The Middle Space

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This master's project is dedicated to my loving woodsmith, Mike.

The author wishes to acknowledge with appreciation the thoughtful insight and generous instruction she received from the members of her advising committee, Professor Kelsey Parker, Professor Kenneth Smith and Professor Rebecca Brittenham.

She is also grateful for the support and guidance from Department Secretary Anne Richmond.
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Sadly she had to admit that the eyes' movement even if minutely savored was not such an adventurous journey.

*But she had become interested in her own courage.*

Grace Paley, “In the Garden”

Genre is a vast realm ruled by literary siblings whose temperaments are as varied as those of the metaphorical monks who nursed a fair-skinned princess until she chewed a poisoned apple. This terrain is especially difficult to navigate when stories thematically serve women. For the most part, fiction written by and for women is helmed by Sappy who regulates the hills of Romance while Chirpy manages, between puffs on her broken fag, the shadowy and untenable Chick-Lit valley. While there are other classifications, they will not be considered here because my three short fiction stories titled, “Lucy Lifts a Wing,” “The Middle Space” and “Blind Mr. Rochester’s Tree” live under the opaque gaze of Sister Serious. Generically these stories are Women’s Fiction, a classification which is largely defined by the use of literary prose to examine issues particular to women with characters who work to conquer internal and external adversity, the latter often in confluence. In other words, they don’t need to amuse. Juliette Wells, in her essay “Mothers of Chick Lit? Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History,” gives a kind of inverse definition of Women’s Fiction when she discusses the difference between the popular Chick-Lit genre and traditional Women’s Fiction. Comparing Chirpy to Sister Serious she writes, “When we look in chick lit for such literary elements as imaginative use of language, inventive and through-provoking metaphors, layers of meaning, complex characters, and innovative handling of conventional structure, we come up essentially empty-handed. Only in its humor can the best of chick lit stand up favorably
to the tradition of women’s writing” (64). Writers such as Kate Chopin, Anita Diamant, Amy Hempel and Grace Paley are fine examples of writers whose works fit within the Women’s Fiction genre. Their use of language, metaphor, meaning, character, and structure can feel like a map to one’s own soul. The power of their words resides in their desire to reach certain truths about human nature and they do so with language that is artful enough to create or resurrect insight in their readers. So, with the goal being to emulate these women writers who employed “taste and genius” to “richly reimagine in literary form the worlds” that inspired it, I wrote Women’s Fiction (Wells 67).

The above-mentioned writers, and others to be discussed later, inspired my stories, not only because they are fantastic Women’s Fiction writers; they wrote about women and nature. I wanted to explore nature when it is defined, for women, as a force that drives her body and identity. In addition, nature often carries female identification. However, Women and Nature as a generic distinction does not exist in this context. Stories that do fit under this classification are literally about women hikers, women naturalists and women gardeners. There is no easy classification within critical literary theory for Woman and Nature, yet there are many rich examples of literature that explore the woman and nature theme and this is also true for literary criticism. Stories about women’s intimate connection to “mother earth,” or about nature embodying woman through the hills and valleys and rushing, burbling streams, are abundant. Drawing a parallel between the female body and the treatment of these plunging, ripe, and creative contours as a landscape that must be conquered can, of course, be problematic. Thus, in this sense, nature is body and body is woman. Certainly, the idea can be seen as kind of
poetic metaphor. However, it is interesting to consider what happens to a woman’s sense of self when this social or cultural identity-shorthand becomes the definition of her essential nature. My stories, “Lucy Lifts a Wing,” “The Middle Space” and “Blind Mr. Rochester’s Tree,” examine this reduction of essential womanhood through the woman and nature theme. Whether it cycles her a step closer to adulthood or out of motherhood or beyond being, her body is the clashing place for social, cultural, spiritual and personally intimate forces. They are engaged in an epic wrangle.

The very definition of woman mostly springs from her physical form, especially how she functions as a birther of other persons. She is mother. Let certain feminist theorists say what they will, the word on the street is that motherhood is her nature, her essential source. In fact, feminist literary critics have been caught in a debate about this very issue, about how to define essential femininity. In her book *Images of Women in Literature*, Mary Anne Ferguson writes, “[some feminist theorists] focus on the female body as the source of identity and as the means for women to write differently from men. Many American feminists who view women as morally superior to men ascribe the feminine to women’s bodily experiences, especially childbirth...Other American feminists see the ascription of women’s characteristics to biology – essentialism – as a trap forgoing the possibility of change” (8). The essentialist view of women is even built into the field of psychology where one would expect to find a more complex understanding of female nature and identity. But complex it is not. In her book *Revising Herself: The Story of Women’s Identity from College to Midlife*, psychologist Ruthellen Josselson writes, “Within developmental psychology, women tend to be regarded as
potential mothers, then as actual mothers who eventually confront an empty nest – and little else about their lives is articulated" (9). This is the social message that women hear and absorb and this is what my characters have heard and absorbed. And it is powerful because it is timeworn and because, if anything has historically come close to defining essential woman, it is motherhood. Ferguson writes, “Throughout history mythical archetypes of women in their biological role as the mysterious source of life have reinforced stereotypes about women’s place in society; women have been viewed as mother, wife, mistress, sex object ... in society men are neither defined by nor limited to the roles of father, lover, and husband” (2,3). When a woman’s biological nature defines her socially in a subtle, but deeply rooted way, conflict and contradictions arise between her personal and social identity. If her body is the tipping point between these forces, what can she do to maintain balance when the form changes or, worse yet, fails her? The Women's Fiction genre shows characters who deal with this constantly. They are worried because they are too: heavy, old, clumsy, weak, ill, infertile, sexual or slow. My three stories meet these themes. They show women searching for balance through illness, menstruation and, the most puzzling identity challenge of all, infertility (aka the Anti-Mom). Ultimately, the protagonists awaken, or self-actualize, through their experiences with the physical changes and maladies because they submit to them. This submission becomes a kind of dis-identification of the self from the body, a process that proves transformative and liberating for the women because they no longer identify their natures through biology; they are taking steps beyond an essentialist view of themselves.
The idea that liberation may occur through a process of letting go of expectation laid down like iron tracks throughout a woman’s life, arose from my reading of Kate Chopin’s *Awakening*, an eighteenth century novel with themes that remain as relevant as they were in the author’s time. All three of my stories are linked through my reading of this extraordinary novel. Not only is the prose as lyrical as champagne on the tongue, her protagonist, Edna, seems to be a prototype of Woman, especially as Woman appears in Women’s Fiction. Edna is driven to self-identify beyond social expectation; eventually, she removes herself from the world and through this solitude finds truth: she cannot go back. She chooses death over submission of the self. My characters seek the kind of liberation that Edna finds at the end of the story, although, perhaps due to the time in which they live, they find it without the heavy sacrifice. Chopin presents these themes through frequent reference to her character’s interaction with nature; ultimately, Edna gives her life to no one save the ocean. Since the natural world and female identification through the body is often linked, particularly as a social construct (Mother Nature), the theme of nature as an external presence reaching a person’s internal self is conspicuously present or absent in my stories as well. In her work *Resisting Representation*, Elaine Scarry suggests a similar event happening with Thomas Hardy’s famous protagonist Tess; she indicates that nature’s presence deepens his construction of his female character. Scarry writes of a “stand of pines which finally become ‘the woods and orchards’ in some integral unity collectively acting as an extension or ‘prolongation of the human body.’” Scarry says that “Tess’s body, too, is continuous with the surface of the earth, as is implicitly acknowledged in [Hardy’s] many comments on, for example,
the ‘correspondence’ between the changing landscape of close hills and open expanses and Tess’s own changing body” (60). Indeed this idea may be found in much of the literature that inspired my short stories. For example, Frances Hodgson Burnett’s classic novel *The Secret Garden* plays with the connection between her character Mary’s internal landscape and the nature that is healed and healing when Mary tends her garden. The garden is more than a metaphor for a young girl returning to life and love after deep trauma; it acts as an extension of her body and being. Burnett writes, “When [Mary’s] mind gradually filled itself with robins...with springtime and with secret gardens coming alive day by day...there was no room left for her disagreeable thoughts which affected her liver and her digestion and made her yellow and tired...the secret garden was coming alive and two children were coming alive with it” (223). This idea evokes Hardy’s ‘correspondence’ between the female body and nature-as-object and it works through my characters as well. The stories show female protagonists who find solace within their natural environments when the “forces” of nature disrupt their lives.

Such is the case in the story “Lucy Lifts a Wing” which is about women who must accept the end of the familiar. The young protagonist, Kate, is on the threshold of womanhood. She observes her teenage sister’s rejection of the childhood games and fantasies that absorbed them for years and feels frightened by the change. She does not want to grow older like Molly; she wants to be Peter Pan:

> [Kate] poked at a velvety tipped miniature orchid that grew close to the ground. Its delicate center looked like the opening of her grandmother’s silk purse or the Georgia O’Keefe paintings Kate’s mother dubbed the “The Vagina Pictures.”
Molly really was an idiot, she decided. Kate opened the flower lips to peek inside. She imagined it was the threshold to a place where girls could fly without shirts to the tops of trees and caw to the world below. A Neverland where girls like Wendy could stay girls forever. That’s what Kate wanted because Molly had changed so much once she became a teenager. (2)

Kate is determined not to change. This determination is in conflict with the changes in her body. Her mother has spoken openly to her daughters about the start of their periods and has made it clear that she sees it as a threshold to womanhood. While her mother hopes to empower her daughters with this treatment of menstruation, Kate does not see it that way. This theme of menstruation works well in stories that hope to explore female identification through self and body, especially since some social constructs for women were directly formed from “the cycle.”

Such is the case in Anita Diamant’s The Red Tent. The women in her novel, who lived during the time of Moses, organize their lives around their cycles, removing to a girls-only tent when they are bleeding or giving birth. The tent is a nurturing and supportive retreat from the drudgery of their daily lives. Diamant’s novel also explores a nature-based spirituality that belongs to the women and secretly sanctifies their physicality, unbeknownst to the men who often treat the female body as an unholy, dirty and suspicious entity. Diamant’s novel certainly influenced Kate and Marjorie’s story. Unlike the women who retreated to their rent tents, Kate views menstruation as the end of the life that she holds dear. She utterly dreads the death of her adolescence. So, as these things go, she gets her period at the height of her anxiety about it. However, the trauma is
compounded by a parallel experience of a woman much older than herself. Kate’s grandmother Marjorie arrives with luggage and moments after Kate begins to bleed, she learns that Marjorie has months to live. The old and the young women room together and lean on each other as they both face nature’s course. They share Marjorie’s pet bird, Lucy, and whisper secrets to the wise creature as she sharpens her beak on her slab of bone. In a scene that is meant to introduce the bird Lucy as well as provide a glimpse of Marjorie’s history, character and interaction with the other women in the home, the latter tells her granddaughter that “[Birds are] good listeners.” She continues:

I tell Lucy things that I can’t say to your grandfather. That’s how he learned he would be moving to the guest bedroom. Lucy told him all right.’ When Kate asked about the bird’s name, her grandmother said she named it after the little girl in her favorite poem by Wordsworth. “The girl is sent by her parents, out in the cold night, to make a delivery. She gets lost in a blizzard. The prints from her final footsteps stop in the middle of an old bridge and she is never seen again.”

“That’s creepy,” Kate said. “That shouldn’t be your favorite poem.”

“Shut up. You sound like your mother.”

In this exchange we learn about past conflict in Marjorie’s life that might illuminate her defensive response to the news that she faces the end of her life. Interestingly, Kate Chopin also uses bird imagery in *The Awakening* and, according to Zoila Clark in her essay “The Bird that Came out of the Cage: A Foucauldian Femininst Approach to Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening,*” Chopin’s birds are also about communication. Clark writes,
"[The bird in a cage] is an image of isolation, confinement, and lack of communication. Edna experiences this in her marriage to a rich Creole husband, and so do other women...both Edna’s body and her mind remain inactive while she is living as a housewife in the private sphere of her home" (337). Marjorie’s acid tongue belies a soft heart, but she is angry, and her relationship with Lucy suggests a lifetime of frustrations. However, she is not so wrapped in her own difficulties that she cannot support her granddaughter or weigh their fears, about their respective changes, equally. While dealing with these internal conflicts, the story is infused with references to nature meant to support the link between the characters’ understanding and identity as women and their natural environment. Of course, they are forced to face this when their bodies “fail” them.

Kate’s response is to immerse herself in nature; in fact her face is often so close to soil or sand she can almost taste it. Marjorie’s bird, the creature she teaches Kate to whisper secrets to at night, acts as a kind of courier who will pass messages from the frustrated women to those forces beyond their control.

This use of an animal as a kind of representative of nature to help soothe the chaos of adolescent change, and the aching understanding that come with it, drives another story that, like The Secret Garden, inspired “Lucy Lifts a Wing.” Madeline L’Engle’s novel, A Ring of Endless Light, is about a young protagonist on the brink of womanhood who is in the throes of awakening awareness about the uncertainty of life and how she will find her place, a grounded sense of herself. She escapes to the ocean and discovers an ability to communicate with dolphins, creatures, in L’Engle’s book, who are profoundly wise. They comfort Vicki while she deals with the impending death of her
grandfather and she receives the message that, though true understanding of the mystery of life (or the forces of nature) will be forever beyond her comprehension, there resides a deeper order within the chaos. The dolphins recommend submitting to the chaos with love. Eventually, this is the same understanding that Kate and Marjorie receive in “Lucy,” though it is not as explicit as in L’Engle’s novel. Through interactions with nature – the orchid, lake and bird acting like soothing representatives of the unknowable that frightens them – we leave the women at the end of the story with the sense that as they awaken to the end of the familiar, they will discover that they can stand on their particular thresholds and recognize possibilities, even a kind of liberation, while submitting to the inevitable.

“Lucy Lifts a Wing,” evolved through successive drafts the content of which was significantly impacted by the medium itself. Originally it was written in a third person, limited point of view (Kate’s perspective) interspersed with a first person dialogue with a character called Creator. This phantom narrator was meant to highlight the theme of accepting the inevitability of cycle and time, the unfolding of nature, so when the protagonist “speaks” to Creator, she addresses both her sense of Creator as spirit mother and creator as human mother. Kate’s feeling of alienation and separation as she loses girlhood paralleled a distant (old) Kate looking back on her life and having the same sense of alienation and separation as she faces death. However, this format did not work for the short story because it needed a stronger plot, was choked with theme, and the ideas behind it lacked clarity. In his book of advice for fiction writers, *By Cunning and Craft*, Peter Selgin writes that the best plots “are born of the conflict(s) between
characters and setting” (70) Following this advice, Marjorie was added as a character who speaks and moves through the story; her experience facing her own passing allowed that theme, originally played through Creator, to crystallize in a less abstract way. It was also possible to open with the tension of Kate waiting in the pasture for her grandmother’s arrival which catapulted the story to “the first interesting thing that happens” which, Selgin writes, should happen as soon as possible (211). This is especially important in a short story which needs to get off the ground quickly if it is to take flight. Certainly, the short-fiction medium affected the construction of the story since these considerations of plot and pacing modified character placement in “Lucy” as well as the need to use broader strokes when applying theme and characterization. In fact, Kate’s character changed. She became edgier, less romantic: flicking a bug away rather than helping it, imagining putting a snake in their mailbox, getting angry at her grandmother. When Marjorie says that Lucy the parrot already likes Kate better the young girl snaps, “She’s sad because you dumped her,” a tone that the original Kate would probably not have taken (4). This tone adds punch and helps drive the pace. Her desire and motivation is obvious from the first scene and the anticipation of waiting for her grandmother adds action and light suspense, a move that also clicks the plot into place. Selgin writes, “to the extent that characters want something, they exist...[and] to the extent that characters are motivated, they make their own plots” (70). Kate plays in the pasture, a demonstration of her youth, but she is waiting for...something...and it is both her grandmother and (though she doesn’t know it, hopefully the reader senses something) the change her grandmother represents.
In the story, “The Middle Space,” the protagonist spends the length of the tale sitting on a toilet in a locked bathroom. She is taking yet another pregnancy test and doesn’t want her husband to know. They have experienced infertility for 6 years and every month Bailey must face the rising hope then let-down of her body cycling outside of her wishes. She imagines pregnancy symptoms; often they are not imagined, just tricky. Bailey allows herself to believe that this month the side-ache and breast tenderness mean something. During the span of those two minutes that she must wait to read the test, Bailey reflects on her adult life and how her perceived physical limitations, or failings as she sees them, must define it. She is a successful entrepreneur who owns a coffee shop known for its specialty, Cappuccino Mudslingers; she rock climbs, travels, and has a good marriage. Bailey is also a proud neo-feminist. She despises the fact that she has reduced the identification of her female nature to her level of fertility. Bailey can’t seem to help herself, though. She is surrounded by women who procreate as easily and breathing and is constantly reminded that she is letting herself and her partner down. She wonders what defines her as a woman in nature when this seemingly fundamental part of womanhood can’t function properly within her body. Even spiritual groups who celebrate the divine feminine, Bailey discovers during a Pagan ritual she attends, chant three phases in a woman’s life: maiden, mother, crone. Bailey panics about this and feels betrayed by her body, by her physical nature. However, there is another complication. She and her partner have carried on for years without children and, while the lack of a pregnancy has often been difficult, it has been like an intermittent melancholic background static. They have not let it define them and, fertility issues aside, have quite a
fulfilling life. So Bailey’s fertility worries, which could (really) be an unconscious spiritual crisis, get compounded by the fact that she and her partner have become set in their patterns. She is alarmed by the realization that she can’t imagine how a baby will fit within the family they have created—just the two of them. Her obsession with pregnancy may be about children or it may be about the fact that she is profoundly guilty for slowly losing the sense of urgency for children that she believes every woman who has ever desired motherhood should possess. Thus, while Bailey feels betrayed by the laws of nature, or how her body refuses to participate in nature, the realization that she has begun to live beyond it brings her closer to a kind of liberation.

Bailey’s story, and her struggle to identify herself as a woman, when that very thing that socially distinguishes the sexes—the ability to give birth—escapes her, seems to be a common theme in Women’s Fiction. These stories about women are, of course, not always about the ability or inability to conceive children, but rather point to a broader definition of what it means to be “fertile.” For example, the glorification of youth and narrowing definitions of beauty can lead, when there is too strong an identification with Body, to similar feelings of failure, barrenness, even detachment. Such is the case with certain characters in Elisabeth Berg’s collected short fiction, *The Day I Ate Whatever I Wanted*, a contemporary work with stories that are structurally and thematically related to “The Middle Space.” Berg’s title story is a first person tale about a woman who struggles with her weight on a daily, grinding basis. She thinks about fat constantly and it defines her. One day she stops salivating over donuts and just eats them, many of them; of course, the food just piles up after that. Her feelings of inadequacy color the
heartbreaking narration. After her binge, the protagonist recalls a scene from childhood, sitting on her porch watching other children play games that she cannot because of her collection of fat. Berg leaves readers with the sad indication that maybe this battle will never be overcome. Though Bailey’s story is a bit more optimistic, her feelings of detachment from the rest of humanity are similar. The women feel infertile because they are unable to participate fully in the human experience, to play the roles that they feel have been assigned to them. They have allowed their bodies to become battlegrounds because they have embraced the idea of social “failure.” Berg effectively presents this through the short story medium. The dense space within a short story allowed her to ladle thick descriptions of the food her character consumes into the text; rather than be comforting or appetizing, the heavy food is juxtaposed with the fact that her character is slipping away from herself (and the reader). Her use of detail was necessary in Bailey’s story, one that had to incorporate a history of disappointed hopes within the span of time it takes to read a pregnancy test.

In addition to Berg, Grace Paley’s short fiction also aided the construction of Bailey’s story. Due to the very short span of “real time,” I had to rely heavily on flashbacks. This, of course, called for the careful, seemingly effortless use of transitions, a task that is not as easy as Paley makes it seem. Transitions shape a narrative by defining, moment to moment, the textual position of character in relation to the arc of the story. A story written by a person like Paley who has perfected the art of transition will not immediately stand forth to be considered as an example because the art of transition also involves stealth. The movement must be mysterious, the transition seamless, or the
story’s grip on the reader’s imagination will release and the reader will become self-conscious and so will the text. The best stories work like a magician’s trick with the ‘truth’ buried beneath layers of wonder. By maintaining forward motion with effective transitions, a story can keep its mechanisms well hidden and further the power of the fantasy. In her story, “In the Garden,” Paley gives readers glimpses of people in a neighborhood meeting and not meeting, talking and not talking. Somehow we learn that a child has disappeared and the tragedy wafts through the story while an old lady, failing in her body, hands out courage. Paley’s transitions keep her readers moving through backstory, character development and location mainly through her wistful dialogue which doesn’t feel like dialogue; she avoids placing obvious exposition into a character’s mouth, that Selgin cautions, can make the dialogue seem inauthentic. He suggests allowing the characters to say enough to advance characterization and to provide background information through exposition (98). With this advice in mind, and with magical examples of master short fiction writers in hand, I connected Bailey’s flashbacks with her time in the bathroom, using dialogue with her husband as well as having her think about the past events in the moment.

Unlike the flashback format, and the grounded narrative style employed in Bailey’s story, “Blind Mr. Rochester’s Tree” floats the narrator through time, a structure that relies heavily on a kind of abstract presentation of sensory experiences. This tone is meant to reflect the emotional state of the heroine who is betrayed by her body in a different way. Her experience with her body’s ‘dysfunction’ is unlike the characters in the other stories because her illness is not particular to women. Therefore, unlike
menstruation or childbirth, she will not necessarily be further tangled by a set of social expectation. However, her attitude about herself, when she considers what is happening to her body, much resembles Bailey’s feelings about infertility. “Blind Tree’s” protagonist experiences her brain tumor as a kind of failure. She views her illness as a dysfunction of her self, a response in line with misplaced body-identity. In fact, her response to illness might be one particular to her gender. She is Nameless Woman who feels the growing symptoms of a serious illness at the same time that she meets the man she will love. At first, she does not know why her head spins like a batter mixer when she closes her eyes or why bending to peer under a bed causes her to lose consciousness.

When she is finally told that she has a brain tumor, the protagonist releases her earthly life. She removes herself from the man who should be her life partner, who spent months carving a rocker that perfectly conforms to her body; this, of course, is a reference to the physical form from which she is mentally departing.

She stepped from the car and walked to his woodshop, her knees numb, her ears cold.

Gentle jazz twined towards her through the open door and she saw his bulk follow his hands down a wide board peeling away splinters and shards of oak with a hand plane from 1876. She stood and watched him, the wind picking her hair. (3) In this scene, she observes him “peeling away splinters,” a loving act that indicates the intersection of these souls; he will do this for her if she will let him. However, she will not. Her detachment is further illustrated by her physical sensations and interactions with nature: parts of her lose feeling while wind picks at her indifferent hair. In the moments
that she tells him she will leave for the city, he gives her the chair. He does not know about her illness or her reasons for leaving, and he is powerless to pull her back, but she takes the rocking chair. While she lives in the dreary city, a place she must occupy because that is where the surgeons will cut her, her detachment from life is almost complete; in fact, his chair’s embrace is the only solid thing in her anesthetized existence. Later, when her body begins to heal, and she realizes she let go of life too soon, the reemergence of her love for him develops along with her awakening connection to her physicality. She had divorced herself from nature, from her nature, and when she reunites with this self she is able to recognize the person with whom she shares a love that fits her as well as the wood he carved for her.

This story began as a series of images woven through with the melancholic solitude experienced by the heroine. Using the haunting prose of Amy Hempel’s short story “Going” as one template, the story about my protagonist’s illness began to emerge. Hempel’s story takes place in a hospital, after a car accident. The prose feels drugged and her transitions match her prose style. Sensory words, colors, and smells, like blood, chocolate, and a Christmas candle unite and form her plot. This, in turn, creates a kind of narrative detachment that I also employed. As my character removes herself to seek an uneasy solitude, the narration gives her space as well. The short fiction medium works for this story because it helps to sustain this tone. A longer work might become burdened with such detachment. In her novel In Hovering Flight, contemporary author Joyce Hinefeld offers a fine example of what I hoped to accomplish in “Blind Tree;” she uses nature, particularly the song of birds, to heighten understanding about her characters’
intimate motivation. Her narrative style, through its melancholic voice, resembles my story, but, because of it novel length, she balances this tone with alternate structures. For example, the text moves from present-time narration about the illness and death of a mother, to the mother’s youthful field journals; the latter, of course, full of an energy and vitality that would not suit the other story-lines. If “Blind Tree” grew into a novel, Hinnefeld’s work would be a wonderful model for how to manage themes of illness, identity and love, through nature’s lens, without exhausting the reader.

Luckily, there are many such examples within the Women’s Fiction genre that offer nature’s presence as a kind of portal to understanding the complexities of female identity, especially when the characters struggle with the fact that their closely held senses of self, by way of natural mechanisms beyond their control, must change. When the women in my stories are pricked by a wind or tickled by blades of grass they are calmed, perhaps because such things, like an orchid’s perfect form, indicate a kind of order within nature’s chaos. Though frightened to discover that their experiences with their own physicality must redefine how they must exist, they can be moved by the womb-like embrace of warm sand. When they become hostile, abrasive, superficial and distant, they might turn to the solid contours of wood or earth because they do not seek other people for comfort at first. By choice they turn inward; they escape into an uneasy solitude that reinforces their isolation from other people. This withdrawal forces them to face their own helplessness, but it also helps them realize that it is only through acceptance, or a kind of connected truce with the machinations of nature, that they will find true solace. In a counterintuitive way, by submitting to the forms their bodies will
inhabit over time, they become disentangled from the Woman as Body, or essentialist, self-identification.

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Kate felt that this Tuesday had been designed for her particular use. She sprawled on her back and pasture grass pricked her cheeks when she rolled her head to the side to watch a spotty bug step along a green blade. When the bug neared the tip, Kate made a bridge with the fingers of one hand, then the other, to see how long the critter would continue to move forward before it realized it wasn’t getting anywhere. The bug walked until Kate got bored and flicked it away. Now resting on her belly, she put her nose to the ground and squinted so that the smallest things came in to focus one at a time.

“I’m Sherlock Holmes,” she whispered, “looking for clues. There’s definitely something fishy about the veiled woman who visited my study yesterday. I think the answer lies here.” She curled her fingers into the soil and it caved; she had uncovered a vast network of worm caverns. “Good work. You’ve almost found the first clue....”

“Kate, are you back there?” Sherlock ducked her head; she felt sure her older sister could not see her. Molly’s voice grew clearer as she moved closer.

“Mom’s looking for you. She says you took off running again to the back-forty as you hicks like to call it. You’re probably getting Lyme disease as I speak. Come on, Kate. Grandma will be here any second. I know you’re hiding somewhere and I’m not wading through that snake-infested grass for any amount of money. Mom can get you herself. It was her idea to move to this stinking place anyway.”

“Score,” Kate thought. She pinched her lips to keep from laughing. The latter thought would send her sister into paroxysms of self-pity, throwing her off the hunt. Kate
sometimes planted these thoughts as a defensive tactic. Sure enough, Molly let out a
drama-sigh and raged off in another direction.

Kate wondered if snakes really did slither around the pasture. She decided that,
if so, she would catch one and stick it in the mailbox.

After Molly left, however much she tried, Kate could not get back into the
Sherlock game. She poked at a velvety-tipped miniature orchid that grew close to the
ground. Its delicate center looked like the opening of her grandmother’s silk purse or the
Georgia O’Keeffe paintings Kate’s mother dubbed the “The Vagina Pictures.” Molly
really was an idiot, she decided. Kate opened the flower lips to peek inside. She imagined
it was the threshold to a place where girls could fly without shirts to the tops of trees and
caw to the world below. A Neverland where girls like Wendy could stay girls forever.
That’s what Kate wanted because Molly had changed so much once she became a
teenager. They used to have such great games; they could be anyone, make anything into
a fort. Kate thought about her favorite character, a gypsy named Bernatha The Wise, who
talked to trees and turned water into glistening animal spirits. Molly always became
Sophie-Anna, a princess who fought sludge trolls with her trusty spear made from a dried
stalk of horse-weed.

This fun only lasted for about a year after they moved to the country. Then Molly
became one of those girls who just HAD to have Ugg boots and coconut-flavored Bonnie
Bell lip-gloss. In Kate’s opinion, the change happened overnight. Now her older sister
took forever to get dressed and she changed the sound of her voice when she talked to
certain people. Once, when Kate offered to show Molly and her friend a mushroom circle
in the woods that had to be something weird, Molly said, “Oh my god, my sister is so annoying.” She sounded fake. Kate wondered what else girls forgot when they became teenagers.

Kate touched the purple orchid, but did not pull it away from its soil nest. She wanted it to stay in the ground and grow old right where it stood.

“This is for you,” her grandmother said, holding out an ornate birdcage. Kate stared uncomprehending. She stood next to her Grandma Marjorie’s silver Buick, along with Molly and their mother, Heather. As soon as she had leapt from her car and given them staccato hugs, the old woman began to throw piles of suitcases covered in floral tapestry from her car to the driveway. She only paused long enough to drag out the sheet-draped cage and present it to Kate.

“Mom, what’s this about? You can’t give Lucy away,” Heather said.

“Of course I can give Lucy away. Wouldn’t you if you couldn’t sleep at night because of some ratchet-jaw bird? I can do what I damn well please. Take it, Katie, or I’ll give it to Molly instead.” Kate wrapped her arms around the frame and finally met her grandmother’s blue eyes. She couldn’t read them. This was the most unusual thing Marjorie had ever done. Everyone knew how much the bird meant to her. Lucy Gray had been a gift from Kate’s grandfather, Henry, before he died. During one of Kate’s overnight visits Marjorie told her, after one or two nightcaps, that Henry knew he couldn’t meet all of her needs, so he gave her a yellow parrot.

“They’re good listeners, Katie. I tell Lucy things that I can’t say to your grandfather. That’s how he learned he would be moving to the guest bedroom. Lucy told
him all right.” When Kate asked about the bird’s name, her grandmother said she named it after the little girl in her favorite poem by Wordsworth.

“The girl is sent by her parents, out in the cold night, to make a delivery. She gets lost in a blizzard. The prints from her final footsteps stop in the middle of an old bridge and she is never seen again.”

“That’s creepy,” Kate said. “That shouldn’t be your favorite poem.”

“Shut up. You sound like your mother.”

Kate carried the bird to her bedroom and almost slammed the door in her grandmother’s face.

“Watch it. I’m with you, remember? You’ll sleep on the trundle.” Kate told her she forgot. She set the cage on her desk and lifted the protective sheet. Lucy clutched her perch as if she gripped a bridge that spanned an icy river. Kate sat on the bed and watched Lucy while her grandmother unpacked large, silky slips and complex girdles. Soon, Lucy was relaxed enough to sharpen her beak on a slice of powdery bone. She trilled when Kate clicked at her.

“See, she already likes you better,” said Marjorie.

“She’s sad because you dumped her,” Kate said. She was angry at herself for getting so excited about this visit. She wondered how she could have forgotten the weird stuff.

“Don’t forget to tell her your secrets,” Marjorie said and her voice sounded crumbly.
After the girls’ father left two years before, Heather moved Molly and Kate to their small, eco-friendly house with acres of trees and a cow pasture. Heather told the girls she was finally living her anti-suburbia dream; she refused to use electricity, joined a Unitarian church, and began to wear long skirts that she kept wrinkly by stuffing them into a small bag when she hand-washed. The new place and the new Mom confused Kate at first, but when she learned that their property neighbored the shore of a wide, endless lake, she felt soothed. Kate called it Deep Blue and went for a swim in fine weather or when certain troubles boiled her blood.

“The lake is my Lucy,” she told her grandmother.

The next morning, Kate woke to the promise of good weather. She rolled off the trundle and, in honor of those times when the two of them talked like best friends, decided she would start over with her grandmother by introducing her to Deep Blue. Kate bent to Lucy and repeated “Deep Blue, today. Deep Blue, today,” until she felt a garter belt elastic snap the back of her head.

“Knock it off,” Marjorie said, “I’m awake.”

“Knock it. Knock it,” said Lucy.

Kate’s mother collected some food for breakfast — Marjorie called it horse-chow — and walked with them to the water, a picnic basket on her hip. Kate wanted to be cheerful, but the sun made her feel dull and heavy and her gut ached. She blamed it on her grandmother. Their moods seemed to have slumped since yesterday, even hippy-dip Heather who liked to hold hands before a meal and say things like “Love will set you free,” seemed as blue as Deep. Kate hoped the water would help.
The lake had a sandy shore and, when they reached it, Kate took off her shoes and
scrunched her toes around the gritty stuff already baked by the heat. She watched her
mother lost in wistful thought as she clutched her basket of homemade molasses granola,
her hand half-way to the knot that tied her sarong. Marjorie watched Heather too and
Kate saw the old woman’s eyes grow wet with tears. Something was up, Kate decided.
She rubbed her stomach and wanted to burrow down inside the warm sand, to curl like a
child in the belly, to feel its heavy beige-ness press her chest and back close and tight.
Wind rippled the water into dainty ruffles, the kind she would absolutely refuse to wear if
anybody dared make her try, and she tilted her nose to hold the water’s gentle sewage
breath at bay.

“Why don’t you run in, honey? Usually, you can’t get in there fast enough,”
Heather said as she stretched on her beach towel. But Kate held back. Something wasn’t
right. Maybe her sense of imbalance didn’t start with Marjorie, Heather or Molly after all.
Her bathing suit felt wet and sticky.

“I’ll be right back,” she said. Her grandmother watched as she hid behind the old
willow that dipped long locks, like a reposed Ophelia, into Deep Blue. Kate checked her
crotch. Her own blood and it couldn’t be stopped.

She heard her mother say, and it seemed like her voice came from an infinite
distance, “Don’t worry, she’s always running off like that. Now what did you want to tell
me?” Kate stood in shock and wanted to cry. Somehow she had imagined that it might
not happen to her, or at least that it would not happen for a long time. She wasn’t ready.
When Kate walked slowly back towards Heather and Marjorie, the enormity of her discovery distracted her. She did not, at first, notice her mother’s face.

“Mom, I…” Kate stopped when Heather buried her head in a wad of paper towels and began to sob deeply into the sand; ragged cords jutted from the back of her neck. Marjorie spread her legs around Heather – a birthing position – and held her daughter close to her chest.

“Go get Molly,” Marjorie told Kate. “I need to talk to the two of you.” Kate obeyed in a daze; fear clutched her. She fetched Molly and choked out that something must be terribly wrong with Grandma. The girls retuned to Deep Blue and huddled together on the sand like they were five and seven watching their father rage because his stocking feet had just found one of their discarded Lego pieces. Heather now sat upright next to Marjorie and the two women faced the girls; Marjorie released Heather’s hand.

“I have something unpleasant to tell you. Like I said to your mother, I don’t want a big fuss, though she didn’t listen. I’ve been given about six months to live. Kate, now you know why I ‘dumped’ Lucy on you. So.” She said the last like a shot, threatening, defensive. Heather sucked in her breath and Marjorie jabbed her in the ribs.

“You know, things haven’t been as interesting since your Grandfather went, so I feel like it’s probably a good time. I’ve lived a long, good life. God, I sound like a Hallmark card. You girls will be fine. I’ve made sure of that. Don’t you worry.” She poked her daughter again. Kate felt like she was watching from the wrong end of a telescope. Words and images were distorted and distant. Had Blue swallowed her? She opened her mouth to breathe.
“Girls, I know this must be very hard for you to hear,” said Heather, “but we will be here for you. We will help each other get through this. I told Grandma she can live with us here until... for as long as she wants. I don’t think she should be alone.”

“Ha. Listen to you. This is just the way things go. This is life, girls. I don’t mind staying here to keep you company, but I don’t want to spend my last days with a bunch of mopers. Will you promise me that you won’t talk to me with soft voices and do nice things because you feel sorry for me? I want to see you, the three of you, bright and alive and young. That sight might answer some of the questions I have about this whole getting old thing. Because I’ll tell you,” and this was the first time her voice betrayed emotion, “sometimes it doesn’t make a damn bit of sense.”

Later, after Molly cried on her bed and Kate climbed to the top of her favorite tree to stare numbly at the not-so-miniature world below, Heather made supper in a heavy copper pot on the wood cook-stove. Marjorie said that was the most ridiculous thing she had ever heard and why did people bother to invent things like stoves if the old ways were so much better? Heather slammed a lid down on the pot and stoked the stove flames. Kate’s chest unclenched a bit. The variability of the stove’s heat made it tricky to master most dishes and she wanted to laugh when she thought of what her grandmother’s reaction would be when she tasted the inevitable scorched soup and runny goat yogurt. It relieved her to know that some things would not change. She felt choked by a kind of acceptance.

After she and Marjorie settled in their beds that night, Kate waited for her grandmother’s breath to deepen into sleep. She waited a long time. When she felt certain
that she would not be overheard, Kate folded back her covers and leaned over Lucy’s cage.

“Are you awake? I have some secrets that nobody else knows.” She told Lucy about what happened that day at Deep Blue, about what she found when she hid behind the willow. Lucy tilted her head and lifted a wing. She hopped on one foot.

“I don’t think I want to tell Mom yet,” Kate said. “She’s got a lot on her mind and, besides, I don’t want to make a deal out of it. Lucy, it really sucks. I’m not ready. Why do things have to change?” She began to cry.

“I’m afraid I’ll stop believing in things. Mom will say now I’m a woman and I don’t want to be.” Kate rested her face on the cage frame and allowed the tears to flow. She heard the bed moan and soon felt herself enclosed in her grandmother’s strong arms.

“I thought you were asleep,” Kate said.

“You got your period today, didn’t you?” Kate nodded against the bony collarbone. Then she said something she would only be able to admit in the dark, standing next to Lucy’s cage.

“I’m scared Grandma.”

The old lady was silent for a time then whispered into Kate’s hair, “Me too.”
The Middle Space

Bailey laughed at herself often. One or two weeks of every month, in fact, and this month, sitting on the toilet, holding the test, she chuckled again, forcing the sound from her chest to fool herself that she was so self-aware she did not really believe it would happen this time because hoping was pathetic and defied possibility. She laughed at herself for what she called The Symptoms. A few days after fertile-time sex (“We need to do it tonight,” she would say to her husband Tim, “It’s my fertile time.”), Bailey began to experience pregnancy symptoms. When her side twinged. Implantation? When her breasts hurt in the shower. Mam glands starting to flood? When she peed once too soon, twice hummm, three times I sure am peeing a lot, four THIS is weird, five Oh my god, when would I be due? October? That’s a good month. One morning she puked for no reason and added maternity clothes to an online shopping cart. She did not press the “buy now” button, though. That would jinx it. After being hit so many times with a negative test, a minus sign in the window, she began to see her body as an enemy combatant, ready to slide another trick through those lines of defense that had not yet become too thick. A maneuver called The Bailey Body Fake-out. When one symptom turned out to be yet another one of the odd and expanding weapons in the PMS arsenal, she remembered and discounted it next time it appeared. She laughed. Oh you nausea, you, I’m not going to fall for it this time. So next month she’d get a new one. And then the treacherous hope.

Bailey tore open the foil wrapper surrounding the test and gently placed it on the bathroom sink. She grabbed a rubber-band and twisted it around the blond strings of hair
that kept dragging through her lashes, stinging her eyes. The hair needed to go; she would cut it. This required full concentration, this bathroom ritual. Bailey pulled the instructions from the box and read them again. “It doesn’t hurt to be overly cautious,” she thought.

*These rituals.* She imaged her movements after the recommended two minutes had passed. She would carry the test sticks to the kitchen window and turn them in every direction to catch the light. Sometimes her eyes would trick her. *Was that a glint of something?* When the window definitely only revealed one line, she would let the urine stew longer than the required two minutes and tell herself that the hormone hadn’t had time to develop. *Still nothing.* So she would carry them to the stainless-steel trash can to bury under paper-towels with sopped up coffee grounds so no one could see another failed attempt, most of all herself. She buried the tests and thought the act contained symbolic significance.

She also thought that two lines would mean that she could finally feel true joy, that her very soul had expanded because she had achieved her biological imperative and defined her womanhood. A plus sign would mean her body had proved that those inner parts worked that, because men did not have them, made her female. What else were they supposed to do? The possession of a uterus did not suggest that her café would sell more cinnamon rolls. Her cervix did not translate into capital on deposit from a sales onslaught of her specialty cappuccino Mudslingers. She knew her sense of her womanhood had little to do with her career, her other talents, or her relationships and felt guilty that over the six years it took her to create the café, rock climb a craggy class 5.12, and rearrange the digestive system of her Mini so that it drove on yummy oils like Canola and Grape-
seed, she could not make a baby. And she felt guilty that she felt guilty because that's not what enlightened women should feel. Now she was the one running on toxic fuel. Her New Age friends would advise her to tie on gut magnets or do some aura balancing if they knew the state of her insides which churned, rolled, and gagged every time she saw a baby or heard about Mrs. Go – Fuck – Yourself getting pregnant again. "Oh, wow, congratulations," she would say. "That's great news. I'm so excited for you."

Aiming must be harder for us girls, she thought, trying to catch her drops from some...where....down....ugh. Must drink more next time. "It's too damn dark," she said aloud. She pulled the stick up and squinted at the scratchy part that wicks the pee. Contact. She capped the end and set it on the black sink-top. She could not see the result window, so tilted it up occasionally while squatting on the toilet. She jiggled her legs. One line or two. Her bare feet were cold on the tile. The cold briefly sliced through her body. She asked herself what she was doing here – again. Tim wouldn't like it. She heard him moving around their bedroom. His flip-flops slapped the wood floor, closer and away, closer and away. She didn't want him to know she was taking another test. He had told her to stop obsessing, to drink wine until they definitely knew. He had held her on too many first-blood days of the month.

"Bailey, what are you doing?"

"Tim."

"Are you doing it again? Honey, we talked about this." He stood outside of the door. She had locked it.
“I’m two days late. I know how ridiculous this is, but this time really might be the one.”

“Are you sure about the days? Are you really late this time?” She recited the formula. Twenty-eight day cycle. Day fourteen, sex. Check. Two weeks later no period. Check.

“Can you let me in? I want to be with you.” Bailey flipped the latch and Tim entered leaning over the test on the counter.

“So this really could be it?” his voice sounded tight.

“Yeah. Isn’t it weird to think our whole life could change because of what a plastic stick tells us in the next few minutes.”

“How would you feel? Sometimes when you talk about Sue, I’m not sure what you really want. Do you really want this?”

“Are you serious? What the hell have we been trying to do here? Of course I do.”

“I just think you don’t know for sure if you want kids.”

“What are you talking about? I love kids. Of course I want them. I’ve always had a thing with kids and I thought you were that way too. That’s one reason I married you. I thought you’d be a good father. Are you saying that’s suddenly changed? Is that why I’ve been the one obsessing about the tests and taking vitamins and listening to shit?”

“Bailey.” She ignored him.

“I know that sperm count packet has been unopened for over a year. I’m the one working at this. It’s just occurred to me. Maybe you don’t really want it.” Her voice had risen and she realized she stood facing him with her pants around her ankles. She looked
down and couldn’t help smiling. It was all so absurd. She sat back on the toilet. Tim
folded his legs and faced her on the floor. He didn’t share her amusement.

“I love kids too, but things are good, you know? We’ve got a pretty great life and
we’re close. Besides, I hear you say all the time it’s not such a bad thing not having kids.
You look at Sue and the crap she’s been through, what she’s had to give up. We’ve had
the freedom to accomplish a lot. You tell me that all the time.”

“I tell you that after I start my period. I think that after my period. You notice that
before, when I think I might be pregnant, I don’t say those things. But after, I say it to be
like, ‘Hey, this thing doesn’t have to ruin me. I can move on. I have a full life with or
without kids.’ I’m not sure if I mean it.” Bailey felt weepy.

“The truth is, I don’t know. Sometimes I want a kid so bad I can’t stand it, other
times I like coming back to our peaceful house, doing our thing. What if the problem is
just that we’ve become too set in our ways? What if we’ve had too much time to imagine
all of the scenarios?”

“I just think you shouldn’t beat yourself up so much. We’ve got plenty of time
and if we still can’t get pregnant some day we’ll adopt. We haven’t even been to
specialists yet. There are still lots of options. I’m not worried about it and I don’t think
you should. I’ve seen you disappointed so many times. I guess I just want to put this in
perspective.” Bailey’s temper ignited again.

“I know. Exactly. You’re not worried about it. Well, I am. Can you just leave me
alone? I’m going to finish this.”

“Bailey....”
“You know, I get it okay? You’re not pressed for time. You can make babies until the day you die. I can’t. You don’t know what it’s like to feel broken. To hear some of the stuff people say to me. This fertility thing is something that defines me, unlike men, and... I can’t explain it. I just need some space right now. Can you leave and just give me some space?” He started to say something then rose. His eyes held compassion. She knew she didn’t make sense to him, but he left the small room.

After Tim closed the door, she rested her head against the toilet paper holder. One of the hardest things about dealing with what she refused to call infertility were the comments from other people. Especially women who seemed to breathe in the sperm and breathe out the baby. Like her cousin Ellen who had sex once, for the first time, and was now due in three months. Ellen sidled up to her at the family Christmas party in a red-print, flowing top tied under her breasts to accentuate the prow of her fine ship, and looked down at Bailey’s pasta bloated stomach.

“Ohh, Bailey,” Ellen said, putting an arm around Bailey’s shoulders, “Do you have something to announce? You look... You would tell us, right?” The body packed kitchen compressed on all sides. Bailey smiled.

“No, not yet. I wish, but really it’s fine. Not a problem.” Ellen’s belly pressed her waist. Bailey wondered if this was some kind of Fertile to Infertile ritual.

“It will happen someday. I know it will,” Ellen said rubbing her belly.

Maybe if I rub it a genie will pop out and grant three wishes.
“You have to stay positive. I have a friend who was trying to get pregnant for, like, a year and then she just decided not to try anymore, to let God take care of it whenever He felt was the right time and, guess what?”

Um, let me see. She conceived through Immaculate Conception.

Bailey had a list of some of her favorite advice and comments, which occurred more frequently now that she and Tim had been trying for so long. She felt that the older she got, the more the state of her fertility became a public matter. She believed, now that she neared her mid-thirties, that the fact that she had tried and failed for too long made others feel nervous. People told her to stop trying, to try every day, to put her legs up, to take vitamins, to cut out coffee and red meat, to pray to God, to run, to not run, to take cold showers. More than once she was told to adopt because “as soon as you do, you’ll get pregnant.” Others said things about “people in their thirties having a harder time” and the “higher risk of birth defects the older we get.” Bailey felt herself drying up as they spoke. Did she represent a malfunction in the reproductive chain that drives humanity? What will she become if not mother, grandmother, great and beyond? She worried about what defined her if the definition of woman equals man plus the ability to conceive and carry and labor and push. It’s not just about organs, she decided, but about my communal position and social definition. Even the Pagans and the Wiccans, women who spell it womyn, reinforced these precepts. Once she went with her friend to a pagan ritual and, in a room full of flowing witches and candles and beads, the head witch intoned the three stages of a WOMYN’s life. Maiden, Mother, Crone. Maiden, Mother, Crone. Maiden,
Mother, Crone. Bailey felt frantic. I do not exist in the middle part. What am I during the middle part?

“It doesn’t matter what other people think or how others define me,” Bailey said aloud more than once. But, she could not deny, with the start of her flow every month, she felt more than grief; she wanted to apologize. To the Ellens and the Pagans and the Parents, and the Husbands, and the Doctors and the Jesus-lovers because she – just – couldn’t – manage – it.

Bailey tilted the stick and could see the movement of her fluid across the window. One pink line emerged right away, the control line. Her line of control. There. Solid. Pink. Bailey didn’t want to watch beyond the “confirmation of proper application.” She wanted to wait longer to check the result because tilting it might unbalance the whole thing and give her a false reading. Watching it closely had never made that second line appear. She imagined what it would be like to get a positive. This time might be the one, she told herself again. She considered lateness a guilt-free, no reason to make excuses reason to take a test, or two, or.... Tim didn’t need to understand this. She knew his logic didn’t need to apply to her. Bailey squirmed on the toilet because her legs were getting numb and grabbed a magazine from the unruly pile on the floor. She heard her husband grinding coffee beans in the kitchen and threw down the glossy pages. She thought about what he had said about their “pretty great life” and about what they would give up if they had a baby. She remembered those times when they held hands across a restaurant table and quietly discussed expanding the café or their next trip downstate to the San Gregornio Mountains while parents at other tables gave in to their kids’ manipulative
demands. Tim was right. She did remember saying, stunned by her annoyed response to
the four year-old screeches, “Do we really want to do this?” She thought some of the
good things that would change: easy conversation, restful nights, intense arguments,
spontaneous travel, spicy cooking, noisy sex, free-time, bath-time, work, Masterpiece
Theater, blasting ACDC, blasting anything. They both clung to their relationship, the life
they had created together, because it was a refuge from the chaos of their outer lives. A
child would disrupt this. They would be forced to redefine both their connection to each
other and their lifestyle. Would they grow apart?

His words had shaken her. Nothing made sense. She thought about Sue’s visit last
week with her “munchkins” in tow. Bailey had made Jasmine tea and chocolate scones
and settled across from Sue in her favorite easy chair. Sue put the kids, ages one and
three (the age span precisely according to plan) on the hardwood floor and piled toys,
unearthed from one of her four capacious diaper bags, in front of them. The kids were
interested, quiet and cute, drooling over the colorful, hard plastic, and Bailey had looked
at her friend.

“They’re such great kids. The two of you must be so proud. I mean, what an
amazing thing, to be part of the creation of two such special beings. It’s just...powerful.”

Sue nodded. “Yeah, it is pretty great. My mom stopped by the other day and I was
able to take a shower. It felt so good. I had all this energy afterwards and did six loads of
laundry, cut out the St. Patrick’s Day cards that I’ll send with pictures of the kids, and
baked banana bread. You know what would be really great, though? A nap. A nap would
be amazing. A nap and a shower.”
“Can’t you rest while they’re napping? Catch up?”

Sue looked amused. “Um, that’s when I try to pick up the house and stuff like that. Make calls, do the checkbook.” Sue stretched and sipped the tea. A biscuit crumb dangled from the corner of her mouth.

“This is so nice,” Sue said. “You don’t know how great it is to have some adult conversation. I get so used to kid language it’s ridiculous. My god, I was so embarrassed. The other day I went to K-mart for some plastic mattress pads and Stella started hopping around like she had to go to the bathroom, so I went up to this lady to ask where they were. I was like, in this high pitched sing-song voice, ‘Excuse me, please. Where is your potty?’ She looked at me like I was nuts. That’s why I listen to NPR as much as possible during the day. To try to remember what adults sound like. Sometimes I feel like my brain is turning to mush. Like there’s no way I could do now what I did in college.”

At this point, the kids had decided the adult talk had continued far too long and began to demand Bailey and Sue’s undivided attention by screeching whenever the conversation ebbed away from them. Bailey saw her friend strain hard to appease them; it looked exhausting. She noticed Sue’s eyes were not as sharp and clear as they used to be, that her skin stretched tighter over her cheekbones and she had stuffed her hair into a brown claw-clip. There were banana pulp stains on her jeans and her breasts were different sizes. In college, Sue had been fastidious about everything from the state of her dorm refrigerator to studying for her MCAT’s. Then she learned she was pregnant and decided that childcare did not fit into her plan to be, not only Super-Mom, but Super-Duper-Mom. So she traded Med-School (for the time being, she always said) for
macaroni crafts, homemade baby-food (once they were off the breast), and the discipline method that does not require the word "no."

"Anything yet?" Tim stood outside the door again. "Is it safe to enter the dragon’s lair?"

"You know, I don’t think now is a good time to be saying stuff like that. This is big, Tim. This moment is huge. I have a feeling…and now, sitting here thinking it just might happen I’m starting to get scared to death. The reality is hitting me. How can I want something for so long and then, just when it’s a possibility, start to have doubts. God, this sucks."

"Bailey, thinking about you being pregnant scares me too. It’s not that I don’t want it, but we have reason to be unsure about potentially upsetting everything we have—and are happy with. At the same time, though, I think of a child with you and I just ache for it. It would be the most amazing thing that I’ve ever experienced."

"You’re giving me mixed messages."

"So are you."

"Tim, maybe it will be different with us.” Because she wanted to be convinced, Bailey said that maybe they would parent differently; they would not fall into the same trap; their kids would behave in restaurants because they had more time to study parenting methods that really work and their lives did not need to change very much—really. She and Tim agreed that being parents together would be a powerful and beautiful thing.
While they waited those final seconds for the test result, time pressed them into some kind of understanding. They realized that alongside their doubts, they had left spaces, in the circle of their home and the family that now included just the two of them, for people who did not yet exist. They were afraid that those spaces had to be filled or the two of them would never feel complete. This is what they said to each other.

The recommended two minutes had passed and Bailey sat staring at the pregnancy test that rested horizontally on the bathroom sink. The light above the sink pooled briefly, absorbed by dark red walls. Bailey looked at Tim and something like fear passed between them. This was it. The moment before, infused with hope or dread, the moment that could change everything. Her urine washed from one edge of the window to the other and in that space, that middle space, she would discover something important.

Bailey reached for the test and held it to the light.
Blind Mr. Rochester's Tree

She lived in a Gotham city, dark and dreary, without an ounce of desire for it. She hated the heights and the Pythagorean angles. At night and alone in her apartment, she rocked before an open window in the chair he carved for her – a Sam Maloof-style sweeping beauty with slopes and curves that hugged her. She rocked and held a lavender blanket to her nose. She dreamed about traveling to Vienna, to the great opera house, with him and her Why Not pen, creating, swallowing, carving in a red, lacy bra with a Storming the Bastille kind of passion. Instead, she lived in Gotham, making her bed the way the nurses taught her, waiting for a dolphin moonrise.

"Brain tumor," said the doctor with the snaking cowboy boots that circled the white room. His beady eyes watched her and his mouth said he would schedule the cutting for next week. Snakes. Poison. Not to be trusted.

"I'll get back to you," she said. "I need time to think." She had just finished vomiting until nothing came up except bitter green bile. It emptied her. She longed to collapse against her pillows at home because when she moved her body her head had to follow. And the emptiness felt light and heavy at the same time.

"I'll call soon," she said because Cowboy Boots argued that she should not mess around and he wanted to get as much as he could out of that brain of hers and, considering the location, he hoped she would not be blind or immobile because it would be hard not to nick something.

"It's wrapped itself right around a bunch of blood vessels, you know."

“Yes. Right. I’ll call,” she said.
She drove to the bank of a pond and watched cattails, eyes open because when
they were closed it talked to her. Whoom. Whoom. Whoom. Like a record turning on a
turn-table or a lighthouse lamp twisting in the night or her grandmother’s mixer in yellow
batter. When she closed her eyes, her brain spun around and Whoomed as it passed her
sockets. She hated to close her eyes. She hated that time before sleep, alone with the
Whoom and her thoughts about what it would be to not be. She tackled different body
parts. What if this finger? What if this elbow? What if this prickly leg hair? Now she
knew the answer. Maybe.

Easing her car from the waterside she made some decisions. The man with the
rattlesnake boots would not slice open her head. His hands would not part the hair, the
skin, the skull, the oatmeal matter. She did not trust him, so she would go to the city and
find a suitable person – fast – because that doctor was right about one thing; the Whoom
had to go. She made some other decisions too. Turning her car into a gravel drive, past
weeping willows and an old well, she parked and decided the man she loved must not
know about the thing going on inside her head. They knew each other well enough to sit
in silence, but not long enough to know yet where they were bound and he had felt too
much loss in his past. She would not add to it; she would leave him free.

She stepped from the car and walked to his woodshop, her knees numb, her ears
cold. Gentle jazz twined towards her though the open door and she saw his bulk follow
his hands down a wide board peeling away splinters and shards of oak with a hand plane
from 1876. She stood and watched him, the wind picking at her hair. For a long time.
Finally, he saw her and his face lightened.
"He deserves the best," she thought. Five kids and a hearty wife sharing blueberry muffins over a hand-planed breakfast table or travels to exotic locales getting warm and tan and drunk on mushroom juice. Not this. Not this uncertainty. Not this binding to a life that will inevitably hurt.

"I am broken," she thought. "This broken self will not have adventures like others do. This body probably cannot even sustain children. I am not of this world anymore; my path diverges even if I do live through it." She thought these things standing there watching his lightened face, but the feelings were not new. For months she wondered and planned while doctors told her the headaches came from allergies, migraines, psychosomatic nightmares. She wondered and planned because the Whoom had to be something bad; she knew it and, for a time, pretended she didn't. When she bent to look under her bed for her discarded underpants while he slept after a night of lovemaking, and the world heaved until she rested frozen on the floor for twenty minutes, she stopped pretending and demanded a brain scan.

Often, watching him sleep, she knew what she would do if her fears came true. And they did, so she put her arms around him in the woodshed and held him until the world stopped heaving.

"I made something for you," he said.

*Please not kindness. Make me hate you.* Her eyes were dry. Gritty. Like the 220 sandpaper he used to soften the curves, shapes and angles.

"When I made the pattern, I figured I might as well make two chairs. This one's for you." He set the rocking chair before her and could not meet her eyes. He knew that
she knew how many hours and hours it took to fashion these sculptural pieces of cherry and mahogany because not one part of the chair had a hard edge or sharp angle. He formed and rounded it for her body and, sitting, she felt the back of the chair perfectly follow the curve of her spine. It embraced her.

"I have to go to the city," she said. "I have to move there."


“No. It’s just something I have to do. Everything is all set up. Please don’t ask questions. I’m fine, but I don’t really want to talk about it.” He grabbed the back of the chair, facing her.

“What do you mean don’t ask questions? Of course I’m going to ask. This makes no sense. I thought we were….I thought this was working. We had plans. It’s one thing to move to the city and we could commute to see each other, but you won’t even tell me what’s going on. It’s pretty god-damn sudden.”

“I know it’s sudden. I can’t help that.”

“It sounds bad. It sounds bad for us. You’re letting me down gently aren’t you? That’s what’s going on here. You’re ending it. Can’t we talk first?”

“I know it sounds bad, but it’s not what you think. I can’t explain. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” She ran her fingers along the slope of the arm-rest, following the grain pattern.

“Please,” he said. She saw his face when she turned away from him and knew his eyes in that moment would haunt her.

“I’ll let you know where and everything as soon as I can. It might take some time to get settled, so don’t worry.”
"Take the chair, anyway," he said and his words choked him.

That night she called and found a surgeon in the city who would open her head and treat her and he did not sound like a beady-eyed serpent.

That week she collected her things, put them in her car and found an apartment with a window for her rocker. When her lover called her phone, she said the same things about needing time away and not being able to explain why. He told her the vague answers taught him not to believe her reassurances that he had done nothing wrong. He told her the non-answers were lies and might be her way of being kind, but he hated it. He asked her to stop. She told him she loved the chair.

Being alone sustained her. She would be undone if any person moved too close.

The night before her surgery, nurses came and shaved her skull. Later, she rested on her bed and read Jane Eyre. When the nurses found her with tears they gave her things that made her sleep. She tried to tell them to stop, that the book made her cry because, when Jane stands at her place of happiness with Mr. Rochester, she must turn away. Pills would make her sleep before she could reach the part about the lovers standing in a garden under a tree, watching young and old branches intertwine, knowing they can finally be together because they have forever left the mansion and the first lightening-struck tree that parted them. She wanted a happy ending, damn it. Instead she fell asleep and then fell asleep again the next day when they made a little bubble on her skin and held a needle over it and said, "Start counting to ten."

She made it to three.

When her eyes finally opened, the world had doubled, so she closed them again.
When they pulled the long tube out of her nose, she saw only one of the same nurse and felt better.

When she could stay awake long enough to eat, she discovered a consuming craving for canned mushroom soup, the kind with white balls of fat and specks of brown. She got it down her throat for a few minutes before it came up again. So did every other kind of food. People in thin cotton uniforms began to tell her she had to eat and walk though food became the enemy and her thighs had no feeling.

She asked to see the back of her head and a nurse held up a large eye-shadow compact, The Pastel Collection, and her scalp looked like whip-stitched leather hide. "I want to try to walk now," she said and slapped her numb thighs with a hair brush.

Two days later, three doctors stood at the end of her newly made hospital bed. She had watched the nurses make perfect corners while she sat in the easy-chair reserved for visitors. The chair suited her better than the bed, so she decided to wait there for the white, flapping coats and the cold, metal stethoscopes and the fleshy fingers that would press her skull. She pulled the thin, never warm enough, hospital blankets to her waist and held her finger on the line in Jane Eyre that she had been reading when they walked in.

"Well, as I'm sure you know by now, we are very pleased with how the surgery went and your future prognosis. We were able to remove most of the tumor. The rest we will have to watch with periodic scans."

"How often do I need to come back?"
"Every six months at first. Unless, of course, you start bumping into walls." She imagined walking through the dark, hitting wall after wall, flattening her nose.

"We'll also want to test your coordination and check for swelling, so it would help for you to live nearby for awhile."

"Finally, just avoid situations where you need balance. No tightropes for you or bike riding or ice skating. Just try to avoid being too adventurous, at least until things grow back together."

She stayed in the city and rocked by her window, avoiding balance. The Whoom had left, but she had nightmares in its place about the back of her head being mush like ground chuck and slept face down, breathing through one nostril. She realized that she had made herself alone and she did not die. When her hair reached her eyebrows, she dreamt of Vienna and mashed her body into his chair wondering what had made her let him go. Now, when she bent to look under her bed, she found piles of dusty magazines and did not collapse holding anything.

Her head grew back together, not perfectly, but back and she got a job as a waitress for small tips in a small diner because her savings would sustain her for a time and writing for work still took too much energy. She began to drink carrot juice and eat raw almonds. Now when she slapped her thighs, it hurt. This pleased her, so one night after a late shift she opened her pen and wrote a letter. She told him everything. About the green bile and the prickly leg hair and bumping into walls. She said that when things unraveled her, she didn't want people near. She said he had suffered enough without adding her messy stuff. She told him about the angles, the window, and the chair.
When I rock, back and forth, you hold me and I'm moving. I want to find my balance again. I want you and Mr. Rochester's second tree, the good one. I was stupid to let you go.

She waited every day for a reply, but her mailbox was empty and no one tried her phone. Her hair reached her ears and still she did not hear from him.

"He has let me go," she realized one day. "I was right to do this alone. It's better."

When the knock came, she was home and thought UPS had delivered her new walking shoes. She opened the door and he stood there looking older and it felt like someone had blasted open her chest because he stood there.

"I didn't get it right away because I was out of the country. Your letter."

"I wrote it," was all she could say. He looked her over, really looked and his eyes were angry.

"How could you not tell me? I think that was the cruelest thing anyone has ever done to me. Are you okay? Are you going to be okay?" She pulled him inside and made him sit on the wood he carved, pushing it to rock him. It rained outside her window and grey mist rolled over the city she despised.

"It's Gotham City," she said, trying for a laugh. A laugh would help her know he was okay. He did nothing but look frightened. She stopped the moving chair and placed his fingers along her raw scar.

"Twenty six stitches," she said. "Not counting the escape route. That's what I call the cut on top that they made in case something started to blow up back there." His fingers bumped over the uneven skin and he swallowed. He would not speak. She moved
to his lap and bent his face to that cradling space between neck and collar-bone and held him until he stopped resisting and let his tears slide between her breasts.

They talked long into the night. She answered his fears with works of assurance. She finally got him to laugh. As they eased back into each other, she took comfort from the thought that he would never need to know all the horror of it. That nobody did. That it belonged to her.

They talked of what would need to happen next.

"You don't need to stay here do you? I can take you back home. We can...."

"I am not the princess in the tower waiting to be rescued. You don't need to do this. I wrote to you so that you could understand, but I'm not sitting here waiting to be saved." He looked at her a long time and she realized that she lied when she pretended that she didn’t need him. She had been as blind to this truth as he would be to the depth of her loneliness. She discovered that they, like Jane and Rochester, were left standing in the cottage garden under the old, good tree and she preferred this solid ground to the heights and grey mists of angular Gotham. She knew what she wanted.

"If we do try to be together I want you to know I will not be easy," she said.

"Sometimes I might feel that I'm not worth the trouble and feel guilty about hurting you. I can’t guarantee that it will never come back. The unknown might always hang over us."

"We should try, though. I want to try," he said. She smiled.

"Yes."

They drove away from that place and took most of her belongings with them; someone else received a new pair of walking shoes. And though the things that could
grow back together did grow, she always fought to find her balance, to feel essentially whole. But she didn't mind so much. She learned to be okay with the mis-meeting of muscle and skin in her head. The two of them kept healthy and drank juice from vegetables they raised. They bought plane tickets and she wore a grey sweatshirt that scooped over her shoulders to show the strap of a red lacy bra.

They built a house with a wide window for the wood rocking chair that curved into itself like the twining branches of a tree.
Curriculum Vitae

Education

Indiana University: Master of Library and Information Science, December 2011

Indiana University: Master of Arts in English, August 2010

Saint Mary's College: Bachelor of Arts, May 2000, Magna cum Laude

Majors: Philosophy and Humanistic Studies

Scholarships and Awards

Robert C. Byrd Scholarship

Presidential Scholarship, Saint Mary's College

Nominated for Truman Scholarship, 1999, Saint Mary's College

Coley Family Scholarship, Saint Mary's College

Academic Honors, Saint Mary's College, 1996-2000

Philosophy Writing Award, 1999, Saint Mary's College

Bauervicz Award for Historical Writing, Saint Mary's College

Listed in "Who's Who among Students in American Universities and Colleges"

Work Experience

Vice President, Greater La Porte Chamber of Commerce, 2009-Present

Office Manager, Belzowski Custom Carpentry, 2000-2009

Associate Faculty, Indiana University South Bend, 2007-2008

Writing, Literature, and Math Tutor, Self-employed, 1996-2005

Circulation Clerk, La Porte County Public Library, 2003-2004

Feature Writer, La Porte Herald Argus, September 2001-2004
Summary of Qualifications

- Supervised four employees, coordinated the information and member services division, including member outreach and support, event planning, resource development and database maintenance for La Porte Chamber of Commerce
- Managed accounts payable and receivable for the Chamber and the La Porte Economic Advancement Foundation
- Reviewed audio materials for Talking Books and Braille Library
- Taught fiscal literacy to first graders through Junior Achievement of La Porte
- Created and maintained website for Belzowski Custom Carpentry
- Wrote and won grants for non-profit with largest award totaling $750,000
- Designed and taught college-level English composition courses
- Created curriculum for people of all ages for tutoring business
- Conducted interviews and wrote features and reviews for La Porte Herald Argus
- Founded and moderated a writing group for the La Porte County Public Library
- Interviewed clients and wrote case narratives for Legal Services

Memberships and Volunteer Activities

American Library Association, member
Kiwanis International, member
Indiana State Library Talking Book and Braille Library, reviewer
Junior Achievement of La Porte County, classroom volunteer
The Writer’s Block at La Porte County Public Library, founder and moderator
Legal Services, Intake Worker, South Bend, Indiana