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bestial rooms
a work of prose fiction

Catherine Kidd

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English & Creative Writing

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

Bestial Rooms

Catherine Kidd

This work of prose fiction traces the recollections of a young narrator as she attempts to piece together her own past through stories and letters written to her infant daughter. Particular emphasis is placed on the way the narrator's faltering memory figures and disfigures her sense of physical identity and gender, and also on issues surrounding the subjectification and objectification of desire. Focus is also placed on the narrator's consciousness of her written medium and the degree to which it supplants experience with an artificial facsimile; the narrator's inability to locate a consistent point-of-view in the vanishing world of her childhood points to the impossibility of constructing a reliable chronicle of the past. But unlike devices of mystery and suspense employed in fiction, the sense of mystery resulting from an incomplete memory does not necessarily point toward singular revelation. Instead, the narrator recalls the elaborate mythologies which she had created in childhood to explain those aspects of her family history which had been left unspoken or kept hidden. Her memory begins to resemble a series of rooms which the adult constructs in order to retain and restrain the mythical beast of childhood, an obscure creature which seems to vanish whenever it is looked at directly. Although the narrator's past remains obscured in shadow, its negative shape begins to emerge as her stories describe the peripheral environment surrounding her family's central inability to see, hear, or speak to one another.

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*White Elephant*  
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The man from the riding stable sends flowers to my Mother. I never see the little enclosure-cards but there must be some, hidden in a kitchen cupboard behind all her baking ingredients or somewhere upstairs. I don't snoop through her things anymore. After a certain point with people the case is closed, you stop trying to figure them out. You just let them be there in the room, like a lamp that's turned on, or one that's turned off.

Right now she is sitting on the lawn like a chess piece near the bleached yellow circle where the inflatable turtle-pool used to be. She is snapping string beans. When I watch my Mother through the kitchen curtains, the flowers on the table blur and bleed, roses and baby's breath, corpuscles inside her house. If I focus on the dozen red roses instead, it is my Mother and the lawn and the pile of beans she's snapping which mesh together like cells, sunlit yellow-green, the cellulose fibres of a plant.

Baby's breath. The smell of it, recalling nausea. Two lobes hang heavy on either side of Rose's face, those are her cheeks, with such tiny red lips between them like a cyclopean nipple. A cupid's bow, eructating.

Rose is my little girl. I love her best when four fingers and her thumb are curled boneless about a strand of my hair, or held fast to one of my own fingers, which unlike hers are yellow and bony. I love Rose best when her pastry-cheeks, her tiny restless mouth, are fastened sucking to my breast, suspending for a moment the crisis of being or provoking it. At times I hate the weight of her.

You're hungry. My Mother says this. I step over the threshold of sliding glass doors onto the concrete patio, and then onto the lawn, and this is the first thing she says to me. She seems to say it every time she sees me looking at the baby, whose crib has been set up out here on the patio like a cake with a gauzy cake-cover to keep mosquitoes away from her baby-blood. Sweetly, it seduces them. I am sulky today, apparently, but I step out

of my shoes and turn a cartwheel on the grass. Not gracefully. But for an instant my hands are feathered-green and my legs are spread wide open to the sky. I feel the oily sun-heat slide between them, and think of mermaids in green bathing caps with sequins. They are turning and turning, their feet turning to fins.

I'm not hungry at all, I tell my Mother as I crouch down beside the growing mound of string beans. *I ate all those oysters,* I tell her. *I ate the whole tin.* I had even licked out the tin, unable to shake off the image of a cat cutting its tongue on the jagged lid while licking oyster-juices from a can. God knows where these images come from. The desire for symmetry perhaps, or resolution, the probable resolution of metal against skin. In my mind, any television army-doctor hurrying toward a helicopter with supplies will always be decapitated by the spinning blades, just as my mother will always lose her fingers in the soup she purées in the blender, in my mind. It seems inevitable, aesthetically. I will always cut my legs in the shower, even if the razor sits untouched on the edge of the bathtub.

Looking at a surface of skin inevitably recalls the fluids coursing beneath it. It is incredible to me that people manage to remain discrete and self-contained at all, without somehow rupturing and flowing together like a broken yolk or the piebald Fraser.

Salmon Court. Salmon Court is the name of this cluster of housing-units where I live. The housing-units arrange themselves in a big circle, with a breach for cars to drive in and park in the centre like marbles in a chalk circle. All the front doors of the cluster open onto the parking lot, at the very centre of which is a concrete-bordered island with a single tree growing right in the middle of it. It is a very large oak tree. The housing units were built in 1967, but the tree must have been there before that, judging from the size of it. Which is strange, when you think about it, to build a circular cluster of housing units around a single tree. I imagine the roots of it underground, pale as larvae fingering the soil, spreading out their shadow-branches like a phreatic brain.

Around the outer circumference of the Salmon Court is the lawn, with all the patio

doors glinting their sliding glass like the grooves round the edge of a quarter. On the day-side of the circle where my mother sits snapping string-beans, the lawn slopes down to the highway. On the night-side, the side which seldom gets much daylight, it descends down into a ravine. I imagine that from the air, it looks as though we live in the green iris of a giant protrudent eyeball with a concrete highway brow and deep crease beneath it, with a single tree growing out of its pupil. Or it looks like we live on a giant cyborgian breast, part-organic part-architectural.

On the lawn are a metal swing-set and a slide, and one of those carousels which you sit on while someone pulls you round in circles until you're sick. The campus housing unit was built for married students with children, that would be my parents and me respectively, though it's only relative to them that anyone would call me a child. At her most sentimental, my mother occasionally reminds me *You know you'll always be my little girl*, but it is only in this way that I am one, and it's only been since the birth of Rose that I've ever heard her say it. I outgrew swing-sets and carousels at least ten years ago, and Rose won't be old enough to play on them for another five years, at least. So she and I don't really fit in here. The other married couples have children who are two or five, or seven or ten. None of them are old enough to have children of their own. I'm not sure I am either. I believe that other people in the unit wonder what I am doing here.

I see the swing-set and the slide and the carousel every day. I think I hate them. It's interesting to me that so many playground toys are essentially vehicles which don't go anywhere in particular -- you can go up and down, or back and forth, or round and round, but you can't get anywhere in particular. I suppose there's a hopefulness in sheer motion for its own sake. I do seem to remember a time when I just wanted to move and didn't really care if there was no point to it. It's probably good for children to do that, they can worry about destinations later as long as they don't wait too long. My brother Gavin had learned quite young to leap from a swing in mid-air, his sneaker-feet landing in the sand like a paratrooper before tearing off in some other direction, toward some other destination. He

had been quite good at this. It always made more sense to me to simply stop pumping and wait until the swing came to a natural halt, or at least slowed down enough that you could jump off without risking injury. Some people would say this was sensible. But it is not courageous, and it takes much longer than jumping off the swing in mid-air.

It's a bit eerie how the playthings on the lawn look more real than anything else here. If these days were a movie, the scene would keep cutting back to them as though they were the only pure objects on the landscape. It must be a type of purity to move only for the sake of moving, which may be why so many sentimental love scenes show couples dancing, and everyone gets choked up trying to remember the last time they did something just for the sheer kinesis of it.

The swing-set and the slide and the carousel are painted in waxy unadulterated colours, red, blue, and yellow. In contrast to them, the grey sky flattens into two dimensions and everything else looks as though it were made of wet newsprint. Primary colours are probably meant to harken back to the good old days as well, when things were simple and uncontaminated by hyphenated colours with too many names. *Sunset-Sarasota Orange. Midnight-Teal Green. Burnt Umber.*

I prefer these, the mongrel colours. The primary colours seem untrue and indigestible like blue food. I can't accept that there are really only three colours in the world and all the others are their bastards. Who came up with this idea? I'd bet it was someone who also had some romantic ideas about childhood and purity and how everything can be traced back to simple formulaic sources like the Holy Trinity. I don't think that's wrong, but it is misleading. There are something like a hundred pure substances in the world and everything else is made up of them, so almost everything is a mongrel, or becomes one. When I was a little girl I took a handful of oil pastels and left them in the sun in a salmon tin until they melted together. I suppose at the time I thought I'd end up with the most beautiful colour in the world, but that's not what I got. I got a muddy greasy disc like a hockey puck, which made muddy greasy marks of roughly homogenous greyish-pink. I

still have the disc, stuck in a box somewhere, to prove that this experiment was actually conducted, with this result.

Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and start hauling out boxes looking for something I think I've lost, a doll's head with blond hair or a drawing of a jellyfish or some baby teeth or Great Aunt Hilda's sheet music for *We Three Kings*. Because of the way people's stories tend to bleed and blend together over time, objects are sometimes the only way of proving that a memory you have is your own. If I find the thing I'm looking for, then I record it in a notebook along with anything I can remember about it, and sometimes a diagram, as though it were a specimen.

When I have compiled an inventory of everything, I plan to give the notebooks to Rose. They will comprise a sort of bestiary, one of those paper zoos of fabulous beasts which are not believed to exist in reality but which lurk in the corridors of memory regardless, vanishing in the mist of grey matter when you turn to look at them directly. The wide eyes of children see them everywhere, they are grotesque and familiar and strange. they lie coiled in childish objects and become the desires and nightmares of the adult. I remember that my first object of desire was a severed head, which I suppose I will have to examine at some point, but I can see how in some ways this desire has not changed. Although no adult believes that a severed head is sentient being, many still find it desirable to divide their heads from their bodies in various ways, as though the head were not also a body part.

*

Take from the unsnapped pile, kitten, not the bowl, my Mother says. *That pile is the heads, see.* I keep eating these raw beans, heads, tails, spines, and all. My appetite keeps changing, even now. Sometimes I feel like I'm still eating for two, or three or four, or sometimes even less than one, although my Mother says these things should have stabilized by now. In the mirror I lift my breasts in my hands and let them fall, the weight of them. When I climb the stairs to my bedroom I feel pins and needles inserted at my

heels, the empty heaviness of my belly. Rose is too young to know what I look like, that I haven't been feeling too pretty these days, that I really don't know what I look like either outside of what I gather from my Mother. Rose stares at the sky through the yellow netting of her crib.

It would be nice to have a few pictures of Rosie where she isn't scowling like that, says my Mother. *Honestly the two of you are quite a pair, like a couple of old women.* Every time she catches Rose not-scowling she runs for the camera. But I think that maybe Rose scowls because she can see things which the rest of us can't, through walls or underneath skin. Babies are supposedly unable to distinguish between themselves and other objects on their landscape. When Rose is looking at something, she supposedly assumes that the thing is part of herself. But I do wish whatever it is she sees didn't make her scowl all the time.

Salmon Court. My Father has gone back to school to become an Anglican minister. that was one of the conditions of my parents' Clean-Slate Agreement. The house on Dormier Street was sold and my Mother stopped working for Dr.Beard, though she still receives Christmas cards or crystal animals from him occasionally. She now scrapes people's teeth in a new clinic on campus, part time, and designs gardens. Which is how my parents wound up living here in this circular housing unit with other, younger married students who have children. In two more years I'll see my Father with one of those stiff white collars round his neck, which is waxy and red like a dog's penis protruding from his brown acrylic turtleneck. He will visit the elderly in homes and tell stories to children and perform ceremonies of the requisite sort, weddings and funerals and baptisms.

That's if I'm still here in two years which I doubt I will be. I've been making some plans. I've been writing a very long letter to Rose, or sort of a letter, a zoological garden of things past. It seems the right time to do it, to pen things in writing, although it's plain that once creatures of memory are penned up in zoos their behaviour changes irrevocably. They become aware of being watched, and have limited options as to how to respond to

viewer's eyes. But seeing as my parents have opted to erase everything and start again, I must backtrack. I must retrace my steps and retread them. Once I catch up to myself in the present, perhaps I'll be ready to pave over the whole park and move elsewhere.

Earlier today I saw a little girl swinging very high on the swing-set, with her legs pumping up and up and hanging down like two white rabbits on the descent, her lilac dress fluttering. She had no breasts at all. I saw a thin pale strip of her little thigh, which made me so angry I wanted to slap her. The worst names came to me, the names I almost wanted to call her. I hardly noticed her face and only vaguely noticed the shapes of her yellow hair in baubles all over her head. She was all pale legs and fluttering and breastlessness. And I watched the two front hooves of the swing-set lift slightly and thump down, with her swinging and swinging from the red beam toward me and away and toward me harder. The hooves thumping, lifting higher, horse-mad with every pump of her little white legs, pumping and pumping.

Suddenly the painted arch reared up all the way, so that only the two back hooves were still planted on the ground, with the girl suspended in hang-time like a gazelle. Then the great blue-red-yellow arch fell back like a broken jaw. Its cross-beam missed hitting her head by only a narrow stretch of sky, and she stood there screaming and screaming with the jaws of the swing-set fallen open around her, the chains dangling slack in her hands.

Pumping too hard can eventually make the whole structure topple over. I suppose that's when it's good to know how to leap into mid-air, as my brother had been able to do, and trust that you won't break your ankle. Although breaking an ankle would still be better than being hit in the head by a falling cross-beam.

My brother is in the army now, stationed somewhere along the eastern border of Turkey. It's difficult to pick him out from the photos he sometimes sends home, it's been so long since we've seen him. I admire the multiple anonymity of uniforms, and admire how his voice fluctuates between crackling static and the deep grown-up tones of a man none of us really knows, when he phones at Christmas time.

*

The man from the riding stable comes up the hill with a red plastic pail. I know there are pretextual fish inside it, my Mother having offered to help design a pond for the Japanese garden pavilion across campus. Sometime the man comes with miniature trees to show her, or model bridges to straddle ornamental streams. My mother tells the man that the fish are beautiful over and over again and he says *Yeah, they're beauties*. He chews his cheek while my Mother's lips make goldfish-bubbles saying *beautiful beautiful*. The man lifts his trouser leg slightly, at the knee, and squats down beside my Mother. They talk about money and saddles and bridles, and about how the appearance of a place is so greatly improved if one plants a garden. He is squatting down so his brown trousers bunch up at the crotch like a walrus. My Mother smooths her yellow sun dress over her thighs.

My mother with her thighs spread open very wide, and my startled red face in between them. I was born face-first, almost. My Mother has been telling people this from time to time since as long as I can remember, sometimes reaching out and framing my face in her labial hands, pressing hard against my temples, laughing at the redness of my cheeks. I don't mind the story when it's taken to mean that I'd been full of curiosity. That I'd wanted to take a good look at the world from the very moment I was pushed into it. But sometimes she adds the detail that I'd tried to brace myself back with my elbows, as though I'd taken one peek and decided I was better off where I came from. *Your father wanted to call you little Thel,* she says in a voice like tinkling bells, *but it was such an old-fashioned name. And besides you weren't all that little, as I recall.* I was a good couple of pounds bigger than Rose, my Mother reminds me, crossing un-crossing her legs and lighting a long skinny cigarette, or touching the place on her belly where her scar must be. That scar says I've been evasive about rites of passage since the day I was born.

Sitting on the lawn that way my Mother looks as though she has no legs at all, like a chess piece. There is a round egg-yellow pedestal where her sun dress tucks under her knees, a sunnier yellow than that of my fingers holding back the kitchen curtain. I have

gone inside again and the man has gone away, taking his red bucket of fish with him. They didn't kiss each other as they sometimes do, perhaps because they thought I was watching, which I was. Now my Mother sits there like a cool queen waiting for something else to happen, the sound of the telephone ringing or Rose crying or dusk descending like freon gas.

She doesn't keep her eyes on the beans she's snapping, not always. Sometimes she looks up and across the lawn to the communal driveway where a hanging sign says *Salmon Court*, in painted orange letters on brown wood. The sign is suspended from an L-shaped wooden gallows like a sign in a ghost town, swaying when it's windy and soaking up rain, getting bloated then drying out again, and weathering, weathering. The driveway leads up and around in a loop at the centre of the court, then doubles back in a running knot and trails off to the road. When my Mother finally comes inside, she comments on how little she notices the mountains here, despite how huge they are, looming green and purple like cabbages at dusk.

Last summer I could wear cut-offs with a yellow happy-face patch on the right thigh and a turquoise short-sleeved sweater from one of my Mother's old twin-sets. She's kept all her twin-sets, a salmon-pink one, an avocado-green, a mustard-yellow one. She wore the mustard sweater-set with a brown skirt once for a photo, looking like a hornet with hardly any waist at all. She and my Father are leaning over the railing of the *Queen of Squamish*, with my Mother's lips so red like a gash. But this summer all my clothes are black and shapeless, which my Mother says makes me look like a widow or a depressed person. She wants to know if I am either of these. I tell her I'm a black fish, which is the name given to salmon after spawning.

Listen. There's another reason why I've been writing those long letters to Rose, and it's that I'm not sure how well I'll be able to trust my own memory in say a year or so from now. Something is going awry. I'm not at all happy with the way my parents have methodically readjusted their living space to the periphery without ever addressing the

unspoken things in the centre, all the unspoken things at the centre. There seems to be a giant hole in the middle of things which I have to fill up with something or I'll fall in.

But the things I have to fill it with are so little, and so changeable. Maybe some afternoon my Mother will come home from the riding stable all breezy and sweaty to find me in the kitchen on my hands and knees, on all fours eating from the cat dish. I swear to God this doesn't seem impossible at times. The dish seldom gets washed very well, there's always a brown-red scum like dried blood encrusted on the bottom, and sometimes I find myself wondering about diseases which might inhabit the mouths of cats. I find myself wondering if it's possible to catch one, and what would happen to me if I did. Whether I would become a mad cat biting and scratching and biting and scratching. Sometimes I worry about things like this, even though I know a little about cat diseases and can't think of one which would effect me in this way. But you can never really tell how things are going to effect you until they happen.

The orange cat at the riding stable recently had kittens, the man had brought over a few to show my Mother. I came out and sat down on the grass as well as though he'd come to show both of us, as though we were a friendly party of three. The kittens looked like little rats with giant heads, ratty little tails and eyes gummed closed like mollusks. Of the kittens he showed us, one was much smaller than the others. It was the runt of the litter, he said. Then a couple of days later he came back and said that the mother cat gone mad, she'd killed the runt and eaten it. When I told him this wasn't unusual he said he knew it wasn't, he'd probably seen more mamma cats eat their young than I'd ever see. But he said it as though the mamma cat was a monster like a vampire or a werewolf, as though he had witnessed a supernatural event. I told him about mother hawks who laid only two eggs then let the twin siblings battle it out between themselves, the larger sibling usually pushing the smaller one out of the nest or pecking it to death. Probably because there wouldn't have been enough for both of them to eat, naturally, or because one of them was not healthy enough to live very long anyway.

That's a hell of a thing for a young mother to be thinking about, teased the man from the riding stable.

I don't know, Alley, my Mother agreed. *You'd have a hard time convincing me that it's natural for a mother to eat her young. Imagine! I've always tended to think there was something of the devil in a cat.*

It was my Mother who'd set up the lacy yellow net over Rose's crib to keep the mosquitoes away from her. But I know the cover is also to keep cats away. My Mother believes that cats are seduced by the milky smell of baby's breath and would coil themselves up on the sleeping faces of babies, smothering them to death. The old grey cat which I inherited from the Buffalo Man lives here now, shaved of its name and its sex and its past. It breaks my heart to look at her. My Father seems to have taken a shine to her though, I watch them together with a strange combined feeling of longing and relief. I should be glad if my Father is willing to adopt the cat and love her without knowing anything about where she came from. But at the same time I know the cat is one more example of how things from the past can get mollified into complacency in the present.

Sometimes I scoop the cat up onto my lap and whisper her original name in her ear, but all she seems to hear is the annoying tickle of disturbed ear-hairs. She up and runs from me. But my Father, she runs to him the minute he gets home from school, and he picks her up and strokes her contentedly without even asking where the red roses on the kitchen table came from.

The other day I had to wash the Darth Vader duvet-cover from my goose-down comforter after the cat shat on it, like she seems to do whenever there are any new additions to the household, or new subtractions, or any other ruptures. She goes into a chaos and shits on things, mostly my things, as though I'm the one responsible for chaos in the house. But this time I think the chaos has to do with the man from the riding stable. I really do. He's the one upsetting the balance of things. He's like one of those mongrel colours which taint the primary three, which would be my Mother and my Father and me,

I suppose, we'd be the primary colours according to someone's model. My Mother would be yellow, she tends to lighten things up, for better or for worse, like a new coat of paint in the kitchen. My Father would be red, because there is something inversely ecclesiastical about red, it is the contents and fundament of ecclesiasticism. Red is what his faith is built on and tries to contain. Blood, wine, passion, anger, sex. Which leaves me with blue, I suppose, I'm the one who gets to be blue.

Outside of this triangle I have been as much of a mongrel as the man from the riding stable is, tending to upset the balances of things, tossing spanners in the works, tainting yellow to mustard and red to rust and blue to slate. Acting as both the tainter and the tainted by turns. There is nothing fallen about this necessarily, it is simply true and inevitable that unless a person lives in a bubble she gets tarnished by outside variables. My Aunt Hilda spent her whole life in the same house, as what my Mother calls an old maid, playing piano and collecting curios which she kept out on the porch if they were too exotic. And it seemed to work for her. But who knows. the man from the riding stable could be the best thing that ever happened to my Mother. or maybe even to my Father by extension. It could be that he's breaking a bubble which has kept us stewing in our own juices for too long. I could be that he's relieving some of the strange pressure which has been building up in the house ever since I came here with Rose. He could be relieving some pressure. the way a four-legged table is probably more stable than a three-legged one. The more legs, the less stress on each of them, theoretically.

But sometimes I'm not sure the man from the riding stable is absorbing his share of the stress. He's in and he's out of here, and doesn't leave much of himself behind as far as what's visible. There are the bouquets of roses and baby's breath, I suppose, and once I found a pair of his suspenders in the kitchen, but that's been all. Which maybe means the extra stress is absorbed back into the house like a certain quantity of dark matter, invisible and unspoken about. Rosie must breathe it in, the net over her crib couldn't filter out something like that, and I must absorb a little of it too. As for my Father, it pushes him out

of the house and into a sleep of study and prayer, while the old grey cat becomes restless and shits on things. Who knows, maybe the excess pressure affects the internal wiring of the house as well, muffles sound waves, sends surges through cables, is responsible for the build-up of ice in the deep freeze.

I do realize that none of this is the fault of the man from the riding stable in any direct way, he's more like the guy who accidentally backs into a lever and starts up an infernal machine which had been rusting for years. Despite that his horse-grooming involves bridling things, breaking their wildness and taming them to domestic use. I think he's had the opposite effect on the wildlife of the house. There is a chaos creaking the floorboards. There have been so many secrets, so many things left unspoken, that the addition of one more could easily break things wide open just when everyone hoped they were settling down. I almost wish my Father would come home and catch the two of them together. But you know, I wouldn't be surprised if even this failed to provoke a crisis. Some species have a terrifying ability to adapt themselves to just about anything.

A secret is an invisible elephant in the room. Even those who are unaware of its particular features can still sense the space it takes up, the air it displaces, how it pushes their living room to the periphery. Everyone learns to suck in their guts and breathe more shallowly, creeping along with their backs to the wall like spies. Invisible elephants are parasitical to my family, they seem to follow us wherever we go. Selling the house on Dormier Street didn't get rid of them, the Clean Slate Agreement was ineffectual at eradicating them as well. They are a sort of family familiar, born of secrecy, breeding secrecy. I have imagined ways of exposing them, setting up drums of paint above all the doorjambs or booby-trap bombs of white flour. Perhaps it's about time someone did something like that. There ought to be some way of detecting the opening and closing of doors, the comings and goings of secrets. It is time that a bomb fell on our house, like a storm of finger-print powder. Then once the dust has settled I could point and say *There, you see? There is our elephant, coated in dust.*

Just now there is nothing I can point to without looking like a lunatic, I would be pointing and sputtering at nothing. I tend to over-react to things, my mother says, I tend to make a big deal out of nothing. But someone has written the analogy of a trout flipping and thrashing in a pond as though it has lost even the simple mind which trout are thought to possess. From a distance it appears that the trout has gone mad, until closer view, when a nylon line is just barely detectable, and traceable to a hidden figure on the shore who holds the rod. The analogy ceases to be useful here, the secrets of a family are rarely so simple that they may be traced to a single figure with his rod in his hands. But the slippery flipping and thrashing continues, and it is perhaps about time that someone picked up a thread and followed it through to its resolution. I suppose it's because of Rose that I believe the task falls to me.

But not yet. My Mother may be right that since the birth of Rose I've been unwell. that I worry about things which don't really exist or matter in the real world. I know I've been preoccupied. My Mother may be right that moving back here was the best thing for me to do, for the time being, that I must rest and let myself be taken care of, after a fashion. She wouldn't be very happy to know about the letters to Rose, for instance. They're only little stories, children's stories, they don't seem to do me any harm. It seems more important that I keep my mind active, than let it chill and congeal like a jelly in the fridge as my Mother seems to recommend. It's been difficult enough that my zoology texts have been moved into storage somewhere only half-read, and that the only other things to read here are religious books and novels of etiquette by one Mrs.L.T.Meade, dedicated to improving the minds of young girls. If I can't do my own work I must do something else, but be discreet about it. It may not be the exactly the time to provoke confrontations.

So the other day I discreetly washed the cat shit out my Darth Vader duvet-cover and left it hanging on the line overnight like a wet pelt in the dark. That night I slept under just the white down comforter without the cover, which I didn't find very comforting, because of an aversion to white things. My mother calls this aversion both precious and

irrational. Maybe so. But her opinion is not unbiased either, whose job has been to polish people's teeth in order to keep them as white as possible. She polishes kitchen appliances in order to keep them as white as possible. She bleaches her fingernails and her bed sheets to keep them as white as possible. But it seems to me that only the bedding of things which are dead or inanimate remain purely white, without leakage of blood, expulsion of fluids, the smears of streaky mascara and tears. Stained sheets may be held up as evidence in several different contexts, all turning on life and animation, or the cessation of these.

White is as deadly as the primary colours are. Maybe even more deadly. If primary colours are a Holy Trinity, then white is the absence even of this, the unmanifest beyond the colours of the manifest. White the absence of anything on which to tether faith. White is the sleepless nightmare of a paranoid person that her stalkers dwell only inside her skull, and that nothing but white walls exists outside it. White is the most desolate place there is. It is a surface absorbing no visible rays of light, deflecting everything, retaining nothing. White is the absence of sanguinary gall, as in white-lipped fear, white-livered cowardice, white winding sheets. Hostility with the absence of bloodshed is known as *white war*. *White nights* are those spent in the absence of dreaming. White is the absence of contrast, of differentiation, *white noise*, *white light*. The absence of anticipated attainment, *white hope*. The point where metal almost sublimates itself into insubstantiality, *white heat*. The whites of eggs, the whites of eyes, peripheral environment where the stuff of life and vision is not focused, is not manifest. The white of wedding dresses.

Rose. Today I stood looking at the smooth pale skin of your back in the mirror as I swayed you to and fro. Even beneath the lacy yellow net where you're kept the fresh outdoor air seems to reach you and give you some colour, I see you looking healthier. Beneath your skin I can still see all your purple veins like beautiful subaquatic ferns. You are so small. In time you should be given a pair of shiny new boots and a full empty field of snow to run around in, laughing and leaving your mad little bootprints wherever you like. It should be after a new snow, before any body else has walked there. It should be

new and you should be able to mark it with your own two feet however you like. But there are a few things that I must do before that time. Truthfully, my first desire when I look at a blank sheet of white paper is to pick up a fountain pen of black ink and scrawl things all over it. Even one word changes the whole composition of the page. It becomes a point of fixation, like an eyeball, a place from which to begin to see.

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## *the headless bride*

My first object of desire was a severed head. I was seven or eight if memory serves, which it generally doesn't. More often I find myself playing chambermaid to my own recollection, rearranging objects on its vanity table to look as functionally generic as possible, clearing the hair it leaves in the sink. Moving mental furniture to suit its changing fancy. But I do remember desiring the head, after my father's perennial *I'd like to see you get ahead, you need one*, which limping pun was not even original, as I found out, seeing it printed on a dozen t-shirts in the window of a Water Street souvenir shop. The t-shirts would make a fitting souvenir of my father, who in memory is figured as a sort of spatial concept or emblem, bearing little physical resemblance to the man but easily transferable onto other things and other people. like an iron-on decal. or a phony tattoo.

But I did get a head. the Christmas when I was seven or eight. It sparkled from beneath the low-hanging boughs of the tree, a kitchen-appliance-sized box. wrapped in shiny pink & silver paper, tied with a pink lepidopterous bow. The bow had made similar appearances in previous years, like a lacy fading ghost of Christmas past, moldering to naphthalene. But under the warm burlesque light of the tree it remained lovely, its whispered proposition was ever the same: *open me first*.

Strictly speaking the bow was not tied to the box at all, but stapled to itself in multiple loops and stuck with a dab of adhesive. I was slightly disillusioned to learn this. I had thought my mother was able to tie such elaborate bows herself. She was resourceful, and believed strongly in the importance of presenting an agreeable package. She also believed in occasionally reminding us that her resources were pinched, like the nerve in her back was pinched, and that it pained her.

And so I unwrapped the box carefully, knowing the bow would be preserved to reappear on some other object of desire, some other time. I slipped my father's pen-knife beneath the bands of tape and sliced through until the paper fell away, then clamped my

hands like forceps over the temples of the lovely head to lift it carefully out of the box. A small plastic bag of pink hair-ornaments and play-cosmetics fell from the box as well, like those bags of internal organs found in turkeys. For a few moments I could only sit staring at the severed head. until my mother said *Well, if I didn't like my new head I could always exchange it for something else, such as a decent pair of slippers.*

*What do you say, Alley?* prompted my father. Then was I all praise and thank-you's, murmuring that the head was even more perfect than I'd imagined, the most lovely head I had ever seen, the most perfect of presents.

And strictly speaking the head wasn't severed at all, severance being predicated on some original attachment to a body, which attachment the head had never known. It was blond, female, single. Its only attachment was a pony-tail of artificial hair which could be fastened in place with a pink barrette and as easily removed. Unlike my own head, the head was pliable and weighed almost nothing. A thumb pressed into its forehead left a dent, which gradually re-inflated when the pressure was removed. It smiled with sealed lips, as I was encouraged to do, as not to expose my crooked lower incisors.

The head stood about a foot tall and had long shiny locks of celestial platinum, while my hair was dark as dirt. Its eyes were the two-dimensional blue of postcard sky, while mine sank back to oily brown, then black, then deeper to infinity, or less profound than that. My eyes were the colour of drugstore sunglasses, that cheap dark glass which tricks the pupil into wide dilation as though it were protected, the retinas only getting more burned for their beguiled openness. I've heard that cheap sunglasses are more damaging than no sunglasses at all. That I'd be better off staring directly into the sun for one ecstatic moment, than walking around behind lenses which only seem to screen the eyes from tiny ultra-violet violences.

At seven or eight, my eyes sucked in radiance like a vacuum. The world burned silhouettes on my retinas which corresponded in negative to the shapes of objects on the landscape. By the time I was nine I had collected an entire shadow-pantheon of objects,



constructed frames around them in my mind. I saw their forms represented everywhere, as though every woman's face were trimmed to fit the portrait-silhouette in the back room of my brain, or every man were Alfred Hitchcock lumbering into the ink-sketch caricature of himself and sublimating there. I projected these shapes from my eye-beams like a magic lantern, and saw their ghostly forms reflected in everything.

The severed head was one of these forms. She exactly filled the ideal silhouette in my mind of what a little girl might aspire to, in her detachment, in her severance from butterflies in the stomach and clumsy feet and other appendages which couldn't be relied on to function with any grace. If desire was a glass slipper, then the head was that lovely dainty foot which slid into it smoothly and fit perfectly.

She was supported upon a pink plastic pedestal embossed with curly designs. In place of shoulders, the pedestal looped out in two epaulet-compartments which held hair ornaments and play-cosmetics. The face of the head floated luminous like a spider egg-case, pale and gossamer, self-contained. I thought of spiders because of her hair, which was almost white and slightly sticky, like webs, or hair products. When I flipped the head upside down to peer through her hollow neck and into her cranium, I could see rows of egg-like baubles where the sticky strands of hair were pushed through perforations in the scalp and heat-sealed in place. There was nothing else inside the head at all, except two blue concave bruises which corresponded to her eyes, and a tiny dimple where her nose was -- the face of the head in negative relief.

I envied her freedom from attachments. I envied that she never had to shut her eyes to sleep, was always wide-eyed and eager but registered no change of expression whatever. Smug knowingness. Smug ingenuous knowingness, knowing nothing. I envied that she did not have to drag around a body, like other species who spend their lives tethered to their own larval cases, or to communal shell-structures, or to arms and legs. The head's empty-headedness meant that she had achieved something, in thinking nothing, in conceiving nothing, in seeing-hearing-speaking nothing. I could stick my fingers up the slender tunnel

of her neck and hold her aloft in one hand. Like a ballerina, she was easily borne. Were she ever to bear progeny, I envisioned these as baby spiders, which would float away immediately after birth to make their own way in the world, independently and elsewhere. Baby spiders arrive with their parachutes ready, know instinctively how to use them, or quickly learn. Then they leave. I envied the head for having, for *being*, no body. It was her birthright, her copyright to remain attached to nothing. And nothing, for its part, would remain attached to her.

After dinner, I carried the head into my room and closed the door. I draped a pale blue chiffon nightie from my mother's dresser over the head's shoulders, over the pink plastic pedestal which stood in place of shoulders, then cupped the back of her graceful nylon scalp in my squarish hand and lead waltzes about the room. I admired how gracefully her blue chiffon no-body flowed in time to music it could hear not at all. I admired how she never trod on my toes. I was always treading on people's toes, my mother's toes, though I scarcely ever saw my mother's toes. They were hidden in fluffy blue rabbit-fur slippers, or raised out of harm's way on the foot-rest of her big mustard armchair. This didn't seem to stop me from treading on her toes, she said, but at the same time she also said that I was always getting underfoot. I didn't dare point out the apparent contradiction in this, my dual identity as both treader and trodden upon. I simply understood that as a subject I was an imposition; as an object, an encumbrance. All in all I was too much of a body, and this I had to bear in mind. *Mind your tongue, mind your manners, mind your feet you great horsy girl, mind you stay out of harm's way.* Enough to make a girl wish for a body which occupied no space at all, so that it could be kept out of harm's way. Enough to make a girl long for a body which occupied negative *space*.

How delicious then, to be a severed head, transcending all of that. Immortal women were often bodiless. Preserved behind glass inside tiny gold locket, or framed on gallery walls; embossed on boxes of chocolates and cake mixes, bottles of pancake syrup, backs of coins, packets of cigarettes; preserved on postage stamps, or suspended above the

gateways of stone castles. More memorable as heads than they ever were as bodies, and not in anyone's way.

My mother had a vase in the shape of a woman's head, a very pale woman with red lips and lowered porcelain lashes painted thick black. The earlobes were actually pierced, so the vase could wear actual cultured-pearl earrings, with an actual cultured-pearl choker to match. The chin was demurely grafted to a single slender hand, neatly severed at the wrist, blood red polish on its long tapered nails. The mouth of the vase was a mauve porcelain sun hat, with a hole in the top to stick tulips in, or plant a cactus. The difference between this vase of my mother's and the head I got for Christmas was the location of the hole. My hole was on the bottom, my mother's was at the top. My head had an opening where the body should have been, hers had no body either but was sealed underneath so it wouldn't leak water and plant-food. The hole in my head opened itself to earthly things, while her head was open to the sky.

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Boxing Day my brother and I were packed in the dusty back seat of the green Torino and driven a hundred miles out of town to our Great Aunt Hilda's house, for dinner. My father stayed home to take care of the house and the hamster, or to repair something at his workbench, or whatever it was he did down there in the basement. I decided to bring my head with me, draping my best red corduroy jumper over its pedestal-shoulders and fastening the six pearly buttons up to its throat. My mother had laid out the jumper on my bed for me, with a pair of white tights, and shiny black shoes with gold buckles. I was supposed to wear them to dinner. I wore the tights and the shoes, but my new head wore the jumper. Instead, I wore a brown cable-knit sweater which belonged to my father, and which I was swimming in. But I pinned my hair back from my eyes with two of the head's pink barrettes, and hoped my mother would not be cross about the jumper.

I don't know why you persist in doing these things, Alison, she said as she drove, *I don't know why you persist. Your Great Aunt Hilda hasn't seen you in a whole year. It*

would have been nicer if you'd made more of an effort to be presentable. You're not a bad looking little girl, in that jumper. She frowned at me in the rear view mirror, the eyes at the back of her head. *Well I hope I won't live to regret being talked into that ruddy doll,* she muttered to herself, swerving abruptly into the passing lane.

My brother sat crumpled beside me in the back seat in his navy polyester suit, bent over a game which fired marbles at pictures of jungle animals when he released a spring-lever. Antelope, fifty points. Hyena, one hundred points. Tiger, five hundred points. He had killed the same antelope at least a dozen times, was still trying for the tiger. The game rattled endlessly.

Gavin, let's leave off with that for now. I mean it, pet. You can pass that up to me, if you like. My mother's green-gloved hand appeared at her shoulder, reaching into the back seat like an eyeless puppet opening and closing its mouth. *Gavin, let's have the game, please.*

Gavin handed her the game and asked again why our father hadn't come with us. I watched the back of my mother's hatted head, and half of my face in the rear-view mirror. The head lay smiling on the seat between me and my brother, its yellow hair curled in spirals for the occasion, the red jumper lying limp across my lap like a grounded parachute.

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At dinner, my brother made the announcement that both of us had got pinworms. My mother caught him quickly by the elbow and escorted him from the table. The grown-ups had been talking of absent persons and suspicions of illness, and other suspicions which couldn't be verified as the persons were absent. My Aunt Hilda was listening with distaste. I couldn't tell whether she disapproved of the people who were being spoken about, or of the fact they were being spoken about behind their backs. She hadn't seemed to mind about the pinworm revelation, she had even smiled, a little. Enough that I felt encouraged to pursue the subject once my mother returned to her seat, leaving my brother to do his five-minute time-out in the kitchen.

*But it's true, we do have,* I said. *I've seen them.* I was convinced it was some exotic ailment I had, or evidence of genetic malfunction, at least a signal that something was wrong, that something was rotten. There were worms in rotten apples and crawling all inside dead groundhog-bodies at the side of the road. I knew of such things. I assumed that Great Aunt Hilda would know something of them too, she was very old and had seen the death of many things. She would know how to tell if a body were dying. She would know better than I did that dead bodies couldn't speak nor do much of anything, and that they were generally disposed of by somebody, being unable to dispose of themselves.

But my mother reached for my arm beneath the table, and pressed a discreet trail of slender half-moons in my flesh with her small pointed nails. Above the table, her mouth was smiling and explaining that at times I tended to forget myself. This was why she was digging her nails into my arm, I thought, to remind me of myself. That I was there and that I had arms, which were under the table where no one could see them, so no one would comment. I was interested in things which no one commented upon. Despite the turkey & stuffing, the sparkling cranberry-orange relish in its clear crystal bowl, despite the candied yams, the green-beans in butter & cream, the turnip mashed with carrots, the polished silverware, the best bone china, despite the festive paper table-cloth embossed with bells and red bows, all I could think of was whether it had occurred to anyone that there was a mangled dead bird on the table.

*Mangle.* That night I slept on a cot in my Aunt Hilda's kitchen, beside the old washing machine which featured a device called a mangle. The mangle resembled two rolling pins, pressed together like tight white lips, between which wet laundry was fed to wring it out and press it flat. The clothes would emerge pristine and two-dimensional on the other side, as though the machine ate laundry and spat linen sheets and shirts. I'd heard stories of women getting their arms caught in mangles, and tried to imagine what would get spat out the other side. Long thin arms pressed flat, like the red satin evening gloves my mother complained of never having occasion to wear.

The kitchen smelled of steam and turkey-fat and laundered flannelette. The cot made me think of an ironing board, it creaked when I shifted my weight to escape the metal beam at my tailbone. My mother had pulled it down from a tall cupboard by the cellar door, unfolding its jointed legs until it could stand up on all fours. My Aunt Hilda had contributed a pale green night-light shaped like a little cat-face winking. She'd plugged it into the wall beside the old washing machine, making the barrel of the machine glow mint-green like an enormous jellied salad, one of those menacing salads which mixed shredded cabbage with mini-marshmallows as though the two had anything to offer one another.

The night-voices of Great Aunt Hilda's house had not changed in a hundred years. Night spoke in crickets and creaks like the slow turning of a wheel, the groaning of the rafter-beams like oxen. the ticking of the kitchen wall-clock and my own pulse pacing back and forth in attic rooms. Green light washed the contours of the walls and slid over the oval frame of a portrait hung above the cellar door. I was sure the same portrait used to hang upstairs. I had seen it before. Now sparse green light contorted the head and shoulders of a sallow little girl in a lacy-necked pinafore, her high lunar forehead and low-sloping brow shading eager little eyes, which peered from beneath. Her short curly hair clung close like a plaster cast of itself, and her small tapioca teeth glowed green in the half-light.

Her face was green-tinted as well, like the face of a girl who is sick. or envious. I knew she used to hang upstairs because I'd slept in the same room with her once, or had not slept. There had been a game I couldn't win, against her softly eager eyes defying me to shut mine. *Just lie back, there you go.* I would begin to nod off. Then my eyes would open with a start and there she'd be, her veiled eager stare, her odd little smile. I had run down to the ground floor to my to wake my Great Aunt Hilda, who had kindly climbed the stairs with me to save me from the girl with the tapioca teeth. I had hoped my Aunt would stay with me until I fell asleep again. My heart had sunk when I watched her simply reach up and turn the portrait to the wall. *I don't think that will help me very much,* I said. In truth

I thought it was much worse, the sallow little face of the girl pressed to the wall like that. She would be furious. She would try to flip the oval frame back over with her tongue, and I would lie in the dark and listen to the thumping.

*Well now Alley don't be silly, My Great Aunt Hilda said. Imagine making such a fuss over a picture. Your grandmother had it was painted when your mother was just a little girl like you, you know. It's your own dear mother, after all.*

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Tonight it was my mother who had the upstairs room, with my brother in a cot at the foot of her bed, while I was down here in the kitchen with her floating head to watch over me in my sleep. *The eyes at the back of her head.* I shivered and pulled the grey woolen blankets up to my neck, then turned my face away toward the beautiful blond head in bed beside me. Her pale nylon profile was green-tinted as well. Over her shoulders I had draped my pink flannel nightdress, which quite became her, being only a head, she quite became whatever costume she was dressed in. Her pink flannel no-body lay limp and flat against the cot like a paper doll, or a fairy tale princess pressed flat between the pages of a book.

When I looked down at myself I was the opposite of this. I could not see my own head, but the rest of me appeared a grey mass of woolen blankets. If I peered beneath the blankets, I became a naked cluster of pale and rounded shapes like cheeses under glass at a delicatessen. *Too much of a body.* The milky smell of a body, warm and slightly damp, against the cool artificial scent of the head like those products advertised as unscented which are not. Each of us seemed to have what the other one lacked. But if the head was my first object of desire then perhaps I could be hers, we could complete each other.

I sat up creaking in the cot and set my bare feet down on the chilled linoleum, with its twisting pattern of cabbages-roses strangling themselves in lovely ways. I nestled my blond severed head in the crook of my arm and let her pink gown flow to the floor like a veil. She smiled sweetly, with sealed lips. I placed her up high like a basket on my head

and held her there with one hand, then draped the grey woolen blanket over both of us in such a way that my body was hidden except for my feet. I was able to peek through a crevice in the folds of the blanket to avoid bumping into anything as I shuffled our feet over to the cellar door. Our head looked up.

The portrait would serve as the Justice. The cellar door above which she was framed resembled one of those lofty wooden podiums where judges sit. In my mind, I fed her lines one by one like tea-cakes, while her tiny tapioca teeth grinned green over the proceedings. It was the first time in memory I was able to put words in my mother's mouth. *We are gathered here in the green sight of the winking cat to witness the joining of this head to this body, holy macaroni. If anyone present knows a reason why these two should not be united, let that person speak now or forever rest in pieces.*

There was adequate pause. The house creaked, the clock ticked and my pulse paced but no one spoke. I fed the portrait her next lines. *Do you, head, take this body to be lawfully yours, to have and to hold things for you, for better or for worse. For richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, til death does its part* or however the words went, they seemed to anticipate the worst. And I was conscious now that the worst parts of the vows referred more to me, the body, than they did to the head, who would never be sick, would never be dead. But I tipped her back and forth like one of those glass-ampule birds filled with red fluid which dips its beak into a wine glass, and the head slowly nodded *I do*.

Beneath the blanket it was dark and becoming very warm, my arm was beginning to tire from holding up my severed head that way. But cool against the floor were the soles of my feet, pale and green like phosphorescent fish among the tangled vines of cabbage roses. A pale green island with two feet planted on it. This was all I was able to see clearly, everything else was cloaked in thick woolen darkness. My two feet. Our two feet.

I was having second thoughts. The head had nothing to lose if this union failed, she had never been attached to any body in the first place. She might even begin to miss having no body, having done very well for herself with no body to weigh her down. *Blonde,*

female, single. Bodiless. Bloodless. Unbiodegradable. Immortal women were often figured as bodiless heads, but I had never seen a picture of a headless body on a postage stamp or a coin or a box of chocolates or preserved in an oval frame, suspended under glass above a cellar door. A body, set apart from its head, was mortal, and anonymous. *What would I do if I lost my head?*

Do you, body of Alley, take this head to be yours, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, for as long as you both shall live? Now the lines came unbidden to my mind, automatically, like the workings of an infernal machine having only one switch to set it into motion. And *wouldn't* the portrait of my mother have to speak the lines itself if the head and I were really to be joined? A body is mute without its head, but the lips of my head were permanently sealed. I had seen inside her, I had peered down the narrow tunnel of her slender neck and saw she had no tongue. She had no teeth. She had nothing at all inside her skull but the impression of her own face in negative, whereas the portrait was able to speak words simultaneously with their appearance in my mind, as is the case with putting words in someone's mouth, or taking them from someone's mouth. There is spontaneous correspondence between the gap of generations. It becomes difficult to tell where words came from, in the beginning, and just who is feeding the words and who must eat them. *Do you take this body? Do you take this head?*

The joining of two things is predicated on their being separate from each other in the first place. This was not a script which I had written, the original severance of head from body, yet I knew it to be so. Subtle severances seemed to happen every day in a person's life, until finally at the age of seven or eight the desire is already in place -- to be united or reunited with a part which has been lost, or is thought to be missing.

I lowered my head and let her rest in the crook of my arm, gathering the blanket around us as though we were standing on the bridge watching the last of the fireworks. The head on the wall was still chattering, like a ventriloquist, without moving her mouth. *Is there any body present who objects to this union? Who will give away the bride? Are you*

with the party of the bride or the party of the groom? Do you take this body? Do you take this head? It seemed the only way to make her stop was to accept her terms. *I do*, I said. I looked up into her soft and eager eyes which did not blink and did not weep as the eyes of mothers are said to do at weddings, and spoke the words again *I do. I do take this head. I do.*

I now pronounce you head and body, said the head on the wall, *and let no one tear asunder what herein has been conjoined.* Then was I permitted to kiss my better half on her small pink lips, which were cool and hard like buttons.

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## *a hollow leg*

My mother stood at Aunt Hilda's cast-iron stove frying eggs, potatoes and onions, bacon and blood-pudding, candied yams left-over from the night before. The stove also stood, on four stout legs like a black bull in the corner of the kitchen by the window. Outside the kitchen window I could see the bony fingers of the crab-apple tree, frosted white like the piped moldings of a gingerbread house. My mother's hair was pulled back from her face by a set of blue plastic jaws, which gathered it in frothy champagne curls at the back of her head. This was also how she wore her hair to work, as a dental hygienist at the private clinic of a man named Dr. Beard. The short blue housecoat she was wearing looked like a uniform. She worked quickly over the frying food with metal instruments, slotted spoons and spatulas, occasionally pressing back tendrils of hair with her wrist. She had informed each of us by turn that her head was killing her this morning, but then when Aunt Hilda shuffled in and asked how everyone had slept, my mother had said *Like the dead*.

*Well, so which is it?* said my Uncle Ernie, coming in from the shed with an armful of logs the size of pig-legs. *You're either being killed or you're already dead. It's got to be one or the other.*

*It's always one or the other, Ernie,* my mother said. She scraped some dark round slices from a pan and piled them on a platter. *How many of you are really interested in blood-pudding, anyway? I'm cooking it all up but I must say I've never seen the attraction.*

*Oh it's a tradition I suppose,* sighed my Aunt Hilda, who was sitting in the rocking chair by the window and looking critically at the backs of her hands. *It used to be a favourite of your Uncle Herbert, dear.* She flipped her hands over like pancakes and examined the palms, then rubbed them together and set them down on her lap. Behind the rocking-chair was the bathroom door, which opened presently, and out stepped the thin

apparition of Uncle Ernie's Australian wife with a handful of vitamins which she carefully lined up beside her place-setting at the table as though they were bean-seeds. *I can't believe how quickly the kitchen warms up,* she said gently, to no one in particular. From upstairs, I could hear the rattling of the game which shot marbles at jungle animals. My brother was still trying for the tiger.

But this morning I was cheerful and ravenous. My dreams were of a honeymoon with the head, we had planted a secret garden in the cellar of Aunt Hilda's house and watched it grow before our very eyes. Purple and green cabbages bloomed from hanging vines, and all around the garden were looping foot-paths in the shape of a trefoil with a very deep well at the centre, yellow-green like a cat's eye. We had set up lawn-chairs with legs that unfolded like the legs of an ironing board, and were sipping elegant green drinks from stemmed glasses with sugar-cruled rims, through candy-striped straws with bendy necks. I was watching all this from outside the frame of the picture, but still I could see my naked headless body sipping serenely through a tidy little hole like a tear-drop pendant at the throat.

The lovely head was sitting like an Easter basket on her lawn-chair. She looked at me and smiled, and I could see a row of small perfect teeth between her lips. She laughed at my astonishment, the sound of tinkling china, delighted. She had no trouble at all accepting the mouth of the straw between her lips, and I watched the fluid-level in the glass go down as she sipped. I had to wonder where all the fluid was going. But when I looked down at my feet, the cellar was filling with green liquid, it was already up to my ankles and rising. The head's fancy drink was flowing straight through her neck, and pouring out the bottom of the pedestal in frothy mint-green cascades like swooshed mouthwash. It was marvelous. *You see,* said the head precisely, *having no body means never having to take responsibility for anything.*

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My mother piled the browned steaming food onto platters and set them down

heavily on the table, then unreeled herself onto a straight-back chair. Hers was slightly removed from the other chairs around the table, she hadn't set a place for herself. *Well, that should keep you going for a while*, she said tiredly, pouring pink grapefruit juice into a small fluted glass. She sat sipping it, knees crossed, foot extended and switching to and fro like a cat's tail with her blue rabbit-fur slipper dangling from her toes. I interpreted two instances of familiar familial sign language: the leg-swinging and the fact that most everyone in the family seemed to begin statements with the word *Well*. The leg-thing was particular to my mother, it was a something she did which made her seem perpetually impatient or slightly cross, the way some birds and certain fish can puff themselves up to intimidate potential predators.

The second was something everyone did. The word *Well* could preface almost any statement: its implication seemed to be that listeners had the option of paying attention or not to what was about to be said. *Well, I guess I'll drive into town today and find out about that steer manure. Well, I don't suppose anyone's interested but I'm going to say something now.* Or the word *Well* could be a sort of resigned sigh, a slightly grudging acceptance of the way things happened to be, as in my mother's *Well, that should keep you going for a while. Well, I suppose there's no end to baking pies for weddings and funerals.* When people only spoke the barest bones for what was on the minds, it was necessary to invent elaborate systems of signs to fill in the spaces between what they did and did not say.

My mother's foot switched more furiously as she watched me stack my plate with potatoes and refried yams. She lit a long skinny cigarette and blew out a thin gust of smoke. My Uncle Ernie, who was Aunt Hilda's son and technically my second cousin, passed the platter of steamy blood-pudding to his Australian wife who had wispy blond hair and whose name I can never remember if I ever knew it. Uncle Ernie called her Missy, which was a name I only knew in the context of a cat Aunt Hilda once had who had died of feline leukemia.

Oh I couldn't, I really couldn't, said Missy, gently declining the platter. She was smiling shyly at my mother and drawing a tiny infinity symbol on the sunny vinyl tablecloth with her finger. *Well you could take a tip from Alley there, Missy,* said Uncle Ernie with his equine laugh half-whinny half-wheeze curling back his upper lip. *Looks like she has a hollow leg to fill.* My mother raised her chin slightly and touched the tiny enclave between her collarbones with her fingertips, which was the most subtle and magical of my mother's sign-language. Touching her throat that way seemed to sever the possibility of speech, her own speech as well as any body else's. As though the gesture were a stylized *Cut* -- a silent slicing of the throat with the fingers, the director's directive to stop the scene. My mother was a director of silent films. When she touched her throat a grainy silence would descend like scrolling acetate and everyone's motions would turn jerky and artificial and mute.

This technique worked very well with my father, because often the speech my mother withheld touched him in some way, unless it touched me. It might have been his locked room in the basement which she was not commenting on, or the trousers which didn't fit him properly, or his inability to fix things so that they functioned better than before the repair, or his perpetual unemployment. We were creatures of a common species, he and I, like those dogs who don't seem to fit their skins very well. I would watch him dance round my mother's glass bell of silence like a spaniel condemning himself as cautiously and doggedly as possible. *Well, pet, they did ask me if I might pop by the manse again next week, which I will do. And Reverend Forster's wife loved my little story of the leech, you know the one, the horse-leech and his two daughters from that verse in Proverbs. And I think Forster will take a shine to me once he's had a chance to see me with the little folks. I think prospects are good, pet, considering --*

Perhaps congregations were moved by my father's earnestness but were unable to summon much faith. It would come out later that he hadn't got the position as children's story teller at the Church, that perhaps there wasn't the budget to create such a position at

the present time. My father would disappear downstairs to his workbench again to work on repairing a lamp, or to fix the rollers on a footstool. I would come home from school to a silent house, to find my mother standing by herself at the big window with one hand pressed gently to her throat. *Queen Midas of Quietness*. The silence would hang in the house like lingering paint fumes, making the furniture uncomfortable to sit on. My father would remain in the basement until another position came up, or he'd go for long walks through alleys and empty lots in search of interesting junk to drag home and store in the back yard. *You do what you can, don't you?* he'd say, while my mother would gradually develop the language of crossing her knees and switching her foot, as she was doing presently.

Now Earnest, don't tease, said my Aunt Hilda, in answer to his comment about my hollow leg, *Alley's a growing girl*. She intended this kindly, oblivious to the silent raising of my mother's eyebrows, which responded *she certainly is*. Looking down at the mess of left-over potatoes and yams on my plate, the segmented coils of fried onions like translucent earthworms, I wish I could say I lost my appetite. Appetites of all sorts were distasteful to my mother. My brother, unmoved, was scarfing down his third helping of blood-pudding, while my mother continued to watch me, and to switch her foot back and forth like the kitchen wall clock synchronizing time. Uncle Ernie was sucking his teeth, sated, while Missy was carefully smoothing out her region of the table cloth, and sweeping her toast-crumbs into a discrete little continent. Great Aunt Hilda was dozing like a cat in a patch of sunlight by the window. I wish I could say I lost my appetite, but I sat there and continued to chew the fried yams knowing well that my mother would continue to switch her foot and watch me do it.

I would like to state that I was not an overly large child, but the truth is I can't be sure any more. *Until you were born, Rose,* no body took many pictures, and the ones in my head are faded now and unreliable. When I remember these scenes I'm not usually in the picture, the same way the person holding the camera is not in the picture, except as a

particular bias of vision or occasionally a blurry thumb in the corner of the frame. I must have relied on my mother to supply me with some clue as to how I appeared, but her reflections tended to be ambiguous, variable, contradictory, and so I learned to see myself this way. As a sort of blurry mist, whose shape was defined by whatever it happened to condense upon, or whatever receptacle it was poured into. Garment-evidence of childhood size was donated back to the thrift-shops it came from; a body be erased from memory like a puppet yanked into the flies. Doors of memory could be boarded up, and chambers so thoroughly renovated that few signs of previous tenancy existed at all.

Rose. I could tell you a funny story which happened quite recently while you were sleeping. I had my head buried in the hall closet, and was going through boxes trying to find something or other I thought I'd lost. I didn't find whatever it was, but I did find a monstrous wooden shoe, a Dutch clog, stashed at the very back of the closet behind the other boxes of boots and shoes. The clog was the size of a cinder-block if it was an inch. Then when your grandmother came home she found me weeping, so hard that I could scarcely catch a breath to tell her why. It was that I was convinced the shoe must have been mine. Why else would she have hidden it like that? I kept thinking of Clementine, blowing bubbles soft and fine beneath the surface of the foaming brine into which she'd fallen and in which she would drown. Do you know this song, I wonder? Clementine had worn *herring-boxes without tops-es* on her feet, because there were no proper shoes to fit her. When I was a little girl I had no idea how big herring boxes were, but I couldn't reconcile *light she was and like a fairy with her shoes were number nine*, which seemed very large to me. Your grandmother's shoes had been size four her entire adult life without fluctuation. She still wears size four, while I tend to buy my shoes second hand so that the size is already scuffed from the soles.

Anyway it turned out that the wooden clog was a window-box my mother planned to plant geraniums in. Of course it was, how silly of me. But I guess I've been thinking lately that I have a somewhat skewed vision of scale, always have had. I used look at

t-shirts intended for terriers and wonder if they would fit me, or again at table-skirts and wonder the same thing. I knew that your grandmother was a size four, anything more or less than that seemed unquantifiable. But what I want to say to you about this is that things like clothing and identity are better described in terms of relative function than absolute size. There is no such thing as an absolute identity or an absolute size four anywhere in the world, except in outer space where these exist as floating concepts. Somewhere in outer space there is a size-four dress-maker's dummy which resembles my mother as I used to see her, but the woman herself is not this entity.

If a person were to tell a story about some body called *she*, then that *she* could be described as fat or thin, by the story-teller's estimation, she would be the object of that person's vision. But in a story about a person called *I* there is no one to watch the watcher. and no one to take her picture as she sits at a kitchen table eating fried yams. What's in an *I*? a blind spot, the centre of a lie. A relative truth. Watching frenzied drops of condensation fret their way down a bus window, I am monstrously huge. Looking up at similar configurations in a clear night sky, manic points of light a million miles away, I am tiny, or nothing.

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From my chair at the kitchen table in Aunt Hilda's house, I could see into the living room as I scooped forkfuls of yams into my mouth. There was a calendar by the phone with a picture of a prize Charlais bull, the colour of cream, and beside it was a window onto the porch, beyond which the snow-covered hayfields expanded like a pale and monstrous underbelly. Out on the porch and propped against a window ledge I could see an old wooden boomerang, decorated with aboriginal designs in black and maroon, which Uncle Ernie had picked up while stationed in Australia. Objects which Aunt Hilda considered too exotic to be fathomed were often relocated to the porch -- there was a little Chief with feathers and face-paint out there as well, who beat a drum when you wound him up, and a set of camel teeth on a leather thong which someone somewhere had once

worn. The porch was a capsular limbo between the inside and outside the house, it contained articles which Aunt Hilda could neither reconcile keeping nor throwing away. She was interested in things from other countries, but only insofar as they retained that dear strangeness which made them interesting but undemanding.

Inside the living room things were lacier and more delicate, there were lots of teacups and doilies and ornamental figurines of lovely ladies and animals from Red Rose Tea packages. There was a avocado-green chesterfield with curly wooden legs and little bouclé pommels all over it. But the thing I was fixing upon, as I chewed my yams, was the framed fauvist print hanging over the chesterfield. It was predominantly red and garish and completely flat, like a window onto a world of two dimensions.

The print was an enlargement of a 1916 Vogue magazine cover, showing a mother and daughter in a glamorous salon or sitting room. Aunt Hilda had said she'd always wanted a daughter. The daughter in the print was about four or six, I could never estimate the ages of children and still cannot, any more than I can estimate the sizes of things, or the distance between places, or the weight of anything. The girl was seated behind the round red table in the foreground the picture, so that only her head and shoulders were showing above its ledge, her two little hands placed on the vivid surface as though at a seance. Her hair was the colour of old pennies, and cut short like a skull-cap. Her purple smock had criss-crossed stitches at the throat, the same milky-blue as her eyes which were pupil-less like robins' eggs.

The mother in the picture was pressed flat against an encroaching backdrop of bright swirling peacock feathers, bearing an elegant bowl of fruit. She was tall and pale and very thin, her body bent over the fruit-bowl like an ivory shepherd's crook or the embodiment of question mark. She was elegantly dressed in a white billowing blouse with a tangerine bodice, and a black velvet bow drooping from between her breasts. The bow resembled melting tar. The woman was coolly pushing the bowl of fruit across the table toward her daughter, with the black bow looking as though it would drop from her breasts

as a massive arachnid to nest itself among the fruit. Whoever painted the picture hadn't included any viable way for the girl to exit the table, unless she were to scoot beneath it and stay there until the mother took the fruit away.

The most inviting of the fruit was an apple, a bright rosy-cheeked apple like in Snow White. Apples were my favourite fruit. Had I been the girl in the picture I might have taken a bite of it, if it hadn't been for the spidery bow drooping over it tarry and poisonous. But what was she to do? Most little girls would never think to suspect their beautiful mothers of feeding them poisonous fruit.

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red delicious

Aunt Hilda used to refer to those tough, translucent casements covering the seeds in apples as *apple teeth*. I called them *apple fingernails*, which they more resembled, but whether tooth or nail they had apparently evolved to protect the seeds beneath. My mother's fingernails, though not excessively long, were strong and beautifully-shaped, they tapered to crescent-moons like those knives used to scrape residual flesh from deer pelts. During the work-week they were unpainted, to avoid nail-polish chipping off into the mouths of her patients. But on weekends and holidays she polished them red or mauve or fuchsia or frosted mahogany. She took gelatin supplements to keep them strong and hard, because gelatin was made of a similar substance to fingernails, the boiled-down resin of hides and hooves.

Out back my Aunt Hilda's house was a crab-apple tree. In the Fall, it was heavily weighted with small hard fruit, which Aunt Hilda would boil down to make crab-apple jelly, transparent and salmon-coloured like sunsets. My brother and I would be sent out with ice-cream pails to gather crab-apples from the ground. Sometimes the apples would look perfectly discrete from a distance, red and picturesque in the dappled green grass, until we picked them up and found a wasp or a horsefly or a large black beetle gnawing great caverns inside. Often the crab-apples would be brown and rotten underneath, and our grabbing thumbs would thrust right through the softened skin into the rotten flesh. *Gross me out*, my brother would shriek, and chuck the bad apple as far as he could, in the direction of the wooden fence-post dividing Aunt Hilda's land from the encroaching woods. His exiled apples never gained the outskirts of the yard, the yard being large and my brother's throwing arm not being that strong, they never landed that far from the tree.

You know, my Dad -- that's your Great Uncle Herbert -- is buried out under that crab-apple tree, my Uncle Ernie told me once. I never asked Aunt Hilda whether or not it was true, it would have been improper, her husband died when she was quite young and

people tended not to mention him. In photographs he looked a bit like the man on the five-dollar bill, but less sour and less blue. Who knew what he looked like now, buried beneath the boughs of the old apple tree, though I knew it was this image Uncle Ernie meant to conjure when he told me he was there. *Where else did you think we'd bury him Alley, down cellar?* he joked, biting into a crab-apple. *It was just lucky for your Aunt Hilda and me that he went in the spring instead of earlier, or he'd have been laid up in the shed all winter til the thaw.*

Sometimes I thought Uncle Ernie was only pulling my leg, which was said to be hollow, and that my Great Uncle Herbert was probably buried in the cemetery just like anybody else. But other times I'd find thin red vein-like things inside the apples, like laugh-lines following the curve of the apple-teeth, and then I wouldn't be sure anymore he wasn't telling the truth. It seemed likely that buried things did not lose their ability to affect the world, only their ability to speak.

Northern Spy apples. Red Delicious apples. Braeburn apples. Spartan apples. *An apple a day keeps the doctor away.* Pippin apples. Royal Gala apples. Granny Smith apples. Red Rome apples. *How do you like them apples?* Apple strudel. Apple pie. Apple cider. Apple dumpling. Apple juice. Apple sauce. Pineapple. Roadapple.

On top of the toilet-tank in Aunt Hilda's bathroom sat an old woman whose purpose was to conceal a spare roll of toilet-paper beneath her navy-blue gingham skirt. Her head was a dried apple, brown and wizened. Two pale blue push-pins had been inserted into her eye sockets, and a blue gingham bonnet sewn to her head. Her hair was made of frayed grey yarn, or lint, and her face had been coated with spray-starch to keep it from rotting. Like my own betrothed head, she had no body beneath her dress, only a spare roll of toilet-paper, which was never used. People seemed to forget it was there, like those old ladies in the rhyme my father used to sing --

*Oh dear, what can the matter be?
Two old ladies locked in the lavatory
They've been there from Sunday to Saturday
Nobody knew they were there.*

I imagined they would have been dead by then, deaths to which the song did not refer, deaths unspeakable and unsung. But people always died. Ever since there were people, they had wizened and dried and reverted to objects like the toilet-paper apple-woman. Bodiless, blind, associated with dung and with things below. Aunt Hilda would put up dozens of jars of crab-apple jelly and store them down cellar to last through the Winter, which came after the Fall. Apples were associated with the Fall.

Adam's apple. I had always wondered, if it was Eve who ate the apple, why it was men and not women who possessed that bulbous protuberance in their throats. While my mother's throat hollowed to an enclave, my Uncle Ernie's throat bore an apple which bobbed up and down when he spoke and stuck out as large as his nose. His theological explanation was that Adam had taken one bite of the apple only because his wife had told him to, but that it stuck in his throat because he was unable to swallow what he had done. And there it sat to this day, like a toad, or like those wads of swallowed chewing-gum said to be gathering in my appendix. *Well what an idiot Adam was,* I thought. If my mother had been God, she would never have accepted this excuse. *Well, if Eve had told you to jump off a bridge, would you have done that as well?*

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*yonder peasant, who is he?*

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In order for something to become an object of desire, the subject must believe that it is not already in her possession. She must be conscious that the object is missing, either never having been there at all, in her awareness, or having been lost. She would not desire to have tonsils were she unaware of tonsils, for example, or were she unaware that hers had been removed. In order for the impetus of desire to be sparked there needs to be an empty space where the desired thing is meant to be, or where it once had been. The charge between that negative space and the thing itself is the force of desire. The desire of a jigsaw puzzle for the single missing piece wedged between sofa-cushions. Or the desire of a throat for its missing tonsils, a mouth for its extracted wisdom teeth. The desire of waking arms for the warm body they had wrapped themselves round in sleep, if only in dreams. Or the desire of a body for its head, which once had been content to number itself among the other body parts, now lording over the rest as though it were a separate entity, a stranger, an autocratic government.

My first object of desire was a severed head.

Desire is the gravitational pull or charge between a part and the whole, or its perception of the whole, which perhaps once existed, and perhaps not. Because it is also possible that there is no whole, never was and never will be. Possibly the present model is utterly misguided in terms of the way things are, but what of that? Models often have little to say about the way things are. Take model aeroplanes: a model aeroplane has almost nothing to say of actual aeroplanes, being of different substance and function and size. The most common model aeroplanes are not even able to fly, although flying is the first function of aeroplanes. In effect, a model aeroplane only says something of the person who built it, how well she can follow instructions, how well she can assemble a predetermined quantity of parts into a cohesive whole, or model of a whole, that is all.

I would like to work in a factory which manufactures model aeroplane kits. I would like to include with each kit an extraneous anomalous part, secretly and without corresponding instruction, simply to toss a spanner in the works. Because the utility of a spanner depends on what you understand to be its function. If I had not learned from my father that a spanner was a wrench, which is a very useful tool, I might have thought it a sort of virus which, when introduced into the works, causes them to cease working. The purpose of the experiment would be to find out how the person who eventually builds the model would interpret the anomalous spanner. Whether she would be able to find a way of incorporating it into her model of aeroplanes, or whether she'd be at a loss. Whether she would dream of the spare part for several consecutive nights amid floating question marks. What I'd like to know is if the spanner would then become an object of desire, simply because there seemed to be no place for it where there ought to have been. Or because the subject believed there had to be a place for it, somewhere, but no one had invented the proper model yet.

My first object of desire was a severed head.

I was born with all my parts. There must have been a time when this was taken for granted. Taking something for granted is the opposite of desiring it. As long as something is taken for granted the desire for it remains asleep. An opal ring sleeps perfect and complete until the moment one notices the stone has fallen out of it, as opposed to the moment when the stone actually falls, which might have been days or hours before. In my own case, I did not desire a head until it was pointed out to me that perhaps I needed to get one. I took my head for granted until I was first caused to wonder where exactly it was at, when it became separated from me. Before this, it was taken for granted that my head was where it should have been, attached to my body, not separate from my body but merely its navigational device, or its roof.

Before the Christmas of the severed head there had been another doll in my life, a doll who also seemed to have all her parts, roughly the same parts I had. She had two arms

and two legs, two ears and two eyes, one mouth, one nose, and one navel, but no nipples and no genitals, which I took for granted was as it should be. I had not desired this doll expressly, she had simply been delivered to me from Santa Claus the Christmas morning when I was six or seven. I had accepted her unconditionally and without question, she was taken for granted as though it were only right that a little girl should have a doll and should identify with her in all her parts.

The doll had been hidden inside the sewing basket which Santa Claus had given my mother that year, which meant that in one way my mother was the mother of the doll, not I myself, because she saw her first. I imagined that dolls were like goslings, not born with any innate attachment to anyone in particular, but ready to fix themselves to the first person they saw. Or the first person who saw them, which in this case was my mother. The sewing basket was made of lacquered wicker with a snow-flaky gift-tag which read *To Janis. With love, From Santa* in back-sloping handwriting quite like my Aunt Hilda's. My mother unlatched the horn-clasp and peered into the interior of the basket, which was lined with pale blue satin, like my mother's housecoat, and quilted like a casket.

Well, will you look at this! my mother said. *We seem to have a stowaway, here.* Then she reached into the basket and picked up the doll in both hands, and it woke up, its eyes opening for the first time onto the face of my mother. *Well, I think that must be meant for Alley,* my Aunt Hilda reminded gently, winking an eye at me. I trusted the wink of my Aunt Hilda's eye. If anyone knew the intentions of Santa Claus it must have been she. She was not unlike him, it seemed to me, they both were white-haired and sparkly-eyed and had the same hand-writing.

I had been sitting under the dining-room table with a white lace doily on my head playing *safari* with some walnuts and filberts. The filberts had been functioning as a herd of antelope, while the two fat wrinkly walnuts were elephants. The villainous poacher was a nut-cracker. Not the kind which looks like a bearded man but the other kind, silver chrome-plated and shaped like a long pair of legs with serrated inner thighs and a rivet at

the crotch. My mother came over and laid the doll on my lap. It closed its eyes again and went to sleep. *That's a present from Santa Claus*, said my mother. *You might go over and say thank-you to your Aunt Hilda*. Which made no logical sense at all, although I had intended to do it anyway. When one person was mythically absent you invented a surrogate. you poured your affections and gratitude onto some thing or some body else.

Family trees, the giving and taking of gifts, and just where things came from in the first place were very confusing concepts. Before going over to thank my Aunt Hilda for the doll which came from Santa Claus via my mother, I played a quick game of relativity with the walnuts and filberts. They were no longer safari animals, but transmutable family members playing different roles, depending on the what the other ones were doing. It would later make sense to me that the people who were then in the room were called *relatives*, because none of us existed in any absolute way, we simply took turns performing the different functions of family mechanics.

Sometimes we had big roles and sometimes we had small ones, sometimes we played several roles at once. At any given time, someone got to be a walnut and someone else had to be a filbert, though even these were not fixed identities. Filberts were sometimes called hazelnuts, having only one seed inside but more than one name. Walnuts, on the other hand, were always called walnuts but were duplicitous inside. cleft nearly in two with a segue between like a corpus callosum. But even inside the tiny filbert there were two halves, which only looked like one whole seed until you peeled away the bitter skin. And then there were peanuts, which my Aunt Hilda called *ground nuts*, just as gophers were *ground squirrels*, woodchucks were *ground hogs*, and hamburger was *ground beef*. Ground nuts were the easiest ones to crack between the teeth and usually had two seeds inside, each of which was also duplicitous under its skin. It seemed that a family of nuts could have any number of nicknames, and could either be hard to crack or quite easy, or practically impossible like Brazil nuts. The shell of a nut could bear only one seed or several of them, or it could surprise you with triplets where you'd only expected to find

twins. And frequently one of the triplets or twins would turn out to be rotten and foul-tasting.

What I figured out from arranging and rearranging my family of nuts was this: that at any given time, and relatively speaking, any of us could play several different parts and go by several different names. We could be a mother or a daughter, or a sister, or a spouse, or a mythological character, or the male versions of these, or the sexless versions of these. If the doll had been placed in the basket by my Great Aunt Hilda, then she was its mother, a single mother whose absent mythological spouse was possibly Santa Claus. They might have been a kindly king and queen who had carefully abandoned their sexless daughter in a basket, in the hope that she would find a better home in the arms of whomever chanced upon her, which as it happens was my mother. In this regard, it was my mother who was the mother of the doll, having opened the basket first, having been the one to pull the doll from its padded womb and into the world. It could be regarded as a sort of virgin birth, because my mother's spouse was not there that Christmas, as he usually was not. She traditionally attended to the labour of Christmas alone. My disembodied father was a hundred miles away, invisible as a god, pressing his voice through the phone line after dinner to bring my mother glad tidings of prospective employment, which she received with some ambivalence, her faith in him being less than pure.

But finally the doll had fallen to me on that Christmas morn. Now it was lying asleep in my lap with no crib for a bed but a wicker basket, as I sat among nut-brown domesticated animals beneath the stable-roof of the dining room table, with a lace doily draped over my head like a veil. If I would be recorded as the mother of the doll, then my mother was either its grandmother or a sort of heavenly hostess, as many people thought she was, delivering into my hands an infant conceived in Heaven and made in Taiwan. It was often said that my mother resembled an angel, clad in her blue satin housecoat, her hair done up in golden twine with stars sprouting from it like grapes.

I had resolved to accept the doll as though it had always been mine, but perhaps I

was mistaken in this. Perhaps I had taken from my angel-mother what was rightfully hers, the same way I tried to take up the faith in my father when she didn't want it. After all, it was she and not me who had freed the doll from its casket-basket, and she who looked first into its blind and fierce eyes. It was probably she and not me who was the most appropriate mother of the doll, regardless of whose arms held its body, or between whose breasts its face would be pressed. And since I too was my mother's daughter, perhaps the doll was more appropriately my sister, in the end, which suited me fine, I'd always wanted a sister. I would call her Isis Millipede, after Isis who had a thousand faces and the bug who had a thousand legs.

Isis Millipede was three times the size of a barbie doll but looked as though she were a third barbie's age. Her hair was mutantly white, like that fibrous sparkly cotton-batton called *angel hair* wrapped round the trunk of the Christmas tree. Her eyes were yellowish-brown glass, and they opened and closed slightly unevenly. Sometimes the right eye only opened half-way, making her look slur-eyed like grown-ups on New Year's morning. Isis Millipede wore a spangled pink & yellow mini-dress which was too short for her, the pink underpants with lacy ruffles on the bum were clearly visible underneath. Her legs were not jointed at the knee, but set stiffly into her hip-sockets, so she had to spread them open in a wide V just to sit down, as most little girls were taught not to do. Girls who sat that way were teased by boys and scolded by their mothers. Although I never scolded Isis for sitting this way, for as long as we were together I couldn't sit her down without hearing voices taunting *I see London, I see France, I see someone's underpants*.

Isis arrived in the world with teeth already in her mouth. Her pink protrudent lips were fixed permanently open, you could see the pink tip of her tongue and a few painted teeth, four upper teeth and a milky homogenous strip of lower ones. Between her teeth was a small round hole in which could be inserted the plastic nipple of a doll-sized baby-bottle, or the tip of a cocktail straw if you squashed it flat and curled it round. Years later, the

Buffalo Man would tell me *In some places it used to be called bad luck for a baby to be born with teeth already in its head.* He would tell me that some people used to knock out the teeth of tooth-bearing babies or do worse things, this being preferable to risking a life sentence of bad luck.

But I wouldn't have minded knowing earlier that Isis and her teeth were bad luck, it seemed to me that bad luck was more curious than good luck. It was more due to bad luck than good that people were moved to question *Why me?* Bad luck seemed more apt to make people regard themselves as the subjects of potentially useful experiment, it pinned people to a corkboard, or thrust them in an observation tank to see what they would do. Bad luck was like the backward-repellent quality of magnets, pushing away what should have been an object of attraction, or like a fishing net which hauled up every possible thing except fish. The possibilities for bad luck seemed infinitely more inventive than those for good luck, whose providence was more predictable. Bad luck would pluck out your right eye only in order that your left might learn to see through walls, or so my father said, who knew nothing at all if not all there was to know of bad luck.

I crawled out from under the table and went to sit at the arm of my Great Aunt Hilda's chair, which smelled of old tweed, lilac talcum powder, and faintly of something else biscuity and human. I was afraid to bury my face in Aunt Hilda's soft folded neck as my brother did, but I loved to sit by her chair and look at her hands. They were thin-skinned and spotted like the backs of tropical frogs, like the legs of fabulous insects her thick-jointed knuckles, the bulbous blue veins of her hands standing out like tree roots. The dull gold of her wedding band hung loosely on the third finger of her left hand, I could spin it round and round like a tiny roulette wheel. I couldn't understand how she'd ever got it on past the swollen knuckle in the first place, or, having got it on, how she'd ever get it off. If Aunt Hilda died, they'd either have to cut off her finger or bury her with it.

After a Christmas breakfast of knotted bread flecked with red and green citrus peel, my Aunt Hilda opened up the piano bench whose seat folded back like the shell of a

mollusk. She pulled out a tattered folder of sheet-music and sat down at the old piano, which seemed to be invisible much of the time, now functioning mostly as a display stand for framed photographs and glass animals. Aunt Hilda rested hemispheric spectacles on the hooked bridge of her nose and peered at the black ants which ran up and down the musical staff. She positioned her fingers carefully, determined to catch every ant, every single one. Her hands flexed tentatively over the keys, padding down lightly once or twice before striking. The first few chords croaked thin and hollow, like her own voice in the morning before she'd put her teeth in and washed down her handful of pills with a glass of prune juice. She played a few familiar chords and called to me. *Alison, will you come stand by me please? You shall be my page-turner.*

Her loyal page-turner. Or her royal page, like the page in *Good King Wenceslas*. *Hither page and stand by me* or *In his Master's steps he trod*. The picture was vivid as emeralds of a large and regal man in a green velvet cape, breaking the crust of snow with his great fur-lined boots, forging a footpath for his faithful page to follow in. I should have loved to follow, if there had been such a man and such a path, as no one could expect a lowly page to know where on earth she was going. My two feet would fit easily into the boot-tracks of the good King, with room to spare, so that other tiny feet might follow there. And those who faithfully repeat the path of someone else's feet do so more safely than those who forge a new one. Where there are hidden gorges in the path it is the forger who first finds them, and by his warning or his fall saves the souls of those behind him. At times a body longs for guidance of this sort.

But other times a pair of wayward soles may want to dash off and stamp their mad little feet in every direction than the one prescribed, leaving footsteps behind which no other soles can follow, stamping out musical notes which no one can read, and no one can play.

I can't read those notes, I said to my Aunt Hilda.

You don't have to read them, dear, said she. *Just follow along by counting them.*
You know how to count, don't you? I'll nod when I want you to turn the page.

We sang of three more Kings, bearing certain things in common with the first. Like he, their cause was philanthropic, and like he they spoke in verse. But unlike the King whom others followed in the footsteps he tread, these Kings knew that they also serve who let themselves be *led*. Convergent on a single course they traveled from afar, hailing from exotic lands rich in *orey* and in *tar*. Whatever *orey* was, I couldn't say, I didn't know -- but I knew that tar was glossy black, like the shadow-twin of snow. The song *did* make the Kings sound more like harbingers of doom, with their sighing, bleeding, dying, mummy-caskets of perfume. My mother's comment was that none seemed a desirable guest: *I'll thank you kindly for the gifts if you'll take leave at my request*. But in truth the writer of the carol would've known little of the Kings, being Christian in another time, his concern was other things.

And I admired them, the Three Kings, their mournful caravans in silhouette against the sands. At least they seemed to know where they were going. In *yonder star* they'd found something more beautiful than boot-prints to follow, and less variable. It also seemed wise to fix one's desire on a thing so far away. A star won't argue if you blame it for leading you astray. since stars are deaf and dead and cannot hear a word you say.

I thought of my father a hundred miles away, mumbling in his basement-room or banging tools around his hapless workbench. Perhaps he'd say he had something to follow or perhaps not, but it was certain that none of us could follow him. His name was not written in the sky but scratched onto the undersides of things, like the names of bone-china purveyors on the undersides of cups and plates. It was impossible to follow him without being drawn into an underworld of half-vision, half-hearing, half-statements and questions only half-understood. He never came with us to Great Aunt Hilda's house at Christmas. the festive season passed without my father, even though so many things we said and sang about at Christmas time had to do with fathers and men who were like fathers. With being grateful to them, singing praises to them, following them, and placing our small and mortal faith into their hands.

With my eyes I followed the disordered army of ants across the staff while Aunt Hilda's hooked hands picked them out one by one and pressed the keys to extinguish them. Her hands were like spiders, fingers crooked and jointed, spinning webs to catch the notes as they came marching in. As she struck the keys, each sang their single name then nothing more. I counted them, and once they were all accounted for, I turned the page.

I did not want to be this person. I was scarcely conscious of it then, but I knew I didn't want to be the one who stands and turns the pages of what someone else has written. the one who only follows in the footsteps someone else had trod. Despite how much I envied the page which turns, the page who turns the pages and follows under westward leading star, I knew that someday I would not envy these at all. Perhaps I lacked faith that the tread of any master could ever lead my steps. it seemed likely that there was no such master. And only here, in the sky above Aunt's Hilda's house, were there ever stars to follow. At home in the city, they were buffed from the sky by the scouring wool of city lights and traffic. they were wired to the ground like the yellow eyes of street-lamps and the windows of sky-scrappers, they were blinded by smog.

Sense of direction was like a private club, as when touring motorists stopped at Aunt Hilda's house to ask directions to such-and-such a place, to be told by my Uncle Ernie *You can't get there from here.* It made Great Aunt Hilda cross when he said it, once the tourists had doubled back the way they came, she would scold him *Now really Earnest, there is no such place as a place you can't get anywhere from. Why, they could've took the old road through Butcher's field, and still got there in a day or two.*

But Aunt Hilda herself scarcely knew this for fact as she scarcely ever left the house. Perhaps her faith in finding a way was strong only because it was uncontested. Until the day arthritis froze her fingers stiff and the piano was sold to city auctioneers, she would always be able to follow what was previously inscribed and find music in it. There would be something to follow, and somewhere it would lead, if only to the silence at the bottom on the page. If I could find something like this to have faith in I'd follow it, I'd read

the whole book and recite it chapter and verse at family gatherings. I'd play every note and not mind if I hadn't written them myself, *to be their instrument would be enough*. But my hands were dumb and clumsy like my father's, not graceful like my mother's hands, nor gnarled and eloquent like Great Aunt Hilda's hands. My own were lumps of stubborn clay, as though I wanted them that way. But then I was only six or seven and still had plenty of time to find ways to kill the formless time on my hands. I could play with my new doll for instance, and learn whatever skills they were that she was meant to teach me.

Let's sing the Twelve Days of Christmas, piped up my mother when the Three Kings were done. She loved the many gifts, and loved the true love whose devotion was matched only by his seemingly endless resources. The doves and the geese and the swans and the French hens, the hired musicians and dancers, the five golden rings every time a new verse rolled around. That would be five golden rings a day times twelve, or a new ring for each finger and thumb every couple of days. Sixty golden rings by the end of the song, if you read that way, which she did. *Imagine!* said my mother sipping egg-nog from an amber goblet. *The dear man would have to buy you a whole new house by the end of it all, just to hold everything -- with an ornamental pond for those eighty-four swans-a-swimming.*

Not to mention all those geese-a-laying, said my Uncle Ernie. *D'you think the eggs they laid were golden too?* My mother downed her amber glass of nog and poured herself another one. *Well I'd certainly hope so*, she said, *for the sake of the geese. Or they'd end up golden-brown themselves, God love'em.* Then she laughed weirdly like a pinwheel spinning into the room and no one tried make her to stop.

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*i know you are but what am i*

Like the small bones of chickens, aeroplane parts lay grey and bleached on the concrete floor in the basement beside my father's workbench. We'd driven back to the city on Boxing Day. My brother had been too young to construct the model plane by himself, but he was not too young to have destroyed it already, on its virgin flight. He had stood by like an intern at my father's side while the man requested tools and glue, paper towels and tiny screws, or another peek at the instruction-sheet, which was translated into seven languages with equal lack of clarity. My father cursed tamely, blamed the work of careless or malicious translators, blamed illustrators who must never have laid eyes on an aeroplane in their whole lives. He blamed my Aunt Hilda for deliberately presenting Gavin with a gift whose assembly she must have known would fall like a gauntlet to him. *Fancy giving a model aeroplane to a four year old, he muttered, who did she think was going to inherit the task of putting the damned thing together?*

It was true, there was no way my brother would have been able to decipher the instructions and all the myriad parts. My father was scarcely able to do it himself. The finished plane was peculiar-looking, it bore protrudent horns and appendages which surely were meant to have been internal mechanisms, and the tips of its wings sagged a bit tiredly. My brother was not too young to sense this, the discrepancy between the flashy picture on the box and the flightless thing which it yielded up. He must have sensed that it was a monstrous satire of aeroplanes which my father delivered into his hands with some disgust, before going to wash his own. Perhaps the tragic end of the craft's virgin flight was a type of mercy killing, after all. Gavin had lifted the thing into the air and had run in swooping circles through the basement, up the stairs and back down again with turbulent engine-sounds sputtering at his lips. He had guided the nose of the craft in the direction of the workbench, then drew a magnificent figure eight in the sky before plunging it into the

concrete like a fallen egg.

The model of providence was my mother's. It was best to do away with failures, best to consign them to dust and sweep them under the carpet, best that they should descend in silence and never be spoken of more. Especially concerning my father, who could little afford to collect his failures like trophies on a shelf, nor recount their stories again and again to curious guests after dinner. It was best that the plane sign off with a final figure eight, a reclining infinity symbol in the basement-sky, contradicting itself only a moment later with its own destruction.

Later, my mother swept the parts into a dust-pan and disposed of them in the kitchen garbage bin whose lid opened like a rude mouth when she pressed the pedal with her foot, slamming shut again when the blue rabbit-fur foot was removed. My brother returned to building cities with potatoes and peas on his plate, and made functioning vehicles of his knife and fork. We would all say he forgot the plane almost immediately, it seemed that he had. But my mother still wrote a thank-you note on his behalf to my Great Aunt Hilda, which my brother Gavin was requested to sign, in shaky awkward letters as large as dimes.

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Why doesn't your Daddy just take it back to the store? whispered Euphemia.

He can't do that. He would have to tell them that the instructions didn't make sense, but he doesn't have any proof that they don't. Besides, the plane came from my Aunt Hilda. She would have to take it back herself. She'd hate that.

Can't your Daddy just tell them that the instructions don't make sense?

What if they do make sense?

That's not possible. He's your Daddy, he'd be able to tell if they didn't make sense.

We were crouched beneath a card-table in the basement, my best friend Euphemia and I. Euphemia's father built motorcycles. It was he who would have been able to tell if the instructions didn't make sense. It was he who would have been able to slam the

merchandise down at the check-out counter and convince the sales lady that it was a piece of crap. And she would have found herself apologizing to him. she would have offered him another plane or his money back or anything he wanted. This was my impression because it was Euphemia's belief. I could easily believe it too, having seen the man in his big leather hat with the Mexican turquoise set in silver on the band, his sky-denim shirt and the dusty black boots, which he pulled off his feet like he was skinning a seal when he came in the front door. He called Euphemia *princess* and referred to me as her *little friend*. He would take off his shirt and sit down on the couch with his big legs spread wide open. drink a stubby brown bottle of beer, and clean his fingernails with a pen-knife. One of his fingernails was very long and curved like the tooth of a dog.

But today we were at my house, crouched under a card table draped with mosquito netting. listening to my father's muttering and the clatter of plastic aeroplane bones. *You can do it, Daddy*. I heard Gavin say only once, and hoped Euphemia hadn't heard him, or hadn't understood what he meant. It was quite possible that she hadn't registered my brother's statement at all. the way people don't register things they take to be self-evident. Euphemia believed implicitly that anything in pieces could be put together, and that fathers were the people who could do it. Fathers had tricks up their sleeves, and presents in their pockets. Fathers were that imperative quantity which was greater than the sum of parts.

The mosquito netting was made rich and verdant by the tint of our imaginations. It was deep forest green, velvet with sable trim. It was the skirted robe of the Ghost of Christmas Present with the two of us crouching like urchins beneath it.

I thought you said it was supposed to be the ghost of Christmas presents, said Euphemia, disappointed that the imaginary banquet-table laden with candles and gifts and platters of cooked goose and pyramids of almond snowballs rolled in icing sugar and Christmas crackers with toys inside and shiny Christmas apples and steaming plates of figgy pudding, whatever that was, were not intended for us at all. *Why did we bother imagining all this stuff if we're not allowed to imagine eating it?* she protested. But in my

fastasy, it was my mother who had laid the table with these temptations and that was precisely why the desired object of the game was to resist them. *He's not the ghost of Christmas presents, I said. He's the ghost of this present Christmas. He's the absent guest you set a place for. Only he never shows up.*

I got this idea from Aunt Hilda, who traditionally set an extra place at the head of the dinner table every Christmas. I always sat right beside the empty place, which I assumed had been set for my father in case he changed his mind at the last minute and decided to show up. There would be the sound of heavy boots outside the front door, then the muffled knock of his fist through fur-lined mittens. He would be wearing a thick cloak of velvet or satin, in green or black, and there'd be a sack of gifts slung over his shoulder. The stump of a pipe would be held tight in his teeth and the smoke would encircle his head like a wreath. I would save a candied yam for him, as I did every year, wrapped in a red linen napkin on my lap.

Well bless your angel heart, my Aunt Hilda would say when I explained the swaddled yam-bundle on my lap. *The empty place isn't necessarily for your father, dear, unless he's the one you want to be there. Truthfully I'm not sure where the tradition came from, but my own mother used to do it as well, and her mother too. She called it the place of the absent guest. That could be anyone you wish, I suppose. I admit I tend to imagine it's your Great Uncle Herbert sitting there, God rest his soul.*

I imagined it was the absent guest who was speaking when every body else at the table fell silent, and he who knew how to laugh it off in the sound of tinkling china when my mother touched her throat to strike the table mute. The absent guest licked his platter so clean that it needn't ever be washed, but left his Bloody Mary standing in the glass until my mother lifted it away. The Ghost of Christmas Present was similar to this, a present absence at the table of opulence, the invisible object of everyone's unspoken desires.

Perhaps this presence was not so dissimilar to Euphemia's ghost of Christmas *presents*. Except her mistake did make me wonder what midnight penance might come to

haunt our childish eagerness to tear the paper from any mysterious box bearing our names. This was my first inkling as to why presents came tied with ribbons or string or frothy pink bows. Were presents really presents if they came with strings attached, if they arrived in the company of ghosts whose job was to remind you what you might expect to owe for them? If a little girl were given a plastic model of a little girl, for instance, did this mean that some day she would owe someone a little girl? Was this the midnight penance she would some day have to bear, and if so then to whom?

Whether presents or presence were the province of our ghost, he had been conceived in the basement where the family ghosts were kept. We had conceived him well, according to the model I remembered from a Christmas story traditionally read to me by my Great Aunt Hilda, who was a bit like a character in the story herself. For most of the year I saw her not at all, she lived in a room in my mind associated with the sparkle and the heady fragrances of holidays. At Christmas, her world would open to me again, sometimes a little less sparkling than I had remembered it being. This year she had not read the Christmas story at all, which maybe was why I was determined to play out a pageant of it.

The ghost of Christmas Present was like Santa Claus in negative. As green was the opposite of red, his robe was green, while his beard was dark instead of snowy white. Instead of concealing a sackful of gifts to present before the glowing faces of children, this ghost presented a glowing banquet of gifts and concealed beneath his robe a pair of scrawny children dressed in sack-cloth. These two were who we were supposed to be. *Why are they hiding under the old man's robe?* said Euphemia, making a face. *I don't think that's nice.* She was still annoyed that the gifts we'd conceived were not intended for us. *Is he their Dad?*

They are the children of Man, I recited. *Their names are Ignorance and Want --*

What kind of names are those? said Euphemia. *This doesn't sound like a fun game, Alley.*

The boy is Ignorance and the girl is Want, I continued.

Then I want to be Want, said Euphemia. *Maybe then we can do what I want. And I don't want to be the boy.*

Fine, you be Want, I said. *That means you don't have anything in the whole world, which is why you want things. And wanting things has made you miserable-looking.*

Why do I have to be miserable-looking? asked Euphemia.

Because, I said, *that's what the book says. Let's try it the way the book says first, then we can try something else if the book is no good.*

I can tell you right now that the book is no good, said Euphemia. *And what about you? Are you miserable-looking as well?*

I'm Ignorance, I said. *I don't have anything either, I don't even know that I don't have anything. This is why the book says I'm worse off than you are, I probably look worse as well. But I don't even realize it.*

In fact I realized it very well. It seemed to me that every girl I'd ever seen looked worse than Euphemia. She didn't even look like a real girl. She reminded me of a Japanese cartoon, one of those girl-creatures who really look more like preying mantises in a way, or baby deer, with huge eyes like half-avocados and thin elegant limbs. When she ran her ankles looked as though they would snap. Euphemia's eyes were the colour of green tea flecked with gold and her eyebrows were scarcely there at all. Her face was cordiform, not the shape of an actual heart-muscle but like the hearts on playing cards, with a wide forehead tapering to a pointed little chin. Her mouth was a baby's mouth, two perfect peaks above and a pink lozenge below drawn close as though by a drawstring. Her long yellow hair seemed to have a life of its own, slinking about her shoulders like a sable, or kestrel wings swooping forward when she stooped to tie her shoes. In school photos, she was always the girl who got seated in the very centre of the front row, with her knees facing forward, while all the other front-row girls had to turn their knees slightly in toward her, like neon chevrons directing people to the entrance of a fancy motel.

But it was because of this that Euphemia had to consciously sit with her knees pressed more tightly together than any of us did, because otherwise the camera would always be aimed right up her skirt. Euphemia always wore skirts, every single day, skirts with flounces and multiple tiers like wedding cakes. Skirts made especially for her by her mother out of cranberry calico or purple velveteen, with satin ribbon or decorative braid around the hem. She often wore a large hair-comb with a poisonous green bow on it, which peeked above the crown of her head like an Egyptian cobra. I thought she was beautiful and strange, just as everyone else seemed to, only more so.

Euphemia used to think *Butterflies are free* meant she could have as many of them as she wanted. It was in this way that the girl Want was better off than the boy Ignorance, because at least she had something to chase after. Being aware of what she lacked, at least she had something to aspire to. But how much better off was Want knowing what she lacked if she also lacked the means of getting it? Want was like her twin sister Desire in a desperate situation, with no butterfly net. Which made me wonder whether Ignorance wasn't better off than Want after all. I suppose Ignorance by definition wouldn't have any goals, so he couldn't be cursed with worrying about what he didn't have. He wouldn't know the difference. Maybe this was better sometimes.

I sometimes wished I didn't know that Euphemia was beautiful. for instance. I might have been happier if I'd been ignorant of the fact. Because maybe then I would never have been troubled by the desire to be that way as well. I had no proof that I was not but neither did I have any proof that I was, which tends to be stronger evidence in these cases. It seemed to me that a little girl was not beautiful until some body told her she was. And everyone told Euphemia. But still she herself often seemed ignorant of how people looked at her wherever she went, unless she'd simply learned to take it for granted. And taking something for granted was the opposite of desiring it. Being beautiful seemed to leave little to be desired in Euphemia's case, it more seemed to make her listless.

That girl could be a model when she grows up, my mother said. I told her I knew

that, everyone knew that. Her own mother said the same thing about her and her father called her *princess*. Her parents had put her in beauty pageants and twice she had won. But when we had to write compositions on what we wanted to be when we grew up and why, Euphemia said she wanted to be a model but that she didn't know why. She was told that her composition was too short and was therefore unacceptable, according to the school's model of compositions, it was not the right weight.

So it was hard to say which was worse in the long run, not knowing something or not having something. Or having something but not knowing it, or not having something and knowing it. Perhaps the happiest person in the world was the person who didn't have anything and also didn't know it, like my brother Gavin, who was as content to play with sticks and stones as he was with model aeroplanes. He could have his picture taken hanging from the monkey-bars by his knees if he wanted to, without having to worry about skirts flipping up and everyone seeing his underpants.

It seems to me that if the twins Want and Ignorance were to grow up and get married to each other, their children might be the happiest children in the world, having nothing as their mother had nothing, knowing nothing as their father knew nothing.

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## *Isis Millipede*

The yard of Euphemia's house was bordered by a tall hedge, which circled the house and continued along one side of the driveway. From the point of view of a crow heading East, the hedge would form the figure of a question mark, with a maple just beyond the yard punctuating it. Among the lower limbs of the hedge were numerous irregular chambers, leafy cupolas with branching buttresses, fluttering windows filtering green shafts of light in harlequin patches on the mossy floor. In Winter, the hedge was a cage of frozen spines and barren ribs, the picked bones of seasons past. But now, finally, it was Spring.

Throughout the Winter we had played inside, in the basement at my house or nestled in a nest of downy comforters on the upper bunk of Euphemia's bed. Euphemia's sister Robin-May was a quiet elf who dwelt on the lower bunk with her crayons and her smooth pretty stones, while Euphemia's bunk rose transcendent like the long thin legs of the maternity stork, like the long thin legs of her barbies who all had jointed knees and could sit discreetly. Euphemia's mother made us doll-sized sandwiches with mini melba rounds and raspberry jam, and sliced apples into slender crescents like miniature watermelon wedges. She filled the doll-sized tea-pot with cranberry or apple juice to serve in the tiny china cups. We perched up in the top bunk and dressed our dolls for tea, then sat them round a table made from a hat box with yellow j-cloth placemats. Each teacup held about two teaspoons of juice, each plate two mini melba sandwiches and one apple wedge. Because of Euphemia's wheat allergies I would end up eating all the sandwiches myself, breaking them open like eggs to get at the red pitted jam inside.

Euphemia had the richest clutch of barbie-dolls I'd ever seen. There were seven of them in all, like seven sisters who looked exactly the same except for differences in hair colour. They all had sky-blue eyes, insectival waists, hands resembling lobster-claws, and hard exoskeletal breasts which didn't spring back when you bit them. The more advanced

ones had stigmata through their hands which could be plugged up with rhinestones on pegs to look like diamond engagement rings. Their names were Pinkie and Silky, Petals and Creamy, Tulips and Rosehips and Cherries. Silky, Tulips, and Creamy were blonde, Rosehips was a redhead, and Cherries' hair was black. Pinkie was bald. She had once been blonde like three of her sisters, but Robin-May had cut off Pinkie's hair with pinking shears to make a nest for her family of featherwing beetles. Whenever Euphemia needed a doll to be male, for weddings or lion-hunts, then the role would fall to Pinkie, unless it fell to Isis Millipede.

After the shearing of Pinkie, Euphemia kept her dolls safely locked up in a carrying case made to resemble a great thick book. The lid folded back like a front cover, beneath which the seven sisters could be packed away like entries in a dictionary of synonyms. There was a separate index for dresses and an appendix for the plastic shoes, paper umbrellas, purses, stethoscopes, combs, dumbbells, ski-poles and snorkels which came with the various outfits. The cover was gold-embossed with the title *My Secret Fantasies* and featured a tiny heart-shaped lock with a key which Euphemia wore on a string round her neck. *You are never ever to look in that book, do you understand?* Euphemia warned Robin-May. *It's my one rule. I shouldn't even tell you what will happen to you if you do, because that wouldn't be nice. But probably a man will come and cut off all your hair as well, and glue it to his chin. Then you'll be bald like Pinkie.*

In Spring we left the nest of Euphemia's upper bunk and went outside to play in the garden. I learned that it was possible to suck up apple juice through a cocktail straw then inject it back out the straw through the tiny hole in Isis Millipede's mouth. The straw was one of those jointed types with a flexible ringed segment like the clitellum of an earthworm. I dangled the tip of the straw over Isis Millipede's mouth and let the juice fall in small gulps, which gradually seeped down through the hole. I managed to feed her all eight tea-cups of apple juice in this way, then peeked under her skirt to see if she'd pee.

*Do you think I should make a hole down there for her to pee through?* I said.

Euphemia's green eyes grew as wide as ivy-leaves, and she looked as though she ready to cry. *You shouldn't say such things,* she said, *It's not very nice.* If something was not nice then it was wasn't supposed to be spoken about. But I thought it was much less nice to only have one hole which things went in, and no other holes from which they could exit. It was like keeping a secret for too long, until it started to turn toxic and poison the person. Once I'd seen an old movie where a bunch of Roman soldiers had killed a man by force-feeding him a whole cask of red wine through a funnel in his mouth, until he swelled up like a leech and exploded when they poked him with something sharp.

I guess one way of avoiding this was to be careful of what you put into yourself in the first place, and how much of it. This wasn't only true for apple juice. Euphemia never kept her eyes open when she undressed her dolls for instance, so that she wouldn't have so many pictures of naked ladies filling up her head. She would close her eyes as soon as the snaps were undone, and I would have to talk her through the change until the doll's body was covered again and she could open her eyes. I would help her find the sleeve-holes and neck-opening by saying *you're getting warm, warmer, warmer,* or else *you're getting cold, colder* when she was missing the holes. Often a barbie's lobster-claw thumb would get caught in the lace of a sleeve, or its hair would get tangled round the metal snaps, pulling the pliable face horribly askew when Euphemia tried to force the head through the neck-hole. I had to watch all this, the impossible contortions, the smooth shiny surfaces of plastic skin poreless and pinkish like skin that's been burned. I had seen all Euphemia's dolls naked, though she never did, as far as I knew, unless she only stripped them down when no body else was around.

She often closed her eyes to get from her bedroom to the bathroom as well, or from her bedroom to the kitchen, because both of these required passing through the corridor where all the naked ladies were hanging. The walls of the corridor were lacquered with a mural-collage of pictures cut from magazines and stuck there in different configurations. I studied them carefully whenever I could, although Euphemia got cross

whenever she caught me, and told me that the poker-man would come and poke out my eyes with his poker. I also wasn't allowed to refer to the parts of the pictures, or the washer-woman would come and wash out my mouth with detergent. Euphemia had invented her own names for the unmentionable parts of the pictures, names which were very similar to the names she'd given her dolls.

Hanging on the corridor wall was a tan, spread woman who had a cut-out of an electrical socket shellacked over her *pansy*, and another woman whose head had been snipped off and replaced with a cut-out of a shiny swollen *pinkie*. There was a old man with round spectacles and a curly *poof* glued to his face like a beard with pink *tulips* where his mouth should have been, holding a stiff *poker* in one hand as though it were a cigar. There was an upside-down woman with her head and shoulders stuck in one of those apparatus which my Aunt Hilda used to grind apples and suet into mince-meat by turning the handle. The hind-end of the apparatus was dropping annelids of red meat, piling up on a plate.

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Beneath the leafy flying buttresses of the question-mark hedge I helped Euphemia undress the dolls for their naps, exchanging evening-dresses for night-dresses then laying out the seven of them in a row under a flowery pillow-case with Isis Millipede on the end. Euphemia opened her eyes again and laughed when she saw the sleeping arrangement. *Well no one would ever think your baby was one of mine,* she said. *I hope Isis doesn't roll over in her sleep or she'll crush everybody.* In comparison to the other dolls Isis Millipede was monstrous. She was a baby cuckoo hatched in the nest of a smaller surrogate mother, who'd feed her along with the rest as though she belonged there. A mother cuckoo lays her single egg in some other mother's nest and abandons it there, then disappears never to be heard from again. Once the legitimate babies are hatched, the impostor pushes them out of the nest one by one, until she is the only one left. She will grow to three times the size of her surrogate mother, wearing her to a frazzle with her insatiable appetite. *No wonder you*

always eat all the sandwiches, Euphemia said. You have a giant to feed.

It was true. Isis Millipede was a monster. The apple juice I'd fed her was now fermenting inside her body cavity and giving her breath a peculiar alcoholic-smell, while the metal axis holding her eyes in place was rusting slightly, tinting her tear-ducts to look like those religious statues who weep blood. Her rusty eyes made it all the more difficult for them to open and close without some assistance, I either had to pick her up and shake her or physically pry her eyelids open with my fingers. The seven sisters didn't have his problem because their eyes were painted permanently open. And while they had a different change of clothing for every day of the week, Isis had only one dress which she had to wear all the time, because it was very difficult to find dresses for dolls of her size. At nap-time she wore either just the ruffled pink panties she came with, or she napped naked, which Euphemia had told me wasn't very nice. *It would be okay if she were only sleeping by herself, you know,* she'd said, *but its just that she's in bed with all of mine. You know, and she's not even covering herself.*

I was beginning to be disappointed in Isis Millipede. Though she towered above the other dolls she had the body of a child, she was too much of a body and too childish. Sitting down, she was more-or-less at the same eye-level as Pinkie, Silky, Petals, Creamy, Tulips, Rosehips, and Cherries when they were standing up, but still there was the problem of her legs, spread open almost at right angles like a nutcracker. *Does she have to sit like that?* Euphemia said. But things were no better if I stood her up again. Among the other dolls Isis Millipede was fifteen feet tall. Relative to Pinkie, Silky, Petals, Creamy, Tulips, Rosehips, and Cherries, she was a mutant Snow White among seven gorgeous Dwarves.

Robin-May hopped down the front steps in a green pinafore with appliqué apples for pockets, carrying an empty mayonnaise jar and a nail. She sat down under the question-mark tree and started digging an embedded stone out of the earth, which she used as a hammer to pound holes into the lid of the jar. Then she pulled up a fistful of grass and stuffed it inside the jar as well, and disappeared again behind the hedge.

In the bedroom of our hedge-house, Euphemia was singing to the dolls, who lay passive and smiling on their backs, staring up at the ceiling of leaves through sky-blue paint. Isis' eyes were closed because I could no longer make her keep them open, no matter how much I shook her or picked at her lids. *Isis is in a coma*, I announced, and propped her up in the corner with her arms outstretched like a sleep-walker or a priest offering blessing in pink underpants or a mummy in a horror movie. I was watching Euphemia's thumbs and index fingers climb up an invisible water-spout as she sang --

*Itsy-bitsy spider climbed up the water spout
Down came the rain and washed the spider out
Out came the sun and dried up all the rain
And the itsy-bitsy spider climbed up the spout again.*

The tiny voice of Robin-May echoed *itsy-bitsy, itsy-bitsy* from some corridor inside the hedge, then her two little hands suddenly burst through the leaves of the bedroom wall. They hung there for a moment like the antlers of a moose-head stuffed and mounted. She clapped for the song and got a little slap from her sister. *Don't stick your hands through the walls*, scolded Euphemia. Robin-May pressed the finger-tips of both hands lightly together so they made a little cage with an empty space between the palms, then pumped her hands so that her fingers moved together and apart like the spokes of an umbrella. *Guess what this is*, she said. *Can you guess?*

What it looked like to me was a set of miniature moose-antlers in combat with itself. *You're so retarded*, Euphemia said to Robin-May's hands. *Anyway I taught you that one in the first place. It's a spider doing push-ups on a mirror.*

Is not, chirped the voice behind the hedge, then the hands disappeared into the leaves again.

Is too, muttered Euphemia finally. I tried it myself, the pumping hand-spider connected by five fingery legs to its own reflection, and found the motion quite curious. There was no way of telling which hand was supposed to be the actual spider and which

the reflection, and the imaginary plane between the two of them remained tangibly solid as long as the fingertips remained joined and continued to mimic each other. I figured out that if something you were touching followed your motions exactly, even a single point of contact could feel like a solid plane. I wondered whether this would only work with one's own hands, or if two people's hands or even two whole bodies connected in this way experienced the same thing. If touching some body could feel like a continuing surface of support, which extended beyond the particular points of contact, then this was a marvelous thing.

You should try this, Euphemia, I said. *It really feels as though there's a mirror-surface there.* Euphemia clucked her tongue and pulled Tulips out of bed to have her hair combed. *Robin just wants you to pay attention to her,* she said, which was the first reason not to pay attention to someone.

Mirror mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all? said my right hand to my left, or my left to my right, it didn't seem to matter which of them was speaking. *You are. No, you are. No, it's you.* But it wasn't an argument that could ever be settled internally, it required a third opinion from outside. I looked at Euphemia, who'd moved on to Silky now, and was rhythmically stroking her long yellow hair until it clung to the comb, as slinky and electric as Euphemia's own hair. She wasn't interested in whatever I thought was doing with my hands. So I looked to Isis Millipede, who was standing in the shade propped up against branchy undergrowth, with her arms outstretched and her eyes rusted shut. *Monstrous.* She was my only doll and she was monstrous. I began to understand how she might become a bad reflection on me, as my mother sometimes said I could be a bad reflection when I was acting in a way which wasn't how she liked to see things.

Isis Millipede resembled some body a mother would not want to see in her little girl, her sluttish way of sitting and her uncooperative eyes and her sleep-walking and the hole between her lips and the teeth she was born with. And the flirty pink ruffles on the

bum of her underpants and the apple-cider fermentation of her internal humours and the fact that she held everything inside. And the fact that she wept rusty blood. And the fact that having no genitals nor any other orifices besides her eyes and her mouth did not make her more pure after all, but really were the reason she was rusting up inside. And the fact that she born in a basket at the hands of several different women, any of whom could call themselves her mother. And that her name was Isis Millipede of a thousand faces and a thousand feet, born fully clothed and fully grown like a warrior-goddess from the skull of a god.

She was not the sort of model daughter which a mother could comfortably set loose in the world without some modification. Her potential multiplicity of character would only confuse people, and many would dislike her for it, and few would care to marry her. There was Isis, living out in the wild with God knows how many dwarves and women with shaved heads. *Imagine!* She'd end up not finding many who'll take her, once the dwarves tire of her. She'd make a square peg of herself. Any mother who cared would do her best to correct all this before the day she looks at herself in the mirror and is properly horrified at what she's become.

I decided that the best strategy might be to break off Isis Millipede's legs. This would be helpful in two ways. It would create two large lower orifices from which the toxins in her body could be bled, and it would also assist in normalizing her height. She would be able to look other dolls straight in the eyes without having to sit down to do it, and would also be relieved of her untidy sitting habit. The operation wouldn't be as barbaric as it sounded, the legs were only shallowly set into the hip-sockets and could be popped out as easily as undoing a button.

I picked up Isis and held her close. Her outstretched fingers lightly chafed against my skin as they brushed my neck, her naked plastic torso beneath my chin like the cool smooth body of a violin. *To be the instrument would be enough.* I sat Isis Millipede down on the ground in her usual way, with her legs spread wide open and the earth and the grass

like a private baseball diamond in between them. I sat her with her back turned. I figured all I had to do was push her head forward to the ground, once and hard.

Euphemia made a sound like she was choking on a cherry pit and then she started to cry. *I can't believe I just saw that I can't believe I just saw that I can't believe I just saw that* she said about seven times, unconsciously twisting Creamy's hair into tight little knots until the doll's body did a full flip like those jointed wooden acrobats suspended between two poles. Robin-May popped her head through the hedge-house door. *What did you see? Can I see? Do you want to see what I just found?* She held up the mayonnaise jar which now had a large hairy spider inside it. Euphemia screamed and scrambled past her sister then ran up the front steps in tears. I picked up Isis and stuck her in bed with the other seven dolls. Now she fit perfectly, height-wise anyway, and seemed to be resting comfortably.

Is the lid screwed on tight? I asked Robin-May. She nodded her head. I picked up Isis Millipede's legs and set them on my lap. *Then let me have a look,* I said, *but not too close.* The spider was standing up on its back legs, tentatively tapping at the glass with its front legs as though they were fingers tapping at a window. *Are you going to let her go eventually?* I asked.

Of course I am, said Robin-May, as though it were an obvious question.

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## *Oblique House*

Empty. When my mother was away from home scraping plaque from the lower incisors of strangers, my brother breathless in a field among other skinned and skittering knees tumbling after a pigskin, and when my father was scarcely anything at all but a pulse below the floorboards --the banging of tools in the basement, or hushed murmurings behind the door of that private basement room where no one but he was permitted to go -- then you could say that the house was empty. You could say that. A body alone in the house was no body's daughter, no body's sister, no body's relative to any body. Who was it, then, that she became? Some body. Any body. No body.

A house with no body in it but oneself is like those painted facades in amusement parks, showing fabulous caricatures of various descriptions with empty portholes where their faces should be. You walk behind the facade and stick your face through the hole, look through it, adopt another possible identity. Maybe you become a circus freak, a bearded lady or a fat lady or a four-legged lady half-lady half-horse, or an arachnid ballerina turning like a spindle on your toes. Or a thin man sitting cross-legged on a bed of nails, or a strong man with tuberos thighs, and sausage-packed biceps suspending a thousand-pound barbell over your head. Or a tiger on a tricycle, a gorilla in pink underpants, an enormous dandelion with petals encircling your face like the mane of a lion. But the trouble with these possible identities is that you are unable to see what you look like from the outside. Unless you walk round to the front again, only to find that your face has disappeared. Then once more you could be any body.

Of course, if some body else were present as well, that other might be determined to let you know exactly what you look like from the outside, as if such precision were possible. The other might run for a camera, for instance, saying *Hold still, just a moment...Ha ha! you should see yourself... Rather suits you, really...Let me know if you want me to send you a copy.* And the pictures would arrive in the mail, and there -- you

see? You'd hardly recognize yourself. You should have been a ballerina. A fat lady. A strong man. A gorilla. A sister. An impostor. A daughter. A butcher, a baker, a liar, a thief. A nameless nervous creature inhabiting a house built by some body else.

Or maybe no pictures would come, and you'd never know what you should have been.

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When no body was home the house was a circus of rooms with the faces cut out. I was a pair of bestial eyes suspended like plums floating from room to room, taking on the after-images of the bodies who slept there, inhabiting objects as though they were eggshells. I could have been any body. The pale body of lavender soap in the drawer where my mother's underwear was folded neatly in white cotton gusseted rows, for instance. Or the negative shape of the body absent from my brother's bed, traced among the untidy folds of his Darth Vader comforter. Or the ream of pages my father referred to as his *body of work*, parts of which he sometimes left lying on the table like the signature glove of a diamond thief.

My father's body of work was divided into several segments. The segments were stored in hard-cover binders labeled according to month and year, the same system my mother used in labeling Mason jars of rhubarb preserves. I knew that there were at least a dozen of these binders, though they never seemed to appear all in the same place at the same time. They rather migrated singly from place to place like polar bears, hiding themselves only partially where I'd be most be apt to find them. At first I found it puzzling that my father hadn't locked up in the basement room. Surely the segments of his corpus belonged there if anything did. But slowly it began to make sense to me, that no matter how well a secret is kept it always leaves parts of itself scattered about, as though inherent in a secret were the backward desire to give itself away. The binders were like keys to the locked room, and you wouldn't tend to leave the keys to a locked room inside the room itself. You'd either carry them on your person, or hide them. Unless the keys were meant

to be found, when you'd leave them under a mat or on top of a door-jamb, the first places any body would tend to look.

The black binders exerted the same strange gravitational pull as the locked room did, they were like scattered pockets of the same mysterious substance. If the room were a sink of anti-matter, then the binders were migrating black holes in space. I would invariably stumble upon one and be transported to a different sort of place, no matter how I tried to avoid them. And so I resisted opening their covers. It was enough to rap my knuckles against the glossy black carapaces and to understand something about carapaces. That for some creatures such as black beetles they were necessary; that without them certain creatures would fall apart, and become an undifferentiated jelly of innards glistening like ointment. It was enough to understand that covers sometimes conceal unpleasant things which a body would rather not see.

My picture of my father relied on not being able to see him very clearly, in a manner similar to the way faith in God often relies on not being able to see Him clearly. Despite dreams of my own shadow slipping under the door of the locked room and witnessing, once and for all, what was behind it, I really didn't want to know what he wrote beneath the covers of his binders. I knew peripherally that he wrote Bible stories for children, I even remembered hearing a couple of them, when I was smaller. I remembered not liking them. I think I had felt implicated in them in some way, because they were stories intended for children, and I was his child. Who knows, he might even have been trying to see the world through my eyes when he wrote them, for the sake of truth-semblance. My mother often said that I had my father's eyes, which could have meant that he also had some sort of access to mine. I neither wanted to open the book and find my own eyes staring back at me, nor did I want to find myself looking into the migrating eyes of my father.

As in water face *answereth* to face, so the heart of man to man.

Hell and destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied.
-- Proverbs 27: 19-20

It is perfectly human to seek explanations for private mysteries outside the proper boundaries of the mysteries themselves. Humans look to the stars to chart out the courses and constellations of their lives, and into the entrails of sheep to understand the digestive processes of the cosmos. My father seemed to find his story between the lines of ancient holy books, he inscribed apocryphal amendments to them. My own story was refigured in the plastic bodies I played with, and reflected in the flickerings of silver screens. If it is the dream of every fictional character to become real, then perhaps it is the character of the real to make a fiction of itself.

There was a scene in *Empire Strikes Back* in which Luke Skywalker, stranded on the marshy planet Dagobah, learns how to become a Jedi knight. He runs through the jungle and climbs trees and develops lower-primate skills of agility, speed, endurance, and intuition. I can't remember any more whether the Dagobah scenes occur before or after Luke learns that Darth Vader is his father, because in movies these revelations are foreshadowed all over the place, as though knowledge of genesis were supposed to be innate. Well maybe it is and maybe it isn't, but in movies it sort of has to be. The story has already been written. The first thing you see is the name of the director ascending the screen like a hand withdrawn from a crystal ball, and the director already knows how it will end. The ending is implicit right from *In the beginning*, right from *Long ago, in a galaxy far far away* --

But in this particular scene, Luke finds himself in a marshy jungle cavern which appears to exist outside conventions of time and space. Although we understand that the positive side of the Force is strong wherever Luke happens to be, it is also apparent that the Force is never entirely black or white. Even on Dagobah there are pockets of the dark side, like the black eyeball of *yang* in the tadpole of *yin*.

Although Luke has been warned not to go into the cavern he goes anyway, because he has to, the script says he must. He moves tentatively, as though expecting to confront something in there, which he does. Out of the mist like the carapace of a locomotive appears the mask of Darth Vader, black cloak flowing like oil. The two of them draw their light sabres, Vader's being red while Luke's is blue, like blood flowing to and from a common heart. They fight a duel wherein Luke appears to succeed in striking the head of Darth Vader and severing it. *Just like that.* The head within its black helmet falls to the earth, and through the rising mist Luke stares into its face. It is his own face which he finds staring back at him of course, this is what was destined to happen. In my own memory, one of the double's eyes had been smote clean from its socket as well, though I may be confusing this story with another one. The important point is that Luke is horrified at what he sees, even though on some level he must have known what he would see, or because of this.

It was this scene I thought of whenever Euphemia tried to convince me to read my father's stories. She always loved to watch her father repair motorcycles, it was right that little girls should take an interest in what their fathers did. I would appreciate my own father more if I were more interested in his work, she said. But I didn't think the binders were like the motorcycles. *D'you know how you used to close your eyes to undress your dolls?* I asked her once, it wasn't something we were supposed to talk about. Not talking about it was part of the whole thing. She wasn't supposed to see her dolls naked and I wasn't supposed to talk about the fact. *And d'you know how you used to get mad if I looked at the naked girls pasted up at your house? I feel that way about the stories.*

Euphemia put her hands on her hips. *Well, I never understood why you wanted to look at them in the first place,* she said. *They're dirty pictures. I still don't look at them, usually, it's become a habit. I don't even have to close my eyes anymore. I just don't see them. It's better that way.*

That's why I think they're the same thing, I said. *I don't look inside my father's*

binders and you don't look at your father's naked girls. They're the same thing.

They are not my father's naked girls, Euphemia insisted. They aren't even real girls, they're just some horrible wallpaper. It's not like he knows them all personally or something. It's not like he took the pictures.

No, but he stuck them to the wall, I said.

Listen, said Euphemia. I don't even know what you're saying. Do you think your father keeps pictures of naked girls in those books?

No, I said.

Then I don't even know what you're saying. Anyway, that scene with Luke in the cave was supposed to be a dream, Alley, you do realize that don't you? He doesn't actually cut off Darth Vader's head because you see the two of them together later on. Can't you tell the difference between what's supposed to be a dream and what's supposed to be real?

Maybe not, I said. That's not the point. You don't look at the naked girls because they point to some private part of your father, in a way, and I don't look inside the binders for the same reason.

You have wax in your ears, Euphemia said. I already told you that the naked girls have nothing to do with my father. The binders are your father's binders, but the girls are not my father's girls.

Whose girls are they, then? I said.

Nobody's, she said. They're nobody's girls. As far as I'm concerned they don't even exist. Then Euphemia plugged her ears and sang several bars of *na na na na* which meant the conversation was over. It seemed consistently true that some things weren't supposed to be spoken about or even named, and that so much depended upon this. Take Darth Vader's wife, for instance. Who was she? We find out that Luke is Darth Vader's son, and that Princess Laia is Luke's sister and so probably Darth Vader's daughter as well, but the woman who bore them isn't mentioned anywhere. It's as though someone thought she needed to be that way to maintain a certain family balance, to keep things intact. The

other three family members start out quite distinct, but through the unveiling of secrets they all seem to bleed into each other until every body turns out being related to every body else. The puncturing of secrets seemed to make people flow into one another like eggs cracked into a bowl and beaten to a single homogenous fluid. Characters became like scrambled eggs, which was not a good thing. It's as though a secret, a discretion, were the shell which separates one body from every body else, and eggshells are fragile things. They need to be carried very carefully, like in those races on Sports Day where you had to carry an egg balanced on a spoon all the way across the soccer field. The winner was the person who could make it to the Finish line without dropping her egg. But all the eggs which didn't win were left broken and runny all over the place like a battlefield of indiscretions. The janitor was always being called in to hose them down before they began to smell.

Darth Vader's wife was the final proof that certain secrets should be preserved as faceless. Otherwise, who knows, maybe there wouldn't even be a story. The heart of a story was often the thing which no body could see, it was the pulse beneath the floorboards which everyone was trying to pretend wasn't there. Concealment was its generating force. Like the Force itself, the heart of a story was invisible, you weren't supposed to know what it looked like. The Force was an anti-character, without a body or a proper name. It was like a pregnant space, out of which characters were born and into which they would dissolve when they died. Which was why I kept thinking about Luke's mother, and whether her body had been cut out of the story because she was a more compelling character in her absence. Maybe her role was to be the unnamable space which linked everything else together.

And if I am wrong I would rather not know about it. It had been disillusioning enough to witness the unmasking of Darth Vader in the final film, revealing him to be nothing but a nice old man just like any other nice old man. I wished someone had warned me to cover my eyes, it seemed to me the power of a mask depended upon not knowing the features of the face which lay beneath it. When Vader was unknowable, it seemed to

me he had all the power in the world, because mystery is power. But then if this is true, the most powerful character of all is the anti-character, the woman whose name was only written in space. The mystery of a mask was nothing compared to the mystery of something unnamable.

And so I avoided prying into my father's binders, in case their glossy black covers concealed something I would be better off not seeing. Those seemed to be the rules of the game. Every other secret in the house was carefully probed except that one, as though hiding and seeking were flip sides of the same impetus, which I guess they must be.

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*the innards and outards of spider eggs*

When no one else was home a little girl was invisible, unknowable, unnamable. She was no body's girl, and could creep into her parents' room unseen and marvel at the objects on her mother's vanity table, the crystal jewelry stand in the shape of a lady's hand, the pregnant perfume-bottles, the blue gelatinous mask her mother wore over her eyes in the evening. She could rifle through the drawer where her father kept those elastic knee-braces which were the same colour as marzipan pigs. She could wonder why he collected dead batteries in a cigar box, and why his things smelled so different from her mother's things. She could open the lids of canisters and examine the Cracker Jack prizes her father collected on a shelf above the basement stairs. She could sit cross-legged on the kitchen counter-top and make zoo animals out of toothpicks and mini marshmallows. She could choose to be which ever sort of animal she wished. A prowling tiger. A sneaky snake. An all-seeing giraffe, or a waddling warthog seeing nothing which wasn't directly in front of its unsightly face.

The ghosts of my parents and brother were still present in the various rooms, amid the smell of musty towels outside Gavin's bedroom door, or in the basement where the workbench was, the smell of rusty iron like old blood. Or the biscuity smell of the bathroom, milky and human, released in steam from open pores. My mother tried to smother these smells with aerosol sprays, but still they lingered beneath.

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Sometimes a little girl is like a mist condensing on the window of a moving vehicle which transports her some place else. Or on the window of a house, where she remains fluid and stagnant until change of season evaporates her again, or freezes her in place. When no one is home she can fix her desires on various objects and find ways to convince herself *I am that, that I am*. Then she can follow a make-believe course of possibility through to its resolution.

Sometimes this might involve dressing up in different costumes, depending on who in hell she thinks she is, which is a question often put to her. She might not have a consistent answer. Her mother might think she is quite an idiot, being unable to answer such a straightforward question as *Who in hell do you think you are?* But then the girl might begin to suspect her mother doesn't know the answer either. She might even admit to not knowing -- *Frankly, Alley,* she might say, *I have no idea what's gotten into you.* Or other times it might be *I just don't know what possesses you...* to do such and such a thing. As though her mother thought of her as a container for the in-dwelling spirit of some other little girl, and that she ought to figure out who that other girl was, *in hell.*

I believe this is why little girls like to dress up in different costumes, so they have a few answers ready when people asked them who in hell they think they are. My favourite costume had been that of a bug. I could hardly wait until the next time my mother asked me that question, so I could say *In hell, I think I am a bug.* I borrowed a glossy black half-slip from my mother's dresser and pull the waistband up to my armpits, then tied a leather chamois round my waist like an over-skirt, the overlapping wings of an insect, so I could fly from room to room unseen and creep my hands over everything. In the living room, rolled up cocoon-like on the back of the sofa, was an afghan hand-knitted from fine silvery-blue yarn, which, when spread out on the floor, looked a bit like a spider web. I could lie tangled in the web and imagine being ravished by the massive green spider plant which hung over my mother's chair, or try imagining a different scene where I escape.

Escaping wasn't as interesting. It was more interesting to be injected with digestive enzymes through the chelicerae of the spider plant, which I thought would feel like a dental injection. The bite itself would be painful, but then you wouldn't feel anything. The whole point of the bite was to make you go numb. Then the spider plant could extract all the liquefied innards it wanted to without me even knowing what was going on. It would be like a root canal: when the operation was done I'd be an empty shell with no guts inside. But the beauty of this was that no one would ever know the difference from the outside.

Like the hulls of flies on the windowsill, which looked as though they were only resting there for while, but under gentle pressure of a thumbnail dissolved to powder.

I had learned from my Aunt Hilda's eggs that empty shells could be beautiful. Her son, my Uncle Ernie, sometimes used an expression having to do with teaching your grandmother how to suck eggs, which meant teaching someone something they obviously already know. But the expression made no sense on two accounts. Firstly because *no one* in my family knew how to suck eggs, and secondly because of the grandmother clause. My father's mother didn't even exist except as an old black & white of herself, standing in a kitchen somewhere in Scotland holding her infant son. And while my mother's mother was still alive, she was even less tangible than the one who was dead. My mother never wrote to her or called her so she never called us back. I hadn't even met her. But her sister was my Great Aunt Hilda, who was sort of an oblique grandmother, which did make sense, according to the way my family did things, always slightly off centre. And Aunt Hilda did not suck eggs, she *blew* them.

It was she who taught me how to do it, not the other way around. The first time I did it I was ten, then again every subsequent Good Friday right up until the year you were born, Rose. Aunt Hilda taught me what you do is this: you take a needle and poke a very small hole in the narrow end of the egg, then turn the egg upside-down and bore or poke a slightly larger hole in the wide end. Then turn it back again and close your lips over the first hole and blow. Not like you're blowing out a candle, but like you're trying to play a trumpet, forcing your breath out from somewhere deep and blowing pressure as opposed to just blowing air. Sooner or later a globule of egg white will begin to hang from the hole at the wider end of the egg. Often it'll swell to considerable size before any of it actually drops, and then suddenly it will come almost all at once. It seemed incredible to me that the entire contents of an egg could slip through such a tiny little opening, but there it was.

The contents came out scrambled. If there'd been twin yolks inside a particular egg as sometimes there are, you'd never know it for sure, it was too late to tell once they lay

scrambled in the flowery teacup Aunt Hilda used to catch them in. I found this part a bit traumatic, I wouldn't necessarily recommend egg-blowing to everyone. But sucking eggs must be much worse. I was grateful not to have a grandmother who would teach me to do it. But whether an egg is sucked or blown the results are the same, you're still left with an empty shell. And by itself an empty shell could be quite beautiful, ignoring the particulars of how it got that way.

Especially the eggs my Aunt Hilda made. She drew patterns on them with wax and dyed them different colours, black and yellow and orange and red, geometric diamonds and chevrons like designs on the backs of bugs, or on the abdomens of tropical spiders. Aunt Hilda admitted that many people didn't bother blowing eggs before dyeing them, but that she always did it, mostly because she didn't like the thought of the egg slowly going rotten inside and drying up like an old cheese. Just as I didn't like the thought of the insides being blown out through a hole in the bottom, she didn't like the thought of them stuck there rotting in their shells.

When they were finished. Aunt Hilda's eggs weighed almost nothing. They were lovely and gloriously empty like my beautiful blond head on its pink plastic pedestal, which was now back in its box and buried in the basement storage closet. I wouldn't mind never being reminded of things like that, it's strange how trying to get rid of something has the opposite effect of making you think about it much of the time. But still it was good to find out we had this in common, Aunt Hilda and I, both of us seemed preoccupied with objects and which rooms to keep them in. Aunt Hilda would collect all her beautiful eggs in a basket, with tulips, and arrange them as a centrepiece at Easter dinner. The basket was allowed to sit on the table until the tulips died, then was moved to the top of the piano, where it remained until sometimes as late as Mother's Day. Then Aunt Hilda would decide to move the eggs outside, to the windowsill of the enclosed porch, where they'd stay all winter until she brought them in again the next Easter.

I'd give my eye-teeth for a set like yours

Insides and Outsides. By the time I was ten or eleven I was still trying to figure them out. Whether a person was the shell, or the stuff inside it, because these things were connected but didn't necessarily go together. But certain rules had divided almost everything this way, according to insides and outsides, so the best a body could do was learn to label itself accordingly.

One afternoon, when I was scheduled for a dental appointment with my mother, I decided to test the hypothesis that there was little difference between the two of them, or at least there was little difference between the outer appearances of things and what they were actually made of. One way of testing this is to lie a lot and see whether the lies you tell start to feel real on the inside.

I would gladly have stayed at home and sent my body to the dentist, if it had been possible to make the split. I would have sent only my teeth in a glass of water as my father would have been able to do, and left the rest of me at home. I kept hoping a fireman would phone and tell me the clinic had burned down, or that I might injure myself on the way there. My father had forsaken my defense, was angrily banging a lawn-mower downstairs with a hammer. He stopped banging only once to yell up the stairs *You'll not get any more sympathy from me if you're late, Alley, I'll not cover for you here -- the teeth in your head are nobody's business but yours and your mother's.*

My father's teeth were no longer any body's business but his own. He had earned that, at least, having lost the originals in a rugby match in Aberdeen when he was a twenty-one. According to my father, almost any turn of fortune was better than a kick in the teeth. A free cup of coffee with the purchase of a two crullers was better than a kick in the teeth, and my achieving a total three and a half seconds in the flexed arm hang on Sports Day was better than a kick in the teeth. I had to take his word for it since he knew it for fact. He might tell the story this way:

It was a final match against a group of dullards from Tongue, who were as nasty, brutish, and short as life itself. I gained the ball by mere chance, not having meant to, simply being in the right place at the wrong time, you might say. But I postponed the pass for a fraction too long -- a span of time no wider than the space between your teeth might have saved me the whole mouthful. A larger man who still had all his hair and more than enough of it bristling like mattress stuffing from the V of his jersey tackled me, and my first reflex was to hold the ball right in front of my face. My own face, like a ruddy ostrich, as though the brute wouldn't see me that way --

At this point in the story I'd be imagining my father as that little man on packets of *Bic* pens with a ball-point for a head. What should have come next was that click-of-a-lever which pulls the ball-point up inside the pen out of harm's way, like a tortoise's head. This would have been a useful skill. Tortoises probably lived longer than ostriches because of it.

-- But a mighty boot found me in my hiding place, and with it came a mighty leg whose muscles strained against their skins as though the body housed a daemon. My mouth met the toe of the boot with crushing impact, my lips inflating like a safety air-bag and my cheeks filling up with fluid. Tumbling in the fluid were a dozen stones or so, which I could neither seem to swallow nor spit out. I held them where they were until a teammate clapped me on the back, then they were spilling forth in the muddy field like pearls before swine.

Level with the gums, my father said with awful emphasis, *they cracked clean off level with the gums.* And he'd had the roots dug out with metal tongs, he said, in the days when folks were so poor they couldn't even afford dental anesthetic. Just as he and others of his generation had had to walk thirty miles to public school in the pelting snow without proper footwear uphill both ways.

And so my father had worn false teeth since the age of twenty-one. He had made

his first set himself out of pine wood and sticking plaster, he said, and they were stronger and more comfortable than any set he'd had since. Losing his teeth so young had made him a sadder but a wiser man too, he said, a graduate of the school of hard knocks to the teeth, a survivor of those things which can kill you. But the barest truth of it was that his teeth were *false*, which was a word no one liked to use, like *failure*. At the end of the day he took them out of his mouth and stored them in the glass of murky water which he kept in a drawer by his bedside, because even my mother preferred not to see them as soon as she woke up. She'd have to spend the rest of the day looking at people's teeth, she said, she didn't need more of the same at home. So my father would switch off the lamp and take them out in the dark, then lie back and draw the covers up to his neck like Oz behind his curtain.

My mother worked as a dental hygienist at the office of Dr. Beard, who did have a beard, and a set of teeth as long and strong as new piano keys. His name was engraved in gold on his door, *Dr. Lloyd Beard, DD*. My brother and I each had to walk through that door at least twice a year, then two more times coming out again after our teeth had been scraped, scaled, polished, fluoride-treated and x-rayed by our mother. The x-rays always came at the end, and in an envelope like a sentence. Our mother would hold the tiny grey prints up to the light and either tell us we were free to go, or that we had to stay put and wait for Dr. Beard. Which meant that the x-rays had come back *guilty*.

Lloyd, could you come and take a look at these please? she'd say, using his first name as though they were on the same team. Dr. Beard would come up and stand right behind her, then they'd both squint up at the ghostly grey slides and nod grimly. Then my mother would be sent to fetch the instruments.

I dreaded these appointments. And I noticed that dental appointments were one thing I'd never heard my father call *better than a kick in the teeth*. Which meant he thought they were just as bad, unless they were worse. But he hadn't had any reason to go to a dentist for a very long time, and he'd never had his teeth scraped by my mother. I

sometimes envied him, who could simply drop his in a glass and let the minty scrubbing bubbles do the scraping and cleaning at safe remove. But *Alley, don't be daft,* was all he said, *You're a lucky little girl if the worst that ever happens to you is a free dental check-up twice a year. It's better than...a sharp stick in the eye, after all.* But since I knew that neither of my father's eyes were glass it seemed unlikely he'd ever had a sharp stick stuck in either of them.

So he would send us to have our teeth scraped anyway, in his own manner of sending, by disappearing downstairs to his workbench all afternoon. His authority was often the quiet withdrawal of potential support, suddenly and without warning, like the time he'd removed the training wheels from my bicycle without telling me. He'd rightly guessed that I wouldn't have wanted him to do it yet, if I'd been told ahead of time. But he'd been taught to swim by being thrown into a lake by his father, and believed that life didn't necessarily prepare you for things. I didn't even notice that the wheels were missing until the sharp turn at the foot of Dormier Street, when I relied on them and found them absent. I had limped home with sharp stones embedded in my shins. *It could be worse,* said my father, but worse than what he didn't say.

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*a horse-shoe crab as big as your head*

The afternoon of the dental appointment I went into my room and put on a short tartan skirt which hadn't been worn since I was nine and a pair of bright pink knee-socks, and sneakers made of clear blue plastic. Then I sat on the floor in the kitchen with a set of poster-paints. I painted bees on both my knees, one bee on each kneecap, and glued silver glitter to their wings. This was part of my experiment into the relationship between insides and outsides. I wanted to know whether a girl who had bees on her knees would get any special attention which other girls didn't get, and if so, whether the special attention had any effect on who in hell she thought she was.

I crept into my parents' room and found a bright red fifty dollar bill in an envelope taped beneath my mother's underwear drawer. On the back of the bill were fifty men in crayon-red coats with fifty glossy horses black as wet slate, standing in a ring on some very green grass. I folded them up accordion-style and stuffed them in my sock. Stealing the horses was part of the experiment as well -- I wanted to know whether hidden thefts were borne on the skin like a peculiar smell, or were virtually undetectable from the outside, like hairline fractures. Maybe my mother would detect me as a thief as soon as I opened my mouth, the fifty red coats like a cinnamon-heart stain on my tongue, the smell of men and horses on my fingers. Or maybe she wouldn't even notice. I knew that some things got noticed when they went missing, while other things weren't even noticed when they were right there in the room. And some things had a heavier sense of permanence in people's minds than other things did.

I ran out of the house and let the screen door slam behind me, listening for a voice to tell me not to do that, but didn't hear one. I kept running all the way to the intersection at Kingsway and Victoria, where I hailed a cab. I'd never done this before, but I had seen ladies do it in movies, holding up their pretty hands so their skirt inched up their thighs a little. Hailing a cab seemed to be one of the things you could learn from watching movies.

like kissing, or firing a gun.

A black & yellow cab stopped almost right away and I hopped into the front seat right beside the driver, in a style my mother called *flouncing*. I was out of breath from running and my mouth tasted of old pennies. But I figured out which of the levers on the door was for the window and rolled it down six inches. *You okay, kid?* said the man. I nodded my head that of course I was, then looked for a clue of what to do next. I looked at the man's face. It was several shades of pink and pitted like a peach stone. His hair reminded me of fried eggs, mostly white with yellowish tinges and slicked back behind his ears which were large and looked like curls of bacon. He was wearing a blue short-sleeved shirt with an *Esso* patch on the pocket. I thought he had a very interesting face. In profile it looked like a fist.

The cab smelled of Brewer's yeast, celery sticks, styrofoam, and coffee. There was a greasy paper bag on the seat between us, and a packet of cigarettes with a camel on it. Stuck on the shelf above the dashboard was a small plastic bust of Smoky the Bear, about size of a charcoal briquette, with a hole in the top of his hat to stick a pen in. A ribbon-like plastic scroll formed the pedestal of the bust, inscribed with the words *Only you can prevent forest fires*. It reminded me of the firemen's calendar in the kitchen of my parents' house, where it said *Always know where the nearest exits are*. This was good advice if a fire was already burning. But preventing one was a new concept, and it sent a quick hot chill up my spine. How was a person supposed to know what was going to happen before it even happened?

The cabbie was looking at me. I could follow his eye-beams straight to my knees, the bees on my knees, the bright pink knee-socks which were slipping until I reached down and pulled them up a bit. He was still looking at me. And I was beginning to understand something about being looked at, why certain people went out of their way to be or not to be looked at. I began to see clearly what it was I was trying to do, with the socks and the bees on my knees, it came all at once in sudden colour like opening the door onto Oz.

There was a shift in perspective, having to do with difference between being a pair of eyes looking at things and being one of the things which a pair of eyes is looking at. Being looked at seemed to have the potential of transporting a person's awareness to some place else, outside of its body.

Perhaps it was possible to split off entirely, to relocate your point of view in some body else's eyes. It might feel very consoling to do this, at times. It might feel rare, ecstatic, to be positioned so securely in space in this way, like the belt which holds you safely in your seat. I could understand why some girls might prefer this to floating about like a vapour, condensing on windows, invisible to everyone including themselves. It might even feel like a type of desire, to be pinned down in space by some body's eye-beams. I thought of a stick-pin securing a beetle. Surely even this could feel like desire sometimes, because at least the beetle could be labeled then. it could be given a name. Like the red flag on a map labeled *You are here*.

It can be difficult for a little girl to know what she looks like when no one in particular tends to tell her. The first time I'd been allowed to pick out my own clothing at Value Village, I'd chosen a purple sweater with an ice-cream cone in satin appliqué, and some red corduroy trousers with a tiny Italian flag sewn into the seam at the right hip. I knew that jeans with flags sewn into the hips were supposed to make you look like somebody. I'd seen them on bodies of older girls, girls with hair which feathered back like windswept wheat and cherry-cola lip gloss worn on colourful shoelaces around their necks.

I tried on the clothes in one of the changing room cubicles. It was one of those horrid types with no mirror inside, forcing you to leave the cubicle before you have any idea how stupid you might look. Then what usually happens is a saleslady runs up and says, *That's cute on you*, as soon as you open the door. But this time there didn't seem to be any around. I went over to my mother who was flipping through racks of clothes like a private eye through dossier. *How do I look?* I said. She didn't hear me because she was too busy flipping. *How do I look?* I said again, more windswept this time. My mother

stopped, looked at me, and said *Well you'll pass in a crowd, dear*. As though this were the highest goal of self-presentation, to pass in a crowd, like a peculiar smell which no one is quite able to identify, or would rather not draw attention to.

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You're sure you're okay, kid? the cabbie said again. I sunk my head into the upholstered headrest and said *Take me St. Paul's, please. St. Paul's Hospital*.

Dr. Beard's clinic was inside St. Paul's, but it didn't occur to me to specify this. The potential drama of the destination didn't strike me until he said *All right, you don't have to talk about it. I was just checking 'cause you seem a little nervous, that's all*. And I thought, here's a man who doesn't know me from a hole in the wall, as my father would say, and I'd probably never see him again. I could tell him any story I wanted, really, it wouldn't do any harm. It could be part of the experiment.

-- *No I'm not very okay, actually*, I said, looking down at my feet as though there were a dead sparrow there. *I'm going to visit my mother in the hospital*, I said. Technically this was true. It didn't require that big a leap in my mind to be able to say *She's very sick, actually. It's kind of an emergency*.

You got it, he said, his hand flicking the switch on the meter. I liked that, *You got it*, and settled myself in for the ride as though it were a role in a movie I had got. I felt as though a make-believe window of time had just opened up out of nowhere, and things seemed to be moving very smoothly, in our time out-of-time. Make-believe moments were meted out by rotations of the wheels, the red shifting of the metre, and when the scene was over I could step out of it again as easily as opening a door. Outside the universe of the cab, nothing either of us said or did had any relevance to the other one. A taxicab was like a changing-room cubicle where a girl could try on different personalities before she committed to buying one, and the cabbie could be like the mirror.

I studied the low ceiling of the cab. Like at the planetarium, there were pin-hole stars on a contrasting background, describing the vaulted shape of space. The background

was ivory-coloured vinyl, the pin-points were small black holes in patterned rows. I could arrange the patterns as interlocked squares or diamonds depending on how I slanted my vision. The ceiling of the cab looked like outer space in negative, black vacant stars, white solid space. When I closed my eyes again, the left-over picture on my eyelids reversed things back to normal, white stars in black space.

So what seems to be the problem with your mum? the cabbie said.

Uhm. Cancer. I was thinking of the constellation. I was thinking that the man who first saw a big crab in the sky must have been a fisherman who caught them every day, because I'd never seen a crab up there, unless it scuttled out of the sky as soon as I looked at it directly.

Is that right? he said. *What kind of cancer's she got?* This was a challenging question. I didn't know much about cancer. I didn't know which kinds were the worst ones, which were the ones you'd hear about in movies, so I said *All kinds. She has all kinds of cancer.* It would suit my mother to have a variety on hand. I decided, thinking of the cupboard in my mother's kitchen where there were all kinds of cans, tomato soup and creamed corn and whole baby beets.

That's a terrible story, kid, the cabbie said.

I know it is, I said.

The car turned onto a gravelly street lined with rainy-looking houses. An old woman was struggling with an umbrella as though it were a fishing rod with a large-mouth bass tugging at the other end, and a frog-boy was hopping from puddle to puddle. From the cab I could watch people without them seeing me. I could look into people's living rooms and sometimes even see what they were watching on television. But when I asked the man if he liked being cab-driver, he told me he'd just been let out of hospital himself and that I was only his second fare. *What was wrong with you?* I asked.

Nothing life-threatening, he said. *Nothing like cancer. You might say I was over-tired.* He told me he was originally from Florida State, and that he had a family there, a

wife and a daughter who looked a bit like me. But he didn't want to break my heart with sad stories since I seemed to have plenty of my own, and again he said he was very sorry to hear about my mother. I was starting to feel an unpleasant twinge in my stomach, and told him I was sorry too. He said it was a shame, how people could get shut up in institutions like hospitals and forgotten about. And that my mother was lucky to have a little girl like me who would come and visit her. I let my eyes wander from his face and up along the frame of the window on the driver's side, stopping at that plastic hook you're supposed to hang dry-cleaning on. A driver's identification card was hanging there instead, with a picture of a taxicab driver. The knot in my stomach twisted in a different direction when I saw that man in the picture wasn't the same as the man who was driving the car. The man in the picture had brown skin and long hair tied back, the two of them didn't even look alike.

For a moment I wasn't sure what I was supposed to think of this. But then it occurred to me for the very first time, that if it were possible for me to pretend to be some body I was not, then it was equally possible for some body else to be doing the same thing. Was it the man in the picture who had a wife and daughter in Florida, or was it the man who was driving the car? Did his little girl really look like me? Maybe she was as make-believe as I was. Maybe the man was only pretending to be a cabbie who was only pretending take me to the hospital.

I looked out the window in search of familiar objects. There was big red dog who looked familiar, but none of the stationary things did, none of the houses or trees. I tried to tell myself this was because trips to the dentist were usually erased from my memory, like confessions under hypnosis. The trips back home were often a blur as well, since my tongue would be frozen and monstrous and I would be slurring my words.

I was beginning to wish I *had* taken the bus, even though the cabbie hadn't done anything wrong that I could see. Except pretending, which was what I was doing myself. I remembered hearing my mother say *Never trust a man who keeps his hands in his*

pockets, but the cabbie had one hand on the steering wheel, and the other one hooked through it and hanging limp. I looked at his pockets. They were pouchy and walrus-looking, but they weren't doing anything strange as far as I could tell. The only problem was that he seemed to be driving the in the wrong direction. *Are we lost?* I said. The man looked over and puffed out his cheeks in a way which seemed to mean that he thought I was joking.

Either we were lost or he was taking me someplace else without telling me. I remembered once being taken to the Kingsgate Mall to get a decent pair of sneakers even though I didn't need them, my mother had packed me into the car with promises of cherry-lime slushes at the Dairy Queen. But then suddenly we were at the Kingsgate Mall in the shoe department of Zellers. *You're not going to tramp around in the slush with those things on your feet*, my mother had said, referring to the canvas slippers Aunt Hilda bought me in Chinatown when she was here. They were my favourite shoes, I liked having shoes from Aunt Hilda to stamp out my own footprints in. But my mother hated the shoes. *You'll catch your death*, she said, as though death were an old boot in the pond and I'd be the unlucky one to reel it in. Anyway whatever shoes I was wearing felt like moot points anyway, since it was no longer my shoes which were carrying me. In my mother's car I was carried by her shoes, her blue size four pumps like the feet of a church organist pumping the floor pedals. I'd left the mall with squeaky white tight Zellers sneakers on my feet. She'd made me leave my Chinese slippers in the store.

I didn't want anything like that to happen again. The shoes a person chooses to carry herself around in are no body's business but her own. My Uncle Ernie often began words of advice with the condition *If I were in your shoes...*but the thing was he was never in my shoes, only I was in my shoes. No body had any business being in any body else's shoes. And presently it was the cabbie's shoes, dog-brown and battered, which were doing the footwork for the both of us, while my blue plastic running shoes didn't even touch the floor. This made me suspicious. I sat forward in my seat and narrowed my eyes at the cab

driver.

How come that picture of you isn't you? I said to the two-faced driver. It was the only ace I had but he couldn't argue with it. I later learned that this trick was called *calling someone's bluff*. I'd have to remember it. It would probably be necessary to use it again some day, and I would be prepared for that day when it came. I would also have to be prepared for other people to do it to me.

So you've just come from a birthday party or something, have you? the cabbie responded.

No, I haven't, I said. I didn't know what he was talking about. *I'm going to visit my mother, I told you. She's very sick.*

I remember you saying that, the cabbie said slow-smiling. *I just wondered why a little girl would worry about painting glow-bugs on her legs when her mother's sick and dying in the hospital. You gotta admit, it's a strange little detail.*

To cheer her up? I suggested. The cabbie snorted.

I tried to pull the tartan hem over the bees on my knees but it wouldn't stay put. The skirt kept inching up all on its own, like the skirts of ladies hailing cabs, as though being looked at were less of a matter of deliberate make-believe than I'd thought. The antennae of the bees would peek out from underneath my skirt, then both bees would creep into view with their sparkly wings nipping at the light. I covered them with my hands.

I asked you first, I said finally. *How come the man in the picture isn't you?*

Your mother isn't sick in hospital, is she? he said. The fist of his face seemed to be tightening, and I noticed that his lower lip looked fatter and trembly.

How do you know she's not? I demanded. *Can you prove she isn't?*

Nope, he said. *But she isn't, is she?*

I turned away from him and looked out the front window. At first I could see the street, the red tail-lamps of the car in front of us, the streetlights suspended like costume jewellery from criss-crossed wires above everyone's head. Then gradually space was

shortened to a very small area extending no further than two feet in front of my face, and I could see only the smudges on the windscreen, the two ghostly arcs where the wipers had traveled like moons. My eyeballs turned into tongues, thick and monstrous, they slurred my vision until it staggered like a drunk into the traffic. They started drooling and blubbering all over my face because they knew that I'd been caught.

Where are you taking me now? I said. For a long time he said nothing. He reached his big hand over and shut off the metre, freezing time at seven dollars and eighty-five cents. We glided quietly through unmeasured space. My face felt as hot and wet as if I had held it over a steaming bowl with a towel over my head, as my mother sometimes did. *For the skin,* she said, though she'd emerge from under the towel with her skin looking ruddy and rubbery. I was sitting on my hands and tapping my knees together and apart, together and apart like wings. *I'm not sure what to do with you,* the cabbie finally said.

The cab rolled along for a hundred years with both of us inside it, the face of the cabbie brooding in moonish cycles. Then suddenly he dragged the steering wheel in a wide arc like reeling in a net, swooping the car in a horse-shoe to double back the way we came.

Where are you taking me now? I said again. My feet were dangling limp like hanging rabbits, not touching the floor.

I'm taking you to the fucking hospital, he said. *That's what you said you wanted, isn't it? St. Paul's hospital?*

We drove back down the rainy-looking street where I'd seen the old woman and the frog-boy, but they weren't there any more. I saw the same red dog again, though, barking from one end of a chain attached to a tree in the yard. I hadn't noticed the chain the first time. It seemed I hadn't noticed a lot of things. And I couldn't be sure any more that the cabbie was taking me to the hospital just because he said he was, but still I felt glad for the change of direction. We seemed to be going back the way we came, as though it were possible to move backward through time and wind up where you'd begun. I looked at the metre to see if it was moving backward as well, erasing its numbers all the way back to

whatever amount it started with. I hadn't noticed that, either. But the metre was still frozen at seven dollars and eighty-five cents as though time were standing still, which it wasn't. It wasn't moving backward and it wasn't standing still. Otherwise the old woman would still be standing there, struggling with her umbrella or frozen motionless like a mammoth in ice.

I thought of the red fifty dollar bill folded up accordion-style under the skin of my sock. In some ways it was comforting to have it there, at least it was something which the man hadn't discovered about me yet. Initially, it had been my plan to give the fifty to the cabbie and tell him to keep the change, because I'd always wanted to do that. That had been the plan initially, before all this happened. I'd always wanted to hand an excessive amount of money to some body and tell that person *Keep the change*. Just because I liked phrase. I liked the way the it seemed to contradict itself. There were things which you could keep and other things which would change. Taken together they seemed to mean that change was the only thing you could keep.

I knew that some things had a heavier sense of permanence in people's minds than other things did, like my mother seemed more permanent than my father, who seemed more permanent than me, or especially my brother. My mother had special creams and lotions to make her last as long as possible, like the cream she had us put on our boots in winter. Almost everything she did had to do with making things last longer. Winter boots. people's teeth, rhubarb and strawberries put up in the deep freeze. It had been ridiculous of me to tell the cabbie my mother was dying of cancer. It was like telling him I had a dime in my pocket which *didn't* have the Queen's face on it. The Queen's face appeared on every pocket of change I'd ever had, and it would still be there after she was dead. Something about my mother was like this as well, she seemed as immortal as a copper casting of herself. Having absolute value in theory, relative value only in practice.

The cab pulled up to the curb and stopped beside a tall building with rows and rows of narrow windows like the open windows along the edges of a roll of film. *St. Paul's*

hospital, said the cabbie, Get out. He flicked a switch on the dashboard, and the lock-peg beside my right shoulder popped up like one of those plastic darts stuck in raw turkeys, which pop up when the bird is done. I got out of the cab walked round to the driver's side, then crouched down and reached into my sock for the fifty dollar bill. When the driver rolled down the window I held out the money. I didn't want it anymore, but I wasn't going to tell him the keep the change either. After everything else it would seem obvious.

Don't give me that, kid, the cabbie said. I don't even want to know where you got it. Give it to your mother or somebody else. He quickly glanced down at my knees then squinted ahead through the windscreen. I think you should wash that glitter off your legs, too. You're too young to walk around with glitter on your legs. It doesn't look good, do you understand? Now get out of here.

He rolled up the window, then reached back and yanked the phony driver's permit from where it was hanging. I didn't get out of there right away, but stood and watched him while he searched his cab for somewhere to hide it. Soon he was angrily rolling down the window again.

In case you don't realize I just let you off the hook, the man said. Doesn't your mother ever tell you about guys like me? And listen, one more thing -- if you're going to be a liar, you better learn to tell better lies. Don't give yourself away, unless you mean to. Because they'll always be some part of you that wants to get you caught. I just figured that out today. Do you understand? I don't think you're too clear on why you're telling stories in the first place, but figure out what part of you is trying to give you away before you start out. Then get rid of it, or be ready for it to call your bluff.

The man rolled up the window again, then bent down and pulled up one of his trouser-legs to shove the phony ID card down his sock. He sat up and shot me a glance, then took his foot off the brake and pulled away from the curb. I could see his head and his shoulders framed in the left corner of the rear windshield as he drove away, as though he were a picture of Mackenzie King's head. But this would only be if fifty dollar bills were

reversible, showing both the front and the back of the man.

cephalopod

"Just scoot your bum forward a bit and lie back...there you go."

My mother bent over me to fasten a pale blue bib around my neck, a flash of pink lace between her tan freckled breasts. The bib was a paper-towel laminated on one side, which fastened with metal clips like tiny crocodile-heads on either end of a sink-plug chain. She ran the cool chain round the back of my neck under my hair, clamping the little jaws down on the other side. *There you go.* Then she pressed an unseen lever with her foot, and my head sank back below the horizon while my feet rose up, like a see-saw. My pelvis was an axis, a fixed point on a lateral plane, or a ragged scrap of flotsam between the above and below. It was as though my head, my neck and shoulders, were submerging under water, bibbed in blue and staring through jellied yellow light. The light in Dr.Beard's clinic was never breathable, it had no air in it but seemed to be a gelatinous mass through which things swam unnaturally, pale things of artificial yellow, blue and pink, styrofoam-white and chrome. My head was a stone under water, looking up.

I saw another set of jaws. That sea-monster lamp on its long mechanical neck, the gummy yellow light inside its mouth like melted glass. My mother placed her hand on the back of its silver head and drew it closer to my face, squinting down at me as though I were difficult to see way down here. There was another set of jaws clamped to her breast pocket, a serrated clip holding her photo ID in place, like a placecard, a postcard with her picture on the stamp. *Janis Underhill.* The photograph looked nothing like her, she looked less famous than I tended to imagine her being. I always thought of my mother as famous.

When she turned her face away I saw one more set of jaws at the back of her head. They seemed to be everywhere. These were the pale blue jaws which gathered her frothy hair between long curving teeth like a monster will a mouthful of foam. *Hang tight a minute, pet,* my mother said, *Don't go anywhere.* Then she went away. I didn't know where she thought I was going to go, the only other place in the hospital I knew how to get

to was the bathroom down the hall, where I'd just been, to scrub the bees off my knees. The glitter-glue wings had peeled off whole like fingernails, but the paint didn't come off as easily. When I'd left the bathroom my kneecaps were rosy red from scrubbing, as though I'd spent the morning kneeling in a chapel, or scrubbing floors like Cinderella. I had hidden the stolen fifty in the sole of my shoe, which now felt uncomfortably conspicuous, sticking way up in the air like that. *There'll always be some part of you that wants to give you away.*

She wouldn't read my theft in my face, then, if she read it at all. she would read it in my feet. My blue plastic feet which were now up high where my head should have been, while my head was down low where there should have been shoes. I was inverted, had supplanted two eyes with two sets of eyelets. lashes for laces, a pink fleshy tongue for two nylon tongues rudely protruding from the shoe-mouths in which I had stuck both my feet. I was a two-faced cephalopod with two foot-heads and one head like a foot. Those soles were exposed which should have been hidden, which should have been connected to the ground. Astronauts in space must feel like this, I thought. and also deep-sea divers. They must feel monstrous and displaced, like plaster narwhals suspended in glass tanks at an aquarium.

I tried to anchor myself to the walls with my eye-beams. There were numerous sets of jaws there as well, posters of green crocodiles with gleaming white smiles, and tiny pink *trochilus*-birds whose job was to hop about in the crocodile's mouths and pick plaque from between its teeth. In a lower corner of the posters was a small insignia, a circle and a triangle entangled with each other, and the words *Recognized by the Canadian Dental Association*. I recognized the insignia from toothpaste tubes. It also appeared on the green crocodile bookmarks my mother brought home from the clinic for my brother and me. Anything bearing that crest was recognized by the Canadian Dental Association, of which I assumed my mother to be an essential part. *This product contains sodium monofluorophosphate which is, in our opinion, an effective decay prevention agent, and is of significant value when used in a conscientiously applied program of oral hygiene and*

regular professional care. Who knows, my mother could have written the official toothpaste-message herself. Most of the words were just the sort she might say, or sounded that way. *Effective. Decay prevention. Significant value, conscientiously applied, professional care. In our opinion.* As though my mother were a queen, referring to herself in the plural to account for her several faces. Any product bearing that official stamp was recommended and approved, which was no small accomplishment. I studied the crest. It showed a white circle and a blue triangle entangled together as though they were one shape, with a very small snake twisted round a pole at the centre of the double shape.

The crest reminded me of a toy I used to have, a hollow plastic sphere with cut-out holes of different shapes, circles and stars and squares and triangles. The sphere was half-red and half-blue, like the two faces of the globe, the day-face and the night-face. There were yellow plastic blocks which corresponded to the shapes of the holes. You were supposed to feed the yellow blocks into the proper holes, the globe wouldn't accept the shapes if you tried to force them in some place they didn't belong. The square block didn't fit in the star-hole, and the triangle wouldn't go inside the circle. It was impossible, it wasn't supposed to be possible, this had been the instructive purpose of the toy. But if it had been possible, and if I had managed to force the triangular block into the circular hole or the circular block into the triangular hole, *then* would I have been recognized by the Canadian Dental Association and my mother.

I wasn't sure what to make of the twisted snake. Perhaps a relative of the crocodile on the posters and bookmarks, the reptile who instructed me *Brush your teeth twice a day -- Put the bite on tooth decay* every time I opened my book to the place I'd left off. There was a crocodile hidden in the *Secret Garden*, and another one waiting at the centre of *Charlotte's Web*. Like those pointers on maps which mean *You are here*, they were not really part of the landscape but placed inside it by a hand from outside. They had no meaning to any characters in the book, they were rather an intrusion.

Imagine. Mary Lennox turning the key in the rusty lock to open up the secret

garden for the first time in ten years, finding the gnarled tree with the broken bough, the dormant roses, and a crocodile. Or astonished farmers staring up at Charlotte's web to find embroidered there the spindly words *Some Pig* and a crocodile. The crocodiles were always there, like Rod Serling, to snap me from the story I was in and drag me into another one, or back into the primary one, which was about a girl crouched beneath a card-table in the basement with a book falling open in her hands. That story was no more believable than the others, sometimes it was less. Like the others, it required that I wrestle disbelief and break its jaw, force it to swallow its own tail until it disappeared like the final pixel before the screen goes dark.

Perhaps the twisted snake inside the emblem of the Canadian Dental Association was also a creature of this sort. Not part of the pattern of circle and triangle, but something stuck there to remind me that the interwoven pattern was impossible and could not last; that such perfect symbiosis could not exist in what was called the real world. The crocodile and the twisted snake were monsters from a fallen world, sent to warn me that the secret gardens I inhabited were only pigments of my own imagination, and that the proper world was somewhere outside the frame of wherever I thought I was.

Crocodile Dislocates Alley. Every time I saw the initials of the CDA I had to wonder whether the scenery I was walking around in was real or whether I'd painted them all by myself. There was the voice of my mother at dusk, when I'd been out playing with my brother in an empty lot and skinning my knees and tasting the cool copper taste of my own blood in the air itself, finding emeralds in the green glass of broken bottles and Roman coins in bottle-caps, seeing crouching lions in every matted clump of yellow grass. Suddenly out of nowhere the voice of my mother would snap the air like a crocodile calling *Come to Dinner, Alley. Can't you see it's getting Dark, Alley. Call it a Day, Alley.*

Catch you Daydreaming, Alley? My mother's blue-uniform breasts were sloping over me like low storm clouds, to which were pinned a shiny brass emblem of the CDA. Her bare arm reached across and picked up a metal apparatus from the small side-table

attached via a mechanical arm to the chair. In her other hand she held a plastic cup the size of a shot-glass, filled with tiny cotton balls soaked in bright pink fluid. The balls looked like spider-eggs pickled in grenadine. She set down the cup on the table and began to unscrew the jaws of the metal apparatus, which was a sort of clamp like a vice-grip to hold my mouth open. *Okay, I know how much you love this part but try to cooperate, all right?*

My mother fastened the clamp onto my lower jaw so that my mouth was held open. my tongue propped up from its natural bed. She then picked up the cup of spider eggs and a set of tweezers. *I know it's not as bad as you pretend.* She picked out a pink egg with the tweezers and placed it in the bed beneath my tongue, then swabbed it back and forth along the inside ridge of my lower teeth. A sharp sour shockwave attacked the glands at the back of my throat and my tongue started moving around like a blind mole. My mother swabbed another pink egg along my upper teeth, then another, until I could feel their poison dendrites creeping in between all my teeth and sliding down my throat. I couldn't tell whether she was leaving the eggs in my mouth or taking them out. I imagined them clustered in there like the soft-shelled eggs in a nest, and wondered what sort of reptiles would hatch from them. Whether the creatures she planted there would pick my teeth clean or dig them out by the roots.

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## *tympanic membrane*

There are three things which are  
stately in their march.  
Even four which are stately when they  
walk:  
The lion which is mighty among beasts  
And does not retreat before any,  
The strutting cock, the male goat also,  
And a king when his army is with him.  
[Proverbs 30:29-31]

The locked room was tucked beneath the basement stairs like a small gland, oyster-like, self-contained. No one held a key to it except my father.

Just as I knew the words to certain hymns without remembering how and when I had learned them, I knew that there was a mat inside the room, and many stacks of paper things, notebooks and magazines and binders and books. I must have been inside the room at least once, unless a person can inherit knowledge of a room she's never seen, the way young cuckoos inherit the song of the genetic parents they've never met.

I knew there was a rowing machine in the room as well. Not the kind which plugged into the wall and had a digital screen to monitor how many strokes and how quickly, but an older type with only a seat on an aluminum rack, and a set of handle-bars. Under the seat were four grooved wheels which rolled back and forth along the parallel bars of the rack like a boxcar. The handle came at the end of a long lever, which was held in tension by two thick springs. The machine creaked when in use, back and forth, back and forth like a swing-set in a playground. *Pull, release. Pull, release.* Until I found out what the machine was and what it was used for, I imagined the source of the sound as a torture device or some other unspeakable thing which only grown-ups could use behind locked doors.

The basement-room was where my father went instead of going fishing or out to

pubs, instead of working in a parish or an office or a factory, instead of sitting in an armchair in front of the fireplace and cleaning his pipe or his rifle or his boots. Sometimes he would stay down there for days, surfacing only for meals, which he would spoon into margarine containers and take back downstairs with him. *What is Daddy doing down there?* my brother would ask. And my mother would say *Why don't you ask him yourself?* because she knew that neither of us was going to do that. We knew that my father didn't want to be asked without knowing the reasons why not. I became accustomed to envisioning him as the sound of creaking wheels running back and forth along a track. red hands with white knuckles curled round a set of handle-bars like the hands of Euphemia's father on the handle-bars of his motorcycles, only different.

My father only seemed to appear in shifting parts. It was impossible to ever see him fully and accurately, as though to do so would have been unbearable to him. Sometimes he would come upstairs half-dressed in knee-shorts and an undershirt like a man sleep-walking, but I would see only the elastic brace on his knee or the hair under his arms. Other times I would steal a glance at his face, and could tell by the hollow of his cheeks whether or not he had his teeth in. Or I would notice only his hair, floating in wild dark wisps about his head like a blizzard of gnats.

It is possible to figure out the missing features of a thing by imagining the shape of the space it takes up. The mass of a thing has a correlative shadow described in space, like that red & blue hollow sphere I'd once had with the yellow blocks fitting into different holes. The shape of my father would have to have some negative correlation to the objects surrounding him, he would be the hole that was left if I shaded in every other feature of the locked room.

I drew a dark room in my mind and tried to place him inside it, which I found a fair task, not being certain what the space around him looked like, not knowing how much I had to shade in to be left with an accurate profile of him. If I didn't shade in enough, then I would envision him larger than he actually was. If I shaded in too much, his image would

be too small, like the time I'd tried to draw a crescent moon by colouring in the sky around it with black felt pen. The black had flowed so easily from the pen that I had gone too far with it, until there was not enough blank page left even to make a moon.

Envisioning the space my father displaced seemed as impossible as hitting that carnival target which sent a seated bather plunging into a pool. I would have liked to be able to submerge him in water, like my mother did with slices of butter, to read his mass by which red line the water-level reached inside the measuring cup.

Instead I envisioned the rowing machine. Once I had seen the seat of it without the rack, when my father had brought the seat out of the locked room to fasten a square cushion of yellow foam to it with silver duct tape. I could envision the buttocks described by the two concave hemispheres of the seat, and extrapolate from there. My father's back would be bent, reaching forward to grasp the handles at the end of the lever. His head would be bowed, maybe his face would be scrunched like the faces of Olympic rowers or the galley-slaves in *Spartacus*. I had seen his face like that at least once before. It was on an aeroplane, when we went to Winnipeg.

As the pilot's voice announced that we were beginning our descent, the stewardess came down the aisle with a tray of hard candies. She said the candies would help stop the ear-ache I was getting from the change of air-pressure, and were a safer method of achieving this than plugging my nose and blowing until my ears popped as I had been doing. The stewardess had winked at me, I liked her. *You go ahead an take a couple, sweetheart, if it's okay with your Mom*, she said. *Well,they're your teeth*, my mother said. The stewardess laughed and I took two red candies.

My brother had the window seat and my mother was sitting beside him, in the middle, with me on the end. My father's seat was next to mine across the aisle. I was sucking one of the red candies which turned out not to be cherry, only red-flavoured, but still it seemed to help. I sucked and swallowed and sucked and swallowed as the stewardess had told me to, then looked across the aisle to ask my father which colour he

had chosen and whether it had a flavour, and whether it was helping. It seemed not to be helping. My father was bent-backed and red-faced, doubled over with his head practically between his knees. His large red hands were held over his ears as though holding the plates of his skull together so that his head would not explode, implode.

My mother said that this was the reason we so seldom went on trips. My father found landings extremely painful, because of the punctured eardrum in his right ear. It was the hole in his eardrum which was responsible for his canine habit of tilting his head to one side like the RCA dog in order to hear things clearly. The hole also meant that sucking hard-candies was not enough to counter the pressure pushing in on his unprotected ear-canal. I imagined the air-pressure needling into his skull, wheezing around in there and creating bubbles of air inside his head, air-pockets holding the scent of aeroplane-food and aeroplane-carpets the swirling blue chemicals of aeroplane-toilets.

There wasn't anything I could do. I couldn't do anything to help him and I couldn't even pretend I hadn't seen him. bent over like that, though I wished with all my heart I had not. The *Please fasten your seat-belts* sign had been lit up so I couldn't escape to the bathroom, and I'd been forbidden to go sit someplace else. The only other options were the exit doors indicated in red, located two at the front and two at the rear of the aircraft. But these were several rows away, and I was belted in. And airlines tended not to consult people my age as to what might constitute an emergency, though the odds are good that more harm would be done if we suffered one. The emergency of witnessing one's father unable to take pressure does not formally constitute an emergency, although damaging side-effects have been shown.

A picture absorbed by the eyes is a strong intoxicant. It can remain in the blood-stream for years, changing its composition in trace but significant ways. The picture of my father bent-backed with his head between his knees, his hands held over his ears like the painting of a figure on a bridge, was such a picture. It would burn its shape onto my retinal screens and it would seek out its own likeness in other men, men in stories, men that I

would meet. Men with curved spines, men who couldn't fly, men who covered their ears when outside pressure became great. It must be common knowledge that pictures can have this effect, or television stations wouldn't bother warning grown-ups that certain programming might be inappropriate for family viewing. But no PG warning ever appears in the upper left corner of a retinal screen, to protect people the age I was then from things they might not want to see their parents doing. And anyway the whole suggestion of parental guidance becomes moot in this case.

It is for good reason that the unmasking of heroes often occurs without forewarning, the impact of unmasking somewhat depends upon not being prepared to see it happen. Masks have been snatched away by curious lovers, riotous rivals, virtuous rebels, envious writers. Sometimes they are vindicated seeing what they see, other times they're devastated just as easily. There are risks involved in the desire to unmask things. *I'm telling you this, Rose*, on the off-chance that you may need to know it someday, if ever you're faced with a choice to know or not know something. I shouldn't call it advice because advice should only be given out by the very strong, but it has seemed to me that some illusions are vital. Without them a person's head may explode, implode. Illusions are a membrane between pressure without, pressure within.

Also, there is a difference between not needing to know and needing not to know. I didn't need to know about the man from the riding stable for example, probably because on some level I already knew about him, his necessity, his inevitability. His appearance is unsurprising. But I needed *not* to know of the bowed slope of a spine, the puncture of an eardrum, the possibility that emperors may have their clothes stolen while they're splashing around in the bathtub. I had needed not to know of the soft pale face of Darth Vader beneath the mask, so much had depended upon the illusion of his mask and cloak which mirrored poreless space, the thunderous voice and massive hands of faceless space.

I don't know how it happens that illusions of this type inherit such weight, I don't think I came up with the idea myself. But the model being in place, what is a body to do? I



had needed not to know that in the final reel, *my god*, the mask and cloak would fall away to reveal nothing more than a face like any other, only paler, softer, more vulnerable than most to the tiny violences of invisible rays. In the theatre-dark my eyes had sought longingly the red exit signs to the left and right of the screen, but there was no point in leaving my seat, it was too late to un-see what I had seen. There was no way of undoing the damage once I'd seen it.

There is no way of repairing disillusionment despite that so much depends upon illusions. The illusion of time traveling in a straight line is one of these, and the illusion of being understood by people, and the illusion of any one thing seen as separate from the rest of the universe without which it has no meaning whatsoever. The meanings of things in general is probably an illusion, but people do insist that things have meaning, for reasons of simple faith. If there had been any way of un-seeing the my father bent over like that I would have done it, I would have followed it out onto the narrowest ledge of faith, and severed completely the suspension bridge of disbelief. So that there was no way of crossing back.

*The air-pressure in this cabin is controlled for your comfort.* Perhaps this is what should have been written above the door to the locked room, it seemed that my father had to be very careful of outside pressure. It seemed that the pressure of things went directly into his brain and gave him headaches and made him unable to do anything much. Perhaps his ears were too open, just as my eyes were too open, they took in more than they were able to contain. Perhaps it was right that he learn to cover his ears, just as I had to learn to cover my eyes.

There had to be a balance between what pushed in from the outside and what pushed out from inside. Either there was not enough pressure in my father's head to counteract the weight of the world, or there was too much. I had hoped that it was the latter. I had hoped that there was so much force inside my father's skull that the world was simply too thin and insubstantial for him. *Sometimes I think my head is so big because it's*

*so full of thoughts*, said the Elephant Man, *what happens when thoughts can't get out?* I had hoped that it was this way with my father, rather than the other way round. That his head might explode implied a certain degree of inner strength, force, even a certain amount of dignity. Explosions are things difficult to contain. But that it might implode was unbearable to consider, as though his head were a shrinking balloon, or a styrofoam cup in the oven.

If my father had been more like Darth Vader, the *real* Darth Vader before the unmasking, he might have worn a black helmet to hold the plates of his skull intact, to balance the pressure within and without. To hold himself together. Instead he locked himself inside a room and rowed back and forth, back and forth perhaps in the faith that simple exertion would strengthen the force inside his body, the force pushing back when the world pushed in. *What is Daddy doing down there?* my brother would ask, and I would tell him that our father was only protecting us from the enormous weight and force of his brain. That our father's brain could lift a body into the air by sheer force of will and asphyxiate it to death without even touching the person. That his thoughts alone could fill a room and swallow the air like a black hole. I wasn't sure any more that this was true, but I thought I should do everything I could to believe it.

Other times I told Gavin that our father locked himself up for the same reason that a compassionate werewolf might chain up his human body during the day, so that at night his lupine form couldn't cause regrettable harm to other humans he cared about. He was only protecting us from the powerful creature he sometimes became. It didn't occur to me that this could have any negative effect on my brother's perception of our father, since most children were more impressed by Mr. Hyde than by Dr. Jekyll anyway, and would eagerly trade all their Luke Skywalker bubble-gum cards for even a single Darth Vader one.

*My, what a big strong man my Daddy is*, I once had said. *My, what a big strong man*. It had been at the Greyhound bus station, several years earlier, when Gavin still had to be carried about in a back-pack like an overdue library book. Bus stations and airports

are like distilleries where years of words spoken or left unspoken may be condensed into a few parting words, or words of greeting, or oblique general reminders on how to go about having a safe journey. *Don't take any wooden nickels*, my father would say. *Keep your neck covered and don't catch any bad germs*, would be my mother's advice. This particular occasion was one of those trips to my Aunt Hilda's place which was less of a visit and more of an attempted escape from the invisible elephant in the house. My father would stay at home to battle it alone while the rest of us got out of the way for a few days.

Neither of my parents spoke during the whole drive to the Greyhound station. As soon as the green Torino pulled into the parking lot, my father got out and hauled both big suitcases out of the trunk, then went striding over the black-top like a colossus. It looked that way to me, at least. All he was doing was carrying our bags into the station, to deposit them there before driving back the same way he came and arriving home to an empty house, outside my vision. I was only about three or four, and couldn't even have lifted even one suitcase. One of my father's footsteps covered more ground than did three of mine, his legs seemed longer than ski-poles compared to the chunky little limbs toddling breathlessly after him. Striding over the black-top like that, he looked like a man who was going somewhere.

My mother had got out of the car more gradually like a woman determined to take her time. She had pulled endless green chiffon scarves from her purse, had carefully draped one over her head and tied it under her chin, watching herself calmly in the rear-view before splashing out into the brisk bright air. The scarf was to hold her jaw closed. I decided. She sometimes reminded me to hold my jaw, to prevent the saying of things which weren't prudent to say.

Now she was pacing coolly across the blacktop several yards behind my father with my brother screaming and struggling in her arms. My stumpy legs in pink tights hurried as quickly as they could after him, then doubled back to catch my mother by her camel coat-tails, to help move things along. *My what a big strong man my Daddy is*, I

babbled breathlessly, receiving in response a sharp cuff to the ear which rang hot like the hum of a space-heater for quite a while afterward. I wasn't sure at the time what I'd done wrong, or wasn't sure why it was wrong.

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It had been very chilly in Winnipeg. During the flight home I created as many distractions for myself as possible to avoid noticing my father. Luckily it was my turn to sit by the window while my brother had to sit across the aisle from him, but I thought it best to borrow my mother's blue gelatinous eye-mask, which obscured peripheral vision entirely. I took three cherry candies from the tray this time, and put them all in my mouth at once. This covered the possibility of speech. I kept my head-set on even after the in-flight audio entertainment went dead to muffle my hearing as much as possible. From my mother's perspective I was making a scene. when a different stewardess than the first one came to collect the head-sets and I wouldn't let go of mine.

I suppose it would be too much to ask you to wait until we got home before you started making scenes. she whispered shortly, but what I was doing was trying to prevent a scene more than make one. It would have been a scene to see my father curl up in a ball again like something unborn, it would have been bad scene. Seeing it twice might have exceeded the limit of pressure my own skull could withstand, and I might have exploded. imploded. Everyone had things which they preferred not to see, surely my mother of all people would have to appreciate that.

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### ***Macula lutea***

One of the anatomy textbooks I'm currently forbidden to read defines *macula lutea* as the yellow spot at the exact centre of the retina, where vision is most acute, about a twelfth of an inch off-side the optic nerve. It is the central area of the visual field, the spot which sees whatever is being directly looked at. But the book also describes a sort of blindness where what is looked at directly is exactly what the eye is unable to see. In this condition, the point of fixation is blacked out by a *scotoma* or an island-like blind-gap in the centre of the visual field. The subject is still able to see objects on the periphery, but as soon as she fixes her vision on any of them directly they disappear. The point of visual fixation becomes a permanent black hole, described by the visible objects surrounding it.

To be a patient suffering from this condition would be very frustrating, if the thing you were most drawn to was precisely what you were unable to see. In order to catch even an indistinct glimpse of it, you would have to focus your attention elsewhere. Then might the desired object slip into side-view, like a blurry phantom who vanishes as soon as you turn your head again, no matter how quickly you learn to turn your head. Perhaps it would be possible to rig up a trick with mirrors attached to your head, like the rear-view or side-view mirrors on cars, adjusting them so that they might catch the reflection of the object in the blind-spot. But you'd only be able to glance at the mirrors side-long, catching only an oblique and probably distorted reflection of the thing itself, which would be an unreliable report on its particulars. Possibly your picture would be no less accurate if you locked yourself in your room and wove speculative tapestries of what the object of fixation might look like, from the best or worst of all possible angles.

*The locked room in the basement was a bit like this, Rose.* If there were a movie about your mother when she was younger than you must be by now, the eye of the camera would keep shifting to the locked door of the room, and everyone would feel the prickling suspense of wanting to know what was behind it. Then in the end the door would open and

something would be devastated. Or vindicated. But there's no movie, and to this day I don't know why my eyes keep returning to exactly the things I don't know and can't really tell you about. Depending upon how much our world has changed by the time you get to read this, and whether or not you get to know your grandparents better than I ever did, perhaps you'll know what I mean. With our family it tended to be the point of fixation which was blind, while dim rough shapes slouched along the periphery.

So it would be a strange little movie. don't you think, Rose? All this stuff about the environment surrounding certain mysterious interiors which would be absent or missing from the landscape, all these nameless unnamable rooms upon which every other thing somehow depended. Maybe things are like this with all families. There's probably always something or other which a family conspires not to see, but the difference between a movie and this life is that in movies you usually get to find out what the thing looks like in the end, the trajectory of the story would be aimed at that revelation. Whereas in life you often don't. People carry secrets to the grave, which is where skeletons in the closet come from. They don't come from the stork. They come from the mutual merging of secrets between consenting adults.

I hope you'll be able to recognize it if it happens. It will feel as though someone has cut out the centre of the picture and buried it in a box beneath the floorboards, or sealed it up behind a brick wall and drawn a thick velvet curtain over it. Yes, I think I'm convinced that there's always something or other which gets disposed of in this way, with most people, in most families. But it means that the collage of memory you end up making is taped together from peripheral scraps left on the cutting room floor. When you put them together like a puzzle, they describe the shape of the missing piece as an empty space at the centre. The whole purpose of the project is to describe the environment surrounding an empty space, not to throw open a door and expose the bones of emptiness. How would you portray emptiness, anyhow? Through the attempts to hide it, I suppose, the gestures of players to something off-stage, in the wings.

Sometimes I used to creep round the side of the house where your grandfather stacked up the largest of the things he'd found and dragged home. There was a rusty shopping cart with one wheel missing, a knobby glass shower-door with the frosty silhouette of a floating mermaid, and a roll of chicken wire the size of a canoe. There was a green porcelain toilet and a tractor tire and a concrete pylon which someone had covered with about a million beer-bottle caps. But behind all these things was the window of the locked room, covered over with a piece of stained cardboard and a faded curtain of brown gingham. It wasn't possible to see inside the room, but it was possible to tell whether or not the light was on by the presence of a yellow glow fingering the cracks around the cardboard. Sometimes I would crouch down on the roll of chicken wire put my ear up close to the glass, watching the gust of my breath turn to ragged little ghosts if the day was cold. *I would listen so carefully, Rose.* And usually I could hear your grandfather speaking to himself, only I was never able to make out the words.

It was probably his own stories he was reading out loud. Or perhaps he'd say *reciting*, not believing the stories came from within himself but from somewhere else outside, a place which different people called by different names. Gods or devils had punctured the extraneous hole in his eardrum for the purposes of special correspondence, which I suppose was what the stories were. He could speak them simultaneously with hearing them, recording himself on a small hand-held tape-recorder then transcribing them later on. *Of course I don't know this for certain, Rose, it's simply what I have managed to piece together.* You could think of it as a historical reconstruction, which tends to be partly based on what's called fact and partly on intuitive extrapolation, aesthetic preference. Some documentation must exist because he wrote the stories down, but it is hopeless to ask your grandmother for any other details. I have looked for the binders but cannot find them. And as for asking the man himself, I don't know, persuasion of habit prevents me from trying. It's things like this which interfere with the accurate recording of history. You could ask him yourself someday, I suppose, if you care to.

I have reason to believe stories used to come to him in the voice of a young girl, who sat curled like a caterpillar-fairy in the crook of his ear, whispering things. Believe me this isn't as damning as it sounds -- the imagination is a crazy witch but it is better to be for her than against her. *I'm sure there were times in your mother's life, Rose, when that sort of thing was rather a comfort*, or would have been rather a comfort, in times when no other voices of guidance seemed to assert themselves. To be guided by a disembodied but pretty little voice must be better than following no voice at all at times, or so I'd imagine. It would be soothing to listen, even if no one else could hear, and even if the words arrived all scrambled up, which I believe they sometimes did. Do. Once I'd found a few of those little doll-sized audio cassettes with your grandfather's voice recorded on them, speaking in a tongue I wasn't familiar with. I believe it was a tongue no body was familiar with, except him and the caterpillar-girl who dwelt in the chambre of his ear.

*Dear little Rose.*

There are men who grow black beards, like thick forests to conceal themselves within, in the hope that they will be mistaken for wolves. But some of them are the reflection of wolves, the image of wolves in negative film, the after-image of a wolf after all mythology has been ruminated to pabulum. Your grandfather was not a wolf in sheep's clothing, but the other, the inversion of this. Shearing his beard and casting his nightly colour off, he would have been exposed, as woolly, mild, as pale as larvae churning under stones. It had taken all my strength of will not to believe it so. It had required his assistance, he had secretly conspired with me, leaving the house when he did to keep our private sense of symmetry intact.

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to a field mouse

It was on my eleventh birthday that he left, and in leaving left the green chain-link front-gate open behind him. I came home from school to find the gate standing open as though an invisible albumen sheathing the house had finally ruptured once and for all. I knew as soon as I saw the open gate that my father was not there, but a stray malamute had wandered into the yard and was digging a hole beneath my mother's wisteria.

Inside the house, a chair had been pushed away from the kitchen table, not quite directly but at an oblique. A knobbly mug of cold tea was sitting there as well, like a gnomish monk in meditation over half-full and half-emptiness. Nearby the mug, a paper napkin lay crumpled like a tiny temple where the card or the note should have been. Really should have been. But I knew even without a note that he had left, the mug and the napkin and the table and the chair had a strange familiar presence which had not been there before.

It had been usual to perceive my father as an absence signifying something. But here was a new presence signifying nothing, nothingness embodied, disembodied. It felt right that way I suppose, it did seem symmetrical. He seemed more human and more real as a mug of cold tea than he had as an inhabitant of the basement room. I don't mean this to be as damning as it sounds, but I could move quite up close to the objects on the table as I had not been able to do with my father. Still I thought there should have been a note. It was my birthday, I was eleven.

I sat down in the oblique chair. There seemed some blasphemy in this, some affront to the respectful observation of customary time, as when a gift of cut carnations is allowed to wither and dry in a vase until all that can be done with them is throw them out in the trash. Their mummified heads, their underwater stems downed with thick coats of mould. These are your final and lasting impressions of what had been given a gift. It might be a type of witchcraft to let this happen, when gifts become the ju-ju of the person who gives them.

The empty chair, the paper temple, the monkish mug, were familiars of my father. I fancied they were what he left behind for me to find. I might have approached them more respectfully, instead of sitting right down in the chair as though the absence of my father weren't already sitting there. I might have offered pennies and fruit as at an altar, allowing the new presence of his nothingness to sink into my bones for a while. It was familiar and strange. But my first feeling was the physical imperative to sit down, as when a policeman phones some body's house asking to speak to the nearest relative of such and such a person. All I kept thinking was how much I wished he'd left me a note before he'd left.

Of what use are the lives of the saints if no one writes them down? Are they saints at all then, or are they simply men unfit to live among other men, or among wolves? I would have accepted any words at all to be his final ones. I had crouched on chicken wire and listened devotedly to words I couldn't even understand, obviously I would have accepted anything. I unfolded the napkin to see if there was even one word written there. There was a greasy stain, some crusty sugar from a donut. There was not a single word.

I looked away at the kitchen wall, the blurry kitchen window, the undulating curtain-patterns of fish and chopping-boards. My vision swam outward in breast-strokes and finally clung to something on the wall. Some folded pages. Seven words dropped into my eyes like plums into a silver colander. *Always know where the nearest exits are.* My father hadn't written the words, they were not hand-written but printed in small type on glossy paper in the bottom corner of the page hanging open on the wall. The pages were a calendar. It was splayed open to the month of September, with a picture of a Dalmatian dog wearing a red fireman's helmet, beside a hydrant. Someone had drawn a blue X on the 17th, which was today, which was my birthday. The calendar had been purchased from a fireman who came to our door selling them to raise money for burn victims, which would be the people who hadn't known where the nearest exits were.

As final words they would have to do, and I did keep them, concealing them within like a hearing aid. I would become quite adept at listening for the possibility of exits. In

later years it became more a question of where exits would lead to, ultimately. When your only thought is fleeing a burning building just about any exit will suffice, but for how long can you go on solving problems by leaping from second-story windows? After a while you have to start thinking about where you're going to land, and if any body will be there to catch you.

Anyway this was not the manner of my father's departure. His was nothing so gaudy as a leap from a window, nothing so abandoned as that. A mug of cold tea, a gate left open. I preferred to think that he was a man who had someplace important to go, than that he had fled.

The difference was a matter of perspective, though. My mother had no time for embarkations upon spiritual quests, literally no time, she was busy scraping plaque from people's lower incisors to support the three of us. We'd been more supported by the lucrative decay of people's teeth than by spiritual questing. That was the truth of it. *I wouldn't dare to argue with that now, Rose, when I see your little mouth which must be fed.* Perhaps your grandmother had little choice but to think of souls the way she thought of dental nerves. It was best to keep them as unexposed as possible, poking at them was extremely painful unless the subject were heavily sedated. Nerves had to be frozen in order to be comfortably examined, and questions of liberating internal essence might have seemed rather counter to the imperative of keeping surfaces clean and polished and free of cavities. You only start poking at nerves if there's a visible problem, and you don't liberate them from their roots unless the whole tooth's already dead.

My father's departure was like the roots of his teeth, which had to be extracted after the rugby accident when he was twenty. He didn't have any roots, only empty spaces. No fraying nerves, no visible decay, only absences. There was a sort of nervous accountability which he didn't have any more than he had teeth, like someone very very old, or someone very very young. No body expected him to grit his teeth and bite down, or to hunt, or to growl with bared fangs. For this reason it might have been for the best that he'd simply

disappeared untraceably. Mysteriously, like the crew of the *Marie Celeste*, leaving their plates and cutlery set on the table as though each was one of Aunt Hilda's absent guests. As though the possibility of abandoning ship had never occurred to them until the very moment it became mandatory, when they'd simply extracted themselves.

But for several weeks after my father's departure he continued to make his presence felt, like sensation in a limb which has been amputated. He had kept his set of keys, and now and then I would notice small signs of his having passed by. Personal possessions he'd left behind would go missing from the house, or there would be three fewer doughnuts on the styrofoam tray in the fridge. There would be a light fixture newly and badly repaired so that it vacillated between light and darkness, or I'd notice yellow bald patches on a newly-mown lawn. A pen or two would disappear from the jar beside the phone and I'd find spoons and spirals doodled in the margins of the message paper. A few cases of empty bottles would be gone from beneath the basement stairs. At last the three-wheeled shopping cart disappeared from the pile of stuff along the side of the house, and I imagined him dragging it around like the shell of a giant tortoise. I wondered where my father slept.

No comments arose from my father's visits to the house, except for once when a crystal mouse went missing from the mantle. The mouse was part of a collection of lead crystal animals given to my mother by her boss, Dr. Beard. She received a new one every year on her birthday. Their bodies were geodesic domes of many facets, glinting blue like the low flame of a gas stove. There now were an owl, a seal, a baby chick, a turtle, a rabbit, a mouse and a duckie. My mother probably wouldn't have commented on the missing mouse if she really thought my father had taken it, she seldom spoke to him of anything touching Dr. Beard.

The absent mouse aroused comment only because my mother thought I'd taken it myself, as I'd been known to take things occasionally, small ornamental things which could be stashed away in my school-bag and made anonymous gifts of to teachers I had

crushes on. But I swore to my mother I had nothing to do with the disappearance of the mouse, which was true. Or half-true, if knowing its whereabouts made me accomplice. I knew where the mouse had gone. I had found it in the basement on my father's workbench. It was wedged between the steel jaws of the vice-grip with its beady black eyes staring from their sockets. One of its crystal ears had been broken off and repaired with super-glue, then left in the vice-grip for the glue to set. *And this is what I mean about the way that memory works, Rose.* For some reason I remember it as my mother's vice and my father's mouse, when clearly it was the other way round.

I turned the lever to release the vice and caught the mouse in my hand. The repair was not very successful. The wad of dried glue was yellow and mucousy-looking, and there was enough of it to repair a dozen mouse ears. It was not even in the right place. The ear was stuck fast to the mouse's neck like a festering gill. I could have done a better job myself. I thought. And it bothered me very much to think that I could have done a better job myself. I would rather have had a father who was good at fixing things, especially since he persisted in fixing things. His workbench was piled with rusting tools he'd collected at yard sales here and there over the years. I would rather that he'd learned to use them properly, or had chosen something else to do, something he was better at. I told kids at school that he could bend spoons with his mind.

I replaced the mouse between the jaws of the vice and slowly turned the lever back the other way, until they closed again around the tiny crystal head.

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## *Shoel*

Under three things the earth quakes,  
And under four, it cannot bear up:  
Under a slave when he becomes a king,  
And a fool when he is satisfied with  
    food.  
Under an unloved woman when she  
    gets a husband.  
And a maidservant when she  
    supplants her mistress.

[Proverbs 30: 21-23]

It was my belief that each of the four of us had a shadow living in exile in the basement, an invisible twin whom everyone preferred not to see and conspired not to talk about.

My father and his shadow were estranged from one another. His twin disliked him, and kept him locked away in the basement room, as though the survival of one depended on the virtual absence of the other. I clearly sensed the presence of my father's twin in all things dark and intangible, and loved him desperately, he was the stronger one. He was the villain in movies and books, the man who tapped out my heartbeat with the soles of his shoes, the masked man whose cloak was the black plastic tarpaulin of vaulted space. But in whatever form he appeared, he hated my father and kept him down. They were shackled together like prisoners, they depended on each other. One had to fall into a sort of sleep in order for the other to wake and walk the two-dimensional corridors of dreams.

My mother's twin was more difficult to detect because she could assume many faces, and was better at grafting them imperceptibly onto the face of my mother. The twin could weave her tangled nest beneath my mother's hair, and peer out through the eyes at the back of my mother's head. She was a surgeon-cosmetician, blending with a sponge her tawny liquid skin over my mother's skin so that the two could not be told apart. You'd be catching my mother on a very bad day if you could even trace the demarcation line at her

throat where the one face was carefully molded over the other. Sometimes a woman who looked like my mother would leave the house all dressed up for the evening without telling anyone where she was going. Those times I might notice a sparkling rhinestone choker around her neck, and I'd know that it concealed the sutures where my mother's head had been removed and replaced by the severed head of her beautiful twin. I would never choose those nights to snoop through satchels or hat-boxes in my mother's closet.

But most days it was impossible to tell them apart, my mother and her twin, and in the end it seemed that my mother was the stronger of the two. It was my mother who decided when the twin was permitted to speak, and when she was to hold her tongue. My mother owned the tongue of her twin and kept it preserved in a Mason jar, just as she did with rhubarb and pig's knuckles and small cucumbers. She buried the jar in the basement of herself. This was why my mother's terrible silence was never empty, why her withdrawal of speech spoke more sharply than the shrieking of hawks. When the glass bell of silence descended and steeled her, it was the tongue of her twin that my mother withheld, and smothered like a woman screaming under water. We could feel her captivity echoing throughout the house although we couldn't hear a sound.

*Mum's the word.* The phrase unearthed the tongue of my mother's speechless twin, a silent parting of the pursed and painted lips which sealed her in. It had been my father's habit to spell the word *Mum* with a *U* as in *Give my love to your Mum, sincerely, your Dad* in the sparse letters which came later. But most of my teachers said that the custom was to spell it with an *O* in this country, and so I used the word *mother* instead, avoiding diminutives altogether. Anyway I hated the confession embedded in my father's spelling, it spelled out something we were not supposed to speak of, my mother's silence, her tongue-bitterness.

Even worse than this was the word my brother used. He called our mother *Mummy*, with a *U*, like those ancient bodies carefully preserved in scented salves and bandages whose brains had been drawn out through the nose with a hooked utensil made

expressly for the purpose. Whose internal organs had been packed away in jars with animal-headed lids. Whose desiccated bodies was sometimes re-animated and made to walk the labyrinths of tombs, to insatiably glut themselves on the living. Like the tongue of her twin, my mother's appetite was banished to the basement, and it became monstrous there.

I invented a game for my brother and I to play in the basement when no one was home. The game was called *mummy, mummy* and it went like this: I would sit curled at a slant on the old brown-vinyl armchair which was missing a leg, and which had been covered with mosquito netting from the storage closet. I would drape myself in the veil from my mother's wedding dress to look like a tangle of cobwebs and bandages.

In this costume and setting I would take on the roles of both mummies, the one who bent down to kiss my brother's cheek before he slept, and the other one who lurked the catacombs of sleep. Privately it felt necessary to locate the demarcation line in my mind where the one became the other, as though the object of the game were something like the surgical separation of Siamese twins. Or something like watching a lunar eclipse, and mapping out the precise point when the shadow and the moon were fused in the eye of the viewer. I wanted to locate the exact moment between their fusion and the beginning of their separation again. It was the synaptic space between the two faces that I most wanted to understand.

But in keeping with the spirit of the game I had to portray the metamorphosis as fluidly as possible, and to blend the two faces as imperceptibly as my mother was able to do. First I would sit smilingly and call to my brother in cooing tones with out-stretched arms, whispering *come to mummy*, promising him lemon drops or plastic soldiers. Eventually he would creep forward from behind the mattress propped against the storage-closet door, or from behind the chair, or out from beneath an over-turned washbasin. He would be jangly-nerved and laughing, his face shining like a copper coin. When he drew near enough to touch, I would place a veiled hand on his tousled head and let him climb



onto my lap as though he were a fawn or a basket of knitting.

I was eight years old at the time, I think, and so Gavin would have been about four. He was small enough to curl up on my lap quite happily, trustingly, as though we hadn't played the game a dozen times before. He knew that at any moment the mummy's face could change but he was able suspend his disbelief and leave it hanging there indefinitely, like the rubber Godzilla above his bedroom door. Each day for him was like a set of silver spurs with not a speck of tarnish from previous days. Gavin was a cowboy of reckless trust and of forgetting.

It was then that the change would begin to occur, the fatal flip of the coin from one face to the other. It would begin in my fingers. If they had been lovingly combing his hair, now they would now curl like spider-legs about his scalp, they would lift a gauzy swath of mosquito netting and deftly smooth it over his face and his neck. Again I would whisper the word *mummy*, now in chilling tones as though a creature buried in my guts were dragging itself from sleep. My little brother would screech and try to scramble from me. He would flail his arms and kick until he struggled free, and then he'd run. But I knew he'd never get away, there was no escape because upstairs was off-limits. *Mummy* I would murmur, and stiffly lift my body from the chair, stalking him across the concrete floor with outstretched arms now brittle where they had been soft and welcoming. He would shriek and laugh hysterically when I caught him, when I pinned him to the floor beneath my knees and closed the space between our faces. This was a game, we were only playing, but I would softly bite his neck and cheeks as though to suck the essence from him. Then he'd become the spider-mummy, and I became the fly.

Gavin had been less subtle than I at portraying the mitosis of mummies. His mummies shifted back and forth amid giggles and squeaks, one moment he'd be kissing my face with his small wet mouth and the next he'd be screeching in my ear and pinching my arms with his short blunted nails. To him the game was basically unified, basically happy, the two mummies were more like facial expressions than separate identities. Their

opposition was like writing your name with your left hand as opposed to writing it with your right, one version was tidier than the other but both were still under the command of a single body, which was his own.

Gavin seemed scarcely to register the differences between things, what was important to him was that things were there for his use. I knew this from watching him eat. While I tried to divide the items on my plate into discrete little islands of scalloped potatoes or peas, my brother wouldn't take a bite until he'd mashed everything together into one homogenous paste. When no grown-ups were at the table, the mashing would be accompanied by mouth-made sound-effects, the crashing of buildings and toppling of telephone lines, the crushing of passenger buses beneath the clawed tongs of his fork. It didn't matter whether his Tokyo was peopled with plastic soldiers or boiled carrots, what mattered was that he was much bigger than they, and could chew them up and swallow them if he wanted to. Not from any malicious intent, but simply because he was monstrously huge and could do that. But if my mother came into the kitchen to see what the all the fracas was about, the crashing would suddenly stop, and my brother would turn tiny again as though he were only a four-year-old boy.

My own twin was a mirror-image living in a parallel universe only visible through secret windows, three of which were in the basement. Hanging on the wall over my father's workbench was an old medicine cabinet which he'd found in the trash, made of white-painted metal with scabs of rust showing through at the joints. The door was a mirror, and there were two more mirror-panels hinged like wings to the right and left sides. If I opened the wings flush with the body of the cabinet I had only one twin. We could see but not touch each other, there was a transparent barrier between us like the glass dividing one in prison from the one who comes to visit her.

My twin was deranged, she everything inverted. She rewrote my diaries and spelt all the words backwards, signing her name YELLA. If I wrote STAR she wrote RATS. if I wrote DEVIL she'd write LIVED. I was right-handed while she was left-handed, the left

hemisphere of her brain was the right hemisphere of mine. But if I looked into her eyes she'd stare directly back at me, our symbiotic points of fixation no longer blanked out. And although she had no voice she could mimic me like a ventriloquist, mouthing my words simultaneously with my speaking them. Often I believed it was the other way around, that she was the speaker and I only the mouthpiece, that the words came originally from her while I only amplified sound. But if my father came downstairs while I was sitting up on the workbench with her, she disappeared just as quickly as I did. It was she who reflected my existence. without her I would have been invisible.

She could reproduce herself the way cells do. If I tilted the wings inward a little, there were three of her, one full-faced and two in right and left profile. If I turned my back to her and closed the wings about my head in a triangular box, there were thousands of her. all talking at once or else silent. I believed that all little girls had almost an infinite number of twins, which was why there were dolls. Unlike Euphemia, I didn't think that dolls were the babies we were all going to have some day, Euphemia's dolls didn't even look like babies anyway. Dolls were invented to represent the shadow-twins of little girls, who were shape-shifters and could take on many forms. Little girls were different entities to different people, and were able to change their personalities accordingly. because they were made that way. As opposed to being born that way.

While I sat with my head in the triangle-box I couldn't help but be reminded that I still had one more twin, the neglected twin, the one who was excluded from the infinite group of us. *Infinity plus one*. She was the twin outside the box, the headless girl-body who sat quietly waiting the among the other instruments on the workbench until I opened the cabinet-wings again and reluctantly rejoined her. It was she who was always getting in my mother's way, she who was always underfoot, always treading on every body's toes. It was she who was wedded to the blond severed head, which now lay estranged in a hat-box in the basement storage closet. It wasn't my fault if she couldn't keep herself together. And it wasn't as though she could ever really be alone, there were so many of us down there in

the basement to keep her company. Headless bodies and bodiless heads, the spare parts of little girls who were somehow all related to me, relative to me.

Movies and storybooks were full of them. Invisible girls, headless girls, bodiless girls, beautiful girls with no arms and legs, girls without faces, girls without tongues, girls who appeared as a series of dismembered parts buried below floorboards. Girls who could hear but couldn't speak. girls who were lovely to look at but couldn't see. Beautiful girls who appeared to be dead but were actually living, and beautiful dolls who could speak and move like living girls. Girls whose hands would creep away like white rabbits while they slept, girls whose feet could turn into fins, girls who appeared to be girls but were actually ocelots or vampires or geese. Girls who were under the spell of a wicked queen or a tyrant king, and girls who spent their days weaving beautiful tapestries which no one would ever see. Girls locked up in a dungeon or an attic or a basement to die of a beautiful disease.

*Girls of a thousand faces.* When I sat with my head in the triangle-box I felt recognized and approved, infinitely, like the circular block fitting perfectly into the triangle-hole. To my right and left and behind me were brown scalps with hemispheric hair-partings like coffee beans as far as my eyes could see, and further than that. The pattern of heads repeated, reflecting themselves from different angles and repeating the angles in a pattern like that Escher print of black & white angels repeating themselves in a pattern. I was realizing something about mirror images. That losing and finding oneself in this way was not that different from touching yourself in those ways little girls should never talk about if they did it at all. The circularity of doing this, and the fact that it could not reach outside itself. Some things about this realization were good while other things felt unfortunate. I wouldn't have wanted to get caught doing either one, my circular head in the triangle box or my hands circling the angles of myself, angling the circles. Doing these things was partly shameless, because alone, and partly shameful, because lonesome.

Once when I was brushing my teeth, my mother came in and looked my mirror-twin right in the face and said *You have your father's eyes.* It sounded like an accusation,

as though my twin were expected to return the eyes to their rightful owner, which I did not want her to do. I relied on her to look back at me whenever I looked at her, and would have hated to see only empty gouges where once had been her eyes. Or maybe since she and I were so alike I wouldn't be able to see her at all if she lost her eyes. If she gave up her eyes to my father then probably I would have to give away mine as well. *Something always gives you away.*

At some point I'd been taught that if a person has something very important to her, it is a useful exercise to give that thing away to some body else. And that the giving away should be done secretly, so no one sees it happening, the way Christmas presents are wrapped under cover of night in a room with the door closed. My mother might give away her tongue, pickled in a Mason jar with garlic and dill. My father might give his spine, tying it in a curly pink bow around my mother's little finger to remind her that she had it. What Gavin might give was hard to say, he didn't seem to give away anything so much as he simply gave up, or gave in, leaping from the swing at the point of its highest crisis and tearing off in another direction. Only sometimes he gave himself away through the tiny premature wrinkle between his brows, which meant that he was trying to stay focused on something else, that he was busy doing something of his own. He was always busy at his own things. I admired that. He could summon all his energy to a single task, as though he were singular, as though he were all in one piece.

There must have been a time when I was like this as well, when it was a question of merely keeping myself stitched together without fraying at the seams. All parts intact, ten fingers ten toes all accounted for. I pretend to have memory of lying in a baby carriage and staring up at the sky, which was laughing clearly and so I was laughing too, knowing that the world was complete. But something fractures this in people, maybe an expectation which is disappointed fractures this. Then a person becomes a collection of parts like a glass jar broken into many pieces. Something must have broken it initially, it must have fallen or been dropped, but no single part is able to say because each has only partial

memory of the whole. Each part still relies on the others to make a complete picture, they remain bound to each other in this at least.

Once I was sitting with my head in the mirror-box when I heard footsteps coming down the basement stairs. I tore my head so quickly from the box that the left wing of it swung back and smashed against a crow-bar on the shelf behind me. An infinite corridor of possible twins scattered over the workbench and onto the floor like jagged broken teeth, and I was instructed not to leave the basement until I'd gathered up every single splinter of myself and safely disposed of it. As I collected up the pieces from the concrete floor, I caught glimpses of my twin doing the same thing underground, a reaching shoulder or a hanging tassel of hair, the bending crook of a knee. I hid all these parts under the orange shag in the spare room where my brother and I played *mummy, mummy*. There was another twin in the basement then, who was head and body both but fractured into myriad parts.

In my dreams, I stitched her together again with dental floss and a darning needle but she always turned out looking disproportionate. There always seemed to be either too many parts or too few, and they were all of different sizes. The creature I was left with looked as though she'd been made up of other people's parts, the fusing together of other people's parts, her body didn't seem to be her own.

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missing files I:

The horse-leech has two daughters

The horse-leech has two daughters,
Give and *Give*.
There are three things that will not be
satisfied.
Four that will not say, *Enough*:
Shoel, and the barren womb,
Earth that is never satisfied with
water,

And fire that never says, *Enough*.
The eye that mocks a father,
And scorns a mother,
The ravens of the valley will pick it
out.
And the young eagles will eat it.

[Proverbs 30:15-17]

horse-leech: ¹ a large type of leech.
² an insatiable person.
[Oxford English Dictionary]

Once upon a time in the mud at the bottom of a pond lived a leech of peculiar size. It had two fine suckers, one at each end of itself, with which it was able to move along the muddy floor like a slinky, endlessly, end over end. Just as certain flies of peculiar size are known as horse-flies because they are as large as a horse, this leech was known as the horse-leech because it was large as a house, or had once been large as a house. But after several lean years in the absence of creatures the leech could feel attached to, it had shrunk to the size of a horse. The *U* was lost in the translation, as it were, and its absence noted like this: *U was lost*.

Are lost, corrected a little girl named Alley who was hearing the story for the first time.

R was lost? the leech asked, slinking round her little finger and attaching himself to a benign mole on the palm of her hand, which was a part of herself the girl knew very well, like the back of her hand. She also knew that sometimes her hands were so large that there

could be horses feeding on the palms, while other times she was as small as a flea in the ear of the horse, and could speak to it gently, and hear all that it heard. But *No*, said Alley, *R was not lost. You are lost.*

And so *U* became lost and *R* took its place, and the leech shrank to the size of a horse, which is smaller than a house but still quite large for a leech. But the leech fancied the girl had provoked his diminishing size, and he was ashamed, to be lost, in her eyes.

So he sulkily slunk way down in the mud, til he'd sunk just as far as a leech could sink. There he felt things which all leeches feel in their blood, which mostly concerns finding something to drink. Whenever sanguinary drinking-partners popped by for a chat, the leech would drink them under the table, or on the doorstep welcome-mat.

He sucked up all the fish and the ducks and geese too, whose feet dangled like worms before his all-sucking view. He sucked up the poor willows who wept on the bank, like widows who weep for a ship that has sank.

He sucked up the bulrushes brushing the shore, and lured happy swooping swallows in for tea. He swallowed every swallow 'til there weren't any more, and marveled at how greedy he could be. Any V-shaped flock of geese bound for destinations south, the leech rerouted with a road-sign to his huge all-sucking mouth. And though by his own estimation the leech's stature grew, it conversely shrank in the eyes of others, of whom there now were few.

But that night in his mud-bed as the leech lay, digesting the varied events of the day, each sucked-up creature spoke to him in whatever voice it knew -- and each one told its story, which was now his story too. Digesting them, he understood the silver thoughts of fishes who didn't care a sliver that in fifty million years their fins might turn to limbs, their desire being solely to swim. The leech understood, too, the deep-swooping longing of swallows to flirt with the earth as closely as possible without ever touching it -- like the lovers on the urn, they had no intention of embrace, since to swallows such a union would be death in any case. They only swooped because that was what swallows do. The horse-

leech understood, too, the happy indecisiveness of ducks who sometimes paddled in the water, sometimes waddled on the land -- no loose screw in their bird-brains made them loath to take a stand on one firmament or the other. They dwelt in both places since this they were able to do -- *if you could live in two places at once, wouldn't you?* The leech now also knew that weeping willows only wept because it suited them to do so. Their limbs were drooping not through sorrow, but just because they grew so.

Why, each of these creatures, marveled the leech, *only does what its nature decrees it to do. They have no other reason to fly or to swim, to waddle or weep, but swimming or flying or weeping or waddling itself.*

But what of me? I suck. It is this that I do. But sucking can scarcely be said to exist in and of itself, in the same way that waddling or swimming does for duck. For if one is a leech, well, one depends upon having something to suck.

How is it my fate, the leech lamented, *to take from others what they'd rather keep themselves? The rump of a horse takes nothing from me. I am worse than a scourge on the rump of a horse, to take from it so indiscriminately. How did it fall to me to be so dependent on the blood of others, to do what I must do naturally? The willow needs no reason to weep, what cruel design makes me so needy? The swallow loves the earth but has no wish to take it, what mistake of providence makes me so greedy? I never give, I only take. To think of the all life I've sucked away, it makes my belly ache. If only I could reverse the bloody course which Nature forces me to take... for when my sucking days are done I am left empty after all. The sightless weeping of the willows makes but mournful company, when there is no one left but me.*

[I believe at this point there's one thing I should say
Regarding the sex of the leech, by the way:
Although up to this point we've been calling him *he*,
It is equally true that each leech is a *she*.
For leeches, you see, possess parts of both types

In the folds of their *annuli*, which are their stripes.
But despite this, the leech, in its mud-bed embedded,
Won't do *well* if to only itself it is wedded.
If the species is destined to stay in the game
It must find itself mirrored in those of the *same* --
 as well as the opposite --
Sex. For clearly it's proven, when leeches are mated,
that sexes aren't *opposite*....just inversely located.]

Then did the leech cover his ears, and let out a screech. *Enough! Let it be here
decreed that there is Nothing which I would not Give to undo the sins of my heredity.*

Meanwhile, the lonely moon was taking her nightly stroll across the sky, her mind split in two by worries of her own and her mournful face cast half in shadow. She heard the leech's plea and peered down at the earth to see what creature seemed as melancholic as was she. For she too had felt the sting of natural decree, that she should monthly be diminished to a slender fingernail, only to rebuild herself again when she was done, again and again throughout infinity. She saw the pond, and saw reflected on its surface not the bulbous body of the leech but her own face, or half her face, with which she fell in love immediately.

This same scenario had happened to her many times before, in other cycles on the surfaces of other ponds. But the curse upon the barren moon was to retain nothing, to forget all that she had seen previously. And so she never learned from her mistakes, but repeated over and over again.

Nothing is exactly half of what I have to give, thought the half-moon, and there lies half a face who claims that there is Nothing it would not give to undo whatever it has done. Which is the same as saying there is something it would give, since something is the opposite of nothing, and the opposite of nothing is exactly what I need to find myself complete. I will offer the stranger half of myself, my shadow-half, my nothing-half, and it will give to me its opposite-of-nothing. Then I will be a full moon once again, and it will be

redeemed. It will be able to begin again from two halves of nothing, which is perfectly nothing, and the perfect place for half a face to find itself again.

And so the moon dipped down from the sky and fell into the pond, where she was immediately sucked up by the leech, who could do nothing else but suck, despite his resolve to do the opposite. A leech is a leech, after all. Then all was still, there was no sound but the infernal churnings of leech digesting itself infinitely.

Is that the end of the story? asked Alley, who couldn't believe that a creature as lovely as the moon could become so foolishly fallen, nor that the leech, having sucked up so much, could be so fruitless at bringing it to action.

But no, the tale doesn't end there. Several months passed, and in time the leech swelled once again to the size of a house, resembling a house. A quaint little house, with two windows and two chimneys releasing the smoke of two hearths. With two flower-beds of red geraniums growing vibrantly along two little paths, leading up to the two semi-circular front doors. At the end of the seventh month, the doors opened wide and out stepped two little girls, who swam to the surface of the pond, clambered up onto the shore, and waved to one another from opposite banks. One girl was dark and cast in shadow like her father the leech, she bore the boughs of weeping willows in her hair. The other was pale and luminous, like the moon her mother, and wore silver stars like fish-scales on her brow. They were the twins, whose names were *Give* and *Give*.

I find this a little simple, said Alley, who from time to time was known to try the patience of the story-teller. *According to the story, the mother-moon was only half-lit and half in shadow, neither wholly one nor the other, while the father only thought he was empty because he had sucked up everything until there was nothing left. He was empty only because he was too full. Neither of them were all or nothing, both of them were all and nothing. Perhaps it would be better if they had only one daughter as well, who was allowed to be a little bit of this and a little bit of that, rather than two who were split between one thing and the other.*

Perhaps it would be better to have only one daughter, agreed the story-teller. *But it says here in the Bible that the horse-leech had two daughters, so what can I do? It's for the sake of the story that the one is split in two, because according to the word of God it is the easiest thing to do. And you must bear in mind that this is only a story, and that these little girls don't exist in three dimensions as do you, but must press themselves flat as paper in only two.*

Whatever, said Alley, pulling apart the halves of a sandwich cookie to lick at the frosting inside it. *So the twin were standing shivering on the bank. Then what did they do?*

The horse-leech's daughters Give and Give looked about themselves and saw that there was nothing left. At heart they were horse-leeches like their father, but what is a horse-leech to feed herself upon if there is nothing left? They dove back into the pond and found at the bottom of it their father's body, as large as a house and sunk deep in slow rumination of the world. The portals from which the girls had been born had reverted back to eyelids, heavily closed as in sleep. Each girl tried to wedge her body between the ledges of an eyelid to pry it open, so that she could swim inside and look around. The labour took all afternoon, as their father's eyelids were as heavy as lead, but at last each managed to prop up a lid wide enough to wriggle beneath it before it fell shut again like a tomb. And piece by piece they retrieved all the things which their father had swallowed, and piece by piece they restored them to the light of day --

But they didn't. They couldn't, there was nothing left to give.

A glass fell from the story-teller's hand. He watched a red stain spread over the page obscuring what he'd written.

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*missing files II:*  
*still-life with father*

Sometimes a man is less articulate than the voices in his head. This was true in my case. If I had realized it in my youth, perhaps I would not have chosen to cloak myself in this religious habit, but it had seemed that such conviction of thought could not possibly have originated with me. I had once assumed that the thrusts of my mind must have been planted there by some other entity, which I assumed was God. Perhaps it would have been better for me if I had claimed authorship of them myself. Perhaps I would have been a different man.

Or perhaps not. It may have been my purpose to condemn myself, if not in one way than in a worse way. These thrusts of mind, as I call them, are only a type of longing to return to something I have lost. I believed, I still believe, that there must have existed a more complete state of things, which a person becomes estranged from, or falls from. This is true of me as it is true of anyone who stumbles deafly out of childhood and finds that he has not been paying attention to how it happened. He finds himself at an unfamiliar intersection and has no idea whether there had ever been a field there, or places to run.

The whole which is fallen from, if it is not God, is childhood. It was better for me that I look to God for the redemption I sought, rather than seeking it in children. They know the answers who have not even formulated the questions, to ask certain redemption from them is simultaneous with the loss of what is asked for. It is their loss. And I have not formulated questions myself, to any satisfaction. But it has been an agony I expect no sympathy for, to know that I only weakly redirect toward God a thrust of mind which is so much more compelling, and so damning. I doubt that I will find salvation in the one when I am so conscious of the other.

Janis believes that I am not a strong man. She herself is tremendously strong, I hate to think where we would be if she were not. But how can I thank her for it, when daily her

strength only reminds me of how short I have fallen of the mark, how far behind her I still shuffle my feet like a boy. I would have left this place long ago, in one way or the other, if it hadn't been for Alison. Someday she will find someone to whom she will give everything, and that day I will become an old man. My love for her such that I am utterly impotent to show it. I would not know how to express it, it would consume her.

I am not so weak as to allow my confusion free reign of itself. A person is not what he thinks, but how he acts, and I have not allowed my ill-conceived thoughts to damn me by action. There are things which I will never tell a soul, if there are souls, if there are souls. And it is central to my chosen belief that there are. What I am unsure of is whether souls are unconditional, or whether they can be taken away. Whether they might sometimes atrophy, like the legs of the bedridden.

When I was a child, I closed my hands around the bars of the iron fence which divided our yard from the street, where boys played and skinned their knees and did things which they would never tell their fathers. I only watched them. My father was proud and forbade me the company of rougher boys who would steer me from the path which God had laid for me. I tried to accept this as true, that I was superior to other boys, and that they would someday turn to me for guidance who had shunned me. But as the sun sank red and I was called inside, I felt my heart would burst to see them running still against the flaming sky like horses in the wild. I would have given my eyeteeth to run with them.

In my room in the basement there was a large coffee-table book with beautiful black & white photographs of children. The book was intended for educational use, it was intended to be balanced upon the adjacent knees of parent and child while the two of them spoke to each other about the thrusts of their minds, the stirrings of their bodies which they did not understand or only partially understood. The parent would instruct the child, and the child the parent, and they would mutually learn of the skins they were in, at safe remove, through photographs. And it would be safe, and good, and instructive. But this particular book was eventually banned. There was criticism that the photographs could just as easily

be consumed by those who fix their desires on children as objects, as by parents who simply desired to teach their kids the facts of life. I had not even realized it until then, that I was one of these former types, and after that point I could no more look at my own face in a mirror than into the eyes of my child, than at my own face in the mirror.

Gavin will be fine. He does all those things which I was not permitted to do, he runs and skins his knees and plays with other boys. He will be a perfectly normal happy boy, if I'm not very much mistaken. This is my hope at least. But Alley, she is too like me, too removed from things in the world. She lives like a nun in a room in her head. I hope that she will be a writer, although I would never tell her so. Someone must take up the task of recording what no one dares record, and certainly it will not be Janis or Gavin, and I fear that it cannot be me.

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the walking man

The Walking Man had been an object of desire for as long as there was breath, he had simply always been there. Even Darth Vader, my later obsession, was derivative of him -- or was the voice and hands of him. who had no voice, no hands, no form in space except the sound of his footsteps, which was incessant. Like breath in meditation, his steps were only noticeable when focused upon, and then became all-consuming, unbearable, huge like death. Minute and desolate, like death. I only noticed it sometimes, the muffled sound of his steps through dead leaves, usually at night just as I was falling asleep. Even if I buried my head beneath a pillow I couldn't smother the sound, once it had arrested me, it only amplified itself. Like the lover on the Grecian urn, the Walking Man was never to be reached, would never reach me, only pursue me forever walking.

Sometimes the sound would feed upon itself, the footsteps of the Walking Man would quicken by the very act of my listening to them. I would break into a sweat and plead with him to stop his steps, but this would only make him walk more quickly, the sound rushing in my ears, quickening my pulse. The warmer I became, the more quickly walked the Walking Man. He excited me. I desired him. I wished that he would come to me and crush me at last, or quit me once and for all, quit his walking once and for all and leave me rest in peace. I felt compelled to give him form, in my mind's eye. He was tall and dressed in a black suit-jacket & trousers which sloped about his ankles, obscuring his feet, which did not appear to touch the ground at all. It was amazing to me that he could make a sound, he whose feet seemed not to strike the earth, but only struck a barrier of some sort, and broke it clean, creating sound.

It was several years before I realized his true identity. And so I find the first man I desired was nothing but a little girl, myself, reading her own pulse as a pursuer, a suitor, a man relying on the beating of her dislocated heart to move his steps, just as I relied on his

pursuit to stir my pulse. And so the barest sustenance is implicated with desire, to be an object of the Walking Man's desire, to be a little girl who figures her own pulse as exiled, aged, and other. It was this, self-love, self-loathing, which clocked the workings of my heart from the beginning.

pink narcissus

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*Burrard Inlet, September 14th*

*Only still water offers up the reflection of a peering face. Only water which is unmoving is able to reassemble the parts of a face and mirror them back, stasis of mimesis, like two statues in love with one another. Love is as impossible as sustaining the same pose for many hours, which some people can do, artists' models for instance, and mimes. But it is essentially impossible, to be reflected in stasis that way, someone or other is bound to drop a stone in the water and fracture the bottom-face into fragments. Or the top-face might fall in, dragging its body with it, a desperate embrace of the face who is little but a shade of the seer. They are both comprised mostly of water anyhow, which conforms to the shape of whatever receptacle will receive it. They are drawn to each other in this, the one face falls into the other. Then the beloved disappears in shards of water, and the lover is all wet. Feels foolish, wishes not to be seen. Or wishes to be rescued, lest she drown, chasing shades in water too deep to be fathomed*

I was sitting on a craggy rock at Burrard Inlet like the *Girl in Wetsuit*, a statue marooned on a tiny island offshore, which people mistook for a clone of the Amsterdam mermaid. Because of passing resemblance, and because the mermaid was more famous. Objects which look alike do not necessarily resemble each other, reciprocally -- if one object is older, or more mythical, then the latter is said to resemble the first. And so the local statuette was a mock-up of the foreign mermaid rather than the other way round. And I, in turn, copied the pose of the *Girl in Wetsuit*, reposing as the *Girl in blue jeans and red velour kangaroo jacket with criss-cross laces at the throat*. The laces hung open like a discarded shoe, and salt mist condensed between my breasts as though the wet air were a lecherous god rubbing himself against me and perspiring. Nobody's face was mirroring me, the sky was overcast that day and the surface of the water churned and turned,

chopping itself into glassy bits. No face could be reflected there, unless dashed to pieces like flour and lard under a pastry-knife. I wasn't looking for faces anyway, that day, which is difficult not to do. You read faces everywhere, if you've got one. But at the time, I was trying look past the pitted skin of the water at whatever pulsed beneath it. I had brought a notebook, to take note of those things, and make presumptuous diagrams of them. As though a girl in a red kangaroo jacket could have any understanding of water-creatures. As though a surface-dweller could decode the habits of deep-sea inhabitants, or accurately figure them as they might figure themselves. But eventually I did see them.

*They open and close once every three beats of my wrist pulse, opening slowly, hovering like that before closing quickly in a spasm.*

*Contrary to my diagrams they often don't look round at all, but are haggard-looking about the edges, like the flounce on a vanity table. They are as graceful and elegant as any animal I've seen, they, having no brain, having no use for vanity tables. Stupidly I find there are tears streaming down my face, unchecked and unpremeditated, and these from what, from nothing. From watching the mindless binary spasms of jellyfish.*

*I draw a four-petalled floral shape in the centre of the diagram, and colour it powdery pink. That pink flower is the sex of the jellyfish, who is either male or female according to our classifications. Unlike the marine leech who is both. Which means it is neither. Sometimes language is like Aunt Hilda's porch, consigning to purgatory things which it can't reconcile, things which are neither here nor there but simply other. Leeches are other, hermaphroditic. This is supposed to mean that they are both male and female, as though they embodied a paradox, when surely a leech is no contradiction to itself but simply another order of creature entirely, not a hybrid of two things.*

*Being both one thing and its own opposite is a logical impossibility. Leeches are logical impossibilities, even though they seem perfectly coherent to themselves, and they don't give a damn about my diagrams. Logical impossibility is the diagnosis of an observer, the agnosis of an observer.*

I didn't give a damn about my diagrams either, once they were done. Drawing them was like confessing your heart to a lover who turns out to be sleeping when you thought he, she was listening intently. This may have been why I so stupidly wept when I drew, jellyfish or leeches or polar bears at the zoo, or maybe it was memory. Once I came here with my father, to this beach, when I was ten. I waded out through liquid glass until the cold edge of it slid between my legs and sloosed the cotton gusset of my leopard two-piece. a sharp intake of breath, abdominal muscles folding neatly into themselves like a magnolia at night. I imagined my sex as a sea anemone, sheer and smooth, opening and closing in labial spasms like the lips of a goldfish.

*My Alley feels perfectly at home in the water*, my father was telling a woman who had set down her red tartan blanket right next to his, *perfectly at home*. I couldn't hear him say it, but I knew it. I had come to rely on it, as he relied on my conventional faith in his mind which could bend a spoon without even touching it. The woman held down her yellow sun-hat with one hand, and turned her head to watch me flip bottom-up like a leopard-skin duck to walk my hands along the ocean floor. I'd been briefly at peace then. frantic peace, hearing nothing but the footsteps of the Walking Man thudding in my eardrums. He was with me, even here under water, even upside-down with my legs kicking at the sky like slippery shrimp. The soles of my feet fell back and struck the surface as I flipped and came up streaming, the aeroplane-pressure in my ears at the sudden change of elements. I could hear nothing but pulse. My father's mouth was moving in tempo to the nodding of the woman's head, perhaps *Alley did this*, *Alley did that*, *Alley is at home in the water* or something like that, I imagined, the way a dog can hear nothing but its own name, can tell when it's being spoken about. I was obliging him, I had done a back-flip for the woman in the sun-hat. I had recited poems to strangers at his request, thinking them silly for being so impressed by that.

I had waded out further toward the shimmering latitude which sliced the scenery in two, cellophane-blue above, glass-green below, and I transgressing the border between

them. Then suddenly, from somewhere inside my belly, somewhere behind the bare section of skin between the top of my swim-suit and the bottoms, a hot stinging sensation burned like leaking chemicals. It began inside and burned outward, eating through the fibres of my stomach to get out, as though I were birthing a meteor through my navel. I shrieked and clawed at the thing, only making it sting more sharply. I tried to run to back to shore, through water thick as tar, I stumbled tumbled until at last, a damp clambering thing. I gained the beach and stood screaming at my father and the woman in the sun-hat, who both came running as though they were my parents.

"You have a jellyfish-burn, sweetheart, that's all." said the woman, crouching before me like an archeologist to read the hieroglyphs rose-tinted on my belly. I was incensed. If any subaquatic creature had touched me, I'd have known it, I'd have felt it glide against my skin, the slither of incendiary mucous. "No, you're *wrong*," I said, "it came from *inside*. There's something *inside* and it's going to eat a hole right through me. You'll see." The hat-woman had smiled maturely at my father, as adults do when they think they know better. As they had done another time, when I'd reported that Missy the cat had sprouted eight pink pox along her tummy, evenly spaced in two rows, and that we had to get her to a hospital. "They're not pox, pet," my mother had said, though she couldn't seem to tell me what they were.

I pulled the laces of my red kangaroo tight to my throat and closed my notebook, the paper closet where creatures of my fancy hung suspended in two dimensions without depth. I had failed again to animate them, had only figured them as vanity tables, shapes of no relevance to any species but my own. My human feet crushed the bones of crustaceans and cephalopods as I quit the beach, the crunching of my footfall like a pulse, or the presumption of explorers who believe themselves the only living thing for miles around.

But soon I was incidental again, among others of my kind, a troupe of Brownies gathered at Lumberman's Arch to compete with each other in friendly contests of physical

agility. The young girls had been tethered to each other in pairs, joined at the hip with the boneless legs of discarded pantyhose, tied once at the ankles and once at the knees. They were running a three-legged race. Pixies and faeries and elves laughed at their own clumsiness, their own foolishness, these mortals, their bundled pedestrian limbs, the unaccustomed effort of coordination which they usually took for granted. The most graceful among them had devised little songs to orchestrate their steps, they lead with the central composite leg and let the other two follow. Others did not laugh at all, to find themselves suddenly sharing limbs with creatures fatter or thinner, taller or shorter than they. I would have been one of these. I would have panicked to find myself drawn into such a contest, such a monstrous fusion of bodies, I would have chewed through my leg to escape.

*You should have more friends,* my mother had been fond of telling me. I was never sure whether it was a practical suggestion or a measurement against some ideal. I supposed that she was right, I should have had. Such as it was, most of my friends could be decoratively set on a window sill and communed with in silence. I had collected to myself an inert menagerie of such friends: a tiny slipper made of amber glass; a litter of cats, black and white, from bottles of *Gato Negro* and *Gato Blanco*; nine ladies dancing, porcelain maidens from packets of Red Rose tea. A set of wooden blocks with letters and numbers and pictures of animals and objects whose names began with the letters depicted. D for duck. A for apple. M for mouse. And a figurine in painted lead, of a young boy who kicked uselessly at a rigger ball, which was soldered in place, when you pressed a lever on the top of his head. The lever was connected to his hip-joint via a metal peg which ran like a spit through his body. The objects of my affection were objects quite literally, I seemed to identify most with things which could not speak and did not bleed. I also hated them, for their silence, for their lack of animation, for their passive ability to be stuck in a pocket and carried from place to place by somebody else. Also I envied them this.

## *bestial rooms*

Among smells of popcorn and pipe-tobacco, sweet-stagnant water, fish and feces, I found a vacant park bench, black cast-iron arabesque with wooden slats painted turquoise like the subconscious of a swimming pool. The shrill lilt of peacocks reached my ears from somewhere in the bushes behind me -- *A-ha, A-ha* -- like some taunting accusation, as though the excellent birds had caught me at an indiscretion. Which it seemed they had, as presently a chimpanzee dressed as a whore was soliciting me, strolling up and down past the park bench in gown of teal satin trimmed with peacock feathers and wilted lace, tawdry like a colorized photograph. The chimp wore rouge and red lipstick, and was carrying a tin box with a slotted lid, which she rattled to indicate the coins inside it. She thrust the box at me and screeched. I resisted. She curled back her liverish lips and wagged her head to and fro, so that the green plastic baubles affixed to her ear-lobes shook audibly. Still I resisted, unsure of what service my coins would be buying, or into whose hands they would ultimately fall. I scanned the crowd but saw no one who looked as though they might be in the business of pimping a chimp.

The chimpanzee bared her teeth and hissed. I realized then that this was not a matter of choice. To the chimp, it seemed not a matter of if I paid her, but when. She seemed to have been trained to expect payment as inevitable, like tolls for road-construction, or taxes, or death. She'd been trained by someone who believed that the end of persistence was having one's way, no two ways about it. Who was I to argue? I reached into the front pocket of my jeans and withdrew a brassy coin with a picture of a loon. Loons, which mate for life, making only one choice and sticking to it.

I slipped the coin into the slot. The chimpanzee curtsied graciously for me, but I strangely felt that I'd been had. Even though I was the buyer, I still thought that I'd been bought. Now I had nothing but lint in my pockets, like kleenexes under my pillow when I am sick.

The report of a referee's whistle slit the air suddenly, and at once the chimpanzee turned and scuttled away, trailing her skirts through pools of orange soda and the ashen castings of geese. A bearded man in aviator sunglasses and a grizzled great-coat appeared from behind a postcard-booth and scooped up the chimp in his arms, hurrying off without turning around, disappearing into the scrum. In a moment I left the bench to search for polar bears.

*Polar bear:*

It is believed that the colour of a room has a substantial effect on the mental state of its inhabitants, which is why lunatics are put away in white rooms or pink, to pacify, to mollify them. The polar bear pit had been painted turquoise like a swimming-pool, and like the worst of swimming-pools it smelled, unwholesome, of astringent chemicals and waterlogged organic matter. It must have been deliberate to paint the pit this colour, turquoise-green, rather than snowy white as the bear would have been accustomed to. It must have been part of an experiment into the psychic adaptability of polar bears.

Perhaps it had been necessary to make the polar bear believe that it has died and gone to Hell. First, it had been shot in the rump with a slug of drugs, in facsimile of its death. Then, it was relocated and allowed to reawaken to a scene of lurid green where there had once been snow. This, predictably, would have a substantial effect on the self-concept of the polar bear. According to its previous experience, such environments as the green underground pit were more the habitat of their food than of themselves: they were home to those silvery comestibles to be scooped up in the claws and eaten. Thus the predator would find itself in an environment simulating that of his previous prey. The polar bear brain is inverted, flipped on its back like a crab, exposing its vulnerable underparts to those who would prey upon them.

*Around the pit are gathered groups of humans, like doctors in the gallery above an operating theatre, to observe the drama of unwholesomeness unfolding to their eyes. It seems the polar bear has gone mad. It paces back and forth, back and forth, swinging its*



*head like a pendulum down there in the pit, its pink and grey succulent tongue lolling like a pepper-steak from its mouth. But the remarkable thing, the thing which we should remark, mark you, is that the bear is walking backwards. As polar bears tend not to walk backwards in their natural habitat, having no reason to, we are to take this behaviour as symptomatic of mental disease. This much is evident. Just as the desire to move forward is indicative of mental health, compulsive backward movement betrays perversity of mind. It appears that the bear no longer cares where it is going, but seems considerably more interested in where it has been. And thus it walks backwards, retracing its steps, as though trying to decipher how it got from where it was to where it is now. Or perhaps, in effect, it is trying to move backward in time, leading with its rump in the delusional hope that some benevolent sniper will shoot it again, and that it will reawaken in the place it was initially abducted from. But clearly, in accordance with our diagnosis, this hope is delusional.*

If I were shot in the rump with a dart and relocated to a clean crisp room of pristine white. with no mirrors nor any other object in which to locate myself, I am sure I would do nothing but stare at my hands. which are yellowed and nicotine-stained, like the fur of polar bear. which now appears yellowed and nicotine-stained. Neither I nor the bear would be able to camouflage ourselves among ice-caps, we would no longer blend nor fit in with our surroundings. Then would I believe the white walls to be hostile, and everywhere watching me, eyeless, voiceless, but everywhere watching me as though they were spectres in exile from memory.

When I turned from the pit, the eyes of the bearded man in the grizzled great-coat flashed like a camera from behind mirrored aviator sunglasses. He was there for a moment, then he was gone, taking something with him. In pursuit of the invisible lost thing which I believed was mine I followed him, in the direction of this most recent sighting. It lead me to an aviary of hawks.

*Hawk:*

The plastic plaque engraved white on black read *Red-tailed Hawk*.

*How dare you*, read the fury in its eye. It perched indignant, on a small wooden platform attached to the stump of a tree shorn of limbs. The tree resembled a scratching post, one of those inanimate whipping-boys built for the amusement of domesticated cats, those cats who still bore their claws but were trained against using them to their purpose. A prosthetic limb, standing in surrogate to the defenseless legs of tables, or the bare ankles of human masters. The bark of the tree was shredded and scarred, with pustules of sap gathering like sores over its trunk. *Look you*, scried the eyes of the hawk, *look upon these wounded limbs and know that there, but for the grace of God --*

Its sleek glossy head was framed in a diamond, one of the windows of space between the twistings of the chain-link fence. This was all that separated its hawk-eyes from the eyes of onlookers, the unprotected eyes that could so easily be plucked out by its talons or marred blind by its sharp curving beak. The hawk's beak was held open, soundlessly, as though its shriek were pitched so high that only gods could hear it. Its thin reptilian leg was jessed with a shiny metal shackle bearing something like a serial number on the crimp.

I thought of my mother, how she had once pressed a slender trail of crescent-moons in my arm with her small pointed nails under the dinner table, to remind me of myself, my fleshliness. She'd been watching indignant as I gulped down my plate of fried yams and earthworm-onions like a fledgling cowbird. A greedy impostor, who surely should never have been there in the first place, bearing no resemblance to her lineage and too possessed of appetites. I was too much like my father. There had been a vengeance she felt she'd been owed, as though I were somehow implicated in his short-comings, as though whatever stamina he might once have had had been spent on my conception, squandered.

*The ceremony of innocence is lost.* I didn't recall its ever having been there, I must have missed that part. Like being sent to buy popcorn just as the planet Alderon is about to be detonated into billions of fragments, billions of voices suddenly crying out and being silenced. Then returning to your seat and noticing the silence, the empty space, but not knowing how it got there, what conspicuous absence it was covering up. *What did I miss?* you would whisper, and receive in answer only a hiss -- *Sshhhh...do you want to miss the next part as well?*

This was how it had been growing up, time had passed strangely, somehow my brain had been sent for popcorn when it should have been watching the action. I always had the sense that something had been lost, that I had slept through something and woke up older than I was supposed to be. And so I learned to fill the empty space with surrogates, replacing the moon with the Death Star, for instance, and found that it functioned just as well. I'd seen the destruction of Alderon so many times that I knew what was missed, what was missing. I knew that merely erasing a history did not necessarily prevent it from repeating itself. It would come again, it only needed to be rewound.

Turning and turning the image of my mother over in my mind, I would have thought that she'd draw closer to me, close enough to hold, at least in the cold embrace of memory. But she only flew further away. I'd begun to accept that it would always be like this, negative charge, the north and south of a magnet repelling each other. It had been my appetite which disgusted her, my earth-bound need for her descent and return to my arm. *How dare you,* scried the eyes of the hawk, *how dare you ask for more after all I've sacrificed --*

It might have been different with my mother had I been less artless, less without armour. I might have been more harkened to if I'd worn a thick leather gauntlet on my arm, and been impervious to the changeable tides of her lunar nails, I might have been more desirable to her that way. But it was not me who fastened a hood to her beautiful head at the end of the day, to calm her, to silence her, to sever her connection to the world, she was

perfectly capable of doing this herself. She would lie back in her big mustard armchair with a cool blue gelatinous mask placed over her eyes, like goggles of antifreeze. She'd be lying there perfectly still and cool and detached. *Listen, pet,* she would say, *could you simmer down please. Your mother is resting her eyes.* As though my mother and her eyes were entities separate from the speaker, and all three of them were worlds away from me. There were things that she simply preferred not to see.

And so it was no surprise that my affinity was with my father, his clumsiness, his failing sense of humour, his well-meaning interference with her life. It was no surprise that I identified with him, and sought out his likeness in men, recognizing in them his hunger, and my own.

### *the Petting Zoo*

Within a circular enclosure of wooden fences they kept animals from story-books. Woolly lambs, floppy-eared kids, awkward calves with knobby knees had gamboled about in books even before I knew them to exist as flesh and bone. Before they became understood as edible they spoke, wore red woolen scarves knitted by their nannies, and were able to communicate with human children, frogs, trolls and rocks. Once upon a time they had shell-pink ears like tulip petals, over-sized heads, and blinking eyes like limpid pools brushed with long curly lashes. They had tiny black hooves like the shiny patent shoes I had worn to church, trotting through story-books, *trip-trapping* over foot-bridges, or straying lost from the flock only so that they might be found again. They were always found again. At the end of the day they would curl up with their mothers and tell of their adventures in plain and simple English. And their mothers would listen, and feed them tea and cakes before putting them to bed.

The gate of the petting zoo was latched but not locked, one of those latches like a parrot's beak clamping down over a metal finger. There was a small maze of fences just inside the gate which you had to walk through in a short zig-zag to get into the yard. The sign over the gate read *Petting Zoo*. It was the only sign I'd seen which did not say what

the animals were, but rather what you were supposed to do to them. The animals inside the enclosure were named that way, as the recipients of touch.

Sometimes the petting zoo was called the *children's zoo*. Children were those creatures who wanted to pet things, who understood things in terms of petting, who believed that if you touched something then it became yours. Their mothers went with them through the little zig-zag maze and into the yard, while their fathers stood outside the fence like uneasy lifeguards, wearing peculiar grins or shuffling their feet. Some of them smoked cigarettes as though they were waiting to hear of the birth of one more, and whether it would be a boy or a girl. Sometimes the children would call to some of the men *Look daddy, this goat has an earring on* or *Watch me feed him, daddy* and the fathers would watch and nod, or stub out their cigarettes, or call things back. *Thatta girl, sweetheart. Thatta boy, son, or Don't let 'er bite off your finger.*

In one corner of the yard, standing spindly by itself like a small straight-backed chair, was grey kid. It blinked and hobbled in the sunlight, the half-sunlight, its shivering hindquarters straddling the border of light and shadow. The blade of a shadow was creeping up its hind legs, from the plywood roof of an artificial barn which was painted red with white moldings. Someone had built artificial troughs and mangers as well, and painted artificial haystacks, and even painted in some artificial livestock in the stalls. All around were the trappings of story-book barnyards, as though to make the living flesh and bones of sheep and goats appear as fictional as possible. The small goat shook its head from side to side, shook its floppy ears, then took two baby steps forward like in the game *Mother, May I?* It stopped, blinked again, and bleated mechanically twice *Mehh. Mehh.*

Scattered crouching on the sawdust-ground like chickens and hens were children and mothers, of which I was neither at the time. Not a mother, not a child, but some creature sketched onto the scenery as a practical joke, like a person in a chicken suit. I was awaiting erasure, a hand from the sky to reach down the pink rubber butt of its pencil and carefully scuff me away. The grey goat looked like this as well, tentative, two-dimensional,

unsupported by anything of depth. Its shivering coat was grey, the barn was red, the shadows and sunlight sliced through everything. All things drawn and quartered.

Suddenly it seemed that everything depended on the touching the goat, I recalled the compulsion of children to touch things. *I had no child of my own at the time, Rose,* and no quarter in my pocket to purchase a handful of feed from one of the red-metal dispensers attached like parking meters to the fence.

Then from outside the frame a crumpled wad of greasy paper came tumbling, pushed along by a low gust of wind and stopping when it hit my shoe. *Soon the winds would change.* I turned to see the bearded man in the grizzled coat pop the tail-end of a hot dog into his mouth and lick his fingers. His tongue was unusually long, he would have been one of those individuals who could touch the tip of his nose with it. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and lumbered away as though we hadn't even been watching each other. I left the petting zoo without even touching the goat, and followed the arrows to the buffalo pen.

*Buffalo:*

His body was commanding and indifferent, like an ode by a poet two hundred years dead. The mount of his shoulders, slope of his back followed a familiar pattern, an ascent to a climax, a more gradual descent of events like diminishing vertebrae continuing to the end of the tail. The humourous irony of the hairy tuft at the very tip, wiry tendrils foreshadowed by the muzzle branching out in ambiguous directions. Even at twenty I knew that most animal attachments terminated this way, unruly and fraying, but with some nod to conventions of symmetry. The bodies of buffalo were inevitable, like stories.

The impossible premise was the head. That head alone would fill a bed and topple it, it was monstrously large, elephantine. Like the head of the Elephant Man, who tried to rest his huge misshapen skull on a pillow and suffocated under the weight of it. They say he built a model church of paper, with his one good arm, his slender and feminine arm, unlike the other which hung from his shoulder like a slaughtered lamb. The church is still

on display, they say, in the London museum, where I've never been. Maybe the church doesn't exist at all, or maybe the Elephant Man never did either, it doesn't matter.

*Sometimes I think my head is so big because it's so full of thoughts,* he's supposed to have said, *What happens when thoughts can't get out?* And I had wondered why, while other girls were cultivating crushes on those actors known for their portrayal of the Hardy Boys, I was haunted by strange erotic dreams of Darth Vader and the Elephant Man. Neither ever touched me, but spilled his mind like thick fog into my ears, stroking my brain. That each of them wore a mask, and that beneath the mask they were thought not to be handsome, I think it was this that did it.

And now was I similarly drawn to these massive beasts who once had made the endangered list and come back. They'd been judged unfit for survival not through natural selection, but through the schemes of men in their attempts to collect and commodify, unless this was also natural selection. It might be only natural, to drive them off a cliff in a stampede of dust and listen to the cracking of their ankles as they fall, trip and tumble heavy in a heap, those gentle giants whose tiny brains dangled dumbly in their testicles.

Even their smell seemed a commodity, recalling some unremembered history of bear-grease and bee's wax candles, tack-leather and lanolin and lamp oil, pemmican and woollen stockings, the boiling sap of maples, Hudson's Bay blankets, the reddish curls of chiseled cedar, perhaps the skins of them stretched taut on the wooden frames of snowshoes. Perhaps buffalo remembered it all, the way history repeats itself, and does not bear repeating. At times not needing to be told, but borne in the blood, bred in the bone. To look into the eyes of buffalo you'd think so, the sheen on them like the interiors of musselshells, their depth like soft brown earth, alert beneath monastic cowls of lashes.

I touched the forelock of a buffalo. His coarse hair, oily and matted, swallowed my hands to the knuckles, I could feel his hard and massive skull beneath. I could see the labial folds of skin around his eyes and again at his stifle, his pendulous foreskin, the clefts between his hooves encrusted with humus and manure. And over all this the mountainous

shoulders arching up, descending his back to the end of his tail, his breath clinging in quivering beads to the hair of his beard.

I sensed that I was not alone, that the bearded man was there again. His presence was prescient in the ponderous tread of buffalo, in the heavy imprint of their ruminant hooves like seeds split in half, hemispheres divided. I was distracted by him, cloven in my mind between wanting to run and wanting to wait, mounting a course and being carried by it to its crisis and its resolution. I wanted to see what would happen, or rather how, the only variation being in the detail. The arc of desire was conventional, inevitable. It was impossible to retrace my steps once I'd entered into it.

Over my head came a heavy pulse like a mechanical heart, or the angry breathing of a bull before the gate is released and its hooves pound the dust of the coliseum. I looked up to see jointed carriages of the toy-train rattling against the sky, and he was there again, hunched over the railings of the caboose and looking down at me. He set his smoking pipe between his teeth and held it there, then reached into the inner breast-pocket of his coat to retrieve an instrument. He raised the sight to his eye and shot, a flash, and I was caught, blinded by his after-image as the toy-train clicked away to leave me standing stunned like a rabbit in the arc of head lamps. My voice alone tore after him, unbidden -- *Who are you?*

But the train was gone. I stood with the buffalo for a still suspended time, still but not unmoving, the way the centre of a spinning wheel appears still but is not. My head was spinning, my thoughts spun out in blurry spokes away from me. I felt I was a vehicle for something. A coach-a-bower drawn by headless horses, bearing the course of something shrouded and familial, dimly seen. There are thoughtless actions unbridled by presence of mind, which yet are familiar, having come before, played out by other actors or other characters of the self. Desire always felt that way, like a sort of nostalgia. Not an invitation to move forward into something new, but a force drawing backward, a re-rendering of something which had come before.

Desire was a drawing room in the back of my mind. Being drawn there, I might



recognize it as a place of previous tenancy, the furniture and wall-hangings having changed, but still I would know that I'd been there before. The object of desire would also have been there before, in some form or another, I could creep among the ruins and recognize that person by scent alone. We would both be seeking out among the living those creatures of a common species who can read us like books, and be read by us, or so we mutually believe. I'd be willing to bet that there is at least one of these people in every crowd, the ones we're drawn to irresistibly for no reason we'd like to admit. And these people are just as likely to become enemies as lovers. They carry a certain charge which may either attract or repel, but which cannot diminish until some other force breaks it.

I felt a tremor up my spine, like a flash of dark wings on the periphery of vision. I turned to look over my shoulder. Once more he was there, standing just a stone's throw away and slightly behind, exhaling vanilla smoke like an engine from another time.

I was not surprised to find him waiting at the heart of this maze of bestial rooms, at last, like the seeds at the centre of an apple, or the worm which noses blindly in then eats its way back out. His lips, set in the bramble of his beard, were full and mobile, full and sensuous lips which never seemed to close completely but hung slightly open and moist. The shoulders of his coat were hirsute and barbarous, holding dust like a carpet, holding scent, the sleek musky oil of his hair and the heady incense of vanilla pipe tobacco. His nose was large and bumped, as though it had been broken, as though he'd been using it for years to push his way through revolving doors. I couldn't see his eyes. Instead I saw myself, reflected twice, moon-faced and sallow in the mirrored lenses of his sunglasses. His hands were remarkably large, unbuttoning his coat and reaching inside to take out his camera again. There was a yellow sun-flower, bright and artificial, pinned to his lapel.

*I thought I should offer you this*, he said, making as if to unlatch the lock of his camera and pull out its celluloid entrails. *I didn't mean to snap at you like that, I was aiming for the buffalo. A man needs to be sensitive to these things, these days, I'll hand over the negatives if you like. Just say the word.* His fingers clicked open the lock but kept

the camera pressed shut, waiting. But I wasn't willing to speak to him just yet. He would speak once more before swinging open his camera and exposing his film to the light, I was willing to bet, and willing to wait. I wanted to hear his voice again anyway, and so I said nothing.

*Here I stand,* he said wryly, *on the very brink of exposing myself to a woman I've not even met and she hasn't the courtesy to stop me from doing it.* His voice bore as many textures as a tree, a soft fluttering in the upper registers, a coarser cadence below, the coagulate thickness of its resin, the smoothness of those places where the bark is stripped away.

*Your call,* I said. I wanted to know if he'd actually do it, how well he could read me, how easily I could be read, or not. Whether he'd pull out the film like doves from a hat, send it spiraling to the ground in golden curls. But instead he flicked the closure with his thumb, back into locked position.

*Then I'll keep it,* he said, *since ours is not a culture which believes that souls are captured in the blink of a shutter.*

*Since it may not be a culture which believes in souls at all,* I said, never having considered whether or not I did.

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***missing files III [post-script]:
unrecorded chat with Buffalo Man***

Setting: exiting Stanley Park Zoo

Buffalo Man [walking]: *My dad was a ventriloquist. He was hired by theatre companies, to play the parts of voices in the wings and other invisible characters. Once he played the voice of the Ghost of Hamlet. He solemnly marched his voice from backstage left all the way to the edge of the cliff at front-stage right, even halted somewhere centre stage and made his voice levitate. Then he made it twirl around the theatre like a twister. The body of the ghost was on a film projector, they had to spin the picture all over the walls chasing after his voice. Must have been incredible. I gather he could raise the hair at the back of people's necks.*

Alley [also walking]: *You never saw him do it?*

Buffalo Man [shaking his head]: *I only saw him do his puppet. He had a puppet. I saw him do that, sometimes.*

Alley: *What was his name? The puppet's name.*

Buffalo Man: *She. My dad called her Nightingale. She was a spooky kid with skin so white it was blue. He would tell her ghost stories and she'd sing odd little rhymes, you could see the slits from her mouth to her chin where her jaw was attached. My Dad wore grey paint on his face and Lyle's paste in his hair. They were supposed to look like ghosts, a dead Uncle and his niece.*

Alley: *Do you have a mother?*

Buffalo Man: *I lived with my mother. She owned a small canning company, soups and vegetables. We had a nice house. I went to school and studied chemistry. Big canning companies employ chemists, that was the idea, but really it turned out all right. I liked chemistry.*

[the buffalo man rubs his eye. he looks different without his glasses]

Alley: *Why aren't you doing anything connected with chemistry?*

Buffalo Man: *I think I am. Everything is connected with chemistry.*

Alley: *I guess I don't express myself very well. I mean why isn't your job in chemicals, rather than in -- actually, you haven't told me what your job is.*

Buffalo Man: *What would you guess?*

Alley: *I don't know. A spy.*

Buffalo Man: *A spy?*

Alley: *You were following me around the zoo. Every time I turned round you were there.*

Buffalo Man: *That doesn't prove I was following you.*

Alley: *I think I've had this conversation before. Just tell me whether or not you were.*

Buffalo Man: *I suppose I was, in a sense. But whenever you glanced in my direction you shot me such a look. Like a slap in the face. Do you see yourself as fierce-looking?*

Alley: *I don't see myself. How do you see yourself?*

Buffalo Man: *Oh, I don't know. A clown. A circus clown.*

[the buffalo man messes up his hair with one hand. there is now more of it]

Alley: *Oh no, don't say that. You don't really think you look like a circus clown, do you?*

Buffalo Man: *Don't you know the type I'm talking about? Look, if I drew a blue shadow over my chin, like this, and my eyebrows were way up here. Add a squashed bowler, and an oversized papier-maché bottle marked xxx. Can't you see it? Not saying I like it much.*

Alley: *I don't see it at all. I'm not even going to look for it. Maybe I wouldn't be able to switch back, like crossing your eyes and getting stuck like that.*

Buffalo Man: *You see something different, then?*

[Alley, nodding]

Buffalo Man: *Mind telling me what?*

Alley: *I can't tell yet. I don't know you. You started out as one thing but you might turn into something else.*

Buffalo Man: *Mind telling me what I started out as?*

Alley: *No. I mean, yes, I do mind. I'd be embarrassed to say -- I tend to see people as animals or objects, and see animals and objects as though they were people. Myself no exception. It just happens automatically. Well, this might not be true. My mother thinks I am obsessive, but it seems to happen just automatically, people turn into things and vice versa. But it was difficult with you, there were too many other things going on. You sort of put me through the wringer -- wait -- I used to think that 'putting through the wringer' meant something to do with telephones, but it doesn't, it means the thing on old washing machines used to wring out the clothes. The mangle. Did you know that?*

Buffalo Man: *What were you about to say?*

Alley: *About what?*

[the buffalo man pulls away slightly, in space]

Buffalo Man: *You said I put you through the wringer. I didn't touch you. You can't accuse me of that.*

Alley: *No, I just mean that I was having trouble differentiating between you and the animal, in my mind.*

Buffalo Man: *Which animal? Not Mae West, I hope?*

Alley: *May West is the chimpanzee?*

Buffalo Man: *Yes. May is a chimp.*

Alley: *No, not her.*

Buffalo Man: *You don't think I'm a buffalo man.*

[buffalo man laughs]

Alley: *Well, look at you.*

Buffalo Man: *That's very flattering. I'd like to be a buffalo.*

Alley: *Why?*

Buffalo Man: *I don't know. Have my picture on a nickel.*

Alley: *Is that the only reason? When was the last time you saw a buffalo nickel, anyway? We have beavers.*

Buffalo Man: *True. I'd be making myself rather scarce to be a buffalo-nickel.*

Alley: *My father used to say, don't take any wooden nickels. It means --*

Buffalo Man [interrupting]: *I know very well what it means. What a presumptuous thing you are. How old are you?*

Alley: *Gonna be twenty, I guess.*

Buffalo Man: *That's not very old, you know. How old am I?*

Alley: *No idea. Thirty-eight.*

Buffalo Man: *Thirty-eight's fine.*

[they stop in a parking lot]

Alley: *The red Gremlin?*

Buffalo Man: *That's the one. Poor Mae West, she'll be having a fit by this point. I should warn you, by the way, she's extremely jealous. I suggest you sit in the front. Where would you like me to take you, anyway?*

Alley: *Where are you going?*

Buffalo Man: *Bloody hell, I don't know. To climb a flag-pole. Dance a jig. Plant roses.*

Alley: *Plant roses.*

Buffalo man: *All right, then.*

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