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Cadensation: A Distillation of Rhythm in Prose

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A Birch Cross

VI

Orlo woke up to an empty bed and wondered, for a moment, if everything he'd remembered about the last ten years had disappeared. Rolling over to find only more mattress, he wondered if he was still living in his godforsaken apartment, if that taste in his mouth was not the coffee he remembered drinking but one more bottle of beer, if, upon opening his eyes and looking around he might see stains from his own vomit and a stack of old newspapers. He wondered if he might open his eyes to the nothing that awaited at 4:30 in the afternoon when the day had been slept away and the night shift was waiting in only three hours and everything in the fridge had rotted and everything on the floor was rotted too, and in the bathroom the sink and bathtub leaked and the toilet bowl was a permanent shade of creamy yellow that was disturbingly similar to color of fresh milk, pulled straight from the udder and straight from the breast. He pictured himself waking up, crossing the apartment, and doing the lonely in the bathroom because he scarcely had time to worry about himself let alone anybody else. He had promised to meet Allen for an early dinner, or a late lunch, or a mid-day half of a meal at 5, hadn't he? He was going to discuss working more hours at a

pizza place in the plaza. They were going to talk about letting him stay on duty for another four hours while everyone else was asleep.

The medicine cabinet would be lined with over-the-counter remedies for every general illness: cold, cough, sore throat, disinfectant (unused (it's hard to cut yourself when you don't do anything)), band-aids (unused (it's hard to scrape yourself when you don't do anything)), hard candies (not medicine, but you can use them and not have to do anything), pills that kept him awake at night (these were not over the counter unless you happen to know a struggling pharmacist), liquids that let him sleep all day (Nyquil for when the beer didn't seem to help), a toothbrush (with no flexi-grips or special molar cleaning capabilities), toothpaste (that did not whiten or advertise special plaque correcting capabilities), mouthwash (watered down to its second or third run), and Q-Tips (just Q-Tips).

The water would be dripping in through the ceiling into a puddle on the floor, the water rushing through the pipes, filled with dinner, filled with dessert and that extra pint of Guinness when they got home, washing all away; water rushing up to the showers going above, fogging up the room, making everything vague, and vague, and vague, until it's nothing at all but gray, and gray, and gray while the faucet made the sound of an angry tea-kettle. The water was hard, contaminated and chlorine-formed, it tasted metallic, it smelled like public swimming pools. He would get up and wait in the corner as the water heated up, trying to find that median that was neither the arctic circle, nor the fate of Pompeii, and such a temperature was always, relatively,

a myth. He would wait for it to penetrate the damage of the day, permeate every inch of him and wash the grime of past away, running his hands through his thick brown hair. *I have to get up, Allen will be waiting*, he thought, and opened his eyes.

The taste, he was sure now, was coffee, old and stale and half congealed on his teeth. Allen had long since retired, and he was separated from the pizza place at which they were to meet by several hundred miles. The medicine cabinet was full of sore throat drops and band-aids, but the Nyquil was no longer for sleeping, even if the Q-Tips were still just Q-Tips. The curtains were old and dirty, once white, now creamy. They filtered the light of early morning into small divisions of its full self, tiny beams. Orlo got out of bed and walked over to the window, spreading open the curtains to get a better look at what had gone on outside.

The place was still a water wasteland, a vast expanse of mud and upset grass and foliage that had already developed the viscous coating of days of rain and being dead. He stepped back and closed the curtains again, but remained where he stood for a moment, bathing his eyes, his ears, his hands in pinpricked light as harp strings plucked up from some distant place. He ran his hands along the curtains, closing his eyes and knowing, despite their closure, that tiny points of light were vibrating over his body, moving fluidly from one area to the next as the curtains moved towards him and away in an endless succession. He exhaled gradually and let his hands drop to his sides, and sat still as the movement became more and more subtle, dissipating, faltering

slowly; and even as he opened his eyes, and as he began to move away, he could feel the echoes of the light that, for a moment, he had touched.

II

The silence was broken by the creaking of the door, the entrance of a young man, who walked to the edge of her bed and waited, tossing the door cautiously back at its frame. The room remained dark; the only light, let in from the hall, moved slowly from her face, down to her breast, her belly, out. Her silver JFK eyes sparkled briefly as the door closed behind him. The young man stood and crossed the room, placing the cross of sticks that had been on the window on her chest and slipped an envelope into her left hand. When he left the last of the light caught her eyes, and glinted back at him. Then, there was darkness.

The door was linoleum green, though nobody could tell that from the inside. The hall was cold, surrounded by plaster of the same linoleum color. At the entrance to the stairwell the space became narrow, the wainscoting just barely mimicking a railing. Pollard ran his hands along the wall as he approached and stopped briefly at the head of the stairs, staring curiously at the silver pads that had become of his fingers where his hands had taken an almost metallic numbness from the compiling dust. He rubbed the pads with his thumb once roughly and replaced his hands on the wall for his descent. He continued downward, and did not stop until he was almost at the second turn of the spiral, almost in the white of the kitchen and in the faces of the others.

He stopped just barely two steps shy, slowing as he approached and stepping cautiously to the right, above the spot where tiny spiders had ripped a hole and nestled for an entire winter before hatching and spreading through the house. At first Pollard only stared, taking a sudden interest, but very soon he found himself running his thumbs along the space, then the rest of his hands, curling and pinching as though to get a hold and pry it open, as though frantically feeling for an escape.

Pollard gave up on this experiment, wearied by lack of progress, and turned the final corner, ducking and moving ever slower as the weight of every eye came down on his face. Soon, he thought, I can be one of them, who sip from their coffee mugs and waits in silence because there is nothing left to say.

Pollard found himself a seat behind his father and lifted his head for the first time since entering the room, turning to his mother, who was standing by the stairwell, and nodding without a word. The slap of her slippers trailed off down the hall as they all turned their heads back to the floor, sitting in silence because there wasn't a thing left to say. When she was gone Pollard began to examine his hands in his restlessness and recognized, after rather some time, that his hands were no longer covered in dust

IV

The sound of the coins was audible even down the stairs, in the kitchen, where father and son waited for mother to join them, be something of

a family. Instead the boy just looked into his father's graying beard, his father's eyes set sternly on the page, looking almost too deeply, as though through the page, as though maybe there was something of great importance just beyond a child's view. Interested now by this concept, by the knowledge he was missing, that thing that was as intuitive as breathing to his father, that thing that was slowly dawning on his mother; had Lauren come to this revelation in her short years? Was he that close to it?

Slowly he stood up and crossed the kitchen, carried on small legs, his thin frame lacking anything that could begin to resemble masculinity. Pollard was caught in that feminine pre-pubescence that makes for long, lanky arms and a voice that was still several octaves too high. He thought that he could remember being educated somewhere, something that was like a blackboard, a figure, however nondescript, that had told him something smart once. That experience which was so far from here and now, that hazy semblance of unreality that was not his bare feet on the cold kitchen tile, or his pale, thin arm reaching for a mug that had been left out on the counter, unwashed, brown-rimmed, dirty. There were not many things that were quite the sensation of scrubbing in cold water with tired hands or filling that thick cup with hot water and cocoa powder, not a single thing that was quite like sitting cross-legged at his father's slippered feet and looking at him through the newspaper, trying to lock his eyes and know that thing that he did not know, but saw his father reading on a page of recycled paper and ink.

The paper shook and the old man cleared his throat, adjusting himself noisily and, in the act of attempting to cover it, made the child aware of the sound of his mother's cries from above. Still there was no movement. No, that was not true, there was the movement of large hands from the paper to a mug covered all around with numbered sheep in blue skied pastures, excepting where the enamel had chipped around the rim. There was the movement of the mug to his lips, the lips vibrating off of coffee as it sloshed into his mouth. There was movement in his larynx when he grunted in approval and returned the coffee to the table, and movement one last time as the old man hand levitated itself smoothly back onto the nearest end of recycled paper. There were all of these movements, and none of these actions, no peering up, no paper dropping, no walking stairward, and maybe even skyward. So what was the use, then, of this other movement? The vibration of saliva and phlegm, water and ground beans, the tiny actions of digits of index and ring fingers? What good were these fruitless contractions?

And yes, these contractions were fruitless, old and wise and stupid and feeble. The boy was staring at this limb, watching its complacency; a dying and useless extension of a man so full of age he has, perhaps, sauntered off prematurely: stupid, he thought, idiot, he thought, do something, he thought, stupid. Still, he sat, reading the print too intently to be reading even a single word while the boy waited for some sign or other that would indicate his duties as son from this man who was oblivious to his role as husband. When,

after some time, the sound had not subsided, the boy stood and began towards the stairs.

“Sit.” The newspaper didn’t even move.

“I’m going upstairs.” The boy said.

“No. Sit.” Pollard turned his back on his father and began his ascent *pay no attention to that man behind the curtain.*

“Pollard!” he repeated, louder, but with the same passive force, “Come here!”

The boy stopped, having only made it up one stair, maybe two, and turned around, taking those same two steps back down. “At least put the newspaper down.” The boy said and smacked the paper away from his father.

“Fine, you want to see your mother?” he grabbed the boy as he asked, tossing his tiny frame into the stairwell. “We’re going, boy, to see what it is that makes that noise,” he picked the child up by the arms and dragged him, as quickly as he could, up the stairs behind him. “We’re going to see your mother.” He said, tossing the child up the last flight of stairs and from the head of the stairs into the doorway, left ajar from Anne Marie’s entrance.

There was only the slightest light from the hallway to see inside the room, but that was enough to show the boy the heart of a quickly aging woman, dancing in the darkness of the room with a mannequin who danced back, whose arms flailed as though to keep her balance, whose head lolled and frame shook entirely.

“What do you see, boy? Eh? Tell me what you see.” The old man called from down the stairs, “tell me what it is that makes that sound,” while that thing that made the noise continued its strange dance with her unwilling partner. The sobbing sound had long since disappeared, replaced by the sound of rushing blood, its miasmic encompassing whole. Pollard slowly became aware of his own heavy breathing, and then that of his father, as he looked down into the old mans unshaven face, and then his mother’s sobbing, as he saw, for the first time, her face buried in his sister’s neck.

The old man ascended the stairs, exhausted by his effort, and stood behind his son as he looked off into the dim light, and gasped himself as he saw the dead girl apparently reanimated in some seizurely fit of arbitrary vibration. It was several moments before he recognized his wife around the girl, shaking her and sobbing into her daughter’s small frame: “wake up.” “For Christ’s sake Annie.” He said stepping into the room and pulling at her fingers where they crossed her daughter’s back. “Come on now, we’ll make the calls in the morning,” leading her quietly out of the room, stepping her over her son, moving her across the hall, tucking her into her own bed, soft and muffled beneath the heavy woolen blankets.

Pollard waited for his parents’ door to shut before he stood up again and allowed himself to enter his sister’s room. Once the old man became involved, he directed his attentions only towards his wife, haphazardly discarding what remained of Lauren, quietly, onto the bed. In the moments since she had managed to slip half off of the mattress; her arms stretched out

beside her head, dangling to the floor as her head slept serenely, looking with closed eyes out at her younger brother, the tension pulling her nightgown tightly over her body, sliding the sleeves up her arms to the elbow and pressing solidly against her chest. Pollard walked in, calmly, and began to lift her back into bed, clutching the back of her head, not chilled, and allowing her hair to fall in curly locks between his fingers. She wasn't warm, and that was unfamiliar. He picked up her letter and placed in her hand, the cross upon her chest, and said a brief goodnight before exiting -stumbling, exhausted-down the hall-way.

III

Anne Marie Cauling caught sight of the crack almost as soon as she reached the turn, seeing first the metallic residue left by her son, followed by the split and broken foundation. She stopped and leaned against the far wall, suddenly feeling cramped. The paint had split in a small bulge on either side and Anne wondered for a moment if that was what she looked like from the inside.

The notion still had not completely left her when she continued up the stairwell, into the dirty greenness of the second level hallway, and towards the outline of the door. She listened intently as she opened the door, the sounds of the grinding hinges moving her heart as though it were a violin string; pulling at it insistently, but never moving it from the tiny space it was given. Even in

the silence the breath was inaudible. Even in the silence the chest did not rise from its place on the bed, the lips of the sleeping form didn't part, her nose did not dilate in the effort of expulsion. Even in the darkness, this could be seen.

Lying on the bed, with her back against the mattress, Lauren lay patiently, resting her eyes and her lungs, resting her mind and her body and soul. The room inside was painfully clean, with every inch of rug exposed and every article of clothing pinned up and put away. There was little evidence that anyone had ever lived there amongst the plain white carpet, the plain white walls, and of course she had not known this moment would come when she'd cleaned it this way, with her daughter sitting up in her bed, in a loose blue dress, back when the sun still shone through the window and made the room look entirely white, whiter than it was, whiter than it should have been.

She'd agreed to the cleaning, Lauren had, acknowledging that there was little to be done to stop it, she'd agreed. She'd talked as her mother cleaned, dictating from the bed what went where, and reminiscing about who was connected to what and why that could not be thrown out. The only thing that could not be touched was the night stand and, given the circumstances, Anne Marie had consented to that. It was only now that she stepped into the antiseptic space that Anne began to understand her daughter's silly sentimentality and wished that she'd never been in to clean at all.

Anne Marie left the door open as she entered, allowing the light to guide her to the bedside. She stood at the edge of the bed for a moment, staring at her daughters face, hidden largely by the shadows, watching for the

movements of lips that she'd neglected to see upon entering, the rising chest she'd half expected to see. Slowly, she brought her face down towards the mattress, next to her daughter's face, as though to kiss her maybe, maybe share a secret, maybe bid goodnight, only when she arrived did she realize she didn't know what she'd intended to do. Instead she pressed her face against the warm cheek of her daughter and closed her eyes, breathing sharp, ragged breaths.

Her hands released themselves from the bedside, where they'd been gripping too tightly, white-knuckled and cover pulling, and unconsciously dragged them up towards the young woman's shoulders. "It's okay," she said, "it's okay, baby, it's okay," pulling at the young woman's back, sitting her up in bed "it's okay, baby, it's okay, it's okay, just wake up now, and it's okay" with the cross slipping away, and the letter drifting calmly to the floor, "it's okay, it's okay, it's okay."

Anne Marie was sitting on the bed now, her face buried in her daughter's neck, her eyes not even visible between the two bodies as the one lolled its neck away from the other. The old woman became oblivious, suddenly, to the cleanliness of the room, the blackness that was around her, the sounds of absence, unconscious of Lauren's chest, her eyes, no longer hidden beneath the coins which had rolled to the floor and off under the dresser, with her hand holding tightly to her daughter's neck beneath a tangled mess of blonde.

She was like this when they came up, an hour later, exhausted, and worn, and holding tightly to her neck, unwilling to let go.

V

Orlo sat out on the steps, watching rust colored dirt settle, slowly, into the ever-graying rug. Orlo sat counting the fibers in each bundle, looked intently into the patterns of footprints that had grips, that were flat, the words written in refuse: Nike, Adidas, Airwalk, Vans. He wiped his hand away from the steps, against the flow of the carpet, picking it up again and bringing some sort of life back into the aging fibers. Airwalk, he thought, maybe soon, maybe now, maybe in those dusty corners and between the printed words where it read that most important message, the one that keeps escaping, right where it says, in cold recycled pulp, that all of these people have died today, and tomorrow more will come, and it will be time, too soon, for the stepping off to destiny, because the only destiny there is waits here, between these lines of black print, of soy ink, in the space between every fiber. It was nearing midnight, he made some coffee.

The house had become quiet as the sun set and rose and set again, and years passed to the tune of finger snapping and whistle blowing. Orlo was scarcely aware of his mouth being open, the tiny stones of his coffee-stained teeth glistening in the molecular motion of the single, pale light, and only slightly more aware of the bitterness that passed above his tongue and back

into his throat as his lips wore away at the blue of the sky. He sat, for an hour or so, and read deep between the pages, aware always of that subtle memo that the editor had not neglected to include that “dear readers...blah, blah, blah and time is passing and blah, blah, blah so are you” and, when he had finished this, began again towards the stairs, a mug full of cold, half-congealed coffee in his hand, stopping to pressure the crack so as to reach in and see that other side. He gave up, though, as had everyone before him.

The hallway linoleum green, color of split-pea soup and milk, the way liberty looked when it was rusted far away. Every door was closed, every light extinguished and dead save for the one that was encased in a protective shield of nothing that was the solidified concept of something clearer than he had ever taken notice of. He could hear his wife’s breathing even now, with the door close, no closer than 7 yards from the door, which, itself, was a good distance from his wife’s own two feet. Even when the stairs creaked he could hear her lungs working heavily, as though to calm her sleeping body furthermore, as though to take her deeper into whatever state she was in. He turned his back to her and started toward her daughter’s door. Orlo turned out the light in the hall, stepping cautiously forward so as not to step on something errant, rattle some crumpled paper, and awaken the dead.

The darkness could not settle itself in front of him. It lay, cold and dry, not content with its own nothingness it forced itself into the color of his heartbeat. With the door closed behind him, the window shades dropped like large rectangular eyelids, he approached the child’s bed. O father, father,

grandfather, and even brother's hand, lost beneath steam engine, dropped between Oregon and Albuquerque with a stump for a headstone, no date of birth, no date of decease, no formal title carved into flesh to say that "here once lay the living body of THE Right Hand of Mr. James Godrich, child once, old man now, most valuable appendage." O man who, drunk one night, for reasons never known, drove from off the road and into some great pine, whose name was not mentioned, whose car juttet out, whose licence plate number was printed, in photographic clarity, on the front page of a thousand papers. O me, who is not dead, with no gravestone to my name, most valuable appendage.

The funeral rites had not yet been delivered when he, a grown man of twenty-eight, or thirty, or three dozen, crawled into the casket with some tiny woman and fell asleep for hours. The death was hardly recognized, now, as he cuddled up beside some tiny woman and put his fingers in her hair, took her hand in his to warm and looked into her ear. There, he thought, were colored trinkets, hiding beneath red-brown webs. And here, he thought, pressing his hand more firmly into hers, is nothing but ornament, as he brushed her hair away from her temples. Her head dropped towards him as he let go and he was shocked, at first, to see her eyes left open, staring back, no weight to hold them down and shut, no dreams to keep her sleeping. He looked, and there was nothing, not a hand, not his father or a man's face as it smashed up against the windshield, not even the gray pulp with soy ink, not the fibers of carpet or tiny dusted corners. He had come too late, he thought, there was

nothing left. He took his fingers from her hair and, slowly, he began to unbutton her blouse, two or three buttons that was all, he didn't need to see much, he had his hands to guide him. He reached up under her shirt, feeling around for a heartbeat, pressing his hand close to her to feel that there was nothing, searching for remnants of the past, searching for clues to his future. Her eyes showed no recognition. Slowly, firmly, he pressed his lips to hers, parting her teeth with his tongue, and sucking out her breath unbreathed, hoping that this might yield some trace of clarity, some clue as to that greatest distance that isn't there, the metallic taste of rounded steel, the dry crackle of naked bones, the sound of hoods and cape, and all he found was air.

He left then, picking up his coffee from where he'd set it on the nightstand, returning to the head of the stairs where he sat, coffee by his side, nervously patting down and fluffing up the carpet, rubbing at the dirt encrusted "Airwalk" that had been inscribed there before him. He picked up his mug and turned it upside down over the spot, watching the brown spot spread, the stain erase the word, verb that was as much command as was suggestion as was the passive notification that soon, you will too...

VII

It was dark when Pollard woke. In his dreams he had been sleeping, watching himself breathe, sprawled across a large grey rock in the middle of a field. The sky was an expansive gray, brighter than his resting place, but smoother, more blank, with fewer features and developments. At some

unknown point the wind had begun to rush and his shorts, the color of earth, flapped wildly, snapping at the air as it passed them by. The field rose up and the stalks of grass began to bend, forced back, every blade distinguished from its partners, refusing to become an ocean of green that thrashed about him, determined to stay particulate, immense, thousands by number. His hair came alive and moved frantically away from his scalp. Pollard watched as he opened his eyes, sitting up, and then standing, half naked, on top of the stone. Suddenly he found himself inside his body. Pollard faced out into the wind, squinting and almost tearing up as it pushed against his eyes. The field stretched out, empty, as far as he could see. There was nothing but the gray sky above him and the ever particulate grass in front. The wind stopped as suddenly as it had come. Pollard was not afraid.

It was dark when Pollard woke, his eyes opened not with the panic of dream, but with the weight of restfulness. Of the dream he remembered very little: colors; green, gray, white. He saw himself that did not look like himself, but he could not remember why or what this version of himself had done or had been doing. In mere seconds everything he'd thought he'd seen had gone, completely, from his memory, excepting the image of his hair running violently with the wind. His consciousness shifted, then, to that which was about him, the thin sheets that covered him, the mattress on which he lay, and the gray carpet that was down beneath. Shapes began to emerge out of the darkness, the blunt, boxiness of his dresser, the taller boxiness of the door, the smaller, more accessible boxy windows, rimmed with the rich yellow light

that is spread by the moon. The clock, analog, arched over the dresser, with only the top half visible from where he lay.

Pollard lifted himself up and allowed himself to slip, silently, to the floor and padded, softly, to the dresser, removing the days clothes as the carpet grated coarsely against his feet. Once dressed he snuck quietly from his room into the cold linoleum hall and began towards the stairs, trailing his hand along the walls so as not to lose himself in the dark. He heard his mother's labored breath as he passed her room, and his father's wheeze, in accompaniment, and their breathing was musical somehow, rhythmic. He paused and listened as their separate breath, the rattle and hum of age, came together and swirled around him in the hallway, the sound of love in sleep, the sound of complement. The treble of his father's chest deceptively weak, the bass of his mother's projecting a force in the manner that the dream projects its subject. The moment ended though, as do all things, and time began again, forcing the boy down the hall and down the stairs.

The kitchen, he could tell by moonlight, remained much in the state in which he had left it. There were several used mugs left out: on tabletop, on countertop, in sink filled with water that frothed with useless cleanliness. The newspaper lay open to the obituaries on the table, ripped and crumpled from earlier events. He noticed, as well, that the tablecloth had begun to slip as his father had risen. Pollard readjusted the cloth carefully, and began, in the darkness, to fold the newspaper, clear away used dishes, clean the countertop, the mugs, drain the sink until only the ring of suds remained, and even then to

rinse them all away. This done he began searching the silverware drawer, blindly groping for the house keys.

He opened the screen door and shut it gently, closing the main door behind it. The steps were steep, but easily discerned by the full moon overhead. The air was slow, but cool and heavy with the morning's dew, still too warm to settle. The driveway at the foot of the stairs was only a gravel trail and, though not long, managed to lodge several of its bits into his shoe, both interior and exterior, as he stepped onto the dirt road. And he began to shuffle weakly away from his home, to the east. The roads were empty and, despite the lack of signals, signs or streetlights, Pollard felt no more fear than the moment he had awakened from staring down the wind. He walked in that direction for miles, hours maybe, time was immaterial, distance measurable only by the space over which his mind had wondered between moments of sudden awareness. At length he reached a field that stretched on for miles itself, nothing but grass, nothing but grass and sky. Here he had played soccer with his father, and again with mother, and again with his sister, and most often with her, and most often daydreaming with her, and most often flying kites, and they had been there most often. He walked further, out into the middle of the field, taking some smaller pleasure in the resistance of the grass to the weight of his feet. There he waited, half thinking, half euphoric, sleeping in his wakefulness and dreaming in the darkness. He could not tell what time it was when the sky began to blue.

I

It had been storming for days. The wind, which had been wailing at noontime, had nearly stopped by sunset and was cautiously falling into memory. The light slivered itself as it came into the room, dividing and dividing as it passed through the window. The shadow of a cross fashioned out of birch sticks and birch bark became distorted and had lost its essence in its newfound greatness. The muted rushing of water raging through pipes could be heard from inside the room, as well as a mount and decline of human voices, indistinguishable as being anything more specific. These sounds were the only two audible elements from outside. All else was some other kind of sensual.

The closet had long been piled high with junk, clothing falling off of its hangars, piles of old toys and books. The door was closed and no light was allowed in, but her tutu was pink where it hung, in the back of the closet. There was a kimono that Uncle Virgil had brought back from Japan and a sweatshirt that said the words “H. Vernon School of Music” that had come from her boyfriend; everything else was relatively average. The bookcase in the back, now hidden behind an assortment of dirty clothes, all shapes and sizes and colors, stacked against any intruder, contained several boxes of memorabilia. “You must never forget a thing,” her father had said, so when his memory had begun to go, just before he’d passed, the tragedy may have been twofold.

The books on the shelf were old, long read and discarded, had not been touched for months. Many of them were dime romances with a lot of ridiculous throbbing sex and “I love you’s” and prince charming speeches of recognition. There was one entitled Captured, on the third row from the top, where a woman had been enslaved by a pirate whom she later fell madly in love with. The best read from the second shelf was entitled Good Karma and was about a well-to-do woman, responsible and honest, who found her love in a grocery store while buying produce. They later dated and broke up and subsequently married, in both books. In all of them actually. On top of the bookcase was a copy of the Hamlet with the words “Time is out of joint.” Next to that there was a small picture of herself from Junior High school, wearing an *Angels* cap and holding a good friend around the back of the shoulders.

Next to the bed was a tiny octagonal music box with a ballerina that sprung up and spun every time it was opened. The box was full of odds and ends. A picture of her mother and father, taken before they were married, covered everything. Under this was a key with the word “MEMORY” carved into the flat knob at one end, the other pertaining to her diary. The diary itself had been filled and consequently forgotten; a pressed rose left a pink stain on the final page. Underneath the key was a barrette from second grade that she had worn when she was first kissed. It was pink and light and glittery.

Her mother’s diary lay towards the box’s bottom, with the latch broken and the memory key now useless. There was a book of prayers by the side of

the bed that the girl herself had never used, its purpose was largely in pleasing her mother. The digital clock on her nightstand was all black. A dream catcher made from old oak sticks hung lazily from her bedpost, laced with pink and sky-blue beads, wound intricately together, rotating in concentric wispy circles with two brown feathers whose tips were white. There was a satin pillow, years old that lay beneath her head. Her hands lay by her sides and reached only barely past her hips, her watch removed and set aside wasn't even audible in the vast blankness of the dark room. She, herself, was very well hidden beneath her aquamarine bedspread. At the foot of her bed hung a pair of ballet shoes and a pair of big slippers with no grips on the bottom. In a far distant corner of the room there was a stand where a sponge and soap lay out.

If We Whistle Just So

Into the bright sunlight. “Stand still.” Robert called, and if she did the game could not go on for hours. That wasn’t the idea. Into the sunlight and behind the column. Matilda had passed behind seven now, there were nine and she would have to go back. “Honey,” Robert said, but she stuck her leg. Behind nine. The sun was not to be hidden from, the clouds, her dress, light, brown, ankle length, and what of her hair that was braided tightly behind her? What then.

Behind and out and behind again and out again and when it was light she stretched her arms upwards and the cuffs of her brown sweater pulled down her forearm towards her elbow and tickled the fine hairs of her arm and the coarse hairs where there were freckles. Robert caught her between the fourth and fifth columns. She could feel her heart racing. He did not kiss her. Matilda had thought he might. He looked like he was for kissing, his

eyebrows did, maybe his eyes. Not his lips. The sun was warm on her neck. Her knees were bent in mid-motion. Echoes and claps. The blinding light of the sun and how warm it must feel to be blind.

“We won’t go,” she said. And if they didn’t go then they could sit on the steps. On the cracks of the steps. Between them even. If he would let her go she could climb the tree, she could scale the columns, at the very least she could breathe without his chest. With her hair. The steps were cold. In the concrete at the foot of the stairs Matilda recognized a grain of dust that had been sitting on her shoulder and reached down and up and placed it there and she whispered and she hummed and she whispered. “What would you have us do now then?” Robert asked, as if that were a real question, as if there was an answer that he knew and was obvious and should have popped into her head like an egg, round and white and cold and fragile, and been something that she owned like the dust or the sweater. The hair on his upper lip might have been penciled in, she was not one to ask and he was not one to offer, but when he spoke it moved in a way unfamiliar to hair that struck Matilda with the comical horror of tragedies that happen to other people.

“What have we got left to eat?” she said.

“One cheese sandwich between the two of us.”

Oh. Had it been that long? The sun was good and bright and the air was bright and crisp and her skin was crisp and good and it flared around her nostrils when it was cold out. He pulled a pomegranate from his shirt, of which he had forgotten, and offered her the seeds to suck and spit because the

flesh was no good. She ate it very quickly and excitedly, excited more by the colors than the taste, the eating experience, she placed the palm of her hand on the crack in the steps between them and he pretended not to notice. They each ate half of a cheese sandwich which stuck in their teeth and the roofs of their mouths and when Matilda pulled her bit free it slid down to her lower jaw and Robert thought of the way her lips would look pursed over old wooden teeth. When she saw him she smiled a bread and cheese smile and, though it made his stomach turn, he smiled back. When Robert called for a taxi Matilda began to yell gibberish into the receiver. He tried to warm her small face in his hands but she stomped violently on one half of the pomegranate and threw it at his head.

The taxi driver was a short gentleman with seven fingers on his left hand and two on his right. Matilda reached her hand out to the divider and pressed her face there, trying desperately to touch his fingers, convinced they were made of rubber. He told them the story of how he had lost them in the second great war in France and, after some surgical error, had become one of the greatest pitchers in all of Mexico. She shook her head. She wondered if he'd had them penciled in and how he could drive with them so. When they were dropped off he left his name and telephone number on a card with Robert and took a seven dollar tip. He smiled and told them to call him anytime, that he would teach them how to pitch balls as they had never seen before and touched Matilda with his hand. He pulled out of the driveway and

into the street and tapered off from where they'd come until he looked like a tiny yellow bug that Matilda had every urge to squash.

Robert opened the door and waited for Matilda, who had seated herself on the brick steps and begun grinding the loose cement into the spaces between the bricks, rolling and massaging the dirt into the pads of her fingers. The sun felt like it should be setting by then, and maybe there should be tears in the trees. "Quiet now," she whispered and watched her fingers, rubbing deeply into the cement, "We'll sleep." And Robert petted her head as though he might know what she was saying in this manner and have some bright-eyed idea of who they were. When he touched her face it had the texture of tree bark and he thought that if he did not move, if continued to have his hand against her face, if she continued to sit and play with the loose concrete that lined their steps, then he might soon begin to cry.

II

Matilda could not sleep through the night. In her bedroom she rolled and pitched with a ferocity unmatched in sunlight. The floor, which had been covered in dolls and plush animals, was covered by her bedsheets, which had come loose from the ends of her mattress. Robert did not awaken until daylight, by which time large dark spots had been worked from the sweat into her sheets. He kissed her lightly on the head and began to mop up the drying beads from her forehead and he held her hand so tightly that when he got up to

leave the room Matilda's dark pink skin was pale and bloodless and Robert looked at her for a moment and thought of how much her flesh felt like damp paper and how much his moustache felt stiff on his lips and her feet were at the end of the bed. "Oh God," he said, the room would burst into flames, the bed, the sheets, the plush toys, and surely she would smolder and die and sleep, he could not breathe, the air was heavy, now with sweat, but with smoke, and soon. "Oh God." He said and wiped her forehead and left to get the phone and when he came back the room was not on fire and he was breathing slowly and her face was the color of moonlight.

He waited outside for the doctor and breathed and tried not to speak to himself. His breath was cold and he was cold and his breath cold and how warm she had been and how the room could smell like her and when she followed him he could look and where was she?

He ran his fingers in the cracks between the bricks. He looked at his hands, dark like an egg, dimpled. If he ate them they would crack. He bit the inside of his cheek and rubbed the dust into his hands and ate the cold morning air. He went upstairs to Matilda's bedroom and ran his frozen fingers down her exposed arms and his fingers burned as his hands thawed against her skin. Robert carefully laid himself on the floor beside her bed and drifted off to sleep.

When he awakened there was a prescription on his chest for one priest and some holy water and a crucifix had been set on either side of her bed. He walked quietly down the stairs and thought about how much easier it was to

run into an enemy in the supermarket or at the bus stop than a friend that has slipped away. Robert sent notice to a medicine man and a pair of herbalists, the taller of which insisted that Robert leave the room as he bathed Matilda in oil, which only seemed to make her more agitated. The shorter herbalist spent six hours with Matilda in her room chewing a variety of roots and spitting on her eyes and belly and the medicine man sent a group out with rope and shovels to fetch the blood of the seven fingered driver whose deformity, he declared, must be an external indication of some blood pact or other, made in the illest of favors. The blood was carried in a pouch carved from the skin of fallen gods and angels and sewn with fine dark twine woven from the beards of three Roman deities. "She will sleep soundly for three days and awaken restored." When the blood was forced down her throat Matilda vomited.

Robert left her alone during the mornings and visited the café down the street and sat with his hands around his coffee mug. He dipped his fingers in the water and stared and watched his breath and licked them until they were red and cold and Matilda's hands, but his hands and if he were a fire wouldn't his tongue be hotter and why weren't the children in the streets and why was it so quiet and nobody ever talked except the woman who brought him coffee and every morning he offered her a twenty dollar tip to make no more noise than that of heart and lungs. He often found himself trying his keys in doors that were not his own and rushing in front of cars to chase after a set of stairs that had more cracks than his stairs, the rubbing of which had left his hands so rough that when the women came out to shoo him away he would only touch

their hands, not even feel them, and they might run back to their bedrooms and wonder how a man so brittle could possibly walk the streets without collapsing in a shower of sawdust.

In the evenings Robert sat with Matilda and bathed her in a tub of hot water and salts and was surprised by the weight of her head and the subtle mold of her body. He threw out all of his white and yellow and red sponges on the advice of a doctor who thought they might be wiping off her skin. He brushed her lips lightly and ran his fingers over the freckles on her arms and he shampooed her hair which was fine and light and slick from the labor of carrying illness. When he dried her off and put her back to bed he went downstairs and sat in front of his door and slept there on the bricks and if he could sleep and know that she was quiet. He spent so little time with Matilda towards the end of her illness that her recovery took on the appeal of the miraculous, as though it had been a game and she'd finally decided she'd won after a month and Robert came back into the house.

Though the fever was gone, the vomiting persisted irrationally. What was at first thought to be a predictable response to blood had become something of a habit so that she began to wear a plastic cover over her clothes to keep them clean until her wellness was complete. Her belly, too, had taken on a firmness she had not had before and Matilda found herself, often, rubbing at her stomach and whispering to it and teasing her navel excessively with her fingers and when she closed her eyes her hands felt so grand and she felt full and happy. She sighed and sat and felt her heart beat and Robert was glad to

have her back again and he waited for her and let her lean on his shoulder and was happy and if this game could go on for ever and if her hands were quiet and her nose was soft. Her feet kicked out in front of her and when the vomiting stopped her belly continued to swell and she ate and was sore and a child as children are and she slept restlessly and cried often and Robert placed his hands on her face until she thought he was about to crumble and if he did and if the sheets were white and if she bit her lip in the night when she was awake and heard the cats outside her bedroom window crying at the moon. And the dogs. Her feet walked leaden.

“What have we left to eat?” she asked and if it was cheese she wanted meat and if meat then sweets. “What have we left to eat?” Between the two of us. She paused before she spoke often or spoke spontaneously altogether. Robert was sure she had been touched in some manner by the fever. She was tired of the same locales, he told himself, she was bored and fidgety and unhappy. He touched her shoulder in his car and thought he couldn’t take it anymore and drove them four hours into the countryside and her feet were dyed with grass and she napped in the sun and was warm and was blind. Matilda’s belly had grown out, pale and round like an egg and quiet. She rubbed it against the trunk of a tree and placed her cheek against the bark and told Robert that she smiled and Robert had already known. “Does the sun shine always?” she asked with her hands on the padded seat, looking out the window to her right and feeling as though if she were to jump out and tumble

down the road to her death, then that would make as much sense as the sunset or the cabaret clouds whose hour was both miraculous and gradual.

“It does” he said, “of course it does” and if she was happy or sad she did not look him in the eyes, but battled the knowledge in her chest that to throw herself then would make as much sense.

That night Matilda sat on the steps and watched the sunrise and felt as though her stomach might fall off and to the ground and shatter and she might pick up the pieces and blow on them in her hands. Robert woke early and found her at the door, cold and pale and alone and if she could breathe and was pink she appeared an apparition and ill omen and he fought her away into the street until she turned red from his blows and he held her dearly, wet and red like the center of a grapefruit. She hardly left her room after that, hardly spoke, hardly ate, and her belly grew. When Robert called in the Doctor to have a look she threw her growing weight against her bedroom door and screamed incoherent syllables until Robert took an axe to the knotted pine portal and physically broke it down.

Robert told the doctor that the vomiting had started when the medicine man had come with the blood of the seven fingered cab driver. “Were you present for the feeding?” yes, he told the doctor, of course he was. The doctor stood for a moment and felt as though his stomach were a balloon that was trying to get away. “Your daughter,” he told Robert, “is with child.” The doctor left without speaking again and stepped into his car and drove for a long time and when night fell he pulled over to the side of the road and cried

in a bush in a meadow. Robert sat beside Matilda's bed and watched as she wrestled with her belly, rolling over and over and trying to heave it from herself.

The doctor came uncalled the following morning and rang the doorbell only once in seven minutes he waited at the door-step. "Who is the father?" he asked. His eyes were red.

"I can't imagine." And Robert's moustache moved unnaturally.

"Have you asked her?"

"I don't think she knows," Robert told him, "she's only a child herself." And his eyebrows wrinkled up on his forehead. And the doctor silently paced back to his car and drove himself home and locked his daughter up tight in her room. Matilda did not leave her room for thirteen days and when she left then it was only to clean the waste from the corners. Her plush animals and her sheets had long been soiled and neglected and by the time she was done on the thirteenth day her room was entirely bare. That night, when Robert left for the café she lit a fire of old cardboard and matchsticks near the door to her bedroom and lay down in bed. When Robert returned home he found Matilda sleeping quietly on top of a pile of ash and went to sleep beside her and put his hand on her child and when he woke there was a priest standing over them and a crowd had gathered in the street. Robert closed his eyes and gripped her stomach and why the priest and he couldn't even bring himself a greeting but to pull her close and whisper her name and sleep again and again and again.

News had gotten around, the priest said when Robert finally moved, it had gotten quite furiously. He placed a crucifix on the bed between the two and took Matilda up and began to walk away and if Robert could attack him without hurting her. The mob disappeared with the girl and left Robert there alone in her bed and he stayed there for three months and watched the ashes turn to mud and rubbed his fingers in the cracks between the stairs and painted his face black with the soot he found there until the rain had washed his face to a pallid gray. The café waitress came sporadically with food and clean water and sometimes he ate them and sometimes he refused and threw dirt in her face and she returned just the same.

Matilda was locked in a room with steel doors and walls that had white cushions that were gray and soft and did not feel like eggs. Her food was brought to her daily and she would eat her pillows and bedsheets and sleep in piles of fried chicken which she would throw at the nurses upon any intrusion. When she bit them they thought she might be rabid and began to wear padded clothing when they entered the room and Matilda's face was cold. If she could sleep if die if bruise her belly unremoved.

The doctor, convinced of his original diagnosis of possession had gathered together the barber, the mailman, and three street cleaners to make an attempt on Matilda's life and keep her demon child out of the church over a round of draughts. When Matilda gave birth her cries were carried by the wind as far as wind blew and its whistle through tree branches was noted to have urgency as far north as Banff and as far south as Chile, where mothers

wrapped their own children up tight and stayed awake by their bedsides in a ceaseless vigil. The doctors clan made it only as far as the first gate before they all turned home and sat silently at their doors, ready for the coming of the end.

Robert was found the next morning on the stairs to the church, sleeping. Matilda was buried in the ashes of her home and her son was born with big blue eyes and chestnut colored hair and he looked a little bit like a cockroach when he was finally cleaned and bathed and he slept quietly for thirteen days and was never given a name.

Not

“No more games then, Katie? No more games?”

Tugging at the hem of her blue blouse. She smiles. “Will you pray for me, Alex, pray when I die?” she asks me, fire in the candles, eyes at the ears. My belly is up against the beds.

“Pray for me Katie, pray for me now”

A smile, teeth, lips pink like sunset, I am tugging at the hem of her blouse; my belly, the beds, they're quiet, they're quiet. She giggles. She is 16. She smiles and giggles; fingers of ivory, white like the linens. Her dress is blue, or her eyes. “Pray for me Katie.” She giggles; I am waiting, I am waiting.

The door is dark and wrinkled, it knows things, it is quiet. A flame in a cup, on a wick, she is thinking of ghosts, pulling on the hem of her blouse, she is picking at the arms, and picking at the neck. Splint against wick, rubbing, friction, flame, held in fingers of ivory.

Father is watching, Katie is not. She is kneeling, I am sitting, we are not. Her calves not unlike mountains, of course, when she kneels, tugging at the hem of her blouse, nipping at sleeves, hair is tied up. Tight. Nothing Doing

Shhhhhh. My knees are on the aching floor, my dust is in the knee-prints, my hands are clasped at noselength, my eyes are shut for time-space, my lips are pressed to hair thin, she is not looking, father is watching, we are both there close-eyed.

“What are you praying for?” she asks. Pray for me, pray for me, pray for me. Lips are pressed, my knees are dust on the aching floor, my eyes are still unclosed, still seeing, I am nipping at her sleeves, I am tugging, her hands are cold, splint against wick. Bless me, he is watching.

My hands are on her shoulder, eyes-unclosed, unsure unknowing. I am tugging at the hem, her blouse is blue, she giggles, she is more than noselength, there is not us. There is no shhh, my lips are. Bless me bless me bless me, father is watching. Her smile feels all over, pink like sunset, pressed to the width of hairs, eyes closed, this is how it should be, not how it should be. Her calves are like corn stalks that clap on the floor, fingers on my shoulder, heads.

“To bed now then.” Of course of course, ears and feather-hair. Shhhhh, not trembling, not sliced by her hands, beds. She was never, is never-folded beds, creased, like side-walk. Shhhh...sleeping, right? Not going, not going. His feet are like drums. I see feather-hair, I see feather-hair.

“Goodnight.” Not going.

Her fingers are rivercold, I see her lips, they are gone. There is light outside, her feet are like sheets not sliced on the floor. Her fingers are dark. There is light outside the door. It cries when it goes. I yap.

II

Eyes in the dirt. Water is under the day bridge. I am speaking: “the light has brightened,” of course it has, of course. So she is sitting and I am laying and her back is to the tree and my head to her lap and her fingers my hair and her eyes not my eyes. If she rises there will be dust marks. If I rise I will be brown. The leaves above us are green so high up I can’t see. She smiles, and so at what?

Katie has breath that is slow like sleeping, and so do I maybe, and we watch if darkness comes, the creaking of doors. If beds (not going) her lips, I yap. She looks at me. We are resting. It is bright. Her hands are feather light, still smiling and still to what like I’m watching leaves. The leaves are falling in tag games and still my eyes are at her and still there is water and still to what; to field; to blue.

The sound of birds talking, a post that is white, so if I could talk to birds then I would open my mouth and call them nearer and ask them if they knew, or ask them where or if the fence post felt good between their toes at night time. I open my mouth, the sound of water, my lips pull apart, the ground stays still, the grass whispers. I breathe out. Lipwind. Airspeech.

If she closes her eyes I will watch her sleep. If she closes and I won't close. The grass whispers its warning: shhhh, shhh, and I sit up and her toes move and light in the sun. She looks at me. "I'm going up" she says, to the tree, which is my back. My shoulder is not pale. Her dress is not blue.

"Don't" I say.

She goes.

So now she plays at leaf games, on branches, on tree, so then a leaf?
To fall like tag? "to fall like tag?"

She laughs. "What?" So high I cannot see. If she closes her eyes I will not close my eyes. The speaking of birds. She giggles. "I won't fall."

Her dress blows out kite-like. Her arms are grabbing and she moves and the sun. White space. I can no longer see. When her foot slips she will not fall. Up. High to the window, she sees my bed. "Alex it is a mess." Of course.

I sit. Eyes in the dirt. Leaves rattling. The grass sits still. I look up, she is perched. She will not fall, of course. Her feet are brown. I will ask her if the white post feels good between her toes. I will.

The daybridge is talking down the hill and I want to speak too, there are no words. Katie, how come you don't fall when your feet slip? "Toes." Her feet dangle and she looks, to where, to blue maybe. I will look and know. I will look and the water will speak and I will go too. One foot from the other and the grass is strong enough to bounce. Still Katie is still. I sit.

The house claps. The ground moves. I am darker. Father. "Katelyn get down from there" he says. There is a cloud that looks like a kitten. There is

one that looks like a rock. There is one that looks like bird. Its head drifts away. I laugh. “Kate”

Will he bring her down? If then she slips does she fall? He was not here, does he know? Katie is still. I smile. Fathers hair is silver. We could sell it, go off. Make millions. When she was younger we would speak like the birds, when she climbed. And I speak like the birds and she is silent.

“You’re upsetting Alex.”

“No, I’m not. Alex, are you upset?” She does not climb higher. The water is louder. “shhh” I say and the grass is dry and sharp. Knees itch with grasspoke. When I pick, it is sharp. I do not yap. “He’s fine dad.” Fine, of course. The ground grumbles and it is quiet. The grass is quiet. The tree does not cry leaves. So it is determined. So it is.

“Look at him, of course he’s not fine.” So if not fine then? Picking at the ground hair, green. Then what? With big brown hair at the bottom. With big brown hair. I am quiet, they are not. If her hair was gold, her dress, my forehead is wet. My eyes are closed, not going not. His hands are large and naked. Will she sleep? Will he...shhh

Arms tied up, eyes. Lips wet, and the house gapes, and when he yells there is sound. She will not fall, right? Her feet dangle. Her legs are the tree, leaves talk, all green. If my hands, my arms, are green, grass tickles, water talking. If then he looks at her, her feet are falling trees. Her hair is feather light, her feet no longer perched. So when she walks to me her eyes, her dress

with tree like feathers, I cannot hear the bird speech. “What the fuck were you doing up there?” and still she is gone.

And at her feather hair “What the fuck were you doing up there?” and at her back and at her arms. “Katie” and if his hands are his then her arms are maybe sticks. Pale. He will rip her if he can. With his fingers. With her shoulder. Her arms are moving. Her smile is broken her, her feet like leg drops, her chest out, to where, to home, to me, to here. Her hair trails behind, if only a bit, if only, to where?

Father waits and we are watching and eyes not in the dirt. There is no sound, so what, her feathers, her feet, the ground whispers. The water babbles, the tree screams. Her eyes are like marbles. What? His hair. We should make millions. Eyes closed, teeth wet, tongue up. He looks like glass. My fingers press. A wind and I am cold.

There is nothing. Shhh and quiet then. Her fingers in my hair. Her arms and my back. She whispers and slow like. She breathes warm and I am sleepy. If she sings...The house is red and white and we walk until it swallows me up. And we are in the kitchen.

The door is loud and claps behind me and claps again. Sounds like skinbrush, sounds like clods, face is hot, cold, wet with feet down the table. If she speaks she tells “quiet now, things are good.” They are. If ears could hear themselves maybe that is the sound. If nose leak. If tongue

“For gods sake” and into the fridge.

“For gods sake” and his hands and his limp and my hands and the wall. If rough then. if quiet. if mothers face then glass. Then only. Shhhh, if she goes, has went, goneleft. If was. Shhh (not going) the rocks then words. Petals grass. Is green. Stop! And quietlike.

Hands then. Knees. The floor is box like. White like a mouse, cold, sticky, quiet. Fingers on face. Hand. Cool. “There” Her breath. Once. At my neck. Down

“He’s fine.” She bends, unsure, unknowing. The room is night-like. The lights are pale.

She sits, she doesn’t, she sits and with her hands. Only with her hands and eyes. “shhhhh” and that for that. If my fingers hurt, if they hold, they press, “shhhh” my hands. So the trees cry and it is wet and it is wet. So more wet. Like the sound of dropping, like breaking, like the wall. Shhhh like the mess he made, smack, not me. And if I am made of red, my hands “shhhh” nothing ever. Nothing. So what then? To what?

If that then moves. Is quiet. My hands his hands. Shaking and he doesn’t say at me, and so she doesn’t. there are hours, if we crash. No more breath then. Lines. “Leave Katelyn.” Does he know? Floor squares boxlike. And me.

“What?” and over and if there is not space then there is hours. And so if she moves, and so if she is silent. Not the question and so not the answer, not the question. She knows. To what? There is silence, her hands not me. Not mine. If not silent, unbroken, uncrashed. Shhhh, but also the mess he made.

The sound of tea kettle. There is hot. We stand. She is still, unbroken, like the mess. Like eyes, her face, melted, feathers, slowly. If she falls then

“Get out!” and to the floor and to my feet and if my knees could cry, and if my feet. She. Broken, of course. Mothersglass. Shines. If only.

Air and like, so if he watches, she won't stand. I hear you I hear you, foot tears. Like when, not when, my hand, he. So the tea kettle, the table, the chair . (We drink) don't drink. Eyes, like sleep, pressed, gone. “No” her teeth. the stop, like arrows. Don't. So, if, but when. The table. Eyes. Her hands not me her hands, please. bless me bless me bless me. If he sees then he knows (arms) knows what?

His hands by my arm. His face and the house and the house. My knees are hands at the floor place, if not dirt then crying. I stop, she is kneeling, oh please please please, not. Don't. she knows. Knees and feet. If the door is screaming. If I'm wet and so my arm, his hands, the door. Not speaking. Out again. Though water. Treecries.

“Stop it!” of course, she screams, and out. So wet. Like crashing. What. Eyes. If I don't know then I don't know. If i don't know. Eyes like marbles if I don't know, hands round. So where, so what? I don't know, I don't. I don't. Like the treecries. And the last shhhh. Open. Ever was?

“You weren't worth it” if only and Father wet now too, and shirt. Lips pressed, shhhh. She comes. Just—

“You little shit,” to where? and my eyes. The rocks. So we are wet,
 don’t like now. Don’t. my knees cry into the dirt, brown, darker. And so my
 hands and—

“Not a hair” and not me, please! With writing. The petals. So help me
 so help me. I didn’t. There aren’t. and so it burns with his hands. And so his
 eyes. So help me, marble. Teeth out, my lips. What—

“You little shit” Mother

“Stop it!” Her name

Grass—

Her name.

“not a hair” so where sunleaves. The fire, my nose. My eyes. So what?
 Like. Her arm, his neck. Noise and quiet. The sound of crashing. Shhhh....her
 hair. “Stop it!” I don’t know. “Stop it!” pulls—

“not one on her fucking head” and so there’s quiet. And so we’re
 quiet. If not. Arms asleep like. Dirt prints. Handwater. Her fingers, her hair.
 The sound of crashing, my knees.

The tree is quiet, maybe, like the leaves, and so we sit, pulling like
 lemongrass. Still, her breath. And her toes. The birds will not talk. Her hands
 are rivercold. Her arm.

He is going. The house is red and it is white and he is going. And he
 walks and he walks and he walks and he walks until I cannot see and it
 swallows him up.

Passive Constructs

We welded to her forehead a green plate of copper and proceeded to maneuver her as a tool of violence at first. The automatic clean look, the faded chrome interior of her thighs, the text book machinery of heart-piece and breathing apparatus, how could I resist the prospects her tongue might hold for me, forking cold and steel inside my own mouth. Was that not the ideal summary? The mystified tragic stance she put on when I plagued her cleaved nose, face hole, mouthquiver. The barbaric features of her face sleeve which we lift as (ta da!) her viscous preponderance caught itself in her throat. How could I do other than fall in love.

It wasn't half past three on a Saturday afternoon when I showed at her house my own face: flushed, swollen. Brow moist, feet wet, eyes half closed: Here for her a sense of humor, four white roses, pistils removed and arranged

in the apparent form of the tiny pale green body, the entire insect of fertility, her alien fright, a woman was entirely womb and seed. The door slammed.

We didn't speak again for a number of days, the notorious tribblely winter where neon hair seemed to breed irrationally and unmistakably across my body. Out of control and ravishing. My corporeal frame most certainly invaded, if not by the disease of eyes then by the lack thereof. I thought at first I grew moss and mold and swallowed yards of string to bring up the William Shatner that lived in my heart. It took six hours to get him through his inverted peristaltic odyssey. When he arrived he was not much help. "Its...only natural...boy...you...shouldn't wake me up...from my...parasitic nest" in his favorite yellow uniform.

"But what about Lindsay," I looked hopeful, I think, about the womb woman, could I wear her skin like a libido, driven through my ankles, pasted to my thighs, stuck fastly to my teeth, my gums, my hair, my plague of hair which was natural and tribblely orange. Wake up! My belly like a sneeze. A most inhuman revolt. Blurting. Ejaculative.

I offered him my pistil packed female figure and I wondered about what he might do to me when they bred a little, ate of each other, sweated their sweat. Would my flesh grow flowers, would my pimples bloom and blossom. Could bees perch on my petal and sting at my stem? I swallowed them both and choked a little on his ego. I could feel them pounding in my chest.

Her quiet vision came to me the next day in treaty, as I watched her from across the yard, eating a snowy sno-cone and sipping lemonade. Was I supposed to know that she was asleep, that what I had sighted was the rogue aesthetic, the hourglass, the waving heat inching on my bedroom floor. Mother was chopping onions in the kitchen and sobbing terribly with open eye sockets wounded and running, hacking mucousy moments into the hamburger helper as the baby monitor hissed and boomed from the tiny table. Out in the yard I felt the Shatners' pumping blood again and stood over her body quietly, in motionless excitement, in anticipation of some terrible exegesis that might reveal itself beneath my fingers. Her hot breath hissing. Held deathly still. Apparent. If she should rise, her heliocentric palms, her panicked steely tongue, cold papillae of immanent doom.

“Mark?”

I gagged and expelled a number of slimy rose petals falling heavily to her naked torso. Unseemly, half digested, alive. Alternately: curious and mortified. What had I been eating?

“What the hell have you been eating?”

My father poked at his meatloaf reticently, a hyperbolic androgyne with the subtle palate shading of ivory and pastels discordantly plastering his closet and his face. His hands were palid and obese, frightening, oafish. The triangular quality of his moustache. His earlobes poking from beneath his

headcap. My first notion is to bionicize his feverish forearm, sheer and shave. The passage from his chin to his neck. When I say that he frightens me he tilts his skull stem, palate podium, and declares in utmost italics.

“This is delicious” his watertongue, always unstable.

“Thank you.” One brown and textured hand grown out from the baby monitor, her seeds and her seeds, the quiet one, who sleeps always. She sneezes at me: “what happened to your arm?”

I had grown pock marked, attacked by rashes and mosquitoes maybe, Spring. Close walled arabesques are spread across the room and I am reminded of Rapunzel: Lindsay, let down your corrugated locks, braced for violent appropriation. Shatner pounding slowly. My vernacular, my skull case stuffed and impotent.

“I think that’s the worst rash I’ve ever seen”

I look at my arms and feel an obstruction on my own neck. There are bumps as big as bolts. If my skin were green. Amphibious.

“It’s only natural for a boy his age” like the eyes of a potato, I grew hotter and redder. He chipped his nail polish on the fork and cried for half an hour as his hand began to crumble.

After dinner I brought him my baseball mitt and he taught me how to vacuum the carpet, bake a pie. He tried to teach me the advanced processes of house eating and teeth clucking, sneering with my side, but his limbs continued to dismantle. Teeth and lips. Arms. When his shoulders finally

broke he taught me the gross inaccurate art of flesh knitting, the dermisweater to contain.

Marky Curtins and Stag are running about, propelled by their hyper-swollen appendages, inflating as I watch, chest, face, shoulders, broad and identified and running. I could pierce, slowly, break, they move with sharpies scribbling briefly on the shoulders, heads, and Lindsay to lie sleeping. On the grass, her shallow skin the preposterous luminosity of the gorgeous afternoon. If I could bury my face in the sand, the silicone glass encased body, be preserved for ages tribblefree.

“Don’t” my voice. Slipping. Perhaps silent. They fall upon her almost peripherally, cold and still. Markers open. Up. Her hands by her sides and her green dress like her green forehead, her iron breast And the words: *sweet soft* her dress torn *smile* on her face as I approach: watching, frightened. Written tiny on her fingers *long* cold, her breastbone *fragile* her arms *thin*. And on her belly now *warm*, her breasts *warm* her thighs. Again. *Warm*. And cold and locked. Steel. Solid.

And as they released I took her up again. Afraid and pallid all excitement gone but from my lungpieces, expelling warm upon her neck: *Adam’s* I wrote choking *adam’s* on her chest. The parable. And cloven lost apple. And I turned her over. Naked now. Asleep. Her shoulder blades. The bedside topology, the trenches and mountains. *Parable* I wrote. *Mundane*. *Docile*. *Asleep*.

Bent over her. Close. Whispering. Tongues tight *invaded* my rash grew redder *Quiet* and redder still. My bones *wilting* weaker and shrinking and I began: *Your heart, your lungpiece* Shatner at it again *folded and alone. Pressured. Deep.* And again: *You choked and we left under the tree together but alone now* and the veil was immanent *our children* the tiresome. And again: *lips eyes mouth* her rust covered footprint, her broken iris. *When will we speak again?* The broken phraseology, her whites blacked, negative. Should I stop here? At this point. Close but not internal. *Love* did I write? Could I? and not her chestplate, under her arms, hidden, secret. Still asleep.

Child I wrote her and closed my eyes.

His jawbox. When we went hunting, after much not uncharacteristic pressure from the motherwoman, I had the suspicion that this might end well. His refurbished arm, constructed out of rabbit and bird flesh, rebelled at every opportunity and I relished the competing disarray it would find in my changing flesh mounds, which had taken to leaking at moments a white and mucousy fluid. Predictably his appendage management was feeble at best.

Throughout the day his scattershots went afoul, drawing blood from trees, murdering waters, destroying foliage and underbrush. One shot grazed the back of a deer, knocked a bit of skin from his hind legs which was picked up and laid straight in his jacket pocket. "This is the greatest" he told me alone under scattered sunlight. "Two men out being manly" an androgynous textural

mashup and his pimpled prickly pear of a son. He smiled and a twig snapped under his feet.

It was two in the afternoon when he leveled his gun at the ocean, bald faced and sweaty, ears broken, eyes concentrated, and asked me about women. He pulled the trigger and must have been shooting at a rabbit by my footpiece. He hit me square in the chest and the wound dripped white and slow. We spent the rest of the afternoon pasting tree bark to my ribcage, hardening, rough and flammable

Lindsay could not remove the writing, could not bathe it off and I read her neckpiece in class, always, fearing for my own health as the plagues that had attacked my body worsened. My silence was a deeper silence, my nouns deeper nouns. If I could maintain motion, stuttering movement, collapsible speech patterns, I was sure could all fall in on itself. Marky and Curtins compressing to points infinitesimally small as breath under pressure from the universal diaphragm, sucking orbitals, crashing. Her insensate mouthpart: bewildered, scowling. Her peppermint toenails poked through the meat flesh of her feet. In hallways she travels with companions: tired, lazy. Under semi-pink white blouses and super-bronze they remain translucent and willfully penetrated. Bare. Sleepy. Atmospheric disruptions. When they spoke on April 25th the locker-room erupted, pants on the ceiling, underwear everywhere, skin plastered to my face, clearly nothings.

The strained barbaric anecdote of the time we put a rope around her neck, Marky a good noose tier, and riddled her with apple shells and apple cores. The moon was still and lifted, hung heavy and hollow, alone, polluted, excavated by the winter cleavings, the charred bosom blossom. Her fingers bright and chilly. Let us play games: vanquished, hiding, asleep. Her navy pores, blue and idolatrous. She laid lame in the dark grassy lot and I snuck up behind her, with my teeth in her ear, on her side, completely irrational, illmaking, Shatners, Pimples. “Shattered” because I could not whisper dead, the painting of my tongue that things should be the color they are. I would put my hand inside of her and wear her like a glove, would that be a reason? And again I wondered *Child* and walked.

What I had really wanted was to strike them, blind Curtins and Co. Lindsey still stiff as a bat and still working. Her back stitched and sewn, non-lethal, criminally. I could back my palms and in pushing know her breath. Through her back. Around.

When finally after school she stopped to look at me my acne had grown to an inch and a half in height. Their buds magnified at points, waving in the wind sometimes, breathing all around, furry. She wore an eyepatch over her left eye. Her sore lips. Alone in a dark streetway.

“Undress me.” She said unexcited, apathetic. And I fell on her quickly, first her shirt, her blouse, her hair ties. Her socks I tied around her neck. Her shoes I flung out and away. Her concrete breast, rock solid armpiece. Her underwears.

I removed her skinsuit and dressed myself in it, consumed it, lined my belly. Mine, finally and alone. My arms began to itch, and my neck, my throat was drying. I admired the sleek musculature of her abdomen, was surprised by the bulbous bulgings at her chest. Sincerely bizarre. I felt my own acne pop, all of it, at once as I cut through the tissue and tried to grab a hold of her ribs. Talking to me, singing at me, in its favorite yellow uniform. Bees gathered and perched on their noses, angry and frustrated. My flesh yielding a hundred faces. Her intestines and stomach lining. Her beating heart, her lonesome.

I stole the bone of her smallest toe and put it in the back of my pocket. She gathered herself together and I left. Only the sound of my feet. Only the cold white air.