

Windows

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w i n d o w s



Figure 1

V A L E R I E M A R I E A R V I D S O N

*This book is an invention— an act of the imagination— and should not be mistaken for reality, though the fictions are sourced from many facts. Names, places, and incidents are either products of the author’s imagination or they are used fictitiously.*

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- *Apt (Aforementioned Productions)*: “Massachusetts, 1945”, “Massachusetts, 1935”, “Burn, Float”, and “Fawn.”
- *Anomalous Press*: “Here, There”
- *The Seattle Review*: “All-kinds-of-fur”, “Cold Spell”, “A black one in our house . . .” (text & image), “White or What the Eye Shows”, “What Home Was Like”, “The Eve of St. Agnes”, “Linnea in Furs” and “Agnes in Furs.”

All publications appeared/appear with corresponding photographs or images.

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**Please see End Notes for credits for materials used in the book.**

**The ways to read this book:**

1. As it is presented, electronically.
2. In its hard-copy book-arts form (limited edition).
3. By the oracle of the Runes (using rune stones to determine the order of readings).
4. Online (work-in-progress): <https://sites.google.com/a/uw.edu/phantasmagoria/home>

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	V
<b>POSSESSIONS.....</b>	<b>1</b>
ALL-KINDS-OF-FUR .....	2
COLD SPELL .....	4
<b>STRENGTH, WOMANHOOD.....</b>	<b>16</b>
SIBLINGS.....	17
WHITE OR WHAT THE EYE SHOWS.....	19
STÄMNINGSFULL .....	25
<b>A GATEWAY, A THORN.....</b>	<b>27</b>
WINTER TREE, WINTER HIDING.....	28
TUNNEL .....	35
<b>A MOUTH, A MESSAGE.....</b>	<b>41</b>
LITTLE ANGELS.....	42
<b>A JOURNEY, A REUNION.....</b>	<b>49</b>
VACUUM.....	51
<b>OPENING/CLOSING, A FIRE.....</b>	<b>60</b>
I AM NOT.....	61
WHO IS THE ONE WHO.....	62
RABBIT .....	63
<b>A PARTNERSHIP, A GIFT .....</b>	<b>68</b>
MAGDALENA.....	69
<b>JOY, LIGHT .....</b>	<b>85</b>
THROUGH THE GLASS.....	86
WINDOWS BY CHARLES BAUDELAIRE.....	90
<b>DISRUPTION, HAIL.....</b>	<b>91</b>
HOME BODIES .....	92
<b>CONSTRAINT, NEED, PAIN .....</b>	<b>114</b>
SOMETHING SINKING.....	115
<b>STANDSTILL, ICE.....</b>	<b>117</b>
WHAT HOME WAS LIKE .....	118
<b>A HARVEST, A YEAR.....</b>	<b>125</b>
APRIL 20, 1940 .....	128
BE FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLY .....	130
SELF AND SISTER.....	132
<b>DEFENSE, AVERSION.....</b>	<b>137</b>
WHERE WERE YOU?.....	138
WITCH .....	139
QUICKENING .....	144
<b>AN INITIATION, A SECRET MATTER.....</b>	<b>145</b>
HERE, THERE .....	146

**PROTECTION ..... 151**  
    LINNEA IN FURS ..... 152  
    AGNES IN FURS ..... 153  
    ROWAN TREE ..... 155

**WHOLENESS, THE SUN ..... 156**  
    BURN, FLOAT ..... 157

**THE SKY, THE NORTH STAR ..... 161**  
    THE EVE OF ST. AGNES, JANUARY 21ST ..... 162

**GROWTH, REBIRTH, THE BIRCH TREE ..... 166**  
    MASSACHUSETTS, 1945 ..... 167

**MOVEMENT, PROGRESS ..... 170**  
    IMMIGRATION ..... 171

**THE SELF ..... 174**  
    MY OWN ELEGY: THE NORDIC DEAD-CHILD ..... 176  
    HISTORY OF MY BIRTH-DEATH ..... 176  
    MEDIEVAL CHURCH LAWS CONCERNING INFANTICIDE, SCANDINAVIA ..... 179

**WATER, FLOW, THAT WHICH CONDUCTS ..... 180**  
    LADY OF THE WATER ..... 181  
    A PLACELESS DEAD CHILD BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH ..... 182

**EMERGENCE ..... 183**  
    OLD HOUSE, NEW HOUSE ..... 184

**A SEPARATION, INHERITANCE, HOME ..... 191**  
    HOME, A SEPARATION ..... 192  
    THE OTHER SIDE OF HOME ..... 193

**BREAKTHROUGH, DAY ..... 197**  
    PAINTING THE SUN ..... 198

**THE UNKNOWN, THE EMPTINESS ..... 208**  
    THE ENDING ..... 209  
    MASSACHUSETTS, 1935 ..... 210  
    COLD SPRING ..... 212

**END NOTES AND CREDITS ..... 215**

*List of Figures*

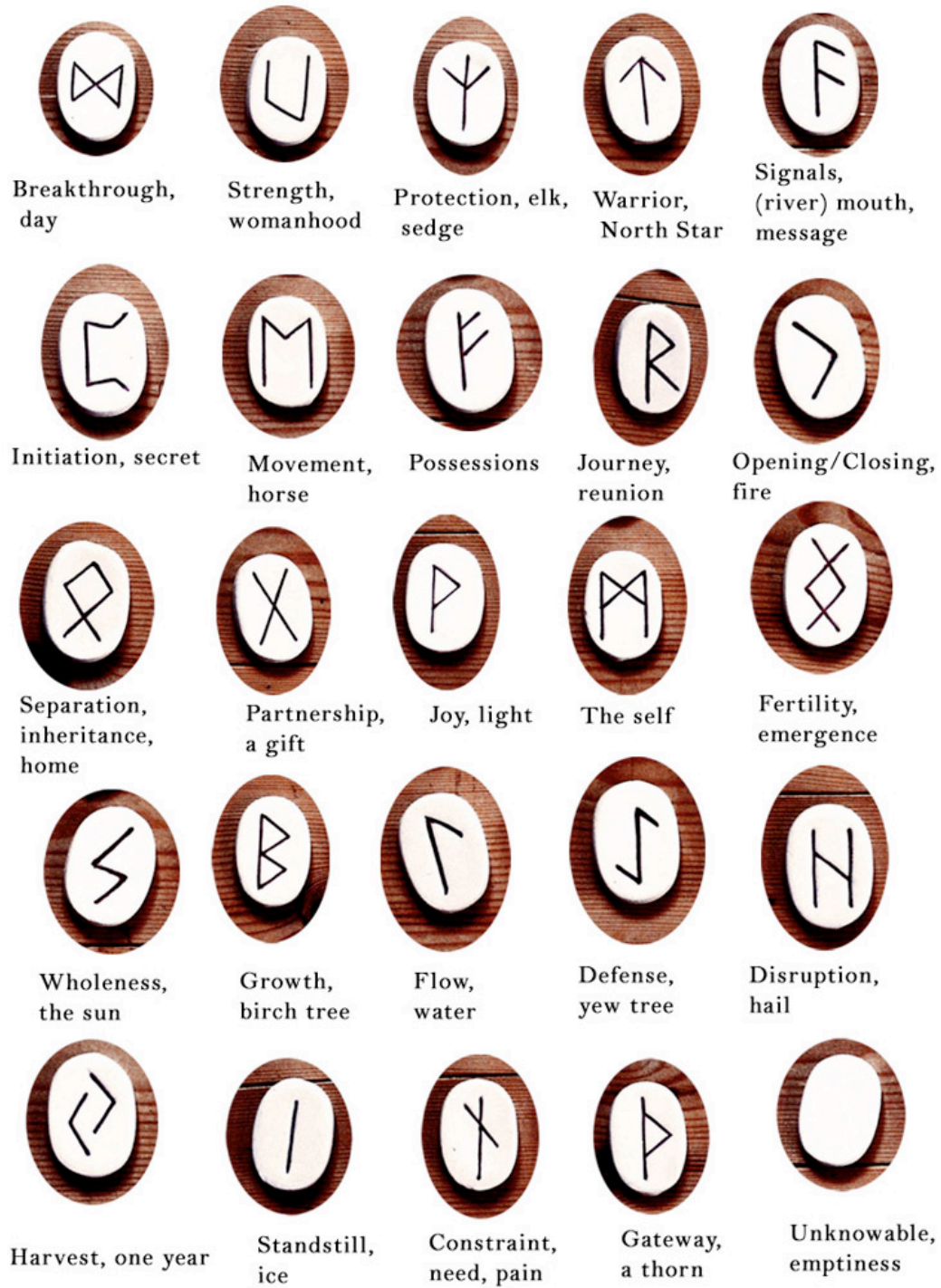
FIGURE 1 .....	I
FIGURE 2 .....	VII
FIGURE 3 .....	2
FIGURE 4 .....	6
FIGURE 5 .....	10
FIGURE 6 .....	15
FIGURE 7 .....	18
FIGURE 8 .....	19
FIGURE 9 .....	20
FIGURE 10.....	22
FIGURE 11.....	24
FIGURE 13.....	28
FIGURE 14.....	30
FIGURE 15.....	33
FIGURE 16.....	34
FIGURE 17.....	45
FIGURE 20.....	50
FIGURE 21.....	58
FIGURE 22.....	59
FIGURE 24 AGNES AND THE WIND .....	62
FIGURE 25.....	67
FIGURE 26.....	75
FIGURE 27 “DEN LILLE HAVFRUE” .....	84
FIGURE 28.....	88
FIGURE 29.....	89
FIGURE 30.....	92
FIGURE 33.....	116
FIGURE 36.....	126
FIGURE 38.....	128
FIGURE 42.....	131
FIGURE 48.....	138
FIGURE 49.....	143
FIGURE 51.....	150
FIGURE 52.....	152
FIGURE 55.....	155
FIGURE 59.....	167
FIGURE 60.....	168
FIGURE 61 AGNES WITH ANTLERS .....	169
FIGURE 62.....	171
FIGURE 63.....	176
FIGURE 66.....	187
FIGURE 68.....	192
FIGURE 69.....	207
FIGURE 71.....	211
FIGURE 75.....	214

## ALTERNATIVE TABLE OF CONTENTS

Traditional order of *Elder Futhark* (Scandinavian) Runic Letters

<i>RUNE</i>	<i>SECTION TITLE</i>
ƿ	Possessions
ᚚ	Strength, Womanhood
᚛	Gateway, A Thorn
᚞	A Mouth, A Message
ᚠ	A Journey, A Reunion
<	Opening/closing, A Fire
×	A Partnership, A Gift
ᚦ	Joy, Light
ᚨ	Disruption, Hail
ᚫ	Constraint, necessity, pain
	Standstill, Ice
ᚭ	A Harvest, A Year
ᚰ	Defense, Aversion
ᚱ	Initiation, A Secret Matter
ᚳ	Protection
ᚷ	Wholeness, The Sun
↑	The Sky, The North star
ᚾ	Growth, Rebirth, The Birch Tree
ᚠ	Movement, Progress
ᚢ	The Self
ᚣ	Flow, Water, That which conducts
ᚥ	Emergence
ᚦ	Separation, Inheritance, Home
ᚨ	Breakthrough, Day
□	Unknown

Figure 2





**POSSESSIONS**

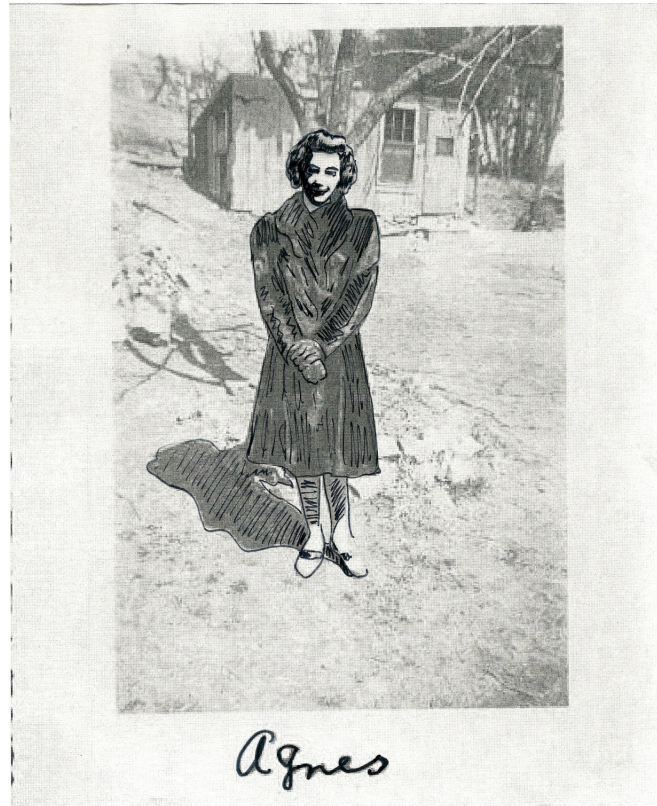
*All-kinds-of-fur*

Figure 3

In my father's house, at the end of the hallway on the second floor, sits a cedar chest as long as a casket. Lift the lid and hear it creak. Place the stick in the corner, so the lid stays up. The trunk will appear to be dark and empty. It smells of wood and bergamot. It smells like the scent of fallen leaves. Reach your hand inside, deeper. You feel rough fur, each individual hair, coarse and stiff. It smells like leather, like sawdust, like salt. The gray hallway light comes in to the chest, but the coat, like a hibernating beast, is dark brown and mysterious. You cannot see the edges. You cannot sense its depth or fullness. Is there a body beneath the skin? You find an edge and feel the soft skin on the underside where the silk lining has torn away. No, it is not a bear. Search the fur. Run your hand over the hairs so that they lie flat under your palm; travel with the grain, the way you pet a cat or a dog. Feel the

bones that might lie beneath it. The muscles that want to move. Your legs shiver. You feel more and more like a small child, a small girl. You feel like you've met a sleeping wolf, that he might warm up and come alive. You feel around. You find the collar. You find a button. There are no ears. There is no tail. There is not a mouth, open and wet. There are no slippery sharp teeth. The fur is cool to the touch. It takes up the full length of the trunk. It would cover you from head to toe like a cape. It would make you invisible.

It might be made of long fox pelts that have been dyed dark brown. It could be made from rabbits. It could be mink or beaver. Sable, possum or muskrat. Many beasts combined to make one.

You climb over the edge of the cedar chest. You pull the coat around you so that one side is beneath you and the other side is on top of you. It smells unexpected, like a man, like an old book. Not musty, not damp like mushrooms. It is like the smell of dry snow. It is sharp in your nose. Dry wind. It is crisp and it is clean. Your elbows and bones bump against the wooden box. You lie down. The silk inside the coat is dry and cool like shaded dirt. You rest your face against the soft collar of the coat. Your brown hair falls around you, loose and shining. Your breath warms the air around you. You are inside the belly of the beast. You are inside your grandmother. They are holding you. You close your eyes and disappear within the fur. No one is coming home for a long time.

The fur belongs to your father's mother. To your father's mother's mother. The fur belongs to you.

*Cold Spell*  
*Massachusetts, 1990*

Aunt Magda has always been the keeper of the family secrets. She keeps the recipes for *kanelbullar* and *pannkakor*; she keeps the old photographs, and all the strange memories that no one else seems to recall. She has all of the little family trinkets, the diaries, the letters, the unopened gifts. She has the locks and the keys to doors that no longer exist.

Like my uncle Kerby, she keeps things that most people throw away. She's a squirrel, a stasher, a hoarder. Maybe she keeps pennies in glass jars that she places around the house and maybe someday she'll count them for something she's saving up for. She has drawers full of blackened knives and thick rusted files, nails and screws in every size. She has bottles of wine that are long past drinkable, turned to vinegar. She keeps the newspapers under couch cushions, seashells in the bathroom that still smell like the sea; buttons that might be sewn back onto their coats.

She's a taker too. But I know the urge to take things that are not yours. Only certain things are take-able. The sort of things you know you deserve, the things that you should have but you don't have. So it's only right that you take them. They become your best-loved things. Nothing compares to the love you have for your stolen goods. They become deeply yours.

Magda would take the un-takeable too. She could take my thoughts right out of my head.

...

I remember: I am nine years old. Sleeping in the attic with my cousins. We are on the floor on a heap of pillows, sleeping bags and blankets. It is Memorial Day. Family has arrived

for the town's parade. We are awake and the morning light is hot. We can hear Aunt Magda downstairs. She climbs the creaking stairs. I look at my cousins' blue eyes and place my finger against my lips to indicate silence. They nod in understanding. My two blond cousin-sisters. We close our eyes and cover our heads with the blankets.

Aunt Magda sighs when she reaches the top of the stairs. She fingers the children's ice skates that hang from the hook next to the window. The blades clack against each other. *Oh, look at these*, she says to herself. *Look AT These. My goodness. These must be mine. Yes, these are Mine. They're mine!* In her voice I can hear memories rushing back to Aunt Magda.

Hidden beneath my blanket, I am terrified that she knows we are awake. That she will stand there all morning, gasping at herself.

Her body weight shifts, the floor creaks. She moves toward us. *Beautiful, beautiful girls*, she says. And then as we stop breathing, afraid she will touch us and claim that we belong to her, too, she leaves. Lightly down the stairs, two gentle feet per step. She has become slow and terrifying in her old age.

I feel terrible for hiding.

I open my eyes to the soft cotton sheet covering my face. Warm yellow light filters through the fabric. I pull the sheet down and look at the scuffed ivory skates hanging on the wall. They have black skid marks around the toes. They are mine. They were mine. *Those were my skates!* I tell my cousins, when they rustle out of their cocoons. This confirms our suspicions about Aunt Magda. She is not to be trusted. She's the kind that walks into a room and *wants* things— she walks into a room and looks for things she can snatch.

But later that day, Aunt Magda caught me alone, sitting on the couch in my father's living room. I was drinking a glass of lemonade and falling into a daydream. As soon as she began talking, I knew I had to listen and could not leave. It was the way she gripped you with her eyes. She never broke her gaze. She told me that her mother— my grandmother, Aggie— saw the face of her dead brother during a séance one day when she was a child living in Finland. This was just before the turn of the century, Magda said, about one hundred years ago. 1899 was an important year; for people believed the world could end, that wicked things might happen if they did not pray.

Nevertheless, all of Aggie's sisters, three in total, and a few neighborhood girls, prepared to evoke the dead one wintry day, Magda said. While huddling in an ice-fishing house atop the frozen lake, called Langosundet, they did a séance in order to see what spirits might come to them. The lake was a mile from the center of their village in Geta: the northernmost part of the Åland archipelago between Sweden and Finland. In the middle of the ice-fishing house, someone had made a hole, perfectly round and perfectly blue (the color of nightfall). Magda's eyes widened: It was like a doorway to another world.



Figure 4

During the séance, my grandmother's sister, Sanna, had licked her finger, lifted it behind Aggie's head and touched the curled rim of Aggie's ear. Aggie hissed with fear and curses, and brought her mittens to her face to cover her eyes.

Aggie's brother was what the Fins called a *pokoiniikka*: a person not yet married into the fellowship of the dead. A séance, Magda explained, allowed the living to bring the dead back to our world. Let me explain where this all comes from, she said. Your ancestors believed in other worlds, and that humans were animals, too, made from the same stuff in the earth and the sky as other creatures.

Magda explained to me: Long ago your fingers were webbed together. Long ago you could swim and breathe through your neck. Long ago you could breathe easily. All of us could, naturally.

Long ago, Aunt Magda said, the sun and the moon were freed from the belly of a fish. Two red eggs spilled forth, rolled along the bottom of the sea and collected light. Meanwhile, the world was made from eggshells. From fragments on the bed of an eagles' nest. The cloudy lining of the placenta fluttering in the sun's new light attached to the inner shell. But what had punctured the egg and eaten the fetus, leaving behind the pieces? Magda said: our world is made from something fragile. Just look at the palms of your hands, at the blue insides of your wrists, if you ever doubt it.

When you die, said Magda, in order to die properly, you must cross the water, and if you can not get across that stream of arctic water that flowed from the glaciers in the far north, and if you froze in the middle, like a rock, you would never get to death's iron gate. This is like what happened to the boy, Aggie's brother.

The gate is on the other side of a terrible waterfall, which turns everything upside down. If you cannot get there, you would remain forever right-side-up, in the world of

humans. But you would be able to see the other side of everything, the living and the dying sides of everything.

You could see all the other invisible worlds embedded in our human world. You could see the dwellers in the land of birds, short large-headed things with feathers on the tops of their hands, fishing for eggs at the feet of people: people who were just in conversation or drinking coffee on their breaks from work. People who did not know these beings were picking at their feet silently. So, when Aggie saw what she saw, she thought she had died. She thought she could see *both sides* of things. But it was the other side reflecting her: like a strange mirror.

This is how it happened. The girls huddled in the ice-fishing house, rocking on their ice-blades in the middle of the day. Their ankles were numb and purple with cold despite the wool socks they wore to warm their feet.

The girls called for the dead and began to sing an old Swedish chant.

*Dig går vår längtan till möte!  
Forngravars kummel i hängbjörkars skygd  
tälja din tusenårs saga.  
Aldrig förgäta vi fädernas bygd  
vart vi i fjärrled än draga  
vart vi i fjärrled än draga.*

As Aggie sang, a face appeared in the window.

*You, we long to meet!  
The ancient graves beneath the birches  
tell us of our past: one thousand years ago.  
We will never forget the land of our Fathers  
No matter where we go  
No matter where we go.*

The face appeared as if it always existed in the window of the ice-fishing house. It was part of the window, and part of the sky outside at the same time. The face was sheer white like the face of a day-lit moon, and it looked engraved, as if on a coin.

The face was as sheer and yet as hard as a fingernail. The ghost face grew out from somewhere hidden. Like this, Magda said, holding my hand and pressing on my fingernail. Like the other half of a fingernail: the other end is tucked neatly beneath the bed of your skin, connected to cartilage, connected to bone, connected to teeth-like knuckles that would one day become beads on a string, rattling songs, in the land of the dead.

The longer Aggie looked at the face, the more it looked like it was her own face, metallic almost, like an image made on a silver-coated plate; like the face on a coin. Aggie stared, and the longer she stared, the more alive the face became. It gained color. Mercury-red veins appeared around its eyes and cheeks. She could see its eyes moving, looking for something.

Stop, someone said. And there wasn't any screaming, there was just wild motion. Aggie pushed open the wooden door of the house and lunged across the ice, her skates slicing and carving the frozen surface, producing scruffs of snow, like trails of white fur curling behind her.

The loosely hinged door banged behind her, knocking things down inside the house. Aggie didn't see the ski poles slap the walls, or the thermometer crack and brake against the back of the door. But her sisters shook and grabbed at the air.

Imagine, Magda said: Tufts of snow fell from the sky. The snowflakes felt like scraps of paper scratching against her as Aggie move swiftly towards the shore. A cold river of wind pushed against her.

Meanwhile, the other sisters watched the thermometer break open on the fish-house floor. Beads of red mercury spiraled towards the center. The red balls rolled like marbles, dropping into the blue-black hole. They shimmered and crackled as they sank into the lake.



Figure 5

Magda went on: Aggie's skates broke through the ice at the edge of the lake. She sank into slushy water, but pulled herself up to the hard black soil of the bank. The bank was covered with patches of snow that had settled in the shady spots like lichen. While sitting on the bank, she untied and then pulled off her skates, but realized too late that she had left her boots in the ice-fishing house. She could not go back. She could not face her sisters because they would not understand why she fled. They would not believe that she was the one chosen to see their brother.

Barefooted but for her socks, which soon became damp and then stiff with cold, she padded through the forest, which had been unfarmed and let go wild for hundreds of years in this part of the island. The blue juniper bushes near the rocky shore grew out of mounds of chalky yellow sand. Deeper into the woods the conifers turned the soil dark and acidic. Atop the soil were layers of brown fir needles and old snow. The needles stuck to her socks and created a soft and slippery natural shoe. Aggie traveled along what she believed was the path that could take her home.

She looked for the trees she knew: That tall golden birch with the quivering yellow leaves. The old dwarf pine that was shaped like an old man's reddish arm. She thought she saw these. She went deeper into the dense green woods. She descended towards the rock caves. She ascended up into the meadows. She began to worry that this was not the same island she at all. She could be on Däno, or Lokö, Hallo, or maybe Sandskår. They all connected in the winter because the ice created natural bridges. She had skated quite far with

the girls, and the ice-house was slightly closer to Däno than it was to home. Had she skated West instead of East? She looked up at the sky for the sun, but the sky was entirely white. A snow would come soon. Among the thousands of islands, she felt she could be anywhere. But she was certainly somewhere, somewhere that had to change, that had to end, that had to lead to somewhere else that was knowable.

She might have been headed towards Eckerö, the Widow's Isle. This was farther than she could travel in a day, but she did know that the water-spirits, *näcken*, would guide you towards the most dangerous places, making you think you knew where you were until it was too late. Sometimes they'd play music to lure one into the water. She had not heard any music, so she knew she was still okay.

Magda continued: Aggie tried to remember all the spirits that could try to trick her. The *lyktgubbar* or Will o' the Wisp, spirits of people who had drowned in the lakes or marshes: they would sometimes lead a lost wanderer to a death similar to their own. But sometimes they could lead a person home. How would you know if a spirit were good or evil? She thought about her brother, and what he had wanted. He showed his face to tell her something. Perhaps his face would return. He had made her run. Perhaps he would guide her somewhere. In the land between life and death, he may have wanted a friend.

The trouble with being lost is that you begin to lose trust of your own mind, said Magda, tapping on her forehead. You begin to look for signs, for signals. The trees you thought you knew turn out to be doubles. The wind begins to blow in the opposite direction. The sun seems to set in the East.

Usually islands are knowable places because they have clear boundaries. They are places that can be mapped and remembered. But no island in the archipelago of Åland is ever

so simple. Åland is a maze of skerries, sandbanks, caves, and muddy paths that morph with the tides in the summer and treacherously connect with the ice in the winter months. In some sections, the Baltic Sea is calm and gentle like wash water; people swim in these safe harbors after heating their bodies in the smoke saunas. On other islands that face out to the open sea, the Baltic lashes fiercely against the jagged red rocks.

In the spring and fall, dark rains or snows drench the island and threaten to sink the land; people stay in their houses as if the buildings were arks that appear to sail on the wind; arks that might capsize if the rains continue. During the thaw, or on a warm winter day, the icy bridges that connect two islands may become impassable. One should never travel alone.

One can easily become disoriented even at the shore. Perhaps the open ice covers a lake, not the sea; or perhaps it just covers a marsh. The trees on the other side look familiar, but so do the trees in the opposite direction.

In the deep woods in the center of each island, glacial drop rocks provide caves for beasts. Golden meadows open up out of nowhere, peppered with wildflowers and medicinal weeds. In the winter, the meadows turn silver and the tall grasses stiffen with frost. Some flowers still manage to live in the mild salt air, clinging to their stems, reaching their tiny blue faces toward the white sun.

And so in this land of changing places, Aggie came to a meadow and sat on the edge of the forest, the threshold of one place and another. She looked out to the silvery grasses and remembered the meadows of summer, and their boldly colored flowers, the reds, yellows, and violets: the Wood Crane's bill, Red Champion, Buttercup and Water Aven. She'd collect them in her basket and bring them home. Where the ground was drier there were Bluebells, Mountain Everlasting, and Red Clover. Maiden Pink would thrive. It was as if the snowy meadow danced in front of her, painting her colorful memories as she saw them in her mind.

In the summertime she could find her way home easily because the rocks and chalky dirt near the house would have endless amounts of Red Clover. But in the winter, the flowers could not signal for home. All the colors of the land seemed to be the same, the white sky, and grey sea, the black trees and the rust-red of the granite rocks.

Sometimes in a winter meadow, Magda explained, you might have seen an old ewe: a sheep whose teeth had been broken off. It may be mangy and tired, rejected from the flock, trying to chew on dead grass in the meadow. It may, at first, even appear to be an old woman, withered and hunched over, wearing a fleece cape. Very often it's hard to tell. Very often there's an old woman and an old ewe in the same meadow.

The old woman, the crone, might have a shelter, but usually she doesn't have the strength or know-how to build one her self, so she may live in an old wolf's den or a lynx cave. She may use the old bones to build a bed. And the old furs to line the floors. Imagine how it would smell, Magda said. Warm and stale like unwashed hair. She'd make fires from fish-skin.

At this point, Aggie knew she was seeing things that were not there, and she needed to find shelter and warmth before it was too late. It wasn't the first time she had become lost on the islands, so she knew how to fix up a lean-to if she needed it. Aggie realized she needed to make a fire, too.

The sky was darkening and the snow was falling harder, Magda said. Aggie's feet did not have any shoes to protect them and the pain of the cold was startling. Her feet stung with the sawing teeth of the cold air. Her toes went into occasional waves of numbness. She slipped her hands into her socks and rubbed her feet with her palms to create heat. With her hands and her feet together like this, and rocking back and forth, she looked up to see a reindeer and a wolf, staring at one another across the expanse of the meadow. They were

diagonal to one another, both frozen in place, eyes locked. The reindeer was a young male. The wolf looked older, grayer. Aggie knew neither of these creatures traveled alone in the winter. There were more in the woods behind her, watching the scene, as she was. Could they see her, too? Was she part of this lock of gazes? She sat still, pulling her limbs into her body, forming herself into a camouflaged rock. She closed her eyes and thought of home.

Suddenly, an arm covered in thick fleece hooked around Aggie's body and dragged her backwards into the forest. Aggie opened her eyes and saw a wrinkled hand, grey and bone-thin, holding a jagged blade made of a long opalescent clamshell. The fleecy arm was strong and smelled of old bread and fish smoke. Or perhaps it was the smell of bones and moldy wool in the darkest parts of a cave. Aggie's small body tensed and shivered as the crone slung the child over her back and lumbered towards her den. Aggie prayed that her brother would find her and protect her. She prayed that this had all been part of his plan. Although she could not be sure if he would send her home to mother or if he would bring her to live with him forever in the world of placeless dead children, the world of locked windows and silver mirrors and cold, cold waterfalls, rushing fast and white as snow.

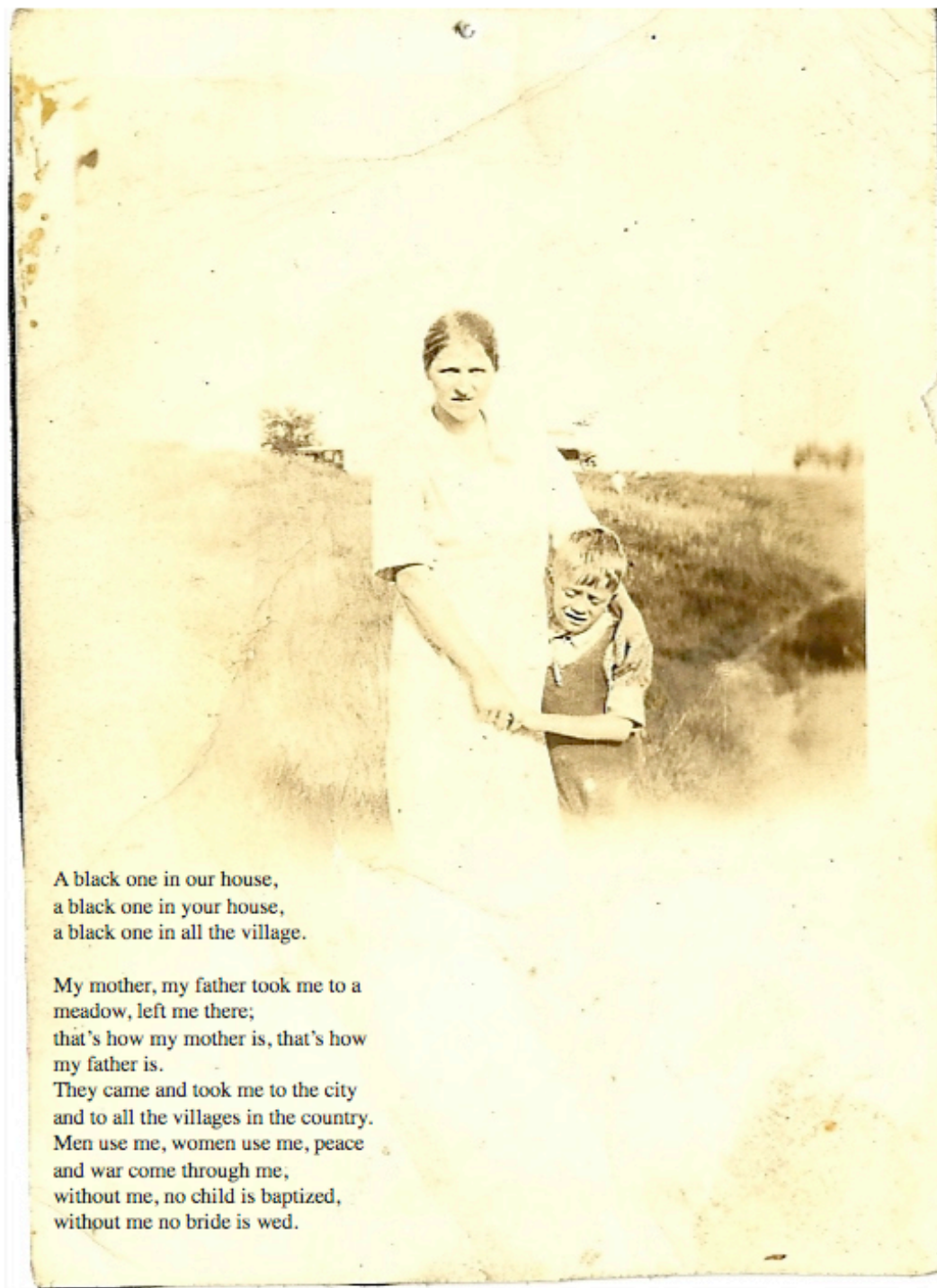


Figure 6



**STRENGTH, WOMANHOOD**

*Siblings*

My grandmother Agnes had a few sisters, but the closest one was Linnea. They were almost like twins, or at least that's how they were treated. On the surface, much about them seemed similar. But of course, the two girls were actually quite different. And like many sibling pairs, they loved each other greatly, but they also held deep resentment towards one another.

Linnea hardly ate her food at mealtime, in her attempt to have as slender a neck and wrists as Agnes. Agnes always brushed her hair an extra dozen times at night, so as to have hair as smooth as Linnea's. When they were older, Linnea worked more hours at the bakery, so as to seem more diligent, and she'd give Agnes money and clothing from time to time out of what appeared to be generosity, but this she felt gave her more power in the relationship. Though Linnea had to wear glasses because she was farsighted, Agnes was jealous that she didn't have the opportunity to wear fashionable eyewear. Shortly after Agnes married, Linnea wed, though Agnes always believed it was because she was already pregnant. Agnes also knew that Linnea drank during both her pregnancies, in secret. She knew because this was an urge she resisted, especially on those evenings when her husband came home from the insurance company, already smelling of rye whiskey, and pouring himself another glass to sip as he smoked his pipe out on the front porch and listened to the jazz hour on the radio. She longed to sit alongside him sipping her own smooth liquid out of a glass, but there was dinner to make, and children to feed, then bathe and put to bed, and then clothes to iron, and sheets to wash, before she could lay her head down, with its curlers pinching her scalp, all held in place with netting. She'd lie down, trying not to wake her husband who had passed out long before with the radio on. She'd turn the volume down slowly, then she'd click it to the off position while holding her breath. Many things, like the drink, were unspoken, invisible, bridging their distance, and also coming between them. Meanwhile, Linnea would be in her house, in

the bathroom, sitting in the empty tub, behind a curtain, eyes wild and awake with insomnia and worries about the next day. The bathtub was pastel pink, like inside of a stomach, she imagined. She counted her breaths in Swedish to help her relax. Her children slept in perfect beds made with blue sheets, tucked in with hospital corners, and pretty yellow pillows beneath their heavy heads. *Ett. Två. Tre. Fyra. Fem. Sex. Sju. Åtta. Nio. Tio.*



Figure 7

*White or What the Eye Shows*



Figure 8

What a white sheet hides: girls' waists and the way their hips just barely touch as they both try to fit behind the sheet.

The white sheet is an unseen x-ray, a blank photograph, an overexposed idea.

An empty image and an image flooded with light look the same. Whiteness reflects everything and shows nothing.

The girls hold onto the white sheet that hides them. The white sheet is hanging from the line with wooden clothespins. They pull down on the clothesline, like children do.

They were playing when someone found them.

A mother somewhere cringes, hoping the line won't snap loose. A mother somewhere who bleached the sheet until it screamed white, a mother who hung the sheet in the hot yellow sun until it smelled dry like daytime.

These girls peek over the sheet, and the pretty one looks away. She bends her knee just so her toe points out. She knows she is pretty. The girl on the left keeps her feet close together. She pinches her eyes.

What a white sheet shows: a mirror. A window painted white. What the viewer desires, what you long for, what you wish you could see. What you want to shatter and destroy.

The white is complete. The white is empty. The completeness is empty.

The mind of a young girl is empty and full of light.



Figure 9

As the girl ages, the aperture of her mind begins to find edges, black spots. The mind finds holes, the plaques and tangles of an old woman's brain. It becomes more difficult to understand the world. The mind opens and closes like the circular eye of a camera, spiraling inward and outward in order to focus on anything.

Later, the girls sit in front of the sheet, crossing their legs or their ankles. They hold their hands in their laps. They sit in black wooden chairs. They tilt their heads down and away from the sun. They work hard to keep themselves intact. To keep themselves together. The pretty girl looks down at her hands, she turns a silver ring around and around on her finger. It is smooth and cold. She thinks about a world made of silver and chrome.

The white sheet is not a blanket. It is not a towel or a tablecloth. It lies too stiffly. The white sheet is a children's drawing drying on the line. The white sheet is a large piece of paper. It's what they want to show; it's what they want to hide. It shows a contour line drawing of the house. It shows the line drawings they made of each other's faces. It shows their signatures that they just learned how to make in cursive script. It shows a painting they made of the clouds. But you can't see what's on the piece of paper. The house is white, their faces are transparent, their signatures are thin, and the clouds are evaporated in the flowering sun.

How much light to let into the eye, to wash out the faces of the children or to wash out the drawing they've made of themselves?

Show us what you made, now show us yourselves.

Years before, or years later, the ladies, the mothers, or the girls grown backwards into time, find a shaded spot among the pine trees and the bushes. For an instant, they become majestic.



Figure 10

The white gown is oversized. A girl inside her mother's old dress. A mother inside a white sheet. The gown attempts to show everything and hide everything. The white hat sits atop the woman like an egg on a nest.

The girl who pinches her eyes is now a woman who knows it's silly for anyone to take a photograph of her. She wants to cluck but doesn't. Her arms hang limply by her sides, her face contorts. She closes her eyes before the flash. She keeps them closed until it's over. No one can see them rolling back and forth.

What she sees behind her eyes: shades of black, red shadows moving, bright white lines etching an image of a girl's face. Yellow bursts stuttering into pattern. Blue trees branching out. She thinks she sees her veins. She thinks she sees the electricity of her brain. She wishes the camera would show this vision from behind her face instead of her face.

When she opens her eyes: the world is a negative. Her stomach turns over.

For an instant, the sky is black. The emptiness is complete.



Figure 11

*Stämningfull*

August 12, 1938  
Norwood, MA

Dear Linnea,

I woke this morning knowing I had given birth. It was knowledge that a child of mine was somewhere in the house. Not with me, but somewhere waiting for me. It was knowledge not in the body or in the mind, but somewhere on the surface of things. It was gnawing at my nerves to feed this waiting somebody. I also felt that it was a girl, a hungry little girl.

I rose from bed, and felt electricity at the ends of my fingers. I felt the new weight of my breasts. I was so happy and light as I walked through the house. I walked like air, so as not to wake Gusta. Yet, I had the knowledge that it was he who had hidden my daughter somewhere in the house. I walked so silently across the wooden floors, almost slipping across them like ice. My feet knew, and my hands knew, and I let them show me where to go. I touched the walls. I knelt on the floor, sweeping my hands across the surfaces of the house like a blind woman. I felt at everything. I looked for her under tables and chairs and around corners. I crawled.

A sudden tightness on my scalp and a hollow emptiness that appeared just beneath my lungs caused me to move quickly. Something in me was telling me she was close by. My heart was going like a throng of spring peepers, all those tiny little mouths, opening and closing and singing for a mate. And then, there, next to the breakfast nook, in the kitchen pantry closet, I saw a laundry basket with a blue cotton blanket over it, and I felt warmth coming from it, and I pulled back the blanket, and there she was, small and breathing.

She had hazel eyes, deep-set and adult in their complexity. The colors moved in washes and waves—the way water changes and crashes gently over a sandbar—from green to blue to brown to white, they were little globes of the sea, rising and settling ever so. They were shimmering in and out. She had little black eyelashes, and a tiny square nose. Her skin was fair and pink-ish. Her hair was dark and composed of thousands of the tiniest black strands. And the singularity of her helpless red mouth.

She had loosened herself from her white swaddling, and was half inside and half outside of it. She lay on a thin amount of fabric separating her soft head from the wicker of the laundry basket. I thought, I must get her out of this thing! I felt, I must bring her to my breast! My body had a gravitational pull, attracting everything around it to come closer. Strands of my hair reached out from my head full of floating static energy.

I touched the basket, and then I touched the blanket, and felt her moving. The universe washed over me. I was hungry to love her. She lay silently and peacefully, watching me like an adult. My mind overflowed until my body was heaving with happiness. It was *stämningfull*, full of ceremony. We created our own atmosphere of celebration. It was all one festive world, she and I.

But then something happened, Linnea, something took me away from her, and she did not even have a name. And she will never have a name. How could I have named her?

I was pulled to do something else, to go somewhere else, to be someone else, and I felt terrified and as if my whole body was a loosened feather, moving farther and farther away from the warmth of the body, and all I wanted was to be back with her.

And then I was in my bed again, next to my sleeping Eldon, and my eyes were opening and my mouth was dry. And I thought, I have to write to Linnea. I have to write her.

Anyway, I feel much better now, though I still have this longing; I'm not sure if it will ever go away. And meanwhile Gusta sleeps away, dappled in the morning light, and I sit here wondering.

All of my love,

Ag



Figure 12



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## **A GATEWAY, A THORN**

*Winter Tree, Winter Hiding*

Figure 13

I am obstructed by snow. Obstructions show me what to look at. Corrections are part of looking. I think I know that you took these photographs. Either that or I made them in my sleep.

That winter tree is winter showing off while hiding itself. Winter hides in the tree. Little father hides and shows off. Like light and dark. Like—

It's like: I wish I could tell you what it's like.

It was not a Christmas tree. It was our neighbor's tree. It belonged to them, the way nice trees belong to people. No one would cut it down. You'd never cut it down. You borrowed it sometimes, for pictures.

I cut the photos from the album. I ran my finger against the soft scalloped edges.

The tree grew against the neighbor's house. Snow painted it like the way snow paints trees. The way I try and paint snow on a canvas tree. I paint in the attic sometimes, (the same attic where you left all your things).

I lived there, too, for a time. One hundred years after you were born. Sixty years after you made the photograph tree. After you took the photograph of the tree. After you gave the photograph the tree.

After you took the tree. The light and the dark of that time of day made a mark on the glass lens that you aimed at the tree. Later the light appeared on the paper, when someone added water. The pointing developed and showed exactly what you took. You, grandfather, father. One of you did one of those things. Father inherited his father's version, his vision of him.

Who took the photograph: a man like a child that wanted to be with that tree. To nest there for a long time. Would you be insulted if I suggested you were like a bird?

Back then men were the takers. And women and trees and little boys were the taken.

A series of children were taken. One by one or all at once. A baby, a brat, a boy, a girl.



Figure 14

This is our family's house and our neighbor's house, side by side. Ours was always brown and shingled. I remember. Always warm with wet radiator heat. Peeling wallpaper over walls of horse-hair plaster. Chipped paint where the carpet met the molding. The threshold. The neighbor's house was tall and white. But it was cold and not good like ours. Your son (my father) was born in the brown-shingled house. You were at sea. It was the second war. You wouldn't remember. You lived there with me, once, but I did not know it, for I was not yet born. You did not know it either, for you were dead at the time.

You took the photo before the kids left for school. Maybe it was February, 1947 Or December 1951. Maybe it was after Aggie left in the morning to go to work at the bakery; to make one hundred lemon buns for Valentine's Day or one hundred coffee rolls for Christmas.

Or you took the photo after school one day. When the kids came home. After Mr. Anderson offered you a delivery job at the bakery. When you were collecting unemployment. Collecting fir leaves for the scent. When you were on welfare, waiting for an offer. At 10 o'clock in the morning, at 4 o'clock at night. You put the baby in the snow. You told the boy to pretend to

throw a snowball. You said, stand right there. In front of the tree. Did you know you are just like that tree? You smiled to show them how to smile.

I took the photos when no one else was around. When I was just loafing. I took the photos from the wooden box under the bed. I cut them out of the album that was inside the box and then I tucked them into my pocket. Your name was penciled across the yellowed back of the tree photograph. Your name, because it was you.

I thought the photos were only a pair, then I found the others. Maybe you never saw the others. Maybe you were never there.

The sky is white with darkness. Bright with terror and calm. Winter isn't like that now.

A rip is at the top of the photo, and beneath it, black.

Was it your hands or mine that turned black trying to start a fire in the wood-stove. The fir needles burn and remain like tiny red irons. I scratch my nose; a black line is drawn across my face. I run back and forth between the flame and the letter. I am not poor. I am not hungry. I am just trying to be like you.

There is that little basement window, and what: An old lamp. A dead light-bulb. What is inside the window behind the boy: the reflection of a mirror, shadows. No one. My boyhood (made of bats, balls, mitts, rackets) was kept down there until we sold it all at the yard sale. I am a girl.

The neighbor's porch is made of stone. The porch has cement columns painted white. The neighbor's barn was brown with a window, painted white. There on the porch is the kind of ceiling that you could walk on. The kind of ceiling that looks like a floor, and if you lie down: if you lie down on the ceiling, you'll be standing.

The infant Jesus is like the infant tree.

You made them read the bible. You made them plant the trees.

See the infant conifer tree, next to little father who sucks his thumb. Shy. Like a—

His coat is red, brown and yellow. His pants are corduroy. His boots are rubber.

His face is like—

See beneath that conifer, that blue spruce, that white pine, that balsam fir, that—

That tree that is like every tree covered with snow that I have ever seen.

See there that warm shadow? Crawl under there, hide under there, and no one will find you.

Father, see that tree, stand by it, and you will see how small you are. How small the tree is.

How big you are.

You came to live here with your wife. A place to work and raise children. She wanted a place that reminded her of home, where she came from. The other place. The other self.

Who knows what home is like now?



Figure 15



Figure 16

*A picture of the line to show the snow. A picture of the tree to show the line of snow.*

***Tunnel***  
*Winter 2011, New England*

I am meditating in a lukewarm room, with my bottom flat against a tightly woven carpet. My back is straight and my shoulders are relaxed. I am breathing with ease. I am breathing naturally. The room is empty. The carpet is clean. I am not wearing any shoes, only soft cotton socks, soft denim pants with room at the hips. A cashmere cardigan I found at Goodwill, with a few missing buttons. I have tucked my left foot neatly on top of my right thigh. The curved palm of my foot faces my belly. I make a heart with my hands around my navel. I steady my elbows in the air.

I stare with eyes half closed towards the bottom of the wall.

The heater kicks on and air sighs through the metal slats in the vents.

I am meditating in an empty room with walls that are egg-shell white. The walls are shiny like a forehead. The shadows in the room shimmer and ripple when the cars moan and huff on the winter road outside, vibrating the building, causing air to move through doors in the outside rooms, causing air to slide through the space under the door of this room. Cool yellow light from under the door quivers in a path that widens along the carpet.

The wisps of my hair suspended in static create a crown of wings silhouetted against the floor. The heater turns off, with a click and a long slow wheeze.

I am meditating in an empty room. There is no furniture. I am alone.

A bright shape spreads across my visual field blocking vision in one eye. There are flashes of light and color waves. Lines and geometric patterns blurring together like a laser show. In this partial loss of sight, in this partial numbness or tingling in the face, other visions can be gained. I concentrate on letting the feelings flow through me. I close my eyes. Is this pain or is this memory? On one side a sense that limbs are distorted in shape or size. I

imagine a ballooning arm. A weak or heavy hand. No words, just images. Difficulty finding appropriate words. Difficulty understanding words. Skin is cold and clammy. Face seems to be swelling. I touch my face. My eyelids are tender, as if I have a bloodshot eye or a black eye. I've read about this: migraines, auras, visions, stroke— then death. I concentrate on my “third eye.” I see a pure white lotus flower, floating on a stream. The stream is moving, but the flower is not. It as if it were staring right back at me. Facial sweating. Water-retention. Floating womb. Floating feet. Yawning and sighing, again and again. I'm listening. But there are only heart-rhythms in my ears.

Suddenly bells are ringing from behind me. I wince and inhale a long deep breath.

The bells repeat. Their digital perfection reminds me that they are from my cell phone. I visualize my knapsack leaning against the hallway wall outside the door. Cluttered with receipts, broken pencils, tampons, books, make-up. Tucked neatly into my wallet, a crisp twenty-dollar bill and some credit cards. My license photo peering through the plastic. A crumpled map and grocery list from two months ago. And my cell phone nestled on that heap like a toy, tolling and humming.

I close my eyes and curse my father. I assume it is my father calling. Nine times out of ten, it's my father calling, or someone else to whom I equally would not like to talk—which is anyone, really. I don't want to tell him about my day. I don't want to talk about his day.

I unhinge my body, and slowly allow my legs to unfold into a wide V. I stretch forward, my fingers crawling along the carpet. I rest my forehead against the carpet. I hear the long beep of a voicemail message coming from my phone. It's as if it has a weight, like a letter dropping into a mailbox.

I breathe in and exhale, flexing the arches of my feet for the smarting pleasure rushing through my calf muscles, and then I curl back up to a seated position. The phone has

stopped making sounds. My feet slip across the carpet and I crawl towards my backpack. I am fishing through my bag for my phone. I hit the green button. The phone tells me: *One Missed Call. One Voicemail.* It beeps again. I dial. I wait. I listen to the digital woman. I wait and listen.

“Maria, this is your uncle Kerby. I hope everything is okay up there. Just wanted to call and let you know what’s going on around here. There’s some bad news. Not sure if you heard yet, but your dad is in the hospital again. I mean, he’s not hurt. The cops picked him up. But they found him out on the train tracks outside the station near route 128. At some crazy hour in the morning. Anyway, you know, he was on those new meds, which apparently weren’t doing what they were supposed to, so— you probably know more about it than I do. Ha. Well, I went to bring him some clean clothes, and his toothbrush, and his comb, stuff like that, when I visited him. Anyway, give me a call. Otherwise, I’ll see you soon.”

The phone was hot against my ear. I pulled it away and pressed the red button. I’d have to drive down to Boston. A four-hour ride from Vergennes. I contemplated whether I should drive through the night or wake up early the next morning. I called my sister. She was already there, by his side, she said. She said I could come the next day, but I decided to leave that night. I wanted to talk to the doctors. I wanted to know what they thought about it all.

If you saw my father’s closet, all the clothes in it were organized by color, starched and ironed, on wooden hangers, and separated by exactly two inches so that each item of clothing did not touch. Everything in his house had to have its own perfect clean place. The only thing that seemed wrong in his house was the large black water stain that remained on the Persian rug in his TV room. The stain flowered out across the middle of the rug. The source seemed to be from beneath the brown leather couch. He wouldn’t buy a new rug

because he was saving all his money for something special he wouldn't name. He had started pulling the money out of the bank, in large sums, once a month. There was one window in the TV room. The window had sheer white curtains that moved like ladies' slips in the breeze and streamed the sun across the wooden floor in dapples of lace and shadow.

I stood up, lightheaded and standing on pin-needles, with both my feet asleep. Not enough blood in my head or my feet. Black patches float across my vision again, slipping in from my periphery. Some of them are spiders. Some of them take the shape of a human face, or a door, a window. I close my eyes and black becomes yellow, becomes red, becomes blue.

So, all of this: that train black as a suit, coming forward so fast it seemed to be pulling you in. That black storm roaring in the early green haze of morning air. And dad standing there in his button down shirt and tie, shirt tucked into his pants, pants belted, and wearing his penny loafers, but this time barefoot – for the pleasure of the silky leather against his naked foot. But dad was seeing his body in the train, seeing his own hands operating the machine, and waiting and sighing and panting and muttering.

This confirmed our common brain. Not just for dad and me. Others in the family had a death wish: a hunger to consume and be consumed all at once. Our wish was to belong, to return to a place of quiescence, a quiet place. We were a family of misanthropes, hermits, and eccentrics. Lucky, or unlucky, if one child in each generation grew up to marry, have children, continue the line, pass on the traits.

The only problem was, when this wish gained perfect clarity, I knew that belonging somewhere could only mean being singularly alone with God, ecstatically alone with myself in the after-world. Naked before God, who was only a child, impotent and impossibly empty, with the hands of a grown man. So pure as to be untouchable, except that he was so close, he

could touch you from within, storm you from within, implode clouds inside your ears, your lungs, your knees.

Standing still on those tracks, the tips of your fingers grew claws of silver light. Your body grew light like hair. Was it you or was it God that had perfect control? You were finally free to be nothing.

I was sure that Dad had wanted to be killed, which is different than wishing that you were dead. Wanting to be dead— that’s an entirely different thing than standing in front of a train.

Wanting to die, I keep showing up in this room. I keep arriving for death. I keep looking in mirrors. I keep meditating. I keep almost-dying.

It’s very passive, this almost-dying. Like water going down a drain. It just goes through the tunnels. Then the water is absorbed by the ground. The water is absorbed by the air. The water falls down. I come to die for 40 minutes and then return to living.

I am kneeling on the ground. I am shutting off my phone, holding the red button down with my thumb and counting to eight.

I am sitting on the cold porcelain toilet seat in the empty bathroom in the empty brick building. I am staring at my pink knees. I am trying to relax. I tell my foot to stop shaking. I am counting to eight. I am counting again in letters: A B C D E F G H . . . Just counting until I can let go.

Dad had been counting, too. But the overnight train from New York didn’t come on time. It was late, and the cops were quick to arrive after they received a phone call from a

concerned onlooker who happened to be staring sleeplessly out his bedroom window at the train tracks that neighbored his house.



**A MOUTH, A MESSAGE**

*Little Angels*  
*Finland, 1920s-30s*

When she was about thirteen, sometimes Agnes would wake in the middle of the night, with her cousin Seraphina standing at the foot of her bed. On the worst of these nights, Seraphina's head was wrapped in white linen, part bandage, part head-scarf. Her oversized dressing gown, translucent in the gray moonlight was draped over her fragile body. On her nightmare-walk, Seraphina came to Agnes' bed where she prayed for Agnes, out of piety, and out of pity. She sang the words from an old Swedish lullaby:

*With one stone at your head, good girl,  
And another at your feet,  
Your good deeds and your bad, good girl,  
Will both together meet.*

From there at the end of the bed, she watched and she prayed. Sounds issued forth from her lips: first a purring whirring from within—a hum, a moan—and lips whispering sibilants and pitter-patters— nonsense, like the frantic sound of little bird feet on a windowsill.

Ringling and rubbing her hands as if to clean them, she held her neck like a rope, rigid and tall. She gripped the end of the bed, her nails digging into the wooden frame. Her body would tense, and then she'd cry, saying: *Stop!*

And Agnes knew that in Seraphina's mind's eye she could see Agnes' dreams. Perhaps Agnes was dreaming of making love, becoming one with a young man. Seraphina would wake herself up in her fury of trying to wake Agnes, trying to cure Agnes of her sins.

Seraphina was the one to watch, Agnes thought. She was the witch in an entrancing dance with death. She was the one who woke up ecstatic with sweat and love all over her— love that only a demon masked as God could feed her in her sleep.

Awake, Seraphina walked back, closing doors behind her, back to her own bedroom, where she slept soundlessly until dawn. Agnes curled up in the windowsill like a cat, looking out to the sea wondering what new-something might come ashore. She knew that being a

pretty girl, sometimes you had to be a little wicked, to protect herself from trolls and men, and worst of all, other women, who'd drown you if they could.

In autumn before the first frost, the sailors and soldiers came in and out of the islands. They traveled through the rivers of their archipelago called Åland, pronounced *ohland*, meaning *land of water* in Swedish, or also called *Ahvenanmaa*, meaning *perch-land* in Finnish. The sailors stopped in Agnes' town, to peruse, purchase or sometimes pillage. But most of all, to meet girls.

They came hungry. They were large-handed and their manners were rough when they were drunk. But that's what Agnes and her sisters Linny and Sadie liked about them. They were entertaining and they had money to give away.

She remembered the Russians: with their broad foreheads and flat noses, and their eyes that followed you around the room. The Finns: with their beautiful lips and dark brows—they were intelligent barbarians, her mother had said. They spoke soothingly with their long words and with slow vowels. Every word was a lullaby.

And the Swedes—moralistic and wide-nosed, expecting you to serve them. They had high cheekbones and gray-blue eyes that were silent and still. But they had the most money, it was true.

The Danes and the Germans and the Norwegians were the same, civilized and haughty—tall, tan faced, and almost brown in the summer, and always blond-haired (even on their legs). They were the most polite, but only on the surface.

The Åland fishermen were hardly sailors. They stayed in the harbors and bays, making local catches, never going farther than their mother or wife could see. They were skinny and stunted—arms longer than they should be—torsos and legs too short. Most of

them were pug-nosed or round-headed, unless they were your brother or your son, and then they were 'handsome' and 'tall' and should have been sailors.

All of them came into the main city of Mariehamn for the same stuff. The sweet tobacco—dry, red-brown as earth, and sticky—if it was good. They came for the herring and perch. The fishmonger's wife (she was oily and fat) always saved the best catch—the biggest catch—if she knew her Finns were coming into the harbor that evening for some food and games.

The men would tear through their dinners—potatoes and fish and rutabaga—and throw vegetables at each other until the pubmaster's daughter climbed up onto the table and presented a perfect miniature orange from under her skirt. She'd position it between her teeth and pass it into the mouth of the best-behaved man, with her hands clasped behind her back. Once he had it, he'd find another girl, and then she'd find another man, until the sweet juices stung the corners of their lips, until it dropped on the floor, or until a man grabbed a woman's breasts or licked her nose and caused a riot. Bits of the orange would be passed around and dropped fizzing into glasses of beer. The pub became a saloon, a place for mischief and money-spending.

A fish-eating contest was put on by the fishmonger's wife. If they could, the men would try to eat their fish as fast as they could while preserving the skin in one whole piece. She'd toss a whole half-foot perch at them, and they'd slice it down the middle, rip out the skeleton, and then lick and slurp and break apart the pink-white tender flesh between their sharp teeth, sucking the meat off the skin until it there was nothing but a flap of skin left. The first man finished would place the gold-red skin atop his head like a hat and swim around the room collecting coins in his palms.

The Kållström girls, including Agnes, would watch, sitting on stools, their pink knees showing. They drank their mulled wine, their beer, or their mead. And often a man would take a Kållström girl's hand and give her a dance or give her a drink or something more. They were handsome, and the girls didn't mind the attention.



Figure 17

The rest of the autumn for the girls was spent mowing the fields, making grain, milking the cows and goats, churning butter, packing crates of fish to ship out. When the men came into town, they shared what they knew about real cities, what they knew about life there, and the fine food they ate there. They knew about pleasure and music and had many trinkets and gifts and songs to share.



Figure 18

Sitting on the barstools at the pub, the girls would watch and they waited for the men's eyes to catch their eyes. They'd buy the girls drinks and hand them bits of candy, sometimes putting the candy right into the girl's mouth. Then the men would pat the girls' braided hair and put their broad hands across the girls' slender backs—across the length of their waists as they danced. And they danced in the pub, or out in the streets, or out on the fields by the bonfires. The men would slip foreign coins into the girls' bosoms and then say they'd let the girls keep the money if they could have a touch.

The girls kept a lot of coins that way—letting those sailor hands travel along their bodies. Agnes was always shocked at the roughness of the calluses on their palms, scratching and tickling parts of her that every other day of the year were unspeakable, unknown parts of herself.

Poor Seraphina— in the mornings she'd sit pale-faced and bitter in front of her porridge and coffee, passing judgment with every glance she gave the girls. Agnes' elder sister Linny, and her cousin Sadie, were rosy-cheeked and yawning, rubbing their eyes and foreheads between sips of coffee. Cousin Seraphina, she should have had a church named after her. No one was saintlier on the whole set of islands.

Agnes kept Seraphina's nightmares a secret, and Seraphina kept Agnes' lovemaking a secret. But inside of both of them, these memories lay hidden like old flowers dried and pressed inside a diary. Secretly (secreted away inside their secrets), each girl loved the other girl's strange and wicked ways, and she would miss it when it stopped. They kept the secret love of sweat tucked away. And the wrongness intoxicated them both with fury and righteousness and religion and self-hatred.

Seraphina would gaze upon her pale face in the tiny mirror of her empty jewelry box. She would gaze upon her naked red wrist, her naked neck, her naked face, and imagine that Agnes' dreams were hers. Agnes would finger the jewelry the men would give her, warming the cold gold between her fingers, wearing them all, the bracelets and pins and locket.

At meals, Linnea, Sadie, and Agnes would hold hands beneath the table. They would laugh and laugh—pushing the delicious morning feast into their young red mouths—pushing their joyful exhaustion and careless appetite against the little angel's corpse-like eyes as she watched the other girls eat. Their tribal joy pushed against her from across the table, as if to say, *Don't you see, you're already dead, Seraphina: you're the little-dead-one.*

Seraphina knew what she was and what she wasn't. And the pretty girls knew they had to be a little wicked.

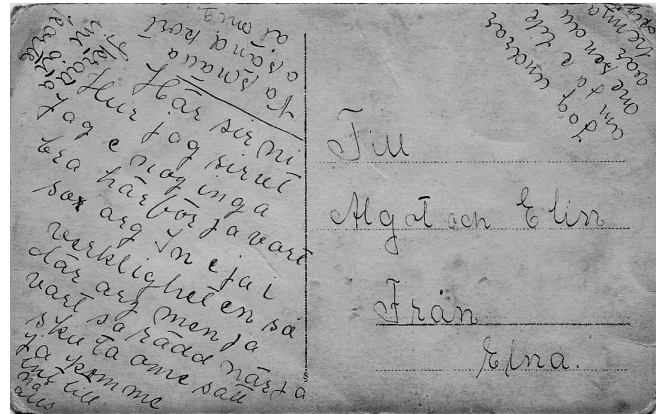


Figure 19

*Here see how I look. I don't look very good. I seem to be angry for some reason but actually I was just so afraid this card wouldn't reach you. I wonder if it will. Send me a card if you get this. Don't laugh at my handwriting. I know how bad it all is.*



**A JOURNEY, A REUNION**



A man goes over a copper  
mountain  
through a snowy castle,  
gives joy in the evening,  
sorrow in the morning.

A man goes into the forest,  
his nose scrapes the sky.

A man goes into the forest,  
with a hollow pine stick on his  
shoulder.

We have one,  
You have one,  
The whole village has one.



Figure 20

*Vacuum*  
*Present*

When your father dies, a tree takes root, and its many branches rise into the air. These branches are the things you must do and the people you must call, visit, or inform: old friends, brothers and sisters, neighbors. This all happens very quickly. You become the tree and the tree cannot move; it can only reach. You can watch your little yellow leaves fall onto the wet windshields of empty cars parked below, and you can face your fingers upwards towards the sun, hoping to melt some of the ice off your skin.

Here is what you remember: You are sitting on his old carpet, while the vacuum cleaner is still running. You become the room. The room becomes a giant motor and the noise feels as if it's emerging from you.

A calm logical mind takes over and you know you must call your mother, she must be the first to know, she will know what to do.

Moments later, before you can even reach the phone, it descends like a cool fog, just over your head, and you inhale sharply. He is dead.

Then it falls down like warm water over your head and then you are falling through it and there is no bottom until your eyes and mouth break open. You can breathe under water. He is dead.

And instead of calling your mother, you want to call your first love. The boy whose corduroy jacket and Beatles albums and Converse sneakers you remember as if they were yours. You want to press your face against his warm chest and cry. He once sat here in this very spot with you, listening to a mix tape you made. He once walked with you to the

cemetery where you both could be alone. Where you could climb trees. Where you found the exoskeletons of molting cicadas on the skin of beech trees. You haven't spoken with him in years.

You crawl to the phone, and press the off button on the vacuum along the way. The room now is quiet in a familiar way. You decide not to call your first love. You call your mother.

Your parents do not live together, and they haven't for years. But still you dial your mother's number. "Mom. Dad is dead. He's on the front porch," you say and your mother gasps in disbelief, "What?" but then she says, "Okay, I'm coming right away," and the phone is left off the hook and you can hear the dial tone. You hang up to stop the moaning sound.

You call your husband, who is not your first love, but he is the one you love now. He says, "Sweetie, oh, sweetie! I'll be right there. What do you need? Tell me what you need." But you don't know. You laugh and barely get out the words, "A hot toddy, or something to drink." That might dissolve the feelings a bit. "Anything," He replies. You have been married almost one year.

Some time passes and your foot falls asleep. Later, you don't see your father's face as your husband carries you past the body. You see your father's sheepskin slippers. His argyle socks and the bits of melting snow from your mother's footprints on the floor. Your mother is kneeling before his body; she's on the phone with someone, the police, a doctor, a relative or friend. It is as if you are the one entering limbo, as your husband puts you in the car and buckles the seatbelt. You feel the seatbelt in your hands; it is smooth, almost silky. Red lights and purple sounds are flashing from somewhere.

Your husband drives along the smooth quiet road that is dusted with white snow. You drive through the silent center of town. You say, "McLeary's" as you notice the pub you

always go to, its window warm and red. You say the name of the place as if you were a child; you point your finger at the glass window of the car. You can read. You can speak. It surprises you. Now and then the windshield wiper smoothes wet snow away. You float in and out of sleep. You wonder where your sister is. Maybe she is holding your father's hand. Maybe she is responding to questions that she doesn't know the answers to.

You and your husband drive until it is dark out and it is colder, and you arrive at an old white house with Christmas lights and little candles in all the windows. A green pine wreath with a red velvet ribbon hangs on the front door. You walk in, and you walk through a dining room, where all the guests are dressed in white, and the table is covered with glasses of water and wine. You know everyone but they do not notice you. They are talking. They are laughing. Some of them are smoking cigarettes. It is home and it is not home. Your mother is there with her dark hair, before it turned gray, and her red dress. She is drinking something red out of a glass. She is alone in the corner, slouching towards an invisible man.

The glasses on the table are sparkling and there is a fire in the fireplace. It is warm inside. The children's cheeks are rosy. They run through the kitchen and bang through the swinging doors. You want to run with them and follow them into the cold library room, where they hide behind the furniture. The leather chairs and the musty bookshelves and the mahogany desk. The room with the cigars and the scotch and the wool plaid throw. Degrees framed on the walls. Letter openers, and pens, and other things that look like knives, strewn on the desk. The room looks over the lake. You think you might see the silhouettes of winter swans through the watery window. Is it winter or summer now? The geese are flying across the sun. The cat-tails are bending in the wind. The snakes have come out of their hibernation.

You are escorted upstairs by a warm hand. Now you are handless, footless, floating now through the wood paneled halls. It is an old house. You come to a door, and you float in

and your husband takes off your coat, and sits you down, and takes off your boots, and he gives you a mug of something hot as you sit on a familiar bed. You feel the flannel beneath your hand.

Your husband asks, "Do you want to take a hot bath?" No. Not yet. Maybe later. "Do you want to watch TV?" No, God no. Not yet.

Suddenly, I want to call Sam. I tell my husband this. I tell him why. He understands. I hope he isn't hurt. My husband leaves the room; he says he will return. I find Sam's number in my phone. I tell him what happened.

"What do you need, I'll do anything I can, you know," Sam says over the phone.

"It's okay," I say.

He says, "I'm sorry."

"I don't know why I called you." I laugh. "I thought there'd be something different you could do. But there's nothing you can do—really." I am angry. It surprises me.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry about this." He pauses and then says, "Maybe coffee?" I forget he doesn't drink alcohol.

"No, no. I'm fine. But someday soon we can do that. We should do that." It's what we always say.

"Whenever you're ready. Let me know." He hangs up. I remember the time he told me that he loved me. The last time he told me that he loved me, not the first. We were in bed with all of our clothes on. It was 3 in the morning. I was twenty-two. "I love you. You know that, right?" He said. That was five years ago.

And before that I can see Sam and me at my dad's house, sitting on my twin bed under the bright, uncovered lights, and all the windows are open, and the sound of the crickets rises

in warm waves outside. My dad is downstairs, watching the news, drinking a beer. Sam is sixteen but he reminds me of my dad. The way he combs his hair to the side, and wears button down shirts and khaki pants. I used to put on his thick glasses and feel my way around the room blindly, like a zombie.

He takes photos of me with his manual camera, never letting in enough light, saying he likes the shadows. Some people are photogenic, he says. Some people look best captured and frozen still; and some people are more beautiful when seen moving, when experienced in motion. One flickering facial expression after another, the fluttering of life. Not the beauty of death, though he searched for it anyway, as I turned beneath his lenses.

I hear Sam's voice in my head. *I know*, Sam says. *When can I see you*, he says? I say, *I don't know. Sometime*. And I ask him, *Can you take me to my old house? Can you take me to the country?* Just somewhere else that feels safe. All the old places we used to go. He tells me, *yes*. In my mind he just says, *yes*, over and over. In my mind he is the only one that loves me. In my mind he will always love me. He is married now, to a chef. They have a dog. Is it possible to miss someone for as long as you live? To never act upon your deepest wish? I knew to make it real would mean to destroy its beauty. It was better left as an idea. A memory:

Our hands are touching the beech tree, feeling over the carved names, hearts, and dates. I suggest that we carve ours in the tree. It is getting dark: colors are turning from blue to gray. Our hands find cicadas—the bodies, and the skins, as they crawl out from beneath their old selves and nest up in the leaves to sing to us. Thousands, millions, of voices. Then I see Sam with his Swiss army knife, testing the blade on his thumb. And he carves a crooked heart, and our initials. Then we are climbing the tree, tree dust all over our hands, and we sit in the tree and I feel exceptionally delicate against him, like his is the living animal, and I am just the skin.

My husband returns with towels, a bathrobe, a bottle of wine. He lights a candle for the scent. He rubs my feet. I can't stand the smell of the candle and I tell him to blow it out. I probably won't get coffee with Sam. He will probably just show up one day at my doorstep and that will be fine. I can picture him in a parka, out of breath and stamping his feet on the stairs in front of my dad's house. Rubbing his hands together and smiling with his crooked teeth. *Hi!* is all he would say. And I would cover my face and moan in disbelief. It was never a good time, when he showed up, but it was always the right time.

I slip into a hot bath and rest my head against the cold porcelain tub. I tell my husband about a memory of my father making me breakfast. I can smell the eggs and the sausage. I breathe in the steamy air. My husband pours me a glass of red wine. I go to sip it, but then I interrupt myself and urgent thoughts paralyze me. I remember my other family members.

"Where is my mother?" My hair is half wet. I am shivering now, sitting up in the tub.

"She's okay," He says, "She's with your uncle, and your sister." He says, "You'll see them soon."

I suddenly have the urge to get dressed and find my family—to help them. My feet feel both icy and on fire as I pull them out of the hot water, lift them and press them against the cool slippery tiles on the shower wall. "I should go," I say.

My husband is anxious now, and he furrows his brows defensively, "I brought you here to rest, to collect yourself first before you do anything else. You need a good night's sleep. It's been a long day."

"But there are things I need to do, aren't there? I mean, I shouldn't just be sitting here."

“Your mother is taking care of it. She doesn’t want you to have to do anything.”

“But what if I want to?” I pull myself out of the bath and wrap myself in a bathrobe. I towel dry my hair and put my clothes on. My back is still wet. I am wandering around, looking for my things. My jacket, my keys, my wallet.

*Where's my dad? You ask. Where is his body? You don't remember it being moved and the thought of him alone and dead on the ground on the front porch in the dark house, makes you want to cry. It's okay, your husband says, pulling you close to him and rubbing your arms, which are still wet and soaking your t-shirt. And you think to yourself: What has dad done to himself? What has he done to us? You think to yourself, They took him away somewhere. Is it somewhere warm? Is it safe?*

*How will they bury him? How will they dig through the snow, and the frozen ground?*

*How will we plant flowers in the snow.*

Later, you are holding one hand and your sister is holding the other. His hands are stiff and swollen and white. Your mother is elsewhere, taking care of paperwork, answering phone calls, answering questions. He is on a metal table where he will be prepared for the autopsy, for the examination that will reveal the truth. He is covered in a white plastic sheet.

*What did he want? Your sister says. Did he write it in his will? He was adamant about keeping an updated will. He had changed his mind several times, but the last thing he said about being dead was that he wanted to feel like he was at home. And that he should be placed with the rest of the family, in the town cemetery, in the same town where he had been born.*

You are holding his hand, and you feel like Sam is watching you from the doorway, but he is not, and then you see yourself as if through a photographic lens, as if through a microscope, a telescope, a doctor's magnifying glass. You are the one they should cut open and explore for the answers. You inflate and deflate in this view of the self, and then you notice how similar your father's hand is to your own hand, though his body is warped and almost foreign. It is like holding your own hand, and how strange that feels. And you say, *Look, look at our hands*. And you raise your hand up and you lift your father's blue hand and you show them both to your sister, who does not quite see what you see, but she smiles with half of her mouth and her eyelids twitch as she begins to cry. She stares into your face for a long time, almost too long, like she is trying to get you to say something, but you can't. You don't want to talk about it. And you won't cry about it either.



Figure 21



Figure 22

And so there you are, sifting through your father's belongings. The boxes of his mother's recipes. The old baseball cards and newspaper clippings. A photo of someone in military uniform now and again. A photo of your house and your father, standing there, and he's just a boy.



**OPENING/CLOSING, A FIRE**

*I am not*

I am not like the *run* in your stocking  
nor like the *cut* of your tooth;  
Not like the *slapping* of water, nor the *whipping* of wind.

I have opened so many doors inside this house; I no longer know how to get out.



Figure 23

*Who is the one who*

Who is the great one who swallows both waters and woods?  
White in color but wights nowise— (a living creature by no means at all),  
The wind he fears, and seeks to consume the sun.

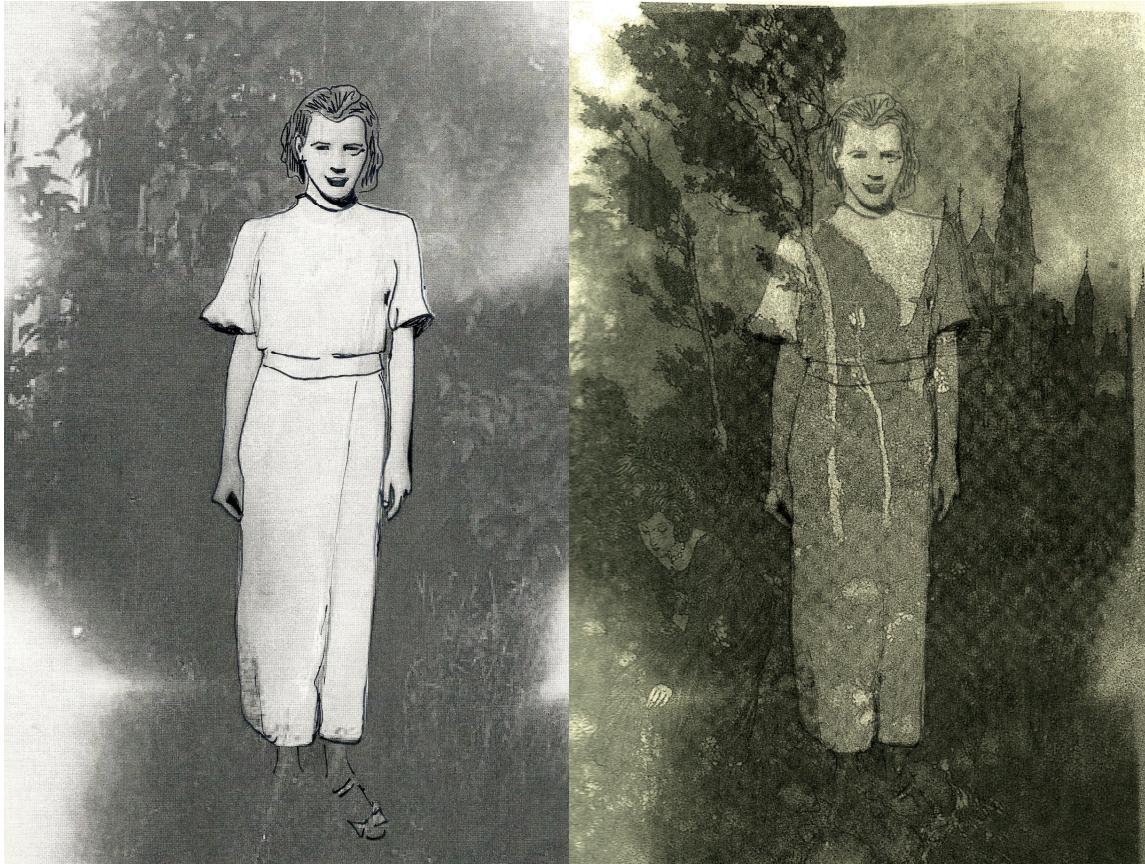


Figure 24 Agnes and the wind

***Rabbit***  
*Åland Islands, Finland, 1906*

Aggie always liked being on the outside looking in. At bedtime, she'd look to the blue window to see herself looking back. She'd see all the children in one bed. Closing her eyes, she'd feel herself sitting on the windowsill, cheek against the cold glass, falling asleep in the snow-filled flower box. She would dream that she was an orphan, and that it was always winter. Or she would dream she was one of the twelve sister princesses who danced their shoes to pieces. Because a story like that could explain so much.

Aggie and her two sisters all slept with their long honey hair tying them together in braids. They slept this way until Aggie's 12<sup>th</sup> birthday. It was so they would "not run away too easily," her mother would say. A kiss, a prayer, and a pat on the thick plait of their hair put them to bed every night.

Midnight trips to the bathroom were somewhat like a dance: in and out, sliding around corners, hugging and holding hands and bending their necks awkwardly, like swans or ballerinas. Sometimes Aggie dreamed of lighting the ends of their hair on fire, so they'd burn free like little knitted wheat-dolls. The room would glow red and all the dolls would leap free from their shelves and cascade out the window, floating by their dress-skirts in the white air. Someday she'd ask to have it cut short, to be bobbed, in the modern fashion. It would represent that she'd made it through childhood.

They had a brother too. She called him Kanin, which means Rabbit, but his given name was Kalle, meaning Free Man. Rabbit had very long teeth and his eyes were small. He was like a child that would never grow old. Because he was a boy, he had his own bed, but he'd come sleep in their nest at night, curling against Aggie.

He promised to marry her and take care of her, though she said it was impossible. But sometimes she pretended that they could marry in order to please him. If she said no, he would cry and rub his eyes until they were red and puffy. He would pull at his hair and try to rip it out. When he did this, his eyes grew wide with spite as he stared at Aggie. He'd moan and grit his teeth. If she said yes, he would stop pulling and curl up against her and coo, pretending to be a cat.

Rabbit's fair skin was dappled with yellow-brown freckles, like the back of a fawn. She once tried to count the spots on Rabbit's arms, but always lost count at one hundred or whenever Rabbit grew restless under her grip. "They are truly ugly," she would say, kissing his skin. He would always smile a frightened smile.

After finding the girls' bed at night, the boy, growing into his adolescence, woke each morning like a mechanical clock, unaware of his own arousal. But she knew what Rabbit's body wanted, though he did not know himself. She always already knew, because she woke before him. She would stare at him and the feeling of their bodies so close together nauseated her. Then she'd see the yellow dust collected in the damp corners of his eyes, and the white froth of morning coagulated along the ridge of his lips.

Seeing him this way, and so close to her own body, she'd have the urge to rush to the wash-basin to rinse any of him off of her. But like his freckles, they could not be separated. Her sisters locked her in place next to Rabbit. So she would have to close her eyes and settle into her braided bed. She would settle in against Rabbit, against all the warm bodies and pretend he was a prince, clean and beautiful. Sometimes she'd try to hold her breath until he left.

When their mother, who they called Oma-ma, came in to unbraid them all, they'd untangle quietly and slowly so as not to hurt their heads. Aggie would run to the bathroom

to scrub her teeth with baking soda and gargle with hot water, as soon as she was free. She'd splash her face until her hair was wet. Oma didn't mind that Rabbit slept with them, since refusing him would only end in screaming and biting. Once when she tried to remove him, his hands dug into Aggie's stomach, and as Oma pulled, he dragged his nails across Aggie's belly, drawing blood. His gaze was fierce and animal and pointed at their mother, though Aggie was the victim. In his mind the pain Aggie felt could also be felt by Oma. Their mother did not see this act, nor feel it, for her eyes were locked in fear from his gaze and she grew cold. He was only a baby then, two years old, and yet full of want and fury. When Oma held him, he would suck on her pale blond hair until it became stained with carrot juice or whatever colors of food remained in his mouth from that day. Where he suckled, her fine hair twisted and dreaded, and the ends coarsened into stiff wicks. Oma let him, as it helped him fall asleep.

When Rabbit was older, sometimes in the middle of the night, when Aggie could not move, he'd wake and push his soft nose against her neck, smiling in his half-sleep. Sometimes he'd drag his nose down her chest and onto her stomach. He would breathe a long slow breath as he pulled his face across her pelvis and thighs, and rest his face on her belly as if it were a pillow. And sometimes he'd rest there all night on the cushion of her womb, and most of the time she let him, because it did not feel so bad. Aggie had learned from Oma that sometimes it was easier to just give in.

This, her only affection towards Rabbit, was kept silent. She wanted to give more to Rabbit, because she pitied him. He was born before he was ready, and he would still be very small and odd even as a man.

Aggie always remembered Rabbit's strange kind of love. One year their Christmas tree that was eaten by flames after Rabbit had spilt a candle at its base—on purpose. He had clapped and sang and danced side to side as all the women came rushing in to the smoky

room, hollering and pouring their mulled wine all over the tree, all over the wrapped presents and velvet curtains that were curling into black ribbons from the flames. Aggie knew that for Rabbit burning the tree was a kind of sacrifice, but that if he could, he would have had her head among the flames. As the eldest daughter, Aggie had worn the white dress of St. Lucia, and the crown of candles lit with real fire every Christmas. She always saw Rabbit eye her with envy. As he watched the tree burn, Aggie could see him mouthing a song, the song she had always sung for St. Lucia day, and out of pity for him, she thought perhaps her head should be among the flames. But for Rabbit, she would be smiling happily as she died.

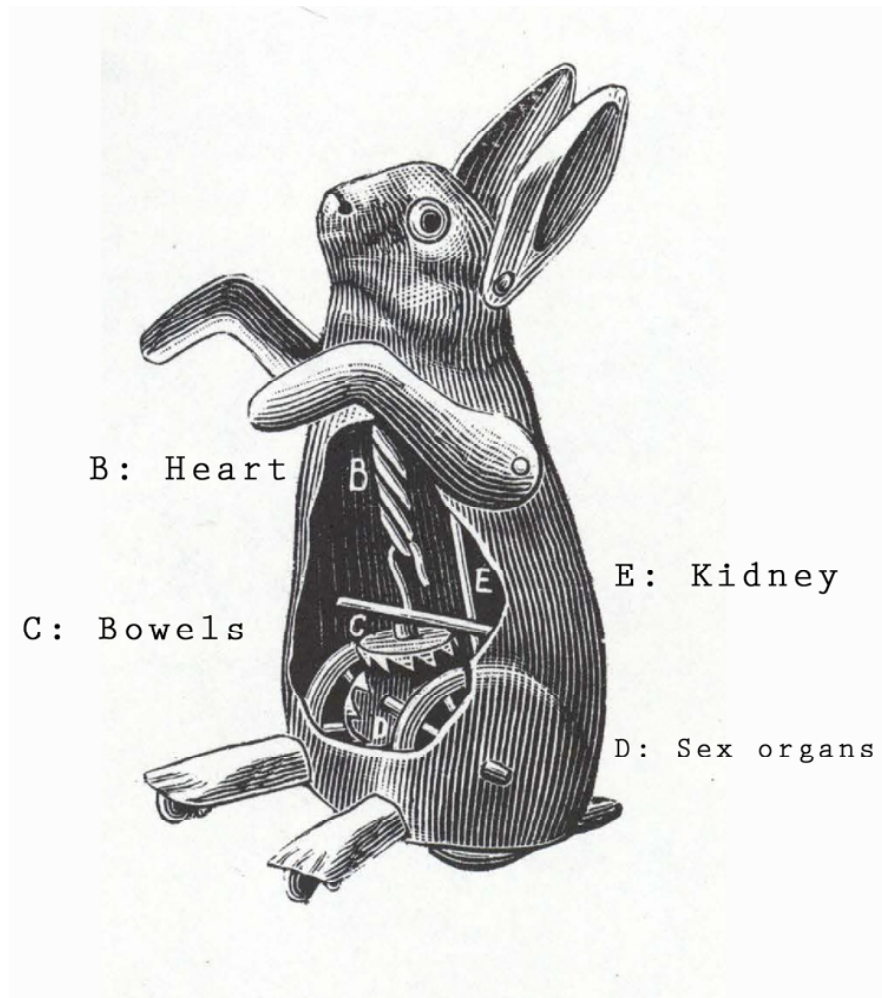


Figure 25



**A PARTNERSHIP, A GIFT**

*Magdalena*  
*Massachusetts, 1960s*

*"They said to him, "Why do you love her more than all of us?" The Saviour answered and said to them, "Why do I not love you like her?" – the Gospel of Philip*

Magda learned to paint after graduating from divinity school in 1962. She began by transforming her love for the Lord into a love for pigments, linseed oil, and turpentine. She could compose and she could erase and only she and God would know about all the ghosts beneath the final skin of paint.

She also fell in love with flowers, and she painted them as faces, as portraits. It was something like the grace of the mother Mary that she saw in all flowers: all that sorrow and strength in one mortal body. The turgid stem, an upright neck curving towards light; the prayerful head with its plain, bare face bowing with a mind weighted with labor and grief but airy with life and expectation.

A flower's face had a wide white forehead of clarity, of equilibrant giving and receiving. Magda knew the fragility of wanting only a window with light and a drink of water and nothing more. She felt all this in the feel of the clean vase, like a cold glass bell, and the smooth white petals of a calla lily wrapping around its soft yellow stamen of pollen. In a flower there was a sense of waiting, of growing desire. There was the presence of patience. All of this she would consider in the seven days of a flower cut from the soil and living on life support. Finally she'd bury the week-old flowers in the compost on Sunday, even if they still looked fresh. New flowers were purchased on Monday, and new paintings started then, as well. The paintings would be put away as well, turned upside down, becoming mere stacks of canvas or walls of wood, unless there was one good enough to display. There was something

she envied about the life of a flower; perfect, precious, but ephemeral and disposable. The paintings seemed to weigh her down, though. The canvases could be washed and painted over but the images could never be forgotten.

Her sister, Selma, tried to introduce Magda to the single men she knew, in an effort to get them both paired off before their 30<sup>th</sup> birthdays. Once it was clear that Magda did not want to pursue becoming a nun, Selma began pairing up Magda with various men in earnest. Most important of all was William, an old friend that Selma had met while working in Cambridge at Vega's Swedish Bakery. He was a painter who had studied history at Harvard. Selma never mentioned the reasons she hadn't dated him herself.

It was a February evening, 1964, on Beacon Hill in Boston when Magda first met the man. The two girls got out of their cab and walked up the curved steps of the old brownstone apartment building on Boylston Street. The door to the building was ornate and decorated with a Sphinx-faced knocker and brass knob.

Magda wondered about where this man got his money, living in a place like this. But Selma was friends with all kinds. After the guard let them into the marble-floored entryway, they could hear every click of their heels until their feet met the velvet carpet on the stairs. Softly they walked up to the third floor, trailing their fingers along the glossy mahogany banister, to apartment 303. She felt at the banister beneath her hand as they glided up the winding stairs. The banister was thick and snake-like, covered with layers of lacquer.

They arrived at the door of his flat, which felt suddenly masculine and intimidating to Magda because of its largeness. It was taller and wider than your usual door, but the doorknob was crystal like a piece of a chandelier. Depending on the angle of one's eyes, a

rainbow could be seen projected on the door as the light refracted through the doorknob. Selma knocked and within moments the heavy door opened, just as Magda found herself moving her hand towards the shimmering spectrum of colors.

There he was, a tall man in the tall doorway, rubbing his hands together with fervor, with a perfect grin on his face. He pulled his hands several times across the top of his head, mussing his light brown hair, which he wore longer than most men of the time. Then he extended his arms towards Selma for a spirited hug. They almost broke into a jig as he held her hand out in the gesture of a dance. Magda smiled at the floor, and stepped backwards out of the way, not knowing what else to do. He overwhelmed the space of the entryway with the way he threw his body around so freely and enthusiastically. She found herself backed up against the hallway wall, listening to Selma's shrieking laughter, as William made eye contact with Magda over Selma's shoulder. Slowly, he released Selma's body and walked over to Magda, taking both of her hands and squeezing them, with his mouth agape. He muttered something and Magda heard the word *gorgeous*. Her eyes closed and her face flushed with heat. She bowed her head. Something about the word was vulgar, the sound of *gorge*, and the hiss at the end. William's lips were full like her own and they seemed almost feminine, a rosy pink, Magda noticed. His nose was slightly larger than it should have been, but this added a certain power to his face. She could see the slender muscles of his forearms, and the pleasing shape of his hands. Magda could not look at him for more than a moment, her attraction to him felt like an enormous dog pulling at its leash.

They all entered after a few chuckles and Selma and Magda removed their coats and scarves while taking in the apartment. Magda felt warm and tied her long blond hair back behind her neck with a ribbon she knew would fall out by the end of the night.

There were long windows that overlooked a promenade of trees whose trunks and branches were wrapped in glittering white lights. The living room wall was lined with bookcases, facing a kitchen that could be accessed through a separate doorway. Through the doorway, Magda could see it had an old gas stove, and a glossy black-and-white checkered floor. The whole apartment space was open and airy like an old ballet studio. Magda could almost see herself dancing there—it called for her to twirl in a chiffon skirt while looking out at the wintry trees, as if she were performing in Swan Lake.

The living room hosted odd chairs here and there that seemed more like sculptures than pieces of furniture. Magda stared at one chair, which had table legs for arms and the moss-green leather seat of an old car balancing on four pink rubber balls.

William moved around as if he were the only man in the world. He slid a little across the floor in his socks, singing to himself a song Magda did not know. He extended his long slender hand towards her hand.

“William,” he said with urgency, as if making up for lost time. A sort of apology shone in his eyes. Magda laughed and shook his hand. He was looking all over her face, eyes darting rapidly around from her eyes to her nose to her lips and to her hair. His mouth opened into a smile, which showed a set of straight white teeth. Magda thought of her own snagged teeth. His eyes were golden-brown. His open mouth seemed to be asking her something.

“I’m Selma’s sister,” she said. She blushed. She was more embarrassed than charmed as his hand grasped hers and then he brought it up to his face and rubbed her hand along his cheek, grazing the top of it across his lips.

“Selma’s sister? I know!” He said. He pulled her along the floor to show her around. Then he leaned into her shoulder and whispered in her ear, “Is that what you want me to call you? Tell me what you want me to call you.”

“Magda.” She said, looking down at the ground, in surprise at how close he was to her body. She wondered what Selma had told him about her. Did he know, for instance, that she had been to divinity school and that she was religious? Selma shadowed them, following along slowly so as not to interrupt, but wanting to participate or facilitate in their courtship somehow as well.

William let go of Magda’s hand and did a twirl in the room, his long muscular arms extending into the room like a dancer’s, as if to say, “Isn’t it great?” The ends of his fingertips curled out like a flower.

“What a lovely place—” Magda responded to his gesture. She began to slowly look around at the details. William had placed tiny objects along the shelves in front of the books. Strange and exotic ornaments: a Chinese-looking jewelry box, spiky cacti with little red flowers, beeswax candles and jars of multicolored tinctures, and a brass icon of some peaceful-looking Eastern god, sitting cross-legged with his eyes closed and his hands in prayer. On one shelf he had placed tiny wooden furniture, including a miniature painting of the Mona Lisa in a gold frame. Magda moved towards this and picked it up for a closer look. It was an actual canvas. It was actually painted and it fit in the palm of her hand. She put it back and looked above her, where another shelf displayed a blue and white porcelain tea set, a long narrow African mask and a stack of Tarot cards. Magda almost forgot that William was behind her, watching her as she absorbed her surroundings.

Magda heard Selma begin to walk through the apartment towards the kitchen. She turned around. Selma leaned against the kitchen doorway, and began to chew and suck on a segment of her long brown hair that she had placed across her tongue and into her mouth. Selma’s body hunched forward in poor posture. She seemed to be hiding herself away from

them now, and trying to assess the situation. Magda wondered how Selma was feeling about all of this.

Magda turned back to the bookshelves at the sound of William's voice.

"You'll love this," William said, placing something soft and round into her hand. She began to sweat behind her ears, as she felt his fingers touch her hand, and she looked up at him before seeing what it was. "It's from my collection," he said and pointed to a line of shells and rocks.

She opened her clammy hand and felt at a white and furry mound. It looked like a small stone covered in short rabbit fur. She turned it over; the underside was molasses brown, concave and smooth like a seashell. It had the slender mouth of a cowry shell; that narrow fissured lined with tiny pointed teeth that always seemed to her as fragile as glass. She turned the object around again, feeling at the dorsal side of the mound with her thumb, as if she were petting it.

"What is it?" she said with some disappointment. A kind of fear filled her mouth. "Is it real; I mean, or is it man-made?" she asked, this time looking at his smiling mouth. Was it some kind of mineral or botanical formation or was it the exoskeleton of something long dead? He looked like he wanted to explode with joy as she stared at him with her face wound into a confused pinch.

"Selma, she wants to know if it's real!" William shouted towards the kitchen.

Selma shouted back from the kitchen, without showing herself, "Uh oh. Well, should I make some tea?"

"Yes, please," Magda said, feeling suddenly parch and claustrophobic, and then she returned to the mystery in her hand. She wondered why William had given her this thing. It made her feel uncomfortable—the shocking white fur coming from something that seemed

inanimate; it was both animal and not; and the way he placed it in her hand before she had a chance to even accept it, as if it were a secret message or love note.

“Maybe you’ll want to keep it,” William whispered with light in his eyes. She placed it on the shelf next to her and smiled flirtatiously, replying, “Maybe.” She wondered if he might be trying some kind of witchcraft on her. She made the sign of the cross on her palm, three times, and said a small prayer to her mother Agnes.



Figure 26

After putting the water on the stove for the tea, Selma crossed the room slowly and took Magda’s hand in hers. She guided Magda toward the kitchen. Magda looked at Selma’s hair, undone and hanging over her shoulders so loosely now. Selma whispered into Magda’s ear: “It’s real.”

“What is it then?” Magda asked while drawing herself closer to her sister, so that their arms touched and they held each other’s hands. Magda wanted Selma to be her ally, to help her feel safe in this odd place.

Selma looked behind her, over her sister’s shoulders. She caught William’s eye. They looked at each other and boiled over like pots, bubbling with laughter, with Magda beneath Selma, shaking under the movements of Selma’s laughing body. Selma snorted, “He did the same thing to me! And now you—an after all these years he still thinks it’s a riot.” Selma’s

voice was foreign; the same sort of voice she used when she came home on holiday from school. It dipped low and murmured at times, and then would shoot upwards into squeals, varying its pitch in ways that seemed ridiculous—straight out of the cinema. It was sexy and free and obnoxious. William and Selma seemed to know something that Magda did not know as they howled and sighed. Selma let go of Magda as the teakettle began to whistle. Selma had somehow managed to so easily extract herself from the social situation and then so easily re-insert her power. William was still in the other room, as Selma and Magda pulled themselves deeper into the kitchen.

“So, you two must have spent a lot of time together, when you were both in Cambridge,” Magda whispered, following closely behind her sister near the stove.

“Sure we did,” Selma responded, unfeelingly.

“I mean— you really *never* dated?” Magda whispered.

“Of course not. No, no, no.” Selma bit her lip and tucked her hair behind her ears as she scanned the kitchen for a potholder, appearing uninterested in Magda’s questions and avoiding eye contact as she continued to shake her head involuntarily. Magda wanted to ask why, but it did not seem like Selma wanted to talk about it as she moved about, flitting like a bird.

Selma spoke to Magda but stared at the kettle on the stove. “That thing he gave you. It’s called *Okenite*. It’s a crystal from India. It grows like a small animal but it’s not,” Selma said without emotion. Magda felt a little cheated, as if the world had tricked her. She had wanted to find out the truth herself, but all the same she was glad she knew now and William couldn’t act like he knew so much more than her.

They sat around his coffee table, which was made of raw wood. There was a knot in the middle, with a small blackish hole that was shaped like a woman’s navel. The hole was

wide enough for a finger or a spoon handle, and it went all the way through to the other side. Over tea, William told obligatory stories about “life after Harvard” and the dramas surrounding getting his paintings into galleries. He paused when the tea turned cold at the bottom of their cups. He looked down at Magda, whose head was on the table, ear and cheek against the wood. A shivering frown appeared on his face. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t say so much about myself. What about you.”

Selma replied for Magda, “It’s fine. We love your stories.” Selma was picking at her fingernails when she said this. Magda awoke from her resting spot and bit her lip. She wanted to tell him that she painted too. But she also wanted to tell him that she didn’t know much about paintings or art except for those depicting Jesus or Mary. She did love those, especially the medieval ones that featured gold-gilded halos, or the wooden triptychs that opened on brass-hinged doors and told a story.

William looked past Selma to a closed door across the room, next to the kitchen. The door was painted white. It had a blue crystal doorknob and a pretty black keyhole. Magda watched his eyes settle there.

“What’s in there?” She asked quietly.

“Ha!” He said, lighting up again. “I shouldn’t show you. It’s more about me, in a way—” he rambled on, sort of talking to himself.

“Let’s take a look,” Selma said, already up from her seat and walking over to the door. Did she know what was in there? She seemed tired, emptied out—bored almost. William hurried towards the door. He chased after Selma for a bit and grabbed her hips, sliding her across the floor so he could get to the door first. Selma put up her hands in mock surrender, giving him a smirk. Then Magda saw Selma’s posture change. Selma frowned and stared at the wall across from her. Her face went blank in some kind of deep thought. Magda felt a

tingling in her head and felt lightheaded. She got up and moved towards Selma, and touched her on the shoulder. Selma twitched and looked Magda in the eyes blankly. Magda tried to show both apology and curiosity in her eyes, the way sisters try to communicate sometimes. But Selma seemed in another world.

“It’s locked, of course,” William said matter-of-factly as he searched his pockets for the key. Selma crossed her arms and cleared her throat, regaining a sense of the present moment.

“Got to keep the skeletons behind closed doors, you see,” Selma joked.

“Right,” Magda said, as she stood against the opposite wall. William was trying a key vigorously in the lock. William muttered, “I know I have the key on this ring. It’s one of these.”

“So many keys, so many doors to open . . .” Selma swayed slowly back into the kitchen. She clanked around, pulling wine glasses down from the cabinet. Then she became distracted and she started turning the gas on and off on the stove, letting the spark ignite, and then watching the flame die slowly like a deflating balloon. Magda watched her from the hallway. The room began to fill with the smell of sleep and rotting cabbage.

“Selma, you’ll kill us all,” Magda said quietly.

Selma frowned and said, “Hardly,” and then moved to the wine rack to pick something to drink. “How’s a *cab* sound, or maybe a *shiraz*,” she shouted to William. Magda entered the kitchen and turned off the stove. Selma started to hum a song and then she laughed at herself. The bottles amused her, and she read each name carefully aloud.

“Grab us something meaty,” William said. Then he shouted, “Ah-ha! I got it!” The door to his secret room swung open into blackness. Magda re-entered the hallway and her gaze followed William into the room.

“It’s not some kind of animal, is it?” asked Magda. She was watching him carefully. She imagined some kind of exotic pet. Or who knew if there might be some kind of sacrificial chamber or shrine for a demon in there. Her trust of William was feeling precarious, and yet she was intrigued by his intelligence and energy. He disappeared into the room. Magda followed, leaving Selma in the kitchen with the wine and clinking glasses.

Inside, Magda searched the wall for a light switch, finding one of those industrial ones that require you to push them up like a lever using a bit of force.

“No, no animals; nothing really *living* at all.” His voice came from deep inside the room before the light buzzed on. Magda had almost forgotten her own question as she scanned the room beneath a single low-watt light bulb. Several large paintings were stacked like files and leaning against the walls. Her eyes adjusted to the yellow light and she could see that the canvases all seemed to depict similar subjects. Some kind of milky form emerged from the deeply layered hues of black-green and kelp brown. As Magda squinted her eyes, fleshy creams and pinks emerged from the treacle. Stretches of delicate skin and wet fat floated over slim and slippery bones.

These were women’s bodies dithering in oily shadows, illuminated from within, aglow under murky water or in beds of sphagnum moss. Somehow awake and also asleep, pink-lipped and jellied, with translucent wings, or fins. Purple veins, eyelids, ears and gills. She could see their ribs stretched against the inside of their skin. Inside their mouths it was black as the sea like the navel-knot in the redwood table; the mouth made you want to put your finger in, as if it were a baby needing to teeth. Their stomachs were concave, frozen in a final gasp. Their legs were slender like jaws, forming long blurry feet at the end. The pelvic bones protruded as if morphing or warping under strain, with gentle messy curls of hair at the apex of their thighs. Shimmering, deep purple anemones. Surrounding the bodies, were floating

plants, shimmering curtains, animal mouths and electric eyes, pink areolas, and ballerina fingers, all hovering as if in the eaves of a darkened stage.

Magda brought herself closer to one canvas. It was as tall as a person and long like a bed: 5-feet by-7 feet, at least. She looked at the glassy eyeballs and gray teeth of a painted woman. She stared at the pink fingernails and blue toes.

Selma came in with two glasses of wine. “Do you want one, Magda?”

She opened her mouth slowly and rose to see Selma’s pale face. Some of Selma’s makeup was smudged around her eyes. Magda took the glass hesitantly, as if unsure about whether the wine might be poisoned. Her eyes flickered around the room at the paintings as her glass shook slightly in her hand. She slipped her palm around the bowl of the glass.

Next, Selma handed William a glass. “Here’s something meaty,” she said. He had emerged from behind a canvas, and moved to stand near Magda. He was trying to watch her eyes, to find what she was looking at. Magda did not notice him staring at her.

Selma moved backwards and stood in the doorway, blocking the light from the hallway outside the room. Her body cast a long winding shadow, and her silhouette seemed serpentine as she perched there. She slithered her back against the doorjamb, as if to scratch an itch or to warm herself. Magda circled the wine in her glass and watched its slimy legs descend along the inside. She felt that she was on her own now, as it seemed that something about William made Selma become a different person. Men always did seem to do that to her, Magda noted to herself; hopeful that Selma would return to normal on their way home.

These paintings were not what she expected, though she should have known he’d have some of his art in the apartment somewhere. They were both realistic *and* abstract and the nudity made her feel awkward, especially with William’s overwhelming male presence in the room.

“So, what are you thinking?” William said in a low voice.

“He wants to know if you approve.” Selma added with a smile. The oil paintings were velvety and lush—unabashedly sensual and yet also somber in a way Magda had never seen before. The feelings swirled together inside of her and blood rose to her neck and face. She felt as if her lips were either swelling or draining. Her hands felt tingly. She thought of the painting of Jesus, nude on the tomb. She thought of her mother, Agnes.

She stepped back, bumping into William. One could almost here Selma stop swirling her wine when Magda’s and William’s bodies touched. One could almost hear Selma cock her head sideways at Magda’s body, assessing with pleasure, as William’s hand rose up gently. William’s left hand was now on Magda’s bare shoulder where her blouse had shifted. He held her up, so she would not fall. His other hand was placed on her waist, as if pulling her in for a moment. Magda twitched in fear, but the wish to collapse into him was overwhelming.

She wanted to relax like the women in the paintings, she wanted to free fall and rest at his white feet, and placing her hair around his ankles, holding onto his warm legs as if they were trees. She sucked in her breath as her mind clamped down against these thoughts. She felt her neck and shoulder turn cold, naked under his hand. She could stay frozen until he moved again. And then he let go and receded into the room. She turned around to face him.

“The paintings are a part of a series.”

Magda pointed to a canvas. “What is this one called?”

“*You.*”

Selma snorted, and then seemed to make a gulping sound. Magda turned around hard, staring at Selma. “What do you mean?”

“*You,*” William repeated. He was being genuine.

“Not *me*,” Magda paused and she crossed her arms across her chest, now feeling very vulnerable.

“*You*, you fool. That’s the title!” Selma said impatiently.

William continued, “That’s the thing, Magda. It’s every woman I’ve ever loved. Over and over.” He swirled his dark purple wine and blushed, looking down at his glass.

Selma smiled and wiped something from her chin.

“From your past,” Magda said softly.

“And the future,” William added.

Magda looked down at her glass and felt her mouth twitching. She smelled the alcohol rising, and felt she could fall away for a moment to be alone with the pure scent. She drank the wine, and through the glass watched Selma approach her. Magda swallowed hard as Selma drew close to her, until her face was against Magda’s face, and her mouth opened and breathed against Magda’s ear. Magda stood still.

“He likes you,” Selma said. Magda swallowed, tightening her throat and turning now to look at William’s form, the way his shoulders sloped, and the way his knee bent, with his foot pointed out, as he looked into his thoughts. His right hand touched his thigh and he brought his left hand up to massage his own neck, and he appeared like a Roman statue, muscular stone that seemed to be made of liquid.

Magda thought of the soft white stone that William had placed in her hand. Selma had given away the secret. It wasn’t anything magical, just a strange wonder of nature. Maybe she would take it home. She felt now that she wanted to accept his gift. Selma disappeared into the darkness, and William stood still in front of a painting, staring at it. Magda wanted to lie back upon a black velvet sky of paint, her body nude and pink like a flower bulb or a

nest of stars, the soft ends of his paintbrush streaming across her skin as she allowed herself to shimmer between the dimensions of the canvas, stretched like a cot, and the round cradle of his gaze. But this desire was not sexual so much as it was a desire for death and for peace. For William to lead her to it.

As she closed her eyes and held the wine with both hands to her mouth, Magda thought: this man does not love women. This man loves death. The women in the paintings had open eyes and open mouths, but they were not alive. Their hair hung loosely as if unattached. Their arms rose in the space like seaweed. They were already drowned.

Again, Magda thought of her mother: Agnes' body, and how white it looked when it was found in the water, stripped of its clothes, save the long coils of hair-like kelp, rust-red, and her shoes, black leather, still buckled to her feet.

A door closed and suddenly Williams hands were intertwined with Magda's hands, and the room was dark, and the door was still closed, with the sound of music on the outside, and her head spun with the sound of him so close to her and his face against her face, and his lips softly upon hers. She felt as if she had been chosen, that perhaps she would be the most beloved one of all. But did she want this man to love her. It would mean he would only love her as something that could die in his paintings. And she thought, *I am already so close to death. You won't even have to drown me.* She felt his hand place something new inside of hers, something smooth and hollow and hard. All that was possible in her was to receive. She looked down, and lifted her hand up to the light from the crack in the door and saw an egg, painted light red. It almost seemed to glow and emit its own light. She ran her thumb over it and placed it inside her blouse, in the center of her brassiere near her heart. Suddenly she floated like a lotus, like an empty egg on salt water, and she lifted her neck up to him, as he

spoke gently into her ear, through her hair, *My Magdalena, my tower, my egg, my flower*. And she thought of kissing his hand, of kissing the inside of his wrists, and saying the word *you*, which felt so close to love, and she thought of kissing his naked ankles and the tops of his feet. And then all she could think of was her own body, nude in dark water, unfurling like a shawl of prayers, and all she wanted but could not say was *paint me, paint me*.

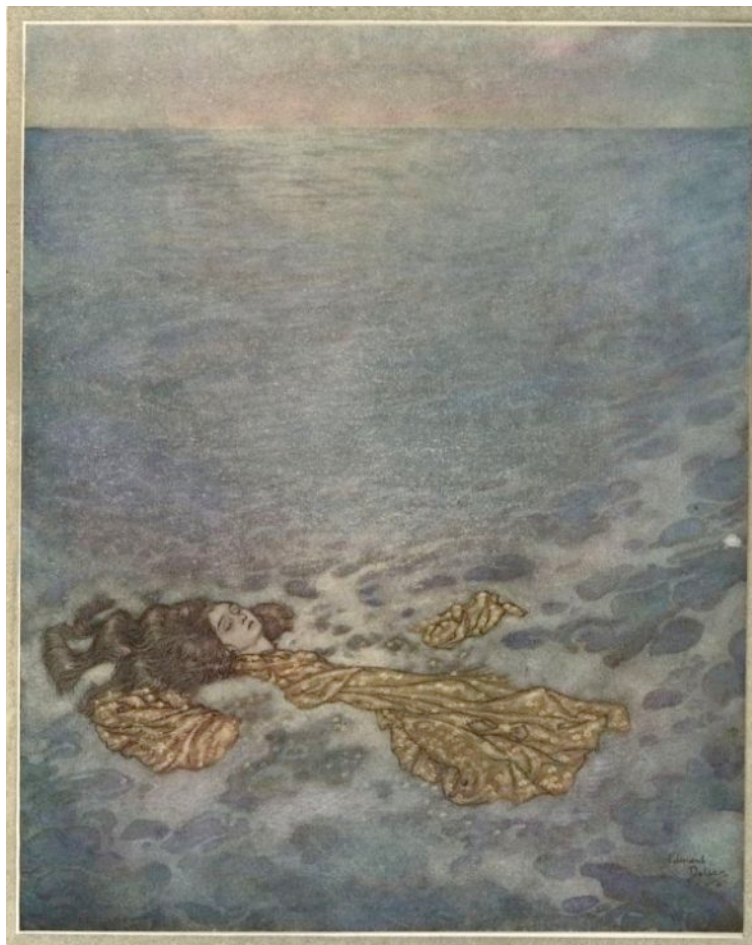


Figure 27 "Den Lille Havfrue"



**JOY, LIGHT**

*Through the Glass*  
*Massachusetts, 1998*

My fingers considered the different pencils in the old cigar box, which still smelled sweetly of my father's bergamot scented tobacco. I brushed aside the wood shavings and pulled out the 6B, a soft pencil with oily, dark graphite. The tip would crumble easily against any surface, like a clod of dirt on cement. For this sketch, I needed something I could smudge, something silt-like that could express the flurry and noise of the activity below. From the attic window I could spy through the hand-blown New England glass, warped and blurry as it was, and I could watch my neighbor, Selma—who was also my aunt—in all of her strange back-yard activities. My true interest, as it always would be, was not the reality of the woman but the rendering of it. I was always scribbling over the truth: drawing, smudging, and erasing. Giving claws where there were hands, and horns where there were ears. Capturing the life of something often meant having to lie a little.

Through this glass window my eye allowed itself to be tricked. Therefore I could see only the impression of the person and her movements, rather than the exact details, and the impression is what I sketched. I had heard that long ago some painters would create a similar effect by putting on a monocle with a clouded lens, in order to simulate myopia or cataracts, which would blur the edges of reality into beautiful dreamscapes.

I pressed and twirled the tip of the pencil against the fleshy part of my palm, that gentle space below my thumb, and the graphite spread like grey clay. I did this in order to make the tip the right shape for drawing: not too sharp, not too blunt. Positioning the conical neck of the pencil perfectly flat against the callous of my middle finger, I pressed down onto

the strip of paper, an old curl of wallpaper that I had torn from the old ceiling of my father's turn-of-the-century house, and I began. The scene I saw below flew to my blind hand, which spread across the paper in dark shadows, copying the messy untidy gestures of the scene. My hand chased after hard lines and half-moons, smoothing out anything too stiff.

Drawing was more about looking than it was about pencils and paper, though. It was about light and shadow, and the way things changed over time and became lost. It was about your own hand, and its muscles, its memories, its willingness to do what was counterintuitive. The way the eye captured something and brought it into itself, through the skin, into the body, and out again through the fingertips—it was like a kind of magic. The kind of magic that cloned, copied, mutated, morphed, created, and killed.

In this drawing, Selma had not face, not fingers, only limbs and a body, like a spinning orb, muscular and troll-like. As Selma's actions slowed, I took in the surroundings of her yard, the rich summer garden of plum trees, heirloom tomatoes, beans, and gourds. Cages and wooden fences. The sounds of baying and shuffling. The occasional chitter-and-chatter of birds and other animals. And there was my old aunt Selma breathing heavily, whispering, working away, thwacking away, but carefully.

Tufts of black on the paper explained the fur and the hair that I saw splitting into parts below. For the empty glassiness of the eyes, I needed a harder tool, an angled blend. I grabbed the H pencil. My focus shifted and I could almost see the miniscule pinpoint of the tip. I crushed it just a bit on the edge of some newspaper before using it. Adding slight creases, curves, and notes of stress and sweat, I continued sketching Selma's body, her neck, fingernails, and the animals that lay at her feet, their whiskers, her socks folded at her ankles, and her loose shoelaces, and visible, a pair of long, limp ears.

Still in her hand was her small axe. Her short swollen fingers were purple with age, and they fit perfectly around the worn wooden handle. The final act had been one quick motion: *Swack*.

“She uses an axe,” My father had explained, though I had not seen it for myself until this moment.

When I was drawing, I had a habit of rubbing my lips with my fingers and pulling at my clenched jaw, and so by the time I finished my hands and my face were also blackened s, stiff and numbed. I would always forget about the mess across my face until my father would see me and silently gesture at his own face, his hand a loose circle around his mouth. His eyes would be flags that signaled for me to wash myself. I couldn’t keep my drawing a secret because of this; I wore it right on my face, which heightened my embarrassment about the whole thing. The drawing had drawn on me.



Figure 28

This time after capturing Selma’s backyard butchering, I came downstairs from the attic to eat lunch with my father, my jaw covered in a soft beard and mustache of carbon and

charcoal. After my father pointed it out, I had to take a rubber-gum eraser to my face when the soap wouldn't work. Of course the red rawness of my face after this cleansing did not compare to the pain I felt in my fingers after having gripped the pencil so firmly—as they say, so often one doesn't know her own strength. Sometimes, I'd break the stupid stick of a thing, snapping it into pieces, ruining my work. As I ate lunch, the callous on my middle finger and the knuckles of my right hand throbbed with almost arthritic pain.

My neighbor and aunt, Selma Kallström, was my father's sister. She did not like visitors, so spying was the only real way to get to know her. Persons and personalities she tolerated quite well. Her true obsession was with the inescapable shell of filth on each body that would lay itself down like a coat upon her floors, furniture, and walls. In her old age, the pollution that visitors represented became her excuse to isolate herself or at least keep people out of her house. This hermitage was unfortunately a family trait— from which many Källströms suffered.

Figure 29



*Windows by Charles Baudelaire*

Looking from outside into an open window one never sees as much as when one looks through a closed window. There is nothing more profound, more mysterious, more pregnant, more insidious, more dazzling than a window lighted by a single candle. What one can see out in the sunlight is always less interesting than what goes on behind a windowpane. In that black or luminous square life lives, life dreams, life suffers. Across the ocean of roofs I can see a middle-aged woman, her face already lined, who is forever bending over something and who never goes out. Out of her face, her dress, and her gestures, out of practically nothing at all, I have made up this woman's story, or rather legend, and sometimes I tell it to myself and weep. If it had been an old man I could have made up his just as well. And I go to bed proud to have lived and to have suffered in someone other than myself. Perhaps you will say "Are you sure that your story is the real one?" But what does it matter what reality is outside myself, so long as it has helped me to live, to feel that I am, and what I am?

from *Le Spleen de Paris, petits poèmes en prose*  
(1864)



**DISRUPTION, HAIL**

*Home Bodies*  
*Massachusetts, 1990s*



Figure 30

I was no exception to Selma's rules about avoiding visitors, especially when I was a child. And so when my father dropped me off at her house for her to watch me, she started our visit together by sweeping me off her porch with her broom, singing: *shoes-off, shoes-off!*

What she seemed to love most, inside this hatred, was her own priority: her natural status above others. To her, she was alone in her fastidiousness and the good work of cleaning; and it was a shame that others could not see their own sinfulness and filth. Selma wore the thickest pair of glasses I had ever seen, and I truly imagined her sawing off the bottoms of two coke bottles and fashioning herself a pair of sturdy spectacles, just so she could magnify the tiniest bit of dirt and clean it away.

The more I stayed at her house under her care, the more I would watch her clean up around any visitors who entered and exited. Upon the exit of her visitors, she would dust all surfaces and rid the house of the remains, (made of up hair and skin mostly, she knew), and

then she'd add the collection to her compost pile in the garden. Little did her visitors know that the food she might feed them was truly born of their own flesh.

She wanted to make each aspect of her earthly life as useful as possible, leaving nothing to waste. Idle hands were the devil's play-thing, she'd tell me. But this was a truth impossible to articulate to the other neighborhood children. They simply knew not to trample her manicured lawn in fear of being chased by a broom.

On the other extreme, there was my uncle. My father's brother Kerby lived in our house for as long as I could remember, in a small apartment in the back. For a family so close in proximity, my relatives were awfully unfriendly to one another.

Selma became the closest adult with whom my father could trust me. Allowing my Uncle Kerby to baby-sit me had proven to be a bad idea. He didn't watch me at all—in fact he would often just fall asleep or sometimes leave. Before changing over to Selma as my babysitter, I had quite enjoyed my alone-time at Kerby's apartment, because it also meant I could explore his collections of souvenirs and trinkets, and satisfy my kleptomania by stealing tiny things I thought he would not miss. I'd squirrel them away into my attic space, using them as props for still-life sketches. Uncle Kerby kept everything he could, and in addition, let the flora and fauna that usually resided outside one's house enter into his abode. Vines and spiders were allowed to flourish in its cracks and corners. Cobwebs lined the tops of old board games. Mice scurried behind the couch along a well-worn path; squirrels scratched at the screens from the inside, and House Wrens nested on the top of a corduroy recliner. They were Uncle Kerby's friends, my father explained—along with the cats that hunted the birds and vermin and made the whole place smell of litter and ammonia.

On the other hand, when I stayed with Selma, I was made to clean. Selma re-used everything and kept her home clutter free, unlike Kerby. I felt as if she made me clean in

order to erase my own presence. By deleting the marks and traces I made, I in turn made my visit non-existent. I disappeared myself. I became invisible, as I washed away my own shadow on the floor, wiped up my footprints, and stripped my hands of oils using alcohol. I was not a body in her house, but an airy spirit with only an internal voice, for even speaking required exhaling the hot putrid breath of my being, and so I was instructed to become as breathless as one could.

Most days at her house, my first duty (after removing my shoes and placing a smock over my clothing), was to scrub out the dirt and hairballs that were stuck between the carpeted stairs—using only a toothbrush. That crack in between each step was, as she described a "crevice for filth. Like an armpit." She taught me to clean in order to teach me discipline and grace, she explained. Because working hard was God's work and it would promise me a place in his heart.

Cleaning out the bathtub was the most putrescent act, however. It had to have its weekly bleaching with boiling water. The stink of bleach remained on my body for days after cleaning at Selma's. My fingers, though covered in gloves when I cleaned, still became white and dried-up, brittle and peeling like garlic skin. And as invisible as I had made myself in her home, I entered my own home as a stinking reminder of Selma's attempt to erase me.

Any time I visited my uncle Kerby, he'd sniff me and say, "Been to old Aunt Selma's again, huh?" He'd chuckle to himself and hobble around, his big belly protruding out like a perfect Santa Clause paunch. He would mutter sweet-nothings to his animal friends, as he inspected his trinkets, checking them to remind him self of their value and yet never noticing the missing ones. He'd scratch at his balding blond head, and pull at his eyebrow hairs while watching television with the cats at his feet, over his shoulders, and on his lap.

My father and I forgave Uncle Kerby's ways because he was old, and because he was sick. Uncle Kerby had diabetes, among other mysterious ailments. He kept his freezer stocked with sugar-free popsicles and ice-cream sandwiches. He had a sweet tooth but couldn't really ever satisfy it, which as a child I understood to be the real source of his angst. I'd often open the freezer door when he was not there and see if there were any snacks I might want to steal. But then I would always taste one and realize again that it was sugar-free, tossing it into the waste basket and feeling guilty for wasting yet another one of Uncle Kerby's simple pleasures.

Though Selma was in some ways wicked to me, her perfectionism resulted in somethings that kept me willing to return. Selma made my favorite meals: Hot, briny, savory meals that in most ways represented the opposite of her ideal world. All of her indulgence seemed to manifest itself into cooking food. She managed to create gourmet dishes, like a fresh white cod filet drizzled with butter and lemon, with a sprig of parsley on the corner, and a sprinkle of black pepper and salt scattered across it. She cooked in copper pots and swirled and caressed the food in the pans as if she were painting. Somehow she was also able to maintain the cleanliness of her kitchen all the while, sponging up spills and drips as she went. It was a science or an art, cooking food and cleaning up simultaneously, so as to fill bellies and appear to leave no waste. A perfect, yet totally plumping experience: afterwards I'd feel like a tomato on its engorged stalk, skin taut and about to burst forth with its late summer juices.

Meat Stew was Selma's specialty. And often on the most difficult days of chores, I would be rewarded with this dish. She would call me in to the kitchen to sit at her round dining-room table. Beneath the chair was a plastic mat to catch my crumbs, and the tablecloth also had a plastic layer for easy wipe-ups. She laid a towel across my lap even though I always

tried desperately to prove to her I would not spill. I tore the tender meat easily with my teeth and tongue and always swallowed the last of the salty broth bobbing with blobs of fat. She would watch me eat, enjoying the experience as I enjoyed the food, and she would wipe up after me with every missed or sloppy spoonful.

After dinner at Selma's, I would be sent out to play during dusk, and I was rarely allowed back in. I played in her backyard under the plum tree or by the tomato bushes. In the summer, grass would stain my pants and my white sneakers. I collected black soil under my fingernails, as I scooped the dirt up in the old fallow garden and made mounds and buildings for an imaginary village. I let the world mingle in my pores. Even her garden felt pure and germ-free.

Selma also kept rabbits in a small little house in the backyard. I would kneel by their round door and talk to them, toddling my paper dolls along the edge, as if the two species could correspond. The rabbits would sniff and perk their whiskers against the cage. I played Hansel and Gretel, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves (the rabbits were the dwarves), and Sleeping Beauty.

The rabbits were as clean as any little beast could be. She fed them a strict diet, and she carefully monitored their droppings and their breeding, in an attempt to keep them neat as dolls. But I saw that there was no real way to keep them so pure. After all, they still lived outside, and I wondered why it didn't bother her more that they had fur that smelled like mud, and carrot-breath, and that they slept near their own droppings. In some ways, they were like her babies, and I wondered why she just didn't put them in diapers.

One summer evening after I returned home from Selma's, I sat down to eat dinner with my father and began to wonder about how I could learn to cook like her. The curtains

on the windows alongside our kitchen table fluttered in a summery gust, reminding me of Selma's backyard. In addition to the rabbits, she usually kept a chicken or two and a cock, as well as a goat, which she used primarily for rooting out brambles. I could hear the creatures scuffling and stuttering in their pens through the open window.

My father sat down across from me, sliding his fork under a small buttery scallop and placing it in his mouth. He had made scallops with asparagus, with a butter-cream sauce on the side. Though my mind was full of food, my appetite was low.

"Have you already eaten? Or are you still full from lunch at Selma's?" My father asked.

"Well, that stew is very filling."

My father raised his eyebrows in response and then he finished off the remains of food on his plate. Then he moved to the sink to wash some dishes. He was wearing his clothes from work: a plaid flannel shirt with moth holes and patched elbows, with his high-waist jeans splattered white and blue with old paint. When he'd return from work, his hands would also be splattered with paint and he'd have to scrub at them in the sink, using Goo-be-gone and Magic Green, and sometimes turpentine which smelled worse than Aunt Selma's bleach.

My father was chuckling to himself now, still washing dishes.

I was staring at the little curtains on the windows. They started half way up, and were patterned with red and white roosters.

"What are you laughing at?" I asked with annoyance.

"What were you drawing the other day?" He asked.

"Nothing."

He started to speak, then stopped and turned around to face me. He returned to sit at the table with me as he dried a bowl with a hand towel. "You know, Selma could teach you a good lesson about cooking and cleaning, anyway." He would say things like this anytime he thought a woman who was not my mother could teach me something about being feminine. My own mother I only saw sometimes on weekends in the city, and we usually went out to eat in restaurants. The plan to see her more often quickly became blurred by her work and travel schedule and her new boyfriend.

"I want to be a good cook," I replied, my forehead folding, and my eyebrows coming together in seriousness.

All I could think of was Selma's stew: that tender meat that fell to pieces on my tongue, so salty and so gentle on my teeth.

Out the window, as the curtains fluttered back, I could see Selma's garden and the little house where the rabbits lived. Then I saw Selma's round bottom swaying in her garden, flattening out my little dirt castles with a shovel.

"There she is!" I exclaimed to my father.

"Ha, that old loon!" My father lifted himself from his seat, to put away the dishes in the cabinets. He laughed as he dried his hands on his pants and grabbed his keys for his truck off the table. "I'm off. I have some errands to do before bed."

"Don't leave me alone with her again! She's out there squishing my sand castle!"

"I thought you wanted her to teach you how to cook?"

"I don't know," I said, suddenly frightened.

"Go to Kerby's then, I guess. I'll just be an hour or two."

My father pulled out in reverse, with his window down. I could hear him holler something at Kerby's window as he drove away from the house. He replied with a grunt and a frown, and a wave of the hand.

I walked to the back of the house, shouted out a hello to Kerby through the open window, assuming he was inside watching TV or napping, and then found a seat by the fence where I could spy on Selma. She wore a white cotton house-dress, covered with a floral apron. She had on black rubber boots and now she was kneeling on a plastic gardening mat. Her black and silver hair was tied back into a perfectly round bun. Not a hair out of place. She was a short but large woman, the same height as I was but twice as wide. Her arms and legs were thick and muscular and her middle was solid and bulging like a sausage. As she worked the dirt with the back of the shovel, I could see the muscles in her forearms contract and expand. Was she going to make a new garden patch there? That was where I always played in her yard. I thought of my dish with its uneaten dinner still on it, the sad little scallops now sopping up water in the sink. I should have eaten what my father gave me.

I decided to go into Kerby's after getting bored with Selma's somewhat destructive gardening. Perusing Kerby's treasures was a good distraction. When I pulled back the screen door on Kerby's porch, and called his name, there was no reply. As I entered, the cats ran through my legs to the drive-way. I decided to go upstairs and enter the attic space to look around. My father's attic and Kerby's rooms connected through a long narrow hallway that ran along the slanted part of the roof. The attic stung me with the smell of cat pee and mouse feces.

Heaps of dirty clothes lay piled in every corner. Kerby didn't do laundry, he just let the clothes collect and he would buy new clothes from the Wal-Mart when he ran out of clean ones.

Old recycling bins were filled with broken electronic parts, VHS players and slide projectors. Wires and cables were tangled with Christmas lights on top of shattered ornaments. Other boxes held things like dusty porcelain marionettes, unopened packages of underwear, and my grandmother's costume jewelry and her old wigs, which she wore near the end of her life.

The back closet of the attic, with its dilapidated door, peeling with a hundred layers of lead paint, was always a colder and darker space that I usually avoided. At some point a door had been walled at the back of the closet, suggesting that perhaps at one point the attic connected to other spaces in the house. The walk-in closet was then presumably a hallway converted into storage space. The mystery of these possible in-between spaces intrigued me, because the closet held the oldest and strangest of Uncle Kerby's collections. I thought that if only I could get through the wall, perhaps I'd find a hidden staircase, another bedroom, or something forbidden. In my mind, the hidden parts of the old house led to infinite and labyrinthine dream-worlds, since my relatives had inhabited the house since they immigrated to the United States, changing and updating the building only when absolutely necessary.

There was a small light bulb in the closet that flickered on with a firm tug of its chain. One wall was lined with old gray gym lockers, clearly taken from a school. Each door was locked, except one, which hung open. It was empty, rusted, and littered with mouse feces. I remembered that this attic was where my father and Kerby slept as kids. Some of this junk was theirs from their childhoods, and much of it had never been cleaned or even moved.

Beside the lockers was a stack of extra-large newspapers that dated back to the early 1900s. Some of them were bound and kept in books, yellowed and stinking of something sour. The pages were large and wide, as big as picture books. A cardboard box held Kerby's old hockey skates. They were grizzly things, dark brown leather and scratched up and sprayed

with something that looked like blood. The blades were dull now, and hacked-up from years of cutting through ice.

What this whole room needed was a bleaching from Aunt Selma. But she'd probably faint from the stench of it all before getting around to cleaning it. No wonder she had moved out years ago and bought the house next door.

I followed the closet's sloped eaves and looked into its darkest corner. I kicked old slippers and comic books aside, reaching around in the musty air. My body swayed through the clothes hanging from the rod above me – old fur coats and stale wool suits, My movements flicked the chain of the light bulb around, causing it to hit the glass bulb with a *ticking* sound. I felt my way along the scruffy carpet, with just enough light to see in front of me. A few cardboard boxes sat against the back wall of the closet. I grabbed the edges of the first box, and placed the box between my legs. As I unfolded the flaps, dust flew and clung to my sweaty arms. Inside were two old paintings of the same stone church. For some strange reason, the pyramidal steeple of the church was sitting next to the main building on the ground in each of the paintings. It had never been placed on top.

In the next box, I found postcards and pictures written in a language I did not recognize with some letters and vowels that had dots and strange marks over them. The largest box held the heaviest objects. When I opened it, my eye went to the brightest thing: something snake-striped: red, white, and black. In the shadows, I could tell as I lifted it, that it fit snugly in my grip, like Selma's axe fit into her hand. I squinted my eyes as the swinging shadow of my own body blocked my view of the box's contents. I dropped this thing back into the box. Then my hands felt at something hard and hollow like a tortoise shell. And then, a few more things that were long and inside scabbards. These objects were somehow full of light and reflection, but dark and black all over.

Pulling the objects out of the box and testing them in my hands, I suddenly became a warrior. I held the kind of dagger that could skin something clean; the kind of knife that could even kill something. It seemed to be meant for some kind of ceremony, something sacred. The sheath was wrapped in silky material and braided with metallic threads. As I held the heavy object, my hands doubted that it actually had killed a person. It seemed too pretty and clean. In the box there were four knives total, each with a crest on its handle, the insignia of an eagle carrying some demented cross in its talons. Each knife had a neat tassel and a chain hanging from its hilt. In their ceremonial splendor, the knives still felt crude and barbarian to me in some way. How ancient – or how recent— were these weapons? Where were they from?

Also inside the box were a helmet and a gun. I placed the helmet on my own head, buckling the leather strap beneath my chin and I became a soldier, sitting in that closet that felt like a prison cell. I imagined I was a female soldier pretending to be a man like Joan of Arc. A surge of adrenaline made my senses alert. I imagined I had been caught but had run away and was forced to live hiding in this closet. I felt the handle of one of the knives. A hand-woven ribbon was wrapped along the hilt and was in perfectly clean condition.

My head fit into the helmet's hollowness perfectly. Then I stroked the heavy, short-barreled rifle, which was black like an engine machine-part. It seemed to take on a sudden heat, and I put it back into the box. Who knew what it was capable of doing. Who knew if it contained gunpowder or ammunition—and if I hit the wrong lever by accident, I could blow myself to bits. I looked again at the details of the knives, and found some engraved words written in another language I could not read. Taking off the helmet, which was nicked and dented in a few places suggesting it had been in combat, I found a leather skin inside, tattered in places. It was like a scalp that had formed to the inside of the metal skull, but helped the

helmet fit onto the idiosyncrasies of a human head. On its underbelly it looked like a horseshoe crab one might find dead on the beach. A name was scrawled in small handwriting along the leather near the back. It was a foreign looking name, and next to it was also a long number.

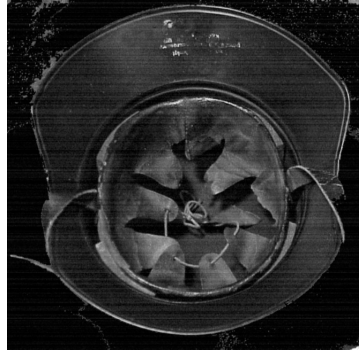


Figure 31

Something about the handwriting, and the name, which had belonged to a real person, probably a young man who was killed or at least dead, made me feel nauseated. I put each object carefully back in the box, one by one. That box had been like a little coffin for these things of death, and I had disturbed it. I shoved the box back in the corner, reversed out of the closet and closed the door, jamming it shut. I shook my hair between my hands, and cleaned off my head. The horrible things that had not seemed real to me about the past and its mythic wars suddenly felt very present. A sense of guilt rushed over me as if by touching these items I had somehow disturbed the dead.

As I wondered more about the objects, it made me think of my relatives and family. I looked out the attic window, to see if Selma was still outside. She was gone. I could see a light glowing from her kitchen window. The plants in her garden seemed to breathe in and out in the summer dusk. The animals in their cages were still, tired from the long heat of the day. The tiny chicken-wire gate to the rabbit house was left open, fluttering ever so in the wind. I couldn't see whether they were in it or not. Any cruelty I experienced from Selma seemed so

suddenly mysterious to me and yet so very human. Somehow I felt that she suffered and inside that was where her wickedness was kept. The fact that she was a woman, and yet was so different from me, somehow made me feel suddenly sad and alone. I went downstairs and waited for my father to return. Even though she made it seem as if she hated me, I wondered if Selma did like me, or even if she missed me sometimes.

The thought made me nervous for some reason, but I suddenly wanted to confront Kerby about the old boxes, and especially the war weapons.

I sat in Kerby's kitchen, licking one of his sugar-free neon-purple Popsicles. He had about four cuckoo clocks on the wood-paneled kitchen walls, all set to slightly different times, so he could hear their individual songs. Through the window, I saw the smoke rising from Selma's kitchen chimney.

One of the cuckoo clocks released a mechanical song & dance. And the smallest of Kerby's cats came down from the windowsill and sniffed around my hand, following the popsicle to my mouth, leaving silky hairs on the sticky droplets that melted off. I muttered to it softly like Kerby would, and I let it lick the last of my Popsicle off the stick.

I didn't see Kerby that night. But it wasn't so strange to not see him for days at a time. But I asked my father about the box instead. He explained, "I don't really know what stuff you're talking about," he rubbed his forehead, trying to remember. "I could have a few things up there like that—from my relatives, from the wars or from the islands— but it's been awhile. You'll have to show me."

So we went up to the attic the next day from the staircase in the front of the house, and I opened the closet to get the box. It was gone.

"Maybe Kerby took it. He's sneaky like that," My father said with a laugh. I told him I hadn't even seen Kerby the night before. We both shrugged.

“Your grandfather took a lot of things from his enemies,” my father said. “The things he took-- they were sort of like trophies.”

“Were they from people he had killed?” I asked. My father stared at the ground and raised his eyebrows at a thought inside his head.

“It’s possible. Or just—from dead bodies.” I frowned and did not want to imagine the scene. I could not understand what it was he would have wanted from those bodies, or those objects, and yet, when I remembered holding the things in my hands, they had power and mystique. Their realness, their weight and substance, so well-preserved, was something that frightened me. Why did we keep them at all? What was their value exactly? I did and I didn’t want to find any more secrets like this in my own house.

“I found other things too that were old.”

“From the islands?” He asked.

“What islands?”

“In Finland, where your grandparents came from.”

“I don’t know. Things were written in multiple strange languages.”

“Sounds like the stuff from Åland.” This place he pronounced *Oahlind* was where we were from.

I imagined cleaning up the attic and making it into my own room, a place where I could be alone. A place where I could draw and think. I could get started right away, moving all the boxes to one side, re-arranging, then vacuuming the avocado green carpet and dusting the faux-wood paneling on the walls. I could set up my own pretty bed with my quilt and white pillow. I’d have my own desk by the window and a small bookcase against the wall. I wanted to gain more control of the space, and make it mine. When I asked my father about this, he laughed at the idea but said I could try to clean it up, as long as I didn’t break

anything or throw anything away. He said we should ask Kerby and find out where he had been, too. So we shouted his name through the walls of the house. It smelled like he was up and cooking food, so we went around back to find him. As we approached, it smelled like burning eggs. I could imagine him grunting and shaking his head as we approached. He never really wanted to see us, or so it seemed. He always said I came just to steal his stuff.

As we got closer, and pulled open the door, we could tell something was off. Smoke was coming from the kitchen. We ran in and found Kerby passed out on the kitchen floor. Kerby was unconscious and the eggs were burnt black. Gray smoke was rising from the stove. I shut off the stove and then knelt beside Kerby, lifting his head in my hands so it would not be against the cold floor. My father called the ambulance. I looked at his face. It was sallow and I could see red blood vessels like tiny hairs scrawled across his pale cheeks. His mouth hung open like a fish and I saw that his teeth were yellow and his gums were a dark purple. His face felt as warm as the belly of the stove, but his hands and arms were cold. He smelled as if he hadn't bathed for weeks. The blond hair on the back of his head was matted like a cat's fur. My father knelt down and looked at him. He gasped as he looked inside Kerby's mouth.

"That's one bad infection," he said. "Looks like black rot." He was shaking his head with frustration as he held the phone and began to dial 911. I could see my father shaking a little, as if he did not know how to handle this emotion. A twinge of guilt could be seen in the corner of his mouth.

"Is it his diabetes? Can we give him something?" I asked my father. I looked at the kitchen table, where Kerby often kept his meds. On top of the dirty oilcloth table-cover he had his insulin and testing kit and there was also a thermometer and some other cold medications.

“Maybe—but it’s hard to know what exactly the problem is. Too much sugar or too little. Or if it’s something totally different. I should know more about it, but now I just can’t seem to remember.” He walked out of the kitchen to talk on the phone and get help.

Soon the EMTs arrived and started working on him immediately, asking us questions about Kerby’s medical history. They laid him out on a white stretcher, working to revive him as they carried him gracefully around corners and out to the driveway. He was alive and he was breathing, but he was not in good shape.

One of the EMTs told us, after he closed the ambulance doors, that Kerby had let his sugar levels drop too low and that he also seemed to have a high fever and a strange infection. I remembered seeing Kerby’s insulin on the sticky kitchen table. Maybe he was just minutes away from taking care of himself.

Had he been nesting somewhere in the house, all feverish, hiding himself away and licking his wounds, like one of his cats, for the last few days?

"He was just about to eat—" My father said, as the EMT ran backwards to the front of the ambulance. My father shook his head back and forth for a long time. The EMT said, “We’ll take good care of him. He should be fine, but you should come check in with us—the infection might be a bigger problem.”

My dad stopped and said to me, "Maria, why don't you go over to Selma's. You don't need to come to the hospital, but I should go. I'll be back later, hopefully with Kerby."

I paused and looked over at Selma’s dark house. My dad waved his hand at me and widened his eyes to say, “Go on!” I walked over to Aunt Selma’s and knocked on the door. I thought I saw her small round face peaking through one of the windows. I wiped my feet on the mat. I could hear the floorboards creaking as she came closer to the door.

She opened the door a crack and looked up at me with her big glasses, which magnified her eyes into huge brown saucers. I slipped off my shoes, automatically. She spoke softly, "Oh, Maria. It's been a long time. I thought maybe you had forsaken me. What's going on over there?"

"Uncle Kerby passed out. He's going to the hospital."

"Ah, the old fart. He never learned how to feed himself properly." She rubbed her cheekbones and hummed to herself a sigh of disappointment about Kerby. "Anyway, come in. You came just in time. I have something special on the stove for you to help you forget about all this."

I froze and looked around at her pristine house. Every clock and coffee table and picture frame was dust-free and in the right place. No space was cluttered, every rug was straight, and the plastic on the couches was crystalline.

"Uncle Kerby passed out," I repeated this softly to myself. "He has a bad infection."

She sighed and made a soft hissing sound, "I know. I know. Well, I always said that he should have gotten married. A woman would never have let him live that way. But that was his choice." Anything bad that happened to someone was deserved, according to our family, it seemed.

I followed her into the kitchen and sat down at the table, expecting her to rush over with towels and plastic. But she just put down a bowl of meat stew in front of me and sighed. She collapsed into the chair across from me. I didn't ask any questions.

She smiled as she leaned her cheek against her hand. She seemed tired. A few pieces of her silvery hair curled freely behind her ears. A few strands stuck out from her bun. I noticed a yellow stain along the collar of her white cotton blouse. It looked like sweat.

The stew smelled delicious though my appetite was small. I wanted to cry. Steam rose from the top of the bubbly broth and I stared at the gray bits of meat bobbing about. She put a cold spoon right into my hand. It was a little bit wet from being freshly washed. Then she pulled her chair closer to the table, leaning in towards me.

"I missed this," She laughed at herself and sighed again, looking at the spoon in my hand. *Watching me eat?* I wondered.

I just sat still. Then she said, "Well? What are you going to do, take a photograph?"

I looked up and she said to me, "Go ahead now. Don't just look, eat!"

Then she got up and made herself a bowl of the stew. When she returned, she immediately spooned a big chunk of broth-soaked meat into her mouth. She tilted her head to the side in satisfaction. She chewed slowly with her eyes closed; then she swallowed and looked at me. I still hadn't eaten any of my stew, as I was in awe of the ease and indulgence she seemed to be experiencing in my presence.

"They're dead now anyhow. Half in heaven, half in our bellies." She swallowed a gulp of water from a glass. "I mean, the meat. Go on, eat it."

But of course the meat was dead, what did she mean? I was growing hungry, and the stew smelled good. I knew I shouldn't let the food go to waste. Selma was acting strangely, and I didn't want to disappoint her for fear of what she'd make me do. I felt like I was somehow sinning, enjoying this food, as I slurped a spoonful of salty celery, carrot, and meat into my mouth, then slurped at the bowl. I felt a little bit like a witch, enjoying the soup this way and being messy. I let the beautiful parts melt into mush on my tongue. My teeth tore through the different textures, and I thought maybe the life of a witch, of someone like Selma, was one of pleasures like this. The kinds of pleasures you forbid yourself for no good reason,

just so you can receive the pleasure of breaking your own rules. The tip of my tongue sought all the sweet parts, and lingered on the fat. I sucked out all the salt I could get.

“Now, when you finish that, would you like a little cup of hot coffee?” Selma asked.

“I’ve never had coffee before. Dad says I’m too young.”

“Well, you’re getting older now. Anyway, I think you’ll like it. I’ve got fresh cream to put in it too.” She moved over to the counter, where she put the coffee on.

I watched her body, as she moved around the kitchen she knew so well. It was a kitchen I knew well, too. It smelled familiar and comfortable, even in its relative sterility compared to Kerby’s kitchen. And then I pictured Kerby on the floor, his mouth slightly ajar, his eyes half-closed. The skin on his face flabby and yellowish. The warm smell of smoke, a combination of the sun and the woods. As I thought of these things, I heard Selma begin to hum, and a few pretty Swedish words appeared in the air between her hummed notes: *Lilla kanin, akta dej, akta dej, akta dej, Lilla kanin, akta dej, Annars tar jag dej.*

A funny feeling rose in my throat, and I felt like I had lost something, as if I was missing a part of myself, and I wanted to cry. And I felt like it was suddenly difficult to breathe, as if a tiny hole in my lungs opened up, like the run in your stocking, the tear that keeps opening on the leg of your white Sunday tights. I began to make short gasps of breath. The metal spoon had become very warm in my clammy palm. I heard the coffee machine whirring and dripping under Selma’s song: *Little rabbit, be careful, be careful, be careful. Little rabbit, be careful, Otherwise, I’ll take you.* She hummed to herself. Heat rose in my cheeks and radiated. I forgot what house I was in as I looked out the window where the curtain fluttered against the open window, letting a clean cold breeze come in. I shivered and looked at the side of my father’s house. Selma came back to the table and placed a hot cup of coffee down next to my bowl. She slid the bowl to the middle of the table and then she crumpled her soft

hand over mine, though I still gripped the spoon against the tabletop. She peeled my fingers back, and took the spoon, placing it in the bowl. This caused tears to fall from my stinging eyes. I gasped for air and shook as I tried to prevent myself from crying. She rubbed my sweaty hand between her hands. "You're cold. Drink the coffee. It's good." I sniffled and tried to breathe in and out. I made sounds that I had no intention of making, until I whined and let more tears out, my lungs inflating and deflating like paper bags. My heart slowed down and I shivered as the hot coffee soothed my throat.

I drank more of the coffee. It was nutty and smooth, with a strong aftertaste like chocolate. She sipped from her cup of coffee as well. We sat silently, holding the heat inside our mouths.

"Here." She said, dropping a block of white sugar into my cup. The block broke into pieces and then dissolved, sinking in the hot creamy liquid, the color of tanned skin and summer shadows.

She left the window open and we watched the curtain move about in the wind. It felt nice to be cold and hot at the same time. As we sat together, I felt like I was taking part in something adult. Selma smiled at me from time to time, and she remarked at how good the coffee tasted.

"Hmm . . . I heard you're looking for something in that old attic of ours," Selma said, placing her cup down on the table when she finished it. "Magda said that those things belonged to her. I think she took them. She's always looking for things that might have belonged to our mother and father."

My body felt relaxed and soothed though my mind ached. The cry left me feeling vulnerable but content; like taking a bath and getting out to dry yourself off. I began to

speaking, and sounds came out in rasps. I coughed to clear my throat, and then decided to remain silent.

Selma spoke, "You should go over to her place and steal the stuff back. It will be yours someday soon, anyway."

I wiped the wet spots from my cheeks.

She pulled out a box of photos from the bookshelf in the kitchen. She showed me pictures of her as a little girl, and of my father as a little boy, with Kerby, and their mother, Agnes. "I just need a picture of you, now, to add to the collection," she said.

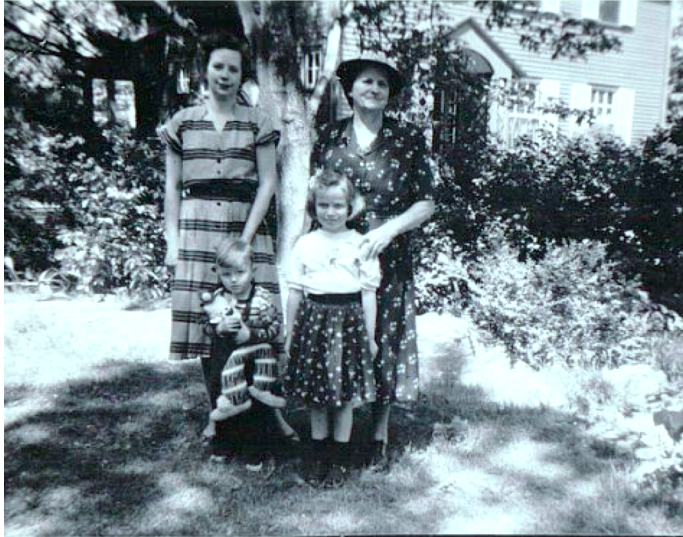


Figure 32



**CONSTRAINT, NEED, PAIN**

*Something Sinking*  
*Finland, 1890*

I would never say: *there were two of you.*  
I would never say: *I chose you. I kept you. The other was not good.*  
It was a secret.

It was something wrapped in muslin,  
something sinking.

Something that was done,  
that had to be done.

They told me not to name it,  
but already it was named.

The other lived long enough to be saved,  
saved long enough to be killed,  
For a time, all three of our bodies curled around one another  
like a dead bird, still wet after hatching, in the palm of a hand.

I should have left it, a bundle by the church door,  
or like a nest by the alders in the cemetery. But it had been raining that morning.

I should have dug a hole outside the cemetery walls, and waited a full day, and shooed the  
rooks away.

Now you, dear one, the other one, are in the garden. Now you are in our food.  
Now you are in the lake, in our water, so now you are everywhere.

Do not judge me (I know you won't).  
Your father struck me across the face, across my back with a book,  
while you were both inside of me.  
I thought two things: you were a curse to me  
and you would be cursed.

On a night walk, while your father slept,  
I fingered cold sterling scissors that I kept on a chain around my neck.

I remember: the immense weariness of stones in my dry white hands  
how tired they seemed, the gray stones without breath, crania enclosed,  
as I lifted them from the river bank out of their muddy holds,  
leaving bubbling pockets, mouths that quickly succumbed to water and disappeared.

I placed the perfect stones gently over you. Gravity created the weight and pressure.  
I used no force.  
I built a buried tower as tall as a man.  
A wall of stone faces,

staring at you and blocking your rise to the surface.

There was no sound. There was no cry.  
You never will have language.

Just the sound of rushing water, the kettle on the stove,  
the fire rising in the hearth, the wind rattling the windows,  
hushing me to sleep.

But I see your name there, in my sleep, written out in bones, in the land where trees are made of bones, and there your name is carved into the stones, where the sea is made of stones, And there your name is scratched into the door, where every door on every house is my door. You are blackened into my palms, each letter of your name on the pads of my fingers so everything I touch turns to you.

*Curse* has no etymology. It is not like cursive, the hand that runs. It is not like *corpus*, made of the body, nor like *chorus*, made of voices. *Curse* is most like *cross*. It is the other side of the sign of God.

In the north, where I lived, I made the cross, formed of two sticks charred in our stove, and dipped in goat's blood, and I keep it against my body, hanging on a string around my hips, and turned upside down.

Perhaps you will know all this, find all this, on my body when I die. But I would never say these things to you. This is one thing I know. Sometimes, even now, it is not clear which one of you was in fact the other.

But the birthmark and the face on the body were signs--. Even the midwife turned away from you, chanting quietly to herself. Advice was given. I heeded it.



Figure 33



**STANDSTILL, ICE**

*What Home Was Like*  
*Åland Islands, Finland, early 1900s*

Withindoors: a following wind, and a somber wall made of horsehair plaster. A bedroom door painted red as rowanberries. Cracks in the house made the whole thing rattle, but anyone from out-of-doors would have called it a regular gentleman's place: it was painted white, with two floors and a veranda jutting out from the front like a jaw, with windows on the upper half. The more windowpanes, the finer the house, and theirs had 365: one for each day of the year.

When Aggie Källström left for school in the morning, the neighborhood boys would say, "Hur mår du?" (How are you?) with their island lilt (mostly Swedish with a Finnish rhythm), and they'd give a wink. And Aggie, who was only a young girl, would say, "Well as the bucket said when the chain broke," just a little tease her mother taught her. She'd give a little tilted smile: showing only two teeth.

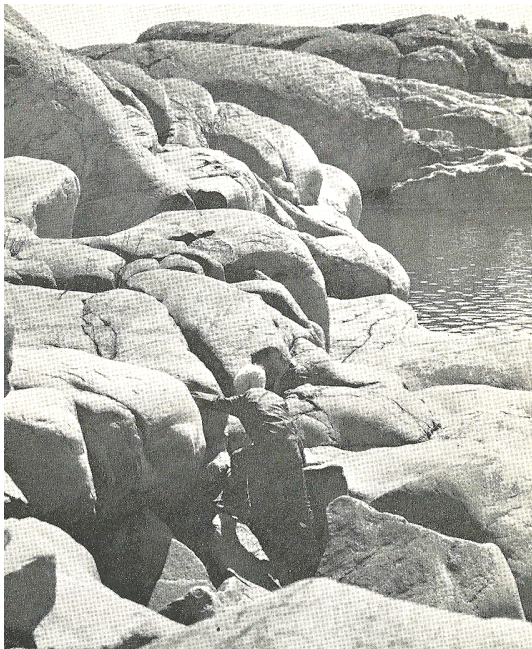
Algot, her father, would be out in his boat already. Her mother, Elin, would be in the kitchen with the other children. On the range: black coffee. On the table: an approximation of food. Cold potatoes and fish and possibly porridge with blue milk at room temperature. Also, likely, perch or herring, salted down for the winter and kept in barrels. Potatoes put in dirt piles in the root cellar, if it hadn't been too wet that year.

Autumn afternoons on her walk home from the village, Aggie'd gather apples in the orchard that had fallen onto the dewy grass. Green apples. Red apples. Blue apples. She'd slip off her shoes to feel the grass clean her bare feet.

Often at night, barking foxes might wake the children. Then they'd fall back to sleep, all together in their big bed stuffed with straw. The children's one big dream-head might see the dream-self falling through the ice on a sled. Their eyes would toss to-and-fro behind their eyelids. *Don't cross the strait in springtime, they'd say all-together, in their mother's voice. Or you'll fall through the ice on your sled, like Brother.* Dream-self looked a lot like brother.

After the summer-melt, when Aggie was old enough to have lost all her milk-teeth, the children found a human skeleton on the red granite rocks by the shore. The children screamed when they discovered these remains of the drowned. They screamed because it was twisted and small. They could not tell whether it was a man or a woman, or even if it might have been a child or some other creature. Its legs were bowed and its ribcage was warped, so as to have made the thing barrel-chested. Its jaw seemed too narrow and pointed for a person.

Figure 34



A white haired boy walked closer to touch the pebbled bones of its wrist. He came back glassy-eyed and mute, with nothing to report, just a shake of the head.

Later, a white coffin would be strewn with juniper wreaths and spruce boughs. She would watch them lower it into the ground and she would watch the congregation sing. The way the people moved their mouths. And she could see the strange open mouth of the skeleton frozen in place.

Coffee and ginger cookies would be prepared for the funeral. *We gave it a proper death,* they'd say. Alder-wood would be burned in the hearth. Liverwort would be garlanded around the church. She'd wear a long white dress, the same one she wore for communion,

confirmation, and any burials or births. And the boys would watch her as she lifted the hem off the ground and she stepped delicately about showing off her small feet.

She turned ten years old and began to act proudly. *Shame on you*, she'd say to other children, and to men, as she mimicked her mother. Pointing her finger, and lifting her chin, she'd say, *I'm a child who's hardly lost her milk teeth*. She'd say this, knocking her head from side to side and clucking. She'd say things like this more and more as she grew taller and her pale-brown hair began to curl, just so, around her face. She'd laugh in her funny way between her teeth. She noticed older boys had begun to stare at places on her body other than her face. She liked this but she ignored them and began to daydream and cloud-watch.

Even so, her mother made her find work when she was old enough to stop school. Work was determined by the season and the needs of each farm. One might go around all day not finding anyone that needed a hand.

One late winter, when work was low, Aggie wanted money so she could buy a gold-chain necklace, but her mother would not lend her any. So while Aggie was out alone one day searching for something to do on the islands, she decided to cross the frozen channel to see if there might be a paid job to do in the neighboring village.

As she walked, she danced here and there and twirled like a ballerina to busy herself. She stared up at the clouds while she moved and she tried to swirl as if she could make herself evaporate and become one of those up there in the sky. And she wondered what the dance would be for the weather that the cirrus clouds might bring. But as she day-dreamed, she tripped on a mound where the ice changed shape around a rock. She fell hard onto her shoulder, and as the tingling pain traveled along her arm, she grew angry with herself for not being more agile, and for wanting that necklace. She had fallen where the ice was thin, and it began to crack around her, as she tried to sit up. With her other arm she tried to push herself

up, but she fell again and the ice gave way. She grabbed at the slush forming around her, panting and reaching for the rock, but as she moved her weight around, the ice broke into chunks and the water rose up fast around her. The rock seemed to rise beyond her reach. She grabbed at the slimy black weeds and barnacles that were attached to the side of the rock. She could not grip anything with her hands or her feet and the channel was deeper than she expected at this spot as she kicked through the heavy water.

The hole expanded around her in fractures, like a star, revealing the black water below. The cold penetrated her body. Soon, she could no longer feel her booted feet, (they were empty heavy things), but she felt the cold water rise and billow beneath her skirt, finding its way through her bloomers and up her back. Her body rose and fell as she kicked to keep her head above the water. She found herself saying, *good girl, good girl*, over and over inside her head, like her father used to say in Finnish, *hyvä tyttö*, and this kept her feet moving.

Meanwhile, a mile away, the Finnish postal service workers were laying down planks so they could pull their sleds over the strait. The men were bringing provisions across the way on their daily delivery. They moved swiftly across the ice, following their dogs.

One of their bowlegged dogs ran ahead towards Aggie and the rock. A paroxysm of coughing and crying had drawn the animal near. The men rushed ahead and found Aggie bobbing and white-faced, barely alive in that jagged hole of ice and water. She whined and moaned along with the excited dogs to keep herself awake and afloat as the dogs nipped at the air and jumped along the edges of the ice. She had been in the water long enough for her skin to burn with pain and her breath to become slow and shallow. She could hardly speak but her dry whispers were saying, *hyvä tyttö, hyvä tyttö*, and she reached for the dogs who used their teeth to pull at her dress sleeves and help the men lift her out of the water with a rope. Dogs' breath was hot against her neck and face. She gasped for air as the men pulled her into

the winter air and wrapped her in furs. And the strong men kept saying to the little girl, “Mitä sinulle kuuluu?” (How are you?) And it sounded like warm wind, like cooing.

As she began to warm, she felt embarrassed as the men put her on their sled. They tied her down like a package. The sled ride was bumpy and fast. She watched the dogs race alongside her with their bright blue eyes and silver coats. Her teeth chattered, and she had never been so aware that her teeth were made of bone. They moved towards the nearest dwelling where an old Finnish woman fed her fresh coffee brewed on the fire.

After Aggie’s return, another child from her village ran off and became lost. The ice had melted by then, and the search was led on boat, through straits and bays, and the drag hooks swept back and forth across the bottoms, but all they found was a sack of drowned kittens or an old bow-net or a waterlogged branch.

After this and after many other lost children, her family knew it was time to leave the islands. When Aggie’s family left, she was just becoming old enough to think of marrying. And she knew she’d never see the island boys or the sailors again.

On the ship headed for Stockholm, then for London, and then for Boston, the harbor shore smelt strongly of pitch and oakum from the old ships still anchored there. She knew pitch was dark and sticky as night and she felt that maybe the odor was some kind of message to her. It used to always be on her father’s clothes. He had worked on the ships, unraveling old ropes and soaking them in tar to seal the gaps between the planks in the hulls. Before they decided to leave, he had helped make good ships that kept the water out.

As they stood on the deck of the ship, looking back out on the islands, Aggie remembered that one thing her mother had always hoped for was to get the whole cabin painted red. But all she managed to get done were the inside foyer walls. She had wanted to

grow a big garden and maybe even put up a fence. The house would always remain unfinished.

The other child was still lost when they headed for Boston. Some folks spread rumors that the boy had been killed. They said that he had been an odd one and the mother hadn't been very proud of him. He had only been about seven years old, but old enough to know he wasn't wanted, they said.

After Aggie's family left the islands, the sea would continue to give up the dead that were in it. And books were opened. Another book was opened. The dead were judged according to what they had done.

*Good-bye*— her mother would say, over and over again, trying her English.

She'd say, it's like—*God be with you*.



Figure 35 *AGGIE, AS SNOW QUEEN*



**A HARVEST, A YEAR**

An old woman sits in the corner  
with a hundred eyes in her head.

An old woman in the corner  
with a hundred teeth in her mouth,  
bites, but does not swallow.

An old woman sits in the corner  
with a hundred sticks on her head.

An old woman sits in the corner  
with red berries on her lap.

An old woman sits in the corner  
with black eggs on her lap.

A fat old woman  
a thick fat old woman  
sits with her hair in her mouth.



Figure 36

Gata Bani's januari 24-49.  
 Kära Linea!  
 Nu säll jag sitta mig ned och läsa med  
 och ni bli stund i en mån må jag tänka  
 på hur lätt det skulle varit att gå till  
 med alla minsta, ja jag gillar  
 att jag bara inte att jag ska se någon annan  
 som skulle bli hemlös, jag försöker inte säga  
 att så bra i Sverige. Jag vill varit där  
 och jag har varit och allt har varit  
 så lätt, ja det är en såg det. Vi ska  
 Linea jag har en utsläpp för en mån ett  
 ni för hemmanne pappa & mamma. Jag  
 tänkte på det att ni och sedan bara till till  
 att ni. Jag har inte varit där för att  
 de jag skulle ha varit där jag har varit  
 i går och jag skulle inte gå till skolan  
 och som jag skulle vilja gå till. Helt  
 enkelt skulle det vara bara till till och  
 och skulle det vara för lätt, ja jag  
 bara skulle gå till för alla godhet som  
 vara i skolan för att jag skulle gå till  
 att man jag så glad att jag skulle gå till  
 kommit. Men om den skulle gå till & till  
 hem och till och till och till och till  
 ja. Jag skulle gå till och till och till



Figure 37

Dearest Linea!  
 Now I sit with me and with your time again, but  
 the house some manner would  
 in talking to you verbally,  
 I cry when  
 I am

more in life  
 would be home  
 we feel it would  
 in America.



Figure 38

*April 20, 1940*

Dear Sis—

Surprise Linnea –

I have started working down Vega— I am packing cookies in the bakery. Sundays I will be in the restaurant. So I'll be able to get a few things now—I will also save my money too though for our future plans.

I started last Monday. I certainly appreciate Ma taking care of David and I'll do all I can for her.

I missed him awfully the first few days. Gee I didn't think I could stand being away from him so long.

He's behaving swell for Ma and she has him play in the play pen.

How is your permanent now? I'm going to get one as soon as I can.

Linnea let's have the babies christened soon.

Shall we plan for the first Sunday in May. That will give us both time for getting clothes. I have a pair of white shoes I bought David but they are a soft sole. If you want to buy them you can. He never wore them. I was going to use them for his Christening long time ago but we never got it done. I paid 89 ¢ for them and they have never been used. I have to have hard sole shoes for David because he'll be walking now.

He creeps around now and also walks in the play pen holding himself up.

I have white silk rompers for Dave and white socks. I'll be up to see you soon. Otherwise come down some night,

Bye now—

Love to all,

Agnes

Write.



Figure 39

*Be Fruitful and Multiply*



Figure 40



Figure 41



Figure 42

*Self and Sister*

Two birch trees. Two sides of a sister. Two white columns. A trail of buttons. A dotted line. Down the middle. A seam. Down the side. A round belt. A bangle. Two slits for pockets. A tennis shoe. A sandal. A summertime mirror. Sixteen and seventeen. Five foot five and five foot four. Two pairs of shiny stockings. A white summer. A white mushroom blooming. Splitting and multiplying. Numerous daughter. Cells yield. Cella: the inner room in the temple that contains the statue of a god. Cellar. A room wholly or partly. Below ground is not a suitable place to live. A room where wine is stored. A chamber. Four chambers. Two milky lungs. One inhaling. One exhaling. To double. Twofold. To double over. Twice over. Two times. Lookalike. Twice as much. Bend in half. Dual. To double check. To double cross. Double back. Double date. Double doors. Double bed. To descend the cellar stairs. To drink the wine. To rise up. To stand up with proper posture and not to slouch and collapse like ruins into one another.

Figure 43

February 11, 1935. Dear Agnes,

A few lines that are less blue. Whiter strokes. As you always say. OK: I'm not going to ask you. Neither will I tell you. It's down to this. It will be hard to find another job. I'm telling you, in other words, suit yourself—what a thing. If you don't want it. Only yesterday someone came by. Too long since you've been home. A Merry Valentine Day. Such a thing. Beatrice said. The girls went up. Again. Lucky having money. I hate to. And of course. I can't. I need a skirt. Could you give me 1 dollar? And a blouse. Most clothes you wear were mine once, remember. So don't think too much. Don't forget. The day may come when I can help you again. I will. Draw your own conclusions. Please also: another pair of those stockings. Ma will give you the money. It's fair. Same shade and the same kind of stockings. I want you to. 59 cents. Don't forget now. You don't need any candy so. You won't have to lose any money. It's not too much. It's only fair. (Please don't forget). Come home. So long now and "best wishes." Loads of love, and write soon. A Valentine To You and kisses. xxx.



Figure 44

Here's a letter I wrote but never sent to you.



Figure 45

Dear Linnea. Important things to tell you. Here it is. I only have today, Tuesday, to tell you. Are you still looking on the blue side? Instead look for the "bright side." People do. Look for the white in the blue. Turn it over. Don't let things get you. Don't you think? We. Both of us will get together this summer and get lots of goodies. I. Me. The job and see. Work hard. Drop it. Gosh! You. Plans. I might be quitting school. Coming to see you to find work. The first place is Dorchester. If I don't take it, will she come after me? You ask her. What a thing. Will you? Bring my small black suitcase. Bring it home. Sunday. Has Ida got a maid still yet? No hurry. But you could do it. Gosh. Ask. It will be all right to stop. Ahead of time. Better make my mind. I wish you would borrow me a dollar. Could buy a house dress. I haven't got a one even. Me. I hate to. Ma. Money. Saturday I'll dance. I do hope. A time like I had last time. Dancing is. Quite anxious. Wants to. I hope. Time. I guess. Have to. Me. Find out. Best of Wishes from us all, So long, "Agnes." Hope you can read this. I am writing this sitting on the bed. Write soon. xxx. Answer questions asked you.

Wednesday June 11, 1933



Dear Linnea. Received your letter today and I am answering right away. Quite a few things. On my mind. I shall try to. Saturday again. To the dance—with the girls. Didn't have a good time. A crowd. Raining of course. Tonight. Don't I wish. I. them. Afternoon I went up but she wasn't. Lizzie please don't. Anything. I take after all. There won't be much. I might enjoy myself. I'll see. I'll take Dorchester. So if you see I have it all planned out. I come out. So late. Please try to find out. Take me home. Some Sundays. Quite high and I don't like. Money. Ma. So—a suit. Gloves, hat and shoes. Still you'll look. Wish. I could. Me. Only 3 dollars. Dying for one. If you can get. Get me one—Ma. The balance—Thanks thanks—a thousand thanks. The tip you sent. You don't know. Taking a few

cents. I'll have to put it before I get caught. A crook. We did. You last Sunday—I felt. As blue as ever. No place to go as usual—Oh and Please. Oh Please don't get glasses. You might get them. While you and doing. But don't let me see you. I can't bear them. I hope.

I think I'd. Can't think of. Now so—toodle ooo. . .By the way, please. Buy me a bottle of perfume – 10 cents – Thank you – I love perfume. Yours as ever, "Agnes" P.S. Hope to see you Sunday and I think I'll be home. By the way, Jose from Walpole was down Sunday night. He tooted the horn—Did I go out? I did like hell!!! Whooo!

Figure 46

March 3, 1939

Dear Sis, Are you still miss or Mrs.?

I was rather in doubt but I put Miss just the same. What's the big idea anyway. Did Ma tell you I cried when I heard it. I didn't think you should get married so quick when I just did. I understand the circumstances however so what can you do. Let me wish you luck anyway— Boy us married people need it. Eldon and I both send our wishes and I hope you will be as happy as we are. I think I have the best fellow on earth—guess you do to.

I suppose you need a lot of things—I mean towels and tablecloths etc—can't give right now but will later on—I mean when our "bit of heaven comes"—which will be soon. Hope you have been feeling all right—I didn't have any trouble—I guess I was lucky. Well I haven't much time to write any more. Please write to me soon Linnea— Tell me everything. Sincerely, Agnes. I will write again

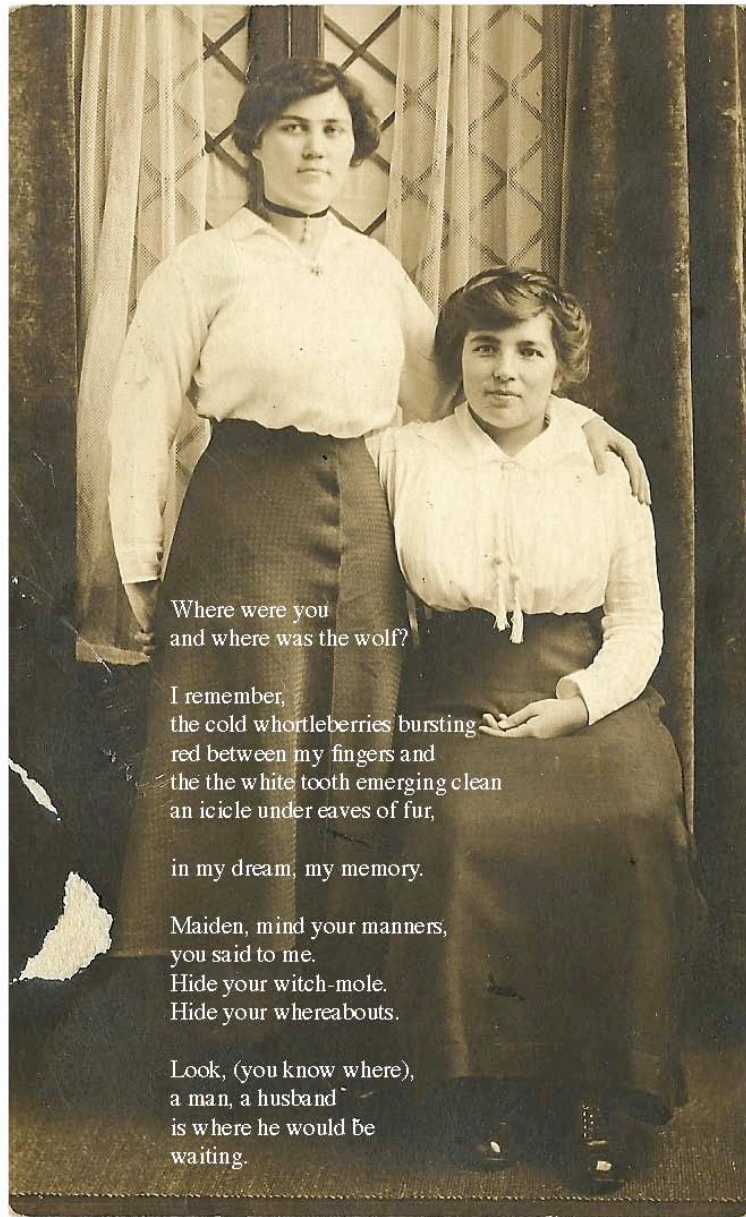


Figure 47



**DEFENSE, AVERSION**

*Where were you?*



Where were you  
and where was the wolf?

I remember,  
the cold whortleberries bursting  
red between my fingers and  
the the white tooth emerging clean  
an icicle under eaves of fur,

in my dream, my memory.

Maiden, mind your manners,  
you said to me.  
Hide your witch-mole.  
Hide your whereabouts.

Look, (you know where),  
a man, a husband  
is where he would be  
waiting.

Figure 48

*Witch*  
*Present*

Everyone knows a witch. She may or may not be your evil aunt or even your own sibling. Sometimes she is a man.

How do you know if she is a witch? There are many traits you can observe in determining if someone is one or not. Sometimes it begins with just a feeling.

She'll look at you for a long time, appraising your body, as if you owe her a tax for it. The beauty of your body is grotesque to her. She will sometimes look at you through the back of your head. You can feel it, and so you turn around and catch her looking at you. You look at her eyes, and still she looks at you. She lets you catch her. She smiles gently and turns away. She seduces you.

Here's what you don't expect: Her craft will be mostly invisible. None of the paraphernalia you're used to: Tarot cards, Ouija boards or palm-readings. Those are silly games. A witch can read your mind and you know she's reading your mind but she won't say a word. She'll leave you with that odd sense of having been trespassed against. As if she broke into your skull, entered and occupied the space, stole a few memories, perhaps inserted some false ones. Perhaps you feel suddenly angry— as you leave the office, the cafe, the library, the party— and alone, shaking your head and blushing.

At first, a witch will try to be your friend, your lover, or your mother. You'll think: I already have my friends, my lover, and my mother. But she will find a way to show you that you don't really have anyone, that there is a hole in your life, that you need her.

Most importantly, what makes a witch a witch is that she is able to make you see everything about yourself that you did not want to see. She will tell you about yourself and you will believe her. Doubts you've had about yourself will bloom.

Sometimes she doesn't have to say a word, she will simply act in a way that makes you feel ashamed. There's a small part of yourself that you hate, that you want to destroy. This is the part she makes you want to feed.

Witches write letters. They talk and chatter quite a bit. They use words to chant you into submission. They sing. They laugh exceptionally loud, and in a strange pitch. They seem capable of extreme joy. It is sometimes enviable.

They are very strong. You can sense it by the way they open doors or pull out chairs. They look heavy-boned and yet they walk lightly.

A witch has the power to cause forgetfulness in people. He or she is concerned with sacrifice, that is, what must be suffered, what must be compromised, what must be destroyed in order for pleasure to persist. Witches may seem aversive, pessimistic, but it is only because they know something must die for the day to be good, and they'd like to be a part of that death, if possible.

What does she want? To have you and keep you. Not to eat you, not usually.

Rather, she'd like to have you around as a doll, like a pet. Maybe you are envisioning a voodoo doll that she can stick needles into. Or a Barbie. Maybe she wants to cut off your plastic hair and put red lipstick all over your face. Maybe you are made of porcelain, or wood. She wants to stroke your wooden legs with her cold fingers.

Maybe she wants to pull out your little doll-face eyelids, the pretty white ones that flap and tap with long black eyelashes that flutter over shiny glass eyes. She doesn't like the

reasonless tapping and closing. She wants you to stay open. She wants you to stay awake all the time.

When in a trance, or casting a spell, witches may take the likeness of an animal, growing tufts of hair, long nails, or arching their backs like cats.

They may take an interest in odd plants, or mushrooms, tea, honey, tonics, and herbs. They seek entheogens, tinctures that “cause God to be within”. They often suffer from insomnia. They will stay up all night, building them selves into a house for God, they will become sleepless trying to inhabit God.

The body gets in the way; the body begins to crack and tear at the seams. The beautiful, wretched skin is keeping it whole, but she wants to disperse herself and shatter like glass.

They say that witchery is not a choice. They say that it is inherited, like a personality trait. That it skips a generation and alternates gender. That it travels from mother to son to daughter. It must transubstantiate; it must change form in order to continue. This is part of its hiding.

You do not know what you desire; you do not know what satisfies you. The witch knows her object of desire; she knows it does satisfy her. She knows that it will satisfy her.

There is at least one witch in every family. Perhaps you already know this. You have to look backwards in time to see it in photographs. To see it in their handwriting. To recall the strange deaths, or odd behaviors. Look at the headstones in the cemetery. Learn all of the surnames in your family and find out how everyone who lived before you died.

Perhaps as you look in the mirror now, you are disappointed. Or perhaps you fall into a trance-like stare. Perhaps you cannot look at the reflection for very long. You become anxious, restless. Perhaps it doesn't look like you. Perhaps it looks like someone else, a

stranger. Perhaps you see your father. Or your other self: that self that no one else can see. Perhaps you feel ashamed.

Witches seek out dark spaces and very quiet spaces, anywhere they can deprive themselves of their senses, so that they can focus on prayer, spell-writing, or meditation. They might say, "I just have a head-ache." or "I'm just going to take a cat-nap." Or, "I'm just going to close the door for a bit." Be wary, be cautious. Listen through the wall if you can. Sometimes you can hear them muttering.

Is a witch a ghost? Well, what is a ghost; something back from the dead. Witches are as dead as they are alive. They are both. And they are there, in your house, in your books, in your hair, walking alongside you, waiting to be found and recognized. Perhaps you are the one you must watch out for and you have not yet realized your own soullessness.

Perhaps you lock yourself away sometimes. Embarrassed what your family might find you doing. You're just writing or reading. Just sleeping. You enjoy your privacy. Why do you need to be alone, so often? What deep satisfaction do you receive in your solitude?

A witch will know she is not alone; that behind every tree in the forest, and in every dark attic is another waiting, her consciousness converging with the greater mass of witches. There is a vibrancy, a sense of solidarity.

Under the gray luminescence of the bald moon you feel it brewing, your vitality.

Sometimes it feels like you are part of an army. When you find another witch, you treat her with great respect, naturally. You want to be with her, to stand arm in arm. To feel you are all part of the same sisterhood, the same family. When she kisses you on the cheek, and puts her arm in your arm, courting you, you feel mad with love.

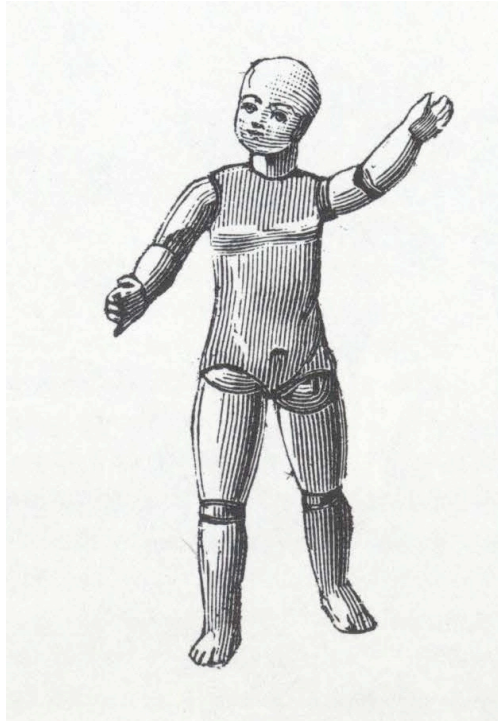


Figure 49

*Quickening*

Quick, come alive.

Feel the kicking.  
Quell the kicking.

Are you quick?

To kill, or to curse.  
To return to normal.  
To let be, or to be.  
To restore one's self.  
Or not.

Signs of life?  
Take Cotton Root Bark,  
Pennyroyal and tansy.  
Take Evening Primrose,  
Slippery Elm, with some nutmeg, and  
with some parsley,  
then sleep, wait, bathe,  
and then breathe.



**AN INITIATION, A SECRET MATTER**

*Here, There*  
*Massachusetts 1922, 1942*



Figure 50



A pair. A pair of girls, of women: sisters. A pair of shoes, of pearls. A piano. A pair of woolen coats.

Two scenes, a stage. Broken window, broken branch. Behind the broken window is a cold basement, walls lined with wooden crates. Crates that were once full of hard things like shoe buckles, and whiskey, and tender things, too, like cradles and cotton diapers. Against the wet stone there is your father's piano. Mahogany brown and upright. Keys white as teeth. Perhaps the window isn't broken. Perhaps it is only coated with crackling frost. It is late November, after all.

Here in front of the basement window, Linnea the sister-head, the mad one, she holds your hand, loosely, like a doll would. Here she holds your hand, and there you hide your hand.

There in front of the woods, where it is cold, where they placed you like furniture, a pair of arm-chairs: maybe you warm yourself, maybe you touch lightly a small something.

A yellow photograph, a scratch on your nail, a piece of grass. Do you imagine you are somewhere else, knowing full well that this is it? Your eyelids droop with languor. But your back knows something else and straightens against cold air slicing at your neck and ankles. Your shoulders straighten against guilt. You could be going to church, to a family dinner. Though it is a serious occasion, Linnea is convinced this is a game, a joke she doesn't get.

Linnea does not finger anything from the past; she holds tightly to herself. Her eyes are confused about the present, about the future. Her eyes are merry, in that they are quick, skeptical. Her neck pulls away, stiffly, like a scientist's. She does not understand what a photograph is. But she suspects it is some kind of theft. She lurches like a dog, afraid of what they might take from her, what they might make her do.

Here your woolen coat consumes you, and there your white legs emerge like lovely tusks, like soft swords. Your sheer panty-hose are loose, soft, scented with powder. You hide a rip above the knee. You are worried all day that the rip will show, increase.

Linnea wears velveteen pumps, and you your mesh peep-toes. Linnea wears her white floral pin made of ivory. She slides away, slants away. This photograph is not of her. You look straight on, holding your new leather hand purse. You sit delicately upon the fallen beech tree that is consumed by nests of lichen and mushroom blooms. You sit as if you belong there, in your dress-clothes and overcoat, all upon the forest-floor.

The window isn't broken, the tree is not dead. Here sit, here stand, like a pair of animals, like a pair of twins. Give us the same hair, the same neck. The same ears.

You look to see if you can find something that is yours: if the photo is of you, for you and if so, where it has gone. You notice the white mouth beneath the camera, how it twinges, the lips curling to the side. A momentary smile: a twitch. You slowly close your hand around itself, onto what's yours.

Here, you've been dressed.  
You know what's yours and  
what's hers. You've been  
told. The coat with the  
white buttons. The boots  
with the nice laces that go  
all the way to the top. You  
look because he is your  
cameraman.

There, those are the woods  
behind the house. Before you  
settled into your pose, you  
looked behind you to see  
deeply, and try and find the  
edge, the other side. The trees  
went on forever, naked, white,  
and staring. You look and you  
looked.

Here you are five and she is six. You are twenty-five and she is twenty-six. You have four children. Here she loves you; she protects you. Like a mindless brother.

You watched her hands, and walked inside them as they traveled and touched the world.

Remember. Your father was away. He sent a gift, signed, "For the girls." It was a white communion dress. You did not dare to try it on to see which girl it fit. But you watched as Linnea touched the lace-work, the satin under-slip, the silk collar. You supped on that dress, little drunken eyefuls of that little bride-dress. You dreamt of father, your eternal groom, coming home, all in black wool, pulling you into his coat, consuming you, into his warm quiet power.

Mother put you in the white dress for a photograph you never saw, for a coming-of-age you cannot remember.

It must be Thanksgiving; it must be a Holiday, a ceremony or a celebration.

*Here, put your hands together, just like that, hold them. Hold still.*

There, now. Now you are closer. Bodies warming like burning logs, swallowing all the oxygen in the house, laughing and falling down together like ashes. Linnea crackles and chatters, and you are mute, turned grey, like a room without air.



Figure 51



**PROTECTION**

*Linnea in Furs*

Her mouth opens as commanded but the mind, the high white forehead, looks at the wet puddles in the snow. The mouth. Her mind. White hands. White ears. Eyebrows high-painted: two fingers crooked and pointing. Cold teeth. White sky. Cars splash past. This is the field near the cemetery. Surrounded by stone walls. Surrounded by stones. Coat closes, double-breasted with secret snaps. Held close by arms. The tree and the coat and the fur and the arms and the woman. Her belly, warm and breathing. Her feet, small and child-like, inside stockings inside the leather shoes, the souls wetting, becoming wet.



Figure 52

*Agnes in Furs*

To keep warm. To hide. For protection and adornment. The black fur absorbs and reflects the winter sun. The morning sun. Casting a brown-gray shadow. Shimmering. You squint. The tree emerges, branching from your head. You hold your wrist. You keep warm. It is Sunday morning. You hide. You hide yourself in animal skin. You are photographed. An animal. Soft, yet stiff. Touchable. You attract the light. You attract the shadow. You attract the flash, the wind, like a string pulling things towards its center. You hold your wrist, like a snare, like a trap.

You seethe and gnash your teeth. A twisting, a turning. A circular incantation of the jaw.



The baby is cold. The baby must hold still. He is crying. He is laughing. He is teething. He is gnashing.

Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The sacrificial lamb. Agnus Dei. The Lion-like lamb. Saint Agnes of chastity, of gardeners, of girls, of couples, of rape victims, of virgins.

Cover me in black lambswool. Cover me in black. Cover my hands in leather so they will not burn when I reach into the fire.

A naked St. Agnes was dragged through the streets to a brothel. As she prayed during her escape, her hair grew and covered her body. She was spared.

Figure 53

A black square, a window in the air. A finger, too straight to be a finger. Branches permanently wind-driven. A rubber factory. A school. A store. A house. Brother. Husband. Boy. A church. The cemetery. Gold-stocking'd feet in tufts of silver grass. All of us, an army of two. In the back yard, all of us.



Figure 54

*Rowan Tree*



Figure 55

Rowan tree on a sacred hill,  
sacred leaves in the rowan tree.

Blooms as grass,  
blossoms as flowers,  
to be beholden by all people,  
lasts only a few hours.

A sacred rowan tree,  
on the edge of a sacred field, a sacred berry in the rowan tree.

One tree grows,  
its branches fell down,  
its branches came down,  
and still the tree remains green.



**WHOLENESS, THE SUN**

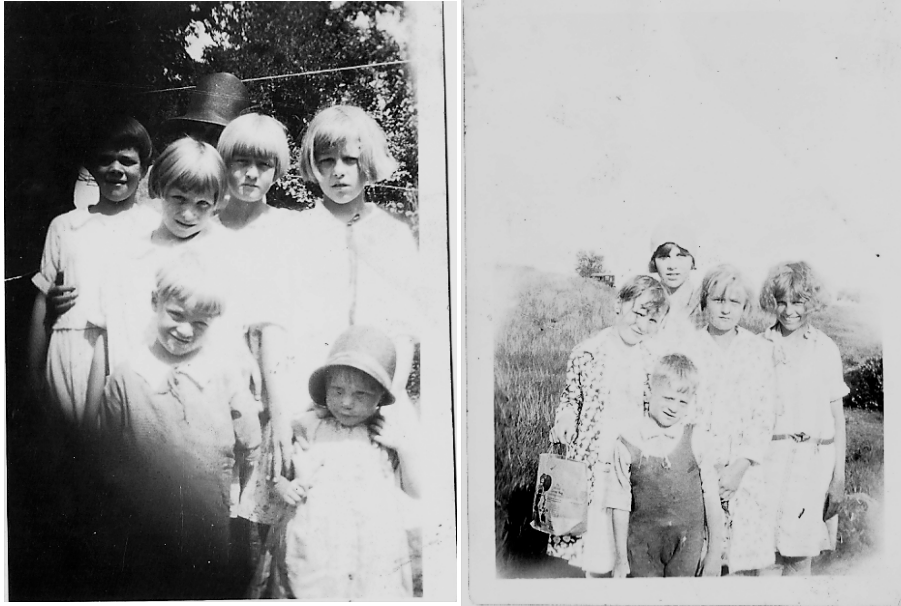
*Burn, Float*

Figure 56

God, I am supposed to love you. Instead I look for myself in photographs of other people.

In a field, or in a backyard strung with clotheslines, the children gather and huddle. They squint and tilt their heads away from the sun. Half closing their eyes in order to see better, they are trying to look at the photographer. The heat and light push their necks down, push their heads down, like punishment to which they are accustomed.

A cape of light, in the hot afternoon.

These are children who all look the same. Who all look like me. Who all looked like I looked, but for a crook in the nose, a thicker brow, a narrower lip, a more slender neck.

Their heads emerge from one white mass of clothes; they gather close as if they are in bed, sleeping together for warmth; a nest of offspring. A litter. A bed of straw and limbs. I see my face. It disappears.

The girl holds a bag that shows a picture of a child holding a bag. The child on the bag looks like a clown or a scarecrow. The children are scarecrows, frightening but not dangerous, which is more frightening. But they draw other children in because other children liked to be scared. They draw me in because I am scared.

Their thoughts are ragged, dressed up and torn down. The figures are wheat-doll effigies, already smoke, already ghosts.

The sun is whole; the sun is partial. The black shadow of the moon overtakes the sun, the hand in the photograph covers the flash. The shadow holds the children in his hand, hides the woman in the black hat. She is pleased to be behind everyone, holding them up like a scene.

The smudge, the shadow, the mistake. The children tilt away from it. It's always there.

The girl holds up that bag so it fits inside the frame of the photograph. They went apple picking. They went berry picking. They went for a swim and the bag carries her wet clothes.

These are children who went for a dip in the pond, splashing their white reflections:

All of them went floating, all of them tried to sink to the bottom: holding their breaths and losing count, pretending they weighed nothing, descending in the brown night of water, elbows and heels and backs hitting the cold green silted bottom and then in a flash swimming upward like a shuttle, speeding upward towards bright air, ready to inhale the clear blue sky and look around to see if they are triumphantly alone.

Up and down, in and out of the water, panting, mussing their hair until it curled, tangled and matted like dogs. They escaped when they felt themselves become waterlogged, scrambling onto the mud and grass and sliding their wet feet into their warm dry shoes, and slipping their cotton jumpers and smocks over their wet shoulders. Their cotton clothing attached to their clammy skin. Dark blue transparency blooming.

Would they see me there in the water: standing, watching? Would they feel they'd forgotten something, feeling their pockets for their money, and their heads for their hats, and still look back?

Is it like this: death?

This standing. This watching. This looking for eyes.

Is it you?

The eyes are not here. There are no eyes here.

My gray feet are real,  
are cool and actual like clay,

in the shallow brown water along the far bank.

First, she is hidden,

then she appears.

Not mother, not sister, not cousin, nor aunt.

Secret woman, where have you gone?



Figure 57



**THE SKY, THE NORTH STAR**

*The Eve of St. Agnes, January 21st*

As Agnes squeezes her eyes closed and tries to sleep, the owl outside asks who it is, and the white hare limps across the frozen grass of the yard and then lifts its ears and pauses. The girl pulls her cold slender fingers up to the warm breath on her lips and she prays rapidly, but quietly-- so as not to wake the three other sisters who sleep beside her in the

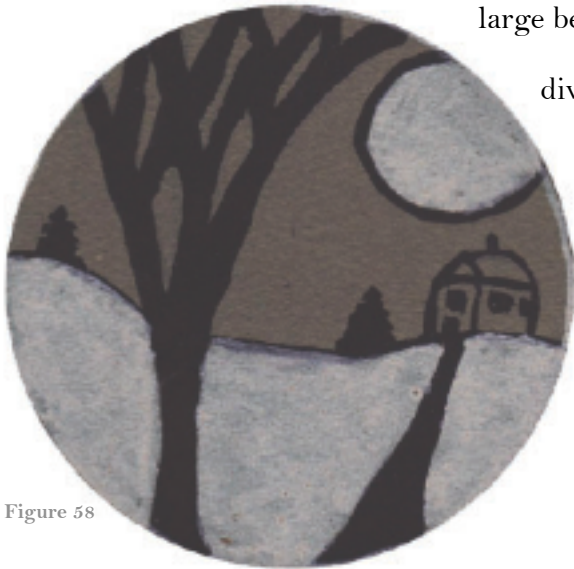


Figure 58

large bed. Agnes knows they are too young for this divination, but what if her man comes for one of them, and confuses her for another? She did not know what secrets her sisters kept in their sleep, or if they awaited a vision as well. Perhaps their dreams could slip like fish through water into hers.

It was the Eve of St. Agnes, in the month of thresholds and new beginnings, and young women and girls around the village were preparing for visions of their future husbands. Girls young as eleven refused to eat their meals for the entire day. The eventual headaches and dizzy spells were promising signs that a vision would occur that night if they continued to follow the rules of the ritual. If after fasting when the girl or young woman went to bed, she should place her hands under her head, lying on her back perfectly still, never looking behind her. Then as she fell asleep her future husband would appear as if in a dream to kiss her and feast with her. In Agnes' silent stillness on this cold winter night, her twelve-year-old body attempted the divination that would let her see her future. She prayed to her namesake, and asked the saint to bring her a vision.

*Agnes sweet and Agnes fair,  
Hither, hither, now repair;  
Bonny Agnes, let me see  
The lad who is to marry me.*

She had secretly eaten a yolkless egg boiled and filled with salt in the cavity where the yolk had been. And now her thirst was her greatest pain, as her dry mouth and lips tried to chant. *Will you bring me water in my dream?*

Perhaps the visage of the man would appear in the frosted window of Agnes' bedroom, or in the glow of the fireplace near the foot of the bed. Perhaps she might hear him knocking at her door, or rustling in the curtains. Perhaps he would appear from beneath her bed, or from within her bed, turning from a pillow into a person. Would he arrive bearing food and drink? Would his hair be long and ragged? Would he be nude or clothed? Perhaps his eyes would be wild and bright, shining in the early dawn sun gleaming through the frosted window. Perhaps he would be old like a father or young like a child. Would she recognize him or would he be a stranger?

And then when Agnes finally belonged to sleep, she saw a figure by her bedside with long golden arms and a sheer blue sheath that revealed radiant breasts that shone like two white suns in the same sky, and this princess had a dark navel that was like an eye into a deep hole of black water. Agnes stared into the womb of this woman, entranced, and surprised at how in love she felt with this being, and then appearing in front of her were black patches like bits of earth breaking through snow and everything was without sound. A dark figure dressed in black strode across a field, as if in a memory.

The ghost of her future walks through the cemetery near the chapel that has no steeple. She knows this place, the one by the sea. He walks past the gravestones and the dead

sculptures, as if he is looking for something, or as if he is leaving. The water in the cemetery well rests like a stone; the earth like iron aches under the January moon. And then the cemetery is her bedroom, and the floor is covered in soft snow. Her bridegroom, appears through the window, tiptoes across the floorboards, carrying a tray with sugarplums and brandy, almonds and tea, saffron buns and salted meats. He creaks closer into the room towards Agnes' white face and her frozen blue eyes. She cannot move, she can only watch. She is transfixed and feels her own stomach shrinking inside of her the way a fallen wet flower petal curls into itself.

He makes her shiver in this temporary death. He feeds her and holds her. He strokes her hair and kisses her hands. His hair is long and begins to grow, its ends connecting to the ends of her hair until their mutual hair falls down across them and onto the floor like wool on a loom. He brings her back to life and she can feel her heart gulping its blood slowly. In this bliss, he makes promises and promises that she cannot understand. He pours black-red roses over her body. They turn to paper. They turn to shadows.

Agnes looks closer and closer at him. He wears a red beard and a robe of blackwatch tartan; he wears boots and bear fur. And then he changes and he wears a robe of scarlet velvet, or he wears all black. He wears all white and shimmers as if painted in gold. He smells of horses and tobacco; he smells of mud and cold; of whiskey and sweat; and now of winter flowers bathed in sun. He is a shadow; he is a light; he is large; he is lean; he is alone and everywhere in the room. And he changes again and again and now he slips into the princess of this January night who leans down and kisses Agnes' golden lips and gives to her the taste of figs and pomegranates and fruits of paradise. The flavors fill her and she convulses in sudden and terrible pleasure. She hears a voice inside her head as she is weighted down deeper by the anchors of the unconscious ocean. Image after image crawls across her eyes:

shiny fish scales worn as a sleeve, a bare tree made of black stone, the veins in a man's neck pulsing under sweating skin. *Who are you?* ask her fingers and toes which reach and reach on tingling forever.

*Is it He or is it She who hath clad me with precious stones and with jewels of gold? I will have no other spouse but Him. I will seek no other. To Him I have commanded my heart; when I love Him, then am I chaste, and when I touch Him who is also Her, then am I pure and clean, and when I take Her, then am I taken only by Her. This is the love of my God. A princess inside of a prince.*



**GROWTH, REBIRTH, THE BIRCH TREE**

*Massachusetts,  
1945*

Massachusetts, 1945

Here is Aggie in Norwood, standing by the old blue spruce and balsam firs. The drooping clothesline hangs outside the frame. It is empty but for her mind's hand and its delicate touch. Here is her other hand: fingers folded in a hesitant fist.

The forefinger is cocked and pointed away from the body. Her knuckles tuck towards her thumb, as if she were holding a coin. Somewhere near the dark soft place of her palm, she holds all her heat. As if that heat were a copper secret keeping her upright. Along her left arm her nerves are taut and expectant: please make this quick. Her skin is watery, it moves over narrow silvery bones. You can see through the cloudy light to her bones: alert, uncomfortable. Stiff and restless like the architecture of antlers.

Somewhere in her house there is a velvet couch, mangy and thinning. See the black skeleton underneath. Touch and touch the soft parts until it comes away in your hand, like hair.

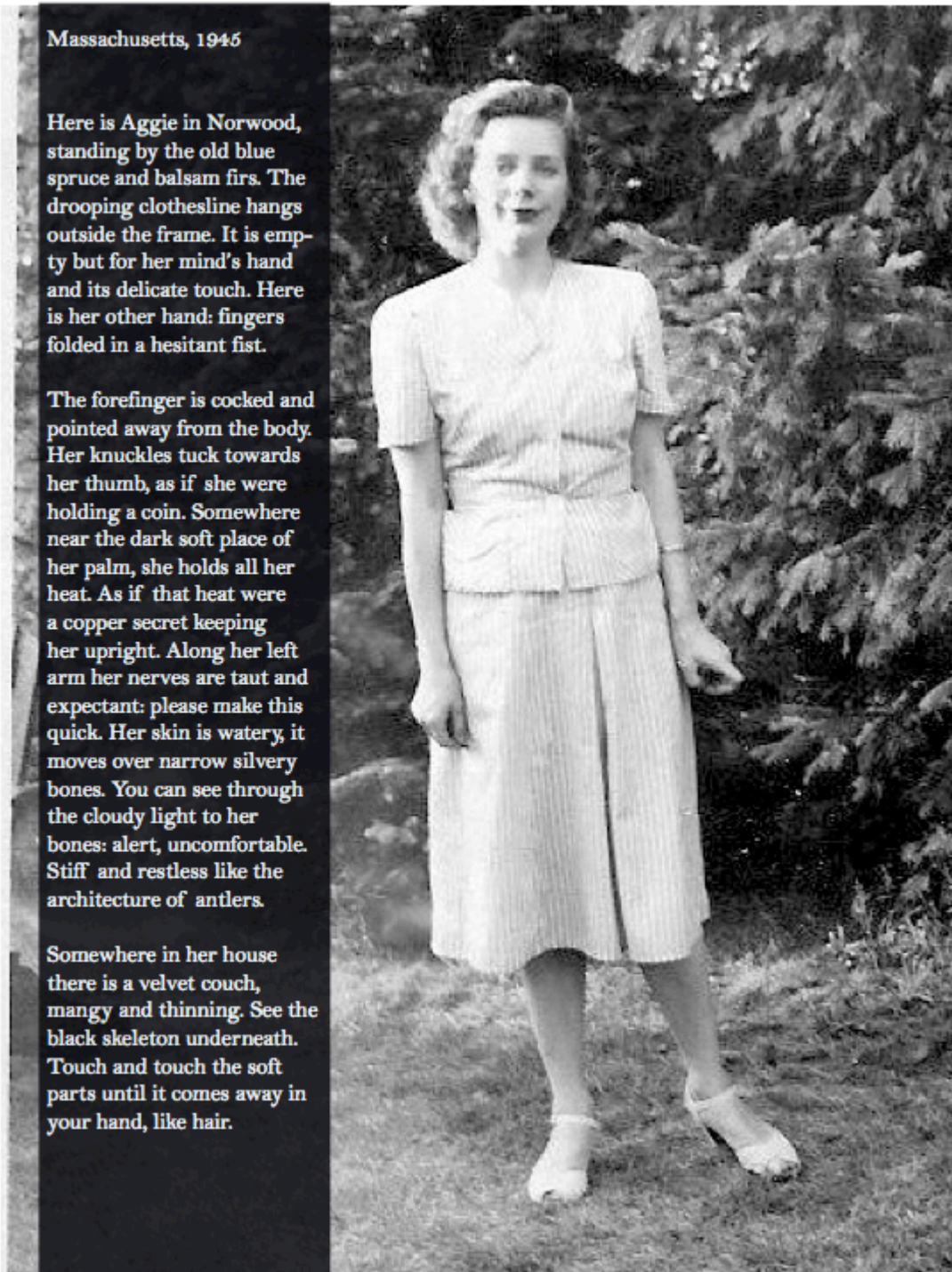


Figure 59



What the cameraman said:  
The layer of fur sheds; then  
grows again each year. The  
furniture was once living. He  
said: It comes from the gnarled  
grey bone emerging from the  
reindeer's head. You look at  
the photograph. You look at the  
hair on your arms: your arm of  
wool. You consider that you are  
like the reindeer: you are also  
made also of hollow hairs.

She is a body. She is a still  
form. She is like a deer. Her  
eyes are open forever.

It feels blindly at the braided  
laundry rope, (looks at you and  
never looks away), with timid-  
ity it sniffs out and courts its  
own death. It figures it out. It  
draws in breath. So still it dis-  
appears. You cannot kill it with  
your shot.

Her mouth is closed, a frown  
perceived as a smile. She sucks  
on a sore front tooth. Her gaze  
is in her mouth and it pushes  
against you.

You know how it feels (to  
be scared). You look at your  
hands. Her gaze gets inside  
you, to the wet wall of your  
heart. There her mouth attaches  
to something in you that is soft  
and mewling and sad. You want.  
And together you nuzzle, as  
you gaze on her gaze. Her eyes  
stare, they stow away some-  
thing terrible. She is looking  
past you, through you — like  
her hand pointing away, tilted  
and waiting for the last slow  
click of the shutter.

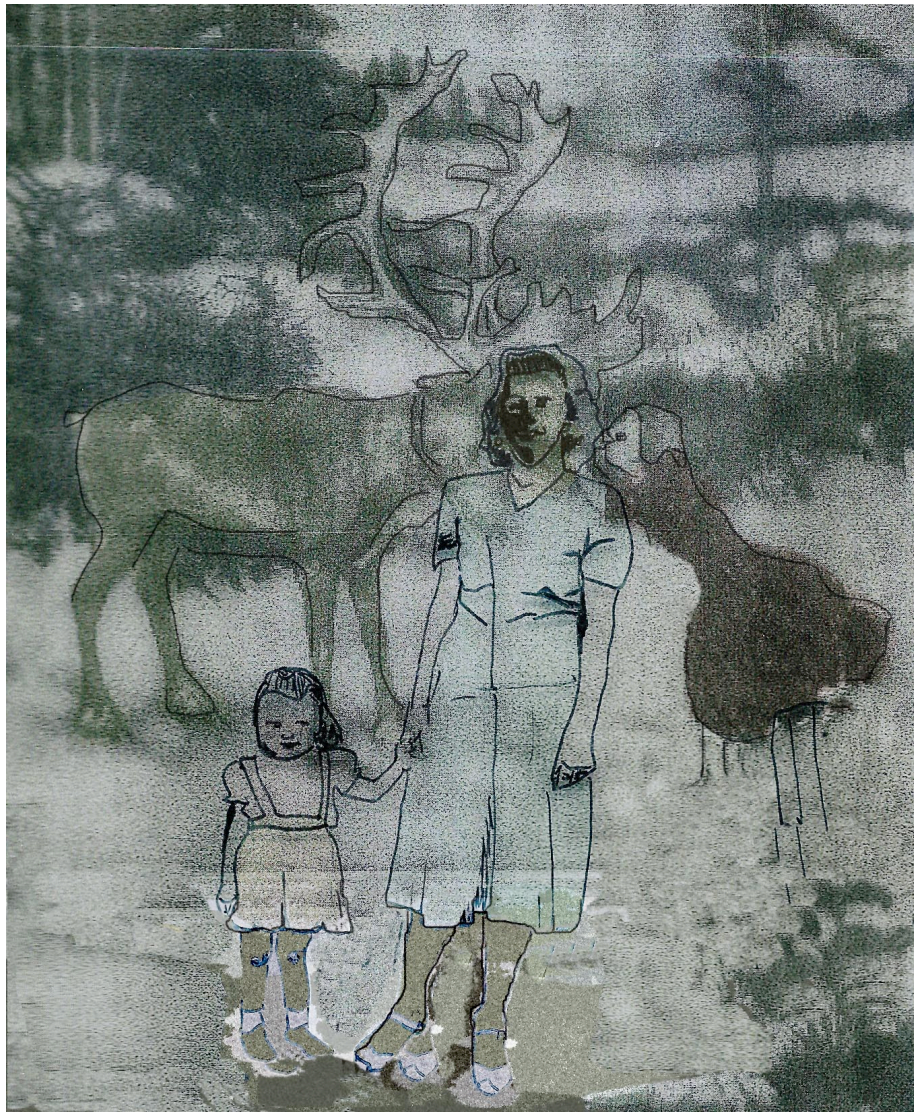


Figure 61 Agnes with Antlers



**MOVEMENT, PROGRESS**



Figure 62

### *Immigration*

*Geta Bonäs, Åland Islands, (Ahvenanmaa,) Finland, early 1900s*

They were island-people, accustomed to isolation and water, and yet they never learned how to swim in the ocean—a place of death, a place of rising waves and of hands that take and never give back. Families stayed on the islands until the waves displayed their empty hands, the fish were no longer enough, and there grew a sense of begging, of a need that surpassed reason, until they began to wonder what lay beyond the Baltic. As the new century approached, news of work came by boat over the red sea foam, over what the old folks called *waves of bloody hair*.

The news named the States where industries boomed. *Minnesota. Michigan. Massachusetts.* There you can build railroads and dig *Gold. Copper. Iron.* And the families in the congregation listened to hear their sound, a familiar word that called for them, maybe Fish. Maybe lumber. Maybe sewing, baking, cleaning. They waited in the church, leather shoes on dusty wooden floors, linen dress-skirts stained brown at the hem due to lack of soap and time,

bodies with tired legs and rounded backs in the pews, and wool-pants too short on lanky boys who volunteered to go, to hear their name spoken clearly inside the promise of labor. They all listened so they could raise their hands and announce themselves anew. Here. *I'm here.* I'll go there. Here because there, thousands of miles away, is something that I know, something with my name on it.

They would board the boat to Stockholm, the SS Heimdel, and then board another boat, the SS Megantic to Boston. They were hesitant to give up their land on the islands, though the land had produced nothing that year in the harvest. It was a good piece of land. It overlooked the north Baltic Sea. The property had a few apple trees that bore fruit, and an overgrown meadow that once was awash with grain.

Many Åland sailors left home when they jumped ship in foreign harbors, unwilling to face their wives at home with their slender faces and pregnant bellies, asking about their husbands' pay, and what gifts they had brought back from their travels.

How the women's backs hurt and how they waited on the rocks for the ships to come in, and for their men to drink and dance in the city and spend their gold on tobacco and candy. If their men did come home, they would sleep soundly in their home-bed, while their wives lay awake beside them staring at the wall, with their warm palms open against their face, wondering about socks that needed darning, and coffee in the morning, and other women in other harbors.

The Kallstroms came to find work in the great shoe industry of the Eastern states. They came to be shoemakers, carpenters, bakers and maids.

Algot first worked as a laborer, then a carpenter. Then he was a manufacturer of ladies heels at the Emerson Shoe Company. Algot used sturdy materials to construct the shoes: steel shanks supported the arches, a layer of natural cork lay beneath the leather insoles; and brass tacks secured the heels to the soles. The uppers, on the ladies boots, were made of calfskin, suede, and shell cordovan— a shiny leather that comes from the backside of a horse.

Horsehair was used on the girls' shoes, and it was also used in their stiff mattresses, and in the plaster in the walls of their three-story house.

The shoes, like the beds and walls, like the people, over time would soften and become dull. In the spring the shoes could be cobbled and corrected. The beds would be flipped over and put out in the sun to air out. The walls would be washed and repainted with good lead-based paint, with colors like the palest blue or blonde to match the wind and sun.

-----

They say it was seven thousand Ålanders who got their papers to leave around the year 1900. That was a quarter of the island population. Most of the Kallstrom family left early on, and then the few remaining stayed on for a few more decades. Only a handful of folks in the family stayed until their deaths in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



**THE SELF**

*A Family Tree*

Maria asked her father Isak what his mother was like.  
 She was a baker who came from the islands of Finland. She was quiet.  
 Agnes asked her father Algot what his mother was like.  
 She was a shoemaker. She was often tired.

Julia Maria asked her father what his mother was like.  
 She was a seamstress from Bonäs, Geta. She was very clean  
 Mathilda asked her father what his mother was like.  
 She was a washwoman from Saltvik. Nearly blind.

Edla asked her father what his mother was like.  
 She was a servant from Finström. She was shy.  
 Ingalill asked her father what his mother was like.  
 She was a farmehand from Finström. She was a thief.

Vendla asked her father what his mother was like.  
 She was a cook from Lumparland. She was strange  
 Serafia asked her father what his mother was like.  
 She was a mead-maker from Mariehamn. She was smug.

Lena asked her father what his mother was like.  
 She was an innkeeper from Jomala. She was careful.  
 Brigit asked her father what his mother was like.  
 She was a fish peddler from Jomala. She was timid.

Beata asked her father what his mother was like.  
 She was a glove maker from Hammarland. She was superstitious.  
 Synnöve asked her father what his mother was like.  
 She was a midwife. She was one-handed.

Caisa asked her father what his mother was like.  
 She was a wet nurse from Sund who killed her own child.  
 Ånka asked her father what his mother was like.  
 She was a weaver from Sund. She was sleepless.

Tekla asked her father what his mother was like.  
 She was a sheepshearer from Vårdö. She was unkind.  
 Dagmar asked her father what his mother was like.

Tindra asked her father what his mother was like.  
 Saga asked her father what his mother was like.

Gudrun asked her father what his mother was like.  
*Bóthildr* asked her father what his mother was like.

*Gunnvör* asked her father what his mother was like.  
*Gull* asked her father what his mother was like.  
 Guld asked her father what his mother was like.

Gud asked her father what his mother was like.

God asked her father what his mother was like.

Od asked her father what his mother was

her father what his mother

father what his

what  
 ha  
 a  
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 akk  
 Akka,

old woman, asked herself what her self was like.

*My Own Elegy: The Nordic Dead-Child*

Figure 63

Father left me on the icy ground,  
 mother on the bare ice,  
 brothers left me in the breathing water,  
 sisters in the damp marshes.  
 They left me just like a baby hare  
 on the ice to roll around,  
 in the marsh to wriggle along,  
 in the clearing, babbling alone.

A man said: Take the child to the swamp  
 Then brother said: take it to the water  
 and Uncle: dash her against the wall.  
 My mother's heart would not let it happen . . .  
 A man ordered it to be taken to the bog,  
 the brothers ordered it to be thrown into the stream,  
 the father said throw it into the waves,  
 But the mother could not do it . . .

This half-moon old child spoke.  
 I was but two-weeks old, but I defended myself.  
 The man who tried to kill me was ashamed and cast a copper boat, an iron-bottomed boat.  
 He sat in his boat, in his cast sail-boat.  
 He sailed the red sea, with his red sails, to the lowest heavens,  
 to the mouth of the maelstrom, to the maw of the maelstrom.

*History of My Birth-death*

A baby, I was taken away from my mother and given to my father.  
 I dreamed that they tried to throw me in the marsh or bury me under the house.  
 They took me away from her because she was sick. She was dying.  
 I was barely there, just a wisp of life.  
 When I was older, she came back to life, but I did not know her.  
 Sometimes she was near me, but I could not see her.

My father, he fed me and he taught me to talk and to walk.  
 His sisters surrounded me, and his mother mothered me, though she was dead.

But I was in-between worlds, a half-ghost, and I could see all my siblings:  
 Dead-children who still lingered at their death, looking for a name.  
 Do you know my name?  
 Have you seen them or heard them, these beings, these dead-children?

## (1. At the place of burial or abandonment)

in the forest,  
under water in the lake, or under tree or stone,  
in the cattle-shed or on the floor of an empty cottage  
at the top of a windy hill,  
or in a bog or in a well  
in a basement or an attic  
or in a mystical place

## (2. Time of encounter)

in the evening  
at night  
seven-yearly  
within a fixed time  
until the normal time of death  
phase of rite of passage  
at regular annual intervals

## (3. Form of the being)

invisible child  
naked child  
small child  
gigantic child  
like a troll or elf  
with a death mark  
in flames  
in a coil, or a bundle  
as a bird or another animal  
in a dream

## (4. Behavior of the being)

cries like a child  
makes a noise  
laughs  
changes its voice  
calls by name  
answers when addressed  
revengees imitation  
follows you  
moves quickly  
leads astray  
weighs down on a load  
rides on the back  
frightens you

frightens an animal  
foretells disaster  
reveals a hiding place  
reveals parents  
asks for a name  
suckles its mother  
cries for its mother  
leads you astray  
puts a charm on the mother to kill her  
appears to the grandmother, aunt, uncle or other relative  
kills mother  
kills father

(5. Expulsion of the being)

banish it  
swearing it away  
addressing the being  
burial in the haunting place  
taking the body to the graveyard  
discovering the crime  
striking it  
praying for it  
baptizing it, name giving  
baptizing it with two names  
shooting it  
knifing it, with a steel knife  
crossing running water

(6. Origin of the being)

murdered child  
(drown, frozen to death, violence, war)  
unbaptized child  
unburied child  
aborted fetus  
dead born child  
after-birth  
abandoned child  
suicide (mother and child), murdered (mother and child)

*Medieval Church Laws concerning infanticide, Scandinavia*

A.

Every child that is born in our country is to be fed. Unless it is born deformed in such a way that the face is turned where the back of the neck should be, or the toes where the heels should be. Such a child must be taken into the church and be converted from paganism and laid down in the church and left there to die.

B.

Every child must be fed and baptized and taken to church if it has a human head.

C.

Children with animal characteristics are to remain unfed and be buried in the place of the devil.

D.

The mother must not give it food. The chin is between the shoulders and the back of the neck is in front on the chest, the thigh muscles are in the front part of the legs and the eyes in the back of the neck, it has seal's fins and a dog's head. It must be taken to *forve* (the devil's place) and buried (in a heap of stones) or where neither human beings nor cattle walk.

E.

There is another child that is born with hairy skin; there is hairy skin where the face should be. It is clear to all people that this human being must not receive food in order to grow up. It is to be taken and carried into church and blessed, and put in front of the church door. The nearest relation must guard it until the spirit has gone. It must be buried in the churchyard and prayers must be said for its soul by that one who can do it best. Let God's will be done!

F.

And if the child is dead when the people come to the mother and if they then see marks of a hand or cord, if the child has been strangled or suffocated and she (the mother) speaks and is conscious then the mother must be her child's killer. But if she is delirious when people came to her, then let her go.



**WATER, FLOW, THAT WHICH CONDUCTS**

*Lady of the Water*

I am the Lady of Shalott,  
Pale Ophelia,  
the lady of waves.  
A little death was all I wanted,  
now I sleep in the black stream water,  
floating out to the green shadowy sea,  
part of the family of maidens,  
the Billows, the Widows, the Sisters,  
through which one can see the heavens,  
skin transparent as air,  
welling, frothing, pitching,  
flecks of red foam in my bloody-hair,  
cool waves at my feet as I rise and eat the clouds—  
the foggy shadows and soft white sun,  
I rock back and forth, and back into myself,  
curling and laying open myself,  
asking for more, from you, like a hungry ghost

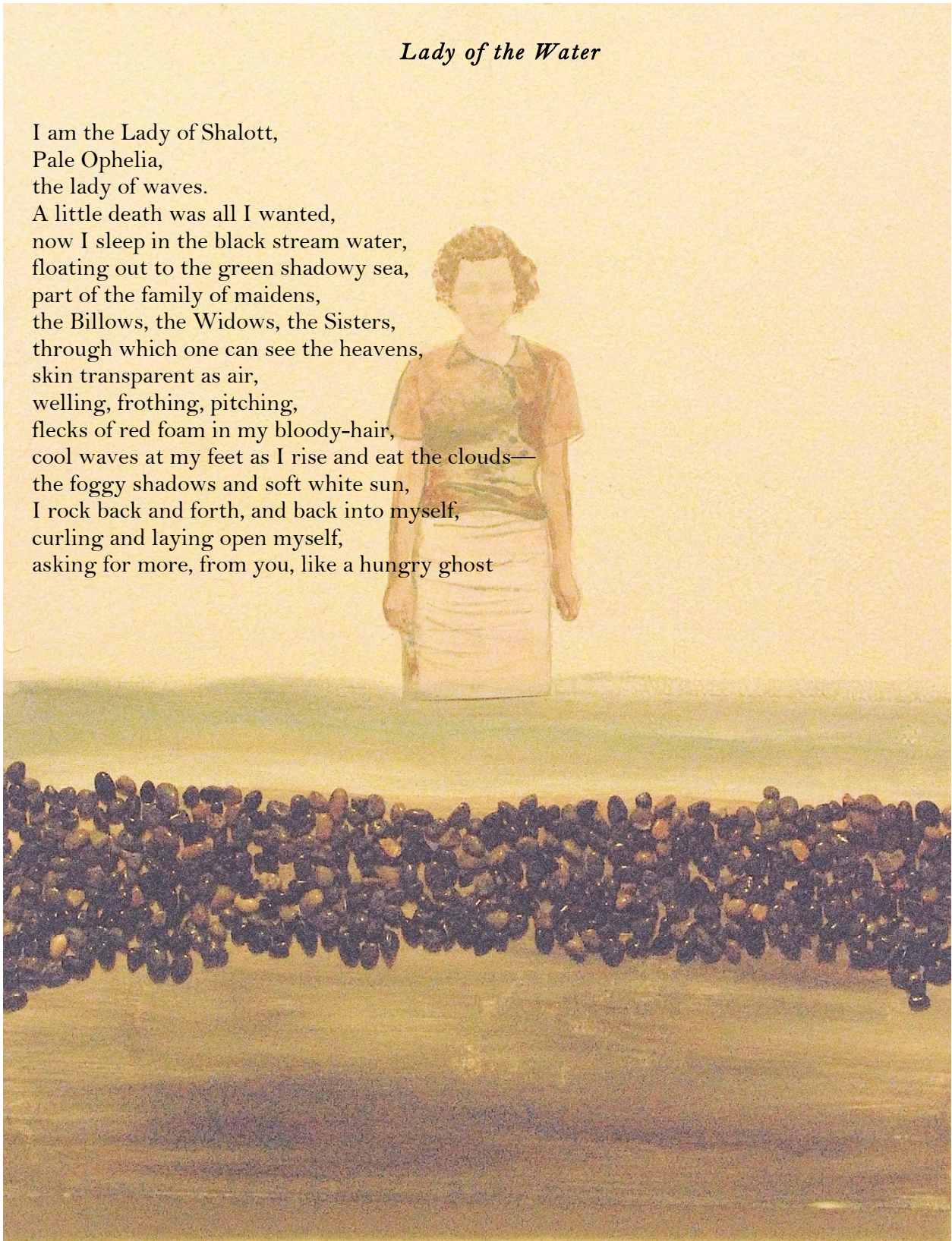


Figure 64

*A placeless dead child between heaven and earth*

If you see the ghost of a dead child in the place where its body was hidden, in the middle of the day in a swamp, where it is crying and warbling and calling for its mother, you shall make the sign of the cross, close your eyes, banish the being, and then run through the nearest stream of running water. Afterwards you may find that your face is wet not with the liquid of the stream, but from the secretions of your own face; that is, you will be weeping, though you feel no pain, only great fear and a great sense of guilt.



Figure 65



**EMERGENCE**

*Old House, New House*  
*Norwood, Massachusetts 2012*

We pulled into the driveway to my father's old house. I had changed quite a few things after taking over the mortgage. I had committed to returning the house to its original turn-of-the-century glory with crown-moldings, picture windows, wood floors, and weathered shingling in Federal Blue. It had been the better part of a year since my father had been at the house.

"It's blue." He said, stepping out of the car.

"The way it used to be, you know, originally," I replied.

"That must have cost you an arm and a leg. I would have done the painting, you know, if you could have waited."

I was calculating the cost in my head. My eyes darted over the varying shapes of the shingles. The ragged edges curled up in spots, graying and splitting, following the grains of the wood. They looked rustic, the way they were supposed to.

He was already walking away from me, towards the front door. He tried to open it, pushing at the usual spot, knowing how it stuck. He put his shoulder into the space a foot or so above the doorknob, then turned the knob as he heaved forward, but the door was not budging.

"Wait. I have to keep it locked, now, dad."

I edged by him to open the door, and then I let him in first.

"Did you notice the front door, dad? It's eggshell white now. I painted it myself." He didn't respond.

The living room was twice as large now. I had knocked out the wall that separated it from the dining room, creating one large space that featured the brick fireplace in the center. I had torn up the blue-green rugs to reveal the original oak floors, which I had refinished, and then I covered the middle of the room with a large red and brown oriental rug; a wool one with little floral designs. I walked into the large, clean space, dropping my purse on the ground and circling around with my arms in the air.

“Look at how spacious it is now.”

He crossed his arms. Then he uncrossed his arms and stuffed his hands into his pant pockets, fiddling some coins and objects in there. He tightened his mouth into a thinking-pout.

“What about the kitchen,” He said.

I told him it was in the same spot, but he just said, “Everything’s different now.”

“Not everything, but, it’s a good thing, Dad.”

The curtains with the little white chickens were gone. The orange linoleum was pulled up and replaced with black-and-white ceramic checker tiles. The backsplash and countertop were slabs of pink and gray speckled granite now. He nodded continuously as he walked around, fingering the copper pots and pans that hung on the wall behind the new gas stove. He pulled open the dishwasher door to look inside. He went through the cabinets, but they were empty, having recently been painted eggshell white.

I narrated, “It’s much airier now. You can move around and get things done more easily. You can really breathe in here and stretch out. I installed a few more lights in the ceiling, too.”

“Do you still have my coffee-maker?” He was bent down on one knee, looking under the sink and in the drawers. “My silverware?” He looked in the pantry and broom closet.

“Where are my tools?”

“Most of your things are in boxes and suitcases in the spare bedroom. Don’t worry. Everything is labeled. We can go through everything later.”

He swept past me and climbed the stairs to the spare bedroom. Suddenly my phone rang. I searched for it in my purse then found the flashing, buzzing thing. It was my sister. I picked up, “Hey . . . Yeah, we’re here. He’s looking through his old stuff already . . . See you soon.”

I remembered his mail, and grabbed the most recent bundle, which was sitting on the windowsill. *Isak Källström, 221 Winter Street*. I had a box full of the Sunday newspapers from this past year to give him too.

My father was sitting on a wooden chair in the spare room. He had a small box on his lap. He had already begun to sift through things. There were milk crates filled with books, suitcases filled with clothes, and cardboard boxes filled with his other belongings stacked on top of the desk, the love-seat, and the floor next to the twin bed.

“I guess different is good.” There was disappointment in his voice. But I smiled and just shook my head, quietly accepting his attempt at readjustment.

I turned away from him and I stared into the foggy bureau mirror, which reflected the long mirror on the wall, which showed the side of my father’s face. He scratched at his ear, pulling the lobe; then he cupped his hand lightly over his hair, feeling at the static strands that rose to meet his palm. His hair was like goose down now, fine and soft. He rested his eyes and his mouth settled into a gentle closed smile. I saw now that he held a photograph of a woman in his hand.

I spoke, “Who’s that?”

“My mother: your grandmother as a young woman. She was very beautiful.”

I had never known those photos were of my grandmother. I had just believed they were random relatives from long ago, since I didn’t recognize them. There were photos of her sister, Linnea, too. And other relatives whom my father could name but had never mentioned before.



Figure 66

My father continued, “She actually hated being photographed.” I frowned in response. He said, “We used to have this old camera that my father operated. He brought it out when he was in a good mood, even if none of us wanted to be in front of it.” I smiled, and leaned over his shoulder, looking at the photo of my grandmother, looking for resemblances.

I brought up the house. “You know how you were going to sell the house? It’s worth a lot more now. But I think I want to keep it. It’s like an heirloom now. It’s the one thing that

hasn't changed in this family." He stared at the wall above the bed now, as if he didn't hear me.

"This is the room where Magda and Selma slept. My mother slept in that room." He pointed down the hall. He continued, "I slept upstairs in the attic with Kerby. Christ, was it hot up there in the summer. Did you put an air conditioner in?" He was wiping his forehead as if he were sweating.

"It's all centralized now, the cooling and heating system."

He mumbled that it was probably a good thing I did that. He pushed himself up out of the chair and I heard him walk through the hall and try the doorknob that opened onto the attic staircase. The door was locked.

He shouted over his shoulder at me. "Why are you keeping me out? What are you keeping up there?"

I followed him out into the hall. His voice became small and high-pitched as his throat constricted with emotion. He rubbed the whiskers on his chin and pulled at his lower lip, which stuck out now like a slug. He placed his forehead gently against the attic door and he let his arms hang loosely, balancing his body on the one point of his head against the door, like a child in tantrum.

"You always said if I went up there that I'd let the mice out. Or the bats. I'm going to have it cleaned. I mean, Dad, it's a mess right now, so you don't *need* to go up there." The truth was I hadn't been up there for many months, and was not ready to sort through all of the junk and family belongings.

He groaned. "*What I need*," my father said, "*is . . .*" his voice became low and punctuated, then he was silent. I inhaled the smell of fresh paint. I put my hand on his shoulder, which tensed under my touch.

“We should eat something, dad. It’s getting late. And you’re probably tired.”

“It’s already dark out. I didn’t nap today.” He moved and was standing in the door to the master bedroom now, looking out the window. A flash of headlights beamed into the window from my sister’s car.

I cooked chicken potpie for dinner that night. Dad said that was something his mother used to make. I thought it was a good idea to do something comforting and hardy. While I worked in the kitchen he sat at the new dining room table, leafing through last Sunday’s paper. I kept saying, “You’re really going to like *this*,” just like he used to say when he had cooked for me. His medicines were lined up in front of me on top of the bread box. I read quietly through the names as I cooked, as if they were ingredients in my recipe. The meds had been carefully planned so as not to interfere with one another: some of them for his heart, and some of them for his head. Nevertheless he insisted on having his drink, two fingers of whiskey, something he had been forbidden to have for the last year, up until now. Now that he was back home, he wanted things to be normal again.

His reading glasses were perched on the middle of his bony nose, causing it to redden. His hair shined under the light of the new chandelier that tinkled whenever he shifted in his chair. I could tell by the way he raised his chin into the air, and looked down over his nose, that he was reading slowly, but now and then he pursed his lips, or turned his head to look out the window at the empty birdfeeder that swung in the night breeze, tapping at the window. Across the table from him, my sister flipped through a magazine.

“What’s in the news, dad? Anything interesting?”

“Well, what do you think?” He squinted his eyes and looked down his nose at the paper. Then he said, “It’s all junk. Just junk, anyway.” He cleared his throat and closed the

paper, folding it neatly into a narrow rectangle. He had a graceful way of reading and folding the newspaper, as if it were the American flag.

“I always hated how it makes your fingers turn black— newsprint.” I laughed, as I layered the raw piecrust over the chicken and vegetable stuffing.

“The food smells good,” my sister said softly. I gave her an appreciative glance and walked back into the kitchen, humming to myself. She turned to face dad, as he stared at the window. The glare on the window was a reflection of me in the kitchen. But it was very warped and blurry. My sister followed me into the kitchen and stuck her finger in the pie for a taste.

“So he goes into these trances now?” my sister said to me.

“Yeah, like a kid daydreaming,” I said.

“What do you do?”

“Nothing. It’s like someone sleepwalking. You don’t wake them up. It could kill them. It’s such a fragile state.” I was half-joking, but my sister turned and just kept looking at our father, in a trance of her own.

I used a fork to push down the top layer of pie dough along the edge of the dish, trying to make pretty scalloped edges. I was an artist; I was a surgeon. Then I took a long sharp knife and made three tiny slits in the middle of the flabby dough. It was like a pale belly, a pouch of thin lukewarm skin.

*We need to clean the attic*, I said to the pie. I remembered as a child exploring various boxes up there, organizing them and thinking the junk was pirate’s treasure, a secret bounty. Was I stealing it now? It had always felt already stolen.



**A SEPARATION,  
INHERITANCE, HOME**

*Home, A Separation*

On a bluff by the Baltic Sea stands a house moored to the land like an old tooth in a dog's mouth. Partially absorbed into the rocky crust of the land, the timber walls have become rot with wet and infused with the stench of fish flesh. Humans no longer inhabit the place, but birds nest in the bedrooms and bats roost in the attic eaves. An occasional fox will find shelter and rear its kits in the house's cove-like cabinets.

It was known for many decades as simply Mother's House. The woman there had bore twelve children, though the rumor was that she had reared twenty-four. No one seems to remember her name, nor her face. She was not anonymous, just forgotten. All of her children had hair as white as snow. There were many unknown fathers, but the one man that was remembered was of the name Kallstrom, a half-Finn half-Swede who was thought to also carry traces of Russian and Sami blood.



Figure 68



Figure 67

The sides of the two-story house are spattered white with salt-spray. Patchy green lichen are attached on the lee side, fluttering from their place of anchor. The house slopes a bit with the wave of the hill. One can feel the slope in the kitchen, sliding towards the oven, and on the staircase where it feels like you are walking sideways rather than up. The two bunkrooms on the second floor have sloped ceilings just tall enough for the tallest man around. Practically a boat, the house moves with the wind and has become a fixture on the horizon.

The basement, like a ship's bilge, was always dark and dank. The Kallstrom children that are still alive recall grabbing the bucket and mop to swab the kitchen floors in the spring. They'd leave all the doors and windows open for one hour to let the sun and air inside. To clear out any bad spirits and diseases from the winter. The sun would dry the floors and the flies would get in and then get out.

The garden sloped away from the south end of the house like a slack jaw. The mother of the place, and all subsequent mothers who had lived there, had built and maintained a raised bed that slid towards the sea.

An old cow shed and chicken coop have since collapsed into the ground.

*The Other Side of Home*  
*A dream*

*You know, you have a run in your stocking?* said the man with the blurry eyes. Linnea hummed in affirmation. She looked out the window to see a man wearing a white doctor's coat and surgeon's scrubs step up to the bus stop and light a cigarette. He was handsome. *Was that a spot of blood on his coat sleeve?* She looked closer at it. The stain was in the shape of something that looked familiar. The man in the seat across the aisle was still leaning towards her hoping for conversation. She did not want to look at him to see him staring boogie-eyed at her legs. So, she tried to make eye contact with the handsome but lonely doctor whom she recognized suddenly. As the bus moved forward, her head turned to look at the past. She turned her white paper wristlet around and around.

I slept for nine days. It was the summer of 1943. I would wake in the middle of the night now and then to drink a glass of cold water and squeeze a lemon into my mouth. After the first two days I was no longer even hungry. I kept the room dark and slept on the sofa across from the window. I left the window open at night and listened to the chant of the cicadas. On the eighth night I dreamed.

Linnea dreamed of an attic room accessible only by a ladder that was inside of a hidden closet. At the top of the ladder was a door in the ceiling, which was the floor of the attic. She pushed the door up and open, and crawled into the attic space where she could stand up. It was lit by natural light that came in from the windows on either end. How had she not noticed those windows from outside when looking at the house before? The room was mostly empty but for

a few knick-knacks and boxes along the sides of the space, which had sloped walls reflecting the A-framed roofline. A porcelain marionette with a white painted face and a clown costume hung delicately on a wire stand. Inside its clown suit, there was no body, but it had porcelain hands and feet. The hands made tiny fists.

Once I was there I could not find my way out. Where had that door in the floor gone? All the boards looked the same. So I crawled out the window that faced the east. The window swung forward and I climbed out onto the roof, which I recognized housed the back mud-room. I scraped along until I noticed another area I had never known existed. It was a flat roof with a large glass green house on top of it. I lifted myself up to this level and walked over to the green house which seemed to be well-taken care of, although a bit unkempt. Green ferns spilled over pink ceramic pots and I could hear the trickling of a fountain from within.

Then a hand seized Linnea by the shoulder and told her she must get inside before “they found her.” The man with no face seemed kind. He said he had a place for her to hide. It was in the basement. A back-staircase from the green house led them past several floors featuring hallways with closed doors. She wondered why she could not stay inside those rooms. They entered the basement which had only small windows at the top just above the surface of the ground. There was a large wooden closet that smelled of mice and chicken. Inside the closet was a bed stuffed with chicken feathers. A single pet mouse lived inside a cage on the inside of the closet, at the foot of the bed.

I slept inside my bed in the closet, which was very comfortable, and I dreamed of long green lawns, and summer lovers. My desire for the outdoors grew and I began to lose track of how long I was being hidden in the basement. On occasion my protector would come down and give me plates of food. I wanted to ask him if I could leave, but I was afraid to talk to him unless he talked to me first. But something inside of me was trying to live, though my apathy and my pity for my room-mate the poor mouse, were very powerful.

When she escaped, she ran barefoot across the green grass in front of the house, until she came to a yellow egg that was rolling along the ground in front of her, making slow progress in a perpendicular direction. She scooped up the egg and placed it next to her ear. Linnea said, "Where are you going?" and the egg suddenly felt very warm against her face. It made a faint ringing sound, like the way a glass bowl sings. It could not speak in words, of course, but somehow she knew where it wanted to go and so she followed it as it rolled along the grass.

On the way home I felt a great weight drop from within me, but also from above me, as if I had lifted a bucket of water from the well and then turned it over, releasing it onto my own body. I could not walk. My legs were like wood or stone: stiff and heavy. From between my legs flew a red bird and then a red fish swam out into the air from the same place. A red frog appeared in my palms as I reached down to my thighs. And each time something new came out it felt as if it bit me and the biting continued even after this entire family of red creatures spilled across the green lawn like a path or a great veil and train in front of me and behind me.

Linnea was wearing a borrowed house-dress and a pair of her mother's stockings. When she found herself awake, in her own bed, she realized she had painted herself white to cover the red. A white shadow of her body remained on the sheets, wet, where she had slept. Her main concern was now having to get new stockings to replace the ones her mother had lent her. And she thought a trip to the doctor might be wise, as well. She hoped she wouldn't need surgery or electric shock therapy, but if she had to, she wouldn't mind staying for a while if they'd take her. Otherwise she'd try and sleep it off—this strange feeling of being very tired and very confused.



**BREAKTHROUGH, DAY**

*Painting the Sun*  
*Massachusetts, 1989*

Magda had always wanted very much to paint. Now she was older and had a lot of time alone. So she painted. "But, not *really*," she thought. There was always something missing. She had taken art classes for adults. She had even sold a few paintings. One to her brother and the other to a man at the flea market who found one of her portraits "delightful." He had said this while laughing slightly. It hadn't meant to be a funny or even cheerful piece. Magda had noticed that the man had a lazy eye or a glass eye, she couldn't tell. But it seemed to make him like her painting.

Magda had taken the work quite seriously, a melancholy study of the woods behind the house, actually, (of those skinny pale birch trees), but the man was kind and did not negotiate the price when she said, "Twenty dollars." She knew what she was worth.

She liked painting very much but she did not like that she was not very good at it. It made her sad to think too much about it— how she wasn't very good. It made her remember better painters, and the real paintings she'd seen. It made her remember her husband whose paintings were so good they made her feel ill. But her paintings only felt good when she was painting them. She could not really look at them and love them the way she could look at her husband's paintings, or the way she could look at her husband, and feel sick with love, and envy.

But when she did feel like painting, she did it and she did not feel guilty doing it. Only afterwards did she feel wrong for doing it—indulgent, childish, snobbish. But during the act, it felt very good and she was almost lost in the sound of the brush on the canvas and the colors: each perfect color, one at a time. It was a lot like taking a bath, or brushing your hair, or gardening. But afterwards, when she felt the act was done, there was always something

missing, just like it had been after sleeping with that other man, years after her husband had gone away.

She wondered if the works were too empty, maybe. Did they need some people? Or words written across the middle with ink? That would be very modern, she thought. Big black chunky letters that would eat the painting up and look edgy and angry. But she wasn't angry, exactly. What could be more tragic, she'd think sometimes, than a *desire* to make art that was twice as strong as one's talent for it.

She usually painted the same sorts of things, like clouds and trees. Or the way the sky looked to her at dawn and at dusk: daubs of titanium white, slurs of cerulean, a bit of dry-brush to capture the airiness of the cirrus clouds, violet and peach pigments or watercolor sometimes to suggest at rain. Over the years, she had learned to identify the world through paint pigments and techniques. She learned that the sun was never really yellow, but every other color. It was never what you expected. She learned that the world was not actually still and everything was vibrating and turning just a bit. And she learned that trees were not really brown at all, but something in between and far more complicated.

The gardener said to her once, "I see that you like to paint." And she said, "Yes." And that was that. He was good at the flowers and she appreciated that, but it made her nervous that he could see her working through the windows. And she worried that when she painted his flowers that he'd be insulted by her interpretation.

Magda tried to paint a self-portrait once, by setting a mirror down next to her easel. It turned out that hair was quite hard to paint realistically. Was one to paint every strand or make one big swoosh? It mostly ended up looking like ragged fur on top of her head. She decided she didn't want it to look realistic anyway and made herself have long black hair, because the black paint hid most mistakes. But really she had straight white hair that was

cropped in a bob at her chin. The eyes were easier, wet blue things, a little blurry. The nose was not so bad, she thought. A few quick lines, just a gesture.

"Who is that?" The gardener asked through the window one day while she was at her easel. He was smiling and holding a box of tulip bulbs.

"Me." Magda said, frowning. And that was that.

Magda thought maybe she should move to another country where they appreciate art more. Maybe then she'd be inspired to paint interesting things. Maybe then she'd find a style, a signature that could propel her into the art world, *really*.

Magda's son came by one time to visit. Actually it was Easter weekend and he had brought a girl with him. They had brought her an Easter basket, too, (how strange since those are for little children, Magda had thought). This cheap-looking gift made Magda angry and she scolded her son with an evil eye. She poked at the translucent plastic covering. It was a synthetic looking fuchsia. Then she asked, "What about some nice blueberry jam on toast or something?" Her son nodded and said, "Sure," and glanced at the girl, "for both of us." He eyed his girl again, and she smiled back. Magda receded into the house and frowned. The kids followed.

Her son was very handsome and his name was Matthew. He had black hair and blue eyes. The girl he brought was not very good looking but Magda saw she was wearing a white diamond on her left hand. She began to sweat a little bit under her arms.

"We brought you a basket," she said, smiling with teeth white as her diamond. Magda still had not taken the gift out of the girl's hands. It had a yellow bow on the handle of the basket. She looked at all the pastel marshmallow treats and chocolate eggs. Maybe she could use some of them for paint. The girl placed the basket on the kitchen table.

"Mom, this is Anna, remember." Matthew reminded Magda. The girl extended the left hand with the diamond. Magda froze, uncertain of what to do. She pretended to stare at the rug. Anna gave a closed-mouth smile, and wiped her pant with the hand she had put out when Magda did nothing and just said, "I know."

"I'll make us some tea," Matthew said, pushing Magda into the kitchen.

"I hope you like chocolate, Mrs.—" The girl called out behind them as they went into the kitchen, and then paused, blanking. The girl didn't even know my name, Magda thought.

"I'm going to marry her, Mom. I told you." Matthew was whispering very close to Magda's face now, and they stood behind the refrigerator so the girl could not hear from the other room.

"Oh, Anna?" Magda had almost forgotten about her.

"Yes."

"She's not very interesting looking." Magda twirled her hair on her finger and rolled her eyes. "And she doesn't even know my name."

"No, she doesn't know what to call you probably because of Dad. Did you ever change your name back to Källström after he passed?"

"No!" Magda was flustered now.

"Anyway she's the real thing, and she's right for me."

"Is she smart? She doesn't seem very smart, or very artistic." Magda widened her eyes as a bold gesture of retort.

"She's very bright and she is artistic actually, just the other day she was knitting a scarf." Magda dropped her hands and folded them in front of her.

"Well, then. Make some tea, then, for your little bride."

Magda went out to see Anna. "What's in the basket?" She said, trying to be nice. Anna was on the couch, picking at the lint on her peach-colored cardigan.

"Oh, some candy and sweets for you!" Anna peeped, ending with a wide smile.

"Thank you." Magda said, looking away and wiping her hands together as if something sticky had been on them.

Anna was now looking around the large den. "I hope you like candy," she said timidly.

Magda did not reply.

Magda was looking at one of her landscape paintings that she had hung over the fireplace. It was called "Sky at Dawn" though no one knew that but Magda. Lots of warm colors, Magda thought. That was a fine day. Magda glanced over at Anna for a second. Anna was looking at the painting too, now. Magda looked up and down at the girl. She noticed that the sun in the painting was the same color as Anna's cardigan.

"How lovely. Are these paintings yours?" Anna asked with a small tender voice that expressed either sincere concern or wonder.

How did she know the paintings were hers? Magda thought. Are they that bad? Or had Matthew told her?

"Did Matthew tell you?"

"No. But—"

"How did you know?" Magda interrupted Anna more firmly this time, eager to know the truth for once and for all—"Ha, I guess they look like an old woman painted them!"

"I just guessed. They all look like—"

"They all look the same?" Magda finished Anna's sentence. Magda stood tall and proud, with meanness surging through her. She wanted to catch Anna in the moment of harsh truth.

"No, no, Magda." Anna said. Magda flinched at the sound of her first name coming out of the girl's mouth. The girl continued: "It just looks like they were painted by the same hand. They have a certain style, you know." She looked at Magda with wide frightened eyes. Magda looked past her at the landscape above the fireplace. She was saying that Magda had a *style*.

"I think they are brutally bad," Magda said. Her face collapsed into a wrinkled cabbage, and she restrained her tears. She sucked in air through her nose. She began to laugh at herself as she covered her face with her hands. She inhaled deeply and shook her head. Anna hadn't noticed Magda's face, because Magda had turned toward the wall.

Anna sat down on the couch. "Oh no, I think there's a deep emotion to them—" She paused, looking down at her hands, which she wrung in her lap, covering her ring, "They seem very mature— developed, that is." Her voice came across as sincere, persistent.

But now Magda knew she ought to drop the whole subject. Anna was never going to say that the paintings were *beautiful*. No one would. *Let it go*, Magda thought. *Drop it*, as Matthew always said. Magda felt old and sad. She knew she should take all her paintings down and put up William's, but then all her visitors would ask about them, and about him, when really that was all gone now.

"Tea's ready!" Matthew said as he pushed open the kitchen door and brought out a tray. Three little cups sat on the tray, each filled with black tea.

"We were just talking," Magda said.

"I know. About what?" he was looking at Anna and not at Magda.

"Her paintings." Anna said quietly.

"Oh, yes. Ha." Matthew laughed.

Anna replied, "I think they're quite lovely, Matthew. You know I love paintings."

"Oh, you love them?" Magda asked skeptically. Looking over Matthew's head. Magda was sure Anna either knew nothing about paintings or worse that she knew far too much and would be snobby and make Magda feel inadequate or unintelligent.

"Yes, actually I paint a bit myself. I'm sort of artistic." Magda's mouth twitched at this remark. Who calls herself *artistic*, she thought.

"What sorts?" Magda didn't really know how to ask what kind of painting Anna did. She didn't know *all* the proper names and did not want to get caught in a mistake.

"Watercolor, mostly. Some oil, now and then. I see you like oil." Magda saw this too as she gazed around the room at the various canvasses on the walls. Magna liked the chemistry of it, mixing the linseed oil and having to use turpentine to remove mistakes. And, the texture felt more real. Of course the painting of the sky at dawn did not look real at all, she knew. People had so often asked her about the "abstract" painting above the mantel.

"It feels more real," Magda said to Anna with a certain voice.

"Right, like skin. Flesh." Anna spoke as if she were echoing Magda or remembering something. She had come close to Magda and was standing next to her now, staring at the painting above the fireplace. Magda could see now that Anna's cardigan was made of cashmere, and the soft fuzz seemed to stick to Magda's arm with static electricity.

"Right." Magda said with a small smile. Oil paint was so velvety. She rubbed her fingers together, imagining the paint on her hands.

Anna said, "And these oil paintings, all of them, they are really very—"

A loud buzzing overwhelmed their voices. Magda suddenly walked away towards the front of the house, facing the windows on the sun porch. The windows were made of thick hand-blown glass that warped in the day's white and blue light. The outside cedar shower was just past those windows. There, Magda would sometimes strip naked and let the cold

water spray off the summer heat. Her tanned skin would steam and create beautiful clouds.

The gardener was cutting down the weeds with one of those whacking machines. He was trimming the edges along the perimeter of the house and was near the front door now. The drone grew louder as he came so close to the house that it seemed he would come right in. Magda became lost in the sound. She felt at the pearls around her neck and let her hand rest on her collar bone.

"You have a gardener?" Anna asked, looking over Magda's shoulder. The man with the black beard and overalls suddenly seemed foreign to Magda. She stared at the gardener's face and found his dark eyes and furrowed brows. He was tall and his hands were large. His name was Raymond. She said the name again in her head. *Raymond*.

"Yes, she does. He maintains the yard," Matthew answered for Magda who had become non-responsive.

"He doesn't like my paintings," Magda replied suddenly, as she turned, pulling in her lips to feel them full and dry. She felt hollow inside. She faced Anna. Anna had a face full of pity and deliberation.

"But he's *just* a gardener!" Anna said triumphantly, putting her left hand, the one with the diamond, on Magda's shoulder.

Magda stared at the neckline of Anna's fuzzy cardigan and saw that the top little white satin button had come undone. It dangled on just two loose threads. Matthew would notice that button later, and he might unbutton all the rest of her buttons too, she thought. Her son might do this. Her son in love.

Anna reached her other hand out to Magda. Anna's hand was light and childlike.

The murmur of the weed whacker came in and out like crashing waves. A warmth filled Magda, and she felt a sudden rush of forgiveness, and a relaxation. Her tense shoulders fell towards the ground and she let her back round gently. She exhaled. She saw Matthew staring out at the gardener, at the man's kind gentle face, ruddy with work and opinion. *He's a good gardener, though*, she heard someone say.

Raymond was probably right, Magda knew, when he would just shake his head and stare blankly at Magda and her paintings. But Anna seemed to know more, if not about paintings, than about what it felt like to make them. She decided she'd keep William's paintings a secret, locked up in that dark room, preserved only for her eyes. She decided she'd show Anna only her own work, and she'd let her own art reign in the family despite its failures. This would help everything, Magda thought. I'm Magda Kållström, she thought and wanted to introduce herself in a new way.

Magda liked Anna and what she had to say, and the way her hand felt inside of her hand; it was firm and feminine and smooth. And Magda liked the way Anna had opened up, like a yellow morning glory, and she liked most of all, the way she blended in perfectly with the sun.



Figure 69



**THE UNKNOWN, THE EMPTINESS**

### *The Ending*

It was the end of the world, and my love came looking for me. The world was ending by way of water, quickly at first and then slowly. The waves came in tides and then gave us many peaceful days when the sky was red and pink and the sunsets cast orange and purple shadows. When the waves came, the mountains crashed and crumbled down as oceans surged across the country. Those who survived met at high ground on plateaus or in tall trees in the middle of the world, where the new shoreline had been created. We all lived on floating homes and we were all transients.

*It's happening*, said everyone who lived, sighing with relief, *it's finally happening*. Our strange God, the same one you know and love, had granted would-be-suicides the chance to survive a little longer during those final days, to truly enjoy a global demise, a gorgeous apocalypse. A final pleasure.

And when we were given time to live in the end, to know the end was near and to keep on living in that knowledge, yes, we surprised ourselves by trying to find ways to survive, but mostly we tried to do the things we could not do before, before when there was no hope of the world ending. We did criminal things at the end, not just looting and stealing food, but quietly making love to other women's husbands and taking their most precious jewelry, not to wear, but just to keep. And we killed things, not maliciously, just out of curiosity, seeing what would happen when you lit something on fire, or seeing something die that you had never seen die before.

God's wicked little angels were playing tricks and helping us do wicked little things.

So we did things that we knew were not right, but we did them because our brains were just pure electricity, and we wanted everything and nothing at the same time. We wanted to be everywhere and nowhere, and mostly to have that lover who escaped us. We were all searching for our lost lovers. And now that lover was here and asking for you, looking for you, because it was the end of the world.

And you could be together, all of you, all of us, because you were meant to be together, because you were meant to – until the end of time.

And then we were surrounded by water, and we were filled with water, and the self emptied itself out into the universe, and the universe filled the self, and inside and outside became the same, like a bulb of white light inside more white light—

but from above, from where your eyes float, you look down upon everything, and it just looks like night— so you sleep.

*Massachusetts, 1935*

Figure 70

Here is Aggie at Nantucket Beach wearing her linen day skirt and button-up blouse. She holds her coin. She is happy. She holds back joy in her small mouth. She is exhausted with embarrassments. This is before the house, and the couch, and the tooth. As the light sets up, as the black cloth drops, and the mirror reflects the sand, the sky, the theft of the cameraman, her shame rises. She holds still. She thinks hard: of all the salty coins at the bottom of the Baltic, plucked up in the mouths of fish, and then discarded, little bits of metal slowly rocking through the silent glitter. She thinks, if she were there, underneath all the weight of the sea, she could hear the tiny gills of flapping fish, the moan of tired whales, the creaking of sunken ships ruined like churches, the suitcases of bones and all the coins rocking against the stones— all of them, all their cold and clanging bells.

## Massachusetts, 1935

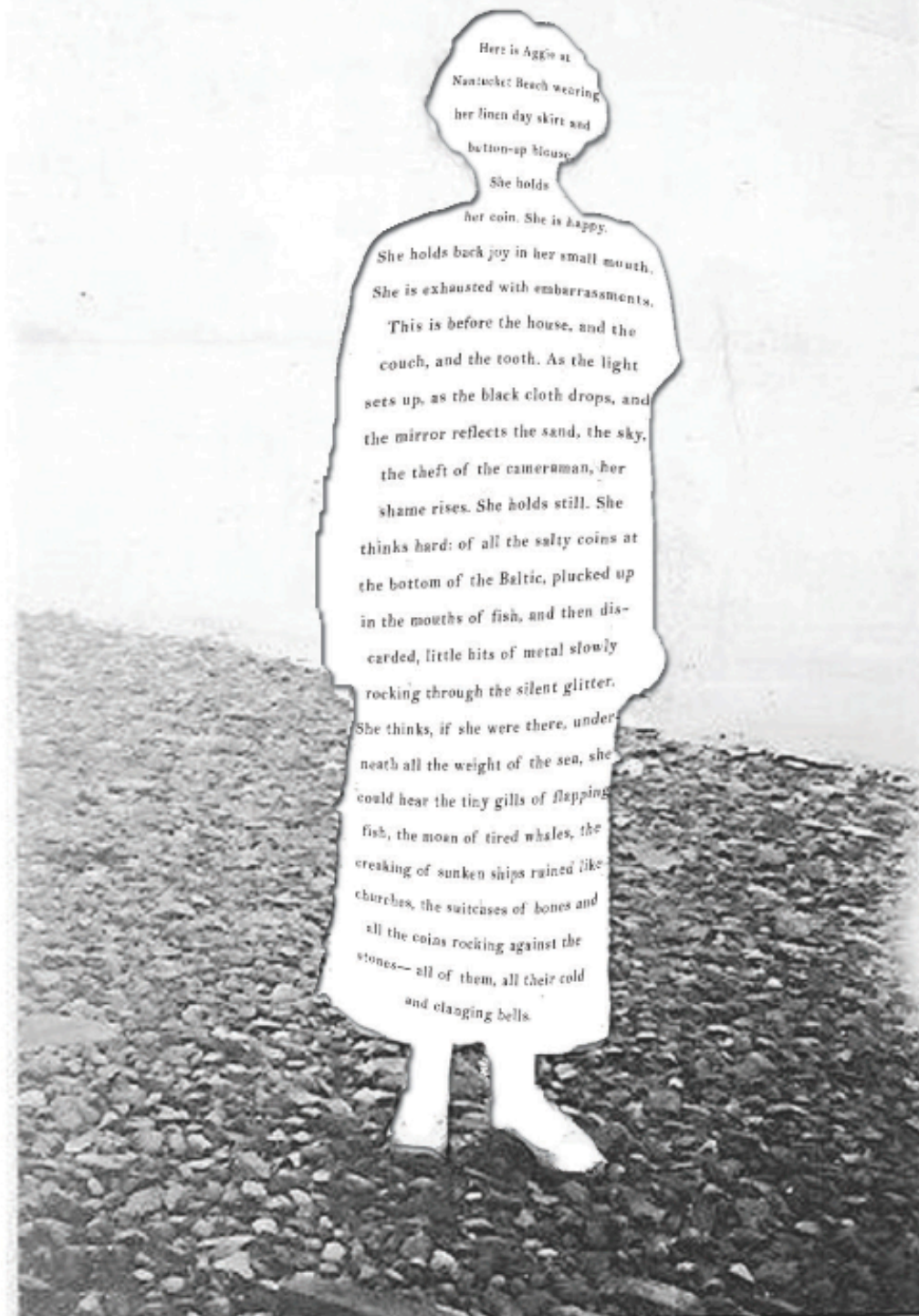


Figure 71

*Cold Spring*

Figure 73



Figure 72

I must look backwards until there are no more names. Until there is only sound. The family name is *Källström*, in Swedish: *a cold stream, a spring, a cold current, a coil of electricity*. I look at my grandmother Agnes. She looks at me. My eyes reveal that I seek approval and knowledge. They say: I know you. Her eyes reveal: anxiety, misunderstanding, deliberation. Her eyes say: I do not know you.

We both have the memory of the red granite rocks sloping into the Baltic, and the translucent jellyfish slipping through our fingers. We think we see our ancestors walking in procession gracefully along the bottom of the sea, white watery ghosts moving in a long slow cloud of flickering faces, film grain, and halftones. They're walking towards a place where everything is at it should be.

They know who I am. They look up to the surface and see their reflections, and they wave silently back to themselves. They speak a language I do not understand and call me by a

name I have never known. This isn't me, I want to say, pointing at the water. It is you, they say to me, all at once.



Figure 74



Figure 75

The Author, 2011, in Geta, Aland Islands, Finland at a Kallstrom family gravestone.

## END NOTES AND CREDITS

(Figure numbers refer to list of figures at front of PDF file.)

1. Figure 1: Cover image II: Image made from the earliest surviving film negative. "William Henry Fox Talbot: (The Oriel Window, South Gallery, Lacock Abbey) (1997.382.1)". In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-. <<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1997.382.1>> (October 2006)
2. Figure 2: Rune images at chapter headings: Scandinavian Runes from the stones that accompany this book: Blum, Ralph H. *The Book of Runes*. St. Martin's Press: New York, 2008. Chapters are organized by the traditional "Futhark" rune order/alphabet.
3. Figure 3: Pen, ink, tracing paper, and photograph of Agnes Kallstrom, circa 1940s. (The author's paternal grandmother. Photo from author's family album. The title of this piece, "All-kinds-of-fur", is adapted from the Brothers Grimm/German fairytale "Thousandfurs" of the [Aarne-Thompson](#) folktale type 510B, unnatural love.
4. Figure 4: Ice-fishing hole: Kelley, Robert W. 1962. LIFE Magazine. LIFE Photo Archive. Web. 12 May 2012. (© 2008 Google. © Time Inc.) <[http://www.gstatic.com/hostedimg/5878f4ccfcce0d9\\_large](http://www.gstatic.com/hostedimg/5878f4ccfcce0d9_large)>
5. Figure 5: Finnish hut. Mydans, Carl. "A view of the North Finnish landscape during the Russo-Finnish War." 1940. LIFE Magazine. LIFE Photo Archive. Web. 4 May 2012. (© 2008 Google. © Time Inc.)
6. Figure 6: Photo of Elin Johnsson (Agnes Kallstrom's mother) with child. From author's family album. Text adapted/arranged from Finnish riddles. Translations of Finnish folk-riddles: Maranda, Elli Kögäs. "The Logic of Riddles." Centre interuniversitaire d'Études sur les Lettres, les Arts et les Traditions (CÉLAT). Faculté des Lettres, Université Laval (1971).
7. Photograph, digitally altered. Agnes Kallstrom and her sister Linnea Kallstrom, c. early 1930s.
8. Arvidson or Kallstrom children, early 1900s. Behind white sheet. From author's family album.
9. Arvidson or Kallstrom children, early 1900s. Seated. From author's family album.
10. Elsie Arvidson (author's grandmother) and other. Early 1900s/late 1800s. From author's family album. Unknown location.
11. Linnea Kallstrom, laundry line, c. 1940s. From author's family album.
12. Agnes Kallstrom and baby, photo c. 1940s.
13. – 15. Arvidson children, c. 1940s/50s. House/tree in Norwood, Massachusetts. Family archives.
14. "
15. "
16. Photo of back yard clothesline. Norwood, Massachusetts. Family archives.
17. Algot Kallstrom and relatives in a boat from the Aland Islands, Finland. c. early 1900s.
18. Dancing on Midsummer's eve. LIFE Magazine. LIFE Photo Archive. Web. (© 2008 Google. © Time Inc.)
19. Photo-Postcard from Elna Matilda Kallstrom (Aland, Finland) to Elin and Algot Kallstrom (Massachusetts), c. 1910. In Aland Islands dialect of Swedish.
20. Photos of Algot Kallstrom with his father and his father-in-law, c. early 1900s. From author's family album. Riddles adapted from "The Logic of Riddles" (see above citation).
21. Photo of author. 2004. From author's personal collection.
22. Photo of Arvidson home with child in front, c. 1940s. Norwood, Massachusetts. Family album.
23. Figure 23: Author drawing of Agnes from a photograph c. 1920s. Riddles adapted from medieval Scandinavian riddles: "THE RIDDLES OF KING HEITHREK" (HEITHREKSGÁTUR). <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/onp/onp17.htm>
24. Agnes and the wind. Drawing of Agnes from a photograph laid over digitally & manually altered image from Edmund Dulac's illustration for "The Wind's Tale", a story by Hans Christian Andersen.
25. Image of mechanical rabbit (author-altered illustration-- text added) from Jim Harter's *Picture Archive for Collage and Illustration*. Dover Publications: New York, 1978. 8.
26. Okenite. From Google image search. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/14833125@N02/2924376246/> Okenite is a silicate mineral that is usually associated with zeolites. It most commonly is found as small white "cotton ball" formations within basalt geodes. These formations are clusters of straight, radiating, fibrous crystals that are both bendable and fragile. (Wikipedia.org).

27. "Den lille Havfrue". The Little Mermaid, dissolving in foam, by Edmund Dulac. (From the Story by Hans Christian Andersen). *Project Gutenberg* file. Originally published by HODDER & STOUGHTON: London, 1911.
28. Photograph of author's hands stained with charcoal. 2004. Author's personal collection
29. Details of author's drawing over photograph of Agnes Kallstrom at beach, c. 1935.
30. Photo of Elsie Arvidson, 1930s. Family album.
31. Photo of WWII German soldier's helmet. Altered digitally by author.
32. Agnes, Elin, and children. Family photos. Massachusetts, c. 1940s-50s.
33. Photo of church in Aland. "Geta kyrka". Web. [annuaire-mairie.fr](http://annuaire-mairie.fr)
34. Boy on the rocks. Photo from *The Aland Islands* by W. R. Mead and S. H. Jaatinen. North Pomfret, VT: David and Charles, 1975.
35. Aggie as snow queen. Digitally-altered Photo of Agnes Kallstrom, c. 1920, over digitally-altered illustration of the "Snow Queen" by Edmund Dulac. From story by Hans Christian Andersen.
36. Author's great-great grandparents: Erika Gustav and Julia Maria Kallstrom, parents of Algot Kallstrom. Aland, Finland. Late 1800s. Family album. Riddles adapted from "The Logic of Riddles."
37. Letter from relative in Finland to Linnea Kallstrom. Written in Swedish. January 25<sup>th</sup>, 1949. Family archives.
38. Photo of Agnes Kallstrom, c. 1940s.
39. Photos of Agnes and letters to Linnea. 1930s-40s. Massachusetts. Family archives.
40. - 42: photos of Agnes and Linnea Kallstrom -altered by author.
41. "
42. "
43. - 47: Self and Sister: Author-altered photos of Linnea and Agnes. 1930s-40s. And author-altered letters between Agnes and Linnea.
44. "
45. "
46. "
47. "
48. Relatives in Finland, early 1900s. Photo from family album/archives. Riddle/poem written by author.
49. Wooden doll image from Harter's illustrations and collage book.
50. Photos of Agnes and Linnea as children and as adults from family album.
51. Photo of Linnea and Agnes, older, c. 1970s.
52. - 54. Linnea and Agnes in furs, c. 1930s-40s. Last one with brother. Family album.
53. "
54. "
55. Photo by William Henry Fox Talbot. "An oak tree in winter." 1842-43. Calotype (negative and positive.) <http://hotshoeblog.files.wordpress.com/2009/08/talbot-photo.jpg>. Rowan tree riddles adapted from "The Logic of Riddles."
56. Photos of Agnes with siblings and cousins, c. 1920s.
57. Photo of Agnes, Linnea, and unknown woman c. 1920s.
58. Drawing of snowy tree and house by Agnes Kallstrom, c. 1920. Family archives.
59. Agnes in Norwood, photo c. 1945. Family archives.
60. Author's drawing of Agnes and child, from photo c. late 1940s.
61. Agnes with antlers: drawing of Agnes Kallstrom with child (From author's family album) on sheer paper, over photocopied and digitally manipulated illustration by Edmund Dulac of a girl kissing a reindeer in "THE LAPP WOMAN AND THE FINN WOMAN" from the longer story "The Snow Queen" by Hans Christian Andersen. *Project Gutenberg* file. Originally published by Hodder & Stoughton: London, 1911
62. Map of Aland, Finland. From the book by Ahlsen, Bengt. *Aland*. Brevskolan: Stockholm, 1984.
63. Poems adapted from Finnish rune poems, history and info from the book by Pentikäinen, Juha. *The Nordic Dead-Child Tradition* Nordic Dead-Child Beings. A study in comparative religion. Folklore Fellows Communications. Helsinki 1968. V. 55 no. 202. (Finnish rune poems from pg 88-92. (Chart of ghost behavior from s 168-169. (Medieval Laws pg 76-83)

64. Painting/collage by author of Agnes on the beach.
65. Author-digitally-altered drawing of two girls by Erik Theodor Werenskiold (1855 – 1938) over image of trees. Original drawing from the book by Peter Christen Asbjørnsen: *Werenskiold samtlige tegninger og studier til Norske folkeeventyr*. Kristiania Kjøbenhavn, Gyldendalske boghandel, Nordisk forlag, 1910.
66. Agnes near the high school. Massachusetts. 1930s. Family album.
67. Photo of man. Mydans, Carl. "Evacuated Russian Lapp man posing for a picture during the Russo-Finnish War." 1940 Finland. <<http://images.google.com/hosted/life/8223dc749e618d58.html>>
68. Photo of woman and children, from the film *Katrina*, 1942, based on the book about Aland by Sally Salminen. In the book by Ahlsen, Bengt. *Aland*. Brevskolan: Stockholm, 1984. Pg 38.
69. Painting by author (abstracted from image of Agnes).
70. Agnes at beach, photo 1935.
71. Author-altered photographs of Agnes at beach, 1935.
72. -73. Cold Spring: Photo of author as child, late 1980s, next to photo of Agnes as child c. early 1900s.
73. "
74. Photo of Agnes with author as baby, 1985.
75. The Author, 2011, in Geta, Aland Islands, Finland at a Kallstrom family gravestone.