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ALONE AMONG

by

Debra Mattson

A Creative Writing Project
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
through the Department of English Literature
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

1994

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Always there remains portions of our heart
into which no one is able to enter,
invite them as we may.

Mary Dixon Thayer

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MANDOLINS SOUNDING IN MY HEAD

I hear my father's mandolin
my mother's song, like crying
I will go outside now
to catch her some fireflies
Nancy Mattson

I built a grave for Audrey Rose. I built it up past the horseshoe pits before the log fence. I pulled the grass out with my hands and tilled the soil with a spoon. No one saw me do it. I made a cross out of a poplar branch tied together with fox-tail. I wrote her name on a piece of hand-made paper and hoped the rain would not come too soon.

At night, when Mom and I went to the outhouse I tried to see the grave in the dark, but could not. I felt the shivers run through me and hurried on ahead. Mom had no idea. Only I knew the real Audrey Rose and only I knew to put her in the ground now or never sleep again.

At the beginning of the summer journey there are songs and games. Lucky lucky white horse, lucky lucky lee, lucky lucky white horse, bring my wish to me. We come over the final hill and I see the sauna first. That means I get to hug all the aunts and uncles before anyone else when we get out of the van. The farmhouse seems smaller to me than it was last year, but that is fine. The granary has a hole in the roof, but Dad and some uncle will fix that. I wonder if Peter-the-beaver still lives in the dam. Cousin Nancy washes laundry in the basin outside so it is her I get to hug first. She wraps her cold, wet and soapy arms

around me and I cry a little because some soap gets in my eyes. Mom thinks I am crying because I'm so happy to be here. Maybe I am.

Mom says that maybe it really is a bigfoot print. I found the stone under the combine on the Haارينen's quarter-section. Mom has always said I shouldn't go near that old rusty machine, but I had to squat down because I thought the deer wanted to hurt me. It saw me running to catch up with Dad miles away. And it snorted and kicked its front legs back. When I moved forward, it moved forward. When I moved back it came closer. A deer's a deer and I was scared. So I knelt behind the combine. And I screamed for Dad to help. And the deer left. It flew into the woods and probably ended up near our salt-block. But that is when I found the print. Or the stone or the freak of nature. I think it's a bigfoot print. Some say the sasquatch could very well live in Saskatchewan. I don't see why not, there's lots of room here for the sasquatch. Maybe that's the rustling I hear behind the granary when I'm on the way to the outhouse.

Dad and Uncle Einar let me play cow-pattie golf today. Except I put a nine-iron through a fresh one and then I had to clean it off in the dam. So, I decided to catch gophers instead. I propped up a wash-basin on a stick and placed pieces of bannock under it. With the string tied to the basin, I sat and sat on rough, dry yellow grass and waited. When the gophers came, I

pulled the string and screamed in triumph. I did this all day. But I always let the gophers go.

Aunt Elsie and I picked wild flowers today. Some buttercups, daisies and bluebells. *Lavender's blue, dilly-dilly, lavender's green. If I were king, dilly-dilly, I'd need a queen.* Then we put them in the old green vase and placed them in the middle of the table. Aunt Elsie watched me do crossword and word-find puzzles, but she would not help me because that would be cheating. She sat with her quilt and added more patches of colours and stripes and dots. When we looked out of the window we saw a deer across the road and on top of the hill, licking the blue salt block and carefully looking around. I wondered if it is the deer I saw before? I wondered if it remembered me. *Lavender's blue, dilly-dilly, lavender's green. When I am king, dilly-dilly, you'll be my queen.*

The coal-oil lamp is on and the moths flutter in and out of the globe. The farmhouse smells of chicken in the oven, roasting overnight. All the aunts and uncles and cousins are in bed now and mom and I sit together in the living room which used to be the whole house. Mom says nine kids and two parents lived in that living room, but I don't believe her. She reads me the story of the Pieni Keltainen Kissa and I fall asleep. I guess she carried me to Grandma's old bed because that is where I woke up after dreams of mandolins and bright sun.

The steam rises and I can barely keep my eyes open. It stings so much and now I can hardly breathe. I walk out naked into the bush and pee behind the well. All the aunts and uncles like it really hot and they don't really think of me. They slap each other with vihta but I am too scared the dried leaves will hurt. I'm back inside the sauna and the steam settles. I often wonder what it would be like to touch the hot rocks that are the colour of lava. If I just did it really quickly, what would happen? Mom wouldn't dare let me. But mom isn't here. After the sauna we swim in the lake and I watch the dead skin float around me in the water. I hope Peter-the-beaver doesn't bite my toes.

At the farm, we call it Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Esterhazy. What used to be Saturday is now the day we all go into Esterhazy and pick up stuff like flour and bacon and if I'm lucky I get a new pair of earrings or a huge crossword book. After we finish up in town we have to get ready for the Johanus picnic. To celebrate mid-summer there is a bonfire in a field and dancing in a huge barn. Uncle Carl plays the mandolin while Frank blows on his harmonica. Sometimes when they play *Finlandia* I cry, but I'm pretty sure no one sees me because it gets pretty dark. I meet a girl from Vancouver there and she has expensive shoes on, which I think is kind of silly considering they will be covered in mud and hay dust by the end

of the night.

We visit Aunt Irene who lives in Whitewood and has bright red-painted fingernails and blond, blond hair. She always has Conway Twitty or Kenny Rogers playing in her trailer and that reminds me of our house back in Ontario. My parents talk to all these old people and I just sit quietly. Finally, I make the move to Aunt Irene's few paperbacks by the couch and that is when I find Audrey Rose. On the cover, her name is in raised silver letters, with a bright pink rose twisted around it, dripping with blood. The "Reincarnation of" part is really small compared to her name. I open the book up to the middle and see black and white pictures of Audrey Rose and her family and her psychiatrist. I read the front of the book and the back cover bits and figure out that reincarnation means you come back as someone else, only if they die at exactly the same time and exactly the same way as you did. And they have to be the same age as you too.

Aunt Irene sees me reading and tells me it is a good book, but mom thinks maybe I should put it away for now, because we are about to leave. I can't fall asleep back at the farmhouse. The curtains blow too much and the coyotes howl too close to the farm. When I crawl into Mom and Dad's bed, Mom says I shouldn't read such nonsense.

Only I knew that even though she was Audrey Rose from Aunt Irene's paperback *The Reincarnation of Audrey Rose*, she was the

reason I could not sleep alone in Grandma's bed at night, but had to sleep with Mom. Audrey Rose was the reason I had to make sure I prayed for all my relatives before I fell asleep. She was the reason I decided there were others in the dark besides the fireflies and foxes.

By the end of the summer there were others in the dark but there was no Audrey Rose because I built a grave and buried her.

When we leave the farm I am last to hug Aunt Anne. I find myself with something in my eye again and mom thinks maybe I am sad to leave. Maybe I am.

EXTRAS

Well, it's really just a piece of extra flesh, I'm thinking to myself as I examine my nipple in the mirror. The whole thing, the whole breast. A flab of flesh. If we go way back, way back, that's all it is. Oh, I suppose it helps with the baby stuff, but other than that, it's a useless, extra piece of flesh. If I'm not having a baby, I don't need it. I'm not a model, I don't need it. And no one's caressing it to arouse me, so I don't need it. Go ahead. 'Take, cut off my breast.' Offer it up to those who crave.

There was a time, way back, if we go way back, when Michael rubbed the breast. Like a pile of dough, waiting to rise, waiting for the yeast that is his palm. Circle, circle, round and slow. Where it leads, nobody knows. Tongue the nipple, flick it fast, watch the bread rise, hot from the oven. Those were the days when that extra piece of flesh was necessary. An appendage with a purpose. I only knew my breast existed--really lived and breathed--when his hand brought its pulse to my attention. A baptism of sorts--old Minister Michael with his hand upon my nipple--bless thee, oh coveted one, come, be in God's family and live whole here and ever after. Now I'm thinking I'll ask Michael to write the eulogy, and lay his hand on that space where there used to be my left breast.

Now, the breast limp and full of things that shouldn't be there, things that twenty-three year old breasts shouldn't be full of, things that fifty-something women expect to find in their breasts, lies in my hand. Or my hand holds up the breast. Or, with or without my hand the breast hangs from my chest. One chest, two breasts. One should realize that one is very lucky to have more than one of something, and shouldn't be so selfish as to expect to keep two things. Losing one is fine, that's what I tell myself. I remind myself that I have one left, and to hold out for two is disgustingly self-absorbed. I remind myself, yet again, that I am not a model, nor a mother, nor simply an erotic playground. I am a woman and I have a breast that needs to go or I won't be a woman much longer. I have an extra piece of flesh and mother always said that only good little girls get their extras. Lord knows I haven't been a good little girl.

Michael knows the breast well. For five years now he's known the nipple, the tiny hairs, the two birthmarks underneath. He's rubbed his hands over it through silk and wool. He's tongued the nipple and kissed it underneath. He's even eaten tangy-tart candies off of the breast. I'm fairly sure Michael will miss it more than me. When I went on the pill I told him my breasts might get bigger. With this as his cue, he began to chart their progress. Often he was amazed at the growth. The growth that I myself never noticed. My cup size never changed,

but Michael insisted that they grew. Perhaps a fantasy of his own. The breasts remained the same for me, important only when in contact with someone else. Somewhat like a book or story--non-existent without the reader. Unknowingly he reads my breast. Like magic, the story unfolds.

He loves to watch them under the yellow see-through skin towel in the bubble bath. He loves to see them hard when I am cold, under the cotton of my t-shirt. He especially loves to see them lying flat in the candlelight, my thighs spread, my arms open wide. I ask him to read me and create me. Like the Michael that he is, he writes his own story with words of praise for my growing breasts.

I sit on the subway staring at the poster above somebody's head. Such strategy here on the part of the advertising people. No one wants to actually make eye contact on the subway, so we must look away, above, around, anywhere but at each other. And what better to fill the space with than promises of quality products and low, low prices? The poster I stare at gives me a woman in a camisole. The poster is black and white. Dark shadows show me that her cleavage is the proper size for this fashion season. Her breasts are the size of peaches. Not mosquito bites like mother used to call them or melons like my high school friends used to say. But simply and perfectly (for now) peaches. The woman in the ad wants me to buy the shampoo she uses. Oh

yes, I notice her hair now. Long and full and shiny, even in the black and white. Although I'm fairly sure--unless it is my cynicism--that her cleavage is far glossier than any strand of her hair.

Her future is bright, I can tell. She has the shiny peaches. She is a survivor. I, with my soon to be one-for-two breast will not get the man or car or job I want. I will get something else instead and deservedly so.

It's a commercial. A moving, talking commercial as Michael and I sit and stare at the tv. This time it's for beer. But there are more bikinis than beers. And tank tops. And tight, fashionable cropped sweaters. Colours. Shapes and sizes. Michael mentions how juvenile this commercial is. Hours later he tells me my breasts are fantastic, as is the rest of me, mind and all. He means well, but he should soon be quiet or I will have to tell him. I'll have to tell him that I won't be in a beer commercial now for sure or there won't be much growth to chart any more. I'll have to tell him the breast comes off in a few weeks but I will be ok. Will he?

Such an amputation can be quite stressful to all parties involved says my pamphlet. Why is that, I wonder, when it is my extra piece of flesh and no-one else's? Why can't I have the monopoly on pain right now? Michael, when I tell you, please don't be sad for yourself. Please, tell me lies about how it

doesn't matter. We have enough breasts to look at on tv, we don't need your extra one--please tell me that Michael. Feed me lies, like a story, and I will read your tale willingly.

I've told Michael my news. He hasn't said much but my god, he's sorry. We'll get through it together he says. I try to decide if I believe him as I look at my breasts in the mirror again. The mirror has become remarkably important these last few days. Can I see the lumps? Is that the swelling? I check under and beside and around the breast and see nothing new. I move the breast around in my palm and feel nothing new. It's all the same to me. Perhaps a trick is being played on me. The doctor knows I'll believe whatever she says. But this is the third doctor and I suppose now I have to realize this is not a conspiracy. At least not an earthly one.

Michael doesn't touch the breast now. He can't bring his tongue to touch it or his fingers to stroke it. It's not the sweet, sensual mango any more, but a prickly pear. He must watch so that the thorns do not draw blood from his hands. I offer up my blood, but no one is interested. Take, drink this. The breast isn't interested and I am not interested. There was a time when decisions were made together, with the breast. Now we

lead our separate lives, me and the breast. A slow, kind separation is always the hardest. It is best to move far, far away and make a clean break. This double entendre, I'm thinking to myself, is too much, even for me.

Perhaps, in utopia, (or is it atopia?)--in a place where the rules make sense and Fate does not exist--perhaps here in this place, I would be the extra piece of flesh and cut myself off of the breast. I would let the breast stay in the land of utopia and I would leave. I would be thrown into the surgical disposal bag and labelled appendage. Then that way I would be the one told I am worthless all my life, and therefore, when it comes time for me to die and leave what is worthy, I, the appendage that I am, would not mind. For I am worthless. And it is only my poor, suffering breast that is worth something. In utopia, out it would go and live a life of worth for years and I, the lucky extra piece of flesh would be swallowed into the earth to know nothing.

I tell my mother about my theory that the breast is only an extra piece of flesh. She argues, 'no, dear, you'll find it's much more than that, but at least you'll be ok.' She also says 'I told you this might happen.' She says, 'why didn't you get yourself checked out sooner? This has happened to everyone in

the family, I knew it. Sooner or later.' I wonder, why can't she say 'I'm sorry this is happening, I'll be there for you.' But that is too much to ask of real life. Yes, real life is 'I told you so' and 'be strong dear, you'll be fine'. I wonder how much of this real life I really want? Instead, give me a place that's different, give me a place where mother or Michael or strangers don't care. Give me that place, please, quickly, and I will run to it, breastless and ready.

CAT HAIR OR REBELS

There's this thing on my apartment wall. It's a design, like a lobster tail--or a lightning bolt--it's cracked paint or something--underneath the new layer of grey paint. It's weird. I stare at it as Bill and I make love. I try to figure it out. Why would someone be so obnoxious as to paint over a pretty massive tear like that? It looks like shit. Did they think we would be fooled? All it would have taken is some Poly-fil--just a thin layer, spread like jam. But, people are lazy. Oh, speaking of lazy--

"Bill."

"Yeah?" he grunts.

"This just isn't working for me. I'm too distracted."

Bill rolls off to the other side of the bed and I get up to put on a Gabriel tape.

"So, what's wrong?" he asks as he moves into his I'm-definitely-going-to-sleep-now-position.

I move back into the bed and investigate the fuzz in my belly-button as the music fills the room.

"Does it have to be so loud?" Bill asks, as he asks every time I put a tape in.

"Yeah, it does. Listen, I'm just thinking we've gotta stop having sex just 'cause we're bored."

"Is that what it's about? I don't think I was bored." Bill says into his pillow.

"Well, I think we are." Why else would I want to know about

a cracked paint design in my wall? I'm thinking to myself.

Bill thinks he's a rebel. Most of the time I just let him have his little illusion and hope he'll shutup eventually. What's with the rebel theme anyway? How can he be a rebel and be a twenty-six year old secure-at-his-job teacher at the same time? Isn't that an oxymoron? Isn't oxymoron just a throwback word from my days of freedom in university? Wait, isn't freedom in university an oxymoron? Or just moronic? Like Bill? Bill's a moron?

"You're a moron." I tell him, just to try it out.

"Excuse me?" he says and actually lifts the side of his face off his pillow.

"Just kidding." I tell him, thinking he'd rather hear he's such a rebel. He only thinks this because he's not using the standard curriculum as much as he should. He thinks the grade elevens should read Henry Miller and not Dickens. Dickens is old and dead. Miller is old and dead, but at least he's a rebel. Or, was a rebel.

Rebellion... it's time for my own I think. I think I'll talk to Evelyn, my kitty. She's far too distinguished to be rebellious. More like an aristocrat. Or, aristoCAT I suppose. That's what I'll call her, AristoCAT.

"Hey, sweetie, Eeeeeelyn... Aristocat, come here." I say in my sweet-as-sugar voice.

"Not now. He's shedding too much." Bill growls.

"She! How many times do I have to tell you? She." I

reply.

"Whatever. Don't bring him over here. No way. The bed's all clean and he's shedding." Bill insists.

Fine. I'm thinking to myself. I'm also staring at my Evelyn and craving to kiss her eyes. I like to kiss them when they're shut tight, just little curves perfectly set in her face. They're so soft to touch and kiss. Evelyn is orange. Not tawny or red, but pale orange. Almost like she's sickly but she's not. She's very healthy. Am I that healthy? Is it like mother, like daughter?

I stare at the crack, the tear, the flaw in the wall and wonder if I'm so healthy. Is this healthy? This clean bed with crisp new purple paisley sheets and my Queen Anne's Lace pillow cases? Is my bed so clean with this growling rebel snoring into his pillow dreaming of James Dean and Lucky cigarettes?

It's been a healthy six-months-and-some-days, I think. I think. I'm doing that thing I always said I wouldn't. Letting "him" support me while I try to write. Letting "him" buy the groceries and pay the rent and then letting myself feel guilty when I just have to have that silk blouse from Bannerman's. Maybe I could tell him it's for that interview for an editing job. Or maybe he'll know that's bullshit. Writers don't need silk blouses. Writers could be naked for all anyone cares. Naked and sitting at the desk. Or in a tank top. Or maybe a fur coat. But no need for fashion consciousness as a writer. Naked. What an interesting painting that would make: 'Naked Writer at

Computer, Struggling for A Story.' But, then again, writers do need to go out and use people. Use whoever they need for the next situation in their story. And to use people, one needs to look good and convince those people that the writer is O.K. Nowadays, that means a calm mauve silk blouse from Bannermans and a healthy smile.

Hopefully, tonight, I won't have one of those bad dreams again about the bagel with lox. Damn that thing. Between Evelyn meowing to go outside, Bill splurting out rebellious phrases in his sleep (like "power" and "nice dog baby"), and this bagel with lox dream, I can't get any sleep. Maybe tonight I'll just dream about the blouse. This bagel thing is too much. It's a simple dream really. I go to Sam's Deli, down the block. My mom's working behind the counter. My dad's sweeping the sidewalk around the front. I ask mom for a bagel with lox and an iced tea. I see my ex-boyfriend is the cook and he's toasting up a bagel and spreading cream cheese. I look away for two seconds and when I look back, the paper bag is in front of me and my mom's giving me my change, smiling her stupid sarcastic smile and sending me off. My dad never really looks up. Then, it's one of those all night dreams. I'm just trying to get to some stupid bench somewhere to sit down and eat the damn bagel, but there's no bench to be found. Nowhere. I'm thinking--later, when I'm awake--why didn't I just eat it as I walked? But, dreams are dreams and I just have to find a bench. Finally, I find a tiny one-person bench to sit on. I get all comfortable, open up the

paper bag and there's no iced tea in it. And if that's not enough, then I unwrap the bagel and it's a plain one, with only cream cheese. No onion. No smoked fish. Nothing but plain cream cheese. And my mouth's really dry and I can't even imagine eating this plain, boring, dry, crunchy bagel with plain, boring old white cream cheese on it. And no iced tea. I cry. I cry, because my bagel isn't right. It's not my mother's fault. It's certainly not my dad's. I guess it's my ex-boyfriend's. But, in typical dream fashion, what I realize after all this is that my ex-boyfriend is really my current boyfriend. It's Bill's fault. It's all Bill's fault that I don't get my bagel with lox. Damn, I hate that bagel with lox dream. Hopefully I'll dream about not getting the silk blouse tonight. Then, I won't have to ask "him" if it fits into our (really, his) budget.

Ah, a good night's sleep and a 'bit of lovin' in the morning. That's what Bill calls it. A 'bit of lovin'. Well, it's a bit of something, but I'm not sure what. Bill's trying. Always trying. He touches me in the right places, at least according to the Joy of Sex. And he fills me with words of love and promise and compliments. He hasn't changed a bit since I met him. Well, he has come to realize that being a writer isn't as glamorous as he thought it would be. At least, living with a writer isn't as exciting as *Naked Lunch* or anything. In fact, it's pretty matter-of-fact boring for him. I know that. He pushes the right buttons and I feel all wrong. I know I'm self-

absorbed. I know Bills don't come along too often.

I also know that Evelyn is particularly cuddly today and I'd rather think about that than my own self-absorption. Evelyn does have moods. Some people may think, oh, she's just a cat, but I know she's more. She knows. So many things. One thing she knows for sure is jealousy. She pissed all over the bed one night after Bill moved in. "I'll show you whose bed this is, buddy" she seemed to be saying. I told Bill not to take it personally. The thought, of course, had never crossed his mind.

Today Evelyn is very loving.

"I bet it's 'cause we just made love." Bill says, into my eyes, even though my eyes are looking into Evelyn's.

"What?" I say.

"I bet she's all loving 'cause we were. Don't you think?" he asks.

"No. If anything, she'd start pissing on the bed if she knew what we're doing." I say.

Bill thinks I'm cynical. Cynical and old for my twenty-something age. I think--in the true words of a cynic--that I'm simply a realist. Why candy-coat stuff when there's no hope anyway? Bill's a romantic rebel. He believes in candles and incense and a bouquet of flowers just-'cause-I-felt-like-giving-you-one every few days. But I see it as barter. He gives me romance, I give him lovin'. God, it sounds like a country song. Except in country songs, the wife and dog leave and the guy loses his job. That's why when you play the music backwards you get

all that stuff back. That's the joke anyway. What a joke all of this is. Six months. That's always the changing point in any relationship. That's been my experience. After six months you begin to hear that annoying turn of voice or maybe that laugh that's too loud, or maybe the way he spends too much time on the right breast and forgets the left. Or you start to notice that maybe he's not so exciting after all and it was only that first-few-months-euphoria and now it's an adult relationship with all its games. Yep, six months later and suddenly the toothpaste-spit on the sink faucet isn't so rebelliously cute any more.

Today is Tuesday. Yet another Tuesday. Bill will be up soon and off to the education factory. I'll put on my robe and sit at the computer, with a strawberry candle burning and the Junkies in the background. Perhaps their "Misguided Angel" will provide me with some inspiration or at least an idea or maybe a phrase or even a word that I could use. Right now, though, I lie in bed and watch Bill fighting the urge to fall back asleep. He used to get up and put his arm around me, moving closer and smiling with his eyes still closed. Now we make love in the morning and he fights the urge to fall asleep afterward. That's not a good sign in my books. Yeah, sure, we're tired, but he's lost his insatiable need for me. But, I'm guilty too I suppose. The only difference is that I'm thinking about it all the time. He, in true rebellious fashion, thinks that we're just going through a stage of change. As long as we stick together, we'll come out together. Those are his words, of course. Mine would

be more like, as long as we stick together, then we don't move anywhere and simply sink in the quicksand. This view, far too cynical for Bill, stays inside my head. Besides, it too sounds too much like a country song, *sinking in the quicksand of life, baby, i'm sinking in the quicksand of life.*

The Junkies would never sing a stupid song like that, I'm thinking to myself as I sit and listen and try to write. It's been a while now. I haven't written much since I met Bill. He chalks it up to love. I haven't put my finger on it yet. I know, in my head at least, that Bill's been great. He's the reason I have twelve or so hours a day to write anything at all. Before it was nine-to-five at the print shop. When I met him I told him I was writer. Shit. That meant he wanted proof. I had four stories. He decided I was a writer. I was pleasantly surprised. He decided I should write full time. I was pleasantly surprised. Then he decided, because he loved me so much, that he would support us and then I could pay him back later. I was pleasantly surprised. Now, I'm sick of thinking *I-better-be-nice-'cause-he's-paying*. That is no surprise. I knew it would come to this.

I knew the Junkies wouldn't help my writing. I knew the strawberry candle or the sun shining on the jade plant wouldn't help. Not even sweet little Evelyn curled in a ball on the wicker love seat. Even my lips on her sweet little soft eyes can't provide inspiration. *There's nothing left here to bring me to write.* That line isn't out of a country song. But, it may be

out of a story I read somewhere. Or, is it a story that I'm going to write? Maybe I'll write it tonight. In the middle of the night. In the dark. With a candle to help me see the keyboard. Maybe tonight. Oh, I hope it's tonight. tonight's the night baby, only tonight.

I'm filling in the crack, or the tear, or the lobster-thing on my wall. I have the poly-fil and the steel spatula. It is like spreading jam. You have to be careful not to leave any lumps or ridges. Once I paint over it it'll look great. Bill's reading Saturday Night and drinking a scotch-on-the-rocks. Evelyn, as usual, is snuggled in the wicker rocker, her little pea brain shut down for at least an hour or so.

"Evelyn, come here sweet little aristo-CAT, come here." I say to her in my baby voice.

"You know, Artistocat is a Disney movie I think. It's not original." Bill manages to say as his glass just reaches his mouth.

"Oh, gee, Bill, sorry... what's your original thought for the day, then? I think I forgot it." I say this quite sarcastically, even for me. I say this as I spread Poly-fil jam across the tear in the paint and pretend, quite silently, that I'm smearing Bill's face with some sort of silencer-gel.

"Touchy much Anna?" Bill asks.

"No more than usual Bill." When we start saying each other's names at the end of sentences, we know something's up.

If he'd have ever told me his middle name I'd throw that in too, just like my mom used to do when I was little and I broke something--"now, Anna Ruth Thomson, watch yourself." I'm thinking to myself, "now Bill rebel Maxwell, watch yourself. I may not put up with this much longer. I may decide to let Evelyn take your place in the apartment. I just may decide to borrow money from my best friend and ask you nicely to leave the apartment so that I can Poly-fil all the cracks and tears and hope to smear away your face, even if I can't quite smear away your memory."

I'm naked. And Evelyn lies on top of my chest, between my breasts. No bestiality here. Just love. Just soft, fuzzy, clean and tickly love. It's bedtime. The blinds are down, lights off and the street's quiet. Or as quiet as they ever get around here. I'm in the middle of my bed. Simply because I can be. Not on the right side exclusively, or the left. But right smack in the middle. My legs are spread, taking up both sides of the bed. Sting is blasting on the stereo. Evelyn sheds fur as I pet her and I welcome the dusty bits of hair all over the crisp, clean sheets. I enjoy my quiet rebellion, naked and still, with a cat on top of my chest. I enjoy the stillness and the emptiness of this first night. This first night without my rebel. Perhaps on another night I'll think about who it is under the rebel skin and what I've really done. For now--finally--after thoughts of stories to come and a blouse waiting to be

bought, I kiss Evelyn's eyes and hope to dream of nothing.

PLAYING GOD

To be different today, Jessica picks the wings off the Monarch and hopes the butterfly doesn't bite her. Usually she simply captures the butterfly in her net, holds it in her hand until it dies and pins it to the corkboard. This is the task she is sent to do out of love. Her father's love for her. He says she must learn to collect because collecting is a wonderful mode of expression. Jessica thinks that to collect such winged beauties is a fashion of olden times. She would rather watch the new miniseries, but trash television is not to be seen in her house. She would rather, today at least, pick the wings off the Monarch and see its orange-black powder on her fingers. It's only once. Once in a lifetime of collecting. One little butterfly she will destroy and rip apart and examine for herself.

She feels the pull when she rips the wing off and wonders how such a papery thing can have any strength. When she rubs her fingers together, the powder from the wing is like silk. The butterfly's body is black as ink. She lets the body drop into the grass and rubs the wings between her fingers a bit more. Once the powder is all gone she also lets the wings fall to the ground. This isn't as exciting as she thought it would be. Now the butterfly is destroyed and she must find another perfect specimen to bring to her father. Jessica would rather be on her way to Disneyland, but being nine, she is too young to travel.

Her friend Izzie says Jessica can do anything she wants if

she puts herself to it. Izzie plays with rabbits in her back yard and isn't afraid to poke out their eyes and blame it on foxes. When they play Trucker her call-name is always Snow White and Jessica is Jezebel. Her Auntie says that should not be her name. But, Jessica loves the sound of Jezebel. She loves the tongue against the top of her mouth, and the vibrating buzz feel it makes. It reminds her of a poem she read the other day in Ms. Fillipo's apartment, (burr of blue

please if I
blow you
might respond.

She thinks that Jezebel sounds like the word you would hear between your legs when you are riding your bike down a stony path. burr of blue. buzz of Jezebel. tongue on roof.

As Jessica sneaks quietly through the grass she thinks of blue Disneyland and the plastic swan rides. That is where she will go she tells herself, but no one else, for fear of being found out. As her father says, one must collect things together to make scrapbooks. Jessica collects her wishes together to make a crap-book. Or is it chapbook?

Ms. Fillipo thinks she recognizes good people. She sees in little girls and boys the hope of what they'll become--wonderful people full of ideas and theories--even, perhaps, artists. She believes in a bit of anarchy. She thinks that one should always disrupt something--she doesn't mean be noisy in church or paint graffiti downtown. Just stir up what seems to be O.K. Like

poetry. Disruption is good. Breaking rules is good. That's why Ms. Fillipo likes to see the potential of children. Even though she has none of her own, she babysits many. She likes to notice how they'll disrupt with their frankness and naivety. She won't shut them down or stop their creativity. Let them be! Who are we to regulate them? That's what she wonders. She believes that when she has children of her own she won't impose such silly rules upon them. She won't.

After collecting two Monarchs and a Cleopatra, Jessica makes her way to her house. Her father is proud to see her beautiful prizes and she too is proud that he feels so warm and good toward her. Now it's time for Jessica's bed-time routine. This isn't the routine of teeth-brushing and private-part washing--this is her own little routine. Jessica lies in bed and looks up and down and across her shelves and shelves of stuffed animals. She says goodnight to all of them--every single one of them--Orangey-Man, Chipmunk, D'Arcy, Corduroy, Piggy-pig, Bear-bear, Lester, Mephisto, Samson, Lulu, Raggedy-Ann and on and on and on for quite awhile. She knows she's nine years old. She knows that nine year olds don't talk to their stuffed animals any more. Nine year olds play Nintendo and watch "Beverly Hills 90210". In fact, most nine year olds don't have any time at all for stuffed animals except for decoration in their room. But, if Jessica doesn't say goodnight to them all, then they'll stare at her. Their buttoned or beady or plastic or felt eyes will watch her

all night long. When she thinks she's almost asleep, and she hasn't said goodnight to the animals, she knows they're watching her. She sees them.

She's only forgotten a couple of times and even when she couldn't deny her body's need to sleep any longer, she woke up at intervals--too tired to say goodnight to the animals, but too worried to fall into a thoughtless sleep. Jessica knows it's much easier to just say goodnight to the animals right from the beginning of the bed-time routine. Much easier.

Jessica often wonders when this will end. When will she be able to go to sleep without talking to the endless, stupid amount of stuffed nothings. If Izzie knew about all this Jessica would die. Izzie can never know. Jessica wants to stop this nonsense. She'd rather spend her precious minutes before sleep planning her trip to Disneyland. How she'll get there without her parents knowing or caring is a mystery to her. Completely. If she didn't have to spend all this time saying goodnight to stuffed animals then maybe she could come up with a plan. Maybe she should ask for Izzie's help. Or maybe Ms. Fillipo would help her. No. She's a babysitter and babysitters belong to parents. Well, with or without any of them, she'll get to Disneyland. Even though her parents can't afford it, Jessica will somehow. Somehow she'll get all the money. Maybe her own corkboard full of Cleopatras and Monarchs is worth some money somewhere. Maybe a famous collector will buy it off her. This is what Jessica thinks about--but not for as long as she'd like to--just before

she spends minutes saying goodnight to the animals.

Jessica thinks that today will be the day she buys the tickets to Disneyland. All she has to do is take some money and a credit card from mother's purse and the bus to Central Street and Felix. She's heard that the summer is not a good time to go because everyone goes there from the States. Canadians should go in the winter because there are lots of sales and offers and insurance discounts. She won't opt for the insurance. But I'll like to dance. Insurance. And a dance. Yes. If she does this, she will be a Jezebel. She knows it. But that's OK. Auntie cannot know everything. Jessica's father never says she is a Jezebel--he calls her Jess-Jess. She wonders how the tickets come? Perhaps you just go in and say you want to go to Disneyland. For cheap. She has a feeling they'll say she's too young. Well, that's too bad. She will just argue with them--she'll explain to them that she has the money--it's her money, therefore, she can do whatever she wants to do with it. That's what she'll tell them. She's sure Father would be proud of her for standing up for what she wants. Perhaps while she's in Disneyland she will pick a beautiful Monarch butterfly. She will let it die and encase it in the plastic bubble. She will polish the covering everyday until she is ready to come home. (How long will I stay in Disneyland?) And when she gets to the door, she thinks, she will hold out her hands and offer the wings. Her Father, if he is smart, will take up these wings with words of

thanks for her, his Jess-Jess Jezebel.

Jessica is in Rainbow's End. Ms. Fillipo is babysitting and, as usual, simply watching television. Rainbow's End is a place that only Jessica knows about. It's a place in the furthest corner of her walk-in closet. She's designated it Rainbow's End, behind the picnic basket and sleeping bag. She's written "Rainbow's End" on the wall, in tiny pencil lines. And a rainbow. But no colour. Just a led pencil rainbow. But that's enough for Jessica. She knows it's Rainbow's End and that's all that matters. Now, she sits in it. Behind the picnic basket, with her flashlight on and her Graph's Collected Butterflies. But she doesn't have the Graph's open. It's there, just in case. Instead, she has Mrs. Blood. She took the book from Ms. Fillipo's apartment. That's not so bad. Ms. Fillipo said she could take books anytime, just as long as she returns them. The only thing bad about it all is that it's about a baby. It's about a baby who doesn't get to be born and the mother bleeds and bleeds. And it's about memories too. What the mother remembers. It doesn't make much sense but Jessica likes the sounds the words make. She's never heard some of them before. Particularly she likes the "I heard a voice from heaven, saying unto me, Write." sentence the best. Jessica still hears a voice saying she should go to Disneyland. Maybe it's Izzie. Or maybe it's God. Or her Father. Or maybe it's just her own voice. Jessica isn't sure. All she knows is that the batteries must be wearing out in the

flashlight. She decides, instead of reading, to sit in the dark in Rainbow's End. A place, she feels, where she doesn't need a light on. A place, where at last, she doesn't need to collect butterflies or read stupid books about them.

Ms. Fillipo thinks Jessica is a good girl. She can't really think of any other word for her. She babysits her three times a week. Ms. Fillipo notices that Jessica spends most of the time in her bedroom. She worries about the girl a bit. Why would she spend all that time in one room? Perhaps she's just introverted. Ms. Fillipo hopes Jessica will grow out of it all. She also thinks that Jessica really looks up to her. She's seen Jessica stare at her book shelves when she has her over. When she's not reading about butterflies she's reading something of Ms. Fillipo's. Jessica's parents are wrong in that sense. Not fostering her literary or creative senses. Only her abilities to organize and collect. Ms. Fillipo believes there's only so much of that you can do before you shrivel up and die. She still insists she'll let her child explore and discover all sorts of creative things--even if it didn't quite understand yet. Yes, Ms. Fillipo is going to have a baby. Yes, by herself. Thirty-five and pregnant. She's secure, financially. She's happy with her home and her arrangements babysitting and freelancing for Metro Times. She'll be O.K. A real baby. All hers, not anyone else's. With hopes and dreams and imagination. She knows she'll have to make sure she never stops imagining. She'll have

to be sure to get lots of books and crayons and paper. There's no way her child will have to sit in her closet in her room in order to read a good experimental novel. Isn't it appropriate that Jessica chose Mrs. Blood to read now? Ah yes, a baby in a novel and a baby in real life. Isn't art strange?

Izzie told Jessica she should probably not get the tickets to Disneyland. She told Jessica she would only embarrass herself because there is no way they will let her go. Izzie was her rock of strength and Izzie let her down. Jessica has decided not to talk to her any more as she sits in yet another field netting yet another Monarch. Why always Monarchs? There are so many of them. Black and regal in their flight. Monarchy. Kings and Queens, right? That makes sense. They are not too regal with their wings chopped off and their bodies lying in the grass. But Jessica guesses they don't know that themselves, since they're dead.

Speaking of dead, Ms. Fillipo's baby is dead. Jessica heard her mother saying it to Auntie over the phone. It wasn't even a month old. Jessica's mother says it's probably a good thing because Ms. Fillipo would have a lot to deal with by herself. Especially, thinks Jessica, if it's like Mrs. Blood and all there is is blood and crying. That's too much. Jessica's seen a baby being born on television. It was fairly disgusting. No wonder they die, all soaking in blood and purple tubes around them. No wonder they choose not to come out perfectly. Who would?

Jessica wonders.

Today Ms. Fillipo doesn't watch television. Instead, she follows Jessica into her bedroom and asks for her Mrs. Blood book.

"Where is it?" Ms. Fillipo asks Jessica, looking sternly into her eyes.

"Here, right here." Jessica says, reaching into her closet, but trying to keep Ms. Fillipo from seeing Rainbow's End.

"Yes, I need to read it again. That's all. Did you like it?" Ms. Fillipo asks, calm and collected now, staring at the cover of the book, not even looking at Jessica covering up the Rainbow's End writing on the wall with a blanket.

"Yes. It was neat." Jessica says.

"Yeah. A bit too much for a nine year old, but doesn't really matter. You might as well know sooner or later that babies die." Ms. Fillipo says.

"Yeah. And no wonder." Jessica says, feeling very adult as she speaks with Ms. Fillipo.

"What do you mean?" Ms. Fillipo asks.

"Well, it's gross, the way they come out. No wonder they stay in or die." Jessica says.

"Oh no, that's not why," Ms. Fillipo says, "babies can't remember all that anyway. There's all sorts of other reasons why they die. More than we all know."

"What happened to your baby?" Jessica asks, a bit unsure if

she should.

"Well, God must have picked her out of a bunch of babies to go to heaven. God likes playing God and deciding that it's time for poor defenceless babies to die. That seems to be his job." Ms. Fillipo replies, calmly, leaving the room with Mrs. Blood in her arms.

Ms. Fillipo doesn't feel like taking Jessica to the library today. She only feels like watching trash TV shows that Jessica is not allowed to watch. Jessica decides to spend the rest of the afternoon in Rainbow's End making animal shadows on the wall.

Today, to be different, Jessica takes her net and corkboard and bottle of pins out to the field but she simply leaves them in the middle. She watches the wind blow the long grass to the right and then quickly to the left, back and forth, back and forth, like the little swaying cuckoo-clock pendulum. She watches the gopher run into the clearing and down his hole. And of course she watches the Monarchs dancing with each other. Circling and swooping, like hawks, but smaller. Gentle. Fluttering. Asking nothing, demanding nothing, only moving freely in the big expanse of sky. They touch the violets beside the fence and then move off again to swoop and swirl. Jessica has decided not to play God today, or any other day to come, for that matter. She will let the butterflies fly. Playing God is for Gods and she will see what her Father says later. For now, she walks away from corkboard and pins and does some cartwheels

through the foxtail, imagining roller-coasters at Disneyland and that purple and yellow book on Ms. Fillipo's bookshelf waiting to be read.

CREATING RAIN

The poetry you read to us is not your own. I know that. But the words seem fit to come from you. The words form and shape in your mouth as easily as the air that you breathe. You read to the whole class, but I am sure you are thinking only of me.

*(i do not know what it is about you that closes
and opens; only something in me understands
the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses
nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands*

We are a small bunch. Six American Poetry graduate students. Six of us putting pieces of puzzles together in our best academic language.

You, trained differently, and trying to show us a different way, read the puzzles differently. You cry sometimes. Not heaving cries, but subtle tears that you try to hide quite well, but I think most of us see them. We have all been together three months now and still I'm not sure how old you are. I think you're fifty-something. I know I'm twenty-something. I know this means we're different. I know I should be wary. But those words in your mouth. Those whispers of intense fragility. I can't help but want to love you. Perhaps it's a master-servant trap. No, you never set yourself up as a master. You, the leader of the class, you, the employed master of American Poetry are the first to cry and the first to admit defeat in the midst of confused images.

It is your emotion that lets me watch you carefully each class. In fact, you almost beg for it. I watch your eyes change

from feeling to feeling as your hand moves slowly through the air while you recite the poetry.

somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond
any experience, your eyes have their silence:

I want to know what's behind those eyes. And I want to know it outside of the walls of this tutorial room--painted pale yellow brick and green chalk boards. I'd like to walk down streets with you or simply sit in my apartment sipping mint tea and eating chocolate pudding as we uncover mysteries from the great men of literature.

Perhaps, after I trust you, and I know I will, I will show you my own poetry--from a great-woman-yet-to-be-in-literature. I will let you see the anger and the hilarity of confronting this world as a twenty-something woman. You, fifty-something, will be amused with my energy and drive. Then, you will respect it. You will tell me that my eyes are wide open and they speak volumes. You will look at me with your quiet eyes and I will still continue to try to figure you out. Never--not once--will you reveal it all to me, because without the mystery, there is no use. Talk away, but tell me nothing. Isn't that your role anyway, Mr. Professor?

As the months pass, we still have not spoken outside of class. I need to see you about a paper I want to write. But I am scared to talk to you. I don't want you to tell me what to do. I want my own ideas. And I want to write them on my own. Perhaps I will be very specific and that way you cannot say "What I would do, is this." But shouldn't I trust you? I must know

that you are not one of those. You are gentle and thoughtful and emotional. You will understand my position and you will not take advantage of it. This, I hope, is also what you believe. You will treat me like the first rose of spring and gently unfold my ideas, remembering your own fragility, as ultimately we are only man and woman.

As man, as woman, what would happen to us? What if I leaned over in your office and gently placed a kiss on your forehead? Would you remind me you are professor and I am student? Would those be the first words to come out of your mouth? Or would you ask me to come closer and kiss you again? Perhaps you will lean toward me. Perhaps your hand will touch me. Maybe I will invite it. Or demand it. Or, in all likeliness, your doctorate shell will go up and I'll leave the office in embarrassment. This is all too much speculation for me.

The poetry you read to me is your own. It's original. Or, at least, original to you, something you think no-one else has said. You are younger than me. Twenty-something, but younger. And you're in my Shakespeare class. I'm not interested in you, but you are persistent. Not obsessive or strange, but persistent. You want me to be a part of your poetry group. But I have other interests. Namely, a fifty-something interest. I enjoy poetry of rain and roses and small hands. You write poetry about abortion and NAFTA. You are sweet, but you are young. And young is a judgement, not a number.

Someone told me today that you, Mr. Professor, have used this poem before. This e.e. cummings poem. This is nothing new. Nor is this crush I have on you, according to someone. That's fine. I'm not completely gullible. Some days I figure things out and this is one of those days. This is the day I will meet you. I will walk into your office and offer my idea of love poetry. I will ask you to lunch, perhaps, a break would be nice on this warm day.

I knock at your door.

"Professor Brown?" I ask, tentatively leaning into your office.

"Yes? Come in." you say, not even looking up from your desk.

"Hi. It's Becky Mills, from American Poetry." I say, smiling, not too much so that you won't be reminded that I'm young and twenty-something.

"Oh, yeah. What can I do for you? Sit." you say, gesturing to the chair in front of your desk.

"Well, I'm working on my paper and I wanted to check it out with you."

"OK. Tell me what you're working on."

I begin to tell you my subject and the details and my focus. I've rehearsed this entire meeting so I do this quite automatically while the rest of my mind concentrates on your reaction to what I say. You hold your hand under your chin, in

that perfect academic pose. You raise your eyebrows every so often to let me know you're impressed, or at least paying attention. Sometimes you even move your hands and cross them both on top of the desk. These are the moments I know you're most interested.

I want you to read the poem to me. I want you to pick up on a point of mine and say, yes, you're right, here it is in this line, the line about rendering death. I want you to be thrilled that I would pick up on such subtle images. However, you, instead, tell me that I need to focus more.

"You need to narrow this all down. There's too much. I don't think you know your direction yet. Let me read it and maybe something will snap for you." you say to me, reaching for your copy of the selected poems.

You begin to read, standing, in your orator position. You're wearing your beige button-down and Levi's meant for someone my age. Nothing snaps for me as you read. Except the months of speculation I've had. Wondering, wondering, what will you say to me? And you said the worst. You decided you will show me my focus. You said, 'listen, listen to me read the poem the right way, I will show you the angle you really want. You'll think you found it yourself, but we both know it was really me who showed you the way.' I don't need this. I need your flirting. I want you to read the poem to me with your breath hot and your eyes burning to see me. I want all that passion and colour. You have stamped it out for me, with your monotone voice

and shallow breath.

You, fifty-something professor are not for me.

All because you read to me, alone, in your office, surrounded by your ideas and the ideas of those who've come before me. You have ruined it for me because you won't even listen to my breath, to my passions. What are ideas but little sparks of passion that reverberate inside us? Every focus you offer to me reeks of your passion and your passion bores me.

You, my twenty-something friend, write me a poem about Catholicism and penises. That's all fine and dandy, but where do I find myself in it? Perhaps you write the poem more for yourself than for me. For therapy. For release.

"No, read it again," you tell me, "it's more about repression than anything, and surely you know about repression."

"Why would I?" I ask, knowing where I find it everyday, but wanting someone else to confirm it for me.

"Well, you must find it here, in classes and stuff. There's not much freedom or creativity," you say, lowering your head, shuffling your feet, hoping I will agree with you. Without agreement, there won't be much of a start to our flirting.

"Yeah, that's true. I just saw Brown and he practically told me what to write my paper on even though I had a complete idea worked out."

"Yeah, I hate that. Have you done any writing?" you ask me, still encouraging me to join your poetry group.

"No. No time for creativity. Just essays," I say.

"That's writing. And it's creative. You just have to find the place to put it, not here."

"But this is university, it's about essays. Ideas." I say, knowing that I don't sound convincing.

"Yeah, right. It's about regurgitation. Conformity and standards," you say, angry as ever now. Convinced of your passion and ideas.

"Well, we don't know how good we have it sometimes though," I say, actually convinced of this statement.

You hand me yet another poem and yet another offer of dinner and a movie. I decline, using my final paper as an excuse. I decline because I know my head is filled with too many thoughts and questions to possibly concentrate on any frivolity.

I write in my journal tonight about my day and my meeting with you, my fifty-something fantasy. It's over. As all fantasies usually shatter. You are a giggle in my mind now. Yes, this quickly you've gone from a light obsession to a slight play-thing. You're not evil, that's not why you no longer matter. You're a mystery. I suppose I said I wanted it that way. But you're a mystery I don't need to solve any more. In one visit I am indifferent.

You, my twenty-something friend I write about differently. I write about your energy and conviction. I write about my own of the same, but tire too easily to write much longer.

I recite the rain poem again before I go to bed, thinking of my essay, and then, much later, thinking of my passion.

you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens
(touching skilfully, mysteriously) her first rose

I am the rain--and still, as the poem says--I cannot open your petals with my touch. And I, as the poem says, 'have closed myself as fingers.' What will I do now?

SWEATY PALMS

"But it's like leather on the bottom," says Juliana to her mother.

"Sssh! Just eat it. Don't be so rude. You're a young lady now," Mrs. Thisten tells Juliana.

"I can't mom," whispers Juliana. "It's disgusting. It's like eating lime-green loafers."

"Oh, please Juliana. It's not that bad. It just means that Mrs. Corrie didn't stir it enough when the hot water went in."

There is nothing worse, in Juliana's mind, than Jello with a leather bottom. Why can't Mrs. Corrie get it right? What is her problem? Every Sunday after Sunday-School Mrs. Corrie, the Jello and Freshie lady screws it up. The cherry-bomb Freshie tastes like water with some cherry juice left in the bottom of the glass and the jello..., well, Juliana can't even talk about it right now.

Juliana knows she's too old for after-Sunday-School snacks in the church basement. But Freshie reminds her of a few years ago when she too was a student and not an assistant-about-to-be-confirmed Sunday-School teacher. But that was then, and now being thirteen is really hard. Being thirteen means confirmation classes and big responsibilities. Soon, after the big confirmation day, Juliana will be able to drink the blood and eat the flesh. She has never been allowed to do this because in her mother's mind, Juliana "is not mature enough to understand the complete ramifications of partaking in Jesus's body." Breaking

bread and drinking Welch's Premium Grape Juice is not stuff for the ignorant or fickle.

Now, with sixteen weeks of Confirmation Classes on Tuesday nights behind her, Juliana is ready to "take, eat this". In fact, Juliana has given some thought to that part of the ceremony. She is nervous about taking the piece of WonderBread. Should she take the one closest to her (like you do at meal-time) or should she take the one on top of the pile? Should she hold it between her index finger and thumb or should she place it in the palm of her hand? If she puts it in the palm of her hand it might get all full of sweat and be really disgusting. On the other hand, if she holds it between her fingers she may just drop it.

Juliana also has a thing about people chewing. When there is no music playing or radio on during dinner, Juliana can hear her father chewing away at his meal. It always sounds like a spoon stirring through just-cooked pasta. Or like a slimy snake crawling through mud. What if her chewing sounds like that in the silence of the church? What if everyone is disgusted with her? There are only three other people being confirmed that day, so it's possible everyone will hear her.

And then, about the grape juice. What if she drips on her white dress? What if some of it gets caught in her throat and she has a coughing fit? Juliana wishes her mother would have let her take communion before all this. Everyone else has had a warm-up. They're all practised. She'll be doing it for the

first time ever in front of so many people and on such a special day. There's just too much anxiety around being thirteen.

Lisbeth Kafferty makes her way over to Juliana with a look of disgust on her face as she stares down at her own bowl of leather-bottom jello.

"This is gaggy," she whispers in Juliana's ear.

"Tell me about it. Gross," Juliana answers.

"My god, you'd think she'd know how to do it by now. We should tell her. I could make the jello with my eyes closed," says Lisbeth as she grabs Juliana's forearm and squeezes it with her half-painted red fingernails.

"Yeah, well, I could do it with my arms behind my back and my feet in the wrong shoes," Juliana replies.

"What do your shoes have to do with it?" Lisbeth says as she starts her half-smile before the big giggle.

It seems that whenever Juliana and Lisbeth get together at church they end up having to hold their thumbs in their mouths so that they won't giggle. Even then it's really hard. Juliana tries to cover up her giggles with a cough sometimes but she's pretty sure no one falls for it. The funniest times are when the minister says 'Jesus lay' or 'Mary the Virgin'. Juliana and Lisbeth know that you can't be laid and be a virgin. And plus it's so funny to see old man MacKetsie say virgin, because he always says it a little lower than the rest of the words, as if he too knows it doesn't belong in a church.

In confirmation classes, slimy old layperson Mr. Benson

keeps saying "as a lay-person, I believe blah, blah, blah" and Juliana and Lisbeth even have to keep their thumbs in their mouth then too. Mr. Benson sometimes sticks his peppermint-scent mouth right near Juliana's nose and she can't get away because he has his sweaty hairy hands on her shoulders. He tells her she's 'gonna be a real nice wife someday' but Juliana thinks he probably doesn't know what a real nice wife is because he's never had a date according to Paul, the other guy at confirmation classes. Paul's not a virgin. He's told Juliana and Lisbeth about going behind the Dairy Bar with Beth. Beth goes behind the Dairy Bar with everyone.

Juliana and Lisbeth are still holding their hands to their mouths when slimy old Mr. Benson comes down the stairs and heads straight to the leather-bottom jello. He always eats it so there's some around the corners of his mouth and a little on his bottom lip. Sometimes he'll even eat Digestive Cookies with the jello, both in the same bite. That's pretty disgusting according to Lisbeth.

"Check it out." she tells Juliana, "he's soooooooooo disgusting. I don't want him laying his slimy hands on my head next Sunday."

"Oh foul. There's no way. Maybe he'll get sick and we'll get some nice old lady layperson doing it instead." says Juliana.

"I doubt it. This whole thing's gonna be a nightmare." says Lisbeth, in a much more serious tone.

"Oh, it's no biggy. I'm mostly worried about the communion-

thing. At least you've done that." says Juliana.

"Yeah, but I've never even walked down the aisle while people watch me. It's like being in choir or something. Gross." says Lisbeth.

"Hey, maybe you'll get to walk down with Paul." says Juliana.

"Shutup." says Lisbeth.

"Maybe you will."

"Shutup."

"You like him." Juliana tells Lisbeth.

"I do not. Wha'd you know?" says Lisbeth as she turns away with a concealed giggle.

"Lots. I know lots." says Juliana.

"Yeah, not much, if you ask me." says Lisbeth, "let's get outta here. Come to my house."

Juliana and Lisbeth leave the church basement, after permission from both moms and head off to Lisbeth's house, only two blocks away. Sundays are the best days for the two of them. They sit around and listen to the songs from Grease and Air Supply. Most Sundays Lisbeth's parents go and play bridge in the next town so Juliana and Lisbeth smoke cigarettes while they do each other's hair and make-up. Juliana has always been a bit jealous of Lisbeth because she has all the cool bat-wing shirts that Juliana's mother will never buy her. Juliana's mom thinks girls should wear nicely coordinated pant-suits and cardigans. Bat-wing shirts are sloppy and unflattering according to Mrs.

Thisten.

Juliana wants a really great dress for confirmation. She has seen one at Hodge's store in Cumberland. If anyone who lives in Massey is going to buy a dress or a suit, then they have to go to Cumberland because they have the Saan store. Massey only has the General Store and all they ever have is rain gear and polyester pants. Hodge's has this one dress at the very back, in the petite ladies sizes that Juliana really wants. It's a burgundy velvet with pink-thread flowers running through it. It has long sleeves and a high neck. And there's some pink piping that runs along the hem and the bottom of the sleeves. The velvet is so soft and shiny. When Juliana showed her mother the dress, her mother practically laughed her head off.

"As if you could wear a dress like that for your confirmation." Mrs. Thisten said. "Don't be ridiculous honey. Here we are, this is definitely the dress."

What this is Juliana isn't quite sure. All she knows is she has to wear this dress of white lace. It has a sort of bib in the front with all sorts of frills and detail. Then there's a blue satin ribbon around the waist that ties into a bow at the back. The bottom has three tiers, with a run of the blue ribbon separating each section. And at the bottom there are more frills and lace than even at the top. Juliana is convinced she will die if she wears this dress to confirmation. She feels like a Barbie doll. She'd rather feel like something else.

Juliana puts out her cigarette and sprays Lisbeth's hair one

last time with hairspray.

"Lisbeth, do you have your dress yet?" Juliana says.

"Oh my god, yeah. I didn't tell you? Oh my god, it's so cool. Check it out." Lisbeth says as she gets up and opens her walk-in closet.

"Now close your eyes. You're gonna die." Lisbeth tells Juliana.

Juliana does as she's told and hears a rustling of material.

"OK, open up." Lisbeth tells Juliana.

The first thing Juliana sees is the dark green colour. It's a forest green, a classic green, not a lime or kelly. It's the darkest colour Juliana has ever seen. It's beautiful. The dress is long and flowing. As Juliana reaches out to touch it, she realizes that it's probably real silk but she knows not to say that with surprise. Of course it's real silk if it's Lisbeth's dress. The sleeves are long and the neck is in the shape of a heart. As Juliana runs her hand up and down the dress she thinks she'll probably cry if she's not careful.

"So, whadda you think?" says Lisbeth with a huge grin on her face.

"God, it's so gorgeous. You're so lucky you slime. Wow. I love it." Juliana replies.

"Yeah, it took some convincing but my mom finally gave in. I think she's pretty tired of the boring old standards at church too. And I can't wait to hear what as-a-layperson-Mr. Benson has to say under his breath." says Lisbeth.

"Yeah. Cool. Put it on, I want to see it." says Juliana.

"OK." says Lisbeth as she starts to take off her church dress. Juliana tells Lisbeth about her stupid dress and how much she hates it and her mother. As she's talking she watches Lisbeth move out of her dress. Her arms are skinny but not bony and her shoulders are perfectly right for her neck. Her bra is a white cotton, without any wires or heavy elastics like Juliana's. Lisbeth's stomach is a bit bigger than Juliana's but it's perfectly alabaster without any of the brown birthmarks all over Juliana's body. Lisbeth's legs are long and perfect. In fact Juliana has never seen legs like this before. Even the knees fit perfectly with the legs, without any knobs or bruises. Lisbeth has cotton panties with little cabbage-roses all over them. Mrs. Thisten believes it is extravagant to have patterns on underwear since it is exactly that--underwear. No one sees it, why should it be pretty?

"I'm gonna not wear my bra, so you can really see how good the dress looks." says Lisbeth. "My mom's gonna get a bra built into the dress so you don't see the lines and all that. Like I really need one anyway."

Lisbeth is always able to laugh and joke about her body. Juliana fails to see anything funny about small boobs. In fact, they're probably about the worst curse of all. Lisbeth's boobs are exactly the same, left and right. They'd both probably fit in one of Juliana's hands, but they're exactly proportioned. Juliana finds herself staring at them while Lisbeth changes.

"What? Haven't you seen my boobs before?" says Lisbeth.

"No. They're cool." says Juliana.

"Thanks. I do exercises. Do you?" says Lisbeth.

"No. Should I?" says Juliana.

"Well, let me see yours. Probably not. It's just something to do to keep them up." says Lisbeth.

Juliana's not so sure she should be comparing boobs with Lisbeth, but in all fairness, Lisbeth let Juliana stare at hers. Juliana's dress comes off to reveal a fake-silk undershirt that looks like a football jersey on her. Once she takes off the undershirt her boobs lie open for inspection.

"No, yours are cool too. Your nipples are brown. That's hilarious. Mine are pink." Lisbeth says as she holds her own nipple in her fingers and looks at it closely. "Why is that? Do you think it means anything?"

Lisbeth moves closer to Juliana and puts her face right in front of Juliana's nipples.

"You're so weird. They're just brown. That's the way. My mom's are too. How about your mom's?" says Juliana with a giggle.

"Oh, god, she'd never show me hers. No way. I don't even know if she has any. She probably just stuffs her shirt." Lisbeth says.

"Oh, get real. My mom's are foul. They're like that skin underneath the rooster's chin." Juliana says as she wrinkles up her nose.

"Oh disgusting." says Lisbeth, putting her hands on Juliana's shoulders and squeezing her. "You're nutty."

"No way, you are. Your nipples look like Paul's weenie." says Juliana through her now uncontrollable laughter.

"Oh my god, you're terrible. How would you know? Like you've ever seen a weenie." says Lisbeth.

"How do you know? Maybe I have." says Juliana.

"Doubt it." says Lisbeth. "Have you ever touched a nipple, besides your own?"

"No. Why would I?" asks Juliana.

"Because they're kinda cool." says Lisbeth. "Here, feel mine. They're great."

"No way. That's foul." says Juliana.

"Nah-uh. Can I feel yours?" asks Lisbeth.

"Oh my god. You're so weird. I guess so. Are your hands warm?" asks Juliana.

"Yep. Nice and warm." says Lisbeth as she brings her index finger to Juliana's right nipple and touches the tip and the brown skin surrounding it.

"Ok, let me touch yours." says Juliana as she too brings her hand to Lisbeth's nipples and touches the bumpy pink skin surrounded by the smooth white skin.

"Wow. That's cool." says Juliana. "They're really nice, hey? I mean, compared to Paul's dinky."

"Shutup you loser, as if you know." laughs Lisbeth.

There's a silence in the room as the two girls touch each

other's nipples. Then there's a silence in the room as they touch each other's bellies and shoulders and necks and thighs and other places that girls don't usually touch girls in. That's what Juliana thinks the whole time her fingers explore--girls don't do this to girls. Mom says, the Fonz says, and particularly God says. But mom or the Fonz or God aren't here right now as Juliana and Lisbeth lie on the four-poster rubbing and moving and giggling and crying.

The long-awaited confirmation day rolls around and Juliana finds herself in a barfy white dress with blue ribbon. Paul looks kind of cute in his navy suit. But his hair's always got too much gel in it. Of course Lisbeth looks amazing. Her hair is up in a french bun and she wears her mom's jade drop earrings. Mr. Benson's mouth practically drops open when he comes into the back room before the service and sees Lisbeth. His palms are as sweaty as ever and his breath as minty. Old man MacKetsie gives the class a short speech about their upcoming special time and leads them through prayer. More importantly for Juliana, Lisbeth assures her that her dress isn't that bad, and reminds Juliana that there's really not anyone here in the church who matters.

Juliana manages to grab the perfect piece of white bread without too much difficulty. She decides to take the one closest to her. The grape juice goes well too. She doesn't spill any of it and keeps her chewing quietly to herself. Her mind wanders a bit as she tries to listen to the sermon. She can't wait until

the whole thing is over and she can go downstairs for social hour. She can't wait to get out of this stupid white dress that makes her itchy with all its frills.

She stars at Lisbeth and wonders what she's thinking. Juliana wonders if Lisbeth's thinking about how beautiful she looks in her silk forest green dress? Doesn't she know? Juliana wonders. Does she really know? Does she know how she always plays with her tiny pinkie ring on her right hand? Does Lisbeth realize that she has a perfectly angular nose that's the right size for her face? And does she realize that Paul would probably die to go behind the Dairy Bar with her? Does Lisbeth ever want to go behind the Dairy Bar with boys? Juliana wonders. She also thinks to herself how great it would be to never wear a stupid, white, frilly dress again in her life. Never again. To only wear green or navy or burgundy velvet. But, Juliana knows she will wear white again at her big church-wedding. She knows her bridesmaids will wear feather-pink and she will have daisies for flowers. And as Juliana feels Mr. Benson's sweaty slimy palm on her head she wonders why she can't just eat leather-bottom Jello until she wants to burst?

SHADOW-BOXES

She has a purple artist's pen--a fine, thin pen. It is meant to fill in tiny lines of detail in paintings, but she uses it to write long letters and stories to her friends. The pen costs \$6.99 at Grand & Toy and her father finds this ridiculous. The red and black and blue Bic ballpoint pens overflow in the soup-can container on her father's desk and work just fine for him. He wonders from whom she acquired her loose spending habits and decides that he is definitely not the cause. She cannot hold a Bic pen in her fingers for very long, for it is cumbersome and bland. There is no smooth circle, but rather there are ridges. Her purple pen is one smooth cylinder where no ridges remind her that she holds a pen in her hand. With her artist's pen, she feels a continuity and an infinite number of possibilities.

She often forgets that she holds the pen as she writes and it is only after, when she discovers the indentation on her middle finger that she realizes the pressure she exerted. The other pens leave globules of ink after an s or a and this allows for smears and dirty hands. Her fine pen leaves no smears and dries instantly when it touches the page. Her father recommends that she try to write slowly so the ink can dry between sentences. This, she feels, is ridiculous and carefully puts her artist's pen in its place behind the scissors and calculator in the third drawer down in her desk.

Her father knows where she keeps the pen, but she knows he will not look through her desk again. When she was seventeen he

discovered some of her journals and read them. She was not pleased with this development and only knew he did this because a few of the short pieces of thread she placed between the journals were to be found in the bottom of the drawer. It was only her father who could have done this, for she and her father live alone together.

Her father has always asked her questions about her life. She lives at home, but her life is elsewhere. Her life exists among fellow students and writers'. She is never quick to tell her father what she has been doing or who she is out with. He would not understand the poetry readings or the writer's workshops. Her father is one half of an Asphalt Sealing partnership and she is a fourth year Classical Studies major.

Secretly, to study Zeus and Hermes is not enough for her. Secretly she fantasizes of her very own flights from Gods with blazing hearts. Secretly she fantasizes of how she will tell the story of the chase and the story of a capture. But she thinks she will tell the story with more artistry than known to anyone. She believes she will spin metaphors and rhythm, beautiful images and perceptions in the fabric of her stories. As she daydreams she knows she will tell the story with her purple artist's pen.

Her father often tells her she spends too much time gazing at her soapstone figurine of Psyche. She tells him perhaps he spends too much time breathing in oil-based sealant fumes. She does not know where to begin her next story or who will be in it. She does not know how to follow the tricks of the trade and the

techniques of the great Aeschylus or Aristophanes. All she knows is her pen in her hand and the swish-swish of the tip along the paper.

Her father often listens to the radio while he works through sales receipts and purchase orders at his desk. She closes her bedroom door and stares in silence at Psyche, waiting for an inspiration, but finally knowing she is only a mere mortal, hopes for little more than a beginning to her story. Now she falls asleep at her desk, tired with incomplete thoughts and beginnings with no direction. In her sleep, she dreams of hot candle wax and a voice tells her 'Love cannot live where there is no trust.'

She wakes up with the soft tap on her door. Her father asks if she wants to attend the hockey game with him tonight. Secretly, it is the last thing she wants to do. To have the house to herself and all the space available to talk out loud and form a story is a luxury she so seldom finds. But, she must not be rude and she did promise she would go with him to a game. She tells him she will go and that she will invite a few of her friends also. Perhaps she and her friends will discuss the latest book they have read or a poem or something of value beyond pucks and penalties. Perhaps the arena will provide some inspiration for her story; the story she will write with her artist's pen.

At the hockey game, she and her friends sit down with hot chocolate and french fries with gravy. She notices the people in the arena--the mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters. She

notices the ones who yell and those who sit quietly rubbing their hands to keep warm. There is a young man who announces the scores and penalties throughout the game. There is a team owner, in his navy suit and leather overcoat. And there is her father. He stands to the side of the ice, behind the plates of glass. His hands are in the pockets of his jeans and his breath is a visible steam as he whistles a tune, probably *Delilah*, she thinks. His red plaid jacket stands out from the beige and brown arena seats. He stands there and she sits here with her friends because she wants it that way. She talks freely and dreams freely with her friends. Her father would not understand. Or, perhaps, she does not ask him to understand. It is this that makes her eyes fill with tears and it is the cold arena that she uses as an excuse when her friends ask her why she cries.

At home and at her desk she sits quietly. Her father taps softly on the door to say goodnight. He usually tells her to make sure she gets enough sleep for her classes tomorrow, but tonight he asks her to come to the basement with him. She follows him downstairs wondering where this will possibly lead. Her father pulls down a tin cookie container hidden under shoe boxes and Christmas decorations. He tells her this is his shadow-box. He tells her that in this container is his past life--a life that can only be a past because other things get in the way. Things like mortgages, income tax and a wife's death. The box is full of sheet after sheet of note-paper. On the paper

are stories. In her mind, poorly written stories, but stories nonetheless. Stories of walks through fields and biker gangs. Stories of friends in beer halls and mothers who leave their families. She reads all the stories while sitting down in the old brown easy chair. She reads all the stories while her father stands behind her, reading over her shoulder. When she finishes reading the eight or nine stories, she asks the obvious question.

"You wrote these?"

"Yeah. A long time ago." her father answers.

"I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything."

Alone, in her bedroom, she is restless and uneasy. Her father once again taps lightly on her door and she tells him to come in.

"Listen," he says, "maybe next Saturday we could go to a game. Just the two of us. I don't know, think about it."

"Yeah, sure." she responds.

As her father closes the door he tells her

"I hope whatever story you're writing works out. Good night."

She says nothing as she tries to sort out the seeds of images and thoughts of the evening. She must separate the piles into other piles and from out of that succeed in her task. She looks to Psyche again, but quickly looks away, in hopes that she is faithful to her task. To use a Bic pen or to use an artist's

pen is certainly a difficult choice. To not choose at all and sit quietly with nothing in hand is no longer possible. She picks up her thin purple artist's pen and begins (only begins) to draw laurel leaves around the border of the page thinking to herself, 'goodnight sweet Dad, goodnight.'

SAFETY NETS

Bekka squishes the green-yellow avocado underneath the fork. She stirs in the cream cheese and watches the avocado disappear into a lighter colour. Bekka adds the chopped up pepper, tomato and onion and stirs the ingredients with great care. She drops in a touch of cumin and sugar for flavour. What Bekka does not expect to find in the bowl are the three drops of Tabasco Sauce. Susannah slips in over Bekka's shoulder.

"It's better this way." says Susannah. She always needs spice and flavour in her food. Bekka prefers to eat avocado on its own--smooth and green. "How does it really taste?" Susannah often asks her and Bekka can only tell her it tastes like green. When Susannah bites a small piece of pure avocado she insists it tastes like nothing.

It is the night of Susannah's and Bekka's dinner party. Once the guacamole is complete, Bekka places it in the centre of their favourite cheese-and-cracker plate--the one made of light blue clay with feather-wisps of grey on it. The crackers and taco chips surrounding the guacamole are beige and light brown. The yellow-green is a welcome respite from the bland.

During the appetizers, Bekka's and Susannah's office manager comments on what a strange fruit the avocado is. Bekka insists it is the best one of all and praises highly the nutritious value of and the variety of possibilities for an avocado. Susannah

insists there is no flavour and reminds everyone that there are plenty of other fruits and vegetables to eat.

"Besides," adds Susannah, "It is so terribly overpriced."

Bekka suggests the conversation should move on to, perhaps, a more substantial topic.

After the dinner party Bekka confronts Susannah as she washes dishes.

"Why do you hate avocados so much?"

"What?" says Susannah.

"Why do you hate avocados so much? You haven't even really given them a chance." replies Bekka.

"You sound so upset about this. What are you talking about?"

"I just think you should be more open-minded about them. And you shouldn't drown out their taste with MSG-infested, man-made sauces."

"Oh my god, Bekka, what is this really about? You sound like my mother."

"Well, perhaps mothers are right about a few things." says Bekka as she puts their favourite cheese-and-cracker plate in the hutch and leaves the kitchen.

Susannah follows her into the bedroom.

"Bekka, what is this? You're being so immature."

"I am not being immature. Think about it Susannah. You say

something so wonderful and pure and healthy is 'nothing' and expect me to take it lightly. I can't. I can't stand it. Why do you have to ruin everything with severe jolts of 'crap'. It's just like us, you know. We have all these great times and conversations and whatever and then you ruin it by telling me you need more excitement. It's not enough for Susannah that she and Bekka sit and play Trivial Pursuit and talk about their plans. It's not enough for adventurous, wild n' crazy Susannah that she and Bekka live in a boring old two-bedroom apartment on boring old Queen Street in boring old Toronto. No.... Susannah wants to live in the fucking Amazon jungle and eat nuts and berries. ...oh, I'm sorry, nuts and berries with Dream Whip on them."

"Jesus, Bekka, suck shit."

Doors slam, drawers open and shut, music blares loudly and all is the same-as-ever in the Bekka and Susannah home.

Bekka met Susannah, or Susannah met Bekka at a poetry reading four years ago. Neither remember the poetry except that it had something to do with cockroaches and testicles. Both women were students in Business Administration and wished they were students in Drama or Creative Writing. Both knew then that wishes were not enough and that office work was inevitable. Now, five years later and the same apartment and the same office and the same life, Bekka knows Susannah is bored. Her restlessness began after Andrew made his way into her life. Everything became Andrew and Susannah, Susannah and Andrew. He knew where to eat

dinner, he knew where to buy books and he knew where to take the most adventurous river-rafting trip of all. About the only thing Andrew did not know was how to keep Susannah in his life.

"I'm so bored Andy. We're doing the same things over and over again." Bekka heard Susannah say over the phone just before Susannah broke up with Andrew.

"I know, but, there's not much we can do. I think we're at an impasse." Pause. "No, really, it's not that at all, I think I'm just restless, I think I need a change." Pause. "Oh come on Andrew. It's not the end of the world. Seriously, you are exciting and everything, it's just that excitement always wears off when you involve yourself with one person. You have to have variety. You're NOT boring. I just know everything about you and you know everything about me. We need some newness." Pause. "I'm sorry Andrew. Please don't be insulted. Let's still do stuff together, but I want us to both be free to see other people."

Four months and a few days after they met, Susannah and Andrew broke up because Susannah decided she knew everything there was to know about him. Still, after four years and some months, Bekka knows nothing about what Susannah will do next or who she will dismiss as 'done'.

The morning after the dinner party, Bekka wakes to an empty house with no trace of Susannah's morning routine. The bathroom is not steamed and there is no smell of espresso in the

apartment. For Bekka, this is strange. Susannah must have left early, without her usual preparations. Bekka completes her morning routine with automatic proficiency and perfect timing. Leaving the house at 8:46 she wonders how long it will take before she and Susannah speak to each other again. Now, the silent games begin.

At work there is no sign of Susannah. She did not even call in sick or beg for a personal day off. Bekka decides not to worry yet, but at lunch-hour she decides she will call everyone she and Susannah know in the city. Perhaps by lunch time Susannah will come floating in wearing her multi-patterned jumpsuit and army boots. Or maybe today it will be her sensible day-suit in beige and khaki tweed. Her hair may be pinned at the nape of her neck in a sailor's knot or her hair may be loose, framing her face. Perhaps Susannah will wear the Victorian silver brooch with Tiger's Eye stones that Bekka bought for her at the antique store in New England. Or, perhaps Susannah will never walk through those doors again and will never walk through the apartment door again. Perhaps Bekka will begin to worry now as she picks up the phone just a little bit before lunch hour and begins to call everyone she knows.

"You know, Andy, I just want to know why I'm like this." Susannah tells Andrew as she sits in his red polka-dot bean-bag chair. "I want to know if it's me or is it just that I haven't found the right person at all."

Andrew and Susannah have not spoken really since their break up six months ago and now he is quite surprised to find her in front of him, sitting in his favourite chair, wearing her patchwork blouse. She looks unkempt and nervous. She fiddles with the mother-of-pearl buttons on her shirt as she tells Andrew what Bekka said to her.

"You know, it's true. It's even the reason you and I broke up. I get bored or I get frustrated," Susannah tells Andrew as she watches him put too many spoonfuls of instant coffee into his cup,

"It's like I think people should transform into something else when what they've been for so long now just doesn't work any more. Like a cocoon or something. Why can't we all have cocoons and just grow out of them every six months or so as people get bored with us or we get bored with ourselves? Could you imagine that Andrew? It would be great. There would be no divorce or infidelity or boredom. It would be so exciting," Susannah tells Andrew emphatically.

Andrew looks at Susannah with a face of disgust, emphasized by his ruffled hair and sleepy eyes. Andrew is never one to wake up too early,

"Oh, get real Susannah. It would be hell. You would never know what a person was going to do. It would drive people crazy. You've got to have some order in an already chaotic world. If you can't count on people to be a certain way, well, you'd get pretty insecure and confused."

"I don't know Andrew. I'm not talking about changing every five seconds, just every few months or so. Like WonderWoman changed with three spins. There'd be some warning, and people would know you were changing."

Andrew and Susannah both chuckle at this. Andrew tells Susannah

"That spinning thing is far too pragmatic. You'd get bored with that Susannah, you'd want the I'm-going-to-change warning to change every few months."

"True enough."

After a few hours of catch-up talk, reminiscences and a devoured box of chocolate ants, the phone rings to interrupt their steady flow of conversation. Andrew picks up the phone and after a few seconds, looks at Susannah and tells her it's Bekka. Susannah takes the phone and says hello.

"No, I'm fine Bekka." says Susannah. "Really, I'm OK. I just didn't feel like coming in today." Pause. "Well, I'm sorry I made you worry. Really. It's OK. I'm going home now, I'll see you after work." Pause. "Yeah, Bekka, don't worry about dinner, I'll get something started. Bye."

"You know Andrew, I think I'm just scared sometimes." Susannah turns to Andrew as she leaves the apartment. "I mean, so many people have just up and left me you know. I don't wanna sound melodramatic or Freudian, but my Dad left and James, my brother is nowhere to be known. And then a couple of my boyfriends have just taken off without an explanation."

"I didn't go anywhere until you asked me to." Andrew replies.

"I know, but I think the damage was already done when I met you."

"You know, Susannah, you're talking about all these people who left you before. You know, maybe like your WonderWoman spinning cocoon thing, patterns in your life change too. Maybe your pattern is different now, but you can't see it because you won't even find out."

"Maybe. Thanks Andrew. I'll call you. This time for sure."

"Susannah?"

"Yeah?"

"Bekka won't leave you. Bekka will change but she will never leave you. Besides, you own pottery together. You couldn't ask for a tighter contract."

With candles lit and incense burning, Bekka and Susannah lie on the floor of their apartment listening to the rain outside. Bekka tells Susannah she thinks they should consider painting the living room a deeper burgundy this coming winter. Dipping a slice of avocado in fresh lemon juice, Susannah tells Bekka there is nothing more sad than the moment when a butterfly spreads its wings and ascends into the air.

GHOST-WORDS

We speak over the phone only two nights per week. His voice fills my ear with promises of trips to Victoria and sail-boat rides. His voice fills my ear with breath hot as my heart. He speaks softly and smoothly. Words fly from his mouth as though no effort is needed. He tells me of his evenings of canoe-building and song-writing. He writes a song for me once a week and plays it only to Rosha his Labrador. Sometimes, in bed alone, he tells me, he pretends the pillow is my body and imagines he kisses and tongues and rubs my flesh from the back of my neck to my Achilles tendon. Only then does he fall asleep to dream of feather beds and honeysuckle oil.

His days, he tells me, are filled with endless newspaper deadlines and a forced, automatic writing. His song-writing, he tells me, is the only refuge from stagnation. As he speaks, every sigh, every stolen giggle and every mention of my name leaves me suspended. I speak very little sometimes so I do not break the spell. Sometimes I do not speak at all so that I will not change a thing with the power of the word.

Tonight he calls me after eleven and I am very tired. He tells me he cannot get to sleep without hearing my voice at the end of the day. He says he misses my arms and the way my hands stretch to massage his neck--pressing firmly and helping him to release tension. He asks me to tell him what I am wearing and I

do--a dress of light blue cotton, suitable for the hot weather in my hot Toronto apartment. I tell him I am wearing tan leather sandals and the leather anklet with tiny bells on it. I tell him of my sheer blue scarf tied round my hair to keep it off my sweaty face. He asks me to describe the material of the scarf. I tell him how it is a transparent blue but there are white flowers embedded on the material that look as though they are another layer of scarf themselves. Then he asks me to describe my face--my blue almond-shaped eyes, my crooked brown eyebrows and my birth-mark near my right ear lobe. He wants me to describe my clear, milk-white skin with freckles and my soft, thin lips. I do as he asks. Now he wants me to tell him about my body, touching whatever I describe. Close your eyes, he tells me. I speak of my neck--long and smooth--defined by an Adam's Apple vibrating and humming as I run my index finger along its length. I tell him of my breasts--tiny and firm--with the rose brown nipples lying flat and uninterested in my touch. He asks me to circle my nipples between my index finger and thumb and I do as he says. I tell him of the plane of my stomach, rising and falling in tune with his hot breath in my ear. I run my hand down my thighs to the backs of my knees and further where I tell him about the smooth skin and taut muscles. He tells me to run my fingers--all ten of them--around and around my stomach ever-so-lightly until it drives me crazy and I have to scratch harder. He laughs when I laugh, sighs as I do. He asks me to describe my cunt--its wiry hair and parted lips. I tell him of the smooth

rough flesh around its entrance and he insists that I place my index finger inside. I do so, at his command, and come into the phone, sighing and asking him to be quiet, please don't talk. But we are on the phone and that is what people do on the phone. He calls me sweetie and wishes me goodnight.

Tonight he wants to reminisce. He reminds me of our first night together at the folk concert in October. He remembers the navy wool tam I wore with my brown corduroy jacket. He remembers the steam from my breath, as I sang all the words along with the band. I remember his beard and tell him that I miss it. I miss the way it tickles my chin and my thighs. He tells me to get my favourite teddy bear from childhood and take off my pants. I do so and he tells me to run the bear up and down my thighs and stroke my cunt as I do. I run the bear lightly up and down but it is softer than his beard. I tell him I am still using the bear even though I use both my hands to rub and rub until I come again, lying pantless with my Paddington between my legs.

We talk tonight about our upcoming six month anniversary. He wonders when I will take some time off and fly out to see him. He knows it is difficult to have a relationship this way--he knows I am restless. I tell him--no--I am not restless. I am needy and demanding. I demand that he touch me and smell me and

walk with me. Instead, he offers me all that he can--a honey voice and love commands.

Tonight he leaves a message on my machine--'you are my heart, i do not touch or taste or smell until you tell me to do so'--I erase and have a hot milk bath before I go to sleep.

Tonight I call him with words of joy. I am designing more houses than ever before. I am in demand. I am wealthier than ever before. I have more bath-oils and books and silver earrings than anyone I know. I ask him to rub his hands along his chest, twist his nipples between his index and middle fingers, and squeeze his ass as he rubs his chest. I tell him how hard and smooth his chest is. I tell him how his veins stand out on his arms and how I want to put my teeth through them and drink the blood. I tell him to lick his finger and roll it in his belly-button and grab the base of his penis and move, move, move. I tell him to come now as I hang up the phone.

No one calls today.

Today the phone rings while I am doing sit-ups. He asks me

why I am out of breath and jokes that it is for the love of another man. He tells me to pour some spring water on my face and drink the rest. Then, I should cut kiwis and oranges in a bowl and eat them slowly as I read through my old journals. He asks me to put two slices of kiwi over my nipples and send him a picture. I do as he asks, but add a pillow of orange to my navel.

Today he tells me that his Rosha ran away and went to a neighbouring yard to die. He buried Rosha by the coast, under the maple tree with the tire swing. I tell him to rock himself to sleep and think only of me lapping up his salty tears.

Last night, today and tonight I call him in need of words of beauty and promises. I get only the machine and a formal greeting suited to many others like me--those who call to be heard and those who call to hear. I refuse to talk to machines so I hang up after each time I hear his voice. The third time I call I am sure he spoke only to me when he said to leave your number.

Why did you not call he asks me tonight. I tell him I have called him three or four times but he does not believe me. Or he

is suspicious of my fear of the machine. Why should I call him everyday anyway I ask him. There is no point I tell him. He insists that this is the only point--our conversations, our words, our offerings of love. I tell him that words are not enough sometimes. They are what we settle for, demand and need, but they are not enough. There are times when words are painful, fleeting and empty. Empty promises, empty joy. Words only last for seconds, suspended in that time and then disappear, never heard that way again. I want to capture the word I tell him. I want to capture the mouth, the chest, the lungs, the body that the words escape from. I want to keep it--solid--in my life. I cannot stand the way the words escape me.

He tells me to record our conversations and I softly hang up on him.

Tonight he demands that I visit him. But I have no time or opportunity I tell him. He must visit me I tell him. But he too has deadlines and responsibilities. Remember our apartment in Toronto I ask him? Remember our nest among the post office, donut store and laundromat? Remember the days of classes and nights of song and poetry and drinks? How about the time we walked our way around the city for a whole day while we should have been completing assignments? Remember that, I ask him. He tells me it is nice to remember but it is the past. It is the time that is no longer here. Now it is him in Victoria and me in

Toronto. Now it is both of us exhausted with summer heat and adult lives. I tell him that nothing else connects us but our phones. No hope of visits, no hope of a life together, no hope of the past moving to the present. No hope of anything more than insubstantial words and ghost-hands making love to each other.

He tells me to think of something else, please, he says. Think of good things. Think of my body against yours, moving and sliding, ready to enter you, he says. Please, think of that, and take your hands all over your body, rub them, move them, touch every inch of you he demands. I tell him I cannot reach that spot in the middle of my back and he tells me not to be so sarcastic. I tell him that I was not aware of any sarcasm.

Today no one called me and I did not call him.

Tonight he tells me that things will get better, we will be together and our conversations will be words filled with touch and breath and scent. I tell him I believe him, that there is hope. We are both so anxious, so in love, so wanting of each other that to wait and tease and know each other only through words is exciting and fills us with more need than any two people could possibly know. This is what we agree before we say I love you, goodnight.

Tonight I make love to myself with my hands and come in my silence.

The phone (for now) is off the hook.

CHARCOAL SPACE

Nude men are so interesting, Samantha thinks, as she stares at Ben's upside-down penis. At first she's apprehensive about looking at nude men and sketching their fluid lines and depths with charcoal; but, Felix convinces her it's time to move away from her safe drawing-room in the attic of their house and actually join a community of artists. Samantha agrees to art classes so Felix will stop bugging her about them. Mostly. (Felix sketches and paints--even sculpts--when he can find the time. Right now, the unemployed chemical engineer has plenty of time.)

This is Samantha's first person. This is Samantha's first penis. All she's ever sketched are rosebushes and bird houses. Sometimes the bird houses turn into people-houses because her dimensions are off; nevertheless, she's always sketched straight lines and simple curves. Now, before her, stands a man on his head, a man who only just entered the room in a burgundy terry-cloth robe and flip-flops. The instructor introduces himself and lets the class know they'll leap right into sketching Ben, the nude model.

Samantha expects some sort of warm-up or, at least, some kind of preliminary discussion. She'd felt nervous enough walking through the abandoned shoe factory where the class takes place. She'd felt nervous enough walking into a class where she knows no-one and no-one knows her. Now she feels really nervous--but, interested--staring at the nude man and his inverted penis.

Samantha stares at Ben's body (as art class gives her license to do). He has an enormous amount of body hair but Samantha decides she will not draw this into her sketch. He'd only end up looking like Ape-Man if she tried. His toes are disgusting (as most toes are). They are long and bent and his nails have not been clipped in a while. He possesses wonderful legs, almost too muscular for a man in his forties. His torso's a bit heavy. How long will he be able to stand on his head? His hairy chest droops, but it's much more tanned than the rest of his body (even though it's the middle of winter.) His face, of course, is red; its temple veins pop out of both sides of his head.

Finally he stands. Samantha stares at his penis. It's limp and small. She wonders what would happen if he got a hard-on during the class. She wonders about the other three men in the class. Do they look at Ben's penis and go, My goodness, mine is large? Probably. The other six women in the class are intent and serious as they examine Ben's body. They look with squinty eyes and tortoise shell eye glasses. Some wear smocks filled with different sizes of charcoal and paint brushes. One woman closes her eyes for a bit; then, decides to draw. She must be a real artist thinks Samantha. Only a real artist would close her eyes to what she has to draw and then attempt to draw it. Only a real artist would be that silly.

Samantha stares at her finished drawing and realizes Ben's

toes are too large. Samantha realizes she's only drawn toes, has forgotten about the rest of Ben's body. The instructor comes by with a bland face and nod. He gives everyone the same reaction. Samantha glances at the other drawings. Most of them are large and round and seem to float along the surface of the paper. Some consist of shapes and contours. All convey a sense of peace and sophistication. Samantha stares at her gigantic-toes drawing and longs for a bird house with a woodpecker picking up a sunflower seed.

After two months of nude men, women and children, three people in the Life Drawing class invite Samantha to spend her spare time with them in a sketching workshop. At first, Samantha's flattered and excited; then she realizes they're probably being polite because their class is so small. Well, whatever the reason, Samantha agrees and meets Susan and Carl and Roger on Monday nights after she finishes teaching Geography at Central Secondary. There are four of them. Three artists and Samantha. They meet at Susan's loft apartment decorated in red and only red--right down to her toothbrush (which Samantha notices when she went to the bathroom to collect herself before everyone reveals their sketched interpretation of a sculpture Susan shows them).

The three other artists speak very little and simply stare at the sculpture of a pregnant woman in Susan's den. Samantha finds herself staring at Carl, his shaved head and earring. He

must be at least forty-something; she wonders when he will grow up and get a sensible hair cut, wear a tie, lose the earring. Susan's extremely sophisticated in both her dress and her artistry. Strong lines dark colours are her ethics for clothing. This explains her uncanny ability to convey a nude man through the use of shapes. Roger is Roger and there's not much else to say. He draws men and he draws them well. On the other hand, his women are twisted and twined. Samantha doesn't want to know why he draws women that way.

When the four reveal their sketches, there's silence. Samantha finds them staring back and forth between her and her sketch board. Carl smiles and nods, crosses his arms over his chest, and sits back comfortably in his chair. Susan looks skyward with a whistling sigh and shakes her head. Roger smiles slightly and looks away. Finally, Samantha looks at her drawing and realizes it's of the woman's transparent belly and her sprawling fetus behind the skin. The baby is faceless and sexless, but writhing to be free from the belly. In a split second, Samantha decides Felix won't enjoy this sketch. She decides to give it away (or, perhaps, burn it). At the moment she decides this, Susan stands up with tears in her eyes and asks if she'd let her frame it so she can keep it in her showroom downtown.

"You are some artist, " says Susan. Carl and Roger nod their heads in agreement. Right about now, Samantha wishes for red rosebushes or bird houses. She wishes for anything but this

pain that is art.

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Pain is something Samantha is accustomed to now. Not mortal pain, or melodramatic pain, but an aching, constant, pain. It's not exactly a headache or stomach ache, nor is it her heart or her chest. It's a body ache. A general pulsing reminder that she lives inside this body of hers. I suppose, she thinks, it's the kind of pain that the baby feels in the womb. Can the baby ever really forget that she's surrounded by another layer of skin and slime? It's like when Samantha broke her toe. You never even realize your toes matter until you break one. Samantha knows she recognizes her body now because it too is broken.

Felix notices the breaks first. His hands are expert. They glide across his sculpting clay and weave figures of motion and flight. He likes to sculpt naked sometimes and let the clay get all over parts of his body. This means he'll be able to linger in the shower without feeling guilty for wasting time. Samantha prefers to wear old grimy clothes when she sketches, just in case the charcoal stains anything.

Felix's expert hands glide across Samantha's body and he recognizes the ache. It isn't a desire for his smooth touches, it's a defensive and shielding ache. Samantha and Felix lie in bed together, Felix sculpting Samantha's flesh and Samantha tracing the lines of Felix's body.

"What is it?" Felix says.

"What is what?" Samantha answers.

"What's up? You're a little tense." Felix says.

"No more than usual, do you think?" Samantha answers, bringing her hands together across her chest.

"Well, yeah. It's weird. What's up?" Felix says, letting his hands lie on Samantha's belly.

"Um. It's art class. I really like it." Samantha says.

"That's great. That's good, isn't it?" Felix says.

"Well, maybe. It's weird. I don't want to like it. It's hard." Samantha answers.

"Yeah, it's a lot of work, but it's so rewarding. You must know that, right?" Felix says.

"No, I mean it's hard here." Samantha says, pointing to her heart and letting her hand rest there.

"How?" Felix says.

"Well, it makes me think of things I haven't in awhile. It makes me think of shitty things. I can't seem to just draw stupid little Bateman scenes, it's all like Dali or something." Samantha says with a tiny smile.

"Well, that's OK. Maybe it's just what you need right now." Felix says.

"But what if it never stops? You know me. I'm pretty happy and laid back. And not especially 'artistic', like self-absorbed and all that. I just want to have fun." Samantha says.

"If art isn't fun Samantha, maybe you need to try something else. I mean, it should move you or it isn't worth it, but it doesn't have to be psychotherapy, we know that." Felix says.

"Yeah, but I can't really stop. It's all your fault, you bum." Samantha says, tickling Felix's stomach lightly.

"Yeah, it always is." Felix says as he attempts (and not successfully) to mould away Samantha's ache as she traces the contours of his thighs.

Actually, maybe it is time for Felix to see some of her sketchings from art class. She usually leaves them in the studio and refuses to bring them home. But, he's been curious, so it's probably time. The only thing is, her fetus sketch is going to be at Susan's studio next week, and Felix saw the invitation for the art class display before Samantha had time to put it away. He'll go to the showing and see the fetus sketch.

Of course, he probably won't see it like Samantha does. He won't see that the baby is really a girl (even though people think it's sexless and that that makes it such a great sketch). He also won't see that she has a tiny mole on her right cheek and a left index finger as long as her middle finger. Felix won't notice these details because he won't be looking for them. He's not obsessed with this child as Samantha is. He's not obsessed with quenching the ache that Samantha must. Felix doesn't know everything about Samantha and there is certainly one thing he will never know of Samantha. That one thing in that one sketch. That one telling sketch that leaves Samantha in need of pain killers that just don't exist.

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"Samantha, this is amazing." Felix whispers in her ear as he points to her fetus sketch.

"Thanks." Samantha says casually as she tries to move them along to other sketches at the exhibit.

Susan showcased the fetus sketch on the biggest and brightest white wall available at the gallery. How ridiculous thinks Samantha. It's absolutely nothing to anyone else. It's a 'good' sketch, but they don't really know what it is. Or, for that matter, what is even good about it. Is it the movement? Or the shading? Or is it because it looks painful, and painful is so terribly trendy right now? What is it that makes it good? Samantha wonders. Is it that there is life inside this woman? Is it good that the painted woman is about to give birth?

There is nothing good about giving birth when you're seventeen and broke. And when mom and dad think you're a criminal. But, then again, giving birth and giving the result away is o.k. At least, there's hope for everyone involved. At least, that's how Samantha feels at the time. Why worry, just let everyone else take care of it all and then, no problems, no worries, no aches and no pains. Except stitches and memories.

The stitches heal after a few months while the memories seem to be relentless as Samantha lives her forty-something artist life. This is the life, she thinks, now watching Felix interact with her artist friends. There are things in the drawing that he doesn't notice. He doesn't notice the mole on the cheek or the long finger. He doesn't notice much of anything, and for this

one less pain, Samantha is glad as she sips her rosé and inhales her cigarette.

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The Artist's Evening doesn't end. Or so at least it feels that way. Samantha's made her small talk and connections. She's even made new friends to sketch with and to take to movies. But only if they can keep themselves from the deep pull of artistic endeavours for one evening. Samantha is impressed by Susan and Carl's sketches. She's impressed by pretty much everything in the room. Even her own dress. And her own sketch. She glances at it again (tentatively) and decides to accept its inherent value. She decides to move away from the sketch and perhaps tomorrow sketch something to do with the beautiful Protestant church in the old part of the city.

As Samantha looks away from her fetus sketch and begins to walk toward Felix she can't help but gaze around the room at the self-absorbed twenty-something artists and wonder, well, Is it you? Is it you? or Could it be you?.

DIGGING IN THE DIRT

My fingers dig into the soil, I feel the dirt, dirt, dirt under my fingernails, filling the space between flesh and nail. My hand feels refreshed in its filth--a cool velvety feeling submerses my hand. As I dig deeper and deeper my fingers tire and begin to numb with the icy cold of deep earth. I have to remove them quickly before my fingers fall into the soil and become the rotting mulch to nourish the underworld. My fingers are black. Most of the dirt flakes away and falls to its origin but some of it remains--embedded in the tiny lines of distinction that are my fingerprint.

I rub and rub my hands together. There is no feeling of velvet any more, only callousness and cold. I rub until I rub the dirt further into my flesh; I rub until the white flesh is made red; I rub until my fingers ache with the warmth of a home fire but smell of earthworms and mud.

And still no Eliza.

She died, she died, she died. Yesterday she died. My friend, my love, my perfect who-I-want-to-be. I suppose I will get up now. And I suppose I will go to work. But what will I do tomorrow? Tomorrow when the old house on Front St. reminds me of our student home or when the red scarf reminds me of her red water tumblers or the song reminds me of a camping trip. What

will I do then?

I had a dream the other night. A dream of red hair and blue bathing suits. I had a dream of supple flesh. I woke with the cat on my chest licking my chin with his sandpaper tongue. Eliza never let a cat on her bed. To let a cat on the bed is to admit dependence. I argued that to not let the cat on the bed is heartless. In a compromise, we both laid on the floor with the cat. She told me of a summer in France with cinnamon-breads and rain. She told me of the family she boarded with and how she wished they were her own.

The cat licks my cheek and I send it off. This is nonsense. Everything reminds me of Eliza. Every scent, every sound. Nonsense. I never thought of her this much before she died. Maybe here is the tragedy.

I think of her in dreams now. spurts of memory clouded by hindsight. I dream of red. I dream of once upon a time. We sat in a tree once, she and I. And she pointed out to me the rippling electric red eels in the lake. And I quickly pointed out that there were not any electric eels in the water, it was the reflection from the railway light. She said that she knew that thank you very much and that she never said they were electric eels, only that they were electric red. But that is

only a memory of once upon a time. Me and my friend Eliza. In a tree where we sat.

Now my friend Eliza is my dead friend Eliza.

Eliza left us all a little too soon. Too soon before she completed her sculptures. Too soon before she had one more daughter. Too soon before she lived among the elderly. Too soon before she found her mother.

"But you come from her body!"

Whose body?

"But you are part of her flesh!"

What flesh?

Eliza and I had been friends forever. Forever meaning past, present, future and infinity. That enormous expanse of time that you cannot imagine--it has no grasp. You close your eyes and imagine nothing, NOTHING, NOTHING--but it never works because you cannot go that deep, that red and dark. And the colours in your closed eyes keep you from concentrating and your breathing interrupts too. That is how difficult it is to imagine nothing and that is the infinity for which Eliza and I were supposed to be friends. I remember the beginning. I remember the lilac bush and the SunMaid raisins and realizing that if I share I could gain much more than I give away. My motives were purely selfish--share the raisins and gain access to Eliza's apartment building. I knew only the life of four walls and a sensible rec-room

basement and the same back yard all our own. I knew nothing of sharing space and hearing other families walk and talk and love at night. I especially knew nothing about actually sleeping in the basement. Eliza lived in a place where the top, highest window inside was the bottom most window on the outside. After the raisins I used to lie on my stomach and talk to Eliza through the window while she did the dishes for her mom.

Eliza's favourite pass-time was to find bright coloured stones from the creek behind the apartment building. She would collect and wrap them in an old terry-cloth towel and then leave them to dry on the cement steps. After they were perfectly dusty she would rub and rub them together until the coloured powder fell into separate piles. This would take days and days of careful collecting and rubbing. And then she would be left with piles of blue and violet and pink. She rubbed the violet on her eyelids but I would not dare. I thought the thin pieces of rock might cut through the skin and leave me bleeding and blind.

Eliza always knew how to take that extra step.

Our favourite game was Bluebird. We were both rich girls lost in the forest of enchantment and the only way out was to capture the bluebird and bring it to Hector, our guard. The only way to get past Master Bate or Frankenstein was manipulation. We batted eyelashes and wooed with riddles. Once we even let Derek Teed play the part of Hector. But Derek did not play correctly so we quickly tricked him into believing that eyes were made of flour and water. He promptly stopped playing with us because he

knew God made them out of glass. We never found the bluebird, we just stopped searching. When did we stop? When did we stop?

Kitty pounces and I awake. I have dreamed again of closets full of new clothes and jewels and wake to find the contents of my closet remain the same. I cry at this loss. I cry and remember the most important thing Eliza taught me. Free and full of energy, she informed me that dolls could speak. They were not simply bodies to be dressed and manipulated, but they had minds and personalities and likes and dislikes. Her Sandra enjoyed singing and sucking her thumb. My Barbara liked to dance and she cried often. Eliza taught me to turn my attention to Barbara when she cried and ignore everyone else, because your doll's pain was real and it needed to be tended to. In all the years Eliza never taught me to turn to her own pain and tend to it. That, I felt, was up to the teacher Eliza, who knew all about so many, many things.

As we grew older our games grew older. We were Mr. and Mrs. Dee. I was her husband and I loved her very much. And we shared a bed because that is what married people did. And no one loved each other more. We even had children and steady lawyer jobs. And for awhile we made music together. She used only her voice and I needed to use the organ. We sang Abba and Elvis songs for the neighbours and served lemonade and chocolate no-bakes. Alone we were happy husband and wife. But when we played with everyone else she was always Pinky and I had to be Leather because Paul was the Fonz and Paul was her boyfriend.

But was I not her husband?

Oh, Eliza, Eliza. What I would give to have a slippery (red) electric eel glide across my mind and through my fingers. And I would feel a spark and see a bright light all around. And I suppose I would feel warm and static. I do remember red (electric) eels. But that is so long ago.

Can I light you back?

Eliza killed herself two weeks ago.

"She is your mother."

"Like hell she is my mother."

Conversations, conversations, words, words, words. Snippets come back to me, fragments of deeper meaning I am sure. I remember winter and lingering over dessert years after our degrees and our jobs and our children. I remember Eliza and her angry words. She hated her job and resented her children. She only wanted to sculpt. I suggested she do just that and she told me she would if her mother were dead. Her mother disapproved of her artistic, frivolous pursuits. Where is the money in that? Where is the security? Surely Eliza was old enough to do as she wished, but around her mother she was two years old.

"I've had enough Sara," Eliza informed me. "I can't stand it. My mother won't leave me alone. I feel like I'm a child and there's no hope for escape."

"Escape? From what?" I ask.

"From her. She's a lousy, oppressive, stupid, ignorant woman. She knows nothing about art. I hate her. Most of the time." Eliza speaks with her eyes low, focused on the white linen tablecloth.

"What?" I respond, appalled at her ignorance. "She's your mother, you come from her flesh."

"Oh, don't be so naive. Just because she's my mother doesn't mean I should like her."

"Of course that's what it means, Eliza. You just do. You

realize her goodness. She's your mother."

"Like hell she's my mother."

And that is when Eliza told me. She told me she was adopted. She tells me this thirty six years and four months after I have met her. She said she needed to find the body that she came from. She said she needed the comfort of knowing she did not really belong to the woman who knew nothing about art and who held money more important than happiness. Eliza needed to find her real mother. The physical body-mother, not the mother of the legal papers. Her search had been fruitless for many, many years.

I hated Eliza. I hated her secrets, her acts. All these years, all these years of resentment toward her mother(?). I thought she was immature and heartless, but I let it slide; my image of Eliza coloured by her coldness. All these years Eliza never told me the whole story, she never completed the sculpture. She left out the heart and I lost the chance to know the full figure. She forced me to know her as mother-hating Eliza and gave me no choice to share in her years of wondering.

I hated her now. How dare she make such a choice for me. How dare she not let me turn to her pain and tend to it.

She killed herself two weeks ago. It was six years after our dinner. Six years after my decision to hate her. After my decision to write her only obligatory holiday notes and after my decision to be busy every time a visit was planned. Six years after my resentment and shock. And for six years I let her fade and die in my memory. For six years I let her be nothing but that childhood friend and nothing but that woman I knew once who never became who she really wanted to be.

Her note said she could not stand her life. She could not stand the monotony and endlessness and struggle. Her note said please, do not blame yourselves. And all I could wonder is which mother should I blame?

Again, the silly cat. Again, I am awake in the dark morning hours of winter. I have plans today. I may write to Eliza's (paper) mother and tell her how much her daughter loved her. Or I may search and find Eliza's (body) mother and tell her how much her daughter loved her. Or, I may blame myself some more. I may wonder how I could turn my back on the Eliza who never asked for my support. I may wonder how I will possibly live with the woman I am today and the woman Eliza will never be.

Or, perhaps today I will do something very different. I will purge myself with a tribute to my dead friend. I will do something her mother(s) would not understand and her husband and my husband would not understand. I will do something I do not understand but know I have to do.

I will write, write, write, right her death. I will (w)right her life. I will.

I don't even eat now as I write. My heart beats, my stomach rises up and down, my hands shake and I forget how to spell. My foot falls asleep and I am nervous someone will catch me--oppress me--editors; and oppress me--words; and oppress me--'writer'; and oppress me--you; and oppress oppress.

Oh press my temples; my head aches. My ringing pulse and my ringing pulse--my body louder than my world.

To reveal this is to heal myself and to heal myself is to wallow and to smell and to taste and to roll in dirt, even shit, even the grave of my dead friend Eliza.

FULL OF HOLES

There's a man from Cuba underneath my kitchen sink. I see him every time I open the cupboard to reach for a pot. He stares up at me from the yellowed black and white print of the newspaper. The headline reads *Life After Cuba*. I noticed it the first day I moved in to 319 Waterford, Apartment 4. Who would cover a pot shelf with newspaper? Surely someone could afford shelf-paper. I'm thinking now that my own headline, I suppose, would be *Life After Morrow*. Or, more accurately, *Is There Life After Morrow?*

I left Morrow behind a month or so now. The town of my past. Goodbye to its boredom and conservatism, I said in glee. But, surely as with every pure emotion, eventually contaminates enter. My glee is mixed with a bit of sadness. Just a pinch, or a dash. Enough to hold Kate in its grains of regret.

There's a hole in my closet ceiling. It's about the size and shape of a basket of strawberries from the market. I've never climbed right up to the hole with a flashlight to check it out. I'm not sure I want to. My kitty could fit through the hole. But I don't dare send him up there. I know that in Morrow there was no hole in my closet ceiling. Here, at 319 Waterford, in the new (to me) town of Harspring, holes are abundant. Holes in the closet ceiling, nail holes in the bedroom walls, holes in the window screens and a wee bit of a hole in one of the wooden stairs leading up to my apartment. After my second pay cheque I'll fix these holes. And I'll ask the landlord to pay for my

efforts.

Once I'm settled at Row Advertising. Once my boxes are emptied--trinkets placed on shelves, clothes hung in closets and pots covering men from Cuba--then I will fix the holes. I'll have to have them finished before Kate comes to visit. Kate, my friend from Morrow. Kate, my shadow and my sun. Don't think me too corny; no one knows my Kate like I do. She'll come to visit and know that I haven't changed. She'll know I am still myself, only encased in a space of holes. She'll fill them, I know she will. Kate has always been able to fix. When she comes here, and smiles in my space, then, and only then, will I let my shoulders relax and exhale. For now, I wait with expectant breath.

the thread. the thread is coming. it's coming out of my throat. it's coming from my stomach. the thread. here it comes. my god, it's long. it's long. it's purple. here it comes. i think i'll throw up. the thread. it's scratchy in my throat. it's coming from my intestines. it's coming out. finally. here it comes. out my throat, out my mouth. what'll i do with it now, here it comes. what WILL i do with it now?

I feel like my cat. He went through this once. This thread-in-his-bowels thing. Except it started coming out of his bum. And it was thicker than a thread. I think it was turkey-roasting string. And I thought I'd help him out by pulling on it

(with rubber gloves on my hands of course). But, that didn't help. All it did was make him growl. Low and long. And he flashed me a look that definitely said I should leave his bum alone. But I couldn't stand it. I knew it was ready to come out, and I wanted to speed up the process. But now I understand. After that dream I had about the thread. I'd have been upset if someone had pulled my string out too. Plus... maybe I liked it in there. Maybe I'd rather walk around telling people I have a purple thread in my stomach. I bet no one else could do that. Of course, there aren't many people to tell about this purple-thread dream anyway. I'll save it for Kate. I'll write about it in my journal and save it for when she comes to visit. She's busy working too. Adults now, we are. Working and saving and scrounging. But still holding our breaths, waiting for the big one. I know it. It's a perpetual state of expectancy.

Even when I go to sleep now, I'm waiting. Waiting for the purple thread dream or waiting for something else. Waiting. Expecting. Wondering. But never breathing too deeply. Shallow breaths only, in case I miss the big one.

it's coming out fast now. like a slippery eel. i'm alone. no one's watching me. maybe i'll just let it slide out and see what happens. no. it wants me to do something. the purple thread is turning toward me. it's calling to me with its movements. it wants me to do something. quick. i grab it and pull it. no. not quite pull it. i don't want to do that. i

grab it, near the end, quite far from my mouth. i roll it. like a long electric cord or garden hose. roll it. around my hand. around and around and around. until there's too much of it. my hand is squished. it's getting tighter. now i have to unravel it? how the hell will i do that? it's getting tighter. what on earth should i do now?

Such ridiculous dreams. Continuous dreams. I rarely have those. Some say you can make yourself continue a dream if it's the very last thing you think about before you go to sleep. Now, how can you know it's the very last thing, because you never really know when you're falling asleep for sure. And plus you'd then end up staying up all night, waiting, because you'd keep thinking, ok, this'll be my last thought. No, now this'll be my last thought. No, that's crazy. But I'm having continuous dreams. About a stupid colour. A colour I hate more than words can say. When I was twelve and thirteen purple was my favourite colour in the whole world. In Morrow I had purple drapes, a purple bedspread and purple doilies. Purple washcloths that mother bought just for me. I even had a purple soap collection. Do you know how hard it is to find purple soap? After I was thirteen, I gave up on the purple and moved on to flowers and lace. But, Kate's mom, Mrs. McKile still thought I liked purple and bought me purple underwear for my birthday. It was thoughtful of my best friend's mom to buy me a birthday gift; but purple underwear?

Now that stupid colour is haunting me. Why can't I dream of ecru or mustard-coloured thread? A much more classic dream that would be.

the thread is gone. i'm in front of the mirror. i've got purple underwear on and the thread is gone. my belly button has hair coming out of it. almost like grass. and my breasts are a bit twisted. sort of moulded like play-doh. twisted breasts and hairy belly button. and no purple thread. where is my purple thread? i'm looking for it. i'm wondering. i'm desperate. where's my purple thread? it's MINE, so i should have it. MINE MINE MINE. where is the bloody thing? i check my underwear and it's not there. i check my insy belly button and it's not there. where's my purple thread? what will i do without my purple thread? what will i do?

Someday I will finish this bloody dream. Someday. Soon I hope. There's only so much purple thread one can take. I think I need a vacation. I think stress is getting to me. New stress. The stress of new. New space, new work, new town, new holes. Perhaps I need a new hobby. Maybe I should take up embroidery. Maybe that's what this dream is all about. A hobby or a purpose. A purple project. Or a friend. Maybe I need a new friend. Or maybe I need an old friend. That's what I'll do tonight. I'll think of old friends. I'll think of best friends. And I'll make sure it's the last thing I think about before I

fall asleep. Even if I have to stay up all night.

where's my purple thread? this time i yell it out. loud.
WHERE'S MY PURPLE THREAD? and i start to look under my feet.
and behind the mirror. and in my throat. down deep. and
nothing. and no purple thread. and then i see your hand. kate.
i see the hand come out. i see that your hand is swollen and red
and there are cuts on it with pus and scabs. and you're crying.
tears that no one human could cry. tears so many tears. and you
say, laura, here is your purple thread. you say it's been so
long laura. please laura, you say. here's your purple thread.
i've brought it for you, you say to me. where's my purple thread
i ask you because i cannot see it. you cry some more and say
please laura, here's your purple thread, do with it what you will
you say and you open your mouth and out comes the purple thread
and i take up the thread, careful not to pull too hard, and start
to wrap it around my own swollen hand. i do all that i can do
now as i watch you cry the tears that no human being can.

I think it's time for Kate to visit. Regardless of our
schedules. Kate should get here soon. It's a feeling I have. A
feeling I can't get rid of. If dreams came through I'd tie the
purple thread around Kate's waist and pull her in. Pull her in
to Harspring, away from Morrow. Pull her into my own hole and
hope it saturates with purple. The first step is the phone.

I finally manage to phone Kate. I find the time and the

nerve. Two things I've been a bit thinly supplied with lately. She's fine, she says. She also says she misses me. Terribly. Never knew how much she loved me. The old cliché it is; don't know what you got 'til it's gone. I knew it all along. I told her almost everyday. I told her she'd never know love like she knew with me. Never feel it so easily or so strong. She never agreed with the easy part. Two women in a town like Morrow? Never easy. But two of us alone in a room--or two of us alone in a crowd--easy was how it felt for me. Easier than working at the office, easier than mom and dad and dinner out, and easier than reading Plato.

Kate found things difficult. All sorts of things. Yes, she was--and is--a fixer, but she always needs to find the difficulty first. Rather than the ease. For me, I'd rather wind the purple thread around and around and place it on my mantle in its perfect sphere. Kate, unlike my dream of Kate, would snip the end off and throw it in the trash. Together, we balance. It's a shaky balance, but it's better than a fall.

I remind her of our balancing act on the phone and she assures me she will visit soon. The timing is perfect. The two pay cheques here, the holes filled with assorted putties--319 Waterford is ready for Kate. Am I? Yes.

Only a week passes and finally Kate steps into my space. While we hug, my shoulders relax. Instantly. This is what I wait for.

"You look great. Happy, are you?" Kate asks me.

"Yep. Come on the two-room tour." I take her hand and lead her through the apartment.

"This is cute." Kate says, "but where are the pictures of us?"

"In here." I show her the top of the bookcase in the tiny hall way. It's full of pictures. Some of my family. Plenty of my kitty. And a select few of me and Kate.

"This is homey. I like it." Kate says, smiling, looking at me, at my face and then the rest of me. Looking that look I know so well.

A look that says 'I'm fairly sure about this. I'm pretty sure there's love here. Let's find out.'

We find out with days filled with dinners out and touristy things I would never do on my own in Harspring. Things no one would dream of doing in Morrow. But then that's what 'new' is all about.

We also find out more about love each night. Not surprisingly, one night, with Kate beside me, I dream of purple. But there's orange and red also. A kaleidoscope of sorts. I wake up with a smile on my face, and a smile on hers. Finally. Some sunlight in this water.

Not surprisingly, Kate's visit doesn't last long enough for me. As she stands at the door to leave she tells me I should get

a big, colourful Mexican blanket rug to hang on my living room wall. She says I need some brightness in this place.

She says this as she stands by the doorway, tote bag in hand and that funny smile on her face again. And that look. A look that says 'there is love here, but I am leaving.' I can't say much, except for the hug goodbye.

a hole. the size of a basket of strawberries from the market. a hole in a closet. a pale orange kitty pulling a purple thread through the hole. into the hole. out of sight. out of mind.

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