

## Alfalfa

Her room smells of alfalfa even though she has taken the rabbits.  
The stages of her life have settled into an archaeology of smells.  
The sweet dander of guinea pigs. Sour turtle bowls.  
Saddles redolent of horse piss and her own gamy adolescence.  
Weed.  
Incense.  
Her first boy.  
Her second boy.  
When a friend lied about her at school and everyone believed it.  
When she did not make ballet.

I would rather think of alfalfa.  
Of her uncle's farm in Kentucky  
Her small hand on the wheel of the tractor  
Looking with intent across the unplowed field.  
Her hair, white as corn silk  
Her voice, all made of music  
Her spirit, an unhunted bird  
Gathering bits of shiny colored things it saw that it liked.

I don't want to think of the empty bed frame  
Waiting for the moving boys to dismantle.  
The mattress is already gone.  
Gone with Ani Difranco and the three A.M. phone calls  
And everything that was nailed or taped to the walls.  
She has left behind the dresser that she built herself, refusing help.  
It wobbles like an ancient parent you have to help to the bathroom.  
The wrong size screws protrude from the knobs.  
The drawers are emptied chrysalises  
Splayed open like the tongues of exhausted oxen.

She calls to give me her new phone number.  
I write it down, thinking it is something I should already know.  
Something I should be teaching her.  
She will know things first now.  
If she gets cancer, it is she who will break the news to me.

I tell her that without her instructive derision  
I go into the world unfit for public display.  
Hair unkempt. Wearing unmatched sox.  
Tufts of spiny filament sprouting from my earlobes.  
I threaten to wear slippers and a tattered bathrobe to the supermarket.  
But she is unmoved by pity to return.  
So I describe the cream of cauliflower soup I have made for dinner,

The clever substitutions to keep it non-dairy.  
The artichokes and roasted yams.  
Dad, she says,  
I don't live there anymore.  
Ah, I say.  
And now it is she who fills in the silence:  
Don't you want me to live in the world and be self-sufficient?  
Isn't that what this whole childhood nonsense was all about?  
No, I argue. After a certain point I am opposed to metamorphosis!  
But even that is not true.  
And I tell her yes.  
Yes to everything.  
Yes and yes.  
And of course yes.  
Only just  
You know,  
Not yet.

## MATRICIDE

She is on the floor when I find her. Blood stains on her nightgown where the metal frame of her walker gaped her chest, arms reaching for her bed in supplication. The outline of her spine is the bent balsa skeleton of a kite, strong and close to snapping. She is horrified she has soiled herself. *Why didn't you let me go*, she wails. I find leverage under her sallow cheeks and attempt to lift her onto her bed. She looks no heavier than ashes and dry straw, but she has swallowed the shame of gravity. I feel a twinge in my lower back and fear for a moment it might go out, and the paramedics will find a middle-aged man draped over his mother's half-naked body and wonder what depravity they've stumbled into.

In her bathroom I soak a washcloth under warm running water. When I return, her arm is reaching toward the remaining sleeping pills, spilled like carelessly sown seeds across her night table. Her arthritic movements are slow, like the earliest demonstrations of robotics. "Mom," I say. "Really?" She is angry to have been caught. I clean her toadstool buttocks, pat her dry, find a fresh set of diaper pants on the adjacent shelf, place one bamboo leg into them then the other. *Why won't you let me go!*

The ER doctors suture the chest wound, pump the toxins from her stomach. Nothing to be done for the deeper wound. I return to her apartment the following day to gather items she has requested. The air in her bedroom feels rebreathed. A jagged slash of light cuts diagonally through the drawn Venetian blind. Its brilliance contracts my pupils, and ironically, makes the room seem darker. Her housedresses hang in a neat line like wallflowers. I take the blue floral print, as instructed, third from the front. I feel like I am slighting the others. I sense their reproach. Like I have overlooked something important about them I'd been relied upon to recognize. I squint at the dizzying pattern in full light, hoping it is blue. Like my maternal grandfather, I am color-blind.

She's asked for fresh underwear. The powdery sweet essence of crushed flowers bears up from the pores of the wood. I avert my eyes from the mirror hanging above her bureau. I do not want the act witnessed, even by myself. My hands root blindly through her perfectly folded satins. Panties on the right, brassieres on the left. The cassette tape she commissioned me to find is tucked behind a column of folded handkerchiefs. The tape is an off-brand, the kind sold in supermarkets, six-for-a-dollar. Her penmanship is still elegant, like the illustrations of cursive writing in grammar school textbooks. In the blank space on the label above her signature, she has written in block letters: TO BE PLAYED IN THE EVENT OF MY DEMISE.

Demise. The oddity of the word shields me from its meaning. When I come out of her apartment, a group of women are playing canasta alongside the swimming pool. They know they are their last circle of friends. "How's Sylvia?" they all ask. They have never invited my mother to join their game.

"You tell her we're thinking about her," they say. I walk away quickly, lest I overhear murmured opinions not meant for my ears.

Her hair on the hospital pillow is tufty and white like an old man's. She awakens with a start, embarrassed that she may have fallen asleep while talking to me. "Please," she says. "I'm begging you." Tears well in her eyes. I understand the bargain. She has given me life. and so has the right to demand anything from me in return. I find the Head Nurse at her station and discretely relay my mother's request. She is a compassionate woman in her forties from a Caribbean island. The name on her badge is Glorianna. I assure her that my mother knows exactly what will happen if the morphine is increased. When we return to her room, relief floods my mother's eyes. She nods yes to the nurse's question. She adjusts the settings on machine. She touches my shoulder as she departs, her soft-soled sneakers making barely a sound.

My mother grips my hand with the strength of her younger self, the woman who pulled bushels of crabgrass from the lawn every summer, who whacked me across the face so hard for lying that my nose bled. Her grip relaxes as the drug takes effect. There is gratitude in her eyes, duty in mine, the distorted love songs of our lifelong duet.

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When the Mexican boys came with their moving dollies and wheeled out your dining room table and mahogany dresser, your home exhaled its life. Smaller than the way you had first seen it, your eyes then like a little girl's, painting it full of possibilities. Outside your door, someone has scratched two dark lines through your name, as you have done in your phone book to lost friends. There is defiance in the decision to cross out, not to erase. *We have been here and gone.* Not, *We never were.* It is the time when I have called each morning to see if you were alive; and you have answered, "Yes Unfortunately." Out of morbid curiosity I press the single button that dials the familiar pattern. A mechanized voice informs me that I have reached a number no longer in service. The screen on my phone asks, Do you wish to delete mother?

Press 1 for yes. 2 for no.

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## BELLE AND MELINDA

Times I wish I was born a man. Coming up in a house with two stepbrothers, I knew their bodies better than I knew my own. I'm not complaining. Everybody's past is the only thing that ever happened to them. Melinda does everything I can't do. She's got twelve different kinds of pots that hang across the kitchen stove. I'm used to eating off the picture on the menu, but she starts with things you'd never think of eating and turns them into food. I don't know what I do for her, except to be young and pretty and how long can that hold? Thing about age is there's more of it every day, and it's the weight of all that carrying that worries people. Youth is just fistfuls of birdseed you toss from a basket. First time I came home with her we sang "You Are My Sunshine," sitting on the piano bench in the dark. I took the top line; she took the harmony. Second time through we switched. It just happened that way and we sounded tight and sweet. Never been in a house with a piano. Radio, sure. She likes it when I bend over her in bed and let my hair graze slowly up her back, like a summer rain where you can see the cloud roll across the field right into your window until you feel it reach you and you breathe it in. She has blue veins under the backs of her knees and her skin is not as nice as mine. Like a corn tortilla. A little wrinkly. Cool almost moist. Or the remains of moist. She has a grey buzzcut I love to run against my palm. I tell her she should trim it every few days and she does. Nobody's ever done what I asked them before. There was a phone message I don't think Melinda wanted me to hear. Something about an ovary. I'm not one of those people who needs to know more than they already know. Nothing you ever find out is good news. She asked me if I believed in heaven and I said no, because if there is a God that makes everything happen, he's got to be a bigger prick than all the assholes he put here to do it. It just slipped out, but the way she looked at me then was like, whoa who am I in bed with? But not in a bad way. More like she ordered a cheese omelet, and they brought her a hat. The woman on the phone message said she wanted Melinda to come see her right away. I'm not going to get jealous. I understand if she needs to see other people. I mean, who am I?

## “The Ku Klux Klan and Me”

You were safely at home  
Summer solstice of '64,  
When by the electricity of shoe leather  
They ambushed you on the road from Neshoba to Meridian.  
You and Chaney and Schwerner.  
Pulled the three of you from the car and beat you till your teeth crumbled.  
Shot the nigger first so you New York jewshits could see what they thought  
About voting rights.

You had lent that actor guy your dead father's shoes.  
You thought he'd make a good Cassius with his lean and hungry look  
In those sleepy eyes  
That could be truthful and devious at the same time.  
The college girls loved it  
Made them believe he'd do obsessive things for them  
If they drove him mad enough.

By electricity it was you that they let out of jail that midnight.  
Told you a mob was coming  
And you better haul your kike and nigger asses out of town.  
Oldest trick in the book but what does anyone know at twenty?  
By electricity it was your foot jammed on the gas trying to outrun them,  
Your toes turning into walnuts, your heart seizing  
When you saw the Sheriff's boys blocking the road from the other direction.  
No applause.  
You died with people you had known for a day,  
Your body shoved in through the back window of the Chevy wagon,  
Crammed into the earth dam at Jolley's farm.

In the backlight of retrospect  
You wonder if you didn't pass on some premature bad luck,  
Lending Goodman your dead father's shoes.  
Black Florsheim wing tips. Size nine.  
Left heel worn lower than the right.  
Scuff on the instep that you had meant to polish,  
Though you knew you weren't ready to wear them.  
You'd dig them out of the grave now if you could.

The Worst Person In The World  
Hopes To Find Love

Baxter stopped feeling his legs after the second mile. His breath came without effort. His body became its own vehicle, driven by inexhaustible propulsion. His skeleton made of lightweight composite, so elastic and pliable, he doubted his feet even left imprints in the hard wet Malibu sand. Beautiful sweat broke onto his sculpted pectorals, lubricating his arms and dripping sweet and salty from his forehead to his tongue—A perfect infinity of self-sustenance. The feeling was ecstatic, the way he loved himself. He felt a benevolent nostalgia for those women who had adored him. He saw them only in their plural form. As gassy nebulae of women. As sheets of cutout dolls that never stopped unfolding.

He always thought first of the slender Asian girl whose lips caressed him like butterfly wings, whose breasts were bite-sized cookies, whose tuft was prairie grass, willowy and soft as June, who said she liked it rough. And then there was the mystic who read books about angels, whose body was sponge rubber, who told him he deserved better than her, not guessing he would so readily agree. And the one who had waited all night at the spot he told her he would be. And when he drove past in the morning, so he could say he had kept his word, he found her with her suitcase. And after what she'd told her children and her husband she couldn't go back. Not that day, not ever. And the one from the peach farm in Georgia, whose hair was haloed in backlight, who had called him darlin' with a voice of whispered secrets. And the little terror with the burnt charcoal eyes coated in white ash, combustible if you blew in the right place. The same look that cute brunette had, who practiced psychotherapy in the valley, who drove her Lexus Coupe with an unsteady foot, who told him the first time they met that she saw the thing he was running from was as clear as a caption pinned to the back of his neck and that he could never outdistance it.

His gift to them all was making the endings swift and ghastly. He never demeaned their appearances or their character. Not even the one who tried to sing along with Mozart in the car and asked what he found so fascinating about the Grand Canyon when he could be looking at her, or the one who pronounced theater in three syllables, so it rhymed with creator. And the kinky-haired actress who had knocked at his door late one night after rehearsal, wearing her long tight skirt over her beautifully shaped bottom. She showed him her red crotchless underwear, told him to touch where she was wet as a ripe avocado. How their bodies had folded together like Africa and South America. She asked on the phone a few days later if he thought having sex on the first date was a mistake and he had said, "Probably. Who is this?"

There must have been someone he loved, mustn't there have been? Memories of them were like street addresses, only relevant before you had found them, forgotten driving home. The trail to his heart was cold. Could it

have been that woman whose apartment had the waterfall and the Zen chimes, who put her hand on his thigh and asked him asked, “May I unzip you,” polite as a loan officer? And when he said sure, she said she only wanted to press it against her cheek if that was all right, Or was he confusing her with the woman who lived in a turret and wore medieval dresses, had Sleeping Beauty hair and the oddest name that dangled annoyingly in an unreachable crevasse in his mind, a fragment of walnut stuck between two back teeth. She’d left her two babies with her husband in Pittsburgh, whose home was crammed floor-to-ceiling with furniture and knickknacks and hand-painted cups and saucers and porcelain dolls, hundreds of dolls shoulder to shoulder across wooden shelves, all the exact same size; her windows covered with thick velour curtain, the air trapped for decades in old books.

The tide was coming in and the wind was changing. Families were gathering their blankets and coolers. In middle age, Baxter has fallen into an unfamiliar longing to feel the footsteps of a companion constantly at his shoulder that he hoped would pass. Even as his bare feet splashed through receding wavelets of the Pacific and he imagined himself an Iroquois running through a primeval forest, something in his internal ecology had deranged. He was unaware of its onset, as we are never conscious of our body’s tenth-of-a-degree rise toward a lethal fever, or that first mutant cell dividing unevenly in the colon. He remembered a woman carrying bundles of groceries from her car. He had stopped to help her, followed up the stairs to her apartment. Some hunter’s instinct told him this was her first shopping trip after her husband had left her, buying food for one. “If I begged you would you console me,” she had said. And he hopes he had undressed her and given her solace, though he may have gone back down to bring up another bag from her car and kept right on running.