

Bad Jokes for Women Who Want To Be Good

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Abstract

Bad Jokes For Women Who Want To Be Good

By Madeleine Maillet

This collection of twelve stories was written between 2012-2016. The stories explore the theme of women's identity and anxiety in the face of it. In order to make the anxiety attending these typically female experiences come alive for the reader as subjectively as possible these stories were all re-written in the first person.

With this collection I seek to trouble the conventional distance between the author, reader and narrator of realistic fiction. The title character of the title story shares the author's name.

Championed by queer and feminist modernist writers Jean Genet and Marguerite Duras in France and postmodernists Kathy Acker and Chris Kraus in America, autofiction has long been a means of populating narrative with subjectivities and experiences normally excluded from it.

This shift into autofiction in the final story of the collection is an effort to cement referentiality (meaning and subject) as *the* aim of the text, supplanting the formalist concerns that define literary merit. Thus, encouraging the reader to see this short story collection as a work of outsider art. The stories preceding the title story are immersive and plot driven in order to provide the reader characters in whom they can provisionally believe, so that they can experience the moral and imaginative pleasure of experiencing the inner worlds of fictional others. This traditional reading experience is disrupted in the collection's title story in order to dramatize subversive reflection and affirm its power, once the meaning and value of the world these marginal female characters inhabit have been assumed by the reader on the character's behalf.

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Achilles' Death

Achilles. Not like the god, in French you say it like “a shill”—the *s* is silent. He was my grandfather and he was strong, he could crack a walnut in one hand, he could do that until he got sick and died. I don't remember what it was—I want to say it was his heart. I remember that they put a hospital bed in his room and that it looked funny with all the normal furniture. I remember that he looked like a child; is it a cliché, to say that dying people look like children? Because it's more than just the way we tuck them in.

The day he died we didn't go to his deathbed because I had lice real bad. My mom shampooed my hair with insecticide and sat me at the dining room table and combed out all the dead lice, wiping the comb on a mottled old towel. She has a very expressive mouth and I think that's why she didn't do it in the bathroom. We had a vanity with a chair and everything and it would've been the best place for it, but she didn't want me to watch her.

“Are there a lot?” I asked.

“Oh yeah, honey, there's lots of these babies,” she said in her trying-not-to-sound-excited voice. It was the voice she used when she told my dad she was gonna pop his zit. “Wanna see one?”

There was a dead louse on her thumbnail, its exoskeleton was beige, like a worm. I could see the brown food inside, my blood. But I couldn't see the part that mattered, the piercing and sucking mouthpart.

My sister stared at us. She was doing her homework at the table, because she wanted to gloat or she wanted to be near us. That morning, after my father had stood up from the table with his dirty plate and peered down at my head and said, you have lice, they had checked her too.

She was hysterical, the eczema and the asthma made her meticulous about her person. Now, she stared like she wanted to see the lice and didn't want to see them.

“Do you want to talk about P  p  ?” Mom asked.

I felt itchy and sorry, but mostly for myself.

“No,” we said. We hated feelings talks.

I could feel the comb's metal tines scrape my scalp. Well, the lice were almost gone, it would take two weeks of daily combing. It wasn't fair. I was eleven years old—too old for lice. I was a lost boy in *Peter Pan* and one of the other lost boys must've had them. There was another girl lost boy, but most of us were boys. I had thick, mouse brown hair that I never brushed. It stuck out from my head like a triangle. I had to cut it. And I knew that instead of a girl with wild eyes and wild hair, I would look like a weak-chinned, weak little boy. I had a crush on Eric E. He was my birdhouse project partner. I wanted to be pretty. I wanted him to think I was pretty, but nobody thought I was pretty. I wished I were a boy and had a penis. I would write my name in pee. No, I would pee in a drinking fountain.

“Are you thinking about P  p  ?” Mom asked.

“No,” I said.

The phone rang and my mom grabbed the cordless, still holding the tiny comb. She stood in the doorway and nodded and asked my father eager unthinking questions, “How's your mother? How's your brother? How are you?”

I watched my sister flip multiplication table flashcards that my mom let her laminate at the school board office. I liked to laminate pictures of whales from *National Geographic*. If you laminate something it says that thing is important and that you know how to take care of things

that are important. We all loved the laminator. It was huge and it looked like a loom and it looked like a computer. Trimming the plastic edges with the paper cutter frightened me. I thought of a paper cutter as a finger guillotine and felt afraid of myself.

“What are you thinking about, honey?” Mom asked.

“*Jane Eyre*,” I said.

“There’s a big black dog, but I don’t know if it’s a real dog or if it’s in her head,” I said. I wanted to read but it would’ve been rude. I asked my mom how much she’d gone through and she tugged the section of my hair from my nape to my earlobes and said, “Baby, I’ve gotta go slow.” So I stared at my sister, staring at her flashcards, and wished my eyes were blue like hers. Mom quizzed her on her multiplication tables, from six to ten, and she looked pleased with herself, and I hated her, the way you hate your sister.

I twisted up a tress of wet hair and imagined I could wring the lice out. I let it go and it clung to my neck, like a disgusting thing. If I were a Medusa I wouldn’t have lice. But I knew I wasn’t brave enough to be a Medusa. And I wanted to be pretty. I wondered what I would look like when I was a woman.

Mom asked Nadine to put the radio on and it was smooth and she moaned along. Alan Almond played Sade, Marvin Gaye, that kind of thing. My favourite part was the requests. Someone loves Linda, in Flint, and so the listening audience knows that Linda, of Flint, is loved.

The phone rang. This time my mom just left the comb hanging in my hair while she talked to Papa. After, she asked us about our funeral clothes and we pretended not to feel like funeral clothes are weird and boring to talk about.

When they played “My Girl” we all sang along. Mom had the most gusto and Dini had

the best voice and all our voices together made a mood.

We didn't talk for a while. I asked Mom how much hair she'd done and she drew a line on my scalp with the comb, way beneath the crown. My sister drew the same two-and-a-half-storey house with a fence that she always drew. The sun and the seagull were there, in each corner of the sky. Looking at her drawing, she asked, "What's for dinner?"

"You're in charge," Mom said. Nadine beamed because she was bossy. Mom knew how to appeal to us. She appealed to everyone, she always said, it's not hard to be nice. There were no more frozen entrees so Nadine said, "Toast," and we said, "Toast." And I was grateful that she put the baguette under the broiler instead of toasting the Weight Watchers bread. I ate slowly, because I was hungry but disgusted. Mom kept pushing my head down and saying, "I've gotta get some light on the subject." But it was hard to eat with my head bowed.

"Shit," Mom said. A louse fell out of my hair onto the dining room table. It scurried onto the napkin and onto my toast and got stuck in the peanut butter. Its posterior, which was most of it, twitched. We all stared at it. Against the rich ochre of the peanut butter you could see that my blood was very dark.

Mom said, "Oh, honey."

The louse twitched still. I didn't want my body anymore. White crumbs fell from my mouth, white louse eggs fell from my hair. Mom said, "Dini, throw away the toast," and Dini whimpered with every breath until she dropped it the bin.

"Those lice are fuckers," Mom said. Nadine's eyebrows went up. "Call them what you want."

"They're motherfuckers," I said, and Mom grinned.

“Motherfuckers,” Mom said. And I wanted to crawl into her grinning mouth.

“Motherfuckers! Motherfuckers! Motherfuckers!” we screamed. We were all looking at the towel that was moist with what my mother had been wiping on it. The bugs and eggs she’d gathered from my damp hair in her comb. Mom touched the small of my back and I was glad she was touching me.

“That feels better,” she said. She liked to identify a mood to make sure it was a worthy one. It was an annoying habit, but right then it was right.

Nadine’s eyes looked crazed. She didn’t even take the Lord’s name in vain. If someone said, oh my god, she would say: God can hear you. Say, I’m sorry God. Mom kept trying to make her stop.

“You said *mother fucker*,” I said. She blushed and tore a sheet of paper from her drawing pad.

The phone rang. Mom gasped and said, “Take us off your list of people you call.” “You said *mother fucker*,” I said, all smug.

“Mom made me,” she said and centred her sheet of paper on the “Map of the World” placemat that Mom had laminated.

“Whatever,” I said, and Mom sighed. I hated myself for being small. Mom pushed my head down further and kept combing. Nadine drew two more houses, one was orange and one was purple. There was the sun and there was the seagull in each corner, did they strike a balance? Mom only had three sections left when Papa called to say P  p   was dead. She hugged my sister and then she hugged me, craning her neck away, and squeezing.

“I’m gonna miss the way he ate,” Nadine said. M  m   would be unhappy with nobody to

feed. Everybody was always saying how observant Nadine was. I thought of all the things I wouldn't notice if she didn't tell me to.

“He always ate three muskrats,” Mom said. They were as big as a rabbit so I never knew how he could eat three at the muskrat boil, and sit there after like it was natural, when Mononcle Vic and Mononcle Zéphir and Papa and the others could only eat one. And I heard my sister and my mother talking the way you talk to someone you love, because their voice makes you feel safe.

Mom finished and said, “We're finished,” and put the towel in a garbage bag, and tied it off with a wretched bow. She said no one would want to use it, even after she washed it. I took it out back to the dog shit garbage, so the lice would freeze. I looked at the shed for a while, because I liked the way the slanting snow piled on one side and made it slouch. The porch roof collapsing made a very loud noise. A harrowing crack and then there was the whoosh of falling. Seeing the roof pull away from the house, and the sky filling the sky, was shocking.

I remember feeling something spinal and unbearable. Like brain freeze without the freeze. I remember the porch roof covered most of the snowy yard—it looked like a smaller snowy yard. Now the larger yard was liminal.

When Mom and Dini came out I was laughing. Dini stood before the roof and she turned to face us, and to face the roof, and to face us, her little body like a cup without a saucer.

“It's because we said *motherfuckers*,” she said.

Mom laughed and I laughed too, and Dini didn't mind for once that we were laughing at her. Mom held on to me, her long arms folded around my neck, her hands bracing my shoulders, the bare edges of me, her breasts a pillow for my brain, which was still in my strange skull, and

she shook, and I shook, with laughter, and I felt the weirdness of this orb, how bulbous it felt in the back.

Our faces rose with laughter, until we were all looking at the sky.

After that, I no longer lay awake, afraid of dying in my sleep. I knew that dying would wake me up. This didn't help me sleep. No, I lay awake still, for longer now than before, until the sun rose, sore in the red sky. I wanted to make my dreams, and I did. I dreamt I was the Lady of Shalott, floating along in my rickety rowboat, seated still as it dipped back and forth, pooling with water, finding its level below, until the rowboat was gone, and I was supine, but unsinking, floating still, because my gowns were made of gossamers' wings and weighed nothing. They pulled me along a little, catching the currents, making me look this way and that, like a little girl who's got your fingers in her grip.

I fought sleep still, because I felt like it.

Heavy Skirts

“You’ve got to go see Bruno-Charles. Paulette and her historical society ladies are in there with the pioneer costumes.” Marie-Anne said, bouncing gently on her exercise ball behind the reception desk. She’d had to quit being a veterinary tech after a sow she’d inseminated kicked free of its harness and crushed her, fracturing her pelvis. The exercise ball was rehab.

“He promised!” I whined. She was already shrugging and bouncing, marking time until she told the next waitress. She wasn’t here last year-- didn’t remember how we couldn’t get our pioneer skirts with their crinolines and also the carts loaded with food for the buffet into the elevator. How the old receptionist had to ride the elevator for us. We had the kind of elevator that can fit one person in a wheelchair or one waitress and a cart. It was probably installed when *Place d’Alliance* was still the Polish Community Centre, before the Polish community went broke, so people in wheelchairs wouldn’t sue. It was hydraulic and I was scared of it, the way it always stalled for a moment before descending, unsuspending. When it stalled you could feel your own heaviness inside the elevators’ heaviness, like how you can feel the rhythm inside of rhythm in the piano riffs of an old blues song.

Marie-Anne was looking at me with soft consternation, her eyes baffled, her face relaxed. I was aware I was standing there, staring, so I nodded awkwardly and did as I was told. Bruno-Charles wasn’t in the office, but Paulette and two of her ladies were. There was a rack of dresses and a pile of garbage bags with crinolines spilling from them. The Saint Anne’s girls were there, and Mal was there, she went to school there too, but she wasn’t one of them. She was super popular until last year, but then her boyfriend fucked her best-friend, and those two were

also super- popular, so after that Mal had no friends at St. Anne's. Now during lunch hour she mostly read, she'd worked her way through the Brontës and was onto Middlemarch. She was holding her skirt over her head, while an old lady was hunched over, attaching her crinolines. Mal's green converse peeked out from under them. Paulette came over to me and *fait la bise*: pressed lips brushed each cheek, but there was no smack -- that was the way you did it. Her eyes were busy and her mouth was smiling proudly at her victory over Bruno-Charles -- people never meet your eyes with their pride. She was saying something about how *Place d'Alliance* was more than a banquet hall, it was our only cultural venue, a government subsidized protectorate of French culture. It had the language classes and the daycare and yes, the banquet hall, so we could make some money, but we had the charge of our traditions. *Cabane à Sucre* was tradition. She wasn't even from here, her *joual* was thick, it was always the Quebecers who had moved here that talked politics. Who didn't realize that if you had to fight for it; it wasn't a culture, it was a crusade.

She had her measuring tape out and cinched it around my bust, my hips, my waist, reading off the numbers, clucking her approval that I wasn't fat. It made me feel the closeness of her more oppressively. She picked out a pastel blue dress that had all the yellow of cornflower blue but none of the brightness. It had sleeves and a high lace collar and was fitted everywhere except the skirt, which had a million little pleats at the waist to make it puffy. She held it up to herself, her own reedy body disappeared behind it and her face beamed. The wide brimmed-bonnet that went with it was tied to the hanger, drooping like a dead baloon.

"We're all girls here," she said. That was her cue for me to take my clothes off. Mal met my eyes and gave me a grim smile. Those rich girls from Saint Anne's who didn't even need to

work would see my baggy underwear and the wings of my sanitary napkin. Why didn't I make Mom buy me tampons? I unbuttoned my vest and my shirt, my fingers stiff with dread, and draped my clothes carefully over the back of Bruno-Charles's desk chair. I felt all their eyes on me so I stared at the finger groove in his right hand drawer, where Anne-Marie and I left him the joints that meant we got the shifts we wanted. Pauline zipped me into the dress, and it was as tight in the sleeves and neckline as it looked. I stood next to the others and waited for someone to attach my crinoline. Pauline's ladies were talking about the new Costco gas station, wondering why their husbands waited in line for forty five minutes to save three cents a litre, when they could be inside with them, eating samples.

The other girls were setting up the buffet in the Main banquet hall, the one we didn't have to take an elevator to get to, thank god, while I got sent down to the bar with the Buffalo wings for happy hour. I carried the hotel pan down the mint green hallways, with their mint green mottled linoleum, the fluorescents buzzing blithely, past the classrooms, past the daycare, past the francophone employment office, past the empty pool that cost too much to maintain, past the gym advertising their tanning booth prices on a Bristol board. My arms were getting tired.

The bar was in the basement. A big room with the kind of drop ceiling and fluorescents the rest of the building had. It was like an impossible church basement with a scratched up pool table, and a cigarette machine, and Bristol boards everywhere advertising drink specials, and a sexy beer frau holding steins at tit level on the clock face. There were six guys at the bar in their Ford coveralls because the truck engine plant was across the street. They turned their heads and

stared when they heard the door slam and I felt so conspicuous. I thought, shoulders down like a dancer, and chin up. I dropped the wings into the chafing dish on the table next to the video poker machine. I had to ask the barmaid for a lighter for the sternos, and all the men turned their faces to me and tried to look engaging. One of them, he had ruddy Scotch cheeks, or maybe he was just drunk, said he liked my bonnet. I locked my face and watched the engaging expressions on their faces fade. The barmaid watched me too. I nodded at her, she was the kind of elaborately made up middle-aged lady who was so dedicated to looking pleasing it made me happy she was alive, trying to make people happy. That made me immediately afraid that that might look like pity on my face. Hags like her got so much scorn. Mom always said, mutton in sheep's clothing, but I thought they were a force of good in the world. As I asked her for her lighter, I searched her face for a tightness in the lips, any sign that she thought I was naive or silly, but she handed it to me impassively, so it was ok.

I lit the sternos, then went outside to smoke. Getting the cigarettes tucked into my sock out from under my skirt proved to be awkward. I had to flop over at the waist and hold my skirts up with one hand and get my smokes with the other. I heard the whoosh of the door, one of the men had followed me outside. I smoked and looked out at the Ford plant across the expressway and the Ford Fire Safety Village in the field next to us with its tiny houses, and tiny police station, and traffic signs for teaching kids the rules of the road. The fire engine was a real fire engine. It threw off the child scale of the village.

“What is this dress?” The man asked. He had an Eastern European accent. We had every kind of former USSR immigrant, because of all the Catholics and the factories always hiring in our town. One priest personally sponsored two thousand poles. He wasn't the one who'd asked

about my bonnet, he was a wiry guy with bushy eyebrows and a hooked nose. He had tired red eyes that were warm and quick and they contended with my outfit very openly. He was smiling too wide.

“It’s *cabane à sucre*.”

“Is that an, ahem, ceremony?”

“It’s a French thing.”

“It looks very good.” He said, and nodded at me and smoked. I could hear the pause before he said his name. “I am Peter.”

“Pietr?”

“Yes, I am Polish.”

“Hi.” I said and smiled curtly. I threw my cigarette into the snowy flowerbed and went inside. My skirts billowed up around me in the doorway. It was little thrill to leave him hanging, he was old and he deserved no better. I hoped he wouldn’t think it was because he was Polish. Inside, the drinkers were drinking their three dollar Labatt 50’s and OV’s with their three dollar shots of Canadian Club. I waved to the barmaid but she didn’t see me. She was playing an old song that was maybe country, maybe blues, the singer’s tremolo wasn’t laid on thick at all, it sounded like he was talking to me... *I just got tired of being poor*. And she was listening to it, she was in it.

The *cabane à sucre* had sold almost twice as many tickets as last year. It was hectic.

I emptied my tray into the dish pit, adjusted my bonnet. I looked at my hands, smeared with *fèves au lard*. “Fuck,” I muttered. Paulette would yell at me. The skinny dish pig we called Dish Pig because he was a pig, said, “ha!” His face stayed sullen. “Hose me,” I said. He reached for the spray nozzle. It was scalding. I yanked my hand away. He stared, still spraying water into the basin, still smiling through the steam.

I hustled back to the line, my crinolines rustling, and asked the cook for the cold salads we needed to restock on the buffet: chef salad with maple vinaigrette, maple marshmallow salad, gherkins and cocktail onions pickled in apple cider vinegar and maple syrup. He rolled his eyes and said, “Cocktail onions look like eyeballs. Why do people eat them?” His eyes were very pale blue. The girls said it was because he used to do so much acid, letting every hit melt under his eyelid, because that worked faster. But I didn’t believe it because it didn’t sound true. He loaded my tray and I ripped the plastic wrap off the Lucite bowls. He grabbed my hand and hoisted it over my head and poked a hole I’d torn in my armpit. It was a warm wet thing, his finger, and I hated him. I pinched the pubic hairs on the naked woman tattooed on his arm (he had cut off all the sleeves of his t-shirts, so it was an easy target). When he grinned, I tugged the fine arm hairs growing there. He laughed, called me a female pig, “*cochonne*,” which means slut, in a good way, in French. And I hissed, “*connard*,” which means male cunt, but it’s a parisian insult, I’d read it in a book, so he just looked at me like, what?

In the banquet hall, Bruno-Charles was nodding at Paulette, and touching her elbow: a safe touch. His mouth was loose and smug because all those people had paid sixty bucks for

tickets to the *cabane à sucre*. When I side stepped past, she gasped and touched the brim of my bonnet and said, “You look so pretty!” Her lips were tight with pleasure at her vision:, to have us all dressed as pioneers. The accordion player was playing the old folk songs, sad songs with no real rhythm besides the sad accordion’s sawing. *Son autre amant est à la porte qui écoute*, her other lover is at the door listening, only the singer had no charisma, so the empathy wasn’t caching.

People were eating and waiting in line to eat. Shifting their weight from foot to foot, holding their plates in their hands out in front of them, like an offering, or pressing them to their bellies, in a gesture of modesty. I took cautious steps up to the stage where we set up the buffet, and unloaded my tray on the round table at the foot of it, with the maple beet salad, and the maple carrot salad, and all the rest. Then the table collapsed with a fantastic crash, the sharp clatter of metal and the dull bounce of plastic. It looked like a compost pile on a silky bed sheet. The table skirts billowed still around the mess. The waitresses gathered around it and stared. We took tentative steps toward it, then stepped back, when we remembered our skirts. The customers gave the mess a wide birth and looked carefully away from it, to the hot chafing dishes, the meat and potatoes in their gleaming urns.

Eric came out and looked at it with us, mopping his brow. He said, “All the salads, prep all the salads.” The janitor came out with the mop bucket. He and Eric picked up the mess, the way you pick up a sheet to fold it, and carried it solemnly down the front steps of the stage. There was some splatter but the janitor would get it. We carried out the broken table, carried in a new one, covered it, clamped new table skirts to it, and brought out the food all over again. Some

of the customers said, “good job”. The same ones who always said something, like, how’d your memory get so good, when you brought them the thing they asked you for.

People stacked their dirty plates in the middle of the tables. I leaned in, wedging my wide skirts between the diners, I couldn’t keep them from ballooning beneath their elbows. They clutched their cutlery and stared at me, startled at the touch. All the sauces cascaded down the plates that bones and foregone potatoes made into an unsteady stack. I put my sauce-smear hand on my hip and felt the crescent of grease there already. I was sweaty and itchy because silk doesn’t breathe.

In the dish pit, I unloaded next to Mal. We sorted the cutlery into bins of dishwater. “Did Andrew call?” I asked.

“No. But he drove me home from his brother’s show,” she said. “Did you talk to his sister?”

“I think she thinks that I want her brother.”

“Why do you want your brother?” Dish Pig asked. Mal and I scoffed at him but it wasn’t worth the effort.

I followed Mal to the meat freezer. We both groaned with happiness when we got inside. My sweat cooled immediately; the slickness was both disgusting and pleasing.

“So?”

“So, after choir I asked her...” I said. Fiddling with my bonnet until I got it off, then resting my cheek on a frosty cardboard box of breakfast sausages. “And she says there’s a girl at

the campground he works at every summer, and they get back together every summer, but she's got a boyfriend now and he's not over it." Mal looked really pathetic in her stupid straw bonnet and buttercup gown. Yellow is awful on pale people. Her fractious face made it worse. She was so beautiful and smart. I was fifteen and I wanted to be exactly like her when I was seventeen, gorgeous but smart enough not to care. It was hard for me to see her so sad she wasn't attractive anymore. I had to appeal to her, so I said, "This is good. He's single."

"He's in love," she whined.

"He was in love," I said. She dropped her shoulders and then threw her arms out and turned her face up to the fan. She stood there, in Christ pose and laughed. I laughed too, a little desperately.

Pam, our banquet team leader, stepped inside. She looked cold and awkward in her flouncy purple top. She had her tits out, like always. And there was the pink scar from her throat down to her big tits. She wasn't even five feet tall, you had to look for her face, but facewise she wasn't much, and then you saw those tits and that scar. Thyroid cancer. She got thyroid cancer at thirty. People in this city were sicker than anywhere else in the country, it was so bad that even the people who were upwardly mobile looked hard.

Mal dropped her arms and looked at Pam, miserably.

"I know we said we wouldn't be doing the pioneers. But Bruno-Charles..." Pam said, and cleared her throat. We all hated Bruno-Charles. "We've gotta break down the buffet, ladies. And do dessert."

I grabbed the beige plastic tray cart. I loved that Rubbermaid plastic, it's matte strength. I draped a tablecloth over it so it'd look nice like I was supposed to. It took three trips for the hot food-- the cart bore me along. I felt for Mal, I was lonely too. My cellphone was vibrating in my sock. It was Alex. I went to the linen storage and sat on a waist high stack of tablecloths. My skirts rose all around me. I felt like the princess and the pea. I sat there for a moment before I called him back.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Nothing. I'm at work," I said.

"What esteemed event are you serving? The Instant Loan staff party?"

"Cabane à sucre."

"Come again?"

"We dress up like pioneers, there's some accordions, and all the food's made with maple syrup," I said, giggling.

"Are you wearing a bonnet?" he asked. Hearing him breathe was pretty exciting. "Are you?"

"I'm nodding."

"If I bring you a joint will you come out and see me?"

"Two joints," I said. I didn't even like him, I said to myself, but I liked that he liked me, or maybe liked me. Alex sold weed and had a three-piece band, sort of r&b, with the guys he

worked with at Chrysler as an occasional worker, which is what the factories called temps. His band played at the strip club on Sundays, Retro Theme Night. I had to wait for the battle of the bands at school to see them, because none of my fake IDs were strip club good. Also, Alex was good at science, and had a notable Adams apple, and cared about the way his clothes were cut. So I liked him, but I didn't like that his voice had a flat affect to it and his fingers were so feminine. Also, I hated that he'd decided he wanted me only after Jenny gave him the clap.

In the kitchen, I loaded my cart with all the desserts: maple and cranberry cheesecake, *pouding chomeur*, maple corncake with maple cherry preserves, and the rest. Eric checked over my cart, his elbow bumped my elbow and he stared at me, and I stared, and it seemed like his pupils should be getting smaller, and it seemed important not to look away, but I did. He asked, "What are you waiting for?"

I wheeled the cart away fast. The halogen washed everybody out, made us all pale and mean around the mouth. The pot lights in the banquet hall were kinder. I unloaded the deserts on stage and felt how hot my skin was, how fast my heart was beating. Alex was stopping by. I imagined that I might burst if he touched me, but when I noticed people's greedy eyes on my cart the heat in my face became disheartening and strange. Spacing the platters out evenly on the stark tablecloth, the pleasing beiges of pies and cakes made me feel more at ease. When I was finished, I faced the crowd. The greedy people rose slowly, and talked a little still to the others at their tables, not wanting to be first in line.

In the kitchen, all the girls who went to Saint Anne's ate standing up around the prep table. Stacey was talking about Mal, "Last year she chipped her tooth on a beer bottle in the

woods, then this bitch decides to look for her missing piece of tooth in the leaves.” The dainty quality of her thin lips and round eyes were only highlighted by their stillness. While the stupid spray-tanned faces of the others were laughing, their hands were draped across their ornate lace collars, betraying their guilt. Mal sat cross-legged on the baking table by herself, spooning mashed potatoes into her mouth. Pity would make it worse.

“Spoons *are* the best utensils,” I said. She nodded too ardently and went back to staring. Trays of food were set up on the serving side of the line. Alex was going to be there soon, so I got all wifey and made him a take-away. He could eat five cheeseburgers so I overdid it a little: beans and potatoes and carrots and meat sauces pooled together grimly.

“Alex is in the parking lot. Come smoke a joint?”

“Weed is boring,” she scoffed.

“It’s a dazzled sort of boredom.” Mal looked at me like I was talking to myself, blankly, but not discouragingly, and I was. She dipped her mashed potato mounded spoon into the cranberry and the gravy and turned it over in her mouth, so it would all fall onto her tongue. She closed her eyes when she swallowed. I was too excited to eat, and way too excited to eat like that, letting the eating ease the expression on my face off.

I skipped down the stairs. Past the fake ferns and the fountain you could plainly see a hose coming out of that was supposed to make the foyer look fancy.

“*Maria Chapdelaine*, are you wearing panties?” Anne-Marie asked, her thin voice gleeful. She was tiny behind the ten-foot reception desk. Marie-Anne did days and Anne-Marie

did nights, it was confusing for everybody. I rushed over to her, my skirts rustling, her face affected me like feedback affects a fan of punk music, every feature was more defined than most people's: her jaw was sharp, her nose was aquiline, regal rather than pretty, her high cheekbones gave her famished fashion model cheeks. What bone structure! Her eyes were small but warm and daring. She raised an eyebrow and said, "Alex texted me and asked if you were working."

"He's here. I look so stupid," I whined, like a stupid girl.

"You're a very pretty pioneer," she said a little mockingly. Not because I didn't look pretty, because we both knew I did.

"I hate the historical people. I hate Paulette."

"You don't even deal with her," she said and sighed, looking down at the Yellow Pages. They were open to Strip Club listings. "Bruno-Charles has me planning his birthday."

"You need a reservation?"

"He's having them here," she said. I looked at the drawings of silhouettes on poles and thought, we have no pole. "Do you think all the places are the same?"

"They're not even pictures. They're just drawings of girls."

"Should I ask for something specific. Like a blonde or something?"

I wondered if Alex was wondering about my tits. If I'd been by myself I would have bounced on the balls of my feet; I would have sang a little song, to get the jitters out. The phone

rang, and Anne-Marie's fingernails clicked together as she wrapped her hand around the receiver. She still had her fireworks acrylics from semi-formal.

"Place d'Alliance. Bonjour."

In the parking lot, the asphalt was night slick under the streetlights. My breath fogged and the cold made my lungs feel full. Alex's F-150 was all by itself at the edge of the lot, on the other side of the expressway was the Ford Engine plant. Its white aluminum siding was bright for three blocks behind the fence you couldn't see in the dark. The factory was tall but you couldn't tell how many stories it was because there were no windows. White smoke stacks rose in the sky and the smoke was white too. Cars came off the expressway and drove past us on Ford Quality Way, past the people in the factory and the people in *Place d'Alliance*, past the tailings' pond flickering with the glow of headlights.

I always wanted to walk slowly, to saunter, but I dashed across the lot. Alex rolled down his window and whistled. It was hard to fit my skirts inside his truck. They billowed up past the dash. I gave Alex his take-away. He opened the Styrofoam tray and it had that watered down butter and sweet, unspecific vegetable smell of buffet food. I was embarrassed I'd brought it.

Alex said thank you and sparked a joint. He was listening to the Roots, their one hit song. The one with mostly singing instead of rapping, where he comes inside the girl and names his baby Rock n' Roll.

Alex told me he didn't get the permanent part-time position at Chrysler. "It's bullshit," he said. "They don't give lifer gigs to the students who are gonna go to University." His eyes were

too sharp and his jaw too loose. I took a haul on the joint and I could see him in the interview, his long face alert, his answers too wordy, and his pants too tight.

“Are you gonna keep the occasional work?” I asked.

“Weeding out the smart ones. Fuck that guy in his dockers.” It gave me a thrill when he got catty. He spritzed CK One in the vent to keep the weed stench out. “You know I’m staying and those fuckers know I’m staying. Nobody else is paying twenty seven dollars and hour.”

That he was sharing with me like this, it made me think my skin might stop containing me. I didn’t want it too. I wasn’t brave enough to look at him so I looked at his knuckles, thick and white on the glossy wheel.

“I want Sade,” I said. Alex smiled and obliged me. The lazy bars of *Is it a Crime* were fraught in the smoky cab. But this was what I asked for. I made myself look at him and smile and not look away. I knew that if I did that he would have to kiss me.

“You look stupid pretty in that,” he said and I laughed a honking laugh. Being pretty did feel stupid! Here was an intuitive man. His lips were pressed, his eyes black and unfocused. Headlights streamed across his face marking time unbearably. Sade’s voice was ringing me out, she belted out the bridge ... *my love is wider than Victoria Lane, taller than the Empire State, is it a crime...?*

“I’m still in love with Jenny.” He said, so that her name sounded like a secret. Then he looked at me with that self-conscious candour that stares. I didn’t know how to look away

without looking wounded. So I didn't. I looked until it occurred to me to nod. I could tell he was cringing.

“Two weeks of antibiotics, and she's not out of my system yet.” He spoke a little too loudly, and his mouth made the shape of laughter, but he only exhaled. I hated him for that. For making his love a maudlin little joke.

When I scooted out of the cab my skirts were a welcome weight for the first time. They rose behind me and before me as I hopped out, so my leaving had some gravitas. I heard him start his truck and drive away. The Ford Fire Safety Village was lit up with miniature streetlights. The primary colours were so pleasing in the snowy field: the red schoolhouse was shaped like a schoolhouse but it was aluminum. It was all aluminum. Ford made aluminum: the boxy blue police station, the bright yellow houses with white aluminum shutters and real geraniums in the aluminum window boxes, the true to life fire truck parked forever on that little street. I wanted to drive that fire truck into a building. Not a baby building, but the stupid box of red brick that was *Place d'Alliance*. I wanted to come out the other side and hear the accordion and see the square dancers in their formation, staring at me in the driver's seat.

I had to go back to work. Retrieving the pan of wings from the bar gave me a reason to dally. It was packed, the music was blaring, moms in mom jeans were dancing with their men, smiling those broad smiles that mean you're so so happy to have a body, a body that dances. Men in Ford coveralls were drinking at the bar, marking the rhythm with those lazy nods that mean you're going along with the good time everyone is having. There was no stage so I had to elbow my way through the crowd to have a look.

A stooped old man on a barstool was singing the blues and playing guitar, and he had a butch girl in a shirt and tie playing bass. The song was about how poor he was. He was so poor he had to feed his wife's chihuahua mice, her chihuahua would paw at it's bowl whenever it heard a mouse squeal in a trap. He was so poor there was no food in his pantry, and eventually there were no mice. He was so poor he ate his wife's chihuahua. And then he was so poor he ate his wife.

I was standing next to an old lady with a tattoo of a butterfly on her neck and a plastic daisy tucked behind her ear. We were both laughing with abandon and eyeing each other, like yeah. I forgot I was so conspicuous because that's what a party is-- conspicuous togetherness. Someone touched my elbow and it was Pietr, smiling sheepishly, still in his coveralls. He handed me a shot of whiskey in a plastic cup and we grinned at each other. It burned in my throat but it wasn't unpleasant. He asked what the song was about.

"He was so poor he ate his wife's chihuahua. And then he ate his wife." He shook his hand no the way men from that part of the world do.

"Yes." I laughed and he looked at the singer with his grizzled face and his yellow teeth with a deep regard.

"That is very funny."

"Yes."

I gave him an indulgent smile, and looked at him, and didn't look away, to see if that would still work. And he put his arm on my waist and we danced a quick two step with all the

others, and smiled at each other with real glee. These French Canadian songs always have a ton of verses. And in the tilt and whirl of this dancing mass I was so happy to be enthralled in the nonsense of the present, of our present, that I forgot the square dancers enacting the past in the banquet hall. Pietr's calloused hand squeezed mine and called me back to myself. When the song was over, I was at a loss for words, so I curtsied. And he laughed and gave me a beer foamy kiss on the cheek.

“You're very pretty.”

I shrugged, guiltily, because I couldn't muster any gratitude. You can't hear that too many times, that's what they say, but that's a lie.

I went outside for a smoke, and he didn't follow. Being alone outside felt like a little vacation after the dance floor. My skirts swished in the wind and the cold tickled my ankles. The smoke was hot and it rolled off my tongue and curled so prettily in the wind. I saw it before I felt it. The flames on the silk rose and then shrank. I felt the heat all of a sudden as the black edge of flames ate through my nylon crinolines. There was a plastic smell. I hurled my body onto a snow bank. When I could feel the snow pearling on my face I lifted my head to gulp at the air. My fingers shook as I lifted my crinolines to touch my skin, to feel its intactness, and it was still skin, not some horribly split flesh, I was fine. The skirts were destroyed. The silk had blackened in an instant, some layers of the white nylon had melted to a sick yellow, the skirts effect was of a colourful wound.

I no longer wanted a cigarette. Or to have a man's face near my face to make me feel my own expression and desire most keenly. Or to hope he'd take my face in his hands so I didn't have to bear my face anymore, so I could lose myself. I watched my frozen breath and the smoke of the factory rising from the stacks making the city a place people worked and ate and drank and danced. Now that I remembered I was together with everything, whether or not anything or anyone wanted me, breathing was easy again. I fondled the frayed edges of the hole in my skirt, some of the burnt silk crumbled. I hoped that Bruno-Charles would be feeling too drunk and successful to fire me for ruining my pioneer costume. I shook the snow out of my skirts and went back to work.

When We Were a Statue

We burned the dead tree. It wouldn't be enough. The boys planted the dwarf spruce in the sand, doused it with gasoline, and threw matches at it until it caught. We drank beer and threw our empties into the fire to watch the ink melt off the aluminum. The spruce sap made spitting sounds and I looked for things in the fire the way you look for things in the clouds. The only thing I saw was a woman with a witchy chin. The fire waned. We needed more.

There were lots of dead trees beyond the dunes but it was too dark and we were too drunk to go get a saw. I looked to the bluffs and the cottages all lit up. Next to Mrs. MacEachern's place was Tom Stockard's lot. He married a girl in Regina. Now he hardly ever came home. His place was still just a concrete block foundation and two walls of studs and a big blue tarp with stuff underneath it. I nudged Kyle, and he nudged Tyler and pointed to Tom Stockard's stuff.

"Bet he's got some wood under that tarp he's never gonna use." Kyle said, squeezing my knee. His sisters were watching us as his hand made assurances. I wondered if they sensed that I was pregnant, if it created some disturbance in the universe. Kyle rose and the rest of us followed. The waves lapped lazily at the shore and the moon was waning but you could still see the shadow of how big it could be. Kyle hoisted me up onto his shoulders. I laughed at the salt in my nose and my thighs holding tight and my loose feet out in front of me. We were against the wind, pitching forward and back as his feet sank in the sand. He put me down when the beach got rocky beneath the bluff. I felt small on my feet. I had the flashlight and so I lit a path up the bank.

Under the tarp there were two by fours and the boys carried those. I picked up a sheet of insulation because it weighed nothing. It was pink and looked like cotton candy. We could sit on it and keep our asses off the damp. We went single file toward the fire. The fiberglass made my fingers itch. I felt like an ant beneath it-- my limbs so narrow and my back so broad. The two by fours were teepeed and the flames rose to lick them. The fire was too hot and we sat too close and the flames cast shadows on my friend's faces that played like thoughts.

"I've gotta piss," Joe said and walked off. Kyle grabbed the can of gasoline. It dangled strangely from his fist. He was drawing a line from the fire, he ran, and the fire followed. When he drew a circle around Joe we could see his bare ass surrounded and licked at by the light. He spun around peeing on the flames and they fizzled loudly until they died. We laughed and laughed.

Joe charged at us and wrenched the insulation out from under us. We tumbled into the sand. He held it above his head and dropped it on the fire. The red and yellow flames melted a black hole in the pink insulation and the smoke billowed huge and blue, cerulean, and red and yellow too, snaking across the night sky like a shaky rainbow. The fire grew fat with the fiberglass and it clinked as it burned, glass wool filaments collapsing. More windchimes than you've ever heard. They all ran back, but I just watched.

Smoke as colourful as a flame, that dayglo cloud, it was the most shocking thing. It was not dispelled. I watched it swallow the stars.

I came to with my head in Kyle's lap, my ass in the damp sand. Ann, he said, the smoke choked you. I sat up and my lungs hurt. I could hear the others behind us and looked out at the

sea before us. I coughed up some phlegm and spit it into my palm. It swirled with every colour, red and yellow and blue. It was so pretty.

“Shit,” Kyle said. I put my hand in the sea and my bright lung butter was buoyant, frothing on a black wave, it washed away. I did that many times and Kyle watched, holding the hand I wasn’t horking in.

When there was nothing left he walked me home. I slept until noon. My sister shook me awake and leered at me.

“Grandma came over, you missed her,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I yawned, my tongue felt like sandpaper. I hadn’t coughed up the glass, but you could hear it there, my voice was too gravelly for a girl. She looked at me, her round face tight with righteousness.

“You always say sorry,” she said.

I wasn’t any uglier in the bathroom mirror. My tongue felt like sandpaper but I wasn’t thirsty. I drank a glass of water. I dropped the glass in the sink and it shattered. My hand shot out to delicately take a sliver of it and put it in my mouth. It was as good as sugar but it didn’t taste sweet, it was a new taste, a mineral bitterness. I swallowed. I took a big piece that still had its curve. Every bite was as satisfying as the crust of a crème brulee. The glass clashed against my teeth, a gorgeous sound.

I could feel grit in my gums. I looked in the mirror and opened my mouth. Blood pulsed from the tiny laceration on my tongue. It was warm but it didn’t taste as thick as I expected. I watched a pearl of blood make its way down my ugly pink tongue. It was a thrill.

The rest of the water glass was in pieces in the basin. I ate it all, even the base, still intact, a denser pleasure.

“No,” I said. When it was already done.

My sister banged on the door. I felt trapped. I rinsed my mouth. My spit bloomed red in the basin. I rinsed it out. I started combing my hair and let her in.

“You have practice?” I asked.

“At three.” She said and gathered her hair into a ponytail.

“Are you gonna do the Schubert?” I asked. “Are you getting nervous? Are your lips still shaking? Do your hands shake the flute too?” She sighed at me. “Dolly, do I look weird? Does my face look weird?”

“You’re weird.” She said, and left. My face in the mirror was stupid and still. I raised my fingers to it. It was still my face.

“Annie, come set the table.” My mother hollered. She was picking fish out of the soup on the stove with a slotted spoon to check its tenderness. “I thought you were working,” she said, her voice reedy. I got the spoons and she handed me the bowls she’d already stacked on the counter.

“Terry Lee took my shift,” I said.

“She covered for you. That’s nice. She’s a nice girl.”

“Sure.”

“What’s that mean?” She asked, with the way she was watching me I didn’t want to make it hard for her to talk to me.

“She asked me to switch. She’s got her cousin’s wedding next Saturday.”

“Lester’s daughter.”

“Crystal.”

“Nice girl.” She said and looked at me like it was a question, so I nodded. “Who’s the groom?”

“Dave. He’s a taxi driver.”

“From town then,” she said, nodding. “Nice guy?” Her head was cocked like a dog’s. The only thing I knew about him was Crystal got wasted in town and took a taxi home but she couldn’t pay. It must’ve cost at least fifty, so she gave the driver, Dave, a blowjob. Now they were getting married. I kind of loved her for it.

“Who knows?” I asked and she groaned at me. “Mom, someone knows. Crystal knows. But I don’t.”

“You’ve known Crystal your whole life,” she said, scoffing brightly.

“I’ve barely known Crystal my whole life,” I said. And it *was* weeks before I heard about her and the taxi driver. Mom put the food on the table with her elbows out and her back straight, her body pleased with her rectitude, her face still fractious.

Mom ladled the soup and Dad said grace. My family ate heartily and I ate daintily. It was like any other meal. Mom asked Dolly about her rehearsals for the Anne of Green Gables Centenary Concert. Dolly shrugged. Dad cleared his throat and asked me about Heart of Darkness. I told him it was pretty dark. Mom asked Dad how much he would bet at the auction they were having at the Legion to raise money so kids who couldn’t walk could ride horses. Eighty dollars. The soup was vile. It smelled the way it always smelled, the tang of tomatoes, the fishiness of fish, the sweetness of cooked cream, but it barely tasted like it. It was a warm balm

on my wounds. I swilled it around in my mouth and let it run down my throat. I watched my family eat, dipping the warm sourdough into the soup and chewing the porous red stained slices with their red mouths.

Mom and Dad drove Dolly to town. I did the dishes. It was too hot inside. I crawled under the house. The smell was damp earth and rotten wood. I crouched over the old windows nobody had bothered to bring to the dump. I spit shined our old picture window. My spit sparkled on it, with rainbow flecks, like windex. My face in the window was still my face. I pulled my sleeve down and made a fist and punched it in. I made my sleeve a mitten and ate a piece of reinforced glass as big as a steak. I was ravenous. The warm salt of my blood tasted as comforting as being done crying and still tasting the tears. I ate the whole window. The empty frame made me sad. I curled up under the house and slept in the moist darkness. I dreamt what I always dreamt. That I was a statue, that I smiled at people and people smiled at me, not adoringly, only obliquely. It was nice. I woke too soon. I lay there looking at the empty frame's jagged edges, wanting to run my tongue over them. Work the scraps off with my teeth like the rock candy that clings still to the stick.

I crawled out into the glaring day. The sun's heat was in the brightness of the sea the cloudless sky, too turquoise to be believed. I looked at the spit a mile out and it was an easy day to make it. I put on my swimsuit.

The wooden steps down to the beach were warm and the sand stung the bottoms of my feet -- it felt so good to wade into the cool sea. The tow was only a whisper and my arms cut through it nicely. The sea was alive but the salt and the silt made it pointless to look for all the things that lived there.

I lay on my back, feeling my body borne by the water, the way I liked to. My belly felt heavy. My baby was a stone inside of me. I let it drag me down through the mottled water with my eyes stinging, watching. There's no seeing the sky underwater. All there is is light. When I felt the water start to weigh on me the sea spit me out.

So, I swam. I swam until my knees struck the sand and I raised my face and sat on my haunches. The spit was glassy in the sunlight. I crawled to the bank on all fours and placed the palms of my hands on the searing sand. I could feel the cool water lapping my calves and the hot sand in my hands.

I put my finger in my mouth and felt four extra slick spots on my tongue. I was disgusted and fascinated with myself. I sat on the spit for a while, still feeling restless and ashamed, like I had missed a test. A baby was a sort of test. Like the big test of life-- of women's experience. I was thinking, a woman who can't care for her child, that is the lowest. When our bible study group worked the soup kitchen the people we fed were mostly old men and some young hippies. They'd make small talk with us and we'd have a good time chatting and feeling useful. If a woman came in with her children everybody got quiet. These women tried to make conversation, like the others, but it didn't work. We were too sad to talk about the weather. We'd offer more food. Things to bring home. The women left looking more reserved than they had coming in. I was gonna be that pathetic. I was gonna cast a pall on anyone who looked at my belly. I started laughing, theatrically. Noise carries across the water. I wondered if I'd scare the tourists renting cottages all along the beach. I hoped so. They'd think I was the ghost of some woman who'd drowned long ago. I swam home.

In the picture window, I saw Kyle at my kitchen table. The light made his pursed lips glisten like a peeled grape. He stood up when the door slammed.

I was wet so I stood there before the door, dripping. He squeezed me and his t-shirt was as warm as skin but better, not fraught with the vulnerability of nakedness.

“You’re gonna get all wet,” I said. He groaned. He palmed my face.

“Your skin is so dry.”

“It’s the salt.”

“Rinse it off,” he said and he kissed me. His tongue flitted in and out, grotesque. “Your mouth.”

“What?”

“Are you ok?”

“It must be the smoke.” I said. He looked worried. He tapped his fingers like insect feelers along my cheek and my brow. I hated it but I had to let him. He sighed.

“Your voice is still hoarse.” He said. He cupped my chin and kissed me firmly with pressed lips.

“Is it gross? Are you grossed out?” I asked and I felt his fluffy head on my wet head. Folded into him, I wanted him to fix it, but I couldn’t imagine saying anything. It was illegal in this province. Our parents would never let us take the car overnight. We were Catholics. He squeezed me finally, to make me let go.

“Better?”

“Much.” I lied, forcing a smile.

“Go shower.”

After, we smoked a joint of his friend’s ditch weed and watched the Ninja Turtles movie. It was stupid. What did it matter? Weed made me feel stupid and feeling stupid felt better. He kept squeezing me to fight his discomfort. I felt it.

My parents came home. Mom made bright small talk with Kyle and Dad put the groceries away. After, they left to pick up their friends for the silent auction because Mom was always the designated driver.

People from work were having a party and so we went. The steaks Kyle stole from the walk in at work were on the barbecue, they looked disgusting, with their boils of fat. We went in. The vodka smelled sharp but I couldn’t taste it. Paul and I took turns playing songs and he told me I won when I followed Sonic Youth, *Teenage Dream*, with Hole, *Violet*. All the boys groaned, and it was mostly boys. They disagreed, but Paul let his head fall back and left his drunk mouth open as Courtney Love wailed, *go on, take everything, take everything, I want you to...* After she was done we looked at each other, like, there’s nothing more, *more*, than a whore from hell. I loved Paul but he had this privacy and I wasn’t brave so we would never touch each other.

When the moon had risen the mosquitoes weren’t so thick. We went out on the porch for the meteor shower. Kyle rolled a joint and we smoked it, our legs dangling off the edge of the porch, our feet colliding now and then. We watched the sky and counted the meteors. It seemed to me that their heads should be brighter than their tails, but they died with a scream not a sigh. Kyle curled his long fingers in my back pocket. I wanted it and so I led him down the dirt road to a cottage that was being built. I crawled under the foundation and he followed, laughing at me.

He knew I liked to wrestle like a little kid. He pinned my elbows and knees and I liked the ache of his bones. He pulled my hair and I laughed at him. He put one dirty hand over my mouth and shoved the other one down my jeans and put his dirty fingers inside me. I licked the dirt off his hand. He kissed me and he shrieked.

“Shit. Your tongue. It’s like a cat,” he said. His face was so big above me and it seemed to be getting bigger and bigger, as he shook his head.

“We need to go to the hospital,” he said, and I nodded. He looked hapless and afraid, shifting his weight from me to his hands and knees, fumbling with his belt.

We crawled out from under the house and walked back to the party. I told him to tell everyone we were going home and I ran for the shore.

I stumbled drunkenly down the beach, muttering to myself, “Oh my God! Oh my God!” and “I’m sorry.”

When the tightness of horror made me tired I felt my mind loosen, and looked around. The sea was there and the moon in it. The only face that black mirror will ever see.

I put my fingers in my mouth and bit down. Bone on bone, my knuckles were only fatuous wrinkles. My tongue was thick with scratchy scabs.

Why did I do it? I’d known it might end horribly. That with him inside of me, there might be no room left for me.

The sky seemed so far. And there, there was a shooting star. How did it rain stars? Why did they all die at the same time?

I was careful with the creaky door. Everyone was asleep. Everyone’s sleep made the house heavy and happy and I felt lonely in it. My arms and legs ached for sleep but my guts hurt,

I was hungry. I ate a hot dog bun. It felt as dense and dead as mold in my mouth. I vomited in the sink. I felt the retching but I could barely taste the bitterness that filled my mouth.

I sat down at the kitchen table. In the picture window was a stained glass panel of a ship, it's bulwark breaking whitecap waves. They must've got it at the auction. The porch light's yellow beam slanted through the sails and the tiny bright triangles that capped the waves. Each shape, outlined in iron, wrought the soft world into a better order. I took it down and bit into it and a glass wave cracked from it's casing and sat on my tongue. I moaned in happy agony and bore down. Such a clamour in my mouth. Such a sound. There was the heat of my blood and the dull pulse of my life. With a knife I stabbed each piece out and ate them as I went. It felt like eating an advent calendar all at once. I looked at it and cried. I traced the sharp articulations of the glass shards with my fingernail, fondly. The glass was making it's way to my baby. My sobs filled my mouth with spit and I felt the grit of glass in my teeth.

I curled up on the floor. The cold tiles made me feel the heat of my body.

My watch alarm woke me. The sunlight bled through my eyelids. All the colours. Mostly red, but blue and yellow seeped in too. The pattern was all lines, no circles, nothing that makes a body feel good. I shut my eyes tight against the day.

In the salt marsh, the buzz of insects was thick. I was a glass statue floating in the narrowest most fetid finger of the marshes many fingers. My body was shiny on the dull water. Then my sister was calling my name. I felt her in the long a in my name, Ann, Ann. Her steps sucked at the mud. It took her some time to find me, to wade out to me.

Her body shuddered out to my glassy weightlessness. She cupped my chin so tenderly and all of a sudden her hand was muffling me-- her fingers covering my mouth and the heel of

her hand in my cheeks. She raised her hand to her throat and stared at me for a what felt like forever. Then she carried my body through the marsh with her head bowed, and her neck bare and brave. Our house looked unsteady with my sister in the foreground and the burden of me. She stood me up to get me through the door, and carried me into the living room like that with her arms wrapped around my waist, and her body hiding behind mine. She lay me on the couch. My mother let her fingers feel the gross smoothness of my whole body. My father and my sister were still standing there, but my mother wept wholly to herself.

Eventually, they put me in my room, mine and my sisters, in the corner, with the music stand and little shelf of illustrated classics and sheet music. Before Grandma came over, Mom draped a sheet around my body, like a toga. And it was obscene, my stupid body, it was more shocking than it had been in my skin, some big stupid breasts and stupid ribs, so brittle, and a waist and big hopeless hips. It was obscene. My face was just a roundness that cast light on the walls all afternoon. She snapped the sheet and came at me with her wrists. It seemed like she was all wrists as she tied it around my neck, and I hated her tired hands and the opaque cotton that covered me because this was all I was.

My grandma stared at me in my robe like I was an animal. She put holy water on my eyes and said the rosary. My family's faces were impassive when she asked them to pray, but they did and the words sounded in my body.

My sister would practice her flute for me, facing me, and my body would tingle with the glassy notes. I swear I felt her lips twitching so nimbly on the embouchure. When she began again she stood a little closer, and this would change the resonance, so the symphony sounded more and more dire every time.

When she stood in front of me her face was determined. She turned on her heel and put the end hole of her instrument on my mouth. My hard inhuman body vibrated with a shrill impossible song, and ecstatically I felt myself shatter.

And I was gasping and awake, under the kitchen table. It was a quarter after five. I was late. The carcass of my mom's craft was on the table. Shit.

I brushed my teeth and rinsed my mouth. My blood was filmy in the water I spat into the basin. I tapped the glass against the sink tentatively and I was surprised when it shattered. I ate the shards, the clashing of my teeth as sweet as a promise, as soothing. But my face was ugly and eager, so I closed my eyes and imagined it's transparency, it's stillness, the gleam of my glass face, my glass body, and my glass baby inside. It wouldn't be like my dream. All of my insides would be displayed, glass organs, glass bones, my glass baby in my glass womb. I imagined my baby's thoughts and mine swirling inside our glass brains like smoke in a hurricane lamp. We'd make a beautiful statue.

Casual Encounters

Tonight I rode my bike around the city selling bags of weed to people in their living rooms, trying to be polite while declining to sit down. I do this after seven almost every night until I'm out of supply. As always, I'm famished. At the convenience store on my corner the fluorescent lights inside flood the freckled face of the woman begging out front. She's always here.

"Please, my baby," she says and blinks as slowly as a cow. She's wearing a parka even though it's spring and I look at her swollen belly, it's been like that for years. I wonder when she thinks it will come. I only have paper money so I look down and go inside.

The bright lights and bright packaging shelved with precision make me happy. I pick: 7/11 brand trucker cherry pie, a family size box of chewy Dad's oatmeal cookies because my mouth will get tired if I go with the crisp classic recipe, a personal size bag of Ruffles sour cream and onion chips, beef jerky, and a 2L of Brisk lemonade; all of the tastes, sweet, sour, salty, meaty, and bitter, bitter, to make everything taste more. It's too silly to use a shopping basket at 7/11, so I clutch everything to my chest desperately. The asian clerk is mopping up, he is skinny and his posture is loose, he seems lost in thought. I don't want to startle him. A crack head is standing before me, before the register, shuffling back and forth. His hair is long and lank and his camo jacket smells like stale sweat. He's waiting to buy a brillo pad and a shot of ginseng and he taps the tiny glass bottle on the counter. He'll use them to make a crack pipe. I wonder if he'll drink the vitamins.

“Go back to your opium den if you don’t want to work,” he shouts and the clerk reddens, places the mop in the wringer and gets behind the register to take the man’s money. Now I’m next.

“That was crazy,” I say in a hushed voice and look at him in a way that’s supposed to be human. He takes my money and says nothing. I realize that he’s not young like me, it’s just that his posture is so easy. His forehead is lined and his skin is dry, he puts all my nasty food in a plastic bag and then he double bags it. He pulls out the lottery display from beneath the laminate counter and starts straightening the already straight lottery cards.

She has her hand out on the steps and when I give her the money in my pocket her fingers stay limp for a long moment. She clutches my change and says, “Oh! Oh well!” Her smile beams and her eyes are a doll’s eyes, shiny and expressionless. She’s far away from her body. I want to say something, I always do, but not enough to do it. I think of the imaginary child in her womb as a kind of anchor for her mind and spirit in her body, and I know it’s an obscene abstraction.

I get home and drop all my stuff on the floor. I eat the jerky first, swill the lemonade. I put my legs up on the coffee table and my thigh twitches- I stroke it absently, my skin is warm and damp. I never thought much of my body until I started riding so far. I thought it was feminine, not like, inspiring. It’s different now. I slap the thigh that twitched like it belongs to a noble animal, an animal that is mine.

You’ve responded to my text about the girl who complained weed was making her unproductive, she asked for a strain that was “less couchy”. You wrote, “let’s sell aspirational strains, like, Marathon.” I write: “Yes! 401K, RRSP.” I had a whole network of friends I felt

close to before my fiancée left me, and I quit my job, and I started selling weed. Now they parse their words when we talk, so the best parts of my day are all addressed to you.

There is a preview of Meryl Streep as Margaret Thatcher. I pause the DVD and sit before the face of Meryl Streep. What a face. It's better than it was in Sophie's Choice. It's more itself. None of her wrinkles are too sad or stressed. She has the face of a good woman, a fortunate woman. I press play.

“Watch your thoughts for they become your actions.”

“Watch your actions for they become your character.”

I say to myself, she's talking to you. You hate hard work. Mom was right, apply at Costco, they have benefits. You know that you will wallow no matter what. You don't have any wherewithal. The only way to feel about this is dismayed. Margaret Thatcher talks to the dead and looks tender, though she has no right to. Meryl Streep is an empathy machine, with the girlish treble of her voice, she is sardonic, she is fragile, Margaret Thatcher closed the mines, did nothing to end apartheid- now she's sweet and forlorn, too frail to hold her teacup. Meryl Streep, be my mother.

I wake up. I'm a bracket around a box of Dad's oatmeal cookies. I'm almost late and it's my first day. In the bathroom I swallow a handful of water and another and another. At some point last night I was just eating and eating and not drinking anything and now my mouth is dry and achy. I scrub yesterday's eyeliner from my eyes, the washcloth is spectacularly soiled. I brush the crumbs of chips and cookies from my tits before I turn on the shower. The water feels fine.

Outside, I like that my head is cool and wet like the morning. There are puddles, but I've missed the rain.

The office is above a Thai Express. I take my boots off on the mat and the place is poorer than expected. The workspace is the size of a child's bedroom. There are five desks of chipped wood veneer with dirty beige monitors on them. My new boss doesn't shake my hand, he says hello and opens an accordion closet door for my coat. Opening the door forces him to step back into his office. His office is not oppressive, there are windows and books on bookshelves. The smell of peanut oil is pleasant. I will translate his only publication. He passes it to me, a reference guide for journalists that indexes activist organizations and spokespeople under subject headings like "marijuana" and "mineral rights".

"You can sit with our interns," my new boss says, his eyes are blue. With his impassive face and his height he might be Finnish, or Norwegian. I follow him into the room with five desks and no window.

"I normally work from home."

"But what if you have questions?"

"Translation questions?"

"Oh! Anything." He says and he gives me an obliging smile. I open a document and do the colophon and am onto the Table of Contents when the interns come in. I can hear their chairs accept them with a plastic creak and the stunted keystrokes of filling in subject fields. My stomach gurgles, there's still a box of oatmeal cookies in my bowels.

I take a selfie on the toilet, caption it “hardly working” and text it to you. There isn’t any air freshener. I spray my perfume, Lanvin Arpège. I don’t smell the bergamot, the coriander, the vetiver, the rose. I smell aldehydes and shit.

The work is mindless, a word is a word, each worth \$0.12. Community-Based Development/Developing Nations gives me pause. I have to make a decision between the more common usage *Développement à base communautaire*, which uses the noun form of the verb *baser* that L’Académie française is loath to see describe any action other than the establishment of a military base, and the too long for the Table of Contents *Développement fondées sur les communautés*. *Fonder* is of course the more evocative verb, meaning to create.

You’ve replied to my toilet selfie: “Are You There God It’s Me Diarrhea?” I bite my lip to keep from laughing. My keystrokes mark the passing of time in what strikes me as a chipper tone because when I take a break to stretch my legs or fingers, I think of you.

The best thing about this gig is that it’s a block away from the park, not the best park in the city, it’s just an old dump that grass grew over, the pile of garbage is a big hill now, great for sledding, and the rest of the park is a sort of valley. This is one of the only places in Toronto that has topography, so it feels special.

I have a box of apple juice on a park bench for lunch. It’s exactly what I want. I watch pigeons fight over bread crumbs a round little girl throws not very far. She winds up avidly, but breadcrumbs don’t have the density for velocity. I laugh at her and savour my half hour.

After work, one of the female interns walks to the subway with me. She speaks English, to practice.

“He’s got boxes and boxes of stuff no one has, Mennonite pacifist newsletters from the second world war, labour union manifestos from Detroit. But everything’s indexed democratically by subject heading, so you’d have to, you know, know what you’re looking for, and how could you know?”

“You should curate a special collection.”

“I asked, he says there’s too much yet to be indexed. I just did a pile of articles from the Guardian that anybody could look up on the Guardian website.”

At the turnstyle we look at one another and I meet her pained grin with mine. We are echoing one another with a sincerity that doesn’t have anything to hold onto in terms of concrete hopes, so it looks like sarcasm. I go westbound and she goes eastbound.

I collapse onto the couch when I get home. It’s nicer to be in a clean room than a messy one, I am messy, I can’t help myself, that is one of the lies I tell myself. There are papers on every surface. On the empty plates the cutlery is at ready. Pairs of shoes are where I took them off when I sat down. All the things in my purse are strewn on the couch: receipts, cash, weed, lipstick, palettes of makeup, and pots of makeup, and books, and tobacco, yellow flakes of tobacco like dull confetti, everywhere.

I pick up a nearly empty glass of water and drink the last drops. Check my phone, there are four messages from customers: “I got scrilla if you got anything”... I can’t tell if people talk to me in racialized slang because I’m white or in spite of it. I’m too tired to get on my bike. The money isn’t even compelling. I power off the phone and draw the curtains. The sun sneaks past. I

stand there with the curtain in my fingers, feeling a direness that makes me want to be looking at things that don't belong to me.

Outside the sun feels weak, but it is still the biggest thing out here, sharply describing every building, every tree, every traffic sign. I turn my head to the west at every cross street to catch a glimpse of it, thinking, this is the difference between dusk and sunset, you have to see it to be sure it's setting. The street is full of people. I look at them and they look at me. I walk and walk, and then I walk to your place.

You open the door. Your skin isn't yellow or brown, it's Sepia; it's enough to make anyone sentimental. The planes of your wide face have depth from your sharp cheekbones and chin. I say "hi" to be saying something. You pass me the joint drooping from your slight lips. You smile at me, your eyes are slow and your mouth is quick. You never say hello and I never say goodbye. Hello only means I haven't thought of you and here you are. Goodbye only means you'll be fading in my mind... these are facts it's better not to make a formality of -- see, I say to myself, even our anxieties are kindred. The dogs are whining and wagging their tails at our feet and you put my shoes in the closet to keep them safe.

"How was work?" I ask and pass you the joint.

"It's the benefit renewal period so we're under a deadline with the insurance firm, but people ignore emails from HR so, you know," you say and you exhale slowly and I watch the smoke rise in a column and get sucked into the ceiling fan. "And, I ate a whole fruitcake."

You're such a glutton, you smoke the rest of it.

"Is that like 2500 calories?"

"3400. I'm disgusting," you say and we laugh.

“Have you’ve ever puked?”

“No, I want to feel it,” you say and I agree, it seems like cheating, the purging part. We watch a VHS you found in your closet that’s labelled 1993. It’s mostly Hole and Tori Amos music videos. Every Tori Amos video ends in a close-up, both the European and North American versions of Cornflake Girl leave us with her long after she’s stopped singing.

“I have to poo,” you say. You walk like a kid, lock knees and loose shoulders. I press pause and read Philip Seymour Hoffman’s interview in Purple Magazine. It’s boring, a film person asks him about other film people. My questions would be: What is the meanest thing anyone ever said to you and was it true? What is the brightest sound you can think of? What’s your favourite colour? Do you ever wallow in your own voice? We put a casual encounters ad on Craigslist looking for Philip Seymour Hoffman, hoping against hope he would Google his name. A Caucasian girl and a Korean girl who want to encounter anyone get lots of responses. And though we did want him, we wanted him to say things to us with that voice most of all, the voice of a perfect pervert, full of worshipful curiosity. We got lots of dick pics; it wasn’t even funny after the first few. I hear you flush and close the magazine.

Tori Amos is singing again. Her hair is whipping around her face in the wind, this pathetic fallacy is totally evocative, candour *is* a mighty struggle.

“I ate too much last night and not enough today,” I squirm and say.

“What did you eat?” You ask. And I tell you. When I say, Dad’s oatmeal cookies, you smile like I knew you would. I snort and you ask “what?”

“Daddy issues,” I say and you shake your head, you hate puns, but your face says yes. Your friends are at the party. Your phone beeps. So we apply lipstick. We pat the dogs and take

the stairs. And in the dark stairwell we bound, me after you, and I feel the darkness on my back, and I step into the night where the shadows, at least, are never lonesome.

We walk. I know the moon will pour her milk on me. I wish I could tell you how good it feels! But I can only shudder.

We smoke so we know every breath. We drink to taste our thirst. We dance our bodies in stupid circles. I think everyone is pretty when I feel their pulse. And I say, you're so pretty. And you say, you're so pretty. Joking, like. And we show each other our teeth. When you met me you said: you look like a sexy child. You walk like a child and smile like the whore that made Gomorrah fall- with more knowingness than anyone is entitled to. I take your dry palm in my sweaty palm and squeeze it. You don't like to touch but you bear it because it's me. I might go home with someone else, but I'm glad I am here with you.

A Real Mother

When his mother came in, she said, “Christ it’s hot out there,” and sighed and looked around the condo. “So this is it, nice.” She walked past us in the galley kitchen and around the glass table that indicated the dining area and out onto the balcony. She rested her ribs on the bannister like a girl.

“The cops are gone,” she said, loud enough for us to hear it, and came back inside and stood facing us in the kitchen that was too narrow to feel like a room but too wide to be a hallway. “Outside, there were two black guys, *deux nègres*, yelling at this big fat lady and trying to get inside her bra, and she was trying to hold in her tits,” she laughed nervously and looked at me. “They must’ve been pimps, and she must’ve been hiding money, or something?” And I nodded, and she nodded, and stared at me, her neck stretching, her chin jutting, and she turned her head to look out the window, “The cops are here. Those negroes are gone,” and I followed her gaze to the stoop in question, I knew which one it was already, the one closest to the convenience store, where there was always a fat white lady in bicycle shorts sitting on the concrete, not waiting, just sitting. Then his mother looked at me, “So this is your girlfriend, she’s pretty.”

Ghislain grinned.

“Annette,” she said, to see what it sounded like.

I thought to shake her hand and thought, too formal, and smiled and said nice to meet you. I was thinking, negro! It was like that scene with the razor and the eye, the eye and the razor, that I saw for a month every time I closed my eyes after seeing that avant-garde movie. It

was always another eye and my eye, another hand and my hand. Did I want to do it or have it done to me? I thought, negro, negro, negro, until the word was just noise, while he and his mother talked about his brother and his brother's girlfriend. Her dad was African American, she looked like a tan white lady with a wet look perm, but it was up to her, I guess, if she wanted to say that word. Ghislain's body was stiff, his head was cocked and hearing her. He didn't look quite white. He was a white guy with a black guy's square hairline and deep set eyes. He'd told me she was a real mother and I wondered what that was.

“Do you like my necklace?” she asked, smiling with her eyes, her mouth open in concentration, pulling it away from her chest, so I could see it better. It was a silver Chinese symbol pendant on a necklace like a shoelace. There were matching earrings and a matching bracelet. I nodded. “My friend bought it for me,” she said. She gave the word the weight of the masculine. It reminded me of a necklace I bought in Chinatown with my own money when I was a kid. I picked out the pendant and the hemp necklace from separate bins and it only cost me three dollars and I felt so rich, to have something so precious for so little. But by the time I was a teenager I had a tin of necklaces, some had whales and dolphin pendants, one said, DIVA, another, SWEETHEART, they were all a nest of tangled polyester, and nickel plated metal, and I sat there trying to detangle it for as long as it took me to realize that I would never wear any of it again, I threw it out and felt guilty, and now I felt guilty again. But she didn't see my guilt, her smiling eyes looked down at the symbol in her open palm. I was waiting for her to tell me what it was supposed to represent, but she didn't, so I smiled. And she smiled, maybe pleased with me, maybe trying to be.

“My purse is falling apart,” she said, and pulled on the petals of a black pleather flower with a grommet-pistil that drooped from her purse, “I want a new one, a white one, for summer, you should buy one, for your mother.” Her commas piled on the way they did in French, dramatically, her small face fell back to look up to her tall son.

“Let’s go, I’m hungry,” my boyfriend said. I bent over to pull on my shoes and he kneeled down to tie my laces, when I blushed she smiled at me, like, that’s my son.

“Are you hungry?” she asked.

“I’m so sorry.” I said, I felt my head unsteady on my neck and tilted it sympathetically, explaining that I had plans to meet my friend. That it was too late to cancel. She looked at me like she didn’t hear me with darkly frantic eyes. “She’s just stopping by,” Ghislain assured me, I thought she’d cringe at that but she laughed. She was always stopping by, her sons were a joy, and she was a joyful woman. You could tell because she laughed at gravity as we rushed down the stairs, humouring her, because she was afraid of the elevator.

“Fancy,” she said at the huge print of a woman’s lips in the lobby, it had that Lichtenstein type pixelation. It was tacky. My boyfriend grinned, happy that she’d noticed.

It was hot out. Ghislain told his mother they would walk me to my bus stop, it was a block from Jean Luc’s corner and Ghislain needed to get his money and give Jean Luc more cocaine. Drake was blaring from a car window, *everyday, everyday, we be sitting on the bench, but we don’t really play, everyday, everyday*. And there were people yelling on the street because it was one of those blocks where people loiter and when the tedium of loitering is too much, they yell. We crossed the empty parking lot, hopping over the parking curbs.

“Did I tell you, my friend, Marie-Lynne, hung herself?” she asked. She told us she had depression, she told us what was in the letter, but I don’t remember, I do remember, I want to be with God, and that it was so hot and that the line in the ice cream parlour was spilling out onto the sidewalk. I had to step into the street. She went on, about her dead friend’s dead husband’s cancer, and how that did it to her. Ghislain was holding my hand and I felt intention go from his grip. His face was my face: masking his disapproval at the spectacle of sadness his mother was making.

The Saturday shopping crowd on the sidewalk kept coming at us and past us, couples with postures heavy with heat and happiness, a girl walking fast all by herself with her arms swinging, mothers and fathers grabbing their kids in the crush. At the crosswalk his mother shifted her weight from one foot to the other, like it hurt to stand, and she looked at her son and his hand in mine, and she told us, “I get lonely, I do, I get lonely... I’ve got children, thank God.” It made me want to let go of his hand. I looked at the intersection, Ste. Catherine and St. Laurent. Blind green glass on this side, and the friendly cursive of a snack bar sign facing us, the cartoon hotdogs on the streaky glass smiling, too many people waiting to walk.

“How’s work?” she asked.

“*Sa roule*, Francois sold ten bags to some guy from Chicago last night, here for the Jazz festival, and Formula One was amazing,” he said.

She nodded and looked at me with a laughing mouth and asked, “Did he tell you I used to keep him company on his corner in St. Henri?”

I nodded. I could tell she wanted to tell me about it. I thought of questions to ask, what was that like? Stupid, stupid, stupid. I smiled.

Ghislain was waving, I saw Jean Luc's caved in shoulders and fitted cap on a park bench. Everything about his posture was waiting for something. Ghislain told us to wait. We looked up at him and blinked yes in the sun. His mother was pulling her cotton minidress down and her knees were a bit bulbous and old but her ankles were very slight and pretty, her legs would've been called "pins" at some point.

"How'd you learn French?"

"My mom."

"No kidding?"

"She's from Lac St. Jean, originally," I said. It was a lie. My mother studied French in University. But I didn't feel up to talking about my father, how he'd left his mom in Québec and never looked back, called the nationalist spiel "la cassette" but refused to speak English with his kids.

"You should hear my daughter in law. She says, *le garbage*, like that's what it's called." The way she was staring at nothing, with her shoulders back and her face relaxed, you could tell she loved her daughter in law. "All my sons like the Anglo girls, Anglo girls and fucking Haitians."

"You're a waitress, right, where do you work?" I asked. She told me she worked at a Greek Diner, she'd worked there for years, I asked her how many, she said, years, and told me she'd been a waitress for twenty-two years. Her eyebrows were thin, aggressively penciled, the hairs made the line look blurred, but her eyes were dark and startling and brimming. Talk, talk, make talk. "Do you have lots of regulars?"

"Lots of old people! I love old people!"

“I love old people, too.”

“Where do you work, Annette?”

“I’m a stripper.” I said, in a normal way. Why did she say my name like that? She looked at me, looked at my body.

“What’s that like?”

“The money’s good.” I said, she stared at my waist and I watched her, and there were the numbers in her mind’s eye, 35-25-35. I crossed and uncrossed my arms.

“Who goes there?” She asked, ardently. “Who are the men?”

“Oh, I dunno. Everybody.” I said. “Teenagers and you know, single men, businessmen, married men. Sometimes women, with their men.”

“Taxi drivers? Are there lots of taxi drivers?”

“Not really.”

“Italians? Italian taxi drivers.”

“No, no Italian taxi drivers.”

“My friend is a taxi driver.” She said, her eyes were proud and young. Her face was used to waiting. Lips open, so I could see her small teeth, the pallor of her tongue in its darker chamber. It made me feel tender.

“No Italian taxi drivers, no.” I said, I thought I should qualify, that I didn’t remember, I wanted to be specific and sincere, but I didn’t know how.

“I bet.” She said, laughing. “I bet you make a bundle.” And we both laughed nervously and then broadly and the sun bled all over us and we stood there sweating, waiting for Ghislain to get his money.

He didn't hurry across the street, he never hurried, and when he was before us he kissed the top of my head with a kindness that shamed me. How was he so pleased with me when I was so baffled by his family?

"What shall we eat?" his mother asked.

"I want a hot dog," Ghislain said.

"Take me somewhere good," she said, kicking at a pebble when he looked at her.

"Let me pay for your taxi," he said.

"The bus stop's just there," I begged.

Then the 85A was turning the corner and I waved, cringing, and ran across the street and down the block to the stop, in the noon brightness I was blinking, the cityscape stuttering like film at the end of the reel.

I met my friend Lester at a coffee shop and told him some anecdotes I felt he was fishing for, how the strippers are always eating hot dogs in the change room, the Québec celebrities I'd danced for that I'd never heard of, but the other strippers had told me after, that guy's from a pop punk band called Sum 41, or that guy's from that action movie, Bumrush, things I'd have to pretend to be impressed by, since they were. We worked on our Charlie Chaplin presentation. Lester used to be a clown so he wrote most of it. Now he was a waiter at a fancy place and he asked what I made during Formula One, he said he made 700\$ on the Friday, and I told him, 1200\$, but I was naked, so.

At work it was better than an average Sunday. The Jazz Festival customers were mostly middle aged and polite. One man I danced for told me he hadn't been to strip club in twenty years. His wife was a feminist, but he was divorced, and now he was here, in Montreal. When I

told him I was feminist he gave me a cringing smile and said, “Of course, of course.” That made me angry, but when he paid me with a shrug, and grasped my hand a little desperately, saying instead of goodbye, “You’re beautiful,” I got to say, “Of course, of course,” and it felt like we were square.

After work I walked across the street to Ghislain’s, he was sitting on his balcony, four floors up, this was our routine, at three he’d sit outside and wait. In the elevator mirror, I smiled at my lids heavy with false lashes, at my tired eyes, thinking those careening end of the day thoughts of a hot shower and a soft bed.

He held the door open for me, his eyes were dark and brimming like his mother’s. Crushing my shoulders into his torso, he sighed, and I felt the alertness with which I’d held my body all night melt away, and I sighed into his solar plexus, breathing soap, cigarettes, and warm cotton.

Ghislain had made his father’s macaroni and cheese casserole for us, and now he warmed it in the oven.

“Did your mother cook?” I asked.

“She’s a waitress, she wasn’t home for dinner. My father cooked,” he said. I never asked him about his father because he was a shylock with a side business selling Native cigarettes and my interest in him felt voyeuristic. Ghislain poured me a glass of Pepsi and sat facing me at the kitchen table with that calm and sated gaze of his. He lit a joint he’d rolled for me.

“How did your parents meet?” I asked.

“My father was married when they met, to one of the Dubois brothers’ sisters.”

“Who?”

“You never heard the name Dubois? That was the *pure laine* Mafia.”

“What?”

“They owned all the strip clubs, even the ones for homos, they ran everything in the 80’s, the drugs, the numbers...”

“He stepped out on their sister?”

Ghislain smirked. The buzzer sounded-- Modesto was downstairs, finished with the night shift. His name was a cosmic joke, he was a braggart. The second time I met him he told me he had a ten inch dick, that he liked to make a lady’s vagina bleed a little. I asked if he had cervical cancer, and he asked, is that what that skin is called, I can feel it sometimes, and I didn’t correct him, I only nodded, thinking, it’s not skin it’s an *organ*. The other runners called him The Martian, because he had three Marvin the Martian tattoos, which he always bragged he’d had done before the craze for loony toons tattoos, but he was Ghislain’s runner, even after ten years in the streets, so Ghislain called him by his name. Modesto spoke to me in English, he acted like he was extending himself for my benefit, since none of the other runners spoke English. I hated having to act pleased to be speaking English, like it was better because it was easier for me.

“Ghislain told you they busted me?” Modesto asked, grinning like a fool.

“No,” I said, I’m sure I looked shocked.

“How did it happen?” Ghislain asked, his features as still as ever. He knew what happened, this was for my benefit.

“They were behind the bench, foot patrol.”

“You didn’t look?” Ghislain asked, but he wasn’t looking at Modesto, he was looking at me. He wanted me to feel the cynicism of waiting for it, Modesto’s grin flagged a little.

“Were you arrested?” I asked.

Ghislain scoffed, “It wasn’t worth it, you had what, seven bags?”

“They weren’t even gonna confiscate it. The cop was like, is someone gonna hurt you if you lose this?” Modesto droned, imitating the super enunciated question of a concerned officer. Ghislain laughed. His laughter for things he disdained was a high pitched bark, grating and vain, I hated it, it degraded his true laughter which was also high pitched, a boyish trill.

“I was like, what, I can walk away with this? Then the cop saw I was hesitating...” Now that Modesto had told me the anecdote his eyes darted at the dirty plates and packs of cigarettes and plastic Slurpee cups and prepaid phone cards and the bag of weed on the table. He started rolling a joint. Normally, Modesto would make small talk with us for ten or twenty minutes while we smoked and Ghislain counted his take and gave him his share. I was excited that Ghislain wasn’t talking and that I got to be aloof too. When he lit the joint and passed it, it was as if his eyes were inhaling, wanting something from us as necessary as air. I waved the joint away. Ghislain looked at Modesto evenly and Modesto took the cash from the pocket of his hoodie, \$480, he told us and sucked on the joint, holding it in that claw fisted way Marlon Brando holds a cigarette. Ghislain separated the new plastic money from the old paper money, piled the bills in different denominations and counted \$480. He gave Modesto one hundred dollars. The split was supposed to be fifty fifty.

Modesto looked baffled and held it delicately as though it was the cash that was flawed. I was waiting for him to say something when Ghislain cleared his throat.

“You didn’t look,” he said flatly. \$140 was the street value of the seven bags he’d lost, it was embarrassing, that he had to pay the inflated price the crackheads paid. The timer sounded

on the oven. Ghislain donned his oven mitts and the macaroni and cheese casserole smell filled the condo. He made up three plates for us and brought us our supper and cutlery. Ghislain smiled that demurring smile of a person putting food on a table. I got up to get paper towels, to be able to bustle in the silence, and Modesto complimented me on my Bart Simpson shorts, dope, he said, and talked about how Anglo girls have better style than those *pitounes* who think they're hot shit, with their fake tits and fake tans and fake nails and hair extensions. Modesto ate with his elbows on the table, his whole posture hunched towards us, his eyes laughing, scapegoating all the French Canadian girls who tried too hard, titling his head, asking me to take the compliment. I shrugged a thank you. When he asked me where I shopped, my eyes darted at Ghislain.

“Where do those Bart shorts come from?” He prompted me.

“Korea, I said, a Korean store near the nail place I go to.”

“You don't shop at the mall do you? The stores all the girls go to.”

I shrugged and felt like a man eating my dinner and ignoring him. The macaroni was better than my mother's so I groaned happily at Ghislain. His smile was preening. It was early weeks, so we were obsessed with each other. Every little animal consideration, every bite of food, every sigh and snore, felt like some keen observation into the goodness of being. He was so happy to be feeding me. I was happy to be fed. Modesto was still sitting there. He told again how they were both on the news at 16, soliciting in the street, *Les vendeurs de drogues de la rue St. Denis*, how his mother was so angry. Ghislain said his mother was always at the diner when the news was on, but she didn't mind, she'd known her boys had been working for scalpers since the third grade. We ate in silence again and this time it was relaxed.

“You meet his mother yet?” Modesto asked.

“This morning.”

“She’s a trip, right?”

“She’s sweet.”

“She’d visit him on his corner, when we were working in St. Henri.” Modesto said, nodding approvingly of Ghislain’s mother, how ride or die she was.

“I know. She has a man now, right?”

“He doesn’t respect her.” Ghislain said.

“She asked me if I’d seen him at work.”

“What?”

“She described him to me, said he was Italian, a taxi driver.” Modesto was laughing, a disbelieving honk that was so crass. Ghislain’s face was open, his expression as still as ever, his eyes cast sparks of humiliation at me, it made me feel like a man, to be the one to make them appreciate how pathetic she was. “When I told her I was a stripper, she went on and on, describing his face, his hair, he’s about sixty, dark and handsome, she said.” I was scoffing, Ghislain’s face was contorted and his words were choked in his throat. And I knew I didn’t belong here with these boys, whose only loyalties were to themselves, the gang, They were bonded together by those sad animals on the streets they’d tamed together, the crackheads, who nodded at Ghislain like royalty when we walked down the street, like I was proof of his power. They called them *pookies*, which was the pet name my mother had for mine and my sister’s privates, girls, wash your *pookies*. The coincidence was so perverse. I was humiliating him because his permissiveness was catching. I was only sort of thinking that. I was also laughing. Ghislain was staring off at something. Modesto was laughing like laughter was a mantra.

“She deserves better.” Ghislain said feebly.

She did.

Chester Carnegie's Tweed

It was my birthday. At breakfast, I was gumming my toast miserably, birthdays, I don't have the energy for. I don't have the energy for friends either. In high school, in University, I had one friend, and then I was thrown in with her friends. She's in Calgary now, so I'm not thrown into anything. I process hunting and bait and tackle licences for the government. They hired me because of my ecology degree. In the interview my boss said, "oh, we're all animal lovers here," and there *were* posters of wolves and owls on the walls but she meant cats, they all had cats -- the boss had six rescues. "An illegal number," she'd say, and then widen her eyes like, oops. Because she was athletic, stylish, had both highlights and lowlights in her hair, she didn't look like a cat lady. When she'd eat a donut hole she'd grin and say, "Only 90 calories." So it *was* nice to imagine her doing something wrong.

Today, Krista the secretary would probably be buying donuts the way she did sometimes to enjoy the attention and thanks of people. She would say it was because of me, "a birthday treat." If I didn't show, all of Krista's anticipation at being the thoughtful one would be for naught. I called in sick, and that made me happy, nothing forsworn was going to happen, as soon as that was a thought it was also a fond hope. I went to a different coffee shop across the street from the one I went to every morning.

In line, a man stepped on my heel, and scraped the skin off my ankle. I was wearing ballet flats -- silly shoes, still, I moaned in agony. He ignored me and ordered. I wanted to be like: excuse me, excuse me, you hurt me, you've just hurt me. But I didn't have the energy. So I watched the man as I drank my coffee. His bald pate was fringed with hair like Caesar's and

inclined before the newsprint he snapped sporadically to keep it from flopping over. What was he reading? Was he nodding at Iraq or Afghanistan or Iran, or some more obscure war? What was happening in Chechnya? Was Chechnya still happening? He seemed so at ease. I hated him for it. If a person's voice lilted and they raised their brow to ask me a question, my brow and my voice mimicked theirs. Like with the barista. When she asked, "room for cream?" I said, "Cream? I take cream!" Making the whole thing a drama rather than a conversation. No way this man had that problem. He rose from the table and smoothed his pants. When he walked to the toilet, I imagined tripping him, his skull's dolorous bounce—"oops, oops, I'm so sorry," I'd say. Him clutching his hurt like a child in his fine wool pants and his wingtips.

I noticed he'd left his tweed coat. I stood and the five paces to his table seemed to last an eternity. I scanned the café. People were looking at their phones or laptops. The barista was pumping syrup into a paper cup. I slid the ochre tweed off the chair back and draped it over my arm. It grazed my thighs with every step I took to the door. I felt that my heart was beating in my hands and my throat, and that the coat was a part of that beating-- the way the sand is a part of the waves.

In the street, the cold was refreshing. I was so hot, and I wanted to run, but I didn't. I kept a measured pace. My wrists were sweating against the coat's scratchy weave. There was a tight feeling in my chest as I took longer strides down the block, but I did not hurry, and this not hurrying was brimming inside of me. I reached the intersection, cast a look back, and the man was not there, so I exhaled with total satisfaction. The feeling seemed to suffuse the street. The church on the corner was being restored. The scaffolding was so ornate in its temporary elaborations while the stone facade behind it was blithely ancient. It made me smile that men

were scrubbing the dirt off. A cold breeze scared up the hairs on my arms, so I put on the coat and I was happy and warm.

Another block of apartment and office blocks, dutch elms dying from dusty wounds that looked like woodpecker holes only there were no woodpeckers. There was a blue jay in one of the trees. He was too pretty because his blood was too hot, 125 F, I thought to myself. The blue jay's feet and beak so sure, the rest of him, downy and unknown, every blue, the fair throat, the dark face, singing: do you see me, do you see me?

Do you see me? Do you see me? The blue jay, his song, it *made* a lonely morning. At the next intersection I turned around to be sure I was undetected. I had to distance myself from my crime. Birding. I'd never been birding before. I would bird alone on my birthday. That would take me far from my victim. In the subway, I let my eyes get lazy and listened to a lady talk to another lady about how she was tired. People blinked yes and people blinked no. When the train was above ground I got a good look. Row upon row of grey stone pre-war homes on grey streets reaching towards the endless water that was brightly monochrome under a grey sky. The lake was vast! The city was vast! This looking, this light, it forced me to think of myself as a part of something. A sensation that worked from the outside in-- the way your skin gets hot before you start sweating.

We went over the bridge and I got off. I took the stairs cut into the ravine. It was trees all the way up to the water. The Humber River was looking dry and lazy. That was ok.

There was a dead salmon in the muck. It was dull with mud, even its gelatinous innards, which had been pawed or poked at. Maggots made bright spots but that was it. I wondered, do they know it, when they start upstream, that after they spawn, they're dead.

I sat on a concrete block on the rocky bank. It was a very big concrete block, maybe four feet by four feet, with rebar sticking out of it. My legs dangled off, and I wondered if it was a piece of bridge. The clouds made the sky small. I could still make out the sun like a body beneath a blanket. No birds. The weak light and the silt made the river unshiny. Where there should be light and shadow there was only water. But there were fish there.

I looked at the water and waited for a fish to show itself to me.

I tugged at the hem of my right sleeve and unravelled the man's tweed to the elbow. The silk lining flapped in the breeze. I spooled the wool around my fist. I reached awkwardly into my collar to unfasten the dry cleaner's receipt. It was made out to a Chester Carnegie. That name was unreal. It was the name of a magnate, or a philosopher. I kept the receipt safe in my breast pocket and tied the safety pins clasp to the end of my fishing line. A lure. I needed a lure. I circled the belly up salmon and considered its salmonness. The grey flesh has fallen away from the grey chest. It was not at all a salmon. I plucked a maggot from its slick insides and speared it.

I cast my line and the current lolled along. My ochre line dipped in the middle of the lazy brown river. I was already thinking, fish. Looking for a darting gleam in the dark water. My open hand was limp and attached.

Birds dropped low over the river but they did not show me fish. They watched the whole world to find the things that shone like life. They rose to draw themselves against the clouds and blur and draw themselves.

Things were floating past: plastic bags and branches.

The subway passed every five to seven minutes, so it seemed, the cars on the bridge made a steady whirr. I sang little songs to my fish that had no words.

I asked myself, what will I do with you when I have you? I'll have a look at you. And then? And then I'll decide. What will you look like? Stout and sparkly, a perfect parabola forged by the face of the water.

My line was still there in the river. Would the water eat away at the wool? Was my maggot a good lure? What it lacked in size it made up in brightness. There were pins and needles in my fingers. I worked the feeling back into them.

Wheels on gravel, a woman was going along the path with a small boy in a stroller. His face was as softly fat as a peony. She was wearing stretchy exercise clothes and they flattered her articulated body. Her eyes were startled and her face was slack. I nodded and she nodded and I was alone again. There in the trees it was so easy to forget I was in the city.

Then there were ducks, coming downriver. A pair. Mallards mate for life, with their earnest round bills and their brief tails. The male followed the female along the other bank. I imagined the furious paddling of their big feet beneath their placid bodies. I imagined they loved each other like that: desperately but barely.

The clouds were starting to burn off. I could see the shadows of things that grew along the banks and the light where things didn't. If this were the woods, I thought, there'd be insects.

There was the lurch. The spool began to unravel around my fist. I didn't understand what I was working against and it didn't understand me. I was still. I watched my yellow wool skip out into the river. I felt my sleeve unraveling. That taut line sliced down and down. When I felt a tug at my shoulder, I found the loose thread and held it. He yanked and I gave a little. Hand over hand I hauled him in. When I felt the line jerk, I realized he was there in the shallows. I waded out to him. He was slippery, scratchy, and strange. I held him as carefully as a baby. He was

wearing the man's coat. An ochre tweed, the tiny sleeves hid his fins, the collar came up to his gills, the leather buttons fastened the coat over his stout speckled body. He thrashed wildly in my arms and died. I looked at him. The hook unhappy in his mouth. The eyes were dead. Dark as ore.

My fingers brushed his tail -- the perfectly fluted appendage of his intent. Shit.

I cradled his cold body in my arms, and waded out of the river, and took the stairs two at a time until I reached the street. With my fish clutched between my breasts, I hailed a taxi. The driver had his radio tuned to the classical station, Mozart it seemed, the hopeful tone of a clarinet felt so incongruous. My thoughts were crazed. My fish was magical. He might still speak or sing. He might dance. Float in the the syncopation and formation of a waltz, drawing jaunty triangles in the air. Not really. Maybe he'd breathe again in the sink. My chest was sodden from the water logged wool of my fish's coat. I was stroking the side of his face. I only realized it when the driver hit a pothole and my finger slipped inside his gill. The inside of him didn't feel different from the outside, wet and cold. Death does that, erases distinctions. The taxi driver's gaze darted at me in the rearview. When I stared back he didn't cow like I wanted him to, he felt entitled to his curiosity. He asked, "Whatcha got there?"

That he was a fish did not seem to describe it. "You wouldn't understand," I said. He took a furtive look at us. I used my lapel to shield my fish. His attention drifted back to the road.

At home, I put him on the table belly up. His gills gaped red and my throat was tight. My unravelling sleeve still tied me to the hook in his mouth. There were so many threads hanging off of me, I didn't know what to sever -- I yanked until the line snapped. I got the hook out, wincing. The blood tarnished the thing's gleam but a hook is always frightening. I dropped it

down the drain. I unbuttoned his coat and slid it off, hanging it on the cupboard knob from its tiny handstitched tag. I placed my naked fish in the sink and began to fill it with water. He floated as the water rose. I would wash his body the way Mary Magdalene had washed Christ's body after she took him down from the cross. No. He was already clean. Underwater there was no sorrow for death; the social mammals like whales and dolphins floated down to the bottom where a whole ecosystem sprouted up around their carcasses. Scavenger sharks and crustaceans came for the rotting flesh. Eels lay in wait for those that came to feed. Plants flourished. It wasn't sad or lonely, the death of a fish in the water. But he had been caught and suffocated.

I cleaned the scales off easily and cut his translucent red flesh into filets. I put a pan on the stove and fried him in oil one strip after another, eating him out of the pan as soon as his flesh had become pink and opaque. I ate until my guts were swollen and hurting. I ate until all there was left of him was his head on the cutting board. I wished I had gills. That my face were more open to the world. If I did that to myself it would look like a cry for help. Not a desire to feel the wind inside my face. Rather than live my whole life as a person, I'd like to evolve backwards, until all I saw was light and dark, all I felt was cold and warmth, and hunger. Until I could move in one direction, seeing and feeling the whole world as it passed me by, never looking back, not knowing what that meant.

The Other One Died

The man in the tower buzzed me through the gate into the parking lot. It must be called that, I thought, a tower, like an air traffic tower. It was a squat building with a lookout on top, it didn't look right, like a clown hat. I parked and waited for your boat. I sat on the hood of my car and smoked and looked beyond the locks at the river rushing through the chain link fence. The current seemed to move through the steel.

I thought about the day we got back together. It was a heatwave. We were both looking out your window a lot, at the green valley and the grey smog you could only see from a window like that on a day like that. The trees looked so impressionistic outside and your chest hair etched a whorled pattern of sweat on your t-shirt-- the weather agreed with us, made everything blurry and beautiful.

A cherry light flashed on top of the tower and a speaker was emitting a sustained beep. A horn bellowed an answer, the lock doors clamoured, and the water rushed in. The boat made its way slowly because it was a tight fit. The deck was checkered with dozens of perforated iron partitions that had been painted white and looked like lace. Men on both sides of the boat threw lines of rope to men on both sides of the canal. The water rose and the boat rose. I picked up the yellow weatherproof phone and asked the man to open the gate and he told me this was the wrong boat.

I watched the wrong boat leave the locks. I thought, I can't imagine your boat, a bulker, even though I've seen pictures. A ship is a major thing, I thought, I can imagine standing on

deck, holding the railing, looking at the water. And I know what it feels like to watch them float heavily along, but that's all.

Yours was next, it was bigger and it looked different. There were two steel houses and the deck was covered in hatches and hulking mechanical winches. I saw you and you saw me.

You pulled a big switch and a motor whirred and the ladder rattled down to meet me. I was afraid and so I climbed it like a child, bringing my feet together before I reached the next rung. You laughed at me. I winced as I climbed higher and your arm circled my waist and I was over your shoulder and standing on the ground or rather, the boat. And you kissed me with the firmness of a promise and I was embarrassed.

"I thought that boat that just went through was yours," I said.

"The oil tanker," you said, you looked surprised, "you didn't notice they're all Indians?"

The boats' interiors were all beige metal and the metallic sign plates that said Stairwell A, and Level C, were stamped in beautiful modernist fonts. The beige didn't make the metal warmer, or maybe it did. Your berth had a dim bathroom with a bucket next to the toilet, to make it flush. The bedroom was better. There was a built in shelf and a built in lamp at the head of the bed, like on an airplane. They made the rumpled sheets seem wrong. The writing surface of the desk was the same beige metal as the walls and the drawers were wood veneer, a warm oak, called golden oak, that's more oak than any oak. The dresser was built in. The chair was an inelegant take on Danish Modern, the wooden arms and legs weren't tapered, but that made it more endearing. You saw me smiling at it, and you said: I love that chair. I put my bag on it and you kissed me and I thought, you aren't the you in my mind, but I can't say how you're different.

When we had sex not even the shock of static from your scratchy blanket could make me feel like I was real. The late afternoon sun streamed through the porthole but the romance of it was a waste. I had to close my eyes to feel myself in you like a furry thing in its burrow. I fell asleep and you woke me, and told me you were going to put your laundry in the dryer and to meet you for dinner because it was dinnertime.

When I'd followed the square corridors that lead past every door on every level; I was sure the galley was the only door without a sign on it. I stood next to your boots and your waders and your windbreaker on the hook that faced your door. The way they sagged made me sad. You found me and you sighed at me. "There's no sign on the door," I said, "every door's the same."

The kitchen looked like any industrial kitchen: so much stainless steel the fish and chips looked out of place in the stainless steel hotel pans. The filet was thickly fried and great flakes of crust and whitefish came away with my fork. I was famished but I couldn't eat. The men filed in past us. They asked, "it's not what you expected is it?" Like I could expect anything.

There was an eating contest last night. You lost, now you made fun of the winner, Ronnie. He had a child's face, and his laughter tithered. You introduced us, though we knew all about each other already, we both smiled, our eyes darting at each other and back at you.

"Jay tells me you feed your dog chicken dinners," he said.

"He eats what I eat, lasagna, whatever," I said, feeling shy, nodding at nothing.

"That must be expensive," he said.

"He's sixteen. I'm trying to keep him alive." I said. He laughed awkwardly. His freckles and his weak mouth were sweet.

"I wish I had a dog," he said. "Like my dad did on the tow when we were kids."

“A lab?” You asked, your head cocked. I’d never seen you so solicitous. He nodded and I pictured a golden smear on a green slope. I tried to picture it sunning itself between the enormous steel hatch covers of the steel deck. I imagined the sound of a dog’s nails on the grate steps. And when you said, “boat dogs are the best dogs,” I wondered what you meant.

After dinner we smoked on deck. We sat at the picnic table you built. The wind whipped my hair in a satisfying way. You asked me about work and I talked about the low calorie muffin campaign, how the people at headquarters had that French Canadian taste for puns, which was why they weren’t doing the work in house anymore, and had suggested something that translates to “mufinately healthy”, which I had to elaborate for the team, as an adverbial phrase that makes more sense in french, which it didn’t.... You grinned but it was only a flash of glee, nothing to relax into, and my laughter was sad because here I was using a tried and true anecdote on you, and it was failing. I asked if the wheat the boat was carrying would make our muffins. You shrugged. I watched your determined face in the dull light of the cloudy evening, you watched the town on shore come closer. I watched it too, by the time I could make out the houses and factories and churches, and wonder what was happening inside, they were gone, so I looked at the sky, but it wasn’t captivating, it was only big.

When you finished your shift and you climbed into your little bed with me, it felt like my first sleepover. I love first times. You told me we had to be careful. That you were conceived in the hold of a Laker, and so was Ronnie, and the rest of you, whose fathers were sailors too. There’s something about the boats, you said, and you kissed my face, firmly, and I giggled like a puppy was licking me, like it thought I was a puppy too. You weren’t facing me, your hair tickled my back and I lost myself in ticklish laughter and we made love after all, and they woke

you at four to tie up, but I slept dreamlessly until I woke up with you inside of me. My body was sweaty and heavy and aware of an exact tightness. The sky was dim with dawn. I watched the light off the water lick the ceiling. Why did I tell you that you could do whatever you wanted to me? When you finished, you said, it's six in the morning, you can go back to bed. You said my name. You said, when I got out there, there were Northern Lights, but I didn't want to wake you. I didn't say anything. I didn't say, that's not possible, the Northern Lights are more northern still.

When you were on your way home I was so apprehensive. I Googled: lonely; Google auto-completed: lonely synonyms.

When we kissed I wanted to work your teeth out of their sockets. To show you how sorely you were missed. The maxillofacial surgeon gave me my wisdom teeth in a glassine bag and you said- these are mine. They were tiny yellow bulbs with brown roots, hastening on your necklace. I felt them against my collarbone.

We were eager and afraid of each other. Trying to act like you lived there. You scowled at the dishes in the sink. I did them. You scraped out a jar of homemade barbecue sauce that had gone sour in a huff. You got stoned and told me the dog was too old, you said, *you* should put him down, not even *we*. I was so overwhelmed, but I only said, I know. Then, I told you the ending of your novel, "his father dies, it's pretty dramatic." I acted like it was an accident.

That first morning was the first time I ever woke-up before you.

I had a coffee and smoked and read on the toilet. You knocked.

"You're still in the bathroom?"

“I already pooped.”

“It’s been forty-five minutes. You reading?”

I came out and said, “The killer narrated his own death.”

“How?”

“A crippled girl did it with a hatchet.”

You smirked and said, “your sphincter must be well cold.”

I wanted to stay in that laughter.

We used to walk well together, on stupid unscenic walks. So we walked to the movies.

“There’s so much random equipment on the boat. Me and Ronnie found these parts in a box and we put them together, whenever we had time. It was a week before we realized we were building an air cannon.”

“What did you say, when you realized?”

“You could kill somebody with this, we both said that.”

You hurried and I lolled, or I hurried and you lolled. I sighed and you didn’t sigh. I wanted to be talking to you and so I asked, “What are words you know but not what they mean?”

“What did you call it? That girl’s jacket?”

“Like a Toreador’s?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s a bull fighter.”

“You?”

“Caliphate.”

“Me neither.”

The movie was bad. We left before it was over.

When we got home we had bad sex. I made a sound that made you go soft.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s just like this noisy thing in my face,” you said and made your fingers crippled and flourished them. You fell asleep. I fell asleep. In my dream, you killed me with a pretty knife. My guts fell out the front.

“I had a fucked up dream,” I said, when I felt you stirring. You looked at me but I was embarrassed.

“I heard the things you dream are things you want to happen.”

When I got home from work, you were there, of course, but it was always strange to see you there. You told me two of your co-workers got arrested in Toledo.

“Why?”

“They’re saying Tyler punched a lady-cop in the baby maker.” I stared at you. I was shocked by the word babymaker.

I asked, “The cops are saying that?” You were texting, so I faced your brow. I had to tilt my face to look at all of you, chin tucked, hunched over, elbows heavy on your knees, thumbs furious, the face of bathos, I thought, and felt small and mean. “Where were they?”

“A McDonald’s parking lot,” you said, still texting.

“A McDonald’s parking lot? Were they smoking weed?” I asked.

“Why else would they be there?” you said and then you looked up at me, soberly, “this reflects badly on the boat.” I nodded. I had no idea who reflects on the crew of a cargo ship. If I asked, you would be annoyed and I would be too distracted by your face to hear you.

The next day, you had to go back.

It was the third Friday of the month, there was a catered lunch at work, I remember. I stood in line with the copywriters, Charlotte was talking about a ten thousand dollar dental bill, and I was wondering if I’d ever get a permanent contract, if I wanted that. Once we were standing around with our plates full, she asked me if I was sad to see you go, and what you did again on the boats? I told her you were a wheelsman, which was what you were training to be, but you were actually a deckhand, and my class pride was a knot in my chest, liar, I was thinking to myself, while I smiled and told her what you told me, that steering a cargo ship is like steering an apartment complex, in terms of scale. Charlotte looked a little awed and baffled, which is the look of anyone who asks about the boats.

In the toilet, the email notification startled me.

Subject: Re: I miss You

M,

I keep trying and trying but it’s no use. I do not want to get married.

I have become

less compassionate, less democratic and

more and more bitter all the

time....

I really think you agree in some ways and it

would be

best if we could

be nice to each other about this. Civil at least.

I know that

i am doing

the right thing

however I'm sorry that I can't make it work. for now – J

Sent from my iPhone

I called you but when you answered it was only wind.

You left me a voicemail, “It’s so fucking cold. To talk to you I have to stand on top of the grain elevator. I don’t know what to say.”

I went home. My street was still my street. Once I was inside, I was thinking, I’ll cry. I smoked and looked out the window at the snow bright street until dusk made it grey and ugly. Every man, woman, or dog that walked past was unremarkable. I didn’t have the heart to really watch them or to draw the blinds and be alone. There was a birthday party for my friend who worked for a women’s rights NGO. When the street had settled into the night, when there were no more people with grocery bags or children, I put on my coat. It never occurred to me not to go. I was not having fun, but I thought “fun” many times, and I smiled every time. I talked about feminisms with feminists, about consent. I didn’t tell them what I was thinking, consent is tricky, I don’t think desires are made of words.

I stood next to the bar so I could drink and a woman with a flipper arm, the only thing I know to call it, which is horrible, made herself a virgin drink and introduced herself. We both described our work and volunteer responsibilities, it felt good to know I could still describe myself, to enthuse about music, she was in a LGBT choir. I asked her what her range was, soprano, what they performed, where. I enthused. It was so nice not to think of you. She had a talk radio show for activists, which I commended her for, and when my optimistic questions bored her, she asked me if I'd moved to Montreal alone, and I said no, with my fiancée, but we broke-up. And when she asked if it was recent, and I said today, she was startled and concerned, and said it's nice you're not crying in a corner, but she didn't meet my eye, and I thought, it's not as sad as having a flipper arm. And felt too obscene, so I left.

On my way home I got some poutine and fed the dog half. I watched the fries fall from his maw as he chomped, his pink tongue lapped the gravy. The sofa was too soft. I had to sit on the floor. The dog sat before me, his eyebrows were worried. When I wept into his fur he bristled, as trembling as any condolence.

It was 5am and the phone was ringing, it was you. I was still on the floor. I wondered if I was drunk anymore.

“I know you don't want to talk to me,” you said and you were crying. This anguished chirp couldn't come from you.

“What happened?”

“Carlos is dead. It was an accident, a bad accident. And he's dead.”

“You're ok?”

“It happened and we dealt with it and then it was just us sitting around staring and I couldn’t sit anymore. I was like, I’m gonna go for a walk, take a civilian route.”

“What happened?” I asked. I listened to you crying in the street on the Reserve near the grain docks in Thunder Bay, I tried to see your face red with melting snow and cold tears. I couldn’t.

“And I can’t call anybody. I can’t call my parents.” Your thick voice was thin when you said, my parents. And I could hear you hearing yourself, and you began to breathe desperately.

“Can I come get you?”

“No. There’s an investigation.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know you don’t want to talk about us. But the reason we broke-up was this job and this changes everything.” I love you, I thought. But you don’t know that there are no reasons. We want our lives to be more meaningful than all the things we say and do, but we reveal ourselves perfectly, everyday. That man’s death made everything pulse with a terrible meaningfulness for you, but I could only feel that in the human part of my guts. I waited for my chest to constrict with longing or sorrow. For some specific aching to carry me back to you, but I only felt pity.

“Let’s not talk about us. I love you. But let’s not talk about us.”

“Ok.”

“You need to deal with this now.”

“Yeah, ok.”

“I love you.”

“I know. I love you,” you said and then neither of us said anything. “I have to go. It’s so fucking cold. I have to move.”

“Maybe we can stay on the phone and not talk.”

“I have to go.”

I Googled: What to say when someone dies.

At ask.com a person wrote: Many a time we find it difficult to phrase right words for someone’s condolence.

I put down my iPhone. I tried to picture you. It was too painful to picture you crying so I pictured your face lax with dreams. All your limbs lead. I felt them from that familiar vantage. At the edge of me.

I woke-up and smoked and thought about Thanksgiving dinner on the boat with you and the man who died and the rest of you. I couldn’t eat all my food even though I had smoked some of your hash to make me hungry. It was surf and turf and the steak was cooked to a grey pink, I like it to bleed. I felt ungrateful. I asked him about Venezuela and about Chavez. The only thing I remember him telling me was that it cost less than five dollars to fill his SUV with gas there. You said he was a talker and he stayed and talked with us after all the other men left - until we excused ourselves so we could go fuck.

I called your best friend. He asked me about you and me. He seemed surprised but he might not be. He threw us an engagement party with three kinds of barbecued fish and chicken and beautiful salads, so I answered his questions. He told me what happened.

You were checking the ballast tanks with the man who died. I Googled: bulker ballast tanks. They're in the double bottom below the hold, the hold that gapes, emptied of tens of thousands of tons of wheat. I saw you walking along in the dark. Did you have a flashlight? There must be floodlights, for loading and unloading at night. How many cramped ballast tanks had you climbed into already, or was it enough to open them and check? Which one was frozen? If it created a vacuum, did it make a sound when he opened the hatch? Did you watch him— did it look like falling? Your friend said that you had to go in and check that he was dead. Did you know, when you climbed in, you must've known, when you turned him over, and how did you steady your hands to tie the hitch to haul him from the hold?

I thought about the first time you asked me to marry you. You were on another boat and you'd just come off an eighteen-hour shift scraping coal from the cargo hold. You texted me a picture of your face black with coal, and captioned it "chim-chiminee". You called me and told me that flecks of coal sparkled in your shit. That you were worried you were taking too many muscle relaxants. The others were on steroids. I pictured the acne on their broad backs. The one who wasn't on steroids was addicted to energy drinks and he shat himself the last time you were scraping out the hold. They hired a new guy but he was a teenager and his legs gave out halfway through the scrape you'd just finished. You had to get him up the ladder. I asked, how do you get someone up a ladder? You said: with one man above and one below. I asked, but how? You said: Jesus, you just help him. Picturing it gave me vertigo.

And you said, I need you to be there when I come home. I need a home. Let's get married. I said: that's the kind of thing you need to say to my face. When you came home your

toenails were black with coal, under the nail, it grew into the skin. You told me you started duct taping your pants to your socks to keep the coal dust out, but it was too late.

A Dog's Dog

He called me dog because they called me dog, but he was a dog, so that was worse. I haven't seen him since high school. I've thought of him, I knew his name sounded like a sneeze. He sent me a friend request on Facebook. His name is Dawson White. I don't accept, because I don't want him to remind me of himself. Like Lynne from study abroad who's teaching in Korea. I read that a little girl stuck her finger in Lynne's asshole at the bath house- it's a thing kids do there, the way they toilet paper your house here. Or like Derek from Drama Club, I read he died in a crash, he was hanging out the window of his car, trying to beat a transport truck that cut him off with a baseball bat, there was a link to the story in the paper, with lots of comments, RIP, RIP, RIP.

I shouldn't check FB like this, before I get out of bed, acting like all I am is a pair of eyes on a screen...But Dawson White, I sat before him and he sat behind me in the seventh grade. All our desks were linked up like a paperclip necklace. He was the only one who was liked less than me, and so it was natural, that we should hate each other. We both had that open mouth stare that makes people hate you. But I was smart, so people wanted to be my science project partner. And he wasn't good at anything yet. I mean, he played in an in- line hockey league, and he talked about it all the time, like it was real hockey.

And he was a pervert, he would pitch his voice low like TV to talk to me and say, "Pamela Anderson's titties are as big as basketballs. I bet her nipples are as big as baseballs". I remember thinking: you can't feed a baby with baseball nipples, nobody's got nipples that big.

“I wanna tittyfuck her,” he’d say. I didn’t even want to know what that looked like. I had seen a porno so I knew what doggy-style was. And I wanted to do it. Not like that. I wanted someone who wrote me letters, who loved me, to be naked on top of me, but I wouldn’t be able to see anything, with our faces all smushed together.

“I wanna jizz all over her tits,” he said. And then I remember he poked me, “I would jizz all over your tits. You want my jizzum?”

I remember he giggled like a girl, the way boys do when they make you a girl by being so gross. It was an awful word, jizzum. I bet you feel bad for me. But I was a pervert too. That’s why he talked to me like that. It’s more than just that I masturbated on the bus home from our overnight field trip. I was asleep. When I woke up they were all staring. My hand was making a duck face in my crotch. I mean, over my jeans, but still. When I looked at their wan mouths I knew they watched me do it to myself. That was enough for them to hate me, but that wasn’t it. The most popular girl in my class, Cora, the one we all called on three way, and then we would three way again, so there were four or five of us on the phone, listening to her tell us about the Mexican waiter who kissed her in Acapulco, and that weed tasted as bad as it smells, I mean, she was fearless, well, she told everybody I touched my dog’s penis.

I think about how I’ve told two of my ex-boyfriends about it. About how when I was a kid I had friends and then I had none, because all the kids thought I touched dog penises. And then we laughed and laughed, and I loved the way they’d looked at me then, like I was a woman who had been formed by some force beyond myself into someone who could laugh and laugh and laugh.

I never thought about how I'd done it. How Cora, my fearless friend, had looked at me when I poked at the dog's penis in the kitchen and then washed my hands. She wasn't shocked or anything, just curious. She asked me why I did it and I told her my Mom told me to, to make sure he'd peed. She told everybody, because I was still a baby, my weird mom's weird baby. And her boyfriend was in high school, we didn't know if he was real, but we were too terrified to try to find out.

But I loved her. We had snowball fights. She never invited the others; I was the childish one. It was such a thrill, to stuff a snowball in her mouth and watch it melt all over her face, beading on her freckles. Our blood got so hot and our skin got so cold. We'd shudder our clothes off and put them in the dryer. Then we'd thaw out together like that. Her shoulders were squarer than mine and her legs were sturdier and the way she flopped onto the beanbag chair naked, I mean, I just thought she was so much more than me. We watched Bob Villa, or we watched Sally Jesse Raphael. Our clothes were so warm when the timer would sound. We would make a show of it for each other, zipping up our jeans, losing our faces in our t-shirts, groaning with gusto.

I was obsessed with Cora and the boys knew it. They called me her bitch. Until they called me dog.

I remember I went home and wept. I haven't wept that way in a while. Until your jaw trembles, and you weep still, until you yawn, your jaw reasserting itself.

I'm cross-legged on my bed and the sun is too hot on my back and too bright in my room. The warm plastic of my laptop feels good on my thighs. I find Cora on Facebook. She's a

teacher. She's backpacking across Australia with her Australian husband. He looks Australian, sports sunglasses, sports sandals, smiling even in the candid shots. Of course she's in Australia, where everyone talks too fast and their accent brays. There is Cora, shielding her eyes from the sun. Her smile is still goofy and her teeth are still big and white, her stance is wide and brave on a hilltop. She's a teacher. She will teach mean girls and she will know their bristling loneliness, the way they snicker when she tells them to say sorry.

Why'd I listen to my mother? Why didn't I say, no, I don't want to touch the dog's penis? One time, at a family party, she told a story that went: when Maddie was still in diapers, I was vacuuming, and I found a raisin on the floor, and popped it in my mouth, and it was poo! I didn't blame my mother. At that time, I thought I was my mother. I thought that until I had sex. I didn't blame her. But I loved our dog less after that.

After the dog penises, no one talked to me except a girl with a dull face, Lisa, mostly we watched TV and ate too much together. Even talking about boys was boring with her. There were only two things about her that weren't boring. Her mother was a waddling fatty and her grandmother was a ghost (everyone we knew was that kind of Catholic, they believed their dreams). I loved watching her mother eat at the kitchen table, such a small mouth and it all started there. When you came to the table all you saw was her ass on the meagre seat, and when you sat down all you saw was her bosom, like two Christmas hams, such a wealth of meat breathing before the meagre dish of spaghetti and meatballs, and her hands, her hands... After dinner, we would watch TV. We sat before her, cross-legged on the peach Berber carpet, in front of the big screen. In my family we had to pass the chips, but at Lisa's she and I had a bowl and her mother always had the family size bag between her legs, to fill us up, she said. I would listen

to her eat chips, the constant rhythm of her crunching and sucking the dust from her teeth, then the slurp of soda, the swallowing. It was soothing and disgusting.

During recess, Lisa would sit with me. I never wondered if she thought I was boring. And I would look longingly at Cora and the other girls, perched on the parallel bars. I missed sitting there, even though I knew sitting on the cold metal bars was bad for your privates- it might make it hard for you to hold your pee. I missed practicing witchcraft with them, chanting, light as a feather, stiff as a board, trying to levitate each other into the ether. So I would just talk and Lisa would listen until I got bored of hearing myself talk. I guess Dawson talked to me too, not at recess, but during class and at lunch. Dawson talked the most at lunch. I remember I was applying it, my peanut butter, to my cracker, with the plastic implement that came in the package, and Dawson was telling me about how he was gonna fuck me: “I’m gonna fuck you until you squeal. I’m gonna fuck you until you squeal like a bitch, dog.”

He laughed and his laugh was the laugh of an old man and a child all at once. You know the fake laugh people do to make fun of French people: a wet Santa Claus laugh. It was like that, but with real glee.

I stuck the peanut butter blade in the peanut butter. I was picturing it: Dawson’s stupid mouth open and me, me, me. Just a stupid body for another stupid body.

I listened to him tell me how he would do it and when he got up to throw away his Jello container, I heaped all the peanut butter onto my plastic blade and reached beneath my desk to spread it onto his seat. He must’ve felt it, because he stood up right away. I wasn’t expecting that. It looked like shit. It felt sweet for a moment. He stared at his soiled seat, and then he stared

at us with all the sweetness of defeat on his face. And we all stared back with the meanness that was always ready.

And I knew I wasn't a dog. How can a dog make a boy beg?

He stared at his seat again and his wretched mouth was my own. I fantasized about taking a knee and lapping the peanut butter from the orange plastic seat. My pink tongue heavy with it, I would open my mouth to show him how sorry.

Dawson was groping at his pants, pulling them away from his body, and everyone was laughing desperately at every gesture. He knew not to put his hand in the mess-that that was what we wanted.

The teacher rose and tried to match the class' mirth with her sternness, until Dawson put his head down and left.

He never spoke to me again. I was more alone than ever.

I never told anybody, but Lisa knew. We were having a sleepover at her house and her sister wasn't home yet, because she was with her boyfriend. This was good because it made it more likely her grandmother's ghost would turn on the TV or something. We would lay back to back under her flannelette sheets and her Backstreet Boys Poster sagging on the attic ceiling, talking until one of us fell asleep. That night, Lisa told me her grandmother was a ghost because her sister was having sex, and she told me her sister said not to have sex because once you do you're basically a boy, you think about it all the time. Like Dawson, she said. I remember I was

so ashamed. I remember she said, "I saw you do it to Dawson?" And I stayed so hot in my skin, saying nothing.

I type Lisa's name into the Facebook search bar. She's a kindergarten teacher's assistant. Her face isn't dull, her brow is short and her mouth is weak, but her cheeks are so fat and her eyes are so happy that her whole face looks fortunate. She is smiling in a bridesmaids dress, she is smiling with a daiquiri in Cuba, she is laughing at her niece's baptism, holding the baby for the blessing, under the priest's golden pitcher, the baby's crying face is contorted, and Lisa is laughing.

I accept Dawson White's Facebook friend request and look at all his pictures. Most of his pictures are comics he made with a comic strip app. They depict his wife getting angry that the fridge is filled with beer, his eyes bugging at his wife's hot nurse outfit, his wife naked in a cake, also him getting angry that his wife is always online, so it's not all tired stereotypes... Anyway, they have a baby and she's beautiful. His baby's standing with her arms out, trying to walk, and he is kneeling in the grass, arms out, his eyes slits, his mouth open like wow.

When We Were Jellyfish

“So, a fetal egg is crunchy? How close is it to hatching, when they cook it?” Dan asked. I looked past him at the menu painted onto the food truck that served fetal eggs, and deep-fried tripe, and things like that, which frankly smelled great.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t think I can feed my fetus fetal eggs.”

“That’s perfectly understandable.” He said and made an elaborating gesture but didn’t. I lit a cigarette. There were other food trucks, serving fancy macaroni, or fancy hot dogs, or some such. “So, you’ll pitch something else?”

“I have to.” I said, and sighed. “Are you hungry? I’m not hungry. Let’s have a drink.”

We did.

“You’re smoking a lot.” Dan said. I raised my glass, it was a broad gesture and I was embarrassed of it.

“So I don’t change my mind.” I said and looked down, because I could feel him looking at me looking at the table. “I don’t want to feed it fruits and vegetables. It feels like lying, like saying, life’s gonna be great.”

“It’s your baby. I bet it loves smoking.”

“It’s horrible how much I want him.”

“Your baby?”

“I want him like I want my thumb.”

“Of course.” He said and looked at me, his patient smile twitching. “What happened?”

“I was stupid.” I said. His giggle forgave me, he always forgave me, for dumping him when he was high on MDMA, for calling him in tears a year later, asking him, stupidly, selfishly, *babe, am I lovable?*

The waiter came over and we ordered lavender gin salty dogs, and popcorn chicken hearts. “Just something to munch on,” Dan said, and I thought, he talks to waiters like my mother. “Who’s the guy?”

“He was a cook. It only lasted a few weeks.”

Dan giggled and said, “I’m sorry, babe. I mean, I’m sorry.” He held his drink delicately to his lips. “What’s wrong with him?”

I looked into my purple drink and shook my head. “I was in a sex haze. We had nothing in common. But he’s beautiful. And he has a baby parrot.”

“But you hate birds.”

“Hated birds, Rocco cured me.”

“His name is Rocco?”

“No the bird, the bird is Rocco.”

The chicken hearts came, and they weren’t rubbery at all, but chewing felt laborious and sad.

“Don’t tell him, the guy,” Dan said.

“I can’t.”

“You can’t,” he said, and looked at me wearily, because he knew, he knew that I wanted to. And I would, I was compulsive that way, but there was another man, one I’d met on vacation,

and I didn't know whose baby it was. Talking was no consolation. Some questions are so big they beget no questions. You contend with them as simply as your own face in a mirror.

“So, are you seeing anybody?” I asked, and laughed at the awkwardness. I wanted to eat the last popcorn chicken heart in the basket, but Dan volleyed it into his mouth and I felt fondly for him. He'd been on two first dates with Jen and Jin. Jin was an introvert and Jen was an extrovert, and one was Chinese and one was Taiwanese, but he couldn't remember which. I asked him if he thought it might be a problem.

“It's already a problem- thank God I have a speech impediment,” he said.

“You called me Naeema once.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. You're a racist *and* a misogynist.”

“Well you're both soft and sweet.”

“Part of some endless feminine being for you to project your needs onto...”

He laughed broadly, the way you laugh at yourself. My laughter brayed desperately, because I was desperate.

We walked back to the park. We had tickets to see the Marina Abramovic Institute Prototype Exhibit. The idea was to experience performance art in action. On the way I saw Ray, the flesh tunnels in his ears were larger, the rest was the same, jeans faded in the knees and falling off, the same, sweaty, earnest face. The only person in this city I'd known since high school. He stopped.

“Ann,” he said, his voice boomed and it was awkward. “You still doing food?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m still DJing.” He said, probably because Dan was a music critic and he wanted him to write something.

“How’s that going?”

“Good. I’m at Neutre on Wednesdays.”

“Are you still a beer wench? Has Medieval Times promoted you yet?”

“No, not yet,” he said and looked at me with all the candour of horror but none of the horror. I hated myself for making fun of him, and I hated myself for making out with him, more than once when I was thirteen and he was nineteen, because I wanted to be making out all the time.

“You owe me a hundred bucks,” I said. A year ago, I got him to dog sit for a weekend because I knew he was broke. When I got home there was piss and shit everywhere and no food in the bowl and no water in the bowl and only a cup of water left in the toilet. Brutus was pissing blood. The vet said he got a bladder infection from trying to hold it. Ray’s phone was cut off, but I called his girlfriend and she said they took five hits of acid on Friday and on Sunday he remembered about the dog.

“How’s Brutus?”

“I had to put him down.” I said, he winced, and I added. “Not because of the bladder infection.”

“I’m sorry.” He said and looked at Dan, furtively, who was staring at a parked car. “I don’t have it.”

“You could give me some acid.” I said and stared. He put his fist in his pocket and I put out my hand like a little girl. He looked hatefully at my hand and put a piece of cardboard in it.

“Thanks.” I said, and felt grateful and hoped that I looked it.

“Yeah.” He said and sort of bowed sarcastically as he stepped off the sidewalk to pass.

“That was mean.”

“I know.” I said, and looked at the ground. “I’m not myself.”

We waited in front of the interconnected white tents of the exhibit under the maple canopy, the darkest part of the park, where the grass won’t grow and it smells like dirt.

“Do you want to take it now?” I asked.

“After,” Dan said. We all went in and donned lab coats and put the iPods earpieces’ in our ears so we could hear Marina Abramovic’s instructions. Having instructions to follow made me relax.

Inside, there was a long pine bench and four coolers of water in which sat colourful crystals as big as heads. The coolers were made of glass, and had tiny silver taps that looked too delicate for their vessels. We were asked to pour ourselves a glass of crystal-filtered water, and to focus on the quenching of our thirst. We had to drink from the one whose crystal’s mystical properties we were most drawn to. The rose quartz was about unconditional love; as soon as they announced it we both stood and chose that one. I knew we would. I sipped and gulped the cool, cool water. I felt cool inside. My body was a watery world, and my baby was a world afloat inside. I imagined my baby’s round belly swelling with mine, pinkly.

Then I realized, when they announced amethyst, that the red crystal was rose quartz, and that we both poured from the amethyst one, because it was rose. What was the amethyst crystal about, I wondered. But it was too late, to pour another glass, and to reflect on the act of

quenching our thirst, again. After it was over, we left the tent, and left the park, and I felt elated. Then I remembered the LSD, and felt elated still.

“We drank the wrong water,” Dan said and we laughed. I tore off a tab of acid for him and a tab of acid for me and we put them on our tongues.

“Call Leslie, tell her to come over.”

I could hear him talking to her. Then he looked at me, blankly. “Shit, it’s tomorrow.” I put out my hand and he put the phone in it.

“You can’t have an abortion with an acid hangover,” Leslie said.

“Will it kill me?” I asked.

“Ann,” she begged.

“It’s too late,” I said. She made a sound that had all the throatiness of yelling and none of the yelling. “Come,” I said, in a hushed way that made me hate myself.

“I’m hanging out with my husband. I can’t do acid for no reason.”

I wanted to say, of course, but, of course, I didn’t.

Leslie came over and we all sat around my old apartment, feeling the good feelings of LSD. Leslie asked us what we ate.

“Chicken hearts!” Dan cheered.

“What did you eat?” I asked.

“Just chicken.” Leslie said.

“What’s your favourite offal?” I asked.

“Sweetbreads.” Dan said.

“Tongue.” Leslie said.

“Tongue, me too.” I said. “Doesn’t it seem like, if you cut out your tongue, ok, not your tongue, but if you were to cut out a tongue, it should still live a little. A chicken runs around without its head. It seems like, a tongue should wag without its mouth.”

“Don’t talk like that.” Leslie said and then more softly, “Don’t talk like that.” I’m sure I looked scolded. I thought, it doesn’t seem too dangerous, a tongue without a mouth.

We walked to the lake. Waiting for the crosswalk, I heard a thudding bassline pouring from an SUV. I stepped towards it and Leslie took my hand.

“Do you want to get inside?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you know those men?”

I looked at the men and she said, “No.”

She looked at me, kindly. I thought, rape. I thought, if they tried to I would make my face a martyr’s. I would say: I’m with child. Then their greedy faces would fall off and they would just be people. Leslie’s hand, still in mine, felt slight and spry. We walked and walked. It was dawn before it was too cold to be outside. We went back to Dan’s and listened to the new My Bloody Valentine album, and I had to hear the bass.

“I need to lie on the floor.” I said.

“Lie on the floor.” Dan said.

“Lie on the floor.” Leslie said.

I did and it was right. Dan said we could crash, but the blanket on his couch smelled so pungently of himself I was worried it would blot me out, so, I went home.

When I rose, every one of my cells felt unclean. I brushed my teeth and in the mirror I considered my scarred face, my sad, smart eyes.

In the shower, I closed my eyes. I put my hand on my belly and took my hand off my belly. I thought about Berlin. At the Neue Museum, I stood before the Standing Figure of a Queen from Attenkut's tomb. She had no head but that did not make her less of a queen. It was in the swell of her belly, and the thickness of her thighs, and the prettiness of her feet. All the tourists rushed past her, to see the bust of Nefertiti, but I knew that she was more perfect, because she was pregnant. And I knew that I was pregnant. And I was.

I washed my belly, still concave. I washed the rest of me.

I checked my e-mail and the man from my vacation had e-mailed me and I felt guilty about it. I thought, what is a crush? It's hope. You hope they won't think you're as ugly as you think you are. But, we're all ugly. Maybe you hope they'll think your ugliness becomes you, like a bulldog's.

I waited until it was time. I wasn't alone. When you're pregnant you're never alone.

When I got to the clinic, Leslie was already there. I thought I would lose it, but there were half a dozen women in the air-conditioned waiting room not losing it, and I didn't want to let them down. One of the others, a pretty, plump girl sitting with her soulful looking boyfriend, looked despondent, and we searched each other's faces for a while, until she got up to go to the water cooler. Some of the women sat with other women who I assumed were their friends, and some sat with men who I assumed were their men. One stoic looking older lady in a pantsuit sat with a distraught teenage boy, and I was confused by them until I figured they must be the

mother and the boyfriend, and that she was braver than me, the girl who was in there already, because I would never tell my mother.

“How were the fetal eggs?” Leslie asked.

“I can’t do it. It’s gotta be something else, something seasonal.”

“Cold soup?”

“That’s good. The Korean one, with the hard-boiled eggs, and spicy mustard, and vinegar, and arrowroot noodles. D’you think Esther’s aunt would give me the recipe for the noodles? For people with pasta makers.”

“Sure. But you should go to K-town in Markham, they’ve got the best one.”

Leslie was good, sending me to a suburban strip mall. City people would feel adventurous if they made it there, they wouldn’t, but they would think about it. People who lived there would go, and they would feel good about where they lived.

Then they called me in and I lay on the exam table. I asked the nurse to tilt the ultrasound screen away, so I wouldn’t see my baby. And she asked me if I was sure. I nodded and looked away from her open face. The jelly was cold, I knew what to expect because ultrasounds are always on TV. But she couldn’t find it.

“Sometimes, with very early pregnancies, it’s hard to see it, and we have to do it vaginally,” she said and inserted something like a dildo. When said, “There it is,” I wept. The more you cry, the more they ask you, are you sure? And you have to say, yes.

Then it was the room they do it in, with the stirrup chair. They asked me if I wanted the gas, and I said I wanted everything.

“Are you sure?” The doctor asked.

“Yes,” I said. Finally, yes, and a nurse handed me the mask, and I heard the terrible din of a vacuum. I thought it was coming from the hose in my mouth, but the hose injected gas into my mouth with a hiss and the big noise was aspirating. I thought, my baby is actually being aspirated by the hose in my vagina, and I gulped at the gas, until it was over.

After, I told Leslie it wasn't so bad. Because it wouldn't change anything that it was.

Dan called me that night.

“I'm sorry babe,” he said. “I asked Jin about it because she's a nurse. There's only like three layers of cells at this point, she said, and she named them, but I can't remember, and these cell layers haven't even folded over to make the spine yet. There's a rudimentary heart, I guess, but that's it.” It made me feel much better. I pictured layers of cells, of uniform density, looking like a jellyfish. I wonder if that's what we were before. If we floated before we had a spine to swim, and then limbs to swim, and then hands and feet, finally, so we could crawl out of the sea.

If I were a jellyfish how good would it feel to touch you, baby, how good would you feel touching me, if our brains were all over our bodies?

And he said, “It doesn't even have a soul. It doesn't have a soul for a few months at least.”

“I wonder if you can feel it come into your body-- its soul.”

“I bet you could,” he said.

As soon as I said it I knew it was wrong. How would the soul enter the body? It can't, I thought. It's in me already. The soul is mine, and it cleaves, rather it would, it would cleave into two souls. I pictured my baby's belly button, the wound, like the smooth wound of a worm's face. So my baby's soul is mine, still. Or it was. It was.

“Yeah,” I said. “Thanks for calling.”

“Sleep tight,” he said.

“Sleep tight,” I said.

In the shower, the steam always seemed to choke me.

I tried to forget about you, baby. I blared music while I tested recipes. I blared music because my thoughts were sick, like, don't, don't, don't, and music vibrates in me like a thought, with all of the sadness but none of the nonsense. Courtney Love screaming, *might last a night, yeah, mine is forever*. I tested recipes one batch at a time, taking notes on index cards because their thickness pleased me, making sure they were the same. They always were. Usually, I would call people to come over and take the things I made, but it was a pleasure to throw it all away. To see three layers of lemon tart a top three layers of meatloaf in the trash, a nasty trifle, rife with fruit flies.

I e-mailed with the man from my vacation in what I hoped was mutually appreciating attraction. I remembered the ultrasound woman's supple voice, *sometimes, with very early pregnancies*... That it was maybe him, that made me want him more and less. He made puns about Auschwitz and asked me if I thought poems were made of words.

I went to meet him in the park. He had a dozen books laid out on a picnic table, to help him write, which was silly and endearing. He held his face like he had a secret and chain smoked. He told me the same anecdote about his first job making funnel cakes at the fair. When a customer found a hair baked in he'd said, that's extra. I watched him talk. I kept having to say things and then wondering what kind of face I was making. The word for the picnic table under

the tree was sun dappled, but the light looked sad like it was spilled. It rinsed me, that sun. My eyes were watering. He offered me allergy pills. I knew it was only me leaking.

We walked towards my place. He had to pee. He told me again about how everyone he knew went to the same coffee shop to watch each other watching each other. How they looked for that in the zoo. That when the animals started to have habits like that it meant they were already crazy. I was thinking, conversational recall is a real shame. He was waiting for me to say something. I remember the light made the pavement look pale. I said, *everybody's crazy*. He laughed at that, and it *was* trite. I wanted to say, habits are the only thing that will have us, but they're not enough. Instead, I punched him, joking like. He looked pained.

In my apartment, I waited for him to pee. I heard him flush. In the living room, he grabbed his backpack and grimaced.

"I can't do this. I'll regret it."

"What's *this*?"

"You know, I've been travelling, now I'm abstaining."

"From what?"

"Everything."

"Use your words," I said.

His eyes darted around my apartment, tidy, not clean, he pursed his lips and said, "Sex. Everything."

I laughed the kind of laughter they call theatrical, but it's real. He put his shoes on in the hall. I closed the door and pressed my face to the smooth wood veneer. I grasped the door handle. I was only a woman, no longer pregnant, still desperate, still waiting for some man.

I sat down. Drank water, it was bitter, yesterday's water. I'm an anarchist, I thought, I would pour my heart out to watch it puddle.

I called Leslie.

"How was the boy?"

"Abstinent. Abstaining."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm so embarrassed." I said. I listened to her breathing and felt better.

"*I fall in love too easily.*" She sang the first bar in her breathy, pitchy voice. Her tone was everything, all the sadness of Chet Baker, none of Sinatra's brass.

"I'm not in love."

"*I fall in love too easily. I fall in love too fast.*"

"I'm not in love."

"*I fall in love too terribly hard, for love to ever last.*"

"It's just my stupid baby."

"*My heart should be well schooled, cause I've been fooled in the past.*" She sang the oo's so brightly. I felt it there in my throat. "*But still, I fall in love so easily. I fall in love so fast.*"

I laughed and said, "I'm not in love."

"I love you," she said.

I said, "I love you, too."

Beasts

My daughter Claire is in the yard with my husband. He's mowing the lawn with his shirt off. His posture has that correctness that comes from the motors' kick, he looks naturalistic in the evening sun, a man mowing a lawn, but his sweating and squinting undo the impression--it's 94 degrees with the Humidex. Claire is working on a landscape with her sidewalk chalk in the driveway. I can see her horizon: blue above, green below. She has her shirt off too. My husband says it's fine-- says we raised her to be uninhibited by her body. Whenever he says it, I want to say *of*, she's uninhibited *of* her body. But there are more important things. There is Claire. I call her inside, say, "Daddy has to weed whack the driveway, *tu le reprends plus tard*, finish your art after." But it's that I don't want a debate: Why can daddy take his shirt off and I can't?

I'm washing the potatoes for supper, new potatoes, the little ones, they seem lucky to me, luckier than the larger less regularly shaped potatoes, so more likely to be chosen in the store. Although, there is something pleasing in the wartiness of yams. Claire is singing along to *Hey Mr. Postman* in the living room. I peek in and she's running out of breath, singing back-up and lead -- "*De-liver de-letter, de-sooner de-better*"- looking into the bay window, at her reflection and past it, trying to win herself over. "*Wait! Wait a minute Mr. Postman. Look and see! What have you got for me?*" Her voice thrills itself as it rises to a panic, "*Oh. Oh, please Mr. Postman.*" With that she throws her head back. What a natural!

The water is boiling, so I throw the potatoes in and put the green beans in the steamer. I feel like I'm getting away with something, with both side dishes cooking in one pot. The radio is playing *Earth Wind and Fire* now, and I bet Claire is lip syncing. I heat some oil in a pan and

watch the yellow bubbles pale and chase each other around. Because denying this rhythm is a waste of joy, my shoulders bob along to the music. I slice a big trout filet into three pieces. Claire's little slice is first, always Claire's first, then mine, then my husband's. I get a thrill out of sliding my knife along the cutting board to separate each piece, making sure it's just right. I throw them in the pan, fatty side first, and the sear is pleasing. Claire isn't lip-syncing, she's making snow angels, enjoying the friction of her limbs against the carpet. She's never bored. She gets that from me. And *Earth Wind and Fire*, the horns, they are very heady, too heady for children really, but the rhythm is easy. I take out three plates and three knives and three forks. I flip the pieces of trout and their colour has richened from the true red of flesh to the brown red of meat. I call to Claire, "*à table, à table.*" I am teaching her French because my mother is French. Everyone knows there is the only one language you know how to love a child with, or is that only a French thing, *la langue du coeur*, a preference rather than a real value, like frankness.

When I go into the dining room she is straddling the arm of the sofa, dragging herself forwards and back against the fabric, her hands gripping the edge, her hair a curtain. One knee is bent on the sofa, the other leg trails lazily along the floor as she masturbates. I cannot look at her. I watch the pallor of the bottom of her foot travel back and forth.

"Stop it. Stop it."

She plants her foot and looks at me with resignation.

"How many times, Claire? How many times? *Avec ta mine de qui, moi? T'as pas honte?*"

Sam's sweaty hand is on my shoulder, and my throat's readiness has become a tightness. He sighs and his voice is conciliatory, "You do your exercises in your room, Claire. You know better."

She says she's sorry, and there is trepidation in her voice. He is so understanding of her when she's like this. I'm sure he's smiling a reassuring smile, because she is at ease again, standing, waiting. It's like he's her mother. They set the table together. She wonders what insects eat. Sam knows the answer, says, "leaves and twigs." I put the green beans in a bowl and drain the potatoes, this oppressive moisture on my face that smells faintly of dirt, it's a release. I exhale all this hot steam very slowly, like at the spa. I slide the trout onto a plate and carry the food to the table. Claire is talking about butterflies, wondering what they eat. She asks, "is it different, because they look so different? Do they get their colours from the things they eat?"

"How do you mean?" Sam asks, as he spoons himself some green beans, balancing them strangely across the width of the spoon. I should've brought tongs, but I'd just be fussing if I got up now. He has beautiful hands-- a musician's hands. He plays viola. We live in Minneapolis. We've lived in Cleveland, Chicago and Cincinnati. Chicago was my favourite, because they have jazz like Montreal has jazz, but the symphony here offered him the first chair, so here we are.

"Like in the fall," Claire says, "a caterpillar is in the caterpillar part of life in the fall, and it eats yellow leaves, and red leaves, and purple leaves, and orange leaves, and then it goes into its cocoon, and then I bet that makes it colourful; when it comes out a butterfly. But if a butterfly is a caterpillar in the summertime, and all it eats is green leaves, well, it'll turn into a green butterfly, and that's good! It's good camouflage!" She is so smart my daughter. She isn't looking at us, she's staring off at green butterflies, a green too stiff in a flutter of green leaves. There's no

food on her plate. She hasn't tried to serve herself. So my husband does it for her, beaming at her, he asks, "how many potatoes?"

"Four," she says, "they're little, they're my favourites."

"I know," I say, and it feels like a reproach, but I haven't spoken to her since I got angry, so I can't help that it sounds like that. "They're my favourites, too," I add, lamely. And only talk will make talk easy again. "I've seen a butterfly being born, or maybe it was a moth, still, they're born the same," I say. I don't want to correct her, but I explain-- "caterpillars are hatched from eggs in spring time. There's barely anything for an insect to eat in winter, so they can't have babies in the fall -- they can't have babies 'til it's spring. By late spring the caterpillars are cocooning, and in June they come down from the trees. When they're ready the thread of their cocoon starts to unravel, and they come down slow and steady. It looks like they're in an elevator. An elevator in the air. Then they're reborn on the ground."

"I bet they get dizzy being born." She adds. My laughter brays with the ease that is between us again, and at Claire's incredible sensitivity to the experience of insects.

"Yes, yes, I bet," I say. Sam smiles at me.

"Thank your mother for supper," he says. With a nod to me and to her.

"*Merci, Maman,*" she says. We don't speak French at the table, for Sam's sake, but we know he loves the sound of it. Claire, reminded of her dinner, smashes her potatoes with the back of her fork, and with her left hand takes her knife and scrapes up some butter, and awkwardly spreads it across the potatoes she's still smashing -- going in and out of the fork's tines. Her hands are totally contorted. Her knife and fork are clashing. We don't correct her. We watch her figure it out together.

I ask Sam about his rehearsal tonight. They're preparing for the Pop's series. Of course, the Sunday Pop's series. Last month was music from the movies, Star Wars, The Godfather, etc.. Before that it was Sinatra, so they had a guest tenor.

"What is it this month?" I ask.

"We're doing The Beatles," he says, "haven't you always wanted to hear an orchestral arrangement of Yellow Submarine?" We laugh our cultured laughter, and Claire laughs to be laughing with us, too loudly.

"There's a yellow submarine?" She asks. Her nose wrinkles; this is her incredulous look -- it's my sister's too. This *retroussée* nose that's so expressive. Sam and I exchange a sideways glance, and he gives me a grim smile and begins to sing. His pitch is obviously right -- he can't fake that, but his tone is a protest against the song, nasal, thin, worse than Ringo's. I groan theatrically. Now she and Sam are a team.

"We all live in a yellow submarine, yellow submarine, yellow submarine!" They sing wildly.

I take my part, in a frail irate tone, I ask, "What is that infernal racket?" The way she guffaws at the way I make fun of my seriousness; to prove that I can take a joke, that I am a joke with my adult prudishness... What am I thinking? Why do I insist on ruining this? But it's too late to sing.

Serious, suddenly, Claire asks, "What was the yellow submarine?"

"Oh," Sam says. "It was imaginary. An imaginary submarine."

Sam asks if my sister might come down for Christmas, a propos of nothing, or maybe it's that she told me she feels like she hates her husband now that he's become interested in

municipal politics and talks about it all the time, which I should never have shared. Anyway, I've told him a million times, no. No one wants to come to Minneapolis -- not from Montreal. So, I shrug. We'll just have a token *tortière* again this year and he'll ask me again to tell Claire how my family always stays up all night on Christmas eve. That we wait 'til after midnight mass to eat, and that we eat until dawn. When we were dating he asked me what we ate for Christmas, and I told him we ate venison pies, head cheese, blood pudding, and we did, but mostly the old folks ate that. The rest of the food was what mid-westerner's would have, casseroles, sweet gherkins, pickled onions, and ham. Last Christmas I couldn't sleep so I had some cognac in my smoking spot, the second step of the back porch. I let the snow purple my fingers, and sang the folk song about the girl who wants to get married, but all the men are at war. *C'est la belle Françoise, qui veut se marier, maluron, lurette...* And I cried because my voice was not my mother's -- had none of my mother's warmth, and you have to let yourself be maudlin. You have to give into it sometimes. They've moved on to talking about choir practice, and the crowd imitation exercises that improve projection. They're such fun. We've done them together, Claire and I.

It's half past six, so Sam stands and says, the way he says every night he has a rehearsal: "Ladies, I take my leave." He bows. Claire bows. They bow at each other like she's Chaplin and he's her straight man, again and again. I love their complicity. I wish I wasn't her mother, so I could be in on it too. Stupid maudlin thoughts. Stupid. Stupid.

Everything is quiet after he's left. Claire puts her dishes in the sink and asks, "*s'il-te-plait Maman, je veux dessiner dehors?*"

"*Je voudrais,*" I say.

“*Je voudrais dessiner dehors,*” she says, blankly, but using the conditional like I asked. I watch her while I do the dishes. She is totally absorbed, her arm mirrors’ the tree limb she’s drawing like one of those movement lines in cartoons. I put the radio on again and music isn’t quite satisfying. I put on an audiobook, *The Old Man and the Sea*, and find that dark night of waiting again. I stare at Claire’s rigid body. The only point of interest in view. The houses are there, but all I see is myself in this street; myself and my girl. The sky gets darker and the trees get brighter, but I don’t really see it. I feel a direness. It’s plain this fish is killing the old man. He’s long since sliced his hand. Now his good arm has gone numb. He has no sway. He only has a line. Claire’s crouching on the perimeter of her drawing now, not wanting to scuff it. The Macnamaras pull into their driveway but stay in the car. I don’t imagine why. I stay with myself. I swear I see a flying fish on the Macnamara’s lawn, it’s wings, protruding from its dorsal fin, a bioluminescence of impossible green. I wring out my scouring sponge with my fist. Imagine all the bacteria caught in the drips that strike the stainless steel of the sink. If we could see germs, they might be that colour.

At bed time, Claire has her head in the crook of my elbow. I read to her and I can feel her attention ebbing, so I let the book close.

“*Tu m’aimes plus que Papa?*” she asks.

“*On t’aime également, sans cesse, sans mesure.*”

“No.”

“*Mais si!*”

“I mean, do you love me more than you love Daddy?”

“Ça n’a pas rapport.”

“Why?”

“Quand t’es follement amoureuse..”

“What?”

“When you fall in love, and want to make a baby. When you have a baby, you’ll see, it’s different.”

“Why?”

“It feels different.”

Claire is quiet. I feel the heat of her and imagine the rush of her thoughts and wait for her to ask why? When she doesn’t, I get my arm out from under her by jiggling it elaborately and making a pained expression. She laughs. I pull the blankets up around her shoulders, and she says, “more”. I pull them up around her chin, and she says, “more”. I pull them up and let them fall, covering her face, and she squirms and shows me her laughing face. Her eyes are grey like mine, naturally. And I bring my face to hers, and say, *“bisous.”* Like I say every night. And she puts her tiny mouth on my mouth and thrusts her tongue past my teeth.

I stand and her head is alert, but her limbs are still cast lazily away from her. I close my eyes. Feel my molars inching towards my front teeth. Taste the soap my mother slid over my tongue when I was bad. Imagine forcing that horrible bitterness on Claire, the desperate pleading of her eyes as my hand clamps the soap inside.

“I want to feel what it feels like,” she says. She is like a woman, saying, *I want*, like that. My rage is still a knot in my chest, so I close the door. I’ve never shut her up in her room before. There’s no lock on it. I stare at the mute knob-- wanting some kind of sound, some closure. I

open the door and slam it. I imagine carrying the Shaker chair from my desk up the stairs, and wedging it between the door and the doorknob. Instead, I sit in the hall. Exhale slowly to stop my heart from racing. This is all my fault. I made her this way when she was a baby.

I remember that I was dreaming, and the man with the classic torso was kissing me, more and more—and I woke-up with my tongue in my daughter's ear. There was the rawness of morning in the room and the unfirm look of her skull. And I shut my eyes against the fat of her cheek, the delicate cartilage of her ear. I couldn't look. *Claire, Claire, Claire*, I said, to break my own heart. *Rape, rape, rape. I raped my baby at eight weeks*, I said to myself, to an interlocutor, the one you explain yourself to, to yourself. I remember that I couldn't look at her.

I knew that when I opened my eyes, I would see only how much more I was -- more than she was. She was just a baby, and I could hurt her. What if I opened my eyes, and I saw the tight bliss of sleep in her baby eyelids and her baby fists, and I stuck out my tongue and licked her face like a dog-- like a man acting like a dog. What if I raped my baby more?

She cried all the time. And I was terrified of her. All a baby understands is touch. They can't really see. It's all vague shapes. My hands were fearful of her, that I would drop her, that her face would be between my breasts, one hand supporting her head, the other under her butt, that my tired hand, my right, would get sweatier and sweatier and slip off the plastic diaper, that my left hand would cup the absence of her skull, as she fell.

I told Sam about my thoughts. I remember Sam saying, *A thought's just a thought. We all have stupid ugly thoughts*. And he held me. He always holds me when I'm overwhelmed. Sam has this way of saying trivializing things so feelingly they seem smart. I always feel better after I tell him my secrets.

Still, he was wrong, is what I'm thinking. I work my big toe into a big knot in the pine floor. A thought's not just a thought. It must be followed.

"Your daughter is a nymphomaniac," I say to myself, and I hate myself for saying that angry misogynistic word. Claire is thoughtful, and smart, and has manners. "She's not a nymphomaniac. You can't say that. She's a seven year old child exploring sex. Frankly, it's normal. You can't. You shan't..." When I hate myself, I'm so haughty with myself. This isn't something to give into. Talking to oneself. Letting my senses disintegrate until I'm sitting in the hallway like a lame animal, and wanting Sam -- wanting someone to act with purpose, so that I can act purposefully, also.

Get up, I think. Then I feel it, as spinally as fear, and stand. I take the stairs two at a time. Feel dizzy in the foyer. The front door looms with the porch light shining behind it. I hate that yawning glow it has. Our house is open concept, so I can see the living room, and the dining room, and the kitchen that has walls with arches cut out of them. I gather things in my arms that look out of place. Stop when I'm holding two books, a bowl of stale popcorn, a bottle of coral nail polish in a shade called *malicious*, and Claire's terrycloth robe, which she took off when I said bedtime and streaked up the stairs naked like it was a prank. She knows her nakedness provokes me and she likes to provoke me. Like any child, I think. The books. Those go on the shelf. I like my private little gallery. The nail polish goes in the fridge, so it'll last. Throw the popcorn in the trash on top of the supper, but my hands have no purchase... Reach into the trash. Grab the bowl. Feel something that is slimy enough to be trout with one finger, but the other fingers feel the innocuousness of popcorn, and then the edge of the blue popcorn bowl. It goes in the sink. Wash it and dry it with Claire's robe still draped over my shoulder.

I feel bobble headed. Looking thisaway and thataway for something to do. Those words aren't mine they're musical theatre words, they're trying to make the manic turning of my head charming to myself. I call my sister, even though it's ten o'clock and she's usually asleep by nine. It goes to voicemail.

"Valérie, ma fille à fourrer sa langue dans ma gueule"..... That's the car in the driveway. I feel his steps on the porch and his key in the door so keenly. Like a dog does. I'm glad he'll see me on the phone with my sister. I can't stand to lie in wait.

Sam is smiling at me, and patiently untying his shoes. Picking them up. Putting them away. I always kick mine off so aggressively... I am pacing in the kitchen but I need to sit. At the dining room table. He sits too.

"Claire tried to make out with me."

"What?"

"She said she wanted to feel what it feels like."

"That's crazy. I mean, it's an understandable impulse, but it's crazy."

"I hate that. An understandable impulse. What's understandable about the way she thrusts herself at us? It's disgusting."

"It's not disgusting."

"I'm disgusted by it."

"Those are only feelings."

"Feelings aren't only feelings."

"That's not what I was saying."

"What is a person besides, like, feelings."

“Carbon?” He asks, and I scowl. “Ok. Should we take her to therapy? Is that what you want?”

“I hate that idea.”

“You hate that idea.”

I nod. He nods. His mouth is open and that is rare. He is looking at me as desperately as when he asked me to be his wife; his questioning simplified by passion, but sadly. I feel the need in me and sit on his knee, and he tucks my head under his head. My face is on his shirt. My tinted moisturizer will stain his shirt. I let my tears wash the beige pigment off of my skin and into the waffle knit cotton. His thumb is nervously tracing a circle on my neck. This current runs through us -- this begging of lovers for love. I cry harder. I say to his chest, “I hate her, I hate her, I hate her.” I close my eyes to compose myself. I feel the edges of myself, my nose, my knees, my heels dangling off the floor.

My rage is an augury in his eyes.

“Tell me all the times she said she hates me.”

“She doesn’t hate you.”

“Every little girl tells her father she hates her mother.”

“Why?” He asks, and I don’t know how to start. “She doesn’t hate you.” He says, and shushes me tenderly. I let him. I feel his cheek on my cheek, and his mouth on my mouth. I sigh into him and he sighs into me. But what has to escape is not inside our bodies. It’s in my mind.

“I hated how husky she sounded when she was proud of us. I hated her laughter. I hated the way she said my name.”

“Your mother?”

“I was worried I was her.”

“Claire doesn’t hate you.”

“Don’t keep her secrets from me,” I say. I can feel his posture righting itself, asserting our separateness. “If you keep her secrets, you don’t love me the most anymore.”

“That’s insane.”

“You’re right, I’m ruining everything.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

I am standing again. Behind him there is the night in the screendoor. It’s as dull as a TV turned off. I go to it and it’s a bit better. The back porch is lit white against the night and so are the wicker chairs, and the wicker table, and past them the white posts and the rail. The tiger lilies nod against it. Spattered orange petals flippantly fall away from their other stamens.

“I hate those flowers.”

“What?”

Outside the smell of the lilies is sweet -- grievously sweet. I struggle to find a stalk and yank. Feel my feet falter against the slick grass. When the roots come loose, I hold up the lily. It’s as tall as me. Sam is on the porch.

“What are you doing?” He asks, and when I ignore him he pleads: “It’s dark. You can’t garden in the dark.”

I let my fingers slip blindly through the sharp leaves until I find a woody stalk and yank. This time watching the bloom bob above the others as I tear it from the earth. It looks so skinny against the night with its flower now above me. I toss it. I grab for another stalk, yank. Hear the screen door clatter. Sam isn’t watching anymore. After the first few, I work methodically along

the perimeter of the porch. Pulling, grunting, piling a waste of orange fakery in the night. I am sweaty. Without the soft fluency of flowers along the edge of it the porch is starker now.

I feel all my bones sink into the cushions in the wicker chair. Close my eyes still smelling the lilies. Dream of Claire, baby Claire, crying and crying in my arms. I lay her in tall grasses, and I lay myself in tall grasses, and listen idly until her cries became the cooing of a bird, and then I look at her: her eyes are black beads with no light in them, and her nose grows sharper and sharper. Her skin stretching until it's white against the white bone below. I open my eyes. The grasses in my dream are the dead stalks and leaves in the yard. That scares me.

I go into the kitchen and it beckons me to my family. The dishes in the drying rack and the photos on the fridge all clustered in a way that is *ours*. I take the cognac from the cabinet and the clink of the bottle in the snifter is nice. The night bites at my conscience still. I think to myself, *these are the beasts of night, the beasts of night are me*. I sit on the porch step. I sip the gold of cognac in a circle of light that makes the dark darker. I can make out the neighbors house. She's so old. We never see her. She has a clothes line she hangs no clothes on. She has a sink next to her back door. No porch. No patio. No chair. I wonder what the sink is for? She's alone but the house is bigger than ours. It's two stories, whereas ours is what's called one and a half. The hinges on the screen door screech. Claire is in the doorway. Her features are mostly mine: round eyes, round cheeks, dainty little nostrils, and a tender underbite. They're all in disarray. Her nose quivers. Her lips are pressed. Looking at her face in this tense moment is like considering my own face in the mirror when I've let myself down.

"Maman."

"Oui bébé."

“Je m’excuse.”

“I’m not mad anymore,” I say, staring into the night. The porch slats creak as she comes over to me. She sits a hip’s width away.

“Why?”

“It makes me sad to be angry.”

“What are you doing?”

“Watching.”

“Watching what?”

“The neighbour’s house. What do you think her sink is for?”

“It has paint cans in it. Old paint cans.”

“You went over there?”

“I’ve been to all the yards. Are you mad? Are you gonna tell Daddy?”

“No. I used to sneak into this one family’s yard all the time. I didn’t know them so it wasn’t spying. The best was when they watched TV. It was a big screen TV. We watched together...” I say. Her eyes are dark and startled, and it makes me feel for her. I was always shocked that my mother was once a little girl. I ask, “Why did you go over there?”

“I like secrets.”

“I like secrets too.”

The new moon is a scrape of light. We watch the dark that’s alive with the beasts of night, but we’re not alone, so we don’t imagine them.

Cash for Gold

Cars farted hot exhaust that made me breathe through my mouth. I stopped at a light behind two little girls. The bigger one cast an exasperated look over her shoulder at the smaller one who sat on the rear rack, eating spaghetti and meatballs with her hands from a plastic bag. I could make out the shape of a Tupperware through the greasy translucent plastic, meatballs distended the bottom of the bag. The bigger one rolled her eyes and laughed, because knowing better made you feel bigger at that age. The little one slurped up the spaghetti through the knot of her red fist. I laughed and the girls looked at me like I was a stranger. I asked the bigger one, “Would you like a napkin?”

“Yes, please,” she said. She took the bag of spaghetti and meatballs from the little one and hung it on her handlebar.

I fished in my purse for Kleenex but could only feel the lycra of a g-string, the fluted glass of a perfume bottle, and then the plastic corner of a box of baby wipes. I held it out to the little one and she made a show of scrubbing her chubby face. We both laughed because it felt good. Then the light changed and we were all on our way.

I locked my bike out front. In the change room, Lacey addressed all the girls corralled there, she said, “The preschool kids are bitches. They tell me, he pushed me, he kicked me, he took my toy.”

Locker doors hung open and the girls they were allotted to stood in their shadows. They took their time lathering cream on ashen skin and lacing-up pleather boots; they belonged to their

lockers, like lifeguards to their chairs. They ignored me and they ignored Lacey. Dakota looked up into the mirror from her magazine and her smile was a grim acknowledgement that we were both listening to Lacey.

Lacey tugged off her clothes, pushing her jeans angrily over her hips and her fake ass. Last year, she had an ass that was nothing more than the ends of her legs, a hinge where she bent. Now, it was a shelf where she stood.

“If those kids were snitching on me I’d hit them. Now the teachers have this idea that he’s a bully, and he isn’t making any friends.”

Dakota spoke into the mirror, “Do the teachers fill out an incident report when he acts up?” She had three kids, she was on the PTA.

Lacey nodded and said, “It’s because they have this preconceived notion. I want to tell them. What do you expect? His dad’s a gorilla.” She lost her balance taking her sock off and laughed. Looking into the mirror, she watched the tension of laughter leave her face. “I can’t take him home and beat him. It makes me feel like shit.” She bent over, after the other sock. “But that’s what those teachers want from me.”

Dakota was staring at Lacey in the mirror, “If they keep a record, you know, you could find out where the behaviour comes from,” she said, nodding.

“They don’t bother anymore,” Lacey said, folding socks into a pair. “You’re right. They oughtta.”

Dakota met my gaze in the mirror and we gawked. I rushed out of the change room and into the DJ booth. His gaze flicked over me and he reached for my waist and pulled me close.

“Why don’t we just do it so we can get past this sexual tension?”

“We should,” I said, my lips pulling away from my teeth.

“You’re joking, but I mean it.”

“I have a boyfriend,” I lied.

“I don’t care.”

“I try not to lie to him.”

“You tell him he’s the one?” he asked. The walkie-talkie was gasping. His arm dropped from around my waist. “Sorry.” He took it from its holster and gripped it horizontally like a bat. He pressed the button and lifted it to his mouth, “Yeah.”

A voice said, “Malibu’s in a champagne room. Cancel her show.”

I signed-in and surveyed the room. A bored looking man in a pastel polo shirt sat alone. He would do. I came up from behind, brought my mouth to his ear and said, “Hello.”

His muscles became taut. He turned around and I nudged his foot to widen his stance; his knee became a seat that I took. His eyes darted at me because he was a rapper, on the radio, on tv, the whole thing, he was waiting for my recognition. I gaped and he said, yes, and his smile was too wide to be obliging.

I gushed and asked him questions, the same questions I asked everybody, do you like to travel, do you like Toronto, and I smiled at him until my mouth hurt. I told him he had a nice face and he said I had nice milk fed tits and I laughed, because men like women who make a show of themselves.

“You’re funny,” I said.

“You say that to all your tricks,” he said, his smile was terse, because he knew what I was.

“I try not to talk shit like the others,” I said.

“Why?” he asked.

“Suspension of disbelief. So, if you touch me and I shiver, you believe it,” I said.

“What does a fake shiver sound like?” he asked, looking amused.

“It sounds like shivering, it feels like lying,” I whispered and let my breath fill his ear, “with you, it won’t be like that.”

He laughed and followed me into a mirrored cubicle. I was happy with the bored sort of happiness that comes from doing something you’re good at. He peeled some bills from a wad and paid the waitress. I eyed the cash.

“You love that paper?” he asked and I nodded overtly. He plucked at my fishnet dress. My butt was cold, it was far from my heart and the blood was chilled by the time it trickled down. He lifted it to know its weight, slapped it and watched the fat quiver. He took a seat and I sat in his lap. I was sitting on what felt like a fist sized rock.

I stood up and asked, “What’s in your pocket?”

He pulled out a gold sculpture of Jesus standing in the arms outstretched position of a person after a hug. Rubies beaded on his palms where the nails had been driven through. Black diamonds articulated a crown of thorns. His forehead and his mouth were creased with pain. His eyes were gold too and they made him look blind. A bail protruded from his hair like a bow. The pendant was attached to a thick gold chain. His palm was a velvet pillow, the idol resting in its folds, gothic and impossible.

“Nice,” I said trying not to gape.

“You just sat on Jesus’ face,” he said and laughed.

“Don’t say that.”

“Why?”

“I love him,” I said and closed my eyes and saw the sacred heart. Jesus smiled, flames licked his heart, but they did not perturb his robes. When I opened my eyes he was grinning.

“You love Jesus?” he asked, with curiosity or interest, I couldn’t tell.

“It’s not interesting,” I said, simpering.

I sat on his knee and rested my head on his shoulder and he said, “I was raised to fear God. You know, the God. Wasn’t like you chose if you were going to be a Muslim or a Rasta or something else.” I nodded and slid deeper into his lap.

A sharp pain stabbed the inside of my thigh. I stood up and felt the contortion of my face and I hated him and I hated that I didn’t want to be too ugly or rude. He took the pendant out of his pocket and we looked at my blood sheathing the golden tines of Jesus’ hands.

“Sorry,” he said and shrugged. I untied the napkin from the neck of the champagne bottle and wiped up my thin blood. I looked at the red rorschach smear on the white linen, and I felt him looking at me. It can’t be helped, I thought, wanting to know what you’ve lost when you sneeze, when you bleed; it’s more than garbage.

I sat down awkwardly, feeling the hunch in my shoulders, and sipped my drink. He showed me pictures of his Jesuses on his iPhone, this one was the only figurine, the rest were busts, one was obsidian with famished cheeks and almond shaped black diamonds for eyes, a black Jesus, one was enamel, with sapphire eyes and ropes of golden hair, a white Jesus, crying ruby tears. His favourite was cartoonish, with a face like Munsch’s *Scream*, but with a curtain of

diamond hair masking most of the small face, the screaming mouth seemed unserious. I told him that one was my favourite too, but I preferred the one in his pocket. The lie felt precious.

Lacey stomped past us, she tricked with all the rappers, so I whistled and she filled the doorway, 6'2 in eight inch heels, portraits of her kids tattooed onto the biceps and calves of her sinewy body.

“This is my girl,” I said, “Look at this ass, you have to feel it.” She turned around and I manned his hand and our fingers prodded her ass. Not too firm like fake tits, the solution was injected and absorbed into the body. It yielded like fat. The procedure was illegal but she said she knew it was safe because the “fag doctor” who did it injected his own penis with it. I pinched her skin and it felt too taut, but otherwise it was as good as the real thing.

“Fat for a white girl,” he said.

“High as a mare,” I said and slapped it. We shook our asses’ in tandem to the frantic bass of a Future song. I watched the profile of his tight grin in the mirrored cubicle. He grabbed Lacey’s hip and she arched her back, he poured a bump of cocaine on her ass, and he rose and bent over to snort it.

Then we straddled him like a daddy, ready to bounce on his knee. But we were not hunched with excitement. We leaned back, bored, into each shoulder, blanketing him. He told us to make out and I knocked Lacey’s drink out of her hand.

“You’re a whore,” she said and grabbed my jaw.

“I’m a whore?” I asked and we both grinned at that word, a salute and the curse. She had my jaw still, stroking it with fake nails that were starkly hard and thick.

“Who’s your daddy?” she asked, her eyes flashing with manic glee. “Who’s your daddy?”

“I’m a bastard,” I lied and she cackled and let go. He was looking smug at our smallness and he raised his glass, to bastards, and we drank and stared at each other awkwardly. So we made out, like he asked us too, and her teeth were big and terrible and kept bumping mine. I watched him stare at us with his mouth loose and honest. Then we smothered him with our tits and laughed at his lack of a face.

When he finally left to find the toilet, I slipped off my Lucite sandals and flexed my feet until they cracked. Lacey did a bump of his coke.

“Are we going to his hotel?” Lacey asked, “at this rate, he’ll have coke dick.” I was nodding and thinking the paper would sweat in my fist.

He leaned through the cubicle’s doorway until he was seated. I climbed onto the back of the sofa so his head rested between my thighs, because I was sick of smiling. Lacey played with herself idly in his lap. I rubbed his neck with one hand, and poured my champagne behind the couch with the other. The straw coloured liquid was clear as soda under the black lights.

The last song played and the fluorescents came up. Lacey crawled out of his lap. I dismounted and slid down the back of the couch, landing between them. He was looking beyond me at Lacey.

“She’s drunk,” he said, laughing.

I pulled Lacy’s hair away from her ear and whispered, “You’re losing your pretty.”

He peeled off fifteen hundred dollar bills for each of us. Holding his wad between thumb and forefinger, he found his pocket with a practiced hand. He hugged us, for three hours I’d been

holding my face in a dewy expression of arousal. Now my eyes were closed and my face felt smooth. He squeezed me until my ribs grated against his.

“We’ll meet you,” Lacey said.

Climbing the stairs in eight-inch heels, Lacey’s legs bowed like a foal’s. In the change room everyone got undressed and dressed with the weariness that came from doing it all night long. Tired of looking into mirrors, I eavesdropped while I waited.

“It’s a sty in here.”

“These carpets absorb the spray tan mist, and now my white socks all have orange soles.”

Outside, three men in suits kicked a Blackberry back and forth, pieces of plastic and metal skittered across the sidewalk. They laughed and laughed. They made all the girls smoking outside smile.

We walked down the block and I lit a cigarette and a joint. Lacey took the joint and shivered and I knew the way coke makes you dizzy with zooming perspective. Until you see the makeup gathering in the lines around the strippers’ mouths; see the city’s made of porous garbage and breathing is decaying, writhing on every corner are human maggots with black teeth and black feet, eating the city’s shit and bloating with it. The coke shows you the city has a face, the stadium its almond shaped eye, the airport runways lacerating its cheek, the arterial highway its grin, hustlers like dirt packing every pore.

A cab honked at us. He told us he’d let us keep our cigarettes. I liked the antiseptic squeak of the seat covers. Lacey tossed hers feebly out the window, took out her lipstick and curled her lips into an expression of disgust to get at the corners. She turned to me and bared her

teeth. I scraped the pink off her teeth with my thumbnail. Lacey giggled and spittle flecked my face.

Drake pined, "I want art money, fresh start money/ I want women to cry and pour out their hearts for me."

"Lacey do a bump," I said.

She nodded. White powder was inside an origamied receipt and she spilled some on the bench. I brushed it off. She scooped some up with her fake nail and inhaled it. I watched her pupils widen and the muscles in her face regain some tension.

The lobby was a big empty room and the elevators were where they usually are. He greeted us with a double kiss that did not become him. We received it awkwardly. He was playing his music. The chairs were conceptual, not obvious to sit in. So Lacey plopped onto the Danish Modern couch.

She scoffed, "Chintzy."

He looked confused. She meant the cushions were too thin, skimpy. There was no chintz. The grey palette was all about textural contrast: the floors were polished concrete, the walls were glazed, the curtains were velvet, the sofa cushions were felt, the chairs were a cantilevered composition in suede and stainless steel. Our eyes were all darting at the bed as if it were a rain cloud.

I lay on the rug, the pile was thick. He poured drinks and sat in a chair facing Lacey. I was between them like a coffee table. He handed me a drink and I secured it between my breasts. I felt the condensation and wished I had a coaster. Lacey stuck out her feet and rested them on my belly. There was vodka soda all over me.

“You’re a clumsy slut,” I said.

Lacey looked stupid and guilty. She crawled off the couch and onto the rug and pulled off my clothes with a messy tenderness, which annoyed me more than when the men tried to take off my clothes because she knew better. When she straddled me and kissed me her acrid post-nasal drip was all I could taste.

We had sex with him, that’s what he was paying for.

Lacey pretended to fall asleep immediately after, or maybe she did.

“Did you come?” he asked me, panting.

I ignored him and poked my bellybutton. It was still a thimble.

“I like you plenty for a whore,” he said.

“I like you plenty for a trick,” I said.

“What does that even mean?” he asked, smiling.

I thought, it means I hate you more than I hate myself.

“You don’t have to pay for it?” I asked.

“No, I don’t,” he said. “But how would I know what it’s worth?” A tautology, I thought, words that made themselves a god. He was good.

While he slept I watched him sweat, his life eking out of him at the same rate as mine. Listening to the Eames starburst clock, I wanted to smash it. I imagined tossing it up, the joy I would feel as my spiky projectile reached the height of its parabola. It would be dashed on the sidewalk below, its cogs and wheels flayed. And I would say, there.

I pushed the thoughts out of my head playing I spy. Thought green and saw money, the toothpaste squeezed out on the commode, buttons on the remote, a flashing light on the receiver.

Thought gold, Jesus was a golden egg in a nest of cast-off clothes, winking at me. I'm a little bird that eats money, a whore named Asia said that to me. If a whore stole his gold he wouldn't be able to report it. It would be bad publicity. And he already had bad publicity. The starts of his cocaine sleep subsided. His face was slack with sleep. So I rose quietly, and put on my clothes quietly. The gold was cold but it warmed in my hand.

I had to shake Lacey awake. She looked dazed and drunk.

"We should get going," I said and she blinked at me warily. Standing and stretching she kept her eyes firmly shut, then she loped across the suite naked and sat before the glass table cross-legged, sweeping cash with both arms into her reach. She placed a bill on her tongue.

I held out my arm like a baton twirler, with Jesus in my fist.

"I'm taking it. You have a kid. You don't want this," I said. Lacey peeled the bill off her tongue and her chin sagged. Her eyes were focused with shock.

"I thought you were soft," she said.

Walking through doorways and hallways made me lose my train of thought, my thoughts were a sticky hinge, *hard*, was that the word for what I had become, no, that was nonsense, it was only the opposite of an ideal. Cotton can be soft. Rain. A tone of voice. If you applied that quality to a person's character? I imagined a woman who was all magnetism and no will. Maybe I was soft. In the pocket of my hoodie I felt the figurines limbs gently prod my belly with each step and I thought, no, now I had a thing I wanted, and there was more on the horizon. A shack on a beach. A stack of dime store novels. The whole cliché of time passing in a place totally disassociated from any notion of work. A really proletariat fantasy. Once I got there I'd have

other better fantasies. When love becomes work it's a problem because of its endlessness- when I was a tomato picker I dreamed of tomato picking but now that I'm a whore I don't dream at all.

The damp night felt close. Stars had burned to embers and the sidewalks were slick with mist. I took a taxi home. Fell into sleep where my mind clung to the world's noisy shape, the air breaks of a truck were a sigh of disappointment, a siren was the pealing laughter of a person who had been waiting a long time for their comeuppance to reveal its face.

At noon, I woke with a start, my loot sweaty in my hand. I felt it's sharp description of the messiah and felt ecstatic and scared. I put his feet in between my lips, tasted the metal. He didn't deserve to have him anymore than me.

I drove to meet my favourite trick, Manny. Manny was a drug broker who owned a heating and cooling business. He was my favourite because he was too fat for lap dances. His belly filled his lap and splayed his legs. He came to see me every week and we got wasted. He paid me to go to his cousin's wedding and his sister in law called me a whore in the bathroom. The smell of urine cakes, and the fat floral print of her dress, and the tight righteous set to her mouth, they made me feel like I was nothing. Just guilty and drunk and skinny in my little black dress. When he told me he loved me in his car that night, I didn't feel better, but I felt like I should feel better, because love isn't nothing.

Manny's brother owned a Cash For Gold outlet on the outskirts of the city. I parked around back. The whirring fluorescents and painted concrete made the back room feel like a bunker. I fell into an ergonomic chair with stuffing bleeding from a gash. I rolled up to Manny's scratched wood veneer desk, and leaned on my elbows, my arms crossed beneath my breasts, hiding my guts.

“I came upon a piece of jewellery.”

He laughed at me and said, “Let’s see it.”

I put it on the desk. He beamed at it and fondled the tiny likeness with his fat hands.

“I need you to remove the diamonds, and melt down the gold.”

“Who’s looking for this?”

“He’s not looking too hard,” I said and slouched. His eyes narrowed and I could hardly look at Jesus in his hamfist.

“Babygirl, I worry about you,” he said, his swollen face was growing more and more fractious with worry. I laughed, a raucous laugh, it just fell out of me.

“You’re so cold,” he said and blushed and it thrilled me a little. He put Jesus down and rolled a blunt. We smoked. His tweezers peeled back each of the golden prongs that held the pigeon blood rubies in Jesus’ palms. Like pulling the petals off a dandelion: he loves me, he loves me not. He pried the diamond thorns from Jesus’ brow, studied their anthracite sparkle through a loop, weighed them, and piled them into a pyramid.

“The stones are worth thirty grand wholesale, fifty retail,” he said. “What are you gonna do with it?”

He might have said a bushel.

“I can’t tell you,” I said.

He laughed and his shoulders shook and I smiled at the warbling laughter that came from his chins reverberating against his vocal cords. He stood up and I followed him across the room, happy to be led.

The gold oven was no bigger than a breadbox. It had a hole in the middle that swallowed a vessel, where the gold changed state. The male and female parts fit together. I kissed Jesus' face, and then his feet, and dropped him in the well. I clasped Manny's hand. His robes bubbled first. He became expressionless, and he became a blob. It took him only a minute to melt. When Manny poured the liquid gold into the brick dye, I wondered what it tasted like.

Manny weighed the gold. He counted fifty thousand dollars and put it in a plastic bag. I slipped the chain over his head. Only the thickest rope could lasso his neck, which could not properly be called a neck. The chain drew a distinction between his head and his body. It was the only thing I ever gave a trick.

"Thank you," he said.

And I buried my face in his breasts and felt like a child.

Bad Jokes for Women Who Want to Be Good

My grandmother was named for the beatific suffering of St. Theresa. The saint whose conversion was a victory over her own sentimentality, of which she had suffered acutely after her mother died, crying when anyone would look at her. Like her namesake, Theresa my grandmother suffered the death of a parent as a child— lightning struck the tree and the tree struck her father. But she described her own suffering as prosaic. Once she gave a beggar her supper. She wasn't being selfless, she thought there was a potato to spare. All her stories were tales of miscalculation. When they lived in Spain she kept the family's money in traveller's cheques, because she liked to have everything organized and at hand. When the cheques were stolen she spent what was left on salt cod and potatoes. She made a huge vat of what the locals ate, bacalhau. When she fed it to her children they started crying. She didn't realize you had to soak the salt off.

Her jokes didn't worked the same way. She was a nurse in the maternity ward at Henry Ford Hospital, she told me one about a baby born with bright red hair. She showed the woman her baby and asked, "does he take after his father?"

"I don't know," the woman said, "he didn't take his hat off."

Many of my mother's jokes were also mistakes. She named our yellow lab Fanny. A good Irish name, she said. When she visited her friend's homes and their dogs sniffed at her, she'd say to

the dog in the soft and pitchy tone reserved for beings that have no language, “you smell my Fanny.”

My mother was named for her mother’s eldest sister. Great Aunt Dolores was and was not an old maid. She had been married but nobody ever mentioned it. “He was very cold to her,” was all my grandmother said on the matter. When my mother and my aunts considered me to be nearly a woman they told me she had married a drill sergeant in the army and lived out in the country by the base until it came out years later that their marriage had never been consummated.

“Consecrated” is what Catholics call it. Dolores had been a nursing instructor before she was married and I think it was embarrassing for her to have to tell her little sister, who had children already. Catholics are known for their delusions, but I don’t think she stayed married all those years because she had any hopes. While Dolores’ husband was with his recruits my grandmother drove all night to go get her. My grandmother knew from her good fortune that carefulness is not an ethos, it’s an attitude. After her marriage, Dolores worked as the nurse of a young country doctor. When she told stories about the practice her eyes were too quick and her colour was too high, she looked girlish, which was unbecoming but made me feel tenderly for her. After her funeral my aunt confessed she believed Aunt Deedee had been in love with the good doctor. I didn’t want to agree with her, I felt that if I did, she’d be another old maid whose life was defined by small losses and even smaller victories, like wit, like quitting smoking, like a good credit score.

When we'd go over to Aunt Deedee's she would show us photos of our mother's cousins, their wives, their children. I still remember my mother's cousin Mike's ex-wife, the eighties bouffant, the décolleté, her breasts looking elaborate and bare in the wedding gowns many satin tiers. Aunt Deedee saw me looking at the neckline which I knew was called "sweetheart" from reading V.C. Andrews novels. "Yes," she said, "it was going to fall off if she sneezed." The way my mother laughed at that, a harsh staccato trill, it was the closest I've ever seen her come to being insincere. You could tell she thought meanness was the consolation of sorry people.

Being a nurse or a teacher, those types of jobs, involve standing on the sidelines of other people's tragedies. My mother has a small mouth and a weak jaw like mine that always betray what she's thinking. This is what's called an honest face, it makes people talk to you. And she's known the kind of sadness that gives a patina of empathy to a person's gaze, so people keep talking to her once they've started. The problem with empathy is that it seeks its own level like water in a flood. My mother listened to sad stories and came home and told them to me. She told me about the woman who left a parent teacher conference weeping. Her son didn't talk right. My mother recommended speech therapy. The woman started balling and admitted she'd taken Ecstasy while she was pregnant, she was a teenager when she had him. I said it was horrible. My mother said it was sad. I was maybe twelve but precocious, my mother bought me People Magazine's 100 Most Influential Women of the Century Edition and then when I asked her to she bought me Gloria Steinem's *Revolution from Within*.

"Mom, that's why abortion is important. So girls don't have babies before they're ready," I said.

“That woman loves her son,” my mother said. I felt guilty for turning a real tragedy into conversation. This was one of those times she told me to help her sort the laundry and we wound up talking until late, while my sister practiced baton or rifle throwing, she was the best twirler in the whole town, while my father worked in the garden.

“So you’re saying if a woman’s life is too hard, she should abort her baby.”

“Her fetus. Yes.”

“So say, a woman has nine children, she’s very poor, her husband is a drunk, if she gets pregnant, she should have an abortion.”

“If she wants one.”

“Then Beethoven might never have been born. He was the child of an alcoholic. The *tenth* child.”

We were staring at each other over the ironing board, the laundry long since folded. My body was tense with disagreement, my mother’s body was like a part of mine, so anything she said might make my blood boil. I wanted to say: Beethoven doesn’t matter Mom, women matter, and they don’t even know it. I’m going to move somewhere where women look smart and important and rich, like they know they matter. I didn’t say that. My mother’s eyes were molten with sadness, for this woman whose son couldn’t form words with his mouth, for herself who listened to every story no matter it’s motive with the keenest interest, like the story of Beethoven’s tragic beginnings. My anger meant my heart was in the right place so my mother sighed and said, “Let’s watch TV.” We did.

My mother dressed us in baggy cheap clothing so that pedophiles wouldn't think we were cute. I told my friends that at Wellesley, beautiful east coast democrats with the broad shoulders and high cheekbones of WASPS, they laughed and laughed. I've never been more embarrassed. It seemed smart to me.

I was a member of Wellesley Women for Reproductive Rights. At the time South Dakota had an abortion ban on the ballot, so we were calling all the women who were registered to vote from the formal living room of our residence building which had the same architect as Central Park, and the Met, the crown moldings were figurative, like cherubs eating grapes. I loved going into that room alone. It made me feel like Maria Von Trapp when she first walks into the captain's house, but now that we were gathering to call the women of South Dakota on our cell phones, which I was pretty certain the other girls parents were paying for, I was feeling awkward and cheap. The women of South Dakota were nice. Some would say, "Sorry, I'm voting my gospel." Very polite. I'd go, "Hi, I'm wondering if you're interested in any information about Ballot Measure 11? Yes ma'am, that's the one about abortion, do you plan to vote for or against?" The mothers who hadn't decided would sigh, saying, "I don't know," while their kids made noise, and I'd do our talking points, that the ban had no exceptions for rape or incest, for the health of the mother (we were supposed to say *woman* but it didn't sound right, a mother has her own idea of what pregnancy is and *woman* felt weirdly prescriptive). The mothers mostly said, "thank you for calling." The old ladies were happy to talk to me, "It's not even the rapes and incests," a woman with a reedy voice said, "it's the money, right?"

"Yes ma'am."

“Don’t let a man tell you how many babies you can afford.”

“Yes ma’am.”

When I was done my call list, I realized all the other girls had been finished for a while.

“South Dakota loves you,” said Kyra, our president. She was an affable blonde who talked constantly. Political people are always talkers.

“Lord knows why,” I said, like my mother, always talking folksy whenever I felt uncomfortable, a tic that made me hate myself.

“It’s the accent,” she said. I looked at all the other girls, Boston, Boston, New York, California, California, compared to them I talked like a hick. In the dining hall, since I had done so well engaging the voters, Kyra asked if I’d like to pick up the feminist writer doing the Keynote for our conference. I didn’t have a car so she let me use hers. People who are born with money are very generous with their things. At the airport she was tall and lanky, handsome, totally unruffled by travel, wearing an accent scarf of that matte silk that just looks like wealth. In the car, we talked about the book she’d write if the South Dakota ban went through, about a teenage girl hitch-hiking from Sioux Falls to Fargo for an abortion in a winter storm, how she’d lose the baby in a snow drift, and freeze to death. She talked about how women were crossing state lines for access again, like it had already happened, like she wanted it to. I was so angry. Here was the struggle before *the struggle*, figuring out who’s a phony.

I asked, “So, the only good teen mom is a cautionary tale? A sort of christ the savior of Planned Parenthood” I was really exceeding my character, shaking a little. This forced joke did not become me.

She'd been eager to share her ideas but now her face settled into a tense grin, considering me. "Where are you from?"

"Canada. Near Detroit. They make minivans there. It's the Motor City of Canada."

"Oh," she said, "you're here now." I laughed at that, and when she balked at me I realized I was supposed to feel encouraged. Rich people are always earnest about the poor and middle classes. They don't like the boot straps to be laughed at.

Another thing my mother thought was funny from Steinem's *Revolution from Within*... In the prologue she talks about the architecture of the Catholic Church, how it has the same shape as women's reproductive system: the vaginal aisle through the nave, the altar in the sanctuary, a womb for the clergy, and the transepts as an ovarian space of devotion for the laity. I loved seeing those words together. I told my mother how the patriarchy had co-opted generative myths, stealing women's magic. "Doll baby," she said, "that's also the shape of the cross."

Trust a martyr not to underestimate the value of the body. Steinem, my mother, they both know the body is the only thing beyond the word.

My mother didn't have a curfew but my grandmother never went to sleep until each of her children looked into her room and said goodnight. My grandmother and my grandfather slept in separate beds because my grandfather thrashed around. One night my mother said goodnight and when she didn't hear anything she peaked in and my grandmother wasn't in her bed, she was in my grandfather's. My mother started laughing and my grandmother jumped out of bed, slapping

her and chasing her all the way up the stairs. When my mother told me the story she mimicked her father's voice, dropping her pitch so it was sober but ridiculous, "oh shit Dolores, shit," she said, leaning out of her seat, mimicking her mother's pursuit, slapping at the air, doing her mother's voice too, shrill and ridiculous, "Dolores! Dolores, you're laughing at me!" She did the whole primal scene for me, her parents alive again in her voice, the child in her eyes laughing, the tender cliché of old hands wiping away the tears of an old sadness.

When my grandmother was dying I made her Aretha Franklin's peach cobbler recipe because she loved peaches and Aretha. I made it with artificial sweetener, she was on a restricted diet, and it was way too sweet. Everyone looked grim and asked for more coffee. My mother tried to improve the mood.

"How do you tell which potato is a prostitute?" she asked and my grandmother spit her coffee brightly. "It's got a sticker that says I-DA-HO."

"That's bad," my grandmother said, exactly the way my mother says it. She was hoarding the real part of her laughter in her throat, it made her look like she was shivering, like the thing that was plain was also a secret. Propriety can be so seductive. My sister also laughed discreetly, and we forgot about the cobbler, and what it meant that someone had bothered to bake for a day that wasn't Christmas. My sister had told me not to. "Let's have a normal dinner," she said and she was right. My mother and I have a way of making too much of things. For instance, when I couldn't spell my own name she told me it was because I was a genius. For instance, when the doctor said my sister was allergic to milk she said we were going to find a doctor who "wasn't ideological." So that day was ok after all, because in my largesse I was just being my mother,

and my mother was being a worn down version of herself, because her mother was dying, but she dispelled the awkwardness of my largesse with her own obscene joke. Pointing to herself with both thumbs, “I-DA-HO,” grinning like an idiot, like I did when I said, “this is *Aretha’s* recipe,” because that’s what families are like. They reproduce themselves endlessly.

My grandmother spoke to my mother the way my mother spoke to me, but not at night. They’d talk in the mornings, my grandmother worked nights in Maternity and later the Chronic Ward. All her stories were either birth stories or death stories. The stories about the Maternity Ward before the war were about the stillbirths. If a baby was born with something wrong with it the Doctor didn’t help it live. It was considered a kindness. There were so many babies back then, and everyone was poor. When my mother told me this, she said, “Think of all the old people like me, none of them are like, obviously disabled, maybe the odd veteran. Today, you go into any school and there is a kid in a wheelchair, there are probably three.” She said it like it was a miracle. All of those imperfect children surviving their births. I suppose it is. I hope when I am old there will be miracles young people can’t see, and that there will be a young woman in the world who wants me to tell them to her.

My mother wanted me desperately, but after she had me she suffered post-partum depression. She apologized to me when I was a teenager-- talking to me like I was there. I thought it was funny. Using the hushed tone of a beleaguered father, I chuckled and said, “I couldn’t have known. ”

“The soul is mysterious, Madeleine,” she said, the candour of a storyteller thrilling her eyes. She was tearing up. Mothers are so intense. There was no way to agree or disagree with that statement. I said, “My name is a curse. *Tu pleurais comme une madeleine*,” in French when a woman cannot be consoled they say, she’s crying like Mary Magdelene, the whore who wept for Christ’s body when he rose from the dead, because she thought his grave had been robbed. Another misunderstanding. She laughed at that. Puns were the only jokes she approved of. Everything else, from pratfalls to sarcasm she considered to be cruel or stupid. Her empathy was so broad it was embarrassing. But she was right. In most jokes, the listener is either the subject or object. It’s kill or be killed. But a pun is always hopeful because it enacts understanding.

“Grandma must have been feeling really low when she had you.”

“Why?” Mom asked, turning to look at me like I had accused her of something. Then her face changed, her mouth was prim with restraint, eyes beaming again. “Oh! Oh good one.”

“Dolores.”

“Sorrow in spanish”

“Like, *douleur*, pain.”

“Ha! And of course her mother too, my grandmother, chose that name first.”

“How will we break the curse?”

“Give your daughter a name that doesn’t mean anything.”

“What’s a name that doesn’t mean anything.”

“Beryl or, Kim.”

“Maybe Kim means *misery* in LA.”

“Maybe Beryl meant *chagrin* in 1952.”

“Maybe all women are named for suffering.”

My mother was crying again, crying and laughing. It barely took anything to make her laugh or cry. She wiped her eyes daintily. She slapped my thigh. I was laughing too. We let our laughter grow profligate and silly. Why not? It was barely a joke. Still, it was perfect. Families are made for in jokes, since they betray the teller, confession being a kind of mania, which wards off loneliness.

