

Small and Heavy World

We moved up into the trees when the neighborhood flooded that April—blue plastic tarps slung up with belts and ropes, splintered plywood floors, dinghies or canoes bumping up against the tree trunks. Makeshift hammocks hung from the branches, swaying in the breeze. The water was the color of peanut butter. It roiled below our branches, churning up a soup of all the things we'd lost: spatulas, dolls, romance novels, Tupperware, spools of colored thread, porn magazines, textbooks, bicycle tires, empty picture frames. Once a miraculously airtight bag of mini-marshmallows, which my younger brothers fished out and gave to our mother, six months pregnant with her fourth child and hungry in every way.

My mother spoke to the neighborhood physician often, describing her latest cravings or a cramp in her lower back. Dr. Adair was not actually a physician at all, but a professor of linguistics at the local community college, new to the neighborhood just that March, not long before the rain started up. His neighbors promptly appointed him physician when the local doctors' offices were swept away with everything else, and he took to his new role with stoicism and an endless reserve of ambiguous homeopathic remedies. Because he was a single parent, and good-looking, Dr. Adair was a rich source of gossip. He was also slightly darker-skinned, a smooth shade of caramel, and although American-born he was considered by most to be foreign, to be exotic. It was rumored that he had moved south from Boston not long after his wife—beautiful, we were sure—left him for another man. It was rumored he had lived in South Africa as a boy and discovered a new species of beetle, and also that he was a huge snob. His freshly painted house washed away with the rest of the neighborhood, and Dr. Adair now lived with his son, Peter, in the ancient oak that had marked the edge of their property line.

Shortly after our new living arrangements were made, my mother rigged the first neighborhood telephone: two empty soup cans linked from tree to tree with a long, yellow string. Dr. Adair was on the other end.

“Sahd,” she would say, lying flat on her back. “I haven’t felt it kick in hours.”

His voice rising up through the can sounded thin and weary. “Annie, Annie,” he’d reply. “The baby is probably just resting. As should you.”

“Still. I worry.”

“Ring me in an hour. If nothing by then, I’ll row over.”

By mid-May, we began to settle in. My father hung a rope swing from a thick branch. It struck me as boyish and primitive—I was never a strong swimmer, anyway—but my brothers, Charlie and Jackson, loved it.

“Watch out for water moccasins,” my mother would call, lying in the shade, one hand rubbing her ripening belly. She glowed blue in the light filtered through the tarp. “When an alligator eats you, don’t come crying to me.”

In truth, the local wildlife seemed to have abandoned our town. Birds were scarce, and we had not seen so much as a catfish since the water rose. I wondered about the alligators that had haunted our swamps, if after the rain they swam towards sea, mistaking this boundless new space for freedom. Something less easily identified had replaced the usual dangers, and so my brothers busied themselves all day, swinging like monkeys and dropping into the muck below. When I grew bored watching them, I found other ways to occupy myself—painting my toenails with the gold polish Charlie found among the debris, or closing my eyes and thinking about Mr. Janice, my Advanced Algebra teacher, whom I’d harbored a secret crush on for the entirety of the school year. My mother and I, though often inches apart, said very little to one another. There seemed little to say, even when I thought I might want to say something.

On days when she expected Dr. Adair, my mother straightened up our living space as best as she could, stacking the cans of food in neat pyramids, stretching the tarp rooftop taut or rolling it back to illuminate us in dappled light. Once, on a sultry morning early on in the summer, she asked me to braid her hair.

“I don’t know how,” I lied. I was sprawled out on a branch, my limbs dangling to either side, as Charlie and Jackson fought for turns on the rope swing. It was the first truly hot day that season. Steam curled off the water and perspiration frosted our foreheads, though it was long before noon.

“Yes you do, Rayanne. I’ve seen you do it to your own hair a million times. I’m no good at doing it myself.”

I climbed down from my perch and sat behind her, tugging the plaits hard with each fist.

“Ouch,” she said, and reached behind her to pinch my thigh. “You’re hurting me.”

I tied the ends with bits of leftover yellow string and my mother rested cross-legged against the tree trunk, pretty and bathed in sweat. When Dr. Adair appeared at the edge of our wooden platform, glasses fogged, my mother smiled. “Hello,” she said.

He hoisted himself over the edge and took her hand. “Annie,” he said, and even I, then thirteen and resentful, could hear that the word was filled with love.

This was the Deep South, the houses clung low to the flat earth. The weathermen had not predicted this flood. It came fast, and from all sides: from the river that ran to our east and the canals threading through the neighborhood and from the granite sky overhead. The rain beat an angry chorus on our rooftops until the shingles slid off in defeat.

Our town was small and surrounded by farmland and easily forgotten. Rescue boats never came. We saved what we could—chain- ing our dinghies and canoes to the trees, carrying food and extra clothes in plastic garbage bags—and then we sought shelter in the crude tree houses the neighborhood men had desperately, fearfully constructed, and we watched the water rise. We saw corpses float past, already bloated, the color of hardboiled eggs. There was a horse—a colt—struggling to swim, or to find footing. We watched his head dip under and then come back up, his eyes black and frantic. I saw our house float away in a torrent of foamy water, although my family does not remember it that way. But I saw it rise up off the earth and drift some yards, turning and bowing in the rapids, before pulling apart with a long and awful moan.

My father was often gone for days at a time. He rowed out with the other dads, searching for houses on higher land, some of which still stood, their third stories or attics peeking out over the water like islands. They returned with armfuls of canned fruits and vegetables,

soggy chocolate bars, hammers, nails, tarps, or oftentimes nothing at all.

Whatever my father brought, my mother seemed to resent. One afternoon in early June, we watched him unload his share of the goods, squatting on two legs and spreading his findings across the plywood floor like a proud salesman. A rusting corkscrew, a broken sports watch, a few cans of dolphin-safe tuna. The water gave off a sour stench, and we slapped away the mosquitoes gnawing at our arms and necks. Charlie and Jackson were down below, playing pirates in the dinghy. Their whooping sounded distant, and their feet stomped out erratic rhythms on the metal. I watched the corners of my mother's mouth turn down, down, as my father squatted there, and I wished I was young enough to join them.

"That's all," my father said. His face and bald patch were sun-burned, his eyes creased.

"Well," my mother said.

"We found one house, but it had already been looted. This we fished out of a half-sunk boat, turned over on its side. Dave Johnson found a radio, but it didn't work. Probably no reception out here anyway."

My mother turned her gaze out past the branches, squinting in displeasure. A web of multicolored string stretched across our neighborhood—her idea with the soup cans, borrowed from a television show she remembered from her childhood, had grown popular. The string quivered even in the stagnant air.

"There's tuna," Dad tried. "I know you love tuna."

Across the way, Dr. Adair's tree house was reinforced with rafters and a mobile wall to block wind and rain, regardless of the direction it blew. None of these details were visible from my mother's vantage point, but I wondered if she wasn't thinking of them, envying them.

My mother sighed. "I can't eat tuna," she said. "The mercury's bad for the baby."

I picked up the black rubber watch. Its digital face was blank and filled with water. "I like this," I said.

"You take it then, Ray." Dad stood and brushed his hands off on his shorts. They were frayed at the bottom and he looked a little like Robinson Crusoe, I thought. "It's about as useful as a working clock, these days."

The next evening, the sky pink and orange, Dr. Adair came over. He greeted my father with a handshake and asked my mother questions about her appetite and dreams. I hugged my knees to my chest, and my brothers played war with a deck of crumpled playing cards. My father stood, his hands on his hips, his back towards us all.

Dr. Adair was fond of dream interpretation as a means of diagnosis, and although none of us knew where such authority originated, we accepted it as truth. Peter had come with his father and sat on the far edge of the platform, looking embarrassed. From the corner of my eye I could see him staring at me, but when I looked over he ducked his head.

My mother said she had dreamed that she gave birth to a raccoon instead of a child, with sharp yellow teeth and an absurdly long tail. As she spoke, Dr. Adair prodded her stomach with his long steady fingers, examining.

"That's a good sign, Annie. Promising. It only seems like a nightmare." He handed her a can of pears, her favorite fruit. "Pears have restorative properties. They're good for the heart, yours and the baby's."

My father made a coughing noise. "I've never heard of that," he said.

My mother rolled her eyes and laughed. "You're not a doctor, Jim."

"Neither is he," Dad said, and turned around to face us. He laughed without smiling.

Dr. Adair stood and said, "I think we'd better be going."

"Oh, don't be silly, Sahd."

Peter stood as well, his face blotched red. He and his father had to stoop low so their heads wouldn't hit the tarp overhead. My father shook hands with Dr. Adair. His lips looked thin and white. "Thank you for all you've done for my wife," he said.

"I'm doing my best, Jim." Dr. Adair's voice was low and serious. He had lines jutting from the corners of his eyes, and the start of a promising beard. Standing across from him, my father looked small, almost elfin, his head clearing the roof by several inches despite his upright posture. He looked nothing like the Robinson Crusoe—the rustic hero—I had seen the previous day, and I felt an inexplicable pang.

He nodded and then let both hands fall to his side. "Yes," he said. "I guess we all are."

My mother heaved herself to her feet and linked one arm around my father's elbow. "We'll be seeing you soon, Sahd. Stop by anytime."

I looked towards Peter, but he was already climbing down towards their boat, his dark head disappearing over the edge of the platform.

I lay awake late that night, curled on one side, my brothers breathing soft and deep from their hammocks nearby. My parents whispered a long while. I caught bits and pieces only. At one point my father started to speak too loud. "I can't stand that he calls you—"

"Shh!" my mother said. "You'll wake the kids."

My father lowered his voice, but not by much. "—that he calls you Annie," he said. "That's my name for you. Mine."

I heard a great sigh, and then only the lapping of the water, the creaking of the branches.

Peter was my age. He was over six feet tall and bony, with bad acne and shaggy dark hair that he flipped out of his face all the time. He shared only his height and his black hair with his father; in every other way he was almost wholly opposite. At school he had always seemed sulky and alone, and I sat far from him on the bus and ignored him in the cafeteria. After the flood, I found myself both hating him and craving his attention. When he came by with his father, I hoped to catch him looking at me. Some days, while my mother napped and my brothers played Marco Polo, I lay on my stomach and peered through the branches, through the sifting clumps of Spanish moss, towards the Adair oak. Occasionally I caught Peter climbing down into the boat with his father, headed off on some appointment or another—stomach aches, snake bites, allergies. Once, on a hot, cloudy morning, I saw him dive into the water. He was shirtless and seemed, in that instant, to fly from the tree like some enormous and graceful bird. He swam for some time, doing backstroke and breaststroke with ease, venturing further from the tree than I would have ever dared to go. Against the muddy landscape, his body was pale as ice.

I had grown tall myself, too tall. Both my parents were fairly short, but that year I had sprouted upward with alarming force. My feet were long and flat and I no longer knew what to do with my hands or arms. They felt superfluous, gorilla-like. When Peter came by, I made myself small. I squeezed my knees to my chest, or folded my arms and slumped against a branch.

A week after bringing back the watch, Dad left again. He shouldn't be too long this time, he said. They were headed in a direction they had already explored, in hopes that they may have missed something. My brothers and I watched our father row off, his friend Tom rowing a canoe alongside him, and supplies and food tied in plastic bags at their feet. I waved. Jackson bit his lip, eyes watery, and Charlie stood with his arms crossed and his brow furrowed. Both boys had streaks of blonde in their messy brown hair, with lean, tan limbs. They looked more and more like two of the Lost Boys in the illustrated copy of *Peter Pan* I had so loved, that I still loved, although of course it too was lost in the flood.

"It's all right, Jack," I said. "Don't cry."

"I'm not." He wiped at his eyes.

"He'll be back soon enough," my mother said. She had rolled back the tarp and was doing yoga moves, arms stretched to the sky, eyes closed. She wore one of my father's button-down shirts, and had tied it in a knot at the top of her belly. Her breasts were voluminous, and through the white of the shirt I could see her nipples.

That morning, I had pointed this out. "Mom," I said. "You should put on a bra."

She laughed. "What for?"

"Because they're"—I was embarrassed, and nodded towards her chest—"they're showing."

She had cupped a hand around each breast and given them a thoughtful squeeze. Then she laughed. "No one will see," she said. "And it doesn't matter up here, anyway."

"Dr. Adair could see," I said.

She narrowed her eyes at me, and then, in the next instant, rolled them as if I'd told her a bad joke. "He's a doctor," she said. "He's seen it all before."

I had imagined Dr. Adair teaching linguistics to a room of lithe, bare-chested college girls, furiously scribbling in their notepads. The thought had made me giggle, and I no longer felt like arguing.

Now, my brothers upset, and our father's boat sliding past a grove of unoccupied trees and then out of sight, I grew angry. Who did she think she was, exposing herself this way, so self-satisfied? Hardly batting an eyelash as my father left, and yet bound to resent him for his absence? I moved past her and opened a can of roasted potatoes for my brothers, who plopped down with it and made bets about the treasures Dad would bring home. When my mother finished stretching, she inhaled deeply and climbed into her hammock to rest. I watched her from a tree branch and wondered what had sprouted inside of her, in the wake of this flood, to make her seem so free.

My father and Tom had not yet returned, and we were growing nervous. My brothers began keeping watch through fists stacked like telescopes, and I watched through the foliage in hopes I might see him rowing towards us, his reddened head, his sideways grin. Tom's wife rigged up a telephone between her tree and ours, and began calling us several times a day, speculating about reasons things may have gone awry. "I'm sure they're fine," my mother told her each time. "They're perfectly capable, Marian."

My mother, too, seemed concerned, although she sought solace with Dr. Adair. "I think you need to get out more," he told her, patting her hand. "Get your mind off the waiting."

He began taking her out in his boat, helping her climb down the ladder, going first and promising to catch her should she slip. Then they would row off, past the neighborhood trees, the oars making water ripple back towards our tree and lap at its trunk. My mother sat in the basin of the boat, leaning back against the bow, her belly full and tumid. Oftentimes they left at night, my mother kissing my brothers' foreheads, asking me to look after them. Then the two of them, gliding off in the moon-drenched water.

My brothers were lost in their own world, but my mother's relationship with Dr. Adair was affecting me in ways I couldn't seem to explain. I was aware of an energy between them that didn't exist between my parents. I tried to recall a time when it *had* existed.

When my mother was pregnant with the twins, my father had sung to her, pressed his lips against the globe of her stomach and sang Aretha Franklin, Willie Nelson, Frank Sinatra—whatever came to mind. He sang badly and his voice cracked and it made my

mother laugh. Sometimes she rested a hand on top of his head, as she might do to a child, to me.

With this new baby, though, he was often visibly tense, his jaw rigid, his silence more disturbing than whatever inexplicable anger he seemed to be experiencing. He did not sing, although I had heard her plead with him to do so on more than one occasion. When my mother had morning sickness that February and vomited up her breakfast into the kitchen sink, my father seemed angry at the sound of it, at the very fact that she was nauseated. She went into the bedroom to clean herself up, and my father ran the water in the sink, slamming the faucet handles on and off with unnecessary force.

Charlie and Jackson had looked at me, nervous, and I left my bowl of cereal and went into the bedroom to check on my mother. She was sitting on the edge of their bed, her back to the door, staring out the window towards the white winter sky.

"Mom?" I had called from the doorway. "Do you feel okay?"

She waved a hand behind her and said, "Oh, I'm fine," but her voice trembled.

Crying was not something my mother often did. I had only seen her cry once before, and it was when *Brian's Song* played on television sometime that year, before the pregnancy. My father had sat beside her on the couch, his arm wrapped around her neck. I was drifting in and out of sleep next to them, glad for the time with just them, my brothers asleep in the bedroom they shared. Then, her tears were sweet, almost funny. Now it scared me, her crying. My father so angry at something I could not comprehend.

When I went and sat next to her on the bed, she pulled me close to her with both arms. "Rayanne," she said, crying hard now, her back shaking with the effort of it.

"Yes?"

She pulled away, wiping at her eyes even as new tears welled up in them. "It's just the hormones," she said.

I took a deep, shaky breath and then blurted, "Is Dad mad at you?"

She shook her head. "No. Dad isn't mad at me."

"He seems mad."

"He's just worried," she said, and took a blue tissue from the nightstand, blowing her nose hard.

I said I didn't understand.

"Babies mean a lot of responsibility," she said. "This one—we didn't plan for it to happen. It just happened. And it means we need more money, and a bigger house, and things we just don't have right now. That's all. Dad is just worried. Okay?"

"Okay." I rubbed her back, glad, in some way, to act as her sole confidant, as a source of comfort. I said I understood, that it would be okay.

But I still didn't understand, not then, and not when I thought back to this moment from my perch in the tree, trying to comprehend my mother and father, my mother and Dr. Adair. I could not understand, not really, and I would not until I had my own children, my own bills, my own household, an entire small and heavy world of my own.

There had not been rain in over a month, and the water seemed to be slowly receding. This would have been good news, but my father and Tom were nowhere to be seen, and my mother's due date was approaching faster than the water could diminish entirely.

"I'm going to have a tree baby," I heard her say to Dr. Adair one evening. He had not brought Peter with him; he rarely did, since my father left. My mother shook her head. "A fatherless tree baby."

"Annie," Dr. Adair said, offering my mother a hand up from her seat against the trunk. They were getting ready to leave again. "Don and Larry are out looking for them. I'm sure they're fine, just fine. Probably stranded on high ground somewhere, what with the drought, waiting for a good rain to come our way."

Don and Larry, two neighbors with families of their own, had left the day before in Larry's sports cruiser. Larry, retired from the Coast Guard, brought flares and promised to shoot them off should they run into trouble. "Which they won't," it was said, and then said again, into the makeshift phones, across the gulf of water.

It was twilight, the clouds pulled in plush ribbons of deep violets and pinks and blues. Heat lightning flashed over the horizon. Charlie and Jackson had gone to sleep even before sundown, and lay shirtless and brown in their hammocks. My mother leaned over them and kissed each boy on the cheek, then began tying her hair in a low knot at the nape of her neck. Dr. Adair stood with his back to me, his cotton shirt stained with sweat, watching the bursts of

lightning. He seemed to rarely know what to say to me, and with my father gone we stayed out of each other's way.

"I'll just be a moment, Sahd," my mother said, and then she turned to me. In the strange light she looked much younger than her thirty-five years—almost a teenager, but with a lushness that no girl my age could have possessed, no matter how much we tried. "Watch your brothers, Rayanne. I'll be back later, of course."

I was standing, too, my long arms tucked into the pockets of my cut-off denim shorts. "Why do you have to go?" I asked.

"I'll be back," she said again. Her eyes gleamed, cat-like. "This is good for my health, good for the baby."

But I was feeling bold, my breath quickening. "Why?" I asked. "What exactly do you two do that is so good for the baby?"

Dr. Adair stepped forward. "Annie and I have—" he started, but I was too angry to hear him out. Something in me had been growing taut these last weeks—even before, maybe—and it had snapped, just then, in one sudden and unexpected motion.

"Dad is gone," I said, the volume of my voice rising. "He's gone, and you keep leaving, and Charlie and Jackson are worried, and—"

"You watch your tone, young lady," my mother said.

"—and Dad doesn't even *like* him calling you Annie, but you keep going off with him and doing who knows what—"

My mother slapped me, hard, across the face. Dr. Adair, in silhouette behind her, said, "Annie, that's really not..." and then, "Perhaps we shouldn't..." I held a hand to face, my mouth hanging open. From the branches behind me, my brothers snored and murmured in their sleep. A knot swelled in my throat.

"Rayanne," my mother started. "You don't—you can't understand. You can't—"

She turned back towards Dr. Adair, as if looking for help, and then back to me.

She shrugged. "I'm sorry," she said, and the words sounded so sincere I wanted, more than anything, to accept them. I wanted her to hold me the way she held Charlie when he broke his wrist from a bike fall, or the way she had held my father's head when he sang to my unborn brothers.

Instead I turned and made for the upper branches of the tree, the place I often climbed towards when I wanted solitude, or to spy on Peter, or to watch for my father. After a moment of murmuring, I

heard them climb down into Dr. Adair's boat. I watched as they rowed away, heard Dr. Adair's low and soothing voice. When my back grew stiff and my eyelids felt heavy, I climbed back down to the platform and lay on my back. Through the dark mesh of branches and leaves, the sky was alight with stars.

I had just started to drift off when I heard water splashing, and then the creaking of the ladder rungs nailed into our tree. I wondered if my mother was back already. I watched the edge of the platform as a long, white figure climbed up over it.

"Peter?" I whispered, and made my way to my feet.

Peter stared at me, his bare chest slick in the moonlight, his hair plastered back from his face. He was drenched, water dripping off his shorts and staining the plywood in a dark constellation. His shoulders looked broader than I remembered, his muscles firmer. Standing there, waiting for him to speak, I didn't slouch. I didn't try to make myself small. I stood upright, as though I had expected him somehow.

"I know what it is they do," he said, and reached for my hand.

We swam east, out past the trees.

Before plunging in, I told Peter that I wasn't a strong swimmer, that I was afraid of alligators and debris and dead bodies. I stood on the ladder, hugging the rungs close, while he treaded water below.

"All that's gone," he had said. "There's nothing here anymore."

"But I can't swim well," I repeated.

He said, "I was on swim team at my old school. If you get tired, I'll help you along."

So we glided through the warm water, pushing aside an occasional piece of driftwood with our sweeping breaststrokes. Peter coached me in how to kick my legs like a frog, to take steady breaths through my nose. Beyond the threshold of our neighborhood was mostly open water, the highway and tobacco fields sunk ten, fifteen feet below us. After some time, my muscles burning, Peter whispered, "There. Slow down."

We came to a slow tread. Up ahead some fifty feet or so glinted metal. Across the open water, the sound of voices.

Peter moved in front, and together we crept, crept along the surface of the water until we got so close I was afraid they would hear us breathing. The boat was rocking, groaning, and in the silver

light I saw my mother and Dr. Adair. They were naked and facing one another, only inches of night air between them. I saw the curve of my mother's stomach, the arch of Dr. Adair's back as he leaned towards her. His toffee skin glowed even in the dark.

Maybe it was the water, so warm and calm, or my own heartbeat pounding away like wings in my chest, or the moonlight pouring out over this endless lake. Or perhaps it was the sight of my mother, so undeniably naked, her breasts hanging heavy and huge, her long dark hair curling over her shoulders, looking like some small god, or a ghost. Whatever the reason—as I watched them there, Dr. Adair reaching out to press his hand to my mother's stomach—I felt only a sharp and inexplicable yearning.

We need to leave, I thought, we should go—though for what reason I couldn't place. Moving as quietly as I could, I began backing away from the boat, back towards our neighborhood, but Peter caught me by the wrist. He held his other finger to his lips, and wrapped one arm around my waist, pulled me closer. A rush of currents from his kicking legs pushed below the surface of the water, churned around us. He used his free arm to continue treading, and held me flush against his body with the other.

"Listen," he whispered, and wet lips pressed against my ear.

With Peter holding me, my body relaxed. I watched, and listened. The doctor was kneeling in the basin of the boat, now, between her legs, and she said something to him and they both laughed. Then he dropped his head forward, towards her stomach. His hands still rested on it, as if holding an enormous and tender piece of fruit. I could hear some murmuring, but I could not make out what he was saying. After several moments, though, his voice grew a little louder, and then louder. He kept his eyes down. His voice rose loud and steady now, and in the same instant I realized I was crying, I realized Dr. Adair was singing.

The next morning, Don and Larry's boat came cruising through a cloudy dawn, the four men—Don, Larry, Tom, and my father—standing at its hull, hands on hips, grinning towards the trees in anticipation of our welcome.

Later, my brothers pressed at his sides, my mother and I sitting cross-legged nearby, he told us what had happened: they found ground that had not been evident before, when the water was

higher. It was a thick brown muck, too sticky to walk on, so they skirted around its shore for days. It was littered with objects, with canned food. If the sun heated the surface enough, it would firm up the ground, and they could collect a treasure trove of food and supplies for their families, for the neighbors. As they waited, though, the water levels continued to sink, so that by the time they awoke the next morning, their boats were stranded in a sea of mud. When they tried stepping across it, they sank in up to their thighs. "We had plenty of food," my father said, his face streaked with mud, "but nowhere to go, no way of moving."

After some days, the ground did firm up, grew hard enough to walk on, and they abandoned their boats and headed back in the direction of the neighborhood. When the land sloped down and met the water again, they decided to wait for rescue, with their sacks full of canned food, full of rusting tools, and prayed it would not rain.

"And I kept thinking," my father said, staring at my mother, "about what a great story this would make to tell the baby. You know, 'When your mother was pregnant, and we lived in trees, I was stranded on this muddy shore....' This is a story I've got to tell, I kept thinking. I've got to make it back and tell this story."

My mother stood and waddled to our food supply. She took a rag and poured water over it and began, as my father answered my brothers' endless questions, to wipe the dirt from his forehead, from his sunburned and peeling cheeks.

When my mother went into labor—a seven hour process that sent her screams echoing through the trees, my brothers and I crying and trembling in both terror and excitement as we waited in the dinghy below—it was Dr. Adair who delivered the baby, a slick little boy with a domed head and reddish blond hair, like my father's. That was the last I knew of them together, Dr. Adair and my mother. And as if because of Jonah's birth, the water dropped quickly after that. Peter stayed with his father, hidden behind the foliage, the water too shallow to dive into. Eventually it was all mud, no water, and each family stayed high in the trees until the wasteland below looked hard enough to support our weight, to allow us to move about on the slab of its surface.

Some years later, visiting home with my first husband, I sat with my mother and drank cold root beers on the porch of our

new home, a larger version of our old house, in our reconstructed neighborhood. Jonah squatted on the driveway, drawing pictures of enormous-headed creatures in green chalk, talking to himself or to some imaginary friend, shaded by the same oak we had lived in during those months. Charlie and Jackson were out with their girlfriends; they were teenagers now, and no less inseparable. My father and husband were somewhere else, my husband trying hard to appease his in-laws, to impress them with his attentiveness.

Across the street, a young family lived where the Adair house had once stood. The Adairs moved back to Boston the autumn following the flood, where it was rumored Dr. Adair remarried, and that Peter went on to Harvard Law. The tree in which the Adairs had resided had been cut down long ago, and, for all the people of our town had experienced, the only reminders of the flood were the occasional rusted soup cans that dropped to the ground after a bad storm, bits of discolored string still attached.

My mother finished her soda and then set the bottle next to her lawn chair.

I said, "Mom?"

She swept back her graying hair with two hands and then over one shoulder, waiting for me to speak. I had planned to tell her I was pregnant, two months along, but that was not on my mind now. I was thinking instead of her and of Dr. Adair in the boat, of his voice in the dark. I wanted, in that moment, to ask her about the affair. I wanted to ask not what started it, or ended it, or anything like that. What I wanted to know was what she had been seeking, and if she had found it.

But I turned back towards the lawn, towards the sweltering greenness of our neighborhood, sweat trickling down the backs of my outstretched thighs. I bit my lip. I remembered the currents of warm water, Peter's mouth against my ear. The silvery darkness outspread around us, endless, like an untold secret.