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What are my eyes for if they can see but see nothing? What are my ears for if they can hear but hear nothing? Why all this strangeness inside my head?

All of it must be thought into nothingness, one whorl of gray matter at a time, until in the end a spoonful of me will be left glistening at the bottom. I must seize memory like a knife and turn it against itself, stabbing memory with memory. If I can.

Father and mother. Ball. Car. These might be the only words that were still intact when I learned them. Then even they got turned around, ripped out of me and stuck back in upside-down, making the opposite of ball ball, the opposite of father and mother father and mother. What is a car? All the other words had silent halves dragging them down from the start like lead weights around ankles, just as the moon lugs its dark half around with it even when it's full. But it keeps circling in its orbit all the same. For me, words used to be stable, fixed in place, but now I'm letting them all go, if need be I'll cut off a foot if that's the only way to get rid of them. Ball. Ball.

Lullaby and goodnight. My mother is putting me to bed. She strokes my head as she sings. White, dry hand stroking the head of a child. *With roses bedight.* Eyes the color of water gazing at me; already my eyelids are falling shut. *With lilies o'erspread,* she sings. But lilies are for funerals. Not these lilies, she'd say if she saw the words were making me cry again, they aren't real lilies at all, they're just lilies-of-the-valley for faeries to sleep under. But tonight it's already too late for crying, I've traveled too far into the land of sleep to turn around, and they aren't lilies-of-the-valley, they're real lilies that someone I don't know is going to lay on my coffin and nail it shut as I sleep. *Lay thee down now and rest,* she sings. She pulls the blanket up to my chin and turns out the light. The coffin nails scrape my skin, lots of little bloody wounds. *May thy slumbers be blessed.* And what if they aren't blessed? Then I'll remain lying here in my coffin-bed forever. *May thy slumbers be blessed.* And the drops of blood will turn to stone. Mother.

A ball is a thing that rolls and sometimes bounces. A father is a man who stays taller than you for a long time. Before my father goes to confession, he shaves and puts on a clean shirt. If a person wanted to play ball with someone's head, only the nose would get in the way. Before my father goes to confession, he takes me on his lap and lets me ride his knees. Many, many children have already ridden into this

landscape and become fodder for ravens, countless white-skinned screeching riders who never seem to manage a full gallop before they've tumbled down into the bog between their fathers' knees. My father's shirt smells fresh and is rough when I bury my head in it after I've pulled myself up out of the bog with a motion that makes me dizzy every time. Father.

House. Our house is the exact center of the garden. Pink walls, the pink bleached by the sun and already flaking. I slip a fingernail beneath the plaster and snap it off. Underneath, an ochre color comes to light. When I tap a rock against this hidden paint, yet another layer of skin appears in the islands that result: gray. I can't go any deeper than this, the gray clings firmly to the walls of the house, perhaps this gray really is the house itself. My mother says: Stop that. I know, I know: If I want to go into the house, I can use the front door.

From sunshine to shade. Naked soles padding from the dust outside to the cool stone. Barefoot. The sun is almost always shining here, it shines and shines and shines, and the sky around the sun is almost always completely empty. What does the sun eat? I ask my father. Water, he replies. And where is its bed? The sun doesn't sleep, he says. When it is nighttime here, he says, the sun is shining on the other side of the world. Lovely weather today. Today and every day.

Why didn't you have any milk for me, I ask my mother. Some women have a lot of milk, and others none at all, my mother replies. I can remember my wet nurse's breasts quite clearly. I drank from them for a long time. Longer than any other child I know, my mother says. Even after I started school, the first thing I would do when I came home was sit down on my nurse's lap and drink. Her milk was watery and sweet, her breasts rosy and full, firm islands on the body of an aging woman. My wet nurse—who even after I had stopped drinking from her held my entire childhood in her lap like an apple—resembled a faerie with green, slanting eyes, one who had been cast out of a faerie tale and now appeared rather somber, thanks to her hair, which had grown darker at the roots and then turned gray, and the colors she wore even in the hottest summer, autumnal hues: brown, black and olive green. To what I saw, I added an invisible, pointed, coneshaped hat, light blue with a veil. That's just not normal, my mother had said once as she watched me drink from the faerie breasts, and she'd

tried to dismiss my wet nurse. For three entire days I refused to speak, and on the fourth the nurse returned. Milk. Drink.

I never saw my wet nurse's garden. I don't know whether the shoebox with the hands fell on the grass or into a flowerbed. It doesn't matter, my wet nurse says to me when I drop my ice cream; she buys me another one. Where my fallen ice cream is melting in the sun, it leaves a bright splotch on the asphalt. Marie, my wet nurse's daughter, has much longer fingers than I do and never drops her ice cream. And her hands are always clean, no matter what dirty things she touches. My hands are always exactly as sticky and dusty as the things we play with and eat, or as the city streets we fall down on when we're running or push and shove one another. As if her skin were different, though when I take Marie's hand—Marie who is in a matter of speaking my milk-sister—her skin feels just like mine. As if it were actually made of wax or stone so the dirt slides right off. *Our Father, who art in Heaven*. At night when I am lying alone in bed, I creep all the way under the covers and fold my hands, which I have rubbed clean with an eraser to make them just like Marie's; by praying, I am now drawing all of Heaven down into the dark with me, including Our Father. Say good morning, shake hands, shake hands.

Those who, and then their friends, then the ones who remember them, then all who are afraid, and finally everyone. My father says these words behind a closed door in our house, at the time the door still looks huge to me, I imagine what would happen if it were to fall on me while I am pressed against it, listening, wonder whether I'd be crushed flat, through the door the smell of tobacco is filtering into the hall—everyone—and whether it would make a noise when it fell on me, or whether a door like that falls quietly upon a body made of flesh. The next day, hopping from island to island across the city's stone carpet patterns, holding my mother's hand, I count off silently: Those who. Then their friends. The ones who remember. Who are afraid. And finally everyone. Either always the black stones or always the white ones or always the gray, holding my mother's hand. This sentence is like a counting-out rhyme, and like a counting-out rhyme it cannot stop until it reaches the end—I can't interrupt my hopping in the middle, can't just freeze on one leg somewhere in the city, standing on black or white or gray. I am afraid for my father. Everyone. Everyone everyone.

A bird was walking here, my father says. Squatting down beside me, he points out the star-shaped scratches in the dark soil at the edge of our garden, in the shade of the trees where no grass grows. *There were three ravens sat on a tree.* What is a track, I ask my father. A trace that is left behind, something that cannot be caused by chance, my father replies. *They were as black as black might be.* But then before you can know what cannot be caused by chance, I say, you have to know everything else. Probably, my father says. And what about the double time a track like this has. What double time, my father says. The time, I say, when the bird was walking here, and then the second time, when we see it was here—the track is a sort of bridge between them. Perhaps, my father says. But by the time you're finally old enough to tell the difference between chance and everything else, you're too heavy to walk across the bridge. No, my father says, that's silly, and he picks up a little stick and starts making star-shaped scratches beside the star-shaped scratches.

Day after day, my father works in a palace whose exterior is perfectly white. In this palace my father sees to it that things are orderly. Wailing sirens, flashing lights. White walls, white columns, white front steps, blinding sun gleaming off the building as if the building itself were the sun, only the trees to the right and left of it are dark, and there is never a wind stirring their leaves Wailing, flashing. I wonder whether the windows are just painted on, since the palace always stands there so quietly, my mother says everything inside it is orderly and well looked after, my father keeps everything in order, and I never see anyone at the windows. It might well be that the building's been walled up, that's why its exterior gleams like that, sunlight cannot enter and get lost inside. Flashing lights. Just as my mother looks after me. Do you comb order, do you give order something to eat and drink? In a building which no light ever enters, in which you have to hold on to the walls and feel your way about because all the windows have been bricked up. More wailing. If you can't find order in the dark, might you accidentally comb the air instead of it, or upset the food and drink, and does order remain there all the same: dirty, uncombed, ravenous and running wild? Wails upon wails, an explosion of lights. My father comes out of the building, thank goodness, he's holding one hand to his eyes because at first the sun blinds him, but then he sees us, my mother and me, standing at the foot of the steps, it's Friday at half past two, we're picking him up from work as we do every Friday, he runs quickly down the steps and kisses me with his lips that are as soft as a woman's.

My father never wears a uniform, and the cars lined up before the building are gray and white, no flashing lights anywhere. Where have the sirens gone wailing off to? They turned into birds, my wet nurse says. It is sunny and quiet in the middle of our city where the police live.

A miracle, my mother says and points at two black-clad, billowing angels who, hand in hand far off in the distance, are plummeting from the sky above the ocean, the sky is blue, utterly blue, just as blue as the water in which it is mirrored, the angels are plunging from blue to blue, from sky to water, plunging black against the blue with their arms spread wide, holding one another's hands, my mother and I are standing down below at the harbor observing this miracle, and many other people are standing there as well, pointing at the angels and crossing themselves. Red, green and yellow, us on the ground. Orange. The wind slips beneath the angels' clothes, white, white wind, only the clothing of these angels is black, why black, I ask my mother. Black. Black isn't a color.

Or does black come about because you've thrown all the colors together in a single pot. I am sitting on the living room rug, cutting animals I like out of magazines while my mother is off in the kitchen washing lettuce, stirring and chopping, and my father is squatting beside me on the rug holding the paper taut and saying things like: Careful, watch the ears. It's always evening when my father sits beside me on the rug, sometimes even nighttime. When I look up at his head, which I have to look up to see even when he's squatting beside me, that's how tall he is, it appears framed, evening after evening, in the dark rectangle of the uncurtained window behind him. Shiny smooth blackness, no moonlight, and before it this head belonging to my father, which appears light by contrast: blond, light-brown eyes, and teeth like pearls when he opens his mouth and says what is in the pictures. Is it true that a vulture can seize an entire live lamb and carry it up to the sky and then drop it somewhere to eat it? Of course not, my father says, a vulture only eats things that are already dead. He strokes my head while I am cutting out the little lamb. Dinner's ready, my mother calls, we get up and suddenly the entire living room is reflected in that same window and the blackness vanishes. But behind the reflection it is still there, this impenetrable blackness, I know this because the garden, which lies on the other side of the window, is hidden from view all night long. The window has captured the garden and won't let

it out, it's thrown a black cloth over it and now is trying to trick us with the colorful reflection of our living room.

In the morning the garden has returned to view, I could probably even walk around in it if I didn't have to go to school; trees and flowers have been released from captivity, someone has pulled off the black cloth, folded it up and hidden it away somewhere, but only temporarily, until night falls once more, this much is certain. Morning after morning the skirt, knee-highs and shoes in blue, and the shirt with short or long sleeves, white. Just like the others. For years on end, morning after morning: the blue cap on my head, a folded ship made of felt, upside-down as if capsized and fixed in place with a bobby pin, a gold insignia on one side. In the grass the dew glistens, my feet would get cold and damp now if I went outside barefoot, instead I slip into my shoes and lay the scarf, the same blue as the cap, around my neck and tie the knot, a knot that makes the knot itself invisible, my father taught it to me years ago, even before I started school. Blue the sky was, utterly and perfectly blue. Now I look exactly like the others in all the places where my body is covered with fabric.

Present colors! This command, issued to the honor guard by a girl standing in front of the assembly, calls our eyes to order. Now all of us are required to gaze at the three pupils who are bringing us the flag, the one marching in front is the flag-bearer, he holds the pole to which the flag is affixed, and the two others walking behind him form the honor guard's train, the flag itself has no train and hangs straight down because no wind is blowing. All eyes are fixed on the trio with the flag, we stand in the schoolyard in a square, only one edge of this square has been left open, the one facing the entrance to the school, and it is to the center of this open edge that the honor guard is marching, the rest of us stand along the other three sides of the square with the smallest in front and the taller ones in back, each row of toes lining up perfectly, right hands held to caps in a salute, and from this moment on I can no longer allow my gaze to wander across the blue and white water above which the other children's heads are bobbing like flesh-colored buoys, heads that cannot be made identical to one another without masks, no more than can the naked bits of knee sticking out between stockings and skirts, knees that are crooked, fat or pointy, scraped or dimpled, but definitely tan in this land of eternal summer. I gaze at the flag and wonder whether the teachers who have stipulated where our eyes must rest can

see our gazes crisscrossing through the air, aimed at the trio with the flag like so many lances.

One. Two. And three. During the first three years of school, we are required to cross our arms if we wish to rest them on our desktops when we aren't writing. Only when we are older, the teachers say, will we be permitted to lay one arm smooth and straight atop the other. When we pray, each hand rests flat against the other, no interlocking of fingers allowed. When it's time for recess, we exit the classroom one behind the other in single file, nice and slow, the teachers say. One. Two. And three. All rapid motions, everything that is sudden or askew, all running, swinging, shoving, lolling and falling, all spinning in circles and jumping has been cut off from us, brought to a place where it is inaccessible to us and left for scrap. Just like bicycles no longer fit for use, all these things twist together in a heap, intertwining to form a mass that can never again be disentangled, and in the end all of it decomposes collectively, as if it had always been of a piece. One.

During recess we crouch in the shade of the big tree—no shouting, children, no fighting—gathering up the firebugs that live at the base of its trunk, filling our hands with them, or else with gravel and grains of sand, and when an airplane flies past overhead, one of us whispers louder than the other: My parents are up there, they're on their way to Alaska, or: That's my mother's airplane, she's traveling to Rome, or: Today my father's sitting in that plane up there, he's flying far far away, where's he going, really far away, well if you don't even know where he's going then it can't be true, yes it is, my father's even flying across the ocean, well so where's he going. Really far away. That's stupid. No shouting. We're winning, my friend Anna whispers to us, we're winning, she always says when a tire blows out somewhere outside, the noise it makes sounds like gunfire, sometimes there are many shots in a row. We're winning, she whispers, and then all of us fall silent, waiting to see if we really are winning.

This time we didn't win, my friend Anna says a day later. My mother, she says, climbed over the fence to give the horses something to eat. And one of the horses wasn't really tame yet, it shied away from her and didn't want to eat anything. And when she got closer, it reared up on its hind legs. And then, I ask. Then it came down

on its hooves and almost hit my mother in the head, so she tried to run away. But she didn't manage to get back over the fence in time, and then the horse saw she was scared of it and came after her. And if she hadn't been afraid? Then the horse would have remained calm. But it saw she was afraid. And then it came after her and kicked her and threw itself on top of her with all its weight. But horses never kick people, I say. Not if they're tame, Anna says, but this horse was basically still wild. Oh, I say. And then the other horses got carried away as well. They remembered how they used to be wild. And then? Then all the horses ran over my mother. With their hooves. My mother was an Indian, Anna says to me. I don't say anything. She climbed over the fence to feed her horses, she says, and then her very own horses trampled her to death. Just imagine, Anna says to me. I imagine this, and then say to my friend: I think that's a good way for an Indian to die. I think so too, Anna says. Were you there? I ask. No, Anna says. And the horses? They had to shoot them, of course. You heard the shots yourself. Yes, I say, that's true.

A music box is playing: *Plume in the summer wind, waywardly swaying, thus heart of womankind everyway bendeth*. The music box is on a table with wheels that my mother and father roll into my room in the morning. Flowers and candlelight, and beside the music box are the presents. It's my birthday. One day out of all the days of the year is the day when I was born. One day out of all the days of the year is the first day. Or is it better just to dive into the wet concrete right away and let the first day be the last. Open your eyes, behold the grave and then dive right in and turn to stone. *Plume in the summer wind*. I am given a silver barrette, a book of faerie tales, letter paper with a watermark and my name in the upper left-hand corner, a soup dish on the bottom of which two girls are playing ball, and a Rose of Jericho, a dried-up thing that becomes a flower when you wet it. Until the dish breaks, the girls will go on playing ball at the bottom of the porcelain. Until water is in sight, the Rose of Jericho will keep rolling through the desert. The dish will not break. When I have spooned up enough soup that the girls begin to play beneath the noodles and greens, I put my ear to the dish to listen, I want to hear one or the other of them catching the ball. My mother says there's nothing to hear because the ball is suspended in midair between them. And it will never come down? No, my mother says, it's a picture. We are so happy you were born. A picture always remains just as it is.

Saint Difunta Correa died of thirst in the desert, but the child drinking at her breast was still alive when the two of them were found. Drinking life from a dead woman, my wet nurse smooths the little picture with her index finger, it's odd, when the life leaves a body, this makes it heavier rather than lighter. The saint's back, legs and heels press heavily into the sand as she holds the child in her arms, yes, holds it, the dead woman is still holding a living child in her arms, which are already dead, and the third figure in this alliance is the silent sun beating down upon the two of them, the sun that caused the death of the mother. Wherever there is an altar in the sand for this saint who died of thirst, travelers leave bottles of water as offerings, my wet nurse says. I wonder whether the water can summon her back to life. Whether a saint who has been dead so long can drink her life back out of all these many sealed bottles. Does a saint even have hands and a mouth. My wet nurse says she will most assuredly get up again. Yes, but when. When no one comes any longer to leave new offerings, she says. When silence reigns on earth, she won't be able to resist looking to see what's going on, then at the latest she will get up again and drink.

So the story does go on. To the right and left and above and below the edges of the picture. Of course, my wet nurse says. And only as far as the picture extends do things remain as they are. That's right, she says, and lets me hold the little card with the image of the Difunta. But all around the picture things remain in motion, I ask, even this story itself which cannot go any farther here in the picture. Most certainly, my wet nurse says. You can see, she says, how for example the sun is moving across the sky. Yes, I say, that's true, that's how you can tell. It would be awful, she says, if the sun were always as high up in the sky as here above the two people in the picture. It would burn everything up. That's true, I say, looking at the bars of light on the floor of my room put there by the sun slipping between the blinds. My wet nurse takes back the picture of the saint and puts it in her olive-colored bag. Outside it's noon.

I wonder if the sun can wear out. In countries like this, where it must shine day after day all year round, does it get shabby more quickly than elsewhere. In countries like this, where it can see everything at almost every moment except during the night or when, as rarely happens, it is raining, is the sun marked by what it sees. Are the things taking place beneath its rays reflected back at it. So that the sun itself, depending what it illuminates, appears perfect or rumpled, healthy or cold. Is this

what sometimes makes it turn white. Or blotchy. All that looking. Probably. While I kneel and get up again and sit down again and then kneel again, performing the roundelay of prayer Sunday after Sunday in the crepuscular church, I am thinking of the Holy Trinity: mother, infant and sun.

Hot, my mother says, pulling me away from the stove. Hot, my father says whenever anyone's making a fire, and he positions himself between me and the fire. Hot, my mother says as she lights the candle to place inside my St. Martin's Day lantern. *Star light star bright, first star I see tonight.* When the candle's little shade has been drawn all around it like an accordion, I am permitted to take the lantern by its long wooden stick and go outside with it. *I wish I may, I wish I might.* The shade is made of paper. Am I made of paper too, I ask my mother. My mother laughs and says: Of course not, and calls out to my father that I just asked if I was made of paper, and my father laughs too, comes out of his room into the hallway and fondles my head. Then I go out onto the street with my mother and see children coming out of all the other houses with lanterns in their hands, on St. Martin's we're all allowed to stay up past midnight and brighten the dark streets with our lanterns. If I were made of paper, first my dress would catch fire, then my legs, then my arms, then my head, basically all the parts farthest from the center, and only then would my stomach start to burn, and the little pink buttons above my heart, and finally the heart itself, the most interior part of me. All these things would turn black and keep flying up into the night as long as they continued to smolder, and only after the air had cooled them down would they return to earth in a rain of ashes. But I am not made of paper, my mother repeats. Nonetheless she pulls me away any time I want to touch fire, saying: Hot.

Eyes, nose, mouth. How often my mother shut her eyes the instant before my index finger hit its mark, how often my father opened his mouth to show me what a mouth is and then closed it around my finger as if he were going to bite, but he didn't bite. If you wanted to play ball with someone's head, only one thing would get in the way: the nose. My father's teeth are very white, and when I probe around inside his dark mouth with my finger, they feel damp and hard. I see a tree and say tree, I smell the cake my mother bakes on Sunday and say cake, I hear a bird twittering in the garden, and my mother says: That's right, a bird. We put the cake into our mouths, it vanishes there, mouth, eyes and nose: holes, the beginnings of paths, no one knows

quite where they lead. Stomach, my mother says, I've never seen my stomach from the inside, but at least what I eat comes out again on the other end, and what about the things I put into my eyes, where do they go, are all of them supposed to fit inside my head, even if I were to stack them up the way our housekeeper stacks the laundry, folding it and placing one piece atop the other, there still wouldn't be room, I don't think, and therefore I keep saying all the things I'm seeing so they'll change course inside my head and go out again through my mouth. Shit, I say later when I see what has become of the cake. That's a filthy word, my mother says, wiping my bottom. Don't say words like that, she says and flushes. But it's something we ate. That was before, my mother says, and we go back to the other room. So the cake has gotten dirty on its way through my body. You can't look at it that way, my father says, it doesn't have anything to do with you, it's just a matter of the word. I'm not allowed to say it. No, my mother says, words like that should never cross the lips of a young lady. Eyes. Nose. Mouth. So it's precisely the things that are filthy that are supposed to be stacked up and stored in my head and aren't allowed to change course and go out again through my mouth. But, I say, if I see a foot that is dirty and say foot, then that's a filthy word too, isn't it, but my mother says no, the word itself is clean. Aha. It's only the word shit I'm not supposed to say, but now that's really quite enough, my mother says. My father says: time for a walk. The obelisk stands at the eye of the city, on the large square with cars circling around it, since yesterday it's been wearing a wooden skirt; I slide my hand across the white letters on the fence boards, there's a spotlight shining on them, and my father reads aloud: Silence is health.

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