

Ghost Floor

During what we all knew was her final illness, my mother gave us jobs to do around the house. Mine was to keep the bathroom clean. It had a black and white checkerboard floor, one stripe of black tiles accenting the white tiles surrounding the bathtub, red towels, and a built-in black soap dish above a freestanding sink that looked like a birdbath.

My father no longer slept upstairs with my mother. He spent the nights dozing on the couch in the living room where he listened to her rustles and sighs via a baby monitor, its speaker placed on the piano like a metronome. Evenings, instead of conversations back and forth we got only my mother, continuously, and she didn't get us.

While I cleaned I often thought about a boy I'd noticed, a friend of my older brother. Sometimes I would find myself sitting on the chipped toilet lid with a cloth in my hand staring in an unfocused way at the floor. That's when a second floor would appear, floating about a foot above the original one. I would automatically call up this ghost floor, which soon began to seem more real than the actual floor, while I thought about the boy. I liked him because of the way he would never face me but would always stand sideways to me, alongside me but a little bit away, as if I were particularly skittish or potentially dangerous.

The boy I'd noticed, this young man, loved baseball. He often played catcher, which made his thighs bunch up in a way that was hard to ignore. He had small perfectly formed ears that were tilted flat on a line parallel to that of his jaw, and I would imagine putting my palms along his jaw and sliding my hands up until my thumbs tucked behind

his ears and my fingers cupped around the curve of his skull. There's a good hollow place for a thumb to touch, just behind the jaw's hinge. I carved it once into a block of basswood. When I was done I gave the wood a kiss and a few dried shavings clung to my lips, until I blew them off.

Names. Joseph, Joseph Dupolos. I never spoke his name in vain, I mostly just said *He*. Joseph of Polos, I sometimes thought, polishing porcelain. Polos to me was a Greek island with bleached ruins perched high above unbelievably aquamarine water. I imagined the scene in miniature. My brain in those days was a panorama set in a shoebox.

My brother's name is Thomas Lusk Junior. When we were very young my mother would plunk us down in the bathtub together, the very bathtub that was now mine to clean. We'd lather up with soap, close the shower curtain, and slide in circles past each other until the water turned milky opaque. Afterwards my mother would scour the tub. When years later she was pregnant with my sister Carolyn she would climb right into the tub to clean it. My name is Olivia Lusk. My piano teacher (old Mrs. Chavez) once told me with a sigh while she was trimming my fingernails that my name was right out of a romance novel. She trilled a waltz. She envisioned great feminine escapades for me in spite of the condition of my nails.

The chorus room at school had a high ceiling and a sloping floor like a swimming pool. That winter of dwindling days I could not get rid of the feeling that we were all under water, that the sounds we made were released encapsulated in bubbles. The teacher, an energetic woman with masses of golden hair and thick glasses, wavered in the

deep end facing all of us. Our desks were arranged on curved tiers that looked down on her. We groaned when she made us stand to sing.

I had a clear voice but couldn't carry a tune unless I stood next to a strong singer, so I parked myself near another alto, Michelle Ashida, who had sparkling baby-sized teeth, a broad face, and black hair that had an unusual musty smell that I thought of as dried caterpillar. The scent was instantly addictive. Whenever we swung our heads together, giggling for no particular reason other than we were simultaneously bored and thrilled with ourselves, I'd always take a deep sniff of her scalp.

In class when we were supposed to be doing our breathing exercises Michelle Ashida bent down and ran her hand along my calf. "I thought you were wearing nylons," she said, flushing a little when she realized what she'd done. When she came over to my house we snuck looks at my father's magazines and ate cherry cough drops until our tongues were as numb as rubber. I showed her my mother's collection of desert roses. When Michelle talked she always played with her hair, tucking it behind her ears, forming little paintbrushes with the blunt ends and painting along her delicate brows.

One night I went skating with Michelle in the false winter of an indoor rink. I skated better than I ever had before because with her I was not afraid of falling. We spun around together under lights like close-up stars until out of nowhere my brother appeared. "*You* look happy," he said to me suspiciously. Michelle sailed up to him and grabbed his arm, almost knocking him over. I wondered what was wrong with her. Her cheeks were bright red.

"This is my brother Tom," I said.

"Tommy, I love you, Tom." Her breath came out in cherry puffs. "It's love at first

sight.” Then she laughed in a crazy way when he pulled off her hat. It wasn’t that cold; she didn’t even need a hat. Her hair was full of electricity. Tom followed Michelle carrying the hat when she skated off.

I picked up my sister Carolyn outside the elementary school at our spot by the flagpole and we drifted toward home. For a while we balanced on the neighbor’s railroad ties, Carolyn slipping every so often onto perfectly raked gravel. The neighbors were retired and had nothing better to do than to groom their property and sit at their plastic-covered picnic table watching their prickly pears grow. Our yard in front looked respectable enough, but the back was overgrown with snarled tumbleweeds and fierce yellow tufts of desert grass. This we blamed silently on my mother’s condition, as if it had somehow spread to include the landscape.

That day on the neighbor’s picnic table sat two fat striped watermelons in a puddle of water and a knife. Something about watermelons nestled side by side stopped me there. Carolyn ran ahead and I walked up to the table and touched one of the melons. It was warm and clear sap oozed steadily from its stem. I thought about two pinstriped thighs straining toward knees. I wanted to see exactly, to strip away and study how *His* legs tapered abruptly to those improbably slim knees. How did the muscles work, and how did he even walk with all that going on? My hand curved around the melons. On the ground nearby was a shallow wooden bowl, like a trough or a small dugout canoe with two gloves curled together in the center. Inside the house the neighbor’s little dog began to yap. The neighbor appeared as a gray shadow at the back door. I left, pretending not to see her.

My piano teacher was in her yard plucking dead leaves from her rose bushes when I passed by.

“Are you crying?” she asked. She came out to the sidewalk and touched my shoulder. I was taller than she was, and bony enough to intimidate. “Are you hungry?”

She didn’t think anyone took care of me. But—I have always wanted to tell her—people *did* take care of me well enough, as well as people can and people aren’t everything, so she shouldn’t have worried. During her illness, for example, my mother had made a ritual of speaking to each one of us alone each day in her room. Sometimes she made sense and sometimes she didn’t. At times she slept through the visits, but that wasn’t the point. One at a time we would sit next to her on the bedspread, ducking under a sort of scaffolding my father had rigged so that my mother could prop her arm up all day without effort. The lymph nodes under her left arm were swollen several times their normal size. She had a plum-sized lump high on her neck, too, which had made her deaf in one ear. We weren’t fazed by it. We talked into her good ear. My grandmother, a former nurse, gave my mother morphine and for the rest of us cooked spaghetti, stews, and piles of chicken—food for an army. She also kept the kitchen clean, did the laundry, and took Carolyn away with her whenever I couldn’t stand her. My brother looked out for me, swept, vacuumed, dusted, and brought Joseph Dupolos around. My father worked. I cleaned the bathroom and watched Carolyn. Carolyn picked up her toys. That was my mother’s list and we followed it.

I assured Mrs. Chavez that I was fine. My piano teacher’s job was to hear the beautiful melodies behind stumbling efforts. Like my ghost floor she conjured them up. A mysterious elusiveness, almost obliterated by false notes, kept us going.

*

During our breathing practice, our chorus teacher made us stop and start over, stop and start over, cutting us off with her hands. She counted in a loud, determined way while we did our tongue exercises, way out, side-to-side, tilt. She pushed and pulled and pounded at us, but we were as sluggish as cold, old clay. Michelle whispered to the girl seated on her other side, “Just little circles,” she was saying. “Rubbing your back in little circles means they *want* to.” The other girl nodded, widening her eyes at Michelle’s wisdom. Down in front a tall boy staggered out of the seats, retching, his hand over his mouth. *Splat*, he flung a pool of plastic vomit at the teacher’s feet. A few people laughed. Our teacher picked up the sickness and handed it back to him, then removed her glasses and set them on the scarred piano. The tall boy bowed and dropped back into his seat with his long legs sprawled in front of him.

“I’ve tried and I’ve tried,” our teacher said finally, blinking. Her eyes looked soft without the glasses. “I’ve tried everything I can think of to reach you people.” Michelle sighed impatiently. I tried to think of something I could whisper to her so that I could sniff her hair. We waited. I forgot Michelle. The teacher’s hands hung at her side. I was amazed by the wide-open defeat in her posture. She didn’t even lift her hands to hide or protect or wipe her face. She didn’t hunch over or collapse or walk out. In cold silence we watched her cry until the bell rang.

In the garage my father was working on another cedar chest. He sold these and benches, headboards and bed frames, cabinets, decorative shelves, doors, and lamps. Sometimes customers would request that he fasten all sorts of hardware to these pieces,

scalloped false handles, ornate knobs designed to look like shells or swords or twigs, brass corner fittings, elaborate hinges. During such projects he would always murmur sadly about the wood lost under all that junk.

I poked through his pile of scraps and found a block of cedar just larger than a man's hand. Above the noise of the sander I asked if I could have it and he nodded without looking.

I wanted that block because I had a picture in my head of the neighbors' watermelons and I thought I might make something for my mother. I didn't want her to think that I was wasting all my time on thoughts of boys, even if I was. She had given me her woodcarving tools when she got weak again, after my father had forbidden her to use them because she had the habit of becoming too absorbed and cut herself too often. My hands were fine, strong, large for a girl. I knew I had done something right when my father once said that I was like him, I thought with my hands.

Upstairs I found my grandmother changing the sheets while my mother, wearing a striped shirt and nothing else, nodded nearby in a wicker chair.

"Where is Carolyn?" my grandmother asked, puffing a little as the cloth billowed and settled. "Downstairs," I answered, even though I didn't know for sure. I set the wood block down and helped my grandmother with the pillow cases, and then, as we eased my lightweight mother into her diaper underwear and then onto the fresh sheets, I saw that wicker had marked her thighs with curved bands like the stripes on her shirt but with depth. I saw how her shape was formed entirely by lines, as if she were standing behind partially closed blinds. My grandmother swung the scaffolding back into place, and my mother draped her arm there and was instantly asleep.

I picked up the wood. “I’m making a carving.”

My grandmother sighed. “Well, work away from yourself,” she warned.

My mother’s tools had faceted wooden handles and faded yellow stickers that said *made in West Germany*. Each blade was engraved with two cherries joined at the stem, although in some the mark had been nearly worn away. There were flat and curved blades of all sizes, some sharper than others. The flat blades produced rough chips and were hard to for me to control but left a strong, satisfying texture. The curved ones sailed, making smooth troughs. As I worked with a curved blade I followed one of the golden veins running through the block, then cut across the reddish grains to round the ends. The wood’s sawdust scent made me sneeze. Part of the way through when I stopped to rest my fingers I realized that the watermelons were being pushed together due to the shape of the block, that what I was carving had turned into more of a deep groove than an actual separation.

My piano teacher’s son tuned pianos for a living. Even though he was at least forty years old and had a sad face full of folds and creases, he was called Bobby, not Bob or Rob or Robert or Mr. Chavez, due to his minimal shy and clumsy speech, his formlessness, and his pigeon-toed toddler feet. Underneath all that he had perfect pitch.

Bobby stayed for almost an hour bent over the piano’s exposed guts, pressing keys and pushing pedals, playing his discordant tuner melodies, while I sat nearby reading a magazine and jiggling my leg. Upstairs, my brother and Michelle turned a radio up louder, singing along, while down here all those velvety hammers tapped directly on

my vibrating nerves.

After Bobby was done I walked with him back over to his mother's with the check my father had written in advance. She thanked me and told Bobby that she had a sandwich waiting for him in the kitchen. When he ducked in there she turned back to me and in her concerned way asked me if I wanted to stay to lunch. I had a choice of salami, cheese, bologna or peanut butter. "I'm having bologna," Bobby showed me. I asked for peanut butter and milk, remembering too late that she always made her milk from powder.

Bobby chewed and chewed each bite, politely, with his mouth closed, and wiped his lips often with a pink paper napkin. It looked like he needed a shave. How did he shave all those droops and crumples? When his napkin fell his mother bent to pick it up and I reached over and quickly touched Bobby's cheek. There was no stubble after all, just the beginning shadow beneath the surface. His skin was as velvety as a bulldog's. Bobby smiled at the remains of his sandwich. My teacher tucked the napkin back on his lap. She wasn't eating anything. What would happen to Bobby when one day his mother died?

Peanut butter stuck in my throat so I took a good drink of that milk, which tasted just like you would expect: dried bones dissolved in water.

Summer came. Tom and Joseph Dupolos began working for a landscaper named Rick. They dug trenches for railroad ties, hauled and spread stones, poured cement, planted trees and bushes, laid sod, leveled dirt, and built up hills where there were none. Everywhere they went the land underwent subtle shifts, views changed, old fences fell

and new ones blocked access.

My father decided that Rick and company should fix up our back yard so that my mother would experience peaceful and cultivated last visions from her bedroom window. Rick had eyelashes so black that it looked like he wore eyeliner and had a soulful, deferential droop to his stance. The first thing he noticed was a small dark pouch, a bat, tucked under the eaves right by our front door. My father lifted a rake from Rick's truck and poked at the bat with the handle. The bat hissed but didn't move.

"I don't mess with bats," Rick said. "I got nothing to do with bats, nothing." He kept his eyes on the eaves. "A bite will make you sick." He nodded gloomily at me. "He'll fly off there right into her pretty hair and get caught." I laughed. "Hey, she laughs. I'm serious," Rick said.

My father gave me a frown I didn't understand and returned the rake to the truck. I trailed a ways back as they walked around the house to check the yard. My father pointed out what he wanted done, a yucca there, a circle of grass surrounded by bricks, a place for the garden, river rock, cobblestone.

"Cobblestone." Rick shook his head and scribbled something on a piece of paper. As they examined the ancient patio I quit listening and wandered near the wall, where I found a splintered baseball bat under some sagebrush. When I pulled, it came apart easily into two pieces, a broken wishbone. Make a wish.

At bedtime Carolyn got away from me and ran downstairs. I finally found her curled against the door outside in the dark shadow of the front step. I picked her up. "Leave me alone!" she shrieked, fighting me. In her nightgown she was like a bag of cats.

I wanted to, but I couldn't hold her, she was that wild.

Through the kitchen window I watched them work. They were beautiful in the sun behind glass, bending and lifting, their arms vibrating as they took turns pushing a tiller back and forth inside a flat circle made of bricks and mortar. I poured a glass of water and stood in the middle of the kitchen, drinking it down with my eyes closed as I thought about a woman so greedy that she always tilted her head back and gulped at whatever she wanted until puddles of excess formed at her feet. I remembered tears flowing down my chorus teacher's face. Water would take a long time to flow from my head to my feet. I'd grown so tall that I suddenly missed the intimacy of being right down there with my feet, or maybe I missed Carolyn as a baby playing with her toes. I missed my father being himself. I missed something that wasn't even gone yet. I kept drinking the water, feeling it go down. Now there was just too much flesh in between. I might as well say goodbye to my feet, I thought, and because that made me laugh I quit swallowing but kept pouring and let the cool water flood over my chin and down my neck, where it broke into rivers across my front.

Someone knocked on the window. Rick was standing right outside, motioning. He wanted to use the telephone. I let him in and he carefully looked away from my wet shirt.

After Rick finished and returned to work I wiped the floor and then took a lawn chair and my sketchbook out to the patio and sat in the drying heat next to Carolyn, who was weaving a potholder on a cardboard loom. My shirt became stiff where the water had spilled and dried. Joseph Dupolos paused in his digging and nodded once at me.

From the other side of the house I could hear the whine of my father's saw change

pitch as it hit wood. The mountain shimmered. I could see every bristling antenna on the peak, every twig and needle on every stubby piñon. Ants linked in trains of two crawled on the neighbor's wall. Each moment was so heavy it could barely tip into the next.

Eventually Rick showed up with rolls of sod stacked on a flatbed. White roots were matted in the dirt. After Joseph and Tom had broken up the plot of earth, they crawled back and forth laying the sod over the lumpy ground. It was as though they'd lost a precious coin or gem and were desperately searching for it, or maybe they were on hands and knees in a cemetery, crawling with grief, sweat falling from their faces like tears. The knees of their jeans and the palms of their hands and the toes of their boots slowly stained green. When they took off their shirts I turned a page and drew their bent backs as they trimmed the strips of sod with long blades to fit the curves of brick.

When my grandmother appeared next to me, they were rolling a large heavy drum over the living circle they'd made in the dust. I flipped the notebook shut. Joseph and Tom quit working, brushed themselves off, and stamped their feet. They went inside.

"The sun will give you wrinkles," my grandmother said. "Or worse." She was the wrinkled one, I thought but didn't say. Rick came up to us, wiping his forehead with a smudged work glove, commenting on the heat. He asked for a glass of water and some salt.

"Salt," I said.

"For the avocado."

The kitchen smelled of raw earth, grass and perspiration—the odor was stronger inside than out—but Joseph and Tom were gone. I got the water and shook some salt into my palm. Outside I poured the salt into Rick's dirty, cupped hand and he stood there with

it, sipping the water.

“I never know what she’s thinking,” my grandmother said, leaving and returning with more salt in a cup. Rick tipped the salt I’d given him into the breeze and took the cup. He walked past me to the new, seamed sod. Gloves poked like boneless hands out of his back pocket.

Carolyn had a dreamy look on her face. Her hand was moving under her shirt, scratching or rubbing.

“Stop that,” my grandmother said, and Carolyn jumped. “Watch the game.”

Michelle Ashida leaned forward and picked up the bottle of Coke at her feet. When she lifted it drops of condensation sparkled and fell dark on her lap. On the field Tom seemed to wait forever for a fly ball to drop, shifting a few feet to the left and then to the right. He caught it with a delayed smack. Michelle whistled and clapped. “He’s good, isn’t he,” she said. Joseph Dupolos bent to touch his toes, stretched until his ribs nearly popped free, then turned his hat around and crouched down. The back of his uniform dipped at the waist.

Carolyn was at it again. Some new kid was at the plate. He swung. I reached and held Carolyn’s arm and out of the corner of my eye I caught a blur as we ducked.

Joseph began playing with my hand with one of his, turning it, catching it and releasing it, bending the fingers into a fist inside his fist, and I had been watching as if the hand weren’t mine but just an object or maybe a small silly animal. Then we were playing that game with stacked hands, on the desk, both our hands, pull one out from

underneath and slap it on top. Suddenly he pressed down and I couldn't move my hands at all.

He smiled, raising his eyebrows, which were thick like thumbprints but set far apart. His eyebrows were more like tufts than arcs, riding his expressive brow. They made him look ready to please, unable to frown, eager as a puppy. His eyes were deep-set with dark smudges beneath as if stained by leaks, not like his eyebrows at all but sadder, cautious old drains.

In the morning I placed the nameless sculpture in her good hand, her free one. The bones in her hand stood out like the ribs of a rake, extending below her white robe. Her starved wrist with its bracelets that fell unencumbered to the elbow, a wrist so starkly feminine compared to my own, as if maturity meant not filling out but becoming a skeleton.

Her thumb slid naturally into the dark indentation I'd carved as she asked me if I knew how sick she was. She'd asked me before. I said I knew. She said it was my turn to tell her anything.

I decided to say, "There's a boy I like."

She said, "Oh--"

I waited but that was enough for her, the whole story, or maybe she already knew the story. She set the carving on the spread, pushed the top-heavy diamond of her ring back into place, and asked for my father. I brought him, and she asked him to help with her bath.

As the water ran, I read a story to Carolyn. My grandmother prepared the

meatloaf. Thomas swept crumbs out the back door. Carolyn replaced the book on the shelf when we were done.

My father lifted my mother from the water and wrapped her in a towel. She was pumice, light enough to float, and yet smiled in a slow, knowing, contented way, as if she had a secret. “Like the cat that swallowed the canary,” my father said to us many times afterwards. The next day my grandmother found my sculpture lodged in a way that would have been painful to the living, tucked under the small of my mother’s back, right where all the purpling blood had begun to settle.

The sound of disembodied breathing from upstairs used to fill our living room after dark. What a labor breathing was, a cough, a moan—always, it seemed, more air struggling in than coming out. When it would stop, my father’s eyes would move. He’d be lying on the couch just outside the circle of light from the lamp, a lamp he had made and my mother had decorated by carving the base with crisscrossing ferns. A sudden intake, and the breathing would start up again. My father would reach for his glass. Listen, wait, drink.

In the end there was no real reason to keep using that monitor, now tuned to some haunted frequency. For months we depended on it, though, relied on that crackle of dead airspace kicking in for the night, as familiar as the hum of the refrigerator or the rattle of that loose fan blade, the turn of a page, the howls of the neighborhood dogs when rabbits came out after dark to chew on the false oasis of our lawns.