My father arrived late to my conception. His day had been difficult. His patient was dying. The young man had called the night before, apologizing for the disturbance. My father, a great reader of men, had smelled death over the phone. Some patients called for solace and companionship, some for consolation. Others called because their lungs were flooded, their chests weighted with fluid, or their feet numb. Even when they knew and he knew, and inevitability breathed down their swollen necks, they did not want to bother him. On those calls, so polite and apologetic, he told them to come to the hospital. He hung up. He rang the on-call nurse and told her to meet him at the emergency room and prepare endotracheal tubes, oropharyngeal airways, and mechanical ventilators. He did not need a list of symptoms. He did not make a diagnosis.

There are people who want their physician for comfort, and there are people who want to pretend the physician is not necessary. My father knew the difference. When they treated him as a parent, complaints uttered before he asked how they were, there was no concern. When a phone call started with a patient making conversation, labored breathing and long pauses interspersing comments on the weather, my father was up and dressed and looking for his keys.

He had spent the day with the man, reading charts and draining lungs. The elderly are accepting, if frightened, of their ends; not so, the youth. Young patients are angry. The unfairness of their illness turns their world gray. They swear at television shows, laugh at radio songs, and throw magazines in the trash. The angry do not enjoy popular culture. Illusions of immortality do not fool the dying. The great American promise—you

can do anything—does not apply to the terminal and the bedridden. The young men and women who lie beneath burdened chests, with shallow breaths and dry, pursed lips, see through the sitcoms, the pop songs, the celebrity gossip. And it makes them mad.

If they are not angry, then they are sad. Their grief is oppressive. Nurses avoid the sad ones. At least the angry are funny. They make jokes. The mourning faces of the dying young are burdensome to look upon. Their quiet eyes and long stares would be bearable if their depression did not spring from understanding. Those who weep see through the pointlessness of rage.

The young man had smiled when my father walked into the hospital room. Evening was approaching, and my father had stopped by for a final check before returning home.

"Sorry I woke you this morning, Doc." The words were soft and gray, wedged between shallow breaths and painful swallows.

"How you feeling, John?" My father stood at the end of the bed. He unhooked the medical chart and looked at his patient. The man was thin. The springy flesh of the twenty-three-year-old had shrunk; the skin was tight and drawn across his withered frame.

"My sister's getting married."

"Really?" My father replaced the chart on the hook. He walked to the side of the bed and smiled. "When?"

"Two months." The man's eyes were faded, his pupils large. My father leaned forward and checked his pulse.

"That's great. Do you like the guy?"

“He’s short.” The young man swallowed, his lips open as his throat worked. “But he’s all right.”

“Are you excited to go?”

John closed his eyes. The corner of one lip lifted. His breath came in three short puffs.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

The man’s blond hair fell across ashen cheeks. His pulse was weak. The tips of his fingers were blue.

“Come on, John. That’s—”

“It’s all right, Doc.” He opened his eyes. They were dull from dehydration. “It’s just the way it is.”

My father held the skeletal hand. When patients wanted to talk, he talked. When they wanted distraction, he told jokes. When they understood, and voiced their clarity in simple sentences, he did not offer pity. He did not offer reasons. He did not mention his Catholicism unless they brought up theirs. He stood by their beds, or pulled a chair next to the wires and tubes, and sat. He held their hands. He listened as they spoke of mothers, past lovers, and dead pets. Sometimes, they did not speak, but still my father sat: doctor and patient, living and dying, both quiet and peering into the chasm.

He left the clean white room and drove home. John’s labored breaths burned in his chest. The roads were narrow and curved. The fading sun outlined autumn leaves and telephone wires.

He pulled his briefcase from the backseat and walked to the house. The air was full of musk and dusk and fireplace scents. The door creaked as he opened it, the

floorboards of the old farmhouse sighing beneath his weight. He hung his jacket in the hallway and sat in the antique rocking chair. He slipped off his shoes and padded to the front of the woodstove. One dog slept, the occasional twitch belying her dreams; another smiled and thumped his tail at my father's approach. The cat brushed past his leg, returning to stretch its black paws against his calf, kneading the trousered skin and gazing up at my father with shuttered eyes.

My father found my mother in the bath, her eyes closed, head resting against the porcelain rim. She said nothing when he shut the door and seated himself on the mat beside the tub. The third dog blinked against the steam in the small room.

"John's dying."

My mother nodded. She lifted her arms, wet and shining, to my father's collar.

"Come."

He removed his tie as my mother released the pale buttons down the front and cuffs of his shirt. She undid his belt. He pulled the undershirt up and over his head. She scooted forward. He stood and stepped from his trousers and underwear, and bent to remove his socks.

The bathtub was big—a white, ancient thing with clawed feet and high, rounded sides. He stepped in, wincing at the temperature my mother preferred. She smiled and slid across him, her chest against his, the curve of her buttocks rising from the clear water. She kissed his neck.

He slid his palms across her lower back and pressed his lips against her wet hair.

"I hate it when they die."

My mother closed her eyes. She lifted a hand and wiped the tear from his cheek.

They had met when he was in medical school and she was a nurse. My mother worked in the Emergency Room. My father was finishing the last year of his Pulmonology studies, buried in texts discussing respiratory infections, lung disease and thoracic surgery, while she was an expert in severed, panicked flesh. He picked her up at her apartment and they walked along the narrow streets of Baltimore, watching the harbor come into view.

My parents were both tall, quiet people. She had worn purple the day they met: a long skirt and light top, floating alongside his pressed trousers and buttoned shirt. They passed beneath cherry blossoms. The sun was setting when they approached a friend's apartment, a room atop a bookstore. My father had been invited to a party.

They rang the bell and climbed dark, wooden stairs, entering the open door. Couples lay in corners, lights dimmed and smoke heavy in the air. The host was stoned. He took their photo and handed them the Polaroid. They sat and held warm drinks in plastic cups. The smell of smoke and the sound of laughter turned to breath and sex. The air thickened as private scents grew bold. My father was exhausted. He had been studying all night for his Reptilian Embryology class, a five-credit waste of frog dissection. His eyes drifted shut, lulled to sleep by the sounds and smells of drugs and lust. Slumped in a corner, his head fell forwards. His hands lay by his sides.

My mother took one large palm in her own, linked his long fingers between hers, and admired his smooth flesh. His arm was hot, pressed against the linen of her skirt. She traced the patterns of his palm and saw that he had been kissed once, an awkward encounter with a buck-toothed girl in summer that had ended in bruised lips and bent necks. She saw that he loved his mother, who was sick and feeble beneath his father's

rage and drink. She saw him bending towards the small woman, rubbing her back and carrying her dinner to the table as she raised her legs to her chest, easing the burden of emphysema. She saw his gentleness in the hospital and his shyness in class. She saw that he was not the most brilliant student. He was not the best diagnostician, but he was intelligent and kind. He looked his patients in the eye. She saw that he had named his cadaver, and that he spoke to the body in the second person even as the circular saw threw pieces of scalp and skull over his face.

He began to snore. She rested her head on his shoulder.

My mother knew things. She prepared for work by running her fingers across a windowpane. She dressed in her white skirt and comfortable shoes, and she counted the number of new patients as she tied her hair in a bun at her neck. She knew the man from the motorcycle accident would arrive on a gurney, legs lost below the knee, the side of his face removed by road. She knew he would speak no English. She knew the shock would ease the pain but not the fear. She knew the others would adopt their work expressions, serious and detached, as they wheeled him to the operating room. She knew a hand on his shoulder, a soft smile, and simple words would calm him.

Days before the collisions, heart attacks or bar fights, she knew who would enter the hospital. Before the diagnoses and the surgeries, she knew who would leave and who would stay, wrapped in a large, black bag, wheeled down to level G.

When my father woke, surprised by the location and the soft form to his left. He shifted, peering beneath his lids, and saw the purple skirt tucked across her legs. She held his hand in hers and turned.

She smiled. “Perhaps you should take me home now.”

He flushed. They exited the dark stairwell into the evening air.

“I-” My father hesitated. “I mean, I-”

My mother did not interrupt. She continued to hold his hand as they passed beneath the cherry trees.

“I was tired,” he finished.

She nodded. “The party was boring.”

Her hands were gentle against his palm. “Tell me more about the embryology of the frog.”

Maple leaves passed above their heads, dark against the sky. The boats in the harbor were large and rhythmic, swaying and tapping against the docks. The bricks beneath their feet hummed in the spring air. A car honked. A couple laughed. A light breeze brushed my mother’s skirt against my father’s leg. He placed the Polaroid in his pocket.

They reached her apartment.

“Carol’s home,” my mother said as she looked up at the French windows, bright from above.

“Your roommate?”

She nodded and lifted one leg to the bottom step. “Otherwise I’d invite you in.”

My father laughed. “Even after I fell asleep?”

She grinned. “Yes.”

He looked up at the large windows and then down at my mother’s face. “Damn shame she’s home.”

“Get some sleep.” My mother smiled. “Then give me a call.”

She turned and walked up the four front steps. A key in the lock, a hand to shut the smooth mahogany, and the sound of retreating steps roared against my father's pulsing heart.

He turned, profiled against the dark sky, and walked back to campus.

Upstairs, my mother opened the door to the apartment. Her roommate reclined on their yellow couch with a cigarette and a bottle of beer.

"How was it?" Carol flicked her ash on a conch shell that rested on the footstool.

"He fell asleep." My mother laid her bag on the counter. "He took me to an orgy and he fell asleep."

Carol looked up, her arm still extended. "You went to an orgy?" She leaned back, the smoking cigarette forgotten. "I never thought, I mean, I didn't think you—" She paused. "Did you say he fell asleep?"

My mother opened the fridge. "Yes."

Carol reached again for the cigarette, dismayed to see how little remained. "Well, I guess that's settled."

My mother smiled and placed cold turkey slices on a blue plastic plate. "Not yet, but it will be."

My father's walk to his dormitory was not long. The campus was close to the center of town, and he enjoyed the uneven brick beneath his feet. That night he had walked quickly, the hum of arousal overriding his fatigue.

He lived alone. Occupancy was full and rent was expensive, so after the suicide, the college hadn't been able to move him. Every night he entered the same small square, his bed to the right, his desk straight ahead. Every night he turned on the light and

listened to the same ceiling fan begin its lazy spin. Every night he saw him, hanging and stiff and wearing one sock.

That unexpected evening, after the shock, the sick, and the call for help, he had stood by the door. It seemed rude to enter and, even from the doorway, he knew it was too late. The chair lay sideways beneath the still, small feet. A stain spread beneath the shadow of the body. My father's panic climbed.

His neighbor across the hall had entered first.

"Jesus." The thin man leaned his head past my father's shoulder, staring at the body that hung from the ceiling fan. "You all right, man?"

He nodded, eyes on the stain. "I'm fine."

The police came. An ambulance followed. People gathered, peering into the doorway, past the lines of tape. Thirty future doctors crowded the hallway. A paramedic picked up the chair and stood on it. He cut the leather belt from around the crooked neck. Another took the pulse and pronounced the man dead. They lay the body across the urine stain. My father's neck hairs stood as he saw the swollen face of his roommate, the quiet Japanese boy he lived with but never knew.

Someone had taken my father to the police station, where he waited on a bench. People and paperwork whirled around him. The harsh lights of the busy room hurt his eyes. He recognized a volunteer from his first year physiology class: a tall, sickly man in torn jeans and a stained brown shirt. His ears hummed. His roommate stood in the corner of his vision, watching him. Someone came out and ushered my father inside an office.

"He only had one sock."

“I’m sorry?” The officer looked up from the report, a pencil hovering in his left hand.

He’s left-handed, my father thought, *just like me.*

“One sock?”

The nuns used to hit me when I used my left hand.

My father noticed the silence between the two men.

They watched him.

“I meant, I noticed he was wearing only one sock. No shoes. I thought that was strange.”

One officer nodded and jotted on a piece of paper in a manila folder.

“Perhaps for the investigation.” My father swallowed. “Perhaps it’s important.”

“Sir, can you tell us exactly what happened this evening?”

My father looked at the desktop.

“I opened the door and turned on the light.” He swallowed again. “Ken is usually in the library. I don’t really see him.”

The conversation continued. My father answered questions, embarrassed by how little he knew of the man he had shared a room with for the past six months. When the officer closed the thin folder and stood to shake my father’s hand, the clock behind the desk read 11:30.

“That’s fine. Thank you for your time.”

My father gathered his coat from the back of the chair, his fingers shaking against the shoulder seams.

"Will you…" He paused and stared hard at the rough fabric in his hands. "Will you contact someone? I don't know … what to do."

The officer leaned forward. "The college will take care of the details."

My father nodded and followed the officer into the noisy waiting room. He walked back to campus, the stones uneven beneath his feet. It had not occurred to him, until he returned to his room and to the yellow tape across the door, that he should have stayed somewhere else that night.

The corridor was silent. The rooms were empty. The future doctors of America had left to spend the night in bars and laboratories.

He stared at the door. He did not want to go in, but his clothes were in that room. His books. His pens. He looked around. No one else was here. He faced the yellow tape. He had classes tomorrow.

He pressed the door, breaking the tape as the door swung open. He turned on the light and saw that the chair was upright and tucked against Ken's desk. The bed was made. The papers were stacked. Even the books were as he had left them.

My father sat on the edge of his bed and pressed the toe of one shoe against the heel of the other, prying off the tight leather. His mother had bought them for him. He wore them because he knew nothing about shoes, except when they hurt his feet. He lay on his bed, dressed and above the covers. The moon was out. When he turned off the light, it illuminated the floor and cast long shadows across the desk towards the closet doors. It fell to the middle of the floor, stopping before the edge of his bed. It reached the stain, highlighting its dark form in the center of the pale carpet.

He did not sleep that night. He stared at the stain. He closed his eyes. It pressed against his lids. A man reduced to a spot, to the sick smell of ammonia. My father turned on his side, one arm beneath his pillow and the other fisted and pressed to his chest. The stain stared back, a shadow beneath the moon, the acid scent of sorrow.

When my father left my mother on the night of their first meeting, he returned to the room. He opened the door and stared at the carpet. The stain was no longer visible, but he remembered its shape. The college had paid for professional cleaners. They had removed the desk, chair, bed and bedside table of the other man. They had sent Ken's books to the used bookstore, and had put his clothing in a box and shipped it to his family. The few toiletry items he owned were thrown away. The room was large for only one person, but my father did not reorganize his furniture. He did not cross the line beneath the ceiling fan. He lived as he had lived before, the ghost of his roommate occupying the same space that Ken had in life.

The night my father met my mother, he gazed at the carpet. He spoke. He remained on the edge of his bed and told the absent stain about his evening, his exhaustion and embarrassment. He told it about her purple skirt and soft hair. He showed it the Polaroid. He said she had told him to sleep and to call her again. Tomorrow, she was working and he had class. Perhaps he would invite her somewhere on Sunday. Somewhere they could walk, so he would stay awake.

He spoke to Ken for an hour, exchanging his shirt and trousers for a T-shirt and boxers.

"I'm going to change rooms tomorrow," he said. "I'm going to ask for a change."

He nodded and gathered the toothbrush and paste from his dresser drawer. “This building is a long walk from the laboratory, and I’m spending all my time there this term, so it makes sense for me to be closer.”

The floor was silent. My father left for the bathroom down the hall. When he returned, the moon had drifted behind a cloud. Its glow on the floor was dim. He lay on his bed and turned off the light. The moon hid further, its reach drawing away and towards the window. He watched the stain retreat into shadow. He drifted to sleep and dreamed of his dead roommate and a purple skirt. He twisted, rubbing his right foot against the mattress until his own sock inched down and he awoke with one bare foot.

Years later, moving inside my mother beneath the bath water, he thought of the man who had died in his room. The small man he never knew. He hated when they died.

Their sighs peaked and quieted. She lay across his chest. His hands caressed the swell of flesh that peeked above the water. She shivered and he rose, setting her on her feet outside the bath.

“Dogs fed?”

She nodded. He wrapped a towel around her and picked her up again.

She laughed. “Aren’t you hungry?”

He shook his head and carried her to bed.

Nine months and three weeks later, my mother kneeled beside her beloved balboa tree. I moved. The floods broke, and she pressed her hands against the coarse bark, feeling me twist. The garden was down the hill, far from the house. I moved again, and she bent forward.

My father had been fretting over my slow arrival, but my mother welcomed my burden. She had already lost three children, all boys, all early. The first had died in the birth canal. The physician had failed to remove the umbilical cord from around the infant's neck and it had suffocated inside of her, a tiny hand to a tiny chest, just beginning to crown.

The second stopped moving during her sixth month, a week before her check-up and two weeks after she had begun to take the experimental drug the hospital had promised was safe. She had known what the ultrasound would say, but had said nothing when the physician stilled, his eyes locked on the unmoving screen.

The last boy survived the longest but was delivered as a stillbirth, dead on arrival. The nurses had told her she was lucky to be alive. They showed her the charts, the blood loss, the risk of hemorrhage. She nodded and listened, but as she lay in the hospital bed that night, beneath the drugs and pain and panic, she remembered something. She concentrated, leaving her body to enter her mind, as machines beeped around her. She closed her eyes and listened. An infant's voice, singular and pathetic, broke through the edge of her memory. She turned to her side and wept.

My labor was simple. My mother raised trees, and the balboa was in her garden. She had no flowers. She did not like herbs. Each day of our pregnancy we went, supported on her strong legs, down the hill behind the field and in between the local maples until we found her joy—the square acres of tall, imported beauties. My father worried about her there, thinking of hunting season, rapists, and rabid dogs. She smiled and patted his arm, never telling him of the bear sightings, the hikers, or the wild foxes.

She ordered saplings from Boston and planted them in the garden, making room for her exotic friends between native birches and pines. She kneeled, reaching beyond my growing self to smooth the bases of her bamboo, her balboa and other large, tropical wonders from all continents. No one knew how they survived, how the green leaves of Africa, Asia, and Europe thrived beneath the snow, sleet, and hail of New England winters, but every morning they greeted us, healthy, bright, and vibrant.

The neighbors thought she was odd. She had no interest in the gardening society, despite their frequent requests for her attendance. She did not partake of village gossip or communal complaints. Sunday mornings, while my father sat attentive in a pew, she remained outdoors, planting, trimming, and seeding. Sometimes she sat, slim back resting against broad bark, eyes closed, listening to green whispers. She attended the obligatory parties in winter, seated among the doctors' wives, but conversation was strained. Neither of my parents was skilled in mindless chatter, but while a doctor's social silence is ignored, his wife's is unforgiven. As my father feigned interest in golf, electronics, and the Lion's Club, so my mother pretended to listen to recipes, potty training techniques, and quilting advice. Both ignored the marital discontent pervading the community, the rolled eyes of the men, the disgusted whispers of the women.

After the parties, my parents laughed in the car on the way home.

"Learn a new pie recipe, my dear?"

"Still fucking your secretary, sweetheart?"

It did not surprise my mother that I should make my entrance in her garden. Her blood was my own, and even in utero I shared her dislike for sterile and authoritarian things.

My waves began. She arched and changed positions. Contractions stopped her breath. Her fists dug into the earth by her sides. She pressed and twisted, turned and bowed. Her eyes rolled back. Her lip bled beneath her teeth.

When I slid out, my crown landed on a bed of grass and summer leaves. The rest of me followed, slick with impatience and amniotic fluid. She squatted, bearing down to pass the afterbirth, strong thighs on either side of me. She made no noise, and the birds continued to peer down from the trees around us.

She wiped my face with her skirt and slapped my backside until I cried. The garden shears cut the umbilical cord, and she nursed me beneath the heaving sweat of her cardigan. We lay on the ground, cool earth against hot flesh. The balboa stood above. The dirt was matted and red beneath us.

The sky began to darken. The birds grew quiet. She removed her skirt and wrapped me in the bloodied, violet cloth. Leaving behind her basket of gardening tools and the fleshy mass of my afterbirth, she carried me through the trees, pausing to rest against pine, birch, bamboo and maple, until she reached the edge of the garden. She continued upwards, my body cradled in her left arm while she used the right for balance, one foot in front of the other, blood and fluid congealing between her thighs. She reached the house and rested on the steps of the deck before she opened the screen door.

My father was in the hospital when he heard me cry. Miles away, an hour before he would return home, my voice reached his ears, followed by my mother's coos and the sound of running water. He checked his pager. It was blank. He stared at the square rectangle beside the elevator, the glowing circles and arrows. There was no sound. The

door slid open. He returned to the nurse's station. There were no messages. He walked again to the elevator, hearing nothing as he pressed the button.

When he arrived home, having left early and sped home, the door was unlocked. Fresh air came through the screen. Seeing blood on the deck, he called my mother's name. Her voice came from the back of the house, and the steam from the bathroom reached his face as he rushed in. The dogs lay on the tile floor, noses resting on folded paws, heads tucked against tails. In the bath, pressed against the drape of her large breasts, I was quiet and red. The water washed pink across our skin.

My father stood in the doorway.

She smiled, raising her face with closed eyes. Her hand caressed my back. "We have a daughter."

A dog, hungry for dinner, stood and stretched, his tail wagging.

My father pressed a hand to my bald scalp. "How—"

"The usual way."

"Where?"

"In the garden. Between the trees."

"Why didn't you call?" He watched her sleepy eyes open. "Why didn't you call me?"

"The garden is far from the house." She yawned and stroked my back. "I knew what to do."

The next day, my father had descended the hill to retrieve my mother's tools. He did not like the deep woods; they made him nervous, and he rarely walked through them. He wondered at her love of dark, green places. Most people preferred colorful flowers in

gardens beneath the kitchen window, from which they picked bouquets to decorate Easter dinner or Sunday brunch. What purpose did trees serve? He wondered if something other than trees lurked along the border of their property, as he wondered what else lurked along the edges of her mind, beyond the quiet lines he knew.

She had told him to look for the large pines on his right, the path between the bamboo in front of him, and the birch on his left. He knew the hours she spent here, the bills from the nurseries and the gardening stores. He said nothing because he assumed the urge to nurture was innate in women, and that the absence of children, the loss of children, had left her wanting. He did not understand miscarriages, and he was ashamed that to him they were lost ideas, not lost children. After the first, she had stopped laughing. After the second, she had stopped working. She had begun the garden before the third. When the contractions hit, too early, he worried she would stop everything and he would lose her, but the garden had helped. Her love of solitude, silence, and earth, and her need for large things and dirt, she found it here. He did not understand, but he welcomed the return of her joy.

He saw the bamboo and walked between. The smell of pine drifted past his face. The cool breeze of birch brought goose bumps to his arm. He continued. Leaves and twigs and bugs crunched beneath his feet. This world was as unfamiliar to the man as he was to it, but the garden accepted him. It knew my mother's scent, and it recognized her trace on him. Branches parted to allow him entrance. He saw the balboa.

The tree was large and lumped, a warty beast with frazzled hair and distended limbs. The basket lay at its base, turned on its side. He did not notice that the shears were missing. He did not suspect that the afterbirth had been eaten, the bloodied earth

scratched by bear claws, a piece of his wife and child ingested by wild things. He did not know our bodies fed the shadowed lives behind his house.

The garden was quiet. He picked up the basket, unaware that he stood where I had first lain. He did not see the imprint of my mother's feet or smell the sweat against the bark.

The garden was dark. He hurried back between the bamboo. The chill of early evening reached through his shirt and ruffled the hairs along his chest. He held the basket in his left hand, using the right for balance as he ascended the hill, as my mother had held me, unaware that he followed her footprints.

My birth was my mother's last visit to the garden. Seven days later, she lay with me in the bath. I suckled, but her arms grew limp.

No one knew why. Obstetrical hemorrhage, perhaps. Deep Vein Thrombosis.

When my father returned home that evening, the water had turned cold. My crescent moon shivered against still breasts.