

MFA Creative Thesis

Rachel Linn Shields

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Committee:

Maya Sonenberg

David Bosworth

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Abstract

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Rachel Linn Shields

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Associate Professor Maya Sonenberg

English, Creative Writing Program

This creative thesis project includes three main sections, “Curious Incidents in Underwater Research,” *What to Expect When You’re Not Expecting*, and *Modern Yarns*. The first is a mystery story, the second a series of stories that ask questions about parenting, and the third a collection of brief stories within the structure of a knitting guide.

Rachel Shields, MFA Creative Thesis

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Curious Incidents in Underwater Research

The third time the woman in the blue sweater came into the tiny library to make copies of articles from the *Journal of Alaskan Seal Fisheries*, Ivy decided her recurring appearance meant something. A single instance was odd enough, but three? Most patrons accessed current research online—did not come into the building, let alone return repeatedly. In her head, Ivy referred to the disintegrating volumes as the *Epic of Baby Seal Clubbing* and she only knew of their existence because of the re-shelving project she'd completed the summer before. She had moved every single book twice, off the old shelves and then onto the new. Workers tore down the shelves bolted to the floor and replaced them with rolling ones that compressed as Ivy turned metallic wheels. Steering slender ships. Sometimes she would move the shelves unnecessarily, for the momentary sense of being at the helm. The librarians kept saying how wonderful it was that they could fit additional materials into the Fisheries and Oceanography collection, but unfortunately (thought Ivy) most were journals like this one, taken out of disintegrating cardboard boxes—books no one knew of or needed. As a Library Assistant level III, she processed the requests for materials in storage—so she knew.

During the movement of materials required by the new shelves, Ivy had held each book and looked through the pages and now she remembered even the ones that no one ever checked out, like the seal fisheries journal. She often thought about how her fingerprints marked every single book—her microscopic skin cells invisibly adhering

to the dust jackets and the pages. She wondered if other people who held those books ever sensed her touch through their own hands.

Ivy preferred the books containing illustrations of microscopic otherworldly cnidarians and ctenophores—their structures and colors impossible to photograph accurately—painstakingly drawn from observations made through microscopes. The pages filled with these tiny creatures, like bathymetric layers you could hold in your hands, made her think that there were many other things happening unseen all around her, at any moment—now and now.

The woman photocopying seal hunting articles was the only person—to Ivy's knowledge—who had ever shown an interest in those particular journals. Inside the volumes, the checkout tags had not been stamped for decades. Yellowed and worn thin, the slips of paper would need to be replaced if someone wanted to take the books home. Discontinued in 1979, the journals were no longer relevant to anyone other than, say, a historian of the sealing industry. It was possible that a professor at the university studied these things, but Ivy had never heard of anyone who did. She would look up the publication lists in the curriculum vitae posted on the marine biology department's website when she didn't have anything to do, in the lull near closing.

No one usually came into the library late at night. The building was located along the dimly-lit shipping canal at the edge of the university, amidst classrooms that were only used during the day—which she supposed made the building less appealing to the brightly matter-of-fact scientists who did research there during the daylight hours. She had been disappointed to discover that they were remarkably normal human beings. None studied methods for attaching octopi tentacles to the backs of sea otters or tried to

reanimate rare sharks accidentally killed by trawlers. They did so little with what they had.

Ivy had worked at the library for slightly less than a year and estimated that she knew about half of the university scientists who frequented the building by sight or through their publications. Perhaps someone had written an article on seal fisheries that was only available digitally and therefore Ivy had never seen it on the shelves. She set aside the list of oceanography course reserves she was working on and brought up an academic database on her computer screen. The only articles she could locate were in Russian or Chinese or described heavy metal poisoning in seals that had eaten contaminated shellfish. She didn't see any current work on the history of seal fisheries. After that, she looked at university faculty profiles. None of them appeared to be studying mammals at all. She could find no connections, no sign of a project that would lead to the kind of research she had observed.

Near the end of her shift—when no one had walked through the doors for hours—Ivy would have been less surprised by scraping radulae of monstrous chitons than the quick, light steps of the woman who looked like a graduate student in marine biology. Blue sweater wearing out at the elbows, jeans slightly frayed at the cuffs, and curly hair denying an effort to braid. The second time she came in, Ivy noticed an unraveling snag in the sweater under the woman's right arm. She could see about an inch of off-white fabric—or perhaps skin—through the gap. The third time, the hole had been sewn up with uneven stitches in mismatching navy blue thread.

Ivy only knew what the woman had been copying because the machine broke down the first time and the women asked for Ivy's help. Ozone filled the air, toner

spilled on the carpet, and Ivy saw the books stacked untidily on the library cart next to her as she pushed and pulled at the insides of the copier. Her fingers turned black with toner, leaving dark prints on everything she touched. One of the woman's shoes was untied and Ivy resisted the urge to tie it for her, to fingerprint herself on the laces. Ivy cleared the paper jam, but the copy she pulled out of the machine was so ripped and smudged that she couldn't tell what she was looking at. When Ivy came back later to put the books away, they weren't on the cart because they had all been re-shelved where they belonged, exactly in the right order by call number and in the correct location. She wasn't even certain which ones had been taken out because they were all precisely even with the shelf edge.

After the third time, the woman didn't reappear. When she discovered nothing in the academic profiles and article databases, Ivy found herself paging through the *Journal of Alaskan Seal Fisheries* looking for slight wear on the pages, trying to guess which ones had been recently photocopied. Examining the journals was more fun than putting magnetic strips in books, which was what she should have been doing for the remainder of her shift. The strips were necessary so that alarms would sound if someone tried to leave the library without checking them out, but sticking the strips into library materials was not Ivy's favorite task. She started to see wear patterns on the edges of the pages of the journal, especially at the corners. She wrote the bent pages down by number, but so far had not been able to figure out why some were folded and others weren't.

After staring at her lists until the automatic streetlight went on, Ivy went back to the security strips. Placing the strips required practically breaking the spines of the

books so that the magnetic piece wedged in deeply and invisibly between the pages near where they were sewn or glued together. She loved when someone walked out with one of those books by accident and the alarms went off, causing the library patron to look around as if he or she had done something suspicious. Ivy liked to think about the transgressions they might have committed amongst the shelves. What had they imagined as they studied illustrations of budding coral polyps and aggregating anemones?

For weeks, when Ivy wasn't helping patrons research the influence of ocean currents on algae or the feeding habits of sea urchins, she started paying more attention to details. She was ready for whatever might happen next—even if it was something quiet, something barely discernable. Book ordering, scanning, and shelving. Her eyes open, her mind occupied by possibility.

Then one day, as Ivy walked toward the entrance of the building that housed the library, she noticed a window that looked different than the others—a slightly darker shade, though all of them were tinted. This was, perhaps, connected to the mystery she already pursued. Or maybe it was the start of another.

A scale model of the building sat mounted on a low table in the lobby above a plaque, an award for the design given to the architect in the early 1960s. Ivy thought that it was not an attractive building—its appearance like a taller-than-usual concrete barge with inadequate, darkened windows striating the sides. The rounded end pointed toward the water and the boxy side—including loading docks that were rarely used—inland. Not a shipwreck, but a boat in dry dock, awaiting repairs.

The miniature version of the building was cut down the middle and she could walk around it, to see the outside and inside. She had never paid much attention to it before because of the building's pointless ugliness and the monotony of the interior structure, equivalent to most parking garages—though now it occurred to her that you could hide all kinds of things inside a structure like a garage because no one ever examines bland, functional buildings with any kind of carefulness. This time, however, she took a photo of the cross-section and walked the hallways, repeatedly checking the picture of the model with the actual doors, windows, and other building elements as she passed them. Somewhere near the middle, on the second floor (there were four total), she noticed a missing door in approximately the same location as the darkened window could be seen from outside.

Now, it was possible that the model Ivy referred to was not completely accurate, or that a renovation project had altered some of the interior spaces. The maintenance crew frequently cut rooms in half to create an office for a new professor or a private storage space for an important project. However, in this case, the missing door had empty classrooms on either side, and the walls of the classrooms—the one that they appeared to share—were not in fact the same wall. There was empty space between the two rooms, but she couldn't discover how to access it no matter how many times she examined it that day. She ran her fingers over the wall of the hallway, trying to find a seam. She felt only smooth drywall. Again, she walked outside to look up at the window, covered over with what appeared to be black paint. That in itself was not strange because various labs on campus had their windows painted over to protect

equipment, make it easier to read the computer screens, etc. However, she couldn't quite dismiss this combination of suspicious factors.

A few days later, when Ivy was sitting at the circulation desk creating accounts for imaginary library patrons out of boredom, she thought of accessing the room through the ceiling or floor. She checked the ceilings on first floor first, on her way to the vending machine during her break. Halfway through a flat can of soda, she found the spot with the missing door again and checked the surrounding rooms as well for good measure. She couldn't see any way to access the second floor through the ceiling. She finished her soda and went back to her desk in the library. On her second attempt, later that afternoon, Ivy climbed the gray concrete steps to the third floor. She found a dusty storage room above the space she wanted to access. Crawling on her hands and knees, she ran her hands over the floor, eventually encountering a wider seam than those between the linoleum tiles. Tracing the line with her fingers, she discovered a trapdoor nearly hidden by stacked broken office furniture and out-of-date computers—but it was padlocked. Running down four flights to the basement, she borrowed a bolt cutter from the janitor's closet, but when she opened the trap door, quietly thrilled, the space below was too dark to see.

The next day, when Ivy pointed a flashlight into the darkness of the room below her, she startled to see something gleaming back at her. Pairs of eyes. It reminded her of shining a light into seawater along a pier at night and seeing the glowing eyes of dock shrimp flashing back. She used to do that when she was little, to scare herself pleasantly—their bodies so vague and shadowy that their eyes could belong to any creature. She stepped back from the edge of the trapdoor, out of view. No sound come

from the room. Nothing moved. What quiet things waited there in the dark? She walked forward again and shone the light down. She could see indistinct dark shapes on the floor—long rounded bodies that tapered and ended flat, squared off. After a moment, she realized that the shapes were seals—seals with glass eyes that caught the light. She counted seven of them, all lined up perfectly in a row. They filled in the entire floor of the room. She didn't have any way to look closer, so she reluctantly closed the trap door, holding the broken lock in her hand for a moment before stuffing it into her pocket, not sure what to do.

When she got back to her desk, Ivy checked out a book about marine mammal taxidermy under one of her fake library accounts. The book was from the 1950s and reminded her of one of those cookbooks full of gelatin molds and casseroles that you find in used bookstores. A man with thinning white hair in a heavy-duty apron was featured in the photos that accompanied the instructions. Black and white shots of viscera seemed strangely acceptable because of the age and colorlessness of the book. There seemed nothing violent in it, though her imagination recoiled from the idea of skinning and gutting a seal. There were instructions on how to preserve every part of the seal—or else use it for everything from soup stock to lamp oil. It made her wonder if all animals could be turned into so many things or just seals. She also checked out a field guide to North American seals with full color illustrations of every species.

When she passed the miniature model of the building on her way out, there was something in it: a triangular tooth with three distinct curving points, the longest in the center, approximately half the length of her thumb. It was placed precisely inside the

room she had found. She put the tooth in her coat pocket where it knocked quietly against the broken padlock as she walked.



Ivy borrowed a ladder from the storage room. It was tough to maneuver it into the hole in the floor without knocking into one of the seals, but she finally managed after a few tries. Reaching the off-white linoleum, she walked carefully around the seals, guidebook in hand, shining her flashlight up and down and touching their hides to make sure she'd identified them correctly. Ribbon, Harp, Leopard, Grey, Ringed, Weddell, Ross. All true seals, all inhabitants of polar regions. Striped, mottled, monochromatic gray. Other than that, she couldn't see any patterns. There weren't any fur seals at all, but she had found out during her research that Harp Seals were still frequently hunted in Canada. The room smelled musty and at the same time like a harsh cleaning product. Her eyes began to water. The tips of her fingers felt filmy. There were no other clues to the identity of the seals or their purpose in the room. The walls were bare of any decoration, slightly yellow in contrast to the darkened window. Darkened by paint—she could see the brush strokes. She climbed back up the ladder, returned it to where she'd found it, and bought her usual brand of soda from the machine in the basement.

How did the collection of seals connect to the volumes of seal fisheries journals? Ivy couldn't believe there was no connection at all. She drank her soda behind the front desk and considered a variety of possibilities, from serial seal murderers to spectral

seals swimming through the concrete halls after hours. Everything seemed suspicious. Were the library patrons hiding the soft interior bodies of shell-less clams and periwinkles between the pages of books next to the security strips? Did they steal textbooks and feed them slowly in tiny chopped pieces to the creatures in tanks in the lab building next door? Who knew what they were capable of.

A man she recognized from the research staff biographies walked into the library and asked for the microfiche machine. His arms were covered with tattoos and when he leaned his elbows on the circulation desk to speak to her, she found it difficult not to stare. Sea life—from microscopic protozoa to the giant squid—swam from one wrist to shoulder and then from shoulder to wrist on the other side. She nearly touched his right bicep when she pointed to the machine in the corner. When he turned around, the form of a seal was barely visible, curling around one side of his neck, almost concealed by the collar of his shirt. She stifled an impulse to reach out and touch the design.

"What kind of seal is that?" Ivy asked abruptly.

"A harbor seal. The most common kind here." Without turning around, he pulled his collar down a few inches so that it would be easier to see.

"Why is that one all by itself, not on one of your arms?"

"It's not, the design continues across my shoulders—but I like seals because they do almost everything of importance underwater. They are hard to observe even though some kinds are so common." He faced her again.

"Why would someone need a collection of taxidermy seals?"

"What?"

"Why would someone collect dead seals?"

“For teaching purposes, usually.”

When the man returned to the desk a few hours later, carrying copies from the microfiche and a stack of books on bivalves and ocean bacteria, Ivy asked, “Wouldn’t it be terrifying if seals were dangerous? It always startles me when they rise out of the water suddenly.”

“They are, in a way,” he said, “they can spread diseases to humans.”

“I remember hearing one breathe strangely.”

“Probably had pneumonia—they can get it just like us. You’re not a scientist, are you?”

“No,” she replied hesitantly, and turned her face away as though she had been caught doing something unpleasant. She scanned the books and held them out to him, fingers oddly numb.

He walked away, then turned around abruptly right before passing through the book security alarms in front of the library door. “Actually, we’ve got a whole collection of taxidermy seals right in this building.”

Ivy’s shoulders slouched more than usual, though she knew this was barely noticeable because of her already awkward posture in a listing rolling chair behind the counter. She recalled a time when she was very little and her mother rowed out with her at night from a bay in the islands so they could look at the bioluminescence in the water. A seal watched them as they headed toward the shadow of the island to find the

darkest place away from the moon and stars. Her mother also told her that *Seals live all of the most important parts of their lives underwater*. The paddles stirred electric blue circles. Ivy, about seven at the time, pictured glowing seals swimming through castles constructed out of sea urchins and brittle stars while the pups bowled retracted moon snails across the sea floor to knock over crabs and sea pens. *Seals take the same amount of time to grow a baby as human beings do*, her mother continued. Months later, Ivy was inconsolably disappointed when her new baby brother arrived in human form—and also upon discovering while secretively filling the bathtub in the dark that most kinds of water did not glow blue in the absence of sunlight.

The tattooed scientist interrupted her thoughts: “The room is sealed off—something about the experimental preservation process leaving a toxic residue. One of the new graduate students just found a couple of articles written by the man who originally made them because we’re trying to figure out what chemicals he used—so we can get rid of them carefully and use the room for something else. Something more useful and less dangerous.”

He wrote quickly on the back of one of his photocopies, the tattoos on his arm lifelike in waves of motion, and handed the paper to her. “Can you post this on the bulletin board?” he asked. Ivy read his clear, bold handwriting: “Have you seen a leopard seal tooth? Please call 206 – xxx – xxxx.”

Seeing Ivy reading the note, he said, “It went missing after I used it to mark the seal storage room in the model of the building for one of the graduate students. I never should have forgotten and left it there overnight.”

Ivy walked a few steps to where her coat hung and reached into the pocket. She had carried the tooth for two days, touching it secretively, pretending it was a signal from members of a secret society or perhaps a an otherworldly message. Holding it hidden in her fist for a moment, she uncurled her fingers and placed it carefully on the desk in front of him. She said nothing. The three points of the tooth and its jagged roots left noticeable red marks in her palm, which she hid below the desk when she noticed the marks. The man looked at her strangely, retrieved the sheet of paper with his phone number written on it, and quickly left with his books and copies. Ivy watched him walk away, certain that he would set off the book alarms as he passed through them—but he didn't. She couldn't remember if she had demagnetized the security strips in his books, but there was also the possibility that the books he carried did not contain strips at all, that they had been overlooked. She ran her fingers over the spot on the desk where his elbows had rested.

Pulling each one slowly out of her shoulder bag, Ivy scanned in the books she'd checked out about seals and carefully placed them on the returns cart to be shelved later. The shadows cast by plants outside the windows no longer looked like spears or walrus tusks or even suspiciously oversized blades of grass. The carpet, always a dull and serviceable color of gray, somehow gained an even more dusty appearance. She looked down at her knees and thought, *I should stop wearing nylons with runs in them, or not make holes in them in the first place.* She pulled her shoulders down farther into herself. Yanking sticky magnetic security strips off a plastic sheet to put them into books, she didn't wonder if there were fanged, glowing creatures lurking in the darkening hallways or making prints of their tentacles using the photocopy machine.

The library was very quiet. She looked at her fingertips. They had touched the taxidermy creatures and she wondered if she was going to fall ill from the chemicals. Even in her current state of mind, it seemed so factual that she could barely believe.

Dropping a security strip to the floor, where it stuck persistently to the fibers of the carpet, Ivy pulled Ernest Hackel's *Art Forms in Nature* out of a drawer and reassured herself with the intricate black and white drawings of microscopic creatures, so much like snowflakes—except in their degree of permanence. Perhaps the toxins were also tiny, intricate things that could not be photographed accurately. Perhaps the tips of her fingers would start to glow blue. Perhaps the chemicals would find doors into her cells, and open them. She smiled imperceptibly at the idea being altered in hidden, secret ways.

What to Expect When You're Not Expecting

Stories

Hand-building Techniques for Parents

Jeanette sat at the back table in her art class. Though the windows were behind her and she could not look out on the view of waves and peaks without turning around, she could see the sun projecting her own shadow onto the table, slightly elongated, almost stretching past the edge onto the floor. While she waited for the class to start, she played with her shadow, giving herself a crown of fingers and making snake-like monsters with her arms.

The instructor began: "To give you ideas for our first project, I'm passing out photos of babies and children. If you have your own pictures, feel free to work from those. I want you to consider methods for transforming a two dimensional image into a three dimensional work of art. Once you've chosen a picture, pick out a block of clay. Begin kneading it, making sure that you dampen your clay occasionally so that your hands don't dry it out. Think of the story of Pygmalion that we discussed during our lecture session last week—we will be creating an ideal child out of clay instead of a woman."

Ignoring the pile of photographs torn from parenting magazines and moving straight to the largest piece of clay she could find, Jeanette was ready to work nearly before the directions had ended. The clay felt cold and slightly sticky. It looked like a

newly poured cement support column or a drab, misshapen box with no clear method for opening. She did not have or want a child, so it was difficult to settle on an image—until she considered the reasons she disliked babies. Their red, raw appearance, for example. Their persistent scent of acrid bodily fluids. Their crying, biting, pinching, and general lack of empathy for others. Shaping a section of clay into a vaguely infant-like form, Jeanette began to create her child.

First of all, she wanted the baby to have entirely self-enclosed systems. Like a lagomorph, it would re-ingest food repeatedly. In cross-section, she tried to show this internal process. Her attempts to attach the tubes to the outside of the figure made her realize that they might inconveniently catch on things if constructed externally. Perhaps, she thought, it would be easier still if the child could photosynthesize and collect fluids through osmosis. This would eliminate the necessity of feeding and waste disposal entirely. She began to build a moss-like fuzz over the infant's skin, using a pointed clay working tool to create a feathery texture. Mosses, she knew, increased the humidity of their surrounding environment, contributing to the health of other species reliant on the water they held. This layer of soft plant fuzz would also hide diaper rashes and other unpleasant irritations of the skin.

Inside the baby's mouth, now unnecessary for eating, Jeanette constructed a delicate system of musical strings made from a loose thread pulled out of the cuff of her sleeve. This child would sing—never scream or learn to say words.

Jeanette shaped each of the baby's hands and feet into a useful tool: the right foot had three wheels in a line to assist in rapid movement, the left had a shovel, and the two hands transformed into a can opener and a device for holding the pages of

books open. Then she gave the baby two more human arms. Jeanette thought, *it is nicer to be the shaper than the shaped.*

Though momentarily distracted by the delighted exchange of wallet-sized baby photos and the requisite polite comments, squeals, and other noises about family resemblance and unique adorableness—the instructor quickly realized that Jeanette had not waited for further instructions. Indeed, the inattentive student’s table displayed a horrifying monstrosity—like a figure from one of those chaotic Renaissance paintings of Hell that the instructor had been forced to memorize the titles and dates of during college art history classes.

Jeanette had not followed the correct methods of crosshatching and wetting the clay before sticking new parts to it. The instructor noted with satisfaction that there were probably air bubbles inside the creature that would make it explode dramatically when heated. None of the appendages would survive firing in the kiln without at least splitting asunder, if not shattering into tiny pieces—which, the instructor admitted, could not possibly make them look any more infernally ill-formed than they already did. The strings inside the creature’s mouth would burn immediately. Walking closer to the table, the instructor frowned in a way that she hoped appeared thoughtful rather than irritable.

“What do you think?” Jeanette asked.

“That is very creative,” the instructor replied, making a vague gesture at the tormented figure. As a community center art instructor, she had learned not to say that any student’s work was bad. It wasn’t about bad or good, she reminded herself, it was about whether or not students would sign up for additional ceramics art classes after the introductory series concluded. Whenever asked, she said that only the experience

mattered, not the final product—at least, that was what she told her less-skilled students. As calmly as possible, the instructor continued, “the class is studying the realistic human form. Can you explain what you’re doing here?”

Jeanette said, “I don’t think that the human race is really meant to survive. Our own children are so inferior.” She said it just to be mean—but then it didn’t feel mean when it came out.

The art instructor pulled her clay cutting wire out of the front pocket of her mud-stained apron and repeatedly sliced through the clay creature on Jeannette’s table until she had carefully reduced every part to the precise size and shape of sugar cubes. As she finished slashing into the clay figure, the instructor said, “Someday it will be too late.”

Jeanette thought, *I will grow three hearts and nineteen claws, I will encounter the boiling and scalding of thermal vents, the spikes of ice axes, and the freezing passage of ghosts. I will crawl awkwardly onto land out of the sea, out of crevasses, out of kitchens. I will be my own sea infant or house monster.*

Magic Grow-Baby™

Barbara opened her freezer to reveal a full-grown infant, skin blue except for the parts covered by frost crystals—its arms extended as if it had been pushing against the door from the inside. It began to fall. Reaching out her own arms, she tried to catch it, but the baby merely brushed coldly against her fingertips as it slipped past. It hit the

floor and began to scream. At first it made a monotonous, strained, tearless howl, but then its mouth began to move with greater elasticity, its brow furrowed more deeply, and its screams became louder and increased in range. Barbara stared, her own arms still extended, as the freezer burn on the baby's skin began to melt away and a puddle expanded around it on the floor. She stared at the scattered boxes of frozen peas and carrots and the cylinders of orange juice concentrate—some of which had not yet stopped rolling and bumping against the cabinets.

Months before, Barbara had pulled apart the clear plastic bubble and cardboard backing of the baby's packaging. It was not fully grown then (nowhere near the size of the infant now rocking and thrashing on her floor), so the baby and its protective material fit easily in one hand. Though she tried to do it carefully—in case she needed to return her purchase—she accidentally tore a long, jagged strip across the brightly colored illustration printed on the surface of the paper and bent the protective bubble, making white creases in its clear surface. As she struggled with the packaging, the figurine baby, about the size of her own thumb, dropped onto the hard surface of the kitchen counter and bounced three times before coming to rest against the side of the microwave. She winced, wondering if she had damaged it—but then felt reassured when she read the packaging, still in her hand, which explained in bright neon yellow letters that the bio-plastic couldn't turn into a real baby until she left it in water overnight.

It seemed a dangerously easy process. She wondered, for example, what would happen if you got part of the baby wet by accident, or if you submerged it completely and then changed your mind. Could you could dry it off to stop its growth? Could the

baby feel pain in its pre-growth state? Could she, as the future parent, already be shaping it for the worse? For example, would her child develop a fear of heights or kitchen counters or microwaves before technically even being born? She had acted without thinking and now the package was open and it was too late to glue it back together again. The baby didn't appear to have any injuries when she picked it up in a clean paper towel and inspected it carefully—though it would be hard to tell because of its rubbery, monochromatic surface.

Barbara suddenly recalled that the electricity had gone out a few nights before and that while she had thrown out some of the especially perishable items from the refrigerator, she had forgotten to check the freezer for melting and spoilage.

Looking at the tiny figurine, Barbara was reminded, most unfortunately, of toys from her childhood. A cat figurine she had melted in the microwave while drying it off after pretending there was a cat-eating shark in the bathtub. A doll whose arm had been sucked into the vacuum cleaner, never to be seen again, during a game of airlocks and astronauts. The miniature semi-truck her grandfather had given her, saying that he would let her drive the real version, his own, if she took good care of it. While attempting to ship an unwieldy cargo of breakfast cereal and clay pterodactyls, she had pressed too hard on the top of the truck and cracked all of the windows in the cab. She buried it—whole grains, dinosaurs, and all—in the backyard so that no one would ever know. She had not done these things maliciously, but that did not change

the outcomes. As a child, she had always loved her toys, though sometimes too intensely.

One mistake was already clear—Barbara had purchased the navy blue Magic Grow-Baby™. A friend of hers, a nurse, had warned Barbara that blue children were very difficult to diagnose in emergencies, especially if they had skin conditions or breathing difficulties—but Barbara felt that the advantages of superior resistance to sun damage and a slightly higher rate of future employability outweighed those issues. Now, however, she regretted this decision. It was impossible to see injuries. She might not know until it was too late.

Now the baby had fallen farther and harder. And must be hypothermic.

Barbara carefully set the figurine down on the countertop, this time face up on top of a clean dishtowel, tucking one corner of fabric over and under the small form, and picked up the packaging to read through the complete directions. Her eyes continually drifted away from the cardboard sheet, as if to see if the baby had moved.

The instructions on the cardboard packaging read as follows:

1. With dry hands, carefully remove Magic Grow-Baby™ from packaging.

Barbara's palms started to sweat as she read. Terrified, she set the instructions on the counter and stuck her hands in her pockets, which she hoped would minimize

the possibility of them touching the thing inadvertently. She continued reading, leaning her head close to the cardboard.

2. Discard packaging so that it cannot become a choking hazard once your new baby is grown. Magic Grow-Baby™ Inc. encourages sustainability! Plastic and cardboard elements of this packaging are recyclable. Magic Grow-Baby™ is not recyclable.

In fact, Barbara had heard that it was illegal to dispose of a Magic Grow-Baby™ outside of a medical facility. The most recent law stated that discarded babies had to be placed inside the orange biohazard containers meant for “sharps”. Considering this information generated another series of childhood memories: the time she’d accidentally paper-cut her cornea with a copy of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* that she was reading too closely, the piece of pencil lead—still embedded in her palm—from when she’d done an experiment to see how her skin worked, and the barbed wire scar on her ankle that she gotten after insisting to another child that she had the ability to walk through fences. None of these things were found inside a biohazard container, which made her wonder about the comparative danger of babies. To themselves as well as others.

She realized that she didn’t know how this kind of baby started out—if they were vulnerable at birth like biological children or if they knew and could do things beyond

their chronological age. She didn't know practically anything about what she had inadvertently brought to life.

3. Set Magic Grow-Baby™ aside in a cool, dry place until you are ready to grow it. If you do not intend to grow your Magic Grow-Baby™ within three weeks of purchase, freeze in an airtight container until the timing is right (if frozen, add 5 hours to the gestation time stated below).

Here, she wondered how strictly airtight the container had to be, and also if it was all right to use her aging Tupperware, which was permanently stained with tomato sauce. Would the stain rub off on the baby? Turn it purple?

4. If you do not own a Magic Grow-Baby™ Birthing Vat™, find a container that is at least 20 x 20 inches and 10 – 15 inches deep. We recommend glass or metal because some plastics contain chemicals which can be harmful to growth. Once you have found an appropriately-sized container, fill it with water at room temperature. Depending on your region, you may want to filter or boil the water first, although we have discovered no difference in results between regular tap water and treated water during laboratory testing on Magic Grow-Baby™.
5. Gender assignment of the Magic Grow-Baby™ is not guaranteed. However, some studies have shown that turning up the household heat above 70 degrees creates a larger percentage of females.

6. Fully submerge your Magic Grow-Baby™ in the water. We recommend that you place your Magic Grow-Baby™ as close to the center of the container as possible to allow freedom of expansion in all directions.

Barbara found this part difficult. Submerging the baby seemed too close to stories of desperate mothers drowning their children in bathtubs or rivers with all of the car windows rolled up.

Now it had been born in an even worse way. How could I? she asked herself, leaving the question hanging because she could not decide which specific thing on the list of mistakes to accuse herself of. That she had done something so irreparably horrifying without intending to terrified her still more than the baby itself and its sudden appearance in fully-grown form

7. Leave Magic Grow-Baby™ unattended for 12-15 hours. Remember, a watched baby never grows! Enjoy your solitude, for this is the last time you will be legally allowed to leave your Magic Grow-Baby™ unattended.

She did not know how long it had been awake and alone in the freezer.

There, the instructions ended. Barbara picked up the tiny navy blue baby again and held it in the palm of her hand. She pictured waking up the next morning to the

sound of splashing in the kitchen, then reaching into the metal tub (could she use the same one that she used to mix cake batter?) to hold her baby for the first time as its dark blue eyes looked into her own. She pretended it would be like taking care of a spiny succulent plant or a hamster whose evolution was tied to survival in arid grasslands. Then she remembered a cactus given to her by her third grade teacher that, for unknown reasons, had melted inside so that it collapsed into a snot-like substance when she touched it. She remembered how her pet hamster had escaped from his cage, made a nest in her winter boots, and been crushed to death when she put on a boot on her way to play in the snow. She couldn't pretend that she was good at taking care of even the most simple forms of life—or even inanimate objects.

After a few more moments of reflection, Barbara pulled a zip-lock bag out of a kitchen drawer, put the blue baby inside, carefully pressed out the excess air, locked the seal, and placed Magic Grow-Baby™ carefully inside her freezer next to some fish sticks and a microwaveable apple crisp.

The baby, still screaming and shaking, curled onto one side and then rolled over on all fours. It crawled toward her and she had to stop herself from running away. Before she knew what was happening, its fingers grasped the cuff of one of her pant legs and yanked more fiercely than she would have thought possible. It stopped crying and looked up at her, past her shoelaces, the pockets of her jeans, and each button of her shirt, and she looked back down at it. Its expression was direct and malice-less: you are exactly what I have been looking for in the cold and dark. She felt as if her pupils had slowly dilated until the lesser stars were visible along with the brighter ones

and darkness acquired depths and shades and what seemed like one thing became many. The strange blue creature raised its arms in the air to be picked up. It was.

Playing House

A snowy day. Snow becoming visible on the paved street in front of the house, the street dwindling into a dirt road and disappearing gradually amidst the trees. One could see farther than expected into the forest, the tree branches usually bare, or seeming bare, displaying a year-round sparseness of leaves against mute bark. The trees ended at a steep rock face overlooking the river, in which icebergs floating out to sea collided, sometimes freezing together before detaching and continuing south, passing and joining the jagged edges of ice lining the banks. When the snow melted completely in the spring, the river would be no different—flowing one direction slowly—too far north to feel the tidal influence of the Atlantic.

On this particular winter day, the passing snowplow buried the car and then more snow fell and fell until all objects outside the house seemed muffled and stilled—featureless. Through the morning, white slowly crept up the windows and doors, fastening them shut and blocking what light there was, covering the carefully clipped shrubberies, heavy stone fence, and rusted mailbox. A bicycle leaning against the siding appeared to acquire a coat of white spray paint before being overtaken entirely. The snow hid a dead bird in the grass—a sparrow the size of a child's fist—killed instantly after hitting the window some weeks before.

The world blanketed and blank. By midday, it seemed as if only the inside of the house still existed.

After giving up on shoveling out the car, fingers numbed and sharp, the husband and wife stayed indoors, ate cereal out of the box, and made paper dolls with pages from the previous day's news—collected from sections scattered across the couch and floor. No one had remembered to recycle the pages the day before and now the bins, encased in snow, could not be reached or opened. The new edition of the paper never arrived that day—nor the next, for that matter—the snow still impassible. But the missed delivery had not yet occurred.

The husband and wife put the pieces of the paper back together, carefully in order, and then divided them in half, pulling the back sections away from the front precisely equally. They cut the sheets of newsprint with scissors and attached the pieces together with masking tape and a few bent pieces of wire left over from fixing a broken screen that had let in mosquitos during the summer.

The husband, John, made a family. Two parents, a boy child and a girl child, and pet dog in newsprint. The female cutouts wore triangle skirts made from an orange and yellow coupon page, making them look like men who happened to be standing behind over-sized traffic cones. The pet dog had the most accessories—a bone, a leash, a ball, and something that John claimed was a stuffed squirrel toy but looked more like a tadpole with a feathery tail. After thinking for a moment, he gave the family a pet rabbit too, and a hamster inside a hamster ball. He made a house out of pictures from the real estate section, and glued photos of beaches and gardens from the travel articles on top

of the windows so that it would appear that the family looked out onto a perpetual warm-weather vacation.

The wife, Charlotte, made a giant squid with tentacles twisted out of paper strips and then a tyrannosaurus rex and a saber tooth tiger and a yeti. After thinking for a moment, she went searching for additional supplies. She cut sharp teeth out of the stiff material of toilet paper rolls and stapled the jagged cardboard pieces into her creatures' mouths with a click that startled in the muffled silence of the day. Her paper beasts did not want a house or a cave or a boxcar or even a couch. Each of those possibilities dismissed itself rapidly into crushed balls of paper, accumulating on the table like discolored snowballs asking to be thrown. After various abrupt changes in domestic setting and transportation, her creatures crowded onto a boat made out of textile images from the fashion pages and trees from an article on forest ecology. The boat floated on a sea of cloudlike crumples of text left over from the places they had not wanted to live.

It was unclear whether the husband and wife enjoyed themselves or not. When John left the room to get a glass of water and to make sure that the kitchen pipes hadn't frozen (as they had the year before), Charlotte put his boy child into the mouth of the tyrannosaur, paired up the yeti with the husband, and set the wife astride the saber tooth—yes, in *that* way. From inside the dinosaur's mouth, the little boy shook hands with the squid tentatively, or at least Charlotte imagined so since the squid's tentacles were also lined with teeth, while the dog, rabbit, and hamster balanced on the child's forehead, side-by-side. Charlotte had to staple the pets to his head because they kept falling off and fluttering to the floor.

When John came back into the living room and saw what she had done, he looked at first as if he was going to say something, and then as if he had decided not to. He set his glass of water down on the coffee table, where it left a mark in the varnish. A few months later, he would try to hide the mark by refinishing that corner of the table—but, having chosen the wrong shade of stain, the ring would still be visible, darker than it had been before.

The power went out a few hours later and it got unbearably cold. The husband and wife lit their newspaper figures on fire to get the snow-dampened kindling—retrieved after an hour of tunneling through snow in the backyard—to start burning. Under the pyramid of slowly charring firewood, the yeti took the longest to catch, even as the paper husband collapsed into ashes beside it. When the yeti lit, there was a quick and brilliant burst of flame and afterward nothing discernable remained except for the red glow of the heated staples that had attached teeth to its furry jawline.

John stared into the fire for a moment, then decided to go upstairs and continue the work of repapering the smaller bedroom. Watching his own breath in the cold air, he pulled old pieces of yellow paper off in jagged strips, exposing the age-stained paint underneath. The room had been other things to other people—and sometimes the same thing, as he could tell from the faded pattern of rocket ships on one of the layers. The new paper rested on the floor, still in rolls, protected from the dust by cellophane.

Downstairs, Charlotte sat close to the fire and read a book about knitting with yarn made from cat hair. They did not own a cat because John was allergic. When Charlotte had wanted to adopt a stray kitten that wandered into the yard and hid amongst the snapdragons, John had suggested something *e/se*.

They had not gotten a cat, they had gotten something *else*—or at least they were going to.

Pulling the blue afghan folded over the back of her chair over her face, Charlotte pretended for a moment that she was wandering around on the bottom of the ocean searching for thermal vents. Then she pretended that the fire was an expanding sun about to engulf her in a fiery supernova. She fell asleep in her chair and had nightmares about reanimated paper dolls, particularly ones in the shape of children with animals stapled to their heads. In her dreams, she threw them in the fire, but they just kept moving, never burning, their staples glowing red.

My Child is My Universe

Right after the baby was born, the disappearances began. Stella's reading glasses vanished from the table next to her bed at the hospital. She reached out, did not feel the metal frames, and leaned over blindly to search the table. Seeing nothing, she put on her disposable hospital slippers and shuffled around the room, leaning close to the floor to look for her glasses, though it was still painful to bend herself. Her book, a new edition of *A Brief History of Time* with revised information about black holes, went missing next. It had been difficult to sleep since the baby was born, so she read as the nights stretched on. She hadn't been able to read without her glasses, but she had hoped to pick the book up again when she returned home, during those tired nights of screaming sleeplessness that everyone had warned her about.

Once home, the disappearances continued. All that remained of an antique lunar globe was a circle of dust on the fireplace mantle. The safety lights off of her bicycle, still twinkling after she detached them, vanished from the hall table when she turned to lock the door. The leg of a chair, a row of encyclopedias, and a half-finished pair of mittens, were next. All of her “nice” underwear disappeared from the laundry basket.

Angrily, Stella accused her husband of playing a trick on her that had gone too far, but then he went missing too—right after saying he was leaving to buy a pack of cigarettes. The strange part was that, unlike most men who disappear when they’re out buying cigarettes, he hadn’t left the house when he vanished. Stella heard him say he was leaving, and watched him run up the stairs to find his wallet. Then she heard his footsteps moving overhead from the bedroom, past where the baby was sleeping, but he never came back down the stairs and out the door. She looked for him everywhere, even in places where he couldn’t possibly hide, like inside the small storage chest underneath the cushions of the window seat and behind the door of the mirrored bathroom cabinet. He was nowhere to be found.

Stella wondered if her husband was so desperate to escape her after she had frantically accused him of taking her things that he had used one of the windows. Most of them were permanently painted shut. She checked the ground under all of the others, but found no sign that someone had landed there. It would have been easy to tell since there was fresh snow. The circumstances were so strange that she didn’t know how to feel. She wondered if she was imagining all of it, until the sound of baby’s cries in the next room brought her back. She ran to his crib and lifted him to her shoulder, patting his back reassuringly while he burped and made word-like sounds.

Stella filed a missing person report with a skeptical police officer who kept asking, “ma’am, are you certain that your husband disappeared *inside* the house?”. As she finished writing in the date next to her signature on the last page, the entire upstairs bathroom silently vanished. She was looking over the officer’s shoulder when it happened, looking to see where the baby had crawled off to, when a precisely-cut hole opened up in the wall where the bathroom door had once been. The baby crawled to the edge of the void and stared at the new view of the trees in the back yard with his mouth gaping open in what she thought at the time was surprise.

As Stella picked him up quickly out of fear that he might fall, the officer gave her a lecture on doing dangerous remodeling projects around a baby. Without being asked, he dragged a bookshelf across the opening. Stella knew better than to explain that the hole hadn’t been there a few minutes before—because that sounded impossible. She didn’t even fully believe it herself. After the officer left, shaking his head and commenting on the citable distance between rungs on the staircase bannister, she put the baby back in his crib while she blocked the rest of the opening by dragging the dining room table up the stairs and tipping it over on its side. With the table in place, she sat down on the floor, staring at the missing wall and feeling the strain in her muscles from the effort of moving the table. It was time to feed the baby. She missed her husband.

Suddenly, something touched the elbow Stella had been using to prop herself up as she stared at the missing piece of wall. She looked down and there was the baby, looking at her curiously. He had a bruise on his head, visible through the thin fuzz of

hair covering it. Picking him up gently, she examined the rest of him for injuries. He seemed alert and he smiled at her while she ran her hand down his body to see if anything was awry. Deciding to take him in to the doctor just in case, she carried him into his room to gather diapers and a pacifier. Something was strange about the room—it seemed bigger than usual. Abruptly, she realized that his crib was no longer there. She thought, *that explains why you were able to crawl into the other room.*

For a moment, Stella held the baby at arms length and looked at him. He was ordinary, as far as she could tell. She had seen many of her friends' babies and she didn't think hers had any extra parts or unique abilities. Turning his head to the side, he scrunched up his face and opened his mouth wide in a yawn. Something flickered in the corner of her eye, in the side of the room that the baby faced.

She turned to see that this wall too had disappeared, along with the changing station, a bin of dirty diapers, and an old wooden rocking horse that was a gift from her mother in law. After a second of irrational relief that she would no longer have to think of a way to sneakily dispose of the horse—which she found both ugly and dangerous—she realized that something quite terrifying was happening.

Stella wondered if a human being could be born with some sort of strange gravitational pull—like a black hole. She had heard people described as “black holes” before, but never so literally. Perhaps her baby had the ability to destroy matter. In a strange way, this made sense to her. She had always been a bit of a home destroyer herself. Struggling against marrying, against buying the house, against laundry and dishes and mowing the lawn and three square meals and framed family photos—this,

this certain destruction, was a strange relief. She had been right to fight against the accretion of matter, its culmination in the child.

In front of her, Stella's hands, still positioned as if holding the baby, were empty. Looking around herself, she encountered a cheerful darkness lit by stars. A second later, she was frozen solid, a piece of space ice slowing orbiting the sun.

Autoimmune Disorders Associated with Childbirth

When her child curled against Mary's body, her form still swollen from carrying it, she imagined her intestines stretching out full length, pushing through her skin, wrapping themselves around the baby's fragile form, and then tightening violently and irreversibly. She could feel her viscera wanting to turn violent, the contracting peristaltic movements slowly, secretively positioning coiling entrails under the surface of her skin. Every irregular bulge might be one of them, persistently pressuring her internal walls, saying quietly, muffled, but still audible, *you can use us. Why do you think we are 25 feet long? You won't even miss our lost coils.*

When Mary rested the baby's head on her shoulder, her collar bones felt pointed and straining, as though they were about to jut through her skin, into the baby's body. The bones wanted to shatter themselves to make their edges sharper—compound fractures as lethal weapons. They didn't care about the sacrifice required of themselves, of their own pain. They said they wouldn't be angry if she injured them for this purpose, if she hit them with a blunt object. They told her, *don't worry, you will heal,*

we'll make sure not to sever your arteries when we strike. Let us stab! It tore you, let us tear it.

Before this, Mary's body had never been on her side. Insect bites expanded beyond a reasonable reaction, as if invisible plungers yanked on her skin. Mysterious nerve damage made her hands permanently blue, and always lacking in feeling. Bruises calcified along the straight bones of her arms and legs, making them seem like jagged sticks of rock candy under her skin. Sudden and inexplicable hair loss. Hospitalizations for asthma. Ulcers both inside and outside her body. Early-onset inflammation of the joints. Night blindness. Repeated sinus infections. Always the underlying fear of chronic and irreversible metamorphosis. Mary had no clear idea of what her body wanted to be, only knew her own helplessness.

Pregnant, Mary felt sicker than she'd ever been in her life, unable to do much more than sit propped up by pillows on the couch until the parts of her that touched the fabric became sore and broke out into rashes. She slept intermittently. Visitors left guides to parenting featuring illustrations of expectant mothers with glossy hair, slender arms, and implausibly well-fitting jeans. They also brought knitting needles and soft, pastel yarns for making baby hats and slippers. Others donated hand-me-downs from their children: onesies of which they said, "you can barely see the stains", trucks with swallowable wheels removed, and a variety of block-like items that ranged in purpose from teething to merely decorative. Mary left these offerings wherever they were placed by the visitor and they accumulated until her living room looked like a strange shrine in cotton candy pink and sky blue. As if from outside herself, Mary watched as her body expanded beyond the boundaries of one cushion to reach the middle of the couch.

Though this observable evidence of loss of physical control discouraged her, she was pleased by how thoroughly her misshapen form hid the couch's garishly overly petal-filled floral design.

Mary found it difficult to keep up small talk about the progress of her pregnancy while vividly picturing parts of her body splitting away and turning against the rest. She would nod and pat her stomach, all the while thinking of her cells moving in military formations in the shape of organs as she watched helplessly. Later, Mary worried her body had somehow known about her anxieties. It had never occurred to her that her muscles and membranes and lymph nodes might find out what she was thinking.

When the baby came, she loved it, but she also knew that she wanted to hurt it. Perhaps those two feelings were not unconnected. After her water broke, she felt as if her body was closing around the defenseless thing, trying to stop it from coming to life. She heard a disembodied voice: *Muscles that contract can also compress. Can press. Can press.* The fear of what would happen if she didn't push the baby into the world overpowered her urge to suffocate it.

The baby was alive, but she couldn't depend on that side winning every time, especially when self-preservation was no longer part of the decision. Mary knew that she shouldn't be allowed to care for it by herself—knew she should ask for help immediately. Nonetheless, she could not fully believe the intensity of the combined desire of her mind and body to do harm, and knew that no one who had known her before would believe it of her either, that people would try to talk her out of her instincts—though the instructions became persistent, louder than the protesting parts of

her mind just like the baby's screams overcoming sleep. Her body whispering, urging, inescapable.

Within a few days after the baby's birth, Mary's nails grew quickly and had to be cut every morning to keep them under control. When she looked in the mirror, her teeth were sharper than before. It was terrifying, really, seeing her body shift, seeing herself become more and more dangerous without being able to stop the process from happening. At the same time—if she was perfectly honest—she felt more aligned with herself than ever before.

Weeks passed before she admitted that the changes couldn't be resisted, her body *would* turn into a deadly weapon like a toy transforming from a truck into a lethal robot after a few swivels and clicks of its plastic parts. Even her hair took on menace. Braided, combed out, or unwashed. No alteration in care seemed to take away the savage brutality underlying its follicles. She kept thinking of ways it could be used to do harm, her destructive creativity seemingly infinite. In a moment of internal rebellion, Mary cut off her hair so that all that was left were irritating bristles, unable to do anything more harmful than cause hives on sensitive skin. Once, she leaned over and rubbed the sharp stubble across the baby's forehead before she could stop herself.

Mary began to think of her transformation into a killer as another stage of human survival—a survival against the fact of her own offspring. She found her mind turning to a new darkness, one in which she knew that the baby was really the one trying to kill her, that her body was merely having an autoimmune response; a reasonable one considering the circumstances—months of nausea, bed rest that forced her to quit working or doing much of anything at all, and finally the risk of bringing it into the world,

from which her body was not yet repaired. *I'm trying to save myself*, she sometimes thought—or perhaps it was the voice of her body. Maybe the speaker had always been a single entity. Either way, the dawning justification of self-preservation made her violent impulses much harder to try to resist.

A few months after the baby was born, Mary walked out of the house, locking the door behind her. She could hear the baby crying, asking her to let bygones be bygones—but she couldn't. With the locked door between them, it felt safer for both. The baby could not could not work insidiously against her—ensnaring her feelings and threatening her health—and she would not unfairly destroy its fragile life. It had not, after-all, chosen to be born, and it could not help the fact of being constructed from her own malicious, self-destructive cells. She barred her newly-sharp teeth.

Pushing the key under the door so she wouldn't be able to get back into the house, Mary ran down the cul-de-sac to the street before being overwhelmed by the temptation to smash a window, step carefully over the broken glass, and stop its crying. She would not use the glass to kill it. She had her own self.

Of the Squirrels

The first time Hazel gave birth to baby squirrels—unexpectedly, on a Monday morning as she had just broken an egg against the edge of a pan to make breakfast—she called in sick to work and took all of the tiny squirrels, which looked remarkably similar to stubby pink worms with ill-formed limbs (she identified them accurately as

Sciuridae through Internet research) to a wild animal shelter in an empty shoebox. By the fifth time, the shelter, overrun by all the squirrel babies, started releasing them into the wild to fend for themselves. The trees adjacent to the shelter were quickly populated with birds of prey, omnivorous raccoons, and stray cats.

From that Monday forward, Hazel's uterus filled up with baby squirrels whenever she didn't take precautions. Precautions meant avoiding squirrels entirely—problematic at first because she was employed as an arborist and spent her days trimming branches from trees. After nearly a year, she managed to figure out that she needed a squirrel-free radius of at least 65 feet to avoid pregnancies—which was more challenging than it might seem considering the abundance of squirrels and a lack of means that gave her few housing options and little money for experiments in protecting herself. Three weeks after exposure, the squirrels would start to come out. Fortunately, the squirrel pregnancies were relatively painless due to their small size at birth.

Hazel finally decided to seek help in getting rid of the squirrels before they were born because that seemed kinder than putting defenseless creatures out at the edge of the woods when they were blind and hairless. This was how she became national news.

“Promiscuous Bestiality Compounded by the Sin of Abortion”

“Genetically Exceptional Mother Murders Miracle Babies”

“Is the Apocalypse Nigh? Normal Woman Gives Birth to Squirrels”

“The Evolutionary Impossibility of Cross-Species Conception: the Fetal Squirrels Hoax”

Lastly, “An Interview with Squirrel Woman”

As soon as she agreed to an interview, Hazel wished she hadn't. It was before she became truly famous and she had not yet learned to avoid the media. She arrived at the local radio station, which was difficult to find in a strip mall between a Laundromat and one of those stores that claims to only sell things that cost less than a dollar. They were having a sidewalk sale, so bins of tiny plastic toys, kitchen utensils, and hair products partly obscured the radio station's logo. When she went inside the station, the woman on the phone at the front desk gestured her into the back room. A man shook her hand and told her to take a seat in front of the microphone. At this point, Hazel was so used to feeling uncomfortable that being in a small glassed-in booth with a stranger sitting closer than necessary seemed normal. However, her unease grew as he began to question her after a brief introduction for radio listeners. The transcript was reprinted in various newspapers:

Interviewer: What do you do to attract the attention of squirrels?

Hazel: I'm not sure what you mean.

Interviewer: Surely male squirrels would not be doing this to you if you hadn't wanted them to. Are you giving them the green light? How do you tell a squirrel that you're hot and bothered?

Hazel: Are you trying to say that I want this to happen?

Interviewer: Are you trying to say that you don't?

Hazel: You're bumping into my knee.

Interviewer: Let's change topic. Is it true that you feed your babies to raccoons?

Hazel: No, I gave them to an animal shelter. I didn't know they were leaving them to die until it was too late.

Interviewer: Do you get turned on by raccoons too, or just squirrels?

Hazel: What?

Interviewer: How does your boyfriend feel about this squirrel business?

Then the interviewer asked her if she was single and winked, so Hazel walked out of the station, got in her car, and locked all the doors. Once home, she refused calls and visitors and spent the better part of a month putting up different types of insulation over the dry wall in her apartment in the attempt to protect herself from persistent squirrel gametes. She had two more litters of squirrels during that time. Efforts to shield her reproductive organs with household items such as tin foil and margarine spread did nothing to stop the onslaught of squirrel fetuses developing within her. She spoke on the phone with various doctors, but none felt confident about removing the squirrels safely because her condition was so unique.

Soon, a religious group began a charity for squirrel embryo adoption and tried to convince Hazel to have the fetal squirrels removed and implanted into members of their church. They placed a one story tall fiberglass squirrel in front of the building without asking the landlord and surrounded the statue with acorns that were always sprouting inconveniently in the grass between the sidewalk and the street. Hazel didn't want to have the repeated surgical procedures required to transplant the babies and, even if she did, she was already worried about medical expenses.

The squirrel fanatics began protesting when Hazel refused to cooperate with embryo adoption. Since she could no longer leave the building without being screamed at by agitators wearing homemade bushy tails and waving signs with bloody squirrel babies on them, when a new batch of squirrels arrived, she would simply push them out the mail slot into the hallway on the lid of a shoebox and hope for the best. Hazel hadn't chosen to give birth to squirrels, couldn't afford to take care of them all, and didn't feel the slightest bit of maternal instinct toward the naked pink rodent babies. She didn't like to kill things or cause pain, not even to spiders, but otherwise she merely wanted safely rid of them.

Next, a group of scientist tried to convince Hazel to donate herself to science—she previously thought that was only something people did after they were dead—and gave her waivers to sign. She promptly dropped the stack of crisp papers into the compost bin and threw coffee grounds on top of them so that she wouldn't be tempted to change her mind. An organization of squirrel enthusiasts wanted permission to install cameras in her home so that they could observe her in her natural habitat and send live updates to their community of squirrel watchers. They told Hazel they considered her to be a squirrel and human hybrid species, though she tried to convince them that she was not hiding exceptional body parts underneath her jeans.

After more than two years of squirrel babies, Hazel received a phone call from which she found out something very useful—she didn't know why it hadn't occurred to her before: There were places in the world that did not have squirrels. No squirrels at all. The woman on the other end of the line apologized for not having called earlier, but

she had only just then found out about Hazel. She explained that she suffered from a similar condition involving marmots, but was now living safely in New Zealand, one of the few places where no species of squirrels were either indigenous or had been introduced. Hazel asked if there were trees in New Zealand.

Hazel delivered her last litter of squirrels in an airport bathroom, and left them curled up asleep in a sink that she padded carefully with paper towels.

Simulated Miracle of Life

Whenever the life-size manikin came out of its box during the unit on childbirth, the professor peered hopefully around the classroom. All of the students' eyes looked away—stared at yellowed masking tape and staple marks on the walls or into the corners of the classroom, at grey balls of shuddering lint and dust—their body languages silently repeating, *not me, not me*.

Less hopefully, the professor would ask: "volunteers?". And the young woman sitting in the front row—by herself—the only student whose eyes were not averted, would stand up and say, "me, me, me!" After a few more seconds of searching—her slight frown daring any of the other students to make accidental eye contact or an unintentional gesture that could be construed as a raised hand—the professor would sigh and say, "Yes, Annie, go ahead." At this, the young woman would bounce up and down on her feet as if warming up for an athletic competition. Outside, barely visible

through the narrow laboratory windows, the green leaves on an alder tree had started to yellow slightly around the edges since the previous week.

The training manikin needed a human actor to function. It was called a *hybrid simulator*, which meant that the technology required pairing with an actual living body in order to operate realistically. Or operate at all, really. No engine, no wiring, no trailing cord to plug into the wall. No power source. The manikin also lacked a head, arms, and feet—simply consisting of a torso and thighs laid over a live person, who would use his or her own arms (hidden inside the fake torso) to push a plastic newborn manikin through the stretchy neoprene birthing canal while pretending to be in labor.

Due to a limited budget, the school had chosen not to purchase the premature baby manikin, which included additional features such as the ability to turn completely blue and a button that collapsed its lungs. Plus, the healthy, full-sized baby required a slightly more dramatic physical effort to push into the world.

For the simulations, the professor had no requirement that the human participant be "into it"—but Annie decided that it seemed unrealistic (and therefore less educational) to merely lay there on the table calmly pushing around expensive humanoid pieces of medical plastic. At least, this was the reason Annie gave when she tried to explain her perpetual volunteering to her more reluctant classmates. The first day of the birthing unit, the "volunteer" was an 18 year old boy who had accidentally scratched his ear as the professor scanned the room for raised hands—and been chosen quite against his will. He shoved the baby through the manikin's thighs with a motion that reminded Annie of unenthusiastically plunging a toilet. She knew she could do better.

Over the course of weeks, Annie's performance developed. She invented an imaginary husband who she spoke to during the simulation, frequently in anger. She never gave him a name, so the other students began referring to him as "Mr. Annie". Sometimes one of the students would even stand up for him if Annie seemed too harsh or unfair. Mr. Annie refused to follow the exact surgical methods for washing his hands before entering the operating room because he didn't like the feeling of scrubbing under the tips of his fingernails. He had a latex glove allergy, an extreme fear of bodily fluids—especially those belonging to others—and he insisted that she have a baby in spite of her own intense terrors of caesarians and mastitis.

After the second simulation, Annie shyly asked the instructor if she was allowed to curse during the procedure and when the teacher agreed (for the sake of realism, of course), Annie added a string of expletives to her act—including some words apparently invented by her, since no one else in the room had ever heard them before. The other students could tell which were supposed to be bad words by listening to the changing tones of her screams.

As Annie punctured the bag of fake blood and slid the gelatinous plastic placenta between the manikin's thighs for the fourth time in three weeks, all her classmates stared, some pale—though too ashamed to avert their eyes in this instance—others with their sympathetic bedside manner faces firmly in place. One woman patted Annie's shoulder lightly, reassuringly—she did that after every simulation. The woman's bulky hand-made sweaters, stray yarn ends sticking out where they weren't woven in properly, always made Annie feel like she had a real aunt in the delivery room with her, or possibly a kindly mother-in-law.

Once the simulation finished, the students' faces looked relieved as the infant's electronic voice box wailed and the umbilical cord detached with a quiet ripping sound from its Velcro hold on the nearly limbless manikin. One of the men always wanted to tie it off, to create the belly button. It was easy to get students to do those kinds of jobs—but no one wanted to play the mother. Then, someone always handed Annie the baby, washed up and wrapped in a towel.

Annie would sit there for a few seconds on the hard Formica surface of the laboratory table where she had laid down to do the simulation, and stare at the closed eyes of the plastic baby, willing them to open and mirror her. Then Annie would hand the hard plastic baby back to the professor—with a feeling that was not relief, but was a loose approximation of relief.

When the class transitioned into the unit on caring for newborn babies, Annie felt neglected—no longer the center of anything significant. After a week or two of directionless memorization of anatomy diagrams and incubator practice, she spoke to her professor, who told her she was welcome back for the birthing next term. It was so difficult to find anyone with a gift for hybrid simulation and such an excellent understanding of the drama of birth. Watching Annie's repeated birthing scenes over the past weeks had reminded the professor—who at the beginning of this term had felt a sense of dread when students filed into the room yet again—that there was still something remarkable in processes seemingly dulled through repetition and practice.

When Annie got home to her studio apartment that night, she tried out new insulting slang words for male body parts by shouting them into the mirror while watching her face to make sure her expressions were adequately agonized and angry.

Lying down in bed, she practiced breathing and pushing at varying rates of intensity until she broke out into a sweat. Then she stretched out across her empty bed and lay still. As she drifted into sleep, she imagined a newborn that never grew up. Never learned words. Never left home. She heard the wail of an electronic voice box in the night.

Cross-Species Parenting

An inky gray liquid leaked down the inside of Coral's right leg in the shower. *This had never happened before, quite certainly not.* She considered possibilities. She had not cut herself shaving because she had not shaved. The color was too dark for that anyway. She had not used a black pen or worn new pants with the dye still bleeding or left black licorice in a coat pocket during laundering.

At a loss to explain this new medical condition, Coral quickly washed the soap out of her hair and dried off, then pulled on jeans and t-shirt and drove to a walk-in clinic, where the doctor on duty asked if it was possible that she was pregnant. Though she said "no", he nodded and told her that it was nothing to be ashamed of. "Sometimes," he said, "you can have a bit of *spotting* that is *very* dark if you've just recently become *that way*." First she told him it wasn't possible that she was *that way*. She hadn't done anything, at least not recently, that would make a baby. And she was careful—it wasn't recommended that she have one at all. Then she tried to explain that

the liquid she'd seen running down her leg was black without any hint of red, and watered down, nothing like blood—dried or otherwise—at all. With a slightly stern look, the doctor said, “no need to hide *anything* from us.” For a moment, Coral felt as if that same black substance had filled her eyes. Overlooking her expression, the doctor just nodded again and said, “young lady, you've got some decisions to make—and *soon*.” He had a nurse help Coral administer a pregnancy test, which was negative. He said, “can't always trust *those* things.”

Coral went home worried that she had an undiagnosed fatal condition. What if her blood transformed into something else? What if that time in elementary school when a boy had stabbed her in the elbow with a pen after she told him he smelled like salt—which she'd meant as a compliment—one of the pen shards had slowly worked through her body until she developed an incurable disease? What if she was to blame for chewing on the ends of pens until they broke and stained her mouth? Was this why people used pocket protectors? *Now*, she told herself, *you're being ridiculous*.

After slouching in a chair, her navy blue wool jacket blending with the upholstery so that only her face and hands stood out palely in the darkening room, Coral spent nearly an hour slowly eating the remnants of a package of freezer-burned fish sticks while reading the chapter of Jacques Cousteau's *The Silent World* about cephalopod behavior—until she fell asleep, rolling over restlessly all night like the breakers on a beach.

A few weeks later, Coral switched from jeans to sweatpants—only able to fit into clothing with elastic waistbands—and started leaving the lower buttons of her shirts unfastened. Letting go of the idea of a mysterious disorder somewhat reluctantly, she

accepted that, equally inexplicably, she was going to have a baby—unless, of course, the rapid expansion of that one specific part of her body could be attributed to something else, like a particularly persistent case of food poisoning.

Coral began to feel movement inside herself, pulling in multiple directions at once, resulting in painful cramping. Her mother once told her that being pregnant was like having a squirrel moving around inside you, but this was something else entirely. She wouldn't have described the motions as mammalian.

Months later, Coral broke the news to her mother, now a new grandmother. They hadn't spoken in some time and the letter seemed strangely impersonal, but Coral didn't know how else to tell her:

The Salish Sea is home to the largest cephalopod in the world, the Giant Pacific Octopus. Whatever their size, octopi have amazing abilities to reshape their bodies to fit into all kinds of spaces. It is nearly impossible to build an aquarium that they cannot break free from. If you look them up right now, you will find a story about one escaping from a jam jar with the lid screwed on tight. Why people always happen to have jars on hand when they discover an octopus is a mystery to me, as well as their luck in happening to find a creature that fits inside their container. I had to clean out a half-eaten jar of marmalade for my octopus so that I had something to keep it in while I made the house safe.

There are other stories about octopi mysteriously disappearing from their tanks in marine science labs, only to show up in some other aquarium nearby,

eating whatever had lived there. The only thing that keeps them from crawling out of their containers is Astroturf, which they have a hard time affixing their suction cups to. Because it was an immediate matter of life and death, I temporarily borrowed some Astroturf from a miniature golf course in the middle of the night. I know how you feel about stealing, but there wasn't enough time to wait to go to the hardware store.

Coral stopped writing there, uncertain how to proceed. There were times when she looked back and wished that she'd known more about cephalopods before, though she was not convinced that wading into the ocean clad in Astroturf would have changed anything, since she never found out exactly how it happened.

Though she now knew considerably more, Coral was ultimately uncertain whether her situation was one of gestation or a marsupial pouch kind of parenting. Since she didn't know what size or stage her octopus had been to begin with—octopi, like many ocean creatures, start life as microscopic zooplankton—it could have found its way into her reproductive system as a newborn or at a much larger stage, perhaps thumb-sized.

When she reflected on the course of events, Coral was just glad that her octopus did not decide to use its hard, shell-piercing beak and paralytic saliva on her uterine walls. Coral left that part out of the letter to her mother.

To try to soften the message, however, Coral did write about the first time she saw her octopus: "Octopi have cell specializations called chromatophores within their skin cells that allow them to change colors to match their environment. They can also

alter the texture of their skin to better blend into their surroundings.” When the creature finally crawled out, Coral told her mother, she was in the middle of taking a bath. After a few moments of struggle that Coral decided to leave to her mother’s imagination, she found that she was no longer alone in the tub.

The octopus wrapped around Coral’s leg, smoothed itself down, and turned exactly the pale tone of her bare skin. People say that their newborn babies look at them directly, as if the baby knows them already. Coral told her mother that she thought she had experienced the cephalopod version of this connection. As the octopi’s chromatophores shifted to imitate Coral’s own body, her initial instinct to swat at the tentacled creature or crush it with something heavy was immediately overridden by the desire to cradle it in her arms. Coral couldn’t act on this urge because she found it impossible to detach its tentacles from her leg—but she felt it nonetheless.

In the letter, Coral enclosed a blurry photo of herself trying to get her octopus to hold still as it climbed the surface of her jeans, half of its legs matching the blue denim and the other half imitating the skin tones of her hands. During the hysterical phone call she received from her mother a few days later, Coral reminded her that it can be challenging to have a child who is different. As she said this, she wondered if this was how her mother had always felt about her—she wondered if that was why her mother was so upset.

On the phone, Coral told her mother, “When we visit the ocean, I always worry that my octopus will wander too far up on the beach and get dried out by the wind or become prey to shorebirds. I test the acidity levels in the water to make sure it is safe for permeable skin. I can’t get a clear answer on whether or not octopi are affected by

paralytic shellfish poisoning, so I live in fear that I will accidentally collect bacteria-infected clams and make it sick.” Her mother was finally quiet on the other end of the line. Coral continued, “I cannot tell if my octopus is a girl or boy or whether or not it misses its own kind. I’m worried that when it grows up, I will have to give over its care to an aquarium. I can barely keep it safe at home, in spite of covering nearly every dangerous surface with Astroturf. When I sit on the chilled tile of the bathroom floor, watching my octopus drill holes in rubber duckies with its beak and try to blend in with the color and texture of the silver faucet handles, I can’t recall what my life was like before it came—and I would not want to give up this experience in spite of the inconveniences and fears. Sometimes I feel as if I also have three hearts.”

Coral fell silent. Far away, on the other end of the line, her mother said, “You used to destroy rubber duckies. I still have one with your teeth marks in it.”

The Ghost of Childhood

The boy watched from the attic window as Helen Harper took her things out of the moving truck and carried them inside. Heavy cardboard boxes full of books, a bicycle, and a plant with flexible, white striped leaves that he later learned was called an *aspidistra*. Matches, a wrench, scissors. As more belongings appeared, he catalogued each one and considered how best to take it away. He would take away her last name—she would only be Helen, she would only have him.

Many years before, still a living child, the boy watched insects crawl across the rug in the yellow house. The carpet was red and felt like soft grass that had been worn down by being walked on. He wanted to be picked up, but no one would, unless it was to put him in the crib. Holding onto the bars like they were his mother's fingers. His dad in prison for stealing *everything that wasn't nailed down*. The boy did not know him. He *did* know his scars. In pictures they had the same hair. Like pale flames.

By the time he was four or five years old, the boy was so notoriously misbehaved that when he tried to explain to adults that he could only see the color yellow, they thought he was lying to avoid coloring inside the lines.

His mother's anger was like touching an exposed wire, like the cord attached to the lamp next to the couch that a mouse had eaten through, like the red coils on the electric stove that are still hot even when the color fades. The boy brought the two orange kittens to school inside his backpack and let them out in his classroom. His mother had to take time off work and sit next to him in a desk that was too small for her every day for a month. She held matches against his skin with her eyes. His stepfather said, *your mother is the frying pan and the fire*.

The boy used sparklers on the trampoline and the sparks burned nearly imperceptible holes through the fabric. He jumped until the holes unraveled and he fell to the dirt underneath, still holding two sparklers. No one was watching, so he let them keep sparking while he lay on the ground, the brittle grass underneath the trampoline making imprints on his skin. When he got up, he threw the fireworks into the green

water of the plastic wading pool to extinguish them entirely. The next morning it snowed and the boy lay down in the street in front of the snowplow and refused to move because he thought that if his street wasn't cleared, he wouldn't have to go to school. The snow melted around him and his outline could be seen in the street hours later, like a police chalking of a body.

These were nearly all of the things he remembered from before. Those things and fighting at school, but all the fights ran together, not specific, unique instances like the other things he remembered.

At school, the man in the office next to the nurse and the principal said that the boy had a lion inside. The boy told him it was a dragon, like charred hot oatmeal and sunburn blisters. The man in the office said, *there are ways to get what you want without hitting*. He said, *I will teach you how to use words—to act coldly instead of with fire*.



After she moved in, Helen realized that John's very old house made lots of strange noises and was always falling apart. Because of that, it contained an odd combination of new and old things. The place seemed confused—for example, the upstairs bathtub had old, chipped clawed-feet, but the rest of the bathroom was equipped with modern appliances in shining white plastic. When the sink broke, there was nothing to replace it that looked exactly like the old ceramic one, a hefty white basin that the plumber dropped when he tried to carry it out of the house, leaving a dent

in the floor below the stairs. Helen could feel the place on the floorboards where it had hit when she ran her hands over it and water pooled there when people came into the house with wet shoes on. The downstairs bathroom had been carved out of the dining room and awkwardly squished into a limited amount of space. The shower stall was made out of light blue plastic that looked strange next to the wood paneling. The laundry machines were stuck in a flimsy closet and you see past them into the back of the kitchen cupboards. There were closets put in in awkward places, where there used to be hallways connecting rooms. Someone had covered the old tin ceilings with plaster because they were falling down, square by square.

The first time John talked about the ghost child, Helen was barely listening. They were sitting around the fire she'd started with brush cleared from the yard. She leaned back in her plastic lawn chair, looking through the branches of the pine trees to the stars, pretending she was a flying through space. Suddenly a curtain opened upstairs in the attic, seemingly on its own. John pointed it out to her, and reminded her that it had been pulled closed earlier in the evening.

"I keep forgetting to tell you," he said, "our house has a ghost—a little boy." He continued, "He goes to bed at 9:16 every night. You can hear him climbing the attic steps." She thought, *a child up to the unheated, unfinished, raccoon-infested attic to sleep? Walking past the bedroom to sleep alone?* John continued, sounding hesitant as if he was coming up with it right at that moment.

"He used to talk to me when I was a child, to stand next to my bed, and hold out his hand, ask me to come with him. He said he couldn't touch anything and that he

needed me to help to bring toys up the attic. He wanted someone to look after him. He said he was always cold.”

Helen’s attention wandered and she stopped listening, just stared at the sky.

“Helen,” John said suddenly, “why do you seem so far away?”

She said, “I’m thinking about a kid I used to give reading lesson to in the city. He drew pictures of subway tunnels and trains with these tentacled creature things crawling around under them. I asked him what they were and he said ‘the outer space monsters who lived beneath the trains’.”

John said, “I used to be like that when I was a kid.”

Helen said, “I miss working with children. They make you feel so necessary.” She looked up at the moon and wished it was less bright so that she could see the stars more clearly.

John said, “I don’t need anyone other than you.”

When John came home from work the next night, Helen was reading. He pulled the book out of her hand playfully and said, “You care more about books than you do about people. Didn’t you hear me come in?”

“Give it back,” she said. “Books are like friends.” Helen reached for the book and John held it away from her. She told him that she’d heard something moving around in the attic and he said that he used to sleep up there sometimes when he was a kid and his parents were fighting. She said it must be mice or raccoons or squirrels.

Without knowing why, Helen started sleeping on the side of the bed that was far away from the door, which was close to the attic stairs. She told herself that she needed the stronger light on that side of the room for reading before bed. If she had to use the bathroom in the night, she didn't dare breathe during the seconds it took her to turn on the light, using the switch that she had to stand on tiptoe to reach, looking away from the dark mirror below it. She was always afraid to see the mirror before the light switched on, sometimes even after. She expected to see someone next to her in the reflection, or behind her on the attic stairs just beyond the bathroom door. Sometimes she would hear a noise and her heart would race—but it was always just John.

The boy saw that Helen had stopped sleeping in close reach. He watched. When she slept she turned her back to the door, curled with her hands under her neck as if to keep them warm. He paused in the doorway. He stood next to her head and held his hand out to feel her breath, then laid his hand on her neck. He put the other on one ankle. He could just barely feel the warmth of her body. He missed heat. He wished he could pin her there, but he knew that if he pushed down his hands would pass through.

Awake or asleep, Helen felt on guard. She kept a wooden chess piece—a knight—that belonged to her grandfather in her right-hand pocket, handling it so much that the edges became increasingly rounded and it lost one ear. She wore her maternal grandmother's blue flannel around-the-house jacket with corduroy elbows and unraveling cuffs. She re-read books her uncle had bought for his winter term at college but never read because he died in a car accident before school began and before she

was born. She wanted to feel surrounded by her family even though they were very far away and John always scolded her for being too dependent on them. When she wasn't using her things, she hid them in a compartment she'd found beneath a window seat.

John said, "I don't understand why you're always holding onto your past—the only thing that matters is us."

As Helen slept, they watched. The boy asked John when she was going to stay forever. John told the boy, *there are too many trees in her forest. I will keep burning them down until we are the only one left.* Helen woke up—perhaps he had spoken aloud—and the child hid behind, or perhaps inside of John. "Come to bed," Helen said. The attic steps creaked and she stopped herself from checking the time.

The next morning, while Helen was still sleeping, he slowly pulled pages out of the book from Helen's nightstand and fed them into the wood stove. Then he quartered the blue flannel jacket to make it small enough, cutting it jaggedly with a pair of scissors, and stuffing the pieces into the flames. He even put in things that he knew couldn't be burned, like the wrench she used to change her bicycle tires. Helen came downstairs, still half asleep—then abruptly awake when she saw John at the stove, pushing her houseplant farther in as the leaves withered in the flames.

"Don't leave," John said, "the boy needs a mother."

Julie sat on the floor in the childrearing section of the bookstore surrounded by pastel covers and friendly (yet authoritative) titles. It was strange to think that the slick, precise shapes originated from trees. As she paged through them, the books felt slippery and heavy—easy to lose hold of. It was a good thing she was already sitting down. She thought about dropping a baby and wondered if hers would be difficult to hold onto. Which would hurt more, dropping a book about babies on your foot, or dropping an actual baby on it? It would depend on which part of the baby hit your foot—for example, its teeth would probably be as painful as the corner of a book. She stopped herself, realizing she was not supposed to consider her own foot. Her own foot was irrelevant now. Maybe there was a book on *that*.

Julie felt entirely overwhelmed: she was enrolled in three different parenting classes, subject to a continual stream of advice from family members, friends, and inquisitive strangers, and had lost count of how many books on childrearing she had read. She had been crawling around on all fours in the parenting section of the bookstore for hours, peering through books open on the floor. Her baby was due in less than a month.

After pulling so many books off the shelves that she nearly disappeared amongst them, Julie decided with frustration that she would raise a feral child—from birth. She had a big back yard that bordered a forest and was frequented by raccoons, which she knew were omnivores, like human beings. Just over the unfenced property line, there were old-growth stumps, some so hollowed out by animals and decay that a grownup could crawl inside and sit comfortably. The forest and bordering marshland—overgrown with thorny blackberry bushes and cattails—would be a suitable habitat for her child.

Julie always liked stories about feral children, especially ones raised by wolves who lived off raw meat gnawed and vomited up by their adoptive parents. The idea of pulling a mildewed lunchbox out of a sticky backpack filled with crumbs and peed on clothes stuffed in a plastic bag by a teacher (and perhaps left there for days since children never remembered to tell their parents about these things) was worse. Cleaning out one of those soft-sided lunch boxes every day, scraping congealed applesauce and potato chips off the sides, appalled her. She didn't want to strip the crusts cut off sandwiches every morning, sandwiches that would always be jelly-filled since apparently peanut butter killed children left and right. She didn't want to feel the tiny jam-covered fingers touching her. She didn't want to hear about the chocolate milk and gummy bears in other children's lunches.

Julie was not the first person to consider feral parenting. She put back the books about teaching your toddler to read to make room on the floor as she pulled out books on raising children in the wild. A helpful bookstore employee informed her of additional reference materials filed under "Gardening" and "Outdoors." The books had lovely pictures of alpine lakes and meadows on their covers, with titles in shades of unobtrusive yellow, pale pink, or robin's egg blue. She got out the notebook where she recorded parenting advice and started writing.

The first book she glanced through recommended planting native flora in your backyard feral child pen. Leafy, edible lamb's quarters, for example, would often grow on its own if you ripped up your lawn and tilled the soil. Foxglove, in spite of its beautiful flowers, should be avoided until the child has built up a resistance to digitalis. Another handbook recommended introducing at least some exotic plants so that your feral child

will not develop into a finicky eater. “Once he or she has reached adulthood,” the book claimed, “you might want to eat falafel or kimchi as a family. If the child has never tried anything beyond Oregon grape and hemlock needles, he or she might be lacking in dietary flexibility as an adult.” There were illustrated instructions for installing a fish pond and releasing the most nutritional strains of field mice into your yard. Squirrels not only could be eaten themselves, but industriously stored food that the child could dig out of the ground and eat. Parents were warned to stock their yards with tree squirrels instead of ground squirrels, since ground squirrels hibernate in the winter, and are therefore less readily available as a source of food year-round. Julie bit into her wooden pencil and gnawed on the eraser.

The advice on den materials was similarly contradictory and complex. While some of the books recommended letting nature to take its course—allowing your child the character-building experience of having to construct his or her own shelter through trial and error—other authors believed that the best dens were made by wolves, bears, or rabbits. Though she read the section carefully, Julie did not understand how a child could fit into a rabbit burrow. All of these animals could be trained not to eat the feral child through the use of short bursts from spray bottles filled with water. The author who recommended rabbit burrows suggested adding cayenne pepper to the water if the first couple of sprays didn’t deter attacks. Wolves and rabbits could also be conveniently litter trained so that they could live inside the home during colder seasons. Feral children and bears could not be litter trained without interfering with their natural behaviors and would have to remain outside year-round. All of the authors agree that children should not be provided with artificial sources of heat because it would

adversely effect their problem-solving abilities. One book insisted on relocation to Minnesota, North Dakota, or Alaska so that your feral child would not be coddled by temperate winters.

Julie was particularly intrigued by detailed instructions on how a biological parent could entirely hide his or her existence from the child by wearing a custom-made shrubbery blind (the kind usually used by hunters) every time he or she left the house. This was only, of course, for parents who were not wealthy enough to build a biodome or a very tall and indestructible fence. In any case, the parent should never speak to the child for fear of accidentally passing on language skills. All language that the child acquires should happen naturally, without the interference of potentially damaging parental oversight. Some of the guides referred to feral parenting as “learned autism” precisely because of this aspect of the technique.

The more books she read on the topic, the more she became uncertain of her decision. Raising a feral child seemed just as prone to misdirection and failure as traditional parenting. She was enchanted by the idea of living on blackberries and flying squirrels, but she thought it might not be the right way to raise a child—though she remained uncertain of the right way. Her legs burned from kneeling and crawling across the short, rough carpet at the bookstore. She thought, *maybe I am feral. I am a feral parent.* Arranging the stacks of child-rearing guides into a large circle around herself, Julie thought, *I am inside a tree.*

Assuming the pregnant woman had finally left, a bookstore employee began re-shelving the parenting manuals immediately. Someone else might be in need of them. When he heard a low growl from behind the wall of books, he backed away slowly.

Crevasse Bears: A Vulnerable Species

Professor Ursula didn't think it wise to enter the crevasse until she had disproven the existence of the bear. No snow had accumulated since the incident, so the two streaks of blood—one for each amputated leg—were clearly visible where they started in the disturbed snow at the edge of the drop off and ended in a dark red blot, located three and a half meters from the crevasse. Two concave spots in the snow revealed where pickets from the rescue anchors had been placed, buried, and then retrieved after the helicopter departed. There was a precise-looking cut where the rope had gone over the lip of the crevasse and sliced through the softer, newer snow above the ice layers.

In the official report, one climber explained that the group was so focused on hauling quickly and resetting the prusiks to take up slack in the rope that they'd nearly pulled the victim all the way to the snow anchors before anyone noticed the blood. Earlier, when one of the women had approached the edge of the crevasse to try to make verbal or visual contact, the fallen climber's missing legs were hidden by the bulk of his upper body and backpack. He was unresponsive when she yelled and waved, though she'd heard him a few minutes before—screaming something incomprehensible about teeth and then falling abruptly silent.

Using athletic tape and a down jacket, the rescuers attempted to stop the bleeding, but whatever had torn the lower limbs from the man's body had opened the

femoral arteries. Ursula noted to herself that this would have been obvious to a medical professional—one cannot, of course, have intact arteries without legs. The fallen climber died quickly, before his fellows began sticking white tape to the remaining parts of his legs, before the blood was visible on the snow. This was enviable. She envied it. By the time search and rescue arrived with a helicopter, his body was already partially frozen. Professor Ursula observed bloody tufts of down feathers stuck to the snow from when they'd been ripped out of the jacket and tossed by the propellers.

Due to the peculiar nature of the injuries sustained by the victim, the local sheriff's office opened a criminal investigation and performed an autopsy. The results seemed to point to an animal attack of some kind. The punctures and scratches in man's skin above the missing limbs as well as a two inch long piece of what appeared to be the tip of a claw embedded in his thigh entirely changed the focus of the investigation. They contacted Professor Ursula because of her well-known studies of mammals in polar environments. No one knew for certain what had attacked the man, but the claw was similar to that of a grizzly or polar bear in size and curvature.

She took a significant risk by traversing the glacier unaccompanied, but she wanted to be alone for reasons of her own and—since it was below freezing and early season—most of the crevasses were covered by snow bridges. Bears she had become accustomed to, perhaps too accustomed, as the investigators of the Noatak incident claimed—though after being mauled and partially eaten, she was more cautious. Plus, the potential for loss was less now than it had been then.

After digging a pit in the snow to set her own anchor and attaching herself to safety ropes, Ursula walked carefully toward the edge, probing the snow for hidden

holes and gaps. Attached to her harness, she carried audio and video recording devices designed to survive wet and freezing conditions that she intended to lower past the glowing blue ice exposed to the sun near the surface to the darker reaches of the crevasse. An intermittent scratching noise echoed from somewhere below, beyond her sight.

Ursula peered over the edge, but nothing immediately rose to visibility in the sparkling sunlight illuminating the upper reaches of the crevasse. The rippled surface of the ice walls obscured parts of the view into the gradated darkness. Nonetheless, she suddenly realized that she *could* see something below her. An out-of-place shape, irregular, fuzzy edges amidst all of the smooth curves of ice. Two furred half circles matched the bluish tones of the ice nearly perfectly. Two small, lighter blue discs looked directly at her, disappearing briefly as the creature blinked. The scratching noises started up again after a brief pause. She couldn't see the animal's limbs because they were in shadow.

Silence on the snowfield. At the time, Ursula thought she was too far away to discern the animal's breaths. Then she heard a long huffing intake. She discovered later that these creatures had adapted to high altitude and exceptionally long hibernation by developing a uniquely lengthy cycle between breaths, over three minutes in some cases.

Slowly bringing a camera up to her eyes, the professor glanced at the scars on the ends of the three missing fingers on her right hand, remembering teeth, and feeling the dulled chill of the wind in the present moment. She was still unused to the way the healed skin conveyed less sensation of cold. Having checked the temperature only a

few minutes before, she was not overly concerned at that moment, merely worried about future circumstances, and her ability to gauge the state of her hands accurately. And it wasn't merely the missing fingers, but also the indented claw marks on one side of her face, and her severely damaged right thigh, repaired with uneven pieces of flesh cut from excess elsewhere on her body. Ursula felt unfamiliar to herself. The official report didn't include the fact that she had been six months pregnant when the attack occurred.

Snapping a photo, Ursula quickly zoomed in on the image to see it more clearly. It looked like a species of bear: half-circle ears, nose-length comparable to that of a polar bear, two prominent nostrils, forward-facing eyes, uneven lengths of guard hair sticking out from its coat. However, its canine teeth extended much farther than any current day member of the species, and their tips were prominently visible even with its mouth fully closed. She heard the scraping again, but the noise had shifted, sounding now like the points of crampons making solid purchase on ice. Closer.

Looking beyond the camera, the professor saw that the bear-like form advancing up the vertical wall toward her. Progressing slowly, but certainly.

Ursula looked around herself. She stood on a nearly featureless plain of snow. There was a pile of rocks a few hundred feet below her in the direction of the tree line, but she knew they were merely ankle-height since she had passed them on the way up to the crevasse. Looking up at the peak, hidden under stacked lenticular clouds, she understood quite suddenly that she could not similarly disappear, though she was tempted for a moment to empty the contents of her climbing pack and try to scramble

inside, like an animal from the children's story about taking refuge in a mitten on a cold winter day.

She unclipped her collapsible avalanche shovel from the side of the pack, snapped the pieces together decisively, and started digging deeper into one of the indents in the snow left from the previous party's anchoring system.

Curled up inside the hastily-dug snow pit, Ursula could feel the creature walking over her as she pulled the metallic emergency blanket tightly around herself, trying to stop her body heat from escaping into the snow. She had carved out a rough snow cave with her shovel and crawled into it to hide, hoping that the animal would pass over her without ever knowing she was there. Its weight through the snow on her shoulder was massive and painful, reminding her absurdly of a cat trying to wake up its owner by stepping on them in sleep. The bear moved on.

As the danger of being crushed subsided, Ursula's body filled with a hot rage—she felt as if she might melt a hole through the glacier, to the rocky moraine underneath. This was not the same bear that had scared her face and killed her unborn baby, but it would do. She preferred this bear, because it was a mythic, previously unknown creature—perhaps even the only one of its kind. She could make its entire species extinct. How often did one human being have such power? Ursula's hands balled into fists and punched at the snow wall of her hiding place until it compressed into ice.

The professor rose out of the hard, tamped down snow with her ice axe in her hand. The bear ambled slowly down the snowfield, strikingly blue. Ursula ran, yelling as she did because it seemed cowardly to attack the bear without giving it some kind of

warning. As it turned, one clawed paw extended to fend her off, she sunk the axe into its neck. She kept swinging away—oblivious to the sounds of pain and fear—until the creature stopped trying to defend itself and lay in the snow. In her detached rage, Ursula thought its blood seeping into the ice looked like syrup being poured into a snow cone. Tufts of ice-blue fur slowly floated through the air around them.

The bear lay still—except for a very slight movement that caught Ursula’s eye. She reached out and touched the blue fur of its belly and felt something alive inside of it. Her rage subsided suddenly, as if her own blood spilled out onto the snow, and she pulled out her serrated climbing knife and carefully cut open the bear.

Covered with blood and blue fur, Ursula pushed her ungloved hands into the opening and felt for movement. Gently, she pulled out what her searching hands had found—a cub, almost old enough to be born on its own. Its skin was the color of a blue hydrangea, and its head was partially covered with a darker fuzz the shade indigo dye that would later cover its entire body. She cleared its airway quickly and tucked it into her down jacket after making sure that it could breathe on its own. Without wasting any time, Ursula used her portable stove to heat up water to wash it. The newborn was so small that Ursula could hold it in one hand as she cleaned its skin. Its eyes were closed and it made alien squeaks that she supposed were cries for its mother. The small, undeveloped claws dug into her hand, but she allowed this slight pain without pushing them away. It seemed only fair after what she had done. She mixed powdered milk with warm water and fed it with drops from one of her scarred fingers.

When the cub finally slept, Ursula zipped it securely into her down jacket next to a water bottle filled with heated water and set off in her snowshoes across the glacier,

under the stars. Passing her tracks from earlier in the day, she headed away from where she had come—and deeper into the wilderness.

Little Visitors

A red-faced toddler screamed and shook outside Shelly's thin-walled house, continuing to grip his mother's hand with one small fist even as he let his legs go limp and drag behind him on the concrete sidewalk like a fin-less, diapered mermaid. Shelly watched mother and child through the window until the crying ceased, then snapped the blinds shut as the mother reached down to pick up the child, now smiling, now bouncing happily. On the floor inside Shelly's darkened kitchen, two glowing shapes shook with unearthly white light. She had just had a second miscarriage, and Shelly worried over how to care for her growing spectral family—her own overwhelming need for love and their need (was this the right word?) for something inaccessible to her understanding. Her stillborn children rocked listlessly in fetal positions on the linoleum kitchen floor, reminding her of plastic bowls that persist in rattling after being dropped onto a hard surface.

Shelly was surprised that her miscarriages remained in the kitchen with very few exceptions. Sometimes they started to follow her into the hallway or out the door, into the backyard, but they rarely wandered far. In trying to discover what they liked, she made a list of things that were different about the kitchen than the other rooms in her home: Heat (oven, toaster, electric teapot, easily accessible furnace vents), four more

electrical outlets than any other room, three different light sources (not including the oven light), no rugs (*could the children move more easily on a slippery floor?*), a variety of smells (from the musty scent under the sink to the glass bottles of vanilla and almond extract), and a uniquely high amount of metal objects (refrigerator, steak knives, cookie cutters, pots and pans). She left trails of forks and spoons leading to the living room, placed appliances in plastic buckets of water on the floor while they were still plugged in, and left spices and rotting vegetables in the corners of the room—all to see how the spectral children would react. She was never certain that they had. In her best moments, she was able to believe that they preferred the room because she did.

When one of the fathers called, she did not tell him about the lost baby—she said he could not come over again because her kitchen had become infested with mice. He asked why she didn't call an exterminator and she told him she was afraid she might miss them when they were gone.

Shelly quietly explained to her mother, the plumber, a curious neighbor, and two Mormon boys in dark suits that you could not give the babies the comfort of holding them or forcibly stop their ceaseless rocking. The ghosts were intangible, but most people didn't know because they were afraid to try to touch them. The horrified looks from family, friends, and strangers, and the eeriness of the specters vibrating across the linoleum were minor concerns compared to her pained curiosity about their well-being and desire for a recognizable return of affection. The miscarriages belonged to her. She had cared intensely for them when they were alive—and even when she sensed they weren't. Without joining her children in whatever dimension they inhabited, Shelly wondered what she *could* do.

The spectral forms caused no discernable barrier to the motions of her daily life (their silent, massless bodies could easily pass through solid objects—Shelly’s hands, or the door of the dishwasher), but her concern felt like low-volume, constant static. Yes—ever-present sound. Perhaps this was always how ghosts emitted signals to their living parents—or perhaps the pervasive buzz of broken electronics was simply her own singular way of sensing loss. She could not tell if they felt the same way—she could not interpret their uncanny vibrations. Repetitive behaviors in domesticated animals—chewing the leg of a chair until it splintered or licking the same spot on their own skin until it was raw—often signaled distress. She knew she should not compare her babies to pets, but she was sometimes at a loss to understand or categorize them or her own feelings. She suspected the ghostly fetuses might be in distress and decided they needed a suitable playroom to distract them—and herself.

The room Shelly designed held no diaper bin, no pacifiers, no mobiles with whales or butterflies or sheep hanging from them. There were no safety covers on the power outlets or safety bars covering the lower halves of the windows. Those things remained in the garage, where she had stored them when they became unnecessary. For days, sitting at the kitchen table sketching her ideas, her ghost children curling and vibrating near her ankles, she asked herself, *how do spectral miscarriages play?* Neither child had come to full term before death—one at eight weeks and the other near seven months—so she considered their fetal developmental stages. The first child barely had the beginnings of limbs, fingers, and lungs—its appendages looked like the rounded forms of melted popsicles, though on a miniscule scale. The second had advanced far enough to develop vision and hair, its eyes glowing bluish-white through

transparent skin and its hair represented by thin vapor trails rising from its head. Neither had fully developed neural connections—she could merely guess what their world seemed like to them and what parts of it they comprehended. They could not hold material objects any more than she could hold them. She focused on sounds, images (for the older child), and things she thought they might be able to feel, like heat and cold, electrical currents, and the allergic effects of animal dander. Shelly wondered if it was more pleasant to have bad sensations than none at all.

To make things more complicated, they were ghosts. No one knew for certain how spectral perceptions worked.

The nursery completed, Shelly opened the door for her little ghosts and the youngest of them started a slow, meandering crawl (for lack of a better word—it was closer to the pulsations of a jellyfish) along the floor following the movements of a stegosaur with Christmas lights that flashed on and off in different color patterns in place of the plates along its back. The spectral fetus' curved form could barely catch up with the mechanical creature's erratic gait. The dinosaur smelled of catnip and mint and when the small child reached out for its tail, a heat lamp attached to the end clicked on and glowed orange. Stretching its other undeveloped hand toward the light, the child made a motion that appeared to be soundless clapping. The other child, its eyes open and staring, looked from one tottering creature to another and made small sounds to itself. It had never spoken before, never cried. When sparks flew out of the mouth of the pterodactyl, the ghostly baby smiled and wiggled in place.

She called it the Dead Child Petting Zoo. The name misled—in her experience, spectral children were unable to touch anything except each other. The creatures in this zoo actually pet the children, but since attempts to touch them just ended in your hands passing through cold air and the hairs raising up on the back of your neck, that wasn't really the right way to describe it either. Instead, the zoo was intended to raise the hair on the backs of the fetal ghost's necks—though neither of them had much in the way of hair and the youngest barely had a neck. The toys she created for the zoo stimulated otherworldly sensory experiences—she hoped. Using plastic dinosaurs from her own childhood and tiny motors extracted from various household appliances, Shelly created an army of moving creatures that sparked and emitted a range of scents, colors, and vibrations. The dinosaurs rattled as they walked because she had fed them pieces of cereal when she was a child and now the loops and flakes were dry and hard inside their plastic bellies. She gave the robotic creatures as many sensory features as she could think of, in hope that some of them would get a reaction from her tiny spectral children.

Shelly put her spectral children to bed at night under a blanket of electrical current and lavender scent. It was hard to tell if the youngest was asleep because its eyes were merely dark spots in its tiny head, but both lay still and calm—the first time Shelly had ever seen them so.

In the morning, both children had disappeared. They were not in the nursery, the kitchen, or the garage. Shelly never saw or felt them again—not even a slight vibrating movement out of the corner of her eye or a spot of cold air surrounding her ankles. She tried to call the ghosts back—but she did not know what or how they were called. When

she realized they were really gone, she let the robotic dinosaurs loose in the house until their engines ran down, and then adopted a cat just to have something to brush by her ankles—but both were too warm, too concrete, too lifelike to replicate her children’s quiet combination of presence and absence. She came to regret that she had helped them. She tried to re-create the presence of her children through some of the same means that she had created their nursery. She installed fans to make cold drafts of air and vaporous steam vents that sent clouds rolling across the floor in an attempt to replicate her children and trick herself into thinking her they were still there—but they weren’t. Though she wanted them to be happy, she also did not want to be alone, and that urge became stronger than kindness.

Shelly came to think that she should have left her children rattling on the floor instead of creating a happiness that took them away from her, that released them from whatever held them near. Though she tried killing other small things—birds, mice, even kittens—none of their ghosts lingered in the house. They slipped out under the door to the backyard and sometimes she would see them alight on a branch, burrow in the grass, or chase a butterfly, but they would not stay with her. She tried to have another child, but she could not—could no longer get far enough along to miscarry. Once, she found herself standing over an unattended cart in the grocery store, holding her jacket over a baby’s face, about to smother it. She did not do it because she worried that it would not work. It might haunt the store, the creamed corn and the evaporated milk, and refuse to cling to her. She came to believe that the children had taken something out of her—not when they had died, but when they had left—some forgotten or vestigial organ that would have become necessary if left in place.

Plasticity

Nancy Carson was part of the first wave of punitive relocation. Though the rehousing projects were not initially developed with punishment in mind, no one volunteered to move into the prefabricated barges in spite of severe overcrowding in the higher elevation neighborhoods. For weeks, the floating apartments stood empty, moored to abandoned downtown buildings, about level with their third stories. The barges' portal-style windows looked directly into the derelict offices, where pencils, three-ring binders, and multicolored plastic paperclips drifted back and forth against the walls under the influence of the tides.

Those who were sent to live on the barges were those most to blame for the rising waters. Blame was calculated precisely, offense by offense. Each household was rated based on its damage potential: vehicle ownership, inefficient appliances, monthly garbage volume, pet waste, unnecessary consumer materials, toxic household cleaners, etc.. In addition to their share of household blame, individuals were judged by factors such as exploitative business practices and other actions commonly known—for nearly a century in some cases—to be harmful, but only recently outlawed. Thoughtless procreation was considered particularly harmful to the future survival of our species and Nancy Carson had had three children, adding exponentially to the total calculation of her blame.

When she spoke to her children, all of them grown up, about her relocation, they were unsympathetic. *But I just wanted something to love*, she told them. Her youngest son tried to explain that he and his siblings had not chosen such circumstances, had not been able to refuse, but she didn't understand. She said, "wouldn't you rather be alive than not alive?" and he said, "I'm not sure."

Carson chose a few personal items allowed on the barges and wrapped them into a quilt tied together at the ends so that she could carry them easily. Her children sorted the rest of her belongings for recycling or resale. On her barge, Carson shared a room with one other woman who had been placed there for developing genetic modifications in poultry that caused cancer in children. This woman still was considered dangerous and wore a band of metal around one leg that beeped incessantly if she left the barge. Since Carson could no longer have more children even if she tried, her physical restrictions were less severe. The two women shared a restroom with the adjoining apartment. The women next door would not discuss their blame openly, but both had the facial marks of the Church of the Seven Seals—unbelievers.

Since Carson's fingers were severely arthritic, she was assigned to oversee oceanic debris sorting robots in the plastics cleanup division. After a few weeks of directing the robots, travelling farther and farther into open sea each day in her solar-powered seacraft, she realized that they would agree to almost anything she requested, as long as her request involved the elimination of pollution. Remembering, though not entirely clearly, the structure of a sea star from her childhood, she described the internal skeleton, tube feet, and eversible stomach to a robot as it perched on her hand. It dove into the water and, a few hours later, returned with something very like a sea star,

completely constructed out of artificial plastic particles. Delighted, Carson held the star in her hand. It was exactly how she remembered. Her face fell. It was not alive. No one had seen a sea star in the wild for 20 years. She set it on the glowing control panel of her seacraft. She found herself running her hand over the surface of the creature every few minutes, as if it just needed attention to be woken up.

Though she could no longer see them in person, she spoke to her children often. That night, Carson's daughter called and they got into another fight about medical bills. Carson wanted to pay them herself and her daughter told her that that was just her way of not taking responsibility—that no amount of money would make up for the poisoning that had led to her condition. Carson's only answer was to say that she loved all of her children and wanted them to be happy. She had said this many times, but none of them believed her. They thought that if she had really cared, she would have imagined *this*. "This" was a gesture that all three of them made. Her youngest son would step back during a call so that she could see the cramped dimensions of his foldable housing unit, the canisters of powered food rations, and threadbare blankets issued by the unemployment benefits office as he pointed silently. Her daughter pointed out scars all over her body where infections caused by an industrial-strength pesticide she had ingested as a child while eating contaminated apples had led to a continual series of amputations and skin grafts. Her oldest son would point at the sky, which could mean any number of things. They would never forgive her for bringing them into "this".

Carson asked her robots to make other sea life: a purple sea urchin, barnacles, shore crabs, mussels, even isopods. She would move the creatures with her fingers sometimes, to try to make them seem like they were alive. She wanted to send them to

her children, she was only allowed to contact them by video call. She kept the creatures in the seacraft so that no one would find them and take them away, even though there was very little space.

In the middle of a complicated cleanup project of a derelict cruise ship, Carson accidentally bumped the seacraft into a partially submerged waterslide attached to the deck of the listing boat. She fell and cut her hand on one of the edge of a reconstructed sea shell. One of the robots stopped to bandage the wound and clean the spots of red off the floor. “What will you do with my blood?” she asked the it. “Human pollution,” it replied. Carson knew that meant that the blood would be incinerated or off-worlded, the two primary disposal options. Looking at the models of sea life scattered around her seacraft by the impact with the deck of the cruise ship, Carson asked, “can you give it to one of them?” The robot paused, with the seeming uncertainty that came from a particularly rigorous systems search. Then it picked up the purple sea star, touched it in various spots with its needle-like mechanical legs, then shook the star vigorously like a machine that separates out platelets. The robot crawled up the wall so that Carson wouldn’t have to bend down, held out the star. She took it in her hand. She felt tiny tube feet attaching to the skin of her palm.

After that, Carson asked the robots what they needed to make each of the sea creatures live. Sometimes it was blood, sometimes another part of her: a bit of fingernail, some scraped skin cells, a sampling of something internal that they would extract using a long needle.

Carson had to start releasing the creatures into the ocean to make room for new ones. It was painful, at first, to see them pass through the series of see-through

vacuum tubes and ejected into the water, but she realized that she had made the right decision a few weeks later, when she looked through the clear floor of the seacraft and saw a sea star attached to the glass. A few days later, her fellow custodians started to report that their seacrafts were encrusted with barnacles. Others from the barges discovered creatures they hadn't seen since they were children. Plumose anemones bloomed underneath the barges and the residents were so entranced by the sight that they would reach into the contaminated water to feel the lacy tentacles against their skin. Most claimed it wasn't exactly as they remembered it. Only Carson realized that this was because the animals and plants that repopulated the ocean were exactly how *she* remembered them.

Carson's body started to deteriorate as she gave more and more of it to her creatures. Watching moon jellyfish pulsate past the seacraft with even more grace and delicacy than she remembered of the living version, she knew what she wanted to do next. Describing everything else that she could remember, she instructed her robots to use every cell she had left.

Carson's youngest son, hearing the news that the beaches were becoming repopulated with life, decided to walk the waterline, along the sandbags and through the abandoned buildings exposed at low tide that were being eaten slowly and quickly by the waves. It was true—the rebar and bricks were covered by things he had heard of, but never seen alive. Green plantlike stalks, slimy to the touch, some with bubble-like appendages. All kinds of things with shells, in colors and shapes that he had never seen life take. Under the rusted door of a car, he spied a crab with ten claws and he

remembered a story his mother had once told him, about how she was scared of crabs and imagined them with a claw on the end of each leg—until she actually saw one. All of the animals were somehow odd, somehow unexpected. The anemone colors shimmered metallically, strangely artificial, though also vibrantly alive. When he touched them carefully with one finger, their tentacles closed around him in a manner that felt more affectionate than predatory.

The End

Modern Yarns



Introduction: The purpose of this collection is to expand a knitter’s knowledge beyond traditional two-handed techniques and redefine “yarn” in a modern context. The industrious reader will learn how to use the lesser-known properties of wool to: disappear into the space-time continuum, defend against marmot-strandings, detach hypothermic doppelgangers from completed projects, collaborate with oceanic species, and internalize woolen-ness.



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PROJECT: Gravitational Singularity Infinity Scarf

The story: The theory behind this scarf amassed during a close encounter at the New York State Sheep and Wool Festival. Containers filled with sheared tufts of sheep, alpaca, and rabbit wool nearly obscured the discolored plastic tables that circled around me like slender-legged animals inside the dimly lit Raw Wool Display Barn. Bits of fuzz floated through the air and long strands appeared almost to emit their own white light against the dark wood panels, like slowly falling comets.

From the shadows of the barn, I watched lines of shaggy alpacas on leashes bob past the open double doors in the sunlight. I cast on a few stitches, knitting by feel in the darkness. Knitters passed me in bunched sweaters, uncomfortably scratchy under unnecessary layers of cables and bobbles. Some had not followed their yarn's washing instructions; had not heeded warnings about the damaging effects of spin cycles on natural fibers: Pilling. Stitch snags. Color fade. Shrinkage. Stretch. Warp.

“What are you making?”

Startled by the unexpected question, I jabbed the speaker with my 8 millimeter bamboo knitting needles, dropping a stitch in the process. Luckily for her, she was protected from my defensive stabs by the gauge of her sweater's yarn. Two stitches per inch, worsted weight—or heavier. I wondered what size needles *she* carried around with her. She seemed like the type who would use steel without considering the sound she made as the needles clanked together. Her overwhelmingly luminous sweater—covered in a spattering of pixelated yellow stars on a black background of stockinet stitches, with hints of metallic thread woven through here and there—sparkled when she

moved. A woolen galaxy.

I retracted my needles. She launched into a lecture on the relationship between the optical properties of yarn and the rotational axes of spinning wheels. Pausing, she asked, "would you like to meet my baby alpaca?" I nodded, thinking that she would produce an actual alpaca from underneath one of tables or inside her poorly blocked celestial sweater. Perhaps after I touched her alpaca, she would allow me to go back to my knitting and find someone else to terrorize with conversation. Reaching into the depths of a plastic tub, she gathered together a rough sphere of detached wool.

"He's so soft," she whispered in a voice of wonder. I put my hands out to touch the dark, light-absorbing ball of infant alpaca shearings. I felt as if I was being handed a child's detached braid instead of the child itself and it seemed unfair that the creature was unable to bite or kick in defense. As I handled the wool, my fingers were drawn into the fibers as if sucked into the vacuum of space. I wanted to jettison myself through this wooly airlock.

After buying the entire lot, I spun the alpaca fibers into yarn and used circular needles to knit a lightless cylinder of warped space. A dark, dark place. When I pull the scarf over my head, it is as if I have passed beyond an event horizon, never to be seen or spoken at again.

Materials:

- *3 skeins of black alpaca wool.* I recommend spinning the raw wool into a small gauge yarn (ex: sock or fingering) because larger weights allow light to escape between the stiches.

- *1 circular knitting needle, number 299,792,458 (U.S. size C).*

Instructions:

1. Measure around the widest part of your body. When encountering small-talk, it is essential to have the option of a full-body disappearance.
2. Create a swatch to confirm stitch per inch count and estimate the amount of light escaping through the stitches.
3. Knit in the round until you have covered as much of yourself as you need to.



PROJECT: Marmy of Mittens

The story: The desert can seem haunted at night. Under the cold, bright stars, the sand provides shelter for all kinds of noxious beetles and snakes and scorpions, whispering like the specters of Tartarus in the shadowy sagebrush.

As you cast on to distract yourself from sheer terror, it may be reassuring to know that many of the ghostly sounds echoing against the basalt columns are merely the scratchings and rattlings of unusually large rodents driven by scarcity. When they find you, the marmots will raise their arid voices in supernaturally piercing whistles, cutting sharply across the desert like a knitter severing a ball of yarn from a finished mitten.

For those unfamiliar with marmot kind, imagine a freakishly oversized, reddish-brown guinea pig. Marmot young fit into the palm of a human hand, but are born ready

to whistle holes in your eardrums and eat the battery acid out of your car. The term “marmy” refers to an extended family group of genetically related marmots organized into military formations. Large marmies are frequently observed on precipices above parking lots, pushing rocks over the cliff’s edge to neutralize cars. For their dens sites, marmots prefer boulder-strewn landscapes where they can hide their stockpile of mini-vans and jeeps for sustenance during winter hibernation.

After years of climbing canyon walls in the starlight, cabling needle and sewing scissors gripped tightly in my hands, ready to eviscerate marmots boldly clawing their way along the rocks after my pickup truck—I have finally stopped fleeing and started fighting.

Full disclosure: this knitting project will not get rid of the marmots, but it will help you make lemons into lemonade, or, in this case, marmots into mittens. Not the full marmot—mind you—merely its bristling ruff of menacing shadow-casting fur. De-furred marmots appear smaller and are therefore less frightening in the dark. Using every part of the marmot—while less daunting than using every part of a buffalo—seems overly ambitious to this author.

A note of caution: Be very careful that the marmy does not pull the wool over your eyes. Marmots are exceedingly fond of their own version of this project, which they refer to as “hummittens”.

Materials:

- *A marmy*
- *Opposable thumbs*

- *A set of size 4 double-pointed knitting needles*

Instructions:

1. Acquire marmot-approved food: brake fluid, anti-freeze, high fructose corn syrup, etc.
2. You will know the marmots are coming when you hear their whistles. Prepare to grasp their fur as they ram their heads into your tent. I recommend unzipping the door just enough to reach your hand outside—any more and they will get into the tent with you, which is to be avoided.
3. Near dawn, when the coast is clear, exit your tent to collect the detached marmot fur.
4. After washing the marmot wool thoroughly to remove any residual brake fluid, spin the collected fur into yarn. Knit the fur into mittens using a pattern of your choice.

Safety Concerns: Wear marmot mittens with caution. Every marmot you injured in making this project has an endless supply of half-brothers, mother-sisters, and kissing-cousins who will yank out all of your body hair and/or gnaw on the brake lines of your car if they smell the fur of their kins-marmots on your hands.

▽▽▽

PROJECT: Crevasse Rescue Harness

The story: Perched on the thin spine of jagged rock on the summit of Mount Olympus, we pulled the ribbed edges of our hats over our ears against the wind. I had a bad feeling about the descent. So did she. Red clouds that morning, threaded through the blue dawn like an asymmetrical two-color pattern. Now the sun shone, melting bridges over crevasses and unstitching the snow's hold on rocks and blocks of ice. I untangled, coiled, and anchored the rope. Then I cast the free end into the air. The loops unraveled as they fell over the side of the cliff. Tangling in the wind, the rope wrapped around rock horns as if swatted by a giant, invisible cat. Rain clouds moved up the valleys from the ocean as I rappelled down the rock face, landing lightly on the snow blanketing the surface of the glacier. My partner slid down the rope next and stood beside me.

Moving in echelon to avoid a pendulum fall into the crevasse, continuously probing the surface for unseen weaknesses, our rope team of two cautiously plunge-stepped over the side of Snow Dome to the Blue Glacier. Snow-covered crevasses melted open like a sweater unraveling around a cigarette burn. In some cases it was possible to traverse around the gaping ends, in others we were forced to step or leap over the cracks in the ice. The sunlight reflected up from the snow until we had to take off all unnecessary layers of clothing in the heat. Sweat soaked through the fibers until they were damp and hanging. Removing my wool cap and mittens increased my uneasiness. I saw my partner pull her cable-knit balaclava off over her head and wring it out.

Though the glacial surface seemed smooth and solid, I felt sudden tension on the rope trailing behind me, like a knitting needle catching a loose strand of yarn from the wrong stitch. Abruptly swept off my feet by my partner's body weight, I anchored myself face down in the snow to stop her from dropping lower into the crevasse or pulling me in on top of her. My face and hands burned from the friction of ice crystals against skin as I slid to a stop. The pick of my ice axe snagged hard snow and held. I breathed. To calm myself, I imagined resting upon coarse, unprocessed sheep's wool.

After kicking the spines of my crampons into the snow as deeply as I could—still laying face down—I used the triangular adze of my axe to dig a trench to bury an anchor to secure myself, comparable to using circular knitting needles for increasingly tight cycles of stitch decreases at the crown of a hat without being able to switch to a set of double-pointed needles. My partner's initial screams quieted to wet gurgling. I tied myself to the snow anchor. Walking to the edge of the crevasse, I stared down at the blood-smeared blue wall, a macabre Fair Isle pattern.

Working one-handed to leave an arm free for gathering materials, I reached down to use the points of my crampons to devise a knitted rescue harness. I chose a thick, insulating stitch pattern modeled after traditional Aran Island sweaters, with complicated, textured cabling running through the design like water from melting glacial ice. In mirroring the surface of the glacier itself, I hoped to neutralize its menace. Lacking yarn, I repurposed glacier rope, nylon slings, and strands of my own hair.

Before I could knit her safely out of the crevasse, my climbing partner silently succumbed to hypothermia and blood loss. I do not know the exact moment that this

occurred. The mists rose from the sea, the rain began, and I knew I would have to leave her broken, freezing body on the mountain in order to save myself.

My friend swayed slightly on the end of the rope. I pulled out my knife and freed myself. I stared for a moment after she disappeared into the darkness beneath my feet, uncertain which of us was the finished project and which the leftover ball of yarn. Then I wove the frayed end of the rope around a leg loop of my climbing harness and continued down the mountain alone.

Materials:

- *Glacier rope*: static rope preferred over dynamic options because the garment will not stretch out after repeated emergencies
- *Nylon slings*: at least two double runners
- *Your own hair*: as much as you can spare without dangerously lowering your body temperature

Instructions:

1. Quickly locate two pointy objects that can serve as makeshift knitting needles. I recommend ice axes or crampons, but use whatever you can find. Icicles are only useful in extremely low temperatures. If it is absolutely the only option, fashion a crochet hook out of your chock pick. Be forewarned, however, though it may seem reasonable to use a one-handed technique in this situation, crochet stitches are inferior to knitting for rescue purposes due to their lack of flexibility.
2. Using a prusik and pulley system, create as much additional slack in the climbing

rope as possible so that you can incorporate it into your project.

3. To create additional warmth, knit detached strands of your own hair along with the climbing rope as you begin to shape the shrug around the slings. NOTE: Since pack weight is one of the many challenges of technical mountaineering, it is very important to acquire multipurpose equipment. Hair, for example, serves the double requirement of insulating your own head and use as makeshift yarn in emergency situations.
4. Choose a stitch design. Please refer to the most recent research on stitches for mountain rescue before leaving for your trip. Based on my own past mistakes, I recommend you pick a simple design in the interest of saving time to save a life.

Last Words: This project explores the possibility that knitting skills are transferable to rescue scenarios and can mitigate the risks of technical climbing. I recommend frequent practice of the required skills to increase speed because efficiency is everything in mountaineering emergencies.

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PROJECT: Symbiotic Sweater

The story: A fierce wind scoured the fishing pier. Shredded plastic bags blew against the rusted metal railings and held: fraying, rustling. Sunflower sea stars, more than twenty arms unfurled, lay upside down with their tube feet slowing and drying, unable to

flip over and crawl back to water after being forcibly removed from crab traps. Sea urchins and clams washed up on the beach below and exposed, were snatched up by gulls and dropped out of the sky, shells shattering on the rough concrete. A ferry passed, the profiles of passengers darkly contrasting with the warm light of its windows.

Setting the ball of wool on the bench next to me, purposefully obscuring a heart enclosing initials carved into the wooden seat, I cast on the sea-blue yarn. A gust of wind rolled the ball of wool off the bench, just as I began to click through the second row. The yarn moved speedily out of reach, under the railing of the pier, and into the water below.

Though startled, I held onto the needles. As I walked to the edge of the pier, I felt the yarn go taut. I grasped the end of the yarn in my hands, peering into the dark, windswept water. There could be anything down there, beyond the reach of the clouded sunlight, hidden by the refracting properties of water. Pieces of styrofoam in pink, white, and grey floated near bobbing doll heads trailing matted blonde hair and fishing floats, encrusted with barnacles, traveling off-kilter and attached to frayed ropes.

Suddenly, the yarn in my hands went slack. The unexpected relief of tension felt like stitches accidentally slipping off a needle mid purl. I reeled in the line carefully and discovered to my delight that the yarn had been knitted into a blue sweater decorated with fishing line, six-pack rings, shreds of plastic bags, and detached limbs of toys. The stitch pattern is reminiscent of the textures of seawater: Windblown, rain-drenched, and becalmed.

Scientific note: While conducting research on the crafting capabilities of aquatic

species, I discovered that the Puget Sound is not only home to the Giant Pacific Octopus (the largest in the world) but also to the only cephalopod known to have developed the ability to knit.

The knitting species, commonly known as the "stockinet octopus", has evolved specialized suction cups that affix to wool with the ferocity and strength of shark teeth puncturing a tuna. Using a combination of unusually pointy tentacles, sea urchin spines, dried kelp, and other natural tools, the knitting-adaptive octopi execute a range of yarn crafts far beyond the talents of elderly human women and their cats. In certain circumstances—red tides, violent winter storms, or rare days of sunshine—octopi will crochet, macramé, and felt wool (this last being rarely successful due to the cold local water temperatures). One marine biologist I interviewed spoke wistfully of how the warming ocean will allow sculptural felting to become a dominate form of cephalopod artistry.

Inherent in this sweater's design is the unspoken, intra-species agreement to mitigate the effects of floating debris from the 2011 Japanese Tsunami on the Pacific coastline, particularly to reduce small plastics and chemical byproducts. These findings were originally presented at the Pacific Northwest Regional Joint Conference of Chemical Oceanography and Wool Arts. The stockinet octopus are also responsible for the initial experiments in production of fleece fabric out of plastic bottles—a fact little known outside of the scientific community.

No one has yet discovered how to initiate the entire range of possible collaborations. Most of the research currently available is based on knitwear found attached by mussel adhesive to drowning victims and the undersides of ships.

Safety concerns: As you may recall, floating debris from the 2011 tsunami is not radioactive because the nuclear plant meltdowns occurred after the massive waves receded. However, other toxins (fertilizers, rat poison, etc.) may be present. Make sure to wash your sweater thoroughly with soap and water, update your tetanus shot, and keep this project out of the reach of children.

Materials:

- *1 ball of yarn, sea-colored.* For a medium or large sweater, tie multiple balls of yarn together *prior* to dropping them into the ocean.
- *Floating debris* (ex: Styrofoam pieces and small, seaworthy plastic toys). NOTE: It is considered unethical to throw plastics into the water yourself, so make sure you have chosen a location that is already sufficiently contaminated.

Instructions:

1. See attached map of octopus territory.
2. Drop a ball of yarn into water, making sure to hold onto one end. I have been told that attaching a kitten to the ball of yarn precipitates the interaction, but I have not tried this myself. Though octopi do, evidently, enjoy eating kittens, the long-term health effects of feline-consumption are not well documented. If you try this method, I recommend you use only organic kittens because octopi are very susceptible to chemical contaminants, especially when ingested.
3. Note the tension in the yarn. When the tension is released (5-7 minutes), reel in

the line to bring your sweater onto dry land.



PROJECT: Naturally-Processed Wool Baby Blanket

The story: On the floor beside multicolored snipped ends of yarns, wayward stitch holders, and stray pieces of graphing paper, an orange kitten slept in a wicker basket filled with balls of yarn of various colors and sizes, no two exactly alike, and all rather smaller than one expects of a full skein of yarn. Unlike the kitten, these woolen creatures would never grow larger or learn how to use their claws and teeth to capture prey. Remnants from finished designs, the balls had no future plans. Red, pastel pink, salmon pink, intertwined fluorescent pink and gray strands, charcoal black, and a teensy ball of solid grey yarn that fit easily into the palm of my hand when I picked it up. As I emptied the basket—waking the kitten—and lined up the yarn to start my project, I thought, *meaty colors. Like partially cooked hamburger.*

Knitters often wonder what to do with balls of yarn left over from finished projects. Before a mitten or sweater is even begun, as one wanders through the aisles at a yarn store past tempting skeins—like rows of frozen dinners just waiting to be microwaved—it can be challenging to gauge the precise length of yarn needed to complete a particular scarf or hat. Even a careful knitter, using a swatch and ruler to calculate yarn needs, may find the yarn itself irregular. Cautiously buying from the same dye lot does

not ensure precision in length. I have sometimes unraveled seemingly equivalent balls of yarn only to discover that they are more than 10 inches different in length! The sleep-destroying fear of insufficient matching yarn can lead to a dangerous overestimation of knitting needs.

I have heard stories of terrible consequences from wool hoarding—from “yarned” lungs caused by inhaling wool fibers in infested households to the merino-related suffocation of a toddler who fell into his mother’s supply closet. I make a point of turning all of my yarn into projects as quickly as possible to avoid anoxic brain injuries and persistent wool burns.

Still contemplating the leftover balls of yarn, I paused before casting on, hungering for a project requiring skills beyond standard needle technique. The kitten returned, dropping a dead mouse on my foot.

I began to eat the yarn—slowly and methodically, as if it was an exceptionally long, furry noodle. When I got near the end of one ball, I held it, fighting the urge to swallow, and tied it to the free end of the next. Continuing through the remaining yarn, I paused for a moment at the end of the last strand, considering pulling it all back out again, but instead I let go and it joined the rest inside my digestive tract.

After a few hours of severe abdominal pain, I drove to the hospital and had the yarn surgically removed from my body in a tangled mass. While taking a few days off of knitting to recover, I washed the bile-encrusted clump of wool on the delicate cold water cycle with Woolite to see what had become of the balls of yarn as they moved through my digestive system. During washing, I could see it tumbling in the machine, opening itself. The cycle finished.

I carefully blocked out the design flat to dry on a towel. Finally, I could see the forms my insides had knitted. The pattern looked like the twists and turns of an intestinal track or an umbilical cord, neatly coiled into a square approximately four feet by four feet—a detailed map of my bodily functions drawn in yarn.

After allowing the yarn to dry completely, I wrapped up my Processed Wool Baby Blanket in pastel pink tissue paper, tied a bow around it, and gave it to a dear friend who is expecting her first child.

Materials:

- *4 balls of yarn* Note: Choose colors that are appetizing to you personally. Non-meat eaters might consider shades of green, for example.
- *A digestive system*
- *Health insurance* (recommended, but not required)

Instructions:

1. Ingest all four balls of yarn. Do not cut the yarn and make sure that you tie the ends together as you finish one ball and move on to the next.
2. Wait 12 hours.
3. Call 911. Make sure to instruct the surgeon at the hospital to take the entire mass of yarn out in one piece. It might be useful to designate a care proxy before you get to this point in the process in case you are unable to advocate for yourself.
4. Wash and dry the yarn mass.

5. While the yarn is still wet, block out the baby blanket on a flat surface by spreading and tugging it into the desired shape and pinning or weighing down the edges so that it dries in the right form.

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No animals were seriously harmed in the making of this book, unless you consider the author an animal.

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Project Submissions: Do you have your own ideas for unique, contemporary knitting projects? For consideration in our next volume of designs—which will feature reader submitted projects—please send your ideas to:

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