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GROW INTO YOURSELF

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BETHANY LYNN MITCHELL

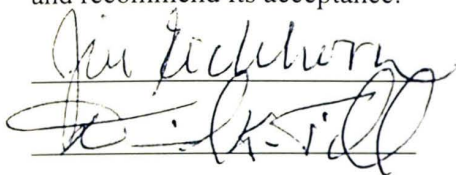


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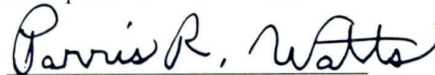
I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Bethany Lynn Mitchell entitled *Grow Into Yourself*. I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

  
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Grow Into Yourself

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

Austin Peay State University

Bethany Lynn Mitchell

May, 2002



## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents

George and Nancy Mitchell

who have given me love and support

throughout my education.

It is also dedicated to my daughter, Claire

who is the inspiration I needed.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank every professor who has taught me during my time at Austin Peay. I have learned a tremendous amount from each one, knowledge that I will carry with me for a lifetime. I would also like to thank Dr. Till and Dr. Eichhorn, for their helpful insights and comments. I would especially like to thank Barry Kitterman for his help with the process of my thesis and my creative writing career at Austin Peay. He has encouraged and supported me through many steps of my growth as a creative writer. Finally, I would like to thank the students who have encouraged and supported me in the process as well, especially Laurie Cannady who has offered many insights and encouragements regarding my writing.



## FOREWARD

This collection of poems and a short story intertwine to tell the story of Erin, a girl who is growing toward womanhood. *Grow Into Yourself* explores the themes and issues that affect the lives of girls on their journey into womanhood. The people in Erin's life help shape her into who she will become. She feels alienated from her mother and her mother's new family and forms a strong connection with her Aunt, who nurtures her through her journey. She grows throughout the story, learning about herself and others along the way. She realizes in the end that a pregnancy will finally ground her into adulthood.

Girl, Waiting for Woman to Happen

Her feet are bare,  
toes digging into brown  
soil. She is contemplating  
the sunrise.

Her hands sit firmly on  
new hips, soft skin  
curving over jutting bone.

She does not feel  
the roots  
rising from the earth  
to tangle into her.  
She only feels a dull ache  
of muscle and tendon  
stretching their firm arms.

Her eyes are closed, and  
she feels the quickening  
of life, her breath,  
the heat of her blood.  
She wonders how many  
seasons before she pushes out  
of her taut skin.

\* \* \* \* \*

"It feels like fall," Erin said to her Aunt Helen. Sweat spread its fingers from Erin's hairline and ran its hands down the smoothness of her face. It felt like the hottest day of summer and Erin sat on the back porch watching the ground being turned by her Aunt's hands.

"This is chocolate mint," Aunt Helen said.

"How do they make that?"

"*They* don't make it. God does."



“Oh,” Erin said. She held in her hands a yellow piece of paper with small precise handwriting. It was her Uncle Henry’s handwriting. Henry was Helen’s second husband. “Why did you want me to read this?” Erin studied the list trying to make sense of the list of words: cloud, sky, rain, grass, ground, dark, dirt, cover.

“Henry had a premonition that he was going to die.” Erin studied the piece of paper again and looked quizzically at her Aunt. Helen was much older than her younger sister, Erin’s mother. She was twenty when her only sibling, Emily, was born. They were not close, in age or otherwise. Twenty years is a whole generation. Helen only began to feel close to Emily when Erin was born. Erin was sixteen, Helen almost sixty and they had more in common with each other than either of them did with Emily.

“Hmmm,” Erin replied.

“Well you know he was always into playing free association games.”

Erin remembered Uncle Henry’s strange game, and how she felt a sense of dread when he used to get out his notebook and pencil and turn to her with a look of intensity. He was a psychology professor at Volunteer State Community College, and thought that he had a knack for analyzing personalities. Erin didn’t want to be analyzed, so she listed off the things in the room when he asked her to free-associate, starting with the word cloud. Chair, rug, lamp, book, bookshelf, clock, window. “Yes,” he had said slowly to himself. “She likes to be in control, keeps her emotions tight,” he said as though she weren’t there.

“I remember,” Erin said to her aunt.

“He did that one two days before his heart attack. He kept reading it over and I finally had to take it from him and put it away. He could get so obsessed with something, for days and weeks.”

“Do you miss him?”

“Yes, I do.”

“And Dan?” Erin said, referring to Aunt Helen’s first husband.

“I miss him too.”

“But you seemed so untouched when Uncle Henry died. No... I mean, you know?” Erin said as her Aunt wiped stray hair away from her face, streaking it with dirt.

“I know what you mean, sweetheart.” She continued to make holes in the dirt and fill them with green herbs, then cover the roots over. “I *was* touched, that’s because I loved them both. I just think it’s silly to break down when someone you love dies. Good for them, they are much better off.”

“That’s what Mom did when Dad died.” Erin was only five when her father died, but she remembered her mother’s reaction. She remembered her mother’s blue eyes streaked for weeks with mascara. She always tried to look her best, but by the middle of the day her best had streaked down her face. One day Erin reached into her mother’s makeup drawer and painted her own face with the mascara. She thought it was part of the mourning ritual. She went into her mother’s room and lay on the pillow beside her, stroking her mother’s thick brown hair. Erin didn’t look like her mother; she inherited her father’s dark blond hair and brown eyes. When her mother looked up and saw Erin, she let out a tiny whimper of a laugh, then told her to get off her satin pillow, she might



ruin it. Her mother scrubbed her face raw with hot water from the bathroom sink, holding Erin's forehead with the clamp of her small hands.

"People react differently to things," said Helen, with her back to Erin.

"Yeah, you waited fourteen years to marry again. Mom took a year and a half."

Helen turned to look at Erin. "Honey, she needed someone. Your stepfather is a good man."

Erin started to tear at the paper in her hands, dropping the pieces onto the concrete of the back patio.

"Give me that," Helen said as she walked to Erin with her hand out. "Let's go inside and clean up."

Erin sat down on the edge of Aunt Helen's bed and watched as she placed the paper inside a book then slipped it into her bedside table.

"I'm going to take a shower. Won't be but a minute," Helen said over her shoulder as she undid her graying red hair from its pins. Erin lay back on the bed, staring at the holes in the pattern of the ceiling fan blades. She had counted fifteen before she realized what she was doing and made herself stop. When she was seven she started to count things; sometimes she drove herself crazy because she couldn't stop. She could stop now, if she realized she was doing it. Erin listened to the water from the shower, feeling a sense of calm. Aunt Helen's house was a haven. The pink flowered spread in her bedroom, the blue plaid walls, the stained glass window overlooking the small garden in the backyard. Erin's mother always lifted an eyebrow when she entered Aunt Helen's house, which was in sharp contrast with her own home in a modern subdivision, color

coordinated in neutrals. Erin felt like a guest in her mother and stepfather's home. Her room was down the same hallway as her stepbrother's and stepsister's. Andrew was eight and Taylor was seven. They didn't know what to make of Erin, who didn't speak much or come out of her room when she was home. They saw their mother's sharp blue eyes focus on Erin when she came in, overheard her tell their father that Erin had become so moody. Their father laughed it off.

"Teenage girls are like that," he said.

Aunt Helen came out of the bathroom wearing her soft cotton pajamas. "Are you going to wear those to dinner?" Erin asked.

"It's just you and me, sweetie. Do you mind?"

"Not if I can put mine on, too."

Aunt Helen looked around the room, her finger pressed firm to her lip. Then she stuck her head out the door and asked, "Does anyone mind if Erin puts on her pajamas?" When no one answered she shrugged. "I guess no one minds."

"Okay then," Erin said, getting up from the bed, taking her backpack into the bathroom. "I'll be right back."

"I'll be right here. Oh, and wash your face while you're in there."

"I know, Mom wants me to wash my face twice a day to help clear it up."

"No, I want to make you up," she said, opening drawers in her vanity as Erin shut the bathroom door.

"Why? I don't like makeup."

"It will be fun. Girl stuff, you know."



When Erin came out wearing her blue cotton pajamas, Aunt Helen motioned for her to sit on the vanity bench beside her. Aunt Helen brushed softly through Erin's hair. She pushed her bangs away from her eyes and pinned them on the top of her head. "I see a pretty girl," she said as she drew the rest of Erin's hair off her shoulders. Erin looked in the mirror, tried to discern what Aunt Helen saw that she didn't. Shadows fell under her eyes and around the frown of her mouth. All she saw was a bland girl who couldn't easily smile.

"I see just me," Erin said.

"Yes, that is what I see too. Just you. But I don't think you see the same young woman I see."

"Young woman? Mom still calls me a little girl sometimes. I don't think she knows that I'm sixteen. Or other times she calls me a teenager. But that's only when she's mad at me. She gets this tone in her voice then sighs and says 'teenagers.' Or sometimes she calls me young lady. But it's always in her tone, too."

"Well I see a young woman in you." Aunt Helen began smoothing eye shadow over Erin's eyelids. "See how this color brings out your eyes? I bet this blush would look great with your skin," she said, reaching for a compact.

Erin's hands brushed over the compacts and jars as Aunt Helen's hands moved over her skin. She never wore makeup. She felt like she was trying to be someone else when she did.

"Why do you think it feels like fall today?" Aunt Helen asked.

"What?"

"Remember, out in the garden? You said..."

“Oh, Yeah. I don’t know. You know how sometimes in the fall you get this feeling. Like an expectation of something. Like something is about to happen, maybe? I don’t know. I guess it sounds sort of weird.”

“No, I think I know what you mean.” Aunt Helen held up a hand mirror for Erin to take. “See what a little makeup can do? Not that you need it, but it does look pretty.”

Erin looked in the mirror and studied the glittering blue over her eyelids. “I’m going down to make the pasta,” Aunt Helen said. “You do want pasta tonight, yes?”

“Do I ever not want it?”

“I was just asking. Oh, and I got chocolate ice cream in the freezer to make sundaes for our Audrey movie marathon.”

Aunt Helen slipped out of the room and Erin heard her footsteps on the stairs, then the cupboards open and close in the kitchen. Erin turned back to the girl in the mirror. She liked the way she looked, but the makeup didn’t feel right. She pulled at the corners of her mouth and tried to make them stay up. Her lips were thin and had a natural downward curve. Maybe if they were thicker, or curved upward, she could fool people into thinking she smiled all the time. Like the other girls at school who laughed as though it were nothing to laugh. “Why aren’t you happy?” she got asked all the time. “You would look much prettier if you only smiled.” Smiling took too much energy. She wanted to save it for when she really meant it.

Erin placed the mirror back on the vanity and took the pins out of her hair. She went down the stairs and paused to look at the photographs stair-stepped down the wall. Aunt Helen took a photography class at the university where Uncle Henry taught. She only took one semester, but learned enough to make life seem clear and vibrant in her

black and white photographs. Erin could never walk up the stairs without looking at the pictures. There was a picture of her when she was twelve years old standing in the garden holding a sunflower. She wasn't looking at the camera, but over the fence to something out of sight. Aunt Helen took this picture before Erin knew she was being photographed. This picture was contrasted with others on the wall which showed her face forcing a smile, or intentionally looking away. She felt a strange sense of calm when she looked at the picture, and tried to remember what she was looking at. She couldn't remember what it was, or what she had been thinking, but she felt anxiety at having the picture on display for everyone to see. It was so vulnerable against the white of the wall, so open and unprotected. No matter how many times she asked Aunt Helen to take the picture down, her aunt insisted that it stay where it was.

In the kitchen Aunt Helen was bent over a large pot of water boiling on the stove. She was stirring a wooden spoon round the edges absently. "What do you want me to do?" Erin asked.

"What?"

"Sorry, I mean...should I do anything?" Erin asked from the doorway.

"No, no. Just go pick out the movie you want to watch."

Erin stepped into the living room and sorted through her Aunt's Audrey Hepburn collection on the bookshelf. She ran her finger over the spine of each, studying the titles intently. She did this five times before Aunt Helen came in.

"Well, what did you decide?"

"I don't know. You pick," Erin said without looking up.

Aunt Helen looked at her for a moment. “Honey, it’s just a movie. It doesn’t matter which one you pick.”

“I know.” She turned to look at the movies again and closed her eyes. She pulled out a movie and opened one eye slightly. “No, we watched *My Fair Lady* last time. And it’s too long anyway.”

Aunt Helen set the bowl of pasta on the table then took the movie out of Erin’s hand and placed it back with the others. She pulled out a tape and put it into the VCR. “How about *Funny Face*, funny face?”

“Okay, that’s good.” They sat down on the floor in front of the couch. Erin rested her head on her Aunt’s shoulder as she put pasta into each of their bowls. “Aunt Helen.”

“Yes, Erin.”

“Why do they always want her to change into something else in her movies? She’s perfect when she starts out.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Erin woke to the sound of wind chimes softly clanging in her window. She opened her eyes to the blue dim of her Aunt’s guest bedroom. She could hear her mother talking to her Aunt downstairs, then feet softly padding up the stairs. Her Aunt knocked on the door, then opened it to peer in at Erin.



“Honey, its time to get up. Your mother is here.” When Erin didn’t respond Aunt Helen came in and sat on the bed. She placed her cool hand on Erin’s hair, smoothing it out of her eyes. “Erin.”

“What.” When her Aunt didn’t respond, Erin threw off the covers. “Why does she have to come pick me up so early?” She pulled her jeans out of her backpack and looked at Aunt Helen.

“I’d like for you to stay, too, but your mother is here so go ahead and get dressed. I have some juice for you to drink for breakfast.”

Erin stood with her jeans held tightly to her chest, looking at her Aunt. Aunt Helen smoothed the wrinkles out of the sheet, then stood and walked to the door. She studied Erin’s face for a moment, then walked out the door and closed it softly.

When the door closed again, Erin slowly dressed. She looked out the window to her mother’s van, where her brother and sister sat with her stepfather, Steve. They were driving to Kentucky to see her step-father’s parents. They lived on an old farm in a small town. Erin told her mother that she didn’t want to go, but her mother wouldn’t hear of it. “You are a part of this family, and you need to come along,” she had said to her. It was funny how adamantly her mother could say things like that, then act towards her as though exactly the opposite were true. Erin felt at times like it was her stepfather who really said the things that came out of her mother’s mouth. She could picture the two of them at the kitchen table late at night discussing her. Her mother would say, “I think a boarding school would be the best place for her,” then her step-father would say, “Emily, just give her a chance. Let’s just involve her more.”

Erin stepped into the kitchen without looking at her mother's face. "Morning," she mumbled. "Where's that juice, Aunt Helen?"

Aunt Helen took a glass out of the refrigerator and handed it to Erin. She insisted Erin drink it for breakfast when she spent the night and wouldn't let her have anything else to eat until noon. "It will make you a cheerful girl," she told her.

"What's in it today?"

"Apples, pineapple, grapes and just a touch of tofu. No funny faces. It will keep you going for your trip today."

Erin kissed her Aunt goodbye, then went out to the van where she slipped past Andrew and Taylor to the back seat. Her mother walked to the van, got in the driver's side, and backed out of the driveway without looking at Erin. When they got to the interstate, she finally asked how her night had been.

"Fine," said Erin to the back of her mother's head.

Erin watched the road of the city turn into the road of the country that led into Kentucky. She saw why it was called the Bluegrass state. The day was bright and solid, filled with a blue haze of such depth that Erin felt she could finally be surrounded, finally be fully taken by something. She wanted to throw open the door and run into the wheat fields beside the road. They were so yellow, gold, and tall that she could be hidden; she could seep into the mud and become the color of nature. She wanted to live in a denseness that would not give her away. The woods beyond the wheat field looked enchanted. Maybe she could disappear into a storybook and never have to think of her life. Maybe no one would notice that she was gone. She watched the pavement slide past the van, wondering how badly she would be hurt if she jumped out.

The haziness of the land reminded her of snow. A snow that she had walked through with a boy, who held his hand in her back pocket like it belonged there. For a moment she felt like she had succeeded in crossing over. Her cold breath splayed out in front of her face like an ice vine in Tarzan's jungle, throwing her across to the world that she could see vividly in her mind but never for real. The boy pressed her against a tree and slid his hot tongue along the cold of her neck. Tingles found their way through her body, and she allowed him to kiss her. She allowed the cold of his hands to unzip her pants and find her warmth within. She watched the treetops, wishing they would speak to her. She looked beyond to the sky filled with stars, and wished she could call one of them home. She stopped the boy before he could fully unzip his pants, pulling his hand out of her pants. "I don't want to do that," she said to him. She walked ahead out of the woods and onto the street that led to his house. He caught up and put his hand back into her pocket.

Erin looked up and saw her mother's eyes in the rear-view mirror. When she saw Erin looking, she looked back to the road. Erin wondered if her mother knew what she was thinking.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Innocence is Selfish

The night is warm enough to lie  
on the grass without fear of chill  
and listen to the trees shiver.  
They hear cars passing by, but don't  
see them because of the density  
that blocks the road.  
She barely notices the building  
overlooking them.  
Its eyes are shut for the night,

dark glassy stones  
 giving back the moon.  
 She sees only her skin,  
 waits only for it to be touched  
 by a hand that is loosely pulling  
 clumps of grass from beneath them.  
 She invites him with a half closing  
 of her eyes, and he accepts-  
 tracing the smooth curve of her lips  
 with his finger and tongue.  
 She is thirsty to know how her  
 body will feel.

\* \* \* \* \*

Steve's childhood home was an old farmhouse in the middle of a housing  
 development. The developers bought up the rest of the neighborhood, but stopped short  
 of this one house. Erin stepped out into the weeds of the overgrown drive. The rest of  
 the family was on the porch, and it seemed that they looked back for her as a second  
 thought. Steve's mother, Alberta, held her arm out to her, bidding her to come inside  
 with them. She reminded Erin of a bowl of oatmeal; her coloring was a pasty tan, and  
 she was a little lumpy. But she was a tall and hearty woman who insisted that Erin feel at  
 home when she was there. The last one on the porch, she held an arm out to Erin and  
 held the door open with the other. Erin stepped through the door onto the uneven floor  
 and soggy smelling carpet.

"Come in, now. Be sure to make yourself at home, you hear?"

"Okay, thank you, Alberta."

"You bet."

Andrew and Taylor were running around Henry, their grandfather, as he held his  
 hooked arm into the air, dangling two baggies full of cookies. Once when Erin asked her



mother how Henry had lost his arm, she said it was a logging accident. But Alberta always insisted that she did it.

“Cut his arm right off one time when he was too slow bringing in firewood. Took the ax right out of his hand and cut his arm right off.” Alberta ended with a hearty laugh, and kissed the top of his head. “Isn’t that right, Henry?” she would ask.

“You bet,” he always answered back.

Taylor had climbed on a chair and jumped onto Henry’s back. He fell to the floor like a giant losing a battle. Andrew and Taylor grabbed the cookies and ran to the couch to eat them. Henry looked up at Erin, “Sorry, no cookies left. You want that I should scrounge some up for you?”

“No, that’s okay.”

“Lunch will be ready soon, so don’t eat too many cookies,” Alberta said.

“Can I use your bathroom?” Erin asked Alberta.

“What are you asking for? Go, go. You know where it is.”

Erin walked up the dark stairway to the second floor. The first room at the top was the bedroom, the bed unmade and clothes on the floor. An old sheet covered the window, and odd patterns of orange light floated into the hallway. Erin felt like she was intruding, though the door was open for her to see. She walked softly to the door and peered in. She saw several pictures of Steve at different stages of his life. She also saw a picture of a young man in uniform, probably Steve’s older brother who had drowned years ago on a fishing trip. Erin backed out of the room, not wanting to go in any further. The room was too dark and strange. She went to the end of the hallway into the bright tiled bathroom. Through the window she could see her mother and stepfather on the

porch swing. She hated the way he looked at her mother. He had his arm around her shoulders and he faced her as she talked. His full attention was hers, but she could tell that her mother's thoughts were not fully in the present. She could not tell where her mother was. She could never fully read her mother's face, nor understand her. But she could tell that she was never fully in the moment. Her mother was always analyzing the moment, withholding herself somehow.

Erin pulled shut the curtains. She noticed a basket behind the toilet that held feminine powder and a package of Depends. Erin felt embarrassed for Alberta. She wanted to push them into the cabinet so no one else would see them. She wondered what it would be like to be an old woman, to not care who saw these things about you. Erin looked out the window again; no one was outside now. She quietly made her way down the stairs, wondering if she took too long or if anyone would know that she had been looking into the lives of Alberta and Henry.

Her mother was in the kitchen, pouring lemonade into glasses. "Erin, here will you put these on the table." She held out two glasses, then set them on the stove. She pulled Erin's shirt straight, then buttoned the top button. "Honey, don't you know how to iron?"

"Yes, I just don't want to."

"Well, do when we are visiting other people. You look unkempt." She brushed Erin's hair behind her ears. "Do you want me to take you to Stephanie? She cuts young girls' hair. You might like her."

"No, I'm trying to grow it out. I don't want my hair to look like yours."

"I'm just asking. Here take these," she said handing Erin the glasses.

They sat in a small dining room at a large cherry table and chairs. A cherry sideboard and a cabinet that held china plates took up the walking space, and small blue figurines made of glass. Erin had to squeeze past the others who were already sitting at the table. She sat between Alberta and Taylor in front of the window. She could see herself reflected in the glass, could see her hand reach for a sandwich and lift it to her mouth. Erin felt odd and foreign in this house. She looked at her mother, and felt that she didn't know even her. She felt hot, then all at once cold, as she sat between Alberta's large frame and Taylor's tidy small body. She felt as though she were naked, exposed. She wanted to run out of the house and lie under the back seat of the van. She wanted to go back to her aunt's house and sit in the heat of the day, watching her aunt sweat into her herb garden. She wanted to sweat into the ground, to feel real and not so vapory as she did sitting at the over-sized cherry table. She sat, though, forcing down her sandwich and lemonade. She sat telling herself to chew so the food wouldn't spill out of her mouth onto the polished table. Then everyone would look at her and wonder at how odd she was. The feeling passed when everyone finished eating and moved to the living room. She sat in a corner chair and picked through a stack of *Reader's Digests* that lay on the floor.

For dinner they had a bonfire. Erin sat in the barn, listening to Henry throw logs into the fire pit. Alberta was setting up lawn chairs, telling her mother about the new fabric she bought at Daisy's fabric store up the road. Steve was showing Andrew and Taylor the exact place to spear their hot-dogs so they wouldn't fall into the fire. Erin smoothed her hand over the cool dirt, then placed her hand to her forehead. She liked



sitting among the old farm equipment, some pieces with cobwebs wrapping silky arms around them. She saw the large saw blades on the wall, the rusted cans on the shelves, and felt as though she were somewhere else. Again she felt as if she had gained access to an old painting.

The boy, Josh, had taken her to a barn. It was six months ago, in his grandfather's barn. He kicked at the dirt floor and walked over to a shelf, tinkering with old cans and jars of rusted nails. Erin sat down on a tarp. Josh walked slowly over and sat down beside her. He licked his lips nervously and cleared his throat. He was dressed in a white T-shirt and jeans, which showed off his forming muscles. They both knew what they wanted, but neither knew if the other one wanted the same thing. Erin pulled at a loose strand on her socks. They both felt the heaviness of the air between them. She wanted to reach out and touch his lean back through his soft shirt. Erin thought the idea of love at first sight was silly, so the first time she met Josh, she studied him with a distant interest. But the second time she saw him, she was startled by the strength of emotions she felt her body passing to him as through an electric current. She felt that she got the same back from him through the look his eyes gave. She knew then that she wanted him with everything she had within her. His grandfather's farm was next to her Aunt Helen's house, though there were acres of forest and pasture separating them. She felt awkward about being in his grandfather's barn, but she felt so right being anywhere with Josh.

He finally draped his arm around her neck. She felt his heavy arm behind her, she felt her neck grow numb, she felt his lips on hers. It was a sloppy kiss. She couldn't tell if she was doing it right. She didn't care if she was; she slid her hand lazily up the back



of his thick hair. Her stomach felt hot as fire, and his cool hand smoothed over it. He nuzzled his lips into her neck and reached to unbutton her pants.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey what?” he answered back, his lips close to her ear.

His hands were already slipping her jeans off her legs. He kissed her knee and moved up to kiss her thigh. She kicked her leg and he rolled over to lie beside her. They giggled in nervous apprehension. He smoothed his hand over her cheek and kissed her again. He slipped on top of her. Erin felt dizzy. She felt as though she were in the middle of the ocean, relaxed and afraid of drowning all at once. She took a deep breath and felt as though she were sinking into the ground and floating on a cloud. She felt the cool of his hands again at her legs, pulling her underwear down. She closed her eyes as he undressed, then felt the pressure of his body on top of hers. “Oh,” she said when she felt him enter her. There was an odd sort of pain that felt as if he were bruising her inside. Afterward, she looked down to see a blood stain on the tarp.

That night at home Erin stared into her mirror. She still felt light-headed; her face was still flushed red from the cold and from Josh. She thought that she should somehow feel different, but she didn’t quite know how.

“Erin.” Steve poked his head around the door of the barn. “Come on out and have a hot dog. The fire is going pretty good.”

Erin pulled her jacket closer as she walked out of the barn. A cool night breeze blew her hair out of her face as she sat down in one of the lawn chairs around the fire. She looked at her mother, her face half in shadows, half-glowing from the firelight.

Taylor was resting her head on her mother's lap, her hair being stroked by her mother's hand. Erin could remember being a girl and laying her head on her mother's lap. The only time she was allowed to do this was when her mother was on the phone. It was the only time she sat still long enough for Erin to lay her head on her lap. She would listen to her mother's voice vibrating through her body as she talked and mindlessly wound Erin's hair around her fingers.

Her mother looked up and caught Erin's eye. She pulled the corners of her mouth up into a small smile. Erin did the same then quickly looked away. The stars shone brightly in the night sky. Erin could see a few thin clouds racing overhead, streaming over the stars then disappearing. She listened to the low murmuring voices of her step-father and his mother. She was telling him of Henry's last doctor's visit, her outrage at having to wait for hours when she had an appointment.

Andrew and his grandfather had gone out with flashlights to check out the small cemetery that was fenced in at the edge of their property. It belonged to the family who had lived there before Alberta and Henry. Some of the family members still dropped by every once in a while. Henry had been telling Andrew of the ghost of a woman who haunted the graveyard. She lived in the farmhouse, and had family in another city. Once, upon returning home from visiting her family, she came home to an empty house. She had expected to return to her husband and two children, but they were nowhere to be found. The woman asked her neighbors if they had seen her family, but no one could tell her anything. She was said to be seen walking around in the same clothes for years, until she finally died and was buried in the cemetery. Andrew wanted to see her grave, so he

ran into the house with his grandfather to get the flashlights and ran excitedly toward the graveyard.

Erin heard a scream and everyone turned to see Andrew running full speed toward them. “What on earth?” Alberta said as she turned. Andrew collapsed on the ground beside his mother. They could see Henry, a distance behind, making his way slowly toward them. When he reached them, he stuck his hooked hand into Andrew’s belt loop and growled. Andrew fell into a panting laughter.

“The old claw got him again,” Henry said.

“Grandpa, I could have had a heart attack you scared me so bad.” Andrew lay gasping on the ground, barely able to get the words out.

“On this note, I think we will leave,” Steve said, pulling Andrew to his feet.

“Come on guys, to the van.”

Erin was the first one in the van. She lay on the floor in front of her seat. She could hear the clamor of everyone saying goodbye. “Erin, are you in?” her mother asked from the front when they were all in.

“Yeah, I’m here.”

Erin felt the heat vibrate from the engine, and the soothing movement of the tires on the road. She picked at the carpet and thought about Josh. She was supposed to call him when she got home. She dozed off and dreamed of snow.

She was in a world covered with snow. She was packing ice bricks one on top of the other to make an igloo. She was not cold because a huge fur coat covered her body. She saw someone walking slowly toward her, body covered as well in a fur coat so that she couldn’t tell if it was a man or a woman. The person seemed to be walking lightly in

slow motion as if on the moon, but finally reached her. The person's hands began to move slowly from side to side as if trying to tell her something, but when Erin did not understand, the arms shrugged and the person walked on. Erin finished her igloo and went inside.

Erin awoke as the van pulled into the driveway, crunching over rocks. She did not want to get up from her warm spot on the floor, but Taylor tugged on her leg. "We're home." Erin stepped out of the van expecting coldness. She felt the summer air and heard the chirping of crickets, bringing her back from her dream.

She went into her bedroom and shut the door. Once she had her pajamas on she slipped into bed and picked up the phone. "Hi, is Josh home?" She heard a knock on her door, and when her mother entered she put up her hand. "Oh, he's not?...Oh, okay. Just tell him I called.... Yes, this is Erin.... Thanks. Bye."

"Are you going to bed?" her mother asked from the doorway.

"Yeah, I'm sort of tired." Erin pulled the blanket around her. "What?" she asked when her mother didn't leave.

"Nothing really." She came to sit on the end of the bed. "Was that Josh?"

"What?"

"Josh, on the phone?" Her mother looked in the mirror and smoothed her hair behind her ears.

"No, his dad."

"Oh." Her mother looked at her.

"Josh wasn't home." Erin sat up and studied her fingernails, picking at them and biting the loose skin around them.



“Erin, honey, don’t bite your nails. It’s such an ugly habit.”

Erin shoved her hands under her blanket. “What do you want, Mom?”

“I just came to tell you goodnight.”

“Okay, goodnight.” Erin scooted back under her covers.

“And I wanted to talk with you.”

“About what?” Erin was looking out the window studying the night sky, or what she could see of it from under the glare of her neighbor’s street lamp.

“About girl stuff, I guess.”

“Mom, what?” Erin was still looking away.

“Okay, well, I guess I just wanted to know if you and Josh were having sex.

That’s all.”

“What? What do you mean?” Erin looked over to her mother.

“We should just have a talk, mother to daughter, about things like this. I haven’t really talked with you about these things, and I think I should now that you have a boyfriend.”

Erin turned her gaze back to the window. “Mom, I’m fine. I don’t need to have this talk. If I wanted to find out about sex, I would just ask one of my friends.”

“So, are you having sex then?”

Erin looked at her mother without answering.

“I just want you to be safe, Erin. I need to know the facts so I can teach you how to be safe.”

“I’m not even doing anything, so you don’t need to worry.”

"I'm not worried. I just know that you're becoming a young woman and things will start to happen. I was your age too, and I know how it can be." Her mother returned her glance to the mirror and smoothed her hair again.

"You know how what can be?" Erin knew what her mother meant, but asked anyway.

"It's hard to say no to a boy if he wants to have sex and you don't."

"But what if I don't want to say no?"

Her mother studied Erin's face, then drew her mouth into a tight smile. "Then be careful and use a condom. I was hoping you would say that you weren't and didn't want to, but if you are, use a condom."

"Mom, I'm not. But I'm not dumb. If I did, I would."

"Okay, but it's best not to even start until you're married."

"Did you wait?" Erin asked.

"Did I wait? I was hoping you wouldn't ask that question. No, your father and I didn't wait until we were married. But he was my first and only."

"Until Steve."

"Yes, until your step-father."

"What if Josh was my first and only?"

"So, you are having sex then?" her mother asked, taking Erin's hand.

"No, but what if he were?" Erin pulled her hand away.

"Erin, I don't think Josh is the right boy for you."

"Why not?" Erin asked.

"I just don't think he is. I have a mother's instinct about these things."

“Yeah, like you really know what is right for me.” Erin pulled the covers around her and turned her gaze again to the window.

“Fine. Goodnight, Erin.” Her mother closed the door behind her and Erin stared at the treetops swaying slowly in the breeze. She listened to her neighbor’s wind chimes tinkling together until she fell asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

There it is-

sharp and dense  
 into the pit of my stomach  
 when you look at me.  
 You say so much to me  
 that you would never  
 let escape your lips.  
 I think so much about you,  
 and I wish to hurl it at you  
 a heavy rock to sink into  
 the ocean of your mind.  
 I am not afraid of you,  
 if only I could reach out  
 and ball up the rough terrain  
 you lay out like static cling  
 and crumple it into my skin  
 and make it real.  
 If only I weren’t so stupid  
 to stutter and stammer when  
 my mind so eloquently slides  
 over you, around you, under you.  
 I want to be in that warm spot of you,  
 the one you hold for cold nights  
 when you think no one else is going  
 to be there. I want to open the door  
 and be welcomed, to be called in to sit  
 with you, indian style on the rug  
 face to face, eye to eye, to trace my  
 finger importantly across the map

of you. I want to be the only one who knows, and I want you to save me from my dreams.

\* \* \* \* \*

Erin lay in bed watching the sun stream through her curtains. She could hear Andrew and Taylor in the bathroom fighting over the sink. Her mother and stepfather were in the kitchen; she could hear the clanking of dishes as they were put into the dishwasher. It was Sunday morning and everyone was getting ready for church. Erin usually went with them, but lately she had been staying home. She heard heavy footsteps coming down the hall and knew it was her stepfather. He knocked lightly on her door and waited.

“Come in,” Erin said as she rolled over to face the door.

Steve’s head pushed around the door. “Are you coming to church?”

“Aren’t you about to leave?”

Steve checked his watch. “In fifteen minutes.”

“I guess not then.”

“You don’t think you could be ready in fifteen minutes? We’re going out to lunch afterwards.”

She heard her mother’s softer footstep behind him. “I told you not to bother,” she murmured as she went to the bathroom to break up Andrew and Taylor.

“If you’re not coming, then I guess we’ll see you when we get home. Why don’t we order pizza and watch a movie or something later. You know, as a family?”



“Maybe.” Erin looked at him with her eyebrows raised, wondering if he wanted anything else.

“Okay, goodbye then.”

Erin stayed in bed until she heard the van crunch over the drive. She stretched, then got out of bed. She was glad for the peace and quiet of the house. She poured a bowl of cereal, then ate it as she watched out the kitchen window. If her mother were home, she would ask if Erin had been raised in a barn then tell her to sit at the table. From the window, Erin could see a small dog in the next yard jumping at the wooden fence. She opened the back door and walked to the small backyard that was connected to the dog’s yard. She stood watching the dog jump to the top, scraping its paws over the top of the fence, then falling away again. She turned and felt the gentle breeze; with her face upturned she let the sun warm her. She felt the cool earth give slightly under her feet, anchoring her as she watched the clouds glide above her. The phone rang inside the house, startling her. She turned and ran inside to get it, thinking it could be Josh.

“Hello?” she answered, trying to catch her breath.

“Hey,” Josh said.

“Hey, Josh.”

“Why are you out of breath?”

“I was outside when you called. I called you last night, but you weren’t home.”

“Yeah, I know. Dad told me.”

“Oh,” Erin said, looking out the window.

“So I was out with my friends.” Josh said.

“Yeah?”

"We went to see a movie."

"Was it any good? What did you see?" Erin asked.

"Just some dumb movie. Not worth remembering anyway."

"Oh." Erin wrapped her fingers in the cord of the phone; there was a pause as she waited for Josh to speak.

"Is anyone at home now?"

"No. They went to church." Erin sat down on the couch and rested her head on the back.

"Can I come over?"

"I guess so. I don't think Mom will mind. She might get mad that I didn't ask her first."

"Well?"

After a pause she said, "Come on over. I think we're watching a movie and eating pizza tonight. A family thing or something."

Erin hung up the phone and took a quick shower, then pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. She sat down on her bed and looked in the mirror. Her wet hair dangled into her face, looking more brown than her usual dark blond. She pulled a comb through it and pulled it back into a ponytail. She pinched her cheeks and smiled, then pulled her lips into a frown. When she heard the knock on the door, she grabbed strawberry flavored lip-gloss and ran it over her lips. On the way to the door, she pulled her hair out of the ponytail.

Josh stood on her porch, hands in his pockets. "You going to invite me in?"

“Yes, I’m going to invite you in. Come in.” When she closed the door, he pulled her close and kissed her.

“You know I like strawberry.” He kissed her again.

“Do you want something to eat?” Erin asked as she walked to the kitchen.

“No.”

He kissed her again and she wrapped her arms around his firm waist. He had to bend slightly down when he kissed her. She placed her head against his shirt and smelled his soapy scent. She liked the way he smelled and the way the warmth of his body seeped into her. She pulled him into the living room and they sat on the couch. His face reminded her of a man’s face, angular and tan, full of knowledge. She felt that he knew her when he looked at her. In action and speech, though, he was less than a man to her; she wondered if he knew her at all. She always expected something brilliant to come out of his rosebud lips, and still she waited. He never quite articulated what she thought she saw. When she saw that thing in him that she could never put her finger on, it was brief. Like when he drove the car. He bit his lip as if in contemplation, hands firmly on the wheel as if he were in control of their small universe. She felt as if he could take her anywhere and never criticize her for where she wanted to go; never ask her why she wanted to go there. At those moments he looked at her, maybe reached over and brushed her hair out of her eyes, and they shared a secret. Sometimes she thought it was a secret about who they would be one day. Erin felt that young people weren’t anyone, but he saw her in those moments as she would be when she was someone. Then the moment was broken as he reached to the radio, as he often did, and cut through the thickness of their future with mindless noise.

As they sat on the couch, Erin tried to get his eyes to communicate with her. She tried to sink into his chest with her head so violently that something would snap. He kissed the top of her head and jumped off the couch.

“You got anything to eat?” He shoved his hands deep into his pockets and followed her to the kitchen.

Erin made him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, then sat at the table watching his mouth take gulping bites of it. Jelly slid from both ends of the sandwich to land on his plate and chin. She scooped it away from his chin with her finger. He winked at her and kept on eating. The front door opened and Tyler came running in followed by Andrew.

“Hey Erin,” Tyler said as she flew into the bathroom. Andrew came to sit at the table by Josh. When Josh was over, Andrew tried to stay as close as he could to him.

“Andrew,” Erin’s mother said from the doorway. “Go help your father bring in the groceries.”

Josh nodded his head at the door and said through a mouthful of peanut butter and jelly, “Go on.”

“Hi Josh. I didn’t know you were coming over.” Erin’s mother looked at Erin pointedly.

Erin felt her hands grasp the edge of the table. Irritation ran through her body and shone through in the hotness of her face and the whiteness of her fingers. The muscles in her back tightened in shivers along her spine. She wanted to overthrow the table, to scream and release the pressure caused by the look in her mother’s eyes. She wanted to kick and punch at the air until her mother backed down and apologized for asking such a



loaded and stupid question. But she sat at the table, jaws clenched, meeting her mother's glance straight on for a moment. Steve and Andrew bounded through the door carrying bags of groceries.

"Hey, Josh. How's it going." Steve walked by and winked at Erin on his way into the kitchen. He walked between Erin and her mother and broke the invisible line that held them together, her mother standing above her with the advantage of the spider.

Andrew resumed his place beside Josh and asked if he could stay for dinner. "Fine with me," Steve answered, raising his eyebrows as Erin's mother walked by passing on a look that went unseen by the rest. "Well?" he asked her.

"Well? You made the decision, so I guess he can stay."

For the rest of the afternoon, Josh humored Andrew by playing video games with him. Erin slipped away to her bedroom and lay on the bed, studying the pattern of whiteness on her ceiling. She heard a knock on the door, and expecting her mother, she turned away to look out the window. When she heard the soft footfalls of Taylor's feet she turned to the door.

"Can I come in?"

"Sure, I guess." Erin was not used to Taylor being in her room. Erin didn't know what she could want. Taylor came in and sat at Erin's desk, fingering the chapstick, pens and books that lay on top.

"Put some on if you want."

"What?" Taylor's hand lingered on the chapstick as she turned around.

"Put on the chapstick if you want." Erin came over and took the top off and handed it to Taylor who greedily turned to the mirror and ran it across her lips. She

turned to let Erin see. "Looks nice." There was a moment of silence as Taylor glanced around the room, at her hands, intently at Erin.

"What?"

"What do you mean what?" Taylor grew uncomfortable and started to get up.

"What do you want to ask me?"

"How do you know that I want to ask you anything?"

"Well, don't you?" Erin swayed between being impatient and being amused at Taylor's curiosity. "I'm not going to bite you." Taylor acted as though that were a silly statement, but Erin could see a slight relief as Taylor's shoulders fell. Her eyes lit up and she wiggled a bit in the seat with anticipation.

"What's it like to kiss a boy?" She giggled into her shirt after she had asked.

"That what you want to know?" Erin sat back on her elbows and looked at the door. "How do you know that I've even kissed a boy?"

"I heard Mom and Dad talking about it in their bedroom."

"You did, huh?" Taylor nodded her head yes, and waited for Erin to speak.

"Don't you think you can wait to find that out?"

"I'm not going to kiss any boys now! I just want to know because I've never, you know." Taylor was half sitting, half standing, waiting for Erin to tell her whether to stay or go.

Erin looked toward the door and thought of Josh, of their first kiss in the snow. Of his warmth slipping through her cold lips, his cold hands slipping onto her cool skin. He wasn't the first boy she had ever kissed, but it was the way that his kiss went beyond her lips to travel into the pit of her stomach that kept her wanting more.

“A good kiss...”

“Yeah?” Taylor sat, leaning toward Erin now instead of the door.

“It’s something that makes you hot when you’re cold, and cold when you’re hot. And it’s soft and firm and slides all over your body. It’s all sorts of things at once, and it’s a little of something I can’t put my finger on.”

“Oh.” Taylor sat down firmly in the seat, contemplating what Erin had said.

“Oh,” she said again, without understanding.

“It’s something different for everyone, so you tell me what it’s like when you have kissed a boy.”

“But, I don’t really want to kiss a boy yet.” Taylor shook her head with assurance.

“I know, and I won’t tell mom that you asked me.”

“No, I don’t think mom would be too happy. She didn’t sound too happy talking about you and Josh here all alone probably kissing and other stuff that I couldn’t hear because her voice got real low.” Taylor jumped out of her seat and to the door, suddenly shy. She smiled at Erin as if they had a secret between them now, then she shut the door softly. She could hear her fighting for a place with Josh and Andrew at the video games.

After dinner, Erin wanted badly to sit by Josh on the couch. She knew she couldn’t get away with much because her mother would be watching, but she ached to have her thigh pushing firmly against his, to push gently against him with her shoulder as they watched a movie. But Andrew positioned himself between them, oblivious to the looks he got from Erin. She put her arm on the back of the couch, touched his ear lightly with her fingertips. She saw the lopsided smile that came to his lips, the bit of red on his

cheeks. He turned his head slightly toward her to nuzzle her hand. She saw her mother watching and put her hand down to the back of the couch. Josh, too sat still for the rest of the movie, his hands anchored in his lap. Erin could feel the tension of his body inches away, a tension that grew because she could not have him then. Her mind ran over the times when she could have him; she wondered what he was thinking.

When the movie was over, Steve offered to drive Josh home. Erin quickly went to the door with them. Her mother spoke to her after Josh and Steve went out the door. "You should stay here. I want to talk to you." Erin slipped out the door and shut it firmly.

When she stepped out into the warm air, filled with the talk of insects, she saw the Mustang back from the garage. Josh got out, pushing the heavy door with a satisfying creak, to let her into the car. He started for the back seat, but she shook her head and slipped behind the front seat to recline against the musty leather in back. She loved to ride in the mustang, to feel the loudness in the pit of her stomach. She closed her eyes and let the murmur of the voices from the front seat and the grumbling vibrations of the car lull her. She felt the wind walk across her face and her hair whipped into her face like tall grass bending to the curve of the earth. The tension in her body, from Josh and her mother, got picked up by the tornado of air and sound and thrown violently into the sky. She wondered if she would find it again, pick it up and examine the tattered and worn edges that she had felt so wholly. She thrust her hand out the window and let the thought of the night go. She barely noticed when the car stopped and Josh stepped out. He grasped at her fingers, but found no urge to grasp back within them. He stepped away



into the night, walked with long steps to his house wearing the dark face of uncertainty and want.

Twenty minutes later, Erin stepped into her own house wearing the slack face of unwanted. She slipped past her mother and almost made it into her bedroom. She heard her mother's quick steps, and felt her hands on the door. She shut the door and stood against it.

"Erin, if you're going to sleep with him, you should get condoms. And you should also go to the gynecologist. You never know what boys these days have."

"Why are you so insistent that I am sleeping with him?"

"I saw the way you carried on during the movie. I saw how you looked at him when you were feeding him lunch. It's so obvious to me, Erin. I am a grown woman and I can see these things, and I want you to be smart."

"By being smart you mean not to see Josh." When her mother did not answer, Erin sighed and shrugged her shoulders. "What do you have against him?"

"I have lived enough years and known enough people to know that he is not the one for you."

"That has nothing to do with it. You just want to have control over my life, and you feel it all slipping away. You don't have to worry about that though. You have a whole new family for that. Just look down the hallway. There's another little girl in there for you to tell what to do." Erin's mother did not move from her position in front of the door. She did not offer any words to fend off the words that Erin was throwing at her. She simply fixed her sharp eyes on Erin, daring her to continue. "And don't forget your husband. He did away with original thinking when he married you. He just waits for you

to tell him what to do.” With that Erin was finished, she knew she had gone too far. She had emptied out her lungs of breath, and her mind of the words that she kept pushed back. She sank to the bed, tired. She had not wanted to say those words to her mother. Did not know if she could hold them back until she no longer needed to say them.

Her mother’s eyes fixed on the top of Erin’s head. She had a look of sadness and anger in her eyes. She wanted to bridge the short distance between them to slap her face, then hug her so tightly as to forge some connection between them. She sighed and sagged slightly, knowing that she could do neither. Erin too sighed, wishing her mother would just leave. She hated to see her mother filled with anxious sadness, hated it worse than the face of efficient pride she usually wore.

\* \* \* \* \*

Erin stayed the next week at her Aunt’s house. She bent over the moist dirt, feeling the humidity crawl down her back. She was working seeds into the ground, flowers that would reach in all directions, into the earth and sky. She was always amazed how tiny seeds could change so rapidly into something that looked nothing like what she now held in the palm of her hand and dropped into the hollowed out place in the soil. She felt the shadow of a cloud pass, then when the cloud had passed, the shadow stayed. She looked back to see her Aunt snap a picture.

“Aunt Helen. Are you trying to get a picture of my backside?”

“No, you look absolutely charming bent over into the ground like that. Trust me, it will turn out great.”

Erin got up from the ground and shook the dirt from her hands and jeans. She took the glass of water her Aunt held out to her.

“Why the sudden interest in planting?” Aunt Helen asked.

“I just thought it would be neat to watch something grow. I watch you do it all the time, and I want to do it, too.”

“Do you want to help me pick some tomatoes and take them to the farmer’s market?”

“Sure.”

“Maybe we can stop off for a little picnic too. This weather is not going to hold up for too much longer. A rain front is moving through.”

“Before you know it, fall will be here.” Erin looked wistfully over the fence of the small garden.

“Yes, it will be fall soon.” Aunt Helen handed Erin a basket and together they picked the large red tomatoes from the vine.

After they dropped the tomatoes, along with cans of okra and peaches, at the market, Aunt Helen turned her car down a bumpy dirt road. “Where are we going?” Erin asked, looking out the window at the green lushness of the leaves on the trees they passed.

“It’s this lovely place that your Uncle Henry used to take me. It’s close enough to the university. We used to take picnics here during his lunch break.”

She and Erin sat in silence for a few moments, both of them watching the colors float past them: blue, green, brown.

"It was our own place. But now I want it to be your place, too." Aunt Helen glanced over at Erin. She reached out her hand to squeeze her arm. Erin smiled, feeling the warmth of her Aunt's hand. They drove on through denser trees, and when they crossed a small creek that broke over the road, Aunt Helen pulled the car under a tree.

"Here we are." Erin looked over the large meadow that was completely surrounded by trees, except the place where the car had come through. Aunt Helen picked up the picnic basket from the seat and led Erin beyond the tree they parked under. For a while they walked through bushes and broken branches scattered on a path that was not well defined. When Erin least expected, the trees gave way to a small opening. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to what she was seeing. The trees canopied this opening and she felt as though she were in an emerald room, a room designed for a palace of some sort.

"Isn't it wonderful?" Aunt Helen looked at Erin with expectant eyes.

Erin looked above her head at the ceiling of trees and felt the security and secrecy they offered her. She walked further into the small room of trees and felt that the trees were talking to her, as if they had been waiting for her to carry on a conversation. Aunt Helen had spread out the blanket in the center and Erin lay down on her back, looking up. She felt as though her senses were heightened. Her eyes almost hurt to take in the hazy color. Her back sank a little into the soft ground, and she felt a deep ache that passed across her chest and traveled into her legs. For a moment she felt as though she were going to cry. Then she felt silly. Never had something made her feel like this before. All at once she wanted to run around like a child, touching every tree with her outstretched fingertips. And she wanted to curl up in her Aunt's lap and cry. She felt a



deep need to cry, to empty out her body of its heaviness and hurl it deep into an ocean of trees. She looked over at her Aunt Helen, who was watching her. She had spread out the food on the blanket and was making a plate for Erin.

“Here, honey. You need to eat.” Erin took that plate and quickly ate the grapes and chicken salad sandwich that her Aunt gave her.

Erin lay on her back once again and was lulled to sleep by the whisper of the trees surrounding her. She slept and dreamed about Josh. They were in a meadow, much like the one she was in today. She was holding a book and the wind grabbed it from her and tossed the pages, spreading them over the meadow. She and Josh ran like children and scooped them up. He helped her place them back into the book, and she noticed that the pages were all written in her handwriting. When she awoke, Aunt Helen was packing the basket.

“Erin, I think we should go soon.”

“Have I been asleep for long?” Erin sat up, feeling a heaviness pulling at her.

“About two hours. I’m afraid the rain has started. We can’t feel it much in here, but I can hear it.”

Erin rose to her feet and swept the sleepy feeling away with her hands. She helped Aunt Helen pull the blanket over their heads, and they ran out of the security of the trees and into the less dense trees surrounding the meadow. It was only lightly raining when they made it to the car but by the time they made it to the main road, the rain was coming down steadily. Erin felt a heaviness pushing her deep into her car seat, and was lulled close to sleep by the rain on the windshield and the monotony of the

wipers trailing back and forth in front of her eyes. She was awakened by a sharp pain in her stomach.

"Oh, oh...I think I'm going to be sick. Pull over, pull over!" Erin held her hand to her mouth and darted from the car as it pulled softly to the side of the road. Erin was sick. She emptied her stomach, felt a cold sweat gripping her forehead. Erin felt afraid. She got back into the car and the tears that she had felt earlier flowed freely down her cheeks.

"I don't know what is wrong with me. I just feel so strange." Erin hid her face from her Aunt, ashamed of the hot tears she could not stop.

"Erin, its all right. You're okay, honey. Just let yourself cry. Just let it all out." Aunt Helen placed her hand on Erin's arm where it stayed until they got to her house.

Erin collapsed on the couch, tired and wet with rain. Aunt Helen sat next to her, running a soothing hand through her hair. "Can I get you anything?"

"Maybe some coffee. I just feel so tired."

"No, no coffee. You need to sleep now. Maybe some hot tea?" Erin nodded her head, then relaxed into the couch. After drinking her tea, she went upstairs to sleep.

She slept until noon the next day, and when she woke the sun poured into her window in bright threads that burned her eyes. After she took a shower, she looked in the mirror and noticed a small, thin, silky mark on her thigh. She stared at it for a moment before she recognized what it was. It was a stretch mark. She had seen one on her mother's leg, a thin white line carved into her thigh. She stared at it harder, wondering why she would have a stretch mark at her age. Realization sank in slowly as she fell to the floor and stared at her body. Her stomach felt tight, her breasts tender. Her body felt

foreign to her, and she felt a vastness into which she was falling. She could not cry now, only stare at her reflection in the mirror. She held her arms tightly and curled her legs up under them. She did not want to touch her stomach. Did not want for her sudden knowledge to be real. Did not want to think about how this would affect her for the rest of her life.

She dressed slowly, and let gravity take her down the steps to her aunt. She sat heavily down into a kitchen chair and watched her aunt chop carrots rhythmically. Aunt Helen glanced over her shoulder and asked how she felt.

“Awful.” She pulled her legs under her chin, and buried her face in them. “I think I’m pregnant.”

Aunt Helen came to sit at the table. She pulled out one of Erin’s hands and held it. “I know.”

“You know? What.... How do you know?”

“When women get pregnant, their eyes give a sign, and your eyes have that sign.”

“How long have you known?”

“For about a month now.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Erin couldn’t hold back what she felt was a constant spring of tears that had finally found its way to the surface.

“This is something that you need to know for yourself through and through so you can know how to deal with it.”

They sat in silence; Erin watched the steam rising from the teakettle on the stove. She took her hand from Aunt Helen and brushed back her hair. “Can I come stay with you?”

"Yes. You can come stay with me whenever and for as long as you need."

"I want to stay with you now. And I don't know when I will stop needing you."

Erin dressed slowly, feeling the changes in her body that were sudden and unexpected. She spent most of the day on the back porch, watching her aunt ready more of her vegetables for market. She would spend a few more days here. She would wait before she would let this thing be real for her, and for her mother, and for Josh. She would finish being young in those few days, then she would let it slip from her hands and be carried on the wind to sink deep into moist soil.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Erin went to her mother's house, she opened the door to a quiet house. She stepped inside, waiting to hear her mother's voice. She knew that Steve had taken Andrew and Taylor to see his parents. She went to her bedroom and began pulling shirts and jeans out of their drawers and placed them into an awaiting suitcase. She heard the faucet in the kitchen turn on, and knew that her mother knew she was there. When she finished her packing, she sat heavily on the bed. She sighed, and tried to hold back the new tears that she could feel just below the surface. She looked at her room, and it looked different to her. She knew that it was no longer big enough for her. She had never fully grown into the room, had never let much of herself into the neutral walls and carpet. The floor creaked with her mother's step, and she met her in the living room.

"Erin, what are you doing home? I didn't expect you to be back from Helen's until tomorrow." She leaned against the wall, sipping water from a tall glass.



"I know. I have to tell you something though." Her mother didn't say anything, just looked down into the glass. Erin sat on the couch, needing support for the newfound heaviness she felt. "Mom?" Her mother continued to look into the glass. "Mom, I'm pregnant."

Her mother didn't look up for a while. When she did, Erin saw a tiny tear slide down her cheek. "Erin, why did you do this to me? What did I do to you to make you do something like this?" Her mother looked at her pleadingly. The emotion she let drip from her in waves was the most Erin had seen from her in a lifetime. She sank into the nearest chair and let the glass slip from her hands, forming a small pool on the carpet.

"Please, tell me. What have I done wrong? Didn't I tell you to use protection?"

"Mom, it's not your fault. Stuff like this just happens, you know. It happens all the time."

"Not to me it doesn't." Her voice was full of self-pity and near hysteria. "Not to me it doesn't." She said again, stabbing the air as she pointed at herself.

"I'm the one who is pregnant, not you."

Her mother shifted her gaze from an undefined point in space to meet Erin's eyes. "And you are going to keep that baby. I am not letting you give away my grandchild."

Erin sat in silence, not knowing how to respond at first. She thought her mother would be glad to have the baby out of her sight. Glad to have Erin away so she wouldn't have to answer to her friends and neighbors about her unwed pregnant teenager.

"I am keeping the baby," she said. "And I'm going to stay with Aunt Helen."

"What the hell is so special about Aunt Helen? Everything is about Aunt Helen, and now you are going to run to her?" Her mother looked away, expecting pity.

“What should I do? I can’t stay here.”

Erin walked slowly from the house to her aunt’s car. As they drove away, Erin closed her eyes. She felt the wind graze slowly and less urgently across her face and she thought she could feel the change of season on that breeze.

\* \* \* \* \*

She went to see Josh on his grandfather’s farm. She found him sitting on a slope overlooking the barns, smelling of the tobacco that was being readied for market.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” He looked at her from behind the hand he used to shade away the sun.

“Just thought I’d come see you.” She sat down beside him and looked over the smoke filled barns. After sitting in silence, she reached over to take his hand and placed it softly on her stomach.

“Do you feel anything?” She didn’t look at him, but knew he was looking at her sharply.

“Shit,” he muttered under his breath. He took his hand away and put a cigarette to his lips. She heard the burn of the paper and turned to see him pick a piece of tobacco from his tongue. It was a gesture that she had found sexy before. He started to offer her the cigarette, then put it back to his lips and shook his head. They lay back on the slope feeling the still air and watched the sun sink lower to the earth beyond them. Josh picked up a clump of grass and let it go. A new breeze picked it up and carried it away. They heard a voice calling for him.

"Do you want to stay for supper?" he asked.

"No, I think I'll go to Aunt Helen's. I'm staying there now, so that's where I'll be, okay?"

"Okay." She watched his lean body make its way down the hill toward the house. He glanced back up when he got to the bottom and gave her a small wave. She waved back, and he walked on.

\* \* \* \* \*

Erin watched the winter snow from her aunt's front window. It was a wet snow that reflected the light of the night sky onto the pavement of the road. She knew that the soil was too warm for the snow to freeze. It would simply plunge its cold fingers into the earth, spreading like roots that run down in tangles only to be lifted into the sky to begin the process again. She ran her hands over her full and tight stomach, feeling her baby respond with a kick. She felt the heaviness of sleep overtaking her body, and made her way slowly up the creaking staircase. She saw the picture of herself as a child, looking beyond the fence. A couple steps up she saw herself bent over the soil, planting a flower that had by now wilted back into the earth. The next picture, she saw herself standing in front of the Christmas tree her aunt had decorated for her. She had a bow on her growing stomach, and her arms wrapped beneath. She made her way up the rest of the stairs and wondered what pictures would be there at this time next year, and the year after.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Waiting

you are there  
a cliché across a smoky bar.  
you are a solid presence,  
lassoed to the earth as it pivots  
and bucks across the universe.

you are gone  
barstool empty- napkin soaked  
ring on wood- and your soapy clean  
smell moves its way closer,  
the only reminder that you were there.

in my old tile bathroom at 3 am  
I am no closer to cleanliness, nor you.  
I let down my hair and smoke rises  
with the heat, my tired eye close  
and dreams appease me.

you are there,  
sneaking in before morning coffee,  
your finger hooked in my pocket,  
your eyes caressing my hair.