Datum Point

i.

The paramedics converged on the back bedroom, one wall of which supported a floor-to-ceiling green-painted pegboard. Strung up on the board by elastic straps under their tiny arms were at least a couple hundred dolls, all about five inches tall give or take, with white porcelain heads and what seemed to be glued-on real hair of many shades. This was my Mom Renee's collection. Those dolls have followed me everywhere, I have to tell you, even into the future, even into dreams where they're usually still strapped in place but sometimes I'll find a head sitting alone on a chair or an arm in a cup.

My mother was awake but would not speak. They found me under the bed. I was four years old.

After this I was sent to my grandmother's in Saline, Michigan. My grandmother had been estranged from Mom Renee for years (since Mom Renee was strange, she said). "Your Mom Renee is a plugged-in radio balanced on the edge of a full bathtub," she explained to me as she scrubbed me down. I was none too clean and the water soon resembled a grim Michigan November sky. Grandie had a lot of rules about staying near to hand, sitting still, sitting in a chair the right way, not grabbing food from the refrigerator at all times of day, not pushing the screen part of the screen door--but on the plus side she did own a pet skunk named Henry, black with a white stripe that began at his head, split in two down his back, and merged again for the tail.

Grandie put up a piece of plywood blocking the entry to the living room and told me to stay out. Henry, though, was allowed to vault in there, where he would watch me

with his beady jet pearl eyes from a perch on the back of the couch, his fat tail twitching like a squirrel's, back-lit by the bay window. He liked to tease. He'd put up his tail and charge at me, veering away right when I grabbed for him. Of course Henry had been descented—but unlike me, he smelled muskier after a bath than before. Each night I watched my grandmother brush first Henry's then her own thinning hair with the same brush (I was fascinated to see long hair on an old lady). During the day Grandie wore a gray braid coiled and pinned to hide a bald spot at the back of her head.

Even with all these entertainments, I soon wandered away, looking for my mother, reaching I-94 where trucks careened creating their own violent windstorms. A man dressed all in brown standing by a brown truck lifted me onto his shoulders as he radioed 911. "She's like a feral cat," my grandmother complained later. I heard this as Fair Old Cat.

I cried for my mother, her emptied and shadowed face, for the cozy flickering beam of a dying flashlight under the foil-lined table.

I cried long and loud and with my mouth open.

"I'm astounded a little bitty thing like you can make so much noise," Grandie said, which surprised me so I shut up. In any case it was decided I would be better off with an actual family including a father figure, which I pictured as sort of a statue, a bust on a mantle. Grandie was getting too old to be running after children on the highway. No one knew anything about my real father, so that's when Aunt Pam (older sister of Mom Renee) and Uncle Ray stepped in. Even though they didn't want children, Grandie confided to me, at least they were simple, amiable, *responsible* drunks. Unlike my mother, they were *basically sane*. They lived up the road from Saline in Ann Arbor.

So I went with them. I asked if I could take the skunk Henry and they all said no. My aunt and uncle had a house with dormer windows upstairs and tight alcoves with slanted ceilings, and they let me slide my bed into one of those narrow slots with the pillow right against the windowsill. It was winter. I would open the window and by the morning snow had drifted in and I could etch a "C" for Carlotta in the frost on the sill. They'd given me Uncle Ray's comforter from childhood, dark red with shifting stuffing and a design of cartoon baseball players, some squatting as catcher, some swinging the bat, some running after fly balls, heads tilted back with their hats falling off. Little black vibration lines showed the figures were moving. The best part was getting entirely warm, almost hot, then sliding my foot out from under the quilt into the cold, with the choice to bring that foot (if it behaved) back into warmth or not.

What was it like to sleep with my head on the windowsill year after year? Spring thunderstorms were so low and wild and primitive I spoke to them directly, praising them for their power, reminding them to take pity on my weakness. It always worked; flattered, they moved on. Summers, car headlights blinked on and off like ghost eyes as they passed beyond the black swaying trunks of trees. Leaves tossed in the breeze as I listened to shouts of kids who got to stay out late. Mourning doves under the eaves rustled and cooed and rattled deep in their throats inches away from my own rasping breath when I had the flu. In the fall once I thought I saw a man in a long tan coat circling the house looking for a way in, but maybe it was just the leaves crunching on their own.

Now that Mom Renee had appeared back in town, she could be seen following the curb as if she needed its linear guidance, a familiar figure walking along the gutter and

ignoring the sidewalk, Indian Madras wraparound skirt with a caravan in silhouette marching along the hem, gray hooded sweatshirt with a faded Biblical message written in marker on the back, the hood lined with the inevitable foil, watching her feet in denim-colored tennis shoes with orange laces and muttering theories about angels and the devil himself. Her hair under the hood was caked and matted like black rope. Aunt Pam said there was nothing anyone could do about her, it was the law, and so, like a decree, nothing was done. Aunt Pam and I would pull Mom Renee indoors every so often and clean her up and try to feed her, which was difficult due to the poisoning. She took apart my old Barbie and in that doll I finally saw what Barbie really looked like to my mother: no body, no hair and holes in her head where hair had once sprouted. Since the mouth couldn't move, the voices came through those holes in the skull, and each hole had a different voice, all murmuring at the same time. To hear, Mom Renee had to hold completely still, which she could do for hours, not even blinking. To escape hearing, she had to walk, Barbie trailing along in that periphery like a helium-filled balloon.

Once from my window I saw my mother waving her arms at some girls smoking down at the bus stop by the stop sign. They just kept smoking steadily, sweeping their silky hair back in that way clean not really bad teenaged girls do with one shake of the head, trying to ignore Mom Renee as she went by, but I could see she made them waver. They weren't so tough or so crazy. Another time I confided to a neighbor boy as Mom Renee passed by that the woman was my real mother and he said, "Yeah, right." He walked behind my Mom Renee for a few steps, arms out, swaying like Frankenstein, and I felt ashamed, as if I'd been the one to make fun of her.

*

One summer day when I was maybe nine years old I went around the house to the front porch, finished my orange popsicle and sat on the cracked and patched steps and honed the stained stick to a sharp point against the cement. I tested the tip on a mole about four inches above my knee (the mole my grandmother said should be the absolute cutoff for skirt length—anything shorter and I'd end up loony like Mom Renee) and listened to the lonely wind in the trees as the cars flowed past on the two-lane blacktop that led to downtown. Colors began to gleam like stained glass. The sky, I understood, wasn't really the top dome of the world after all. It was the inside of an egg, painted blue, and the egg was held in a giant hand that could crush everything but chose not to. Words fed into my head: *he died for your sins.* The voice was not from anywhere in particular, neither external nor internal, not up high, not down low, neither loud nor soft. It was not my own voice. A few clouds blocked the sun, then passed, and the sun came back out. Nothing had changed. I poked the stick into my leg again. Aunt Pam opened the front door behind me and asked if I was OK. Without turning around I said I was fine.

People dropped their keys or stumbled or sometimes abruptly turned and walked the other way, mumbling. Cars cut across lanes of traffic. Bikes wobbled. Wheels on shopping carts flapped uselessly or stuck at an angle, impeding progress and making people shove forward angrily, while excruciating sparkles of spit flew sharp as diamonds when people spoke. My third grade teacher lost my social studies report on Marco Polo, complete with a cover drawn in colored pencil, hole-punched and tied with red yarn with help from Aunt Pam. When the teacher finally located it a few days later, she handed it to me with both hands, bowing ceremoniously yet somehow satirically with a little extra dip

of her head as if presenting a crown balanced on a velvet cushion to some unworthy monarch.

Aunt Pam and Uncle Ray tracked down Mom Renee to formally ask for my adoption. Carlotta Appleton would become Carlotta Barron. We were moving from Michigan clear across the country and down south to New Mexico for Uncle Ray's new job. That was the plan. Even if I didn't understand all of it I did know that I was in some way smarter than the adults surrounding me at that final meeting. They didn't know about faint-hearted girls smoking with their long hair snaking in the wind or only stepping in the middle of each floor tile or right after the trill of a red-winged black bird overhead finding a red scarf like a slash in the dirt below—so why was I here in the world? I felt a disappointment. If the adults weren't smarter, who was running things?

"You aren't even original," Aunt Pat was complaining. "Foil? Why do people go nuts in exactly the same way?"

Mom Renee said, as she turned an envelope in her hands, "Pamela. Pam you'll find out one day—you can't really buy a child from its mother." I looked up at this and saw my uncle was watching me and I understood the envelope. Uncle Ray wore glasses that magnified his gray eyes, which gave him a swollen but neutral expression that I later associated with the word, "scientist." I saw he wasn't about to be fooled by anything, including me, so I looked down again fast.

They left me alone with Mom Renee to say goodbye. She smelled of faint but sour sweat combined with maybe wet sand. Something strange happened, though, as my mother clung to me one last time. I still for no good reason and in an abstract way

wanted to be with my mother, but when I aimed my entire focus at her I could see through her as if through a gap in some blinds down to a small burnt black and embittered core: a coffee bean soul. But that soul was false, it was not the real soul of my mother, which I dimly remembered as wide, more like a meadow. I waited and willed, I begged silently mind-to-mind for my mother to do the right thing, to return, to give up craziness and the dead soul for me, to bloom again like something that understood seasons, but when that didn't happen I realized that doing the right thing didn't matter when the person was your mother. A mother was a fact, my fact. At the same time I didn't have to love or not love the facts. They just were, or are.

Right then my mother let go of me and I fell to the floor. I had two nearly simultaneous visions: the first a memory of a bowl of maggots, how hard I had cried because oatmeal should not be moving. The second sight dropped like a blessed curtain blocking the first. I was clinging to the leg of a man in a long camel's hair coat—the man had just told me it was made of a real camel's hair--a man I suddenly knew was my real father. The scene came to me as one entity and I never forgot it, nor did I forget the power of a mind to see what was real and the remedy for it, too, all in one. I needed not a father figure, but my real father.

ii.

The year I turned fourteen the piñons started dying, mostly farther up in northern New Mexico but in a line slowly descending toward Albuquerque, where we now lived. Bark beetles were to blame, and drought.

Now that I was into my teens I expected sheer trouble to advance in a similar

manner upon me via my mother genes. I plucked it all out, though, like the decisive pinch of plucking my eyebrows, those plump black follicles held in tweezers, mini tadpoles nipped before becoming full-fledged. I was no trouble at all, none whatsoever. I was smart, teachers said. I did well in school. Aunt Pam told me it was odd, my habit of closing my eyes for a second or two right when I was talking directly to someone, but it helped my mind to stay there on the conversation. I felt older than my high school peers, felt little interest in them, usually ate lunch with a shifting crowd of about ten other students in my AP English teacher's classroom. He showed old classic movies for half an hour during lunch each day, removing the need for talk. It was a black-and-white time-warp respite from glaring school colors.

After school each day I rode the bus home. Aunt Pam, an elementary school secretary, was by now a plump woman with loose-fleshed arms and a sharp, sometimes offended manner, a marshmallow hiding a razor blade. She arrived home next, followed at six by Ray, who had quit his original Intel job to sell insurance because he couldn't face the night shift. Pam and Ray would have a few gin-and-tonics and then crack a jug of wine to go with dinner. Dinners were lively as my aunt and uncle would disparage the various members of the dim public they had encountered that day. When Pam and Ray got louder and started to repeat themselves, I would retire to the back bedroom where I did what little homework was required. My aunt and uncle—my parents—never picked on me or yelled at me. When they remembered I was there, one or the other would wander into the room and rest a hand on my shoulder or touch my hair and give it a little ruffle. They were essentially benign people. As my grandmother had said once on the phone, "Proof you don't have to be a *mean* drunk."

*

One spring morning I heard baby birds begging in the pyracantha: loud, louder, insistent, clamoring, on and on--a batch of desperate chirps born behind thorns. New naked hatchlings stretched their pale necks. A voice or an impulse told me to seize the nest. I fought it as best I could. Later Uncle Ray held in his hand an intact yet empty nest, dull twigs laced with one strand of bright yellow artificial twine, its interior smoothed and softened with the finest of gray down.

"Look what I found right on the lawn," he said. Birds still sang in nearby trees. "Incredible craftsmanship. Maybe there *is* a God." He shook his head. Then he laughed.

About this time there came to me written in miniscule print on a postcard taken from a Holiday Inn:

Carlottalottie on my long walk god has shown me the salvation or destruction of those near death but no one listens no one hears I am warning you they are going the wrong way the exterior is the only proof of interior life it is not science fiction!!! I am skipping the King evil is a bent trapezoid I have seen floating yellow above an island the problem remains—distinguishing

I also received two boxes: the porcelain dolls removed from the pegboard, each one wrapped in foil. As I freed them from their capsules, I noticed they all had the same painted faces: six sweeping eyelashes for each eye, each eye a white dot topped with a smaller black dot, three red dots making a bow for a mouth, and no eyebrows. All had their feet painted black, like ballet slippers. The glue holding their hair in place had turned brown on their scalps. Aunt Pam said we should try to sell them online and Uncle

Ray suggested we donate them to a horror museum. I didn't know what to do with them so I put them back in the boxes without the foil. It bothered me to see them piled there limbs tangled as if in a mass grave but at the same time I knew they were just dolls.

It was a rule at my school that if you were in advanced science you had to participate in the science fair and you had to collaborate on a project with a mentor. It was a nuisance. It was a pain, in fact, Aunt Pam admitted, because it dragged the parents into it. We were standing at the window looking at the rusty-tipped piñon in the back yard. When we'd moved to Albuquerque an ancient truck had trundled by, the back sagging under a load of large rocks and a piñon with roots wrapped in burlap. On impulse Aunt Pam had paid for three rocks and that piñon (in Michigan it would have been called a bush not a tree and you wouldn't have paid for it either) and now bark beetles were getting to it, just as they were devouring those trees up north. "Should have bought all rocks," Aunt Pam said now.

So, I contacted the University of New Mexico, found a mentor teacher who helped me flesh out an idea, and Uncle Ray took me up to the Jemez Mountains to do a study, "The Effect of Dead and Live Piñon Trees on the Percentage of Ground Cover Inside the Drip Line of the Tree." We scrambled up a steep rocky slope to reach a small plateau, where we proceeded to collect data from twenty live and twenty dead trees, marking the finished trees with strips of masking tape as we went. Uncle Ray pushed his glasses up on his forehead and snapped a photo of me crawling under a piñon with my tape measure and another one of the perfect dip of a saddle between two mesas across the way.

When I received a second place ribbon for the project, Uncle Ray put on the accent he sometimes did, as if he'd been born somewhere in the deep south. "Watch it, *honeycarlotta*," he warned, "Y'all might get a *swell head*."

The assignment was to write a myth of one's own. I wrote:

The Myth of the Girl, Polished Each Night Before Sleep

They stand outside in line behind her mother all dressed up. They are waiting for something to happen as a cold mist falls through the dark. Her cheek is against the coat. Amazing that a coat could be made of a camel's hair. He has just told her that. His hand is resting on her head. She is the right height for that. A perfect height. Child height. She just found out about camels, too. They have humps that hold water. They cross the desert. They are the color of sand. They have long faces like flapping boots with the sole coming off. They smell like damp mittens. She holds his leg and looks down the crease of his pants below the hem of the coat. Her mother takes a step back. Her mother's high heel sinks onto the top of the man's leather shoe and stays there too long for an accident, pressing down. When she lifts her foot away the leather holds the dent. The man cradles her head and turns it away from her mother.

"Where have you been all this time?" my English teacher asked when he returned my paper. He seemed to want an answer.

"I don't know," I said, surprised. "Nowhere."

*

Trying to imagine infinity, late at night, head on the windowsill flying past planets and stars beyond the Milky Way, out of one universe and into another for as long as I could stand it, then hitting a wall. But the wall had to continue forever, too, so trying to imagine that solid thickness forever—Was, I wondered then, a person infinite?

On a Saturday morning two weeks after I'd turned sixteen they dropped me off at driver's ed classes on the west side of town. The school was in a strip mall near a Target store. On that first day we sat in rows of scarred school desks in a small dim room behind the front office and watched a gruesome movie from the Ohio State Police. After the movie we walked to an abandoned church parking lot to practice maneuvering driver's ed cars forward and back around orange traffic cones. Later at dinner I entertained my parents with the tale of the movie, which had been hopelessly dated with a newsreel-type narrator intoning dire warnings about hippies in vans, that tacky screaming headline: *Mechanized Death.* At the back of my mind, though, were jumbled images of curiously peaceful and rubbery bodies interwoven with metal parts, limbs in impossible positions, a woman who looked a little like my mother being pulled from the front seat of a car. Aunt Pam was pretty sure she'd seen the same movie way back when *she* had been in driver's ed. Ray said that one thing was for sure, you *shorenuff* didn't want to get hit by a train, and right then the telephone rang. Grandie reported that Mom Renee had died along Scio Church Road near Pioneer High School in Ann Arbor as result of a hit and run.

Things were more built up now between Ann Arbor and Saline. Grandie showed us the spot where my Mom Renee had landed—small yellow circles marked where tiny

spirit demons had leapt from her body. Across the street from sedate homes were weedy back lots used for science study at the high school, while Michigan Stadium loomed a half mile away. The ashes had been placed in a teak box with a carved lid at Grandie's, whose hair was now cut short like a million other old ladies—a patchy fog of white encircling a gleaming beige and freckled planet. "Where's that skunk Henry?" I asked. "Dead for years," Grandie said, and we all looked at the teak box.

A few months after we got back, Uncle Ray tackled the piñon tree in the back yard, which had by then dropped all its needles in a rusty circle around its base. He chopped at the limbs until just the trunk remained, then borrowed a chain saw. He left the stump and nailed a plywood seat to it and sat out there during sunsets drinking beer, while I—I had my learner's permit by now—took Aunt Pam on slow rides through the neighborhood, hugging the curbs like Mom Renee used to do. Aunt Pam said she had heard somewhere that if you yawned you just couldn't feel tense at the same time, so she spent the rides yawning and yawning, deep dragging yawns as if we'd been on the road for hours and we'd never get there.

iii.

Why are the piñons dying? the cardboard triptych read. *Is there a correlation between the distance of a piñon to its nearest tree neighbor and the extent of damage to the health of the piñon? The hypothesis is that if the distance of the nearest neighbor tree is closer to the piñon, then the extent of damage to the piñon's health will be greater because the closer the trees are together, the more competition they have for essentials*

such as water.

This follow-up study examines 30 trees in a randomly selected transect, and rates the health of the trees on a scale of 0 (no damage) to 3 (dead) based on needle color and loss of needles. The health scale is taken from a University of Arizona web site about forest health--

It amused me that in order to find randomness in nature, the mentor said I must draw a straight line through it, hence the transect.

The ranger station was a newish building with dusty blue accents offsetting pink and tan stucco. As we approached the door, a ranger wearing a khaki-colored uniform was heading out. He reached up to hold the door for us. He was, I realized as I passed under that arm spread like a powerful and protective wing, the man in the camel's hair coat, when least expected, the center and the antidote to all that had gone before. The eyelashes on his left eye were pure white, on the other, pure black. His eyes were gold and looking into them was like gazing into a three-sided mirror, a kaleidoscope of self.

"I called about a science project," I said.

"Oh, right. Carlotta? Give me fifteen. Do you have time?"

"No," Aunt Pam said under her breath.

He was looking at me. I nodded. I had time.

"Check out the ruins," he suggested. "It's a short trail."

The ruins were down a slope behind the station. We could hear the drone of the cement plant across the road, a light flashing at the top. A sign warned us to stay on the trail. *That way you can see a snake before it sees you.* Four hundred people once lived at

Tijeras Pueblo. I pictured four hundred miniature dolls strung up on a board and then dumped in a box. We regarded a model of the Pueblo's first occupation, then its second. The Datum Point, we read, is the point in an archeological site from which all measurements originate. The site had been buried over time and we were looking at a patch of weeds that with imagination would reveal, perhaps, the mysterious round imprints of a former existence.

Aunt Pam mocked the damp soil, its reddish cracks, the idea of a buried excavation site. "By knowing what to look for," she read aloud, her voice full of scorn. "What kind of place is this? There's nothing to see."

We read about clues to the past seen in an usually dense concentration of plants: rabbit brush, snake weed. We passed a low sign posted near a dead piñon. "Piñon," it said. Another snort from Aunt Pam.

"What happened here?" the signs asked. "Why did the people leave?" "Drought," they answered. "Repeated planting. Abandonment of the Pueblo way." "We will never know for sure." What remained? Anthills. A scattering of juniper berries. A cold wind in the brittle grass. A rocky mountain juniper. Red pellets in a pile of scat. Boot tracks in the mud from a previous wanderer.

The fifteen minutes were up. Aunt Pam went to wait with Uncle Ray, who was sulking in the car with a bum knee.

Later when I was clumsily unfolding the topographical map with its wavy highs and lows, a muscle twitched impatiently in the ranger's tapering forearm. He was just like me, biding time until we could cut through, our linear solution to the jumble of nature.

He used his GPS and I unspooled measuring tape from a large wheel borrowed

from the PE teacher. This would mark our way cross-country through the trees. He took a digital picture of me holding a clipboard and squinting in mock concentration at a live piñon. He took another close-up from above that made my head loom huge as a baby's. I made him delete that one and take another with my hair blowing all over the place like a fashion model near a fan. I knew then as clearly as anything I've ever known that at the right moment his hand would cup my head and turn me from the mark of the mother as once again I disappeared into the warm folds of the camel's hair coat. In the end we did not prove the hypothesis of my study, the data didn't support it, but—curiously—if you get the process right none of that matters in science.