

It was in Chicago that I told my mother, “I have no memories of my childhood from the neck down.”

“What does that mean?” my mother asked while making a face that looked like it had just tasted vinegar.

“It’s like I had no body as a child... I can’t remember anything about my childhood from the neck down.”

It’s always this way: Me, omnipresent in a storm, with a rowboat made of bedsprings and sheets for sails, riding out the rain as San Francisco sleeps.

My walls are papier-mâché. Shadows of leaves rise and fall in the dim light of my nightlight as Chicago webs through me like a liquid. My hand moves to comfort me, massages my throat where those words of my childhood waded for so long, until I went back and looked into my mother’s face that echoes my face like a sonogram.

My mother mixes up the names of her children, says all the names until I turn to her, like my body still belongs to her, the resident ghost who starts the scene. On rainy nights, the window she raps on. Leaves like tattered photographs sprinkle on the windowsill. My mother let her face drift toward the monotony of the black and red tiled floor. Perhaps somewhere inside her there is an inkling of why her daughter’s body would be missing from her own childhood. I imagined that, at that moment, she wanted to be like me, when she turned her back to me. Omni-absent from life.

My hand moves to unravel the buttons of my nightshirt and travels underneath, lightly touching my nipples with the pads of its fingers. My nipples grow taut and electric as my hands move over my belly where the skin’s as supple as a baby’s.

When my mother died, she didn’t get a headline. She died at daybreak when her heart stopped. She didn’t care about being sick, until death threatened to rob her. It rained during her

funeral and at the burial site, but the sun came out for the reception. She looked sharp. A trio of her children picked out her outfit. A dark blue silk blouse and skirt. A gray scarf for her neck. My friend, Dena, said, "It's too bad she didn't get to enjoy it. I kissed my mother and, and stood entranced as her lashes lay in their arcs as if she was only sleeping and would awake if I just stood there long enough. Skin that's rough and cold. Refrigerated like meat. My body became restless as my fear became primal. We walked through the ruddy mud to bury her near a railroad track, just outside of Chicago.

My hand rests just below my breast and trembles.

Chicago looks the way I remember. Lots of green grass. Clean. Tall, red brick apartment buildings defining blocks that run parallel and perpendicular. I pick up my groceries from a turnstile made of bulletproof glass. Something about the thickness of the glass makes walking home feel safe, until I realize I'm walking outside of it. My sister walks outside the glass when she gets off work at midnight. I walk where my sister walks, where my sister walks five midnights a week. My brother hadn't noticed the box cutter sitting on my sister's mantel before. My sister tells him she carries it just in case. Would she use it, I wonder? My pepper spray was taken from me at the airport. I carry it for comfort only. It's no good against a .38. My sister's attractive, and she walks home at midnight five nights a week. Five-feet-eight, and more feminine and bolder than I. She says, "I want people to think I'm crazy." She figures they'd leave her alone.

She says, Stress makes her talk to herself. Her only child goes to the bus stop to walk her home, but a black man has no business standing on a street corner at midnight in Chicago.

Handcuffs.

The cops think he looks like every other black man. Whatever was done in the darkness has her son written on it. My sister goes to the police station after midnight to get him, while his father's medication makes him sleep through the night. Now her son lets his mother walk home at midnight alone.

A man grabs and drags her into an alley.

My life flashed before my eyes at 5:31 a.m. The time my mother died and a few hours after my sister's rape.

The omni-absent one glittered before me as if standing on broken glass. Blood coloring the pieces, his pedestal crumbling. He was he who lived in my body but had no name. I've given him a name. I call him *The Rapist*. With lines riding across his forehead, his face looked lived in. Red veins webbing the whites of his eyes. Old for such a young man. He had hidden between two buildings in a narrow alley off Halsted Street. A busy street. Operation Push was in one of the buildings he hid between. The didn't save either of us. He grabbed me off the sidewalk in sloshy snow. *How old are you? Ten, I said.* He gave me a shove. Told me to go, while he stayed behind. When I got home, I had no words to describe what had happened, so he took up residence in my body, claiming it from the neck down. *Did my mother ever remember my being out late?* To name it is to own it. To call it, *Mine*. Instead my mother turned cold and rigid and sat with her back to me.

Circling my navel with my index finger, I let my finger rest inside the thin folds. I then run my finger along the dark line down the center, stopping just above the mons. I use to think that line was to guide the baby doctor. A line right down the center for the doctor to cut along to get the baby out. I didn't know about an umbilical cord back then.

Light is seeping in through the light well in my drafty bedroom in San Francisco. I lay beside my lover, bend into her curves, and listen to her deep breathing. Her breath smells like baby's breath. I wrap my arms around her like a cord.