LOST/FOUND: MOTHER MYTHS AND THEIR BASTARD DAUGHTERS

Aschala F. Edwards
B.A., California State University, Sacramento, 2009

PROJECT

Submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ENGLISH
(Creative Writing)

at

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO

FALL
2011
LOST/FOUND: MOTHER MYTHS AND THEIR BASTARD DAUGHTERS

A Project

by

Aschala F. Edwards

Approved by:

____________________________, Committee Chair
Doug Rice, Ph. D.

____________________________, Second Reader
Joshua McKinney, Ph. D.

____________________________
Date
Student:  Aschala F. Edwards

I certify that this student has met the requirements for format contained in the University format manual, and that this project is suitable for shelving in the Library and credit is to be awarded for the project.

__________________________, Graduate Coordinator ___________________

David Toise, Ph. D.                                          Date

Department of English
Abstract

of

LOST/FOUND: MOTHER MYTHS AND THEIR BASTARD DAUGHTERS

by

Aschala F. Edwards

This project explores the issues of familial relationships with special attention paid to those between women. In addition, many of the works are concerned with grief and its effect on both these relationships and the stories we tell about those we believe we know: people both real and imagined. In an approach that incorporates poetry and prose (and often bridges the illusory gap between them), this collection is an elegy for lost, forgotten and bastardized stories. Most of all, this project questions whether it is possible to reclaim lost stories and the people in them. Are we ever free from the empty spaces in the narratives they haunt?

__________________________, Committee Chair
Doug Rice, Ph. D.

__________________________
Date

iv
DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the women in my family.

In memory of my aunt, Effie “Louise” Collier, who fostered an early love of reading, gave me my first book of poetry and always asked the right questions. I miss you.

To my mother, Kathryn, for being my first storyteller and for supporting me and cheering me on even when neither of us knew what I was doing. And for your example of the strength, grace and beauty possible in a woman. I am grateful for you. Always.

And to my grandmother, Pauline. For sharing your stories. For unconditional love.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge all of my teachers, from every walk of life, for their passion and devotion.

Thank you, Doug Rice, for your dedication to your students. For your commitment to craft, to art and its power. For reminding me, after being away far too long, why I fell in love with words in the first place.

Thank you, Joshua McKinney, for challenging me. For pushing me to explore new horizons in my work and for your unceasing encouragement.

Thank you to Hellen Lee-Keller for being my advocate and mentor.

Thank you to the Sheltering Tree Ladies for your friendship. A finer, more beautiful group of women never existed.

And my deep and abiding thank you to the most important people in my life. My husband and son, Aaron and Miles, for not only allowing, but encouraging me to pursue my dream. For inspiring me and loving me. Thank You.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>VI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Lodestar and The Lighthouse</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Blocks</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking Out</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fort Ord</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tempered Hearts</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son, In Case You May Wonder What We Keep and What We Gave Away</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh Cherries Every Sunday</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buried in the Desert</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silk</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Splitting Hairs</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Black Widows

Mentholatum

We Were Girls

What Have You To Declare

Labor and Delivery

A Field Guide

The Wilderness

wolfmother

Patchwork Daughter

Salt Wife
THE LODESTAR AND THE LIGHTHOUSE

You want to ask, am I lonely?
Well, of course, lonely
As a woman driving across country
Day after day, leaving behind
Mile after mile
Little towns she might have stopped
And lived and died in, lonely.

-- Adrienne Rich, from “Song”

“Mercy?” Now she was asking a question. “Mercy?”
It was not enough. The word needed a bottom, a frame. She straightened up, held her head high, and transformed the plea into a note. In a clear bluebell voice she sang it out—the one word held so long it became a sentence—and before the last syllable had died in the corners of the room, she was answered in a sweet soprano: “I hear you.”

-- Toni Morrison, from Song of Solomon
Building Blocks

There is suffering in Lego City. Rectangular shapes stacked precariously in tall thin towers or grouped into sturdy masses. A woman and boy kneel before them. Gods above their city. His plump fingers curl around one, holding it out to her like a bouquet.

“Blue is my favorite color.”

It pleases him that pink is not a primary color. She knows he is too young for symbolism. To open the scar beneath her navel and show him the mix of red and white that is their flesh seems unmotherly. For now. He maps out the city—library, train museum, school, airport. She eyes the empty space where once a fat yellow box squatted, windowless and doorless. A home for his nightmare people. He dismantled it brick by brick the day he brought murder home from preschool. She wonders who taught him. That little blond boy had gifted him with other four letter words, other verbs. Somehow, kill had hurt more than fuck and that made sense to her. She rebuilds the prison to teach him about redemption though she senses only fear and rage through its walls.

The inhabitants of Lego City are massed in the city center as though sacrificed on an altar. Headless torsos, torsoless heads, heads on bodies to which they clearly don’t belong. King Arthur’s knights lay sprawled beside pirates and cowboys. Indiana Jones and Luke Skywalker joust in asymmetrical vehicles with red pennants and too many wheels. The boy does not know she has been stashing tiny bows, arrows, swords, axes, tomahawks, laser guns and pistols in her breast pocket when he is not looking. His armies must fight with his words and their ineffectual fingerless hands.
At sunset, it is time to decide the fate of Lego City. An empty table waits for it in the corner. Tomorrow, a hospital, a church? Not a church. From her, he knows the hidden geometry in his fingertips--how to connect one piece to another. But he must decide what comes next. She leaves the room to prepare the feast and turn on the news. Behind her, down the flickering dark of the hallway, he pulls bulldozers and tanks from beneath the bed where he dreams. They are revving their engines, vibrating warmly beneath his small hands. At the end of every day, before the storytelling and the singing, he must clean up his messes.
Looking Out

*summer*

“Harold, what’s the date?”


“We’ve new neighbors and I was just trying to figure out how long that house across the street has been vacant.”

“Since March, I think. So around four months, then. New neighbors, huh?”

Harold got up from his breakfast to stand beside her and peer out of the window. She could smell the tang of cigar smoke on his sweater. He said he wasn’t smoking any more, that the smoke just wouldn’t come out. He wouldn’t let her throw it out like the other things that reeked of his habits. “Hopefully they’ll treat the place better than the last ones. Either way it’s nothing to do with us.” He sat back down and stared at Georgia through the greasy lenses of his glasses.

*Nothing to do with us, yet.*

“Come eat.”

“Just a minute. I still haven’t figured out who the helpers are and who’s come to stay. There’s so many.”

She slipped her thin fingers between the blind slats and spread them apart. *The better to see them.* Her narrowed gaze darted from the weary old duplex with its chipped paint and crooked fence to the dark figures as they swarmed from the back of the moving
van up the driveway. Barefoot and pantsless children ran around big men in cutoffs to climb over the well-worn furniture they deposited in the yard. Something tickled her cheek and she swiped at a graying curl that had escaped the tight sleek ponytail she always wore. With a practiced hand, she pressed down and slid her fingers from hairline to nape until her scalp prickled. Harold thought about how he used to joke that their old friends, the radicals and hippies, would not recognize her now that her follicular rebellion—that magnificent afro—had been chemically tamed. Georgia no longer found him to be particularly funny.

She turned to Harold, the sunset making her features hard.

“There goes the neighborhood.”

Harold flinched.

autumn

Georgia decided it wasn’t worth watching the news anymore. She didn’t need the anchors and their fake accents to remind her of her lack of options. Besides, if she heard the words subprime or bailout one more time, she might do something unseemly. The TV now squatted in the corner, screen to the wall. She had not done this in anger but so that she could stand more fully before the window.

“Those children, Harold, they’re climbing on top of the fence. Where are there parents? And now the oldest is egging on the two boys boxing. I mean really, they’re punching each other in the face. How old are they, six?”

Harold walked in from the bedroom running a brush through his rapidly thinning hair. Stopping a foot before the window, he stared at the back of her head. He almost
asked her to go outside with him, to take a walk through the neighborhood, to step away from the glass. Instead, he said, “They’re just being kids. No one seems to be hurt. So, what’s the harm?”

Georgia turned away from the window just long enough for him to see the coldness in her eyes.

“What’s the harm. That’s a familiar refrain. We could ask Dorothy. Oh no, we can’t. There’s harm, Harold. It sneaks up the moment you remove your eyes, the moment you look away.” She saw him shrink into that oversized sweater until it covered the weak bones of his wrists. She saw Dorothy at the morgue bruised and cut for twenty bucks. She did and did not see her bleeding on the floor of the clinic she had fought for. Her dark eyes flicked over to the photos on the overcrowded bookshelf. Behind the delicately wrought frames, her books slipped slovenly from their once neat rows. Books she wrote to uplift the race, to get tenure, to buy them this house in this neighborhood that she no longer recognized. She turned away from the frames and the books. She saw the glass and the light from outside blinded her.

“I should really call someone,” she said to Harold who was no longer in the room.

winter

They were putting up those damn blue lights again. For years, every house sparkled with white webs of twinkle lights dripping from their eaves. Except that house for two years in a row glowing in whorish neon. Why couldn’t they get anything right? Or move back where they came from. She couldn’t say that aloud, not even to Harold
who couldn’t answer her now anyway. She wondered where Harold kept their lights. Maybe the nurse could find them.

“Mrs. Williams, I come here to see to your husband, not perform household tasks for you. Maybe you should go back to teaching. It would keep you busy and everyone could use the extra income these days,” the nurse told her on the way back to the bedroom. Once there, she would change Harold, check for sores, wipe the crusted white lines that accumulated over night between the corners of his mouth and his jawline. Sometimes she sang in a tropical lilt that reminded Georgia of their honeymoon trip to Cuba when revolution had run strong in their blood and fired their lovemaking. When the nurse left, she walked into the bedroom and counted the change in the old metal ashtray he had brought back from Vietnam.

She looked at Harold. The weak wrists and thinning hair had been a sign she missed. She had meant to ask him to make an appointment but the neighbors had been fighting that day. Their screeching interrupting her thoughts, intruding through their walls to take up all the empty space in their house. She stopped wondering why Harold wasn’t eating breakfast anymore—suit yourself Harold but if you get hungry in an hour don’t expect to see me back in that kitchen—and began to wonder if anyone in that house owned a gun. When the media came, she hoped they chose her and not the other fools that ended up on the news representing them with their broken speech, ignorance, and poverty. She would look into their cameras and she would say: it started with yelling but I knew it would end in bloodshed. You can just tell with people like that. I tried to tell my daughter, you know but my husband didn’t agree. Couldn’t see the harm.
She turned away from him. She should get back to the window. Those children were on vacation and running wild down her street.

“Harold, we have new neighbors next door. I’m sure you’ve heard that racket they call music. And you won’t believe how fast they drive,” she said this over her shoulder and Harold wheezed in response, his eyes screwed shut.

summer

He was coughing again. They had saved enough money for six months. When the savings account withered, the nurse began to prepare her to take over the watch. The watch over Harold. No one needed to prepare her to watch out for danger, suspicious characters, unattended baggage, suspect language, causal relationships. Earlier, those children across the street had come home from school and began to fight, playfully at first. Now, it was the adults outside pantomiming the violence of the world. It had been five years and still she could not tell who belonged there. But the man, the one pacing with a bat in his hand, she recognized. The scowl never left his face; she could see it even from that distance. The woman, however, seemed new. She defied him, daring him to swing the bat. Georgia saw it in her rigid body movements and the jutting jaw. Georgia cradled the phone her hands. 911 or non-emergency. She was never sure. Dorothy had told her not to worry. The man who had handled their money told them not to worry. Did blood have to be spilled before it constituted an emergency? She wanted to get it right. Harold’s cough rattled up through his lungs and out of the bedroom. It sounded as though the bones in his chest had come loose. The man across the street pounded the rounded end of the bat into the cement as if trying to send a message through the earth. The veins
in his neck distended with the effort of his verbal assault. Georgia wished she could hear what kind of violence those words contained. She might be required to bear witness. The noise from the bedroom changed, grew muffled and she heard the bedsprings whine once. Georgia turned from the window and saw, out of the corner of her eye, the bat begin to lift toward the blue sky. The quiet from the bedroom expanded, bulged out the walls of their house. Georgia gazed at the phone in her hand. The bat hung there in the air. From the side of the house, the children’s faces pressed against the glass heated by the sun. They looked at Georgia but Georgia could not see them through the glare.
Fort Ord

Derelict buildings lay open or slumped over like wounded infantrymen. They are the color of sandstone (not the riversmooth red curves of Arizona valleys), composed of gray grit and low clouds. Where buildings have been vanished, sloped concrete driveways lead to empty spaces, perfect rectangular or square foundations holding the ghosthomes where military wives hung their laundry out to dry in the damp air. Children played war on their dying lawns while their fathers bled in jungles not found on grade school maps. Some flew home under their flag; some came home under their own power but left a limb, an eye, the skin of their souls in the fields. Others walked through arterial fire into ordinary lives as if they never held the dirty knife blade to the throat of a girl with skin like sand and eyes dilated black beneath the canopy. She lives here, too, in doorways and shattered windows.

We drive through the base unable to get our bearings in the fog. The bay has come to mourn with us. The base chapel appears around a corner, framed by cypress trees bent in prayer like the scarred and puckered old men and women who still come here.

Outside the family congregates. Clouds of darkness gathered, satellites of grief clustered in groups of indeterminate numbers pulled by the gravity of loss. The magnetized poles of their cracked hearts attract and repulse each other rhythmically. My father stands in the shadow of the door, a part of it in his charcoal suit. The chaplain puts his hand on his shoulder. A dove’s wing. The paleness less startling than the action. I
have never seen a man touch my father except for brothers and old friends who slap backs with the familiarity of men who have done violence to each other as youths.

Inside, my eyes become accustomed to the low lights and find a figure standing at attention down a hallway to my left. A triangle of fabric pressed between his hands, gloved in pristine white. I imagine a bead of sweat runs down from the brim of his hat, stinging his eyes. He never blinks.

In the first pew, my father’s three sisters sit, shoulders touching, turned toward each other. My mother sits behind them three rows back, rubbing her hand across her forehead. When I get closer, I can see her lips are raw from the sharp points of her teeth.

“There’s a problem with the flag.”

“What’s the problem?”

“They both want it.

My Aunt Carolyn is the oldest of my grandfather’s children, my father the oldest male. The military has rules for everything except how to decide whose grief is more worthy, whose mantle is strong enough to bear the weight of my grandfather’s battles.

Walking toward the clutch of my aunts, my father folds his hands in to each other until the flesh underneath his nails turns white. A gold band encircles one of the fingers of his right hand. Sharp angles house a banded onyx center. Secret words carved on its underside blurred by the calluses on my grandfather’s hands and known only to him. The ring whispered its secret to my father in the rasp of precious metal against flesh.

What I know of men’s stories came to me in snatches stolen from the dinner table. Men who were lost but found or found and lost again. I wish I had asked for more.
Stories are not lost but become the anchors that hold ghosts in their place. Heavy tongues reverse physics, refusing to remain buried though sensation sinks. The tongue haunts not the body.

I can find the war zones on a map. In the books of my early education, the dead pages tried to tell the story in the language of numbers and strategy. My grandfather spoke of war, his voice full of the humid warmth of the jungle and the whiskey glossing his throat. His stories contained caverns of silence when given to me, only girl grandbaby. My budding left unsoiled by the dirt he brought back in the soles of his boots and under his nails. What didn’t wash off seeped into his pores to squat in his liver.

My father has heard the stories of war: blood stories, drug stories, jungle rot stories, bad and good luck stories. He wants this to mean something. He knows his sister by virtue of her sex is storyless, has lesser stories. And after all he is Junior, their sharing of names another kind of bonding or branding she cannot understand. He stands before the sisters alone, his brothers lost to bedtime tales (blood, drugs, rotten luck). They do not speak.

Another flag is on the way, the chaplain’s attempt to broker peace. A compromise that festers in their lips so that they no longer kiss goodbye. The battles will rage for months over wills, trinkets and cars. Every man and woman, sister and brother soldier for themselves. There is no time to grieve if you are waist deep in mud and shit and you are missing a limb but can’t figure out which one.

The family I remember is a corpse in the clearing. I recognize the clothes and the shape of the body but the face, now bone and pulp, has no stories to tell. My
grandfather’s tongue buried with my father in the breast pocket of his charcoal suit. I
don’t know what happened to the banded ring. My brothers never ask.
Tempered Hearts

Less than one percent of the universe is made of stars. I carry them along my clavicle and ringed around my hipbones. This is a gift. My stepfather was a military man. He gave me a regiment across my back, a comet trail of scars and ice.

Seventy-three percent of my fathering came from a man whose DNA does not contain the same filaments as mine. The twisted helix that determines the length of my legbones, my torso is such a small fraction. Not even enough of the pie to satisfy my hungry blood. Yet it determines my center of gravity when I dance. When I walk. When I bend at the waist to lift up my son.
Son, In Case You May Wonder What We Keep and What We Gave Away

We packed your grandfather’s
shoes
for Goodwill to honor his preference for bare feet. His
hats
we enfolded in tissue paper:
a fedora, a panama, a sweat-stained Little League cap—*World’s Best Coach*
stitched in blue.
The pith helmet I saved for you and our backyard excavations.
I swore I would make a quilt out of his old
neckties,
the really loud ones, to scare the monsters away while you sleep.
But my grandmothers are not here to teach me
how to piece together a life.
Your grandmother sold his
books,
not having much use for
war and engineering, except the one with his
name
on the flyleaf. Thick, block letters lined up straight as schoolboys.
It wasn’t until your naming that I uncovered he didn’t have one
in between his first and his last, only an A—an
absence.
He never knew the name you wear like an oversized coat
that hangs off your thin shoulders. I will write it in a
letter and slip it with this one, inside the
*Tears and Laughter*
he has left me. A book of poetry I never expected.
If you pause long enough
to breathe between beats
you will find it when you need to.
In that place between the lines,
in that white space
where your fingerprints will meet his.
Fresh Cherries Every Sunday

Grandfather Wilson was thinking of cherries as he sat down on the bus bench at the corner of Twenty-Ninth Avenue and Valdez Street. He reached into the pocket of his faded peacoat and pulled one out. It sat in the palm of his hand like stigmata. Years ago, he told his wife that it should have been a cherry Eve picked from the Tree of Knowledge. They looked like sin, inside and out, and once tasted the stain remained visible on fingertips and lips. He always knew when Charlene had been out back harvesting. Even without the predatory reddening of teeth and tongue, he recognized the sweet musk on her breath and tasted their hidden bitterness on the roof of her mouth.

Slipping the fruit past his lips, he paused between biting down and swallowing it whole. The October wind came up from between the empty buildings. He buttoned his coat, leaned back against the bench and closed his eyes. The paint on the wood beneath him was peeling and the sign above was covered in the bright hieroglyphs common to this neighborhood. The city had taken the bus route away but not the bench. Valentine Wilson figured seniority made it his. Red Morgan who lived on the corner said Val had been sitting on that bench every Sunday for going on sixty years though that didn’t seem likely. (Red also told the neighborhood children that they had better stay off his steps because his wife Ozetta practiced voodoo). So when that old man on the bench didn’t move for hours no one noticed.

Aunt Cornelia sent Ches out looking for Grandfather Wilson at six o’clock.
“I don’t know how many times I have to tell him he can’t be out all night,” she said.

“It’s only six, Auntie.”

Aunt Cornelia’s lips thinned as she looked Ches over out of the corner of her eyes, fingers hooked around the blue apron strings that bisected her thin waist.

“And suddenly, Miss Chesapeake, you’re an expert on what I should or should not be concerned about?”

Ches leaned her hip against the kitchen counter. *I’m sure he hates being bossed around this place by dried up old lady who isn’t even family. You constantly going on about Christian charity.*

“No ma’am,” she said.

“Well, since you know so much why don’t you go get him and bring him home so he can eat this food and take his pills. Unless you think he doesn’t need his medication anymore. Nobody else bothered to claim him when they sold off the Murray Apartments. I took him in; he’s our responsibility now. You tell me, little girl, what a good Christian woman should do.”

“I wouldn’t know, Auntie.”

“Excuse me?” She swiveled her head so that her functioning ear pointed at Ches as if trying to find the truth of her words in the air.

“I’ll be right back, Auntie,” she said a little louder than necessary.

“See that you collect Grandfather Wilson and come home directly. Your mother’s been through enough without worrying about you out on the streets after dark.”
Ches didn’t bother to reply as she dragged her scuffed white sneakers across the wood floor and out of the kitchen. They both knew her mother rarely left the small room in the back of the house. When Maggie and Chesapeake arrived at Aunt Cornelia’s six weeks ago, Maggie’s face was not the mother-face she knew. Every crease and freckle made shadows on her toffee skin. That first day, ushered into the hallway by Aunt Cornelia, she stopped and looked at her own face in the ornate brass mirror hanging in a darkened cove. Nothing different. No strange new landmarks on her features. Only the desert of her eyes. The wells behind them were empty or maybe they were just not primed for this kind of pain.

She remembered her father on the gold-flecked carpet of her parent’s bedroom. Some part of his heart revolted while he lay gasping for air- eyes closed, body rigid and then clenching like a fist. Her mother knelt with one hand pressing on the other, compressing electric desperation through his blue flannel pajamas into the fifteen-year rhythm of a shared heartbeat. When his knotted jaw muscles relaxed and his chest stilled, the banshee grief that tore from her mother’s throat scalded Ches’s irises. She turned and stared at the coffee mug cooling on the dresser, a stained brown crack disappeared into the dark liquid. *Step on a crack, break your mother’s back.*

Her mother’s body was illuminated in the windows of the departing ambulance, her back curved in prayer. She imagined the sympathetic show the paramedics were putting on for her mother’s benefit, knowing the time for miracles had passed. The siren’s call was there only to guide her mother to the shores of mourning where she remained stranded.
Ches stumbled down the steps pausing on the sidewalk to glance in both directions. She knew Grandfather Wilson would be up the street and six blocks over sitting on his bench. Wally’s Liquors (called Wall-Eye’s Liquors because Wally’s left pupil swam around drunkenly in its socket whenever he looked at anyone) was still open but the gates of the bookstore, the bank, and the dry cleaners were down and locked. Down the street to her left, the Miller kids were playing in front of their apartment. Sheila was riding her bike, a too big hand-me-down relic of patch-worked blue paint and rust. She loved that bike more than the four brothers who had manhandled it before her arrival. While Ches was still deciding which way to go, Sheila turned and saw her. She whistled through the space in her front teeth and wheeled the bike sharply in Ches’s direction. Every time she did this Ches was sure some piece of metal would fly off the old thing, neatly decapitating one of Sheila’s brothers. Hopefully. Pain-in-the-ass brothers aside, she liked hanging out with the Millers. They were loud; they never asked about her mother or looked at her, eyes wide and liquid with a selfish apology that threatened to drown her.

“Where you going?”

“I’m supposed to bring Grandfather Wilson home.”

“You gotta go right now? It’s not like G.W.’s going anywhere, right? Junior found,” she leaned on the word like that would make it true, “a twenty on the bus so we were going to go up to Grady’s and get some Halloween candy.”

Sheila knew the only sugar Aunt Cornelia allowed went into her afternoon tea.
Aunt Cornelia had read about afternoon tea in a travel book she borrowed from the library. Now every day at precisely four o’clock she sat down at her kitchen table, kicked an old cork coaster firmly under the wobbly leg and stared, through the steam, at the setting sun gilding the wash hanging in the backyard.

“If Grandfather Wilson wanted to come home, he’d be here, right?”

“All the folks his age are dead already or got shipped off to the old folks home on the eastside.”

“All right, let’s go but we got—have to be fast.” Ches stepped off the curb and straddled the bike’s front tire. Once her butt hit the handlebars, Sheila pointed them downhill and lifted both feet off the ground. As they picked up speed, Ches wished she could close her lids against the cold air catching at the corners of her eyes, trying to find a way behind them.

She held the piece of chocolate between her tongue and the roof of her mouth. It was the dark kind that her mother liked. It wasn’t sweet more like something sad trying to be happy. The chocolate sat behind her teeth refusing to melt fast enough until she was forced to bite down. She looked at the other small dark squares in her hand. Her mother refused to eat very much because “everything tasted like ashes.” She thought people shouldn’t be allowed to sell disappointment wrapped up in gold foil. The failed offerings fell from her palm into the first storm drain she passed.

By the time she left Sheila and began walking up the block, the sun was a thin sliver of orange glimpsed between buildings. Almost everything else was already
shadows. She crossed the street before she reached the liquor store. Wall-Eye knew how to keep the older boys and grown men who gathered there in line. But Wall-Eye was out of town and his nephew was running the store. The boys lounged in the doorway, eyeing passers-by for potential conversation or ridicule.

She saw a tall thin boy in a faded black sweatshirt and jeans detach himself from the crowd and jog across the street towards her. It was one of Sheila’s older brothers, Lionel.

“What’s up, itty bitty?”

“Please move, Lionel, I have to go get Grandfather Wilson before Aunt Cornelia comes looking for us both.”

“G.W. ain’t there. I saw him at the bench earlier. But I just walked by, like, ten minutes ago and he was gone. Maybe a bus finally came and picked him up.” He looked across the street to see if anyone had caught his joke.

“Ain’t about a bus,” one of the older boys shouted drunkenly. “That house across the street used to be his back in the day. He’s so old maybe he figures he ought to get a head start on hauntin’ it.” There was some half-bored snickering from the group which made the speaker throw back his shoulders like an intoxicated rooster.

Ches felt the muscles in her face tighten as she looked around Lionel to the darkening street beyond. He couldn’t be back at the house. She would have seen the light on in his room when she ran past. He took his tray of food and pills up to his room every night, never eating with them.

“You better not be messing around, Lionel.”
He shrugged and sauntered back across the street. “Go see for yourself then,” he said over his shoulder. He took up his post against the side of the store trusting that if he looked enough like what he wanted to be, he could become it.

She quickened her steps. The streetlights were coming on and she knew that meant trouble for her whether he was at the bus stop or not. Half a block from Valdez, she saw the bench and Grandfather Wilson. *Pain-in-the-ass brothers.* No one else was on the street. Every third house was unoccupied, a hollow darkness showing through the boards missing from the windows. Neon orange signs were nailed to the doors. Most houses were shut against the night. A little light leaked from behind curtains and blinds but no sound. She approached the bench and sat down beside him without saying a word.

At the house across the street, the lights were on and a couple stood in front of the window. The young woman’s hands sliced through the air while his hovered at his waist cupped in supplication. Ches watched as the man walked away from the window and reappeared at the front door. He walked down the steps, head down and muttering to himself. Reaching the side yard, he grabbed the open gate and pulled it shut with exaggerated force. Still not aware of his audience across the street, he shouted as he opened the front door, “I know I closed it before we left. Just like I closed it last weekend and the one before that. No, we don’t need a lock. Nothing’s back there to st-” The door closed and the conversation moved to another room.

Ches looked at Grandfather Wilson who sat with his eyes closed. He usually got up as soon as he saw her coming. He would hand her something he found along the way: a flattened penny, a blank domino, dandelion fluff, a bottle cap that read ‘try again’
underneath, and once a speckled bird’s egg cracked in half.

“Are you coming home?” He shook his head without looking at her.

“Got a bus to catch?” she asked attempting the joke. He turned toward her and opened one eye; the white had turned yellow with old vices and new afflictions. Closing his eye again, he opened his palm. The streetlight revealed two cherries, nearly as dark as the night beyond. She took them out of his hand. One was kept closed in her fist while she popped the other between her lips. She bit down until her teeth met resistance. It burst in her mouth, filling it until she thought it must be coming out of her eyes. Swallowing slowly, she imagined her cheeks stained with streaks of red.

“You should get to pick where you want to be. Not everybody gets to, I guess.”

She hesitated for a moment on the edge of saying goodbye. He folded his empty hands in his lap; she turned and walked away.

Walking up the back steps of Aunt Cornelia’s house, she knew there would be consequences for showing up late and alone (for a few days her great aunt would make a show of trying to find him eventually coming to the conclusion that she had done her duty). Chesapeake walked into her mother’s room, placing the gift on the bedside table. She slid into bed getting as close to her mother’s warmth as she dared.
Buried in the Desert

I

Her only defense was to write down every word they said. But she couldn’t. They held her histories in their hands. Hands already beginning to turn in on themselves. They would be gone soon. Some already gone and Thelma was the third this year. Gloria almost smiled at Thelma’s perverse sense of humor in drawing them all back here to Tucson in the deep of summer to bury her. Thelma, the only one old enough to remember Arkansas, the rows of slanted migrant shacks, the cotton. Gloria had never asked and now the stories were locked, buried behind crooked teeth and a lacquered smile.

She wanted to take notes every time one of the old ladies behind her opened their mouths. Her hands ached for it. The notebook was closed up inside her purse in her cousin’s locked car. She wouldn’t be tempted to sit poised like a court reporter when each distant auntie and cousin walked up to Thelma’s made-up face and whispered their stories into her ear. They would think it disrespectful, the sight of her moving pen. But Thelma would have understood.

She looked over her shoulder at the scene behind her. A cluster of great aunts inhabited a pew four rows back. They had chosen carefully, those three old crows. They would watch to make sure it was all done right. Those narrow brown eyes roused even the most lax among them to prayer and induced stillness in bored children. When they were little, Cousin Marcus claimed he saw one of them silence a crying baby with a look.
She and all the other cousins spent the rest of the summer sneaking glances, stifling giggles when they got caught. They always got caught.

She spied Marcus against the back wall in a line of cousins who fidgeted and chuckled and slapped each other on the back. A nervous energy bounced from one to the other covering over the occasional hitch in their voices. If not for the aunts, they might have broke out in mock boxing matches like when they were twelve. She caught Marcus’s eye and he lifted his chin in her direction. The only girl among them he had been her champion, daring anyone to exclude her from their clubs.

Choking heat filled the church. A woman walked to the podium and began to speak. She started slowly and then her voice gained momentum and volume, her strident tones cutting through the thick air. When the pastor’s wife spoke, Gloria jumped and dropped the box of tissues, leaving them on the floor unopened. Murmurs of assent hummed up from the congregation and beneath it Gloria heard the thick clogged throats working. Their silent glossolalia was a Pentecostal way of weeping, of hiding the ugliness of their grief before God. She hadn’t been in a church like this since childhood. She shifted on the bench, sweat gathering in the creases of her knees and elbows. Wide women rocked side to side in the pews fanning themselves with the memorial program. Before their dark seamed faces, cream colored squares of paper flew—a thousand beats a second like hummingbird’s wings. Thelma’s face and her life a tiny pulsing heart folded inside. She remembered the summers her mother would put her on a plane from Oregon and send her back to this place she had run from. She begged to stay, whined about the
twice weekly visits to church. Her mother always looked sympathetic at first. Gloria could see, in those moments, the memories gathering in her mother’s unfocused eyes.

*What I remember most are church songs and that bad piano they had.* ‘Puddin, sit up straight,’ Mama would say under her breath. She sat in the pew fanning herself, her simple navy church outfit spotless though a little threadbare in places. I wanted to tell Mama I wasn’t slouching, I was melting, but I knew better. As much as I hated spending every Sunday at that Lighthouse Pentecostal, the Tuesday and Thursday evening services were the worst. Locked up all day, the church gathered the Arizona heat. When they opened the doors those evenings, the air from inside rolled down the steps like damnation.

*Mrs. Foster, the Sunday School teacher, sat down at the ancient second-hand piano, every service, while the rest of the congregation prepared for her playing. Mrs. Foster was ancient. We used to wonder whether she played the way she did because she was going deaf or because she thought force of will and sheer volume alone would assure her place in heaven. Fortunately, the choir soon overwhelmed her playing. Their voices raised in such joy almost made me believe in God. They were the only thing that made church bearable. Amateurs singing “This Little Light of Mine” as if God himself were in the first pew. What they lacked in training, they made up for with faith and heart. What I lacked, well, I’m still working on that. Aren’t I, baby?*

**II**

Her duties dispensed, the pastor’s wife stood at the door prepared for hands that desired grasping, bowed shoulders in need of squeezing—the knotted muscles stoic and
waiting for release. Her eyes held the practiced sympathy of doctors and funeral home directors. Gloria wanted to escape the stifling room but her eyes had been caught. The pastor’s wife wanted to give her condolences and thank her for speaking on her family’s behalf. She was trying to forget her time up there in front of all those blank faces, some with features she recognized as her own. Composing her tribute in the hotel the night before, her memories rose up and shook her lean frame. How Thelma had carried her, too big to be carried, from her mother’s house after the accident. How Thelma cut her eyes at anyone who asked how her mother could take that many pills by mistake. Thelma who told the truth when the time was right. When she walked up to the podium to read those words something shifted in her or on the paper, she wasn’t sure. Her words grew oversized and weightless. They floated away from her. Looking down at all of them, she knew that they knew she was not saved and so did not have the gift of tongues.

“What you said about your Auntie, durin’ the service was lovely, dear. I’m sure she and your mama are lookin’ down on you and appreciatin’ every word.” Gloria nodded her head and stepped back slightly as the woman wiped a sweaty palm on the side of her pantsuit and raised it toward her.

“My mother didn’t believe in heaven.” She bit down on her tongue a second too late and tasted salt. The pastor’s wife cleared her throat.

“I didn’t have the honor of knowin’ your dear mama but Sister Thelma, now, she was a force. A regular bundle of energy. Yes she was.” She cleared her throat again rocking slightly back and forth on her heels. “And so brave. Yes she was.”
“She was afraid of lizards.”

“What’s that, sister?”

“Those geckos you have here. She was terrified of them. Cats, too, and lightning. My mom thought it was funny, used to tease her about it.”

The pastor’s wife looked at her through heat-glazed eyes as if she was mentally preparing herself to move on down the line of grieving folks. But Gloria couldn’t stop herself.

“Those geckos scared her the most, though. One of them ran across her feet once when she chaperoned our sophomore class up to the canyon. I thought she would scream but she froze there looking into the saguaros. I couldn’t understand it. Then I saw her pants. She pissed herself right there. In front of everyone. A grown woman. Because of a lizard.” She remembered watching Ms. Perry unwrap the long scarf she always wore around her hair. She tied it around Thelma’s slender waist, linked arms with her, and walked her back down the trail, chattering, asking about the pies she planned to make for the Juneteenth picnic. “They laughed, you know, the other kids. I laughed too. I’m sure she could hear us all the way down.”

The pastor’s wife had been reaching around her to shake the hand of one of her many cousins; she paused and cleared her throat loudly.

“Well. That’s ah…”

Gloria grabbed her outstretched hand and pumped it hard.

“It was a lovely service. It was.”
Outside the church, strangers parted to let her pass. Fingertips brushed her shoulders and the small of her back. She fought the urge to run, mostly because she didn’t know where she was or what direction might lead her home. Thelma’s old boss, choked on his tears crushing her in a hug that lasted longer than it should have. A cousin from Tennessee bent close enough to whisper in her ear but she couldn’t make out the slurred words. Gloria hadn’t realized she still had relatives in the South. The South she knew from her great-grandmother occupied a shadowy place in her memory. A place to escape from and never return.

From within the crowd, the great aunts looked her over, their stern faces asking the questions she had managed to avoid. Auntie Buggie, Auntie Addie, and Auntie Sissy couldn’t have been more than four feet tall. Still a silent space hovered around them that their many children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren did not cross without an invitation. Auntie Buggie exuded Southern gentility but no one confused her soft maternal body for the real thing. With a ready smile that softened her broad flat face, Auntie Addie hardly looked like a woman who had been widowed three times. The last husband, drunk as usual, froze to death inside his pickup. Gloria wondered how she kept smiling knowing everyone joked that a man would rather risk exposure than crawl into a warm bed with Addie. Auntie Sissy made an unexpected entrance into the family eighteen months after Grandma Lou. The details had always been a little fuzzy. She’d heard from a second cousin that Great-Grandpa had been “away” at the time regarding some sort of mix-up at the bank. Gloria avoided eye contact though she could feel their
stare. Auntie Addie would ask if she was married. She heard Buggie’s familiar speech about waiting too long for babies. And Sissy, who apologized before every word she spoke, would ask the real question.

“I’m sorry, honey, but why was you so late?”

She thought about the history degree that she’d been working on interminably, the work piling up at home, the cost of plane tickets, when rent was due, but none of these were reasons. Just stories she told herself at night while she waited for the phone to ring. Gloria looked around her for a face that loved her, finding none, she saw a break in the wall of black dresses and suits. She tried not to run.

Grandma Lou was waiting in the car. Gloria could almost see the top of her head through the back window. In the intervening years between Gloria’s visits, her grandmother shrank by inches like the polar ice caps. Like the ice caps, Gloria thought it might be some other hole in the atmosphere raising the temperature and desiccating whole limbs of the family tree. Grandma Lou had buried her parents, her husband, two babies and three of her six sisters. And now her eldest, Thelma. She was smaller, sure, but still upright. Gloria remembered her, the day before, in her tiny dusty backyard watering the okra. She was always growing something. Okra, mustard greens, lemons, onions with their browned tops bowing into the dust. So small she barely ate enough to sustain a child and every year her garden pushed the boundaries of the yard. She only tended the garden in the burgeoning heat of early afternoon. Because the geckos came out at dawn and dusk. Thelma had been the same way, worse after the mastectomy, letting her tomatoes shrivel and blacken towards the end when the lizards had grown numerous
and used her patio for basking. She said food tasted empty after the chemo and eating became a chore. Months later, she stopped eating and leaving the house altogether so Cousin Marcus, her sister Lila’s child, moved her to hospice.

Gloria slid into the backseat. No one reminded her to adjust the towel to protect herself and the vinyl burned the backs of her legs. She hissed behind her teeth. Cousin Marcus turned to look back at her from the driver’s seat.

“I have to go to the hospice to get whatever’s left. You don’t want to come, do you.”

Gloria almost smiled at the way he said it. Like phrasing it that way would make it true. She considered leaving him to it but then winced at the thought of spending another afternoon in Grandma Lou’s rented house. The incessant chatter from the television in front of the fireplace made her lethargic and nervous at the same time. Soap operas bled into talk shows and reality shows until the day became one long commercial for everything forever outside of that room and the desert surrounding it.

“No, I’d like to come. I never saw her there. I couldn’t...make it. I could help.”

In the passenger seat, Grandma Lou adjusted her seatbelt pulling it away from her throat. “Well, come on then. Let’s get a move on. I swear you all are slow as Christmas.” Gloria reached inside her purse for a pen and her notebook. Slow as Christmas. She would it write down. No one had ever said this before and after Grandma Lou no one would again. “Drop me off first. My stories are on and besides I’m not going back to that place until I’m dragged there. Worse than a cemetery. ‘Cause those people ‘sposed to be dead.”
Every time they drove up to the house, she had to adjust again. Not to its small size but the dullness of it. The ashy brown walls blended into the roof and the tiny yard with its spindly tree and few cacti as round and fat as rain barrels. Rather than a picket fence, there was a brick wall that curved around either side of the cracked cement path to the front door. The yard was above street level and the foundation well above the yard. Beneath the porch a very large crawlspace hosted a tribe of stray cats. Grandma Lou fed them table scraps. Gloria remembered scraping chicken bones off dinner plates onto the hard dry earth out behind the house. Grandma Lou’s back steps steeped in cat piss and chicken bones. The strongest is the smell of bones.

Inside the house, Gloria waited as Marcus dug through the old shed for empty boxes. Grandma Lou sat in the old lumpy chair she recognized from the old house on 7th Avenue. The paint on the arms vanished where her fingers rubbed smooth the wood. Her heels propped against the scuffed legs in that familiar pose of concentration. The TV was on.

“Fools.” Gloria hid a little smile by ducking her head. Game shows always had this effect on her grandmother. She watched as host after host, overly tan with their white teeth and their stiff boar bristle hair, enticed contestants to risk it all for the really big prize.

“Who’s a fool, Grandma?” Gloria knew what she would say but asked anyway. Anything to fill the room with the sound of her voice.
“Sure, sometimes they get lucky,” she began in the middle as though they had been having this conversation all along, “double their money or win the fancy car but mostly they lose everything.”

Gloria watched her grandmother. She wondered who was worse off. The people on TV held their dreams in their hands at least for a moment. They could dream for a moment about a bigger life, a shiny life. Grandma Lou never had room to dream beyond the everyday dullness of her life. She worked all those years to wind up here in this little apartment full of cheap trinkets and photographs of the dead. She never had much and still kept losing.

For the first time that day, Gloria noticed the dress her grandmother wore. Pale yellow with the suggestion of green and white flowers from waist to hem. She’d never seen her in anything like that and instinctively recognized Thelma’s hand in it. Grandma Lou had promised to wear it. Gloria couldn’t decide if it was meant as a gift or some kind of torture. She covered a laugh with her hand. Her grandmother shifted in her chair, tucking one bare foot beneath her like a little kid. The dress moved an inch above her knee. A patch of pale scarred skin extended from that point down to the middle of her calf. She didn’t mean to stare but she fell into the dimpled and pitted flesh—so much lighter than the rest of her leg—as if it could gaze back and tell her what it knew.

“That’s a souvenir from my first driving lesson.”

Startled by her voice, Gloria glanced up to find her grandmother watching her. She adjusted the dress to cover her legs again.
“How did you get that from a driving lesson?” Grandma Lou didn’t answer right away,

“I can’t explain it so don’t ask me to.” She shifted in her chair again. Gloria turned away, her face frozen.

“I don’t know why I was so afraid to learn. It’s irrational. But I got in the car anyway. He drove us out to the desert out near Old Tucson. Figured there’d be less chance of me crashin’ into someone.” She paused distracted by Wheel of Fortune on the television.

“What happened?” Gloria prompted.

“Oh, I got behind the wheel. Started down the road just fine. But desert roads out there aren’t as flat as they seem. I started picking up speed faster than I was ready for. I just panicked. Braking didn’t even occur to me.” She laughed softly, her eyes creasing at the corners. “I opened the door and jumped out.”

Gloria tried to imagine this little old woman jumping out of a moving car and tumbling across the asphalt like a Hollywood stunt driver.

“What did Grampa do?”

Her grandmother stopped laughing. Her body went rigid until, as if she’d come to a decision, she relaxed her shoulders and bowed her head.

“Your Grampa never taught me to drive. Philip taught me.”

“Who’s Philip?”

“Was. Who was Philip.”
IV

“Get in. You’re learning how to drive.”

Philip had not been kind but businesslike. Different than in bed. The army had made him efficient; being a prison guard after had made him hard. She didn’t have any pictures of Philip anywhere but she could see his sharp eyes, gray—sometimes cold and flat. Other times the silver in them became liquid, coating her exposed skin when he gazed at her, heating the room until it was unbearable. And then he would speak to her. That voice in the dark. Not her bedroom, never. Sometimes his apartment, the desert on warm summer nights naked beneath the saguaros, blooming. That same voice called to her from the car.

He gazed up at her through the open window. She glared back. He was here and he shouldn’t be. She was angrier at herself and the way the veins just beneath her skin opened up at the sight of him, flooding her against her will.

“Miss Lou, is that you?”

Lou heard Clara’s sing song little girl’s voice and turned to see her neighbor crossing the street. That woman was never up before ten. I almost had a heart attack when I saw her scrawny legs struttin’ over to us.

“Hiya, Clara. I’m surprised to see you up so early.” Lou stood with her back to Philip’s open window. She felt his annoyed exhalation through the fabric of her housedress. His breath hot against her spine.
“Well, my oldest dropped off her baby last night, the colicky one. She and her husband are going through some things.” Clara’s head thrust from side to side on her thin neck. She looked like a chicken, her hair still ruffled from sleep.

“That’s a shame.”

“Yes, it surely is. You know nothing’s more important than the marriage vows. Gotta do whatever it takes. Stay on the right side of the Lord.” She craned her neck hard to the left, massaging her shoulder. Her eyes focused on the car’s interior, shadowed in the dim morning light. Then she looked past the car to the house beyond. The children would be up soon. She didn’t know what Philip was thinking.

“How’s Grady?” Clara’s eyes flicked between the bedroom window on the side of the house and the pitiful old car. She could barely contain herself. She called Bernadette first. That was the fastest way to get the story around. Between the two of them the whole neighborhood knew by 9 o’clock.

“Same as always, Clara,” It was hard to keep the knife-edge out of her voice. She couldn’t tell if it was guilt or hate. Either way the lining of her throat burned. “Doctor says not to expect much anymore. He’ll likely be in that bed forever.” Not their bed. Not where she’d learned how to please him. Where they’d made their eight babies and lost two of them. He lay in a room off the kitchen, beside the shadow of the ironwood tree. The coolest room in the house—the closest to the kitchen where the children congregated in the morning. She’d want to die in that room, where she could still hear them even if she was shut away in her own mind.
“Well nothing’s forever. Eventually the Lord will call him home,” she clucked her tongue. “Two strokes inside a year.” She looked back at Lou and the car. They waited in silence. Lou felt another puff of warm air on her back right before she heard the click of the car door opening. She stood rooted to the asphalt until Philip gently pushed her aside with the door. Clara’s eyes widened as Philip unfolded his long lean form from inside.

“You’ll have to excuse your friend Lou, missus . . .”

“Bartlett. Clara Bartlett.”

“Well, Mrs. Bartlett,” he continued in his soft drawl, “your friend Lou is a mite embarrassed.”

Who talks like that? A mite embarrassed. But Clara, despite her righteous indignation, sure was charmed. Gone with the Wind. Only Philip got to be a gentleman. Not the knee-slappin’ Toms on the porch.

Philip cocked his head in a way that cried out for a wide brimmed hat and a sharp suit.

“She wants to learn to drive. Too embarrassed to ask someone she knows. I was Grady’s apprentice,” Lou winced, “before he took sick. I offered my services but all you excellent church folk had the cooking and cleaning taken care of. I decided Ms. Lou needed to learn to drive. She’s got a lot on her plate and Grady’s not driving that old truck anymore. Driving will ease her burdens.” He smiled.

Clara narrowed her small eyes until Lou could barely see the irises.

“I see.” She looked from Philip to Lou.
Her version of the story would be different. No one was interested in a handsome young man performing a good deed. But Clara had a way of telling a story, of burying hidden damning words beneath the facts just shallow enough. She didn’t think she was a gossip but the jackals had no trouble sniffing out her meaning.

*From inside her house Clara’s husband, Robert called.* “Clara, where you at? The baby’s screaming again.”

*Clara’s spine grew rigid as her head spun toward her house, disheveled hair flopping to one side. Lou could hear the sharpness in Robert’s voice. Probably from lack of sleep.* Robert needed his sleep, his whiskey at 4 o’clock (and 6 and 9), peace and quiet. Robert needed a lot of things and when he didn’t get them everyone less than four houses away knew about it.

“All right then,” she said sidling backward. “All right then. Nice to meet you Philip. You all be careful out there. You know, it’s monsoon season and those flash floods will sweep you away in a blink. Be careful which road you take, Lou.” She used her Sunday school voice but the effect was ruined by her hands worrying each other and her gait—quick and reluctant at the same time.

Lou waited until Clara’s door closed and the muffled voices within rose to their typical volume.

“What are you trying to do to me?”

*Philip stared down at her, unblinking eyes scanning her face. He lounged back against the car.* He was so young. She felt the difference between them in her bones—the
years on the farm, the kids, Grady. Her own mother had been old at thirty-eight. Thirty-eight felt like fifty.

“It seemed worse to pretend I wasn’t there.”

“Why are you here? Why are you . . . here?” They agreed she would take the bus to his place. She’d tell Thelma or Agatha she had errands to run. Disability papers to take to the government buildings downtown or prescriptions to fill. She thought of the first time she rode the bus to his place, gripping her purse strap until her fingers grew numb. Her face flushed, and she was sure the bus driver was praying for her soul.

Philip didn’t speak. Too stubborn, too handsome, too damn young. He didn’t understand this neighborhood. He could go back to his side of town, where he was new and ignored. Here the rumor would take up residence, moving right in between the peeling white church on one corner to Bobby’s market on the other. It would follow her everywhere like a stray mongrel. Proof or no proof of actual sin, Grady’s ailment would become her punishment. She turned from martyr to whore. From one Mary to another.

“Let me take you driving.”

Lou shook her head. “Go home, Philip. I can’t.” She rested a hand against the open door, wanting to lean into him but the rising sun brought a brightness that shamed her stiff. “My brother will teach me. I should have turned to family in the beginning.”

She watched his eyes and saw it dawn on him that she was ending it. Before she could do something unforgivable, like touch his face, she turned and walked up the stairs to her porch. She opened the door and walked straight through to the kitchen. Minutes
later, she heard the car engine roar over the spitting bacon on the stove and the children squealing their way out of bed. They were singing their morning song for Grady.

V

Gloria sat cross-legged on the couch, afraid to move. Grandma Lou reclined into her chair. She looked like the same tiny brown woman, but also like something precious unearthed, washed and polished until every facet shone bright and clear and flawed. Gloria knew not everything had been revealed. If there was this—Philip—more lay buried and waiting.

“What happened to Philip? Did Aunt Thelma or my mom or anyone ever find out?” She sounded breathless and Grandma Lou looked at her sharply. She could see a door closing in the tight thin line of her grandmother’s mouth. Grandma Lou hated tabloids and gossip. She had little patience for books full of people whining about their miserable lives.

Gloria leaned forward with her open hands palm up on her knees.

“It’s just that Aunt Louise said something once I never really understood. I was complaining to her about the pressure to get married. I said you were my role model. You were married, sure, but after Grampa died you lived and raised all those kids on your own. I mean you were on your own for thirty years, more than that with him being sick those last two.” She paused, for a breath, for a sign that she should go on. “She said I was being naïve. I had created a grandma that didn’t exist.”

A hand, wrinkled and freckled, reached over to the television and snapped it off.
“I never knew. I hoped the girls never saw, never heard anythin’. Maybe I knew. Maybe I just hoped they didn’t know about my...my Philip. He almost didn’t forgive me for sending him away. He saw it as weakness that I cared so much about what others might say or think. But he did forgive me and then he waited for two years until Grady passed on. But not a moment longer.”

Gloria imagined him at the funeral parlor, in a sharp suit and a wide-brimmed hat, sweeping her grandmother up and out of her hard life. But this story wasn’t a romance, she could see that around Grandma Lou’s eyes and the way she held her head as if perpetually in prayer.

“Of course he didn’t do anything foolish like show up at the memorial. He had more sense than that. But a few days later he pulled up in front of the house and told me it was time for my lesson. I was alone in that house with those kids for so long. Even before your Grampa got sick. I went with Philip. Maybe that’s weak, I don’t know. Thelma and Agatha, my girls, they were almost women by then but not almost enough. Somewhere between the little girls who loved their daddy with a fierceness and new women in a new time who didn’t need men. If they knew, they must have thought I was weak for betraying Grady and, worse, weak for betraying myself.”

She looked at Gloria and took her hand.

“I might be right or wrong. Maybe all this death had been my penance. But I had him for sixteen years. And that’s all I could ask for. He never lived in this house or tried to help raise the kids—the girls wouldn’t have stood for it. Even after they left. Besides it was a separate thing in my heart, being a mother and being with Philip.”
She followed her grandmother back into the half-lit bedroom. Rows of photographed faces on the shelves and walls seemed to track their movements. The trinkets piled and tumbling from behind the frames waited for their revelation. She stopped before a small bookshelf and reached behind a row of dusty paperbacks. When she straightened, she held a small wooden box, carved with cactus blossoms. She opened it and placed it in Gloria’s hands. Inside taped beneath the lids, a faded picture of a gap-toothed young man smiled at her. His uniform was slightly askew and another man’s arm was draped across his shoulder. The only other item in the box was a broken silver ring, no longer a complete circle.

“They had to cut it off him at the hospital. And after . . . it seemed like the only thing worth saving.”

“Why don’t I remember him?”

“He held you once when you were a baby. You were visiting from Oregon. Your mama was off in the desert looking for somethin’. By the time you came again, he had passed on.”

Gloria wanted more, so much more she thought her body might fly apart if not for the anchor of her grandmother’s hand. She tried to settle the questions in her head so she could grasp one and get out before Grandma Lou—this new shiny Grandma Lou who made love in the desert—disappeared.

“You ready?” Cousin Marcus came into the room with an armful of flattened boxes and a roll of tape. He looked startled by their closeness and blinked as he took in
the silent dark television. Gloria looked from her hand covering her grandmother’s and
the box beneath it to her cousin and his boxes.

“You should go, Gloria. Help bring home your Auntie’s things. See if there’s
something she might have left for you.” As she walked through the front door, she heard
a game show host shouting from behind her. “Risk it all for a chance—“. She closed the
door behind her. In the backseat of the car, she noticed her purse open on the seat, her
notebook tucked into its shadows.

VI

Outside, the sign read Evercare Rehabilitation and Hospice Care. It seemed odd to
Gloria for hope and hopelessness to reside. She passed down hallways of rooms with
curtained beds and flickering televisions. In a common room, a young woman with a long
red ponytail and polished blue toenails conducted the elderly through yoga poses. She
smoothed her slender fingers over a man’s back.

“Try to arch a little more, Mr. Kasden. You can do it. Mr. Washington, it is not
time for child’s pose yet. Stretch those arms. Let’s all use our imaginations, shall we?
Let’s pretend these fluorescent lights are the bright sun in a clear blue sky. Ms. Telecki
don’t forget your breath.”

Gloria watched the old people, their skin turned reptilian from lives spent in the
desert, until they bent onto the floor. Their spines curved—some intentionally and some
under the weight of years in their bones. She wondered idly if anyone had ever died that
way. On their yoga mat curled up like the day they were born. The thought of it had a
symmetry she liked. She turned away before they unfurled into knotted muscles and memories.

She walked down the hall until she nearly bumped into Marcus carrying a box.

“I thought you were going to help.” His voice was rough and wet. He tried to clear it. “Four doors down on the right. Room 1180. Box up anything not nailed down.” He brushed past her juggling the box. She walked into 1180 and stood still just inside the doorway. Her eyes scanned the room and all the lonely objects in it. These were Thelma’s last things. She tried to imagine where her eyes last rested. The television mounted on the wall, the flowers dying on the table, the painting propped on an easel near the window or the machines measuring out the halting electrical storms in her head, the final surge of blood. She sat down on the bed facing the open door. Nurses passed by, their steps purposeful, and old men shuffled pushing walkers and I.V.’s; their eyes never left the on the floor. Thelma had looked out this door, maybe watching. Maybe waiting.

Marcus barreled back into the room into the room, huffing when he saw her on the bed.

“That’s one of yours, isn’t it?” She asked, heading off his grumbling. Her finger pointed, directing the accusation at the large painting. A blue wash suggested a calm sea in the background framed by a crumbling stone arch. Bright green lichens crept across the brick façade until only a few patches of red remained. The muted colors of the sea, turquoise bleeding to gunmetal gray drew the eye to a point on the horizon. A ship maybe.
“Yeah, it’s mine.” He seemed reluctant to look at it. He walked quickly to the other side of the bed where he began putting together boxes. She grabbed the tape, ripping off sections when he held out his hand.

“Remember that summer your mom left you here so she could ‘soul search’ in Africa?” Of course she remembered. Africa announced the beginning of her mother’s leave-taking. Searching for her soul, researching for a book, always some reason to put her on a plane and send her back into the desert. Until the last time when her search had led her to a bottle of antidepressants.

“She brought back all those pictures of Sierra Leone. The slave fortress. That’s why this looks so familiar.”

“Yeah, she was talking about beginnings. Where all our stories started and got lost. Or something. Anyway, she gave this picture to Aunt Thelma. I couldn’t get it out of my head. A few years ago, after I moved to Boston for that marketing gig, I found it in a box I’d never unpacked. Don’t know what it was doing in there. I hadn’t painted in years but I went out that day, mind you this was Boston in December, and got supplies.”

“How did it end up back here?”

“If your mom had still been alive, I might have sent it to her. Instead, I called my mom when I was done. She said, ‘That’s good. How’s that nice fancy new job of yours? I’ve been telling all the girls stories about my son living the life in some corner office of a very tall building.’” Gloria laughed at the imitation of Aunt Lila’s voice, the accent she was always trying to bury by talking through her nose.
“After I hung up with mom, I called Thelma. She was quiet at first. I found out later she’d been diagnosed but wasn’t telling anyone. She asked me to describe the piece, every detail. She wanted to know how I painted it. Where I started and where I ended. If the picture in my head had made it on to the canvas. I reminded her that it was from a photograph. She said, ‘I don’t believe that. Yes, it is a photo of a place somewhere in the world. A place that meant something to my sister. A photo that means something else to you. And now this painting. It is something else altogether.’ I was planning to keep it. You know, as a reminder of when I used to believe in feeding myself with my art. But a week later, on a whim, I took it down and arranged to have it shipped to Thelma.”

He walked over to the painting. “So who gets it now?” He looked at Gloria, tracing the simple wooden frame with his hand.

“I think. . .” she tried to think of the right words. She knew he wanted her to take but this wasn’t what Thelma had left for her. “It’s yours again. It’s something new again, since she’s had it.”

His hand stopped caressing the frame and gripped it lifting from the easel. “Well, if nobody wants it, I don’t have much choice.” He held the painting between them. She lifted her hand to help him. “I’m going out to the car. Box up that stuff on the windowsill would you.” He left the room without her help.

Maybe she’d been wrong to reject him. She imagined the painting in her small apartment. She heard the stories she would tell about it, the fictions she might add to the truths. She looked back at the empty easel. Then she looked behind it. Something on the windowsill, winked in the bright light.
VII

She walked to the window and looked down. All along its base ceramic geckos crouched as though sunning themselves. An incredible variety of sizes, colors, and textures. She reached out to stroke one when she heard footsteps behind her and whirled. Questions brimming from her eyes, she was surprised to see a nurse in the doorway instead of Marcus.

“Sorry. I didn’t realize there was family here.” His almond eyes gentled when he saw her expression. “Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Did you know her?”

“Ms. Dixon? Yes, I was her nurse three days a week. She was your . . .?”

“My aunt.” He nodded vaguely. She wasn’t sure why she felt disappointed.

“Nice geckos, eh?” He pointed at the one in her hand. She didn’t remember picking it up. Stamps covered its glossy body. Postage stamps from all over the word—she recognized some of the places her mother had traveled—glued to the lizard until they resembled overlapping scales and then glazed. It warmed her palm. “It started out as an art therapy project. One of those paint-your-own-pottery places donated the pieces. We encouraged the residents to pick something that spoke to them in a profound way. Apparently Thelma had a special place in her heart for lizards.”

“But she was afraid of them.”

“Really? I would never have guessed. Creating these was about all she would do right up until last week.”
Gloria turned back to the window until the nurse finally left the room. She found the one that had first caught her eye. It was covered from head to tail with the pieces of a shattered mirror. When she angled it into the sunlight the reflected rays were nearly blinding. But held up to her face, her image fragmented and coalesced over and over. She placed it in her pocket when she heard Marcus in the hall. The other five she wrapped in the silk scarves she found in a drawer by the side of the bed and closed up in a box. She began to imagine what she would do with them.

She left one in the airport. Another covered in painted ironwood blooms, she buried beneath a saguaro by the side of the rode in the middle of nowhere. The blue one that felt like sand against the skin, she mailed to Boston. The mirrored lizard basks in the sun on her desk throwing pinpoints of light across the pages spread there.
Silk

I.
When they tore
down my grandmother’s
house, October filled the skies
with spiders—tiny
alien clouds
with life wriggling
from the silk.

II.
Spider webs dusted
the trees around
the empty plot with a creeping kind
of snowfall.

III.
A wisp stopped
in mid air as if caught
on the ghost-eaves no
longer filled
with the crumbling
leaves of
the trees left behind.

IV.
October whispered rumors
of grandmother’s buried
silver or
was it the sliver
of her heart beneath
tree roots wrapped
in silk?
Splitting Hairs

The first time I saw my own hair I froze, arrested by the stranger in the mirror. How could someone live for twenty-five years and not know what their own hair looks like? In baby pictures, barely-there curls hardly justified the ridiculous bows placed on my head. Once the hairs began to amass, thick and unruly on my crown, my mother knew it was time to take action.

She can hardly be blamed.
Ties had to be cut from what came before.
Roots pulled out, civilized. Nothing new.
A braid cut at the Indian school. A queue pulled
for laughs and humiliation. Nappy locks whipped into mimicry.

First, the hot comb. Almost medieval, if not for the cord plugged into the wall, smoking and hissing as it came close to singeing the tender flesh of my scalp. My mother pressed with heat and sheer force of will hoping to get a diamond shine out of my earthy tangles.

We try not to hate her for this assault.
We have been fried into submission.
We are the dirty little secret.
More than adornment, we are fact. Good or bad.
Kinky or straight. We are who you are.

I don’t remember when Mom resorted to chemistry. Jars of thick white paste and a smell that peeled layers of paint from the walls. The Vaseline was first, a thick coat of petroleum to protect the ears from burning. She slathered on the relaxer while my shoulders tensed, drawing up into my jawbones. “Now sit here and call me when it starts to tingle.” It started tingling before she crossed the room. Taking my chin in her hand.

“You’ve been scratching, haven’t you?”

We were changed from the inside out.
Our strength cored out of the shaft;
we lay damaged, dried up.
A lacquered shell encasing a lie.
Our bulbous ends itched until you raked long fingernails
through the dermis as if trying to unbury the past.

Mom relinquished the cultivation of my hair to me. I learned to carry an umbrella on cloudy days and to avoid the pool. Getting my hair “done” was a treat, despite the scabs
from Sheila, caught up in gossip, forgetting to rinse. Illness broke the rhythm and more than a few appointments. In the habit of scratching, I reached up and felt a softness long forgotten. I put my hair in braids and waited until the roots had grown strong enough to withstand severing the burnt edges.
Black Widows

In my family, men die young. We are rooms full of women. Gathering around half empty tables—half ignoring the children sitting between our bare feet. Our bodies creating 15 million blood cells a second; our men killing just as many. Our men doubling the number killed with their pipes and bottles. Flooding too-large hearts with gin-drowned blood. 30 million dried out husks of DNA floating through the viscera of our poverty and submerged rage. The uncle who froze to death on a park bench. The poisoned grandfather whose hasty burial was whispered over photo albums. The proxy father who short-circuited on Valentine’s Day. And the disappeared father. My one-night stand father. The women around the table tell tales about the one who got away. I imagine him free in the world—beside me at the bus stop, the frozen aisle of the grocery store. And this bastard daughter turns to congratulate him on his near miss. His escape from the kitchen-table-women who cluck their tongues and purse their lemon-soured lips. I congratulate him and then pick his pockets for the map that leads out. For my brothers. Not for me. I have a place here, circling them, distilling their disappointments into a measure of peace. For my son and his fragile rib bones and the grandfather ghosts that squat in the meat of his too big heart.
Mentholatum

*I hated that smell; you couldn’t wash it off your hands.*

She opens the jar, bracing herself against that astringent smell that coats the back of her throat. Her greasy fingerprints smudge the label, making it hard to read. She isn’t the oldest or the youngest; her little girl hands can’t be strong enough. But he always asks for her.

They call him by his name, not Dad, Daddy, Papa, Pops. Mama is Mama, always and irrefutably, Mama. But every one of their six children call him by his name like he is a favorite uncle and not their father.

Maybe it makes this easier. Maybe it is easier to watch someone lose themselves if you don’t have to call them Daddy. The first stroke muddled the features on the left side of his face, destroying the smile that won over Mama.

Now, his arms and legs, the sinewy limbs of a farmer’s son, are slow and uncooperative. They stage a violent revolt, muscles knotting up into a mob of agony with pitchforks and torches raised against his inability to rule them.

In these moments he calls for her. She dips her fingers into the jar and then kneads them into his back. Her eyes water and she tells herself it is the liniment.
We Were Girls

Tall, loose limbed you

    with dark braids that whipped

    your face as skinny legs propelled

    you out of your front door away

    from your immigrant mother,

    superstitious and strict as a nun.

And me, too big everywhere.

    The boys can’t stop staring

    and prodding until I shrink

    down, doll-sized, hiding behind

    books, oversized sweaters and you.

Though you denied her, sent her

    flying fast back to Grenada with

    the blunt force of your disdain,

    I hear the music of her language

    as the lilt on the tip of your tongue.
And you hated me and

my family dinners,

cable television,

thick hair and how

my mother let me shave

my legs and paint my toes.

Now on us both light marks the dark skin of our stretched bellies.

I become my mother

sliding into her skin

(warm and a little snug).

Yours shadows you

and like when we

were girls, I watch to

see how fast you can run.
What Have You To Declare

In the airport, Dallas, we wait
in the customs line. Shifting
hesitantly on
sunburned soles.
DEA dogs make me nervous with
their sensitive noses; they can smell
Zihuatenejo on my skin.
Will they bark at
the sand
I smuggle home in my hair?
Have I more to import
than I am allowed?

for sister-in-law
who never calls or visits.
She needs a place to
keep her secrets.

for little brother, always late,
lost in his own head. He needs guidance
more ancient than mine to arrive
on time to his life.

for baby brother and his collection
of masks too small and heavy to wear
for long. It fits no better than the
ones fired by his birth.

the one for our kitchen table,
appearing fragile, sits wide-lipped
to catch our vows, our curses,
our son’s first cry, first word.
The other curves deeply to hold
keys to forgotten doors,
parts to broken toys,
pretty money from the foreign places
we may travel together—things
we will never use but
cannot bear to give up.
How much have I brought home
with me in
These things I carry home
I wrapped in paper to help them
survive the flight. The
I carry home I left
exposed to the air,
skin raw, layers sloughed
by warm salt waves,
the silky heat of good tequila
and the music of slow strumming
guitars.
But grounded here in the cold
of the airport, I shiver and
the dogs turn and
bake their teeth.
Labor and Delivery

Lying on the bed, she sees
red lights winking on and off
all around. A hundred heated pupils
blushing at her nakedness, gauging
the flow of breath,
the pulsing of contraction and release
(below the sickle bones of her ribs now).
The squeak of linoleum announces
the nurses’ nightly intrusions.
Callused hands palpate
the shrinking womb, dress the wound.
Compressing her body
to shape the empty space
into forgotten curves.
The doctor with the ash blonde bun asks
questions in a drowsy accent,
her vowels as round and heavy as magnolia blossoms.
Questions that would have warmed
her cheeks had there been blood enough.

This is the first night
baby cries filled the room and her head,
magnified until she looks at the man
sleeping beside her on the threadbare
hospital chair. Angry that he doesn’t hear
them, angry that she is crazy
alone. Dr. Magnolia said it was
the drugs, glinting in the
clear bag beside the bed. The drugs
they gave her to save her,
curling through her brain until
she dreams of running, her
flailing limbs trailing tubes to internal
monitors that fail to measure
the depth of doubt settling
into the space beneath her skin.
A Field Guide

I. Ant Graveyards and Other Imponderables

*In most species, the stinger is only found in female ants.*

It starts with small drops as the children fill the chipped bowl at the hose. Water splashes the anthill. Gleeful and malicious in the way of children, they faced the scrambling horde. This was the summer Jacinta discovered she was a god. Later, as she and Cousin Andrew watched the ants drag the drowned beneath the earth, she wondered where they buried their dead.

II. Flight of the Unaccompanied Juvenile

*The females become queens or workers, depending on the type of nutrition they receive.*

They had been running late. Too late, her mother said, to eat their last breakfast together. Jacinta sat in the front of the plane near the flight attendants. They gave her mints and extra bags of peanuts. She did not eat them because she was allergic. Instead she said thank you and stuffed them into the pocket of the seat in front of her.

III. The Winged Queen’s Refusal

*In some species the queen cannot establish a colony of her own.*

Jacinta’s mother flew away to the jungles to study bugs. She promised to write and she did, but not enough. Her mother’s missives were terse and carried none of the humid warmth or the heavy tropical scent of her dreams. Jacinta’s mother was an entomologist. Jacinta decided she would become one too. But instead collected and dissected words. Etymology. Entomology. But for a few letters she missed becoming her mother entirely.

IV. Little Ant Gets Her Marching Order

*The queen bites off or scrapes off her wings, excavates a chamber, and proceeds to lay eggs for the rest of her life (up to 15 years).*

Her mother sent her postcards addressed to her grandmother. “In care of Marie Wright” they said. She had been delivered to the care of someone else like a letter or a package in torn brown wrapping. Before the trip, she remembered holding her mother’s hands, the hem of her skirt. She lay beneath the kitchen table, wrapped her hands around her mother’s ankles feeling the knob of bone and flexing tendons, and dreamt. She could not
hold her mother in place. She cleaned her room, kept her clothes neat and her toys from underfoot. Still her mother used her teeth for capturing wasps not for biting off her own wings. She spread them wide, crowding Jacinta until she hid beneath the stove.
THE WILDERNESS

Just remember that the things you put in your head are there forever...
You forget some things, don’t you?
Yes. You forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget.

--Cormac McCarthy, from The Road
At the edge of the forest, the oaks, gnarled and stooped, scraped the ground rather than rising toward the darkening sky. She heard the children shrieking behind her, tumbling across the picnic blanket while Thomas snored drunk and oblivious. She could see the sleeve of his shirt pinned flat from wrist to shoulder. The war had come, bringing with it draft cards and accidental dismembering. What good to a wife was a dead soldier? What good was a woodsman who couldn’t hold an ax? His ax had two coats now. Maybe three. His blood, wolf’s blood, maybe hers. (man, woman, and wolf. girl and wolf and then man and woman. and always blood in between). Now all he did was drink to past glories, to saving little girls and old women from tooth and claw.

When her bare feet left the checkered blanket, the chilled dampness of the grass surprised her. Everywhere else on the green, families and young lovers lolled in the sunshine. The air was warm and humid, almost tropical. Unusual this far north, but she heard the weather was changing everywhere. The world, unbalanced, tilted too far towards the sun. Into an unforgiving light and away from deep shadows, mystery, magic. One day this lush land of thick moss, clover, and sedge would shrivel and bake into desert. Living land was desiccated. Red looked back at Thomas. People shriveled, too, until there was nothing left but wasteland.

No one noticed her walk past the two tallest oaks that defined the line between the green and the wild. She paused on the threshold, looking back over her shoulder at the girls. Lucy, with dark curly hair like her father, spun through the dandelions. Her long
brown arms outstretched and palms skyward, she spun until the pale green skirt she wore ballooned around her thighs. When she finally fell, her large eyes rolled in their sockets until her expression teetered between ecstasy and nausea.

Thea collected. Kneeling with her yellow Sunday dress spread around her, she marched row upon row of daisy heads, smooth river rocks, insect carcasses, bottle tops, feathers, owl pellets. The last were her favorites; she unraveled them like Christmas presents. Some of her lines were uniform and others revealed a pattern—Red knew without seeing—speckled gray stones, dead cricket, plastic orange cap, blue bottle fly, an oblong of fur and small bones. Thea’s red hair hung down her back, ruler straight across her shoulder blades. Fingers drumming a military tattoo. Red could see that she watched her sister, out of the corner of her eye, spinning and falling. In a minute Thea would rise and fling herself at Lucy who lived in the space between spinning and moment of falling. They would roll past their sleeping father through the damp grass in a tangle of elbows and knees and teeth.

When Red turned her back on the green, the picnic sounds stopped as if the wilderness had shut a door behind her. The air chilled her now and she regretted not bringing her sweater. Somewhere to the north, she heard the river. The old bridge washed away last winter along with the crazy transient who lived beneath. She needed to go west anyway.

The path was still there, although a thick layer of moss had crept over its boundaries. Sedge blades grazed her exposed calves and left small vertical cuts that did not bleed but stung. He had carried her over this path. She remembered the blood
beginning to dry on the blade of his ax (whenever she thinks ax she feels a desire to add an e as though it is not strong enough on its own. it needs a handle something with which to heft it and split wood or bowels. axe is Old English. ax is bastard American. Disney. axe. now there’s a weapon. a word. a weapon). Blood on the ax(e) and her skin but, no, not her blood. Grandma said she would bleed later than other girls. Like her mother, grandmother and all the girls from the woods.

_I will take care of you. He said._ Because she wanted to be close to Grandma, the girl and the woodsman played house on the edge of the forest. He had been too old for her but everyone was so grateful and he was so brave. The red brown pelt stretched over their bed. The ax hung above the fireplace, unclean(ed). She washed her babies in the kitchen sink and through the window felt the forest watching.

When she reached the house at the end of the path, she almost missed it. The wilderness devoured it, tearing it apart. The front door lay rotting a few feet away. Kudzu vines snaked in through shattered windows and out through holes in the roof. Soon all of its stories would be buried beneath the flat broad leaves and the twisted ever-seeking tendrils of vine. She found the nearly obscured entrance and made her way inside, leaving finger trails in the thick mass of green on the doorframe. Inside, the dirt floor smelled loamy and squelched up through her toes. None of the furniture had survived except the wrought iron bed frame that dominated half of the room. The quiet overwhelmed her and magnified the treble echo of water droplets hitting small puddles that gathered on what might have been a sink. Something dark bathed there now, splashing in the shadows.
She heard them enter the house, moving fluidly to flank her. When the alpha entered, she turned to face him. Gray streaked his black fur and his panting revealed ribs moving too close to the skin. They all had a gauntness about them. The five or six wolves that paced around the small room ranged in color and size from the smaller red brown juveniles to the grey black elders like the alpha. She looked for a female among them and instead found the pack wanting (desiring, panting). They had not replaced her. Or her mother? Her?

“It’s been a long time,” she spoke just above a whisper and yet, as usual, she was surprised to hear her own voice. “The hunters must be in the north again. You have not eaten.” The wolves behind her stopped their pacing and appeared to listen. Their strange yellow eyes jumped from her back to the alpha before. He remained rigid from tail to muzzle except the frozen exhalations forced through his teeth.

“I will not bring them here.” The thin blue cotton of her shirt grew damp despite the cold. “I know you have been watching but they are not a part of this story.” They are not part of this story. The one that was told every night suffered from missing parts. Her story was disemboweled and stuffed with straw in order to appear life-like.

Her eyes were made of glass.

“Mama, tell the story please,” Lucy’s face turned toward her. Her brown eyes, the center of the iris streaked a muddy yellow, pleaded.

“I can tell you,” Thomas said from the couch, dangling a beer bottle from his fingers.

“Mama tells it better,” Thea whined, “cause you forget stuff.”
“And you tell too much.”

“And your voice is boring.”

“And sometimes you use bad words,” Lucy admonished, loudly, in her most serious tone. Thomas frowned, the lines in his forehead deepening.

“Girls let your Daddy tell it. I’m tired of storytelling.”

And the forest is listening, she knew and failed to mention.

Thomas huffed.

“Don’t do me any favors. The girls don’t want a story from me; they aren’t getting one.” He looked at them, chin thrust forward and lips pursed like a spoiled child.

The girls knew their prey well. They usually do the hunting. Climbing into her father’s lap, Thea began to whine again, “Aw, Daddy, you always tell the hero parts real well. It’s just that by the time you show up all that’s left to do is kill the wolf and save Mommy.”

“We want to know the rest of the story.”

“Once upon a time there was a silly little girl in a silly red cape who didn’t know her way around the woods.” He smiled at her and she, too, bared her teeth.

Thomas told them the story. His version. He could not tell them how she felt inside before he cut her out. Her geography was lacking but she knew well the fine network of veins that fed the womb. She knew in the dark with her fingers the slick topography beneath skin and fur. How the only sound she heard was the rushing blood. And how when she was laid out, steaming in the frigid room, no one could tell her if she had been cut out of the wolf or if the wolf had been cut from her.
Patchwork Daughter

Carry a frog in your pocket for the Loup Garou. And salt if the Loup Garou is someone you know and want to save.

The frog heart beats in her skirt pocket. She feels it kick against her thigh. Grandma told her if she saw a shadow on the path before her, “Do not hesitate, Lena. The Loup Garou is not controlled by the moon. It can change at will through the force of its rage.” Aunt Tillie told her, “They are afraid of frogs, you know. Throw a frog at a Loup Group and it will run screaming in fear back to where it came from.” Lena remembers raising an eyebrow in disbelief. “I know. Frogs? Yes, I know how silly that sounds. And no I don’t know why frogs of all things.” Aunt Tillie said all this without turning from the stove.

Few people questioned Aunt Tillie.

Lena carried a small handmade bag full of salt tied around her wrist. She had made it herself, sewing together patches of cloth from the women in her house. She cut a small piece of ivory satin from the underskirt of Grandma’s wedding dress. She rescued Aunt Tillie’s apron from the trash and took a square from the bottom. Her new apron said “Kiss The Cook” and had roosters on it. The old one bloomed a cornflower field that smelled like yeast and whiskey and smoke. For the lining of her salt bag, she stole a scarf from Jane’s mother.
Jane was her best friend and her mother had been Lena’s mother’s friend. Jane’s mother was round and squat. Most of her clothes faded into the sand colored décor of her house. Except the red silk scarf Lena found in her underwear drawer, after school one day. She picked it up and smelled it. And knew. She knew Jane’s mother had borrowed the scarf until it was too late to give it back. The scarf smelled like her mother might have smelled. It looked like a scarf her mother might have worn. She thought she remembered seeing a picture of her mother, straddling a rusty blue bicycle with her jeans rolled up to her knees, her feet bare with red sparking from her toenails, a billowy turquoise shirt and a hat. Her head was tilted to shade everything except her red lips over a toothy smile and her nose that was dented in the center like Lena’s. Lena was sure the scarf had been tied around her neck or maybe her wrist. Perhaps it cinched her waist over the brilliant blue shirt or trailed, like a pennant in the whipping wind, from the handlebars. She stuffed the scarf in her training bra before leaving Jane’s house. She sliced through one end to line her salt bag.

Grandma told Lena about the Loup Garou when she was six. And she told her how to protect herself when she left the house to fill her summer days with open field wanderings and the secrets of the soft wet places in the undergrowth. She walked the dirt roads and forest edge looking for it. She believed. And when she heard the clusters of women talking after the funeral about her mother, she knew. They said she had been stolen away so young. They marveled at how she transformed from Grandma’s sweet Lorraine to a monster, spitting and incoherent. In that moment, Lena understood. The
casket was closed because her mother wasn’t there. That was what Grandma had said, too.

*Your mother isn’t there,* she had said pointing to the hole in the ground. Her grandmother had opened her arms to gather in the land around them. *Your mother is still with us.*

There were things a family didn’t talk about. She knew instinctively that the quiet around her mother’s disappearance from her life meant something. So she walked the muddy paths and looked for something secret and terrible. She looked for her mother. She never left the house unprepared. If her mother didn’t recognize the little girl in her favorite green dress and a red silk scarf covering her hair, she had the tiny amphibious heartbeat that pulsed in her left pocket. But in her strong right hand she carried the salt cure.
Salt Wife

The musk of incense and slaughtered animals lay thick and wet across the back of her throat. The market was empty except the refuse of yesterday and the days before still choking the alleyways. She avoided streams of unknown origin that crisscrossed the dirt paths, her feet finding their way by habit. The quiet lull of these hours just before daybreak made it easier to ignore the bodies slumped in arched doorways still overcome by last night’s stupor. She could ignore the rank excess—the spilled blood, the spilled wine, the copulation, the war—that coalesced just outside the square.

Alone beside the well, she filled her jug with the water she would use to rinse herself later. She bent to the ground, kneeling, her fingers scratching into the packed earth. The quiet soothed and in the half-light she murmured a prayer for her city, her home by the Eastern Sea.

She was headed for that sea now. It was early enough still that her husband would not wake for hours, and her daughters, practicing for their married lives, would not yet slip from their beds to make today’s bread. She remembered them as girls. Their dark hair in twin plaits swinging between their shoulder blades as they fought for space close to her. She was teaching them the way of bread.

“Enough.”

Her voice stilled them. She was a quiet mother, and she knew raising her voice would shock them into silence. Not like their father, who bore the scars of his captivity in
neat white lines cut into his copper skin. They had only seen the ones on his forearms nearly hidden beneath thick coarse hair, but she knew the ones underneath his clothes. They ran in deep rivulets across his back, the way the sand dunes looked after a storm.

“You must measure the proper amount of water, flour, salt. Too much of any and you will having nothing fit to eat. And your husbands will beat you.”

She looked down at their serious round faces. A spark flashed in her eyes before her stony expression cracked and she gave into a soft chuckle. Her youngest daughter waited with her eyes on her sister, who pouted for a moment at the idea, the insult of a man laying hands on her. Then, the little one laughed covering her mouth with a small dirty hand, ashamed of her crooked teeth. No one would beat these girls though the practice was common. They would not be like the girls she met every day at the well. Cowed, shoulders slumped beneath their fraying shawls, their bruised eyes slid sideways and down whenever she tried to make contact.

“They may not beat you. But they may leave and find other wives.”

“Then we will marry Father and make his bread,” said the eldest.

“And where will I be?”

“You might be tired and old by then,” the youngest whispered, “like old mother Cherith. We will be his other wives.”

“So then you will need to know that this is the way we have always made bread. Remember this. Your father and his fathers and even the great Abraham who rescued him in the war of kings, these men do not know the way of bread. Of war and blood and gold,
they know. And of this sinking city by the sea that they have made a home for vultures and vermin. But here too, we knead the bread.”

Her daughters stared up at her, and she saw the women they would become in their dark irises. The sight of them shook her until a small fine cloud of flour bloomed above her hands. She knew the young men who would claim them as brides. That had all been decided before they were even born. An exchange of goods and words of fidelity made over her distended belly. Twice she gave away a daughter while she still moved inside her, kicking against her ribcage. And as the city grew more restless every day, their father walked the streets beseeching his people to change. Lately, he came home after sunset with his clothes holding the acrid smell that seemed familiar. Whenever she tried to place it, her memories skittered away. Until she returned to the market in the lonely morning and watched other men turn toward home with the night clinging to their skin. She watched her daughters grow in this city, and she watched her husband fade here.

Her family. She knew every inch of their skin. She knew them better than God. This she would never say aloud. But to them she was mother and wife. They had forgotten her name. They forgot she was also Abana. Stone woman.

“Remember this,” she said, unable to look at them without feeling their loss through the white veil now over her heart.

She willed her hands to stillness, pressed her palm into the yielding mass, then in one motion rolled it up and over itself. She repeated this unnumbered times. It was a prayer she taught her daughters. A prayer learned from all her mothers. From our pasts
feed yourselves and those you love, she did not say to them. What they heard in the rasping quiet near hearth, she did not know.

On her knees beside the fountain, it was still morning and she was still just a mother, just a wife.

“Lot’s wife! You are up early.”

Cherith—the fig seller—entered the square, shuffling across the deserted paths, her body shrunken and bent nearly double from age. Her white hair twisted up in plaits around her head though most of it had escaped and hung down shrouding her face.

She raised a hand to the old woman.

“As are you, old mother.” There were few in the city she spoke to anymore. She did not travel at night. Neighbors no longer shared bread as they once did.

“I do not sleep well these days. Terrible dreams. But I am not sure they are dreams. All night, outside my door, the city screams and squeals and grunts like an animal in the wilderness.”

Abana rose from her knees and approached Cherith. Folding at the waist until she was near level with the bent woman, she swept the dead white hair aside. Her fingers brushed Cherith’s skin.

“But it is morning now. And beautiful.”

“Yes, yes you are right. In the morning, I am reminded how it once was. I have lived only here and likely I will die here. I am afraid though He will take me in the dark rather than the dawn.”
Abana thought she should say something but wondered too at the manner of her own death. Cherith did not wait for her words.

“I must get on. I have the babies of my grandchildren to soothe my old heart. You should get to the shore while you have it to yourself.”

Abana hid her surprise. She had supposed her ablutions occurred infrequently and early enough to have gone undetected. The old woman smiled with black gums and shuffled past—the rasp of her sandaled feet on the sandy path the only sound.

Abana entered the water, picking her way among the rocks crusted over with white spiked clusters like tiny opalescent cities that burned her when she misstepped. Any place that the water gathered in stillness, flat humps of salt grew over the rocky outcroppings and long cones beneath like teats. The sun smoldered at the horizon above the distant mountains. She turned away from the light and lowered herself into the warm waves. The water cradled her. She felt a part of it. Her hair loose from its tight braids floated out behind her following the invisible current away from the shore.

The people born here called this the sea of death. The city could not feed itself from its depths though the salt gardens brought some their share of wealth. The rakers would wait until the sun was higher, strong enough to dry the sand. They would scour the shore until small white hills rose in a curved line. In time, the salt wives would appear to load their barrows. Their trade lay in preservation. What they couldn’t use for their own families, they sold to the people from the caves and those beyond the cities. This is how the cities were known, through stories cured on the salt road.
She refused to envy the salt wives or the stories they shared and collected along the road. She lived her stories here and weaved new ones for her daughters. New stories that always ended before sunset. She told them about the city to the east where her people lived. They knew the stories of their infant days in the only city they remembered as home. One had crawled out among the sheep looking for milk, only to be bitten. The other had nearly been lost down the well as their father proselytized in the square. The girls laughed at these stories, fingering the rough edges of old scars. She laughed as well, though a spot inside her chest grew tight with each retelling. She remembered everything.

She thought about her first glimpse of the five cities when her husband brought her to the valley. From the mountain pass, their tight clusters caught the heat of the sun and the walls blushed orange, shimmering from the ground upwards like banked coals. The rivers threaded around and between them providing the water and life that the sea could not. Palms lined the riverbeds thickly, often whipped by the desert winds.

Even then as they entered the gates, she felt at home despite the fetid air exuding from the alleyways, the shuttered windows, and eyes. Abraham had told them these were now her husband’s people and he pleaded with them to save their souls. But when her husband was gone late into the night and returned to slip into their bed and mumble prayers until overcome with sleep, she wondered whose soul he prayed for. When he rose at midday those prayers remained quiet and yet feverish.

Walking out of the sea with a tang on her tongue and a fine film on her skin, she felt as though she floated above the dark breakwater. The sun was further along across
the sky, and she knew she must hurry to rinse off her salty second skin and cover her flesh. Miraculously, she had never been caught swimming naked in the sea. The rakers came later and later. More and more of them spent their nights awake searching for danger, pleasure. Or was it just another way to live?

“Some of them go too far,” she whispered, pouring cool well water over her hair and down the curve of her back. “Some of them are wicked.” But greed and lust found a home everywhere, she thought. Many of them joked with her in the market and threaded necklaces of desert flowers for her daughters when they were small.

Behind her near the cliffs, a noise drew her attention. She hurried into her clothes. The rakers were early. But when she looked over her shoulder, the figures she spied did not resemble the barrel-chested men she knew. They glowed against the white bluffs and appeared taller. Were these angels or men? They stared at her half naked in the sun and then turned away. Save one.

He walked toward her slowly giving her time to pull her damp tunic over her head. Her fingers fumbled, tangling in the ties at her waist. As she reached up to tame her loose hair, he loomed over before her. The bare feet that peeked from beneath his gray robe were smooth, uncallused, clean, and that bothered her. He clasped his arms behind him but she felt that his hand would also look like babies’ hands: fat and untouched. Her eyes floated between his feet, pale as dough, and his waist. She could look no higher. She fought to meet his gaze but she stood there, like a stone, with her unbound hair and salt skin. She stood and waited for the condemnation her husband spoke of.
The angel or man reached forward and touched her cheek. She flinched, certain his fingers would burn her. She felt nothing and then a fleeting sensation as though warmth and cold, pain and pleasure existed at once in his touch.

“You will linger. You will fall behind,” he spoke or she thought he did though by the time her eyes found his face his lips were still. She tried focusing on his features, to capture them for the stories she would tell later. All she saw were his eyes, flat like the eyes of scavenger birds.

She managed to move her tongue.

“What do you mean?”

“You will linger. You will fall behind.”

Her eyes fastened to those unblinking eyes, she had failed to see his lips move again. Had they?

“You could be spared,” he said, his hand drifting from her cheek to the curling strands of hair on her bare shoulder.

“You could be spared, but you do not forget and in remembering you will linger.”

She gazed at him for minutes or hours. His face seemed to sag and something closed over his eyes like the opaque inner lids of lizards. They were almost bleak, if eyes like his could ever reflect anything but the clouded sky and smooth, dead sea. She felt when the moment broke and time began again. He dropped her hair, turned and walked toward his companions who still stood with their backs to her and the sea.

“Abana. Do not forget. Linger.” His words were neither question nor command. She wanted to call after him. A question worried the edges of her mind but her voice
remained a stone in her throat. Instead, she reached up and began to braid her wet hair, weaving the striated lengths of black and gray into a thick rope that she wound around her head like a crown.

That night she would meet them again as men. As guests at their table, the two men seemed to draw in the candlelight though they joked loudly and spilled wine like any other. When an agitated crowd began to gather outside the door, she trembled though their guests remained seated their black eyes without expression.

One of the salt wives must have seen them on the road to the Sodom. The story had spread through the city, hungry for something new, something more. Her husband stood between the guests and the door, wringing his hands.

“I am a good host,” she heard him whisper. He repeated the lessons of hospitality learned from his uncle Abraham. No harm should come to a guest under your roof. No guest turned away. The crowd outside raised their voices seeking the unknown men. For what end she did not know, she suspected no one did.

“You may have my daughters,” she heard him offer to the seething crowd. His eyes avoided theirs. Her virgin daughters were not guests so the commandments of hospitality did not extend to protect them. They were only daughters. Someone’s almost wives.

Waiting for waves of rage to break from the mouths at her end of the table, she was shocked by their silence. She expected more from them than their placid stares. Their eyes were not on their father but on the men, their guests. Her husband quailed as the
crowd grew louder, rejecting the substitution of daughters for men. Or were they angels? The question came unbidden to Abana. She raised a hand to her cheek but could not remember why.

The guests stood, towering over Abana and her daughters. A wavering light flickered behind them that reminded her of the sea. They turned toward the door and raised their downy hands. The mob outside grew silent and then began to scream. The angels spoke to her husband in strident tones, gesturing at the distant hills beyond the house.

“You will come with us,” she thought they said. “You must leave your city. Abraham has asked for you. For him, you will be saved.”

Though she knew better, she clenched her teeth against it, the question erupted anyway.

“Why?” In that question lay hidden many others that did not make it past her lips. Why this city? Why now? Why her home? Why spare only them? She had seen the good who lived with all the rest as she did.

When her husband cradled his face in his salt stained hands, the rest looked at her as though she had made a choice.

“What do you see? There is life here. My life. Our life. We were told to make a life beside the sea of death. And we did.” She realized she was shouting but this time her voice did not shock them into stillness. The guests gathered her family in their embrace, nearly covered them in the voluminous folds of their robes. They opened the door and passed through it. One of them waited for her. He took her hand but did not meet her
eyes. She breathed in. The room smelled of smoke and sweat, of bread and wine and the sweetness of roasting figs. They would burn if she left. She would if she stayed.

They could take nothing with them and they alone would be saved. Abana thought of the bruised girls by the well, child brides whose mates were more fathers than husbands. She saw Cherith, the old mother, and her babies and their babies. Abraham asked only for his nephew to be saved and God agreed. Yes, sometimes her city roiled with its sin like the tar pits beyond the river but there was life here floating above the salt sea. She did not know if the measure of good was enough, but she knew it existed in Sodom. She felt the angel tug on her fingers and she turned to the door.

Outside, men and women crouched nearby with their hands over their eyes. The screams had turned to whimpers. As she walked past lead forward by the angel, a man looked up at her and his eyes were milky and rimmed in swollen red flesh. She recognized the man from the market. He was from the same city where she was born and smelled of the desert. He had saved the baby from the well. She stumbled and almost stopped but the angel was relentless.

When they reached the mountain pass, the city behind them roared. Heat licked at the back of her neck and smoke snaked between their feet. Gray specks began to fall around her. They clung to her like the layer of seawater she had never fully cleansed from her skin.

She felt the pull then, on her hands still white with salt and flour, and on her eyes, already stinging from ash and burnt memories. The angel’s hand no longer held hers. In the smoke billowing up from the valley, her valley, she could not find him. She thought
she heard voices calling her. But she could not tell if they came from the mountain above her or the city below. She stood on the path alone. She remembered everything. She turned, her braid falling from the crown of her head. The seawater in her irises hardened before they fell on the burning walls of the city. For that she was grateful, eternally.

Her daughters tell her story to their sons. The angels said do not look back though they always knew she would. They took her and her daughters with soft hands and led them from the destruction. But always she was the one who would fall behind. They told the story—their eyes still red from the ash and rimmed in her salt—watching their father take the wine jug to his shadow beside the fire and stain his lips. They are forgiven, her daughters. But not the salt mother. In the Sodom Mountains above the Eastern Sea, fault lines raced through her.

They name her Halite. Rock—stone—salt woman. In her daughters’ stories, she is not a ghost reduced to opaque grains with no memory and no name. She is a pillar as clear as the dead sea with a beating heart inside.