

we browsed the store windows we grunted to each other in low, indecipherable voices. At the toy store Sean wanted to buy a present for his mother and, with relief, we went our separate ways. He looked at clay earrings and stuffed monkeys; I touched this angel with my fingertips, tracing the Magic Marker crescents of her eyes, the red dot of her mouth.

As the angel drifted in her limited circle, I thought about Sean's birth, in the round shack at Orr Hot Springs, his head crowning, the turned shoulders, the body rollicking onto the bloody sheet. I remembered holding him twenty minutes later, in the rocking chair by the window as the morning ascended outside the glass. He still smelled of the womb; he tapped his white, wrinkled fingers against his lower lip, like an old man reminiscing. His gaze seemed all peripheral, and as I stared at him I said words I've never said before or since.

Of course Sean's forgotten, but I know he remembers *something*. As a toddler he sometimes looked at me oddly and babbled about our "special place," asked me to take him there. I walked with him down to the bend in the river and threw stones into the water, kneeling with him in the wild grass.

I went back to the store later, alone, and bought the angel for five dollars. The saleslady asked if it were a present, if I would like it wrapped, and I said, oh yes, that would be nice. It attracts whatever light seeps into the bedroom, fragments light into octagonal bits of stars. The angel's eyes are always closed, her mouth forever open in a red "Oh" which I take to mean singing, but which could just as easily be surprise, admonition, a yawn.

SHELL

A fragment of a snail shell, bleached white, the whorl in the middle a bluish brown that sprouts to a point like a diminu-

BRENDA MILLER

Artifacts

ANGEL

Once, in Sonoma, I bought an angel suspended from a twig. Her head is a polished knob of wood the size of my thumb; her hair, a mass of curly white thread. Her body's a thin shave of wood the color of cream. She's surrounded by strings of gold stars, and in her arms more stars cluster, overflowing. I know this mobile's supposed to dangle over a child's crib, dispensing blessing, but I have no child. So it hovers in a corner of my bedroom, and I watch from my bed, late at night: the twisting stars, the oblivious angel.

I saw it in a toy store on Main Street, while walking with my godson Sean. We glanced sidelong at each other as we loitered until his father got off work. I wanted to hold his hand, but I didn't dare; he was eight years old, a man already, and as

tive nippie. I found it on Whidbey Island, on a cold February afternoon. I had my own cottage in the woods, and in the mornings I sat in the window seat and wrote letters to my friends about the progress of the forced hyacinth I had brought with me from Seattle: "Its folded body still so green . . . I feel like that bulb, just now opening, but perhaps before my time. . . ." I wrote to them about growing older, about my fear of being alone and childless as I aged.

I usually grew discouraged in the afternoons, when the light no longer looked so promising through the pines, and so I got on my bicycle and pedaled for seven or eight miles along the coastal road, churning up hills, past gardens with stuffed owls to keep away the starlings. Or sometimes I just pedaled a mile to Useless Bay, and walked there at low tide, watching the sanderlings scuttle out of my path.

The shell was buried in the sand, the same color as the sand, camouflaged. I unearthed it and put it on my windowsill, gazed at it till it hypnotized me. Sometimes it became an eye, staring back, asking me to go deeper, to follow that spiral path into the center. Sometimes it disappeared in the dome light of afternoon. Other shells lay scattered on the path outside my cottage door, disintegrating under my feet, scattering into mosaic. Intertwined with the broken bodies lay feathers from the legs of an owl, dried needles of fir, cedar cones, footprints of invisible deer.

AN UNEARTHED CRYSTAL

In the garden of my house at Orr Hot Springs I dug up a round crystal while trying to dig under the compost. I struck it with the edge of my spade, picked it out of the dirt, brought it inside and washed it at the kitchen sink. I strung it with a

piece of mint-green dental floss, hung it in the loft window. Seth came upstairs as I touched it, as it threw truncated rainbows across the sun-yellow ceiling. Look what I found, I said and he said Lovely, then kissed me behind the ears, down my neck to the place where the change begins, where the head becomes the body, and the body knows nothing of its own bounds. I lay back with him—I was still young, he was not, our love already disintegrating, turning to shards dangerous and elusive as glass. But he traced the scar below my belly button, his fingers inexplicably kind, forgiving. My crystal knocked against the window, twisted on its string, transformed whatever light happened to fall upon our skin.

DEAD PEOPLE'S THINGS

My grandfather's silverware, adorned with roses, the initial "M" engraved in the handle of each utensil. My grandmother's linen handkerchiefs, monogrammed with the same "M," yellowed around the edges. Books from people I never knew, bought at bookstores with dusty shelves and dim lights, the inscriptions on the flyleaves sheared of any luster, sad now in the wrong hands. A wedding photograph of my grandmother and grandfather, my grandmother's hands covered in flowers, her eyes focused on a place that does not include me.

EMPTY VESSELS

A glazed bowl from Mendocino, swirled in pastels of blue and pink; a green-striped pitcher from Portugal; a blue vase from Italy, the glass pale and veined with ivy; a reed and willow basket from Montana, braids of acorns dangling from the handle. I like the fact of their emptiness; not only the clean lines of

the vessels themselves, sharp against their backdrops, but the empty space they shape and contain. I'm tempted to leave these vessels empty forever, to forgo the cut flowers, the coins, the fruit.

My Zen teacher told me "emptiness is form and form is emptiness," a phrase I repeated but never understood until now, as I lie on my rug in my new apartment and gaze at these forms which keep changing under my eye. One moment they are clearly containers; the next moment they are contained by what surrounds them. I've often thought of my body as empty, in a negative sense: infertile, gaping, hollow. I've envisioned the cup of my barren pelvis as a void: dark and unfathomable, a body perverted by the fact of its emptiness.

Two people I know died in their sleep this week. As I think about them, their empty bodies float in my mind—sometimes light, unfettered; sometimes heavy and inert as lead. Both died of heart failure: a forty-nine-year-old woman and a nineteen-year-old girl. And, as I surround myself with empty vessels, I become aware of my own heartbeat, the shallow labor of my lungs against my ribs. *Form is emptiness, emptiness form*, I repeat to myself, and with that hymn my body starts to hum, to be filled.

