Tamara Grogan

Little Death

All day, he scoots through the house, shouting. She talks back, sometimes with a high mom-voice, or with her normal voice. Neither understands the other. Sometimes he cries for long stretches. Or, he says, Aah!

He says, Bbbbbb.

The mother says, God.

When she's doing okay, she tells stories. Pigs, wolves, bears. She can rattle these off. They cooked him up in a pot! Split him open with an axe! He was never seen in that part of the forest again.

He of course has a name, a stiff-upper-lip name like a London suburb, but she cannot bring herself to utter it. From the first, he has been Baby. Sometimes, lately, Boy.

She'll read the paper and turn the news into a story.

That mother turned her back, she'll say. A boy a little older than you, in a shopping mall. Something on sale, she turns her back and he's gone. Goes off between bigger boys who promise, she'll say. What, do you think? A trip to the moon on gossamer wings. A girl around the corner with pink eyes. A train ride? One minute, and he's gone. All of you, you all follow bigger boys as far as they'll take you. Your stubby legs grow tired, but there are bigger hands to hold. Dirty hands! If you want to sit down, or ask where is that pink-eyed girl? Bigger boys have pockets, with candy. That keeps you going long enough to get through doors. Outside, they walk fast and pull hard. Everyone in the street is in a hurry. No one looks. Brothers, you could be. You're out of breath but not scared, since these are boys, like you, only bigger. You want to get there. Open sky at the end of the street makes you break away running, kneel and push through the fence hole. Look! you shout. Wave your arms at the line of cars on the track, zip under a boxcar and out the other side. Bigger boys follow, they take their time. No hurry, no worry. You are that small. On the ground before they know it. Then the job is to stop that crying.

Baby listens to the noise his mother's words make. He looks at her trembling mouth, waves fistfuls of Cheerios in the air.

It only took a few minutes, she'll say. Hear that? One brick flies, and the mother, at that exact moment, is in an office, writing his name on paper. The

pen in her hand grown too fat to write with. Then the questions are done, the manager turns on the P.A., she finds Kleenex in her pocketbook. When his name is heard in shiny corridors and in front of three-way mirrors, first and last, a half-dozen times, by the time people look up from racks of sale merchandise and pay attention to a fact, a boy missing, why you know, he's stopped being a fact, or is a different fact. The back of his head crushed in, his body lying across one track, not long enough to cross both. In a while, a train slices it in half, before anybody thinks to look there. The other boys have gone home. Do you hear me?

You could become one of these.

Dark for an hour already, and it's only five-thirty. The mother shoves one leg then another through snow. Twice a day she makes the trip, but drifting fills the channel her body plows so it is like fresh snow every time. She's got the hatchet and a bucket. She tugs at the peg, ducks through the door, scrapes the snow aside with her boot, tosses feed. Chickens gurgle inside their house. With the hatchet she chops at ice on top of the water bucket and flicks off shards.

Mornings are the same except in daylight instead of darkness, with hatchet and feed and also a scrap bucket. The chickens strut their gangly strut down the ramp, lured by the ripe smell of peelings.

Tonight this air is hard with cold, and they don't come out. Their voices churr through the black doorway. Still alive.

With food on the ground and the moon a bright slice in the water bucket, she closes them up tight and follows her path toward the house. One light on, down at one end, in one window, a yellow rectangle of curtain. The window beside it is always dark. She has not turned on the light in that room since July. Very late every night she drops her clothes in a pile by the door, walks through the dark to the bed and gets in. At daybreak, sometimes with her eyes still closed, she grabs the clothes on her way next door to Baby, who needs her right away. His room has stayed open all night to the kitchen and the stove. Naked, she takes him on her lap. In his sleeper he feels like a teddy bear stuffed with sand. The milk pours. When she has fed and cleaned, wrapped and bundled, when the sopped diaper is in the pail, wet sleeper in the basket, his bed stripped and changed, the pile of clothes buttoned back onto her body, she can go in the kitchen, set him in his walker. She can get started.

But no morning is without its sinkholes. They open in the seconds between Baby's siren wail and her feet on the floor, or at the thrown switch of current and liquid in her breasts—somewhere between nakedness and clothing, there is always a moment. The hills tinge red out the window; she feels a calloused hand lift the hair from her neck. Or Baby lets go his happy mouthful, his head gains weight and lolls, and then it is not his dewy cheek against her but a narrow, scraping cheek, a dying pulse inside her and a sleepy voice whispering, What is it the French say? Death, little death.

First thing, there's the fire: handfuls of fatwood kindling get it going again, then trips down cellar and up with the moldy canvas full of pine and oak to last the day. She used to overload the carrier to the point she could barely heave it off the floor, to avoid the fourth trip, but now she makes a comfortable load for herself, takes the few more minutes in the lightbulb glare with Baby upstairs zipping into God knows what: a collapsed fire screen, full dishtub teetering overhead, claws and fangs of the man's old, irritable cat. The mother glances up the cellar steps to the gate at the top, measures the distance down—not long enough—notes the missing railing on one side. She can see the walker hurtling over, bouncing free of the steps, and his head . . . or there was the stack of firewood against the wall, taller than she was, one stick pulled from the middle and the whole thing would avalanche onto whoever was just there, against the bulkhead door, at the right angle. She had pitched down and stacked every piece of that wood herself, three cords, and remembered, just how hard and heavy. She could hear the lumpy music of them on concrete, like bowling pins on a slow strike.

The man was not around to stack wood this year. Not to cut timber, feed chickens, empty compost, shovel snow, bake bread, split kindling, can tomatoes, pull weeds, change oil, mow grass. Gone eight times a day for the diapers that needed changing, fever screams or vomit in the bed. Never there in the late afternoon when she thought five minutes with closed eyes might be enough to save her. Gone since the day of her six-week check-up, the day she ran a stoplight to get home because everything was finally okayed, shipshape, ready for gingerly love. There was Baby in the kitchen in his playpen. She had found him not even wet, whining a little. It seemed like the man had not been gone long, and though she was puzzled, she went about her business the rest of that day and night and did not fully realize until the next morning, hanging out diapers, when she glanced into the shed and saw his chainsaw

gone. He'd wanted toil and dirt, fruits of both their labor, this baby like one more row of beans. Yet he'd packed his tools and saw and started the truck. In two months she got a postal service card from Kayak Island, Alaska saying he would send her some money eventually but was saving it for now on a herring boat, twelve-hour days, to buy his way elsewhere. Hard life. He was hunkered down.

The mother read that card, and looked at his brown-eyed baby. She thought of the man hunkered down. Out loud she said, That's a team sport.

But the chickens had to be fed. She laid the card somewhere and put her boots on.

Baby's shits have been monsters the last little while, ever since she introduced him to the Jolly Green Giant, bright cubes and globes. They load his diaper, squeeze out the sides of his wrap and down the legs of his longjohns, so he is smeared from butt to ankle. This happens a couple of times a day, so on any given morning she might have just set him in the walker when he'd go red in the face, and she'd be half an hour getting him stripped and washed and changed again. Gagging, she stands him up in the tub and scrubs. He grins his two-toothed grin. His tiny bump of penis wags, caked with shit. The water gets too deep then, sometimes, before she knows it. The H on the hot water handle seems the boldest letter in the alphabet. H, H, H! it proclaims, and the white curved porcelain is noisy with its own hardness. She washes her hands meticulously at the end because there's a sinkful of the dishes they eat off of, then lunch to make. When she dries them, those hands scare her, scarred-up spider-webbed hands, a million lines per square inch.

Baby's naps collapse into smaller intervals. She used to be able to count on a round two hours in the afternoon, but lately the hours seem to be eating themselves and there are five minutes less, fifteen. One day she heard him squawking to himself again a mere hour after he'd closed his eyes. She stopped, envelope in hand (somewhere in the 600s, with over 300 left to go). She glanced around the kitchen: trays out, packed tight with long, white, sealed, squared-off stacks of letters, basket of diapers to hang, pile of bills to pay. Doable, in part, only if she galloped hard for the next hour. What if she ignored it, the laughing, gargling, happy certainty that she would come? If she snowshoed out, across the field and into the woods?

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Had he finished that bite of banana, had he started to cry? She was nowhere near, it wasn't even the same season, it was the lake late in summer, the man watching mothers with their children on the banks. He shook his head, nudged her. She saw that loose flesh swung on their bodies, except for one who swam along the buoys, hauled her fantastic self out, dripping, near the dock, and settled into a beach chair. The woman found herself praying for children to attach themselves to this swimmer, maybe the flaky-shouldered boys having a chicken fight, or the little girl holding her crotch, standing in water to her ankles. At that point Baby was a speck, not enough to talk about, just the first day or two of tender breasts. Unwilling, yet convinced, and now here, after the fact, sat the man shaking his head at the comfortable bodies of women with other things on the brain than toned buttocks. She continued her prayer. Of course no child ever approached the swimmer, oblivious to anything but her chair, hair wound in a spotless towel, fat book in her lap. The mothers wound their towels around their hips. Their movement was unceasing but slow, as if conserving themselves: squirting lotions, opening coolers, lifting toddlers from the shallows. Each mother's children were a buzz, a come-and-go around her. The woman watched and felt pressed down by something beyond the edge of her sight, a colossal vertiginous dark growing. She remembered that day, and the little cringe around the man's eyes. She also remembered lying in bed with him a long time later, Baby's back rising and falling in his, and the man's inwardness so great as to make her nervous of speaking. She lay on her back in the night-lit room and listened as the breathing on both sides of her fell into rhythm sometimes and then fell out. She lay and thought that whatever else, she was still herself. She was still herself. Wasn't she still herself?

Baby was still himself, red in the face, tears squirting like the juice of something. She must look down, feel. Hot food was cold. Cold food was brown. She would have to dump it all out and start over.

Then the feeding, again, him too mad and tired to care, nearly facedown in his plate, and the giving up, scraps to the bucket, dishes to the sink. Then diapering, and washing, tiny fingernails (too long, and somehow, dirty—impossible to cut), the singing and long nursing—seemed to get longer every night—his eyelids refusing to close while hers longed to shut out the light, to close on this tail-end of another impossible day. And still those damned chickens to feed. Always before her, the face of the man, sometimes the smile around his eyes but more often, the other thing, the cringe. She saw no other

grown person. She daydreamed about seeing the man again, a time when she might be holding a chainsaw.

There were so many other dreams, during the day, while her body was in motion: one, of the policeman's blue coat, afternoon sun bouncing off the tops of cars, making his buttons and helmet gleam, waiting on the stoop as the lace curtain twitched and fell, and the door cracked enough to reveal a face screwed tight. What is it then? a woman's voice would ask, one hand in a yellow rubber glove clutching the door. Speak up, what have they done now? For once the policeman won't say. He takes off his helmet, asks himself in. She makes him a cup, slamming more quickly and haphazardly through the kitchen while he sips and fingers the sleeve of his coat. And just when she thinks, This is too much, she'll brain him with the kettle if he doesn't out with it, he does, and she sucks in her breath and holds it, looking into this policeman's eyes to be sure it's not some vile prank of his to make her sweat. His gaze is hollow and steady. The two faces neither will look at smile from school photos on the fridge, side-by-side five-by-sevens with a blue chalky background held in place by magnetic carrots, a lettuce leaf, a pig. The woman leaves the room to powder up and get her things but is gone so long and so noisily the policeman has to come down the hall and knock at the door.

The part of the daydream she can't finish is the other woman, the one who's been told there's nothing more to be done, who leaves the shopping mall and drives her car blindly and parks it three feet from the curb. In this part the mother can only dream as far as a car sitting halfway out in the narrow street, the woman still inside it.

The newspaper is crowded with these stories. It's the details that hold her attention: a lake encircled with white pines, sky and sun overhead. A dock. A breeze making the surface shiver, and wavelets sucking at mud and long grass on the banks. Just under the water, slanting light but further down, weeds, bobbing trash, a few little crappie darting around a sedan parked as if waiting for someone to pick it up from the showroom. A dark, respectable container of cold water, with a little hand pushed against the backseat window. This is a new one, and it fascinates her. She tells it to herself differently each time. In one version, the woman skids off the highway, taps the gas pedal and throws herself out before the next thought comes. In another, she kisses them first and lets the engine idle for a few minutes before watching her own hand put the car into gear, like a pointing, prophetic hand in a dream. In all versions,

the woman is wearing a skirt and espadrilles, with fixed hair. A woman coming home from her job.

Tonight it is late, she has no idea when she let herself stop moving. She tells herself these leaning over, elbows on the kitchen counter. While she leans there, the long grasses turn to velvety rushes, the lake is a deliberate brown river, where a pitch-daubed basket floats, a baby so longed-for he ends up with two mothers, as soldiers who were once boys kick down doors to club, stab, and smother. The last thing she does before bed is go in his room, stand with her hands on the crib rail looking down at the dark mound of him in the corner and whisper Boy, sorry, sorry.

These times she can love him the way she wants to, the way she's supposed to. She crouches and brings her face close to where his is mashed into the mattress. She smells him, sweet and sour, reaches in front of his mouth to feel the breath on her hand. She'll lay it lightly across his mouth and nose and take it away again. She'll tuck him up. She'll walk next door, leave her clothes in a pile, climb into her own bed. Lay her hand across her own mouth and nose until sparks fly through the cold dark air and then take it away, tuck herself up, and shut her eyes with a fierce internal *Clap!*

In the morning there will be another six inches of snow. She'll wallow through it to feed the chickens but forget the feed. She'll trudge inside and forget to go back.

When had she been convinced? She tries to think about this. No player with baby dolls, she. No pets, brothers, or sisters, though she once had an imaginary friend named Beverline. How had she been persuaded to produce these tiny versions of her feet, eyebrows that cause her to stroke her own carefully to make sure they are still there? It is ludicrous to consider—she who had never eaten lunch with a co-worker, back in the days when she went to a job and lived in a town, and walked to work to avoid having to look at and be looked at on the bus, who traveled everywhere alone and who liked the idea, when it first came up, of envelopes, stacks of perfect white alikeness shipping in and out, gainful employment via mailbox, no breaktime tales of woe, none of the false friendship of the bottom of the totem pole. Just her own hands, flying faster and faster. She whose favorite moment of most days was sundown, when she found herself at a miles-away crossroad and turned her steps toward home, knowing that nobody knew or even thought about where she

was. She and no other had decided to let first her body, then her house, her mind, her life be inhabited for all time by this person. A boy, too.

It was unbelievable.

Two years before, at the same season, she had come up into these deeper hills, dipping in and out of hollows and coves, to her great-aunt Marian's. An old-lady death. Neighbors had found the body, the funeral was sudden and closed-casket. Someone had found her number in the front of Marian's Bible. This house here, the voice on the phone said, is slam full, couldn't you come out and have a look? Marian hadn't left a will. The property was a burden for the neighbors to shoulder. She took a leave of absence and drove a rental car, the first driving in years, on roads that wrung themselves out along rivers crowded with rock and ice. Beside the road, the roofs were white, porches sagged with stacked wood. It felt like a disappearing act, pushing farther and farther into this country where the shoulder grew narrower, buildings more ramshackle, fields and woods on either side thicker, snowier. Within days it was decided that she should take the house and such estate as there was, as no one else had claim. Her employer was notified, the car was returned, her belongings were stacked in the hall, and a life was handed to her: chickens to feed, meals to get, fire to keep going, path to shovel. Necessary, beautiful acts, simple acts.

In the first weeks, she cut kindling to exact lengths and perfected the circle the chicken's feed made on top of the snow. In the afternoons, even at first, there was nothing to do until dinner, though she made everything from scratch now. She read and took long, cold walks and looked through binoculars. After dinner she read some more or spent hours packing away the curiosities that thronged Marian's shelves: Everything you'd think could be made from china and some things that you wouldn't, like necklaces or hats. Animals painted onto plates, or represented by bronze statuettes, even one stuffed squirrel who looked cancerous. A large picture of a rooster made from kernels of corn. Jesus's sad face everywhere, everywhere, from the outside flap of a pocketbook to the inside of a paperweight, where he dragged his little cross up a hill in the snow. Drawers stuffed full of pamphlets whose topics ranged from The Sin in the Garden to Canning Your Garden. It was a source of pleasure to note the absurd chaos of things Marian had gathered to herself in the course of eighty years, and to compare it to her own few boxes stacked in the hall.

The house became cleaner and more empty. She could read sometimes for four or five hours at a stretch, or listen to Marian's record collection, heavy black disks in yellowed sleeves that popped and wavered so consistently that she couldn't imagine the music otherwise. It surprised her how attached she began to feel to the voices of these singers, dead tenors and choirs she'd never heard of before. She lay on the sofa and listened to the words saying themselves on the record and repeating in her mind. After listening to the same one several times, she would turn the loud black switch and lie down again and listen some more, to the wind, or the rain, or to her heartbeat.

Late in March, about the time she received her first big shipment of envelopes, an ice storm broke off a dead bough from the big sweetgum in front of the house. It fell in front of the door, a limb the thickness of her body, with sharp, flaky branches. She was just going to walk around it, or wait until she turned up an axe down in Marian's crammed cellar and start hacking off pieces, but one day a truck stopped in front of the house and a man jumped out and crossed the yard. He walked around the limb, then without looking in the direction of the house, went to the back of his truck, pulled a chainsaw out of its case, and set to work, first sawing off the limbs, then sawing the limbs into sections. After a bit, he took off his jacket and worked in his shirt. It took him about forty-five minutes. While he worked, she watched from the storm door, only leaving once to go to the living room desk and bring back a twenty in one hand and a fifty in the other. She had no idea how much work of this kind was worth. She weighed what she would say or if she would smile, hoped not to have to; the muscles of her face felt weak. When the man was finished, he loaded up the pieces of wood, waved once at her standing in the door, and drove away. The folded bills went back in the drawer.

It embarrassed her now to remember the baffling weeks she spent taking walks into town instead of away from it, her purposeful steps slowed to a dawdle past the three blocks of commercial buildings, past the gas station. Surely he would have to get gas? She didn't know what else to do. The picture of his arms was keeping her awake at night, his hands bracing the chainsaw as it screamed through wood.

What convinced her? Later, when he reached across the table so there were four hands whipping the skins off scalded tomatoes, four at the same time, red to the wrists, pulpy and seedy, and above them four arms: her skinny ones, browned from time in the garden, and his, also browned, but

wide, freckled, formed and definite. Those arms and rows of widemouth jars lined up along the table, jeweled, steaming, so when he set down the two peeled and dripping tomatoes in his hands and came around the table to press his arms against her sides and run slippery fingers up under her shirt, over belly and sternum and collarbone, when she said, Mmm, not a good time, but he kept moving, whispering, It's all good time, there was no denying it. Later he kissed her very happily, cradling the back of her skull in his hands, and waved at the gleaming rows. Look at all the good stuff we can make, he said. She was a believer, she was sold. Her body stung all over with tomato juice for hours.

She's walking again, these days, with Boy. Her old time of day, solves problems for everybody, gets him out in the air post-nap, gives him new vistas, birds and clouds, chunks of swirling ice in the river smashing against rock. She leaves the house at the precise moment in the day when she starts to hate its stupid Marianisms, its smugness, sitting there, deeded over to her as if she needed a house and wasn't absolutely fine in her fourth-floor apartment. For an hour she gets to not look at its rooms and all that needs doing in them, gets to not look at him, he's just twenty pounds on her back. She carries wafers in a pouch and hands them to him one at a time when he starts to fuss. She strides carelessly on the shoulder, against oncoming traffic, greeting every conjunction of pothole and passing vehicle with a flare of anticipation, especially big trucks. They give her a shiver that starts warm and ends cold.

Walks are not a time to talk. Not that he can talk anyway, but if he tries to, the distribution of wafers speeds up. And the backpack holds him still. So if every condition is met—if she has enough snacks, if there are interesting things to look at, if his nap was sufficient and his bowels are resting, if it's not too cold or there's not too much wind or the planets align momentarily and he chances onto a reverie of his own—then she might have ten minutes to feel again like a solitary walker on the road. To keep this illusion going she holds her eyes straight ahead and her back square, so as best not to feel twenty pounds.

There is no way not to feel twenty pounds. The solitary walker never had this tic either, an arm jerking from waist to shoulder every few minutes.

Then there are other days, when she staggers forward, all control of inner and outer circumstance flown, feeling soupy—lukewarm, thick, something

that might puddle in the road. She steps in potholes and teeters, Baby misaligned and complaining on her back, listing forward because there is nothing else to do but that. Blinks at the sky, a broad, unfamiliar thing. On one such day she comes upon a couple, retirees they seem to be, with matching short white hair and fleece jackets, pulled over in their car at a roadside picnic table. They are watching a bird on a power line, and turn to smile. Old people can't help smiling when she's with Boy. These in particular have something crisp about them, the cropped lines of their jackets, or maybe their still very nice, strong teeth. It seems expected of her to stop.

"Do you know if that's an eagle?" the man says. "Isn't this the county where they're reintroducing the eagles?"

"I think it's a hawk." The woman waves upward. "We should keep binoculars in the car. It looks too small to be an eagle. Can you see it?" She points, but the mother is looking down at their matched, well-made walking shoes. What I couldn't do, she is thinking, with some shoes like that.

"They're probably old hat for you," the man says, but seeing her baffled—hats? shoes?—kindly changes the subject. "And who's this little man?" He presents a finger to Boy, who squeezes it in a crumby fist. The man laughs. "Remember Mark this age, Lois? What a grip. Let's see here, friend, you must be about Elijah's size. We've got a grandson," he tells the mother. "But only in pictures. They're up in Alaska." He is smiling into Boy's face over her shoulder, pulling his finger back and forth. "These names! How do you suppose I ever got through life as a Bob? What do they call you, sweetheart?" He turns to the mother, pleasant, confident, expectant.

But for the mother, everything—the big bird on the power line, the swirl and smash of the river—has flattened, thinned to wateriness, sky faded, ground blurred. The man looks into her face and gently removes his finger from Boy's grasp. For an instant his hand hovers above the mother's shoulder and then he lets it rest there, his own face distressed and beseeching. His wife, too, has ceased to move, stands staring.

The mother looks away from the man and shakes her head. She pulls the straps tighter on the backpack and lurches past them both, unmatched, illshod. Behind her the woman is murmuring, Oh, honey.

★

Boy has never been a breast-and-a-half nurser. He goes and goes on Number One until he falls asleep. Then, when switched around, he wakes and gets revved again for a full treatment on Number Two. It's a long time to sit there. She's never put a curtain across that window, and they're at it so long in the evening she sometimes sees the moon rise into its black square, then up, out, and away. She pays attention. The last white slip of it slides from view. Where does the moon go? There's a man in that moon—in the moon, there is the man. On the first night he stayed, the moon was full. She had framed herself in the middle of the window, kneeling in its light. She could smell him on the bed behind her. Trying to say how she felt, how there ought to be acknowledgment, ritual, some ceremony of joy. Though as she said the words, the first time she had ever said any such thing, a feeling of ceremony had taken her over. She held the sides of the window frame with her face turned upward, rocked, felt the tips of her hair brush her back and the waves of cold creep down window glass and wall, across her hot skin. She was feeling friendly towards the moon, glad it had been watching. The man said, I think we did the ceremony. He laughed and palmed the soles of her feet. Ah, he said. Look at you.

In Boy's sleep his body twitches and jerks; whatever is going on in his dreams, he is alive there. Her own body has grown to the chair, holding still for him while the moon circles the earth. He burrows, his tiny hand reaching up to pat the skin of her emptied breast. Her arms clench around him so hard he wakes up crying.

Boy must be accounted for, his whereabouts must be known. He is supposed to be pushed up against the living room window in his walker, to watch her progress out to the pen. Twice she has half-turned, knee-deep in snow, raised a glove in that direction. Now she steps along feeling him watching, though he's probably not there. Three steps at a time to the rhythm in her head, God . . . damn . . . chickens, God . . . damn . . . chickens . . .

In the pen, she raises a boot and kicks down hard through the ice in the bucket. The smash feels good, even if some water leaks through her cracked boot. She pries the lid off the feed and shakes. Food's almost gone, down to its powdery bits.

But there's fire in her belly today, it's going to get done! all of it! with a smile! She pounds the peg through the loop and heads for the house. All of it!

Kicks the snow off her boots on the screened porch. Okey dokey! Grabs the basket of wet diapers and bounds up stairs to the attic. Thunders back down, I'm coming! I'm coming! Boy (in the bathroom, with the toilet) scooped under one arm, his walker under the other. Up, up, up! we go. Yank the lightbulb chain and set him down, ready to roll, big green basket of heavy fragrant diapers, smell of dust and a half century of air in a windowless room. Here she goes one! pinned at the corner, the other left dangling, waiting to be coupled. Two! Boy kicking backwards, strong two legs at a time, zooming into corners where the mortar's sifted and the gluey cobwebs beckon, near the teetery shelf with the cast iron pans (from Marian's early years in the house, a young married woman with a man at the table three meals a day, going to or coming from the sawmill), near the lopsided open door and the rickety landing, the leaning stairs. Get back over here! she shouts, swinging one more diaper over the line and running to him, spinning his walker, Zoom! she cries, zoom! zooooooooom! she bowls it, and he flies, whirling, laughing, stopping a few feet from the far wall. She runs after him, ducking for the roofbeams, grabs the edge of his saucer and whirls it in place again, revving, Gentlemen on your marks! vrroom! And shoves it hard, it careens across the attic floor toward the open door. He scoots himself through it just in time for her to get there. Come back here, you. She pulls him through and parks him near her, searches the shelves and finds a little sewing basket to lay on his tray.

The diapers weigh down the slack rope line. She hangs one after the other, thinking tilt, angle, and impact, in a dream of ill-made walkers, top-heavy and brittle. And there was that story, a consumer-page story of a baby who would have lived had the exact weight and design of the walker not pinned him in his seat and added the extra momentum to his head's meeting with the concrete basement floor. His head crushing on the concrete basement floor. His little head broken open and his . . . He is looking up at her. She is speaking aloud.

He smiles, waves a full pincushion in the air. He says, Daaaa.

She picks him up. Picks up the walker and carries them downstairs, sets them gently, firmly, gently, down in the hall. As the days go by she does not think again about that batch of diapers, the ones left in the basket to dry into wadded shapes, mold-spotted, the ones hung on the line to fill with dust.

★

There's just the one paper to be had here, a daily, the *Index*. She used to read it obsessively—every TV listing and birthday wish—but who has the time? She still gets it, skimmed this morning while Boy worked on his eggs. The obits lately are more varied. One man joyriding with friends, decapitated by a mailbox. Another man drowned off a fishing boat. Soldiers killed in exercises. Elderly hearts, livers, and lungs. A very young mother of two, a baby who never made it off the ICU, "Sherilyn, Our Angel, God Took Her Home."

She and the man had a long conversation once about ways to go. She wanted a bare, light room with polished wood, a blossoming tree outside the window. She wanted two weeks to lie in bed with smooth sheets beneath and over her, her waxy hands clasped at their hem.

The man wanted something full-tilt and sudden: lightning, aneurysm, bomb blast, living right until the moment he was not. They argued it back and forth. The man hated to see anything diminished. She felt death was a momentous occasion a person should be present for.

Well, that's what I'm talking about, the man said. Momentous. Violent. Here goes my life, light the fireworks.

Violently. That was how she disagreed. There he was on his end of the couch. She saw that he was listening, he was waiting, and she could say whatever she wanted. So she took a deep breath, because it was long, this feeling of hers about how we should die. She talked until the room felt crowded with people, ones she'd read about, families, people gone surprised into another world, the ambushed left behind, waking up each day with names on their lips and nothing but sorry artifacts to finger, an odd expression in a photograph, clothes on hangers, strawberry-blossom letter paper crammed with banalities. She brought forth the ones she'd known who had died ready, on a day when the accounts were closed out. Everything checked off the list. The room, when she finished, seemed full of shining people, lying in bed with closed eyes and a blue haze—incense or something—hovering around.

The man was smiling. You make it sound relaxing, he said. But it was his turn to talk, and at the picture of the people he'd known, immobile veterans parked on beds, dying to die, old men whose flame guttered so long and feebly the merest action was beyond their reach, whose lost powers made them weep, she could understand his desire for the quick snap. It's a party, he said. Wouldn't you always rather leave a party when you're still having a good time?

Then who cleans up? she wonders now, but remembers also how it felt to have their two different visions side by side, where she could see their shape, leave hers and walk around inside his as though they were framed-up houses, adjacent but not touching, built word by word for each other.

She's at the pen now, listening. Snow melts off the trees. It drips and hits the tin roof of the house. A warm enough day but they do not come out. She pitches scraps over the wire to chunk down into the snow of the yard. With her boot, she shoves at the water bucket through the fence. It leans free of the ground, turns over and thuds. Melt off the top pours out but the rest is frozen solid. She waits, crouched, peering at the black doorway. She rounds up the granular, packable snow into the biggest, rock-hard snowball she can hold. Steps back, measures distance, and launches, nearly straight up, toward the lowest limbs of the old pin oak the chicken house is built against. A high toss, way up and down hard to explode on the roof, BOOM, the inside hollowness speaks. Then the yard is silent, just drops of water thumping on tin.

She waits.

This is who cleans up, she is thinking. Now turn around. She says this, fierce with herself. Go.

She looks at the living room window. The late day sun has moved, glazing that side of the house so all the windows are a blank, reflected orange, and the little head she saw the last time she checked is gone. Her boots crunch deep in the rotten snow. Something in her body tells her to speed it up, get on in there, but the fierce other voice is saying, Walk.

When she lived up under the roof in town she loved to shower. Winter or summer, her evening ritual was the same, the hard walk to the periphery where the two-lane roads started, in steam, heat, rain, snow, it did not matter. Then home, at just the point when the last drop of the day had drained out of her, there would be one bowl of something for dinner while she combed her way through the paper, and then she'd go into her bathroom and close the door.

She loved this bathroom, its bright light and tiny black and white diamonds of tile, and the transom over the door. She owned a lot of bath products and used them. Words like "anoint" and "unguent" occurred to her there, and though she was a grown woman she became variously an Etruscan priestess, an Egyptian bride. As a rule, she didn't think much about her body, but in the

bathroom she did. She would stand with one foot on the toilet and shave her leg or clip her toenails with surgical focus. She would condition her long hair, rinse for a long time, and wrap it in a clean towel while she creamed and buffed every inch of herself. The longer it all took, the better. She kept that bathroom scrupulously clean, and sometimes when the room was foggy and warm she would lie down naked on the damp tiles and close her eyes to feel the odd currents of air touch her body. She liked to breathe in the steam and meditate on how clean she was, her mind's eye skimming over her white crescents of fingernail, wiped-out navel and ears, between her toes, the fragrance of each hair protruding from her clean scalp.

Many days, these days, she is too tired to shower. Sometimes she does manage, and then it is late, a matter of soap and shampoo. The hot hard spray on her head is warm, a little too nice. It never fails to beat tears out of her.

Tonight she opens the bathroom door and the steam wave rolls into the kitchen. She is sick of her clothes, the stains and spots. They stay piled under the sink. She doesn't dry off but goes to the stove and lifts the lid, stuffing pine logs in, then stands naked in front of it, watching her body go from glistening damp to dry and red from the heat. She turns around to dry her backside.

Boy's doorway is black, with an orange edge from the nightlight. It is late, time for bed, but there is still more to do. A pile of peppers on the counter, sliced before the shower, pounds of peppers that were cheap, for something she will make tomorrow, she is not sure what. As she walks across the kitchen, the linoleum underfoot goes from warm to cold. This floor, she should not lie down here, even by the one lamp she can see the rolls of dust, smears of food, gray grime and grains of cat litter, onion peels. The green piles of peppers remind her of bananas the man sliced, two whole bunches of bananas once while she lay on the clean floor naked, watching the round white slices slide off the knife onto her belly. He was smiling and lining up bananas all over her, and once she got used to the idea, they felt slippery and cool, lined across her forehead, on her cheeks and chin, down her neck, covering her whole body, one of course on each nipple. They smelled so good, and she began to feel like a creamy banana, the Banana Princess. The man was being careful. He finally set the last circle of banana on her lips and put down the knife to lean over her and eat it. It passed so delicately from her lips into his mouth, she closed her eyes and felt a piece of herself slip loose. Every piece could pass

from her to him, she had thought at the time, she would know where to find them.

But it's peppers here. She has stood in the middle of the kitchen floor staring at the pile until her red body has whitened and cooled. It is late. She gathers up the peppers with the newspaper spread under them, sets them on the floor and sits down. The peppers are sliced in rings. The first one is just the right size, it encircles her kneecap exactly. Then the other kneecap, and from there up the thighs, a parallel march up the two sides of her groin with a little chaplet for the middle. Lie down she should, she must, encircle the navel, the nipples, bracelets for the wrists, the clavicle, mouthpiece, nosepiece, spectacles, she is dressed, she is garnished, lying on the cold kitchen floor. She does not want the sheets or the two weeks now; the blossoming tree makes her tired. How long would it take once the fire went out? She could get up and open some windows and the door. No one knew her. No one would know what to say. Her obit would be a curiosity, there might even be a picture, "Somebody's Mom, With Bell Pepper Slices."

It has always been easy, in this house, to lose track of time. She lies there so many hours, unmoving, unseeing, hearing the wind in the trees and the rain against the windows, her heartbeat, in this quiet, that the cry seems to come from another world. There it is again, the cry of one of the peppers, maybe, as she tilts herself and heaves up, green rings dropping to the filthy floor. She staggers for Boy's black door with numbed limbs and half-closed eyes, picking up the signal to tuck or pat or cover, whatever is needed, not knowing what she will offer from the millions of things that are needed, or whether she will stand in the dark and look at his sleeping head.

But he is somehow awake, too early—bottomless, omnivorous Boy, awake and bouncing, holding his crib rail and saying it. She's standing in the doorway with a slice of bell pepper clinging to her breast, and there it is, the name she's never waited for in her life. The next cry surely does come from another world, from anything and everything in the vanishing world that is not him.