

There was my mother's voice

on the landing, a rumble on her lips like the truck outside where it was cool in the summer at night when rain came down the mountain. I pressed my head against the wall. I think I was wearing pj's but who knows, I started sleeping naked when I was young and it was hot so maybe it was a different time, my father's voice, my sister's boyfriend choking me on the stairs that day cause he wanted to fuck and I wouldn't leave him alone, I didn't know. Night fell in the foothills at 8:30, a crown of light still on the hogback and on the mountain the forest all lit up like smokeless fire. I'd want to be up there, listening to the smell of pines and dirty needles under my toes, the ruined chimney standing in its ruin of thorns. Instead, I held my little body there and felt the family breathing through the drywall, Dad and Mom fighting, Sean's stereo in the basement, the TV covering Marianna's body stirring in the next room. That night, the confusion of being the smallest in the world, curling into my Mother's arms after dinner at the end of the day, all these things I'll never get back to.

## The basketball court at Alameda High

smelled like sawdust, stale sweat caught in wrestling mats and rough metal bleachers. Marianna in her sweatshirt, hood up like a boxer, one leg of her track pants rolled up. Her hair straw and bunned, her small face red freckled and pale. Justin was there with his new Kawasaki, tan and tatted and strong. White undershirt, shaved head. Gold shine in his ears. My sister was a baller, her birdy arms were limber and long. She stared down the big girls and pump faked, swung the ball to her right hand and cut to the basket. Stop. Pull up. Release. The back of mom's head, her heavy mom scent, her pink fuzzy sweater, all the voices. Marianna hit the hardwood with a smack and she's screaming and everyone around me is screaming. There's a fight in the stands and there's Justin on the court and some ref is backing him down, some little twerp just like me now, who grew up buck-fifty and soft, somebody he'd hate. But basketball bores me. I wandered away down rows of gunmetal lockers and butcher paper signs, fleeing the hum of air conditioners and the crowd's distant thrum. I wanted to feel the unknown geographies of the entire world, to unlock every door that would not open before me. I want a life that means something, anything, outside all that noise.

We left Denver when the sun was coming up

and it was like the pupil of a great orange eye that flickered and gazed, our van rowing out along serpentine roads through how-green-are-my valleys, tunnels cut straight through mountains, watching out for falling rocks. I was its receptor then, listening to the kid symphony I thought would last forever. It was hot July and dad kept the windows down. I climbed out of my seat belt over the chairs to get at the cooler in the back and grab a pop for the third time that morning. I was coca-cola red. Marianna was young and so was Sean, there was no such thing as war or college or east coast. I had no brothers in law. At US 191 we drove south to the canyon land, where I was sure God with his fat fingers had worked raw earth like dough, mouthing his songs into the archways and dried up lakes, striking his palm against the body of the world to set it ringing so I one day might hear. I couldn't explain that to anyone in the car so I daydreamed about growing up and knowing God and singing with my one-day-maybe baritone grownups voice. Where that feeling went when it left I can't say, but I know we stopped at a gas station, the man in red suspenders asked us how the drive was and dad answered, Okay. Behind the counter I saw the white nose of a black dog tied up, flies dancing on his eyelids. Back on the road, I found a grasshopper clinging to the window frame. His copper body all armor and spindly legs, his black eyes so big and dumb I couldn't stand it so I flicked him out into space where he hung for a second before whipping backwards into desert air. The sun was white and lonely. There's no one sets the world to ringing.

1993

I sat in a wingbacked chair  
outside the JC Penney's  
dressing room while mom  
tried on cashmere sweaters  
in the spring when the deals  
were good

there were mirrors in front  
of and behind my chair

sitting next to me  
a woman wearing black hose

I reached out watching  
myself in the mirror  
my wrists brushing her knee

mom came out  
slapped my hand and  
hustled me away

the other day I sat next to a  
nun on the subway who told  
me she was married to Jesus  
Christ

I asked her what  
the sex was like

she smiled

he and I sleep  
in separate beds

We were driving home

south on university boulevard  
when it started. In the rear view  
mirror, his eye like a clenched  
fist, dad dropped the camaro into  
third and popped the clutch. His  
fingers tight around the stick.  
Outside, a blue sign read Bonnie  
Brae. Mom looked into the back  
seat to hush me with two fingers.  
I didn't speak a word. Cherry  
trees, white blossoms. Rich  
people's houses peeking over a  
red brick wall. Dad's knuckles so  
meaty, all the times he broke  
them. I love you. Hush.  
We pulled into the driveway, he  
exploded out the door and  
punched the code for the garage  
that began to rise as he lifted his  
body on his heels and slammed  
head first into the wood. He was  
a missile. He was tense and  
animal beautiful. After that I  
don't remember. Just the other  
day I was laying in bed next to  
this girl and she was mad about  
something and I was too. Well  
she said you never listen to what  
I say and I said, I just want to  
break-- and slammed the crown  
of my skull into the headboard.