

Anne and Mary

It was one of Anne's duties in the morning to rise and part the linen curtains and allow some light to fall allegorically on Mary's soft swollen face. It was only like this, divinely ordained, that she could be expected to start her day. When asked what she wanted to eat Mary would say languidly, *the same*, meaning persimmons in the winter boiled with cardamom and cloves. They ate at Anne's old vanity and listened to a dozen different shapes of January wind coming down from the North Sea. They had learned to make the wind say nearly anything. They could make it say something Anne was learning in German or they could make it sing *Lullay, mine Liking, my dere sone, mine sweting, Lullay, my dere herte, mine own dere derling*. Mary liked to make the wind play the chords she was working through that day, and while Anne cleared the plates she would sit gripping her lips between her thumb and forefinger, interrogating the wind and considering how things should be changed. Today the wind played *Auld Lang Syne* in honor of the new year and when Anne looked up Mary's face was webbed with tears. She withdrew back into bed. Anne dried her hands and joined her daughter; there was this translucent wire that tethered them together in the flat.

Should we go over the list, Anne asked and Mary said *no*. Anne rested her head on her Mary's abdomen and felt one of those long tendrils curl across her spine. She counted her the watery rise and fall. She addressed the little patch of skin on her daughter's inner thigh which contained her whole substance and soul. It was half a shade darker than the rest of her body and it was shaped like Sepphoris, the city of her birth. Or Anne claimed it was shaped like Sepphoris and Mary rejected this, saying it looked like an *eagle in flight*. In the summer she'd argue it wasn't there at all, it was a momentary flush of color against her near-porcelain skin. *But there it is*, Anne would say. *I can outline it with my pen*, and before long they were sort of passively angry with each other.

Most mornings they could afford to stay sheltered in this Mary-shaped Elysium until the girl was ready to re-emerge. Anne had few responsibilities except to her. Occasionally she had to check on an eggplant she'd put in the oven or rotate some semi-solid that was coagulating in the fridge. Sometimes Mary had to leave to perform at a small club on Yorckstraße, where she would be met with admiration because she was a pretty, lacteal thing. But more often than not they could lay for hours like human sediment sinking into their mattress on the floor. The sun rose and they ate and lay, the sun set and they did the same. Sometimes they would forget they even lived in that expansive city until cars would drone by, or the skateboards rattled over the macadam in the spring. No, like two pupas Anne and Mary cocooned under their duvet, gestating in a warm, pre-nascent phase.

But today Anne had no choice but to make the two of them stand, and stretch, and wring out their bodies like they were wet. She asked her daughter if she still felt sure, and Mary, the pale martyr, released her most tendrillic sigh, caught Anne in the corner of her eye, and said simply *okay*.

As a child Mary would masturbate while watching the birthing show on TLC. Stretched on the futon, she grated her crotch against an angled cushion and listened to the stoic young women as they began to weep, then cry, then scream something dark and satanic, and with each resounding wail Mary was brought closer and closer to ecstasy. She didn't know the meaning of it, she was the mere victim of her own animal instinct, but whatever final sensation this ritual caused shook her to her tiny core. It tightened all her little pores and froze the blood in her veins, and made her vision go black from semi-self-asphyxiation.

Once all was said and done she hardly reflected on the event. She was too young to produce wetness so she would simply regulate her breathing and wait for her cheeks to come unpink and then change the channel a few times so Anne wouldn't suspect anything. Because at some point Anne did discover Mary's habit and tried to suggest that she cease masturbating entirely, which had the sole effect of causing Mary shame, but not enough to stop. She had never known anything else that could make her feel this way, so if the TV broadcasted a birth, the girl took it as a sign from God—who else could be charging her so forcefully and from so deep within? There was only one other conscience, besides her own, that could control her body in that automatic way.

Anne was concerned about this vice afflicting her daughter, and she felt lonely in her concern. She was too ashamed to tell her friends and she couldn't tell the church. She tried researching childhood masturbation, which she learned was a universal thing, but no one detailed the variform potential objects of childhood lust. How was Anne to know, then, if birthing shows were appropriate porn for a five-year-old girl? Then again, what could porn for Mary possibly be? The girl's sole experience with a sexual organ was that organ from which she had sprung. Perhaps out of necessity her subconscious had dragged that scene forth from the depths of her memory—her very first memory—and manipulated it into something pornographic. Mary would hear the anonymous women wail through the speakers and she imagined them echoing forth from her past. It was the sound of her first blood miracle, her coming into this world. And they say one reaches unattainable levels of ecstasy upon exiting the earth, might it be the same upon entering? If so, each time Mary came, fixating on the bald bulb emerge from the hole, she was merely reliving that initial

ecstasy as smaller, earthly reverberations, each one alluding to the crushing climax that had bore her.

When Mary came downstairs, trying to determine whether her mother had heard the rhythmic rustle of fabric, and Anne glanced up at her daughter, smelling faintly pubescent with the tussled hair and the watery gleam in her eyes, asking *are you alright?* they would know they shared an understanding. They sat down to hardboiled eggs and cheese and Anne would talk about her workday like it was poetry even though she had spent eight hours at the immigration office on Water Street. And she would listen to her daughter, only five, already speaking eloquently about her classmates, who she liked and who she abhorred, and a bit of that wet glimmer in her eye still remaining from before, that spark which some other wiser writer deemed her very self (her very soul), and Anne would wonder what kind of woman might come to fill its surrounding form.

If Anne and Mary left the house before March they liked to dress in fur. They were aware that they made a public impression, with Anne wearing two chinchillas sewn tail-to-tail around her neck and a coat of twelve squirrels, her long white hair concealing the wrinkles that gathered at the margins of her face. Mary wore a wool cloak and a skirt, glowing as if she were the only one outdoors who was really moving through light. She would wander planeless, her skin so thin and milky it was almost translucent, and the absent gaze, and the tear that sat stagnant at the edge of her eye. Side by side they resembled old and young phantom brides, or long stalactites dripping from the roof of an Arctic cave. When stopped on the street by someone asking *are you ___ are you ___?* they would be graceful and serene and point their devotee in the direction of the nearest parish.

Even in the case of a scheduled appointment the two were in no rush to arrive at an end, understanding that hours existed to flourish in rather than to confine. Instead they wandered towards their destination grazing on the parcels of nature that resisted the cold and concrete. Anne was partial to the Gothic flowers, black and fried, that pierced the snow from below. In the spring she liked the spindly ones that grew white hairs on their stems.

Mary was more absorbed in things that could fly. She had an eye for spotting low nests, and if the mother bird was gone she would finger the fine warm eggs and place broken petals or ginkgo leaves like blankets over each one. If she found a butterfly dead or dying on the pavement she would pin it to her hood so it became a set of eyes behind her head. Moths were her favorite because she thought they were misjudged by the public, who swatted at them without discrepancy and without

the intent to kill. She found them endearing, so small and vulnerable, and their inherent photophilia granted them a certain tragic pretext, like Icarus flying too close to the sun. She liked watching them at night as they hovered and crashed spasmodically against a candle's flame, pitiful creatures consumed by the desire to attain the unattainable, driven by the delusion that their next attempt might prove somehow more fruitful than the last. This way they made themselves the victim, or the prey of their own masochistic submission.

Now Mary was squatting in a puddle of snowmelt trying to bring her face as close to the ground as possible. Here were two beetles locked together like a vise. Or here was a water strider tending over its web, the eggs like little bubbles suspended in the pond of liquid snow. Crouched in this position Mary looked to Anne like a girl again, the nape of her neck so supple and still, with light fuzz so tender and erect it could have formed dew, and her hair pulled back as when she was in grade school. When she rose to walk her belt dragged behind—a young woman's autonomy coupled with childlike disorder—and in Anne's heart unfurled a new leaf. So grateful was she for this girl who, as delicate and thorough as water, filled all the small chinks between the granules of soil that comprised her inner world.

Mary now walked a few paces ahead, trying to identify that smell which had been caught in her nose all morning. It wasn't the cardamom or cloves, it wasn't the washed towels hanging near the stove, it wasn't Anne's rose cream or the smell of sleep or tea or toast. It was something like cardboard or wood, like autumn again or spring, like waking up in her old dorm with a blue window and the room feeling tall and immaculate and clean. It was the smell of expanse, the sweet self-rule of body mind and time. Mary recognized this feeling in a brief moment of lucidity (she had been traveling in a dream all day) and tried clinging to it—the scent and the accompanying sentiment of autonomy—but with each recollection she found her comprehension dimming, like the blinding white imprint that the sun makes on the back of one's eye. Like how the cold sting of the needle in the upper part of her thigh became reduced, over the course of three months, to nothing worse than a dull thrice-daily inconvenience. Because here was a brown pigeon masticating a worm for its young. Here was Anne trailing duly behind...*your belt drags, your shoe's untied, your food gets cold...* beating her wings against the flame, causing it to oxygenate, only transforming herself into a more ardent lover than before.

That smell of expanse had all but evaporated for Mary by the time they arrived at the KINDERWUNSCHKLINIK, replaced by something woolen and old. An ancient building in Reuterkiez with heavy glass doors, a lobby and a lobby man, and a dog who wandered from corner to corner

interminably and metronomically like a ball. The lobby man told them *zwölf* and pinned visitor passes to their fur. In the elevator Anne took up her daughter's hand (loosely because Anne was arthritic) and said: *now, Mary, you'll free your heart of all its vanity and self-love. You'll see. You'll know yourself as you truly are, and learn meekness and simplicity of soul.*

In response Mary's chin and body trembled, out of expectation and nerves and because the old cage-elevator shook as it ascended them along. At the top floor they were directed into an office at the end of a red-carpeted hall, Mary in front again and Anne following behind, and they presented themselves to the doctor as a couple, as they had planned to do.

How long have you been married, asked the doctor, who looked to Mary like an illustration of Roosevelt.

Not married, replied Anne.

Domestic partnership?

Yes, quite.

And how long?

Is that relevant? Mary asked from her armchair. *I mean...*

Five years, said Anne. *No, four.*

After that the doctor calloused himself against Mary and addressed all his points to Anne even though she understood less German and wasn't the patient. He explained the procedure, the risks, the potential for success. Now that the priming had been done, he said, all that remained was to discharge the gellid spittle into Mary's uterus and see if it would flourish. At this word, *blühen*, Anne instinctively gripped her daughter's leg, and the doctor half-closed his eyes and inhaled disapprovingly and then looked out the window towards the Spree. But only momentarily; in this trade he had learned how to clench down and swallow, then pass over the papers to sign, and with two rigid fingers point the way towards the operating room nearby.

Mary had been born on the eighth of September with her caul intact like a shroud. The wet nurse suggested removing Anne to a hip bath and meanwhile bringing Mary to the dining table where she could gently pull open the amniotic sac, but Anne, maybe emboldened by the uninhibited crying and screaming of the previous four hours, released a howl so commanding that the nurse abidingly set the vacuum-packed child on her mother's chest. Like a girl appeased, Anne began unwrapping her gift, breaking the seal with her thumbnail just at the point where the chin was pressed down against the neck. It was like a bonus birth, or like being gifted a doll and examining it

through its cellophane window, and then having the pleasure of removing it and being able to touch it, and smell it, and discover its joints and hidden folds. It was like peeling the papery epidermis from between the layers of an onion and then rolling it into a ball and flicking it into space, as if that matter might cease to exist. Like this the caul went in long strips into a box marked *hazardous waste*, but whatever significance the extra skin held was conserved, in the shape of a full-body nimbus hanging eternally around the girl.

Mary's eyes stayed closed for six days. The nurse said it was because there was too much light, that if she opened her eyes the soft tissue in her retina might be scarred from the sun, which had been shifting closer to the earth the closer they came to the day of Mary's birth. It had started gradually, the days getting longer and the nights getting warmer, all the world barking about climate change. But then it was constant daylight, hot daylight, so that people weren't able to leave their homes. Those first few days in September saw the Redwoods combust and the poorest coastal towns immersed in sea, but also Russia was forced to leave Ukraine, and then Israel really did purchase and migrate to Alaska leaving the others in peace.

But after Mary's birth, Anne couldn't care less about the interminable daylight or icecaps or combustible heat. She was in an alternate veiled space, counting Mary's toes, or teasing the crest of her chin, or tying petite knots in the blonde hairs that made her daughter look like a dove with fresh down. As she nursed, she was sure to sing songs that had no end like *Voodoo Chile* or Dream Theater's *Octavarium*. She used her foot to agitate the paper tray in the printer on the floor, which made the sound of a small plastic snare.

But mother and daughter can never go long undisturbed. All of Sepphoris was keen to meet the baby rumored to have been born with a caul. The butcher, who was losing his wife, stood below Anne's window and cried: *spare my present pain by shewing us the girl*, and made his eyebrows curve and tremble like hands imploring Christ. The sun was still strong but gradually fading, and with each passing day more visitors could be expected below Anne's window as if it were the daily meeting place for all the trade workers and gentle-folk in the city. For example there was the woman who picked weeds from empty lots on the outskirts of town and distilled them into tinctures and liquors and who was undergoing a double-mastectomy in a month. She climbed the drainage pipe one afternoon and, with longing and spite, watched as Anne breastfed Mary, who that morning had for the first time opened her eyes. When Anne noticed the herbalist's shadow curl across her armoire she clutched her daughter tighter to her chest and sent a glare through the window that

could have dissolved the woman's tumors had it been imbued with a different sentiment of a similar intensity.

Now that her daughter had eyes, it became clear to Anne all that she had bore and all that she might one day lose. It was all collapsed into that prevailing glimmer, which reflected its surrounding illumination as equally in pleasure as in pain. When Anne looked into Mary through that prism of light she felt her body throbbing like a hunger deep inside. And when that hunger would subside it became something ephemeral and fluid, like sugar syrup pulsing through the marrow of her bones, and Anne recognized that she needed her child in the same way that a preindustrial machine needed running water or wind or flames.

To continue avoiding the citizens of Sepphoris who gathered daily in the garden—now a trampled patch of dirt—outside her house, Anne harbored Mary within. Both layers of shutters were closed against the front window but there was a small circular lookout on the other side of the flat which faced the yard in the back. It had once been used to shoot birds from the oak trees, but now it framed Mary's fuzzy head when Anne held her up to see the color changing in the leaves and inhale the smell of dried nature and slow decay that becomes sweet en masse and characteristic of fall. The smell of decomposition, a return to the whole. *September Baby song.*

By December Anne was feeding Mary clotted cheese with plum preserves, and by April the baby was using her own fingers to pick various oily fish from their tins, like herring and sardines. Anne continued to breastfeed, for sentimentality's sake, and because the thought of old age was beginning to creep around the undergrowth of her mind as she felt herself ever so slowly wasting away. The little paws cupping her breast and the determined lips sealed against her areola managed to quell this anxiety for some time. They told her not only *am I needed* but also *I'm desired*.

It was only when Mary learned to speak that she could express those thoughts, like moths, that had been hurling themselves at the inner walls of her head, saying plainly: *you put yourself in my mouth and I suffocate. Put yourself less in me, and let me look at you. I'd like to see you while you nurse me.* To this Anne could abide, and under a mutual understanding the breastfeeding continued for several years until Mary was too large to be cradled and Anne's breasts were freckled and dry.

On a table at the far end of a passageway lay a careful assortment of small and large objects connoting myth and magic, atonement and alms. A crystal decanter supporting a plume, a ramekin of snake oil set over a low flame, a mirrored platter with lines of DMT, small iron chains maneuvered into coils, wax spillage from the various colored candles melting in their holders, dried flowers with

violent spicules, fresh flowers with soft stamens still heavy with pollen. In front of the low table was a long velvet cushion showing four imprints from the two sets of legs which regularly knelt at this altar in prayer. Here they came, the legs, down the darkened hall, for the final benediction of the day.

In her hand Anne carried a framed photograph, which had to be brought to and from the bedroom each time they said their prayers. Mary thought the spirit of the bird, which was encapsulated in this photograph, would cower into nothingness if left too long in the dark alone. Anne was aware that the sparrow's spirit was as much in that photograph as it was in every coruscation of light emitting from the sun and the candles' flames, but Mary was only twelve and Anne only wanted to appease.

Mary raised two triangulated palms to her head. *Dear god, on this the twelfth day of prayer let us send Sol even further towards the heavens and through the ether and pray she doesn't get caught in the translucent webs of aerosol and jet fumes knitting themselves among space. With our words we propel her higher in death than she might have flown in life, and although her body is buried under soil and her muscles are frozen in snow, we anticipate her spirit being much released into clouds.* Then Mary whimpered and ensconced her face in her palms; even after twelve days she couldn't accept the fact that her dear pet was dead.

There had been no doubt in either of their minds that the child Mary was gestating would be a girl. Any other option was so much an impossibility that they forgot there was even a chance. Both of their lives were so homogenous in that respect that an inextricable male presence, inserted in the midst of everything they had worked so hard to sow, would seem like an impossibly malevolent act from God.

But within the first few moments of the procedure Mary was imbued with doubt. Imagine, a needle being pried between a nail bed and the exoskeleton of the nail. Imagine a ribbed parasite crawling through the hollow stem of a leaf. Or in the back room of a club, in the shady second office, a white Russian being imbibed through the nose. It was something foreign and small but causing her a pain that coursed unceasingly from spine to toe. *Almost done* said the doctor. But before it was done she fainted, lying down, and dreamt of a boy in a striped shirt launching ripe pears at a wall. In the corner a seated woman was taking notes, her eyes expressing something like pleasure at his misbehavior, having predicted it would be this way.

This is how she knew that the thing would become a boy, before any scans or rings on strings or urinating into bags of grain. She knew it was a boy from the way she couldn't sleep

through the night because her vision would get spiked by images of city lights, so distinct from the familiar soft glare of the sun, or the sun dulled behind clouds, or the sun reflecting off river rocks, hiding the fact that they were grey only in a different way.

She knew he was a boy because in the mornings the wind no longer sang, instead it whipped around histrionically and cracked against the roofs like foil. Anne, who still didn't know, would try serenading her daughter with one of her odes, accompanied by this same wind, not realizing how discordant it sounded to Mary's informed ears. Mary cried and Anne assumed it was just her daughter being colic again, and they would return to bed and hold each other and pet.

Now Anne paid special attention to the tender spot below the navel and above the thick light hairs which curled over like insect legs. She brought her face close to this spot, where the muscle under the skin trembled with a shallow beating heart, and to it she sang: *Adorned palace, its window is green, come out you rose, the violet is waiting. I am little, I'll grow up someday, next year or two years hence, I'll become big.* Then she would sing it in Arabic and Hebrew, not sure which language would allow it to travel faster intradermally. All the while Mary withered and puled with regret and guilt and remorse. It was as if she were hatching the devil rather than a son. But these misgivings she kept within herself, or even deeper, in the belly of the fetus. It was only in her diary that one could discover how she was tormented all the while:

19.2.54 What did Calvin say? 'The torture of a bad conscience is the hell of a living soul'? But then, 'if it seems horrible to kill a man in his own home, it ought to be deemed more atrocious to destroy a fetus in the womb before it's come to light.' How to reckon the two is beyond me. Were he faced with the dilemma—it's impossible to assume. Were Calvin faced with the dilemma he'd have lost his faith, he'd have climbed on a pyre and been willingly set aflame.

1.3.54 Winter is the worst time to gestate a fetus you don't adore. Those quilts aren't for you, child, this warm brick is to comfort me.

3.3.54 Anne last night came to bed and I had the sudden impulse to remove the covers and show her my stomach. 'It's changing shape' I cried and looked her dead in the eyes.

Maybe I'd feel this way regardless of Joshua or Jane. Someone coming into you and changing your shape, seems invasive. And yet how is it so different from how Anne comes into me? She forced herself inside me before I could even open my eyes. For feeding and in those other ways—vanity; neuroticism; superficiality; complacency. Those undesirable and desirable traits, so I'm the shell into which she'll transmigrate after death. And now mother

comes into my nightly, settling herself within me, in the same way Joshua coils, sleeping, like a serpent in my womb. Is it that I resent not having my own shell to inhabit postmortem, my own dress-up Jane? Yes, I'm the master of my own fate, I enter blind and leave alone.

16.3.54 I read a poem today: Groping back to bed after a piss/I part thick curtains, and am startled by/The rapid clouds, the moon's cleanliness./Four o'clock: wedge-shadowed gardens lie/Under a cavernous, a wind-picked sky./There's something laughable about this,

22.3.54 Realized after opening my ears to the rumble of the train on the raised tracks outside that I haven't played since January 1. Anne tells me I still move my fingers in my sleep. I think she's only saying it to convince us that everything is still the same. Because my apprehension is blatant. It's only, that I feel myself on the edge of a dock, or a bridge that's about to come down. The end of something, obviously, and irreversibly, and how she can't recognize it's true.

28.3.54 Bled, and prayed, but regardless, everything was okay.

31.3.54 I played today, a song meant for the flute, and it came out sounding like corybantics, like a precambrian screw. Like the sound of the rusty gears when they turn in the ground, something not meant to broach human ears. I felt my son writhe in his soil and played increasingly louder until Anne came home. In playing I had become almost lifted and that long-forgotten scent and the warm wood and the clean moon and the cavernous sky and and and

Like this Anne discovered her daughter's torment, but not until years after her death. The journal was in a drawer, in a wool pouch, whose only other content was an odorous white ball of dichlorobenzene. Written on the inside cover in that childish scrawl which made Anne's broken heart bleed was *Sensitive material. Do not open under any circumstances. If I should die, destroy in flames.* Anne disposed of the mothball, refusing to touch it with her skin, and tucked herself into the same bed they had shared from the very beginning of things, and read Mary's journal until the night's heavy fabrics drew themselves against the sky. Then it was the hour when she normally succumbed to that unyielding sense of loss, but guarded by Mary's words she slipped through unscathed. When the sentences became too unpleasant and evil to bear she told herself it was only a palpable fiction, and then groped through all eighty pages of Joshua's gestation.

But to return to present.

It was early spring and all of Berlin was humming and buzzing like a machine readjusting after their extended Easter weekends along the Rhine. Anne and Mary had been in Mannheim tending bees and drinking an assortment of fresh teas with homegrown honey. There was almost nothing to eat in their Airbnb except coconut oil and honey, and the two women starved a bit, not unintentionally, not in unanticipation of the public appearance they'd be making later that week. Because on Friday was the biannual festival honoring Anne and Mary which they were always obligated to attend. The American Church in Berlin organized the event, Anne and Mary being universally recognized as American despite the fact that they transcended daily across temporal and spatial bounds. The American Church argued that they clearly spoke from the front of their mouths, by their lips, like spit, and everyone agreed this was sufficient evidence to prove American descent.

The festival was being held in the park with a palace and vast palatial gardens. The entry fee was 10 euros but once inside guests could stay the entire day and eat and drink for free. For food there were tents selling charmed plates like pickled herring filet, poached rhubarb, savory oats, pre-season strawberries in a pesto of their leaves, bitter lentil pudding, young coconut, bratwurst, scones. Standing somewhere along the stone path that runs through the central lawn, guests could take in the offerings of the miniature wind system which sometimes formed in that expansive place, today picking up scents of coal and skewered meat, burnt sugar syrup and boiled oats, and then the nascent smell of buds bursting impatiently within their sepals, just a day away from being truly born—powder, fuzz, russet-gold. These two smellscapes—food and fertile ground—worked at conjuring up feelings of intimacy and contentment in the guests, although few of them realized it was doing so.

Then there were all the craftsmen who had come in during the dark hours of the morning, leaving tracks in the garden beds where they dragged their folding tables and buckets of tools and, in the case of the unknown poet who wrote from one word, a heavy electric Olivetti on wheels. All day the peddlers made and sold things like children's toys, candles, desk vacuums, hollowed pearls, chiseled coins and baubles, trematodes suspended in fluid, simonies, confessionals, prayer. There was the opportunity to sit on an antique scale or hold your head under the dulled blade of a guillotine. This one claimed Mary's attention when she first entered, before she saw the mess of milkweeds and monarchs in front of the palace gates. Then she went and stood among this foliage, genuinely enraptured, but also taking care to conceal her stomach in their long stems. She was wearing black robes of raw silk which, layered one over the other, worked at hiding the measurable bump. But if she faced the wrong direction and momentarily stood against the wind, the silks were

pulled back like the hair around her head and the outline of her stomach was as discernible as the soft sloping contours of her face. *No matter*, she said to the ivory speckles skirting the peripheries of the monarch's wings. They were like patterned dust, flat and refined. She whispered: *is it a woven edge that keeps your fabric from fraying*, to no butterfly in particular. Then, in the low tone of a shrift: *if it were me I'd dissolve into the water's edge, lapse right over the rim of a glass. No amount of weaving could prevent that.*

Drinking from the same cups as the monarchs were the gossamer-winged butterflies with the false antennae at the bottoms of their wings, meant to divert predators from attacking their delicate crowns. These flighty beings Mary purposefully ignored; there was something about their characteristic duplicity that aroused in her memories of birth and transitions, of Janus as the authority on beginnings, of pleasure and hope, and Mary was too far gone, too much preoccupied with the end. So she slipped away from the milkweeds like a strand of blonde hair falling loose from the ear, and she wandered among the outer barricades for a while. She was searching for her mother without knowing that she was. But Anne was squatting behind a curtain at the furthest part of the lawns and Mary wandered in confused vain.

Soon she was on one of the park's random grassy knolls, from which she could look down and watch the groups amass and disband like spheres of mercury agitated in god's palm. Unconsciously she ran a hand over the fetal bump and recognized its slow systole match the wavelength of her own heart's contractions. Here came a rare pulse of tenderness eclipsed by sudden vertigo; she saw on the horizon the spinning hands of a clock, a black and red roulette, the ouroboros chasing its tail through the Black Sea. Things were ticking red and green as they swam past her mind's eye. Her mother pulling the congealed sweet substance from the fridge was green and all matching cherries on the slot machine. Some sixteen chords she wrote and titled *five hundred lengths of plight*, her sole interest and occupation just six months prior, also showed green. A memory from last winter, Mary poaching pears in sweet wine, her mother at the foundry getting a ring engraved with four consonants, showed bright red like fresh blood.

When Mary regained consciousness the grass was cold and thick with dew, the sun was low but rising. The craftsmen were taking their time packing up their tables and tools, sending words of playful abuse to one another across the lawns and distributing coffee in enamel mugs, and tossing their bodies east and west to keep warm in the pre-morning frost.

Why didn't anyone come find me, Mary wondered, *why wasn't I woken up?* Forcing her stiff limbs to comply with her mind she started downhill on a crawl, then a crooked climb, then she stood pregnantly erect, all the phases of human evolution represented in that one descent.

Halfway down she saw what looked to be a pile of soggy clothes. Really it was an old woman lying fetally in the grass. As Mary approached, the woman, who might have been awake all along, rolled onto her side to stare at the blonde virgin all dressed in silk, who stared back with resilience. Mary recognized in this haggard mien intense suffering and loss, but from two or three lifetimes ago. As if something which had tormented her in her past had left behind its physical tracks, in the hollows and creases of her face, but now no longer evoked the shallow feelings of a superficial and literal sadness. Instead her eyes held a profound vacancy, like a well without water, but a well which had once been filled to the absolute edge with things too tragic and likewise serene.

She wore an iridescent grey suit, wrinkled in the parts where it had come in contact with the ground, but its quality was still apparent. A rich old maid. Her hair was also grey, and all the textural elements of her face were of a dusty grey too. She didn't take her gaze off Mary, merely moaned and writhed while staring the virgin directly in the eyes, and Mary was reminded of a silverfish she once found in a book of poems in the stacks (was it Shockley or maybe Keats?) and which she trapped in the book and took home. Once in bed she opened to the page with the poem that starts: *And now, reader, I come to a period in my unhappy life*, and the insect sprung out onto the duvet, not considering the presence of the sun in the same ways that a non-sapient being never frets over its own mortality or death. But a silverfish can't last a minute in light, so it shivered and seized and shed its papery skins til it became too small for Mary to see with her naked eyes.

Mary sort of wished that the woman would dissolve like the silverfish into the cold fog of their surroundings. She didn't like seeing those empty eyes dilate as she wriggled and puled. But the old maid was like gravity incarnate, as fixed to the earth as if she had roots traveling underground. In fact, it appeared she couldn't stand if she tried, as if she needed to have four points of contact with the grass at any given time. Now it was her left thigh, her left shoulder, her chin, and her right palm, if you can imagine. An unnatural position, an orchid bent out of shape, something crawling demonically backwards in time, with a nonverbal message foreboding:

You can-not knit together in your womb all the threads of your memories past. You can-not knit from nothing a warm pocket to hold your delusions and desires. There's a transgressor dressed as a cedar who stops you down the line and asks for your body in exchange for his sap. But you could not knit from nothing a pocket to hold your soul. So extinguished and uninherited goes that characteristic

glimmer in her eyes. Like an unfanned flame sits stagnant and then one day goes out. Without wings you can-not oxygenate and with only deep wells for eyes you can-not see. You'll sink closer to the ground because it's the only one who must assent to swallowing you whole. Put yourself in me less, and let me look at you, you said, and now you can see the absurdity of that appeal.

Not a word of this was lost on Mary, recognizing that the old silverfish was she. Clasp her son between her palms she fled, tumbling once or twice down the knoll, and wincing and bleeding, but aware that nothing would hinder the plot of the god who wanted to see Joshua born. She sensed that the fresh dew lapping at her calves, and the fragrant sepals bursting in their circuitous bundles of leaves, and the small eggs cracking melodiously in the low branches of the trees, were all mocking her solipsistic calamity. *Put yourself in me less*, came into her head, *I'd like to see you while you nurse me.* She thought, *how unfair. Where is my mother now? Where is she anyway?*

Things happened, Mary bore the child and successively died by falling chest-wards into a knife. This was how that low altar, from ten years prior, came to be permanently reestablished in the far end of the hall. It was dressed the same, in white lace, and the candelabras were dusted and the chains polished and the velvet cushion was fluffed and its fabric smoothed. Now to the snake oil, pink blossoms and dried briery stems, Anne added the portentous tail of a Russian mink, a robin's nest of eggs stinking faintly of wet death, and the page from Mary's journal which read, *if I should die destroy in flames.* Beside that, the porcelain urn balanced on a brass ring.

With heavy steps two sets of white legs once again led the mourners down the hall, Anne with the photograph of the departed in her right hand, and Joshua still a baby, hardly a morpheme of a being, but maintaining the appropriate mien of grief and mourning. Kneeling, obscured in the dark, Anne promised, on this the first night, to perform all necessary obsequies to her dear dead. Her words were interrupted by excruciating coughs, and all of her peripheral wrinkles bunched. She said, *Mary, you were born to me in an egg. I didn't realize I was oviparous until you arrived just so. Now exit as a sparrow, not without feeding on the elements of nature that cross your path along the way. Tell me, in what pitch does the wind sing when it hasn't been broached by the trees? In what language does the wind sing when it isn't being heard? Mary, ossified in time and miscible with the vapors in the air. Mary, settle in the stars and under the soil in Rome, and keep your resplendent palm close to the surface of the earth or the lower edge of the sky and once I've done spinning wool I'll come find you.*