Two
Like his Rebel grandfather, he stands brass buttoned on the roof of Georgia Military College. In his hands a saxophone gleams dully in the after “Taps” dusk. He points the wide mouth at a flush of lights icing the nearby College for Women. One yellow pane hides a girl so close that Sweet William is her perfume, and the pulse of her throat is just beyond his touch. He pushes out with the horn, a long honeyed sound. In her room, the girl sits writing in her small neat hand. Her eyes mirror the desk lamp as she dreams of the dean’s list and Sunday’s parlor visit. Again, she sees his muscles moving beneath sharp creases as he sits the hard chair. The blaze of his smile and his crackling black eyes touch her through woolly uniform folds. Her breath comes short and her writing slows. She leans ruddy curls against a white arm, caught in a gilt frame of sound.
The House on Bolton Road

I drive past it on the way to the airport. Shabby men lounge with their cigarettes on the front steps. The vast spread of grass where I built small towns with acorns in the roots of an absent fir tree has shrunk to a weedy strip only yards from the street. Instead of a rabbit warren rooming house, I see the brick fortress, my grandmother Annie’s house, her gift from a mail-order groom, a dirt farmer turned insurance salesman.

I want to turn in the driveway, tell the guys, “I used to live here. Can I come in and look around?” I would walk up those steps, past the screen porch where Annie taught me how to crochet doilies, into the living room, chairs circled like wagons around a wood stove, down the long hall, make a left turn to the kitchen where a heart attack took my grandfather, where I sat after school in first grade listening to Stella Dallas, watching Annie push her weight into the handle of a grinder, making meat loaf for supper while my parents worked downtown.

My big sister and I slept across from the kitchen, in the room where Annie’s parents had died, the refuge my sister shoved me from when she heard noises in the night. Again, I tiptoe down the haunted hall past Annie’s snoring, past Reggie Sue, the boarder, to the front room to wake our parents. I would find them there, still beautiful, in their thirties with jet hair, wrapped in each other’s arms, innocent as me at six of the time when whisky would drive a stake through the heart of their marriage and Daddy would sit among men like those on the steps, trying to warm himself in the sun.
If General George was father of our country, my father was big chief on the home front. The Army looked past his straight back as they listened to his murmuring heart. When they wouldn’t let him join their war, he went down to the muddy Chattahoochee and sat quietly, awaiting that subtle pull on the line.

One day each week he spent hoeing his yard full of corn, tinting his skin with red clay and sun. At night my father crept on moccasined feet, his obsidian eyes gleaming as he searched the house for firewater. He fought his way through jobs like land mines, each one growing more treacherous. Sometimes he lay in the mud for days, his fatigues decorated with permanent stains.

My uncle, the colonel, cried when my father’s body declared war on itself. But my father sat on the riverbank and smiled, ignoring the rocket burst of cancer in his head. The water soaked into his feet, made lakes of his lungs. Dreaming of fast ponies and scalps, he slid under the swift current.
A toddler, I stand on the frontseat,  
my arm around Daddy’s neck as he drives,  
studying that small brown island on my ribs.  
It hovers over training pants pulled high  
on a round belly while his voice rumbles  
yarns about Scottish ancestors, Cherokee wives,  
braves lurking in the woods behind our house.

I’m six when Daddy takes me to squat  
on a riverbank with cane poles. He shows me  
how to thread protesting worms on a hook,  
how to cast a line. We compare the sun’s stain  
on our arms, as brown as my birthmark, unlike  
the moonscape skin Mother and my sister wear.

On my eleventh birthday Daddy gives me a basketball.  
Weeks later he leaves, lost to the white man’s poison.  
Soon that brown spot, my bit of Indian, disappears  
under a jutting breast. But when I glimpse it  
in the mirror, I remember his Old Spice and  
tobacco smell, and miss his sweaty arm around me,  
as if we had shot hoops only moments ago.
“Please, let me stay home.” I press both hands below my navel, squeeze out one hot tear, but Mother’s mouth freezes in a straight line. Wearing her office clothes—nylon over lace, clattering sling backs—she pushes me out ahead of her, turns the key a final click.

Now, the hard points of my butt aching on a wooden seat, I watch Mrs. Burns, my seventh grade teacher. Her face turns that purply red. This time she aims her ruler at Robert Reynolds. He bounces in his seat like a ball on a bolo bat, wearing a silly smile that only makes her screech louder.

I slide down, legs in the aisle, yanking out my eyelashes by twos and threes. Each little jerk helps me forget the spit dried at the corners of the teacher’s mouth, her whistling ruler, how my daddy moved out, how, ever since, my mother’s sobs rise up through the linoleum to shake my bed at night.
Sunday Prayer

Tomato-ripe at twelve
she sways in the oven air
of church, her dress sticking
like licked candy. Up front
the deacon’s voice drones
as women beat at flies with
cardboard faces of Jesus.
River-washed sinners face
the floor. Light bounces
off bent wire curls. Bald
heads shine like ceramic.

She alone looks up
to see the song leader,
a hot-rod hero saved by
the Call. Her eyes glide up
legs skimmed with Sunday
white, brushing his secret
bulge, to arms hung from
dark half moons. She stops
at his mouth, now moist
with amens, and her lips
move in silent prayer
as his eyes meet hers.
1. Kissing Practice

When Patricia Cox, my best friend, and I hear Barbara Bennett is going to play spin the bottle at her birthday party, we panic. Until now, in the seventh grade, we only had to flounder blindfolded with a donkey tail. Kisses meant the dry pecks of sisters and parents. Our faces sprouting pimples, our chests crab apple breasts, we decide to practice—the real thing. Copying movie smooches, we press lips together—slightly open, softened—fitting noses sideways in a smooth glide, tongues only a nasty rumor.

2. The Real Thing

A week before that party two ninth-grade boys give us a ride home from a basketball game. “This isn’t the way,” I say, but they stop the car on a dark road. The boy with me in the backseat, tall tan Jesse, takes me in his arms, while his frontseat buddy reaches for Pat. At least a chance to show off, I think when his dry lips descend, hard on mine. As if by an offstage cue, they shove us, Pat and me, onto our backs. Jesse jerks down my underpants. I push at his hands, hearing only bursts of breath from the frontseat.

A filthy secret lies between my legs, a wet pad. In the dark my face blazes. As I swat at Jesse, my hand brushes something alive, velvet over bone. I jerk away. He touches the pad, recoils, too, before pressing me down again with his steely arms. “Wait, wait. Let’s talk about this,” I say, and he, daunted by that bloody lump, stops. But, hearing his pal’s grunts, he falls on me, his hard thing jabs against the bone over my crotch, stabbing blindly between pubic hair and pad, bruising blue pain.
3. Ever After

Finally they let us pull our panties up, skirts down. At home I wave to my mother who sits guard by the black phone, lie in bed wishing for Pat’s chuckle, how talking to her will make those boys a bad dream. The next day I see Pat in the school restroom. “What happened?” I ask, searching her gray eyes in the mirror, but they are flat as closed doors. She, the sharer of every secret, says, “Nothing,” and turns her back to me. Even as whispers swirl, staining our names, I lose her forever, my best friend.
Mr. Trimble, I think of you often,
with the half-sized fingers dangling
from your left sleeve as you wrote on
the chalkboard with your normal right hand.
The thick glasses that slid down your nose,
the receding hairline. But mostly
I remember how you were the only person
who saw more than a poor girl at a rural school,
how you alone protested when I announced
nursing school. “Such a waste,” you said.
Only you mourned when I gave my life
to a man, to children, to a boring job.
With each small victory—an aced exam,
a promotion, a publication—I whisper,
“See what I have done, Mr. Trimble.”
Now forty years later, I think of you
and wonder if you, too, were forced
to compromise. I want to find you and ask,
“Mr. Trimble, is this enough?”
I raise hand weights and watch my reflection, muscles bunching in brown shoulders, arms drawing controlled arcs. I stand among other lean women intent on defining sinewy curves that once only men dared to claim, men like my father, his shoulders strong enough to raise me overhead. “Feel this,” he would flex biceps, tan skin over stone. “Promise me, you’ll never paint your fingernails red, you’ll always be my little buddy.”

As if that could have kept him from the hooch he loved more than me. Rain-clear sweat streams down my face, not the tannic booze my bad father swallowed. But his same hunger drives me to pump out reps, willing fibers to tear and burn. Ignoring my mother’s dark curls and sad eyes, I stare at thighs, carved like his, as if I could bring him back, or even be him, the good father.
Two friends of twenty years, as at home in New York as Atlanta, we cab down to the Village for a matinee. Mrs. Klein used her own children to practice new analytic theory: the son walks off a cliff; the daughter, also an analyst, vows revenge on her mother for forcing sex, like worms, down her young throat.

Over cappuccino we rehash the play. Suddenly my friend reveals a child whose parents, drifting on clouds of politics and porn, forgot her. At ten, her father eyed her new breasts until she backed away, stumbling into a sinkhole. She shows me the memory like black dirt still under her nails.

I tell her: my mother caged me with a Baptist will against sniffing boys. Yet at sixteen, I perched on her bed, as she crooned about her first sex since my father. Her legs danced against the sheets as she asked, “Do a lot of orgasms mean I’ll get pregnant?”

She asked me, a girl who only knew poking knees and hot breath in my ear. I stared at the dark nest bared by her hiked-up gown, the white belly rising above it, and dreamed of a place safe from that voice, oozing from her red lips. I wanted, like my friend, to fall deep into the ground, to huddle with other children, fleeing parents such as ours.
Somebody told me that you were dead, but it’s not true. You live forever in the stone Home Ec building, where you bully Tucker High girls into sewing useless aprons, baking gummy pies. You taught my class Sex Ed, passing around a Kotex to watch us cringe, as if we were touching a frog or maybe a boy’s creepy thing. You talked about tubes and ovaries cycles and shed linings, not fat, sloppy tongues pushing past our teeth, blind hands crawling under our clothes or the stab of a boy’s dick against a girl’s nylon underwear. You sat, your billows of arm flesh quivering, thundercloud thighs slammed shut over a petrified hymen, pointing at diagrams that had nothing to do with me and your so cute nephew, Chipper, or the bottle of Jergens in the glove compartment of his shiny black convertible, the better to grease his way into me. That night I smiled at myself with puffy lips in the bathroom mirror and thought of you, Edna Faye, and that fleshy mole at the corner of your mouth, the three bristles that quiver when you grin.
On my sixth birthday, I stand by a trash fire clutching the bride doll in white lace Santa brought me the day before. We’ve lost our home on Gladstone Road in Atlanta because of Daddy’s drinking. Mother has to find a job when we move three miles to live with Grandmother Annie, but I only think of my doll and my new cowgirl outfit with the fake leather fringe. Wherever we live, I sleep, curled up in the maple bed beside my big sister.

On my fifty-sixth birthday, snow glitters as I snooze on a futon in Colorado, snug in my daughter’s house, while three miles away in the foothills a six-year-old beauty queen dies, a cord around her neck, her head bashed, her underwear bloodied.

On my next birthday, I sleep at home, three miles from Gladstone Road, three miles from Annie’s brick fortress, and three miles from where the dead girl’s parents now live. I wake, still pulsing from a dream of sex with a man as powerful as Daddy, to think of that child, her TV image—painted face and dyed hair, dancing in a cowboy hat and fringed skirt—frozen at the age of flat-chested dreams. I know now, despite Daddy’s drunk driving, bouncing off mailboxes, Mother’s weeping, my sister’s shrieks, I had always been safe.
Today is Grandmother’s birthday. Born over a century ago, she’s been dead a dozen years, but I can still see her knotted hands pulling greens in the garden, shelling peas, crocheting, never resting. I write poems, but will anyone in the next century remember the lilt of my words as I relish the memory of one bite of her cake, the feathery yellow layers held together with tart lemon curd, wearing a gossamer white coat and a snowstorm of fresh coconut?

She tried to teach me. Set out eggs and butter the night before. Use a hammer to crack open the hairy coconut head into jagged chunks. Grate the meat into fine wet flakes, beat six eggs, each for two minutes, whip the batter on high to liquid gold, clap pans on the table to pop bubbles before interment in a hot oven. Tiptoe around the kitchen as if in church while you boil icing until it spins a silk thread that balls in water. I do each step, but my cakes never come out like hers, fluffy and moist, the taste of eternity.

My teenage years I lived with Grandmother in the big yellow farmhouse while Mother, her sorrow fried by electroshocks, wept, jabbered, and scratched me like a cornered cat when I took my turn sitting suicide watch. “Not my child, you won’t,” Grandmother told doctors to Mother’s lobotomy. She dressed me, the orphan of a drunk father, a crazy mother, in handmade finery. Her sure touch fitting a dress to my body, like the frosting that held together her cakes, kept me from flying to pieces. While Mother healed, I became yet another cake in her oven.
Hanging from a tram strap in Prague, I look down on a seated woman. Amber beads, clear as honey, lie on fine white skin and floral lawn drapes her lap. I stare at her wide-brimmed straw hat, a hat like you wore, Annie, in my favorite picture. The brim’s shadow veils your face, your chin framed by a feather boa. I rock on my heels, remember other trolley rides, my hand in yours. You could have taught me more than how to crochet, how to play a winning game of Chinese checkers. You survived two wars, a dead baby, a husband gasping and blue by the kitchen stove, your life forced like paper whites in January. This Czech woman lived the Velvet Revolution. Her life evolves as Prague emerges with barnacles of new growth on ancient houses adorned with statuary like wedding cakes. The tram window flashes on street musicians, Marlboro signs. A careful woman, she looks straight ahead, safely contained by beads, a proper summer dress, and the shade of her hat barely covers her smile. If only I could ask her secret, your secret, Annie, of how to live in a world flying apart.
In an old newspaper clipping you dance in a chorus line, a dozen girls in a fashion show. It was 1931, the Depression, yet you sport the latest style—an open coat skimming a slim dress. Sixteen, dark curls shining, your smile earns you the title, “prettiest girl in Atlanta.” Soon you would go off to Milledgeville, to the Georgia State College for Women, but the following year your “sadness” would keep you home, beginning a downward spin. Stop here.

I want to rewrite your future, to start again at the time when you counted, like pearls on a silk string, how many dates you could squeeze into a weekend. My new film would show you, nineteen again, at the altar beside one of the other men who courted you, not my father, the darkly handsome Donald, his eyes burning into you like lava. This husband would be sober, balding, too busy at the office to notice the dresses you bought for me and my sister, the sweet, obedient girls of this other father, a man who would thank God every day for his good luck in having you.

See, I’ve torn up the old script, the one that shows Donald, slipping from your arms toward a whisky bottle, that shows you, after the divorce, taking the job you would hate, where smarter than the rest, you trained men for promotion over you. I would edit out the part where after work you scrub clothes in a bathtub, cry in your lonely bed, blaming yourself for Donald’s gutter slide. Instead of the pills and barbiturates you swilled to still your frantic hand-wringing, instead of the shock treatments, the threatened lobotomy, you would be the grace note at dinner parties, entertaining friends with accounts of your vacations in Europe.

The old reel shows you marrying again, to a mountain man disguised in city clothes, a man who dragged you away from shopping and concerts, who had you can beans from his garden, cook for his relatives, who slapped you around when the sex stopped. I wouldn’t have to carry your whispered messages to Donald. In my new version, you would spend afternoons reading to a book club, wearing a new hat, a watermelon-red dress, your pretty feet set off by sling backs. Other days your fingers would fly over the keys of the black Royal, writing stories and poems.
Instead of swallowing a bottle of pills at sixty when I told you Donald was dying of cancer, you would take your writing to a beach house in winter, to a lake house in summer where your grandchildren would visit, and I wouldn’t be standing on dead grass over your grave on a hill in North Carolina, away from everything you loved. No. Your family would celebrate you on this special day. You would be lovely with your crown of thick white curls, as we come bearing gifts for the woman who wants for nothing—handmade cards from the children, a diamond bracelet from your doting husband—and you would smile radiantly, like that girl in the browning newsprint.
Suicide Club

For Jalaine

You and I were flat-chested little brats, too young for secret societies, hardly speaking to each other on the school bus, when my sister, at fourteen, started her own select club. Our country school had no sororities, just Future Farmers and Bible Study Club, so she called it Eta Pi.

New members painted their pointy little knockers with fingernail polish, went to school without their underpants. I told on my sister one night at dinner after she ratted on me for playing doctor. I didn’t bother to tell you, Jalaine, about how I got her grounded. You were a kid, a whole year younger.

But listen, Jalaine, I’m telling you now. We share more than faded yearbooks as members of our own nasty girls’ club, too new for rules or secret handshakes. Enrollment is automatic, sort of like the gray hair we rinse away, but not so easy to hide, what with the red clots of sleepers my mother gulped, the oozing bullet holes your folks wore to bed.

Like my sister’s once-lacquered tits, we both wear a scarlet “S” branded on our hearts. At our meetings, when we bother, we knock back yet another martini, pretend we can forget how it all got started, this bonding of women whose parents reach out from the grave to club them with guilt.
My parents lie in the dusty cage of memory like once brilliant jungle snakes. An occasional sequin-bright scale shines through yellowed skin. Too many years of captivity, a steady diet of rats, have bloated their slender forms. All that is left of the Belle is an elegantly tapered tail. The sparkle of wit can only be imagined in the slow nodding of the male’s ponderous head.

But I have saved a ragged brochure. Here. They are shown on a tree limb, in full color, along with a description of their feeding and mating habits. There are fewer requests to see them of late, though the rustle of their coils still commands a chill, and venom can be seen dripping from bared fangs. I continue to open the museum door each morning at nine.
I got out the easy way when Mother left you. I was eleven, but my sister, sixteen, eloped to escape clanking bottles between sofa cushions, your nightly gorilla rampages, only to live with another kind of brute. Without your slurred curses, random backhands, and Mother’s weeping I slept alone, wrapped in velvet silence.

For a long time it was enough. Then I began to forget your monster rages and remembered your tremulous tenor crooning love songs, you, bending Mother over in movie kisses— “The most beautiful woman in the world”— pulling quarters from my ears, my pal, teaching me to plant corn and bait a hook.

Mother warned me against your kind, while she still mourned you, her Valentino, and her dreams—a house with white columns, a canopied bed, candlelit dancing. Yet she wed a man dull as the earth he farmed. When I told her cancer grew in your lungs like kudzu, she wore a lacy gown to swallow all her pills.

Now I have what Mother wished for me, Daddy, the opposite of you. This man, blonde to our Cherokee dark, shines, gold flakes in sand, weighs each word for truth. Even after forty years this Marine is as likely to speak Urdu as utter sweet lies and braces himself against the gale of my kisses. His blue eyes still melt my bones.

But I yearn for one last waltz around the kitchen, standing atop your feet, the brush of your fingers against my cheek as if my skin were rose petals.