

Mystery Readers

JACQUELYN THOMAS

The children know someone is coming. Someone one of them knows. Only Mr. Bussian can say for certain whether it's their very own mother or a stranger. "Boys and girls, listen up!" All morning he's parceled out clues, nudging a herd of eight-year-olds toward a critical-thinking cliff. "This is our final fact." Whatever he says next will constrict the afternoon's potential. The children know this. They'll feel it too: a final tug of possibility, the dawning weight of vacated space. I'm sorry for that. Inside my bag are three dozen cheerful pencils.

It's Friday, Mystery Reader Day in a Sun Prairie classroom. This week, I'm it. Mr. B. finds my email on his smartphone. He's scrolling down my list. What little there is to be said of me (green hilltop, creaky windmill, sour barn) is sent flying (*Little Women*, *Pippi Longstocking*, *The Hundred Dresses*) with a gesture like the flip of a coin, until his thumb comes down on this: "All of our initials are consonants. Only our grandchildren's names begin with vowels."

Amelie appears in the doorway, fist on hip. "Grrrandma," she growls, peering up at me from beneath the sweep-bangs of her *fashionable* bob. The look on her face, I feel it. She's eyeing me *smuggily*, I think. "I knew it was you."

"Fashionable" is Amelie's word. A word she affixes to herself. And her things. Casually. "Fashionable," she says in response to compliments. "Fashionable," upon opening gifts. She means "fashion-able," as in "works for me!" Her goal is aesthetics, not acceptance. Given any old thing, she will fashion it into something greater than itself. Today, her paisley leggings, lime tutu, rhinestone socks, and camp T-shirt are elevated by what my mother would call a bolero jacket. On Amelie, it's a simple jersey shrug.

“Smuggily” is my word, a concoction of her knowing and my instinct to snuggle.

Amelie beside the playhouse-sized lockers (cobalt blue) and gray wash of artwork above them (birch trees, a single cardinal in each)—this Amelie we call Ami un-fashions my thoughts. A luminous pressure blooms in my chest. *Mi nieta gloriosa*, it gushes. My granddaughter. *Ami*. She is glorious.

Glossolalia is the collision of familiarity with awe.

“I knew it was you,” she says.

“It was the farm,” Mr. B. offers, as Amelie gathers in what she can of my waist. Encumbered by picture books, I stroke her shoulder with my wrist. I’ve come for her, for my Ami, because her parents are working. Everyone is expected to contribute someone, on some unspoken Friday, for Mystery Reader Day. It dawns on me then that while I am Ami’s someone, she did not choose me—her mother did. I wonder whether Ami, like the others, is disappointed to discover that I’m not the someone they hoped I’d be. This makes me sad for Ami. What makes me sad for myself is that she is my youngest grandchild and this is likely the last time I’ll step inside an elementary school classroom.

Her teacher is not what I expected. Mr. B. is chubby. He blushes. Young and immediately likable, he is unbothered by the press of curiosity behind him. I don’t know how many children there are—17, 18, maybe 20. It seems they are mostly boys. Mostly sound. I cannot take them all in.

Amelie pries one of my fingers from the handle of my bag. She leads me inside the dim classroom. Someone bum-ushers me from behind. A buzz-cut boy, taller than the rest, gallops around the mob of us. He arrests himself beside a haphazardly padded chair and bows with a sweep of his hand. He’s funny. I can tell. I laugh, though I don’t understand a word he is saying. My ears have stopped. The school steps and hurried hall winded me, but now I’m nervous—and uncertain of the wooden chair. It’s short and possibly not as wide or sturdy as I am. This will not go well, I think, lowering myself to the storyteller’s seat as if entering a scalding bath. I’ve lost them already, the gathering children, to a blood surf garbling sound.

They say that when we die, hearing is the last sense to go. We were warned, back in high school, to watch our mouths at Orchard Manor. I wondered how they knew, those small-town practical nurses, what dying people know. Had

someone resurrected and complained? And what disappears before that? When our senses take leave of us, are they orderly as they go? I worked in nursing homes, on and off, until I married. No one ever traced the loss list further back than sound.

I had a working theory. Taste, I reasoned, was the first to go—maybe smell. Old folks eventually quit eating. Obstinate as toddlers, they stiffly resist their trays.

The children assemble themselves on a carpet at my feet. Behind them, a wall of windows tints the classroom February gray. A chart pad on its easel flutters beside the radiator. This feels like feeling for a memory. Most of everyone is gone, obscured and backlit. Small moving parts glide into the light. There are girls here after all: a snippet of ear in butter-blond hair, knobby knees in cable-knit tights encircled by the sleeves of a cardigan, a slender finger, a twirling bracelet. And Amelie.

Ami is a small-chinned girl with big brown eyes and an upturned hum of a smile. She looks like Ramona Quimby. Not the one I met at school in 1968 (inky mouth howling beneath a scribbled-on face and wild hair splashing like a cartoon fountain of tears) but the tender and eager watercolors of recent editions.

Mr. B.'s belly presses against the back of my chair. He's reaching for the knob of an unlit pole lamp. The books I hold up blaze into view. I've brought two. One is for talking about pictures. Its title is covered by painter's tape. One is for talking about words. I've blotted out the cover art with a square of white tagboard.

"Which of these do you want me to read?"

I'm stretching the silence, telepathically communicating *words or pictures*, to set up a didactic punch line, which is really a cascading riddle. If pictures make words and words make pictures, where do stories come from?

"Have you read the book with no pictures?" It's the boy who introduced me to my chair.

"This one?" I ask, wagging the tape-censored book.

"No." He tugs at the collar of his shirt. "The book with no pictures," he says. I realize my mistake. "You mean this one."

"Noooo." The class fidgets.

“You have to say it,” the bracelet girl adds. “That’s the rule.”

Suddenly the children are all talking at once and it sounds like this: *blibbity-blobbity, glug-glug, monkey mouth, and boo-boo butt.*

If hearing is the last to go, I hope it doesn’t sound like that.

I look to Amelie, who says nothing at all.

“And *that*, boys and girls,” Mr. B. says, in the standard measure of teacherly oratory, “is why *The Book with No Pictures* does *not* leave the library.”

I hear the capitalization of Mr. B.’s speech (*The Book with No Pictures* is a read-aloud that forces adults to speak gibberish) as I’m reading Ami’s face. Her smile is fixed, but her eyes brim with certainty, not sympathy. She believes in me.

“Hey, guys!” Now *my* voice is too loud. “What other books do you like? Anyone have a favorite? What else are you reading?”

Amelie raises a modestly curled palm beside her cheek. I acknowledge it and her mouth moves. I tilt my head. She straightens and repeats herself in a wobbly, rushed reply. I fail again to hear her and turn away in shame. None of the other answers matter, their titles unfamiliar. I nod at the children who speak them and move on.

Weeks later, at home, I sound Ami out to see whether I embarrassed her and ask whether she remembers. *Molly Moon’s Incredible Book of Hypnotism*. I write it down, to prove I’m listening. She ducks beneath my arm and curls her warmth against me. I drag her onto my knee and hold her there, long after my limbs have grown numb. Touch, I hope, is the last sense to go.

Dying can take a long time. Without food, a person might last a month; longer if a doctor ordered liquid supplements. Sight shrank while we waited, moving from a calendar on the wall to a plant in the window and then, gone. Faces stared openly at nothing as we rocked the breathing logs of their bodies: peeling them from sleep, propping them against bed rails, wedging them in place with their own soiled linens—a sod roll of rubber pads and soaked sheepskin. We worked silently, in pairs, to unfurl fresh sheets, miter

corners, and smooth edges—self-conscious in our knowledge of steadfast listening.

What lasts? The Latinate symbols we used for charting (*q*, *prn*, *bid*, *npo*, *stat*) were embedded in variegated layers of ink (blue day shifts, green PMS, red *nocs*). Two generations later I can pry them like fossils from a stratum of memory and readily identify the staccato clicks of a tricolor pen, but Orchard Manor lingers—emerges uninvited—as stale mint mouth swabs, scorched oatmeal, sweet urine.

The children have no more titles. The weight of waiting settles in. They're scratching and breathing, staring and picking. I lift *All the World* from my lap. This is the book meant to demonstrate words. Its narrative is sparse. Noun lists, arranged in couplets, anchored by the title's refrain: *Rock, stone, pebble, sand. Body, shoulder, arm, hand. A moat to dig, a shell to keep. All the world is wide and deep.*

"Focus your listening here—" I slap the tagboard affixed to the cover to gather and direct their attention. "Make believe this is a movie screen and I'll read without opening the book." I've typed up Scanlon's text and taped it to the back cover, where only I can see it.

"Read *Sam and Dave Dig a Hole* first."

It's him again. I lower my arm. "Oh. You know that one?"

"There's diamonds in the yard," someone says.

I'm disappointed. I chose the book lying at my feet because it's new—and because its words depend upon pictures to carry tension.

"And the boys, when they're digging?" This is a girl I didn't notice before. "They go a different way and never find anything *spectacular*." They do know the book.

"Yeah. But *we* see the diamonds," the sweater girl adds. "We see them all, because in the book—the world is cut open."

"No, it's not." It's a boy who's left the carpet. He's sitting on a table nearby.

"Yes, it is."

Mr. B. indicates a chair, but the boy only flings his legs across it. "It's the world," he says, "not a watermelon!"

“So!” Sweater girl turns to confront him. Her hands fall away from her knees. A hole the size of a belly button has opened in her tights. “In the picture, it’s half.”

“Why don’t they fall out then?”

“Because they’re standing inside of what’s left.”

The table boy groans and goes limp, flowing onto the chair. He’s done. We understand this. He doesn’t want to argue, so he’s melted in exasperation.

“They do fall out though,” the sweater girl says, turning away. “At the end. When the dog finds the bone.”

“Out the bottom. Not the side,” the boy tells the ceiling.

“I know,” the girl answers quietly, twisting a thread on her knee.

The boy who started all this says nothing. He’s wadded up his shirt front to contain his delight. He’s the one I’m looking at as Mr. B. scoops up the smaller boy and pours him back into the group—an event the larger boy misses, intent as he is upon kicking, kicking the book he wants, kicking the book he wants to hear, kicking the book he wants to hear right now against the rocker of my chair.

“Open it,” he says.

The first person I watched die was a gravedigger. I don’t remember his name. He was solidly built—squared off at the shoulders like a barn beam and long as his hospital bed. He farmed down around Beetown, I think, digging graves into his eighties for the gospel church.

“Open it,” he says again. “*On Monday Sam and Dave dug a hole.*”

He wants me to skip to page four. That’s where the first diamond is buried. Why not? I flip ahead. I find it. The children lean in to study the picture. I stick to the deadpan text: “The hole got so deep that their heads were underground. But they still had not found anything spectacular.”

The children love it: shouting as each ever-larger diamond appears, bickering about who spotted it first, groaning in unison when the protagonists miss it. Some track the apples, the dog, and the cat. One comments on the boys’ dirty and dirtier clothes, and then—just before the end—when Sam and Dave take

a nap and the dog continues digging—the children fall out of the story. Most people do, I think. The payoff is in the pictures, not the plot. The boys land back where they started, in the yard, which is implausible, so no one cares.

Months later, at home, I find Ami revisiting the book. She delays glancing up as if to spare my feelings. “Wasn’t my favorite,” I say. Hers either. “I like the pictures,” I add. Ami directs my looking, then, from the first page onto the last, with nothing in between. Over and over again she reveals the fine details I missed: the cat in a bright new collar, a tulip transformed into a daisy, a weathervane rooster reversing direction and becoming a weathervane duck, and an apple tree filled with pears. I hope death is like this—falling asleep, falling from earth, falling back to where we began—an awakening both familiar and mysterious.

Orchard Manor. Four stories of brick bewilderment in a sea of tumultuous corn. We knew nothing of its peaked attic (our keys did not fit those locks) and little of the dim basement where we stomped snowy boots and fed a growling punch clock. There were acres of subterranean corridors there—puddled by dripping pipes, straddled by ductwork in scabby plaster casts—and an elevator.

I found it irresistible: fingers against its disappearing door, the brief, blank panel that followed, another door, another panel, another door, tracing the throat of Orchard Manor. I wish I could say I read its pockmarks and grit like Braille. That the story of how it began, an 1846 poorhouse on the Grant County pauper farm, seeped into me—lingering soot, lifted as fingerprints, read and identified. But only recently did I learn how it burned to the ground—time after time, time and again.

I

It had become a difficult problem what to do with the insane of Grant County. The matter was vigorously debated, some wanting an appropriation of at least \$20,000 and others favoring a cheaper establishment that, as one member of the Board said, “could be burned every few years to disinfect it,” as hen-houses are burned to get rid of vermin and bacteria.¹

2

The main building was destroyed by fire October 24, 1866, an insane pauper, Susan St. John, starting the fire in her cell. There were no men about the building, and the utmost efforts of the women to check the flames were in vain.²

3

A serious fire occurred at the asylum Sunday, Feb. 13, 1887. It was supposed to have caught from the furnace. . . . A woman named Catherine Murray remained in her room till dragged out. . . . She died a few days afterward. She had been ill, but it is supposed that the smoke and fright hastened her death.³

4

**MUCH DAMAGE DONE
BY A CLOUDBURST**
 Pearl, Ill., May 4.—A cloudburst submerged this town tonight. Many houses were washed from their foundations and the property loss was large. All residents escaped to the high ground.
 Fire at Lancaster, Wis., last night destroyed the Grant county insane asylum, causing a loss of \$150,000. All the patients were rescued, and there was no great confusion.



Words or pictures. What lasts? I'd hoped to reassure the children, who were leaving behind illustrations and emigrating to chapter books on wobbly rafts of text, that the gestalt of story would hold. Perhaps he was right to mutiny, that boy.

I held onto the newspaper report of the 1912 Orchard Manor fire because I loved its final sentence. Everyone at the insane asylum was “rescued, and there was no great confusion.”⁴ It read like redemption.

I kept the Cloudburst article to preserve a single word, having read it as “rodents,” then “residents,” and finally, for what it was: “resodents,” a Freudian-type slip. Imagine the sodden villagers, fleeing from Depot to High Street, with shotguns and baskets and casks, cradling wedding gowns, holding up clocks. Some, carrying lanterns, wandered like fireflies, weeping over armloads of books.

I keep the photo from 1912 because so much of Orchard Manor is as I remember it, and when I stare at that scene long enough, my eyes do what

they always do: they miss things. My brain fills in the gaps. Those twin arched doorways open onto a kitchen, below it a laundry, and below that a cistern the size of a swimming pool, which no one I ever knew ever saw. I read about it in the *Grant County Herald* of November 22, 1864. The cistern held 300 barrels of water “in the basement of the new wing” and was expected “to last without repairs for perhaps a century.”

Did it? I don’t know. I do know that each time Orchard Manor burned down, town fathers rebuilt it. Grander each time.

A small chandelier glittered in the lobby. The floors were a cobwebby marble. Its woodwork dark, windows tall and narrow. They were plentiful, those windows, a pair in each patient room, absent in hallways, and abounding wall-to-wall and floor-to-ceiling in dayrooms and solariums, though night in Grant County is endless.

Because we were young, we worked second shift, weekends, and after school. First shift was for mothers, third for hearty spinsters who knew how to knit. Because we were strong, and irksome with energy, charge nurses assigned us Two North (2N), a locked unit where minds were unpredictable and bodies prone to wander.

There was a radio on 2N, meant only for bad weather, tucked behind the half-wall of the nurse’s station. It was winter. A twilight gap between Christmas and the New Year.

“It’s a long way to Tipperary.”

Soon school would resume, the tail end of a semester. 1978. Senior year.

“It’s a long way to Tipperary.” Alma was stuck.

“It’s a long way to go,” I supplied.

“It’s a long way to Tipperary,” she sang back.

I knew if I rushed on ahead of her—*To the sweetest girl I know!*—and barreled into the swing of the second half of that chorus, I could break the spell, confuse her with the beat she’d miss at the next Tipperary and settle her right down—but I didn’t. I lifted the radio instead. My intention was to spin a few folks around the dayroom waggling the arms of their wheelchairs, killing time until Jim and Birdlegs came up from the basement, so I could go down to supper break. We weren’t supposed to do this. Use the radio. Unless a tornado siren was blaring. But we did a lot we shouldn’t at Orchard Manor and felt superior because of it: to be young and reckless with fun; good medicine, we thought.

I wasn't expecting the gravedigger to dance. He was stoic and angular. Aides bent him from bed each morning and folded him back each night. Once on his feet, he shuffled reliably, gripping handrails so fiercely his bones shone white, but mostly he sat. He sat on the edge of his bed to shave, to slick back his hair with oil, and to painstakingly button his shirt. We ferried his teeth to and from the bathroom. Rubbed lotion into his spider-veined feet. We tied his shoes and helped him to stand while pulling up his pants from behind. He wore short-sleeved undershirts even in summer and buckled his own leather belt. We tucked in his shirttails. And latched his fist onto railings. Wherever they led him, he sat. On the toilet in the bathroom, in a chair beside the elevator, upon wide stone ledges in solarium windows, he sat. Upright and reticent. Staring solemnly. Hands cupped on kneecaps, knuckles big as nickels, he sat.

It happened in an instant—the gravedigger's fingers clamping my wrist, the pull to resist, his rising well beyond six feet. Where he faltered. And wobbled.

In the moment it took us to fall, to land, and to settle, thought continued: the floor spilled treacherous as marbles; chairs unsoldered and blazed in blue arcs; *the porous hip, a porcelain dish, apothecary's mortar and pestle.*

The gravedigger landed in my lap. Options were available. I could have tethered him to a railing, pivoted him toward a bench, or lowered him onto the floor—I didn't. Instead, I slid behind him and hugged his waist. Braced between his shoulder blades, I folded; so that as I sat, he sat.

I did it because I thought it was funny—or would be, when my coworkers returned to find us like that. A big, ugly girl like me. Trapped beneath the gravedigger on a couch. If they found my predicament—and by extension me—worth repeating, it would become an anecdote, if not a story, which felt like enough back then, a perpetual extension of me.

The gravedigger sat as he always sat. Tight-lipped and buttoned up.

My cheek found the furrow of his spine and warmed there like a newly turned potato. He smelled of cornstarch and coffee and bleach. The landscape of his shirt was spun sugar. And I, in that moment, was ebullient as yeast.

It's what we did back then (as Ami would say, "in the ninetens"), girls like me, girls who weren't pretty: we grew dependent upon personality, which easily corrupts to shtick.

I'm burdened by burlesque nostalgia for esoteric celebrity.

Harvey Bloom knocks repeatedly against a Dutch door, rocking as if walking but going nowhere. His head pops into and out of the dayroom, hands

dug in by their heels at his temples. His fingers are loose. He is not the *Shrik* of Munch. He's a moose. This is his usual posture. I cannot say why. His chart noted but never explained it: *@ bed—hobbling in place; rocking w/o results @ urinal; agitated, shuffling, chattering; patient refused to bathe; Thorazine prn*. The Thorazine minimized his babbling but had no effect on his sway. Once, on a good day, someone charted colloquially: *patient in hallway, quiet as cigar store Indian on windy day*. Nurses blamed it on headaches or voices. Night-shift workers said he was shaking loose his last marble. Those of us young enough to be made giddy by strobe lights and transgression mimicked him beneath mirror balls after work.

At The Patio in Platteville we approached one another with fingers splayed into crowns. We deepened our voices, riffing catch phrases built from things Harvey said: *Pardon me ma'am, there's a thousand tiny humanities swimming between my legs*. Wanna dance? We sidled up to coworkers who might buy us drinks and stood vacant, grinning, with money in our fists. If they didn't recognize us as Herman, lobotomized before we were born, we'd lean in—growling the grit of speech he retained: *god damn son-of-a-bitch motherfucker bastard*.

We considered this a mockery of no one but ourselves. If ever we felt remorse, we presumed we would grow out of it. We were Orchard Manor Nursing Assistants—*prn*—only as necessary. The future would come for us, and we would be changed.

In the meantime, we humored ourselves. We wore matching navy-blue T-shirts custom-made at the mall in Dubuque. OMNAPRN, arranged in a rainbow, flashing from our chests. Each prism letter cost thirty cents. We bastardized our surnames and bore them on our backs: "Hotcrotch" for Hutchcroft; "Raise-a-dick" for Raisbeck; and "Humpman" for me. I paired mine with painter pants, overalls, and cords. I danced in Earth shoes, huaraches, and clogs.

Any car we fell into at bar time was Harvey's Hupmobile: *presented to me by the man himself, before he went electric*. Over patty melts at Country Kitchen we sang *shine on, shine on Harvey Bloom* and howled a nonsense chant lifted from Marian Hickock: *Oh, you ecka-pecka! Bobbledy-bop per-day-ble!* If conversation lagged or grew serious, someone would send up the siren song of Bernice Henkle wandering hallways at night: *WEIGHS ten pounds, WEIGHS ten pounds, WEIGHS ten pounds*.

On soft humming drives back to Lancaster, oncoming headlights passed over us in long, dispersive waves. We rested our heads on one another's

shoulders, murmuring sounds that bound us together in what none of us pictured as our lives. We were elective geeks, the anointed specters of our town, voted most likely to leave. Kids like us might drink when we shouldn't—in discotheques—but we'd never be old at Orchard Manor: burglarizing supply closets to drown unlikely sorrows with mouthwash and aftershave.

It could never come to that. We had plans and jobs and friends. Church nurseries and 4-H clubs counted on us. We were the chairs of committees seated in student government, who did paste-up on the school newspaper and mock-ups for the yearbook annual. We had deadlines and bylines and staff. Nothing disastrous could befall us. We were Lutheran, Catholic, Baptist—Congregational on Sunday, ecumenical throughout the week—good kids who studied the Bible. And prayed. Together. Who said *GOD-love-ya* when it hurt to laugh and *BLESS-your-heart* only if we meant it.

Why did our gods not smite us? A stiff-necked people, we brazenly cast plaster masks of maladies and afflictions to insulate and stabilize ourselves. We wore others out like fools, believing we were being ourselves.

Mercy is a collusion between wonder and fear.

We loved our lives because they were ending and we were expected to move on. Friends and relatives, churches, our school, the town—everyone we knew—was eager to miss us. We weren't ready.

Good-bye my Piccadilly. Farewell, Lancaster Square. It's a long, long way to Tipperary, but our future's out there!

In a backseat nest of polyester sweat, we nuzzled one another and cooed: *Goddamn son-of-a-bitch you goddamn-son-of-a-bitch you goddamn-son-of-a-bitch you.*

I focus the children's attention for a second time on the blank white space I've made of *All the World*. "Can everyone see?" Heads nod, solemn and expectant. "Good. Keep your eyes right here," I say, tapping the tagboard. "Okay?" I fumble the book a bit, trying to secure my finger in place to mark the first illustration. "Hold on."

"Is she taking our picture?"

"With what? A book? She can't take a picture with a book."

"Well," Mr. B. says. "It is a picture book." "*Bah-dum-Ch-shhh*," he adds.

"*WAH-wah*," a handful of voices respond.

“My mom has a tablet that’s a camera *and* a book.”

I listen as the children exchange boastful infomercials—an inventory of family birthdays and Christmases past—but, mostly, I’m studying the strange boy. He fidgets in place, squinting and blinking at something beyond my right shoulder. I remember hours spent as a child closing first one eye and then the other to compare almost-twin images in the lenses of a boxy red toy. He’s curious, this boy. I can tell. A worthy View-Master, island of neutrality, in a war of iPads and Kindle Fires.

There are points of intersection between him and me that do not exist for Amelie and me. Ami is tiny, with long, lithesome stork legs she folds aside delicately. Her classmate and I are made of lard. We’re pasty white. It’s winter. Only our faces are florid.

Despite an oily-faced sheen, our elbows are scaly and pink. If his knees are like my knees, they’re ruddy and prone to warts. In summer, our upper arms brown and our shoulders burn. We wear tank tops if we swim. Naked, we are soft scoops of Neapolitan ice cream. I recognize the frayed neck of his T-shirt, its gnawed collar. I have shirts like that at home. We wear them because we love them, and we need them. We’re hard to fit.

We are anxious with nonconformity. We may be naturally gregarious, as girls like Amelie and wood violets are, or boys who move like otters in groups called a romp or a bevy, but we’re aberrant of each and abhorrent to most. We know what they think. Fat kids. We are a fungus. We hunch and sprawl simultaneously. Our bodies make us difficult. We’re sorry for that. But we adapt. I hope he knows this. I want to whisper into his ear this fact: *the world is encased in a mycelium embrace.*

The children enter enthusiastically into a trance and let words paint pictures on the book cover, which we then check against inside illustrations. *Tree, trunk, branch, crown. Climbing up and sitting down. Morning sun becomes noon-blue. All the world is old and new.* The scenes they imagine, or so they claim, are *always* and *exactly* as the artist rendered them. Their voices call out details—*red wagon, brown puppy, green hill*—and crescendo—*brown puppy in a red wagon rolling down a green hill*—as they argue over who said it or saw it first. There isn’t much conversation, or curiosity, about words doing what they do, but I think the children understand it.

Mr. B. has moved to the table. He sits where the slippery boy sat. We’ve run out of books and pages and pictures and words. The room is quiet but for

a breathing radiator and muttering window shade. The pillows beneath my bum have bunched themselves up like hedgehogs, and I'm ready to go home.

"Tell us a true story," says Amelie.

I look to Mr. B. because he's in charge of time. He rolls his shoulders and raises his palms, like Harvey Bloom. Or Jesus. I guess it's up to me.

"Should it be a story about you?" I watch Amelie consider this.

"Tell us an old-people story," says the boy I've come to think of as me.

"Oh, you don't want to hear any stories like that." Even I hear the nervousness in my voice. But now all the children are nodding and wiggling.

"I love old-people stories," my boy continues. "My grandpa was in every war in the world—"

"Tell us one from the farm," Ami says.

I ask the children what kind of story they want—funny, sad, scary, gross—and only half-listen as they call out their answers in a tussle.

I'm not ready to tell them how the gravedigger died. How thin he became, too skinny to walk, how his eyes iced over, cold as moons. Or how, for a time, he pulled himself along railings in a wheelchair to sit as he always sat, with the knobs of his knees supporting gnarled hands. When the calluses on his heels cracked and began to bleed, we swathed his feet in gauze and strapped them to the footrests, rolling him into and out of the bedroom and bathroom, to park him again in a dayroom or solarium.

A spot appeared on the gravedigger's coccyx, blush of pink on skin soft as any girl's cheek. It was tiny, almost imperceptible, a petal in a field of snow.

The charge nurse pronounced it "duh-cuba-die." The day shift said pressure spot, and the night shift predicted a bedsore. We shoved a spiky foam pillow into a case and placed it on the seat of his chair. We treated him to more naps, fussed over his rump, and washed him more gently, tenderly patting him dry.

When a white spot appeared in the pink spot, like a nipple inside an areola or a baby tooth stressing a gum, the gravedigger was drawn from his morning toilet and ushered back into bed. We laid him on clean woolly fleece. Propped him between banks of pillows. Our blind fingers slid beneath hip and waist, reading taut sheets, smoothing errant wrinkles. We mapped our concerns with iodine and covered the evidence with gauze.

The bottomlands of Grant County are carved from bedrock and loess. Water leaps from the land so abundantly there are two cold springs for every square mile. Above us, deep in a forest of steep talus slopes, ice vents draw monkshood and bulblet fern near to their mouths. Beneath us, hidden streams flow through limestone caves and abandoned lead mines. We're prone to sinkholes.

The gravedigger opened up just like that: a trickle, a vent, a collapse. Within weeks, the decubitus ulcer was big as my fist. It smelled like what it was. We held him on his side, averting our eyes from exposed tailbone, as nurses applied packs of various foams and gels. We tried everything: scalpels and razors, pressurized irrigation, sunlamps and zinc. The only thing to slow the erosion of him was sugar. It wicks away the water that bacteria require to gather food and discard waste. Without it, they starve. I know that now. Back then, we believed we were offering an alternative food source, something anything, even germs, would like better. Silently, we willed them to supper, night after night, as the sugar poured in.

Several times a day we drained the gravedigger of sap and packed him again with sugar. Week after week, his wound contracted, shrinking like the iris of an eye. And then, when its mouth was the size of a tablespoon, the gravedigger died.

I felt it too, that final tug of possibility.

The children have asked for a story that is everything. They want it to be funny and sad, not too scary, and a little bit gross. Amelie wants a story from the farm.

"Which one?" I ask.

She squints at the ceiling, pursing a smile to one side of her face. She's tapping her chin. *Contemplatively*, I think. When her eyes return to mine, I hold them with hand gestures. *Scissors?* I suggest. She frowns and wrinkles her nose. *Chickens?* I tuck my thumbs into my armpits. She thinks a moment as I waggle my elbows, then shakes her head no. *Ladder?* I ask, pawing the air.

"Yes," the eager boy says. "Tell us the one about bears."

Ami cuts her eyes at him in a way that says *don't interrupt me*, before raising her cupped hands like a nest—or an offering—and joining the empty halves together. *Chickadee*, I think.

The last sense to leave us is story. We assemble ourselves by accretion, a product of all our senses—blips of light, a swoosh of sound, fronds and shimmers of taste and touch. This world will evaporate. We may rise as heat to hover in hospital-room corners or flow as water into some new dream, but the making of us ends. And then? We are subsumed in story.

We know that someday it's coming, that something no one can know. Only Ami can say for certain what stories she'll keep when I'm gone. I hope our origin story holds. How she and I arrived in a delivery room, where I was handed a raw and language-less thing. "It's you," I said then and hope she hears forever. "I know you."

NOTES

1. Castello N. Holford, *History of Grant County, Wisconsin: Including Its Civil, Political, Geological, Mineralogical, Archaeological and Military History, and a History of the Several Towns* (Grant County, WI: Walsworth Publishing Company, 1900), 81.
2. Holford, *History of Grant County*, 80–81.
3. Holford, *History of Grant County*, 82–83. Other works referenced or used include Liz Garton Scanlon, *All the World*, illustrated by Maria Frazee (San Diego, CA: Beach Lane Books, 2009), and Mac Barnett, *Sam and Dave Dig a Hole*, illustrated by John Klassen (Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press, 2014).
4. "Much Damage Done by a Cloudburst," *Quad-City Times* (Davenport, IA), May 5, 1912. Photo from personal collection; permission granted.