

A Girlhood · *Julene Bair*

BECAUSE KANSAS WAS SO EMPTY, we could see and feel the edges of things. There was a definite place—that saucer horizon—where earth ended and sky began. There were the opposed seasons—winter, when the sun, still unrisen out our east windows, frosted winter cloud bottoms in ice-white light; summer, when warmth awoke us and the sky all around was blank blue. On the earth, bare ground was delineated from wheat ground in square fields.

There were night and day, and we were subject to them, less immune to darkness than city dwellers, because the night outside our big-windowed house had no people in it. The black panes cast our reflections back at us. Daylight set us loose in our limitless space. Night told us that we were alone on the planet, and that the planet was alone in the universe. We would stand at our front yard fence and crane our necks at the stars. Their light angled down at us, nailing us to earth. On the southeastern horizon, it was clear where town ended and country began. Grainville shimmered, a necklace of jewels, with rubies on the television tower and grain elevators, and one emerald in the airport beacon, which flashed white to green, reminding us that we were here, here, here.

In this world of here, there were two realms, Mom's and Dad's. Mom was at the center, in the big white house with the red roof, lawn and flowers surrounding it. Dad was everything beyond, so that Mom's yard was an island knoll in that expanse of profit-making dirt. Among us children, there were two types, boy and girl. The boys belonged to Dad. I belonged to Mom. There were two brothers with two temperaments. Carl was reverent, serious, obedient, older. Keith was irreverent, sarcastic, sly, the favorite. It is probably a common conceit, but it seems to me that life only became murky when I, the youngest, came along. As Keith ran out the yard gate, I streaked after him, blurring the boundaries. We were not sky and earth, outdoors and indoors, day and night, not purely male and female, but the definitions lowered themselves anyway, driving me back inside the gate.

In my very first memory, I toddle beneath my mother's red wooden sewing table. The ceiling is pleasantly lowered, my world a house within a house,

as above me, her scissors snip and thump. Trimmings drop down, strips of fabric falling fast, the pattern edges floating after. As she works, her legs inch steadily around me. They are bare between the bottom of her house dress and the top of her white anklets, which lead down into black, orthopedic shoes. I went everywhere with my mother, “helping” with all her chores. Laundry days were my favorite, because I got to go into my brothers’ rooms on business, without sneaking. Their rooms were smaller, less elegant, and with their dirty socks factored in, stinkier than mine. For bedspreads they had thin, plaid, woven cotton. Mine was pink chenille. My bedroom set was walnut and had been my mother’s before she was married. It included a dresser with a cushioned stool and a big, round mirror. Carl and Keith had hollow tin bed frames, painted at the factory to look like wood, and tall chests of drawers that were the same colors as their rooms—Carl’s light blue, Keith’s green. My walls were papered in pink and blue ribbons. I had two throw rugs instead of just one. I didn’t really notice these differences, but I felt them. Boys didn’t require beauty the way girls did. It would be lost on them. Also, girls needed more indoor space, because that was where we lived.

Going into Carl’s room, in memory, I can sense his martyrdom. Dad put him on a tractor when he was ten, and that’s where he stayed until he graduated from high school and went away to college. His room, like him, radiated brains and accomplishment, but the setting was austere. His grand prize 4-H ribbons, for bottle calves, lambs and for test plots of wheat, hung beside his Future Farmer of America and honor roll certificates. He had only an east window that looked, like one of mine, across the rutted drive at the barn and an abandoned cement stock tank and dead cottonwood tree.

Keith’s room, across the hall from Carl’s, was more intense—smaller, always messy. Mom had “given up fighting him” and just kept the door closed. When we entered, through a narrow corridor walling off the stairwell, the lair exuded mystery. It was dim mornings, but in the afternoon, light exploded through the west window, and I got the sense that Keith actually lived in the most spacious room of all. Mom would shake her head and click her tongue when she saw the tangled bed linens mixed with pajamas, socks and Jockey shorts. “Come here. Give a yank,” she would say, and we would scoop everything up and drag it out the door. Mom acted peeved, but it was clear she worshipped her second son, the same way I did. He had two floor to ceiling stacks of cigar boxes filled with

all variety of things—arrowheads, animal teeth, sulfur for stink bombs, bullet casings, bird bones, fossils, bug carcasses, leaves, gunpowder gleaned from spent firecrackers, rocks, and chunks of molten glass he'd found in our dump, a bulldozed hole south of the house. He had been slithering about the farmstead, making discoveries on his own ever since he was a toddler. He knew the place better than anyone, even better, I suspected, than our dead Grandpa Carlson and his son, the first Keith, whose tractor had been struck by lightning before we were born.

In my parents' room, where the smells of my mother's bath powder and my father's greasy overalls mixed in forbidding mystery, Mom would tear the sheets off their bed and lay one out on the floor. We would throw all the dirty clothes and linens inside it, then she would tie the bundle with a big knot. She would let me ride on it as she dragged it down the stairs.

After dinners, our noon meal, I would sit on my father's lap in the easy chair beside the bay windows in the dining room. I would play with the buttons on his overalls while he teased me about giving him some of my blond hair. The top of his head was bald. I would pull at the black chest hair that furled out of his shirt, suggesting he could use some of that. "Ooh, ooh, ooh!" he would shout, wrenching his lips apart, pretending the pain was unbearable. Finally, he would thump me on the head with his empty coffee cup, telling me it was time for him to get back to work. Carl would take a turn in the chair then, twisting me into knots and tickling me until I said the password—our old number from when we had a wall telephone, which you cranked and then told the operator, "Grainville four, three oh three." Released, I would fall giggling to the floor, then watch, my elbows on the sill, as Carl followed Dad out the gate and back up to the shop. Of course, I longed to follow. Keith would already be off somewhere. "Up to no good, I reckon," Mom would say, shaking her head.

Neither brother was there when, at age five, I sat beside my father on the Oliver, the only tractor with a bench seat. Dad depressed the clutch and pushed the starter, tapping the throttle downward until the engine roared. "How do you like that?" he yelled.

I showed him all my teeth.

"Wanna drive it?"

"Huh?"

He put his hand on the wheel. "Wanna drive?"

“Can I?” I shouted.

He stood up and pulled me to the other side of him, until I was beneath the steering wheel, then he sat back down, on my right.

We went out the road, looking festive in my memory, cresting the hill east of the barn, then rolling down it, until from the house, we would have been just two disappearing humps, one large, one small. That’s the view Mom must have had of us, but for her, the moment was probably a sad one, not festive. She often told me that she had cried with joy at my birth, because I was a girl. Here, finally, was a child who would be hers the way Carl and Keith were Dad’s. She could fashion me into a lady, relive her teenage beauty through me, but with improvements. I wouldn’t be socially backward the way she had been. Being raised on the farm wouldn’t hamper me, because cars were faster now and the twenty miles of road between us and town were better maintained. The county’s one-room schools were consolidating, moving to Grainville, so I would have a better education. I know she wanted me to have options, a chance at a career maybe. She, for instance, had once dreamed of becoming a dress designer. It would be nice if I chose something like that, something feminine. But she hadn’t reckoned on the males’ charisma and their numbers, how my desire would draw me after them.

Keith hovered always, if not directly in my vision, then just beyond it. We were alone on the place, after all, the only kids besides Carl, whose age put him in the fields, beyond my reach. In the eternal childhood summers, Keith entered my head the moment I awoke. I always tried to sleep as late as possible, but as soon as my eyes opened I would become aware of a scratching sound or a rhythmical squeak. “Keith?” I wondered. After dressing, I would tiptoe down the stairs, then discover that the sound came from my mother, at work in her garden, or sweeping the front porch, or in the kitchen, kneading bread. The large dining room would be empty, the hubbub and the power center having migrated with my father, Carl, and the hired men out the east porch door hours before.

“Where’s Keith?” I would ask Mom.

“I don’t know where that little dickens took off to. He’s supposed to be milking the cow.”

So I would go. Out the yard gate, lifting it carefully to prevent the hinges from squeaking. I didn’t want Mom to call me back, and I didn’t want Keith to hear me coming.

What I usually found were silences, places charged with his recent presence. There would be no cow in the barn, and no fresh manure, so I knew he hadn't milked yet. Then I might spot him through the rear door, dashing across the corral.

"Keith!" I would yell. "You're supposed to be milking Rosebud!"

Keith would scale the two wooden fences like a GI in basic training, then disappear. I would stand with my back to the empty pig shed, peeking round. It was like tracking mother cats. You couldn't let them get a glimpse of you.

One such morning, Keith reappeared, trotting along the ridge roll of the sheep barn. He hunkered and rested his B-B gun on the first cupola, aiming down the length of the roof toward the other one. Then followed a typical dance of pursuit and teasing.

I ran to the corner of the building. Climbing the splintery fence, then hoisting myself up onto the corner post, I grabbed the woven ground wire from the lightning rod and scampered up the wall. Pop . . . ping. A copper ball struck something metal. When I lifted myself onto the roof with my elbows and one knee, scratching my belly on a curled up corner of tin sheeting, Keith was gone. I slid down the corrugated tin to the front edge of the building and made the twelve foot jump. I took the shock in my shins, then ran along the chipped stucco wall and stopped in the gaping doorway. A cool sheep odor breathed out at me. One foot inside. Another. In the shade now, peering. Keith nowhere, pigeons burbling, a comfort. "Keith?" I called.

"Ha!" Keith shouted, and leapt from his hiding place between the wall's exposed uprights.

I screamed, then turned to accuse him. "Why are you always scaring me?"

My brother lifted the gun to his scratched right lens and squinted, aiming up at the cupola. A piece of elastic ran along the back of his head to keep his glasses on.

"Don't shoot Snowy!" I shouted, alarmed.

Snowy was up there with four other pigeons. We'd hand-raised him after Keith robbed his nest in the spring, then in August we had set him free. "Would I do that?" he asked out of the corner of his mouth.

I played along, making him the enemy. "Yes, you would."

He raised the gun, aiming into the air space above the birds, and fired. The pigeons flew out in a panic, loose feathers drifting.

“Shows what you know,” Keith said. He left.

Something tickled my belly beneath my waist band. I lifted my shirt. Blood dripped down from the track left by the tin. The wound stung, now that I was aware of it. I ran to the house, where I reported the wound to Mom and told her who was to blame.

Following Keith.

Onto the school bus at 6:35 every morning. Living the farthest out on the route, just a mile from the county line, we were the first passengers. “Where are you going to sit?” Keith would ask, as if my choice would be his. Every time he did this I fell for it. He waited for me to pick a seat, then would choose a spot as far away from me as he could get. I pretended to be relieved, and as the bus rattled up our hill on its return to the county gravel, we bounced along inside of it like two negatively charged magnets, repelling each other.

Through the sumac field. He’d tied strips of white sheet to the tallest stalks to blaze a trail. It was magical not to be able to see the house, the barn. We pulled the heads from the stalks and chewed on the stems. When I got lost, he let me wail, until Mom sent him back into the field to get me.

He climbed higher and higher buildings to get away from me. Finally, he scaled the windmill. My fingers gripped tight as I mounted the narrow rungs. The tin turned my palms black.

He looked down at me. “Don’t come up here. This is too high for you.”

“I’ve been up here before.”

“Yeah? When?”

He reached the wooden platform at the top and pulled himself up with his elbows.

I arrived shortly after and thumped one of his leather lace-up shoes with my fist. “Move over.”

He didn’t kick at me or say something mean. He just reached down and helped me up. I entered a whole new level of exposure, of danger. There was nothing to hold onto.

We were above the roof of the house, could see the tin sheeting around the base of the chimney. We saw like birds, right over the sheep barn and out into the pasture, where the expanse absorbed our one thousand ewes

and their twelve hundred lambs, making them look like no more than a hundred. Gray rocks, they dappled the gradual hills. Beyond ours, the neighbor's pasture was empty.

It was as if Keith had always viewed our lives from this angle. "Think of it in the old days," he said.

"Before we were born?"

"Before Mom and Dad were born. Before Grandpa Carlson even. Before he ever laid eyes on it."

It was impossible to think past that grandpa, but I tried to erase the house and our farmstead. I imagined just grass and no fences.

"This was Indian country. Sioux."

Sue? I wondered, but said nothing.

The yard dogs, Snooker and Flopsy, sat on the sidewalk, staring up at us. They looked like rats, their bottoms widening out from their shoulders. Rex, Dad's border collie, lay sprawled in front of the barn, his legs out straight, as if he were dead. I leaned forward to see how far it was to the base of the tower, but Keith put his hand on my arm, pulling me back.

Joe the Crow perched on the clothesline, swooping down every so often to swipe a chunk of the dogs' food. Beside me, Keith cawed, a perfect imitation, and the bird rose off the wire and flew to the roof of the well house. Keith cawed again, and the bird lifted. Ink black against the blue sky, he flew around the tower two times, above our heads, but close enough that when Keith stretched his hand up, he could almost touch him.

Joe the Crow, unwilling to risk going too near the windmill's blades, returned to the clothesline, and I gazed again at the horizon. I could see the wheat elevators in Grainville.

I swung my feet a bit and the heel of one of my cowboy boots struck one of the angle iron supports holding the rungs. Vibrations hummed through the tower.

"Watch it," Keith said. "You think you'd land on your feet, like Humbug did when you and Cousin Angie dropped him out of the barn loft?"

"That was when we were little. We didn't know any better. Besides, we didn't hurt him. Cats *do* land on their feet."

"Just watch it," Keith said. "Think about Mom."

I knew what he meant without asking. I envisioned her stepping out onto the porch, and a wave of guilt washed over me at the thought of how scared

she would be to see me up there. Keith, she knew, could handle himself. Or maybe she was simply resigned, believing that, with boys, you had to swallow your fear and let them go loose.

A welcome breeze picked up, drying my sweat. Behind us, there was a screech of metal.

“Keith!” I yelled, scampering for the first rung, but missing it, nearly falling. Keith grabbed my wrist. “Keith! Let go! Hurry! The wind!”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “You don’t think I’d come up here without braking the rotor first, do you, Slick?”

When Keith was twelve, Dad put him to work, the same way he had Carl. Carl had already graduated valedictorian and gone away to college. Ever since he’d gotten a telescope for Christmas and was able to find Sputnik overhead, there had been a sense that science would kidnap him. He didn’t come home his first summer or any after that. All of Dad’s expectations moved onto Keith, whose sarcasm grew more hard-edged. I saw him mainly at dinner.

He would come onto the porch carrying his shirt in his hands, his face a mask of dust and his chest as tan as those of the lifeguards at the swimming pool in town. Mud ran off his arms into the sink. He would put on his blue work shirt, with the sleeves torn out, fasten two buttons, and sit down opposite me at the Formica table in the dining room. Without his glasses, he looked like a raccoon, and his teeth, the ones we called fangs, protruded as he smiled, making him look even more like an animal.

“What’s up, Slick?” Keith would say, as mashed potatoes and gravy and platters of fried chicken sailed round. “Been working hard?”

Mom always handed me the chicken first, and I grabbed the wishbone, my privilege as the youngest. “Never mind,” I said.

“Never mind,” Keith mimicked.

Dad came in last, after the hired men. Elmer, our sheepherder, sat by me. The other hired man, Hank, went to the end of the table where Carl used to sit, opposite Mom. Dad paused behind my chair to stroke my head with his heavy hand. Lava soap-scented droplets sprinkled off his hairy forearm. “Can I drive the tractor today?” I asked. Year in, year out, we had the same conversation.

Not hearing, Dad sits down across from me, on Mom's left. He reaches out mechanically and grabs a homemade dinner roll, butters it and begins munching, no other food on his plate.

"Da-yad, can you give me a lesson driving tractor today?"

"Julene." Mom's tone is a reprimand.

"I'll give her a lesson," Keith says. "She can drive the 4010. I'll do her job. What is her job?"

"I don't want to learn from you. I'll take my lessons from Dad."

Dad finally notices me. "You want to disk the summer fallow with me? You're going to have to stick it out, though. I can't be stopping to. . . ."

Mom interrupts him. "No daughter of mine is going to bake out there on a tractor like a man. And it's too dangerous, Harold. For crying out loud."

"That's right," Dad concedes.

"Lucky little shit," Keith says.

Not noticing him, Dad says, "You can lose an arm or a leg in the blink of an eye."

I know Dad is thinking about the time his leg was caught in a thresher and he spent two months in the hospital. I remember his absence vividly, although I was only four at the time. Carl took me onto the lawn outside the hospital window and let me wave to him. But all I can think of now is what I can't have. I narrow my eyes and try to make Keith wither.

"Chow down, people," Mom says. "We've got a special dessert today. Julene's trying out cookie recipes for 4-H."

I want to tell everyone that I baked them only under duress and I wasn't really trying them. Mom was. She's wearing a short-sleeved, shirtwaist house dress, like always. This one has yellow and white checks with faded pink flowers across the bodice. Her hair is reddish brown. She sets it with bobby pins, making dozens of little spirals, then wears a net over it until it dries.

I can see myself in the mirror over the mantel. I am framed between the backs of Dad's and Keith's heads. I think I look more like Dad than Mom, although at her club meetings, the women nod to each other, saying, "She takes after her mother." I practice my mysterious smile, the one that conceals my teeth, which are straight, but mottled by brown spots from the well water. Above the mirror is a set of leaded glass cabinets. When I was tiny, Dad used to lift me up to see into them. I was no heavier than a kitten to him, my legs trailing and flying up in the air.

I want to drive the tractor. Lilian Creston, the daughter of the richest farmer in the county, probably the state, drives tractors in the summer. She wears her bikini, and has a tan to show for it too. I look down at my arms, comparing them to Dad's which are big and solid, almost black beneath thick hair. It's as if Dad is a different species from Mom, who always wears a long-sleeved light shirt and cotton gloves when she works in her garden.

In those envious moments, I didn't know to feel sorry for Keith, who was losing what remained of his childhood. He has since told me about those tedious hours after Mom's big dinners, when he would return to the tractor in the hottest part of the day. He would nearly fall asleep, only to be brutally brought back to his senses by a swarm of flying ants. He would shake himself and pour his jug of ice water over his head. I, meanwhile, had only a single image of farming—that morning in early childhood when Dad and I went down the hill in the Oliver.

And that moment replayed itself over and over, strumming my yearning. Somewhere deep, I remembered how, on the Oliver, my stomach had felt giddy like it had whenever Dad lifted me up to see in the cabinets. I clung tightly to the wheel and over-steered. We crossed the gravel and headed down into the field. My arms were metal bars, but Dad continued to relax as the Oliver began the dive. He reached over and with just a thumb and two fingers, guided the tractor through my resistance. The sleeve of Dad's flannel-lined denim jacket, smelling of sheep, brushed my scalp. Its corduroy collar bent upward and poked his cheek, making a crater where new black whiskers were beginning to appear, mid-morning. Love and longing for all that was male and inaccessible fueled my resentment.

"Thirty bushels," Dad announces. "Whadda ya think, Keith?"

Keith groans. Hank, who has a handlebar mustache and wears a denim work shirt with pearly snaps, chirps in, "Hell, I think it'll go forty."

"Forty what?" I ask.

Keith looks at me and sneers. "Whadda ya think we grow here, Slick?"

Mom says, "Forty bushel wheat, Julene."

Beside me, Elmer gums his potatoes, and his Adam's apple ushers them down his scrawny neck. He smiles wetly at me, eyes beaming. "Maybe your dad'll buy you that Arab mare."

“Or build that house,” Mom says. I envision a low-slung ranch-style made out of red brick, like the ones I build with my Legos.

“Or give me a day off,” Keith says, imitating Elmer’s and Mom’s singsong rhythm. Everyone laughs.

I tried to continue my escapades about the farmyard, but without Keith, I lacked zeal and patience. I could seldom find nests of baby kittens or rabbits the way Keith could, and even when I dragged a big wooden step ladder into the barn loft to capture pigeons, I couldn’t reach the rafters. I would get Dad’s sledgehammer out of the shop and bust rocks, or trail sticks through the dirt. Finally, when I was nine and I had moped and complained long enough, Dad bought me a horse. It wasn’t the dapple-gray Arabian mare I’d begged for. Such an animal would have been too pricey, too classy for the down-home horse sense in our family, centered until then around the draft stock my parents knew as children. There used to be a couple of descendants of these—black and white, swaybacked paints, who roamed around in the north pasture and were seldom ridden—but this new mare was part Quarter Horse and spent her youth working cattle. Copper Queen, I named her. Queenie.

Our shepherd, Elmer, brought me a curry comb. “Heah,” he said, the edges of his speech having disappeared with his teeth. “You comb down like dis. Go with the hair.”

“What about here?” I said, pointing to Queenie’s flank, where the hair flowed upward then veered to both sides, like the water in the Gulick Park fountain in town.

“You just go boat ways, then,” Elmer said, showing me with the outer ring of the circular saw-tooth comb.

“Feel how smooth up here,” I said, lifting Queenie’s yellow mane and stroking beneath.

Elmer put his right hand next to mine, but carefully, so as not to touch. He petted Queenie’s neck. His left arm hung at his side, like a broken tree limb, the hand turned backward so that the fingers were always grasping air. “Yep. She’s a fine hort all right. You get your dad to buy you a brush, and you can make her this smood all over.”

I spent hours in the stall with her, following Elmer’s directions, currying until there were no trails of dust, until no loose hair of her roan coat remained to be dislodged.

When Dad came in for dinner at noon, he would give my ponytail a yank. "Saw you in the wheat stubble. Hell bent for leather. Both your tails flyin' out behind. Couldn't tell whose was whose."

I would beam across the table at Keith. Here finally was something I was expert in. Keith had never even ridden Queenie, or any horse besides the paints before, and everyone knew they were so tame that you could sit on them bareback while they grazed. He didn't even like horses. He hadn't read every word in Marguerite Henry's *Album of Horses* ten times. He hadn't read all the entries in the *Horseman's Encyclopedia*. He didn't draw horses, or dream about them, or collect figurines.

The insides of my knees became raw, but I rode until they scabbed over, then formed calluses. In the summer fallow fields where the men had gotten every last weed and broken every clod with the harrow, Queenie's hooves left deep prints, maps of our figure eights and barrel racing patterns. But the more months that separated Queenie from the cowboys of her past, the less solid and sensible she became. She learned she could get away with things. It began to dawn on me that she was not the supple, spirited, compliant horse of my dreams, but cranky and aged and headstrong, like my Grandmother Carlson, who made my mother's and my visits to town miserable by insisting we sit for hours in her cramped-up house. My rides became secret wars, out beyond the windbreak, where no one could see. Queenie grabbed the bit in her teeth. "No," I shouted, trying to pull her around, but she thundered with me back to the barn.

Dad said, "Don't run that horse home. You'll spoil her." Finally, Queenie wouldn't leave the barn at all.

Then Dad said, "I'll get Keith to ride her for you."

Keith swung aboard her like an Indian. He whooped and kicked her, then singing "yee-haw," plummeted out of the barn.

Dad stepped through the doorway to watch Keith go. It was the same way he paced after tractors as they took off with either brother or a hired man aboard, a businesslike maneuver that soon had him digging dirt with the toe of a Red Wing to check an implement's depth. He didn't kick dirt now though. Beneath tangled brows, his fawn-colored eyes stayed lifted, tracking Keith. "Ha! Look at 'er now," he said.

My horse and my brother disappeared over the hill on our road, Keith bent low over her neck and still kicking. We waited. When they came back, Queenie was walking. Keith didn't have to rein her in.

"Now you get on," Dad said.

He slapped Queenie's rump. "Get outa here!"

I rode in the same direction Keith had, refusing to bounce, although I had a hard time keeping Queenie above a trot as we went up the hill. Once over the crest, she tried to turn. I plow-reined her back around, hating Keith's muscles and boy spirit. I kicked her hard. "No!" I yelled. It was a plea, not a command, but it succeeded.

"Keith taught her a lesson," Dad said at dinner. "She won't be doing that again."

Sometime during the winter when I was eleven, it was decided that Elmer was a menace to little girls. My mother had heard a rumor. Some neighbors who hired him for an odd job suspected him of molesting their daughter. Molest meant to "bother you where you shouldn't be touched." Cast in this putrid light, Elmer's fond glances at me down the years, over checker boards and horses' backs, turned to leers. But then I remembered the easy swing of his long right arm in its thin blue cotton work shirt, and how it had never failed to send Rex, a dog who would work for no one else, out around our flock. I couldn't reconcile my parents' suspicions with Rex's trust. The news from my mother in April, that I was not to speak to Elmer when he returned for shearing at the end of the month, sent me in a gale of embarrassment and shame up the stairs and out of her sight, but when I heard her sewing machine begin in the room below mine, I tiptoed back down and out of the house. I found Rex sleeping just outside the yard gate.

He jumped up, ready to follow wherever I was headed. "Shake, boy," I said. He did, avidly, then raised his other paw.

I buried my face in the silver white fur on his shoulder. "Oh Raxy. When Elmer comes back, don't go to him."

Elmer's old Packard appeared in the yard a week later. I pulled my head back in behind the barn door, but Rex bounded into the light. "Hi dare, boy," said Elmer, a stooping tower of imbecility, of innocence. I stayed hidden in the barn, just in case. I stayed hidden all summer, flitting around corners, up stairs, behind trees or into the sumac whenever I saw him.

I was never sure whether my shame derived from his possibly corrupt attention or from having the parts that could elicit such attention. Around this time other comments began surfacing that made me feel uneasy. My father noticed I was growing “little pimples” on my chest. He told me, when I wore shorts, that I had nice legs and predicted that I would forget horses soon, trading the interest in on boys. I felt I was being watched by the hired men, by my father, in a new way. Their stares, or my consciousness of them, turned cells in my skin around, so that they faced inward. This was my first awareness of myself as a protectorate, a body that belonged not to the world, but to a cloistered family. If I wandered too far, or in the wrong company, I would be prey. Eyes followed me that I had never known existed, and when they were the dark ones of the young school bus driver, I felt the first cresting excitement of sexual danger. Swimming suits in the spring Montgomery Ward catalogue took on a new, tantalizing attraction as I realized how worshipped were the bodies in the pictures.

At the dinner table, Elmer said the same things. “Saw you on that yellow hort today, lookin’ like an Indian princess.” I stared into my plate. By then, it was Fancy I rode most often, my second horse, a palomino foaled out of Queenie. Elmer encouraged every contact I had with my horses, but his words didn’t make me proud anymore. Elmer looked, hurt and questioning, at my mother. She asked him if he wanted dessert. Fudge brownies that Julene made.

After dinners, throughout all those summers, I watched out the big windows in the bayed wall at the east end of the dining room. They would disperse out there, like fragments of light, each male off in his solitary direction to do his solitary important chore. Dad’s step was zealous, while Keith’s was hunched and rebellious, but they were all equal to the size of the world, undaunted by its glare. I scraped the bones and other remains of the meal, even the green beans and bits of pie crust, into the skillet Mom fried the chicken in and took it outside. In the spring, Mom’s yard was lush and aromatic with tulips, lilacs, hyacinths and pansies, but in midsummer, the stems of the few remaining flowers would bend before the wind. The catalpa tree’s big leaves stretched northward, like extended, clapping hands. I worked as fast as I could. Globes of mashed potatoes and gravy would blow onto my shoes as I scraped the leftovers in three piles, one big for Flopsy

and Snooker, another little one, far apart for cats, and one outside the yard for Rex. He trotted across from the barn, his head cocked against the wind, one ear turned inside out, the other horizontal like a flag. Roads of white-pink skin meandered along his side, where the wind parted and re-parted his coat. If I had failed to put on one of the cotton scarves that Mom always insisted I wear, my fine hair would tangle, and I would pull the gate shut hastily behind me and race up the walk.

The pipes leading down the center of the windmill banged and threatened to buckle. But the tower stood straight, as summer after summer, the rods plunged and pumped, filling the well house holding tank with water, performing a prescribed function. As did all the structures on the place, all the machinery, all the people, me. In the beginning I grew out into the farm in the course of natural discovery. Then gradually, I retreated back into the house.

I had been a bright eight year old, a smattering of freckles over my nose, eyes that were as ornery as Keith's. But as the pictures in my mother's albums advance into the high school years, my face softens and grows melancholy. Looking at these pictures, I recall the smell of bath powder, not dust. I smell Clearasil makeup and hair spray, not horse sweat. Of course, the pimples appeared. My hair darkened. My brows were still thick, a characteristic of my father's side of the family, but below them, my eyes were uncertain.

In one of the pictures, I am thirteen. My hair is short for the first time in my life. My neck is long and graceful, but, thinking it scrawny, I hold my chin down in order to conceal it. I've adopted a gaze that attempts to be alluring, a close-lipped smile to conceal my teeth. I wear a white western blouse with black-trimmed ruffles up the front. This picture more than any other reminds me of the ones of my mother in her oldest album.

I trail my fingers over the album's dark, forest green cover, embossed with vines. Opening it, I am greeted first by a posed profile of my grandmother, whose skin is alabaster, whose long, dark hair is pulled up and wrapped elegantly. Her bodice is lace, and lace also spills from the cuff of her sleeve as she gazes into a hand-held mirror. After my once beautiful grandmother, come page after page of shocked white faces, unartful shots of my mother's Norwegian and Swedish ancestors, got up for posterity. Then my mother and her siblings begin appearing. The girls, in their teens and early twenties,

pose arch-backed, like fashion models. They are half-joking, half-wishful. My willowy mother wears long, closefitting, dark dresses and poses with one hip and one elbow askew beside the cement columns on the south porch of the farmhouse. There is one of her with her father, beside his horse-drawn thresher. In that and even in the one of her with her pet pig, Florence, she wears culottes, the fashion then. She has a ribbon in her hair.

When did we start posing, like Mona Lisas, looking out only to fetch others in? Waiting for someone to paint us, capture our spirits on film, see our beauty, save us? She took me to a box supper once, an old-fashioned event where the girls all brought shoe boxes decorated with crepe paper and inside them suppers that they, or as in my case, their mothers had made. They were bid on then, by the boys. My box was bright blue and yellow. My mother was an artist. I wore my new Sunday skirt and cape—a balloon of blue, her latest creation—and the dime store heart bracelet I'd bought when we visited my aunt in Denver. Even though I was only ten, someone actually bid on my supper. I don't think he sat down to eat with me though. The purchase was made for charity.

My happiness depended on being claimed by some boy, some boy, who like Keith, had volition and ways of getting about in the world, ways of having fun. Richard lived on a farm ten miles away, between us and town, but not on our school bus route. We started "going steady" in fourth grade, though we seldom had the nerve to speak to each other. Occasionally we exchanged notes through my more brazen cousin Angie and her boyfriend Ben. One time when Angie stayed a weekend with me, we each tied two pieces of rope together and buried them below a tree out in the far corner of the windbreak. They represented Julene and Richard, Angie and Ben. When we came back as adult couples, we would dig them up and show them to our husbands. We vowed to check them every year, because it was imperative that they remain intact for our spell to work. We couldn't find them the following spring.

At night, when Angie stayed over, we would watch the yard lights out my east window, and, convinced we could see both Richard's and Ben's, would wait for them to blink Morse code signals to us.

My brother Keith never seemed to wait for anything. He was driving his own car to town at fourteen. Abusing a learner's permit given farm kids to get back and forth to school, he would fill up out of the farm gas tank and stay out well past midnight Fridays and Saturdays. "Swipes my gas and

carouses like a tomcat,” Dad would say, but he’d smile as he spoke, and I knew he was remembering his own youthful hell raising.

Keith got the pimples too; and the points of his unstraightened canine teeth protruded onto his lower lip, even when he smiled with his mouth shut, but his eyes stayed bright. You could see in them how he was adding things up. He was looking outward and finding the world laughable. The stories filtered down to me as I ebbed through high school. He was a pool shark in the local bars, where nice girls never went. “The flag is a piece of cloth,” he told the history teacher, Miss Murray, when she asked him what it stood for. There was a dance hall out in the country somewhere in Colorado, where he spent his Saturday nights with a girl from the only Mexican family in town. His grades were scattershot, some A’s, some D’s, but he was the teachers’ favorite anyway. He still drove the tractor in the summer, and I became a housedaughter, whose single goal, when at home, was to avoid work.

In from scraping the frying pan, I set it on the mud porch sink instead of going into the kitchen, where Mom might assign me another chore. I enter the dining room. Dust motes float down over the wallpaper, which is gray like the rest of the room at first, but as my pupils widen, its tiny print of olive green and beige L-shaped lines comes back into focus. Saying the leaded glass cabinets were too old to repair, my parents tore them and the mantel out, replacing them with a blank wall. Carl’s graduation picture hangs in the middle of it, the shoulders of his gray suit, the bows of his tie and his flat top all similarly squared off. The room echoes of his loneliness, his losses, the times when he should have been with his classmates on school field trips, but had to help with field work instead. Or there was the night he dressed up in a suit to compete in a senior class best-groomed contest, but couldn’t get the grease out from under his fingernails, except with gas, and then he reeked of the fumes. He stood in this room, beside the door leading in from the porch, where he’d been scrubbing for half an hour. “I look like a dumb farmer,” he said, his eyes brimming.

My mother says words I don’t hear. I want to slip away from her the same way Carl did from Dad, in the trail of Sputnik. I sense there is some escape even better than his, something I’ve lost the capacity to envision or the language to ask for. It is not in this room, but may be lurking somewhere, in a secret passage or room that I dream of nights. In town, at

school, they are training me, though no one knows for what. When asked what I want to be, I say astronaut, nuclear physicist, vet. Dad laughs, and suggests nursing or teaching. Mom's lips just press together, registering undeniable disappointment now—that I won't be a fashion designer, or a home economist, the type who goes around the countryside visiting ladies' clubs, sharing delectable recipes and the latest scientific information on botulism and garden bean hybrids. I don't do much of anything around the house, but am good at appearing to help, choosing chores that are really just fun—rolling the food cart back and forth from the kitchen; perfecting the skill of sorting silverware until it clanks rapidly into the drawer, like machine-sorted change; skating the dust mop over the pine boards in the upstairs hallway.

The long imitation boards in the dining room linoleum stretch out from beneath the vinyl-quilted easy chair, where I loll in front of the window air conditioner, my legs twisted around the pole lamp. I sort through a stack of *Ingenues*, *Seventeens* and *American Girls* that I've checked out from the library. Keith is a fast reader; he has a photographic memory, Mom says. But it's the pictures that intrigue me most, making me sick and wishful for clothes and a perfect tan.

Mom presses on. The dishes get washed; then she sews or bakes. Sometimes she reappears in the dining room, surprising me. I begin flipping pages at the rate Keith would. She opens her dream drawer in the blond buffet and pulls out her house plans. She has drafted these carefully over the years, while I've watched from the other end of the room, growing lankier, my legs winding further up the pole lamp toward the nine-foot ceiling, my hair growing tawnier, but still fine and picking up electricity off the vinyl easy chair. She sets her pad of wide graph paper, her protractor, compass, ruler, and number four pencil down on the dining table that she has carefully washed, then wiped dry with an embroidered dishtowel, its white cotton gone limp with the years. Pretty soon, she says, "Look, Julene," excited over her latest. "A butcher block counter, a lazy Susan, and a breakfast nook. It's open between the living room and the kitchen area, except for a low built-in bookcase. Here." I come over and stare down at the cryptic symbols she has learned from *Better Homes and Gardens*. I envision our family occupying the featured house. Gleaming wood, the smell of shining newness. We would become glamorous versions of

ourselves there, selves that up till now have been only clodhopper shadows of their potential. Somehow our dreams have joined, mine and my mother's. I want what she wants now. A new house, a new place to live inside of. The polished, modern house will have a gleaming kitchen like in the Johnson and Johnson wax commercials on TV. Mom will wear her Sunday suits and heels when she mops. When the new house is built we will live in a magazine country, where sliding glass doors look out on lush trees, none of them ragged or windblown. The light will pour in, and I'll never go outdoors.