were allowed to swear at other kids and disobey adults. My hair was cut when it needed brushing. Once I told Mrs. Hope to shut her big fat mouth. "Shut your big fat mouth!" I yelled through fish breath. My mother told me Mrs. Hope was dried up because Mr. Hope wouldn't sleep with her because she was dried up. Because it was hopeless I told Mrs. Hope she was dried up. When she told my mother about this my mother told her it's because she had a stiff walk and that was why she was dried up.

In this neighborhood people took things to heart.

I would run alongside Mr. Hope's car, barefoot, my feet slapping against the pavement of the busy street and earnestly yell: "Hey, don't sleep with dried up!"

Mr. Hope was a dentist and Mrs Hope was a nurse. Their house a neat white block, the lawn a green tightly-knit carpet, the shrubs manicured by elves. In the summer our lawn looked like it had been doused in gasoline and torched and there were always things on it: tool boxes, unicycles, ladders, a couch, and the big plastic clown's head from the car dealer.

At first Mrs. Hope was nice, telling my mother the kids were anemic, scraggly, and possibly retarded, that she shouldn't have breast-fed, that peanut butter and jelly is more nutritionally complete than garlic and dandelion-leaf sandwiches. After the Hopes met my father they decided he was a drug dealer and a Communist -- that we all were. The man couldn't string three words together. How else could we afford to live in Park Ridge? Drug dealers because my parents grew up in the jungle in South America and Communists because they were born in Russia.

At home we spoke perfect Russian and Portuguese. The English we made up. We favored words like "worstest." My father named my sister and me "tell-she" -- tell-she go out of room, tell-she get me matches, tell-she pull onions from garden. Pa called me tell-she until I started college. When my mother told him how much tuition was, he said, "Tell-she get married."

My sister and I played over by the Connors, six blocks from home, my father would call us in with a high pitched whistle and we'd come running.

Mrs. Hope had a good heart and worried that we were being raised like dogs. While having tea at the middle neighbor's she said, "Those girls are being raised, well, quite frankly like dogs!" She brought her good heart to my mother, who was sun-tanning by

the pool, long curvy legs, long curvy hair. My father was piss drunk on the porch cleaning his gun collection -- it was Sunday -- the transatlantic radio blasting. My mother spreading caviar on mango slices and throwing them to us in the pool. My sister and I yelping like seals and catching the chunks in our mouths, knowing it looked wrong to Mrs. Hope, knowing to play it up.

"I need to go on mental pills!" I screamed spitting the Mango peel.

"I'm sleeping in someone's husband's bed!" my sister yelled. Somehow we knew the right buttons.

My mother made herself more curvy, she offered Stiff-butt a chair, and they spoke in a hushed murmur. Then Pa wobbled over.

"Hope, hey, Hope!" He stood over her with a gun.

"How much, how much you think it cost?" he said, removing the magazine as if showing her a new tupperware. "Six thousand dollars, that damn thing. six thousand dollars all the way from Bell-jum" he said, irritated, rolling his eyes and sigh-whistling as if he were being forced to import these guns himself.

"Wait," he said, as Mrs. Hope rushed out of the yard. "I have a joke -- a good one."

After Hope left the Amazonian goddess stood at the edge of the pool.

"You girls are going to join Girlscouts. She's a nice lady and grandparents will like the uniforms."

She despised the uniforms. We were at Sears and she held the green dress up with the tips of her fingers.

"The uniforms will make you walk with a stiff butt," mother warned. They would give us infections and flat butts. It could happen suddenly, from clothing, from dry thoughts, from peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, or in the case of Mrs. Hope -- a curse. I was always checking my skinny shanks in a mirror.

"One day you look and it's as flat as an American pancake," mother warned, "then everything will go to hell." Mother didn't call Mrs. Hope about it. The woman, bitter and sexless, was trying to sabotage her chiquitas.

That week she enrolled us in belly-dancing classes. Then we took Hula lessons. We wore grass skirts and bikinis indoors and out. We wore them on the street on our bicycles, skateboards, unicycles, and scooters. Sometimes the neighbors formed groups at different fences and watched. I wore my bikini top and grass skirt to the supermarket to pick up some beef tongue for mother. Mrs. Hope saw me in the freezer section and buddied up to me.

"Tongue, now that's unique, will your mother make a jungle-dish out of it?"

"Voo," I said.

"That's an interesting name."

"Voo doo!" I hissed, did a mazurka and tried to roll my eyes into my skull while darting my tongue in and out. I looked back at her once, from the cashier line, straining my best reptile face.

The Hopes were the kind of people that outwardly didn't believe in such things. But after that day Mrs. Hope stopped with her good Samaritan visits. In fact all the neighbors stopped trying to save us. When my father walked out into the street to go bug them, all the automatic garage doors would be closing at once, children were ushered in from yards. He had no one to show his new guns to. I knew then that things would be changing soon.

There were still the strangers from the bars. My father would bring them in without warning and being that it was too confusing to go along with the lies my sister and I would hide in the closet. We'd pull off our socks and stuff them in our mouths to muffle our laughter.

"The indoor pool?" my father said. "It's in the basement. I don't know where the hell my wife put the key."

"The pool table? My wife, she's always stuffing it in some corner."

"My son? Ah, he's not home -- Harvard."

The tour would end with the showing of the brass sewer pipes in the boiler room.

"Those damn pipes are almost as strong as my pipes, my liver," he'd say, pointing to his stomach. When they left he would continue drinking the Stolichnaya until eight, cognac

until midnight and then back to Stolichnaya. He ate caviar by the handfuls. Why not? He was a rich man.

One afternoon when my mother and I came home from shopping we were surprised to find the kitchen tiles re-done in red. It was like that, a cartoon, the first time Pa threw up blood. So much blood we knew he was dead, so much you wanted to laugh, but it came out as a scream, a bloody toilet flushing through your head.

His body was two rooms away.

"It's simply impossible," the doctor said. "*Really* impossible for him to have survived that."

After the second time it happened, the doctor said. "No, *really, really* this time was a bizarre miracle. Once more and he's dead -- one more glass. If it was up to me I'd say he was already dead."

After the sixty-fourth rush to the emergency room the doctor started with. "No, *really* . . ." and then trailed off. I was eighteen. There were studies, specialists, researchers in aging and cell division. Biopsies were taken. Pa's skin samples were sent to Sweden and Germany. A geneticist visited our house for a week, watching my mother prepare meals.

"It's good for the heart," my mother said while preparing a calf brain and sorrel soup.

"How do you know?" asked the researcher, as he weighed the portion my father would have.

"I just know," she said smiling. "My family line is all witches," trying to impress him.

Then my mother and I argued about the time Pa would start with the cognac. Next she showed him the bottles. Empty gallons of Stolichnaya in the garage. Lining the walls. "That was last week's," she explained.

Pa still had a beauty of a job. A toy designer. The company owner made out a will, just hours before his death, stating that my father could never be fired, no matter how drunk he was or how much garlic he ate. Pa would show up at work around noon.

"Hey stupid, what time did *you* get up this morning," he'd say.

During the presentations, when the big-shot buyers came, Pa would walk in late, throw his colleague's designs off the display table shouting, "That's stupid, it will never sell -- now look at this," while Tonka, Mattel, and Ideal looked on in horror. He was excited about his new truck. When it hit an uneven surface tiger claws shot out of the wheels and it would climb over *anything*. Pa lay down on the floor of the presentation room after setting the truck in motion.

"Look, it's coming for me, now it's stuck. Oh no! Holy smoke that sucker has claws! Son-of-a-bitch-claws! Holy smoke that sucker's climbing over me! Help! Those stupid kids are gonna go nuts. Those stupid kids aren't gonna know what happened -- it's the worst thing yet!"

A half million animal-trucks sold in Japan.

Pa loved the TV. He watched Dorothy's house crash and as she opened the door to a rainbow of color his gray vampire's face seemed to glow. But then he looked sick, real sick. He must be trying to live for something very important I thought. He was stuck in the black and white.

I saw my father on a warm and windy afternoon, crossing the sprinklered lawns, heading toward the neighbors'. Wearing no shoes, red socks and striped shorts. I knew I was dreaming. I was dreaming about the time before the screaming and the breaking of all the windows because we ran out of steak sauce. I was dreaming and the phone was ringing. I knew I had to get it on the first ring before Pa wakes up. Before all hell breaks loose. My mother and sister and I could make it to the kitchen on the first ring, we could run like that from a deep sleep, telling the monsters in our dreams to make way, there was a phone to be picked up! We'd stare at one another in a confused blinking as to who will pick it up first. But I couldn't wake that time. Let it ring I thought. When I did wake, it was my sister.

"Sorry, sorry to call so early . . . yeah, it's five a.m. Listen, he's dead. He died two hours ago."

"You sure," I said sleepily.

"For real."

"Thanks, bye." We both tried to sound upset.

I didn't go to the funeral. I was living far away then, attending graduate school and there were classes and the night before I watched a B-horror movie and maybe the refrigerator

needed de-frosting. I had been away several years and he never noticed. Sometimes, my mother said, he'd go looking for me around the house.

That summer I returned home.

My sister and I sat on the back porch, looking out at the expanse of suburban yards.

"The funeral was freaky," my sister said, "everyone thought he was going to come back to life and start swearing at everyone. People wouldn't go within ten feet of the coffin. Even his *friends* at the company were afraid. Mostly *he didn't look dead at all.*"

"Look at this," she said, handing me a photo. A man in a dark gray suit was on all fours. He had a handsome smile. Three other men, also in suits, looked like they were instructing the floor man to scrub an airport floor with a toothbrush.

The floor man was my father.

Their faces showed a humor of another country, another time -- in the present time we didn't get it.

"Grandmother gave it to me," my sister told me. "Sao Paulo airport. She said they called him the 'phooligan,' or the joker."

I looked across at the Hopes yard. Mr. and Mrs Hope were setting up a barbecue, their grandchildren were sitting at the patio table, under a green and white umbrella. It was windy and warm with a smell of freshly cut grass and chlorine from the pools. My mother was bringing in fresh tomatoes from the garden.

It had begun raining on my way to the airport. I looked out at the passing gray blocks with the pink, green, and blue liquid pearlescent letters of the strip mall stores . . . of the taverns.

Crackerjack

Morning

Mayfly don't bother me

Mayfly don't bother me

Mayfly don't bother me

Cause I belong to somebody

Stuck in my windshield. Mayfly's got it right. Does its work in a day's time and then frees its soul. Maybe its home is a walnut shell, then you look again and it's a house of cards.

I have a home and a sister and a husband. If that's how you want to look at it -- I mean my sister. She is that house by now. Took it over like the ivy. And she set those ivies beneath the hedges, careful, petting them down in little plots. I know, I saw it in dreams. Saw it as if I were looking through a crystal ball the size of a television. What else was I supposed to do? I kept my eyes on the TV set, the one they let me keep in my room. It was my sister's doing. Asia put me in there in her own way, by using those lotioned arms and long long hair. She may as well have taken that hair and wrapped it around the house

along with the ivy. I can almost feel the wheel steering toward the house itself, I mean without me, right up to her.

Poplars -- and to think that thirty miles back all was barren. I saw malls with lots as wide as deserts with black top sand. Parked cars. People. Can't get by nowhere without someone eyeing you. Neighbor's knowing each other by first names.

Here it's a different world.

Never thought I'd be coming back when *she* was to supposed to have left.

I don't want to ask . . . do you think -- think I look all right?

I guess it would be fair to say a little less than all right.

Another half mile and she'll be coming up the path. Not knowing what to do with her hands. I see her in my mind's snapshot in black and white with the color fading out, inhaling a little before the shot, making her chest rise.

There's some more poplars. That's where they trail single file down the coulee before they break up in the yard. Oh! you must know about Rafter. You must know that no man is a finer husband. It's been a year but I could already feel him in the road and grass just as I made that turn. He's been watching my sister for me. I'm telling you - wait a sec - there's the house - just as I thought - only different.

Clenches something in me to look at it -- it's beyond me how she can do that with brick and wood. Rotted and overripe. Asia got rid of the trellises and that ivy of hers snaked

up along the sides of the house and lidded the roof. Makes it look like the house is dirty and she's trying to cover it. Ivy's even fingered its way into the windows.

Asia coming out now. Asia with her smile -- that broad smile. Coming up on her. I taste salt in the back of my throat.

"Well, look at you! . . . Oh how we missed you Sarai and now just look at you," she says. Her hands feel soft and rough and cool as snake hide.

In dreams I saw her walking barefoot on the rugs after being outside. Then she'd be sitting in the television room -- letting the house go to hell.

Asia and me talk like we're under water, which doesn't matter. I just want to see. Her skin reminds me of winter. Look at her moving like that as she leads me into my old room, unpacking my things like she knows what's what. Moving her big belly around the bureau and arching just so -- just so I could get a good view of her seven-month pride.

The baseboards need cleaning.

Asia keeps on with her nonsense, her talk, slow moving mouth going on about where my mind's at, the past year and the clinic. That mouth is overripe too. Looks nothing like me, but then she's not blood. Emily Carp was a swollen gassy woman, big lips over the booze, sucking away like a newborn. All those children left to themselves when she died. We got Asia. Asia's lazy walk with her hand on hip.

"Sarai honey, help yourself to some raisins, I didn't prepare anything yet, you just wait till Rafter comes home."

Raisins is all she offers and me with an empty stomach! Now she's sticking that face close by me when I just want to rest. Now that's warm. Ben's got his nose in me the way dogs do and I start beating at him. Asia's got her face up close too. I pound at the thick carpet fur but my arm weakens so I move back. Warm breath gone.

She has a beautiful mouth.

"Sarai, *Sarai*, want to lie down? Or how about some TV?"

Good, she put the TV on good and loud. So I don't have to look at her. There's a restaurant of sorts where everyone is drinking coffee and a girl with green hair is pasting aluminum foil to the walls and the ceiling. I watch her do her work with no meaning, no end. Courting and children? Who would even look? Green hair -- but it's relaxing to watch her all the same.

The foil lights up her face and it shows her like the angel in my locket, the one I found by the tracks, when I saw the train go by with all those passengers looking at me through the lime-colored glass. It's the one I keep with me, in my coat pocket but now it's in my dress pocket -- see? Doctor said to keep it moving. Take it from one pocket and put it in another. I do it fast when I get like this. Angel going all over me. Or maybe she looks like Judy Garland.

I don't know where I get such ideas. Asia's watching me from the narrow part of her eye. She keeps working on Baby Jesus, setting him inside the Styrofoam ball. Glue is strong like acid in the air. Christmas ornaments in this heat, but that's Asia, always thinking far off ahead when I just want to get through till Rafter comes.

I switch the channel. A heavy white worm is covered with dozens of ants.

They tear that worm open, each layer like liquid glass falls open and shows all the colors of a rainbow.

Red ants eat at the eggs inside.

It's all dead in here . . . air stopped moving and the TV's stuck in some in-between channel -- making that noise and showing millions of grey pieces all fighting each other. Asia gets up and starts banging on it. She's got that wheat colored hair that looks all damp underneath but thick enough to wipe your hands on. I trail down and see her stony ankles with streaky veins popping out from the burden of her weight. Those veins go all the way up the back of her knees. I could make a road map on them from here to Mamre County with towns and cities in between.

Generations could come out of those legs.

Her body covers the front of the set and shows her up as a round ball with a glow all around and surrounded with important noise, so I go over to the window, go over to calm myself.

Asia's watching, waiting, I feel her eyes almost touching the back of my head. Her mind is asking mine, *when will it happen Sarai*, but I won't let her know.

Dust on the ledge. Look at that! A single flash of lightning breaks into the purple of the sky but I hear no thunder. It etched out a single line and two streaks leaked out from the

middle one like twenty-mile outstretched wings. The center falls over into a loop forming the neck of a swan. It's like the heavens have no mercy on me. Lightning showed itself full bodied before me but now it's gone and I stand here like a fool with an open mouth.

Leaning out, I smell hot dry grass and a different odor -- human. Pork bones. Right there under the sill, must be days old. More flies than I can count and a couple of bluebottles.

And those dogs.

Ammi's standing over Ben there under the blaze. Breathing with their whole bodies. Tan and gold hide that gets lighter and softer by the groin where it's cool. Ammi's sack's down low, it jerks this way and that as he walks. Bluish white with some gray in them. Hanging down and away from the warmth of his body. When it ain't cool -- the juice is no good. He can hump her all day and night without making her big.

Asia's big.

Ben's big now too -- a bitch though we didn't know it. Those unborn pups are eating at the marrow. That dog can birth twelve in one shot.

Noon

Outside the air's the same, it's like I just walked into the inside again. Under this tree is cooler. 'Pile of snakes' is how these roots come across. Twisting themselves into the earth. There's that eye, Asia's eye. She thinks I can't see her but that curtain is sheer -- that eye's a cold blue marble with gold flecks. Unmoving. But there's no harm in me just

laying here looking up at the clouds. Sky is in pieces around the leaves. Branches of crazy shaped arms with the fruit pointing down at me. Loaded. Out of reach.

Hunger's getting worse so I suck at the cornstarch. An Indian woman's picture is on the box. Her inside is corn and she's opening her overdress made of the husks. Showing what she has to offer. I'll throw some six times and make a prayer -- there -- Ha! Nothing. Asia won't figure it out.

What can I tell . . . in the meantime. Saw a twister once. Schoolteacher cried for us to go indoors but I held the fence. Turned away from schoolteacher and waved out at the woman -- a woman wearing a gray shroud, dancing and jerking ten-mile-long hips to a crazy music. Pulling everything up and into her Breaking up the order. Everyone south of Mamre died: mothers and husbands and children.

She didn't come my way.

Chevrolet. Now it's in full view. Rafter is coming home. The car's gliding past the poplars, road dust in its wake, turning into the drive. Homing in. *Corn woman's got some pull.*

Ben and Ammi move away with their ears up, watching as he gets out. Rafter used to call me "skinny legs" and "Crackerjack" and now my husband's all before me.

I feel something speeding up in me.

"Your'e looking good, Sarai," . . . what he said just now, but it all happened too fast.

Wait - he said that I was looking good and wait . . . let me get the thread through the eye-

hook . . . then he said my name and he went in the house. It all went through me like some crazy white shock of light. He looked me square in the face and at me all over.

Makes me go back a year. Hot dark bedroom by the laundry, him on me and my eyes closed to see white pain inside the lids.

Weeks and months. Nothing to ever come of it. My belly as flat as a snake's.

Once it was cotton sheets all twisted up and looking grey after the hours. Then Rafter pulled out and it went down to red pain inside the lids. It was always degrees of fire with him. Rafter's eyes round and clear as dimes. I spoke into the heavy air and said unto him: "Go on then, go on to Asia," and the words went through the air and everything got all slow and thick and more wetness broke onto my brow and right behind my neck. Rafter got himself up and went out and I heard him knocking on the door and the door was opened. But when I heard them the syrup anger come over me. More and more my Rafter came to lay with Asia.

It was after that first time I saw them side by side with the door open. It all got caught in my throat and then everyone came. Strange ceremony. Mama, Sheriff, and Asia wearing my mauve and white robe, the one with three pockets, them standing about me in that hot dark room by the laundry. Air as thick as sap pouring into my lungs. That's when, and Rafter put his hand on me, on my head and said the lights were going and they went and that's when Sheriff took me. Asia standing, watching like some angry dog and pretend waving. Getting smaller and tinier through the car window until I could pinch her face between my fingers. Sheriff talking me up all soft and smoothlike driving me god knows where. All the voices going far from me. Like now those voices coming through like they're from another world.

Rafter was one of a kind with me. From Grottohorn where the woods are cool and covered up with white birch, alder, and pine. It's where he lived on the lake, across another river where the trees look like sticks. In his own way he ended up here and started coming by after he saw me in the field, burrowing, putting my whole body into it.

Then Asia got her hand in, offering her food, but when she'd be feeding him her crawfish baked in orange rinds his eyes would lock with mine . . . cool lake.

Asia started her work early, but when I'd ask she'd say it was crazy talk and then ask *me*, "Sarai, Sarai, Sarai honey, did you take your pills?" in a voice that broke through it all. But sure enough for three days I saw her put salt in three corners when Rafter's back was turned and in three days time when Rafter and me locked I saw cool lake. But when I looked again Asia was tiny inside them, winter skin shimmering in the water and showing off her naked body, moving the way she does and then Rafter blinked and I saw his full face afresh and porcelainlike with no recognition for me.

Asia walked around the table with her eyes on me and my teeth got hard in my mouth.

The opposite of salt is light. Mama knew it so she did nothing but left us after Sheriff came -- let the strongest take her natural course.

In grade five Asia made castles out of toothpicks and I used sap to hold mine in place. Mama judged -- judged mine superior.

In my eyes Asia's fell apart.

Asia watching again. Rafter too. What are they looking at?

Those lights again . . . racing all over my skin Too fast to catch. Too fast to stop. It's not fair if she sees it all again. Now that she wants to. I'll set to work with the hedge trimmers right here and now and let them see how I take care of what's unclean. I'll sweep it all into place -- the baseboards too. I'll clean up the bones and chase away the dogs. These flies all over the bones. Not going to move. Now they go, watch them go, my hands are fast and I'll get them all.

Flies' blood shows all colors in sunlight, like the colors in their eyes: purple corn, blue moon, milkweed, chili red, velvet, royal colors -- colors of Rafter's skin, the way it looked just now glazed in the heat with the blood shining up close to the surface. I wipe it on my arms to cool me. I wipe some on my legs too and I put some here.

"Sarai!"

Asia's calling out, running, Rafter too. Do I look alright?

I feel something speeding up in me.

Late Afternoon

I'm hungry. A fat white worm is eating me from the inside -- my still empty stomach.

It is those soft sounds that wake me. Sounds I've heard before. Rafter's saying those words over and over and I know I am hearing it for a while. Two of them by the laundry.

A warm grass smell blows in from the side window and the shade flaps and flutters in response. My nose flares when I smell that smell.

She has a beautiful mouth.

The shadows start up on the walls. Shadows of people telling me what's been happening is all right. What's been going on in this house. I can tell what they're saying by the way they move their arms. They move them like they're walking on ice.

But I can't see how to fit with them.

I spin and spin. Balloon out my dress like a twister. Keep it going and fall down.

I make a castle out of toothpicks: free standing, no glue, no tricks, fifty-mile high and fifty-mile long and strong with a hay-bed-Cracker-Jack-cradle on the inside and when a light moves the length of a feeler on a mosquito the castle falls and falls down fifty miles hard on my head.

Now Asia and Rafter can't see a thing.

Outside is better. The field is good to lie down on. There, strings of lightning. Water from the sky releases the smell of wet earth and the soft fat grass presses onto my face and mouth and nose. Mixed in is the smell of memory. My stomach is empty and the hunger runs deep into the earth, my hands soften over the field stroking it all in one direction. I eat at the grass and then the rich black soil.

Swallowing and swallowing and swallowing.

I unbury the earth with both my hands. There! Stones. Going right through me and the earth rocks back. Rain beats hard onto my hair and back and legs. I rain hard into the soil. Stones. Bluish white with some gray in them -- eggshell. Cold in my hands, cold in my mouth. They're getting choke-stuck before ever reaching the hunger -- and it is now I know the evening is over.

Twilight

I do see angels. Angels with green hair and they take me to a place where they show me all of the dead -- and all of the dead are laying there dead. Then the TV gets stuck and shows millions of gray pieces fighting each other right before it goes off.

w i n t e r a n i m a l s

"I'm going to take your shoes off and give them to those people over there," he said wincing. It was the ham bone Jilly couldn't pull her eyes from, under the next table, snagged into a red cropped carpet. In a trance -- Pete couldn't fish her back now, the way she was drawn to mismatched things.

Three men laughed about something in the adjacent booth.

"Stop that biting thing," Pete tried, as another heat swell passed. It was work, with his fever, trying to keep up with Jilly. She snapped her jaws at him. A small animal with dark fierce eyes.

"I just want to bite all this slow air around things."

Jilly's face showed porcelain, harlequin, with a darkness beneath her eyes in the form of a moth. Pete thought of leaving the hot white lighting of the diner and finding a motel room with a huge tiled bathroom, to lay down against its cold floor.

Pete knew not to pick up hitchhikers. On his last trip back to university he picked up a teenage boy, the kid pulled a knife, ordered Pete to drive up only a few miles just to let him off. With Jilly it was a long stretch of woods. Ice formed a shimmering glass cover over the snow. No tracks -- no winter animals. The girl flashed before the windshield scene like 'what is wrong with this picture.' Once in the car her skin too pink, too warm, a scent of herbal balsam shampoo. Hair pulled into a white knit mushroom cap -- cute. He'd drive her back home. The high-beams of a passing truck lit her face into early twenties. The woman said she was going nowhere and pulled off the cap. Pete made out six shades of red and blonde. There were stories between the deep inhales of her cigarette. She was sought after, chased, a crazed lover, several crazed lovers, her parents actors, dancers, her father a politician, her mother a hairdresser.

Now Jilly had taken to the sugar packets, folding a wrapper house onto a wrapper island. Somehow, it gave Pete a quickening of pain, the wound opening, he put his hand over his ribs. When they'd reach Seattle he would see a doctor. Five stitches tops.

"Ever have a chicken shit in your face?" said the man in the adjacent booth to the one with the coughing spells.

"It's damn dehumanizing." Nodding, the coughing man dipped a corner of toast into runny eggs.

Smiling fish waved at Pete from his placemat. It showed a food chain. Above the lake was Delila's Diner. Inside the diner a man with a grin held a pork chop. He was at the top of the circle of fish and fowl. It hurt Pete's eyes, the colors too pink. The fever was settling there, he thought, deep inside the nerve.

Pete looked across the wide table at Jilly. Her elbows pointy against its surface. Bird bones. She was all sharp and angles under soft

The grid came to mind.

The grid he felt when they had stayed at the Travel Lodge. Facing the wall Jilly removed her loose black shirt. Her back was narrow and girlish but an odd thought came to him. A metal grid lay under its smoothness. The kind you find in sidewalks, on streets, over holes. You can't see it but it's there, Pete thought. It was something his mind caught glimpse of and like seeing something horrible he turned away.

When Jilly removed her nylons he didn't see the symmetrical lines which appeared on her upper thighs. Red and raised, some deep, round, and small. She climbed into the bed next to his, pulling the synthetic teal coverlet over her eyes.

Pete lay awake for a long time. His sheets had static electricity. He lay awake thinking about skin.

"A hundred dollars for your thoughts," Jilly said, spilling her coffee.

"Are you feeling all right," said the waitress, blinking at Pete, her skin flushed from running her station.

"Just a bad cold, thanks."

Jilly took his hand. "I'm meeting someone here," she said with a strange seriousness.

"You don't meet people in off highway diners, Jilly. You eat in them and leave. No one you want to know lives around 'hem." He laughed a weak laugh, he laughed for the first time since they met.

"Besides, you don't even know where we are."

True, in Montana she tried to convince Pete that it was Texas, that it only rained like that in Texas. And it did rain. For eight hours it rained. Sleepy Inn smelled of disinfectant, a dark room, sleet hitting against its thin walls. Jilly was small in the airless room and the airless room became her. Pete already spent the trip money his parents had given him. He spent it feeding Jilly -- she grazed. And she made him stop at all the sites; nick knock stores and cemeteries. It was her doing, the smallness of the room, the storm. An outside light washed her face into a soft blue, making it plastic smooth, baby-doll. Raindrops from the window projected onto the walls in the form of large dripping creatures. They sat together on the synthetic brown coverlet.

"The aquarium's a crazy kind of TV I keep in my bed," she explained, looking down and kicking her foot into the carpet. It made Pete think about her back. He petted her hair scarcely touching her.

"Sometimes I get a visual but the satellite is underwater too -- a jellyfish choking on it."

They slept in their clothes without pulling the sheets. Pete dreamt about Jilly. Jilly inside the octagonal fish bowl in his parents' foyer. Smaller than the fish, her red blonde hair waving about her tiny face in slow spirals. Jilly motioned him with a translucent arm, she was the mermaid on the *Chicken of the Sea* wrapper. One of the fish turned mean, kicking

up red and blue sand, biting chunks out of her. Pete woke with his hand stuck in the neck of the bowl, then his wrist all tingly, bent under the pillow.

Jilly was under his shirt.

Her mouth on the border of his ribs, unmoving but creating a slow pulling sensation which shot down to his toes. To remain still Pete counted numbers seeing flash cards in black and white, he got to "eight" -- a piercing, the fat of his skin gliding over her animal teeth.

"You liked it didn't you," Jilly cried from the floor. "You did!" hitting her fist into the carpet. The bathroom door slammed as if it closed in an enormous hall making the rain stop -- he locked it. The storm had moved to another county. Noiseless until the electric light buzzed. Pete depressed the switch twice to 'bright.'

The waitress cautiously placed the breaded cutlet and mashed potatoes before Pete. He could see Jilly at the pay phone and the diner suddenly felt unbearably warm. She leaned her head out the door while holding onto the phone. Fifteen miles to Moline, he would go to the hospital in Moline.

The mashed potatoes were impressed from an ice cream scooper. He ate them leaving the meat untouched. Pete felt better, then worse, much worse. A loosening sensation came over his eyes. He wondered about Jilly at the pay phone. Another rush of warm and there was something in the fabric, the polyester, the buttons in the waitress's uniform appeared frighteningly large. The uniform leapt off her and rushed toward him, busily, angrily. Pete blinked to stop it. He felt a pinch at the wound and a trickle of warm. A garbage can smell rose from the wound. Pete lay his head on the table, cool formica, the boomerang design moved in frantic scissorings.

Jilly's hand on his hair and the smell of her bubble gum. Five stitches and antibiotics. He would be well for the beginning of classes.

"I'm calling an ambulance for you, all right? I'm calling . . ." said the waitress as she rushed toward the counter island grasping the booth ridges with her hands.

Pete looked over the booths. Sitting there was the placemat man, big, he shook a cartoon pork chop at Pete. Pete put his head back down. He would be leaving the diner soon, leaving with Jilly.

He tried to say her name and forgot her name.

Then it came through another man's voice.

"Jilly."

Looking up it had no face. It stood square-shouldered, solid, unmoving. Lines all whipcord, electricity, fuzz. It barked out her name again. With the heat passing, Pete's vision cleared, fuzz lines chased themselves into skin tones but the stranger was already walking away.

"I'm the jelly fish choking on it," whispered Jilly without moving her mouth. Sound vanished and recovered as a muffled siren, the ambulance was coming, screaming with purpose through the snow. Jilly rose from the booth, clutching the mushroom cap. He tried to read her eyes but she became faceless. A paper cutout wearing a knit cap. Pete lifted his head a second time. Jilly was at the door, moving in photograph stills.

Jilly and the stranger held hands.

"They'll be taking you to Moline, it's fifteen miles . . . they'll fix you up," the waitress said, bending one knee onto the booth. Pete felt the wound gluing to his shirt. A streaked water glass came into focus. He could see the outside now with clarity. A man with a shotgun was crossing the parking lot -- dangling a slender rabbit by its ears.

Waiting for Laura

April could see the end of the dirt sky from the window on the eleventh floor. A miniature silvery truck reflected light as it crossed the bridge at the city's edge. This is where the great clouds ended. April covered the truck with the tip of one fingernail as the guy pushed into her from behind. He pulled her head back and his fingers touched the inside of her mouth making it salt ash and coin.

Outside she was spitting larger than the raindrops but the taste wouldn't go. The tire store was an enormous block of lights on a barren stretch near the edge of town. The other times it was the hospital parking lot, a video store, and a funeral home. Mostly Laura chose places with blinding lights and uniformed employees. No shelter wastelands. But this time April headed toward the box-shaped building skipping over the puddles.

Through the blur she made out an employee stop and take notice of her as water fell from the sides in sheets. April found an outdoor phone booth. The phone had been severed at the cord. It lay ridiculously on the ground on the other side of the glass. April knew she was being watched. When she turned there were three, high-school age, a little older than herself. Still no Laura. It was going to be a long wait with nothing but the lookers and that taste in her mouth.

They would be taking a train south when Laura showed. Away from her mother's boyfriend who said, "If you think you're too good for us then go."

April was hoping it would be Miami or Fort Lauderdale, "a sure thing for waitressing jobs," she thought. The lights flickered and went off at the Salvation Army store, beyond it, a blurred figure leapt out from behind one of the buildings past the bridge. Laura's bouncy kangaroo walk. As she approached Laura looked tired, very tired -- old. Until it was not Laura at all but a woman, in her thirties, Laura's straight haircut and dark purple leather. The woman meandered about the booth as if it wasn't pouring. Then she pressed herself up against the glass to balance herself as she dug into a large handbag. April watched the woman's long pale arm twisting through wrappers, panties, and fruit juice containers. The woman looked up and smiled at April as if catching her look. Then she tapped on the glass and started pushing at the door with her shoulders. Before April could say anything -- the woman, drenched, smelling of stale hairspray -- was smushed against her inside the booth.

"Hope you don't mind sweetie, I mean it's raining real bad. I'm meeting someone here."

"That's okay. I mean I'm just waiting."

April stepped into the corner of the booth behind the phone book holder. The woman shook her head and scrunched at her hair with her hands as if styling it.

"I'm Mary."

"April."

"The rain soaked through these shoes. They're canvas." Mary lifted one foot and removed the canvas shoe as if showing her an unusual insect. April nodded.

"You have a real pretty name, a tulip name."

A hot light shot into the booth. Parking lot security. Mary hunched over the missing phone and held her hand up to her ear.

"Look through the yellow pages honey."

April leafed through the heavy book until the van slowly turned away. The rain started moving in what seemed to be blocks. April thought it was like standing behind a waterfall. In a cave with a smell of wet clothes and shoes. Mary stared at the water with her nose almost touching the glass. She had unusually broad cheekbones. April thought she looked stunning.

"My father was sick for a long time and almost died," said Mary, trailing a raindrop against the glass. April wanted out. She wanted out and it was pouring. *Always stuck with some weirdo*, she thought.

"There was that acid smell in the house of someone dying."

April imagined the view from the high-rise, at how large the city seemed, and how she ended up in a phone booth with this woman.

"Once I saw my mother feeding him and watching that mouth sucking at the puree the way it did made me make up my mind I prayed hard and good for him to die that night. I was in the ninth grade and just started wearing a bra "

April made out something in the trash just outside the glass. A rivulet of rainwater clearing off the form of a small gray wad. A dead mole. April didn't want to think about how it got there.

"What happened after that?"

"He got sicker and then he got well. I know he's still alive somewhere today. I can feel it." Mary let her head fall back. Her skin turned an odd color, wet tissues, soaked. Mary looked very tired, very old. She opened her handbag as if talking into it.

"Praying only makes you feel better in that moment and that's all." Mary touched April's arm and then squeezed it.

"He's alive today."

They stared out at the rain from the glass booth. April was about to tell her something when without warning the luminous colors of a car edged up to the streaked glass.

"That's my ride. Goodbye April."

In what seemed a second Mary was already settling into the back seat. There were about five men in the car. Those expressions April learned how to look through so she wouldn't see them. April waved but Mary never looked back at her. April watched the rain for a

long time. She imagined Laura's figure coming up the street. She looked through the ads in the yellow pages. *Mark's Plumbing* had a cartoon plumber doing a handstand and she spent some time trying to figure it out. Then she kicked at the glass to see if the mole would wake. Mostly, she kept swallowing and swallowing to get that taste out of her mouth. But the taste went inside -- it was her taste now. April closed her eyes and listened to the rain. She listened to it until it sounded like something else. It was screaming and choking all at the same time. The phone was ringing. Its head laying on the outside trying to get a message through the severed cord.

burnt orange lipstick

Now I know they must have been watching us from that cedar branch. It was dark and heavy with them crawling and crawling over each other and that branch looked as if it was about to snap.

In the summer of that year of the locusts, he told me: *fine go on then -- get yourself going.*

My eyes hurt, and my bones.

What he really meant was: *I'll follow.*

Inside the doctor's office was cool ceramic white and a feeling of no air. Outside was all dead from the drought. Yellow gnarled leaves as if the trees smoked too many cigarettes. It was a summer of water laws. The wind dry, making everything filmy. Only live things were the locusts, shiny wet look on them with a prism of dark colors in the sunlight. Deep purples and blues too beautiful to describe. And the way they moved, in bunches. I thought of fat water droplets, gliding and twisting slowly downward -- cooling me off.

Luke said: *take it easy babe, slow it down -- your breathing.*

By then it was too late.

Inside the office Luke was pulling my braids around my face. Then he started scratching an arrow design lightly on the back of my shoulder with a toothpick. I could tell what it was by the feel of it -- *by knowing his mind.* Then I heard the doctor coming and a swell of guilt passed through me. But Luke seemed forgiving and that toothpick didn't go in too deep. The doctor shut out the light and pointed to the phantom. On the X-ray Luke's hand made a clear-blue shadow with the finger-bone broke up in a frozen cracked plate, all eggshell, delicate, and quiet.

A tiny planet explosion inside him.

Unkind is how it all seems when I think of the locusts and how they show up for awhile and die off quick without ever having to feel the changes that seep in slow. Slow as sulfur snaking its way into well water until the taste of it finally makes you spit out a mouthful. In me the anger rises with daybreak, morning after morning. After each night of twisted sheets and knowing it's no longer curious.

I wake up to see wallpaper peeling in our antique room.

Something still keeps me though. Never told Luke about it except once. He took it with a laugh.

It was a summer day so dry even the locusts were searching for moisture. When I told Luke he took it with a laugh and then he really laughed: *my girl's growing now, wants to grow those braids into her mouth!* His mouth open wide with the back teeth showing but then he had me down fast with my head reaching the terrace ground before me. Black smoke flashed over my eyes in a kind of fog which also gave a wound taste. My vision wetted. That's when I took his finger between my teeth. The one he needs for fiddle. In a twist our heads fell close. Chin and mouth porcelain calm. His eye froze in a glass stare with miniature firefly movements trailing. Iris's a damp moss green or the kind of water that sits on the edge of a lake. Making me curious again, making me circle my legs around his muscled thigh, giving myself strong pushes. His weight relaxed on mine and his long hair closed around me forming a circle around my face. Inside he brought mouth water as he went licking the heat off me in the fashion of animals with that kind of mouth.

Luke said: *that's it baby.*

It set my head spinning.

Water vision showed us together at the bottom of the sea, a tightening place, wrapping in a drenched and twisting electric blanket with the radiant switch on and blinking. And I kept thinking that electric cord has no right to be under water like that.

There are always others of like mind.

Creed flew up the same weekend the locusts started up. In the airport, I saw something in the way of his teeth tearing at my skin and then cleaning off the bones. There were always fights with company.

Luke would say *look at this place, what will people think?*

Pulling up our drive, I'm wishing Creed doesn't see our front lawn, even though he's family -- Luke's brother. The yellow grass that looks like it was set fire. And yesterday I was fined by the city for putting up the sprinklers. I'm making a shellfish bouillabaisse with a nice lemon and sherry stock. At the store meat cost twice as much. Cattle are dying left and right and the live ones stopped breeding altogether. Luke's messing with the fiddle, playing quick-fingered tunes and making my ears hot. I give him a look and he changes it to sounds of drip-falling as he walks from room to room. Now he's pulling at my blouse while reaching into the pot. Touching the polished plates with oiled hands, and that laugh. But I'm thinking we don't have the best china and how am I to please them in *this* house? Those locusts are buzzing. Holding onto the screens with their crusted armour on.

I'm saying: *Luke! NO!*

Too late, he pulled one clean off leaving the soft body stuck naked on the grating. Least he should kill it dead.

Then at the table Luke on me about licking out shells with company.

Creed with the same kind of mouth and hair is watching me all through the cooking and serving. Now he's walking through the rooms, touching everything, like Luke. He opens my little velvet music box. But his hands are clean. Earlier he was complimenting the food right down to the color of my lipstick. He brushes his hair back showing me more of that mouth. Looks like Luke. Now he's breathing close. In around my ears and brushing against my lipstick.

He whispers: *waxing skin*, touching it -- my face.

His mouth water on the back of my neck with my hands still in the sink. I turn and see a sunken mattress in the darkest room of a treasure ship. A place of unknowing and everything above is a wavy blur. I look at him pushing the hair out of my face in pretend nervous laughing and decide everything's fever. Violin on the counter and Luke's lifting his arm as if it were a paw on that cartoon lion -- the one that says *Buy Leason's Radial Tires* and then gives a big roar. That's how I see Luke seeing his brother and I make our acquaintance.

They fix me another gin -- a kind of game.

Ceiling's plate-white and showing in snapshots behind the fan.

Open windows with locust drowning my ears. A war is on, in the next room, Luke left the television on. All those bugs at the windows watching me and watching them. Creed pulls at my shirt without taking time for the buttons. Creed and Luke with their hair slip-falling like thousands of chains pulling across me heavy. They spread me with their hands and hair pours in cool with electric sparks trailing. Their heads become sheer tents trailing my stomach and legs. I start sound. A hand pushes deep into my mouth, massaging back to stop vomice. I push back in angry. My eyes rolling but left one locks in with Luke's. His eye fixed in mine in fear the color of clear nerves. That eye shows a moment's recognition of me.

Luke says: *easy baby*.

Creed says: *go*.

Luke just looks at him.

I slash their throats again and again, with burnt orange lipstick, smear marks. Luke's eye shows a moments recognition of me until the voices come.

Luke says: *no*.

They go flying out of my mouth.

Creed whispers: *yes*, and keeps doing what he's doing.

Creed bought me hyacinths on our way to the airport seeing him off. I counted twelve angry dogs on the way barking. One with a red collar. A crow almost hit my windshield. Luke stayed home.

A day of dampness and low clouds.

Walking up the drive I see locust trails dark and heavy. So many now crusting the bushes and filling up cracks in the walk. Strange how they have wings but keep crawling and crawling over one another in the same tight spaces.

I shut the door but the sound moves on like they came inside: *I hear them breathing*.

Luke is sitting in the big chair with his hair undone beautiful. He smiles up at me and says: *you're far away -- come*.

Sure I look different with both braids on the floor at the hairdressers. But I needed a change. Luke's pretend smiling and he's staring at me as if slowly breathing. I see his nostrils flaring like a crouched down dog waiting on a rabbit. Luke's arm comes at me like a fast growing weed, hitches onto my skirt, my knees break in a snapped wire, taking me where the floor moves in clear water racing across hot sand.

A curious place.

Luke's hand smears my face and bunches the skin up tight. Forcing lines that make it familiar for him like a cast. He brings my head down hard flooding a red taste and flashing out light.

I hear his eyes crackling in their sockets.

I feel a red color coming on as I feel for the door -- push on the door. Warm air outside -- warm liquid. I smell a grill in the next yard. The screen door closes again. They're silent - - the locusts.

Luke's saying: *easy baby, come.*

Quiet now, the locusts, watching a stranger offering me his hand. He's a gray shadow and the sun behind him cuts into my eyes. His arm whips out in an electric cord with fingers unfolding in broken wires. My hand stretches out toward his without minding me. In the way of children toward razors and matches.