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In Window Tree: A Novel and Three Fables

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In Window Tree: A Novel
and Three Fables

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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Thank you

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for more patience

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for making it all so much harder

In Window Tree

THEY HAD BEEN gone for some time already when I looked up and found the curtain whose window would burn. It stood asleep, eye closed, below the shade of the roof, half-hidden by ivy and dust, unopened. But unlike doors, no window ever opens upon where you want to be, and so I turned the other way, went back inside, alone, hearing rain in the distance, just starting to fall.

The owners of the house, both distant family, had said little about that part of the place when I arrived. From what I gathered, the house was really two houses, more or less divided in half. The half that I was staying in was built sometime in the sixties, but the other side, brick and stone, was colonial—had housed a small family whose portraits still hung on the walls and mantles. On that side, the walls were thicker, not as flat or straight, and the floorboards were loud, the stairs slender and steep. “I don’t see why you’d want to come over here,” was all they’d said, as they directed me about. “Just thought we’d show you.”

It was very kind of them to allow me to spend the summer there. They were older and were to be taking a vacation somewhere up north, along the beach. I would watch the house, being in between leases myself and not wanting to stay with either of my parents. Shortly after I’d moved out each one in their own way had called to tell me they were getting a divorce. They never said why exactly,

but that things between them, the threads they'd once used to connect them, had frayed, had split and spilled off to where they could no longer retrieve them. And I didn't know what that meant. I was not shocked, though, as I maybe thought I would be, or broken, upon hearing it, but took it as something that I was glad not to have happened sooner. I had never known or seen my parents in love, never seen them kiss other than in parting when my father left on long trips; and knew very little about them, the people they were before I showed up.

When the owners of the house asked me how my parents were, I lied and said they were doing fine, both happy. As I drove them to the train station later, in parting, they said my parents were good people, and that they'd raised a fine son. They told me I had been to their house once before as a child too, but not this one. This one was new, they said, and asked if I remembered the old one.

"A little," I said.

"It was a long time ago," they admitted, and began to explain a party and good food I had no recollection of. I nodded politely, watching the road.

I remembered very little of my own childhood. It was a subject I did not like to talk about, and sometimes, secretly, was even convinced that it had never happened; or if it had, that it must have happened to someone else. So much of it, when I tried to remember, was simply not there. Other people could recall whole stories, and I would sit there listening to them, wondering whether they were lying or if there was something wrong with me—something that had happened that erected a wall or net that let nothing else pass—and even if there was such a thing, if I could ever remember what it was, or would want to.

I walked with them to the platform, waved goodbye as they boarded. It was a hot, humid day in early June. The tracks quivered in the heat, and the old brick station was not crowded. A few people, but no more than four, stepped off and wandered away through the glass doors. The train left.

By then I had been living with them for two days—just the weekend, to sort things out. But alone, standing there, with the tracks empty and burring, it seemed as though I had only just arrived as well. Very little of what happened was memorable, and mostly our conversations over dinner concerned other distant members of the family dying or about to die. Sometimes they would talk about the house and the people who lived there before, but not often. It was a family of three: one child like me who went off on their own and the parents decided not to live there anymore.

“They used to live near you,” they told me. “What town was that again?”

I told them and they smiled. “Yes, I think that was the one. Yes. Isn’t that funny? Out of everywhere, your little town. I was only ever there when you were born, but I can still see it, faintly.” There had been a pause as they chewed. Their brows jumped up. “Do you remember them at all?”

I shook my head.

Down came the brows.

“You weren’t friends?” they said, leaning forward, telling me vaguely about what they looked like, what they did, whatever they could remember.

Again, I shook my head. “Maybe.”

Most of the friends I remembered making moved away soon after I made them. They moved away to other states or towns and I never saw them again,

never told them the endings to stories I had once promised them. I remembered that much.

“Pity,” they said, knitting the food with their forks, and then, out of nowhere: “But that would be something...the world making its way back around to you. Wouldn’t it?”

When I got back into the car it had started to rain. The sky was bright and clear, though, and it was only a summer shower, misting down so as to make the world crammed inside a vast crystal or jewel. Halfway back it stopped and then started, then stopped once more as I parked the car in their driveway and went for a short walk, sat for a time under the old tree in the backyard where the grass was dry, reading. There was a little breeze, swirling, and I had to hold the pages flat. The ivy that scrawled up the old stonework of the house flashed with the sun all the way up to the chimney and around the windows and then back down to the garden below. A cloud of insects foamed and fuzzed about the leaves and flowers. The oak tree hummed in its trunk.

It was a small, quiet neighborhood with the houses spaced far apart. Behind the single tree there stretched a field, and a hill, prickled with tall transmission towers that marched off into the sky. They reminded me of people, tall giants turned to steel and metal instead of stone, like the stories I had read and been told.

Turning back, my eyes met upon the window. It was thinner than the others. Nothing else distinguished it: the shutters were old and open with the rest; the hinges were rusted; the frames needed new paint. And yet it drew me. Half-obsured by ivy, by leaves, the curtain flat and long and black as the hooves of a horse. I did not go up to investigate. I took it to be a closet, or storage room,

or liked the mystery, perhaps, and had at that time nothing I needed from it. There was no reason to.

When it started to rain again I left the tree and went back inside. Ink had spilled and leaked into the clouds, and soon there was no more blue or white, and no shadows either. Everything was alone, monolithic, and yet the wind still tugged them; the single old oak tree in the backyard seemed to clench itself nervously, as I closed the screen-door to the kitchen. What leaves were on the ground tumbled and scraped and the loose joints of the house buzzed and twitched at the coming thunder, rolling in from the river and the west.

As a child I was told I had always liked storms. I didn't remember them, but in the stories I'm always at the windows, nose pressed to the glass, hands splayed, and smiling. I don't know why, but I think as I've grown that it's the same feeling I feel and love in old churches, cathedrals, temples. It's the movement and the stillness. The movement of the choir and the words being sung, rising and swelling and expanding like waves to sand, while all the while contained within the stiff stone walls of an arching ceiling that cannot and does not move. It is looking out on a storm and seeing the world ripple with life and energy and inside feeling none of it, or only echoes at most; feeling distant from the push and pull of something out there, always moving and changing, while inside remaining untouched.

I sat on the couch and watched it. The rain a long beaded curtain, the sky and the clouds, listened to the stillness and at times a car wishing past in the puddles. In a way I felt like a kid again, and in another way like an actor playing the part of a kid, half-expecting my mother or father to come in from the other

room and ask me to help them with dinner. For a strange moment, I waited there, wondering what we were going to make. I smelled soup, or the echo of soup, and so soup it was, I decided, my stomach grumbling. I hadn't eaten much all day. I got up and went into the kitchen. It was only five or six but the sky was already dark, fringed with purple and green, and there was lightning, branching and bruising the sky. I gathered some ingredients: potatoes, leeks, peppers, from the shelves over the stove and started to cook.

My mother had always been a good cook. She never taught me, though, and perhaps she wanted to, as her mother had done with her. There were long recipes: old, folded sheets of paper freckled with sauce and oil she would slip out of books and drawers and hang to the walls as she went, and whatever she made was impossible to replicate, but I tried. The scents and steams returned things in a way that my mind could not, and slowly, clumsily, I made what I made.

When the lights went out I was pouring it into a small bowl. The walls dissolved and I lost the pot, spilled a little down my leg to the toes, and it burned. I yelped once, hissing, then set the pot down, and remembered where I'd set the rag and grabbed it, cleaned myself off. I could still hear the thrashing wind and rain on the roof, sweeping. The smell was still there, in the dark.

I searched through the drawers below the sink in the kitchen, where the flashlights in my own childhood home had been. There was nothing but pipes. I sent out my hand blindly until each flash of lightning strobed and, building a puzzle from the flashes, found a small silver lantern hiding behind a bucket. I pulled it out and as I did so, before even rising to my feet, the backyard became the moon, glowed white with a fierce and hot brightness, but only for a moment.

I blinked. The ground shook. Plates and glasses rattled, some fell, shattering, and standing up, a long moan of thunder rent and cracked the sky in my head and then silence. Quiet. I clicked on the lantern.

The light that spilled forth fluttered, then stilled. It was a dull, pallid tunnel: at times gold, at others pewter or bronze, depending on what it was touching. I saw the plates on the ground, the glasses, the little red spot of soup on the tile.

Lifting the light, I tried to see what had happened outside, but the windows only caught the reflection and trapped out the yard in the glare.

I tried to open the backdoor I'd used earlier, coming in, but couldn't. It budged an inch and then hit something, stopped. Fortunately, the opening was just large enough for the lantern, and the light that managed to squeeze through fell upon branches and leaves, and allowed the damp slow air to sneak inside, no longer whipping as it had been; it seemed to have calmed down. There was something it was holding, and needed to be delicate with. My breathing made more of a sound.

I followed the light across the house and out of the front door. The darkness erased all the other houses. As far as the lantern light stretched it would not reach them. There was the grass, below, glowing, and the silting rain spitting around me, trapping me, and I could no longer smell the soup, no longer smell the warmth inside, hot like the stones around a hearth, and yet coming around the corner, panting, my light just touching it, I stopped. I stopped and looked. I looked—

The tree had been struck. It had fallen.

There had been two main arms to the tree, shooting up and splitting off, and now the two of them lay along the grass, riven down the middle in one great and jagged unzipping. They spread up into the house and ran off into the field, and they went on for what could have been miles in my head. The darkness had no bounds and a tree on the ground is so much bigger, does not obey the rules of shrubs or nettles. It expands and seems alien, wrong, unshaped in a strange coralline rhythm that if it were underwater, fish and planktons would find their homes with ease and peace, as I found them violent and hostile. The way the soil had been gnashed up near the bole of it, where the bolt of lightning had maybe surged into the trunk, had made the flesh of the wood and limbs into fossilized amber, paler and brighter against the rain-wet bark and the singed and blackened skin. Smoke rose up there in coils, weaving, and yet within this, with the light swaying then stopping, I found what I thought at first to be an animal. It was small, whatever it was, no larger than a fox. It lay perfectly still, unaffected, but did not seem to have a tail, or fur, or paws. I crept closer. The scent of woodsmoke became a curtain. I crept closer. Had it been killed, was it dead? No. Nearer. No. It was breathing.

At the sound of its breathing I stopped again.

It was a child.

A girl.

Her eyes were closed and she was sleeping. There were leaves falling around her, flickering and flashing, as fireflies, guttering, and she was cold. Both her hands and feet were balled into pale, bluish knots. Her nose was small, upturned, and starred with freckles. Her hair was dark. Each time she breathed

out, the strands of it would shiver before her face, and then be drawn back to her lips, her mouth. And, as though it were meant for a person much older than herself, she was wearing a dress that seemed far too large for her. It billowed out over the roots, and surrounded her on a white island of fabric, dislocated from anything and everything around it.

I set the lantern down quickly and stepped closer to touch her awake. I tapped her shoulder, then shook her, but at the touch, she didn't move. She only lay there in the dark and the rain, somehow nested in the palm of the fallen tree, with all around her splinters and wild branches. There was no one to call, no authority with the phone lines down and the power gone out, but I picked her up, her arms and legs limp with sleep, and I carried her back into the house. There was enough light in the lantern to show me a path out of the wreckage, so I left it behind. I wasn't able to carry her through the branches with it, I thought, and not wanting her outside any longer than she might have already been, I hurried on, feeling strange to hold her, unsure of when the last time I had held a child was, or even touched one. The bones, the weight, they seemed so much different than my own.

And I wondered how long she had been out there. I wondered if she was a runaway, and that somewhere, in shadows, her parents were looking for her, or that she was one of the neighbors, playing in the storm. The path darkened around me and I stumbled into branches, scratching my arm, but found the end of it.

It had led me to the old side of the house. The door creaked open. The air was hot and stuffy inside, smelled of dust and wet. I was sweating.

Finding a large dark chair I set the girl down upon it, and angled her toward the fireplace. I couldn't see if there was any wood in there already, and hoped the wood outside would be dry enough. In the shadows I could hardly even see her. My eyes made out a thick outline, and her breathing was the only thing I heard. The soft rise and fall. When I rushed back outside to retrieve the lantern and break off some of the dry spits, I still heard it, buried in my own.

And with the light on her again, sleeping there, I felt as if I knew her—that I'd seen her before. It was a feeling in my stomach, not in my head or my chest, but something rooted deeply inside, and that twisted itself when I realized it: that she had not come out of nowhere, that this was not the first time I had seen her.

I set the light on the table. With my head swimming, I searched the house for matches, loose kindling to start a fire, anything. I found a blanket and laid it over her, and then remembered the room and the window up the stairs. Now I needed it, I thought. Whatever it was.

I raced up the stairs, taking the light for a moment out of the sitting room, and, not needing a key, turned the handle, and opened the door.

It was a small room, almost ornamental in size. It was longer than it was wide, with a bed and around it, scattered on the ground, loose toys and books and clothes. The curtain was closed on the far wall. I stepped in, floating, with the certainty that I had been here before, as I had seen the girl before. I had been in this room. Not this exact room, but a previous model of it—as though looking at a child and seeing the face of the father or mother you knew and seeing it so clearly that you stop yourself and can think and see nothing else.

There had been a boy who lived next to me and these were his things. We had played together and this was his room. On the floor and on the bed and I could see his clothes, our pencils, the pictures we drew, and then he had moved, moved to this state, this place, and the girl downstairs, she had moved into the house after he left, but something happened: a storm, like this: a tree, like this, a night like this....

And so there in that darkness, alone with myself, I began to return to a place I had once, long ago, seemed to have known.

In the beginning there was someone else. Someone like him later on, but not quite, not really.

He preferred to stay inside, often peered out of windows; very rarely did he ever go out.

When he did, it was always early, always cold, and the foot-flattened path that wound down to the garden was always wet and soft with dew. Opening the gate and closing it behind him, he drew his water from the well, then watered his flowers, his trees and, slowly, without leaving the path, returned to the house until night came, erased, and went out once more in the morning.

Only, one day in the wind, among the birds and the clouds, there was a voice that he heard, a voice far off and lonely. It seemed to grow and to grow familiar, though he knew he'd never heard it before. And by the time he'd closed the gate and was back up to the house, the voice had grown so large that even with the door closed, he could hear it—hear the voice unfold and funnel into him, asking him once to name all that he saw: all that lay like a life around him, all that mattered, all that was. And afterwards, when that was done, he was asked to place them deep within a bowl and to carry them, not dropping them, to the well by the house.

It said nothing more after that. It left in a quiet.

And so too therefore in a quiet did he leave, and did as he was asked, unable to refuse. He started with what was obvious, what was always there and would be: skies, fields, hills, trees, colors, rivers, seas, and then, remembering his garden and the small things within it, he named the way light fell and splintered through leaves, the sounds of a grassblade growing, the heart of an afternoon, beating. When nothing else could fit, when all was found, he returned a while later to the house and his garden, the foot-flattened path.

But just within sight of the well, coming over the ridge, he heard the voice once more. Look down, it said, look down. And so down he looked, down over the stone, to the foot of the well, where he saw his own face, unnamed and alone, and noticed himself. It hung there, suspended, trembling a moment with light, a strange artifact, unearthed, unlike anything he'd found.

He dropped the bowl. In a breath it was gone. He dropped all that it held, and the world fell away, piece by piece. He could not have held on any longer. Everything he had gathered, all that was named, was lost, now, forgotten, remote and unknown, and so, with his life still undone and wild around him, he started again, started back at the beginning.

Only this time, knowing nothing, but his own small name.

One

“WHAT IS IT?” I asked, eyes closed.

We were in the living room, sitting around on the floor, late at night, with the lights and our lamppost brightened to gold and amber. On the ground, between us, my father’s suitcase lay open, scattered and crowded with clothes, some bags. Coming in, he’d taken off his boots and gloves, but he was still wearing his coat. I could feel the wet cool air trailing off him. “Keep your eyes closed,” he said, and the package crackled, rustled as he slid it off whatever he was holding.

I felt it again.

It was glass, smooth and round, a disc, but not thin, and no larger than my palm.

“Does it have something inside it?” I asked, shaking it.

My mother laughed.

For the past two weeks my father had been gone. It had only been my mother and I, helping with the house and the garden, and sometimes, if it was simple enough, with the cooking. Most times it wasn't, though, and most times my father wasn't gone for two weeks either. He'd take smaller trips, maybe four days, five days, a week, and always for work, traveling here or there, selling curtains for theatres and the circus, or so he said. I never believed him. Whenever I asked if I could go along with him, he always became guarded and blamed money, or the lack of it, the cost of flights, the cost of hotels, school, and that no, I couldn't

go, it was for work. This time, he said, he'd gone off to Istanbul in Turkey. And as promised, as always, he brought us back small gifts.

"Okay," he said now. "Open your eyes."

I opened them. The room was silent.

"What is it?"

Around the outer edge of the glass there was a blue ring I could not have felt, and further in a white ring, and then a paler blue one, and in the center, staring up at me, a small black spot.

"It's an evil eye," he said.

I turned it over in my hands.

"They made it blue like that because of the Vikings," he said. "When they went south along the rivers and did their raiding. It's a protection charm, or good luck, I guess. They're all over the place over there. Hanging from balconies, shops, in cars. They think it keeps the evil away."

And he told me how he'd bought it in one of the markets—how for whole streets there were huge old things called bazaars with spices (which he'd brought back for my mother) and foods and jewelry, clothes, anything.

I thanked him and hugged him. I wanted to hear more, I said, wanted to feel him and the house returned to normal just a little longer; it had been so long, I said. But because the plane had been delayed and we'd been waiting and it was late, I was told to bring the eye upstairs into my room in the attic for bed. I wasn't tired, though. I sat up and held the eye under the light I used for reading and studied it long into the night, puzzling over it, admiring it. Both my mother and father had brown eyes, dark eyes, but this one looked more like mine. It was blue

and large, and I could see my reflection dangling in the glossy black pupil. I could see it easily: silver and small, arranged no differently than if I were to glance up into the window just behind my bed. Was I supposed to be afraid of myself? I wondered, and then wondered further why the people had made the eye blue if they were so scared of it. Maybe it made them familiar to it, I figured, setting it down at last and turning out the lights. If it were brown like theirs it would not hold the same power, not contain the fear they needed to make it matter.

Walking to school the next day, I thought about showing my friend, Isaac, but decided not to. He, like my parents, had brown eyes, the color of wet wood, and I had grown scared to give too much of myself to other people. I had grown scared the eye would work for him instead of me, and he would, like the others before him, move away, and leave me to start all over again.

So many of the friends I had and made as a child moved away soon after I'd made them. Sometimes it seemed as though I had a curse: that if I got to know anybody too well, or tell them something I had not yet told anybody else, they'd be gone the next morning. Goblins or ghouls would climb up with ladders and snatch them out of their beds, and I never saw them again after that. In dreams, perhaps, projected across the backs of my eyes, but never close enough to touch. And no matter how many times it happened it always hurt the same. I was always alone. And it always feels the same to be alone, whatever age you are.

Already my first best friend, a nice boy my age, with my same name, had moved to Ohio. His father worked for a bank and had relocated him, my parents told me, but that was a while ago, and years had gone on since then.

For a brief time, afterwards, I took small consolation in the two cats we adopted, one grey and shadowy, the other white as snow with red fierce eyes who remained nameless until my mother fell ill with headaches and sore throats and laid in bed for two weeks on end. She was allergic to the cats, we came to find out, and they too were sent away to live in a house down the street. And while it was not as far as another state, whenever I saw them in a window they seemed to have forgotten I had ever known them or touched them, only looked down with quiet distant eyes, staring on through me, staring on for miles. And after that, there had been Drew, who moved to Massachusetts, and later Riley who moved to Kentucky, Anna who moved to Colorado, Adam who left with his father to England, and Susie who moved to somewhere I still do not know. I had a joke with myself that saw her moving to Somewhere, as though it were an actual place, with playgrounds and parks. There was a Somewhere Airlines and a Somewhere National Anthem, and when I wanted to be elsewhere I thought of all the cities and towns of Somewhere, but every time they were different, and every time the weather seemed to be foggy.

Now, there was Isaac. There was Isaac with his red hair and his wild laugh. Isaac who loved dinosaurs and thought that if he dug up his backyard he would find fossils under the earth, like the candy colored ones in his oatmeal. He was the best kind of crazy. We went to the beach together and to movies, and climbed trees, rode bikes in mud and rain, and made battles out of wooden swords, and drew maps of places that did not yet exist, penciling in mountains and rivers, roads, cities.

He lived next door, just one house over.

There were communities farther north, where all the houses looked the same and all the lawns were green and straight and trimmed, but we did not live there. Our houses were older and smaller, running along a thin and slowly descending avenue that connected the two larger roads as they fed into the capital of my state. From the window in my room, nestled in the trees, I could see across my driveway to his yellow house and its red-brick chimney, dirty but still bright, or brighter than mine. My house was grey, like a gravestone and if I could, I avoided looking at it. On my toes, though, through the window, I could see the places where we'd dug up our treasures (looking for dinosaur bones) in his backyard, and the little forest that started the further back I looked, just the other side of the stream.

One day, we told ourselves, we would go back there. It wasn't very big and the trees, though tall, never knitted together or blocked any of the paths, but we were convinced there were other people living inside it. They were like us, we guessed, people who had a home that wouldn't appreciate it if someone just shouldered in unannounced; you have to knock and you have to know them and it was a whole thing. But one day, we said, one day we would go in like real explorers with old fancy hats and canteens and see what it was that hid in the shadows and vines. We weren't sure that they were monsters, not faeries or anything like that, but we were certain there had to be something other than the squirrels we saw and the occasional owl or hawk. And whenever that day did come, we always got ready, looked in and said: "Tomorrow" and went back to digging. Most of the time we were digging with our hands or with spoons, and most of the time his parents were okay with it. I didn't really know them that well but they seemed nice. They

would usually come out as the sun was going down to tell us to stop and to come inside, and then I'd say goodbye and do my homework in my house, or read.

When I came back from school the day after my father returned, there was a white truck that turned out of Isaac's driveway. We were told the people in the truck had sprayed chemicals on the grass and we were not allowed to touch it, or breathe it, or we would get sick, or "At the very worst, given the worst luck, you could die," said his mother, before going out to buy groceries. We didn't argue.

It was already a hot and humid day, very grey, very heavy, and always seemed about to rain, but never did, and so we went upstairs, to draw. Isaac was older than I was by three years, he was thirteen, and whatever he drew I also tried to draw, but they never turned out the same. His lines were always so light, so precise, while mine were thick and dirty, often tangled in little ponds and fogs from messing up and erasing and starting over. Now and then he'd try and show me, grab my pencil and trace out the lines, and it worked sometimes, though most times it didn't, and what I ended up with on my paper was usually crossed out later on, back home.

That day, however, upstairs, he kept to himself. I'd never seen him like that. All day he was quiet, not saying anything more than I guess, or okay, or sure, and his eyes hardly met mine, avoided me; his pencil made almost no sound on the paper. I kept to myself, too, not knowing if he was upset or angry with me, or just wanted to be outside and playing, and couldn't. For a long time I let him be, and then, not really understanding, I asked him if he wanted to do something else, but he didn't answer. He said nothing until, a little later, maybe minutes, maybe hours, he reached his hand over to me and lifted the pencil from my fingers. I thought he

was going to tell me what I was doing wrong, but he'd set aside his drawing, and set mine aside too, and began first slowly, then softly, lightly, to hold my hand and trace it over his legs and then, even slower, to where my hand was not supposed to be. At the doctor they told me I was never supposed to touch anybody there and that nobody was ever supposed to touch me there either, but I could not take it away, or tell him to stop. It was no longer my hand; it was his. I had no feeling and, numbed, paralyzed, in shock, he continued, whispering if I was okay, and I, unable to say anything, was silent, only nodded, not wanting to say no and hurt his feelings. Somehow his feelings were more important than mine. He was Isaac, my friend, and suddenly I didn't know what that meant anymore. Suddenly I was not in control of me; suddenly nothing made any sense anymore.

"What's this?" he said. He'd pulled the blue eye out my pocket, and was looking at it, curiously, and I told him. After that, in the grey room, our clothes half-off, he looked at me for a long time and I looked at him, into his brown, wet eyes. He wanted to tell me something, but he didn't know how to, and then, whimpering, he began to cry. It made his face look strange, and I think I left then, although I do not remember leaving. I just remember I was not there anymore, that I had somehow gone home and it was night and I was in my bed. But I was still so confused that I didn't cry until the next morning, when, upon waking, I went downstairs to ask my parents what the sign in front of Isaac's house, on the lawn, could mean.

When they told me, I ran back upstairs.

"It won't be for another few weeks," they called, through the door. "You'll get to see him before he leaves. It won't be far. It's only Connecticut. We can always drive up there if you want."

I never answered, and I never told them what had happened. The idea of telling them was almost as unthinkable and strange as what had happened and I was afraid they would not believe me, the way they did not believe me when I showed them the eye at dinner.

"Isaac is not leaving," they said, "because you showed him that. Now eat your leftovers, they're getting cold again."

"I don't want them." It was pasta, with carrots and zucchini, but the pasta was too hard now, and the carrots and zucchini were floppy and wet.

"I asked you what you wanted and you said you wanted that," my mother said. "I don't understand."

"I'm not hungry."

"All of sudden?"

I mumbled out something, and they got mad, asked me to speak clearly: "E-NUN-CI-ATE," they said, showing me their teeth as they said it. But above the table, very dim, a spindly iron chandelier hung from the ceiling, a spider casting a web, and I sat there, waiting, as a fly would, or an ant, unable to move, as though Isaac's hands, like spiders themselves, had followed me and colonized my house, my mind. From that day onward, I was no longer the same person. I did not know why he had done what he did, why he waited until he was about to leave to do it, or what it would even be called, but nothing that followed was ever settled; everything in its shadow became uncertain and in that uncertainty,

anything became possible: there was a fingerprint of magic about it, about all that came after.

Later that night in my room, I built a fort out of my winter sheets. I made it in the little nook by the railing of the stairs that went down out of the attic, and inside it, I began to put things that had some part of me inside of them, to tie myself back together somehow. I don't know if it worked, but, over the blanket on the floor, I placed my favorite books (*Prince Caspian*, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, *Edward Tulane*, *The Hobbit*, *The BFG*, *The Thief of Always*) and my favorite toys, my journals of maps and languages, some of them colored, others black and white. And then, searching for something else, I opened a box under my bed and there, gathering dust, were the little stones and pebbles Isaac and I had dug out of his yard, the ones we thought looked most like bones, or gems.

They were small and furred with dirt. I took them in my hands and cleaned them off, until they were smooth, like beans, some grey, some red, or tan, and one of them, a little darker than the others, actually caught the light and sparkled. Another, much bigger, was veined with white. There was a story of a boy who traded a cow for beans, and the beans, when wet, grew a great stalk and the boy climbed up into the clouds to the land of the giants. But I did not want to climb up to the land of the giants, or bring back a golden harp that played by itself.

I only wanted a friend that stayed. Someone I could trust the way I trusted the trees to be there, behind me, someone who wouldn't do whatever Isaac had just done. It was those same trees in the forest I had touched as a baby that were the trees I looked at and who watched me now; they hadn't gone anywhere. Their leaves changed and fell, but always came back, and their roots were firm and deep,

and so I would ask the trees for a friend that stayed, since they of all things had known what that was, and had listened to me, and would listen again.

Very quietly, I found a box of paints. Then, by the light of the lantern in my fort, I painted the stones yellow and gold. They couldn't be so dull, or they'd get lost in the brush and the leaves; I had to make it clear of what I was doing. All night I painted them, until every crack and crevice was filled and the paint was bright and slowly, the painting eased my body, but I did not close my eyes, no matter how tired I was, no matter how much I wanted to.

In the morning, I carried them down in my hands and pockets to the stream. There were ten of them. Away through the trees tops and behind the houses the sun was just rising, and the sky was still purple and soft and the forest, with the water and my parents, was still sleeping, still snoring. I knelt down on the wet grass, and placed the stones on a piece of broken wood, as many as would fit, and gave it to the current to take into the trees and whatever it was that lived there. I watched it bob and sway out of sight, and then, at last, my offering made, I turned around and felt the eye in my pocket, the small blue eye like mine still there. It was cold. I took it out.

I thought of burying it first, but, leaving the trees and turning back, I dropped the eye away into my father's car instead, parked with the back windows still open. My father had brought it to me and now he would take it away. I did not want it anymore, now knowing what it would do, and so, now free of it, now hopeful, I hurried back to my house in the damp mist and quiet, to sneak back inside, and there, without magic, after closing the door, I slept and did not wake again until the sun was starting to set.

Two

A COUPLE DAYS later the fox showed up.

I had forgotten the keys to my house, and was waiting outside for my father (who was usually home on his lunch break by the time school ended) when I saw it. I had looked up from my book and there it was: a match being struck. It was small, I thought, but not young, a little mangy, perhaps, a little rusty. The comet under its chin was more grey than white, and it kept close to the creek, never keeping the same pace, but darting around a tree and out again, beneath a bush. It was fast when it needed to be, and slow when it wanted. There was gold in its eyes and something in its mouth, dangling, but it was too far away to see, and then all at once I heard my father's car splashing up into the drive and the fox, with a wind, was gone.

"Must have hit something," my father mumbled to himself, stepping out of the car. He saw me on the porch, and said it again, raising his voice: "Back wheel went flat," he said, pointing. The car was hunched in an uneven crouch, but I looked over it, into the trees. He must have followed my gaze. He said, "I don't know if Mom told you," then trailed off: "Did she tell you?"

I shook my head.

"About the forest?" he said.

I didn't know what he was talking about.

“There’s some people who want to,” he started, then stopped mid-sentence again.

“What?”

He smiled. He showed no teeth. It was the smile grown-ups make when they remember they’re talking to a child, and therefore keep them in the dark, to avoid questions, or complications.

“I saw a fox,” I said, playing his game, and changing the topic. No matter how much I asked, he would never tell me, and when I went to my mother about it, she would never tell me either—I was unsure which of us it was protecting: me from knowing, or them from saying. I followed him inside. “It looked like it had something in its mouth...”

“Well then let’s hope it doesn’t come back,” he said, finding his tools to fix the car. “For all we know it could be rabid.”

But the fox, not rabid, became a steady guest.

Spring draped into summer and every now and then I’d see it, walking or darting with its ears tipped up, though never crossing over the water. And day by day as it came, the holes that Isaac and I had dug in his yard began to heal and fade. The brown scab-like spots again, in time, became green, and any traces of our having been there at all were lost and forgotten, cleaned away under newer, softer skin; and Isaac’s house abandoned slowly with them. A chair would be heaved out onto the curb, or a dresser, a lamp, and strangers would take them, one after the other. At night, I’d look in through their amber-squared windows and see its body-parts leaving, its organs and ligaments, see boxes where there had been furniture, until at the end, when the long truck came and they packed it all

in, it no longer seemed alive, a kind of fossil. Even the yellow paint that had always been there, shining, now appeared grey, now white, now no color at all, only thin sheets of lined paper without margins, or words, or the faintest familiar graffiti. It all went. It was all taken. At any other time it would have been called thievery, and so for me, in my window, that was what it was.

I was not there the day it happened.

My family had taken a trip up north to visit distant relatives, people we didn't see much. In some ways I was glad. I wouldn't have to say goodbye, or watch the truck leave, but it left me unfinished, disfigured, and lost as we pulled up and joined the other cars outside my relatives' house. They were hosting a party for something, but I could never tell what, and there were lots of people I had never seen before who somehow knew my name and told me I looked just like my mother. They said it was the nose, the lips, their bodies tall towers with faces, leaning over me. Most of the time, I avoided them. Sat around nibbling at cookies, or studying the old furniture, the paintings of fruit on the walls, and trying to figure out the animals that everybody was. There were hawks, bears, pigs, sheep, sharks, deer, an entire zoo crammed into five or six rooms. It was a big house. I tried not to think about home.

Older cousins were downstairs, I was told. I found them (a separate menagerie entirely) shooting at geese on a small television screen with plastic guns, but shouting as though it were real. It was some kind of game. The guns did not make sounds themselves, but the television crashed, boomed, and sometimes, always accompanied by a roar of excitement, an unfortunate bird would tremble down the screen, into the mud, having been shot. It would lie there for a moment,

a new rock in the earth, and then, suddenly, be pinned to the side of the screen, without a head, not knowing where it was—whoever ended the round with more geese on the side of their screen was the winner.

At the end of the round, there was some fighting for who was going to shoot next. A boy with large doughy hands (a bison) rose up off the couch we were sitting on and tried to snatch it from my cousin (a dog). They started to fight, to wrestle. I was in the way. I got up. But just as I was getting up the boy with the doughy hands ripped the gun away from my cousin. My cousin shouted, and ripped the gun back, and again the bison, kicked out and grabbed and pulled, and as he pulled, the gun broke free from my cousin's grip, and the back of the gun shot towards me, and I fell. There was silence, darkness. Then the wooden rafters of the ceiling, the lights, came seeping into my eyes.

"He's bleeding," said my cousin, and took the gun back.

"Someone get some napkins or something," another said. "Or his parents."

They were all standing around me, as I lay shielding my face, looking down at me. My mouth was numb.

"Did he lose a tooth?" asked my cousin, and the boy with the doughy hands had to bend down to look.

"Let me see," he said, and tried to pull my hands away.

"Let him see," the boys said.

The bison was stronger than I was.

"No," he said, when he'd looked in, and gave my hands back.

"Then why's there so much blood?"

"Dunno."

“Liar,” the dog, my cousin, barked.

“Am not.”

They started to push each other again.

Somebody came back with a towel.

Somebody else came back with my parents.

My mother dug a small mirror out of her purse, hazy with flecks of makeup, and I looked and saw, floating in the blood from my gums, two of my teeth bent crooked and forked. Another had chipped, and now spiked.

“We still have our insurance, right?” I heard my mother saying, on the other side of the bathroom door, as I cleaned up. It was a nice bathroom, very clean, with green furry carpets on the floor and the seat of the toilet, a large gold-framed mirror hung over the stone counter and sink and lavender hand soap. My parents were apologizing for the mess, and again I heard my mother ask if we still had our insurance. My father didn’t say we did.

But the next day, back home, regardless, my mother drove me to the dentist.

I hadn’t been able to sleep very well because of the pain. My tongue was always moving, and touching the area, as though I had grown an aloe from my gums overnight, tasting the salt and the metal of the blood that still, sometimes, leaked out. I tried to sleep in the car, but found it too hard to focus, or not focus. So instead I tried to take my mind away, and stared up out of the window as we went, with the sunlight hot and thick, and the blue sky cloudless.

On the left, down a one-way street, we passed my old elementary school—sitting with its ancient brick and stone, still divided into BOYS and GIRLS. On

the right we passed the firehouse, the police station behind it. We passed the church I had taken communion in. That had been a sunny day too. I had worn a black jacket and khaki pants that seemed to have been made for someone much more box-shaped than I was, always being bone-thin—a fact that would forever worry and confuse my Italian grandparents. The priest I confessed to, in a small, low-lit room, was very pale, and had dry, pinched lips (a mouse). He asked me if I had ever masturbated, and I said no, I don't think so, not knowing what the word meant, and confessed instead to having cursed once, when an older boy had stolen my library book on the moon and the future, and how we'd be living there soon. The church fizzled away. We passed a farm, an orchard. We passed the military armory with its tanks and weapons that I had played soccer behind, in the fields.

The dentist's office was in a bigger town than mine, about thirty minutes away. They were tall, stoic buildings, grey bricked and blunt, and once inside their glass doors, keeping my mouth closed, we sat in a waiting room that smelled whitely acrylic, and toxic. There was a television up in the corner, playing the news without any sound. My mother, clicking her feet, told me the story of how we'd been sitting in here, years ago, when the planes flew into the Twin Towers on September the 11th.

"It had happened so silently," she said. "Nobody heard it, or saw it, except me. Everybody just kept working, and I was the only one, but I didn't tell anybody. You were probably too young to remember."

I nodded.

They fixed my teeth. A needle had pinched into my gums and I had woken up with my mouth still open, hours later, when they suggested I could use a palate expander.

“And how much is that?” my mother asked.

“I only say it,” said the dentist, dancing around the question, “because his mouth’s a little narrow. If he bites down you’ll see it. Go on, bite down for your mom.” I bit down, as instructed, pulled my lips back. “When more teeth grow in it could be a problem. They’ll grow in crooked, and grind up against the enamel, and we don’t want that to happen.”

And the trip became even longer. They attached a metal plate to the roof of my mouth, that every night had to be tightened with a little, twisting key, and would slowly widen the shape of my mouth.

I dropped the key the first night. My mother had to help me. She sat down on the side of the bed, and reached over my mouth, twisted it once, and the tension gave me strange, spotty headaches.

“I’m sorry,” she said, now finished. My room was dark, and the lamp on the bedside table was harsh, stinging. It felt like it was still happening, and perhaps now always would, a tightness both opening and closing me inside of myself.

“When we were out,” she said, sitting up, “you got a phone call.”

“Me?” I said.

She nodded. “I didn’t know the number, but they left a voicemail.”

As she reached into her pocket to get the phone, I wondered if this, at last, would be the forest, telling me they hadn’t forgotten about my wish, and that they’d taken my offering. I had waited patiently and now they would answer. I

had not thought about how the friend I had asked for would come, arrive, or even tell me when they were here. Would they have sent a friend in the mail? Could they do that? Would they be delivered, or would they simply appear, as the fox had appeared and gone and come again. Would the voice on the other end of the phone sound like whispering leaves or the creaking of limbs, or both?

My mother handed me the telephone, pressing a button. The phone beeped, once, and told me I had one voice-message. Then it beeped once more and it started to talk. I didn't recognize the voice. My face must have told as much to my mother, because she said, before leaving me to listen, "It's Isaac."

It was strange to hear him without a mouth. He sounded somewhere underwater. And he spoke quickly, as though he'd rehearsed it before, or written it down, telling me about the new house, and that it was old, or at least part of it was. He didn't own all of it. And that there wasn't any forest behind him, only a single, sad oak tree that he couldn't even climb that well, and that he'd been drawling more maps and planning to send them to me.

I gave the phone back to my mother.

"You can call tomorrow if you want," she said, but I already knew I didn't. She creaked away down the stairs before I could tell her I didn't want to, and instead found myself saying to no one "I didn't know". I didn't know what I wanted. I wanted Isaac back, but he would never come back, and if he did I wanted the first Isaac, not the one that had left me. Yet he was miles away, and no phone call or letter would change that. I wanted the forest to have listened. I wanted those stones that I had painted to have made a difference, or at least to have given me some bravery, some courage to cross the stream into the trees, but I was

nervous, I was weak, I was scared. What was it that I could trust the forest and be so scared of it? What was that? My parents were like that. I had trusted them before and I was scared of them mostly, scared I'd make a bad step and they'd not bother with me anymore, say "Enough!" and then be gone.

When school started again in September I thought they would. I thought they'd leave.

I possessed nothing peculiar in the length of my toes or hands, but my arms and legs were hairier than most of the other kids at school. At recess and at lunch, they showed me their arms, their legs, and they were always so clean, so smooth. They laughed at me and told me I was not supposed to have arms like I did, that I was a wolf, probably, not a boy, and that my parents must be wolves too, and that we should be caged in wires, not houses, in a forest somewhere. They would howl at me and sit apart from me in class, and, having no friends since Isaac had left, nobody was there to protect me. I was all alone, and so, one night, my parents both asleep, I stole my mother's razor, the blue one she kept in the shower, dragged it up and down my skin, not knowing how to use it, but finding out as I went, and cutting myself in the process here and there.

I had wanted it gone so badly I had forgotten to think of anything else. Forgotten somehow they had even seen me before, and now laughed harder the next day, when I came into school, and told me that when you shave, your hair grows back faster and thicker, and I felt so exposed, so unhidden, I hid in the bathroom and would not come out until my father was called from work and drove me home, not understanding why I had done what I'd done, not trying to.

Luckily, though, it did not stay September. The days shriveled, dried up and grew shorter and darker. The leaves became heavy with rust and fell, scraped against the streets, and by late October I no longer had to show the hairy parts of my skin. I wore pants and long sleeve shirts (sometimes under short sleeve shirts) and if it was really cold, I wore my white sweater, as I did that Friday my father asked if I could help him clean the gutters on the roof.

I had gone and come back from school to find him setting up a ladder in the grey, blustery afternoon. There were three huge trees: a magnolia, a maple and a sycamore, all crowded over my small grey house, and in the fall, their leaves were red and yellow, but mostly looked burnt, like the charred ends of toast leftover on a plate. The weekend before we had raked and cleaned the grass to set up Halloween decorations, but the gutters too would clog and choke and the drains on the roof wouldn't work as they were supposed to. The water would splash and flood our yard instead of funneling down the downspout as it should, I was told, although I never saw the point of it.

Usually, I would stand on the ground and my father would open the second floor window, remove the screen and climb right onto the roof. Then, he would sort of shovel the leaves out with his hands and toss them down to me, waiting with a bucket or tarp, to set the moldy heaps at the curb with the mountains we'd already assembled. When I was younger, he'd throw me into the pile afterwards, and I would sink in and lose the world for a moment, and burst back out, sticky with leaves. Only today he said his back was hurting, and he wouldn't be able to bend down. He would stand in the yard with the bucket and I would climb out onto the roof.

“You won’t fall,” he told me, opening the window. “If that’s what you’re scared of. You’re giving me this look.”

“But what if I slip,” I said. It had rained the day before.

“You won’t slip,” he said, and he ran his hand along the slate and held my hand. It was dry, more or less, but I still didn’t trust him. I wondered what my mother would say, if she knew. If I fell, I’d break more than just one bone.

He opened the window, took out the screen. The cool air rushed in. He patted me on the shoulder. I clenched at the touch. It wasn’t too hard, he was almost always gentle with me, but there was something in it that mummified me, wrapped me up and cinched me. He let go, and I was back, unwound, but not released. With a “wait for me,” he left down the stairs, and I was alone with the window. He called again.

I climbed out onto the roof.

For a moment, I was weightless there. I was a head among the trees and bodiless, looking out over the autumn sky and the houses, the lawns, the streets and roads that wove on and on into the distance. Then everything about it felt wrong. The roof was not meant to hold people by their feet. It was meant to beat away rain, to slice it apart and throw it off. My feet were aliens, there. My legs were shaking. I took a step and paused. My father was standing just behind the porch. I could lift my foot and cover him with the sole of my shoe.

“Get down on your knees,” he shouted up, the bucket in his hand. “Lower gravity. It’ll be easier.”

I got down on my knees.

“Also,” he called, “if there’s any twigs or sticks, pick those up too if you can and throw them down. I think I saw some when I was up there.” I was amazed at the calmness of his voice.

I nodded, gulped. A gust of wind came crisp and red, scattering more leaves down, and I inched closer to the edge, where the plastic gutters hung over the lip. There was a stick, as he’d said, and I picked it up, and threw it off. My father bent down crookedly, because of his back, and set it on the curb. A car passed by, a bike, a squirrel. The car parked; doors were shut.

I crept closer. I could smell the leaves, crammed in the gutter. They held the smell of the morning, a morning of fog and mist, heavy with water, cold to the touch, slick. I began to remember the morning I had set the stones on the little wood barge and watched it float away. I had been calm that morning. I was calm in the hope, the belief that things would turn out okay, that I could do something to make them okay instead of escaping into myself or into books as I had always done before. I looked back over my shoulder, across the driveway, into the yard, and the trees, and the stream, hoping again to find some small calmness.

Only there was someone standing at the water’s edge. They had come out of the woods and were now standing on the pebbly bank, lifting something up to their eyes and then washing it in the stream at their feet. When they were finished, they jumped across into Isaac’s yard and kept walking. And it was as they came nearer, out of the shade, that I could see at last what they were holding. I could see the little stones glinting like a hoard of fallen stars and the little girl that was carrying my offering away, slipping them one by one into her pockets.

Three

I WAS OFF the roof and through the window, racing down the stairs. My father shouted after me, a lonely pointed cry, but I couldn't hear what he said above everything else. The stairs were too loud, they drowned his voice, and my mother was telling me "slow down, slow down". I had slipped once as a baby coming down those stairs, but I pushed past her now, ran through the kitchen, opened the door, leapt off the porch and crossed over the drive, around my father's car, and through the garden-gate into grass and leaves.

"What are you doing!" I shouted, breathless. "Stop!"

My body prickled. The girl stopped. She looked back at me, no older than I was, but I do not remember what she said, or if she'd said anything at all. The way she was holding the stones seemed wrong, the way she looked in that backyard, the way she looked at me. She had the darkest eyes, like a road after rain; there was hardly any white to them—only wet, unfolding darkness, and a thin, sharp nose that curved up, and was freckled, a mouth like a line of ocean far in the distance.

Shaking, I said, "Where did you get that?"

"In there," she said, and pointed to the trees. She was wearing a purple rain-jacket and rain-boots, although it was not raining. "I was exploring," she said. "The stream goes in pretty far. I followed it around a little until I found whatever this thing is." The offering lay dirty in her small, muddied hands. Not all the stones

were there—maybe four, maybe five were left—and the gold paint I'd dressed them in had flaked off in places. "It was just along the water, on the bank," she went on. "I think some sticks must have caught it or something. I can show you if you want?"

"No," I said. "It's mine. I put it there. You stole it." My fists were clenched at my sides. "Give it back."

"But I found it," she said.

"Because I put it there," I said.

"Well if you wanted it, you shouldn't have put it in there. That doesn't make any sense. Do you live there?" She pointed to my house.

"Yes," I said, through the bars of my teeth.

"Then you can come over and look at it, if you want. I live there now." And she pointed to Isaac's house.

"I don't want to look at it," I said. "And you don't live there."

"Yes I do," she said. "That's my dad's truck. See?" There was a red pickup at the curb, which I could see through the boxwood hedges. It was rusted around the wheels, had been parked there sometimes when I got home from school, a while ago, at the end of summer.

"Actually," she said, rolling her eyes, talking fast. "He's my step-dad. He's not my real-dad. And my mom was the one who bought the car, but it's the only one we have so I guess, um... I don't know whose it is." Her words melted one into the other. "A big truck dropped all our stuff off today," she said. I kept my eyes on her hands. "You must have been at school and you missed it." I did not close them. "My name's—"

But she did not finish. I leapt forward and grabbed the stones out of her hand, and no sooner had I done so that she lunged back after me. She had a wild sort of strength, ripping and pulling, and seeing that she could not pry it from me, opened her mouth and put her teeth to my arm. I cried out. I kicked at her shins. I tried to hold on as fiercely as I could, but the teeth sunk in further and stayed, and I dropped it onto the grass.

“It’s mine,” she said, picking it up, wiping her lips. “I found it.”

There was a glistening ring of white-rimmed hollows on my skin, when I rolled up my sleeve, encircling the birthmark to the right of my vein, not far from my wrist.

“I just wanted it back,” I said, the pain still hot, still burning, whimpering.

And it was then, looking up at her, that I noticed the sky had darkened. It had been late afternoon on the roof, and grey, but now it seemed the night had come early, had shoved its way forward, spinning clouds like sopping black clothes, without moon or stars, and soundless. Her eyes became even darker. The trees beside us hissed. Yet somehow as she stood there, and walked off into Isaac’s house, her hair did not move but a strand. It lay perfectly still and flat down her shoulders, but it did not move as her jacket moved and twitched.

And before I could chase after her a hand dropped out of the sky and grabbed me.

“This doesn’t look like the roof,” said my father’s voice, dryly. “This doesn’t look our yard either.”

Low thunder thrummed in the distance, as he loomed and spoke over me. I had never known him to possess such an impenetrable voice. It was usually stern,

but mild, and though the rain hadn't come yet he looked up to the sky, where the air was still parched and wheezing, and told me to follow, and I could not argue. There was no room to argue between his words or tell him about the girl, or the offering. He faced away from me and took my hand and pulled me over the driveway and up the stairs, and opening the door at last, said: "Lucky for you, Mom doesn't want us outside at the moment."

He closed the door. The wind quieted.

"Would you?" she called from the living room, the television on, though she and the machine were hidden. There was a wall that divided the rooms, but the windows at the front of the house, through the hallway, were alive and shimmering with colors. They flashed up and lived full lives and died and changed and lived again: blues and reds and yellows, greens. The rest of the house was dark. Few lights except the TV had been turned on since the clouds had rolled in and the sound, though muffled, had contorted itself, so as we passed through the house, it uncoiled and grew clearer. The television was silver and small in the corner of the room, crouched as a gargoyle, atop a thin wooden stand.

"He'd get swept away by the wind," my mother went on. She was standing in front of the molten screen, the remote at her hip, waving it. "I didn't want him up there in the first place. You know that."

"Yes," he said, and again "yes".

He peered out the window. At the peak of his long, slim head the dark wrought-iron hair he'd kept and grown thick was dirty with pale, whitish bits of scalp underneath. His hands found his pockets, and he kept his shoes on, tapping

them over the caramel wooden floors, eyes lost in the pile of leaves on the curb, breathing differently.

Where my father was hard, my mother was soft, in her face and in her words; she was heavier than he was in her voice and her body. There were things that she could say that he would never be able to refute, and he knew it too, I think, though it was to him that letters of importance and money were sent, and she crinkled her nose whenever she sorted through the mail and found no trace of her name in addition to his.

"What's it saying now?" he asked.

"I don't know it's a commercial."

He nodded.

"He's not going back up there," she said.

"I didn't say he was."

"I'm just telling you."

He nodded again, then left the window, swept past me, and opened the door into the basement.

"Where are you going?"

"When it rains it'll flood," he said.

"And the gutters would have made so much of a difference? It always floods."

But not saying another word, he vanished down the stairs.

I sat on the couch. My left arm, where the girl had bitten me, started to itch. I tried to ignore it.

The weather report flared back on.

For the past week, there had been a map with a storm crawling up the coast and then spinning off into the ocean. We were supposed to get some rain, but not much, and only for the weekend.

"Now," said the television, through a short, balding man with glasses the size of dinner plates, "as you can see, the storm here has hooked inland, and looks to be growing throughout the night. Rainfall estimates are currently hard to predict, but expect to see strong winds, power outages..."

I snuck my fingers under my sleeve and started to scratch.

The first drops of rain chinked outside on the windows and the porch, growing quicker.

"You okay?" my mother asked, tilting her head. "You're scratching."

"Just itchy," I said. It was probably my hairs growing back, from when I'd shaved, though I did not tell her that.

"If you want I can take a look at it," she said.

"No, I'm fine," I said, and sat on my hands, and clenched my jaw, pressed my lips together.

My mother turned off the TV.

"That's enough of that," she said, and the rain, faster now, seethed around us as butter put to a smoking pan. She sat beside me. "Can I have a look?"

I shook my head.

She frowned. "Why not?"

I held the sleeve down with my clenched fist.

She sighed. "I don't get a reason?"

Another shake.

"Not just one little reason?" she pleaded. And as she said it she nudged me in the leg with her hand, and again she sighed, though this time through her nose. "You used to tell me so much, you know," she said, taking her hand back, and I thought it would all pour out again, as it did some days earlier: "You wouldn't believe it now but you were very talkative," she'd laughed, then, at the dinner table. "You loved putting on these little shows for us at Christmas when the family came, and when it was your birthday you actually liked the attention. You'd run around and ask everybody how school was, because you'd just started and I don't know, somehow you thought people went to school forever. And you'd act out whole stories, movies, saying every line just in the right pitch and tone, and maybe you still do, to yourself, I don't know. But it was little things like that. They were beautiful." Her voice had fumbled, and softened. "Sometimes it's like I think I've had two children," she'd said, "in a way," and then stood up, her voice following, clearing her throat—but she didn't. She paused, briefly on the couch, as the wind shook the walls with the rain, and said only: "If you want me to help you I'm always here. Okay? If you want I can help you tighten the palate expander now or later?"

I said later, hoping she'd forget, and she did.

The rain fell harder.

I laid in my bed that night, feeling each drop water my cheeks and strike my nose or forehead as if I were on the roof again, staring up into the dark and the clouds I knew were still swirling. I did not sleep. I saw the girl, in the corner of my eye, and I was racing down faster, not talking to her, but ripping the offering out of her hands and running. Not letting her catch me and bite me, but bringing

it back and repairing what needed to be mended, the paint I'd reapply, so that next day, as before, I could put it back into the water, and start over again, start fresh, but her dark eyes, no different from what howled outside my window now, hooked into mine as I laid there, unable to quiet the things she'd done and said or the itching at my skin.

The itching at my skin had stayed. I scratched and it worsened, unlike a mosquito bite—which reddens and rashes and sometimes bleeds if you keep your nails scribbling at it—when I lifted my sleeve and held my arm up to the amber light on my bed-frame, there was no sign I had even been bitten. The marks that had been merely faint footprints at dinner, not bruised or red, were gone, dissolved into the flat, cool sand between the dunes of my tendons and the grass of my hair, too long I now thought to still be prickly. It was the birthmark that was the root. The bite-marks had encircled it, all alone and little like a dark, black button or seed.

It was shiny and polished, sitting there quietly. It caught the light, and suddenly I remembered my mother coming home one day in the summer with two full bags of seeds. It was when I was much younger, and she smiled and held them up to me: tulip seeds and orchid seeds, lupine, daisy, poppy seeds, she told me; and later in the hot sun we planted them, our hands dirty and shingled in the tiny water-smooth stones that, one after one, we blanketed with earth and in time watched return as a kind of homecoming for garish strangers, weeks on, grown up and changed.

The other birthmarks on my arm and hand were flush with the skin, but this one stood up. It was the pupil to an eye without iris or white. And it was from

there, beneath it, around it, that the itching was finding its sting. There was something under it or in it that wanted to get out, and so I dragged my nails over it, down it, pinching it and squeezing. It made small tapping sounds every time the nail clipped and tugged, echoing the rain falling from the gutters on the roof, onto the windows. The more I scratched, the bigger it seemed to rise, but there was relief in the scratching, a strange lessening of the itch and pain, a pleasure until, not feeling it, I watched the birthmark flake and fall off, and vanish among the folds and sheets of my bed.

There was no blood. It was there and then gone, very clean. The rain was very loud. The wind even louder. The skin was undamaged.

I started to look for my birthmark in the blankets as one who picks off a tick from their head to see the removed vestige, to retrieve it, understand it, but the light blinked off above me just then, as well as the streetlights far below. My hands scuttled over the linen covers, finding nothing. I could not even see them as they moved, could not even see my pillow or the shelves of books I kept at the foot of my bed.

I heard footsteps. Footsteps on the stairs. They were rising, growing taller, creaking. I hid myself under the blankets, tried not to move. There was a tap on my leg.

"Hey," it said, in a whisper. "Are you awake?"

It tapped again.

"It's dad," it said. It shook my leg. "It's not safe to be up here," and said I had to get up and come downstairs with my parents, into the living room. Hands started to peel the sheets off, and I flinched from the instant cold.

"I'm looking for something," I said.

"You can look for it in the morning," he said, picking me up.

"No, I have to look now," I said. There was a part of me that wondered if the birthmark would actually be there, where it had fallen, in the morning.

"We're not staying up here."

"I don't want to stay I just want to find it."

"And you can find it in the morning when the storm's passed. But now—"

Something hard thumped onto the roof.

"Now we're going," he said.

I fought against him, but he grabbed me around the waist, and he pulled me away down the stairs. It was impossible to hear his footsteps over the thunder, the wind and rain, now. He set me down on the landing, and although I tried to scurry back up, he was firm, a single shadowy roving wave in the lightless house, pushing me along all the way, where eventually we reached the living room, my mother beetling about lighting candles with a box of matches. On the radiator and the windowsills and the television and the table there were candles of all different sizes and colors with long or short or fat tails of flame wagging and shivering up to snowy, bright points, and when she saw me she handed me a thin, half-melted stick and a little tin tray to hold it by, to avoid being burned by the wax.

"It'll be okay," she said. "We'll just stay down here tonight."

The floor, where the carpet had been, was covered in blankets and pillows for us to sleep on.

"Dad's got the couch because of his back," she said.

He was lying on it already, nose tilted up to the ceiling. He hadn't made any groaning sound when he carried me down, but perhaps it had hurt him more than he was willing to show, to hold me like that. His fingers were laced across his chest. His eyes would open, and then shut at every gust of wind that breathed and held the house, at every thunder and lightning. But it was the wind that always came first. The wind came and nuzzled the house, then swallowed it and spat it out again, and it was in that naked waiting silence that attended it, where we held our breath, and floated in weightlessness, not knowing if one of the trees that covered our house would fall and crush us, just knowing enough to say nothing. I'd hold my breath and stare into the flame of the candle I'd been given. There was nothing inside it but light. If I stuck my finger over it or through it, it would bend and split, but it would not break. It was soft enough not to break, and it changed the hard walls around us into soft wax too, as the wind came again to mold it.

It passed. I breathed. I sat in the light and looked down at my arm. It was just an arm. A thin, bony hairy arm almost exactly like the one I had woken up with this morning.

"Mom?" I asked.

"Yes?"

"Can you scratch off a birthmark?"

"No, not usually," she said.

"Okay."

"Why?"

The wind came back and we were silent. The wind left.

"I was just wondering."

"Did you scratch at something, was that what you were doing earlier?"

She grabbed my arm and looked at it in the changing light.

"I was just wondering," I said.

Her eyes darted, looking for some sign of red skin, a scab, anything. She said, "Normally you don't scratch them off. You're born with them. And most of the time you can't get rid of a lot of the things you're born with. They tend to stick around."

I took my arm back and looked at the house.

The house I grew up in was old. It had a single, small bathroom, and every stair creaked with its own voice, so that if you memorized them all as I had, you could play a song, as though the steps were a piano—and fall, as I had, too. The basement flooded (which was why we weren't there then) and the floors were uneven and all the doors, upstairs and down, had beautiful glass doorknobs, and the one on my door, going up into the attic, was purple. I loved my purple doorknob and even though it had only one bathroom and that it was hard to creep around in and was always too clean and neat, I loved my house. I loved that it had a lamppost outside, and that I could switch it on and off from inside. I loved my attic room, and how if I looked outside it felt as though I were in a treehouse, looking down from an eyrie, high above the ground.

I only had the one. It was my house, and they don't hold funerals for houses, I knew, not if they die, in a storm, or get eaten by time; you did not gather up a house and put it in the ground like you would put me in the ground, or my parents in the ground.

There was a crack. I thought it was lightning until the ground shook, and the house whimpered. My father rose up and said he'd go check to see what it was. He said he couldn't do this anymore. The waiting was going to make him insane. I believed him. My father was a very calm man, and so when he became angry, or irritated, he did not gradually grow into it, but rather burst open from the inside out.

He opened the closet, threw on his raincoat. It was red, like nothing else he ever wore, and he laced up his brown boots, stamped little brown thunders towards the backdoor, and rustled, looking for a flashlight under the sink. My mother and I said nothing.

There was a window in the kitchen that looked out into the backyard, and there was a gap between the radiator and the counter. When I was very small I could fit perfectly into it, so that my eyes just barely reached over the sill and my parents would laugh and take pictures. I had to turn my body sideways to fit now, but I stood there and watch him open the door and shine his light into the darkness and the rain. The rain was not falling straight. I could only see it slanted sideways when it was caught and stabbed by the broad cane of light my father let out, prodding into a black backyard that seemed alien. There were branches that looked almost metallic, and his car seemed almost to move with a ripple of muscle. My father stepped down off the porch. He held a hand to his head so his hood would not whip off.

Then there was another snap. I could see it: the sharp burst of sound yellow and bright and then gone, and it was even louder, and resonant, and I saw my father frozen for a moment. Move, I screamed but no sound came out. Move! And,

flailing the light, he ran back to the porch while behind him, just where he'd stood, a huge shadow forked, roared, and fell still.

My father crashed back inside. His flashlight was still on. My mother grabbed it out of his hands and turned it off. Nothing was said about what had just happened. We went back through the darkness of our house and sat with the candles on the floor and my father breathed heavily, as though he'd some of the wind with him, and did not stop for a while.

The storm carried on.

I studied his face in the chasing shadows until it was bent and different, and I did the same with my mother. Then I imagined myself, after a time, crooked and new, and together I watched these people sitting in my house, in the darkness, and I did not move all the rest of that long night.

I only sung in my head:

*Here we are we three we fall
down the rain I hope we're tall
enough to meet the wizard's doll
who eats us with his teeth and all.*

Four

BY THE MORNING the candles had all gone out.

I'd watched them curl away to smoke sometime in the night, one closing its fist and soon another. It happened slowly. I'd tried reading a book, but the light was too dim and it hurt my eyes and so I had sat quietly on my hands all night on the floor, not daring to sleep as my mother and father still did. They were snoring, turning over, snoring, while around us, in the dawn, our house became like every blank space on a map, every white and empty gap of land laked between mountains and hills and rivers and trees, the parts you did not visit. There was nothing to hold on to. Instead of the staircase, the railing, the shoes I was meant to put away, there was nothing but light and dark, a fog pretending to be lamps, tables, walls, parents. If I bent out my hand to touch them it would slowly pass through them, and go on slowly forever, into the cold grey storm still churning outside.

I got up and tried the lights. I flicked the switches and they cracked their joints but no light came out. I tried the phone line but it was dead, the heater, dead, the television, the refrigerator—all dead, all silent. On the ground in the kitchen a small clay bowl lay broken, chipped into crumbs. I picked and placed up onto the counter. My father must have knocked it over when he stormed back inside last night, or when my mother cleared a space to set his jacket and flashlight. It had been so loud and so dark the shards that had fallen and burst

invisibly then were the only sounds in the house by morning, grating together as I tried to find the pieces that fit and rebuild it. I set them down.

I did not wake my parents when I saw what lay outside. I let them open their eyes when they did, and find me on their own, in the kitchen. My mother appeared first, in a whisper.

"Everything okay?" she said over my shoulder. "I didn't feel you on the floor with me anymore." She was not wearing her glasses and her hair was not its usual calm, and, still half-asleep maybe, she had to lean on the counter to steady herself.

"Is dad up?" I asked.

"I don't think so, no, not yet," she said, squinting, and cleaned her glasses with her shirt. "Did you sleep at all?"

"No."

"Too loud?"

"Yeah."

"You've always been a light sleeper though," she said, yawning. "Your father used to be too, but..." and her eyes rolled back into the quiet of the living room, and then flicked back, and laughed. "I never was."

She put the glasses to her nose, blinked.

"That's better," she said, and looked around the room, then frowned. "You're bowl," she said, and moved over to the counter where I'd set the fragments, and picked them up in her soft, dark hands. "When did this happen? Did this happen last night?" she asked. "You made this for me at school...Remember? See?"

My initials were etched on the underside of one of the clay splinters, in the teacher's faultless hand.

I looked at it and then back out the window.

"We'll fix it up, don't worry," she said, and ruffled my hair, and was trying to remember how it might have fallen, when she followed my gaze, and dropped her voice.

"Oh," she said, and was quiet. "Oh God," she said, and: "I think I'll go get your father up too."

There were murmurings and rustles behind me as she went, and a groan as he peeled his back up from the couch, although when he came into the room he said nothing. For a long time our faces crowded into the window frame, growing up out of the potted plant we kept on the radiator, hunching our backs and bending our necks and knees.

"You stay inside," he told me, and unlocked the backdoor and went out onto the porch with my mother, whose lips were pursed, I saw, and whose hands were clenched, as the two of them (myself their thin bound shadow) looked out and up at the tree that had fallen in the night and crushed his car.

I could hardly even see the car when I looked. So much of it was lost beneath the branches and pine needles that hung down or spiked out from the trunk that I thought I was looking at a pearl caged between seaweed and coral on the floor of the ocean. The wind nudged the tree just enough to sway and billow, slowly and sleepily, and reveal sometimes the roof of the car, crumpled and buckled beneath the weight of the tree, where the windows had gone, salting the ground. At other times the tree swallowed it completely, as it did the rest of the

yard. From the porch the stairs dropped down and vanished into the shadows it cast, the trunk uprooted in what had been Isaac's yard, cutting raggedly into mine, and lancing up to lay on the roof just above me.

My parents tapped the glass and told me to get away from that part of the house. It wasn't safe there, they said. I went back into the living room and sat on the couch. I laced my fingers, unlaced them, and tried to find something that hadn't changed, that I could hold onto, and use to steady myself.

There was a knock at the door.

I clenched.

On any other day, the doorbell would have played but that morning the sound came off the doorknocker instead. It was a black iron ring I could not yet reach and was almost never used, had probably been left over from before the bell was installed. The beats that struck were dull. They knocked again, this time: one two three four, firm and heavy, then quiet. I never answered the door, and so I stayed on the couch and waited for my parents to come back in, but they didn't. They were still talking about the tree, arguing, not able to hear.

I got up and opened the door.

On the other side of the glass was a tall but wide man, with dark charcoal hair and rough, almond skin. The hair on his head was beginning to thin around the temples and forehead, where it slicked back with oil, and shone with the rest of his face, the bridge of his nose lined with light and bent like a root. His lips were wide too, his dark eyes widely set. Unbuttoned, he wore a nice grey shirt.

"Is your father there?" he said.

I nodded.

"Would you mind getting him?" he said. He spoke very precisely, like an actor in an old film, very polished. His heavy brows narrowed as he peered behind me into the house, when I didn't move. "I'd like to have a word with him," he said. "If he's not home I can talk to your mother or when he gets back I can talk to him then."

He said it was about the tree.

I went back through the dead house and opened the door to the porch and told my father. He was confused at first, but he went eventually, and I watched him walk out of the light of the kitchen into the dark of the living room, step out through the front door with the man and close the door behind him.

"Who did he say he was?" my mother asked, coming too.

"I don't know," I said, and went back to sitting on the couch, only this time on my knees, facing the windows, watching my father and the man with the unbuttoned shirt. He was taller than my father. They stood talking, but I couldn't hear all of what they were saying. Their voices would dip and swerve out my ears, both deep, both very unlike my own. Soon, my father followed the man down the stairs and around to the backyard, walking up the wet driveway. I changed windows and watched them walking up to the tree and the car underneath it, the fence that sagged under the weight of the trunk. If I squinted it looked as though my father and this man were explorers in the Amazon or Africa, standing on a dark mud road before a dense and impenetrable forest. They talked for a while.

When they came back onto the front porch, they shook hands and the Unbuttoned Man left down the stairs. My father shoved his way back into the house, dripping, and slipping out of his boots, and said that was our new neighbor.

"Nice guy," he said, unzipping his red jacket. "He's a pilot he said," and then carried on to explain how they had power (it had only gone off for a few minutes last night) and that the tree that had come down was actually on their property, not ours, and that they felt really bad about it. And that if we wanted, we were welcome to stay at their house for a little, or until the power came back and the tree was removed. They had lights that worked, heating, the news, a fridge...

"Sounds like an okay idea," he said. "Until things get settled. He's got a daughter too," and he glanced at me. "You're age, I think."

My stomach dropped. I felt sick.

My mother said, "Are you sure they're okay with this?"

"That's what he said."

"But they've only just moved in."

"He said he'd been coming over every other weekend to drop stuff off. They were staying in a motel for a little, between houses. They have furniture and everything set up. Some boxes still, but it's not empty or anything."

"I don't know," she said.

"I'm just scared about the tree," he said. "If it leans a little further it'll be in the house, and I don't know when the wind's gonna stop, or the rain."

"I know, I know," she said.

He said, "I think we can at least go over for a little. I don't think that would hurt. We can use the phone. That still works. Call the fire station and see if they can get people over, tomorrow or even today. I don't know how many other houses lost power, or if there's trees down on some lines on other streets." He sat down

on the stair. "We can have a little something to eat, maybe. They offered. See the news. How does that sound?"

"Should we bring anything over?"

"I guess if you'd like. What do you mean? He didn't mention anything like that."

"Just something to show thanks. They really don't have to do this. It's very nice of them. How about you?" She was standing beside me, and she nudged me.

"Are you fine with going over?"

I shook my head.

"No?"

"I'm not going over there. I don't want to."

"Why not?"

"We don't even know if we'll stay over there yet, okay?" said my mother.

"What's the difference?"

She leaned over to him and started to whisper.

"It's not that," I said. The only other time I had stayed in another person's house, and slept there, I had been too scared and called home and my mother came and brought me home.

"Then what is it?"

I told them about the girl, the bite marks and I tried to show them, rolling up my sleeve, but the bruises were already gone, and they didn't believe me.

"I don't remember you ever having a birthmark there," said my mother.

"And why would she bite you?" asked my father.

"If you're scared—" my mother started.

"I'm not scared! She's evil, she bit me, she took Isaac's house. I'm not going!"

"Then how come I didn't see her when I got you the other day?" asked my father. "How come you didn't tell us when it happened? Hmm?"

But I was gone. I closed my eyes and ran up the stairs, grabbed the key out of the bathroom door. It was the only door in the whole house that locked, the only door with a key, and I brought it upstairs to my room and fit it inside the lock and shut it. I waited, panting, my face near the face of the door. I heard their footsteps pounding after me and the doorknob shaking, but not turning.

"Open the door," they said, together, one and the other.

My mouth would not open.

"Open it!"

I backed away up the carpeted stairs.

A fist pounded on the wood and I felt it in my feet.

"You're not staying up there!" they shouted. "We're going as a family! Open the door! Now!"

I left the key plunged into the lock, wedged on its side, stiff, and instead of fleeing to my bed, which was farther away, crawled through the flaps of the fort I'd made, and laid among the blankets and books there, peering down into the hollow of the stairwell, and the flat, unmoving door. I was close enough in the fort to hear just about every word they said and every time their footsteps creaked on the wood below I heard that too.

They were going over now, they said. If I wanted to come, I knew where to find them. But when I did, if I did, they added, I would have to apologize for

being rude and disrespectful, and that I could forget about dinner, forget about anything but sitting there, hands crossed like a decent child, not hiding in a book, not making things up about birthmarks or biting, or magic stones.

"Stop that," my mother shrieked, "that's only keeping him up there."

"Well he's not coming down. I don't know what else to say." My father tried the doorknob again, but the lock held, and he gave up. Then, out of the silence, I heard, softly, "I'm sorry," although I did not know which of them had said it, for the voice was so thin and young, like mine.

Their footsteps led away. They grew dim, became snow over snow, but I couldn't be sure. They could still be out there, hiding on the other side of the door, pretending to have gone by moving slightly and tapping ever lighter and lighter to later spring up and catch me if I went down too early to check, so I waited. Lying on my stomach, I waited. And because I hadn't slept at all the night before, my eyes fluttered and were heavy and at some point, setting my head to a pile of books, closed my eyes and fell asleep.

When I woke it was neither light nor dark. The room was soft with grey. I could see my hands before me, my arms, the walls, the floor, but just barely, and I did not know how long I'd slept. Thick clouds could have come and perhaps it was only an hour, or perhaps longer, and nearer to dusk.

Down the stairs the key was still in the door. Outside the window it was raining, misting, and at first that was all I heard. Then, crawling out of the blankets, I heard a creak and a sigh, a ruffle by the windows near my bed, and I stood up. It was quiet. The sound was shy. It slipped away and my ears touched the drops on the roof, touched the red skating leaf on slate, and then again the

creak, the wooden moan, and the sighing I knew was not wind or rain or low thunder, but human, two humans—it was breath being breathed, very old, very strange. I could hear one deeper and one less firm, layering and weaving together. It swelled and it fell and I followed it, holding my own breath to better hear. I stepped closer. It was not from outside, I knew. It was inside. It is here with me, I thought, and then, shivering: I am here with it. It is in my bed. I am here with it. I can see it. It is here with me. It is moving. The covers of the bed in the corner of my room were moving.

In a hunched wave they rose up, crested, then sunk, and the wooden bed-frame creaked, then sighed. The shapes became clearer, the voices louder. They sounded somehow familiar now, although I had never heard them make these sounds before. I reached out a hand and began to pull the sheets away. I was shaking, and out of fear or reflex, I let the sheet drop back as soon as I saw something under it. It fell, furling, covering half of the shape, and then, like water, like milk, it slid off the rest, but it did not matter anymore. I had seen enough, although not what I expected.

I had thought there would be bodies, and there wasn't. The sheets were pitched up by what appeared to be bones, and arms, someone's back, but there was only a dark mist underneath that produced some kind of illusion. It moved slowly, though I felt I missed so much of where it went. And in that way it was it really was like water and it really was like milk. It was dark, and I could see through it, as though a pool had been lifted up out of the ground to hover and ripple, and sometimes borrow the lines of an arm or leg or torso so that the two voices shared

a single body that changed, moved, changed itself again and again and again and again.

And as I stood over it, not breathing, not breathing at all, suddenly something else happened. There was a small, dim bead of light that was born up inside it. It burst up out of the belly of the mattress like a comet and even lightning, afraid as it is to open its eyes and face the world, could appear and go no quicker: I had never seen anything so quick. The light, pulsing blue then red began to grow and curl out of what had only been the size of a pea just a moment before. Small hands, small feet, I saw, unmoving, but forming. They bloomed from the stem of the light and the mist that wrapped around it echoed and swarmed with light. And there was an ear next, a nose, a mouth, a spine. And then there was a pain, an stabbing itch, where, just a day before on my arm the birthmark had been, and had fallen and disappeared into the same bed I stood over now, and in pain and fear, I ran.

I ran still hearing the moan of the voices in my mind, with a sickness in my stomach. I jumped down the stairs and through the door, ripping the key from the lock, and barreling through the halls, going down, away, going away as far and as fast as I could.

The house was too dark to feel like mine anymore. It could have been anybody's and even the sounds of the creaking stairs and floorboards no longer sounded warm. They were my bed upstairs, the voices, and the thing growing out of it, which had come from my birthmark, I knew, though I did not know how.

I paused over the sink in the kitchen, looking for a flashlight, or a box of matches to light a new candle, and spat out a long filmy tongue of vomit. I grabbed

my stomach, spat again, this time burning my throat. Picking my head up there was a light. It was not like the light that had glowed upstairs. There was an orange heat to it, a perfect square, and it was outside the window, across the gap between the houses and I could see my mother in the other house, soft and safe. They hadn't come back yet. They were still there, and without taking anything, or thinking, I sprinted out the front door and started down the porch, went around the dead lamppost, across the damp yard, the driveway, and over the fallen branches I did not see until they were under me.

I set my foot on the stairs. They did not make a sound. I came to remember I had rarely ever used the front as an entrance, when Isaac still lived there. It was too formal, maybe, or perhaps we liked the secret of going through the back. I tried to push him out of my mind as I lifted my hands to knock on the door. I looked back to my house, almost lost in the night, and tapped three times on the wood.

The Unbuttoned Man opened the door.

"Is it him?" came my mother's voice, from behind him somewhere.

"Yes," he said, "it's him," and my mother let out a rush of air, and stood up and appeared just to the side of him, below his shoulder, her hands on her hips.

"Come here," she said.

I stepped into the house. The door was shut behind me.

"There, now, take off your shoes and I want you to apologize to this nice man, and to thank him for letting us stay here until the tree is removed. It was very kind of him."

I apologized, and thanked him. He held out a large, callused hand. I shook it. I wondered why they thought I had come over at last. Did they think I was scared of the dark, or that I was hungry? The thought of food sent a shiver through me. I hadn't eaten in almost a full day, and there was still food I saw on a table, but my mother informed me that, as they'd said when I had the choice, when I locked myself in my room and would not come out, I would not be having anything to eat until the morning.

I looked around at the house as she talked. She told me they were going to bed, and that my father was already sleeping, and the Unbuttoned Man's wife was sleeping too, and I had to be quiet when we went up. She'd show me the room, she said, and I saw the stairs were in the same place, right in front of the door, splitting the rooms so that on the left there was the kitchen and the table that was the dining room and to the right was the living room, both rooms dark and hard to see, but crowded up with boxes, as though they were the same boxes I had seen before Isaac had left, and they hadn't taken them away, just left them.

They showed me up the stairs, and pointed down the hallway to the left. "We're in the last door," my mother whispered, "if you need anything. That's their room, just across the bathroom here, and down to the right, that's where you'll be. They didn't sleep well last night either, so be as quiet as you can, if you need to use the bathroom or you get scared." She kissed me on the forehead, which seemed more like a formality, as out of place as the "Goodnight," she said afterwards, considering everything that had happened.

I went down the hall into the room.

I did not remember ever going into this room before, when Isaac had lived here. I could see his room clearly, on the other side of the hallway: the clothes he never picked up, all the drawings scattered around the floor, the green paint and the airplanes he'd hung from his ceiling, the dinosaurs. There was a mattress on the ground in this room taking up most of the floor, boxes stacked around it. Not much had been taken out. It was quite empty. There was a desk, a chair.

On the left against the wall was the bed and the girl, the one who had bitten me. She was sitting with her legs crossed, reading a book.

"Why are you doing this to me?" I said as soon as I saw her. I did not know why I said it.

She looked up and smiled. "You came!" She put the book down and started to get up.

Backing away toward the window I said, "I know you did this and I want you to stop."

"What?" she said. "What did I do?"

"You put those things in my bed. I know it was you." And I remembered I had to be quiet and I whispered: "And you probably sent the tree falling into my house too, and this storm."

"Hey!" Her dark eyes held me, her teeth bright in the poor lighting. "I didn't put anything in your bed. I've never even seen your bed. How could I put something in there if I've never seen it!" She sat up straighter. "Are you still angry about those stones?"

"Where are they?"

"They're right there, don't worry," she said, pointing to the desk, where the wood of my offering was lying alone, with the stones.

"What did you do to them?"

"I cleaned them."

There was barely any gold left on them.

"Did you come over here just to yell at me?" she said.

"I came because you bit me!"

"What does that have to do with anything?" she said.

"You know why."

"But I don't know why."

"The thing," I said, not knowing what to call it, "came out of my birthmark after I scratched it off. And I scratched it off because you bit me there and it itched."

"Because I bit you?"

"Yes."

"Well I bit a girl called Alice in my old school and she didn't say whatever you're saying. Also," and she let the word hang there, "she was crazy like you. I hated her."

"I hate you."

I had never said that before, to anyone.

I grabbed the pillow on the mattress and threw it at her. She hadn't expected it, and so it hit her head and sort of bumped her into the wall and she picked it back up and threw it, hurled it at me and afterwards, grabbed one of my stones and closed her fist around it, and I saw her arm pitch back and I ducked out

of the way just as the stone flew away over my head, struck the wall, and heard the window pane crack.

We were silent. We both looked at each other and said nothing.

Suddenly, from outside the door I heard footsteps, traveling slowly along the hallway. The Unbuttoned Man opened the door. He stood big in his shadow. He looked at the window and its star-shaped hole, where a cold wind had started to leak inside and then back at her, to me, to her. I told him she'd thrown my stone at me, "And it did that," I said, angry, wanting her in trouble. "Thank you," he said. He did not ask her if she'd done it, or why, but told her to come down the stairs with him, and pick up whatever it was she had just thrown.

The girl sunk inwards.

She got up off the bed and slid off the side of it and passed me without looking at me.

"We'll get it back to you," the Unbuttoned Man said.

The door closed behind them.

I heard them go down and go out into the night, and the girl, a faint, pale shape among the dark, bent with her face close to the ground and searched under leaves and in the grass and said: "I can't find it. It's not here."

But from the broken window in the room I could not see the Unbuttoned Man. He was on the porch, I guessed, under the low roof that pitched out over it. And though I could not see him, I knew he was there, watching her, as I knew there was something growing out of the birthmark in my bed, both of them shadows, both of them bad.

Five

THEY DID NOT come back. Alone, the cold leaked in through the broken window with the sound of the rain and I stepped away, sat on the mattress, unable to sleep, eyes open and listening. I picked up my legs, hugged them close to my chest. Crossing over the lawn, running through the darkness, I had not worn any shoes, just socks, I realized, looking down over my knees. The bottoms were no longer white. They were wet and moist with mud and shredded leaves, some grass, and each time the wind skirled in to puddle at my feet, I was standing on ice. I dug a finger in at the foot-hole and slipped them off, and set them on the ground in a messy heap. Then I buried my feet away into the blankets I'd been given. There were two of them, one a little less scratchy than the other, and so I set that one down on my skin and the other overtop it. I was still cold, though. And hungry. I hadn't eaten anything all day.

Earlier, there had been sharp pangs of hunger, needling, growling, but they had passed and now all that was left was a heavy, dirty ache. I wanted nothing more than to sneak away downstairs to steal the food I had seen on the counter when I'd come in, before the window was broken. It seemed so long ago, black and white in my mind. It could work. The two of them: the Unbuttoned Man and the girl were outside. I would be able to go down and they would not see me, not if I was quick. I would slip down the stairs into the kitchen and take a piece of bread, a fruit, a leftover, anything; I was so hungry.

Even Max had left *Where The Wild Things Are* and traveled in and out of weeks across sea and storm to have his supper in the book by the only children's author I knew by name: Sendak, because I would point to it and cry in a rhyme "That, that!" before I could read myself. "Sendak, that!"

For a while I could still hear the girl's feet swishing far below in the grass, sometimes a twig snapping, or a bush being parted, returned. I slid the blankets off. I stood up. I moved to the door.

As I did so, the footsteps outside suddenly paused. Had they found it? I imagined them bending down at last and picking up the stone, now dirty again, unclean, but I heard a voice, very small, say something too small to hear. There were footsteps again, blurry in the grass, and then firm on the porch steps, the front door clicking shut. I hurried back into the bed and waited for the stairs to creak and the bedroom door to open and if I heard the stone click against the table I would know, and I waited.

They weren't coming up. They moved off into the kitchen, instead, away from me, since the living room was under me, and the stairs remained untouched. Maybe they were making something? Maybe she was hungry too, or he was? I didn't know what else could be happening. Were they cleaning the stone in the sink to give back to me? A pot or bowl slid over a counter. Perhaps, I thought. But, no, water, I heard. They were making something.

Go down, go down, I hissed through my teeth, standing up again, pressing my ear to the wood of the door. A click like the turning on of a stovetop. It was so quiet, so muted that if I had been sleeping I would not have heard it. But again soon after there was silence, thick darkness, and the room that was not my room

pressed itself together and twisted my stomach and, biting my lip, I turned the doorknob without a sound and went out.

It was not far to the stairs. Like my own house it was very small. Down the hallway my parents were sleeping, and the girl's mother somewhere too was asleep. The kitchen would be just to my right, so all I had to do was step down enough, maybe three stairs, two stairs, to see below the lip of the second floor and, through the railing, make out if they were eating, or smell what they were cooking. There was a light on, luckily. Pale and yellow it drenched the wall, and everything else bled blue and dark. I held the banister with one hand and my stomach with the other, like a muzzle. It didn't smell like anything was cooking. I took a step. Another step. The stairs were quiet. I clawed the skin of my stomach, and stooped, bent at the waist, and when I saw it I did not understand. It was like looking at the bed again, but worse.

From between two of the wooden bars on the banister I saw the Unbuttoned Man holding the girl who was not his daughter by the arm, as she struggled, all of it silent. Her face was twisted into a foul root, seen from the side, and all that I could see of him was the back of his head. They were at the stovetop. He was so much taller than her. Even when she slipped out of his grasp, once, sliding her hand out from under his hand, he reached out to grab it, missed, and got her by the arm instead, and the way he gripped it, his fingers laced all the way around, as though he were holding a stick and would break it if it pulled against him. He was facing me now, and my stomach gasped out a groan, and I clenched, but I could not move my feet. His eyes were two shreds of underground, cold and yet hot, never leaving her. He dragged her, hissing in a venomous whisper, teeth

together, as silent as he could, "Stop moving." She whimpered. "You're not going to ruin this house like the last one, okay? You're not going to ruin this fucking house in front of these people. Which hand was it?" She didn't say anything. "Which hand threw the stone?" At once, he raised his hand to hit her, but if he hit her, it would be loud and so he yanked on her and pressed his dark mouth to her ear, his hair no longer slicked back and neat, but fanged over his face, and he asked again I guessed, though I could not hear. Her eyes were closed. She raised her right hand. The Unbuttoned Man took it and took her and held her hand down, palm to the stovetop. I watched as he twisted the dial and the flat glass burner burned redder and redder and I imagined the key to my palate expander turning and turning and wrenching until I would never be able to feel anything again, as her hand was burned, and I did nothing. I did nothing. I only watched and stood there on the steps, watched, and when her hand was taken off and the red glow died, I rushed away back up the stairs and could see nothing else. I laid on the floor again, threw the blankets over my head and body, and shut my eyes, shut myself off from what I'd seen but could not scrape it away from becoming my father, my mother; they would never do that. But I saw them doing that. I saw the girl and that man, over and over, and I wanted to go home. I wanted my bed back from whatever was in it, I wanted my eyes back, my body back, and now she had not only taken my house from me but my body as well. It was not her fault, no, but I felt that. Did it make me a monster? How could I feel something like that when I had just seen what I'd seen—was I evil? Was I a wolf after all as everyone had said, and come full moon I would finally grow hair to cover my skin and change?

I do not know how long I lay there, breathless.

When she came in I could hear nothing else.

Softly, the door inched open and then closed with a click. She was sniffing a little, trying to be quiet as I was, both of us not wanting to say anything. I kept my eyes closed under the blankets, but I heard her step shyly around the mattress and climb gingerly into her bed, as if it too was a thing that would hurt her. She did not pull the covers over, not at first. She sat there, maybe numb, maybe gone from her body.

My mouth was dry.

I heard the covers rustle, like little swirls of water, and finally, in the darkness, she began to cry: a controlled and quiet cry that she had learned, over time, to perfect. And as I lay there, pretending to be dead, not knowing what to say to her, or if there was anything to say to her, I could hear her bed drinking the tears drop by drop, and yet it could have easily have been the rain.

IT WOULD HAVE been safer to say that I had imagined most of it. No other time in my life had a memory opened so much of me up and, in a single stroke, resurrected me—let me live again as myself in a smaller, newer body that I in time had shed and forgot. Or if not simply forgot than erased for the mere sake of becoming someone else, although I had always wondered if there was anything behind me, prowling, silent. I wondered if I were to step back I would not simply descend into spacelessness and void, but that there was, somewhere, an iron nail, invisible, pinning the flapping tent-cloth of my person to the ground, which I alone could not rip out. And there was a comfort in knowing there was now. I was no longer penumbrous. I looked down at my hands and saw that every line and crease was holding something small enough to be valuable, that there were other islands set in my archipelago, other me's, other scraps of land etched out of the sea for me to visit and climb and set to port, no more the castaway without a ship, no more the weathervane bound to show direction and never move its own feet. And yet even still, regardless, there was a fear far greater to knowing that what I had lived I had lived; the story did not need to be found for it had already been found and instead, like a wave returning to the shore, growing old and bending its back before the break and dying, could only ever be retold and retold again.

There were things that recurred: there were storms that came, trees that fell. I was in the house Isaac had moved to when he had left me—I was sure—in another state, far away. There was a small girl downstairs, asleep, that I had only just heard crying, in the memory. The two places, the two once disparate settings, now seemed equidistant, and the residue of one stuck and clung to the other.

I sat down and tried to collect myself. The sky was still dark; it was night; the rain had almost stopped. In the corner of the room, just above my head on a wardrobe, shone the lantern I'd found under the sink, when the power first went out. The light was rusty and reddish. It lit the small room well enough to see everything inside it. There was not much beside the bed and the window, still closed to the outside, the curtains drawn. But the floor, which before had been ivied with clothes and papers, was clean.

Slowly I stood up again and checked the wardrobe for the clothes, but it was empty as well. The papers, toys, scribbled on, loved, and cared for, were gone. Had there never been any? I was sure there had been. As I'd walked in, I'd seen them and known instantly where I was, that I had been there before, but now perhaps, having been there and having gone back, it had all left again, and vanished, began to grow faint in my mind, even as I tried to hold on.

There was a knock on the door.

It was the girl, I thought. She's woken up and heard my footsteps above her, through the wood. They were faint enough, very light like a tapping faucet, but when I cracked the door from the lock there was nobody on the landing, and the knocking came again. It was floating up from down the stairs. I went down and directed the light towards the girl from between the old banister: she was still

asleep in the chair where I had set her. The fireplace had yet to be lit. The old room with its low ceiling and its dark wood walls and its musty smell curled up and slept all around her. She looked cold, despite the blanket I'd laid over her.

The knocking came louder.

I'll come back and check on her, I said to myself. After I open the door, I'll find the matches and light a fire, and she'll be okay. She'll be okay. In the back of my mind I still saw her stepfather arched over her again, tall but ill formed like a scaffold, and her little hand on the stovetop. I'll look at her hand, I thought. Then I'll know if it's really her, or somebody else, somebody that might only have looked like her, and flared the memory inside me instead.

I followed the knockings. They came from the newer side of the house, from the front. I opened the door. An older man stood on the porch, white-haired, with a hood, and bearded with a few faint whispers of hair. He seemed surprised to see me, but didn't show it with his face, which was pale and a little red on the cheeks and the tip of the nose, but rather with his eyes, two bird eggs, and also, more discreetly, the hasty shuffle of his feet, in the large brown boots he wore, all of him dripping with rain, and frowning.

I explained what I was doing there, before he could ask.

"Oh," he said, when I'd finished. The people who lived here were my distant relatives. They were going up to the coast for the summer and I was watching the house, being in between leases on apartments and not having a home close by to go back to, I said. His voice was gravely, he mumbled. He nodded. A small smile cracked the stonework of his cheeks. "I just, well...I just didn't expect you there was all."

"Sorry about that," I said.

"No, no don't be sorry. No need for that; not your fault. They didn't tell us they were going anywhere."

"No?" I asked.

"No," he said. "But that's probably being a little unfair. We've not seen 'em in two or three weeks. I was up at the hospital on Lafferty and West with Holly for a bit and that took up some time, but we're back home now." He scratched his chin. "It's good to be back home, when you've been in a place like that. You said they went up the coast?"

"Yes."

He swallowed. "Well they picked a good time, didn't they," he said, and chuckled a little. Most of the time it was hard to hear what he was saying. I guessed he was friend of theirs, lived nearby somewhere, but he never told me so. "I'd just come over to see how they were in all this, with the power and the wind and things shot as they are. There's a tree down over a line some ways," and he gestured with his hand, taking it out and slipping it back into the pocket of his coat.

"There's a tree down behind the house too," I said.

He didn't seem to believe me.

"I can show you if you want."

"The big one?" he said.

I assumed so.

His shoulders slouched. "Holly loved that tree."

I closed the door as we went out to look at what had happened. I carried the lantern and the keys that were to be hooked back beside the door, with the hats, when I was finished with them. He slipped a small flashlight from his pant-pocket and we walked around the side of the house. The air was thick, fuzzy with rain-mist.

"Course she wouldn't really remember it," he said, between our footsteps and the squelching grass. "Doesn't really 'member much 'cept she likes those hospital potatoes," he said, and then, more to himself. "Still knows my name. Still knows hers. And potatoes. Damn potatoes. I've got a number back home," he said, louder, all of sudden. "Good folks to help clean up the tree. Couple years back we had a snowstorm. Big branch came down across the drive and they were over next mornin'. Good folks. I'd give it to you now, but, off the top of my head, I don't know... something 2324 at the end maybe. I'll give it to you later."

"Thank you," I said. He muttered.

Just then the tree rose up in our light. We stopped. The branches bent and hooked and bent again, snapped, frayed, writhed and waved a thousand little green flags our way, displaying some unknown country or province without writing or law.

"There used to be a kid lived here," he said, after a long silence. "Bright red hair, always runnin' around. Don't know where he went to, before your relatives came and bought the place, but he'd climb this tree as though it were going somewhere or something. Holly and I, we had a dog then, and we'd walk it around, a little dog, and we'd see him. Down that way there's a nice river Holly liked, and we'd walk there, through the fields and around. Tell her now and she

doesn't know what I'm talking about. But we did that. And one day we were coming back, and it was getting a little dark, I think, and we seen him up there, climbing around, a little redhead, and then like a sack of...like a fifty pound weight, he drops out of the tree right on his arm, screaming, howling. Next day, though, coming back, same time just about, we saw with him with a cast on his arm, right back up there. "

That sounded like Isaac.

I turned back to the house. So he had lived here, I thought. My eyes drifted back up to the window. So this is where he went. How did I know that earlier, before all this, when I was just here on the grass under the tree, reading?

"You been up there yet?"

"In the room?"

He shone the flashlight on the shutters and glass.

"Yeah. The small one."

"Just tonight actually," I said. "I was looking for matches."

"What for?"

"The fireplace, candles."

"Oh. I'll show you where they are when we go back if you still need 'em. Yep." He walked in closer to the tree, looking at the bole of it, and then back. "That room's how you know the place is pretty old."

"It's a bedroom right?"

He shook his head. "It's a fainting room."

I'd never heard of a fainting room.

"Holly told me. Told them too. They didn't know what it was either. Holly was smart like that. Knew stuff, but most of the time—I mean, she was quiet, reserved—but most of the time she never told anybody. Most of the time you had me yapping aroun' and not really makin' much sense."

In the 19th century, supposedly, he said, you had rooms in houses, small places, just a bed, a mirror, like a closet or cupboard, and the women, wearing tight corsets all the time and all those layers of clothes in the summer would, out of breath, naturally faint.

"So they made the rooms, Holly said, and they'd go in there when they felt light, faint, and come out again."

"You would think they'd just have them take off the corsets," I said. "Instead of making a whole room for them to faint in."

"You would think," he said.

We walked back around the house, through the slow rain and wind, and he showed me where the matches were in the kitchen. I don't think he wanted to leave; he kept talking. He talked about baseball and fishing and golfing and driving and his two sons, on the other side of the country, whom he hadn't seen for eight years. He couldn't talk like this to Holly anymore, and so I let him. Although I was always thinking of the girl in the other room, and getting back to her, to help, but I listened.

In the end, about an hour later, he said: "I'll be over tomorrow with the information for the tree," and then, getting up and nodding his head once, he turned away into the darkness, and disappeared.

I closed the door.

Grabbing some loose newspaper clippings and the matches, the lantern, I hurried back into the old sitting room. I set the lantern back on the table near the chair and tore up the paper and spread the pieces through the ashes so the kindling had a chance to spark and leap its way up to the larger oakwood taken from the tree outside. On the third match the fire bloomed and the heat came with the light and the acrobatic shadows. The room was very red. Red enough so that when I turned back to the girl, in the light, she seemed to have changed. She seemed to have grown older. I'd thought it was only because of the strange light, but as I moved the armchair a little closer to the flames to keep the shadows at the margins of her face, and she came into view, still sleeping, she was not as small as when I had pulled her out of the tree. The dress that had fanned and billowed out around her still billowed and fanned over the chair, but it was closer to her at the shoulders and the arms. Her face was not as soft, her nose sharper and even her hair was not as long. Years had gone by inside her as I'd been up in that room.

I reached out to look at her hand, but pulled back. In the palm, almost too faint to see, was a pale and ragged scar that I would never have seen or known without remembering, and my fingers traced it without touching the skin while she still, unfeeling, slept without fluttering her eyes, just breathing in and out, as though she would do so forever. Out of my eyes and down my cheeks tears came, but I was not sad. I didn't even know her name, not yet. But I was guilty for what I'd let happen to her, how I'd watched, how I still watched her sleeping in the chair and could do nothing and how she deserved none of it, how I'd caused her to throw the stones and that it should have been my hand that was burned.

And then pulling my hand back into myself, and looking into the light of the fire, the flame began to remember, and so too did I: I remembered being in her room, remembered falling asleep and drifting, tumbling, remembered how much I wanted to be in my own bed, and dreamed that I was, dreamed I was there, under the covers, warm, and safe. I remembered the knots in the wooden panels my father and grandfather had laid down and painted, remembered the musty smell of the carpet, and the blue of the walls in the darkness. I even remembered the dream I would have more than any other, how it started with stairs and creaking, as I slept in bed. There was a figure, wearing only black, a creature, and it rose up out of the shadows, its shoulders long and stooped, walking slowly, clumsily, very thin and gaunt with bright and terrible eyes that seldom ever moved or blinked. It came to my bedside, and folded back the covers, and dragged it down to my toes, and reached over me, and cradled me, as I lay there, unable to move or speak. Then the creature would carry me, climbing out of the window, and down off the roof, over a tree and into the forest, where we passed through the darkness and an open field of tall swaying grass where there were thousands of stars and into the tree it would place me and again out of the tree I was born, sweating, waking; and I remembered how I always wondered if it really was a dream at all, or if it was something darker, a nightmare, or something even darker than that: the truth—what I have never said but known.

Six

I WOKE UP in the morning without knowing I had slept. One moment I found I was lying in the darkness, too afraid to even breathe, and the next it was bright, the room changed, and the girl, her blanket on the floor, was no longer in her bed. At the window, the hole the stone had made was covered. It had been patched in three or four strips of black tape and around it, very pale, light crowded into the room, and there were hardly any shadows anywhere. It was still cold though; the tape did not fix that. I half-leaned-half-stretched-half-rose up from the mattress, careful to keep my blankets cloaked around me, and peered over to see if she had maybe brushed closer to the wall, but she wasn't there either, wasn't crumpled in the corner or wedged, sock-like, between pillows. It was just me. No one else.

In my own room, in the attic, in the trees, I kept little candies and chocolates tucked into that space between the wall and the bedframe. It was a perfect space for that. I kept my stuffed rabbit I named Rabbit there too. At Easter, when I was no more than a year old, my grandmother had given him to me and, almost immediately, I loved him more dearly and more deeply than any other toy, for every day after. He had wonderful floppy green ears with blue denim lining inside them, which most of the time I fixed into hair, slicking one back and pushing the other forward, so that it sliced down over one of the embroidered eyes, and sometimes, if I didn't want him to see something, both ears would be hung over like a blindfold, or both pulled back, if we were eating.

Then, some years later, wanting to play with him, I reached my hand into the crevice and touched something wet. Pulling him out by the hand, the R on his blue plaid shirt was blotched with brown, and I ran to my mother, crying, thinking that he had bled and was dying, but it was only that the chocolates had melted, she showed me, and oozed out of their wrappers in the summer heat. After that, she told me not to keep the chocolates there anymore, and for a day or two I listened, but not for long. Soon I was scooting Rabbit a little further up, and finally, finding a small pillow just his size for him to sleep on.

I wished more than anything that I was holding him again. It would have made things a little easier, a little less scary maybe, although mostly I think I just needed someone to talk to. Someone who would listen and then say nothing after I was done talking, just listen, just hear.

If either of my parents came into the room I decided I wouldn't tell them anything of what the Unbuttoned Man had done. It was too horrible to say. I didn't know the words. If her mother came in, I wouldn't say anything either; I was too scared she knew about it, and did nothing to stop it. I would try to look at her as little as possible, in case my eyes gave anything away. And the same was true if the girl came back. I would try to keep my eyes glued to the ground or my feet, studying the way the toe beside my little toe curved under the the middle toe and looked vaguely broken but never hurt. And if her step-father, his shirt still unbuttoned, his hair still oily and shiny, came in to check on me, to ask me to come down, I did not know what I would do. Would I hit him? Would I scream, cry, run away, or simply stand there, in fear? Would I say I saw you? Or would I only act like nothing had happened, thank him for having helped my family and trying

to find the stone that had broken the window? I didn't know. It all seemed too big to fit inside me. I was too young, too small; I was only the corner of a room, one sleeve of a shirt. I wished he didn't come. I prayed he didn't. I wished I was back in my room. My room with my chocolates and my Rabbit. In my mind, I tried to reposition the furniture in this foreign and yet familiar place, tried to bend the roof and change the walls into my walls and my roof, but it was pointless; it only made me sad to try it again and again and to fail. And besides, I couldn't go back.

The tree had fallen. It wasn't safe. There was something in my bed, growing out of it, out of the birthmark I had scratched off my skin. It was something alive, but not the alive that I was. That was the part that scared me the most. It was something that had been inside me once, perhaps always, and had come out at last, and had taken me away from where I belonged, where I had built up all my magics, had painted the stones in my fort and had made my offering and found it all ruined by the simple act of appearing, an intruder, having borrowed my own skin without me ever even knowing.

On the floor now around me the stones lay scattered. When she'd thrown them last night, after we fought and I'd thrown the pillow at her, the ones that didn't go through the glass had stayed inside. Seeing them, here and there, I stood up, and began gathering them together again, one after the other, and set them in a pile on the desk. There had been ten of them before, a tithe—now there were only seven; one under the bed, a couple near the boxes.

There were lots of boxes in that room. They were stacked two or three high, some opened, some closed, and on the wall just behind me some books were pinched together on a brightly colored shelf that looked to be hand-painted, where

a stone lay all by itself, amid scrawled clouds and palm trees and waves. I picked the stone up, then put it back with the other stones, crouched down to look at the books. There is almost never anything menacing about a book; books are like bread, with hard crust on the outside and soft, good stuff on the inside, perfectly shaped.

I opened the first one. It was a book of Egyptian Mythology. Osiris, a god, was tricked into lying within his own coffin, and was tossed out into the Nile by his evil brother, Set. And there was Mayan mythology too beside it, a book of fairytales, and a Sendak picture book I'd never seen before between *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *The Magician's Nephew*, a book called *The Witches* by the man who wrote *Matilda*, and a small book, off to the side, about an ogre who was not quite ugly enough to fit in with her ugly family and so she left, only to come back later and find that aliens had abducted them all because they liked how they smelled and wanted to make soap out of them.

On the lower shelf there were adult books. Pumpernickle books and rye. Books with quiet covers, and dull titles like: *Jane Eyre* and *Mansfield Park* beside *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Bleak House*. They seemed like books they made you read in school, so I stopped looking at them, but only after opening a page randomly and finding: "I sat there for another hour or more, finishing my books and payments, and getting through plenty of business. Then, I arranged my desk, and put everything away, and was so composed and cheerful that I thought I had quite dismissed this unexpected incident. But, when I went up-stairs to my own room, I suprised myself by beginning to laugh about it, and then surprised myself still more by beginning to cry about it. In short, I was in a flutter for a little while;

and felt as if an old chord had been more coarsely touched than it ever had been since the days of the dear old doll, long buried in the garden," and not understanding how she could understand any of it, put it back in its place.

By the window, there was another stone, and I went over, quietly, and picked it up. There was something on it, something shiny. I nudged it around in my palm a little, squinting, before realizing what it was. Very quietly, like a deer in a wood, the gold paint was still there, when given to the light, even though the girl had said she'd cleaned them. It was the paint I'd covered the stones in after Isaac had told me he was leaving that night, alone, in my fort in the summer, and I had wanted a friend that stayed—a friend that wouldn't abandon me, or move to some new house in another state because their mother or father found a new job: a friend that would be with me always, as the forest had been with me always, behind me, my shadow.

My fingers closed tight around the stone, remembering the morning I had gone to the stream. They closed tight and they closed warm.

There was still some magic left in it, I could feel. There were old mountains, slow water, warm fire, wet fields. It was fading, but it was still there. I felt it in my hand, felt it in my fingers, while my other hand, free, was peeling the black tape from the window where it covered the hole—until it was off and dangled, limply, and the cold air coursed into the room. There were no curtains or blinds to move aside or part, and so all at once, in one sharp motion, I threw the stone out over the roof and watched it, falling, shrink and vanish before meeting the ground in silence.

I had thought it would have made me feel better, but it didn't. Instead, it only made me feel the way a cold shower always seems to trick you into getting into it on a hot midsummer's day, to leave you shivering and blue afterwards, holding yourself for fear you might, at the worst, freeze away into snow, or leap out of your skin. There was nothing nice about it. And taking back my hand, trying to patch the tape over the hole again, I found I was bleeding. A small bright bead of blood glistened upon my fingertip, and on the glass, along one of the jagged ends, a pinkish smudge shone where I'd cut it. With my sleeve I cleaned it off, then finished replacing the tape. With my mouth, I sucked the blood away from my finger, tasted iron and dirt. The blood welled back up.

"I thought I heard little feet up here," said a voice, from behind me, and I turned around, startled, hiding my hand behind my back. There were still some ends of the tape that weren't flattened, that were crinkled and ruffled, but the voice was so soft and so light that, for a moment, I forgot about it, and only listened to what I'd first thought was the girl's voice, but turned out instead to be her mother's.

She stood alone in the opened doorway, holding a box beneath her arm. Her hair was long, brown, straight (not unlike the girl's) and her eyes were dark, amber whenever the light found them. Her pants had more pockets than I could count. They were like two apartments buildings, with balconies jutting off them; I tried not to stare, but I wondered what they were holding; I looked down; she wasn't wearing socks. And while she did in some ways look and sound like the girl, her daughter, (mostly around the eyes where there was a patch of freckles) she looked much more like a younger version of my own mother, or what I'd seen

of my mother in old pictures around the house, and in her room. She was thinner, but not thin, and did not paint her fingernails, which my mother had started to do, though I did not know why, and did not like the smell that filled the house when she did.

She said, "You were sleeping when I came in earlier," as she picked up another box. Using her thigh, she helped it atop the other one, and balanced them both on her hip: "You're parents were kind of surprised. How was the mattress?" I said it was nice. "Good, good," she said, then moved across the room to the window to inspect the tape and the hole, and smoothed out the edges I'd creased, and cleared away some of the glass still on the ground. "We were gonna give it away before we moved, but I'm glad we kept it. Although I'm pretty sure it isn't as nice as your bed back home, though, right?"

I didn't say anything.

"It's okay, it's just a mattress. You don't have to be nice about it. You can say it stinks."

"It doesn't stink," I said, shaking my head. "It's okay."

She laughed through her teeth, and even her laugh was the same as the girl's: bubbly, bright, like water splashing. "Your parents told me you were a light sleeper, like my husband, so it must have pretty good I guess. You slept right through us putting up that tape. If it was me I would have too. I didn't even hear the window break." She tried bending down, and stopped. "Could you help me with just that one?"

I picked up the box she pointed to. It was a little heavy. She thanked me. My finger felt hot as I gripped it, but I tried to keep it off the cardboard, so it didn't stain, which made the box harder to hold, and awkward.

"I'm sorry she threw those stones at you," said the girl's mother, as she looked down at me, and then out the window. "She can get like that now and then...You weren't hurt though, right?"

I shook my head. Still a great part of me didn't know if she knew about what had happened last night. It seemed like she didn't, but I couldn't be sure. Adults have practiced lying for longer and were better at it than I was. Whenever I lied, it was never on purpose, I just didn't know how to say the truth, and wondered why if something was true it was so hard to say. My palms were sweating and I avoided her gaze, was scared she'd spy the blood on my finger, kept my eyes on the window and the sky, like her. Each time a gust of wind skirled inwards, the tape bowed, and then was sucked back out, like a bag over somebody's mouth, struggling to breathe.

She asked me if I was okay with the box, that it wasn't too heavy and when I said I was fine, she told me we were going to carry them downstairs, into the living room.

"There's breakfast down there, if you're hungry."

I was starving. The last thing I ate was the chocolate I kept in my fort before I fell asleep and woke up and then left my house, running. In the back of my mouth, between my teeth now I could taste the caramel and nougat. The palate expander was loose, had not been tightened, and actually moved once when my tongue touched it.

The girl's mother led me out of the room and into the hallway. We went down the hallway and down the steps. It didn't seem to matter at all that I had been in this house many times more than her; I still followed her. And what had felt so small and clogged the night before had somehow opened. The railing I had hidden behind and looked through looked like any other railing, like my railing, and the wooden floorboards creaked common creaks. The kitchen was full of smells but empty. There were dishes in the sink. My eyes locked upon the place where I had seen what I'd seen, but could not see it now; the sunlight and the dishes all made it seem like a different room altogether, or even a different house. Maybe, part of me thought, I simply didn't want to see it, and my brain was hiding it, had built a wall around it in my mind. Sometimes that happens. Your brain can build walls or tie nets that catch only certain things, and lets them, in time, slip out without warning. The house itself was a kind of bone, I decided, then, very big and oddly shaped, the ankle-bone of a giant or dragon, and the marrow of the bone had been replaced, had been taken out when Isaac had left, had been taken out this morning, and now refilled.

We set the boxes down near the front door, passed into the dining room and its large, round table.

"There you are," said my mother. She was eating what looked to be oatmeal, alone, and when she saw me she stopped. "Good morning." She ruffled my hair as I sat down, and scratched my back. "There's oatmeal, and some bread with butter, and I know you don't like berries, but there's some in a bowl here."

I ate the oatmeal as she talked.

"Are you feeling okay? You feel cold."

I shook my head, took another bite.

"Have you looked outside yet?"

No. I was avoiding it.

"Have you said thank you?"

"Thank you," I said, again.

"It's not a problem," said the girl's mother, from the kitchen. On the table beside my mother there was a plate of food, half-eaten, and a dirty fork, but an empty chair. I wondered if it was the girl's, and where she was, if she was okay. I wasn't angry at her anymore, I found; I couldn't be. In a way, though, I would have rather than been angry at her, if it meant that she hadn't been hurt as she was and cried as she did.

"It's still very nice," said my mother. "And you're sure you didn't wake up last night? Not even with the glass?"

"I didn't hear it," she said

"And neither did you husband?"

"Only for a little, he said. But he's a light sleeper."

Outside I could hear my father's voice, talking to the Unbuttoned Man. They were in my driveway, talking about I couldn't really tell. The blinds were down on the windows, so I could only hear their voices, like crickets in the summer, neither rising nor falling.

Then suddenly, the girl burst out of a door.

"You don't think it's too much?" she was saying, and took a seat at the table again, across from me, with the window behind her and the forest in the glass. Wrapped around her right hand, the hand her step-father had pushed to the

stovestop, was a knot of white gauze and linen. She swung it around, flicking her wrist clumsily and, noticing me, smiled and said, "Look," and tried to pick up her fork, and when she found she couldn't, slid it between one of the folds of cloth instead, so it stayed and started eating.

Her mother sat beside her and took the spoon out.

I didn't understand.

"Is it itchy?"

"A little," she said. "Not too bad."

Had she told them what happened? She couldn't have.

"I don't think it's too much," said her mother, looking at the wrapping.

"The main thing is that you don't want it touching anywhere else. Cause then it'll spread and—"

"You don't want that," said my mother, shaking her head. "Poison ivy like that's never nice, so it's good you caught it soon like you did. I had it on my hand once I think two years ago but I didn't know it and it was all down my arms and neck the next day. Do you remember that?"

I must have mumbled something because they went on talking.

"We'll have to rip it out. You said it was by the porch?"

"In the bushes," said the girl, nodding. "I couldn't see the leaves cause it was dark."

My mother asked if she'd put anything on it: an antiseptic, Neosporin, to lessen the pain.

"Normally, I'd have some herbs that would work. I'd make a poultice out of the leaves and the buds," said her mother, "so we don't really use Neosporin. I was pretty sure I packed them too, but I can't find them."

"You can put honeysuckle on it," I said, even though I knew it wouldn't help. It was just another lie, to fit into her lie.

"You could, yes, but we don't have any."

"How do you know about honeysuckle?" my mother asked.

"At camp," I said. One summer, the only summer I had ever gone to a camp, making tents, building fires, swimming in rivers: "I scraped my knee and a counselor got me honeysuckle and it didn't hurt anymore," then, "There's a bush of it outside."

My mother wanted to know where.

"At the bottom of the street. We could go and get it."

My mother squinted. "Would that work?"

"It's an antiseptic" said her mother. "The ones around here are probably Japanese honeysuckle, or woodbine, which I think Shakespeare used in one of his plays. And the Chinese used it a lot in medicines."

"Ok," said my mother. "Just come back before dark. That's all I ask"

"And let me ask her father first," said her mother, quietly, and went outside. When she came back, the Unbuttoned Man was behind her, taller than her, even though she was taller than both of my parents. I tried not to look at him, just down at my plate, but when I went to pick up my fork, I could see him in the upturned reflection, watery and spindly, staring past me with those dark, dark eyes. He crossed his arms.

"If they go out," he started, slow and heavy, "they can tell the police station about the tree and maybe someone can come by. It's not far?"

"No, it's not far," said my mother. "You know where the police station is?"

I nodded.

"The poison ivy will not be healed," he said. "But you can try, of course," and just as he was about to leave, he paused, and pointed to me. "Your'e bleeding."

I looked down at my hand. My fingers were clenched together, white-knuckled, and a stain of drying blood had formed.

I grabbed a napkin, embarassed, cleaned the blood off.

After that he left, split apart in the four prongs of the fork, and stepped back outside.

"Did you bring a jacket?" my mother asked, later, getting up and carrying her plate into the other room, as we were getting ready, and I was talking to the girl's mother about plants and how almost everything that we know, all of science, and all of math, are descendant from witches and hermits, cooking frog-legs and studying the stars.

"No," I said, I did not bring a jacket.

"Would you like to use mine? I'll go find it upstairs, and you help her with the dishes."

"Ok."

I carried the plates and the utencils, the forks and the knives, the spoons and cups and bowls into the kitchen and set them on the counter, beside the stove. My mother hurried up the stairs and the girl's mother showed me where the soap

was and the sponge, and then, because they didn't really know where to store them yet, I could just leave them on the side of the sink, on the countertop.

"Stay down here when you're done," said the girl, "I'm gonna go get my things and come back down" and she raced upstairs too, and I was alone. In the other room, her mother was looking in boxes, making small sounds, deciding which boxes to put things in, and where her jars of marshmallow root and yarrow and oatstraw were hiding. I sat down on the couch and then got up and wandered around the house, trying to remember where Isaac and I had drawn our pictures on rainy days. I came into the living room on the other side of the stairs, and in the dark grey light, there was a fishtank, a huge blue tank that took up the length of one of the walls.

There were no fish. Only small pebbles and rocks, some coral, and not even water.

"We had to take out all our fish before we left," I heard the girl say, suddenly. She was wearing her rainboots again and a jacket with a hood, so that her hair spilled down on either side of her long neck. "I was pretty sad."

"What did you do with them?"

"I wanted to put them back in the ocean, where they belonged," she said. "But my dad didn't want to drive that far. He said we'd get into traffic and it would take too long and we wouldn't get back in time to watch some show he wanted to watch, so we didn't do that."

It was interesting, I thought, hearing her talk about him, seeing the ways her eyes moved and her hand.

"We lived close enough to the ocean," she said. "It wouldn't have been that far, really. But he put them all in a big garbage bag, with some water in it, and since there was a lake outside out house, I watched him throw the bag over his shoulder and walk outside, in the rain, and dump them all in the lake. Which is horrible because they'd die in regular water. He thought I didn't see, but I did. I watched him."

"I'm sorry," I said. I told her about my own fish, William, who was like a knight in gold, shining armor, and how, after he died, I flushed him down the toilet and would not, for the next week, use the bathroom, out of respect.

"What did you do?"

"I went outside."

"Did you have any other pets, or just William?"

I told her about Rabbit, although he wasn't real, and also I told her about the two cats, and my mother being sick and allergic and giving them away to the cat lady down the street.

"There's a cat lady?"

I nodded, asked her the same question she asked me, and she nodded, excitedly, using her hand to count out: "Two poison dart frogs, a dog called Bluey and a green cheeked conure."

"A what?"

"He was a bird."

"Oh. I didn't know people had birds as pets."

"We did. He was so beautiful, too. He had green feathers, and his tail was like a fire; it was red and orange and blue. But we couldn't let him see himself in any mirrors or anything."

"Why not?"

"Because he'd fall in love with himself. Like Narcissus."

"The Greek myth?"

"Yes! I think I have a picture of him. Wait here, I wanna go get it."

"Okay," I said, and she threw back her hood and raced back up stairs. My mother came down almost at the same time. She handed me her jacket.

"You know," she said, as I slipped it on, handing me a pair of shoes too, since I'd run over only in socks. "We didn't do your palate expander last night. Or the night before," and she brought out the key from her pocket.

It was the first time all over again.

"I'll get you some clothes for tonight when you're out, since it looks like we'll be staying here again tonight. Where's that girl? Do you know her name?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I think she went upstairs to show me something."

"Well go up and get her, you don't have so much time."

I rushed upstairs. We came downstairs and stepped out onto the porch through the door. The air was cold.

"Be careful, please," said my mother. Her mother echoed.

"We will," she said, and skipped off down the stairs.

I gave a brief smile back, and then tried to catch up with her to tell her that she was going the wrong way.

Seven

SOON AFTER STEPPING outside and tugging her shoulder, we were on our way down to the honeysuckle bush. Over leaves and branches, we followed the sidewalk as it bowed and buckled, and for the first few moments we both said nothing. And yet whenever there was a puddle in the grass to our left, the girl, as if on principle, always made sure to veer aside and splash into it—however far, however large—and then return, boots squelching, to my side.

"It's not working," she said, after about four or five of them.

"What are you trying to do?"

We were near the middle of the street, and there were some birds flapping around and landing, looking for food in the ground.

"I'm trying—" she said, and then, spotting another, leapt, and splashed, and stood there, as the water settled back down into grass around her feet, "—to slip through."

Other than the birds and a couple neighbors, cleaning their yards and following the water down the slope of the street, wending through trees and debris and here and there an eyeball decoration or spider or bat from Halloween, we were the only ones out. It wasn't too cold or too quiet either; ahead I could hear an axe, chopping, and every now and then a wind in the treetops, dragging more leaves, and rustling, shifting, and standing quietly again, waiting for the next and the next to come.

"It would be like a tunnel," continued the girl. "Or a door. And if I slip through..." she said, thinking. "If I slip through... I change places with my shadow."

She splashed into another.

"You wouldn't be able to tell I was any different," she said. "I would look the same and I would still be able to remember everything, like all the books I've read, and your name, but I would know—" she paused. "What is your name?"

I told her.

"I would remember that, for example," she said. "And I would remember my name and my mother's name and my father's name," and then paused again, before stepping out of the puddle. "My name's Nettle."

The way she said it sounded as though she were merely reminding me. And for a little while after that she went on explaining what it would be like on the other side of the puddle: how it would be like the moon with its different phases and how there were, inside her, different phases which she had never known, and which, without them, she was not yet able to call herself herself, not really.

"But why would you want to switch places with your shadow?" I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I switched fathers," she said, and said it without sadness—just said it. "Maybe my real father fell into a puddle and I have his shadow now," and picked up a leaf, started peeling it apart as best she could, with her fingers and her hand wrapped as they were in the gauze. "Are both your parents real?"

I didn't know what to say.

She dropped the leaf.

"What I mean is that you came from both of them. Did you come from both of them?"

"Yes."

"Then they're real. I didn't come from him, the one you met inside. He came later, when my mom and I were alone."

I didn't know what she meant.

"Well," she started. "After my dad died, the real one, we didn't have anywhere to go."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It's okay. I was too young to really remember and everytime I ask my mom about it she doesn't want to say anything. It makes her upset I guess and I guess that makes sense. He was her true love. She told me that once. She said that sometimes people get lucky and that she got lucky, even if it didn't last."

"I'm sorry." It seemed the only thing to say, although it felt as though I was letting her down by saying it.

"All I know is that he drove his car into a tree," she said. "Like that tree or that tree," and she pointed towards two trees, standing near us, their leaves wet but still flaming red and orange and yellow. "I don't know the kind of tree. It was just a tree, really, in the story. His grave only has a tree too. It doesn't have a stone."

At that age, still trying peice together exactly what death was or how it worked, I had only been to one funeral. It was for my aunt, and we had driven for hours and then more hours and found the graveyard and all the graves in the field,

like the sails of ships at harbor, not going anywhere, not moving, but everybody had a headstone, I remembered, large or small, as far as I could see.

"It's because money," she said. "It costs money to have a stone and we didn't have any money. We got money and a house again when she met my second dad, and he kind of saved of us, but not really. I didn't want him to. He's not nice," but that was all she said. She stopped herself. She wiped her nose with the back of her hand. We carried on.

At once, the clouds opened and light fell around us, and the world was wrapped in a wet, shiny plastic for a moment and then shriveled back into grey flatness. I was still trying to figure out how best to tell her what I'd seen, what I knew, how her bandage—which she'd been picking at and peeling ever since we left the house—was hiding the wrong secret, but I couldn't find the words. She'd begun to tell me all the things she remembered her mother telling her, all the memories of her father, and she sounded too happy to scare her away with what I'd say, and so I left whatever I could have said inside me, unformed.

I was amazed at how grown-up she sounded as she spoke, how different she was to me. She knew so much about her parents, remembered details, pictures, as though if she did not, they would never have even existed. I hardly knew anything about mine. They were simply my parents, the people I lived with and who cared for me and who I spent the holidays with. I didn't know who their first loves were, or how they met, how my father asked my mother to marry him. They never told me. Sometimes, I wondered if they were being honest with me and that there were no stories to tell, or that they just assumed I didn't care, but I thought that was sad and didn't want to believe it. I wanted to have stories. Everybody

should have stories, I thought, even if they're sad, or not that great, they should have stories and they should tell them, and I was just about to tell the girl this, when, tapping my arm, she asked: "Is this the honeysuckle bush?"

We had come upon a small bridge, made of stone, that crossed over a canal. Every morning and afternoon I had walked over it, coming and going from school, but the water now, motionless, had flooded over the wooden barriers and swallowed up the grass and shrubs that grew on either side of it, crept up into the sidewalk and our faces, growing green flowers and red and purple.

I shook my head. "It's further than this."

"Oh, good," she said. "I didn't want to go back inside yet."

"No?"

"No. It doesn't really feel like my house yet. It could be anybody's and we're just sort of sitting in their body." She waved down to her reflection in the water.

"Have you ever moved?"

I said I hadn't.

She shook her head. "It's terrible," she said. "You're lucky. You have to put everything in boxes when you move and you always lose something or leave something behind. And, besides...actually nevermind."

"What?"

"Nevermind, I don't want to say it."

"Have you moved a lot?"

She counted on her fingers: "Virginia, Arizona, Florida, Illinois, then Florida again, but not for too long, and now here. So, six if I count Florida twice, which is kind of true since it wasn't the same house."

"I've never been to Florida," I said. It seemed another world in my mind, as far away as any fairytale, or neverland.

"I didn't like Florida either time we lived there," she said. "It's too hot and the leaves don't fall or change like this because there's only palm trees, which aren't real trees. Arizona was good, though, because it had the desert, and you could go out there and look up at all the stars and actually see them and hear your heart in your chest because it was so quiet." She stopped walking, as though listening for her heart, and then caught back up with me: "I couldn't hear it," she said, as we neared the end of the sidewalk, and had to cross the street.

Here, the water, which had flowed fast as we followed after it along the curbs, going down, slowed, and emptied out into the larger road to form a kind of shallow river, mirroring the field and the church that stood on the opposite side. I had walked past them many times, the church and the field, but had never seen them upside-down before. The cross on the steeple, unlike everything else, remained a cross; the stairs marched into the sky. We took off our shoes and stuffed our socks into them, picked up our pants around the ankles, "Like this," I said, then waded across. At the edges of the street, the water was colder and deeper where the pavement dipped and raised the water up to our shins. Nettle seemed to like that. She hurried ahead, splashing until there were little waves that curled and then flattened, and vanished behind her, encircling her, and even, spreading, encircled me. The forest, behind us, hung dark and knotted. It swallowed up our shadows, while up further, looking left, there were two trees that had fallen into the street, bridging the gap like the rungs of some great ladder a giant might

climb, and we had to curve around them—more to avoid the men with axes chopping the trees than anything else.

When we did, we returned to the sidewalk, and continued, passing a line of houses hedged one after another to our right.

"I thought you said the honeysuckle was across the street."

"It is," I said, although it was not as close as I'd said it was.

"Then why are we going this way?"

"I didn't know if our parents would have let us go if they knew it was farther," I said.

"Is it a lot farther?"

"Not so much."

"Can I tell you a story?"

"If you want."

"Do I have time?"

I nodded.

"Only if you tell me one too, okay?"

"Okay."

And she started to tell me a story. I heard most of it: there was a pot that some people found behind their house and it seemed like a normal pot. But when they dropped something into it one day, they found that more of that thing filled up the pot. She said the things that fell in, but part of me was listening and part of me was trying to figure out my own story to tell, one that wouldn't be boring, or stupid, and the only thing that I heard fall into the pot was the family's grandfather, who was cleaning, and fell in accidentally and died.

"So there were a ton of dead grandfathers and they had to bury them all with the money that fell in earlier—the end! Your turn."

I told her my story.

I said that when the Revolutionary War had happened George Washington had once used this road.

"The one we're walking on right now?"

"Yes."

There had been a battle a day before, in winter, south of us, and because the ground had frozen over at night, they were able to creep north, through the dark, unseen, and to fight another battle in a field I had played in once, with a tree that still had some of the bullets holes from the guns, if you looked close enough.

"Is that true?"

"I'm not lying."

"You're not making it up? I made mine up."

I told her it was true again.

"So this town's pretty old?"

"I guess," I said.

"I've never lived in an old place," she said, looking round at everything. I tried to follow her eyes. There were some signs I guess that had dates on things, scattered around, and some houses you couldn't live in because they were historical and looked like they'd fall apart if you did, but nothing about my town felt very old to me; it felt about as old I was: not older, not younger.

"Illinois kind of looked like this but it wasn't old." And she looked back over at me, her eyes dark. "Could I tell another story?"

"If you want."

She said, "We had our bird in Illinois, it reminded me," as above us, around us, the small blackbirds flew, looking for worms, singing softly.

"He was a lot louder than them," she said. "Sometimes I felt bad because, well, he was a bird, but we had to keep him locked in his cage. My mom sometimes let him out, and he'd zip and fly," and she skipped, and jumped into another puddle. "The windows had to be shut of course," she said. "But we probably shouldn't have done that because after we let him out the first time, he always wanted to be out, and he'd screech and screech if he wasn't. And my step-dad, who kind of liked him at first, started to hate him and shake his cage and my mom would get angry with him for it and then they'd screech and scream with the bird and I had to go to my room and pretend I was somewhere else."

"I do that a lot," I said.

"Yeah," she said. "It helps, but not always. Not too long after that started, all the yelling and stuff, I came home from school one day and when I went into the living room to play with him he was gone and the window was open. My mom, who was home, but would never do that, cried with me when I told her until my step-dad came home. But swore he was at work, and that he didn't come home for lunch or leave late, just said it was probably an accident and that one of us had left the window open and the bird had gotten out of his cage. He said we could maybe look for it, but it was dark out. He couldn't have survived anyway; it was winter. My mom and I loved that bird."

She looked ahead.

I imagined a bright green bird, with red on his chest, flying off through a cold and grey Illinois sky, not all that different from the one above us.

"You don't talk a lot, do you?" she said.

"Sorry." I was still thinking about the bird.

But the road turned and we turned with it, after that, crossing over an empty street to the library, which used to be a train station, and the field just before it, where the honeysuckle bush stood small and alone. In the summer sometimes when I'd finished my reading I'd come out here and take a little flower down and taste it, before starting back home. The petals weren't white as they were in the summer, I said; they were a little pink and some of the petals I saw had wilted and fallen to the ground, and there weren't as many as I thought there would be.

"How many should we bring back?"

"As many as we can carry," I said, and we started to pick them off, one by one, and to place them in our pockets until they were full. I felt like a thief but it wasn't stealing, they would grow back. We moved slowly, saying nothing, both pretending that what we picked up mattered, and with a different sort of weight, they weighed us down, weighed our pockets and our hands, and yet I still couldn't say it. Lies depend on themselves this way, growing out from one into another and more.

As we were leaving the bush, the clouds parted again. Light chased and ran, warm into pale into cold, needles threading us into air, into breeze. I pointed ahead, through a stand of five or six old evergreen trees, still in shade. "The police

station's just over there," I said, and we started towards them. Under their blue tents, between their coppery trunks, Nettle asked me: "What's in there?"

She was looking at the forest.

I said, "I don't know. I've never been in it."

The trees grew close and dark, wiry, violent, down in the palm of the hill we were walking on.

"You mean you've never...But you..."

"I never went in."

"Well, then I'd like to," she said, and picked up a honeysuckle she'd dropped. "Is it the same one behind our houses?"

I nodded.

"Then I've been in it once. Not a lot, but we can walk back that way, maybe. Would you want to? I can't believe you've never been in it."

"Maybe," I said, and hoped with all of my heart we wouldn't. "It may be dark," I added. "You've never been in that part of the forest. We could get lost."

"It's not that big of a forest," she said, shaking her head. "And there's signs. And the creek. Actually, it'd be pretty simple. Once you find the creek you can just follow it and end back up in our backyard."

"I don't think it's that easy."

"Sure it is."

She told me more about how easy it would be.

I didn't listen.

On the other side of the evergreens, the police station stood small, but long, a single story building, grey-walled and lined with blue, some cars parked

out front, a wooden staircase and railing twined with ivy. In each of the windows the blinds were pulled shut. It said POLICE over the door, and POLICE across each of the cars. My mother and father came here to vote, but the only time I had ever been inside was on a class field trip in first grade. As a class, we took the school bus down the road and the officers showed us how they caught people, and how they could track people's fingerprints and what you would need to do in order to become a police officer. I had no intention of becoming a police officer, but I listened, and nodded as they talked. A nice officer had led us around that day, showing us a mock-cell and making jokes so that we laughed and later, pretended to handcuff us, even though we were too thin and small and could slip out of them like magicians.

"So what do we ask them?" Nettle said, before we went in.

"I think we just tell them about the tree," I said.

"That it fell?"

"Yeah, that it fell, I guess and it's on the house and I don't have power. And if they could send some people, or know people that could help take it away we could ask them that."

"Do you want to do it, or should I?"

I was about to say I would do it when, out of the door, burst a large, bearish officer, who, surprised at seeing us, grunted something and called back into the station.

"I can never understand you, Brian, whadju just say?"

"There's two kids here," said the large officer.

"Kids?"

"Yeah, kids."

"What the hells are two kids doing here?" and, from the darkness of the station, came a bald man with a pointy face, big ears. His uniform was untucked, his hands were stuffed in his pockets. He looked down at us, and then over at the other officer.

"We were gonna come in anyway," said Nettle. "We walked here."

"They walked here," said the bear.

"Yous walked here," said the bald man, who sounded like one of my uncles. "D'ya live here? Whadju walking aroun for? It's Sunday, and you know schools been canceled for a week anyway."

"We live back that way," said Nettle and then poked me. "What's the name of the street?"

I told them.

"Yous goin that way Brian?"

"No, I'm heading down Reece Ave."

"Ok, forget it then, you go."

"See you later," said the large officer, and walked away, started up his car and drove off.

"Busy day," said the bald man. "Not a day for kids like you two be going on a picnic. What are you doin out here?"

Nettle told him about the tree.

"It fell during the storm," I said.

"And what street is this?"

Again I told him. I told him my name, when he asked, too.

"Okay, come in a sec and I'll sort ya out."

We followed him through an empty office, to a desk where we sat in two chairs far too large for us, and he picked up a phone, and, like a fork through food, twirled the cord with his finger, and waited. The office was very quiet, and dark, and not at all how I remembered it.

"Usually I'd call ya parents but yous told me yous don't got any power so I'll work somethin else out." He stopped twirling the cord and talked into the phone. "Yeah, hallo, I got two kids here. They told me there's a tree down on their house."

"His house," corrected Nettle.

"What?" He held the phone to his chest.

"We're not family."

"Then what are yous?"

"I live next to him."

He shook his head. "Doesn't matter right now. Right now what matters is yous got a tree where it shouldn't be, okay, and I'm tryin to fix something up for ya, okay, now be quiet for a second."

Nettle pursed her lips.

We waited for the officer to stop talking and then he hung up the phone. He sighed.

"So here's what's happening," he said. "I'll take yous ova and talk witchya parents, sort some things out and maybe tomorra if we're lucky we'll get somebody free to get ya tree taken care of, okay? How's that sound?" He got up. "We got a lot of trees down and right now we're cleanin up the roads as best we can. So...this

is the best we can do. Lucky we still have some phone lines up the other side of town. Lucky you two didn't get hurt or nothin, too. Yous want water before we go?"

"We're fine."

"Then how bout yous go wait outside by my car. Only one out there now, and I'll get the keys and meet you soon and we'll go before it gets too dark. Starts gettin dark quick again nowadays. Don't like it. Never did. Never will."

We thanked him and went outside, waited by the car. Although I didn't say it, I was glad he'd offered to drive us, and we weren't going into the woods. I could still see the trees, across the field, across the street, and the birds, dark upon the sky, circling as they'd circled us ever since we left. But the air felt warm for once, and the wind was gentle, and I began to imagine the ride back, and the days of no school, a full week, like any other vacation, and the fear left me for a moment, before realizing that Nettle was no longer beside me.

"Nettle!" I called, and saw that she was down the hill a little ways, walking through the grass, her eyes fixed on something in the sky. "They're just birds," I said, cathing up to her. "They're just birds. Come on, we have go back so the officer can drive us home."

But she didn't want to go back. She kept walking towards the forest, her eyes fixed to the sky.

"It's my bird," she was saying. "It's my bird, it's my bird."

I didn't know if she was playing some game she'd made up or if she really, truly believed it. I didn't know if she was pretending the way she pretended to

jump into the puddles and imagine they were doors, the way she pretended she had poison ivy on her hand.

But again she cried out: "It's him. He's right there. He's not dead."

And I looked up at where she looked and saw a bird far larger than the others, not black, but green as she said, throwing shadow and color as a cloud opened and closed. She began to run after it. The sound of its wings beat dry; its flight was straight. She ran until the field ended and splashed into the street. I shouted behind her, following the fountains of red honeysuckle that trailed out of her pockets, but it was no use. She was too far ahead.

And so running after Nettle, not thinking where I was, I entered the forest as though falling and tumbling through water.

Eight

THE BIRD BEGAN to shrink.

It happened almost as soon as I'd crossed under the canopy into the shade and the damp; it began to shrink and continued, fading, to fly, lowering, dropping, but keeping its distance. Outside, in the open, it was the size of a hawk, wide-winged, and now, in the forest, it was small enough to hold, and seemed to stay that size, wending and weaving through the trees as Nettle chased after it, and I chased after her.

She did not look back.

Her eyes were fixed on the bird and where it went she went. If it flew between two trees she was there, jumping through them. If it hooked to the left or to the right she followed it, never slipping or losing her footing, and never quite reaching it either, yet always coming closer and closer with every step. I struggled behind, tripping over roots and brush. I called out her name, "Wait," I said, "Nettle, wait!" But there was another stone, a vine, a straggly branch. And cramping, sliding on a patch of mud, and stumbling, I watched them leave me, slowly—Nettle and her bird. Her body floated away through the darkening trees so naturally, without sound or whispering leaves and I, on the ground, out of breath, was alone and surrounded on all sides, in every corner, by a quiet colored green.

For a moment I sat there, numbed, not moving. Then the moment passed and I got up again and kept running. But again I stopped, overwhelmed, and stood

in the silence as though standing in a puddle: the air was cold on one part of me and not on another. There were no paths to follow or footprints to retrace and find where I had been, or where she had gone. Only trees and more trees, hanging from the sky like rope, some huge and fat, others smaller, thinner, smoother, with yellowing leaves. I began to wander between them. My steps were small, my legs trembling and as I went, I marked each tree I passed with a stone I'd picked up, to know where I was and where I was not. I set the stone to the bark and carved a line, and my body steadied, before being unmoored once more, set loose.

But a tree is an easy thing to like. It is calm and never says anything you would not say yourself, and can still somehow surprise you. The way they grow, the way they bend, is the way sleep moves through a body, silent and patient; you can see their dreams as they dream them, in their leaves as they flutter. They are messengers bringing no news, historians telling no story, magicians casting no spell.

In all of the books I'd loved there was always a tree and a forest. And in them and under them magic happened, and was taught by old men in cloaks with long beards, and the girl or boy always found their power there, discovered what had always rested inside them, had they but known it, had they but looked. And yet they were also places of darkness and evil, where slow sounds lingered, and shadows were never simply shadows, and I wondered how that could be. I wondered how I could look at a tree and see a child or a monster, a demon or mother. I wondered how a forest could be so peaceful and quiet, a garden, a temple, and also where you could die, at any time, by a falling tree, by getting lost and starving, by getting eaten by animals, by eating a wrong plant.

There must, I then thought, passing over a fallen branch, be a peace in death. There must be a fear and a knowledge too, where the wizard tells you the spell and you cast it and you know, but I tried not to think about that, not yet.

I walked deeper into the forest. All around me, the ground was still soft and flat, but to my right there were small hills, browned and grassy, that rose and I wondered when the sun would go down under them and when the light would fade and vanish. I wondered if I would vanish with them, and where I would go. It was already dim, and sometimes, as it had been outside, a cloud would part and light would sprinkle down and slice and spear through the air and the canopy, but no more than three or four times at most did that happen. Now was about the time, though, my parents would be getting worried. I could see my mother, biting her lip and looking at the clock, looking out the window, tapping her foot. Anger would come later, if we weren't back soon, and trouble; and with just a word, the whole week of school that had been cancelled because of the storm and the damage would be lost to punishment. Or worse.

I made another mark, another.

By then the stone had lost some of its sharpness; it wouldn't cut as deep into the bark, and so I dropped it and looked around for another one. Under mud I found something, and bent down to see it, and beside it, beneath my shoe, half-covered, there was a small and slightly crumbled red flower.

"Honeysuckle," I mouthed.

Picking up my foot, I took it in my hands. It was soft, a little damp, but still fresh. My heart beat faster: Nettle had been here. It had fallen out of her pocket as she ran, as the ones before on our way into the forest, across the field

outside the police station. I looked around, bent over double, and tried to find the next one, found it, found the next on a log, the next among leaves, and the next, the next. She can't be far now, just over this hill. Please let her be over this hill, I said to myself, and then we can get out of here and we can go home and everything will be better. I prayed to God for it to be better. But the last petal I found led only to a small clearing in the woods, nowhere else, no Nettle. It lay between the roots of a white tree, on a patch of lichen. I picked it up and placed it in my pocket, and sat down, exhausted, breathing shallow, grating breaths.

After a couple minutes, I took it out again and looked it over, turning it through my fingers. It made my palms sticky and so I picked out the parts with the honey on them and licked them and tried to smile, and instead, from behind me, heard footsteps, and a voice. The footsteps were soft, barely touching the ground; the voice was singing. It sounded familiar, but I couldn't remember where I'd heard it before, or if I ever had—if I didn't just imagine it. I'd never heard Nettle sing, but it didn't sound like it would be her, and so I looked around, curious, with one eye peering out.

In the clearing, walking amid the green grass and the white trees, there was a boy. He started out on the other side and then came closer, and as he came closer I could see more of him. At first I'd thought it was Isaac, or hoped it was, maybe, but his hair was nut-brown as mine was, not red, and his nose was small and short, as well, his eyes the same wintry blue. He must have been about the same age as I was and I wondered what he was doing in the wood, or if, like me, he was lost. The way he moved did not seem like he was lost. He would stop now and again and pick something up, and then move on, singing as he went:

*ash and alder
on the lawn
standing here
among the pond*

sang the boy to himself, almost under his breath. He went along, before starting again, a little louder this time:

*leaf and lock
around a rock
look for him
at non-o'clock*

but then he stopped, and, irritated, scratched his nose. "Or it is tick a tock?" he asked, and went back to the beginning and sang it again, ending instead with *and tick a tock*. But even something about that seemed to bother him and so he sang, stomping, a new song:

*where blows
west wind's
window
tree*

*I see a season
soft as milk
and mustard
seed*

Then he looked at me. "Do you know any songs?" he asked. I was too startled to answer. "It's okay if you don't. I just don't think I want to sing anymore. I could show you something, though. I found it today."

When I didn't move, he came over and grabbed me by the arm. "It's this way, silly. I don't have it with me right now. Come on. That wouldn't be very smart."

Still holding me, he led me through the grass and the trees. Sunlight spilled and splashed the clearing where we walked and went, and then was gone, returned. Small winds rose up and tugged the leaves. Who was this boy? I asked myself. I had never seen him before. And why was he holding my hand like that? Why did he talk to me like he knew me? My town was small, there were not many streets or people, and I had never seen him anywhere, not even in school, though his face was so familiar, so like mine.

"Do you live here?" I asked him.

He nodded. "I've always lived here."

"I mean in this town?"

He looked puzzled, but said yes, he did. "You've seen me before," he said. "Sort of."

For some reason I didn't believe him. I thought about Nettle; I thought about if she would believe him, and decided that most likely she would not, but would know what to do, or at least figure out some things. "Have you seen my friend?" I asked. "She's a girl. She ran in here and I tried to follow her, but I got lost."

He shook his head.

"You didn't hear her?"

"No," he said. "I've just been over here. Like this. Singing. Did you like my songs?"

"I guess," I said. "I'd never heard them before. Did you make them up?"

He said, "I did," pushing his nose up into the sky, proud.

"And what do they mean?"

"What do they mean?"

"Yeah," I said. "In school sometimes we have to figure out what things mean, like songs, or a poem."

"That's stupid," said the boy, but he said it smiling. "They don't mean anything."

He started whistling, and then singing little nursery rhymes again that didn't mean anything.

Up closer now, following him, it looked as though his skin was made of wood. It was pale wood, if it was wood, like the inside of a tree, not the outside. I didn't ask him though, like I didn't mention he was not wearing any clothes, because in some ways it did not seem like he knew, or would have minded me pointing it out. When he'd first appeared I thought he was simply wearing something light and tan, but he wasn't. The leaves and sticks he carried hid the parts of him I was not supposed to look at, or touch, even though sometimes I saw something and sometimes I looked.

"Here we are," he said, and let go of me.

There was a low stone wall, rising and falling, just ahead of us. It was velvety with moss and lichens, the stones broken and slumped and next to it, there was a circle of them, in the shape of a well. And next to the well, unmoving, there was some kind of animal, curled in sleep. "Is that a fox?" I said, and stopped walking, remembering the fox I had seen behind my house in the summer. "Yes,

but it won't hurt you," said the boy. "He's mine. He sleeps a lot." We went on. Overtop the well, there was a wooden board. The boy lifted it up.

"See?" he said.

The well was choked with dirt and leaves. He brushed them away, and beneath them was a crowd of old coins he'd found, most likely, and oddly-shaped rocks, sticks, bones of animals, pine-cones, moss, a bird egg. He dug his hand around and pulled out a large feather.

"This," he said, "was what I wanted to show you." It was green, tinged with red, and yellow. "I only found it today, just before I saw you. I was walking and I saw it, but I haven't found the bird yet. It must be a huge bird, wherever it is. I've been looking all over for it."

"Where?" I asked.

"Just around here, where you were."

"No, the feather. Where did you find the feather?"

"Over that way," he said, pointing behind him. "By the stream." He narrowed his eyes. "Did you see the bird?"

I told him I had, and that I too was trying to find it, because of my friend.

"Then that's how you lost her, isn't it," he said. "She must not be a very good friend. Good friends like me don't run away."

"But I only just met you," I said. "We can't be friends. Not yet." I didn't know if I ever wanted to be friends with him, he was so strange and smiley, but I kept that to myself.

He seemed to brush the statement aside anyway. It didn't even seem like he heard it. Instead, he set the wooden board back over his well and started

marching off through the grass and the white trees. "The stream's this way," he said, and when we got there, he leaned over and cupped his hands so the water filled them and he drank some. "If it tastes a certain way I'll know where they are, or where they're not, okay?" Time passed. The sun slipped through the trees. The water glimmered, bubbled, purred.

"Can I ask you a question?" I said, watching the small fish flash and hide away under rocks.

"Course," he said. "What is it."

"Are you...are you a fairy?"

He laughed. "No."

"Then what are you?"

"I'm what you are."

"And what is that?"

"What I am."

"But what if I don't know what I am?"

"Then you don't know what I am either."

"I know what some of you is," I said.

"Yes, I guess." He kicked a pinecone around. "It's like a mountain."

"What?"

"When a mountain's far away it's blue," he said. "But when you walk closer they stop being blue, and start being brown, or green, or whatever they are."

"Then are you the mountain? I don't understand."

"Not just me," he said.

"Then who?"

"Us."

He rose up from the water and dried his mouth with the back of his hand. As his arm passed down, I could see a small dark spot on the other side, facing me.

"Wait a second," I said.

"Do you want me to tell you again? It's like a mountain..."

I shook my head, and he quieted. I asked: "What's that? On your arm." I stepped closer. On the skin, which now really did look more like wood, was a very small spot, an opening, like a chink in a plate of armor. It was where my birthmark had been, before I'd scratched it off.

The boy smiled. "That's it," he said.

"I don't understand..."

"Yes you do. You'd asked for a friend," said the boy, and I had, that morning a long time ago, giving the stones to the forest, after Isaac had done what he did to me, and left. "A friend that never left you." He smiled. "That's you. I'd always been there, and now I'm here, and we can play and dance and sing and do whatever you want to do."

"So it was you in my bed, during the storm. It was you growing out of my bed."

He nodded.

"How did you get here, then?"

"I was carried, like in your dreams."

He was right: "I've had dreams like that," I said, under my breath. The figure walking up the stairs of my room. The figure picking me up and carrying

me off over the roof and into the forest, pushing me into the tree, and being born out of it.

"I can show you the tree," said the boy. "It's very beautiful, the one I was born out of. And big. After we find the bird, of course I can show you."

I was quiet. "It actually happened?"

"Depending on where the mountain is," said the boy. "Yes," and he was just about to say more, when, all at once, from beyond a hill, a shrill, piercing cry split through the forest; and upon hearing it the boy, startled or scared, ran away through the grass, darting between the trees, and was gone.

It could have only been Nettle.

As fast as I could, I followed the stream in the direction the cry had come and soon enough I was at the top of the hill, the other side of which was clothed in a dark shirt of ivy. There was a path that creaked down and at the base of it, in a pinched and narrow valley, I saw the creek. It had overflowed its banks with all the rain and bloated out onto either side and there was Nettle beside it, facing the water, deadly still. She was holding something, since both her arms were bent, and was not looking away from it. From where I was standing, though, I couldn't see, and so I started down the hill, using the path and avoiding the roots that ribbed the way. There were pebbles where she was standing and I came up from behind her, her toes in the water.

"I just followed him," she said. Her voice was weak. "That's all. I swear. I just touched him. And now he's...We were running, or I was running, he was flying and I caught up to him and I reached out to take him in my hands, like he liked sometimes and then he wouldn't move."

It was her bird. It was stiff in her small hands; the wings were spread wide, but held about as much as air as the stone we were standing on held, and, as she'd said, it did not move. I could hear her shaking, and sniffing.

"He was such a good bird," she said, after some time, and then looked at me, holding him up, and showing me his green feathers, his dark beak. His talons were crooked, his eyes still open, watching nowhere, two black, wet olives.

"I'm sorry I ran off," she said. "I just wanted..."

"It's okay," I said.

"We have to bury him."

She looked back at the bird. "Do you have any shovels?"

"I think," I said.

"I guess if you don't have shovels we can use our hands and fingers, or spoons if you have some you don't eat with. That's what I did in Florida." She wiped some snot from her nose.

"I think I have some."

"Ok," she said. "Then let's go back. I need to show my mom. She'd want to see him, before we bury him, or maybe she can help too. She loved him a lot." She started to walk and stopped, looked at the water. "I just don't understand why he had to die. I just...touched him...I'm sorry I'm crying. We should probably head back, right?"

I nodded.

She forced a smile. "Okay."

We left.

I followed her along the creek. The pebbles and the stones became sand and spits of grass. We had to climb up again because the water had swamped the path, where the trees were dark and thin, their ankles socked in water. They had begun to grow further and further apart the farther we went, but we did not know where we were. I wondered if we were close to our houses. I didn't see any houses, or lampposts, but I hoped. The day was beginning to pale, as it does before night comes without warning. I tried to find a way to tell her about the boy, but I never found one, not then, not yet.

"What's that?"

Nettle was pointing.

I looked ahead.

On the other side of the trees there were lights, flashing.

They were blue and red.

"CAN YOU SEE my bird?" asked Nettle. "In my pocket, can you see him?"

Her voice was quick and sifting, the same sound as the bushes we crouched behind. Parting them, glancing down, I shook my head. The shadows that leaked through made things slippery and wet; her bird was safe. Blue light came and was slashed by black, by red.

"Good," she said, then sighed. "I don't want them to see him and take him and look at me all weird. They would do that, you know. I know they would."

"Who?" I asked.

"Them."

There was a house on a low hill, where the trees of the forest had stopped growing, and where, on the curb, two police cars were parked, an ambulance on the other side of the street. Their lights strobed, slid, glanced together, deepening the night around us. When I looked back into the forest, I could see maybe two trees or four, their limbs and bodies painted, but nothing else. Nettle tugged my arm. "Look," she said. I turned back. The door to the house had just opened, was held, and officers spilled out, carrying something or someone on a long bed with wheels. It limped a little down the stairs, the driveway, but they pushed it easily across the street and over the curb, and opened the ambulance.

"We can't stay here," said Nettle. "They're gonna see us."

"And go where?" I said. We couldn't go back into the forest. Not at night. "Maybe they'd take us home?" I suggested. "If we went out and they saw us they could drive us back home." I felt dirty inside for saying it, did not like that I was siding with an adult, or wanted their help.

She shook her head. "You can't trust them. Even if they did drive us (which they don't have to) they'd still take my bird. And," she stressed, darting her eyes out and around, "they'll be angry at us for running off. I'm telling you."

"But I don't know where we are," I said. Nothing looked familiar, no house, no car, and it was so dark without any of the streetlights on. I started shaking my foot. Nettle hit me. "Stop," she hissed. "They'll hear you." It must have rustled the leaves.

"I think it's best if we just wait for them to leave," she said. "Then we can go."

"But what if they don't leave?"

Nettle was quiet.

"What if they don't leave, Nettle? We're not staying here all night," I said. It was beginning to get cold.

"They'll leave," she said.

There was something in her voice, the way she looked through the bushes, the way she steeled her eyes, that made it seem as though she were casting a spell as she said it, but they didn't leave. They stayed, in the quiet, and not long afterwards, a light fell and just grazed us and we froze as it jerked back over and paused. Then it wandered off, bounding among the trees, a long bright snout nosing through the brush and grass. Then it pounced back on us and this time

stuck. I closed my eyes; the light was too strong to see anything more than a fuzzy cloud. But from behind it, rising, came a dark figure. An officer. In his hand, he held a radio up to his lips, but the words were muddled, parched in the static. We sat beneath him. Neither of us moved. Not until he set the radio back in its place, and a hand came and grabbed Nettle. She pulled at first, fought a little, but stopped and stuffed her fists back into her pockets instead, once the hand grabbed me and we were both out of the trees and on the street, the hard ground.

"These the ones you were looking for earlier?" asked the officer to the second one, who stepped over, bald and tall, with a pointed face. "The kids who ran off on you?"

The bald officer nodded. "Where'd you find em?"

"Just in the bushes here."

"Good eyes," said the bald one, and looked down at us. "I'll take em back home, like I said I was. You stay here, with the medics. That good for you?"

"Good for me," he laughed. "I don't like kids."

"Yeah, I know. You don't got any." Then the bald officer deepened his voice, stuffed his thumbs between his hips and his belt, and looked down at us. "If I was yous I wouldn't run off again. That clear?"

We said: "Clear."

He nodded. "Then let's get in the car."

We followed him, saying nothing for a long time. He sat us in the back, on the hard, leather seats, behind a metal cage, and he shut the door and stepped in after, lighting something that burned and smoked. It smelled horrible.

"Lucky I was where I was," he said. "Got pretty dark on yous just there."

He stuck the burning thing between his lips and the smoke laced and bloomed around his head, as he turned the key and spat out the window. The engine grumbled and we drove off, the blues and reds fading away behind us, the two headlights showing only a wedge of the road, the houses and the yards and shops and streets all lost and secret on either side.

"So what happened with you?" he started, looking back at us through the rear-view mirror, his eyes, like embers, all I could see. "One moment you are there and I go and get my keys and I come back and you are gone? What happened?"

"We got lost," said Nettle.

"Lost," said the officer, nodding, rubbing the wheel. "You got lost."

"We got lost."

"More like you thought you'd play a little trick on me, right? Isn't that it? Some game you made up? You can't get lost in an empty parking lot, like that."

"We weren't playing...we just...got lost," she said again. The officer didn't say anything this time. The car hummed, then: "Bet your parents won't like it—you come back late like this. Also, since you're not really supposed to be out anyway. But that's new, you probably don't know about that just yet."

We asked him what he meant.

"Governor issued a state of emergency this morning. Nobody's supposed to be driving, out late, shops are closed, school's cancelled...and Halloween too."

We both gasped. With everything going on, I had forgotten it was even close to the last day of October, and my heart sunk even deeper than it was. Images of walking out through the night, wearing costumes, being pirates, mummies,

skeletons, zombies, the gravestones, the spiders, the candles and candy all cometed through my mind and dissolved back into the darkness: it was my favorite holiday, they couldn't move Halloween.

"Yep," he said "Not happening...Tomorrow I guess it would have been, right? I think it got pushed back to November sometime or something like that. Makes sense, I guess."

No it doesn't, I wanted to say. Halloween should never be in November. It happens in October. It always happens in October, and anything else is wrong and I don't want it. But he shook his head, blew out the smoke from his mouth again and slowed the car as we splashed into a small pond on a dip of the road, and the water crinkled and sprayed. A fog started to settle. "I haven't seen a storm like this before in all my life," he said, hunched over, trying to see and clean the glass. He had to slow the car again to creep around a tree branch, sped up, slowed down. "Which street you say you lived on? Allen?"

"Devon," I said.

"This one right here? Devon?"

"Yes."

And we turned up the street.

Because of the power being out I couldn't tell him to look for the lamppost as I usually did, so we parked the car on the curb further down and he said we'd walk up. He got out, then we got out, and in a sort of line we walked off the street onto the grass and the sidewalk again, through the quiet: the officer, Nettle, me. I tried looking up into the sky to find the moon, but it wasn't there. The clouds were

too thick and the light was too faint, too misty, like a chalky white pill dissolving in water.

"Did that person die?" Nettle asked suddenly. It came arrowing out of her; for most of the ride she had been quiet, or quieter than I'd known her to be. "The one you took out of the house back there," she continued. "Did they die?"

The officer was silent. His strides became smaller. In the end he stopped a moment, a quick moment, sighed, said: "I don't know," but by that time he was off and walking again. He seemed to glide over the grass because of all the darkness.

"I think you know," said Nettle. "You just don't want to tell us. Was she old?"

"Yes. She fell on the stairs when the lights went out."

"Did she live alone? Or were there other people in the house with her too, when she died?"

"I never said she died."

"Was she alone?"

"No, she had a daughter staying with her. Why do you want to know these things, huh?"

Now she was quiet. "Because," she said, "you would tell a grown-up. You would, I'm not making it up. You would tell them and so why wouldn't you tell us?"

"Because yous haven't done you're growing up yet."

"Who says?"

"I say."

"Well that's not fair. You can't just say. What if I've already grown up?"

"You haven't," he laughed.

"Then what makes you grown up if you don't even want to tell me she died? I don't get it. It's not fair."

And I already knew what the officer was going to say because every adult there ever was always says it: "Well, life's not fair, kid."

But before she could argue anymore, we reached the house. It had come up suddenly, the yellow walls more grey in the gloom, the roof vanishing into the sky, the light from inside weak but still on, the hole in her window still there, through the branches and leaves of the small tree crouched in the front. Over the driveway and the lawn just left of us, my house was dark, the shadow of her house, my room in the attic somewhere lost in the night. The officer led us up the wooden stairs to the porch and knocked on the door, glanced down at us and put his hands on his hips again. The door swung open.

It was Nettle's mother.

The officer held out his hand and she shook it.

"I found them down the road someways," he began, and I heard his voice straighten a little, with his back. "They said they were lost but I don't know if that's really true or not." And they talked, her mother concerned, thankful, talked about the storm, the tree that fell. Then my mother rushed down the stairs and, through the doorway, looked at me. Her eyes did a strange thing. They sort of jellied, went soft, and she lunged over and dragged me inside, saying, "Come here," and I came; Nettle stepped in too, her hands still in her pocket.

"You're filthy!" my mother shrieked, cleaning her hands off. "You've got mud everywhere. On your shirt, your pants, look at you, it's all over you. I

thought...I thought I told you to be back before night? Didn't I say that? It's not so much to ask. It's not really. You've got it on her faces too." She was being mean, and not just to me, either. It was a strange thing—usually when my parents got mad, they'd get mad only at me. It seemed a rule, or a law, that as a parent you were not allowed to throw anger at your child's friend. Once, I remember, my father was hit by a soccer ball my friend kicked in the yard and as soon as he noticed it wasn't me, his anger shriveled away. My mother didn't seem to care now, though. She let it all out. "Take off your shoes," she ordered. "Both of you. We just cleaned earlier."

The house did look different inside. There were not as many boxes, and the boxes that were there were small, and only in the corner. Some pictures were hung, and some books on a bookcase and a carpet had been laid down and now it really didn't look like anywhere I'd ever been before. A warm glow and steam rose out of the kitchen.

At the door Nettle's mother was apologizing to the officer.

"It's no problem," he told her. "All I'm doing is my job. But if you don't mind, could I have a word with you for a moment?" He motioned down the steps, away from the house. "Sure," she said, and her mother closed the door and stepped down the stairs into the darkness.

"Hey!" my mother barked. "Look at me when I'm talking to you," and grabbed my arm, as I finished taking off my shoes. "What did I just say?"

"I don't know," I said.

"I said you're not allowed outside by yourself anymore. Do you understand?"

I nodded.

"Say you understand."

"I understand." Nettle said it too.

"Good, okay," and she straightened back up to her normal size, glanced at my clothes again. "You're gonna have to clean up before dinner. That's unacceptable."

She hurried me up the stairs and gathered the clothes she'd brought over earlier, when we were out. "Just take a quick shower, maybe," she said and she left me, breathing heavily. Nettle had stayed downstairs. The Unbuttoned Man and my father hadn't been down there when we came in—I didn't know where they were, but I think she was waiting for her mom to come back inside so she could show her the bird.

Down the hallway was the bathroom. Quickly, I turned on the light, stepping in, locked the door behind me, set the new clothes on the edge of the sink. It was nice and quiet in there. The walls were greyish, the light was bright, and the floor was tiled with little green-blue squares that, through my socks, was very cold. I kept them on as long as I could, until I had taken off my shirt and my pants, and I was holding myself, almost naked and shivering. Not wanting them to dirty the floor, though, I found a place to hang them, where the towels were, then turned on the water to the shower. Eventually, I figured out I had to pull up a pin on the faucet and the water came out, not too cold, not burning, fizzing. I took off the rest of my clothes and got in, closed the curtain.

Time slowed. Time always tends to slow down in water, the same as when you look into a fire and the world becomes only one thing, since water and fire are

always changing, unlike tables or chairs. As I was washing my body I lost track of it, heard far away the falling, plunging sound over some hill or valley, did not feel the water needling into my skin, or even the soap dragging and gliding, foaming and frosting over and down my legs, my stomach. When I reached my arms, I slid it over the space where the birthmark had been and brought it back, set it over the newly empty place and held it there, looking, wondering if, once the soap was put down, it would be there again, and I'd only imagined it all—imagined the boy, naked, in the forest, growing out of it, playing alone by the well and singing. Part of me didn't want to move it away, was safe in that belief, but I did, and it wasn't there, was smooth under my fingers, not scarred or bruised or even a little red. For a moment it seemed I was touching somebody else's arm. I held it away from me and stared at it, traced the shape of it as it bent and met my shoulder. It wouldn't change too much, I told myself, trying to calm myself; it didn't hurt, it wasn't damaged, but somehow that made it worse: only I would ever know. No one else would believe me, no one else would care. If there was blood or something broken, pain at least, I could look at it and see it and see what had happened, not rely on some memory that, with time, would fade and shrink.

As if I were in a science class, I inspected my other birthmarks, curious. There were two, spaced evenly apart above it, leading along to my elbow and then there were more on the elbow, only one on the other arm, some on my legs. I knew there was one on my back, and I felt it, rise and fall. None of them itched, but I started to scratch the large one on my left forearm, where my hair was pasted over it. I used my index finger and scratched and pressed, held my face close to the skin and saw the redness, the dried, broken skin. I tried another, but the same thing

happened, tried another and another, tried digging with my nail, but drew blood and stopped. I turned off the water; I dried myself off. The room was quiet again. The steam was thick and clouded the mirror. I grabbed toilet paper to clean off the blood. It was the second time, I realized. Once on the window, once in the shower.

Slipping my legs into my pants, my arms into my sleeves, I heard voices, talking, outside the door. I waited before going out, my hair still damp, not wanting to intrude. But the more I listened, the sounds weren't coming from the hallway, but just across the hall, behind another door. Dripping, I crept out of the bathroom into the hallway, the cold. It was Nettle and her mother. The door was closed, but in the darkness, a thin knife of light cut into my toes as I listened. I guessed it was her parent's bedroom. But it was only her mother in there, only her and her mom. Their voices were muffled through the door, but I could almost hear all of it, and if I couldn't hear something completely, I strung what I could together.

"...he didn't do that," her mother was saying.

"Yes, I saw him. I know he did." That was Nettle. "He opened the window and let him fly out. I saw him." She was talking about the Unbuttoned Man, about her bird. "Just like he killed our fish when he took them to the pond in that garbage bag." My heart was drumming, thick in my throat.

"Your dad did not let him out of the window."

"Stop saying that. He's not my dad."

"He doesn't like when you don't call him dad."

"Well I don't care. I don't like it when he throws our bird out the window!"

"But he didn't. All that happened was that we went out to eat somewhere—I can't believe you don't remember this—and we forgot to close one of the windows. That's what happened. That's all. You know he could get out of the cage."

Nettle's voice was quick and sharp: "I don't know why you're siding with him. You always side with him."

Her mother laughed. "I'm not picking any sides."

"But he wouldn't do that," said Nettle, raising her voice. "You know that, I know that. He wouldn't fly away, he liked us. He was good."

"He was a bird."

Nettle started to say something and choked. "I thought you liked him?"

"Of course I liked him, but he's gone now. He's been gone. It's what happens. Things go."

"But that's what I've been trying to tell you. He's not. I found him. In the forest. I found him!"

She was so excited. I heard her jacket rustling as she dug a hand through her pocket and then there was silence.

Then a wail that turned to a shriek, was cut off.

"Mom! Stop! What are you doing!"

Feet chased and then paused, further away.

"Stop, mom!"

"Why are you carrying around a dead bird, Esther?"

Why did she call her Esther?

"But it's ours. It's not just a dead bird. Give him back!"

Was her name not Nettle?

"This is not our bird," said her mother, and then I heard stomps, the window opening. "Our bird was green."

"He is green! It's just dark in here. Turn on a light, and you'll see. You'll see."

A light clicked on. More silence. Then a crash of leaves, branches. The window was closed. "It was just a bird," said her mother. "It was black."

Nettle was quiet. She was quiet for a long time. She said: "I just wanted to give him a funeral."

"Of course, a funeral," said her mother. "All you talk about is death."

"No I don't."

"Then why did that officer who brought you home just tell me what he told me?"

"What about him?"

"He told me what you were saying."

Nettle was quiet again. "I don't know why it's such a big deal. I was just curious."

"It was rude," said her mother. "You can't ask those kinds of questions."

"Why not?"

"Because you can't, okay. Now get your clothes, and clean your hands. That bandage is filthy."

"Why not?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why can't I talk about it?"

"Because your just a kid."

"Hey!"

"Hey what?"

"Why are being like this? You're being mean. I thought—"

"You thought what. What did you think?"

"I thought..." said Nettle, but she couldn't finish it.

"What did you think? You thought I'd just forget you were out late tonight, that you didn't listen to me, that you were rude to a police officer, that you brought home a bird?"

"I thought you were my friend."

"Well I'm not. I'm your mother."

"But it's not the same."

"No, it's not the same."

"I meant because dad died."

Now her mother was quiet. "I thought we agreed we don't talk about him."

"You loved him."

"I love your new dad now."

"He is not my dad! And stop saying that! I know you don't like him. Why did you even marry him!"

"I'm not talking about this," said her mother.

"He doesn't let you do anything and he smells gross and he doesn't brush his teeth and he hurts me and you let him, you let him hurt me and...and...Why is he with us!"

"Because we had nothing," said her mother.

"Well nothing was better than whatever he is. At least I had you, then."

"We were homeless. Do even understand that? We didn't have a home. Your dad died and he left us nothing. We were broke. He crashed his car in a tree because he was drunk and he left us alone. Your new dad saved us, okay? He's still here. I don't care if you like him but he did, he saved us. I didn't love him like I loved your father, but he liked me and that was good enough and you know, now we have a house, you have a house. We have a life. I can look my parents in the eye and not have to cry and beg for money."

"But we can leave him."

Her mother was quiet again. "We're not having this conversation again. Okay, we're just not," and I could hear her mother hurrying toward the door.

"I have to wash my hands before dinner," she said, her voice tired, "and you, you should take a shower, too. And change that bandage on your hand like I said. I can smell it from here."

I leapt away from the door, soft as I could, quiet as I could, and I was almost at Nettle's room when the door opened. I froze a moment, but nobody came out. The door stayed open. I heard Nettle say: "It really was our bird, mom. I just thought you'd be happy. I thought you'd want to know."

And I was out of the hallway and Nettle was in the bathroom, and the water was rushing out again, whispering, seething, dying.

I was shaking. Her room was cold, but it wasn't because of the cold. Numb, still hearing their voices, I set my clothes down, and sat on the mattress again, didn't turn on the light. Stop shaking, I told myself. Stop, stop, stop shaking,

please. I heard her mother leave the room and the stairs creaking. Stop shaking, I said.

Sometimes this would happen. There were pains in my chest that came and went without warning, pinching and stabbing and I thought I was dying, but it was only the lining of my lungs, the plura, my doctor told me, sticking together. And although I always believed him in his office I never did at home, when they happened, or in the car, or outside. And they'd never happened because of someone else either: seeing them, hearing them hurt by the people who were supposed to love them, and doing nothing, not knowing what to do, to help them.

What helped a little was drawing, as I used to do with Isaac. Drawing our maps, the little mountains and hills; it calmed me down, and I wandered around the room looking for paper, and I found some, and a pencil or a pen, but there wasn't one.

Then there was a knock.

"Yes?" I said, sitting back down, still shaking.

It was my father, he said it was dinner. "Can I come in?"

I said he could.

He stepped in, holding something in his hand, sat next to me. "We were cleaning the rooms today," he said, and set it down in front of us. "It looked kind of familiar. It's what you and your friend used to draw, right?"

It was a piece of paper, flimsy, with some pencil marks.

"It's not finished, I guess," he said. "Maybe you started it and you...You okay?" he asked, pausing, sitting down next to me, like a doctor, touching me gently. "You're shaking."

"Just cold," I said. I could hardly keep myself from shaking; the paper in my hands was starting to shiver.

"The cold doesn't make people cry," he said, and laughed, kindly, while my hands darted to my cheeks to wipe them off.

"Was it mom? Did she get made at you?"

"It's nothing," I said.

"She was just worried," he said. "You know how she is. Come on, are you hungry at least? You've been out all day. You're bound to be."

"A little."

He laughed. "We'll see about that," he said and he helped me up off the mattress, but just before going downstairs, I stopped on the edge of the stair and wrapped my arms around him. He seemed surprised, but I couldn't see his face; my eyes were closed; I heard nothing; I began to feel the shaking stop.

DOWN THE STAIRS the table was set. The chairs, each evenly spaced, were knuckled around it, and my mother, her mother and the Unbuttoned Man, far taller and darker than either of them sat waiting with their empty plates and empty faces, while the food, still steaming, sat uneaten at the center. Nettle wasn't there yet; her chair was empty and stayed empty too, the same as her plate, as we began, her mother first, to take the food from the bowls, to sip at our drinks. There was a lot of food on the table: in one bowl glowed a yellowish rice, which my mother never made (we clung to pasta) and another bowl, dark, had beans with peppers and tomatoes hiding inside and below the surface; and sweet potatoes, salted; corn, buttered, and further something green, and closer, some kind of meat, that had been, as my mother mentioned, cooked all day by the two of them, watched closely, so that it was soft and softly hung about the room and our noses, very different to anything I'd ever smelled; it was busy with flavors and spice. Once everybody had taken what they wanted, my mother adding more to mine, Nettle still wasn't there, and after another few moments or so, waiting, her mother said, suddenly, "We don't have to wait for her. Let's eat, it'll go cold," and forced a smile towards my parents.

Forks were raised and knives, and then: "No," said the Unbuttoned Man, and we stopped. The knives and forks ticked back to the table. "It's rude," he said, with a voice hewn out of his stomach. "I'm terribly sorry," and he rose up, his shirt

flapping, clearing his throat: "I'll go and get her. It won't be long," but I knew it was all fake, all of it; it was just as Nettle told me: he wanted everyone to know how good he was, how generous, how gracious and thoughtful, so that no one would ever suspect anything at all.

He took his napkin off his lap and set it back down on the tabletop, took the stairs one by one, making each one wince and cry. The table might have floated away without him there. The other adults were not so heavy, and Nettle's mother, much younger, was reorganizing her utensils, again and again, straightening them, and switching the knife with the fork, the fork with the knife, as though she were sewing something onto the tablecloth. Then she too burst up and said, "I'll go get some foil so these don't get cold," and left us, my family, the three of us, in another family's house, my mother still mad at me. "Don't sit like that," she said, when she saw me sitting on my hands, a little on the side. I sat straight. "And put your napkin on your lap," she said; I did so.

Above me, I could just hear the water to the shower turned off. After a short pause, the door was opened and after another pause I heard the sound of the stairs, silence, and then Nettle, with her step-father behind her, enter the room. He took his place again, and Nettle sat across from me, her hair wet and long and dark, her lips clenched, her face and cheeks a little red and soft, avoiding any eye contact at all, even mine, not looking at anything except her empty plate.

"Is everything okay?" my father asked.

"She's just upset," said her mother.

"Do you want any food?" my father asked her, sitting beside her.

Nettle did not look like she wanted any food. She looked hungry, but something wasn't right.

"She can get it herself," said the Unbuttoned Man.

"Of course, of course."

"It's all very good," said my mother. "Everything came out perfect," and she started asking how it all was made, the ingredients, the spices. I felt myself drifting away from the table, wanting things to just go back to normal, to fit and not scrape or tug when I moved, but as my mother asked about the spices, she said my father had gotten her very nice spices from Turkey once, on a trip not long ago, from the markets there, and she still had some in our pantry if they'd ever want to borrow any.

The Unbuttoned Man was quick: "You've been to Turkey?"

"Istanbul," said my father. "But for only for a couple days. For work. Have you?"

"Once also. Do you travel often?"

And they started, first slowly, naming the places they had been, the reasons they went; I was shuttled over oceans, over mountains, through deserts, but I kept my eyes on Nettle, and I found, every now and again, the Unbuttoned Man, too, would look over at her, waiting for something.

"Eat a little more," my mother whispered in my ear.

"Does he not like it?" her mother asked, the table split in half now.

"He likes it," she said.

I nodded. It was good.

My mother prodded me. "Then say 'thank you.'"

I said it.

"We have a lot to thank you for," said my mother, almost finished with her plate, looking for more. "And not just this. I imagine all this is the last thing you'd have wanted to have happened when you moved here. I would be a wreck, if I was you, breaking out in hives all down my neck and chin like I do around Christmas when the family comes and I have to cook for them. And we don't even have a large family, not like some people. Cooking for me is fine, you know, but when it's for other people, it's never good enough." Then, catching herself, she said: "But this is very good. This is great. And from what the officer said, I think we'll be able to go back home tomorrow night, wasn't that it?"

The Unbuttoned Man must have overheard. "Yes," he said, cutting off my father as he was talking about the Black Forest in Germany, the Schwarzwald. "They're supposed to come some time in the morning, and clear what they can," and the darks of his eyes then, slowly, shifted and pointed towards us like two piercing arrowheads, "which means the both of you will be helping instead of running off across this town and getting lost."

"And scaring us," added my mother. "I think that's a very good idea. And it'll give them something to do, so they're not just sitting around in here. Where did the cop say he found them earlier?"

"In the new development behind the shopping center."

"How did they get there?"

"They're right here," said my father. "You can ask them."

She looked at me and she asked. My voice was soft, but I told them as best I could, not saying anything about the bird, about the forest, and the boy, but saying we made it to the police station and then...

"Then what? He said you went in and told him and then when he came out you were gone."

"May I have some more of the rice," said the Unbuttoned Man.

My mother let her question rest, and tried to hand him the bowl, but he stopped her. "My daughter can do it, she's not eating right now."

Nettle's face paled, and as soon as it did so, I realized that she had been keeping her hands hidden under the table the whole time, ever since she'd come down, and I knew why.

"It's a heavy bowl," said her step-father, slowly. "Don't spill it. Use both hands. Go on."

The table was silent, waiting for her.

With one hand she tried first lifting it but it wobbled and she set it back down and tried again. And this time, almost doing the same, her other hand, against her will, sheer reflex, shot out from under the table and grabbed it. There was no bandage, only skin. She'd taken it off as her mother had told her and then had had no time before being forced out of the shower to wrap a new one around it. And just after she'd given him the bowl, and he thanked her, I could see, as everyone else at the table, the dark red scar on her palm, before plunging it back under the table.

"I also suspect," said the Unbuttoned man, serving himself, "in their little travels they did not, as they said, find any honeysuckle."

"It wasn't where you thought?" asked her mother.

"No, it was," I said.

"Were they all dead then?" she asked.

"No, they were fine, just a little red."

"Then why didn't you take them?" my mother asked.

"We did," I said.

Nettle still wasn't saying anything. I looked at her to help, but she was stiff and still, her hands both under the table again.

"We did," I said.

"And where are they?" asked the Unbuttoned Man.

In the forest, I wanted to shout, but didn't. I said, "They blew away."

"Of course," he said, and grinned. "They blew away."

After that the adults started talking amongst themselves, as though we were not even there, thinking up things for us to do, for us to clean, to unpack, to dust, to complete. When they'd told us they leaned back, and it seemed like they'd started to get up when the Unbuttoned Man asked, finally: "Do you oppose these punishments?"

I didn't know what he meant. The other adults, too, looked confused.

"If both of you say, and you'll have to speak loudly, of course—if you both decide that you oppose these punishments aloud, using your words, then we will not enforce them."

I didn't understand until he looked at Nettle: it was a test. I knew it immediately. It was a game, a cruel sort of game: she couldn't say anything. She had been silent all that time and now, even if she wanted to speak, she couldn't—

it would mean they won; it was a game I had played often at the table, and now he'd done it to her. I waited. Nothing happened. The table was quiet.

"Tomorrow morning then," said the Unbuttoned Man, and he shot up. "Are we all finished? Good."

We brought our dishes to the kitchen, the six plates, the bowls of food, and placed them in the sink. Nettle cleaned them as I dried them. When we'd finished washing the dishes, our hands raw, I followed Nettle away up the stairs, back into her room, but we were stopped before we got too far.

"I have another dish that needs cleaning," said the Unbuttoned Man, from below, and even below us he seemed to tower somehow. "Only you," he pointed to Nettle.

I didn't dare question. I went away upstairs into her room as she went away down, and I closed the door behind me, shutting out the sounds, the light. It was like entering a stone, a dark, smooth, wind-worked stone, that left me cold, left me wanting to be somewhere else, to climb out of the hole in the window and fly off into the night with the trees and the stars. But I couldn't do that, I didn't do that. I couldn't even find the lamps or the light switches and so I stayed in the dark, in the stone. It felt selfish to escape, to leave like I did, and not say anything at the table to help her, but they were adults, and I lived in their world, they created it, they could take it away. And so I sat down on the mattress as before, helpless, useless, and went to the only place I could go.

I SLEPT. ALTHOUGH sleep, like life, is always a gamble, never safe. What happens in one colors the other, so when, eventually, my eyes opened and I saw Nettle, hovering over me in the dark, she looked worried and said: "Are you okay?"

It seemed the kind of thing I should have been asking her. But I was sweating and when I tried to speak nothing came out.

"I heard you breathing heavily, but I thought that was just how you slept. Then you made some weird sounds and I saw you shaking. Did you have a bad dream?" she asked.

"Did I wake you up? I'm sorry."

"I was up already, you didn't wake me."

I cleaned the sleep from my eyes, blinking. There was something different about her. Not her voice, her face, her hand was bandaged again, but—

"You're hair!" I said.

She'd cut almost all of it off, so that it was short and uneven and messy but still very dark. I could see her ears now, two shells, her neck, and there were strands that poked out like twigs or the stems of leaves, but she didn't seem to care, she didn't mind at all.

"I knew it would upset them," she said. "And I like it. It took a long time, and I probably messed up the toilet trying to flush the hair away, but it looks nice,

and they can't do anything about it now. Do you like it? You're looking at me all weird."

"I like it," I said. "Just...didn't expect it."

"Okay, good," she said, and she sat down next to me. "Are you gonna tell me about this bad dream then?"

There was a part of me that wanted to shake my head, as I'd have done to my parents, or my doctor, if they'd sat like that, and asked me—to stay quiet, but I nodded. I told her. I wanted to be brave, like her, and not hide anymore. And she was a good listener. She was patient as I told her about the stones, the fox, Isaac, the forest, and the birthmark, the thing that grew out of it, making strange sounds in my bed.

"What did they sound like?"

I made the sound. "And the bed was creaking," I added.

"I think my parents make that sound in their bed too," she said. "One night I was scared by something and I got up to use the bathroom in our house and it was a lot smaller back then, so they were kind of connected, and I could hear them."

I was silent.

"Is it a bad sound?" I'd never heard my parents making it.

"I think," she said.

I continued on telling her.

"The birthmark was on your arm?" she asked.

"Where you bit me, that time," I said, and rolled up my sleeve. Near the wrist and the tendon, the bite-marks were gone, the birthmark was gone; there was only skin. "It was right there," I said. "And now it's not."

"Was it big?"

"Not really," I said.

"Hold on," she said, and got up, and dug around in a bag on the desk. When she came back, and sat down she showed me a wooden necklace, a locket, which she opened with a key. "Like this?" she said, and took something very small and dark and set it down on my arm, where the birthmark had been.

"It's a mustard seed," she said.

I lifted it up closer to my eyes, and it fell, and I put it back.

"My grandmother gave it to me when I was born," she said. "She was very religious, and there should be a little piece of paper inside the locket....there it is," and she unfolded it and started to read the words: "The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest amongs herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof."

"What does that mean?" I asked

"I think a lot of people are still trying to figure that out," she said. "But I like it, and it's special, and it was my grandmother's and I loved her a lot before she died. I usually wear it around me neck, like this," and she wrapped it around, left the locket open.

I asked her: "Do you believe it?"

"Does it matter?"

"Whenever I was in church I never really believed," I said. "I was just scared most of the time that I was doing something wrong."

"You probably were," she said. "I definitely was, but I think still I believe," she said, and I gave her back the mustard seed, almost weightless in my hand. "Or at least I believe in the words." And she put the seed away, tucked it under her shirt. "Was that all the dream was?"

"No," I said. "Although I don't really think it is a dream. It's sort of things that would usually happen in dreams happening here, with us." I told her about the boy in the forest, and the well with all the things he'd found, how he looked just like me, how he was naked, made of wood, how he said he knew you.

"He knew me?"

"He said so."

"Weird. And he was really there?"

"As real as your bird was there," I said. "He was actually looking for the bird too. To play with, I think. He had one of its feathers."

But Nettle's eyes, I saw, were no longer bright. "My mom didn't believe me when I told her."

"What do you mean?" I asked, even though I knew; I remembered being outside the door, listening; I couldn't tell her I'd heard all that, and so I listened to how she told me, how she retold it, and what things changed in the retelling.

"She didn't think it was him," she said, dripping the words out of her. "She didn't even see the same bird. To her it was black, it wasn't green. You saw it was green, right? You saw it?"

"Yes."

She dropped her head. "She threw him out the window."

"So he's still out there?"

"I don't know."

"We'll get him back."

"Not really, he's dead."

"But to have a funeral," I said. "Like you said."

"It doesn't matter anymore."

"What?"

"She doesn't think it's him. She threw him out the window."

"So? All we have to do is find him and—"

"No," she said. "No. I don't want to bury him. I want my mom to see him.

That's all."

"I'm sorry," I said, after some silence.

She put a hand through the air, where hair would have been a day ago, then looked at me. "Do you ever think of your own funeral?"

"Sort of."

"I do," she said. "I think of all the people standing there in the grey, like in a giant ice-cube, all dressed in black and looking down at the ground and I think of them crying and saying what a life I could have had. Sometimes I think it would be better that way. It would be easier to die like that."

"Like what?"

"Young," she said. "Because then people will always just say what you could have done. They can dream of it and dreams are always better."

"Or worse," I said.

She shook her head. "In a dream you don't feel any pain. You can see it, but you don't feel it."

She was very still, her eyes caught in some net in the dark.

"Sometimes I think of the pictures they'd put of me," I said, and she moved again to look at me, "if I died. The ones in my house that I took for school or when we were at a wedding because when I look at them I don't see myself in them. And I feel they'd be burying somebody else."

"Have you ever been to a funeral?"

"Just one," I said. "In Virginia."

"Me too," she said. "In Virginia too."

"We should probably stay away from there then," I said.

She laughed. I laughed.

"Do you want to read a story maybe?" she asked. "They always calm me down when I'm like this."

"They do that for me, too."

"I'll turn on a light and we'll look for one."

The tiny lamp on the desk was light enough. Quietly, not knowing what it was, we moved to the shelf, and started taking down books, and looking at the covers, creased like the lines on my palms.

"What are these books?" I asked, pointing to the adults books I'd seen earlier that morning.

"I don't want to read those to you," she said.

"But what are they?"

"My mom made me read them. Usually they're not too fun, but I like some of them all right." She set the book I'd taken out back on the shelf, and took out a book of folktales from around the world instead. "This is better," she said, "it's from Italy," and pressed her dark eyes up to the pages and searched, and then, after clearing her throat, began:

Once, she whispered, long ago, a man dressed all in black came to a house and knocked on a door. There was a war going on and all the soldiers in that part wore black, and this one seemed lost, was bloody, although quickly explained that it wasn't his blood, and that he was okay. The family who lived in the house, only a mother and her daughter, let him come in. They cooked him a dinner that night, and later he slept by the hearth, for it was early spring and winter was still lurking and lingering in the mornings and nights. Many mornings were grey there and misty, and very rarely was there ever any sun. But the man, the soldier, had told them before bed that next day there would be, that grey was now dead.

"And how do you know that?" they asked of him. But he only smiled and pointed to the windows when he awoke, and sure enough, the next morning and several mornings after that, the sky was bright with the sun and the sky was blue, and cloudless. They went out and sat on the porch, sat wondering how the man could have known, talking amongst themselves before asking him again, asking whether he'd ever studied runes, "or bones," they said, "or tarot. Or do you simply have very good eyes?" They seemed like normal eyes, a little grey perhaps.

After every question, the man smiled, but did not answer and the girl, judging, did not like his smile: there were too many teeth in it, she thought. In the beginning her mother had agreed, but as time drew on, and the days continued bright and sunny and no grey ever

came, she began to think otherwise. She insisted the man stay a little longer. "Until when?" the girl asked her, but "a little longer," was all her mother would say.

Her first husband, like the man, had been a soldier and he, like many in that war, had died some years ago, his body brought home in a bag. She'd loved him dearly and wept a very long time, would not go outside or eat or drink, fearful she'd lose the house, and be on the street and hungry and poor. Yet in only a few days, she had given this new man her husband's old uniform, the same black, with less blood and less mud. In a month, the girl had a new father.

"I don't like him," she told her mother, every day at noon.

"He's new, that's all," said her mother, and scolded her.

"But there's something not right," said the daughter, and did not do anything the man ever told her to do. She did not kiss him goodnight when he asked, she did not help him cook, she did not play any games with him, and said it again, and again: "There's something not right, there's something not right," though her mother, in love with what she had lost, now less alone, did not listen. "He isn't as bad as you think, dear. Let him help you. That's all he wants. He complains to me you do not love him as you love me."

"Well he's right. I don't love him."

"Then try to, for me."

Weeks later, she went missing.

The girl woke up one day and she wasn't there: she wasn't in the kitchen, baking bread, or in the garden, tending their fruits and their vegetables. "Where is my mother?" she asked the man, dressed all in black.

"Last I saw," said the man, smiling and showing his teeth as before, crooked and yellowed, "she was outside. Go look and see, my dear."

So the girl, hesitant, went outside and called out her mother's name, but there was no answer. She was not in the wood or the field, or by the river aways off, and by evening, upset, she wandered back home to her father's old grave. It was a small stone, simple and mossy, now overgrown with weeds. When she looked down at it, she saw a puddle, a small pond of a very strange color. "Mother?" she said, confused. For before the grave, her mother had become a pool of still water, her color and her scent. She dipped a hand into it, into her, and knew then for certain, and watched as the water, glinting in the late light, fell back into the pool like gems. Cupping her hands she filled them and carried her mother back into the house, careful not to spill any as she went.

"What did you do to her! I know it was you!" she cried, when she saw the man, smiling, who said only: "As much as you did yourself," and he seized the girl and drank the liquid that was his new wife, and color came back into his eyes.

"Stregone!" cried the girl, but the man, the soldier, the wizard shook his head. "I am your father," and all of a sudden the voice had changed, "And your mother." The girl tried to run, but he held her tight. "Now what is going to happen," lo stregone said, "is that you my dear, each night will bring a cupful of your beloved mother to me. Do not skimp. You did not skimp in your love for her, and so you will do the same for me. I want to be fat with her. I want you to love me as you loved her. Can you do that for me?" he asked and bent down now, so his face and teeth were close. The girl spat at him. The wizard hit her. "Then it's off to bed with no supper! Soon enough you'll learn. You'll come down and you'll help me. Soon you'll be hungry."

But the girl never did. Of course she was hungry, but more so she she was strong-willed and fierce and forceful and though she tried many times to escape she was always thwarted and sent back and never did she eat a morsel or a nibble of whatever food was

sent her. So, some days later in her room, very quietly, she died. Upon finding her dead body, the wizard cursed her. "I need you alive," he said. "Only you can feed me your mother, not I!"

He put a spell on the child. He went out of the house and made a soup from the bones of her dead father, the dirt and the earth he was buried with, collected, and the wood of his casket, the water of her mother, steamed to a broth. After feeding it through her lips, the girl opened her eyes. Lo stregone spoke quickly and clearly: "Now fetch me your mother as before you died and do not die again," and he gave her back the cup.

This time, forced, the girl went and filled up the cup and returned. But she did not fill the cup with her mother. Instead, as her mother had often showed her, there was a small plant of nightshade not far, and she soaked the river water and the leaves and stems and berries together and gave it over to the wizard to drink.

"Your mother is sweet, like honey," he said, for the plant, though poisonous, was indeed sweet and deceiving. "Give me more of her," and the girl did so, day by day. Soon, his skin grew pale and the veins in his hands and neck and face bulged dark and blue. A cold sweat soaked his clothes, and so he walked without them, going as one much older, hunched and angry, clutching his stomach, still believing, convinced, that he was becoming, slowly, the girl's mother, and that he would be loved. When he died he died in his sleep. The girl was joyed and kicked him, laughed and spat, though her mother still lingered in the pool of still water, and one day, with the war nearing its end, continuing, she woke alone in her house to gunfire and shouting and screams, and the house she had loved was burned to the ground.

The girl escaped but only just. She hid herself away in the forest where no one would find her. There, among the trees and the dead logs, she had an idea, smart as she

was. She made a mould of her mother from memory and love, using the wood all around her and carving it as best she could. By this time it was quite cold, not yet winter, but cold. She laid the mould down in the pool of still water, by the gravestone, and as winter came, and the water froze, the mould was set. She broke it out, chiseled the rest, and there again was her mother, as before, alive, and missing only her left thumb. "That's all he got," she joked, holding it up to the sun. Then she hugged her daughter and said how proud she was of her, but soon her smile faded when she saw the fate of their house and her daughter told of the war and what happened. "What should we do? Where do we go?" she said.

"We leave," said the girl. "But with father. With all of us." And so thus it was that on a bright, brisk day, just beginning to snow, they dug up his grave and carried him passed the ruined house, the road, down into a newly whitening world. They went toward a new home, then, wherever it would be, far away from wars and wizards and evil. And no one said a word as they went. They walked quietly, hand in hand, for all of them had died, and knew now that love and silence were one and the same, for ever and after. But it was still a very long road. A very long road indeed.

Then Nettle closed the book.

And I closed my eyes.

THE FIRE WAS low now, loosing light.

In the corners, scarcely burning, where the ash already, like years, had settled, and the wood already had burned, the flames no longer died with joy, but fell and stumbled, wrestling into silence and struggling into dark. They lived their lives in reverse: first tall and bright, then small and scared. And the smoke now, their ghosts, were larger than they were, were almost all of what they were, as already, no differently, the memory I'd held, was gifted, was gone: a smoke of a smaller world. I looked over to the girl, to see if she'd changed, and again, as before, she had. She was in the chair near the fire, still sleeping, still quiet, but no longer the same girl I'd carried out of the tree. It was Nettle, I knew, but an older Nettle, somehow, one closer to my own age than how I remembered her, how she appeared, before, in my mind. Her dark hair was still dark, her nose was still freckled, though her feet, having grown, were now long enough to reach the floor, and there, they would sometimes twitch and then stir, and it seemed at last that she would awaken from her sleep—her strange and aberrant sleep that passed and crossed through years in a single night. Every time it happened I held my breath. And there were even other times that came, more curious, but rarely, when her mouth would open, her lips would tap, and I did not know if she were merely

trying to speak or indeed was speaking, though too softly for me to hear, and so I leaned in closer, listening to the wind that blew from her to me, through fields, through grass, and unraveled before I could know. If only I could know, I thought. If only the flames would not fade and go out into darkness as they did, but dance on, dance forever, as the world around them died and broke, be dancing until the world ended, and dance still after that.

But Nettle did not wake up. And I could not wake her. There, around her, almost perceptible, but palpable, as around every sleeping animal or person or land, a pall so very similar to the one death drapes over us was hung; and only a parent, one whose hands had flung the curtain off at dawn, may ever have that power, without fear, to wake a body in sleep. So instead, turning away, I watched the fire and waited. I could not touch her. Though I had as she slept alone in the tree, carried her in, she had been cold then and she had been in danger, and nothing went through my head but to bring her inside and out of the storm. The only thing I could do at the moment was keep the fire going. I grabbed one of the irons that hung beside the fireplace and stabbed it into the flames, nudged the wood around. Some embers flared up and smoke, but the wood was black and crisped. It was no use to try and fix it.

I'll go outside, I thought. There's wood out there. I'd have to find places where the rain hadn't touched, but the canopy had been large and I hadn't heard any hard rain since I'd come back in. Not after the old man up the street had knocked on the door and told me about his wife, the house, my relatives, the little room upstairs. What was it called? The fainting room? It was an old name like that.

I stood up and grabbed the lantern from the table, turned it on, let my eyes adjust. Then I followed it on through the house, around the old furniture, the tables and chairs and lamps, and opened the door. As soon as the wet air met me, all the heat the fire had waxed over my face and arms was gone. I went back and grabbed a coat, not mine, but one that hung on a hook not far from the door. The sleeves were long and the collar bunched and it shared the same stale smell as the backs of empty drawers, but there was nothing else.

A small rain still fell outside and the wind came cold, even though it was summer. When I walked over the grass in the darkness, I made almost no sound at all. Only the leaves of the tree stirred, sprawled and out of place. I had to pass it, curve around it, heading on to the small shed in the back. There, were the saws, rusted and out of use, and an axe, too, among the potted plants and the small shovels, and so I took them and went out and started looking for branches to cut, dry branches that would still catch a spark. They had to be small enough to fit into the fireplace, but large enough too so that they'd burn for some time. I didn't want to have to keep coming back out here if I didn't need to. Yet, at the same time, I didn't know how long the night had gone on, if it was somewhere in the middle, or nearing its end. I had no way to measure it. Back in the house, in the sitting room, there were clocks, but they were all old clocks, antiques, and none of them told the right time or the same time; the newer electric ones I'd used when I arrived were no different. Like the the sky, they showed nothing. Clouds hid the moon and there was no light on any horizon, though now and then, as I looked up, I thought part of the night seemed faded, watermarked. It wasn't. And most likely the morning would come dark and grey as it does after storms and I

wouldn't notice it. I'd be asleep, maybe, as Nettle was asleep, but didn't know if, like her, I'd grow at all, or change, or what that would even look like.

When I looked ahead at my life I saw nothing. When I looked to the past I had seen nothing, and now, having remembered some, but not all of it, I felt a weight on myself I had never otherwise known, like an anchor, but whose ship had no sail and no sea before it. Waves crashed and rushed on behind me and I felt their spray on my back, but ahead my face was stainless and untouched: no island idled in my eyes, no coast or jetty was there, ironed, to receive me. There was nothing. I did not exist that far. Immeasurable distance, unknown and not mine, extended and threatened nothing, knew nothing, saw nothing but time never ending, an infinite field without grass, without ground, and yet somehow sustaining. It seemed impossible that I would go there. It seemed impossible that I had lived this long, what felt like to me an entire and complete life, and yet it was only the roots of a life, soon to grow its own leaves, its own fruit. Why then was I so tired of it? Why, whenever I looked ahead did I not believe I would be there? Because I would die? Because there was death? I did not believe that either. Although I believed in a kind of death that I was soon to undergo, that I was soon to pass under some untold lintel on some ever-nearing shore, beyond this interlude of time, this marsh of abeyance and that as we that go on living we die slowly and invisibly more than once, as though death, with too large a job if waited until the end, took us in parts. It happens like forgetting. It happens when you sleep, as you grow, as you change. How was it that I could I have worn the same name and not remembered all of what I remembered in the fainting room, or downstairs, with Nettle? Was it a choice? Did I ever make it? I did not want to

make it anymore. I wanted to stay. I wanted to run back and tell Nettle to stop growing, to stop passing through life and open her eyes, to see, to feel and understand before going, remember before going, before passing and leaving me alone with our memories, too heavy for one person to carry them off. I reached down to cut a limb of the tree. I couldn't. I couldn't feel it in my hands, but I lined it up. The axe came back, the axe came down. It stuck and I pulled it up and brought it down again, pulled it up, and used the saw to saw through it once there was a clear break, a crack. I wanted to cry but did not. I went on cutting the branches.

Then at one point I stopped. Looking down, I was at the heart of the tree, the place where it had split. Nettle had been there, in its opened hands, small enough to hold, a child. The wood was seared and lashed with dark stripes, like iron gates, from the lightning. No leaves fell. Nothing stirred. But I felt eyes on me. There was a pressure, wrapping my entire body. I felt someone watching, and then, moving closer, just then, I saw something flash as through the window of a moving train, sudden, then forgotten. I stood still, silent, listening. It was there and then gone, a wisp, and as much as my eyes strained and my mind whirred to call it back into shape, it escaped me. There was no form to it and there was no sound, only an image, passing. With the light, I kept the lantern steady on the spot, in case it came back, but it didn't. It was probably never there to be begin with. I was probably tired. I went back to my searching, my cutting. It was nothing.

But later, when I was finished and carrying the wood back under my arms, something was different. The house was where it had always been, a dark smudge,

and the door was still open, as I'd left it, but in a corner of the sky, far off, it seemed brighter. A hand had been dragged over dark velvet, reshaping the layers of fabric, and just under my feet there was a feather, though whatever color it was, I wasn't sure. For a moment I thought it was a leaf, astray, for, like a leaf, it blew and skipped off on a sharp wind, as the clouds, now ruffled, were powdered with a pale and unnatural light that lifted my gaze and that moved, motionless, on toward the morning.

Twelve

WHEN THE MORNING came Nettle was gone. Again I woke and her bed was empty, although quietly, the book of fairytales we'd read from last night was still there, where she'd been. The light from outside was bright on the cover, and in the street, the curb, my driveway, like icebergs, there were one two three white trucks, not moving, but grumbling and turning their engines over and over in a steady, panting throb. Men in orange clothes and hats stepped out of them, carrying machines, wires, ropes, saws, and one by one I watched them walk out of the frame of the window and into my backyard to cut the tree apart and take it away.

"They got here about an hour ago." I turned and Nettle was standing in the doorway. In the light her hair looked even shorter than it had last night. It went up around her ears and fell over her forehead onto her brows, but no further. She came over next to me and we stood looking out of the window, watching the trucks, and the men moving around, climbing up the telephone pole, and she said: "Why do trucks have to be so loud?"

I shrugged. "I don't like trucks."

"I think if I had to choose between something really awful," she said, "like listening to goblins eat people or trucks—I would choose the goblins."

"I'd choose the goblins too," I said. Then: "Did your parents say anything about your hair?"

"Not at first. They just sort of stared at it."

"My mom would have said something."

"She did."

"She did?"

"She said when she went to take a shower earlier the water wouldn't drain because it was so full of hair. I had to go clean it out."

I laughed. "She would have hated that."

"I hated cleaning it up. It was a lot of hair." She scratched her head, in the front, then in the back. "It felt weird because yesterday I would have felt it. I mean, yesterday, if somebody was balling up my hair like that I would have felt it and told them to stop. But it wasn't mine anymore. Not really. It was like...like picking up leaves or grass off the ground. We have to do that today, you know. We have to clean up the tree."

"And then I'll go home," I said.

"And then you'll go home, yes. But you'll come back. Or I'll go over there. To play. You do like me right?"

"I do," I said. "Why wouldn't I?"

"You didn't like me when you met me," she said.

I was quiet.

"It feels like it was a long time ago, but it wasn't. It was only a couple days."

"Yeah, I guess it was..." From the Friday I got home after school and the storm came and Saturday followed outside in the forest, and now Sunday, there was no space for them to align perfectly, to unfold and unknot in any kind of order.

"Isn't it weird how that works?" Nettle said. "That days are all the same size on a calendar but when you're in them it's not like that at all. I don't think there's ever been a day that's been the same size for me." She thought about it some more. I could see her thinking, biting her lip. "I think they should remake calendars." She started drawing in the dust on the windowsill with her fingers. "They could keep the numbers because you sort of need those, but they could be all funny shapes, like this:" She'd drawn something ovals, and then something tall and thin, "or like this," and it was some kind of puzzle piece, with holes and arms, another one like a maze. "That's for a confusing day."

She smiled, cleaning off the dust. Then her smile ballooned into a yawn and she looked off into the brown and yellow leaves for a while, more quiet, more calm, watching them flutter their wings, and nod, and spin, before saying, "I think I want my bird back." She nodded her head, softly at first and then harder. "I didn't sleep at all last night; I was thinking about it, and I think I want him back. I want to bury him."

"Do you know where he is?"

She kept nodding. "It doesn't matter if my mom doesn't believe me. It really doesn't. She can say whatever she wants to say about my step-dad, how it's not his fault, how he had some kind of hard childhood and his mom wasn't nice to him and he had to leave home. She can say that, sure, but I need to bury him. He deserves that. He was my bird and now he's behind the house in the shrubs, all alone. I was thinking about it all night. Will you still help me. Like you said?"

I said I would, always, and she thanked me and stepped away from the window, and meandered her way over the messy floor to her desk, and came back,

holding the five stones that were left of what I had given as offering to the forest, and which had started so much of this. "Your parents wanted you to pack up your things earlier and they told me to tell you, so...here," and she put the stones back into my hands. They were heavier than I remembered, but still smooth, even without the paint. "There's not as many as you came with, but they're yours again. I'm sorry for taking them. And cleaning them."

I dropped them into my pockets. "And throwing them," I joked. "And throwing them," she sighed, and held up her bandaged hand, and I wished I hadn't said anything. It was not easy to look at, even though she laughed about it now, and tried and tried to keep to her story, to keep to the poison ivy instead of what I'd seen. But around then, I'd come to the point that I wasn't going to tell her. It was going to be a secret and it was going to stay a secret for as long as it could. The idea of bringing it up terrified me, although not for seeing her reaction so much as to remember it myself, and lend some kind of reality I had tried to push away from it.

As she talked, I piled everything else that was mine together. I balled my dirty clothes together, my wet socks, not much, and carried them out of the room, down the hall, and down the stairs. Nettle followed. "They're outside," she said. Nobody was down there. The house was empty, quiet, or at least it would have been if not for the trucks, rattling the old windows in their panes, and the pipes. It looked more like a house now, I told her. "We'll see," she said. "Houses don't seem to like me very much."

"Why do you say that?"

"I've had too many to say any differently," she said.

I said, "Maybe they miss you." She shrugged. "Do you miss them?"

"I miss too many other things to miss them. They don't talk to me or say anything nice or want to do anything. Houses are always just sitting around."

"They keep the rain off," I said.

"But I like the rain."

Through the blinds of the windows, on the porch, talking, I could see the adults, all four of them. Nettle grabbed my arm before opening the door. "Don't go out yet," she said. We crouched below the windows. "I was also thinking last night about the boy you found, in the woods. When I couldn't sleep." I let her go on, curious. "Well, I just...I just thought it might be my fault."

"How could it be your fault? It was my birthmark. I made the wish. I scratched it off."

"But I was in your forest and I took the stones away and I bit you there, like you said. I bit you where your birthmark was. I didn't mean to. I just did."

I was quiet. "I don't think..."

"Do you think he's still there?"

"I don't know where else he could be."

"Well, I want to talk to him."

"I don't think he'd want to talk to you. When he heard your scream he ran away."

"I can be quiet," she said. "I want to see him. I'm not scared. Was he really made of wood."

I nodded.

"And naked?"

I nodded again. "You could see the part where the birthmark was on his arm, only it was empty, kind of like a hole in a wall."

She listened deep and long.

"And so these are seeds?" she said at last, rolling up her pants and showing me two dark birthmarks on her legs.

"I think so. But I don't think you can scratch them off just whenever. I tried in the shower last night. I think they need to itch or be ready on their own."

"So they're sleeping now?" she said.

"I guess so. Right there and there," I said, pointing. "There are other Nettles in you. But they're sleeping."

"I'd like to know what makes them wake up," she said.

"Me too."

Then Nettle rose.

"If I were you I wouldn't trust a thing he says."

"But he said he was me," I said. "If I don't believe anything he says I don't believe anything I say either."

She shook her head "He's not you."

"But he came from me..."

"He's just a shadow," said Nettle. "He wouldn't be able to move by himself."

She opened the door; I stopped her going out.

"How do you know?"

"I don't," she said. "I just know most things are shadows. Like the universe. The universe is a shadow—it's a big monstry kind of shadow with lots of little dots of us in it. But if we weren't there it would just be shadow and dark and

nobody would see it, and it wouldn't be very big at all. The biggest thing we know, maybe endless, would be the same size as... as nothing."

"I never thought about that," I said, not really following her.

"It sounded better in my head."

But then a voice shot over us. "Are you coming out or not?" It came from the porch. "Close the door if you're not. Don't leave it open like that!"

We went out; Nettle closed the door behind us. Her parents were there, and for the first time, with their backs facing us, I noticed her mother was actually quite tall, although she hunched her back a little, and she was, I think because of it, just shorter than the Unbuttoned Man, who stood straight and dark beside her. Off the porch and across the driveway, I saw my parents, walking together, not close, but together. I said my thank you for letting me stay here, and I left, knowing I'd see them again soon enough. It was still morning and they'd agreed, with Nettle, to help clean. The air was colder when I stepped off the porch, and the sky was blue.

I caught up with my parents. By the time I did, they'd stopped in the middle of the driveway and were speaking with one of the workers in his orange suit and helmet. He had a wide nose and a rusty beard but the buckle to the helmet wouldn't quite go over the beard, and so he kept on, whether he knew it or not, tugging the plastic as he talked.

He led us three back along the driveway, a stranger showing us the way home. One of the trucks that had come with the other two, took up most of the space, and so we had to walk on the edge, through the jungled engine sounds, through the mud, through the leaves, until we reached the backyard. There, the

tree's weight was still balanced over my father's car, huge and brooding, but some branches had been cleared, and the part of the tree that had reached up onto the roof and laid over the slates now reached no further than the garden, and allowed us the smallest path to wend up towards the back door. Instead of going inside immediately, though, we spent some time outside, just looking, not talking, hardly breathing, curving around the bulk of the tree and onto the grass, where the workers had begun to pile up the blocks of wood they cut so that, here and there, they loomed and towered. I walked through them and touched them, smelling the sawdust, finally touching the bark. Except for the chimney, the house couldn't be seen from where we stood, or where I stood. For alone, my mother, without saying so, had veered off to her flowers and plants, the roses, the lavender, the rhododendron, the ones that hadn't been crushed and flattened, picking up the ones that had, and holding as many as she could. My father looked at his car—what was left of it.

Inside was no better. Inside the basement had flooded. Just opening the door, we could smell it before we saw it: there was water up to my ankles, water holding the last step in its throat, water destroying some of my oldest clothes, my oldest pictures, my oldest artwork, kept on the floor in wicker baskets. "We'll figure this out later," my father said, finding a basket full of old records and music, and picking them out, dripping, to find them beginning to warp. We went back upstairs. The rest of the house was clean, untouched: the candles, still frozen, stood in the exact places we left them, with the wax melting, with the wax dried and the wick unlit. But it was all just as foreign, and in some ways more so, since

it was untouched, unchanged while everything else around us was unrecognizable. I didn't go upstairs. I didn't dare that.

By then, around midafternoon, the workers said they'd come back and finish removing what they could tomorrow. There were other trees down, other houses, families displaced. They left and the trucks thundered away and the sounds faded out, and the world widened just a little with the silence, relaxed and flattened.

"Let's see what we can do today, then," my father said, and we went out and started cleaning what we could. Mostly, in the beginning, it was picking up branches, or cutting logs and piling them up on tarps with leaves and folding the tarps and dragging them out onto the curb. We weren't the only ones doing it either. Up the street and down it, people were out in the golden afternoon, glad to be out and cleaning their yards at last, the storm over.

Even Nettle and her parents were out now. The Unbuttoned Man kept going inside, but Nettle and her mother stayed in the front, cleaning his truck off and then made their way over to my house, to sort out where things went on the curb, so it wasn't a big mush of leaves and twigs, and even brought some over to their curb, when the pile was getting too big. I always passed them before going back. "When I'm done," Nettle said, in a whisper, once, "I'll try and sneak back and get my bird," but time after time I came with the tarp to the curb, and she hadn't snuck back—her mother wouldn't let her out of her sight, not after yesterday. "Maybe you could do it," she said.

"And do what with it?"

"Do you have a pocket?"

"Yes."

"Then put it in there. Or!" she said "Or... you could go looking for branches like you're doing and pick up some and pick up my bird too and hide him in the tarp, and I'll come get him on the street when you go back and nobody's looking, and put him in my pocket. We can do the funeral another day. I just need him, and I'm scared he won't be there."

"Why wouldn't he be there?"

She shrugged. "Just go check for me, okay?"

I asked her where it was again.

"Behind the house in the bushes under one of the windows...I think the middle window."

"The middle..."

I carried the tarp back up the driveway with my father and set it down and stepped over a place in the broken fence. I said I was going to see about the bottom of the tree, the roots. "That's a good idea," my father said, and he came along too, and I waited for him to leave, but he stayed around, perhaps on the orders of my mother.

The ripped up earth was taller than both of us, taller still than both us if I were to sit on his shoulders. "Hang on," he said and knelt down in the dirt. My eyes had drifted back towards Nettle's house, Isaac's house, found the middle window, and the bushes underneath. The best pass was to keep close to the fence, and then move on to the wall of the house, go under the bushes, not around them.

"What's this doing here?" he asked me.

I looked down. Covered with dirt and little bugs and ants, he was holding the evil eye—or part of it. It was broken down the middle, but the blue was just as bright as it had first been.

"Where's the other part of it?" he asked.

"I don't know, I didn't put it there," I said. I told him I was mad at it and that I'd put it in his car, for him to take away, but that I hadn't put it here, I hadn't buried it. I didn't know how it got there.

My father was quiet, and stood up and said he'd go try to look into the car and see.

And as I started to go back over with him, I saw what I'd first thought was a very large and orange cat, but turned out instead to be a fox—the fox I'd seen the day before, and after Isaac had left. It had padded over from the forest and now was scrounging around in the dirt, behind the house, in the bushes. It lowered its head and jerked its neck, and paused there, for a breath, and then turned to go back. And as it went back, slowly, turning to face me, in the open grass before the wood, I saw, in its mouth, just dangling there, hung over the snout, the bird—Nettle's bird.

No sooner was it gone. It loped off, leapt out of the grass and into the trees, across the stream. I'd thought I'd lost it already, scrambling after it, but just on the other side of the water, it had stopped, and, as though waiting for me, its head to the side, looked back at me, and was off again, weaving again through the trees. I had no other option—the bird would be lost and Nettle would never have him again, never bury him, as she'd wanted. I wanted her to have that. I crossed the water, but it got away, came back. And sometimes, passing through the shadows,

the red-orange body looked as though it was black, and had changed, and then burned back into the light and went out once more in the dark. I couldn't be sure, though, and not until I was already deep inside the forest did I realize where I was, or what I was doing, and that indeed the fox had changed its color: it was black, with a spot of white on its tail now, and something like a sunset in its eyes. It turned and I turned with it, turned with its turnings along the stream and up a hill, darting little looks back at me every now and then to see if I was still following.

At the top, I lost it. It must have darted behind something or into something, and out of breath, I doubled over, half-hearing nearby a sort of song I had heard once, just the day before. It was light and airy, chiming, although the words were too soft to put together, I looked around as it grew louder, saw how the trees there were white and their leaves were gold and knew at once where I was.

Thirteen

THE BOY WAS standing beside the fox, holding the dead bird in his hands. He was playing with it. He was smiling, singing, flapping the wings and making them rise and fall with the words and the melody, as if it were a doll, its legs limp and slack. Up to the branches of a tree he carried it, and set it there, let it swoop down and the fox, waving its tail, kept near, always near. Then he'd hold the bird low for the fox, taunting it until it leapt, and at the last moment, he'd pick it up, laughing harder and harder each time. But either because the fox was quick once, or the boy was tired, it snatched it away and the boy had to chase after it, away through the grass, and I had to follow. When I caught up, the two of them were wrestling, kicking up leaves, rolling over and over, and when the boy saw me, he stopped.

"You're back!" he said, smiling. "Look!"

He held the bird up to me, triumphant. In the late sunlight the green feathers of the wings were dirty now and there were less of them. The ones still there, under the beak, on the back, were matted, ragged, uneven, and, like the fox, the color had even begun to change a little, to darken.

"Put it down," I said.

He laughed. "I'm not that stupid," he said. "If you want it, come get it!" And he waved it in front of his face.

"I didn't come here to play," I said. "Just put it down. It's not yours."

"But it's the bird! The one I was looking for!" He rose to his feet again, still naked as before, still wooden, with my eyes and my hair and my face. "I saw it in the trees, remember, and I said I want that bird. We were looking for it but you ran away and my fox told me where it went to later and so I sent him out to get it, and he did. He's a good fox, isn't he."

"I didn't run away," I said.

"Then who did?"

"You did."

"You did," he echoed.

"No," I said, firmly. "I did not run away. You heard Nettle scream and you left."

"She's the girl, right?"

"Yes," I said. "Now put the bird down."

He shook his head. "I hate her."

"What?"

"I don't like her."

"Well it's her bird," I said. "It doesn't matter if you like her or not. She wants it back."

"And what's she gonna do with it?"

"We're going to bury it."

He stuck out his tongue. "But that's no fun. I want to play with it. I am playing with it!" and he started to run off, and I had to follow again, shouting for him to stop, as he laughed and skipped. There was something very strange about that laugh, I thought. It was the laugh of someone who had never known crying;

who may have been sad, yes, but had never actually dropped a tear out of their eye, or felt one welling before brushing it aside.

I asked him, "Have you ever cried?"

He looked confused. We were in a different part of the forest now, and the light that fell here was thick and golden and the trees were bent by it. Long arrows, gleaming, stuck out of the ground, pinched between the leaves overhead that, without wind, hardly moved anymore. I asked again.

"Are you going to make me cry?" he said.

"I don't want to," I said.

"But you would," he said.

"I don't want to."

The bird was still in his hands, and he threw it up and caught it. "If you don't play with me, you'll make me cry."

I said, "I don't want to play with you."

He stopped walking and turned to face me. He was trying to cry, very hard, but he didn't, or couldn't. There was no change in his face, and the wood, like wood, did not crinkle into tears, or sap. He simply stood there, and then turned back and after going some ways further, he said: "Okay, fine."

"Fine, what?" I said.

"I'll give the bird back. But only if you come in window tree with me."

I asked him what he meant.

"You know," he said. "The tree it put me in—the creature you dream about all the time. It picked me up out of your bed and carried me there and put me in and took me out. That tree."

"Why do you want to go there?"

"I want to show you where I came from."

"Why do you want to do that?"

"Because it's fun," he said. "And you've never seen it."

"And you'll give the bird back if I go?"

He smiled. "Yes."

"Okay," I said, then, and sighed. "Show me the way."

As soon as I said it, he jumped up into the air, and ran around me when he landed, clapping his hands, showing his teeth. "If you want to," he said, "we could race there."

I shook my head.

"Not even a little?"

When I didn't answer, he put his hands around his mouth. The bird became like a mustache under his nose and he thought it was funny and he giggled and laced his hands like a trumpet: "Fox!" he called out. "Show us the way!"

In a moment, the fox came, rustling through the brush. It nuzzled our legs and pushed on ahead, its black tail swaying back and forth. The white at the tip of the tail caught my eye, and held it. It was just a small crown, snow at the top of a mountain, but it seemed to glow in the twilight and grow brighter the farther we went and the longer I looked at it. Soon it was all I could see. I tried to look away but I couldn't. The light was blinding and pale, not warm, and not cold, but unmistakable, musical, mist-like in the way it moved and margined the forest on either side us. It bloomed up out of the tail, brighter and whiter, brilliant and blazing...

Until it went out. Just wasn't there anymore.

All of a sudden there was darkness. Deep purple darkness and open space. The trees were not there anymore either; they were behind us. Ahead, there was only a field, waving with tall blue grass that made no sound. In the middle of the field, there was a huge tree, the largest tree I had ever seen, rising up into a sky overflowing with stars, heavy with stars, and clear, without clouds or moon, only stars upon stars, and the colors of oil on a wet dark street, all shimmering like silver leaves. The boy and his fox kept on toward it.

"I thought the tree would be in the forest," I said, catching up.

"It is," said the boy.

"It doesn't look like it," I said.

"Course it doesn't look like it, but it is," he said. "Every forest has a window tree, or something like it. You just probably never went far enough."

"But...what is it?"

"What is it? It's a tree."

"But what makes it so special? Why's it all alone?"

"Because it's the only tree, really. All the other ones are just reflections of it."

"They're not real?" I said.

"I didn't say that. They're as real as the window tree is. Just the mirrors are different."

I said, "You're bad at explaining things."

"Am not! It's like this—okay—when you drop a stone in a puddle," he made the sound with his mouth, *plop*, "the stone is real," he went on, "and the little

circles it makes in the water are real too. And it's easier to see the circles than to see the stone so that's what people see. They see all the trees back in the forest, but they're all just this one."

"This is the stone at the bottom?"

"Yes."

We walked on, deeper and farther. The path through the field of grass tapered to a point. My eyes, working hard, adjusted to the darkness, saw little flashing lights dart now and again, here and there, the same sort of color as lightning, yet instead of falling from the sky, it was forking up from the ground, and there was no thunder here, only the lights, thin and willowy.

"We're not in my town anymore are we," I said.

The boy laughed, but he did not answer me. I did not ask him any more questions. Somehow I was not as scared as I thought I would be. If this was what I had to do, I would do it and return with the bird for Nettle.

But coming closer to the tree, I began to feel sick in my stomach. I had felt something like it once after running a great distance, but we had only been walking now, and it grew worse and worse the closer we came.

"Okay," I said, gritting my teeth. "You took me to your tree. Now give me back the bird. Like we said."

"But I have to show you," he said.

"Show me what?"

"Where I was born."

We went closer. The tree was so large now the trunk of it was as wide as a house, two houses, and so tall I was not quite sure if the branches really did

touch the sky as they seemed to, or just missed it. And the fox's tail had begun to glow again as we neared its shadow, this time much softer, and I noticed also that among the branches, growing out of the wood, there were what could have been flowers, that wagged and glowed with a similar white light as its tail. If they hadn't been there, the tree would have been very dark, and I would not have been able to see what the boy was trying to show me.

"There it is," he said, pointing with his finger. "That's where I was born."

At the bottom of the tree, there was an egg-shaped shell of bark that hung, broken to the trunk. It had the faint outlines of a person, the angle of an elbow, the arch of a back, the little bump of a head.

"It put me there," said the boy. "Right there." He seemed very proud of it, and then set the dead bird down overtop his head. "Do wanna see something else?" he said.

By then, my stomach was burning, turning in on itself and I said, "No. You said if I went with you to the tree you would give me back Nettle's bird. I'm here. Give it back. I want to go back." I did not know where he had taken me, but I was certain it was not my town, now and now it scared me. I was alone here. Very alone.

"But I want to show you," he said, smiling. "Come on," and he put a hand to the tree and looked like he was about to climb. I lunged forward and tried to take the bird away, but the fox was there and bit at me, caught my sleeve. The boy howled with laughter. "I knew it! I knew it! I knew it! I knew you'd play with me!" And he scrambled up the tree, like a spider, shot a look back down. "Are you coming? Come and get me!"

Before I knew what I was doing, I was up in the tree. It was easy to climb, being so large, being so old and gnarled. There were footholds and branches to grasp and it was not dark because of the strange, swaying lights that bloomed out of it, and so I could watch and see where the boy went and follow after him, hear his laughter.

"You're playing!" he shouted.

I knew he'd never give up the bird. I should have taken it in the forest, I thought as I climbed. I should have taken it and run and gone back home, to Nettle and she would have had it, and she would have been able to bury it, and finally say goodbye. She'd never got to say goodbye, to her bird or her father. They'd gone and she was not there to see them go. She was not there when they left, and so in some ways they could always return, and in some ways they did return, but I did not want to return to her, like them, empty-handed. I did not want to let her down. I climbed on, always on, further and further, higher and higher.

It was silent all around as we went, but the laughter was loud, a kind of thunder all its own.

"She's not your friend," said the boy, above me, a voice among the dark. "She's not the friend you asked for. But you know that. You know that, and yet you don't want to say it." A sweetness, like hard candy, scraped at his words. "You were lonely and you were upset and did not want anybody to ever leave you again. You wanted a friend that stayed, a friend that would be where you walked when you went there, anywhere, like a shadow. You asked for a shadow."

"I asked for a friend!" I said. "And she is my friend."

"Really?" said the boy. "Is she really your friend? A friend that bites you and hits you and throws rocks at you and gets you in trouble?" At that the fox let out a scream, it's mouth opened wide, harsh and shrill, the sound of iron scraping stone. "She will leave you," the boy said. "She has left people before. She will leave you and you will be alone again and your offering will be wasted on her. You will be lost!"

The boy then, appearing, on one side of me, the fox on the other, leapt down from a branch, and almost as they'd come, I lost sight of them again, looked around, but could not find them. I went up further. I heard them: "I was taken from you. I know you. I was inside you ever since you were born, and now you choose somebody when I am here, wanting to play? You choose somebody sad and upset, surrounded by death?"

I climbed on, anger welling up from my stomach to my heart, to my throat, pusling under my ears.

The air grew colder here, the stars closer. Falling down, instead of rising, the branches seemed to join at each point of light, making pillars and holding up the sky, connecting the two together. The boy was headed towards one, the fox too, and when I reached it, just after them, I threw up an arm before they could go through, go into the star and out the other side, and the boy kicked out and I slipped and fell, slid down and had to grab hold of the bark as they went on, and by the time I was back up, they'd already gone through.

I followed them.

Raising up a hand, I felt around and found wood, more wood, broken wood, and leaves, but not boy, and no fox, and no bird. It was warm there, though, or

warmer than where I was, at the top of the tree, and I picked myself up, hauled my body through the tight space, the prick of light that was the star.

For a time it was very bright again.

Then it went away.

On the other side it was much darker. That was the first thing I noticed. The second thing was that I was alone; the boy and the fox were nowhere to be seen. Nearby, I heard a chopping sound, something falling, sticking, and falling again. I did not know where I was. It was night here, and the sky was cloudy, there were no stars, and the ground was wet. Around me, there was a fallen tree. I was in the trunk of it, the place where it had cracked, and a little ways away, across a small yard, there was a house. None of the lights were on, except, behind one of the doors, in a little window, there was a very dim, flickering light, firelight.

Then I heard footsteps. They were to my right, and I crouched, in the fallen tree, wondering if it was the boy. It wasn't. It was somebody else. They were older. On the ground there was a small lantern, and I could see the person's face. And upon seeing it, I felt something I had never felt before and knew somehow that I would never feel again. It was indescribable. I was unable to move. I only watched as the stranger, unaware of me, went along through the night, looking for branches to cut and then cutting them with an axe and then sawing them smaller and smaller. He went on doing this for some time, and then he stopped a moment, and I could see his face again, as he stood, looking off into the darkness. It was wolfish. It had dark eye-brows and a wide nose and a beard, still growing in. His hair was long, covering his ears, was dark, not curly, but wavy, and his upper lip was thin and his lower lip drooped somewhat. He looked sad about something. I

couldn't tell. His eyes were nowhere near the rest of him. They were off in the dark, peering through thicker, blacker shadows with a kind of intensity that grew a small root in me and through it I felt, like the pains in my chest, the turning, aching knot twist and bunch together.

I hoped he was okay.

And, thinking that, softly to myself, he turned towards me. In an instant, his eyes met mine and he came closer, squinting, trying to see. His eyes, too, were blue, I saw, and before I could hide myself away, I felt something keep me standing there, locking me into that place, until, below me, that same force pulled at my leg, tugged at me, and I was now falling, falling out of the tree, falling weightless and soundless. I tried to grab something, anything, a branch, a leaf, but could find only air and more darkness, and so I closed my eyes, waiting, as I fell on through a night and still another night somewhere far, far beneath it.

BACK INSIDE, THE house was dark. I closed the door. I set the wood down, set the lantern, the axe, the saw down, and sat for a moment, catching my breath. In the fireplace, the flames were so low now the small wind from closing the door had almost snuffed them out. They were very dim. One rose up, one fell, and then they were only embers, and then they were only fading, erasing after-images, lingering for a time like scars at the backs of my eyes. Then they were gone.

I got up. I carried the wood and the lantern back over to the chair where Nettle sat. The lantern was weak too, not flickering, just very quiet. I couldn't see much of her. On the mantle over the fireplace, I took the matches back down, and positioned the wood and kindling into place again, struck a spark. I held it there, red and hot, held it there longer, and had to blow it out before it burned me. The next one caught. The wood grew bright and the flames leapt up, and looking into them, so different and yet so similar to the flames that had burned before, I tried to remember what was left, what had happened after, after the falling, the climbing, and what had happened to the boy. He did not give back the bird, he only laughed and tried to play and I had chased him and his fox up the tree and lost him at the top of it, gone through the star in that strange sky, and found this...found me...this house...this tree...

I stopped.

Had the boy followed me here? Had he gone through as I saw and...was he still here?

I rushed outside, looked around through the darkness, but couldn't see anything. I called out into the quiet, and still there was nothing. The tree swayed and skirled, a beast asleep, and its leaves seethed at every scratch of wind, but there was nothing out there and, if there was, it did not want to hurt me. On the grass, I waited, and when nothing showed, I went back.

I closed the door again. This time the room was much brighter and so it was easy to follow the floor, easy to avoid a chair, a stool, a lamp. The fire was bright and racing now. And as I walked over, I noticed I was shivering. It wasn't cold, but I was shivering and uneasy and I couldn't stop it. But the heat would calm me, I knew, and I sat before it, watched it again, and I was right; the heat was simple and steady, and they were almost gone and I was settling down, when, all at once, there was a hand.

Behind me, just over the sound of the flames, I'd heard a rustling, and now suddenly, on my shoulder, there was a hand. It was a small hand. How long had I been looking into the fire, or was it that I had been outside so long? I thought. Had it been minutes, an hour? No, no, it couldn't have been. The fingers tapped me, falling no harder than stray leaves, and so I turned, slowly. Slowly, my eyes moved up and along the outstretched arm, moved up over the wrist, the elbow, the shoulder, up to the neck, the chin, the lips, the nose, and froze there. They did not stir, there, but held.

Nettle's eyes were open.

She was awake.

They were opened and her pupils, like drops of water falling on cloth, grew darker and then wider, before adjusting to the light and shrinking, vanishing into the wide wet street I had remembered that first day we met, the day she bit me and the storm came and unraveled into everything else that followed.

My mouth was dry. I couldn't speak.

Neither could she.

We simply looked at each other.

I had thought about what I would do, if she woke up, or when, and I'd never figured anything out. I never made it that far. Part of me had wondered if she would ever stop, or if, instead, she would keep growing and aging into an old woman, white-haired and frail before me and I would have watched a life begin and end. But only once more had she grown, was no longer that small child I had first found in the tree; she had passed, in sleep, through years and come up to meet me on the other side, somehow older, somehow changed, both now adults, and both now not really sure what that meant.

"Do you remember me?" I asked her, after a while.

She was quiet. She was looking right into me.

"Do you remember me?" she said, slowly.

"I do," I said. I nodded. Her dark hair fell around her face, down past her small chin. She looked more and more like her mother now, older, with her freckles and her nose that curved in and out. But it was still her, and she was still a little wild, still, as I had thought then but never said or knew how to say—very beautiful. "Your hands are still very small, too," I said.

"Are they?" She took it from my shoulder and moved it around through the air. She smiled and laughed at that, and then, tracing the lines on her palm, she saw the scar and stopped.

"Do you remember how you got that?" I said.

She stared at it for a long time, but she shook her head.

"You don't?"

"Is that bad?"

I looked back into the fire, biting my lip, thinking, deciding.

"Let me show you something," I said.

"But who are you? Is this your house?"

"Just let me show you," I said.

And I got up and helped her up out of the chair. She was almost as tall as I was, and had to lean on my shoulder a little; her dress, fitting as it should, brushed against me and she smelled of wet grass and wet stones, an earthy, airy smell. At the door, I picked up the lantern to go back outside, but when I opened the door it was already bright, or bright enough, and so I set it down where I'd left it. The sun was just over the edge of the field and the sky was pale and pink, mottled with white, slim clouds that stretched wider and wider apart. The air was warm; there was no wind; the rain had stopped.

"What happened here?" she said.

I told her about the storm, the tree.

"You found me in there?" She didn't believe me.

Still holding her arm, I showed her through the dark branches and leaves, to the place where it had been struck and opened, where the wood was singed and

split. In the middle of the wooden stump, there was a black hole like a night sky I could not have seen before, and I pointed to it. I told her more, and asked if she remembered now, seeing it, but she wouldn't answer. I looked over at her, and she was staring again, motionless, at the tree and the roots and then her hand and then at me.

"Tell me what happened," she said.

"Where should I start?"

"With the part you don't want to tell," she said.

"Why's that?"

"Because then it gets easier."

So I told her from the beginning, and every now and then, as I went, telling her about Isaac, the stones, the wish, the forest, she'd say, on the same path, remembering with me, "It didn't happen like that." She'd say, "I didn't bite you that hard."

I told her about the birthmark and the storm.

"Can I see?"

I showed her my arm.

"Where would it be? If you didn't scrape it off."

I pointed, but had no proof other than my word, and went on telling her the rest, how the tree fell, the night she threw the stones, and then she was already ahead of me and I didn't have to tell her about the scar on her palm. She remembered that before I told her. After that, things seemed to fall into place, moving forward, until, cleaning up that day when I ran off after the fox and her

bird, she told me what I couldn't have seen, what happened behind me, and later caught up.

"I didn't know you ran off for a little bit," she said, starting. "I thought you maybe got in trouble, but that you'd got my bird, and it was okay. When you didn't come back, I started to walk up your driveway, but my step-father wouldn't let me go any farther than the fence. He told me to get back, I think, and then...something must have happened. My mom told me, after she left him—"

"She left him?"

"Eventually," she said, and sighed. "It could have been a lot earlier, but that's too complicated to get into. I don't really know why she stayed when she did, or why she left. She doesn't talk about that sort of stuff. I guess I should just be happy she did. I never thought she would."

"And so this was when I was gone?"

She nodded. "Your parents said they saw you run off into the forest and that they tried to run after you but they couldn't find you. You'd gone in too far or too fast. I guessed something bad had happened with the bird, and so I tried to run in after you, but my step-father, he wouldn't let me go and I was kicking at him and biting his fingers, and at one point, close to stream he lost his balance and he fell down into the water and I could get away. I didn't get too far into the woods, though on my own. He came back after me, dirty now, and yelling. It was probably the scariest thing I'd ever seen."

"And then?" I said.

"Then I couldn't find you, and it was even scarier. I just heard him howling my name,"

"But not Nettle," I said. "You had another name..."

"Esther," she said, looking away. "I don't like that name. Don't call me that.

"I won't. I'm sorry."

"Nobody ever called me that but him. And then my mother started doing it and I had to let it happen. She doesn't anymore, though, which I guess is nice. But that day, in the woods...something happened in there..."

"If you don't want to tell me," I said.

"No, it's not that. I can't remember exactly. Give me a second."

It didn't take long.

"I remember, but you're probably going to think I'm crazy."

"After what I've told you, I think I already there," I said.

She laughed, then: "When I was in the forest and I couldn't find you, kind of like what happened with my bird, and I was alone, there some kind of creature..."

I described it back to her, the one from my dream, the one the boy had spoken about, the one that carried him out of my room and into the tree.

"Yeah, that's sort of what it looked like, but...Do you think...no,nevermind."

"No, what?"

"Do you think...it could have been my father?"

"The creature?"

"He looked like my father. Maybe it was only for me he looked like that, but he did. The one who died."

"Maybe," I said.

"What did it look like for you, again?"

I told her. It was tall and dark, had barely a face, was mostly shadow, was mostly mangled and writhing with roots and thorns.

"Yeah, that's different," she said. "But it was nice to me. It helped and took me over to you, when I asked it where you were. We came out to this open field, and a tree. It told me not go up after you, but I did."

"You did?"

"Yeah."

"Why did you do that?"

"Because you went after my bird. Nobody I ever knew would have done that."

"I'm sure they would have," I said.

"No, they wouldn't." She grabbed my hand. "You were a good friend. You were good."

"So were you."

"That's not what the boy said, though."

"No it's not."

"He kept saying we didn't find what we wanted and that I was no fun, that I would leave you like everybody else."

"And you did," I said.

"Yes, my stepfather—"

"The Unbuttoned Man."

"I didn't know you called him that."

"I never knew his real name. And his shirt was always unbuttoned"

She told me. I laughed. "We moved around a lot because of him."

"I know, it wasn't your fault," I said. "But on the tree, what did you do?"

"Well, the boy kept saying it. He was laughing, and he was grabbing you everywhere and he wanted to play but I don't think he even knew how. It was actually kind of scary."

"I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize, you know. It wasn't you."

"But it kind of was."

She shook her head. "No, it wasn't. It was something else...It...When I got up to it, or him, and the fox, too, they'd just gone to this side, and I followed them, and the creature did too at that point. At that point, I didn't know where we were, or why, but the boy was angry with me, and he was holding my bird and taking the feathers off it, like it was some kind of game, like it was a flower. I told him to give it back and when he didn't, I just chased him and grabbed him and we bit at each other and kicked and fought and was laughing the whole time. The fox would hiss and scream sometimes, bite me too, and took my bandage from my hand, but then the creature caught up with us and, somehow surrounded us, and like that, wrapped around us, it showed me the boy's arm, where the birthmark would have been, the gap in the wood...Hang on—"

Nettle's hand darted to her neck, her chest, touching around it, finding something. "My necklace," she said, and brought it out, a little wooden locket on a string. She opened it. It was empty.

"The mustard seed," I said.

"It was just the size of your birthmark," she said. "The creature took it and put into the boy's arm."

"What happened when it did?"

"When it did," she said. "The boy sort of...died."

I tried to imagine how it happened.

"He sort of rotted away," she said, and then, putting the locket back under her dress. "I don't remember anything after that."

"You don't?"

She looked puzzled. "Do you?"

"A little bit," I said. "I remember falling now and being caught by the creature, led back, and you were asleep, so I guess it makes sense, but afterwards..."

"Afterwards what? It's not bad is it?"

"Calm down," I said, "It's not bad. It's over now. And, I guess it's been over, hasn't it, at this point?"

"Yeah, I guess so." She swayed and grabbed me. I held her up. "It...it feels weird to stand so long," she said.

"Do you want to walk?"

"I think so. Is that okay?"

"Of course. There's a river down that way..."

We started walking toward it, away from the house, the fallen tree. The sky was a little brighter now, bluer. The clouds were denser, sewing back together. The sun was low. It was at such an angle so that, looking back toward the house, the stones and the ivy were bright and vivid, and, just under the shade of the roof, the little window I had first seen, and somehow knew—that window

to the fainting room, and Isaac's room, where I had first remembered—was burning, and whether it was from the sun, reflecting, or the candle I had left there, eating away at the closed, black curtain with a scarlet flame, I did not know, only walked away, and up a little further heard the river, whispering, and Nettle asking me to tell her what happened next.

But my mind had gone ahead and come back before that. And so by the time we were at the water, among the tall grass and the little feathery bushes, the words had already begun to flow.

THE CREATURE LED us back through the forest, holding you up in its arms after that. I walked beside it, a little behind, through the darkness and the moonlight, the tall grass and leaves. We went quietly, and by the time we reached the stream the creature had already turned and was following the water along, taking long, slow steps, until we came again, after some minutes, to the boy's well. There was nothing inside it anymore. All the stones and the twigs and coins were gone, but the creature, pausing over it, lowered its arm and raising it, brought out a white cloth from the dirt. It handed it over to me, to hold. "I'm sorry the fox took it," it said.

I'd expected it to be dirty, but it wasn't. It was actually quite clean, and even seemed to glow a little. I held it up and sent my eyes back to you, in its arms, in a kind of sleep. Your arm and hand were hanging down and open, the rest of you somewhere above me.

I asked if you would be okay, and it said you would, but that: "She will not be the same," it said, as we walked on.

"But will she be okay?" I said.

And the creature sighed.

"What does that mean?"

"I hope so," it said.

"Then I'll help her."

"Good," it said, and then told me, "First, you will tie the cloth around her hand. She will sleep until the morning. Do it before that."

"And will she remember?"

The creature said it did not know. "She is still in the tree."

"What do you mean?"

"She went through a tree not her own," it said. "I had to leave her shadow there, so she could return. And," it said, slowly, painfully, "the mind remembers certain things, and the shadow remembers certain things, in its way. I do not know what it forgot, or kept close to it, when I took it out, and brought it back."

The creek bubbled on ahead of us, and in silence we walked some ways further, until, through the trees, I could see our houses, asleep, both tall and dark. The creature stopped. It looked out through the branches, over the quiet lawns, up to your house, the middle window, and there its gaze lingered, for a moment, before lowering itself down to me.

"Can you bring her across to the porch for us?"

It said, "No."

"No?" I said.

"There is no bridge. The night I crossed into your room, the tree was my bridge," it said. "I cannot cross out of the forest unless there is a bridge. Sometimes shadows are enough, but not tonight," and it pointed towards two arms of shadow reaching out, but failing to grab hold of either house.

"So it was you that made the tree fall?"

"I might have," it said. "I have not. The tree did not fall on its own, though. Just as the storm did not come on its own. Or the itching on your skin. Or her."

The creature laid a hand on me, and then lowered you to the ground and laid you on the dirt and the grass, just on the edge of the forest, in the furthest branch of shade.

"There are other things that linger in the woods beside trees," it said.

"Like the boy," I said.

"Yes," it said. "Like the boy, and the bird: things that are buried but never with your own hands." Then it laid the bird down onto your chest, a dark and silent shape now.

Before it left, or turned away, I said, "The boy was me."

"In a window, yes," it said. "In a window."

"But it wasn't, either," I said.

"You asked for a friend that would not leave you, and the forest answered you. It could not give you something, but what you yourself already had to give. The boy's world," said the creature. "The place he came from, and where the tree is, still, is right here," and it pointed a long dark, thorny finger to my arm, the empty space of skin there. "I can tell nothing but what you already know, somewhere inside you, for the boy came from you, and not I. The forest is behind you, not in you, child." And again it rose up, as though growing from the soil anew, and said, just after I realized the blue of its eyes. "Take care of her."

"I will," I said.

Then it thanked me, and after that, without another word, it slid back into the darkness of the forest, until even its footfalls became no more than falling leaves touching glass, and then nothing at all.

The forest was quiet. You were quiet.

There was a little rise and fall to your chest, but nothing more than that. The trees knit over us and under you I made a small bed of moss and leaves. And slowly, too, the darkness began to peel away like old plaster, as the broken leaves tumbled down one after the other, in a flurry. The ground whispered with leaves as I moved, and the moss fit nicely under your neck. There were shadows that crossed you, but there was also light, blue light, moonlight that silted down through the trees, and made islands on your face and body. Your eyelids were bright and closed. Beneath them were those darknesses, those comfortable rooms where you had held me and told me things were going to be alright, even if you yourself did not know. When I close my eyes even now, walking here with you, and think of you, I see you then, as though below water. There is never a clear picture, but there is something which clarity may unstrip and unribbon: a blurred and unfocused innocence, that, if followed, leads you down a pathway within yourself to further avenues you did not know existed, or could be unlocked. I wondered how one person could do that, then and now, how one person could shine a mirror back and reflect a thousand selves and have them all there, waiting, to greet you.

After I finished, I brought the cloth to your hand and began to wrap it. I was careful, even if I knew you would not wake up. I was very gentle. Under your

arm, then over, up to the wrist, and even through your fingers. When I was finished, I sat down beside you. And there, like that, I waited.

Our houses, without us, loomed in the darkness. The tree was still down, but no longer one; it was split up and spread out. Above it, I watched the sky change, and then the little insects at my feet, and shivered in the cold. As the darkness passed out of the air, so too, in a heartbeat, did your eyes flutter awake.

They were the same eyes; their light hadn't dulled. I was scared something would change, and you would have woken different, that you would not remember me at all, or think me stupid or little or weak. But then again, I had changed, a little. Change happened, it was okay.

Your eyes met the air, wide for a moment, then blinked. You were still on your back, and I waited for you to get up and when you looked over at me, I remember, you said, "Why are you looking at me like that?"

I laughed, a little, apologized, said I was sorry, I think. Mostly I didn't expect it. "Are you okay?" I said.

"Yeah," you said. "It's just you're looking at me kind of funny." Then you looked around, knit your brows together. "Why are we outside?"

"You don't remember?" I said.

"I remember you ran off into the woods and there was a boy that looked like you..." but then you saw your bird on your chest and stopped talking. It was green, still, but the green had mostly gone by then, and in the darkness, it looked awful.

You said, "We have to bury him."

"You don't want your mom to see him anymore?" I said.

You shook your head.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," and you picked yourself up off the leaves and the moss. It was funny to see you stand up on your own two feet again, after the creature carried you—or maybe not funny, but it was good to see.

"We'll have to use our hands," you said. "Unless you've got a shovel hidden in your shoe somewhere."

I said, "No, no shovel."

We dug with our hands. It didn't matter.

We dug a small hole, where you had been lying. You did most of the digging, but I helped a little, from time to time. Part of me thought it was not my place, but you wanted me to help you and so I helped.

"Do you think that's good?" you said, breathing heavily, your hands dirty and black. Looking down at it, the hole swallowed itself in shadow, was a little, rough circle.

I nodded.

"You sure?"

All of sudden, I could tell you didn't want it to be over. You didn't want to bury him just yet and so I said, "We should make a little bed for him. So he's comfortable."

"Yeah!"

You slowly gathered the moss and the leaves and slowly we set them down.

"And a blanket too," you said.

We smoothed some grass over him.

"That's good," you said. "Okay."

I sat quietly, watching you. The sky was bright and pale now and there were small, early mists moving over the fallen leaves, drifting and floating.

When I looked back at you, your bird was in your hands. It was finally back in your hands, and you looked down at it, and kissed it once, although it was dirty, although its feathers were torn, and set him down into the darkness, laid his blanket of grass over his body.

"I miss you," you said. Your face was reddening, changing, and there were tears on your cheeks, finding their way down to your chin. Then you starting looking around, darting your eyes.

"What is it?" I said.

"He needs a stone."

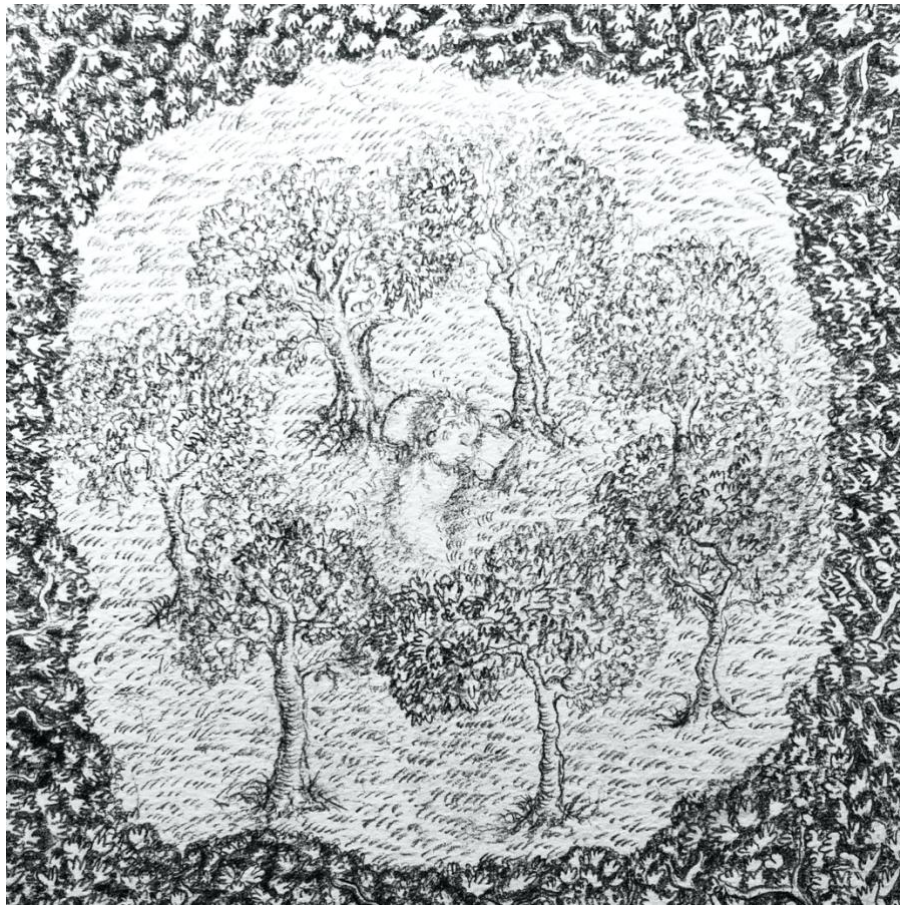
We looked around. "Wait," I said, and dug my hand into my pocket, where the little stone I'd painted and given to the forest, were, the ones you'd taken and that were no longer gold, but I felt had some magic still left in them. "Do you want to use these?"

You nodded. I handed them to you and let you set them down over the dirt the way you wanted, and you changed it a couple time, still not really wanting to be done, to be forever burying, and not afterwards have to walk away, and leave it alone.

When you finished, you kept your eyes there, sighed, and said, "What do we do now?"

My voice was thin from not speaking. I didn't know what to say, but I looked up at you, and then out over the stream, out over the broken fence, and past our houses, to the lamppost in my yard, where its light, having been out, was now lit again, and where it burned clear and warm and bright above the darkness, and so I said, without meaning to, without looking back:

"I think we go home."



Three Fables

The Willow Child

THERE WAS ONCE in a land not here not there a mother who was not yet a mother. She lived in a house with a man, her husband, and while there were two of them, there were not merely two floors to the house but three. And so they tried to have a child, a third member of the family, to fill the house up and even things out. They tried very hard with much love and much care, but for whatever reason, whatever the problem, they simply could not. No child came in one month, in two months, in three, and whenever she saw outside a child, a boy or girl, playing in the street, she would hide her face, grow sad and teary; and though her husband would try and say it'd be fine she always looked away, red-faced, and muttered: "But I'm supposed to be a mother. I just know it. I just know."

On those days, depressed, she went out to sit in the backyard, alone, where she kept a very fine garden. The garden was her pride. It made her happy to sit there and look and smell. There was a rose bush and hydrangeas, azaleas, and in the back, half-hidden with ivy, there was a beautiful stone-woman's face hung up on a wall, with which she sometimes, in private, would talk. Where the face came from and after whose it was modeled she never found out, but they became friends of a sort and like friends they were close. They talked together of womanly things, things she would not speak to her husband about. But always they were light, sweet as the garden was sweet, even if the mother's thoughts were not always so bright.

Then one day, in midsummer, with life all around her, she went out to the wall quite nervous. There was blue in the sky and sun, but clouds moving in from the west, far off. Her voice was small in her chest. She'd been practicing all night, but now it had gone.

"Garden," she said, to the face on the wall. "Garden, you give me such beautiful flowers," and she stopped, paused, looked down at her feet. "Garden, you give me such...such beautiful flowers, but...but is there anyway, Garden, you can...you may...you may give me...you may give me a child?"

There was silence for a moment. The face of the garden was slow to answer, and said what she said very slowly.

The wind mumbled the grass.

"No?" repeated the mother.

"No," said the garden. "I cannot give you that."

And on hearing the words she went numb. She did not know exactly why she had thought the garden able to give her a child: in her own mind now it seemed silly, foolish, to ask a garden, though it gave one life and flowers, for a child.

The mother dropped her head. She began to turn back the way she'd come when, from just over her shoulder: "Though I know who can."

She spun: "Who?"

The garden was slow to answer again. "Do you know the willow?"

At the end of a dirt lane, leading out of the garden, stood a willow tree, lonely in a field. The mother nodded.

"He is always asking for things to be done. I can hear him from here, but nobody else is listening," said the garden. "If you listen, he may give you what you wish. He is old and knows things I do not, but—"

"Thank you," said the mother, interrupting, and set off at once towards the tree.

When she arrived she asked the same question she had asked of the garden. The willow was very large, though, and the green umbrella of his limbs and leaves sighed in the wind, and beckoned her closer. She passed into his shade and heard him more clearly there, like a whisper in her ear. He said he could give her that: a child, as she asked.

"And what would *you* wish for," said the mother, "in return?"

She would have given him anything; would have sought whatever prize or bauble however far the distance, over mountains or seas or enchanted forests.

A wind explored his leaves.

No no no no no, he said. There is nothing but what I am giving.

"You ask for nothing?"

I ask for what I am giving, said the tree. Now go and come back in nine months time and you shall have your child.

The nine months came and went.

In that time, she told her husband none of this. He never asked, or never would have guessed for that matter, and so she thought it better to keep it that way. Whenever she went out into the garden, he would always ask to whom she was talking with, and she would always say, "Myself, no one else." And so she

would surprise him now, she thought, for he too, in his own quiet way had grown sad in the ill-sized house.

When at last she went out to the willow it was winter. Snow covered the field and the willow's leaves were gone; its limbs hung limp like wires, shivering and cold.

"I came back," she said.

So you have, said the willow. It has been nine months.

"And the child?" she asked.

The willow said, Look down.

At the foot of the tree in the white of the snow against the black of the bark appeared a single tuft of hair.

Brush him off and take him home and warm him up, said the willow.

And the mother said, "I will!" But was much too joyed to hear what else the willow had to say. With her gloves she wiped the snow from off the little child's head and saw his eyes, both closed, his nose and mouth, and then his body, small, no more than a year old already. His little fingers were curled and pink. He wasn't wearing any clothes.

Back home the mother took her child, and as the willow said, she wrapped him up in blankets and put him by the fire. Slowly color came and slowly he opened his eyes. In the big red chair on which he sat, he even began to cry.

"What's that?" asked her husband, rushing down the stairs.

"Come see, come see!"

He almost slipped on the slick wood.

"I don't believe it," he said. "How did..."

But the question died right there in his mouth and was replaced instead by glee. And as the winter ended, and as the spring and summer came, they loved that child with all their hearts and raised him very well. They fed him fine good food and taught him how to walk and even how to say a few faint words. And as their parents and their uncles and their aunts all traveled to see their new child, they said, "I didn't even know you were pregnant! You hid it so wonderfully!"

And that was that.

Until, of course, the autumn came. Out of grey, dark skies it rushed, rusting the trees once more and chilling the air and it was then, near dusk one day, the mother noticed something slightly out of order.

"Do you see that?" she asked her husband.

"See what?"

"That, those leaves," she said, pointing. In the bed around the child there seemed to be leaves, little thin green leaves, dotting the white sheets.

"We were playing outside," he said, shaking his head, "It's probably just some scraps. Nothing more. It's okay, don't worry."

"Are you sure?"

He picked one up and set it in her palm, then closed her fingers over it.

"It'll be fine," he said.

But it wasn't.

As winter approached it only grew worse. The child seemed to be shedding leaves and as each one flaked off, like old paint from a wall, the child grew thinner, shrunk. In the mornings, he would wake up smaller, his clothes no longer fitting to his skin, floating in a puddle of leaves. Around the house as he walked, for they

did not let him outside anymore, he would trail a leaf like a footprint behind him, one-two, one-two, and as they brushed his little teeth or scrubbed him in the bath, tiny leaflets were shaken out of his mouth.

The mother marched past the garden, and off across the field to the willow.

"What is happening to my child?" she said.

I asked for what I was giving, said the tree.

"And what does that mean?"

I gave you a child, said the willow. Though I gave you what I know, and what I know above all else is that leaves, in their time, in their place, will go.

As the tree said it, three leaves, like birds, fluttered and flamed to the ground, and lay still.

The mother wept under the willow.

But, it said, and she looked up. It is your child too, and you know staying.

"What are you talking about?"

The wind does what it does to me, said the willow. I lose my leaves, and I never see them again. I am left a different face, when before I was green or red or yellow and orange, I am less full, I am thin, I am barren, but you... You are not like that. You stay. No matter what leaves, you retain your same face, and your same body, and so you are able, in a way, to keep your child.

"How?" said the mother.

Take my fallen branches. Use their skin to mend the child's. Every year you will need to do it. And all I ask is for what I gave, said the tree. Gather me the leaves that fall and bring them here. Bring them back.

"And when I have done that?"

I would ask you to bury them. Dig a hole to my roots and bury them there where I can feel them again, where I may touch them and ask them where they have been, what they have seen.

The mother said she would, and the willow thanked her.

She gathered up the fallen branches, the withies, and hurried back to the house, where the child was now even thinner. It took her some time to figure out how exactly to weave the wood and the bark back into the child, and, while she was a fine seamstress, sewing fine clothes, the process shared very little in common. It was like weaving a shirt, she thought, without any of the fibers showing, and she did not think she would have been able to do it. But she tried, having no other choice, and when she was done, when she stepped back, though she wove it as well as she could have, with as much love and care as she had, the child was different, changed. It was hard to say how in so many words, but he was not the same. Almost, in some ways, he was unrecognizable, somehow grown, yet healed, and in other ways, in other lights, he seemed that small, delicate child again, the one she had brushed snow from not so very long ago.

The next day, at dawn, she took the leaves to the willow. She buried them near the trunk and asked the tree if it would get any easier, this changing, this leaving, but there was no reply. Each year followed the one that came before, she found: every spring and summer the child grew and learned new things and every autumn, though they never knew when, he would start to leave, and flake apart.

Until one year, when the child was taller than both the mother and her husband, the child did not flake, or leaf apart. That was when the child left for good, to a house of his own, far away.

The mother went to the willow after saying her goodbyes.

"I have no more leaves to give you," she said.

Then he is grown, said the willow.

"I suppose," said the mother. "He thinks so, at least. But all I see is his little face on my chest, wanting me to hold, to hug. I see that little child going out into the world and...I guess, well...well I don't really know anymore."

She frowned, looked down.

You are a good mother, said the willow.

"I don't feel like a good mother."

But you are, said the willow. You let him go.

The sweep of the branches, frail and scratching, came in an icy gust, and calmed: I have lived a longer time than you, and still every time I watch my children leave I weep as you do now. It is never easy.

The mother looked up through the empty cracks of the willow, up into the blank grey sky.

But you are still you, said the willow. And you know staying. So stay. Stay as you are and breathe in those spaces your child has been. They are with you forever. And from time to time, from place to place, wherever they are, they will return. Trust in them. But even more so, if you can, trust in you.

And the mother, crying, said she would.

The King and His Courtier

ONE NIGHT EVERY month the king and his courtier would leave the city to walk out among the woods that bordered its walls and gates. They went in secret, drifting from shadow to shadow, hooded and cloaked, avoiding the squares and markets and ports. Coming to a bridge they talked of money, and crossing it, they spoke of horses, amid farms they talked of food. The king, it was known, loved every kind of food there was and even sent great ships to far-off realms, returning some time later bearing spices and strange fruits. And though not a soul except his courtier would ever dare to utter such, the king was very fat because of this.

"Phss!" he always hissed. "Would you call a boulder fat? Or would you call it strong?" To which the courtier, himself quite thin, always brushed up against him, and nudged him slightly to trip, and nearly fall. "I would call it clumsy," he said, but after that they spoke no more, having reached the wood at last, where the darkness deepened round them and blotted out both moon and star. It was quiet there, lightless, and in and among the moss and leaves, the roots and vines, the streams, they lay down side by side and made their love in the way they had made it all their lives, never telling anyone, and always, always wanting the night to linger on a little, little longer.

"One night they'll be someone," the courtier always warned. "Someone passing through: a traveler or someone lost."

"Then we'll tell them what we are," said the king.

"And what would that be?"

"That we're like them," he said. "That we're lost."

Many nights followed and many mornings came, but nobody ever found them, and nobody ever saw. Only it so happened that one night, finding their way back to the city, in the dark of the wood, the trees around them began to move. It started slowly, softly, and for a long while, neither the king nor his courtier noticed. They walked along, brushing leaves and dirt from their cloaks, while, like a woman with child, the trees began to grow larger and thicker around the boles and the trunks, to swell and to bloat, until there was not a single space between the trees. The two of them were fenced in, surrounded, pushed together within a small and still shrinking pocket the size of a tight cupboard or pantry.

Yet in the corner: a slight crack, a thin sliver of a line.

"You'll fit through that," said the king, and patted his wide stomach. "I, alas, will not." And he told his courtier, still: "You must go to the city. Do not cry. Bring me back with you a hundred men and have them chop down these trees."

The courtier nodded, fighting tears.

"You'll have time enough to reach the city before dawn if you run," said the king. "Tell them you woke and found the king missing, and to search. Lead them here."

"And when they ask why the king is here? In the woods...alone?"

"Ask along with them. It will be easiest that way, I think."

And so the courtier, kissing his king's hand, hurried off through the crack and was gone. As quick as he could, he returned, sweating, to the city, having struggled and climbed away through the trees, crossed the bridge, climbed the

keep, snuck into the castle, and rang the alarm. Bells were sounded at once. In the throne room, encircled, he explained to the court their king was missing, that he had found his bed empty, and ordered a search. Within a small hour, he pointed down over the ramparts to the forest, and it's strange and bulbous shape.

A hundred men with haste were armored. They were handed axes and saws, and on the road as they went, marching, rumor spread and ivied about them:

"The king finally found himself a queen," one said, "a fairy who's art ensnared him."

"Or a witch that he bartered with for wealth and power," said another.

"Or a princess in the shape of a doe a wizard once had hexed."

There were many rumors among them, and although it was hard for the courtier to hear, he was relieved his name was never mentioned, and relieved that soon enough they stopped their talking, and began to hack and cut and chop instead.

After many days of work the hundred men had felled the forest. The trees were all down and ravaged, wrecked and ruined, except, in its center, at its very heart, there was the small, walled-in cupboard-sized room which no blade would break, and where inside the king was trapped. The courtier slipped back through the narrow gap and told the king this, and also what his men had said of him.

He was angry. "Then build my city around me," he spat. "Bring it here. This will be my new throne room."

"Here?" asked the courtier.

"And bring me food. I'm starving! I haven't eaten in three days!"

The courtier looked back through the hole in the wall, but could see nothing. He stepped out again into the sunlight and ordered a plate of food for the king, but it was too large and he brought only half of it inside instead. Handing it over, the king, sitting in the darkness, devoured it, and licked his fingers when he'd finished.

"Tell them what I told you," said the king.

The courtier bowed and left. He told the men outside their king's request and told the city upon their return, but none were very happy to hear it. Most groaned and argued and refused to uproot their lives, to move their city, which had stood where it stood for time out of mind. Their houses, they cried, their work, their families, their loved ones, buried—where would they go, how could they leave? Yet the king was the king, and they were bound, as they were and would be, to his word, whatever it was, whatever it would be.

The courtier heard their complaints, and listened to them. It was not easy thing to do. And after a long and sleepless night alone, he appeared before the city and said: "We will not move this city, as the king demands." And the people rejoiced. "But we will, if we can, make the king believe it is moved." And the people quieted. "From what he has told me," the courtier went on, slowly, "he can hear what happens outside his new throne room, but inside it, he sees nothing."

He bit his tongue when he finished. He did not want to say what he said, or betray his king, but he found himself with no other choice. There had been talk of revolt, of rebellion, and talk of blood as though it were wine. If he wanted his king still alive, if he wanted the city to still be theirs, whenever or if ever the king was freed from his prison, there was nothing more he could do, nothing else.

So that night, the city's great inventors and blacksmiths set to work, crafting and building devices, like clocks, that would tick and tock and rattle as though feet were moving, as though rock was being set, and a city being built. And when they had finished, they transported them, gradually, over time, growing in sound until the king, the courtier repeated to them, was in full and complete belief that around his new throne room a great city stood and bustled.

"You must tell me when it is complete," said the king, and for a short time, life resumed as it had. One night every month the king and his courtier met in the wood, alone, and made their love, until the courtier no longer could. He felt too guilty; the lie was too much to bear. Although, now and again, he brought food still, slipping again through the crack, passing the machines that whirred and sounded around the king, where the forest once had been. They were always smaller portions, though, smaller and smaller, which made the king grumble and fuss. But year by year, little by little, he lost his stomach and his size, until, at last, one day in summer, the king slipped through and found all around him nothing but empty field, the bones of trees, and the sounds of a city, the thrumming and grinding of several strange devices he had believed were shoes, horses, carts, cats, dogs, merchants, ships, people.

As in a dream, he wandered away. He staggered blindly, unable to open his eyes under the harsh, new sunlight. And perhaps by choice or by some form of memory, he retraced the road back to his city, and found it as he'd left it, tall and proud, and towered and his, but he could not see it. He had been in that darkness too long. His eyes would not adjust. Yet hearing it, he collapsed, heaved his hands upon his ears, not knowing if he'd left his throne room at all or if it truly was some

awful dream, and cried out, and wailed, and fell down, in the dirt, and the mud, and believed with all of his heart that he was dead.

The last thing he saw was the courtier's face, smiling, loving.

And when the king awoke he heard only silence. There was no city, but beneath him, he felt rich cloth, and cushions, pillows. A sweet perfume filled and flowered wherever he was. He heard footsteps, and then, not far, a familiar voice.

"You were on the side of the road," it said. "I must have walked past you for when I went back to the forest to tell you the truth, you were not there, and when I returned you were in a ditch. Are you comfortable now?"

"I can't see," said the king.

He felt lips on his mouth.

"I know those lips," he said, and then something began to happen.

"I know your voice too. I can hear it. Kiss me again."

Again he was kissed, again and again. And with each touch of lip and cheek and hands, his eyes began to open, to see and seeing saw the courtier, his friend and love, and the courtier said, before taking him into bed, "I am sorry my king. I told you not the truth." But when they left the city in the morning, and looked back, from a distance, at the silence and the quiet of the walls and the gates, the king said only this: "It is good we left and it is good you lied, my love, for now we need not lie in love. "

The Door of His Back

IT WAS A very old stretch of country through which they passed, and off amid a forest, thick with trees and green, the man tripped on a root and fell. He staggered at first, then lurched forward a little, planted his foot in mud and tumbled down a small hill, armored in ivy, and landed on the flat of his back. Looking up, he saw hands, the hands of his friends, and they helped him once more to his feet. "Thank you," he said and "no problem," they said, and sat in the shade for a time, drinking and catching their breath.

It was still some ways to go until they reached the house they were to be staying at. As far as they thought, it being midsummer, it was a perfect time to be rid of the city, the muck and the heat and the steam and so, on his prompting, they came along with him to his grandparents' cottage—a place he himself not been for almost fifteen years at least, ever since his grandmother had died there.

Standing again, they brushed the leaves and twigs from his hair and shirt as he laughed and joked about his balance. "A fairy must have stuck out a leg and tripped me," he said, and the others, snickering, went along with it, not really believing in fairies or anything of the sort. Each in their own way, as most will do, had outgrown those stories, those tales of adventure and danger so wolfishly consumed when still a child, and the world less firm.

But just as they finished cleaning his back, one of them stopped, went pale. He called the others over; the others gathered round.

"What is it? I'm not bleeding, am I?" the man asked, trying to bend himself around and see.

"No," the others said, and then asked him if he felt any different, if he felt anything...on him.

He shook his head. "Why? Is there something there? Is there an animal?"

His friends were quiet. They shook their heads, and then, slowly, one of them, very softly, said: "There's a door." And they were right.

On the man's back, in line with his spine and shoulder blades and hips, there was a wooden door, painted a dark green, with a golden handle. One of the friends suggested that perhaps he'd fallen onto it and it got stuck. "But look," said another. "It's not old at all." None of the paint was chipping, they showed the rest of the friends, and the handle was bright and gleaming. "It's summer," they said. "Those leaves we brushed off couldn't have fallen any time soon."

"And you can walk and stand okay?" another asked the man. The man walked normally, perhaps only a little straighter.

"And you can't feel it? Try touching it."

The man shook his head. "It's just my back," he said.

"Let's get to the house then," they said. "We can figure things out there."

And so the man, with the door on his back and his friends behind him, walked on and away and came out of the forest and passed through a meadow, and over a bridge and finally, over a hill, in the afternoon, at last, they came to the cottage. There, they rested. It was a very old house, like the country around it, ringed with a low stone wall, and made of a pale brick, sun-baked, with clay tiles for the roof, and ivy bearding the walls, a garden on all sides. Old chairs and old

tables and paintings and books surrounded them inside, when they entered. But nowhere in the house was there a mirror. The man had looked in every room, and had found nothing to see what the others had said was on his back.

"Let's take a look, again," they said. "Stand right there," and he stood as they asked.

"Do you think we should open it?" one said.

"I don't see the harm," another said. "It would only open onto his back."

"Then how about you open it. I don't want to."

A hand was placed to the handle and the handle was turned.

"It won't open," they said. "It's locked." The others tried, one after another, but by dinner they had all tried and they had all given up.

While looking for a fork, though, one of them shouted, "A key, I found a key!" And they crowded again. "You've found a lot of keys," they said.

There must have been fifty keys in the drawer, all different shapes and sizes. It was easy to figure out which ones would fit and which ones wouldn't based on their cut, but it took some time all the same to sort out the rest. Not until after midnight, in the dark, having gone through several failed attempts, did they find a key that looked like it would fit. It was the right size, the right look: it was old, but, like the door, it was not rusted or tarnished. They placed the key in the lock and turned it. Suddenly, the man heard his friends gasp and he tried to wheel around to see, but he couldn't.

"What is it?" he asked them, but none of them answered.

"It can't be," they said, to themselves. "It's beautiful."

"Should we go in?"

"What's happening?" shouted the man, but this time, turning around, he found that he was alone in the house. And it was very quiet. A small lamp was on, a couple candles lit. The windows were dark with the night outside. "The windows..." he mouthed, and quickly, knocking things off the table, climbed atop it and looked at himself in the reflection. He almost couldn't believe it. He hurried closer to the window, as close as he could. His friends had been right. There was a door on his back, and it was opened, and through it, as well as he could see, there were golden hills and little dells and glens and..."Fairies," he said, aloud. They were not small, not glints of light, but tall and thin like the trees, and shone and glowed. He looked at them, watched them, looked all that night until morning, when the reflection faded and vanished, and he fell, without effort, into a dark and dreamless sleep.

On waking, his friends had gathered around him.

"There's a whole world behind the door," they said.

"And these tall thin people gave us candy and played us the nicest music," they went on.

"Fairies," sighed the man who had wanted all his life to see them, and believed in them still, having grown but not forgotten.

"Sure, fairies," they said, and they went on explaining all the things they had seen and the man with the door on his back named them: the dragons, the unicorns, the fauns, the nymphs. "In the distance," they began, after a silence, "there was even a castle, with towers and I bet a queen. We should go there tomorrow."

And they did. They opened the door and went inside and did not come out until morning. The man watched them, but felt nothing as the door was opened, as they crossed over the threshold, as they came out. He watched his reflection in the night, crept as close as he could to the window to see as much of this world, this land that was in some ways his and in others more distant than any star in the sky had ever been. It seemed so familiar to him, so close, and yet he could not enter, could not smile and laugh and run through it, as the others did, his friends.

One day, as they slept, he crept through the house, unseen. He made no sound in the daylight, and he found the key that opened the door. It was not large and not small and not anything special, only dull metal, plain and common. He started a fire in the hearth. The flames licked and spat and after watching them, flickering, he threw the key in, saw it nest among embers and ash at the bottom, saw the flames around it surround it and yet, somehow, after hours, it did not burn.

He grabbed the iron tongs and set it back in his hands. The key was not even hot.

In a hurry, rushing, his friends waking up, he dug a small hole in the garden outside and buried the key beneath the dirt. His friends searched everywhere but they couldn't, as hard as they looked, turning over cushions, peeling back carpets, find it or any trace of it and could not sleep either. Their eyes, the man noticed, had a strange quality to them, almost too wet, too shiny, and it scared him.

The next day was not good.

In the garden, where the man had buried the key, there now was grown a small bush. The leaves were spare and shiny, and hanging like little fruits, were keys, all the same, and so many the man, when he saw it, cried and sat alone, simply waiting now for the night and the door of his back to open, and him not enter.

As before, when the others found the bush, and grabbed the keys, they went inside, and again the next night went inside and again the next, the next. They stayed longer at the cottage than they intended, and had no desire of leaving, when, walking quietly through the house, wandering, the door opened, the man found a very large chest. It sat on the floor of an otherwise empty room, was made of wood, was also green, and set with golden locks, like the door.

Using the same key, he opened the lock. Then he opened the chest.

At the bottom, which went down much farther than the floor, like a well, the man saw a body, and on its back, a door. It was his grandmother's, and she was, as he had been told as boy, dead. He remembered trying to imagine what a dead body looked like back then, and it was nothing like what he saw now.

The image haunted him. He wondered if it was real or if it was like the door and he could only see it a certain way.

As soon as his friends, enchanted as they were, had risen, he asked them, together, to come and see what he saw. He led them to the room, he opened the chest, and what they said, after a silence, surprised him.

"We've seen her before."

"Where?" he asked.

"In the door."

"But she's dead. She's my grandmother."

"No," they said. "She's the queen. She told us her husband killed her."

"Killed her? He wouldn't do that. My grandfather's a good man. He lives in the city. I saw him last month."

"She said he threw her down into a pit when he had the door, like you. She said she didn't want to come out and he made her."

"I don't believe you."

"She said it," they said.

"Then ask her again, tonight, when you go in. Tell her I want to know."

They said they would. They opened the door.

But the man did not wait for them to come back as before.

He had thought, through the night, of running away, of leaving the house, but he was terrified of them finding him again. And they would, he knew. Going through the door for them was a drug, and however tall and soaring they came out, he was just as low. He positioned himself over the chest so that when they did come out, they would fall and fall down into the pit. And a long time he stayed like that, but in the end, decided he couldn't do it. They were his friends, after all. He guessed. He felt farther away from them than ever, though. But they were happy. He could not take that away either.

So instead, before they came out, the man, with the key, locked the door. It was not easy; he had to bend around, and use a window again in order to see, but he locked it and then, opening the chest, and closing his eyes, he stepped down into it, and fell into silence.

When he opened his eyes, he saw bright, clear sunlight and a wide, vast glen, with flowing green hills, and, in the distance, beyond ribboning streams and

trees that no longer moved like trees, he saw a castle pointing up into the cloudless sky.

And he knew it was his.

For the door was green.