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WITHIN WALLS

By

Melinda Floyd
BA Centre College 2002

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2008

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A Thesis Approved on

April 28, 2008

By the following Thesis Committee:

Thesis Director – Paul Griner

Aaron Jaffe

Benjamin Hufbauer

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to
My Sister Beth Floyd
and My Friend Sarah Hatfield

ABSTRACT

WITHIN WALLS

Melinda Floyd

April 28, 2008

Within Walls is the story of a woman's psychological and physical deconstruction as she comes to terms with a childhood tragedy she feels she caused. This process is mirrored by her sister's perception of her own life after death. A philosophical study on the often slippery human relationship to spaces and structures, this is a story about the power of the walls we live within, and the hope of breaking free from them through the force of our own will.

“I think it’s good,” Bin said, holding the scrunched papers. “What made you do it?”

“I just thought we should make our own stories.”

“Cool. We should get this copied so you don’t lose it. Have you drawn any pictures for it? Do you think you could draw them again? Well, maybe we can do it after dinner. I’ve always wanted to put a little book together. It will be fun. Now lemme read it again.”

Faye tugged at her shoe tongues, sighed through her teeth and sat down on the tile kitchen floor. She took off both her little white tennis shoes, revealing socks that had sagged into folds around her foot. She pulled her socks as high and tight as she possibly could, and quickly reached for her shoes. The over-stretched socks wrinkled around her ankles before she could get one shoe on. She slapped the floor with both hands. “Bin, can you PLEASE help me! You know I can’t stand it!”

Bin slid out of her chair and onto the floor, stacking the papers onto the seat of the chair while she rolled her eyes in mock exasperation. Faye took her shoes off again, and pulled up one sock with both hands. She held it in place while Bin slipped her shoe on and laced it tightly. Bin noticed that her forearm was the same length as Faye’s small shin. They repeated the process with the other shoe, and they both stood up. “Wrinkle-free?” Bin asked, hands on her tilted hips.

“Yes, thank you,” Faye said, walking in place to make sure. She took off to the sliding door, slamming it shut as she rocketed into the yard. Carrie, their dedicated border collie who was always waiting for someone to come outside again, barked in joy.

Bin focused on the papers propped up in one hand, blindly grabbing at a cup full of orange juice just out of reach on the table. Her ten-year-old legs, tanned from a summer of swimming, were covered in blonde hair that was slightly mussed around the tops of her white cuffed socks. Her jean shorts and oversized pink t-shirt twisted awkwardly as she contorted in her seat, reading and reaching for the scratched blue plastic cup. Faye ran by the glass sliding door and Bin caught the motion, looking up just as she sped past. It was twilight – the sun was moving behind the trees outside, the fireflies were beginning to warm up. Carrie was chasing Faye around the yard while Faye vigorously flapped an old pea-green sheet that they sometimes used for picnics. Bin smiled as Faye tried to trap Carrie in the sheet; the dog loved the fight of it, searching for exposed skin and pretending to bite, twisting out of the sheet just in time and prancing around in circles. Bin turned back to the cheap newsprint paper, torn awkwardly from a school-supply notepad. The penciled words were difficult to make out, but it looked like Faye had already had some help with grammar and spelling. Probably from Mom.

This is the story of Belinda Decker LeRoy and her sister Faye Camille LeRoy. The sisters loved each other very much, as sisters often do. They were happy with their parents and they had a lot of fun with their dog Carrie, who protected them while they played. One day as the girls were finishing their chores their mother came to them and said, "Girls, will you please go the town and buy me some masking tape? I am all out." The girls wondered why their mother needed masking tape so badly, but said nothing.

As they walked to the market in town they were set upon by a group of mean dirty boys. But Carrie, who was always with them, chased them away. Next, they were set upon by a horrible band of giant snails, but Carrie, who was always with them, chased

them away too. Finally, they were set upon by the biggest earthworm in the world, and even Carrie was too scared to chase it away. It could tunnel miles into the ground where no one could follow, and was as tall as a bus. The sisters ran fast, and made it to the market. They bought the masking tape and fearfully started for home.

The worm stalked them underground, waiting for his chance to pounce, but Carrie, who was always with them, was also a smart dog and decided it would be a good idea to leave their side and run for help. Just when all seemed lost, she returned, herding the same group of mean, dirty boys who had bothered them before. When the worm pounced, the boys cut the worm into pieces and went to the river to fish. They caught so many fish that the whole town was invited to a feast that night, and it was a very happy time.

When the girls awoke the next morning, they rushed downstairs to go outside to play. When they got to the living room, they found hundreds of brown boxes covering most of the floor. The boxes were dry cardboard, and big enough to crawl inside, but they couldn't because they were shut tight full of heavy things and sealed with masking tape. They stood in rows, like soldiers in an army. The sisters thought for a moment that the boxes would be opened and presents would spring out, but they realized as they looked around the empty house that the family belongings must be in the boxes. Carrie sniffed them suspiciously.

When their mother found the sisters with the boxes, she said "Daughters, I have exciting news. We're going to have a whole new home in a whole new town. Your father is going to have a new job, and we get to start fresh. When you finish your breakfast, pack your own things and we'll be off."

The sisters were unhappy to hear that they would have to give up the home they

had lived in for all of their lives. The boxes stood around their mother, under the dreadful things she was saying. The sisters ran outside, and decided to keep running. They ran as fast as they could until they found the worm's abandoned tunnel. The opening where the worm had sprung out was slimy, but it was big enough that the girls could walk in standing straight. The tunnels ran deep into the ground, and there the sisters hid forever, following the winding paths, running from the band of snails that was still free in those lands.

When Bin had finished reading her sister's story, she sat silently at the table. She crumpled the pages slightly, slowly, eyes dark. The yard was fully out of the sun, and the crickets were loudly celebrating. Her mother rang the dinner bell, and she heard Faye stomp to the bathroom to wash her hands. Her father had come home from work and was in the basement working on his computer. The broad windows that dominated the humid sunroom soaked the solid wall between them with the dark green of sunset. Bin twisted in her seat, let a slow stream of air out of pursed lips, and paused. She let one bare foot free-fall from the table-top to the floor, jarring her knee. Still she did not get up. Her foot filled the tile on the floor where it landed. She tried to raise herself up without moving her foot, and almost succeeded. Her foot slipped over the almost invisible grout edge, and Bin felt her stomach move. She aligned her other foot perfectly within another tile closer to the door, and then fixed the other one inside the lines, behind her and slightly, awkwardly, to the left. Once it was perfect, she looked up to the glowing doorway into the house, and saw her mother's silhouette cross the brightly-lit hallway. She moved her feet, grabbed at the stack of her sister's papers, and ran into the house.

“Hey, you wanna go over the fence? It rained and the wet weather creek might be full.”

We were sitting on the couch watching our usual Saturday morning cartoons. I was leaning over the arm farthest from the TV with my legs on the couch cushions, pushing my foot into her side as I spoke. Faye was holding a tea cup half full of Honey Nut Cheerios and focusing on the television. She fished one Cheerio out of her cup, put it on her tongue and showed it to me. It melted a little as saliva gathered around it. “Sure” she said, her tongue still sticking out and slurring her speech. I kicked her harder. She rolled onto her back, braced herself against the couch arm and kicked her legs hard, constantly, like she was swimming. The oversized blue and yellow flowers on the upholstery bounced around her feet. This was her favorite defense mechanism, and it worked. I decided to try it too, turn it against her, and each heel landing yielded an increasingly animalistic howl.

“Girls! What is going on in there?” Mom did not sound happy, but Faye and I were not put off our mission to obliterate each other. It was a real war now, and I was bigger and stronger. I had to end it. I kicked her with all my strength. She didn't lower her legs until I did, and then she looked at me, considering. She pulled at the fuzzy white blanket that had gradually tightened around her torso. Then the tears came.

“Why did you do that?” she wailed, and I rolled my eyes. Drama queen. She always does this to me.

“Oh come on, it didn't hurt that bad. You were hurting me too.”

“You're older and bigger than me.”

“Whatever. Do you want to go over the fence or what?” Faye picked up her tea cup, jammed her hand in, stuffed as many Cheerios in her mouth as she could and munched. One stuck to her cheek.

Mom came into the room holding two plates of pancakes. She placed them on the coffee table and straightened the cushions around us. “What’s goin’ on in here? You girls cut that fightin’ out.” She went through the door to the kitchen and before it closed all the way was back through it with a tray holding syrup, butter, silverware, a stack of paper napkins, and two glasses of cold milk.

I straightened the tray so that it was parallel to the edges of the coffee table and grabbed my milk. As Mom talked to us about fighting, I tried to decide if the area of the space to the right of the tray was larger than that to the left. When Mom got to the “sister” part of her standard speech Faye looked at me sideways and rolled her eyes. I moved the tray again so it was exactly in between us.

The collected tea cups clinked in her hand as Mom pointed at us. “Take care of each other. Y’all’re sisters. Belinda Decker LeRoy, I’m countin’ on you to look after your little sister.” I let her see me scowl before I stuck my face in my milk glass.

When she was back in the kitchen I turned to Faye who was absent-mindedly mashing up her pancakes. The cartoon figures danced around to some tinkly music and Faye stared, eyes pushing out. “So, you wanna go?”

“Yeah, lemme finish my breakfast.” Mom came back in with a plate covered in a paper towel. Bacon. The evil character was on the screen now and the music had gone over to mostly drums and low horn sounds.

In the driveway Carrie was sniffing suspiciously. I pulled our bikes out of the shed and held them upright. Carrie circled, making prints in the fallen tree matter, nose

gathering bits of cedar leaves and dirt as she snuffled around. Her ears perked up suddenly and she looked toward the field over the fence, about fifty yards from the house. She ran off just as Faye came outside.

I watched Faye tug on her jacket as I steadied her bike for her. Mom still made Faye wear things like jackets even when it wasn't that cold. I was old enough to decide, and my t-shirt was enough. The sun could find me inside it. It was going to get hot today, after the rain burned off. Faye started to get fussy again trying to fix her jacket so I spilled our bikes onto the driveway and went over to her. "You OK?"

"My sleeves are all bunched up." Her bottom lip protruded slightly, a darker pink.

"Here." I reached my fingers into her jacket sleeves and pulled on the bunched ends, pulling her balled fists into my belly. She finished straightening her shirt tail as I picked up our bikes. Faye reached for the handles of her bike, stepped onto a pedal and pushed off, easily moving into a steady pedaling motion. "Nice!" I called to her. She looked over her shoulder and smiled wildly, hair blowing into her mouth. I pushed off and raced past her, past the driveway and into our field that adjoined the over-the-fence field. It wasn't too far, but it was good to have your bike at the fence in case.

Faye was huffing when we reached the log we had hauled onto the fence a few summers ago. Both of us dumped our bikes and I scrambled over the log. The barbed wire stuck into the air with hot menace. I watched Faye climb over, waiting to unstick her clothes. "I can do it Bin" she insisted, but I watched anyway. Her feet gripped the rotting log like a monkey, her fingers digging into the soft splinters like worms into the earth. Blue and pink against brown and green, skin blooming around the elastic of her jacket sleeves.

Carrie shot out of a nearby clump of thorns and brush and wagged her tail, mouth open, tongue flapping from its fleshy stem. She kept moving, toward the pond I guessed. She was covered in burrs and mud. I pranced in the air, legs scissor-kicking as I moved toward the other edge of the trees, looking back to watch Faye's progress. When she was over she brushed herself off with tiny pink hands and ran after me.

The barn always surprised me. After the fence there was a thick growth of trees and then there was the field, but stuck up next to the trees was the barn. The barn was old. It had a silo next to it. When I was little I thought it was a ruined castle and the silo was the tower. I wished I was the princess in that tower. It didn't have a rounded top anymore, and it was made of old cinder blocks, so it really looked like a castle ruin. The barn was leaning into the trees, and you could see through some of the boards. A few years ago we had discovered a maze that someone had made into the straw. Faye and I would wind around through the musty hidden passages pretending to be all kinds of mythical creatures. We would make up our own names for them. And then there was the lost princess game, where one of us had to be the prince if we didn't have any other friends around. Sometimes I was the prince because I could make my voice deeper and I was bigger and stronger. Truth is I sometimes felt like a boy around her. But sometimes I made her do it. The princess would wait in the top of the hay loft while the prince fought his way through the tunnels to her. When he got there we usually had a crowning ceremony or the game dropped entirely and we just had a straw fight. The wind would whip right through those boards, howling, pulling our hair and pushing the straw against the open walls. The boards creaked like they knew what they had been, like they were trying to grow again, competing for sunlight.

Now the barn was tall and starkly gray against the thick trees. The sun was

almost directly above us. The barn smelled of dust, of dead wood baking but not burning, splinters curling. Faye screeched as she chased Carrie around. The barn swayed, scratching against the brittle branches. The canopy of trees looked tired, like a mother snuggling a child who was too old to be comforted. The tall boards stretched up and over, talking to her. I could see the gold inside it, staring at me through each slat, silent and still inside the rattling, whistling walls.

“Bin! Bin come see!”

Her voice was far away. I looked around and saw her in the distance crouched down next to the wet weather creek. Jogging over I could see the swollen water moving through the slimy mud banks. Faye had already made a boat out of sticks and leaves. She carefully placed the boat on the rushing current and it sped away, quickly dropping onto its side. I spread out my hand and placed my palm on the moving surface. The water was the same color as the bank, but the cold made it seem clean. Faye was busily making another boat. I started looking for promising twigs but the sound of the water kept distracting me. I ran along the bank, jumped over the creek, landed on a slender root that had been washed out. Carrie sloshed through the water, not bothering to jump. She happily lapped up some of the muddy rain water, looked at me and wagged her tail, shot back into the field. She went over one of the gradual slopes. I jumped the creek again but this time my foot landed too near the current and my shoe was soaked. Faye laughed, close to my ear. I turned and saw her right next to me.

“I’ve been running too.” She sprinted ahead, up the broad gradual incline of shorn grass. I walked behind her as she disappeared over the hill. The grass was already dried out, and my wet foot created muddy spots as I walked.

We didn’t usually come this way. There was rarely a reason to go to the wet

weather creek, or really to go anywhere but the barn. Sometimes we explored around the fields. There were a lot of sinkholes in this field. I was always scared I'd be walking and the ground would rumble and collapse under me. Dad told us there was nothing to worry about, that we could never trigger one. But he said to make sure we were careful not to trip and hurt ourselves. The sinkholes were often filled with cool stuff, like old car parts and little caverns that stretched into the rocks. There could be anything in those caverns.

Over the slope I could see a small pond, and the continual roll of a larger hill that pulled out from the valley that the pond was fastened to. Faye and Carrie had split over to the left, away from the pond. Faye was standing still looking down. I ran up to her. Carrie ran to me and then pranced along as I made it to Faye, getting underfoot. Faye had found a sinkhole. "Whoa."

"I know." Faye and I stood away from the edge in awe, but Carrie walked through the hole, nose down, sniffing each bone. A pool of watery mud had washed from the side of the hole, collecting around and obscuring the pelvis. It looked like a cow, but it could have been a bull I guess. It had horns. It was lying on its back, bouquet of hooves collected and pushed toward the opening, head thrown back, mouth open. There was no gory flesh, no hair, no blood. Just cleanly baked and washed bones. Faye and I stood silent. The clouds blew over the sun and put the sinkhole in shadow. When the sun came out again I put one foot on the side of the mud wall, bracing myself with my hands. My other foot crept down over jutting stones, tangled roots, landing on a rock near the bottom. I moved my weight to the rock and my hands came over my head slowly, steadily. They approached the bleached arcs, fingers spread, skin meeting porous calcium, grabbing. My eyes stayed on the head, looking into the hollow sockets, the gleaming row of smiles. I reached up to it, tugged at a tooth. The skull creaked against

the spine as I wiggled it, but the tooth came loose and it dropped into my palm. I pushed it down into my jeans pocket, steadying myself against the ribcage. Leaning toward the mud wall, I shifted my weight away from the bones. Twisting around I looked for a way up, blinked against the sun. Faye's silhouette slid toward me. I grabbed at the muddy lip and a cool chunk tore from the grass roots and tumbled into the puddle. Thin brown liquid splashed onto the white bones, dripped down, growing clearer. I reached farther into the field and wove my fingers into the stronger grass, heaving myself over the lip of the sinkhole. Faye looked at me with her mouth open. The tooth was a hard lump in my pocket. I pulled it out and rubbed it clean on my jeans. It gleamed in the sunlight, marble lines running through the enamel. Faye pulled on my hand, struggling to see. I lowered it. She looked up at me and I nodded, so she took the tooth and balanced it on her carefully stretched palm. It branched from her skin, ivory down, roots climbing into the air toward the grasping sunlight.

“It looks like a tiny castle.”

Sunday after church Faye and I escaped over the fence. This time we ran directly to the pond, hoping to find some frogs or maybe even some little fish. The pond was surrounded by rotting posts, barbed wire trailing in wide rusty circles, trampled into the mud in most places. The water broke under the pressure of the winds caught in the basin, plants bending in the current. I watched the sun find the chlorophyll in the deeper spots, thin needles flexing, pushing clumps of blurry algae under the surface like its own set of clouds. I heard footsteps thudding behind me.

Faye stood between me and the open land, trapping me with a muddy brick. Barbed wire followed her, caught in the canvas of her shoes, pulled from the ground. “I think we should invent our own religion,” she said, holding the rusty red brick by her ear and looking at me.

“Where did that brick come from?” I scanned the field behind her, the occasional groves of scrubby trees stretching from the shorn grasses. The brick was the same length as her forearm. She held it with both hands. “I found it in a sinkhole over there.”

“Where?” I saw the one she was talking about, not too far off, at the base of the high hill.

Faye lowered the heavy brick quickly, the weight jerking at her elbows. The brick held her fists to her right hip, smearing mud on her pink corduroy overalls as she trotted toward the sinkhole. I left the pond’s shore. Carrie sloshed out of the water to follow us, shaking droplets and running at the same time, pushing her body in all directions at once, projecting soggy paws ahead of each other too fast, stumbling. She ran up the high slope, curving around, growing smaller until she was over the crest, out

of sight and barking. Faye paused at the sinkhole as I caught up to her. It had bricks pushed into one side, like a wall had been built into that side, maybe to hold it up. She tossed in the brick. It broke with a muted clay sound, mud dulling the clatter. The wall was curvy, as if it undulated over stretches of years with the barely perceptible movements of the earth behind it. My eyes relaxed into the pattern of alternating red and brown, and the wall danced. Faye rubbed her muddy hands in the grass.

I looked up. Carrie's barking was throwing itself off something down the other side of the slope, almost out of hearing range. I walked around the sinkhole and started climbing the hill. It sounded jumpy, like the sound waves were breaking on something inconsistent. My feet began to burn slightly, but no, it wasn't a burn, it was more like a vibration.

I reached the top of the hill, Faye plodding with me, not far behind. We were suddenly very high up. A wide expanse of open farmland stretched down a much longer slope on this side of the hill. I saw Carrie's low body streaking through hundreds of distant cattle. They were sprinting in a gradual curve up the slope, aggravated by Carrie who was even now happily darting between their legs. I looked left, slightly back down the hill, at the closest grove of trees, about thirty yards away. Pivoting, pointing, screaming to Faye to start for the trees, sprinting. The ground shook, and my eyes ached for horned heads moving on the horizon. I scanned the trees. There was a dead birch leaning at an easy angle against the trunk of a tall pine. My knees gripped the trunk as I pulled myself up. I twisted my torso around to grab Faye's raised hand, but I saw nothing. The cows crashed through the trees, churning up dirt and twigs and bumping into each other. They seemed endless.

Finally they slowed down, when most of them were on this side of the hill and

Carrie had stopped herding. Some trotted in the grass. Others stopped completely in their newfound pasture, noses down and jaws working. Carrie sniffed and circled at a patch in the grass. I felt my breath leave me – I saw how far apart the feet were. The cows surrounded the tilted dead tree. They looked up at me, blinking round eyes and lowing. Carrie saw me and came to sit at the bottom of the tree. She whined slightly, and, as if she suddenly made up her mind, jumped up and herded the cows out of the way. I waited for a moment, staring over my own shoulder. My chest was squeezing the breath out of my throat. When I moved, the cows startled farther away. I walked over to those feet, thinking about them only as feet. I saw my baby's hand, too close to muddy white tennis shoes.

You get to redo everything. I heard once that you see everything, but I think we're really doing it. I stood up on the field and Bin was there, in the same clothes, running. I knew what to do. The whole sky wanted me to do it. The sun pulled off a new twin one, and the new one came with me. I ran, and we met at the top of the hill. I think that might have been against the rules, because I heard the trees crying when we hugged. When it was time I walked to the hole and found the broken brick. It came when I told it to, and it was just like it was. I turned and walked to the pond again, and Bin was there too. She was still crying really hard. She knows. She looked different this time, but she was doing it OK I guess. She looked at me, grinning like she hadn't never grinned before, and started.

“Where?”

I raised the brick in both hands and I

I rolled over, feeling the sharp pop of each vertebrae. My abdominal muscles stretched, twisting my hip bone upwards, bending knees, tangling the sheets and blankets. I reconfigured my skeleton, exploring new structures. I rubbed my face in the pillow, waking up my skin. The moment when my eyes would open naturally. This is always the best time for thinking. I saw a public square, some buildings, people meandering around. I tried to walk toward the coffee shop, and couldn't move. The people were gone, and the square began to lose its edges. Empty streets sucked at my limbs, the bricks of the alleyways touching my skin like teeth under soft lips of open space. A doorway yawned, I fell into it, stomach floating, brushing its frame with my feet and hands. I put out my limbs - elbows, fists up, even with the top of my head, legs out, pushing into nothing.

said "I found it in a sinkhole over there."

"Where did that brick come from?"

"I think we should invent our own religion." How strange that sounds now, outside of my first thinking.

Bin turned from looking at me toward the pond. There were Carrie prints, Bin prints, and cow prints in the soft light brown mud. I stood between Bin and the fence. She was trapped. I went back to the hole so she could get out, but she stayed by the pond just staring and staring. I put the brick back in its place with the others, dozens of bricks lining the side of a muddy hole. They were covered in clay sludge and rough grasses. Pioneer grasses, I learned. No moss, though. The bottom of the sinkhole was as far down as I am tall, so not very deep. Deep enough for me, though. Again, I thought about the ground giving way, but I had already given the brick back so I couldn't get it again. The buried wall would stay there. Carrie came back to me, nose to the ground, and she scrunped

I stuck in the room, suspended but

anchored, the space growing around me,

Something unlocked. I fell.

I woke fully before landing, fluids rushing until my pulse shocked me awake, jerking my legs and throwing my weight forward. I reached for my forehead, fingers on fire for touch, felt only hair. I felt my lungs inflate, I groped at my face, gasping, fingers through hair, fingers in eye lashes, no skin, no bones, until one hand found the other, something solid, something, I reached back to my face and felt it, moved it, pushed it, daring it to disappear again.

Finding fruit among the leaves and branches, farmer hand plucks but I was glad it was where it was.

I got up from bed and started toward the bathroom, but, losing my nerve, went to the kitchen and splashed warm water on my face. The water warmed skin, hands felt bone, sighing, pressing the two pieces of my body together, walking back to the bathroom. I looked up at the wall and saw

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I got up from bed and started toward the bathroom, but, losing my nerve, went to the kitchen and splashed warm water on my face. The water warmed skin, hands felt bone, sighing, pressing the two pieces of my body together, walking back to the bathroom. I looked up at the wall and saw

through the hole hardly caring what she did. myself in the mirror.

A few bricks jumped back, and I thought,

The morning light was white, white

Oh that's why.

through the window, silver against the

The next days were easy, following

white tiles that climbed half the wall from

every push of the sky, every wave from a

the floor. The porcelain sink branched from

doorway. I retraced my steps, and so did

the floor – slippery flower. Two sets of

everyone else. We all knew what was

eyes looked into each other, a new set

coming, but me better than most people. I

looking into mine. They caught the

'spect it will get harder, though, when I get

newborn light flying around the small

really far along. I mean I hardly remember

room, the white light pushed by hard and

some stuff, but those aren't the times I have

sterile surfaces, absorbed by nothing but the

to pay attention. Other people do, though,

glossy brown irises. Two sets of eyes,

some people. People used to be hard and

twins, one pair searching, one pair so much

looking, now they're soft and interested.

like hers were.

Bin sat at the head of a folding table in a small room with no windows. A woman with streaky brown hair and blue eye shadow sat across from her, holding a camping lantern in both hands. Bin watched her eyelids crease to a darker blue as she studied the plastic, metal, and glass parts, held the metal handle and dangled it, tapped the metal frame with manicured nails, peered at Bin through the glass. She placed it back on the table on its side and it rolled slightly. “Miss Topper, you said in the questionnaire that you camp every month? You enjoy outdoor activities a great deal, then?”

Bin watched Miss Topper’s green eyes roll to the upper right side. “Oh, yeah, I love being outside. My boyfriend loves to fish, and he has a place up on Baker. We go up there all the time.”

“How nice. I love Baker. So, he has a shelter you guys stay in – you don’t actually camp when you go up.”

“Right, right. There’s no way I’d sleep in a tent all that time, but I have before a couple times we went down to Rainier and had a blast roughing it for a weekend.” She laughed, leaning forward to emphasize her open mouth.

“Great. Um, OK, so since you have some experience with camping equipment and being in the wilderness, you have no doubt had to deal with a bunch of these.” She held up a handful of instruction manuals for various gear.

Miss Topper laughed knowingly. “Oh Lord yes. Usually I end up holding it while my boyfriend does everything himself, though!”

Bin smiled, recording on her notepad. “Well, what I’d like to do is create a user manual that people will want to use, even those who don’t care for instruction.” Miss

Topper laughed, crossed her legs and leaned back in her chair. “Ok, what we have here,” Bin slid a group of oversized papers across the table toward Miss Topper, “are some prototypes. These are some ideas I’ve had for ways to improve on the company’s current design, which I have here. Look at numbers one and four first.”

Miss Topper considered each sample, one propped in each hand, the large sheets rigid. Her pink fingernails pointed to the low ceiling. “I like the way number one – this is number one, right? I like the way number one is set up like with the flow, the arrows pointing to the next square you’re supposed to look at. But, I like the way this one is numbered. And I like the color coding. I think the colors in number one is better.” Miss Topper’s curly hair brushed her shoulders as she looked rapidly back and forth. She put number four down so she could scratch herself.

A smile played on Bin’s face. She focused on her notepad. “That’s great. No really, that’s great. Thank you. Now, here are numbers two and three. You’ll notice that these samples have different text. Do you find either of them easier to understand?” Bin handed the prototypes to Miss Topper and arranged the others neatly on the table. She lined each edge up equidistant from the other. When she looked up, she glanced at the recorder. The red light was still on. As she readied the paper samples she reminded herself that she had just enough blank tape left for one full session. She picked up her notepad and took notes on Miss Topper’s facial expressions as she read from each prototype. The joints of Miss Topper’s fingers pushed in and out as she pointed and moved the sheets around the table top.

“I think this one is too technical. No, it’s just in a weird order maybe. This one is simpler and it has a better flow. If I was in a hurry to get some lights on, I’d hope for this one.”

“Good, and any further comment on the organization? On the layout? Anything that strikes you.”

“I don’t think I have a preference, but this one has a separate and easy quick section that’s nice. In case you don’t have to get so in depth, or if you kind of know what you’re doing. I think my boyfriend might actually look at that one!” Miss Topper leaned forward as she laughed again, not making any laughter sounds, just using her teeth to show her good will.

“Excellent, Miss Topper. Now what I have here,” Bin took the samples from her and handed her a small packet of blank sheets, “is a collection of the different kinds of papers we could use for printing. Tell me what you think.

Miss Topper considered each one carefully. She got to the Tyvek and visibly stiffened. “Ew, what is this stuff?”

“That’s a vapor barrier often used in wrapping houses that are still under construction. The brand name is Tyvek. It doesn’t have as nice of a feel as some of the other ones, but it’s water proof, foldable while still being durable and light.”

“Yeah, that feels really gross. It gives me the willies. This one is just laminated, right. Hmm, that seems sturdy. What’s this one?”

“This first one is simply a heavy paper. It’s very foldable, though not as durable as some of the others. This one is simply laminated paper, as you said, which is the most durable, but it is much harder to reconfigure if you need to pack it. The last one is a treated paper that is slightly water resistant, but not as durable as either the Tyvek or the laminated version.”

Miss Topper fingered each sample carefully, preserving the innocence of her manicure. Bin could track each stage of her loss of interest. Bin visualized the potential

text on each sheet, and was frightened again to think of that death. Miss Topper fixed her mouth to convey her choice, but seemed to hesitate. “Um, I think I like the laminated because you could clean it if it got dirty and it won’t tear up.”

“Excellent Miss Topper. Thank you so much for your input, its much appreciated. Now, for your compensation would you like the \$30 gift certificate to the company store, or the \$20 cash?”

“I think I’ll go for the cash.”

“You can’t take anything I say seriously.” Bin paused, looking down at fidgeting fingers. “I say what I mean, but it might change in the next minute. I am a, um, of the moment, and my mind is different for each, each new moment.” Bin waited on a chair in her therapist’s office. Dr. Wilson sat in a more regal chair, swiveling slightly, tapping a pencil on his pad to create his own roar.

“I don’t know why you insist that you are so ever-changing. It’s the same with all people. We say what we mean sometimes, other times we are speaking from an agenda.” Dr. Wilson’s pencil was mechanical, cheap, from the office supply aisle in a drug store. It made three kinds of noise as he tapped: the lead against the inside of the body, the body against the pad, and the soft shuffle of fingers over the body, causing the motion. He stopped, subconsciously aware of its annoying aggression on his thinking. “The ability to speak the absolute truth is something beyond human capacity. Your truth will change, but that doesn’t mean you’re a bad person. And it doesn’t mean I can’t take what you say seriously.” Thinking again, he started beating the pencil against his face, thudding his lips with the black hollow tube, amplifying the jingle of the lead refills. When he stopped, Bin could sense Dr. Wilson thought he was about to say something profound. She looked up to the light fixture, hoping to quell the urge to assault him and his pencil. “Your words have an inner source, whether hidden or evident, and it’s those inner sources we’re trying to identify. Think of your words as evidence, artifacts of those sources inside you. Not as concrete structures of your everlasting self. Now, shall we continue?”

Bin’s eyes moved from the dusty light fixture in the low ceiling down the striped

wall paper (masculine, muted versions of primary colors) and back to her sweaty hands. “It was terrifying, but the element of fun and adventure overpowered the sense of terror I should have had. We would scamper across our field, scramble over the rotten log that was weighing down the barbed-wire fence, into the farmer’s lands. The barn was right on the edge of the property; but for the thick trees we could have seen it from our house. I always got dizzy when I was over the fence – I get dizzy any time I’m somewhere I don’t think I’m allowed. The barn itself looked massive to us, slightly leaning and built of gray clapboard. You could see through it, and eyeball that it was structurally unsound. But that didn’t stop us. The straw bales were old, too. Fresh straw bales are clean and aromatic, and you could tell that this straw had been here for years. But that didn’t stop us. I can barely think of it now without getting sick. I don’t know how we found it the first time we were there, I can’t remember. But we could find the opening again and again, and we loved it. Absolutely loved it. There was feet-deep decomposing straw an inch from each ear, under my belly and elbows, an inch from the top of my head. We would crawl like that through yards of narrow, low tunnels, eventually reaching a slope and then, finally, the open hay loft.”

“How did you find your way?”

“Well it wasn’t the most complex maze. And we were together the whole time, no splitting up. It was quite bright, so you could tell direction. Sunlight could somehow find its way through the straw.”

“And it was sunny all the time?”

“Well...” Bin stopped talking. She could feel the blood rising in her face.

“Well, it couldn’t have been sunny all the time. In fact, I can remember quite distinctly, some days, rain, swirling gray clouds, no, no that isn’t right. That can’t be right, but I

can't remember." The blush was so intense now that beads of sweat were popping out on her forehead and nose. She could feel Dr. Wilson staring, waiting, closing in on her.

"Do you need to look through the movies?" Bin closed her eyes so she could roll them without him seeing. He was right, though. She could feel the fear and anxiety closing off her memories, creating false ones. Bin imagined her parents' large bureau that had always stood in the family room. She opened the large bottom door and looked inside at the rows and rows of video cassette cases. She could smell the familiar finished-wood, the sterile odor of plastic and the acidic film. There were many she recognized (some of them were currently in her apartment) all of them children's films, all of them in the large, over-sized plastic cases frequently used by Disney. She passed *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White*, *Alice in Wonderland*, saw some titles she didn't know. One of them was dark and fire flirted around its edges, undulating. It said "Brooliga" on the spine, so she picked it up and opened the case.

"It was dark! Oh, no, we carried flashlights. Flashlights! It was pitch dark in the actual tunnel, and we would scrimp along with flashlights clamped in our hands or our teeth. Anytime we wanted to turn around it was impossible, the tunnel was so narrow, and we had to backtrack. Going backwards in a small space, where you can't see where you're going, at any moment the path could collapse, could go down, could go up – it was so dangerous, should have been so terrifying." Bin allowed herself to indulge in a fit of nausea, shivering and brushing imaginary creepy-crawlies from her skin.

"But nothing ever actually happened to you?"

"No. But my God, looking back I just can't believe that it never did. The nightmares I keep having play it all out for me, all the possibilities."

"Things that never actually happened."

“Yeah. I know that.”

“Well, what did actually happen?”

“We had a great time. Once we got through the dark straw maze we would be in the upper hay loft, but it wasn’t open to the ground like you might think, like an overlook. It was just like a second story of the barn, full of loose hay and straw. I think there might have been a rope swing. We would stay up there for hours, until we got afraid that Mom would be angry we had been gone for so long. I don’t remember, but I don’t think we ever told her where we were going. She would never have let us go into that rickety, snake-infested place. I’m surprised Carrie went with us, but she always loved exploring and followed us everywhere. ”

“Carrie was your dog?”

“Yeah.”

“What happened to her?”

“We don’t know, she was pretty wild. She would go off by herself when me and Faye weren’t around and would come home with all kinds of crazy things. She brought home a half-eaten chicken, once, and once – seriously – she came home with the lower part of a cow leg.”

“You mean, she was getting into the neighboring farms?”

“Yeah. Seems like it. But the chickens were easier for her – this one guy in our neighborhood had a coop in his backyard and they were always getting loose.”

“So, what do you think happened?”

“We suspect a farmer shot her. She came home one night all full of small pellets, like she’d been shot with a shot gun. Then one day she just never came back.”

“Do you ever think of her?”

“Yeah, of course. She was Faye’s best friend, my best friend. She was always with us. But then that changed.”

“And what happens in your nightmares?”

“Mostly it’s stuff I do that scares me, or stuff that’s out of my control. Sometimes I trample on snakes in my bare feet. Sometimes the tunnel becomes choked with spiders. Sometimes the barn caves in and traps us. Sometimes the hay loft doesn’t have a bottom, and we fall into hay that never lets go, like sinking sand. Sometimes we never actually get to the barn, because the whole dream is me running across a field that keeps expanding and stretching. Sometimes the maze is impossible to solve, as if it keeps changing, and we can never get into the open space. They’re all different.”

“And how are these different from your recurring nightmares, would you say?”

“Well, they don’t have anything to do with me disappearing. They’re all about real things, like bugs and stuff. And drowning or sinking or being stuck or snakes, things that actually exist and can actually happen.”

“And usually your nightmares are about you ceasing to exist?”

“Right.”

“And refresh me on how those work.”

“Um, well, usually I’m just going about things that happen everyday, like going to work, brushing my teeth, watching movies or TV, and I just start to fade out, like I go see-through and I can’t function.”

“Interesting. They seem related, at any rate, the new nightmares to the old. Just in that there’s a total lack of control in both cases. You can’t control what’s happening to you in the barn, just like you can’t control your own existence in real life, in ordinary things.”

“Right. Yeah. No, that makes sense.”

“The fact that they’re operating in different realms might mean that your paranoia has jumped over into a new realm.”

“Oh. Well, yeah ok.” Dr. Wilson kept talking as Bin realized she was still mentally holding the Brooliga tape. She reached into her mind, back into the cabinet, put it back, the flames still licking the sides. She looked around the room. Sunlight speared its way through the heavy curtains, illuminating great highways of moving dust particles. The braided carpet was old and yielding under her feet, the walls painted a soft green. It smelled of her mother’s lemon wood-polishing products. Bin pulled herself back into the moment with Dr. Wilson, invisible arms stretching back, wanting to visit her bedroom.

“Why don’t you start journaling about the new nightmares? These memories are valuable information, and you might start writing them down just after you wake up so you don’t start getting everything mixed up. And keep taking notes about the other dreams as well. You might start keeping a notebook by your bed. Good? Good. I’ll bet we’ll be able to see some intersections, see patterns emerge. OK?”

“OK.”

“Alright, see you in two weeks.” Bin stood from the chair and turned towards the door. Her eyes slid across the carpet and up to the light coming from the window. She crossed the outer office and waved to the receptionist. As her hand went for the silver doorknob, she steeled half of her brain for the familiar cold and braced the other half for the potential electric shock. Neither happened, and she looked down at her hand and saw nothing.

My favorite day was at school when I was painting. It was water color time, I remembered that. We all had aprons with our names on them. Mine was covered in splatters, dry on there like Mom hates on the walls of the shower, but rainbow colors.

All of our brushes took the paint and water right up offa those pages. Each streak of blue, each splotch of red, just knowin' how to jump off the page and into our brushes. Some kids had paint going right onto their fingers, which was so funny. The splashes on my apron flew onto my brush, like a wet sparkler on the 4th of July.

We got all the paint back into each little jug and each little tray, and we had fresh paper all over the classroom. Paper in all sizes, clean from paint and names and being grabbed by all our hands. And it got put back away in its own drawer, 'cause that's where it's'posed to go.

I dream about work sometimes. We're working on a pamphlet for snowshoes. I study the panels, just like in real life, looking for patterns of logic and rhetoric. I have the product with me, so I can experience the purchase, the product, the satisfaction of having the thing. Like any normal consumer. I circle features on the pamphlet with a highlighter. I denote problem areas on the snowshoes with the help of an exploded model and a red pen. I slash like any sadistic English teacher. I regard the snowshoes lying on the floor. It is summer. Shiny black metal, satiny rugged straps, intimidating and impressive in their specialized and expensive nature. I try them on over my canvas shoes and stomp around the room. There are grids stamped into the carpet. How many steps until I know these snowshoes? At the mountain, where there is still snow, I find my necessary context. I pull the straps

I had a secret note in my desk that no one knew about but me. This was the time. I took it out after my apron was clean and put away. I unfolded it on my desk and took out a pencil, I think it was the right pencil. The paper lost its creases as I unfolded it. I pulled the pencil over the drawing I made at the bottom, a heart with eyes, and one of the eyes was winking. That was the first to go. Then the words. My first love letter, to the boy who sat in my group. I never gave him the letter, and it had burned in my desk like a sore spot, deciding if I ever would. And now here it was, comin' back up into my pencil, love words going back into the lead. The paper laced its crinkly edge back into my notepad, and the whole love letter was in that pencil.

tight, feeling tension through my thick mittens. The slight slope is covered, wrapping back into the dark pine trees that grow in their layer cake home. How many steps until I know these shoes? I am equally dispersed and I feel perfect. The bottom of my pants are wet, wetter as I sink in, watching the slope rise, until I'm equidistant from the blue ice in the pond, the blue ice in the sky, the 16 pine trees, the slopes becoming my room.

The next person on the schedule was a Mr. Armstrong. It was difficult to tell his age, but he had a full beard, ratted red hair and deep set blue eyes like sequins sewn onto a canvas bag. He was tall and thin, his body covered in rugged mismatched clothing. He sat awkwardly in his chair, too tall to cross his legs or sit perfectly straight. “Mr. Armstrong, you spend a great deal of time out of doors, is that right?”

“Yes ma’am. I’m outside most of the time. I make a living as a forest ranger.”

“Oh, excellent. Are you stationed at one particular park?”

“Well, I was stationed at one particular park. But I resigned from Park Service a few years ago, and now I’m out on my own. I go wherever my van will take me.”

“I see. Well, have you ever had to use a lantern like this one before?”

“Oh, yeah. I have to do alotta work clearing trails, and under the cover of the trees, even after dawn, it’s still pretty dark.”

Bin watched him pick up the lantern carefully, holding it like a bottle of whiskey. She imaged his tent, or perhaps his blue tarp pitched near his van. She thought about him clearing unauthorized paths into the deep wilderness as she pushed the prototypes across the table toward his chair. His brown mandrake fingers touched the crisp printed pages, covered in off-black ink and bland off-primary colors. She wondered what he could possibly say about such designs, these artifacts of offices that pretended to belong outside. Mr. Armstrong picked up a sample with both hands. “So. Didja do these yourself?”

Bin smiled. “Have you ever needed to use an instruction manual before?”

“Well, when I first started as a Ranger there were all kinds of manuals and

guidelines and stuff like that. But I haven't looked at an instruction manual for a while."

"I understand. Maybe you can compare these layouts to the ones you're used to encountering. It doesn't seem like you would need a quick reference to something, but what if an appliance, like this lantern, or a heater maybe, broke? Would you go for the maintenance section of the owner's manual?"

"Yeah, probably. I do keep those around in case somethin' breaks. Like the space heater in my van. Let's see." Mr. Armstrong picked up some of the numbered samples. The squares that sectioned off the information, with their modern rounded corners, glared falsely against the earthy tones of Mr. Armstrong's work clothes.

Bin noticed him hesitating. "Or maybe just the kinds of information in each section. What kind of information do you want to see first when you're trying to fix something?"

"Well it would be a bit frustrating to have to wade through all the stuff about setting it up. This troubleshooting section is what I want first, and it looks like the way things are listed here – it's alphabetical by problem, right? Yeah, maybe it should be ordered by the most common things that go wrong. Like for this lantern. If it's going to break it's probably going to be about the fuel source before it's going to be about broken plastic parts. Maybe what should be more important is rigging this thing up in an emergency, like if you don't have any more batteries and you're in the middle of nowhere. But I guess then you could just build a fire, right?" Mr. Armstrong laughed a little. "Maybe it should be a survival guide about what to do if this breaks, not how to fix it once you're out in it."

Bin laughed with him, heat engulfing her face as the blood rushed to it. She fanned herself with a prototype, sweat drying on her face, picturing him in the wilderness

with this plastic lantern, holding it up to find firewood. “Well, seems like there’s a use for this thing in that sometimes you need to have light to make a fire to begin with. But I see your point. If you were going to carry those kinds of survival tips with you, which kind of paper would you want it to be on?” The blush was subsiding now, as Mr. Armstrong thought about her question.

“What kind of paper burns best, case I have to use it for kindling?” He winked over a sideways smile.

“I think the plainest paper here would be best in such a survival situation. Less polluting chemicals.”

“Then that's what I'll say.”

“Well, thank you so much for participating today, Mr. Armstrong. Would you like the gift certificate or \$20 cash?”

“I believe the cash will be the most helpful to me.”

Bin handed him a crisp bill and he folded it gingerly, fingering it into his breast pocket.

My birthday and the new bike. I remembered this one really good. Bin helped Mom pick it out, and it was my favorite color: rainbow. It came with training wheels, but Bin said she could teach me in one day how to ride without them and we got those things off lickity split. That was good because training wheels are basically for babies. I had been riding my trike for so long I was too big for it, and I had to stand on the back and push with one foot. All my friends were riding bikes already. But this time the bike was taken instead of given, and I was back on the back of the trike again, which was OK, I guess. Soon it will be Bin's trike.

It was my dog!
My dog, that I loved so much as a child!
I remembered it, I dreamt it.
I thought it was something else,
but I came up to the
mess in the grass and I saw her,
perfect velvet fur spread out
on a new skeleton of twigs. I
fell to my knees, petting the mess, hands
spreading into the grass, heavy with
precious gore.
My innocent one,
she was my own, my baby.
I woke up crying.

The last person used the rest of the tape, and Bin relished packing the used cassettes into equal piles in her zippered duffel bag. She built the samples into neat stacks, placed the paper samples on top. Her slim black purse went into the duffel bag too, nicely filling in the available space. She took a gulp from her water bottle and slid it into place as well. The duffel bag was almost as rigid as the hard plastic case that held the rest of the recording equipment. She picked them up, and each hand was evenly burdened as she walked from the narrow back hallway of the office section of the warehouse complex. She stopped by to see the company's manager of marketing. "Hi Dan."

"Oh, hi Belinda. How did it go? Get what you needed?"

"Yes, it was a good group. About fifteen people showed up, so I have a lot of footage, and a lot of feedback. I should be able to have a report and a proposal to you by the end of the week."

"Oh, that's great. I'm so interested to see what you come up with. We've never used a usability consultant before, but you convinced us."

Bin laughed politely. "Yes, I did, didn't I? Well, you'll see how valuable I turn out to be. I'll email you so we can prep for the meeting with the execs."

"Awesome."

Bin left the small manager's office complex and searched for a way to the parking lot. She couldn't remember which way she had come in – the morning seemed so long ago. She turned down a promising hallway. It was wide and seemed designed for a lot of human traffic. The wide double doors that she came to at the end of the short corridor

opened easily, and she met with a dull roar. The sudden shock of the huge open space of the warehouse caused her to stumble. Her bags struck the floor, the plastic case making a loud crack and the tapes within the duffel crunching loudly.

Bin knelt down, ignoring the stares of assembly line workers on either side. She could feel a flush begin at her throat and steam its way up her face and down into her blouse. Looking down sharply, her flooded eyes lost the light and she couldn't see. Feeling her way to the zipper, sweating now, she unzipped the duffel bag and reordered the stacks of tapes, feeling for damage. They seemed fine. Her sight gradually came back, and she over-confidently picked up each bag, head brewing in fluids.

She looked around for an exit, and saw a small door glowing with sunlight across the huge room. She began heading toward it, walking across the coated cement floor. It was marked with neon painted arrows and lines pointing all directions. Loud crashes came from one station to her left, and Bin felt her left shoulder shiver as she struggled not to react obviously. The floor loomed on either side of her, the walls soared up to an indistinct ceiling. She felt she was walking backwards, shrinking. The door seemed farther away than when she had started. Someone walked across it in the distance, miniscule.

When she finally reached it she saw that it was actually twice the size of the door through which she had entered. She put her shoulder into the push bar and stumbled into the blinding sunlight. Tall white walls on either side shot straight into the sky, blocks of reflected light. The door closed behind her with an efficient click and she stood looking over the tops of the parked cars spread out in a vast lot. The heat that emanated from their shiny metal tops distorted the buildings and overpasses in the distance.

Bin walked down the narrow sidewalk against one enormous wall, searching for

her own car, remembering it was close to the main entrance. She saw people coming in from the parking lot, probably for the third shift. They were fifty yards away, each one getting out of their cars, sifting through the heated obstacles like early autumn leaves floating in summer flood waters, rushing to the hot metal gutters in the curbs.

One day I knew was going to be sad. I knew it the minute I got on the bus and I saw the kids. I remembered. I didn't want to go to it, but the bus drove on. I sat back down with my ex-best friend Allie, and we opened our lunchboxes. She knew it too, I could tell. We both had knowing eyes. I raised my hand and slapped her. Not very hard this time.

"I hate you," I said, trying not to say it as bad as I had said it before. "I never want to see you again. You're stupid and ugly." I had to look at her, because the bus pushed my head her way. She was lookin' right back at me.

"Shut up. Anyway, you're too poor to trade food, you need all your food just to live. Your daddy prolly has to work all day just to buy that stupid stinky tuna. Why would I want that smelly ol' thing?" Her voice had gone so soft she was almost

Something there that wasn't there before.

The cat watches the wrong end of the pen,

the residual ride, the reaction side. No one sees that the pen makes something out of nothing, a craftsman

a lawyer,
an architect.

The paws could move it too.

What a great death.

The walls ask me

if I'm comfortable and I have to answer yes.

But it's like a body pressing the bedclothes around me.

The floor has made me what I am.

I cannot see myself, but I am so comfortable.

The walls are my ultimate paradox – they speak in undertonal rhetoric,

while I watch their immutable

positions change

in relation to my

spinning

atoms.

whispering. But she knew like I did.

“Whatever. Like yours could be any worse than it is now.”

“No way, I don’t want tuna breath.”

“It’s not gross, it’s good my mom made it. Here, I’ll trade you that and my tangerine for your chips and juice box.”

“Ew, tuna, that’s so gross.”

“Yeah, lemme see what I’ve got.

Oooh, tuna sandwich, tangerine, chocolate chip cookies, and carrot sticks.”

“Wanna trade food?”

“Hey watcha got in there?” Her face grew brighter, smiling, and then I realized I was smiling too. And just like that, friends again, all the way home to the morning.

Rumbling, rumbling,

the brick wall grows from the ground.

Stack
upon
stack

of brick,
mortar,
brick,

mortar. Growing
like

a
weed straight

into the sky, n

a
r
r
o
w

The ground shakes as the mighty structure

pulls itself out of dirt, nothingness.

The bed

of flowers loses its sunlight, withers.

My hands

go in,
tug at
the roots,

petals disappear.

Resisting the day of usability analysis ahead of her, Bin put on the kettle and picked up a ragged, well-worn book of poetry from a stack on the kitchen table. She had thumbed through it many times but, busy with other books, had never taken the time to read it. In the used bookstore a few years ago she had indulged in a similar faux-pas she sometimes used when selecting wine: she liked the cover and decided to buy it. She opened the collection to the title page, and a few pages from the middle of the book slipped out. They fluttered to the floor, dry, threatening to disintegrate. The editor of the collection, or perhaps a previous owner of the book, must have liked Emily Dickinson. All the pages that escaped held her work. Bin picked up the pages and stacked them neatly together, reading one as she did so:

I felt my life with both my hands
To see if it was there -
I held my spirit to the Glass,
To prove it possibler -

I turned my Being round and round
And paused at every pound
To ask the Owner's name -
For doubt, that I should know the Sound -

I judged my features – jarred my hair -
I pushed my dimples by, and waited -
If they – twinkled back -
Conviction might, of me -

I told myself, “Take Courage, Friend -
That – was a former time -
But we might learn to like the Heaven,
As well as our Old Home!”

Bin's eyes lost focus as her face remained pointed at the page. Four boxes, lines

It's weird,
weird to have this time to myself.

The walls tell me what to do,
the cord that pulled me in
keeps me, pulling me through,
back
into the walls.

All I do is think
and watch myself dissolve,
building the room around me.

My cells are simple.
Each part shows itself to me
I love
what I was. I don't
know what to do, but the walls
tell me.

I love what I was
I can't wait to begin again
My tummy feels rosy,
until it becomes
the water around me.

I stop the tape of the session I'm analyzing.

Relieved to no longer have to listen to
myself say largely the same thing over and
over again, I plop down on the couch on my
back and stare out the window. It is
darkening outside, and the city is dotted
with lights blurred in twilight. Each
Venetian blind slat catches the slim
elongated reflection of the desk lamp, the
light settling in to the white metal like a
hundred gleaming eyes about to open.

I let my eyes slide together, and the pattern
becomes a hologram, built into me. I feel
rubbed clean, my stomach clenches in silent
laughter to think of my apartment as
housing so many guests.

I force my eyes to look through the blinds
to the building across the street. I can only
see stripes of building, sliced to bits by the
regular blinds, like bricks made of building.

I see a decapitated person leaving the front
door, a shoulder-less woman in a window
with floating arms. Opposite eyes look
back.

“I got a letter from my mother. She said our old neighbors sold their farm. Sold it to some land developers.”

“Is your family's old place still in tact?”

“Yes, it is. But it isn't nearly as big as the farm that was next door.” Bin fidgeted, pinching the loose skin of her inner elbow. The fields played in circles, cartoon reel, background repetitive behind changing characters.

“I imagine that in Kentucky there are a lot of big farms.” The stripes on the wall pointed, steady, showing off the wave of the white eraser on the end of the black plastic pencil.

“Well, yes of course there are. But this was the place we used to play. The place with the old barn, the pond. This was the place.”

Dr. Wilson sat in his chair, extra-still for the moment. He had stopped tapping his ubiquitous pencil. He watched her. Bin was slumped down in her chair. Her chin rested on her chest and her eyeballs strained to continue looking up at him. She wondered what he was waiting for. “Yes of course. And is your mother upset about this?”

“I don't know. Any time you have to think about it is upsetting. They moved, you know, shortly after the accident. Moved into town. So they don't have to look across the yard at the place. And I, of course, moved across the country as soon as I was old enough. So I wouldn't have to look at the place. But, anyway I think Mom is indifferent to what happens to the land. Having it settled might make it a safer place, in a way.”

“Do you think of it as a dangerous place?”

“Well yeah. It's structurally unsound, in the first place. Soft grass and mud overlaying porous limestone. That's why there were so many sinkholes. There are a lot of sinkholes in Kentucky, but in this field they were all over the place, on display, and grown over, like they'd been there a long time. The whole farm is about to collapse. Dad said he saw cement trucks pulling onto the property. The guy who bought it probably wants to stabilize it a bit, to fill in the gaps as best he can. I'm surprised they're using it at all.”

“How does the thought of them developing the land make you feel?”

“I don't know if it's the development so much as just the renewed intensity of anxiety over that place. I'm starting to disappear in real life. You know like in my nightmares? It's starting to happen while I'm awake. I don't know if it's just anxiety, or grief or what. It's really frightening. So far it hasn't been drastic, but I'm afraid I'm going to have an accident or something if it happens when I'm out in the city.” Bin looked at her elbow, red and welted from being pinched.

“What exactly happens to you when you disappear?”

“I start to slip, like I'm slipping away. I try to talk myself back into the room. I try to regain control of my mind, of my place in the space around me. But it's so frightening between the slip and regaining my footing. I know it's in my mind. I know it is. But it's so frightening. It feels real, like physically real. I can't see myself, I can't feel myself. What if it is real?”

Dr. Wilson sat up straight, in familiar territory now. “Real is a matter of opinion. It's really happening in your mind. Doesn't that make it real?”

Bin hesitated, unsure if his question was merely rhetorical.

“I think you should try to get on the other side of these episodes. Not alone,

certainly not while you're crossing the street – we'll set up a controlled environment for you, try to trigger one. But, I think letting your mind do what it obviously wants to do is the only way to conquer this fear.”

Bin let her mind relax, thinking about surrendering to no body, no presence. The room shimmered momentarily. Her pupils focused on Dr. Wilson's notepad, room jerking into proportion, centered on the shining silver spiral.

unequal but the space within equal. They were stacked, aligned, like the floors of an apartment building. But within the four floors, two rooms, and within those pairs, broken shards of shapes hit the floor, or floated within, tails wagging, impetuous. Perfect architecture, the building flattened to the page, but alive within it. Bin read it again, words sliding together, slippery dashes, and the structure fell, but it never landed.

The sun was finding its way into her apartment through the large window facing the street. The building across the street was shining, resplendent with architecturally-pompous aluminum and painted panel siding. Rust-colored, though it was specifically meant to deter actual rust. The edge of the building was at a different angle from the edge of her window frame, and Bin moved her head, tilting it, until it the lines appeared parallel. She then moved so that the lines were also equidistant from each other. She stared at the lines this way, unblinking.

At the signal of the whistle, Bin went to the kitchen and stood in front of the stove, watching the distortion of the shadows behind the column of steam. The kettle rocked slightly, the underside glowing against the blue flame, steam shooting from the ill-fitting lid. She picked it up and directed the opening to her mug. Released steam rose to her face. She decided it was time for a movie. Just to relax.

She took a tape from her shelf and studied it carefully. The case was hard, but brittle in its aged state. A piece of white plastic fell into her palm, like an eggshell shard. She regarded the colorful picture on the cover, the two-dimensional appearance of the princess with lines that meant curvature or angles in skin or clothing. The supporting cast flanked her like pillars over a Madonna, smiling if they were funny or frowning if they were evil. There was an arch painted around the scene, styled like a gothic window, its sharp points and dark grooves muted for children's sensibilities. Bin opened the case,

took the heavy black tape out and pushed it through the door of her VCR. The television screen was filled with the white and black of static, the leftovers of the great cosmic collision picked up by antennae into the impotent screen. The VCR kicked on and the screen went black, blaring into the room the familiar and calming hum of tape around spools, feedback in the tubes. The numbing presence of a familiar anticipation came over Bin as she abstractly enjoyed this ritual. She sat down on the couch, tucking her legs away under her, gripping her warm mug. Even the message from Interpol bathed her face in a blue glow that felt like mom doing laundry and dad coming home for lunch. The warnings, the notices, the bright splash of marketing, and finally the opening credits. Bin felt a pang of self consciousness deep in her bowels as she saw her thirty year old hand clutching a crocheted blanket around her body, settled in on a weekday to watch a children's cartoon. The room shifted, but she melted into this familiar frame, washing her dark mind with the bright stupefying sparkles of these candy versions of worldly, ruthless fairytales.

I walked around the outside of the library, studying its peculiar shape. It spun, spilling borrowed light onto the sidewalk. How am I going to do this? I closed my eyes and a shower of fish scale diamonds slid sideways across my eyelids. Street noise and the smell of exhaust fought my concentration. The changing proximity of pedestrians put me off balance. I opened my eyes and steadied myself, looked at my watch. Half an hour, a little more. The diamond black lines crossed each other, thickening and thinning as I jogged to the door. Open space, small people and furniture, strange screen-printed carpets. I watched the familiar space play through my professional eyes for the first time.

Swinging my backpack around to the front I fished out the map of the library. Just enough time to look through everything once, use the map before the meeting. Before they tell me what they think I should do with it. Well, I have some ideas already. The map is actually pretty cool – flat, colorful, designer. But, does it match the signifiers of the library? OK, their offices are on the eleventh floor, a strange little out of the way spot. It looks small on here. Seems unimportant to the map's general scheme. That makes sense. They want to meet on the fourth floor, which also looks tucked out of the way. Start from the top, work down. Ah, here's the information desk. "Tour the Central Library", oh and here's another copy of the map. I glanced through the tour suggestions but decided to submit to the cues of the building itself and its signifiers. I walked.

The walls are stunning. They move and breathe like crystal lungs. The skeleton of exposed concrete, towering blocks of it, the yellow escalators connecting, the spiral book stacks, the invisible and inconceivable support structures – feeling that death is

only suspended because you haven't personally stopped willing it to remain at bay – it's like looking at a body on an operating table. It reaches up and out from inside, while lying helpless, motionless.

I scribbled a note on the map I had clipped to my clipboard. The signage, the signs and shapes in place to shuffle you about, have an athletic functionality, made of neon and rubber. The escalators rise like the slimy yellow entrails of an insect – the main thoroughfare of an ant's being. They are easy to find, that's what I'm drawn to, so that's where I'll go.

I find myself riding a nearly continual road uphill, uphill, moving moving up a gradual slope until I am thrust to a window overlooking the city and the Sound.

Reconnected to my position in the city, the building slips around me and then steadies itself, eyes anchored on the bay.

Wandering back down the tenth floor I move through the clusters of furniture and people. I see a door beyond them on the far wall. Probably the stairs, a much more banal place. But yellow and curves pull me. The book spiral slopes gently in rubber, glass and light gray metal. I enter into the library's innermost system. It pumps me over its rugged rubber paths around the stacks. Numbers tell me where I am but don't give me direction the lantern sucks at my ear the silver stacks switch past me like blades of an airplane propeller. So many white and red cells lamp pumped into the yellow vein again.

I float disembodied

– I can't feel my arms or my legs.

I know I am gone.

OK, ok, I can do this. I feel back into my mind, searching for a tape. The escalator carries me down to the Mixing Chamber, there are screen printed carpets and people sitting at orange chairs peering into square monitors, blue lights in their faces. Mother's lemon scented wood thick carpet underfoot smooth handle feels sick in my palm the tapes line up like soldiers some I know some I don't know.

The metal grid at the base of the escalator pulls on the soles of my canvas shoes. One tape has flames I know Brooliga I know *Sleeping Beauty*, I know *Snow White*, I know *Alice in Wonderland*. Here's one I don't know. There are steps, down into the place. Red walls red floors wall floor swallowing slide.

Dry grass pokes from the plastic lips and rustles in the wind from the escalator force. It says Drekkep quickly in a hoarse red voice, tall grass waving to me, pushing sunlight and the smell of dry grass, dandelions and clover. The smooth pink oval looks

out, over. I float over to it and see vast carpets with long leaves printed onto them.

I take it from the stack open it and my hands are there solid and my face can feel the push, my nose can smell the grass. One raised platform with grasses, long leaves pulling themselves up, the space between each leaf pushing against the soil the weight of the open air impaling onto the still blades. I put my hands out but see nothing. A suburban neighborhood spreads out over the shadows cast by passing clouds. A stone sign, freshly cut from a riverbed, says "Saddle Creek Hollow", and icy blue water hums over each side, pumped by an inadequate motor, falling into round beige pools. Gentle sloping hills push away from the sign, radiating in all directions.

I step onto one of the hydrated fescue squares in front of me. Houses are neatly placed in the middle of each small square, windows matched and looking into each other. Their clean gray shingles glance over gables and offset angles. They look like giant cubist elephants roaming the hills. Yellow acidic streams of driveway drip from their garages, flow into the asphalt river that mouths the nearby highway. I scan, find a grove of wild trees in the distance, behind what looks like a recreational area. I know where I am, stomach hollowing. I start toward the grove, heat swimming up from the asphalt. This section doesn't have a driveway yet, just a dirt path with wooden stakes stuck along the boundary, sun-bleached pink and orange plastic strips tied onto their leaning splintered heads. There is a fenced swimming pool, a tennis court, and a basketball hoop sprouting from its own square of fresh asphalt. I pass the pool where people lounge in the direct heat, women reclining in deck chairs, one knee propped up, muscles taugth. A boy pops the lid off the gutter and squeals. His friends skip around in circles while he rings his hands. Hand dives in, pulls out a frog. He squeals again, straight into my inner ear, and flings the frog toward the umbrella tables. It lands on the deck with a sick smack, enough to move the statuesque knees. Now the green of the tennis court absorbs the sun, rubber stretching. The white lines are rigid and curved. Now the edges of the black asphalt square crumbles, spilling shiny black crumbs into the dry brown and green under and around it. The heat spoils the lines of the houses. I reach the thick grove of

trees and underbrush, as of yet untouched by the construction. Tearing through the thorns and burr-bushes, planting footsteps into the thick layer of rotting tree matter, as close to the middle as I can determine in such an oblong shape, at a high point. Sit down, breathless, in the deep grasses – wind my arms into them, holding them firmly at the roots. Nothing can move me. I can see the fields spreading from this point, can twist around and see everything.

Woven into the grasses Bin twisted with the wind that sought a way through the thick trees and underbrush. The grasses grew greener, shorter, pulling her hands into the cooling ground. She watched and diminished.

First were the families. They left the pool. They left in their cars and moving vans. They took their belongings, their landscaped shrubberies and pond installations, their golf carts. The yards grew unkempt, losing their shape. When the construction companies arrived the sweaty men hauled themselves out of dirty trucks, cleaned themselves by hauling planks and pipes away from each site. The asphalt under the basketball hoop tightened, and liquified. The tall stalk of metal broke into pieces and was taken away. The herd of houses caught a sickness and died, one by one, an epidemic of deconstruction. They turned pink, lost their roofs, went blind. Their gray skeletons grew golden, losing rain and sun but then they too were taken up, put onto trucks and hauled. Someone picked the pink and orange petals from their woody stems, flowers grown more and more bright. The field grew fresh, undivided.

When the cows were herded back onto the land Bin watched them roam. They wallowed in the filthy ponds. Men came with trucks again. The herd moved into a different field as the men used their trucks to pull giant worms out of the ground. The worms looked like liquid sand, and the holes they came out of reached far into the earth, down to the deep water, among the craggy rocks. The men mixed the worms together for a while, and then took them away. The cows returned.

The farmer came to the field often. He would collect hay onto his truck, pushing it into twine-wrapped bundles with a pitchfork. Sometimes his wife would come with

him. She always came with a handful of wildflowers, and she always planted them again before she left. When she wasn't with him he would crouch in the dirt, looking at unknown things. He would study the fences that needed repair, he would herd cattle into a trailer. The farmer stood up straighter and straighter, coming into the land more often. The herd swelled in size. A few times the farmer and his wife came with children. Little heads bobbed like ducks on water, swirling around them as the farmer and his wife walked straight ahead. They laughed as the children gathered insects to show them, pretended to apply their shining tongues to the salt lick, screamed and hollered.

Her pulse was racing mine,
rounding elbows and necks
beating against our chests.
I can barely breathe,
so long, it's been so long.
I untangle my limbs from my mother's
Run to the door.
My bicycle is here, yes,
spilled in the driveway.
I ride it for the first time
in over 150 years,
feet grown limber,
remembering shoes on pedals,
the push of the chain.
Look for the log, tires treading
into the grass, straight line, straight to the log.
I knew it would be there, but it was still
so amazing. Everything is amazing.
Dump the bicycle where it was,
next to hers - grown shiny,
risen from the earth, fallen branches,
mildew dried from the rainbow seat.
I can feel her closer, ever closer -
Jump the log, never mind climbing,
pants, skin sewn together by a stray barb

A dog barked, Bin spun quick around. She spotted herself running over the hills as fast as she could, legs and arms thin and pumping, pushing herself into the fields from home, forcing herself between each breeze. She stopped, panting, sobbing, dropped at the sorest spot in the field. The grass rubbed her green knees clean. She leapt up, torso twisted, low wails escaping on each deep exhale, looking back, sprinted into the grove of trees. Each branch shook as she scrambled up the side of a fallen birch held by the other live trees in the grove. The cows began moving through that part of the land, slowly grazing and then as a herd picking up speed, spilling over the high hill and down into the valley. The dog knew how to guide them again, and she let them rest once they arrived in their pasture.

As the cows moved down the hill the girl scrambled out of the trees and ran to the smaller one who was running slightly behind her. They met, clasping each other like halves of a peach, tumbling into the dirt and sunlight, spilling sweetness. Anchored to her spot in the far grove, Bin echoed the girls' words that rang out into the open field, crying apologies, unraveling the forgiving words tangled up with them. The sisters touched the grass, and the roots loosened. Bin let go.

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