

Grace

Dawn looks like a wound blooming on the horizon from the bay window above the kitchen sink, just beyond my mother's head. She brews coffee in the light of three Moroccan lamps, turning to pull out flour and salt for biscuits, still peaceful, still human, she doesn't know my oldest sister is not in her bed. The lamps cast stained-glass shadows on the walls, across my mother's face, peaches, teals, browns, blues, she bought them from a garage sale two years ago, they're tacky and awkward in our outdated kitchen, not even bright enough to read from, but they are my mother's joy. The smell of coffee is strong over the warm air.

My mother can break out of human form when she's angry enough, her spine bends backward to unleash a clawed thing, gnashing fangs, she'll snarl, charge, shake, but then, in the heat of battle, she'll leave the house to be with our cows that gamble from island of shade to the next, an exorcism by the crepe myrtles and live oaks. She always turns back human, back to Mama. Mercy Ann and Lila named all twenty-eight of our cows, from Jasper Pirate, George Washington, to all of Santa's reindeer, Prancer being everyone's favorite. Mercy Ann should've been home by now, and I wait for her to sneak back in through the kitchen, ready to distract Mama.

Mama's brothers like to say, a house full of women must be a calm, quiet, and overall soft place to live, as if they can't see the rage boiling beneath the surface, the fist fights Mercy Ann, Lila, and I engage in like we are three economic powers at war, clawing, punching, pinning shoulders to carpet, over the television, whose chewing too loud, who wore whose clothing last. They're oblivious to the loud, confident way Lila spits and snarls, slams her fists, sinks her teeth in, to Mercy Ann's courage and light, her resilience that guides her through the dark. People act like a house full of women is some sort of oxymoron without a man to run it. My mother's skull

is made of metal, her mouth is a line of a spear, a pointy index, her hands indestructible from a life hauling, hammering, hacking. My sisters and I are carbon imprints of her, you can hear our mother in our throats, find her in Mercy's passionate nature and in the shape and brown of her eyes, in Lila's endurance to pursue self-righteous validity, in her slim, tall build, and in my quiet appreciation of the trees, in my frown, my freckles. Mama's brain simmers, just between explode and bake, and like telepathy or ventriloquy, it's hard not to take on her strong personality, wear it like an exoskeleton, be formed like clay from her deft, muscled hands.

Lila is always playing a sport, in the spring it's basketball, the summer is soccer, track is all year round, she enjoys the debate, the game, and fight or chance to show her quality to lead others. Mercy Ann is her grades ringleader, trendsetter, and roof climbing, table dancing starlit, with a high alcohol tolerance. She blazes like a nova star birth, her acolytes' orbit around her, feeding on her light. Mercy Ann cannot be contained to these walls, her body, to any set of rules. I don't like alcohol, cows, or sports, so my life is like a game of make believe.

Lila comes downstairs in her blue soccer uniform, her teeth bared, corn silk hair bronze in the dim lamps. My shoulders tense up, like I'm prepping for a shove.

"Mercy Ann's not in her bed." Lila declares loudly, hungrily, anticipating the chaos that will follow, and I hate her oblivious way she thinks this will merely affect Mercy. Lila's eyes gleam like coins.

Mama stops flouring the counter where we roll out dough and looks at Lila. "Well, where is she then?" She asks, hands hovering, face subsuming the relaxed, peaceful smile. The oven beeps. I can see Mama's chest rise and fall. Mercy Ann's life motto used to be, ask for forgiveness, not permission, but this summer it evolved to, I will not disregard paradise in my flesh, in my landscape, in my ability to dance, drink and feel alive, to party like I am dying. She

leaves the house whenever she's not allowed to, slipping out the back door and walking alone by the light of the moon to the dirt road that loops around our fields, to a rendezvous point where her friends or boys or men will pick her up.

“She’s”—I start to say but Lila’s powerful voice bowls mine over, conquering it.

“She’s not upstairs.”

Mama’s sigh is soft, but it resonates like a shotgun in the quiet, sinking down to the linoleum. She goes to the stairs, a trail of flour following her like dust behind a fairy. Lila beams and pours herself a cup of coffee as the sound of Mama running the hall and searching for Mercy Ann tumbles down.

“I know she went out.” Lila says. “And I’m sick of her doing whatever she pleases.”
Mama’s muffled scream spills down the stairs and I flinch.

We did not cook biscuits. It became evident after the sun pierced open the sky a pristine lapis, sucking all the dawn away, Mercy Ann was not coming home. Maybe she felt in the air, or in her own warm blood, she had been caught, and to put off the inevitable she decided to stay out a bit longer. No one could be sure. Lila was self-satisfied at first, but by the next morning, Sunday, her smug chuckles and sanctimonious little sighs calcified to her forehead, sinking her expression down to a stone like frown of worry. I felt a stomachache from the moment it was clear Mercy Ann wasn’t sneaking back in, and it intensified as the day went on. I fell asleep by accident that night, and by Sunday morning I felt so nauseous I sat on the floor by the upstairs toilet, thinking any moment I’d barf.

Mama tells Lila and me to stay near the phone in case anyone calls. She’s off to file a missing person report at eight in the morning on a Sunday, missing church all together, driving to any house Mercy Ann could be at, any haunt or home. We always go to church, even when we

had walking pneumonia. Mama forced us to sit outside the church house listening to the sermon through the open windows. The spring air was hazy and sweet, the ground lousy with wildflowers. We coughed and sweated and hacked up phlegm into the grass as we listened to the choir sing *How Great Thou Are*, like a disembodied voice curling out in the tepid wind.

“Do you think,” Lila says, standing on the porch as the morning heat settles in the grass like a wet sheet, “Mama knows something we don’t?”

I pause putting on my shoes. “I don’t know.”

I take the twenty-minute walk to Ella’s house. Ella and I hug in her driveway.

“What do you mean, gone?” She asks, her voice pitched low, her nosey mother standing only a foot behind her as Ella’s three brothers and father climb into their van for church.

“I don’t know.” I say and lean in for another hug. Ella pats my back. I want to give her my weight, sink into her soft skin. I don’t kiss her shoulder, but I let my lips press against the edge of her collar bone in the hug, inhaling her pear tree perfume, her lavender shampoo.

“I’ve gotta go, but I’ll call you as soon as we get back.” She says. I watch their van disappear down the long dirt road of their driveway before walking home, feeling like my ribcage is made of lead pipe, heavy and hollow. Lila sits on the porch, her arms crossed.

“God, Grace.” She sneers. “Tell me before you leave next time. If I wasn’t on the porch I wouldn’t have known where you were.” I nod and go straight to my bedroom to lie down. Mama comes home at noon with my Uncle Toby and Mark. Jane Packcrown, the pastors sister, brought over a casserole; we leave it on the porch until Lila throws it away. Ella never calls me, and after a long day of wrestling the sick feeling in my stomach, I call her.

“Oh hey!” She says. “How are things with your sister?”

“She’s still missing.”

“Wow.” She sighs. “Where do you think she is?”

“I don’t know.” I say.

Ella and I kissed six months ago on New Year’s Eve. Ella said it be unlucky if we didn’t have a New Year’s kiss, said we should do it. She cupped my face in her hands at midnight, as her brothers lit up the sky with pinwheels of crimson, lime, and gold, Ella’s tongue in my mouth, the ground shuddering, acrid smoke filling my lungs as I pressed in closer, hungry for her in all her soft, sublime sanctuary. Even before New Year’s Eve I daydreamed about her, what it would be like to wear champagne, silver gowns together, speaking vows in a golden hour, and then slow dance under a sky dripping with stars and gardenia, we would run away together and not speak of it out loud, not mention it ever, but be so in love we wouldn’t need to. At first it this seemed possible, we held hands at the Delridge Mall when we walked around the sunlit shops, in her bedroom she’d whisper secrets to me by pressing her forehead against mine, and then, to trophy all triumphs, she said we should kiss—she said, she brought it up first. But then she started dating Thomas Selwin. Even though I knew this was not a direct betrayal of me, it felt like nothing else. Ella acted as if we never kissed, and laughed when I brought it up, but I could not forget, the memory burned visceral and blinding in my head, my head throbbing from the sensation of it, my head on fire, my head full of lavender and lilac and blood.

Tuesday marks the fourth morning without hearing from Mercy Ann. I walk out into the back pasture that’s bordered by a crescent shaped grove of dogwoods and red maples. I sit in the shade on an old tire that was once a swing. It smells of manure, and dogwoods, a perennial scent reminding me of jasmine tinged with vanilla. At the house Mama and my three uncles are preparing to go searching for Mercy Ann three towns over town over. We all love Uncle Toby,

but Mark and Gareth are insufferable and bossy and believe in the sanctity of gender roles, they believe Mama shouldn't own a farm without a husband.

You can see it in Uncle Marks sneer and in Uncle Gareth's long, stalling glances, they think Mercy Ann's troubled because of Mama's desire to be without a husband, in her quirks and tacky lamps, in her desire to allow her daughters to be loud and confident, and not ashamed of assertive answers, or our bodies, of blood. I don't like how Uncle Garith talks to me, like he knows something about me that I don't. On the horizon Ella's house looks like a tiny blue doll house. I imagine her running to me.

"I'm sure she will be fine." Imaginary Ella says, I want to lay down and rest my head in her lap. Imaginary Ella smiles at me, but she is a ghost, transient, and we cannot kiss.

After five days of Mercy Ann not coming back, or even calling, I knew she was dead. The feeling settled in my skin and sank down past my subcutaneous fat layer, burrowing like worms to the umber marrow in my wet bones. I could not eat or sleep, I even forgot to pine for Ella. I could see my sister in my mind's eye, dead in a ditch on the side of the highway, her body slit open, the way hogs are in a slaughterhouse, or worse, I'd see her being raped by a greasy, terrible old man, see her chained up on a bare, stained mattress in a thick-walled basement, crying for help. That thought frightened me so much I would stand up and pace to calm down. But then, magically, magnanimously, miraculously, she walks through the front door as if she is simply coming home from school, wearing men's basketball shorts and a Rick Allen t-shirt, exhausted, skinny, and annoyed, her face scarred with popped pimples. Mama cried and hugged Mercy Ann to her breast, and then sat on the hard tile by the bathtub while Mercy Ann soaked in hot, sudsy water. My uncles, even Toby, told Mama she was being stupid, she should send

Mercy Ann away to a boarding school for troubled Christian girls or to rehab, a mental institution, something. Lila's fear morphed seamlessly to rage.

“All that worry, and energy spent on her for what—for what!” Lila snarls, stomping through the house. She calls mama useless, demanding retribution, and then laces up her shoes, going for a ten-mile run along the highway to release her undulating, pent up fury, her self-righteous volition like a cured ache in her throbbing veins. I crawl into Mercy's bed, her clean skin smelling of magnolias and mint.

“I'm sorry, I know, I know.” Her voice sounds different, like she hasn't slept in years. “I should have come home.” Mercy Ann says she met a rich man who took her to the beach, gave her fresh fruit on a sunny yacht that gleamed like snow, and let her dance in the moon. I listen to this story, curled against her body as the wall across from the window changes from lavender to peach to eggshell, feeling her ribs through her sleep shirt against my back, her fingernails bitten down and yellow.

We make biscuits Sunday morning and go to church, Lila runs during twilight, Mama makes us all sit in the living room to play cards, everything back as it should. Mama told my uncles to let us be and they did, withdrawing back to their lives like fingers of soft light receding to shadow. But Mercy Ann doesn't eat or sleep. She sits behind the barn in the heat, chain smoking and picking scabs. Lila and I watch her rummage through things like an incensed, manic animal, digging through cupboards, drawers, medicine cabinets, furious, her head aching, her mouth like a blunt, pink line.

Lila comes to my bedroom one night after her run, her face pink and slick with sweat, her gym shirt stuck to her chest. She sits in my broken desk chair.

“What the hell is wrong with her?” Lila asks, still breathless from running, her blond hair bound in a tight braid. “Mom’s in denial because she’s glad Mercy Ann’s not dead, but something is off. Seriously, what is it?”

I don’t want to talk about Mercy Ann with spiteful, ruthless Lila, but she’s right, I shut *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* and press it against my lungs. “I don’t know.” I say, thinking about Mercy’s face, so picked at its infected, her frame shrinking in the short time she was gone as if her bones shriveled overnight. “Her face.”

“I know.” Lila says, and frowns, gazing down at my desk absent mindedly at my schoolbooks I have resting there, untouched since May, when I left the eighth grade behind for good. “It’s odd, right? It’s not acne, it’s like she’s self-injuring. Like she’s possessed.” Lila picks up a notebook I used in English. She grins. “Who is this Mr. E?” I wrote E plus G inside hearts, doodled e’s all over the spine of the notebook. I snatch it away.

“Get out,” I hiss and she does, with a whirl of the lopsided desk chair, the end of her braid disappearing last out the door, like it’s the tail of a dragon. I rip up all the E + G hearts, shredding them so fine they look like hamster bedding before putting them in the trash. I call Ella and her mother answers.

“She’s with Tom right now, they’re outside riding Jim.” She says. Jim is their family horse. I stifle a sob.

“Okay, thank you, Ma’am.”

“Are you alright, dear? Ella’s told me about some trouble over there. Mercy Ann is home though, right?”

“Yes ma’am.” I whisper and we hang up. I wish I had a horse and a new best friend, and we would ride the horse together and kiss in front of Ella while she pouts and begs me to be with

her. A thump rattles my bedroom window, I realize, belatedly, someone had slammed the front door so hard it shook the entire house. Lila runs back into my room and shuts the door, wearing just her sports bra and running shorts, like she came in mid change.

“Hey,” she says breathlessly. Mercy Ann screams something downstairs, Mama screams back, transforming from human. Glass shatters. “Don’t worry about it, it’s just a dumb fight.” She says, looking like she wants to cover my ears. Lila opens the window at the end of the hallway, and we climb out and sit on the roof. I tell her she is a bitch sometimes.

“I know.” She nods like she’s being interviewed. We look for Venus in the sky, but the moon is too bright tonight, it glows like an opal thumbprint, the breeze smells of alfalfa. Once the mosquitoes find us, Lila and I climb back into the hallway. The house is still and quiet again so we descend the stairs. Mama’s sweeping glass in the kitchen. Her face looks soft in the dim light, the Moroccan lamps she treasures are on, but one is smashed into a million pieces of colorful glass, like shards of precious stones, peridots from a jewelry case scattered. When she found the lamps at a garage sale two years ago, she was flushed with excitement, able to get three at a bargain, a perfect set. I wonder what it will be like when she dies, how vast and impossible and cold the world will be then. I go to her and we hug. Mercy Ann is curled up on the couch, staring at the wall, unblinkingly, like she is a dead animal. Mama steps into her muck boots and goes out to the barn in the dark, to stand beneath the stars, near her cows, they will rally around her and give her something none of us can. The phone rings.

“Hi.” It’s Ella. “Mom told me you called crying, so she let me call you late.” I tell her I miss her.

“Who are you talking to?” Lila asks.

“Ella.” I say, Lila watches me.

I'm pulled jaggedly from sleep. Mama is screaming.

"Lila! Grace!" I get up and follow her voice through the purple dark. Mercy's bedroom door is flung open and her light floods the hall.

"But it's Wednesday," I say, as if this meant anything. We all go out to the yard, barefoot in our pajamas, and scream for Mercy Ann like she's a family dog that got out. Lila squints in the porch light, in an oversized t-shirt and no pants. Mama recognizes this is fruitless quickly, her mind working faster than Lila's and mine, she retreats to the house and puts on shoes. She leaves to drive around town searching for Mercy Ann, as if she's walking along the highway. Mama doesn't even say bye to us, she's just gone, a tornado whirling through the door. Lila and I sit in the living room, staring in the darkness while my stomach cramps from anxiety and nausea, my stomach is a sack of writhing worms.

When I open my eyes on the couch Lila is already up. Mama is still gone. I pace around the living room. Lila sits on the kitchen counter, drinking coffee.

"She stole all my birthday money I had in my sock drawer." She says. "One hundred and eighty dollars." I swallow, wanting to say are you sure, but knowing it's true. "She cleaned out mama's wallet too." Instead of eating lunch I sit in Mercy's room, which is the coolest room in the house, the late summer heat able to penetrate and perfume the walls of every other room but hers. Lila goes for a run and then comes back, face the color of a blood orange, heart racing, and eyes wide. By the late afternoon I'm climbing the walls, my cyclical thoughts pressing me down, sinking me into the carpet. It's hard to breathe.

I run out of the house to the wide open sky, a wide open mouth, sprinting all the way to Ella's, running until it hurts, understanding for once why Lila does it. Ella isn't home, her whole

family is out. I want to sit on her porch and wait for her but I see a dark figure down the highway, I can't tell, but I imagine it's Thomas Selwin watching me. I walk back to my house slowly, catching mouth fulls of dust from every passing car. By the time I'm close enough to count the slats in the barn my face is dry again. I hate Ella as much as I wish I could see her. Lila ambushes me as soon as I close the front door, her hair swinging like a platinum sheet of flame, she bares her teeth and shoves my shoulder. I stumble back.

“Where did you go! I'm in charge when Mom is gone! I didn't know where you were, I thought you ran away like Mercy *fucking* Ann!” Her complexion is shadowed with red and pink patches, her hair is tousled. “What the hell is wrong with you Grace!” She shoves me again. Lila is lean and strong from playing soccer and basketball half her life, but I am strong from all my silence, my ghosts, my bones that threaten to crack. I lunge forward and yank the end of her hair, she does a bow and bellows. I kick her in the mouth, and she releases me, making a wet cry. I run to the back door, down the back pasture. I follow our field until I'm combing through the wood owned by the state, running until I reach the Piggly Wiggly, the land mark before you get to scenic down town.

Our downtown has a small park in front of the courthouse that's lined with beach trees. Two marble statues, one depicting David and Goliath, one of Jesus on his cross, both built with tax dollars, flank the park. I sit there, feeling empty and numb, my skin tender and cooling in the shade. I think I hear my name curling along the wind as dusk settles, the world glowing orange. I imagine it's Ella, coming to find me. I lay back in the shaded grass beneath a beach tree, the branches above me intersect and overlap, they look like a web of myelinating axons, a mosaic of green and light and blue.

“You know I’m not gay.” Imaginary Ella says, sitting in the grass next to me, picking at the blades. “So why can’t you just let it go?”

I raise my hands to make a square, looking at the canopy through my fingers. “Because we kissed.” I say. “And I am in love with you. And... and.... I feel like you love me. I can feel it. We hold hands.” I add, remembering all the nights we camped out in her back yard, when I nestled against her body beneath starlight and crickets and wind rich with honeysuckle and lavender and fertilizer.

“A lot of straight girls hold hands.”

A tear squeezes out and sinks into my ear. “I know that.”

“We start high school in a month, I’m sure there will be lesbians there.” Imaginary Ella sighs, leaning back and letting the long-traveled sun touch her face. I let my hands fall to my side, thinking of the girls on Lila’s track team, how some seem more interested in each other and running than boys. The rows of beach trees swell with light and breeze, a smell like juniper in the air.

“What’s wrong with my sister?” I ask Imaginary Ella, who’s transmuting to an oracle, representing a clairvoyant, wise wizard in my brain. “Where does she go?”

“No where.”

“She’s going somewhere.” I think of Mercy Ann standing in front of the bathroom mirror, picking at her cheeks, her arms thin and pot marked, I think of her on all fours on the kitchen linoleum, as if she dropped something there, her exhausted heart and small voice while we laid in her bed, telling me a man whisked her off to a yacht. My stomach starts to hurt. I get to my feet, Imaginary Ella is gone, evaporating like mist before I can stand. I walk back the way I came, wanting to be home before dark. I hear my name again, weaving through the beach trees,

I turn and Lila comes flying out of nowhere on her bike. She leaps off, her lip is fat and her mouth looks swollen. She hugs me tightly to her chest, and I rest my head in the spot her shoulder and neck make like it's too heavy to hold up.

“I am sorry. I'm really sorry.” Lila says, gripping me hard. “You're right, I am a bitch. I'm a terrible bitch. I love you.”

We walk back to the Piggly Wiggly, Lila leading her bike, telling me mom is still out looking for Mercy Ann, but should be home by now. As we pass the back of the Piggly Wiggly I see a zombie standing by the dumpster, smoking a cigarette like a shaky machine, her face bleeding, scratches down her bare arms. I stop and Lila does too, we stare at our sister. Mercy Ann is a reanimated corpse, blue flesh peeling off her face and arms, in her shorts and blouse she wears to parties, her purse a bundle by her feet. The earth is cooling in the settling dusk, a solitary breeze brushes my hair to the left. Mercy Ann grabs her face, dropping the cigarette, and pulls a long strip of skin off, like peeling an onion. Behind her a large shadow hovers above the ground like a wraith.

Lila marches into the Piggly Wiggly and calls Uncle Toby. He picks us up, having to coerce Mercy Ann with a new pack of cigarettes. We put Lila's bike in the truck bed. Mercy Ann sits between us, ignoring everything Toby says, trembling and twitching, smelling of cigarettes and stale whiskey and sweat. At home she goes to the back porch and smokes, her purse still secure on her shoulder. Lila and I stand in the kitchen watching her from the window. Mama bangs the front door open, nails like claws and teeth like fangs, eyes wild, blowing in on wind and fear and intention, going purposefully to the back porch. She lunges at Mercy Ann, ripping the cigarette from her fingers. The sky is on the brink of twilight, pink and indigo. Uncle Toby watches with us, he looks like an older, man version of Lila, blonde and lean and tall. The dark

shadow has followed Mercy Ann home, it hovers beside her like an undulating tower of black smoke, it curls around her wrist and delicate throat.

Mama wrestles Mercy Ann's purse away from her and grips it in her arms. Mercy Ann levitates, shrieking and flailing her arms, like she will die if she doesn't get it back. Mama retreats to the kitchen, Mercy Ann at her heels, bellowing and snorting, she slams the door shut so hard a framed picture falls to the ground, the glass cracks.

Toby grabs Mercy Ann in a bear hug and Mama confiscates her cigarettes and whatever is in Mercy Ann's purse. Toby releases Mercy and she screams into her hands, the shadow blossoming out around her like a spot of ink in water. Lila watches her, a cold scowl of disgust on her face. Mercy Ann releases a breathy roar, her whole body vibrates, and a demonic, cracking, sonic scream of electric fury and betray shudders me, the house quakes with it. . She seizes a Moroccan lamp and chucks like it's a basketball to the ground; she grabs the other and it goes hurling against the wall. Glass explodes rising up to the ceiling and as far as the stairs, I cover my face, the shattering sound is crash like, a tinkering cacophony loud enough to shock us into silence. Mercy Ann folds down, melting like a soufflé, sobs like a baby, defeated, clutching her head, smacking herself in the face. A solitary tear slips down Lila's face. Uncle Toby is lit from within, it looks like he's about to beat Mercy Ann, pull her to her feet and box her ears, but Mama sinks down too.

The black shadow is small and hardly noticeable, though still there, flickering. My sister collapses into my mother, who holds her against her chest, enveloping her with her arms, telling her everything will be fine, fine, we will make it fine together. Lila crouches down and puts her head on Mercy Anns back, her face looks like a wet violet. I sit beside them and bury my face

into Mama's hair, clutching Mercy Ann's arm amidst a sea of rainbow glass, as if we live in a church house and someone smashed in all our stained-glass windows.