When I sleep I dream of my sisters. There is a melting sun sinking over the horizon and grass soft enough to put our heads down on. My sisters are blonde and beautiful with the light splitting into shards of blue and pink around their bodies, crowning their heads. I hold hands with my older sister and she is as she was at thirteen—limber, tall, with smooth muscles sliding down her leg bones. She effuses pink. The breath that floats out of her mouth is so warm and alive that it makes gray clouds in the damp air. In my sleep it is always this certain spring, one that has cool, light rain and a sun sent from below the equator to warm us in our old jeans and white linen. I don’t remember anymore when the spring was, or why there were never days that were too chilly, or evenings when we wished to see stars but the city lights were too bright. But we three are there, our younger sister wrapped around my back, her cold patent leather shoes pressing into my stomach. It is the kind of dream where when you wake up, you breathe the day in and can fall back into it for a few moments, and be there whole, in the flesh.

It takes until you put your foot out of bed and touch the floor to know it isn’t real. In this sleep we walk toward a yellow house tucked into a valley. Inside we hear thick oatmeal popping in a saucepan and careful scales on an old upright piano. One of the low keys is broken. We stand outside. I am holding our older sister’s hand and our younger sister is on my back.

The house in Wisconsin was calm yellow. We helped paint it ourselves, turning it from a crusty gray into a warm home with snug red shutters, when we moved from New Hampshire late in May. The road from the neighborhood angled down and tucked us into our yard in such a way that we couldn’t see any other houses unless we climbed onto the roof from the upper story. Sometimes before breakfast, I climbed the eight stairs to the dusty attic and slipped out the window to look over the sleeping houses. Because it was late spring when we moved, the neighbors left their shutters open to let in the early morning light. House by house, lights flickered on and illuminated the gray shadows of bedposts and dressers, until they were turned off again after the sun had fully risen. Our mother cooked us warm oatmeal or soft-boiled eggs on most mornings. Claire liked soft-boiled eggs. She was oldest and knew the most about what was delicate. She tapped her egg with a small spoon and cracked the shell so that the yolk ran out in ripples of bright shiny light. She soaked it up with soft toast. I scraped the bottom of my oatmeal bowl and watched the yolk seep into the bread.

“They’re like snot,” I said, spooning lumps of brown sugar into my bowl. “Like snot from an old, disgusting man.”

“It’s an acquired taste,” said Claire. Our younger sister Blanche ate Cheerios without milk. She watched us from across the table, reserving judgment. Her third birthday was three months away, the third week of August. Blanche was very small and watched other people talk with her mouth pressed shut in a firm, thin line.

“Claire, you have an acquired taste for snot,” I said. I picked my nose and wiped it on her napkin.

After breakfast, we opened our heavy red front door and walked up the slight incline toward the neighborhood. When we reached the top, my calves throbbed and my breath stung low in my throat. Claire rode her bicycle up the hill, toward the peak where the neighborhood began. Her body rose upright, using the whole strength of her legs to press to the top. It was a blue bike with a banana seat that made her shorts ride up. The low edges of her white underwear were rubbed black from the dye that turned the banana seat so dark. Her Keds sneakers, warm, white, and thin, stayed clean until the end of summer. I jogged every few steps to catch up, dragging our red Radioflyer wagon behind me. Blanche, wearing her blue cardigan, sat in it and ate an orange popsicle with her right hand. Her other arm gripped the side of the wagon.

Our first stop at the beginning of this spring day was Mrs. Beatty’s moss garden. Claire dismounted her bicycle and pulled the wedge out of her shorts. She parked her bike by the big maple tree, striking the kickstand with her foot. I grabbed Blanche under her arms, lifted her out of the wagon, and set her on her feet. Blanche could be so lazy. She walked, of course, but she’d rather have been carried.

“Come on!” Claire whispered to us, her eyes trained on Mrs. Beatty’s moss. It was ugly and green and seeped over four chunks of sidewalk. It festered in the cracks that belonged to the other neighbors. Every morning we came to check on its progress. I sat Blanche on my lap to look. Years later, after we were thrown across thousands of miles of continent and sent each other postcards for Christmas, I had a dream...
that I carried Blanche back to the neighborhood to look at the moss. It hadn't died, even though it was a deep January frost.

Claire took a fork from the breakfast table out of her shorts pocket. She leaned down and examined the moss closely. "Come on, Beatrice!"

"I forgot my fork." The only thing in my pocket was an Almond Joy candy wrapper.

"That's why I always bring an extra." She took another fork out of her other pocket and handed it to me. We kneeled down by the moss and began chipping away at it with the tips of our utensils. Blanche pressed the moss down with her fingers, willing it into the grainy sidewalk so that it stuck to the anthills and the dirt deep below. It had been weeks since we started doing this, coming every morning to stop it from taking over our neighborhood. But it was a virulent, moldy moss that grew overnight, like when we left bread on the counter in the June humidity.

I looked up from my work and put my hands on my thighs, breathing in the scent of the neighborhood. There was no hint of any sort of autumn. This was a clear, warm spring, and there would never be another like it. I looked up at Mrs. Beatty's house. It was dark blue, and dank on the inside. Mrs. Beatty had a daughter who had almost been our babysitter.

We spent the better part of an hour at the moss and now it was past eleven, getting toward the hot part of the day. The moss was picked back by three inches and we went down to the pond. I put Blanche back in the Radioflyer and Claire strode beside her bike. My thighs stuck together with a light coating of sweat as I walked.

The pond was a small, still place, thriving with ants and tiny flies. The wagon wheels jerked over the small rocks that layered the downward sloping path and Blanche dropped her popsicle stick and gripped both sides of the Radioflyer. The mosquitoes went after Blanche the most, probably because she smelled the cleanest. Claire never got bitten at the pond. Now I think this was because she would die so young, and nature is tied into us in such a way so that it knows what punishment to put where. My mosquito and black fly wounds turned into tiny red marks, smaller than a pinprick. Claire threw a rock into the pond and it skipped four times.

"How do you do that?" I threw a smooth stone into the water, where it plopped and sank, fat and old, to the bottom. There was a murky point where the pond water became very deep. The stones caught the light, glinting, and then, overwhelmed by ripples of water, sunk into the cloudy quicksand. The sunlight bounced off the dank water and the slimy flash of a pond creature reflected up at us.

"God, just flick your wrist, Beatrice." Claire did it and it was a clean and simple thing.

"I did flick my wrist."

"No, Beatrice, that is not flicking your wrist." I sighed and sat cross-legged by the edge of the pond and put Blanche in my lap. She was very patient then. She was content just to sit. We wondered if she would ever say more than five words put together, because she was already almost three and so quiet. She mostly smiled when she meant to say yes and looked away when she meant to say no. There was something so melancholy in her. She was a tiny prophet, reserving her wisdom. There was a splash in the water just then, something that made the air bubble up from the water just so.

"Claire, Claire, what is that?" I got up and put Blanche on my right hip. Claire ran to the edge of the pond and looked in.

"Beatrice," Claire said as she pointed into the water, "You know what these are! Come look!" I walked over and crouched down. Claire's excitement could be so fleeting that I knew I had to be excited right away. Sometimes she was the sister that I knew, quick to make things funny and lighthearted, and sometimes she was dour and smoldering, someone I didn't remember. Blanche's feet skimmed the top of the pond.

"Oh, a crayfish," I said quietly, not wanting it to skid away. I put Blanche in Claire's arms and picked up the crayfish with two hands. He smelled like my marbleized classroom where we had drawn pictures of crayfish the year before in New Hampshire. "Can we take him home?" I whispered, picturing Mrs. Beatty spying from a tall oak tree limb with binoculars.

Claire looked down at the pond water, raising her eyebrows. She was far away. "Sure, put him in the bicycle basket. I don't care." She turned her back toward me. "Come on. Let's go back." She mounted the bicycle and I placed the crayfish in her basket. He squirmed up the wicker edges, but he was trapped. I put Blanche back in the Radioflyer and hauled her out of the woods toward home.

Our crayfish lived for two weeks in a small dish that smelled like dirty pond water. My father thought he was funny and bought us a big picture book about sea creatures. Blanche liked the page with the
crossed them over each other, binding them with a hair elastic, and stuck them on her arm in the kitchen, rolling the paper between her fingers, while my mother cut vegetables or talked on the telephone. After those two weeks, of course, the crayfish died, smothered in sunken fish flakes and deep green growths of seaweed moss. We buried him in the back yard and Claire conducted a simple ceremony. We never named him, so the funeral was short.

"Now we lower this crayfish into the ground," Claire said, and raised her arms up to the sky. "God, watch over his soul, and watch over his grave." She clasped her hands together and knelt in front of his white Mary Kay coffin. Blanche, who was latched onto my back, put her head on my shoulder. Our parents weren't invited to the ceremony, but I told them they could watch from the kitchen window. I looked up at the back of the house and saw the dim movements of them making tea and talking softly. They walked over to the kitchen window and looked down on the back yard. My father touched my mother's arm and she held his hand in hers for a short minute. "Now we must place the dirt in a ring around this grave." Claire picked up a spoon and made an indentation in the shape of a wide circle. We scooped up teaspoonfuls of dirt and made a one-inch mound around the crayfish's coffin. I took two twigs and crossed them over each other, binding them with a hair elastic, and stuck them on my nose. "God," I whispered under my quilt, "God, please watch over our crayfish. He didn't have a name." I breathed in and tasted the scratchy fabric of my blanket. Blanche rolled over and her mattress springs squeaked. I didn't want her to hear me but I knew that if I didn't say it out loud it wouldn't mean anything. "God, if you see our crayfish, please take care of him. Thank you." I paused and tried to remember a prayer that I had seen on a television show. "Thank you, Lord." I squinched my eyes together until I saw exploding neon stars. "Thank you, Lord, Jesus, father, son, holy ghost. Holy ghost. Amen." My body was tense from remembering so hard. I rolled over and closed my eyes under the sweaty blanket.

Later in the night, my father came into my room to peel the blanket off of my face. My mother sent him sometimes to check on us when she woke worried in the morning. I heard him creak the door open with just the tips of his fingers and walk over to our window to look at the streetlight. I peered out from a tiny breathing hole I had wrapped around my nose and saw my father put his hand on Blanche's cheek and sigh. He walked over to my bed and tucked the quilt down around my shoulders. My face was red and hot when he peeled away the blankets. If he noticed that my eyes were open, he didn't say anything, but put my arm behind my ears and sat in the small chair between our beds, looking out into the moonlight. He rested one hand on Blanche's cheek and another on mine. His hands were smooth and cool and I could feel their coolness calm my head and make my thoughts quieter. I fell back to sleep with the sound of his and Blanche's breathing. It was a still pond of calm breath, with small glowfires of insects flying under the insides of my eyelids.

The weather changed after our crayfish died. It got humid so that every night we could only stay outside until it threatened rain. Before this, June had been a simple, constant heat. Blanche stayed the same and so did I; every morning I dragged her in the Radioflyer up the hill to the neighborhood. Claire still came usually, but some mornings she stayed inside. She took old National Geographics from the oak bookshelf in the hall and cut out little pictures of islands and palm trees. She shut the door to her room all the way, latching the tiny hook and eye, and Scotch taped the pieces of ocean and land together into colorful seascapes. She taped one picture on her door that had a pink and orange seascape. She shut the door to her room all the way, latching the tiny hook and eye, and Scotch taped the pieces of ocean and land together into colorful seascapes. She taped one picture on her door that had a pink and orange seascape. She shut the door to her room all the way, latching the tiny hook and eye, and Scotch taped the pieces of ocean and land together into colorful seascapes. She taped one picture on her door that had a pink and orange seascape. She shut the door to her room all the way, latching the tiny hook and eye, and Scotch taped the pieces of ocean and land together into colorful seascapes. She taped one picture on her door that had a pink and orange seascape.
That night, a huge storm swept through our neighborhood. Our house rattled with the thunder and Blanche clung to our mother's legs from under the kitchen table. Torrents of rainwater slammed down on our roof and flooded the gutters. Out the window, the neighborhood was a smattering of tiny lights clouded by bursts of horizontal rain. After we were sent to bed I propped my head up on my pillow so I could look out into the storm, racing the fat droplets down my window. The ones that sucked in the other raindrops always sank to the bottom first because they were fat and powerful.

In the morning we swung open the front door. A thick limb from a nearby oak tree had fallen across the path up to the neighborhood. I shimmied under it quickly and Claire hopped over its rough trunk, dragging her bicycle over it with her. My parents lifted Blanche high up between them in the air and stepped over the split tree limb. We climbed up to the neighborhood to look at the ruin.

A huge branch had landed across Mrs. Beatty's moss. My father lifted Blanche up to look at the broken tree limb and she touched her face to it and rested her arms across it. Claire rode her bicycle through the puddles and left tire marks around the moss. My mother looked up at the pink sky.

"Skies are always beautiful after storms," she said. Her nostrils flared as she inhaled. "Beatrice, come here." I walked over to her. Her voice had a warm, mellow timbre. Now I know that it was like a viola. "Put your nose up to the air and close your eyes." I leaned my head back and shut my eyes tightly. Pink explosions flashed across my eyelids. "Do you smell that?" I didn't know if she was asking only me. I breathed in the morning and it was clean and bright. "That's what it smells like after beautiful dreams, doesn't it?" Behind her eyes I knew she was watching her beautiful dream. I thought of a nighttime dream in a vast, waterless desert. My mother breathed a deep, contented breath. "Now you know what it smells like after storms." I looked at my mother. With her head back and her eyes closed I saw her like someone I didn't really know. This was her last alone moment of perfection. She inhaled sharply and opened her eyes.

"Let's go home." She looked at Clare spinning in her circles. "Claire," she said, "put Beatrice on your handlebars. We're going home for lunch." I rode back perched on the front of Clare's bicycle and closed my eyes as we coasted down the hill to our house. The air was damp and that was all there was to the world. That night the rain poured down again. Flashing red rivers of water reflecting the street lights whacked and then slid down my bedroom window, coating it with dirty acid rain.

When the morning arrived, a wet, stinking world released steam from its underbelly. Claire's bedroom window had been opened during the night. Water was dripping down her wall. From my bed, I heard the slam of the front door and the thump of my parents' feet running down and then back up the stairs, my father's hurried voice on the telephone and my mother's low heels jogging up the hill to knock on the neighbors' doors. Blanche was still asleep, breathing quietly. I stared up at the ceiling and waited until my mother came into our room to get us out of bed. Her face was lined with worry and she shut our door behind her with a frantic swing. Her breath came heavily, from high in her chest.

"Beatrice, get up." She wasn't looking at me, but rather out the window. I swung my feet out of bed and ran over to the dresser, pulling off my nightshirt. "Get Blanche dressed and come downstairs." I pulled a turtleneck over my head and nodded vigorously. I felt my mother's hands pull the head of the turtleneck down over my face, but when I could see again she had gone out the door and slipped into the hallway. I pulled on clean underwear and a pair of jeans and left my nightshirt in a pile at the foot of my bed. Blanche was still asleep, breathing quietly. I stared up at the ceiling and waited until my mother came into our room to get us out of bed. Her face was lined with worry and she shut our door behind her with a frantic swing. Her breath came heavily, from high in her chest.

Later in the morning, they found Claire floating face down in the pond. Neither Blanche nor I were told anything to our faces, but oh, the things we heard. We listened to quiet grownup speak from the sidewalks about how her body was swollen from the water and were we going to have an open coffin. Her blue bicycle was standing next to a tree, the kickstand down, with an empty soda bottle in the basket. No one had seen her go down the path, but everyone remarked how the pond had grown to twice its usual size from the storms, as if this was something that might explain why the universe makes these horrible accidents happen. I peered down the path a few days after the funeral, crouched under the fluorescent strips of police plastic. The water still hadn't completely receded from the roots of the big oak trees that lined the pond's rim. The sandy banks were worn away, rubbed down to the hollows between the tree roots.
By that summer I was well old enough to read, so of course I read the papers. Not from our house, since my father stopped delivery, but from the front pages thrown away in the big metal wastebaskets by the mailbox and grocery store. The papers printed an old picture of Claire from a year before that didn't look at all like her. Her smile was wide and her front teeth had little ridges on them. She was peering straight into the camera and looked very young.

Then our tucked away house became an asylum for flowers and candy. My mother wrapped up the bouquets in wet paper towels when we ran out of vases and eventually started throwing them away. Piles of white lilies, chrysanthemums, and purple lilacs grew out of our kitchen wastebasket. It was a spectacular sight, this blooming pile of garbage in the corner of our kitchen.

Blanche and I ate candy any time we walked by the counter. There were no rebukes or scoldings about ruined appetites. I started taking little plastic baggies of candy up to my room, hoping to get some playful chiding out of someone, anyone, even the Episcopalian minister who visited two afternoons in a row, or my father's strange cousin from Saint Paul. But whenever an adult's eyes caught my gaze I looked away frantically and ran up the stairs, squeezing the chocolates to warm bits. When they looked at me they saw a younger Claire, entirely the same except for maybe a more turned up nose. It must be terrible to have no child to your sad, empty chests. No, it would have been better to have two shadows of their dead child lurking in every corner of their house, sneaking up to the kitchen table and making child noises from upstairs. It scraped against their wounded hearts, wearing them speechless with those eyes." Blanche held his gaze and stayed still, her arms clasped in front of her. The minister got up with a little struggle. His eyes passed over me, only resting for a moment to notice my same-colored hair and same-colored eyes as the dead girl he'd seen in the papers. He slid his gaze over our mantelpiece and the photographs of Claire sunbathing on the dock in New Hampshire, and Blanche and I floating belly-side up in a navy colored lake. Then he slipped into the dining room where my mother was pouring coffee.

I spun my body around to face the piano and banged out the two hands to "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean." I was a slow music reader but I played with loud, intentional keystrokes, my left hand always a little behind my right. When wrong notes popped out I didn't go back to fix them, but played on, covering them up with the left pedal. Blanche listened staring straight ahead. If I stopped in the middle of a song I felt her body tense up across the room and heard the chair creak impatiently. Printed next to the music there was a picture of a hat flying over a tropical ocean. I thought for a very long time that the Bonnie in the song was a hat that had floated away over the sea. I wondered why anyone would want their hat back so badly.

And then there was the funeral. I twisted my body backwards and saw a church full of people I had never met collected in black, jammed into pews, looking at me, so bored and tired and out of place, with a sadness I would see in other people's eyes for the rest of my life, all the while hearing the minister's voice, the minister with the eyes that passed me over, slip in and out of my consciousness so that all I picked up were words that would never have been said about my sister if anyone had known her, songs no one would have ever sung, and some man she only knew about because of Christmas. I heard all these things and then we buried her body, and there was a little angel on her grave, a little angel with a horn, announcing her into heaven.
To be in the middle of this was to be caught up in the momentum of such great, adult grief that it was spectacular. In the three days after the funeral there was such excitement! The people in and out! The sweet smelling church ladies with their cakes, the handsome neighborhood fathers who came to sit with mine! And always they had something in their pocket, a candy or a small toy. Blanche and I reached our hands into the deep, warm coat pockets and soft leather purses held out to us and groped for the smooth plastic of a spinning top or the slippery crinkle of hard candy. Family we had never known appeared on our doorstep, holding weekend suitcases and stacks of wrapped parcels. Once a fat, shiny quarter was put into the flat of my hand. The tall man who gave it to me was my uncle from California. He had sharp minty breath from the white gum he chewed on. His teeth were also very white, and his skin was scrubbed and shiny. His height itself was overwhelming: when he opened the front door and stepped into the foyer his hat brushed the hanging light, making it swing very slowly back and forth. He looked like my mother, but only in the moments when his face was calm and his eyes were looking far away. He walked further into the foyer and leaned down to Blanche's chair, grabbing her up in his arms so quickly that she didn't have time to stiffen her body or make her eyes glaze over. Instead she threw her arms around his shoulders and wrapped her legs around his chest, grasping so that when he let go she stayed right where she had been, a concave half circle. Her tears made a damp patch on his suit jacket. "Hey, little girl," he said, his voice a little muffled in Blanche's shoulder, "you've got quite a grip.

My father appeared in the doorway between the living room and kitchen and leaned his arm against the wall, over his head. A small smile darted across his lips and his eyebrows rose up softly. "Hello, Nicky.

"Jack." My uncle walked over to my father with his right hand extended. His left arm held Blanche against his chest. My father reached for Blanche and she fell back onto his chest, gently attaching her forearms around his neck. He carried her to the sofa and sat her on a fat pillow.

"It's good to see you." My father's voice was thin and strange, but he strided over to shake the extended hand. "Beatrice, this is your Uncle Nicky, from California." Uncle Nicky grinned and walked over to my piano bench. I kept my hands pressed down around the edge of it and looked up.

"Hey, kid. Shake." He held out his right hand. I lifted my left hand, palm-side up, and slid it into his. His hand covered mine completely and he pressed the thick, cold slice of a quarter into it. I held my palm up and open, looking at the left-facing profile and long hair etched into the quarter. "Don't let that burn a hole in your pocket," he grinned, and folded my fingers over it. My mother appeared in the doorway, wiping her hands on a dish towel. She looked past me to my uncle. Their faces were so alike, soft brown eyes and beautiful curved mouths.

"Oh, Julie," my uncle said, and crossed the room, his coat billowing out and sweeping over my knees. His arms opened wide. "My baby sister," he said, and held her to him, cradling her head against his shoulder with his wide, flat palm. "My poor baby sister." My mother gasped once, a cry that sounded like it hurt to breathe, and then buried her face in my uncle's shoulder. They stood like this, his great coat wrapped around her, for many minutes. My father leaned against the banister and his features dissolved softly—slacked jaw, unfocused eyes, mind gone away. I gripped the quarter in a sweaty fist.

Then they were gone, swept into the place of whispered conversation. From the piano bench I saw my mother's hand resting around a teacup, her fingers sometimes tapping on the table, or her arm slashing the air with a gesture. Sometimes it rested very, very still and the murmur of words would stop. I watched this conversation with such intense interest that it slipped my mind why there was a visitor at all. That night, I woke up in a clammy night sweat and, still enveloped by my dream, couldn't remember what was so sad about our lives. I breathed the night in and with that breath fell back into my dream for a few moments, back before anything had happened. I was there whole, in the flesh. It took until I put my foot out of bed and touched the floor to know it wasn't real.

Even after the visits slowed and telephone calls stopped, our real lives never came back. It was as though I could see them, waiting around the corner of the banister: my mother watering the tiny kitchen window box, her dark hair tucked behind her ears, with a little rouge spread smoothly over her cheekbones; my father out in the garden, maybe, paused as he watched a butterfly or a bird. But all of these familiar patterns seeped away, and, if they returned, they were bent out of shape, made sad and uncomfortable. My mother began cooking again at some point, but there was always too much food, and dinner time was
filled with the bubbles of silence that sucked up the air as my father spooned the remaining rice, or fish, or carrots, into smaller portions and put some on each of our plates. When Blanche and I watched television my father came into the room and paused behind us, his eyes resting on the television screen. None of us would move through the three minutes of commercials, though my hand fiddled idly, picking at the carpet, wanting to change the channel. The feeling of my father behind me, his tired eyes resting so calmly on advertisements for tile scrub and new sports cars, kept my arms away from the television knob. When he finally crossed the living room and I could hear his quiet footsteps padding around the carpeted hallway upstairs, I let out a deep breath and flipped the television to an episode of "Green Acres" or "The Hudsons.

It was because of these uncertain pauses, my father's gone away eyes, my mother's gone away spirit, that I became sure that what had happened had been a heavenly mistake. I knew other older siblings who had gone away for a time, like to sleep away camp or a grandparent's house, or even to a hospital, and come back. There wasn't always the same response of pity and sadness, but the absence was noticed. And then one night, I had a dream where I walked all the way down the path to the pond. It was exactly as it had been before, no strips of police tape, no posted warnings, except that the rainwater had worn away the large, hollow roots of the biggest oak tree so that there was a wide gap between the still water and the root. Through it I could see a blue window of sky and soft grass. The pink sun was sinking over the horizon. On the grass there was the figure of a girl with her arms up and spread wide, palms to the still water and the root. Through it I could see a blue window of sky.

It was the last week of August and Blanche's birthday had come and gone. My mother told us over a quiet dinner that we were moving from the yellow house back to New Hampshire. My father stuck a large white post in our front lawn and nailed a deep red rental sign to it. I looked out the kitchen window and suddenly remembered the crayfish's little grave. I ran to the silverware drawer, shoved a fat serving fork in my back pocket, and sprinted across the living room to the front door, slamming it behind me. I ran to the patch of grass where we had buried the crayfish. I fell to my knees in front of it and frantically dug with the fork, bent on exhuming the crayfish's body to bring with us. I ripped through the baby roots of the maple seedlings that had spun down like helicopters and fiddled the tiny white worm bodies that squirmed between them into the small vegetable garden next to the garage. The dirt scraped away without much trouble.

A few inches down, I found scraps of the white makeup box he had been buried in, but his body was gone. My eyes swelled up with a thick layer of tears. To cry about it would have been silly, because he was just a crayfish. I placed the wet, dirty pieces of the box back in the grave in a careful circle and packed the dirt tightly over it. I marked our rhythm a little out of whack with the rest of the world. The black scraps grew into blankets of grief. When we married we thought of Claire unmarried, a permanent child. When we bore our first children, both girls, their middle names were hers. When our parents died, well into their eighties, a week apart from each other, we buried them on either side of her. In every new house in every new country, it flashed across my reflection in the strange hotel mirrors I looked into late at night. When my own little girl was thirteen I saw it again, even though she had a dark Eastern complexion. In her eyes I saw the faraway look I knew from Claire so long ago. No one should carry this around in their hearts, but we did. And, growing up with it, we were strong. In my night prayers I wondered if it was bad to think that I was a better, stronger person because my sister had died, that my life was shining brightener because she wasn't there to pale next to. I asked for the feelings to be taken away, for the tiny pleasures I got out of having a dead sister to disappear. But they didn't really ever leave, and when they did, briefly, they were replaced with the sinking feeling of a black quilt covering my head and heart.

In the seven days after the funeral, I had that same dream as many times: walking down the path to the pond and seeing the blue window of sky through the oak tree. It was the last week of August and Blanche's birthday had come and gone. My mother told us over a quiet dinner that we were moving from the yellow house back to New Hampshire. My father stuck a large white post in our front lawn and nailed a deep red rental sign to it. I looked out the kitchen window and suddenly remembered the crayfish's little grave. I ran to the silverware drawer, shoved a fat serving fork in my back pocket, and sprinted across the living room to the front door, slamming it behind me. I ran to the patch of grass where we had buried the crayfish. I fell to my knees in front of it and frantically dug with the fork, bent on exhuming the crayfish's body to bring with us. I ripped through the baby roots of the maple seedlings that had spun down like helicopters and fiddled the tiny white worm bodies that squirmed between them into the small vegetable garden next to the garage. The dirt scraped away without much trouble.

A few inches down, I found scraps of the white makeup box he had been buried in, but his body was gone. My eyes swelled up with a thick layer of tears. To cry about it would have been silly, because he was just a crayfish. I placed the wet, dirty pieces of the box back in the grave in a careful circle and packed the dirt tightly over it. I marked our rhythm a little out of whack with the rest of the world. The black scraps grew into blankets of grief. When we married we thought of Claire unmarried, a permanent child. When we bore our first children, both girls, their middle names were hers. When our parents died, well into their eighties, a week apart from each other, we buried them on either side of her. In every new house in every new country, it flashed across my reflection in the strange hotel mirrors I looked into late at night. When my own little girl was thirteen I saw it again, even though she had a dark Eastern complexion. In her eyes I saw the faraway look I knew from Claire so long ago. No one should carry this around in their hearts, but we did. And, growing up with it, we were strong. In my night prayers I wondered if it was bad to think that I was a better, stronger person because my sister had died, that my life was shining brightener because she wasn't there to pale next to. I asked for the feelings to be taken away, for the tiny pleasures I got out of having a dead sister to disappear. But they didn't really ever leave, and when they did, briefly, they were replaced with the sinking feeling of a black quilt covering my head and heart.
The quilt cave quickly became hot and damp. I took a deep breath down my stomach, squinched my eyes shut, and tried to send a second message to God. I fell asleep wound tightly like that, on my side, my hands gripped together. I dreamed of the pond and the oak tree, and when I woke up the next morning I knew in my heart that Claire wasn't gone the way all of the adults slipping in and out of our lives seemed to think. Blanche and I collaborated. Even without words, Blanche confirmed my ideas with her serious expression and a small nod. Together we outlined a plan on paper to find Claire. I wrote down the finger highlights drawn on the road to our grandparents' house. We lived there every summer. This was the only other place Claire knew and so she had to be there. Our grandparents' house was in Great Neck, near a beautiful park with meadows and stone elephants that spouted dear water from their trunks. I pulled out a sheet of tracing paper and placed it carefully over the map, lining up the edges. I bore down with the black pencil and traced the thin squiggly lines. The paper was so thin, like delicate cloth, that if I pressed just a little too hard it tore a gentle hole. The pencil left wobbly child's hand and the sloppy traced letters spelling out Throgs Neck and Kingston. The roads were thick and all looked the same. I crumpled the smeared map in my fist and threw it behind me, where it landed in front of the hot air heating grate. The light ball of paper blew across the room, bouncing under the piano bench. Blanche's back was to me, her head poring over the map book.

"No," I said to her, roughly snatching the big book out of her hands. "No, this isn't the right one." I flipped quickly through the pages. Blanche watched my fingers. Tears gathered and I couldn't stop them. They leaked over the edge and dropped onto the tracing paper book next to my knee, bleeding holes in it. "No one knows where we have to go!" I ripped the highlighted page from the map book and thrust it toward Blanche. "It isn't on this stupid map!" Blanche sat very still. I clasped the map to my chest and fell on top of it. The musty paper smell shot up my nostrils and sobs came out of my lungs as if from a deep underground cave. Blanche's small hands were on my back and her head on my shoulder. Her arms wrapped around me. In the corner of the porch I saw our backpacks that we'd packed so carefully for the journey, with clean underwear and canned food from the pantry. The tears tumbled down my cheeks and my breath now heaved in and out like I was running away from our house, up the hill. My face had soaked the map with my tears and snot and sobs. And then, this one time in my life, I felt my mind leave behind my body and pull itself violently upwards. I saw myself from above, a crushed circle of clothing with Blanche's little body covering mine. Through the ceiling above me I heard our parents moving quietly in Claire's room. I saw them through the floorboards, frozen standing. My mother's arm was resting on Claire's bedside lamp, about to flick the switch off. My father was looking out onto the street, his hands resting on his windowsill.

My body breathed a deep breath and I slammed back to the floor. I lifted my face off the map, which stuck for a moment and then drifted down to the carpet. I picked Blanche up in my arms and she swung her body behind and latched onto my back. We walked out the red front door, leaving it wide open behind us, up the hill toward Mrs. Beatty's moss. My arms wrapped around Blanche's legs and her cold patent leather shoes pressed into my stomach. Mrs. Beatty was outside, wattering her plants.
I didn't think she heard us coming up behind her, but she turned toward us. Her face was soft and gray. She slid her gardening hat off and held it in her gloved right hand. "Girls. How is your mother?"

I looked at my sneakers and couldn't think what to say. I felt Blanche slide down my back and heard her land on her feet behind me. She walked forward toward Mrs. Beatty and stood on her moss.

"Is she well, your mother?" Mrs. Beatty's hands rested on her wide hips. She glanced down at Blanche's scuffed black shoes. Blanche stepped forward and took Mrs. Beatty's gloved hand.

"Oh," said Blanche, her fingers wrapped around the sticky green glove, "she will be better sooner than you think." Mrs. Beatty's mouth turned up slightly at the corners and she parted her lips as if about to say something. Blanche looked up at me and I smiled. She reached her arms up and I hoisted her onto my shoulders. I turned and started down the hill when Blanche's hands gripped my shoulders tightly, turning us around to look back up at Mrs. Beatty. Her shadow was outlined by the sun. She was a deep green, watery silhouette. Blanche raised her arms high up in the air. "We'll see you around!" she shouted, her voice ricocheting up and across the bumpy neighborhood, all the way to the pond, where I imagined crisp little ripples of water splashing against the roots of the oak trees. Blanche kept her arms up and spread wide, palms to the sun. She tilted her face back and closed her eyes, breathing the air in through her nose. She rode high above the world, so close to the heavens, down the hill to our yellow house.

---

**THE ART GALLERY**

by Laura Mandelberg

Only in an art gallery do nude figures coexist with rocky beaches, cherries, and Chinese vases.

The owner of the naked rear is permanently turned around, perhaps unaware that a mere few feet to her left, waves crash against rocks, and in the other direction, vases sit demurely on a white tablecloth.

Or maybe she does know.

Maybe she is planning to stand up, dust off her long-motionless body and scoop a few of the tantalizingly red cherries into her mouth, spit the pits into one of the elegant porcelain vases, and—as she has always wanted to do—go skinny-dipping.