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Versions of a Life so Far: Tales from the Ceiling

Versions of a Life so Far: Memoiring the Memoir

Submitted in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Lancaster University

May 2023

Research Abstract

Louise Rosenblatt champions the belief that the reading of literature—or the encounter with ‘the poem,’ as she would say—is the active process which includes multiple levels of response by the reader. Rather than considering ‘the structure of the work of art as something statically inherent in the text,’ she explains, ‘we need to recognize the dynamic situation in which the reader, in the give-and-take with the text, senses or organizes a relationship among the various parts of his lived-through experience.’¹

Rosenblatt also talks of ‘text events’ as a way to explain the very particular experience of reading a particular text at a particular place or time.

Cue my memoir *Versions of a Life so Far: Tales from the Ceiling*, which is built around a series of ‘text events,’ that is to say encounters with certain texts at certain points in my life, in particular my childhood years.

These years belong primarily to the 1960s and early 1970s, and so reflect the foundational text events of my life. Most notably, and at the heart of my text-sense of family, was the Laura Ingalls Wilder *Little House on the Prairie* series. But I have expanded the definition of text to include artifacts, colours, and photographs, among other ‘text events.’ And as I relate and indeed re-enact my encounters with these texts, I find myself experimenting with form in various ways. The result is that the conventional prose of memoir here becomes a shifting of point-of-view as well as a vacillating chronology.

By retelling the story or stories of my early life through its textual events, I have sought to produce a text that is itself an event in the sense that these ‘versions’ are at once representative of a single life (so far), but exist also in the segmented way that a life unfolds.

¹ Louise M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP; 1994), 90.

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Proem***: Technicolour***

According to my mom, my hearing loss didn't last long. It was difficult to say, though, because I was silent so much of the time, even after I seemed to be listening. Language was just emerging before my bout with the measles; and language was truncated. Vivid Technicolour snapshots of no-hearing usurped language and I preferred that.

My world was objects, each and every one, consumed in colour. No matter the thing—chaise-lounge, kitchen chair, ashtray, dandelion—it was stamped into my brain as an intense colour wash: goldenrod, lemon chiffon, amber, and sunglow. The thing was the *colour* and not the *name* of the colour, or the name of the *thing*. Hearing no language, having no words for basket, mailbox, Mommy, colour was my lexicon. My mind recorded the colour-on-canvas image of brick brown, shellac black, and rose glow. I knew it to be what I saw without the black-and-white duplicity of words.

Colour was where I was in the silent time. Was where I was.

My home.

But I was hanging by a wordless thread to objects who named themselves in the light of sound returning, as an ocean *whoosh* before the onslaught of noise. These objects were my no-words: my truth.

Mine.

Yes, mine. The truth of me. When I shifted vision from one eye to the other, the tree in the front yard moved for me. When I made a wordless wish before blowing out a birthday candle, the Universe heard from me. When I knew myself to be tangled and wrong on the inside, I could wear a veil of pretense to hide my inside self from others. Sometimes. But always the fear, as I waited for the birthday wish to arrive, that someone might see the awful ugliness that was at my core. And when, at the age of fifteen, my bed would wake me with its tremble and quake, it was only a matter of time before its truth won out, before it lurched with a soaring railroad-train whistle that crescendoed to a deafening blare, and the bed, with my body pinned to the mattress, flipped upside down.

(1966—four years old)

: *Shadow*

I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me,
 And what can be the use of him is more than I can see.
 He is very, very like me from the heels up to the head;
 And I see him jump before me, when I jump into my bed.

...

He hasn't got a notion of how children ought to play,
 And can only make a fool of me in every sort of way.
 He stays so close behind me, he's a coward you can see;
 I'd think it shame to stick to nursie as that shadow sticks to me!

(Robert Louis Stevenson)

Before words were ever spoken, blocks of colour were my words, and it was images that told all stories. A dull ocean reverberated in my ears—the soundscape for my world of snapshots, like the hum of an old projector. Mouths that moved but did not speak held as little mystery as the marbles which failed to click glass-on-glass, sphere-on-sphere, though I could see my brother taking careful one-eyed aim as he knuckled down. Contact. No sound.

After, though, a time, the world's volume returned, disturbing silence, words sidling up to tales told by pictures and colour. But it was a clumsy new world—a grabbling for sounds that were not quite words, like chasing wisps of dandelion seeds scattering in a haphazard wind. My voice was an unmannered and croaky thing. Sometimes refusing to come out at all; other times, frustration unleashed its discord. Adults lured and dickered, paltering a penny for a word rather than a thought. 'Cat got your tongue, Jules? Say "fur," Jules, go ahead. You can do it, come on now. Or, here now, say your brother's name, huh? Say that. Say "Roger." We all know you say *that* real nice.'

My doomed attempts to make my mouth imitate what I could say in my head caused raucous laughter on many a holiday, or diverted neighbors from the Minnesota swarm of mosquitoes on a steamy summer evening. They would gather together, planting folding chairs in the driveway of this neighbor or that, smoking, talking about the weather, voices hushing as the sun sank. If my Uncle Earl were there, he would pull me to his side, his breath heated with cigarettes and beer. Pulling away with all my might, but I couldn't budge a straw. It was all I could do to arch my back just a bit and crane my neck away before I was forced to speak. The guffaws, sprinkled with the women's tisking tongues shamed me. And released me.

Words would not take shape the way they did for my mother, whose voice, melodic and clear, would recite Robert Louis Stevenson to keep company with chores. It was her voice I heard in my head. The round cage of a laundry basket hitched to her hip, she would swing the back door open with her free hand, glance over and down to see me at her feet, and say, 'I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me.' She would smile then, and hold the door until I was out. And I would know satisfaction in the predictable screen-door slam, the tip-tip of her white Keds down the steps, and the smell of green. 'And what can be the use of him is more than I can see.' Head tilting, half smile: we share a secret. It is the time I feel that we—my mother and I—are separated by space only, that the life we are leading here at home (after the yellow bus lumbers down the street carrying my brother away and away) is one life. Our life. We are two people, but she says the things I cannot say, she moves the way I imagine myself to move one day—long alabaster arms extending to fling the sheets to the breeze before clipping them to the clothesline. I smell clean laundry,

the fragrance of detergent offered to the summer air, delivered by my mother who makes everything clean, everything right and straight.

I hated the Mother Goose rhyme—“There was a crooked man, who walked a crooked mile”—as I recognized myself, crooked and misshapen, a skewed figure to a skewed world (peas in a pod and all). All the more reason to cling to my mother, to be my mother, to bask in her clean lines, her golden hair and melon lipstick, melon prints left behind on the cigarettes she smoked—Chesterfields—head tilting and eyes at half-mast to duck the wisps of her curling smoke.

These earliest secrets, nascent code between us, had all to do with that ‘Shadow’ poem, for she, too, I think, was all off-kilter and bumptious, and dogged by a shadow shooting up ‘taller like an india-rubber ball.’ This bit of herself—trickster, nuisance, magician, and mystery—was, I thought, the look-over-your-shoulder sensation of being watched. The message was woven through the words, an unraveling of a skein of yarn which spun itself through the telling, but which also wound *out* of the telling, to wrap itself around our life, teasing me in to a secret. For, as I say, I think she had her own shadow, a shadow to match mine. There was, then a promise of hope for the both of us in Stevenson, even as, ‘before the sun was up,’ my mother and I would daily sham the shadow, that ‘lazy little shadow, like an arrant sleepy-head,’ and tiptoe out of the house as he ‘stayed at home behind.’

It was not, though, for years that I realized she was referring to a different Shadow.

(1964—two years old)

: Blanket

Laura couldn't wait to see the inside of the house. As soon as the tall hole was cut, she ran inside. Everything was striped there. Stripes of sunshine came through the cracks in the west wall, and stripes of shadow came down from the poles overhead. The stripes of shade and sunshine were all across Laura's hands and her arms and her bare feet. And through the cracks between the logs she could see stripes of prairie. The sweet smell of the prairie mixed with the sweet smell of cut wood.

(Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*)

In a crib, still a baby at two, on her side. The blanket is worn, soft. It has silky tendrils from frayed edges, like gentle fingers to brush against her nose, her cheek. The blanket has a powerful smell: sunshined dandelions and the hot tar of the street, her mother's White Shoulders perfume, green leaves tugging at warm wind.

Waking.

Through uprights of brown wood, focused: sharp lines marking Here from There.

Quiet. No sound.

Blinking eyelids and shallow breath feel as loud and cacophonous as the screech of a hawk disturbed, caught unaware mid-flight.

Through vertical pieces of brown wood, a shaft of light, a parallelogram of dusty sun.

It creeps under the door.

But creeping, too, under the shape of calm, is an acrid voice. Disturbing the round of quiet, the jagged edges of a familiar mid-day voice it is cutting the comfort of now. His laughing is strepitous, as a rattling pot lid falling to the floor.

Be quiet. Make no sound.

(1969—seven years old)

: *Angel Cake*

I am seven. The angel-food cake my mother has baked for my birthday sits in dim candlelight, its pink icing smooth as the surface of our yellow Formica kitchen table upon which it rests. Even at seven I appreciate the glassy exterior of these things and the way that, if you tilt your head just so, you can see different versions of the surface: matte, semi-gloss, and—when the sun strikes just so—reflective gloss. It is the kaleidoscopic. Early on, the impossibility of two truths, side-by-side like the nesting spoons in the silverware drawer, made me feel special. But I quickly began to sense that One Truth was the standard, and that this One Truth belonged to the world. There was though, another truth, a little truth, carefully wrapped and stowed away somewhere inside, marked: 'Fragile.'

My brother Roger, better and older, once shared with me a secret, a secret angle on the world. If you fix your gaze upon some specific thing—the little oak tree in the front yard, for instance—and then close one eye, you still see the tree. But then, being careful not to move your head at all, close that eye at the very instant you open the other eye and the little tree seems to move. Except, of course, Roger didn't use that very slippery 'seems,' opting instead simply for, 'See? The tree moves.'

The first time I did this, sitting with him on our living-room sofa, I understood what it was to have knowledge I didn't want but could no more give back than change the color of my eyes. When the tree moved in our front yard—in fact, I *made* the tree move—I felt a shift in my mind, my consciousness, the first 'knowing' of so many, that carved a wedge

between clarity and what was out there to know. A legion of truths like trees, both dying and living.

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'Hurry, Jules, before the wax drips!' my mother says, and, my Uncle Earl adds, 'Gotta make a wish first—don't forget the wish.' I don't need reminding. I have been rehearsing my wish for 365 days, since the last angel-food cake with pink icing. Then, at six, I was still a baby, still uncomprehending of the nature of a birthday wish. The birthday wish was sacrosanct, like a letter to Santa or a prayer to God.

At six, I felt that my thoughts were somehow the property of a chosen few beyond me (no matter what friends said about not telling the birthday wish)—my parents, of course, but other adults of whom I might think ill, and—naturally—God. My mother had always told me that God hears all thoughts. You might say something nice to someone, but if you are thinking otherwise, God knows.

God, I knew, most certainly was watching, which was one more reason to keep my peace, my silence. But Uncle Earl would not be pleased with such a gaping space of no-words and never tired of taunting me with his abrasive, 'Cat got your tongue?' when I refused to speak. My knee-jerk reaction ricocheted around the walls, arriving back to me with its shame and guilt: *I hate you*, I thought, *I hate you*. My ears felt on fire. How bad a girl I was for thinking such things. At night, sleep was made to wait while I pleaded to God *not* to hold it against me. With equal fervor I would beg God to 'make it so' that Uncle Earl would never again come to our house, and I saw no conflict of interest by wordlessly

adding that I wouldn't be upset if he suddenly and inexplicably died. Any interaction with him—his barking, too-loud voice an affront to my practiced silence—stayed with me for days, like a cold or the taste of onions. I was crooked and coiled in on myself after his visits, the way the delicate links on a gold chain seem to put themselves in knots when no one is looking.

Relatives on my father's side of the family are marked in my memory as people frequently tucked away, like the stained dishtowel pushed into the back of the drawer when company comes. I gathered kernels of conversation not meant for my ears, but people tended to talk openly in my presence, as long as I didn't make eye contact. My father's people were broken and disturbed; mental illness and abusive tendencies blanketed them in secretive corners where sidewise comments blossomed over time, a colour dark and opprobrious assigned to unforgiveable vices. There was the aunt taken to an asylum, the alcoholic uncle, the cousin who committed suicide, the grandfather who raped his wife. Dark colours. Shame by association. 'God hears everything you feel,' my mother would say at times when I was convinced that she, too, could read my mind. If so, could she not hear me pleading with her when my uncle, his hands rough and grabbing, sweeps me up for a sandpaper embrace and insists I sit on his lap?

Make him stop, Mommy, please make him stop.

And then it is not his lap exactly, as he suddenly positions me so as to straddle one beefy leg which he spastically bounces up and down. Again, always the same. He yanks my skirt up from the back, settling me unsteadily to his drumming leg and I am one piece of material closer to his other intruding limb, which now jabs at my lower back. His laughter

is not the gentle sustained note of a flute as my mother's is; it is the truncated bombastic blare of a trombone, as he shouts, 'Ride the pony, Jules! Yee haw!!'

My face fires shame at the heat building between my legs from the friction of the drum-drumming, the up-and-downing, the blaring blasts, and the pulling on my skirt as if yanking the leash on a lunging dog. Tears well, my mother's face a blur as she tries to smooth the ugly wrinkles of the scene. 'Jules, honey, what's the matter?' but it is a dead fish of a comfort. Finally, I think, she hears me. But as our arms begin their journey toward each other, Uncle Earl's leg jolts, his trombone guffaw jilts gestures, and he booms, 'Oh, hell, she's okay—you're gonna love this when your older, Jules!' Trombone blast. 'Won't she, Arlis?' Before he releases me he pinches my nipples, hard. 'Hah! Make 'em grow, now, dontcha know.'

My mother bites her lower lip while he throws back his thick-necked head and blasts and blasts.

Uncle George was blowing his bugle. It made a loud, ringing sound in the big room, and Uncle George joked and laughed and danced, blowing the bugle. Then Pa took his fiddle out of its box and began to play, and all the couples stood in squares on the floor and began to dance when Pa called the figures...Laura could not keep her feet still. Uncle George looked at her and laughed. Then he caught her by the hand and did a little dance with her, in the corner. She liked Uncle George.

(Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*)

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At seven, then, I was ready to lie. I had tested both God and all adults and had slowly arrived at the realization that I alone knew my thoughts, in spite of what my mother said. This was the beginning of my secret self. The advantage? I could think whatever I wanted about Uncle Earl and I would never have to share my true birthday wish—but the ethereal, hovering Me was now locked Outside, looking on. Being a complete-and-utter secret, alone, enclosed behind the shuttered window of my soul, confirmed to me that I wasn't like other people. Still, birthday wishes acquired new meaning by the time I was seven and, for all the blowing-out-of-candles afterward, my wish was the same. There were no words.

No, there were no words.

My birthday wish, then, translated imperfectly, was this: please let me be only what I am supposed to be. Let me not be divided—half inside, half outside. Just let me be.

Be. Me.

Me.

And this was the wish for the next nine years.

&&&&

When my mother would come to me in the middle of the night I would ask, 'Why is the house burning?'

Dream images of pock-marked black, of aphotic space everywhere I look, eyes closed. I must have cried out. Sirens during the day caused a panic and consorted with the ink visions of nighttime. I was to blame for this shameful happening. The trucks were coming for me because of what I had seen—because of what I had done. Something bad had

begun with me, had caused the grotesque burning, bubbling-alive thing—I couldn't name it—charred and smoldering. When it came to me in the night I was repelled by what I saw in my mind's eye but I also began, as time went on, to try to look into it, the way you look into the snake room at the zoo.

Eventually, the fire-trucks ceased to come for me. My stomach sank when I heard them, as my friends and I loaded stones in the fenders of our upside-down bicycles; but now, though the wailing sirens built and climaxed, they invariably diminished and disappeared, much the way a summer storm in Minnesota would transform the sky to so many shades of purple before a pelting rain beat down on the blistering asphalt; and, just as suddenly, the sun appeared and remnants of rain dissipated. I was, though, still to blame for the world.

This secret I told no one.

(1964—two years old)

: *Chesterfields*

She wakes to familiar cold morning smells: cream of wheat homey with sweet-singed sugar. It is the Chesterfields her mother smokes, strong coffee. No words. Blinding pain. There is heat somewhere on this snowy day, and the morning feel of chenille against her cheek. And the burning. This burning, from her head, is explosive. Silent crying out, no noise, but, still, her mother comes. Her mother's cool, fine hands to her head, lips to her temple, holding cool hand to her head.

And now there is something cool and sweet to her lips, but the liquid burns when it travels down her throat.

And.

And she is crying without sound. Quiet is the pain. But still there is the hand, the cool, fragrant hand—dishwashing liquid, Jergens lotion, and the earthy faint scent of her Chesterfields. Breathe it in. Breathe it in deep and sleep, sleep.

&&&&

Arlis watches her daughter's tiny muscles tense, the little face contorting as she swallows the apple juice. Some of it drips out the side of those fevered lips, and Arlis pleads silently to God that enough of the chalky children's aspirin make it down her throat. She had stirred the crushed tablet with fervor, willing it to dissolve, fast, fast, to get it quick-quick into baby's body, burning with fever, and those glassy blue eyes seeming to ask Why, why? And

she holds baby close, allowing the tears to travel down and down, making a path from her cool cheeks to baby's head, heat radiating even without direct contact, like the wisps of steam from the distant road. Her lips are buried in the fine hair, baby-shampooed: 'I'm sorry, Jules, I'm sorry... Little rosebud, I'm sorry... Mommy's here, Mommy's sorry.' Finally, the gasping for air gives way to quivering exhalations. And the rigid muscles relax, tense, relax, relax. Relent.

Surrender.

Sleep. As suddenly as the storm had emerged, it deliquesces. The ticking of the clock meters peace. And the breathing of the baby keeps in time.

Arlis counts to sixty and breathes deeply. Needs coffee. Cigarette. Now. Gently placing Julie on the sofa next to her, she separates herself, damp from tears and perspiration. She watches with gratitude the still-damp hair and the rising and falling of her chest. Rising and falling: such a small, fine thing, really, and all we could ever hope for, all we really have a right to ask God for.

God for.

Two hours later, Julie still sleeps. Arlis has made the most of the early morning hours: the beds are made, dishes washed, and two loads of laundry—washed, dried, folded. And yet. There is this space.

She lights the cigarette and, as one would choose shoes to match a bag, she tries to give a name to what might fill the space. Is it to love deeply, some One or some Thing? No, that's not it, not exactly, not entirely.

Each day had its own proper work. Ma used to say:

'Wash on Monday,

Iron on Tuesday,
Mend on Wednesday,
Churn on Thursday,
Clean on Friday,
Bake on Saturday,
Rest on Sunday.'
(Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*)

Arlis shakes her head, laughs a sudden, rueful laugh. *Back to work*, she thinks. She puts out the cigarette and checks the list again. Vacuum. Nothing else.

Vacuum. But Jules is still sleeping so peacefully. Arlis moves quietly into the living room to check; still the same, except that Jules is rubbing the bridge of her nose with her index finger. *There's my baby*. She leans in to kiss the furrowed brow. The fever is making its way back already. If only it would just be over. How many days has it been since she's slept through the night? She realizes she cannot remember what day it is today. Wait—it must be Tuesday. Tuesday. Vacuum.

Right. Vacuum. *But it will wake Jules*. Wake Jules, or no vacuum? No, she needs to vacuum. Ah, nothing goes smoothly when a child is sick. For a moment, she resents this child. *I should be ashamed*, she thinks. *I'll vacuum*, she decides. *Jules needs more medicine before the fever spikes*, she thinks. *And, besides, I want to sleep tonight*. Yes. She wanted to sleep. Without interruption. If only for just one night. She wrestles the Hoover from the back of the coat closet, plugs it in, and glances one more time at sleeping Jules before turning the vacuum on. The noise is jarring after the quiet of the house, but she continues, stealing a glance now and then, over her shoulder.

At last she can get on. Press on. That there might be no more Things to Do. But now that chastising voice is back, reminding her that Jules startles at the sound of the vacuum, just as she startles at blaring fire trucks and the weekly civil-service siren.

She startles. She clings.

But not today. Not now.

And there it is. Arlis, on the edge of understanding it, but holding back from naming it, flips the switch to 'off' on the vacuum cleaner and the roar vanishes. A sound sucked from the air like water down a drain. Silence. Arlis looks at the even rhythm of the little sleeping figure on the sofa, the up and down of the chest inside the pale pink Dr Denton's, the distinct rosy patches on her full cheeks. Rosebud. It isn't the first time Arlis is struck by the paradox of small children: their power to smash the best-laid plans, to dismantle the world, and then, in a moment, another moment, to reveal—what? So small, barely more substantial than a chrysalis.

Arlis flips the switch on the vacuum cleaner, eyes transfixed on Jules. Nothing. Not a wrinkle, not a flutter.

She turns it off.

On.

Off.

'Jules? 'Jules?' This time louder than it should be.

Arlis looks around, desperate now, holding on to the belief that this is an anomaly, to be resolved simply finding something, something heavy enough.

Her eyes rest on the small shelf of books at the end of the hall. *The World Book Encyclopedia*. Volumes 'A' through 'M' would serve the purpose. 'N' through 'Z' would be

ordered once enough S&H Green Stamps had been collected and pasted in their books. She bolts to the shelf, removing Volume 'D'—it looks to be the largest—and hurries back to the sofa. Jules's head lay next to an end table. Arlis shifts the book to one arm, looking like a school-girl, moves the lamp to the floor, and poises the book above and parallel to the top of the table. Her heart pounds—will Jules hear?—and she releases the book flat, heavy, with force. The room reverberates, echoes, stills.

Jules sleeps.

'No!'

No. This is something that happens to other women's children.

'Jules! Dammit, Jules!'

Jules still does not hear, and yet even the room does, the room, with its objects all carefully appointed and dutifully dusted: the heavy amber ashtray on the half-wall next to the door (the illusion of a foyer); the glass candy-dish shaped like a dachshund, centered on the Magnovox Theatre Console (the first of many purchases settled with a Finance Plan); the idle Hoover upright; the hand-knitted afghan (a housewarming gift, shades of amber and burnt orange); the small brown coffee table (rummage-sale treasure); the amber table lamp, the framed black-and-white family photographs (stern faces, care-worn). Yes, all these things seem to hear, to vibrate. With the sound of the child's name. Name. Name. Name.

Jules, however, sleeps.

'You will be all right. Don't worry,' Ma said, cheerfully. Laura crawled into bed and Ma tucked her in. It felt good to be in bed. Ma smoothed her forehead with her cool, soft hand and said, 'There, now. Go to sleep.'

Laura did not exactly go to sleep, but she didn't really wake up again for a long, long time.

(Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*)

(1974—twelve years old)

: Closets

In the narrow space between two kitchen counters, Arlis stands, pressing down on the steaming iron, breathing in that which the heat resurrects. Friday: ironing. Days off from work are days for the work of the house ('A man can work from sun to sun,' her mother would recite, 'but a woman's work is never done'). And there is no use keeping a list as she used to. Jean would scoff at the list. ('Wait, dear, here: on Friday, shall I add "Slap and tickle?"' 'No, please don't.') Early October and so hot! Whoever heard of such a thing this time of year? Arlis pats her moist forehead with the back of her hand, sweeps a stray curl back in place, and presses down so hard on the iron that the legs of the board squeak, insistent that there would be no wrinkles in her blouses. Or in her husband's uniform shirts. Or, for that matter, the sheets. Some things are sacred. And on Saturday morning when the sheets are changed in the house, the sharp gridlines made by the iron are testimony that she can hold down a job *and* keep a house.

Once, in her mother's day, there was a season for all things household. On an annual basis, the shelf-paper lining the kitchen cabinets would be changed, with all contents removed to the kitchen table for the ritual. And, twice a year the window screens would be jostled from their frames and lined up like so many soldiers against the fence in the backyard, to be battered by the forceful spray from the garden hose; and the ceiling-light fixtures would be unscrewed and taken down for baptism in a sink of fragrant soapsuds,

wiped clean while steaming, the glass restored to clarity. There were so many ways to begin again.

Seasons now are further marked by the exchange of warm-weather clothing with cold-weather—so rigid the ritual as to make it seem that the weather changes because of the clothes, because of the seersucker shorts sets and sleeveless dresses that pack themselves and move to the cedar closets in the basement. In their place arrive corduroy pants in rich, autumn colours, dark turtlenecks, and thick woolen socks and tights. The cedar closets are replenished.

&&&&

Yes, the cedar closets. Though she never told Morris, the cedar closets down in that damp, unfinished basement are the only reason she'd agreed to come to this far-away place. The smell of the cedar reminds her of Aunt Julia's farm. There was a large cedar chest at the foot of Aunt Julia's big bed. Opening it for fresh towels or the woolen dresses for school during the winter would emit the lovely, cedary smell of earth and spice. Here in this new house, when they first arrived eleven years ago, there was nothing but acres and acres of wasted potato farmland. Flat and dusty with no protection from the stifling heat in the summer or from biting icy winds in the winter. Some days there was no distinguishing between snow falling or snow simply blowing, so that weeks seemed to surrender to time in an unremitting blizzard.

No better was the summer. Saplings wouldn't provide shade for years, even if they endured a Minnesota tornado season; Arlis had, therefore taken to wrapping the fragile

tree trunks—smaller than a tree's branches might someday be—with strips of threadbare sheets. Jules called the mummied little trees 'the patients.' Arlis smiles. How easy it is to raise a tree.

In the early days of this neighbourhood, potato-dust from the fallow fields would coat every surface of the kitchen by 4:30 each day—at first because there were no other houses, and lately, because there soon would be, as hordes of builders disturbed the land to erect a host of identical houses: small stucco ranch-style homes, three bedrooms, one bathroom.

The only way to assert yourself back then was by the colour of your house. Arlis had insisted on pink. Pink for Julie Ann, dear little Jules, barely two weeks old when they moved in. Morris had thought at first she was joking about the pink, so he brought several respectable colours home to sample from Hirshfield's—only after he had first determined the store wasn't owned by Jews. He painted small squares on the back of the house, a variety of greys and tans. When Arlis came out to look, her lips pressed to a line of annoyance. She turned abruptly to re-enter the house, flinging the door wide with force so that the wind caught it and wouldn't let it shut. It rattled against the stucco of the house, the only words riding the air.

Later, in bed, Morris would reach for his wife. A generous man, he did not hold against her the overcooked skirt steak or the almost-raw potatoes she served for supper. But she would deflect his advances, claiming headache from the potato dust.

The next morning, Morris would be the first in line before Hirshfield's opened. By suppertime, the house was wearing its first coat of Shade #030: August Sunrise.

It was fun to watch them set up the skeleton house. The timbers stood up slender and golden-new, and the sky was very blue between them. The hammers made a gay sound. The planes cut long curly shavings from the sweet-smelling boards...Pa and Mr. Nelson covered the skeleton walls with slanting boards nailed on. They shingled the roof with boughten shingles. Boughten shingles were thin and all the same size; they were far finer shingles than even Pa could hew with an ax.

(Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*)

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The sound of the screen door at the front brings Arlis back to her ironing. Could it be so late already? 'Jules? Is that you?'

'Mommy, guess what?' Jules is out of breath, and must have run from the bus stop.

'Guess what I did—'

'But, Jules, look, you're leaving a trail behind you—like Hansel and Gretel!'

'I'm sorry, Mommy.' Jules bends to gather the fallen items while continuing to talk.

'Guess what I did today?'

'I don't know, but it must have been good. Jules, get those hangers from the back closet for me. Then you can tell.' Time for Morris's work shirts.

'Did you know Mr McClung lets us have Fridays for discussion?' Jules yells from the back closet.

'Oh? Well, that's nice.'

'Yes, it's great, 'specially since we don't have to talk if we don't want to.'

Arlis adjusts the setting on the iron, shakes out a light blue shirt with the patch of the eagle on the arm and the letters USPS. Above the front pocket is embroidered 'Moe' in dark blue. She'd told him to request new shirts with his proper name, that he shouldn't go around with a name that belonged to a child, but he couldn't understand why it was important. She smooths the open collar on the ironing board, presses down hard as she pushes the steam button. The hiss of water meeting heat satisfies, so clean and good.

'So, guess what?' Jules brings the hangers.

'What, little girl?'

'You know Linda Starkie?'

'Mm-hm.'

'She said something about someone having an abortion.'

'Oh?' Arlis straightens one of the sleeves of the shirt. There. A nice sharp crease from the top at the shoulder to the cuff. The board squeaks, steam hisses.

'So we all started talking. All at once. It was crazy.'

'And you, too?'

'Oh. Well, no. The class. It was crazy.'

'I see.' The other sleeve, front, back. Hiss.

'And then someone—Carol, I think—said that people had to decide by themselves.'

'Really?' The front of the shirt now, the tip of the iron dodging in and out of the buttons, and the squeaking, hissing.

'And then, guess!'

'I can't imagine.' Arlis pulls the shirt over the horn of the ironing board on the seam, flattening the material so there are no wrinkles, and presses down hard, the steam hissing and rising to meet her glowing face. 'I can't imagine what happened. Tell me.'

'I had something to say,' Jules says, her tone suddenly even and calm.

'Why, that's fantastic! What did you say?'

'I said—well, I raised my hand and everyone stared! I almost couldn't talk then, but Mr McClung told everyone to settle down and then he called on me. Just like that.'

'And?' Turning the shirt to the back, pressing the pleat.

'I said I didn't think it was fair because the baby doesn't get to say anything.'

The board squeaks, the iron hisses. The pleat is pressed.

'Wasn't that good, Mommy?'

'I am proud of you for raising your hand.'

'But wasn't I right? What I said?'

'Well, now, you're the only one who can answer that,' Arlis says as she presses the other side of the front. She takes one of the hangers and places the shirt over it, buttoning the collar, and hands it to Jules. 'On the doorknob, please, and be careful.'

The shirt is still warm, and smells like grass and sun and her mother.

'Everyone liked what I said.' Jules is quieter.

Arlis begins the routine on another shirt. She doesn't pause for a second when she says, 'Do you remember I used to work at North Memorial Hospital before your father and I got married?'

'I was born there, wasn't I?'

'Yes. Roger, too.'

'I remember.'

'Well, I will never forget that first year. I was what they called a Candy Stripper—'

'Your blouse had stripes—like a candy cane!'

'Yes, well, we used to say that we earned our stripes that first year because the newest girls had to work the night shift, from eleven to seven. Not only that, we had to work under the strictest head nurse. Her name was Mavis Johnson. "Sergeant Johnson," we called her.'

'Did she mind?' Jules is wide-eyed.

'Oh, my, no, Jules,' Arlis laughs. 'We would never say that to her face—goodness, no one would do that, and stay on *her* staff.'

'But did you learn from her?'

Arlis stops, iron hovering over the shirt, as if she'd never thought about this. 'Yes, I do believe I did.' Her gaze is far away. She shakes her head then, coming back to Jules. 'Well, one night—'

'Is this a story?' Jules asks.

'I suppose.'

'Okay, "One night..."'

'Right.' Arlis hands Jules another shirt, the last wisps of steam trailing from the iron, the way her mother's tea does when the spoon moves back and forth in the tea cup. Like the wisps of smoke from her cigarette. Like the curl teasing her forehead.

'One night, we were at the front desk. It was a Sunday. I don't know why I remember that, but it was. The way a Sunday feels different from other days, you know?'

Jules nods.

‘Anyway, we were doing the charts and it was so quiet. And then, all of a sudden, there was a girl standing in front of us—I dropped my pen. She seemed to have appeared out of thin air. I hadn’t even seen her come down the hall. Anyway, she looked very pale, scared. Her voice was shaky. We couldn’t hear what she was saying, it was that low. Sergeant Johnson was irritated, I could tell. She just said, “Visiting hours are over, young lady.” And the girl shook her head, looking into my eyes, then Sergeant Johnson’s eyes—it was kind of heart-wrenching, you know, as the girl wanted to say something without actually saying it. Nurse Johnson raised her voice, said something like, “What is it you’re looking for, Miss?” And the girl placed her hands on her stomach. Her face was blushing and she started to cry, but without a sound.

‘ “You ought to be ashamed of yourself,” said Sergeant Johnson. “We are a God-fearing hospital and we do not do such things. Now you go on home, tell your parents, and then get down on your knees and ask for forgiveness.”

‘The girl walked backward a few steps—it was like Sergeant Johnson held her with her eyes, and then she turned and walked away.’

Jules says nothing for a moment, then, ‘That was good of Nurse Johnson, right?’ The ironing board squeaks. The iron: *hiss*. ‘Right, Mommy?’

‘We heard a scream about two hours later. One of the aides was standing at the door to the utility closet, her hand over her mouth now. We rushed to see what the fuss was about. It was that girl. The girl who didn’t want to have her baby. She got rid of it with a coat hanger in that closet. She bled to death.’

The ironing board squeaks.

The steam. *Hissssss*.

The story was never mentioned again.

(1966—four years old)

: Tornado

The ringing in my left ear seemed never to disappear altogether—a *swoosh swoosh* underwater noise. My mother told me to try and think of it as the sound of the ocean. Only we'd never been to the seaside. I did have a large cone shell my grandparents brought me from their trip to Hawaii; it sat on the shelf above my bed with other treasures—my *Little House* books, a farmhouse snowglobe, and my Breyer horses. I would see them all whenever the noise and the pain in my ear—as if someone were slowly inserting a red-hot needle—would wake me in the night. My mother would soon arrive with the little bottle of Bayer Children's Aspirin (Orange Bear, we called it) and a tiny piece of store-bought pastry. I chewed the chalky pills noisily, the 'um um um' a necessary accompaniment to 'make it go down.' She would then give me water in my red cup shaped like a cowboy boot (my brother had the identical in blue), followed by the coveted bit of pastry, sweet icing balanced by the tart lemon cream in the center. Tears were still moist on my cheeks, the pain still intense, but my mother was next to me, smelling of Jergens lotion and rubbing my back. She would take down the shell and hold it to my other ear.

'Hear the ocean, Jules,' she would whisper. I would pause in chewing, listen, nod. It seemed so strange to hear the world in something so small.

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Dusty summer, cool morning. All I want is to be in the sunshine on my bike. I smell the coolness, the metally air in the garage, cold steel tools, rusty nails like the smell after a summer storm. I ask my mom to help me get my bike out of the garage and her 'Just a minute' is permission enough to send me out on my own. It is, this bike, wedged between the lawnmower and a snow shovel, the bent tip of the shovel's scoop inserted through the spokes of the back tire.

My bike. Passed down to me two weeks ago when my brother turned seven and received a new Schwinn: red and ivory. The Tornado. 'Mom,' he'd shout with his hand on the door which led from the family room to the garage, 'Takin' the Tornado!' And he was gone. I would wait five seconds, then dash out through the garage and peer down the street, enthralled at how far he'd already got, standing, pedaling, white-blond head moving from side to side. Summer's boy, always moving, playing, making the rounds of the neighborhood to gather kids for baseball.

He had this way of whistling through the back of his teeth—even a tune—where he didn't have to pucker his lips. It reminded me of ventriloquist Jimmy Nelson and his puppet Danny O'Day, whom I knew from Saturday mornings. Whenever the cartoons took a break, together Jimmy and Danny would celebrate *Nestle's Quick: 'N - E - S - T - L - E - S, Nestle's Makes the Very Best...Chooooooclade...'* Roger, though, once told me that Danny was a 'dummy.' This astonished me at first because he seemed to be very smart indeed and was the one who made the audience laugh. Roger pointed to the fixed expression on Jimmy Nelson's face, and insisted that he was the only person talking. I didn't believe him.

'Look. Just watch his mouth. How it never moves. Look—there!' Roger now pointed to the spot just above Jimmy's tie. 'See how that bump in his throat is moving—no, not his

mouth, just right under it. Aw, can't you even see? You're such a baby. Mom! Why does she have to be so dumb?'

'Roger Allen,' came my mother's voice from the kitchen, 'you know I don't like that kind of language.'

'But she *is*, Mom, she *is* being dumb—she doesn't even see Jimmy Nelson's mouth moving. Come and look!'

'Well, I don't have time now, dear, but please—no more teasing. You'll make your sister cry.'

'Aw, geez,' he muttered under his breath.

But it never did quite make sense. Even when Roger received his own Danny O'Day doll, complete with vinyl record, *Jimmy Nelson's Instant Ventriloquism*. Up close, I held my breath as I scrutinized his bulging eyes and that mouth with the perfect teeth like so many white mints. Holding the stare—still not daring to breathe—Danny O'Day's eyes seemed to flicker, the corners of his mouth moving, but only just. Roger would dare me to put my hand close to Danny's mouth and I would shake my head, heart pounding, palms sweating.

'What? You're afraid of a dummy? Gee, what does that make *you*?' he would say. For some reason, the taunting would only go so far until, fingers shaking, I would, inch my hand toward Danny's mouth. Nearer. Nearer. Nearer. And Danny O'Day would always bite. Always. And then came the tears. And the flight. And then, yes, the return, as I would force myself to go back and open Roger's closet door where Danny sat, atop a pile of bins filled with army men, cowboy and Indian figures, marbles, and pieces of Grand Prix racetrack for his cars. There he was. Alive. Suddenly alive. Gazing at me.

&&&&

But. My bike. The bike that is wedged. The bike that will not budge. Not budge as if mocking me, as if saying, *I don't belong to you, I belong to that boy—that better boy*. I am angry and the ringing, the muffling, in my ear, is interrupted intermittently with sharp zaps of pain. When that happens I involuntarily snap my head to one side. I pause, let go of the handlebars of the bike for a moment and rub my ear, not to soothe but to rub away, dismiss the pain. And anger. Inside. Stupid bike, stupid ear. Stupid—

&&&&

I drop a pot lid and it clamors to the floor, ringing its reluctance to settle quietly. It is Sunday, my father's one day to sleep, and this startles him awake in the living room where he has fallen asleep. He had been watching *The Wide World of Sports*. 'What the *hell?*' he shouts en route to the kitchen. Roger stifles a laugh behind his hand, and I stand guilty, lid in hand now, belying the after-clatter silence still disturbing the air. 'What the hell is going on in here?' His voice is weary, latching on to this anger as a rope to shore.

'I...' And then my voice is gone.

'What? Jesus Christ, can't you even speak?'

I hold out the lid to show what made the noise. He shakes his head, a slow and deliberate punctuation mark. And then I hold my breath until he says it. 'Don't you think that was stupid?' he asks. He glares, wants an answer. I used to shrug my shoulders but the conversation would continue and his incredulity escalate while he pointed out that 'the

only thing stupider than what you do is that you don't even have the sense to know it's stupid.'

So now I look down and say, 'Yes.'

Just outside the lean-to door Pa was hammering at something. Laura went bounding out so quickly that his hammer nearly hit her.

'Oop!' said Pa. 'Nearly hit you that time. I should have expected you, flutterbudget. You're always on hand like a sore thumb.'

(Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*)

&&&&

—I grab hold of the bike, with its fender bent and rusty, still stuck with that shovel pinned through the spokes and I shake it—shake it with the hatred of the bike, the hatred of the no-help, the hatred of the me. The shovel slams to the concrete floor of the garage with a metal peal and I start, eyes darting to the door to see if my mother will appear because I have been told to Wait-a-Minute.

Nothing. Quiet. Quiet now that the shovel has fallen and the silence expands. I am still gripping the handle bars and I notice that one of the brackets holding the training-wheels to the bike has fallen off. This will make my mother angry because I never wanted the training-wheels on. Shameful hand-me-downs. Or so they had become the day after my brother's birthday and the grand arrival of the Tornado, that shiny, most perfect, most grown-up machine.

&&&&

Birthday morning breakfast—Cocoa Puffs and warm August green air so superior to the frigid February of my birthday, always chill, always half-light. My mother says, from the kitchen sink, ‘Roger, check to see if the milk bottles are out on the step for the milkman.’

‘Why can’t she?’

‘No arguing, now, just go.’

He scowls. I stick my tongue out. Winner. But—

‘Oh, boy!’ Roger shouts and he is off.

I wait for her to call out, ‘Shut-that-door-young-man-and-don’t-you-dare-slam-it. Or, Roger-Allen-you-get-back-here-this-instant,’ but no. Her face is glowing as she peels off the rubber gloves, still soapy, and rushes past me toward the open door.

‘Mom!’ cries Roger. ‘Wouldya look at this?! Look, Mom, isn’t this the neatest? Have you ever seen anything so neat, Mom?’ And she smiles. She smiles that satisfaction of a mother witnessing her child’s unabashed joy. He is never self-conscious, never observed by an outside eye, censoring, eager for a misstep. Even now, going after my mother, I see myself watching me, I feel the shame of having stuck out my tongue because it wasn’t the last word, after all. Instead, the last word is this: Roger, circling the redness of the Tornado, unaware of his desire to devour every inch of that beautiful bicycle, to take it in, to match its perfection with the splendor of his body. And he does, growing all at once, into a miniature man. He glances up. His eyes lock onto my mother’s.

And I watch myself. My pettiness exposed, like soiled underwear. Shame. It is shame.

And later that day, in the garage, my father sighs heavily as he gazes up to the storage space, searching for those training wheels. It seems the effort of this is like a burr in his sock, the aggravation showing in the squint of his blue eyes—and on a Sunday, of all days, his only goddamn day.

On Sundays Mary and Laura must not run or shout or be noisy in their play...They must sit quietly and listen while Ma read Bible stories to them, or stories about lions and tigers and white bears from Pa's big green book, *The Wonders of the Animal World*. They might look at pictures, and they might hold their rag dolls nicely and talk to them. But there was nothing else they could do.
(Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*)

The recollection of my father's pained countenance, the still sporadic zaps of pain in my ear, incites a fury and I pull with all my might. Partially to free the bike, so well-used before me, but mostly to lash out at Shameful Me. Or to catapult the question 'Why are you so stupid?' back at the bike or into the zephyr where it might take up space outside of my ringing ears.

And, then, just like that, the bike is free. For a moment, I am fearful of what I have done. I should have waited. Now I see the bracket that held one of the training wheels lying to the side of the bike. Off. A gentle kick with the tip of my foot and the training wheel wobbles, slumps, to the garage floor. This is not good.

&&&&

There is a wooden paddle-board hanging in the slender kitchen closet, keeping company with the ironing board and the step-stool my mother had us sit on for homemade haircuts. Mine as short as a boy's. Words on the paddle read 'Board of Education,' which I can neither read nor understand until the board is no longer used. Well-used, certainly, as signaled by the crack running down the middle. But we know its name so well. Not-minding, or being bad, will result in the use of the paddle to the backside. When I was especially bad, the spanking would wait until bath time, the steaming water adding insult. I would spend the remainder of the day posturing perfect, praying for a lapse of memory. But she never forgot.

&&&&

I feel the grip of panic in my throat, water welling in my eyes, but, as it turns out, my rancor is resting, furred in a corner of my mind, waiting for something useful. My perspective shifts, and I suddenly see the glory of this thing I've done. I can't even put it into words. As usual, no words. But the thing to do is so obvious, an accidental gift from the universe. There can be no wasting time now. I lay the bike—*my bike*—gently on its side and wrest the bracket from the other training wheel. A swirling power wraps its arms around the throbbing in my ears. A rhythm, a cadence, to action. I clear away all that has been loosed. I shall liberate my bike—*my bike*. Clear a path out of the garage. At the edge of the driveway I have a lucid thought (*the Board of Education hangs on a sturdy nail*) and run back to assemble the shovel, the rake, the tomato poles, and my brother's hockey stick, against the wall. They are my mute soldiers, keeping my secrets.

To the bike, then.

Freedom.

One of the training wheels never quite rested securely on the ground, this I know from having compensated for the one-sided balance traded for a wobbling existence—and this gives me enough deep-down knowing: I can ride this bike—*my bike*—I can ride this.

Confidence. Like a foreign country. *My bike*. Away from the house. Away.

(1973—eleven years old)

: Flute

Mr Madsen has a mustache that he trims at the beginning of each month. When he comes into our classroom to teach music each Tuesday, should the mustache have abruptly ceased its salt-and-pepper travels from upper lip to lower, Lisa will sometimes flash her eyes at me, leaning in to say, 'It must be October' or, 'Time to turn the calendar.'

'Boys and girls,' Mr Madsen says, at halfway-there volume. He then clears his throat while at the same time actually saying, 'Ahem,' but in a higher octave, so that he sounds as if he is mimicking someone or other. Only he's not. Everyone laughs and my face burns.

Ever since first grade, Mr Madsen has crept into our classroom to teach music. He doesn't control the class the way real teachers do and I cannot eat breakfast on Tuesdays because of the heavy knot in my stomach. I heat up at the ridicule he suffers because of us. He understands and we understand. It's some unspoken contract where tables are turned and he must match us ridicule-for-ridicule.

Part of me feels angry at him after all these years. *Aren't you the adult?* I ask in my head, but then I hear my mother: *Shame on you, Julie Ann.* I don't laugh at him the way the others do, as if howling at the clowns at the circus. He drops the chalk, they laugh. He bends to pick it up, they laugh. (Always, I think, I must be missing something, a dirty secret whispered half in code by the popular kids, because they shriek when he says certain words, like 'position' or 'hard'.)

They also laugh when Daniel Burton raises his hand in music-class to answer a question (*only* Daniel Burton raises his hand in music). Daniel Burton answers the questions correctly ('An eighth note gets half a beat,' 'Andante means "at a walking pace"') but the lilt in his voice—the over-enthusiastic lilt—again triggers laughter. And, like a falling domino, Mr Madsen's dazed expression prompts yet more of the snorts and guffaws and howls.

Miss Wilder had put the record book in her desk and was ready to begin school, when the door opened again. Everyone looked to see who had come tardily to school on this First Day.

Laura could not believe her eyes. The girl who came in was Nellie Oleson, from Plum Creek in Minnesota.

She had grown taller than Laura, and she was much slimmer. She was willowy, while Laura was still as round and dumpy as a little French horse. But Laura knew her at once, though it was two years since she had seen her. Nellie's nose was still held high and sniffing, and her mouth was prim and prissy...

She had come late to school, yet she stood looking as if the school were not good enough for her...

'I would like a back seat, if you please,' she said to Miss Wilder. And she gave Laura a nudging look that said, 'Get out and give me that seat.'

(Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*)

The joke is a mystery to me, as it is at our neighborhood's summer block party when slurry adults—men, always, with roughness in their voices and beer on their breath—goad

me to say a particular word. I cannot pronounce the letter *R*, so Mr Starkie, a neighbor who has a can of beer attached to his hand no matter what the day or time, would ask me any number of questions, so long as the answer had an *R* sound. He might say, for instance, 'Hey, Jules, what's the name of your brother? C'mon, honey, I don't remember.'

I once take the bait. 'Wa-joh,' whispers the outside-me, the discord between what I hear in my head (*Ro-ger*) so out of sync with the movement of my lips that I was like one willing a tree to move on a windless day. I won't fall for the same trick again. But the men in the neighborhood don't need an answer after that to let loose their jibing hoots. Play fetch with a question: pick it up and throw it again. I can hear them as I walk away.

Another summer, and all the kids are saving their money for a Lucky Rabbit's Foot. To earn enough for a white-and-tan Lucky Rabbit's Foot I give my mother a vigorous back-scratch while we watch television at night for two weeks. Most of the girls covet some shade of pink rabbit's foot, but I want one that isn't dyed, that is instead *natural*. As we take them out that summer's block party, to compare and admire, Mr Starkie catches me off guard by asking what it is I have in my hand—could he see it? In my pride, I hold it out. 'Huh,' he remarks, examining it like some precious backyard find. 'What do you call that?'

'Wabbit—' I say, eager to share my treasure, before I catch the sparkle in his glassy eyes, the *I-caught-you* look of victory. Yes, adults are so very clever in this way. But, like watching Mr Madsen and the laughter he sparks in the classroom (I'm sure he doesn't mean to), something is missing, like those table-sized jigsaw puzzles, when some piece you think is the very one you're looking for just doesn't quite fit. Yes, something is off. I understand the pieces: I speak, people laugh. But how they fit together remains a puzzle.

And so I do not speak. And neither do I sing. I don't mind the songs we've sung since kindergarten, and I used to sing to my mother during bath time: 'Bicycle Built for Two,' 'I've Been Working on the Railroad' (not my favourite, since it makes me think of my Grandpa Clarence), 'On Top of Old Smoky,' 'She'll be Comin' Round the Mountain,' 'Sweet Betsy from Pike,' and 'Kookaburra.' My mother would never laugh, never correct, when I sang, '*Kookaboowa sits in the old gum twee-ee, mewwy mewwy king of the bushes he-ee,*' as if the pieces of the puzzle fit perfectly. But singing like that—with all abandon—is out of the question in school. No matter the shape I twist my mouth into, the horrible sound coming out of my throat is not the voice I hear in my head. That was as impossible to conjure as water from an empty bucket.

I live, therefore, in terror of Musical Vocalization. Mr Madsen's only weapon.

It is twice a year we get marks for Musical Vocalization and Mr Madsen warns us the week before, thus smashing to silence some rude outburst of ours. And I see it—the shadow of a smile, like a crescent moon sliding out from beneath a traveling mist—a brightening in his tired green eyes. My stomach churns. I think desperate, fleeting thoughts of planning to be sick that day, but I know, from previous years, that it will not work. The other kids seem to forget about it when he leaves; they act, in fact, surprised, when the next Tuesday shows up, as if it were the first time Monday were ever followed by Tuesday. The morning of, as I slide in next to Lisa on the bus, I hear the tremor in my words. 'Music today,' I say.

'Right,' she says, not looking up from *I Capture the Castle*.

'Leese,' I say, pushing against her shoulder. 'Today is Tuesday: *Music*.'

'I heard,' she insists, but looks up to meet my worried eyes. 'Oh,' she says.

'I can't do it,' I say, 'I never can. I hate—everything. Everyone.'

'Stop,' Lisa says. Her voice firm. But soft. 'You *can* do this. Imagine Mr Madsen in his underwear—that's what my mom says. I would guess polka-dotted boxer shorts. Purple polka dots, in fact.' She pushes her glasses up and brushes the hair off her forehead. In spite of my clammy hands and too-fast beating heart, I laugh.

My friend, I think. My friend.

Music is first thing, right after the pledge of allegiance and Cursive Writing Practice. If I focus on cursive practice, I know, it will calm me down, something I've relied on since third grade. But my pencil refuses to be still until, through my pressing it down, the lead snaps. My teeth clench and I feel moisture seep from under my arms. Since getting my period the summer before, I need deodorant. My smell—musty, briny—is another shameful reminder of something gone wrong, but I cannot put a name to it, cannot call it anything but bad. And how are you supposed to ask your mother for deodorant?

I think about this upon the breaking of my pencil, the sound impossibly amplified in my ears. It is a crash to accompany that old surfacing of self-loathing. *Why am I so stupid? Why such a coward?*

Lisa makes a silly, cross-eyed face at me when Mr Madsen bombasts in, waging war with the door as usual. Laughter, as usual. But today he smiles. No usual nervousness. The upper hand is his: 'Musical Vocalization Assessment today, children. Who is to go first?' This is the greatest silencer.

We all stand next to our desks. The familiar battle now begins in me. To volunteer means getting it over with and being able to sit down, to disappear and be done. Lisa has

schooled me on this often. 'You don't have to be first,' she reasons. 'But do *not* be last. You'll only make yourself sick.' She is right, of course, but even as part of me urges my arm to raise, I remember who I am and desist. I am someone who is stupid and fat, someone who smells bad and cannot talk. I will not raise my hand.

A couple of kids who sing all the time do raise their hands. Amy Miller will go first, pretty Amy who wears ribbons in her blond hair that match her outfit. She is tiny. Standing next to her makes me feel monster-large, but it is rare that I stand next to her. Every school line-formation has us arrange ourselves 'tallest to smallest' and, since first grade, I am second in line to Lisa Pederson, who is proud of her height and somehow demands (albeit politely) the attention of all the teachers. Now, as Mr Madsen sidles through the rows of desks, he says, 'Good, Amy, and what will you be singing for us today?'

Singing for us, singing for us. What will you be singing for us—for everyone? Oh, and Jules, how will you make us laugh today?

'Um...' Amy says, as if she hadn't known (and practiced) since last week. 'I think "On Top of Old Smoky".'

'Very good, Amy.' Mr Madsen takes his pitch-pipe from his shirt pocket, blows a delicate note and says, 'Whenever you're ready.' I try to hear the resemblance between that note from the pitch-pipe and the first note Amy sings, but I can't. I never can. It makes me wonder if this is all pretend, nothing more than people agreeing to a charade. Except that I am left behind again, not understanding—not *hearing*—what everyone else knows.

As Amy launches into the second verse, Mr Madsen clears his voice—'Ahem'—to pronounce, 'Excellent, Amy, excellent.' A physical sense of relief all around, bodies collectively relax.

And then the next. And the next.

Fewer and fewer students are left standing.

Mr Madsen scouts out anyone looking down. As he walks down the aisle to my desk, he calls on me, though he needs to consult the grade book to remember my name. He leans in when I open my mouth, but no sound breaks the silence of the room. The heat rising up to my face is unbearable and I know that what I feel flooding my face and shooting into my ears and forehead will be evident to everyone in seconds. Elbows nudging, hands covering giggles. 'I can't hear you, Julia, let's try that again,' he says. I close my mouth.

By the time I am eleven I begin to have a cold curiosity concerning adults. When things should be clear to them, they are not. My father, for instance, will still say, 'Don't you think that was a stupid thing to do?' when I forget to set the timer for the Hamburger Helper and his supper is burned. Likewise, Mr Madsen, right now, leans in so close I smell coffee on his breath and he snaps, 'Sing,' as if I could. As if I could. And when there is no sound, he must think I do this on purpose. 'What is wrong with you?' Like my father ('Wasn't-that-a-stupid-thing-to-do'), he asks a question for which there is no answer. I look down at my hands, clammy fingers entwined, remember lacing them together as my mother showed me so long ago—before school, before standing 'tallest to smallest,' before singing or reading or even talking out loud. I could do the hand motions while she measured out the words: *Here is the church, here is the steeple; open the doors and see all the people.*

Mr Madsen sighs a heavy sigh, demonstrating to the class the burden he carries. As he turns away, I see him make a bold mark in the gradebook: *Needs improvement.*

&&&&

One Tuesday in March of fifth grade, the door bolts open in the usual Mr-Madsen way. He kicks the metal trash-can for emphasis, but only smiles broadly and genuinely when the boys shriek with mirth. At first I am struck with horror, so ingrained is the sight of him with fear. Musical Vocalization Day? No, of course not, I remember.

Thank God, no. 'Instrument Selection, children,' he says. Each word is enunciated the way Mrs Golnick read *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* to us in third grade. Suddenly, Mr Madsen is as animated as Willy Wonka himself, practically hymning, 'I am the maker of music, the dreamer of dreams!' He is now crouching over, with his arms out, and circling the room (still Willy Wonka!). 'Yes, boys and girls—it is time for you to select your musical instrument!'

Several of us begin to stand, to move toward Mr Madsen, but his palms turn toward them. 'Have a seat, have a seat.' He is finger-wagging now. 'We will do this in an orderly fashion.' The boys who cannot do anything without pushing (as well as Laura Gambrell, for she is a tomboy), all voice their almighty disappointment that they cannot, through sheer force, claim percussion or trumpet before anyone else.

For at least a year, Instrument Selection Day has been chief topic of conversations with Lisa and my mother. I had noticed how older siblings in the neighborhood now exit backyard-play thirty minutes before supper and, with an affective rolling of eyes and heaving sighs, they pretend to lament the burden of 'practicing.' Never to be confused with 'homework,' 'practicing' is a strange kind of privilege, a rite of passage. Goodbye dear childhood. So long, farewell, *auf wiedersehen*. Katie Edmonds and I would steal into Katie's

room, the one she shared with her sister Theresa, and look at the sheet music on her stand, flipping pages to witness what we couldn't read, a foreign language that defied understanding, crying out for some wondrous translator, or a sibylline wizard who might speak this language and reveal its secrets.

Mr Madsen is no such wizard; I hate him. No different from those other adults who look for cracks in the armour, he waits to pry open the very thing that will cause me to recoil in utter shame. There are other kids he pries open, too, drawn like a magnet to a vulnerability he must smell. One of them was Cindy Michaud, who always had a runny nose and oddly stiff, curly hair. No one ever wanted to touch her. Mr Madsen picked on Cindy all of fourth grade, even making her cry once because she had a coughing fit. She missed two days of school and the next Tuesday Mr Madsen didn't say a word to her, not even when she coughed again. He never spoke meanly to her the rest of the year, never even made her sing. At the start of fifth-grade, we heard that Cindy had died. She'd had cancer.

&&&&

Each year in school we watch the Disney film *Peter and the Wolf*—the film has a narrator who introduces the instruments and the animals to which they correspond. In the early grades, the boys want to play percussion—more precisely, the kettle drums—for they are the hunters' shotguns in *Peter and the Wolf*. When the screen shows the kettle drums, a golden ball bouncing on the surface, the boys (and Laura Gambrill) pound invisible drums, matching the sound and force and rhythm of the visible, on-screen drums.

No one, though, wants to play the bassoon until fifth grade. The narrator introduces it by saying, 'Grandpapa is an old bassoon,' and we laugh as the silhouette of the bassoon

morphs into the profile of the grandfather who, with ballooning-bassooning nose and plump and wagging index-finger, is saying to Peter, 'No, no, you cannot go outside.' When Bob Berger announces, in Fifth Grade, that he will play the bassoon, the other boys make fun of Mr Science-Head as they call him. By the time sixth grade is ending, however, we speak of Bob Berger with reverence: his musical ability has awed us all. He takes private lessons and has been practicing with the Junior High-School Band, receiving an entree to a world we won't access until the next school year.

For many of the girls—(Lisa and me, included)—the flute is the instrument to play. In my case because it feels like the very things I am not: slight and shimmery, clear-throated and melodic. It is true that a few girls want to play the clarinet. Some boys, too. But when Mr Madsen shows us the clarinet, something about an instrument with a reed sends shivers down my spine like fingernails on a chalkboard or the shrill start of the civil-service siren on Wednesday afternoons. Watching him suck on the reed before attaching it to the mouthpiece lemon-puckered my mouth. I would play the flute.

&&&&

And, finally but suddenly, the Day is here, Instrument Selection Day. Lisa catches my eye, smiles, and places her hands in flute position. I nod. Mr Madsen tells us he will wait for quiet, that only a show of maturity will persuade him we are ready to be musicians. We are quiet.

'Now,' he says, pausing to enjoy the silence he commands, 'You will line up at the door tallest to smallest.' When the pushing back of chairs seems to portend chatter, he reprimands with lightning speed, 'And! You will remain silent.'

We file into the hallway, staying to the right, and make our way to the library which has been reserved for us. A handwritten note taped to the door announces 'Instrument Selection Today' and, collectively, we grow taller as we follow Mr Madsen through the door. This is my favorite place in the school, with its packed shelves and booky smell. I know where—exactly where—the authors I have loved live on these shelves, and I can locate them from across the room. Beverly Clearly, Carolyn Haywood, Edward Eager, Sydney Taylor, Hugh Lofting, and—of course—Laura Ingalls Wilder. My mouth waters whenever I enter this room. Here, no one stares or laughs at me. Here, no one speaks above a whisper.

Today, though, it is the place where I will choose the flute to play. I will learn the new language of musical notes, a new kind of reading. I awoke knowing only the music of words, now, right now, I shall learn the music of music.

Mr Madsen is motioning towards the 'smallest' in our tallest-to-smallest line. We stand against the wall. Amy Miller will be first, Daniel Burton next, and so on. I will be second-to-last, but I do not mind waiting. The flute will be worth it.

We prattle while we wait, interrupted only by Mr Madsen when voices rise to an unacceptable level. Each of us in turn approaches the tables with the instruments and tells Mr Madsen which they wish to try. I watch Amy approach, glad now that I am not first so that I can see how the work of selection is done. Amy wants to play the flute, of course, and my brain flushes black—I am certain I have wanted to play the flute far longer than she. Mr Madsen removes the mouthpiece from the instrument and holds it under Amy's lower lip,

showing her what her mouth should do. I see that it is not like blowing out birthday candles. The air, I see, is to be blown downward. I look down our tallest-to-smallest row to see Lisa. She is reliably—enviably—middle of the line, a place of inconspicuousness. The other kids are now doing what we are doing, and what Amy is doing: imitating what Mr Madsen is doing. It is as if the strange movement of his lips is as contagious as a yawn. Amy's first blows produce a *whooo* that sounds like someone blowing into a sodapop bottle. Disappointment. 'Here, now, Amy,' says Mr Madsen, 'don't be discouraged. Any sound is fine. Take a deep breath, now, and continue to blow while I move the mouthpiece.' She does as he says and, as Amy maintains the blowing out, Mr Madsen slowly-so-slowly rolls the mouthpiece up a bit, down a bit, and there it is. A note. A clear, bird-twittering note. In *Peter and the Wolf*, the flutes are birds. Lithe and light, clear-voiced and lilting. Joyful and pure. Clean.

The tallest-to-smallest row gasps in appreciation. Mr Madsen smiles (*yes, smiles!*) and writes on his clipboard.

I watch as Daniel Burton now chooses percussion. He is shown how to hold drumsticks, and then, upon something that looks like a tambourine without the jingling bits, he imitates a clapping pattern that Mr Madsen first performs. For a fleeting second, I imagine that I could play percussion, that I could occupy that place attempted by only the most daring girls. But those girls are looked at closely, too closely. No. It will be the flute.

When it is my turn, I am ready. I have rehearsed in my head, 'I want to play the flute' many times. And the words tumble, trip out, and Mr Madsen says, 'What's that?' like a man irritated by the buzzing of gnats at a picnic.

'Flute. Please.'

'Uh, I'm afraid not, Julia—'

Jules. It's Jules.

'—We have our limit of flutes. We need more clarinets.'

My mouth, I know, has dropped open. My whole face must show something, too. I can see it in his eyes, hear it in his heavy sigh. But I don't want to cry.

Mr Madsen grows—like my father—impatient as quickly as something catching fire, and when he grabs at the flute mouthpiece, he doesn't quite place it right, just rests it on my chin, barely making contact with my skin. He gives no direction, only glares. I think of asking for help, but know that I will go *buzz buzz*, like gnats at a picnic. *Buzz buzz*.

I try to blow into the flute's mouthpiece, to lean in and a bit down so as to aim into the hole to make the right sound. But it isn't even the sound of blowing into a soda pop bottle. It is blowing into nothing. It is blowing out phantom candles on a birthday cake. 'No, I don't think so,' Mr Madsen says, as he takes a new reed from its plastic case, dips it in a bowl of water (there must have been a parent-complaint about is putting it in his mouth, thank God)—'here we go, now'—and slips it into the silver bracket on the clarinet's mouthpiece. He tightens the bracket, tells me to place my mouth here, not too far down, and try to make a sound.

The squawk is dreadful: like a dying bird, I think, or a cat in heat. My jaw tightens involuntarily.

'Perfect!' announces Mr Madsen. A proclamation confirmed by the marks he makes to his clipboard. A scratching out of

Clarinet.

(1977 & 1975—fifteen & thirteen years old)

: *School Bus*

There is a soft way to waking on a summer day—especially early in the summer. Jules smiles. There is nothing quite like summer, she thinks. More especially, there is nothing quite like *this* summer. But then, for a fraction of a second, there is that old familiar trace of dread and the down-to-the-core knowing of that other self no one should ever see. At times—those unguarded moments—Jules feels that she is hanging her hopes upon someone else's life, appropriating what does not belong to her, like a soft cashmere sweater which fits fine but is not hers. *Push it back, push it away.* And just like that, she does. Jules imagines her brain a labyrinth of hallways and rooms behind doors which lead to more rooms, more hallways. How to navigate? And why is it that sometimes she is expert at shutting the door on the bad thoughts and, at other times (3:00 a.m., for instance) they arrive unannounced and pound at the front gate of her brain with the persistence of raindrops pelting asphalt.

The likelihood of returning to sleep now fades. Stretching, Jules feels the power of her legs, the condensed muscle of her quadriceps, the gap at the top of her legs where, two years ago, her inner thighs chafed in blue jeans as they rubbed against each other. Superfluous skin. It was disgusting. Being thin is lovely and her morning mantra consists of the practiced repetition of two words: *Never again, never again.*

Never again would she allow herself to experience the humiliating heft of her own body, the roll of fat over tightly buttoned jeans, or the creeping up of too-tight cut-offs on a

mid-July day as she navigated the longest way round the neighborhood in order to avoid certain houses when she walked the dog. She had never been fat, exactly, but Jules remembers the day she refused this thing. Refused her body.

&&&&

Seventh grade. Barely spring and a warm-day harbinger pleases everyone, like a bank note you find in the pocket of next season's jacket. On the bus home from school, spirits were quickened. Hand-clap 'Miss Mary Mac.' The return to the rhymes of elementary-school. Older Adam Walker, Best-Boy-to-Love-from-a-Distance, was even seen to fist-bump a seventh grader.

Jules observed. Looked on. Watched. Then, as the bus jolted yet again, felt she needn't *only* observe, the warmth of spring perhaps an invitation to participate. Yes, perhaps she would participate, become part of the scene, the world. On the bus. Perhaps. And then there was Adam. A girl like Jules didn't smile at a boy like Adam. But eyes locking, she did. Adam, the near-seraphic Adam.

'Hey, kids, someone open up them windows!' It was the bus driver, Eugene. So. A purpose. At last a call to action. The bus, the world, had summoned her and she would respond. She stood up and tugged at the window. It was, though, a complex operation. The metal clips on either side of the window had to be pinched toward the center and were reluctant to move, sullen with an inertia learnt through the winter. Jules contorted her face with effort, unaware that anyone was watching. Then, of a sudden, the

sharp edge of Adam's voice cut through the bus, damping the evanescent flicker of belonging.

'Put your weight into it, Jules—that'll open the window!'

The bus laughed.

'Just put your weight into it! Thata girl! You can do it—just put your weight into it!'

The bus laughed again. It roared.

'C'mon, put your weight into it, Hassinger!'

Jules sank into the seat, wanted to become only the seat. Heat traveled from the crown of her head, rolled over her forehead, and set her ears ablaze. Skin prickled. And a loathing churned in the pit of her stomach—but not for Adam, never for Adam—and it rose to the back of her throat, toxic, a bitter medicine threatening to explode.

No tears, no tears, you stupid cow. No tears. Not until home.

Home. No car in the driveway at home. The relief, the solitary gift of the day. She pushed the door open with a thrust of her hip.

Just-put-your-weight-into-it.

She ran to her parents' room, the mirror above the dresser large enough to see almost a full view of all that had so disgusted the bus, so caused it to roar. Her face, those round cheeks blushing humiliation, blushed like a baby. And then there was the paunch above her pants, the swell of a greedy belly resisting the confines of that shirt—that shirt she would never wear again. She cursed that shirt.

Her eyes burned, her face now a gothic fun-house of a face. Freak. Jules jerked her shirt up to expose the roll of fat that was hanging there.

Just put your weight into it, Jules. Yeah, put your weight into it, you fat pig.

The words dragged across her throat, scraped their truth from the bottom of her soul and announced it to the mirror, to the room, to someone's God, anyone's God.

'Loser!'

Stupidfat.

Loser.

Never again. Never again.

(1967—five years old)

: F - O - R - D

There is a secret to this, this to-the-core certainty. My chest expands and I breathe in as deeply as the roots of an ancient oak. I laugh, not afraid of the neighbors—not even old Mr Hassett, even as he moves his greasy curtains with two knotted fingers, like a pair of praying mantises scaling the clapboards of a house. Older kids shortcut through his backyard after school, jumping, one-handed and legs-swinging over the redwood fence. Then Mr Hassett flings open the screen door, brandishing a rolling pin as he threatens in words no one can understand. Only the rhythm is understood. ‘*God-damn-it...god-damn...god-damn-you...*’

Just past his house, confidence wanes. No.

No.

I will do this thing, I must. Riding without training wheels—

baby training wheels

—all will be forgiven. She won’t ask why I didn’t wait for her to get off the phone (with best friend, Jean, born with only half of her pinky and ring fingers, never hiding the fact). Going home with only no-training wheels? No.

I get on the bike. I hear Mr Hassett in my head: ‘*God-damn...God-damn-it.*’ Shameful, but I will pray later, pray on my knees.

Think now. The balance thing. The not-crashing thing.

Roger said, ‘Falling to one side, tilt your body to the other side.’

How is there time? How?

No. It cannot be a thinking thing, must be a doing thing. So I do. I ride. I'm up, even going faster now because movement is the thing that keeps me up and I know it. I know it. *Goddamn.*

I don't see the gravel collected around the corner as I turn, realizing now that turning is a thing I had forgotten. The bike skids sideways, gravel pulling down, and my right knee is dragged across the pavement before I completely fall. I don't want anyone to see. I rise, at once, my knee burning, eyes stinging.

Turning is a problem, it seems. Stopping and turning. It cannot matter. It cannot matter. But time will run out if I am baby Jules, if I think too much or go back to thinking. I will walk my bike around the corners of the block until I can get that part, but how to stop? Stopping is falling. Unless.

On my bike again. I can do this. Long before the next corner, I ride up a bit of the Knuth's driveway (we know which neighbors will allow), and slow-motion in the grass to a place where I can put my feet down. So easy! I can do this. Once, twice, three times around our block, I am now walking-through my turns. But even now I fall. It is, I know, when I think. Mustn't think. Just do. Stop *How* and *Why*. Just do. Do.

&&&&




There is, thank God, a block in my head that can dull the questions firing in my brain. It is like the dish towel my mother hangs over the phone after she turns off the sound so she can nap. She says the towel reminds her to flip the switch for the sound, but I know it is the towel. It blocks the connection, the thing inside the phone that listens through the wall for

the other person calling. No one can call while the towel hangs over the phone. I sit at the end of the sofa with my blanket and rub the silky edge against my cheek. I watch her sleep. Creases in her forehead disappear like the vanishing wrinkles on the sheets she irons.

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I am tired. I want to go home. I pass a small pickup truck. Red. It was there each time. But now I see it. Bold block shapes on the back, raised and painted white against the aging gold-rust of its body, remind me that I know what this is. My heart is beating in my throat. I ride up onto the grass, drop my bike, and run back to the truck. I'm certain it is waiting to tell me something, and I know that this is something I am supposed to understand. Something is missing.

&&&&

She sits at the kitchen table in the time of no-sound with the pen moving smoothly across paper. I point. Mouth moving, she says something. No sound but the ocean in my head. She opens a drawer and takes out a paper bag, hands it to me. Plastic shapes. All different colours like the bright ball with cut-out shapes like  or  . She picks one of the plastic shapes out of my hand and her mouth is moving. Whoosh, go the waves. I look back to the shape she holds. The colour of our table, the colour of the flowers that grow all over the lawn, the colour of lemon for tea. Straight with a hook—like this: —like the hooks on the fishing poles in the garage. At the kitchen table, she takes a sheet of paper from her

notepad and moves her pen again. She shows me the paper, holds up the hook shape next to it. Same. I have a crayon, so I try. My hook at the end always turns the other way.

&&&&

Letters. Now I know these are letters and I know what they are. I know my letters—they are just like the refrigerator magnets. Block shapes. I know them. I used to think the A-B-C song was a long collection of sounds running together. *Elemenno Pee. Kew Are Es. Tee You Vee*. But when we have the letters sticking to the refrigerator, she sings the song and I see each one alone. Letters. L – M – N – O – P...

I know, too, that there are letters in the books she reads to me. There are letters in *Mr Rabbit and the Lovely Present*. She reads it to me every night, though Roger groans and she sighs. I want to hear it every night. When she tells the story, it is like a song, always the same. I see her head moving across the page, across the page. There is something here. I remember refrigerator shapes on the pages.

Refrigerator shapes in *Mr Rabbit*.

I know these shapes, these refrigerator-magnet shapes. They are on the red truck.

F – O – R – D.

It was then that Laura discovered a secret. She was on her knees, lifting winter underwear out of Ma's bottom bureau drawer, and under the red flannels she felt something hard. She put in her hand and drew out a book.

It was a perfectly new book, beautifully bound in green cloth with a gilded pattern pressed into it. The smooth,

straight gilt edges looked like solid gold. On
the cover two curving scrolls of lovely, fancy
letters made the words,

TENNYSON'S
POEMS

(Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*)

I can say the letters, but the *R* gets stuck, won't leave my mouth without sounding like OW instead of ARE (*And see that? I can say it in my head. Hear it in my head and not from my mouth. Head and mouth are not the same—like caterpillar and butterfly.*) and I think of how people laugh. Still, I need to make her understand and I need to say them.

F - O - R - D.

F - O - R - D.

All the way home.

Home.

F - O - R - D.

F. Ride onto our lawn, shifting weight until my bike leans.

O - R. Resting my bike—gentle—into the grass.

D. Goddamn that Mr Hassett, busybody, still watching.

She is wiping her hands on her apron when I burst through the door and bolt toward the kitchen.

'Jules, don't let the door...'

SLAM!

'Sorry, Momma. F—O—R—D! Momma! F - O - R - D!'

'And where did you get to young lady? Didn't I say wait?'

'F - O - R - D!'

'Good Lord! Look at you. Your knees. Oh, Julie Ann, shame on you! I can't get those stains out of white shorts. And blood—oh! I just scrubbed the floor. Where did you go?'

'Bike ride. Mommy, quick: F – O – R – D. What is it?'

'What are you talking about?' Her blue eyes so wide with asking.

I am out of breath. 'Quick: F...O...*breathe*...R...D.'

'Ford?' Still asking. Not answering. 'You're spelling Ford, Jules, but where...?'

'Back of a truck. Red. At the Knuth's house.'

Her questioning eyes brighten. She almost smiles until she looks down again at my bleeding knees. 'It's the name of the truck,' she says. *Tsk, tsk.* Head shaking.

'The *name*?'

A name for a truck.

'Yes.'

'Trucks have names?'

Now she does laugh. Her eyes glitter. She puts her hand over her mouth. 'Well,' she explains, 'it's not a name like your name. It's the name of the company—the people—who make the car. Do you see?'

I shrug. Still something missing. I say, 'But it's the letters, like on the refrigerator, like those.' I point.

'Well, yes, those are letters. And, yes, you're right: F – O – R – D are letters. Right. They spell *Foord*.' She draws the word out slowly and it sounds lovely, like caramel melted in a pan for apples on a stick: I see a smooth trail of golden caramel drawing out, stretching and extending.

'Fo..wd,' I say, trying to make it sound as nice. I can't.

'Right. It's a word. The letters make a word.'

Word.

Now, connecting. Connecting and trying to gather all the ends.

'Like the letters in *Mr Rabbit?*' (Except that my mouth says *Mistew Wabbit.*

Goddamn-it.)

'Yes. Books have words. Words tell the story.'

'And words in *Little House?*'

'Yes, words in the *Little House* books. I read the words when we have our story-time.

They tell the story.'

Words. There is something in this. This thing. This letters-and-words thing. Yes, letters make words, I think.

'Alright, young lady,' she says, suddenly tired, 'March into that bathroom. A bath in the middle of the day, such shame. And no crying when I scrub those knees. Do you hear me?'

As promised, she does scrub, and the water is steaming (to stop infection, she says). The water gnashes at my knees, my elbows, as if it had teeth. It stings, but I don't mind. I will read the *Little House* books on my own.

F — O — R — D.

(1975—thirteen years old)

: Diet

Jules had never known such a sense of power. Words ringing in her ears—words from the mouth of Adam Walker—turned from a taunt to a mantra. After just a few days of cutting back on what she ate, there was a difference. If not so obvious that anyone else could tell—
(Who cares anyway? This is my secret. I feel it.)

—Jules felt it. Felt that she was just beginning to grow as slender as Arlis. Arlis's friends had always been so envious of her tall and slender body. From as far back as Jules could remember, the mothers of the neighborhood would say as much. Stopping at the Dairy Queen on the way home from the lake, Mrs Edmonds would always say something to Jules as she declined an ice cream of her own. 'Your mother is so lucky, Jules,' she would say, licking around the edges of Mikey's cone to stop the rivulets of melting ice cream from traveling down Mikey's arm as he sat and stared. 'She's just naturally thin and eats whatever she wants. Such a shame you didn't inherit her good fortune. You'll have to watch that waistline.' Jules would feel a lump in her throat where the cold creaminess had been. She wasn't sure why she felt a kind of guilt.

She knew that other mothers dieted, but what did that mean? For some, there were pills or little candies they took. Arlis's friend Jean always seemed to be taking something, but would often complain of not sleeping or feeling the need to smoke constantly—'Beauty

sleep, Jules, or, dropping the pounds? You can't have both,' she would say when she stopped by to dye Arlis's hair.

It was so. When Mary held her breath again and Laura pulled tight the corset strings, the bodice buttoned, and it fitted beautifully.

'I'm glad I don't have to wear corsets yet,' said Carrie.

'Be glad while you can be,' said Laura. 'You'll have to wear them pretty soon.'

(Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*)

Jules loved Jean for including her in the conversation, saying things to her that were part of the grownups' talk. Jean would even swear in front of Jules ('He's such an asshole,' she'd say about some local politician) and say other things that Jules's mother would not. 'Why on earth would Mary go and have another baby? Six? Don't tell me she's such a good Catholic she won't go on the pill. That's just bullshit.' Jean, she never used the hushed tones that other grownups used. Indeed, she very often would punctuate the more scandalous comments with a sideways glance and a wink to Jules.

In the beginning, just after Adam Walker had exposed Jules's fat to the world ('Hey, Jules, where you grazing this afternoon?') Jules had been angry, very angry at herself for her weakness, for her manifest and spectacular inability to keep from being fat. Suddenly, she was aware of every part of her body, seeming to live with her mind on the inside of her body. She no longer required a mirror. The bulge of her stomach tugging at a too-small t-shirt as she waited for the bus, or the discernible roll of fat which appeared as she sat down, or the chafing of her thighs—these sensations disgusted her. For two days after the

bus incident, she ate nothing. On the third day, Jules felt she must eat something. So she opened a package of Pop Tarts. She placed one in the toaster and pushed the lever to lower it, then returned the box to the cabinet.

Eyeing the familiar logo, Jules smiled, suddenly struck by how old she felt. When she was little, all she had thought about was learning to read. Back then, the world revealed its words at every turn, the way a strong breeze in autumn shakes from the trees a cascade of leaves: too many to look at all at once. She had felt it was important, urgent even, to learn the words and to understand what they were telling her. Even now, waiting for the toaster, she mumbles the legend on the Pop Tarts box aloud, recalling the first time she did so, years ago, after the F-O-R-D on the red truck unleashed this remarkable knowledge that letters together made words. **‘Kellogg’s apple-currant Pop-Tarts. A wonderful breakfast treat—grand for lunch and snacks, too.’**

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[In a whisper:] ‘Grand.’ *[A trifle louder:]* ‘Grand.’ *[Audibly:]* ‘G-R-A-N-D. Grand.’

‘Mommy?’

‘Yes, Jules?’

‘What is G-R-A-N-D Grand?’

‘Grand. It means...wonderful, I suppose. Fabulous. Really fine.’

‘All of that?’

‘Well, no, not necessarily. Not exactly. Those are words that mean the same thing as “grand”.’

'They mean the *same*? The *same*?'

'Maybe not exactly the same, honey, but very close.'

'Why?'

'What do you mean, "Why?"'

'Why could there be different words for the same thing?'

'Well, that's a very good question, Jules.'

'Why then?'

'Hmm...I would think, maybe, so you could choose. Yes, so you could have a choice.'

'Choose a word? —*Choose?*'

'Ah, just look at the time, Jules. We've got to meet your brother's bus. We'll talk about it later.'

&&&&

The toaster spring snaps; the Pop Tart peeks through the top, edges dark brown and smelling like pie crust, brown-sugar and cinnamon. Salivating mouth, grumbling stomach, eager hands. Hands *too* eager, heat burns, fingers reprimanded. The old impulse had been to feed the body, to always answer the call of hunger. And Jules is hungry now, so hungry she almost forgets the shame of the day on the bus and Adam's taunt. But it rushes back at her, just as an icy wind will consume a breath, and she stops short of taking that first bite. *This is not the way it is supposed to go*, Jules tells herself. *No, this is not the way.*

And there is a shift, just like that. Like passing through a door. And Jules now is no longer a child. And the ugly fact of the fat on her body is but a vestige of childhood. Like the

too-small yellow Easter coat her mother had wanted her to wear ‘just one more season’ (purchased four years ago, two sizes too big), fat was a thing to leave behind. And she is through that door now. Just one small bite of that Pop Tart. Jules rolls it around in her mouth, conjuring distaste. *This is food, nothing more*, she thinks. *Only what you need. Take only what you need.* She swallows and throws the rest of the Pop Tart away.

Childhood now dismantled, hunger takes on a new wealth. There is something of value in the emptiness of hunger. Not a hole to fill with those things that brought pleasure to a child—Bridgeman’s mint-chocolate-chip ice cream, rhubarb pie from the wild patch of the stringy fruit growing in the backyard, or her mother’s early-summer apple fritters. No, now the emptiness is not a *lack* of something; *it is* the thing, the thing to strive for, to dwell inside of, a hunger taking up a space, just as a room does. This new hunger is so severe it borders on nausea, on standing-up-too-fast-and-feeling-oh-so-faint.

The mothers in the neighborhood cluck approval: ‘There now, you’ve got your mother’s slight figure after all, Jules.’

‘Losing Your Baby Fat,’ they called it, like losing baby teeth. Effortless. A rite of passage you only have to wait for. But this hungering, this going-without, makes it something deserving. Pleased by the image in the mirror, she could imagine saying, ‘What? No, I haven’t lost weight. I don’t *think* I have. My pants? They are a little baggy, I guess. They stretch, right?’ when friends questioned. A game they all play anyway, as the size of her pastel Levi’s shrinks: 28, 27, 25. The disappearing feels so lovely.

You

: Seeing

If you should ever find yourself in a mirror and are caught unaware; or shuffle down the hallway at school and remember that your body used to move in an easier, unburdened kind of way; or see colours hanging in your closet that you're sure you never would have worn; or chew and chew your food but cannot quite remember how to swallow and have no idea how this will end; or find that your bed flips violently in the night but holds you to its plane like a rag doll sewn to the sheets, then...

This is what you do: when the sun goes down, find a window good at reflecting your image. Stand in front of it and zero in on your eyes. Walk slowly—your perception is a camera lens moving toward its subject. Only watch your eyes as you come as close as you can to that reflecting pool. This is important: see inside your eyes. There is something to re-visit there.

(1973—eleven years old)

: Clarinet

The bus ride home from school is too-long too-short. The clarinet case is next to me on the seat as far away from me as possible. I hate it. Want to swing it over my head and watch it sail to the back of the bus, want to drop it out the window.

He said we would *choose* our instruments. No, I did not choose this, did not—*do* not—want this stupid thing. A ‘practice horn’ is what that liar Mr Madsen called it. Plastic and dull. Ugly. Someone used it before and it is ugly.

‘When you get to junior high school,’ Mr Madsen said, ‘You will want to upgrade to a wooden clarinet—the sound is much better. That is, if you stay with it. But I see that your parents have signed up for the...ah, *least expensive rental.*’

Good. I don’t want it anyway. Better it’s cheap. Better it’s garbage. Better for me.

How is this happening? *How?* Lisa got the flute. We were going to play together. I don’t know what to do. But, there is nothing to do. I can’t quit. *If you’re sure you want to play an instrument, you have to stick with it for the whole year—we have to sign up for the year and pay every month; I won’t tell your father you quit and then he has to keep paying.*

I heard them, *him and her*, talking about it last week when they thought I was asleep. These nighttime Johnny-Carson-show conversations they think I can’t hear. But I can, notwithstanding the rustle-rustle of the newspaper behind which he hides.

Anyway, I can't say 'clarinet.' Everyone will laugh when I say it: CLAIWINET. Try now, Stupid. Form the sounds—not out loud, Stupid—in your head.

CLAIW...

CLAIW...WA...WA...

Stupid mouth!

Hear someone else say it, say it the right way: CLAIRINET...CLAIR... 'R.'

RUH. RUH. You can say it, you *have* to say it.

(1976—fourteen years old)

: Disco Ball

The ceiling of the school gym is festooned with spiraling ropes of crepe paper. They wave to the rhythms of large, oscillating fans positioned on the floor. As if to say, *Look, it's not so bad. Come and dance.* But the girls' bodies, pressed against the wall, overlap one another. They look like so many dresses of a similar variety pushed too close together in a closet. *Pick me. Please pick me.* And the boys on the other side of the gym claim their own space with wide stances and arms folded across their chests.

Jules and her friends had been dropped at Christine's house before the dance. Christine lived out of town, close to school. Lisa, Cheryl, Nancy, and Jules shared a fascination with Christine—she smoked cigarettes and drank instant coffee. She took art classes and wore clothes from the Salvation Army. Since Jules had become thin, Christine noticed they were in the same English class and struck up a conversation one day before class started.

'Did you do that bullshit essay?'

Jules wasn't entirely sure she was talking to her. 'Uh...me? Oh, right. I. Well. Yes. I mean, sure. Yes.' She tried to sound neutral.

'Of course you did, Jules. So did I. In fact, I wrote a kick-ass essay. Lundquist isn't going to know what to make of it.'

Jules smiled. Everyone saw how Mr Lundquist's upper lip grew moist when he bent over to read anything Christine wrote. His hands shook a bit and he cleared his throat before speaking to her. Jules knew, too, that Christine was a good writer. Her poems were always chosen for the school literary magazine. No one knew what they meant.

'Instead,' said Christine, 'of arguing whether George's actions toward Lenny were cruel or noble, I posited that anyone who would appropriate such adjectives as "cruel" or "noble," to define George has no idea what Steinbeck was getting at.' She laughed.

Christine used words like *appropriate* and *posited*. And *kick-ass*.

'Hey, you dropped a ton of weight, right?'

'I don't know. I guess.'

'Dexatrim?'

'What?'

'Are you taking Dexatrim?' She asked a little too loudly, as if Jules couldn't hear.

'No. What is that?'

'Oh, Christ. It's only the greatest thing in the world. My sister says it's better than Speed and she would know. You take a couple of Dexatrim and all you want to do is drink coffee and smoke. Plus, you can get your homework done in, you know, half the time. What are you? Size 3?'

'No. Just a 5.'

'I'm a 3. I'll bring you some Dexatrim tomorrow.'

&&&&

When Jules told her friends that Christine had suggested they go to her house before the dance, they had balked at first.

‘Why did you even say yes, Jules?’

‘I thought it was nice of her. What was I supposed to say? Besides, I think she’s kind of...interesting.’

‘She’s a burn-out.’

‘I heard she had sex with her boyfriend in the backseat of her sister’s car.’

‘Okay, but not everyone is just like we are.’ Jules wanted to defend Christine.

‘Besides, we’ve been talking a lot—she’s in my English class. She is *so* funny. She’s smart, too.’

‘She’s never on honor roll,’ Cheryl said.

Jules felt impatient. ‘Maybe she doesn’t want to be.’

Doesn’t want to be. Doesn’t want to be the good little girl we all want to be.

We all want.

We.

After Lisa’s mother made the introductory call to Christine’s mother (*Hello-Mrs-Erickson-I’m-Mrs-Quinn-Lisa’s-mother...Lisa-tells-me...girls-getting-together...Fine-and-you’ll-be-home?-So-nice*), it was arranged.

Christine’s bedroom was a converted attic room. The door to the walk-up was two short flights of stairs up from the entrance to the bedroom. The girls walked through shimmering glass-bead ropes hanging between the door jambs. They made a rippling-tingly sound, a gentle tintinnabulation of glass on glass. Like the marbles they played with when

they were little. Jules wanted to show the other girls this was what she had expected while they openly gaped.

‘Wow! This is so neat!’

‘I love your room—where did you get that lamp?’ Next to Christine’s bed were two wine crates, stacked as bookcases. On top, a lamp with a clear base. Below, the wire connecting to the bulb was showing. The shade was covered with writing—Christine’s angled cursive, complete with cross-outs and tiny drawings of soldiers, some with twisted expressions or broken bodies crawling.

‘I made it.’

‘You *made* it? What’s written on it?’

‘What? Oh, it’s a poem—“*Dolce et Decorum Est.*”’

Silence.

‘You know. Wilfred Owen.’

‘Oh! Right...’ Nods all around to fill in the awkward space of not-knowing.

Jules wanted to remember the words. *Dolce et Decorum Est.* Christine had been rummaging through her closet, and now emerged with a bottle of clear liquid in one hand and a stack of Dixie Cups in the other. Cups were passed. Cups filled. Jules noticed the design: swirls of mod colour combinations that reminded her of the dresses Goldie Hawn used to wear on *Laugh-In*. Her brother and her father would laugh—tremendous knowing hoots, and when Jules looked at her mother for an explanation, she would only say, ‘When you’re older, Jules.’

‘It doesn’t smell like anything,’ Cheryl said.

‘I know.’ Christine laughed. ‘Isn’t it great?’

The liquid burned a trail down Jules's throat. Her eyes watered, but she managed not to cough like the other girls.

'Okay, kids, let's get a move on. Dance time. Anyone need to stuff a bra?'

&&&&

As they enter the gym, Christine whistles long and low in mock admiration. The pastel crepe-paper ropes cast snaky shadows along the floor, flicking between the feet of the daring first dancers. Christine grabs Jules's hand and pulls her to the edge of the dancers. The lights dim and suddenly the very air is filled with moving squares of colour, bouncing off walls and faces, lighting up shoes with a rotating palette of blue and gold and rose and aqua. People are laughing. Jules begins to inch away as she looks up at the disco ball suspended from the ceiling. She backs into someone.

Adam. Adam Walker.

But he looks past her to see Christine, dancing on her own now to 'The Strangeloves' 'I Want Candy.' The opening beat unmistakable.

'Hey, Chris. Lookin' good. You slumming tonight?'

'Shut up, Adam.'

'Can I touch your ass?'

'Go fuck a cow.'

Some, those close enough, laugh, and Christine dances further into the middle of the floor. Jules has already turned to walk away, but Adam takes hold of her arm. 'Jules Hassinger. Shit. Is that you?'

She nods. Slight smile. Curses herself for smiling.

Just leave me alone, please leave me alone. Don't remember the bus, don't remember me.

'Hell, you look hot. Really hot.'

'Oh. Thanks.'

Fuck. Thanks?

'Course, there's a lot less of you.'

'Okay. Bye then.'

'Wait—you wanna dance?' Pressure on her arm.

'No. Thanks.' But he doesn't release her arm. In fact, guides her over to a corner of the gym where one row of the bleachers has been extracted from the wall. No one is sitting down and Adam pushes Jules against the wall. She resists sitting but he leans in and puts his mouth against her ear.

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks

'Dolce et Decorum Est'

'I know what you've been wanting.' Hot breath against her ear. 'I know.'

'No,' Jules says, even as something seemed to flutter in the depths of inside. And suddenly. What was happening? Why couldn't she think? Was this a good thing? Where was the breathing deep, and the smell of clean sheets and Saturdays at the library with Lisa? Adam's mouth on hers then, hands pushing her down to the bleachers. One of his legs is thrust between hers as she slides, her body not her own, down the wall. She cannot close her legs against his strength and his mouth is hurting her. The world closes in, closes down, as someone—*Someone?*—throws a jacket, a coat, over them. Adam's tongue finding its way

and Jules tastes mint and something else: earthy, base, elemental, something. *Something*.
 She cannot breathe, cannot find air. Fresh air.

*In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
 He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.*

'Dolce et Decorum Est'

He is groping, tongue pushing *pushing*. Jules finds breath enough to start to cry.
 Breath enough to find a prayer. A prayer to someone's God—*Please, oh please,
 oh please oh please. Please help me.*

He gropes at her breasts, rips the back closure of her bra. Still the tongue,
 suffocating. *Where was anyone? Where? Anyone?*

Jules struggles, intuitively bites down. Bites down hard. Taste of blood. Release.
 'Asshole!' she screams. Voice.

Into a vacuum of disco beat and laughter.

Adam slaps his left hand over Jules's mouth as his right hand finds its way under her
 dress. Tights ripping at the crotch and now something inside her—his fingers? *His fingers?*
 What else could it be, but the pain. The pain is breathtaking. It hurts so much she prays
 again. *Let me not be. Oh, please. Let. Me. Not. Be.*

Breathtaking. Breath. Taken.

Laughter. Shiny and cheap. Plastic for glass.

*...deaf even to the hoots
 Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.*

'Dolce et Decorum Est'

Jacket removed. Jules released. She stands to a world revised.

'Hey, Jules,' Adam says. There is blood in the corner of his mouth. 'What the hell did you expect? Isn't this why you lost all that weight?'

What did you expect?

Taste of blood in *her* mouth.

Still the laughter, but distant and ringing, like the echo of voices shouting down a well.

(1971—nine years old)

: *Little Black Dress*

Ma was beautiful, too, in her dark green delaine, with the little leaves that looked like strawberries scattered over it. The skirt was ruffled and flounced and draped and trimmed with knots of dark green ribbon, and nestling at her throat was a gold pin. The pin was flat, as long and as wide as Laura's two biggest fingers, and it was carved all over, and scalloped on the edges. Ma looked so rich and fine that Laura was afraid to touch her.

(Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*)

Arlis looks up just as the white Ford Galaxie pulls into the driveway, not quite the right angle, and bumps over the curb.

'That's our Jean,' Jules says. She has been 'looking out' while her mother 'put her face on.'

Arlis laughs, sunny smile white outlined in brightest pink. Jules breathes in the smell of her *White Shoulders* perfume, watches her take one last drag on her cigarette, makes the same 'O' with her mouth to blow out invisible smoke. Neil Diamond on the phonograph, singing:

Oh, I love my Rosie child,
 She got the way to make me happy
 You and me, we go in style
 Cracklin' Rose, you're a store-bought woman

You make me sing like a guitar hummin'
 So hang on to me, girl
 Our song keeps runnin' on...

Arlis turns away from the mirror, and she and Jules—and Jean too, who, right now, is coming through the door—belt out the chorus: *'Play it now, Play it now, Play it now, my baby...'*

'This is how you get ready for an interview, ladies?' This from Jean, feigning indignation. 'That Neil Diamond...' (fanning her face)—'What an honest-to-Pete dreamboat. But girls, we gotta cut out or we'll be late.'

'Cut out?'

'You bet, Jules—cut out, lay a patch, goose it.'

Jules crinkles her nose and squints her eyes in confusion.

'We need to leave—*now*. Get with it, Jules. Arlis, c'mon, shake a leg.'

'I'm here, I'm here,' Arlis singsongs. 'How do I look?'

'Hmm. Much too attractive to be a nurse's aide. Tell me again why you're getting a job?'

'We could use the extra money,' Arlis says matter-of-factly, glancing sideways at Jules.

'Is that the way Moe feels?'

Jean's question weighs more than the words she uses, and Arlis looks at her best friend. 'What?' her eyes demand. But out loud, she tries to sound cavalier. 'You know *him*,' she says. 'He thinks women have no place working, especially married women with children.'

'Well, you know me, Arlis, I am *not* one to agree with Moe—'

'Oh, Jean—'

'But, my dear, I guess that's the way it works, you know, the marriage transaction.'

Arlis groans. 'No. Not this again. You make it all sound so...so *sinister*.'

'Sinister, no. It's the way the world works. We give them children and pretend it's the hardest job in the world. We give them sex and pretend to enjoy it.'

'*Ixnay on the exsay*,' says Arlis. Pig Latin came in handy when Jules was listening in.

'I'm just trying to understand your point, that's all,' Jean says. 'If Moe isn't insisting...'

'No, of course not.' She leans in, her mouth out of sight of Jules, using measured words. 'I want my own money. My *own*.'

Jean looks muddled. Frowning, she shakes her head and says, 'Well, I don't get it, but I'm here so let's go. I suppose next you'll be setting up your own bank account.'

Glance.

Silence.

'Arlis? *Arlis*?'

'Hush now, time to go. I don't want to be late.'

&&&&

The car is hot and smells of cigarette smoke and perfume. Sitting in the back, Jules tries focusing on the landscape moving by in order to quell the car-sickness. Jean's erratic driving doesn't help; she has a way of pressing down on the gas as a kind of exclamation point to her side of the conversation.

'I told Bob last night that I was taking you to a job interview, and do you know what he said? What he assumed?' *Vroom*. The car lurches and yaws as Jean gives it a little more gas and turns her head to look at Arlis.

'I can imagine,' Arlis says, and she places her hand on the dashboard as if to steady the car. She turns to look back at Jules. 'How are you doing, honey? How's your tummy?'

Eye contact. *Not so well.*

'We'll be there soon.'

Jules nods.

Jean is quiet while she changes lanes, then—*vroom*—'Have you really thought this through? What do you know about this job?'

'I have my certification to be a nurse's aid. I might want to go back to school to get my nursing license, like my mom did.'

'You're a housewife and a mother.'

'Jean Schubel! I cannot believe what I'm hearing—you of all people! Didn't we just read *The Feminine Mystique*?'

'Don't get me started,' Jean says. *Vroom*. 'I am Betty Friedan's biggest cheerleader, you know that. But working in a nursing home? How liberating will that be?'

From the back seat: 'Mommy.' Almost a whisper.

'Not feeling good, Jules? Poor baby. We're almost there.'

Suspension. A pause. Jules feels out of control.

'I want to feel useful,' Arlis says.

One evening at supper, Pa asked, 'How would you like to work in town, Laura?'
Laura could not say a word. Neither could

any of the others. They all sat as if they were frozen... 'A job? For a girl? In town?' Ma said. (Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*)

'Okay, well, I have told you often enough you need to get involved in politics—we're canvassing for Bill Luther this weekend. You should come. I'll let you wear my boater hat. It's on the back seat. Jules, sweetie, hand your mom the hat back there.'

Jules looks next to her on the seat. She hands the lightweight straw hat to the front. Around the base of the flat top is a red, white, and blue ribbon. Printed on the white part, is *Look to Luther for the Future*.

As Arlis takes the boater, she looks at Jules's pale-pale face. A tiny line of sweat is forming above her white lips. 'Oh, no,' she says.

'Jules?' asks Jean.

'Mmm.'

'Hang in there, sweetie. Take long, deep breaths. We're coming to the nursing home now.'

Jean seesaws the curb—*clunk*—as they enter the roundabout driveway, past a grand wooden sign with gold letters embossed. The first word is the biggest, and it starts with a fancy-swirly *M* that Jules doesn't have time to sound out, but under that—'Baptist Nursing Home'—the words materialize like chalk moving across a blackboard to register as real words. She breathes slowly, concentrating on being still. Reading words matter more than trying not to throw up. Words are like that now. They are all along the road in front of

offices and restaurants: **Arby's ROAST BEEF Sandwich IS DELICIOUS**. Arthur Treacher's Fish & Chips. Two of Jules's favourites.

Words too are on the cover of her mother's magazines, the magazines that come in the mailbox. And Jules has much more time to study these words. And Jules thinks of them this way, these magazines with their reliable typefaces and the personalities she imagines are attached. *Life*, with its solid block letters dressed in white against a rectangle of red, seemed like a worldly aunt who had no children, and therefore treated her nieces and nephews like grownups, never speaking down to them but always listening—with *fascination!*—to their opinions. She would *hear* them, eyes wide, and say things like, 'Well, my goodness, how interesting! Tell me more.'

Newsweek, on the other hand, was like a well-meaning uncle (*not* Uncle E): harmless and newsy, but boring. An uncle who liked to talk at his nieces and nephews about politics and the news, about the way to be patient when fishing, and how to properly re-use waxed paper.

Of course, Jules loved *McCall's* best of all. The letters at the top of the cover looked so neat and sure of themselves, and there was something all-of-its-own about it, what with the extra upper-case **C** in the middle. And above the name, between the **M** and the larger **C**, in type so small you couldn't read unless you were very close, were the words **First Magazine for Women**. Hidden within the pages of this First Magazine for Women, among the celebrity news ('Debbie Reynolds Tells What She's Learned About Men, Money, and Sex'), recipe ideas ('25 Dishes for Those Days When You Hate to Cook'), and political interest ('Eleanor Roosevelt: The Drama of her Early Life and Marriage—by Archibald MacLeish'), was the

true treasure of *McCall's*. Jules never rushed straight to this treasure. Never flipped through the pages in a hurry. To do so would violate a principle of patience. (Besides, God was always watching, and if you seemed too eager to get something, you probably wouldn't.) Each page must be turned with care and neatness, taking in words at random, sometimes whole sentences, but never an entire page. Sooner or later, a page would be turned to reveal (*a curtain flung back!*) the pages dedicated to Betsy McCall Paper Dolls.

Almost every issue of the magazine had a couple of pages devoted to Betsy McCall. There she would be, like a friend Jules hadn't seen in a month. She was always ready to be cut out, and to put on a slip or an undershirt, white anklets, and black Mary Janes. Jules now remembers one very particular day. It was a rainy-day Saturday, when she and Roger were allowed to retrieve the Rainy-Day Bin from the front closet and play with the special things stored there for just this occasion. And on this very particular day her mother took a large manilla envelope down from the high shelf in her bedroom closet.

Jules was five. 'I have something I've been saving for a long time,' her mother said in a voice that was soft and sacred. Secretive. Only for the two of them. As she pulled out the pages from *McCall's*, she added, 'I do believe you are old enough, now that you're six, to take care of Betsy McCall.'

She placed the pages on the bed where Jules sat, legs dangling, in a gentle way, which made the gift seem even more important—a fragile thing that Jules must handle with the greatest care. This was the very first Betsy McCall page, and so, Arlis read all the words to 'Introducing Betsy McCall' before they would cut out the paper doll and her first outfits.

" 'This is a design for Betsy McCall,' Jules's mother began. 'Betsy is five, going on six—' ."

'Like *me*, mommy!'

'Yes, Jules, she is the same age as you. Now, let me read.'

' "Betsy is five, going on six, and she lives in a little white house with a porch and a yard to play in. Her mother and daddy and Nosy, her puppy, live in the white house too. Nosy is six months old. Betsy and Nosy and Betsy's friends play together all the time. And every month from now on they'll come to play with you too." Well, how does that sound, Jules?'

'Yes, please. Read more—read about the outfits.'

'Well, let's see. Okay, under Betsy herself, it says, "Betsy in her new slip with the lace."

'Oo, *lace*,' Jules repeated.

'That's right, and here, it says, "Betsy's sun dress that she wears with her little bolero and her straw hat when she goes to Sunday School."'

'What's that?' Jules asked.

'Bolero,' Arlis answered, saying the word with care, so that it lingered in Jules's mind exactly the way her mother said it. It is the same way Jules has memorized the lift of her mother's arms, snapping a white bedsheet to the air before pinning it to the clothesline to dry. Or the way she sprays the foamy Windex cleaner on the glass of the outside door, forming a *g* before wiping it away with a rag. Her arms, achingly white, and slender and strong, are in Jules's head most of the time. So too her voice as it repeated this mysterious word: 'Bolero. See? Right here—it's a little jacket that goes over a dress. That's why it's so short.'

'And we put it on her?' Jules asked.

'Yes, that's right, but we have to cut everything out.'

Jules frowned, looking at the little dresses with white tabs coming out from each of the shoulders. Arlis saw that Jules frowned and said, 'This is what we'll do: you can use the kitchen scissors to cut *around* the pieces, then I'll go through and do a clean-up.'

'Clean-up?'

'That's right. If you just separate the pieces, I can finish cutting on the edges. How does that sound?'

Jules nodded. It sounded fine.

&&&&

They are parked now, at the *M_____ Baptist Nursing Home* (Jules can read 'Baptist Nursing Home,' but not the long name in front) and Jean is saying, 'Well, good luck, dear, though I'm sure you don't need it. Like I said, I'm not sure I want you to get this job—who will I call when something crazy happens on one of our shows?'

'You'll be fine, and you know it. Goodness, it's not like I'm moving away,' Arlis says, and she pulls on the handle to open the door.

'Tell Mommy good luck, Jules,' Jean says. Arlis looks back to see the worried expression in Jules's shiny blue eyes. The lips so white you can hardly see the difference between them and her pale face.

'Oh, no. Maybe we should go home,' Arlis says.

'Don't be silly, Arlis. Jules and I will be fine. You go now. We'll get out of the car and sit under the tree over there. How does that sound, Jules? We'll sit in the shade and the cool grass will make you right as rain.'

Jules nods. Arlis, reconciled, says, 'Fine.' And to Jules, she says, 'I'll be back before you know it.' Jean turns the engine off and begins to open her door before letting out a low whistle.

'Oh, my Lord, Jules—would you look at that?'

'What?'

'What your mother is wearing.' And then a little quieter: 'Hail Mary, full of grace.'

Jules starts to ask what's wrong, but the car sickness is rolling over her like a tide. Jean sees it, too, and says, 'Oh, shit. Can you get out of the car?' But not waiting for an answer, Jean grabs at the *Look to Luther for the Future* hat, leans over the front seat, and deftly positions it under Jules's chin.

'No!' Jules groans, 'not your hat.'

'Sweetie,' Jean says with a smile, 'I promise. If you throw up in this hat, it will be the most useful thing it has ever done.'

And Jules does.

Leaning over the straw hat, feeling the burn in her throat, Jules thinks of the times—usually four or five times a year—of getting strep throat. First there was a funny taste in her mouth like sour milk and then she would get what her mother said was a 'tickle,' but the intensity of that would grow within hours until Jules tried not to swallow. Fever next. When the throwing up started, her mother would make an appointment to see the doctor at the clinic. If Jean were available, she would drive; if not, it meant taking a taxicab—an

experience so foreign and unsettling to Jules that she pleaded not to go, saying she promised she would get better. The sight of the orange car slowing at the driveway (*Town Taxi: Think Orange!* read the words on the doors) made Jules believe she was being taken to her death by a stranger.

After, when Jean wipes Jules's forehead with a scarf she has pulled from her purse, Jules asks, 'What about what Mommy was wearing?'

Jean laughs her booming laugh, reminded of the last sight she had of Arlis walking through the door to her interview. 'Did you see what she was wearing?'

'Yes,' is all Jules can say. She knows her mother looks beautiful; she always does.

'Well, until she got out of the car, I only saw her from the front. But her dress, Jules, it's a *cocktail* dress. *Backless*. Open practically to her *a*—to her bottom!'

This still did not make sense to Jules. She imagines the black dress, just a little bit shiny, with a band of satin around her mother's small waist. Yes, in the back the dress cut down to her waist (okay, a little lower, yes) the fabric laced with the tiniest pearls. She was perfect.

'Let me tell you something, sweetie,' Jean says. 'That big sign at the entrance? This place is called Maranatha Baptist Nursing Home, with the emphasis on *Baptist*. Say what you might about the Catholic religion—and, Jules, you know I don't agree with a lot of it—but Baptists? They don't get *jokes*.'

'Are they bad?' Jules asks.

'Don't get me wrong, they are God-fearing people, but they're also afraid of *every* goddamn thing—oops, sorry, Jules. They're just afraid of things they shouldn't be afraid of.'

'Like what?'

'Like everything fun. Dancing, card playing, reading certain books, watching certain television shows. They do *not* believe in having fun.'

'And her dress?' Jules asks. 'It's a fun dress?'

'You better believe your life it is,' Jean says.

Jules wants to hear more about Baptists and dresses that are fun, but Arlis is just making her way out of the nursing home. They watch as she waits, holding the door open, for a woman pushing an elderly man in a wheelchair. Jules sees her mother's face, watches the way her smile seems to light the air around her. It is not the little black dress or her high heels, nor the golden curls haloing her smooth white skin, nor her apricot lipstick. It is her. It is *she* who causes Jules's heart to ache with a longing to be as good as this. To ever be this good.

'I got the job,' Arlis says, in a casual way that belies the beaming of her face.

'I'll be damned,' Jean says, but she is smiling, pleased for her friend. 'Details, please.'

'Oh, Jean—that's the best part! I'll be working a three to eleven shift, so I'll be able to get the kids ready for the bus in the morning, make their lunches, and do some housework. You'll be able to drive me, right? And Moe will pick me up. It's my own job, Jean. My *own*.'

There is something about the way Arlis says this that makes Jules feel sad. Makes her feel that something is missing. Lost before you knew you would miss it.

Jean is saying something now about Jules, about coming home to an empty house. Jules can come to Jean's house after school if she wants.

'We'll see,' Arlis says, turning her head to Jules, 'but you're getting to be such a big girl now. I think you'll be just fine on your own after school, Jules, won't you?'

(1977—fifteen years old)

: Julie

And this is where the first breaking off occurs: crisp and clean as the *snap* of Grandma Ann's garden-fresh green beans, hot from the sun, dusty with pollen. Jules hears the snap and shudders. The core of her erodes, she thinks, in fast-forward time, a glacier weathering away at a rock-face in a moment, and pieces of her separate out, out of the body that felt stone-solid slim and clean. And good. Maybe for a short while only, but she'd been stupid enough to think it was true, pushing away the inside shards of what was too foul to be allowed out. Suddenly it seems that these unacceptable pieces had only lain buffered by the make-believe of school dances, the promise of a sweet-sixteen kiss, and the certainty of an ever-diminishing waistline. The inside version had stopped talking, stopped tormenting, as long as her nails were painted the school colours, and she could measure out her daily bread. Never enough, just a little (more or less) of what the body wanted, what the body needed. Eating any more would feed the monster living inside, the monster that divided her.

Jules holds her hands to her temple—she is trying to keep things in. It cannot be helped, though, this is not going away. The shuddering now turns convulsive, and that separating inside is building momentum, a landslide. This other self she can feel as easily as she sees those lovely clothes laid so carefully on the bed.

This other self she knew so well—no, *I* knew, and now *know*—hovers near the ceiling in the corner of her room, in the solitary and cold recesses of a place *she* has never seen. There. Up there. Watching with the old eyes of knowing, shaming me for denying her

existence. How can it be that the new, shining me (who is now she) could ever think she had replaced that fat-fuck?

She is down below, feet-on-the-ground, and her body is taking stock of the clothes laid out so carefully on her bed—the navy cotton twill pants (size 5), and the blue floral button-down with the poofy sleeves. This will be (would have been) the first time for wearing this much anticipated outfit. Just perfect for an Indian summer in mid-September. Julie's mother will serve apple fritters and acorn squash for dinner. Just perfect.

But less than perfect.

&&&&

She wakes to a jarring *brrrrrrrrng*, that tick-tocking of the lime-green Big Ben replaced for seconds by the unapologetic noise before she taps it silent. Still, she doesn't mind rising at 5:00 on a school morning, not for marching band, time with friends, and their easy silences. Not to mention the references made to parents, half-references, half-sentences—words could never capture the disconnect or the off-key of the thing. And, this morning, after she'd poured a cup of black coffee (zero calories) left on the stove by her father just minutes before, Jules turns to start her toast (sixty-five calories) but now, of a sudden, is startled—there is her mother. Out of place and time.

Just that. Ah, the sight of her so early in the morning, her thin robe wrapped around her tall, spare figure, and her eyes heavy with sleeplessness. She stands in a waiting pose, that is clear, and the concern on her face is enough to cause Jules to yearn for Now to go

away, for what had been her lovely-little-morning not to be put on the back shelf of the cabinet with the wine glasses never used.

And mother and daughter each move, in their way. A kitchen ballet. Macabre. And Jules's mother is saying, 'Lisa is dead.' Yes, Lisa is dead. Dead. Dead. And Jules backs up before all the *deads* are uttered.

'She was hit by a car last night,' her mother is now saying, as if more information had been asked for. Yes, she did. 'After she got off the bus last night a car on...' She paused, then started again. 'You know that curve on 73rd.'

&&&&

After band practice, they took the city bus home, Lisa and Jules and four of their friends. Thick as thieves, her mother would say—thieves bussed to a district twenty miles away where all the houses had two stories and large gardens in front. For the thieves, time on the bus was the cave or shell in which their inner lives found voice. Secrets shared. Boys, periods, and the perils of sitting in the back of the movie theatre. Not to mention—no, not to mention—unseemly relatives. Or, indeed, all the women not to be found in the literary canon.

Not that Jules's father cared. 'You ain't going to college like your brother, so I don't see why the hell you should care. Best get your beauty sleep. John Carr come into the gas station the other night, say he seen you standing at the bus stop in the morning. Say you looking pretty damn good.'

Jules's stop was first, 68th Street, where the mini-mart was; next was Lisa's 73rd Street, with its overgrowth of green and blind curve.

The morning before, Jules and Lisa had met to wait for the school bus together. The sunny chill of September had been like steaming coffee in a cool-white porcelain cup. And Lisa, glancing askance at the slender arms of her friend, all goosebumps in summer seersucker, had said, 'Jules, my God, you're going to freeze. And look at you. There's nothing of you.'

Freeze, she said. Nothing, she said. Nothing of you.

'Just listen to this, really, you know, listen. I read it in *Young Miss* magazine. Anorexia. It's literally starving to death.'

Young Miss, she said. Pretty clothes on pretty girls, she said.

She said, Pretty-pretty girls-girls, in Young Miss.

Young Miss, Young Missy-Missy (Prissy), don't we all want to be skinny-pretty? she said.

She said, No, she said.

I say-Yes, Young Miss, Yes-please, yes. Young-pretty-skinny girls whose hip bones should not be hidden away, I say. Corduroy hip-huggers in every fall hue. Yes, yes, pretty-skinny, match the season in your skinny-pretty-skinny corduroys.

Lisa sounded like her mom. Jules, though, found pleasure in the attention, satisfaction in the reprimand.

'No, seriously,' she said.

Seriously, she said. Starving, she said.

'Listen—these girls are, you know, maybe eighty-five pounds, and they think they're fat!'

'Maybe they *are* fat—or *were* fat,' Jules offered. Her stomach growls, lurches, a wave of nausea and pleasure mixing in secret.

'But it's a real disease. I really think you shouldn't lose any more weight, Jules, I'm serious.' Close to tears. And a voice that is throaty and on edge.

'I'm fine—maybe three more pounds, but then I'm fine. I feel great.'

Lisa pursed her lips, nudged her glasses up, and swiped away at the hair hanging over her forehead. Jules mirrored the nervous habit.

They laughed.

'I love you, Jules.'

I love you skinny, she said, so-skinny she said.

But don't disappear, she said. Don't disappear.

'Love you, Leese.'

&&&&

The morning is still frozen. Chilled by 'Lisa is dead.'

And Jules's mother reaches out to comfort her, awkward as a colt, and Jules rushes past, past the clumsy posturing. Her mother cannot wear the cloak of sympathy because, you see, they are Protestants. Midwest Scandinavians. And, therefore, are distant. As cold as the land. Their Bible teaches reserve (*Remove grief and anger from your heart and put away pain from your body, because childhood and the prime of life are fleeting*), and this attempt at

embrace is unpracticed. As unfamiliar as a tulip in the dead of winter. And Jules wants only to return to her room, to find somewhere to breathe in a house whose walls suddenly seem to be inching towards her.

She shuts her door and there she is. In a child's bedroom.

Snap. A breaking off.

And now she is *someone*, or part of someone, staring down at the beguiling promise of a beautiful today.

But *dead*.

As in *nothing*. As in the end of everything. The bus rides, the band practice, the way she flipped her hair off her forehead, the mothering, the nurturing, the protecting. Secrets of maybe-boyfriends. *He touched you there? Did your heart stop? Could you breathe?*

Stop.

Stop!

Dead. So never.

Never-again-here and so dead.

And there is an eye hovering, just hovering in the corner close to the ceiling. Watching. Eye as in *I? Is this the real me, that eye that watches?* Jules wonders. *The I watching? Is it the one to hide? The one that is supposed to stay deep inside?*

I, Jules thinks. I watch. I watch and eye-witness the dismantling of her, that one who thinks so highly of matching nail polish and school colours (Burgundy!). She is no more than a baby.

But now, Jules sees that there are two of her again. Just as in the green-clean summertime of her mother and fresh sheets on the clothesline. Cut grass and the heat of the sun.

Snap. A breaking off.

Jules tries to force an impossible concentration. *Are there two again because Lisa is dead? Or, are there two because there always were and always will be two?*

Separate but together. Jules whispers to the room, 'I am an *I* to the *She*.'

To the She of the living-moving-laughing-hoping-planning.

Snap. Again and again. *The clicking-snapping like a gun*, Jules thinks, *like the sharp and clear snap of Roger's cap-gun, and the smell-and-whiff-of-smoke*. Jules liked that smell from the red paper-rolls that her brother placed with confident expertise into the chamber of his Kilgore Buc-a-roo Pistol with the Inlaid Pearl Grip. 'Not for girls, Baby Jules,' he warned. 'Don't ever *ever* touch the Kilgore, or you'll be sorry.'

But the *snap* now is in her head. And the breaking off.

I thought I could keep the two together in a tiny-little body. Tiny bodies don't hold much, don't hold two.

The terrible ruckus slows, settles to a dim din of once-was.

Now I am I.

And what does this mean?

Well, for one thing, it's I because this is who I am, who I've always been.

And then this: *I can't wear that, can't be seen in that.* And she gazes in scorn—*No, not again. Fuck. I. I. I. From she. She who once-was. Once-was me.*

Push down, push down. That crookedness, that voice. Ugly, ugly voice.

She looks at those clothes on that bed, that childish bed with plush pillows and poor stuffed animals with flat and empty eyes.

But what do they mean? What does any of this really mean?

The walls are bright, bright with caricatures of colours, criss-crossing wallpaper ribbons of lime green and pale pink, all an assault to the eye. And as for the clothes—
her clothes—

(My clothes? No, her clothes).

A body was disappearing, an infant body, a little-girl body.

How could I have been so stupid?

Jules suddenly feels that she will be sick, but there is nothing there. Just a choking empty sound, and the shame that will no longer crouch in the corner of the room, posturing as normal. And there is a buzzing in her head, her scalp feels prickly. She sees flashes, blocks of brightness and—for no reason—those images, those photos in the book in her father's bedside drawer.

This is what he wanted to do...? To my mother?—(and never with but always to). But no, no, not this—

Desperate, Jules tries to think what to do next, how to be...

How to be—who to be—

A gentle knock on the door—

Do not treat me like a baby—

'Jules?'

Skin crawling. A bad taste in her mouth.

Like sucking on a penny. Please help me find myself.

'Jules?'

'What?'

Foreign it was in my mouth. As foreign as a land or time without words.

'Honey, I just spoke to Mrs Quinn and she said all of the girls are going to school today.'

Fuck this, fuck you.

'Jules, you don't have to—'

'Julie.'

'What?'

'Julie! It's *Julie!*' She shouts so loud she feels a scraping in the back of her throat. And tears are starting to sting.

I want only for everything to stop.

To stop. Where am I? Lisa? Where are we?

'Uh, okay, honey...Well, you don't have to go to school today, of course. Can I—'

'Stop!' *I cannot stand the sound of her voice. Or mine.*

In a whisper: 'What?'

'I *am* going to school. I *am*.'

'Well, okay. It's just that the bus will be here soon, so...well.'

Well. And fuck you for not knowing how to drive. You can't do anything for me.

'Okay,' she repeats. 'Can I do anything for you?'

'No,' Julie says. Hollow, gravel voice from a long time ago.

Don't, no, don't feel sorry for me, me-poor-fucking-me.

The phone again. Her soft retreating steps. Her words are muffled.

Muffled like someone speaking into a pillow.

Anger pulses behind brick-red eyes, anger at the way her gentleness so wants to mollify, to beautify, and to forgive.

Yes, to forgive. Forgive.

Forgive me.

Because what I touch turns bad—it always has—even if I thought I sent the shadow flying by becoming less of me. It didn't work, did it? No. It didn't work and now I see that. I see me like a curdling black mass of something burning. How have I managed to believe this other lie I took to be true, that I could be a single good person? I hear my father deriding, 'Wasn't that a stupid thing to do?'

And a shrug is not an answer, not an answer, but a not-answer is a yes-answer because, 'I don't know why you gotta be so goddamned stupid. Just like your mother.'

Now, in this little girl's room, Jules (*Julie? Is that my name now?*) morphs into a poor Alice, poor shooting-up-into-the-sky Alice. Enormous: *how do I fit in this space? How do I even breathe in this space?*

And yet, she somehow does dress, does go to school.

I don't remember how. And I go to school. I don't remember how. All of us go to school. I don't remember. If I can only be with my friends, I can surely be the right size, I can be small enough to fit. And we can hold each other up.

And at first, they do. They stand close, so close to one another. And these friends stare into each other's eyes, gazing without shame. *Here, at least, is a mirror held up to the*

way we feel, Jules thinks. *We do not need words for this moment—but then*, she wonders, *Who will have the words when we need them?*

&&&&

I asked Lisa once, ‘Do you ever notice how all of us in the whole world have exactly the same thoughts?’

She pushed her glasses up. ‘Read it,’ she said.

I opened my book. ‘The beginning, where it says, “I felt like singing. I wanted to leap and dance with joy, yet I stood quietly and watched the river running between the greening cotton-wood trees, for I knew that it is bad luck to be so happy. The gods do not like anyone to show happiness in this way and they punish those who do not obey them.” It’s like when my mom says we should never be too proud of ourselves. She says we should always remember we can do better.’

Lisa nodded, knowing. She was Catholic.

She and I had just begun *Sing Down the Moon*, our book-club book. We were the only members but it was still a club because there were rules, and they were written down in our *Paper King Memo* book. We took turns choosing the books (single copies in the stacks at the library would not be considered), and could read the book-club-book only when together. Lisa was a faster reader, so she would often stop after a chapter to let me catch up. Meantime, she would slide her crochet hook out from behind her ear and continue work on a granny square.

'I get it so much,' Lisa said. 'It's like last week in Catechism, we had to memorize Proverbs 21:17.' Lisa leaned in to straighten her back, hands folded. ' "He who loves pleasure will become a poor man." And then Father Brian talked about it in mass on Saturday.' She rolled her eyes. 'God forbid we have pleasure.'

Jules laughed. 'But you're so lucky—you get to go on Saturday instead of Sunday.'

'I don't like it one bit,' Lisa said. 'It ruins my Saturday night. My mother thinks watching TV is "slothful" after going to church. She watches her daytime shows during the week, but when I asked her why *that* wasn't slothful, I had to eat soap. It practically burned my throat.'

'I still think you're lucky to be Catholic and not Lutheran.'

Lisa stared at me, mocking disbelief, and we laughed. 'My mom just gets all heavy about it, like it's *so* everything, you know?'

'I guess. But you have all the neat stuff—holy water and rosaries. And that statue on your dresser of Mary with the snake on her foot—'

'Serpent. It's not a snake, it's a—'

'Whatever—okay, *serpent*. And, you get to kneel sometimes during ch— during *mass*. That is very neat.'

Lisa shrugged. 'I guess.'

'Will you try to teach me the rosary again?'

'Sometime, sure. Not now, though. Anyway, say what you were going to say about the book.'

'Oh, right.' I looked down at the book and began. 'You know, it's just what you were saying. The Bible verse. When I ask my mom if she's proud of me, she says, "When pride

comes, then comes disgrace.” So, what is that? It’s like what Bright Morning says in our book: “I knew that it was bad luck to be so happy.” She’s an Indian, and, you know, many gods and all that—we’re different, but I get it. There’s something *bad* about being happy. I mean, is this the way we’re supposed to feel?’

‘I don’t know, Jules. But I don’t *want* to. I don’t want to feel afraid of feeling good.’

For a minute, neither of us says anything. I feel close to crying so I wait. Then I tell Lisa, ‘Can I tell you something even if it sounds weird? Will you hate me if this sounds weird?’

‘Jules!’ That scolding tone of Lisa’s. ‘Never, *ever*.’

‘It’s just that sometimes, you read something you somehow feel you’ve always known. Maybe you had never said it, maybe not even in your *head*—maybe you didn’t know *how* to say it. And suddenly, there it is. It’s in a book. And part of me feels glad for that, but it kind of hurts, too.’

‘I know,’ said Lisa quietly.

‘Really?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ she whispered. ‘Everyone always thinks my family is like the *Brady Bunch*—lots of kids, serious talks, and everything works out happy-happy. Well, it doesn’t.’

‘Really?’

‘Really. Can I tell you something?’

‘Uh huh.’

‘I hate my mother.’

&&&&

Once, I was looking through the stacks of books in our hallway—the tiny square space which joined three bedrooms and a bathroom. The shelves were held up by metal brackets on the wall, three boards that sagged under the weight of the oddest collection. There were romance novels (*The Flame and the Flower* by Kathleen Woodiwiss—my secret sex education—and *Love's Tender Fury* by Rosemary Wilde) and modern-day scandals (*Helter Skelter*—I kept going to the pictures, the one with the pregnant outline of Sharon Tate's body), diet books and self-help, vitamin bibles and gardening tomes. And, of course, *The World Book Encyclopedia*.

Once, flipping through the alphabetically-tabbed *House & Garden*, I stopped at a page with an illustration of a plant with one branch 'wounded,' or cut almost through, then pushed slightly below ground and held down by a bracket of some kind, like a croquet wicket. And that wounded section which is under the soil roots and rises—grows—and pushes through to the surface, to the air.

'Layering,' I read. This is layering. I read on. 'All layering...should be wounded to encourage root formation along the stem or branch. Wounding...involves removing or breaking a bit of bark or the outer layer of the stem...Layering allows you to establish a good strong root system on the new plant before separating it from the mother plant.'

Wounding, I thought.

&&&&

'But, "hate?" You can't really-truly *hate* your mom. You mean, you love *her*, but you hate how she is.' When there was no confirmation from Lisa, I said, 'Right?'

'Nope,' she said, easy.

Silence. And then, she said, 'Do you remember in *These Happy Golden Years*, when Laura gets her first teaching job? Remember how she has to stay with that awful family because the school is too far away?'

'Yeah, sure I remember. I don't like that part. Makes me uncomfortable.'

'But it's like you were saying—you feel like you're reading something you always knew, but had never quite said, or even quite thought, and it kind of feels like—I don't know. Like "click." Does that make sense? It's like what you were saying, isn't it?'

'I guess,' I said. 'And so it's that you feel like Laura in that horrible house with that woman who was so mean? And would say such awful things as soon as Laura went to bed. And knew Laura could hear her.'

'Yes, that's how I feel when I'm home. With my mom.'

'She is pretty strict,' I said. Everyone in the neighbourhood knew this. We compared chores (Roger and I had none) and I soon understood why, come Saturday morning, we all had to wait for the Edmonds kids.

'It's not just that she's strict, Jules. She's hateful. Every time I read how Laura feels sick to her stomach because of the silence—remember the part where she's lying in bed and—I can't think how it's described, exactly, but somehow it hits her. It's like, bam! And it wasn't Laura's fault that Mrs Brewster—that was her name, Mrs Brewster—was so awful toward her. The first time I read that was the first time I thought maybe it's not me. Maybe I'm not the problem.'

'Oh, Leese—no!'

'Maybe it's her. But it's like you said, it's just so strange when something you read shows you, you know, your life.'

'Good afternoon, Mrs. Brewster,' Laura said as cheerfully as she possibly could.

'Just go in the other room and take off your wraps,' Mrs. Brewster said. 'Hang them behind the curtain where the sofa is.' She turned her back on Laura and went on stirring the gravy in the pan.

Laura did not know what to think. She could not have done anything to offend Mrs. Brewster. She went into the other room...

(Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years*)

You

: *Falling Off (An Interlude)*

But can you see things clearly *as* they happen? Sometimes people look back and say things like, 'It was as if I was watching myself in slow motion,' but I do doubt this. Retrospection changes things. That's when you see the slow-motioning of the *before* and the *after*. Maybe colours are richer in hindsight—your amygdala now a movie-camera lens, a movie-memory in technicolour. The *before* is pristine, is without taint (secret selves well-hidden, practically invisible), and will always be the as-I-wish-it-was. You watch the *before* like a scene from an important film. You want to understand *How could I have been lucky enough to be that?* You reside in the shame of *after* (secret selves oozing out of your very pores like a pestilence), with the agitation of *How did I let myself become this?*

When the questions, in fact, were never meant to be asked.

Watch:

You stand on the edge of a precipice—a ledge—whose strength in limestone and shale, having survived millions of years, is belied by its fragile appearance. Your feet are planted, unmoving, sure of their foundation. But, like the tree out of the earth, you reach upwards toward that sky, that blue, that life. And it is good, that life. So good. And you are good and strong. The fear that breathing too deeply is selfish (too full of life and too full of goodness) begins to recede as you turn your face to the sun, and the shadow that cautions those breaths ceases to reproach. You breathe. No shadow, just sun. So, while you waited for a time when the sun might defer to the shadow in your soul, your fear—that lurking

shadow—is not realized. Not gone, of course, but its presence is undetected. You breathe. Perhaps this is life as you will always know it; this is the *only* you. You breathe. You are grateful for this life, this knowing that you are both grounded in the ancient earth and yet bound for that Someplace Else. Finger-tip close. You stretch, certain (*finger-tip close*) that this fine life is yours for the reaching.

And yet.

Even so.

The fall that follows is no surprise. Because inherent in the fall (like something you were about to say) is the inevitability that this should happen. Trying to trace the *How* of it preoccupies a lot of the falling time. *How did this begin? How did I think just before? And how just before that?* By the time you realize you are still falling, the questions dissipate in the space you left behind.

All you can do is wait.

(1968—six years old)

: *Babes in the Woods*

Once upon a time,
 A long time ago,
 Lived two little girls
 Whose names I don't know
 Went strolling along
 On a bright summer's day
 Got lost in the wood,
 So I heard people say.

And when it was night
 So sad was their plight
 The sun it went down
 And the moon gave no light
 They sobbed and they sighed
 And they bitterly cried
 And long before morning,
 They lay down and died.

And when they were dead,
 The robins so red,
 Brought mulberry leaves
 To lay over their heads
 And all the day long
 They sang their sweet song
 For the babes in the woods
 Poor babes in the woods.

(Traditional English Folk Song)

I love bath time. And now that we are older, Roger and I take our baths separately. The water is so warm, and I watch my mother pour the pink liquid under the faucet, to add to the torrent and transform into white bubbles, honeysuckle and lily. She swirls her hand in the water, looks far away.

'Sing the "Babes in the Woods" song,' I say.

But she breathes deeply; heavy sigh. 'Oh, Jules, I'm tired. Quick bath, quick book, quick bed, remember?'

'Please, Mommy? Please sing.' She has sung this song since I remember hearing, and it is always at bath time, sending us both to her childhood, and to songs passed down and down and down.

'And tell about going to town with Grandma and Aunt Flossie—about the paying the bills every month. Please tell, Mommy.'

'Julie-Bud: the song or the story?' Pretending to be vexed.

'Both, please,' as I scoop a handful of heaping bubbles to my chin.

'During the time I lived with my mother and her sister, Flossie, it was always summer—'

'Because why, Mommy?'

'Julie Ann, now just let me tell the story...Yes, I lived with other relatives during the school term—mostly Uncle Arthur and Aunt Julia—and it was such a lovely time to be back with Mother and Flossie. At the beginning of every month, Flossie would sit to breakfast in the morning (oatmeal during the cold months) and say, "Clara Ann, do you know what today is?" Of course, they would both look at me, surprised expressions already.

' "Why, now, I don't rightly know," my mother would say.

' "I do believe it is time to go to town," Flossie said. "It's the beginning of the month!"

' "No! Is it really? The beginning of the month already?"

' "I believe so. Yes."

' "I declare! Time flies like the robins going south, doesn't it?"

' "It shorely does, that it does."

‘ “Well, to town we will go, then,” my mother said, “And what about Arlis?” They would tease me then by pretending to think through this until I thought I would burst.

‘ “I suppose,” Flossie would consider, “we’ll just have to take her with us.”

‘And so we went, Mother and Flossie in their white gloves and worn velvet cloche hats, me with my beret and red saddle shoes, and we make the rounds: first to the bank to cash checks and pay the mortgage; then we pay bills—Mayer Electric, Minneapolis Gas, and Northwestern Bell. We pay in cash, the exact amount, and everyone knows our names and asks about family. But the best part, of course, is when we go to Sentyrz Market. We are there, Flossie says, to buy “only the essentials:” soup meat at the butcher, carrots and dried beans, a loaf of bread, and Ivory Snow Flakes for the laundry. And when we were done, Mother would say, “Well, Flossie, I do believe we have spent all of our money.”

‘ “Well, now,” Flossie almost always said, “I think we might have one penny left. Let me check.” And she would open the snap on her handbag and withdraw one shiny penny. I remember it was always shiny—fresh from the bank. The three of us looked amazed, though, of course, none of us were. Not really. Mother and Flossie would then go back and forth with what they could do with the penny, and all the while I watched the two of them like I was watching a badminton game. Finally they would stop, and Flossie would bend down and hand me the precious penny.’

‘And what did you buy, Mommy? Always the same, right?’

‘Yes, one of two—I would get a Mary Jane or Turkish Taffy, and we would then walk home feeling like the richest people in the world.’

And now, after all that, my mother sings. She sings the 'Babes in the Woods' song. I watch her eyes, milk-glass blue and far away. I imagine her to be one of those little girls, lost in the wood, hungry, and dying. Dying and so beautiful that the animals are sad. I want to be that way, too. And somehow, the dying is connected to how beautiful the girls are, and to how beautiful my mother is. No one cries for an ugly girl. The birds wouldn't care, and the forest wouldn't be this place unless—

But it would still be so lovely.

(1970—eight years old)

: Artifice

Not lovely is the truck in the driveway when I round the corner of the redwood fence. It is our neighbor's fence. The Haubners. And I am already saying the words I will use to tell my mother about my morning. There is a free Arts and Crafts Class once a week at the park and almost all the kids in the neighborhood are pleased to attend. I am not. My clay pots lack symmetry and my paintings are grotesque, while Carol Haubner is always being praised for her colour choice and her uncanny ability to paint So Very Realistically.

We paint the old Warming House where we retreat from the below-freezing temperatures when the pond is open for ice skating in the winter. I love the Warming House because everywhere—on the ramp leading to the door, on the wide pine planks of the floor, and on the benches where we sit to lace our skates—there is evidence of years of use, a cross-hatch pattern made by so many blades on so many skates. If you look carefully you can tell the lines made from a figure-skate blade from those made by a hockey-skate blade, and you can see the double lines of a toddler's training skates. It always smells of fresh wood, no matter the season. The clapboard siding of the outside has been painted many times—not by anyone official, but by various neighbours when deemed necessary. No one agrees on whether the little house should be green or red, and so it is both at once. I want to fuse the paint I stroke across the clean white paper with the love I feel for the Warming House—the outline of the structure is lost to me and I abandon myself to a sudden compulsion to use colour to show how I feel. I tilt my head to observe the thickness

of paint wherever the brushstrokes are plain and bold. They are like the lines the skate blades make. Careworn.

'What is that?' The teacher stands behind me. Heads turn. Muffled laughter. Called out.

&&&&

Called out. As my mother used to call me out whenever I fell short. 'Shame on you, Julie Ann, shame on you,' she said when for instance, I tried to stir the cake batter. The counter was too high, she warned, but the phone rang, her back turned and she cradled the phone on her shoulder as she reached for her cigarette case. Brown leather, worn and soft, her fingernails the colour of cantaloupe. She flipped the top with one hand, reached for the lighter with the other, and I breathed in kitchen and tobacco and home. She wore an apron that grandma had made, the fabric covered in kitchen objects all orange and green: tea pots, cookie jars, flour canisters, breadboxes, cream pitchers, and samplers, all interspersed with bold pictures of flowers, their fanned-out petals and symmetrical green leaves curling upward. The cigarette meant a long time on the phone, so I could please my mother by stirring the batter—'So much to do, so little time to do it!'—and later she might sit for a bit and read a book to me. But the counter was high and the yellow mixing-bowl drew nearer the edge each time I went round with the big spoon. I was almost big enough when I stood on tiptoes to scrape the far edge of the bowl. But I turned my head when she called my name, forgetting to let go of the spoon, and we both watched as the bowl traveled closer to the edge of the counter. It almost seemed that I pulled it toward me. It wasn't supposed to

fly off the counter that way. Disaster. The call ended. The cigarette, put out. 'Shame on you, Julie Ann...ruined. I scrubbed that floor yesterday.' Fresh butter taken out of the icebox.

&&&&

And when the teacher stands next to Carol Haubner, she places her paint-stained hand on her heart, and bears witness to the Genius of this Precious Child. Others gather to congratulate her and gape at her glorious depiction of the Warming House.

On this day, though, we were each given a rag loom and bags of bright-coloured bands to loop and weave. Potholders for our mothers. I grabbed random colours. Carol chose meticulously, having made a quick sketch of a potholder with a checkerboard pattern. I didn't care. I would present this to my mother, and bathe in her praise.

I stop short when I see the truck in the driveway. Uncle Earl is here. Again. Why can he not leave us alone? My heart pounds in my ears, my palms gather moisture. My body seems to grow out of proportion. I am like Clifford the Big Red Dog who cannot hide behind the neighbour's garage. Uncle Earl works for the telephone company, and his truck has thin blue and yellow lines around the middle—like a belt, separating the top from the bottom. The top half is white with letters and a blue outline of a bell inside a circle. He himself is Mr White-Shirt-Man. Mr Truck-Man, and the nose of his truck juts out like that jutting thing that was once in Mr Truck-Man's pants.

I cannot go in there. I won't. I stand, then sit, blades of grass scratching the backs of sunburned legs. I pace, try to sing the Babes in the Woods song. But my stomach is grumbling, and I have to go to the bathroom.

I wait so long. Wait till the quiet is finally broken by their laughter, the two of them in the kitchen, with music wafting out through open windows, and the discord of her crystal melody dancing around his fortissimo. I wait till the clink of cup to saucer ceases. Wait till I can no longer keep the wetness from traveling down my legs. Wait till the sun moves. Till the truck rolls down the driveway.

(1978—sixteen years old)

: Sneaker

The air is so cold now that Jules can hold her mittened hand to her mouth and watch little crystals form on the cloth. Her mother told her to stand inside, that the bus would wait, but she cannot do that. People would watch her, watch her slow progress toward the bus.

This morning, the old fluttering hope of something good, of a clean, ordered life reminded Jules of the time before. And then it was gone. But she would try, she would concentrate to make that feeling come again. She hadn't been to school in two weeks, but now, now—*I will simply start again, get back to me, to how I am—I know this hasn't been me, and people are tired of waiting.*

It was true. She had been surprised—no, aghast—that first time in the cafeteria when her friends started laughing. Cheryl was eating an orange.

The smell reminded Jules of the summer, of before, and she thought about the last time she had met Lisa at the corner-market before the bus came to take them to school—their new school—high school. They had been taking the bus three days a week for band practice, and now felt sufficiently familiar with the building (all three floors) that the prospect of entering their sophomore year was one of pure excitement. They had helped each other with all the things that might make a new school terrifying, planning best routes for getting to class on time, memorizing and executing the combination on their lockers, and planning where they would meet before lunch to avoid walking in alone. First-day outfits were discussed, the process of elimination begun.

Finishing the last section of orange, Cheryl seemed to pause, to consider, and then quickly slid a large piece of orange peel into her mouth. We watched as her mouth, closed, worked around the orange peel, and then suddenly, her eyes working mischief, she smiled. Jules felt her face easing into a smile, but Susan and Rhonda shrieked with delight at the childish antic, and the table erupted.

Jules was repulsed. She hadn't been able to manage getting to school for two weeks, no one questioning the sore throat she said she had. Her voice had changed somehow, the froggy rasping of unpracticed vocal cords reminding her of that old silent time of hers.

Now it was time. She didn't want this to turn into her life, not after all she had done simply to feel a part of this world, this best-time-of-your-life world, makeup-and-dances, boyfriends-and-weekends, late-night-study-dates. And then there were the bus rides and concerts, tuxedos, taffeta dresses, and the orchestra pit. *My Fair Lady. The Music Man. Meet Me in St. Louis.* Early morning rehearsal. Rehearsal for life.

Snap.

Snap. Heartbeat. Heartbeat...Is that what this is? Please help me, oh, please help—

A breaking off.

Voices on the bus. I am on the bus. I am on the bus?

'Hey, Jules, lookit you—long time no see.'

'Hi, Jules. Someone said you had mono.'

Mono. MON Õ NUKE LEE Õ SIS. Kissing disease. So laughter. Kissing? Who would want to...?

Funnysofunny. I would laugh, too, if I could.

Laughter.

No words. *I have no words.*

Jules finds a seat as quickly as she can.

Sit, just sit. Don't talk. Don't look. No looking. Please don't look at me, oh please don't look, please—

Voices from behind: out-of-sync familiar, eons-ago mockish. Jeune. Puerile.

'Hey, Adam, isn't that—' Words we cannot hear. *We are she and I again, the overlap of that one who is supposed to stay inside padlocking out the skinny one. Where has she gone?*

'Yeah, she used to be—' *And words we cannot hear, cannot hear, cannot bear, the buzz-buzz of bees. Busy.*

Words. Words. Leucocholic buzz.

'Hey, man, check this out—I heard that, when the car hit her, the impact was so huge it knocked her shoes off.'

'No shit? No way!'

'Seriously, man—one of her sneakers was found fifty feet away. You know, like, from her body.'

'Fuck, man. No way. I don't get it.'

'Yeah, that's because you fucking don't do Physics.'

'Huh?'

'It's torque.'

'What?'

'Jesus, you *are* stupid. *Torque*—you know, a force. That's how hard the car hit her—so *hard*, man, her shoe literally *flew*.'

'Wait. So, like, you could say she was *torqued*?'

I get it. Dr Larsen-in-the-houseslippers explaining torque. I get it. I get this sneaker of Lisa's hurling-burling through the air. Catapulting. Trebucheting-trepagetting. Accounting for the force, yes, but look closer (look-closer-ladies-and-gentlemen), for that's not all (oh-no-no, my-little-naivetiés), you see the word, 'torque,' also accounts for the location of the force on a given object. A push or pull, yes, but as a twist. Do you see? A twist—remember that. That's important. We write $\tau = r \times F$, which gives us torque: the vector cross product of the displacement of the force—the displacement, that's important—the displacement of the force with respect to an arbitrary origin and the force that's acting. Flying fifty feet? Okay, so that's the magnitude ($\tau = rF\sin\theta$, where θ is the smallest angle between r and F , when tail to tail).

Simple, right?

Laughter.

Snap.

You

: *Snap*

Here's the thing—the *snap*—you get that, right? Think it so you hear it—don't think it's not forceful—just because it's small.

Because—*snap*—that's the only word and it is a small word. Small. But you know it holds this force that can prevent you from breathing. Try to think after that snap, and all you see in front of you is rushing emptiness, a madness at break-neck speed. It is that place where the inside self locks the revolving door at the moment the two of you stand equally exposed.

Here, listen to this—here is another way to imagine it. It's like when you sit in a theatre watching a film, and maybe it's a film with a great deal of shoot-'em-up violence and crazy standoffs, there is that back-and-forth repartee between shooters, and you're only slightly aware of the way your eyes also move back and forth, darting to this shooter, that shooter, your eyes suddenly now the camera, the lens, back and forth, a deadly tennis match, and you are rigid in your seat because suddenly—suddenly—the outcome depends on you and you alone to follow the bullets, and then.

The screen suddenly freezes on one of the shooters, and you become the finger that squeezes the trigger, and as much as you think afterwards that you shouldn't have been surprised, the click—the *snap*—of the empty cartridge causes your brain to reel and twist.

Snap.

It's the loudest thing you've ever heard.

(1978—*sixteen years old*)

:Bed

Before the bed moves at all, it is me who moves, whose body jerks that spastic myoclonus thing—I know it's angling around the corner of my sagging heart, easing into the fabric of the fitted sheet. I know this like the way we know we are about to sneeze or about to cry. But it takes its time, insinuating movement through tremoring threads attached to the mattress. They tingle the perimeter of my body, but I know I have no proof. Like whatever my mother does to the clock—or even what it does on its own—only *I* know. Yes, only I know.

And something is going to happen, that too, only I know. Something. Something like a nighttime shoe-dream slow-motioning in the air. A shoe with its tumbling, breezing machinations. Floating, spiraling, and somersaulting, then dipping, plummeting, against a background sky morphing from azure, then glaucous to griseous, as the shoe slues and drops, a flight gone awry. And the sky complying is, now perse, then indigo. Going from slate to sable.

At last the shoe arrives, welcome at first but then, detested—familiarity un.masks, unveils the shoe. And now I dread the shoe before I welcome the shoe before I hate the shoe.

And then I dread the sleep.

And then I dread the thinking about the sleep.

It is not my version.

It is the truth.

Spinning reality makes my heart beat fast. I cycle what I know to be true over and over—that I am alone in this world of warped time and must keep it to myself, tuck it in my pocket next to the silent time that was the one good time.

You

: Lying

And what you (yes, you) must understand as well is that the clocks tell the time but not the truth. No matter what you thought before, you must now understand that they have faces for a reason, just as people who are assholes have faces, which is because there is a behind-the-face that you cannot begin to comprehend, and if you could you would be fucked anyway because the behind-the-face is so aware of you thinking you understand that it will fuck with your brain even more. And there's the irony, isn't it? Your very striving to understand the mechanics—to piece together a logical explanation—a *formula*—to account for how the clock is manipulating time now (*If I know it to be 5:30 in the morning and the face says '2:39,' I know to add three hours fifty-one minutes*) it will only undo you in the end by switching up its quartz crystal oscillator's piezoelectricity. And it's not that there's any secrecy to this, any covert agenda on the part of the clock: it doesn't give a fuck whether you know or not, which is why those electric synapses will strike you in the back or in the ass or in the neck or wherever—when the time is being altered.

Which it always is.

(1978—*sixteen years old*)

: A.W.

A.W. is on the prowl, scouting, scouring, for me. I know his schedule, know the trails along which he lurks and loiters. I have only one class with him. A mix of juniors and seniors. He stretches his ego and finds a way to adapt better than the others. I recognize the joke he is hawking but I lose my voice in his presence—like shouting into a conflagration. Impotence.

She—I—

I...

I always do this. Anger wins out in the space of me, but I am slack when he breaks the boundary between what is bright and clean from somewhere in my life (—in *my* life? *Mine? Her* life?—) and what is on that other side of the redwood fence between my backyard and the neighbor's.

Our eyes connect in the hall, he pierces through my prayers to make-it-all-go-away and exposes the fraud that she—

that I—*that I...*

am. That I am.

I am that.

On the bus one day. A.W. and his asshole entourage. Training has been cancelled and jocks abound. Her skin—*my skin*—is crawling. Too many people make the chaos shimmer and vibrate, like the late-late autumn downing of the sun. Unnatural. Unbearable. Get on the bus, I tell myself, just get on the bus and look away. She—

I—do. I do look away, mini-stepping to find an empty seat. Right there, there is one. Lean into, but no, someone pushes my back forward, forward with force, no mistake there. I keep getting pushed farther and farther back, momentum having its day, until landing in the last seat of the bus. A.W. Of course. Oh, dear God, let me please not be here, please. Not here. *Please.* Not.

Not here.

Not her.

But he is all encompassing, all inviting-insisting, as his buddies push her into that last seat on the bus. He is unzipping his jeans and the realization of what this will become arrives full-force. Something in her eyes warns him and he slaps a thick-fingered hand over her mouth.

‘Not a word, you got it? You don’t fucking say a word or make a sound. Most of the team would have a go at you if I tell them to, so you don’t say a fucking word unless you don’t want to be able to sit down for the next two months.’

She leaves me and it is just me.

He pushes my head down and something covers us completely, like that time at the dance, when she was there, when she—*when I?*—at least was courageous enough to fight.

‘You know what to do, don’t you, baby Jules? Here it is, here, Jules.’

Pushes my mouth on it, the smell of sweat and salt. I want to throw up. I cannot breathe.

I cannot breathe.

‘Open your mouth, bitch.’ And I do, because I am starting to breathe in these spastic heaves, ‘Don’t you fucking cry, Jules, or I’ll hurt you. I don’t want to hurt you, you know that,

you know. C'mon, you're going to love this.' And then his thing is inside my mouth—'You bite down, bitch, and I will have my guys take out your teeth. Fat girl with no teeth. How would that be then?'—and I know I have lost. I am done.

I am done.

Fat girl. Done.

I am floating. As much as I am here, I am up above, floating. *Snap*, hear the snap. Separate and be the she to the I. Save yourself or not. But let her hover up above if you cannot save yourself. Cannot save yourself. *You*

Cannot.

Cannot

Cannot save yourself.

He spasms. The thick heat, salty, rancid burst sickens.

My stop is next. The boys push me forward. My books come flying out the window as the bus lurches forward. Afterthought.

(1979—seventeen years old)

: *Scratch*

Therapists? Yes, there were therapists. Several, in fact. Each one, though, was the same one. A well-coifed, college cheerleader-turned-psychology major whose father had paid for grad school and who—in the first session—signaled Understanding with a well-practiced tilt of the head, but as soon as I said, ‘And then the bed flipped,’ reached for the emergency button under the desk.

She did, though, recover. ‘I have some graduate students in my Abnormal Psychology course, she said, ‘who would derive so much from sitting in on one of our sessions. What do you think?’

And here I am. On display for you.

But—try as you might—you cannot come in. As you examine me I might see in your eyes an orange flash of recognition—a goldfish flicker, a flashbulb flick, a lightning zip. But you only really have eyes for your notepads. And your scuttling pens are so many sideways-winding and scuttling sand-crabs, scuttle-scuttle, scratch-scratch. And your legs are crossed at the ankles just so, and the petal pink polish of your toes matches you nails, matches your lip colour, matches the little bow resting in the center of your bra. Cross your heart. Hope to die.

So, Why am I here?

‘So, tell us, what does it feel like to be you?’

Why the fuck am I here?

And slowly, because I cannot resist, I raise my arms, level, outstretched, to say without words, *Here, touch me. This is how it feels.*

Scratch scratch go the pens.

'It is,' I now say, 'the hottest day, in the hottest place in the world.'

Scratch scratch.

'And I am here.'

Scratch scratch.

'And—

'And I cannot breathe—somehow I cannot get enough air, I—I am here, in the heavy heat, and I cannot breathe. Somehow, I have to put on a thick sweater—an Irish fisherman's sweater, you know, the kind in the catalogues at Christmas. It is wet, heavy with moisture. But the not-breathing is worse with the sweater—you know, wet wool in unbearable heat.'

Scratch scratch.

(1978—sixteen years old)

: Tornado

Anticipation said it would happen. Like a nascent tornado in mid-summer Minnesota: a baleful, achromatic stillness pressing down in an absence of air. Grey sky darkens. The leaves of trees begin to shiver, and the empyreal grey overhead turns a deep viridian green. It happens quickly, so quickly—where was the waiting?

Winds pick up, roll over me like a body, and the rain pours sideways—in my bedroom, all of this in my bedroom. Civil sirens sound with occasional crescendos, peaking to pierce my ears. Then down again. But always back, always rising, always threatening—the sound and the wind and the rain—to raise their angry voices louder and piercing. Momentum feeds the forces of nature, and resistance is as futile as a moth flying into the torrent. And then.

The bed flips.

The first time it happens I am not surprised—the waiting said as much it was coming.

Still—no air. It is pushed out of my lungs as if a knee to the stomach, and the space between breathing out and breathing in stretches like Minnesota's Highway 7, flatlined over 190 miles of farmland. Sparkles of colour halo my head: I can see them, and I want to sleep. I sink heavy, but how can this be? The muscles in my body tighten. Taut muscles that my brain tries to will to spring into action: *Get off the bed, sit up and get off the bed*. But I am operating under some bizarre Ohm's Law: the voltage and the current of electricity in my

body—*Move!*—is matched beyond my control by equal resistance. I cannot move, nor can I fix the bed to the floor. Shaking, shaking, beads of sweat sprout from my forehead.

The bed .sd!f

Breathe, just *fucking breathe*. And BAM—I breathe.

I panic. *How can breathing be so hard? Where is breathing?*

Only grip the bed goddammit, grip—

Blood rushing forward inside my head, that thing with gravity.

Gravity wants me to slam into the fucking floor.

(1978—*sixteen years old*)

: *Ballerina*

What I find so troubling is the lying. My mother thinks she lies so well, about what she does with the clock. But *why the clock?* Well, it makes so much sense, for the clock, this oh-so-reliable friend (*TIMEX: IT TAKES A LICKING AND KEEPS ON TICKING*), gives us the *time*.

Time.

Time will tell. Tell time.

 It's high time. Time flies. Time. Flies.

Tell (me the) time.

Tell—*me*—Time, tell! Time ravages.

And:

No man waits.

But—the bed. It is worse than the clock with its non-time time, and is vexing—not merely troubling. Because, you see, I cannot think while suspended from the ceiling, back stuck to the mattress of the flipping bed like a magnet to steel. Staring down at the floor, I can hardly breathe, and energy cannot be wasted. At first, I don't think it has really happened. But then I wake with sore muscles. And why is my back aching in the morning? It will, I think, take time (*time*, right?) to understand this nightly resisting of gravity.

One afternoon, I crawl under the bed. I scour and scout the underside for what must be the operating force. If my mother is fucking with the clocks, the bed, too, must be rigged, must be mechanized or 'worked' somehow. My hands trace the blond wood of the bed

frame. I rotate on my back, tracing, tracing. Is it a lever? A button? Something must be here to effect this goddamn flipping. There are wooden slats joining one side of the bed-frame to the other—a nest for the mattress—and here, I think, is the best place to plant the device.

And could this device have something to do with the clocks going all haywire? Yes, yes it must. Of that I am quite sure.

There must, I think, be some way in which the bed will only flip if the clocks are fucked. A flip-fuck kind of thing.

I cannot quite grasp this, not yet, but I will.

&&&&

Back there in another life—whose life?—there was another bed. And this other bed was better. This other bed was not a war zone.

At night, when Laura lay awake in the trundle bed, she listened and could not hear anything at all but the sound of the trees whispering together. Sometimes, far away in the night, a wolf howled. Then he came nearer, and howled again.

It was a scary sound. Laura knew that wolves would eat little girls. But she was safe inside the solid log walls. Her father's gun hung over the door and good old Jack, the brindle bulldog, lay on guard before it. Her father would say:

'Go to sleep, Laura. Jack won't let the wolves in.' So Laura snuggled under the covers of the trundle bed, close beside Mary, and went to sleep.

(Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*)

Maybe not wolves, but *this* bed, this *present* bed, is not safe. Oh, to be in the Big Woods back then—among wolves but safe. Ma and Pa, and a sister's back to lean into. In a trundle bed.

The first time I read about Laura's trundle bed I was eight. There was a picture in the book: Mary and Laura making the bed, fluffing pillows on top of a patchwork quilt after the trundle bed had been pushed underneath the bigger wood-framed bed. I asked my mom what it was, but my backwards mouth said, 'twundle.'

'What, Jules?' she asked. Mystified. Ears burning pink, I pointed to the word. 'Oh,' she said, recognizing. And, 'Oh! I know.' She stopped ironing and left the room. I had tried with the word—and only with her would I try. Twundle.

At school, there was a hulking woman with glasses on a pearly chain around her neck, and a clipboard cradled in her thick arms who came for me during reading class. We sat in desks in the hallway and she pointed to words written on cards: car, far, ring, rut. She smelled like the mothballs in the cedar closets downstairs. Car. Far. Ring. Rut.

These, like 'trundle,' were words I could not say, though I could hear them in my head. The first time Mrs Golnick read aloud to us (the only teacher who ever did) I did not want her to stop. She read *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and every word seemed offered up as a treasured gift, a thing you knew to care for. But my clipboard-hallway teacher only wanted me to "Think like a fierce tiger, now, say "Grrrrrrr...," right?' Unlike Mrs Golnick, this *tigrrrrrr*-lady soon grew impatient with me, looking at her watch as grown-ups do. My reticence to even try would result in her sighing, and finishing the lesson with, 'Oh, my goodness, child. What is wrong with you?' Twundle.

Mrs Golnick only winked at me when words held back, saying, 'Well, I suppose there are some of us who talk too much and some of us who hardly talk at all. I would have to say it all evens out.' After she started to read aloud every afternoon, the reading voice in my head became Mrs Golnick's voice. Trundle.

From the kitchen I could now hear my mother rummaging in the cedar chest at the foot of my parents' bed. She came back with a thick, much-used catalogue, the corner pages curling upward like the tail of a happy dog.

'This is the *Sear's Wishbook* from the year your father and I got married—1957. I have a feeling there is probably a trundle bed in here.'

'Wishbook?' I asked.

'Christmas catalog. Because kids would look through the back of the catalogue where all the toys were and make wish-lists for Christmas. Now, I dare say we can find a picture of a trundle bed in here.'

'Did you make a wish-list?' I asked.

'When I was a little girl?' She laughed that way that sounded like music. 'Oh, honey, the big *Wishbook* was the wish-list.' When I frowned in confusion, she said, 'We would pass around the big book—you know, Flossie and your Grandma Ann—when it finally came in the mail, and then, secretly, just before Christmas, each of us would have a turn with it, alone, in order to make our purchases.'

'Puwchases?'

'Yes. And—well, it's not as easy as it sounds, of course. Because, let's say I found a mink coat for my mother or a sewing machine for Flossie. Before cutting them out to put

under the tree on Christmas Eve, I had to make sure there wasn't something else printed on the other side of the page. It was very careful shopping.'

'Shopping?'

'Mm-hmm. Now, let's you and I find a picture of a trundle bed.'

&&&&

And here is a bed, a little girl's bed that is not a happy trundle bed in a happy other-time. Here is a flipping bed that is flipping because I am bad and wrong. There is nothing, nothing that says, 'Here! This is how she does it!' And so I feel confused and my heart beats in my ears. Echoes. Panics. But I cannot confront my mother with this if there is no evidence. I had such high hopes. High hopes. High (*apple-pie-in-the-sky* ♪) hopes. Was that a song? If so, where did I hear it? And how hard I try to form thoughts and hold on to them (like with a picture in my mind: *Didn't I used to do that? Do that?*). The pictures should be connected and not go off in the margins where they don't belong. But thought-pictures inside my head are lightning flashes—gone in an instant—and I am only looking at the place they used to be. Forgetting.

I go to school so seldom now. I have no room in my head for anything but thinking about the clock and the bed. One day I am so angry with not solving this that I pull on my dirty hair as hard as I can and scratch my legs, these two fat legs, until comforting tracks of red appear, glisten up.

Glistenup and listenup, you bitch, you fuck-head. Yeah, I think, that's me. That is.

That. And the me of the she sees this as the truth. There is no hiding who I am now, even though people would very much like an explanation. How can you explain such raw and gaping ugliness? I look around my room, this room that has been frozen in time. A little girl's room, a sham of a room for a sham of a girl. A ballerina music box sits on the shelves above my bed. I open it and hear the remnants of what it used to play. I over-wound it years ago, sanctioning the spinning figure to a life of staccatoed slow-motion. First, I push the figure down and the music is stifled. Then I pop my hand up and she *boings* to an off-beat twang. Now I pull at her until she is free. Throw her against the wall. She's not mine anymore. I start taking things off the shelves—nothing here is who I am: not the snow globe or the dream catchers, not the dainty glass figurines of deer and rabbits, and certainly not the baby books. *A Child's Garden of Verses* and the *Betsy* books, *Pippi Longstocking* and *Dr Doolittle*, Beverly Cleary's *Ramona* books and the *Little House on the Prairie* books.

Little House on the Prairie books. Her—*my*—favorite. The comfort and clarity of a real family. Pa, who played the fiddle at bedtime, who worked the land, and made Laura feel safe and loved. Ma, who kept house, with chores assigned to her each and every day. Order. Order, however difficult their life on the prairie. Living on the land and through the land can kill you, but not if there is order, order and love, and waving grass, and a single penny for buying candy, and a Sunday dress, and maple-sugar candy in the snow.

But that is all for babies, not me, not for the me I am now.

I reach my arm back. And, with one forceful sweep, all my *Little House* books fly the shelf, like birds unfolding wings only to find they are too heavy with pain to fly. I wince to think how I had lined them up, just the other day, when I was baby Jules, and all the books were people. All placed in order. Order.

But order now is only for babies.

And the rage resurges, and I feel as if I am suffocating in this room, in this life, in this skin. Out. I want out.

But there is no place is for me—*Noplace*—as if a Place, a State, a Country I can point to on a map, say, *That's where I need to be to feel the notfeeling, please. Take me there.*

I claw at my arms, at the fat rolling over the waistband of the only pants that fit. How can I fit into this moment? How?

Later, sometime in the night-quiet, when the waiting is so heavy and the grip around my heart is like a fist or a brick, I think of the prayer my mother used to hear me say every night.

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

When I try to mouth them now, the words stick in my throat, until that last line, and it is all I am able to whisper, with a new kind of hope: *I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

I pray the Lord my soul to take.

I sleep.

&&&&

The bed flips.

(Late Fall 1978—sixteen years old)

: Clock Face

This is how it went with the clock.

Look at the front of a car (see the way the headlights sometimes slant, eyes of a predator—or lurking movement somewhere inside the labyrinthine grillwork between the lights). Or at the formations in shifting shadowpatterns projected on the floor through sunlight. There are faces. Grotesque and twisted. In pain.

But clocks.

Clocks have faces, of course they do. Wily clocks, slippery as imagined flights of stairs in darkness—don't think they aren't there. The metronome *tick tock* is just a ruse—the *tick tock tick tock* is a veil to mask the face. The face.

Is not a watching face.

Not. Watching.

No, not all faces are watching.

A clock is a telling face, a telling face. (*Tell me no secrets I'll tell you no lies, no lies no lies, no lies.*)

&&&&

Small hope. What is the smallest best thing I've known? Find the smallest clean moment.

Clean. Hold close.

Sit up.

Snapshot in my mind: my feet, grounded in ankle-deep icy water in the creek behind our neighborhood where I walk with my mother. I was small and good. Early morning June, summer stretching as long as stalks of rhubarb reaching fan-leaves towards the sun. The water in the creek is so cleanclear we can drink it, and we do. The smallest thing: not the dozens of tadpoles flashing-flicking between our ankles, but their shadows. Tiny grey apostrophes zippering in tandem with their mirrored selves. Summer's *Symphonie fantastique*.

Sit up. Feet to the floor. Remember the music.

Some days I cannot manage, limbs useless as a marionette with strings cut. When I am able, though, I wrap the evanescent hope around my shoulders, breathe in a smell of long-ago. The smell of books. Cinnamon. Acorn squash. Grandma's jellies on the stove. Sit. Feet to the floor. Stand.

And so it is one morning. I anticipate my alarm clock, turn to see that I am one minute ahead of its harsh announcement. 5:21. Yes. I will do this thing, it is not too late. Turn this around, be the me the me I used to be. Be *her*—I will!

Channel energy ahead, only the task at hand. (*Task-at-hand: who says that? Yes, Mrs Brown, lovely Mrs Brown!*) Suddenly, I cannot wait to see Mrs Brown, to be in her Honors English class. Diagramming sentences with their lovely logical parts ('Every word of every sentence belongs to some category. No word left behind. No, not even in Joyce, ladies and gentlemen. Behold with me the wonders of the compound predicate, the objective complement, the reflexive pronoun and—with its unabashed authority—the intensive pronoun. Not to mention the appositive and the predicate adjectives). The list went on!

I tap the top of the clock at 5:21. No need to wait until 5:22.

To the bathroom. Shower on. Pulling my flannel nightgown over my head, I flinch from the morning cold. My mother lowers the thermostat at night, but usually the heat can be felt in the small bathroom. My—*her*—father has been up for at least twenty minutes. There should be heat. *Shit, it's cold.*

But stay. Concentrate. 5:22. Just as before. Before it all. And now it can be as it was. Solitary morning time. Now. Listening. None of the usual sounds from the kitchen. Not the Coleman's coffee pot placed back on the stove burner, no jingle of keys or the muffled door opening against carpet, shutting. Silence. He has gone already then. That's it.

Into the shower. Why? Stay on schedule. Why? Keep to the Schedule, goddammit. The fog of *Whys* is an unnecessary distraction loitering in the margins of the Schedule. I know that when I step out of the shower, towel wrapped around me, and step (*no noise!*) back into my room, the clock will read 5:42 (*best day!*) or 5:43 (*move a little faster!*). 5:42. That's the goal.

I wince to look down at my rounded belly, evidence of the weakness of the past few weeks. Past few weeks. And this ugly inside-turning-out thing. Ever since Lisa—no. No. *Nononono*—that is over, be beyond, move on, everyone else has. No one talks about it. No fucking—

&&&&

'Jules! Hey! Uh, Julie, right? Sorry. Julie. It's great to see you—how are you?'

'Okay. Good, I guess. Fine.'

'Oh, God—wait till you see Janice and Brett. They are back together—again—and they are so disgusting! Tongues down each other's throats during passing time. I don't know how they get to class on time.'

'Yuck.'

'Do you want the vocab for History?'

'Sure, great. Thanks. Can I ask you—'

'What?'

'Do you think about her?'

'Who?'

'Never mind.'

'Jules, you need to just—'

'—Never mind, I said. Forget it. Please call me Julie.'

&&&&

Forget it. I will be the *her* of before. The her. Me. Not *me*, but *her*. Her of the little boxes, sharp corners, clean white order. Order. Order. Clean. Like time, like the clock. 5:22, then 5:42 (not 5:43, *not*). Dress—and—fuck!, did I lay out my clothes last night? Did I do that one simple thing?—But focus. Focus. It doesn't matter, doesn't matter, fix it, fix it, fixit. Fine. Dress at 5:42, to the kitchen by 5:54, hair wrapped in a towel. Fill the kettle from the stove, set to boil.

Filling the clean sharp-edged boxes of the day with all that is clean, good. Know this.

Two scoops of Sanka in my—*her*, goddammit—St John’s University mug, a gift from Roger at Christmas. Zero calories. One slice of *Fresh Horizons* bread in the toaster. Fifty calories a slice, but toasting reduces the calories (Christine had said the secret to this bread was the wood pulp added—fiber, they called it). Yes, I will lose that round belly, round without sharp edges. How disgusting to be so round. That fat person I am can go underground again, can stay inside while the she-of-me tells the world she is back and just fine, thank you very much. Thin and clean and good.

A litany of the day calms me. Meals planned, happy words to friends, only happy words, happyhappy, all happy for the clean little boxes of the day. Yes, and when I think of—

What? What is that? Something not fitting, like the mistakes you cannot predict—like cream in coffee or—a knock on the door?

A knock on the door. *Shit*. Hesitant, reticent. Then. Insistent. *Shit*.

I—*she*, please be *she*, not me, for Christ’s sake—turn off the water. Bile rises.

‘What?’ *Is that my awful voice? Yes, that unpracticed voice.* Again: ‘What?’ Like a heart-fist.

‘Jules—Julie. Honey, are you okay?’ Something is falling.

‘Yes. What do you want?’

‘Well, I...Are you showering?’

Oh, my God: really?! ‘Yes.’ A punch. Why are we doing this?

‘But, Julie, honey, it’s too early.’ Something falling, the giant hand of God, chiseled fingers releasing a cascade of crumbling rock. ‘It’s too early,’ she says again.

'No, it's not.' When I open the door to face her, she says it yet again, but the way you would tell bad news.

'It's too early. Not even 3:30. Go back to bed, honey. I can wake you in a couple of hours.'

Heart-fist.

It is more than I can bear. Turning from her outstretched arm that wants to pretend to comfort (my skin is crawling), I go into my room, shut the door. The clock. Life moves to the clock, we do not move time. We stay in time, keep time. If you watch the panels of the digital clock in the kitchen, you can see the way the number is waiting for its panel to turn at precisely the right moment, and you will always know that the 3 turns into 4 turns into 5. On and on it goes, to fit the perfect boxes, sharp edges. Clean. Perfect. Count on, counting on. This is how it goes. This is how it has always gone, with numbers meaning something, meaning everything. 5:22, waking, showering. 5:42, dress. 5:54, coffee and toast. 6:02, eat while I dry my hair. 6:15, brush my teeth. 6:21, check books, notebooks. 6:32, to the bus stop. Numbers to tell the time. Tell—tell me.

In my room, I see the light of the clock glowing red behind the numbers. I make sure I don't blink as I watch the panel of the last number fold in on itself to reveal the next number, for the 3 to morph into a 4. And it does.

3:24.

Still wet, still wrapped in a towel, I crumple on the bed. No words for this deception, this defeat. It feels good at first to cry, to sob silently into the pillow where hot tears mix with the bit of soap left on my skin and I can at least breathe in the clean.

(1966—four years old)

: Paul Bunyan Land²

Try as she might, there was simply no avoiding vacation. Not this year. Morris had saved the brochure since Roger was born in the summer of 1959. It was not even up-to-date, the brochure. He had picked it up at...where? The dentist's office? The post office? Discarded perhaps on some table in the break room? By one of his gas-station buddies? Goodness. At that time, it was easy enough to refuse. Who, in this heat, would want to go to Paul Bunyan Land? And with a newborn? The boy was barely three weeks old—Oh, my Jesus, why couldn't she remember his name? She was sure she had insisted on 'Anthony,' for this was the name if the baby was a boy. This had always been the name, from the very beginning, and she had even imagined (dreamed?) writing the name on the birth certificate. The Twilight-Sleep cocktail of morphine and scopolamine administered some time during labor seemed to linger through the ten days in the hospital.

Home didn't feel much better, especially with the heat. The baby—Roger, that was his name—was going ape all the time. And, for some reason—well, no, it was because this was what his name was *supposed* to be—she kept calling him Anthony. It was impossible to remember 'Roger,' only that this baby's name began with an *R*. As a result, she sometimes called him Roland, and then Ronald, just grasping for the right one. The air seemed to throb around her ears, and when he cried the rawness of it felt electric to her

² <http://www.datingdementia.com/2014/06/24/1960s-childhood-memories-remixed-saturday-june-28-is-paul-bunyan-day/>

nerves. The suggestion of vacation was repugnant. When he had first showed her the brochure, the *Paul Bunyan Guest Guide*, Arlis saw only the attractive couple on the front cover: young and vibrant, movie-star attractive, and doing—of all things—an impossible lift on water skis. How on earth did they get that photo? It was only the handsome, muscular man who was on skis; his partner deftly propped, feet to his thighs, arms raised high in a perfect V. Both smiling.

Really? Arlis had thought, and she huffed out a laugh. But the look on her husband's face made her regret this. He looked hurt. And again (she couldn't help it), *Really?* she asked herself. He wasn't the one who had just had a baby. The whole ordeal was miserable, honestly, and she knew already that she would be expected to have another one.

Out loud, she asked, 'You want to go water skiing?'

Relief unfurrowed his brow, that easy smile alight. 'No, dear, of course not. Aren't you sweet and funny?'

She couldn't stand this tone, this what-a-funny-creature-you-are way he spoke to her. He seemed especially fond of droning on about things which couldn't possibly be of interest to her, purely in order to rejoice in her feminine not-knowing, her endearing way of not understanding the difference between a piston ring and a poppet valve. But then, why should a funny-little-creature care about the inner workings of an automobile? Even if she did one day learn to drive, there were mechanics whose sole purpose was to fix the damn things.

'Look, dear, it's Paul Bunyan Land,' he said. I remember you asked your mother to take you there when you were a girl. I thought we could have a change of scenery, you know, take Roger—'

'And you know, Morris, I do not recall—*still* do not recall—agreeing to that name. It was to be Ronald, always Ronald. Who wrote the name on the birth certificate?'

'Why, I don't know, silly. The nurse, I suppose. But—'

'Silly.' There was a taste in her mouth from the word.

'What, dearest?'

'Why do you call me silly?'

'Aw, c'mon, Arlis. Dear. Roger is a fine name, you'll learn to love it, dear.'

Dear. Sillydear. Silly deer. Babydeer in the headlights. Baby Bambi deer, poor deer. Poordeer. Baby without a mother. Shoot the mother. Shoot. Shoot me. Please.

Arlis could barely stand this moment. Just get me an ice-cold Hamm's and a cigarette.

She stared coldly at her husband and he looked nonplussed. Baffled. Befuddled. Muddled.

With Anthony—*No, dammit, Roger*—caterwauling over her shoulder, she deftly opened the icebox door to extract a lovely cold beer and went looking for her ashtray.

&&&&

By the time Roger was six, Jules was four, and there were no more excuses to be had for not going to Paul Bunyan Land. Morris had recruited Roger to beg for this adventure, to see the bigger-than-life Paul and his sidekick, Babe the Blue Ox. And so it was her son, instead of her husband, who doggedly brandished the same, now well-used, brochure, reciting statistics he knew by heart.

And so there she, Arlis is. Standing at the ironing board. Jules is coloring at the kitchen table. Silent, always silent. And Roger weaves between table-legs and the ironing board. He is constant motion, like the tadpoles in the creek at the edge of their neighborhood, their darting bodies propelled tail-first. Instinct moves him, he doesn't look where he is going but rarely falters or bumps.

'Hey, Mom, whad'ya think: "Seated on a large live stump, Paul towers 23 feet in the air"—23 feet! Gee whiz, I gotta see that. Can we go, please? Can we, huh?'

And, every night, he reads aloud the stories about Paul Bunyan and his Blue Ox. At school, the librarian had helped Roger locate the two long shelves dedicated to Minnesota's greatest Tall Tale: there were *Paul Bunyan Swings his Ax*, *Tall Timber Tales: More Paul Bunyan Stories*, *Ol' Paul the Mighty Logger*, and (the best title of all) *Paul Bunyan, Last of the Frontier Demigods*. There were more, too, as many as Roger wanted. And now, right now, he was, once more, doing his best to read his favourite.

' "Well, any creature raised in Paul Bunyan's camp tended to grow to mighty..."

'Massive.' She knew it now by heart.

' "Massive prop...property—"

'Proportions.'

' "Proportions, and Babe was no..."

'Exception.'

' "Folks that stared at him for five minutes could see him growing right before their eyes. He grew so big that 42 axe-handles plus a plug of turkey..."

'Tobacco.'

‘ “Tobacco could fit between his eyes and it took a *murder* of crows—” Wait. What is that again?’

‘A *group* of crows. Remember we looked it up in the World Book Encyclopedia?’

‘Oh, yeah. “It took a *murder* of crows a whole day to fly from one horn to the other.”

Isn’t that amazing, Mom?’

She sighs. Knows she is done. Murdered.

(Early 1979—seventeen years old)

: Centripetal Force

Nobody heard him, the dead man,
 But still he lay moaning:
 I was much further out than you thought
 And not waving but drowning.
 (Stevie Smith, 'Not Waving But Drowning')

The bed flips. Again.

And one night, hanging, not-breathing but clutching, clutching at the not-breathing until—whoosh—I am breathing, I have made myself breathe because there is suddenly a small pocket of time, a secret envelope of space for thought, whereas, usually, all time in the hanging is empty of thinking, a break-neck speeding with only hanging on, and forgetting to breathe until remembering. It opens—this moment, this space—like an asterisk of light, like a gift, and I cling to it not blinking, if only it won't fold into the night and leave me hanging.

What can I fill the space with? There is something there, a once-discarded note, a scribble, a scratch in the margin of a notebook. 'The fictitious force,' Dr Larsen called it. *Fiction in Physics*. Reminds me of the imaginary variables—but no, that's not the thought to hold, it's the fictitious force Dr Larsen had spoken about with so much passion, even as the kids in first period faded before him. Physics' fictitious force. The force of what is not so. Force of story.

Story. There is space enough for remembering a story.

Tell me a story—

No. Think, goddammit, think. What is it I am supposed to remember? And then—

Centripetal force. Centrifugal force. Centripetal is the real one, the only one that truly exists —because things-are-seldom-as-they-seem on the surface, and looks-can-be-deceiving, and don't-judge-a-book-by-its-cover, and still-waters-run-deep silent and strong—

For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

Action: the bed flips—*counter-seeking force*—centripetal.

Re-action: my spine is cemented to the mattress—*equal and opposite to centripetal force*—reactive, centrifugal. But.

But

Not

Real.

&&&&

'Don't be fooled, my young scholars.' Dr Larsen shuffled, shuffled as he lectured, in his ancient house-slippers. (The first day of school Adam Walker asked why he wore slippers to school. 'And would you prefer that I wear them to church?' was Dr Larsen's response, establishing his only way of engaging with A.W.: Questions to questions left A.W. nonplussed. Faceless. Feckless.)

'I repeat. Do not be fooled by this fictional force called centrifugal. It will dupe you as the best fairytales do, will draw you into the slippery subterfuge of story, make you think that it is its own force.'

He stopped. A kind of punctuation to his pause.

‘But alas—it is not. And this, my friends, is where physics relies on imagination, just as storytelling does. You imagine a centrifugal force where there is an *apparent* force, or when, in fact, there is *inertia*.’ He scratched the word unevenly on the chalk board, his arthritic hands clutching the chalk holder. There was something primitive in the action, as if the board were a wall of a cave.

And who was it who wrote on a wall in a cave? Not a cave, no, but old and mysterious nonetheless. A different story from longer ago. It was something about a king and was funny at first. ‘Then the king’s countenance changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his hips were loosened and his knees knocked against each other.’ It was the Bible, yes, that was it. On the first Sunday of the month, there were verses to memorize. Easy enough, but like Dr Larsen’s shaky chalk marks, cryptic. Why were things so difficult to understand? The king made sense, as did a powerful king. But, not one whose hip-joints loosened and knees knocked. Why couldn’t adults see how funny that was?

Because it was a lesson. And there were so many lessons, so many lessons to learn. Like, cross your eyes and you will stay that way; or, a cold wind blowing in your ears will land you in hospital; or, eating raw cookie dough will give you worms. Oh, yes, and God hears everything, even thoughts.

And what was the lesson of the king? Well, you see, it was the Book of Daniel, and young and clever Daniel, of course, could tell the meaning of the kings’ dreams and visions. Indeed, he could even read images, like the hands writing on the wall, the hands without a body: ‘In the same hour the fingers of a man’s hand appeared and wrote opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king’s palace.’ Clever Daniel is, of course, so very

clever that he can decide that writing means, or so he says, ‘And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see or hear or know; and the God who holds your breath in His hand and owns all your ways, you have not glorified.’ By the way, this seems to me a lot, given that there are only three words written on the wall. Anyway, what is so wrong with worshipping silver and gold? Was it that silver and gold—those things that ‘do not see or hear or know’—filled the space in which he should have been thinking about words? Hanging from the ceiling, I have the space, must remember the space for words.

&&&&

I don’t remember the space for thought until the next night when the bed flips again. I slam (slam *up*, actually) to the above where the bed seems pinned to the ceiling, hair hanging down. The shock recedes to make a space for time to think, even if this space is artificial, is a paradox to how it felt at the beginning of the bed flipping. Like the bed, time feels suspended. It reminds me of the way needle-sharp pain in my ears used to pale to a shadowy ache after the orange-bear medicine: a space of time in the midst of so much pain. Then a memory of Dr Larsen floods the hanging space, and I know it to be familiar. And what else am I supposed to remember—or to cling to? Cling to the bed, yes, but I know now I don’t need to cling. I won’t fall, no matter how this feels. The bed is possessed of a centripetal force, but it’s okay, centripetal force is not real. It’s just a story. Or at least, it is like a story. If only I knew the story—

Oh tell me a story, Dr Larsen. Tell me a story. Oh fairytale me with physics.

And he replied, 'If you are observing a rotating system from the outside, you see an inward centripetal force acting to constrain the rotating body to a circular path. However,' (he continued) 'if you are part of the rotating system, you experience an apparent centrifugal force pushing you away from the center of the of the circle, even though what you are actually feeling is the inward centripetal force that is keeping you from literally going off on a tangent.'

Fictitious. False. Off.

On a tangent. Tangential.

Tan gen tial. *Marginalia.*

Off-beam. Apocryphal. —Meaning? I do not have to hold to the bed the way I do. That is to say, I need not hold on any more than Mary needed to hold on to the resurrected Christ. And all this is good, because I am so tired of holding on, so very tired of holding on, keeping a grip. I *can*, it seems, let go.

And yet, still—I cling. So, why?

No idea. None, as memory now floods, and Dr Larsen is resurrected: the house-slippers, the dirty reading glasses perched on that nose of his, the tufts of grey-fuzz hair dashing out from his scalp every which way, each one an exclamation mark, and all together haloing him.

(1966—four years old)

: Vacation

Arlis plans to leave at 7:00, having packed two days prior. Morris suggested they get on the road by five to miss rush hour, but Arlis decides they will leave when she is ready—more to the point, once she has readied the children. She doesn't believe in waking them. She feels that if a child has to be awakened in the morning, well then, he hasn't been put to bed early enough. Both Roger and Julie are, therefore, early-to-bedtimers and so, also early-to-rise-and-run-amok. Things are simply better that way; a more natural rhythm, and to such one should always pay attention. But people seldom did. Take eating, for example. Everyone she knew was on a diet, and forever pestering her—albeit good-naturedly—about the Secret to her Success. Jean and Mary were on the Sego Diet (*'SEGO Diet Food boldy and coldly and goldly reinvents Chocolate, Cherry, Coffee, Toffee. Behold.'*), drinking their meals three times a day. But while her friends flitted from diet to diet, Arlis endured no such fate. Five feet and nine inches tall, Arlis weighed but 115 pounds. Even when pregnant she gained no more than 12 pounds and had no need for those dowdy maternity tents. She ate only when she was certain she was hungry. 'I eat to live,' she would say, 'I do not live to eat.' The maxim left her friends both eager for details, impressed by the display of will power, *and* indignant when, at The Birthday Club, she accepted a large piece of birthday cake but never quite finished it. Jules was like this, too, she had noticed, never able to finish what was on her plate before asking, 'Can I be done, please?' Morris would often jump in and say, 'Well, little girl, don't you want to be a member of the Clean-Plate Club?' When Jules shook her head slowly, 'No,' he grew impatient. 'Here, now—' he began, but Arlis responded with

a whisk of the plate away from the table, sliding what remained into the garbage. A rebuke louder than words.

By 7:30, the traffic is backed up as far ahead as they can see and Morris sighs deeply, that somewhat throaty sigh of frustration. There are other sighs: the sigh a baby makes before yielding to the comfort of unconsciousness; the sigh lovers issue when passion is satisfied; the sigh when confronted with an image of undeniable beauty; but this sigh is none of those and Arlis refuses to apologize for the late start. This is what he wants, she knows, but there is nothing in the surrender of an apology for her. The vacation would not be abandoned, that much is certain; in fact, acquiescing on any point at this juncture would likely encourage Morris to assume all-is-well, and could ultimately result in unwanted lovemaking advances. *And in this heat?* Arlis thinks. *Lord, no.*

‘Well. This is what you call your rush hour on Highway 10. Should’ve taken 169 I suppose, but then those curves can get tricky. Here of course you got your idiots on the road who ain’t got sense enough to stay to the right when they think they’re out for a Sunday drive.’ He glances furtively at Arlis, offers a rueful laugh in case she wants to share in the disdain for Other Drivers. Nothing. ‘Jesus Christ, look at that moron up there—d’ya see what he’s doing? Weaving back and forth in the same goddamn lane—like what? He thinks he’s gonna maybe take off and *fly* over the rest of the cars?’

Arlis bobbles the sleeping Jules in the crook of her left arm while, with her right, she opens the glove compartment to retrieve her cigarette case. ‘Here, dear, let me help,’ Morris offers, but his wife has already deftly popped open the case, removed a Chesterfield from the pack, settled it between those melon lips, and flicks her Dunhill lighter to the tip. ‘Well,

anyway...' Frustration misses its mark, humour evaporates, and placating goes nowhere.

'Anyway, at least we're on our way, dear. Once we pass Otsego, we'll switch on over to 169 North. Then it's a straight line right to Route 27 and Lake Mille Lacs.'

Arlis turns the radio on, searches the airwaves slowly. As the static blares, Morris also blares, 'Now, Arlis, dear, remember I told you the best way to choose the station when the car is out of range is to turn the volume down until you've decided on the station?'

'Is that a question?' she asks.

'Well now, see here, Arlis—'

'Oh. It's not a question.' Static disappears like an extinguished flame and The Rolling Stones fill the void.

No colours anymore, I want them to turn black
I see the girls walk by dressed in their summer clothes
I have to turn my head until my darkness goes

Arlis turns the volume up.

&&&&

Four hours later, after Highway 169, after the Rum River Forest, after the town of Milaca, and after Route 27 with Mille Lacs National Wildlife Refuge and Father Henepin State Park (*Stop? Lord, no, I don't think so, thank you*), there is the check in at Chapman's Mille Lacs Resort in Isle. There are a number of brochures at the reception desk: 'Mille Lacs Indian Museum and Trading Post,' 'Charles A. Lindbergh Historic Home,' and, of course, 'Paul Bunyan Land & This Old Farm Pioneer Village.' Morris takes one of each. Arlis makes a note, girds herself for quick refusal. The woman at the desk introduces herself as Mrs Holmquist,

runs through housekeeping details—where to find firewood and ice, the rental booth for rowboats (“The lake is stocked full with walleye, small-mouth bass, muskie, northern, and perch,” she says. “Best fishing in Minnesota, you bet.”)—and hands the key to their cabin, number two, to Morris.

Once inside, Arlis surveys the accommodations like a fox in a newly discovered burrow. There is a slight frowzy smell that isn’t altogether unpleasant, in fact reminds her of her winter stays with Uncle Art and Aunt Julia when she was a little girl. Early mornings, her aunt made a pot of oatmeal on the old Monarch iron cookstove just before dawn. Uncle Art enjoyed a heaping helping (the man was 6 feet and 7 inches tall), then drank his bitter coffee, then was out the door. Arlis would pull the quilt up over her head as he opened the door and the ice-cold air rushed in like an invasion, a metal cold smell to the air. Aunt Julia would place the still-hot pot of oatmeal on the bed that the three of them shared—just feet from the stove—and the warmth would radiate. Under a safe padding of quilt, Arlis would set the pot on her legs, as Aunt Julia would place a generous pat of butter to melt on top of the remaining oatmeal, sprinkle on coarse brown sugar, and drop a dollop of fresh milk. She would give Arlis the wooden spoon she used to make the oatmeal and turn the radio to WCCO’s Morning Almanac with Clellan Card, all Scandinavian dialect. Arlis would wait for his trademark rhyme: “Birdie with a yellow bill, Hopped upon my window sill, Cocked a shining eye and said: “Ain’t you ‘shamed you sleepy-head!”” Usually Card would change the last line to one with a silly pun (“Hey—I heard you took a bath...*Matt!*” or “What’s the matter with Hazel, *nuts?*”) and Aunt Julia would cover her giggling mouth and shake her head.

Breathing in the Mille-Lacs cabin smell, Arlis relishes these memories for a moment before circling the rooms, opening windows, and taking note that, outdated as the

furnishings are, the cabin is spotless, and the linens fresh and smelling of morning. She has packed doilies crocheted by her mother's hands, and she places them on end-tables and the arms of sofas and chairs. As her mother always says, 'A Place for Everything and Everything in its Place.' Order, order.

&&&&

There are six boats in the circular 'lake' contained by a curb of concrete. Painted in primary colours, they are attached to each other by thick braided rope, emphasizing the nautical; on the bow of each little boat is a bronze bell with another, thinner rope which will elicit a discordant jingle when pulled. Arlis stands in line with Jules, whose cheeks are rosy from heat and who pulls on the bottom of her mother's shirt, rubbing her face into Arlis's thin, capri-clad legs. Both are tired, but Arlis is relieved that Morris took Roger to the Big Kid side of the Paul Bunyan Land Amusement Park to ride the Tilt A'Whirl and the motorcycles. The negotiating between the two children (Roger: 'But, mom, jeez—she's such a baby. She can't go on any of the *fun* rides. *I'm* not a baby.') exhausts her, but Morris's attempts to mollify her by reprimanding the children only compounds the situation. What was it Jean was always saying? When they're home, it's no different than having another child. It was true. There was a reason for men going to work and women staying home. 'Vacation' was considered by the neighborhood women to be more work than staying home (again, from Jean: 'We just got back from a week at Lake Winnibigoshish, and I need a rum and coke and a four-hour nap—alone.').

Arlis takes a deep breath, wills herself to accept the cumber of Jules's tiny body, so heavy a burden, so fast a tie. In Arlis an impulse to run, to flee, plays out. It is a fantasy which makes her a chimera—part mother, part wild horse as, with a glistening apricot mane, and wings of *Voile de Ville*, she bolts and flies far away, unleashed. She remembers when the weight latched to her leg belonged to Roger. Jules, weeks old, wanted to be held every moment, it seemed, and Arlis obliged for the most part. Once, in passing the door to the basement, with Jules draped over her shoulder and the dead weight of a knee-high Roger pulling on her capris, she imagined opening the door and hanging her toddler-laden leg over the threshold. One strenuous shake would send him tumbling, and free her. Anyway, quite why she cannot say, right now Arlis wants to put Jules on the little boat. It seems to be the thing to do when one visits Kiddie Land at the Paul Bunyan Amusement Park with a four-year old. No different from checking off 'laundry' or 'clean bathroom' or 'change sheets.' Besides, she is growing exasperated at her daughter's unfounded fears. Why can't she be more like Roger? Roger, whose lower lip doesn't quiver the way Jules's does when someone speaks to him, and who says what he wants and doesn't hesitate when...well, really, doesn't hesitate *ever*. Roger joins in games with other children no matter what they're playing, whether he knows them or not. And what on earth is there to be afraid of? All around Paul Bunyan's Pioneer Village, statues or models—cowboys and merchants—in old-time, authentic outfits are posed to look as if they are engaged in their day-to-day business. For instance, the model postmaster with wire-rimmed spectacles (so real!) permanently extends his hand to accept a letter from a farmer in his plaid shirt and overalls.

Jules had in fact stopped at the post-office door, refusing to enter. Roger, though, simply approached the two models and said, 'Here, let me help you.' And there was the model cowboy, so realistically clad in his leather vest, holster, and ten-gallon hat ('Jules, look,' Arlis pointed out, 'he's just like the Man in the Yellow Hat—you know, from *Curious George!*'). He was positioned on one end of a wooden bench outside the saloon, one arm extended around the top frame of the bench. When visitors sat on the bench, it looked exactly like the cowboy had his arm around them—Picture Perfect! Everyone was getting out their cameras and snapping away, and Arlis longed to do the same—the picture would be perfect to show the girls at Card Club. But Jules clearly did not agree. She had to be carried to the bench and, once there, started crying right away. Only when Morris had whispered into her ear that he would give her something to cry about did she choke back the sobs. As it was, the picture was a dismal failure, with Jules refusing to look straight ahead in a natural pose, instead forever gazing up over her shoulder to keep an eye on the arm of the cowboy.

The queue for the boats is now shortening and, as they finally get close to the front of the line, Arlis begins to explain that Jules will go on the boat: what fun it will be and, 'See? Look at the little bell—you ring the bell. Hear the bell?' But Jules looks terrified. Arlis sees the little brain at work, the emerging connection between standing-and-waiting and riding-the-boat-to-ring-the-bell. And, instead of joyful anticipation, there is horror written all over her troubled face. Then of a sudden, as happens with waiting, there they are, at the head of the line. The burly man with a cigarette clenched between his teeth clicks open the chain to allow in the next batch of boat riders. Jules presses against her mother's body, as if an

ocean swell has been unleashed beneath the boats, while all around her little boys and girls run from parents to the waiting, swaying boats.

And boats are small which should be as big as me but boats are small. I am too big for fitting into this boat. Please mommy no please here I am and too big don't make me please mommy I will pray I promise.

'Step on up, young feller,' Burly Man of the Boat Rides says. His eyes squint as they look into the sun, but Jules's short-short hair (Arlis was not going to do battle with tangles in the hair) signaled little boy. 'You want to get on one of them boats? I got a nice red one for you.'

'Of course *she* wants to ride the boat—isn't that right, Jules? Be a good *girl* now, get on the boat.' Arlis places her free hand (one is pulling on Jules's tiny sweaty fingers) on her daughter's shoulder, a grip firm enough to let her know that getting on the boat is not a choice. It is too hot, and they have waited in this line too long.

The man is nonplussed. 'Oh, well, sorry 'bout that—the hair, you know...'

Arlis brushes past, ushers Jules to the boat. Urging, nice-nice talk is over now, she needs to get on the goddamn boat. 'Come on, up you go!' Hyperbolic cheerfulness, a shibboleth of mommy-speak.

As the boats start up, six moving in a circle, Arlis positions herself behind the fence, her Kodak Instamatic poised. Jules comes around, her little face just visible behind the windshield. That baleful expression won't do for a photo, not at all. The next time Jules circles round, Arlis calls, 'Ring the bell, Jules. Ring the bell.' But there is no reaction, no

emotion to read in the face. Except for her eyes, glinting a kind of defiance. As if deaf. Quite deaf.

Snap. Arlis takes the photo.

Ring the bell Jules Ring the bell. I am big and bigger than the boat so small. Babies are here and I am not a baby any more. How do I even fit in here? I do not. Everyone sees this bigness in such a tiny space and I will not ring the bell like the babies.

I am so big. The bigness hurts but I will not cry and I will not ring the bell.

(early 1978—sixteen years old, just)

: *Word*

It is so peaceful sleeping on the ceiling!

We must go under the wallpaper
to meet the insect-gadiator,
to battle with a net and trident,
and leave the fountain and the square
But oh, that we could sleep up there...
(Elizabeth Bishop, 'Sleeping on the Ceiling')

The bed flips and, up here, up there, I cannot read. Far away are my beloved books: *I Capture the Castle, Of Mice and Men, A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, Martha Quest*, and all the *Little House* books. They litter my floor, flung in frustration from the shelves mounted on brackets to the pink walls of my bedroom. I stare at pages once as familiar to me as my hands—neither are familiar now—and the words, the letters, pass through each other, inchoate, like words thrown from a paper bag and scattered to the wind. I cannot command their stillness. I try to focus on a line, a single line. I blink, squeeze shut my eyes, and open them with fierce concentration. No use. Each side of the line of text moves, weaving towards the other side, moieties of rank and file. They glide, elide, skirr, slide, words moving into and over and through. Catching a solitary word is like stopping rain in its tracks.

It is a loss I wasn't expecting, the walls seeming to narrow when I felt there was so little room to begin with.

I spend hours now lying on my bed, rehearsing the night to come. As if I haven't spent a good part of my life here, in this room on this bed, I school myself on orientation: *I am here on the bed, the ceiling is above, the floor is below, the wall is to the right. Excellent. Now, touch the wall, hand down, touch the wall.* If only I can memorize this—if I can only memorize the *action*, and retrieve that in the night—maybe then I can right myself no matter how the bed flips. And there is a chance, a chance I can do this. There is always that moment, those seconds, before the bed makes its final lurch—yes, seconds only, but if I rehearse enough during the daylight hours, maybe those seconds can become minutes, hours even.

And it works—almost—as something kicks in and I slam my hand against the wall to the right just before the bed pivots. But I don't prevent it from the ultimate lurch, the harsh jolt as my flipping bedframe meets ceiling. And, in the morning, I cry. And, as I cry, I breathe in the laundry-scent of my love-worn quilt. I cry until sleep blankets me again.

&&&&

Later, today, there are quiet moments cocooned in my sun-dappled quilt. I like my quilt. It has a Sunbonnet-Sue pattern my Grandma Ann made for me when I was ten—each square a little prairie-girl figure wearing a dress and bonnet from fabric my grandmother used for making my clothes when, once upon a time, I was a prairie girl. There is the brown, fine-waled corduroy for Thanksgiving, with tiny cornucopias dotting the skirt; the blue-and-white seersucker sailor suit; the cotton jumper with bursts of bright flowers; and the ivory flannel flecked with red elderberries that was once my nightgown. Each square on this

patchwork landscape has its own textured, well-crafted characters. The quilt had been a Christmas gift from my Grandma Ann. Back then, outside was the gelid landscape of Minnesota's winter. The world had looked untenanted then, and without day- or time-markers, like an endless Sunday.

I called Sunday my 'so-and-so' day, echoing what my mother would say when she couldn't recall someone's name. ('Oh, Mrs So-and-so, from church, you know, the one with the sparkly cat-eye glasses,' she'd say, and I would picture a face without features—except for the cat-eye glasses.)

&&&&

Now, today, this afternoon, I am thinking about the words in the books that are still on the floor of my bedroom. I am rocking on my bed and thinking, *There are secrets in those books, I think. Secrets I used to know. Did I think I could have them forever?* My heart aches and there is a hot pain in my throat when I think of having pulled my *Little House* books from the shelf, the carelessness of hurling them across the room. What did they ever do to me? I imagine my mother saying, 'Shame on you, Julie Ann.'

Shame on me.

I pray the Lord my soul to take.

My feelings turn to grief and, as if in apology, I sit down in the midst of my scattered friends. I pick them up gently, one by one, and place them in order: Laura grows from a six-year old in *Big House in the Little Woods* to a young women in *The First Four Years*, when she is married to Almanzo. I offer a prayer of wordless thanks to each book. They humble

me when I touch them, smell them, resurrecting the memory of my intense attachment to a world they offered. I cannot believe I mistreated them so, when all they did was show me the family I wanted. Laura was less than perfect, but Ma and Pa loved her. And more than telling her this, they showed her. Ma was cheerful and Pa played the fiddle.

I put the pile down and choose one. *On the Banks of Plum Creek*: the Ingalls move to Minnesota, and Laura is only seven—‘half-pint,’ Pa calls her. My father has no nickname for me but still asks, ‘Well, don’t you think that was a stupid thing to do?’

The book I have chosen has beautiful, rudimentary drawings by Garth Williams: I like best the picture of Jack, the Ingalls’ good old brindle-bulldog, barking at the door of the odd house built into the side of a hill—

The bank rose up beside her till she could not see the wagon. There was only the high sky above her, and down below her the water was talking to itself...Then Laura saw the door.

The door stood straight up in the grassy bank where the path turned. It was like a house door, but whatever was behind it was under the ground. The door was shut.

The picture draws me in and back: back to the time of reading under the covers, the flashlight an orb of cynosure, exposing words as needed. And these are words I do need. For these are words that stay put on the page. These are words that do not slip toward each other like tectonic plates shifting.

I venture out my door to the empty house, padding softly, as if footfalls will rouse memories I don’t wish to awaken. There is a flashlight in the broom closet in the kitchen. I locate it by feel or intuition or memory, careful not to make noise; lately, I can barely keep my inside-self within the confines of my skin. Noise, noise of any kind, (conversation,

television, the snap of my father's newspaper after he turns a page, the sound of someone chewing, the faucet dripping) makes it worse. Thinking on it, especially after the bed flips, makes me want to peel my skin off—painted on, it feels too tight, hugging and squeezing me like an unwanted uncle. But stillness helps. Necessary movements only. *Step-step here. Move arm there. Movement for a purpose, purpose for everything.* Yes, purpose—dear, sweet purpose. And now, I stop again. Am still. To be still as stone may be the only way to fool the bed.

I turn on my torch. The heft of the Everyready flashlight is comforting and I want to cry. I remember why I am standing here now. Ah, yes, I was—I think—reading.

I turn off the light. And the glare of my flashlight illuminates a circle of words from *On the Banks of Plum Creek*. The book feels heavy as I sit on the floor, my back leaning against my bed (that bastard bed), and I open at the middle, where—

When that crop was harvested, Pa said, they'd be out of debt and have more money than they knew what to do with. He'd have a buggy, Ma would have a silk dress, they'd all have new shoes and eat beef every Sunday...

'Where are your boots, Charles?' she asked.

'Well, Caroline, Pa said. 'I saw Brother Alden and he told me he cou'dn't raise money enough to put a bell in the belfry. The folks in town had all given every cent they could, and he lacked just three dollars. So I gave him the money.'

Ah. Home. I am once more at home. In the Little House. Familiar but new, like the first smell of onion grass on a new spring day. You know the smell. Like the smell of Pa's new boots, if he really is ever able to buy them.

In our house, with both Roger and me, new school year meant *two* new pairs of shoes: a proper school pair and a play pair—sneakers. Roger never cared about things like that. When I was nine, though, I wanted the brown slip-ons with a gold buckle across the front and a slightly higher heel.

‘Jules, let’s stick with the Buster Browns. They always fit nicely and we know they last,’ my mother warned. But I slid my finger over the gold buckle, back and forth, and she sighed. I could try them, but she knew that the Buster Browns were best. I felt I had outgrown those baby shoes that came in a box with a picture of Buster Brown—too pretty he was for a boy, with his long golden page-boy hair. But Buster Brown had a dog, a dog called Tige. Tige’s sharp-toothed grin reminded me of Roger’s Danny O’Day doll. I sometimes feared that one or both might come to life to get me.

I wanted the gold-buckle slip-ons. I had to have them.

Walking out of the store with my grown-up shoes snugged in their box, I felt my mother’s insistence that, no matter what—blisters or breakage—I would wear these shoes to school for the entire year, salt the sweet of the purchase. Two weeks into the school year, the ‘gold’ chipped off the buckle and, on one shoe, it broke in half. The look on my face when she scotch-taped it every morning. ‘Not a word, don’t you dare,’ she would say, ‘Not a single word.’

(5 February 1978—sixteen years old today)

: Red

There is blood on the walls.

I'm not certain what it is at first; I don't feel startled or jarred. There is even something impressive about it, something grand or theatrical. A large print of a Mark Rothko painting hangs in the school library, and these walls remind me of Rothko's layers and layers. He has three thick bars of colour: red, black, and red-orange. But each is outlined, hazily, in red. And even the deepness of the orange, and even of the black, feels as if they each borrowed themselves *from* red. As if they, too, once were red.

Yes, red is everything, where it begins, where it ends; blood and birth and death. And earth. Apples on a yellow plate. And fire engines, fire hydrants, and blaring noises and civil-service warnings on a Wednesday afternoon. An uncle's orotund laugh.

When I check books out of the library, the Rothko painting pulls me in like the sweet smell of summer—it is impossible *not* to look at it, not to breathe it in almost. And here, on the walls of my parents' bedroom, the colour has the same effect. It shouts, 'Here! Look here!'

I see, of course, that it is blood. Of course it is. My mother's blood.

Minutes before, I was asleep. Some many *more* minutes before, *they* were asleep—my mother, my father. I woke to hurried conversation, muffled-behind-a-hand expressions of something. Was it fear? Pain? Subterfuge? At first it sounds like Indistinct Conversation

from a movie—background noise for a crowded restaurant, loud enough for ambience, but low enough to hear the main characters speak.

I sit up, and feel a sinking inside that maybe I am inventing a new time of day again. Look to the clock—2:47 (one to trust, my mother says, because it tells the **AM** or the **PM** next to the numbers). But the light from outside feels unnatural. And you can't trust anything in the middle of the night.

I am moving from my bed to the cold-cold sharp air, my hand reaching out to turn the doorknob even as I note the bulk that I am. I am surprised by this bulk and hulk of me, this protruding stomach that I am, this thigh-chafing, breasts-hanging version of who I used to be. I note it. I notice it. But only for a second. Something on the other side of the door says commotion and I go.

A scream woke her. Mrs. Brewster screamed, 'You kicked me!'

Laura peeked through the crack between the curtains. The moonlight shown through the calico, and thinned the darkness so that Laura saw Mrs. Brewster standing there. Her long white flannel nightgown trailed on the floor and her black hair fell loose over her shoulders. In her upraised hand she held the butcher knife. Laura had never been so terribly frightened.

(Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years*)

Leaving my bedroom I step upon something wet, thickly wet. Spongy wet is the low-pile carpet. My parents are right there in the middle of the tiny hallway. (Snapshot in my mind: I am small, three or four years old, holding my blanket, following everywhere she

goes. She won't let me come with her into the bathroom, so I lay on the bare floor—before the installation of the now low-pile carpet, now *squish-squishing* under my feet and, with my head turned, I can see under the door. It's just a small space, but then I marveled at the panorama of such a sliver of space. It was a tiny secret for me, a space opening to a bigger world. Comforting, because here I was, Inside-Outside me, belonging only to my private world and watching—not belonging to—the uncertain expansive world beyond.)

'I'm taking your mother to the hospital,' says my father. 'Her varicose veins.'

It is the only thing he says. His arm is wrapped around her shoulders, supporting her bent body—bent, as she holds a thick bath towel to her ankle. It's as if I have entered mid-movie: what led to what I'm seeing is absent, and the *now* of it is a puzzle, the pieces lying in front of me to examine and put together. There is the towel, and her right hand, fingers crooked from arthritis (how *very* crooked), spread out in clutching the towel, pressing it to her ankle. Now I see the blood that is coming through the towel. It spreads—radiates beyond the extension of her fingers. I smell it.

'Okay, let's see now,' my father says, as he grips her shoulder and pulls her towards him, so that she leans into him, putting weight only on her left foot. He places his hand over hers on the towel; this seems to be a practiced thing. Together, they slowly release pressure on the towel and, at its release, I see a spate of blood. It pulses from her ankle—once, twice—before the towel is clamped tight again. They are moving toward the front door. Once there, he helps her sit on the little ledge in front of the door, then quickly moves to the kitchen.

Car keys jingle, I hear him open the garage door from the kitchen. He will pull the car out, I know, and come in for her. Surely he will. Or does he want me to help her to the

car? I panic, for the first time realizing that I am part of this theatre. But I haven't moved, I haven't said a word.

Silence.

Speak, is all I can think, but my lips will not move. As usual. And now I see her. Now, too, I hear the garage door opening and the car starting. And I look down to see the blood on my feet, then follow the trail of blood which tells of travel from bedroom to bathroom to bedroom again. The scene is unfolding like the Jacob's Ladder toy my mother still has from her childhood—coloured blocks held in a moveable line by ribbon-runners on either side of the blocks. You hold the Jacob's Ladder vertically by one of the blocks and then, ever so slightly, bend your wrist so that the block you hold will lean into the block below it. It begins a chain reaction of block-tipping-block and they seem to cascade from your hand without ever extending. It mesmerizes with its impossible falling-not-falling.

Somehow I croak, 'Should I—'

'No,' is all she says.

And they are gone.

&&&&

It seems to me I stand for a very long time. I feel the temptation to follow the eristic thoughts in my head, walk down that cul-de-sac of circle-thoughts that takes me nowhere. But ever since being able to read again, I hear faint murmurings of another voice. It's impossible to make out the words exactly, and I feel so close to that little girl I used to be: no sound, no words. Still—so much to pay attention to.

And I move. A decision? Not quite; a body-outside-of-mind thing. Acting-not-thinking. I watch myself go to the kitchen, open the cabinet under the sink which has a blue bucket filled with cleaners—Ajax, Windex, Pine Sol—and sponges. The sight—the smell—of this cleaning bucket conjures up memories of spring-cleaning, warm-weather, and the green smell of grass. I breathe it in, that smell, and am grateful for Ajax, Windex, and Pine Sol.

‘Listen to me, Carrie and Grace,’ [Laura] said briskly. ‘We are going to clean this house from top to bottom, and we’ll begin right now! So when Ma comes home, she’ll find the fall housecleaning done.’

...It was amazing, too, how dirty they all got, while cleaning a house that had seemed quite clean. The harder they worked, the dirtier everything became.

(Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*)

I set the cleaners on the counter, and think for a moment that I should go change out of my nightgown. I then dismiss the thought. It would feel like striking a match, then deciding to interrupt the flame in order to do something else. Since Lisa died, I have felt that motion or movement is the enemy. Hence my desire to eat and eat, to push food down my throat without thinking, without tasting, only so that I might be still. But I must now move.

I run the water with as much force as possible, waiting for it to turn hot. Steam begins to whisp upwards and heat to surround the sink. I place the bucket under the stream of water, splash Pine Sol into its warmth, and smell the sharpness of pine and something like chlorine as it mixes with heat. I pull on rubber gloves. I think, *I must move*.

The bucket is heavy, and the fat on my upper arms jiggles with the effort of carrying it to my parents' bedroom. *Her* bedroom, I want to say. For *her*, this is something perhaps I can do. But pausing at the threshold of the bedroom, feet sticky on the sodden carpet, I almost back down when my eyes challenge me to take in the whole room. It is too much, the blood, being everywhere. Best not to think, not to take it in at once. *Move*.

To the nearest wall, I will myself to move and not to panic: move, move, move; the repetition of the same movement—sponge to water to wall to bucket, sponge to water to wall to bucket—is the panic's palliative, is my way, finally, to feel that there is some one thing that I can do. And, as I scrub, I notice that, where there is blood (*her* blood), it sometimes extends three feet from the floor, as if a child has taken clumps of red (of red *what?* paint? tomato sauce?) and hurled it at the wall. Slap! This spray of blood must have struck with a mad force, then time passed while this blood—this whatever it is—moved in rivulets against the tiny paintbrush lines from so long ago that coated these walls. Up close, I see those miniscule brush strokes bathed in blood, a kind of bas-relief of a wall. Of a life. Up close, I see a beauty unexpected. *Like words*, I think. It is, I think, a kind of writing on the wall. Oh, if walls could talk.

How is it that the blood, in places where there is blood, is up to my thighs? The thick towel was clamped to her ankle, wasn't it? But when blood comes out of you it pours, it seems, like rain, even though they, together—her mother and her father—had eased the towel off so cautiously. Why? And without the towel to stop the blood, and with her heart beating—her beating heart—heart beat, the blood-storm had free reign. Such is the force of the heart. The heart-beat.

Heart BEAT...Heart BEAT...Heart BEAT is, I think, what it sounds like. Like the miniature Big Ben sitting, even now, on the nightstand next to her side of the bed, one beat is always louder, even if you try to convince yourself it's not. *Tick TICK. Tick TICK.*

Heart BEAT.

And every heart beat had sent blood to the wall as she walked. Bedroom to bathroom to bedroom to...

I'm thinking these things, but I am working. This is what I keep coming back to: I am working and the work feels good, the movement is good. The warm Pine-Sol water starts to smell like wet metal, and I notice that it looks red-black. Best to dump it out, start clean.

I watch it swirl down the kitchen drain, and it occurs to me without any of the details that might make it less clear: this is blood, this is my mother's blood. I start to cry, then heave the sobs of a little girl. This feels good.

Emptying.

Clean water fills the bucket, again the steam begins to rise, and I long for that time when my body had felt empty and grew so small, grew so small and slim. That was a lovely time. I remember once, walking through the halls at school, feeling as though I could slide between people, turn slightly sideways and weave between them, minnowing, maneuvering. Going unnoticed. And my period had stopped, too, when I became so small. Lisa said it was not a healthy thing, but I felt fine. I felt strong. I felt clean.

I scrub the blood from the walls until the darkness outside turns a new shade, that of the nothingness which comes between night and day just before the sun rises. It is the non-colour of pre-dawn. I stand and stretch, my back sore from bending. I meet my reflection in the mirror which is attached to my parents' dresser, and realize that I am

looking at myself for the first time in a very long while—whole, like this. The medicine cabinet in the bathroom has been cracked in the lower-right corner for as long as I can remember. Since Lisa died, seeing that image repulses me. When I was little and stood on a stool to look in the mirror as I brushed my teeth, the crack in the mirror was where my reflection looked back—in pieces, like a Picasso painting of a woman's fragmented face. I could see my mouth in two parts, but the halves didn't meet, puzzle pieces askew. Lately, this is where I look—where the crack in the mirror is—when I'm in the bathroom. It's a friendlier view, this cracked and scattered face.

But in my parents' room, the whole of me, from thighs up, is grotesque. My flannel nightgown is soaked, the roundness of my body on display, and my hair hangs limp and grey, white really. It had started to turn, a hair here or there since the fall, but I hadn't seen it, not *really* seen it. Not like this. 'Hey, you fat fuck,' I say to the mirror, testing to see if it truly is me. *It is*, I think.

I touch my hair, watch her do the same. Suddenly, the she-of-me in the mirror is pulling on her hair, that goddamn old-woman hair. Once—it seems years ago, but I know it was in the early bed-flipping time—I saw streaks of silver in my hair, like flashes of Christmas-tree tinsel we placed with care on the branches. Now the silver consumes my head. I am surprised and yet, at the same time, I am not surprised. I see in the mirror my mother's sewing basket. I don't have to look directly at it, do I, in order to watch *her* reach out and open the top to retrieve the scissors.

And in a moment of clarity (Blood on the walls? Scrub it away! Silver-white hair? Cut it away!) the scissors are there, cutting and cutting. I love the sound of the *snip-snip*. I love to see the falling away of her grey locks, grey-white chains, silver shroud.

Standing before the looking glass in the front room, where the lamp was, Laura carefully brushed and braided her hair, and put it up and took it down again. She could not arrange it to suit her.

'Oh, Ma, I do wish you would let me cut bangs,' she almost begged. 'Mary Power wears them, and they are so stylish.'

'Your hair looks nice the way it is,' said Ma. 'Mary Power is a nice girl, but I think the new hair style is well called a "lunatic fringe."'

(Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie*)

&&&&

'What the hell did you do to your hair?'

It is my father. But before I do not answer, he says, 'You ready?'

And time stands still for what feels like time enough for a mountain to form.

It is my birthday today. I am sixteen. I have an appointment in the morning (is it still morning?) to go to the DMV for my road test. Everyone at school does it. You take the road test, then show up late to school for congratulations if you passed, condolences if you failed.

'We're going?' I ask, feeling stupid and larger than the kitchen I'm standing in.

'Where's mom? She okay?'

'Gotta have surgery today. Back in a couple of days.' He looks at his watch. 'We better get going or they'll like to take points off for being late.'

&&&&

The behind-the-wheel examiner is a middle-aged man. He wears gold aviator glasses and looks tired. I am tired. The having been up-in-the-middle-of-the-night is getting to me and I start thinking thoughts that don't fit together. They are mismatched shoes, these thoughts of mine, and, sitting in the driver's seat waiting for the examiner to buckle up (*Buckle Up For Safety, Buckle Up!*), I look at his shoes and say, 'Mismatched shoes.'

'What's that?' he asks.

'Oh—nothing. Sorry.'

He clears his throat and adjusts his head so he can look through the bi-focal part of his glasses to see his clipboard. This reminds me of my father and then I feel less worried.

Bi-Focal Man. Mismatched shoes are all the rage. Ah, yes, some shoes will sail through the sky—some will land so far from your body. How does it happen? 'Physics, my friend,' he said. 'The universe's mysteries are answered by physics!'

I take the turns too wide and the examiner has to say, 'Stop!' two times before I slam on the brakes. 'Someone could've died there, you know,' he says with a slightly raised eyebrow.

My lips tremble, I just can't help it and I almost don't care.

'Oh, no. Now, see here, I didn't mean to make you cry.' Fumbles for a tissue, Mr Bi-Focal Man does. 'Here, now, no need to cry, we're almost done.'

Parallel parking. Mandatory in order to pass. Even after my fourth attempt, I am still a good two feet away from the curb. It's the last thing.

'All right, that's enough,' the examiner says.

As he adds the score on his clipboard, I'm thinking, *I don't care. I don't need to drive. Where would I go? I don't care. There was blood on the walls, blood everywhere, and I don't really care.* He looks up and says, 'Okay, we'll call that a pass.'

'What?'

'But just barely,' he says. 'I would expect you to consider the next few weeks as practice—*careful* practice, miss.'

All the way home I sob. And once, just the once, my father says, 'What the hell are you crying for?'

(1974—twelve years old)

:Period

In the midst of it all, Jack stood looking on. Everyone was too busy to notice the old bulldog, till suddenly Laura saw him standing between the house and the wagon...He was troubled because he saw the wagon ready to go traveling again, and he was so old and tired...

He stepped in [his bed] and turned himself around once. He stopped to rest his stiff legs and slowly turned again. Jack always turned around three times before he lay down to sleep at night...It is a proper thing for dogs to do.

(Wilder, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*)

Jules scans the headlines of the *Young Miss* magazine, still warm with the time it waited in the mailbox: 'WHAT'S RIGHT OR WRONG WITH TEEN-AGERS,' 'HOW TO TALK TO BOYS—AND MAKE THEM LISTEN!' She has settled into her room, door closed for this monthly ritual, wanting to make reading her magazine last for the next couple of weeks at least. She follows a ritual that never varies. Things feel better that way.

She reads the ads first, hungry for what she should know, what older girls than she know. On the inside cover, as with almost every issue, is the Tampax tampon ad. The familiarity doesn't lend itself to glossing over; it demands attention, promising the secrets to growing up. This ad shows girls at a ballet class. They wear pastel-coloured leotards. Robin's-egg blue, cream, and the palest pink. Each is frozen by the camera in a different ballet pose. Two in the back hold the barre with their right hands, one in *plié*, the other, *tendu*; near the middle of the photograph a dancer in arabesque; near the front, the

teacher—only slightly older-looking and the only one wearing a skirt—helps a young student with her pirouette.

The caption directly below the picture reads, Dancing is your life, in large (but slender and graceful) letters.

The grace and charm of the dance have caught your imagination. You love the joy of physical expression. Of discovering agility you never knew your body had.

During your period you turn to Tampax tampons. They give you internal menstrual protection that's dependable and safe. There are no unnecessary deodorants that may irritate sensitive tissues.

With Tampax tampons there are no pins, belts or pads to restrict your movements. Nothing to show or bulge under your close-fitting leotards.

You get soft, reliable protection with Tampax tampons. And the freedom that helps make every day of your life a day for dancing.

Jules pores over these words as if they held the secret to more than the mystery of tampons. And tampons *were* a mystery. There was only one other girl—Jan Jenson—who admitted to having her period. In fact, Jan relished all Being-a-Teenager topics with hyperbolic gusto. When they had to separate into two classrooms last year, boys in one, girls in the other (or, as Mr Meyer said, 'Young men in room 47, ladies in room 49) to watch the movie on puberty, the girls sat in stony humiliation. During the discussion after, Jan raised her hand to declare, 'I find that the new Stayfree maxi pads are *so* much better than those *awful* belts.'

Jules, of course, had seen those ads in *Young Miss* as well: Stayfree maxi pads—No belts! No pins! In almost every ad, girls (For Active Women, Like You!) who were thin and beautiful were shown in the midst of Healthy Normal Fun. In one, a perky blonde paigeboyed girl has almost fallen on a skating rink. Thank goodness her boyfriend (or perhaps her skating instructor?) is there, catching her from behind so that we can see her short blue skirt and

white-white figure skates. Plenty of tanned, toned leg there, too (in winter, indeed!). It is My First day with Stayfree Maxi-Pads.

I'll never forget that day. It was the first time I had used a napkin without a belt. It wasn't a great day to experiment, but I was glad I did! A friend of mine told me that STAYFREE had an adhesive strip that holds the napkin right onto your underwear. Well, the idea of no belts or pins really appealed to me. A lot.

Jules didn't need convincing. The only problem, of course, was how to get them. Her father was the one who did the grocery shopping, but her mother kept a list on the counter in the kitchen. If she wanted to get the Stayfree Maxi-Pads she would have to endure the shame of dropping hints. She would leave *Young Miss* magazines—open to the Stayfree ads—wherever her mother might see them. On top of the sewing basket. Next to the shopping list. On the end-table next to the sofa. Even perched on a pile of clean towels in the laundry basket. And, finally, there they were, the Maxi pads themselves—as if by magic they appeared on Jules's dresser, waiting for her after school. Her face burned at the sight of them, the thought that her father had thrown the package into the grocery cart with the Hunt's Snack Pack Pudding (butterscotch was Jules's favourite), frozen TV dinners (*Trust Swanson!*), Liquid Drano, White Rain Hairspray, Wella Balsam Shampoo, and cans of Spam. Was it possible that he had had to ask someone where the Stayfree Maxi Pads were? And how would he have said it? *Can you tell me where Intimate Feminine Products are? What aisle can a fella find maxi pads in?* The thought was mortifying; Jules felt certain she was the only girl in the world whose father had to buy her maxi pads.

She felt certain, too, that there must be other girls in her year who now had periods. Many of Jules's friends—even Lisa—had developed breasts before Jules did. As far as she knew, that was the clearest signal to becoming—as the booklet told her—a 'New Woman.'

Jules shudders now, remembering how, just a year ago, she was on her bed—like now—reading. Like now. Footsteps, a gentle scraping on the floor, and a *whoosh!* from under the door, a little booklet slid across the floor. The cover was a pale teal colour, decorated with geometry: a grid behind the title—*Very Personally Yours*—and shapes that looked like the kind you could make with Spirograph. Jules had always loved Spirograph because the shapes created by placing a plastic wheel with gear teeth inside a ring (which also had gear teeth), inserting a coloured pen into a point on the wheel, and then oh-so-carefully moving the wheel around the rim (around-and-around), were quite magical. The pen never seemed to follow a path that could be predicted and yet, once the wheel and the ring were lifted from the paper, the intricate designs left were—at least to Jules—like the science of flowers. Mysteriously patterned. Perfect.

She read in the *World Book Encyclopedia* that Spirograph was invented in 1827, and that the shapes it created were called *hypotrochoids* and *epitrochoids*, words Jules copied into her diary and practiced saying in different ways. *Hi POTro kids? Or HIPPO tro kids? Maybe hippo TRO kids?* There was no dictionary at home. Note to self, Jules thought: save babysitting money for a Merriam-Webster.

That day of the booklet-under-the-door, Jules waited until she was certain her mother had retreated to the kitchen. Silence. No sound of anyone at the door. But had her mother only pretended to walk away? Was she standing with her ear against the door, listening for the sounds that would tell her mission accomplished? Jules, wincing at the

sound the bed springs made, eased herself off the bed to quickly grab the booklet and jump back on the bed. She moved as if she were surrounded by a moat of hungry crocodiles.

It was a dirty little secret, this pretty little book. Slipped under the door. Like maxi-pads left on the dresser. Like Jules's first bra, the *Junior Petite by Teenform: The Criss Cross Shaper, Lightly Lined*, tucked into her underwear drawer. It all happened as if by some secret or behind-the-scene presence. Like a rich person's maid tucking away the lingerie.

Even so, Jules read the teal-coloured booklet, hoping it could answer questions she didn't know how to ask. Like the wording on the box that hid her first bra, *Very Personally Yours*, these words seemed to be written for someone else or for someone from a different time. And Jules had no interest in Becoming a Woman, wanted no part of it. The strange little booklet promised a process that would become normal, but Jules felt betrayed by her body.

Far from being mysterious, menstruation is a very commonplace routine. In fact, it's so right and normal that once you understand menstruation and how little bother it need be, paying attention to it makes about as much sense as brooding over your digestive process.

Really? Jules thought. Why write about it then? Why separate boys and girls, and have the girls watch a movie about it? Why, indeed, must it happen at all? If only things could be as they were for Laura in the Little House. Laura knows she cannot stay a little girl forever, but Laura never has to read a book about *menstruation* (how Jules hates that word), and Pa never has to drive the wagon to the general store to buy maxi-pads. No. Pa, with a twinkle in his eye, just plays the fiddle and all is lovely. And it is lovely, so lovely, until one day, in *Little Town on the Prairie*, Laura opens her history book.

Suddenly she could not bear it all. She thrust back her chair, slammed her book shut and thumped it down on the table.

'I don't care!' she cried out. 'I don't want to study! I don't want to learn! I don't want to teach school, *ever!*

'I am so tired of everything. I want—I want something to happen. I want to go West. I guess I want to just play, and I know I am too old,' she almost sobbed, a thing she never did.

(Wilder)

Ah, if only Laura had read *Very Personally Yours*. She might not, then, have slammed her book down so rudely. Poor Laura. No enlightening tome had been pushed under her door. No words from a pastel booklet to tell her to delight in ceasing to be a child.

And yet.

And yet, Jules thinks, those conversations must have happened. They must have. Ma could not have said *nothing*, she thinks, not with four daughters. And Ma, direct but gentle. Direct.

&&&&

Jules thinks back to when she last had a conversation with her mother. It may well have been when Jules was drying the dishes as her mother washed them, since it was at such times that she would find courage enough to prompt a conversation, to ask the most unaskable questions.

'Is there *really* a Santa Claus?'

'What does he mean when he calls someone a Jew?'

'What happens when we're sleeping?'

'How can people say they *hear* the wind?'

'Oh, and does it hurt to have a baby?'

'Well, that's certainly not something you need to worry about, Jules,' her mother had said. Her words had the sting of a scold and Jules blushed bright red. Clearly, her mother saw this and quickly added, 'It just feels like you have to go to the bathroom, you know, and then you just push. It hurts a little, not too bad.'

But the last conversation over dish-drying-washing was the worst, the one that Jules knew would be the last. She had tried so often to ask about babies and where they came from but could never get at The Answer. All of this before Girl Scout camp, where Lynn Sellars offered a wordless explanation of sex—one hand forming a hole with the tips of thumb and index finger, the other hand, index finger inserted into the hole. Jules's mother kept returning, over and over again, to the egg explanation.

'Well, you know about the eggs, right? Women have a lot of eggs, and—'

'I know about that, mom, and they get fertilized, and then there's a baby inside the egg. I know that. But I don't get *how*. How does that happen?'

'Well, it just does. And the baby grows a little bit every day, and—'

'Okay. But before that. *Before that*,' Jules had persisted. 'How does the egg get a baby in it?'

Big sigh. Long pause. *Big fork, little spoon, little spoon, knife.*

'Fine,' her mother had said, seeming to be defeated. 'In order to have a baby grow inside, you must love someone very much.' These last words were spoken like a prayer, Jules felt, with a kind of reverence that had no space for discussion. Somehow, though, it wasn't enough, it didn't feel quite right.

'That's it?' Jules hears the challenge fly out of her mouth. *For shame, Julie Ann. Shame on you.*

'That's it,' her mother said.

&&&&

As for staying in bed the whole day...that's nonsense! The idea is a hold-over from by-gone days when women used menstruation as an excuse for being lazy...It's no use pretending menstruation isn't something of a nuisance, and sometimes, downright uncomfortable. But a goodly share of that discomfort is in the mind.

When her period came, Jules felt that she was dying.

Thinking about it now, she blames the book. The pain arrived as a harbinger of the blood. She said nothing to her mother about the pain, the dull but unremitting ache which seemed to her to be a sign of some foreign, fierce thing invading her body. It wasn't 'perhaps a draggy sensation in the lower part of your abdomen, or a slight backache.' No, it was not perhaps like that at all. No, after the blood came, and she had soiled her blue-and-white-striped romper, and her mother had shown her how to attach the bulky pad to the sanitary belt, she had cried and vomited (her mother's cold hand pressed to her forehead).

Before all this, all the pain and crying and vomiting, she had tried to see herself as one of the cartoon figures which graced the margins of *Very Personally Yours*: it was a very particular figure, a prettier, more wholesome version of Betty Boop, whom Jules had seen in her mother's scrapbook (the one in the only-look-when-I-am-with-you cedar chest at the foot of her parents' bed). This Betty Boop maintained the wide-eyed, long-lashed, unabashed gaze at her viewer, but she was dressed in clothes that were tasteful, even if

they were form-fitting. She had perky, well-defined breasts and a cinched waist that a Barbie doll would envy. Her hair, whether dark or blonde, curled at the ends. It didn't dwither down in a mass of rough split-ends, hair damaged by the sun and chlorine. Like Jules's hair. Her mousy brown hair.

She fell so far short of this Betty Boop. This Betty Boop had painted lips and painted nails, and her own vanity table with a round mirror to reflect her perfect face, and in which she smiled at herself.

And Jules should smile too. Not just at herself but at the world. Yes, she should smile. 'Don't Dramatize Yourself—Smile, Sister, Smile!'

For modern doctors know that fretting can create sickness, even pain, when there's no physical cause for either. And thinking about menstruation as being 'unwell'—or dramatizing little irregularities—has made a part-time invalid of many a perfectly healthy girl.

Sitting on her bed, Jules shifts a little to keep her leg from falling asleep. She realizes she must change her pad unless she wants to stain her jeans and her quilt. (And of course, out of consideration for others, always be sure to wrap your napkin carefully before disposing of it.) Being home at least meant she could change the pad every hour if she needed to. And she needed to.

But no matter how much Jules pleaded, her mother would not let her stay home. 'Honey, you can't stay home every time you get your period,' she would say, as if speaking to a child.

'Why not?' was Jules's usual response.

'Well, it's not realistic. I can't call school and tell them you're sick. That would be a lie.'

'It's *not* a lie. It makes me sick, you know it does. I *hate* this.' And Jules would cry, her throat burning with the effort to speak in spite of crying. 'I can't change my pad at school, so I wear one the whole day.'

'I still don't understand why you can't just go to the bathroom—'

'I *told* you. No one at school goes to the bathroom. It's embarrassing. And no—I will not take pads in a purse because then *everyone* knows why you're going to the bathroom.'

'But—'

'No.'

Science and education have cleared away the cobwebs that used to clutter our thinking about menstruation. We now know that the normal loss of blood is not weakening. In the first place, as many doctors will tell you—chances are you lose less than you think. One and a half to five ounces is the usual amount discarded over the several days of the menstrual flow. What's more, menstrual blood is intended to be lost, and it is quickly replaced.

(1978—sixteen years old)

: Lear

The chalk leaves a cloudtrail of dust slowmotioning to the carpeted floor in a cornucopia-shaped sunbeam. Mrs Brown is writing, her well-practiced cursive appears at the end of her looping arms. White dust lies delicate on the toe of one of her sensible pumps.

‘Okay, ladies and gentlemen, quieten down,’ she says, placing the chalk on the tray, wiping hands against each other to slough away the dust. We are Honors English, but most of these in Honors are here because they are popular, not because they read. I don’t belong. I am only here because of a guidance counselor who didn’t know I wanted to take Film and the Novel, since he didn’t know me. Give me a dark room, please, not this.

‘Now. Who can give us a working definition of “nobility”?’

‘*Mobility?* As in Christine Pederson really gets around?’

‘Scurrilous, Mr Walker.’

‘I don’t even know what that means, Mrs Brown. I thought this was English.’

Laughter.

‘Fuck you, Adam.’ This from Christine, loud enough for most of us to hear from the back of the room where the two of us sit.

Mrs Brown taps her wooden pointer on the desk, and stares down the class. Four-foot-eleven and she takes no shit.

‘No more of that, Mr Walker, or you are out.’

She doesn't miss a beat, pointer now to the blackboard where she has written

Nobility.

'Nobility. What does it mean to be noble?' Several hands. 'Brenda?'

'If you're a noble person, you do the right thing—you know, you're good.'

Mrs Brown writes on the board:

Nobility = Goodness!

She looks now for other hands. 'Steven, what do you think?'

'It's not about actions. It's a birthright.'

Mrs Brown writes once more.

'Say more about that, Steven,' Mrs Brown says. Christine pushes her notebook to the edge of her desk so I can read as she writes, *Oh, Steven, give me more, I want more!* I half smile.

'I mean, it's like you're either born a noble or you're not. If your parents are part of the nobility, you are, too. It doesn't matter if you do good or if you're a fu— uh, you know, a jerk.'

'Yes, Steven, thank you for your restraint.' Laughter. 'Anyone else?'

She waits. Most teachers will answer their own questions. Not Mrs Brown. She will wait until the question ricochets off the walls a few times to make sure everyone knows it's still there. Silence heavy as a heart and getting louder. I glance at Christine. Her face is all boredom, but she raises her hand slowly, so slowly. How the fuck does she do that, all control and shit? Mrs Brown's face loses its frown. Faith restored.

'Ah, Christine, what are your thoughts?'

'It's both.'

'Pardon?'

Snorts, chortles.

Snorts and pretending-to-hide chortles.

'Or it's neither.'

'Right on, Chrissie, long as you got the looks.'

But Mrs Brown is unflappable for now. 'Explain what you mean, Christine,' she says.

'Nobility is just one of those fascist words that people in control can appropriate to suit their ends. You know, choose the definition that best fits the people in control.'

Fuck, that's good.

'Let's add, then, "Subjective." Christine, can you give us an example of what you're talking about?'

My good friend sighs. *Fucking brave.* 'Obviously, characters who are noble by birth don't necessarily *act* noble.'

'Excellent.' Adds to the notes on the board:

Nobility = superiority of mind or character or of ideals or morals.

A.W., for whatever reason, cannot resist showing his ignorance. 'Is that what Christine said?' The class sniggers. A.W. thinks he's made a joke.

Mrs Brown turns back to the class. 'Does anyone in *Lear* fit this definition? Or is Shakespeare showing us a landscape devoid of nobility in a world whose very structure depends on the ability to delineate the classes?'

Silence.

More silence.

And more.

Heart pounding, *Lento*, but then *Affrettando* before I know. *Mosso*.

Throbbing in my ears, pounding, a thunder roiling and rising through the floor.

What is wrong with me?

Then it comes out of my mouth, just like that, with no thought, all whisperish. Like one of those promises I make to myself in the dead of night.

'Cordelia,' I say.

The silence stops breathing.

'What was that? Who said that?' Mrs Brown looks towards the back of the room.

A.W. snorts, 'Whoa there, big little mute girl, stop talking so much.' He glares at me.

'Mr Walker, I'll have no more of your insolence in my classroom. It was Goethe who said, "There is nothing more frightful than ignorance in action," and I believe you are living proof of that. Even A.W.'s cronies laugh at Mrs Brown's Goethean strike.

'Julie,' she says, all gentle now, 'I think you are absolutely correct. Cordelia must stand out amidst the field of characters otherwise blinded by the misguided presumption that love can somehow be quantified.'

In a voice barely audible, A.W. whirrs, 'Yeah, like, how many blow jobs equal "love," right Jules?'

'Goodbye, Mr Walker. You may take your ignorance and your lascivious comments to Principal Douglas's office.' Mrs Brown, clearly incensed, somehow remains unruffled.

'La...la...what? Mrs Brown, I don't get what that even is. Whad'I say?'

'You'll have ample opportunity, Mr Walker, to look up the definition of "lascivious" and many other words—I am recommending seven days of in-school suspension.'

'Ooh...,' the class begins to chorus, but stop as one at Mrs Brown's severe stare, her pointer raised up as if an orchestra conductor's baton.

'But—,' A.W.

'Out. Now, Mr Walker. No—'

A.W. opens his mouth.

'No,' she repeats (speaking as if to a toddler, a dog, a demented ancient), 'Not another vacuous word should escape your lips again—and, Mr Walker—we both know the only safe way to proceed, therefore, is for you to keep your wide mouth shut. Now go.'

A.W. walks out, leaves Paradise, Adam without Eve.

'Back to work, ladies and gentlemen. We've wasted precious time with blather. Now, I assume you have all read the article I gave you yesterday by Norman Holland. In it, he describes the way in which "fashionable teachers" are likely to have students dissect Shakespeare.' Mrs Brown raises her reading glasses from the simple beaded chain around her neck and places them on her nose, a gesture I find so comforting—in a surprising way—that I blink back tears. 'Mr Holland,' resumes Mrs Brown, 'describes research as a way to "depersonalize with semiotics, making literature into a code of impersonal signs fixed by social practice, with structuralist techniques for interpreting myths and literature as mediators of themes in conflict, or with Derridean schemes for separating language from belief.'" Mrs Brown looks up. 'So, what is Mr Holland's stance on what he calls "fashionable teachers" methods?'

Palpable discomfort is abroad. The clock, the clock—oh, how much longer to go? How long?

'The clock cannot save you, my friends. Mr Walker may have stolen several minutes from my time with you but I intend to take them back, bell or no.'

I raise my hand. Reticent, but only just.

'Yes, Miss Hassinger? Thank you.'

'My sense...' (*Who's speaking?*) I clear my throat and, blushing, push through. 'I think he felt that teachers expect students to give up their own voices when they read. That they should deny their experience and...you know, bow down to what the professors say.'

'Yes. And what does Mr Holland advocate when analyzing literature?'

'Well...' I am tired. Tired in a way I haven't felt in a long time. But Mrs Brown does what she does so well: she waits. 'Well, I think he believes every reader sees through their own perspective.'

'And so?'

'How we read...how we *interpret* what we read is valid when we allow our experience to inform us.'

'Brilliant, Julie. Welcome back.'

(1967—five years old)

: Friend

I do not like Circle Time. The songs are good. The floor is good. But I still do not like Circle Time. Mrs Brault will say a name, but please don't let it be my name. PLEASEPLEASE-oh-PLEASE, NOT MY NAME. But someday it will, Mommy says, someday that's the way, that's the way, that's the way it goes. Mrs Brault calls a name, every day—if it is a name EVERY day it will be MY name someday.

And what do I do if my feet do not move? I stare down at my feet and say: What will I do if you do not move?

Mrs Brault is, though, so nice. She watches us and smiles. AND—she hears everything! Which means I like her because no one can pretend and say, NO, NOT ME. I DID NOT DO THAT. That's when people are not nice at all. Sometimes I do not want to be friends but someone (Nancy Curtain) says, YOU. YOU ARE MY FRIEND. Smile and pretend.

Mrs Brault calls a name every day. Every day. One day it will be mine. I will walk to the middle of the morning circle and take the flag from Mrs Brault. Everyone will say the words. I will move my lips to the words.

I pledge of legions to the flag
 Of the you mighty states of America
 And to the something of when they stand
 One nation under God
 With something and something for all

Mrs Brault calls me to her desk at the back during Quiet Book Time. She puts her finger under my chin, like always. Slowly: 'I have a job for you, Julie Ann. It's *very* important. I know that you are the one to do it. Does that sound fine?'

Nod. Yes. Yes.

'Our friend, Todd Brown, needs you to be his *special* friend. We all need help now and then, don't we?'

Nod.

'What I would like you to do for me, then, is to be Todd's special friend. To help him put his morning things in his cubbie, to be his bus buddy, and his line buddy. Would you do that for me?'

I nod and feel tall walking back to my carpet square.

At bus time, Mrs Brault tells Todd Brown that I will be his special friend. His eyes don't look at her but he says, 'Okay, okay.'

When we get in line, Todd Brown stands a little away from me. So I take his hand, I hold his hand. His eyes look right at mine then, only one eye doesn't seem to look, but I know that he is looking because he smiles this very big smile that I have never seen before. I am glad because I have helped him. He needed me.

'Don't dread a lesson,' Laura said. 'I'll always be glad to study any of them with you, if you want me to.' Martha's brown eyes smiled almost like Ida's as she said, 'I would like to, sometimes. Thank you.' Laura wished that she need not be the teacher; she and Martha were the same age, and might have been friends.

(Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years*)

When we get on the bus, Todd still hasn't let go of my hand. When someone laughs, we both look. Everyone laughs. I try to laugh, too, but it hurts my cheeks. My face feels like it is on fire.

The next morning, Todd Brown looks for me when he gets on the bus. I wave my hand and he comes to sit with me. Karl Zettel sings, 'Jules and To-odd, sittin' in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes Jules with a baby carriage.' Roger is on the bus because it is the morning bus. He looks mad.

In the afternoon, when Roger gets home, he says, 'Hey, mom, Jules is holding hands with Todd Brown, and he's retarded.'

'We don't say retarded, Roger Allen, we say "special."' And to me: 'You're holding hands with Todd Brown?'

'Mrs Brault wants me to be his Special Friend,' I say. *Special friend. Special?*

'I see,' Mommy says, 'Well now, I think that is very nice. Very nice indeed.'

Indeed. Special.

'The kids are laughing,' I say.

Roger has a growly face on, shakes his head, and goes, 'Geez.'

Mommy stops ironing and the iron makes a *Shhhhh*. 'Julie Ann, you just never mind those children. Mommy's proud of you. That's all that matters.'

She is not on the bus.

When we wait at the bus the next morning, Roger says, 'Todd Brown is retarded and you hold his hand. That means you're retarded, too.'

'I'm telling Mommy.'

'Telling her what?'

'You called me retarded.'

'You *are*,' he says, and my face starts to burn.

'*Not*,' I say, only it doesn't come out right. Like someone else's bad voice.

'Are too.' Loud voice. Boy voice.

'I'm telling.' Now I sound like I'm crying.

'Go ahead and tell, you big baby. But guess what?'

'What?'

'Mom and Dad *know* you're retarded. You're just like Todd Brown. Do you think they *want* you to know? Boy, are they gonna be mad if you know.'

When I bite the inside of my cheek, it makes me stop crying.

Todd Brown sits with me on the bus. I pull my hand away when he tries to hold it.

(1979—seventeen years old)

: *Mirror She, Mirror Me*

The she of me flickered a short time only, like the fleeting time of crocuses or the season of cicada-song. The mirror reflecting a body apart from me but so pleasing to the eye, reflection in the eyes of others—mothers, would-be friends, someday-boyfriends, neighborhood men—so approving. I don't look at my eyes now. They are unfamiliar but unchanged: eyes that apologize, eyes that look away from eyes that look at me. What would I see reflected back?

Fleeting, like the sun on tornado days or the delineated colours of after-shower rainbows, the pleasing me of the mirror morphed into a spectre I don't recognize. This spectre wears too-tight jeans, has the breasts of a woman stressing at the buttons of her blouse, a blouse too small, tight around the arms even.

These days I feed myself as much as I can, the ache for food the only thing—the *only* thing—except that it isn't. I am hungry, so hungry, and eat food in place of what is unnamed, a temporary tamping down of unsavory feelings. In the middle of the night or days home alone, the foods denied in the name of being a good-girl are there for me: Bridgeman's cherry-nut ice cream, sour cream with cinnamon-sugar sprinkled on top, Dare Maple Leaf Cremes, homemade white bread with butter and peanut butter, the greasy Old Dutch potato chips my mother stores in the big Tupperware container. There isn't enough food to fill me until I can sleep. And when sleep comes it is an anodyne at first; but waking

is fraught with the panic of being in some other body, some other life. I don't recognize this face in the mirror, this face that eats and eats.

It smelled good. The whole house smelled good, with the sweet and spicy smells from the kitchen, the smell of the hickory logs burning with clear, bright flames in the fireplace, and the smell of a clove-apple beside Grandma's mending basket on the table.

(Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*)

I sleep and dream of looking in the round mirror my mother used when she applied makeup. I was six and she and Jean would pore over the Avon cosmetic samples left the day before by the Avon Lady, Lannie Linnaman, no lie, platinum curls and a little flask in her purse tipped gently into her Lipton tea. Lannie came ringing our doorbell once a month with a new order catalog and plenty of samples. My mother poured coffee for herself and Jean, they lit cigarettes, and I listened to them say the names of lipsticks she might consider ordering: *Honey Bisque*, *Silver Trill*, or *Carnation*. I would be allowed one sample to 'play grownup' with, and apply it, gazing into the magnified side of the makeup mirror exactly as I had watched my mother do hundreds of times: an outline of the lips first, using the sharp point of the lipstick, filling in the lips next with multiple layers, and—finally—the 'blot' with a tissue, leaving a perfect lip-print, a reflection of Avon's promise to provide you with a '*Lipstick You'll Love at First Sight*.' There were other Avon products to '*Create a More Radiant You*' (Radiant! with *foundation* and *blush*—I silently formed these words in my mouth) but these were for grownups. Jean snapped a picture of me next to the mirror, hair

in the pink sponge curlers and my *Silver Trill* lipstick. Lips pursed just so. When the picture is developed and delivered weeks later, reflecting a little girl playing at being grown, I say, 'That's not me.' My mother tilts her head and laughs that honeyed way, and I get angry. Reflected in the photo is an image foreign to the one in my mind's eye. And which to trust? My mom and Jean, surprised at the tears of anger, seek to mollify: 'Oh, Jules honey, you're a cutie,' Jean says. Something seethes in me.

But now is not childhood. When the snow falls and the days are short, reflections are refracted bits of me bouncing back from windows in our house. Looking out is looking in. At the largeness that is me, the shapelessness of my prowling figure. I am looking for something that has no name. But the itchiness and ache of this skin I'm in is a thing I want to shed. Food dulls the ache, eventually brings on sleep, the bed flips, and I remember to breathe.

I pray. I pray the Lord my soul. To take.

I pray the Lord my soul to take.

One night I am sitting in the living room, my face up against the large picture window. I want to watch the snow falling, like I did when I was so little in that time of no-words. Walking in snow reminds me of that time, so soft. I want to be close enough to the glass that I see only outside. Pick a single snowflake as high up as I can, and watch its trajectory downward as far as I can. I do this over and over. Suddenly, following the path of one snowflake, I meet my eyes reflected in the glass. For a few seconds I am alive in a combined world of my own eyes merging with the falling snow—like a snow globe shaken and set down. I see my eyes reflected back, but without the face I don't recognize. And they are my eyes.

You

: Truth

I will put this Truth in a room with clean walls and sharp corners where honest calculations determine the accuracy of this Truth down to the hundred thousandths place.

Little room for error here, so sleep is smooth, a Minnesota lake surface at dawn; a ripple here or there, perhaps, but your metronome breathing will plane away all the irregularities, and furniture will (fingers crossed) stay put. If I visit this room often enough it is only to recognize this one version of the truth—which is not to say that it is mine.

My truth resides in places where it cannot be spoken, or maybe just once in a seashell whose relic echo lingers. Or, in the far recesses of a drawer where desperate fragments of a letter-to-myself may yet be found.

(Please oh please oh please, she would write, a paper-prayer scrawled in blue ballpoint, Make it stop make it stop Please oh please—whether to a god or herself, who knew?).

Neither does this Truth speak in the long-ago hallways of a public high school whose sentient walls absorbed my growing body to render me nothing. A no-thing. A grateful nothing. And (*shh...*) that was a lovely secret: the bigger a girl is, the more she becomes a part of the wall. Less a person to say *Good Morning* to.

My truth depends on the What, not the Why, because order will collapse under the wallop of Why, and messing with Truth will only result in denying that certain things happened—or *are* happening. Or, worse, Truth will result in not-remembering. You could pull one thread of a quilt my grandmother made for me, a mosaic of silhouetted girls in

bonnets, and its loveliness would not diminish. But repeat the act because you want to see why these millions of threads all woven just-so amalgamate to such beauty—just so—and the threads will cease to tell a story. Every thread becomes a version, a shadow, of what was once there.

(1978—sixteen years old)

: *Word, Revised*

Pa and Ma. Mary and Laura. Baby Carrie. Housekeeping, farming, schooling, and everyday catastrophes . And everyone except Pa would get Scarlet Fever.

Far worst of all, the fever had settled in Mary's eyes, and Mary was blind.

She was able to sit up now, wrapped in quilts in Ma's old hickory rocking chair. All that long time, week after week, when she could still see a little, but less every day, she had never cried. Now she could not see even the brightest light anymore.

(Wilder, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*)

Yes, Julie reads every *Little House* book. She reads randomly but urgently. She fears that the blurring will come back, that the words will again go on holiday, and roam the page. They don't. They are brave little word-soldiers, these *Little House* words. That first time around, the books held out a promise: this is what life will be like someday, this is a picture created in words that will come to visit and then to stay. Not in the form of a cloud of locusts to ruin the wheat, and not in a winter so harsh that Laura truly grows up by helping Pa. She was always wanting to help Pa.

'Let me help you, Pa,' Laura begged.

He did not want to let her. 'Your hands are too small for such work,' he told her. Then he admitted, 'But somebody's got to help. It is going to be more than one person can do, to keep this stove going and haul hay for it.' Finally he decided, 'Come along. I'll show you how.'

Laura picked up all the hay her hands could hold and shook the snow from it. Then, watching Pa, she followed his motions in twisting the hay.

(Wilder, *The Long Winter*)

It isn't, I think, easy for Laura. Winter in South Dakota and bitter cold. Pa, admitting he needs help, and Laura, helping. He doesn't call her stupid when her first tries at twisting the hay are far from perfect, doesn't shake his head or heave a sigh to show his disappointment. Yes, thinks Jules, life would be this way someday. One day, too, Jules would have a pa who played the fiddle and who built a barn. And who needed help.

Laura's feet were numb from cold; they felt like wooden feet. Her hands were red and when she held them in the warm air above the stove they tingled and stung and smarted where the sharp blades of the grass had cut them. But she had helped Pa.

(Wilder, *The Long Winter*)

At first Jules had wanted to be Mary—pretty, golden-haired, obedient Mary. But then she saw *The Wizard of Oz*, with Judy Garland's Dorothy, and decided that Dorothy was more like Laura—resolute Laura. Dorothy would not allow nasty Miss Gulch to get away with taking her beloved Toto to be destroyed; and neither would Laura have allowed it. Dorothy was looking for that thing to be—wanting to *be*, but to be what? A happiness that has no name and cannot be discovered using any kind of compass. No matter that Dorothy arrives where she began. Home. Home and resolving not to look further than her own backyard. But, watching the movie every year, an event which qualified viewing on the living room Magnavox (*Once you've seen **Magna-Color**, you'll never be satisfied with anything less than a **Magnavox***), Jules understands that Dorothy *has* changed. She has become the girl she is supposed to be, the one-and-only. Not the two. Just as Jules had wished to be, on her seventh birthday.

Besides, Dorothy had brown hair, like Jules and Laura. And, like Laura, Jules knew the shame of comparing herself to a flaxen-haired sibling who was better behaved.

Ma took the rags off their hair and combed it into long, round curls that hung down over their shoulders. Mary's hair was beautifully golden, but Laura's was only a dirt-colored brown.

(Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*)

Someday she would rise above that pettiness and show the world a spirited getter, someone who wasn't wondering always *What-She-Should-Be, What-She-Should-Think*. For Jules, you see, other people were for trying on. She admired many girls but couldn't *be* them, no matter how hard she tried. They were like ill-fitting clothes, at first simply uncomfortable, but soon the chafing began. Wanting to be Laura, though, had felt different. Laura was a dress that fitted.

Laura stood miserably waiting for Mr. Owen's comment. He looked at her sharply and said, 'You have written compositions before?'

'No, sir,' Laura said. 'This is my first.'

'Well, you should write more of them. I would not have believed that anyone could do so well the first time,' Mr. Owen told her... 'There are no corrections. It grades one hundred. Class is dismissed.'

(Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years*)

&&&&

After the time of Lisa's death, she—but it is *I* now—after the death, I saw the sadness of a family I lost, and mostly lost because I never had them, except in the someday way. In the way that you refer to yourself as 'she.'

&&&&

I read the books again and again. The *Little House* books. Then I read paragraphs out of order, simply by picking up one or another of the books and opening to any page. I feel the colours, I hear the loneliness. I bask in the transport to this other world. Dorothy, too, traveled to a world of colour.

The sun was enormous and it was throbbing and pulsing with light. All around the sky's edge ran a pale pink glow, and above the pink was yellow, and above that blue. Above the blue the sky was no color at all. Purple shadows were gathering over the land, and the wind was mourning.
(Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*)

&&&&

I think of the book *Mr Rabbit and the Lovely Present*. It was my favorite bedtime story from long ago, and I remember how it tugged at me, like a tune in your head barely there—maybe you try to hum it, but it doesn't come out the way it should. Mr Rabbit helps the little girl find the perfect present for her mother. Mr Rabbit doesn't wear any clothes, but he stands and sits and walks like any adult—except he listens—listens as the little girl tells of the different colours her mother likes. Red, blue, yellow, green. After each colour, Mr Rabbit tells the girl, 'You cannot get her red,' and so on with the other colours. At the very end, they have a basket filled with fruit that are the very colours the little girl is looking for.

But then, what is it? A basket of fruit?

Or, is it a basket of colours?

And I think, perhaps it's neither, perhaps it's a basket of words.

&&&&

Now, sitting and reading—finally reading—I glance at my bed, that flipping bed. Always getting the better of me. Still I practice touching the wall to the right, but it hasn't kept the bed from flipping. When the shaking begins, I know enough not to bolt to the right to escape, but what does that matter? The bed still flips. How to keep the bed upright?

There is something in a word. Words mean things. Words can be things, can be the thing.

Jesus, I think, what the hell is this? These thoughts go round and round, but can't catch up, a dog chasing its tail, the full story just out of reach.

I get up from the floor, from my cocoon of books. I lie on my bed. Habit brings my hand to the wall. I touch the wall.

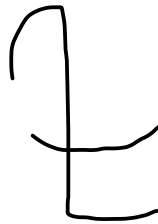
And then I know. As never before. There is a word for me, it belongs here on the wall. There is a word. Do it now before it is lost. Touching and feeling, not really *reading*, but then perhaps I read what I feel? And then I remember Mary, who is blind, and Laura needing to be her eyes. But Mary goes away to college. She comes home for a visit and is able to read: to *feel* to read.

'There,' she said, slipping the paper out and turning it over. Wherever the stylus had pressed, there was a tiny bump, that could easily be felt with the fingers. The bumps made different patterns, the size of the squares, and these were the Braille letters.

(Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years*)

I don't quite know what I am doing, but I know this is one of those times—like learning to ride my bike—when thinking will only get in the way. I go into the bathroom, looking for something—not sure what, but I will open my eyes, will see what I need to. There—a sharp cuticle scissors. It is like Mary's stylus, an instrument to write, to carve

with. Tiny, with that upturned point. Sharp. I bring it back to my bedroom, lie down again. I lie down. Hand to the wall. Again, eyes closed, hand to the wall. Hand to the wall over and over, until I am certain that here, *here*, this is the place I will know to reach to when the bed begins its rumble. I keep my finger right there, sit up and replace my right index finger with my left. And then—no, no, don't think. Carve. Write. It needs to be up-and-down, yes. Do that first. But I see right away (*write away, write away*) that, when I touch it with my eyes closed, it's not enough to orient me. There is a top line, and there is a bottom line, but they need to be different. I carve. Now there is a line in the middle, too, closer to the bottom than the top. And that's it. Simple. This is, I think, a kind of word. It looks like this:



It is, I think, the word for the wall. There is a name for it, like the time I saw the letters on the back of the Ford truck. But here, on the wall, is this whole word in a single shape. If I can come to recognize this shape as the word to right me (*write me?*) in the flipping bed, it will be the word I need for now.

I feel a flush of victory, that I have won something even if I cannot name it. But as soon as the work of carving the word is over, my head fills with a nascent sense of shame so familiar and so awful. I think of Uncle Earl, his raw guffaw, his roughened hands. I hate him. I hate myself. No, stop. Concentrate on the word. It's all that matters now. I trace it, close my eyes and trace it. I think, *This, too, can be reading*. My finger can read this word in the night and recognize it, if only I practice enough. Just as I once practiced saying F – O – R – D

all the way home and in doing so finally learnt it was the name for a red pickup truck, just around the corner from our house. My word is, I think, the thing to right my upside-down world. I will hold tight to it as if—as if

—As if my life depends on it.

And so I practice for hours. Lying on the bed, eyes closed, hand-touching-wall-finding-word. *This is the word and this is how it goes. Here is the top, here is the front. This is down, this is back. This—in the middle—this is upright. I am here. I am upright. Here is the top...*

That night, the bed flips once more. But I do not care because I now have my word and I will keep on.

The next night: I am upright. And the next and the next.

Now I lay me down to sleep. I lay me down to sleep.

(1979—*seventeen years old*)

: *Words to Letters*

I wander now, still this divided *me* and *she*: roaming the home unsure of what I am looking for but unable to stay confined to my bedroom. He—my father—is up before the sun, just as forever ago, and I drive her to work at noon, unless I go to school. It is a rare treat for her when I go to school. She only wants things to be normal, for me to be Having the Time of My Life: ‘You should be having the time of your life, sweetie,’ she said once when, hand on the door knob, I crumpled—first, from somewhere inside, then to the floor.

‘Maybe I should make an appointment with a doctor,’ she said, smoothing my short hair with her always-cool hand.

‘No—what do you mean? I don’t need a doctor. I’m just fat. I’m your fat daughter.’

‘There are other kinds of doctors, you know—someone—’

‘No.’

I can’t remember if I went to school that day.

&&&&

I want to look inside the cedar chest at the end of my parents’ bed. When I was a little girl, we would look inside together on a ‘special occasion,’ often on a Rainy-Day Saturday. I loved the smell of the cedar, like earth and spice, and the dusty smell that reminded me of the wild rhubarb leaves clinging to the metal fence in our back yard. Draped over the chest

was an afghan, a throw blanket with knitted diamonds of orange and umber. 'When I was little, my mother—Grandma Ann—called it a Hope Chest,' my mother said. The first time she allowed me into the cedar chest, she removed the afghan with care and placed it on the bed, then lifted the lid of the chest. Now I do this by myself.

There is a place for a key, but no key. On the outside of the chest, around the lid, are carved sets of three oblong notches spaced about four inches apart. In the center of the front of the chest is a wood inlay in the shape of a diamond, just a shade lighter than the walnut of the rest of the chest. The diamond is framed by pieces of walnut shaped like thick ropes.

I open the lid to meet that familiar smell which makes me long to be in that time again, with her, to watch her hands (smooth then, without the twisted knots of arthritis) as they pulled treasures from inside. There is a hinged tray nestled on top, with compartments lined in green felt for smaller things: Jacob's Ladder, aluminum tops (*'Spin toys,'* she called them), and wooden spools that once held thread (*'Before I had a doll,'* she said, *'I pretended they were people'*).

One of the spin toys has pictures of the Three Little Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf on its top, the characters riding carousel-fashion. The Wolf (who once had frightened me) is riding a swan-boat, his sharp teeth gnashing, mouth salivating, eyes flashing. Each of the Pigs rides a horse. And none are the same. I find this remarkable, that each figure is unique, no repeating a pattern in their outfits or expressions. The Pigs all look jolly, dressed in little-boy knickers and jackets, all of different colours and slightly different styles. We would take turns picking our favourites, which would vary for me but never for my mother. Still, she wouldn't complain when I asked, but say, 'Well now, I believe this is my favourite,

with his yellow, polka-dot pants—see how his horse is spotted, too? There is just something I like about that, and, of course, look how sweet those white cuffs are on his short red jacket.’

I notice now that the Wolf is portrayed as an adult, his grotesque feet filling the bottom of the swan-boat, and his blue patched-up jacket a man’s jacket. A man’s length. It makes me feel sad.

Lifting the tray, the hinges move up and back, so that the tray is now elevated above the deep part of the trunk and suspended right next to the carved-in-wood maker’s label. The words **LANE Altavista, Va.**, are centered on a rectangle with round edges—like a rolled-up carpet as you would see it from floor level. But behind the name is an oval, like a cameo brooch, with a house in the distance and trees on either side (*‘Ancient oaks,’* my Grandma Ann once said, *‘arching over the road to meet each other’*).

Inside the treasure trunk, my mother’s scrapbook with its cream-coloured cover looks smaller than the last time I saw it years ago. I take it out, breathe in its mustiness, and sit on the floor. There are pages filled with magazine ads and celebrity pictures. They belong to a time that feels more familiar than my own. Judy Garland is lying on her back, shot from above, with one arm just above her forehead, and the hand of the other barely touching her cheek, both palms up. She is wearing something white and sheer and her eyes look to the left. The photo has been taped in, as they all are, with the work of time browning the edges. My mother, in careful script, has captioned each with a name and often some other reference. This first photo is labeled, ‘Judy Garland. Presenting Lily Mars.’ Then there are Lana Turner and Rita Hayworth, with eyelashes so long their lids seem heavy with the

effort of holding them up. There is also Veronica Lake who has gold-spun hair and dark pouty lips (I am sure they must be red, though the photo is black and white).

And finally there are ads cut from magazines for everything from cigarettes (*No wonder filter smokers are flocking to Winstons!*) to soap (*Here's our lovely Rita...*). In every ad there is a beautiful woman.

Looking through the scrapbook now doesn't feel the way it used to. With my mother next to me all those years ago, examining the denizens of the trunk was a ritual as much about her as it was the precious objects. All this beauty preserved now feels as fragile as a china teacup.

I go to the kitchen and eat a glazed donut.

The next thing I find in the cedar chest is a worn, pale blue baby book; this, too, I've seen before. It is a book for recording all of those baby moments: first words, first steps, first voyage out. What I don't remember are the other papers folded into the back of *Baby Days*. One of the first pages has a photo; it is my mother, a blurry but bright, laughing girl, perhaps two- or three-years old, in a wooden high chair. I read the rhyme under the picture—

As a flower garden
 in a sunny place
 So is the beauty
 of a baby's face—

and I remember my mother telling me that one of her first memories was watching her father beat her mother. From her high chair. My grandmother left him and they divorced not long after, although most of the family thought he died in a car accident. (*Divorce wasn't*

a thing a woman did back then—especially during the depression—not if she wanted to keep her family.)

I turn to the back of the book, where the loose papers are stored. So old, I'm careful when I open them. The creases in the papers look brittle. The collection is a farrago of writings, too varied to make sense. Some of it looks official, the words tapped out by ancient typewriters and on long sheets of paper that feel like the tissue wrapping-paper we use at Christmas. And there are one or two letters, handwritten. One in pencil. It feels burdensome. I'm dizzy.

I fold everything, palms sweating, and return all the treasures to the Lane Cedar Chest. I replace the sliding top-tray to its position, close the lid without a sound, and drape the afghan over the chest. Just as before.

Then I go to the kitchen for another glazed donut.

&&&&

I cannot wait for her to leave for work the next day. It is Saturday, and no excuses are needed for not going to school. I have decided what to do with the loose papers in the *Baby Days* book: read the handwritten ones first, then the others. I imagine myself to be Nancy Drew, combing through documents in a research library in hot pursuit of the solution to a mystery.

I look first at the photo of my mother in the wooden high chair, and wonder who took the picture. Did my grandmother take it? And was *he*—my mother told me his name was Butch—standing next to her? Maybe he didn't like that she was taking the baby's

picture instead of getting him breakfast. Or maybe he had a bad day at work. Maybe he couldn't find work.

Maybe he didn't need a reason.

The first letter I open is written in ink. Neat handwriting. Cursive. Lined paper folded in half, then in half again, and then once more. A vertical left-hand margin in red. 'Arlis,' it begins.

I am not very good at expressing ~~myself~~ my feelings or opinions with words so I have chosen this way to tell you how I feel.

The reason I can't, ~~although I want to very~~ see you any more, although I want to very much, is that every time I see you I fall more in love with you.

Wait. Who is this? Someone was in love with her—before she married my father?

There is no date. My eyes shoot to the bottom of the paper.

Good Bye Dear

Moe

My father? I've only read two sentences, but this cannot be my father. I feel as if someone is playing a trick on me. Or as if I've said something awful and discovered the awful person was listening. Or maybe I was the one overhearing. But I cannot stop reading.

I suppose this sounds forward, but so help me Dear it is the truth. I believe I have told you quite a few times that I love you, but it seemed to me you always let it sort of pass by, whether this is true or not I don't know, but guess it doesn't really matter too much now.

When and if you ever think of me, please Dear please don't think too badly of me, or maybe you should forget me altogether.

I hope when you settle down, the guy you marry loves you have as much as I have and you love him to, but I know you will, as

you are a very sensible girl and wouldn't marry a guy in the first place if you didn't love him. I want to take this time to wish you all the happiness & success a person could ever have.

Oh by the way the other night the accusation of my being out with a brunette is not true. Whether you were kidding or not I don't know but it hurt very deeply and you have the right to think anything you want.

I hope some day I can find a girl half as nice as you, then I know I will have a happy life. On the other hand maybe I will remain a bachelor and pamper my nieces & nephews.

Good Bye Dear

Moe³

And I am now thinking. It is not that I do not recognize the writer of this letter as my father—the man who sits behind his newspaper at night, who says 'ain't' and spouts grammar gaffes every time he opens his mouth, who drives with both feet (one on the gas, the other waitin' on the brake), who chews one piece of Dentyne Cinnamon gum *per week*, nightly placing it on the kitchen counter before going to bed, who belches loudly, who has both the television and radio on simultaneously, who signs up for radio contests, as many as he can, turning the dial to one station to record the Jackpot of the Hour on the back of a grocery receipt. When the radio station calls him—he is certain it is only a matter of time—he will tell them the amount and win it all. Sometimes as much as \$2,000. He'll spin the dial to another radio station that announces a trivia question every morning (*Who co-starred with Humphrey Bogart in the film The Harder They Fall?*). The right answer can net \$50.

So, no. It is not that I cannot imagine him writing this letter. But what I am thinking, what stops me in my tracks, is this: that something (*something*) happened back then—back

³ Most errors in spelling in this or any other letters included have been left uncorrected, with the exception of added punctuation in order to clarify meaning.

before a wedding, before this house, before Roger, before me, before not-hearing-not-speaking, before Uncle Earl's bouncing, before Adam Walker, before Lisa dying, before—

Beds flipping.

Yes, before everything I have ever known, something happened. It happened after he wrote that letter. And I will never know.

'I was wondering...' Almanzo paused. 'I was wondering if you would like an engagement ring.'

'That would depend on who offered it to me,' Laura told him.

'If I should?' Almanzo asked.

'Then it would depend on the ring,' Laura answered and drew her hand away.
(Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years*)

&&&&

Days are spent like this, bent over the cedar chest, feeling now that I am excavating the relics of strangers, or uncovering the deep-buried roots of sleeping ancestors. As if I had only been looking at the trunk of a tree and its branches, only seeing what grows above-ground. Not seeing the vast network of roots, not witnessing the growing down, the maneuvering out.

One day, I find a letter from my mother's adoptive father, Butch. Handwritten in pencil, it is inside an envelope with several addresses, all but one crossed out and all trying to find Clara Ann Roneson, my Grandma Ann. It is written by a sad man, a man trying to gain a foothold in a past that doesn't belong to him. The letter is post-marked Salt Lake City, Utah, 25 May 1935, when my mother would have been four years old.

May 10 - 35

Dear Clara & Arlis:

May I wish you a happier birth day in the coming year than it was in the past. I haven't hear a word from home or have I written to anyone since I left just 6 months ago today. I've just got to write and tell you that I have missed you both so terrible much since I left in a disgusted drunken stupor and may these few lines help ease an acheing heart as I know it will mine. How many times have I heard the dearest little girl in the world Arlis say, "Mamma when is daddy coming home," isn't daddy ever coming. Clara how could I ever do what I did is more than I know. But it is to late now I've paid in full lots of times and I'll pay some more. But I don't ever expect you to forgive me. I'll not even ask it. It is to much to expect it. But if you can find it in your heart to give little Arlis Kay just one little kiss from me and tell her daddy sent it and no one else in this whole world can or will ever take her place. Please be good to her and I know you will as you love her as much as I do. If I could only send some money so it would help you both but I haven't even got enough to mail this letter.

Will it ease your heart if I tell you I never will love anyone as much as I did you. But the sunshine and shadows of yesterday's are not for us. It is to late. The very most I could ever expect of you is to let me see Arlis sometime or if anything should ever happen to you is let me have her so I could at least make up for the wrong I have done.

Butch

These last words ring in my ears like a playground taunt. I have only ever seen my Grandma Ann as a plump, happy woman who hosts Thanksgiving, used to sew clothes for me, and kept a special 'Jules's Jewels' box on her dresser. It was filled with costume jewelry, all manner of garish colours and colossal shapes. When we came for Sunday dinner, if I had been 'helpful in the kitchen,' we would sit on my grandparents' high bed after dishes and play dress-up with the jewelry. I was always declared helpful.

‘What do you think would be best for the party tonight, Jules?’ my grandma would begin. ‘I am wearing my floral chiffon garden-party dress, with the v-neck, like this,’ and she would mark the pretend neckline with her index finger.

There is a small photograph in the *Baby’s Record*. It’s not taped in as the high-chair picture is, or framed at the corners with black mounting tabs as is the one at the end of the book of my mother standing on top of a large rock. But there are remnants of the corner-tabs left on the photograph. Someone must have ripped it away. This little photo is of a man—my mother’s father, I am certain—holding my mother. He is stocky, wearing a suit with wide lapels and baggy cuffed trousers. He holds her with one arm, the other hanging at his side, which makes him look too large compared to everything in the photo. Clumsy-strong. Almost careless. My mother is looking into the camera; Butch is looking off to the side, a partial profile showing a full head of hair, but ending abruptly—shaved—about two inches above his ear. The *Baby Days* book records my mother’s first word as ‘Daddy,’ and I think of her saying that, calling him that as he holds her.

The picture of my mother standing on the rock is opposite a drawing from the book of a curly, red-haired baby with eyes closed, a feathery blue blanket pulled up to the middle of her back. This image of a baby is sleeping on her side, her head nestled on a cloud of a pillow with her little arm resting near her chin. The poem under the drawing reads,

‘Tis lovely to see when a baby is sleeping,
 The dark curling lashes on rose petals lie,
 And lips softly parted like buds that
 would kiss the sweet baby breath
 as it passes them by.

Except for the red hair, there is a resemblance between the toddler that was my mother and the angelic drawing. Her golden curls fall over her furrowed forehead. She looks worried, or maybe the sun is in her eyes. Her white dress falls to her knees in a scalloped edge. She holds a flower. It's difficult to tell what kind of flower it is: its petals are white and they blend in with her dress. But the same flower is replicated in the garden behind her. Lacy-white anklets frill over her dark shoes; they look just like the Buster Brown lace-ups I wore when I was small. Never the Mary Janes, so that I would learn how to tie my shoes.

I am drawn to the picture as much for the setting as I am to my infant mother. There is a lush garden directly behind her, but in the distance is farmland. Indeed, all that can be seen are two small buildings—far far away and neither look like a house. She was born in North Dakota. She told me that. And, for as long as I can remember, I knew she was adopted.

Baby Days confirms this. The page opposite the photo of my mother in the high chair is a place to fill in birth information. After *Baby* arrived _____, my grandmother entered 'here Aug 9, 1931 at 11:30 PM from the Fargo Children's Home, Age 5 mo. 3 day[s.]' Lines for ~~Doctor~~ and ~~Nurse~~ are crossed out; in their place is written, 'Born March 6th, 1931.' I picture my Grandma Ann carefully filling this out, adjusting for the details she could not know.

&&&&

'But does it hurt to have a baby?' I asked my mother once while drying the silverware.

'It's only a little uncomfortable and then it's over.'

She was being borne away on a wave of pain. A gust of cold, fresh air brought her back and she saw a tall man drop his snowy overcoat by the door and come toward her in the lamplight.

She vaguely felt a cloth touch her face and smelled a keen odor. Then she drifted away into a blessed darkness where there was no pain.

When Laura opened her eyes, the lamp was still shining brightly over the room, and Ma was bending over her with the doctor standing beside her. And in the bed by her side was a little warm bundle.

(Wilder, *The First Four Years*)

&&&&

As I read through the rest of *Baby Days*, I feel a weight. These grainy pages are dedicated to happiness, but I feel a weight.

We named our baby Arlis Kay. Mother Clara Annette Roneson Heringer. Father Martin George Heringer.

Baby's First Shoes—Description White laced kid shoes with a chicken on top. Size of Baby's First Shoes 0.

Our Baby's first Tooth came October 20th 1931.

Our baby's first steps were from Her chair by the dresser to the bed. Date May 14th 1932.

Our Baby's first Outing was Aug 9, 1931. From Fargo to Barlow.

And a lock of hair secured to the page with a piece of black tape. First Haircut Jan 2, 1932.

&&&&

I find a business envelope with my grandfather's return address embossed in the upper left corner (ROY G. GENNEARY, Deputy Grand Master, GRAND LODGE OF MINNESOTA, INDEPENDENT ORDER OF ODD FELLOWS, 3329 Parkview Boulevard, ROBBINSDALE, MINNESOTA). This is my Grandpa Roy, who married my grandmother when my mom was twelve years old. Typed in red, centered on the envelope, is

Adoption Papers (Arlis)

Inside is a photocopy of something from the North Dakota Children's Society—it's a birth certificate, I think, but it doesn't look like mine. There is no name of a hospital, no record of how much she weighed.

This is to certify that Arlis Kay Heringer was born March 6, 1931, at Valley City, North Dakota, and such birth has been certified to the State of N.Dak. and that such date has been taken from such records as are now on file.

It is dated November 5, 1936, more than five years after she was born.

'...such birth has been certified...' A certified birth. And 'such date has been taken from such records.'

There is something about that word—*such*: I picture an ancient Aunt Such, watching over me if I had been Laura's other sister and busy with some chore. Churning butter, maybe. Or learning the tiny hand-stitches of sewing that would hurt Laura's fingers and bring her to tears. Aunt Such would surely be looming. Watching, waiting (hoping?) for a

hint of slap-dashery—you know, unrhythmic churning here, a slipped stitch there. Or some *such* thing.

There is also a page of stationery, so old that at each of the intersections where fold-meets-fold, the paper is separating in sharp lines, as if run through with a knife. At the top—official letterhead—is a banner in green, like a scroll, with the words

NORTH DAKOTA CHILDREN'S HOME SOCIETY

On the left side, the banner ribbons down about $\frac{1}{4}$ of the page, settling around the feet of two silhouetted children (also in green), a boy and a girl. The boy is taller and holds the hand of the girl; in her left hand, she dangles a doll.

804 TENTH STREET SOUTH

FARGO, N.D.

March 6, 1952

Miss Arlis Heringer
1751 Park Road N.W.
Washington, D.C.

Dear Arlis:

We were very glad to have your little letter, for we are always pleased to hear from those we have cared for in the past. I only wish you had told us a bit about yourself and what you are doing. I expect you are a "government worker", and I do hope you have a nice job. Have you been in Washington long?

It is natural that you should wonder about your own people, no matter how happy you may have been in your foster home. I remember you when you were a baby here, and I remember about your mother. We have never heard from her again since a few months after she left you with us for placement. She was a teacher, gave up her school about Christmas time, went to Valley City, far from her home, away from people who knew anything about her, stayed there until you were born, then arranged for us to plan for you. No one in her home community, and no one in her family save her mother knew about you, and I am sure to this day

that none of them have ever known. Your mother loved you, enough to want you to have what she couldn't give - parents, a home, a good education. That is a real sacrifice on a mother's part, as I am sure you can understand now that you are mature. It was a heartache for her, but she did it bravely. Even if she could be located now, it might bring more grief to her.

There is a bit more, telling my mother that it is possible now for her to acquire a birth certificate in her adopted name. A consolation prize.

&&&&

'Don't you want to know anything about your real mother—I know Grandma Ann is real—but I mean about the mother who had you?'

'I used to, Jules, and I thought about doing something when I lived in Washington, D.C., trying to find out something about her. But I changed my mind.'

'Why?'

'It was very upsetting to my mother. I couldn't hurt her.'

'You told her?'

The ironing board squeaks as she presses down, then lifts her head. 'I would never lie to her,' she says.

&&&&

There are more things to look through in *Baby Days*, but one day I pull out a dilapidated box instead. In the lower left of the lid, in red, is 'A DeLuxe Embossed Stationery.' The center of the lid is decorated with a drawing of a brown ribbon. It sashays down and around,

cradling a red square with a line drawing of a grid, armless hands poised and holding threads to weave into the grid. Making paper? On the ribbon is the company name: Wicker.

On the top of the box, written in pencil, is 'Moe's Letters.'

Which is why I never opened it before.

I've been thinking about the goodbye letter he wrote to my mother.

Yes, a goodbye letter. He wrote, pen in left hand, thinking—as the strokes materialized on the paper as words—of how to formulate a goodbye.

Will I know who he is if I read what's in the box?

I open it and one side of the lid drops away, as if it is too tired to hang on anymore.

There are a lot of envelopes, all with postmarks reading 'U.S. Army-Air Force Postal Service.' For many years, when I was little, a black-and-white portrait of my father sat on top of the television and phonograph console. It was framed in gold and he was in uniform. Next to it was a portrait of my mother in the same frame. Her golden hair curled up just at the ends, resting on her shoulders. She was wearing pearls. I spent hours looking at her, trying to see if I might look like her one day. I haven't thought about those portraits and never even noticed they were removed. So much happens.

When I check the dates on a few of the postmarks, I see that they are not in order. I spend a great deal of time putting them in order. My hands start to itch because of something—it feels like sand or dirt—on the envelopes. And then I think of how I shouldn't be doing what I'm doing. How maybe my hands will break out in some awful rash with blisters that will break open, wounded and weeping, and then everything I touch will be tainted.

I have that feeling again, that I cannot bear who I am. Was it really true that I had friends and we laughed at marching band practice? Did Lisa and I really spend hours during endless summers playing Crazy Eights and reading aloud to each other? Did I really eat ice cream with friends and smile at a boy who smiled at me? Did I really sleep easy?

&&&&

The last thing inside the blue covers of the baby record is a legal document. It is printed on paper that is tissue-paper thin.

STATE OF NORTH DAKOTA
 COUNTY OF FOSTER
 ORDER OF ADOPTION
 IN THE MATTER OF ADOPTION OF LOIS ANN TORGERSON, A MINOR.

IN DISTRICT COURT
 FOURTH JUDICIAL DISTRICT.

The above entitled matter coming on before the Court in Chambers in the City of Carrington, in the County of Foster and State of North Dakota, in the Fourth Judicial District, and it appearing to the Court that M.G. Heringer and Clara A. Heringer, husband and wife, have filed a petition in the District Court in and for the County of Foster and State of North Dakota, in said Fourth Judicial District, for leave to adopt Lois Ann Torgerson—

This is confusing, until I remember the closing lines in the letter from the Children's Home Society. 'Did you know that it is now possible for you to secure a birth certificate in your adopted name if you wish one?' Sincerely (Mrs) Lucy J. Hall had written. *'We could help you get it.'*

I skip around the strange archaic legal words now, looking for details. Pieces—partial sentences—rise to the surface like stoney poetry. Soldier stanzas.

Said child was by an Order of the District Court of Cass County, North Dakota, dated on the 9th., day of August A.D., 1932...a ward of the State

Committed to the custody and guardianship of the North Dakota Children's Home Society

To place said child in a suitable Protestant family

Naming therein as such child said Lois Ann Torgerson

And the Court having proceeded to an examination of the files herein

Best interests of such minor child will be promoted by granting such adoption;

NOW THEREFORE, It is ORDERED, ADJUDGED, and DECREED, That the said petitioners...may adopt said minor child

Henceforth said minor child shall be treated in all respects as their own lawful child should be treated

Hereafter bear to each other the relation of parent and child

The name of said child shall be changed to, and she shall henceforth be known by the name of Arlis Kay Heringer...

Attached to the back is much thicker paper, about the size of an envelope, with the stamped seal of the Clerk of the District Court. I run my index finger over the raised seal, wondering if my grandmother did as well, and indeed my mother.

Like the *such* in the birth certificate, every time I read *said*, I hear it amplified in my head. Said, said, said, *said child said child, said child, said Lois Ann Torgerson*.

Lois Ann Torgerson. The woman who gave birth to her had given her a name. She had not kept her, had not given her a home but she had given her a name.

And then it was changed. Still, I have always loved my mother's name, ever since the long-ago time she told me she was named after an actor adored by my grandma. George Arliss.

George Arliss Gives Another
 Masterful Portrayal as a Deaf
 Musician Who Eavesdrops on
 Distressed Persons
 By MORDAUNT HALL.

George Arliss turns to another old favorite in his latest picture, "The Man Who Played God," which was offered last night at the Warner Theatre before an enthusiastic audience. It is a charmingly poetic idea that has received tasteful and reverend attention from John Adolphi the director. Mr. Arliss delivers another of his effective and meticulous portrayals as a celebrated pianist named Montgomery Royale, who is afflicted with deafness and subsequently finds joy in eavesdropping on distressed souls in Central Park by reading their lips through powerful field glasses as they talk to each other.

(*New York Times*, 11 February 1932)

I have told my mother many times over how much I hate my name, but I never told her why. Since fifth grade, I have been in most classes at school with 'the other' Julie—Julie King. Julie King is nothing like me. Her hair is smooth and she brings sandwiches with store-bought bread for lunch; she volunteers correct answers in class, and teachers ask her to run office-errands for them. She is thin and wears all her shirts tucked in.

Back in elementary school, when a teacher called on Julie to read aloud or answer a question, she would pipe up, 'Which Julie?', confusing teachers because they didn't remember there was another one. I felt sick to my stomach each time this happened because it never failed that the next paragraph to read or the next question to answer would be lobbed to me. Even now. 'Read the next paragraph, please...uh...' (looking around), 'the *other* Julie.'

When my mother told me the story of my name ('We had two picked out if you were a girl—Amy or Julie. But I saw you, and I knew you should be Julie'), I scoffed. 'You should have chosen Amy. I hate my name.'

It came up a lot. For a long time, I thought it had everything to do with how bad I was. My mother's placating—'But it's a beautiful name,' or 'Why don't you use Jules instead?' or 'It's what's *inside* a person that matters the most,'—often ignited rage, and I might run to my room and slam the door, promising myself I would never speak to her again.

But once, when I screamed that I hated my name, hated her for giving it to me, she looked defeated. 'Well,' she said, her voice hollowed out, 'when you turn eighteen, change it.'

'What?' I felt duped into showing my surprise.

She didn't repeat it. Instead, she paused in her ironing and said, 'It seems to me that you are happiest where you are not.'

Where I am not.

&&&&

This is how the first letter my father writes from France begins:

4 July 52

Fri. Eve.

Dear Dad –

Yes, Dad, you are the only faithful one of the family and it is probably because you have been in the same position as I and know what a letter from

home can mean when one is so far away. Some day when the others are gone they too will realize the importance of letters and when they don't hear from me they can think back a few years when I was away from home and didn't hear from them. I know none of them are so busy they can't write but they think they are too good to write their brother though as far as I am concerned they can all go to H E L L. I am drinking beer while I write this letter so if I sound pissed off in this letter don't take it too heart Dad cause I am not blaming you. I know you never had much to do with us kids in the way of entertainment, but you made a living for your family and I think that is all that any child should expect from parents...The weather here has been hotter than Hades...

Did I know—ever—that he was in France? When, one day, Roger calls from college to tell my parents he is thinking of joining the Peace Corps, my father admonishes, 'What the hell would you want to go and do that for?' His voice is marked by an irritation familiar from our childhood, those Sundays he had off from the post office and we dared to squabble while he only wanted to sleep.

On the phone, though, with Roger, my father continues. 'Africa, for Christ's sake? If you have to help people, why the hell can't you do it in your own country? Shit. Those Africans are filthy.'

Once I start with the letters, I can't stop reading. And I hear his voice as I read. Whinging as he does on the phone with Roger. As he did when we were a buzzing annoyance on his precious Sundays. I wonder what I am looking for or what I hope *not* to find. There are times in my life when I force my eyes to a place outside myself—a necessary dare, to face the world, to see if it is still there and still laughing at me. This feels like one of those times. I am so sure I know my father. But maybe I don't know everything.

(1978—sixteen years old)

: Mozart Concerto for Clarinet, K. 622

Before the reading returns, Jules feels she has committed an unspeakable violation against her books, her beloved books. Not being able to read the words is not their fault. Books will be loyal where people cannot. They hadn't changed. Jules had changed.

When their covers had been smoothed (crashing against the wall, many were folded over) and placed gingerly on dusted shelves, Jules cries. Not tears of anger, but of sadness and out of need for redemption. If she can never read again, she will not take it out on her books. Never blame them.

In the corner of her room is her music stand with the sheet music for the Mozart piece she had played just a few months ago. Next to it, on the floor, is her clarinet. This darkness has taken away words. What about music? Words on the page make no sense, they just don't come together, not letters with words nor words with sense, and Jules wonders if it is just as bad with music. Notes are like letters in a word, aren't they?

She opens the case, carefully assembles her clarinet. Seeing it, holding it—and the smell too, of cork grease makes her cry again. It is such a relief after all her night-time flipping, where nothing is stable or good or clean. Maybe she won't be able to read the music, but this tangible instrument is comfort, is a friend who makes no demand for conversation. Not a book, but close to a book.

When she turned thirteen, her parents bought the Buffet Crampon R13 Prestige clarinet for her. It had been recommended by Mr McCarthy, the band conductor at the high

school where Jules and Lisa and some of their friends had been practicing. Mr McCarthy was nothing like the awful Mr Madsen of elementary school, Mr Madsen who visibly watched for those weak seams in a person, waiting to humiliate them in front of other peers. Jules had never had a teacher who seemed to think children were as capable as adults, but Mr McCarthy watched carefully, and soaked in whatever was good about his students and made sure they knew it. He was all energy and drove a motorcycle to school. His blue eyes were quick and danced with the music he conducted. He pulled Jules aside after one rehearsal to ask if she would be trading up ‘that practice horn anytime soon.’

‘No,’ was all she said.

And this was another thing about Mr McCarthy: his eyes danced, yes, and because of this, they communicated a great deal—as they did now, to ask why Jules would not be upgrading her instrument. No words, just those eyes, but not at all in a cruel way. He was patient.

‘My parents can’t afford it.’ Head down. Jules knew how much they cost from listening to other students. Close to a thousand dollars or more for a nice one, for a Selmer or Buffet.

‘Have you spoken to them?’ he asked.

‘No,’ Jules said, and right away regretted her too-quick response. Implying, of course, that she would not ask.

‘Would you mind if I gave them a call?’

Jules couldn’t hold a blank face. A phone call to her parents? It felt invasive, as much as she liked Mr McCarthy. Her parents had nothing to do with this part of her life. It was hers. Not theirs.

Instead of waiting for Jules to answer, he said, 'You see, I have some connections.' Blue eyes shimmering. 'And, it wouldn't have to be one payment all at once. Just a little each month, whatever they can manage.'

And that was it. In a few days she was in possession of the beautiful Buffet, made from grenadilla wood. When she first opened the case and saw the pieces resting against blue velvet, Jules could only stare, could only try to take it in. She knew if she opened her mouth to speak—and she *had* to speak, she had to thank them—she would cry. It was there in her throat, threatening.

'Well, I guess you don't like it,' was what her father said.

'No! I mean, yes. Yes, I do.'

'Jules, honey, what do you say?' her mother prompted.

No matter how stupid she sounded, she had to eek it out, say something, even if the moment was ruined. So she managed, 'Thank you.'

Her father went back to his newspaper.

And now, she examines her cherished clarinet, at once seeing it as if for the first time but knowing each part so well. The barrel, especially, is so fine, the wood a deep reddish-brown like some of the leaves on Grandma Ann's begonias. And then there is the mouthpiece, a Vandoren, which she had bought on her own, saving baby-sitting money for two years. She had not liked sitting for the Millers, as they never came home before three in the morning, but they paid her a ridiculous amount being, invariably, drunk.

Sitting on the floor before the music stand, Jules reaches to get the sheet music. It is by Mozart. I won't put a reed on it, she thinks, not just yet, but maybe try to finger the notes. The music was originally for orchestra and clarinet, or piano and clarinet, and there

are 56 measures before the clarinet enters. When she had performed the piece for jury, there had been a pianist available. To Jules's delight, it wasn't the playing together that helped as much as it was being able to lose herself in those measures at the beginning. Hearing the piano alone gave her so much of what she was about to play that the music sent her to a place without time, as if the walls of the auditorium fell away and the world consisted only of music, and its only words were now notes. She loved to be immersed in the music enough to believe that music was itself a being, on its own, with no people behind it. Maybe we are vehicles for the sounds, she thought, but we work for the music. Servants to the music and responsible for learning the mechanics, but we are not the music. It has a life of its own. In this way, playing in front of others was not an issue for self-consciousness. Jules never felt that she was good or talented. But she was faithful.

(1979—*seventeen years old*)

: *Dear Folks*

His letters home are now in order. I put them in order because order is so satisfying and clean. Speckless. Sharp. I think of spice jars alphabetized, or spoons ranked by size in the silverware drawer, or books on a shelf arranged by author, or clothes in the closet organized by item: dresses, then skirts, then slacks, then shirts.

But *I* cannot read the letters. To do so would be naughty, would be shameful (*and at your age, young lady, you should know better*). She still hovers in the corner, however, the she of the me who will always hover, always threaten to evaporate the wall I built between us on the flipping bed. The flipping fucking bed. Oh, yes, *she* can say fucking. She can say and think any shameful thing. And she can read the fucking letters from the father.

Father-letters.

&&&&

They are in order, dated between July 1952 and November 1953, mostly from France. Struck by this (*My father in France? Why France?*), Jules wracks her brain to resurrect the US History syllabus from her junior year. She remembers writing a lengthy paper on Woodrow Wilson. He, too, she remembers—like her father—went to France after a world war. Jules learnt to hate Woodrow Wilson, notwithstanding all the lectures in class on his work for the League of Nations, his Nobel Peace Prize, and how he helped women in getting

the vote. One would think he was a saint. Indeed, Adam Walker once whispered from the back that their teacher, Mr Colwin, 'comes in his tights-whities when he talks about Wilson.' Jules in fact had chosen Wilson as her topic because of Mr Colwin's enthusiasm; for he had lectured without notes, inserting endless acronyms and dates, of course, but bringing drama to events and people so that they materialized from facts and data to storytelling. Yes, he clearly admired Wilson and Jules had felt that research on Saint Woodrow would please Mr Colwin.

But scanning through microfiche articles in the library, Jules discovered a civil-rights activist called William Monroe Trotter, a man who supported Woodrow Wilson's run for the presidency but was later to find out that Wilson, in fact, was an advocate for segregation. When a confrontation at the White House ended with the president throwing Trotter out, newspapers latched onto the story. One Texas newspaper, Jules read, called Trotter 'merely a nigger, not a Booker T Washington type of colored man.'

Jules wondered why this wasn't a part of the lectures on Woodrow Wilson. She wondered, too, whether to include this as part of her research. Could her teacher not have known? Impossible. Mr Colwin knew everything.

The Woodrow thing weighed on Jules, questions surfacing and expanding like the rings around a tossed stone in still water—out and out. And, in the end, her research paper was nothing more than a collection of book reports. Mr Colwin wrote at the top, 'Lacking appropriate enthusiasm for one of our greatest presidents,' and gave Jules C+.

Jules shudders at the thought now. She would stick with the present—or, rather, with 1952—and her father's letters. Why was he in France? Jules vaguely recalls post-war

words and phrases that had something to do with the US and France, the Marshall Plan and NATO, but not much else. Anyway, he had been there. That was the point.

French editorial writers largely agree, in effect, that the Marshall Plan dollars were at first a warm, fertilizing wind from the west, causing post-war business to sprout again in the war-caked area of Western Europe. What they think is urgently needed now is a great wind that will blow in both directions across the ocean—and blow good and hard, like a splendid gale, for the rest of the twentieth century.

(Janet Flanner, *Paris Journal*, 28 December 1949)

Jules reads through the letters quickly, then—over many weeks—reads them again and again. In order, always in order, trying (*For what?*) to find something, something about herself. She does this with everything she reads. In the *Little House* books, scenes of family life feel all-familiar, but not recognizable. She has always been more at-home in a book than in her life. And, at first, she could endure, because, until recently, until Jules became Julie, the *Little House* family had felt like it might just turn out to be *her* family. The Ingallses had been something to dream of, to hope for. When she was little, it seemed to Jules that it would only be a matter of time.

A part of every letter her father writes grouses about the weather.

In October 1952, her father writes, ‘At present France is having her rainy season, and what a mess it makes, mud everywhere you turn. Out of 64 days here they had rain 63 (*he counted!*) so you can well imagine the slop we must work in. This morning I slipped in the darn stuff so now I have an extra wash job. My whole left side was plastered with mud,

my cap fell off and was full of mud. The other fellows laughed to beat the band and I must admit it looked pretty silly.'

That's entertainment, Jules thinks. And immediately feels ashamed. These are days, after all, that he shared with his parents. And there emerges an image of her father—her father of the old photos—sitting somewhere in France writing on this very piece of paper she holds now. She cannot say exactly what, but these questions hover in the room: *Doesn't this act of writing mean something? Am I to dismiss this because it is my father writing?*

In November, there is more about the mud. 'The mud is still with us, Dad, and it looks like it will stay all winter. We have only had one snowfall which wasn't very much, sure wish we could get about three feet.'

It isn't the only time he pines for snow. In December, he writes, 'The weather here is as unpredictable as a woman's mind, no offense on you Mother. The other day it snowed about two inches and it was real beautiful, but last night it rained and today there wasn't a single trace of snow.'

Jules thinks about how he is in the Minnesota winters he must endure. With temperatures below-twenty degrees, sometimes lasting weeks, the car must be plugged in during the night or the engine will simply not turn on. Even then, the old Buick must run for at least thirty minutes before driving. Moe does not seem to think—at least to Jules—that the snow is beautiful now. She knows he hates his job ('Mark my words, I'm gonna hang goddamn mistletoe at the bottom of my coattails when I walk outta there for the last time'), but senses a sharper resentment in the cold weather and mountains of snow. His sighs are heavier, his neck—bent over when he walks—bends further. His callused hands crack and blister from the cold. A bottle of Corn Huskers Lotion has a permanent place on the kitchen

counter from October to March, next to the piece of used Dentyne gum placed there each night. Jules knows this life he lives now (because of *her* somehow? Because of Jules's ugly presence compared to the Arlis he loved—no, she suddenly knows, the woman he *loves*, still—so much he wrote he could never marry if it weren't to her?), this life that has established itself as a monotonous grind, is hard on him. He works hard. In France, snow would have been beautiful for him. Here, now, it is a thing he battles, another burden. He is up long before the sun in this unforgiving winter and returns home in the dark.

For the past three weeks, a prolonged fog has transformed Paris into a phantom capital of gray beauty, of which everyone is growing extremely tired. The anticyclone has covered all France...
(Flanner, 27 January 1953)

Besides the weather, food is a topic of nearly every letter. Of course, it is mostly bad. Even when it's good, it seems, he clings to the inevitable wretchedness he knows will come. In 1952, on the day after Thanksgiving, Moe records, 'We had quite a meal yesterday but today we are back to the same old crap. Less than a month later, he writes, 'Tonight for chow we had pork chops I wouldn't feed to my worst enemy, no potatoes, cauliflower that wasn't fit for pigs and two measly slices of bread. Now I ask you what kind of chow is that, and it isn't only once or twice a week but every meal. You can imagine the men's morale over here, lower than a snake's belly, and all the time the base commander says morale is high. Maybe it's because we stay drunk all the time and don't realize half the time what is going on.'

And the town was all alone on the frozen, endless prairie, where snow drifted and

winds howled and the whirling blizzard put
out the stars and the sun.

(Wilder, *The Long Winter*)

&&&&

Jules remembers, the summer she was nine, her mother going back to work, and taking the late-afternoon shift at the nursing home, from 3:00 to 11:30. She would leave before Jules was home from school and return when she was asleep. There were minor cooking lessons—re-heating instructions, really—since Jules would need to get supper for her father. Hamburger Helper supplied the staple, which Arlis cooked in the morning. Brown the ground beef, then add boiling water and the contents of the package, et voilà! Cheeseburger Macaroni Dinner, Potato Stroganoff, and Rice Oriental. Like magic—and in a single skillet.

That summer, Arlis bought a little wooden rooster, with strips of felt glued on for tail feathers and, under the coxcomb as a beak, a clothespin—the kind with a spring near the top so when you squeezed together the open ends, the top would open, like a mouth or, in this case, a beak. Instead of clothes, the rooster's beak held a piece of notepad paper. Jules's mother would write, 'Menu' at the top before leaving for work. Under that, as a list, would be the Hamburger Helper variety of the day, followed by 'Bread & Butter, Milk.' Jules needed only to re-heat the meal and serve it to her father. Since he came home from the post office at 4:00 in the afternoon, and left for a second job pumping gas at the local Shell station by 5:00, there was no excuse needed to let him eat alone. Roger played sports all year round and friends' parents shuttled him from practice to home so Jules was alone for

hours. She felt, therefore, that it was a blessing that her father was only ever there for an hour.

There was that time, though—only once, only once—when Jules had gone to her room after turning the burner on under the Hamburger Helper. It was spring, the smell of the air the first reminder of the new life to come. Jules opened her window and grabbed *On the Banks of Plum Creek* to find a favorite passage.

The wheat-field was a silky, shimmery green rippling over a curve of the prairie. Its insides were straight and its corners square, and all around it the wild prairie grasses looked coarser and darker green. Laura looked back at the wonderful house. In the sunshine on the knoll, its sawed-lumber walls and roof were as golden as a straw-stack.

It was one of those passages, for Jules, that sent her back to someplace, journeying through the familiar words toward an imaginary place and time more real than here and now.

But on the very edge of reaching this faraway place and time, Julie is startled by a clatter, an alarm, a cursing.

The kitchen. The burner. The goddamn Hamburger Helper.

She moves into the kitchen with dread, taking in the sight of her father, his face twisted in disgust. 'What the hell is this?' he asks, master of the question with no answer. Jules's blank expression and ashen face fuel his indignation. 'God *damnit!* What the hell were you thinking?'

The lid to the pan is on the floor, still rocking on its edge, back and forth, back and forth, slowing, slowing. Stop.

Then, to quiet the silence, 'Jesus Christ,' he says. He now flings the pan across the room where burned bits of meat and noodles hit the wall. He grabs his jacket with the Shell gas station patch on the back ('Moe' embroidered on the front in sunny yellow). Before he slams the door he says, 'Your mother just *had* to go and get a job, didn't she?'

&&&&

'Yesterday being Christmas we had a very good dinner,' he writes, in 1952, 'but already it is back to the slop we are so used to over here. Another year and we will have a good meal again, something to look forward to. HA HA.'

Back to the weather in the next paragraph: 'The weather here is the same, muddy as the devil. The sun came out for awhile so our planes had to fly, can't let a man rest a minute.'

The persistent fog has acted like a melancholy condenser of people's present apprehensions. [And] the French are startled and worried by the news...of the Nazi revival and the arrest of its presumed leaders in the new, republican heart of their traditional despoiler, Germany... And, to make it all worse, there are France's deteriorating, tit-for-tat relations with the United States. After what Parisians have so far viewed of 1953, they will be glad when the opening winter segment is passed and the fog has lifted and they can see the spring...
(Flanner, 27 January 1953)

In the subsequent readings, Jules looks for things—politics, family, her mother, or anything not weather-related. As if researching, she will scan the letters looking for one particular topic through each read. She wants to understand France in the 1950s, and the

World Book Encyclopedia on the bookshelves in the tiny alcove outside the bedrooms is consulted regularly. Mostly there is information about geography. The words are beautiful, but Jules cannot find a story. And she always wants the story.

That was the problem with history, with Mr Colwin's American History. What is the use of dates and place-names? Jules received high marks for multiple choice questions because dates and such-and-such, and so-and-so, were easy. But, words she finds are words, she finds, still sometimes shift, wander, on the page. Gliding-Sliding, like the ballroom dancers in Jane Austen's world, words hold hands briefly as they pass through to the other side of the line—

Well. All beside the point. France, 1952.

Moe writes infrequently about politics but Jules tries to fill in the missing pieces when he does. It doesn't work for the most part. He writes about the world the way you would simply give directions to a person looking for the nearest gas station. Still, now and again, there is something, and Jules hears a kind of familiarity in the ironic tone he adopts. One letter says, 'No, Dad, Tripoli is in North Africa. We leave sometime next month and will be gone approximately 90 days. On the way to Tripoli we are going to stop at Furstenfeldbruck, a base in Germany and will probably be there a month or so. I don't catch much of this French chatter as I never go to town. I have only been to town three times since I have been here. *Compris* (kom-pree)(understand).'

Her father's 'French chatter' bothers Jules. There's a disregard there. *But then*, she thinks, *could it be fear? Am I allowed to feel terrified at this place I have arrived? He is not? Foreign country, maybe, doesn't have to be far away. I am foreign to myself.*

Compris? Mrs Brown says it, especially when she regales the class with theories of 'reiterated imagery' in Shakespeare's plays. '*Compris?*' she asks. *Shakespeare, compris?*

Tripoli. North Africa. Furstenfeldbruck, Germany. And the place he writes from most, Chaumont, France. She reads these place-names out loud, the way she used to read some of the Crayola-Crayon names. Ah, the feel of words on the tongue, the passage of words-from-page-to-eyes-to-brain-to-tongue. What a miracle, she thinks, to read. To read at all. *Compris?*

The irony of Moe going to Africa, where Roger plans to go after graduating. Had their father ever spoken of being in Africa? Certainly not to Jules. And had she ever thought to ask? The picture of her uniformed father that sat so many years on top of the TV. She remembers, too, staring into those eyes in the photo, and seeing a kind of twinkle she had seen before whenever he looked at her mother. Why didn't she ask him about anything, the way she was always asking her mother? Because his life could never have been interesting? No. Because, for whatever reason, Jules realizes, she didn't want to know.

The trusty volumes of the *World Book Encyclopedia* remain on the shelf second to bottom. Arlis had chosen that shelf as the books, with their gold-edged pages, came two per month. That shelf made for easy access by both children. Slightly above eye-level for Jules, a bit below for Roger. The cream-coloured books with bands of hunter-green on the spine. Gold lettered. And, each March, a *World Book Year Book* to supplement. Jules loved the original set the best. Like the *Little House* books, they would not change. No matter how old she got or how early she died, they would still *be*. Reliable and sturdy. Fixed. She finds a map of Africa in the *World Book*, locates Tripoli in the very north and The Gambia (where Roger will go) in the northwest.

‘**Tripoli**,’ Jules reads. ‘Arabic **Ṭarābulus**, in full **Ṭarābulus al-Gharb**, capital city of Libya. The city was known as Oea in ancient times and was one of the original cities (along with Sabratha and Leptis Magna) that formed the African Tripolis, or Tripolitania. Occupying a rocky promontory overlooking the sea’ (*like poetry*, Jules thinks) ‘and located due south of Sicily, the city was founded by the Phoenicians and later controlled by the Romans (146 BCE until about 450 CE), the Vandals (5th century), and the Byzantines (6th century).’

Her father may well not have known such things as these. Such things. Nor indeed *his* father. ‘No, Dad, Tripoli is in North Africa.’ He had then added that, ‘As far as work is concerned here it is just the same routine every day—Keep ‘em Flying.’

It is the dark-skinned, antique peoples on the south shore of the Mediterranean who have been making sanguinary news lately, instead of the pale men of Europe...[U]prisings, deaths, repressions, and general strike...
(Flanner, 30 January 1952)

In a later letter, Moe echoes what Jules heard him say to Roger about ‘those filthy Africans.’ ‘The natives of Tripoli are dirty and very slow,’ he writes to his father in October 1952. ‘I thought the French were slow but the people in Tripoli are even worse. As for the Germans they are way ahead of the rest of Europe and always will be.’

Jules’s face grows hot to read this.

The Germans? Oh dear God, Jules thinks. What she knows of World War II comes mostly from Anne Frank’s *Diary*. Way ahead? What does that mean?

It is not, though, clear what Jules’s father ever means. Or perhaps she would rather not know what he means. Before the presidential election in 1952, he writes, ‘No Dad it

doesn't make much difference who gets in office, it is all crooked anyhow,' before recommending a 'good book' he is reading called *Washington Confidential*, hinting that the secrets among its pages are damning and that it 'tells just what goes on and about the nation's capital and how the taxpayer's money is spent. It has quite a lot to say about Eleanor Roosevelt.'

Here came a woman of blood and millions...

That she became invested with certain homely and all-wooly virtues by the worship of millions is precisely why she choked the last breath out of social tradition with her Negro friends, her boondoggling, sweaty indigents, her professional socialists, her dedicated slum-house guardians of gutter garbage, and her antics as the militant apostle of democracy and equality.

(Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer, *Washington Confidential*, 1951)

But if the US is ignorant, France, according to Moe, is parasitic. Just before Christmas, he explains, 'Oh yes, Dad, we have guard duty every six days and I will have it Christmas Day and New Years. We were supposed to have Polish guards in January but I think that has fell through as most Poles guard with dogs and dogs used to guard anything is prohibited by the French government. These damn people. I wish to Hell they would all drop dead. They are bleeding the U.S. dry, and the U.S. doesn't realize it. I shall never be so happy as the day I leave this hole and go back and live with human beings.'

Considering the offense taken here in France at Eisenhower's convention reference to the French as morally debilitated and half agnostic or atheistic, it is extraordinary how the French reporters allotted him the major publicity. Now they are also allotting him the major criticisms...

(Flanner, 20 October 1952)

Moe, it seems, is like Ike—Ike Eisenhower, the new man. New old man. ‘On Tuesday our new president and his boys take over. I only hope he does the servicemen some good like sending us home after eighteen months over here. We listened to Harry’s farewell speech to the nation the other evening. That guy sure can sling a lot of malarkey, about what he has done for the nation.’

&&&&

Jules knows nothing, really, about Harry, Harry Truman, except for one lovely image in her head—a snapshot—from a story her mother told her a couple of years before. Arlis had stood ironing in the kitchen while Jules worked half-heartedly through math homework at the kitchen table. The *Squeak-hiss-squeak* of pressing down and misting was rhythmic comfort, *mezzo piano*, like the overlapping notes from a clarinet quintet with which Jules had been practicing. Shostakovich’s Waltz No. 2. They were scheduled to perform a jury with it the following weekend, and it was almost perfect. The *one-two-three* music played in Jules’s head almost every minute it seemed, and she was preoccupied with wondering how such a piece could feel so old-world melancholic, while at the same time...what? Not happy, no, that wasn’t the word for it. It reminded Jules of merry-go-round calliope music. Falsely jovial, a masked dirge played too fast.

SQUEAK-hiss-squeak.

‘But, did you always want to marry him?’ Jules had asked.

‘No, not always.’

‘And what did you think of him when you first met him? You were only thirteen, right?’

SQUEAK-hiss-squeak. Arlis looked up. ‘Aren’t you supposed to be doing homework? Besides, haven’t I told you this?’

‘Please? It’s practically the only story I like about him.’

‘Oh, Jules.’ *SQUEAK-hiss-squeak.* ‘Your father works so hard.’

‘He’s so mad all the time,’ Jules said. ‘He hates his life.’

SQUEAK-hiss-squeak.

‘When he was growing up, Grandpa Clarence was gone for months at a time working on the railroad. And Grandma Ruby had the five of them to take care of.’

‘I know.’ Jules hadn’t really wanted *this* story.

‘Well, the point is,’ her mother said, ‘your dad’s idea of what it means to be a father comes from *his* father. As long as you can put food on the table, well, that’s the most important thing. If you can do that, you’re a good father.’

SQUEAK-hiss-squeak.

‘And remember,’ Arlis added, ‘it was the depression. Most fathers didn’t have jobs.’

‘Okay. Just, please, tell about the bike? Please?’

Heavy sigh. *SQUEAK-hiss-squeak.* Resignation.

‘Well, Moe—your dad—had this bike. We were all walking over to the Dairy Bar, just like every evening in the summer, and I remember we heard it before we saw it. He had a whole row of different kinds of, you know, bells, all lined up across the handlebars of the bike. So he would ring them. One after another, all down the line. They were each different. A couple of them were more like horns—a bulb at one end. It looked like Grandma’s turkey

baster at that end. But a couple were small and had a high pitch sound. The bigger ones were blaring. Anyway, you'da thought a whole band of I-don't-know-what was coming down the alley. He'd pass us by and shout out, "Hi-di-ho, folks!"

'Hi-di-ho? No, mom! Really?'

The two of them laughed until Jules was hunched over the kitchen table, and Arlis bent over the ironing board. No *SQUEAK-hiss-squeak* for the moment. Just uncontrollable laughter which, when it died down, Jules shouted, 'Hi-di-ho, folks!' and it began again. The scene was repeated a couple of times until they both had to wipe tears away, and exhale forcefully. Catching breath.

'But *why* did you marry him?'

'Oh, Jules.' And Jules knew she had just erased a moment when they might have shared a piece of sweetness that happened long before Jules was born.

'But, I mean, didn't you want other things? Didn't you want to *do* things? *Go* places?'

'I did go places. I *did* go.'

'Where? Where you did you go?'

The waltz of the iron began again. *SQUEAK-hiss-squeak*.

'Well, after high school I worked a bit, you know, at the hospital. But I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. For the first time—I don't know why, really—I wanted to go somewhere where no one knew me and I knew no one. And you know...' Arlis paused, stopped the iron mid-air. She looked into some other place. Not here, Jules thought, but some *other* somewhere. 'Well,' she continued, 'it's a little funny because, all my life I stayed with other people while my mom and Aunt Flossie took turns working. Sometimes, there was nothing for it but to have me stay with others. Your Grandma Ann called it "visiting

with relatives,” but I knew none of them was truly a relative. They were Norwegian. That was relative enough, I guess.’

Jules suddenly felt sad.

‘Anyway, enough of that. What was I saying?’

SQUEAK-hiss-squeak.

‘You went away,’ Jules said. Softly.

‘Yes. I went away. To Washington. I worked at the Pentagon.

‘Wait—DC? As in the White House?’

‘Mm-hm,’ Arlis said.

‘I didn’t know that. Why didn’t I know that?’

SQUEAK—

Arlis stopped. ‘Know *what*, Jules?’ As if she hadn’t been part of the conversation.

‘You lived someplace else?’

‘Sure.’

‘You worked at the *Pentagon*?’

‘Mm-hm. I was a secretary to one of the admirals in the navy.’

It had felt revelatory somehow, her mother—young and striking and blonde, working in a city like Washington. Away from home. Glamorous. And then, quite suddenly, Jules remembered a photo from her mother’s cedar chest which they would sometimes look through—selectively—on a rainy Saturday now and then.

‘Is there a photo of you and Grandma and Grandpa there? By the “reflection pool” or something?’

'Oh, my!' Arlis laughed, 'Yes. I can't believe you remember that. The Reflecting Pool, yes. In front of the Lincoln Memorial.'

'Can I see the photo?' Jules asked.

'Now? Honey, I have so much to do. After the ironing—'

'Please, mom? *Please?*'

Her mother bit her bottom lip, an *I'm-thinking-about-it* gesture from forever ago, then caught Jules's begging blue eyes. Acquiescence. 'Okay,' she agreed, 'But then I've got to get to work or I'll have wet clothes hanging on the line in the middle of the night.'

Moments later she returned with the photo, a 5 x 7 black and white. Jules took it carefully, as if it might crumble before she could look closely. And there she was, her mother. *My mother*, Jules had thought, *my real-live mother*.

Jules had often thought about the difference between a *very-own* mother and a mother who adopts you, a mother who is *not* your very own. And what must that feel like? Her mother, Jules remembered, had not wanted to hurt Grandma Ann by seeking her true, biological, and very-own mother. And here, in the photo, were the three of them: her mother, Grandma Ann and Grandpa Roy. Suddenly, Jules understood that her grandparents, were *not* her grandparents. Swallowing the lump in her throat, Jules looked at her mother in the photo, standing—towering, really—over her parents. She was golden, a light radiating from around her porcelain skin and light, loose curls. One golden floss is a wisp across her forehead. Maybe a soft breeze was blowing. She and her mother are both wearing small half-hats or caps on their heads, clearly not for warmth because they hug just a portion of their heads. Also, on the lower part of the white border of the photo, in her mother's neat writing, is *June 1952 Washington D.C.* Hairstyles still intact. Her mother

faces full-on to the camera, and only a portion of her cap, resting on the left side of her head, is visible. Grandma Ann's cap, however, is in profile. It cradles her head, her dark curls. The cap is wrapped in thick lace, tiny flowers at the back. Her grandparents wear almost-identical horn-rimmed glasses, Ann's slightly rounded, and Roy's with a thicker frame across the top.

Both women wear dresses, of course, and Jules wished she knew the colours. She wouldn't ask her mother, who stood in front of her ironing, because hearing her mother describe the dresses in such detail would have made Jules cry. She could imagine, though, and it felt indulgent and irresistible to create the pictures in her mind.

Her grandmother's dress (she imagined) is white, of light cotton material, and covered in a pattern of specks that look like the seeds inside a catalpa-tree pod. A large catalpa has grown in Jules's backyard for as long as she can remember, an anomaly among the new, fragile growth of her childhood. Years ago on a windy day in late spring, Arlis lifted Jules to a catalpa pod and they opened it together: co-conspirators in an adventure. The wind lifted the seeds, scattered them to the sky. Discovered and liberated in an instant.

A thin black belt sits at her grandmother's waist. Although she is plump, she is noticeably thinner than Jules knows her now. Only her arms looked the same. Their roundness challenges the short sleeves of the dress which have an eyelet opening tied at the base with a bow. The sight of her grandmother's arms reminded Jules of Thanksgiving, and of the mashing of potatoes: 'Alright, Mom, I'll start them,' Jules's mom would say, 'And then you can mash them into submission.' The aunts and cousins would laugh and Jules felt among them, felt a belonging like the snug fit of intricate puzzle pieces.

In the photo, Arlis stands between her parents and is at least six inches taller than her mother—who is fashionable in high-heeled white pumps, no less—while Arlis is wearing flat black Mary Janes. Roy is the shortest of the three, neat and trim in cuffed grey trousers, a long-sleeved white dress-shirt (French cuffs with cufflinks, damn the heat!) and a dark checkered tie.

&&&&

The photo flashes more memories, above all the memory of phone calls, practice phone calls, practice phone calls to Grandma Ann and Grandpa Roy. It had been Arlis's idea, that Jules should phone them, just to chat or share 'newsy' things (the latest goldfish died or Roger got a haircut and won't leave the house without his sailor cap, brim down). In the process of these practice calls, Jules could pay attention to her pronunciation, especially those 'r's—pay attention to the way her lips kept forming the sound of *Wah* instead of *Rah*. No matter how many disastrous attempts Jules made to sharpen her 'r's, neither Ann nor Roy ever expressed confusion, the way other people did. Her grandparents seemed to understand everything Jules said, even though the sound of her own voice assaulted herself. They, though, did not seem to mind. They, the two of them, invisible on the other end of the telephone line.

'Jules, honey,' please call Grandma and Grandpa. 'We want them to come for supper on Sunday.'

As Jules dialed the pale yellow rotary phone, she asked, 'What time?'

Arlis bit her bottom lip. 'We want them here around 3:30, so tell them 4:00.'

'Not 3:30?' Jules asked. (*Read: 'Not thwee-thowty?'*)

'4:00. Roy arrives half-hour early everywhere he goes. It drives my mother crazy.'

'It's not lying?'

'Of course not! It's making sure everyone gets to where they're supposed to be at the right time.'

&&&&

'What was it like?' Jules asks, returning to the photo.

'Busy. Lots of people and traffic. But it was fun,' her mother says.

'Where did you live?'

'In an apartment with two other girls.'

'What?' Jules says, 'An apartment! That is *so* decent.'

Arlis laughs. 'I used to take the streetcar to work every day and once in a while I would see President Truman taking his morning walk.'

Jules considers. 'You mean, he was just out walking with everyone? The *president*?'

'Mm-hmm. Of course, his security detail would be around him—'

Security detail. Ah, how Washington, D.C. that sounds.

'—but you surely wouldn't know. Back then, all the men were wearing suits and ties.

Besides, President Truman just had this...I don't know.' And here, Arlis stops ironing, looking for the right words. 'He had this way, just walking along, you know, that made you feel like he was one of us. He was just an ordinary person walking to work.'

'Say more,' Jules says, wanting a picture.

'Well, he usually wore a light Stetson hat—the kind my dad wears, you know—and sometimes a regular tie, but I thought he looked so cheerful in a bow tie.' She goes back to ironing.

Jules looks back to the photo. Her mother in a mid-calf dress, a light colour with a two-tone geometric pattern at the bottom. If only she knew the colours. What colours, she thinks, did women, young beautiful women in Washington, D.C., wear in 1952? Orange and yellow? Blue and green? Primary colours? Pastel? All of Jules's early memories (a time of silence, she knows) are like this photo in a way: still and quiet, and all ready in her mind to examine, turn over, abeyant in a way that real life—fast-moving, fast-talking—is not. But the memories are rich in colour. Saturated in colour the way old (but not too old) movies are. She needs to stop thinking about this. Unless her mother asks for the photo back, Jules will take it to her room to decide the colours later.

The dress has short sleeves and, unlike Ann's, have ample room for Arlis's slender arms. These are her mother's arms, Jules sees, the same arms that hold the edges of a sheet tight as the breeze catches the other end like another mysterious set of hands; the same arms that open a tablecloth on Christmas Eve and, in slow-motion magic, parachute the delicate lace cloth onto the dining-room table. Not a wrinkle. Perfectly centered. And these are the arms that now (or then), in the photo, reach out to hold the hands of her parents. At the collar of the dress, Jules sees, is a cameo pin. And tiny, cloth-covered buttons run down the center of the dress, ending below the cinched waist.

It is unsettling to have a mother who is so beautiful. And so Washington. And such a friend to Harry Truman.

The Truman-MacArthur crisis and the vast American civilian population's determination to decide for itself which man's military strategy will best serve history has certainly caused worry here, but it has caused no confusion of opinion as to which man is right. The French are solidly for Truman. Not one Paris newspaper has taken anything but the President's side.

(Flanner, 26 April 1951)

'Why did you leave?' Jules asks.

'Why? Oh, I suppose I thought of it as an adventure' (this, as if she is guessing at her own feelings), and I don't think I ever meant to stay. Not for forever.' She sounds sad.

From outside, the sound of a lawn mower starts somewhere in the neighborhood.

&&&&

News of the world—in her father's letters—remains cryptic. But did his letters seem so to her grandparents, to the 'Dear Folks'? He is writing in the early 1950s, Jules reminds herself, ten years before she was born. She wishes the historical markers that litter his letters could read more like textbooks or even stories, offering details, but he doesn't dwell on such things. Instead, the world outside is a footnote for Morris Hassinger. He spells his name this way in the Air Force, not the 'Maurice' she sees on the return addresses every Sunday when he does the bills at the kitchen table. A stack of them, he sorts out which ones can be paid and which must wait. He doesn't complain, doesn't explain. Over the years the Sunday ritual has told the story. Paid bills housed in an envelope with a check and postage stamp, and other pieces—the original envelope and the 'letter' portion carefully ripped away from the small tab 'To Be Included With Payment'—discarded. Of course, the

recollection of this familiar-but-forgotten scene now renders for Jules the shameful fact that Laura Ingalls Wilder worked when she was younger than Jules in order to help her family. She even contributed to a fund to send Mary to a school for the blind.

In late March 1953, Moe records that ‘once more England is in mourning, that business has hit them pretty hard in the last year.’ In June, his letter home contains a P.S.: ‘Looks like they are raising Hell in Germany;’ later in the same month he assures the Dear Folks that ‘We keep right up with the news here and they are sure raising cain in Germany.’ He still does not like the French, hates them in fact. ‘These damn frenchmen... are just as slow as ever, and every time I see one I get a notion to give them a swift kick where it would do the most good. The United States is certainly getting taken for plenty when they build a base in France.’ In the same letter, he goes on to promise his parents ‘If there is ever a war here before I come home you can rest assured I will help destroy this country. They don’t have one bit of initiative and I can’t see where people like that do the world any good.’

A list of reasons for the French anti-Americanism that has now become so openly important runs about like this: Basically, the French, after seven years of peace, are tired of being occupied, even if for their own welfare, and especially of being occupied by Americans who, in their own phrase, ‘never had it so good.’

(Flanner, 5 November 1952)

Reading his thoughts about the French, Jules feels a realization unfolding, an understanding so gradual it is like a rising sun: darkness at the outset and, though you watch with all awareness, the moment of light taking over dark is suddenly there—and

then, of course, it had already been there. The shame Jules feels, she sees now, is not towards her father, has never been about him.

'It's me,' Jules says aloud. She speaks to herself, to the room, to the letters, to the dusty box where the letters live, to the cedar chest that houses the box of letters. 'It's just me.' What has he done that is so bad, she thinks, and wishes he had just tried harder. *But how? What would that have looked like?*

She remembers once, Roger and their dad coming home with a new baseball mitt for Roger. He had outgrown his beloved Rawlings' Tommy Davis glove and arrived home with an only-slightly-used Rawlings' Mickey Mantle MM5 Ridge-Top Web. Someone on their dad's mail route had given Moe a good deal on the glove. People were often giving him gifts, and not just around the Christmas holidays. He did things for people, as he walked through the neighborhood in which he grew up. He would come home with cookies and breads—sometimes a six-pack of Mountain Dew, his favorite—and a story of having shoveled a walkway or jimmied a stubborn screen door for one of his parents' neighbors. There was an elderly woman who lived alone—Mrs Swedberg—and, when she couldn't work the can opener any longer, Moe happened to arrive with the mail at the precise moment her cat needed to be fed. He would open the tin, feed the cat, and rinse the dishes. Each Friday, Moe would come home with pie-crust scraps, baked and golden, sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar. They were wrapped in waxed paper and stored in his black metal lunchbox, which Jules would retrieve as soon as her father walked through the door. *How am I thinking of this now?* she wonders.

And the baseball mitt. Roger had made a beeline towards the back door with his new Mickey Mantle glove, tossing the Tommy Davis mitt on the kitchen table.

'Let's give her a try, Dad, before it's dark, okay?'

'Okay, give me a minute,' Moe chuckled.

But he paused after the screen-door slammed, turned back to pick up the old glove. Holding it out to Jules, he said, 'Whaddya say?' She took the glove but doesn't remember anything after. Except that sweet *puck* sound of the ball landing center in the glove.

Jules finds a voice of peculiar authority in her father's letters. Posturing as the experienced oldest son, he offers advice through the Dear Folks to his siblings, even to his parents. Moe urges his father to 'keep after Earl and Ruth until they have finished school and I guarantee they will thank you in the end just as I wish to do.'

Did Moe even finish high school? Jules remembers seeing her parents' high-school yearbooks, and aunts and uncles joking of the mystery of Moe in a high school. His graduation picture is different from those of his peers. He wears a flannel shirt, open at the neck, a smirk on his face, yes, but that glint in his eye which is the same as his air-force photo. The other students in the yearbook are wearing graduation gowns. The photos are headshots, yes, but you can tell they are wearing gowns, all are uniform and formal. Except Maurice E. Hassinger, whose chosen photo caption reads, 'Why worry and strive? I've got better things to do with my time.'

How odd to choose that as your statement upon exiting high school, and then write from the other side of the world, 'It won't hurt Earl a bit to work Saturdays as that way he will stay out of trouble and won't have a lot of time for foolish running around.' But perhaps this is something experience taught him, yes? And, besides, how can he remain a part of his brothers and sisters' lives except to give advice when he cannot be there?

Moe, in fact, is *not* the oldest child. His sister Audrey was the first born of the five children, and yet, he assumes a parenting role, even with his older sister. Audrey. Aunt Audrey, who lives with her husband and two daughters in Colorado. The families see each other once a year or so and Jules loves Aunt Audrey who has always had a bit of an accent—southern almost, as if she'd lived in Georgia. But Jules has never asked. Has in fact rarely said much to Aunt Audrey, and Aunt Audrey never asks her questions, or if she does, she hides them as statements so that Jules doesn't have to speak. 'Now, darlin',' Audrey would drawl, 'I suspect, if you are anything like myself, you are just breathin' the biggest sigh of relief that school is out and the summer stretches before you, am I right?' A nod. Laughter and hugs. Audrey is easy that way, in a way Jules's father is not, with a jingling happiness that never teases or mocks. Aunt Audrey.

And then there is Aunt Ruth, or Ruthie, who sometimes will come all the way from Connecticut with her husband and two sons. Ruthie is the youngest of the siblings on the Hassinger side. She and Audrey have a daughter-mother kind of relationship, with Audrey almost ten years older than her baby sister, and the sight of Ruthie can make Audrey cry. 'Oh, no, Aud—not the waterworks, please,' Ruthie will purr. 'Who's got a hankie?'

But Audrey will pour tears of joy unabashedly and say through sniffles, 'Well, y'all, I just can't help myself—I just love my baby sister.'

When they visit, the kitchen in Jules's house is transformed. 'Bustling,' is what Grandma Ann calls it. Jules soon forgets who is related to whom. Aunt Marge, for example, who will come by, as she lives just one town over. When Roy married Ann, when Arlis was twelve, he brought with him two daughters from his first marriage, Jean and Marge, and suddenly (Arlis would tell the story), she had two sisters! Just like that. When she was little,

Jules thought this remarkable, like some sleight-of-hand magic trick the way her mother would tell it. As in, *Aren't I just the luckiest person in the world?* But then, the real-life stories Arlis would tell were always like that. Lucky, lucky, lucky. Except when she was *not*, thought Jules.

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The sisters, as they called themselves, would sit at the yellow-formica table and play cards. It is a game called Five Hundred, which is as complex as a foreign language to Jules, no matter how she strains to understand the plays and the words. The game entails mysterious grown-up words like 'tricks' and 'trump,' 'off-suit jack' and 'go negative for the bid.' And the game is accompanied by grown-ups' snacks, supreme among them being the Brach's Bridge Mix, with chocolate-covered raisins, malts, cremes, and macademia nuts. Jules eats one at a time, choosing carefully so that she never takes two of the same in a row. And her mother makes her special Braunschweiger Ball, a not-altogether-pleasant-smelling spread with exotic-sounding ingredients come together for this one appetizer. There are Gold's Horseradish and Lea & Perrins Worcestershire sauce. McIlhenny's Tabasco and Philadelphia Cream Cheese. Shaped into a smooth mound on a fine china plate and covered with fresh Italian parsley, there are delicate club crackers that surround the spread like perfectly fallen dominoes. The sisters admire the beauty of it all, and remark of their plate that it is simply too perfect ('like a picture in Good Housekeeping') to mar to surface with the pate knife. And then, from the living room, one of the men will pass through the kitchen, zero-in on a plate and, ignoring the delicate little knife, scoop up a healthy portion of the

Braunschweiger with a club cracker and stuff the whole of it into his mouth. Riotous laughter among the sisters. Jules is one of the sisters.

Monday morning everybody got up early, in a hurry to get started to Grandpa's...Ma would help Grandma and the aunts make good things to eat for all the people who were coming...

(Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*)

Jules's other set of grandparents, Grandpa Clarence and Grandma Ruby, are her father's parents. They don't come to the gatherings at Jules's house, but will host a separate dinner during holidays where they are in charge. Everyone is careful and quiet, as if they are in church.

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Throughout the letters to his parents, Jules's father admonishes his siblings for not writing. 'Why the devil aren't they writing, or are they mad at me?' he complains in an added P.S. to one letter. 'They should have enough news by now to write me a little book.' In another letter, he simply says, 'Reckon I don't have a younger brother or sister any more.' He crafts his letters with a voice of authority unfamiliar to Jules—is it distance? The experienced world traveler imparting wisdom to those provincials back home?

He is so far away, away from this family that, after all, is the only one he knows. They must have lived on top of each other, five siblings in that small house. None of them had their

own room, of course. And in France, at just 21, no longer a part of the chaos that consumes growing up. Of being barely beyond his teenage years in the 1950s.

In a letter from August 1952, he tells his father that Ruth had written about their mother not feeling well during a vacation. 'Funny thing, they go away for a vacation and Mother works just as hard if not harder than she did at home,' he reports. 'I certainly wish she would go a bit easier, she is getting pretty old to be working so hard but then I guess it is just in her blood to keep going. I am going to make her go a little easy when I get home and you too. You two have raised your family, or almost, and it is about time you started looking after yourselves and your future.' Three months later, writing again to his father, Moe says he has received some photos from Earl. 'Those pictures he took sure turned out good, but the one of you, Dad, makes you look a little tired. I don't want you or mother to work so hard but take things a little easy now that you are getting on in age.'

Jules wonders what her grandparents thought of these getting-on-in-age comments. Did they feel old at the time? And what do they make of Moe's accounts of his childhood? He writes once to his parents of a friend that 'thinks you are real swell and I do too. A Son couldn't ask for better parents,' and adds, 'I know we never had things like other kids, but now I realize it was for our own good and I want to Thank you from the bottom of my heart.'

For her part, Jules cannot imagine ever feeling grateful that it is only once a year that she and Roger have new clothes (not that Roger cares), or that she has to have her brother's hand-me-down black figure skates or used to suffer home-haircuts so hideous people assumed she was a boy. And then—how shameful it feels that she has so rarely thanked her parents.

Next, Pa counted the money that was left and he and Ma bought Mary's shoes.

The shoes were so new and shining on Mary's feet that Laura felt it was not fair that Mary was the oldest. Mary's old shoes would always fit Laura, and Laura would never have new shoes.

(Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*)

And then there is what Moe says of his brother Marty, who, after Aunt Audrey and Aunt Ruth, is a favourite of Jules's. She feels, therefore, hurt for him, seeing how her father speaks of him, even now, after all these years. Moe says Marty is 'off his rocker,' a 'hippie' who has disgraced the family by getting divorced. And when, one Christmas Eve, Marty showed up with a perm and checkered bell bottoms, Moe greeted his brother with mouth agape, saying only, 'What the *hell?*' Roger snickered, but it reminded Jules of the way her father talked to her, the way he seemed disgusted by her. Moe spent the entire meal glaring at Marty. When Marty now and then met his steely gaze, Jules's father shook his head in that aren't-you-pathetic way and heaved a sigh.

Back in the Air Force at the end of 1952, even the distance afforded by France did not quell Moe's hubris when it came to judging others. Jules seizes on moments like these in the letters—she doesn't care anymore—where his meanness is ammunition for her, even if she never speaks the things she thinks of him out loud. But the shame of hearing his words in these letters is never far removed, either, as if somehow he were a product of Jules and not the other way around. Pathetic. Aren't you pathetic.

And there is something else in all of this, the letters, the legal papers, scrapbooks, and photographs. Jules begins to see this way that her family is like a massive tree, where

tracing a tiny twig to a small branch to a bigger branch, and so on, can show that not everything is a part of everything else. Even if it is all part of the same tree. She hasn't yet figured out a way to frame this in her mind or put it into words, but these people, all of these people—even relatives in photos who are strangers—are both connected to her and unconnected. She needs to keep reminding herself, for instance, that Grandma Ann and Grandpa Roy are not *related* to their 'daughter' Arlis—and so, of course, not related to Jules. Not really my grandparents, Jules thinks. Not really. Not biologically. Not by blood.

Jules places a cool hand to her cheek, remembering the resemblance noted by relatives between Jules and her father at almost every family gathering. The slight red in the hair when the sun shines just so. And, even more, the freckles. This, then, is the Great Divide: Arlis and Roger, fair, blond, and smooth-skinned; Moe and Jules, ruddy of complexion and freckled. When adults would say, 'Oh, Jules, you get your freckles from your father,' Moe would half-smirk that smirk and declare, 'Nah, she don't get them from me—when she was a little one, she was standin' too close to the cows when they shit on the rocks.' The adults laughed.

One of the reasons Jules feels an ironic closeness to Aunt Audrey—ironic because they are not physically, geographically close—is Audrey's oddness, her eccentricity. Her aunt is someone Jules feels an almost gravitational pull to, feeling like an observer to a woman who does not follow the unwritten rules of this family—namely, that you don't marry outside of your religion, that you don't divorce, that you pray to the same God your parents pray to, and that you teach your children the same.

Aunt Audrey refers often to someone she calls the Colonel. Events in her life are positioned 'Before the Colonel,' 'After the Colonel,' or 'When I was with the Colonel.' Asked

about this in private, Arlis would tell Jules only that he was someone Audrey used to be married to.

‘Not Uncle Lee?’ Jules asked.

‘No.’

‘But—’

‘And that’s all,’ her mother said, putting an end to questions. The mystery, combined with the love she feels for her aunt, makes Jules feel it might just be possible to find some other way of being in the world.

In a letter from October 1952, Moe is blunt to the Dear Folks about both Audrey and Marty—his misguided siblings, it would seem. It isn’t the first letter he spends criticizing their choices. He complains about Marty having debt while also starting a family; a wife and two children was something a responsible young man should embark upon only when debt was managed. Moe, though, indicates a fondness for his niece and nephew. In August 1952 he writes, ‘I hope Lolly is feeling better and I hope little Marty starts talking soon as I want to take them out and show them off. They probably won’t even know their Uncle Moe but I’ll sure be glad to see them.’ In the same letter he asks his father about Audrey. ‘So Audrey is having company, eh? Male or female? Does she still run around with the Colonel or has that come to an end? If she is [still with the Colonel], have her get a jug of wine and keep it for me till I get home. HA HA.’

But by October, there is no sentimentality or joking concerning his siblings. Jules’s face burns with shame when she reads, ‘So the M.L.s have another child—I thought number 2 was going to be the last one. Tell Marty to stop or have the blamed thing cut off. If he ever needs any financial aid he better not come running to me, and Mother for your own sake.

[You'd better] quit helping them everytime they turn around. Heaven knows you have done too much for them already. I wish to hell they would move to South America. What is Marty's address? Also, you don't have to write to me about Audrey as I don't want to hear anything about her and her damn kike husband.'

Eyes burn and fill with tears. Words echo to an anxious Ba BOOM pulsing in Jules's temples

Heaven knows you have done too much—*Heaven knows.*

Wish to hell they would move to South America. *Wish to hell.*

Stop or have the blamed thing cut off. *The blamed thing.*

Her damn kike husband. *Damn kike.*

Better not come running to me—

Better not.

Jules now once more considers Aunt Audrey and her mysterious first husband, the Colonel. If her father's letters are any indication, he was much talked of. Ah, Jules has so many questions concerning the Colonel. How did he and Aunt Audrey meet? How did he die? *Did* he die? Why is he always referred to as the Colonel, even by Audrey? Did everyone disapprove as heartily as Moe did? Was 'kike' a word floating freely in their house? And, if it was common use as Jules assumes it was, did her aunts and uncles learn the disgusting word from their parents? They must have. Her father writes this word to the Dear Folks, so they could hardly have thought it awful. But it is. The way Jules's father calls Brazil nuts 'nigger toes.' Jules is now shamefully aware that she has never told him how wrong—how dreadfully wrong—this is. *What makes him this way?*

In cities where Negroes and whites live in separate and distinct sections, opportunities for

racial strife and violence are rare. In Washington, where they live side by side all over, use the same streetcars and busses, patronize the same stores, and constantly brush shoulders on the streets, there is friction which sometimes flares high and hot.

(Lait and Mortimer, 1951)

How is it, Jules wonders, that we come to know people—to really *know* them? If they live with us, if we watch what they do and hear their words, do we know them? She thought she knew her brother once. He was that yellow-straw blond who never stopped moving, who would sing-song a play-by-play mock sports commentary to his own dodge-and-weave around the living room, eclipsing invisible opponents to slam-dunk the little Nerf ball into the ‘net’ of a lampshade. *Swish.*

But Roger is never home anymore. Football and University. Damned university. On holidays, when he is home, relatives chuckle at their own inability to decipher some of the things he says—and he isn’t putting them down, Jules can see that, it’s simply this person he has become. An intellectual stranger. A university stranger.

Her father, though, is a simple stranger, pure stranger.

Jules now reads a letter from late July 1953. There must have been a previous letter (missing from the box) with news of a fight on base and, after that, a letter from Moe’s father asking for more details, for her father writes, ‘No Dad, the colored boy is still in the guardhouse.’

Colored boy?

‘We have about five colored boys in our squadron but they are fairly decent.’

Are they usually not decent?

'The colored boys here on the base are very angry at the one that cut the white boy as it sort of screws things up for them. The night that accident happened some guys from the fire department tried to get hold of the colored boy to beat up. An AP (colored) said "He won't get away but I hope he tries," meaning that if he did the AP would have reason to shoot him.'

It's too much for Jules to understand. In the guardhouse. Was he a guard? No, she thinks, that must mean he is being held. A prisoner. Would a white soldier be punished for the same 'accident'? Doubtful. He is, it seems, some kind of bad *colored* apple who 'screws things up' for the other five. Because *they* are all the same. Jules chafes at such, such, such: *those* people, those *kind*. The more she re-reads this paragraph the angrier she feels and it is all she can do not to crumple the letter, to rip them all to shreds. Tear apart the words, make them go away. Make her father go away.

Is he a product of his time? What does that even mean? Jules wonders. Produced by Time? Am I, too, a result of the time in which I live? Is there anyone else hanging from the ceiling?

And she remembers, then, the notebooks—so many notebooks—covered in her own pathetic scrawl. Middle of the night pleas written over and over and filling entire pages. *Please help me help me help me. Please please. Help.*

We write words, Jules thinks, and they are helplessly stuck to a time and a place.

(1972—ten years old)

: *Spirits*

Aunt Audrey. Her gentle way of talking and her sudden jingling laughter. The intensity of her eyes whenever she listens to anyone. To Jules, to her own daughters, to her parents. But she is distanced in Jules's mind. Distanced, from the rest of her family. In a magical way. Not grounded by what she calls 'the practical evidence of this world,' Audrey believes in the 'great beyond.' Uncle Lee says with affection, 'My wife trucks in what most people can't see,' and Audrey always responds with, 'Honey, you know it's what some folks have lost the *ability* to see. We need to re-learn how to see'—and here, she and Lee would say together:—'through the wise eyes of a child.' Lee might then give his wife a kiss on the cheek, and Audrey's eyes would sparkle behind her gold wire-rimmed glasses.

After a few rounds of cards, Aunt Audrey would glance around the kitchen. 'Where are my girls?' she'd ask, and one of her daughters—usually Vanessa (such an exotic name)—would respond, 'Can I get the Ouija Board, Mama?'

'Yes, Miss Nessa, I do believe it's time,' and to Jules, wide-eyed, 'Come along, Miss Julie Ann. You are one of my girls for sure.'

Her cousins hastened off then, on their mission to find the magical Ouija Board ('Mystifying Oracle,' under its name) and Jules thinks about one of the books she and Lisa read in their book club, *Jennifer, Hecate, Macbeth, William McKinley, and Me, Elizabeth*, by one of their favorite authors, E.L. Konigsburg. Jennifer is a girl who claims to be a witch—and, by the end of the novel, Lisa and Jules confide to one another their belief that Jennifer

might indeed be a witch. At the very least, they conclude, perhaps believing a thing to be true about yourself is enough.

Jules knew of the Ouija Board. One of the kids in the neighborhood had one but it was viewed by the others with a kind of wariness, something kids whose parents insisted on going to church would not indulge in. During the hottest summer months, nearly all the backyards in the neighborhood put up at least one tent, and children would camp out, telling stories and playing Crazy Eight to the sound of crickets and katydids. A rite of passage for the older kids was to visit other tents; some even had walkie-talkies, and would arrange these impromptu meetings through urgent static-saturated conversations. They had codenames like Mole, Hawkshaw, or Shadow. All this, Jules and Lisa observed in a furtive, skillful way, all the while pretending not to listen to their older brothers.

One night, when they were ten, the two camped out with Lisa's older sister Mary and Mary's best friend Connie. They talked of boys and bras and whether shaving their legs with an electric razor—the method their mothers preferred—could compare to shaving with Flicker, the round 'Safer Shaver with 5 Extra Safe Skin-Shield Blades.' The girls tucked their Flickers (available in three colours), tortoise-shell combs, tampons, and Kissing Potion lip gloss into colorful knitted bags, wearing the long straps crosswise from shoulder to hip.

Neither Jules nor Lisa wanted to sneak out to one of the older kids' tents (Mary and Connie were 'In Charge,' their parents—out to the movies—having placed their 'Utmost Confidence' in them to 'Stay Put.'). Jules and Lisa knew the Rules and were loath to break them in such a brazen way—this, they communicated with desperate eyes, not daring to

say a word. However, proximity trumped authority, and thus siblings in the same tent superseded parents at the movies. ‘Don’t be babies,’ Mary said, and that was all it took. No disaster occurred. There was even a sense that, for Jules and Lisa, the lure of growing up lost a bit of its shimmer. But the older kids were playing with the Ouija Board, placing the tips of fingers on the planchette, a tear-drop piece of wood (a clear ‘eye’ at one end through which to see). A question would be posed by one person (melodic tones encouraged) and a hush fell. Somehow—and the waiting for it created great tension—the planchette (Jules loved the word) would seem to shudder ever so slightly. You couldn’t be sure at first: Did it move? Wait—was *that* it? Is it? Yes, there it is, moving now. A collective (but controlled—not to startle the spirits) gasp of awe would arise from the tent. And, moving about the board, the planchette would arrive at the answer. At least, this was the idea. Success was more common if a question required either a YES or a NO, as each word occupied opposite corners of the dark-wood board. The letters of the alphabet were shaped in a semi-circle in the center, with the numbers 1 through 9, followed by a zero, just below. Under the numbers, the word GOODBYE.

It was the board itself that mesmerized Jules. She felt she wanted one, but not for any answers it might provide, or vague predictions of the future. It was, the board, so unlike all the cardboard game-boards at home, thin and foldable, and with their plastic pieces. She could almost imagine the Ouija board being made in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s time, hand-carved and polished, with the smell of cut wood and oil. Of course, Laura would never have played such a game.

The attic was a lovely place to play. Often the wind howled outside with a cold and lonesome sound. But in the attic Laura and

Mary played house with the squashes and the pumpkins and everything was snug and cosy.

(Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*)

Watching others play with the Ouija Board, Jules sensed a conspiracy. It was supposed to be the planchette moving on its own, gathering the messages which were answers from Beyond; but, looking closely, she observed the just-perceptible twitching in elbows and wrists. Whispering in their sleeping bags later, Jules and Lisa agreed that the older kids were moving the planchette. There were no spirits from the great beyond. None.

Experiencing the Ouija Board with Aunt Audrey was altogether different. In Jules's tiny ranch-style house, the group had finally settled (Jules reluctant) on the old bed in the corner of the basement. The bed was the gathering place during tornado warnings, and Aunt Audrey felt it a 'propitious place to summon the spirits.' The atmosphere of the unfinished subterranean space suited Jules's aunt, with its stacks of *Look* and *McCalls* magazines, shelves of canned soups, and clothes worn in another lifetime hanging from metal rods between the bare studs. And Jules's cousins, Vanessa and Melinda—silly, heads-bent-together, giggly girls—were altered, turned somber as, with a reverence in her motions, their mother placed the planchette on the center of the board. Audrey's face, with its usual creases of worry, settled into a clarity Jules felt was as obvious as turning a light on in pitch darkness (Vanessa and Melinda seemed not to notice). Audrey placed her fingertips at the edge of one side of the planchette (it reminded Jules of a pianist about to begin: the concentration, the poise), closed her eyes as she inhaled, and spoke with measured words, low and clear:

Powers of the spirits rise,

Course unseen across the skies.
Come to us who call you near,
Come to us and settle here.

The air shifted. Inexplicable difference. Jules felt fear but no dread. In the same tone, Aunt Audrey asked, 'Now girls, who shall pose a question first?'

'Mama, ask if Julie Ann has a boyfriend.' The cousins sniggered. Jules's cheeks flamed.

Warning flashed in Audrey's eyes but her voice remained level. 'We will not trouble the spirits with frivolity, girls, you know that.' And to Jules, gentling, 'Now, honey, what would *you* like to know?'

Pause. Then, in a whisper, 'Will I play the flute?'

'Ah, excellent question. Place the tips of your fingers here, like mine, darlin', just opposite.'

Jules did so.

As her aunt closed her eyes, Jules watched the planchette. When it began to move, Jules couldn't help looking at the elegant fingers opposite her own. Not a muscle moved. She was not moving the planchette and Jules felt—did she really?—yes, yes, it was moving on its own. From the center of the board, the planchette moved toward the upper-left corner, toward the YES next to the full-faced sun etched into the wood. Jules thrilled, but the planchette stopped sudden so that her fingers glided into Aunt Audrey's. Jules gasped.

'No, darlin', it's fine. The spirits understand the eagerness of mortals. Just relax and allow them to answer.'

Hands in place once again, and the planchette began a retreat to its beginning position but circled back toward the YES. It slowed after passing the semi-circle alphabet, seemed to hover as if indecisive, then shot down and to the left. And settled with its eye over the P.

'P,' Aunt Audrey said. Voice firm.

Again, the planchette moved, of its own accord, Jules was certain, darting to the left of the P. Stopped.

'O,' Audrey intoned.

Following the arc of the letters, the planchette's eye moved next to the letter S. Stopped.

'S.'

Next, an almost violent dart to the right and back again to the 'S.'

'Clearly, another S.'

Stillness. To Jules, something had changed, like an energy drained.

'I do believe that is the answer.'

'What?' Vanessa asked in a too-loud voice. 'P-O-S-S?'

'Yes. P-O-S-S,' said Aunt Audrey. 'And please, honey, moderate your voice so as not to jar the atmosphere and cause the Spirits to depart. Now, Julie Ann, we will softly remove our fingertips from the planchette like so.'

'What does it mean, Mama?' Melinda asked the question with the same reverence and quiet as her mother had maintained.

'Well, now, I am no expert' (You *are*, Jules thought), but I believe the Spirits are showing an understanding that you want to play the flute. Is that right, darlin'?

Jules nodded.

‘Then yes, that is acknowledged. My guess—and this is, I would say, very good news indeed—is that the spirits may see the flute as a *possibility*, hence, P-O-S-S, but that the “Better Fates,” as we call them, may have something else in mind.’

In spite of scolding herself, Jules’s chin began to tremble.

‘Now, darlin’, there is no shame in disappointment, I can attest to that. But the Spirits did not answer with a NO. They did not answer with a NO.’

That’s right, Jules thought. Not a NO.

‘Now, my loves. Who will be next?’

(1979—seventeen years old)

: Dear Folks 2

There is much of the day-to-day in my—in *her* father's letters. Above all, the hated weather and food. But as she first glosses over some of the tedious details about the constant construction happening on the air force base, Jules goes back to read again.

He writes about the shack where they live. At first it has no windows, but by the late summer of 1952, he writes, 'we started putting in a floor yesterday and today I built a medicine cabinet and nailed some plywood on the ceiling. I built a door the other day and now all we need is some glass for windows.'

Across the downstairs, Pa put up a partition. That house was going to have two rooms! One was the bedroom, and the other was only to live in. He put two shining-clear glass windows in that room; one looking toward the sunrise and the other beside the doorway to the south.

(Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*)

In November 1952 he writes 'the roofs are all boarded with a tar-paper covering and it makes it pretty nice with an oil stove for heat, but we have a lot of places to fix especially around the windows where a lot of air comes in. When the window frames were set in they forgot to slant the sill and some of the windows have quite large cracks around them.' Jules notices he doesn't blame the French for sloppy work or curse the work they must do. He sounds different, as if this building, this creating a space may, in some way, have changed him.

A couple of weeks after writing about the roofs, Moe tells the Dear Folks, 'Our huts still aren't finished'; but, again, there is no complaint. 'We lack the Celotex on the ceilings and will probably have to do it ourselves,' he reports. 'The Army Engineers are supposed to put it up but they are still working on their tents. I would rather put it up myself though, that way a person can look out for other things in the tent, whereas if somebody came in here to work that didn't reside here, they don't care what happens and once in a while things of value are broken.'

Taking care, Jules thinks.

(1979—seventeen years old)

: Dear Arlis

Early April, 1953. My father writes, 'Dear Arlis—Believe me, Dear...' It is the only letter addressed to my mother included in the box. It is not, though, the only letter he writes to her from France. I know this, because he mentions writing to her often in the letters to his parents, tells them, too, that she writes to him. He shares news about her with them. Three months before this letter to her, he tells them she wrote to say 'she was going home for Christmas and said she was going to stop in and see you, so maybe one of these days you will have a very charming visitor.' The picture of my mother with her parents in Washington, D.C.: June 1952. That was where she was coming home from.

I don't want to read this letter from him to my mother. They grew up in the same neighborhood, knew each other when they were kids, I know that. She says she thought he was strange, 'a real character,' is what she said. So, why did they get married? What made her decide to marry him? I cannot get it out of my head: that letter he wrote where he says he won't see her any more because he falls more in love with her. Why does that make me feel angry, slighted somehow? Was it written before the air force, before France? It was not on airmail stationery, so he was not overseas. None of this matters. It does not matter and I cannot stop thinking about it so I decide to read the fucking thing.

Just before this, though, in a letter to his mother ('Dear Mother' instead of 'Dear Folks') he sounds annoyed. Grandma Ruby must have asked him about my mom. Not in a casual way as if she were a friend. The first thing he says in the letter is, 'I have already

written to Arlis, Mother. I sent her a Christmas card and she wrote me a letter so I answered it. O.K.?’

He sounds like a little kid to a nagging parent. Like this: ‘When are you going to clean your room?’ I *did*, O.K.? Geez, stop bothering me.’ Kind of funny. But he tells her more—not something I would volunteer if it were me.

He says, ‘Last February when I called her, she asked me if I was going to keep writing and I said, “Sure, no sense spoiling a beautiful friendship.” Today I received an X-mas card from her.’

I hate it when people write ‘X-mas’ instead of Christmas. I hate it. Is it so hard to write the whole thing? Is it so long it takes up valuable time? And I guess he thought the ‘no sense spoiling a beautiful friendship’ was clever. But I know—I *know*—he did not mean ‘friendship,’ I can just tell. He thinks he’s funny but he isn’t.

&&&&

My dad never talked much about his childhood but I remember a story he told me about Grandma Ruby. My ears hurt all the time when I was little. Once, when I was around four—it was before I started kindergarten—I couldn’t sleep because there was this sharp pain deep in my ears. One of them was really awful. It felt like there was something drilling deep into my ear—a screwdriver or a knitting needle, but, no, not even. It was sharper, pointed. And it wasn’t constant, but it came in waves or zaps so I couldn’t get used to it. My mom had given me aspirin, I remember. ‘Orange bear’ medicine. I liked it even though Roger said it tasted like orange chalk.

But that night it wasn't working. I called for her but my father came in. He looked mad. He never came in. I said, 'I want Mommy.'

'What's the problem?' he said, 'How come you're not asleep?' The question didn't make sense to me.

'Where is Mommy?'

'You don't need your mother, now, you just need to go to sleep.'

I remember being so afraid but I said, 'My ear hurts.'

'Your what?' He sounded mad. I pointed at my ear.

'Oh. Your ear, huh?'

And in a whisper, 'I want Mommy.'

'Did I ever tell you about the time I had an earache?' he asked. 'I cried every night, cried like a baby. Course, we wouldn't've gone to some fancy doctor for that, no sir. Who had the money? Anyway, my mother, well, she just got so sick and tired of hearing me whine all the time, and so, in the end, one night, with me just crying to beat the band, she just up and hit me alongside the head. Right on the ear that hurt. Well, it only made me cry more, so I was sent to bed without supper. I fell asleep after a time and, when I woke up in the morning, the pain was gone. There was a big stain on my pillow, though. Blood and pus. But you know what? The pain was gone.'

He left then. And I was thinking, Stay quiet, quiet. Stay quiet. Stay quiet, quiet. It was okay to cry, as long as I didn't make any noise.

&&&&

He writes again to Grandma and Grandpa about my mom in February. Tells them she 'quit her job at Dayton's and is now working at General Motors in St. Paul.'

Why didn't she ever tell me she worked at Dayton's? Last summer, I worked at Donaldson's—another large department store in Minneapolis. It was awful. They put me in the Teen section with all these skinny cute girls. None of those clothes even fit me and I know people looked at me and wondered why they put a fat girl there, right in the middle of all those sizes three through nine. Once, when someone didn't show up for their shift in Fine Gifts, I was put there for the day. It was much better. Since it wasn't the Christmas season, I was the only sales person and no one came in the entire day. Not a single person.

In the same letter, my father says he might take a leave, is thinking to go either to Switzerland or back to Minneapolis for a visit. 'I think these last few days and a certain letter from a female have made me a wee bit homesick,' he writes. 'First time I have felt like that, then too the thought of coming back to this hole is kinda disappointing.' It's a strange letter altogether. He goes from this 'a certain letter from a female'—well, obviously it's my mom—to his usual piss and moan about the French even though it's almost as if he doesn't intend to do that. He starts out talking to his parents about the stationery he's writing on. They must have said something about it because he writes, 'So you like my stationery, well I will tell you how it came about.'

Starting early February 1953, in the upper right-hand of each piece of paper, there is a stamp of a girl. Simple line drawing in blue. She looks like a Barbie doll—her legs make up more than half her entire body and she wears shorts that barely cover her ass. She's about to put a letter into one of those huge mailboxes you see in the city on the street. U.S. MAIL is

in block letters on its side. It's so sexist, but what can you expect from 1953? Just imagine if it had been a picture of a girl who looked like me. Like me. Me in the top right corner.

'For about three weeks we were unable to get stationery at the PX, so a Master Sergeant in our squadron saw this ad in a magazine and wrote in requesting information. About $\frac{3}{4}$ of the squadron put in orders and when we finally got it, they received a shipment of stationery at the PX. It seems so damn funny that they would run out of stuff a G.I. really needs but always have plenty of other useless crap that G.I.s wouldn't use in 30 years of service.'

So damn funny, right? Not as funny, funny-peculiar as what follows.

'These darn dependents over here are a pain in the butt,' he writes, 'and Heaven only knows why they come to such a country.'

Why 'they *come*'? They were born there, weren't they?

'Every time I see a Frenchman I would just as soon hit the damn fool as look at him. These people never had it so good, what with the U.S. Government taking care of them.'

Last year, consideration of what the Communists gloomily called the 'Coca-Colonization of France,'—the projected distribution of the beverage on an enormous scale—was discussed by the French Cabinet and was mentioned, usually without affection, at several meetings of Parliamentary committees...

(Flanner, 11 January 1950)

'This base is the best in France,' he says, 'and as far as I can see it is worth two cents. A couple of weeks ago I went to town to buy a pail to carry water in and some cups for

drinking coffee. The damn pail leaked, and each cup had a distinct flaw in it. I am sorry folks but I guess my relief valve let go with a blast of steam.'

There is something I know here, something familiar. I don't know how to say it, exactly, just that he thinks he is right—or, this country is right.

He calls my mom 'Dear' in the letter, right after he begins 'Dear Arlis.' Like this: 'Believe me, Dear, I wasn't angry with you, just thought for awhile that you had forgotten I was over here. Earl and Ruth never write me, in fact I think they have forgotten they have an older brother trying to defend their rights, so if you have any ill feeling that you made me angry, forget it. Every once in awhile I blow my lid and I realize when I do, I shouldn't write you and make you feel bad, but you know someone has to be in the way...It is just the country I am in that makes me so bitter.'

How is it he defends their rights? He services airplanes. Mind you, that makes him, he thinks, a hero. To my mother he writes, 'My head was so big the other day my cap wouldn't fit, and it wasn't because of a hangover. Our Squadron Commander, a Lieutenant Colonel, flew my plane and when he came back he said "you have a fine ship" (plane).'

Well, now he works at the Shell gas station after he gets home from the post office, has something to eat, and changes his clothes. Yes, he just pumps gas, just works on cars. Dirty hands. I think, though, that he would rather be at the gas station than anywhere else. Occasionally, when both he and my mom happen to be home, I'll hear him start to tell her some story about a car he fixed. As soon as he begins, 'Got this '67 Chevy Corvette in the station today...,' I leave the room. I don't know how she stands it.

It's maddening, I think, the way he puts on his poor-me-no one-understands-the-way-I-suffer face. And still, now, he manages to do it with just a sigh. A heavy, my-life-is-a-burden sigh.

As usual, then, what about me? Do I rejoice in my own life? No, I do not. I struggle now to even write down my thoughts. He wrote so many letters, so many.

And, according to the letters, his time in France doesn't sound all that bad. He describes entertainment pretty often, even though most of the time he doesn't talk about it. Mostly, he lists it. In the summer of 1952, writing to his father, he says, 'We had a stage show here last night and it was really good. They called themselves the "Mirthquakes" and I think they picked a very appropriate name as they certainly were comical. There was one fellow from Australia who played four or five selections on the harmonica. He played like the Scottish bagpipes and if I would have been blind I would've sworn it was the real thing...They had the girls in the act that I never tired of HA HA. Two girls were sisters that did a couple of tap dances while the third gal was French, and she could really make your spine tingle.' Ah, I see that not all the French were awful. Some could make you tingle. He sees a lot of movies, which is shocking, since not once have I ever seen him go to the movies. My mom goes often, always with friends. Sometimes with me. In France, my father sees *Man in the Saddle* with Randolph Scott, *The Quiet Man* with John Wayne, *The Will Rogers Story*, *Road to Bali* with Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, and Dorothy Lamour, and *All Ashore* with Mickey Rooney and Dick Haymes. All of them American movies. Some are movies I've seen with my mother on the late show. Why did he never watch with us?

The most fastuous spectacle ever offered in the present Opéra house, and one superior in rich costuming, at least, to many staged at the

Folies-Bergère, was the June-season revival of Jean-Philippe Rameau's 'Les Indes Galantes,' first given in 1735 at Louis XV's Académie Royale de Musique...With the *polloi*, it has been a sellout.

(Flanner, 1 July 1952)

Once, one weekend when Roger was home, we saw *Rocky* with Sylvester Stallone.

No one knew who he was before this movie. When the lights dimmed and the movie started, I thought we must be in the wrong place, as the film was grainy, so grainy. And even though it wasn't in black and white, it had a quality of black and white, its colours subdued, more representative of shadow than light. Right away, however, straight after the camera settled on the face of Jesus Christ to background noises of men grunting and boxing gloves landing punches, before panning out to the shot of a boxing ring in an old church gym—two men sparring, exhausted—under the illuminated gaze of Christ, well, right then I loved the movie. Roger and I talked about it for hours. The light and lack of light, the way the characters did not seem like characters, the angles of the camera, and the wonderful way these people on the screen were not made to look beautiful—at least, not the way the world saw beauty.

And another time, my mom and I saw *All the President's Men* with Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford. I remember when the Watergate Hearings were on television. I was only eleven and I couldn't understand why my mother was glued to the small TV in the kitchen, eyes fixated on the screen while she held the telephone to her ear. It was Jean, of course, and they traded observations about the characters—except, of course, that they weren't characters. It was boring to me. I didn't understand what I half-heard, but my mom kept saying, 'Jules, this is history in the making!' and 'This is *real*, not some made-up show

about people who don't exist,' and, finally, 'Jules. This is live! As we speak, this is happening.' Live.

By the time the book came out, by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, my mom and Jean each purchased a copy and devoured it. More time on the telephone, citing pages and reading sections to each other.

I notice my dad doesn't include any comments about the movies he saw back then. Why even mention them? But it fits the person I think he is—now I have to say *think* he is, because I don't know. Unless he has something negative to say, he has not much to say. Unless it makes your spine tingle, like the French 'gal.'

And it all feels so unfair suddenly, my own persistent drip of criticism feeling sour. Unfair to him. Unfair because I do not know this man.

Maybe I have always been jealous, wanting my mother for myself. But this is shameful, not something I want to think about. He calls her Kay in one letter, and asks if this is fine. He never calls her Kay in our real life. I don't think he uses her name at all, unless he is talking about her to someone else.

From France, he writes, 'I am still debating what to do when I get out, whether to go to school or start working right away,' which are things he tells his parents often. To them, he mentions a couple of technical schools, places to learn how to get licensed to become a mechanic or an electrician. In one letter, he must be responding to his parents about news that Earl had taken a job with the phone company. 'I certainly do envy Earl's going to work for the telephone company,' he says. 'I tried to get in there several times but they never had any openings when I was around. I will probably end up on some railroad like my old man. Ha Ha.'

Ah, yes, the railroad. His father, Grandpa Clarence, did indeed end up on The Railroad.

Numbers 13 and 14 were essentially mail trains...

On March 31, 1958, Clarence J. Hassinger, 13's conductor, wired: '75 cases of eggs for Redwood.' The baggageman must have groaned.

(Don L Hofsommer, *The Tootin' Louie: A History of the Minneapolis & St Louis Railway*, 2005)

He had first worked the railroad during the Depression, when families struggled to stay in their homes, struggled to have enough food to eat. I've heard all about that. But I also heard things I didn't understand at the time.

&&&&

There are, I think, some words I don't forget. Like, words in a book situated just so or some jingle from a commercial, but that's not quite what I mean. It's the words I haven't understood that I store in my head, keep in a special compartment, labeled 'Check Back.' And this I must re-visit every now and then, to find some words and, take them out, turn them around in my mind to see if they make sense. These words are like the myriad remnants of fabric Grandma Ann keeps in her scrap bag, most not big enough to be used any longer, but not 'deserving of the dustbin' either. The scraps tell stories, like my quilt, and over time, the stories—where this piece of yellow cotton twill came from, what that swatch of ruby-red taffeta was turned into once-upon-a-time—become more than a list of sewing projects. It has, I think, to do with growing up or what they call growing up.

My mom talks to Jean on the phone every day, at least once. A long time ago, it was the yellow phone on the wall, the rotary, with a curly cord that was so long, I'm sure it would stretch around our entire house. Sometimes she would call Jean but mostly it was the other way around. By the time my mom had checked off at least half her to-do list, the phone would ring and, with one long slender arm reaching for the receiver and the other for her leather cigarette case, she would answer the phone. 'Hello?' Always sun-yellow cheerful, winsome. If it were Jean, she would say, 'Of course I knew it was you,' and sit down to light her Chesterfield.

There were so many things I could do in the kitchen while they talked. Magnetic letters on the refrigerator to rearrange, to try out words, or to group together by colour. Or I might open the cupboard where the Phone Book and Yellow Pages lived. Anything that occupied me seemed to make me invisible, and I could play or read to the backdrop of this one-sided conversation. I wasn't trying to listen, only to keep busy. But, over the course of time, certain words or phrases would repeat. If my mother complained, it was rare. It was also most often about my father's family. They were always in flux, the mother-in-law, the sisters- and brothers-in-law, and gravitated to my mother as confidant. Did each of them know the hours she spent on the phone with the others? She never told them, at least as far as I could hear, only listened. But to Jean, she would tell all.

Of my grandmother, 'She still keeps asking that I call her Mother but, I don't know, it feels too familiar and too formal at the same time,' she would say. This is something I would witness at every family gathering. Grandma Ruby stopping her mid-sentence with the quick raising of her index finger so that my mom, having just called her Ruby, would say, rather stiffly, 'Mother, can I help with anything?' Maybe it was because she never called Grandma

Ann 'Mother,' but instead 'Mom.' Her voice sounded like her real voice when she spoke to Grandma Ann.

Many times while talking with Jean, there would be a pivot to lowering her voice, something I associated with problems or puzzles half-spoken of. Hinted at. Words that might mean something in ordinary talk but had other meanings that had to be deciphered, worked out. 'Yes, five babies on her own must have been hard,' my mother said into the phone. 'But some things I do *not* want to know. No, but it's not the usual, Jean, that's what I mean. "Wouldn't keep his hands off me during those days," that's what she said. And, that he was never around, not for days and days. Away on the railroad and then, when he did come home, well, that was all he wanted. I'm telling you, that's what she said. She said, "He did not take no for an answer." Honestly, Jean, we both know what that means.'

Eventually, I did, too.

Peroration

: Eyes

When Laura and Mary had said their prayers and were tucked snugly under the trundle bed's covers, Pa was sitting in the firelight with the fiddle. Ma had blown out the lamp because she did not need its light. On the other side of the hearth she was swaying gently in her rocking chair and her knitting needles flashed in and out above the sock she was knitting.

The long winter nights of fire-light and music had come again.

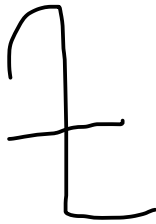
(Wilder, *Little House in Big Woods*)

It occurs to me that there are many words in my life, but right now it seems that they belong—have *always* belonged—to others. When I was young I would wonder how anyone could ever write something that someone else hadn't already written. Hasn't it all been said?

I picture words sitting around an imposing old table, the life of them kinetic. They are at once in motion and still, like dragonflies or hummingbirds. I don't have a seat at the table; instead, I have a chair in the corner, watching. My only word is carved into the wall to the right of my bed. But I won't belittle it, that wouldn't be right.

This is the best I can do right now. The bed does not flip anymore but I don't know for certain that it won't again someday. If it does, the word is there, written on the wall and I will feel its presence, tracing its familiar, crooked lines and curves with the tips of my

fingers to *right* myself, to know where the true ceiling is (the top of the word with its hook-shape) and to know the way off the bed (to the left of my true right-side up).



This is the best I can do. There are times when the bed rumbles, a cloud inside me threatens and turns the murky colour of Minnesota August skies. It is an opaque darkness, far foreign to light. And today. In the world outside of myself, the late summer sky will only get so dark before it cracks wide open to release the rain and sometimes the icy stones of hail. But the sun reappears almost as quickly. Vapors of steam rise from the tar of the roads and driveways, and there is a tinny smell in the air.

The darkness inside me never leaves that quickly or reliably. Most of the time it shows up in the middle of the night to make sure I don't forget that it can keep me from sleeping. Parents, though, are asleep. And I find my way to the living room without turning any lights on. I sit on the sofa. Look through the picture window to find my eyes. It takes a minute as I see—always with a jolt—a face I still don't recognize. Not yet. But let me try. Concentrate. Focus. With my face close to the glass I see only the yard, the flat street under the streetlight. There are no colours out there. Nor face. Try again. Try harder. And as I do the world fades, drops away then, until I see me, the *me* of me. Right there, in my eyes, the

way I have always been. It's taken a long time to find it and I don't know how long it will be before I see myself beyond my eyes.

After a while, if I don't feel tired enough, or my thoughts remain dark wordless clouds, I go back to my room, turn on the lamp beside my bed and pull an old friend from the bookshelf. Maybe *Anne of Green Gables* or *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Maybe *I Capture the Castle* or, maybe I shall return yet again to the *Little House* in this world.

It is, I think, a good thing to be a reader.

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: *Dear Arlis*

Flanner, 117.

Ibid., 175.

Don L Hofsommer, *The Tootin’ Louie: A History of the Minneapolis & St Louis Railway* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press; 2005), 288.

Peroration: Eyes

Wilder, 236.

Reflective/Critical Thesis for *Versions of a Life So Far: Tales from the Ceiling*
Memoiring the Memoir

1: Afterword

Both of my parents died early and under gruesome circumstances. Not early-adulthood early, and not serial-killer gruesome. But I suppose these kinds of things are relative.

My father was around 57 when he came down with the most recalcitrant case of the hiccups. He turned first, of course, to the reliable holding-the-breath remedy, but it soon became clear that these were no ordinary hiccups. I was living in Connecticut by this time, my parents still in Minnesota, living in the only house they would ever own. The story—as told through my mother—was mildly amusing. Moe—my father—and I, did not speak, not so much as an established rule as a matter of course. The way it was. He was a stranger. Not that I ever tried.

Moe tried all manner of neighbors' recommendations for ousting those hiccups, except for drinking water while standing on his head. He consumed copious amounts of apple-cider vinegar, hugged his knees, drank from the opposite side of the glass, rubbed his earlobes, and even tried something called the Valsalva Maneuver. But when he quickly lost ten pounds, my mother insisted they see a doctor.

This was, she said, the day they 'walked out the door and everything changed.' A year of radiation treatment for esophageal cancer decimated his body. It would take hours for him to eat anything ('What's the point? Everything tastes like goddamn metal,' he would rasp out) and mostly he relied on Ensure for a modicum of nutrition. My brother Roger was in Pennsylvania, enrolled in a nursing program, but he left school to help care for Moe, for the stranger. It was a re-visiting of early shame for me: wasn't I the one who should move back to care for a dying parent? Wasn't I supposed to be the nurturer? But I had never been. When we were young, Roger and I went to work with Mom at the nursing home during the Christmas

season. Our volunteer mission was to help feed the patients who couldn't eat on their own. I fumbled, hands shaking, face burning in awkward discomposure. But my older brother Roger, on the other hand, used the easy way he had with everyone, not needing to fix his personality or provide a pretense for the genuine interest he showed the patients. He was like our mother in that way. I was less suited to caring for others than my brother. The rationalization wasn't helpful, of course. It all amounted to my inability to do the right thing, be the right way.

My father's ravaged body lay in hospice at the end, and we were an awkward assembly. My mother had aged since the diagnosis, but I don't believe it was the impending loss of a life's partner that etched the deep wrinkles around her eyes and onto her forehead. It wasn't sadness at the prospect of empty days that shadowed the rings under her blue eyes. It was the horrible work of care. Of course it was, but—just as I had never tried to know him—*how could I have been so certain she wouldn't miss him?*

Again, I looked to my brother for how I should act. Being at my father's bedside was unnerving, and Roger was forever able to act as one should, while I still needed a script. The decision was made to take my father off life support, and we settled back to wait. I have this image of my brother with his hands on the arm of the unconscious stranger— head bent, in a reverent repose. I felt repulsed, not because I couldn't understand the action, but because I could not imitate it. My shame was diverted, however, when the hospice nurse moved toward the television and popped in a VHS tape. I watched in confusion, the only one of the three of us to notice what she was doing. The screen lit up and the distant but indistinguishable call of Minnesota's state bird reverberated off the walls. The loon appeared on the screen, settled on the glass-still surface of a lake at dusk, its mournful wail echoing and searching. When I was little, my mother told me (as her mother had told her) that the call of the loon meant, 'I'm here. Where are you?'

My mother seemed not to notice that the nurse had, unbidden, conjured up the bird. And why had she done so? To what end? To fill the dying silence with the call of Minnesota's ornithologic wonder? I'm not sure, but it did cause Roger's head to pop up. He glanced at me, our eyes locked, and there was some scrap of understanding. I couldn't say exactly what that was, but it flashed across his face.

Moe died about an hour later. On the way to the funeral home to make the arrangements, the radio played the B52s' 'Roam.' That night my mother slept for sixteen hours.

&&&&

My mother came down with what seemed like a case of the flu on a Monday in August 1998, about ten years after my father's passing. It was on that same Monday in August 1998 that I gave birth to my third child. I was still in Connecticut and something was amiss with the telephone lines at the hospital. No cell phones, of course, and I hadn't been able to call Minnesota to reach my mom or Roger, who was still living at home as he finished medical school. Like opposite sides of a revolving door, she entered the emergency room on Wednesday, the same time I was being discharged from a hospital 1,200 miles away.

The news was grim by the time I spoke to Roger over the telephone. Home in Connecticut, I cradled my three-day-old infant as my brother reported that mom's tests revealed a bacterial infection—ordinary as this bacteria was, it had entered her bloodstream, which was not ordinary. The doctors needed to intubate her in order to manage her pain. 'I explained to mom what needed to be done,' Roger said, 'and told her about the tests. She said, "That doesn't sound good."' And here, my brother paused, no longer trying to control his emotion. He managed

to choke out the last thing she ever told him: he should look under her bed when he got home. It was his birthday and she wanted to make sure he found his present.

When, on the Saturday, Roger said the doctors had no hope that our mom would recover, I flew to Minnesota with my baby. In person, the doctor was more blunt than Roger had been. Even if the onslaught of antibiotics they were pumping into her managed to overcome the infection, he said, a condition called muscle necrosis had set in. The infection was eating away at her muscle from the inside out and her limbs would have to be amputated.

She died the next day.

I tell these stories as an Afterword to my memoir, as they are both outside its timeframe. In *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (1992), Carolyn Kay Steedman suggests that revisiting the past through writing must be seen as an act of interpretation:

We all return to memories and dreams like this, again and again; the story we tell of our own life is reshaped around them. But the point doesn't lie there, back in the past, back in the lost time at which they happened; the only point lies in interpretation.

This act—or event, if you will—of translating memory from ‘back in the lost time’ would have been impossible if I had attempted to write about my childhood and adolescence while my parents were still alive. In fact, I had tried to do so many times, but it was futile. The writing felt contrived. The writing *was* contrived. Perhaps the events were too traumatic, I thought, or perhaps I wasn't a writer.

Finally, in 2015—seventeen years after my mom died—I tried again to turn a writerly eye toward my past. And this time, the landscape altered. It was like doing the same journey but on, say, foot rather than in a car. You get to the same place but see a different world. The landscape is altered. When I tried before, when my parents were alive, I was never aware that

their sentient presence stood in my way. But things were very different by the time they had died. I had evolved into an academic writer, was now unfettered by the concern that my account—really, my translation—of the past could be measured against those of my parents. It no longer mattered if my account differed from theirs. While my own truth would run the risk of deviating from anyone else’s recollection or version, what did it matter?

I had, though, still to ask if it mattered that my own version of things deviated, even, from artifactual truth. Jenn Ashworth’s memoir, *Notes Made While Falling* (2019), touches on this in an eerie way for me. She describes a memory she has of a photograph taken of her as a ‘toddler, perhaps eighteen months old. Wearing a duffel coat and sitting in a ride on Blackpool Pleasure Beach.’ There are other intricate details about the ride itself, and the recollection ends with the certain image that ‘I am four feet off the ground, in arm’s reach of Dad who is in the photograph, holding my hand and smiling.’

This, though, is the *memory* of the photograph, not, in fact, the photograph; as Steedman would say, it is a kind of the ‘interpretation.’ Ashworth would go searching for the evidence of the memory when she was thirty-four years old, just as I, at thirty-eight, went looking for a photo of my three- or four-year-old self taken at Paul Bunyan Land. As Ashworth searches through the photographs to discover the one which will match her memory, Ashworth’s mother announces, ‘I don’t think you’ll find what you’re looking for here,’—it is at this point that the photo appears.

My reaction to the photo taken at the amusement park at Paul Bunyan Land mirrors Ashworth’s: it was a memory gone wrong, a mad disputing of photographic evidence.

For Ashworth, the ‘misremembering’ is most distressing in what the photo omits: her father is not holding her hand. It is, she adds, still ‘more frightening to wonder what made me imagine or invent that, and even more frightening to see that I imagined or invented without knowing I was doing it. Drawing on Roland Barthes, she goes on to say that

punctum doesn't quite cover it: this isn't a little wounding, a detail to snag the attention and bring me into contact with the image. It's a fist round my heart. If I am inventing things, I want to know about it. I am a poor writer because I am not in control of my material.

For me, the 'fist round my heart' came from the realization of a disconnet between my body and the photographic evidence of that body. My keen, visceral recollection of my mother's insistence that I ride in one of these primary-coloured boats, all strung together with thick, nautical ropes and moving in a circle of six inches of water, was one where my physical body seemed to expand, to loom over this kiddie ride like a giant. As we got closer to the front of the line, I looked at the small children getting on and off the boats, many needing a parent to hoist them out of their fun. Deep humiliation burned in my face. The sun was so hot and I felt sick.

But my mother wouldn't hear of abandoning ship; we had waited so long and she wanted a picture with her new Kodak.

I half expected to be laughed out of line because of my mammoth size, but I was admitted past the now-open gate and struggled to push my clumsy hulk into the blue boat. There was a shiny bell at the bow, backed by a tiny windshield which couldn't possibly hide the bulk of me.

My mother raised her camera to frame the shot and, every time my boat potted into view, she shouted, 'Ring the bell, Jules! Ring the bell!'

For me, the charade was a nightmare. I was angry at my mother for not understanding that you don't put a behemoth on a kiddie ride while your other child has fun at the big-kid section of the park. She was irate at my refusal to ring the bell.

It was years later that I saw the photograph for the first time. Like Ashworth, I had gone looking for it when I was home from college one weekend. I was looking for evidence of my grossly abundant self—even as a child, I had taken up too much space.

But what I saw, in black-and-white, was someone very different. For there I was—*am*, in the photo—barely peaking over the plastic windshield of the blue boat. Certainly, the scowl on my face *feels* recognizable, but the diminutive figure swallowed up by the boat is at odds with the image I had carried. From the looks of it, I doubt I could have reached the bell, even had I wanted to.

2: *Everything Else, in No Particular Order*

i. Pause

Think about what it is that music is trying to say. It was something like that.

(Mary Oliver, 'Drifting,' 2014)

So many of the narratives we read end at the point where the reader is left with a sense—or at least the hope—that things can get better. For those of us who write, offering hope without becoming a Pollyanna is difficult. Happy endings have always alienated me. While they might be satisfying the moment the last page is turned, what after that? What is there to think about or ruminate over? It seems to me that loose ends tied up neatly are devoid of the very questions that actually connect us to writing or text. They eclipse a necessary space or pause—that pause created when a text invites a reader to ponder, to pay attention.

At the end of Carson McCullers' novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), resolution resides in death and disillusionment. But there is a miss-if-you-blink moment when one of the characters, Biff Brannon,

stood transfixed, lost in his meditations. Then suddenly he felt a quickening in him. His heart turned and he leaned his back against the counter for support. For in a swift radiance of illumination he saw a glimpse of human struggle and of valor. Of the endless fluid passage of humanity through endless time. And of those who labor and of those who—one word—love. His soul expanded. But for a moment only. For in him he felt a warning, a shaft of terror. Between the two worlds he was suspended. He saw that he was looking at his own face in the counter glass before him...One eye was opened wider than the other. The left eye delved narrowly into the past while the right gazed wide and affrighted into a future of blackness, error, and ruin. And he was suspended between radiance and darkness. Between bitter irony and faith.

It strikes me that this dichotomy—and everything in between—is the best of what a narrative must offer its readers. The trajectory Biff travels in his mind, from viewing the world with ‘faith’ to considering human struggle with ‘bitter irony,’ is vast and generous in what it opens up. It is as if the novel invites the reader to cross a threshold and see that this, quite simply, is life.

McCullers packs all the messiness of experience into a very short period of reflection for Biff and, in doing so, unearths more than the understanding that our lives can be tumultuous: that is the case, but the tumult is, above all, a liminal experience. Note that Biff exists ‘[b]etween the two worlds.’ Indeed, twice, the narrative describes how Biff is ‘suspended’ between worlds, experiencing not only a sense of wonder (‘His soul expanded’ in a ‘radiance of illumination’ at the goodness of humanity) but also of devastation and havoc (his eye ‘gazed wide and affrighted into a future of blackness, error, and ruin’).

I used to look for continuities in the texts I read; now, I search for the gaps—those inbetween moments where possibility lies. And this, I think, is part of what we may mean by our ‘felt sense’ of a text, a concept described by Sondra Perl in her 2004 book, *Felt Sense: Writing with the Body*. Perl relies on the words generated—crafted, often painstakingly mined—by writers who engage in a process of intense awareness, right down to the ‘bodily connection...related to words.’

My own particular felt sense, my felt sense of the pauses or gaps in a text is, I suppose, a readerly version of Perl’s account of felt sense. For example, I find myself imagining Carson McCullers, in bed, propped up against many pillows in her childhood bedroom; she is only

nineteen years old and home from college to recover from a respiratory infection. And although she had been in New York (her family thought it was Julliard to study piano, but she was secretly taking creative-writing classes at Columbia University), she has returned to her birthplace in Columbia, Georgia, bedridden, and began writing *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. As I said, I imagine her there in 1934, struggling over word-choice as she completes her masterpiece. Take, for instance, the passage about Biff Brannon quoted above, describing his angsty balancing-act of witnessing both ‘love...[and] terror’ in the world. Where is McCullers’ felt sense? Is it in the phrase ‘he felt a quickening in him’? Or is it, perhaps, in what comes after, when we read that ‘His heart turned’? Either way, there is something here—for me, at least—that operates as an invitation to pay attention, to become aware, as Perl says, to ‘the physical place where we locate what the body knows.’ The difference, of course, is that I am talking about my experience as a reader. I don’t claim that whatever a writer might experience is identical to my readerly pause, but there is, I believe, some kind of physicality on both sides.

Another text in which I find, or feel, a pause, is e.e. cummings’ poem ‘maggie and milly and molly and may’ (1958) where we read:

may came home with a smooth round stone
as small as a world and as large as alone.

The way cummings takes the concepts ‘world’ and ‘alone’ and ascribes to them the qualities of ‘small’ and ‘large,’ respectively, creates, for me, a space of possibility—indeed, the very particular possibility that I too might find my world small and my aloneness large. In my memoir, I come close to this when I arrive in my neighbor’s backyard—a short-cut home from the park—only to see that my Uncle Earl must have stopped by for a visit. He works for the telephone company and I see his company truck in our driveway. I cannot go in, and so I wait.

I wait so long. Wait till the quiet is finally broken by their laughter,
the two of them in the kitchen, with music wafting out through open

windows, and the discord of her crystal melody dancing around his fortissimo. I wait till the clink of cup to saucer ceases. Wait till I can no longer keep the wetness from traveling down my legs. Wait till the sun moves. Till the truck rolls down the driveway.⁴

The similarity I see in this passage with Cummings' is the allowance or invitation for the reader to feel through what is not said, rather than what is. Cummings creates the space for the reader to react—to interpret—that pause created by 'small as a world' and 'large as alone,' each reader needing to reconcile the paradoxes within those phrases. In my passage, I would suggest the pause is created by the repetition of sentences beginning with 'I wait' and 'Wait.' I am not telling the reader how completely terrifying my uncle's presence in my house was to me. My hope is that the power of the passage relies on the not-telling.

Another example of pause, or space, can be found in Paul Farley's poem 'A Tunnel' (2002) in which the speaker's cadence matches that of a train, rattling towards 'A tunnel, unexpected':

A tunnel, unexpected. The carriage lights
we didn't notice weren't on prove their
point and a summer's day is cancelled out,
its greens and scattered blue, forgotten in
an instant

that lasts the width of a down, level to level, a
blink in *London to Brighton in Four Minutes*
that dampens mobiles—conversations end
mid-sentence, before speakers can say

'...a tunnel'—and the train fills with the sound
of itself, the rattle of rolling stock amplified,
and in the windows' flue, a tool-shed scent,
metal on metal, a points-flash photograph,

⁴ All unattributed quotations come from my Creative Project, *Versions of a Life So Far: Tales from the Ceiling*.

and inside all of this a thought is clattering
 inside a skull inside the train inside the tunnel
 inside great folds of time, like a cube of chalk
 in a puncture-repair tin at a roadside

on a summer day like the one we'll re-enter at
 any moment, please, at any moment. Voices
 are waiting at the other end
 to pick up where we left off. 'It was a tunnel...'

I feel a break in the rhythm midway through the poem, at the point of 'before speakers can say' when 'the train fills with the sound / of itself...' Prior to this, although the speaker has told us of the tunnel, we have yet to feel the effect of entering it; all we have before is a kind of ordinariness (it is 'a summer's day,' with 'its greens and scattered blue,' and people are connecting, via cell phone, to others outside the train). Moreover, when we enter the tunnel and the train's 'carriage lights...prove their point,' and, with internet service muted, the 'train fills with the sound / of itself,' we experience a break or pause. Observation now pivots from the outside to the internal and there is a settling (like Biff Brannon's suspension between worlds) into the moment.

Finally, Elizabeth Reeder, in her narrative non-fiction text *microbursts*, lays bare the literal pause. First, in a prologue of sorts called 'between places,' she provides an outline of what is to come. She writes,

There are words for the kind of spaces that exist between other places and many of them are about landscape like littoral, ecotone, twilight. In between places there is something solid, a traveler, passing over. The very details noticed in the midst of travel or shock or bewilderment can hold us fast; lost becomes found...

When I read this, I recognize the pause an author creates where the reader sits, surrounded by the words, but reacting in a way exclusive to the reader because not everything can be spoken, not

every emotion can be written with the language we have at our disposal. And yet. Use the words we must, search for that space to describe the ‘very details noticed in the midst of travel’ so that the reader, too, is transported to a kind of resonance. Peter Elbow, in writing the Foreword to Perl’s book, *Felt Sense*, refers to Perl’s work with Eugene Gendlin. Gendlin often uses the words ‘intricate’ and ‘precise’ when referring to ‘these meanings we build out of felt sense... The words are startling and important,’ Elbow says, ‘because they contradict how most people think about nonverbal language. They usually think of “hunches” and “intuition” as vague and fuzzy and only capable of pointing in a vague general direction—never spelling out anything with intricate precision. Work with felt sense shows otherwise...’

I’m reminded here of a passage in my memoir where I, too, work toward precision, precision of representation, through felt sense. This is the passage in which I describe the way it feels to wait for my bed to flip, the waiting compared to the change in weather upon an imminent tornado during a Minnesota summer. My language is clearly intended to be evocative, suggestive and full of felt-sense and, in that respect, indirect and vague, if you like; however, I am working, I hope, toward an extremely precise representation of how I felt:

And something is going to happen, that too, only I know. Something. Something like a nighttime shoe-dream slow-motioning in the air. A shoe with its tumbling, breezing machinations. Floating, spiraling, and somersaulting, then dipping, plummeting, against a background sky morphing from azure, then glaucous to griseous, as the shoe slues and drops, a flight gone awry. And the sky complying is, now perse, then indigo. Going from slate to sable.

If we return to Reeder’s *microbursts* we find another way in which felt-sense is achieved and that is through use of type-set, and the actual spacing of the words on the page. Her narrator—it is her, it is Reeder—uses second-person to address her father, who collapsed at home and is now in the hospital. The passage begins

What you do not remember somehow resides here in this room where you've been taken, your swollen legs are red-angry like a sky in storm at dusk with silver-coated bandages over their weeping and **you can feel but can't see the broken horizon-lines that puncture the peaceful coast of your neck** and folds of skin hang down and then retreat with the thanksgiving days and with the meds they give you...(78)

What you cannot see in this reproduction of Reeder's text is that the lines on the page in this section of her book are *less* than single-spaced, they are on top of each other, almost—but not quite—overlapping each other. Moreover, punctuation is all but absent. Details of the room and of her father are derailed by other thoughts, like an exhibition of found objects that hold something in common but you're not sure what. If you could stop and ponder, maybe you could *see* the connections better (they are there, yes), but the text isn't set up for that. Instead, it insists that you move at an almost-uncomfortable speed, replicating with precision the way our minds work when they are troubled and overwrought. Interesting, then, the reader is here not being made to pause or slow but rather to hasten or quicken. Nevertheless, the overall effect is, I think, to create a kind of retrospective pause, as and when the reader looks back, almost in alarm or bewilderment, on the sentence just read.

Later in this same section, Reeder or the narrator again works to to create a sense of bewilderment as she dwells further on her father's collapse and settles on her mother:

...back in August the streets are flooded, the power is out, and the wind explodes drops of rain into horizontal needles which pierce trees which give up their limbs and **it's just a moment of extreme force within an ongoing storm** it's an albatross, I yell during the microburst, no electricity, no lights, and the door hits dad's leg and here's the sudden jolt back into illness butted against death as the EMTs come and track rainwater and storm mud through your house, borrowing a flashlight because the lights are out and they carry him out to the ambulance and we're imprisoned in the dark house together and it's crowded with your worry **this house is a fucking albatross**, I repeat and you get angry and it's a Parkinson's anger, different, I can't explain it but I know it, know that it's altered, exaggerated from what has always been here and **you're a top that's been spinning just fine for years and then it**

slows wobble wobble wobble and I'm watching and you still feel the spinning and it has always worked before and why not now, why not now, my logic has always worked before, and why not now and why and why not the breaks between the words aren't steady aren't empty they're filled with the gears of your brain getting stuck, jerking forward I've always been able why not now...

Here again, the page itself—as a tangible artifact, like a photograph—is arranged and manipulated so as to *instruct us how to read it*. This time the reader is at one and the same time being caused both to quicken and to slow. S/he is caused to quicken through the absence of punctuation but she is caused to slow through the occasionally excessive spacing between the words.

It should be added that Reeder's here writing in the second-person—her 'I' becomes a 'you'—and achieves many things. Above all, I think, it enables her to strike more various poses and speak in more various voices. I too, in my memoir, often use the second person to talk of myself and I found that one of the advantages was being able to step out of the other 'persons'—'I' or 'she'—and adopt a somewhat cryptic persona, one who isn't concerned that the reader understands everything, since the text is, after all, addressing myself, not the reader at all. Moreover I feel that the 'You' sections of my memoir are a kind of release from the burden of having to remember, interpret, or imagine. They exist as an exit from the responsibility of telling a truth recognizable by all parties involved. They are a reprimand of sorts, a kind of 'Look here, this is the way it was, no matter what the fuck you, dear reader, might think.' The sections are usually short and not-so-sweet. But they are short in order to get us swiftly back to the 'story.' One of them, positioned after I discovered the joys of dieting and the experience of getting noticed, but before my breakdown—the death of a close friend and subsequent inability to ease back into the high-school social realm—reads as follows:

If you should ever find yourself in a mirror and are caught unaware; or shuffle down the hallway at school and remember that your body used to move in an easier, unburdened kind of way; or see colours hanging in your closet that you're sure you never would have worn; or chew and chew your food but cannot quite remember how to swallow and have no idea how this will end; or find that your bed flips violently in the night but holds you to its plane like a ragdoll sewn to the sheets, then...

This is what you do: when the sun goes down, find a window good at reflecting your image. Stand in front of it and zero in on your eyes. Walk slowly—your perception is a camera lens moving toward its subject. Only watch your eyes as you come as close as you can to that reflecting pool. This is important: see inside your eyes. There is something to re-visit there.

As I say, there is, I think, a very strong sense of grabbing the reader firmly by the elbow and saying, 'Look, this is the way it is. Listen to me.' To put all this another way, passages where 'I' becomes 'you' are sometimes, as here, also passages where the 'you' shades into you-the-reader. There are, in such moments, more than one you in the house. The text has double vision, as it were.

There is then, from all four authors, a profound experience of pause. And in each case, words are inadequate to fill the pause (which does not obviate the desire to try), which is exactly why the pause materializes. It is a pause into which I am invited to sink and thus, if you like, behave as a good reader should, according to Louise Rosenblatt.

But this is all getting a bit ahead of myself. Back to narrative and my sense that a text should leave us displaced, or unmoored. And at the heart of my story is an experience of just such an unmooring: the flipping of my bed. In my story, my text, *this* is the displacement or break or pause, the place that opens up to questions.

ii. Flipped

This is how it has been, and this is how it is:
All my life I have been able to feel happiness,
except whatever was not happiness, which I
also remember.

(Oliver, 'The Pond,' 2015)

This is how it was, and I stand by it: when I was around fifteen, my bed—with me pinned to it as a 'magnet to metal'—flipped. Yes, I do stand by it, but that is not to say I advertise it. If the subject comes up with people I have known for a very long time (it rarely comes up), responses are muted. Of course they are. A change of topic usually follows close on the heels of suggesting therapy, and no one says, 'What the fuck are you talking about? Beds don't flip.' Or even, 'Really? Fascinating—tell me more.'

If, however, someone were ever to say, 'Tell me more,' I guess I would offer a précis of my memoir. It would begin something like this: between the ages of two and three I lost my hearing for at least a year, and a bout with the measles set my head aflame in fever and, for a year, I did not speak. When my language acquisition resumed, I had a speech impediment and a voice I couldn't tolerate. I clung to my mother—both the smell of her and the golden snap-shot beauty of her. Painfully shy when away from my mother, I barely spoke. And then there are memories of one of my uncles—memories of inappropriate touching, pinching, and sexual inuendo.

My story would then continue something like this: as an adolescent, I experimented successfully with dieting and witnessed a change in people's perceptions of me. However, when I was fifteen my best friend was killed when a car hit her as she was crossing the street. Initial reaction: deep shame at the superficial life I was devoted to. I broke down. And I pretty much mean this in a literal, visceral way: I felt a break, a S N A P of some kind and this is where it all

went south. Reality's downward-spiraling serpentine trajectory landed me—quite literally—in a space where I needed words to pull me through.

Unable to sleep, disorientation with time becomes (and here I would turn to present tense) a major fixation in my day-to-day, and I begin to feel that external forces (notably and at first, my mother) are conspiring to put obstacles in my way to get back to myself. Other friends are getting over the death of Lisa—why can't I? It's all I want to talk about but, when the world moves on, it's as if I am standing transfixed on a train platform, unable to board the train. No one else wants to not-move, to not-grow-up, to not-get-back-to-living. I want to (Do I? Do I *really?*), but I cannot.

One day I wake up with a gnawing hunger in my belly, and spend the day eating as much of everything I can. I feel so hungry that nothing fills me, and the only thing that replaces the hunger is sleep. Once I've eaten as much food as I can hold, I am able to sleep, and for long stretches—sometimes twelve hours, sometimes sixteen. There still is no routine, I stop going to school, and a neighbor delivers homework each day. I do it, but I have no idea how it gets back to school.

Then the bed flips.

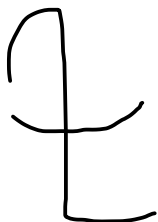
And I am now faced with another challenge. I can believe my sensed experience or I can deny it. But talking myself out of this only proves to be more exhausting. The shock of the bedflip, and the subsequent, simultaneous hanging over the floor—gravity refusing to help me—and feeling a punch-to-the-gut glued-to-the-bed sensation never loses its sudden exigency. The decision to call this real or *truth*—if only to myself—at least provides a measure of relief and the possibility that a real solution can be found.

At this time, I find myself suddenly unable to read. I am devastated when the words in *Jane Eyre* refuse to remain where they are on the page. They jump and spin, the lines trade places with the lines above, and the beat of the novel's rhythm match my increasing heart rate. Always in my head during this time of not-reading is a kind of mantra—a word, a *word*.

A word.

At some point, trying in vain to practice re-orienting myself during the day for the nighttime bed-flip, I memorize the position of the wall to my right. It's a kind of muscle-memory approach, dedicated to the presumption that the wall to my right is the path to my equilibrium. But, through trial and error, I realize that, in the dark of night, memorizing the location of the wall does nothing to keep the bed from flipping. In other words, it's more than a left-and-right conundrum: it is an upside-down-and-right-side-up puzzle.

In the bathroom, I look for something sharp—a needle, a tweezers, a scissors—I am not sure what. I find a cuticle scissors and decide that will work. In my bedroom, without a real plan, I lie on my bed to repeat the exercise of mapping my place in reference to the wall. Eyes closed, hand extended to the wall to find just the correct space for something. A figure, a line drawing, a newly-invented personal Braille to guide me to orientation in the middle of the night when I have no trust in my instincts. I come to think of it as a word—the word—in the same way I felt, as a child, I could unleash the secrets of the world (the secrets of myself) through a single word. The word is something I carve to my right side, and it looks like this:



If this seems underwhelming, dear reader, try not to be disappointed. Shabby as it is, it is my word. It was my word. It would, eventually, guide me upright.

iii. Story

There are many ways to perish, or to flourish

How old pain, for example, can stall us at the threshold
of function.

Memory: a golden bowl, or a basement without light.

For which reason the nightmare comes with its painful
story and says: *you need to know this*.
(Oliver, 'Evidence,' 2009)

My own painful story wasn't always a story I wanted to tell. It was not a story I wanted even to remember. But memory isn't always amenable to our choices. In the short memoir *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary* (2015), Sarah Manguso describes much of her obsession with diary-writing as a way of holding onto memory, and—not to be confused with the same—as a way of not forgetting. 'I didn't want to lose anything,' she writes.

That was my main problem. I couldn't face the end of a day without a record of everything that had ever happened.

I wrote about myself so I wouldn't become paralyzed by rumination—so I could stop thinking about what had happened and be done with it.

For me, too, wanting to set down my story was wanting to 'be done with it.' The rumination of it had hung at the back of my mind like an old wool coat, and gained heaviness as the years moved on. I hoped, therefore, that setting it down, would be like watching my story board a train and head on down the tracks.

My first attempts, when in my late twenties, were, though, frustrating, maddening. Instead of recording a memory, I began to question the validity of my experience. Like the therapists and psychologists who examined my bed-flipping phenomenon, I looked at myself

from the outside, doubting from a distance, what had once seemed real. Recording the-events-asthey-took-place was an unsuccessful venture into explaining, and yet, I didn't want to explain because so often explaining can be editorializing. As Manguso writes, 'I tried to record each moment, but time isn't made of moments; it contains moments. There is more to it than moments' (5). In attempting to *record* my experience, I found that I was missing an essential *insideness* to the moments of that experience.

I find something of this *insideness* of experience to be achieved by Ashworth's *Notes Made While Falling*, in particular where, with present-tense immediacy, Ashworth describes reading from her novel at an arts festival. From the audience, a woman asks about Ashworth's writing process. The question, Ashworth confesses, 'is big enough...to hide in.' As she goes on at length answering the woman, '(who is becoming sorrier and sorrier that she asked),' Ashworth finally launches into

the story of a girl who bullied me for a while at primary school. I make this experience into a funny story even though at the time my hair started falling out in chunks and I developed a bit of a twitch and a squint in one eye. This isn't entirely true (my hair did fall out, but my eyes were fine—though I have to put that detail in there for the punch line of this story to work) but bear with me.

As readers here, we straddle the narrative: we are both confidantes to the truth that Ashworth doctored the story, while at the same time we maintain both perspectives of storyteller (Ashworth at the arts festival) and audience (the poor woman who asked the question). In short, we are both inside and outside the story that Ashworth struggles to tell. And, in order to do justice to trauma, it seems to me, both perspectives are necessary.

I thus attempt, in my memoir, to create a world where the reader is privy to more than one perspective. In a literal sense, my narrative takes on several points of view, depending on whose life I wish to inhabit in the writing. The draft title for the memoir began as *We're All*

Living Different Versions of the Same Life. My life has always felt to me like a *series* of lives, lived by a series of quite different people. And so, in my memoir, I sought to invoke several radically different versions of my self—hence, for example, the ‘I’ and the ‘she.’

The nexus between my depression and subsequent breakdown was the death of my friend, Lisa. In hindsight, though, it was a breakdown waiting to happen. Marking the moment of disassociation was a sound—a click or a snap is the best way I can express it—which brought me back with a vengeance to a time as a child when I felt that I had both an inside life and an outside life. In an early section of the memoir, I recall my mother reciting a Robert Louis Stevenson poem to me as I trailed her every move throughout the day. In it, the speaker unwittingly assumes his shadow is an oftentimes-companion. ‘I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me,’ the speaker says, ‘And what can be the use of him is more than I can see.’ I assumed, as a small child, that this was something my mother was reciting about herself—her way of telling me we both had a troublesome inside self. As I write,

This bit of herself—trickster, nuisance, magician, and mystery—was, I thought, the look-over-your-shoulder sensation of being watched. The message was woven through the words, an unraveling of a skein of yarn which spun itself through the telling, but wound out of the page, out of telling, to wrap itself around our life, teasing me in to a secret. For I believed that she told of her own shadow, a shadow to match mine.

Here, the ‘I’ uses vocabulary I could not have known at the age of four. However, I feel justified in using a heightened word choice as well as metaphor, in describing my feelings this way, because even the I was split or double—both an ‘I’ inside my experience and an ‘I’ outside my experience.

Once my text focuses on my older self, this dual life is articulated with greater clarity, because it was something that preoccupied me—even at the age of seven. Even then, I felt that there were ‘two truths side-by-side’ in me. As I put it in the memoir, these two truths were,

like the nesting spoons in the silverware drawer [that] made me feel special. But I quickly began to sense that One Truth was the standard, that, in fact, the people around me didn't share these mixed ideas of things—the One Truth belonging to the world, the other carefully wrapped and stowed away somewhere inside me, marked: 'Fragile.'

It's important to note that I, always, perceived the inside (real) me as an ugly, shameful thing. I felt therefore that I should control it, and hide it away. Indeed, by the time I started school, I experienced tremendous anxiety that I might be exposed as a bad person, or as a split or double person. In short, I was legion, not single.

Nancy Mairs considers the limitations of a single perspective in *Voice Lessons: On Becoming a (Woman) Writer* (1994). In a wonderful twist of logic, Mairs opens her volume of essays by making the claim that her life is—and has been—perfect. Without even pausing to begin another sentence, however, she places her reader in the midst of the now, much the way Ashworth does, so that we come closer to the messiness of life.

I really did, and do, believe that my life is perfect, although I recognize that certain details of it—like my own advancing debilitation by multiple sclerosis and my husband's metastatic melanoma—might seem from the outside to forbid it such status and even to mark me as (1) a Pollyanna, to use a quaint term, (2) in denial, as pop-psych-speak would have it, or (3), to be blunt, out of my wits.

This is all to say, from Mairs's point of view, that ' "The outside" ...never provides a good vantage point for life study.'

I reveal, in my memoir, that separation of outside/inside lives occurred early in my life. It would dictate for many years the way I attempted to present myself to the world. At around seven, I write, 'I was ready to lie.' And in many ways the memoir may be one long extension of this readiness to lie, to misrepresent my secret self.

I had tested both God and all adults and had slowly arrived at the realization that I alone knew my thoughts, in spite of what my mother

said. This was the beginning of my secret self. The advantage? I could think whatever I wanted about Uncle Earl and I would never have to share my true birthday wish—but the ethereal, hovering Me was now locked Outside, looking on. Being a complete-and-utter secret, alone, enclosed behind the shuttered window of my soul, confirmed to me that I wasn't like other people.

iv. Slant

Even now
I remember something...

the way a flower in
a jar of water

steadies itself remembering
itself
(Oliver, 'From the Book of Time,' 2000)

'Story as the Landscape of Knowing' was the title of the annual NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) conference held in Washington, D.C. in 2014. On behalf of the Connecticut Writing Project (a chapter of the National Writing Project in Fairfield, CT), I presented with two colleagues a workshop on Textual Lineages.⁵ Our workshop evolved from work done by Alfred Tatum, who writes extensively about young adults—particularly African-American males—and the absence of significant texts in their lives and *for* their lives. In 'Enabling Texts: Texts That Matter,' Tatum describes the deficit of 'a wide range of texts that challenge them to contextualize and examine their in-school and out-of-school lives.' As a high-school and middleschool teacher, I knew this to be true. When I started teaching twelve years ago, I didn't question the canon for students—this, in spite of my having read only one 'classic' before the age of eighteen. Eventually, I allowed them to read non-classic texts, half-heartedly subscribing to the 'if-it-gets-them-to-read' philosophy. But my real understanding of the place of text in children's lives (in *people's* lives) didn't fully develop until, in 2012, I started working with teachers

⁵ Crandall, B.R., Roneson, J., & Mitchell, S. (2014). 'Advancing the Stories We Tell Ourselves: Tracing Textual, Tectual, and Textured Lineages for 21st Century Success.' National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention, Washington, D.C., November 23. According to Alfred Tatum, the definition of a textual lineage is 'a visual representation of texts that have found to be significant in [students'] lives.' See Endnotes.

through The Writing Project. Two years later, at the NCTE conference, a full appreciation of what ‘Story as the Landscape of Knowing’ meant effected a profound shift in my way of thinking.

Tatum’s research with adolescents found that students ‘ascribed the absence of meaningful texts in their lives to teachers’ refusal to acknowledge their day-to-day realities couched in their adolescent, cultural, and gender identities.’ All workshops at the conference dramatized this point repeatedly, and I increasingly questioned my practice. Was I *refusing* to acknowledge the realities of my students’ day-to-day lives? I hadn’t meant to. Yes, some of my most avid readers *were* able to draw connections between themselves and *Jane Eyre*, but these were students whose prior reading had provided scaffolds for getting to this level. Many more students, however, were drawn to Celie in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982) and Janie in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). It made sense.

The novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie talks about her own experience of the ‘danger of the single story’ in a 2009 *TED Talk*. She continues as follows:

Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify...

Perhaps this is why I had little awareness of my students’ lack of resonance with the characters they had come across in canonical literature. But then, I had not begun my reading life with African-American characters or characters of colour at all. No, my first heroines were Laura from Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House* series, Ramona from the books by Beverly Cleary, and Betsy from the Carolyn Haywood books. All white. Nonetheless, they did develop a capacity to identify with that was able to ultimately extend to non-white and non-female characters.

Adichie goes on to say that she did, however, go ‘through a mental shift’ in her perception of literature through reading ‘writers like Chinua Achebe and Camera Laye,’ at which point she

‘realized the people like me, girls with skin the colour of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized.’ She only learned to write, that is, once she came to see literature as something *intimately* related to herself.

It was a similar process for me as, during the summer of 2015, my own story reawakened, asked again to be told, but this time with a sense of urgency. Manguso writes about how she ‘didn’t want to go lurching around, half-awake, unaware of the work I owed the world, work I didn’t want to live without doing’(5), and in 2015 I felt much the same. My story was not ‘work I owed the world,’ but it was work I felt compelled to undertake.

With fresh eyes, then, before thinking about *how* to write, I reviewed the early attempts I had made in my twenties. Why had it not worked? I knew immediately that it had to do with the expository nature of it. My ‘landscape of knowing’ didn’t reside in facts; telling the story had to come from another place.

And there it was. I realized I was confusing facts with knowing. In my early twenties, with access to a college library, I had gone so far as trying to suss out what might be the neurological or psychological cause of my severe disorientation. But when diagnoses like ‘brain tumors,’ ‘serious infection,’ ‘dementia,’ and ‘delusional disorders’ popped off the pages, I felt nauseated. It wasn’t because the words presented harrowing possibilities—no, they stood out as bold-faced lies. I felt as if I’d betrayed myself, but I left it at that and worked to dismiss the memory.

Manguso writes:

I record these facts dutifully, as if they dignify this writing with something more real than my memories—as if they reveal.

And that is exactly how I had first approached the writing of my life. However, during that summer of 2015, I understood that there was nothing more real than my memories, not even facts. ‘Tell all the truth but tell it slant,’ Emily Dickinson advised. My truth, however, *was* always already slant; indeed, it was, in fact, flipped upside down.

Thus there was no need to tell it slant, all I had to do was tell it, tell it straight, which is what I attempted to do. This meant, among other things, not so much writing about the *sensation* of the bed flipping, but purely and simply about the bed flipping. In short, I simply had to convey to my reader that the bed flipped. That it fucking flipped.

v. *Roots*

For example, what the trees do not
 only in lightning storms or the
 watery dark of a summer night
 or under the white nets of winter but now, and
 now, and now—whenever we’re not looking.
 Surely you can’t imagine they just stand there
 looking the way they look when we’re
 looking; surely you can’t imagine they don’t
 dance, from the root up, wishing
 to travel a little...
 (Oliver, ‘Can You Imagine?’, 2004)

Since my early twenties, after moving to Connecticut, I have felt an affinity with trees. I have a tattoo of a leafless tree on my left arm and, when asked to explain the ‘meaning,’ I will reply sheepishly, ‘I like trees.’ This is a more nuanced response than one might think, for it reveals much more about the person asking the question. A lot of people will nod and walk away, or say ‘Cool’ and *then* walk away. A few curious people, though, will look baffled, being not satisfied with ‘I like trees’—and, if I sense any such curiosity, I take a deep breath and say this: that I grew up in a place which was once acres and acres of potato fields, flat as far as the eye could see; that the fallowed fields settled a quarter of an inch of potato dust on every surface by day’s end; that trees were planted eventually, yes, but they started so small and I forgot to pay attention to their growing; that moving east presented me with the sight of trees that dwarfed any possible thought I had of my significance in the world; and (finally) that this was an almighty relief to me. I could go on. I could, for instance, go on to say that an old tree’s crookedness or frailty reminds me of lessons our culture disallows—lessons such as: don’t worry about perfection or aging; above all, don’t worry about ‘slantedness’ within the landscape of one’s knowing, one’s

storytelling. This landscape is, you see, always shape-shifting, depending on where you stand in relation to it, its appearance altered by time of day, by season, by weather. There is, then, no fixity to the landscape of *knowing*, or knowledge.

Talking of knowledge, when faced with the demand that my memoir should constitute ‘a contribution to knowledge,’ I determined that my contribution would be woven between and around two particular questions, namely:

- (1) How does reading inform past experiences?
- (2) How are past experiences recalled, and how do they change in and through writing?

I was, though, very conscious that I could not separate out reading, writing, and experience—and, moreover, I needed a metaphor to help me think through this complexity.

One day, therefore, I Googled the word ‘layering.’ The word seemed at least a starting point for the kind of image I was after. I considered things with layers—lasagna, the epidermis, the earth, tiramisu—but what my mind immediately conjured up was lacking. These things had very distinct layers; whereas reading operated on and in my life as a kind of permanent ‘folding in.’ It crept in, and incorporated itself into my being. Part of the etymology of ‘layer’ is, though, from the French *liue*, ‘binding,’ referring to a thickened sauce, and I did like the image of being bound to a book. Moreover, ‘bind’ comes from the Proto-Indo-European root, *bhendh-*, which means ‘to bind,’ as binding *books*.

Here, though, is the most important thing: layering is an agricultural term, a procedure, actually, by which plants are propagated. There are many descriptions of, and instructions for, layering, as well as different methods. But one common theme is that you take a healthy plant whose roots are well-formed—a plant that invariably is referred to as the *mother* plant. The idea is this: choose a branch or stem that is low-hanging and *wound* it; the wound should be substantial without, though, cutting all the way through. One then has to submerge the wounded

portion into the ground, and secure it with a wire bracket. Still attached to the mother plant, the wounded stem or branch will subsequently receive nutrients from the parent, and will grow roots of its own. Once the roots are well-established, the plant can be severed from its mother.⁶

The notion of creative or good wounding is also found, I think, when reflecting on the experience of reading; cue Robert Frost who, in 1925, writes that ‘The right reader of a good poem can tell the minute it strikes him that he has taken an immortal wound—that he will never get over it.’ For as long as I have remembered, reading has wounded me. The wound is sometimes recognition, sometimes desire, but is always, on some level, painful and regenerative.

In my memoir, I explore this wounding in a variety of scenes. One of these concerns one of my earliest memories of text—the Robert Louis Stevenson poem ‘My Shadow,’ which my mother used to sing: ‘I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me, and what can be the use of him is more than I can see.’ This was always already a wounding in the sense that from the very first time I heard it, (if there really was a first time) I could not get over it. Moreover, it was a wounding that was also a form of bonding, in that I always (mis) understood the poem as being about how the two of us shared a secret shadow, and were thus one and the same person. All I wanted, after all, was to *be* her.

Many writers and psychologists insist, of course, that there is a developmental stage at which a girl separates from her mother to form her own identity—normal and healthy in spite of its pain. Steedman refers to Nancy Chodorow’s text *Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, to provide an historical account—albeit flawed, according to Steedman—of the initial symbiosis between mother and daughter, and subsequent break. In a chapter called ‘Reproduction and Refusal,’ Steedman writes:

⁶ Lerner, Rosie. ‘Layering Gives Old Plants New Life.’ *Purdue Agriculture: Purdue University: Indiana Yard and Garden – Purdue Consumer Horticulture*. Purdue University. 11 May 2006.

Chodorow's argument centres on the shared gender of mother and daughter and the difficulties mothers experience in perceiving their infant daughters as separate from themselves. This sense of 'oneness and continuity' with her mother is what the little girl carries through her oedipal crisis, the transfer of affection from mother to father, into adult life.

Writing my memoir, however, brought to light what Steedman calls the 'absences' and 'lacunae' in Chodorow's argument. For this reason, like Steedman, I sensed an opportunity 'to remake [the] system of myths' surrounding mothering.

One of the ways Steedman does this is by looking more closely at the social and economic status of any individual family or community. Of course, she, like myself, is looking for those interstices in theory where, perhaps, her own story will emerge. I have never felt an affinity with the old 'transfer of affection from the mother to the father,' or what is sometimes called the Electra Complex, but I do recognize what Steedman describes as 'the drama of ambivalence' for the late-nineteenth century bourgeois child. The result, Steedman says, is 'the child's being able to internalize a rule-system which was represented by its authority/love relationship with its parents.' She continues:

...there is another drama of ambivalence that nineteenth-century middleclass childhood reveals, which is the child's recognition that whilst she is wanted, she is also resented: that it is economic and social circumstances that make a burden out of her, that make her a difficult item of expenditure.

This ambivalence relates in some ways to my childhood, and my reading of it. For although I was, as a child, unaware of our working-class status—we were no different from our neighbors, as far as I could see—my mom's constant hard work is central to my vision of her in the memoir. See, for example, this:

We are two people, but she says the things I cannot say, she moves the way I imagine myself to move one day— her long alabaster arms extending to fling the sheets to the breeze before clipping them to the clothesline. I smell clean laundry, the fragrance of detergent offered to the summer air, delivered by my mother who makes everything clean, everything right and straight.

I would not say that I ever quite felt, or understood, myself to be an economic ‘burden’ on my mother when I was very small; nevertheless, she comes to me in memories of perpetual motion, just out of my reach. I felt I couldn’t keep up with her, and she didn’t seem to be able to afford to slow down.

As for Chodorow’s claim that the mother struggles to see herself apart from her daughter, my experience (and interpretation of that experience) would seem to suggest quite the opposite. I see no evidence that my mother had difficulty perceiving me apart from herself. The only, and perhaps glaring, exception to this rule would, though, be that I do now believe that when my mother sang of Stevenson’s ‘shadow,’ the little shadow that went everywhere with her, she had in mind myself.

As far as transferring my affections to my father? No. Never. Perhaps this not taking the Electra path was the result of my development, as a child, being interrupted. It was, of course, first interrupted by my infant deafness, which hindered my language development, its effects lingering long after the actual period of deafness. The consequent speech impediment inevitably lent itself to my perception that I was intellectually inferior and somehow compromised in a way other children were not. My interpretation of these memories of the struggle to speak feels oneand-the-same with my sense of possessing a monstrous body that was wildly out of control.

vi. Transaction

And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to everything?
(Oliver, 'Swan,' 2010)

Both my reading and writing lives are informed by Louise Rosenblatt. She resists the label of Reader Response Theory since it is so often understood to favour the reader's interpretation at the expense of everything else. For Rosenblatt, words-in-themselves also matter, and so I am drawn to her use of the word 'transactional' to describe the reader's relationship with the text. We respond to a text and, in a sense, it also responds to us, thus producing a dynamic, reciprocal relationship, or what Rosenblatt calls 'a coming-together, a compenetration, of a reader and a text.' She writes,

The reader brings to the text his past experience and present personality. Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, he marshals his resources and crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order, a new experience... This becomes part of the ongoing stream of his life experience, to be reflected on from any angle important to him as a human being.

This 'ongoing stream,' I suggest, allows 'the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling' to take on a certain fluidity. To put this another way: all the texts I have ever read, or rather *really* read, are part of the 'ongoing stream' of my experience of life. And this is played out, or laid bare in my memoir in various ways. There is the 'Shadow' poem, of course, and Charlotte Zolotow's *Mr. Rabbit and the Lovely Present*, both of which I understood (interpreted and *reinterpreted*) in various ways in this ongoing stream (more on *Mr Rabbit* below). It's as if these texts were planted—like the agricultural layering of plants to propagate new plants—in order to 'wound' a prior understanding. My mother was not *my* troubling shadow: *I* was the troubling shadow. On the other hand, Mr Rabbit does not offer the little girl a poor substitute when he helps her gather

colours for her mother's birthday gift. These are interpretations, however, which have evolved over time. 'Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text,' Rosenblatt says, '[the reader] marshals his resources and crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order.' As my experiences change, I change. Books have been, for me, a way to define myself, a kind of excavation into myself, as it were. And, like the wounding of a plant in order to propagate, the new growth continues. Re-reading, revising interpretation, re-visiting memories through writing—it is all part of the tangled, beautiful story-thread of a reading life.⁷

⁷ For (much) more on the thread of storytelling, see J. Hillis Miller's *Ariadne's Thread: Story Lines* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP; 1992). 'Linear terminology describing narrative tends to organize itself into links, chains, strands, figures, configurations,' Miller writes, 'each covering one of the topographical regions...basic to the problematic of realist fiction: time, character, the narrator, and so on. To identify line terminology used for stories, bit of string by bit of string, will be to cover the whole ground, according to the paradox of Ariadne's thread. That thread maps the whole labyrinth, rather than providing a single track to its center and back out. The thread is the labyrinth, and at the same time it is a repetition of the labyrinth.' (19)

vii. Colour

I picked her up and carried
 her into the field where she
 rippled half of her gray
 half of her red while the
 cars kept coming.
 Gray fox and gray fox.
 Red, red, red.
 (Oliver, 'Red,' 2008)

One of the first books I remember my mother reading to me was Charlotte Zolotow's *Mr Rabbit and the Lovely Present* (1962). The story is about a little girl who wants to give her mother a birthday present. Through a series of exchanges with Mr. Rabbit (more human than animal with his upright posture and thoughtful facial expressions), they ponder possibilities, each revolving around colour. "She likes red," the little girl offers.

'Red,' Mr. Rabbit repeats, 'But you can't give her red.'

'Something red, maybe?'

'Oh, something red,' said Mr. Rabbit.

'What is red?' said the little girl.

'Well,' said Mr. Rabbit, 'There's red underwear.'

'No,' said the little girl, 'I can't give her that.'

'There are red roofs,' said Mr. Rabbit.'

'No, we have a roof,' said the little girl. 'I don't want to give her that.'

'There are red birds,' said Mr. Rabbit, 'Red cardinals.'

'No,' said the little girl, 'She likes birds in trees.'

'There are red fire engines,' said Mr. Rabbit.

'No,' said the little girl, 'She doesn't like fire engines.'

'Well,' said Mr. Rabbit, 'There are red apples.'

It is decided then, that apples are placed in a basket; *they* will represent red, as it were. And the colours yellow, blue, and green are also represented by a fruit. Each time, with the presentation of each colour that the little girl's mother likes, Mr. Rabbit's initial response remains the same. 'Yellow,' he says (or blue or green), 'But you can't *give* her *yellow*' (or *blue* or *green*)—and that's what has always bewildered me. I didn't, of course, verbalize this at the age of four or five but inchoate knowledge (instinct? suspicion?) determined, in a deep part of me, that what is collected in the basket *is* colour.

This idea somehow stayed with me, even up to the time I went off to college. It was 1980, and I declared my first of many majors to be Art. In my first semester, I discovered and felt altered by the works of American painters Morris Louis and Mark Rothko. In particular, Louis's *Breaking Hue* (1953) mesmerized me; for, like the story of *Mr. Rabbit and the Lovely Present*, I felt there was something in it that could not be paraphrased or translated into words. So, when the professor asked for initial responses to Louis's work (I can still smell the heat from the old Kodak Carousel slide projector, the whirls of dust lit by the cone of light.), I blurted, 'I just love it.' Laughter.

But Professor Murray smirked in a good way. 'Say more, Julie.'

And so I did. Our conversation, as I recall, went something like this:

I said, 'The colour Louis uses isn't trying to be anything else.'

'Good, good,' Professor Murray encouraged. 'Go on. Explain.'

'Well, say you see something—a chair, for example. It's orange. But it's not orange itself—it's only *painted* orange. So, now it feels to me that it's wearing orange, even *pretending* to be orange. What Louis does, I think, is to give us orange—orange itself.' As usual, the words coming out of my mouth, catch-as-catch-can, felt inadequate, but it was a start. A beginning. *In the beginning, there was colour*, as it were.

To put this another way: something about *Breaking Hue* sent me back to my childhood—at first, I thought it was the shade of orange, which seemed to produce a joy in me at a time when colours were the texts I read, when the visual spoke to me in a time of silence. This observation and subsequent memory brought back *Mr Rabbit*, though at the time I couldn't exactly recall the title (I would later visit the public library near my parents' house and scout out the book in the children's section). When I was able to re-read this lost treasure, I felt the secret of the story was revealed. *The colour was—is—the thing*. There is no representation of the colour, only the colour itself. It was the same way with many of Louis's paintings—an overlap or layering of colours, but so infused as to be a single thing. And somehow not colour on canvas, but the colour.



When I started on *Versions of a Life*, I soon found myself writing about Louis, and so decided to research the particular painting to which I was so drawn. In an essay on Louis by Klaus Kertess called 'Beauty's Stain' (2006), Kertess not only talks about experiencing *colour-as-the-thing* as it were, but also writes that Louis '[transformed] canvas and paint into pneumatic vessels effusing paradisiacal mists—transparently clear in process but deeply mysterious,

wafting illusion while flat and totally abstract, utterly natural yet completely artificial.’ I wouldn’t use the word ‘artificial’ in relation to my own experience of Louis’s painting, however, I would use the word ‘paradisiacal.’ For to experience colour-as-the-thing is, I believe, to access a kind of Eden, or at least a before-the-world space or time. This before-world was, I believe, part of my childhood, which is why I begin there in the memoir.

I hadn’t any notion to write about my childhood initially—it was so ordinary. But when I faced the question, *How to begin?*—I kept needing to reach farther into the past. It was Frost’s ‘way leads on to way’ in reverse, as the excavation of one memory opened into another, leading, ultimately, to a pre-verbal moment. The memories were there; that wasn’t the surprising part. It was discovering that, in the case of the earliest memories, colour was *all*, serving where words could not.

Interesting in this connection is Manguso’s *Ongoingness*, where she chronicles her revelations after she gives birth to her son:

As I watched the baby play with his toys I remembered an orange plastic panel fixed to the rails of my own crib. A round red rubber air bladder the size of my fingertip. A bell. A black-and-white crank that clicked. [And a] blue-and-red sphere that spun fast in its housing and looked purple.

Again then, in the beginning is colour—before even words. And this was dramatically, or exaggeratedly, the case for me because measles and a high fever left me deaf when I was a little older than two. In the ensuing silence, my world was dominated by the technicolour tones of everything around me: a cream-corn chaise lounge, our glossy black mailbox, and my mother’s deep gold ashtray, orange creamsicle lipstick, and crimson fingernails holding a clean white, brown-tipped cigarette. In the silence that accompanied all these colours, nothing interfered with seeing. The snapshots in my mind were unfettered by description, explanation, or importuning.

Ultimately, I did not utilize Louis's *Breaking Hue* in my memoir, though his depiction, or suggestion of a world of pure and wordless colour very much influenced the way I represented my experience as a child. The irony, of course, is that my objective in the memoir was to put into words what I did not, as a child, have words *for*.

How, then, was I, when writing my memoir, to interpret the intense and heightened memory I have of colour, particularly during the period of time in which I couldn't hear? The first thing I needed to do was to reconcile myself to using the very tool—*language*—that I didn't have at the time. Next, I had to work out how to use language from a distance of more than fifty years to even come close to the 'right' interpretation. I decided, therefore, that I would seek to *crowd* my sentence with objects and colours, as if they were being seen without mediation of language. Note how my narrator speaks at the beginning of the memoir clearly and from a distance, but after the high fever from the measles and the subsequent hearing loss, all the distance disappears:

My world was colour-consuming objects, each and every. No matter the thing—chaise lounge, kitchen chair, ashtray, dandelion—it was stamped into my brain as an intense colour wash: golden rod, lemon chiffon, amber, and sunglow.

Colour again presses upon the page in a section called 'Bed,' where I'm sixteen, and I write about a recurring dream after I overhear a conversation on the school bus. Two boys were talking about my friend's death, how they heard that the impact of the car caused her sneaker to catapult off her body—and this is how I render the ensuing dream:

Her shoe with its lovely—at first lovely—machinations of tumbling and breezing. Of floating, spiraling, and somersaulting. Then of dipping, plummeting; a background sky morphing from azure, then glaucous; to griseous, as the shoe slues and drops, a flight gone awry. And the sky complying, now perse, then indigo. Slate to sable.

Here I choose obscure colour-words, in order to underscore a sense elsewhere of losing control. Emphasizing this further are the words of motion—indeed, the *changes* in colour seem to mirror this sense of unpredictable motion.

In a section called ‘Tornado,’ colour-words operate to heighten the climax of a severe disorientation I experienced. Although this disorientation manifested itself in other ways—losing a sense of time and direction—the most frightening was my inability to keep my bed from flipping over, with me pinned to the mattress much in the way one’s back feels glued to the surface in certain carnival rides. The experience, when it happened for the first time, reminded me of the way a tornado evolves in a Minnesota summer:

...a baleful, achromatic stillness pressing down in the absence of air. Grey sky darkens. The leaves of trees begin to shiver, the empyreal grey overhead begins to move as well, turning a deep viridian green.

Here again, colour-words are entwined with movement. This time, though, the colour-words serve, in fact, to slow or even *calm* the movement—I used colour to quell the panic that often gripped me during the day when I would try to uncover rational explanations for the bed flipping. This is mirrored in the scene in which I think myself through a vision of a setting sun:

See the soft edge of the sun going down...behind the mountains. Make the sun any colour you want, any colour is fine, since the mountain will change the colour of the sun, just as that glowing orb descends to touch the mountain. That the sun is a purple haze, then tangerine to an iridescent pink and fading, is the thing that will urge a beating heart to slow, to slow.

A close neighbour to pink is, of course, red, a colour that is integral to two later sections of the memoir, the one called simply ‘Red,’ and the one following it called ‘Period.’ As I said earlier, I didn’t include Morris Louis’s *Breaking Hue* painting, as much as it made an important impression on me; but I did include a Mark Rothko painting called *No. 36: Black Stripe* (1958),

and the reason is that in spite of its title, red is the predominant palette in *No. 36: Black Stripe*. In the memoir, the sight of my mother's blood spattered on the walls in my parents' bedroom reminds me of the Mark Rothko painting:

[The Rothko painting] hangs in the school library and these walls remind me of the layers and layers of red. In the painting, there are three thick bars of colour: red, black, and red-orange. But each is outlined, hazily, in red. The deepness of the colours feels as if they each borrowed themselves *from* red. As if everything is from red.

Red is everything, where it begins, where it ends; blood and birth and death. The earth. Apples on a yellow plate. Fire engines, fire hydrants, and blaring noises and civil-service warnings on a Wednesday afternoon. An uncle's orotund laugh.

Here, at the end of the passage, colour begins to cross over into sound ('blaring noises,' etc.) in a synaesthetic manoeuvre. These noises are, indeed, noises that are close to tellings ('warnings'), and in this sense they mirror Rothko's belief that 'art was a profound form of communication.'⁸

In *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages*

(2010), Guy Deutscher examines the question 'Is [language] an artifact of culture or a bequest of nature?' Colour, according to Deutscher, is

an ideal test case for adjudicating over nature's and culture's conflicting claims on the concepts of language. Or, put another way: the seemingly narrow strip of color can serve as a litmus test for nothing less than the question of how deep the communalities are between the ways human beings express themselves, and how superficial the differences—or vice versa!

Deutscher relies predominantly on analyzing the work of William Gladstone (1809-1898), who, in 1858 London, served as a member of Parliament for Oxford University. Gladstone's voluminous work, *Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age* (1858), culminates with

⁸ Karen Kedmey, 'Mark Rothko: American, Born Russia (Now Latvia) 1903-1970' (The Museum of Modern Art: *MoMA Highlights*; 2017).

the hypothesis that, because colour is a concept rather than an object ('an abstraction'), people in Homer's time largely recognized qualities of light and dark rather than 'a particular prismatic color' (38). In order for the eye to discern the nuances of prismatic colour in everyday life, Gladstone figured, it would have to be 'exposed to artificial paints and dyes.' As Deutscher writes,

The appreciation of color as a property independent of a particular material may thus have developed only hand in hand with the capacity to manipulate colors artificially. And that capacity, [Gladstone] notes, barely existed in Homer's day: the art of dying was only in its infancy, cultivation of flowers was not practiced, and almost all the brightly colored objects that we take for granted were entirely absent.

In contrast, of course, for me growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, the world was packed full of colours. There were not only the primary colours of my toys, but also a host of shades of those primaries: the cross-stitched hues of a chaise lounge, the subtle gradations of orange in my mother's lipsticks, the variegated greens of the grass, the terrible transmutation in the colourcycle of the sky before a tornado, and the waxy oil-pastel colours of the rhubarb patch. Some, then, of the colours of my childhood are primary and man-made, but many are complex, subtle, and natural. However, I do believe that my sensitivity to the latter was produced by the former.

In short, Gladstone was right: my experience of colour *was* cultural.

Much later in *Through the Language Glass*, Deutscher talks of 'the shattering [teenage] realization that one can never know how other people *really* see colors.' This question is, as Deutscher explains, addressed by various scientific studies of colour perception which suggest that 'color sensation itself is formed not in the retina but in the brain.' As Deutscher writes,

[B]etween the [three types of cones in the retina], and our actual sensation of color there is a whirl of extraordinarily subtle and sophisticated computation: normalization, compensation, stabilization, regularization, even plain wishful seeing.

In my memoir I attempt to mirror this ‘whirl’ of language in order to capture a ‘colour sensation,’ brushing against the grain of conventional orthography, as in this passage:

Dream images of pock-marked black, of aphotic space everywhere I look, eyes closed...Sirens during the day caused a panic and concocted with the ink visions of nighttime...Something bad had begun with me, had caused the grotesque burning, bubbling alive-thing—I couldn’t name it—charred and smoldering.

Relying on the connotations of verbal language, rather than the specificity of colour-words, I want the reader to make a connection that arouses the ‘colour sensation’ Deutscher writes about. The single concrete colour in the above passage is black, and yet, the modifiers surrounding black (‘pock-marked,’ ‘bubbling alive-thing,’ etc.) are what evoke a mood of despair.

viii. Voice(s)

...Impatience puts a halter on my face
 and I run away over the green fields
 wanting your voice... When I first
 found you I was filled with light, now
 the darkness grows and it is filled with
 crooked things, bitter and weak, each
 one bearing my name.
 (Oliver, 'Six Recognitions of the Lord,' 2006)

My mother
 was the blue wisteria, my
 mother
 ...did not always love her life, heavier
 than iron it was
 ...

My father was a demon of frustrated dreams,
 was a breaker of trust (Oliver, 'Flare,' 2000)

Attempting to mimic or echo the voice of a real person can be a thorny thing indeed. In *Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction*, Sondra Perl and Mimi Schwartz write, 'Creative nonfiction writers, intent on being creative *and* truthful, walk a thin line that other writers do not.' They go on:

Journalists and scholars, with their allegiance to fact, tend to avoid the ambiguities of memory and imagination. Fiction writers with their allegiance to story have no qualms about inventing interesting worlds. But creative nonfiction writers, with the intent to write good stories *that are true*, must grapple with the boundary between ethical and artistic clarity.

I set out to write only *my* truth, to voice only *my* voice, but the voices of family and friends as well as others from my past, soon began to infiltrate my narrative. How could they not? Despite

(or perhaps because of) my tendency to self-isolate or refuse to speak, I believe I was an intense observer of everything around me. People, colours, the tone of a person's voice, the movement in a face addressing me—so much felt stored away, resurfacing continuously as I wrote. Whether I resurrected these in an accurate way or not is impossible to know objectively.

Two people viewing a photograph may arrive at similar observations, but their 'reading' will not be identical.

Beyond, though, my interpretations, I confess that I invented. I put thoughts into my mother's head which I only *imagine* were there—thoughts I could never have known, and thoughts she certainly would not have shared *had* they been there. While there is a part of me that acknowledges the space for an ethical dilemma here, I will say that my imagination felt faithfully aligned with the person I knew my mother to be. For instance, while I followed her around as a toddler and little girl, I soaked in more than sunshine and the smell of laundry. I knew, on some level, that this was her work. She took her early years as a housewife seriously. There was a place on our kitchen counter for a book-sized daily calendar. Each day's entries consisted primarily of a list of chores: from the once- or twice-a-week 'Scrub kitchen floor & basement stairs, Laundry (white) or Laundry (dark),' to the less-frequent-but-no-less-important tasks that one would have to record meticulously in order to maintain a schedule: 'Moth balls in cedar closets, Defrost fridge, Window screens out and wash.' My mother once told me—in a self-acknowledged confessional tone—"When you kids were little, I followed that list, Jules, I kid you not, until every item was crossed out. More than once I was up at midnight scrubbing those darn basement stairs.'

The section in my memoir where my mother realizes I am not hearing ('Chesterfields') is told in third-person. It is initially limited to my point of view, but soon shifts to tell the story from my mother's point of view: Arlis watches her daughter's tiny muscles tense, the little face

contorting as she swallows the apple juice. Some of it drips out the side of those fevered lips, and Arlis pleads silently to God that enough of the chalky children's aspirin make it down her throat. She had stirred the crushed tablet with fervor, willing it to dissolve, fast, fast, to get it quick-quick into baby's body, burning with fever, and those glassy blue eyes seeming to ask Why, why? And she holds baby close, allowing the tears to travel down and down, making a path from her cool cheeks to baby's head, heat radiating even without direct contact, like the wisps of steam from the distant road. Her lips are buried in the fine hair, baby-shampooed: 'I'm sorry, Jules, I'm sorry... Little rosebud, I'm sorry... Mommy's here,

Mommy's sorry.'

Finally, the gasping for air gives way to quivering exhalations. And the rigid muscles relax, tense, relax, relax. Relent.

Surrender.

Sleep. As suddenly as the storm had emerged, it deliquesces. The ticking of the clock meters peace. And the breathing of the baby keeps in time.

Arlis counts to sixty and breathes deeply. Needs coffee. Cigarette. Now Gently placing Julie on the sofa next to her, she separates herself, damp from tears and perspiration. She watches with gratitude the still damp hair and the rising and falling of her chest. Rising and falling: such a small, fine thing, really, and all we could ever hope for, all we really have a right to ask God for.

God for.

Two hours later, Julie still sleeps. Arlis has made the most of the early morning hours: the beds are made, dishes washed, and two loads of laundry—washed, dried, folded. And yet. There is this space.

She lights the cigarette and, as one would choose shoes to match a bag, she tries to give a name to what might fill the space. Is it to love deeply, some One or some Thing? No, that's not it, not exactly, not entirely.

Each day had its own proper work. Ma used to say:

Wash on Monday,
Iron on Tuesday,
Mend on Wednesday,
Churn on Thursday,
Clean on Friday,
Bake on Saturday,

Rest on Sunday.'

(Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*)

Arlis shakes her head, laughs a sudden, rueful laugh. *Back to work*, she thinks. She puts out the cigarette and checks the list again. Vacuum. Nothing else.

I include this rather lengthy section because it provides a snapshot of these almost-opposing forces of motivation: my mother loved me, but she needed to get the work of the day crossed off her list.

The last person I expected to write *about* (never mind the writing *from*) was Moe, my father. Even as I write this, I am disappointed in my lack of compassion for him. My mother told me often that Moe was not the father of the family sitcoms I watched in the evening; he would never be Andy Griffith or the dad from the *Brady Bunch*—or, of course, I would think to myself, my beloved fiddling-playing Pa from *Little House*; however, she always added that he loved us. He simply had a different way of showing love. It seemed a paltry excuse to me.

I also never intended to read my father's letters—all but one addressed to his parents ('Dear Folks')—but finally felt I must, although only *as* I was nearing the end of the first draft of my memoir. The reading I present in the book is an imaginative addition which, to me, feels authentic enough, I think. I put myself back into my memory of my 17-year-old self and found that my reactions to his letters—his daily comments on the lousy weather in France, the idiocy of anyone who is not American, and his older-brother directives to his siblings, etc—resembles my youthful reactions to the man himself.

My hope is that neither of my parents come across as unreal in way, but my own 'reading' of them is skewed somehow, I'm sure.

3. *Meanwhile*

Much happens when you write a book, especially when it takes six years. During this time, two of my frequent readers, Professors John Schad and Jenn Ashworth, provided the same advice and I pulled it out of my pocket on a weekly basis. To my melodramatic, monthly emails to John, where I proclaimed all was lost on the writing front, that I hadn't had a coherent thing to say that anyone would want to read, his response would be something like, 'Okay, very good, no worries, then. The PhD should write itself. When you feel you can't write, read.'

And, in Ashworth's heart-gripping memoir mentioned above, she talks about advising her students who are having trouble writing. 'I tell them to remember,' she says, 'even when they are stuck—especially when they are stuck—that writing is like breathing out. But to do it well, to do it fully, to do it at all, they have to breathe in, and this part of it, the inhalation, is called reading. You take in, then you give out. Your heart gives out.'

In spite of my immediate sense that this PhD has consumed me, I have been enthralled by many inhalations, many events of reading, always reinforcing my firmest belief, that writers are readers. If I never write again, I will always be a reader. This is a profound statement coming from someone who is so indecisive that people in my life know they should never consult me when it comes to making plans. They tell me where to show up. But reading? I will always accept the wounding of a good book. It is essential, which is one of things I wished to convey in my memoir.

There is, of course, Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series of books—nine in all—which sit on my beautiful bookshelves watching me as I type this. The books have comforted me throughout my life, as I've said, and in that layering way of agricultural propagation, continues beyond the memoir to create offshoots of new growth when my experience intersects with them.

In the midst of completing my master's degree in 1994, for instance, I miscarried two consecutive pregnancies, both in their second trimesters. The grief was something which had to compete not only with graduate school, but with the child I already had. She was two, and I have always wondered what effect my despair had on her. My routine during this time was to spend Saturdays in the library—research back in the 20th century—and as I sat in my familiar cubicle, the words in front of me began to move. Just as they had way-back-when, during the bedflipping time. In my memoir, I explain it this way:

I stare at pages once as familiar to me as my hands—neither are familiar now—and the words, the letters, pass through each other, inchoate, like words thrown from a paper bag and scattered to the wind. I cannot command their stillness. I try to focus on a line, a single line. I blink, squeeze shut my eyes, and open them with fierce concentration. No use. Each side of the line of text moves, weaving towards the other side, moieties of rank and file. They glide, elide, skirr, slide, words moving into and over and through. Catching a solitary word is like stopping rain in its tracks.

All I can think, is *Please-oh-fucking-god, oh fuck fuck fuck, no*. And I am terrified. Again. From that goddamn ceiling in Minnesota, to this hallowed old library in Connecticut, my lunacy has followed me. Like the little shadow from the Stevenson poem.

I remember sitting there for hours. It was winter and I felt the sun begin to disappear from the window behind me. I finally stood, stiff from having been so still. I walked down to the lower level where the children's section was and inhaled that booky, reading scent that instantly provided relief. I scouted out the *Little House* books, easy as if they, too, were looking for *me*. I checked them out and spent the next few days inviting them to teach me to read again.

&&&&

I felt obligated to read Caroline Fraser's biography of Wilder, *Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder* (2017), but only after I finished my memoir. I knew about the removal of Wilder's name on a literary medal by the US Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) in 2018. Her children's novels, it was said, were 'criticised for language that dehumanises indigenous peoples and people of colour.' The children's books reflect, in part, the very warped notion that the Midwest frontier was uninhabited; that settlers like the Ingalls family ventured into uncharted land. Fraser points to this very early in her biography. She explains that one of the lasting impressions Wilder would hold as her very first memory was the view of the prairie through the cinched canvas roof of the covered wagon as the family traveled from Missouri to Kansas.

Late in life, she would conjure it again and again, trying to recapture the stark beauty and isolation of that vista, seen through the eyes of her notquite-three-year-old self. In her memory, the prairies represented a tabula rasa—wilderness as purity, free from human stain and experience...As with her portrayal of the Big Woods as a place where 'there were no people,' there was a significant omission here. People did live in Kansas. And they fought over it, too.

Context matters a great deal, and Fraser's text supplies this. As a reader occupying my younger self, I allowed the same simplicity in perspective with which I first met the series. One could say, in other words, I slapped on the blinders and didn't look back. This isn't true. My decision to integrate Wilder's books was a choice I could not change, even as I am aware that the memoir is a work of *creative* nonfiction—therefore, I could have chosen some other series, some other book, or some other author. I did ponder heavily on the baggage of Laura Ingalls Wilder, of her father Charles and his family's centuries of having 'lived close by violence and social tumult of one kind or another.' This, from Brian Halpin, host of the podcast *Before We Were White*. In an episode called 'Sunbonnets and Bootstraps,' Halpin describes the very blatant way in which land

was occupied during Wilder's time—and long before. 'American underclass settlers were not stupid,' Halprin insists: 'They knew exactly how free land was becoming available during the 1800s. Almost every family had a forefather who had fought and killed Indians, somewhere, for land, during the preceding decades. Not in a classic, circle-the-wagons, cowboys-and-Indians kind of scenario, but in a very real, malicious and armies-marching kind of way. The list of conflicts between Anglo-Americans and indigenous peoples east of the Mississippi River before the American Revolution is shocking enough.' One of the aims of Halpin's podcast episode is to deconstruct the quixotic romanticism exuded by the 1970s television show 'based' on the Little House books. He does this well, reminding his listeners of the catch-as-catch-can way the Ingallses lived, the debt which was often the impetus for Charles Ingalls to move the family yet again.

I never liked the television show; indeed, as so many readers find, 'the movie is never as good as the book.' For me, I missed the inner life of Laura and longed for her perspective of the many vistas the family inhabited.

The more profound point of 'Sunbonnets and Bootstraps,' perhaps, is the erasure of a people as the US was settled. The sheer hubris of people who could lay a claim to land that was never theirs is a thing Halpin tells in unadorned truth.

The American frontier was bathed in blood. How many Americans today even know the names of these conflicts? Yet, each one represents the snuffing out of thousands of years of autonomous culture, and the extinguishing of language, art, and music: an apocalypse for real communities and real people. By the time the Ingalls family and other colonizers were pushing into the great plains, no one was even bothering to pretend anymore that European and Indigenous co-sharing of the American continent was possible. It is worth remarking that the most common justification for dispossessing the Osage and others of their lands was the idea that land should be controlled and owned by people who would farm and develop it. Passing through a land seasonally as hunters and gatherers was characterized as improper use of land.

The irony of what we have done to land in the United States and the devastation to the climate that mass animals-for-slaughter has caused feels suddenly too high a price for a stack of books which made me feel at home. In short, there is no reconciling the two.

I did not read Wilder's *Little House* series with an eye toward discovering evidence of the egregious actions taken upon Native Americans by the United States and its early settlers. I grew up in an era where Christopher Columbus was a hero and the Thanksgiving holiday was celebrated in school by making our own Indian headdresses and eating corn bread. I feel painfully aware of the terrible sham of this now. If there were voices back then surrounding me, calling for a revisionist history, I was not listening.

Re-reading the books as an adult, in fact, I was reminded that the first 'wound,' if you will, that came from originally knowing them when I was nine- or ten-years old, was the perspicacity of family.

In my memoir, I chose to rely on Wilder's texts verbatim, much more than attempting to interpret them as my younger self. Like so much of recalling my past, words of my own often fall short in capturing the sensibilities of the time. I use Wilder's words to both reflect my feelings in a particular scene, as well as to provide the tension I felt in comparison. In one section, for instance, I describe what is my earliest memory:

In a crib, on her side. The blanket is worn, soft. Has silky tendrils from frayed edges, gentle fingers to brush against her nose, her cheek. The blanket has a powerful smell: sunshined dandelions and the hot tar of the street, her mother's White Shoulders perfume, green leaves tugging at warm wind.

The scene is meant to evoke warmth and comfort, but it doesn't last. My Uncle Earl becomes an important figure in the memoir, and I believe—but don't know for certain—that the comfort and

security of waking in my crib is quickly supplanted by fear. And it had something to do with him, perhaps hearing his voice. I write about seeing ‘Through vertical pieces of brown wood’—the bars of my crib—‘a shaft of light, a parallelogram of dusty sun.’ But, to create the sense of foreboding, that light ‘creeps under the door.’

In contrast, then, is the passage from *Little House on the Prairie* which introduces this—for me—terrifying moment:

Laura couldn’t wait to see the inside of the house. As soon as the tall hole was cut, she ran inside. Everything was striped there. Stripes of sunshine came through the cracks in the west wall, and stripes of shadow came down from the poles overhead. The stripes of shade and sunshine were all across Laura’s hands and her arms and her bare feet. And through the cracks between the logs she could see stripes of prairie. The sweet smell of the prairie mixed with the sweet smell of cut wood.

There are overlapping sensory details: the ‘vertical pieces of brown wood’ that make up the bars of my crib are echoed in Wilder’s ‘sweet smell of cut wood.’ I see a ‘parallelogram of dusty sun,’ while Laura notices ‘stripes of shade and sunshine’ and ‘stripes of prairie.’ And, of course, a sense of looking through shapes and finding an altered world through this looking. For Laura, it is a world which welcomes; for me, it is one which threatens.

Reading *Prairie Fires* confirmed my trepidation that a different truth, apart from the one I clung to as a child—indeed, as an adolescent and an adult—would surface in Fraser’s research. Although there is less about Wilder’s treatment of Native Americans or people of colour, the author certainly devotes the time to provide necessary historical context. The biography clearly shows that it was Charles and Caroline Ingalls—Laura’s parents—who impacted the sense that Wilder disregarded the presence of Indigenous people. Our parents provide at least one of our earliest contexts.

‘Wilder was not a historian,’ Fraser writes. ‘Instead, her novels would be created from a complex tangle of subjective sources: family lore and letters, old hymnals and songbooks, treasured artifacts of her youth, and her own recollections. Her depictions of the West was drawn less from newspapers or encyclopedias than from her inner life. It was a work of pure folk art.’ I, too, have similar source material in my father’s letters, legal documents pertaining to my mother and both her adoptive and biological mother, and photographs. But it is that ‘inner life’ which informs my reading of these documents, these artifacts.

Using such artifacts with ‘a kind of collagist principle’ is something John Schad, Professor of English and Creative Writing at Lancaster University in the UK, speaks of in reference to his book *Paris Bride: A Modernist Life* (2020). In an interview on the podcast *Writing Lives: Biography and Beyond*, Schad describes the method by which he created the reallife central figure of *Paris Bride*, Marie Schad. *Real*, since she existed, but more accurately *created* because so few historical details exist about her life. ‘In one sense,’ Schad says, ‘it’s driven by reading.’ He continues,

I like to imagine I’m not a writer; I like to imagine that I’m a reader. So, in each case, throughout the text, I’m attempting to read a life back into existence, not to write one back into existence...In other words, to piece together a life through literary texts of the period. So the figure Marie lives in and around the first half of the 20th century, and so I seek to locate her, to find her, in various texts of and around the places and the times of her life.

While Schad utilizes literary texts of the time (Woolf, Mansfield, and Wilde, for instance) to provide context to his distant relative’s life, I attempt something similar in my memoir. Like Wilder and Schad, I have certain tangible artifacts to ‘read a life back into existence,’ and, like Wilder, my inner lives, for there seem to be so many, informs my interpretation of memories.

In Wilder's time, of course, there was no designated 'creative non-fiction' genre. Fraser emphasizes the question of truth when it comes to the *Little House* books—an issue during the time Wilder was writing the series, as well as for critics today. Readers wrote letters to Wilder for the rest of her life with questions about authenticity, and bookstore clerks discussed which section of the store to place the series. For the most part, however, the books were viewed as drawn from Wilder's memories. The *New York Times Book Review* saw the eighth book (at the time intended to be the last) 'as a fitting finale to "an invaluable addition to our list of genuinely American stories [with their] authentic background, sensitive characterization...fine integrity and spirit of sturdy independence."' As works of fiction, reviewers were able to endorse the books' fine writing without, it seems, a preoccupation with some of the liberties Wilder took as a storyteller.

I appreciate Fraser's detailed research in her *Prairie Fires*—indeed, the book provides one of the pleasures, for me, in reading a good biography: the window is opened wider to this life. I am pleased that Wilder realized, and was able to reap the benefits of, her own writing success. I knew the books were published and selling during her life, but Fraser magnifies Wilder's singular talent by including the biography of another 'character' in Laura Ingalls Wilder's life: her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane.

Wilder describes the birth of Rose in her last *Little House* book, *The First Four Years*. I use the passage, an unusually dark description, to underscore a section in my memoir where my mother responds to my question, 'But does it hurt to have a baby?'

'It's only a little uncomfortable, and then it's over,' she says. All matters of sex, including menstruation, love, marriage, and childbirth, were best spoken of in the briefest way possible, if it were necessary to speak of them at all. In Wilder's book, Laura's experience seems to be a more accurate account of what I imagine my mother to have gone through:

She was being borne away on a wave of pain. A gust of cold, fresh air brought her back and she saw a tall man drop his snowy overcoat by the door and come toward her in the lamplight.

She vaguely felt a cloth touch her face and smelled a keen odor. Then she drifted away into a blessed darkness where there was no pain.

When Laura opened her eyes, the lamp was still shining brightly over the room, and Ma was bending over her with the doctor standing beside her. And in the bed by her side was a little warm bundle.

In a different conversation with my mom, I recall overhearing a conversation she had with her best friend, Jean, who figures prominently into my memoir as a vehicle through which ‘adult things’ could be stored away in my brain, saved for a time in the future when I might gain a bit of knowledge. It had to do with the trend for ‘natural childbirth,’ and Jean said something about how it was much better with a ‘magical cocktail.’ They both laughed. In writing a section called ‘Paul Bunyan Land,’ I utilized Google—an essential resource for a memoir spanning the 1930s through the 1970s—to discover what this cocktail was. Of course, I know as much as most of us about the historic use of drugs, when they were available, given to women in labor. Like the evolution of so many practices, from drugs to eating habits, present knowledge has us wondering at what used to be standard practice. In this part of the memoir, I write my mother’s story in third-person limited, taking the great liberty to occupy her thoughts—as I imagine them. She is finally succumbing to my father’s insistence, when my brother is six and I am four, that we take a family vacation. Destination: Paul Bunyan Land in Brainard, Minnesota. At the beginning of this section, my mother (Arlis) is recalling the first time her husband suggested a ‘family’ vacation to Paul Bunyan Land: absurdly, she thinks, it was just after their first-born, Roger, was born. ‘Who, in this heat,’ she wonders, ‘would want to go to Paul Bunyan Land? And with a newborn? The boy was barely three weeks old.’ She continues with her thoughts and recognizes that ‘the Twilight-Sleep cocktail of morphine and scopolamine administered some time during labor seemed to linger through the ten days in the hospital.’

Wilder's description of the birth of Rose had been my only reference to the Wilders' only child. I didn't pay much attention to the occasional headline I might see, as an adult, that there were questions surfacing about who, really, had authored the *Little House* books. Fraser addresses the dynamic between Wilder and her daughter regarding the writing and editing of the series, and does so at great length. For me, the sad story of Rose's disturbing mental imbalance and her treatment of her mother has become a separate biography, one I choose not to reconcile with the *Little House* books themselves. Indeed, the books are—and I suspect they always will be—a world I once believed myself capable of joining. I felt that, through force of will, Pa, Ma, Laura, and her sisters could be my family. I knew this was unlikely, but it was at a time when I still believed in Santa Claus. Not much later, of course, I knew Pa, Ma, and Laura *could* not be my family. this was not, *could* not, be my family. Nevertheless, I still knew that they were what love looked like.

Endnotes

1: Afterword

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2: Everything Else, in No Particular Order

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ii. Flipped

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iii. Story

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vi. *Transaction*

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Louise Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (Carbondale, IL: So. IL UP; 1994), 12.

vii. *Colour*

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viii. *Voices*

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3. *Meanwhile*

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