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# Lizard Girl and Other Girl Stories

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Melinda Beth Keefauver entitled "Lizard Girl and Other Girl Stories." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Michael Knight, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Allen Wier, Margaret L. Dean, John Nolt

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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**Lizard Girl  
and other girl stories**

A Dissertation Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Melinda Beth Keefauver  
August 2011

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**Dedication**

*for Boone Keefauver Bowman*

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All artists would be lost without models, and I am indebted to innumerable writers whose works have provided sources of inspiration, guidance, and instruction on the craft of fiction writing. I want to especially acknowledge the models that influenced the stories in this collection: Rick Bass's "Swamp Boy," Eudora Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O.," Ellen Gilchrist's "Victory Over Japan," Tobias Wolff's "Bullet in the Brain," Eric Puchner's "Essay #3: Leda and the Swan," and Raymond Carver's "The Student's Wife."

Letting go of my first collection is bittersweet. I still think of these stories as works in progress, with two exceptions. I want to thank in advance the following journals for publishing these stories: *Pisgah Review* for "Skin," and *Cutthroat Journal* for "Lizard Girl."

## Abstract

This dissertation addresses the notable lack of the comic mode in contemporary ecofiction and aims to integrate humor and ecological inflection through the female narrative voice. Comedy and ecology rarely intersect in literary fiction. Ecofiction tends to be unfunny because the category grows out of the nonfiction tradition of nature writing, a genre that yields solemn, reverent, meditative essays that lack humor. Also, works of ecofiction can seem didactic, lacking the complexity, richness, and ambiguity that characterize literary fiction. Furthermore, literary critics often view comedic stories as lacking in literary quality. However, comedy has an intensifying effect on narrative, imbuing tragic moments with greater darkness and eliciting conflicted emotions in the reader. Literary fiction is characterized by this kind of ambiguity, evidenced by some of the finest works of contemporary literary short fiction that integrate comedy and tragedy.

Accordingly, I aim to write comic stories that are imbued with loss, darkness or loneliness. Ecofiction provides a ripe context for my work, as does the young female voice. Ecofiction stems from the modern predicament of rootlessness, alienation, transience, isolation—of our *detachment from* place. Stories that feature characters afflicted by this malaise are “eco” in the sense that they make us more aware of our contemporary relationship (or lack thereof) to the natural world. Most significantly, these stories are ripe for the intersection of comic and tragic. In my own stories, I strive to create comic female first person narrators whose actions reveal lives deeply afflicted by loneliness, placelessness, and disconnection, and whose inner wildness provides the primary source of comic

dramatic tension. These protagonists are motivated by a desperate need to forge meaningful connections in a world that is precariously poised on a foundation of contingencies and whose stories are simultaneously hilarious and heart-wrenching.

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## Introduction

### Girls Gone Wilder: Gender, Comedy, Ecofiction

Comic ecofiction is a rare beast. As a writer, I am obsessed with what is wild and funny, but comic stories rarely integrate ecological themes, and works of ecofiction rarely elicit laughter. This presents a challenge for the writer of comic ecofiction in that there are few models for our craft. Is there something inherently unfunny about the natural world? How might comic stories effectively integrate ecological inflection? Is setting such a goal even necessary or useful? For me, the female narrative voice bridges these disparate obsessions and has culminated in the “girl stories” herein. Yet, I remain captivated by this question: why do comedy and ecology rarely intersect in literary fiction?

Perhaps our cultural understanding of nature as “other” impedes comic renderings of ecofiction. In her essay “Against Nature,” Joyce Carol Oates proclaims that nature “has no sense of humor: in its beauty, as in its ugliness, or its neutrality, there is no laughter.”<sup>1</sup> Various describing the earth as silent “presence,” a “vast democratic grave,” a “dazzling array of mouths,” Oates humorously ridicules the tendency of writers to romanticize nature as moral, pastoral, or sublime, as well as the reader’s tendency to take these romantic

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<sup>1</sup> Oates, *Woman Writer* (New York: Plume, 1989), 66.

portrayals of nature literally, as legitimate truths that reveal the nature of Nature. We see Oates' vision of nature at work in her fiction. Take, for example, the conclusion of "Where are you going, where have you been":

"My sweet little blue-eyed girl," he said in a half-sung sigh that had nothing to do with her brown eyes but was taken up just the same by the vast sunlit reaches of the land behind him and on all sides of him—so much land that Connie had never seen before and did not recognize except to know that she was going to it.<sup>2</sup>

As Connie looks out, the landscape does not offer her respite or escape, but its expansive presence promises to engulf her. While Oates is comic in her portrayal of a naïve, self-absorbed teenage girl, her landscape is a humorless, foreboding agent in her protagonist's demise. Perhaps Oates' view of nature as humorless results from the conceptual lumping of all things non-human into one category. She opens her essay "Against Nature," for example, with a list of reasons for "the writer's [her own] resistance to Nature," and proceeds to refer to nature as "it" throughout the list, concluding, "There is no other word for it [nature] but *presence*."<sup>3</sup> We can't say exactly what "it" is, but for Oates, we can say for certain that it's not funny.

Of course, nature is not a monolithic "it," but a continually shifting constellation of multiple beings and contingent forces. As writers, what we say about the natural world, how we represent it in fiction and nonfiction alike, says more about ourselves than nature-in-itself. William Cronon addresses this issue at length in his introduction to *Uncommon*

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<sup>2</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been," (*The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women, Vol. 2*, New York: Norton, 2007), 1203.

<sup>3</sup> *Woman Writer*, 68.

*Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (1996). Echoing Oates, Cronon argues, “It is the radical *otherness* of nature with which we have constantly to contend. The fact that it lies forever beyond the borders of our linguistic universe—that it does not talk back to us in a language we can easily understand—permits us to pretend we know what it really is and to imagine we can capture its meaning with the very problematic word ‘nature.’”<sup>4</sup> His book collects the work of scholars from multiple disciplines that provide a thorough contextual analysis of the historical, cultural, and intellectual assumptions that inform our current understanding of “nature.” For example, he argues in his introduction that the concept of “wilderness” is in fact a human creation. Using the example of Indian removal to establish wilderness spaces in America at the beginning of the National Park movement, Cronon contends, “there is nothing natural about the concept of wilderness.”<sup>5</sup> The popular understanding of wilderness “embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural” and “reproduces the dualism that sets humanity and nature at opposite poles.”<sup>6</sup> According to Cronon, grouping all things nonhuman into a single category of otherness is problematic. He contends that nature is a social construction, a word loaded with human values, attitudes, and actions, and the natural world is dynamic, changing, and entangled with human history and popular beliefs. In other words, there is a sociocultural component to nature, and we ought recognize it.

In my fiction, representations of the natural world grow out of this understanding of nature’s heterogeneity, its wildness and its humanity. The concept of “nature” that informs

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<sup>4</sup> William Cronon, *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York: Norton, 1996), 52.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-81.

my fiction encompasses three meanings: 1) wildness, biological instinct or drive to express one's inner nature, 2) earth/landscape, the physical presence of the natural world, and 3) ecology, the patterns of life and dynamic of relationships—human and otherwise—that are in constant motion. Like many fiction writers, my stories begin with a character, and I see my characters as animals who are intimately connected to their cultural and ecological place, whether they resist or embrace or are even aware of that connection. Since I ground my fiction in an inclusive, non-dualistic view of nature, I see my stories as inherently ecologically inflected. After all, fiction may be the most appropriate venue for representing the natural world, since the naming and defining of anything, even scientifically, is an act of imagination.

But Oates has a point: nature is rarely represented in fiction as comic-in-itself. According to Joseph Meeker in his seminal book *The Comedy of Survival* (1974), comedy is essentially biological. As opposed to tragedy, which assumes human consciousness and character transcend biological limitations, “comedy grows from the biological circumstances of life.”<sup>7</sup> Meeker attributes contemporary environmental crises to the tragic view of man, which is unique to Western culture, and argues, “it is time to look for alternatives which might encourage better the survival of our own and other species.”<sup>8</sup> One alternative is the comic mode. According to Meeker, comedy is universal to all cultures and “is the closest art has come to describing man as an adaptive animal.”<sup>9</sup> Meeker suggests that

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974), 158.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

it is the nature of humans to be comic, and that comedy has enabled humans—and all forms of life—to effectively evolve: “evolution itself is a gigantic comic drama.”<sup>10</sup>

If the comic mode is so “natural,” if comedy operates on ecological principles, then why do comedy and ecology rarely intersect in literary fiction? Ecofiction, with a few exceptions, definitively lacks humor. This tendency is clearly evident in Jim Dwyer’s *Where the Wild Books Are: A Field Guide to Ecofiction* (2010), the first comprehensive guide to this growing subgenre. Dwyer codifies ecofiction into major literary genres, including romance, mystery, western, science fiction, fantasy, and young adult. He also utilizes marginal categories such as dystopias, ecofeminism, and paganism to further demonstrate ecofiction’s thematic range. Yet comedy is conspicuously absent from Dwyer’s discussion of nearly two thousand works. One exception is his discussion of Edward Abbey’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), which he defends as a “compelling adventure story” *despite* its “castigat[ion] as a mere comic book”<sup>11</sup> by literary critics. While Dwyer’s guide helps establish a definitive and comprehensive canon of ecofiction, he situates comedic ecofiction on the lower rungs of the literary evolutionary scale through his dismissive approach to the comic mode.

Ecofiction is, largely, a category of interest to critics, scholars and publishers rather than to writers. According to Dwyer, the term “ecofiction” was first used as the title of a 1971 literary anthology of predominantly science fiction stories, and is currently used to describe “fiction that deals with environmental issues or the relation between humanity and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>11</sup> Jim Dwyer, *Where the Wild Books Are: A Field Guide to Ecofiction* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2010), 50.

the physical environment, that contrasts traditional and industrial cosmologies, or in which nature or the land has a prominent role.”<sup>12</sup> The term has since been adopted by ecocritics, literary scholars who pay especial attention to environmental concerns and representations of nature in literature. A relatively new field, ecocriticism was defined in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s by its emphasis on the works of American nonfiction nature writers such as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Edward Abbey, and Terry Tempest Williams, as well as landmark texts that have propelled the American environmental movement, such as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962). In the past two decades, the field has exploded as scholars have made a concerted effort to diversify their critical discussions by considering international literatures, interdisciplinary perspectives, and multiple genres. In my early development as a writer, ecocritical scholarship and the ecofiction subgenre helped me understand from a critical perspective my own interests and concerns as a writer of nature, though not as a writer of comedy.

In regarding nature-as-other, writers tend to use language that represents or addresses the natural world as romantic, pastoral, sublime, silent—the tendency that Oates critiques in her essay “Against Nature.” Ecofiction tends to be unfunny because the category grows out of the nonfiction tradition of nature writing, a genre that yields solemn, reverent, meditative essays that lack humor.<sup>13</sup> Literatures of place have figured prominently in ecocritics’ codification of a loose canon of fictional works because these works centralize

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that Katrina Peiffer effectively argues that seriousness in nature writing does not negate humor and demonstrates the comic appeal of several twentieth century “comic moralist” nature writers in *Coyote at Large* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2000).

rural and wilderness landscapes and the characters that inhabit them.<sup>14</sup> However, they are primarily somber in tone. Notable examples include Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1980), which are often included in course syllabi and reading lists as representative ecofiction.<sup>15</sup> Donna Seaman, whose edited collection of short ecofiction *In Our Nature: Stories of Wildness* (2002) is the first of its kind, includes only one out of fourteen stories that is humorous: Margaret Atwood's "My Life as a Bat." Furthermore, many fictional works classified as ecofiction have been criticized for their didacticism, for lacking the complexity, richness, and ambiguity that characterize literary fiction. Seaman mentions Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* (2000) as an example of ecologically inflected fiction that is heavy-handed in its message.<sup>16</sup>

I have cited only a few examples, but the trend is that most fiction categorized as "eco" is not funny. We are much more likely to encounter literary comedy in urban fiction, as in the short stories of Lorrie Moore and Miranda July, than in ecofiction. On the other hand, critics often view comedic stories as lacking in literary quality, as evidenced above by Dwyer's commentary on Abbey's *Monkey Wrench Gang*. However, comedy has an intensifying effect on narrative, imbuing tragic moments with greater darkness and eliciting conflicted emotions in the reader. As Lorrie Moore has said of her own work, "I suppose most of my stories are prompted by something melancholy or tragic. The texture of the

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<sup>14</sup> As a field, ecocriticism gained momentum from Western Literature Association conferences. See Glen A. Love, "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism," *The Ecocriticism Reader* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> The official web site for the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment provides a searchable database of these syllabi <<http://www.asle.org/site/resources/syllabi/>>. *Housekeeping* is one of few contemporary novels included on the Ph.D. examination reading list for a structured emphasis in Literature and Environment at the University of Oregon.

<sup>16</sup> Donna Seaman, "Many shades of green, or ecofiction is in the eye of the reader," *TriQuarterly* 113 (2002): 9-28.

world I feel is very comedic, but the underlying story of the world is not, and I like that interplay.”<sup>17</sup> Literary fiction is characterized by this kind of ambiguity, evidenced by some of the finest writers of contemporary literary short fiction, such as Flannery O’Connor, who masterfully achieve this intersection of comedy and tragedy. But works of ecofiction, despite literary merits otherwise, tend to miss the comic turn.

I don’t know whether comedy is necessary to the survival of literary fiction, as Meeker suggests, or whether nature is inherently unfunny, as Oates argues, or whether fiction is necessary to the survival of life on our planet, as Seaman implies. But I do know that humor is necessary to the evolution and survival of my own work. Comedy not only enhances the accessibility of fiction, it can also temper didactic tendencies by preventing the writer from taking herself and her cause too seriously. Just as Seaman emphasizes that fiction is more accessible than nonfiction nature writing, and “may be the ideal conduit for introducing ecological thinking to the common reader,”<sup>18</sup> comedy makes literary fiction more accessible to a wider range of readers. At the same time, I feel compelled to make my work mean something, to do more than just entertain, to walk that precarious line between art and politics. As an environmentalist and wilderness advocate, I want to explore the clash and collaboration between civilization and wilderness, and to address our vital need to express our own wildness as animals. True, I must temper my occasional impulse to impart some kind of environmental ethic. But in my best writing, the wild enters my stories at unexpected and sometimes inconvenient moments, and I must wrestle with the

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<sup>17</sup> Helena de Bertodano, “Lorrie Moore Interview,” *The Telegraph* (7 October 2009).

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/authorinterviews/6256085/Lorrie-Moore-interview.html>

<sup>18</sup> Donna Seaman, ed. *In Our Nature: Stories of Wildness* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 4.

wildness within and without my characters until I understand the implications of its presence.

Interestingly, Rick Bass and Jim Harrison, both of whom are self-described writers of the natural world, attribute our contemporary condition of disconnection from nature as a reason for writing. They see writing as a way to re-awaken our ancient connection to wildness in a commercialized, technocratic world.<sup>19</sup> The appeal of ecofiction to me similarly stems from the modern predicament of rootlessness, alienation, transience, isolation—of our *detachment from* place. Stories that feature characters afflicted by this malaise are “eco” in the sense that they make us more aware of our contemporary relationship (or lack thereof) to the wild. Furthermore, these stories are ripe for that delicious intersection of the comic and the tragic, and many contemporary authors have written funny stories that feature dislocated characters. Ellen Gilchrist’s Rhoda Manning, Eric Puchner’s Leda narrator, and several of Lorrie Moore’s and Miranda July’s protagonists are exemplary of those I strive to create: comic female first person narrators whose actions reveal lives deeply afflicted by loneliness, and whose placelessness, disconnection and inner wildness provide the primary source of comic dramatic tension. These characters are motivated by a desperate need to forge meaningful connections in a fragmented world that is precariously poised on a foundation of contingencies, and their stories are simultaneously hilarious and heart-wrenching.

Significantly, the comic stories I most admire and enjoy feature a female protagonist-narrator who is youthful, fiery and defiant, who appears overconfident or self-

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<sup>19</sup> Will Blythe, Ed. *Why I Write: Thoughts on the Practice of Fiction*. (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1998).

serving on the surface, but is cut off from her community and desperately seeking reconnection or belonging in the world. Notable examples include Eudora Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O.," Eric Puchner's "Essay #3: Leda and the Swan," and Ellen Gilchrist's "Victory Over Japan" (among others), and my own stories show their influence. In each of these stories, the female narrator is hilarious, yet as her story unfolds she wavers on the edge of a tragic fall. My favorite stories make me feel both an intense desire to laugh and cry, and conflicted about the particular reasons I feel this way. If a comedic story does not have a thread of darkness, then it is easily dismissed as entertainment only, a means to an end, a joke. I want to write hilarious stories, but I want them to be imbued with loss or darkness, pain or loneliness, whether the conclusion is happy or not.

To this end, my collection consists entirely of "girl stories." For me, the young female perspective is essential to striking the chord of hilarity and hurt. Each of the stories in this collection features a female protagonist whose adaptive instincts and wild impulses provide comic dramatic tension and intensify the narrative, whether the humor is overtly funny or more subtle in effect. While each "girl" exhibits a set of character traits distinctive from the other protagonists, she shares with them a strong sense of self and where she stands in her respective ecosystem, whether she is integrated within or disconnected from it. The comic effect of each story, the level of subtlety or explicitness, is directly related to the protagonist's awareness of her adaptive actions as she negotiates fulfilling her desires within the limits of her ecosystem.

In the title story, "Lizard Girl," the narrator confesses her role in perpetrating the abuse of a girl who adores the wild world and whose collection of deformed frogs tells the

story of the land's contamination with toxic pesticides. The humor is subtle, but points to a larger unawareness and disconnection that afflicts both the mean girls and the community in which they live. "Skin," on the other hand, is overtly comic in its portrayal of Ginger, a self-absorbed teenaged girl, as she prepares for her impending high school beauty pageant. Ginger goes fishing for good luck and unexpectedly catches a turtle, which marks the first moment she shows compassion for something other than herself. More significantly, this encounter with the wild primes her for revelation in the end. In "The Quarry," the darkest story in this collection, the adolescent narrator is entrapped in a small town whose center is a "gaping hole" left by granite miners. While the story reads as a flash fiction portrait that conceals more than it reveals, the quarry provides a rich metaphor for the power dynamic between men and women, industry and nature in the story. By contrast, "The Selected Letters of Sophie O'Day" calls on the reader to laugh at the protagonist's defiant and adventurous character. However, Sophie's loss of innocence and relationship with a sixteen year-old boy, as well as the deep sense of loneliness that permeates her letters, elicit an ambivalent response to her story. The narrative voice of "Flight" oscillates between hyperbolic environmental correctness and lyric transcendence, and this dynamic establishes both comic tone and dramatic tension. The protagonist's passionate desire to commit suicide for a lover conflicts with her environmental ethic, but her fate is ultimately determined by her wild animal impulse. "Snow," the quietest story in this collection, portrays nature as a reflection of the human psyche to signify the protagonist's divided self. Married with a newborn and new house, she has everything she wants, yet yearns for something else. The source of her anxiety is naggingly ambiguous, and she projects this

anxiety onto the landscape around her. Finally, “Women in Literature” takes the form of a college essay that tells the story of a first generation student who wants nothing more than to win her father’s love. While outwardly comic in its portrayal of a first-year student writing about feminist theory, the narrator’s position as an outsider in her own family and the palpable irrelevance of feminist literary criticism to the texture of her life, make it a heartbreaking story that nonetheless opens a window of hope.

I am sometimes asked why I have chosen to write short fiction instead of a novel for this project. In his introduction to the 2007 edition of *The Best American Short Stories*, Stephen King proclaims that the short story is alive, but not particularly well. The good news, he says, is that people are still reading; they’re just not reading short fiction. Why write short fiction instead of a genre more likely to be read? I love reading short stories, which is why I write them. For me, the limits imposed by the short story—let’s say under ten thousand words—are practical and generative. The craft of short fiction is an art as well as a game. I like how there is less time and space to work things out, how each sentence must be infused with meaning, how much is *not* said, how open-ended and ambiguous the conclusions of literary short fiction can be. Also, the spatial and temporal limits of short fiction suggest the physical and biological limits imposed on us as living animals. In this sense, I find short fiction to be a “natural” genre because it resembles the ancient and universal art of spontaneous, performative storytelling. I like to think I could read aloud, perform, or produce films of my stories and my audience would find them wildly funny, as well as darkly unsettling.

Of course, not all stories in this collection are laugh-out-loud funny, just as not all fit neatly into the ecofiction category. Perhaps it is redundant to draw these lines anyway. What work of literary fiction has not portrayed some kind of wildness as the source of dramatic tension or comic relief, even if only within the human characters? As Jim Harrison has said of writers, “we are nature, too, and historically art and literature are as natural as the migration of birds.”<sup>20</sup> My hope is that these girls’ stories glimpse into the dark, hilarious nature of our own wildness.

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<sup>20</sup> Blythe, 154.

## Skin

It's the final night of the Miss Shelby High School Pageant, and I am in the top ten. Aunt Lulu is coming all the way from Nashville, Tennessee to film it on her VHS camcorder. Nobody else in the pageant has a camcorder; I am that lucky.

I'm in the bathroom getting ready when Gramma, who came to live with us after she fell last Christmas, says she needs the bathroom.

"Hold on, I just need to finish curling my hair," I say, looking at her in the mirror so I don't have to mess up my front row curl by turning my head around. I'm trying to make this one piece fall across my face at the perfect angle like Miss Pacolet's in the Miss South Carolina Pageant Daddy took me to last year. I've been using "Olive Eve" Tan Enhancement Cream on my face, which will make this one auburn curl even more radiant.

Well then Gramma gets indignant. "Your hair, that's all you talk about is your hair. There's much more to life than hair, you'll find out soon enough."

It's just like Gramma to try to ruin my night, just because she grew up on a farm. I know she's about to launch into one of her chicken neck wringing stories when she leans forward and squints her eyes until even more crow's feet jump out. I'll tell you this, if my own granddaughter was in a pageant and made it to the top ten and wouldn't have to wring

chicken necks for the rest of her life, I'd be happy as a gnat on a peach. Daddy says our family is moving up in the world.

“God, Gramma,” I say, “this is a once in a lifetime opportunity, and there's plenty of time to go to the bathroom in a minute!” I would have let her but she takes forever with the wheelchair and all.

Then Daddy butts in. “Ginger, let your grandmother go to the bathroom.” He's holding a screwdriver to put up the new light blocking curtains in the guest bedroom where Aunt Lulu will be sleeping. They just built a 24-hour ATM next door, and she's real sensitive.

Gramma just sits there hunched over with that ivory crocheted shawl wrapped around her. She wears that old thing whether it's snowing or sweltering, and today it's sweltering even though it's only April. I'm getting hot just looking at her, which makes my forehead sweat and endangers my aubergine eyeliner.

“I'm almost done!” I say, pulling the curling iron out too soon thanks to everybody yelling at me, which makes this most important ringlet looser than all the others. “Bradley's going to be here soon and I have to have my hair done!”

Bradley is my boyfriend who drives a cherry red '87 Trans Am that says “TEASE ME” across the windshield. He has long hair, which Daddy hates, but he cut it off this afternoon just so he could look nice for the pageant. I can't wait to see.

“Momma,” I yell, “tell Daddy I'm almost done!” Momma doesn't answer. That's how she is, avoiding conflict. She's in the kitchen fixing a special pre-pageant dinner of

London broil in honor of me. And if Gramma weren't here I could sit at the head of the table but that's the only place her wheelchair will fit.

"Now," Daddy says, pointing the screwdriver at me.

"OK, Daddy!" I say as I give my hair the once over with Aquanet.

Gramma fans the air with her hand and squinches up her nose. I step out of the bathroom, bow elegantly, and open my arms toward the door. I'm trying to show respect.

Gramma just stares. She leans forward on her cane, which she always carries even though she's in a wheelchair, and looks me up and down.

"That dress shows too much skin," she says.

She's referring to my evening gown. Daddy bought it for me at Brides and Beauties, which is the biggest formal wear boutique in upstate South Carolina and a whole hour away from Shelby. Daddy got off work from the textile plant to take me there, the day he was promoted to Supervisor. He even changed out of his coveralls into his grey wool Easter suit and Charlie One-Horse Hat before we left.

Brides and Beauties is in this strip mall on Highway 29 right between Fast Taco and Happy Nails Nail Salon, where I get my pedicures from these Chinese women who can't speak no English. Daddy parked in front of the double doors, and I walked right up to the center rack and pulled down this floor length gown with white lace, embroidered sequins, pearl lined hems, and even puffed sleeves. It's like the dress called to me. Best of all, it would match the Miss Shelby High School tiara perfectly.

Then Angie Metcalf, who is contestant number twenty-two and always copying me, comes in with her mom, who is wearing a Wendy's uniform. In Brides and Beauties! I saw

her eyeing that dress as I pulled it down, so I ran directly to the dressing room to try it on. It was heavy and hard to get on by myself, with the beads, puffed sleeves, back zipper and all, so I had to call in one of the ladies to help me.

And then the magic happened—I transformed from a merely pretty girl into a pageant queen! This dress had a built-in bustier with breast pads that gave me cleavage I didn't even know I had, and squished in my tummy to show off my hips. The back of it dropped almost to my waist, and the puffed sleeves were so heavy, the lady had to hook them together with a clear plastic strap across my shoulders. Thankfully you couldn't tell.

I drifted out of the dressing room into the store where Daddy waited. I tried to walk real slow and gracefully, drifting like Spanish moss in a lowcountry breeze. I stood right in the afternoon sunbeam to light up the sequins. His eyes got all teary. "Oh my little Gingersnap. You are breathtaking!"

I just smiled, watching myself in the mirror and practicing the step-turn, step-turn the pageant director taught us. I could just feel Angie watching me from behind this hideous royal blue sequined dress she pretends to be looking at in the "pre-owned" section. I don't know why redheads always think they look good in royal blue. That makes as much sense to me as putting a feather boa on a flounder.

Then the lady who works at Brides and Beauties said to Daddy, "It's like the dress was made for her!" And that's when I shot Angie this "Ha!" look through the mirror, like the one blonde-Heather gives brunette-Heather in the movie *Heathers*, and she finally stops gawking.

Then I turned to Daddy with my very best “please” face, which involves protruding my lower lip, leaning my head to the right, and making puppy-dog eyes. He didn’t even blink when he looked at the price tag hanging from one of the puffed sleeves, and the lady says, “Isn’t it just perfect for her?”

The dress cost One Thousand Dollars! That’s half of Daddy’s paycheck. I didn’t know until Momma told me when we were in the grocery store and I asked her why she was buying all the off-brands.

Now, the best thing about this dress is that under the white lace is a skin-colored iridescent liner. Gramma probably thinks it’s my real skin. She understands nothing about illusion.

“Gramma, it’s not my real skin! There’s a liner, see?” And I pull out the skin-colored iridescent liner from the bottom.

“That’s not all I see. You’re going to put on quite a show, that’s for sure.” Then, with her cane, she taps the pearl-lined V between my breasts and nearly rolls right over my feet into the bathroom and shuts the door.

~

I’m packing up my stage bag when I hear a car pull up in the driveway and I’m sure it’s Bradley, but it’s my stupid brother Sam and his girlfriend Medea, who is in my drama class. When they come in through the kitchen door the whole house reeks of cigarette smoke. All Sam wears since he’s been dating her is a black leather jacket and a Ramones T-shirt. Medea has long purple hair, a pierced eyebrow, and hates me I know it. The whole drama class has to be involved with the pageant and Medea is a stagehand. I just know she

is out to ruin it for me because we both auditioned for the role of Pocahontas in our school's Living History play last year. I got it, of course. Who ever heard of a Pocahontas with purple hair?

They don't even say "hi" or "congratulations," just walk right past me and down to the basement, where they start banging on Sam's drum set.

"Mom, why is *she* here?" Mom's chopping carrots and onions for the London broil. I try to stay on the other side of the kitchen since the onions might make my mascara run.

"Well, honey, Bradley will be here, so I thought it would be nice if Sam could ask his girlfriend."

"She's out to sabotage me. God, they'll ruin everything!"

"Listen dear, Aunt Lulu called and she's running late," Momma says, changing the subject. Like I said, always avoiding conflict. "She got caught up in traffic. Apparently a tractor-trailer overturned that was full of chickens. She said there were white feathers everywhere."

"You mean she won't make it to the pageant? What about the camcorder?"

"She'll be there, dear. She'll just miss dinner."

Great, I think, one less person to protect me from Medea. I leave the kitchen to go sit on the sofa in the den, and there's Gramma in her wheelchair by the window, just staring. Now, Gramma has this big beautiful Cameo she never wears anymore that goes perfectly with my evening gown. The pink inlay matches the skin-colored iridescent liner and the Cameo is the perfect compliment to the white pearls, sequins, and lace. It's the

very last piece of the puzzle, and I've put off asking her until she's in a good mood, which is never. But since tonight is the final night, I try to start a conversation.

"What are you looking at, Grandma?" I ask in real sweet voice.

She doesn't answer.

"Grandma, what do you see out there?"

Still staring.

"Grandma, how's the weather look...?"

Then she turns to me and says, "Can't an old woman sit and think to herself without being interrupted?"

Well, I tried. I pick up my *Seventeen* magazine and start flipping through the pages, thinking she'll warm up in a moment. I see this article, "Know Your Beauty Priorities: The Make-Up Quiz." I love quizzes. It says, "If you were sent to live on a desert island and could only bring one cosmetic product, what would it be? A) Lipstick. B) Eyeliner. C) Base." I think about this. My lips are nice and plump like the models, so I don't need to waste it on lipstick. And I wouldn't need base, since I would be tanned to a perfect bronze were I living on an island spending every day on the beach. Now, my eyes are more of a problem. I have these stubby eyelashes, thanks to Dad and Grandma, and you can barely see my eyes without my aubergine eyeliner. "B" it is. I circle my choice and write in "aubergine" with a pen.

I look up and Grandma is still staring out the window. I try to involve her, to see if she warms up just a little bit.

“Hey Gramma, if you were stranded on a desert island and could only bring one cosmetic item with you, would you choose A) Lipstick, B) Mascara, or C) Base?” I’m already thinking what her answer might be. She could use it all, of course, but I figure she’ll choose “A.” Her lips are so thin and pale, they look like someone put clothespins inside her mouth.

She turns around, glaring. I see even more crow’s feet shooting out of her eyes and I suddenly regret involving her. “Do you know what I was doing at your age? Certainly not thinking about silly questions like that.”

That’s how she is, never joining in.

“No, ma’am,” she continues, “I was nursing two babies, keeping a house, and working at the hospital, thanks to the War crippling your grandfather.” Her dark eyes are fixed right on me.

I prepare myself for another chicken neck story. I close the *Seventeen* magazine, put it on the table under the lamp, and fold my hands together in my lap. It seems the most respectful thing to do.

“I would get up at three a.m. before the rooster crowed to feed the babies. Then I’d change their diapers. But you couldn’t just throw them away in those days, no ma’am. You had to scrub the shit right out of them and hang them to dry, and do it all before breakfast or you wouldn’t get any. Then I’d walk out to the chicken coop.”

Here we go, I’m thinking.

“I’d throw out the chicken feed and open the coop. Then I’d pick out our eggs for the morning. Then if I wanted anything for dinner, I’d have to pick out my hen. Then I’d

chop off its head or wring its neck, depending on my mood, then I'd drain the blood, pluck out the legs, and pull out each feather, one by one. If the babies started crying, your grandfather would wake up and start yelling, I'd have to stop and feed them again or change their diapers or clean up spittle. Then I'd have to fry the eggs and bacon and bake the biscuits. Then I'd set the table and get your grandfather up, and bring the babies in and set them on the quilt in the floor. We'd sit down to breakfast, and the eggs would be cold or the biscuits too brown, and your grandfather would slap me or throw coffee in my face."

She stares right at me. "I was lucky to get a warm bath, much less think about hair or make-up."

She turns back toward the window. "Work, work, work. That's all life is. Everybody wants a woman to serve them. Well I done my time and now I rest, and I don't want anybody bothering me with silly questions. This is *my* time, you understand?"

Why she is so selfish to bring me down on my big night I don't know. It's not my fault she had a hard life.

~

Now there's one thing I always do for good luck, and that's go bass fishing off the old dock at Lake Bowen. It's my secret place and no one knows I go there or why. If I catch one, I am guaranteed good luck. I caught one the day before I got the job as hostess at the new Applebees, where I met Bradley who's a cook, and another one the weekend before Bradley asked me out. When I didn't catch one I got a D on my biology mid-term and tripped down the stairs in a skirt in Wing C, where all the lockers are, in front of

everyone. But best of all, I caught a huge shining bass just before school the day the Drama Club elected to sponsor me in the Miss SHS pageant. It works every time.

The secret is you have to wear whatever you will be wearing the day you need good luck. So I knew I'd have to go bass fishing in my evening gown at Lake Bowen before the final night of the Miss Shelby High School pageant. I went yesterday after school.

"Where are you going in that dress?" Momma yelled after me as I ran out the door to my Chevy Cavalier. But I was gone before she could catch up to me.

As I drove past the house, I could see Gramma sitting there at the window, staring right through me.

The lake is only five minutes away through the new neighborhood that is behind ours. The streets are lined with these huge Victorian-inspired houses, but the best ones are on Lakeshore Boulevard. They are three-stories high with bay windows overlooking the water. This neighborhood even has a private tennis, pool, and spa club. Daddy says we'll live there someday. Which I would love! I imagine myself gracefully descending a Victorian spiral staircase, with everyone there watching, waiting for me. At the end of Lakeshore is a patch of woods with an old overgrown dirt road that looks like an emerald tunnel. Thankfully it hadn't rained so the potholes weren't filled with mud, and I could hear the crackle of sticks under my tires when I turned in.

I pulled up to the dock and unloaded my accessories from the car. First, a beach chair with an old sheet to cover my dress in case the fish is a fighter. Next, I took off my clear plastic high heels and put on my rubber galoshes, in case I'd have to wade. Then I pulled out my fishing pole, which is a simple bamboo pole with a reel. And finally, my

tackle box. I love my tackle box. It's a shiny fuchsia Caboodle that I used to keep make-up and jewelry in until Momma got me a bigger Caboodle for my birthday. She knows I'll have a career on the stage. Inside my tackle box are hooks, red-and-white floaties, fishing line, and pink bubble gum worms.

But I don't use those rubber worms. What these bass like is McDonald's cheeseburgers, and that's what I give them. I always go through the Drive-Thru on the way. It's so close you can see the arches from our dining room window.

I pulled a cheeseburger from the paper sack and unwrapped it. I lifted the bun carefully, ate the pickles, and pulled off a chunk of cheeseburger that goes on the hook. The sun started setting in front of me and cast this orange glow all over the lake. I could see my reflection in the water. It was a sight—me with my glowing skin, almost perfectly curled hair, evening gown of a thousand shining beads, and a fishing pole in my hands.

"I am Ginger Anne Benefield, contestant number seventeen." My age, and my lucky number. I say it before I cast my line.

"My daywear ensemble is called, 'Daydream by the Sea.'" I cast the line.

"If I am crowned Miss Shelby High School, I will implement a district-wide literacy program so our high-achieving students may tutor the less fortunate, thereby improving our society." I cast again.

"For my talent, I will perform a dramatic reading of 'Song of Myself' by Walt Whitman." I cast one more time.

It takes three times, see, and you win or lose.

I feel a nibble. Then I see the little red and white floatie bob up and down. I pull

the line just slightly, but feel nothing. Then, the floatie ducks underwater and doesn't come back up. I'm thinking, this must be a huge fish! I reel in the line and pull it toward me until I see something break the surface. But it's a strange shape; this fish isn't flipping or fighting at all, and I know one thing for certain, the Lake Bowen bass are big fighters. If they break your line, you're guaranteed to get a flat tire or a speeding ticket or hear a Lionel Richie song on your way home.

I pull the heavy weight closer, reel in the line one more time, and hoist what feels like a rock onto the dock, careful to keep it a safe distance from my evening gown.

It's not a fish; it's this huge turtle.

I wonder, what could this mean? I just stand there holding the pole, staring at this turtle poking its head out of its slick brown shell. One of the patchwork squares on its shell reflects a tiny orange sun. I step closer. Its jaw bleeds from being ripped by the hook. Its eyes are dark and empty. Like Gramma's the day we moved her out of that old farmhouse.

I feel this heavy weight in my chest, like a soaking wet towel balled up and stuffed in there. I want to get the hook out of its jaw but at the same time I cannot risk getting turtle blood on my evening gown.

The turtle just sits there and stares, doesn't move at all, a red ribbon streaming from its jaw.

I look at the digital watch in my tackle box. I've been gone 30 minutes and have to leave now to make it back for dinner. Momma gets real quiet and doesn't even laugh during *The Cosby Show* if anyone is late for dinner.

So I do all I know to do, like I do with the bass. I cut the line, leave the hook in its jaw, and throw it back in the water.

It just plops and sinks. I watch the brown patchwork shell slowly get smaller and smaller, and the lower it goes, the heavier my heart feels, until it disappears. And then all I can see is my reflection, but it's darker than before.

I throw the rest of the cheeseburger in there, in case he's still hungry, and leave.

~

Everyone is scrambling around to get everything on the table for my pre-pageant dinner. I figure since it's my special dinner, I'll just wait in the den with Gramma.

She's still sitting at that window, of course, just staring.

I'm thinking I still need that Cameo for the pageant, and now's my last chance to ask.

I walk over to her and put my hand on her shoulder, and bend down on my knees so she's above me. I figure that will make her feel respected.

"That dress shows too much skin."

"I know, Gramma, you told me already." She stares out the window. I look at the clock—6:15—and figure I better give it a shot. My heart's beating real fast, and I don't know if it's nerves before the pageant or fear she'll say no. "Gramma, I was wondering if you might let me borrow your Cameo. It will match my dress perfectly, don't you think?"

She turns and looks me right in the eye. Her eyes are so dark and empty, it chills my whole body. "My what?"

"Your Cameo, Gramma, that you used to wear all the time."

“That old thing? I don’t care what you do with it.”

“Thanks Gramma!” I yell and throw my arms around her frail hunched over body. She pats me on the shoulder, obligatory-like, and keeps staring out the window.

I run down the hall to Gramma’s room and pull the red velvet box out of the top drawer of her old vanity. I unhook my pearl necklace to slide the Cameo on, but it won’t fit. I force the metal clasp apart to clamp it on the necklace, when I notice a latch on the back of the Cameo. It’s a locket.

I open it up. There’s a black and white photo of Gramma. She looks about my age. She is wearing a white pillbox hat with netting. A bunch of lace is gathered at her neck with the Cameo holding it together. Her eyes are shining bright as the lights on Lake Bowen at night, and a smile stretches across her face. She is beautiful.

“Dinner!” Momma yells through the house, and I hear dad stop hammering in the guest room, and Gramma’s wheelchair rolling through the hall, and Sam and Medea thundering up the stairs.

Then I hear a low rumble, and I know it’s Bradley in his Trans Am. Like always, he’s not early, not late, just in time.

“Ginger, honey, Bradley’s here! Let’s eat!” Mom yells.

I stare at the tiny black and white photo a few seconds longer, close the locket, and put the pearl choker around my neck.

~

I can see the dinner table from the other end of the hall and I know it’s the perfect moment to practice walking in my clear plastic high heels like I will on stage. As I approach

the dining room, I see Gramma, Sam, Medea, Momma and Daddy all sitting around the table. Bradley is probably still parking his Trans Am. He has to back it into the driveway just right so the front of it, where it says “TEASE ME,” can be seen by everybody. We get a lot more traffic since they built that 24-hour ATM next door.

Daddy’s eyes are shining like they were in *Brides and Beauties* the first time he saw me in my evening gown.

“Oh my sweet Ginger-cookie, you are radiant!” He gets up and pulls a chair out for me, the one beside Gramma who is at the head of the table where I should be, and which is unfortunately directly across from Medea.

“Ginger, shouldn’t you wear something more appropriate for dinner?” Momma says, ruining the effect of my grand entrance. Everyone else is seated at the table except for Aunt Lulu, who is late, and Bradley, who is still parking his Trans Am.

“What, may I ask, is more appropriate than an evening gown?” I ask as I approach the chair Daddy has pulled out for me. I am trying to be proper, to practice for the pageant.

“It’s the least appropriate, you ask me,” says Gramma, chiming in even though no one asks her.

“Why shouldn’t she wear it?” Daddy asks Momma. “She needs to feel comfortable when she goes onstage. That dress should feel like her second skin.” Daddy looks at me and smiles. You can tell he’s real proud.

Then Momma just leaves the room, of course, since she conveniently forgot the rolls.

“Second skin! More like *first* skin. You might as well be in your birthday suit as in that dress. And saved a thousand dollars for it.” This is what Gramma says from my seat at the head of the table.

Now, you’d think Gramma would be tickled to death her own granddaughter looks so radiant wearing her Cameo that perfectly matches this pearl-lined sequined lace and skin-colored iridescent liner. So I tell her so.

“Gramma, you should be tickled to death your own granddaughter looks so radiant wearing your Cameo, which perfectly matches this pearl-lined sequined lace and skin-colored iridescent liner.” I put my hands on my hips and lean forward, for emphasis.

“The only iridescence I see is the spit spraying out your mouth.”

I glance at Sam and Medea, who are laughing it up. Thank God Bradley is still parking his car.

“Hey Sam,” I say in a real sweet voice, “I wonder if Medea cares to hear about the time you ate all Gramma’s canned beets and pissed pink pee for a week?”

Medea sends Sam a dark ESP message through her eyes that obviously brainwashes him, because he doesn’t even answer my question.

I gracefully descend into my assigned seat, which forces me to face Medea and her purple hair. I look at the giant silver zippers all over her leather jacket and wonder what she keeps in there. I imagine her releasing black ferrets from those pockets that gnaw at my perfectly Chinese-pedicured toes while I’m trying to enjoy my special London broil meal. It’s just like something she’d do.

Momma comes back in with the rolls and with Bradley, whose short hair looks like a dirty blonde upside-down bowl of spaghetti.

“Bradley!” I say, jumping up so he can see my radiance.

“What do you think?” he says as he turns his head to the right, then the left. He’s so caught up in his own hair that he doesn’t even notice me.

“Hello, Bradley. Have a seat.” Daddy has that weird frog-voice he always gets when Bradley comes around.

“I hope you’re hungry.” Momma sets the rolls on the table.

“Oh yes, Ma’am. There’s nothing I love more than food I don’t have to cook!”

Bradley basically duels Niagra Falls over all the food on the table. He hasn’t even glanced at me.

Momma starts passing plates, with London broil to Bradley first. “Your hair looks very nice, Bradley.”

“Do you think so?” he says as he helps himself to all the fat slices. He leaves the London broil to get cold beside him as he rakes through his upside-down-bowl-of-spaghetti hair. “I didn’t know how to tell him to cut it. I mean, I didn’t want a crew cut or anything like that, but it had to be short enough so they don’t make me wear those hair nets at Applebee’s.”

“Hair nets?” I say, reaching over him for the London broil. Momma eyes me but says nothing about bad manners.

“Yeah, some new policy. If your hair’s past your chin, gotta wear a net.” He winks at me. I shove a piece of London broil in my mouth even though everyone is still fixing their plates.

Then Sam, who is suddenly dispossessed of Medea’s dark ESP, says, “Ginger said you were cutting it just for her.”

Then Medea gets started. “That’s messed up. Changing your hair for somebody? Your hair is your individual expression.”

“He didn’t change it for *me*,” I say.

“No,” Medea says, “he did it for The Man.”

“I guess everybody should dye their hair purple like you and never get a decent job or get cast as Pocahontas as a result,” I say, even though my mouth is full of carrots.

“Well, it’s about time somebody made up a policy,” Gramma says. “Men with long hair! When I was growing up, you could tell a man from a woman.”

Just when I prepare myself for Gramma’s lecture on hair and chickens, in comes Aunt Lulu with the VHS camcorder. She’s already filming.

“This is News 13, and we’re here to interview the next Miss Shelby High School!” I love Aunt Lulu. I jump up from the table and throw my arms around her. I feel so lucky, she’s going to get the pageant on video so I can have this night for the rest of my life.

“Well, don’t you look radiant!” Aunt Lulu says as she gives me a big smack on the cheek with her lips. She sets a plastic tiara on my head with a Post-it note that says “Miss SHS.”

“That’s what I keep telling her,” Daddy says, smiling at me.

Aunt Lulu shuts off the camcorder and hugs Momma as she sits down next to her. “Well, Kathy, you have outdone yourself! I don’t know why you got all the cooking genes in the family. I can hardly boil an egg!” Aunt Lulu starts shoveling food from all the bowls onto her plate. She’s a big woman. You can’t miss her because of her frizzy hair, which makes her head look twice its proper size.

“I’ll tell you, I have never in my life seen such a mess as chickens on the interstate,” Aunt Lulu says as she pours gravy into the mashed potato crater she made with a spoon. “It was like a gigantic feather pillow exploded. Can you imagine it? All these cars trying to dodge a thousand chickens running around, but of course they just got run over and smashed. Poor stupid things.”

“I can tell you about chicken mess,” Gramma says. Perfect, I’m thinking. More chicken stories. Here I am trying to make something of myself and all anyone can talk about is chickens.

“Ginger, why don’t you tell us about the monologue you’ll be doing for your talent?” Momma says suddenly. I think she feels the same I do about chicken stories.

“Oh yes!” says Aunt Lulu.

“For my talent, I will be doing a dramatic interpretation of ‘Song of Myself’ by Walt Whitman.” I say it just like I will in the pageant, to practice.

Sam smirks. “The smell of my armpits, sweeter than prayer.”

“Shut up, Sam,” I say.

“That’s your man Walt, not me,” he says between forkfulls of green beans. “He loved body parts. Especially butts. Men’s butts.”

Daddy winces.

“He was a buttfudger. He loved to fudge men’s butts.” Sam keeps a straight face, but Medea and Bradley are laughing it up.

“A what?” Gramma says.

“Sam, that’s enough,” Momma says, taking up for me for once.

Daddy’s staring at me. You can tell he’s disappointed my monolog was written by a buttfudger.

“I’m just so proud you can get up there on stage in front of all these people!” says Aunt Lulu, protecting my dignity. “I don’t see how you do it. The spotlight alone would drive me crazy.” Aunt Lulu hates bright lights. She won’t even drive at night because of it, and she can’t watch movies in the theater, either.

“Is everyone ready for desert?” Momma asks. “I made your favorite, Ginger.”

“What’s that?” Bradley asks.

“Double fudge cake,” I say without thinking.

Then everyone’s laughing, except Gramma, who’s never heard of buttfudgers.

~

“Honey, we need to go if you’re going to get there by 7:30,” Momma says as she gets up from the table.

“Let me just go throw my bags in the guest room,” says Aunt Lulu, jumping up from the table.

Bradley gets up from his chair. “Uh, I think I’ll just drive myself.” He has this weird thing about riding in the car when people’s parents are driving, but obviously doesn’t mind eating their London broil dinners.

I walk him to his car. And he doesn’t offer me his arm on the steps until I ask.

Aunt Lulu is pulling her bags out of the trunk when we get to the driveway. “I’ll be just a moment, then I’ll leave you two lovebirds alone!” she says in this high pitch sing-songy voice. She pulls out these two humongous bags, even though she’ll only be here for the weekend, and this big white machine that makes a sound like a fan. She can’t sleep without it. She wobbles up to the steps and sets her bags inside, then sticks her big head out and smiles at us before she shuts the door. Bradley never offers to help.

“Hey baby,” he whispers to me at his car, “you look so hot.” Now he notices. He slithers his hands around my hips and I can feel the sleeves of his silk shirt snagging on the sequins. He tries to kiss me on the mouth, but I turn my cheek.

“My lipstick,” I say, even though I haven’t put any on yet.

“I’ll be cheering for ya.” He climbs into his perfectly parked Trans Am, catching a wheel as he drives off.

Then I get this feeling that he will be a cook at the Applebee’s for the rest of his life, and I regret letting him get to second base when he said he’d cut his hair for me.

I walk back inside, extra careful on the brick steps that lead up to the kitchen door. Daddy has my stage bag and is on the way to the car. He stops me right when I walk in.

“Ginger, no matter what happens tonight, you are a Queen. Remember that.” He kisses me, then looks me in the eyes. “You deserve the very best, you hear me? The very best and no less.”

I think about my dress, and Daddy’s paycheck, and all the off brands in the pantry. My heart starts beating so fast, it feels like Sam and Medea are playing that drum set inside my rib cage.

“Daddy...” I say, but I’m interrupted by Aunt Lulu yelling from the guest room.

“Do those ATM lights stay on *all* night?”

~

“Let’s take the B.A.V.” Momma says as she grabs the keys from the hook next to the door. One thing about Momma, she can’t stand anybody being late, unless it’s her sister in traffic because a chicken truck flipped over.

The B.A.V. is the Big Ass Van, which Sam and I named. Normally I am embarrassed to ride in the B.A.V., but not tonight.

I stand back for a minute, watching everybody scramble around Momma’s B.A.V. Daddy and Aunt Lulu lift Gramma in through the big sliding door, and Daddy wheels Gramma’s chair back to the mechanical lift.

It’s the first time Gramma has been out of the house since we moved her in last winter. She is not wearing her ivory shawl. She is wearing pearls. The orange glow on the horizon makes her pearls look like a row of tiny suns, like the hems on my dress.

“Ginger, what are you waiting for?” Daddy says as he stands by the door of the B.A.V. I walk toward him and he helps me into the car. I have to sit just right, with my back straight and shoulders back, to keep my posture.

Daddy stands there a moment. “You are radiant,” he says, and kisses me on the cheek. Momma smiles in the rear view mirror and starts the engine. She seems to have changed her mind about the appropriateness of my dress.

I am squished between Gramma and Aunt Lulu, with Medea and Sam behind us, Momma and Daddy up front, all packed in the B.A.V. I figure now’s a good time to rehearse my monolog to myself. The talent portion is 30% of your final score.

“I celebrate myself, and sing myself.”

Daddy reaches over to Momma, puts his arm around her shoulder and starts playing with her hair.

“And what I assume you shall assume.”

Daddy asks Momma to drive through Lakeshore Boulevard. The lights from the bay windows are reflecting on the water like streaks of dripping silver paint.

“For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.”

I suddenly think of that turtle. I wonder if he’s at home with his turtle wife, his turtle son and daughter, if his shell is big enough to fit them all inside to protect them from snakes or hawks or McDonald’s cheeseburgers. I wonder if his jaw still hurts, if maybe his wife got the hook out and kissed him again and again as the red ribbon of blood curled around them.

I look in the way back seat, where Sam and I used to ride the entire seven hours to Gramma's farm. Medea is drawing a fake tattoo on Sam's neck with a black Sharpie. It's a big spiral shape with stars coming out of it. Whenever mom hits the breaks, the lights cast this red glow over Sam and Medea so it looks like they've grown together into a red two-headed dragon.

Normally, I'd think of her releasing ferrets and drawing tattoos as part of her dark ESP. But instead, I'm having the strangest thought. I feel like Medea is drawing a spiral-and-stars tattoo on *my* neck, since Sam and I have the same skin from Momma and Daddy.

I feel the heat of Aunt Lulu's and Gramma's bodies on both sides of me. If Momma and Aunt Lulu have the same skin as sisters, and Daddy's skin comes from Gramma, and mine from Momma and Daddy, then Gramma and Aunt Lulu share the same skin through me, sitting squished between them.

And Gramma, when she says I'm showing too much skin, it's her own. It's the same skin that wrung chicken necks and scrubbed the shit out of diapers. And my evening gown and Gramma's Cameo, the picture inside, me tonight—they're the *same*. I feel it right now, all at once.

I learned in my biology class that we all come from amoebas, who are all from star dust.

That's why I'm so radiant.

When I go up there on stage tonight, they'll all be watching me, and watching themselves.

And I'll I know I am the most beautiful Miss Shelby High School contestant in the entire world.

## The Quarry

### *The Quarry*

I walk to the edge. All my friends have jumped. I wade in from the bottom bank. Too many stories about abandoned equipment, dead bodies. The miners took what they wanted, left their equipment and this gaping hole.

### *Shane's Car*

I skip school in Shane's white Camaro. I have to pick up Jade. She's had an abortion. Shane is a friend. I don't have a crush on him. Jade is in love with him. They've been screwing the past couple of months. Jade's always screwing somebody.

Shane's car is heavy. The doors shut like a vault. When I accelerate on the highway, it goes faster than feels possible. Like I'm in a 747, about to lift off, fly out of this shithole town.

### *The Drive Thru*

Shane has a baby with a girl from Boiling Springs. She found out about Jade and sent her friends. We're smoking up and they come piled in a Jeep, pull her out of the passenger's

seat. All I see are crooked teeth and elbows and Jade's hair, a mass of tightly curled rings. White trash girls fighting over a collector's doll.

Shane, Terry and Cole just stand there and watch, stoned as hell with their French fries and Mountain Dews. Fuckers.

### *The Clinic*

It was awful, she says, soaking my left shoulder. It was the right thing, I say. I can't have sex for six weeks, she says.

### *The Tanning Salon*

We flip through Cosmo. Sex Secrets of Thirty Thousand Women. Flatter Abs and a Hotter Butt. Good Girl Hot or Bad Girl Hot? A Dirty Sex Trick to Try Tonight. Jade won't take the tanning bed after the black girl leaves.

I don't want AIDS, she says.

### *The State Fair*

I have my palm read. A confidant will betray you. You will find unexpected love. Tension will build at home. We ride the ferris wheel. Terry wants my ass. I let him throw knives, win me a unicorn. The cotton candy melts like honey. In the rear view mirror, my tongue is blue. Shane's is down Jade's throat.

If Terry tries to feel me up I'll do like with my stepfather and imagine I'm somewhere else.

*The Quarry*

They say the quarry is a thousand feet deep. To jump alone is to do something. No one there to save you. No one to see you last before it pulls you under. Who's to say there's even a bottom? Only the miners have touched it.

*Black Granite Bar & Grill*

Pool is a quarter. The cues are warped. Terry whips Cole in nine ball. Shane breaks the next rack and sinks the eight. Jade and me light cigarettes and walk to the juke box. The man at the bar stares.

Under the heat lamp, corn dogs spin round and round and round and round.

*The Kwik Stop*

Jade straddles Shane's lap in the passenger seat. Shane cusses Terry for stealing beer from the shelf instead of the cooler. Shane lets me drive the whole way. My hair whips at my eyes but I don't need to see.

Outside the windshield, the sky is flat and gray as a concrete wall.

*The Quarry*

The ledge is fifty feet above the water. When Shane jumps, he drops like a knife. I hold my breath. He stays under so long I almost pass out. His wake laps at the edges long after he disappears.

*The Super 8*

Jade and I wait in the parking lot. When the sun hits the black seats, my thighs stick like band-aids. How do you feel, I say. We'll do other stuff, she says.

They get one room with two beds. They pass a joint and a fifth of Jäger. Terry pulls me onto his knee, unbuttons the back of my dress. Shane watches it slip off my shoulders with Jade on his cock.

*My Bedroom*

The last time he came I screamed. My mother slapped my face and called me a filthy slut.

*The Quarry*

The ledge is high, so high! The water looks solid, like a dark jewel I can walk across. If I jump alone, no one will see me fall.

## Lizard Girl

*after "Swamp Boy" by Rick Bass*

There was this girl we used to torment in middle school. We called her Lizard Girl. We meaning the girls I used to hang out with. It was a long time ago. I never really did anything. I mean, I was there when we hid her clothes while she was taking a shower after gym class, and invited her to a slumber party at a fake address, and prank called her house at three a.m. in the voice of Freddy Krueger. But I never really thought of any of it, just went along. I let it all happen. A red-haired skinny girl with freckles who wore army green cargo pants and a yellow bandana tied around her forehead. She was new. She did not belong.

I was lucky enough to be counted among the popular girls. We all lived in the same neighborhood, grew up together. We're not friends anymore.

We'd follow Lizard Girl home from school. We'd leave just enough distance to show she was not one of us, but linger close enough for her to hear every venomous word we spewed. Sometimes we'd yank her red hair. She wore it pulled into two low pigtails that clung relentlessly to her scalp, despite our repeated attempts to rip them out by the roots. I don't know what it was about those flaming, frizzy curls that so infuriated us. Maybe

because they were so different than our smoothly combed locks, twisted into tight French braids and tied in neat black or white bows.

Every day, we followed the red hair out of the school like it was a torch in the night. We followed her down the sidewalk, past the peach farm that lay between our neighborhood and the school, past the humming tractors with their spinning blue pesticide sprayers that enshrouded the orchards in a perpetual mist. We followed her into our neighborhood, under the arching branches of sycamore trees and down the hill toward the creek, where the air is thick with the smell of moist earth. Here, where the road ended at a vacant lot overgrown with honeysuckle and jewel-weed, Lizard Girl would make her passage. And this is how obsessed we became—we even followed her into the woods, ripping our candy colored tights on patches of blackberry thorns and digging our white heels deep into mud.

She knew we were there. She never looked back.

When she reached the vacant lot, she stopped to pull the yellow honeysuckle blooms from their vines and suck the sweet nectar from their soft tubes. Sometimes she sucked from five, seven of them in a cluster. She reached into the thorny brambles to pick wild blackberries at the peak of their ripeness, then scrunched up her face like a brown bat when the sour juices burst on her tongue. When she pulled away, the thorns left thin scarlet threads the whole length of her arms. She skipped down the bank to the creek, her arms waving like red flags.

We tracked her like a posse of snakes trailing a bunny. At the vacant lot, we'd drop and slither. Some days, we just watched.

She crouched down on a large rock at the edge of the rushing water, the ripples reflecting on her freckled face. She reached into the creek, slowly and deliberately, and wrapped the ends of her fingers around the rough edges of limestone slabs, rose quartz, chunks of granite. She lifted the rocks gingerly, just enough to peer under. She would do this for what seemed like an hour. Then she'd strike, the sunlight flashing in the spray, and slowly rise from the water gripping a writhing giant salamander the color of moss and flame.

Eastern Hellbender: *Cryptobranchus alleganiensis*. Third largest species of salamander in the world. Vernacular name from early settlers who thought it was a creature from hell, bent on returning.

We watched her with fascination, horror, contempt. She ran her hands along the hellbender's back, under the belly, down to the tip of its whipping tail. She stroked its head, pulled the slimy face against the curve of her chin. She talked to the animal: "So hyper today!" "Did you eat some yummy tadpoles?" "Mommy will put you back to bed." And she set the creature in the water, watching as it vanished under the rocks.

After she released the salamander—or turtle, or frog, or whatever other disgusting creature she would catch, love, and let go—Lizard Girl opened her backpack and pulled out all kinds of beakers and tubes and magnifying glasses and things, like she had raided the cabinets in chemistry class. She filled one of the tubes with water and plugged it with a cork. Then she walked downstream, bending down and every now and then to fill another tube. Sometimes, she held the tube up to the sun, looking at the tiny organisms and shining particles spiraling around like stars in a distant galaxy. She reached in her backpack for a

vegetable strainer and dipped it into a muddy, stagnant part of the creek. When she pulled the strainer out, water the color of weak coffee streamed through the holes. She stirred her fingers in the slimy leaves. Sometimes she found strange creatures, hybrids of worms and insects, like pocket-sized versions of the things out of the *Alien* movies. She collected these, too, in other tubes.

After she had filled the containers with some part of the creek, she gently packed her specimens inside her backpack. She was careful to hold it upright as she slid each arm through the straps and safely onto her back. Then she walked into the woods, following the creek. As she walked, she collected things. Blue jay feathers. Acorn caps. Fern fronds. Chipmunk skulls. Tiny jewel-toned stones made smooth and round by the endless rush of creekwater. She stuffed these things inside the zippered pockets and button flaps of her cargo pants. Then she trudged home on the wooded trail that followed the water line behind our neighborhood, moving like a packhorse carrying a heavy weight.

Some days we just watched. Other days—oh, we were wicked. We were brimming with invincibility and crazed with viciousness. We surrounded her like vultures circling fresh roadkill. The bloodstreaked arms and wet, muddy pants incited us to savagery.

One of us would hurl the first insult. Any words that would pierce or punch.

*Hey Lizard Girl. Hey Lezzie.*

*Your mama think you're a boy?*

*Come play with the pretty girls.*

Once, we even jumped on Lizard Girl, pulled her down to the ground. Each of us held an arm or a leg until she was pinned. One of us grabbed her backpack. Lizard Girl

thrashed and squirmed, trying to free herself from our grip to protect the precious contents inside, shaking her head back and forth and pleading for us to let her go. Then one of us, the cruelest, not me, the one with hair curled into perfect ringlets, who wore half of a broken heart engraved with the letters Be/Fri on a thin gold chain, she, the cruelest, held the backpack in the air.

*What's Lizard Girl hiding from her friends today?*

She, the cruel one, slowly unzipped Lizard Girl's backpack and turned it upside down. Lizard Girl's eyes widened as the cruel one picked up each container, flipped the cork with her thumb, and spilled the water onto the ground beside Lizard Girl's head. Water splattered the dirt, leaving flecks of sand and stone on her face. The tiny mud-dwellers squirmed in the sun's fierce heat. The blood drained from Lizard Girl's cheeks as she watched the earth absorb her day's work.

Then the cruelest kneeled down beside Lizard Girl's face. She opened her black patent leather purse and pulled out a silver tube of lipstick the shape of a bullet. She turned the tube slowly, just under Lizard Girl's chin, until the blood red tip emerged.

*Hey Lezzie, want to be a pretty girl? We'll have to fix you up.*

Lizard Girl thrashed, trying to free herself from our grip, the way a songbird, after going limp in the clench of a hawk's talon, will furiously beat its wings before death. The cruelest dug her painted nails into Lizard Girl's jaw and placed the red tip on her lips. Slowly, she drew on the lips, circling them over and over until the absurd smile of a clown belied Lizard Girl's grimacing, tear-streaked face. Then the cruel one pulled Lizard Girl's

T-shirt out of her shorts and wrote **LEZZIE** across her stomach, the belly button dotting the “i”.

Then we, all the other girls, grabbed fistfuls of that frizzy red hair. The cruel one watched with a smirk, replaced her lipstick into her patent leather bag. Laughing like wild hyenas, we dragged her down toward the creek, through the thorns, over rough rocks, and rolled her down the bank into the ice-cold water. Then we turned our backs and ran, our cackles echoing in the forest.

~

Lizard Girl lived next door. We, my parents and I, lived at the edge of the neighborhood that was built when Arcadia Farms sold part of their orchards to a private developer. Ours was the last house at the back entrance with stacked stone pillars and a wrought iron gate that read “Meadowbrook Orchard: A Private Community.” The gate opened when my mother or father pushed a button on a black plastic cartridge clipped to the visor of their cars. Outside the gate, the smooth black pavement turned rocky and gray.

Lizard Girl lived on that side. Before they moved in, we could not see her house from mine. Then, the summer before seventh grade, Lizard Girl and her mother rang our doorbell. My mother made me go to the door. I remember because it was the first time she had spoken to me that day, a Saturday; she was reading a novel over a glass of wine as her mud mask dried in the sun room. I pushed my eye against the peephole. There they stood with a basket spilling over with tomatoes, squash, cucumbers, bell peppers, strawberries, carrots, arugula. They were strange women, the girl with her red pigtails and bulging pockets, and her mother, a tall woman with smiling eyes and long, wavy gray hair parted in

the middle. The girl carried a green velvet pouch with multicolored beads sewn in the shape of a lizard. The mother wore a long broomstick skirt with intricate designs scrawled over it, like some ancient language I did not understand.

The doorbell rang again. My mother yelled. I stared through the hole.

After they left, I opened the door. The note read, "From your new neighbors. Enjoy the bounty of summer!" They had signed their names. I put the basket on the kitchen island. In the sunbeam, I noticed some of the vegetables were caked with small patches of dirt. A wormhole snaked through the bright yellow squash. When my mother came in for dinner, I was reading some teen magazine over the last slice of a frozen pizza. My father was still playing golf.

"What's this?"

"From the new neighbors."

"Lovely," she said as she dumped the vegetables into the trash compacter. "How did they get through the gate?" My mother was always suspicious of a gift that had not been bought.

Soon after they moved in, Lizard Girl and her mother cleared out the kudzu vines and privet bushes that hid their small board-and-batten house from ours. Whenever I'd go swimming, Lizard Girl would be in the backyard, looking in. Before my parents hosted a party for the firm, they hired a landscaper to build a tall fence with wide cedar planks and decorative trim and an elaborate trellis at the gate. The wisteria vines he planted eventually grew over the trellis and into Lizard Girl's yard.

Chinese wisteria: *Wisteria sinensis*. A prolific climbing vine with ornate purple or white blooms. Invasive in North America; spreads rapidly to the detriment of native species.

Sometimes, if I was bored, if my mother was off at a luncheon or getting a pedicure and my dad was at the firm, which was most of the time, I watched Lizard Girl through a crack in the fence. Their yard was like nothing I had ever seen, so different than the trim, impossibly green lawns in the Community, with their sculpted boxwoods and formal arrangements of Asian perennials. Lizard Girl's yard was lush, wild, teeming with life. Strange objects hung from the branches of trees—crystals and bones and feathers—the kinds of things Lizard Girl stowed in her pockets everyday. A stone path led from the back stoop into a vegetable garden dense with thick stalks and twisting vines and broad leaves, bearing fruit of every color. The path spiraled through the garden, into an arbor under a thick tangle of grape vines, and ended at a fire ring with a small circle of stones and a split log bench.

At the very back of the yard, along the creek that bordered the forest, Lizard Girl kept an elaborate system of cages. She had all kinds of animals in these cages—a brown rabbit with five bunnies, a young raccoon, a snapping turtle, and a crow with a broken wing. She fed them by hand. She talked to them as she pushed through the wires bits of vegetables rinds that she carried in a moldy wicker basket. Along the creek, hemlocks, rhododendrons, and poplars darkened the hillside behind their house. From where I stood, it was hard to tell where their yard ended and the forest began.

Now, of course, that forest is gone. Now, there are more houses like ours, but bigger. Now the smooth black asphalt runs by Lizard Girl's yard and beyond, for miles, a four lane artery of concrete with its network of capillaries through the entire west side of town. I mention her house as if it still stands. But Lizard Girl's home, her gardens and stone paths and cages of animals, are gone. Gone, too, are the endless rows of peach trees and the pesticide-spraying tractors, and the school where she was forced daily to face her tormentors. All were leveled for the Community's expansion. Eminent domain.

I haven't been back in a long time. Not since my diagnosis. I'm in Atlanta, in public relations. I spend hours staring at a computer screen, pushing keys, answering my cell phone, Skyping with clients. Or they send me in commercial jets thirty-five thousand miles above the earth at five hundred miles per hour, to other tall buildings in other cities where I stare at screens and answer calls and Skype clients. The people, these places, they are all so eerily similar from the air, from the insides of buildings.

Sometimes, when they send me northeast, I fly over the Community. From the air, the sprawling roads and new homes look like a computer circuit board. Sometimes, from above, I follow the creek to my house. I think about what the place might look like if Lizard Girl and her mother had been allowed to stay—an island of fecundity contained by a network of ChemLawn patches and strips of asphalt. I think, too, about my parents, if they had not divorced, if my father had not lost his practice and moved to Florida to sell time shares, if my mother was not a chain smoker addicted to her shrink, if they had grown old together there. But what does it matter? All that happened is erased, the stories locked into the land by an asphalt grid.

~

We followed Lizard Girl from the wild heat of late summer into the soothing breeziness of autumn. The falling leaves tamed us. We watched from a distance. In winter we hibernated—made a few prank calls, hid her coat at school so she'd have to walk home in the bitter cold. But in spring the madness returned.

As soon as the other girls realized she lived next door—it was not something I advertised, it was not something I wanted them to know—my house became the watchtower. When the daffodils and tulips popped their vibrant heads out of the cold earth and into the late March sun, Lizard Girl began tending her elaborate system of cages in the backyard. The leaves had not yet fully emerged on the trees, and we had a clear shot from my bedroom window.

The days we followed her home, the days our hatred made us inexorably patient, we spied on her for hours. Our spying, which we only did when we were bored, when there was absolutely nothing at all else to do, revealed that Lizard Girl kept a collection of frogs and toads in the larger cage, which was at the back, closest to the creek. After she got home from school, if we hadn't snatched her backpack and dumped out her specimens, she fed the sci-fi creatures she caught to the frogs. She pulled out dried patches of earth and replaced them with fresh, moist earth from the creekside. She removed a black plastic tray of slimy water and filled it with new water from a gallon jug. Sometimes she added new frogs.

Green Frogs: *Rana clamitans melanota*. Following metamorphosis, juveniles often disperse from their natal ponds to neighboring ponds. Movements of up to three miles have been documented.

First, we used binoculars to look in on Lizard Girl when she worked at the frog cage. Then we moved in, closer, so we could see inside. Lizard Girl had recreated their native riparian environment, complete with moss and stone. But something was wrong these frogs. Some had only one eye, or two eyes on the same side of the head. Others had one or two limbs not fully formed. The freakiest one had an arm growing from the back of its head. When this frog jumped or lashed its tongue, the dumb limb flinched and the sticky fingers flung open and closed into a loose fist as if in slow motion.

This grotesque scene—the deformed frogs, the bones and feathers hanging from trees, the wild, un-mowed lawn—ignited our fear. Now we knew she was a witch. And at any moment, if we were found out, she could use her dark magic against us.

~

By summer, when school was out and the sun burned hot and the leaves obscured our view, we hid in the garden behind her house, safely concealed from the kitchen window by towering corn stalks and dense tomato plants. In the evenings, after she and her mother plucked Cherokee purple tomatoes and yellow peppers from their stalks, dug up sweet potatoes and green onions from the dark earth, we crouched below the windowsill and peered in. With soiled hands, they sat together at the kitchen table and talked and laughed while pulling long silver blades through the flesh of each vegetable, splitting open their gorgeous insides. Lizard Girl stood at the stove, looking into the pan as her mother

tossed and stirred. Sometimes, she reached in the cabinet for dried herbs in small, unlabeled glass jars. When they sat down at the table, they held hands and closed their eyes. Lizard Girl ate slowly. With each bite, her jaw moved with the deliberate precision of a praying mantis.

After dinner, they watched a show about a small town in Alaska. Lizard Girl and her mother would curl up on the sofa underneath a handmade patchwork quilt. One of the main characters was a woman pilot with brown hair cropped short who lived alone in a log cabin and carried a rifle on the back of her pickup. Whenever the pilot appeared, Lizard Girl bolted up, moving her face closer to the blue glow of the screen.

From the cool side of the glass, we bored our eyes into that room, trying to crack through the pane with our absolute contempt. I say contempt, but I mean fear. A house without a father was unnatural, alien to us. Maybe evil. Back then, before college, before our parents divorced, we all had fathers.

~

Late one night, after the girls went back to their own houses in the Community, I woke with an excruciating headache. The full moon shone on my bedroom floor in elongated silver panels. I climbed out of my window onto the roof and let the silky light envelop me. The neighborhood, which I had known since I was three or four, looked foreign. The rooftops reflected the empty sky. The air was thick with silence. Each breath made me dizzy. I tried to stand but had no balance.

I heard a sound from Lizard Girl's yard. A steady rhythm, several rhythms at once, like the syncopation of beating hearts.

It was barely audible at first, then gradually became louder, until I felt it in my chest. I closed my eyes. In the rhythm, my head stopped spinning. In the rhythm, I absorbed the night air through my skin. I felt everything I had ever experienced gather under my ribs, felt my body extend out into the night in one motion, one moment, one pulse. How do I describe it? It was a feeling I had never had before, nor ever would again.

Lizard Girl knew a secret. She knew something I was missing, we were all missing. And for that reason, I should have protected her.

But I didn't.

~

The cruelest had an idea. It would have to happen from my house. I would have to host a slumber party to execute the plan. In my room, we waited until the last orange glow disappeared from the window of Lizard Girl's home. We wore rubber gloves and all black. We slipped downstairs and out.

We filled a galvanized bucket with water from the pool. The water sloshed onto our bare ankles as we marched toward the creek, around the fence and into the darkness of Lizard Girl's domain.

We worked quickly. We scooped up the frogs and threw them into the bucket. At the fire ring, we piled broken sticks and pine needles and crisp leaves and held a match to the pile. As the fire grew, we lay three logs in the triangle formation we learned in Girl Scouts, to maximize heat and flame. We set the bucket on the fire. We boiled the frogs alive.

~

Cancer is slow, indeterminate in its origins. But it strikes you like a sniper. You know the bullet is lodged in your body, but you don't know where it came from. Once you're hit, it doesn't matter anyway.

I don't believe that I brought this on myself, that I deserve it. We were just being kids. Normal adolescent girls. We did not do anything anyone else would not have done, had Lizard Girl moved into a different neighborhood. I only wish that I had understood, wish that somehow, we could have heeded the warning Lizard Girl spoke through her strange rituals in the forest—that the Community in which we lived was sick, and maybe, despite the futility of it all, was worth trying to heal.

But the spell was cast.

The next morning, we watched Lizard Girl for a long time, long enough for my coffee to get cold, long enough for Casey Kasem to go from number thirty-five to fourteen. And yet that scene—Lizard Girl skipping down to her cages with a basket full of vegetable rinds to find her frogs floating in a cold, milky broth—is not what I remember most vividly.

It is this: sneaking back into the house as it began to rain, trying to suppress our girlish laughter as we tiptoed up the hardwood stairs, holding our mouths with one hand and, with the other, reaching out for a friend's arm or shoulder for balance as we navigated the dark hallway to my bedroom door. We fell onto my bed like links in a dropped chain, braided one another's hair and painted our toenails and watched *Pretty in Pink* until the darkest hours of the night. I remember falling asleep that way, in the flickering blue glow, with Avery's neck spooned in my arm, my leg over Morgan's shoulder, Kali's head on Haleigh's belly, Eugenia twirling my curls around her finger. We were entwined not unlike

the frogs whose limp bodies floated to the center of the swirling water as the flames died down, reaching for one another as they drifted toward death, toward the end of pain, though I did not draw the connection then.

We're not friends anymore.

## The Selected Letters of Sophie O'Day

May 30, 1986

Dear Mrs. Medlock,

Now that I am no longer in fifth grade and we start Hawkins Middle School next year, I can tell you the truth about what I think of you and your school. I am from Dublin, North Carolina, which is where I should be now. That is where my true home is, not here in Greer, South Carolina. We had to move here because my dad got a job as a Xerox salesman, except I don't understand why we moved because he's mostly gone away on long trips. When I first moved here I thought the governors should join the two states, North and South, and make it into one place called Carolina. Isn't that a pretty name? That was my best friend's name from Dublin—well almost, Caroline. But since I've been here I realize why they are separate states—because North Carolina is obviously a better place with smarter people. You don't even have magnet schools here where I can take Cooking, Painting, Poetry Writing, and Creative Dramatics. Here everybody has to take the same classes, Math, Language Arts, Science, Music and PE, and worse we have to stay in one class with the same people the whole entire year. And because I was in your class with

assigned seats I had to sit next to Chuck Brackins the whole semester who smells like French cheese.

I bet you don't even know what French cheese smells like. I know because I went to magnet school.

Anyway I don't appreciate the way you teach. For one thing, if a student is going to volunteer to read her story she worked so hard on in front of the entire class, you should not make fun of it. I once read a story in your class a long time ago, back in the winter when you were reading *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* to us. You probably don't even remember my story—it was about five girls who travel in a space ship to another planet where the animals can talk. And the main character, Estella, she wants to stay on the planet because it is peaceful, with no one like Gaddafi or the Soviet Union there. And Estella says to the Great Stag who is the leader of the planet, "O Great Stag, I wish to stay here sir because humans are selfish, destructive, murdering beasts. I dislike them, sir." See, they don't allow humans in their world, to keep it peaceful, and she has to get special permission from the Great Stag.

And then you said, "Yet another strange story by Sophia" and kind of rolled your eyes and told me to sit down and then when you graded it you gave me a C+ even though I spelled all my words right and my grammar was mostly right. I asked you why I got that grade, since my story was a lot like *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*: it was about another world, there were talking animals, and there was a girl main character. And obviously you think *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is a good story or you wouldn't read it to us. That's when you looked me straight in the eye and said, "Miss

O'Day, C.S. Lewis is not a misanthrope, and he wrote *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* to tell the story of Jesus Christ.” Well, that killed it for me right there. I loved that book until I found out it was just another Bible story in disguise.

And I bet you think I don't even know what misanthrope means. I looked it up in my Webster's College Dictionary. It means “One who hates mankind.”

But of course you just LOVED Julie's story about her great great grandfather who died on the Cowpens Battlefield in the Civil War! Just because we had taken a field trip there!! You let her read it in class, and in front of the entire fifth grade on Awards Day. Tell me this, whose story has the most imagination, a true story or a totally imaginary story?

Then we get to Science class, and share our drawings of the planets. It was the week the *Challenger* exploded. I worked real hard on Saturn the night before. I drew the rings real carefully giving them *perspective* as I learned in my art class at my old magnet school. I used paints and made my brushstrokes blend the colors in the rings real smooth. I used burnt umber, cinnabar, yellow ochre, and crimson to make it even more realistic. And guess who wins—Julie, of course, with Jupiter. Well I guess if all of us got to use red, white, and blue marble swirls in our planets the week the *Challenger* exploded we'd all have won. Anyway I thought the point was to make it realistic, and my Saturn looked like it was straight out of the *World Book Encyclopedia*. That's why I marched right up to you and told you my planet was the best, because I used *perspective*, if you even know what that means. Of course you sent me out in the hall as usual. Fine by me—I took my Saturn with me to admire.

So that is why I leave this school *happily* and with these final words: I'm GLAD the year is over and I will NEVER have you as a teacher again. Have a nice summer.

Your student thankfully never again,

Sophia O'Day

May 30, 1986

Dear Mrs. Rhodes,

This letter is to explain why I did not turn in the "My Hero" paper or read it in front of class. I think I have told you before you are my favorite teacher and Language Arts is my favorite class and I'm sure not having the My Hero paper is going to mess up my straight A's. But I did not turn one in because I do not have a hero. That doesn't mean I don't want a hero—who doesn't want one, I say—but instead to explain to you that after staying up all night trying to think of my hero, I can tell you for certain she doesn't exist, at least I've never seen her. I wish it was my mom, but she mostly sleeps. Even during the day with the curtains all closed. And me, I have to be outdoors, having adventures.

My hero who doesn't exist is different than any other hero. The best way to describe her is "Adventure Girl." She has really long black hair, black as a raven, and green eyes green as emeralds. Her skin is like gold and she is so muscular. There are things she carries. She has a rope that hangs on her belt and a spear and a sharp stone-knife, not for killing animals but for protecting herself. She has a small pouch with magic objects—colorful feathers, round stones, animal bones. She wears a dress wrapped around her body made of buckskin (but she didn't kill the deer, she found it dead) and when it's cold she wears this thick wool purple cloak with a hood. She can talk to the animals. I can see

them—there are wolves, deer, tropical birds, bears, turtles, elephants, dolphins, beetles, all kinds of animals. They surround her because she protects them, mostly from poachers and hunters who kill them just for fun. She rides a white horse really really fast under a full moon. Sometimes she's on the beach on a tropical island, sometimes in a forest with trees so big you couldn't get ten people around them, sometimes in a deep fire red canyon and sometimes the top of a snowy, rocky mountain. She is always alone.

So now you can see why I did not want to read this in front of the whole class, when all the other girls have heroes like Jesus, Debbie Gibson, and the Sweet Valley High Twins. For one I'm tired of being laughed at because of certain words I use, and for another, my hero's different and besides, doesn't even exist in fact or fiction.

Sincerely, your student,

Sophia O'Day

June 5, 1986

Dear Julie,

This letter is to inform you that I'm the one who started the I Hate Julie Club against you at the end of fifth grade. Of course, only one person joined—Deanna—and that's only because she weighs two hundred pounds and has a black mole the shape of Madagascar on her face and has no friends anyway, and I'd threatened to tell Mrs. Medlock that *she* was the one who's been writing curse words on the desk, not Chuck, if she didn't. So needless to say, I had a grand scheme planned to carryout your downfall but since you are a cheerleader nobody would join.

My momma found out about the I Hate Julie Club and is making me apologize. So this letter is to just explain my reasons for forming the club against you (which nobody joined) and apologize proper.

Reason #1: We presented our illustrated poems in Language Arts class. My poem was about our friendship: “We were bound together like earth and sea./ Because you were selfish, you eroded me.” My illustration featured a unicorn surrounded by colored triangles, called “Shards of the Rainbow.” But you didn’t understand the *symbolism* of the smashed rainbow. You and Kristy made fun of me for using the word “shards,” just because you didn’t know what it meant! Get a dictionary, I say.

Reason #2: We were in the hall waiting to go to lunch—you know how they made us line up in alphabetical order taking FOREVER. It was Thursday, the day Mrs. Medlock’s class is last to the cafeteria, the day you save me a seat. When I finally get my tray through the line, there’s Kristy sitting in my seat beside you and when I tap her on the shoulder she says “What?” and you say “What?” and I say “Whatever” and go sit with Deanna and start the I Hate Julie Club right then and there.

Reason #3: I am not even going to mention the contests in class.

So you tell me, who deserves an apology? The prettiest most popular girl going into the sixth grade with her pick of the boys and all A’s and a seat at the cheerleader’s table? Or a girl from Dublin who sits alone at lunch because her own Blood Sister won’t save her a seat?

Seems like you're doing just fine **WITHOUT ME** as your friend. So please accept my sincerest **NON**-apology. Come to think of it, I elect you **President of the I Hate Julie Club!**

Sincerely,

Sophie O'Day

June 12, 1986

Dear Abby,

I have a problem, it's my **Blood Sister Julie**. She will always be my **Blood Sister** even though she dropped me after she made the cheerleading team because apparently you can't be a cheerleader and be friends with someone who's not a cheerleader. But we are still **Blood Sisters** and that will never change.

I remember the day we became **Blood Sisters** just as if it were yesterday and not two whole entire months ago. It was right before spring break and she came to spend the night at my house. We went down to the creek like usual, only this time it was almost dark and we had the whole ritual planned in **Three Passages** to make us become **Blood Sisters**. The air was so warm and thick like a blanket curled around us as we ran through the grassy field down to the creek. The moon was mostly full and the cicadas were chirping away their songs, like they were singing just for us.

We had planned **Three Passages**: first the **Drinking of the Sacred Nectar**, which we made from honeysuckle juice that afternoon. We spent a whole hour squeezing drop after drop from those teeny honeysuckle flowers into a cup. We had to pick a thousand flowers—yellow is the best but we had to start using white because we picked all the yellows.

Then we'd have to take each one in our fingers and pinch it real delicately on the very end, just above that tight green bud. Then we'd pull out the string, slowly so it wouldn't break, until a tiny bead of juice that looked like a drop of sunshine fell into the cup. We wanted to fill it but that would have taken FOREVER. Then we hid the cup in this small cave in the creek bank, behind this big chunk of white quartz—we made sure we used quartz so we'd be able to find it in the moonlight. After we went back to the house and ate the pizza Momma ordered for us, the moon rose and we were ready to Embark on the Three Passages of the Blood Sisters Journey.

We walked back down to the creek through the cool mist, which looked silver blue in the moonlight. I carefully rolled the quartz back and pulled out the cup real steady. Then we laughed because there was barely even a millimeter of juice in there! I let Julie go first and she was careful not to take more than half of the tiny sip it took us like hours to squeeze. Then she put the cup to my lips and tipped it, filling my mouth with the rest. It was so delicious! The sweetest thing I've ever tasted, made me feel like I was a flower bud jeweled with dew drops about to burst open.

The Second Passage was the Piercing of the Flesh. We took out this needle I took from momma's sewing kit upstairs—she has so many of them she'd never notice one was missing—but it was dull so we had to push and push and push the needle into our skin. Jesus it hurt. I had never felt so much pain, but I kept pushing until the needle pierced the tip of my thumb. Just knowing that I was doing it for Julie, for our friendship, I could take the pain. And right when I saw the tiny red bead on my thumb, we pressed them together, wrapping our other hands around them and squeezing so hard to make sure our blood

mixed and was shared between us. It reminded me of the time Julie spent the night, when she wanted to see if we could both fit in the same sleeping bag. Our bodies pressed so tight together, we could barely fit, and Julie started giggling and saying “Oh, Sophie!” I said, “Oh Julie!” And we kept going “Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh” until Momma knocked real loud on my bedroom door and said, “Girls? Aren’t you asleep yet?” and I jumped out of her bag into mine and then she opened the door and I was breathing so heavy I don’t know why, and I said “Sorry (gasp) Momma (gasp)!” And then she said to be sure to stay quiet and shut the door. Julie was giggling still and I was too.

But I couldn’t sleep afterwards. I felt different, like there was something burning in my belly, and I didn’t know whether it was naughty, or the purest most beautiful thing in the world.

Then there was the Third Passage, the Flight over the River. We found this vine hanging like a boa constrictor from the big old sycamore tree. We had just finished reading *Bridge to Terebithia* for Language Arts. I love that book! How sad Jess is when Leslie dies! It’s the only book that’s ever made me cry. Since the whole tragedy came from them trying to build a bridge, we figured we’d swing over the creek to build an imaginary bridge instead. This Passage was the most important because it was the part that consecrated our new bond as Blood Sisters. So the night we became Blood Sisters we pulled ourselves up on the vine, our legs and arms all entangled with the vine and each other, like we had grown there together, like we were part of the vine and the sycamore tree and the creek and the forest. We looked each other in the eyes. I remember her blue eyes looked silver in the moonlight, and I couldn’t tell if it reminded me of the stars those nights me and Caroline

camped out behind my house in Dublin, or if it reminded me of the stray cat I once saw down here by myself, it's hollow eyes blinding me from the shine that seemed to come from the darkest parts of its mind.

“Ready?” she said. “Ready,” I said. And we pushed ourselves off the bank. The feeling was exhilarating like flying must feel! And just when I feel like I'm flying, the vine snaps suddenly, and we both land in the creek. Then we laughed. We laughed and laughed, cracking up until our sides hurt, laying there in that water like a couple of toads. Julie threw water on me, and I threw some back at her, and before I knew it we were laughing in the shining moon-rain we made. Julie landed on a soft sandbar, but I landed on a big jagged rock that got me right in the ribs. I didn't tell her though, I wanted to splash and laugh with her in that moonlit water forever.

Anyway, two weeks later Julie made the cheerleading team and dropped me for Kristy because apparently if you are a cheerleader you can only be friends with other cheerleaders.

Dear Abbey, this is the problem: Julie is my Blood Sister no matter what. I have no other sister. And even if she pretends not to see me at school, and makes fun of me in class, and doesn't save me a seat at the cheerleader's table, *we share the same blood*.

Miss Abbey, I know you receive a very large number of letters, and cannot answer every one. But please answer mine because I need to know: is Julie my Blood Sister forever? And can I have both a Best Friend in Dublin, and a Blood Sister in Greer?

Yours truly,

Sophie O'Day

June 19, 1986

Dear Caroline,

I miss you so terribly and I hate South Carolina. It's hot here and there are barely any trees in my neighborhood except for along the creek in our backyard. Will you ever come visit me? Momma says she talked to your mom about maybe visiting this summer. Do you know what I'd rather do? Visit you and spend the night again in my old house. I love my old house, that big old white farmhouse. Whenever I tell my daddy how mad I am we moved he says, "Sophie, honey, this house is so much better, it's new, aren't you glad to be in a neighborhood instead of out in the country with no one around but farmers, there are kids to play with, and look! You've even got a creek." But how would he know since he's always gone. And Momma always sighs and says, "Your father's right, Sophie," but I know she's lying. She misses Dublin too and mostly lies in bed all the time now.

Caroline, I met a boy and I think I'm in love! His name is Caesar. Isn't it a beautiful name? Caesar, Caesar, Caesar. Like a prince.

He's sixteen. That's five years older than me! His parents own the bike shop and that's how I met him. I can walk there from my neighborhood. So I needed a bell and streamers for my new bike I got for my birthday. I'm ringing all the horns and bells so I can pick one out when I see him behind the spokes of the bike he's working on, just watching me. So I start looking through these bike magazines, and there's this one with a pull-out poster in it, and it's these three biker girls—I've never seen a poster with biker girls!—and it says: **SOME GIRLS PLAY WITH DOLLS. REAL WOMEN SPIN.**

Isn't that the best poster you've ever heard of? I taped it up on my wall, you can see it when you visit. So Caesar comes over and says, "You need something for your bike?" and I say "I don't know, just looking." And he says, "I can show you some jumps on my ramp." I say "Okay," and he tells me how to get to his house. It's basically through the back of my neighborhood, if you follow it to the end of the road, cross the railroad tracks, and go through the woods on the trail to the left. He said he'd meet me in the woods so I could follow him to his house. He said there's this clearing that's filled with pine needles, to meet there.

I rode my bike fast as I could, I couldn't wait to see him do jumps on his bike. Maybe he would show me some tricks, like a bunny hop or 360 which I can almost do. I just felt so alive, riding my bike over the tracks and through that trail into the woods, jumping over the rocks and roots. I thought about those women in my new poster, standing there so proud with their backs against this brick wall, holding their bikes against their long, strong legs. They're wearing spandex shorts and ripped T-shirts. One is blonde, one is brunette, and one—my favorite—had this crazy wild red hair—so big it looked. She was the only one without a headband. She just let her hair go wild like fire. It was so tough.

That's when I knew who I was. I knew I was a real woman who doesn't play with dolls, a real woman who rides bikes. And I was thinking how now I will maybe have a boyfriend who also bikes, and we can be tough together.

I come around the bend and there he stands, and it shocks me. I didn't think I'd find the clearing so soon. It was just like he said, filled with pine needles. The sun is shining

at a slant behind Caesar and makes him look like one of those Greek gods standing on a bed of gold. I feel a knot in my stomach, but it feels good.

He says, “Woah! You trying to run over me?” and I stop and throw down my kickstand. But it gets stuck in my shoelaces so I just lean the bike on a tree. “Where’s your bike?” I ask, and as gracefully as I can, untangle my shoelaces from the kickstand without him noticing. He says he left his bike at his house. I say well why don’t we go there then. And he just shrugs and sits down against this tree trunk. So I do to.

He asks if I have a boyfriend and I say no. Then he says, “My ex-girlfriend says I’m the best kisser she’s ever had.” I say, “Oh really?”

And then he kisses me. Just like that. His kiss is so—how do I explain it—*overpowering*. It makes me feel like I’m melting into that bed of warm pine needles, like I’m becoming part of the forest floor.

Next thing I know, he’s halfway on top of me. I feel like I should stop him, but I also want to see what happens. This is my first kiss!

And then Caroline, he puts his hand *there*, over my shorts, and starts rubbing me. I feel so warm down there, his hand rubbing me, I feel all the good feelings I’ve ever felt come to me all at once, from *there*.

I know I shouldn’t let him. I know I shouldn’t but it feels so good I can’t tell him to stop.

Then he stops kissing me and says, “Meet me here tomorrow. At 4:30.”

I say OK and jump on my bike, pedaling harder and faster than ever before, the branches hitting my face, my head buzzing from his kiss, his *touch*. I feel like I’m flying

down the trail and over the tracks when the sky opens up into the sun setting and moon rising, and I forget all about the ramp and the tricks and feel like I've just found this secret treasure no one else knows about, and it's all mine.

Your best friend FOREVER,

Sophie O'Day

June 21, 1986

Dear Pastor Paul,

There is something I wanted to ask you about in youth group last night, but I was scared. You were talking about heavy petting and how it's ok to imagine someone we like doing those things. That imagining it is not a sin, but that really doing it is where you can get in trouble. How we should think about Jesus, and what he would want us to do.

Sometimes I do think about Jesus. We are in that secret chapel room on the lower level, the one with the stained glass window of the cross. I imagine I walk in there, and the aisle is lit with candles all the way to the altar. Jesus is standing there like he's waiting for me. No one else is there, just me and Jesus and the dark empty pews and the candles and it smells like steam coming up out of maple syrup after it soaks into my pancakes at the Cracker Barrel. He smiles and his face has this warm glow from the candlelight. He opens his arms. I walk down the aisle. He enfolds me in his arms, and I finally breathe. I breathe him in. He smells sweet and metallic, like my dad after he finishes mowing the grass in July. I am careful not to step on his toes, since he's wearing sandals. Then he turns my head toward his and says, "You, too, are a child of God." His voice sounds like if warm butter could sing.

Then, he leans down and *puts his lips on mine*. It's not like when we played that kissing game with the boys in the loft at the Youth Group retreat. It's not like in the movies either, when they eat each other's faces off. Jesus' lips feel like chocolate that's been in the sun, just melting there on your lips. If he uses his tongue I can't tell. Then I feel how you were describing it tonight, like really warm all over and wanting more to happen, but not sure what.

Maybe that's how Mary Magdelene felt. I saw a painting of her when my art class from my old magnet school went on a field trip to the museum in Raleigh. Mary was bent over Jesus' feet, weeping and cleaning his feet with her hair. Maybe if she wasn't a prostitute, Jesus would have taken her into his arms and kissed her like he does me, because I'm a virgin. Jesus is like a unicorn in that way.

This is how I think of Jesus. I was scared it was wrong and was afraid to tell anybody. But you said it was okay in our imagination, which I have a strong one. This is the only way I can know Jesus anyway, since I've never seen him in person. Even though I am definitely a virgin.

Yours truly,

Sophie O'Day

June 27, 1986

Dear Jesus,

This is my confession. **YOU CANNOT EVER TELL A SOUL** (especially not your Father). I met Caesar in the woods again. I know what I let him do was naughty. And I let him do it and I knew it was wrong and at the same time I liked it. I hope you won't

think different of me. I don't know how I feel or should feel. Or if I should keep meeting him in the woods.

But most of all Jesus, I need to know one thing. Am I still a virgin?

Yours truly,

Sophie O'Day

June 30, 1986

Dear Ms. Geraldine Ferraro,

First of all, I voted for you a long time ago in the mock election at my magnet school. Thank you for almost being the first woman vice president. Ronald Reagan never answers any of my letters but that's only one reason I voted for you. I campaigned for you in my neighborhood even though my dad called you a gay bitch baby killer (he's a Republican). I scotch taped posters to all the streetlamps and I even pinned one of those heart shaped buttons on my backpack that says "Geraldine Ferraro 1984: AMERICA'S FIRST WOMAN VICE PRES."

Ms. Ferraro, I want to be the First Woman President! Even though you lost the election, I hope that you can give me some advice. I already have ideas about how to improve our nation and help poor people. The first thing I would do as president is make the fifty states one state. We must obliterate all borders between citizens! Then I would feed the hungry children with a giant garden like the one my Grandma used to have in Dublin. And after that I would make hunting illegal and free all the wild animals from the Greenville Zoo.

Ms. Ferarro, I have a question: Can a woman still be president even if she has *done it*? I am just asking because a lot of times, there are girls at school and if anybody knows they have *done it* then no one votes for them for student council and they get picked last for kickball in P.E. and they sit alone in the cafeteria.

Not that I have *done it* Ms. Ferarro. My daddy says he'll disown me if I get ruined before I'm married. I just wanted to know in case I ever get married and *do it* with my husband. But I'd rather be president anyway.

Yours truly,  
Sophie O'Day

July 10, 1986

Dear Caesar,

I waited until 5:00 and thought maybe I was supposed to meet you at the shop and then I saw you with that other girl. I never let anybody do that to me before so I thought it meant something but apparently you just do that with every girl who comes in needing some streamers. Don't EVER meet me in the woods again, I will NOT be waiting there for you every day, and I don't EVER want to see any of your tricks again.

Forever NOT yours,  
Sophie O'Day

P.S. You can tell your new girlfriend that your ex-girlfriend (me) said you were the WORST kisser she's ever had.

P.P.S. When I asked you whether you would rather have a car or a horse you said a car. So I don't think we're very compatible.

P.P.P.S. In case you haven't figured it out yet, I am breaking up with you.

July 15, 1986

Dear Caroline,

I have a secret and I don't know who to tell besides you. I am going to start a colony! Girls only: Best Friends, Blood Sisters (unless they are cheerleaders), or Adventure Girls. Would you like to join?

Your best friend FOREVER,

Sophie O'Day

July 17, 1986

Dear Julie,

Even though we have a checkered past, I invite you to be one of the Five Chosen Ones for my new colony. We are still Blood Sisters even though you are a cheerleader.

Yours Truly,

Sophie O'Day

July 20, 1986

Dear Deanna,

Thank you for your participation in the I Hate Julie Club. As you may know, the club was disbanded when my Momma found out and made me apologize.

I am starting a colony for Adventure Girls. Congratulations! You have been selected as one of the Chosen Ones. I have begun construction on a teepee in the woods behind my house. If you would like to join the colony, please report to the teepee.

Yours truly,

Sophie O'Day

July 25, 1986

POSTED

To Anyone:

I am starting a colony for a select few Chosen Adventure Girls Only. If you qualify, report to the teepee by the creek.

Warning! This is a secret colony.

August 1, 1986

Dear Mom and Dad,

Farewell. I am running away to have adventures. I love you even though you sleep too much (Momma) and are always gone selling Xerox machines (Dad). Overall, you have been mostly high-quality parents.

There is no chance I will return so don't come looking for me. **I AM NOT IN THE WOODS BY THE CREEK.**

Dad, I took the sling shot you carved when you were a little boy. I need a weapon to protect myself, and to protect the animals from poachers. Momma, I borrowed some needles and thread for making my own clothes out of animal skins that I find on already

dead animals. I also took some matches, tomato seeds, a loaf of bread, a jar of peanut butter, and my pillow and loaded it all in my red wagon. I'd rather have a white thoroughbred horse, but the wagon will have to do.

After I have my adventures, I am going to find some REAL WOMEN friends and we are going to start a colony. Then I will run for President. I would appreciate your vote as well as the use of a Xerox machine.

Again, do NOT come after me.

Your daughter,  
Sophie O'Day

P.S. I need to come back for my bike so please leave it outside the garage.

August 1, 1986

To the Editors of BIKER Magazine:

Please forward the following message to REAL WOMEN WHO SPIN:

I am a great admirer and an adventure girl who does not play with dolls. I am a biker and a builder of a colony for REAL WOMEN only. I have two questions for you:

- 1) How do I find REAL WOMEN like you to join my colony?
- 2) If you accidentally give someone your virginity, how do you get it back?

Your prompt reply is appreciated.

Sincerely,  
Sophie O'Day

August 2, 1986

Dear Mom and Dad,

The good news is I survived my first night of wilderness adventures. However, this is my last letter. Building a new colony will consume my energy, since I will need to construct several new teepees by hand for the REAL WOMEN who will soon join me. I will not be able to write you anymore, or anyone else. I have collected herein the letters telling my life story for when I become famous. Please do not read the letters until then, when they will be published in the World Book Encyclopedia.

Your daughter,

Sophie O'Day

P.S. Momma, thank you for the ham biscuits. As a reminder, my new colony is vegetarian. I enjoyed them anyway.

## Flight

A problem she does not anticipate is that flying her Cessna Skycatcher 162 into the side of a mountain is an environmentally irresponsible way to commit suicide.

The rest of her plan is flawless: fly solo from Kitty Hawk, North Carolina (where at age seven on vacation with her parents she first felt the piercing urge to fly while watching a video at the Wright Brothers Museum) to Victoria Island, British Columbia (where she would say goodbye to Bousquet, the love of her life whose commitment to ephemeral love and marital fidelity had driven her to orchestrate said plan), and fly full speed into the rain-forested heart of Rainier (where they had first confessed their mutual infatuation and made fast, fierce love against the mossy base of an old-growth cedar before the rest of the group caught up with them on an Academics for Environmental Responsibility conference field trip).

She aims the Cessna's nose toward Unicorn Peak, just above the green strip of alpine forest, a steady descent at 110 miles per hour.

Metal, glass, and bone would smash on the jagged teeth of the ridge. There would be fire, shrapnel, the melting of skin, dark smoke defiling the cloudless sky. Air Traffic Control would call Search and Rescue. Broad shouldered men would helicopter in, bolt

elaborate rope systems into the rock, sift through the wreckage for fragments of skull, a half-burned femur, a chunk of scalp with singed hair intact. Anything to send home.

Her parents would be reading the paper over empty plates. Her mother would speak and her father would not respond. She would watch the Carolina wren dart from thistle feeder to red maple branch when their landline phone rings—a sign of telemarketers or bad news. The mother would drop the phone, her eyes drained of light. The father would look up from the paper, ask without speaking: “What is it, Eliza?”

Someone would have to notify the university. Classes would be cancelled, the students’ exams not returned. Would they find another scholar to write the introduction for the forthcoming anthology, *Ecology and Energy: Visions for the Future*? Would they call her ex? Would they sell or rent her one bedroom bungalow? It is difficult to say. She does not know the protocol of such things.

The slight arc of the horizon implies a gentle earth. This is the lure of flying—everything softens into flesh from the air.

Unicorn Peak pierces the sky like a black fang. Conifer tips scrape the belly of the plane. She cannot turn back.

What will be the final image that flashes before her eyes, the moment that defines her life? Not Bousquet’s hands gripping the small of her back, his teeth clenching the muscle between her neck and shoulder, the redwoods whipping like dry paintbrushes across a canvas of blue, footsteps and voices of the others approaching. Though this is the image she prefers: their impulsive animal coupling.

It will not be that, though it is for him she is committing this deed.

Or not for him; for the idea that carnal bliss prevails over marital fidelity. She is young, or young enough, and such things make sense to the young, before the body breaks down and the choice to remain single—to copulate at will with whomever, to live out one’s days alone—transforms from modern privilege to terrifying nightmare.

Not that. Adrenaline pulses through her veins, her heart vibrates with the Cessna’s engine. Bousquet, Bousquet, Bousquet. The name fills her with calm. Like the dream she had of flying in darkness blacker than night, her heart flaming with terror, and hearing his voice chanting his own name.

The plane jolts her body violently. Pain shoots through her tailbone into the base of her skull, releasing a flood of endorphins that decelerates the lightening speed violence of the wreck to a leisurely drift, like the afternoon she drifts on an inflatable raft in a tidal pool hot as bathwater, gazing up at the lifeguard with one knee bent under a red umbrella. A perfect pair of clavicles span below his chin. Wind loosens fine wisps of hair from her ponytail that tickle the nape of her neck. Packed wet sand throbs with the fiddler crabs’ thousand pulsing breaths. She turns over on her back, stretches out her arms and legs, pushes her fingers and toes into the warm wet sand, deeper and deeper, like the white bodies of cicada nymphs push through earth to suckle tree root tendrils for seventeen years, then emerge to mate, fly, die.

## Women in Literature

Women in literature have always been mad, especially if they were Kate Chopin, Virginia Woolf, and/or Sylvia Plath. This is a true statement because two out of three of these women writers committed suicide. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar say the “madwoman in the attic” appeared in women’s literature in the olden times of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Women writers had an “anxiety of authorship” because of patriarchy, which told them to shut up, if they even noticed them at all. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the patriarchy gave up and let women write legally under their real names, instead of “Anon.” But as Kate, Virginia, and Sylvia demonstrate through suicides by ocean, river, and oven (respectively), the madwoman rages throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Kate Chopin shows her madwomaness best in *The Awakening*.<sup>21</sup> This novel is about a mother named Edna who gets tired of her husband and sons and decides to have an affair with a good-looking guy she met for swimming lessons at the beach on Grand Isle, Louisiana. Except, he won’t sleep with her because she is married, and runs off to Mexico. As a result, Edna commits suicide by removing her clothes and swimming into the ocean. Kate is the one out of three women writers who does not commit actual suicide. Therefore,

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<sup>21</sup> Dr. Chew, I hope you will count this as a 20<sup>th</sup> century woman writer even though it was published in 1899.

she commits protagonal suicide vicariously through Edna. However, maybe Edna did not intentionally drown herself. Maybe, instead, she drowned because she was still learning how to swim. Maybe if Edna's swim teacher had not rejected her, she would still be swimming today.

Learning to swim can be very stressful, especially if someone is yelling at you from the riverbank that you'll never do it because you're uncoordinated and illegitimate, even if he's just trying to help motivate you because that's the way he was motivated in the army. Swimming in the ocean might seem difficult, since tides and depth can increase danger. However, if you learn in a river where your father is watching, learning to swim can be a nerve wrecking experience. For one thing, even though the river is waist deep, it is swift enough to pull you under, especially during the spring rains. Furthermore, you have the constant challenge of dodging your three older brothers, who enjoy dive bombing you from the rope swing or throwing empty Red Bull cans at your head as they float by on their tubes while you are struggling to keep your nostrils above the rushing water. Especially challenging is looking dignified. You have practiced this look of dignity in the mirror by holding your head up on your slender neck and slanting your eyes just aside as if everyone is holding their breath until your next move. You have practiced this look for your father's eyes. But he never looks at you. Not at the dinner table, not when you win the quilting bee, not when you accept a third place ribbon on the Cross Country team, not when you get chosen to sing a solo of "Father, We Adore You" in the church choir, not even when you tell him you got into college with a First Generation Scholarship.

But he looks at you now, swimming alone for the first time in deep water, and you know this is your one chance to maybe become something he is proud of, something he loves. You push off the rock and pull your arms through the frigid water in long smooth strokes, kicking your feet like a propeller. You can feel yourself moving. Moving! Despite the force of the current pushing you in the opposite direction. When you come up for air, your father's silhouette darkens your line of sight. You can hear your brothers laughing and shouting something at you. Maybe they are cheering, just this once. You duck back under, hoping he notices you swimming upstream like a rainbow trout. When you come back up for air, you understand their words: "You're going nowhere!" That's when you feel the frigid water rush into your throat and the current sweep you downstream.

For a moment, you aren't sure if you have the energy to pull yourself onto the riverbank. You aren't sure, as the current carries you away, if they would even save you. But you grab onto a rhododendron root and choke up the water in a series of ungraceful convulsions. Then you lay there for a long time in the thicket, with the mountain laurel blooms fallen on the ground around you. You hear the plunge of each brother from the rope swing, and your father whooping and laughing. You lay there, catch your breath, breathe in the sweet smell of spent blooms, stare into the one bloom above your head that has not yet fallen. It's so geometric, so delicate, so unique, if there were not thousands of them all over the forest floor. The flower is white with five points and a tiny green center encircled by a red ring. There are ten stamen emerging from the center, each one bending to rest its microscopic head inside a red dot in the crease of each petal. Each with its own place.

Except one. There's this one stamen sticking out from the middle, "alone with no red bed/ to rest its lonely head."<sup>22</sup> How could God make such a horrible thing? Then you realize your father and brothers have gone up to the house, that the forest is darkening, that they may even be sitting down to dinner, and you pull yourself onto your feet and cross the river alone.

If a mother like Edna has an affair, sometimes a child is born that does not have the same father as her other children and when that happens the child of the affair is sometimes ignored, picked on, or made fun of. This can result in low self-esteem. At first that child may believe she is treated like an outcast because she is the youngest or because she is a girl or because she has the unfortunate facial features and build of an elf while her brothers more resemble chimpanzees. That child may not know why until she discovers the truth in a box of letters she finds in the cellar under a floorboard behind her mother's canning shelf, where there is a clear blue Ball jar stuffed with moldy envelopes marked "Return to Sender." When she reads them, the letters give her a feeling of danger and desire and teach her something about what it means, exactly, to be a woman.

All the letters are addressed to Ray. In one letter, for example, her mother states: "I ache for you. When I look into her eyes, I feel like I am looking into your eyes. When I pull my fingers through her hair, I remember the nights I stroked your hair, the bend of your shoulders in the firelight, I remember the heat of your embrace."<sup>23</sup> It is a strange feeling to realize your mother is lusting after a man you have never met when brushing her

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<sup>22</sup> Myself, from an original poem entitled "The Lonely Stamen."

<sup>23</sup> Dr. Chew, I hope this qualifies as "examples of primary archival research from diaries, letters, and/or journals of obscure women writers and artists."

daughter's hair after she gets out of the bath. Furthermore, it is disturbing to know she continues to imagine that man whenever she looks at you: "I wish you could see how she is growing, Ray! She is five now, long and lean and beautiful as a young doe. I see you in her every feature, her every move. Her eyes are light hazel and her skin is creamy as custard and she is graceful and swift when she runs. But I fear for her—I am afraid it is too obvious, with my husband and sons so dark—how long can I hide the truth?" Furthermore, she argues, "Sometimes I wish I could live two lives; one as your wife and as the mother of our daughter, and another as the wife of my husband and the mother of my boys. *It is too hard to have her here,*<sup>24</sup> to feel so divided between worlds."<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, Virginia Woolf avoided this problem of unwanted children by having another kind of madness called lesbianism, a form of affairs married women have with other women. Virginia believed the madwoman should have a room of her own, and not be locked in an attic like they did in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to Virginia, a room of her own would prevent women from getting "flung about the room," a common occurrence for Shakespeare's sister.<sup>26</sup> Virginia said that to get through life, one must have a lot of confidence. "Without self-confidence we are babes in the cradle. And how can we generate this imponderable quality, which is yet so invaluable, most quickly? By thinking that other people are inferior to oneself."<sup>27</sup> This is a true statement especially if you are illegitimate. According to Virginia, "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its

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<sup>24</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>25</sup> Paraphrased from memory. The author has since intentionally destroyed these letters by fire.

<sup>26</sup> This only happened once in my house, when my dad found out about Ray.

<sup>27</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2005), 35.

natural size.”<sup>28</sup> However, if you are illegitimate, you can have the opposite effect, reflecting your illegitimacy at twice your father’s natural size. So when he looks at you, he sees his wife giving it to another man, which makes him feel about the size of a horsefly. Only, it makes you feel the size of a fly, too. It’s like the two of you are looking at each other through the wrong end of the binoculars, and even though you are standing close together inside the same house, you are both so very small and far away.

In addition to having relations with your father, low self-confidence makes it hard to do anything like even just walk into a classroom. Especially if you are a “first generation” student, there are the problems of 1) what to wear, 2) where to sit, and 3) what to say. For example, when you get into college and your mom drives all the way to Pigeon Forge to buy you a plaid pleated skirt and a white button down blouse and a pair of white leather sandals to match, then that is what you wear the first day of class, with your shirt tucked in and your hair combed behind your ears. Women have always had to worry about their appearance until the twenty-first century, when getting ready for a college class consists of rolling out of bed and putting on a pair of flip flops with your pajamas. If you are “first generation” you may not know this is how to dress in college and so you may be the only one wearing a skirt and shoes that don’t require giving yourself a toe wedgie to wear them. You sit in the front row because your scholarship depends on a high GPA. You are the first one to class and as the other students wander in they all sit in the back of the room. There are actually two empty rows between yourself and the rest of the class. Then when the Professor asks how one’s gender affects one’s roles in the family, you raise your hand and

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

say that being female in your family means working the firewood stand and sewing quilts rather than using the chainsaw, and you hear the other students snicker. And you start to believe what your father said to you the day you left: “You don’t belong in college.” You go anyway to prove him wrong, but more and more, you believe that he is right.

Another great example of female madness is Sylvia Plath. Like most female poets, Sylvia hated her father and committed suicide. Her poem “Daddy” shows why she became mad. For example, she is forced to live in a shoe for thirty years and finally gets fed up: “You do not do, you do not do/ Any more, black shoe/ In which I have lived like a foot/For thirty years, poor and white/ Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.”<sup>29</sup> As these poetic lines alliterate, Sylvia was suffocating. A black shoe would be a dark, hot, and smelly place, especially if the laces are tied too tight, and anyone would go crazy in this circumstance. But this is a metaphor. It would be like the time your father locked you in the wood shed by accident. Maybe you were locked in the wood shed in the summer time when it was very hot. You are crouched in there and want to yell for help but you don’t because you’re not even supposed to be in there, in fact, you are forbidden because the only ones allowed to help with chainsaw art are your brothers (the “legitimate”). But you sneak in to study the bear carvings because you want to be a woman chainsaw artist. You think that maybe if you become a great chainsaw artist, then he will finally accept you like your brothers. Sylvia’s mother said a woman’s purpose is to be the place where a man shoots off from. But Sylvia argues, “I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the

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<sup>29</sup> Sylvia Plath, “Daddy,” lines 1-5.

colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket.”<sup>30</sup> Applied to chainsaw art, “I wanted to saw through logs at all angles myself, with sawdust flying like candy from a birthday piñata destroyed by three brothers’ baseball bats.”

Inside the woodshed, you might sit there holding your knees to your chest surrounded by chainsaw bears in the total darkness except for a slant of light seeping in through a crack in the shed. Like being in a black shoe, there is no breeze. Unlike being in a black shoe, you are surrounded by chainsaw bears. One bear is holding a trout, a farmer bear leans on a hoe, a grandma bear wears wire rim glasses and holds a pie, a mother bear is kissing her baby bear. On the shelf above are the unfinished bears. They surround you with their teeth bared and tongues hanging out and mouths stretched in an eternal grin like the whole world is a ripe thornless blackberry patch. These bears above do not know yet what they will become. They are rough and unpainted, they hold no objects and wear no clothes and thus have no gender. They are the color of naked wood and if you touch them you get those microscopic splinters that you can’t even dig out with tweezers. You imagine how you would finish them and decide that you would give them each a pair of wings, wings like an eagle (not an angel). Just in case they end up as a doorstep or hidden away in an attic, you’d like to think they could fly back home. Then you begin to wonder if you might be trapped in the woodshed for the rest of your life. You would have to live there in secret, eating spiders to survive and barely daring to breathe or achoo.

The slant of light blackens. The padlock pops open and the hinges squeak. A kind of terror flashes through you, like the last time he whipped you with his belt. Sawdust flies

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<sup>30</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (New York: Bantam, 1981), 68.

and the shed floods with light. He wipes his sweating head with a red rag and bends over to pick up the gas can. His back is turned, you are unseen. It's like the door to a whole other universe has opened, and you run past him up the hillside into the woods, you run and run and run until you reach the top of the ridge, and as you catch your breath the sunset bleeds over the whole valley and it's like you are seeing it for the first time, the shifting colors of the horizon as the sun slides under the earth, and you know you can go anywhere on these two legs, that you are not trapped now and never were.

Part of her madness is due to the fact that Sylvia lived in the city and did not like being indoors. "Spare me from cooking three meals a day—spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote."<sup>31</sup> This statement shows dramatic irony, in that she killed herself by an oven. Also, she was not very fond of automobiles or pollution. She says in her diary, "The noise of the cars on the pike is like a bad fever... all America seems one line of cars, moving, with people jammed in them, from one gas station to one diner and on."<sup>32</sup> In this sense, she was an early forerunner of the ecofeminist movement, which is comprised of women who dislike equally their fathers and pollution. If you live on a scenic highway that leads into the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, there are many cars carrying tourists whose money your family depends on. If your father and brothers run chainsaws constantly then it is difficult give a front porch lip sync performances of your favorite vintage songs, like "Venus." The significance of the lyrics is as follows: "Goddess on the mountain top / Burning like a silver flame / The summit of beauty and love / And Venus was her name/

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<sup>31</sup> Sylvia Plath, "From Diary," *The Norton Book of Women's Lives* (New York: Norton, 1993), 666.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 670.

She's got it/ Yeah baby she's got it/ I'm your Venus/ I'm your fire/ At your desire."<sup>33</sup> This you sing out to the passing cars while wearing a pink sequined tube top and denim skirt, with a yellow plastic microphone in your hand, hoping they will turn their eyes away for one second from the highway to you. But your father just yells at you to put on your "Bubba's Bear Barn" T-shirt and get back to the woodstand since it's a Saturday and people want to buy firewood for camping.<sup>34</sup> This is an example of the patriarchy repressing a woman artist, since lip syncing is impossible when you a) cannot hear the sound of your own voice, b) cannot hear the song you are lip syncing, c) cannot breathe because the air is polluted with chainsaw emissions and cigarette smoke, and d) have been banished from the exclusively male profession of chainsaw art.

But Sylvia did not totally hate her father. In fact, she adored him even though he was a Fascist. She even tries to kill herself for him: "At twenty I tried to die/ And get back, back, back to you."<sup>35</sup> A lot of girls will hurt themselves for a man, either for a boyfriend or husband or their own father. One example is blackberry picking. If your father wants to go blackberry picking on the fourth of July, but no one else wants to go with him, then you go. Your brothers would rather shoot off Roman candles even in daylight, and your mother refuses to pick the berries since she bakes the pies and makes the jam. So you go. You go even though it's hot and you always come home mosquito bitten and bloody, because you want so badly for him to think you are good at blackberry picking, at anything.

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<sup>33</sup> This woman artist also qualifies since Bananarama fell into obscurity after the eighties.

<sup>34</sup> My father's real name is Bascombe Maloney Gibson III. He says "Bubba" attracts more tourists, especially from Florida.

<sup>35</sup> "Daddy," lines 58-59.

Like three summers ago, maybe you risked your life for a cluster of the plumpest, darkest berries you have ever seen. Why would you do this? Your father loves blackberries. It's the only thing he eats slowly. He says most people pick them too early, chew them too fast and miss the sweetness, the richness. You don't pick blackberries, he says, you catch them. They're not ready when they turn black, but when you touch them and they fall. He eats them one at a time at this perfect ripeness. He likes to feel the juice of each tiny berry burst on his tongue. And here is a whole handful of them hanging out of reach, if only you could catch them, all at once. You have to climb onto the top rung of the ladder, the one above the one with the sticker that says, "WARNING: DO NOT SIT OR STAND ABOVE THIS STEP." You feel the ladder waver as you step up, but you keep your eye on this one cluster of black jewels hanging in the morning sun. The thorns hook into your skin as you stretch your arm out of socket, trying to at least graze your fingers across that perfect fruit hanging heavier than all the others, ready to fall. If tasted, these berries would be sweeter than honey, they would turn the eater's teeth violet.

And that's when I notice him watching me. It's the first time I can remember him watching me, and I feel for the first time what it is to be alive. It is my one chance in life not to fail in front of him. I reach my arm so far I feel my bones stretch. But those perfect berries hang just out of reach, as if to mock me.

So I lunge. I lose my balance and fall into the thicket. The thorns tear my skin, stick in my clothes, my hair, even—most painfully—my eyelids.

But I have it. I have that cluster and as my father runs over to pull me loose from the thorns, I hold the sweet ripe fruit up to his lips, the juice staining the inside of my palm.

“Just like your mother,” he said. “Break her back for the cream of the crop, then give it straight away.” But he eats it. He puts the berry in his mouth and closes his eyes. “Just right,” he whispers, and smiles at me with half a grin with his dark brown eyes looking into mine for the first time that I can remember. And even though I’m not a child anymore, he carries me into the house where mom’s making the pie crust and my brothers are eating hot dogs and watching the Nascar race. They don’t even look up. He sets me on the toilet and wets a washcloth at the faucet. His strokes are strong and gentle at the same time. In the mirror, it looks like I am crying blood. He rubs his large, rough thumb over each of my eyelids. For once I feel he loves me like one of his own.

That was the last year we picked blackberries. My father sold the land and it’s now full of vacation cabins. But we sell more firewood and bears and patchwork quilts than ever, though the logs have to be trucked in.

In today’s society, suicide is not the best way to deal with madness or womanhood, nor is having an affair, whether the affair is with a man or woman. There are other ways to deal with the “image of her own anxiety and rage.”<sup>36</sup> For example, when you feel very angry, close your eyes and take three deep breaths. Imagine the person who angers you as a helpless squirming infant.<sup>37</sup> If the person who enrages you is yourself, looking at a photo of yourself when you were a baby might help. Maybe there’s a photo of your mother holding you in the hospital bed and gazing at your pink wrinkled face, and she’s completely overjoyed and imagining all the wonderful things you will become, and it’s before you

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<sup>36</sup> Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 78.

<sup>37</sup> *Life’s Little Instruction Book*, #103.

father knows you are illegitimate, and his lips are attached affectionately to your forehead. And in that picture, there is a perfect world of happiness and belonging that you will never know in reality but at least you can look at the picture as a reminder of what might have been, of what is possible.

In conclusion, women writers are still mad in the twentieth century. Instead of being locked in attics, however, they are given rooms of their own from which they may escape toward suicide in oceans or rivers.<sup>38</sup> With the new freedoms of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women artists are finally expanding their madness from a room to an entire landscape of their own. It helps when the patriarch unlocks the door, or gives her a chainsaw to carve open the doorway herself.

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<sup>38</sup> That is, unless you are Sylvia Plath, who committed suicide in her kitchen because she was unable to leave her children.

## Snow

*for Keith*

He had been reading to her in bed from Jack London, a ritual they observed on the eve of winter's first snow. The baby slept in the room above. The air in their room was cold but the heat of their bodies under the covers kept them warm. Her cheek was nestled in the hollow of his breastbone. She had been listening to the story through his chest and the man in the story breathed and his breath became ice and the meaning of the sentences had drifted into sounds. She could hear her husband speaking the words and underneath each word the low, even tone of his voice hummed like a train. Each word became a train car and each sentence a line of brightly colored boxes moving against the white-grey tundra—first red, then green, now yellow and brilliant blue. She dwelled in the man's warm, moist breath as the colors passed over her and she drifted through the train cars, though she did not know whether she was still and the cars passing or if she was moving herself as the man's breath through the cars or both.

He lay the book down and moved her head to the pillow. He turned over on his side and switched off the light.

She woke when she heard the baby in the room above her whimper and fall silent. The cat was asleep on her legs and her legs were numb. She pushed the cat off. She scooted against her husband's body. He lay heavy and still.

She closed her eyes with her nose pressed between his shoulder blades and tried to go back to sleep. The house was silent. A gust of wind through the window frame left a chill on her neck, like someone had opened the freezer and closed it again. She heard the wind lift through the towering white pines on the other side of the wall and imagined the tops of the pines stirring the night sky. She imagined the wind pushing the tallest pine, just outside the baby's window, into an arc. She saw the trunk bend like a spine, snap and crash into the baby's crib. Her heart pounded. She felt an odd pressure in her ears pulsing with her heart. She heard the baby whimper again, a muffled cry. She lifted the covers, slipped on her robe, and walked through the kitchen to the stairs. She could tell by the silver border around the French doors that it had snowed. The tiles felt like a glacial field.

When she returned with the baby, the cat had moved under the covers between her husband's legs. She set the baby on the bed and removed her robe. The baby cried, reaching for her. She slid under the comforter and lay the baby between her and her husband as the baby found her nipple. He smelled of sweet cream and urine. His body was warmer than the cat's and her husband's bodies and she wished he were naked against her skin. She wanted to remove his pajamas but she was too tired and they had just gotten settled. She tried to go back to sleep as the baby sucked.

Her feet were cold and kept her awake. She ran one toe along her husband's shin. Her toenail caught his hair. She rested one foot against his, cradled in his arch. She moved

the other foot between his leg and the cat's warm fur. She listened to her husband's breathing. On each exhale, he sang out a soft note like a sigh. She thought, at least he doesn't snore. She thought, the sound is sweet, the way a child's un-self-conscious singing is sweet. But it was no use; the sound irritated her. She put her hand on his shoulder and rocked him gently.

“Shhhh, honey, you're doing it again.”

He grunted and resumed his deep breathing. She slid her arm, already chilled, back under the covers and around the baby's body. She closed her eyes. The heat pump came on. The end of her nose was numb, her nostrils raw, her throat like sandpaper. She wanted water, but she would have to pull the baby off and turn completely over to reach her glass.

The baby's sucking slowed. She concentrated on her breathing, making each breath deep to coax her brain into sleep. She breathed in through her nose and out through her mouth. In her yoga class, she learned that breathing this way helped maintain core warmth. She concentrated on the rhythm of her breath. In her meditation class, she learned that concentrating on her breath helped her fall asleep. The top of her head was still exposed. The draft from the window bent the hairs on her scalp. In one motion, she gripped the quilt, comforter, and flannel sheet in her fist and pulled the whole system over her head. She closed her eyes. Her breath was warm and moist and filled the cavity under the covers with a dense humidity. She made a tiny opening between the covers and her pillow. Cold, crisp air streamed in.

She could not sleep. She recalled having once read that in Chinese medicine, insomnia is the result of disharmony of the spirit. That you are living a life that is not consistent with who you are in your heart. That to correct the problem, you had to attune yourself to your true purpose. Her husband turned from his right side onto his back. The singing resumed.

*“Bon hiver,”* she whispered.

She touched his shoulder. “Are you cold? I can’t sleep.”

“Hmmm.”

“Tonight is like Alaska. Do you remember? When we stayed in the cabin?” She pushed his shin with her toe. He grunted in reply.

She turned onto her back and stared into darkness. She heard the cat’s footpads land on the hardwood floor. She rested her eyes in the dark empty space between the rafters. Every few moments, when his cell phone blinked, she could barely make out their rough-hewn edges, the way faint stars appear brighter when you look just past them.

“Where is your favorite place we’ve ever visited? Let’s talk about our top five favorites. Let’s whisper though because the baby just fell back to sleep. Can we do that? I can’t sleep. It will help me relax and take my mind off the fact I can’t sleep. We can switch. You say one, I’ll say one. And you have to say why you liked it. Will you do it? It’s that or tickle my inner arm. If you really want to go back to sleep, just tickle my arm and I will fall back to sleep with you. Just let me know. I’ll start, since you’re just waking up. My favorite place was Juneau. I love how it was so small that you could walk from downtown straight up the mountain into wilderness. I like how all the buildings were brightly colored boxes. I like

the soup lady whose carrot ginger bisque cured my cold. I like how the streets were silent at night, how at night it was dark and silent. I like how bears roamed around downtown. I like the bush plane pilots with their rubber boots and matted beards and long backs. I like the breakfast joint with the jar you just throw your money in. I like how they built a channel through town so the salmon could swim through. I like how, just before landing, the pilot said we were witnessing a rare moment in flying when he was making the sun come up for us. I like how it rained and rained and rained and when you thought the whole earth would wash away the sky would break open and the sun poured in. Your turn.”

He did not reply. She nudged him with her elbow.

“Juneau. Same reasons.” His face was in his pillow and he spoke from the corner of his mouth.

“No fair. A different place, and the reasons. Specific reasons.”

He thought a minute. His eyes were closed.

“Are you asleep?” She gently slugged him in the shoulder.

He suppressed a moan.

“The Brownstone.”

“Any place we’ve visited, not where we used to live.”

“Do you want me to play or no?”

“Fine.” She feigned a sigh.

He propped himself up on his elbow and rubbed his temples with his thumb and forefinger. “I liked that it took me ten minutes to walk to work, five by bike. I liked how you could turn on the furnace and it would heat up immediately. I liked the squeezebox

musician on the corner with the tattoos all over his back and the bone piercings in his ears.”

She was silent.

“What. Is that enough?”

“Sorry. I’m listening. It’s just that... I was just remembering. Remember how I caught all those rock fish from the kayak? One after another. I loved how you could just throw in the line and pull them out.”

He rolled onto his stomach and put the pillow over his head.

“And then you... and then...” She broke into a muffled chuckle. It was the kind that would evolve into an extended series of rolling belly laughter. His eyes were closed.

“...then you got all tangled in the line—” She was shaking the bed with her laughter. She held her mouth with her whole hand. The baby whimpered and she put him back on her breast.

He sat up on his elbow and rubbed his eyes. “I almost caught one. You weakened the line with your compulsive casting.”

She turned her head into the pillow and continued to laugh. He stared at her dark silhouette until her convulsing slowed and she drew her head up with one extravagant sigh.

“I’m glad you still find such pleasure in laughing at my expense.” He cupped his hand over the baby’s warm head. The hair was thin and soft. They were silent a moment, the three of them.

Then: “Do you think he looks like me?”

She looked up at him through the darkness. “Of course he does. Just add facial hair, he’s a little you.”

“People always say he looks like you. I’ve never once heard anyone say he looks like me.”

“Even strangers say he looks like a perfect combination of both of us. And your mother, she said he looked just like you when you were a baby.”

“That’s what every mother says. She was being nostalgic.”

She glanced down at the baby. His breathing was deep and even. She could faintly glimpse the soft highlights of his closed eyelids, like blue crescent moons.

“He looks like you now.”

“Asleep. In the dark.”

The bed shook gently. Her laughter had resumed.

“I’m going to put the baby back upstairs.”

“Good idea.”

She cradled the baby in one arm and picked up her mug from the side table. “Do you want some tea?” she asked. “I’m going to make some. Really I’m just going to heat this up from last night. But I’ll make you some new. Do you want any? Chamomile?”

“Sure.”

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When she returned with the tea, he had fallen asleep sitting up, the lamp still on. She set the teas on the side table and considered, for a moment, waking him. But it was

late. He had clients to meet in the morning. Maybe she could sleep. She removed the pillow from behind his back, nestled against his body, and pulled the covers around them.

She could not sleep. She slid out of bed, careful not to lift the covers in a way that would let too much air in. She looked at her husband's sleeping body. She envied his ability to sleep deeply. She watched him as he slept. His eyelids were smooth as glacial riverstones, with hues of grey-blue, blue-violet, green-grey, and sand. He looked younger as he slept. Like the baby, she believed, even with the beard and its new gray.

She put on her robe and sheepskin slippers and walked into the kitchen carrying her tea. She opened the microwave, set the mug inside, and closed it. She pressed a button. The microwave hummed. She pulled open the door before it beeped. She held the mug under her chin so she could feel the warm, moist steam on her face. She walked to the French doors and pushed aside the curtains. Silver light spilled around her feet.

The snow was falling fast. She watched it fall, covering everything.

She had once read that the Inuit have more than eighty words for snow. She wished she knew them. The snowflakes transformed from fast, diagonal streaks, to wet, plunging spheres, to fluffy, whimsical drifts. The last ones, tinier than flecks of sand, shimmered in the moonlight as they spiraled down.

The snow stopped. Her tea was cold. The back yard stretched out between the house and forest like a sheet of glass. She could not recall having ever seen a snow-covered field in the full moon. Not even in Alaska. It was something she wanted to see. The moon hung like a bare bulb. Stark beams shone through the trees, like flashes of lightning frozen in time. Crooked, skeletal branches cast black shadows that cracked the snowfield into

thousands of shards, like the shattered windshield of a wrecked car held together by the pressure of its frame. That with the slightest jolt, would fall to pieces.

It was not what she imagined it would be. She could not, now, imagine it differently.

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## Vita

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