

When You Are Invisible

I.

One summer, my older brothers and sisters pretended I was invisible. Somehow a passing gag took root, lasting through the long, muggy summer. They liked to sit on me, squashing me against the couch, pretending they'd sat on pure air. Gee, this couch *is* lumpy, they'd say. In hide-and-go-seek, no matter how obvious my hiding spot, I was never found. Once I just laid down on the driveway and was merely stepped over. In a fierce game of King of the Hill, I charged my oldest brother, unnoticed. At last I stopped telling our distracted, beautiful mother. I stopped begging to be seen.

By July I grew mesmerized by the possibility that I *was* invisible. I feared opening family scrapbooks, finding myself vaporized from pictures where my siblings and I had posed, oldest to youngest, in front of monuments and famous battlefields. I spent afternoons floating in the bathtub watching the scaffolding of the bones in my hands. I hugged myself in the tepid water.

Determined that I would never reappear, my brothers were forced to endure my presence in their secret activities—they couldn't admit I was there. I watched as they soldered together model planes with tiny, delicate parts, then blew them up in the woods with lighter fluid and BB

pellets. I imitated the explosion sounds they made with their mouths. I drifted into my sisters' rooms and sat on the edges of their beds while they gossiped. A boy had put his tongue in Nan's mouth. They had forgotten I might tell—an invisible, beating presence. I pressed the muscular fishtail of my tongue against the roof of my mouth.

At the water park, I floated underwater, curling myself into a ball then stretching out like some phantastical solitary sea creature. At the dinner table I'd read a book. Blackberry picking I'd drop behind the others, letting my half-full bucket of mealy berries slide into the ravine. The sound of laughter would get fainter and fainter; sometimes I'd stand still, stiller than the trees. At night words tumbled back down my throat and hung like ominous stalactites in the darkness of my stomach.

II.

When you are invisible, you walk quietly. When you are invisible, you cup your hands around your mouth and say words. Like calling into a well, you want something to come back to you. You pour a pyramid of salt into your palm, lick, to feel something sharp, bitter. Into your cupped hands you say, *salt*. Eventually you stop speaking, even to yourself.

When your mother dabs Mercurochrome on your brother's bleeding knee, you step in and blow. You learn to fold the laundry left in a wrinkly pile on top of the dryer. Who could have known that a sharp crease and the sweet smell of fabric softener could make a person happy? No, *happy* is too big of a word; it's a more diluted feeling for which there is no word. You wipe off the kitchen counters. Nobody thanks you, but that is not what you want.

When you are invisible you like to be awake when the others are sleeping. You like to open the door of the refrigerator and stand in the shaft of light and cold that smells of turning vegetables and milk. If your father comes down to eat pretzels at two in the morning you watch him from your perch on the counter. This is when you understand that your parents are somebody else entirely in rooms emptied of children. Lying under a bed, you watch your mother pad from the shower in the afternoon. Looking at her bare shins with razor stubble you are shocked to understand that she's lonely.

You pad into your sisters' rooms at night and burrow under their covers. You smell the backs of their knees, a place nobody will ever think to love them, even though it is the softest, the most delicate. With the whelked pads of your own fingertips you palpate.

You haunt the woods, your clothes stained with alizarin and blackberry juice. Your hair and clothes are full of burrs and stickers and twigs. The maw of green plants, sun. Limestone spangled with green moss. You put your mouth to the stones and call as if your real self is sealed somewhere inside.

III.

When you are invisible you know things. You know where to find the vanished balls and toys in the long, wheat-like grass. Where the dog has buried the lost sneaker in the backyard and that the missing cat, Peaches, has taken up residence in a neighbor's decaying shed. That the gas station owner gives girls packs of gum for lifting up the hem of their shorts to show him their tan lines. The isthmus of paler skin.

You begin to slip inside neighbors' houses at night. Sit in a father's Lazy Boy gazing at the milky, blank TV screen. Open jumbled medicine cabinets. Drawers. And, knowing your head will not leave a mark on pillows that reek of human things, you climb into spaces seemingly left for you in sleep-wrecked beds. You listen to the heartbreaking wheeze of a middle-aged mother snoring. Ascend the stairs to the peaked attic bedroom. Here a girl dreams, her limbs flung wide on the sheets, as if she has just jumped from an airplane, and there is nothing in this world to be afraid of.