

SOME GIRLS DON'T HAVE A FAIRY GODMOTHER TO SAVE THEM

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In

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by

Jennifer Marie Cross

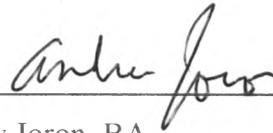
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *SOME GIRLS DON'T HAVE A FAIRY GODMOTHER TO SAVE THEM* by Jennifer Marie Cross, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Creative Writing at San Francisco State University.



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SOME GIRLS DON'T HAVE A FAIRY GODMOTHER TO SAVE THEM

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San Francisco, California,
2018

This creative project is an experimental memoir in fragments, the narrative interwoven with sections that are poetic or in the style of a fairy tale, coming together to form a story about the transformation two girls undergo when their mother brings an abusive stepfather into their lives. Rather than attempting to adhere to the mainstream trauma memoir narrative form, my aim with this project is to both evoke for the reader an experience of the narrator's adolescence in an abusive and controlling household and put into language for the reader the struggle to write about the past when one's body and consciousness have been violated and fractured.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this written creative work.



Chair, Creative Work Committee

5/14/2018
Date

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Prologue

The Old Mothers had lived a long time. They sat back in their rocking chairs on the porch of the morning with toothpicks between their lips. They chewed and watched as the young women walked away across the dirt lawns, kicking up pools and pinwheels of dust as they went. The Old Mothers remembered when they did the same, remembered their own Mothers and Grandmothers nodding sadly.

Perhaps this is the way of it: Men remain the same, and every generation of women tries to change them, believes her men are different, sane; believes that, *for her*, the lies will become butterflies or bees, light and winged things. And then men are men and women are surprised, though the Old Mothers had the stories already pinned inside their dresses, lodged in their throats, slashed across their backs. It has always been so. The Old Mothers carried the terrible stories and had to sit back and watch the girls learn for themselves.

Now and again there was a granddaughter who came to sit at the Old Mother's porch, who slid her fingers under her thighs, who sat small and questioning, maybe even still bleeding; a girl who had watched her mother's persistent hopefulness dashed on the rocks of men for the length of her days, who had been broken open herself, carried to a great height and then dropped to the ground the way a seagull forces open a mussel. The girl need something deeper than saving, deeper than violence. She needed old stories, the

messages lodged in the Old Mother's mouths, the words dusty and faded, fragmented, half-heard. They need the stories that the Old Mothers had overheard their Grandmothers' Grandmothers whispering once upon a time. They needed to have the poison pulled out of their veins. They needed to be weeded and unsewn, unlatched, so someone could kneel down beside them and pick out the cigarette butts and bits of garbage that had been carelessly tossed into them.

Someone has to reach in and tickle the stories out of their hiding places, peel them from the walls of ribcage and lung. Someone has to urge the stories out of the container of the body. This is the only way for the body, for the life, to be free. The Old Mothers reach in and open the airway, help the body on the floorboards remember how to breathe. And when the stories begin to emerge they are a vile and tarry clot, a dead thing taking up space inside life's container.

This was the promise young women made in order to live among men, a promise passed through to her daughters: *I will be the containment of your stories. I will be the storage bin, the coffin, the sarcophagus, the receptacle.* The Mothers try to remove the promise along with the stories, and sometimes they succeed.

How to extract this sludge of vomit and stain from her guts? Imagine the Old Mothers, their hands webbed with the stuff, a greenish-brown waste, each finger tethered to a rope of this history, gently pulling their hands back and up, away from the body on the floor. The material issues from every opening—mouth, eyes, nose, vagina, anus—and

the girl is semi-conscious, but she does not cry; the only sound is a sticky-wet tack, like pulling night crawlers out of wet soil or peeling a rabbit's skin from muscle. It seems as though they are pulling forth the girl's soul, that once they have finished the girl will be an empty husk. The girl is silent. The Old Mothers work slow to unclog her throat. As enough of the tarry bile is removed, the Mothers seem to pull a song out with it. A faint whisper swells to a moan and unfurls into a wail as the girls' throat is emptied of the old sicknesses. The Old Mothers ball up the extracted substance and throw it in the fire, turn their faces from the noxious smoke.

The girl is thinner and weak, but her wail is strong. The Mothers nod at one another as after a difficult birth, when an infant is silent too long and the Mothers must swipe bony and strong fingers in the child's throat, clearing the passageway—the cry finally erupts is not grief or fear, but deep relief, the sound of life.

The girl sobs from her depths, choked and stuttery. Then she sleeps.

The Mothers sit with the girl, palms gently resting on her spent and sweaty body. They sing quietly, nod to one another; they wait and keep the cocoon company as the girl gathers into herself again, her dreams filling in the empty spaces with ferocious possibility. The Mothers wait, watch the sunrise and sunset, whisper to the moon, listen as she whispers back. The Mothers wait a day and a night, another day, a hundred days, it does not matter. One day the girl's eyes open and she is alive. One day the girl laughs loud and full. The girl sits up with still-tear-stained eyes. The girl tells the Old Mothers

she is hungry. She wakes. She is not tired anymore. She is not empty. Pinfeathers flutter across her shoulder blades.

Tick tock

Can you tell a true story of abuse, set down all the facts for everyone to know indisputably? Every single element has been embellished, a stone fence of hope and luck. We don't want more morning than this. I feel quiet today, lucky. There are cards to read and an escape valve to turn. In my dream, there was something about pipes.

The invisible mother, the Cheshire mother, the incredible shrinking mother: In the old books, the young mother has to disappear almost immediately for the child to be able to grow: she is an obstacle, a hindrance, a too-safe place. Did *mother* ever feel like a too-safe place? We are fed fairy tales as reason and rationale for our violation or abandonment. In the old stories, *mother* is a haunting. The responsibility for a child's well-being always falls to the lost mother; the violence is merely a lesson everyone has to learn.

We are snug as a bug in our rugs, wrapped up tight and ready to roll away. The clock tick is a comfort. I wait for the morning to move through, for something to kick in. Sometimes the mechanism of this clock sounds like several clocks ticking all at once, and every now and again, the ticking disappears altogether. The clock no longer tells time. Still, it makes the right sounds. The White Rabbit checks her watch, exclaims, rushes toward the dark door ahead.

What are the prime meridians, the prime directives, the priorities when sharing an untellable tale? What are the first steps toward remothering what has been orphaned in the castle?

Beast

The old stories had warned us about trolls and ghosts, about witches and stepmothers in all their many jealous forms, but no one had warned us about stepfathers, and no one had thought to caution us about Prince Charming.

In the beginning

This place is mine and it isn't mine, the sunrise is mine and the cars on the asphalt and the cicadas and grasshoppers that pop up and away from your feet when you walk through the tall grass on the edge of the cornfield, and the smell of sunflowers that grow small and multiple on a single stem, each yellow-fringed face turned toward the sun, those are all mine, and monarch butterflies and white concrete and dark cracked asphalt and secret backyard alleyways, those are mine, the smell of a room made inside an evergreen bush, swept clean, lined with books and a cup and a blanket maybe, that's mine, too, and old barn buildings and roads called Cessna, Piper, Beechnut—those are mine, the feel of a homemade leopard costume, waiting on the side of a gravel road for the school bus, hot mornings that drip on you, the whine and sting of mosquitoes, those are mine, the tall branch of okra, tomato vines so heavy they collapse, carrots that poke up from the ground, beans you pull from the plant and eat, the feel of hot concrete or grass under bare feet, that's mine, the worry and immediacy of sticker plants, the plunge of a bee stinger deep into the bottom of your foot, and chlorinated water at the city pool on a hot and thick July day, those are all mine, the way to walk from home, up the block, turn left, go to the busy street and turn right, go across the street and down the block, past the big church and the parking lot and then at the other corner there's the library where the women are kind to you and let you sign your name for your own books, that's mine, how the sweet white bottom parts of grass tastes, the tart yellow flower clover buds and how

buttercups smell, that's mine, how lilacs smell, how tiger lilies smell, how little bugs live in all the wildflowers that you put in your hair, that's mine, the long bike rides, how the wind can be made cooler if you go faster, that's mine, the way asphalt shimmers everything on the very hot days, that's mine, too, and how zinnias make someone sneeze, the smell of turpentine and electric kilns, that's mine, the musty smell of grandmas' basements, how gravel tastes, how it feels under shoes and then under bare feet, how the whole world feels under bare feet, the smell of woodsmoke from a summer fire, charcoal lighter fluid on store-bought briquettes, the smell of water in a kiddie pool is mine, the smell of homemade bread in a morning oven, that's mine, popcorn made on the stovetop, and popcorn made in an air popper with a little compartment on the side where you put the butter to melt while the popcorn is popping, that's all mine, too, and the wildflowers here are sunflowers, purple thistle, red-orange black-eyed susans, honeysuckle, buttercup, violet— right now it's more green than anything, all the corn ripening, the cottonwoods and maples and elms all green and flush, the grass thick, the bean fields green, not so many flowers, just that endless green that ends, it ends, in a straight line at the horizon and gets picked up by blue, the sky starts somewhere and you can see it, suddenly it lifts up off the ground, is awake and over you, it would be over you all the way there at that line that it looks like you could step over, last night wasn't the bright orange sunset sky, the lingering, I didn't watch, maybe tonight.

Pretties

The young mothers drew in, afraid. They taught their daughters how to be pretty, quiet birds, how to sit dainty in a cage and preen, even when the captor left the cage door ajar. They forgot the oldest lessons and taught the new ones: if you want to survive, be pretty, be pretty, be pretty—be good girls. The princes and captors and thieves who come for you, they will want a little fight in you, a little mouth, a little strength, so that they can overpower it; they want a little smart in you, so that they can turn it under their own. Don't embarrass him, don't say no. Say *maybe*, dip your head, laugh small, move a half-step away, don't let him see you're trying to flee. Don't let him just take what's not yet his for the grabbing, not until he's given your father and me a fair payment for your maidenhood. And if he takes it anyway, you'll have to fight, just a little, not that much, a little more.

The young mothers learned to drown the girls who were too smart, too strong. They sewed up the mouths that were too big, they did not want to be known as the mothers of a big-mouthed girl. They brought in the doctors and had sliced open or sliced off what was too hungry in any one of their girls. Be small, they said. They showed. They modeled. Be small. Stay in the castle. Play with your dolls until your doll comes alive, then care for that baby the same way. The young mothers loved their daughters when they were small and pink or small and brown. The young mothers stayed quiet and played with their dolls until one of their dolls came alive and suddenly they cradled a baby girl

in their arms and they cried and cried, not because they were tired or because they were happy, but because they were going to have to teach her the same lessons they had learned, they were going to have to break her the same way they had been broken themselves.

Photographs

Once upon a time, in a land last week and a time right around the corner from here, there was a man and a woman. The man stood at the front of a lecture hall at the heart of an old university. The woman entered the classroom with purpose and sat toward the back of the hall with a look on her face that told anyone looking she wasn't sure she belonged there. Pencil poised, she was ready to allow any words he spoke to occupy her thoroughly. The woman—pale, thin, with brown hair that touched her shoulders, and green eyes that didn't quite touch anything—wrote down each of the man's thick words. He said, Therapists have to open themselves to their clients if the therapeutic relationship is to be of service. He said, You—the therapist—cannot close yourself off from your own emotional, even physical, responses. He said, The Freudian model of the disembodied analytic voice probing and penetrating a patient lying prone on a chaise lounge—those days are over, my friends. The man said, The therapeutic relationship is, by definition, an erotic one—and what the therapist does with that erotic spark that is necessary to the process can make the difference between a client's suffering and a client's health. The students shuffled in their seats, rustled papers, but were otherwise silent, concentrating.

The woman dreamed about Prince Charming, and kept her glass slippers tucked in a box under her bed. She studied hard, late into every night, smoked cigarettes when she thought her daughters wouldn't see her. She read her assignments, she completed her

papers, she imagined herself one day sitting on the other side of the desk: What brings you in today? How can I help you? She imagined one day asking a young single mother not at all unlike herself, *And how did it make you feel when he called you ugly and frigid?*

Her daughters waited at home for her. After the bell rang, they walked home from their elementary school, let themselves into the small apartment she'd rented, finished homework, made themselves dinner, and told themselves stories while they got ready for bed. They read stories about princesses. Their father had told them they could be anything they wanted to be, then their father had been banished to another land. They listened for the key unlocking the front door, the small creak of the hinges, the whisper of the door brushing across the carpet. Their mother had told her daughters that they mustn't open the door for anyone; the streets were full of danger, and anyone could have teeth of broken glass behind kind eyes or a gentle smile. At night, the eldest daughter imagined footsteps climbing the stairs, through the silence of their nighttime home. She reminded herself that she was in fifth grade, and old enough not to be afraid of ghosts. Yet every night, footsteps, slow and persistent, rose from the first floor and approached her sister's bedroom. When, with shallow breath and damp palms, she crept to the door and peered into the dimly-lit hallway, she saw no one. She imagined a shadow passing beneath the hall light, then it disappeared.

On a certain day, the man stood before a lecture hall filled with curious minds, and the woman sat at the back of the hall, scribbling notes. The man finished the day's lesson, then packed up his satchel and left the room, ignoring the students who had

gathered about the foot of the lectern, seeking further instruction, drawn like magnets to the thing with the hole at its center, to the thing burnished with rage and wanting.

On that day, the woman followed the man when he left the lecture room, trailed him through dim hallways and out into sunlight so bright it cut her gaze away from him for moments at a time. She watched his broad back, his sure stride. He did not turn his head from side to side, but looked only ahead. The woman followed him away from the university and into a shallow forest, through the forest and into a village, through the village and up to a small house with peeling green paint. At the door to the house he paused, and she watched his shoulders heave once. Then he turned, looked directly down at her, and she froze beneath his gaze.

He opened his palm and pushed it toward her, as though accusing. The empty space between them raised its eyebrows, cocked its head. The man asked her for something—*something*. Why should he believe she truly wanted to learn what else he had to teach? How did he know she would be faithful? He had had students trail him home before. He had had women before, other wives even. He wanted some token of her esteem, something to put in his pockets or wear on his fingers or stuff under his nails. He wanted something it made her uncomfortable to give.

The woman glanced around the anemic yard, at the surrounding houses that seemed, to a one, to have shuttered their gaze against the street. She reached into the pocket of her threadbare coat, and found a piece of candy leftover from the youngest

daughter's birthday celebration. The hard candy, bright red and twisted into cellophane, sat in her palm like a piece torn from a beating heart. The woman lifted the candy between two fingers and laid it gently on the man's lifeline. He glanced down, then raised his eyes to her face. The woman smiled, not sheepish, and not proud, but with something in-between turning up the corners of her mouth.

The man removed the candy from its casing and shoved it between his full lips with a sneer, then turned and entered his home without a word, closing the door behind him. The woman stood a moment, listened, but there was no sound from behind the heavy wooden door. The woman pressed her lips together, dropped her eyes to the ground, and turned to go home to her children.

The next time she came, the woman offered flowers pulled from a neighbor's garden, dirt still clinging to the roots. The man tossed them in the garbage.

The woman drew coins from the small purse she kept hidden in her room and bought the man a glass bottle of scented water, then jeweled rings for his ears, then a silver amulet in the shape of a scarab to protect him from harm. None of these were acceptable to the man, and he would not let her pass across his threshold.

The woman persisted. In class the man said, We must be diligent in our pursuit of the truth, even when it frightens us or our clients—*especially* when it frightens us or our clients. She sat in class, she wrote down his words, and she trailed him home after his lectures completed. Her daughters turned on the lights when the sun went down, they

fried paper-thin slices of meat in a skillet for dinner. They ate at the table, drank glasses of water. Then they washed the skillet and put it away again.

On a day when the sky was mottled with drizzle, the woman stood on the man's doorstep again. He waited before her, hand open, eyes glinting. The woman reached into the bag she carried slung over one shoulder, and handed the man a book she'd discovered in the university library. It was filled with pictures of dead animals that were splayed open to reveal their anatomy, their bones and seams. This he took in his two hands, turning the pages slowly. He raised a quiet face to hers then, and stepped aside to invite her in. He sat her in a wicker chair on his porch, made her tea from a kettle he kept on the stovetop, and told her the stories of the animals in the drawings. He did not like it when she looked around. He said, Are you listening? His stories made her shiver in the inside places of her bones. After a single cup of tea, he sent her home. That night, the stories the man had told her danced behind the woman's eyes. She found she could not sleep. She thought about the man. She wondered if the man thought about her.

Next, the woman bought the man the teeth of a rabbit inside a small jute bag. The proprietor at the flea market stall at which the woman found the teeth had looked sideways at her. The proprietor knew about women seeking out dead and broken things, and had caught a hint of something grey inside the gasp that had issued from the woman when she found the bag of teeth.

But the old woman was hungry and had not made a sale that day. *Each has to learn her own lessons*, she thought to herself. She raised the price she'd set for the teeth. Best quality, the old woman said. See? And she fondled one of the teeth, broken down the middle where a dog had split it in half when it killed the hare.

Did the old woman cast a spell—*once upon a time*? No. She just sidled up alongside a spell that was already in motion, forming behind the young woman's eyes and inside her fingers. The proprietor did her part: she asked three times—*are you certain you wish these things, child?* But the young woman had been blind and choked through already, her thin body aflame with hunger and resolve. The old woman handed over the rabbit's teeth.

The old witch hadn't mentioned the young woman's children, those soft-petaled bodies nestled in their beds across town. The old woman had no need to; a mother never forgets who she is—she simply chooses to set it down sometimes, mothering. She grows weary of its weight and demand, the constancy, and how the mantle of nurturing strips her of all she thought she would become.

The woman paid the extra amount for the teeth, thinking they would please the man. And they did. He took them inside, and she watched him scatter them into a small ceramic dish on the shelf in his grey front room where every night, when he returned home from the university, he set his watch, his wallet, his rings. He fed her tea, and over the steam, he imaged aloud the story of the rabbit's death.

But he turned her out when her teacup was empty, and still he raised an open palm at her when she came to his door evenings after class. What do you have for me, Cinder? He asked her. Why should I let you in this door?

She liked imagining herself a seeker. She read her daughters stories about princesses who undertook quests.

There was a day that she brought the glass slippers. He liked how fragile they were, how dangerous. She told the man, my mother told me not to wear them, but I knew she was afraid; she wanted to keep everything hidden, tucked away in the dark. Cinder wanted to be free, be visible, be seen. She showed him, she put them on. He said, See how you have become luminescent. See how you shed the ashes of your youth. See how you dance. He took her hands, brought her to him, led her round his small rooms to the place with the stone floor. He wanted her to bring her feet down hard. She could feel how much he wanted the shattering, the slice of it, and she nearly complied, just to see delight color his cheeks, to feel excitement tighten his breath. But if she broke them, then it would be over. The spell would be broken, too.

He kept the slippers, tucked them under his arm as he waved her out the door.

An animal that had been sliced open whole, alive, drained of blood and then pinned to a board, all of its organs and bones neatly labeled. A cluster of baby robin hatchlings dead in their nest. A tiny jeweled bottle of belladonna. The young woman did not ask the peddler how she came upon these things, only felt grateful each week for the

next offering she could bring to the feet of her prince. Could she believe he would truly become her prince, if she found the right gift?

She didn't count on the need for sacrifice. No young woman ever does.

On a day that there had been no lectures, the woman felt called to travel directly to the man's house from work; she did not go to her own house across the village, feed her children, wash the smell of desperation off her arms and face. The woman carried papers in a canvas bag over one shoulder. In the bag were reports she was preparing, reports about the broken children she tended to every day, asked to place elsewhere, away from parents or whoever it was that had broken them.

In her canvas bag, the woman carried forms duplicated so many times that the print had grown faint and she could read the words only from memory. In these papers were the stories told by mothers and fathers, sisters, classmates, teachers, uncles, priests, neighbors: stories of each child's particular brokenness—how the breaking came to be, how the child might have avoided it, what the breaking had sounded and smelled like. That day she had in one of her files the ghostly plastic outline of one child's break, an x-ray delivered by a physician. The woman had looked at the image once, examined the fragments of bone, the torn skin, nodded, then slid the photograph into her canvas bag.

When the woman arrived at the man's house that evening, he met her wearing an old blue robe and slippers that looked like small animals turned inside out, with the skin

on the outside and the fur within, as though the bottoms of his feet nestled on eyeballs, whiskers, and snout. The man had his palm spread out before him.

A cold whistled through the woman's body. She had brought him no offering that day. He tilted his round head to one side, and she looked away from him to hide the shape of her panic. He smelled fear like roasting meat. He watched her eyes shift to one side, toward her bag, and he glimpsed the black corner peeking forth. He reached his meaty hand and gingerly plucked out the photograph.

The man's face filled then with delight, open and fresh as a just-unfurled blossom, his eyes suddenly youthful, sparkling, happy. He might have hopped up and down and clapped his hands.

He did not say, *For me?* She did not say, *For you.* A worried smile crept to her lips.

The man took the photograph inside. He called to her, and so she stepped across the threshold of his doorway, and walked for the first time beyond the porch where he had served her tea. She felt like a trusted thing.

The man held the photograph gently between his two palms, and he rested it in a window over the dining room table so that it shone like stained glass drained of its hues.

The man wanted the woman to stand next to him then, admire the picture, its intricate depiction of damage. The woman remembered the child sitting on a worn grey

chair in her empty office, how he held his arm at a wrong angle against his body, how he breathed shallowly in deference to healing ribs. She made herself smile when the man glanced at her, and relief shed its skin inside her body when he took her hand in his and led her up the stairs to his bed.

The woman began to bring the man more pictures, and after that he wanted the stories. He set the pictures up on the windowsill or the mantelpiece, then situated himself in a chair, looked at her with wide-open eyes. He wanted to know how it happened. When she couldn't tell him, he closed his face and raged, or sent her away. It was such a small thing he asked for, something to take his mind off his responsibilities. So the woman positioned herself next to each x-ray like a docent—she might have held a pointer in one hand—and she began to unfold for the man these stories of brokenness. Afterwards, he took her just there, on the couch, or against the wall where she stood, or on the carpeted floor in-between.

The man grew particular about the photographs he wanted, the kind of damage, the specificities in stories he would like to hear. He liked to see the open wings of a pelvic bone shattered, the skin of a child's sex organs abraded or bleeding, the bruised tones of a summer's thunderstorming sky dancing beneath a child's eye or across their buttocks and back.

The woman found these photographs for the man, these stories. It was such a small thing he asked, after all. It was normal to have preferences, she reminded herself he had told his class, normal as she herself preferred eggs over cereal or meat over toast.

And so how could she argue the day she found him flipping through her wallet, gazing thoughtfully at the photos of her girls? How could she quit playing the game when he gently tugged them from their plastic slots, held them up to the window for inspection, then looked to her for the stories. *You've been saving the best of them, haven't you?* He asked her. His eyes were aflame. *Tell me the stories of these ones*, he said to her.

The woman thought of her girls, home alone with their schoolbooks. She looked at the man's wet mouth. She glanced around the warm home, thought about his full larders, then remembered the way he'd spoken to her in class—like she was worth listening to. A painful throbbing filled her body.

It was such a small thing. It was just a story.

She closed her eyes, and gave the man her daughters.

Dowry

In this story, the girls were as yet unbroken—did you know girls could be unbroken? Like wild mares, like city dogs, like the hour before dawn? In this story, the girls climb and run, they are unfettered, their hair a tangle about each tan and dirty face. In this story, the girls don't know what's coming, but the old peddler does.

The girls were angels and anvils. In the old stories, the children do the dirty work, and the stepmother is the lesson. In the old stories, the mother dies. The mother dies. The mother dies. In the old stories, the father is the broken one in need of fixing, a farmer or prince who needs a new wife after his own true love has gone. In the old stories, the stepmothers move mountains for their own daughters, hide the ham hocks and honey from their new husband's children. In the old stories, the father cannot see what is being done to his children—he is still too grief-stricken, he hides away in the fields, he is in love anew and his bride can do no wrong. In the old stories, there are no stepfathers. Prince Charming rescued Cinderella from the filth of the fire, and they lived happily ever after. They danced at the ball with the whole kingdom watching, the prince in his finest white uniform and bright red sash, Cinderella in a bulbous blue dress, her glass slippers sliding neatly over the marble floor. Her daughters hover in the wings, like an extra surprise, like a groom's gift.

The younger one

My sister's cheekbones duck quiet and smooth beneath her eyes and her skin is fair like in old European stories; her hair gets called blonde by people who are optimistic about the shades that theirs could be but we know it's really brown. Her face is my definition of innocence; no matter what, all I see when I look at her is baby sister.

For many years, I saw her face everywhere, in other women's faces: on the street or at the bus stop, on tv, on the campuses, on magazine covers. For awhile, I thought maybe that meant I thought her face was ordinary, the same as any woman's face. But instead what was doing was looking for her everywhere, the pen of my memory peeling away those women's features to reveal what of my sister lay in front of me, inside me, every minute.

It wasn't like we were out of contact for long—it was only a few months. But even an hour is forever after she spoke the words of my mother: that she would rather remain with our stepfather than stand naked and afraid in the wilderness with me, and though I understood it, deep in my bones, it often seems now as though I'm still searching for her, like she's still lost to me, or could be easily enough, once again. How could she leave, how could either of us, when he was guarding every firelit path, every gateway drug, every stepping stone, every telephone, every call, every response, every throb of an answer, in every rerun in your mind.

It felt like nothing could be ours alone again and so we drank hard to kill him off, bleed him out from under our fingernails, and when I put down my bottle and blearily came up for air, she had drifted away too far for me to see clearly anymore. She was still sinking under him. She was still drowning and lost. These are all the wrong phrases and I know that everyone has heard this story before but the problem is I practiced not seeing her for so many years that's it's difficult to be up close to her face now and really know where every feather and feature of hers truly belongs.

He taught us the fine art of unseeing, so I could unlace sisterhood from the bones of her face and instead lash on the mask of mother—betrayer and collaborator. Because I was not allowed to see her during those months, I learned early to look for her everywhere, to try and find that first love scraped across someone else's bones. That loss became an actual stranger walking away instead of her from me, me from her, over and over again, because we have to breathe in the absence of one another, sometimes, just to be able to really see.

Seeds

Demeter loses Persephone. Her uncle, Hades, pulls the girl down to the underworld, but in this version, Demeter doesn't do a goddamn thing to get her girl back to freedom; the seasons just go on the same, spring follows winter follows autumn follows summer—no one knows that anything has changed, has been stolen.

How did he unsnap her from her mothering? After leaving her child with the monster that lived underneath, she filled her own mouth with pomegranate and honey wine. What did she say to the spaces where her daughter had been? Did she sing nighttime songs into the emptiness?

Cinderella

You are trying to pull out the teeth of me, to shove the stories, the words of the past back down my throat, but I don't want them there. I have worked so hard to hold all the pieces of the story together. Now I walk behind, just in his shadow, and he can barely see me. Now I slip on the ice and am gone. You don't really want to see me. You whisper the stories and imagine the troublings, the beginnings and the insides, but you don't really want to go peering down my throat, opening the cabinets of my body with a flashlight and a club, afraid of what you might find. I have many more ghosts than you know. I am a cloak of the ghosts the world wears. I carry them around with me on my back every day, and two of the ghosts are you and your sister. I am a clatter of ghosts and I leave yesterday in yesterday just so I can rise from my bed in the mornings.

Do you want to know why I followed him home from school that day, just like a little lost lamb? I followed him because he looked inside my mind and saw grace. I followed him one day because I was so tired of all the men who were so careful and so mannered, the men who refused to touch my skin for its ashes and stains, the men who would not touch in me anything caught in the gloom. But he pushed aside the other women and he made room for what was heavy in me, what was hollow and angry and hungry.

I can remember so easily the desperate early days, how I left meetings with him feeling my skin aflame. I was so hungry for what he gave me—a place to unfold my questions, a place to both know and not know, a place to be in wonder and curiosity, and he held my questions like they meant something and he didn't ignore me like your father had done or ask for dinner like you girls did. He asked me this: *What have you brought me, Cinder?* And then I would tell him.

It's it so easy to say I followed him because I thought he listened to me, because when I asked questions he gave answers I'd never imagined, sometimes split my brain in two, made me see the world afresh, anew. I didn't see then what he was doing with my answers: how he sewed himself into them, how he pulled aside details for future use, how he began to turn them inside out. By the time I looked down, he'd already sewn himself into my veins. I thought—you understand, I thought that meant he loved me.

Apparition

The first time I saw it I understood objects were nothing I couldn't hold or touch them they would dissolve from my grasp they would disappear. The first time I saw the thing that wouldn't be seen or spoken or named, he took my hand in a dark room and pointed me toward a mirror pointed me toward a shadow. *Look*, he said, *look there. That's where we live.* He showed me alleyways and the cantankerous past he showed me the dark hydrant, the spitstream beside the bar he showed me the unseeable in a cheap porn store peep show he showed me the hole in the world. *Look through there*, he said. *Tell me what you see. Do it with your eyes closed. Do it with your mouth full.* The first time I saw the thing that wouldn't be seen, I learned how to unsuture negative space, and the inside stars of me imploded. The first time I saw it I didn't know what I was looking at; it was too big to be seen, it was too small, I was too much a school girl from a Midwest town who'd sooner get run over by a bus than tell her friends at school that she'd seen that, who thought *heck* was a dirty word, who traced the drawings of men and women making love in her friend's mother's pregnancy books, who got a knot in her stomach when Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing" came on the top-40 radio station—this was not a girl who was ever meant to see that. No girl is ever supposed to see that thing that wouldn't be seen.

Just tell one story. The first time I saw his glasses. The first time I saw his moustache. The first time I saw the bruises. The first time I forgot about the bruises. The first time I saw the Atari, the television, the stereo console, the Apple computer, the white underwear, the tan platform boots, the restaurant menu, the shard of glass, the McCall's pattern package, the coupon collector, the paint peeler, the plaster scraper, the shade garden of lilies of the valley, the pharmaceutical advertisement, the handgun: but all these were the places it wasn't. All I could see were all the places it wasn't. Make me a basket of all the objects that can't be spoken or stained.

When I first saw the thing that couldn't be seen, I could only see the outline of everything around it, everything it wasn't, everything that wasn't it. The shape of white space, hushed like a silenced drum, like swallowed time. It ate into my fingers, and bit the insides of my cheeks. I didn't know what I was looking at. It had the outline of my sister's body. I didn't understand what I was looking at.

You want a noun, a simple thing, an object—a rock, or a gravestone, but all I can think is penis dildo vibrator porn magazine handgun backhand. The shard of glass, the outstretched hand. Something to tell a story, to unwrap the beginning, to reveal an initial apprehension of what was to come.

Teacher

We watched through the bars of our cages. We watched him when it seemed he wasn't looking, we small mice around the corner, we doorstops, we snapdragons pulled from the ground and cramped in thin vases, we invisible and fractured girls. When we had on our other shapes we would watch him, and he taught us things. He was the one who could teach us things.

In the mornings we peered through a crack in the door and watched our mother take hold of his wrinkled skins and flatten them, make them smooth again, firm and young and whole. In the mornings, he still had the red eyes, the sloughed fangs, sand under his fingernails. He didn't like the waking. Waking meant occupying the world again. We watched her salve his tentacles, before he retracted himself in order to reenter the world. Each morning, his tentacles were sticky with night sweats and the secretions of children, so dust and hair caught on them; they stuck to the bedclothes and our mother had to pull them free. They tangled and he grew frustrated. She did not smell us there.

We watched from inside the wardrobe, behind the clock's face. Arms became seconds, minutes, *tock, tick*. He taught us how to disassemble our monstrosities. In the mornings we collected our sticky broken pieces and shoved them into pants and shirts. We were scarecrows, unstuffed by his many arms. We slicked away the burn marks with creams and unguents. We folded our skin so that the scars could not be seen. We

swallowed our voices, twisted our necks closed, we sealed in what couldn't be heard anyway. My sister painted on eyes, oiled the hinges of her jaw so that she could smile again, oiled her joints so she could walk.

Our mother was a blind crawl, a throatless owl. Each morning, when she finished with him, she blossomed into a balloon and floated away. Our mother hesitated to glance into the dark we wore beneath our eyes. Our mother whisked us with her eyes, then looked back at the clouds. *Be good girls*, she said, her voice very small and far away. *Be good girls for him. Do what he tells you. I'll be right back.*

He did not disappear. He never taught us to disappear. He taught us how not to be seen and we learned from him. He put on his clothes like he had only had two arms. When he opened the door and stepped into the sun, the neighbors waved hello. The neighbors smiled and waved hello.

We trailed behind him in the world, smiling when he looked at us, our eyes narrowed. We watched at the people we passed on the street, their downcast eyes, the way their smiles defecated into themselves, the way they refused to see when the tentacles slipped their stitches, when he roared with midnight on his breath, when he reached out and batted a child to one side, an old woman. He wasn't anybody's ghost.

Our mother was a dot in the sky, a disembodied voice. *Be good girls!*

When he found us at night he was mandible and vine and in the morning we had to learn to be girls again, how to sit regular in a desk, how to raise our heads, how to have

hands, how to ache and fold and sing a song that wasn't *help me, help her, help me*. We put ourselves back together again and reentered the world. He taught us, over and over again, how we would have to reenter the world.

Priest

He had a houseful of women to tend to each of his needs. If you didn't complete a task just the way he'd explained it to you, then it began. He'd shout, calling you away from dinner dishes or trigonometry homework, and then there would be a family meeting to help you figure out what was “going on” with you that you were doing shoddy work or otherwise slacking off in your duties. He just wanted to get to the root of the problem, to help us work through it so that we would be more productive members of the family, of society. He wanted to help us evolve.

Why do you think you forgot to dust this part of the credenza? Why did you water this plant and not pay attention to the overflow? Look at this watermark. Why do you think I have to explain to you over and over that you dust first and then vacuum? Why is it you aren't listening? Why are you pushing me this way? It's as though you want me to get angry, as though you want to get caught.

These were the confessionals—the couch and the dining room table. These were the places we sat for hours, listening to his evidence, listening to him create our crimes. We tried to see how long we could hold out before finally admitting that we did or felt whatever he'd determined that we'd done or felt. He *knew* we were scared or angry or hostile, he *knew* we were really sad even though we said we were only tired—he had been observing us. He watched where our eyes went, he watched how we held our

bodies, he watched how we cut up our pork chops, how we set down the silverware, who we looked at, who we didn't—we were always under the microscope of his evidence-collecting gaze. No movement was innocuous. Every move was a message for him. We learned to monitor ourselves. We thought we could thwart his eyes. We sat in the straight-backed chairs with the wicker seats, hands to either side of the woven placemat on top of the handmade tablecloth, while he worked us. Outside, through the blinds, all the streetlights made pools of absence on the asphalt.

You're angry. Just admit you're angry, and we can move on.

The longer it took to admit to whatever it was we weren't feeling, the more evidence he would produce, pulling from days or months prior, asking sister or mother to give their testimony. *No* was not an option. So you finally choked on whatever sense of self you thought you were saving, said *Yes*, imagining he, finally, would be pleased. And then he wanted you to say you were sorry for wasting everyone's time. He wanted to know why you delayed, what that denial was about, what you were protecting. Our tears sometimes helped, at least in the beginning, even though they came purely from frustration and fear—who were we supposed to pretend to be now?

Every action had an underlying, unconscious cause, something only he could discern. He taught us that none of our behaviors were unmotivated by unconscious anger or hurt that we were acting out, by feelings we had (unsuccessfully) tried to repress. And

it was his job—his *responsibility*—to be diligent with us until we figured it out and said it out loud, told the truth, set the feelings free. Even, maybe especially, if we were afraid.

What are you angry about? Don't shake your head—there's clearly something going on. If it's not me you're angry at, then who?

There was no such thing as absent-mindedness in his house, no simple forgetfulness; none of the normal self-centeredness of adolescence was allowed. He knew each of those surface reasons was just an excuse, and batted it away easily. He handed us shovel, pick axe, jackhammer, pointed to our heads and insisted we dig in.

He could tell when any of us were lying, demanded we tell his whole truth *so help you God* whenever he asked a question, like he was judge and Bible, courtroom and private eye. He knew how to read us, knew how to tell when we were lying, so we taught ourselves not to *know*, which was the way not to *lie*.

Come on. You're wasting everyone's time, ruining what was supposed to be a good weekend. We had so much we wanted to do today, and now we're sitting with your bullshit again, while you lie about what's going on with you. Don't tell me you're not lying—isn't it obvious to the rest of you that something's going on with her?

And so there would be something. Some answer he would accept. Some “reason” we could make sound plausible enough to satisfy him. Mad about having to do chores. Mad about how much of mom’s attention he got. Just selfish—didn't want to have to do a good job. Scared to say I'm worried about my grades.

There was always something we weren't saying. Our acquiescence vindicated him. He was always able to make us say it. Then the real conversation began.

Why do you think you're feeling this way again? Why are you letting this feeling control you? And what makes you think feeling bad gives you an excuse for shoddy work?

The one thing we never said, though, was the truth: *I'm angry about the things you make me do in private, and I just want you to stop.*

There was no privacy, within or without. He tore the doors off our psychic hinges. *How do you ever expect to grow if you remain so closed, so afraid?* He wanted all of us open to him, all of the time.

We sat inside the shells we'd become, enervated and exoskeletoned. We lifted something out when he came at us. How does a body learn to unskin itself? I felt myself in the straight-backed chair, I understood the table was still under my elbows, my forearms where I had been told to place them—I crafted something like a body with the cold that I became. Inside, my nerves never stopped singing; they took up a St. Vitus' dance along my forearm. Cold was what my new name was. In the face of unanswerable questions, my body struck out onto Antarctic terrain, took hold of nothingness and shaped it between my lips, inside my eyelids, into my throat. I, an enraptured thing, a wingless bird, a confoundment of flame, understood that words flowed from my mouth, but I could not hold them—they no longer belonged to me.

The bloody key

She didn't know he was Bluebeard. She ignored the tint of his whiskers, the way he told her she could have anything she wanted as long as she thought right and stayed out of that one room. The room was not hidden from her under a lost stairway or secret corridor. Nor was it ever, ever locked. In fact, the prince insisted that the door to the room be kept flung open at all times. It was the girls themselves who tried to close it, eventually, one after the other, out of modesty. But he was never far away, and would give them a look or a word; they would nudge the door open again or he reached over to do so himself.

The room filled with parts of them, the girls—the younger sister's lips and tongue, the older sister's hands and throat. The girls regrew overnight, their bodies apparently whole and fresh the next day. The stone floor of the room was scattered with tiny fragments, stained with small smears of blood from an ear, a hand; and though, like amphibians, they were able to regenerate their missing parts after he was done with them, still the parts in the room remained, growing cold and pale on the stone floor. The floor was soon covered with pairs of the girls' lips, instantiations of their tongues, small bits of flesh torn urgently, pulled from between their legs, over and over and over.

Cinderella was not supposed to see the room fill up with the parts of her daughters. She was not supposed to see the room, though it stood opposite her bower, a chamber lush with opulent colors and fabrics. Every morning she walked in and

manacled herself to the fine gold chains that attached her to the wall. The daybed and chairs were filled with goosedown and covered with the finest Chinese silks. The rug beneath her feet was a thick pile, the cold stone walls hung with intricate tapestry—Leda and the swan, the rape of the unicorn, the phoenix and the gryphon. Every morning the fire had already been kindled, blazed bright and warm, filling the room with a tender kind of light. There were collections of ancient tales, *Arabian Nights*, *Tale of Genji*, *the Book of Kells*—in a small bookshelf next to her daybed, and sometimes she reached for them, flipped through the pages, ran her pale hands over the gold leaf, the textured illustrations. She imagined reading the stories aloud to her girls, the way she'd once made up stories for them when they were small, nuzzling them in close, one on either side of her body. But her girls were too old for fairy tales, did not need a story at night to help them fall asleep, and anyway, neither girl ever visited her bower. So she flipped through the pages as cries echoed through the stone castle halls. A tender remembering pushed at her lips as she caressed the words.

The prince strode down the hall. She knew his footfalls. There was a small wet sound in the chamber across the hall. Cinderella glanced out the window of her sitting room, her chains rang like bells as she adjusted her body to sit more comfortably. Outside, the sun poured across the tops of old pine, into the far meadow.

At mealtimes she unbound her hands and ankles and walked past the secret chamber. She did not glance inside, kept her eyes down, hurrying to the dining room, one shoe on, one foot bare, *click silence, clink silence, clink silence*.

Ariadne's clock

The younger one learned early how to unfasten herself from time. She let her eyes go unfocused, she eased past the frames of herself, and drifted out onto the open plains.

His wouldn't be a maze she could find her way out of. Her mother had sent her in with a backwards map and an absentminded pat on the shoulder, saying, *Don't forget to be back in time to set the table for dinner.*

The mother had watched the little girl disappear into the tall maze of hedgerow and bramble. She was used to sending her girls out alone to play—and had they ever complained? Now here was a man who wanted to be husband to her and playmate to them. None of them would ever again have to be alone. And still the girls fussed and frowned. The mother sighed, turning away while her youngest daughter stood quiet at the mouth of the maze. She'd figure out what she needed to. Didn't each woman have to find her own way through the maze, after all?

The girl hadn't needed a map. She'd needed a watch. But the man had taken all the clocks away while her mother slept.

Before she disappeared into the maze, the girl saw the clocks in the man's eyes, saw all the time he'd swallowed, all the minutes he hungered for. Her minutes. Hers and her sister's. She saw the second hand clacking against his ribs.

The mazed girl and her older sister went in-between time zones most days. The man refused to let the girls live within Outside time once they had disabled the alarm and stepped inside the heavy wooden door with steel at its core, but he also would not let them forget it. If they forgot it, if they lost track of Outside's time, then Outside people might wonder where they were, might wonder *who* they were.

They learned to listen to the inseams of time. They learned to know and not know. It was all he asked of them. Was that really so very hard?

When did he become the hourglass they slipped through? Their most feral offense was to give him the seconds within their hands, the truths of their pulse. The girls ran down the drain. They tried to be Alice, they tried to follow the White Rabbit, but they lost the trail of crumbs, and time skidded out of their grasp.

At the beginning, the girls watched him step through the hourglass. They tried to see how he did it so they could do it when they wanted to, so they could undo it. They could never catch him in the act. He wanted to be free with them, he said, free of every confine. Free of mother, free of parent, free of adult and child, free of the arms of minute and second.

It was the youngest who watched him the longest and learned his secrets.

The inside of the house, the inside of the place without time, appeared to have been drained of its color. The walls were white, as were the carpets, and the rest of the furniture was pale brown or grey. The man kept pottery bowls on his side tables and

credenzas; these had all been cast with colorless glazes that left a person thinking about rainstorms or the sudden affluence of clouds in the fall. He kept computer equipment, all of which was encased in plastic the color of hospital meal trays or animal entrails that had been washed out, dried, and chopped, but not yet thrown into the fryer. There was a front foyer walkway inlaid with jagged pieces of pink marble, which ought to have been warm but instead looked like a scattering of pieces of someone's shattered heart. The carpet up the stairs was the same whitish-grey of dead skin, and the stairs to the basement were old, unfinished wood.

Inside the house, the place without time, felt like, the girl thought, being inside a lung, or maybe like being inside someone's clenched fist.

Their mother seemed not to care about the lack of time. She exhaled as she entered through the front door, releasing the residue of Outside from within her body and, in the mornings, when she walked from the house to her small grey car, she took deep breaths, reminding herself of the smell of the world that time controlled.

The girls stumbled upon exit and reentry, watching clock hands when they shouldn't have been, until he yelled at them. Did you have something better you were supposed to be doing? They coughed out their Nos, then laid quiet beneath as he pierced them, extracting one more layer of time from behind their eyes.

In order to remove them from time, he had to rid them of memory. The youngest daughter was the most successful at this, and he praised her.

I can't remember, she'd say, if her mother asked her about the years before, about grandparents or cousins.

Did she remember the birthday when she cried at the lighting of the candles, afraid that the fire would jump from cake to counter to curtain and sweep them all away? Did she remember the year they drove from their home to an old uncle's farm in Kansas, and they had come upon a field made up entirely of sunflowers, the flame-ringed faces all turned in the same direction, nodding, it seemed, dancing in greeting as they slowly drove past? Did she remember the way she used to pull from the refrigerator hard sticks of cold yellow butter, unpeel and eat them like bananas?

No. She shook her head with a half-smile and shaded eyes. *No, I don't remember that. Did that happen? I don't remember*, the youngest daughter said, her face open and guileless.

He smiled at the girl with the bottom half of his face, before turning, concerned, to her elder sister. The man pretended to be worried about the girl's lost memories. *Some children don't hold onto things from their early years*, he explained. The elder sister closed her lips, trapped the memories inside her throat. She slipped the old stories along the lining of her epiglottis and trachea, where he could not reach inside to take them, to save them for the day her younger sister needed them again.

Legend

In the dream, I was on an island, far away from mainland. The trees were heavy with green, the leaves big and heart-shaped, and there were vines that roped from tree to tree. I walked along the edge of the tropical forest, on the beach. The sand was smooth, soft. I was alone there, but I knew my father—my real dad—was on the island somewhere. Were there animals? I have the memory of a panther, but maybe that's the echo of another dream I had when I was much younger. I have the idea of a snake, but that's most likely just cultural mythology infiltrating my memories with biblical story. What remains all these years later is the enormous, lush, comforting green, and the quiet, surrounded by water. I was looking for my father. I can't remember, in the dream, whether I found him.

In the morning, over breakfast, I described the dream. I was fifteen or sixteen, I had no ulterior motives; I wasn't trying to get in good with my stepfather, or make up for something that had happened the night before, or prove I was trustworthy by handing over the contents of my sleeping consciousness so incautiously. I sat in my straight-backed chair in the same place I always sat, closest to the door, across from my sister, who was trapped all the way in the dining room. My stepfather was to my right, and my mother sat to my left. Every meal, this was our order.

The dream was beautiful, surprising, and I wanted to share it with my family. I hadn't yet learned how stupid and dangerous this predilection was. I told the story of the

dream—all the green, so vivid, and something about animals, something about my dad. Something about my dad. Maybe my dad was the panther.

My stepfather said the island dream was sexual—all that water everywhere, just ask Freud—and my father on the island, too. Did I want to fuck my father? My stepfather didn't ask me that, then, not at the table in front of my mom—or, well, maybe he did. He said the dream meant I'd been molested by my dad, and that I was trying to work out the memories and feelings in dream-space this way.

I didn't feel like I'd been molested by my dad, and didn't have any memories of it or any fear when we went to his house to visit. But through my dream, my stepfather had opened the door to this next part of our lives, the part where we accused my father of sexual abuse, and all of us—me, my sister, my mother—we all had to walk through that door. If we didn't, my stepfather would come after us. He would know we were making fear choices instead of healthy ones. He would want to know why we wanted to stay small and weak, why we were afraid to face the truth and grow. And he would kept at us until we told him what he wanted to hear.

My sister remembered something then. She remembered, when she was little, having to shower with our dad and being able to feel his penis at her back. She didn't say it was hard or that he was doing anything with it or trying to make *her* do anything with it—just that it was there when they were showering. All of my dad's comfort, and the parenting decisions he and my mother had made together in the early 1970s to try and

raise their daughters without the body shame they had been taught, were now under suspicion. Little by little, my stepfather built the case, convincing us to convince ourselves that we had been sexually abused by someone else.

Our father had walked around his bedroom or between his bedroom and the bathroom in just his white underwear. He showered with us when we were small (as our mother, too, had showered with us). Once, in the little white house he rented after he and my mom split up, my dad was taking a bath in his house's only bathroom, and I toilet outside the door, listening, waiting for him to get out so that I could go to the bathroom. I really had to go. But he wasn't getting out. And finally I knocked. I must have been nine or ten years old. My dad told me to wait, and after a minute, said I could come in. He had covered his crotch with a handtowel so that I could come in. The tub was just a tub, no shower, and there was no curtain. I was embarrassed to have to go to the bathroom with my dad in the same room. He lay back down and closed his eyes and didn't watch me.

Later, that would be used against him.

My mother told us about a time when I was a very little girl, still a baby, when my dad had been bathing me at the first house we lived in after I was born. She said he put his fingers in my vagina, though she didn't see it. She said he acted weird—he was washing me, and she had a weird feeling. It was nothing she'd ever mentioned before the dream, before my dream started building the case against my dad as a sexual molester.

I pictured myself as the fat round baby with the wild tufts of black hair in my parent's photo albums. I pictured that baby in the bathtub, and my father, wearing his cut-off shorts and dark red velour sweater, bending over me in the tub, only we weren't in the bathroom of that first house, but in the upstairs bathroom two houses later, even though I'd never been a baby in that later house. I imagined my father washing me in the wrong way. I couldn't see or imagine feeling his fingers, but I pictured him furtive, hunched over, ashamed. I pictured my shocked and scared and silent mother standing in the doorframe, between the hallway with the polished hardwood floors and the bathroom's white tile, her eyebrows raised in surprise, her eyes and mouth sad. Over and over I saw this, envisioned how the thing she said might have happened *could* have happened. In the imaginings, it was though I stood watching from the side, standing behind my father, looking down at him as he knelt on the tile floor, his sweated back bent over the porcelain, claw-foot tub—even though there were no porcelain claw-foot tubs in any of the houses we lived in. My eyes, my awareness, hovered there, seeing him washing me wrong, his sleeves pushed up and exposing the dark hair on his forearms, seeing her stand in the doorway, watching him, saying nothing, seeing him turn to face her, glance over his shoulder, and his face goes ashen to see that he is caught. I am still playing happily in the water. I do not know, the baby in the water, that anything is wrong.

This is not a memory. This is not the memory of something that happened. This is a memory of my imaginings, how I made sense of my mother's sudden accusation that my father had sexually abused me, and she had known about it.

My stepfather, now with the evidence of our words, began to threaten our father, and isolate us from him. He said he was trying to protect us. He loves you so much, Mom said of her second husband.

When we went to visit our dad, we asked him about all of this. We confronted him, like our stepfather wanted us to. We demanded he explain about the shower, the washcloth, the underwear. Your mother and I decided to raise you that way, he said. We tried not to be ashamed of our bodies, because we didn't want you to be ashamed of yours. We thought we were doing the right thing. It was the way a lot of people were raising their kids in the 70s, he said, is voice quiet, calm, apologetic. He said yes, he would have showered with my sister, both of them bathed us that way sometimes, he hadn't meant to scare her. He insisted he never put his fingers in me, he would never do such a thing.

I did not believe, did not want to believe, he had hurt us, but my sister said she did. I did not believe that he had hurt us but I was supposed to. My stepfather said it, my mother said it, my sister was crying when she talked about how scared she was in the shower. What if my dad had done something to me in a bathtub and I had just been too young to remember—would he really admit it right to my face when I asked him about it now? What if I were just repressing the memories? My stepfather said that sometimes happened, and he was the expert on these things, after working with so many sexually-abused kids in his therapy practice.

He asked for our thoughts, slipped them one by one from the folds of our minds, made us take them apart in front of him, deconstructing until we couldn't put ourselves back together again and he could put pain where there hadn't been any so that there would be no past and no other time except his.

Membrane

The girls learned easily and well. Because time could not capture them inside the house of grey walls, they were able to exist in multiple places at once. The girls separated into thin shards of selves, fluted into layers that floated and fluttered in the tinfoil breeze from their bedroom windows. He drifted along these selves, walked among them as old men in the ancient stories had once walked among raindrops.

The eldest sister was revealed to be a skinflint crumpet and banshee and swan. The skinflint had long, pointed nails, a nose that drooped over its mouth, teeth sharp and broken like in the oldest stories; it reached for him over and over as he passed by, but the skinflint never caught flesh on the tearing end of its needled fingertips, reached and clawed with vehemence but its paws struck through him as though he were a ghost or a mirage. He laughed in small waves when she showed up at the breakfast table with forearms that were flayed with thin shallow scratches. Then his grin snapped to attention, and he scuffed his mouth on his toast. *Oughtn't to have been washing that cat without gloves*, he sniffed, then bit down. He said, *pull down your sleeves*, puffing out crumbs with each word. *Nobody wants to see your scars*.

In school, the youngest's eyes drifted shut as teachers droned, and the report cards the teachers mailed home complained that she was such a nice and clever girl—if only she would learn to focus. When the girl opened her heavy books to study, the words

swam, pooled together. She forced them back into place some nights, using her hands and transparent tape. Not long into the schoolyear, her books looked like patchwork, as though someone had torn the pages and she'd had to carefully puzzle the pieces back together again. But it was only the words that tore away from the paper, words and figures, words and figures and diagrams, and if she didn't hold them just so, if she lifted her hand from the page for a second to pick up her pen or take a sip of coffee, then the words would jumble again, sliding toward the center of the page, nearly dripping from the book altogether. She caught them, as she had to, weeping with exhaustion as she tried again to put the print back right and try one more time to finish her homework. Some nights she grew too weary, and just let the words slip and fall. They made small clicking sounds as they bumped into each other, like stones underwater in a stream.

The younger daughter filleted, butterflied, into one hundred parts. Some days she sat for hours after he had shed his fluids into her body. She watched her selves drift overhead. She lay on her back, her arms folded over her stomach, and then the room around her would unlock itself. East wall unhinged from south, ceiling pulled up and away as the roof unlatched. She heard the clacking and whirrs from sometime far away. She heard the mechanics of this thing called a house loosening.

She lay in her bed and watched the peels of herself float overhead. She saw the cat and the dripping girl, she saw the Raggedy Ann, she saw blades of grass and grandfather's fiddle and the stick of crayon color and the old hot dog at the bottom of the

bin. She saw the book her sister read every night, piles of old photographs, the trout-fishing in autumn, the summer ice cream cone running down her arm—

Each self a transparency, like cherry blossoms in a spring storm. They floated across each other, and as they did, the pictures, the selves, blurred. She didn't like it when that happened; it was easiest when each membrane stood apart from the others and she could clearly make out the fragment of image written across its skin. But there were so many, it was impossible to keep them from touching, from discoloring each other.

There was cloud, pink yellow dress, goblin with teeth that dripped poison like snakes, the hollow chamber of an empty old cave where the water slipped from somewhere high above but all she could hear was the wide-mouthed sound of old water on stone. There was her mother's womb, the face of their babysitter looking up at her over a valley of flesh. There was the enormous winking eye, an uncolored kaleidoscope. Here comes the drift of plastic ducks floating and clattering into each other as the water swirled around and around in the tin tub carnival game—

She lay on her back and felt light. She floated. She was not *among* the layers, the filaments, but outside of them. She was somewhere else. When she lay on her back and watched the leaves of herself dance above, she was empty. She was nothing. It was something more than nobody: it was erase.

And when someone entered her bedroom or even just knocked on the door, a hand shot out of her midsection or her mouth, reaching up into the wild cluttered air. It grabbed

one of the membranes and yanked it back, pasting it to her as the walls slammed shut and the roof clattered back into place. The hand smoothed out the membrane the filament the flame of her until she breathed and coughed and was only one layer in the house with no time again.

After the hand pasted a shape back onto her, sometimes she snapped at whoever had come into her room, and then she was punished for using her voice. Sometimes she talked like clouds, sometimes the color of her viscid layer tarnished her nailbeds and eyes. Though the mother had no eyes to see it and the older thought her sister got to try on a new dress for free, the man could see the shifts of the younger girl and it made him twitch his brows and growl under his skin. He did not like that she could unbecome this way. He did not like that she was elemental.

The hand did not choose, was not careful. Sometimes she was catscratch, some days she was bruise and drip, other days she folded back the pages of the book she'd tried to be and sent her body down to dinner, past the boom of his voice and collar, past the instruction manual he pretended to be when anybody else was looking. She stumbled down the stairs and smiled at her older sister with pages on her breath but her sister couldn't smell them yet. Her sister couldn't smell them yet.

Mirror, mirror

It was an afternoon and they were alone in the house. She sat on the couch like it meant something that she was there. The couch was brownish-tan, one of those fat, cushy sectionals. She was seventeen and sat on the L-shaped couch around the corner from him. He always sat near the arm. He needed the additional leverage whenever he rose out of the sucking cushions, heaving himself with a grunt.

Behind them, the walls of the living room were white and hung with Chinese brush scrolls. In front rested the dark wood coffee table, set with fans of magazines.

He sat closest to the stairs leading up to the bedrooms, and between her and any escape through the front door. It was a middle class household in a lower-middle class section of an upper-middle class neighborhood in a good-sized Midwest city. It was probably spring, probably green outside. He'd waited until she was legally over the age of consent for this. Her birthday wasn't until March, so maybe by this point the tree in the backyard with branches spread like an umbrella above the overgrown yew bush was budding. Maybe all the winter's snow had finally melted.

None of that mattered because she was inside. Her dog was lying on the rug near them, never able to be as protective of the teenage girl as she wanted to be. He emasculated, disempowered, everything he touched. Her mother was at the office, in session with a client, trying to earn the money that he spent as though they already had it.

Her sister? She was at voice lessons, maybe, or an after-school rehearsal. It was unusual that they weren't home together after school.

She and he were talking. It's a euphemism—"talking"—for what was really being done. The word "talking" connotes conversation: some mutuality, shared meaning and understanding. The talking going on between these two people was more akin to coercion. Maybe, in fact, that's what most conversations are comprised around. She didn't think so at the time, though.

These grounds have been crossed before, this same earth and these brown and dry leaves. This is an old story. Maybe it was fall. The inside of the house was always the same—the same dark due to pulled and drawn shades, same Central Air-regulated temperature, same throbbingly livid, close-to-exploding temperament surrounding everything and everyone. The house was an open and bloodless wound, and she sat in its airless lung and tried to speak. By this I don't mean to say that she couldn't use her mouth, throat, tongue, teeth, lungs to form words. She was able to do this work. What she couldn't do was press her heart, her meaning, into her words and have it affect anything in the bloodless world in the home that was his, the world they had moved into after their mother took up with him.

He enjoyed her participation in his violation of her, and so she was required to speak—yet, her speech didn't bring about the outcome she'd thought her words would effect. But other things happened via her speaking (or so she thought). Depending on her

speech, either he took her—sexually, somehow—or he grew angry with her and forced her to stay on the couch, doing the thing that looked like talking but really was running for her life with her tongue.

The time was getting short, and began to constrict around her. Outside, maybe the light began to fail and she could watch it creep across the carpet where it managed to sneak through the slats of the Venetian blinds. She knew he was impatient for her to hurry up and convince him of something so they could get on with it before her mother got home from work. She was trying to convince herself to convince him, so that the punishment that looked like talking wouldn't go late into the night and turn into a family affair—where still more words and meanings were cloaked, where she was required to speak in more layers and levels.

Her skin tingled. Although she was never quite removed from her body when he touched her with his hands or mouth or words, neither was she fully physically present. He was asking her if she trusted him, because he wanted to do something new, but wouldn't say what it was. Do you trust me to do anything? he questioned. She said, I trust you to keep your promise.

These two trusts had nothing to do with each other. They were speaking different languages. His was moss-slick, slippery and lowtide: no purchase, no way not to fall down and drown in the shallow water of his constantly-shifting meanings.

He had promised he would never do this thing that he was about to do. He said that only their mother could have that part of his body, and she held on to that, even though she knew (did she know?) that he was putting that part of his body inside her sister. He had said to the sisters—with an arrogant, apologetic laugh, like a movie star hounded by too many hungry women, as though these two teenage girls were begging him—he said, No dick for you girls. Sorry. Only your mother gets this.

What does *promise* mean? He told them repeatedly, like a mantra: Only your mother gets this. Only your mother.

Later, he said, Only your mother gets the whole thing.

Then he said, Do you trust me to do anything?

She said Yes. Only yes would get her off the couch and end the silence. She said Yes, after something in her shrugged its shoulders and whispered that maybe she could trust him, maybe this time he was being honest, that he would only do all the things he'd already done before, and not add this new thing that he wanted.

Of course she could not trust him. Of course she had no other choice.

And she had already learned that her work was to say yes, I trust you, so she did. She knew she was going to have to convince him that she trusted him, which she didn't, but she tried to anyway. In the end it was enough, and with a sweaty grin, intended to convey erotic benevolence, he said, Well then, let's go upstairs.

She went first up the pale carpeted stairs, past the little landing, topped with the three or four small windows that looked out on what she supposed was the rest of the world. Maybe she caught a glimpse of pale green treetops, or a robin drifting down toward the unplanted garden below. And then she turned from it, back into the open wound that was the house she lived in. She went around the upstairs landing to her bedroom, and he told her, Get ready; I'll be in in a minute.

She knew what Get ready meant, because she'd been getting ready at times like these for years. Who knew how many. She still doesn't. Time didn't mean very much since her future had gone pale and opaque and her words had lost their purpose and weight. He had had her whole body with his whole body, except in this one way. Don't think she didn't know what was about to happen. Neither, though, should you think that she didn't continue to convince herself that it wouldn't. She'd learned well enough that cognitive agility.

This was just about when language as she'd come to know it as a child ceased to matter. And yet she was not freed from his consistent pressure to speak, vocalize, confess: articulate her acquiescence and submission. She would not be free for years.

Her room was dim with the fading light of late afternoon. She sat on the edge of the brass bed that had been her mother's before they moved to this new house. She had a low dresser topped with a vanity mirror and an oak desk that had once been the table she and her mother and sister ate around in the apartments they'd lived in after her parents

separated, before her mother met him. All these things, filled with her history and youth, witnessed her violation and her weakness. Even her dog knew her words had no sense or weight or meaning anymore. Her bedspread was the green flowered one from her pubescent years. The wooden toy box on which her mother had splurged for her girls once upon a time, painted green with carved mushrooms inlaid on top, he had filled with his dildos and porn magazines.

He always came in a robe, as though it somehow masked his nakedness. He came from the very next room, robed, so he'd have something to slip into if her mother came home unexpectedly. Which she had once, although it hadn't mattered: her mother had allowed herself to be fooled by his story of a mid-day shower.

He smiled and said Hi, like they were lovers meeting in a hotel room. He came to sit down next to her on her mother's old brass bed and he probably put his fingers into her body for a minute or two. After he eased her down onto her back and put the fat slug of his tongue into her mouth, he asked her again if she trusted him. Words broke against her, because she knew the yes she gave him wasn't the yes that would make its way into his brain. I trust you to keep your promise, she thought. Maybe she said it. It didn't matter. He spread her legs a little more and pressed the small hardness of his penis against her vagina. And then she started to cry with terror. She did not cry because it hurt physically but because she knew nothing would ever be safe and no words meant anything and all his promises were just way stations for further violation. She hadn't

known, or believed, that it could get worse, but now she knew she'd never get away from him or be free.

He tried to continue, made a brief and valiant effort to ignore her tears, but he couldn't, because they marked his wrong-doing. This offended him. So he pulled out what little length of flesh he'd managed to stuff between her labia, and re-robed.

Clean up and come downstairs. Let's talk. He feigned kindness, maybe even worry. She thought—more madness—maybe that could be the end of it. *You said you said you said* what ran repeatedly through her blinded brain, a cyclic abbreviation of accusation. She heard the creaking of the stairs as he descended. She put her clothes back on and, after moment of solitude and rage, followed him.

I could tell you about the light and how the lack of it thickened around her. I could tell you about the silence, or the pressure of time, how she believed maybe he would quit for that day—maybe she could put off 'til tomorrow what he was trying to strip from her today.

Miraculously, and with the stupidity of a much younger child, she was able to convince herself that there were still some words that were trustworthy. Of course, this was because he always required that his words be received as gospel. And so it was that she descended back into the living room and met his pained and angry gaze. Her face, splashed with cool water in the upstairs bathroom at the top of the stairs, was perhaps not

too puffy from crying. Maybe there was a rim of red around her eyes. To an onlooker, someone peering in through the blinded windows, maybe they would look like a father about to comfort a troubled youngster—not a forty-something man who’d just been trying to shove himself into his teenage stepchild.

Perhaps. But no one knew and no one ever saw anything at all. And when I sat down kitty-corner from him once again on the sectional couch, his indignation had almost brought him to tears.

You lied to me, he said.

All the words fell from my eyes and ears, were ripped from my lips and lungs.

You lied to me, he said.

And suddenly I was defending myself against his accusations. I knew it was inevitable that he would fuck me (and he did), that he would do whatever he wanted (and he did)—and that not only would I have to take it but that I’d have to use those traitorous words to “convince” him to do so again. And again.

Supper

The daughters began to feed on their mother. She was an empty zone, a freespace, a skin shell. She took root at the end of the table and nodded past them at him like the drinking bird. She didn't want to be free. The man dressed their mother in brocades and silks and sat her up in the passenger seat of the car so she could pretend to wave. She was a doll's house the girls' futures peered out of like melted icing or rancid oil.

He fed their mother to them. They took the pieces little by little. After all, it was a mother's job to become food.

He took the hidden parts first, thigh meat and vulva, slicked them with oil and tossed them in a well-seasoned cast iron pan. They did not ask what the strange flavor was. They swallowed without chewing. Years before, they had learned how not to taste. They went back on their word and the little one asked their father for seconds. He was not their father, but he had taken the shape of one. He had put on the hat and beard of father, he stuffed himself into father clothes and skin. He even sounded like it sometimes, when they plugged their ears with cotton and old doll's clothes.

He took the mother's eyelids, the surfaces of her palms, her tongue's meat. He explained to her, while he sliced, that this was parenting, this pain. As though she needed reminding. She unlatched one elbow, handed forearm over willingly—let the bones flavor a broth for her girls. She couldn't remember the last time she'd embraced them

anyway. He snatched the breath from her lungs as she slept, taking an exhale between two fingers and peeling gingerly—it was slippery, like an elver—using it to add flavor. The elder girl, later, wanted to know what it was that tasted like pollen.

Did he replace what he stole with mechanics, a tin lid for a palm, a flutter of gears to wear between her legs? The girls never knew it. Their mother began to falter and gape. Her clothes shrank, clung to her shoulders. She was an anti-chamber. She pursed her absent lips. She squinted even without sunlight, in the dim swallow of his climate-controlled chambers. Her glasses covered an absence, became unnecessary, but she continued to wear them, as she continued to speak with no voice, as she continued to gaze at the dinner plates she could not see, as she continued to answer to the name *mother*.

In the woods

Alarm goes off at five am, shower and make breakfast for the family, wait for the bus, head to band practice, home room, struggle through the hideousness of gym, gossip with a friend before English about how boring Hawthorne was, joke with the boys who are among your dearest friends even if what they mostly do is try and look down your shirt, laugh at the way your German teacher makes the same dumb jokes every day, walk with those same two over-sexed boys down the hill to the bus stop, catch the city bus home and if he's home when you get there, stretched out on the couch napping, you or your sister rub his feet for however many hours he wants to lie there, go upstairs with him alone or watch the door and try to focus on homework while he goes upstairs with your sister, practice the clarinet, get ready for dinner, make salad, set the table, and when mom comes home, you all eat together and he jokes about the clients he saw that day and complains about the ass-kissing bureaucrats in his department, you and your sister clean up the table and wash the dishes and then you each go to your rooms to do homework until he calls you back for a "talk" about a pan that wasn't cleaned right (an obviously unconscious acting out that indicated some feeling you needed to talk about) or a problem mom was having that he wanted her to confess in front of the whole family, and after processing until eleven, you return to your homework, get in bed after midnight, set the alarm for five and hope you fall asleep quickly.

In the castle

We sit up in our cold rooms and fondle the past with damp fingers. We don't know what we are saying anymore. We don't know how we are feeling. Our layers are tattered, flaking. We begin to drift away from ourselves. We don't dance anymore. Our feet have scattered to the four winds. We stopped tasting some time ago. There was a year of sweet fruits, of honey and figs, but after that came the year of ash, and then all of our flavors were gone. We lost all our yesterdays when we opened the window to let the spring breeze blow in.

We fell out of time over and over again. Time slipped from our skin. It tore the sleeves from our dresses, took our dreams away with its tick-tock and tonics. We did not know how to be free. Time left its skid marks on our bodies. It happened this way. It barely happened at all.

Our voices fell away along with time. The seconds dripped off our fingers, like we had been soaked with a sprinkler, and when the day's breath cooled, the tangents of tenor and frame bled with it. We didn't have an echo chamber anymore. There was nobody to hear us. We stopped singing a long time ago.

The flowers bloomed in the gardens below for a few years, but then the clouds dried up and blew away, and now all we can see from our windows are the striations of soil, layers of history revealed when the grass died, then disappeared. Now and again

caravans of animals pass by: clots of buffalo or goat, once a thunder of wild mustangs. They fill our room with their scent and noise, but then they are gone.

We are wreck and reckoning. We tried to grow our hair long, long enough that one of us at least would be able to climb down, to go find—well, if not help, at least a yellow dandelion to rub beneath her chin. But neither of us could get our hair to grow much past our waist—and the ground is much, much further down than that. Sometimes food is delivered; we never know how it arrives. It just appears in a wooden box in the hallway, at the top of a stone stairway that leads to nowhere, walks you right into the wall and ends. The deliveries are erratic, unforeseeable, and so we try to eat very small, chew each small bite a long time, so we can make it last.

One year ago, my sister spoke. Her voice was rusty from disuse. She looked out the window and said. Should we give him what he wants? Then she coughed for a long time. I thought about her question. I weighed the options. I wanted to be sure before I spoke. I am still deliberating now. I don't know what to tell her. There are only two possible responses, and of course, I am giving her one through my silence. She sits in the chair by the window and grows gray, my beautiful sister with the once-golden gaze. She watches out the window for a sign. Once she saw a bird go by. I only found out later when I glanced through her drawings.

Hope settled at the bottom of our cups, dried there, scabbed over, flaked away. Once we were firm and fine. Once our dreams blossomed like blood in a pig's mouth.

Once we were the blades, the bullets, the damage done. I try not to remember that time. It is so long ago, I can't tell what part's memory, and what part's a story I heard whispered through the cobwebs. We bear the scars on our insides, and along our skin, too. He does not want us by our blades anymore. But he does not know how long we can wait to summon what green violence needs to be done. We began to summon the pieces we've lost. One day he will return to find us. And we will not be dead.

Sorcerer

In the old stories, the girl is a secret, and the witch is defeated, defeatable. The witch is a small hole, a host of elves. The witch is shell and thorn.

They weren't anybody's yesterday. In the grey house on the quiet street, each one could only be for themselves. You shredded the old bonds when you walked through the door. There were words that ceased to mean: *sister, mother*. Words that meant were: *body, ready, this, now, confess*. Words that meant were: secrets could not stand. He did not make secrets of us. He made disassemblages. He made disconnections. He made individuals. He made women.

The violence was a rampart. The violence was a crust. The eldest girl picked at her hands until they were bloody, cuticles shredded, nails bitten down to the bed. She was a cavern, an emptiness, an escape. She was a bone hollow. After he came to her room, she drank coffee and did her homework. She was ready for a violence to unbecome. She was evidence of a fault, a handsewn history. She was everybody's lost brother, a blank glass, an empty mask.

One girl stands in a shower. The water is running, loud. The girl in the shower is behind a curtain. Another girl is also in the bathroom. She stands at the sink. The girl in the shower, hidden by the plastic curtain, is crying. The sound is hidden by the water. The echo is a heartache. The girl in the shower says, What if we don't want to learn what he is

teaching? The girl by the sink does not answer. She closes her eyes but does not answer. Whatever she says, the girl in the shower will report back to Prince Charming. She won't want to, but she will have no choice: It is how she pays the prince for rescuing her mother. The mother repays the prince for her rescue with her daughters' bodies. The words will wing from the girl's mouth like a flood of cicadas. He will pry open her jaw and draw the secrets forth, like unclogging a drainpipe, like saturating a room with song.

Enchantment

Cinderella believed in all the old stories. She held fast to happily ever after. She knew what the job was supposed to be. *Can't you see it*, they had all asked her, *what he really is?* But she knew what they saw was not who he was in his heart—he just needed someone to love him, to heal the beauty beneath his beast.

Every morning, she ensured the door was bolted and then she began her work. She pulled back the blankets from Prince Charming's still-sleeping body to reveal what was real of him—he lay flattened, deflated, his body unraveled into green-grey tentacles that spread haphazardly around his body; thickish where they met his torso, they grew out to rounded points at the ends, some curling nearly to the edge of the large bed, some small, some just nubs of new growth. Cinderella reached across him for a jar of bee balm mixed with deer tallow and scented with myrrh. She no longer had to steel herself for the task—it had been years since she first found him thus and fainted dead away on the spot; she woke to him pushing into every part of her body, continuing despite her wide-eyed terror, despite her struggle, until something happened deep within her, a kind of rumbling shock, a bright blue breaking, and she cried out and fainted again. Was it pleasure she felt? She thought back to it often during these morning oilings, and still she could not say. Only that she had grown accustomed and never wanted her daughters to see her husband this way.

She pressed two fingers into the jar, then reached for a tentacle, smoothing and oiling its grey length. This she did over and over until he began to plump again. As she did so, often the prince would wake. Sometimes he snapped at her. Sometimes he caressed her cheek, leaving a streak of scented grease. Then something from within him took hold, began pulling in, retracting his many limbs. Cinderella had never been able to watch this part, not in all the many years since she married Prince Charming. His chest rose as though with breath, and filled what had been flat before, filled his night dress. The legs reappeared, the arms. She did not meet his eyes, though she hoped he would praise her; it was the rare morning, though, when he did. Then they rose together, perhaps embraced, and she did not anymore try to feel the true body beneath these human limbs. She bent down, handed him his slippers, and they walked out of the bedchamber toward the dining hall for the morning meal.

Chimera

There is no flap of skin that marks the Before and After. Not in this body. There is only the fuzzy and ephemeral palimpsest of memory. The way I cannot mark when it started. The way I cannot tell you, it was here, when he rubbed my back over my summer tank top. Or: it was here, when he went under the tank top with his hands, a week or a month later. And why am I still looking for this line of demarcation, the moment when that brown-haired girl on the couch went from a regular tomboy with a handsy stepfather to someone not there anymore at all? But that's how it is with ghosting. Could you say when, exactly, the Cheshire cat begins to disappear? You simply saw his whole self, a ball of striped, grinning fur, tucked up into that tree, and only after he was well into his disappearance did you begin to notice what was missing—and by the time that understanding took hold, he was all and only teeth. No obvious moment you could point to and say, look, the edges have blurred. The blurring comes so gradually, you don't know, when it begins, that some part of you will be undefinable, ungraspable, forever. You think it's just going to be for a minute—just 'til he takes his hands back to himself. Just 'til your mom says something. Just 'til someone else comes in the room. But then he doesn't take his hands back, exactly, and he has heard how you didn't call for help, how your body took hold of itself. Those edges that thought they were just practicing the act of disappearing shimmer more freely, get harder and harder to find again; you can't make yourself reappear whenever you want to anymore, like the Cheshire Cat could. You do

not know that one day, you, too, will be only teeth—and that then those sharp knowings will disappear out from under your control, as well.

Persephone

You forgot, after he brought you down here, what being a mother's daughter feels like—the cadence in the bones, the trust. You lost thing with feathers that hovers in pleasure to be near the one called mother. Your thing with feathers got plucked, didn't it?

It was the young mother taught you the right way to do it—pull feather from flesh without tearing the beast within—or at least did not stand in your way of learning such things. Say you wish it could have been different. Say something in you still wants her mother, has been reaching for years, tear-stained and tired, throat finally hoarse, she is still calling, her hands so small, dirty from playing in the backyard sandbox, her hair tangled like a girlchild's supposed to be. She is not a pretty thing, not dainty or light, but she deserves care just the same, don't you think?

It was your mother once who stood with you beside a sunny kitchen window, pulled a small ball of dough from the one she'd shaped into a loaf. She showed you: push the heel of your hand this way, pull the dough over, turn, push again. You imitated her, kneading your own loaf of bread, stretching the dough till it was soft and elastic. Once you watched her hands and eyes to learn how to move in the world, didn't you? It was far, far too late before you understood she was teaching you to be the thing that is kneaded, then baked, and then consumed.

Snow White and Rose Red

As they grew older, the castle pulled them apart, away from each other. Girls were not meant to huddle with other girls, and the whispers reached them, echoing through the stone chambers and stairwells. One is so clever, the whispers said, the other is so lovely. Each wanted the other's whispered-about gifts, and neither knew the words to ask her sister for them.

They unlearned one another's bodies. They unlearned one another's secrets. That's what it meant to be a girl grown into a woman.

The girls became ogres to each other. The girls became a lost hope. The castle vaporized. No one could see anything anymore. The castle swallowed voices and hope. The castle swallowed them when they entered.

Cinderella moved like a wraith through the castle. One could hear her coming for she wore only one glass slipper. One step *clink*, one step *silence*. There had been days, at the beginning, when she first arrived at the castle, that she had moved through the stone chambers like the tinkling of glass bells. Now one foot was dirty and swollen. She pretended not to know where her right shoe had gone.

The candles shuddered in their sconces, although she could not feel a breeze. The castle was the lost place inside.

Rumpelstiltskin

Once we were connected by hands and eyes and mouths, we were each other's hair and throats, we were each other's voices and laughter when does the split become a blade become a wall become the solidity of his shadow hunkered hard between us, hiding her from my view completely while still she watched, still she watched me somehow still she could see me bent, pressed under his hands his hands over my mouth his voice raised. *Why are you so difficult, Jennifer?* She watched him make me smaller. She watched him reframe me while behind the shadow where I couldn't see anymore he had already begun to take her, my little sister, apart. How do I trust these eyes again, that couldn't see what he was doing do her? My sister who says now, No matter what he told you, I never stopped watching you. She watched him break me down. It happened in front of everyone. She said. Anytime he saw you excited about anything that wasn't his, he would knock you down three times.

Boom, boom, boom—and I fell into a hole in the floor.

Faery

In this one, you are waiting for me, long before the capacity of me ever existed.

In this one you're smiling, squinting your eyes into the bright winter sun, and your colors are pink and yellow while mine are blue and red. In this one, we are bundled before the camera, knit caps and scarves, booted in thick rubber galoshes, torsos wrapped in overstuffed Sears coats, almost surely wearing thick denim jeans or even snow pants. The sun glints too bright off the snow and we are both trying to keep our eyes open for the photo. Our cheeks are chapped red-pink and my face, as always, looks so hard and square to me and yours—that soft, open sunshine smile—looks more like a girl's. I want to remember in my guts how it felt to smile with you the way we did thirty years ago on a tiny ditch-side in the snow amid shorn wheat fields, when we weren't also sad in our smiling, when we didn't yet know how much work it would one day take just for us to sit together—all the catastrophes and rewriting that the word *After* can contain.

In this one, we're night-gowned and longer-haired and you have stopped opening your mouth when you smile and so there's something about your picture that seems contained, struck numb. In this picture it's still *Before*.

In this one you're nearly moonfaced at the camera, a year old maybe, gorgeous with fair hair, wide eyes, and open mouth. Our father, amateur photographer, documented our infancies and early childhoods, and in this one, your face is all that exists in the

world, little sister, the whole rest of the image dark and watery, like you're staring into the face of god. In this next one you're at the old farm house before it started falling apart, crawling under grandma's kitchen table while grandma stands over, wrapping a present—you're looking up at the viewer maybe because the photographer called to you and your body is caught in sweatshirt and baby-elasticized jeans and you know that there's nothing about you that isn't safe. There's wrapping paper all around, an old Wedgwood stove to one side. We don't remember those times, you nor I; in our memories, that farmhouse becomes just an open shower on a concrete floor and hallways too narrow for two people to occupy at once, in the Before of these pictures, all the tumbling forward is yet to come.

In this one your open smile is the thing I remember, grandma offering your newborn head for me to kiss, and I am dutifully bent over for the camera, touching the place the priest never will, as if your big sister might truly have had the power to save something, to protect you.

Cassandrae

How to say what's hidden, what's lost? The Old Mothers divide their time in the hunt. They follow the worn ways, the crone's trails, forge new paths through rabbit scrub and fireweed. They burn down the lowest branches so that those who follow will be able to see. The Old Mothers are a fire tin, a landscape, a landslide of history; they are the link to the old ways, but they are left aside. No one ever has to silence the Old Mothers or hide them away. Their hair fades to white, skin loosens and wrinkles, a hunch pushes up between shoulder blades—they simply disappear from view. They are a lost history. They are the answer key, the legend, the glossary, but no one thinks to flip back to their pages—that is, until we get broken. Then we go looking for the old songs, the deep medicines, stories with wings at their backs, but the Old Mothers have gone back into the forest, and we have forgotten again how to look for them.

Happily ever after

Somewhere along the way, Cinderella lost her hope, along with her breath and that one glass slipper.

She wishes she could regret him: regret the meeting, the rush, the delight, the infatuation, the pleasure of discovery, the way she asked through her gifts all those months for his approval, his welcome. She knows she should regret him now—knowing what she knows, seeing what she has been forced to see; he has taken her daughters apart, bit by bit, like humpty dumpty in slow motion, and now the girls are aimless, eyeless, armless, mouthless creatures, skimming the halls on white feet, wraithlike.

He did this. She brought them to him. Shouldn't she regret the door that opened inside her, the mother door, that was meant to stay closed, meant to protect—shouldn't she? She reaches for regret, feels around inside herself for its angry weight, but all she finds is the slick of shame at its absence. She grows angry then. How can they ask this of her, expect her to relinquish what it took her so long to find, this dog-eared luck to have stumbled into his gaze at just the right moment? Would they send her back to the cold, stone hearth of loneliness? Would they see her filthy and poor? Is that what her daughters want for her?

The castle was always cold, the floors and walls made of smooth grey stone. She paced the hallways, the corridors, the interior passageways. *Clink silence, clink silence.*

Her odd footfalls. Prince Charming knew when she was coming. Now and again she came upon the discarded body of one of her daughters; the bodies were deflated when he was done with them, spent. If she had paused her pacing for a moment, and glanced down, she might have noticed the slight swell of chest or back, the girl's shallow inhale, confirmation that the body still had life in it, but Cinderella did not pause—she just stepped over the obstacle, like she was navigating over a pair of boots or a sleeping dog. She left the body on the stone floor and kept walking. Hers were not sentry duties. She did not pace with a watchful eye, anxious to keep out intruders. *Clink silent, clink silent.* She was not even whole enough to be a ghost.

Cinderella had lived so long in the grey castle light that she squinted all the time. She was looking for Prince Charming, but it seemed he had always just left any room she entered—the parlor, the firelit library, the dining hall, their bedchamber, either of her daughter's rooms. Cinderella followed the imagined scent of him down forgotten stone stairways, into old keeps and basement cells, but he was never there when she peeked in. She never heard the gates close behind her. The sound of loss, *clink silence, clink silence,* and then she turned to begin her search again.

Refrain

The problem is that this is an untellable story you are writing an untellable story:
 you sit down in the room at the table in the café in the library on the rock
 in the car on your knees you say, *Now is the time*, and you uncap your pen
 you open your mouth to squeak and nothing comes out. Can you believe me if I tell you I
 don't remember? I want the straight and smooth telling, but all that comes to me is being
 on my back underneath him, his sweat dripping onto my face is my sister's smile
 when she stood naked in the hallway, he took her hand and said, *See, your sister has
 gotten here already. Your little sister. What is holding you back?* There is no way to tell
 this story from inside, from the voice of the ten-year-old who met this man, the twelve-
 year-old he berated, the fifteen-year-old shown porn films in his office, the eighteen-year-
 old he split in half.

I claim that this is an untellable story, so why can't I walk away? I quit my job, I
 unravel my life, I ignore my email, I forgot what tenuous friendships I've been able to
 build, in order to reopen this wound, to sit at the page and stare into the blanket of tar
 grey that is those eleven years to learn how to say it shed myself finally of the
 need to keep returning to that house that street those rooms that eruptive quiet
 try and tell you what it means when a self undoes itself in order to survive.

We shove our tongues our lips our hands back through into the thick
 forest of the past we peel back the layers we taste all of it again. We
 breathe that air again so that we can understand what happened. We live it once, twice,
 three hundred times—all to deep-fry the language of stolen body and unlaced childhood,
 take it into our mouths: *Remember? Remember this? Remember?*

At home, I sat in front of the tv rubbing my stepfather's feet while he napped,
 burying deep in the sitcoms filling the screen, hoping for my mom to come home or get
 out of the shower or pay attention somehow before he woke up and tried to get a blowjob
 in before dinner. At home, I was all erase and fragment, a thing being un-coded, un-
 programmed. A thing taken apart, made up of tidy pieces of my self that sometimes acted
 in cohesion and sometimes worked against each other. All the terrible little pieces built
 together, accrued one into the other, reifying, recapitulating, reinstating themselves until
 something that looked human began to take shape.

What were the parts? The repetitions of rape. The repetitions of having to say yes
 to rape. The repetitions of delivering myself into the picture that he painted of me. This
 isn't a hard thing to figure out. If you tell a child often enough that she's too stupid to
 evolve—sure, she will learn that's who she is. I am trying to get inside the brain, to learn
 how my head turned in on itself, how my thoughts became my enemies. The brain is a
 fractal planet, those repetitions of folds, its physical structure, the patterns of neurons and
 neural pathways. Follow one into the other into the other into the other until you arrive
 outside on familiar ground On one level, looking up from below, the pattern looks

simple: child put in home of sociopath isn't going to fare well—but rush in, focus your lens, get closer and closer and the pattern becomes both repetitive and infinitely complex.

The story is made up of individual pieces that repeat and repeat and reify themselves. Every day after school I navigated the minefield that was my stepfather. He wanted to know if I was ready to start asking him to fuck me because my asking for sex would mean I was evolving into someone not driven by fear. I did not evolve into that person, though, and so the whole family stayed up late into the night, so he could berate me for making fear choices and interrogate my “shit.” How to tell this part of the story. The patterns of a life are infinitely complex but come down to the same old stories—love, violence, fear, repeat.

Clink silence

Cinderella, Cinderella, Cinderella. She could hear the pinched, sneering old song her sisters had sung when she was a child.

She believed for so long that it was she who cast the spell. Prince Charming let her believe. He always let her believe. It was supposed to be happily ever after, after all.

He was only Prince Charming out in the world. Inside the castle he liked other names in their mouths instead. The prince stalked the hallways, the lost glass slipper on a velvet pillow that he held behind his back. He liked to surprise the girls when they came around a corner. Are you ready today? The girls frowned when he set the shoe down in front of them—so dainty, so careful. They shook their heads and ran off, into the kitchen with the cook or into the parlor with the ladies in waiting. Someday he would find them when there was no one nearby, and nowhere to run, and that would have to be the day that they put their foot into his slipper.

Slide your foot in, he said. Cinderella looked away. She was so tired. Let the girls decide to do it or not. After all, aren't they getting old enough? The youngest is almost ten—the handmaid's daughters, had been married off when they were not much older.

The girls demure. The prince lets them demure in front of their mother. He smiles gently, carefully. He likes his fangs not to show. He wants their feet in the slipper. Any foot that fits marks a woman that's his.

The girls didn't know how long they'd have. The nights were quiet in the castle. The nights were angry. The nights were lost. Once their foot could fit in the slipper, they would be his.

Cinderella's daughters knew they could not put their feet in the slipper—and knew, too, he would not let them refuse forever. The elder one watched how Prince Charming eyeballed her sister's feet, comparing, considering. He tossed his lanky brown hair out of his eyes when he caught the elder sister looking at him, grinned, then shrugged, just a little.

Maleficent

I see that teenage girl body, the one that first learned to hold rage between its teeth, the one trained to turn muscles into tightrope and walk upon them, that body that split itself into pieces, the body that became a home for so many different selves: the self at school, the self with family, the self alone. How to say I'm sorry for despising that sixteen-year-old body for bending, for doing what he asked, for not resisting more. The body that still had trust in her bones. The body that still had hope in her throat: if she just acquiesced this one little bit more, then maybe he would be satisfied. She didn't know that satisfied would never be his name.

You are on your back or your knees or your belly. You are making noises that his porn taught you to make. You are not in your skin—you are so skillful there in that squeaky brass bed that used to be your mother's: not exactly able to dissociate the way others describe it, like levitating over your body or hovering in a corner of the room, but you have found a way to grey out your limbs, like the bulk of yourself has gone static. Wings, gullet, tailbone, feathers: all numb. The center of you is only partially alive, only muscles and tendons doing biology's bidding, the particular work they were built for. You build yourself into the boxes of orgasm that he requires of you, but this does not mean you have joy. You are sixteen or eighteen. You could tell me for sure, but now I've forgotten. You are alone in the house with him, and the whole of the planet's atmosphere

has collapsed around you. You are shrink-wrapped in this place of penetration, peregrination. You take all the wrong that he forces you to consume and you turn a page of yourself and become the girl who eats a grown man because you don't know any other way to live.

Let me sit next to you, my hip near your face, give you a hand to bite so that you don't chew off his tongue or penis—I know what work it takes to restrain your jaw. Let me hold this space of nausea and horror with you. Feel me there in the empty that he makes of you, the round plummet of absolute zero. I might not be able to cry, though if it's one of the times with our sister, too, I probably will. That's not because I love her more, you know. It's because she is easier to protect than us, at least in our heart. I want you to see me cry for you. For this moment. For how young I'd be able to see that you are. For the glaze the gaze the bare trees the wicker basket of terror I'd see in your eyes. I'd tell you everything that he was about to do. I'd tell you everything that's coming. It won't help you. How could it help in that moment to know that one day you'd be free? It might not even help to have me there sitting beside you, not able to intervene, fucking up the skill set you so wisely developed to get out of that body and into some other skin when that man moved into and through the cavern the placeholder
 you turned your body into so he'd think it was you that came and leave you alone finally to feel sodden and shamed and sick.

I want to tell you we make it, but you can't hear me. I want to sit with you at the most awful moments in that echoing empty house, with the clean carpets and the closed blinds, all its eyes closed to the world just like the world closed its eyes to you.

Maybe you get tired of the way I keep reaching back for you, stirring you up when you are trying to make it through one of his lessons, or rest. Stop bothering me, you'll say. Let me be, you'll say. You can't fix this time, or explain it away, you say. Maybe you want to stop feeling my fingers pulling at you in that cold room with the round oak table and the cheap brass bed. Maybe you just want to get through the night without one more adult to worry about or take care of, to simmer in the bucket of your fitful sleep.

Maybe you are tired of my eyes on you, just another adult observing as you burrow deeper under the blankets, trying to make no noises that the adults in the next room will overhear and question you about in the morning. Maybe you don't want me tracing the shape of your bones in that bed, trying to remember, describe, reclaim. You wrap your arms around your knees, ball up: These bones are mine, you say, and this skin and these teeth. You can't take them now. They are all I have as protection in this place.

Maybe you wish I would leave you alone there, as lonely and vulnerable as a skinned cat.

Can you unmake this bed I have to sleep in, you ask from the depths of that then. Can you unfold the time between us and shove his gun behind his ear? Can you unfit

memory from its hinges, sling it sideways and scissor it through the air, through the breaths, through the breaking of time, until it finds the seams between him and mom and neatly severs them? If you can do none of those things, you are no use to me—no better than any of the other adults who hang around with their hammy faces, noses bent and mouths pursed in consternation—worrying at me like a bit of gristle, digging in with your sharp yellow teeth until you find the meat of me, the incision, the plainsong, the memory. I have nothing else to give you, you whisper, and I have just five hours to sleep before I have to wake up in his house again, and I have five more years, twenty more seasons, eighteen-hundred more mornings, eighty-four thousand—*thousand!*—more minutes living in the hell he has made as the nest for me to sleep in until *you* say we get away and even *that* I'm not sure I can believe, given how often I wake to you here next to me in this bed, so could you please pull your face away from my nightmares, quit breathing on my heartache? I don't have time to flint any of that right now. I have to keep all my terror packaged up tight, as you know very well.

Could you please go now? you say to me. Please go. Leave me be. Good night.

Geppetto

He put me on his knee and he ran his hands up my spine and grabbed the marionette strings that I didn't know were there and he yanked hard—*Who do you think you are, to say no to me? To talk back?* And then he took my mouth in his hands and squeezed, he put his fingers in my throat and moved my tongue, he ground down on my toes and I yelped and it sounded like *yes* and he said *there now listen you said yes you said yes.*

How could I argue? He was the one who knew things. My mother had taught me strength that buckles and my father had taught me silence and shame. *Woman* I was left to learn from a culture that hates us and a man who used the word *love* while he split me open at the seams.

Baba Yaga

There is an old cook in the castle. She has worked for the royal family for many generations. Her domain is the underside of things: the hearth and larder, the gardens, the ovens. The old cook has watched many women step across the transom into the castle. She has felt their hope. They have offered gifts, made promises. She has heard their laughter turn to cries turn to begging turn to wailing turn to silence. Still she butchers rabbits for stew, sows carrot seed in springtime, harvests herbs in summer, puts up kraut and pickle in fall. Still she bakes the daily bread, gnarled hands tending the dough as firm and gentle as one would a baby. Over the years her back grew wide, her full dark hair brightened to grey, her body thickened about its frame. Never was she a skinny maid of the type found slung into the wives' bedchambers. She came of sterner stuff, her face broad, hands large as a man's by the time she was twelve. Her full bosom and ample backside caught the attention of grown men before she was to know what that attention meant. Her own mother had been castle cook before her, brought her sturdy girlchild to learn her way around bushels of onions and gallons of stock. Her mother also taught her a way with the blade.

One day the prince's great-grandfather, when he was still a young man, thought to get himself a taste of the fresh meat the cook had brought to the kitchen. The mother's back was turned when the young prince entered the room, his hand an inch from the girl's

hair when the cook whipped around, brandishing her cleaver, newly sharpened that morning on the stone. The blade faced the man's unshorn neck, his beard barely parted by the steel. *There is nothing in this hearth ready for your consumption, highness*, the girl's mother said. The prince had frozen, and the girl slipped out of his reach. She did not hide behind her mother's skirts; just stood back to watch events unfold.

You'll not tell me what I can and cannot taste in my own larder, old woman, the prince said, his voice aquiver, betraying the bravado of his words. The cook stood a head taller than the prince. Hair tied back with a rag, she pushed her sweaty face toward the young man, nose an inch from his forehead. She squinted into his neat pale grimace. *Oh, but I shall, my liege. This lamb is not for the slaughter. Return to your quarters if you don't want to find yourself in need of taster after taster—hasn't the king taught you it's unwise to run afoul of your cook?*

The prince kept his attention on the girl, who watched him with interest, her hazel eyes narrowing just like her mother's. The room was silent, save for the snap of hickory in the flame. Slowly, the prince rocked back on one boot heel, away from the cook's blade. *I shall look forward to this evening's repast—another day, perhaps, lamb will be in season*. That evening, her mother sent up to the royal tables roast cur dressed with chestnut and apples. She handed her daughter a blade, taught her how to tuck it into her skirts, how to brandish to warn, and how to cut without a man ever knowing he was being bled. The cook said to her daughter, *Never fear teaching a man the cost of his audacity, no matter his rank or station*.

And so the girl learned. And a year later, when the prince caught her alone, returning from the larder, she held his gaze once again as she pulled her blade from her skirts and held it exactly where he was beginning to unfasten his breeches. *Perhaps you'll just have more work for your tailor, highness—or perhaps my cut'll run deeper than that.* The prince growled once, tried to frighten her into dropping her blade, but the girl held firm, grazing one of his knuckles as he pulled away. *I am not yours for the taking, highness. Move on.*

The names he called her echoed filth through the corridor as he retreated, but could not erase the sound of her laughter.

The girl worked beside her mother for many years, and then one day her mother died. The queen offered the girl, now no longer a child, her mother's position, and she accepted. Now she was cook, and she tied on her mother's apron, knotted a kerchief over her hair, and began preparing the daily bread. She had no dalliances, no loves, and so she bore no children. She fed each successive generation of royal Charmings from her stone hearth. She slept in a small room off the main kitchen hall, and dreamed of the day she would meet her mother in Paradise, where they would walk out of the kitchen together and discover the rest of the world.

There came a day that the younger of Cinderella's daughters began to spend time in the kitchen. The cook watched the girl through the grey damp wisps of hair that had

fallen loose of her kerchief. The younger one was afraid of the cook's gruff way, and hid herself still and silent in a corner.

What are you doing in here, girl? The old cook asked. Her voice was rough and round and filled the room with shadows.

The girl's eyes went wide. She did not speak.

Come now, you are underfoot—get back out where you belong.

The girl grew pale inside, and began to disappear. The old cook gazed at the child a moment. She returned to her stew. An hour later, the girl reappeared, piece by piece, and when she thought the cook was not looking, slipped out the kitchen door.

The younger girl returned the next day, the next. But the cook did not speak to her. She had dealt with feral things before. She knew to bide her time.

On the ninth day, the cook spoke again. She said, *Why do you spend time here, child, instead of in your lessons?*

The girl shook her head so that her fine brown hair swayed. *I learn too much in those lessons*, was all she said. She sat facing the chamber door, on a stool made of rough-hewn birch.

The old woman nodded once, turned her attentions to her pastry. *Has your sister not taught you how to avoid the lessons you do not wish to learn?*

The girl shook her head once more, with a confused expression across her brow.

She learns the wrong lessons, too.

And I imagine Cinderella never learned herself how to avoid such things.

The girl remained quiet.

This prince has too many hands about him, the old cook said, after a long and thoughtful pause. I am too old to teach you what your mother ought to have, what my mother taught me, girl, but this is what I know—that among all the hands in the castle there is a secret, and within that secret will be the answer you've been seeking here.

The woman and child were quiet then, the girl watching the old cook prepare the pasties for the prince's ride that day. Outside the swallows chattered to one another across the open fields, warning about the coming storm.

Breadcrumbs

When we were small, we carried each the same weight of memories—the shape of a monarch in summer, the sound of grasshoppers, cicadas, crickets, katydids, the smell of chlorine or sunscreen and cut grass, the sound of dad's lawnmower coming through the bedroom windows at midday when we had to take a nap, the shade haloed a bright yellowwhite. We each knew intimately the smell of cow manure, homemade vanilla ice cream churned in a bucket with rock salt and jagged chunks of ice, the sweat of a father, the sweat of a mother—we learned all these things by breathing. We watched the sectioned ribbon of freight train snake its endless way across the prairie, running along the highway like it was racing the cars. Once, my sister knew these things. Now she doesn't remember. Now I'm the keeper of our memories and I wonder how much of us I'm losing every time I forget another detail of our childhood.

She can't remember because the part of her that happened before our stepfather happened to her got driven out. The stuff after—she remembers that. What came before she released, because it couldn't save her, because she couldn't get it back. Ten is too early to begin to drop one's history, a crumb at a time over a decade, so that no one would notice its going, and no one would tell her to stop.

Then the crumbs she'd scattered in order to find her way back got lost under leaf fall, or were eaten by birds. Maybe the losing, the forgetting, was how she fled: Hide it. Run away—it's not safe in this body anymore.

She forgot the names of all of our cousins and their spouses, all the family we were never allowed to see. She forgot our former addresses, the house where I stole tulips one day to take to our mom, the house we took crabapple blossoms from when we made May Baskets, the contours of her best friend's bedroom. She forgot the names of her favorite dolls. She forgot the smell of wheat when it just pushes out of the soil, and the smell of wheat when it's about ready for harvest. She forgot how we used to play Japanese lady with the brilliant feathered wings our grandma would cut from the pheasants our dad and grandpa and uncles—the men—would bring home, how we got scolded every time but still we crept into the garage up from the basement and found the piles of discarded wings where grandma had plucked the birds. We took the stiff wings between our fingers and pulled at the muscle, unfurling feathers no longer needed for flight. We hid our faces and giggled, lowered our eyelashes demurely, like we could flirt away what was coming for us.

Through the looking glass

Time became taffy long ago. Was this a thing she knew or a thing she lived: How time moved at its normal speed in school (save for the usual interminable creep of black hands around white clock face during world history), but as soon as she left school, she stepped again into molasses, into the sticky grey gap between the rest of the world and the reality her stepfather created.

The gap began when she said goodbye to her friends—people she only ever saw on school grounds; once she left the building, those friends, unless they were boys her stepfather wanted her to have sex with, ceased to exist—and climbed through the folding doors onto the #2 Metro. She walked all the way to the back of the bus, soaking into the fragrance of the grown-up afternoon riders: exhaustion, hair grease, cologne, b.o. She situated herself, as she always did, in the last seat, by the window, bookbag on the seat next to her, feet up on the square metal armrest of the row of seats just in front of her.

The bus pulled away from the curb. She stared out the window, disappeared into brick and concrete, into the gas stations and fast food restaurants. She slid deeper into the gap. The bus careened through neighborhoods, crested a hill, and began to descend.

At the bottom of the hill she disembarked, crossed the busy main thoroughway, and walked up the boulevard that ran past an overgrown city park. She listened to her Walkman, sang along: *I get so emotional baby / every time I think of you-oooh-oooh / ain't it shocking what love can do*—she mouthed the words, pretending to be on stage.

She tried to make the walk last as long as possible. Not because she could slow down, drag her feet, take detours—he would know if she dallied, even if by some stretch of luck he wasn't home yet. That was the sticky work of the gap: she had to slow time down in her head.

She examined the leaves of every tree—*sycamore maple mulberry elm*—as she walked on. She examined the sidewalk and its cracks, the patterns of frost heave, the bumps where maple roots bent the concrete. She was a seventeen year-old girl carrying a backpack full of books—German, physics, English, world history, calculus—each one fat and heavy. She wore her long straight brown hair in a braid that fell to the middle of her back, kept her head up and her shoulders back, like he had taught her. She impersonated someone who knew how to be a woman. When men honked or whistled out the windows of flat American cars, she smiled, understanding that she was succeeding at something. She kept the backpack slung over one shoulder, making the one long first block along take a year, or even just a season, watching the leaves burnish the tips of the branches red, burst from the buds, flourish from bright light green to the dark summer coverage, until they began to turn yellow brown red gold orange and fall in thick piles along the sidewalk that she kicked and shushed with sliding feet like the child she'd been before—before before before.

She turned the corner, left the boulevard. Everything grew quiet as soon as she turned off the big wide street. It was as though the neighborhood he lived in was a mouth that swallowed everything it didn't want the rest of the city to hear. It swallowed her, too.

Just two blocks to go. She crossed the street that lay behind her own, the block where she walked the dog at night, with the anonymous houses she peeked in on secretly—hidden in the dark, frost exhaling from her lips—the people inside alit by the television's blue glow; they sat at dinner tables or stood alone in a kitchen washing dishes. She kept going. She didn't want anyone to notice her putting herself into their houses, into the quiet blue of living rooms, the quiet yellow of kitchens.

Once she crossed that street and stepped onto her own block, the gap began to consume her. Dread knotted her stomach. This was the time to undo, to take off the face she wore at school: the bright yellow mask, the heavy real smiles, the voice with its aches and actuality that bantered with her teachers, asked questions, flirted with friends, joked; the voice that didn't know anything about home. She took off the eyes that weren't afraid to look at people straight on, that took in everything, that could see. She took off the eyes that could see as she turned onto her street. She shoved her hands all the way into her pockets, pushed back inside the parts of her that could feel. She walked up the gray concrete sidewalk of his street, passed the old people's houses at the end of the block, then the big white house with the big white family—always off to tennis somehow—a blonde family with big white toothy grins.

She kept her eyes to the sidewalk, to her shoes, to the forward motion in her feet scuffing the dried leaves. She kept her eyes on the still-green grass, she kept her hand clenched to the strap of her backpack and the other shoved into her jeans pocket fingering

her house key. She didn't look up, didn't look up, for as long as she could; she was learning how to keep herself from knowing.

She walked past the house next to her stepfather's, shadowed by the enormous blue spruce that loomed between the two properties, the little house with the person in it—a man lived there without his wife, something had happened to his wife—but they never saw him anymore and he apparently never heard anything inside their house—*the screaming the shouts*. None of the neighbors ever heard. No one came banging on the front door. No one called the police. People in neighborhoods like this, with big houses and yards that were clean, kept their blinds closed and their eyes averted.

Living in this neighborhood was the closest she'd ever been to wealth. They had more money now that her mother married him, but still her mother wore a furrow of worry whenever her stepfather brought home a new piece of computer equipment or decided they should all go out for dinner—*again*. Still her mother clipped coupons they kept organized in a plastic expandable container, each section labeled with an aisle at the store: meat and poultry, paper goods, dairy, household items. She and her sister went with their mother every month to the supermarket in the bad part of town, filling two carts with groceries, everything on sale, everything in bulk; her mother kept a running tally on a small calculator that she kept in her billfold. Her mother taught them to figure the unit prices of things—she wanted her daughters to know what a thing really cost. Her mother knew how to stretch a dollar. At home, her mother knew how to stretch and tie her own blindfold, knew how to have eyes open and closed at the same time, ears open and closed

at the same time, so she could respond to her husband when he asked what happened at work, but not hear her speak when he called her children *stupid sluts* or *cows* or demanded to be left alone with her girls—her mother let him be alone with the girls whenever he asked.

She sometimes could get all the way up to their front yard before she looked up to see whether his car was in the driveway. An empty driveway meant the possibility of peace and quiet, moments to be in a skin that wasn't performing, time to disappear. His black sedan parked in the asphalt-sealed driveway, however, meant being drawn immediately into his thrust and parry, fully into the net of his time.

It was just a house, a regular colonial, three bedrooms and one bathroom up, living room, dining room, and kitchen on the main floor. When he was home, she entered the house quietly while trying not to appear to be sneaking—if he thought she was sneaking, he would want to know why, and *I hoped you wouldn't hear me and make me go upstairs and have sex with you* wasn't an acceptable answer. Maybe when she unlocked the front door, she'd find him already napping, stretched out on the couch in the living room, TV on and unwatched, khaki safari shirt hung on a chair, his pale, hairy belly and back covered over only with a white tank undershirt. If he heard her come in, he'd want her to come over and give him foot rub. If he asked her to come over and give him a foot rub, she'd be stuck digging thumbs into muscle and callous until he was ready for her to crawl over him on the couch to take his penis into her mouth or hands.

If she saw his car in the driveway, she began the figuring—had she let him have sex with her yesterday, the day before? Could she put him off one more day? If she misjudged, tried to get one too many days respite, he would want to process the state of her evolution, the way she was avoiding chances to grow.

Didn't she want to grow?

She had at least three hours of homework to do that night, a quiz in physics the next day, she didn't have time to be up until all hours “talking” if he decided she was backsliding and needed an intervention. That meant the whole family sitting on the tan couch while she defended the state of her psychological development, her stepfather bemoaning the fact that she was still making fear choices—meaning, *you don't beg me to fuck you why don't you beg me to fuck you you've got to beg for me to believe that you're really maturing*, but never saying those words and somehow her mother doesn't hear them coating the underside of his tongue. She will have to justify her behavior, respond to what he says and what he doesn't say, speak on two, three levels at once—what her mother can hear her say, what her stepfather and sister can hear she means, what she can make herself believe she's really saying—and he won't let her get up off the couch until she breaks down and cries, accepts his correction, accepts his *assessment* of her as *selfish* and *fearful* and *lazy*—a liar and a tease—or until she gets so infuriated with impotence that she lashes out at him and he has an excuse to put her in headlock, choking off her air supply. But even the breakdown isn't enough. Then she has to tell him how she will improve, how she will show that she is willing to change. *Do it now*, he'll say. *Show me*

now—how will you change? And it's late and everyone is tired and it's her fault they're all still awake and she will have to find a way to say *fine, you can fuck me tomorrow* without letting her mom know what she's saying. She uses phrases like, *I'm really ready to grow, I can see I was wrong, I can see how you just want the best for me and I will be open to that.* He'll give her significant eye contact and ask her two questions at once when he says, *Can I trust you on that commitment?* When he finally pushes his thin lips into a tough-love-sports-coach kind of smile, when he performs the loving father that all of them know he isn't, the relief is so thick that everyone laughs and they all have to be so careful not to say or do the wrong thing, the thing that will make him turn his face back to a delighted disappointment, change his mind and keep them there on the couch, interrogate her further, push for more confessions, more transgressions.

They just want to get off the couch.

When her mother and sister have gone upstairs, he'll grab her arm, turn her to face him, slide his hand between her legs and cup her genitals through her pants with a squeeze, then nod. This is his test. He'll smile and she is supposed to not tense, not look down, smile back. His eyes feral behind the manicured therapist-father gaze, *I'm proud of you*, he'll say, then give a wink, like they are in cahoots. *Tomorrow then.* And then she'll be released. She will go to her room and turn off all the lights except for her desk lamp, turn on the radio to the classical station, and get swallowed by the now. It'll be eleven when she opens the first textbook on her round oak desk; there is no time to worry about what will happen tomorrow.

At their front yard she keeps her eyes down, sticky with dread, no longer the girl who left the high school and climbed on the bus. She pulls in her peripheral vision. She wonders if she can make it to the front door without seeing or knowing. She wonders if she can not know until she's all the way inside. She wonders if she will have to keep on knowing and not knowing all the rest of her life.

Some girls don't have a fairy godmother

In the morning, he acted like nothing had happened. He was in a good mood, almost jovial. Patted me on the back when I came down for breakfast. *Morning! How'd you sleep?* I leaned in for a hug and a kiss, my belly tight and anger threading like ivy into all of my limbs. I weighed my answer—to have slept well, too easily, might make it seem like I wasn't impacted by the night before and everything that happened, like I hadn't learned any lessons and wasn't sufficiently contrite. But to have been too disturbed, or so upset that it impacted my sleep, might indicate to him that I had more “going on” that I hadn't brought up during the talk last night, and might start it all over again. I stepped onto the tight rope and spoke, looking at him. *I slept ok—a little shaky, but ok.* He nodded, his eyes concerned, his round face serious. He tilted his head like he was looking a long way down, though he was just a few inches taller than I was. His graying brown hair was combed straight back from his forehead, and his moustache was still wet from his shower. He glanced at the face of the big silver watch he wore around his right wrist—it was already six-thirty, and the table wasn't set, nor was breakfast ready. I'd gotten dressed quick and braided my long hair still wet—I'd had to try and finish my calculus homework before breakfast, since we'd been up so late the night before.

I was stuck in the doorway between the rooms until he released me—if I turned away before he responded to my response, he might think I was dismissing him, not

taking it all seriously. Outside, winter was on its way—my hair was sure to freeze on the way to school. My dog banged her hundred-pound body against my legs, wanting attention, but I ignored her—I'd already taken her out, and I didn't have time to play. There just wasn't time to play.

He said, his broad forehead creased and furrowed—his face was like a balloon that someone had drawn big eyes, a bushy moustache, and fat lips upon—he said, *you got some stuff out last night. I was proud of you. I'm sorry it had to get so rough—it hurts me to have to be so rough with you!—but I just love you guys too much to let you stay stuck in your bullshit.* His face had gone, in turns, serious, concerned, sorrowful, and he landed on the determined-but-loving forbearance of the parent of teenagers. Then his eyes flashed, but there was a squeak on the stairs—Mom coming down. He kept my gaze for a moment longer; I still wasn't allowed to start working, even though I was almost surely going to be in trouble for it anyway. There was a shallow ache around my neck where he'd held me down, kneeling on my back, pressing me into the couch, telling me to calm down. He'd moved quickly, made precise motions to take hold and keep hold until I stopped struggling, stopped resisting. Until I let him win. My mother's voice, my sister's, those were background noise to the sound of my breath caught, my grunts and screams, my body thrashing into the couch cushions, and his calm face over me—*No, Jennifer, I won't have you out of control this way.* He was always so calm, like something in him needed these altercations, the physical resistance, the way it was sexual, the erotics of the

battle between girl and stepfather, his mussed hair and heavy breath the only indication that he'd exerted himself at all.

Did my mother say, *Jennifer, stop resisting?* Did she sit impassively? Did she watch with pride, with fear, with gratitude that he took such an interest in her child?

My mother was nearly to the bottom of the staircase when he said, *Later this afternoon*—a reminder of the promise he'd extracted from me. *I trust you've made the right moves forward*, he might have said. Or, *let's just keep on seeing evidence of that change you promised last night*. His face would break out in a wide, concerned but loving smile just as mom came into view; she, having heard him, she nodded in agreement, not seeing what lurked underneath and behind this encouraging therapist-speak. She glanced into the dining room to see the still-empty table. *Isn't breakfast ready? We have to get going*. This was her way of staying on his good side, staying aligned with him. I stood rooted, still not exactly released—if I hustled to start breakfast now, without a response, I might be accused of disrespecting my mother. She was dressed in red and gold silk, her hair short and spiky; she was putting on the gold dangling earrings he'd bought for her the previous year.

But he gave me a pass—*We're all moving a little slow this morning, I think, Mom*, he said with smile beneath worried eyes, the long-suffering step-parent of a difficult step-child. *Let's all work together to get the meal going*. I was off the hook—though he snapped a little at my sister when she finally came downstairs. *Come on, move your ass*,

we're all pitching in here—what took you so long? She'd had to iron his clothes before she could get ready herself. Despite her makeup there were dark smudges under her eyes; they were under my eyes, too. My sister apologized, put his and mom's eggs in the microwave while I set out all the vitamins. The coffee at least I'd made after I took the dog out. We all sat down after I poured the juice. My sister slipped the eggs onto their plates, popped the toast, brought butter and jelly to the table. My sister and I had cereal while Mom and Dad discussed their client schedule for the day. Then my sister left to go out and wait for the bus after we put the dishes in the dishwasher, put all the food away, shook out the placemats. I locked the dog in the laundry room with her water and food, got my coat and bookbag and went out to Mom's car. I hefted my overfull backpack on my shoulders, calculating how much reading I could get done before first period. In English we were discussing *Moby Dick*. All those lists, so much detail. I could barely get through a page before I'd start to nod off. In the car, we listened to the morning NPR broadcast, the weather forecast, the local news. There wasn't much conversation, and I didn't have time to worry about what was going to happen when I got home that afternoon—I had a whole day of classes to get through first.

In the woods

There aren't any words for this. I don't want to say it.

The words back up away from the pen, away from the page, they back away. They had been hurtling down the gravel pathway, beneath the awning of live oak branches, but then they see the light at the end of the tunnel, they see the break in the forest's canopy that is the page, they breach, they brake, they dig their heels in, back thoughts tumbling over the ones that were in the lead. The words frazzle among themselves, they run into each other, fighting against the tide, no, no, the light is there, the light, go back, people will be able to see.

People will be able to see.

What do you say, when someone asks you—and if you let them, someone will always be asking you—*how did you allow him to make you do that?* Why didn't you run away? Call the cops? Stab him with a pair of scissors or chop him in the shoulder with his well-sharpened cleaver or shoot him with the handgun he kept under his bed or slice his neck with the knife his father made during World War II? Why did you keep on betraying yourself, your sister, instead of him? Why did you let him win?

What answers do we have for the askers? What can we tell them?

It took years. It was an impossibility and then it was happening. We are in the basement room that was transformed, after my sister left for college, into the place where girls sleep when they are home from school.

I stop. I can't tell it.

We are in the basement bedroom and all of our parents exist but they are somewhere else. The room is dark. We're on the futon bed. My sister is all the way under the covers.

I stop now. I stop stop stop stop.

My sister is all the way under the covers. We have been tasked with doing this. My head is on the pillow, my eyes are open and then closed and then open. I can't remember feeling anything anywhere at all.

He had fucked us both at the same time. Is that the way to say it? He'd stopped hiding us from each other before I left for college. One day I opened my bedroom door and he was parading her naked across the hall and toward her bedroom. She had a look on her face that was supposed to be inviting and warm. She looked sly and superior and young. She looked so young. Did he ask me to join them? I said no, and he shrugged.

He told me my sister was a real woman already.

My sister is still under the covers. She will always be there. He wants her to explore my body. I can't feel her hands on me.

In college I had sex with several different men before I found myself flirting with a woman. After I kissed this woman, after I had sex with her, after I fell in love—months after—I told him. I said, I think I'm bisexual. He didn't want me having sex with women. It's too dangerous, he said—you've got so much still to work out about your mother, it wouldn't be safe for you to get involved with women. And it wouldn't be fair to them. You would be working out your mother issues on them.

But if you want to explore sex with women, you can have sex with your sister.

You can have sex with your sister.

No, thanks, I said. That's not what I want.

But he didn't let it drop. He said she kept asking for it, told him to ask me for it. He told me she was hurt and disappointed when I said no. I was fifteen hundred miles away from them at school—it was easy for me to keep saying no when I could hang up the phone and pretend to forget they existed.

She is all the way under the covers. In any porn story, this would be the climax. In another sister story, if we were four and six, maybe, this could be sweet. Exploration. Curiosity. Normal. But we are not little girls. We are seventeen and nineteen or eighteen and twenty.

This is not the sister he has made, because he is not here. I don't trust her, exactly, but I hear in her voice the sister she used to be.

Was there an orgasm that night in that bed in the nighttime basement room that is two floors away from where my mother slept?

I don't remember. I don't let myself remember. I don't remember the look on her face. I don't remember her long hair mussed. There is no memory of any of it. I don't remember whether she was embarrassed for me, if she thought I was somehow turned on by what we are doing. We are broken with each other for a moment, a shade less guarded, yet still shattered. Later he will want to know the details and he will pretend this belongs to him, too. Later he will try to push his penis in it. But there are things between us he can't ever take, and we know what those are.

He cannot take away my stopping for her *No, it hurts* when he directs me to put my whole hand into her. He can't have the dance we do, naked, on the futon bed in the basement, both on our backs and kicking our legs up and out in sync like awful, prone Rockettes—even though he films it with his videocamera and pretends we are performing for him. There are parts of us he can never have. We keep them between us, so tightly bound that sometimes even we are not aware that they are still there. But they are what keep us alive.

Night birds

In their bedchamber at night, the girls whispered. They told each other stories of the day, reported back what they had seen. They snuggled together under thick bedclothes, their hair hanging loose about their soft, round faces. They used small words and inside voices that sounded like mouse track or nightingale.

What does she mean, a secret? the elder girl asked that night as she plaited her hair for sleep.

The younger sister shrugged. *She didn't explain. She just said he has too many hands, but one of the hands has a secret that will give us some answer.*

What answer? Answer to what?

I don't know. She said, the answer you seek.

How to make him stop?

And then both girls were quiet, and neither could meet the other one's eyes. After a time, the elder girl leaned over and blew out the bedside candles, and the girls pretended, like they always did each night, to go to sleep, but they laid awake as long as they could, listening, listening: they preferred to be already awake if he came for them in the night—it was worse, somehow, if a hand woke them from their dreams.

Minion

There is an 3x5 print I keep on my bulletin board. In it, I'm standing and smiling down at whoever's taking the picture. I am nineteen years old, wearing a light-sage-green silk shirt; behind me, a web of just-budding maple branches. Not shown is my long brown flowered skirt, my brown flats. I'm standing over a picnic blanket where my then-boyfriend sits. I think the smile is genuine, as much as was possible then.

My stepfather used to say he could always tell when I was faking a smile. Once, during a family processing talk, he sent me to the bathroom to look at my face, then come back and tell him what I saw. In the bathroom, I looked at my tear-streaked face in the ratty old medicine cabinet mirror. He wanted me to see how ugly I was. He thought I looked ugly. It was some larger point he was trying to make, about how much prettier I was when I wasn't fighting, resisting, being so difficult all the time.

In the mirror I examined my ugliness: the streaks of red on my cheeks, the deep purple-black smudges under my eyes, the red stains that rimmed them. I thought, looking at myself, that I just looked sad. But I couldn't go back in and say that to him, because he wasn't in a pitying mood. He wanted something else, and there was no room for my grief. My stepfather didn't allow talk about the impact of his actions. If I wanted to discuss the sex he demanded, it had to be from a problem-solving standpoint (solving the problem of

my resistance, that is), or, preferably, appreciation and anticipation, which I was never able to fake to his satisfaction.

In the picture on my bulletin board, I hold my three-foot-long hair back from my face. I'd worn my hair down, a brown sheet that fell to my waist. I am smiling because it's finally warm after the deep white freeze of New Hampshire winter. I'm smiling because I'm going to get to go home with this boyfriend for a few days before I have to go back to my stepfather's house for the entire summer. I'm smiling because I'm in love, as much as was possible then.

In the picture, I don't look like the girl who urged her boyfriend have sex with me before he was ready. In the picture, I don't look like the girl who teased him for his reticence, as my stepfather did. I knew I'd never be allowed stay in a relationship with a guy who wasn't fucking me, and I was in love with this boy and wanted to be with him. In the picture, you can't see the strings tied to wrists and ankles and lips and thighs, wired to jaw and cunt.

In the picture, I look wholesome, like I belong in a Laura Ashley ad.

The picture does not show me naked, on all fours on the hardwood floor of my dorm room, crouched between the twin beds, hair flipped over one shoulder, looking back behind me at the boy, emulating the women in the porn movies my stepfather had shown me, not at all understanding why I was having to talk my boyfriend into fucking me. Didn't every guy just want a girl to let him fuck her? Here I was with my legs open,

on the pill and everything, and he was hesitating. What was wrong with him? The picture doesn't show me begging with my best feminist, sexually adventurous, dirty slut girl enticing smile—*Come on, it'll be fun. Come on, please.* It doesn't show how I felt I had no choice if I wanted to keep dating him. It doesn't show the light-switch change in my personality: the girl wheedling and cajoling, and the girl I was after we were done: someone safe and vulnerable and hungry and tender. Can I show the angry cold-eyed minion and the girl separate from my stepfather? *Was* there a girl still separate from him?

The picture on my bulletin board doesn't show how hurt and manipulated the boyfriend felt. The picture hints at our romance and doesn't reveal the end, six months or so later, which consisted of my oscillating between insisting it was over and then showing up weeping at his door, begging for another chance, desperate for him to understand how much I loved him without being able to tell him anything at all about why I had to end things. My stepfather grew weary of my weakness. Cut it off with him, he'd say on our weekly calls.

The boy grew weary, too—wouldn't you? He didn't understand. And later, when learning some of the real story from a dear friend we had in common, he didn't care to discuss it with me, or forgive. He shows up in my dreams even now, and when I apologize, or try to explain, he just keeps walking away.

Glass slipper

In the dark morning, the mother was a foot, a head. She dressed quietly, she went about her labor. If he had taken her in the night, she tucked herself around what was tender. Prince Charming left her room after, curt, angry, as though in spending within her he had lost something, and now he begrudged her taking it from him. What he took from her was unnamable, some small piece of her soul. More and more flaked away each day.

Cinderella gave him what she knew how to give—smiles and comfort, the work of her hands and knees; she did not bring him gifts anymore, not since he had taken hold of her daughter's pictures, and he had let her into his chamber, thrown her onto his bed, and taken her roughly, nearly with abandon. She'd felt something dark and sour unlock within her then. There was a rush of craving, a hunger that blossomed in her like a fan of metal blades. Did she deceive herself, imagining he would be satisfied with their photos? He took her into his chamber and moved her into the Dark Ages. He treated her no better than a child, a captive, expected her to lock herself up every morning, release herself at night. She told herself he trusted her.

She felt lost, empty; but when he came to her with his blue-grey eyes flashing, she made herself remember the first time, reached inside and tried to switch on the metal fan, whose blades were now rusted and dull, bent. A thing spun in her still when he placed her body beneath his own, but it was not akin to pleasure; rather, a slick of hope, some

mothering in her that imagined her girls were safe for the moments he moved above her. But it was something greyer, too, something animal and prone that flipped over on its back and showed its belly to him, begging to be stroked and admired, begging to be loved, begging his eyes to turn away from those young breakable bodies and back to hers, spent upon, already broken. She tried to make herself seem small, wore the one glass slipper she had left, crept through the castle, *clink silent, clink silent*, looking for the thing that had brought her here, looking for—if not her dignity or his love, then at least his appreciation of her sacrifice. She had given him her motherhood, handed it over, glistening, gossamer, and watched him wrap it around the root of him and rub hard until he came, sliming it with his seed before tossing it into the fire to burn.

Quest

The girls became connoisseurs of his hands.

They examined first their own hands—plain and smooth, nothing out of anyone’s ordinary. What would the old cook have meant? The elder one told her younger sister to go back to the kitchens, ask for more information, an explanation of some sort, but the prince suddenly made it impossible. He gave the cook extra tasks, asked for complicated foreign meals that required days, sometimes weeks, of preparation; the cook had to search out new ingredients—Dragon’s blood, cinnabar, blessed thistle, scorpion tail.

He said he wanted to expand their palates. The girls felt their mouths had been stretched wide enough already.

Then he separated the sisters into their own bedchambers. *We have rooms enough in this old castle*, his proud voice boomed over the morning meal one day. *Why should young women old as you two are still be sharing a bed? Some would say it’s untoward.*

The elder sister was moved into another room, with her own wide bed and barricaded window. The girls did not look at each other with grief behind their eyes when the day came to separate. They kept their eyes down. Prince Charming oversaw the move, smiling like a hyena all the while. Cinderella sat in her chamber, fiddling with her gold chains. The elder sister was moved into what had been the prince’s drawing room;

he had taken her there many times before. Now she would sleep amidst those memories, the sounds of her struggle lodged between stones, the sounds of her acquiescence hanging from cobwebs in the far corners of the ceiling.

Prince Charming did not like the sisters to be alone together. He set them to separate tasks, called for tutors—this one needs to learn to ride today, that one should practice her sums. If he caught them giggling in a corner of the garden, he insinuated himself between them. *What are we laughing about out here like babies in a sandpile?* He clapped his hands together, pretended to play pat-a-cake with the branches of an apple tree. *There's no uglier sound than that of a laughing woman—like a cackling hen or a braying ass. I thought it was a pair of blackbirds out here when I first heard you, cawing away.* He sent the girls inside—one to the library, one to the sewing room—made them walk ahead of him through the gardens, watched to see they made no eye contact with one another, and did not stop to niggle with that old boar down in his kitchens.

They hated the way he held his hands, tended them, buried them in his hair, held one to his chin, thoughtful. He treated his hands dainty, precious, like careful things—at least when there were more than two pairs of eyes on them in any room. He wanted his hands seen, called for manicurist, had nails buffed, fingers smoothed and soothed; the people outside the castle made note, always thought to comment on the prince's hands—so fine and strong, the women would say; so capable and full, the men thought to themselves. The people were fooled. Outside the castle, his hands might seem like gentle

things; he cradled a small child, tenderly kissed the air just above its small furred cheeks, and the people swooned. How good and kind, they cried, is our Prince!

The girls and Cinderella knew otherwise. The younger daughter saw how his hands changed when the prince passed through the castle doors, how they weakened, grew pasty. Inside the castle walls, the prince took hold of no plough or scythe, no tool of any kind, even a hairbrush was kept from his fingers. In fact, the girls noticed, there was only one task which his hands were required to undertake themselves, and that work involved their flesh, their skin and the bones beneath; they were the only labor he put himself to. He undressed and redressed them, he pushed apart thighs, he cradled his own shaft—this was the thing he cradled most tenderly in the world, the girls believed.

They watched and watched his hands after the younger sister spoke with the cook. The cook had said a hand holds a secret. But his hands revealed no surprises, no hidden messages—each one just four beringed fingers and a thumb, dark fur dusted across knuckles, a square, splayed palm, the backs rounded like a turtle's hump. They did not dare catch his hand in theirs to examine it for the hidden mystery; they did not want him thinking they sought his caress.

Riddle

I am hands and I am not hands, the wiry fingernails jutting down to my toes and agitating open the emptiness of my morning days. I am not hands but I am his and I am waking inside every single star, still unpeeling the hot tendrils of his breath from around my wrists. I am hands and I am not hands, the placating of a moment, the soothing open of an orange, the steadfast heaviness of dough pressed against the heels of these thick-palmed, bony peacemakers—and yet I am sick of the renunciation of handshake, of compromise, of all the danger that resides in an open palm.

We survived and did not survive. Mourning unlocks the quiet convolution of truth. Our every moment a gasp of contradictions that frame the fabric of our breath. We are both and always war and not war, love and not love, hands and not hands, sister and not sister: breath instead or tomorrow. Somehow I am severed from the sense that this convocation awakes inside my chest and I am ready for the math that will undo all of my and my parents' mistakes. Where is the clear calculation that can compute the resolution to our lives, trace in snarls of black ink $x = 0$ or y but not both. How could it ever be both? We aren't the changes of our histories but always exactly that and those—and when we sit in front of the tv with a can of beer and a ripped bag of chips, we wish for nothing so much as a lungful of uncomplication.

I am his hands and my hands, his mouth and my mouth. Days like these I am his violation and my own conscription into the terror. Are these the contradictions? Are these

the elements of loneliness my sister and I both are and are not every singularly-unguarded day? Where are the clouds of facts that will hold about us the thick pollen of our unsanitary meanings that everyone needs to see metastasized outside of the so-called frames of our bodies if they ever truly—I mean *truly*—mean to know us?

Pursuit

He visits in my dreams, my stepfather, even all these years later. It's where he's lodged now: in my subconscious. Fear opens the hindpart of my brain and suddenly he's there again when I turn off the lights and track down into sleep, wielding a knife or just that sad, misunderstood smile, the slightly disappointed one, the one that said, *If only you'd let me help you, if only you'd let go, everything would be so much easier. But you always have to do it the hard way.*

Mostly the dreams aren't violent now. These days I visit the old house, the one he moved us into, trying to gouge out the bits of myself still stuck in the walls, strewn across carpets, scattered all across its since-re-landscaped lawn: shards of me and my sister in every single room.

These days he's no longer the man with the knife in the white ribbed tank top and khaki slacks, chasing me up over low hills that I am not able to get breath or strength enough to climb. In those dreams, I sank to the earth, knees pulled down, then belly, then torso and arms, the gravity of my body heavier than that of anyone around me—I had to crawl where they could walk. Over and over, shoved to the ground, back down to the bottom of the hill, by something I can't see, some force that seems to ride on my back but leaves everyone else around me unaffected. As terrified as I was of being caught by the man with the knife, I was as ashamed that the healthy, smiling people around me would

see that something was wrong, would laugh or look at me with pity—*what's the matter with her? Why can't she walk?*

All through my twenties, I woke up shouting or yelling, the man with the knife in the white ribbed tank top finally upon me, he's over me with the knife and he is about to plunge it in or he is unbuttoning his slacks and I have no muscle to resist with, I have no bones in my body to use to run away from him. I woke always before he killed or raped me, my partners catching my sleep-screams, my cries, with soft hands, *Jen, wake up, you're all right, it's just a dream.*

In waking life he only once threatened me with a knife. His knife hung on a support beam that ran down through the basement of the house, right behind his desk chair. I remember a black and white photo of his father tacked up over the knife. I see the knife with its dull, silver-grey handle, shaped kind of like brass knuckles; you put your fingers through the handle, held one part against your palm while the other side nested against your knuckles, so you could punch with the handle and dig with the blade. He told us his father made the knife during the war.

The knife hung on the beam because my stepfather was proud of it. Maybe words were scratched into the handle, maybe his father's name. The blade was the length of my palm, curved, and I remember serrations on one edge of the blade, though that may be an embellishment I've developed over time.

It was the fall. I was home for the holiday visit and quickly got in trouble about something. The four of us sat on the sectional couch in the living room, my stepfather resting against the arm of the short side, then mom sat next to him. I sat by mom, onto the long side, then came my sister. What had I done this time? Some sort of resistance, rebellion, that he needed to quash. We sat in the bright living room while the family “talked” about my problem. Outside the world fell into early dusk

I asked to speak to my stepfather alone, as was our custom by then—my sister and I were allowed to speak to him privately during these family meetings, and mom had to leave the room. She believed we were more comfortable talking about certain things with him—sex, of course, but what else did she think we discussed? Her inhibitions got in the way, her husband said; her mothering instinct made her susceptible to getting hooked by us—she'd rather mother us than call us out on our bullshit. So he'd do the work of parenting by himself.

During the alone time, we always talked about the sex—the sex he'd wanted to have that afternoon, maybe, that we'd resisted and now he was mad about it, or the fact that we hadn't asked him for sex in awhile and he was afraid we were slipping, we weren't growing, weren't evolving. His view was that evolved people saw any sex as acceptable; if everyone was consenting (and we were consenting, weren't we?), why should there be a problem?

We would get him alone to try and talk about what the problem was, be the girls we were with him, which were not the girls we were when our mom was there, not the girls we were at school, not the girls we were when we were alone.

I don't remember my precise transgression that night of the knife. I remember he thought wasn't focusing enough on my studies, was too involved with my new boyfriend—they weren't paying all that money for me to go to an Ivy League college just so I could diddle with some stupid kid from Vermont. I asked to talk to him alone and he made a big show of being reluctant to give it to me, like it was a Big Ask and he really thought it was better if we all talked as a family but ok, we would go take the dog for a walk, and I could talk to him then.

I had only that short amount of time to make my case. I was going to ask for it to stop. He'd said he'd only continue with the sex between us, the sex he said was for my own healing, until I was a healthy woman in a secure and happy relationship—and now I had a boyfriend I loved, and wanted to just be with him. I was going to take my stepfather at his word, despite the fact that it had never been good before.

I clipped my black lab's leash to her collar; my stepfather and I put on our coats and walked outside into the cold November night

When we were outside, he was distant, irritable: So, out with it. I don't have all night, and it's freezing out here. What's this big important thing you need to say? He was rushing me, trying to trip me up by hurrying my words.

I said, I think I want to end the sexual part of our relationship. That's almost surely the language I used. I explained about the boyfriend, how close we were getting, how much I loved him—hadn't that been what he'd wanted for me?

He listened. We walked. He got quiet. I'm not sure if I could tell at that point that I'd made a mistake, or how big a mistake it was.

The block was dark and quiet, and my dog sniffed along the neighbor's lawns as we passed house after house. No one else was out. This wasn't a neighborhood where folks hung outside chatting with one another, even in the summer. I remember, ridiculously, feeling hopeful. Maybe it could end.

My stepfather asked questions, pushed back. I forget what arguments I made. I have a boyfriend now, and want to focus on building something with him. Maybe I talked about being away from home, away at school. Maybe I said how grateful I was for his “help.” I couldn't exactly use the old line, *I hope we can still be friends*. It was a weird kind of breakup attempt. Maybe I said I wanted him just to be a dad. I have no clear memory of any of it, besides that walk in the quiet dark and how I had the guts to actually ask him to stop, after all those years.

We can talk about it more, he said.

Back inside, he told my mom and sister to go up to bed. It was late by that time—maybe already after midnight. They gave him concerned looks—was he really all right to stay up so late dealing with me? Mom worried about his blood sugar.

Jennifer and I still need to talk, he said, and there's no use in all of us getting no sleep. I'll be up soon, he reassured my mom.

So my mom and sister went to their bedrooms upstairs, and my stepfather and I walked through the kitchen to the bare wood stairs that led to the basement, into his and mom's home office.

Eventually, this space would be transformed into a single bedroom where my sister and I stayed when we were home from school, conveniently putting a floor between where he'd come to visit us in the mornings and where mom slept and showered on the second floor. But then, in my freshman fall, it was still unfinished, plain drywall, cold grey concrete floor, a ceiling covered in perforated white tiles. The room was lit by a bare bulb that hung from the ceiling. He pulled a chair over from mom's desk for himself, and he situated me at the rolling chair at his desk, turned on his brass desk light and adjusted it so it shone in my face. I did not move from that chair again for the rest of the night.

He didn't start out with the knife. At first we were still just talking. He kept his voice quiet, modulated, building his case, though I cannot tell you what case he made, how he pushed back on my request, what rational reason he came up with for refusing, what excuse or story he told about why we couldn't stop, why he wasn't going to stop. The time all around that night undulates in my memory, like fluid.

Eventually he took the knife down from the beam and he held it in his hands. He probably told me again the story about its making, how his father came to have it and

pass it on to his son. Then he took one of my hands gently in one of his, and rested the knife at my wrist.

I can't tell you the words he said then, either. You'd think they'd be etched in my brain, but they're a low murmur, background noise to the image of that knife against the skin of my wrist.

We weren't going to stop. He wasn't going to let me stop. Unless I agreed to continue, to say I was wrong, he might not even let me out of the room. He could do anything he wanted to me, he said. He could anally rape me (I do remember that specific threat) and kill me, and tell mom and my sister that it was self-defense. (*Anal rape was self defense?* I thought, but did not, of course, say.) He told me they would believe him, and I knew they would—he would tell them a convincing story. He would weep real tears, wail with grief and apology: he hadn't wanted to do it, but I'd given him no choice. I'd attacked him with his father's knife. He'd had to protect himself. It had been an accident.

I'd seen him perform this way. There was no question about what he was telling me. He would kill me if I didn't take back what I'd asked, but I couldn't just take it back: I had to convince him I *wanted* to keep going. He never went for simple capitulation and acquiescence. He never liked the surface to show his force. He required not just acceptance, but request. We had to put on a show he could believe. So I begged.

He did not cut me, he did not dig in with the knife, but held the promise of that cut to me all the way through the night. Some part of me waits for it still.

As the sun rose, we heard my mom and sister moving around upstairs; it was time to be done with this. He looked to me for reassurance, and I smiled, and nodded. I apologized again. I understood why I was wrong. He fitted the knife back on the post, amid the nails that marked its place. By the time we went back up to the kitchen, the sun had risen. The others were astonished he'd been up all night with me. My stepfather wore the big, relieved smile of a parent who believes his child is *really going to make a change this time*. He hugged my mother, and then my mother hugged me, after giving me a searching look: *Is this for real? Are you going to deal with your shit?* She wanted to be hopeful, but she was wary.

Underneath this hopeful bombast was the smile of the predator who'd won. Maybe he made me have sex later that day. I'm sure I promised to, and he was so tired, he'd explained, of having to chase me for it.

Skin

The sisters formulated a plan.

On a certain afternoon, the elder girl did not fight much when Prince Charming came for her, and while he moved over her, her sister tiptoed through the castle halls until she reached the secret room; she refused to look inside, to see the many parts of herself there. She slipped behind the door, and hoped that her mother would not see her. When Prince Charming spent, he panted a moment on top of the older sister, greasy and slick, then grinned into her face at what he always took for her desire. Her stomach churned. He stood, dressed himself, picked up the bits of her he'd peeled away—the underside of her tongue, a layer of wrist—and clicked his heels together sharp like a porter and touched two fingers of his free hand to his brow in salute, then laughed at the thought of himself in service to anything, or anyone.

The younger sister heard his footfalls well before she could see him. He reached the room with a spring in his step and leaned across the threshold to toss his step-child's bits into his collection. He stood a moment, gazing into the dark, dank room; it smelled of power and decay. The younger daughter made no sound as she pushed the door, surprising Prince Charming; he gave a sharp shout, stumbled forward, inside, and the younger daughter bolted the door, locked it behind him. A great howl went up from

within the secret chamber. The door rattled fiercely, but he could not break it open. Now all there was to do was wait.

Inside the room, the darkness was thinned by northern light from a small, high window. Prince Charming almost did not feel it when the bits began to move, to crawl toward him. Those secret stolen shreds of body, dried now, moved toward the prince like metal filings drawn by a magnet. His lungs filled with the scent of death. They began to gather around him, small piles that grew larger. He could see the pieces as they crept. He was frozen but was it with fear? He kicked at them, tried to shove them away, but it was no use, it was no use—there were so many, after all those years: flayed palms of hands, slices of thigh, peels of eyelids, hollows carved from beneath arms or behind ears. He kicked them back but the pieces kept coming.

Outside the doors, the elder sister had recovered and tiptoed to join her sister. The girls risked smiling at one another. Their plan was working.

The piles of flesh pushed up, up, on either side of Prince Charming; tight to his body, pinning his arms to his sides. Slivers of flesh slid up along his legs. Something crept into the webbing between his fingers, tacky and warm, but he could not close his hands or pull them away, could not shake anything off. The piles grew until they reached his shoulder, his chin, and suddenly they began to take shape, expand outward.

On either side of him, the bits of flesh had gathered into the shapes of girls—hairless, of course, and without eyes but with a place where eyes would go, lips made of

earlobe and labia, the whole face a rotting mosaic of loss, a piecing together again of what was taken, like Humpty Dumpty if he had been torn apart by wolves and left to fester and decay. The girls made of bits of skin and grief, they did not speak, but reached with their reanimated arms, touched Prince Charming's face, his throat. A moan like a cold wind pushing through an icy forest issued from one of the skin-beings; the other opened the pieces that made up its mouth and sang a note so sharp it tore open Prince Charming's ears and made them bleed; frightened him so much he soiled himself; caused a chill to take hold his bones; slapped across his face and forced his mouth open. Then the skin-beings pressed the formulations of fingers at the ends of the things that looked like arms deep between the prince's lips. He gagged at the smell. One after another, these girl bits filled his cheeks; when he tried to bite, he found himself repulsed by the texture, and vomited. The bits that had been ejaculated thus simply began to climb again, though they now left a trail of bile along his body. The fingers fell apart in the humidity of the prince's mouth, and the scraps filled his throat. The skin-girls pushed with the pieces gathered into knuckle and palm until those fell apart and were forced down his throat as well; the prince began to choke and cough, but the beings made up of the morsels of the girls he had been disassembling all those years clung to him, held him upright as he grew weak, whispered shrieks and moans and hiccupping sounds that were the closest they could come to laughter.

Mythical creatures

We are fire eaters we take what was lit to us what scorch or shame
 what hard strike what livid blush and bruise and we consume we are the
 girls and boys who were not meant to live or breathe or sing or tell the tales we are
 the caravans of wonder we hold every inch of history in our feathered throats
 we are unbargained for we are unwon prizes we sit on the shelves growing dusty
 over years until finally we learn enough to brush the sawdust off our faces climb
 down off the wooden planks and follow the strong women the bearded lady the
 tiny girl the lady lion tamer back into the performer's tent and watch them laugh
 together without all their masks on we understood that we were freaks and that made us
 kin we knew too much we ate books for breakfast and fathers for dinner we sat
 unmitigated when the teachers at school told us that we should never let strangers touch
 us *Oh, ok, strangers but this one in the house is safe?* we were the ones who let
 the girls kiss us when they said they just wanted to practice who pursued boys to get them
 to put their hands down our pants we were the kids in tight second-hand Benneton
 sweaters and our cousins' old jeans and too many piercings that we weren't supposed to
 be old enough to get but the guy at the shop liked looking down our shirts or maybe he
 just remembered needing a hole with metal through it to show the world how he'd been
 ruptured we were the ones too quiet or loud we wore headphones every second

we were rule-followers or we cut school altogether we were the ones flaunting
something no one was even supposed to want we ate up the low score on the multi-
hundred-point purity test openly claiming the stuff that usually turned faces red with
embarrassed astonishment *Really, a parent? A sibling?* we just shrugged drank
from the opaque red cups said, *Next question* wore our scores and scars proudly
we learned to eat what they fed us and take nourishment from it we learned to strip the
birch bark from a switch and suckle at its sweet underbelly we were the thing they were
afraid of after they taught us not to show any fear after they taught us how not to flinch
we learned we could choose to open our mouths wider we could claim we chose to
let it enter us even if it was going to push its way in anyway we could decide to
turn it to fire to butterfly wings to shadow to grace.

Secret

Cinderella became aware that something unusual was happening in the hallway, in the secret room. She listened to the silence, then heard a gurgled cry, a short scream. She tore off her chains, scraping her wrists and ankles in her haste, so that she bled. She gave a banshee wail, then Cinderella came flying from the room, her skirts in a whirl, her hair wild. *No*, she screamed, and it was the sound of a window breaking. *No!* The howl of an animal in a trap. *No!*

There were her two girls at the secret door—the prince’s secret door that no one was to enter, that no one was to close. The muted scream issued again from behind the door, and the girls looked at Cinderella with eyebrows raised, worry and hope creasing their foreheads, lips pressed together; their backs were to the door.

The girls broke apart inside as their mother shoved them away, slid back the bolt, used all of her weight to pull open the heavy door to the secret room. There was her husband, slumped between the two piles of flesh. *No!* she screamed again, and the piles, the skin-beings, shattered and fell to the stone floor, motionless.

Cinderella caught Prince Charming as he crumpled, folded herself beneath him, rested his head in her lap, and she whispered soothing sounds at him as she gingerly fingered from between his lips the shards and shreds of her daughters. She pulled and flung, not looking at what he had taken from them before she tossed each bit away; she

gazed only at what they had tried to take from her. She cleared his throat as gingerly as she might have for her daughters once upon a time. As she cleared the last bit of flesh from Prince Charming's mouth, he began to weep. *They don't love me, Cinder. I try so hard with them.* Cinderella cradled Prince Charming's head, surrounded by the pieces of her children he had torn away over the years; she ran a hand over his hair, used a thumb to smooth the creases in his forehead, *I know, I know, shush.* The wounds on her wrists left red smears on his cheek and chin.

The girls, prone on the floor in the hall where their mother had shoved them, watched in shock. The younger one saw it first, turned to her sister and mouthed *secret*. The elder sister raised eyebrows in confusion, then glanced back.

Too many hands: his own and their mother's.

They watched, and something blossomed open within each of the girls. The elder one looked at her sister, and the younger gave a shrug, then a nod. The older one moved slowly, inched herself toward the door while Prince Charming wept and Cinderella comforted. Once she had inched close enough to the door, she rose, got behind it, and shoved the door closed once again. The younger one pulled the heavy wooden bolt into place. Then they stood still, ears to the wood, shivering with shock. *You see?* the prince said. *Yes, shhh,* said their mother. Then a silence.

The low moan again, the shriek. The coughs and gags, then nothing. For a long time, nothing.

The sisters sat on the cold stone floor outside the secret room, listening to the sounds that had been Cinderella and Prince Charming; then, later, listening to the silence. They waited, not frozen exactly, but not at all sure they were safe yet. They hadn't imagined their mother would go with him. They looked at one another, each searching for the unspeakable thing in the other's eyes: she had chosen him. They did not say it a loud.

Their eyes fell to the floor, and they inhaled the castle's grey chill. Then the elder sister noticed something else: Her hands balled into fists, her sister's hands resting on the wood, as though to hold the door in place if needed. Their hands.

Among all the hands in the castle there is a secret, and within that secret will be the answer you seek.

They sat outside the room, their bodies releasing something, relinquishing, moving away from what had been armor and stone. It was an inside place in each of them that listened, a broken, swollen place that wondered *Is it going to be safe to come out?* They sat for hours or months, they sat for days. Somewhere in the castle, a bell was rung, calling them down for supper. Somewhere steel rang against stone. Somewhere, faintly, they could still hear their mother pacing the halls of the castle, her single glass slipper ringing out, *clink silent, clink silent, clink silent, silent, silent.*

They waited. They held hands. They listened. They waited some more.

Fairy tale

Hours later, the old cook had one of her apprentices go up to the private royal chambers, open the secret room. He was to load the bodies into carts and toss them in the town burial pit. He did as he was told with the beasts he found there—one limbed with endless tentacles, the other might have been a woman, had it not been rusted from the inside out. Then he was to return to the room and, using a broom with flaxen bristles and a large satchel made of silk, gather the bits and pieces he found strewn around the stone floor. He was to take them out to the edge of the royal gardens and gently scatter them along hedgerow and rose trellises. The apprentice made many trips, filled the satchel again and again and again with the brown-grey remnants. He did not know why he wept as he gathered. After many hours, or a week, or a year, the room was empty, the floor polished. Inside the room, the girls placed a single rocking chair with a swaddling blanket draped over the back.

The girls remained in the castle, and for a time, lived as happily ever after as anyone could in such circumstances—and if there were innumerable butterflies of all shapes and colors in the gardens and forests that year, neither the cook nor the girls spoke about it. The sisters simply stood in the fields on sunny days and allowed themselves to be surrounded; the butterflies brushed their lips, fluttered in their hands and in their hair.

Godmother

Did you want to be a woven tongue? Did you try for the bones in the back of the hall? She scattered her magic everywhere, then flew away, not able to stand this place one more minute, and so we were left to gather the pieces. We were left with fragments around our feet, nudging them into piles, waving our fingers over them in pale imitation of her power.

Please, we whispered the magic word. *Please*. But it didn't work. We weren't anybody's sorceresses. He still came into the room in the middle of the day. He wanted to find us naked and ready. He wanted us to request his presence in our bodies, but we never did, which hurt his feelings and made him angry. He wanted a place in our lives like a boyfriend got, something giggly and nervous and soft. But he was a grown man breaking into our bodies by force, and nothing in us giggled at the sight of him.

In our dreams, she was the bird who called to us. She was the house angel, she was the undeviled thing, the debonair lounge of legs. She wrote us around the corner and asked us to find names for all our calliopes and rusted bolts, the parts jostling and broken. She strung the places where we had come undone through the body of a needle and knitted our wounds, and while we ached into absence, she untapped our memory from its hiding places. She fingered around our frames, listening for the hollow places, and it was there that she began to puncture and crease, pushing her nails into the thin membrane of our security, waiting for the sorrow in us to be revealed. She strung us over, called to us

from beyond the points of the barbed wire that kept us hemmed in, that we had strung around our bodies, reknitting every year, weeping about our confinement. She hovered above us, she called in sharp songs and pierced anguish, she fed us back what we had practiced ignoring. We thought our lives were complete, that recovery had an end date, that locked jaws and noses to the grindstone were the same as serenity, that slivers of joy were all we could hope to have to shiver our bodies awake every so often. She held out the song of the long-view. She whisked her wings before us and revealed plains of cavernous pleasure: oases pumiced with laughter; days, weeks, even, in which our spirits would not be pockmarked by history; stretches of time in which we would not only live within the carapace of loss. And when we reached for those possibilities, she trapped our wrists in her sharp talons, and favored us with her ashen gaze. She said, There is no easy way to this place that I have shown you—my beautiful, you have to go through the pain to get there. And in her broad, brown wings, we saw the years of rage and sorrow, we saw the tears crease down our cheeks, we saw ourselves remembering what we had worked so long to forget. Our bodies were limp with terror. We did not want to walk this way. We had survived: wasn't that enough? But her body clothed itself in the finery of joy before us, and though we didn't know enough to say we wanted what she revealed, we felt something enter us: the only way through the history is to remember and move forward anyway. And little by little, one tender or broken or strong step at a time, as we remembered and wept, as we grieved and raged, we saw shreds of silver light at the edges of our clouded dawn, felt pinfeathers begin to pierce our shoulderblades.

Ding dong

I was fifteen-hundred miles away when they were arrested. My sister was still in the state where we'd grown up and been taken apart, having abided by a detective's request that to stay longer so that she could call the people we called our parents and get them to say incriminating things on tape. She was twenty-one. I was twenty-four. The police first asked her to call our stepfather, try and get him talking about sex. They wanted a recording of the sorts of things he'd say when he called us at school: "sharing" sexual fantasies or listening to us masturbate or asking for the details of recent sexual encounters. One of the last times I'd had one of those phone calls, he'd been in the middle of having sex with my sister; he put the phone on speaker, so I could talk to them both at the same time. We'd joked about how fun it would be when I came home for Christmas with my then-boyfriend, but then I left the family and that fun Christmas trip never happened.

My sister hadn't had a call like that with our stepfather in months, and knew he'd be suspicious. So the police set up their recording equipment and, with strange men all around her, my beautiful, haunted sister picked up the receiver and dialed our mother's number instead. And our mother told my sister that we shouldn't go to the police. It's all I remember now about that call—that our mother told my sister not to contact the police about what our stepfather had been doing to us.

Our stepfather was arrested the next day. Our mother was taken, too. She was in jail overnight; he hasn't come back out again.

During the six months she was required to refrain from contacting us, our mother filed for bankruptcy and sold the cold, grey house where we'd all lived. She had no money to pay for a storage unit, so to the dump went all of her children's belongings, the boxes of childhood we'd left in the attic, the remnants of high school selves left in our bedroom. Gone were notes exchanged with friends, old photos, high-school essays, pictures we'd drawn and saved, books, dolls, junior-high and high-school yearbooks—the fragmentary total of our lives that we'd imagined we could one day sit down with to help us piece together a sense of the selves we'd been, a timeline of what we lived through, what we became. All this our mother threw away as she shed that skin, as she fled the marriage that had turned her into someone who could tell her child, *Don't tell anyone about this. Don't go to the police.*

We had to build our memories from the shards that we had left.

A week before the arrest, my sister and father and I sat together in front of a deputy county attorney's big desk. The air in the room was heavy, the attorney's desk dark wood, and full of papers. The deputy county attorney we'd been assigned was tall, white, dark-haired, no-nonsense. Her name's right at the tip of my tongue, slips off, is

gone. Outside the morning warmed up, the prairie alive with a thick humidity animated by crickets and the rhythmic wheeze of cicadas.

We didn't know if we'd be able to do it. We'd flown back to this place just to sit in the office of this deputy county attorney and say our stepfather's name aloud.

We knew she wouldn't believe us. We knew her mouth would drop open in shock. We knew she would tell us we were wrong. Everyone knew him in this place. He'd been an expert witness for child abuse cases in this very courthouse. He was friends with lawyers and judges, had connections, he said, to secretive government agencies. Wasn't he a proven ally to abused children? We knew this deputy county attorney would get on the phone with him as soon as we left the room to tell him what we had done, that we had finally betrayed him, betrayed his trust in us.

My sister and I sat in the big dark chairs across from the attorney. We explained why we were there, explained that we were nervous, and that we were sure she wouldn't believe us. The county attorney wasn't impatient, exactly. *Just try me*, she might have said. I looked at my sister, who shook her head.

I took a deep breath.

Outside the deputy county attorney's office, all the government officials in their dark suits, their skirts and pumps, walked slowly from one building to the next, enjoying the July morning. Just a few blocks away was our high school, and less than a mile in the other direction was the college psychology building where our stepfather had an office,

where he'd first introduced me to the movies he said would help me learn to have a healthy sexuality.

We sat in the deputy county attorney's office and hesitated, held our breath, looked and didn't look at each other. I couldn't do this without my sister.

Then my sister changed her mind. Ok, she said. We'll tell you.

I don't remember which of us said his name. Maybe we both did. The deputy county attorney said, Who?—her voice almost dismissive.

We said his name again.

Never heard of him, she shrugged. She wanted to reassure us, to undercut all he had told us about his importance and influence, bolster our courage. I don't believe she was lying. I think she didn't know him, had never heard his name. But rather than feel relieved, I felt hoodwinked and ashamed.

The County Attorney sent us immediately to the police station to make statements to the detectives—she knew we lived out of state, that we were only in town for a short trip, and she wanted to get this thing moving.

We could have backed down then. We had a chance to change our minds, to walk to our cars rather than to the police station.

But we didn't. We kept going.

Journey

They pushed open the heavy oak door that separated the castle and kingdom from the rest of the world. It took all four of their hands, the combined work of all their muscles, to create a wide enough space for them to slip through. It may have taken months of effort—neither is quite sure about that now. First one pushed, then the other took over when the first grew weak and gave up. Only at the end did they work together, one with her hands flat on the wood, heels dug in, the other with her back pressed to the planks, eyes shut tight, jaw clenched. There was no sound when the space around the door became blue and pale with light. The elder one peered out, tentative, her long hair blowing about her face. Her sister snuck her head out, too, eyes scanning the bright green hills, the forest in the near distance, the rutted path that led away from the castle, and the cloudy red sky above. There was a full kind of quiet—no human sound, just the wind pushing the branches of an elm tree so that the leaves whispered, *Hush now—hurry*. A bird and her mate called to each other across the sunrise that had stained the horizon red, orange. Neither sister mentioned blood. Neither sister spoke of what had been left behind in the secret room. They stepped one after the other across the threshold. There was no thunderclap, no bolt of lightning to strike them with char. Only the sound of quiet footsteps, the girls finding their own rhythm, still waiting for a cold hand or rageful shout to reach out from behind, grab their collars, haul them back –

Once upon a time

Someday I'll be able to write the whole story. I'll be able to move through the bubble of the stories that have become comfortable by now after years of recitations, and unmask the broken layers, the parts that are uncertain and murderous still, the parts that didn't save me, that I never offer up for public consumption. All the times I was not strong, the terror of those words unfurled, my tongue like a bloody ribbon, where I dance around sisterness like a tender-footed girl on hot coals.

The facts are straightforward and can be said, if only in the passive voice: Two girls were abused, me and her, and were pitted against one another as adolescents can be, I guess, or all women or all people—pitted against each other, and so I felt shame when he said she was more willing to do a thing, she was more capable, sexually confident: my baby sister the envy what a time for sibling rivalry to latch against your bones. She would tell me much later that none of it was true none of his silvery claims about what she would or would not do were true.

She would tell me later that he said the same things about me.

It took a half a dozen years to know this, to say these words to each other, and it's been another twenty years since, and still there are words we cannot say still we're afraid to tell each other the rest afraid to reveal our brokenest pieces, to peel away the thick layers of shame. To scour out what we wished not to be true, show how it stays

written on us anyway, a matter of the facts of our love, the things we both will and won't regret, how we betrayed each other to survive and how terrible a fact gratitude can be.

We aren't susceptible to the same names anymore. My sister and I sit side by side on a plain couch and you don't see the horror that sits with us. We look grounded, healthy, whole. You don't see where loss has peeled flesh from the backs of our necks or the insides of our thighs, where our palms are scarred by touch neither of us wanted to apply to the other's body. You don't see the girls we once were crowding us there on the couch in a quiet room with unadorned walls. We are three and five, ten and twelve, seventeen and nineteen; we are here with each other, we are gone. The ghost bodies, the girls who could not speak, the women who drank enough red wine to erase what we knew and didn't want to know. Who drank enough wine to erase a decade from our lives. Who drank enough wine to make sense of these bodies and all they held. Who learned there would never be enough wine to make sense of the man who entered our mother's life and through her entered into the delicate and brutal filigree of the nuance we were each becoming—and so we drank more wine in order to render everything in the world lipid and loll and tear. We cried, each of us alone, across the country from one another, and each had to let the other go, again, in order to keep ourselves alive.

We sit next to each other and look whole and contained, though the room is full to bursting with what enters the room whenever we set eyes on each other—all those lost girls, the parts of us that didn't live and the parts that did, occupy the same room, breathe the same clammy, clouded air.

Safe

It ends here, she told him.

She stood at the doorway with a suitcase at her ankles and a hastily-stuffed duffel bag slung over her shoulder. She stood next to the bed with a kitchen knife in her hand, the raw silk robe he'd bought her for Christmas that year falling open, untied. She grasped the phone receiver in two hands, trying to keep the room from spinning and listened to him breathe into the silence that clipped back in and rode hard as soon as she closed her mouth.

The day before she'd overheard him on his office phone telling someone else a story he'd told her once, about a third wife in an ancient Chinese court who was expected to service her new husband's least savory appetites. He smiled at her during dinner, their plates smeared with her crockpot chicken cacciatore and wilted iceberg lettuce drowned in ranch dressing, his eyes waiting until her mother had glanced back down to her meal before flashing feral; *let's you and me go for a ride after dinner*, he said. He left a message on her dorm room answering machine, demanding she call him back: *Quit slutting around and call me*, the tape played back for her. *I've got your sister here*.

The week before that she secretly looked up the price of plane tickets to Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Madawaska, places where the rent was cheap and the winters long and cold enough to freeze the place in her that had called what she felt for him love,

the place in her that had believed herself *mother*. Then she cleared the browser's cache, and did not buy a ticket anywhere. The week before she wrote in her journal: I hate him. I don't even care if he reads this. Fuck you, if you're reading this. I hope one of your patients has a break down and kills you. Then she tore out the page and burned it in the upstairs bathroom, over the toilet bowl, and flushed the ashes that looked like terraced storm clouds down the drain. A week before, she snuck out of her dorm room—even though he was 1,967 miles away and couldn't see her, she still crept around like an escaping prisoner, a kept thing—wearing short shorts over bright flower-print tights, black Doc Martin boots and a denim shirt cut off at the sleeves, the ends tied up at her waist like Daisy Duke used to wear it. She ignored the ringing phone (the phone was always ringing), and once the building's security doors slammed hard behind her, she ran *ran* to frat row, where the loud and drunk and grind could be found.

At the beginning of that season, she'd watched him strike her daughter across the face and swallowed the scream the rage that burst into her throat like an opened vein, she swallowed the screams the way he'd taught her and her body turned inward around her abdication, erupted, and turned her to ash. At the beginning of that season, she signed up for every club and after-school group that would have her, so that she wouldn't have to go home—he was always there after school now, his eyes always undressing her even when she was already naked; then he seemed to be looking beneath even her skin. She signed up for German and yearbook and little magazine and choir and math club and even chess—surely he wouldn't complain about chess—but he made her go back the next day

and tell all the teachers who were faculty sponsors for the clubs that she couldn't join, she'd changed her mind; the teachers believed her when she said she had too much work to do at home. None of her teachers asked what the work was. At the beginning of that season, she'd fallen in love with a girl in her Asian Art History survey course—he wanted to know why she sounded so strange on the phone the next weekend and she told him. She told him. He told her mother to hang up and he said, *We're not paying the tuition for that place just for you to go lez out. Do that on your own time. You check in with me every day from now on, do you hear me. You know you're susceptible to shit like this—don't let some bulldagger turn you away from dick.*

The year before he turned his rage on her like a loosed firehose when she tried to comfort the daughter who was crying after he'd put his arm around the girl's throat and squeezed—he screamed, *What is the matter with you? Don't get hooked by her manipulations, for fuck's sake. She just wants you to get all motherly, come to her rescue, do her work for her. She's responsible for the consequences of her rebellion.* The year before her sister left for college 1,967 miles away and then there was no one who would stand between her body and his. The year before she was a freshman at a prestigious East Coast college whose prestigious East Coast roommate didn't understand why she sat in the bathroom and cried for an hour after she got off the phone with her mom and dad.

Five years earlier, she came home, exhausted after work but grateful to find her new husband cuddling her two daughters on the couch in front of the television; he had moved them out of her tiny post-divorcee apartment and into his big house. He told her

he wanted to take care of her, them, make something easier for her, who'd worked so hard since the girls' father had left. Five years earlier he came into her new bedroom, the one with the bare wood floors and a secret closet behind french doors (where she'd put the two sparkly pink t-shirts and a Crayola art kit he'd brought her); he sat on the edge of her twin bed, next to her sleepy body, he ran his hands under the covers, over her nightshirt, then under the nightshirt, he was quiet a minute and then he said, *Do you like the things I got you?* Five years ago he cried into her mother's arms, *I just love you all so much*, he said, *I don't know why she's so hostile, so resistant*. Her mother stroked his back, gave her a weary look over his wide, shuddering shoulder. The look said, *We need this. Shape up.*

Two years before that, he'd knocked at the front door of their brick duplex apartment in the cheapest part of the best school district in midtown, and their mother had come to the front room, her short hair curled back from her face, all dressed up in her favorite white silk shirt tucked into wide-leg jeans and the tan boots with platform soles. Before she opened the door, she turned to her girls and gave them a look that was smile at the bottom and worry at the top. *He's here*, she said, *the man I want you to meet. Be nice, ok, be polite. I think he's going to be spending a lot more time with us, the therapist friend I told you about, remember?* She didn't wait for a response. She opened the hollow wood door and pushed out the rusting screen door, and the girls stood by their mother's second-hand couch, not touching, not moving, and looked up at what their mother had brought them.

Epilogue

Once upon a time, *once upon a time* made sense to say, or think, or imagine.

My sister was explicitly shamed by our stepfather and mother for believing in fairy tales. They accused her of getting lost in fantasy, of *magical thinking*.

But listen: living the way we did and choosing to stay alive, how could we not become magical thinkers?

If we wanted to survive, we had to think magically. We had to believe it when he or our mother told us things were going to get better. We had to believe him each time he said he would not hurt us. We had to believe him when he told us he only wanted the best for us, he would only go this far and no farther—and then, later, no, really, no farther than this next step here.

One of the most fucked up things about abuse is that we are berated for exactly the traits we develop in order to survive.

We watched and read fairy tales to escape. Everything around us was a fairy tale. Growing up was a fairy tale. Going to college, getting a job, getting away: All of these were fairy tales. We wanted a beast or a dragon or a monster, something visible and obvious. We separated from ourselves. Something was unbecoming. In the fairy tale,

Gretel saves her brother from the witch. In the fairy tale, the children are saved. The children save themselves, and then they save each other.

Paying close attention to fairy tales served us. Late-night talks led deep and far into the night, during which we had to hold on to our own thoughts while our mouths made the shape of the poisoned words he'd fed us. In the old stories, the evil character has the forked tongue. Yet, we were the ones who learned to say two things at once—*yes/no, I trust you/please don't touch me, I will evolve/can I please just go to bed now?*

We became our own island of Misfit Toys. Did we believe someone get washed up on the shores and be able to save us from him? Who could save us, when all the adults were afraid, when we were left to our own devices, and our own devices were not enough? Clubs, boyfriends, homework—we tried to put all of it between ourselves and him, but none of it worked for very long. We didn't have folk tales or guardians or god, no protectors, not even the idea of one—and he knew it. He easily cleared them out of the way, one by one. It was the first fairy tale and horror story in the world: Mother brings home rapist, leaves him with her daughters. It happens every single day.

My sister was the siren song, the nymph in the woods, Helen of Troy—there was light in her all of the time. He hid her from herself, though he could not hide her from me. But he stole her to the underworld, and our mother was too occupied to go looking for a lost daughter. I fell into my own winter, and gagged when he began to push the pomegranate seeds between my lips.

We didn't have any spells and our grandmothers' grandmothers had lost the old languages, generations before we were born. There were no incantations, no fires we could light beneath him. All we'd been taught was how to burn. Once upon a time, our mother taught us to stand up for ourselves and tell the truth. And then she taught us to bend and fold and simper and swallow our tongues. She taught us to hang ourselves up for the taking. She taught us to hide in plain sight, hide beneath him, hide when he was yelling, hide inside our capitulation. We were Bluebeard's wives, sure we would get put in the closet behind the locked door with the other bodies and no one would come to look for us, no one would ask after our hidden bones. The room with the skeletons was when one of us said aloud what was really happening. Then he brought out his knives, showed us the bloody key, promised to kill us for knowing and speaking. For years, there were no magic words. Ours was a house of vaults that no one else could unlock.

No one rode up on a thunder of steeds to kill him and rescue us. We had to be our own saviors, which meant we had to convince ourselves that we were worth saving. We had believed we were not worth saving. We knew we were no one's heroines. The heroines always get rescued.

The secret is that the stories' hope lived in our veins, though we didn't know it for years and years—the ancient possibility of brazen girls, wise and terrifying old women, led us through the darkest chapters of the woods. The voice of the oldest knowing whispering through our bones, telling us that it would not be an easy path, but if we were ready for the journey, and trusted our own hands, we would eventually find a way home.