The Chronology of Water

THE DAY MY DAUGHTER WAS STILLBORN, AFTER I HELD the future pink and rose-lipped in my shivering arms, lifeless tender, covering her face in tears and kisses, after they handed my dead girl to my sister who kissed her, then to my first husband who kissed her, then to my mother who could not bear to hold her, then out of the hospital room door, tiny lifeless swaddled thing, the nurse gave me tranquilizers and a soap and sponge. She guided me to a special shower. The shower had a chair and the spray came down lightly, warm. She said, "That feels good, doesn't it?" The water. She said, "you are still bleeding quite a bit. Just let it." Ripped from vagina to rectum, sewn closed. Falling water on a body.

I sat on the stool and closed the little plastic curtain. I could hear her humming. I bled, I cried, I peed, and vomited. I became water.

Finally she had to come back inside and "Save me from drowning in there." It was a joke. It made me smile.

Little tragedies are difficult to keep straight. They swell and dive in and out between great sinkholes of the brain. It's hard to know what to think of a life when you find yourself knee-deep. You want to climb out, you want to explain how there must be some mistake. You are the swimmer, after all. And then you see the waves without pattern, scooping up everyone, throwing them around like so many floating heads,

and you can only laugh in your sobbing at all the silly head bobbers. Laughter can shake you from the delirium of grief.

When we first found out the life in me was dead, I was told the best thing to do was deliver vaginally anyway. It would keep my body as strong and healthy for the future as possible. My womb. My uterus. My vaginal canal. Since I had been struck dumb with grief, I did what they said.

Labor lasted thirty-eight hours. When your baby isn't moving inside you, the normal process is stalled. Nothing moved my child within. Not hours and hours of a Pitocin drip. Not my first husband who fell asleep during his shift with me – not my sister coming in and nearly yanking him out by his hair.

In the thick of it I would sit on the edge of the bed and my sister would hold me by the shoulders and when the pain came she would draw me into her body and say, "Yes. Breathe." I felt a strength I never saw in her again. I felt the strength surge of mother from my sister.

That kind of pain for that long exhausts a body. Even twenty-five years of swimming wasn't enough.

When she finally came, little dead girlfish, they placed her on my chest just like an alive baby.

I kissed her and held her and talked to her just like an alive baby.

Her eyelashes so long.

Her cheeks still red. How, I don't know. I thought they would be blue.

Her lips a rosebud.

When they finally took her away from me, the last cogent thought I had, a thoughtlessness that would last months: so this is death. Then a death life is what I choose.

When they brought me home from the hospital I entered a strange place. I could hear them and see them, but if anyone touched me I recoiled, and I didn't speak. I spent whole days alone in my bed in a cry that went to long moans. I think my

eyes gave something of it away – because when people looked at me, they'd say, "Lidia? Lidia?"

One day in their caretaking – I think someone was feeding me – I looked out the kitchen window and saw a woman stealing the mail from mailboxes on our street. She was stealthy like a woodland creature. The way she looked around – darted her eyes back and forth – the way she moved from box to box, took some things, not others – it made me laugh. When she got to my mailbox, I saw her pocket a piece of my mail. I belly-laughed. I spit a mouthful of scrambled eggs out but no one knew why. They just looked worried in that uh oh way. They looked like cartoons of themselves. I said nothing of this, however.

I never felt crazy, I just felt gone away. When I took all the baby clothes I'd been given for my newborn and arranged them in rows on the deep blue carpet with rocks in between them, it seemed precise. But again it worried those around me. My sister. My husband Phillip. My parents who stayed for a week. Strangers.

When I calmly sat on the floor of the grocery store and peed, I felt I'd done something true to the body. The reaction of the checkers isn't something I remember well. I just remember their blue corduroy aprons with *Albertson's* on them. One of the women had a beehive hairdo and lips red as an old Coca-Cola can. I remember thinking I had slipped into another time.

Later, when I would go places with my sister, whom I lived with in Eugene, out shopping, or swimming, or to the U of O, people would ask me about my baby. I lied without even hesitating an instant. I'd say, "Oh, she is the most beautiful baby girl! Her eyelashes are so long!" Even two years later when a woman I know stopped me in the library to ask after my new daughter, I said, "She's so wonderful – she's my light. In day care she is already drawing pictures!"

I never thought, stop lying. I didn't have any sense that I was lying. To me, I was following the story. Clinging to it for life.

I thought about starting this book with my childhood, the beginning of my life. But that's not how I remember it. I remember things in retinal flashes. Without order. Your life doesn't happen in any kind of order. Events don't have cause and effect relationships the way you wish they did. It's all a series of fragments and repetitions and pattern formations. Language and water have this in common.

All the events of my life swim in and out between each other. Without chronology. Like in dreams. So if I am thinking of a memory of a relationship, or one about riding a bike, or about my love for literature and art, or when I first touched my lips to alcohol, or how much I adored my sister, or the day my father first touched me – there is no linear sense. Language is a metaphor for experience. It's as arbitrary as the mass of chaotic images we call memory – but we can put it into lines to narrativize over fear.

AFTER THE STILLBIRTH, the words "born dead" lived in me for months and months. To the people around me I just looked ... more sad than anyone could bear. People don't know how to be when grief enters a house. She came with me everywhere, like a daughter. No one was any good at being near us. They'd accidentally say stupid things to me, like "I'm sure you'll have another soon," or they would talk to me looking slightly over my head. Anything to avoid the sadness of my skin.

One morning my sister heard me sobbing in the shower. She pulled the curtain back, looked at me holding my empty gutted belly, and stepped inside to embrace me. Fully clothed. We stayed like that for about twenty minutes I think.

Possibly the most tender thing anyone has ever done for me in my entire life.

I WAS BORN cesarean. Because one of my mother's legs was six inches shorter than the other, her hips were tilted. Gravely. Doctors told her she could not have children. I don't know whether to admire the ferocity of her will for deciding to have my sister and me, or to wonder what kind of woman would risk killing her own infants – heads crushed by the tilted pelvis –before they could be born. My mother never believed she was "crippled." My mother brought my sister and me into the world of my father.

When the conventional doctors voiced their medical concerns to my mother, she went to another kind of doctor. An obstetrician/gynecologist who practiced alternative approaches to health. Dr. David Cheek was best known for his work using hypnosis on patients using their fingers to tell him the subconscious causes of emotional or physical illness. The process is called "ideomotor." Particular fingers are designated (by the doctor or the patient) "yes," "no," and "don't want to answer." When the doctor asks the hypnotized patient questions the relevant finger lifts in response – even when the patient consciously thinks otherwise, or has no conscious awareness of the answer.

In my mother's case, this technique was used to help her through cesarean labor. Dr. Cheek would say things to my mother during her labor such as: "Dorothy, do you have pain?" And she would answer with her finger. He would ask, "Is it here?" And stimulate the area. She would answer. He would ask, "Dorothy, can you relax your cervix for thirty seconds?" She would. "Dorothy, I need you to decrease the bleeding … here." And she would.

My mother was an important case study.

Dr. Cheek believed we are imprinted with particular emotions even while in the womb. He claimed to have taught hundreds of women to communicate telepathically with their unborn children.

When my mother told my birth story, her voice took on a particular aura. As if something close to magical had transpired.

I believe that is what she believed. My father's telling of the story was equally filled with reverence. As if my birth were other-worldly.

The morning I went into labor with my daughter the sun had not come up yet. I woke up because I didn't feel anything moving in me. I put my hands all over the world of my belly and nothing nothing nothing but a strange taut round. I went to the bathroom and peed and an electrical shock traveled up my neck. When I wiped there was bright red blood. I woke my sister. She wore worry in her eyes. I called my doctor. She told me it was probably fine and to come in when the clinic opened in the morning. In my belly there was an immovable weight.

I remember crying in great waves. I remember my throat locking up. Being unable to speak. My hands going numb. Child things.

When morning came, even the sun looked wrong.

In my body, birth came last.

Metaphor

I'M GOING TO TELL YOU SOMETHING THAT HELPS. NOT in the usual way; this isn't in any textbooks or guidebooks. It has nothing to do with self-help or breathing or stirrups or speculums – god knows that territory has been done to death with its terminologies and systems – first second third trimester, quickening, lightening, labor, expecting, fetal heartbeat, uterus, embryo, womb, contractions, crowning, cervical dilation, vaginal canal, breathe – that's it, little short breaths, transition, push.

But what I want to tell you is away from this story. The truth of it is, the story of a woman having a baby is the fiction we make it. More precisely, a woman with bulging life in her belly represents – is a metaphor for making a story. A story we can all live with. The fertilization, the gestation, the containment, the production of a story.

So let me give you a tip. Something you can use in relation to this grand narrativity, this epic status, something you can live with when the time comes.

Collect rocks.

That's all. But not just any rocks. You are an intelligent woman so you look for the unimaginable inside the ordinary. Go to places you would not ordinarily go alone – riverbanks. Deep woods. The part of the ocean shore where people's gazes disappear. Wade in all waters. When you find a group of rocks, you must stare at them a long while before you choose, let

your eyes adjust, use what you know of the long wait waiting. Let your imagination change what you know. Suddenly a gray rock becomes ashen or clouded with dream. A ring round a rock is luck. To find a red rock is to discover earthblood. Blue rocks make you believe in them. Patterns and flecks on rocks are bits of different countries and terrains, speckled questions. Conglomerates are the movement of land in the freedom of water, smoothed into a small thing you can hold in your hand, rub against your face. Sandstone is soothing and lucid. Shale, of course, is rational. Find pleasure in these ordinary palm worlds. Help yourself prepare for a life. Recognize when there are no words for the pain, when there are no words for the joy, there are rocks. Fill all the clear drinking glasses in your house with rocks, no matter what your husband or lover thinks. Gather rocks in small piles on the counters, the tables, the windowsills. Divide rocks by color, texture, size, shape. Collect some larger stones, place them along the floor of your living room, never mind what the guests think, build an intricate labyrinth of inanimates. Move around your rocks like a curl of water. Begin to detect smells and sounds to different varieties of rock. Give names to some, not geological, but of your own making. Memorize their presence, know if one is missing or out of place. Bathe them in water once each week. Carry a different one in your pocket every day. Move away from normal but don't notice it. Move towards excess but don't care. Own more rocks than clothing, than dishes, than books. Lie down next to them on the floor, put the smaller ones in your mouth occasionally. Sometimes, feel lithic, or petrified, or rupestral instead of tired, irritable, depressed. At night, alone, naked, place one green, one red, one ashen on different parts of your body. Tell no one.

Now.

After months of collecting, when your house is full and swollen, when you begin to experience contractions and dilation, after you check the color of the too red blood, after you use a timepiece to record the seconds, minutes, after you

begin to regulate your breathing and abandon your thinking to the story you have been told about this, and, after your baby is born dead in the morning – which you cannot find in the story you were told – after you think of the words "born" and "dead" next to one another, turn to the rocks. Turn to the rocks and hear seas echoed from as far away as the Ukraine. Smell kelp and taste salt; feel that underwater animals have brushed near you. Remember parts of your body are scattered in water all over the earth. Know land is made from you. Lay all the baby clothes that have been given to you as scripts or gifts on the floor in lines. Sit with the tiny clothes and your rocks and think of nothing at all. Have end-less patterns and repetitions accompanying your thoughtlessness, as if to say let go of that other more linear story, with its beginning, middle, and end, with its transcendent end, let go, we are the poem, we have come miles of life, we have survived this far to tell you, go on, go on.

You will see you have an underlying tone and plot to your life underneath the one you've been told. Circular and image bound. Something near tragic, near unbearable, but contained by your irreducible imagination – who would have thought of it but you – your ability to metamorphose like organic material in contact with changing elements. The rocks. They carry the chronology of water. All things simultaneously living and dead in your hands.

On Sound and Speech

In my house one of the corners of the living room was called the crybaby corner. When you cried, you had to go stand there facing the corner. The principle was one of shame. My sister tells me that when she was sent to the crybaby corner she would cease crying almost immediately. I can picture her leaving the wall with a face as stoic as a nun's. Almost like an adult.

By the time I arrived in the family, eight years after my sister, the laws of the house were in place. But none of them seemed to work on me. By the time I was four, when I cried, I wailed. Epically. And I cried all the time. I cried when I had to go to bed. I cried in the night. I cried when people I didn't know looked at me. I cried when people I did know talked to me. I cried when someone tried to take my picture. I cried being dropped off at school. I cried when new food was presented to me. I cried when sad music played. I cried when we put the ornaments on our Christmas trees. When people would open the door to my "trick or treat" at Halloween. I cried every single time I had to go to a public restroom. Or in bathrooms in anyone's house. Or bathrooms at school. Until I was in seventh grade.

I cried when bees came near me. I cried when I wet my pants – in kindergarten, first, second, third, and sixth grades. When I got any bruise or scratch or cut. I cried when they put me to bed in the dark. When strangers spoke to me. When children were mean, when my hair was tangled or ice cream

hurt my head or my underwear was inside-out or I had to wear galoshes. I cried when they threw me in Lake Washington for my first swimming lesson. When I got shots. At the dentist. When I got lost in grocery stores. When I went to movies with my family – in fact, one of the more famous of my crying stories happened when they took me to see *Gone With the Wind*. When the little girl has the pony accident and Rhett leaves Scarlett my grief was inconsolable. For about a week.

I cried when my father yelled – but I also cried sometimes just when he entered the room.

When my mother or sister were sent to retrieve me, the victories were small. About the size of a child.

It was my voice that left.

In my house the sound of leather on the skin of my sister's bare bottom stole my very voice out of my throat for years. The great *thwack* of the sister who goes before you. Taking everything before you are born. The sound of the belt on the skin of her made me bite my own lip. I'd close my eyes and grip my knees and rock in the corner of my room. Sometimes I'd bang my head rhythmically against the wall.

I still cannot bear her silence while being whipped. She must have been eleven. Twelve. Thirteen. Before it stopped. Alone in my room I put a pillow over my head. Alone in my room I got my parka out of the closet and buried my skull in it. Alone in my room I drew on the walls – knowing the punishment –pushing the waxen color as hard as I could against the wall. Until it broke. Until I heard it stop. Until I heard my sister going into the bathroom. I would steal inside and hug her knees. My silent mother ghost would make a bubble bath. My sister and I would sit in it together. Voiceless, we would soap each other's backs and make skin pictures with our fingernails. If the picture was on your back, you had to guess what it was. I drew a flower. I drew a smiley face. I drew a Christmas tree that made my sister cry – but only into her hands. No one could have heard her. Only her shoulders and back moved. The red marks of a child's fingernails remaining

even after the soap washed off.

When my sister left the house I was ten.

I didn't speak to anyone outside of my immediate family until I was about thirteen. Not even when called upon at school. I'd look up, my throat the size of a straw, my eyes watering. Nothing. Nothing. Or this: if an adult required me to speak, I'd hold one leg up stork-like with one hand, and my other arm I'd put behind my head in an "L" shape, and I'd rock until I lost balance. Instead of talking. Little bird ballet. Little girl making an "L" for Lidia with her arm. Anything but speech. All those years with my sister in front of me I was silent. And after she left. Terror stealing the voice of a girl.

Sometimes I think my voice arrived on paper. I had a journal I hid under my bed. I didn't know what a journal was. It was just a red notebook that I wrote pictures and true things and lies in. Interchangeably. It made me feel – like someone else. I wrote about my father's angry loud voice. How I hated it. How I wished I could kill it. I wrote about swimming. How I loved it. About how girls made my skin hot. About boys and how being around them made my head hurt. About radio songs and movies and my best friend Christie and how I was jealous of Katie but also wanted to lick her and how much I loved my swim coach Ron Koch.

I wrote about my mother … the back of her head driving me to and from swim practice. Her limp and leg. Her hair. How gone she was, selling houses, winning awards into the night. I wrote letters to my gone away sister that I never sent.

And I wrote a little girl dream. I wanted to go to the Olympics, like my teammates.

When I was eleven I wrote a poem in my red notebook that went: In the house/alone in my bed/my arms ache. My sister is gone/my mother is gone/my father designs buildings/in the room next to mine/he is smoking. I wait for five a.m./I pray to leave the house/I pray to swim.

My voice, she was coming. Something about my father's house. Something about alone and water.

The Best Friend

WHEN I WAS FIFTEEN MY FATHER TOLD ME THAT WE were moving from Washington state to Gainesville, Florida because the best swim coach in the nation was there – Randy Reese, the coach of Florida Aquatic Swim Team.

I remember sitting in my room alone thinking what? Why would we leave our home out of the blue for something called FAST? Why would we leave the trees and the mountains and the rain and the green of the Northwest for a strip of sand and alligators? We didn't know anyone in Florida. I'd never been there. The only things that mattered to me were at the pool – the only people I trusted or loved, the only time in my life I felt OK, the only place I felt like something besides daughter. And why was he telling me we were moving for me? I didn't ask for that. Why would I?

I loved my swim coach. He was the only man I knew who was kind to me. He's the man that explained to me why there was blood running down my leg at swim practice and what to do about it when I thought I was dying of cancer. He's the man that I spent six hours a day six days a week with training to win. He corrected my stroke. He pushed me when I tired. He lifted me up in his arms when I won and put an arm around me and a towel when I lost. When I said, "What about Ron Koch?" My father, he said, "No one knows Ron Koch."

When I asked my mother her face creased with worry.

She patted one hand with the other on her thigh and said, "Well, Belle, your daddy's been promoted. It's a lot of money."

When I asked her if she wanted to move to Florida, she said, "He says you deserve the best. Besides, Belle, it's sunny!"

In reality, my father got promoted to lead architect for the southeastern coast. But that isn't what he told me. It was, as he put it, the sacrifice they were making for me.

Inside our house always smelled like cigarettes. Back in my bed I thought about my best friend Christie. Whom I'd known since I was five. Whom I'd been eating lunch with every day in the locker halls of high school. Whom I'd sit by in art class wishing every class was art class. Whose family I'd vacationed with, wishing they were mine. I cried so hard I chewed on my pillowcase until it ripped.

And so I left the water of one pool and slipped into another. Water, you'd think it would be the same everywhere. But it is not. The tap water in Florida tastes like swampshit. The water that comes out of the shower is weirdly slippery. The water that comes out of the sky is warm, and leaves behind a thick steam that chokes people who are not used to it. The ocean water is the temperature of urine, and the pool water is lukewarm even in December. Like a giant bath gone dull. Hurricanes go to Florida.

I hated it.

Randy Reese barely looked at me. There were Olympians on his team. I'd try to catch them, keep up with them, and sometimes succeed, but no matter how hard I swam or what my times were or my weight or place on the podium, I never felt like I was … his. When I did well, he'd show me my splits on a clipboard. Numbers. I'd stand there dumb and dripping, waiting for a hug. But he was not that kind of man. Before important swim meets? He'd make all the women swimmers weigh themselves. If you didn't hit your weight? You'd get "licks." A Styrofoam kickboard whack at the back of your thighs and ass. One lick for every pound of flesh. In this way

the pool became a place of shame, and so there was nothing to distinguish it any longer from my home.

Whatever promise I may have carried in my swimmer skin, whatever hope I had in the water began to drown. At home the weight and rage of my father took the air out of the rooms. At the pool a man yelled on the side and hit us with kickboards and never smiled.

At the State Swimming Championships my senior year our 200-yard medley relay had the best time in the nation. I stood on the podium with the three other girls and looked out into the stands. My father wasn't anywhere. My mother smelled like vodka – it seemed I could smell it all the way across the pool. Randy Reese didn't even look at me. Then Jimmy Carter took all little girl dreams of swimmer glory away from our bodies with a boycott – Randy's famous pool full of winners included – anyway. There was no word left to belong to. Not athlete, not daughter.

I hated Randy Reese. I hated Jimmy Carter. I hated god. Also my math teacher, Mr. Grosz. I hated my father most of all, a hate that never left but just changed forms. My life had been ruined by men. Now even the water seemed to forsake me.

But I met a boy not like any other in the water.

In the pool with me. For those excruciating three years in Hogtown. A beautiful boy. With a long body and long arms and long legs and long eyelashes and long hair. And dark tanned skin. And dark eyes. And he had a secret in his skin too – not about fathers though.

This boy, my friend, was hands down the most talented artist in high school. That's an idiotic way to say it – he was more talented than ANY of the people in ANY high school; in fact, he was more talented than ANYONE in Florida who called themselves "artists" by about 500 miles long and 160 miles wide. He painted. He sculpted. He drew. When he did, there was not anything that ever came out of his hands that was not astonishing.

When I'd first moved to the hellhole of Gainesville, he called our house the first week and invited me to float down the Ichetucknee River on an inner tube. What a strange language coming through the phone holes. Ichetucknee? I had no idea on earth what he was talking about but I said yes.

The water of the Ichetucknee is ice-cube cold. And the river is not wide, but it is deep, and it has a current. Whitetail deer, raccoons, wild turkeys, wood ducks, and great blue herons can be seen from the river. And there are … well, snakes. But there is a kind of beauty to it. The aqua blue crystalline Ichetucknee flows six miles through shaded hammocks and wetlands before it joins the Santa Fe River. I floated next to my friend the artist for three hours. He asked me questions about my life. I asked about his. We laughed. We basked in the sun like reptiles. We swam like swimmers do when they've been freed from laps. At the end of the float I felt I'd known him for years.

I think it might be true that we spent every single day together except Sundays for nearly three years. Much of the time we'd meet at school and I'd go to English and French and he'd go to the art lab and then we'd leave round about lunch. Or we'd spend the whole day in the art lab together. Or we'd go to his house and eat sandwiches and listen to Pat Benatar between swim practices. Or nap together. His skin had almost no hair and was soft as velvet.

I don't quite know how to describe how much I loved him. But it was a love I didn't have a wit's notion what to do with. I flirted as hard as I could, but he didn't seem interested in me sexually. Other Hogtown guys seemed to want into my pants on a regular basis, even at 7-Eleven, but him? Never. So I had sex with Hogtown men. And I continued to get all up in it with girl swimmers. But nothing between me and the artist.

And yet he made me the most gorgeous burgundy silk prom dress you can imagine, with a drop-down back and tiny

criss-crossing straps in the front and near my ass – NO ONE had a cooler dress. It's possible no one ever has. In any state.

And he made me a fetching short-waisted big-shouldered women's 1950s blazer from a man's suit coat that everyone at school drooled over.

And he cut my hair in a bob that turned heads.

And he applied make-up on my face (the only make-up I'd ever worn) and took fashion photos of me.

So the love I had just got deeper and deeper for this man, but there was nowhere to put it. It just built up in me like sperm must in men who aren't getting any. Sometimes I thought I might faint in his presence, but he'd bake something and it would taste so good. He could make cheesecake, for christ's sake. All I wanted was to be around him. All the time. His skin smelled like cocoa butter.

Days and days and days and days and days. Perhaps the happiest of my life to that point. Just underneath how much I hated Florida.

Then one day my drunk-drawled mother told Jimmy Heaney's mother in the Publix Grocery store aisle that she heard my artist was gay. What I'm saying is that my dumb-ass mother outed my artist before he'd outed himself. He's homosexual. In a southern drawl.

And he stopped.

He stopped calling me. He stopped seeing me. He stopped having me in his life at all.

You know what it felt like to have a beautiful gay man stop loving me?

Like being dead.

Suitcase

SOMETIMES I THINK I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN A SWIMMER. Everything collected in my memory curls like water around events in my life. Or maybe everything that's ever happened to me I understand better if I picture it in a great, aqua, chlorinated pool. Not even Florida could kill the swimmer in me.

At my senior prom in Florida I armwrestled five boys about to become men. I lost once. After the dance we all got drunk and climbed the fence of the pool in Gainesville. We went skinny-dipping in a fifty-meter competition pool – the same pool I spent two hours every morning, two hours every evening in swimming. My body was stronger than it has ever been in my life. I looked like someone's son. The biceps of a son. The jaw. The shoulders. My hair whiting out gender. Breastless. When it came time for everyone to make out, I did laps.

That summer was long and wet differently for me than it was for other people. The air got thick with more than heat. In June, letters began to arrive in our mailbox. They were scholar-ship offers. For swimming. Exit visas.

In the evenings, I'd go out to the mailbox. My breathing would jackknife in my lungs just before I opened the box, and I'd shuffle through our idiotic mail waiting to feel the weight of something different. Waiting for my leaving.

Five letters came.

The first scholarship letter was cool and weighted in my

hands. It was from Brown. The red and black logo of Brown University on the envelope looked royal to me. I ran my fingertips across it. The envelope felt smooth – the paper announcing its difference. I smelled it. I closed my eyes. I held it against my heart. I walked it to the house almost believing in something.

Inside, I put it on the kitchen table. It sat there all through dinner – which we ate in the living room watching TV. *Barney Miller*. I could feel the blood in my ears.

After dinner, after *Taxi*, after my father smoked three cigarettes, he finally went into the kitchen. And my mother. And me.

We sat at the kitchen table like I guess families do. My mother and I breathing. He opened the letter slowly. He read it silently. I watched his eyes. Blue like mine. In my head I swam laps. My mother sat to the side of me like a drunk lump patting her one hand with the other. I tried not to bite my tongue off.

Finally, he spoke. A ¾ ride. At a snob school. A snob school for silver spoon girls and rich assholes. My mother looked out the window into the Florida night. I stared at the paper with the Brown logo on it. And my name. I knew it wasn't money. We had money. It was what came out of his mouth next, his cigarette smoke making shame swirls around my face. Did I think I was special? Like someone squeezing my neck. In my throat I swallowed language.

The second letter came from Notre Dame. Again we sat at the kitchen table, a mother, a father, a daughter. The cigarette smoke nearly cinematic. I sat in silence, my very skin knew the tyranny of speaking. My mother twisted a lock of hair until I thought it would lift off of her head. Why did he say no? Because he could.

The third letter came from Cornell.

The fourth from Purdue.

No.

At a kitchen table in Florida.

All the rooms of our house carried the weight of Father. All of them except one. My bedroom held the wet and dark of my body. It smelled like my skin and chlorine and pot. The two windows in front had long been my portals to the night life of escaped girls. In July, on a night so thick with sweat lesser girls would have suffocated, alone in my bed I decided on leaving. I was leaving, and I didn't care how. I masturbated so hard that night I scratched my skin raw. Just before I went to sleep, I pictured a suitcase. The biggest one we owned. It rested silently in the garage behind my father's golf bag and boxes from former lives. Black and as big as a German Shepherd. Big enough to fit the rage of a girl.

At the preliminaries for State that year I sat in the locker rooms with Sienna Torres killing a fifth of vodka. If we'd been sons about to be men, I bet we would have taken one of our fathers' cars and headed for Canada. Or took our first punches at authority, not minding the black eye. Instead we sat on the concrete underneath the disgusted gaze of shaved and well-behaved athlete girls and drank.

Even loaded I qualified fifth for finals in breaststroke. At finals, a woman I didn't know with stringy blonde hair and glasses thick as a Florida cola bottle came up to me after I got second in the 100 breast. I swam a 1:07.9. She looked like a stoner. She said she was the coach at Texas Tech, and that though she couldn't talk about it standing there like that, me dripping with water and underage rage, she would call me the next day to talk about a full ride. I didn't say anything. When my breathing stilled, I looked up at my drunk mother in the stands. She was sort of rocking. I hoped she'd stay up there. My mother: the only thing I knew of Texas sitting up in the stands, slurring her speech.

When the coach of Texas Tech called my home, my father was at work. I talked to the woman with the stringy hair and thick glasses on the phone. There was my mother's voice, its sweet southern drawl curling around my shoulders – like

honey does to bees – and there was this woman's voice and there was me. Saying yes. Yes.

Wouldn't it be great if that was all there was to it? A mother's voice soothing the way for her daughter to leave. Blonde swimmer girl gets on a plane, bye bye y'all.

A week later, when the papers came to sign, my father was at work. My mother signed them. I remember watching her hand, a little stunned. She had beautiful handwriting. Then she put them in the envelope, grabbed her car keys, and told me "C'mawn". In her southern drawl liquor voice. In her real estate station wagon. Driving to the post office with her and watching her drop my freedom into the blue metal mouth of the mailbox – I almost loved her.

All the rest of July he raged. And August. Every day when he came home from work he'd find another way to fill the house with rage, shake the walls with shame, while the little women took it and took it. Sometimes I thought he might kill one of us. But I was not afraid. In the palm of my bedroom I could feel the walls pulse.

Once that summer during a rage run my father threw a plate at the sliding glass door. I waited for the shatter but nothing happened. Another night he ripped my swim bag to shit, my suit and goggles flying into the air. Once he followed me all the way to my bedroom door. I could feel his words at my smoldering shoulders. He stopped in the doorframe. When I turned to face him, he was shaking with anger. Then he said, "This is control. I'm controlling myself. You don't know how far I can go." We stared at each other.

I thought: this is your daughter leaving, motherfucker.

But other nights he'd become the man whose desire had twisted up inside him. The closer we got to my exit. On an August night with rain as hard as drums he sat me down on our living room couch. He put his arm around my shoulders. He rubbed my far arm with his big thumb in creepy circles. His voice was more calm than is possible to make a voice. shirts until my neck prickled with anger. I took a wad of cloth

Then he narrated what boys would want to do to me, how they would put their dirty hands up my skirt and part my legs and finger fuck me. How they would reach inside my shirt and fondle my tits and grab my breasts. Suck them. How disgusting boys would be, their hands, their hot hips and breath, their wanting in and up. And what they would do with their dicks, me sitting there next to him on the couch feeling the heat of him touching his dick even without looking, my skin making pins, clenching my teeth inside my mouth, and him saying how I should say no, and how I could find the strength to say no by remembering I was his daughter, that he was the only man for me.

In my head: this is how you know he is insane. This is why to leave now.

I'd thought of leaving before. In the runaway ways, but also the year my mother tried to commit suicide, my sister made a courageous return from the sanctuary of graduate school to see if I wanted to come with her. I was sixteen. Her coming and asking me – somehow it had been enough to get me through two more years.

I thought about the secrets I had stored up inside my body. How many times I'd crawled out my bedroom window to get in a car. The unstoppable fire between my legs. A fire not his. I thought about vodka. Nearly drowning. By the time he sat me on the couch to tell me I was his, I was miles away from daughter. A black suitcase making shape and story in my dreams. I felt like there was a muscle between us. The muscle was my sexuality. Not his.

Our filial showdown happened in our garage the week before I left, next to my mother's station wagon and my father's Camaro Berlinetta. I went there that night to get the black suitcase out of the garage. I planned to take it to my room and fill it and fill it. When I found it, I unzipped its mouth. It smelled like cigarette smoke. I opened it, and inside were two of my father's shirts from some trip. I stared at the shirts until my neck prickled with anger. I took a wad of cloth from one

and shoved it in my mouth and bit it as hard as I could – so hard my head shook. Then I took them out and put them in the trash.

When I got back, I explored every compartment of the suitcase. A tube of Certs. Part of a wrapper from a pack of cigarettes. A comb. Two condoms. I picked it up and shook it. Finally it was empty of him. I zipped its mouth. I stood up to take the black suitcase to my room, and then there was my father. I heard him before I saw him, and when I turned to face him he was standing just underneath the lonely garage dangle of a bulb, his head weirdly illuminated. Then he began to yell, a slow nonsensical roll at first, but humming quickly into a roar. Like engines on Camaro Berlinettas do. He called me a slut, he named my sins, he listed all my mistakes and shortcomings and shameful behaviors – all the acting out that lived up and through me to bring me to this daughter moment.

Maybe they were all true. Maybe he was right. Maybe I would become the slut fuck-up he said. But I was also a very good swimmer. And he was not.

He grabbed my arm at one point, and though I could feel the bruise forming, I never let go of the handle of the suitcase. I felt I could swing it into his head any time I wanted. Somehow that night my girl shame and fear were nowhere in the room. I thought the thought of somebody's son. You don't know how far I'll go, motherfucker.

I looked him in the eyes. Blue on blue.

I felt the width of my shoulders and the square of my own jaw. My adrenaline rushed up like before a race. Nothing he was saying was beating me down. I think maybe he saw that, because he shifted gears and began to rage about what I was doing to my mother – did it make me happy that it would kill her? My leaving? Just like my selfish shit of a sister? Is that the kind of person I was? A selfish bitch who wanted to kill my mother? You and your sister – such high and mighty assholes – you think you are so much better than anyone else?

My sister and I, we were selfish. We wanted selves. There was no rage or love that could stop us. That's what opened my mouth.

Fuck.

You.

Motherfucker.

I said it again, louder, and again, until I was screaming it, screaming with the lungs of a swimmer. Then I said get the fuck out of my way you fucking sadist, and I swung my suitcase back, and he drew up his full height of father and pulled his arm back and fisted up his hand until it white-knuckled and his face went red and he clenched his teeth and those eyes, those rage-filled father eyes … so I did what I was born to do. I leaned in as close to his face as I could and said do it. Suitcase ready.

It was his voice I used.

It seemed we'd die in that moment. But all it took to leave that room was this body I had. Though I did hear him breathing–out of breath–at my mighty back. And I did consider what being punched in the back of the skull might feel like. I believed I could take it.

I carried the suitcase to my bedroom. I went in. I closed the door behind me. I took off my clothes. My skin smelled like chlorine and sweat. Summer heat snuck through the screen of my window. I put my head down on my pillow. I waited. I heard a car go by. I heard a dog bark. I could hear a shiver of wind in the shrubs outside my window. And cicadas. And frogs. I waited and waited. And then I didn't. I put my hand between my legs. I parted my lips. The wet slid my fingers around and around and fast and hard. I closed my eyes. I thought about Sienna Torres shoving her fingers up my wide open cunt, as open as a mouth screaming motherfucker. I came so hard it shot out of me. I didn't know until that night a girl body could do that. Shoot cum.

The first things I put in the black suitcase were a flask and a box with what used to be my mother's hair.