HAYDEN'S FERRY REVIEW

GEOGRAPHIC TONGUE

I had been thirteen for exactly two weeks when the spot appeared on my tongue. It was the size of a newborn's fist, ragged and pale—eerie as hell. I brushed my teeth twice, but it wasn't going anywhere. I kept it to myself. I wasn't scared—not at first. I'd been scrutinizing my body for days, seeking the tiniest evidence of change. Here, finally, on an ordinary Monday morning was something different, a sign of hope. Hadn't Mrs. Alston told us our bodies would reveal their mysteries in many ways? This, I thought, was my mystery.

It was 1977, and I was trying to survive seventh grade. I believed in signs. The storm of puberty had blown in and drenched everyone but me. I was flat and scab-kneed, pony-tailed, all angles and lines—I-85 had more curves. And that had been fine with me. Fine, that is, until Lance came to live with us.

I remember thinking womanhood would come on me fast. I still prayed then, and every night I begged for my growth spurt. I didn't have time for the drawn-out internal processes of adolescent development Mrs. Alston had told us about in class, where eggs were dropped, hips rounded, and hormones gushed, and it was all very busy and hidden, like a swarm of bees beneath your skin. As far as I was concerned, womanhood was a trapdoor I could fall through. I wanted to wake up one morning grown.

Something else had changed that spring. The girls who wore Earth Shoes and Bonne Bell lip-gloss began to fascinate me. Their silliness repelled me. I studied them with the brooding intensity of an enemy—or a lover. Their Farah-feathered hair was sprayed stiff. They were smug smugglers of tampons and tugged at their bra straps with practiced irritation. They rode the bus or carpooled, and passed me as I rode my banana-seat bicycle to school. How had they managed to slip so quickly into those grown-up selves? That's what I wanted to know. They moved in groups—a gaggle, like geese. Mornings before homeroom, they gathered and primped in the school bathroom. I brushed my hair, pretending to care, and I listened to them, those girls. They stood together giggling at the corner sink. They didn't really see me.

But that Monday morning, I'd lost all interest in eavesdropping. I hid in a stall until they left for class. When the first bell rang, I came out and studied my tongue in the wavy mirror over the sink. The splotch had spread and sharpened, like a work in progress. It had morphed into the very thing Mrs. Alston had showed us on the overhead projector the week before. Slender ducts that connect the uterus and ovaries, she'd said. It's where the action is, ladies, where fertilization occurs.

There was a picture of fallopian tubes on my tongue.

The late bell rang, and I didn't move. I'd get detention if I went to class now. I'd never been any trouble to Aunt Violet. This one don't give me no trouble, she'd said. It's Lance that's going to kill me. But there wasn't a chance I was going to be seen with this thing—a womb!—on my tongue.

I went to the school nurse.

You ought to get that looked at, she said, and called Aunt Violet to pick me up. I'll need a doctor's note, she told us.

When my brother arrived one bright chilly day weeks before, in February, toting his backpack and bedroll, reeking of Camels, French fries and the menacing smells of hitchhiking, my childhood began to chafe like a husk. Although Lance fell into one of his awful funks, sitting in his recliner watching reruns all day, I knew the time would come when he'd take off again. And when he did, I planned on going with him. I had it all figured out—I was naïve enough to believe myself. I'd get my diploma by mail order. I'd learn shorthand and wear pantyhose and pumps. I'd be Lance's secretary when he worked for NASA—and I was certain my brother's talents were needed at NASA, if he had a mind to join them.

Lance knew everything about how the world worked. He once autopsied a dead cat and brought me home the skull. He'd sliced open a pickled cow eyeball and built robots and made an explosion. He told me about The Big Ear, a telescope in Ohio that had received a radio signal from deep space. He said Sweden banned aerosol sprays because they messed up the atmosphere. Before he ran away from his father's house up North, he'd gone to a high school for geniuses. But then something happened, and he got kicked out or quit, and he ran away and ended up with us at Aunt Violet's.

You swore to me you would never go back to that school in Massachusetts. They kicked me out, you said, because I'm a deviant. But you were bored and miserable, and I was scared you'd leave us and go back up North. I'd ask if you were leaving, and you'd tell me to stop bugging the holy shit out of you. I asked a lot. Aunt Violet would hiss at me to stop pestering you. She'd tell me how ruined you were, dragged off to Boston where you'd got too smart for your own good, and what use was book learning if you couldn't make it in this world? Did you ever hear her? Her frustrated love?

I never sulked. I guarded you. You had that look, you know? The look of leaving. And because I was sure you'd abandon me, I prepared to go away, too. I wanted to deny myself the comforts of life, I resolved to pull away. I willed my attachments—to home, to Aunt Violet, to Mrs. Alston—to buckle and loosen like wallpaper, so when the time came to go away with you there would be nothing—no one—to stop me. I practiced seeing Aunt Violet's home the way a stranger might: rotten stacks of plywood, a pile of old tires, the smell of old people's skin.

I sat beside Aunt Violet at the free clinic that Monday worried sick she'd keep me out of school the next day. I'd miss Sex Ed! I tried hard to hide how upset that made me. It was an imperative class, Mrs. Alston had told us, and I wasn't about to miss Mrs. Alston's imperative lesson even if I did have a picture of the female reproductive system on my tongue. Even if I had the male reproductive system, I wasn't going miss that class. Aunt Violet pressed her hand on my forehead, and told me I was warm. She didn't know I was taking Sex Ed. I'd forged *Mrs. Violet P. Blair* in that old person shaky way on the mimeographed permission slip that went out about the *disturbing number of pregnancies* and *increasing incidents of venereal disease* at our school, about the *frank discussion and scientifically accurate information the specialist will have at her disposal.* Asking Aunt Violet to sign such a thing would have been excruciating for both of us, and the way I looked at it, my forgery was an act of mercy. Besides, if you didn't take Mrs. Alston's class, you'd be stuck in Home

Ec making brownies with the Pentecostal girls who didn't cut their hair, much less take a sex class.

Even today, I can see Mrs. Alston the way she sat on the stool in front of us that first day, her skirt draped in long folds. She told us she'd delivered babies on five continents. She was as furious as a prophet in Revelations, with a look that made you swallow hard.

She was a health specialist sent courtesy of Uncle Sam, she said, and she looked serious at first as if she were going to be strict, but she had a laugh that burst from her sudden as a clap of thunder. She wore canary yellow blouses from India and a vest she'd made by sewing together her dead husband's ties. She carried a knitting bag filled with books like *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and *Let's Talk About S-E-X!*

In the course of our time together, she said, I want you to ask me anything. And I mean anything. I have seen it all, ladies. I'm here to enlighten you. You know what your job is?

Our jobs? We looked down or at each other, and tried to avoid Mrs. Alston's unflinching stare. We were seventh grade girls—what kind of jobs could she mean?

Oh yes. You don't think your school brought me in for nothing, do you? Don't think I've been around the world, in tents and shacks and refugee camps telling women anything different than what I'm going to tell you here. You've got a job, girls. And I'll tell you what it is. I protect me. Say it with me, ladies.

I protect me. We said it quiet as prayer.

She clapped. Say it again. Loud!

I protect me!

Whenever I clap, you ladies say it. Okay?

On the first day of class, Mrs. Alston gave us a handout about breast exams. (When your breasts come in, cherish them, she said, closing her eyes. Cherish them.) She passed around plastic models of the human reproductive system that she fished out from a large box of Styrofoam packing peanuts. Mrs. Alston told us that people were sexual beings and she said sexual relations were normal and could be dangerous but she did not say it was a sin.

Hey, I'm not the preacher, okay? I'm the teacher. We live in the real world here, right ladies? In the middle of Mrs. Alston's talk on herpes or testicles or conception, she would stop and clap, and we would yell, I protect me.

Wide now, the doctor said, and I opened my mouth. His hands smelled of antiseptic, a scent I cherished for its authority. I still loved examining rooms then—the tongue depressors like fat Popsicle sticks, the billowy clouds of jarred cotton balls. Germs were killed in such places, wounds closed, problems solved—or so I imagined.

It's not the cancer now, is it, doctor? Aunt Violet asked. She was hunched down in the plastic chair by the sink. She'd told me all about how cancer took Uncle Ray, the disease devouring his liver, his kidneys, his organs in days, she said, like a snake swallowing eggs. The doctors hadn't helped. She'd never known one that did any good at all.

The doctor's hands moved down my neck, fluttering, probing. The school nurse thought I had something contagious, and Aunt Violet was scared it was terminal, but the

doctor would recognize the shape on my tongue, I felt certain, and the possibility both thrilled and disturbed me.

Well, he said. It's nothing to worry about. What you have here should disappear soon enough. He washed his hands. He was already finished with me. I tried to be happy—I wouldn't miss Mrs. Alston's class. But I was stunned with disappointment. It will disappear? It was nothing?

What do you call it, doctor? Aunt Violet said. That thing she has?

Migratory glossitis is the medical term.

What now?

Geographic tongue. Named for the map-like configurations that sometimes appear—

She don't eat right.

We don't know what causes it, he said, his mouth gone tight. It's... a curiosity. But it's harmless. Really. He scratched something down on a clipboard. He wore a pained expression of duty on his clean-shaven face. He looked at his watch, but as he turned to leave, the doctor's parting words brought me a surge of joy.

Puberty brings on a lot of changes in young adults, he told me. It's a sign your body is changing.

It's nothing bad, what Cassie's got, Aunt Violet said when we got home. Big Mama and Lance were in the dark, paneled den as usual, stationed in their two lounge chairs, their faces bruised in the blue glow of television. She's got a map on her tongue, Aunt Violet yelled. Big Mama couldn't hear, or didn't understand much anymore, and Lance was good at ignoring us. It's going to disappear, nothing to worry about, the doc says.

Oh, Lord. Did I forget your sugar shot? Aunt Violet asked Big Mama.

I gave it to her, Lance said. He did not take his eyes from the television.

Thank you, honey.

Big Mama turned a little, and sighed. Her tongue waggled in her gummy mouth like a parrot's. When Aunt Violet's husband died years ago, he left Aunt Violet his scrap metal business, his house, and also Big Mama, his mother. Big Mama used to stand near six feet tall, chop her own wood, and run the boarding house in Palmetto, but now she sat shrunk up like paper curling in fire, watching TV all day with Lance. There were those who told Aunt Violet that Big Mama would be better off in a bed over at County, but Aunt Violet said she would never do kin that way.

Lance was watching Bonanza again. His yellow bowling shirt was wrinkled and smeared with Cheeto dust. A sore above his knee was scabbed and puss-filled, he worried it so with his scratching.

You need to get outside in the fresh air, Aunt Violet said, which is what she told Lance everyday. You need some boys your age to talk to.

Mr. Cartwright, Hos, Little Joe—they're my friends now, he said. Even Hop Sing the Chinaman has his charms.

Aunt Violet stood with her hands on her hips, fretting. Her voice lowered. You reckon Mr. Blackenstock might come by for supper?

No.

Lance stood up, stretched, popped his knuckles. Even then, he was scary skinny. He reached for his cigarettes and lighter. I need a smoke.

Where's he keeping himself these days?

Don't know, Lance said. Don't care.

Aunt Violet sighed. Now don't be that way to a schoolteacher who looked out for you like he did.

Lance looked at me. Newsflash, he said. They found rings around Uranus.

Devilment. That's what Aunt Violet called Lance's comments. But I took a secret delight in his barbs, even when they were aimed at me.

What, Cassie? You didn't know? You are familiar with Uranus, right?

Lance, I said.

Seventh planet from the sun, he said. Twenty-two moons. And five newly discovered rings.

Run out see if we got mail, honey, Aunt Violet told me now. And then set the table.

It had been weeks since Mr. Blackenstock had eaten supper with us. For a while, he'd walked over to our house with his dog, Dolly, three or four times a week. That was soon after Lance enrolled at Palmetto High and Mr. Blackenstock was still his teacher. Mr. Blackenstock had recently moved to Palmetto and you could tell he wasn't used to it, or maybe Palmetto wasn't used to him. He had a ponytail and a leather necklace. He was alone in our town, with no mother or wife. He lived over on the mill hill, past the high school, in a rental right there beside the water tower. I rode my bicycle by his house sometimes, and if he saw me he would hold up his arm, his hand spread wide, a funny kind of wave. I had seen the dirty mat on his porch, the wild sticker bushes, the need for a woman there. When he came to dinner, Aunt Violet made him take home leftovers in warm, foiled heaps.

Mr. Blackenstock told us Lance was the brightest student he'd ever taught. He had Lance helping out in the lab and working on his own projects. But one afternoon Mr. Blackenstock came over and said he had a surprise for Lance. He read a letter out loud to us at the kitchen table. He told us Lance could go to a program in California that summer for the good of the world. He could go there on a scholarship from Tao Chemical. Your life is just beginning Lance, Mr. Blackenstock said. But something changed in Lance's face, and he didn't look happy. He kept whispering, California? And then Lance didn't say another word through supper. He didn't touch his food or talk to Mr. Blackenstock. After Aunt Violet served the blueberry cobbler, Lance said, I'm not taking a scholarship from Tao Chem.

What? Mr. Blackenstock said. What?

Lance said Tao Chem was an evil company that used science to kill people. He said they put chemicals in prisoner's mashed potatoes to see what it would do to their brains. After the chemicals killed them, Tao Chem stole the bodies and carved out the brains that were all shrunk up and fuchsia pink and he said they kept them in jars in the Tao Chem labs somewhere in the Pentagon, where they were stored to this day, like rows of pickled beets. They were making a chemical in secret to make a whole class of drones for the American army.

My God, Lance. You know that's not true, Mr. Blackenstock said.

I'm not taking one cent of Tao Chem blood money, Lance said. And then he stood up and walked out of the kitchen and sat out on the porch.

That boy might have his daddy's brains, Aunt Violet said, but he's got his mama's wild notions.

Later that evening, Mr. Blackenstock persuaded Lance to come out of his room. They sat together on the porch swing.

I'll not be the cause of this, Lance. I'll not…you have to take it.

I don't have to do anything, Lance said.

You can get out of here. Mr. Blackenstock put his hand on Lance's bare knee. Don't you see that?

Is that what you want? You want me out of here?

Lance took Mr. Blackenstock's hand and then he leaned over and buried his face in Mr. Blackenstock's chest. Lance's shoulders began to shake. Mr. Blackenstock's hands moved through Lance's hair, across his back and down his scrawny arms. He sighed and said, Oh, Lance.

Aunt Violet's dented mailbox was full of junk when I checked it. Nothing good, anyway. No big brown envelopes filled with little paper umbrellas, cocktail napkins, sunset postcards, twenty-dollar bills. My mother worked on cruise ships. She made people's beds and mopped floors and hung up fresh towels, but she got to visit islands where there were monkeys in the trees and parrots in the air, pet store animals roaming around, or so she'd written once on a postcard. I longed for the day I'd reach in the mailbox and pull out another of those overstuffed brown envelopes with my name, *Miss Cassandra Peters*, in my mother's fat, loopy writing.

As I walked back from the mailbox, I could make out Lance, a speck on the porch. The driveway was long and curved, and Aunt Violet's house looked small as a game piece by the time you got to the road. A few rusted pieces of ruined cars and motorboats were strewn across the wide overgrown yard. Scrap yard leftovers. Husband parts, is what Aunt Violet called them.

Any word from Bev? Lance said, when I joined him on the porch. He was referring to our mother, whom he hadn't seen in a year.

Why do you call her that?

Bev? That's her name isn't it? She's no mother, that's for sure.

I sat down. The porch swing creaked like a ship. He eyed the mail I carried—seed catalogs, bills, a church bulletin.

Nothing, huh?

I shook my head.

You're lucky you never knew your father. One crappy parent is bad enough. Imagine if your lineage included two miscreants.

Out of habit, I scanned the sky for hummingbirds, although it was much too early in the spring for them. When my mother had arrived at Aunt Violet's last May, so had the hummingbirds, hovering around the butterfly bushes and crossvines, hungry from migrating all the way from the equator, the same place my mother was now.

God, that's ugly, Lance said. He stared out at the water tower looming in the distance.

It's just a water tower, I said. No one hardly notices it.

It's hideous. It bears a striking resemblance to a single enlarged virus. Do you know viruses are dead? They replicate and kill living cells. That's their mission on earth. Replicate, kill. They're pathogens. And that's what one looks like. He blew a smoke ring, his gaze locked on the horizon.

The smells of baking cornbread floated out from the open kitchen window, and I knew Aunt Violet would call us soon for supper. Lance ground out his cigarette. As he stood to leave, I said, Migratory glossitis. I hadn't realized I'd memorized the doctor's term.

What?

Migratory glossitis, I said. I was wondering if you know what that means.

From Latin *migrates*, he said, to change or move. *Glossa* is Greek for tongue. Changing tongue.

That's what I have. Geographic tongue is the nickname. I stuck out my tongue and he leaned in closer.

The waning light caught Lance's diamond earring, a sliver of a thing nestled in his ear, hidden like a secret. A pimple lurked in the scraggly, soft beard on his chin. His hands were cool and tender on my jaw as he peered into my mouth. Jesus, he said.

I flushed with pleasure. I knew Lance would recognize the female reproductive system when he saw it. But I was wrong.

It just what? Showed up? This thing on your tongue?

This morning.

It's a map, he said. It's a country. I swear…this is a southeastern Asian country, I'm sure of it. His nostrils flared a little as he concentrated, and his eyes, black and round and scary as a shark's, were fixed on me. He was looking hard as if I were a specimen in a lab, but he was away from his recliner and his TV shows, and that made me happy.

I loved you. I loved you so much it was hard to breathe. I'd do anything to see you curious again. Even show you the picture of fallopian tubes on my tongue. Even that.

He came to my bed that night with a flashlight and an Atlas. He woke me up, and I stuck out my tongue and let Lance take another look. Then I lay down while he sat at the end of my bed flipping through his Atlas, whispering about latitude and terrain.

Burma. Shit, if it's not Burma. I knew it. I knew I'd seen that before. Fucking Burma, Cassie.

Lance, don't cuss.

That northern border is uncanny.

It was three in the morning. Lance wore nothing but shorts. His bony chest was smooth, with two flat, brown nipples like eyes. Why did men have nipples? I would ask Mrs. Alston.

How far off is Burma?

About as far away as you can get from Palmetto, South Carolina, he said.

I drifted off to the sounds of Lance sketching in his notebook. I dreamed I was stretched out on a beach towel, the hard, warm sand underneath me crunching like sugar. The tide

came in. The gulls screamed. My mother was on her ship, docked out on the sea, waving to me. A water bird stood there at the edge of the ocean, and it was Lance. A beautiful silver heron and Lance at the same time, just the way dreams can mix up things and be right, too. One flap of his wings, like snapping a towel, and Lance was in the air, circling over the turquoise water, his shadow moving on the beach around me, a second dark bird. Lance the water bird got smaller as he drifted away, flying off to Burma.

That night you weren't bored anymore. I watched your transformation, I witnessed your terrible euphoria. I remember waking up later, furious at myself for sleeping. I hadn't heard you leave. You weren't in your room. I went back to my bed and panicked. When I heard the front door latch open and close, relief filled me like a kind of ecstasy. You tiptoed past me in the hallway. Your hair was wet, you'd just gone running. You hadn't been out like that for weeks. There was a time you'd run for miles and miles at night, all the way to the water tower and back. You remember that? Right before you dropped out of school. I'd listen for your sneakers—I could hear them slapping down the driveway towards the highway, and they'd get softer and softer, and further away. Sometimes I'd see you come back at dawn, the sweat coming off you like you'd been caught in a downpour.

Ladies, we're going to practice something important, Mrs. Alston told us the next day. What if a man balks at using a prophylactic? What does a smart female do?

You say no. You say no glove, no love.

Excellent. Okay, there's another option, second best, but one I feel obligated to share with you. Anyone want to take a guess?

Mrs. Alston walked down the rows of desks and gave each of us a banana.

Ladies, you put them on the male yourselves. Don't look at me shocked like that. Chances are they won't refuse. It certainly won't hurt to practice.

She passed out square foil wrappers.

Now watch me. Open, take out the condom, put it on the banana…roll it… like this. Leave a little cap on top of him. See?

There was the sound of rattling wrappers as we followed Mrs. Alston's directions. The rubbers were like the skin of some dead animal, limp and sad, abandoned. Sliding them on the bananas felt like dressing dolls.

Oh, ladies please don't peel the bananas. You want them nice and firm.

Mrs. Alston told us we could get more rubbers at the Red Diamond Gas & Go on Highway 13. They have condom machines there in the Ladies'. All kinds, more flavors than Baskin Robbins. Okay, everyone. Easy enough, huh? Hold your bananas high, so I can see.

We held them up like swords. Mrs. Alston clapped.

When I got home that Tuesday afternoon, Lance wasn't in the den with Big Mama. He hadn't been home since breakfast. His room was neat for change-- the bed made, the books stacked. Aunt Violet acted cheerful at first and said Lance had been gone all day, but she was glad he had finally got himself out and about. She figured maybe he was at the library or even at the high school with Mr. Blackenstock, but she was more anxious than she let on.

I didn't tell Aunt Violet about Lance's studying my tongue and making sketches all night. My mouth went dry with nerves. In the bathroom, I saw the spot on my tongue had faded into a ghostly watermark.

Wednesday morning Lance still hadn't come back. Aunt Violet fed Big Mama her breakfast and did not look at me when I asked if she'd heard anything from Lance. I wanted to stay home sick, in case Lance showed up, but I didn't want to miss Mrs. Alston's class. She had promised to start answering all the questions we'd turned in. She had typed up a list of every single one, she said, all anonymous of course, and I've gone to great pains to preserve your slang terms.

But I knew something was wrong that afternoon when we took our seats, and Mrs. Alston didn't say a word. She sat on the stool in front of the class, just like always, but Mr. Hamm, our principal, stood there beside her. Mr. Hamm told us he was sorry but Mrs. Alston was going to leave us early, before her two weeks were up. Awwwww, we said, so loud he raised a hand. Enough, that's enough.

We still had a week left! We had all those questions! I chewed my knuckle, and tasted my own wet skin.

I wanted to say my good-byes in person, ladies, Mrs. Alston said. We saw she'd packed away all her pictures and equipment. The knitting bag, bulging with books, sat at her feet like a pet. We still had a lot to learn, Mrs. Alston told us, shaking her head. How the school district expected anyone to teach us what we needed to know in such a short time was beyond her.

We knew "they" were the grown-ups who had complained about her and were starting to make a big stink about what all she was teaching us. Also, we heard that some of the rubbers ended up as water balloons on the playground. Mrs. Alston said she was sorry about not being able to answer all the questions we'd turned into her, like she promised. I'm just sick about it, she said, while Mr. Hamm glared at her. My heart sank.

My question had been, What is a deviant?

Mr. Hamm cleared his throat and told us the school nurse would come in and he would find a substitute for tomorrow. The nurse hovered in the doorway and Mr. Hamm waved her in. Mrs. Alston ignored them both. She calmly wiped her glasses on her jade green skirt, and then fixed us with her predatory gaze.

Ignorance is a death sentence, she said. It's tragic they don't understand that, but that doesn't excuse each of you from learning what you need to.

Mr. Hamm's face was red as a wound. Now just a minute, he said. Mrs. Alston, the agreement was that you—

Ladies, Mrs. Alston said. She stood up and clapped her hands.

I protect me! I protect me! I protect me!

When I got home from school, a deputy's car sat in our driveway. The sheriff himself was parked at our kitchen table.

You don't happen to know where Lance has got off to now, do you? Sheriff McCauley asked me.

No sir.

He was a big man, the sheriff. His oversized head swiveled calmly in my direction, taking things in with an unblinking stare, like a great horned owl.

Your aunt is tore up about this.

Aunt Violet put down a slice of pound cake in front of the sheriff. You best track down the boy's mama, he told her. Yes, she said. Yes, I got to let Beverly know. And I need to call preacher Lipscomb so we can pray over this thing. Oh, Sheriff, I got so much on me now.

You know I'll do what I can, he said.

Aunt Violet was friends with the sheriff because his daddy was a lawman, too, a long time ago, and she knew his daddy had helped out Big Mama, back when she ran the boarding house in town. There used to be all kinds of fights and trouble at Big Mama's rooming house, and the sheriff would help keep a watch for the mean fellows.

Lance once told me it wasn't a boarding house at all, what Big Mama ran. It was a whorehouse. How did Lance know such a thing? That's what I wanted to know. He'd just smiled. Everybody knows.

The sheriff pushed back his empty plate. That was delicious, he said. He leaned back in his chair until it cracked. His leather gun holster rose as he stretched. A radio at his hip buzzed with static. The sheriff overpowered our small kitchen. He filled it like the smell of cooking meat.

I have a bad feeling about this, Sheriff, Aunt Violet said. My niece—she's not been around much for these children. Her taking off like she did. It's been hard.

The boy ought to join the Marines, the sheriff said. They will break a man down into little pieces and then build him right again. I seen 'em take the worst punks you ever seen and turn them into fine men. I'm thinking of Dewey Kingsely. Caught him playing chicken down there near the high school that time drunk as a cooter with the mayor's daughter setting there beside him. Gave him a choice. Enlist or rot in my jail. Now he's a deacon, a fine Christian man.

There was a knock at the front door and I went to open it. Mr. Blackenstock stood there. His bike was propped against the porch railing. I brought him into the kitchen.

Mrs. Blair, he said. I came as soon as I could.

You haven't heard nothing? Aunt Violet said.

I haven't spoken with Lance, Mr. Blackenstock said.

You the schoolteacher? The sheriff asked.

Mr. Blackenstock nodded.

Set down here, won't you, Mr. Blackenstock, Aunt Violet said. There's cake.

Mr. Blackenstock declined. He stood there awkwardly. The sheriff said, I believe you have something for me?

He did leave a note on my porch, Mr. Blackenstock said, but as I mentioned to you on the phone I don't believe it will be helpful. He took out a paper from his pocket and handed it to Aunt Violet, who passed it to the sheriff. The sheriff stared at it, and threw it down on the table.

Finally gone. Hope you're happy. I can see those words now. Lance's handwriting was thin and spiked as an EKG.

I don't know what the hell this is on the back, the Sheriff said, turning the note over. School work, I guess.

It was Lance's sketches of my tongue. He'd drawn a map of Burma and a little star inside it said *Rangoon*. He'd written out names. *Bay of Bengal, Thailand, Laos* and *Cambodia*. Underneath his map were strings of words. *Major political unrest. Uprising. Demanding democracy and freedom. Pagoda festivals. Buddhists.* The note trembled in my hands. It was my tongue there.

It was my tongue that gave you the idea to leave us. I tried like hell not to cry in that kitchen. I wanted your note. I wanted to keep it and study it, but the sheriff took it from me. He stuck it in his pocket.

Big Mama started up her hoarse calls and her carrying on in the den, and Aunt Violet went to check on her. I got up and filled the sink with soap and dirty dishes, knowing, even then, that shielding myself in an apron, doing women's work, would make me invisible to the sheriff. I ran the water hot as I could stand it, until my hands burned. I wiped my wet eyes with a towel.

The sheriff crossed his arms, and considered Mr. Blackenstock who still stood there rigid as a fence post. Hell, a seventeen year-old boy? the sheriff said. No telling. Probably at one of the tittie bars on Highway 13.

Mr. Blackenstock said nothing. A silence fell between them until the sheriff broke it. Where you think that boy went?

I couldn't say.

Uh huh. The sheriff sucked his teeth and fixed Mr. Blackenstock in the crosshairs of his stare. You got no idea, the sheriff said.

None.

I sure don't want to drag that pond.

A week went by and Sheriff McCauley put out his bulletins and they dragged the pond, but Lance had disappeared. We'll find him soon as he wants to be found, the sheriff said.

It was high summer—the crossvine blooming, the hummingbirds zipping, the spot on my tongue long gone—when we heard from Lance. I am gathering no moss, he wrote. A stingy one-line note postmarked from Seattle. There was no return address.

I have no idea what that boy is trying to tell us, Aunt Violet said, I just thank the Lord he's around to try.

I believed you were having yourself a fine adventure. I pictured you riding an elephant or learning to talk to the natives in Burma. I thought you might have headed to Perth, Australia. You told me the fancy telescopes were there.

I sat out on the porch swing every evening that summer, thinking of you. When the sun sank, the light bounced at the top of the water tower like a signal. I wanted to tell you it had turned into a beautiful thing, that water tower, shining pink in the distance.

Aunt Violet was right. Lance did come back. Ten years later, he came to help me bury her. I drove all the way to the Charlotte airport to pick him up. He was so thin I didn't

recognize him. Embracing Lance felt like hugging a coat wrack. His mouth was full of thrush and on one cheek, a swath of Kaposi's sarcoma like war paint. I was working nights at County by then, and just passed my boards, and I knew the signs, but wished to God I didn't.

I was shy with him. I made him hold up both sides of the conversation. He thought I was mourning, and I guess that was part of it. Poor Aunt Vee, he said.

The July heat did not let up that day. Our clothes thinned and shined with sweat at the burial. After the funeral, Lance and I stood in Aunt Violet's kitchen—my kitchen now, though it brought me no comfort. There were casseroles, meat trays, Jello salads, courtesy of Free Will Baptist.

We'll never eat all this, he said.

They sure loved her down at that church, I said.

Listen, Cass. I've plundered every goddamn cabinet and closet in the house, even the bathroom shelves and spice racks. There's not a drop of anything. No cooking sherry. Not even Listerine. You'd think one of those do-gooders could have left a flask.

I'm sorry. I didn't even think about it, Lance. I should have warned you.

Aunt Violet was ever the teetotaler.

Yes.

I'll buy you a drink, he said.

We cut out to the bar at the new Holiday Inn off the interstate, and sat at a two-top overlooking the parking lot. Even in the dimness of that place, it hurt me to see Lance so thin, like he was put together with pulleys and levers, as thin as he was. You could just fold him up and stick him in the corner, the way he looked

I'm ordering you a Jack & Ginger, he said. I think it suits you. Fire-gut nerve leavened with a certain effervescence.

I wasn't much of a drinker, but the ice cubes in my glass soon rattled, and Lance ordered another round.

Funerals should always include alcohol, he said. It's barbaric not to. Don't you agree?

The drinks had gone to my head. My words were trapped. My vision narrowed like a spotlight in the dark. I focused on our tabletop so the room wouldn't spin. Lance's fingers held a cigarette. My hands cupped my sweating drink. A waitress came and lighted the candle on our table.

You never did tell me if you ever made it to Burma, I said, surprised to hear accusation in my voice. You never did tell me.

Oh, God, he said. Oh, that. Let's just say I've been all over the world and the world's been all over me, as they say. It was good while it lasted, but the world and I are now officially estranged.

Another round of drinks arrived. Despite the food in Aunt Violet's kitchen, I hadn't eaten that day. I wasn't hungry. Grief fills me like that.

You don't remember my geographic tongue? I asked. And how you left that week? To Burma.

He sighed. My adolescence is a big blur. But fill me in? Tell me what I forgot. Leave out the bad parts.

I remember everything. Sometimes I wish my childhood was a blur.

He laughed. Bottoms up, he said. Which reminds me. I hate to hit you up on the tail end of this thing, but I have a favor to ask. And I do mean tail end.

That clutch of words, "I protect me!" began to pound in my ears. Mrs. Alston's voice still played like a riff in my mind sometimes, and on bad days, when a fourteen-year-old came in five months along, or I handed over a slick newborn to a weary, hard mother, that phrase rose up in me, and it was all I could do to keep those words to myself. If you weren't careful they would harden, those words, and pelt out like hail, a curse, and not the blessings they were.

You're nodding, Lance said, but you don't even know what I'm going to ask you to do.

But I did.

I have a theory, he said. Hospice isn't so different from midwifery. Birth, death. Ushering in, ushering out. Entrances and exits. You man the almighty portal, right?

Lance.

A toast, he said. From one black hole to another.

He laughed, and I tried to. I really tried.